



Thrown to the Wolves

Author: *Persephone Black*

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

Description: Lyssa can't resist a damsel in distress...but she'll wish she resisted this one.

The ferocious Styx Syndicate enforcer and trainer known as "the Wolf" has always been the hunter, never the hunted. So when Lyssa sees the gorgeous Scarlett getting harassed by thugs in a dive bar she's visiting for intel, she jumps straight into protective mode.

But Lyssa soon discovers that not every damsel needs saving.

And sometimes, wolves wear sheep's clothing...

Lyssa thought she'd buried her past, but now it's rushing back with a vengeance—literally. Scarlett has a score to settle, and she's not going to back off.

The Styx Syndicate wants Scarlett dead. But Lyssa sees potential in her nemesis—and maybe something more. Something Lyssa has never allowed herself to want.

Something forbidden.

Can Lyssa persuade the Syndicate to give an enemy a chance? Or will she follow orders like she always has, and destroy the one person who makes her feel like something more than a monster?

Total Pages (Source): 71

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

CHAPTER 1

Lyssa

I don't know what the hell Yuri was doing in a place like this, but I can't kill him for it, since he's dead already.

I approach the rundown bar, boots crunching on the broken bottles and debris littering the sidewalk, and try to put myself in Yuri's shoes instead. There are better places to drink, and worse, but this place in particular is deep in enemy territory—not the kind of place Syndicate members usually venture without a damn good reason.

I figured my hunt for the assassin targeting our members was reason enough, so here I am in this dark part of the city where the shadows run long and deep, and the Sokolov bratva keep control with a vicious approach that—secretly—I admire.

It took a while to dig up the information that Yuri was drinking here the night he was killed, because he was found two blocks over in a parking lot. But eventually, I threatened the right people just enough to get the intel I needed.

And now here I am. The neon sign over the bar buzzes with a sickly glow, barely illuminating the cracked concrete stoop. The sign is just a bottle, and it's the kind of bar that doesn't even have a name. Just "the Sokolov place," according to the information I punched out of my sources.

I pause, scanning the area before I make my next move. Is someone watching me? I'm getting that weird feeling I get just before action happens.

Well, let them watch. When they're ready for action, I will be, too.

I push open the door. Inside, the air is predictably thick with smoke and the stench of stale beer. A few rough-looking regulars nurse their drinks, heads down like beaten dogs. But over at the bar, a group of loudmouths attract my attention.

A group of them. Crowding around a lone woman who's sitting there frozen like a deer in headlights. The leering gazes and crude gestures make their intentions clear even from across the room.

Well, that won't do.

As I stroll towards them, the idiots finally notice me. Recognition flickers in their bleary eyes, and they straighten—rats catching the scent of a predator. It's almost comical how quickly their bravado withers under my stare.

The woman looks over as well, her eyes haunted and fearful under thick bangs as they meet mine. Hazel eyes, I decide as I get closer. A soft green-brown that reminds me of the shadows in the forests that grow around the estate at Elysium. There's a delicate vulnerability about her that is completely out of place in this cesspit. Her soft curves are accentuated rather than hidden by her tight jeans and close-cut fluffy red sweater, and she pushes her cascading dark chestnut hair over one shoulder as I stop and look down at her.

She'd be a dream, if not for the wariness in her face.

"Fuck off," I tell the men.

They fuck off.

I lean against the bar, letting my gaze sweep down that pale throat and back up to

those fascinating eyes again. “You lost, sweetheart?”

She lifts her chin, defiance sparking. “No more than you, I guess.”

I grin at her spirit. She would’ve given those chucklefucks a run for their money, I bet. “I’m Lyssa.”

After a long, cautious moment, she offers, “Scarlett.” It comes out slow, sibilant, and I keep watching her lips long after she’s said it, until her tongue darts out along that lush lower lip.

Then I slide onto a barstool next to her. “Not to be a walking cliché, but what’s a woman like you doing in a place like this?” I ask her as the bartender approaches.

Scarlett’s gaze darts away, almost shyly. “I was supposed to meet someone here. A date, I guess.” She lets out a rueful laugh. “But I’m starting to think I got catfished. And now I—well, I’m a little nervous to walk back to my car alone.”

Yeah. I bet she is.

“Whaddyawan?” the bartender snaps, all one word.

What I want is a word with him—about Yuri, about what went down the last night Yuri was here, the last night of his life...

But Scarlett is sitting here like a cornered fox surrounded by hounds. As I look around, every eye is making its way toward her again, skating away when they see me glancing their way. Rabid dogs, every one of them, even the ones pretending to mind their own business. And once I’m gone, they’ll tear her apart. A pang of protectiveness stirs in my chest.

It wouldn't take but a minute to walk her back to her car, then come back here to ask my questions. And a wolf can certainly handle a few dogs.

I turn my back on the bartender and lean closer to Scarlet, taking in the soft, anxious crease of her brow. "You're not from around here, are you?"

She shakes her head, silky hair swaying around her cleavage tantalizingly. "I live uptown. I've never really...been to this part of the city before."

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

My decision's been made for me. I can't leave her here like this, and who knows if the bartender will start a fight once I start poking around. I jerk my head towards the door. "C'mon, let's get you out of this shithole. If your car hasn't been jacked yet."

Surprise flits across her face before melting into a grateful smile that does something stupidly fluttery to my insides. She puts a hand on my arm. "I'd appreciate that, Lyssa."

I tuck her arm around mine, just to make it clear who she's with, and we make our way to the exit, a few last drunken catcalls and jeers fading behind us. I'll have a word with those gentlemen once I head back. But for now, the night air is a welcome reprieve from the bar's stifling atmosphere.

"So, Scarlett..." I give her a sidelong glance, taking in her profile. "What possessed you to willingly meet some strange guy in that pit?"

"Uh, a strange woman, actually," she tells me.

This Scarlett just gets more and more interesting.

A wry chuckle leaves her tempting lips. "And honestly? I was bored of all the clubs uptown. Thought I'd try something...adventurous. I met her on an app. I mean, if she even exists."

"And you agreed to meet her here?" This chick must be naive with a capital dumb. But maybe that's not fair. "Let me guess—you're a hopeless romantic who likes the idea of reforming a bad girl."

Her ears flush an adorable shade of pink, visible even in the low yellow streetlights. “Look, I get that it was a stupid idea,” she admits with a self-deprecating grin. “This adventure didn’t exactly deliver the grand romance I was hoping for.”

“Well, the night is young,” I tell her, unable to resist flirting.

It’s been a while.

I don’t like to bed the same woman twice—for their protection, I tell myself. No point making some innocent lesbian a target—and even in a city the size of Chicago, the lesbian community is a little insular, so while I have a rep as a player, I also have a rep as amazing in bed.

I do okay, is what I’m saying.

But this girl... There’s something about her. Something I can’t quite put my finger on.

Our walk is unhurried, lending a sense of lightheartedness I wouldn’t normally allow myself. But I don’t miss the way Scarlett’s gaze darts about, studying her surroundings with a wariness that belies her soft demeanor.

“You’re okay with me,” I tell her, pulling her a little closer so that her shoulder is flush with mine. “I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

We reach a battered sedan sooner than I’d like, and Scarlett turns to face me. “Well, this is me.” She smiles shyly. “Thanks for walking with me. But now I’m worried about you. Can I drive you somewhere?”

I snort. “You don’t need to worry about me, honey.” No, it’s those assholes back at the bar who should be worried. I plan to go back there not just to interrogate the

bartender about Yuri, but to remind the customers of their manners.

But I take an extra moment to enjoy the way Scarlett's nose turns up at the end, a pretty, perky little swoop that makes me wonder if her tits do the same thing.

Her smile has changed into something closer to a hopeful smirk. "Hey, do you wanna maybe go somewhere else and get a dr?—"

The words die on her lips as figures detach from the shadows, surrounding us with eerie silence.

Shit. I'm brought right back down to earth—back down to Sokolov territory, to be exact.

My hand strays to the gun holstered invisibly at my back as the men close in, their grins all teeth, except where they're missing a few. Five—no, six of them.

Eh. That's decent odds, even with Scarlett to protect.

"Well, well, well..." A thick Russian accent grates against my ears. "If it isn't the Big Bad Wolf."

The Sokolovs have had an issue with the Syndicate for a while now. Some little misunderstanding over a debt they didn't pay, and a few of their guys I killed as a helpful reminder that it was overdue. I suppose it's no surprise they're looking to even up.

Scarlett tenses beside me, and I slide in front of her, pushing her behind me where she'll be safest. But I keep my hand on her hip, because some primal part of me wants to keep her close, feel her warmth and softness pressed up against my back.

“Don’t suppose you mutts would be willing to call it a night?” I drawl. “Places to be, and all that.”

The brute who spoke lets out a grating chuckle. “Not a chance, darogaya.” He pulls out a knife.

Knives are quiet, at least. The last thing Hadria would want is police attention from a gunfight. Not right now. Things are tricky in Chicago right now, as she’s endlessly reminding us all. So I let the hand behind me slide from gun to blade and take it out, twisting it in the light, just so this asshole can see I’m not going to walk away.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

“At least let the girl leave.” I twirl the knife in my fingers and use it to point over my shoulder at Scarlett.

The guy spits on the ground. Delightful. “We have a score to settle,” he says. “For Yuri.”

“Yuri? He wasn’t one of yours.”

“He was my cousin,” the guy growls. “No matter if he ran with you honorless bitches in the Syndicate.”

Well, that’s just rude.

Still, it explains at last what Yuri was doing in this part of town the night he died. He did have Sokolov relatives, I remember now—we’d asked him about that when he wanted to join the Syndicate. The bratva were on the way out, he’d said at the time. He had no interest in drug running, and the Syndicate suited him better.

He’d been a popular member, too. I know Aurora, whose training group he was in, had liked him very much. And Aurora, that little Suzy Sunshine, has changed things for all of us in the Syndicate, brought us all closer, somehow.

So Yuri might have been this fucker’s cousin, but he’d been my brother.

We stare each other down. Behind me, I hear Scarlett’s breath hitch, her body vibrating with nerves against my back. Poor thing has no idea what she’s stumbled into.

“I didn’t kill Yuri, you morons,” I say. “In fact, that’s why?—”

It happens in a blur, like it always does—a storm of flashing steel, grunts, and the solid thunk of a blade sliding through flesh and muscle. My world narrows to the one dance ingrained in my very being—move, strike, counter, survive.

Always survive.

I lose myself in it, the rhythm of combat as natural to me as breathing. And joy thrills through me as I unleash every ounce of pent-up rage and frustration into each blow, each parry.

Gotta enjoy your work, right? And these are the only times I really feel alive.

But a panicked shriek behind me reminds me that there’s an audience to this particular show, and I switch at once to a more defensive tactic—a non-lethal one.

The last thing I need is this Scarlett pointing me out in a line-up. Hadria would be pissed if she had to shell out any more bribes, especially after the fortune she spent covering up the attack on Elysium.

The last of the Sokolovs hits the pavement with a meaty thud, unconscious, but still breathing. I pivot on the ball of my foot, fists raised, ready in case one of them has dragged himself up from the ground to try again. But the only sound is Scarlett’s ragged breathing as she crouches against the side of her car.

When I take a step toward her, she flinches. And those eyes, those lovely forest pools, are wide and afraid.

Damn it. I don’t think I’m getting laid tonight after all.

CHAPTER 2

Lyssa

I put up my hands in a calming gesture and stop right where I am. “Hey.” My voice is low, gentler than normal. “You hurt?”

For a beat, I see naked fear flickering in Scarlett’s face, before she seems to clock I don’t plan to hurt her myself.

“I-I’m fine.” Her gaze drifts around the unconscious Sokolovs strewn about. “Just...shaken up, I guess. Who—who’s Yuri?”

Not the question I expected. She’s clearly rattled, but there’s a curious contradiction in her body language and her actual language. No what the fuck, no stay the hell away from me, no screaming for help. It suggests a core of steel beneath the big eyes and the soft hair. But I file that observation away for later as I reach out a hand to help her to her feet.

“There you go. Good as new,” I say, and I sound like an idiot, but I’m not all that great at giving comfort.

She’s still holding my hand when she gasps and tugs me into a pool of light from the one working streetlight, inspecting the bleeding gash along my upper arm with a grimace. “You’re hurt!”

The cut’s not deep enough to be life-threatening, but I think I’d like a tetanus shot or something, given the shitty state of the Sokolov knives. God knows what bacteria were crawling all over their blades. I pull away a little, but Scarlett grabs me back. “That needs to be properly cleaned and bandaged,” she murmurs, almost to herself. She looks into my face. “I can help.”

A derisive snort escapes me before I can bite it back. “No offense, sweetheart, but the last thing I need is you poking around an open wound.”

Those captivating eyes narrow, jaw setting in a stubborn line I find oddly endearing. “I’m a third-year medical student. I may not be a brain surgeon, but I know my way around stitches and wound care.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

Well, isn't that another interesting little tidbit? I study Scarlett with newfound curiosity, taking in the resolute set of her mouth. She's determined, I'll give her that much.

What I don't tell her is that usually I'd call on one of the Syndicate medics to look me over, but lately it's been real tough getting hold of any of them. They're all too busy or out of town or retired. It's getting to be a problem—but we have bigger ones to deal with at the moment. The assassin, for one.

Hadria Imperioli's impending wedding to Aurora Verderosa, for another.

Yeah. It'd be a pain in the ass to find a medic to patch me up, and besides, Scarlett is sexy as hell. She's the one good thing about tonight. So with a casual shrug, I say, "Fine, have it your way. You can wound-care me, but we're going to have to take this little party elsewhere. I don't want to be hanging around when these guys come to."

"We can go to my place," she suggests, and goddamn if that doesn't just sound like the best offer I've heard in a long, long time.

"Okay," I say with a grin. "Let's go."

The drive to Scarlett's apartment passes in shadowed streets and furtive glances. We're both quiet, and she asks no more questions. Not about Yuri, not about the bratva.

And not about me.

Not about who I am, where I learned to fight like that, and what problems I might have caused to make the Sokolovs think I killed someone called Yuri. But I like that she's not curious.

It'll make things so much easier when I sneak out in the early hours.

I spend most of the trip sneaking sidelong peeks at her, because she's just that pretty. From this angle, I can make out the gentle curve of her cheek, a few wispy strands of dark hair framing her features. Despite the chaos a few minutes ago, there's a tranquility about her, hands loose on the steering wheel, shoulders relaxed.

It's like watching two completely different women—the frightened doe from the alley and this unruffled creature. Terrified one moment, unflappable the next.

My musings are interrupted as we finally pull up to a modest apartment complex. I follow Scarlett up a cramped stairwell and into her flat.

At first glance, the place is unremarkable—a cozy living area opening into a small kitchenette, a hallway presumably leading to the bedroom and bath. Scattered textbooks and notes litter the coffee table next to an old, battered laptop, bolstering her claims of being a student.

But it's the little things that snag my attention. No photos, for one thing. No TV, either. “You must be real busy with your studies,” I say.

She shoots me a look that I can't interpret. “I guess it's one of the reasons I got into that situation tonight,” she says. “All I've been doing lately is studying. I needed a break. Felt a little...reckless.”

I give a dark grin. “You got your adventure, in the end.”

She doesn't respond to that, bustling about gathering supplies to tend to my arm.
"Take a seat over there."

I pull off my jacket and top but keep on my undershirt, and settle onto the worn sofa at Scarlett's request. She kneels beside me, inspecting the wound with a clinical detachment.

I can smell her hair products, whatever they are. Flowers and then something richer, sharper, almost pine-like, with a darker undercurrent. She smells like...

Like a forest.

Despite the pain in my arm, I find myself hyper-aware of every point where our bodies come in contact. And I can see down her top, see a lacy bra the same color as her name, lovingly offering up those luscious curves...

So while Scarlett fixes me up, I let my eyes wander over her—not just her body, but over the alluring lines of her face, too, the delicate swell of her full lips up to the sharp angles of her cheekbones. There's a quiet fierceness about her that draws me in, and when she glances up at me, I feel a smolder low in my gut.

"I need to give you a few stitches," she says.

"Nah." I try to pull my arm away, but her fingers tighten on it.

"The Big Bad Wolf is scared of a little needle?"

"No, but the cut's not that deep."

"I'll be the judge of that," she tells me, and pulls out a sterile-packed medical needle. She sure has all the props. "Why did they call you that?" she asks casually, opening

up the packet. “The Big Bad Wolf, I mean.”

I give a one-shouldered shrug. “Don’t stick me with anesthetic,” I warn, as she picks up a fucking syringe. “I don’t need it.”

“Fine.” She puts the syringe down and grabs my arm again, making me jerk out of habit. People don’t usually come in close physical contact with me unless they can’t help it—or unless I’m fucking them or training them. “Hold still,” she scolds, and then points with a finger. “Look over there while I do this and stay still.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

“I don’t need to look away.”

For the first time, her confidence wavers. “It’s...been a minute since I’ve done this. I need to concentrate, and I can’t if you’re staring at me like that.”

At least she didn’t call me out for staring down her top, I guess. I roll my eyes hard, so she knows how dumb I think it is, and then I turn my head away, taking in the apartment again. And I try not to wince as the needle enters my skin.

“There, all done,” she says a second later. I turn back to find Scarlett studying me with an intense scrutiny, searching, weighing. My skin prickles beneath her stare, the urge to squirm almost overpowering.

“You done?” I say, looking down to where she still holds my arms. She takes her hand away slowly.

“Um. There are towels in the bathroom if you’d like to shower. You have...blood in your hair.”

I pull my blonde ponytail around to check. She’s right, and I’d rather not walk around with sticky hair. I can’t resist leaning in a fraction closer. “You got a little blood on you there, too,” I say, nodding at a smear on her wrist, below where the gloves end. “Feel like joining me?”

Not subtle, I know, but subtlety has never been my strong suit. Especially not where beautiful women are involved.

For a heartbeat, something dances across Scarlett's face. Surprise, maybe. Followed by resolve. Then a sly smile curves those full lips, and the gentle forest pools of her eyes turn even deeper and darker.

"You know what? I could use a shower."

I stand, and she does too, stepping well inside my personal space. The scent of her surrounds me, her eyes inviting me in, and I raise an eyebrow at her unexpected boldness. This isn't the cowering, anxious woman from the alleyway. This Scarlett is all sin and temptation and challenge.

And I'll be damned if I'm not enthralled.

"Then let's get you out of all those dirty clothes," I tell her.

The smile slides into a smirk again, and she pulls off her top, slow and seductive, until she's standing there in that pretty lace demi-bra, the tops of her breasts quivering as they threaten to spill out.

"Come on," she says, brushing past me and heading out of the room. "Time to get wet."

CHAPTER 3

Lyssa

In the bathroom (which is tiny and stuck in the '80s), Scarlett turns on the shower, the spray cascading in a warm rush into the minuscule bathtub below. She meets my gaze, hazel eyes dark again with an emotion I can't quite—

Before I can process it, she shimmies out of her tight jeans, and when she turns to set

them, folded, on the side of the wash basin, I see that she's wearing a thong that matches her bra.

God help me. I can die happy tonight.

She reaches behind to unhook the bra and pauses, glancing over her shoulder at me. "Are you going to join me, or do I have to wash off the grime alone?"

Her voice is a low purr. Where the hell did that come from? Must be this reckless side she's so eager to indulge tonight. As I rip off the rest of my clothes, I feel her watching me still, tracing the contours of my body.

"You can get that wet," she says, nodding at the patch on my arm. "It's waterproof. But don't take it off for at least seven days. Okay?"

I would literally agree to anything at all she suggested right now. "Sure."

Steam swirls around us as we step gingerly into the shower, the water running over her body in the same way I'd like to run my hands over her. Her hair darkens to black, and rivulets of water trickle off the tight peaks of her nipples.

Oh, I am a very lucky woman tonight, Sokolovs notwithstanding.

Scarlett moves closer, her eyes locked on mine. "I'm glad you let me take care of you," she murmurs, reaching up to trace the edge of the patch on my arm. "Maybe you'll let me do a little more?"

She leans in and presses her lips to my shoulder, just above the cut. Slowly, she trails a path of kisses down my arm, avoiding the waterproof plaster, while her fingers feather over my hip, teasing. Unable to resist any longer, I cup her face and pull her lips to mine in a kiss. She moans softly against my mouth, our bodies pressing

together, skin against slick skin, the water cascading over us nowhere near as hot as the furnace building between my legs.

When she pulls back, she seems almost...puzzled. I move in to kiss her again, but she avoids my mouth, teasing, looking up at me with a smirk from beneath wet, star-fish eyelashes.

“You want me to beg for your mouth?” I ask her.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

“Oh, you don’t have to beg.” And with that, she sinks to her knees, skimming her hands over my wet thighs for balance, and tips her face back up to see my reaction. “Can I?” she asks.

“Honey, you can do whatever you want.” I flatten my hands on the wall to brace myself, and then add, “I mean, whatever you want to do that is actually possible in this tiny fucking shower—ohh.”

She’s been spreading my pussy open while I’ve been talking, and her tongue is a damn delight from the second she lays it against me. She teases me in slow, wet circles around my clit, eyes never leaving mine, and then she laves right up and down, making every nerve in my cunt come alive.

“Good girl.” I take a handful of her wet, chestnut hair as she grins up at me and help her return to suckling my clit. My knees almost give out. “Yeah, right there—that’s it, right there?—”

Her response is muffled, but I think it was something along the lines of “Glad you approve.”

She keeps working her magic on me, licking and sucking, maneuvering a finger inside, then two. Her other hand slides up through the water and tugs hard at my nipple, sending electricity right through me. I’m already so fucking close—I’ve never needed release this badly in my life.

But she’s not going to give it to me that easy. No, Scarlett seems determined to edge me into insanity.

And I'm pretty determined to let her.

My head falls back against the wall as her tongue dances, her fingers finding a regular rhythm inside me. Her hair is soft and slick in my palm as I push her face gently into me. "Come on, honey," I pant down at her. "Eat up."

Her tongue swipes side-to-side across my clit and she hums in response as my hips jerk, clearly enjoying her work. She works both of her hands now, one on my tits and one inside me, stroking experimentally until she finds exactly the right spot that makes me moan.

"Oh, fuck, that's it, just like that," I choke out, rocking against her mouth. I can feel my orgasm building deep inside me, inevitable and inexorable. But Scarlett likes to play dirty. She slows down again, teasing me mercilessly until I want to growl in frustration.

And then she pulls her mouth away from me altogether, looking up from between her soaked bangs. "Come on my face," she says, her voice dark and deep.

"I'd be fucking delighted to," I grit out from between clenched teeth, "as soon as you—yeah, that." She's put her mouth back to better use than talking, her tongue back on my clit again, swirling and flicking and sucking until I'm a mindless tangle of nerves, reduced to incoherent moans against the wet tiles. Her fingers delve back inside me and curl, hitting that spot like a bullseye, massaging until I think my legs are going to give out.

My climax builds and builds, threatening to crest any second, and she pushes in deep, her tongue relentless as she drives me right over the edge. I come with a hoarse cry, my back arching against the tiles as I contract around her fingers. Scarlett doesn't let up, maintaining the delicious torment until the waves of pleasure ebb, leaving me trembling and gasping for air.

“Get up here,” I gasp out, still pulsing with the aftershocks, and I yank her up, shove her back against the tiles, and stick my tongue in her mouth just to taste myself.

And now I need to stick my tongue elsewhere.

I want to taste the neatly-trimmed little pussy I’m petting, need it so bad I might just beg for it. But I don’t have to. I get as far as, “Can I—” and she’s wriggling around with pleasure, nodding hard, rubbing herself shamelessly against my thigh until I squat down and hold her hips firmly back against the shower wall. I pull one of her legs over my shoulder and look up at her gorgeous face.

“I’ll hold you up,” I tell her. “You just ride me, honey.” And then I dive in, encouraging her to do exactly what I just said, to slide that sweet, wet pussy all over my face. I suck her down, drowning in her along with the shower water, gripping her tight to make sure she’s safe as she rides out her pleasure.

I can feel her shuddering on top of me as she bucks and glides over my mouth. I get a finger between those bubble cheeks of her ass and experimentally massage her tight little asshole.

“Oh God,” she gasps, arching her back as she pants harder and harder, her body moving urgently against my face, her hands fisting in my hair. She comes hard, flooding my tongue, and she tastes exactly like she looks: lush and darkly sweet.

