







# Sweet Touch of Venom

**Author:** Akita Sparks

**Category:** Romance, Adult, Suspense

**Description:** She's venom to my soul

Ronan

I live by three rules: extract, punish, then eradicate.

My job as an extractor never comes easy, but it's always for the cause: a means to an end.

It's why nothing will stop me from destroying the people who kidnapped me.

Nothing...

Except this mystery person who captures my victims and leaves them with a mark. It turns me maniacal, enraged by the audacity. But when I finally caught sight of her covered in all black shielded in a mask, I was instantly intrigued, drawn to her like her shadow on a wall.

So I did what anyone else would do, I followed her. Tracked her every move like a dog searching for a scent. How can I stay away when she drives me to the brink of no return?

He's poison to my veins

Venom

I've been trained to fight, to defend myself against evil.

And most of all; to Kill Ronan Alvarez.

The moment I get him exactly where I want, I'm caught off guard, appalled even.

He's not the same man I once knew and worst of all, he's still sinfully gorgeous with a monstrous stare and menacing allure.

When I'm captured, he offers me a choice.

Join him or die. His ultimatum bothers me to my core, and it only makes me hate him more.

He stirs up my truths and turns them into illusions, snatching every intricate part of me I was conditioned to believe.

Hating him was the easy part, staying away from him is where my problem lies.

"They say you'll never be satisfied once you've served the head of the corpse on a platter. I beg to differ."

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# Page 1

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## Chapter 1

Ronan

How does death sound?

Hollow City is a mere black city where it makes your fears come alive.

Hollow City is the place that you avoid if you have skeletons to hide. Hollow City?—

I press onto the radio button, shutting off the ghostly tune that sings to you every minute you turn on the radio. My jaws clash together in an agonizing grind as I glide my fingers over the slice on my top lip and cheek. The dent in the unhealed wound tingles under the pad of my finger.

I never understood why they made a song for this place.

It's Hollow Cities anthem, but it's more like an annoying glitch that can never be fixed—no matter how much you take it apart, loosen all the screws, and then meticulously put it back together.

I never liked the chant, anyway; it reminds me of shadows whispering to you at night. Seeking refuge in what's left of your soul and festering itself there until you're nothing but ash. The song makes me sick, but the meaning behind it...?that's an entirely different story.

Because me and those shadows get along very well. I'm the one who snatches the

souls and tosses them to the pits of the stretched silhouettes with a smirk on my face—and that’s exactly what I intend to do tomorrow night.

The door to the bar, with blaring, pink neon lights above reading “Strip Tease,” burst open. Music jumbles with voices and laughter spills out as it slowly closes back, cutting off the noise.

Joe tumbles free, along with a woman clasped around his arm, dangling off him like cheap jewelry.

There you are.

I narrow in on him as he stumbles along with his shirt loose and his belt unbuckled. His belly protrudes, and the button that wants to pop free holds on for dear life. My finger moves to the scar under my eye, running down my cheekbone, continuing to apply more pressure under the base of my jaw.

He’s gained weight over the years, and he’s still wearing that leather jacket. I bet it smells like sweat mixed with rank smoke, giving off a musty scent.

My lips curl in disgust as my breath picks up in intensity. I grip the steering wheel of the truck to calm the heat swarming to my head, but it’s not going to alleviate the fire boiling in me. Nothing will stop the rage until they’re all dead. Gone from this world—that’s when some part of me will be at peace.

I lower my hand from my chin and away from the scars, resting it on the console. I tilt my head toward the side window, glancing out to spot another one of my trucks parked alongside, catching the scene, too.

With a grin, I flicked my gaze back to Joe, who burst out in a cackling laughter followed by a wheezing choke. He hocks and coughs, strolling toward his car,

dragging the lady with him.

My heart shoots up with a squint to my eyes.

Will he die from a cough before I can get to him?

The woman beside him wobbles under his unbalanced body as he heaves for a breath. If he dies from this shit, I will resuscitate him with a defibrillator just to kill him again.

I didn't wait this long only for him to croak now. I'll avenge us, Carter. They will pay for what they have done. I fucking promise. Your death will never be in vain.

Carter Velz. My best friend. My business partner. He didn't deserve to be taken from this world like that.

Give us the money along with the blueprints, or your boy over here dies.

A tightness clogs my throat, blocking the air. Unfortunately, he did die. Brutally, at that. And I had to sit there and watch, strapped to a chair.

The memory shakes out of my head once another laugh booms out. Joe swings his door open, nearly flinging along with it, stumbling and nearly twisting an ankle, while the tall, lanky woman attempts to hold him up. But she laughs along with him.

I hope she robs him, too. Just like they robbed us of our youth and murdered my best friend. I hope she gets him even more drunk, adds a pill in his cup, and then takes his shit. Then again, I don't want that.

His blood and pain will be on my hands.

“Give us the word head man,” Mal speaks through the earpiece.

I narrowed my eyes at his vehicle, once the red lights blare, casting the dull overshadow on the rocky dirt.

## Page 2

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He's leaving.

I could grab him now and throw him in my trunk, but because he's so drunk, he'll piss in it and probably even shit from the terror. I want him fully aware and sober so he can experience all the pain and torture I have planned. The liquor will only dull and shut it out.

My pointer and thumb find my chin again. "No." A low fire simmers in my vision as I watch the car back out sloppily and speed past me. My head follows it stiffly as I jam down on my jaws.

"We had him right where we wanted Ro," Mal hisses in my ear. She's always been ready to kill, fighting a fight that was never her own but made it that way. Loyal, dependable, and ready to fuck shit up at any given moment.

"Soon. Muito em breve"

Because I'm feeling generous, I'll let him live his last worthless night getting shit-faced, only for the next day to come and for me to rip his spleen from his back.

It's why they call me Poison. I surge into your stream, slowly replacing the reek of your putrid blood, only to kill you from the inside out until you're just a pile of mist and disgusting goop.

I dip my head back, resting against the headrest, shutting my eyes as I grind on my bottom lip. A rise in my heartbeat causes me to grin deeper.



“Ro, we have an incoming. It’s time,” Mal adds in.

My eyes jolt open, and I refocus my thoughts on the bigger things at hand. Something much greater than myself that needs my attention.

“Do we finally have a location for the target and where she’s being held hostage?” Opening my laptop, the dashboard light shines across my face, blurring my vision for a second.

“Fifty-fourth Cove off Daunting road,” Boone intercepts through the earpiece.

I type in the location on the screen. A digital map of lines and dots zoom out before circling and zooming back into the destination. I tap it twice, allowing it to pull up a building that looks completely abandoned.

“It looks like an empty building. Easy enough for dumbasses to attempt another hostage situation.” I slam the laptop shut, my mind shifting to the duties of my job.

My purpose.

No one will have to suffer what I went through. Not As long as I’m alive.

“What’s the ransom for this one,” Mal speaks through with disgust practically pouring into the ear device.

I stare off into the light flicking above the dive bar door. “Two million.” My knuckles flex as I squeeze it in, the joints cracking.

“Let’s go.”

Chapter 2

Ronan

Arm, mouth, tongue?...?fuck it all the limbs

It's moments like this that spark a jolt in my stomach, the anticipation rising higher, clenching the muscles tighter. It fuels the adrenaline pulsing through my body to keep going. My one goal, my only motive, is to rescue the person from the tragedy that results from the hands of sick fuckers that have nothing to do.

Dark surrounds me and I adjust the vision goggles, as I peer around the area that seems abandoned, detecting anything that moves. I won't fire off without knowing for sure it's not the hostage.

I don't glance over my shoulder to see if Mal and Boone are a few feet behind me because I know they are. I can't hear them, but they are there, lurking and ready to evade. Extensive training is an advantage—it allows us to sneak up on the prey without a peep being heard.

I raise my gun, cocking it. I flatten my hand on the steel door, opening it slowly with one push to avoid the screeching sounds from the overbuilt rust forming on the hinges. The unpleasant stench of stale dust and rotting wood stings under my nose as I amble my way through the door. I extend my hand back looking forward, and when the door weight lifts from mine, I continue.

“God, it fucking stinks in here,” Mal utters through the earpiece.

I shrug, focusing my attention. “You've smelled worse,” I mumble.

The building is nearly a century old; the walls are crusted and gray with caked up dirt and grime between the concrete. It's a wide space, and up ahead is a narrow staircase that leads to the target.

I twist my head slightly over my shoulder, gesturing to the stairs. Then, I place my fingers to my lips with a 'shhh' motion. One thing I don't want is anyone detecting us before we find them. It'll only end worse for them.

## Page 3

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With one foot over the other, I stroll up the L steps, crouching down with my gun leveled with my shoulder. I take my time staying under the radar since steps are thin plaited wood that shifts each step you take. Including scraps of debris and chipped pebbles residing across the stairs. They'll think it's probably a mouse if one is kicked, but I won't take the chance.

As I go around the steps to the gap before getting to the next level, my body tenses as I spot a green shoe. I shut the night goggles off to inspect it closer. Dirt and dried blood is smeared on the shoe—I am guessing they dragged her up here. I bite down on my jaw, my grip on the gun constricting in my hand. Goddammit, the part that makes me sick to my bones. I let out a short, shaky breath to control the rage clawing at my chest.

They'll die a painful death.

Voices chatter above, guns clicking and the pleading from the victim ringing in my ears loud. And it makes me want to bolt up these steps and get to her sooner. But I have to play it smart and safe.

“Please,” a frantic cry pleads out. “Just let me go, I don't have anything.”

“Yeah, but your parents do. Your whole damn family does. So shut the fuck up before I blow your head into space,” the person spits out before hearing a loud slap echoing through the shallow walls along with another cry from the blow.

My neck stiffens as my movement picks up an urgent pace. Mal and Boone meet my marks by keeping up. Depending on the takers, most of the victims make it out

unharméd, but some like this group are brutal. They abuse, assault, and even kill the victims. Similar to my situation.

I purse my lips, rounding the corner, the rocks and dirt scraping under my boots. The voices grow closer and clearer, my heart pounding louder and louder. I glance at Boone, gesturing my head up to the next L shape steps. It seems they are up there, from the way the dull light cascades toward the top of the entrance. I take a step and another creak.

Fuck

It's easy to stay quiet, but sometimes man-made creations and Mother Nature can be so fucking against you.

"Something there. Go check it out. And shoot anything moving," one targets says.

Oh, they wish they could.

The person doesn't question it and heads toward the entrance, where the steps descend. The sound of his gun cocking kicks my heart into a race. I slip the gun into my holster, then slowly slide the knife up and out.

Mal and Boone disappear back around the lower level. I know they aren't too far. I can sense them lurking along with me. And if anything goes to shit, I have at least ten men outside ready and armed to dissect the mission. He slowly creaks to the steps, mumbling something under his breath. I shut my eyes, counting the beats of my heart, the rushing waves of my ears connecting with my blood, every drip and breath. I tip my body into recline. The skit of his boot veers around the corner where the dark shadows meet the steps. Once he moves past the dark spot, my hand wraps around his mouth, bringing the knife to his throat then slitting it. His body squirms in my stiff hold and crimson spills on my knife, filling my hand with liquid.

His muffled screams are not loud enough. Not beneath the gurgling from his own blood. His frame is large, so it takes a little more in me to hold him up. Then he limps in my body. Lifeless.

Boone comes from around the dark corner, grabbing him from me and dragging him away.

“Why hasn’t he come back yet? Elliot!” Their weapons begin clicking. The girl screams along with the chair, knocking onto the floor and scraping for our attention. We’re coming. Don’t you worry.

“Help! Help me,” her scream pours out and my throat tightens.

“Didn’t I tell you to shut the fuck up!” I know this time, instead of a slap, he punched her by the loud thud.

“Two on your left and three on your right. And one directly by the hostage,” Chris calls out into my ear. He’s my guy with the other team that scopes the outside. Using ray vision to get a visual of the suspects in the buildings.

Gazing over at Mal and Boone, her lips snarled up and Boone stoic as usual; I nodded my head, confirming they heard the directions.

Then we storm the scene, aiming my gun at the two men to the left, shooting them directly in the head. The girl screams and watches two bodies next to her collapse before they can put their fingers on the triggers. Mal shoots the man on the right, along with Boone gunning down the other two beside him. Leaving the one and only man left.

Too goddamn easy.

“Oh, shit!” The man left standing grabs the girl roughly, swinging her to his body. She cries and continues screaming, blood leaking from her swollen lip. Her clothes are dirty and torn, with a large laceration slit on her shin. And there it goes, the one shoe on her foot. My eye twitches as my blood ignites at the sight. Now I have to chop off his foot just for that.

“Come one more step, and I’ll shoot her right in her pretty little face.”

My shoulders slack; a headache at the root reels in to make its way over. I sigh, placing my gun back in my holster, with Mal and Boone still pointing at him. We don’t shoot, especially if the target is in the asshole hands.

“I’ll kill her right here.” His hand shakes as his eyes dart around to his men who sprawled out on the floor.

I shake my head, letting out an exasperated breath. There’s that headache. I rub my temple in agony. “Why do they always make it so hard?” I ask rhetorically.

“I don’t know. Maybe they’re trying to hold off their death for a little while longer.” Mal lets out a chilling chuckle.

I nod, slowly advancing on him, even though he walks backward with the death grip on her neck.

## Page 4

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Okay, his arm goes next.

“I’ll kill her,” another scream, spitting all in her face in the midst of it.

Mouth is after.

“Let me go and the bitch lives. I swear I’ll kill her.”

Tongue.

“Oh, I have no doubt you won’t.” I walk over the dead body. “But you’ve made one mistake.”

He trembles with sweat streaking down his cheeks, his arm loosening on the girl then shifting his body. I notice the movement that happens every two seconds from his nerves, and that’s when it’s time.

“You thinking there’s a way out of here without your brain attached to that floor?”

Boone shoots, hitting him in the kneecap. The shot catches him off guard, and he drops, shooting the bullet in the air. Mal runs over to the girl, grabbing her and moving her away from the scene.

I stand in front of him as he lays in the fetal position, holding his knee whilst reaching for his gun that fell along with him.

“Please man, I have a family,” he pleads, and it irks me even more.



I chuckle, truly chuckle because it's so amusing, like watching a comedian on stage. "That's terrible. Your family has someone like you in their lives." My foot presses into his wound, a thick red liquid pouring out like hot lava. He hollers out, attempting to move my boot. He should've thought about that when he was planning a kidnapping to get money from someone else. There's a consequence to everything. Some consider them to go to jail. Go before a judge, sentence them. My justice is?...

Well, we can see what that is.

Black fire erupts in my vision, and then my bullet pierces his skull.

So Idiotic.

Minutes later, Mal and Boone leave the scene and make sure the girl is safe and sound. I stay behind to have some fun and go forward with the promise to myself and to her. Afterward I'm walking outside, the cool tempered air swiping against my cheek as I wipe his dirty blood onto his filthy shirt before tossing it off to the gravel.

I look at the young girl in the ambulance, an EMT working on the gash riding up her leg. Her body shriveled and meek, fear combing every part of her tired body. I swear if I could, I would kill every last person who hurts young kids like this. She'll need some therapy, but at least she's not in their hands anymore. I stroll over to her, a blanket thrown around her shoulders, sitting on the backside of the ambulance. Her eyes widen with her body shaking; I lift my hands carefully in my steps for reassurance.

"You're alright." I step forward slowly at a no-harm pace.

She tucks the blanket between her arms, shifting. She's probably no older than sixteen, much younger than I was, and that makes this shit so much worse.

“What’s your name?”

Rubbing her shoulder over the blanket she averts her watery eyes back to me.

“Isabella.”

“Isabella, I’m here to help get you back to your parents. They are worried about you.” And they are. They’re the ones that gave me a call to search for her daughter, the video cameras around their house showed all the evidence that we needed to find the fuckers and extract her. They were brave enough to go to her home. Stupid enough to think they wouldn’t get caught.

Tears well up in her eyes, her irises pooled and poignant, yearning for the comfort that I genuinely cannot give to her.

“Are they coming to get me?” She sniffs tears streaming down her dirty face. The EMT finishes and walks off.

I nod, standing a little closer to her. “Yes, but first these guys are going to get you to a hospital.”

“No, they can’t! What if they come and get me again.” She burst out in tears again.

My shoulders are stiff. The part I love but hate the most. Once being a normal kid with nothing to worry about but friends and school only for their innocence to be taken and ripped from them. Only because their parents are rich or of high status. It’s not their fault their parents became who they are, and now they have to suffer the consequences. The kidnapping has increased, as if the fish are becoming less with no way to feed the sharks. It’s never ending, but I’ll keep at it until I’m dirt in the ground, surfing to dark eternity.

“No one is coming for you.” My brows raise, but my hand stays in my pocket. I don’t

want to make her even more uncomfortable with just a shoulder tap.

Her chest heaves up and down, darting her eyes to the building and back at me.

“I promise no one will ever hurt you again.” At least not in that way. Just the common heart break, maybe. I can’t stop an asshole boy from being a jerk, but I can keep you safe from the predatory fuckers that hold no bounds. “You’ll have round-the-clock security at the hospital until your parents arrive.” I accommodate my security team because who can really depend on the security at the hospital? Most hospital security personnel are worn, old, tired or out of shape, and that doesn’t give me the confidence that something else won’t happen whilst in their care. I point over to Boone and Mal and her eyes follow.

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“With people that look like them.” I quirk a brow in hope she’ll feel safer. Though, truthfully, she’ll never restore that part of her. The innocence that gave her the naivety that helped her stay a child, to feel like a teenager. To know there is nothing to worry about besides annoying friends, their drama, and unnecessary homework. She’ll always remember this day, and it’ll haunt her forever.

Her head bobs and shoulders sink. “Thank you so much.” Her voice is shaky, her lip quivers, and her eyes low, but bright. I nod, pursing my lips before stepping back and walking off toward my truck. Footsteps descend from behind me, and I know exactly who it is.

“The boys and I are going out for a drink. You coming?”

I remove my gun from my holster. “No.”

Mal lets out a sigh. “Another rain check?”

“Something like that.”

“This was a good save today. We should celebrate.”

“Then you all should go do that. You’ve earned it.” I look at her while unstrapping my holster around me.

“Can you come just this once?” She does a pout face, which is horrible because it looks more like an evil witch than what the expression is intended to be. I look at her through hooded eyes, tossing my holster in the truck.

“You all deserve the win. Enjoy.” I say it because I mean it. They have earned it. Ever since getting my team together, we have stopped countless hostage situations and deaths, but it doesn’t disclose the fact that there is still much of it happening. I won’t waste my time cheering shot glasses of watered-down liquor only to realize and be reminded after the effects wear off with a splitting headache, of the horror happening. It’s why I don’t have fun. I don’t celebrate. There’s nothing to cheer for when the next person is getting snatched off the streets.

“Well, you know where to find us.” She pats me on my arm, giving me a light smile, then turns away to catch up with the others.

The minute I hop in my car, my phone rings, the name pops up on my Bluetooth screen. I shake my head with a smirk, ready to hear his bullshit.

I clicked the answer button. “Detective Gear. To what do I owe this nighttime pleasure?”

A grumble of annoyance vibrates from the other end. “Why do my men tell me the leftovers are shit to eat, like blocks of bricks?”

My brows scrunch. “Well, I wouldn’t word it that way.” I smirk, a vision of my arm swinging up and slamming down to chop off his leg. I shift into reverse.

“That’s exactly how they described it, and I can only imagine the gruesome mess that was left over.” He grunts in irritation, and that only tickles me like a feather.

“I got the job done. What more do you want? If you didn’t want me involved, then you wouldn’t have given my contact to the Sanchez’s.” Which I will get on his ass about later. I work underground, in the shadows; I don’t willingly give my number like we’re at a fucking bar.

“What I wanted was to bring the men into custody and have it done the right way. Not eventually sent over, cut into bits and pieces like beef cubes.” More of the shuffling with crunches of papers rustles in the background.

I put the car into drive and tear out of the abandoned lot. The red and yellow flashes from the ambulance disappear in the distance out of my rearview.

Cops and their fucking dignity. Normally, I would have my guys cleaning up the mess. Storing away the scraps into non-existence. “I did your job for you. I got the kid, and she’s safe.”

He lets out a frustrated growl, more papers scattering and into the phone. I grin, looking out onto the road. “I do my job well. I don’t need you for that.”

“That’s what you think,” I say out loud.

“And you’re lucky you’re the best and the law shits bricks when they hear of you, but I’m not. I’ll beat your ass, Alvarez. Then throw you in jail and swallow the damn keys.”

“Is that any way to threaten a friend, a partner?” I feed into his irritation; it’s hilarious that he thinks he can do it. He couldn’t even if he tried.

“Partners don’t go against direct orders. You continue to abandon the principle of their law, which makes it very difficult to decide which side you are on.”

“I’m on my own side. You know this. I don’t answer to you or your people in too blue tight suits that sit behind the desk with coffee and donuts,” I say, typing into the GPS the location.

“That’s a standard cliché,” he murmurs while I’m talking.

“I,” I stretch my neck, straining my jaw from the redundant words, “do what the fuck I want. And the only reason you know me is because of our history. If not for that, I wouldn’t do the due diligence and speak to you, nor entertain your threats. Do you think your Janet would be alive if not for me? Also, don’t forget who’s the one that put the word out for you, Detective. So, I suggest you settle your steam and talk to me correctly.” I despise bringing up shit I’ve done out of the goodness of my heart. Well, not the good, it was for my own ill intention. I laugh out loud as I think about it. But it worked out well for us all.

“Screw you, I would’ve made detective with or without your help,” he spits out.

“Again, that’s what you think,” I scoff. “Don’t pretend you don’t miss this lifestyle.” I vividly remember his first slaughter. Just one. But that’s enough to judge a man.

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“Fuck you for bringing that up,” he scolds. “Listen, Alvarez. Do you know the lengths I have to go to clean up that mess? All the blood and bodies.”

“That’s for me tonotknow and for you to figure out.”

He releases an exasperated sigh; the sound of his lungs restricting stabs an irritant to poke at my ears. I’m ready to end this conversation. His threats are like ice under the sun. Sturdy at first, but once in contact with a burn that’ll scorch your fucking world—he melts. Talk shit on the phone, but if he sees me in person again, he’ll choke and die right there.

I scroll on my phone to click into a surveillance video as he continues to huff and puff from his lack of self awareness and shit for nothing ego.

Up pops the screen and I smirk. “Anddetective,you may want to keep me in your good graces. You never know what can be in that coffee of yours.” I glower, my smirk stretching as he puts the white foam cup to his mouth over a mess of papers stretching over his desk.

Soon as I say it, he chokes on the coffee, spitting it up over his papers, while looking at it in disgust.

Then he wipes his mouth, slamming his hand on the desk. The sound screeches through the speakers. “ALVAREZ!”

I click the end call, continuously shaking my head before spinning off into the night where other things await me.



## Chapter 3

Ronan

Revenge is better served with a bloody limb

Tonight differs from every other night. This is the night I strike, and I couldn't be more thrilled. Not jumping up and down like a petulant child, but what I have been looking forward to for years. What I trained for. What made me into the man I am today, and why every name on my list will be dead and gone. Joe, Tractor, Henley, Fred and finally Victor.

I stand in the corner of the dark space in his apartment. I arrived here no longer than ten minutes ago. Without moving my body, my eyes dart around the tiny space. It's small and sloppy here. Thrown beer cans lay out under the rustic coffee table, mix matched shoes scattered around the living room. Not even bothering to place it neatly by the door.

Despicable.

It wasn't difficult to find his location. He was smart enough to not keep his residence in the same place he committed the crime, but he was stupid enough to keep everything in his real name, including his address. Making it too easy to find him. A toddler could have done the job.

I stand in the corner, facing the door, where I can witness every movement or anything out of order. Footsteps clack through the door, the floorboards so lightweight you can hear every movement someone makes.

And?...

Three

Two

One

The door to his shitty home flies open, slamming into a wall. The dry wall from where the knob hit breaks off into tiny pieces, falling to the floor.

There tumbles in Tractor, drunk or high off his ass, bald with a patchy beard. Why are they all always intoxicated? Is it to mask the shame within themselves from the terrible things they've done, the lives they've destroyed?

“Ugh.” He groans loud with extra grunts, and it’s taking everything in me to not chuck my gun directly at his throat.

His phone rings, and I stay quiet in the corner.

“Yeah?” Bringing the phone to his ear, he sits down. Before he can relax on the sofa, his back straightens, snapping forward, and his face pales just a bit.

A grin comes to me. I can’t help it. This is where the real fun begins.

“It’s all in your head, Henley. Joe dying was just a coincidence. Stop worrying your mind.”

It wasn’t a coincidence.

But it also wasn’t me who caused the tragic scene that I very much wish I inflicted. Two days ago, I saw Joe and had him right where I wanted him. I should’ve killed him. A bullet right to the head outside that bar while his girl for the night suffered his

blood stained on her face and clothes. But what fun would that have been? No pain or agony? No torture for his sins? So I decided to go to his place last night, only to find him hanging from a tree behind his house, face distorted, mutilated with open wounds and slices all over his body. One thing that stood out the most was the letter 'V' carved deep across his entire abdomen. So deep, the meat from the ripped cartilages puffed out.

It was absolutely impressive, and I should've been satisfied, but I'm not.

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I'm angry because that was my bidding to do. My pain to cause, and some other motherfucker got off on it. The idea of the man receiving joy from it made me livid, instead of walking off, I punched his already destroyed body until the carved letter on him tore even wider; the skin peeling off and slapping to the ground. And then, after, of course, I called my clean-up crew before flailing the massacre.

But yes, I guess we can call it a coincidence.

The voice on the other end speaks so loud, I bet he's spitting into the damn phone. Tractor lets out a huff, running his hand down his face, hard enough to nearly snap his jaw. Moving the phone from his ear, he taps it, and now Henley's shaky voice is on speaker.

"It probably was." Henley pauses, and you can hear him gulp. Fuck, I almost laughed from his fear. It's so goddamn amusing.

"Poison," he finishes.

Tractor laughs loudly, attempting to hide the quiver in his thunderous boast. He's not fooling me, I can tell in the way sweat lines on his forehead and his hand trembles while wiping it.

"He's not worried about us."

"The man extracts kidnappers and kills them in cold blood. I knew we shouldn't have done that job—" My ears peek out, waiting for the name.

“Shut the fuck up, Henley. What’s done is done, and we got paid well, while Victor got what he wanted. Even if he didn’t get the blueprints. If Poison wants me, then why hasn’t he come for me? He’s a scared pussy.”

“Don’t say that, man. Maybe the rich kid Ronan hired a hit out on us.”

“Ronan is another pussy that won’t do anything. He’s sitting up high somewhere in the mountains, scared shitless after the beating we put on them—especially after Victor killed his friend.” He laughs out again, and this time it feels a little too confident.

I’m basking in his bravery. Not knowing, Poison and Ronan are the same man—and I’m here for blood.

God, it’s fucking cathartic.

A crooked grin dances on my cheek with a twitch, my heart races with the resistance to cracking my knuckles. Goddamn, just one crack would ease the anxiousness.

He cackles again. “Fuck him and whoever?—”

Having enough of his amusing memory session, I step out of the corner. “And whoever?” I keep my voice low.

I nearly laugh from the way his phone drops and his beady eyes bulge so wide they could fall out. I would’ve just put them right back in his sockets, only to yank them back out again.

He swallows, his body collapses back onto the seat as he shakes from unrelenting fear. “What the hell?”

“Tractor, who’s that! What’s going on?” the man on the other end yells and screams.

“Someone who’s coming for you, too,” I speak up, my tone serious and menacing. I can practically hear a gasp, and then the phone call ends. I look back at the large man on the couch.

I step closer, clenching my fist. All these years and here I am. In the flesh, renewed and no longer that weak boy strapped to a chair next to his best friend.

“You were going to say something after, ‘fuck him and whoever’.” I stroll to him threatening, a snarl curling on the left side of my top lip where the healed slash lays. The part where he punched me at with his ring, causing it to split completely. It never actually healed properly, it just left a noticeable slit there where it looks like someone took a knife and sliced it.

“I-I.” he stutters, sweat building more on top of his bald head.

I reach out for the little coffee table that seems like it can be easily broken with one kick. “You know, the funny thing is I thought I heard you say something like ‘Poison is a scared pussy.’”

Tractor swallows.

“Do you remember who I am?” I began walking around the table, which is approximately three steps before I’m towering over him like death with his scythe.

His head shakes, peering up at me, sinking further in the couch. I admit I look different. My hair is not short and faded but out and wavy, my body is larger and stronger, not weak and lean like before, and I have grown a scruff. Before, I only had chin hair. And who can forget the many slices on my chest and the one residing on my lip?

“I must say, I’m very offended, since you were just talking about me.” I let out another low chuckle, although nothing was funny.

“Look man, whatever happened, it was just business.”

I nod slowly as if I understand the reasoning. “Just business.”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:12 am*

His body shifts; he doesn't think I notice his movements. Tractor makes a go for under his sofa seat, but I grab my gun from my side holster and shoot his hand. There was a gun hidden under it. I already searched his house before retreating into the dark spot in the corner, and it was quite amusing to see he only had two guns in here. One under the seat, and the other in the drawer of his nightstand.

He screeches loudly, gripping his hand, the crimson spilling out instantly.

I hold the gun up. "Is this yours?"

His eyes run wild, and he hollers more.

"Yeah. I've already taken the liberty of grabbing the little stash you have."

"Then why'd you shoot me?" he barks, spit flying through his teeth and landing on my boots. My eyes dart down, disgust swirling in my stomach.

I shrug mindlessly. "Why not?" Then I aim for his kneecaps, shooting them too. He lets out a murderous howl and begins to scream for help.

I shake my head. "No one can hear you." That's because we had the few people who do live in this shitty complex leave because of a "water leakage". I bend down on my knees, placing my forearms on my elbows, looking him in the eyes, sweat now falling down his glistening tan skin and onto his brow. Agony folding over him like paint.

"Now I ask you again," I say smoothly. "Do you remember me?"



His eyes search my face, and then that's when it occurs. The Adam's apple in his throat bobs, and I can see his lips dry. The grin slowly forms on my mouth, and I narrow in.

"But how? You fled."

My smile drops. "I did." I tap the muzzle on his open wound, digging into it, the milky red liquid pouring out more. I watch in blind horror, the glory seeping through. Every drop means something, every spill. It'll be counted nineteen times, the same amount of blood it took for Carters before he finally died.

I continue further until I touch the bone, then I knock on it for fun. He releases a tortured scream, his head crashing back. "I have a question for you. Make a wise choice and answer correctly." I pull away so he can answer. "Why were you after the blueprints?"

He heaves, his hot breath blowing into my face. I wince away. Disgusting. I push up on my knees to stand. He continues hollowing. I guess the pain hasn't subsided. I don't care.

I check my watch. "Speak. Now." Then I point my gun at the wound, ready to place another bullet in it. Ouch.

His shaky hands fly up, eyebrows raising so high his sweaty forehead wrinkles. "Okay, okay. I don't know. Our job was to grab you and the other dude, take you both to the storage, get the papers about some shitty vehicle and then for us to get paid we get your money. I don't know. That's it!" Spit flings out of his mouth. "Victor wanted those blueprints. Not us!" He chokes.

My throat constricts as his name being thrown in the air so lightly. I twist my head, biting down on my jaw to ignore the itchy feel in my chest. I focus again.

He's low level, he won't have the answers. I'm sure he only does the kidnapping and doesn't even know the real point of it. The only thing he worries about is the money. It's a waste thinking he knew something.

Tears streamed down his face. "Don't kill me man, I have a family."

I shut my eyes. The irises rolling tight to the back of my head. Why do they think saying that will bring sympathy? I look at him. "You're married?"

He hesitates. "Divorced."

"How many kids?"

"T-two. A girl, a-and a boy."

Nausea rises in my belly. I lean down to look him in his bloodshot eyes while his sweat drips off the lashes. "Your ex-wife had the right idea, divorcing you. She's lucky, and your kids would thank me. I'll make sure to send them everything single thing you've done so they'll hate you and spit on your grave. I'm doing your family a favor." He freezes, his neck tightening, showing the collar bone. "You should've killed me that night." I slip my gun back into the holster and toss his to the side, then I grab his collar, carelessly dragging him off the couch, intentionally dropping him on his damaged knee.

A buzzing vibrates against my thigh, stopping me from my moment. I release a harsh breath as I'm rummaging in my pocket while keeping hold of the dead weight in the other, I press the phone to my ear. "What?"

"You're needed at the compound. Bedford found some information. You're gonna want to see this," Chris speaks boldly on the other end.

“I’m in the middle of something,” I grit, dropping him on the floor; he groans slowly, turning to his side.

“Apologies. Bedford is eager.” Chris’ voice is wary, they know not to intervene, so if they are calling me, then... it must be important.

Reaching to my holster, I get my gun again, letting out an exasperated breath. “I’ll be there.”

I turn to the man on the ground, attempting to crawl to the door, his loose legs dragging behind him. “Looks like the fun is over.” I take a gaping step, kicking him over to fall on his back.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:12 am*

“Dammit, man!” he cries out, going for his wounded knees, his eyes wide like two golf balls.

I tilt my head, watching him shrivel in pain. “Consider yourself lucky. What I had in store for you was far worse than this.” I aim the gun at his head before pulling the trigger. The hot cartridge digging into the flesh between his eyebrows.

I lower my gun, dissatisfied because I wanted to torture him, so this shit better be top level important. Stuffing the gun back into its rightful place, I walk out of the apartment. I’ll be back to gather the body and with my men to clean up the mess I made.

Once I’m out of the apartment building, I’m hit with the gust of chilled air; I tighten my wool collar, skipping down the ruined steps; part of it cracked, and a large chunk is already missing. Cars ride by, honking in the night as if it’s still daylight. The city that never sleeps.

At the last step, I reach for my phone, the bluish hue from it nearly blinding me. I don’t notice the person heading up the steps; my arm bumps them, making us both stagger to the side.

“Apologies.” I look back to see a slender figure, facing the door, engulfed in a hoodie larger than it should be—it doesn’t cover their ass...?her ass. A perfect heart-shaped one. She fixes her hood, keeping me from seeing her face. I don’t notice the curly hair sticking out the sides of the material.

“Watch where you’re going,” she says in a low austere voice.

The hell.

She's still making her way up the steps and only I, including the people in this building, know there is a leakage, and it's not back open until tomorrow morning. So, what the hell is she doing here?

"I'm not sure if you got the notice, but the building is closed." My foot on the bottom step and one resting on the top.

She places her hand on the handle, still facing forward. "Not for me."

Okay? From the looks of it, she's probably a drug addict. It's fucked up to assume that; however, the area is born and bred of them. Horrible, but the cold truth. She's going to have to get her fix elsewhere. I don't have time for the people figuring out there is no leak and why there isn't a crew out working on the place.

She opens the door, ready to stroll in.

I let out an irritated sigh before stepping up the stairs. "Look, lady, you'll need to come back tomorrow." I reach the top quickly before she's able to step foot inside, I scoop my hand under her elbow to bring her back. Faster than I expected, she twists her arm from my grasp, swiftly turning and bringing her palm up, smashing it into my nose.

"What the—!" I howl out, my hands shielding the bone. I stumble back onto the broken steps, bracing myself, so I don't twist an ankle on the shitty stairs.

Bitch.

That didn't go as planned. I brush under my nose, the burning sensation destroying my senses. I seethe a heavy breath as I glance at it, the red smear shining bright

between my fingers.

I breathe faster, my muscles tightening. No one draws blood from me. No one!

“Are you crazy?” I bark, ready to lurch forward and snap her damn neck off her shoulders then kick it down the street. I stop in my tracks to find she’s not there. She disappeared like a ghost, unseen, and out of sight. My anger only spikes at that balls of this random bitch. I yank the door open and rush into the building. Soon as I get inside, the elevator door is shutting (just my damn luck) and there she is leaning back against the wall, hands tucked in her black hoodie, green cargos and black boots with one foot over the other. And she’s relaxing, like there’s soothing music playing in it. The hood covers most of her face, only showing an array of long, thick black curls spilling out. The flickering lights do no justice, so I only depict light brown olive skin and a sinister smirk on her lips.

A bit of amazement mixed with a large amount of pure rage builds in my chest. Who in the fuck is this woman?

I’m disappointed I can’t see all of whom this mystery person is. In my stunned moment, her hand slowly goes up, rolling her dainty fingers eerily in my direction.

My back stiffens. Every ounce of sanity I could’ve had left leaves from her taunt. Oh, you’re dead. I launch forward, bum rushing the doors, eager to catch up so I can see who’s the culprit under the black hood. It’s definitely not a drug addict.

I don’t make it in time before the doors shut, and I can squeeze my fingers in the crack to force it open. They part only a bit then shuts back. My chest heaves as I look above the elevator at the numbers, the light blinking on two, then up to three. I could bolt up the stairs and catch up, but I don’t have the time. This has already stalled me enough, and now I’m left with a bloody nose and a massive shot to my ego. My fist smashes into the elevator twice, the abrasion so hard it shook the door.

“I’ll see you again.” Whoever you are. I shake my head as I step outside while also wiping my nose. It doesn’t feel broken. However, it hurts like hell. The sound of metal scraping against the concrete ground grabs my attention. I glance down, tilting my head to get a view of it.

A dagger.

Nice and shiny, sitting pretty at the end of the staircase. It must be hers, and now I have hope. I grin mischievously to myself. Swiping it off the ground, I stuff it in my wool jacket, closing it and strolling into the dark shadows.

I’ll find you.

I burst through the doors of the Academy compound. Everyone’s head turned toward me, perking up. I nod, ensuring there’s nothing to worry about. Some continue to look at me with slightly widened eyes, of course, wondering why my nose looks red and swollen.

“Get back to work,” I grunt out. Immediately, I spot Bedford at his desk filled with devices and computers. I approach the long desk, knocking my knuckle on the cold metal. “What was the urgency?” I lean on another table set behind him, crossing my arms. “Have we found any information on this V bitch?”

He looks up at me before his eyes spread and his mouth gapes open. “Whoa, what happened to your nose? Did someone punch you?” He leans forward, the wheels on his chair rolling closer to investigate under and around like a doctor.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:12 am*

“No. Now get to the point.” I nod to the screen. I’m ashamed enough. I had a woman punch me in the nose and get away with it. I can’t even think about it.

Catching my irritation, he cocks his head, spinning around, looking back down at the screens. “Okay, Mr. Grumpy Man.”

I don’t bother arguing with him; he’s always been a pain in my ass since bringing him on the team. But he’s great at his job, and it never goes underappreciated.

Mal strolls into the room, her presence giving them the same reaction as they do mine. But only she doesn’t acknowledge them. Great. Now time to hear her mouth.

“You’re back early, didn’t expect you back until?...” Her voice trails off. “What happened to you?” Her face scrunched, confused.

“Nothing happened.”

“He got punched,” Bedford chirps facing ahead typing on his keyboard.

I grind my teeth snapping in Bedford direction. “No. I didn’t.”

Mal opens her mouth, but I hold my hand up. “Leave it.”

I cross my arm circling my chest, resting my fingers on my temple. I can tell she wants to press me more about the situation, but she leaves it alone.

“Okay. What do you have for us?” she says, pressing a palm to the open space on the



desk leaning next to Bedford.

“I think I have a clue on who this V is Ro, but it doesn’t make any sense.” He lets out a shaky breath clicking his keyboard.

My brows furrow looking at the screen. Pictures quickly circulate on the screen.

His black polished nail lands on the square box with pictures. “It took some digging, but this person does not want to be found. I’ve heard of them, though. Him or her. I don’t freaking know, but they are big in the dark web world. Wanted by many people. They mark some of their victims with the letter V. Some think they are personal to them? That I haven’t figured out yet.” He taps, then the collage spreads out, pictures and off-guard snaps layered across the screen.

“This, my friend, is Venom.” He claps his hand together inspecting the photo in awe as if he just found a goldmine. Technically, he did. “Although we’ve never seen their face. This person is ruthless. But that’s all I have for you. For now.”

My head shakes, completely lost and confused. “Why haven’t I ever known of this person?”

Bedford’s head shakes with his arms crossing then shrugging. “They really don’t want to be found.”

I step closer to get a better view; although, they are street cam photos, it can be difficult to see the face, but dissecting little details won’t be. I tilt my head at one photo that stands out from the rest. It’s of someone who’s back is turned. It’s fuzzy, but I can see the outfit clear as day, along with the rest of the form. My throat clenches tight as I narrow in on the figure. My nose began to sting with the replay of a hand decking me. Someone like her. Green cargo pants with a black hoodie and those long ass curls. I could be speculating, or my theory could be accurate. Not

everybody can wear those clothes exactly the way that woman did at the apartment. Same color, same coordination, same location where I killed...

“Damn,” I slip out as I stand straight.

“Headman?” Mal jerks her head to me in alert.

Not responding I dig in my jacket to fish out the dagger. Once I pull it out, cold to the touch, I investigate it further.

“What is that?” Bedford says, lurching out of his seat to come closer. My eyes run wild on the dagger, looking for clues. It’s a beautiful knife, embedded in gold and black snakes. You can tell it cost a fortune by the weight of it. And then there it was.

The letter V engraved right at the bottom of the blade. My heart thunders against my chest, a disbelief laugh slipping out. “What the fuck.”

Bedford gasps, his hand flying to his cheeks, smashing them in. “Is that?...?hers?” He reaches out to touch it, but my hands snap close, cutting my gaze at him.

He squints one eye, his pointer now tapping his cheek. Once he’s put two and two together, his entire face opens wide. “Did she do that to you?” He points to my face, amusement plastered all over him. I give a dry look, not feeding into it.

“What’s happening?” Mal steps in, flipping her gaze to the knife tucked in my hand.

“My guess is Ronan here met his maker and got decked in the face.” He couldn’t even contain the snicker. Asshole.

Mal, on the other hand, does not find it anywhere near as amusing. She turns to look closely at the screen with a snarl, then slowly turns at me. “What do we want to do,

Headman?"

I open up my hand, glaring down at the knife, heat streaming off me, enough to melt the gold.

So, this is the person who has tortured my enemy, and then sucker punched me. But why the hell do they care about the people I'm after? Maybe it's competition?

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*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:12 am*

My eyes narrow back on the screen. There's a bright light surrounding my vision. "Who are you?" I mutter to myself. Now I need to know that more than anything.

I continue staring, thinking she'll turn her head in the picture and look at me with some devious grin. "First, we need to find out who the fuck is Venom."

### Chapter 4

#### Venom

A week earlier

Location:

Southeast Europe, Sofia, Capital of Bulgaria

"Almost done." I swipe the yellow polish on my pointer finger and watch as the cool liquid smears up my nail in a perfectly straight line. There's something satisfying about it.

Eve scoffed, pulling her pants suit up her bare legs. "I don't understand why you even paint your nails. You'll just get them messed up, anyway."

I raise a brow while still applying the polish. "Maybe because I like something else other than stained blood on them." Something, I do not, find satisfying. I give another swipe before bending my fingers to my mouth to give a gentle blow. Losing my patience, I wiggle them in the air to dry the wet polish faster.

“Perhaps you’re right. But I like the red. It’s become my new favorite color.” Her voice crisp, with a sinister shrill. I look over at her as she straps her knives in her holster, then fluffing her tux to tighten it. Fitting her frame perfectly. Her icy blue eyes winking at me and her bleach blonde hair in a braid flowing down her back. Eve, also known as Viper, is known for her excitement when it comes to blood, and she is also the brawn in this operation.

“Of course you do, Eve. I’m shocked you don’t bathe in the blood.” A sultry English accent comes into the room. Scarlett waltzes in; her black sequin dress outlines her curves with her walk. My eyes drift to her. The dress truly gives her deep brown skin a run for its money. Scarlett AKA Medusa; She’s a lot more feminine than us all. Don’t let that fool you, she once ripped a man’s tongue out of his throat because he broke her nail during a fight. Which happened to be her fault. She runs her hands through her long braids that reach her ass.

Eve’s brow raises, smoothing down her tie. “Now that you’ve said it, I think I may consider that.”

I shake my head, still blowing my nails and swinging them. “You are the worst.”

She grabs her gun off the nightstand, slipping it in the back of her pants. “Not worse than you doing your nails before a mission.”

I check the liquid to see if it is dry before standing and adjusting my knee-high dress. I chose a red silky dress that shows my entire back, a full view of my snake tattoo that wraps to the front of my stomach. “It’s not my fault that you have no sense of self-care.”

She gives me a mocking face before sticking me with the middle finger, walking beside me.

Scarlette saunters to us, looking like a goddess in the night. “Anita is right. Self-care is important.” She swings her hair over her shoulders.

“Okay, where is Kyra?” I say with irritation.

“I’m coming,” a low voice calls from behind the door. Mostly a whisper. I’m surprised we can hear it. But we’ve come to terms with her voice and gotten used to it.

Kyra walks out; she’s wearing her normal attire. Black leather pants with her black jean jacket and a black shirt underneath. Her hair is out and wild, with one side shaven and the rest a mixture of blue, green, and jet black.

The all black really makes her look like a ghost in the night. It’s creepy, but absolutely amazing. Kyra AKA Misery. She may be the quietest of us all, but no doubt the deadliest. Before the mission was over, the man who we thought we killed charged at her, impaling her right knee with a knife. She stood there watching him before taking the blade out of the wound, then stabbing him repeatedly until he was nothing but skin particles.

If I was not used to that, I would have puked. I merely smiled at it and kept it moving. Of course, after, we had to treat her quickly before the wound became infected.

“Are you ready now, Ky?” Scarlette says, snapping her clutch.

Kyra only nods, her face is blank. One day, maybe I’ll get her to smile. But I don’t blame her dry expression and bored looks. There’s nothing amusing about this job, especially when all you see are bloody bodies and gaping holes.

Then there’s me.

Well?...?they don't call me Venom for no reason.

We are a group, but I stay to myself mainly. I don't get too close, and I don't make best friends. That only ends in heartache and hurt from the attachment. This job is dangerous, and I'd rather not have feelings behind it if one of them gets murdered right in front of me. But they are closer than ever.

"Okay, check," I order out, standing by the entrance of the door. Everyone knows the drill, looking down at their bodies, making sure everything is secure and where it needs to be. Hidden guns, knives, acid spray, if need be, and of course Scarlett's bomb lipstick. All she has to do is throw it, and a bomb explodes—in case the mission doesn't fan out right.

We all nod, eyeing each other before stepping out of the primary suite. Why not live in luxury, when once you step out, there is only chaos and death? I happen to like only two of those, luxury is just the perk that comes with it occasionally.

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We stroll out of the suite side-by-side with heads held high. Eve swirls her knives in her hand with a resting bitch snarl on her face. She really doesn't give a shit who sees her, huh?

We are not that group in high school that's popular and mean but don't pack a punch.

No. We are the girls who deliver punches and cracked bones. So, a word of advice, you really don't want to fuck with us.

We enter the black limo that awaits us. Each sitting in our spots. I can't help but notice the pace in my heart and the jitter in my leg. Ever since I got into this job, any mission I'm a part of, I always get a sense of shattering nerves rocking my bones. Even though I'm superb at what I do, I'm always never sure if this will be my last night alive.

And that satisfies a part of me. No, you're not. Let's live and be free. Live to flame the earth. Not until I've completed my true mission. My one and only true goal.

"Remember," Scarlett's voice hums out, "WHEAB." I know it's intended for me. She gives me a soft smile that I would suspect is similar to what an older sister would give, even if she's one year older than me. But I look away. I don't need it, but unfortunately, my legs stop shaking, and I glance at her again. Another reassuring smile on her face. Anytime any of us are feeling the nerves rattling us, Scarlett says the simple words.

WHEAB. We have each other's back.



It always calms me. Though, I never admit it out loud. I don't like to show that part of me, but I'm only human. I can't stop a damn knee shake.

I nod without smiling and look out the window. Noticing the tall bright building and the way the night sky brightens from the moon. Like it's feeding off its energy. I've always admired the moon; it shines in the darkness, and I wonder if it can ever be so bright that it can cast away all of mine.

The limo stops, and my back hit the seat from the halt. The door opens, and we get out onto the path of a red carpet. It has a flowy rug lining the path down to a well-carved white door. And to that door is a three-story house that can be a museum with how large it is.