I eat on slowly for another minute while she comes down from the high, let her get her feet back under her, and then I stand up and kiss her again, breathe in her still-slowng gasps, enjoy the dazed look in those gorgeous eyes.

For a few blissful moments, we simply hold each other, breasts sliding against each other, the water raining down around us. But then, as the haze of pleasure begins to clear, something shifts in Scarlett’s expression as she turns her face to look into mine.

Something almost like...

Hate?

I blink and the expression is gone, if it was even there in the first place. But suddenly, I'm reminded of who I am—of the world I inhabit and the dangers that lurk around every corner.

Scarlett pulls back, her expression unreadable once more. "That was...nice," she says.

Nice?

I had her fucking world shaking.

But I just nod, still taken aback by that glimpse of something darker lurking beneath the surface. I wonder exactly what secrets lie behind those haunting eyes of hers.

We step out of the shower pretty soon after that, the intensity of our encounter still reverberating through my body, even if Scarlett's gone quiet.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

It's been too long for me, I guess. Things have been so busy at the Syndicate—but I should make time for my needs.

Not with Scarlett, obviously.

I'm a one-and-done girl, and this—whatever it is—has reached its natural end. I reach for the towel she indicates and pretend not to stare at her as she dries off with her own.

I pull on my clothes again and finally feel more like myself, my control returning—the familiar weight of my weapons, the scent of my leathers.

“Thank you for your assistance tonight,” I say as politely as I can. But I can't resist adding: “On more than one front.”

Scarlett arches an eyebrow, a ghost of a smile playing across her lips. “Believe me, the pleasure was all mine.”

I give a laugh. Even now, she still manages to catch me off guard with her boldness.

But I can't allow myself to be drawn back into her intoxicating orbit. We're done here, and it's time for me to leave. “I better get going.”

“You can stay. Have that drink I was about to ask you for before those guys jumped us.”

I pull back my hair and tie it up into my usual ponytail. Maybe I should get bangs,

like Scarlett. Even easier to keep my hair out of my eyes. I'd buzz it, but then I'd have to maintain it, and I can't be fucked.

She's still looking at me. Hopeful.

"This was...a singular event, Scarlett," I say diplomatically. "And by that I mean, it was great, but it's not gonna happen again. We had a good time, right?"

Her expression doesn't waver, but I see the barest flash of something in her eyes—disappointment? Anger? It's gone before I can decipher it, leaving me even more unsettled.

"Of course," she murmurs, her eyes dropping. "It was super fun."

She's getting a little sarcastic, now. So with a nod and a tight smile, I turn and head for the door. But as I reach for the handle, Scarlett's voice stops me in my tracks.

"When they called you 'Wolf'—you never told me, what did they mean?"

"You should know," I tell her over my shoulder, and then do a double take at the expression on her face. "I just ate you all up, didn't I?" I add. The joke seems to fall flat, so I just give an up-nod in farewell and head out.

Strange night.

Strange girl.

But she really was fascinating...

CHAPTER 4

Scarlett

I watch the Wolf saunter out of the apartment, that cocky swagger burning into my retinas. As soon as the door clicks shut behind her, and her footsteps fade, I head back into the bathroom, where my facade shatters.

“Stupid! Useless!” I slap my hands across my face, back and forth, punishing myself viciously for my pathetic weakness. Crimson blooms on the skin of my mirror self, a twisted parody of the aroused flush Lyssa had brought to my face just moments ago as she brought me to a mind-blowing orgasm.

Sex can be a weapon.

I thought I would be capable of wielding it against Lyssa. But she turned it against me.

How could I have faltered so disgracefully? I had the Wolf in my trap, naked and vulnerable. The scissors were there on the side of the sink where I could reach them from the shower, just waiting for me to drive them deep into her temple—into her neck—into her heart.

“Grandmother will punish you,” I hiss at my reflection, “and you deserve it.” I strike my cheek hard again. The bright sting dies too fast, though, and visions of Lyssa’s powerful, battle-scarred body rise up again.

She’s so beautiful and strong and terrifying. No wonder I fell to my knees for her...

I whirl around from the mirror, unable to even look at myself now. “You’re just a stupid, weak little girl playing at being a warrior.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

All that work down the drain. All that carefully gathered intel. All those Syndicate members killed in an effort to draw out the Wolf, and when I finally did...I fucked up.

Fucked her.

Sex can be a weapon.

Grandmother has told me that time and time again, urging me to use any and every tool I needed to in my hunt to kill the Wolf, but my body betrayed me.

My mind did, too. The second the Wolf kissed me, all the rage inside me just...

Died down.

And that's fatal. If I don't hold on to my anger, I won't ever get justice for Adam.

This cannot happen again. I've remade myself since Adam's murder, forged myself into a weapon in the hellfire of Grandmother's house. And it was all with one purpose: to deliver justice.

To kill the Wolf.

But my mind drifts treacherously back to the shower. The scorching press of her body against mine. The hungry intensity blazing in those unreadable brown eyes as she ran her hands over me, making me arch into her touch. The way we seemed to fit like pieces of a cosmic puzzle snapping perfectly into place...

I snatch up that pair of scissors I should have cut her open with in the shower, the cold steel biting into my palm as a vision takes lurid shape behind my eyes. It would have been so easy to end Lyssa's miserable existence for good. One neat stab and twist, one shocking gush of hot crimson...and the Wolf's life would have drained away with the shower water.

I replay the twisted fantasy in vivid detail, stoking my rage, making each iteration more depraved than the last. At its macabre climax, I imagine standing over Lyssa's lifeless husk as it gurgles its last ragged breath...

I gasp, jolted from the waking nightmare as a burning line blossoms across my palm. The metal scissors clatter to the floor as reality slaps me across the face this time, instead of my own hand.

What have I become?

The violence and the bloodshed...it's rotting me from the inside out, stripping away all those ideals and convictions I once held so dear. I was going to be a surgeon, working to ease suffering.

Not this twisted monster I've been warped into.

I hurl the scissors across the room. They crash into the tiled wall with a clatter, then fall to the floor.

I've come too far now. I can't go back, and I can't lose myself completely. Not yet. Not while Adam's death remains unanswered. I have to be stronger than my base urges and stronger than the darkness festering within me.

Because if I let it continue consuming me...I'll be just like her. Like Lyssa. An unfeeling killer, devoid of humanity or mercy. And it's not just me who thinks that;

the Sokolovs were more than ready to assume Lyssa killed their buddy Yuri, even though he was Syndicate himself.

Killing Yuri turned out to be a useful move, even though it shook me up. His eager, smiling help when I asked him to walk me back to my car...

He didn't even see the switchblade stiletto. Probably didn't even feel it. It was in his heart before he would have had time, and he was dead before he hit the ground.

Just like Adam.

The next morning, I report for my shift at the cafe job I took for cover while I watched Lyssa from afar. She never comes in here. None of the Syndicate members do. But it's close to the hotel where they're staying, the Empire Grand, which Grandmother tells me is owned by the Bianchi Family of New York. I'm wearing a brittle, plastered-on smile as I try vainly to lose myself in simple routine. For a little while, it works—preparing drinks, chatting with regulars, and basking in the simple, low-stakes dramas of my coworkers.

It's all so...normal. So far removed from the bloodstained shadows of last night. Of my real life, these days. A stark contrast that occasionally lets me pretend to be the happy, well-adjusted young woman I wish I could be.

But it's a paper-thin front. It only takes one comment, one disrespectful insult, to tear my composure into confetti.

“Hey sweet thing, how about pouring me some of that special service with a smile?”

The words are crude but commonplace. Just another dirtbag who can't keep his caveman urges in check. Normally I'd ignore it. Flip him the bird, even, or tell him to watch it.

But distorted rage rips through my vision. All I can see is the customer's punchable face and imagine my fist in it.

The plastic pitcher handle creaks ominously in my white-knuckled grip as fury blots out all reason. I picture launching the scalding hot coffee into this pig's yellow-toothed grin, blinding him with boiling liquid before silencing his anguished howls with a well-timed slice to the neck. His cries choking off; his hands clawing uselessly at his gushing throat...

A lurch of my gut wrenches me back to reality just in time. Bile surges up and I slam down the pitcher and mutter an excuse to my co-worker.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

I barely make it to the bathroom in time, retching violently into the toilet. I heave until there's nothing left but stomach acid, cold sweat drenching my clammy skin. And then I flush the mess away just like the vestiges of my former life, the sweet, hopeful persona I used to inhabit.

What's happening to me?

These all-consuming violent impulses, this desperate thirst for destruction and cruelty...these must be what Lyssa feels all the time.

I never used to be this way. Grandmother's merciless indoctrination has reworked my soul into something I don't recognize. I'm becoming a beast governed by hate and the primitive urge to tear, to kill, to destroy.

Just like the Wolf.

And that's what you wanted, I remind myself. That's the point of all this.

I cut myself off from the rest of humanity so that I could focus on nothing but justice. I don't see my parents anymore. A few years ago, I gave up visiting them when they said my rage scared them, tried to push me to therapy.

Therapy isn't going to get justice for Adam.

Dragging myself to the chipped sink, I splash icy handfuls of water into my face. The wild-eyed woman staring back seems more unhinged stranger than familiar friend these days. I'm changing from the inside out in permanent, fundamental ways. The

flimsy veneer of civilian life is fraying at the seams as Grandmother's ruthless influence seeps into my existence.

I swallow hard against the sick resurgence of doubt and indecision. I can't afford this weakness. Not after I already messed up last night with Lyssa. And not while the thirst for justice still burns in me.

Styx Syndicate blood is the only thing that can put out the fire.

Adam's lifeless form flashes white-hot behind my eyes. It's the only way I remember him these days. All the happy times are gone, lost to those final moments.

No.

Even if it costs me everything, I will bring justice to the woman they call the Wolf.

And it's time to stop clinging on to any notions of normalcy. I took this job because I thought it might give me an advantage over my enemies, or at least give me a good reason to be hanging around the Empire Grand. But it's become a security blanket, a place I can pretend to be normal. A place I can pretend to be the me I used to be.

It's time to put such childish dreams aside. I return to the counter and give my immediate notice, ignoring the shocked looks of my co-workers as I pull off the apron around my waist.

On my way out of the cafe, I pause long enough to slap the jerk who insulted me across the face, and then smile when he threatens to sue.

"You don't want to fuck with me," I tell him, using the same intense tone Lyssa used when she walked into the bar last night and made a group of drunk lechers scatter away from me. He cringes away from me in a very satisfying way, and the fear in his

face warms my heart.

I head out of the cafe and walk back to the dummy apartment I took Lyssa to last night, where I stack away all the textbooks I was using as props. Like the cafe job, holding onto my old studies, pretending I was still a medical student, was only holding me back.

No more. My only focus now is justice.

I pull out my latest burner phone, and a few taps later, a tracking app reveals a solitary arrowhead sitting pretty at the Empire Grand hotel.

There she is.

All I have to do now is wait and watch...

And follow.

CHAPTER 5

Lyssa

I've slept most of the next day away, as is customary for Syndicate members. Aurora might have gotten Hadria to face a few extra daylight hours these days, but I already saw dawn—and anyway, most of my work happens at night. So late in the afternoon, after breakfast, I make my way through the hallways of the Empire Grand, the Bianchi Family hotel the Syndicate has been using as a temporary headquarters while Elysium undergoes renovations. Hadria's suite is down the hall from mine, and she wants an update on this business of the assassin. Usually we avoid talking business in this hotel—none of us are foolish enough to think every word we say isn't getting back to the Bianchi Boss's ears—but the fact that someone is picking off Syndicate

members isn't exactly news.

Juno Bianchi might be a little gun-shy about the situation in Chicago, but she can hardly expect us to overlook an assassin targeting our people.

When Aurora lets me into the suite, I greet her with an up-nod and a "Hi, Suzy," mostly to annoy Hadria with the nickname I gave her fiancée. Hadria scowls at me from where she's standing near the large table in the middle of the room. It's covered in papers, photos, and lists of names. My pulse picks up. Finally, some action.

But as I get closer, my excitement deflates. These aren't Syndicate plans.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

They're fucking wedding prep.

I catch Hadria's eye and roll mine, but she doesn't seem to notice, her attention—as always—on Aurora, who has returned to pore over a thick binder of fabric swatches, her sunshine-bright smile beaming.

And Hadria smiles back.

Yeah. Despite the death threats and power struggles that come with leading the Styx Syndicate, the ruthless Hades just can't seem to shake that lovestruck glow. It'd be sickening if I wasn't secretly happy for her.

I stand there and watch them for a moment, content to stay well outside their bubble. They have something I've never had, never wanted. Love is a weakness, a distraction, and the way Hadria has changed since Aurora only proves my point.

She has something to lose, now. She has something that enemies can use for leverage.

That's why I prefer my encounters quick and dirty, like with?—

“Lyssa,” Hadria's voice snaps me out of my thoughts. “I want you to be my best woman.”

I stare at her, blindsided. “Me? What about Mrs. Graves?”

“She's Matron of Honor,” Hadria says. “For both of us.”

Aurora beams again, but her smile dims as her eyes drop to my arm. She gives a small gasp. “Lyssa! What happened?” She comes over to look more closely at me, brow furrowed in concern as she reaches for my arm.

Instinctively, I pull back. Damn, I’d forgotten about that gash from last night’s tussle. I’d pulled on last night’s leather pants and a fresh tank top when I woke up, but I didn’t bother to cover up the bandage. “Just a scratch. No big deal, Suzy, and keep your hands to yourself.”

Aurora sighs the way Mrs. Graves sighs at me sometimes, as though I’m being obstinate just for the sake of it. But it’s not exactly a life-threatening wound, for God’s sake. Still...the dull throb in my arm that I’ve been ignoring pulses with increasing intensity. That shouldn’t be happening after a minor knife slash. Maybe I should’ve taken that shot of antibiotics from Scarlett after all.

Scarlett.

Damn it.

I’ve been very determinedly keeping her out of my mind since I woke up, and here she is, worming her way back in...

Hadria’s eyes narrow as she takes in the bandage now as well. “What did you get yourself into?”

With a slight shake of my head, I change the subject. “Forget about me. We’ve got bigger problems than a couple of stitches.” I nod at the wedding paraphernalia. “Can you spare a second for business, or—?” I don’t bother keeping the snark out of my voice.

Hadria tosses aside the seating chart with a sigh and motions for Aurora to come

closer for a kiss. “Go order some coffee and pastries for Mrs. Graves, will you, Sunshine? She’ll be here soon.” She glances at me and explains, “She’s helping out a lot with the wedding, but I also plan to have a very serious talk with her about protection. Did you know she keeps ditching her bodyguards?”

“I did know, and I’ve had words with her myself about that. She won’t listen to me, though. Hope she will to you—or maybe you, Suzy. You can talk anyone into anything, right?”

Aurora just grins. “I’ll do my best,” she promises, already halfway out the door. “See you both later.”

As soon as we’re alone, Hadria’s entire demeanor shifts. The warmth evaporates from her expression, leaving the cold, calculated mask of the stone-cold crime queen I know and love

“So?” she prompts. “The assassin?”

“I followed up at that dive bar last night, where Yuri got hit, but I got...sidetracked.” I pause, shoving away the memory of Scarlett once more and focus on the point. “I got jumped in street.”

Hadria’s sculpted brows arches dramatically. “By the assassin?”

“No, a bunch of Sokolovs looking to even the score.”

“Did you call in cleaners?” she asks, those brows pulling together now. “I didn’t hear?—”

“I left them alive. Had a witness with me. A girl from the bar...” The words are out before I can stop them.

But if the Boss is bothered by my indiscretion, she doesn't show it. "I've told you, Lyssa, I've told all of you?—"

"I'm not destabilizing Chicago, for fuck's sake," I sigh in exasperation. It's been Hadria's refrain ever since Juno Bianchi RSVP'd as a maybe to her wedding. Her consigliere, Johnny de Luca, who's back and forth between Chicago and New York these days, told us the Bianchi Boss will come so long as Chicago is stable. Hadria really, really wants her there in the church when she gets married.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

Public endorsement, she calls it.

“I trust you took care of the situation?” she asks me.

My chin lifts a notch. “Of course.”

“And this...witness? Was she hurt?”

I shrug. “A little shaken up, but she proved tougher than she looked.” My mind unhelpfully supplies an echo of Scarlett’s soft breasts in my hands, the taste of her on my tongue as she came for me. “She’s the one who sewed me up. Back at her place.” Shut up, Wolf. I’ve already said too much, and if I start babbling, it’ll only raise questions.

But understanding flickers in Hadria’s eyes. “I see. Well, as entertaining as your exploits sound, I need you back on mission.” She takes a seat at the head of the table, the leather chair creaking softly beneath her as she folds her hands over flower arrangement brochures. “Every day this assassin roams free, more members of the Syndicate are at risk. Not to mention Juno Bianchi’s getting antsy. She agreed to a partnership only because things were stabilizing here in Chicago, and if she pulls out?—”

“She won’t pull out.”

“Seriously, Lyssa—I need you to put all your efforts into neutralizing this threat.”

My jaw tightens. Seriously, Lyssa. Does she think I’m fucking around?

Okay, well, maybe a little. It's been two weeks since Yuri was killed, and I really should've tracked down that Sokolov-territory bar long before last night. I could blame all the fuss about the wedding of the fucking century taking up time—the happy couple have held more than one engagement party here at the Empire Grand—but it would just be an excuse.

And getting distracted by a pretty face when I was there for intel last night was a rookie move—one that could prove fatal with a killer on the loose.

“I get it,” I tell Hadria. “And I’m on it.”

“Good.” Hadria sinks back in the seat and—for a moment—she looks tired. “You know I wouldn’t be sending you if it wasn’t important. This assassin is...disturbing. No one’s claimed responsibility, and that worries me. If anything, I would have expected them to be shouting it from the rooftops, how they’re taking on the Syndicate and whittling our numbers down. Even Nero was quick to take the credit when it wasn’t even him.”

Her brother, Nero, was exactly the type to do that—take credit without putting in the work. I will never not be happy when I think about him dying at Hadria’s hands, even if his invasion of Elysium meant we had to pull the whole place down and start again.

I miss Elysium.

“So I need my best on this,” Hadria is going on. “And that’s you.”

The unasked-for praise still sends a swell of pride through me. We have a long history together, and I know nothing could ever come between us. But it’s still nice to hear her acknowledge our bond, especially given all the time she’s spending with Aurora lately. I get it, and I don’t grudge them for it, but I can’t deny I’ve felt a little...

Well. Lonely.

“You don’t need to worry,” I assure her. “I’ll take care of it. You get on and plan your fairytale wedding. God knows I can’t wait to see you in a big puffy dress, Hades.”

“Fuck you,” she says, but she can’t hide the smirk as, with a subtle tilt of her chin, she dismisses me.

Laughing, I exit the suite, but I’ve only made it a few paces down the hall when I nearly collide with Mrs. Graves. The older woman lets out a soft tsk as she steadies me with a firm hand.

“Easy, dear.” Her warm eyes crinkle with fond exasperation as she gives me a once-over. “Where’s the fire?”

“Sorry, Mrs. G.” The old nickname slips out automatically. “I was just going to give this another look.” I nod down at my injured arm.

Mrs. Graves’ expression pinches with concern as she takes my hand, bringing my arm out to get a look at it. “Oh, Lyssa...this doesn’t look good at all.” She starts to guide me back down the hallway. “Come along now, let’s get you patched up properly in my room.”

“Nah,” I say, tugging my arm back. “I have work to do.” The stern look she gives me almost makes me waver. “Look, I need to track down this asshole who’s picking us off, and Hadria and Suzy want to see you—right?” She gives a glance down the hallway, and I lay on the final sweetener. “If the arm’s still feeling bad when I get back later, I’ll come to your room and let you poke at it. Deal?”

Mrs. Graves is the closest thing to a mother that I’ve known. She took a teenaged

Hadria and me in off the streets after we tracked down her daughter's killer and gave out the gift of justice. She and Hadria have both seen me at my worst and still stood by me, becoming the only real family I've ever known.

So when she makes me promise to come see her if it's not feeling better, I do promise—and I mean it.

I get back to my room finally, and peel off the waterproof bandage myself, even though Scarlett told me not to. Shit. It's red and inflamed, and when I poke at it, I hiss through my teeth at the sudden shot of pain.

Did those fuckers deliberately load up their blades with tetanus or something? Or maybe I should've listened to Scarlett and let her give me that antibiotic shot.

Scarlett. Again I'm thinking of Scarlett. Damn it, what is it about her? Something about her haunted eyes and strange fragility-over-strength has burrowed into my brain in a way no one-night stand ever has before.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

It's not just the sex, though that sure was memorable. No. It's something else, some weird sense of...

I'm not superstitious, but I'd almost call it a sense of foreboding.

Of fate.

I shake my head, annoyed at my inability to put the girl out of my mind. I have to focus on my mission: Taking down this assassin targeting my fellow Styxies before anyone else gets hurt.

An assassin who's making me look like a fucking amateur in front of Hadria.

I clench my fists, ignoring the answering throb in my arm. No more distractions. No more wild goose chases.

It's time for this Wolf to go hunting.

CHAPTER 6

Scarlett

The tracker on my phone indicates Lyssa's position at another dive bar called The Drunken Hog on the outskirts of the city. Perfect. Close enough to the bar last night for a new "chance" encounter, but far enough away from both the Syndicate's and just outside the Sokolov's usual territory that my presence won't seem too suspicious.

And if she starts asking questions, I'll just flutter my eyelashes and make that scared face that got her so hot last night.

I slip into a slinky wrap top that hugs my curves and accentuates my assets, and add the same jeans from last night that I know had her checking out my ass. If I'm going to manipulate her back to my apartment for a second time, I'll need every advantage. And so, as I apply a bright red lipstick, I steel myself for the act to come.

This has to be flawless.

The Drunken Hog lives up to its name—a dimly lit hole occupied by stained pool tables and the stench of stale beer. Lyssa sits alone at the bar, fingers curled around a tumbler of amber liquid. She's slumped on one elbow, face propped up on her hand, and she looks bored.

Until she sees me, that is.

I sashay up beside her and she sits up taller on the barstool. "Buy a girl a drink?" I ask with a grin.

For a moment, her eyes travel over me, head to toe and back again, hovering around my cleavage, which is on ample display. Then she scoffs. "You really haven't learned your lesson, have you?"

I settle onto the barstool next to her and shake back my hair. Up close, her presence is suffocating, power and danger rolling off her in waves. "What are you talking about? This is my local."

One arched brow quirks upward. "I know where you live. Remember? Uptown."

I bite my lip, feigning embarrassment. "Okay, look, I know it's stupid. I was on my

way somewhere else, actually, in an Uber, and we were at the lights out there.” I point, but she doesn’t follow my finger, keeping her eyes on me. “I just happened to glance over and see you through the window and...” I pause, try to gauge how she’s taking such a preposterous story. But she’s just waiting for me to finish, her brown eyes cool and steady on mine. “Well, I guess it felt like fate.”

“Fate,” she repeats blankly.

“And I thought maybe you’d let me buy you a drink as a thanks for...well, taking out all those crazy guys last night? I can promise you one thing, I’m never going back to that place again.”

For a long moment, she regards me silently. Then she gives a shrug. “If you insist. Glenfiddich, neat.”

I give a nod at the bartender and order myself one too.

“If you’re expecting this to lead to the same thing as last night—” Lyssa starts warningly, after the bartender brings them over.

“Just a drink between friends,” I say, raising my glass to her. “You helped me out. It’s the least I can do.”

Lyssa finally raises her glass as well, before taking a sip. Those cool eyes are assessing me over the rim of the glass. “So, mysterious woman who hangs around seedy bars at night...what’s your story?”

Here goes nothing. I launch into the well-rehearsed tale I’ve crafted, sprinkling in just enough truth to keep it believable. “Well, like I said, I’m a medical student. Just finished my clinical rotations at the hospital.”

“That’s why you patched me up so good, huh?” The sardonic lilt of her voice raises goosebumps along my arms.

Undeterred, I forge ahead. “I had a...family tragedy a few years back. My older brother was killed in a random mugging gone wrong.” I let my eyes well with genuine tears at this part. “I wanted to go into medicine to see if I could save a few lives.”

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

It's a twisted version of my life. Wanting to save lives? That was the old, naive Scarlett.

But Lyssa's mocking expression softens infinitesimally, and she looks down. "That's rough about your brother. My condolences."

"Thank you." I dab at my lash line.

"They catch the guy who did it?" She's watching me intently now, sucked into the emotional vortex of my only-slightly-fictional backstory. I can't resist a slight twist of the knife.

"The police didn't have any good leads. A random act of senseless violence, they said." I spit the words out bitterly. "That's a shitty excuse."

"Maybe they're just incompetent," she suggests, swirling the liquor in her glass. "The cops."

I shake my head vehemently. "No. No, I've seen the darker side of this city in my work at the hospital. How many times do innocent bystanders get caught in the crossfire? There's evil out there. Real evil."

"Well, there we agree." Her sharp gaze pins me like a butterfly to a board. "But you sound pretty bitter about it."

Tears spill over, hot and accusing, and I wish it was just the act I'm putting on. "Because it's not fair," I whisper.

For an endless breath, silence stretches between us. Then Lyssa reaches out and puts her hand on my arm with an unexpectedly gentle touch. “Life isn’t fair. Best to accept that early, sweetheart.”

The endearment sends a shiver through me, even as I bask in my small victory. I’ve wakened something akin to empathy in her, even if I don’t believe she really feels emotions like empathy or sorrow. But this seems close enough.

“You’re probably right,” I concede softly. “But knowing that doesn’t make it any easier to just move on, you know?”

Her fingers skim up my arm, and I feel a throbbing pulse start up between my legs, a primal drumbeat of desire.

I need to get it together. I’m playing a role here.

“You know what won’t help?” she says. “Going out to shitty, dangerous bars looking for trouble.”

“Maybe...maybe you could help me out one last time?” I suggest tentatively. “One last dance before I promise to quit coming out to places like this?”

Get someone to do you a favor, and ironically, they feel indebted to you. Because you’ve made them feel useful. Humane.

As if the Wolf could ever be humane.

Lyssa’s pupils dilate at my suggestion, a predatory spark lighting up in her gaze. She downs the remains of her scotch and rises. “Lead the way, Scar.”

My eyebrows go up a little, but I don’t protest the nickname. On the contrary, I think

it suits me.

My soul is covered in scars just as much as Lyssa's body is.

Back in the shoebox apartment, the weight of Lyssa's presence really settles on me. Every movement, every glance is a reminder of the danger I've let in.

But it's a reminder of last night, too. Of the way she touched me.

The way she kissed me.

My heart thunders against my ribs, so I stall for time by taking out the first aid kit again. "Let me take another look at that arm."

I expect some pushback, but—wordlessly—Lyssa strips off her shirt, and then her bra. Even half-naked and seated, she exudes that wolfish grace that I think must have prompted the nickname. I do feel like I have a wild predator before me, one that could turn on me at any moment. So, with hands that aren't quite steady, I unwrap the bandage on her arm to inspect the knife wound.

The gash is ragged, flesh slightly inflamed around re-opened stitches. I frown. "You took off the waterproof bandage."

"Uh-huh."

"And did you get into another fight?"

"Nah." Her lips curve in a taunting smirk.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

“Then how did the stitches pull open?”

“I cut them. Had to dig something out.” Terror lances through me as her long fingers close over my wrist. “Any particular reason you thought it was a good idea to sew a tracker into my arm, Scar?”

It feels like time slows, and the layers of subterfuge crumble away.

She knows.

Lyssa saw through my entire ruse. I thought I was laying a trap for her tonight, but I’m the one clamped in the jaws of the Wolf.

My eyes dart left to the medical scissors. I could try to end it all right now. Sink the blade into her throat and wrench them free, hard.

But I’d never get to the scissors in time. I know that. That’s what scared me last night, when I saw—for the first time—how powerful, how tricky, how gifted Lyssa really is as a fighter.

She’s already read my mind. If I reach for a weapon now, I might as well sink it into my own throat.

And Lyssa holds my gaze, unblinking, as she reads the war in my mind.

She keeps hold of my wrist, utterly at ease despite her nudity and despite the fact that she knows I’m the enemy.

And then she smiles, that wicked, deadly smile that she gave last night before dispatching six Sokolovs without breaking a sweat. “Well, sweetheart? Your move.”

CHAPTER 7

Lyssa

I increase my grip on Scarlett’s wrist and lean forward, watching the emotional journey crossing her face with interest. Her eyes get wider and wider as I lean in closer and closer, our faces inches apart.

“Who are you?” I ask with interest.

Scarlett’s delicate hand claws at mine, trying to get me to release her, but she might as well save her strength.

Tears well up in her eyes again as she gasps out, “Lyssa, please...” That quavering, innocent tone pulls at something deep within me, some forgotten seedling of tenderness I thought withered long ago.

But her manipulative act only fuels my suspicion.

“Who are you?” I ask again. “Or should I ask, who sent you? The Sokolovs?” Maybe that woman-in-peril act at the bar went further than I realized. Maybe it was a setup from the start.

With my free hand, I grab a fistful of her thick, luscious hair and yank her head back, baring the pale column of her throat. This close, I can see the wild thrum of her pulse, smell the warm, enticing scent of her skin and fear.

“Don’t you dare lie to me,” I murmur. “I want the truth. Now.” The truth about who

she really is, what she wants with me. And I won't be satisfied until I've stripped away every fiction to reveal the truth at her core...

Scarlett's hazel eyes narrow, all semblance of fragility evaporating like a wisp of smoke. Then she strikes, her other hand slamming toward my solar plexus with skilled precision. I twist aside just in time, so her blow goes glancing off my ribs, but she stabs her fingers into the wound on my arm next. I release her hair and pull back, while she breaks free, leaping out of her seat and staggering back a few steps.

I stand slowly, never taking my eyes off her. Her chest heaves as she gulps in air.

She's afraid.

Good.

But that delicious edge of fear only whets my appetite.

I grin as she squares up in a fighting stance—one foot forward, knees bent, fists raised in a classic Muay Thai guard. “You want the truth?” she says, and her voice only has the slightest quiver in it. Good for her. “I’m the one who’s been targeting your Syndicate.”

My smile only gets wider. “You? Some silly little girl got the jump on my people? I don’t believe it.”

I do. That’s the thing. I can see it, how she worked it. But I want to hear it from her lips before I kill her.

Her mouth twists angrily. “I’m not some silly little girl. I’m the thing that’s going to put an end to you...Wolf.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

Such certainty, such conviction... Oh, it's designed to chill me, but all it does is stoke my excitement.

"Is that so?" I circle her slowly, letting my eyes roam over the toned curves of her body, the elegant arch of her leg as she shifts her stance, ready to strike or evade.

Someone has taught her well.

But she's nowhere near as experienced as I am. And experience makes all the difference. I keep her talking while I size her up. "If you wanted me, why didn't you come for me? Why kill everyone but me?"

"I wanted to draw you out," she says. "Took a while. But you came looking for me in the end—didn't you?"

"Tell me how you did it," I say softly. "If you really did. You must be a seasoned warrior to take out so many of us."

She proudly lifts her chin, simultaneously angelic and severe. "The same way I did it with you, acted like some damsel in distress. You assholes always take the bait if you think you can get the jump on an easy target. I pretended I needed some big strong man to protect me, and it was that easy to get them all alone. They were too busy watching for witnesses to watch me."

I tilt my head to one side. "Do you think I was planning to—how did you put it—'get the jump on you' last night? Honey, I might be a killer, but I'm very fucking expensive, and I sure as hell don't work for free. None of us do." I'm getting pissed,

now. “If any men from the Syndicate helped you back to your car, it’s because they wanted to help. You murdered them for their manners.”

“It wasn’t murder,” she shoots back. “It was justice. Same as I’m about to deliver to you!”

She’s literally crazy. That’s the only explanation. Time to put this to bed. “Then why don’t you stop holding back and come at me?”

She doesn’t need to be told twice. Scarlett launches herself at me with a scream, all her ferocity and wrath unleashed, but that’s exactly what makes her so easy to deflect. I block her first few strikes easily, reveling in her fire—so much more entertaining than the meek, beguiling act—and I wonder with regret if I should have bedded her again before killing her.

We trade blows, her fists and feet a whirlwind blur as she pulls back her focus and begins to attack with more control. Knees, elbows, deceptive feints and blistering combination strikes...she fights with an almost gymnastic style that admittedly keeps me on my toes, blocking and parrying and slipping away from her onslaught.

I let her vent her fury, staying on the defensive as I analyze her technique, committing every tell to memory. She’s fast, I’ll give her that, with a sprinter’s athleticism that allows her to launch a blitz of acrobatic kicks and strikes.

But there are unforgivable gaps, far too many opportunities for a counterstrike if I was so inclined.

And I really shouldn’t play with my prey.

So I catch her next spinning heel kick and use her momentum against her, yanking her off-balance and flinging her down on the bed in the corner. She tries to roll away

but I pounce, straddling her and pinning her wrists above her head with mine in an inexorable vice.

I loom over her and consider my options. One final, decisive strike is all it'll take...

But something stays my hand, some strange impulse that has me simply laughing down at her flushed, snarling face instead. "Not bad," I pant, delighting in the trembling anger radiating through her body, pinned and helpless beneath me. "You've got some skills. More than I expected from a vigilante brat."

A rich bloom of color stains those high, sculpted cheekbones as Scarlett bucks and writhes beneath me. But I've got her locked down tight, my thighs squeezing hard around her torso.

"Fuck you," she spits. "I'm going to kill you. I'm going to skin you alive for what you did to my brother."

Brother? What is she talking about? The one who was killed in a mugging? I've never?—

Before I can demand an explanation, Scarlett suddenly thrusts her face toward mine. For a wild, crazy second, I think she's actually trying to kiss me, unleashing some final act of desperation...

And I let my hands slacken on her wrists, just a little.

It's all she needs. She twists, reaches out, and then a cloud of smoke flows into my face, filling my lungs with a thick, burning fog. I reel away, coughing and choking as the mist stings my eyes. I lash out blindly, but my swinging fists connect only with empty air as Scarlett slips free of my hold.

“You sneaky little bitch!” I cough out, swiping at the dissipating haze as I blink away tears.

The sound of a window opening makes me whirl around just in time to see Scarlett’s silhouette vanish through the open window, out onto the fire escape.

I surge across the room and fling myself out the window, onto the fire escape, hoping for fresh air as well as a glimpse of my quarry. Leaning perilously out over the precipice, I scan the quiet street three floors and see her disappearing around the corner at the end of the alley.

There are a score of streets she could be running down by the time I get there, or she might even have a getaway vehicle—or a partner. No point burning my lungs any worse by chasing her down.

With a growl of mingled frustration and admiration, I climb back into the apartment and kick at the nearest piece of furniture, a spindly side table that cracks satisfyingly against the wall. The smoke is clearing fast, but, needing air still, I double over and brace my hands on my knees, trying to make sense of the chaos that just erupted in here.

That lying, manipulative little...

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

No wonder I was so instantly, viscerally drawn to her.

For a fleeting moment, a thrill rushes through me at the thought of finally finding an equal...another apex predator.

But Scarlett—whoever she is—is fucking crazy. That's all there is to it. Accusing me of some misdeed against her brother? I've never mugged anyone in my life, not even when Hadria and I were trying to scrape together a few dollars for a can of soup while we were on the streets.

Okay, maybe I quietly relieved a few people of their wallets when things got really bad. And if anyone tried to jump us, it was only fair for us to take a fine from them afterward. But I've never threatened anyone specifically for money.

Which probably means—if Scarlett isn't just making all this shit up—that her brother wasn't some innocent. If he was a mark for the Syndicate, for me, then he must have been doing something wrong, because one of Hadria's founding rules was that we don't hurt innocents.

And if anyone ever comes to us asking for that? We hurt them, instead.

And hell, Scarlett isn't some innocent, either. She's been trained. Not by someone as good as me, but not much far off.

I set about exploring the apartment thoroughly, and find nothing of note. No personal information. Not even any photographs or tech that I could break into. This place, this apartment, has been staged.

She doesn't live here, not in her normal life.

So just who the hell is this Scarlett, I wonder again as I give up my search—if that even is her real name? One thing's for certain: this isn't over, not even close. If she thinks she can slip through the cracks and escape me, she's got another thing coming.

A blade. Or a bullet.

Either way, I'm taking her down for her crimes against the Syndicate.

CHAPTER 8

Scarlett

My feet pound against the pavement as I race through dimly-lit back alleyways. Heart thundering, I weave between grimy dumpsters and piles of discarded refuse, desperate to put distance between me...

And Lyssa.

Those cold brown eyes, filled with a terrifying blend of amusement and irritation as she pinned me down...

I should have killed her as soon as I got her back into the apartment tonight. Hell, I should have killed her last night, stuck her full of that syringe when she wasn't looking and watched her die in agony then and there. Instead I just snuck a tracker into the gash on her arm and sewed it in.

Something has been holding me back.

Is she right? Am I just a silly little girl playing at being an assassin? It's not like I

haven't thought that myself sometimes. And I know I'm not like her, not someone for whom evil has become mundane.

I have a flash of her body, all that toned muscle and all those scars, pressed up against mine?—

No. That's got nothing to do with anything.

Shaking my head to dispel the treacherous thoughts, I force myself to focus on escape. Up ahead, the harsh glare of streetlights beckons from the main road. I need to ditch this area before Lyssa hits the streets hunting for me.

A burly man crossing the sidewalk is talking on his phone. He doesn't see me coming until it's too late. I barrel into him, snatching the phone from his hand mid-conversation.

“Hey! What the fu?—”

I don't stick around to hear the rest, sprinting away as his curses echo behind me. With trembling fingers, I hang up on his conversation and punch in the secure number I have drilled into my mind.

“Extraction. Now.” I hiss the words, my breath ragged from more than just exertion. There's a brief pause before Ariadne's smooth alto crackles through the line.

“Location?”

I rattle off the cross-streets, praying she'll be swift and knowing there's always a chance she just won't show up at all. Daring a glance around the corner I just rounded, I see no immediate signs of pursuit. But I know that could change at any moment if I'm not careful. The familiar fear of failure, of disappointing

Grandmother, churns in my gut. I try to disappear into the shadows, cursing the bright red top I'm wearing.

At least I chose flats tonight instead of heels.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

The sound of a powerful engine shatters the quiet only minutes later. A sleek black Porsche screeches to a halt at the end of the alley, passenger door flung open with impatience.

“Well, well,” Ariadne sneers from behind the wheel. “If it isn’t little Red, running scared from the Big Bad Wolf.”

She looks cool as a cucumber, as always, her caffe-latte colored short hair smooth and sleek, combed back from blue eyes and a face that would be attractive if it wasn’t always filled with disdain whenever she looked at me.

I bite back the urge to snap at her. Ever since I chose to enter Grandmother’s cruel world, Ariadne has hated me. She takes an almost perverse delight in tormenting me—as if she can sense the flickering embers of my former innocent self and wants nothing more than to snuff them out entirely.

“Just drive,” I growl at her.

She complies without further argument, thank God, the Porsche taking off hard enough to press me back in my seat. As we peel away from the curb, I catch a glimpse of someone’s reflection in the side mirror—hair disheveled, eyes wide with fear.

It’s me. My own reflection.

I don’t even recognize myself these days.

The drive to Grandmother's blurs by in a rush of streetlights. Before long, Ariadne guides the Porsche toward a high-rise building and then into the underground garage, secured behind an unmarked heavy roller door and an encrypted passcode that changes weekly. We can never get complacent—our survival depends on our ability to adapt at a moment's notice.

That thought has been drummed into me long enough that I don't even think of it as paranoid anymore.

After parking, we ascend through the bowels of the high-rise in an elevator, emerging at last into the penthouse suite that serves as Grandmother's inner sanctum. The space is decorated with a decadent touch—priceless artwork adorns the walls, Persian rugs spread across gleaming hardwood floors, and the soft strains of classical music fill the air, at odds with the fog of dread that always seeps into my veins when I come in here.

Grandmother herself cuts an imposing figure in the sitting room, seated in a high-backed winged chair. Her hair is immaculately coiffed and she wears an elegant burgundy suit, and her eyes remain closed. She doesn't speak until the final, melancholic notes of Chopin's Nocturne No. 20 fade into silence.

"You may report," she intones at last, and opens her eyes.

Ariadne gives me a shove in the lower back, and I step forward, trying and failing to keep eye contact. I look at the soft pink scarf tucked high around her neck instead.

Grandmother always wears a scarf. At first I thought it might be vanity, hiding a neck that no longer had its youthful firmness, but I know now that the scarves hide a jagged scar. I've glimpsed it once, but only once, and she hurried to rearrange the scarf as she felt it shifting.

Today, the scarf is perfectly in place, set off by an ivory cameo at the base.

There's nothing for it. I have to come clean. "I had a chance to kill the Wolf. And I failed." The admission is bitter, made all the worse by the unbidden memory of Lyssa pinning me to the bed not half an hour again, her body moving against mine with fierce intensity. "She...she's better than I anticipated. Stronger. More savage. She moves like..." I shake my head, lost for words. She moves like lightning. It was all I could do to keep my life.

Grandmother studies me, her expression unreadable. "And what do you intend to do about your failure?"

The words tumble out in a breathless rush, driven by a desperate need to prove myself worthy. "More training, please, Grandmother. As much as it takes to match—no, to surpass her skill." My gaze flicks to Ariadne, who has come up next to Grandmother's right hand, and regards me with her usual undisguised scorn. I look back to Grandmother, meet her gaze. "I need to improve. Rapidly. You were right, Grandmother, I wasn't ready. I...I'm sorry."

A ghost of a smile plays across Grandmother's mouth, so fleeting I wonder if I imagined it. With a slight nod, she accepts my apology, and then crooks a finger for Ariadne to come forward. "Scarlett is owed a lesson in humility, it seems. Ariadne, you will attend to her...deficiencies."

I can tell Ariadne is happy with the outcome of my meeting with Grandmother as we make our way in silence to the training room, an immense, cutting-edge facility spanning an entire floor of the high-rise. As we wrap our hands for the melee session ahead, she smiles at me.

It's not a nice smile.

“You have no idea how much I’m going to enjoy hurting you,” she tells me.

I meet her challenging stare head-on, unflinching even as flashes of the pain Ariadne’s training has put me through rise unbidden. “Bring it on.”

Because the truth is, no matter how vicious she might be, Ariadne is nothing compared to Lyssa. The raw power combined with the unexpected moves the Wolf made...it was like nothing I’ve faced before, not even Ariadne at her worst.

If I hope to best Lyssa and avenge Adam, I’ll need to be remade. Starting now, with Ariadne’s cruel onslaught.

We square off in the center of the padded training area, fingers curled into fists, bodies coiled and ready to strike. There are a few other trainees in Grandmother’s house, all women, and there are countless male guards who seem to melt into the walls whenever I look at them. But Ariadne and I are alone here and now, and for a moment, there’s only the sound of our breathing.

Then Ariadne lunges without warning, wiry power honed to a razor’s edge. I sway back, deflecting her first two blows, but she’s relentless. Fists and feet rain down until finally, inevitably, she slips through my defenses.

The impact of her knuckles against my solar plexus knocks the breath from me in a strangled gasp. I hit the mat hard, stunned, only my hard-won instincts saving me from Ariadne’s vicious follow-up stomp. Rolling sideways, I sweep her legs at the last instant, sending her crashing down alongside me.

We grapple there amid the sweat-soaked mats, all barriers of poise and restraint abandoned in our violent tango. Our bodies strain and thrash together, my breath coming in ragged gasps of exertion until?—

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

There. An opening. I seize it without hesitation, flipping Ariadne to her back and straddling her hips, just like Lyssa did to me. My forearm draws back, ready to slam home into that hatefully perfect face, to wipe the arrogance from her eyes for good.

“Enough.”

The single word, spoken with Grandmother’s customary quiet authority, halts me mid-strike. We both freeze, panting raggedly on the mat. Only then do I realize Grandmother has been watching from the rear gallery this entire time, observing with the dispassionate interest of an instructor evaluating her students.

She doesn’t do this often.

It’s a privilege to have her here.

Chest heaving, I withdraw from my dominant position over Ariadne and rise on shaky legs to bow my head as Grandmother walks forward, each tick of her heels on the floor a countdown to explosion.

“Disappointing, both of you,” she murmurs, tutting softly as she circles us. “I had hoped to see something more interesting from you, Scarlett, given your encounter with the Wolf. And as for you, Ariadne—you don’t use your emotion to advantage when you fight Scarlett. That’s how she bested you—by tapping into her rage.”

I suppose rage is an emotion.

Ariadne scrambles to her feet as Grandmother halts before her. “Be better. I weary of

these childish squabbles. They do not become you. Now leave us.”

Ariadne shoots me one last glare before stalking away, clutching a towel to staunch the trickle of blood from a split lip.

I don’t know what comes over me, but I can’t resist calling after her. “You’re getting soft, Ariadne. Better find your edge before the Wolf?—”

That’s as far as I get before Grandmother’s slap catches me completely by surprise, whipping my head to the side with stunning force. I taste iron, feel it blossoming along the seam of my mouth. Stunned and wary, I meet her dispassionate gaze.

“When you address Ariadne, you will do so respectfully.” Each precisely enunciated word is a masterclass in cold menace. “She is lowering herself when she trains you. You have nothing to offer her, no way to challenge her or help her hone her skills. The least you can do is be grateful.”

I nod, barely trusting my voice, the torrent of vitriol I want to unleash. Grandmother look at me for a long moment before continuing in that same soft, implacable tone. “But that said, you did overcome her for a moment just now. You are improving.”

My eyes flick up sharply at that. “Thank you, Grand?—”

She cuts me off with a slender hand raised in silence. “You’ve merely confirmed that you have the capacity to become what is required. The question is...do you have the resolve?”

I still can’t keep my damn mouth shut. “I’ve killed for you many times over. Doesn’t that show my resolve?”

“Killing by surprise or deception is one thing. Now that the Wolf knows you’re

coming, she'll be on her guard. You need to toughen up, girl. If you wish to oppose her...no, if you wish to defeat her, to enact true justice..." She's so close now that I want to back up, but I stay there, let her think she's intimidating me. "...then you must embrace the howling void inside you. Become it utterly."

Who am I kidding? She does intimidate me. "Yes, Grandmother."

"I'll call Ariadne back now," she says. "You have work to do. Don't you?"

"Yes, Grandmother." She leaves me there, and while I wait for Ariadne to return, I catch sight of another trainee, battered and bruised?—

Oh. It's only my reflection in the mirrored walls.

Who am I becoming?

CHAPTER 9

Lyssa

This time when I report to Hadria, Ricky Half-hands is also in her suite, though Suzy Sunshine's nowhere to be found. Good. This business is only for those with the stomach for it, and Aurora is like a toasted marshmallow: a little burned on the outside, but still too sweet—and positively gooey in the middle.

Hadria sits in the oversized leather armchair in the corner, her posture regal even in repose. She's the picture of a powerful Mafia boss, all sharp angles and cold beauty. She really was born to that Imperioli throne, and I think her dad was a moron not to see it until he was forced to take a look.

But all the same, I'm glad she told old Zepp to get fucked.

Ricky leans against the wall, hands tucked in his pockets in an unconsciously-self-conscious way, his scarred face a map of the battles he's fought and won. My own body bears a similar roadmap.

"I've identified the assassin," I announce without preamble, coming to stand before Hadria. "And now I'll take care of the problem."

“You’re sure?”

I tilt my head to one side. “Seriously?”

Hadria sighs. “Look. If Juno Bianchi attends the wedding, it will cement the Styx Syndicate as a major player here in town, beyond just picking up contracts here and there. But she won’t come if Chicago is descending into chaos again. So, once again—you’re sure you can take care of the problem?”

I fight the urge to roll my eyes, because I’ve heard all this already from Hadria.

Over and fucking over.

I know Juno Bianchi’s presence would be a major coup, and I get why Hadria’s nervous—if Hadria can ever be said to be something so human as nervous. The Bianchi Family blessing could launch us into a whole new echelon of the underworld.

But it’s still irritating to have to hear about it every time I see her—not to mention irritating to have my judgment questioned.

“I am one hundred percent sure,” I say stiffly. “You want to come with me, see for yourself while I put her down?”

“Her?” That takes Hadria aback.

“Her,” I confirm.