People post around white and blue flashes around everyone, almost blind worthy.

I hate pictures. Normally, I wear my mask to shield myself from discovery, but unfortunately tonight I had to go without it. But for times like this I do my best to stay out of the shutter and clicks of cameras. I would rather be in the dark, and I need it to be that way.

Other guests walk about to the large dome, women hand in hand with their husband; I think. Smiles plastered on their porcelain faces with no care in the world. Others stroll down the carpet with flashy suits and sparkly jewelry.

We'll see how many jewels you have when your boss is dead.

Scarlette and I walk in front, while Eve and Kyra follow behind. The eyes of those in the room pry toward us; some men's eyes are a little too lustful, and the women wrapped in their arms sneer our way or stare at us with shame.

Trust me, ma'am, I don't want your filthy husband. I'd rather fuck a mule.

But I wink at a couple just to be funny, and the lady's face nearly explodes from how red it turned.

Once inside, we scatter about, already aware of the mission.

“Get to the point, snatch the trees,” Eve's voice fills my ear. Code for: find the man and get the documents.

I nod lightly, rubbing my hands down the side of my curly hair, sure to make sure my earpiece is covered. It always is, but you can never be too sure.

Brushing past the people in this hellhole, I head to the bar where not many are standing, so I press my hip to the counter, my head turning and seeking him out.

“Anything for the beautiful lady?” I whip back to a man with curly brown hair, brown eyes, and a charming smile. But it does nothing for my insides. I stiffen a smile back, leaning my elbow on the parts that are not wet on the bar top.

“Yes, I'll have.” I look back around and my stomach tingles. There goes that feeling.

Found you. I shift to the bartender. “Can I have two martinis on the rocks, S'il-vous-plaît?” I lower my smile, but it still curves my lips. I purposefully hood my gaze at him, and I can see a sweat come onto his forehead.

A sparkle to his eyes, he grins. “Coming right up.”

I tap my fingers on the bar, scheming the area and what's really going on in this place. Apparently, it's a fundraiser by the one and only Fernando Degrazi—who openly degrades women to satisfy his puny ego—but who really believes that. I'm sure it's something sick going on at places like this. People in the dungeon having sex orgies or something like that.

My eyes catch a couple sitting at the edge of the counter; he's completely entranced by her as he swirls his finger in her hair. She smiles softly at him, and nausea rides up in my belly. The lovey-dovey act is disgusting.

I hate it, yet I can't rip my gaze away, and I stare for a bit too long. Something else uncharted flutters in my belly, invading it for a second before my throat tightens.

Uncomfortable with myself, I shift my attention elsewhere. Like the man with my drinks. He must've read my mind because here he comes with two in his hand.

"Thank you," I say softly before taking them and walking off to the area with beige shawls falling around it. My hands smoothly go into the pocket of my dress, taking out powder and gracefully dropping into the liquor. I saunter to where he still sits in his ivory suit and legs spread wide, with four girls surrounding him. Nearly toppling over each other only to be next to him.

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I stop in front of them with a perked brow and half grin on my lips. He cuts his focus up toward me, his eyes grazing up my body, and I almost want to puke. Not after I gouge out his eyeballs.

“Drink, sir?” I stick my hand out, and his eyes glisten with wonder. He shoots up, nearly kicking the girls off him.

“Of course.” His voice is chirpier than I would’ve imagined. He looks at the girls with annoyance. “Leave. Go. Go.” Actually, shoos them off like pigeons wanting to eat his bread. The urge to slam my glass on the edge of the table and jam it into his neck seems like a great fate for him. They scramble away, giving me side eyes and with scowls on their faces.

I shrug with a smirk. Then, I take a step toward him and sit down on the stiff material of a sofa. I cross my leg, my calf rubbing against his.

“You’re a brave girl, coming here and offering a drink.”

“I knew you would’ve said yes, that’s why.”

“How so?”

“Let’s say, I just had a feeling” I smile brighter brushing against him. My stomach’s muscles clenching along with bile sitting in my throat.

Let’s get this job done, so I can focus on other things.

He takes a sip of his drink, and my eyes fall to it, gleaming internally. My head turns slightly through the crowd to see Eve gliding through the crowd like a snake. Her hands are stuffed in her suit pockets, and her eyes narrow at me as she gives a littlenod. I glance back at Francis, my hand runs up his tux to his neck, my breath brushing his cheek, and I'm positive his cock is getting hard.

Ugh, men, so typical it's mind-boggling. Hey, at least he'll die with a hard dick.

"Do you have a quiet place we can go?" My fingers snake around his neck gently.

He adjusts his cuff link, then grabs my hand, and brushes it over his slimy length. He's pleased with that while a smirk spreads across his grimy face. Maybe I should grab it then twist it enough to rip it away from his body, then dangle it in front of him and see if he's impressed.

The food I ate earlier works its way up. Oh, God, the nausea. Instead, I gasp, pretending I'm awed by his size. Don't throw up. I swallow it down with a smile to cover it up.

He leans into my ear, his very heavy cologne filling my nostrils, stinging it, practically giving me a headache, and his hot breath reeks of alcohol. "Let's go, baby girl."

Oh, I'm no baby. The sinister voice cackling like a hyena in my head. This baby is going to kill you.

"Lead the way." I unfold my legs as he grips me again, so I can stand. He guides me out of the area and through the wide archway. Leading me to the two spiral staircases, past numerous doors, until he lands at our destination. He turns to me with a crooked smile and hazy eyes. The dose is getting to him. Great.

He pulls me into the room, and I walk through, scanning it. It's a quaint office, spacious with an outside view. A window that we've already mapped out is covered by large brown drapes and a wooden desk. Brown and leather are furnished everywhere, with frames of his achievements hanging on the wall. His office is simple and typical—like him.

Suddenly, he grabs my waist, pressing himself into me, rubbing his hard length on my ass, and I grit my teeth. I can't bemoan. I lead him on. But now I'm going to lead him to his death. I force a chuckle, placing my fingers in his hands, careful to not give in and sink my nails into his skin and tear it off.

"Slow down, horny boy." I turn to him as I look over his shoulder. I smile again, then pushing him to the chair a few feet from him. He drops on it, his head nearly falling back from the drug.

"You know we ladies need foreplay." I give a sexy grin, and he looks up at me with a sly smile reaching for me. I swap his hand. "Not yet."

He's not an unattractive man. In fact, he's pretty hot, but what he's doing is disgusting, and he's been ordered dead by Popov. I take off his tie, motioning my hips in a swirl, and he groans. "You're so fucking sexy. I need to see you more after tonight."

"Thank you, darling." But there will be no more of you after tonight. I tie him up, wrapping his arms behind his back. Then, I grip his perfectly smooth hair, arching his head to peer up at me. I glide my knife out of my inner thigh. It is laced with a paralyzing toxin. I swing it in front of him like a hypnotizing trinket. "You've been such a bad boy lately."

He eyes the knife, but his eyes twinkle more. "I'm always a bad boy, beautiful. But I can be an even worse one for you." He shifts in the seat, wanting to touch me.

“Oh yeah?” I slice the knife on his cheek.

He growls, and then twists his head as the sting sets into his face. “What the hell?”

I let out a throaty laugh, pulling his hair tighter as the gelled down strands pop out of their follicles. “Getting rich off selling body parts on the black web is a big no, no,” I grit, and then I snap his neck. Tonight, I don’t want to get bloody. I just did my nails.

He goes limp, toppling over, and I let him go so he can fall straight on his face. I kick him over to see the slice turning purple and blue, the veins streaming up his face like webs. I smile wickedly, then I walk over him.

Eve burst in, looking at the mess. “You know you could’ve killed him before all of this.” She wags her fingers between us.

I roll my eyes at her, placing my knife back in its holster. “I enjoy playing sometimes.” Truthfully, I wanted to enjoy the moment before I leave this for good.

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*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:12 am*

Her head shakes, but a faint smile forms.

“I have the papers. Kyra, is the getaway secured?” Scarlett speaks through the earpiece.

“Secured,” she responds.

Eve and I look at each other, nodding. We speed toward the window, pulling the drapes away. Kyra sits far away on top the building in front of us, and aims the zip line gun at the window. Then, she shoots it, connecting right above the roof.

“Ladies, we have an incoming. Frances must’ve tipped off his security team,” Kyra says with ease, although the news is anything but that.

My eyes widen frantically, and I run to the now dead body, yanking up his arm. Fuck. His cuff link. A small button resides between the silver button and the shirt. “Shit! How did I miss that?” I scowl, slamming his hand back down.

The door swings open. Eve raises her gun, and I pull out my knives.

“Hello ladies,” Scarlett says, rushing in stuffing the papers into her purse. “We have to leave now.”

We rush to the window, and before we can make it past the desk, the door flies open. Five armed men stand there with their guns cocked, ready to blow us away. My heart pounds in my chest, and I look at Eve. Until a red dot appears on one of the men’s heads. Here we go. I grin, pressing my dagger to my thigh.



“Bye, Bye,” I say, waving my hand, and the other men look at him. Before they can do anything, glass cracks behind us and a bullet plunges hits him in the head. I toss my knife at one of the other men as he yells, raising his gun. Eve shoots, and the two other men drop to the floor. I take the chance to run at the man by the door, aiming his gun. I kick it away before jumping onto him and wrapping my legs around his waist. I lift my dagger and stab him in the eye with a twist. With my dagger still in his flesh, he falls down, screaming in pain, until I snap his neck. Scarlett goes into her purse, shooting the last man in the chest, and another bullet comes through the window, hitting him in the head.

Scarlette snaps to the window. “I had it!” she yells, but we know Kyra can’t hear her. She then spins back around, her long hair swinging with her.

“Okay girls, let’s go. We have to leave,” Scarlett says smoothly.

We follow suit heading toward the bay window, my heels clicking on the tile floor. I grab a statue off the desk, breaking the rest of the glass on the window. Scarlett reaches in her bag and grabs her lipstick, and then tossing it to the front of the entrance with a wicked smile on her face. The footsteps grow louder and louder. A devious smile spreads across my face as I face her, and then I turn back around to the window.

“Ladies first,” Eve says, stepping to the side. I blow her a kiss, stepping onto the frame of the window, placing my hands on one of the zip line handles. Not wasting any more precious time, I push off, the cool air crushing my face, but it feels...?glorious. I zoom in on Kyra who stands at the end of the wire, still kneeling, her sniper raised as she looks through the scope. I brace myself for the incoming end of the zip line and jump off, landing on my tip toes then flattening my heels to the gravel roof.

Men yell, and echoes swarm down below. I glance over. Other security guards rush

into the building, pushing guests out of the way. Seconds later, Scarlett and Eve follow suit, landing on the roof. We look ahead to the building we escaped from, and loud voices ring from the building and then...?BOOM!

The entire top-level blows up, now engulfed in fire and smoke; the gush of debris shoots out the window. That lipstick bomb is one hell of a weapon.

Each of us all leer, satisfied with that outcome, before turning and rushing off. We don't talk; we keep moving until we are down below and the limo behind two buildings is over. We hop in, then and only then we all finally breathe. My heart racing from the adrenaline and the thrill of it all. The part I do love.

We don't speak on our way back to the hotel—which is normal for us. Nobody wants to boast about all the kills they've had—we don't, at least.

No shame in ones that do.

I do take a chance to look around the group, a quick stab pierces my heart. Very subtle but noticeable. This will be the last night I see them again.

I look back down rolling my thumbs around ignoring those pestering sensations again.

Finally, we are at the hotel, and I'm ready to wash off and change into the clothes I feel most myself in. After a shower and washing the ick out of my hair, I slip on my forest green combat pants and black hoodie. I tie my thick curls in a high bun, wincing at the pain in my shoulder from earlier.

I already have my car packed and ready. I packed the night before, so I won't feel the need to divert from my plan. I've waited this long, trained since I was sixteen, and worked under Popov for eight years. Now it's time to seek revenge for my brother's

death.

To say it was easy convincing Popov to release me would be an understatement. I had to complete several tasks and missions before he handed me back to the world. This mission was the last.

I stroll out of the bathroom, a little sting resting in the pits of my belly as it all comes to that realization. They all sit in the front room. Eve laid back in the love seat flipping her knife, Scarlette legs crossed, reviewing the documents, and Kyra meditating. When they hear me shuffling with my bags, they all look at me as I stand in the middle of the room.

Scarlette's shoulders slump slightly, and her brow furrow in. "I guess this is it, yeah?"

I ignore that squeeze in my gut. "It is."

Eve stands walking toward me, her icy blue eyes drilling into my face. "You know you can always stay right?"

I dig my thumb into the fabric of my pants. "I can't. I've held it off long enough"

She lets out a breath, her eyes darting down. Her lip twitches slightly before she straightens her back. Her hand sticks out to shake it. "It was nice working with you."

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:12 am*

I look at it, my heart gripping and scratching. I shouldn't even be experiencing this, but unfortunately, I've known and worked with these ladies side-by-side for eight years. And we've been through more together than I can count.

I finally shake her hand, and then she steps away, nodding. This is right.

Scarlette comes over, her lip poking out. "I hope you get those motherfuckers." I've told them my plans after years of working together. I figured someone should know after holding it in for so long, and they seemed trustworthy.

She hugs me, and I tense up. "I know. I know. You don't hug." Giving one last squeeze, she lets go, backing up to gaze at me.

"You've been a wonder to work with, Venom."

I smile at the name that was given to me by my victim. And it stuck with me ever since.

Kyra turns her body from her meditation, looking over the couch. She smiles very faintly before turning back around. That look in itself spoke more words than any words could have.

"You know we are always here, Anita," Eve calls over as I walk out the door with my small luggage and carrying my dress from tonight, along with my identification and passport. I exit the door without looking back because my heart is senselessly cracking. I don't like it. This is what I'm supposed to be doing. This is what everything was for. I make it to my car as the bittersweet feeling takes over.

It wasn't meant to last forever; they mean nothing to you.

I nod to myself, almost feeling better, only to look at my nails gripping on the wheel, and I let out a sigh. The yellow paint coated on my pointer finger is now chipped off at the tip. My body slumps, and my face slacks.

So much for that.

## Chapter 5

### Venom

Two days earlier

Location:

### Hollow City

I turned up the volume on the radio the minute I passed the gray and black sign with 'Welcome to Hollow City' written in bold. It's a dreary, quaint spot in Long Island, New York, where the beauty happens along with the ugly.

The very ugly. And it's my home.

My head nodded to the melody that I love, and it's the Hollow City anthem. It truly is a mere black city where it eats everything that you hold dear alive. Leaving your fears right in front of you, taunting you to face them. I continued to rock to the tune as the road opened up so I can pass a bridge, displaying a full view of the shining skyscraper buildings lit with white luminescent lights.

Although I love the song, being back here gives me shivers to my spine and

resentment bubbling in my stomach. Almost similar to wanting to puke, but all you'll get is yellow stomach acid. Ever since arriving here, I have been on the move nonstop, keeping a low profile, ensuring my identity doesn't come up in traffic scans. And on top of that, my sleep schedule is shit, but it'll be worth it.

I'm home. Finally.

I haven't been back here in twelve years. I had no reason to since the relationship with my mother is dead, including my father and brother, who are actually dead. The day someone kidnapped and killed Carter, everything changed for me. Including my father and how he wanted to protect me and my mom, who only wanted to move on.

You're my only child. I can't lose you, too.

My father's voice circulates in my head, and my breath becomes shaky. I shut my eyes slowly. Those simple words always motivated me, kept me level-headed to stick to the goal. I won't let you down. I will get revenge on my brother and best of all, I'll kill the person whose fault it was all along.

Ronan.

Carter's best friend, the boy I once saw as family, another brother, although not related... he was...part of us in a way. I tighten my fist around the wheel, the resentment bubbling up full speed. Now, to me, he's just a billionaire asshole who's sitting lavishly in a yacht somewhere and unharmed. I've looked into him every year since enlisting in the military. And it's always the same.

'Owner of R.A.R.E shut down after an alleged kidnapping. Where is the billionaire mogul?'

He was once creating cool gadgets, selling big time. He and Carter were getting far

and becoming well known. But now who knows where the hell he is? I'm sure he ran away like a bitch from fear. I may not know where he is, but what I do know is that if it wasn't for him, my brother would be here.

I ball my fist, swallowing to contain my swelling throat. I open my eyes, looking down at my phone, waiting for the text.

Finding a home and then a cover-up job was not hard at all. It's remarkable what a smile, a fake ID, and social security number can do for you. And also having the best hacker you can have on your side.

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I chose to stick with a studio apartment and a librarian position. I have enough money to buy a mansion if I wanted to. The amount of money I was getting paid for knocking people off stacked up very well. Nonetheless, I want to keep a low profile. The librarian's job is only to keep up the image. I don't indulge in reading, that's for sure. I find no joy in books, and I would never understand someone who finds solace in sitting, and reading all day. That sounds painful and agonizing.

The ping on my cell rings and my heart skips.

Nobody

One on one. The blue sky is out.

My eyes gleam with a grin. And I head to where he is.

I end up in front of a shed surrounded by tarp over the roof and wood logs laid around the front. I crept up to the 'out of order' tin can. This is just horrible.

I peek over my shoulder, then, go inside. My brow quirks and mouth tilts down. Wow.

I'm shocked it looks so...?nice in here. Not trashy and dirty, like I suspected. The place is white with gloss like walls and gadgets neatly lined around a long white desk. The floor is made of wood, and it looks bigger inside than outside.

Oliver swivels around in his chair with a wide smile plastered on his face. His jet-black hair wildly lays over his forehead, withthin rimmed glasses and the blackest



eyes I've ever seen. "Am I still saved as 'Nobody' in your phone?" His finger taps on his armrest, the ring on his finger staring directly at me.

I give a bored look and roll my eyes. I lower my hood, shaking my curls to set them free.

"You ask, but I'm sure you know what that answer is now, don't we?" I give him a side eye, plopping in the chair at the end of the desk and gliding to him. He laughs showing his perfect molars, his laughs are so enlightening it makes me want to laugh. I don't.

"What's it going to take for you to actually change my name to my 'best friend Oliver'?" His brow lifts.

"Best friend is a stretch. More like." I sigh, laying back onto the seat. "Somebody who helps me track down evil people."

I've known Oliver since I switched my 'career' option. We met on a job to take down hackers, which is ironic. And kind of just clicked. I was quiet and to myself; he was open and flirty.

Although we never indulged in anything sexual, he also never fails to throw in a hint or two.

Anyway, we stayed in touch while he went into hacking into elites and high-status people, unlocking the horror behind the rich and the 'grass is not that greener on the other side' world. Now, he's paid millions to help blackmail government offices. It's an unorthodox route, but someone has to snuff out the corrupt. He also creates my fake identification.

Oliver chuckles again, turning to his screen. "I'll take that," he cocks his head at me

with a lazy grin, “for now.” Then he winks.

I purse my lips to contain my smile. I guess I egg it on because I don’t tell him to knock it off.

“Let’s get to the good stuff.” He presses the screen on his computer, then stretches it, zooming in for an enlarged view.

“Let’s welcome Joe. He and his crew do dirty things and dirty deeds for sometimes rich people. Some are just inexplicable.” He shakes his head with his lip curled. I look at the photo. Heat framing my face as I narrow in on a man with a square goatee and a leather jacket that looks like he wears it to bed and the shower.

“Inexplicable how?” My nails dig into the leather armrest, creating crescent moons.

He rubs his pointer and thumb together. “He’s believed to be involved in sex trafficking and smuggling.”

My mouth parts, a snarl making way. “Filth. I thought GenCre handles that?” The secret underground organization that only people who are in this world would know. I’ve never met this person in charge, but I would say if there is one group I won’t fuck with, it’s them. I heard their ways are ruthless and barbaric, completely the opposite from how assassins or myself would handle a situation. Popov didn’t handle kidnapping, nor traffickers. We were told never to crosshairs and don’t, by any means, get in between them and their job. That never scared me, it only stoked my defiance as a young twenty-one-year-old. However, you listen to the orders given to you.

Now, I have no one to answer to, but myself. But I have no desire to run into them. I’d rather avoid that.

“Oh trust. They do,” he says matter-of-factly. “Anyhow, I guess Joe learned about the big guy Ronan and wanted a piece of it.”

My nostrils flare at the name I wish to crush and disintegrate. “So, where does this man like to hang out?” I lean toward the desk.

His finger glides over to the next holographic screen. My eyes shift with it.

“He’s a regular at the bar, Striptease Plays. Low-budget strippers and water down drinks. That’s the meaning of his life. The other crew sometimes meet with him there, too.”

My head shakes as my lips curl deeper. My hand aches from the temptation to bash this asshole’s head in. I finally smile because this?...?this is where it starts. Knocking them off one-by-one like a maze of dominoes.

And after I’m done with them all, I’ll toss each of their heads in front of Ronan before taking my gun and shooting him straight in his crooked head. Sending him to the place he should’ve already been.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:12 am*

Chapter 6

Venom

Location:

Joe's house

Operation: Kill

I leave my marks on most of my victims. But each one of them will get my mark.

‘V.’

So even if they find out what's happening to their men, and they attempt to flee with my scar, I will always find them. The next night, after scoping him out at the bar, the night before, I attacked. I could've done at that moment, but something felt off.

I spotted two similar black trucks, which are odd to have in the same parking lot. Same color, yes. Same type of truck. No.

And two, he also had some lady with him tucked around his slimy arms. I don't need witnesses, and I'll rather not catch him getting his rocks off.

So, I silently invited myself into his house, which was gray but surprisingly clean. The only thing out of place was a plethora of cigarette buds in an ashtray on the coffee table. Which is a shame because he's killing himself from the inside out, when

I'll be the one taking care of that for him. It won't be cancer-ridden sticks destroying him, but me.

The couch showed signs of wear and was positioned in a way that made it obvious it was where he laid. Soon as he walked into his house, I throat punched him, when he fell to the ground, I took that moment to press my boot into his back as he gagged and gurgled, desperate for air.

Before he could get any air out or any relief of breath, I whipped out my knife, slicing him from his nape and all the way to his low lumbar. His death screams roared out. Maybe he should've chosen to live in a neighborhood and not on empty land. Then everyone would hear his cries for help. But the best part is knowing that you're crying for a mercy that will never be granted.

It works in my favor.

"Enjoy your journey to hell." I kicked him over, then plunged my knife into his throat. The crimson splattered up and hit my face, the warm goo dripped down my cheeks, eyes, and above my upper lip. My stomach twisted with nausea. I pressed the back of my hand to my mouth to stop the gag.

It was right at the base where the acid lay, making its way up.

I may be a killer, but I'll never get used to the feel of someone else's blood on me. Unless it's mine, of course.

I swallowed it down. I hate it, but I did love seeing his eyes widen, probably wondering 'why me?' His hands flew to his throat as my venom stung and invaded his artery, infesting itself into his streams.

Now he was truly being eaten from the inside out. The idiot continues to writhe and

squirm like a fish craving a bit of air, but instead I placed my hand onto his cold, sweaty cheek soothingly.

“Shhh. It's okay, you're just dying. That's all.”

That's when I went to work, grinning the entire time as I carved my symbol into his back. My smile was genuine as I glanced down at my handy work outlining his puffed skin. “‘V’ marks the spot.”

The last word he gets after stringing him to his tree in his backyard upside down. My blade is so sharp, it was easy to stencil in another letter in the front. If I'm honest, I'll say it added a bit of life to him over the ugly ass tattoo on his chest. A symbol that I didn't bother looking further at.

I'll say that wasn't easy, and my back ached from tying his feet to the ropes, then pulling it up from the tree branch. His disgusting, dark red blood spilled to the ground, draining from him like molasses. A pool of blackened crimson formed underneath, almost sending him off to hell's home.

No matter how much my muscles burned, it was so Goddamn worth it.

After that wonderful achievement, the next night I move on to my next victim. Tractor. He lives in the slums of Hollow City, tucked into the dark pits where all the crime and drug dealers hang out. Worn out buildings with broken shades and barbed windows resemble the true meaning of rundown. It's ridiculous that he retrieved this money from taking people to still resort to living like this?

The wind brushes under and through my thick hoodie, the material not giving the warmth that I need. I stuff my hands inside the opening pocket, cupping my fingers together to heat them. Winter is my favorite season, but that doesn't mean I enjoy the cold air that comes with it.

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*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:12 am*

I round the corner, avoiding the cracks and fresh gum sticking on the pavements. I move out of the way as a kid on a skateboard swoops past, brushing an extra gust of air by me.

I keep my head lowered and my ears open. The neighborhood is silent—which is odd, free of humans, only awakened by the passing cars and blaring horns.

I make my way up the deformed stairs as a man on his phone jogs down, not bothering to look at his face. I can tell it's a man by his large boots and how his legs open as he goes down each step. He takes up half the radius of the staircase, and it's not wide. I attempt to squeeze by, but he runs right into me. The strength from him moves my shoulder back, almost making me stumble into the rail.

Walking with your phone to your eyes in a sketchy neighborhood is not smart. He's going to get robbed. Poor thing. I truly don't wish that on anyone, but he can learn that lesson the hard way.

I straighten up, my focus still on the prowl to upstairs. I fix my hoodie as I walk up.

"Apologies," a deep and rough voice speaks out. I don't turn around because I don't care for his atone, only for him to leave me alone.

"Watch where you're going." Asshole. I roll my eyes as I thread the curls through the hoodie after tightening the drawstring. Now, back to where I'm going. What floor does Tractor live on again?

"I'm not sure if you got the notice, but the building is closed." He has an accent. It's

not difficult to detect he's of Spanish descent with his slurred words, but the English is understandable. And the notice?

The pebbles under his foot skeet in a way, letting me know he's shifted toward me.

“Not for me.” My hand wraps around the handle to open the door. I am not concerned with upholding any laws and policies for that. This man upstairs is about to meet death and there is nothing, not even a city work-order, could do to stop his fate.

He lets out an annoyed breath, his boots scraping up the stairs. “Look, lady, you'll have to come back tomorrow.” And before I know it, his large hand wraps around my arm, bringing me back.

What the fuck?

My heart shoots to my throat as I go into red alert defense mode. I twist around rapidly, breaking from his grasp and aiming for his nose. Not letting it break, but enough to make it bleed out.

He stumbles back, growling so loud that it's enough to send a tingle up my spine. “What the?—”

I cringe to myself, tucking my lips between my teeth. Crap. Reflex. I don't stop to check on him. He shouldn't have touched me. You don't touch someone you don't know, and plus, nobody puts their hands on me unless I allow them to. I stroll to the elevator. Thankfully, the door is already open, so I didn't need to wait and eventually going head-to-head with this caveman. I don't have the energy to kill two people in one night.

Another bark rings out, loud and vicious. “Are you crazy!?”



I smile to myself. Kind of.

Okay, where did he live again? Oh yes, third floor. I press the number button, then I lean on the wall to get comfortable. I gaze up at the flickering light and dead flies lying inside the dirty covering.

Until this hulk of a man burst through the doors. I flinch, a jolt racking my body, similar to being a part of a horror movie. My heart swells in my esophagus, cutting my eyes to him. Due to the crappy lighting, I don't get a great view of him yet, but he's bestial and now stalking to the elevator unhinged. Oh, my hell.

His strides are long and powerful, his stature tall and strong—enough to break through a brick wall. As he gets closer, I see fury on his face, the clench in his jaw and blood trickling down to his mouth. The rage is so intense, it's making me enthused.

I smirk, my heart rate picking up from the turmoil burning from him. He stills for a second, as if he's trying to map me out and see who's the person who fucked up his nose. I could scream like a normal woman would when seeing a dark and crazed figure launch toward them, but instead, I raised a hand, waving bye to him. I can tell that irks him, grinding his fucking gears because he charges at me blazing with rage. Oh! He's a crazy one.

I love it.

I get one last look at him, tawny brown skin and deep honey eyes. I scrunch my brow, the name popping into my mind. Something distinctive pulls at the pit of my stomach. The door shuts before he can smash into it, and I finally let out a breath. The doors begin to part slightly, and I jolt back into the elevator wall. "What the hell." I mutter. Then it slams closed. I release a sigh of relief, rubbing my chest and frowning. "Fucking maniac."

Two loud bangs travels up to the elevator shaft. Maybe he kicked the door. I don't blame his aggression. I mean, he did get his ass handed to him by a woman. But I'm not just any type of lady—I'm trained, and I'll slice your throat in the blink of an eye. However, that doesn't mean it didn't send some unease up my spine. I relax again, swallowing the dryness away, thinking back on the lunatic.

Honey eyes. I glance down at nothing, the connection setting in. I jump off the wall, heat flaming my neck. No. He's not in Hollow City anymore. I'm sure of it.

I'm so bent on killing Ronan, I think every guy is him. I relax, letting out a thick sigh, resting back on the wall that I'm sure someone pissed on.

What if it is him?

No, of course, that's not him. Anyone can have honey-colored eyes. And the last time I checked, Ronan had very short, faded hair—this man's hair was fuller and wavy.

But the same color. I throw off my hood; the fabric making it turn into an inferno. It's been twelve years, and anything can change.

I shake my head. No. I'm going crazy.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:12 am*

The elevator doors expand, stopping on a floor with dirty green carpet and terrible lighting. Damp air, mildew, and the stench of urine combined set in my nose. Bile rises in my throat from the terrible blend. I swallow it down, covering my nose with my hoodie sleeve, finding the number to the apartment. Forgetting about the altercation and my paranoia, I walk past several doors until I'm at the spot. He's probably not here since the building was evacuated. If so, I can stay until he gets back. From the sight of it, there is not a soul in the apartment.

Expecting the door to be locked, I still twist it, only to find it open and ready for me to go in. I wait a second, frowning deeper as I glance over my shoulder and down the hall.

Why would it be open? More than accessible for me to stroll in a slice off his face. Speaking of slicing, I reach for my hip, noticing the weight is lighter than usual. My hand touches an empty holster.

"Shit," I grit through my teeth. I look down, sure I'm touching the wrong spot.

Empty.

My legs stiffen, taking in notice that my dagger is, in fact, gone. Son of a bitch. It was just on me. Where did it go?

I peered back down the hall, hoping to see a gold and black blade. My eyes spread wide, not catching anything. Dammit. I let out a frustrated groan. I'll have to check downstairs before some kid gets to it and dies from poison.

Oh God, that's a horrible outcome.

But fuck me, what if that disaster is still awaiting me downstairs like an axe murderer, hiding next to the elevator shaft, ready to snap my body in half?

I can fight. My fist can hold its own, just like my dagger.

With my decision, I lean onto the door to push off, but it opens slightly, knocking into something hard, blocking the entrance.

My eyes squint. I push it again, and I'm met with the same resistance. I skate my view around, the door ajar, and I can get a glimpse of the inside.

Blood trails as if someone dragged a body. I push my weight harder into the door with a small grunt and stick my head inside. Oh, hell. My eyes grow wider.

Tractors's body lies flat across the foyer with his legs splayed. Blood spills out from the bullet wedged right in between the crease of his forehead. His eyes are still open, and his face is slack, like he died pleading for his life.

This is not right. My breath comes out harder as I slam the door shut. I back away, looking around. This should not have happened. My throat becomes dry as I piece in the puzzles. Was he murdered before the city called in the water repair? I scurry off, speeding to the elevator.

Who the hell killed him? I jab onto the dirty elevator button at least twelve times before it opens with a ding. It could be some enemies he's been dealing with. Who really knows what he's gotten himself into with other people. Then again...

I think harder. That was fresh blood. This just happened not too long ago. At least ten to fifteen minutes before I arrived, and the only person who comes to mind is the

random man jogging down the steps. Nothing seemed out of place with him, yet apparently the city called for water leakage, so what was Tractor doing here if that was the case, and why was the mysterious crazy man here if no one should've been here?

I blink, catching my breathing as I play out options, reasons, and fucking ponderwhy.

I'm going to figure this shit out because if someone has it out for my victims, then that's a huge damn problem.

The elevator door swings open, and I don't think of the man that may be skulking, waiting for me.

Part of me hopes he is, so I can kill him just for being annoying and me not getting the actual person I came for. I fold in my lips, stalking to the front doors, praying to the sky that my dagger is still there.

I get outside, and I'm hit with a gush of chilly air and no dagger. A chill runs down my arms and legs as I scream internally.

Shit.

This is all just going to utter shit. I would say a kid got it, but a twisted and logical part of me knows thatmantook it. And if he took it, then he better hope and pray that I don't find him.

I glance back up at the apartment building, rolling my eyes. Looks like someone's replaced with Tractor here and is now added to my kill list.

Chapter 7

Ronan

Death finds you easily.

I found them.

And it's a she.

She is Venom.

The devil in black that has invaded my mission and branded my thoughts. Every minute, every day, I'm staring at her photo; my mind making up its own description of what's under the hood. The fascination with her is becoming sickening, but I won't stop until I see who she is.

My pen taps on my desk, hitting papers and maps that's not holding my interest. Then I lean back into the chair, squeaking as the pen falls to my lips. Flashbacks of her bashing me in the nose and escaping with no fear in her step, it lit a different kind of flame in my chest. I reach over onto my desk, grabbing the cold metal. Her dagger fits in my hand like a personal souvenir. I swirl it around in my vision, admiring the design and embedded letter as I think back on the other night.

I smirk at the thought. The bloody scene and dead body likely took her aback when she arrived in the apartment—not as fucked up as her mess, but I'm sure the same results. Frustrated, wondering who got to him before she did.

My only problem is: She can become the problem, and that's why no matter how intrigued I am, she has to go. I didn't wait this long and map out my poison just for it to be drained right from under me. I don't know what her smoke is, all I know is she's after these men too. And I want to find out why.

After that, I'll get rid of her, dump her body in a river somewhere, and then I can finish the job. I wonder if she'll scream and beg me to stop when I'm carving her own letter on her body, or if she'll smile while she faces her death. I'll find that out soon.

Hence, why I spent the other night figuring out her moves. I decided not to go after Henley, who's next on the list. Okay, technically I did, but not the way I planned. My generosity took hold, allowing her to keep the one up on him.

I watched her scope out my guy. Same bar as before with Joe. See, I knew she was going to end up there, and she's going in order—just like me.

She's vigilant, not making herself known, hiding behind the dust and carved shadows. The whisper that makes no sound. It intrigues me even more, itching at my sleeve. That itch behind your neck that doesn't leave. I need to see what this mystery woman is doing. She wants them dead, and it's clear she's on the prowl for them.

My blood is pumped, feeding the adrenaline to watch her in action, to witness her kill more ruthlessly than me? I won't forget the art piece she left behind that night. I swear I dream of it over the nightmares I already have.

Unfortunately, she didn't kill Henley, and I won't deny my disappointment—I was looking forward to it. Instead, she waltzed off in the wretched shadows, ducking through people that walked the sidewalks. Blending in well with the dark and the hooded ensemble that most of the Hollow City residents wear.

I continued following her. Not making it obvious, of course, like walking behind her. That'd be stupid. It's not like in a movie, where people don't know when you are following them; they can sense you, causing them to panic and possibly run off.

I don't want that. No.

She goes past the small brown café that's closing the gate. Her head stayed down, with her hands tucked into her hoodie pockets. She headed toward a well-lit corner store, and I hoped she would've turned her head once she passed the store—just to get a glimpse of her.



She didn't. Wishful thinking.

My car rode slowly, gliding up, turning the corner. She walked at least ten blocks, and it makes me wonder if she has a car. If so, then why is she walking by choice?

She ended up at an old three-story apartment and slipped in. It's not like the one from Tractor's place. No, this had life to it, with well-kept people and no signs of crackheads lurked in the pathways. I parked far across the street, shutting my car off. My eyes squinted, and I grazed my chin.

I narrowed in on the building, minutes passing as I raked my eyes up the windows, guessing which light may flick?—

On.

A grin spreads across my face because now I saw you little, venomous snake. I watch her silhouette moved past the covered white curtains, shielding me from discovering the menace. I could've gone inside. Scared the fuck out of her, strangled her until near unconsciousness, then killed her.

I shifted in my seat. I won't. I needed to see her face. She's clearly skilled from the way she walks and conducts herself. And let's not forget the bloodshed she left at that fucker's house. But this is better than anything else because now I know where she stays.

I flop out from the memory as my fingers fly to my keyboard, typing in my code and scanning my thumbprint. Security is a must with our devices. I look at the three large screens in front of me. Henley pops up, and I lean back, making an arch with my hands and bringing them to my lips.

I'm going back to the bar because I may be insane, but I have an inkling she'll be

there again. I stand, stuffing her dagger into my pocket to head out.

I bust through the doors toward Boone. “I’m going alone tonight.”

Boone straightens up, his stance stiff with a furrowed brow, before nodding. He doesn’t talk much out in the open, and I don’t force him to. I’ll rather him not try to talk me out of doing a stake out alone.

“If I don’t come back. You know what to do.” If shit goes left, Boone takes over. Mal refuses to partake in it and believes I’ll never die. I’d like to think that in this business you can pretend to be God all you want. But you’ll be seeing that motherfucker sooner than not still thinking you’re invincible.

Without much talk, I leave. Hoping to avoid Mal because she will want to join, and I do not need her to.

Time to find you, Minha cobra venenosa. My venomous snake.

## Chapter 8

Ronan

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:12 am*

Let's Play Little Snake

I was right, of course. Just I thought. The snake waltzes to the bar where Henley, the third culprit, resides. To be so worried, he's still out doing his nightly activities.

I've been keeping an eye on her for three days straight, but only at night. I know her routines in and out of her apartment and sometimes at the library.

I never get to see her face, since the only time I get to notice her is when it's dark. Throughout the day, I'm following missions across the state, and when I get back, I head straight to where I saw her last.

Now tonight I get to witness it all. I sat far from the apartment waiting for her move. Three hours, to be exact. And now it's nine at fucking night. My patience is dwindling, and I'm ready to just say fuck it, but I can't. I'm too desperate to know.

This better be worth it. Because soon I'll see who this snake is, but I'm also interested in how she's going to kill this man. Will she catch him in the bathroom? Follow him home? Lure him in with her shiny scales?

Wind swims through my hair and down the crease of my coat, jerking my bones into a slight shiver. I'm more excited than anything. All I need is popcorn.

I stand between two trees covered by high bushes. I'm camouflaged, wearing all black, which seems fitting for the night sky.

The vibrations in my pocket distract me. Fuck. It's probably Bedford or Mal. Maybe

even my brother Cruz. I don't need his shit tonight.

I grab it while still focused ahead. I set the light on very low, making sure it doesn't blind me or set off my camouflage.

Gear

Consider yourself removed from the barbecue, you spawn of Satan.

My face dulls at that waste of my attention. Stuffing my phone back in my pocket, I divert from the stupid ass message. Big ass baby. I wasn't going to go, anyway. I don't do gatherings.

I kneel, watching as she slowly creeps up to the door with faux bones and skulls nailed to it. Damn. Her normal green cargos and that oversized hoodie swallowing her whole. From a far I can scope her figure, the sweater is large, but it doesn't fall past her ass, and I can't help but slowly skim down to it. It's plump and round—my cock is talking, which makes me disgusted, but it's a natural reaction.

She reaches out, wrapping her hand around the long handle, but her foot lands slowly in front of her before straightening her back.

Something tipped her off.

She then shifts her body, her head lowered; she speeds away from the bar, striding toward the back where the dumpsters are. I straighten up, my eyes zooming, searching for a sign that she's in the bar.

Nothing.

There's nowhere for you to go, little snake. You little motherfucker.

She must've fled the scene—she probably felt my presence. That's amateur on my part.

My throat tenses, darting my eyes all over. What the fuck? What the fuck? What the motherfuck? "Where did you go?" I murmur to myself, looking through the gaps in the bushes. She couldn't have gotten too far without me at least seeing where she?—

The sound of a gun cocking and the cool metal pressing into the back of my head stops my movement. I freeze.

"Who the hell are you, and why are you following me?" she grits out, pressing the gun harder into my skull.

I take in her soft voice. My ears are notating little things to remember, so when I get out of this shit, I'll have further information to stand on. Or maybe I'll snatch out her windpipe—we'll see.

"Answer me." She nudges the gun as I'm slowly standing on my feet with my arms raised in 'surrender'.

"Isn't it obvious? I'm watching you," I say smoothly. Ballsy as fuck. She can shoot me right in the head—no hesitation. But I'm taking a chance that if she's smart, she's more interested in my 'watching.'

"Oh," she sings, and the damn hair on my neck stands. I grit my teeth at the act of my own body in this detrimental situation. "Then you must be ready to die tonight."

Heat runs through my forehead—my neck stiffening. I crunch my boots on the dry leaves, preparing for my next move. "Someone may be dying tonight, but it sure as hell won't be me."

My arms whip around, slapping the weapon directly from her grip; she loses her footing, toppling back. I charge at her at a fast speed, tackling her to the ground, a low oomph escaping her lips.

Before I can lean up to pull off the mask and see her face, her arm wraps around the back of my neck, tightening the grip, pulling me under her pit like I'm a headless horseman. Her long legs wrapped around my waist. She squeezes in, nearly breaking my ribs in a death trap. I grunt out pain and the air escaping my lungs. I dig my teeth into my bottom lip from the bone crushing grip.

“Any last words,” she says breathlessly.

I could say this is a fantastic position to be in if I was fucking, but currently, that’s nowhere near the case. If I don’t do something, I will die, she’ll make sure of it. I let out a low groan containing my grunts, so it’s not too loud. She squeezes again and I tense at the pressure.

“Yeah. Fuck. You.”

Finding a solution quickly, I skate my hands down her thighs—not noticing the plushness of her meat under my palms, of course—then under her hoodie. She stiffens, her legs gripping tighter, and then I dig my thumbs directly into her waist bone. Hard enough to cause it to crack, painful enough to bruise.

A muffled scream fills her throat, loosening her grip. I take this moment to get out of her hold, rise, and go after the gun.

I inhale sharply, shaking my head from how fucking lightheaded I’ve become from that combat chokehold. Everything is dizzy and twisted, but I rush over to the gun near the left trees, stumbling as I do. My hand outstretched, I reach for the weapon, but her weight topples on my back, wrapping her legs around my waist. One hand gripping my hair and the other elbow punching into my shoulder. I grunt, gritting my teeth from the hits.

I reach my arms over my head, gripping the top of her head, getting a chunk of her hair tucked in her hoodie and throwing her over my shoulder.

“You’re crazy,” I growl in an angry whisper, but she lands on her feet, twirling around, and mule kicking me. “Goddammit,” I spit out under my breath, tumbling back against this damn tree again.

“Watch what you say next, or I’ll cut out your tongue before killing you.” Her voice is oddly soothing amidst her threat. Like someone you want to hear singing lullabies but laced with a wicked tone that’ll make your ears bleed in the process. I can’t help the thrill that spikes in my chest.

She glides to me with that sultry switch to her hips. With the mask still blocking her face, the darkness overshadows her form, making her look like she was born from the night sky. Prancing about like a fucking snake, slithering beneath the cracks.

My eyes roam over her body, still ignoring the thump from the beat of my heart. “I normally wait to take a lady home before doing anything with my tongue.” I lean off the tree, putting my fist up to prepare for attack. I don’t believe in fighting innocent women or putting my hands on them, but she’s clearly fucking crazy and wants to kill me—so I’m not backing down for shit.

But she stops mid-walk. Something in her shifts. Her chest rises and falls, her hesitation obvious.

My brows scrunch at her sudden stillness. “What? La Serpiente venenosa, afraid to get bitten?” I say, my fist remaining at my chin.

We begin to move in a circling motion. I’m eyeing her feet, and I can’t tell what she’s looking at beneath that mask of hers. But I’m sick of it, and I’m ready to snatch it off so she can reveal herself to me.

Our movements are slow and methodical. She hums out, “The only one that should be afraid is you.” Her words quiver angrily, then she stops mid-movement. “Ronan.”



My brows furrow deep, but before I can register a reaction, she's charging toward me.

Her small fist swings at my face quickly, but I block each hit. It feels like a rope is wrapped around my throat, squeezing and pulling until I can't breathe. She knows my name. How the hell does she notice it's me?

Who in the fuck is she?

I need an answer NOW. Entrenched in my thoughts, I didn't block her incoming hit fast enough, giving her the leverage to punch me in my mouth. She goes to swing again, but my hand catches her wrist, twisting it until she yelps, leaning over like a rag doll. Then I launch my knee into her stomach.

And no—I'm not satisfied. Metallic rims my mouth, laying on my tongue, alerting me I'm bleeding because of her again. Now that she's leaned over, her arm twisted in the air, I pull her hood off her head, only to see an array of long curly hair falling out and around her.

Still, I take a handful of her locks, as much as I can fit into my fucking hand, and swing her into the tree. Slamming her hard enough that the branches shake, releasing a trickle of leaves now falling around us.

She yelps out again with a whimpering moan. Her body slacks, but I won't let her fall.

I look to the side, seeing the gun within arm's reach by the stump of the tree. I bend over and grab it; the cold metal tingling in my hand.

Her body shifts, moaning still. My hand grips her neck tight, lifting her to her tiptoes, scrapping her back against the tree. She lets out another strangled whimper, wrapping

her dainty fingers around my wrist, scraping at the skin, kicking her feet to push me away. But that only makes me squeeze tighter. My other hand points the barrel of the gun to her head.

“Speak now or your brains will be part of this tree,” I warn, my head throbbing with heat and my muscles aching to pull this trigger.

The doors to the bar open and Henley stands out. Both of our heads snapped to him. He can’t see us. I face her slowly, and I insert the gun into her mouth. Although her mouth is exposed, her face remains covered by the mask. I press the metal further in, nostrils flaring and eyes, warning her that if she does anything that I will shoot her in the mouth and then snap her neck.

To my surprise, she doesn’t move until he goes back inside. She attempts to kick me, but I press my legs into her knees, slamming her against the wood again. She groans, her hand going to her head.

“Now tell me who the fuck are you,” I snarl through biting teeth, my face close to the spikes protruding from the masks. “How the hell do you know me?”

“See for yourself.” She wheezes, her breath scattered from my tight grip, but I don’t give a damn; she’s going to talk—even if her pipes are broken.

“Take it off.” I wave the gun at her mask. I can feel her swallow beneath my palm. Her hand raises to the mask. My heart rate picks up a notch, worried I’m going to see a woman with a grossly deformed face, but instead she pulls it off and my heart grips in my chest, and it plummets to the ground.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:12 am*

Pictures and sweet images, innocent smiles, tiny giggles, and textbooks. A teen with two thick braids down her back and loose curly strands pass through my mind. My memories whirl like a collage, and I'm nearly stumbling in the grip. Almond-shaped brown eyes stare into mine, and she cracks a sinister smile with a gleam in her eyes.

“Remember me, darling?”

I blink at her, and my mouth parts, trying to make sense of it all.

The culprit is Anita Velz. The little sister to Carter, my best friend.

I don't understand because I have been searching for her for years. Until I gave up eight years ago after realizing she practically fell off the damn face off the earth. And now?...?I breathe harder, staring at a ghost in the face, smirking so deviously. Now I see what she's been up to.

“H-how.” My words fumble as they come out. My insides are squeezing so tight it's similar to a steel hand punching me directly in the chest.

This is Venom.

She may be this?...?person. But I can't help the guilt seeping through, and I relinquish, loosening my grip entirely—which probably isn't the best idea. But right now, I'm not thinking clearly. What the fuck? The gun in my hand follows suit, lowering until it's by my side.

“I could ask you the same thing.” The words come out in heaves from her breath,

being constricted.

I keep staring as if her face will change into someone else, and my mind is finally giving out on me. “I looked for you,” I whisper.

Her features soften before glaring again. “You didn't look hard enough.” Then she knees me directly in my balls. Pain shoots up to my belly and I let out a growl, leaning over to clutch my traumatized dick. I back up, falling to my knees and to my side to fathom my fate. Dickless and dying. Fuck, that's one way to go.

I see her feet stepping toward me before hearing a clunk, like the butt of a gun smashed into something hard. She falls to the ground and then a swish sound cuts in. Her body stops. Already in so much pain, I didn't register that Mal had walked up to me from the shadows.

“Looks like you need a hand head man.” Her sedated sniper slangs over her shoulder.

I release an agonizing breath, looking at Anita collapsed. “I had it under control.” I groan, shutting my eyes from the excruciating pain.