Ricky pushes off the wall and ambles over, a grin splitting his weathered face. “Need a hand, Lyssa? It’s been a while since I got these dirty.” He waggles the remaining fingers of his right hand.

I give a scoff, the camaraderie between us easy and familiar. “Even an old fossil like you could manage this one solo, Ricky. Turns out the assassin’s just some girl who thinks we offed her brother.”

Hadria arches one brow. “Did we?”

I shrug, meeting her gaze unflinchingly. “Does it matter? She killed our people.”

She inclines her head in agreement. In our world, guilt and innocence are fluid concepts. Power is the only thing that matters. And vengeance, well, that’s just the cost of doing business. We’ve all got blood on our hands, and we’ve all lost people we care about. It’s the nature of the life we lead.

But the Syndicate cannot appear weak. So Scarlett—even if she’s got the prettiest damn eyes I’ve ever seen—has to die.

I take my leave, mind already racing ahead to my next move. But as I reach my room, I run into Mrs. Graves once more. She tuts at me, her keen eyes zeroing in on my wounded arm.

“Well, that only looks worse. I’m taking a look at it,” she insists, already steering me toward her room with a firm but gentle grip.

I open my mouth instinctively to protest, to tell her I’ve already tended to it, but I’ve lost this battle too many times before to waste my breath. Mrs. Graves has a long history of tending to my wounds. I remember the night we came back to her house, bloody and bruised after avenging her daughter’s murder, to announce that it was

done. She'd taken us into her home and cleaned us up with gentle hands, eyes shining with unshed tears and fierce pride.

"You girls," she'd whispered, smoothing Hadria's dark hair back from her forehead. "You brave, fierce girls. You'll stay here with me from now on."

And...we did.

That moment cemented our bond, started us on the path to what we are now. We became a family, and now the Syndicate has become the same. Bound not by blood, but by something far stronger—loyalty, sacrifice, and a shared understanding of the darkness in each other's souls.

So I let Mrs. Graves lead me into her room and sit me down on the sofa, the familiar scents of lavender and lemon enveloping me. As she cleans out the knife slash with gentle efficiency, I find myself thinking of Scarlett again, of the way she pulled the wool over my eyes when she told me to look away. It gave her a chance to sew that tracker into me.

Into me. The Wolf of the Styx Syndicate.

That took some big brass ovaries.

And I'll admit, there's something about Scarlett that sticks with me—and it's not just her impressive fighting skills or the fire in her hazel eyes. It's the pain I see there, the raw, savage grief. I know that look. I saw it in the mirror often enough growing up.

Scarlett said the Syndicate killed her brother—that I killed him. Adam, she called him. I turn the name over in my memory, but I can't place it. That means nothing, though. I don't remember names.

I only remember kills.

And if we did kill him, it would have been for a reason. We're brutal, but not indiscriminate. We don't kill innocents.

Still, I can't shake the feeling that there's more to this story. And who in the hell taught her to fight like she does? I overpowered her easily enough, but only because she couldn't master herself.

Her fear?

Or her rage...

Mrs. Graves rewraps my arm with fresh gauze, her touch soft despite the ragged rip in my skin. She's taped it together as best she can without stitches. Something of a metaphor for the woman herself. She's got her own scars, like all of us, only hers are on the inside. And she is unflinching in the face of the violent world we inhabit.

"There," she says, patting my hand. "Good as new. Or as close as we get in this life, eh?"

I meet her eyes with a wry smile. "Close enough," I agree.

As I flex my arm and thank her, a plan begins to take shape in my mind. I want to dig deeper into Scarlett's background, find out more about this brother of hers and how he died. Knowledge is power, and if I'm going to beat Scarlett at her own game, I need to understand what motivates her.

But it's more than that, too. I want to unravel the mystery of this woman who fights like a demon but stares at me with such haunted eyes. I want to peel back her layers, to map out the scars she hides beneath that tough exterior.

It's a dangerous desire. Attachments are weaknesses, soft spots for enemies to exploit.

And Scarlett is a dead woman walking, so why waste my time?

But with her quick fists and quicker mind, she's shaping up to be the most intriguing challenge I've faced in a long time. Very few dangerous people can fool me into thinking them harmless. She's a chameleon of sorts. All those poor Syndicate bastards she took out would've had no chance—and I'm lucky I didn't end up with a stiletto blade in my own heart, too.

I give a soft laugh as I realize it: those fool Sokolovs actually saved my ass. Without their distraction...

"Something funny?" Mrs. Graves asks, cleaning up the bloodied swabs.

"You had to be there." I get to my feet as a new thought strikes me. "Thanks for the first aid, Mrs. G."

"Any time, Lyssa."

"Now can you do me another favor?"

"What's that?"

"Quit ditching your damn bodyguards," I say sternly. "They're for your protection."

She makes a flapping motion, dismissing my concern. "For goodness' sake, I'm not in any danger in the middle of the city, not any more than I was in my own home. And I don't like having those heavy feet clomping around me, Lyssa. They get in the way. Slow me down."

"Uh-huh," I say stoically. "Come on, Mrs. G. Just for now. Just while we're staying here in town. For my sake?"

She makes a face, but gives in. "Alright. I suppose so. For your sake."

I go quickly back to my own room and dig into my pocket for the tracker I still have. I used it to lure Lyssa out to the Drunken Hog, and it seemed pointless to ditch it after that—everyone in town who needs to know, knows where the Syndicate is staying while Elysium is renovated.

But Scarlett won't come here to the Empire Grand. So I'll have to wander off the path again myself. Lay myself out like bait.

It will be obvious. But hate and rage make fools of us all, and Scarlett seemed full enough of both to make unwise decisions.

I certainly hope so, anyway.

CHAPTER 10

Scarlett

I hit the mat hard, the breath knocked from my lungs. Ariadne stands over me, a triumphant smirk on her face. "Had enough yet?"

I grit my teeth, pushing myself up on shaky arms. We've been sparring for hours, ignoring the other trainees who came in and worked out and watched us and left—and I haven't managed to best Ariadne once. Every time I think I'm getting close, she finds a new way to exploit my weaknesses and send me crashing to the ground.

She does it again now, dropping into a leg-sweep that takes mine out from under me, winding me once more.

Exhausted and frustrated, I choke out the training safe word. "Foxglove."

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

Ariadne's smirk turns into a sneer. "You know what? You're pathetic, Scarlett. You'll never avenge your brother at this rate. Trying to best that blonde bitch will be your death sentence, even if you are one of Grandmother's favored pets."

Her words cut deep, striking at the heart of my insecurities. Ariadne has been begging Grandmother for a chance at the Wolf for years, but Grandmother always refuses, telling her that the Wolf will be my trophy, since the Wolf killed Adam.

And so far, it seems like Ariadne has a point. If I can't even take her in a fight, how can I possibly take Lyssa?

I gather the last remnants of my dignity to push myself to my feet without staggering, and take my battered body off to the change rooms without a word.

I take a shower in the open shower stalls. There's no privacy here in Grandmother's house, not even locks on the toilet stalls, which was a shock when I first came here. But I learned soon enough to be as comfortable with nudity as I was with clothes.

You never know when you'll need to fight, after all.

As I step under the hot spray, I let the water wash over me, soothing my aching muscles. But it does nothing to ease my mind. Ariadne's taunts replay in my head, mingling with the memories I can never escape.

Adam.

I found him, that night. In the alley behind our family's restaurant, already dead from

a single stab to the heart. I tried desperately to save him, putting every scrap of medical training I had to use, but it was no use, and his hot blood cooled quickly as I sat there with him in my lap.

Eventually my father came out, wondering where we both were. I'll never forget the cry he gave.

No matter how hard I try.

I knew Adam had gotten involved with some small-time illegal stuff, just to help pay my way through college. I knew he was taking a risk, doing things that could land him in jail. But I turned a blind eye, telling myself that once I became a doctor, once I was successful, I'd be able to support him and our parents, pay him back for his sacrifices. I'd be able to get all of us into a better life.

But I was too late. And now, the guilt eats at me every day. I should have done more. I should have tried to talk him out of it, to find another way. But I was selfish, too focused on my own dreams to see the danger he was in.

Adam's death destroyed our parents. They sold the restaurant and tried to find ways to cope, tried to find peace.

But I never could, because nothing he'd done deserved the death penalty. Nothing. He wasn't even a middleman, for fuck's sake—just some low-down-the-pole courier or message-bearer.

So I can't allow Adam's murder to have been for nothing. Can't let Grandmother's psychological warfare or Ariadne's endless scorn pierce the armor that keeps me inexorably moving forw?—

A solid, hard kick in my lower back sends me face-first into the shower tiles, and I

collapse to the floor, soap stinging my eyes, pain lancing through my skull.

Over my shoulder, I see Ariadne laughing, naked and arrogant as she stands over me, hands on hips as her eyes travel over me.

White noise roars in my ears, drowning out her laughter along with the shower water. And swimming up from the static, I see Lyssa's face.

I surge upright from the tiles in a single explosive movement. Ariadne barely has time to tense before I'm on her like a wildcat, all restraint and strategy forgotten in the blazing inferno consuming me from the inside out.

We thrash across the bathroom in a hurricane of blind fury. For every blow she deflects, I catch her with another, matching and then raising the tempo with frenzied intensity. At some point, Ariadne abandons all finesse and starts brawling back, as if she recognizes I have no capacity to restrain the violence she's unleashed in me.

I slam her into the wall hard enough that the tiles crack, and then I drag her by her hair over to the shower and slam her head down into the drain, under the stream of water. My hands find purchase around her wet throat, crushing against her straining trachea as she chokes and flails.

Some distant part of me screams to stop before it's too late. But I can't. I won't.

Not until I finish this. The beast of revenge has possessed me now, and I'm angrier than I've ever been in my life.

"F...Fox..." Ariadne chokes out, her eyes pleading as she scratches at my hands. "Fox...glove..."

I blink, as if waking from a nightmare. I see my death grip on her neck. See her face

turning from red to purple as I strangle her...

I'm killing her.

With a gasp of horror, I let go and scramble away until my back hits the wall opposite. I bury my face in my hands, shaking.

How did I become...this?

I'm no better than Lyssa.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

Ariadne gasps and coughs for air, throwing herself over so her face is out of the water. Blood still runs from the back of her head, spiraling down the drain as I watch.

Something soft hits my chest and I startle as badly as if it were a punch.

It's a robe. I look up to see Grandmother standing a few feet away, observing me with an appraising eye. I scrunch the robe she tossed at me in my hands, confused.

"Get up," she says.

I get up and pull on the robe, shaking so hard that it takes a while to get my arms through the holes.

"Follow me." She turns and leaves without another word. I'm frozen, my gaze flicking between Ariadne crumpled on the shower floor and the door Grandmother left through. The dread churning inside finally pushes me to move—toward Ariadne.

She flinches away, terror in her eyes.

I feel something in me cracking. There's an emptiness blooming in my fractured soul promising only destruction.

I blink, backing away from Ariadne, and then turn to hurry after Grandmother.

As cruel as Ariadne has been to me, what I just saw in her eyes chills me to the bone. A wailing despair deeper than any pain I've known. A place you can never come back from, only keep falling into endless black.

And in the shattered depths of my own soul, I can feel that same howling void threatening to engulf me.

CHAPTER 11

Scarlett

I shiver all the way up in the elevator to the penthouse suite. I speak only once. “Ariadne—she needs?—”

“To learn to take a punch,” is Grandmother’s cold reply.

But that wasn’t a punch that I gave her, I want to point out. That was a rage-induced, brutal beating that might have done permanent damage to her.

I feel sick and dizzy, and sway into the elevator wall as the nausea rises up. Grandmother takes my arm, her grip surprisingly strong for an elderly woman, and pulls me upright, then out of the elevator as it stops and opens.

My body aches from the pummeling Ariadne gave me all afternoon, every muscle screaming in protest with each step. But Grandmother’s pace is brisk, allowing no time for me to catch my breath—or even think.

We reach her private quarters—a sanctuary adorned with baroque furnishings and heavy crimson drapes that blot out the Chicago skyline. It’s gorgeous and refined, but I have learned to fear the sight of it—there is a room only accessible from here where we are taken for punishments when we disappoint Grandmother.

I’m terrified that’s where she’s taking me now, but instead, she gestures toward a chaise longue. “Have a seat, my dear.”

Slowly, not daring to lower my guard, I seat myself, watching as Grandmother retrieves a first aid kit and then returns to sit next to me. She gestures for me to untie the robe, and I obey, then sit there in surprise as her elegant, bejeweled hands gently tend to my wounds. The scent of antiseptic mingles with her perfume, an unpleasant combination that makes my head swim.

As she works, Grandmother speaks, her voice low and hypnotic. “If you channel the same rage and ferocity against Lyssa that you just displayed with Ariadne, victory will be yours.”

“But Ariadne...” I whisper. “I nearly killed her.”

“Ariadne has sorely needed a lesson for some time,” Grandmother says. “If you hadn’t provided it to her, Lyssa would have. Ariadne was next in line, you see, the next one I planned to send out, if Lyssa killed you. But I still think you can do better.” She looks into my face. “Can you do better, Scarlett?”

I only have to tell her the truth, after all. “I’ll do whatever it takes to get justice for Adam.”

She smiles in approval and moves on to my shoulder, already turning purple with bruises. I hiss as she rubs ointment all over it and then settles an ice pack over it carefully. “Do you remember the day our paths first crossed, Scarlett?”

A lump forms in my throat. How could I forget?

Rain poured from the heavens, smacking off the black umbrellas held by black-clad mourners gathered around Adam’s grave.

I stood apart from them, numb and hollow, letting the rain soak me to the skin as the casket was lowered into the earth. The finality of it, the realization that I would never

see my brother's smile again, never hear his laughter, hit me then, and it was all I could do to keep standing.

The floral arrangements on the casket were torn apart by the force of the rain, petals smearing across the wood in a kaleidoscope of fragrant white that seemed to mock the entire proceedings.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

My parents left first, unable to stand it any longer. And one by one, the other attendees drifted away, friends and family, their murmured condolences lost in the noise of the rain.

Until only one figure remained, a regal woman in a black veil that hid her face completely, holding an umbrella wide enough to cover two people. She moved toward me carefully, as though I was a wild horse that might suddenly turn skittish.

“It’s Scarlett, isn’t it?” she asked, bringing me in under her umbrella.

The way she said my name, laced with the barest hint of promise, made the hairs on the back of my neck prickle. I stared at her warily. “Do I know you?”

“No.”

“Then how do you know my name?”

“I make it my business to know things.”

“Who are you?” I demanded, taking a step back into the rain again.

“I am justice,” she replied simply.

I frowned, sensing the weight of her words, the dark power that emanated from her. I wanted to scoff, to call her out for portentous nonsense.

But there was something about her that made me believe her. And then I was

suspicious.

“Did Adam work for you?” I asked, blinking at her through the rain.

She lifted the veil of her hat then so I could see her face. See that she wasn’t lying. “No, my dear. But I know the identity of his killer.” She paused, letting the revelation hang in the air between us. “Would you like to know, too?”

The police had been less than useless. And it wasn’t as though I knew who the hell to ask about Adam’s not-so-legal activities. For the first time since his murder, hope, fragile and treacherous, bloomed in my chest.

I followed the woman to a sleek black town car, my heart pounding as I slid into the leather seat on the back.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“You can call me Grandmother.” I said nothing to that, wondering again if this was a bad idea. Grandmother wasn’t all that far from Godmother, after all, which in turn wasn’t all that far from Godfather...

And whatever Adam had been doing, I knew the mob were involved.

Grandmother produced a tablet, and brought the screen to life to show me a video. I recognized the alley at once—and then I sucked in a sharp breath as I saw Adam come into view. Even from the sharp up-high angle, I knew him, that silly, gangly walk of his, and the Bulls sweater with Michael Jordan’s 23 printed on the back.

I watched, transfixed, as a blonde woman suddenly ran into frame. “What—” I began, but Grandmother shushed me.

The woman moved with lethal grace, and Adam didn't even hear her coming until she spun him around and, with one strike, sent the knife into his chest. He collapsed at once, the trash bag falling from his hand, and lay there crumpled on the blood-slicked asphalt.

The woman turned and ran back the way she came—and then I saw it. She was wearing a mask. A wolf mask.

And then I saw myself, running to Adam.

Cradling him.

I sucked in a hard breath and looked away, looked up, catching a glimpse of cold blue eyes in the rearview mirror. I learned soon after that this was Ariadne, though I didn't meet her officially that day.

Grandmother's voice cut through the fog of my grief. "Scarlett, do you want justice against your brother's murderer? To make her pay for the pain she's inflicted on you and your parents?"

"I want..." I croaked, my voice cracking like glass. "I want her dead."

Grandmother's expression remained impassive, but her faded eyes glinted with what I would later recognize as profound satisfaction. "I thought you might say that. And I'd like to help you."

"How?"

"I'm a woman who deals in vendettas—who equips those like yourself with the tools to reap the justice this world so often denies us."

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

“And do you remember what I asked you that day, Scarlett?” Grandmother prompts now, drawing me back to the present. “I’ll ask again now. Are you still committed to the path of justice?”

“I have never wanted anything more,” I tell her. “Not a single day goes by that I don’t mourn my brother. That I don’t relive those terrible moments. That I don’t remember that the monster who killed him walked away scot-free.”

“Then you must hold fast to that anguish, Scarlett. Let it fortify your resolve and extinguish any lingering shred of compassion or weakness. For Ariadne—and for your enemy, too.”

Over the past few years while I’ve been training here, I’ve come to realize that this is a path that leaves little room for empathy or moral quandaries. But in this moment, fresh from battling Ariadne, I still can’t ignore the pang of concern that worries at me. “Is she...will Ariadne be all right? I didn’t mean to?—”

“Ariadne is of no consequence,” Grandmother cuts me off impatiently. “She is merely a tool, as am I and every other individual you encounter on your journey. You’d be wise to relinquish any inklings of attachment.”

I bristle at the cold dismissal, feel an instinctive flare of compassion as if to spite Grandmother’s advice. But then I think of all I’ve sacrificed. My dreams of becoming a doctor, melted away. My relationship with my parents, broken off.

And Adam.

Adam, gone forever.

White-hot rage ignites in my veins, burning away any lingering doubts. “I’ll do anything to make Lyssa suffer as I have suffered. So long as it leads me to that end, I’ll do whatever you want me to do.”

Grandmother nods, a satisfied smile playing at the corners of her mouth. “Then you must act quickly. Rumor has it that Juno Bianchi intends to attend the wedding of Hadria Imperioli. If the Bianchi Family publicly aligns themselves with the Styx Syndicate, the Wolf will become that much more untouchable. You must make your move now, Scarlett.”

I absorb this information, my mind racing. The stakes have never been higher. If I fail, Adam’s death will go unavenged, and the Syndicate will grow even more powerful.

I won’t let that happen. “I’ll find Lyssa again,” I vow, my voice hard as steel. “And I’ll end her, once and for all.”

Grandmother pats my hand. “See that you do, my dear.”

When I get back to my room, I pull out my phone and check the tracker again. The signal pulses steadily, taunting me, showing me that she’s safe in the Empire Grand hotel, where I can’t touch her.

But...the tracker is still active. Why wouldn’t she destroy it? Why keep it on her person? Or has she left it there just to mess with me, while she’s out doing dark and murderous deeds in the Chicago night?

But then it hits me. Lyssa wants to be found.

She's baiting me, just like Ariadne with her cruel taunts and vicious blows. Lyssa wants me to come to her. If I watch the tracker, I'll see where she goes. But she'll be prepared for me to follow.

I lie down carefully on the bed, my body thrumming with a newfound sense of purpose so that I can ignore the aches and pains.

The road ahead is dark and twisted, but I'm ready to follow it wherever it may lead. For Adam, for the future that was stolen from me, I'll do what I need to do.

I will kill Lyssa, or I will die trying.

CHAPTER 12

Lyssa

I stroll back into the Sokolov drinking hole like I own the place, my boots sticking slightly to the floor. The stale reek of spilled beer assaults my nose again, but needs must when hunting down a cunning little minx like Scarlett.

I plant myself at the scratched-up counter, scanning the dingy space with a practiced eye. The handful of regulars seem the same as last time, and they avoid meeting my gaze, no doubt recognizing me.

The weaselly bartender slinks over, his pinched face radiating a wariness that has me suppressing a grin. "You're not welcome here," he grits out through a thicket of crooked teeth.

I arch a challenging brow. "Then I suppose you'd better throw me out."

The scrawny man visibly falters. A beat passes before he forces out a resigned sigh.

“What’ll it be?”

Claiming a backwards perch on one of the battered stools, I cast him a lazy smile over my shoulder. “I’m sure you’ve got something decent tucked away. Surprise me.”

He pours me a finger of bottom-shelf rotgut and I throw it back in one swallow. I slam the glass back onto the bar and tap two fingers against the rim, wordlessly demanding a refill.

He complies with a glower.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

And now we both know our respective places in this hierarchy.

I nurse the second drink, idly tracking the sluggish crawl of the clock on the wall as I wait. Thirty interminable minutes drag by. I'm on the verge of getting twitchy when the door finally swings open and in she walks, drawing every eye.

Scarlett.

Damn, but she looks good, poured into those tight jeans again and a low-cut black sweater, a leather jacket on top to give her some edge. Heat licks at my clit, a twisted tangle of irritation, lust, and something uncomfortably close to admiration.

She's glaring at me with murder in her eyes.

Delicious.

The bartender takes one look at her stormy expression, glances at me, and throws up his hands in warning. "Both of you, get the hell out of here before the Sokolovs show up. I mean it! I don't want any blood on the floor tonight, you hear?"

I slide off the barstool, the movement liquid and lazy, and I don't take my eyes off Scarlett. "Well, you heard the man. What say we get outta here, sweetheart?"

She glares at me, those haunting hazel eyes flashing with green fire. "Fine by me. I can kill you just as well in the street as I can here."

"Yeah, yeah. We'll get to that." I head for the door, shoulder brushing hers as I pass,

a deliberate invasion of space. A subtle challenge.

The game is on.

Outside, I turn to face her, ready for another scintillating round of threats and flirtation. Instead, I find myself staring down the gleaming black barrel of a silenced gun.

I sigh, the sound equal parts exasperation and anticipation. “Knock it off. I want some information before we get to the fun part.”

Her full lips thin, finger tightening on the trigger. The shot zips out, but I’ve already knocked her arm aside with a lightning-quick strike, sending the bullet to bury itself harmlessly in the crumbling brickwork. A twist of my wrist and the gun clatters to the trash-strewn pavement, her fingers left grasping empty air.

But Scarlett is tenacious. Undeterred, she breaks my grip on her arm in a move that leaves me blinking, and uses her twirl to mask yanking a wicked-looking switchblade from her boot, so that I only see it when the blade shoots out, glinting in the neon spill from the bar’s buzzing sign. “Why waste time talking when you could be dying?”

She lunges for me, the edge arcing toward my throat.

Oh, she’s good.

She’s much better than the other night, now that she’s prepared herself. Now that she’s focused.

On killing me, which is less great?—

The razor comes close enough that I feel the disturbance of air, but I flow around the slash like smoke, weaving just out of reach with an infuriating grin. “If you want to get your ass kicked first, be my guest. But I’ve got questions, Scar, and you’re going to give me some answers...before I kill you.”

Her face contorts, a rictus snarl of pure rage, and she lashes out at me. I block her arm, hard. “Easy, honey,” I murmur, holding her fiery stare while surreptitiously tensing the tendons in my forearms. “If you wanted my attention, you could’ve just asked.”

She rips away from me and repositions, coming at me in a whirlwind of deadly steel and even deadlier intent. I pull taught the steel cord I keep in a handy bracelet around my wrist for just these occasions, and parry her strikes.

Yeah. She’s improved since our last tussle, her technique tighter, more controlled. But that fury still blinds her, telegraphs her intentions. She fights like a woman possessed, a berserker without care for defense. It makes her dangerous...

But predictable.

And playing on that rage is an easy way to win.

“Nice try,” I pant, as we break away from each other again. Our vicious ballet has carried us across the quiet street, into the deserted construction site on the other side of the road. “But you have a lot to learn, kid.”

Scarlett’s lips peel back in a defiant snarl as her free hand whips a slender stiletto dagger into view.

Ah. This must be the blade that ended up in so many Syndicate hearts. With weapons in both hands now, she moves with savage grace, the wicked stiletto stabbing toward

my face in a blur. I sidestep the strike, my blood thrumming with a wild, electric thrill.

“A little too frantic,” I chide, in the same voice I use for the Syndicate trainees. I know it drives them crazy. And from the look on Scarlett’s face, it works on her, too. But the deep coursing of adrenaline through my veins makes this encounter almost...pleasurable.

Scarlett comes hard at me again, her eyes blazing as she rains down a flurry of thrusts and slashes. I duck and parry, pushing back with precisely measured counters, testing her mettle with every exchange.

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

“You’ve certainly sharpened your skills since our last meeting,” I acknowledge at last. “Care to tell me who’s been tutoring my would-be killer?”

A muscle cords in her jaw even as she avoids one of my sweeping kicks.

“Seriously, though,” I say, and I let my admiration show through for real this time. “Who are you?”

“You already know who I am,” she spits out, ducking beneath another arcing punch. “I’m vengeance.”

“Well,” I say, backing up a little to reposition, “you’re certainly intense.”

She throws herself forward, and that’s when I decide I’ve had enough. I seize the split second of vulnerability that her recklessness always leaves after each slash with the switchblade, locking her arm across my body and twisting brutally.

The switchblade goes skittering across the dusty floor, coming to rest beside a cement mixer. With a swift move, I whirl to grab her other wrist and wrench it until she opens her fingers with a cry, letting the stiletto dagger fall into my waiting hand.

Disarmed, chest heaving, Scarlett scrambles back from me, but I’m already on her, using her own momentum to slam her back into the rough brick of an unfinished wall, and then, keeping one hand hard against her chest, I bring her own stiletto up underneath her chin.

To her credit, there’s no surrender in her fierce eyes. Only defiance and the glimmer

of something...hotter. Darker.

My blood sings with the thrill of the fight, the heady rush of dominance as I close in. I pin her to the rough wall with the long line of my body, but it's the unyielding press of the blade that has her attention.

"This has been a fun little dance," I murmur. "But now we're going to have a friendly chat about exactly who trained you, and why you think I killed this brother of yours."

She shudders, the motion bringing her flush against me in a maddening slide. I can't deny the molten desire curling through me now. "Fuck you," she pants.

I give a low, wicked chuckle. "We already did that, sweetheart. But I'll tell you what—you answer my questions like a good little girl, and I'll give you your pig-sticker back for another shot at me. What've you got to lose?"

I watch rage and humiliation war across the exquisite planes of her face. And as close as I am to her now, I see the thick layer of makeup she's applied, and I know what that means. "Who hurt you?" I demand, my eyes narrowing. "Your face, I mean—who hit you?"

"Fuck you," she says again.

Fine. I need to stay on-mission, anyway. "Tell me who sent you."

At last, the words grind out from between clenched teeth, "A woman trained me. I don't know her real name."

My grip on the knife handle tightens, the tendons in my forearm jumping. "You're gonna have to do better than that if you want to keep breathing. I want a name."

A muscle in her jaw tics, the tiny movement captivating. Her lips barely move as she forces out a single word. “Grandmother.”

No. It can’t be.

Scarlett senses my shock, tries to take advantage by struggling again?—

But I recover swiftly, digging the point of the stiletto deeper into her ivory throat until a crimson bead wells up in mocking mirror to her parted lips.

“You’re lying,” I hiss. “Grandmother is dead. I slit the bitch’s throat myself when I left her damn house of nightmares.”

Scarlett shakes her head, a minute motion constrained by the threat of my blade. Her voice is thin, thready with desperation or deception, I can’t tell. “I’m not lying, I swear. I swear on—I swear on my brother’s grave. She’s alive, and she’s the one who sent me to kill you.”

My mind whirls, struggling to reframe reality after this revelation. If Grandmother truly lives, if this is the shape of her vengeance...then I’m in more danger than I realized. And so is the frustrating, fascinating woman pressed up against me.

And so is the Syndicate.

Scarlett must see the decision crystalize in my eyes. Her voice pitches higher, edged with panic. “Lyssa, wait. Don’t do this. You don’t have to?—”

“Oh, but I do,” I cut her off. “See, if Grandmother really is alive, and behind all this, then you’re a threat I can’t afford to leave breathing.”

I lean in closer, until the rise and fall of her chest presses intimately against mine. I

can taste the hitching terror of her breath. “I really am sorry, sweetheart. I wish we could’ve had a little more fun together...but it ends here.”

CHAPTER 13

Scarlett

The icy kiss of my own blade presses deeper into the vulnerable skin beneath my chin as I stare into Lyssa's pitiless eyes, chips of dark amber. Fear is sticking into my throat as much as the stiletto, but I force the words out. "Wait! Please—at least tell me what you meant when you said you killed Grandmother!"

Lyssa's gaze remains eerily detached, as if she's discussing the weather instead of cold-blooded murder. "Grandmother bought me when I was a baby, along with a few others. Raised us to be perfect killers. I was her favorite, if you can call it that—but by the time I was ten, I did what she'd conditioned me for. I killed her and walked away to carve out my own life."

Shock ripples through me, leaving me lightheaded. "Grandmother's never mentioned knowing you...personally," I manage.

A mirthless smirk twists Lyssa's lips. "No, I don't imagine she would. Not if I'm living proof of her failure. Her own little killing machine, turned against her." She cocks her head, eyes narrowing. "So...seriously, the old crone is still breathing? Because I sliced her up something wicked."

"Sh-she has a scar. Around her throat. Like it was cut open."

"Someone must have found her before she bled out on the floor like the dog she is." Lyssa's tone is colder than the Chicago wind whipping through the construction site. She studies me with unsettling intensity, as if she can peel back the layers of my being.

And that's what makes me believe her. Because Grandmother has the same look, sometimes. I wonder which of them learned it from the other.

"Listen carefully to me, Scar," she says, each word precise and diamond-hard. "Get out from under Grandmother's control while you still can. That anger simmering in your veins? You think it gives you strength, but it's a lie. It'll burn you to ashes from the inside out. Believe me, I know. And it makes you so very easy to manipulate. Grandmother isn't holding a hose to that fiery rage. She's holding a fucking gas pump."

Abruptly, Lyssa steps back, flipping my stiletto over in her fingers and extending it to me hilt-first. I take it from her slowly, tentatively.

"Hadria ordered me to kill you," she says bluntly. "And you deserve it, for the kills you made among my people. But if you leave Chicago tonight, if you run and don't look back, I'll give you a pass. Just this once."

She turns to leave, but before I can think, I'm lunging at her again, dagger raised. In a heartbeat, Lyssa has me wrenched to my knees, arm twisted to the brink of snapping, stiletto vanished once more.

"Why do you keep doing this, you silly bitch?" she snaps, genuine frustration bleeding through her stony facade. "I'm giving you a chance to walk away, to live! Why are you so determined to die at my hands?"

"You killed my brother!" I hurl the words at her, scream them out. The agony radiating from my shoulder is nothing compared to the soul-deep anguish ripping me apart.

Lyssa makes a harsh sound of exasperation. "Grandmother has you all twisted up in the head, filling your mind with lies and half-truths. It's what she excels at. Poisoning

your mind until you'd cut your own heart out if she told you to.”

“I saw it!” I snarl. “I saw a video of you murdering Adam in cold blood!”

Lyssa goes almost preternaturally still, the very air seeming to freeze around us. “If I killed your brother,” she finally says, each word cold as ice, “then he was no innocent. No saint. I don’t kill good men, Scarlett.”

Something fractures deep in my chest and I scream again, thrashing mindlessly against her hold until she picks me up and slams me against the bricks again. “Shut up! Shut up! Adam was good and kind and—and he looked out for me, protected me! He only got mixed up in things to take care of me! He didn’t deserve what you did to him, you soulless monster! He didn’t deserve to die!”

I crumple to the filthy construction floor as Lyssa releases me, curling in on myself as I wait for her to just do it. Just kill me.

The cold is seeping into my bones, the last vestiges of my furious strength leeching away.

But I still don’t cry. Can’t cry. I haven’t cried since the night he died.

At last, I hear Lyssa exhale slowly. Sense her crouching beside me, a dark void with death in her hands and shadows in her heart. “You really believe I did this.” Her voice is almost soft. Almost wondering. “This video—I want to see it, Scarlett. If Grandmother is playing you, using what happened to your brother to break you and rebuild you as she sees fit...I need to know. We both do.”

I raise my face to stare at her. “Why do you even care? If you’re so innocent, what does it matter?”

“I never said I was innocent. I just said I never killed your brother. Or if I did, I had a good reason.” Lyssa’s smile is sharp and humorless. “As for why I care...” Her eyes go a little unfocused, as though she’s remembering something. “Because if Grandmother has risen from the grave, if she’s got her hooks in you this deep—and others, I assume?” She takes my blinking surprise as an assent, as I think about Ariadne and the other trainees. “—then that’s going to be a problem for me. For the Syndicate. And I solve the Syndicate’s problems, Scarlett. Thoroughly and with extreme prejudice.”

She straightens, stands over me, and I flash back to Ariadne in the shower, standing over me and laughing.

But Lyssa isn’t laughing.

“You should listen to me, Scar,” she says, serious and low. “Because if Grandmother sent you after me...well, she basically threw you to the wolves.”

“She didn’t want to send me—not yet,” I bite out unwillingly. “She wanted to train me more, but I...I thought I was ready. She said I wasn’t.” See? I want to cry out. She’s not all bad.

“Well, she was right about that,” Lyssa retorts. “You’re not ready.” The sting of truth makes me clench my fists. But her tone changes as she goes on. “So what do you think? We’ll have ourselves a little movie night, and you can try to convince me I’m the Big Bad Wolf of your nightmares. And if I am...well, hell, I’ll give you another shot at taking me down. Out of respect for this brother of yours. What do you say?”

I waver for a suspended instant, trying to find some trick in the seductive offer Lyssa dangles before me. Finally, I give a jerky nod.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

Lyssa gazes down at me, the alley's weak illumination painting her face in shadows. "One more thing," she murmurs, almost gently. "Stop killing my people. Stay in your fucking lane. Because if you don't, when our paths cross again, I will visit horrors upon you that Grandmother couldn't even conceive of."

And then she's gone, a wraith disappearing into the gloom between the decrepit buildings crowding close on either side. I remain on my knees, wondering again if this is a trick, until at last I'm quite sure she's gone.

With a shuddering breath, I drag myself upright on trembling legs, cradling my throbbing shoulder. My mind whirls with Lyssa's words, with the seeds of uncertainty she's so deftly planted in the fertile soil of my soul.

Did I really just agree to bare my darkest scars to the monster who put them there? To show her the moment my world shattered and my heart turned to stone? The memory of Adam's lifeblood dripping between my fingers rises, and I have to pause and remind myself to breathe.

But if there's even a chance Lyssa is right...

If Grandmother has been pulling my strings all along, using my grief and rage to forge me into a weapon...

I think of the cruel satisfaction that lights Grandmother's eyes when she looks at me sometimes, a scientist appraising a particularly successful experiment. I shiver, and it has nothing to do with the cold night air. I've spent so many hours under Grandmother's tutelage, drinking in her lessons on vengeance and death and the cold,

clinical arts of wet work. I pushed down my misgivings, my doubts, armored myself in the certainty that she was the key to bringing justice to Adam. That she could give me the skills and the strength to do what I needed to do, even if I died myself in the act.

And God help me, it felt good.

It felt righteous, even as some parts of me recoiled in mute horror at what I was becoming. What I was allowing myself to embrace in the name of justice.

But—no. It's not about justice. I'm brave enough to face that, at least. I didn't want justice. Never have.

I've only ever wanted revenge.

Doubt slithers through my gut like a snake, sinking venomous fangs into the foundation of my quest. If Lyssa is telling the truth...

She could have killed me. Here and now. She meant to.

And she has no reason to lie, unless she only wanted to hurt me... But I don't know. I just can't tell.

Rubbing my burning eyes with the back of one scraped, filthy hand, I get to my feet and limp towards the closest street. Time to see about hailing a cab and figuring out my next step.

Lyssa was right about one thing—I need to know the truth. I owe Adam that much.

As I slide into the cracked vinyl of a cab's rear seat, I let my head thunk against the window and watch the city roll by, the glass cool against my feverish skin.

Deep in my bones, I feel the first hairline fractures spidering through my ironclad resolve, the fury that's sustained me for so long turning brittle and perilously thin.

CHAPTER 14

Lyssa

I'm still reeling when I get back to the Empire Grand. Scarlett gave a much deeper hit to my foundations than I could let her see.

Grandmother, alive?

No, really—it can't be. I killed her myself, felt her hot blood slick on my hands as I cut her throat. And yet...Scarlett's words ring true. A scar around Grandmother's neck, easy enough for Scarlett to lie about—but the uncanny similarity in her training...

And the vendetta against me.

It all points to one chilling conclusion.

I pace my room, memories of my childhood threatening to break free from the mental prison I've locked them in. I've never told anyone, ever, about all that.

Not even Hadria.

The endless hours of training, the punishments for failure, the cold, calculating eyes that watched my every move—I buried them deep, but now they clamor for attention, demanding to be acknowledged.

For so long, I thought it was normal. I thought all children went through what I went

through—and not just me. There were other girls, too. Older, sometimes. And younger. Sometimes they disappeared. Sometimes new ones appeared. But we were never friends, only rivals.

And Grandmother molded me into a weapon, a tool for her own ambitions. Day after day, year after year, she pushed me to my limits and beyond. Every failure was met with swift, brutal punishment. Every success with nothing more than a shrug of approval.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

I learned to crave those shrugs, to live for the rare moments when Grandmother's lips would even twitch into something resembling a smile. I thought it meant she loved me, in her own twisted way.

But love had no place in Grandmother's world. Only power, only control. And when I finally realized that, when I finally found used the strength she gave me against her, and broke free...

I thought I had ended her forever.

But now I'm forced to confront the possibility that my past is not as dead as I thought. The idea of Grandmother out there, scheming and manipulating, fills me with a dread I haven't felt in years.

And Scarlett...the woman who has consumed my thoughts since our first meeting. Despite everything, despite the fact that she wants me dead, I found myself drawn to her.

Was it because I saw a reflection of myself in her? Another lost soul, twisted and turned by Grandmother's machinations? Or is it something more, this connection I don't understand?

I shake my head, trying to clear my thoughts. I can't afford to be distracted, not now. Not with Grandmother's shadow looming over everything.

What this means for the Syndicate...it's unthinkable. I need to talk to Hadria.

But I need to calm my mind first.

So I head to the training room, naturally, hoping to lose myself in the familiar rhythm of training. The burn of my muscles, the sweat on my brow, the single-minded focus required—it's always been my escape.

And it works...until I'm interrupted.

Aurora and Marco come in after half an hour, good-naturedly shit-talking each other as they prepare to spar. Aurora smiles at me, her eyes bright with admiration. "Lyssa! I should have known you'd be here."

I manage a tight smile, my mind still preoccupied with the ghosts of my past.

"Hadria says we'll have some new recruits soon," Aurora continues, oblivious to my inner turmoil. "I'm sure you'll whip them into shape in no time."

Her words trigger a flood of memories. Training Aurora, pushing her to her limits, making her into something she was not, and never should have been. And before her, countless others.

My methods—are they too similar to Grandmother's? Have I become the very monster I sought to destroy?

The thought chills me. I've always prided myself on being different from Grandmother, on being better. But faced with the reality of my own actions, I'm not so sure. The grueling hours, the relentless drills. Did I push the recruits too hard? Did I cross the line from mentor to tormentor?

Faces flash through my mind. Fear in their eyes, bruises on their bodies. At the time, I told myself it was necessary, that I was making them stronger, better.

But maybe I was just perpetuating the cycle of abuse that Grandmother started.

The thought is too much to bear. Abruptly, I turn to Aurora and Marco. “You two can have the room. I have some business to attend to.”

I don’t wait for a response, just about sprinting up to Hadria’s room. I need to talk to her. Now.

But she’s not there. Her door guard tells me she went up to the roof, and that’s where I find her—in the rooftop pool, lazily swimming laps. She’s alone, vulnerable. The sight makes me...

I’m not someone who panics, but this must be what panic feels like, I think.

“You shouldn’t be wandering around without protection,” I call out to her, voice tight with tension. “God, you’re worse than Mrs. G. And a lot of people have good reason to want you dead, Hades.”

Hadria swims lazily to the edge of the pool and looks up at me. “I’m in the heart of Bianchi territory, Lyssa. I’m as safe as can be in this city.”

We’re all getting way too comfortable in my opinion, walking around like we’re untouchable. So I fold my arms and glare down at her. “We need to talk. Outside the hotel.”

Something in my tone must convey the gravity of the situation. Hadria swims rapidly to the ladder and hauls herself out. “I need to shower and dress. Meet me downstairs in fifteen—we’ll go to Elysium.”

We take twin motorbikes, and the ride to the estate passes without me fully registering it, my mind still consumed by the implications of Grandmother’s return.

As we pull up to the still-under-construction mansion, passing through the guard house at the gate—still staffed, and always will be, even though the bulk of the Syndicate is elsewhere right now—I'm struck by how different it looks. The previous, imposing Brutalist structure has been razed to the ground. In its place, a modern, light-filled mansion is taking shape.

It's a fitting metaphor, I suppose. Out with the old, in with the new. A chance to start over, to build something better.

I kind of miss the old place, though.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

We don't go into the house. Instead, we walk to the night garden, Aurora's pride and joy. Even in the chaos of construction, it's a tranquil oasis. Hadria takes a moment to check on the plants, ever the dutiful fiancée. "I'll have to tell Aurora the garden is thriving," she murmurs, more to herself than to me.

She settles on a stone bench, fixing me with a piercing stare. "Okay. What's this about?"

And so, for the first time, I tell Hadria everything. My childhood under Grandmother's brutal reign, the years of abuse disguised as training, the day I finally snapped and slit her throat. I've never spoken of it before, not to anyone. But if Grandmother is truly alive, Hadria needs to know the full extent of the threat we face.

"She was a monster, Hadria," I tell her calmly. "She took me—and others—as a child, broke us down, and rebuilt us in her image. Even me, the one she liked to call her favorite, I was nothing more than a tool to her, a weapon."

I pause, the memories threatening to overwhelm me again. I haven't thought about any of this for years. The countless hours of drills, the punishments for even the slightest misstep. The way Grandmother's eyes would gleam with a sick sort of pride when I finally mastered a new technique.

"I thought I was strong, thought I could handle anything she threw at me. But..." I shake my head, unwilling to voice my thoughts. "When I broke free, when I slit her throat, I thought it was over. I thought I was free. But now, with this Scarlett...what she's told me about Grandmother, it's all coming back. And I—I find myself—" I break off.

“Yes?” Hadria prompts. It’s the only word she’s said so far.

“I find myself afraid,” I say slowly, finally identifying that tight knot in my gut. “And I am not used to fear, Hades.”

“No,” she says quietly. “I don’t imagine you are.” She thinks for a moment. “This Scarlett...you said Grandmother sent her to kill you—but it’s also revenge for her brother’s death?”

“That’s what Scarlett believes, at least. But I don’t even know whether I killed her brother or not. It’s a possibility, of course. But it also could be one of Grandmother’s lies, another way to control her.”

Hadria is silent for a long moment, her brow furrowed in thought. “And what about this Scarlett herself? What do you make of her?”

I hesitate, unsure how to put my conflicted feelings into words. “She’s...a fighter. Determined, relentless. She has a fire in her, Hadria. A fire that Grandmother is looking to use for her own ends.” I swallow hard, my next words difficult to voice. “In a way, Scarlett reminds me of myself. Of who I used to be, before I broke free.”

Understanding dawns in her eyes, along with a warning. “You think you can save her.”

I reach back to tighten my customary ponytail, frustration welling up inside me. “I don’t know. Maybe. But whatever else she is, she’s the key to stopping Grandmother, to ending this once and for all. She’s my way in. And Hades—we have to stop Grandmother. If you want Juno Bianchi at this wedding of yours, we must eliminate her.”

“Is Juno Bianchi even aware of her? I wasn’t, until this moment.”

I fold my arms and give her a hard look. “Whether she is or not is immaterial. I will not allow you to invite the Bianchi Boss to town while Grandmother is out there, uncontained. It would end in disaster.”

She doesn’t really seem to get how dangerous Grandmother is, and Hadria doesn’t like being told what to do, either. But I’m one of the very few people in this whole wide world that she’ll listen to. She stays silent for a long moment, her gaze distant. When she speaks, her voice is cool. “I will have Juno Bianchi at my wedding, Lyssa. So that means we take out this—this Grandmother.”

“Me,” I correct her. “This is my mess.”

She regards me for a moment, and when she speaks her voice is gentle. “You’re not alone anymore, Lyssa. You’re not that little girl on the streets. You have an army behind you if you want it.”

“I know,” I assure her. “I do. But this is... This is something I need to do. Like you and Nero. You get me?”

Her face hardens. She understands exactly what I mean. “I get you. So what’s your first move—where is her HQ?”

That, I’m not sure about. “She’s not stationed where she used to be,” I tell her. “I’ve kept an eye on that place over the years—the one I grew up in. It was out near the docks, but it got sold off and converted into apartment blocks fifteen years ago. But I’ll find her.”

“You could ask Johnny de Luca to nose around. He’s useful for things like that. Knows a lot of people.”

I don’t love the idea of getting anyone from the Bianchi Family involved. Johnny de

Luca enjoys doing favors, and he seems to be under instructions to dole them out plentifully to the Syndicate. But the problem with favors is, you end up owing someone. “If I need to, I’ll ask him,” I say, just so she won’t press the matter. “But right now, Scarlett is enough of a lead.”

“This Scarlett,” she begins, her brows drawing together dangerously. “She should be dead already, Lyssa.”

“I need to keep her alive,” I say at once. “For now, anyway. She’s my only link to Grandmother.”

Hadria thinks it over, but in the end she nods. “You can keep the assassin alive, for now. But hear me loud and clear—the moment she’s no more use, she dies. Her crimes against the Syndicate cannot go unanswered. Chicago must remain stable and the Syndicate’s reputation must remain sterling.”

By “sterling,” she means “ruthless, merciless and brutal,” of course. But Scarlett lives. For now.

The thought shouldn’t bring me as much relief as it does.

CHAPTER 15

Scarlett

I return to Grandmother's house, the high-rise, my heart so heavy with the weight of my failure that I feel like I've left it on the first floor as the elevator swoops upward. The luxurious surroundings of the penthouse feel hollow and oppressive. As I step into Grandmother's study, I steel myself for the inevitable punishment.

Grandmother sits there in her high-backed chair, her eyes cold and calculating. "Well?"

She already knows the answer, must be able to see it in my face. "I..." I let my arms rise and flop. "I failed."

"Again, Scarlett?"

I bow my head, hoping she won't see the whole truth in my eyes. Yes, I failed. But I also want to know the truth about Adam—about Lyssa—and there's no way I'm telling Grandmother about my conversation with the Wolf. "I was too injured from the training with Ariadne. Lyssa managed to kick me in the same spot and I?"

"Excuses!" Grandmother slams her hand on the desk, the sound echoing through the room. I jump despite myself. "I have no use for excuses, Scarlett. Only results."

"I understand, Grandmother. All I can do is apologize."

There's a horrible tone in her voice when she says, "That's not all you can do, girl."

I suck in a breath and try to raise my chin, keep eye contact. I need to be brave. “I’ll accept whatever punishment you deem necessary.”

Her smile is cruel. “You will undergo the water treatment. Perhaps that will remind you of the cost of failure.”

My blood runs cold at her words. The water treatment—a more banal name for what it really is, water-boarding—is designed to break the will and test the limits of endurance. I’ve had it threatened before, but never carried out.

But now I have no choice.

Not only I have pledged myself to Grandmother’s cause in return for my own vengeance, I need to make sure she doesn’t think too deeply about what happened tonight with Lyssa.

Like why I’m still alive, for example. Though I’m not too sure about that myself...

“Yes, Grandmother,” I say. “As you wish.”

Hours later—or is it days?—I lie soaked and shaking on the floor of the torture room behind Grandmother’s bedroom, wracked with shudders, lungs burning with every breath. Water boarding is every bit as terrible as I imagined, a relentless assault, a drowning that never ends...