I don't sound very convincing at the moment.

She hums, “Sure.”

Chapter 9

Venom

Location:

I don't fucking know.

Operation: I also don't. FUCKING. KNOW!

If it wasn't for him, baby girl, none of this would've happened. I won't lose another child before I'm dead. You're going to learn to protect yourself, pumpkin.

A sharp pain pounds against the back of my head. Is my father here? He can't be because that was the last time he called me pumpkin. I groan, opening my eyes slightly, but the pain thumps again. What the hell happened? I attempt to pull my arms apart to stretch, but I'm halted by what scratches like ropes burning against my wrist. I move them in a circle to see the depth of it.

Yep, it's tightened pretty damn well.

I finally force my eyes open, wincing at the throb, but it's black. I don't panic, but my heart is racing. A black cloth is over my head. I think back on what transpired. Someone was watching me. I felt his stare. I gravitated toward it; the energy pulling like a metal to a magnet. Only to come face to face with the little stalker and realize the man is Ronan. RONAN FUCKING ALVAREZ.

My mind wasn't playing tricks on me. It was him that night. I could've killed him! And the fucker of a thief has my dagger. Once I get it out of the mess, and it's back in my hand, I'm going to jab it straight up his ass.

I jerk in my seat, twisting and turning. Oh, he's so dead now. Dead, fucking dead—so dead.

I'm angry at myself for hesitating.

Snakes don't hesitate. The General's voice slithers in my mind.

I'm mad at myself. I could've shot him beforehand—or broke off a tree branch and

stabbed him in the neck. But something else took over and my mind scattered. I became sloppy, and all I felt like doing to him was screaming and slapping at him like a scorned little girl. Where has he been all this time? He left and didn't care to go to his best friend's funeral? I seethe at myself for thinking that. For pretending that I care. That's not what matters!

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:12 am*

This won't happen next time. If there will be a next time. With the way this situation is going, I'll need to escape first, of course.

"Looks like she's awake," a cool but raspy voice sings out. It sends a creepy shiver down my spine.

"Take off the cloth." That deep Portuguese accent stinging my ears enough to fall off.

Ronan.

My first tightens into a ball, my nails digging into the skin to shape crescent moons.

The sound of heavy boots strolls toward me. I can only spot the faded movements of legs through the black cloth, and then the person reaches me. They snatch off the black rag—some strands of my hair go with it. I wince from the stinging of my hair follicles ripping from my scalp and the bright light blaring in my eyes.

I look up to see a tall man with faded red hair and muscles that overtakes his black shirt. Looks like he's not to be fucked with.

I don't care. I'll kill his ass too.

"Asshole," I seethe out. I've had enough hair pulling for the night with the way Ronan was yanking my hair and slamming me into that damn tree. I'm sure I have scabs on my scalp that could last a lifetime. His expression doesn't falter; he only watches me, stepping back into the gap between Ronan and a woman whose voice I heard earlier.

I look over at Ronan standing there, arms crossed, glaring at me, tall and confident. He looks completely and utterly different. He was tall and lanky, with perfectly quaffed hair and an innocent aura to him—now he is someone?...?I don't even know.

Ronan wears a black shirt, presenting the sleeve of ink and art, his muscular form indenting every curve on his shoulders and arm, along with black cargo pants and black combat boots. And his stupid golden-brown eyes, but it's not how it used to be. There's something haunted and sinister behind his gaze, and I can't help the hairs that stand tall on my arms. I narrow in further to a slice on his upper lip and cheek that gives him a chilling look of death in the flesh.

"You're such a pussy. I thought only girls pulled hair." I rub the ropes together, hoping to get them loosened.

"Stop trying. They won't come loose," Ronan says, ignoring my jab and pointing his head to my hands.

I stop, letting out an exasperated breath. I need to play this carefully. Looking around the area, I spot dark gray walls, a few wooden chairs, and scratched flooring—like a demon used its nails to dig into the concrete. My eyes drift beyond my findings to find a large metal door. I guess we are in an abandoned facility.

"There's no escaping this place."

My eyes snap to the lady—she has dark hair and hazel eyes. This annoying woman grins with her freaking teeth, placing her gun in front of her.

"So, you're Venom."

My eyes drift back to Ronan, whose expression is no longer hard, but there's something unexplainable in its place. My tongue sours at the sound of my play name



coming from him.

“I am. Or Anita. You pick,” I say softly, but my delivery is nothing but that. I surprise myself; not referring to myself as anyone besides Venom has been my foundation for years. I look up at him through my lashes with a tilt to my mouth. His body shifts, wincing from the name I’m sure he hasn’t even thought about in twelve years.

“Let’s go by Venom. She’ll be the one they’ll,” I point my head toward the woman and man, “be looking at once I kill you. And maybe I’ll let your little henchman live, too.” I give a stiff smile at the girl. “Maybe.”

I shouldn’t be provoking them, but whoever said I was known for tolerating anyone’s shit? And from the way Ronan is looking at me, and how he did when he discovered who I am—the way his gaze softened, and his hold retracted—I’m almost positive he won’t kill me. Fortunately, I am still planning to kill him, so I’ll use that to my advantage.

The feline woman stiffens; jerking her body forward to launch at me, but Ronan’s hand snaps out without even looking at her.

“Headman, give me the word, and I’ll be glad to blow a hole into her skull,” she grits through her teeth, anger blowing through her nose. I can see the steam coming right out.

But Headman?

Okay, now I’m extremely intrigued. Who is he really?

Ronan grabs a spare chair and drags it toward me, the scraping sounds bringing an aching sting to my ear. He parks the chair in front of me; then sits in it, leans forward, and rests his elbows on his knees, clasping his hands. He’s at least twelve inches from

my face, and now I get a full view of his dark features.

“Why were you after those men?” His eyes penetrate me, and I stare right back.

“Come closer, and I’ll whisper it into your ear.” I nudge my head for him to come.

His teeth clench, showcasing the chiseled outline of his jaw—it’s as sharp as a machete.

“I’ll ask again.” His tone is hard. “Why are you after those men?”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:12 am*

“I don’t owe you an answer, big brother.” I tease with a little giggle, the title I used to joke around with because he was always at our home as if he were family. At one point, it did seem like it. However, that was never the case and now a part of me wants to know how he knew my location, and I know for a fact he was the one who killed the other man. This would change things for me. That makes my stomach clench with unease. Because if he is someone capable of doing that, then...

I catch him wince from my joke, then his features harden again. “You do if you want to live.”

I shouldn’t feel a shudder swarm to my feet or my breath stilling. I’ve dealt with many scary men. But it’s something about the darkness in his eyes and the promise in his tone that has me second guessing if he really would kill me or not. A second ago, I was sure.

Now, I’m not so sure.

“I believe you’re after the same people I am. The ones that killed your brother.”

After the same people I am.

My insides are hot, clawing through the bones and blood. My mind is in shambles at his admission. We are after the same thing? The man I want to see dead, along with everyone else, also wants to kill the men who killed my brother.

Wait, what?

## Chapter 10

### Venom

He was the reason your brother died.

I clearly heard him wrong.

Heat flares from my nostrils and my hands turn clammy. “You’re lying,” I hiss.

“He’s not, Cinderella. We’ve been tracking down these men for years now. Waiting to strike,” the snarky woman responds.

I squint at the lady that can’t keep her mouth shut. “And you are?”

“She’s part of my extraction team,” Ronan says, leaning back in the chair, crossing his arms.

My brows furrow now. “E—Extraction?...?team,” I repeat. Now I’m really baffled.

“Yes, I am the creator of GenCre.”

My breath catches. Internally, my eyes spread wide like eagle wings, my throat constricts tight enough to look like a mummy, and a glass bubble shatters in my mind, demanding to keep quiet. NOW. Externally, I keep myself settled. I’m not having a mini breakdown over this information.

GenCre: An elite secret organization with a task force so deep, it’ll drown you—and we have been specifically told not to intervene with. We’ve been told stories of the man behind the work, who they called Poison. Ronan’s brow lifts in a way that clarifies what I’m thinking.

Fucking balls. Keep calm. Don't panic.

"You're the creator. I would've never suspected," I admit, crossing my leg.

"We can work together."

I burst out in a hollering laugh. "Why the hell would I work along with you? I work alone." Mostly true. On this, I don't want a crew, a team. I want to let my venom loose. And plus, the thought of working with a man I clearly resent doesn't sit well with me. I want to gag just thinking about it.

His hands splay out, nodding his head. "We are after the same people. It can help eradicate them faster. If not, we'll only be in each other's way, and we both know that will not end well for us." He breathes out exasperatedly, rolling his broad shoulders. "You can stay here."

"Ro, you can't be serious. We can't trust her. She wants you dead," the no name woman barks, gripping her gun.

Ronan's head snaps over his shoulder, and she falters back, her gun dropping to her side. She dips her chin to her chest.

Well, damn. On a leash, I see.

"Take a chill pill, darling. I won't be joining your team of jokes." I point my head at her. Then my head cocks back to Ronan from his ridiculous suggestion. "You are really insane, aren't you? I would rather play Russian roulette with myself than be a part of your SWAT team."

"We both know you have nothing, Anita. No real home. No place. No family." His words hit me like a brick to the face, and I see blazing green.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:12 am*

I fling up in the chair, the rope scratching against my skin. The burn sizzles up my arm. “You know nothing about me, Ronan.”

His brow raises. “I know you sleep at a rundown studio. And the only person you have is...?what’s his name?” His fingers snap together. “Olive, is it?” Oliver, you prick.

My eyes fall to my boots. A knife pierces into my heart from his stupid accusations. Something tightens behind my eyes, and I suddenly feel the urge to throw my head back and scream as loud as I can.

How dare he?

Don’t show them your weakness. You’re a killer. General’s rants parade in my head. I grind my lip into my teeth until I taste metallic. I swallow, drifting back to him, giving him a smile and dipping my head. “I have quite the little stalker. Did you watch me fuck myself too?”

The one who doesn’t talk clears his throat, looking down and the lady who has yet to tell me her name, I notice her face flusters. Ronan, on the other hand, his jaw tightens, and I can feel the frustration fuming from him. He leans forward until his lips are near my ear. His scruff slightly caresses the skin on my jawline. I lean away because I don’t want him this close to me because, honestly, I’m uncomfortable. I’m discombobulated with this entire ordeal, and I don’t want to be here.

Turning his head, so his lips only graze my ear and his hot breath filling it, he whispers, “I bet you would love that, wouldn’t you, Pequeña serpiente venenosa.”

Little poisonous snake.

A shiver roams through me, unwarranted, and I jerk my chin in the opposite direction. I don't answer him.

He only leans away, sitting back in the chair that moves each time he does. "Let's work together."

I tilt my head up along with my eyes, as if I'm giving it serious thought, and then I look back at him. "Still a hard no. Can you let me go now?"

His jaw is rock hard, and the scent of his wood and amber surrounds my senses; I can't even part my lips without tasting his aromatic scent.

"You know I'm right. We are on the same team here. I want to avenge your brother. My best friend." His eyes hardened behind his brown pools.

I toss a humorless chuckle. "Best friend."

He ignores it. "It's only a matter of time that you get in my way, and I may have to do something I very much don't want to." His voice is nearly a whisper, doused with ominous threat.

I scuff in disbelief. "Oh, like what? You'll kill me too?" World record, Ronan—killing two family members. Such a noble man. Still, he doesn't respond to me, but the answer in his eyes differs from the threat in his words.

He squints as if he's confused and scans my face for a second before he leans back further, and I'm thankful for it because any closer I would've opened up my mouth and bit down on his lip. Tearing it from his face. That wouldn't end well for me, would it? His minions would kill me, no question, and I need to live to see my plan

through. He can say all this, but do I believe him?

No.

He's the reason Carter is dead. Dead—in the ground—while he's above, prancing around and creating underground organizations. I'll kill them first, then he's next.

“And the answer.” This time I lean closer, my arms extended, so I can be just as near as he was to me. His eyes flick down to my mouth briefly before slowly gliding back up. “Is still no.”

I can see the slight twitch in his sliced lip, the darkness engulfing his eyes from my answer. The air is thick and heavy; the light above dims with a flicker, as if the energy between us is so potent that it surged through the electric currents and atoms in the air, causing a near power down.

A sly smile parts gracefully on my lips. “I'm going to hurt you, Ronan. You'll die an unimaginable death that'll make you wish that bullet was given to you. Then, I'll string you up like that ass wipe I did at the house and carve you like a Halloween pumpkin.” Every last word and syllable held with emphasis, gliding off the roof of my mouth and rolling among the tongue, spoken in French. A language I'm sure he doesn't understand. “Now, let me go,” I hiss out in English, leaning back because my arms are aching and the burns from the tight ropes are increasing.

He watches me intently, like he wants to hurt me, but I see the same shift in his eyes, the same hesitation as when he found out my identity. But regardless of what he wants, I would never work with the enemy.

After what feels like minutes of staring at each other, he stands up. Nearly kicking the chair back. I raise my chin, my chest rising and falling.



Fuck off. I don't care. Be upset.

He walks behind slowly, making the hairs on the back of my neck shoot up in alert. The sound of a knife flipping out catches my ears, and I tense, not exactly knowing what to expect. I whipped my head around to see him kneeling. He grips the top of my arm gently, and I tense once more from his hold. It's warm, calloused, and large. His rough hands glide down my sweaty arm; each skim is like stepping blocks, like he's feeling whether I'm real or not. Until he hits my bunched hands and cuts the ropes off.

"Ro, what are you doing!?" The lady on high alert stepped further. The other man has been quiet this whole time. He's only been watching like he's ready for me to blink wrong.

Bringing my arms around me, I massage the ache on my skin where the ropes were digging in. I glare at them all.

"How can you know we can trust that she won't bring anyone back to kill you? Or us."

Truthfully, she's not wrong. At this point, I'm not sure what to think. I just know I need to get out of here.

"My things." I stand, the sharp stab in my rib knifing me in the bone, but I don't wince. I roll my lips into my teeth and face Ronan, who walks over to the white table that sees more dirt than the actual ground; he grabs it off the edge. I meet him halfway, my eyes on him. I continue to stare at him as I feel around, checking for my things.

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Brass knuckles—check.

Gun—check.

His gaze is fierce and dark and mine, no less. He digs his gold eyes into my face, and it almost makes me want to look away, but I won't.

However, I am missing one thing. I extend my hand. "My dagger."

His lips curl up a bit. Not much, but the wickedness in his eyes speaks for themselves. He reaches behind his back pocket, retrieving my dagger.

My heart soars. I missed you, baby. I thrust my hand out to snatch it. He pulls back. My neck tightens. "What are you doing? Give me my knife."

He sucks his teeth, eyeing the metal as if he hadn't seen it before. "I think I'll keep it."

My lips part as blood drains from my face. I stay calm. "How's your nose, by the way? Stinging still?"

That tiny lift to his lips falls, his eyes dulling. "Just fine, actually. But if you want your dagger, you know where to find it."

Anger boils under my shirt. I'm ready to deck him again, but I'm sure if I do, then the two looney toons will hurt me.

I send a tight smile. “Have it, asshole.” I hope it pokes his hand, and he dies from the poison. An evil chuckle sounds off in my head as I imagine him poking the tip like Aurora on Sleeping Beauty. He won’t go into a self-induced coma, that’s for sure.

But I roll my eyes from the faded amusement glorifying his face. I fix up my holster around my waist. “And my hoodie. Do you want to keep that too?” What was the point of taking it off, anyway? If you want to see me naked, just ask.

“Over here, Cinderella.”

I swirl around the heel of my boot in time to see the lady with an annoying snarl throwing it toward me. Someone’s upset.

I catch the hoodie with one hand and pull it over my shoulders. “Have your parents ever taught you respect? You don’t throw things at people. It’s bad manners.” I add on, knowing she’s already not feeling me. Her olive skin reddens with rushed blood, and she lets out a growl, charging toward me. I stand there, crossing my arms with my eyebrow raised. Ronan and the big man in the corner come rushing toward her to prevent her from possibly clawing at my face.

Ronan’s head snaps to me with a grilling hard stare. “Leave. Now.”

I’m not afraid of her, and I don’t care if I hurt her little heart. I huff, walking past them as the man with the red hair cools the tiger off. Ronan just watches me as I exit out the door.

She calls me Cinderella, but I’m nothing like her. There’s no pumpkin awaiting me outside these walls, and there’s damn sure no Prince Charming sweeping me off my feet into a sweet abyss. It’s just demons and dark skies in the night, carrying me away as I ignore the sting from Ronan’s words as they fester.

I insert the dangling number key for the room, swinging under my palm. I walk in as I'm met with a swoop of cold ass air from the humming AC vent and a dry smell that should come off like the room is fresh and clean, but I'm sure it's nowhere near.

Motels aren't my thing, but the thought of driving around the entire Hollow City searching for a luxury hotel already has me fatigued, and my mind is screaming 'no.'

I'm tired. I toss my bag onto the thin, carpeted, dirty green floor and flop onto the bed, letting out a tired huff and lying flat on it. I stare up at the ceiling, thinking back on every single thing that had happened. Tonight was a gigantic lightning fuck.

After being blindfolded again and transported in a truck with his other team of losers, and practically thrown out in front of the bar, I dusted myself off like nothing happened. Although my insides were burning with the unknown and rage.

After Ronan spilled the hot beans on knowing my location, I immediately knew I wasn't going back to the 'rundown' apartment. It wasn't the Hamptons, but there was a humble candidness to it.

Either way, I'm uncomfortable with the thought of sleeping there. I might as perch myself up onto a flag with paint that says, 'look at me, I'm Anita Velz.'

Not happening.

I would've slept on the floors of the library basement, but if he's been following me, then I'm sure he knows that too. It's exposing and violating. And I'm beating myself in the head for not catching on sooner.

I release another exasperated sigh.

I didn't love the apartment, and I could've gotten better if I wanted to, but it felt nice

to almost have something to settle down with for a few months. Not constantly on the move and never having your own sanctuary. A place to go back to after all the chaos. A home.

I can't stay here forever, but I'll find another place. It may be outside of Hollow City, but it'll have to do while I finish my duty.

After a few conscious thoughts, I shower, scrubbing my arms and legs with an extra force to get the touch of that man off me. Asshole.

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And for him to keep my dagger?

My heart thuds faster under the pebbles of the water. It only angers me because it's not just a dagger. I've had that blade since I was twenty-one; after my father died, I had it made specifically for this reason. It was a pledge to me that I'll one day get the men and kill them with the toxins on my blade. A reminder of my goal, my purpose. And that I would never let my father down because if I not for that, what point would I have served?

Would it all be a waste? All the pain and late night tears that I had to hide... All the horror and blood. I can't, and I won't allow it.

I step out of the shower, wrapping my body under the towel; the bristles are not very soft, but it's better than nothing.

I stroll back into the open area, ready to put on the spare shirt and underwear I kept in my car, until I see a flashing light coming from my pocket holster. I narrow in, my heart making its way to my stomach slowly.

What is that?

I creep over to the flashes; the holster hanging over the chair, tucked into the brown desk. I reach inside, hesitating. It could be a bomb. Or a camera.

No one touched me tonight—well, besides you know who. I blink several times before plucking out a circular black card. Disk?

And in bold, the letter G.

My heart officially squeezes like a crushed soda can. When and how? Those questions are useless. The real one is—what is this?

I lift it up, inspecting the smooth metal with the gold letter G that is engraved on top of a button shaped like a thumbprint.

My head shakes. What if he has my location now? My breath quickens; he can find me again. I clench the device in my hands, my frustration spiking to the pale-yellow ceiling.

He's the owner of GenCre. Of course, he can find me and slip in shit undetected. Even when I said I'll avoid them at all costs, I happen to physically fight the creator—and to make matters worse, he's already my enemy. I can't say I'm not impressed, though. The stories of GenCre are not pretty, and that means Ronan is really not the one to fuck with. And that also means I don't give a fuck.

I didn't get through this lifestyle cowering away from the boogeyman. I'm the one to blow him up and devour his black soul. Fear is a word—not a feeling.

Something I have always told myself to keep thriving and afloat.

I slow my breathing. If he wants to find me, I'll be here with my gun raised and ready to shoot.

I throw the disk onto the floor, grab my boot, and slam the heel directly on the top, smashing it to smithereens.

Same way I will smash his head.

May the last shadow stand.

## Chapter 11

Venom

Four days later

Location: Terrain Construction

Operation: Kill Henley...?before Ronan does

I had a terrible nightmare last night.

Ronan found me, grabbed me and dragged me by the leg and all the way to his lair of demise. I was fucking petrified, I was screaming and clawing the ground, begging for him to release me. All he did was glare over his shoulder with bright brown eyes and continue until he threw me into a large black dungeon.

I woke up in horror and sweaty with fear. For the first time, it consumed me whole. Which is also how I knew it was a dream I would never allow myself to give into a begging tantrum, and I sure as shit won't succumb to Ronan, out of all people.

You know what I think? I think he must've been hit in the head a few too many times in this business. If he thinks I'm going to sit idly by and let him tell me what to do or work with his league of weasels, then he's very much mistaken.

Everything that he does makes me uneasy, especially learning his entire reasoning behind this. I won't let it misguide me and change my mind, regardless of what he's doing.



It's also why I'm ducked behind a construction trailer with my gun in my hand. It's a quarter past five, the sun is near its end, layering moody and dull clouds that hide the brightness. It's fitting for the results to come.

Death.

Chunks of gravel shift and crunch beneath the sole of my combat boots, and my knees nearly go numb from the position. I waited until his crew members and employees left for the day, only leaving Henley behind to tend to manager duties. If only his staff knew the real man behind the scenes, the one that's involved in callous acts and misconduct.

Then again, I wouldn't be surprised if Henley and his employees are a part of the corruption he's involved in. Do I have to kill them too? Are they involved with a filth of a man that orchestrates kidnappings and steals money from the rich to meet their monthly salary?

Truth be told, I can care less if you steal from the rich. At least do it for a good cause, maybe to feed the less than, I don't fucking know, but don't take children in the midst and scar them for life. It's cruel.

Don't kill a brother—that meant more to someone than anything else.

Thinking about it fills the flames with the venom that burns my veins. I'll leave the rest of my assumptions for later and stick to thenow.

I lean my back against the metal. The wind blows against my neck, signaling to me that it's time.

I glance around once more to get a feel of my surroundings. Metal scraps residing on the ground left unattended, an unattractive trailer with porta potties line awkwardly

over the closed off site with a gate blocking the entrance. Machinery and forklifts parked neatly by the gate, blocking the view for anyone to glance in, including the hazards warning signs nailed to the various poles and the 'Do not enter under construction' sign plastered outside the gate.

I twist my body over a head, where metal stairs lead up to an even more unappealing shed container that's seen every weather condition you can imagine. Three windows line down the sides of the storage shed, giving me a view of Henley.

Hi there.

I glisten with joy, spotting Henley walking past his window, phone to his ear and body shifting around to talk to whomever. From the way his mouth opens wide and other hand swipes and gestures out means his complaining about something.

I lean back against the small shed as my feet move forward, tiny pebbles scrap and filters in every glide to the end of the shed. The simple plan is to make it up the steps as quickly as possible before he plans to leave.

Once I'm almost past the trailer, I glance over again, only for my chest to grip me as if someone personally took the muscle and crushed it with their bare hands.

My eyes spread drastically with a rattle to my teeth that could crack the tooth. Ronan gradually walks up to the steps with his gun in his hand while the other is in his black jacket pocket, like he's going to a restaurant.

Are we serious? My heart tumbles around like a boxing bag, every knock sends me into attack mode.

When did he get here? And how did I not catch it? Dammit, there's no way he's killing Henley before I do.

On a different mission now, I take the initiative to kneel while running over to the stairs, unseen by Henley. I hop over sharp tools and loose boxes on the way.

Ronan's eyes slant at me from the footsteps of the gravel being munched and kicked. His brows lower with a squint in an amused surprise, and I swear on the planet of this universe that I spot a flicking grin on his lips.

I shoot a knowing glare at him as I arrive at the steps, same as he does, with an extra weight of animosity on my shoulders. I glower as my finger rests on the hilt of the gun that resides at my side, suddenly feeling trigger-happy. I could shoot him now and end it.

Another time.

"Glad to see you've arrived," he says nonchalantly, turning to start his-myyyyyjourney.

I block the way with my arm, my gun hitting the rail, I squeeze past his wide frame to go before him, our bodies brushing together as I swivel in front.

"I'll take it from here." I begin transcending up the stairs with a skip until a hand is clasped over my elbow, pulling me back. My eyes bulge from the boldness that he takes in touching me. My head snaps back to him hard enough to rock off my shoulders. "You really are a termite." I seethe through clenched teeth, leveling with his height due to the steps. I get uncomfortably close to his face that I can see the dilation in his honey specs. Or smell the musky wood scent he gives off.

He lets out a light breath that flows into my nose, with a chilling smirk that shouldn't come off attractive. My shoulders tense as his body shifts up a step, towering over me on this much too small stair. The edge of his boot knocking against mine as he hovers above me like an ant to a human. I have to stretch my neck to look up at him.

“I’ve been referred to as worse. I’ll take the compliment,” he says smoothly, with a wider smirk that makes me want to uppercut him again. With his hand still on my elbow, he shifts me back behind him. Attempting to because I keep my handlocked tight on the rail. He tosses a warning look, using more force to wrench me off the stairs. I pinch my lips as he gets the best of me with his unholy strength, almost flinging me around back to the bottom steps.

“I got this,” he states in an authoritative tone that grinds my gears into overdrive.

I let out an aggravated groan, raising my gun to his back as he sets his foot on the next step. I cock it to get his attention.

“Did you forget the gun? I can shoot you right here,” I spat out, making my way back up the steps one foot at a time.

He stops, letting out a ragged breath with a tilt back of his head, like I’m the one stopping his plan. He fixes himself back straight, placing his gun into his back belt, then turning around and by the time he does, the barrel of my gun is right back where it started from the beginning. Aimed at his dome.

He tilts his head slightly, sending the loose strands of his hair to fall over his eye. “Make my day and try. I want you to,” he says precariously low, stepping back down to meet the gun halfway. His eyes flick into an ominous narrow, shifting the curl of his lip.

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“You must be a fool to welcome your death this way.” My foot raises to the next level, now pressing the gun to his forehead.

“I welcome him every day. He and I are the bestamigos.” Ronan grabs the gun and instead of yanking it from me, he jams the cold metal further into his skull, narrowing his gaze at me. “Go on, do it.”

My throat itches for only a second as I shift on my feet, glancing at the door overhead and to the stairs. His callousness is ill-fitting. I would rather catch him off guard or see fear in his eyes before I do something that should have my best ending result. Satisfaction. I don't want to see him excited and encouraging me to go for it. Wanting me to kill him. Nothing about this is satisfying, if anything I'm uncomfortable.

Besides, what would I get out of killing him now, it'll only alert Henley the idiot up there. “I won't waste my precious bullet on you. It's too important, and you just are not.”

I pull the gun from his tight grip, mashing him out of the way with my forearm to get to the source. He grunts from the hit but pulls me back by the wrist. Fury jolts up my stomach, stinging my legs.

I yank my hand from his hold; that's the fourth time he's touched me without my approval. “Boundaries aren't your strong suit, is it?”

His lips fold in, stretching the skin over his mouth with an annoyed flare to his nostrils. “Not if it requires me to protect you. You don't know what he has prepared

in there—he could have a bomb for all we know.”

I’m not sure why his words churn my belly with resentment, polluting me with detest.

I shake my head. “It’s twelve years too late for your protection. I didn’t need you then, and I damn sure do not need you now. And news flash asshole, I don’t need your help,” I snarl, wiggling my gun to give him that preview again. I’ve done well handling my own thus far. Why the hell do I needhimout of all people to do that?Fucker.

“That won’t do you justice if you’re blown to pieces.”

“I’ll take my chances,” I rush out, bunching my shoulders and turning away to move on.

Ronan lets out a huff. “Anita.” He grabs meagain.My arm swings back, aiming for his face, but he catches it swiftly like he’s been preparing since that night. He twists my arm back to my side, yanking me to his chest.

“Take your hands off me,” I grit through clenched teeth, squirming to be released from his hold, my gun nearly slipping from my grip. Maybe I should shoot him in the foot.

He shifts me down the steps; my resistance doesn’t seem to have much effect on him, and it’s unbearable as my body is rigid. “Need I remind you what happened last time you did this.”

He closes the gap, his foot on the step above, blocking me from moving. “And I’ll remind you I’m open to all your stunts and tricks. But do know this, I’ll win every time.” He retorts, shooting a narrowed gaze at me.

I growl in frustration, wiggling again. “I hate you so much.”

“I’ll take that.”

The door to his office opens and our attention snaps to it. Henley walks out with the light in the office off and papers in his hand. His focus is on the jingling of his keys until he perks up and notices the two people in all black with a gun each. Terror folds over his eyes and gaping mouth, the papers spill out, the wind catching it and flying them down toward us. Everything seems to go in slow motion and all we need is Mozart playing in the background. We both swipe the papers as Henley rushes back into his office and slams it shut.

“Fucking shit.” Ronan grits out, slapping the last, then shooting me a furious look like it’s my fault. Really!? Pushing off the rail, I jet up the steps to get to the door. Crap, crap, crap.

In such a hurry, Ronan glides his hands up my waist and grips to speed me up. “Stop touching me!” I screech, swiping him away. Once to the top, I swung open the door to find Mr. Henley here, grabbing for anything in his vicinity to swing at us, including a large pipe. I duck, hoping it hits Ronan instead. Lifting back up, my leg swoops up connecting with his arm, he hollers, his hand falling down. I backward kick him, and Mr. Ronan adds on kicking again, hitting him in the chest. Extremely hard.

“Shit!” He growls, crashing back into the window, the glass shattering behind him.

Ronan pulls out his gun to shoot, but I kick the gun out of his hand. You will not be killing him, I am!

Ronan glares at me. “What the hell are you doing!?”



“Fuck off!” I scream, turning quick and aiming my gun at Henley, who’s now running around his desk grabbing a lamp.

“What the fuck do you want!?” He shouts, throwing the lamp. I duck, pulling the trigger, but he dodges it like a mouse. It hits the wall instead. He’s quick when he’s terrified. Good. Makes it more fun for me. He runs back over to the window, throwing across the desk and chairs. By that time, Ronan retrieves his gun and takes aim.

Henley ducks in time and leaps out the window.

My eyes widen, rushing to him. “What the?—”

Bam, bam splat!

I look over the frame and down below at a body laid crooked, and blood splatter from his skull. Idiot hit a dumpster before making it to the ground. It’s a two-story level, so he would’ve made it. But not if he got banged up along the way.

Ronan leans over me to scope out the scene, his body resting on my back and a manly aroma fumigating my nose. “Looks like he killed himself.”

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My lips pinch with a sharp eye roll, my ears ringing from his deep voice and breath on my hair. I elbow him out of my way. Too close, too fucking close. “You think.” I storm off, swinging the door open and deliberately slamming it back. I stomp down the steps as the wind blows through my hair. What was the point if I couldn’t end his life?

Goddamn Ronan ruining everything. My boots hit the metal staircase like it’s my worst enemy; I march down each step, tapping my gun on the rails, shaking the unstableness in a shaft motion.

A second later, Ronan bust through the door as I make it down the last step and round the stairwell to get to Henley. I eyehim with disgust, catching him already staring at me with this unsettling expression that ruptures teeny tiny pricks down my neck.

I arrive at a?—

Shit on rocks.

I curl my arm around my waist, resting the pointer and middle finger between my brows. I shut my eyes, not from the disgusting view of his dismantled body. But because my way of killing him would’ve left things less messy. Less bloody.

The other night with Joe, I’ll admit I got a little hyper and gory. But today was a straightforward day, uncomplicated and less grimy.

The scraps of pebbles and the crunch of rocks rips into my intrusive thoughts. I open my eyes, my fingers still on my head, glancing down at the man. His head hit the

edge of the dumpster, causing it to split open and part like the Red Sea. His eyes are open, looking up to the sky as if he were praying to whatever is above to accept his soul.

“I’ve never seen anything like that. A man that jumps to his death.” From the corner of my eye, Ronan places his hands on his hip, shaking his head.

I roll my eyes. “He planned to escape. He must’ve forgotten the dumpster was right there.”

He continues to shake his head. “I’ll call sanitation. One less man down.”

I lower my hand, facing away from the sight of him. Ronan, I mean. He disturbs me. I stare off at the birds in flight with their flock. Soaring the skies, flowing through the clouds, free and all. So free.

“Next time, let’s not fight over who goes first. I could’ve killed him before you went all solo.”

My teeth grind over each other, my foot tapping from the baritone of his accent swarming in my ears. I swing around, my feet kicking up. “There won’t be a next time, Ronan,” I emphasize his name with an extra flick of my tongue.

“This can be so much easier if you put aside whatever issue that-.”

“Issue.” I scoff as he speaks, shifting my hips with a vigorous tap of my foot.

“You have with me,” he finishes, pointing to his chest with a cock to his head. “And give some thought to joining me. This will only continue happening until, next time, we both get killed because of your actions.”

My actions?

Steam rises in my chest like a volcano preparing for eruption. Heat overtakes my being, and my hand itches to slam my gun right into his nose.

I glance at the ground where the body lay. Don't let them see you weak, Venom.

I release a lengthy breath, cooling the burn that gathered on my head. I send a tight smile. "Have fun cleaning up the mess from my actions." I walk backward, leaving him with a smirk and my middle finger directed at his clenched jaw and burning gaze. "And go ahead, track me with your silly little device all you want, you creep."

"That's not a tracker. Press the button and you'll see. You know I'm right." He yells out, stuffing his hands into his jacket.

I twist around, my middle finger still raised. Although I should feel like I've accomplished something from that, I'm delivered with something entirely different. Because a sick part of me wants to entertain his idea of joining forces.

And I can never do that.

"Are you sure it's fine?" I ask Oliver, switching the phone from my hand to my shoulder while I unclip my magazine from the gun and place it onto the small table attached to the RV wall.

I stroll through the camp truck that squeaks each moment I take a step. It's old, but inside it's completely refurbished, with fairy lights lining over the walls and a small kitchen section with a flat stove burner and one square sink.

"Of course." Oliver sings out in his husky voice. "What are friends for? What's mine is always yours." he says in mandarin, reminding me of that, although I don't accept

it. I went this far in this trade to keep my relationship at a minimum of none. No feelings, no friends, no L word.

I rock my head with a low smile because no one can see me. “Well, thank you. I’ll try my best to keep it tidy.”

He chuckles. “You better. Unless you want to leave some panties for me, that’s okay too.”

My mouth gapes. “Goodbye, Oliver.”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:12 am*

His laugh becomes louder, and I roll my eyes, clicking the end call. I tap the phone in my hand, glancing around the little home once more. I haven't felt comfortable enough to even stay at the motel.

The invasion of my privacy is unsettling, and maybe now I can get some kind of good sleep. I won't have to keep one eye open, thinking I'm going to wake up with Ronan hovering over me like a creep.

I slant through the narrow section past the bathroom door and up the one step to get to the small area. It resides a king-size bed in its cubby and a set of white towels, extra white blankets, pillows and a thicker cover above the shelf of the bed.

I get undressed, cleaned up in the small tube of a shower—washing away whatever filth and grime I experienced from today's catastrophe.

Once I'm all clean, I dress in my oversized shirt and flannel pants, grabbing my old clothes to fold into my bag.

A blue flashing light flicker in my jean jacket, with a tiny beeping noise like it's signaling a device. My heart pulsing in my throat, as I grab for what I know it is.

Dammit, Ronan. I pull out the black metal circle card, and that only sends my stomach tingling with an unknown flap. Of course, he slipped it in again. I can laugh at his bravery while crushing this thing again. But there's that inkling again, transferring into this pulse that swarms into my mind.

It's not a tracker; press the button.

You know I'm right.

We should be working together.

If I work with Ronan, that goes against everything. Everything. I have worked toward what my father wanted. What I nearly vowed before he took his last breath.

"Anita."

My heart jolts from the voice of my father calling me by real name. A name he hasn't called me in years. And yet on his deathbed he does. I'm not sure whether to be happy, sad, or angry.

I gaze up at my withering father, whose face is sunken and gray from lack of energy.

"I should've been a better f?—"

"No," I quiver out as I grip his cold, frail hand, placing it to his chest. My throat is tightening with pressure, my nose stinging to keep the emotion behind my eyes.

He sighs, closing his eyes, his breath weak like a whisper. "You know what to do then. Revenge will always prevail."

My chest dents in with a hitched breath. "Yes, General. I will get them all."

I'm not sure why I didn't want to hear my father's words. His apology. It would've created a larger hole in my chest. A void I could never fill. And with him dying, I would never have that chance.

I shake my head, blinking away what I know is easing up. The burn behind my eyes that I won't spill.

I swallow the ache and stare back down at the metal card. Although it was never the plan to work with Ronan, of all people. He will only continue getting in my way, and he's a stubborn man who won't leave it alone and walk away. He's more adamant than I realize, and I want to know what his play is in this. And why were they after him during the kidnapping? Why was Carter killed? The men who do the hostage attempts take rich people. Carter was on the brink of it, but not at a rich level.

Unless he was bait. I need answers. And the only way to get that is through the source.

Plus, I'm holding on to my vow that those men will die, even if I have to work alongside the enemy to get that done. Everything I have done was for this moment.

Shit. I can't believe I am doing this.

Press the button and you'll see.

I let out a heavy sigh, pressing into the circle button in the middle. "Here we go."

A blue holographic 'G' symbol rises from the device. And the AI voice recognition begins to speak.

"If this card is in your possession, then you now have access to GenCre. Congratulations, you are now in the first recruitment stage to join one of the most prestigious forces in the world. Follow the coordinates to find your way to your new home."

The hologram switches to a map, spinning slowly and marking the line to an X with pinpoints and the destination. I squint, narrowing into the blue light.

New home?



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“Please note, you must never give out our location. Failure to do so will lead to your death. Failure to accept this invitation will also lead to death.”

I scoff in disbelief. “What? That’s absolutely absurd.”

“Welcome to GenCre. We will see you soon. Goodbye now.”

### Chapter 12

Ronan

Snake, snake come and play?...

If it’s one thing I know for certain is that I’ve never been so sure about something in my life. Besides seeking revenge. But asking Anita to join my team never felt right. It’s why I continue to slip the academy location device on her.

I’m betting my life that she is considering it because if not, she will constantly invade my missions, and I can’t allow that. You work with me, or you die. It’s that simple.

Alright, I take that back.

My stomach twists with the thought of killing Anita. It doesn’t put me at ease as it should, only a sour taste filling my mouth.

Instead of murdering her now, I have this strong sense to protect her with my life. I can’t deny the fact, even though I should.

I don't want to look after her. I need to. For my own sake and redemption.

I squeeze the trigger of the metal that's clasped in my hand. I aim it to the target, rounding it off until the clip is desolate.

Seeing the face behind the Venom really fucking shocked me more than imaginable. After the night she left, we ran a face recognition on her and the results of her past came up full force. You can change the name, but you can't change the face.

I might have stared at the screen for hours, and even more after our little issue at Henley's. I stared as her brown eyes seared deep into my severed soul until my eyes went blurry and stung.

Speaking of that clusterfuck from yesterday. Seeing her at the site storming to me like a wildfire shocked me. Ready to burn me alive. It's fun getting her that way, even though she wants to kill me. Or claims she does, she could've pulled that trigger, even when I grabbed it and tested that theory. Stupid maybe, but I'm not afraid of death, I stopped fearing him a long time ago. But it also helped my decision to bring her here.

I grab the clip on the tray, putting it into position with a forceful slam. Memories of her as a teenager, happy and full of innocent life that I have always admired. Only for it to be turned into a life of chaos and death.

For both of us

And I couldn't protect her from that; the guilt doesn't have any rectitude. I didn't see it coming, just like I couldn't see my mother's death coming. Or my best friend. The image of my mom's wrist slit and bleeding out on the marble floor makes way into my brain, causing my stomach to twist and my hand to twitch against the grip of the gun. Carter's lifeless body laid out at my feet. Vehemence of rage combs my chest.

“I’m getting us out of here, Ronan. But if I don’t make it out.” He pauses, breathing heavy. “I need you to take care of her.”

My head shakes, the air tightening and the ache of my hands burning.

He releases a ragged breath. “Do you promise?”

I shiver from the blood dripping down my chest. Everything stings. It hurts so much. “You’re making it out of here to your sister.” My voice trembles.

“Promise me!” He nearly shouts, causing me to wince.

My chest heaves. I can’t do that, I can’t even survive, I’m weak. And still, I give in.

“I promise.”

I purse my lips, shooting until the ache comes. Take care of her? I failed that, and now there’s nothing to protect. She’s far gone, a woman who has her own back.

You failed.

Don’t think about it. I push the thought far back, keeping it tucked and hidden from the light.

I shoot fast, making my finger ache from the rhythm. Only maybe I could’ve dug deeper, looked harder until my eyes fell out. I could’ve found what was right in front of me all along.

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Now she's older, and even more beautiful, and ten times more dangerous. I never had any urges for her; she was seven years younger than me, and I respected my morality and her brother to make any attempts.

So now when I see her, the thick and curly hair that falls past her shoulders, that was wrapped around my fingers. The bangs that fall over her forehead, the murder in her eyes when she looks at me, her wit and fiery tongue. I don't see Carter's littlesister anymore.

I fire off another round, not caring where I'm shooting in the range, but soaking in the feeling of the gun rocking in my hand. I can't help the shame that engulfs me from the words she said.

And now you're going to die.

Why does she want to kill me? Does she think I had something to do with the kidnapping? These questions spun in my mind all night.

Vicious heat crawls up my arms to my neck, and my nostrils flare. I reload, shoot, and repeat the process, over and over until my hand cramps, and the muscles in my forearms burn with exhilaration.

"Something on your mind, Headman," Mal's voice comes in. The door closes, and I look over my shoulder, reloading the gun once more.

"The usual," I say with a clipped voice. I load a round in the chamber and pull the trigger, blowing a hole in the target.

She sighs as her boots descend closer. She takes her steps slowly with each thud.

“Does that person happen to be the little Cinderella with the name Venom?”

“It’s Anita,” I snap. “Her name is Anita.” I continue blowing rounds into the silhouette of a person on the paper target.

She raises her hands in a teasing defense. “Boss, I think that’s done.” Now beside me and my vision clearer, she’s pointing at the target practice in front of me. A gaping hole the size of a head is in the middle. Hitting the bullseye.

I lift a brow, placing the gun down. I’m satisfied for now.

I shift to Mal, who stands next to me, her expression analytical. She crosses her arms, and an eyebrow perks. She’s almost like a little sister I never had. Ready to point out all the wrong shit I’m doing. It’s something I didn’t experience due to my brother always being so tight up my father’s ass. He wanted to be exactly like our father. Whereas me, I wanted nothing more than to be the opposite. My mother is the only one that understood that.

“What?” I walk off to take off my gloves and earmuffs, actively avoiding her annoying glare. She follows me, of course.

She still doesn’t speak, but I can tell she has a shitload to say; she’s been with me long enough to know when she’s pressed on something.

“FalarMal, or forever hold your peace,” I drool out, disassembling my gun to clean it.

“Oh nothing. Just the fact that you invited some lunatic to the school, and did I not mention she wants to kill you, Ro?” she huffs out, and I look over to see her nails making crescent moons in her skin.

There is a lingering itch on my heart from Mal referring to Anita as a lunatic. I shouldn't give a damn what name she's called, and yet I do. "You have nothing to worry about. We have the same end goal—which is to see them dead. It makes sense. Trust me." Our situation at Henley's only proves why we should work together.

"I do trust you. It's her who I don't trust. She's an assassin, for fuck's sake. They don't care about anything but themselves." A pitch-black inferno blazes in her eyes. The bias against assassins is stupid at best, but I don't disregard her concern. If the shoe was on the other foot, I would be apprehensive, too.

"I understand." I turn to her, stopping what I'm doing and giving her my full attention.

She shifts on her feet, her eyes darting down then back up. "You do."

"Of course." I cross my arms across my chest. "If anything goes array, you have my permission to kill her." It's a giant stretch, but it's the least I can do to get her the hell off my back and give her a sense of control.

There will be no killing. I can't allow that, and I can't let Carter down. Not anymore.

A huge, wicked grin sprouts on her face. "It'll be my pleasure."

I give her a dry look before going back to what I was doing. "It's not like she'll agree to work with us, anyway." As soon as my hand hovers over the slide of the gun, a knock transcends on the metal door. I let out an exasperated sigh.

"What!" I bark. Does someone else have demands I need to hear about?

The metal door swings open, and one of my men slides through the door with a stern look.

He lifts his hands in a 'G' symbol in front of his chest, lowering his head slightly, before standing up straight. I nod my head, giving him approval to continue.

“You’re going to want to see this, sir.”

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Mal and I look at each other cluelessly. My brows lower, immediately walking toward him. He leads us down the long hall until we are bursting through the compound and toward the security camera set up.

“Look who we have here,” he says, pointing at the footage, displaying an image of the outside gate.

My heart thumps erratically against my ribs as my eyes zoom in on Anita standing at the gate, a duffel bag around her shoulder, black shades, and a black jean jacket. My mouth dries at the sight.

She shifts, her finger landing on the intercom button. “I know you can see me. Open up,” she sings out with a sultry tone, her face pointed directly at the camera.

My brow raises as a small smirk forms on my lips.

I guess I was right.

Chapter 13

Venom

Location:

GenCre

Operation: Keep an eye on Ronan



Arriving at GenCre, I don't know what to expect. Maybe a stinky house with cobwebs floating around, or a cracked, small, dusty desk that's nearly broken from how old it is. Or possibly terrible flooring and tiny rooms with just a crew of five.

Nothing could've prepared me for this. I walk into an old, dusty shop—only to be led deeper into the building, down to a long, dimly lit tunnel with lampshades posted along the walls, then I climb onto an escalator with two men. When I reach the top, I look around me—it brought me into an entirely different world.

The dullness of the sky momentarily stings my vision. There's a row of black Land master UTV's lined up to our right. One of the men extends his hand out for me to hop into the seat next to him.

I do.

He drives us down a narrow, well-kept, gravel pathway—tall trees and low bushes bordering the path. I gazed over my shoulder; the cabin no longer in my sight.

My brows scrunch as I bring my gaze forward—my heart skips a beat, the wind brushes my face, and then my eyes go wide. I take in the massive structure ahead; it's nestled right smack in the woods. It is wide in expansion, and its open, serene green grass is so beautifully cut—it's like someone bent down with scissors and cut each blade of grass individually.

We ride through large iron gates. They seem like they belong in Dracula's lair, and a black statue of a symbol shaped like a 'G' sits in the middle of the yard surrounded by more grass, black flowers, and cobblestone. Mahogany benches reside around with peoplewalking?

Where the hell am I?

He stops the UTV and urges me to get off. He guides me along the cobblestone paths, and I'm genuinely stunned. There are kids here.

Teenagers, to be exact, walk around aimlessly with textbooks in their hands, chatting along with their friends. I catch a few holding a device in their hands, swiping in the air; above each device there is a holographic image. I am unsure what it is, but it appears to be important. I scope out their wardrobe. Each of them wear a dark green sweater atop a white-collared shirt, paired with a black skirt or slacks. Some are wearing a blazer or plaid knee-high socks along with combat boots. Is that Oxford wear?

I must be in the wrong place.

I swallow, glancing around wearily as the students catch on to the random lady strolling alongside two of their men, their guns drawn. But they don't look the least bit phased. Some nod, and some don't even care, which strikes me as odd.

'Eerie Courtyard' is on a sign near the statue. We close the distance between us and the building, leveling approximately five floors. Dark brown and muted black paint the entire area, and two black columns frame the entrance of the?...?school?

My eyes roam the rest of the architecture, kicking my boots along the stone path. Two rustic brown lion statues post at the entry of a towering wood door.

"Where are we?" I ask as the first man pulls down the gold handle and opens it up with a creaking screech. Neither answer—leaving me confused as the door widens further.

The walls are painted in gray and black, and rustic brown furniture is displayed around the room, along with dark mahogany wooden flooring. More columns line each side, holding up a long, large balcony. Two grand staircases that lead to?...?I'm

not sure yet. It looks like something out of Professor Xavier's house, just more dark and elegant.