And oh how Ariadne enjoyed inflicting it on me.

My punishment was her reward. Maybe she feels she has her payback now for what happened in the bathroom. I hope so. I still feel bad about that, no matter how much I try not to.

As I stare at the ceiling and shiver, my mind drifts to Lyssa once more, our encounter earlier tonight. Was it tonight? Last night? Two days ago? I have no idea. There are no windows, no clocks in the punishment room.

But Lyssa is a constant in my mind.

I keep thinking about the concern in her eyes when she saw my injuries even as she had me pinned against the wall, stiletto point to my throat. The way she asked who had hurt me. It was a moment of genuine care, a flicker of humanity I never expected from her.

She's...

She's nothing like I expected.

I try to imagine Grandmother showing the same concern. But in the five or so years I have known her, Grandmother has never once asked about my well-being, never once shown a shred of empathy. On the contrary, she enjoys watching us hurt—all of us—and she enjoys it most of all when we hurt each other.

Is Lyssa right? Is Grandmother using me, manipulating me for her own ends?

I came into this assuming she would. Assuming that she was getting something out of this—the kills I made for her, the endurance under torture...

But Lyssa seemed to think there was a bigger plan in play.

At last the door unlocks, creaks open without a word, without sight of anyone at all. I drag myself through the thankfully-empty penthouse and go back to my rooms, limping from the fight with Lyssa and still nauseas and dizzy from the torture.

My apartment suite is a few floors down, vast but empty, the decor as cold and unforgiving as Grandmother herself. She says that comfort is a distraction for warriors, that we must focus solely on our training and get used to hardship.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

But as I collapse onto the hard, narrow cot, I compare my spartan quarters to the opulence of Grandmother's penthouse. The thick, soft carpets, the crystal chandeliers, the art on the walls...

The doubts grow stronger. If Grandmother truly believes everything she says in training, why does she surround herself with extravagance while denying her trainees the smallest comforts? Of all of us, shouldn't she be the most focused, the least distracted?

Shouldn't she have the emptiest damn room of all?

But even if it's true, if Grandmother's motives are not what they seem...does it matter? As long as I get vengeance for Adam, as long as I make his killer—Lyssa—or whoever it is—pay, does it really matter who's pulling my strings?

I knew this journey only ended one of two ways. With me in a coffin, or with me walking away. I said as much to Grandmother when she recruited me, warning her that I would stay under her tutelage only as long as needed to learn what I needed to learn.

To become what I needed to become.

And she's smiled when I said it. She'd smiled as though she knew something I didn't...

I turn over and close my eyes again, trying to shut out the swirling chaos of my thoughts. Sleep, when it comes, is fitful and haunted by dreams of water and blood.

Several days pass in a blur of training and preparation. Lyssa's tracker visits open places, public places, and waits there, tantalizing, a constant reminder of the unfinished business between us.

But I have more to do before I meet her again.

I push myself harder than ever, determined to prove my worth, to silence the doubts that plague me. Ariadne's sparring sessions are different, now. She taunts less, concentrates more. It helps level me up, because she's finally putting everything into it. We're as bruised and beaten as each other, and I seem to have won a little respect from her at last.

Or perhaps it's just wariness.

We don't talk. We just fight. Any word exchanged are only about technique.

And she doesn't call me weak or pathetic anymore.

Finally, on a rain-soaked night, I follow the tracker's signal to a motel on the outskirts of town, the kind of place where people pay by the hour and ask no questions.

The perfect meeting spot. I'll take the video and show her, and when I see that spark of recognition in her eye...

I'll kill her.

The clerk at the front desk, safely ensconced behind thick glass, barely glances at me as I enter. He slides a key across the counter without a word, his eyes already back on the small TV in the corner.

I'm expected, obviously.

I take the key and make my way to the room, my heart pounding in my chest as I get closer. I breathe slowly, try to lower the adrenaline already threatening to spike. When I open the door, Lyssa is there, sprawled on the bed with an impatient look on her face.

I stop and stare at her. Every time I see her, I forget just how—how sexy she is, the messy blonde hair pulled back in her customary ponytail, her long legs bare as she sits there in only a pair of white cotton briefs and a tank top.

I'm pretty sure she's not wearing a bra.

"God, you took ages," she says, swinging around to sit on the edge of the bed. "Where the hell have you been?" She looks more closely at me. "And what the fuck happened to y?—"

"I brought the video," I say, cutting her off.

She stares hard at me for a moment, and then shrugs. "Come on, then. Show me."

I take out a burner phone, hands shaking slightly as I pull up the footage, the only item on this phone. I had a hell of a job getting it on there and then keeping it secret. It's not that I'm expressly forbidden to share this footage with anyone. I think Grandmother just knew I never would.

And I never have. Until now.

The grainy image of Lyssa in her wolf mask, the brutal efficiency of her movements as she cuts down my brother. It's as painful to watch as ever, a raw wound that refuses to heal.

I walk away as Lyssa watches and rewatches, unable to bear the sight of it again. The familiar rage rises in my chest, a searing heat that threatens to consume me.

After what feels like an eternity, Lyssa speaks. “It’s similar to a mask I wear sometimes, I’ll give you that. And the woman moves like me. But I have no memory of this kill.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

I whirl around, my temper flaring. “You’ve murdered so often it’s all become a blur?” Lyssa lets me rage, her face impassive as I continues to hurl accusations and insults. She waits until I’ve exhausted myself, until the anger has burned itself out, leaving only emptiness in its wake.

“I don’t remember names,” Lyssa says calmly, as if I’d never lost my temper at all, “but I remember every kill. And this? This isn’t me.” She throws the phone down on the bed. “Which means Grandmother is manipulating you, Scarlett. And it’s up to you to decide what you want to do about it.”

I stare at her, my mind reeling. “I want justice for my brother,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper.

Lyssa cocks her head, a curious look on her face. “Justice? Or vengeance? Because those are two very different things. But either way...I’m prepared to help you get it.”

I blink, shock coursing through me. “Why? Why would you help me when I...” When I’ve killed her compatriots.

Her friends.

Lyssa sighs, running a hand through her hair and then automatically re-tightening her ponytail. “Because in part, it’s my fault. If I’d killed Grandmother when I had the chance, you wouldn’t be in this mess. And because...”

She trails off, something unreadable in her eyes.

But I don't have the time or the inclination to decipher it, because the weight of everything I've lost, everything I've sacrificed in the name of revenge, is pressing down on me. The brother I'll never see again, the life I'll never have.

The sheer, crushing unfairness of it all.

Something breaks inside me, a dam bursting under the pressure of too much grief, too much pain. And for the first time since Adam died, I begin to cry.

Great, wracking sobs that shake my entire body, tears streaming down my face in an unstoppable flood. I'm dimly aware of Lyssa moving towards me, of strong arms wrapping around me in an awkward embrace.

I collapse to the floor and she goes with me, holding me as I weep, saying nothing. I'm so grateful for her silence that I only turn into her and hug her harder. There's nothing to say, after all. Nothing can possibly be said to make things better. And when my tears finally subside, when I'm left hollow and aching in their wake...

I look up into her face, and I kiss her.

CHAPTER 16

Scarlett

It's a kiss born out of my desperation and need, a clash of lips and teeth and tongues—but Lyssa is just as frantic as I am, and that surprises me more than anything.

She wants me.

She really wants, me, devouring me so completely that when I let my head fall back

and gasp for air, she keeps on kissing down my neck, her hands sliding up my body, over my ribs?—

And then she stops.

“Fuck. Scar, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t?—”

“What are you talking about?” I pant out, pulling her mouth back to my neck. “Keep going. Please.”

She brushes her lips over my throat, back up to my ear. “You sure?”

“Please,” I beg again, and then I force myself to pause, to take the time to convince her. “That time we—in the shower—it’s the first time in five years that my brain finally shut up. It felt good, Lyssa. So good. I want you to make me feel good again. Help me feel...something other than the rage.”

Her dark eyes search mine for any trace of uncertainty. I hold her gaze. I’m not backing down now. Then, as if finally deciding, she hums low in her throat and puts her lips back against mine, soft and subtle, so that I lose myself in the press of her lips and the skill of her tongue, trying to go after her when she pulls away.

“I wanna take my time with you,” she tells me. “If we’re doing this, Scar, we’re doing it right. So get up—” She pulls me up with her, and we stumble over to the bed, where she rolls me onto my back and mounts me gently, sitting up with her thighs spread wide over mine. “You want to stop any time, you tell me,” she says, as she reaches for the button on my jeans.

“Take your top off,” is all I say. She gets my jeans open and then she complies, yanking off her top, pulling off the tank-bra she’s got on underneath, so that her breasts bounce free. She lets me fondle them while she works her fingers into my

panties, watching my face as she explores. It's tight, because my jeans are only half off, and she gets frustrated after a second, tugs them my jeans more?—

“That's better,” she murmurs, sliding those long, skilled fingers right down between my legs. I bite back a moan as she teases me, circling my clit with her index finger and then further down, dipping inside me to see how wet I am for her.

Her eyes darken with satisfaction when she pulls it back out, my juices shining on her fingertips. “Oh, Scar,” she sighs, licking her fingers clean. “You're so wet for me already.”

Before I can respond, she's leaning over to push up my top to expose my bra, gathering my tits in her hands, kneading and squeezing them still in their bra cups, bending forward to let her tongue trace the valley between my breasts. She teases through the lace at my already-hard nipples in a way that sends bolts of need straight down to where I'm already throbbing for her. And when she fishes them out completely and takes my right nipple into her mouth, sucking hard, it's enough to make me arch off the bed and moan aloud.

Page 34

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

Then she's back to my mouth like she's starving for me, her kisses branding me. Like I'm something to be coveted and cared for, not just another conquest.

It's different, this time. Feels different to the shower. Just as incredibly good, but more...

More caring, somehow.

I never imagined the Wolf could be caring, not like this...

She trails her mouth lower, her tongue sliding down my abdomen, sending goosebumps in its wake as she gets closer to the ache between my legs. My breath catches when her hot breath ghosts over my center.

Then she slides off to the side, propping herself up on one elbow and looking down at me on the pillow, smiling a little at my frustrated disappointment. "I told you, doll. I want to do right by you tonight." Her hand slides back into my underwear, stroking and petting, encouraging my legs to open wider. "That's it, honey. Open up those silky thighs for me."

Her eyes are fixed on my face as she spreads my pussy wide, and then she lifts up her breast and offers me a nipple to suck on. "Keep busy with that, and I'll keep busy with this," she says, sliding her fingers up the soaking seam of my pussy. I moan around her nipple, and she pulls me in close, cradling my head as she keeps the fingers of her other hand playing over my clit.

I lash my tongue around her hard, tight bud, sucking and tonguing as her fingers work

me carefully, steadily. I focus on her warmth, on the scent of my arousal rising hot and damp between us, try not to think about anything else as she sets fire to my every nerve ending.

She pulls away just for a moment, just to strip off the rest of her clothes, and then yanks my jeans right down. “I’m gonna make you come, honey,” she tells me, rolling on top of me once she’s helped me with both my shoes and my jeans. “Just like this, I’m gonna fuck down on that hot, greedy little cunt of yours. So I can watch that gorgeous face when you shatter apart for me.”

The words alone are enough to send a shiver of anticipation down my spine, and I grip the sheets as Lyssa positions herself between my splayed thighs, spreading her cunt wide and lowering it down on my own spread-open folds.

“Ohh—” I breathe out as the warm, wet sensation envelops me, the feeling of Lyssa’s slickness against my own making me pulse with immediate need. Her eyes are locked onto mine, her heavy breaths intermingling with my own as she slowly, teasingly grinds her cunt into mine.

“Lyssa,” I whimper, unable to hold back the moan that escapes my lips. Her response is to suck my lower lip into her mouth and rock her hips even harder. I can’t believe how good she feels as we move together, her clit firm against mine, rubbing and teasing as she rolls her hips.

Her eyes never leave mine. It’s like she’s trying to brand every second of this into her mind. Into her memory.

She groans low and deep, sounding almost desperate—God, she’s just as affected by this connection as I am.

“More,” I beg. “Don’t stop.”

“Oh, sweetheart,” she pants, “I could do this all fucking day.” She shifts my leg, grabs one of my quivering breasts for purchase, and picks up the pace until a slick squelching noise fills the room with each delicious push. All I can do is hold onto her, my hands digging into her ass, helping the muscles clench and move as we fuck with an increasingly fast pace.

She lets go of my breast to raise herself up high on her arms, her back arched, nipples swaying temptingly back and forth between us. “You like this?” she pants out. “You like how I fuck you, honey? You tell me, and I’ll let you come.”

“You feel so good,” I manage to get out, and then I whimper, “Harder. Please?—”

Lyssa responds by clamping her teeth down on my shoulder, just this side of painful, as she pistons her hips faster and faster, her clit swelling almost impossibly hard against mine, working me into a frenzy of need. “Come for me,” she demands. “Come on, come all over my cunt.”

The only thing in the whole world right now is the feel of her soaked, hot flesh against mine. I let out a strangled moan as the waves of pleasure crash over me in rolling, unstoppable waves. She fucks me through it, scoffing as I beg for her to stop, riding me through the first orgasm and right on in to a second, her strong thighs never faltering, and her cunt like wet satin on mine.

“Gorgeous,” she murmurs as she slows at last, and I’m thankful for it, my clit pulsing and aching, oversensitive. But she stays right there, letting me pant into her face until my breath slows and the world starts to come back into focus. “You get a two-minute break, sweetheart, and then I want you to come for me again.”

I groan, pushing back my sweat-soaked bangs. “Don’t think I can,” I murmur.

“You have to,” she tells me. “Because I didn’t yet, and I want to spill all over you

while you're in the middle of it. Mark out my territory." She smirks as a full-body shudder goes through me. "Oh, you like that idea?"

No point pretending otherwise. "Yeah," I tell her. "Yeah, I do. So come on—quit being lazy and get me all wet."

And when Lyssa leans down to take my mouth again in a deep, teeth-filled kiss, I feel my mind going quiet once more. She starts grinding again, moaning into my neck as she finds the right angle, the right rhythm, gasping out her pleasure in hot breaths against my skin. Our kisses are frantic, hungry and desperate for each other, her hands tangling in my hair as she rubs hard against my aching, sensitive flesh. It's intense and good and right. This is exactly what I've been craving without even realizing it—someone to fuck my brains out enough that all the bad stuff just...

Falls away.

The friction between us grows more intense, and I can feel myself starting to come undone again as she moves faster and harder, grinding down on my clit with such precision that I think I'm going to be ruined for all other women.

And that's perfectly fine by me...

I come for the third time in a short, painful burst, crying out as the orgasm shoots white-hot through me, and she's right there with me, soaking me just like she said she was going to, and the idea of having her mark me like that sends ghost-shudders through my cunt again, making me grit my teeth hard at the pleasure-pain sensation of it.

Afterward, as we lie still tangled in the sheets, and she's stroking up and down my side, Lyssa speaks. Her voice is soft, almost regretful.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

“Listen, Scar—I don’t want you to misunderstand. I’ll help you find your brother’s killer. But when it’s done...I’ll have to kill you. I have my orders from Hades, and you killed Syndicate members. There’s no way out of it. You gotta take what’s coming to you.”

I close my eyes, the weight of her words bringing me right back down to earth. I know she’s right. I knew where this path ended from the moment I started down it.

But even so, even with the specter of death hanging over me...I can’t bring myself to regret it. Because on any other path, I never would have met the woman lying warm and soft next to me, stroking my hair back from my face gently.

“I understand,” I say, my voice steady. “As long as you understand I won’t go without a fight.”

“I never thought different.”

She still sounds regretful, like she knows already that I won’t survive. But me? I have different plans.

“Then I accept your terms,” I tell her, then add, “You never know, I might die before we get to that point. Or you might. On this little quest of ours.”

Lyssa grins, but something like respect flickers in her eyes.

She leans over to turn out the light, and as we lie there in the darkness, the rain beating against the windows, I know my fate is sealed, one way or another.

But for the first time in a long time...I'm not alone.

CHAPTER 17

Lyssa

The exclusive wedding boutique might as well be half a world away from the grittier side of Chicago, a haven of distilled femininity that seems to exist outside of time. As I step through the door, the delicate chime of the bell echoing, I'm wrapped in the scent of roses, and my boots immediately leave scuffs in the fluffy white carpet. The walls are lined with only a few dresses but a lot more full-size posters that look like they belong in *Vogue*, each one showcasing a masterpiece of silk and lace, tulle and satin. A large, ornate mirror dominates one wall, the gilded frame glinting in the glow of the mini-chandeliers overhead.

I hate everything about the place immediately.

I hate the smell of it, I hate the puffy dresses, and I especially hate the shop assistants, three immaculately-dressed women with perfectly coiffed hair and painted faces, who greet me with practiced smiles. One of them holds out a silver tray bearing a flute of champagne. The crystal glass sparkles in the soft light, the bubbles dancing merrily within as the assistant smiles behind it.

Okay, maybe I hate her a little less than the others, if she's going to keep me in drink. I grab the glass, scanning the room. There's no customers here because it's 3 a.m. or somewhere about there, and the shop opened specially for Ms. Imperoli.

"Where is she?" I ask.

Before they can answer, Hadria emerges from a changing room, clad in a frothy, lacy pantsuit with a bustle in the jacket. She does a little twirl, the bustle bouncing around

as she does.

“What do you think?” she asks, her voice tinged with a rare note of uncertainty.

“You look like one of those crochet dolls that old ladies put over toilet rolls in the bathroom. And that bustle? Not doing your ass any favors, Hades.”

Hadria fixes me with the same stare that makes half the Syndicate quake. “You’re not helping. This isn’t exactly fun for me either, you know.”

I step closer, lowering my voice. “Yeah? Well, I have some news that’ll make your day even less fun.”

She sighs, her lacy shoulders slumping. “Come into the changing room. We can talk there.”

I follow her into the spacious room, which has a whole rack of suits lining one wall. Hadria pulls off her outfit and throws it carelessly onto a pile in the corner, then slips into the next option, the lace replaced by sleek satin. The cream fabric shimmers in the soft light, the color a perfect complement to her pale-as-fuck skin.

But it’s way too goddamn shiny.

“Why on earth aren’t you getting something custom made?” I ask, running my fingers over the fabric. It’s cool to the touch, the satin slipping through my fingers like water. Nice to sleep in, maybe, as sheets. But for clothes?

“I am,” she snaps. “But the dressmaker wanted me to find the kind of style I wanted, first.”

I stare at the suit, my brow furrowed. “This is better than the last one. But they’re

both too...frou-frou for you. Stand over there, for God's sake. Let me handle this.”

As I browse through the options, I fill Hadria in on the latest developments with Scarlett. I tell her about our meeting, the video of her brother's murder, Grandmother's involvement. But I leave out the more intimate details.

Scarlett crying in my arms.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

The way her body felt against mine, the taste of her tears on my lips.

Something tells me Hades might not look too kindly on me sleeping with a target.

“Here. This one,” I say when I’m done, handing Hadria a simple raw silk suit, the lines sharp and clean. The fabric is a soft ivory. It’s understated elegance at its finest.

She slips it on, a sigh of relief escaping her lips. The suit molds to her body like a second skin, the raw silk whispering as she turns around to check her ass. “God, I was starting to think I’d have to look like a wedding cake. But this...this is nice.”

I nod, taking in the way the suit hugs her lean frame. “It suits you.”

A moment of silence stretches between us, although Hadria doesn’t seem to notice, transfixed on her reflection. I take a breath, steeling myself for what I’m about to suggest. The words feel heavy on my tongue, each one a pebble I’m forcing myself to spit out.

“You know, this Scarlett—I was thinking she could be a good recruit for the Syndicate. Once we get her away from Grandmother.”

Hadria’s head snaps around from the mirror to meet my eyes, astonishment in her pale eyes. “Absolutely not. Anyone who hurts the Syndicate must be made an example of. The assassin dies, as soon as this Grandmother is dealt with. I’m surprised to even hear you suggest it.”

She turns back to the mirror again, smoothing down the suit with a critical eye. Her

reflection smiles back at her, the cold calculation in her eyes softening for a moment. “Do you think Aurora will like it?” she asks.

I force a smile, pushing down my protests about Scarlett. The thought of Aurora, with her wide-eyed innocence and gentle soul—traits she maintained even through my training—is a painful contrast to the shadows I find myself in with Scarlett. “She’ll love it. Leave the meringue dress to her.”

Hadria nods, satisfied with my answer. But as we leave the boutique, the dark sky lightening to pre-dawn, I’m not so satisfied.

I don’t want to kill Scarlett.

The realization has been coming slow, just like the sunrise that makes me blink as I say goodbye to Hadria outside the boutique. But it’s unmistakable, now that I see it.

I don’t want to kill her.

I told her I feel responsible for her creation, because I didn’t kill Grandmother when I had the chance. And that was true, but...it’s more than that. I see myself in her. Her rage is so familiar, so tempting. I want to help her. To give her a chance, the way I found mine.

And I don’t really know why. She’s no innocent, that’s for sure. She’s killed our people and that’s unforgivable. But there’s something under that hard shell that Grandmother has formed over her. A naiveté, perhaps?

Sometimes, the things she says...they hit me right in the gut. It’s not fair, she said. Of course things aren’t fair. But she actually thinks they should be. Scarlett doesn’t really understand the way the world works. I find naiveté irritating, usually—like Suzy Sunshine at first. But Aurora grew on me.

So has Scarlett, I guess.

But I'm loyal to the Syndicate. To Hadria. I've always done what needs to be done, no matter the cost. And if Hadria says Scarlett must die...then that's what will happen.

Even if it means burying a part of myself along with her.

I take a deep breath, the cool night air filling my lungs. The city is quiet at this hour, the streets empty save for the occasional stray cat or early morning jogger. It's a moment of peace in a world that knows none, a fleeting glimpse of what life could be like if I was anyone else.

But I'm not anyone else. I'm Lyssa, the Wolf of the Styx Syndicate, soon to be the most feared and respected organization in Chicago. We have a reputation to uphold. There's no room for sentiment, no place for the glow of warmth that I feel when I think about Scarlett.

I push my feelings down, locking them away in the same place I keep all my other weaknesses. The place that Grandmother tried so hard to burn out of me, the place that I've fought tooth and nail to keep down ever since I left. It's a battle I wage every day, a war against my own humanity.

Humanity is not useful to someone like me. So I need to forget about Scarlett's grief, forget about the guilty I feel for leaving Grandmother alive, and focus on getting the intel I need.

"Enough," I mutter, as I reach my motorbike. Time to focus on the video again. I sent a copy to myself, so I've watched it over and over by now.

Who the hell was that woman, and why was she trying so hard to make it look like

she was me?

CHAPTER 18

Scarlett

“Well, it could be Ariadne,” I say in slow response to Lyssa’s question. “Maybe.”

We’re meeting again in another dingy hotel, and I can’t help remembering what happened last time we were in a place like this.

Page 37

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

Neither can Lyssa, judging from the way she looks at me when she thinks I won't notice.

We're seated opposite each other with a table in between, but I'm pretty sure she has a handgun secured to the underside.

I would.

As it is, I have a new stiletto switchblade hidden in my sleeve, and a garrote in my back pocket. Just in case.

Between us, Lyssa has printed out stills from the video, and I'm forcing myself to look at them, although I keep getting distracted. Across the table, Lyssa's features are still coolly beautiful in the low light of the room, her smooth brow furrowed as she studies the photographs scattered before us. The muted glow of the laptop screen to the left, where the video is on pause, lends a flickering glow as my brother's murder plays on a continuous loop.

My eyes go back and forth from the video to Lyssa, trying to figure it out. Is it her? Is she just playing the cruelest of games, and trying to win my trust?

Even if it's not her, whoever is behind this is toying with me, leaving a trail of breadcrumbs that seems designed to lure me further into the forest rather than out. Part of me even wonders if this is all some sadistic test crafted by Grandmother, a fresh torment designed to further corrupt what fragile shreds of innocence still cling to my soul.

Lyssa's eyes meet mine, those eyes that have witnessed so much death and brutality, and I stare back defiantly. Let her read my face if she wants. There's an edge to her stare, a predatory sharpness that sends pure animal instincts ricocheting down my spine.

I'm being studied, assessed as potential prey by a powerful apex hunter.

Run. Run.

My heart beats out the command, but I ignore it.

It should terrify me, this brush with the monster. But it seems to awaken something else, something primal and forbidden that makes my belly flutter and my thighs squeeze together. The intoxicating fantasy of witnessing the beast unrestrained, of having that feral intensity focused solely on me in the throes of...

No. Nope. No way, not again.

"Ariadne," she says thoughtfully. "Who is she?"

"She's...well, she's one of us. Of Grandmother's, I mean. She's been with Grandmother since her teens. She's around your age now, I guess. Early thirties."

Only now does it hit me that—yeah. It really could be Ariadne. Her hair was long the first time I saw her at my brother's funeral, driving the town car. She'd cut it short not long after, by the time I first came to Grandmother's house. With her long hair in a ponytail like the woman in the video, add a mask, and...

My hand clutches hard around the photo, crumpling the corner.

Lyssa sees it, but ignores it. "So let's say it's her. On Grandmother's orders, maybe?"

If Grandmother had her eye on you, wanted you as a recruit, well—” She indicates the video again. “She might have figured out this would be a way to bring you into the flock.”

A bitter laugh escapes me. “Maybe. And to be honest, Ariadne would love nothing more than to hurt me. She hates me, and I don’t really know why.” The words tumble out before I can rein them in: “She hates me maybe even more than she hates you.”

Every time Ariadne mentions Lyssa, I’ve noticed that fierce hatred. I just never really thought about it until now, because the Wolf was supposed to be my trophy.

So it didn’t really matter one way or another what Ariadne felt.

To my surprise, Lyssa’s lips curve into a slow, wry smile. “She hates me? Bitch doesn’t even know me! But I guess Grandmother filled her head with all sorts of tales about the Big Bad Wolf—just like she did with you.”

I shift in my seat again at the sound of her self-appointed moniker, at the hint of dark promise it carries. I try to envision the formidable woman across from me—the infamous Wolf of the Styx Syndicate—undergoing the same tortures I have. Grandmother’s most accomplished student, turned against her.

“How did you get so good so fast? You said you’d only been in Grandmother’s house for a few years?”

Lyssa’s question catches me off guard, its curiosity at odds with the hard-edged tone that has colored most of our dealings up to this point. I blink slowly, but I heard her right.

She thinks I’m good.

“I...trained, from childhood. Not with Grandmother, I mean—” I break off with a sigh. “I was into martial arts.” My gaze strays from Lyssa’s, drifting inward as memories of simpler times rise up. “My brother, Adam, he took classes first. But I insisted on tagging along, wouldn’t take no for an answer. Didn’t give my parents much choice in the matter—or him, poor guy. No twelve year old wants their baby sister tagging along.” A sad, wistful smile tugs at the corners of my mouth as I recall the brash determination of my younger self, so stubbornly fixated on keeping pace with Adam.

I worshipped him. He was my whole world.

Lyssa nods slowly. “But it’s more than that. You’re a natural, Scarlett. The way you move—it takes me years to beat those instincts into Syndicate recruits.”

“Beat?” I ask sharply.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

“Not literally.” She looks down at the photographs again. “I don’t want to be like her. Like Grandmother. I try to be more...” She trails off. “It’s a damn shame you chose this path instead of sticking with medicine,” she says at last. “You’re good at what you do, Scarlett, no doubt about it. But I think you’d be even better at healing people than killing them.”

I open my mouth, a reflexive protest rising—but then I snap my lips shut again as I swallow back the torrent of emotion.

She’s right. I know that. I’ve tried so hard to strangle out the knowledge, because it was pointless for my quest. As a doctor, I could have helped so many, could have made a difference...instead of dealing out violence and death.

But that door is closed to me now.

Lyssa regards me for a long, weighted moment, those deep, dark eyes seeming to stare straight through to the parts of me I’ve fought so hard to conceal. When she finally speaks, her voice is low, nearly gentle. “You’re not convinced, are you? That this woman isn’t me.” She gestures at the video again.

I wish she’d stop doing that. I don’t want to watch it again.

“I’m not entirely convinced,” I agree slowly. “It could be Ariadne. Or you could just be bullshitting me to get close to Grandmother. That’s what you really want, isn’t it? To have another shot at her.”

I’m not stupid. And at least she’s transparent enough not to deny it.

“Mm,” she murmurs thoughtfully. “Does that bother you?”

I think about it. “I don’t know,” I tell her truthfully. “I don’t really care. I only want one thing?—”

“Vengeance,” she says. “Yeah. Well, in that case, I have an idea. But you’re not going to like it.” She allows the words to hang between us, drawing out the tension until I make a wordless Well? face. “We need to go back to the scene,” she says at last. “Where your brother was killed.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, but it does nothing to halt the onslaught of memories—the tang thick on the air, the warm wet flooding out of him...

“Why?” I demand.

“There are things we might pick up on that we can’t tell from photos or video.”

I want to argue more, but I can see her point.

My parents no longer own the place—they sold it after Adam’s murder—and I think it’s a dry cleaner or a coin-operated laundry now. But the alley in the back...I can imagine it hasn’t changed at all.

“Well, you’re right about one thing,” I tell her. “I don’t like it. But...we should do it anyway.” I suck in a shuddering breath, shoving down the swell of emotions that threaten to drag me under. “In the meantime, I’ll see what I can shake loose from Ariadne.”

A muscle ticks in Lyssa’s jaw, the only outward sign of whatever inner argument she’s having with herself. Then she gives a minute nod of acceptance, as though she’d expected nothing less.

“Let’s meet tomorrow night, then,” she says. “Late. Like tonight.”

She gathers up the photos and then, after a moment, hands them to me. I take them automatically, though I don’t want them. And then she yanks a holster out from under the table, just like I knew she had hidden there. She says nothing about it. I say nothing about it.

She just heads toward the door, pausing on the threshold, shoulders straight and body angled halfway back toward me. Her head turns slightly, fixing me with a look over one sculpted shoulder. “Get some rest, Scar,” she murmurs, and there’s an undercurrent to the words I can’t quite catch. “I’ll see you tomorrow night.”

I almost ask her to wait. To stay.

To come to bed with me again.

But then she’s gone. Silence rushes in to fill the vacuum—suffocating and immense, broken only by the pounding of blood in my ears. I sink back on the bed, clutching the photographs against my heart as I think about Adam.

About his friendly smile, and the way he could hug me so tight I thought nothing could ever hurt me when my big brother was around.

Tomorrow, I’ll return to the place where my old life ended, with the very person who might have ended it. Or at least, I’ll revisit the moment that cleared the way for Grandmother’s poison to take root.

But that’s not entirely fair. I chose this path, after all. I turn on my side, curling up, then press the heels of my hands against my eye sockets until stars burst across the blackness.

How many lies and half-truths am I blindly following now? Lyssa says one thing. Grandmother says another. And if it was Ariadne who killed Adam, will I turn my wrath towards her, instead?

How many more people need to die before this rage inside me is satisfied?

CHAPTER 19

Lyssa

I return to the Empire Grand still mulling over tonight's encounter with Scarlett. The revelations about Grandmother's manipulation and the mystery surrounding her brother's death weigh more heavily on me than I expected, intertwining with some strange stirring in my heart.

Scarlett's a killer. She has killed my friends, my comrades. But now I feel torn between my loyalty to the Syndicate and the growing connection I feel with her, a bond forged through shared trauma.

Because I know exactly what she must have suffered under Grandmother, and that? That is my fault, even if her brother's death wasn't. If I'd done my job right all those years ago, made sure the kill was good, then Scarlett would never have been made.

I can't get her eyes out of my mind, the way they shine with a mix of rage and vulnerability. I've managed to stamp out both in myself over the years, leaving cold, cracked rock where a torrent of lava used to be. There's a fire still burning in Scarlett that both exasperates and intrigues me.

And I can't stop thinking about the way she moved against me in the shower, and again in the bed, the way her touch ignited something deep within me, something I thought long buried in a rock-hard heart.

I nearly kissed her again tonight. Nearly offered to stay, to cuddle up to her in bed like we're some kind of...

But I knew I should go, and I'm glad I did, even if part of me wishes I'd stayed. I shouldn't tease her, shouldn't make her think this thing between us will end any other way except with me following orders.

I consider heading to the training room to work off the restless energy coursing through my veins, but something pulls me to Mrs. Graves' room instead. She's been a constant in my life since those early days when Hadria and I were like two wild animals, suspicious of any safe haven or sense of belonging.

She never tamed us. But she fed us and sheltered us until we trusted her. Even loved her.

And I could use some advice.

I find Mrs. Graves awake and working on some housekeeping things for the new Elysium. She opens the door without asking who it is, which I've spoken to her about too many times to count.

"I have eyes in my head, Lyssa," she says impatiently, as I start to say it again. "I saw you through the peep hole."

"Yeah, well, looks can be deceiving," I counter, thinking about that woman with the wolf mask.

The exasperation in her face fades as she ushers me in. "You look like you have the weight of the world on your shoulders," she says bluntly. "What's going on?"

I hesitate, unsure how much to reveal. The feelings swirling inside me are raw and confusing, a tangled web of desire, guilt, and a longing for something I can't quite define. "Dunno," I say at last.

She just sighs and gestures for me to sit, while she sets about making me a hot chocolate. It's packet stuff, the kind the hotel stocks, but it's pretty decent, and the sweet aroma still conjures memories of our first few months under her roof. I remember my first sight of that pink, ruffly bedroom that had once belonged to her daughter, Sarah. I offered to take it when I saw the look on Hadria's face, because I could tell it was important to Mrs. G that one of us, at least, should sleep in her daughter's bed. I figured it'd bring her some kind of spiritual satisfaction, and I think it did.

It felt strange at first, sleeping in a dead girl's bed. But I was grateful that Hadria and I had been able to bring Mrs. Graves some measure of peace by avenging Sarah's murder.

And that teddy bear of Sarah's...well, Mr. Fluffikins turned out to be a good confidante over the years.

As I wrap my hands around a steaming mug now, breathing in its warmth and familiarity, Mrs. Graves settles across from me.

"What's troubling you, Lyssa?" she prompts gently. "You're not usually one for deep reflection."

I give a wry grin. "You got that right." The grin dies as I take a deep breath, the words tumbling out before I can stop them. "I think I...I'm having...feelings. For someone. Someone I shouldn't. It's...complicated."

Mrs. Graves' eyes go wide, and then she nods, her expression a mix of concern and empathy. "Matters of the heart are rarely simple, especially in this world we live in. This...person. What are they like?"

"She's...different. And yet, she's really familiar to me." I warm to my theme after

another sip of hot chocolate. Pretty sure Mrs. Graves has spiked it with Baileys. “She’s strong, but...she’s broken, too, in a way that I understand. Every time I’m around her, I—well, I want her, in a way I haven’t felt before. But I shouldn’t. I can’t.”

“Forbidden fruit is often the sweetest,” Mrs. Graves muses, a hint of a smile playing at the corners of her mouth. “But...I see something shifting in you, Lyssa. Have seen it, since Elysium was destroyed.”

I look at her in surprised, ready to protest—but as I think about it, maybe she’s right. Maybe it’s true that I’ve felt out of place ever since we moved here, to this hotel. I miss Elysium. I want to get back there. I nearly lost my life in the battle we had there, but I’d do it again if I had to. For Hadria. For the Syndicate. For...for the family that I’ve found, even though I didn’t realize until recently that that’s what we are.

“I don’t know what to do,” I admit, staring into my drink.

Mrs. Graves reaches across the table, her hand warm and reassuring on mine. “In our world, love is a luxury few can afford. It makes us vulnerable, exposes our weaknesses to those who would exploit them.”

I’m a little startled to hear her jump to the L-word so fast.

Love.

Is that what I'm feeling?

"But it's also the most powerful force on earth," Mrs. Graves goes on, "capable of transforming even the darkest of souls." She pauses, her eyes distant with memory. "When I lost Sarah, I thought I would never feel whole again. The pain was a void, consuming everything in its wake. I wanted vengeance more than I wanted life itself. But then you and Hadria came into my life, two lost girls who needed a mother's love just as much as I needed a reason to keep living."

Something stings at the corners of my eyes, and I blink rapidly until it stops. "I...I never knew how much you struggled, Mrs. G. I hope we weren't too much of a burden. I know sometimes we could be?—"

"Nonsense," she says briskly, and then she smiles, a sad, wistful expression that speaks of the scars she carries. "We all have our demons, Lyssa. The key is learning to live with them, to find the light in the darkness. And sometimes, you know, that light comes from the most unexpected places. That was you and Hadria, for me. And I want to be clear, dear—it wasn't the act of vengeance that made me whole again. It was having you two to care about. Love does that, you know."

I think of Scarlett, of the way I always feel a little unsteady around her, of the guilt I feel—but also the admiration I have for her.

And I think about her vengeance-driven fury.

"Do you really think it's possible for someone like me, though?" I ask, my throat closing hard on the words. I hardly dare to ask, because I'm afraid of the answer. "Is

it possible for someone like me to find...”

I trail off. I can’t even say the word. Haven’t I proven time and again that I’m a monster, just like the beast from the fairytales that I like to call myself after? I’m a killer-for-hire, and I even take pleasure in the work, in the thrill of the hunt and the sweet release of the kill.

And yet, Mrs. Graves is looking at me now with kindness in her eyes. She’s always seen something more in me, some spark of humanity I thought had died the day I took my first life all those years ago. She squeezes my hand now, her eyes shining with a fierce pride.

“Of course you deserve love. And you are loved, Lyssa. Here, in the Syndicate, by your family. And if this woman has captured your heart—even if you can’t be with her—it’s still a sign for you that there’s more to life than...well, than violence and vengeance.”

Vengeance. The one thing that seems to drive Scarlett. Mrs. G must know how it feels, of course. Vengeance was what she wanted, too, all those years ago.

“After Sarah...” I start, my voice catching on the name of the daughter she lost. “Did it help? Avenging her death, I mean?”

Mrs. Graves’ expression changes. Colder, maybe, or sadder. “It didn’t bring her back. And it didn’t make the pain of losing her any easier to bear. But I...well, I felt a measure of justice, knowing the monster who took her from me could no longer hurt anyone else.”

Scarlett’s quest for vengeance won’t bring her brother back from the grave, either. But perhaps, like Mrs. Graves, she seeks that twisted sense of justice, that need to make someone pay for her loss, no matter the cost.

“But Lyssa, I do need to say this...I’m not sure you should tell her how you feel,” Mrs. Graves says tentatively.

“What? Who?”

“This...woman, Lyssa. The one you have feelings for.”

I stare at her. “I don’t plan on it,” I say at last.

And something like relief comes into her face. “I know it will be difficult,” she says. “But I know there’s someone special out there for you, too.”

Things are getting weird, here. Time to bail. I suck down the rest of the hot chocolate and put the mug down. “Thank you, Mrs. G. For—for everything. I better get going.”

She rises from her seat as I do, enveloping me in a warm hug that smells like home. “You are a daughter to me, Lyssa. Never forget that. And whatever path you choose, whatever you decide to do about your feelings, I will always be here for you.” She puts her lips close to my ear and whispers softly, “And so will Hadria.”

Hadria? What does Hadria...

Wait. I stiffen in her hug. Does she think I was talking about...

Oh, fuck.

“Okay, thanks,” I manage to squeak out. “Gotta go, Mrs. G, places to be?—”

But as I beat a very fucking hasty retreat, and hope like hell Mrs. G doesn’t hear the hysterical laughter bubbling out of me as I head back to my own room, my heart feels a little lighter nonetheless.

Hadria? She thinks I have a thing for Hadria?

No wonder Mrs. G looked so surprised at first. Does she really think I'm jealous of Suzy Sunshine? I get into my room and sag against the door, laughing helplessly at the idea.

Hell, no. Hadria and Aurora are like sisters to me. Very important, sure—but there's nothing else there. Not like...

My laughter dies away as I think about Scarlett again.

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

I mean, I'm definitely not in love with Scarlett, either. I just identify with her. That's all. We're two people who have lived through Grandmother's so-called lessons, so it's probably just trauma-bonding or some psychological shit like that.

Okay, yeah, Scar's also hotter than the sun, but sex isn't love, and neither is empathy.

Plus she's a dead woman walking, as far as the Syndicate is concerned. Tomorrow night, she and I will revisit the scene of Adam's murder, hopefully take a step closer to unraveling the twisted web that brought us together. And once I can get to Grandmother through Scarlett, I won't need her anymore.

And I'll dispose of her, as ordered.

CHAPTER 20

Lyssa

But the next night, before I can head out to the meeting with Scarlett, Hadria's called her own meeting for the senior Syndicate members—and I don't want to ditch, because it's happening at Elysium.

The war room in the new mansion is still unfinished, nothing but bare concrete walls and floors, though the same big fucking table is here now, plus our chairs—and Hadria's throne. But despite the lack of comforts, it's secure—newly soundproofed with audio disruptors laced through the walls to prevent eavesdropping.

It's still a little strange until we all take our seats, and then everything feels familiar

again. My chair is in my usual spot near the head of the long table, at Hadria's right hand. Marco and Ricky have moved way up the table, too, since last time we were all sitting around it, and although there are fewer of us these days—the gardens outside watered with the blood of many people I thought were friends—our ranks are growing again.

It's good to see.

Also good to see Hadria lounging in that damn throne of hers, though I'd never say so to her face.

"Report," she says coolly, and with that one word, it feels like we're finally home.

I launch into an overview of our position—the last six months of the Syndicate's growth since the purging, our tightening grip on some of the best smuggling routes in and out of Chicago. "The Imperiolis are backing off. Our targeted strikes are working."

Something twitches in Hadria's jaw right around where the smile muscles would be, but she remains impassive. "Good."

"They're still paying off or threatening some of our usual medical contacts, though," Marco pipes up, his brows knitting together. "Trying to cut off our support."

Smart move on their part, though I don't say it. Depriving us of skilled medics who will treat our people is a simple way to weaken the Syndicate over time.

Hadria nods. "I think we're all aware of that. I've decided to send Aurora out to speak to a few people, see if she can convince them back to our employ."

There's a murmur of surprise through the room at that.

This time, Hadria does smile, though it's cold and calculated. "It's that sweet demeanor of hers—she's much better at charming people than I am."

A faint chuckle goes around the table I can't help smirking, too. Our little Suzy Sunshine has a way of wrapping people around her little finger without them even realizing it.

"If she can handle the Boss," Ricky rumbles, echoing my thoughts, "I think a few medics would be child's play for her."

"Any other suggestions?" Hadria says, with a glare at Ricky that he just grins at. "Anyone know a few stand-in medics while we're waiting?"

"Scarlett has medical training," I say without thinking.

All eyes swing to me.

Dead silence. Then—"Who the fuck is Scarlett?" Marco asks, trading a bewildered look with another Syndicate member.

Ah, shit. "She..."

"Scarlett is the name of the assassin who has been killing our Syndicate members," Hadria supplies. "Lyssa has been working to eliminate the threat."

Her voice is calm. But I know that tone. I've fucked up, bad, and I don't know what's wrong with me.

The temperature in the room plummets about twenty degrees as everyone processes that bombshell. Ricky breaks the silence first.

“You’re shitting me,” he growls at me. “She doesn’t have a bullet in her skull yet? You said you were taking care of it, Wolf.”

Page 42

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

My gaze flicks instinctively to Hadria, searching for backup, but her expression is carefully neutral.

“I was just kidding,” I say. “About the medic thing.”

There’s another pause.

“Ha-fuckin’-ha,” Marco growls. “That bitch killed Yuri. If you can’t handle the job?—”

“Watch it,” I hiss at him, and pleasingly, he quails. I might have slipped up, but I can still kill him quicker than he can draw his next breath. “She’ll be dead soon enough.”

I keep my expression impassive, years of practice holding firm. But something in Hadria’s eyes tells me she sees right through me.

And we’re not done yet, apparently. Ricky is muttering a string of curses under his breath. He slams his hand hard on the table. “Why ain’t this assassin dead yet if she’s hitting our crews? What’s the fucking hold up?”

“Yeah, what gives?” someone else further down the table demands, and then there’s a whole fucking chorus of it rising up.

This time, though, Hadria has my back.

“The assassin is merely a pawn,” she says, her tone razor-edged enough to cut through the cacophony. “Lyssa, not being a complete moron, wants to find out who is

truly pulling the strings against us. Then we will cut the puppet master's throat along with this...Scarlett's."

It's a good defense, I'll give her that. Marco and Ricky still look pissed but a little of the heat bleeds from their glares.

"We still shoulda been told this was a bigger threat than just some lone actor," Ricky grumbles.

Hadria inclines her head a fraction. "Well, now you're informed. And when Scarlett and her backer are no longer a concern, Lyssa will update you." Her gaze pins me again. "Won't you, Lyssa?"

I nod, keeping my expression impassive despite the sickly lurch in my gut. "That's the plan, Boss."

Hadria seems satisfied, clearing her throat to move the discussion along. "For the time being, the Sokolovs' attempt to flex their pathetic muscles by disrupting our established supply routes must be ignored unless absolutely necessary. I will not have Chicago?—"

"—destabilized before the wedding," everyone calls out, followed by laughter.

Even I smile, though it's automatic. I've lost track of how many times we've all heard Hadria reiterate this mantra.

As for Hadria, she just shrugs. "As long as you all understand. If they need to be dealt with, I want them left alive. And trust me, you don't want to see me in Bridezilla mode."

The others chuckle and I force out a low laugh myself, though it sticks in my throat.

Hadria's gaze finds me again as the laughter subsides, those cool gray eyes holding a faint warning.

And then the meeting goes on.

When the doors of the war room close behind the last Syndicate member leaving our briefing, Hadria turns to me, and I brace myself.

"You've been uncharacteristically restrained about this assassin, Wolf."

And that statement is uncharacteristically restrained from Hadria Imperioli, head of the Styx Syndicate. So I think I'm dealing with my friend right now, not my Boss.

I shrug a shoulder, feigning nonchalance despite the sudden tightness in my chest.

"Like I said, I'm handling it."

"Are you? Because I gave you a long rope, Lyssa, and I'd really rather you didn't hang yourself with it."

"It's like you said in the meeting. I'm getting close to gain her trust, to lure out Grandmother—the one who's really got the potential to be a thorn in our side."

Hadria studies me a moment, then nods slowly. "Look, I didn't want to go into all that with the Syndicate. It's your past, and your business. But if you need help, ask for it."

"I don't need help. It's under control. I'm handling it."

She sighs. "Please promise me you are, Lyssa. We can't afford any fuckups, not with so much riding on Juno Bianchi's visit."

“I promise you. I’m handling it.”

Page 43

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

She holds my gaze a beat longer, then she grins. “That’s a good Wolf. Now get out of here and do what needs doing.”

I offer a mocking salute as I turn on my heel and stride from the room. But the further I get from the mansion, the more I feel like my facade is fraying at the edges.

Am I handling it?

Or is Scarlett handling me?

CHAPTER 21

Scarlett

The training mat squeaks beneath our grappling forms as Ariadne and I exchange blows, our skin glistening with sweat. My muscles scream in protest, but I push through the burn, determined to match her relentless pace.

Ariadne’s fist grazes my cheek, and I counter with a sweeping kick that she narrowly avoids. We break apart, circling each other like predators assessing weaknesses.

“Not bad,” she pants, a hint of grudging respect in her tone.

This is the first time we’ve met since I...well, kicked her ass in the bathroom, and then she water-boarded me. I felt like that was fair play at the time, tit for tat. But now, even though she’s still bearing the visual reminders of our bathroom encounter while I recovered pretty fast from the waterboarding, I’m not feeling the same kind of

sympathy.

Not now that I suspect she might have had something to do with Adam's murder.

I shake my head, banishing the thought. I can't afford to be distracted, not in the middle of a training session with her. Ariadne has been my tormentor since I arrived, her hatred for me a constant, gnawing ache.

But today, something is different. The anger in her eyes still burns bright, but the disdain is...tempered, somehow.

With a series of rapid strikes, I finally catch her off guard, landing a solid kick to her midsection. Ariadne grunts, staggering back, eyes widening momentarily before narrowing again with grim determination.

We continue sparring until, finally, she raises her hand and, to my surprise, says "That's enough for today."

"Too much for you?" I challenge.

She doesn't reply, turning to walk to where we put our towels.

I follow, and as I wipe the sheen of sweat from my brow, I study her face, searching for that familiar edge of hatred I've grown accustomed to. But it's muted now, softened by an emotion I can't quite read. Pity? Resignation?