A screech broadens like a microphone being dropped then a throat clears.

“Great rising rebels, rampages, and riots. I hope your sunrise was as beautiful as usual. President Bryan will be assisting all new rebels on their journey today. It is just four months until Stygian day, which means riots and rampages will be partaking in the assessment. Headman requires your complete understanding. You lose, you start over.” The woman clears her throat again. “Please note curfew hours and that you are aware of those conditions. Now, I will leave you with the morning chant. Good day and good will.”

My gaze strays over to see the kids passing down the hall holding up the ‘G’ letter in ASL as they stroll off regularly with books in hand and quietly walking to their destination. I know the hand gestures because I learned ASL in high school. I even sang in a sign language musical for it too. That's not relevant.

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“It is our duty to thrive and to possess strength. It is a necessity. Bravery is what we yield. Loyalty is a gift, and it is mercy we leave.”

They chant along with her then it shuts off.

This is GenCre?

I blink, captivated by the place until an arm lands on my chest halting me. I raise a brow looking down at the arm, and I turn my face to the man attached to the arm touching me. I give a polite smile. “Would you like to see how it feels to have your arm detached from your shoulder?” I bat my lashes as I look up at him.

I can tell he wants to keep a stern face, but worry streaks over it, and he gulps so loud I could hear it. His arm quickly falls like I doused it in acid. Clasp it in front of him, he looks forward.

“I didn’t think so.”

Ronan rounds the corner and a twinge in my heart does a two-step.

Stay dead heart.

Beside him is another man the same height as Ronan, broad shoulders, wearing all black with a messy, sandy brown tapered cut, a sharp squared jawline, and squinty eyes. He smirks as he comes closer.

Both men are well-built and striking in the looks department, but Ronan’s steps are

large and confident; I spot his gun tucked into its holster.

I suck in a short breath. It's like he's siphoning the dark aesthetic from the room and absorbing it all. I'm still unraveling in the 360° change.

I can finally admit an embarrassing truth, that I had a crush on him when I was younger. Of course, I kept it to myself for two reasons; he was my brother's best friend, and he was significantly older— sixteen-year-old me was too much of a wuss to think I could offer a twenty-one-year-old anything. But now?...Old, unwanted feelings resurface at the base of my chest like Nanites regenerating the body. I watch him making his way toward me with the walk of a king who's ready to wage war. I can't ignore the tightening in my throat. Disgusting.

He's the enemy.

“Starting off with threatening my men, Anita?” He now stands in front of me with his hands stuffed in his pockets.

At a whopping five-foot seven, I'm not a short woman, but his height makes me feel so much smaller than usual. I look up at him with a shrug, and the tip of his brow rises.

“So, this is her?” The man eyes me closer with his arms behind his back. His eyes are so squinted you can barely see the dull blue behind his lids.

Ronan's brows arch up slightly. “It is.”

“And you are?” I shift my gaze from Ronan to the tall man who's investigating me a little too closely.

His eyes widen just enough to make out the entire color of his iris, but I notice they're

just naturally narrow and squinted in shape with dipped brows. He is the epitome of 'serious resting face.'

He grins with an acute expression, offering his hand. "Red."

I wonder why they call him that because nothing on him is red. I would ask, but I don't care.

I clasp my hand in his large, warm one quickly, and then I let go. Simultaneously, the two men besides me shift, and I quickly look, my brows lower from their notion. They both raise their hand forming the letter 'G' with their fingers to their chest with their heads tilting down. Then lifting their heads back up and relaxing their hand at their side. I can't help the intrigue roaming through me, and the disbelief.

What, am I joining forces with a cult?

I roll my eyes instead, even though I am truly impressed. Glancing back at Ronan, who nods his head at them both.

Yeah, I won't be doing that. Ever.

Instead, I lean down with my foot crossing on the back, then tipping my head down, jokingly. "Your Majesty."

Even though the word is very fitting, I smirk once I raise. He gives a blank stare, squinting slightly.

Red chuckles in amusement, showing straight white teeth. "Good luck." He clasps Ronan's shoulder with a light shake. Then he looks back at me. His eyes dim. "I'll be seeing you around, Anita." He offers one last smirk before strolling off out the door.

“You two can go. Thank you for leading her here.” Ronan notions them away then looks back at me with his golden eyes; I noticeably swallow.

A curve forms on the side of his mouth, curling up the scar on his lip. “So, you decided this was the only choice?”

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I pull the duffel bag strap further onto my shoulder. Suddenly, it's feeling heavier than I would like.

"It was an easy choice. I am confident that I could've done this on my own, but why not just kill two birds with one stone?" I give a small, tight grin.

Ronan chuckles, deep and silky. He steps forward. His chest coming so close to my face I could breathe in his scent, and the hairs on my neck stand. The combined fragrance of gunpowder and smoke flows off him strongly, invading my nose. I craned my neck to look up at him, not backing down.

"You won't get away with killing me here. You'll be dead in under two minutes." His hand raises, wrapping around the strap on my shoulder, digging the denim I'm wearing into my skin. I wince and squeeze my lips as the fabric stings my shoulder like a rug burn.

I hood my eyes. "We'll see about that," I whisper. All night, I've thought long and hard about killing him once I arrived. But the answers I seek are my focus. Although, it's nice to let him think I want to kill him.

His smile only deepens, presenting his finger-deep dimples. It should freak me out because it's a smile that reeks of death rather than angelic dust, but I happen to love the face of a mort so much more.

Of course, not on him.

He pulls the strap down from my shoulder, and I don't stop him. With his eyes still



piercing mine, he raises the bag like it's made of plastic and brings it to his side. "Take this to her room, please."

Out of nowhere, a man appears, grabbing the bag from Ronan and making his way toward the grand steps.

"Time for your tour." He moves to the side, still observing me, and I can admit I'm more uncomfortable than I let on.

"Lead the way." I put my clammy palms into the pockets of my jean jacket to help keep the moisture to a minimum as he turns away and walks off.

## Chapter 14

### Venom

Ronan strolls ahead of me, and I finally inhale a deep breath, shaking my head, the lightheadedness coming full force. Similar to blowing your breath into a balloon and now your brain is suffering the consequences.

He leads me down a brown rustic hallway, a burgundy carpet stretches down the full hall. Women in business attire, some with laboratory equipment, stroll by; the men are in combat uniforms, and the students dressed in their Oxford wear walk past, eyeing me with surprise. Doors line both sides of the hall. He stops at the first threshold.

"This here is the Tenebra wing. We hold most classes here to teach skills and about survival. We?—"

I blink, raising my hand to stop him, so I can make room to comprehend. "Okay, what is this place?" I thought I was coming to a compound. Not a damn school.

“This is an academy.”

“Well, yes, that much I can see. I mean, what is this place for?”

“It’s a place for learning to fight, kill, survive.” He moves to the side, letting some people into the room. “It’s not an ordinary curriculum. They learn the triggers in the body, ways to kill and self-defend. The science behind it all.” Ronan shifts to the side, placing his hand on the lower part of my back.

I straighten my spine at his touch. Normally, I would elbow him off, but I’d rather not make a scene in front of his students. He doesn’t notice—I think. And leads me in the opposite direction. I look over my shoulder, wondering why he didn’t show me the other rooms. I open my mouth to speak.

“I won’t bore you with the simple stuff. This seems more like your speed.” On the other side, under the arch, is less rustic and academic; the walls turn wolf gray and the decor is pure black. My heart picks up a beat and my eyes gleam. I keep my face void of emotions, hiding my intrigue.

Muffled noises, and grunts, fill the expanse of the room. He leads me to an open area with a boxing ring in the middle. The instant scent of sweat and musky balls hits my nose, and the thick mugginess lies on me. A weight rack lines the wall, and boxing gloves rest on wall mounts. Shelves with hand wraps, focus mitts, kick pads, and other training equipment hang throughout the room. Two men are sparring each other—and it’s not friendly, either. Or maybe they are friends.

I’ve constantly seen this, men bludgeoning themselves to death. I look further into the room.

Wait, that’s the red-haired guy. He throws a jab at his sparring partner—who is not any smaller than him—then he uppercuts him. Sweat and pink spit spray up in the air.

His opponent falls, but the ginger-haired man is punching his fists together, bouncing on the balls of his feet. My eyes narrow in on the man attempting to grasp for his life, and he stands up. He struggles but rises to his feet. I nod to myself with a small grin coming onto my face.

The nerves on the back of my neck quiver, and I turn my head to see Ronan watching me. I roll my eyes, letting out an annoyed sigh. “What?”

“Do you like boxing?” He nods to the men in the ring.

I shrug lightly. “Not exactly.” He continues staring at me, waiting for me to finish, I suppose. “I enjoy seeing someone fight despite being broken and brittle, when they can’t even fathom the thought of lifting a finger. So, when you manage to stand back up on your own two feet and still conquer. It’s a sight to see.” That’s the one thing I was taught. Never back down and never give up. And I don’t understand why I even shared that with Ronan, of all people.

I clear my throat a troubled twist lurking at my stomach. I shift on my heel, sauntering around him. “Can we finish?”

I follow him to the next area, which is holding a gun wielding session. The man in charge stands with his arms crossed at the front of the room while the students, wearing burnt green tank tops and dark brown combat pants, are aiming their guns down range while kneeling. Then they turn, roll on their backs into a standing position—all while holding and aiming their guns.

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A ping in my heart causes me to shutter. This reminds me of myself in training, but my training wasn't like this. It was brutal. It's hard when your own father is training you.

As Ronan continues the tour, footsteps stampede down the hall from behind us. I turn my head to see a tall man with bleach blonde hair marching toward us, the brightest smile on his face.

I step my foot back one upping him, his joy is making me unsettled.

Ronan comes up beside me with his hand gestured in front of me, as if to tame me? "Bedford, what is it?"

The man bends over, heaving like he's just finished sprinting a marathon. Which could be the case considering how large the place is. I notice he doesn't put up the 'G' hand sign like the other men did.

"I—" He swallows loudly, still catching his breath. "I just wanted to see the one and only Venom." He finally lets out the last of his air from his chest before standing upright.

Ronan lowers his arm, but I sense the hesitation by how he steps in close to me. I resist the eye roll, pursing my lips. I stick my hand out.

"Now we can formally meet," I say with respect, eyeing Ronan from the corner of my eye to show he doesn't need to treat me as some wild animal.

“Anita.” I use my first name because it feels right, like a relief off my shoulders revealing me, even if it’s just a name. But it’s the name I was given when I was born. It holds the memories of my brother yelling my name when I touched one of his projects. Or my mother calling for me to clean up. Or my father—.

He clasps his clammy, warm hands in mine. He’s so nervous, it’s funny. “It’s so nice to meet you, Anita. That’s such a pretty name. I’ve been tracking your work for years now, and it’s just outstanding to see you in front of me.” He opens his arms out with red cheeks and real-life twinkles in his grey eyes. “I just want to hug you to see if you’re real. May I?”

“Bedford,” Ronan warns.

My spine stiffens, and I shift on my feet. “I would rather not.”

His shoulder droops, bobbing his head. “I get it. Germs and all.” He chuckles sheepishly. “It was still very nice to meet you.” His smile is bright again, even though I shut him down. Then he jogs backward, still watching me, then turns, making his way back down the hall.

I quirk a brow up at Ronan. He shakes his head, letting out a frustrated sigh, and waving his hand. “Don’t.”

I squeeze my lips together to keep my laugh in, then I turn and walk the opposite direction. He trails alongside me.

I cross my arms, gazing at my boots as we stroll. “You don’t have to treat me as if I’m going to blow up like a grenade. I wasn’t going to hurt him.”

His arm brushes mine, sending a tiny wave of tingles down my side. I move over, adjusting my shoulder.

“That wasn’t for his protection. It was for yours,” he drawls, pointing ahead to round the corner. “Bedford can be a bit convulsive when it comes to you. I wouldn’t have wanted him to nearly jump your bones at first sight.”

My protection. It’s the second time he’s said this, and yes, I’m counting. Why does he think he needs to protect me now? I want to retort back, something fiery, but nothing comes. “How polite of you,” I say dryly. I pull on the hem of my jacket, needing a change of subject. “So, what is the purpose of this place?”

He sighs, stuffing his hands back in his pockets. “It’s a place to become someone more than what trauma defines you as.” Ronan looks ahead, his jaw tightening for a second. “Many who attend this academy have been victims of kidnappings and were held for ransom.” And that’s all he gives me, but I feel there’s more to it. Okay...

However, an imaginary rope tightens around my throat. I don’t want to say it, but everything in the cells of my being shouts for me to. “Like you and Carter,” I mutter through my constricted pipes.

“Like me and Carter,” he repeats, his jawbone clenching tighter. Our eyes hold each other at a standstill, like time has stopped for a moment and everything slows down.

I’m searching for the anger inside of me that would get upset at Ronan mentioning Carter’s name, the bile rising in my stomach, or the temptation to stab him right here. But it never comes. It’s quite the opposite.

I want to know more. I want to know what happened the day that led to that night and my brother being executed.

I need to know.

Feeling the shift at the moment, he looks back in the room, clearing his throat. “Let’s

move on.”

He continues to show me around. There’s a sparring room, a gym, and other various common areas. Like the courtyard off to the side of the academy where most students are located for class break, either engaging with each other, reading under a tree, or pretending to spar. He shows me an underground bunker; it even has a makeshift living quarters called Death’s Door.

It’s stained, in, of course, more black and wolf gray colors. There is a bar, a huge lounge area, pool tables, quadrants for rooms, and a kitchen. More of his team is here, situated throughout the space. They are loud and conversing with one another.

“Some don’t stay here; they have homes of their own. But it’s always a place for everyone, so in case they want to crash, they’ll have their section,” he says, leaning over to my ear. No doubt, the area is beautiful in its own dark way.

He introduces me to the extraction team; it’s at least ten of them here right now and most, like Red, eyes me in skepticism, unsure if they should be friendly or neutral. I don’t care for either one, just like I don’t care for the introductions. But because I agreed to be here, I guess this comes with it.

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Once introductions are done, I follow him back up to the elevator and toward the front where I came through initially. The woman from the other day stands leaning on the banister. One foot on the step, and the other on the floor, twirling a knife in her hand with a crooked smile on her face. She's more gorgeous than I realized; olive skin, almond shaped hazel eyes that resemble a cat and two dark brown cornrows that stop at her nape.

"Look what the dirt dragged in," she sneers out.

"Mal," Ronan warns.

I scold with a curl to my lip. "Are there lessons here for proper manners?" I toss her a stiff smile. "You really missed the mark, haven't you?"

Her knife stops swinging and we both eye each other. I'm ready when you are. I was wrong; I can be a bit wild.

"Enough!" Ronan barks out. "You'll have to get along whether you like it or not." He purses his lips, gazing directly at new name Mal. I grin slyly, not because he's shutting her down, but because it seems like someone in here can tame the looney chihuahua.

"Mal, show Anita to her room," he states in an authoritative tone.

She cracks a smile that is more deceitful than what a smile should be especially after getting ripped into. "It's my very pleasure." Her smile is anything but genuine; it's evil and unpleasant. I think I'll call her wicked then.



She turns, strolling off, her high heel combat boots clacking on the floor. I move to follow along, only to have a large hand wrap tight around my underarm and pull me sideways. I am yanked into Ronan's hard chest, his breath fanning against the shell of my ear.

"Play nice, cobra venenosa," he coos deep and thick, like molasses dripping into my eardrum. I can't stop the tremble riding up my neck. He tilts his head toward the front of mine, ensuring I can see the underlying threat in his honey eyes.

"Don't worry. I always like to play." But it's not always nice. I smile gingerly, watching his eyes narrow in on me like daggers.

I peel my arm from his hot grip and walk toward Wicked, who stands at the bottom of the steps; there is no doubt she watched our entire interaction. She has a death stare, but I ignore it.

She then turns with amusement, and I'm not sure what's so funny. I count the steps as we make our way up the grand staircase—it appears wider than before. Maybe because I have this itching feeling that once I make it past this part, I'm not sure if I'll ever be leaving this place again.

The thought gives a twist to my stomach, reminding myself I'll only be here to see revenge through—not to play house.

This place is stupid anyway

Okay, I'm lying to myself, this place is impeccable, and I can't help the admiration that filters in.

The hallway is expansive, wide enough to allow a vehicle to drive through and still walk comfortably. The floor is made of rustic wood and has a black runner down the

center, rather than the burgundy and gold trim runners found elsewhere.

“This is the Umbra Hall,” Wicked quirks, rolling her finger back and forth. I catch sight of the dimmed lighting from the lampshades lining the wall, the layered structure of the panels on the ceiling, and vintage books stacked neatly on a few built-in shelves.

We walk past several room doors, and every two to three rooms we drift by, she turns her head over her shoulder to look back at me with a mischievous twinkle in her eye.

Such a sneaky little cat.

Her eyes do it no justice. It makes her look even more like the cats for the Egyptian kings.

I keep myself ready for anything unusual. My eyes are looking around for clarity. Then she arrives at?—

Another set of steps?

“Where are we going?” I ask, unsure, once she begins walking up the narrow stairs in the corner of the end hall. It’s not wide and long like the ballroom steps downstairs. It seems like she is carrying me to the steps of no return. Like she will lock me away forever.

She looks over that shoulder again, smiling. “Oh, you’ll see, Cinderella.”

I scowl at her ridiculous nickname for me. I’d rather be called anything else apart from that annoying bitch.

I follow along, and we reach a door after walking just a few feet beyond the steps. It’s

a two-door frame that's coated in all black and gold etching; the knobs are gold with perfectly carved lion faces, showing the long, thick, unruly mane of the beautiful beast. I guess I got the grand room.

Lucky me.

She opens the door, the cool air busting out and skating across my face. The smell of pine and wood sinks under my nostrils. My brow flies up as I take in the environment.

The room is large, almost like its own bachelor pad. The walls are a deep brown, with matte black furniture. A large gray rug decorated with lions sits in the middle of the living room, which I am sure is Persian because I've seen one made in person. Two white couches frame the living room, which is the only thing exuding some brightness against the black decor. There's a kitchen, big enough to be in a house, nestled in the corner with black cabinets and gold knobs, and I'm not sure how a room upstairs managed to become this.

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I take it all in, noticing my bag sitting by a separate bedroom door, and I turn my head in the opposite direction to see yet another door—this one with a lock. My brows lower slightly.

The wicked witch remains by the room's entrance. I allow myself to walk over past the couches to a large bay window. It showcases the view of the green forest trees overlapping each other. My heart thrashes into my throat and I cross my arms. It's a view that would suck you in, allowing you to give yourself over to nature. It's beautiful.

But something is off. And I can't put my finger on it. Why are there two rooms?

“Whose room is this? Please don't tell me I am roommates with you.” I don't hide the disgust that rolls off my tongue as I point my finger lazily at her. She leans off the door frame with a wider smile.

“Oh God, no. I'll kill you before you can even step through my door,” she huffs out with peculiar confidence.

I pinch my face, rolling my eyes hard. I'd like to see you try.

“Then whose room is it?”

She smiles again, coyly. “Oh, you'll find out soon enough.”

My senses go into overdrive, and the hairs on my arm shoot up. Did he room me with a lunatic?

I should be the one to talk.

I take a step further. “Whose. Place. Is. This?” Each word I’m gritting out.

“It’s mine,” the silky, accented voice rumbles out. Ronan appears in the doorway.

My heart tumbles to the floor. What. In. The fuck.

So much for a grand room.

## Chapter 15

Ronan

Attract the scales

Ididn’t know what to expect from Anita now that she knows she’ll be staying in my spot. Not too well, I’d imagine. I have a place here and my own home off in the woods. I wasn’t going to give her the option of staying in my other home, but since I’m here ninety-five percent of the time, it only seemed fitting. That way, I can truly keep my eye on her.

“I had to come and check to make sure you two weren’t attempting to murder each other.”

“No, but I am this close to murdering you,” Anita spits out, stalking toward me, and Mal steps beside me with her blade steady in her hand. I can handle my own, and she knows this. But it only shows how loyal she is to me, and I appreciate that more than she knows. But I’m going to need her to calm the fuck down.

Anita glares at Mal with a sinister glare, then slowly raises her glare to meet my eye.

“I am not staying here.”

The decision to have her stay here with me was a no-brainer. I don't trust her, and she won't be roaming this place without supervision. And I know it's fucked up because she's Carter's little sister, but she's shown how ruthless she can be. I need to make sure she's not having any other motive, and the way to do that is to keep my eyes on her. I need to know she is to be trusted because I'll be putting my own people and students in danger by not taking those precautions.

“You will and you are.” Ignoring the death stare she's searing into me, I turn to Mal, who glares back at Anita, then looks at me. I nod to the door. She understands the assignment and walks out. The doors closing with a click.

Before I can turn to face her, Anita charges at me, her forearm is jamming into my neck and pushing all the weight she can muster into my body to slam me against the door.

I let her because I enjoy the smell that swarms into my nose, rose and vanilla.

“Easy, amor.” I groan, holding my hands up beside me with a sick grin. I notice the way her eyes flare and body tense.

I'll let her think she has the runner-up on me, although she has no weapon to really back herself on. I bet she wishes she had her dagger right now. It's sitting nice and pretty on top of my dresser.

Her arm jams further into my neck, and I continue to let her because I'll admit I like it. I shouldn't like that I'm enjoying this and worse, it's from her.

Her lip curls. “If you think for one second that I'm staying in here with you, then you're very much mistaken. So, screw you and screw your stupid X-Men Academy

you have going on here.”

My heart scratches against my chest at the comparison. The fucking audacity.

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She lifts her arm, ready to storm off, but I grip her shoulders, and quickly spin her around, slamming her against the wall, but not too hard. Learning my lesson from last time, I kick the inside of her boot with mine, spreading her legs and locking myself in. With my chest now pressing up against her, I fall into the warmth from her body; it engulfs me. The smell of her is almost intoxicating.

My face dips slightly. I'm now inches away from her, so close I'm able to see her pupils dilating and constricting. Her curly bangs flutter from the harshness of my breath against her skin.

"There's no chance in my hell that I'll let you roam this place without a watchful eye on you. Until you prove I can trust you further than I can throw you, then you will be in my vicinity at all times. Wherever you go, someone will be watching."

Her lips squeeze, her chest raising and falling on mine. We're so close together that her racing heartbeat pumps into me. "If I knew I was going to be trapped in my own personal prison, then I would've just given myself over to the feds."

Her words affect me more than she knows. My intentions aren't to hold her captive.

I shake my head, my grip still in place. "You're free to go whenever you please. I would never want you to feel like you're imprisoned here."

She narrows her eyes. "What are you doing now, then?" Her eyes dip, and I follow her gaze, noticing I do have her completely trapped with my body. I was protecting my cock per se, but I tilt my head in touché.



I back away from her, letting her free. “Everything I have here goes against kidnapping or holding hostages of innocent people. Although you aren’t exactly innocent,” our eyes snap to each other, “but you also aren’t the target. I want to work together, and the only way to do that is to take the necessary precautions that allow you to be here before I can trust you. And for you to trust me too,” I add, tilting my head. It’s a two-way street. I’m not the only one who needs to see and know whom to trust. “The people here need to trust you because their lives are in my hands.”

I stuff my hands into my pocket, dropping the snarl and sincerely looking at her for the thousandth time since she has invaded my life again. She can think I’m trying to keep her hostage and potentially have malicious intent, but this is my way of taking care of her.

The only thing that I want more than anything else is to fulfill my desire, the blood I seek from the men who ruined me and murdered Carter. Her misery is not part of that plan.

She stands off the wall, fixing her jean jacket. Her eyes divert down before looking up at me with a slow nod. “I understand.” She speaks softly, and oddly my chest caves with relief. I shouldn’t care whether she was going to agree or not.

“When will I get my own room?”

I haven’t thought that far, and I don’t know. I just needed to get her body in here and work out the rest gradually. “I’ll let you know.” I hope that gives her some comfort.

She lets out an exasperated sigh. “That doesn’t give me much hope.” That shuts down what I hoped she would feel.

“Okay?...” The words trail off into the air as my eyes wander, searching for something to give her some solace.

“At least you have your own room.” I point at the door that’s behind her; she twists her head, looking over her shoulder, her curly hair bouncing along with her. She turns back around, crosses her arms, puts her weight on her right leg, and taps her left foot. Heat travels up my neck with the intensity of her deep brown eyes, watching me like the snake that she is. Her thumb goes to her teeth, biting down on it. I observe the move, my eyes drifting to her lips. I wonder if she does that when she’s nervous or thinking.

We don’t care. Remember?

“What are the rules and boundaries?”

I walk to the couch, leaning the side of my thigh against the sofa back, then crossing my arms. I shrug. “What kind do you want?”

“For starters, don’t go into my room. Don’t talk to me when we are in here. And definitely don’t expect a plate of food to be on that counter.” She turns around to walk to her door. Without hesitation, my eyes skate down her backside, landing directly on her ass. The black jeans she wears perfectly tug and tuck her plump, round ass. The under slit of her ass cheeks makes it perfect for grabbing and cupping when pulling her onto me. No, someone.

No, fuck no. Fucking shit, no.

I place my hands on my thighs and look up at the ceiling. My throat tightens from the way my brain just took hold and spiraling up my imagination on its own—even if it is wondrous.

That is not fucking happening. Though my best friend is dead, it still feels wrong. Although she is very much a woman, and the pigtail sixteen-year-old girl with innocent eyes is nowhere in sight. She’s still not on my agenda. I could never lose

sight of that.

My eyes scrunch and I cock my head back. “Why the fuck would I be expecting that.” My tone is a bit rougher from making myself upset.

She snaps her head back, her eyes narrowing at me. “Why else would you have a kitchen in here if you don’t cook meals?” Her voice doesn’t match the way she daggers those dark eyes at me. She starts taking off her black denim jacket, then resting it over her arm.

I sometimes cook—that’s why. I am a fantastic cook when need be. I don’t need to tell her that. I roam my eyes over the black ink covering her shoulder and dipping into her tank top. It looks like scales, and I wonder where it leads, like a person in a maze fingering their way to the end.

“I won’t expect you to cook. Any other rules?” I cross my leg over the other for comfort.

Her chin lifts slightly, revealing her slender neck. Ideal for wrapping a hand around like I did during our brawl. The way her pulse quickened when I gripped it so?—.

Enough! I grit my teeth together to stop myself from what I’m thinking.

Noticing my on-edge demeanor, she squints slightly. “No, but my dagger.” She extends her hand.

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I could toy with her some more and say she could have it back after the mission, but then she'll catch on that I'm holding it as a souvenir rather than a reason for her to come back. Or both reasons on why I kept it. I gather the will and head to my room, taking the dagger from the trusted spot I had for it.

I stroll back out, her brow raised, eyeing my hand. I had it covered at the sharp end because without it, I would be dead. I found out it's coated in high amounts of atropine and scopolamine. Of course, I had it tested for fingerprints and anything else unusual. It makes me think back on when she willingly gave it up and didn't fight to get it back. Sneaky, sneaky snake.

I place it in her palm. She grabs it, and I swear I heard a sigh of relief.

"Anything else?" I slide my hands into my jean pockets.

She lets out a breath. "Right now, I am tired. The tour of this big ass place wore me out. Inform me when it's time for our mission." She stops herself and looks at me, catching what I caught.

Our.

"The mission," she corrects with a snide tone.

"It's okay if you're excited to be by my side." I tilt my head, holding an involuntary smile that's waiting to come out.

"Excited about the mission, yes. Excited to do it with you?" She kneels, finally

grabbing her duffel bag off the floor. Then, looking over her shoulder, her top lips curl up with a sneer and her dark eyes are ice-cold. “Definitely no. I’ll rather dip my flesh in acid, but here we are.”

Damn, that’s fucking extreme.

Then, without another word, she shifts. As she turns to the door, I catch a glimpse of the rest of her tattoo. I noticed parts of the snake’s body. It’s nearly covering her entire back. From what I imagine, the ink wraps around her stomach as well.

Before I can retort back, she opens the door, then slams it behind her.

Leaving my mouth agape and my mind in a goddamn spin.

This is either going to go bad or very fucking bad.

My hand swipes over the condensation sticking to the mirror, the droplets from the glass coating my palm and dripping to the sink. I clear away enough to only get a visual of my face and nothing more. Twelve years later and I still refuse to look at the scars on my chest.

A reminder of my weakest point in my life.

Of course, I have taken a glance here and there. It’s inevitable. But I don’t keep my eyes there for too long. It causes a disturbance in my chest to awaken; the guilt consuming me like a bad dream.

I have my fair share of those.

It’s always Carter’s body stabbed to death with a bullet in his head. The blood just drips and drips and drips. Seventeen times.

Seventeen drips.

The peaking nose grows louder and louder, even when I escape in the dream. It follows me.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

I run my hand down my face. Every so often I wonder if Carter and I weren't friends, would he be alive. Of course, he would. It's the guilt that drives me, but also destroys me. But they weren't after me for my money. They were after our blueprints. And I plan to find out why.

I get dressed and head out to the pantry closet to grab water; the moment I take a sip, the door opens. A pound in my chest hits against my ribs as Anita comes out holding a pink and black skeleton mug, along with a small bag with something green and leafy in it.

Her eyes flicker to me as I gulp the water. We continue our stare-down as she treads slowly to the kitchen. It's fucking awkward, no doubt, but I still don't avoid skimming down her night wear. A black oversized shirt with flannel black shorts that gives me a preview of her smooth long legs. A tingle to my balls permeates, uppercutting me in surprise.

Don't focus on her legs.

I swallow down the water and it becomes thicker. She breaks the intense stare and saunters over next to me at the sink embedded into the island. She removes a tiny

metal spoon and runs water into her cup, dropping the bag onto the counter and something else that looks like an empty tea.

Neither of us talk, since she did mention to never speak to her while we're in closed spaces. Normally, I wouldn't give a shit about someone's demands.

Now look at me. Pathetic.

Honestly, for a minute, I almost forgot she was here. It's been so long since I have had company in my own home, let alone live with someone. However, the silence is sickening, borderline lethal, and the tension's thick enough to choke someone.

I take a glance at the stuff in her bag. "What is that?"

Without glancing at me, she shuts off the water. "Weed."

My brows furrow, shooting my eyes at her in questioning. "What?"

"I'm kidding. It's herbs for tea." She faces me, wiggling the bag in my view with an amused expression on her pretty face.

I toss a dry look, trailing her every move like a robot as she walks to the microwave and places it in her cup. "What are they for?" I slice my sight downward, relishing in the sight of her ass jiggling when she shuts the microwave door.

I notice her body stiffen before she twists back around to the counter, and my gaze roams back up nonchalantly. She takes the spoon, not catching my precarious eyes, and begins scooping the 'herbs.' "They help me?...?sleep."

Interesting. She has a hard time sleeping through the night. I wonder what she dreams of. Are her nightmares similar to mine? Paralyzing her mind with nothing but stained blood and dirty bodies? I see I'm not the only one that has restless nights.



I continue observing as she dips the bag into the cup, lifting it up and down.

“You already broke one rule,” she says blandly, shifting to me with her creepy ass cup up at her lips.

She doesn’t know that I really don’t give a shit about her ‘rules.’ I only agreed out of respect for her. “I can only do so much. But to avoid speaking to you in my own home is like asking me not to breathe. We’re human.” And I would rather not feel uncomfortable, either.

Her ghostly stare pierces into my face, watching me for a second too long. She takes another sip and says, “Then stop breathing.” With that, she strolls off, taking her things with her, including the subtle warmth she gave when she was here.

Take care of her, he says.

## Chapter 16

Ronan

Lurk in the night play, play, play

Bedford spins in his large seat, facing me, Anita, Mal, and Boone. “Looks like things just got a lot shittier.”

I huff, a dark shadow crossing over me, and my heart thumps against my chest. I hate the sound of that, like everything is on the verge of going haywire. The thought of destroying an army full of kidnappers and rapists brings a pulse to my polluted blood.

“They’ve caught word of murders from their men and called every member from their gang to eradicate the people or person.” He zooms his eyes to me. “And of

course, once they found out Henley was MIA. They know.”

“How large,” Boone interrupts, making Anita’s eyes widen and brows raise.

“He talks.” I catch a glimmer in her eyes, which often happens with people who hear him speak; it’s rough with a Manchester accent.

“You should talk more.” I catch a tiny lift in her lips before her gaze falls on mine and the smile drops in rancid disgust, and she looks away. The girl really hates me.

Good.

No. Not good. I thought we were making some progress last night. Even if she practically told me to die. I liked that because she still spoke to me.

I don’t miss the sting of jealousy poking at the root of my stomach from the mere interaction between them. The almost genuine smile she gave him but can’t even bother to look at me graciously? Am I not the one allowing her to be here? It sears something hot into my chest. I stuff my childish boy banter in the back of my mind.

There are more important matters at hand.

Boone’s expression doesn’t change at all. It’s the same hard and blank stare because nothing phases the man.

“And you should talk less.” Mal snarls, sitting on top of the desk behind us.

“Fuck,” I mutter. I want to grip my head in my hand and let out a roaring growl. This shit is getting old and tiring. We have bigger fish to fry. But instead, I place my hands on my hips and just let them duke the shit out, or maybe I should even put them in the ring and actually fight.

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Anita's head tilts to Mal, her manner so unbothered you would think someone just gave her a compliment. "Problem?"

She hops down from the desk and walks to Anita, getting closer to her. "My problem is you. I don't trust you."

A sneaky smile folds on Anita's lips, making her look dark and innocent. "Get in line. It's nothing new to me."

Mal laughs something shrill. "Give me one reason. Just one." Her finger flies up, shakingly. "I see something strange, or you attempt to deceive us. I'll slit your throat and watch you bleed out."

Instead of crumbling down into fear like any other normal person would do after getting threatened to death, she smirks, flicking her curly hair over her shoulders, not fazed by any of it. And that... That makes my heart squeeze to unbeatable lengths. My lips curl lightly. You either have the bones of steel to handle us, or you simply don't.

"Great. I'll sharpen the blade."

Fuck.

Bedford's head looks up at Anita with an admirable expression and his mouth nearly spreads open and Boone's neck twitches in a way that seems like he wants to laugh, but he contains it.

That's new.

The other workers in the room eyes lift, peeking to see the moment but refuse to stare fully.

And I resist the urge to grind my teeth underneath my bottom lip as I watch her own the moment and stand up to Mal. Not many do.

Before I get wrapped up in her tail, I clear my throat to move on now. "Bedford, please continue."

"We know by now this group has grown through the years. The last two from the problems you all have been solving...leaves him." Bedford points at the screen to a man who looks like he's seen far too many prisons. "Fred Delgado."

My teeth tap together, narrowing in on the man I remember vividly.

"And him. Victor Kareem. Also known as Victor the Vicious. I know stupid name" He cringes as he points at the next guy, and I could punch the screen from the red fury that plunges into me. I narrow my gaze at the clear photo of Victor, my heart gallops over the pricking of my nerves heating up. The motherfucker who killed Carter. The master behind it all. The one who caused these slices on-

"That's all I have for now." Bedford spins around to us, cutting off my thoughts, but I'm nearly seething with carnage.

I release a breath to steady the anger. Soon. Soon. He'll pay. I cross my arms, my eyes looking down at the floor and rubbing the pad of my thumb on my chin. "I'm going to need to scope this place out tonight to get a closer look. Chr?—"

"I'm going with you." Anita walks forward, looking at me, her hands running through

her hair. Oh, now you can fathom the sight of me.

I look at her for a second longer. “We leave at seven. So be ready.”

“Always.” She takes her eyes off me before strolling off, excusing herself from the group without another word.

Mal cocks her head to me. “You trust her enough to be alone out there with her?” She blinks, raising her brows.

“I actually happen to like her.” Bedford speaks with a sly smile, making Mal’s lips tighten. He ignores her. “Do you know she’s worked side by side with the three deadly serpents?” Bedford twists in his chair back to the screen, clicking his fingers, tapping on it and swiping. “Serpents Vixens, to be exact.”

Two women show up. A woman with porcelain skin, white, blonde hair that’s shaved on one side, and piercing blue eyes. The other has black and blue shorter hair with much pale skin framing over a face that seems miserable. I don’t recognize them, but from the logo on their combat gear of a star with a snake slinking over and around the symmetrical shape. It automatically tells me they are assassins trained by Popov, the man who created an underground organization of women to eradicate corrupt ministers, popes, politicians, government officials, you name it. They live up to their name, that’s for sure.

I also don’t give a shit who they are, that doesn’t change anything. Do they know who the fuck I am?

“Oh yes, it’s three of them.” Bedford flips through each photo quickly once more.

“Go back.” Boone’s voice snaps out so deep and deadly that it actually fucking shocks me. My brows perk, and I slowly turn my head to him. Mal is looking at me

with wide eyes and the same stunned expression.

Boone's eyes dagger into the screen so hard that it might actually catch fire.

Bedford's eyes jump to Boone's and then to us. "Okaaay." He drags out, swinging in that chair again. He flips the screen, and it lands on a beautiful woman with long braids and deep brown skin. It only shows her face from the waist and up. She may look like a Nubian queen, but similar to Anita, she's reeking venom in the liquid that flows through her bones. Fucking deadly.

Turning my head back to Boone, he watches the screen with a tightness to his jaw so hard that I can see it protruding from his temples and his face is red, matching the color of his hair. His hands clench tight on the desk as he leans down on it.

What the fuck is going on?

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“Boone, are you okay?” Mal speaks softly, creeping up to tread lightly. I can see she wants to put her hand on him, but she hesitates.

“Do you know her?” I speak.

He looks at me and then Mal, his blue eyes steaming crimson, before standing upright and stalking off.

Mal turns to me, including Bedford. She places her hands on her hips. “What was that?”

I look at the screen of the women. Some history is there, nobody reacts to someone if they don’t know them personally. “Hell if I know, I was standing here the same as you.”

Mal’s head shakes, pointing at the screen. “He knows her, and if he does, she’ll be coming here for Venom. These women are bad news, Ronan.”

I’ll protect my brother and everyone in this damn facility. I’m not scared of no one. But they can try if they’d like to. More fun for me.

Mal eyes me, worry trickling all over her face.

I breathe heavily. I need to reassure her. She’s too much like a little sister to me. She’s more like family than my own damn brother. But I don’t want her worrying about me; that’s my job to worry about her, not vice versa.

“I’ll be fine. Stop worrying.” I place my hand on her shoulder, giving her a little shake. I’m not good at consoling, but that will do. She seems to relax her shoulders only a bit. Nodding her head slightly, she lets out a sigh of relief.

“I’ll remember what you said.” Referring to the promise we made before Anita arrived here.

“Of course.”

## Chapter 17

### Venom

Location:

Outskirts of Hollow City

Operation: Scope out Fred the idiot

The only reason—and I mean the only reason—I agreed to stay in his miniature apartment ducked in the creepy upstairs of that Academy is because I want to see these people dead just as much as he does. And I also meant what I said when I understood his reasoning behind holding me hostage in his home. That’s exactly what it is, even if you wrap it up with a pretty red bow and give it to me with a sexy smile.

Yes, the view is absolutely gorgeous, and the room is extremely accommodating. There’s nothing black and gloomy in there. It’s filled with cream and peach color, the most comfortable bed I’ve ever laid my head on and new feminine products were already in the bathroom with fresh linen and towels.

It’s like he was already expecting me to come and to be in this school. I stow away



the churn in my chest. I don't care about these people. Fuck them. I'm not here to make friends, nor am I here to make this place my home. However, the time has come to at least put that aside and handle this properly and end it with an unforgettable death of these assholes.

Hence, why I'm laying on dirt on top of a rocky hill, next to the man I've hated half my whole life.

Some things we just have to deal with.

"Exactly what I expected," Ronan says, twisting the front of the binoculars. "There's definitely more men."

"We can take them." I add in adjusting my position due to the rock jamming into my rib.

He continues looking into the binoculars. "Oh, I have no doubt about that," he says low and dangerously.

I turn over to see he's lowered the binoculars, adjusting it again with a creepy grin forming on his lips, the scar curling up. The brisk air caresses against my cheek as I play with my binoculars to keep my hands doing something besides poking his face.

It's dark outside, but from how close we are I can see the shadows of scruff in his beard and the lushness in his lips.

The moment he turns his head to face me, I look away, quickly sensing he felt me searing into the beautiful side view of his face. Now I can feel him staring at me, my heart picks up an unnatural pace and I don't like it, so I peer into the binoculars focusing on the building.

I think back to a few days ago on the miniature nighttime talk we conducted. It was strange but also interesting. I take that back. I basically told him to fuck off and obey the rules I set, but I still randomly envision his black sweatpants that hung freakishly perfect on his waist. The imprint was obvious. My breath catches and I shift once more.

Don't think about it.

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*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:12 am*

Men in black suits outside the mansion, posts on each side of the door with AK-47s. I bet there's a plethora of them right now. The image of killing every last man or woman in that building does a different kind of squeeze to my caged heart.

"Does this excite you?" Ronan's voice is still faint, like he's talking directly into my ear.

I lick my lips that's drying from the crisp air, turning to finally face him. His brow is perked and the light from the waning moon brightens his honey eyes.

It does excite me. I want to watch their blood spill from them while I stand over their withering body as they meet with the devil himself. I hope he's a comical bastard.

"It does," he coos, forbidding a sick smile on his mouth. "It's okay. It excites me, too." His eyes darken as the cloud in the sky covers the moon; one shade of his face is completely dark, giving him an ominous look.

I swallow from the sight of it because Goddammit, it's sexy. His eyes drop to my lips, then slowly back up to my eyes. I don't break the connection even though I should. I hate you.

"Soon their blood would be ours." He moves his arm, the rocks scrapping from the movement. Then he reaches over to me, my throat nerves pinching together. What is he doing?

His shaded eyes don't move from mine, but then he grabs my binoculars that I've dropped to the ground unknowingly.

Shit.

He stuffs the heavy material into my hands before grabbing his off the ground and peering back. I swallow again, shaking my head lightly and inhaling to put some more air into my brain.

Get a grip, Venom. Get. A. Damn. Grip.

“So, what’s the plan ‘Headman,’” I joke with an eye roll.

He lets out a light chuckle, adjusting his elbows. “It won’t take too many to take out these fuckers.”

Switching the mode to the X-ray thermal level on the binoculars, I zoom into the house, that’s showing me multiple men with guns walking around the home.

“It has to be about twenty men in there. Unfortunately, we can’t just bust in there, guns blazing.” As much as I would love that.

He chuckles again, and it’s the deepest but soothing sound. Almost like something you’ll be okay with hearing on the radio in the morning.

“Indeed unfortunate, but we won’t. That’s not how I operate, and from the looks of it, it’ll take no more than four of us to infiltrate the building and scare them shitless.”

I put the binoculars down, finally sitting up because the rocks are not friendly. “Do you think Fred’s in there?” I brush my cargo pants from the debris.

“He doesn’t go anywhere without their crew. What I missed was the extremity of it. They’ve surprised me and I can see they are not just some mediocre group anymore. They do this all over the world. Kidnapping whoever and holding them for ransom.”

He places the device on the ground. “They think they’re safe, but they have no fucking idea.” Ronan looks at me with seriousness and a deep sense of passion. “Carter’s death will be avenged. I’ll see to it. I promise.”

Hearing him just speak my brother’s name again gives me goosebumps on my skin, and it’s not from the air. It feels dirty working next to a man that you were meant to kill for years. The man you were conditioned to hate and murder, eventually.

Was my father wrong?

Now I feel differently. The way he dedicates his entire life to seeking revenge and building a whole organization only brings admiration from me, besides hatred.

He immediately stands up not bothering to dust off. I look up to see he’s outstretched his hand towards me, and I gaze at it for a second before sliding my hand into his large, warm one. How is that possible when it’s pretty damn chilly out here?

His hand tightens around mine, yanking me up. I lose my footing from the pull, and I fall into his hard chest. My palm lands on it for stability. I won’t purposely glide my hand against his hoodie to map out the curves under it all.

He hums with a sly grin. “You’re so clumsy for someone so deadly.”

Heat rises to my neck as his breath fans along my bang, like when he pushed me against the wall, holding me in place. I don’t want to admit I liked it. Almost too much. I can’t admit it because if I do, then it’ll show he got the best of me, and I can’t let that affect the mission. The goal. The whole point of this.

“And you’re so careless for someone who’s a killer.” I raise my lips slightly, hooding my eyes, then diverting them down to his pants zipper and back up. He follows the trail of where I targeted and looks back at me, his nostrils flaring, but a dark smile

creeping upon his lips.

Still, he grips me harder, eliciting a hiss past my teeth. “You touch me there again?...?it better be for something else,” he warns, his face so close to mine I can see the star-like shimmer coating his eyes from the direct comment. A spike of excitement burst between my legs, and it stuns the shit out of me.

“Want to find that out?” My eyes unwavering from his honey gold ones.

“I’d rather not. But if you insist on wanting to touch me there so badly, then I won’t stop you.”

## Page 47

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:12 am*

I realize my hand is still on his chest, and his right hand has left mine, where it now digs into my arm with the other wrapped around my waist.

Too close.

“Come to think of it, I’d rather gouge my own eyes than touch you there again.”

He chuckles coolly, the wind sucks up the sounds and the air mixes with it. He releases my arm, keeping me contained and close to his hard body still. Moving his arm around to himself, he brings up a knife, flipping out the blade. It shimmers under the white moon glow.

“I can help you with that.”

What?

I squeeze my lips together, as I look at the blade, and then bring my eyes back to him. My heart picks up pace. “You wouldn’t.”

“I would.”

“Then you must want to die before killing them.”

He hums. “This seems much more enticing. Maybe we can see if you really bleed venom, yes?”

I huff unsurely, watching the blade again. I glance his way. “You wouldn’t dare.”

Ronan's features harden, then he quickly grabs my nape, I jerk away, but his hold is solid. "Let's test that theory, or are you that confident in what I wouldn't dare do?" He raises the sharp end and I watch closely as it nears my eye. I swallow as my heart picks up a beat.

"You're a man of many games, huh," I say breathlessly.

The blade gets closer. "You dared. Now we see." Closer. Close enough to feel the cold of the steel under the fold of my eye.

My hand nears my holster. "I enjoy games too. But you forget one little thing."

His brow tips with a low grin, flexing his fingers tighter on my neck. "What's that?"

I grab what I'm searching for and bring it up to his neck. My dagger sits near his artery, easy to puncture. "You play with the snake. Prepare to get bit back." And it'll end much worse for him than it would me. I can always wear an eye patch, he'll be heavily affected by the poison on my dagger. Good thing he doesn't know that.

Ronan holds his smile, motioning his eyes down then back at me. I gleam, although his knife is at my eye. How fun.

"You got me." He inhales slightly, lowering his weapon but keeping his sights on me. "One day."

I flip a rigid smirk, easing my dagger down. "You'll never see me bleed—not now, not ever," I retort, taking the opportunity to break free from his hold and retreat my dagger. The shine that shies away in the black sky brushes across his face in enough time to catch the menace grin behind the shadow. I back up, grabbing the binoculars off the ground. He's so fucking strange.



I make my way towards the truck that seems further than what I thought it was when we walked over here. I look ahead so I can get as far away from Ronan and actually breathe before he makes it to the vehicle first. I march over the clumps of broken rocks that lie across on the pathway.

If he thinks-.

“Shit,” I huff, as the outsole of my boot hits on to a rock, and before I know it, my body goes flying forward along with the binoculars. Ready to smash face-first into chunks of rocks that’ll definitely leave a horrible scar. I screech, catching the fall with my hands and hitting the rocks flat on my thighs and belly. A stabbing sting pulses from my left hand and up to my wrist. Ronan shouts my name in a way of worry, as if I fell off the mountain.

Heat gathers along my neck and to my cheeks as I pick myself up from the ground and into a sitting position. But as I’m doing so, Ronan skits down, causing the extra pebbles of rocks to knock away.

“Dammit, are you okay?” His breath is heavy, not matching the gentleness in his clasps hand under my arm, that guides me onto my bottom. Normally, I would wrench my arm from his hold, but currently, my hand is searing in sharp twinges of pain.

I suck in crisp air through tight teeth, pulling my hand up to assess the damage on my palm. I don’t detect much—only a dark blotch on my hand. The murky sky is overcast, so I can’t truly see how deep and raw the cut is.

Ronan takes my wrist with a grip still on my elbow. “We need to get this cleaned now. Can you stand?”

My chest caves in horror at his concern. But I nod. I swallow the lump as he carefully

lifts me; the stupid rocks haven't budged a bit, and I'm almost tempted to kick them like a spiteful child.

I don't.

I pull my arm from Ronan's clutch and stalk to the truck. I grab the binoculars and stuff them under my armpit. I keep my hand extended while cupping my forearm to control the dripping. It tickles my skin like a feather, gliding down to my wrist and to the uneven pavement. I didn't fall on my way here, so what the hell?

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Scorching heat slaps me in the face as I replay how ridiculous I must've looked falling down. Humiliation consumes, I'm so damn embarrassed.

I don't glance back, so I don't notice Ronan on my ass like white on rice as he makes way to his truck. The trunk pops up and I open the passenger door. The light shudders on, reflecting off on to my gash, and my eyes bulge.

Balls.

Crimson fills my entire palm, with a darker spot in the middle. I suck in another breath to ease the panic that wants to fester. Liquid continues to leak down; I refuse to get into his truck. I don't want to stain it with drips of blood.

Ronan's door swings open, and I gaze up to see a look of concern before it switches quickly to agitation. He holds a first aid kit in his hand and hops in, slamming the door back.

He looks over at my seat and glides up to me. "What are you doing?"

I hold up my hand, gesturing my head to my hand. "I'll get blood in your car."

Expecting him to agree and tell me to wait, but instead, he does the opposite. His face morphs into full on anger, his eyes widening. "I don't give a shit about this truck. GET IN."

Ronan

Fancy a bit of blood

Anita tosses her binoculars into the truck before slipping into the seat, shutting the door, and keeping her hand raised to control the bleeding.

It's not helping.

I sigh heavily as I nearly tear open the first aid kit. Does she think I care more about getting drops of blood in my car than making sure she's okay? Am I giving off this impression?

Maybe she is just being considerate, but I don't know why that makes me upset. All I know is it irks me the wrong way, and I'm even more bothered she hurt herself.

I push the thought away and lightly grip her wrist. It's dainty and small, which makes me want to handle her like a glass doll. I clicked the light above us to get a brighter view. My stomach twists into knots. I like blood, but coming from her in this way, apparently not. Yes, I just had my knife to her eye, but I wasn't going to actually stab it.

My body becomes rigid, but I continue assessing the damage. "I'll need to clear the blood to see how bad it is." My tone is clipped—my agitation is evident.

"I can do it myself," she says, attempting to snatch her hand away, but my hold is strong.

"Don't move before you hurt yourself some more," I snap.

She scoffs lightly, glancing the other way.

I really am upset. It's triggering me seeing her this way. It's bringing back unwanted memories from Carter, from my mother when they left her bleeding to death, and I couldn't do shit about it.

Now here she is. Bleeding profusely and the difference is I can help her, but it doesn't take away the anguish in my chest at seeing her hurt. It's a pain you can't control, the inner turmoil you get because you can't take away every element and constituent on this damn planet. But I swear if I could, I would destroy every fucking rock and sedimentary segment, so this doesn't happen again.

I use my one hand to hold hers upright while I dig into the kit quite roughly as I look for a large swab to wipe away the blood. I pull one out and tear it open with my teeth.

"You're not going to put on the gloves?"

"What? Do you have any diseases and infections I don't know about?" I ask as I swab the threaded cloth over the area, avoiding the cut.

"No. I just figured you wouldn't want blood on you."

"I'm not concerned about that. My only worry is making sure you're okay," I grit, narrowing my eyes to ensure I don't graze the wound.

She stays quiet after that, and I'm fine with it because it infuriates me that she cares more about other things than herself.

My jaw tightens into a stiff grip as I near the end of the cleaning.

"Why are you so upset?" she asks in an undertone.

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I guess she can sense the heat emanating from me, like I'm my own inferno. "Because you really are clumsy. And if you can do this now, then I worry about how you are out in the field."

She stiffens under my touch, and I don't need to look at her face to know her lips are probably parted, disbelief written all over it. "I only tripped. It happens. Also, Mr. Inspector Alvarez, if you haven't noticed, it's dark out here; these rocks are deadly. And as for the mission, you don't need to worry about that. I can handle myself."

"Handle yourself?" My head snaps up, cocking my brow at her. "I can't have a liability on my hands if you're tripping and falling to hells nowhere."

Her brows furrow, and I can spot all three expressions riding on her. Embarrassment, anger, insult—even when she tried to mask it. "Screw you." She moves her arm, yanking her hand away, but I latch onto it. Not too hard, or that would cause more blood to form and pour out, but enough to keep her hand in the middle, so I can continue patching her up.

"Stop moving your hand. I need to clean it and put a bandage around it."

"No, screw you," she repeats with a snarl to her upper lip. "I'll be glad to fix myself up so I don't become a hindrance and a futile liability."

Promise me you'll take care of her.

My throat clogs with a weight I never asked for. But I'm glad to take it on if that means she'll be okay.

I grind my teeth as my shoulders slack. My breath draws out slowly as I process the words. I glance back down at her hand. “What I mean is, I need to be focused when I’m on a mission. I would like to be less worried about your stability than the opposite of that.” I jumble my words, and I make no damn sense, but that’s the best I can do. Her arm relaxes in my hand, and I take the opportunity to dab the laceration.

“Just wrap up my hand and don’t ever touch me again,” she says, adjusting her body as if that’ll keep her far from me. “And I don’t need you to worry about me. I’ll be clear-headed. I do my job well and have never fucked up a mission. So, take your worry and gear it towards your own safety. Not mine.”

If only I could.

“Oh, I have no doubt about your ability to conquer a mission.” I am no longer spewing my delivery. I could lash back at her because she’s infuriatingly rude. She talks to me in a way that I would never allow. I’m tempted to grip her throat and fill her mouth with something that’ll keep it shut until we’re back, but I calm myself and continue tending to her hand. The cut appears to be no longer than five inches. And thankfully, it’s not deep and will heal in a matter of days.

After a couple of minutes of silence, I wrap one more time with a swipe of my fingers over the tape to keep it secure.

“Tudo feito. I don’t have a lollipop to give you for being such a champ, but you should be good as new soon. You can go to Dr. Rio to get it re-wrapped.” I glance at her as I stuff the supplies back into the kit. Dr. Rio has been our on campus doctor since the beginning. He was in the Medical field in the Marines until he was discharged. I found him in his home, surrounded in a pool of blood and sliced bodies. After they killed his wife and daughter.

She lowers her hand slowly, avoiding eye contact. “Thank you.”

I zip up the bag, then I toss it to the back. “It’s no problem.”

“I’ll clean up the mess when we get back.” Her tone is lower as she points her hands through all the spots that have her now dried blood.

“Don’t bother.” I flick off the light, start the car, and drive off.

She clears her throat, muttering something in French before flipping out her phone. Which reminds me that I need to catch up on the language, not if she’ll be around throwing threats and talking shit. Mental note: buy a French book.

“What’s the plan once we get back?”

I switch positions, resting my elbow on the window frame. “We gather the team, map out the blueprint for invasion. You, me, Mal and Boone will infiltrate it. Simple.”

She nods, putting her phone back in her jean jacket, and she turns to me. “And if shit goes left?”

I lower my brows. “What do you mean?”

“The mission never goes as planned; sometimes it’s more people than we expect or something else unexpected. It’s imperative we have a Plan B and Z.” She emphasizes pressing down her palm.

“Shit never goes left. In and out and that’s that and if it does, we will have it handled.” I lower my hand on the armrest, turning the corner and driving down Black Forest Road.

“How confident of you,” she mocks, facing forward. “If you say so, Headman.”



I despise when she calls me that. I don't mind the crew doing it, but with her an irritated bubble settles in my stomach and I don't like it.

I ignore the twist and continue heading back home. It's an eerie silence between us, and I can tell she's still stewing in the earlier altercation with her hand and likely what I said. Truthfully, she's not a liability—far from it. I've always had a problem with thinking before I speak; it's a thing my mother always told me. And it's bit me in the ass too many times to count. Many times, I didn't give a fuck. But tonight, it's the opposite.

As I ride down the narrow pathway to get to GenCre, I tighten my hand on the wheel, ignoring the clench in my throat.

“About earlier, and what I said. I didn't mean it.” I swallow it through.

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*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:12 am*

She doesn't respond, and I wonder if she heard me or not. "It's fine. I can take it." I peer over at her as she turns to face me with a faint, dead smirk. "I won't cower in the corner bawling my eyes out. Your words will never truly affect me to that point. They have no meaning behind them. It packs no punch. No ammo. Nothing," she says almost robotically, with a slight squint that comes off chilling. "So, take your useless apology and shove it back down your throat."

Well shit. That's an even worse response than I would've given.

I resist the temptation to grin at her blades she just threw at me. She's so far gone and emotionally void that it does something unfathomable to my gut. The shift appears on my lips, and I turn to face the road. That shit is appealing to me. Placing a few tingles under my ribs and down to my toes.

Because so am I.

\*Tudo feito - Alldone

## Chapter 19

### Venom

Operation: Get ready.

So much for never seeing me bleed. It's been days and my hand has begun to heal already. After the ointments Dr. Rio amped me up with, I'll give another week to see the scar tissue mending back together.

Once I wrapped my hand, I step out of the bathroom, sliding my blade into its rightful place, then I look in the large mirror that resides right by the bay window. I check myself out, making sure I feel good. I decided to wear a tight black turtleneck shirt and underneath a black tank, just in case I got too hot. Fighting takes a lot of energy, and that means sweat.

Plus, black cargo pants were already in the closet with the basic GenCre combat attire. It's practically a row of them, which is off-putting. I choose to wear it because it makes my ass look fantastic. I twist around, checking myself out in the mirror.

"Hmph. Nice."

Lowering down, I tie the loose string on my combat boots, securing it. There's also an array of their combat boots which I will not be wearing, and it makes me wonder, how the hell does he know my shoe size?

So strange, that man.

I straighten up, my green nails shining through the mirror. I did my nails late last night since I couldn't sleep. The memory of Ronan wrapping my hand with a wrath of a ticking time bomb is unsettling, and kept playing in my mind all night. I have the faintest idea of what pissed him off so much; he still handled my hand with such care, like he was dealing with a bomb.

As I'm making my way out of the door, my mask that sits on top of the dresser stands out, the spikes glistening, luring me to take it. I gnaw on the side of my mouth. I always wear my mask when I'm doing solo missions. But when I was out with the girls, I never did. I don't see why I should now.

"Another time." I release a breath before walking out.

I make my way out the door, a sigh of relief escapes my chest. Thanking whatever entity is up above because it looks like Ronan left out while I was showering.

I head down the creaking steps and towards the hall. After bumping into a few loose strays (students), I finally make it down to the steps where Wicked, Boone, and Ronan stand, locked and loaded. Earpieces are in and guns by their side. Ronan is placing his gun behind him when he looks up at me coming down the steps. My stomach does a filthy spin and twist before flopping to the floor, his eyes scaling down me like I'm freaking Cinderella awaiting her prince. I take my eyes off him, swallowing the log in my pipes.

I am not Cinderella, and he is definitely not my prince.

"Took you long enough, princess," Mal sneers, rolling her eyes before going to the door to gather the gear. I ignore her because I'm really over her shit.

"How's your hand?" Ronan strolls towards me, finally getting his gun in the holster. He's wearing a black turtleneck like me; it fits his chest marvelously, and it shows all the curves in his broad plates and muscular shoulders. Black cargos and black combats, making him dark and dire.

I inspect his entire face. He has the smoothest tawny skin, even under the tiny scars and laceration on his cheek and lip. His normally wavy hair neatly swooped back, the faded scruff looks freshly shaved, showing his squared and chiseled jaw.

No one should look so damn hot going on a mission to murder people. I want to pinch myself, so I don't have to feel the heat rising to my neck.

"It's fine." I look away from his gorgeousness and glance over to the side, watching Mal place a hand grenade into her duffel bag. Ronan doesn't respond, he only watches me as he puts another gun on his waist. I'm so unnerved, my palms are

sweating already, and I haven't even done anything. He grabs a pair of black cut off gloves from his back pockets and puts them on. Once he's done, he reaches into his pocket again.

"This is for you," he says, lowering his voice; his accent is so thick sometimes his words slur to make the terms out. He pulls out an earbud from his pocket. It's small, not bulky and awkward.

"Chris, my other main guy, speaks into these. He scopes out the building from the outside, making sure nothing goes haywire. If it does, we have a full backup team. All we need to do is say 'kite on flight.'" He lifts his brow, passing me the earbud. "Plan A and Z, right?"

My heart shouldn't tingle with baby flutters, but it does. I don't smile. I won't give him that. But I do appreciate him listening to me and taking my advice.

"Yes. Exactly." I brush my hair over to place the ear bud, but my hair keeps catching it. I knew I should've gelled it down and put it in a ponytail.

"Here. I'll help."

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:12 am*

I tense up, He raises his hands to my face and stills before glancing at me.

“May I touch you?” He shouldn’t sound so sexy when it’s a simple question. That lump is forming again, stunting my breathing. I vaguely recall telling to never touch me again. I was upset. He called me a liability, and that shouldn’t have affected me, but it did. It stung like a bee poking me with its stinger. I told him his words pack no punch, but I was wrong. Very wrong.

“Sure. You only have a minute.”

He steps closer, standing over me like a tower, and I’m the miniature human down below. Wood and citrus fill my space. It’s light and subtle, not overbearing to the point where my nostril hairs catch flame.

He smells so good.

No he doesn't, shut up. Shut your trifling brain.

His eyes move across my face and my hair. He brushes his fingers over the side of my strands gently, the tips of the pads touching my skin, sending electric shocks down my cheek to neck. My heart now thunders against my ribs, causing it to rattle.

After gathering as much hair behind my ear, Ronan looks down at where I’m holding the device, and he dips his fingers into my palms. He glances at me, placing the bud softly into my ear—his carefulness is obvious, like he’s avoiding hurting me. Once it’s secure, the pad of his thumb trails my ear tenderly. My throat goes dry with a shiver down my thigh. I watch his jaw flex and his Adam’s apple bulge out. This

shouldn't be anything, but it seems like it.

I peek at his lips, curved, plump, and dented at the top. It's a perfect juiciness. I'm only stating the obvious—it doesn't mean I want to kiss him.

"I should've put it in a ponytail," I blurt out, trying to distract my thoughts while rubbing my sweaty palms on the back of my cargos.

He shakes his head lightly. "Don't." His fingers play in my curly strands.

"Don't tell me what to do." I flick my eyes to his lips, and he catches sight of it. My chest tightens and I quickly play it off, peering behind him instead. His hand slightly tightens around my hair like he's trying to compose himself. I look back.

"No mask?" His eyes slice back to mine.

"No."

A second passes, which feels like minutes, with us looking at each other, but I can't take it anymore; his gaze is searing into my soul like he's hearing my lustful thoughts.

I gaze away finally, diverting my eyes to the ground. "I believe that minute has passed." I manage to get out even though my throat is drier than sandpaper.

He lowers his hand. I gaze back up to see him clench his jaw and a dilation to his eyes as he steps away from me like I'm poisonous. "Your earpiece is secure." His tone is back to authority.

"Great, now that is over with, can we go?" Mal asks, irritated. I look around to see Boone is gone, the door is wide open, and Mal just looks pissed, as usual.

Ronan backs up, grabbing the last two duffle bags from the foyer, then walks out. Heat is skating up my back and I need air for a second. I make my way outside where it's brisk but Wicked places her hand up, pushing me back.

Reflex kicks in and I slap her hand away. "What?"

She steps in front of me, fury clearly running through her like a hellfire. "You pull any funny shit, you're gone. You may have Ro swindled and fooled, but I'm not." Then she spins around, her wavy short ponytail flinging along with her.

Such a bitch.

What strikes me as odd is why would she think I have Ronan fooled?

Location: Outskirts of Hollow City

Operation: Kill everyone.

We pull up to the same spot we scoped out last week. It's on top of the hill that hovers down towards the compound or mansion? I'll make sure to watch my footing as I walk along the path, but I don't see a speck of rock anymore. There's not even a tiny pebble you can step on.

Where the hell did they go? My brows furrow as I adjust my bulletproof vest, searching the dark tinted area.

Okay?...

At least I don't have to trip on my ass again and make Ronan pissed.

We each check ourselves, making sure we left nothing out. I grab a few bombs, my



knife, my gun, and extra ammo.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:12 am*

“Mal, you go around the back and see if that door is locked like we hope,” Ronan speaks, walking to the edge of the hill. Our plan is to lock everyone in. No one runs free.

“On it.” Mal hops off the ledge of the hill, making her way down the rocky ridge. It’s a cliff, but it’s manageable to get down without falling completely forward. Easy way down, easy way up.

“Boone.” Ronan shifts to him and Boone nods, tucking his AK-47 and running off into the wooded area.

Ronan now faces me. His face is blank and emotionless. “And you are with me.”

I would feel disappointed, but I can’t. His mood has shifted since the scene in the foyer, and I’m good with it because we need to focus solely on the mission. His touches and stares are getting to me, as much as I don’t want to admit it. It’s affecting me, and I don’t need to fuck up on this mission.

“How fun,” I state, my tone bland. Before we descend, a vibrating sound comes out and Ronan quickly grabs his pocket, looking at the screen. He becomes visibly angry, the white, luminous glare from the phone shining on his hard features. His jaw clenches before clicking the vibration off, flicking through the screen with his thumb and placing it back in his pocket.

“Let’s go.” He brushes past me, taking his anger with him.

He walks off, heading down the hill. I trail behind him, right on his toes. Excitement

is purging through me like a faucet when I picture my finger jamming into someone's eyes. They deserve it for being such terrible people. I don't care much for the job Ronan does, but just the thought of them kidnapping people and doing inexplicable things to them only for money leaves a sour taste in my mouth. They don't deserve that. No one does.

Ronan hops off the last rock and extends his hand out to help me down. I look at it and choose to ignore his hand. For petty reasons.

I hop down, and he stands there for a second before proceeding. Walking a few steps ahead of him, I look over to see if the two men are exactly where we assumed.

They are.

Coming up beside me, we both bend down in sync behind the bushes that stand approximately sixty-five feet in between the front home and the yard. It's a large yard filled with green grass, no secured fence and no neighbors. Are these people crazy? They mustwanta death wish.

"Ready?" Ronan looks over at me and I return his stare. My heart is thudding against my chest, and I'm more than ready.

"Of course."

A smile now creeps on his lips, his callous act dissipating. "And no tripping."

A flush rises in my cheeks. "You're never forgetting that, are you?" For some reason, I want to match his smile. I hold it in.

"Do you forget to breathe air?" He winks. "Now let's go." He ascends from the bushes. The two men in front don't see us yet until we are twenty feet from them.

Before they can extend their weapons and yell for backup, we both shoot at the same time, aiming directly at their heads. We have suppressors on our guns, so no one will hear a sound—besides their bodies dropping to the floor. Then I aim at the cameras extending in the corners of the front door while Ronan bends to grab the weapons.

He extends his hand with the dead man's weapon, and I grab at it as he moves ahead of me.

It's a code at the front of the door with numbers and letters. Ronan instantly clicks the pad a few times and grabs a tiny screw from his pants. "It's like a baby toy. Easy to break," he mumbles to himself, still working his magic.

I don't forget that growing up, Ronan was the spectacular billionaire tech genius along with my brother. Creating gadgets and different inventions. And, of course, I remember the surveillance security system he and Carter created just for the fun of it. Well, it came in handy, that's for sure.

The pad blinks green, and Ronan turns the handle on the door. A thickness clots my throat, and my heart begins to drum against my ribs. My eyes narrow with a throbbing beat. I'm nervous like always. The idea of possibly not coming back out of this house or from a mission is always something to think about. But right now, I'm nervous because I'm anticipating the moment where I stand in front of the man who tortured my brother.

Also, this is my first time going on a mission with Ronan. Will he have my six? Is he the type to run off and have me fend for myself? He doesn't seem uncoordinated, but you never know until you are smack in the center of a shoot off.

Can I trust him?

My chest beats harder.

Is he unbalanced?

Shit. Did I make the wrong choice?

## Chapter 20

### Venom

Everything in me screams to raise my guard, but as if Ronan can sense my weariness, he stops mid-way before the door opens and turns to me, gazing right into my eyes. “I got your back. I’ll protect you, trust me.”

There’s not enough time to respond with something witty, like ‘I can protect myself.’ before he takes off into the house. However, his comment did give me some ease.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:12 am*

“The back is locked and caged. There’s no escaping.” Wicked’s voice speaks through the earpiece.

“Catch up with Boone, and we’ll see each other soon,” Ronan orders, pressing his finger to his earbud. Loud footsteps echo from the side double doors. Voices come through.

“The outside cameras are down. I don’t know what it is, but we are checking now. Yes, we will keep you updated.”

Our eyes shoot to each other, and we silently hide behind the wall, which cuts off the front door and the foyer. I press against the wall, gun to my chest, and Ronan follows but pressing intome. I peered up to see him looking off into where the voices were coming from. Determination and focus in his gaze.

Doors bust open, slamming into a wall from the brutal force, and the stomps closer and closer with squeaks against the white marbled floor.

“They aren’t answering their fucking headsets!” one guy’s voice booms.

“Mike! Pat!”

I’m guessing the other one is speaking into the microphone, hoping to get an answer. From the sounds of the feet, it could be about?—

“There’s three men walking toward us,” Ronan says low and calm, like he’s ordering a meal.

He glances down with a deadpan expression. I nod and once the men approach the wall, and we go for it.

“Mike and Pat are gone,” Ronan speaks with poison to his tongue. The men’s eyes widen, grabbing at their guns—but we’re faster. We pull the triggers on our Rugger .22, knocking off two men.

“Oh, shit!” The other dodges the flying bullets. Scurrying off back toward the double doors, but Ronan is fast. He doesn’t even run; his legs are long, making his strides wide and swift. He takes aim with one hand, then shoots the man in his calf. He yelps, falling to the floor. His crimson leaking out and staining the marble like red juice on a crisp white dress.

“Fucking shit man.” The man growls, cupping his injured limb. His gun lay next to him, and Ronan steps closer to the man, lowering his weapon. I stroll up to him, hovering over the withering man—who’s sweating like a pig. His brown face has paled from the shock and his lips are drying from breathing too hard. “Don’t kill me, man,” he begs, inching closer to his weapon.

Ronan lets out a low irritated sigh. Then he steps over his body, kicking the man’s weapon to him. “I’ll give you a fair chance.”

My brows fly up, with my mouth parting in fascination. A fair shot. Loud running steps are rushing down the long hall. I’m sure they heard the man screaming.

The man stares at Ronan like he’s deranged. I’m sure his life is flashing before his eyes. But he takes the chance, swiping the gun and pointing it at Ronan. Before he can even put his finger on the trigger, a loud sound erupts and his head explodes, splattering all his useless brain, painting the floor officially red.

“Shit,” I say, whipping my head around to see Boone strolling towards us while

lowering his shotgun. Wicked walks besides him. “So much for fair chance.”

“What the fuck was that!?” The voices come closer, and my heart picks up speed. Other muffled voices lapping over each other frantically, and I’m anticipating seeing a group of large men rolling down the steps.

“Guess he got his head job.” She snickers. “No pun intended.”

I roll my eyes to the ceiling, ignoring the stupid pun because, clearly, it was intended. Boone doesn’t speak, but his death stare is more intense than before. Like he’s ready to blow that shotgun right through me.

I thought we were good. Maybe Wicked got into his head or something. I shake the thought because I shouldn’t—don’t care. The mission is my priority and all I care about.

I look away, pursing my lips and releasing a breath. I switch my gaze to Ronan, who’s looking at the top of the stairs.

“They’re getting closer. Let’s go.”

I nod and we head to the double doors. Making our way inside the room, not locking the door behind us. There’s no point.

“Are we ready?” Ronan speaks, his attention now on us.

Mal throws her AK-47 over her shoulder, placing her hand on her hip with an eerie smile. “I was born?—”

“Don’t,” I say blandly, fixing the strap on my thigh that holds my knife. I’m over her cliché catchphrases and weird puns. They’re far from unique.



Mal looks over at me with a scowl and rolls her eyes. She switches her head back to the door, her ponytail slapping her on the side of the face. If she didn't have garbage for blood, she'll probably be someone I could like. She almost reminds me of a mixture of Eve and Kyra. Absolutely gorgeous—and deadly insane.

Rambling sounds of loud footfalls echo around the outside of the door. We all at once point our guns at the door, holding our stance.

“Come out, whoever the fuck you are,” a loud voice booms out. “You have no clue who you're fucking with, coming into my place.”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:12 am*

It must be the leader, the one that was a part of the kidnapping with Ronan and Carter. My heart picks up its pace again, my sweaty hands tightening the grip on my weapon as heat forms around my head. I'm not afraid; I can't help the nerves that fold through me.

Scarlette's voice whispers in my head. We have each other.

"Anita."

My heart jumps at my name coming from a man with that accent. The situation is dire, but he's calmer than I imagined. I lift my chin, flicking my eyes to him. Those once-honey eyes that are now blacker than the gun he's holding are transfixed on me, as if he can feel the rocky nerves and heat steaming off me. He nods, giving me a look of surety; it's so strong and telepathic, like he's saying he has my back.

And that. That does something to my pounding heart that now beats normally. It lowers my nerves and sparks my fire, and I don't know whether to be embarrassed or ashamed. I ignore the feeling for now; swallowing down my pride, I nod again, looking back at the door.

"Come out now or die where you hide." The man roars once more.

Boone walks up carelessly to the door, as if we have all the time in the world. He fishes for the lightning smoke grenade and plucks it off his pants. Then he halts, glancing back at us with a straight face. "It's time to play," he says in a sultry Manchester accent. He tosses the lethal metal up and down like a baseball.

And that alone releases the bane in me, like the stick flicking on the matchbox. I crack a grin, hooding my eyes as we all step back.

“I’m so ready,” Mal says, cocking her weapon. We each grab the vision goggles from our gear and place it on, securing it.

Boone kneels on the opposite side of the door, then he cracks the door open quickly, throws the device out, and shuts it. He retreats still low to the floor.

I grin wider, speaking under my breath. “Three, two, one.”

BOOM!

The outside shrieks with growls and screams from grown ass men. “Oh shit!”

We rush to the door, swinging it open, and we shoot and kill anyone in our sight. I toss my knife directly into a man’s skull. He goes down instantly. The surrounding area is smoky, and because the bomb gives off a shuttering white flash, it immediately blinds their vision.

Men are leaning over holding their eyes shouting, some are on the ground crying out. Others are flailing through the air in hopes of ridding the fog. It won’t work unless you are wearing one of these handy things on my face.

I catch Ronan and Boone both side by side, hitting and killing the men with their guns instead of just shooting them. A figure tackles me to the ground. An oomph escapes my breath, but I instantly push my knee up, jamming it straight in his ass to lift him over me. He’s big as shit, but my quickness throws him off balance.

He topples above me, letting out a spur of curse words. Regaining my balance, I flip out my poisonous knife, spin around, and kneel, swiftly swiping it, and slicing his

jugular. I stand up, repeating my movement, attacking another member trying to shoot me.

I peer around, spotting a large man with restored sight, now charging toward Ronan, but he is distracted by two other men—that he is violently beating. I quickly dissect the situation. Boone is busy slamming his gun into men's faces, and Mal is shooting others.

My heart picks up pace. I'm sure he'll see the man stalking up to him.

The man pulls out a large machete, and my eyes widen. Ronan is snuffing out the last weasel, but he still doesn't notice.

Shit.

Only I'm supposed to be killing him, not this asshole. Before I know it, I'm sprinting to the other side of the room with my dagger.

I run up behind him fast enough as he's lifting his machete; panic attacks my heart once the sharp knife swings down. He's so distracted by his thirst for Ronan's blood that he doesn't hear me shout.

“No!”

## Chapter 21

### Venom

I scream shockingly loud, trepidation causing my chest to tighten. Ronan quickly turns to my voice, eyes panicked, as if I'm the one in trouble. But then ducks swiftly to the side. I kick the machete out of the man's thick hand, then I spin, ducking as he

swings before jamming my blade into his chest. He growls out, stumbling back. I look over at Ronan, whose eyes fall on me with an appreciating gaze. He nods softly before his eyes grow dark as he looks back at the man who's still holding my blade to his arteries.

Ronan lifts his heavy boot, kicking the man right in the blade, digging it further into his bones. He screams and falls to the ground, crimson pouring past his lips. The gunshots stop, and the sound of fists and metal hitting bones come to a halt. I look up to see every man is down or dead.

Ronan bows downward, his elbows on his knees. Mal and Boone stand beside me watching their headman become a menace.

"Fred escaped. He's not in the pile," Mal says.

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*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:12 am*

Ronan picks up the machete, swirling it in front of the guy's face, nearly slicing his cheek and nose. The man's eyes shift, following the knife. His fear is evident, his face paling and sweat protruding on his forehead.

The guy tries to talk, but it's unclear.

"Where is he? Make it easy for us so we don't have to search this whole house."

His eyes are wide but dulling; he finally manages to speak. "I-I'm not telling y-you shit." Blood flies through his teeth as he slurs his words.

Ronan, unfazed, turns his head slightly to the side as the blood sprays, and then ticks his teeth. "Wrong answer, but I'll grant you with the same death you tried to give me." He stands up with a careless expression. With no hesitation, he raises the machete and swings down, severing the man's head off like chopped wood. The blood sprays out, flinging to his boots and pants. Then Ronan kicks his head, it rolls over then lands facing us with his eyes open and his mouth spread into its own creepy Halloween mask.

My eyes widened with shock and surprise.

Welcome to GenCre.

My gaze does a thing of its own as it roams Ronan's back. His stand is strong and confident, the muscles clear as day rippling through the black shirt. Along the way, he rolled up his sleeves and now displaying the ink etched into his left forearm, and the veins bulging out like even they have their own set of muscles.

Ronan kneels again as wraps his hand around my knife and pulls it out of his chest plate, wiping it on the corpse shirt. He turns around finally to face us, but his eyes are solely on me, warm and intense.

I don't know why my lungs expand, or why I feel flutters in my stomach when he looks at me, but I don't stray either, even though I should.

"Chris." He speaks in the earpiece while still concentrating his gaze on me. His large chest rises and falls, and his chiseled, bearded jaw flexes.

"On it." A deep and gravelly voice comes into all our earpieces.

"You two scope out the top floor."

Ronan's eyes stay glued on me as he orders everyone around like some king. Might as well say he is; he's respected, idolized, and people will die to defend his honor.

Even save his life.

Unfortunately, I became one of those people.

He's the reason your brother is gone. My father's voice screams at me.

Mal and Boone nod, then head to the steps. Now I wish I would've run off with them because the energy is thick and heavy. The heat from his stare blazes into my face like the sun on a hot day. I watch his black boots that's stained with blood step forward, and I lift my head, raising my chin.

Such a bad choice because that one step closes the gap between us, and now, once again, he stands mere inches from me.

I push the sudden feelings away and glare at him. “You almost died. You need to be more careful,” I rush out, pointing at the headless dead man.

He tilts his head to catch my mysterious worry. Heat rises to my neck, so I cover it up. I thread my fingers through my tangled bangs, but it flops back down. “We need to finish this, and only then you can die however and whenever you please.”

A crooked grin comes on his lips, like he can see through my bullshit. His eyes are still boring deep into me.

Becoming uneasy, I place my hand on my hip. “I’m not sure what’s so amusing to you, but you could’ve been chopped meat.”

“And yet here I am,” he says deep and calmly, lifting my dagger and handling it like it’s his.

I shake my head in utter disbelief, crossing my arms, purposely bumping them against his hard chest. He doesn’t budge. My blood only starts heating up. “Do you not care if you live or die?”

“I care. But what is a team for if they don’t watch your back in those situations? You think I would make it this far without a trusted team? We look after each other, save each other. I’ll do the same for you any day. Hell, I’ll die for you if it means protecting you or anyone else on my team.”

My chest squeezes with heavy pressure, my consciousness reminding me why it’s so difficult to hate him. Why would he willingly die for another person. It’s so stupid and idiotic, yet my stomach is rolling over from his confession.

Without taking his eyes off me, he reaches out, unfolding my arm and wrapping his hand under mine. My body tenses. I clench my jaw to suppress the breath, wanting to



escape. My eyes zero in on him.

“You didn’t have to do that, but because you did.” He places my dagger in my hand. I look at it, clean and free of blood completely.

Exactly how I like it.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:12 am*

I tuck in my lip, licking the rim. He watches the movement, and my heart beats harder into my ribs. It almost feels like he's sucking up all the hate, and reluctance I had toward him and tossing it overboard.

"I amforeverindebted to you." It came out as more of a whisper. One that drives shivers up my spine. It's a clause that I never agreed to. Those little words alone make me feel like he owes me his life. All he needed to do was bow and kiss my red stained boots.

Here we are standing in the middle of a bloodbath, moaning men and dead ones. And yet, I'm here in a whirlwind by a man who's as beautiful as a roman god and dark as the scythe himself.

With a mission at stake, I do not have time for this. These unwanted feelings, all the stupid goosebumps that can't seem to lay off. He continues to make me feel out of place, and I hate it. I hate that I can't hate him. I narrow my eyes and I yank my hand away.

"We aren't a team. It's only temporary. So next time, maybe I'll just let you get slaughtered."

He doesn't care that my entire mood has changed; he seems even more thrilled about it, a mischievous grin on his lips and dark tints shimmering in his gaze.

"Fuck off," I mutter, purposely pushing past him as I jam the metal into the holster. Once again, he doesn't even move from the abrasion.

Stepping over men and making my way to the steps, I swallow the brick suffocating my throat. Because although I made the comment of letting him get killed, it seems he knows more than me—it's a complete lie.

## Chapter 22

Ronan

Only a fool would dare...

“How did he escape?” Ire is streaming through my bones as I stand in the middle of the dark chestnut room. I clasp both hands in front of me. Boone crosses his arms and leans on the large seat pushed into the mahogany desk. The chair is huge, like it belongs in a castle. The room is full of decor resembling a king's quarters. Etched brown vases, thick burgundy and gold carpet, the walls, and ceilings designed with pillars and wood. And an actual damn chandelier slap center in here.

It's ridiculous.

The room is giving me a splitting headache on top of the fact that the bastard escaped. I hate I missed those minor details and that can cost us a lot, turning into something bigger. Like him fleeing and getting away with it.

Mal has pinched brows stepping around the room. “No clue I locked all the back doors and windows downstairs.”

“Your best bet is searching the place.” Chris' voice pops in through the earpieces.

“He couldn't have gotten that far then,” Anita says. I twist my head around to see her seated in another throne chair. Bringing my full body to her direction, my heavy boots scraping against the floor lazily.

I trail my eyes up those long legs that's crossed over the other, tapping her boot in the air with her arm flat on the armrest.

"I can bet he's probably running low on energy. Blood doesn't stay put if he's shot." She looks at her nails while talking, then she finally gazes back at me. I could've winced at the fire igniting in her eyes. She's pissed too, and that shit makes her even more sexy.

My eyes roam her face. Like painting a canvas, I brush all over her features. Soft brown skin, pouty plump lips, her flaring button nose, and almond-shaped brown eyes that'll make a man drop to his knees when she looks at you. The dark eye shadow and natural thick lashes make her look wicked as fuck.

Deslumbrante.

Yes, she's his little sister, but it doesn't mean I can't admire the obvious.

"Venom is right. We start the search now. I'm sure you'll catch up to him in no time, Headman," Chris reassures.

I squeeze my knuckles; the bones cracking and relieving some tension that's built up. I'm exhausted as fuck; the fighting downstairs can leave one winded, and the adrenaline I had is slowly dissipating. But I won't be able to sleep knowing he's out there free and unscathed. That's a no-go in my playbook. I gaze at her again, rolling down my sleeves. "Plan Z."

I finally see a grin almost come to her lips and a shimmer glistens in her eyes. "Plan Z," she repeats.

"Ro, take a look at this!" Mal yells out with a hint of concern. My head snaps in her direction, furrowing my brows. We all follow the trail of rustling. Inside a secret

room with a table, ashtrays, and half full glasses of liquor stand on a wall a large paper with colored strings and pinpoints of?—.

Oh, fuck.

Nausea with a mix of rage bubbles in my gut at the sight. Anita comes up beside me, lowering her gun. “What is this?”

My stomach plummets to the floor, taking my heart right along with it. I crush my jaws together, hearing the molars crack. I narrow my eyes to see the extremities of the situation.

It’s fucked.

## Page 57

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:12 am*

Photos of young girls and boys with blue and red dots on their heads. Different locations on the map. Cities, states?...?countries. Defeat lies in my chest for a split second. Each with a red X across their face. Either they're preparing for the kidnapping or worst-case scenario. Someone already took them.

"It's a map of every victim set to get kidnapped," Mal answers for me, walking up to the wall.

"Or potential. We don't know if they are actually marked," Anita says, eyeing the map.

I couldn't answer because once you think you are one step ahead, you're not, and that makes me sick to my damn stomach. How did I not see this coming?

Anita walks to the wall, jabbing a finger at another picture. "Why are you on this wall?"

My gaze follows to where it lies. Studying the blank picture with a question mark above it. Only thing presented is the name.

"Poison," Anita speaks.

That means they still have no clue who I am, just the name that's circulated around for years, never figuring out my true identity. This can be a good thing. As I shift to walk out of the room of doom, my eyes flicker down to the table; something shiny and gold stands out. My brows furrow, narrowing in for a moment before snatching it up and heading out of the room.

“Boone, take the map. Mal, grab anything you see in here that can give you any clues on the next targets. We keep an eye on them.” I walk out of the room, theories, and ideas rummaging around in my head about when and where to start. First things first are getting their photo in the database and taking it from there.

Trepidation slick in the pits of my belly like the wounds inflicted in my chest. I have no control over this situation. No matter how many people I save, these fuckers are always after more. But I’ll kill every last person on this earth that’s involved in shit like this if I have to.

“If they are on the wall, that means their names and locations have been passed down and added to their rosters. It doesn’t stop here.” Dread is overpowering my senses. Like a natural disaster destroying everything in its path.

I was so caught in thought that I didn’t notice Anita whip in front of me. Her palm flat against my chest ceases my steps. She watches me for a moment, studying my face.

“We’ll figure it out,” she says softly, her head tipping to the side. The heat of her hand snapping me back into reality. This calamity in her gaze sort of extinguishes the burn. Until something flickers behind her calmness and stiffens again, catching a boundary, I presume. She instantly drops her hand, stepping back a few inches. “What’s the plan now?”

I step away slowly. “We search for this asshole. Let’s look for a trail of blood; we know he’s wounded.”

I divert my attention to Mal, who throws papers off the table searching for more information and Boone, who’s carefully rolling up the large map. “I need you two back at the compound with Bedford and the others. We need all the information on each and every one of these potential victims. All hands on deck.” Never questioning

me, they nod with stern faces.

I began to search around; this big ass room has more hidden rooms than it presents to be. “Look for something out of the ordinary. There’s a secret escape.” It has to be.

A large ceiling to floor bookshelf is against the wall. These assholes read books? I doubt it. I step closer, examining the books. All the hardcovers are neatly arranged. Anita comes beside me, noticing what I’m seeing.

There is a bloody print on one of the books. The book is a burgundy color, so it would be hard to detect it at a far distance. Smart. Not smart enough.

I look over my shoulder to see Mal with a folder under a shoulder, heading out the door with Boone. “Anita and I will go find him. Meet you back there.”

Mal almost looks warily at Anita, then she nods again. “We’ll keep you updated.” Then they head out. “Chris, we’re coming.” Her voice trails off down the hall.

“That’s not suspicious at all.” Anita points her head at the book. She raises to touch the book, but I shoot my hand out, stopping her.

“Come behind me.” I nod my head to the back of me.

Her head cocks, and her brows lower. Knowing she’s mostly always taking initiative, which I don’t mind, it’s sexy as hell to me. I glance back at the shelf, following each part and crack. “If anything shoots out, I don’t need you getting hit. I’ll rather it be me than you.”

From the way her eyes soften following a one up on me, she pulls up her dagger from the holster. “And I told you if anyone or anything is going to kill you. It’s going to be me.”



She was just spitting fire at me downstairs, and now something has changed. Her attitude shifts so much that it gives me whiplash and on top of confusing the shit out of me. But I'll take it any day.

I smirk at her subtly. "Touché. My death will be in your hands." I wink before facing the decoy shelf again. "Now get your ass behind me."

She doesn't argue with it. I raise my hand, gently pulling down on the book. And there it is. A hollow, deep sound from the end of the shelf opens up wide like a giant's mouth.

I bring up my gun, pointing at the black space. We stroll to it, finding an open door on the floor. "It goes underground," Anita says, walking around the circular hole.

"I'll meet you down." She hums out with that eerie wave she did the first night we met.

Drop.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:13 am*

She engulfs down into the black tunnel, leaving me in awe and my mouth nearly open. Fuck, I'm finding myself more and more enthralled by her.

The sound of increased debris scratching below, which means she's made it. I follow along, dropping through the hole; it's a good ten-foot width. Not locking my knees, I land smoothly on my feet and look to see Anita already walking ahead. I'm beside her in no time, the tiny pebbles crushing beneath our feet and the echoes of our shallow breaths bouncing off the mildewed bricked walls. The air is clogged, thick and empty, and it's not because of the grayish color. Light is barely visible, making it difficult to get a clear view of a possible blood trail.

"It's nice to see there are no rocks down here." Anita quirks, kicking the pebbles. "Especially since I also saw none when we arrived." She treads slowly.

I raise a brow and grab my night vision glasses from my gear holster. "I guess the wind must've knocked them away." I know what she's getting at. Though I won't admit to her, I came back out the night before and had immense pleasure in chucking every rock I can lift right into the woods.

She nods, grabbing her gear too. "Right. The wind," she responds softly, flicking her gaze to the side of my face.

I clear my throat. "There." Happy something came up just in time. I point down at the tiny specks of blood leading down the tunnel. I tighten my hold on the gun, my heart picking up speed from the pleasure of seeing this fucker. I can envision my boot right now, crushing his bone until I hear it snap.

A loud clunk echoes further down the tunnel. I raise my gun quickly.

“I would assume that’s not a rat,” Anita says; her weapon remaining raised.

“Unless that rat became a mutant, then no, it’s not.” My steps slow, one foot in front of the other.

“If that’s the case, then it’ll fit perfectly in your school.”

I slowly turn my head, giving her a dry look. “Very funny.”

She shrugs with a cute smirk. Side by side, we keep walking down the humid tunnel. Looking down and around as I walk, light shuns from a hole above. The moonlight shining through and cascading on the dirt below. I stop putting my arm out. Anita halts, following my gaze.

More blood. Lots of it.

“He’s nearby.” I squat down on my tiptoes, touching the blood and rubbing it between my fingers. Blood hasn’t phased me since the kidnapping. It’s like something sick and twisted snapped in my brain, and the things that make most people gag don’t affect me the same. “He’s not too far away; this blood is fresh.”

A low moan echoes from down the dark tunnel. I slowly stand back up, looking into the darkness. I step toward it, gun raised. My heartbeat exhilarating with anticipation.

“He’s closer than we thought,” Anita whispers, matching my steps like we both trained together for years.

We walk a few more feet before running right into a man gripping his abdomen. I remove my vision glasses to see him through and through. His face paling and

perspiration shines, although it's dark. My guess is he tried to make it to the pole to grip, but his injury to the stomach is unbearable.

I crack a maniacal grin at his pain. "There you are."

He didn't notice us creeping up on him; his eyes widen with pure fear once he hears my deep, shrilling voice and sees two people looking sinister as fuck looming from out the shadows of the dark.

He attempts to scoot back, hoping his little leg gestures will help him escape. I let out a laugh at how funny he looks and how he thinks that'll do something.

"There's no escaping us, Fred," Anita says low, in a scary melody. She walks in the opposite direction while I move the other way, looking down at him. He whimpers, trying to lean up, his eyes bulging from his face, skating between us both rapidly.

"Are you him?" He stops, scrunching his face in pain and gripping his belly. He looks back up.

"You'll find that out soon."

We both stop in front of him, Anita placing her hand on her hip. I look at my watch, checking the time. "Should I do the honors or you?"

She taps her green colored nail on her chin. "Hmm. I think you got this one."

I slowly stare back at him, giving a leering smirk. I toss my gun upside down so I can grasp the barrel.

"Wait man wait!" His bloody, shaking hands detaching from his wound to block the hit.

I don't hear or care about his useless pleas. It only makes me angrier that he chose to beg for his life. So, I slam my gun onto his hand, possibly breaking his fingers. He screams out; the sounds bouncing everywhere. Then I knock him in the head, and he goes out cold. I want to do more to him right now, but I have something a lot more interesting planned.

I close my eyes, tossing my head back and inhaling a deep breath. Once I've cooled myself down, I look over at Anita, who watches me with a pondering gaze. The moon shining in, skating across her face, made her look like an angel sent to my hell. "What now?"

I look down at the knocked-out imbecile. Threading my hand through my hair, I put the gun back in my holster. "I'll take him back to the compound. And torture him to death," I say plainly.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:13 am*

I don't have anything to hide, all my dark and sick ways I accept it now. She may or may not like it, but this is me. All of me. I have no shame in this side of me. I lean down, gripping the man's jacket collar and lifting him off the ground to drag him.

"I want to be there," she rushes out, stepping forward.

I can't help my surprise. I shouldn't be, since she is the one who left the man at that house nearly decapitated. I hated the person who, I thought, got in the way of my kill, but now I know it was from her and I want to see her in action.

"Fine with me." I began dragging the guy away, and she trails behind me. I'm normally looking forward to the screams of the men, but all I can envision is the twisted shit this beautiful snake has up her sleeve for him.

\* Deslumbrante- Gorgeous

Chapter 23

Venom

Location:

GenCre Academy

Operation: Forget everything that happened tonight

I step out of the shower, my body scrubbed thoroughly and free from any blood that

may have splashed on me. That's the one thing I hate most about this gig.

Meanwhile, Ronan seems to have no problem with it. He's a maniac. And he doesn't give a damn, either.

But tonight was long and exhausting. Ronan was on that wall. A stab lurks into my heart, of that reminder. If he's on the wall of victims, then they are after him for something. That worries me—whether I like it or not. And those kids are soon to be victims, and that's sickening. It was easy to hear about it and move on. To know somewhere in this world this is happening, but I've always stuck to my own goal, sticking to my own shadow.

Yet now that I've seen it. I can't unsee it.

I walk out of the bathroom, grabbing my black checker box pajama shorts, black tank top with a skull face and its tonguesticking out. I get dressed, my thoughts still on the pictures on that wall.

Damn it, those poor kids... They don't even know their lives are being targeted. And what do they want with Ronan?

I guess that's a easy answer, he's the man who's been shutting down their sick operations.

Thinking too much on it has fatigue taking over my body, but I still want to at least grab a cup of tea to take the edge off. Compliments to Scarlett, who secretly filled my luggage with soothing herbs. I pick through the chamomile, ashwagandha herbs, and loose tea bags on the dresser before heading to the door.

I wonder if I let Ronan really think it was weed, would he have kicked me out or smoked it with me?

I chuckle to myself, strolling out of the room, but stop immediately. My heart flutters in my throat. Ronan stands at the large bay window in the living room, looking out. He's holding a bottle of water, and his head turns subtly, only peering at the corner of his eyes. He faces back forward, before drinking the water. I continue to the kitchen. Neither of us speak, and the room begins to fill...strange. Like static buzzing on the TV and you're waiting for something to appear. Normally, I would keep to myself because I prefer it that way. No engagements, or weird conversations. However...

"Can't sleep?" I ask, filling my skeleton cauldron mug with water and placing it in the microwave.

"Tonight's one of those night when the noise... is too loud in my head," he responds, releasing a heavy sigh. Without thinking, I stroll to the cabinet, grabbing another mug, filling it with water.

"They say meditation helps," I say randomly. And they say is correct because I have no fucking idea, I've never done it myself. I've only seen Kyra engage in it. But it's something to say to fill the awkward silence.

"Meditation," Ronan repeats lower, tossing the bottle on the sofa with a stretch to his neck and shoulders. He strolls over to the sofa, stretching his arms and long legs out comfortably.

He looks off into the distance in front of him, his sight on nothing but the trees. I'm privy to it. You're not exactly looking at anything, only the thoughts from your earlier chaos, taking hold and choke slamming you to the ground. Thinking of everything that you could've done right, and everything that went wrong.

It's why I drink tea. It helps.

The microwave beeps. I take my mug and place the one for him in it. I said I wasn't



going to use this kitchen to cook him anything. Making tea is different. I would do it for anyone.

Lies, no I wouldn't.

After I fill the bags, I grab the honey and squirt it into the cups, stirring until everything's dissolved. When I'm done, I take both mugs and dip the bags into the steamy water.

I release out a low and subtle breath, my heart pinching and beating from the unknown. What if he denies the cup, or worse, tastes it and nearly gags? Or even worse, has an allergic reaction.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:13 am*

Oh, fuck me. It's tea, not an atomic bomb.

I swallow the strange nerves and tread over to him; he tilts his head, glancing up at me.

"Tea for your thoughts?" I ask over the loud beat of my heart. I extend the extra mug. He has a tired look to his eyes, the sunken dents under his lids and light squint.

I don't know why I feel bad. I don't understand why I feel a lot of things. Only that I do, and I can't help but sympathize.

My bottom finds the sofa momentarily, as if I'm not sure whether to sit down or just leave. But everything in my body is pushing for me to stay.

He raises a brow, peeking at me as his hand moves up to grab the cup.

"I'm not a tea drinker." His fingers wrap around the mug, grazing fully over mine as he takes it from my grasp.

"Nobody is initially—until they try it." I smirk, holding my mug with both hands. The warmth from it heats my palms.

He looks inside the mug as if it's something supposed to come out and grab his face.

"Chamomile and ashwagandha. It's safe to drink, and it's not poisoned, scout's honor." I blow into the cup with a devious grin, the steam running off the rim.

He flicks his eyes toward me. “How can I trust it’s not?”

I shrug, sitting back an inch further for comfort. “I guess you’ll have to just trust me.”

Ronan hums with a slight nod. We both watch each other, slowly bringing the tea up to our lips. He takes a slurp, and I do the same, squinting over the edge as I sip. The warm liquid streams down my throat, hints of honey coating the walls, soothing the muscles instantly.

We lower the cups at the same time. I glance down at his throat, catching the bob in his Adam’s apple. I look back to see his reaction and as I do, his tongue swipes delicately over his lips.

I shift again, squeezing my thighs. “What do you think?”

“Not bad.” He sips again.

I contain the smile reaching to come out. “Good.” I drink again, watching as he repeats his movement.

I shift once more, ignoring the tingles shooting to my pussy. “See and look, you’re not dead.” I tease, grazing my fingers over the skull’s eye socket on my mug.

Ronan lowers his arm down to the armrest. “I live to see another day,” he murmurs, tipping his head back as he shuts his eyes.

A tightness forms in my throat, and my brows draw together with a slack to my shoulders. Seeing him this way, it’s off. I’ve become used to him being a certain way. Broad and strong, not racked with defeat. I can’t explain, but I want to do something weird like give him a hug and tell him it’ll all be okay.

After seeing that wall of creepy kidnapper routes, it flipped a switch in my head. I have never been this deep on the other side of this world. I wasn't clueless, but it was always left in the hands of GenCre?...?well, Ronan. So, to see the full picture of what happens and what they see. It's really sickening.

When he walked off, deep in thought, his entire demeanor changed. I couldn't help myself. One moment I was angry at him, and then the next moment, I wanted to console him.

However, at this moment, I could leave. And not make it awkward for neither of us, but instead I lick over my lips, thumbing the skull. "Why did you create GenCre?"

He keeps his eyes closed. "Are we asking twenty-one questions?"

"Only one."

"If you're asking a question, then I should get one in return." Ronan opens his eyes, tilts his head, and looks right at me.

I cross my legs, leaning back. "I guess we can work with that."

"Alright." He reaches over to place the cup down on the mini table beside the couch. Then he lets out a deeper breath. "I built this academy to give the survivors a safe haven. As a survivor, it's difficult going back into the world after what happened to you. You don't feel safe anymore. And everything that you did, all that you were accustomed to, every routine you've known, becomes nothing. You're only floating, looking over your shoulder, waiting for the next attack." He looks to the ceiling as he talks.

My head tilts, gazing at him while he speaks openly.

“In other words, this place is to give others another chance. Not the fuckers who kidnapped them. But to show them an outlook. Your trauma doesn’t define you. You can build and grow from it—and become a beast in the process.” He emphasizes the last part.

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My eyes drop to the mug. “That’s wonderful,” I whisper, nearly inaudible. Because it is. He chose to help those who were victims to these heinous acts. Choosing to give them a chance to shift their trauma and turn it into a power. It’s admiring.

Ronan crosses his arms glancing back at me. “Now my turn.”

I roll my eyes up to meet his. I wonder what he has for me.

After a few seconds, he asks, “What’s your issue with me? Why do you want to kill me?”

My heart plummets to my stomach.

Did want to kill you?..?..?

I guess we’re getting real personal. Do I tell him that my father, who also happens to be the man who trained me to become who I am today, had a notion that I was never safe. And we needed to get revenge for Carter and to kill him too?

There’s no real way to explain that. It was only a matter of time before he wanted answers. Same as I do.

I sip again. “My father believed you were the reason Carter was murdered.” I look off to him, searching for hesitation, a fumble, a sweat?... anything that would prove my father right.

But he doesn’t. His brows deepen as he stares directly into my eyes, a tint of sadness

shells them. “Why would your father think that?”

It’s a great question, and sadly... I don’t know anymore.

“You were best friends, and you come from a rich family. My father found out the men that kidnapped you two go after rich people.”

Ronan slowly sits forward, resting his elbows on his knees as they spread wide, his hands running over his knuckles with a pinched jaw.

What is he thinking?

“Your father. Isn’t wrong.”

My mug nearly falls out of my hand, a burning sensation fills my cheeks.

“What?”

## Chapter 24

### Venom

Isuck in a tight breath, my head buzzing in alert from the news he shot at me. Ronan looks over his shoulder at me. “Not in the way you think.”

Relief I wasn’t expecting loosens the grip that was clutching my heart. I swallow to quench my dry throat, shoulder slacking slightly. “Then explain.”

Please don’t say what I don’t want to hear. I chant over and over until he starts speaking.

“Yes, they go after rich kids. Because of my father and my own wealth, that’s what I thought, but there’s something you don’t know.”

I lower my cup to my thigh, swallowing what seems like sandpaper.

He continues to watch me attentively. “They were after blueprints as well.”

I freeze. “Blueprints?”

“Yes. Your brother and I were creating the next invention. A car that runs on air and water.”

I scratch my head with a confused chuckle. “A car that works only with air?...?and water.” I’m almost ready to say, ‘Do you hear yourself?’ But from his serious expression, the disbelief runs free.

“Exactly. They wanted it.”

My head shakes, blinking rapidly. “Why didn’t you?... Carter, just give it to them?”



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Ronan thumbs his chin, gliding over his scar. "Carter didn't want that."

I lean forward, placing my mug on the mini table beside me. "I need you to explain further. Did he die for papers? He could've lived, and you let him die?" I ask hysterically; my heart pulses uncontrollably, heat swarming to my head.

His head snaps to me fast, dropping his hand. "I didn't let him die," he seethes, glaring at me. "They were going to kill both of us regardless of the circumstances; we knew this after we were both tortured near to death. So, before I made the move to catch the men off guard so he can escape. He did it first, and he sacrificed himself to set me free." His voice cracks subtly as he peers back forward, avoiding my eye contact.

My chest caves like someone took a boot and slammed right on it. I glance away, turning my head to control the burn behind my eyes. Don't. Don't. Don't.

"You all were like a second family to me," he whispers. "I would never have done anything to destroy that. Never."

My throat tightens. All the memories replay of our past life. Ronan was always at our house, sometimes he would accompany us for family dinner on the weekends. Most times he'll just be there, and it makes me wonder why? Was he running from something? I never thought of his home life or how his relationship was with his family. Only that his mother had passed, leaving his father with two sons.

Now that I think about it, it's almost like we turned on Ronan that second we found out about Carter's death. My gaze averts to the remnants in my cup as the guilt festers

in my chest.

“You remind me of him in that way,” he murmurs. My head twists back to him. He’s looking at me. “Stubborn as hell, fighting for what you believe is right.”

My eyes shift to my thumbnail that’s scratching over my other thumb. The swelling in my heart pumps all the way to my throat. I want to hate my brother for being so stupid. And I also want to hug him for being so brave. “I’m nothing like him. I’m selfish. I would’ve given them the sheets.”

His head shakes. “You’re wrong. There’s not a selfish bone in your body. Not from what I’ve seen so far. Unless you’re showing me someone else?”

Our eyes meet. His eyes roam my face for a second as tingles prick down my back and up my neck. He breaks the contact and relief flushes down my spine.

“Your brother didn’t want them getting into the wrong hands. If they were after the blueprints, then we knew something had to be wrong.”

I swallow. My voice croaks. “How did they find out?”

“That I don’t know. That’s why I’m going to find out tomorrow with Fred.” He cracks his knuckles, clenching down on his jaws.

“Where are the prints now?”

“I hid them. In a disclosed location. No one will be able to find it—not even Satan himself.”

I nod, relief rushes down my chest. At least his work is still alive.

“But back to your initial comment; I may not have been the exact reason, but it should’ve been me that died that night. Fuck, I wish it was. That’s why I’m going to avenge him. Make his death mean something.”

“I don’t,” I slip out before I can stop my stupid mouth.

His head turns back to me slowly. “You don’t, what?”

My brother died with reason, died for a purpose he believed in. It’s heartbreaking, he knew his decision and understood the consequences. Although it’s so hard to admit that to myself, but I love him even more for it. He’s still my big brother, and I will always look up to him.

I only wish my father could have learned all of this. Maybe he wouldn’t have died with hate in his heart, or these unresolved issues and misbelief.

I run my clammy hand down my thigh. I compose the breath escaping every second I release air.

“I don’t wish it was you.”

His eyes soften, no longer rubbing over his knuckles. “Why would you say that?”

I don’t know. It’s...?how I feel.

It makes me wonder now what if I did kill him that night? The moment I had that gun to his head, I could’ve shot him. It was my duty to do so. The vow my father took to his grave for me to fulfill, and yet, I didn’t.

That part in my mind, after the incident outside the apartment, knew I was right. It was Ronan. And even with my finger on the trigger when I approached him hiding

in those bushes, I couldn't do it.

A stabbing pain hurls in my chest. If I had killed him, these students, these survivors, wouldn't have him in their lives any longer.

I would've killed an innocent man who had nothing to do with Carter's death. He was a victim, just like my brother.

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My mouth parts, then closes. Everything trapping itself inside. “I don’t know.”

His jaws move. “I think you do know.”

“I don’t.”

“We all say things for a reason. Whether you want to admit it or not. So, say it.”

I swallow, heat overtaking. “I’d rather not.”

“Say it,” he demands faintly, hardening his gaze, almost like he’s ready to choke it out of me.

I shake my head, persistent as fuck. I flare my nostrils, plucking at the hem of my shorts.

I swallow once more. “Then GenCre would never be here. They wouldn’t have someone like you making a difference. Changing the entire system. What you’re doing now means something. Carter would be proud.” I mean it. With every crevice in my body.

Tonight is different. I can go back to disliking him tomorrow.

A small glint runs over his sunken eyes, steady on mine. He curls his mouth to the side, showing only a small bit of his dimple. “I think you’re starting to like me.”

I grab the tea and bring it to my lips. “I disagree. I very much despise you.”

He reaches for his mug, his eyebrow rising and sips at the same time as me, our eyes never leaving each other. "Hate is the new like."

Like? "Not in my world." My lip twitches.

That's pushing it a little too far. I could never actually like Ronan again, right?

I swallow, looking outside. Right...

Chapter 25

Venom

Location:

Ronan's place

Operation: Torture Fred to death. Literally.

"You know you're my favorite sister in the world, right?"

I dull my eyes at Carter as I ball up another paper with my failed attempt at drawing a rose. Why is it so hard to draw?

"I'm your only sister, idiot." The crumpled paper lands in his trash can. Slam dunk, yes!

"Oh yes, that's right. Sucks being stuck with you forever," he teases, throwing his pencil at me.

I flip open a fresh sheet. "Sorry to be such a nuisance." I chuckle, sketching the

middle bud of the flower. “Mom needs you here to fix her security camera. She says the one you and Ronan gave her was, in her words, ‘a junkyard invention.’” I shake my head, envisioning how the petal should go.

Carter scoffs, flinging another item at me. “No, she did not, liar.”

I laugh some more as I spin around in his gray swivel chair facing him. Although he’s barely here, he always makes sure to come by for dinner on Fridays. I pretend I hate his company, but I always experience instant relief, like a breath of fresh air, when he walks through the door.

“Hey, ask her yourself.”

His lips purse in disbelief. Of course, I’m lying. His new security system he created works wonders, soon to be out in the world, probably being sold all over the world in no time.

I’m awakened from the flashback of Carter and me before he went off that night.

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I still never got that rose drawn correctly, and after that day, I never tried again. I haven't dreamed of Carter in years, and it must've been because of a Ronan, and I's conversation last night.

If I were told I would be sitting in a living room drinking tea with him, out of all the people, talking about my brother, I would've snapped my own neck from the lie.

But nope. It happened.

I learned two rules. Basic rules. Probably rudiments no one would ever agree too because that would mean losing that piece of your life that humans naturally crave. For me, it was a given,

1. There's no making friends or falling in?—

I swallow the lump, the simple four-letter word that I can't even fathom thinking about.

You know what I'm saying. No relationships.

2. Never associate with the enemy.

I place my hair back in a slick bun, I brush the extra bangs and curls, sure none stick out like a sore thumb.

I wouldn't say Ronan is the enemy anymore. He's proven he's substantiated. It's been confirmed. Being stuck on killing him is far from my view, but it doesn't mean I



want to hash things out and be kumbaya.

This is still a mission, and I still stick to my rules; it protects me. Keeps me on the straight and narrow, not falling off—it prevents me from getting hurt. That’s why I’ll continue to add extra clay and mold on the walls around my heart.

You don’t have a selfish bone in your body. Not from what I’ve seen so far.

I suck in a light breath through my teeth, the pesky little flap hitting my belly.

I recall the stare he gave, a look of wonder and curiosity. That gaze you give when you’re discovering more than a single piece of information. One that you reach your hand out to, to behold what’s beneath the hard skin of the snake.

I wash the access gel off my hands before throwing on my black tank top and the leather jeans Kyra gifted me for my birthday two years ago.

That was the most thoughtful thing she has ever done, by the way. And I have held dear to them since then. Also, it fits me very well.

I quickly put on my combat boots—the ones with spikes sticking out the ankle rim. Then I do it once over in the middle, and head out of my room.

Random thought:I wonder if Ronan is still deciding to give me my own room?

I check my nails as I ponder on that question while walking out to the front.

“Bom dia.”

My heartstrings draw out, squeezing the muscle to death, and stunting my breathing. I nearly puddle to the floor at the baritone voice. I glance up and?—.

Everything in my body awakens, flying and flapping around like thousands of fireflies swarming together from the grass to sparkle in the night.

I inhale a tiny breath through my teeth. He's leaning back on the kitchen counter, foot crossed over the ankle, and his arm across his chest while he chews on something; two water bottles sit in line on the kitchen island.

I stepped in further to investigate. He wears a crisp black shirt that hugs every curve and hard muscle on his broad shoulders, with all black denim jeans, and his hair is slightly wet, while some strands fall to the side of his eye.

Fuck me. There is no reason someone should look so good in such simple attire. He exudes his seriousness exceptionally well and tenacity of power. I swallow the log that never seems to go away.

"Bonjour." I stroll further in the kitchen, and I realize he's eating a mango. There are shaved skin remnants neatly bunched on a plate. I lean my waist into the island.

"Want some?" he asks, strolling slowly to the island as well with a piercing stare.

Do not clear your throat; he'll know you're affected by his stature.

I sit down on the black barstool. "No, I'm good. Thank you." I tap my finger on the cold countertop, attempting, not very well, to avoid the way he watches me as he bites into the mango. His mouth slightly opens to take a hunk of the meat from the fruit, then his lips glide over the seed in a leisurely motion.

I clear my throat, gazing away until I'm back on the sight of the man who's eating a mango more sensually than it should be.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:13 am*

Fuck you, throat. Betrayer.

Some juice leaks down his fingers...?his nice and long fingers. He has large hands...?verymanlyhands. Very...sexy fingers that can do probably do something magnificent to a certain, much, needier part of a woman's body. Not mine, of course.

“You don’t like mangoes?” he asks with that slur in his accent.

I grab for the water bottle, needing it to lather my dry ass throat. “No, I don’t like mangoes,” I say awkwardly. I do like mangoes, but the way he’s eating it should be a sin. Against the damn law.

He chews slowly, a twitch permitting on his mouth. “Come on. Try it.”

“Mangoes aren’t my thing.”

He licks up the juice delicately from his middle finger. “It can be. It’s sweet, delicious, and can be a bit sour.” As he’s talking, he places the seed onto the plate, grabbing a towel to clean his hands. “Kind of rough. But I promise you’ll enjoy it. It’ll fill you up nicely. You won’t ever think about any other fruit again,” he drawls in Portuguese, licking the juice from his lips. My eyes fall to the lascivious act as an unwarranted throb shoots between my legs, beeping like a signal; heat forms on my cheeks. He doesn’t know, but I understood every single thing he just said. I’m fluent in Portuguese, studied for two years, including Spanish.

And why do I feel like we aren’t talking about ‘fruits’ anymore?

And he is flirting with me? Is he actually intending we?...?my cheeks heat, and a tingle flicks down my spine. When did 'like' ever mean flirt, but hey since he wants to go there, I'm your best component.

"I'm more of a banana girl," I say, bringing the bottle to my lips, falling into the trap. My tongue slightly glides on the rim before wrapping my lips over the ridges and drinking the water.

He watches the movement, his eyes deepening and wandering to my lips, then back up to me. "Bananas, hm?"

I nod, lowering the bottle, catching the spill over the side of my mouth with my tongue and licking it quickly. "Bananas are perfect." I begin with a smirk. "Easy to swallow, even though it's big and long. Sometimes thick depending on the tree. It fits in your mouth perfectly. You don't choke on the juice, and it's very, delicious." I speak back in French, my native language.

I hope he doesn't understand the language because we're definitely not discussing fruits.

An inferno sets in his gaze, hardening right before me with a grin spreading further. I examine his face; the scar trailing down his cheek and the slice above his lip.

A vision of me licking up the marks fills my mind. Stop before you make a mess of yourself.

I lean over, placing my elbows on the counter with a tilt to my head. "I'm ready when you are, Headman." I need to get to that dungeon and wipe this lust off on Fred's face. Okay, that doesn't sound right.

His gaze is tempestuous and if I wasn't logical, I would stoke the beast some more,

giving into my normal ways. The affliction I always send when I want to lure a man in.

Ronan is not that guy. No matter how sexy he looks, or downright sinister. I'll never cross that bridge.

No matter how much the whispers in the darkness of my mind tell me otherwise.

\*Bom dia- Good morning

Bonjour - Good morning

## Chapter 26

### Venom

Operation: Get the job done. And don't focus on how attractive Ronan looks.

The time is now to put my blade where it fits. Anticipation is a funny thing. It makes your skin clammy and your nerves jitter like a rattlesnake. It's not nervousness, it's the excitement to see the light dim from his eyes and us smiling down on him as he wishes it never happened in the first place.

Ronan leads us down a tunnel. It's clean with a paved trail, air circulation, and not all at all like what a torture dungeon should look like. There are other cells along the walkway. They've painted the bars a perfect black and only a small floor cot with a pail. I wonder who he holds in these cells.

As if reading my mind, he points to the cells. "Sometimes, we enforce the law on our own terms." He ends it with a light and throaty chuckle. I side eye him. Does he even answer to the law?

We pass the cells and end back at the cemented gray walls and lights stand upon the low rocky ceiling to bring light. All I need is a hand lamp to bring it all together.

“I think it goes to say I do the torturing. You do the talking,” I say, running my palm down my gelled hair.

“What gave you the idea I was going to allow you to do anything?”

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I shrug, noticing a little bug around the cream-colored light. “Once you invited me, it became set in stone.”

His head cocks back. “Correction. You inserted yourself.”

That is true. “Which automatically makes the rules apply. I will do the bashing you interrogate.”

We both turn to each other once we approach the large door with chains and spikes protruding from the barbed frame.

The low setting light shines over Ronan’s thick brows and touches the shine from his hair. “I figured you wouldn’t want to get your pretty little fingers dirty.”

I nip my lip before releasing a tedious chuckle. “Darling, you have no idea how dirty my hands have gotten.” Not too dirty to be clear. I’ve never actually tortured someone for information. I have seen a few of my own, though.

His brow tips, leaning forward slightly to stare me directly into my eyes. I back away an inch because it’s so weird, and why is he so comfortable staring at someone like that? But me and weird go hand in hand, and I stared right back at him.

He smirks. “You think you can torture better than I do?”

Hello pride. “Torturing takes a special kind of technique. Also, I’ve been trained for this. High class, elite, that type of thing.”

His eyes squint, a twitch to his lips shows he wants to laugh at my fuckery. “That means nothing if you’ve never actually had any hands-on experience. Just because you pulled that artsy little stunt back at Joe’s house doesn’t mean you’ve mastered the craft of torture.” His eyes roam up my legs and land on my face. Uncomfortable tingles rock me from his examination. “Something tells me you haven’t quite hit that level yet.”

I lick over my lips. “What makes you think that?”

“I can just tell. Do you even like the sight of blood?”

I swallow. There’s no point in lying. “Not exactly, but that doesn’t mean anything.”

He leans back up, tall in stature. His eyes dim, an eerie twinkle shading his auburn eyes. “That’ll change very soon, pequena cobra.” I catch the rock bulging out my throat from his nickname for me. It’s as if he’s saying under the lines of ‘I’ll make sure it does.’ That will never happen.

He licks over his lips, nodding to the door. “How about this? You watch how I operate and take notes.”

I tilt my head, puckering my lips in, considering his offer. “I don’t see why not.”

“Glad we can agree on something.” He jingles the keys as they insert into the key slot.

The door creaks open slowly, spiking chills to run down my arm from the ominous situation. The creek is deep and loud, like it’s been needing oil on the hinges for years.

He steps to the side, extending his arm. “Senhoras primeiro.”



I give him a dry look. How sweet.

I stroll in first, the bright crystal light blaring down in the middle of the man who's limp and leaning over in the wooden chair, arms free, and all with his blood leaking around on the floor. There's a white patch on his belly; he must've had Dr. Rio treat his wound. Just to kill him in the end. It's so sick and evil that I want to clap and bow to Ronan.

Ronan kicks the chair, the impact scooting the wood and instantly jolting him up.

"Good, you're awake. Did you have good dreams?" He strolls over to a metal table that holds all sizes of torture knives and devices. My stomach flips watching Ronan eenie meenie miney moe which tool to use. The man doesn't answer; his eyes are wild, skating over the entire area. He looks behind me and I follow his gaze toward an exit sign blaring red above a black door. I can see hope in his face, but Ronan shuts the fantasy down.

"No need. It's a fake. A ploy for those I bring down here." He didn't even turn his back. He knows this man's thought process. He picks up two things. A butcher knife and a brick. Once he turns around, his face is emotionless. I bite the nail of my thumb, watching this man turn into something?..?..?maniacal. Take notes, remember.

Yeah, I'll take notes alright. I'll personally have this sketched to keep in my mind forever.

"You see, Fred, people are so caught in saving their own ass, they wouldn't think that it's absolutely redundant to have an exit sign in a torture chamber." He chuckles, slowly walking my way. His eyes hooding over me. He extends his arms slightly. "Pick your poison, beautiful."

That shouldn't make me feel bubbly inside, but it does.

Focus, Anita.

I manage to swallow and grab for the butcher's knife. He gives me a dimpled grin before turning around, continuing his taunt.

Fred's breath is escalated, and his yellowish eyes were still wide, the blood staining his face turning dark. "I'll give y-you anything m-man, just let me go."

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“So, you’ll give me your head?” Ronan says, inspecting the torture tool.

The man whimpers and a leaking sound drips to the floor. He’s peeing his pants. You would think a man like him wouldn’t break so easily. I crack a sinister smile, spinning the butcher knife. This is more fun than I thought.

Ronan narrows in on the large wet stain on his pants and the pee on the floor. “Perfect. Now they have to clean up blood and piss. What the fuck, Fred?” He stalks over to him and slams a brick right on his knee.

I wince in shock, but my eyes spark with delight. Fred screams out in agony. He attempts to grasp the abrasion, but Ronan wrenches forward, bending his wrist back. “Touch it and this brick will become part of your jaw.”

Fred wails even more, but doesn’t touch his flesh.

Ronan steps back, coming up beside me. “Are you done pissing on my floor?”

He cries out nodding, he is absolutely humiliated. The bad man that kidnaps people for ransom and sells other kids to human trafficking is here weeping like a bitch. It’s the best thing I’ve seen all year.

I smirk even more, twisting my head up to Ronan, who meets my gaze. Some life comes back to his eyes, a faint curl to his lips. “He’s ready for you.”

I fold in my lips, and straighten my spine. Breaking the connection, I stroll up closer to Fred. The butcher’s knife is still rotating around my wrist. “Do you know who we

are?" I ask.

He shakes and seethes, the spit flying through his crooked teeth.

"Think hard. You can do it," I coo like a mother to her child. I tilt my head, grinning softly.

Fred looks at me, then at Ronan behind me. Then back again. Until he lands on the towering figure behind me. The color that is left on his face drains drastically and he swallows.

"You're Poison." The man's gaze is only on Ronan. His eyes are wide and lip quivering. Fear is imminent in him, like he's looking at the bogey man himself. I look over my shoulder at Ronan. Then again, he does.

"Guess again, fucker." Ronan steps to the side of me.

He looks one more time, his face looking over Ronan like he's on a discovery cycle. Until his face stiffens.

"Ronan." He heaves. "H-how you fled the country."

"Ah, ah, ah. Wrong," he says.

"Tell us what we need to know, and we'll go easy on you." I step in, gliding my finger over the sharp edge of the knife. Lies, of course. "It's going to be a long night, so you better answer truthfully, or you'll reap worse consequences," I say, scraping my boot on the dusty ground.

"The targets on the wall. What are you planning?" Ronan asks, tossing the brick up and down.

Fred spits to the side. “What do you think?” he croaks.

“Straight answers, don’t fucking riddle us.” Ronan presses his boot on the wound on his knee.

He hollers, his eyes spreading like wings. “Okay, okay. Please,” he begs, urging Ronan to stop by pressing his hand down on the large boot.

Ronan smirks, lowering the boot. “Go.”

He sucks in a heavy breath, groaning. “They’re just future sets. We’ve marked them down once we know for sure, we’ll grab them for a possible shipment.”

Biles rolls in my belly. “These aren’t ransom packages, are they?” I glance at Ronan, then at the filth. “You were going to traffic them.” Saying it makes me want to hurl and vomit all over him.

“Potential. W-we didn’t make the arrangements yet.” He swallows loud, sweat dripping over the surface of his lip.

“Did you send off any details to anyone else?” Ronan asks, no longer playing fetch with the brick.

He shakes his head weakly. “Victor wanted the names for next week.”

I notice Ronan’s body tense at the name Victor. He must be the leader.

He circles his arm over his chest with the brick dangling to the side; his fingers run against his beard and the slice on his cheek. “Why the names?” Ronan asks, chewing down on his jaw.

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Fred's lips shake, parting, then closing. "It's required. It's how Victor works."

My butcher knife swipes down, the air swooshing as I do it. "Where can we find Vicky boy?" I ask.

"Can I at least have some water?" He huffs, his eyes drooping.

I peer back at Ronan; it's his torture chamber. If it's me, I'll just spit on him. There's your water.

Ronan lifts his chin, grazing his thumb under the scruff with thought, then he shrugs.

"I don't see why not, right?" Dropping his arms, he walks over past his shelf of demise and to a miniature fridge. He grabs out two bottles of cold water and heads back.

My lips part in wonder. Who the hell is this man? Fucking Jekyll and Hyde 3.0.

He catches the stun in my eyes and smirks darkly. "What, I get thirsty down here. Don't judge." He hands me water of my own.

"No judgment here," I say, folding my lips as the smile forms. I grab the bottle as Ronan opens the one for Fred and then proceeds to our hostage, who looks thrilled from Ronan's generosity, only for Ronan to pour the water directly over Fred's head.

My eyes widen with a gaping mouth. Savage. I drink my water, basking in it all.

Fred screeches as the cold as water drenches him. Ronan crushes the empty plastic, then throws it at his head.

He kneels before him. “There’s your water. Now answer the question.” He grits through his teeth.

Fred begins to sob uncontrollably. “Please, God. God, help me.” There’s not a limb in my body that has sympathy for this man. He’s pitiful. Everything he has done always has a consequence. He may have lived this long untouched. But we’re here now. We are the reapers to the rest of their measly story. The fate that is destined for them. Created through pain and death, it’s only us to right the wrongs.

It was never in my mind that Ronan would be the one to burn the bodies while I blow away the ashes. Yet here we are.

I set my water on the floor, walking over and resting the flat of the butcher under Fred’s chin to lift it. “Calling for him won’t help you.” I stare into his glossy, bloodshot eyes, the dried blood and sweat glistening in his face. I back away before he gets ballsy and spits on me.

Ronan comes beside me, brushing his hand across my knuckles. A twist knots in my throat. The tingles spread up and down my arm.

“You can call for him while I’m separating your kneecaps from your legs,” Ronan says, eyeing the brick.

He heaves in panic. “Okay. Victor is settled at Dreary Hill,” he whispers in defeat, his chin dropping to his chest.

“Good. See, that wasn’t so hard,” Ronan says nonchalantly. “Now, what do you know about the blueprints?”

His head perks up fast. He wheezes heavily. “I-I don’t know w-what you’re talking about.”

Ronan growls, stepping toward him and slamming the brick down on his already destroyed knee. My heart skips at the abrasion and the shrill of his scream. I can’t help but smile. A true smile.

“I’ll give you one more time, Fred. Answer with truth!” he barks with demand. It’s boisterous, and it astounds the shit out of me. Damn.

He trembles, letting out yet another cry. “And stop crying; your face looks like shit when you do.” Ronan throws his hand up, agitated.

“You better answer, asshole,” I speak up, crossing my arms.

He sucks in a deep breath, wincing from the pain scorching through him. “You and partner were the creators of the car.” He swallows loudly.

“Something we already know, Freeeeed,” I sing out loud.

“Worth a fortune.” He coughs up crimson, the drops splattering on his dingy suit before continuing. “Certain people,” he looks at Ronan, “wanted you both dead and were paying a pretty penny for your heads.”

“Who paid you to go after them?” I ask, releasing an impatient sigh.

“No one,” he says quickly. Too quickly.

“There’s no reason to lie. They can’t protect you,” Ronan states, shaking his head.



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“I can’t say! I can’t!” he shouts out with wide eyes and trembling shoulders. “It was only supposed to be an easy pickup. He told us it would be. It wasn’t supposed to go that way, but truthfully, the other one was just collateral, but he shouldn’t have tried to come at us. He deserved it,” he spit out, but then soon realized his words and backtracked, stammering.

My head cocks, my ears ringing. Is he saying my brother deserved to die?

He might as well just spit on my boots because he served me the disregard on a gold platter. My eyes blaze, and my chest explodes in rage.

“What did you say?” I flinch, my heart thudding wildly.

Ronan steps back slowly.

“I-I meant—” His eyes are wider than Jupiter.

My nostrils flare as the heat fills my entire body. Then everything goes black.

\*Pequeña cobra - Littlesnake

Senhoras primeiro - Ladies first

Chapter 27

Venom

Operation: Die by my fist, bitch.

“You motherf—” I scream, cutting off the words because I drop my butcher knife, and my fist connects with Fred’s face painfully. Repeatedly. Until I see the tint that disgusts me the most. I just want to see him turn black and blue.

How could he say that to me? He was my brother. My only sibling. The one that gave me hope and always looked out for me. The one that believed in me—even when I didn’t believe in myself. Anytime I felt hopeless because I had no clear goals, he encouraged me to lean toward what inspires me. Once he was gone, everything disappeared. The house no longer had that special energy that completed our family.

I let out a screeching scream, continuing to deck him in the face, tears pooling in my eyes and the pain stabbing me over and over in my heart, my eyes blackening. Bastard.

Punch.

Here’s for the death they caused to my brother.

Punch.

The torture they inflicted on Ronan.

Triple punch.

For every child, they made suffer for their own selfish gain.

Until powerful arms wrap around my waist and pull me from his demolished face. I grip at the arms holding me, scratching at it to finish what I started. I scream, hoping to get away. I’m not thinking clearly; my mind is a volcano eruption wanting to spill

its magma all over him. Ronan is unaffected by my wrath; he still holds me tight to him.

One arm stays around my waist while the other hand skates up my chest, gripping me fully into his body. “Breathe, Anita,” he whispers lightly in my ear. “Don’t let him see you break.”

My heart drops from his words. And emotion swells in my throat, constricting it. An unwilling sob escapes from me. I lift my nails from his broken skin and curl my hands over it, pulling him in as my body shakes.

The vulnerable side of me, I dare set free, is spilling out like cracks in the dam. I can’t control it. I shut my eyes, allowing his breath against my face to calm me down. His harsh hair from his beard to prick and graze my skin. The hard chill of his body to relax my hot venom. He draws me even tighter, turning me around from Fred.

I’m wrapped in him like a bear, calming my untamed spirit. His heartbeat thumps against my back, as he whispers “he’s here” and “it’s okay”. I soon realize that he’s...hugging me. No one has ever gotten in such proximity to touch me like this. I haven’t been held this way in so long. I had forgotten what it felt like to be sheltered. Nurtured.

Protected from myself.

I take ten deep, shuddering breaths in my nose and harshly out of my mouth, the sweat coating my skin for that onset of fire. After he sees I’ve calmed down, he turns me around to face him. Shame is all I feel. I lost my cool; I nearly burst into tears, and he may not want me to do this with him again. I never lose my shit like this.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what came over me.” I breathe out, avoiding his eyes.

Expecting to hear anger or criticism, he hooks my chin between the pad of his thumb and finger, tilting my head up. His arm wraps around my back, soothing me with gentle rubs. “Don’t ever apologize for that. You deserve to hurt them. It’s your right.” He speaks with ease.

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My shoulders relax, and I gaze up into his eyes. The man they've trained me to hate calms me. "If you want me to leave now, I understand."

"Absolutely not. We came for blood, and that's exactly what we are going to get." Ronan's fingers leave my chin to cup my face. "I didn't pull you away because he doesn't deserve it. I did it because you were hurting yourself for a disgusting human like him." He grasps my hand softly, lifting it to the middle of us.

I step back, appalled. Not only are my knuckles gashed and damaged, but my nails are also horrendous and covered in his blood. I continue studying my bruised and battered hands. It's bloody, but I've never felt more satisfied.

"Say the word and I'll shoot him right in the face; we don't have to prolong this. I'll slice his throat and end it right now. Give me the word, amor." His words are promising and oozing with the name they call him—poison.

A tightening pulls at my heartstrings. The wall I've built over my heart rumbles and cracks. He holds my hand, the other placed on my lower lumbar. His thumb rubs around the blood, carefully to not touch the gashes. He hoods his eyes at me intensely, showing through silent words that I'm in control. I close my eyes, letting out a sigh. I am calmer than I have been since starting this venture.

"Ok. Let's finish."

He nods, dragging his hand up my waist and to my shoulder. The simple act sends chills up my spine, and my waist presses into him tighter. He flicks his gaze back to my lips. The Adam's apple in his throat bulges out before releasing and withdrawing

from me. “You go to Dr. Rio after this and get patched up.” Gesturing his head to my bloody knuckles.

I suddenly miss his hold on me; the warmth that was created has evaporated and replaced with shivers and chills. So again, I push those unneeded feelings away. He was just doing what he was trained to do. He would do that with anyone.

I gather myself to face this man who makes me sick to my stomach. My hand is now stinging and throbbing from the aftereffect. His face is puffing from the hits, and frankly, I don’t give a damn. His swollen eyes catch me, and his gaze turns furious.

“You-you crazy fucking?—”

Ronan cuts him off by giving him another blow to his face. “Choose your next words wisely.”

I smooth down my shirt. “Let’s start over. Who paid you to go after my brother and Ronan?” I lean over in front of him.

Cracking a toothy smile, the blood staining his teeth, his head bobbing and eyes dulling. “You’ll find out soon.” He chokes out a cackling laugh.

I look over my shoulder at Ronan while he grabs his brick, my brows furrowing deeper. That doesn’t sound promising.

“We don’t have time for this shit,” Ronan snarls, throwing up the brick and catching it like a baseball.

He strolls back over to this shelf of devices, picking up a handful of things.

I slowly raise and glance at Fred, whose smile is gone. I don’t see anything apart from

the image that rests in my head of his body cut up into chunks and pieces. I pick up the butcher knife, stepping to him as Ronan follows.

Ronan leans over my shoulder, pressing into my back. The heat of his body engulfs me into his shadow, the air from his breath grazing my skin.

Dipping his lips to my ear, brushing over the curves delicately. “Let your venom free, little snake.”

A tingle runs up my gut, bursting into my chest as I stand there, watching Fred bleed out. My eyes dilate as I think back on when I sliced Joe and hung him to bleed out. That was fun.

“Make him suffer,” he whispers menacingly. I tilt my ear to his lips, compelled to his word. He continues his hushed tones into my ear of every intricate thing he wants to see me do to him. Everything I desire. All that I wish for.

“Cut him limb from limb.”

“You deserve this.”

Darkness emanates off him and swirls around me, consuming every part of my soul. He holds out his hand for me to clasp, telling me this where I belong. Take his hand and accept his danger.

And I do.

“Ruin him, little snake.”

Chapter 28

Ronan

Manchester & Chess

“Stop stalling and make your move.”



*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:13 am*

I snap my gaze at Boone, who sits back relaxed like he's at a spa, rubbing the top of Vixen; his rottweiler, head. "Shut up. I'm delegating."

The only time Boone speaks thoroughly is when we play chess together. He's a moody son of a bitch, but he's become a genuine friend to me. I am closer to him than I am to my own blood brother. That's sad, but it's the cards I'm dealt with.

"You're only procrastinating because you know I'm going to win." His accent made it hard for me to understand, especially when English was already difficult as fuck for me to comprehend. But I understand him easily now. His H's are O's, his Y's are E's, and the actually H is not available in their language—which so damn confusing, but we make do.

"That is far from the truth." I rub my chin, my elbows on my knees. To be real, he's right. I haven't won a game since we started playing three years ago. It's pathetic, but I won't give up until I win.

"Sure." Boone watches the board with a blank stare, brushing his fingers along Vixen's head, who's watching my hand movements. He's had the bear of a dog since I met him. He was a puppy when he got here; now he's larger than life.

If I move the knight, then I can get further ahead. I go for the kill. Satisfied, I lean back with a grin. Boone stills and looks at me with a bored expression. My smile drops as fast as it came once he pats his dog's head. He doesn't even sit up; he only stretches out his arm, moving his king and knocking off my knight. I don't show my aggravation, I only rub my chin.

“There’s a symbol I’ve been seeing during our invasion. Spotted it again at Fred’s,” I inform Boone while I set a piece ahead.

“A symbol?” He immediately takes his turn. Knocking my place away.

Dick.

I rummage in my pocket, tossing the pendant across the board. Boone pauses, taking it and rolling it over in his palm for inspection. “Hell, is it? It’s butt ugly.”

“I don’t know. It looks like a centipede that’s wrapped in palms.”

Boone shakes his head with a grimace before sliding it back to me. The metal sends a scraping sound through the room.

I grab it, pushing it back into my pants pocket. “I think it’s connected to something cult-like. They seem to all wear it.” Getting back into the game, I push my piece forward.

“It’s weird. But it makes sense. It could be a trafficking gang thing.” Boone moves again.

“That’s what I have in mind.” I focus again, shifting my chess piece. I feel good about that move.

Typical Boone, he makes a tsk sound before moving another piece, knocking my pawn off, and then my knight, and then my rook. Until I realize I lost. I dim my gaze, flicking them to him as he sends me a bored smirk. He wins yet again.

“Good game, you bastard.” I throw my queen on the board.

“Maybe I need to find a real competitor.”

“Damn, that stings. Trying to get rid of me so soon?”

Boone quiets; his eyes tell me he is pondering thoughts, and that strikes curiosity in my mind. I remembered his reaction to that picture the other day. I don’t indulge in the conversation—if he’s ready to talk, then he will.

“Nothing like that.” He stands, his dog perking up. Vixen trails to the bar behind me. Grabbing his usual whiskey with a lime on the side. Whoever said that shit is a good combination?

“Just old skeletons.” He passes me a water then plops back in the chair, leaning fully back, and spreading his legs.

I’m not the sentimental type, and I don’t coddle grown ass men, but there’s something appreciative when you have someone to talk to without seeming like a weak and emotional man. Twisting the cap off, I bring the bottle to my lips.

“Well, if you need to talk...” I tilt my bottle in his direction. Notifying ‘I’m here.’

“Thanks.” He stares off into oblivion for minutes. I prefer silence most of the time. Lately, my thoughts are filled with one person. Anita. The beautiful disaster.

“How’s it going with Venom?” Boone cuts in, drinking his whiskey.

I gulp the water. How is it going? I don’t know how to answer that. “She’s fine.” I won’t go into detail about the massacre we accomplished together last week. It was invigorating. A delightful experience to see. Fred was left in pieces and his limbs scattered about. I lean my head back, spreading out my knees, and resting my arms on the leather armrest. I shut my eyes. Forgetting Boone is there altogether.

The minute she went ape shit, I stood there for a split second salivating like a hungry dog. Watching her beat the living daylights out of him and not having shown any drawback actually made my dick hard. The only regret I felt was pulling her away. It was for her own good.

If I didn't, she would have broken her wrist by bludgeoning that idiot. I can't allow that. Him being the reason my little snake hand was destroyed only made me furious. However, after witnessing the most euphoric act, I knew I couldn't contain the thoughts anymore. Iknewat that exact moment, the way my dick hardened, the racing beat of my heart, the actual drool that dripped from my very fucking tongue...

That Ineedto fuck her.

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The urge is so intense, and after we killed him—well, technically, she killed him. She followed my words and went to work. She hated the blood, but her hands and arms was well coated in it, some splattered on her cheeks. My little snake lavished in it like it was her own crimson. Stained on her from the man who deserved a gruesome removal from this earth. She stayed silent after, allowing me to walk her over to the sink I have in the torture room and scrub all the red from her skin and nails like she was preparing for a surgery. For her first time at torture and body removal, she did spectacular. There's a darkness hiding underneath those scales and real pretty fangs. And I wish to snuff it out.

After I took her to Dr. Rio, I then bolted to my place to relieve myself. I haven't fucked in what seems like ages, so the release shot through me like an eruption, staining my shower walls. The image of my fingers wrapped right around that thick curly hair while she's bound in my knots, screaming for my mercy.

Then guilt breaks into my lust-driven thoughts.

I can't.

I tighten my jaw. Although my best friend is gone, it seems too ...?wrong. Like I'm breaking a code or something. The truth of the matter is, I can't help the situation; the more she's near me, my brain switches, and I only want to kiss her savagely and taste those lips that she swipes her tongue over seductively. Then I'll bend her over and fuck her senseless.

The moment she gazed back at me after our little dirty fruit talk, well, mine, I knew somewhere deep in that wild head of hers that she sensed it too. Especially when I

know for a fact whatever she said in French wasn't just her explaining the way a banana grows.

That has to be why I get this electric attraction. I have to fuck her. But I know I can't do that. I'm supposed to be protecting her, not only because of the promise, but from my own insecurity that marks my skin. I'm not prepared to see the disgust in her eyes if she sees them. It's why I shouldn't be fantasizing about it.

So maybe just a kiss. That should satisfy me.

The sound of my phone chirping jerks me out of my thoughts. "Fuck."

I pull out my phone, already frustrated because I know who's contacting me. My father. If not my father, then my brother. To say I'm not close to them is an understatement.

I view the message popped on my screen.

Cruz

Papa wants you at the estate for dinner tonight.

More bubbles pop up.

Cruz

No exceptions.

Fuck. Now I have to deal with this mess.

I shut off my phone, letting out an exasperated breath. I can see his pompous smile

now, staring at his finger while he typed. I'm thirty-four years old and still am expected to speak and sit with my father like I am twelve. Every time this occurs, it leads to disappointed expressions and a waste of time that could have been allocated to something else.

I stand up, gathering myself, and crack my neck and back to relieve the tension—that I'll soon experience again after sitting in front of people who pretend to give a damn about me.

“Talk shop tomorrow.” I drank my last bit of water. Boone's gaze never leaves the wall behind me, his jaw tightening and grim expression. He's been worse than he normally is, all zoned out into another world. I made a note in my head to look further into Anita's venomous crew.

But for now, I have other things to tend to.

## Chapter 29

Ronan

Once upon a time...?it was still shit

It was true when I said Anita's family mattered to me more than anything. And that meant my own family. I cherished everything about them because it was the opposite of what I had. Your home is supposed to be your safe haven, the place you can unwind and be yourself. Have peace. Unfortunately, I was gifted with a father who had a different kind of way of showing his love.

Including the world, my own father and brother don't know my other lifestyle. Truthfully, they know nothing about me but my tragic past. How terrible. They are also the only ones I've kept in contact with from my old life. At that time, I didn't

know what I expected. Maybe consolation for once from my father or a relationship with my brother to at least make me feel normal.

Let's say I regret ever contacting them years ago. I wish I would've stayed dead to them. But I was alone, and had no one.

We only choose to tolerate each other when papa wants to pretend for a split second we are a family. We are not and never have been.

I pull up to the forty thousand square footage house that stands out like a cotton ball in a mud puddle. It's bright, white, and obnoxious. I ignore the parking spot that's presented for me, and I also ignore the personal valet that resides at the front, awaiting me.

My tongue tingles for something else, something stronger and more potent. A stiff drink. Unfortunately, I can't do that, and I have to get through this dinner now with no mental void.



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I don't plan on staying long, anyway.

Strolling into the house I have no memory of—because it's always being changed every five years—I follow the sound of clattering plates and of a weasel laughing.

“It's absolutely incredible how we can pull that?—”

My father sits at the end of the ten-foot table, my brother is in the chair across from him, and the chef places their dinner plates in front of them. I instantly dull my eyes, already feeling an irritation settle in my stomach.

“He lives.” My father speaks roughly in Portuguese; Cruz's head snaps in my direction, the laugh drifting off like it never happened. I make my way to the chair opposite of Cruz, who watches me with a look like I'm the imposing one.

“Glad to see you can make it.” Cruz offers his hand as if we are business associates and not actual brothers. It's so presumptuous. Why not stand up and give each other a pat on the back or some brotherly shit like that?

No, not us. I ignore his hand, looking at my father, cutting straight to the point.

“What was it you needed me here for?” I itch the spot on my cheek, waiting.

The chef comes around, placing a five-star gourmet meal in front of me. I ignore that too.

Alexandro shakes his head lightly, the gray and black speckle on his chin more

visible; there are deep lines in his cheeks, and his eyes are clearer from age. “Is it a sin to want to see my oldest son?”

He hasn't seen me for twenty years. And not physically. You can be around someone, but can you truly see and understand them? He has treated me like the waste child who couldn't amount to what he expected. The only thing that held us together was my mother, and when she died, that was it. The only one that was under his beck and call was Cruz.

I graze my thumb over my brow with frustration. “It's always something, so what is it?”

Cruz flicks out his napkin, the cloth spreading like wings above the table before gently placing it on his thighs.

Pompous ass.

“How's everything been going? Anything new? Interesting?” My father asks me as he slices a knife into his chicken. The sudden interest in my life only set off alarms in my head, like bright red flags waving in the air. A vision appears in my head of him taking his foot and crushing the heel of his shoe on my thirteen-year-old hand. All because I wanted to show him my new creation. That left me with bruised and swollen fingers for two weeks straight. I swipe the thought away as I tighten my jaw to suppress the rage.

“Fine.” Moving the plate out of the way, I clasp my hands together on the table, not giving a damn about etiquette. Cruz watches the movement with a twitching stare.

“Have you considered my opportunity to take over the business?” The knife screeches on the plate before he stuffs his fork in his mouth.

“I have no interest in being the holder of an oil and gas company.” This is what I mean. I’m a grown ass man, and it’s never ending with wanting to vet me for a company I never had interest in. Disappointed shines clear as day across his face. He opens his mouth to speak.

“Well then, what do you have interest in?” Cruz cuts in instead, his eyes dark and lifeless. The eyes he inherited from our father.

I crack a smirk at him. “Do you really want to know?”

Cruz’s lip raises slightly in aversion. We haven’t truly been brothers for a very long time. I only got to experience it for a brief moment. We are blood, but we are two strangers to each other. Although growing up, I would’ve liked to have had a bond with him. I’m his older brother, and what older brother wouldn’t want his baby brother under his wing?

He wipes the sides of his mouth with another napkin before speaking. “Maybe it’s time you become a part of something life changing. Mind-altering technology.”

My father continues eating in silence. Now that’s more like, do what you’ve always done.

Cruz stands up, exiting the room before coming back in the next second with a handheld box. My brow raises at the thought of a secret bomb being inside of it. Cruz wears a pleased smile on his face as he sets the box in the middle of the table.

I give a blank stare, my thumb itching my brow again, indicating I am bored with the theatrics. “What is this?”

He releases a breath, smiling harder. “This is change as we know it.” He lifts the box. “A new way of living, and most of all, control.”

Control?

In the box lies a tiny device—tinier than my pinky nail. “This is the Pevlon 4. It’s a device that’s used to place in a person’s mind and lead them to a virtual world. We can be the face of the world of artificial intelligence and virtual living as we know it. No more game systems, no more imaginations. This beauty here,” he gently picks up the tiny piece, holding it out in front of him, “will be a life changer. The only problem is, once the implant is inserted, the device overheats and—” He makes aboom sound while sprawling his hands around like a firework with a tiny grin on his lips. He spots the stoic look on my face and the beam drops.

He turns back into business mode. “We’ve only tested on animals so far, but we would like to test on a human. In order to achieve that,” his lips and jaws pinch, the obvious reluctance abandoning his face, “we need your help. You’re knowledgeable in taking things apart, solving problems, and finding the solution.”

A game? Virtual world? Putting this into a body and a serious malfunction? Hard pass. I won’t entertain this. I slowly get out of my seat, finding my cue to dip out of here.

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“Where are you going?” my father finally says urgently, leaning forward into his chair.

“Leaving.” I move away, setting my plan in motion.

“You can’t leave! I haven’t finished talking!” Cruz exclaims, putting the device in the box.

“I heard enough. It makes no sense, and it’s a lawsuit waiting to happen. It goes against biology and engineering.” I stroll to the archway, counting my steps, so I can leave as fast as I came.

Cruz is fast on my feet, gritting out low through clenched teeth. “The one time I ask for your help, you choose to decline the offer?”

“The only reason you need me is that it’s something you can’t figure out, but if you had all the proper technicalities, you wouldn’t ever contact me. So, say it like it is, you’re using me.”

He lets out a frustrated huff. “I—that’s not what this is. Just listen. Please!” He grabs me by the arm and I snatch it back, twisting my body towards him. He steps back, startled, and I clench my fist from my reflex almost taking hold.

His hardened eyes soften a bit as he drops his hand to his side. Cruz swallows, glancing over his shoulder then back at me with a look that I can’t place. “Please.”

I furrow, looking at his face, some part of me wanting to fall for these pleas, but all I

remember is the simple fact. They only want you when they need you. Otherwise, you'll be a ghost to blind eyes to them. I continued to the door, not phased anymore by the realization. Not allowing the tiny stab to fester under the gash where the knife pricked.

As I walk out, Cruz shouts, “You think you’re the only one who can be an inventor in the family!” The words trigger me. “You’ve turned out to be nothing, just a sad excuse for the family name.”

Crisp air stings my cheeks as I ignore his rants behind me. The only inventor of the family.

A pull yanks at my heart like a drawstring closing a bag. I hop in my car, speeding off, leaving Cruz to yell with himself.

Inventor.

I haven’t invented anything since that night. And I don’t plan on it ever again.

## Chapter 30

### Venom

Location: GenCre ‘Somber Garden’

I would have never thought that Ronan would have a full garden green house here at GenCre. After doing a thorough investigation—and of course following the map set in the front—I found this little hidden gem.

It’s beautiful, and enclosed in a large dome that gives you an overhead view of periwinkle skies and cumulus clouds. It’s a garden that’s great for withstanding any

weather condition. It can grow in peace and thrive in resilience.

I brush my fingers across the petals of the August Gardenia flower. Its white petals are soft and moist as the mist sprays down lightly. A flutter folds under my stomach, remembering my mother and her flowers. She doesn't own her home anymore, but I know she has to still own the flower shop.

I always loved being at the shop because?...?I loved being around my mom.

No matter where you are in the world, you are always my petal.

My shoulders sag as a sigh escapes. There's an ache that settles in my heart, the unresolved matter. I suck in a breath, shaking my head, hoping it also shakes the stab in my chest. That was then. This is now.

My fingers fall from the petals, strolling up the cobblestone path where the dahlias and larkspur pour out onto the walkway.

Some kids sit over on the benches tucked under the larkspur droops. They send me cheesy smiles that send an awkward spike down my spine. I cringe with a tight grin and walk ahead.

It's nice here, and the students are?...?sweet. But I can't get attached, just like I can't get too attached to Ronan. There's a shift between us, and it's becoming blatant. Ever since the day he hugged me, and after I sliced Fred, packed him, and then shredded him through a large meat grinding machine, a strange bond set between us.

Anytime I think of Ronan at all, it flip-flops and a twist of butterflies' flutter down into my stomach—and that's not good.

I mean, I let him hug me. Hug! Something wrong is happening.

I stop in the middle of the rose bush, the thorns sticking out, ready to pop the tiny butterfly bubble inside me. It's time to demand my own room and get away from him before he throws me into the pits of his dark abyss. Then I'll never be able to escape from him.

I swallow the lump in my throat, find the exit of the garden, and march to the school. I ignore the stampede of people in the halls scattering to attend their lessons, the bags, and books hitting me. I don't know where I can find Ronan, but I'll find him.



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“Oh!” The crashing sound of a body hitting the floor sounds out. I stop in my tracks. Looking down, I see a young girl with straight brown hair and olive skin. Crap, now it’ll look like I’m assaulting kids, and Ronan wouldn’t go for that.

I look around, making sure no one sees, while sticking my hand out. The girl stands up, placing her hand on the ground to lift. She jumps up, her long hair now swallowing her face.

“You’re that lady everyone is talking about, aren’t you?” She perks up, moving her hair from her covered eyes.

I tilt my head. “I’m not sure. What are they saying?” I peer at her now visible face. I would guess she’s about sixteen.

She tucks her arm bag further into her shoulder. “Pretty much your badass, and you attempted to assassinate the president.”

I cock my head, almost choking on my spit. That is wildly untrue.

But I play it off casually. “I can’t deny those accusations or give a truthful answer.” I began walking around her.

“I’m Isabella!” she shouts out.

I swallow the annoyance that’s trying to escape. I slowly turn back around on the heel of my foot. “Good to know.”

She steps closer, eyes dropping, and a tint of pink forming on her cheeks, her fingers twirling around one another. “I started here two days ago. After I was kidnapped, my parents sent me here. The Headman saved me.” She closed her eyes for a second. I can see the tremble in her eyelids and the quiver on her lips. “He saved my life. I don't know what would've happened to me if he didn't come. I might have died or been sold off somewhere.” She opens her eyes, liquid pooling at the rim.

Oh, crap. I zip and unzip the pocket on my cargo pants, glancing around the hall. This is...?beyond my capacity of vulnerability.

Her eyes shift down noticeably, dabbing away the tears that leaked down her cheeks. My shoulder slacks slightly. I suddenly get the urge to pat her on the shoulder and console her.

Pain shoots to my stomach and up to my heart. I couldn't imagine being her age and experiencing somethingso traumatizing. It's heart-wrenching. Losing my brother is nothing compared to physically getting taken and abused.

“I'm sorry,” I blurt out, raising my hand awkwardly and giving her two pats on her shoulder. That was good, Anita. Good job. I quickly lower my hands, clasping them together.

Her eyes shoot to me with alleviation, a small smile coming to her face. “Thank you.” She tucks a strand behind her ear. “So now I'm here, and I'm excited. I feel safer.”

I can spot the gratitude in her eyes for a place like this. The emotional connection she gets when she mentions Ronan saving her. What he's doing here is nothing less than admiring. To give others another chance. It makes me wish I had something similar given to me when I was her age. Learning to defend yourself and still being...?free.

To have a choice.

“Do you have any advice to get me through this?” Her lips purse with a worried frown.

Her brightness is overpowering me and making me give in to her. I brace my hand on my hips. “Never lose who you are. No matter how dark shit gets. Never lose that shine.” Should I curse around kids? I’m terrible at this. But when her smile widens, and her teeth show, I can see it gives her comfort and confidence.

“Thank you, Ms. Venom.”

“Anita.”

Her eyes snap wider with her gaze bright as the sun. “Ms. Anita.”

I give a quick grin, my heart sparkling with a sense of pride. Then I perk my brow. “Now, where is your Headman?”

## Chapter 31

Venom

Location:

Ronan’s Office

Operation: Demand what you WILL have.

I arrive at a thick, large black wooden door. His other office is upstairs in the Tundra Hall. ‘Headman’ etched in black and gold. Simple.

I’ve never been here, and I can’t deny the thrill of seeing what it looks like inside.

But I have to remember.

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Demand your own room.

I knock—because it’s polite.

“Open.”

I inhale deeply to slow the racing beat of my heart; my hands are already clammy. I wipe my hand on my pants, then walk inside. I don’t need to look any further because there he sits. Behind his L shaped mahogany desk, his elbow resting on the armrest with his finger grazing over his scar.

I tilt my head, treading into the room. I am curious to know what happened to his face. Though now is not the time.

There’s a large computer on top of his desk, and he is watching the screen with deep concentration. The room is dark, exuding a heavy amount of masculine tones and style. Ebony, wooden baseboards and trim line the wood panels and matte black paints the walls. An oversized black couch sits off to the side near another door.

A secret door.

A few frames with students and their achievements hang on the walls, but nothing else.

Minimalistic.

Exceptionally, him.

Without taking his eyes off the screen. “Is there something you need...” His words trail off when he spots me strolling up to his desk with my hands clasped behind my back.

He lowers his hand, the mood in his energy shifting, his eyes dimming into a carnal haze, and I’m immediately swallowing more than usual.

The closer I got, the more I noticed his attire. Dark brown turtleneck with a suede chestnut suit jacket. He looks very...

Studious and suave. His hair is tousled, probably from threading his fingers through it. It’s a complete 360° from the all black combat wear. You wouldn’t think he could flip the switch and chop a man’s head off with a smile on his face.

I gather my breath, hoping to steady my heartbeat. “We need to talk.” I stand, although there’s a nice, comfy sofa and two plush leather seats propped a few feet from his desk. I cross my arms since my sweaty palms need something to do.

He doesn’t take his eyes off me nor acknowledge what I said. I only receive that piercing stare—the one that can split my soul in half—and a clench to his jaw as he rubs his chin. So slowly, he skates his gaze up my body, not even hiding that he’s practically undressing me with his eyes. I shift with unease, heat blazes on my neck to my forehead.

“You look beautiful.”

With those little words, that heat fills my entire body, and my chest blows up like a bomb. I’ve been called beautiful many times by all kinds of men, but never has my body reacted in the way it does when he says it. I tap my foot to match the thumps of my heart. I’m only wearing brown denim jeans with an off shoulder black knit sweater; I’m not sure what’s beautiful about it.

“How’s your hand?” He looks at it before setting his gaze back on me. Suddenly, it all feels like DÉJÀ VU. I need to stop destroying my hands.

I raise it, opening and closing it, even with the bandages on it.

“It’s fine. Thank you for asking.” I lower it, focusing on the reason I came here. “I need to talk to you.”

“I’m not stopping you.” He adjusts his shoulder, getting comfortable.

“You said once you trust me, I can get my own room.”

He nods slightly.

I shift on my boots. “I think I have. I saved your life, after all.” The words are thick on the roof of my tongue. I hate to bring that up, but it is true.

He lets out a deep hum, then rises to stand, tall and broad. He fluffs out his jacket, scooting the chair back.

What is he doing?

My heartbeat rises again. Truth be told, I’m doing this because I respect him and this little school, but if it were anyone else, I would’ve packed my shit and found my own damn room.

“So, you think you’ve earned it?” Each of his steps to me is slow and labored.

I stuff the knot that’s forming up my throat. “Something of that sort, yes.”

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He continues to mark his steps until he's directly in front of me. His proximity is close enough I can smell him.

"I never said I trust you fully, but you have proved your loyalty."

My brows furrow. "What else do I have to do? Save Wicked too?"

"Wicked?"

My shoulders bunch. "Mal, I mean."

He squints slightly, confused. I release a heavy sigh. "What do I need to do to get my own room?" And to get away from you.

An intrigued gleam sparkles in his brassy eyes, diverting down for a second before gazing back at me. A dark flint casting over him—and that's when I knew it wasn't anything good.

"Fight for it."

I blink rapidly. "Fight. For it," I respond slowly, making sure I understand correctly.

"Yes. If you want it? Then fight me for it."

This time I let out a laugh. "And that's all I have to do? One little fight?"

A slow, sinister smile creeps on his lips. The gash on it lifting. "You seem confident



about this.”

I am, partially. The last time we physically fought, he nearly knocked me unconscious. This time, that won’t happen. I’m fighting for my freedom here.

I thread my fingers through my curls. His eyes follow the movement, then his gaze shifts, watching me. “What are the rules?”

“You win, you move to your own room. Simple as that.”

Nothing is ever simple. There’s always a catch. “And if I lose?”

He smirks, lowering his gaze again, then hooding them. Evil bastard. Looking dark and sexy as hell, with a dimple so deep I can stick a finger in it. “You lose. I get to kiss you, and you will continue staying with me until I say otherwise.”

My heart plummets to the ground, and my face reddens, hot like steam is blowing on it. “I—” I collect myself. I can’t do that. “That’s ridiculous and unfair.”

“Life isn’t fair, little snake, but I thought you were confident of winning. Surely, you’ve got this.” His words make me feel unsure of it all.

I swallow. “I am.” I purse my lips. “What kind of fight is this?”

“Fencing.”

Perfect. The general—my dad—had me studying and practicing the art of fencing for three years until I became undefeated. This will work.

“How do I know you won’t renege.”

“My word is bond. I never break it. Ever.” His face turns serious.

I can believe that. He doesn't seem the type to not keep his word. “Let's do it. I'll meet you in the arena.”

I turn on my heel, ready to walk out.

“Anita.” He doesn't even need to shout to make my heart jump when he calls my name.

I glance over my shoulder. He stands there, arms crossed. “You better be ready.”

I swallow again, sweat tickles my scalp. I'm more nervous than ever now. What did I get myself into?

Chapter 32

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Venom

Location:

The big arena

Operation: Don't lose.

My fingers glide against the metal under my white glove. Feeling the thin blade against the tips. Who would've thought I would have to fight this man ape to win a spot in my own room? No matter the circumstances, I am beyond excited. A part of my solitude broke apart for this task. It's becoming?...

Fun.

Although it shouldn't. The only thing I am dreading is touching those delicious lips I fantasize about tasting. That's why I need to win.

"He's going to win," Wicked snarls at me with an evil grin.

I send her a dry look, noticing she's here and other people. I'm in the back room, but I can hear the excited chatters from behind the walls. Shit. What did he call the whole academy here?

"Maybe you can replace his spot," I say, giving a devious smile.

She doesn't retaliate with getting in my face. She only smirks and walks to me, her

evil facade dropping. For a split second, I think she's getting ready to pull a sneak attack on me, so I raise my sabre, steadying it just in case.

She catches the drift and raises her hands slightly. "I only want to say thank you."

I one up her, lowering the sword. "Why?"

"Ronan told me you saved him. So, thank you." She lowers her hands again, placing them on her hips.

He told her that?

I look around, making sure there's no hidden camera because is this the same girl who had it out for me since day one? I began placing my hair into a tight ponytail to fit in the sabre mask.

"No need to thank me." I ignore the look she gives me.

"Okay. I still appreciate it. He's—" she threads her hand through her hair, making it flow behind her like a wave, "—like a brother to me." Her voice merely whispers with so much sentiment.

I understand Ronan means a lot to many. And sadly, I only find that more attractive about him. That's why when I win, I can rid myself of his presence.

Mal's mood changes in a second. "So good luck! You're gonna need it." She walks out with a sly grin, signifying I'm doomed or something.

Well, I'm not.

I inhale a breath, strolling out of the room with my chin held high. I've been fighting

since I was eighteen, and I won't lose now. I stroll through the dark archway coming to the large arena—the cool breeze nicking my cheeks tells me I am close. I step out further and the sky is indigo, but still carrying those thick clouds. The sun isn't bright, but the light from the milky blue sky is enough to glimpse the seats filled with people ranging from mercenaries and rebels to rampages and riots.

Shit.

The last time I fought in front of a crowd was when I had to go against the biggest student in combat school, and let's say I left with a bulging eye socket.

That was also the last time it ever happened. The next time we fought, I punched him so much that his jaw nearly broke.

I swirl my wrist around, the thin blade making whooshing sounds in the air. The pebbles under my shoes are drowning in the sounds of loud whispers and thumping feet.

Then the two doors to the other end burst wide open and in comes Ronan.

My heart flies to my throat, beating hard in my pipes. He swaggers in with the walk of majesty and confidence of a ruler. He holds his mask under his arm and his sword in his left hand. He has his dark, wavy hair pushed back, slick onto his scalp, with a straight face that can make your legs shake. I continue twirling my sword, staring at him walking into the room, owning it properly because people literally worship him.

He narrows a dark gaze at me, the sounds and noise zoning out as he comes closer and closer to me, matching the harsh thud of my throat; the noise becomes muffled and incoherent as he approaches me.

He fixes his white glove, looking me directly in my face as usual. He looks

magnificent in all white. Like a dark angel sent to destroy the world.

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“See something you like?” His voice is thick and sultry, like hot melted chocolate dripping off a spoon.

I lick my dry lips, looking at my sword, then back at him. “No. Only the image of your devastated face when I beat you.” I swirl the knife, stepping forward, closing in the gap between us. I hood my eyes up at him, nipping my lower lip. “You know. It’s going to be terrible for your students to see their headman bowing to a woman.”

He cracks a grin, slowly lowering his gaze to me. “That’s where you’re wrong, my little snake. I’ll bow down to you anytime.”

My breath catches, causing the sword to slip between my fingers and nearly drop to the ground. He returns another satisfied smile to me before stepping back, stare fixed on me.

He’s enjoying getting under my skin this way. Loving the fact I’m almost weak to him. I won’t prove it.

We stand a few feet from each other, reading our stance. Wicked Mal at the end of the arena standings with one hand raised.

“Three minutes!” she shouts, her voice echoing into the filled faculty. “LET THE GORE BEGIN!”

I go into fight mode, shielding my face with the mask. Raising my hand and extending the sword, I point it at Ronan, who’s in the same stance. Both of us walk with one foot over the other, studying each other, sure to see the blade. My breath is

hot inside the metal mask. Then I lunge forward, aiming for his thigh, but Ronan quickly acts like a tiger, blocking it. One arm is behind his back like it doesn't take effort for him. He moves forward, hitting my waist with the point tip; I sneer to myself. Crap.

Moving again, I go fierce, doing a three-hit point. Hitting his shoulder, chest, and stomach. He then comes back, lunging smoothly, hitting my sword to get to my stomach twice and waist.

"You think you can do this," Ronan says tauntingly, attempting to aim at my arm.

"Can you?" I grin as I block him, doubling back. I breathe harder, my face hot. "How do you take your loss? Do you take it like a man or stomp off like a sore loser?" I walk slowly, watching his blade.

He chuckles, stancing in the opposite direction. "I wonder how your lips taste when I'm shutting you up."

My chest heaves. "Not happening!" I lurch forward, but he's quick, abnormally quick. He connects with my launch, swiping and flailing. I block as many hits as I can until we are both swirling swords around hitting the metal so neither of us loses.

"You're very eager to win," he says breathlessly as we fight.

"I can say the same for you. But bad news, Headman. The only lips you'll be touching is the ground where I stand," I hiss, swiping at his mask and hitting right along the metal.

Four points for me. Eleven more. He growls, grabbing at it and tossing it off.

My stomach shoots into the sky, taking in the look of a madman. His hair is slick to



his face; that only makes my venom come out more. So, I throw mine off as well, my band coming with it, so my hair can flow freely from the tight ass ponytail withholding it.

I apply a devious smile on my mouth. “No need to get frustrated, darling.”

“Frustrated? I’m getting warmed up, baby.” He smirks, narrowing his eyes, the blackness popping out more.

And that said it all. Don’t speak so soon.

His sword moves swiftly, swiping in my face, but I block quickly. I lurch back, spinning and nearly swiping his cheek. He beams, the carnal in his smile fixing into a deadly leer.

“You think you can beat me?” His voice booms, and he licks his lips, steadying his prance.

I toss my hair over my shoulder from the heat. The cool air is doing nothing for me. “Don’t distract me, asshole.”

I push my sabre forward to catch his shoulder, but not fast enough; he curves around my sword, swiping my arm and thigh.

I quickly aim for his chest and leg before he bests me, but he’s faster and connects, hitting my waist and arms. Giving him ten points total.

No.

“Fuck,” I hiss. My heart rate picks up, understanding where this is going. He doesn’t even need to stand in the stance anymore. He looks at me with the determination of a

feral man seeking his food so he can feast all night and be full for the winter.

That horrifies me. So, I fly at him, my sword swiping at any part that can hit him. He blocks most of the hits with a sick grin. Until it hit, sliding lightly against his cheek, the blood spilling from the abrasion. He pauses, wiping his thumb on the slice and bringing it to his vision.

The crowd gasps, the pounding of their feet growing in strident echoes. Loud and thunderous.

The creepiest smile forms as he lifts his thumb to his lips, flicking his tongue with a slow, methodical lick.

Sicko.

I step back, twisting my face in disgust and intrigue. I am so fucked.

“Playing dirty, huh?” He strides slowly in the opposite direction while I go the other.

“I came to win.” I go back into stance, sticking out my sword.

He shrugs. “Fair. I hope you can handle what comes next.” His voice emanates with warning, sending chills down my spine.

The crowd screams in pure excitement at how this fight went completely left. The heavy darkness clouds around his large frame. I don’t show that I’m nervous, but inside I am rattling, like someone playing drums with my bones.

He moves hard and fast toward me, not stopping until he hits every part of my body. I’m sure he even hit my foot. I blocked as many as I could, but he’s good. Too good. By then, he’s already swiped my sword out of my hand, the clattering metal hitting the ground.

“Shit,” I grit. I stand there as the crowd rises and feet stomping like an elephant stampede.

Ronan only steps back with a sly grin on his face, his chin raised, showing his thick neck and the bulge of his Adam’s apple. Sweat is glistening off his forehead, and my breath is heavy, my chest rising and falling. I’m realizing what this means.

I failed. Miserably.

“Headman wins, fifteen to ten!” Wicked Mal shouts proudly, looking along in the arena. The entire miniature stadium cheers, some even placing up the symbol G; I can’t even be angry at their devotion. I’m only mad at myself. Because now I am helpless and subjected to him. It’s not like I didn’t agree with it.

“I want to go again!” I shout, reaching down to pick up my sword. Now I’m the sore loser.

Ronan laughs. Actually, laughs. It is a shot to my pride. “Why? I’ll only beat you again. And then you’ll have to give me something more.” This time he says it low enough for me to hear. My gaze shoots to his, and it's flashing with impending dark desire. I don't want to understand his meaning behind that, so look away, swallowing. My heart is pounding from the fight—and also the idea of his mouth on mine. I haven’t kissed a man in a long time, and if I did, it was never enjoyable. I was only heightening the mood for sex. So maybe this will be the same.

“How do you want to do this?” I cross my arms, putting my weight on one side.

Ronan nods to the door, and I thought he meant for me to leave, but I was wrong. All the people began moving from the stands one by one, exiting the room like an army of ants.

“Sorry you lost, Cinderella,” Wicked Mal says, walking past me with a smirk on her evil face.

Why did I agree with this?

Ronan and I stand in the middle of the enormous area, now cleared of onlookers.

The crunching sounds of his boots scratch beneath the tanned gravel as he slowly approaches me. He inches his gloves off before flinging them to the ground.

It's dark, lethal. My breath releases shakily... Sexy.

My hands began sweating in the gloves, my poor heart quivering against my chest. I've never been more nervous in my life. However, I can't help feeling an immense pressure deep in the V of my thighs. My back hits something hard until I realize I've been backing up this entire time. I quickly remove my gloves, dropping them as well.

"You can't run from me, Anita," he drools ominously, his frame is shadowing over, and I become swallowed by his silhouette. He places both hands beside my face, trapping me like a Venus flytrap. There's no escaping him now. "A deal's a deal."

I reluctantly lick my lips, swallowing, but it doesn't help. "I never lose, so you must've cheated in some way."

He reaches for my curls, grabbing a hunk, and bringing it to his nose. He inhales deeply as if it's a drug he's always needed, his eyes closing slowly. I watch as he opens back and wraps a strand around his finger. "You can't cheat when you're the teacher." He cracks a smile.

My beating heart drops. Of course, he's the teacher, his skill was superb. He played me all along. And I fell right into the trap. "You knew I was going to fail," I breathe out, my hand flat on the wall.

He tilts his head, tugging at the strand. "If I admit it, would it make you feel better?"

"From the jump, I knew I was doomed." I walked right into it. Clever man.

I observe him lick his lips, my mouth watering at the soft, lushness of them.

His other hand slides down over my collarbone, and I instantly tense from the graze of his rough hands drifting upon my skin. It roams up my neck, then to my chin, resting on my jaw. My mouth parts as his thumb glides smoothly over my lips, I shudder again, my breath picking up.

I lift my chin, sucking in a breath. The warmth from his large hands causes tiny bumps to form, pricking on my skin, sending flutters through my body. I gaze at him; he stares at my lips, continuing his thumb tease.

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“You have beautiful lips,” he says faintly, narrowing in further, his breath shaky.

Then he wraps his hand around my throat. My toes tingle in delight. There are parts of me that love when he wraps his fingers around my neck, like in one move he can press harder, choking me until I come.

“I can feel your pulse. Are you nervous, little snake?” He lowers his head, coming closer to my lips, hovering. The heat from his delicious mouth suffocating me worse than the hold on my neck.

“Just get it over with.”

He grins again, snatching another strand and twisting it in his fingers. “Don’t pretend, Anita. You know you want this just as bad as I do.”

I swallow the bulge. “I don’t.” My chest raises higher, gathering a little air in hopes of not sucking in his air too.

“Stop with your lies. It’s beneath you.”

I look down away from his burning gaze, biting down on my jaw.

“I see the way you look at me,” he says coolly, gathering more hair to wrap and twist in his finger. I continue to eye the ground, not daring to see him. “You look at me with so much hate and disgust. Hating that, you imagine what it would feel like to kiss me. To fuck me.” My breath catches. “Tell me,” he whispers. “Does it make you sick to your stomach, hating that you want me.”

“Enough,” I grit, finally raising my eyes back to him. “Are we doing this or not?” The grip on my neck twitching like he wants to squeeze the living shit out of it. I’m not as confident as I seem. My fingers tremble against the wall, the sweat making it slip on the paint.

He straightens himself, not letting go of his grasp. His eyes darken, zooming into my lips once more. My heart is beating so hard it physically hurts. I’m afraid it may break free and run for the hills. It’s so harsh, my cheeks and jaw tighten.

I glance at the slice on his cheek, next to the one that’s already there. The red liquid slowly trickles down; that’s when a murky dimness covers his eyes, a sinister smile coming to his lips. He releases my neck, bringing the pad of his thumb to the flesh. He wipes and glances at it. Then slowly back at me. My pulse rises, waiting for something. Anything.

“Not many get to do this. No one draws blood from me.” He brings his thumb to my peripheral.

“There’s a first time for everything.”

His grin slowly falls, heat in his eyes, the threat in his stare. “Then you’ll be the first to taste it.”

Before I can react, his thumb is pushing on my lower lip, smearing his crimson on the wet brim. I gasp harshly, widening my eyes. I could’ve gagged and spit it in his face. But I don’t; my clit throbs between my thighs. My body reacts differently to the disgusting act. I’m aroused by something I shouldn’t like. His lips part slightly, his tongue at the tip of his teeth, as he sticks his thumb between my molars, touching my tongue and wiping it all around it. His honey eyes are heavy and hazy with lust, conducting his own sick act.



The salty, metallic taste of it overpowers my palette. I am beginning to understand the only reason I would allow this, to get an odd pleasure from the taste of his blood, is because...

It's his.

## Chapter 33

### Venom

Location:

Still here, unfortunately.

Operation: This was a trap.

Ronan's blood has settled on my taste buds, sparking this twisted spark of desire between my thighs, showing how sick I truly am.

"Suck it," he croaks through a low pants.

Alarm bells ring in my head as my body heats from what he's asking me to do. My brow deepen.

He glares down at me, spreading his long fingers that are back around my neck and giving it a tighter squeeze. "I said. Suck. It."

My breath comes out choppy, and I can just bite his thumb off and spit it back in his face, but instead my tongue sticks out further, tasting more of his salt and I suck. He watches with pure intensity, the fire streaming off us of both as I tilt my head and swirl my tongue, flicking over where the blood dripped off his finger. Then I close

my lips, applying a little more pressure, bobbing my head only slightly. And it all only increases the pressure between my thighs.

He releases a low groan mixed with a growl, becoming greedier and stuffing his thumb deeper. “That’s it, little snake. Suck it all. Then I want you to swallow.”

His stupid praise sends a shock wave to my pussy, and I yank my head away, appalled by myself. I still don’t hock up the spit. He makes sure of it by grabbing my chin and twisting me back to see his heavy gaze.

“Swallow,” he demands.

I glower at him and swallow the saliva and blood mixture, actually enjoying how warm and gooey it feels going down my throat, how metallic it tastes on my palette. His grins vilely as I lick over my lips. It’s permanently plastered on my tongue. I’ll forever taste that part of him. I look him in the eye with disgust; his stare is intense. And he only looks more enraptured. “You’re sick.”

He grins again. “I am.” Leaning forward, his hot mouth grazing over the shell of my ear, his hand goes to my nape, tugging me closer. “But is it me that’s sick, or the one that enjoys the taste of my blood?”

Goddammit.

I purse my lips, wanting to push him off to show him how much I hate him, but my body won’t move.

He leans back, brushing his thumb under my chin, leering at my mouth with the hunger I’ve never seen from any man. I already know what’s coming now. He lowers, but I cut him off, turning my face. “Only a peck.”

He swiftly brings his hand up, mushing my cheeks like a fish and whipping my face back to him. He clenches his jaw; the rows poking from his jaw, his eyes wild.

“Do. Not,” he grits dangerously. “Tell me how to kiss you.” He smashes his thumb to my lower lip, pushing it down to widen my mouth. “Do you understand?”

I only nod, my teeth grind against the sides of my mouth. The banter at the tip of my tongue. Who am I anymore?

“Good. Now open your fucking mouth, so I can taste you.”

Hot flames implode on my cheeks. “And if I don’t?”

He cracks a devilish smile. “You love to challenge me, little snake.” I wince as he squeezes just a little harder, stoking the ache on the inside of my mouth. “But you’ll find every single time that you do, the consequences will only get worse,” he responds in his native tongue.

Is that a threat?

Before I can respond that I know exactly what he said, he lowers his hand from my jaws finally, tilts his head and dips his lips to mine, and I immediately catch my breath. I pin my eyes on him, and he returns my gaze. That could be awkward for anyone, but it’s his way of watching to make sure I don’t falter in the deal, and it’s my way to ensure it’s a simple thing. Nothing more.

At first, it’s the softest touch, not too hard, not too soft where it’s unnoticeable, but with his full lips, warm and gentle. Lips that you dream to kiss. It’s nice.

My heart picks up a ruthless pace; we both bring our heads back, examining deeper into each other’s eyes. Searching for the ends to the out. A reason to stop right here, right now. No more.

His breath is low as it fans over my bangs, our decision set and stone through energy that’s unspoken.

We should stop. Stop. Stop.

The chants die when we move in slowly, my head tilting, the stache above his lip brushing against the rim under my nose. He kisses me again, this time a little firmer. Another spark shoots down my stomach, invading my cunt. I catch his lush lips, my back arching into him, my hands rise clinging to his wrist.

I pull away again, his fingers thread in the back of my hair with a grip, but I don't care. I bite my lip and glance at the scar; my tongue swipes out, licking softly and tracing the mark. He lets out a low growl, diving his hand deeper into my hair while the other cups my jaw, holding me. He crushes his mouth on mine, pinning me against the wall. I open my mouth up for him to taste all of me. To get all of him. His tongue enters, licking and swirling. I melt into his body, my eyes shuttering close. He works his mouth on me like a man possessed, a man who knows exactly what he's doing. I lick his tongue, a moan escaping my throat, and he catches it. The kiss becomes harsh and intoxicating. Our mouths work against each other, nipping, biting, and licking—the story is telling itself, exploring all the nooks and crannies like we're searching for gold. It's abundantly clear that this is exactly what we both wanted.

My hands claw to his back, grabbing at it to crush him against me, to have his strong muscles flexing under my touch. I need more, so I stand on my tiptoes, reaching my arms up and grabbing onto his hair mid-kiss. My face tilts to get a better entrance. He releases my neck, lowering himself slightly and circling an arm under my ass, to press me tighter to him. Wanting more, he lifts me up, and I wrap my legs around his waist, feeling his hard cock beneath the thin slacks.

Banana my ass.

His large hand stretches along my ass, squeezing hard enough to cause pain. I moan again, grinding against him, visioning him deep in me and not hiding behind such a frail fabric. I pull his hair harder, his deep grunt filling my mouth from the grip. My pussy is heating with molten liquid soaking through my panties. She throbs so badly it hurts. Painfully.

Oh, fuck.

Ronan reciprocates, pushing slowly up into me and using his strength to lift me up and down on his cock. He starts dry fucking me against the wall, letting the hard tip of him tap on my swollen clit. Over and over until I'm squeezing him tighter, the muscles in his ass flexing. I could burst into stars right now from the friction alone.

I squeeze my eyes with parted lips as I let out a slur of tiny moans. My mind is fuzzy, no coherent thoughts or words can process besides, "Keep doing that. Please." I pant as my hips rock with his strong hands.

"Shhh, amor. The students may hear you getting casually dry fucked by their headmaster. Is that what you want?" Worry almost hits me, but not for long. It quickly vanishes as he goes faster, knocking his dick right on my bud repeatedly, causing my body to jerk up each thrust, and I'm nearly convulsing.

"You're evil," I whimper as he devours my lips again. They are the softest ones I've ever encountered and possessive.

"Hmm, tell me something I don't know," he groans through our salacious kiss. He presses up while thrusting me down to grind harder. Sensational flutters swing like ropes, wrapping around my senses. Our tongues twisting to match our rhythm; every lick, I lick back, every twist he responds. We're so in sync it's dizzying my mind. The kisses are so deep it's scratching to the surface of my lost soul.

He captures my lip between his teeth in a lofty groan. I wince with a shudder, tingles course down my legs.

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His tongue sweeps out, licking the infliction. “Do you want me to make you come?” He breathes heavy against my mouth, continuing his delirious dick torture.

My body twinkles in response. Submission at its finest. “Yes. Please, yes.”

He smirks, roaming his mouth along my jaw and to my ear. He plants a feathery kiss right under the lobe of the sensitive part of the neck. “You want to come on my tongue like a dirty little snake, or on my fingers?”

Please both. My eyes shutter closed from the velvety kisses along my neckline. I glide my fingers down his suit, finding the zipper. I unlatch it, aching to get a touch of his skin, to feel something besides cotton and polyester.

I want to fuck him. I want nothing more than that. “Whichever one will give you a better taste, Poison.” My hand finds a home through the inches of the collar. It’ll have to work for now. My fingers slip inside his and underneath, my fingers sear into his smooth chest, even some welted grooves rolling over my pads. His chest tenses up and he stops. As if reality slams down on us, he pulls away, resting his forehead on mine, my heart thumping painfully against my ribs, my lips screaming to continue, to get that shot of his poison again.

But he only wraps his hands around my wrist and lowers them from the connection on his skin. Heat blazes on my forehead, disappointment swimming up my stomach, catching a hook into my throat and yanking the ache.

He tosses my wrist down as if they caught on fire. That only makes me even more nausea, the burn in me extinguishes. I catch my breath from that earth-shattering kiss

and I gaze at him with confusion. His eyes close; he lowers me down and then backs up several inches from me. Once his eyes open, all I witness are black glimmers. The man I kissed is no longer present.

Before I can open my mouth to question, he cuts me off.

“The deals done.” He doesn’t even bother avoiding contact. His jaw is so rock solid it could break a wall. His attitude changed from a man ready to eat me alive to a cold and hard exterior. “And it won’t happen again.”

I ignore the stab in my chest. I don’t indulge. I don’t bother to question what happened. Why the switch?

And what did I do?

I leave it alone because I shouldn’t be feeling the pain of rejection. I shouldn’t be experiencing anything besides meeting the end of a deal to earn a spot. I lost, and that’s all. Time to move on.

I nod, lifting from the wall and fixing my hair from the ruffling of him digging into it. “I agree.” Avoiding his hard thickness as he readjusts himself and the wet smear rubbing between my thighs.

I peer up at the clouds. I can’t look at him and get a flush to my cheeks from embarrassment. He clears his throat and heads out, busting out the doors hard enough to break them.

My chest sinks as I avert my gaze to the floor where he stood. “Fuck, I’m so stupid.” I kneel, shielding my face with my arm.

You’re not like them, Anita. You don’t get to have a normal life anymore. You are a



killer now. There is no happily ever after. Revenge is your purpose.

General words circulate in my head. Pain stabs in my heart, the thickness expanding in my throat. I close my eyes, inhaling then releasing. That was supposed to make me feel at ease. Only it does the complete opposite.

What the hell happened?

## Chapter 34

Ronan

Denial plagues the bones; truth sets it free.

My head tips back, letting the droplets from the water pierce my skin, the cool pebbles taming me but still keeping in that poison that flows through my blood. I'm dreading the moment I have to look at her. Not because she's repulsive, but the opposite.

My stomach twists, my cock jolting a bit from the memory of her moaning so soft and venomous while she ground on my dick.

Now that I've gotten a taste of her, how will I avoid grabbing her and kissing the fuck out of her plump lips? She kisses damn well; our mouths molded together too perfectly, the two missing pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. And that's something I was not expecting. I wasn't intending for the connection to heighten to where it made me want to tear off those fucking clothes and make her moan for me again, to make her beg me to taste her.

I lather the soap over my chest and onto my stomach, mentally ignoring the scars.

That's why I stopped. If she felt the wounds and welts, it'll only remind her of the pain of losing a brother, the agony of how there was no one to save him. The torture we endured.

I was weak. And useless. A damn abomination of a man.

A young man.

I glared down, the water dripping over like rain, my hair surrounding my eyes. The best thing to do is to keep my distance. Which we have been this entire week; she hasn't been here, and I know she left. I watched it on my surveillance cameras. If I had the technology to see how far she drove and where she ended up at, I would've. I was tempted to ask Bedford to search all the stop light cameras and the ones in the city.

I'm that fucking nuts, and that's why I need to fall back. But I also don't want her to not be here. She belongs here, even if she doesn't see it.

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I can look for a room for her, so we don't have that temptation again. Technically, me. I sure as fuck know she hates me all over again.

Which is good because we have a mission to plan. That should be my focus.

Even though the unworldly twist in my gut tells me otherwise.

I hurry out of the shower and dress. When I step out of the apartment my phone vibrates. I grab it without looking at the incoming contact.

Cruz

Have you thought about helping me?

We need your help.

I've been thinking a lot. Of mom and just everything. Just call me. Please.

I let out an exasperated sigh, locking my phone back and heading downstairs. Him bringing up our mother is low. Even for him. He's never wanted to talk about her so the why the fuck now?

I ball my hands into a fist as I walk past a few students, trying to forget about his bullshit. But some stopped me to badger me about the winter dance that they practically begged me for months ago. It's a pain in my neck, but I can't get upset, they want to feel like regular students. A few others question me about a fencing lesson or curriculum, and even complain about a teacher who's being too hard on

them. I only remind them this will help them survive this lifestyle. Once you choose to step foot in this building, you choose to change your way of thinking. We are here to train and give them a new meaning to life, a purpose. The one thing that people search for years to find. I never imagined this would be my future, being the headmaster for an entire organization. But I wouldn't have wanted anything other than that.

Nevertheless, they are not trapped here. Everyone has the option to stay and go as they please. But almost all the kids who come stay for good, only visiting their families for holidays or weekends. They choose safety, endurance, and emotional security over anything.

After finally getting away from the students, I bust through the door of the facility, everyone working and gathering the new kidnapping cases. My eyes automatically search and land on Anita. As if my mind knew what to do without me thinking of it. My throat constricts, ceasing my breath from flowing to my lungs. The irritation I felt earlier because of Cruz vanishes.

Fuck.

She sits on Bedford's desk, legs crossed, looking at pictures of what, I assume, is Bedford, his boyfriend, and their dog. My mind is on autopilot as I skim down her full body, soaking in what she wears. And it's fucking sexy.

She wears black denim jeans with a lace, long-sleeve corset shirt that's stitched with black roses on it. She fastened a thigh holster to hold her gun and dagger, and she donned ankle-high black boots.

My teeth grind together, the pulse in my balls shriveling. She knew what the fuck she was doing when she wore that. A reason to get me hot and weak at the knees. To send a blatant message on what I'm missing.

That I'll never have her.

And to end it with it all. That thick, long, luscious hair. I'm tempted to go over there and just inhale it again. She's my new favorite scent and I need another sniff.

Yes, she's been gone for a week, and I missed the fuck out of her the entire time. It was miserable not having her here. I even went as far as searching for a pair of her thongs and found a sexy red pair in her draw. I laid down on her bed and jerked off until I came all on all over the pocket where her pussy rests. I put the little surprise back in her draw in case she ever came back.

I walk slowly over, licking the drool that nearly spilled out and also not rushing the distance because I know once I do, things will go back to being tense and the air thicker than cement. She grins slightly, a genuine, beautiful smile watching the photo. She points to the pictures leaning on Bedford. Who looks at it and laughs, tossing his head back. It spreads wider as she places her hand on her chest.

I narrow in, relishing in her presence; because her smile could brighten the darkest room. I let out a breath to get my lungs pumping again.

"So precious." I hear her say as I'm walking up. Of course, she's aware of my approach. She looks up and it instantly drops. That's a punch directly to my stomach. I can't help the scorching jealousy burning in me.

I want to slam Bedford's head into the computer.

No, no.

I have to remind myself it wasn't his fault; it's my own mistake, my own shit.

He doesn't even realize he experienced something so rare.

“Anita.”

She raises a brow, her face showing no emotion, no reaction from my presence. That fucking hurts more than a knife to my chest.

“Headman.” She continues staring into me, leaning back, and placing her palms flat on his table. Her gaze fiddled at the surface of the black hole between us. She subjects me to the same cold torture, which crushes my ego even more as if someone ripped it away, threw it to the ground, and shot at it with a machine gun. I glare at her.

Mal and Boone come through the door before I can say something.

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Mal yells obnoxiously from the song that I don't remember the artist. She plays that song every time it's time for a mission.

Boone walks beside her with a dry and unappealing look; he's been looking more and more pissed every day. What the hell is going on with him? I look back at Anita. "That woman you worked with. What can you tell me about her?"

Anita crosses a leg over the other, my gaze flicking to the subtle movement; a quick flash of them wrapped around my waist as I held her up against the wall comes to mind. My urge to run my hand up her thigh is nearly uncontrollable, not giving a damn who's in here with me.

"I worked with a lot of women; you'll have to be more specific."

I cross my arms. "Long braids, dark skin." The eyes that'll probably melt steel.

She raises a brow with curiosity. "Why do you want to know about Scar?—"

"Who's our target?" Mal chirps, walking in front of us with a bright smile.

I cut my look at Mal, who's fingering the papers now on the other side of Bedford's desk.

"Don't. Don't do that." He shoos her hand away, then fixes the papers back neatly.

Mal shrugs, backing away with her hands up. I continue looking at Anita, who now hops off the desk. I forgot about what I was going to ask her, and I allowed myself to

roam down her body again as her hips swayed in her jeans. She stands beside Mal, very aware of my stare burning into her head.

Bedford turns halfway, somewhat facing us, while focusing on the screen. “Victor the Vicious. And yes, as we know, a stupid name. But he lives up to it, unfortunately. After the first kidnapping with Carter, he became thirsty for more. Creating his own drug and sex-trafficking chain. He worked alongside Fred and the rest, specifying the rich young girls and boys. The problem is: We don’t know if Fred told the truth or not about not targeting the kids on that wall.”

My heart thumps wild, the thought of young kids going through something so traumatic. So vile. Infuriates me, I hate I can't do shit to protect every single person from fuckers like them. I didn’t believe Fred for nothing. Anyone would say anything just to keep the pain of their fate at bay for a little longer.

He swipes his hands, moving the screen to the left. “George Bettlleham. 18-year-old kid, mom owns private properties all over Long Island and Manhattan. And his dad as well. Born and bred from a literal goldmine, it appears after reviewing themap.” Bedford swipes again, the map showing up on the screen. “If you see the colored dots on the forehead, it’s an indication of the ranking. The richest to semi-rich. But Victor is our best bet to end it all now.”

I step in, tapping the screen. “Thank you, Bedford. We have surveillance on each person set for being taken. Since we marked Georgenúmero um, we have been keeping a close eye on him. Expecting the unexpected. Also, to our convenience, he lives in Hollow City. If anything pops up on the radar,” I bring a circle device from my pocket, “this will beep red. The team is on watch as well as the police, so there will be nothing going in or out that’s suspicious.”

I toss the device on the table. “We’ve been watching Victor for years, but never were able to catch up to him, though we were able to stop the majority of his kidnapping.



We managed to get a designated point after a little birdie spilled his location.”

“Damn,” Mal sings out. “What’d y’all do to him, Headman?” She snickers evilly.

I flick my gaze to Anita. And at that moment, our eyes meet with instinct. Ear-splitting screams and bone cracking invades my mind and vision. Anita’s arm flying up and slicing down on his limb carves a permanent picture in my mind. Seeing the bond we shared, like two ropes tied in a knot, is something I’ll never want to willingly let go of.

“Nothing he didn’t deserve,” Anita speaks softly, then slowly peels her eyes from me to give Mal a smile that doesn’t meet the eyes.

I point back at the screen. “We get to him; we end his shit. Or we can do it the opposite way. Get the potential victims, then go after the leader.”

“If he is the leader,” Anita jumps in, tilting her gaze at the screen. “I can’t imagine one man overseeing something so large. There are at least thirty kids on this map.” She shakes her head as she leans over to zoom out of the map to show the full spectrum. “How would he know each one of these people is rich?”

I gaze at Anita again, pressure invading my stomach as I watch her become invested in the situation.

“That’s not very hard to find out these days,” Bedford says matter-of-factly.

Glancing back at the screen, I cross my arms, determining the information. “Unless. That would mean someone else is giving him the information on the outside.”

“Of course. That would mean he’s in the social scene. That’s the only way he could pull that off,” Mal sneers, eyeing the screen.

“Not surprised there,” Boone clips. In true Boone fashion, he only talks when he wants to.

“And we still don’t know why you’re on it,” Anita adds in. I clench my jaw, letting out a grunt. I purposely didn’t ask Fred about that. That’s not on my agenda either way that will get diffused. No one is going to fuck with me, I can bet my life on that.

“We don’t need to stress ourselves over that.”

Without looking at her, I can see her head cock in my direction in astonishment.

“We focus on the bigger picture. Scope out Victor’s warehouse. Which is located outside of Hollow City.” Picking up the devices on Bedford’s desk. Each GPS handheld trackers. “Chris has already added in the mark on these.” I hand one to Boone, Mal, and Anita, who still gives an irritated look.

I will deal with you soon.

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The location is further out from Long Island, about two hours of driving. We could all catch the jet and be there in ten minutes, but what better way to get her in one space with me?

“In case we lose each other, you’ll have our exact point on these, including the location of Victor.” I point out. Mal and Boone prepare for their departure; Anita straightens, walking past me to hitch a ride with them until I extend my hand blocking her path, her breast bumping right into my palm. She glares up at me, fire burning in her dark eyes, the plumpness in her lips pinching, preventing her from lashing out. And that only makes me roused, receiving something from her besides nothing.

“You’re with me.”

### Chapter 35

Ronan

Shadow in the Woods

Islam the door, fitting myself comfortably in the driver’s seat. Shrugging off my wool coat and resting it in the back. I wait patiently, soaking in the warm air that’s filling the truck. I already turned it on remotely before getting inside. The temperature is dropping by the day, and soon snow will surround these sticks and rocks. A minute later, she swings open the door, letting in a wave of chilly air. She gets in smoothly, wearing a coat over her clothes. The smell of her invading the car and instantly making my cock hard.

Fuck.

I crunch down on my teeth, focusing forward on the cobblestone road ahead.

We drive off, heading to our destination. The goal is to make sure we know what we're working with, how the structure is, the area, the surrounding. If it's an easy escape, are there men lined outside? I don't need what happened last time coming into play.

For the first thirty minutes, we drove in our own silence, while the hum of the car interlaces with the whispering of the Hollow City anthem. Fine time to play this fucking song.

Hollow City is a mere black city that makes your fears come alive?...

Occasionally, I'll look over to catch her looking out the window. The reflection from the tempered glass drawing her face. My heart stings from the look that I've felt time and time again.

Hostile, discontent. The world is black smoke, and you're standing over the ruinous catastrophe. Just watching, waiting.

I glance back at the road, and my hand tightens around the wheel. A part of me wants to make all of it go away for her and see the smiles I desperately crave on that beautiful face. She doesn't even know she still glows bright, even over the dark inside us.

I take one last look at her as we pass a mountain top, the entire crescent moon in eye shot.

I like to look at her, it's pleasing to the eyes. I'm not a shitty driver, so I can stay

straight for long enough. She turns slightly, her eyes shining through the window; her eyes travel downward, then back up at the moon. Her hand runs the sleeve on her arm, searching in the sky for something I cannot place my finger on.

I finally look back at the road; yes, I'm an expert driver, but if I stare too long, I will eventually run into a tree.

She'll do that to you, capture you in, and wrap her scaly tail around you until you're sucked into her sweet warmth.

My little sweet venom.

No not,mine. I have reached a conclusion. I can't allow her to see this other part of me, this ugly part that consumes me until I'm shrinking and weak. How can she want me when I don't even want myself?

Hollow city is a mere black city that makes your fears come alive...?fuck off.

I resist the urge to touch the scar on my lip. She shifts in her seat, crossing her leg, and leaning further into the window.

I merge onto the highway, filled with bright yellow headlights and blaring red taillights.

The tension is so high that it's suffocating; not even letting the window down for air would help it. We need to talk. Although intimate communication is not my forte, it's unsettling and triggering for me, but when do you bring up the gigantic elephant in the room? I go to speak.

"Why didn't you go to the funeral?" she asks before I can get anything out. My heart drops to my belly, I'm stunned by her question, the wall I placed up now spills over

with emotion, it's bubbling in my chest from the memory. The part of my life I regret the most. I lock my jaw while I try to swallow the tightening in my throat.

“I-.” Nothing comes out. I grip the steering wheel.

“If anyone should have been there. It should’ve been you,” she says it almost as a whisper, one loaded in grief that she probably never had. She clears her throat then looks at me.

“You’re right.”

“Then why?”

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I was weak, that's why. I let out a heavy sigh. "Because I was ashamed. It was my fault, and I couldn't face your family knowing I made it out alive, but he didn't. I couldn't look you in the eye and..." I shake my head, now steadying my breath. "Knowing that I'm alive, and your brother isn't. It would've been like a slap in the face, another knife stabbing you in the heart. I couldn't do that to you all." I admit as heat blazes over my face.

There's silence for a few seconds and I take the moment to look at her again. She gazes at me too, then looks away. "I hated you for it."

Everything tightens again. I could say anything that would make up for it, but you can't make up to someone who feels betrayed. Not really anyway.

"I don't blame you for that. I hated myself for it. I still do."

She sighs. "I also understand now. One day, he was here and the next he was gone, you witnessed his death, and you couldn't do anything about it." She inhales slightly, running her hand down her arm again. "But think of everything you have done, in justice for Carter. Relieve yourself from that hate. I have."

From that, neither of us speak, I only continue in silence replaying every moment, every experience Carter and I shared. A brother who wasn't my blood but treated each like we were. He was my family. Then I think of the promise I made him. It's why I have to make things right with Anita. She can't be away from me. Not ever.

"I think we should talk about what happened last week."

I catch her stiffen. “I don’t think that’s necessary,” she states blandly, gazing ahead at the dark road.

“It is. We need to discuss?—”

“No need.”

I cut my focus on her. “You can ask me questions, but I can’t ask you?”

Her eyes roll, tapping her leg as her tongue plucks around her mouth, not retorting back.

“We—”

She reaches over fast and raises the volume on the radio. The anthem playing loud and clear.

I quickly lower it. Irritation setting in. “Don’t fuck with me.”

“I like the song. More than this conversation you want to have,” she spits out, going to reach again.

I catch it, blocking the volume knob and flinging her wrist. “Do you really want to test me?” I warn, hoping she does.

She doesn’t.

Her arms cross with a flare to her nose. She’s dead fucking pissed. I don’t care.

I face the road again, clenching my jaw and begin, “We kissed.”



She shrugs. “Yes. For a deal. It meant nothing; you won, end of story.”

Damn. My thumb taps on the wheel, my ego flicking like a bad match. “Then why’d you leave the Academy?”

She releases an exaggerated sigh. “I realize I don’t need to stay there. I can meet when missions are set,” she says, releasing an exaggerated sigh.

A surge of panic hits me in my stomach. “That’s not going to work.”

From the corner of my eyes, her head cocks slowly to me. “Not going to work?” she repeats.

“Yes. In order to be here, you must be within the quarters in the mile radius of the tracker. For safety purposes. By going back and forth, I don’t know who your enemies are; they may follow you and find the school.” There’s a reason only a certain number of people know of GenCre.

And the parents that know signed enough NDA’s, you’d have a heart attack. No one knows unless you’re told. Also, it’s the best reason I can come up with.

“Then I’ll find a hotel nearby.”

“There are none.” Of course there are.

“I’ll sleep in my car, tucked into your creepy forest.”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:13 am*

Think of something else quick. “I wouldn’t suggest that. Wild animals out there. Deadly predators. I’ve seen it firsthand,” I add, to fuel the lie. It’s the best I have.

She huffs, shaking her head and tossing up her hand. “That’s ridiculous.”

I tap the wheel, shrugging. “Alright, give it your best chance. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” I keep my face stern and serious, adding to the fib. Damn, I could be a fucking actor. “You don’t have to stay with me.” My throat tightens like I have a lemon is stuck in it.

She pauses, looking at me. “What?”

I don’t suck in the tight breath I badly need. I roll my lips, preparing for my pride to be burnt to ashes. “I’ll find you your own room.” There’s a few left. I hate the idea of her not being in my home, but I fucking despise the idea of her not being where she belongs.

A hotel? Her car? I’ll set them on fire if it means keeping her exactly where she’s meant to be.

With me.

No, at GenCre?... It’s what Carter would want that.

I do too. But mainly for Carter. That’s right.

She flicks over her thumb, fingering at the knuckle. “You would do that? Despite the

bet. The agreement.”

My nail digs into the steering wheel, glaring at the sign that says: ‘Leaving Hollow City.’

No, I wouldn’t do that.

I would tie you to the fucking bed if that meant you’ll stay in my place. But nothing good will come from that.

Well, come to think of it...

“Yes,” I strain out. “Your comfort is a priority. So, I understand one hundred percent.”

She shifts her legs, glancing at me, then back at the window. I know she’s pondering on it, which makes me wonder why? It’s what she wanted.

“While I appreciate it. I think I’ll stay.” She lets out a small sigh. “A deal is a deal. Fair and square. Plus, the bed in the room is pretty comfortable.” Her fingers find her hair, brushing it behind her ear.

I don’t resist the smile rising on my lips. I bought a bed for that room and it’s extra therapeutic. At least, that’s what the person said when I asked for the best mattress they have similar to mine. One that’ll leave you waking up with no aches, like you slept on a damn cloud. I may or may not have threatened the owner, saying he might end up on a spike if bad results came back to me from using the bed.

“Good to know the bed fulfills your expectations.”

Her brow raises with a cute pucker to her lips. “It does.”

I switch positions, resting my elbow on the door frame, and running my fingers over the hilt of my scar. The smirk lingering.

“Also, I find it hard to believe you would be in an area full of wild predators if you have students on the premises, Headman.” She speaks in fluent Portuguese.

Shit.

I snap my head at her with pinched brows. The twist in my belly creates swirls and knots.

She folds in her lips, containing the grin on her cheeks.

I chuckle lightly in disbelief. “When were you going to tell me you understand my language?”

“You know now.”

I face forward. She amazes the fuck out of me. That means she knew exactly what I was saying about the fruit. I bite down on my lip.

Interesting.

Now I must learn French.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:13 am*

A comfortable silence stretches between us for almost the rest of the ride. When we finally arrive, the sky is pitch black, stinging with enough stars to outshine the moon.

Instead of parking directly in front of the building, I park further away, ducked in the trees, since it happens to be stuffed in the woods. I get out of the car, the pricking air bitch-slapping me straight in the face. I hate the cold; it makes my balls tight and my fingers numb. I purse my lips, jamming my fist into the opening of my pockets.

I meet Anita on the other side of the car, her shoulders near her jawline, and her hands stuffed in her black bubble coat; it's not thick enough to withstand the chills.

Her foot goes to walk further, but I put out my hand. "Wait."

Her brows scrunch together, looking at my hand. I open the trunk of the truck. Pushing aside a hammer, an ax, and a few guns, I grab a thick coat with thick fur stitched inside and a hood attached. Something I've kept in my car for purposes when the weather kicks my ass, but it'll come in handy for her instead. I shift to her. "Take that off."

Her mouth parts and her face scrunches further with a quizzical look. "Excuse me?"

"Unless you want to die from hypothermia, take it off. It won't keep you warm." I rotate my fingers over her jacket, shaking my head.

She clutches the zippers of her coat. "It does the job," she defends as her shoulders quivers a little.

I raise a brow, watching her. “Off.”

She huffs, crossing her arm, her foot tapping on the pieces of tree bark. “Have you heard of ‘can you and please?’”

I roll my eyes up, my teeth gripping together. Stubborn as shit. Unfortunately, I like it. I let out a deep huff, looking back at her. I inch closer, her body rigid from the cold air. Normally. She’ll step back when I am near her. I’m guessing it’s because she never knows what I’ll do. Her guard is forever up, ready to deliver her venom. However, I never want her to be afraid of me.

Never. Her fire ignites my flame, burning my mess and leaving beautiful ashes in its path. If anything, she terrifies me.

“Can you,” my body is now towering over her, “put on the damn jacket before I force it on myself. Please.”

Her lips part in utter disbelief. “You are so insufferable.”

I shrug with a bored stare and continue holding the coat up. Her eyes roll, and a frustrated groan comes out, seeing that I’m not going to change my mind on it. She glances at the coat in my hand—that seems to take an appeal to her by the way she shifts on her feet. Her stubbornness relents.

“Okay fine!” She backs away and quickly takes off her little coat, so the unfriendly air doesn’t mutilate her bones. Her teeth scrape over her plump bottom lip. I take the coat from her, tossing it over my forearm, instead of her taking it directly out of my hands. I step behind her, placing the thick jacket over her frame. Securing it tightly before swooping my hands through her nape and the hoodie to pull her hair out. My stomach flips; I finally get to touch her hair again. My guilty pleasure. I lean in without her noticing and sniff softly. My body tingles from her vanilla scent filling

my nose. A week too long for me. I quickly part my lips and bite her hair, letting my spit from my tongue to soak it a little. I don't pull. I only give that much before I pull away like I've done nothing.

It's nothing more than a small touch.

I stroll around, facing her innocently, before reaching down to the zipper. My eyes gazing down at her, and she looked up at me whilst zipping the jacket up. The tall trees cover up the crescent moonlight. It helps with giving light to the night, but there's nothing stopping me from still etching out her entire face.

Memories of her legs wrapped around my waist, grinding on me, and moaning in my mouth plasters like a billboard; her begging me please to make her cum. She submits wonderfully behind the Venom.

We don't move, nor do our eyes waver. I want to kiss her.

Another jerk in my pants snaps me out of it. Four blinding lights flash on the side of us; we both look in the direction, making Anita step back, and my hand to fall down, irritation settling in me from the bright ass lights and the interruption.

I can't be angry. I want this.

The car shuts off and a door slam; boots and rocks being kicked from under their feet sound out in the night air.

"Fucking balls, it's cold," Mal says, walking toward us with her hoodie jacket duo and black gloves on.

Boone walks behind her; the large coat he is wearing appears small on him.

I turn, tossing Anita's coat in the trunk before grabbing two guns and slamming the trunk back.

Without looking, I pass Anita the gun. "We see what we can handle. Scope out the area. See how many men, routes, ins, and outs there are."

She takes the gun from my grip, her fingers grazing across my knuckles sending an electric wave down my cold back.

Ignore it.

"Any questions?" I place the gun in the holster, waiting for any concerns or ideas. I've never been the guy to leave his team voiceless and unheard. I'm open to suggestions, as long as it doesn't get us killed, and, of course, if it's not stupid. My gaze lands on each of them. Anita's the longest because I can't help it.



*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:13 am*

“Nope, let’s do this.” Mal’s voice is eager and ready. She might as well jump around on her toes like Boone does when he’s boxing.

Mal looks at Anita, her eyes landing on my coat tight around her. She stares for a brief moment before pointing. “Why do you look like you’re getting ready to wrestle a sumo wrestler?”

Boone walks around me, but I could’ve sworn I heard him snicker. Anita gives a tight smile, her middle finger raising slowly. “At least I’ll be warm.” Her finger is still up, aiming at Mal, while she walks in Boone’s direction.

I crack a grin, strolling to the doors of the truck.

Mal doesn’t look the least bit displeased. A small smile lands on her lips before she shrugs, walking off too.

I make sure everything is locked before strolling off into the darkness of the forest. Rustling leaves and tree crickets make music tonight as we scrunch on the dry and falling petals. The gap finally opens to a large warehouse. Something is off—we cease movement. The building looks like someone blew it up and then put back together. My senses ring off as we all step forward, vigilantly. Not worried about anyone coming out because we all get the gist.

No one is here anymore.

Venom

Location:

Dreary Road warehouse

Operation: Scope out the creepy building.

We each keep our guns raised. Wicked and Boone are right behind us, the flashlight attached to their gun circulating around the walls and bricks.

Darkness shields the area with busted out windows and debris all over. It looks like a bomb went off. Inside are folding chairs and a torn red couch that seems like a truck has run it over. Wires hang from the ceiling, dust floats in the air, giving me hesitancy due to not knowing what exactly is floating around. It's obvious the building is recently abandoned because of the cups and torn boxes don't appear drenched from water vapors or dirt.

Boone and Ronan take downstairs and Wicked and I go upstairs. Steps scream under my feet as I raise my gun, my heart thumping in my chest, imagining a zombie running out and biting my arm.

I get to the top of the steps, the entire upstairs empty. The same way it looks downstairs.

Shit.

I lower my gun, placing my hand on my hip; the thick coat prevents my arm from fully bending because the sleeve on it is so long, it bunches at the elbow. Wicked lowers her gun, examining me.

“If you two are fucking, it wouldn’t surprise me.”

My stomachs lurch as if someone throws a brick straight at it. “What!?” Heat blasts my cheeks and forehead.

“If you two are fu?—”

I place my hand up, stopping her sentence. “Yeah, I heard that. I mean. What are you talking about? That’s not what’s happening here.” I shake my head stiffly. The coat now becomes more like a ten-pound weight than a warming mechanism.

She lets out a yeah-right scoff. “Sure.”

I let out an exasperated breath, rolling my eyes. “Again, what are you talking about?”

She pauses. “I’ve never seen Ro with a woman—ever. So, to see him with you. Treating you how he does, I mean??...” Her voice trails off until I see her looking closer at something behind me.

Oh my gosh, please don’t tell me if it is a ghost. My chest tightens as I squeeze my fist.

“What is that?” She brushes past me, her eyes on the prize. I follow her direction, my eyes still dancing around the eerie place. I’ve killed, but I would never deal with a ghost. Ever.

I seek what she’s strolling toward. An opened chair in the middle of the deserted area. Alarm rings in my head, my eyes scouring from walls to ceiling, watching for anything that may fly at us.

“It’s something taped to the chair.” Her foot going in front of the other as her arms

are raised like she's ready to prowl any minute.

I widen my eyes, pushing my hand out. "Wicked wait, don't touch it?—"

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:13 am*

She lifts the post note off the back of the chair.

I squeeze my lips in between my teeth. “What if that was connected to a bomb or something?” I snap out.

“Explain how that would be possible.” She lifts the paper, looking at me with a delirious expression.

My eyes pinch as I pluck the paper from her fingers. Multiple footsteps and the voice from Ronan come from behind us.

“Anything is possible,” I say, bringing the paper to my view.

Then her head cocks, realizing something. “And did you call me Wicked?”

I flip over the letter. “Yeah. You call me Cinderella.” I shrug.

She nods, curling her lip down. “Well, shit, I actually like it.”

By then, Ronan and Boone are up to us. “What’s that?” Ronan comes near me, his tall frame hovering next to me. I’m already feeling the warmth in this big ass coat, and now the presence of Ronan so close only makes it hotter.

Ignoring the proximity of him, I finally get a good look at the paper. My brows only furrow deeper, causing an unsettling twist in my stomach.

You’re Invited

347 Walnut Lane, Croydon, London

Casino Twinkling Night Masquerade Ball

December 10 @ 7pm

-Your Best Guy Vic

“This has to be a joke.” I flip the paper to the side, turning to face Ronan fully. Wicked takes the paper from my hand, studying it closer. Boone tilts his head slightly, examining it.

“Best guy?” Mal asks, more with offense.

“Really? Is that all you got from it?” I squint my eyes, pinching my face in annoyance.

Ronan crosses his arm over his chest and the other raised to his chin as he rubs it. His eyes steady on the ground with deep thought.

“It’s a trap,” Boone speaks, his voice nearly startling me. It’s a gift to hear the man talk because he never does.

Ronan takes the letter, examining it again. “Unless it’s his way of luring me out. This means he doesn’t know who we are.” He points at the paper. “We can use this to our advantage.”

I shake my head, placing my hand in the pockets of the coat to keep my hands from turning into popsicles. I still love the winter, even if it makes me feel like ice. “How?”

He shakes the note. “He has no clue how we look; we can go to this party and invade them from the inside out.”

“You think he won’t notice the man he tortured?” I point out. The thought of walking right into the hands of a clown stirs me the wrong way.

“It is a masquerade ball,” Wicked adds, plucking the thin paper from Ronan and wiggling it.

“Yes, exactly,” Ronan drolls, snatching it back. “He won’t notice.”

“And if he does.” I glide it from Ronan’s fingers, holding it between my pointer and middle finger.

Ronan smoothly grazes his fingers over his beard, thinking it over. “Let’s get to the compound and think it over. This air is freezing my brain.”

By the time we head back to the compound, it’s past midnight. My eyes are drowsy from keeping them open the whole two-hour drive. I refuse to let Ronan, of all people, watch me sleep. He already stirs me in a direction I never thought I would be, but to let him see me asleep? I don’t even know how I look in that state. Maybe I sleep with my mouth spread open, or maybe I snore and don’t even know it.

We all sit at a round table that’s in the tech area. The air is warm and cozy now, making my body relaxed and even more tired.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:13 am*

For the first time, I want to...?sleep. I haven't had the best rest since I left. All I could think about was the memory foam bed back at Ronan's. It was so bad I was researching similar beds just to replace the one in Oliver's camper.

Ronan leans over the table. "I thought it through. I also understand if you all don't want to go and put yourself in a predicament." He glances around the table. "I'm going to go to London. Meet this fucker head on. It's now or never. There's something off about the invitation, meaning he's trying to figure out my identity. We will tie him to a chair with a gun to his head before he makes that discovery," he says with a hard stare, his voice full of retribution.

A knot builds in my throat, witnessing him go from zero to one hundred in a blink of an eye. The passion behind his vengeance matches mine in a way no one could possibly understand. And it turns me on so fiercely my pussy might burst like an overfilled balloon.

Leaning back on the chair to relieve the buildup between my thighs and to get comfortable, I cross my legs. "My only concern is that we are walking right into the devil's lair. We have to do this smartly."

At that instant, his eyes slice toward me, trailing up my legs like a well-defined route with checkpoints. For someone who doesn't want to kiss me again, why does he stare at me like I'm fresh meat on a stick?

Heat swirls up my body, burning every part of my skin. Why does he do this? He pushes me away after the most mind chattering kiss while I'm near orgasmic release, then switches route like a bad interception, offering my own room, practically forcing



me to wear a coat. Is it his intention to mindfuck me? Play me like an idiot?

I shouldn't care. I don't care! The kiss was part of a deal that I lost like a missing tooth. So, it meant nothing.

I wouldn't be surprised if you two are fucking.

He finally lands on my face. His stare is hard and eyes dilated, as if he wants me to hear his thoughts, or to melt my soul away and keep it for himself. Stop. My eyes skate to Wicked Mal and Boone, who don't seem to notice.

Boone watches me intensely, his fingers intertwined in a fist pressed to his chin. Gosh, I thought Ronan was terrifying. His piercing green eyes are wildly unbearable. While Wicked Mal leans fully back in her chair, her legs pushed straight out with one foot over the other. As if they are waiting for me to give them an answer.

"What do you suggest then, Cinderella?" Wicked speaks, tilting her head.

I flick my gaze at Ronan, who continues staring at me. "I say we go two days before. This ball is in another week, ample time to prepare, of course, and enough time to expect the unexpected."

"Get ahead beforehand," Boone adds in, cracking his neck.

"Yes, exactly; at least we can see what we are working with—either way, we may get blindsided. But at least we can be prepared. We don't know how strong this guy became. If he can pack up a full warehouse and leave no trace behind, then he has hefty connections."

Everyone nods their head slowly in agreement. "I'm coming along."

Our heads all snap to the voice. Bedford stands a few feet behind me, eating what looks like white soup. Clam Chowder. Disgusting.

Ronan shakes his head. “No, I need you here. We will take Chris.”

Bedford lowers his soup with one hand, a bugged expression plastered on his face.

“Why not? Chris isn’t as good as I am. Let me come.”

I look over to Ronan, his fingers pinching the roof of his nose from agitation and eyes shut. I contain a smile from spilling out. The relationship between the two reminds me of an older brother dealing with his younger, more carefree brother.

“Plus, I’ve never been to London before.”

“It’s not a party, Bedford; it’s not to have fun.” Wicked Mal spits out.

I shrug lightly. “Well. Technically, it is a party.”

There’s a tiny soft spot in my heart for Bedford. After speaking with him yesterday and seeing the pictures he showed me, it tugged at a place in my heart that I thought I stowed away forever.

Hope. Hope that you can have?...Happiness?I don’t fucking know; let me ignore that.

“Not helping,” Ronan groans, pointing his long fingers at me with a straight palm. The smile breaks free, and I wink at Bedford, who looks pleased I stepped in.

Threading his fingers through his wavy hair. He daggers his eyes at Bedford. “You’ll stay in the hotel. You will not step foot outside of it unless it’s from us coming and going.”

Bedford spreads a wide smile on his face, nearly jumping up. “Okay. Daddy Headman.”

Ronan narrows his eyes, his molars clenching. Bedford raising his hand up. “I mean, yes, sir.” He salutes Ronan before backing away and out of view.

Wicked leans forward, raising the side of her mouth in wary. “He’s right; he is better than Chris.”

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Ronan hoods his eyes at her, tossing an annoyed head shake. “We will take the jet.” He diverts the conversation. “I’ll keep you all updated. In the meantime, have a goodnight.”

Ronan eyes me particularly before backing the chair out, the wooden legs scraping against the cemented floor along with everyone else. Boone and Ronan walk off, heading in the direction of the gear room.

I make my way out of the data center and toward the hall, desperate to get to the room, and shut my eyes.

I truly won’t get the best sleep until I see the light from that asshole’s gray in the skin and lifeless. Each one of their deaths will only bring me closer and closer to the end of the mayhem. And to the beginning of maybe...

I remove the thought.

Instead, I massage my shoulder, rubbing the stiff muscles as I wait for the elevator. I’m not jogging up the steps.

Thankfully, there’s no one roaming the halls; I guess that’s what happens when your headman has a strict schedule. Although sometimes when I’m scoping the halls late at night, I see a few teens running off, sneaking around.

Beingteenagers.

I get into the elevator. A slow breath escapes as the stabbing pain swirls in my heart,

the same throb that would randomly appear in my earlier days whenever I saw something or someone living alive.

Laughter, friends, prom, a normal graduation. Attempting at life and failing miserably. The experience of boyfriends that you fuck over or getting drunk off your ass because why not? Or getting your first job and feeling proud of it; even if it's just a minimum wage job, it's yours, and you worked hard for it. Possibly traveling the world without it pertaining to murdering someone. Being twenty-seven, you would think all of those wants and desires would vanish.

But the pain sharpens, filling my mind and body. Crashing me down into a normalcy I only have.

I stroll slower than usual to the door, wallowing in my own what if's.

What if Carter didn't die? Where would I be?

What if I never let my father send me off?

What if I decided to be something more than an assassin?

I approach the door, unlock it, and walk in; the cool breeze greeting me, and the smell of musk and citrus circulating my fumes. Closing my eyes, I let my shoulders slump because for the first night in a week I can relish in an odd comfort. I'll get my things tomorrow, but for now, I want to relax.

It's not my home, but it's become a place that eases the ache from that solemn piece in my chest, and although it doesn't take away the fester of possibilities that racks my brain. His apartment has become a tiny place of solidarity.

I make it to my room; I'm met with a clean bed and bright cream colors despite the

dark shade milking the skies. Tingles spread over in a rush.

Home. For now.

## Chapter 37

Venom

Location:

On the way to Croydon, London

Operation: Relish in his end

Ronan

Boone and I are leaving ahead. Meet you all there.

I release a sigh of relief, stuffing my phone into my bubble coat pocket. I don't pay my heart skipping any mind while I read his message to the group chat.

I am relieved.

The week leading up to our take-off to London went by in no time. Which was perfect for me because that means I didn't have to see Ronan much; he is a really busy man—and that works in my favor. Only because if I do see him, it'll be tempting to grab his face again and kiss him. Though we agreed we won't do that again.

Well, him, not me. But I'm fine with it.

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No attachments. It'll only lead to being hurt at the end.

So, most days, I roam the school or work on my combat skills in the boxing zone. And if I'm not there, then I'm in the greenhouse. I find being there nostalgic. I don't get to see my mom, but I can remember her and the little things we did together.

"Are you ready, Cinderella?" Wicked's voice cuts in as I stroll down the steps to the front foyer. It didn't take too long to pack my things, besides the little hiccup when I found my favorite red thongs soiled and stained with something white and dry. If I were to guess, Ronan had something to do with it. The thought of him sneaking into my room and coming all on my underwear should've infuriated me. But it only turned me on. I couldn't help the arousal that settled, screaming for me to fuck myself. I didn't. I just stuffed them in my bag and continued on.

I make it to the bottom step, my bag strap sinking into my shoulder. Bedford rolls his luggage in through the left side hall, waving at me with a lighthearted smile. His smile makes me want to smile every time.

Then I send her a stiff grin. "Readier than ever, Wicked," I respond dryly with an eye tip.

"Oh, don't be like that. You're going to enjoy being with me. I'm fun." She smirks, grabbing her black luggage from the floor and strolling out.

The skylight meets my eye in a tight sting. "What's your definition of fun?" I follow along to the truck.

“Her meaning of fun is getting shitfaced until you have no idea what your name is,” Bedford answers as his Louis Vuitton luggage wheels drag across the ground.

“Which is the exact definition of fun.” Wicked pops the trunk.

I toss my bag in with a fold to my lips. “If that’s fun to you, then I want no part of it. I’d rather hang off the side of a building.”

Bedford cackles, placing it in his bag, and Wicked Mal shrugs with a chuckle of her own.

We gather in the truck and head off. Fifteen minutes later, we arrive at GenCre’s private airline, board the jet, and get ready for takeoff. To say I’m not impressed he owns his own airline would be a lie.

Nonetheless, the nine-hour flight is as long as I imagine it would be. But it gives me that time to myself before the inevitable happens. I have to see Ronan. No more avoiding. No more leaving before he wakes up. No staying in the room.

The reason for it all is that I’m humiliated by what happened. Not only by that but... Me finally asking why did he never show at Carter’s funeral? I tried so hard to push the question away, but it ate at me like how piranhas eat at flesh. It wounded me, and...hurt me. I had to know.

Now he knows I truly don’t hate him and that I don’t mind kissing him. The only thing that fills my brain is afterward. The humiliation. Why did he not want me to touch him? And why did I have to practically beg him to have a release?

Freaking submission.

I tried my best to play it off like it meant nothing to me, but my stomach flops like a



ruined pancake when I think back on it.

I inhale a heavy breath before disembarking the jet. Time to focus on the plan. Not things I can't change or fix.

A truck is already ready for us—compliments to Ronan and the accommodations. But it's a mind-numbing ride. Being tortured by Wicked Mal on the drive to the hotel is truly horrendous. All she does is make confusing jokes with weird puns. The jet lag is tortuous and Mal's attempt at comedy makes my ears pop worse than when you're being catapulted into the air. It's one of those moments that makes you cringe so hard that you have to laugh.

Bedford, on the other hand, is tolerable. He sits in the back, listening to music on his headphones and typing away on his laptop. Ronan needs him to get full signals of everything around us.

We reached our destination—a beautiful, luxurious hotel. Tainted with milky colors, bold panels, and Greek architecture. Valets span the front of the building; cars honk as they pass by; all forms of rich and powerful people walk in and out of the doors.

“Now this is what pleasure is,” Wicked quips, bouncing her eyebrows at me. I furrow my brows, ignoring her statement.

The city of Croydon is nothing I haven't seen before. I've come here twice. The first time was to kill a corrupt pope. He will NOT be missed. It's disgusting how many people allow someone to stay in control, even knowing the sick shit they do. And the second time was to get rid of a lady who sold illegal bombs. They almost landed in the hands of someone very, very dangerous. After that, we killedhimtoo.

Now I'm here for an entirely different reason with a completely different group.

We stop in the lobby and check into our rooms; as we make our way up, Bedford and Wicked trail behind.

“I am so ready to lay down on a bed,” she says, stopping at a door that matches the light-brown colors of the hotel.

“You slept the whole time on the plane.” I glance at the numbers posted on the walls to find my room. We are all on the same floor and in opposite rows. Wicked Mal is across from me adjoined with Boone’s room and mine is adjoined with?—.

“Looks like you’re next to Ro.” Mal snickers, opening her double door to her room.

My throat squeezes like an orange getting juiced. I really can’t avoid him now. Why does he bother having me in such close vicinity? And is he here right now?

“Toddle Loo girls,” Bedford sings, strolling into the room adjoined on the other end of Boone’s room.

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I tuck my hair behind my ear and open my door. Once I'm inside, I take in the luxurious elements of the room. The ivory color painting the wall and rugged textures. It's warm and inviting. Of course, it's larger than life, much more spacious than the room I am in back at Ronan's, but nowhere near the same comfort level.

I hop in the shower, washing away the dirt and muck from all the different elements and weather my body experienced. I stay under the stream of the water for at least thirty minutes. Every last minute of it was spent remembering the way Ronan kissed me and how he looked after he tossed me away.

Get over it.

Once I finished showering, I opened up my bag and my red thongs sat there on full display, like it was calling for me to take them. The dried cum smeared all over the pocket of the vaginal part. My throat tightens as I narrow in on it. I look around, my skin pricking with filthy goosebumps. My heart thumps as I go back and forth with myself. I keep staring until I'm grabbing my underwear, stretching it and sliding it up my thighs and over my bare ass. I position my panties so the place where the dead semen rubs under my pussy lips. I sigh, satisfied with it and throw on some clothes, a black thick sweater paired with some shorts. The weather out here almost resembles Hollow City's weather. Chilly with a deep blue hue in the sky.

I grab my phone and sit on the room's balcony. The view faces the back of the hotel. I checked my phone, and, to my surprise, I received a text message.

No one

Forgot about me already. Just use and abuse me, why don't you? P.S. how's the camper doing?

Oliver. I can't help the smile forming on my lips. I need to consider adding him as a contact and changing his number to his actual name. But I don't respond; I'll wait until I touch back down in Hollow City.

I place my phone face down and stare out into the scenery. There are cars and red double-decker buses cruising the roads; there's an attractive sight of tall buildings, some brick structured mortars, and people strolling the streets, passing a lake. A glowing bridge with lights follows the waterline. The lake's waves shimmer from the glow of the half-moon bouncing off the water's surface, and it twinkles like stardust, brightening the night sky.

A knock sounds on my door. My heart tumbles to the floor; the thought of Ronan being at the door makes my skin prick with goosebumps. I naturally fluff my hair, walking toward the beating knock.

I swing it open, only for it to be Wicked Mal.

My shoulders slump.

Of course, I wasn't looking for it to be Ronan.

## Chapter 38

### Venom

Wicked Mal stands outside my door with her hands raised, two glasses in one hand and a bottle of something brown in the other and a white plastic bag with two Styrofoam plates.

“Tequila with fish and chips?” She smiles. A genuine smile. Unlike the wicked one she normally wears, this one softens her features. “And before you go saying anything, the guys already left to check everything out. So, we are free until then.”

He already left? When was he even here? I’m not sure why that bothers me.

I chew on the side of my lip, my stomach rumbling at the food; an irritation settles like a pit in my stomach. I don’t see why I’m bothered. He’s only reciprocating exactly what I want.

Or maybe because we were supposed to be going together to scope out Victor’s place before the ball started.

“Come on.” Wicked taunts me by shaking the bottle and rocking her hips like she is doing the samba.

I brush away the uncomfortable bubbles surfacing below. “Okay, but only because you’re practically begging me.”

She chuckles, brushing past me. “Oh, please. You know you wanted some company in this big ass room.” She walks to the open balcony doors, sets the bottle down with the food, and then pours the glasses to the brim.

“Shit, are you trying to give me alcohol poisoning?” I ask incredulously as I sit down, my face scrunching at the liquor nearly leaking off the rim.

“Oh stop. You can’t handle it, Cinderella?”

“I can handle a lot of things, but the one thing I will never do is purposely destroy my liver.”

“One night won’t hurt you.” She smiles while lifting the shot glass. I tip my eyes to the gleaming star in the sky. I’ve never been prone to giving into peer pressure. But fuck it. I take the glass and tap it against Mal’s; some liquid drips down my fingers. Then I toss the tequila back. My face scrunches like I bit into a lemon as the burn sets in my throat, eventually settling in my chest.

“Gosh, you’re a horrible bartender. Where’s the lemon to cover this disaster?” I smack my chest; my mouth is numb and watering. Drool pools out of my mouth. Mal only looks at me, laughing harder than I ever heard. Then I burst out with laughter. The sudden notion shocks me.

“Want another one?”

I chuckle some more. “Yes.” I drag the cup back to her. We clink again and take the shot. It burns, although not as bad as the first one. My body settles into the chair, relaxation taking over. She pulls out the food trays, and it reminds me of how hungry I am.

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“Hope you like fish and chip,” she says, pushing the plate over.

“Anything would do. I’m starving.” I take the lid off the plate. “Thank you for the food.”

“It’s no problem, we need something to soak up all of this.” She taps the bottle.

Okay, I am not drinking that whole thing.

I dig in, biting into the perfectly battered fish. God, fuck; that’s delicious.

Wicked Mal digs into her fries. “This is nice,” she says, chewing, but her eyes never leave the flickering stars above. “Being around men for nearly ten years becomes a bit sad. It’s nice to fight beside another badass bitch like me.” She looks over with a mischievous smile, flipping her ponytail back.

I swallow the meat, my body becoming light and fuzzy. It’s delicious. “How long have you known Ronan?”

She releases a breath. “Since I was fifteen.”

“Wow, it’s been a long time.”

She nods, pouring more liquor into her glass while biting her fish. Bedford was not wrong.

But I scoot mine over. Also reminding myself of a limit. I still have a mission to

fulfill tomorrow.

I chew my food, and we toss back our drinks. She howls out an agonizing groan. Her face scrunches. “Fuck that’s deadly.” She chuckles before relaxing again. “I wanted to say I’m sorry about your brother.”

I look at the glass in my hands; pain rubs along my heart.

“I know it was so long ago, but no one really gets over someone they loved the most.”

I glance over at her, my mouth more numb than ever. “Thank you.”

She flicks a French fry on the plate like she is contemplating if she should say what’s on her mind. “My parents died right in front of me.” Her voice is low.

My eyes drop, sorrow rising in my gut. “I’m so sorry. I couldn’t imagine how hard that must have been.”

She nods slowly, eyes searching the distant buildings. “Shot right in the head. After the men were paid their money. They still killed her.” Mal’s eyes slowly close, pain surfacing over them. It only makes me feel like shit. Time replays back in my head. That’s why she reacted the way she did, why Ronan gave me a look of death at that moment. I asked her if her parents taught her manners.

I had triggered her.

Someone murdered them in cold blood.

I find myself reaching over to touch her shoulder gently. “I’m sorry I didn’t know.”



“How could you? We didn’t know each other.”

I nod softly. “You’re right, but I still shouldn’t have said that. It was wrong. I’m sorry.” And I mean it.

She wipes a tear that escaped. “It’s okay. I told Ronan I would chop your head off, then shoot you if you coughed the wrong way. So, I guess we’re even.” She looks at me with a serious face. And I stare back. Before we both burst out again with a loud laugh, my chest hurts from all the laughter. I slap my hand on my bare leg and her hand slams on the table.

Yes, I’m drunk. I laugh some more, letting out all my pinned up frustration.

“That’s brutal as fuck,” I say, pushing my bang to the side.

An invisible, weight lifting from me.

Once Wicked leaves, I’m left alone in my room. My body hits the plush covers like I’m laying directly on a bed of feathers. My skin tingles and my body rings.

This is the most freeing I’ve ever felt, and all it took was throwing back a couple of shots and eating dinner with WickedMal, of all people. She’s not so bad. Behind the malicious glare, there’s a little girl. Lost and somber. Just like me.

I stretch out my arms, arching my back. My clothes give off an itchy, irritable scratch, so I strip each garment off one by one until I’m only in my thongs. The balcony doors are parted, bringing in a gentle breeze and soft white noise. My thoughts divert to Ronan.

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I wonder if he's okay. I never cared before, so why now?

I just do, that's normal!

I can't take my mind off the way he touched me, how he kissed me. The softness of his mouth and the moan that poured from me. Every dry thrust he returned, hitting my sensitive spot I need touched again, badly. I know it's been weeks since that moment, but it still invades my mind, staining it like a tattoo.

A throbbing sensation tingles on my clit. My nipples harden, thinking of when he lifted me, grinding into my pussy with his thick cock.

My fingers glide up my waist, the tiny stimulation heightened from the liquid resting in my streams. I land on my nipple, my breath becoming harder. I give it a pinch; another spark shoots through my body, landing right below my thighs. I spread my legs, dipping my fingers into the panties and digging the fabric into my hot wetness. Letting his old semen coat my pussy. This is as close to him as I'm going to get.

I let out a moan, my back arching off the bed. I imagine Ronan kissing me, then tearing off my shirt and diving to my breasts, licking and sucking my hard nipples. I fuck myself slowly, rubbing my pussy and making sure my panties stay in contact. Happy with the lather of his cum and my arousal, I push the panties to the side and dip my fingers in, my head presses into the plush pillows as my moans pours out into the air. I guess for one night I can let down the walls.

And think about the only man that can ever make me feel this way.

## Chapter 39

Ronan

Sweet sounds; melody nights

I'm exhausted. Lucky for us, we got shit done. We arrived at the location; it's smack in the center of where all the traffic is during rush hour. It's wide and abnormally tall for a two-story building. Grand steps lead to the entrance.

Since we got there at a late hour, no one was outside; the busy street alongside the building is filled with vehicles honking. The goal was to look for cameras, find the back entrance, and other exits—just in case. We couldn't break in because Bedford informed us that the building is heavily outfitted with security monitors. One malfunction in the alarm and the entire building sounds off an excruciating siren, signaling anyone in at least a ten-mile radius.

Slick fucker.

But we placed the eye recognition devices on the back and front entrances and any section of the building that had a door. It'll automatically notify our devices when it identifies Victor.

We got it done, but my mind was elsewhere.

On her.

It's been a long a fucking week and few days not seeing her. Living with her means nothing because she's still never there. And when she is there, that door stays shut.

I've refrained from knocking on her door and interrupting her hiding, despite the

temptation. I couldn't. The temptation will be too strong for me.

Even though I want her. Every part, every inch, every spec. I want it. My body craves it, but the insecurities outweigh the need, and it's full of my own wretched limitations.

But if I try, maybe I can become wanted inside and out if I allow it.

It's been a busy week; students are working hard to prepare for Stygian day in a couple of months. It's for the Rebels that move up a level and become a Riot. I conduct the training along with Mal, Boone, Chris, Red, a few other combat teachers, and the extraction members that teach a certain skill.

I stroll into the hotel room, relieved to rest, but not for long. The thrill of tomorrow's events excites me too much. The image of his face paling as I shove my gun so far into his chest cavity is a joy similar to getting a Christmas gift.

I keep the lights in the room dimmed just the way I like it. I remove my coat and then walk to the bathroom to wash my hands before drying them.

I stop in my tracks, my ears bouncing. The sound of my boots hitting the hardwood fills the air, but I hear a soft sound singing from the other side of the wall. My heart skips a beat as I walk closer to it. The closer I get to the sensual melody, the more I understand it's not just any sound. It's a sound I've heard before. The one that vibrated against my mouth as I nearly ruined her on the wall. The one I dream of.

My heart thumps against my rib cage, my head throbbing to get closer. To see it.

What if she's fucking another man over there? An unsettling ping shoots through my heart at the thought. I'm not sure how I'll react.

I might just kill him.

No. Who am I kidding? I will kill him. I will end his fucking life, tearing him limb from artery, bone from muscle. I'll force her to watch so she'll know to never let anyone else touch her again. I'll lose all sense of reality and will do what I vowed not to do. All for her, and I'll do it if that means not having some other thing touch her.

I continue, preparing myself for anything. Our doors are adjacent, so one pull, and I'm right in her room.

Placing my hand on the knob and giving it a twist. I peek open, instantly getting hit with a light gust of chilled air.

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And there she is. The door is barely open. But I can see all of her. The bed is only a few feet from the door. Eyes closed, curly hair sprawled all around her, back arched, and her body beautiful with only red thongs on. The moonlight from the open patio door shining in on her succulent frame. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to understand that she is fucking herself.

My body vibrates, causing my brain to go into overdrive. I begin salivating right fucking there; the sight of her pleasuring herself is so tortuous my dick hardens instantly.

I tilt my head in a trance, my eyes skating up her long, toned legs and the way they spread apart how each thrust inside herself sends another moan into the air, mixing with the breeze. Even with the wind blowing through the room, sweat stains her skin, glistening off her body like diamonds under the light.

She glides her other fingers up her belly; the muscles flexing from her plunging in and out of her slick pussy. It's so wet; the slippery sounds emanate out, echoing right into my ear.

My heart pounds harder; narrowing my gaze, she rubs her nipple before pinching them, and sending another wave of moans into the air. The sweetest sound I've ever heard. I look closer, making out the thongs she's wearing, my heart slams into my chest again. I can never forget them. Those are the underwear I came all over. She's...wearing them.

Fuck. My little snake is so fucking sexy, so damn dirty that my body can't take it.

A good man would leave. A good guy would respect her privacy and let her fuck herself without prying eyes.

But I'm not a good guy.

Instead, my cock presses so hard against my zipper that I can't take the pressure anymore. I keep the door ajar, enough to get a hefty view of the beauty before me. I unzip the jagged zipper slowly, not causing any sound.

I dip inside to shift my boxers and my dick falls free, the relief more fulfilling than normal. Instead of thrusting her finger into her wet folds, she pushes the hem back over to cover her pussy and begins rubbing her clit. Fucking hell. My being vibrates painfully, I'm fighting my self-control to not stroll inside and replace that old cum with newer, much fresher cum.

I can imagine how swollen it is, how delicious she tastes. I wet my hand from the drool that formed in my mouth, then I grip my length. An electric shutter shoots right up my core. It's hot and pulsing in my hand, the veins thick, my balls full. I don't tip my head back from the sensation swarming in me because I can't take my eyes off her. I want to take in every last part of her and engrave it in my head like a steel rod burning the flesh.

Her speed picks up, rubbing vigorously. I do the same, jerking my hips, my thickness pushing into my hand. My chest tightens with the harsh beats of my heart, my vision tunnels—only her in frame. My view becomes a lens, only zoomed on the thing that matters the most.

She bites down on her lower lip, her legs becoming shaky, her breath scattering. That only makes me squeeze myself harder and fuck my hand with force as I picture myself being the one pleasing her. Replacing her dainty hands with my tongue. Tasting all her sweetness, sucking and ravishing every last drop of her orgasm.

I wonder what she's thinking about while giving herself this pleasure.

Is she imagining me fucking her so deep that I make her eyes roll back? Or of another asshole? Not that it matters because I'm the one watching her devour herself; she's the one fucking herself with my cum. Mine. And I'm the one witnessing something so magnificent that my mind is swirling.

My heart picks up its pace, beating faster and faster, my movements become jerkier. The pounding in my head sends electricity down my spine and into my balls.

Come with me, my sweet venom.

And from there, with one last rub and pinch, her plump lips part, and her legs spread even wider. A throaty moan fills the room, her head tossing to the other side as her orgasm rocks her body. Just when I thought that was enough for me to cum, she moans again as the shocks take over her body.

"Ronan," she moans out with a soft whisper, her thighs clenching together to contain the sensations streaming through her.

My jaw slacks as my knees go weak, and my chest squeezes tight enough to wheeze for air. Before I know it, with one last pump, my orgasm erupts through me like a volcano. Shooting its hot liquid and spilling all into my hand. I'm buzzing as I keep pumping the cream from my seed, lathering all over my cock. My ass muscles are tensing. It's so strong my body is shaking, and I have to grit my teeth to contain my own groans from escaping.

Before she sees me, I close the door with a shaky hand; the sound giving a soft click. I shut my eyes, my brain still unraveling what took place. My heartbeat slows, my vision resurfaces, but the fulfillment is a high I've never experienced.

My little venomous snake was thinking of me, and she was fucking herself as if she



wished those panties were my cock. Which only confirms everything I tried hard to deny. The message is clear as day.

She wants me. And I plan to have her.

TO BE CONTINUED