The curiosity proves too much. "What's gotten into you?"

Another long pause before she replies. "Just figured you've suffered enough from me for one day."

I scoff. “Don’t flatter yourself. I could go all night.”

“I’m sure you could.” Her gaze flicks over me appraisingly. “But even you need a break sometimes, Scarlett.”

“Since when do you care about my wellbeing?”

Ariadne shrugs, grabbing a towel to dab at her flushed skin. “Call it a moment of uncharacteristic empathy.”

“Well, that’s a first,” I mutter, reaching for my water bottle.

An uncomfortable silence stretches between us as we towel off. I steal another sidelong glance at her. Is there some way I can ask her about Adam? Some way I could...make her spill?

“Why do you hate me so much?”

Ariadne’s head snaps up at my question. For a long moment, she says nothing, and I start to regret asking.

“I don’t hate you,” she says at last. “I feel sorry for you.”

Sorry for me? “Why?” I press.

Page 44

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

Ariadne's expression hardens, the softness fleeing as swiftly as it appeared. She turns away, gathering her towel and water bottle. "Grandmother told me to send you up to her after training. She has...a gift for you."

"What?"

On her way to the changing rooms, Ariadne brushes very close to me.

"She knows," she murmurs, and is gone almost before I decipher what she said.

A chill lances down my back.

Grandmother knows? Knows...what?

And what is this gift she has for me? The implications are as disturbing as they are unclear. Another game, another manipulation?—because that's all my life has become under her merciless rule.

But if I want answers, I'll have to seek them out directly.

I gather my things and make my way out of the training facility, heading for the penthouse suite.

CHAPTER 22

Lyssa

Despite the meeting out at Elysium, I'm right on time to meet Scarlett in the alleyway where her brother died. The shop that I assume used to be her family's restaurant is a laundry now, but the alley seems just the same, or so Scarlett nods when I ask her.

She's quieter than usual tonight, her eyes wary again every time she looks at me. But there's something else there, too. Something I'm not sure about.

If I didn't know better, I'd say there was something wrong with her. More wrong than usual, I mean.

The scents of stale piss and rotting garbage get stronger as we make our way down the alley, the sounds of distant traffic fading to a dull thrum. My footsteps are silent, a practiced stealth ingrained into my very being. But Scarlett's movements seem to betray the inner turmoil I'm sensing in her—each stride is heavy, weighed down.

Maybe it's just that she feels the ghosts of this place.

I study her profile, pale skin yellowed in the harsh glow of a flickering light at the back of one of the stores. Those hazel eyes are more haunted than ever. She came here seeking answers with me, but I know this alley will hold no redemption for her, even if we find some kind of clue. And what clue will we possibly find, all these years later?

I still wanted to see it. Get the sense of the place.

"Did you get anything from Ariadne?" I ask, my voice low, but it still seems to fracture the eerie quiet.

Scarlett shakes her head, her ponytail shaking as she does. She's tied her hair up tonight like I do. "No."

A flicker of annoyance runs through me. “No” isn’t exactly helpful. But something tells me not to push it.

“See anything useful?” she asks, her voice cool.

I glance around. “I see any number of better positions to take someone out from if I wanted to do it quietly and without being seen by the camera.” I point up at some of the fire escapes on the taller buildings around us. “Easy enough to use a silenced gun from up there—or throw a knife.”

Scarlett looks too, and I see the calculations running through her head as she turns to the camera, too. “You’re right,” she says slowly. She shrugs off her jacket. “Let’s recreate the scene.”

“What?”

“Act it out. Maybe it will jog something in my memory.” There’s something so...dull about the way she says it, her eyes avoiding mine, but she’s already positioning herself in the center of the alley. “I’ll be Adam.” She stares at me. “You take the part of the Wolf.”

“Fine.”

I take my position further up the alley, and I mimic, so far as I can remember, the motions of the woman. Scarlett, however, has turned to face me, watching my approach, even though her brother had his back to his attacker.

I reach her, hold up an imaginary knife, and then drop my arm. “Well?”

“It wasn’t you,” she says, that same blank tone in her voice. “Was it?”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

I shake my head slowly. “It wasn’t me.”

Scarlett’s composure crumbles then, a strangled sob tearing from her throat as she drops to her knees, anguished cries echoing off the grimy walls. I’ve seen her angry, determined, flirtatious—but never this hurt, this...broken.

Not even at the motel the other night.

Something urges me forward, my body acting on instincts I didn’t know I possessed. In two strides, I’m kneeling before her, wrapping my arms around her shuddering frame and pulling her against my chest. She doesn’t resist, her tears soaking through my shirt as I hold her tight, shielding her from the cruelties of this world, if only for a moment.

We stay like that for what feels like an eternity, her ragged breaths slowly evening out against the steady thrum of my heartbeat. When she finally pulls back, her eyes are red-rimmed but clear, shining with a turbulent blend of gratitude, affection, and...

“Lyssa,” she whispers. Keeping her gaze locked on mine, Scarlett leans in infinitesimally. My breath catches in my throat. Our lips are so close I can feel the heat of her breath fanning across my skin.

Then, with a low, desperate sound, she presses her mouth into mine. I return the embrace, increasing the intensity in time with her needy whimpers. My mouth moves on hers almost desperately, and my hands knot in her silky hair, pulling her closer still as my body arches instinctively into hers. There’s some primal, electric energy between us that has me craving more, more.

Her arms tighten around me, one hand splaying over my lower back while the other cups the nape of my neck, holding me in place as she plunders my mouth right back with ruthless, relentless hunger.

Time loses all meaning beyond the slick heat of our mingled breaths, the frantic hammering of my pulse, the dizzying spiral of need blazing through my veins. I'm drowning, but for once it's not in blood—no, this is an entirely different kind of submersion.

And just as abruptly as it was cast, the spell shatters.

There's a harsh clatter, boots on concrete—muffled shouts ringing out in Russian. Scarlett tenses as I do, her entire body going rigid as we break the kiss, our heads whipping around to pinpoint the source of the disturbance.

Five stocky men with shaved heads are headed toward us, fists raised and fury etched into their brutish features.

We both get to our feet.

Eyes narrowing, I shove Scarlett behind me and assume a defensive position, fists raised as the men advance.

“Murdering bitch!” one of them snarls, beady eyes bright with undisguised hatred. “You killed Yuri, and now you'll pay for every drop of his blood!”

Sokolov bratva. Great.

“For fuck's sake,” I sigh, “I didn't kill Yuri.”

“Not you,” he spits, further enraged, and points a large, stained knife behind me at

Scarlett. “Her.”

“Get out of here,” Scarlett says in a low voice. “This is my problem.”

She’s right about that. I should go. And Hadria has ordered that Syndicate members should back off the Sokolovs for now.

“What, and miss all the fun?” I ask brightly.

I’ve already instinctively positioned myself between Scarlett and the threat, even though the reality is that she’s just as much a threat to me as these Sokolovs—more, actually. But the protective urge, the need to shield this woman I’m supposed to have killed myself by now, is just too overwhelming.

“But—” she begins, but the bratva are still coming. They’re out for blood, that much is clear from their snarls and blades.

“You gonna pay for this,” their leader goads, his teeth bared in an ugly grin. “I’m gonna slice you up, little girl.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Scarlett reaching for her knife. I take out mine, too, and hope she won’t just plant hers in my back.

But Hadria’s command still echoes in my head. Back off the Sokolovs.

“You know, this doesn’t have to get messy,” I call out, letting my voice take on that steely edge that commands respect...or at least pause. “We’re not looking for trouble.”

The brute throws back his head with a bark of laughter. “Too late for that, lapochka. Should’ve thought of that before you crossed the Sokolovs.”

“For the last time, Yuri wasn’t a Sokolov,” I snap back. “He worked for me. For the Syndicate.”

“Yet here you are sucking face with the bitch who killed him,” the guy growls back.

“Seems to me like you need putting down too, Wolf.”

So much for diplomacy.

“I guess you can try,” I tell him with a smile. With a lazy flick of his wrist, he signals his men forward. They advance to surround us. “No killing,” I hiss at Scarlett, meeting her startled gaze. “Non-lethal force only.”

For a beat, she looks like she might protest, but a roll of the eyes is all the confirmation I need. And then we begin, moving in unison, dancers in a lethal tango as the first attack crashes over us.

A fist swings toward my face, sloppy and telegraphed. I catch the man’s wrist, using his own momentum to send him tumbling into his cohort.

Scarlett is using an economy of motion that is nothing short of impressive. She ducks a wild haymaker, sweeping the attacker’s legs out from under him before bringing her elbow down in a crunch against his nose.

But a cry of fury draws my attention toward the mouth of the alley. There are more of them.

Fuck. A lot more of them.

“Heads up,” I manage to holler to Scarlett, just before the bear of a man who seems to be their leader barrels toward her, all subtlety abandoned in favor of brute force. His meaty fists are clenched as he zeroes in on Scarlett.

An image flashes through my mind—Scarlett, broken and bloodied at this animal’s

feet.

He'll kill her if he gets his hands on her.

The thought propels me forward with renewed urgency. I slam into his side, dropping into a textbook tackle that drives the air from his lungs in a guttural wheeze. We tumble away from the fray in a blur of grappling limbs, trading vicious blows until I manage to slam him down against the unforgiving concrete of the street.

But my head snaps to the side as something hard and blunt glances off my temple, rocking me back with a burst of white-hot pain.

Looks like his friends want to play too.

A kick in the mid-section sends me backward, and the dazed leader is still alert enough to grab my foot and pull, hard, so that I crash to the ground. I kick out, get my foot free, then roll aside just as a steel-toed boot comes crashing down where my skull was moments before. Rising in a low crouch, I lash out with a vicious front kick that sends its owner stumbling back, clutching his abdomen.

I dart a glance toward Scarlett, who has her back against the alley wall, using it to fend off three attackers at once. Even as I watch, her foot lashes out in a wicked crescent, laying one of them out cold with a sickening thud.

A battered groan draws my attention as the leader struggles to his feet. He staggers forward, pure vitriol blazing in those dead eyes as he locks onto his target once more.

Scarlett.

CHAPTER 23

Lyssa

Time seems to slow to a crawl as I trace his trajectory. Before I can even think, I'm moving, hurling myself forward to put myself squarely between them.

His ham-sized fist slams into my chest like a freight train, lifting me clear off my feet with the sheer force behind the blow. I hit the ground hard again, the impact reverberating through my very bones as the world tilts and spins in a sickening vortex.

I try to blink away the haze clouding my vision, just in time to see the leader bring back his foot and start to kick out. I twist away on instinct, but searing pain lances through my shoulder as his boot connects, a howl ripping free from my throat. I roll, stagger to my feet, watch him come at me again?—

Only to stagger backward a beat later, clutching at the blade buried to the hilt in his back.

His legs buckle, sending him crashing to the filthy alley floor in a boneless heap.

Scarlett stands over him, chest heaving and eyes blazing with murderous fury as she wrenches her knife free.

God, she's beautiful. Even as she yanks out the knife, even as she heads my way with murder in her eyes...

She's beautiful.

I brace myself for another attack from her, but it never comes. Instead, she turns on her heel and levels the remaining thugs with a look that would strip paint. They break and scatter into the night like roaches exposed to light, until only the two of us remain

amid the groaning, semi-conscious wreckage.

“He’ll probably live,” Scarlett says. She nods at the guy she just literally stabbed in the back. “But, sorry, I guess. I didn’t have much choice. He was about to kill you.”

Before I can respond, a searing jolt of agony lances through my left shoulder—definitely dislocated, if not worse. I grit my teeth, swallowing back the groan that tries to claw its way free.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

Scarlett's brow furrows in concern. "Your shoulder?—"

"It's fine," I lie. "Just give me a sec."

Without further preamble, I pivot and drive my shoulder into the unforgiving brick wall beside us. A brutal pop, then a screaming wave of white-hot fire quickly chased by a dull, throbbing ache.

But it's back in joint.

"That was a silly thing to do," Scarlett tells me calmly. "I could have helped you rotate it back in."

"Sure, but my way's faster." Wiping a trickle of sweat from my brow, I look to Scarlett once more. Her eyes are wide, mouth slightly parted as if to protest. But only a breathless chuckle escapes those petal-soft lips that I was kissing just before the entertainment turned up.

"You're insane, you know that?"

I allow the faintest hint of a smirk to play across my split and swollen lips. "Look who's talking, Scar. Come on, let's get out of here."

We walk a long time, just putting distance between us and the alleyway. It's late. Or early, anyway; the sun's coming up and the screwy sleep schedule of the Syndicate means I'm feeling exhausted one minute and like I could take on another whole alleyway of Sokolovs the next.

We've been walking without talking, until I hear Scarlett take a breath. "Where are we going?"

"Dunno," I say. "Walking helps me think. We need to figure out what we're doing next, since you finally believe I didn't kill Adam."

Her next question is filled with genuine curiosity. "Why couldn't we just kill them? The Sokolovs?"

"Hadria's orders," I tell her briefly.

"Ah." She tilts her head to one side, watching me as we walk. "Do you always just...follow orders? I thought that's why you left Grandmother in the first place. To do your own thing."

A fair point. One that gives me pause as we make our way back onto the sidewalk of one of Chicago's more populated streets.

The deeper truth is, I couldn't bear to see that light I still see in her eyes extinguished by the weight of one more life on her conscience. But that is not an admission I'm willing to make.

"My loyalty lies with the Syndicate," I say instead, carefully weighing each word. "And more importantly, with Hadria. She's the closest thing to family I've got left—her and Mrs. G. And, well, the rest of the Syndicate."

Scarlett worries her full lower lip between her teeth, her eyes dropping from mine. She stops walking, and so do I, though I pull her into a doorway to get out of the milling early-morning workers, and take a look around to make sure we weren't followed.

“I’m sorry I killed your people,” she says at last. “I’m very sorry about Yuri, in particular. You were right about him. He—he was being kind to me, that night. He didn’t deserve to die. None of them did.”

I wasn’t expecting that. An apology.

It doesn’t fix anything, but I guess it’s nice to hear.

“Well,” I say after a pause, “no one joins something like the Syndicate without knowing the risks. Maybe they didn’t deserve to die for Adam. But none of them were innocent, Scar—and me most of all.”

I’m so glad no one can hear me saying that. It goes against everything we believe in the Syndicate. Blood for blood is our way. Hurt us, we hurt you harder.

But when Scarlett looks up at me with shining eyes, I can’t regret trying to comfort her. “Maybe,” she says, “but I made myself their executioner. And I had no right to do that. It weighs on me every damn day, Lyssa, and more since I realized that Grandmother’s been bullshitting this whole time. She used me. And I let her do it.”

I nod once, a silent acknowledgment. Her capacity for remorse is...unexpected. Disarming.

“And I get it,” she continues, her shoulders lifting in the barest hint of a shrug. “About following orders for your family’s sake, I mean. I’d do anything to protect mine, too. My—my real family, I mean.” Her words sound heavier than they should, somehow.

“Obviously,” I say at last. “You joined an elite organization for assassins and threw away your potential just for the chance at revenge. Most people aren’t that crazy.”

She is a little crazy, I've decided. A little left-of-center in that way we all are in the Syndicate, too. You need a slightly skewed view of the world to be comfortable with the work we do.

And even more skewed to be comfortable with the work Grandmother does.

“Scar, what’s wrong?” I ask gently, when she just looks down. “There’s been something wrong all night. You seem?—”

Page 48

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

But the wail of distant sirens makes us both jerk to attention. Tilting my head back and forth to stretch my newly-relocated shoulder, I let out a yawn. “C’mon. Let’s go get coffee.”

A beat of surprise flickers across her face before she gives a soft, bemused chuckle. “Yeah, okay. Why not? Lead the way...Wolf.”

With that, we fall into step, two dark hearts slithering between the innocent people of Chicago as they start their workdays.

I like her. I really do.

And that’s a problem.

CHAPTER 24

Scarlett

The first thing that hits me as we enter the cafe is the rich aroma of freshly brewed coffee wafting through the air, followed fast by bacon and toast and eggs—God, I’m starving. And my senses, honed to a razor’s edge under Grandmother’s training, are almost overloaded by the simple, cozy ambiance of the bustling cafe around us.

Sunlight streams through the broad front windows, bathing everything in a warm golden glow as the city stirs to wakefulness outside. We get a table right there in the window, and put in a breakfast order, and for just a fleeting moment, I almost feel...normal. An ordinary girl sharing a morning coffee and a breakfast date with a

hot blonde before we both head off to our respective nine-to-fives. The illusion is so tantalizingly real that I allow myself to indulge in it for a few stolen heartbeats.

“So,” Lyssa murmurs, unable to completely mask the smirk tugging at the corner of her bruised lip. “You just gonna sit there looking all dreamy-eyed, or you want to actually drink that?”

I blink, her wry observation snapping me out of my brief reverie as she nods toward the steaming mug cradled between my palms. Lifting it to my lips, I take an indulgent sip, the rich flavor flooding my mouth.

Almost like old times, really. Before everything went completely ass over teakettle.

Lyssa chuckles.

“What?” I ask.

“I’m just remembering the look on that guy’s face,” she says, still grinning. “When you laid him out with that spinning heel kick? Thought his eyeballs were gonna pop right out of his skull.”

Despite my best efforts, I can’t quite stifle the snort of laughter that bubbles up from somewhere deep in my chest. Our giggles draw a few sidelong glances, but I can’t bring myself to care. Not when it feels so bizarrely...right, even though we’re sitting here rehashing the finer points of the vicious beatdown we just handed out.

But the momentary illusion doesn’t last. Something changes in Lyssa’s face—freezes, as she catches sight of something—someone—outside.

“Shit,” she mutters, and then plasters on a carefully neutral expression and gives a half-hearted wave. “Double shit. They’re coming in. Scar, just—be cool, okay?”

Before I even register the telltale tinkle of the brass bell over the entrance, the hair on the back of my neck is already standing on end, every instinct zeroing in on the new arrivals.

I can't believe it.

"I can't believe it!" chirps a happy voice, unknowingly echoing my thoughts. "Imagine running into you like this, Lyssa! What are you doing here?"

It's Aurora Verderosa. And she's all sugary sweetness and light.

I feel a strange sense of unreality come over me as I recognize her, though I've never met her, or the woman behind her, though I know her, too. It's the housekeeper at Elysium, Mrs. Graves. Both women have arms laden down by shopping bags brimming over with what looks like...

Fabric swatches and cake samples?

"We're out really early too," Aurora says, dropping her voice to confide, "I know it must seem odd, but we—well, we keep strange hours." She shoots a glance at Lyssa.

But I'm still finding my voice, because Aurora's face made me stop breathing for a second. She's the kind of beautiful you don't expect to see in the flesh, and it's topped off with a smile so warm and earnest I think I might actually get cavities just looking at her. "Anyway, it's nice to meet you," she says to me, sticking out a hand from somewhere under all the bags. "I'm Aurora."

Lyssa finally falters a bit, fighting to keep her expression neutral as she exchanges a loaded glance with me from across the tiny cafe table.

I take Aurora's hand and try to be polite. "Hi," I say. "I'm...Ruby."

Mrs. Graves is right behind, smiling merrily as she studies both Lyssa and me for a long, considering moment. But then some of the tension seeps from me as she simply shakes her head fondly and turns to me.

“And I’m Mrs. Graves. How nice to meet you, Ruby,” she says. “You’ve gotten Lyssa out very early; she’s usually more of a night owl.” I give a weak smile, but Mrs. Graves is looking more closely at Lyssa’s face. “But perhaps this is a late night rather than an early morning. I do hope you girls are keeping out of trouble?” The pointed lilt to her inquiry is unmistakable. Her eyes are on Lyssa’s bruised mouth, and then return to my cheekbone, which I’m pretty sure is a little puffy after a Sokolov right hook managed to clip me in the alley.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

“Just the usual, Mrs. G,” Lyssa replies with a tight smile. “Nothing to worry about.”

I subtly adjust my jacket, making sure it covers the bruises on my arms, while Lyssa runs a hand through her hair, smoothing out any tangles.

Aurora, blissfully oblivious, simply beams and asks me how the coffee is here.

“It really is so nice to meet you,” she gushes in a low voice, while Mrs. Graves chats with Lyssa. “Are you an old friend of Lyssa’s?”

I pause, caught off guard by the question. I glance at Lyssa, unsure of how to respond, but she gives me a subtle nod. “Yes,” I say, forcing a smile. “We go way back.”

“That’s wonderful! Lyssa’s never mentioned her friends all that much, outside—well...” She trails off, biting her lip as she looks at Lyssa.

And I catch Lyssa murmuring to Mrs. Graves, “...the hell are your bodyguards? I told you to stop giving them the slip.”

“Oh, we haven’t, I promise, Lyssa,” Aurora breaks in quickly. “They’re just outside.” She nods at three unmistakably huge security types standing near the cafe door, holding up hands to stop anyone trying to come in. “Oh dear,” Aurora says in dismay, “perhaps we’d better get going.” She turns back to me with an air of mischief. “Ruby, would you like to come to my wedding as Lyssa’s plus-one? It would be so nice to have one of Lyssa’s old friends there.”

I nearly choke on my coffee, the invitation catching me completely off-guard. I glance at Lyssa, expecting to see shock or anger on her face, but instead, she looks resigned.

As if she knew this was coming.

Swallowing back the impulse to dissolve into a fit of hysterical giggling at the absurdity of it all, I opt for a more diplomatic approach.

“I’d be honored. Thank you for the invitation.”

Aurora beams at me, and before I know what’s happening, she’s leaning in for a hug. I stiffen, caught off guard by the sudden contact, but I force myself to relax, wrapping my arms around her in return.

As we embrace, I catch a whiff of her perfume—something light and floral, so different from the gunpowder and leather scent that clings to Lyssa. For a moment, I allow myself to wonder how someone like Aurora got mixed up with the Syndicate. She seems too innocent, much too pure for such a world of violence and deceit.

Under my fingers, I feel her handbag. It’s huge. Weirdly out of style, too, for someone like her. And then Aurora is pulling away, still smiling. “We should get going,” she says, glancing at Mrs. Graves. “Wedding planning waits for no one! There’s still so much to do.”

Mrs. Graves nods. “Indeed. We’ll see you later, dear,” she says to Lyssa. “It was very nice to meet you, Ruby.”

With that, they’re gone, leaving Lyssa and me alone once more. She’s staring at me very strangely. “I mean, obviously I won’t go to the wedding,” I stammer out. She can’t think I really meant to?—

“We should get out of here,” Lyssa says, her voice tight. “We have work to do.”

“What work?” I ask blankly.

She leans in. “I told you, Scar. I’ll help you get your vengeance. Kill your brother’s killer. If that’s...still what you want.”

She might be telling the truth. Or she might just want to keep me sweet while she figures out a way to get to Grandmother. But I nod, draining the last of my coffee and standing up. As we make our way out of the shop, I ask the question that’s been nagging at me. “How did Aurora get involved with the Syndicate?”

For a moment, I think she’s going to ignore me. But then she sighs, running a hand through her hair and reflexively tightening up her ponytail again. “It’s a long story.”

I frown, unsatisfied with her answer, but I don’t press the issue. We have more important things to worry about right now.

We take an Uber to the shitty hotel that has been serving as our temporary headquarters now and then, the seedy surroundings a stark contrast to the cozy coffee shop we just left. Lyssa unlocks the door to a new room, and we step inside, the musty smell of cigarette smoke waiting right there for us like an old friend.

“So...what now?” I ask.

“Now we need to rest. We’re running on fumes.”

“Rest—here?” I ask, looking at the bed.

“I won’t jump your bones, if that’s what you’re worried about,” Lyssa says, but her tone sounds a little odd to my ears.

“I’m not worried about it.” I consider my options once more. “In fact,” I say slowly, “I wouldn’t say no to a little...relaxation.”

The look in Lyssa’s eye as she turns to me in that electrically-charged moment almost makes me wish again for normalcy. For this. Just this.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

Lyssa and me...

“Well?” I ask, trying for casual. My heart is beating too hard to be comfortable. And all I can hear are Grandmother’s words.

Anything can be a weapon.

Sex can be a weapon.

CHAPTER 25

Lyssa

I know it’s a bad idea.

Scratch that.

It’s a terrible idea. But the thing is, Scarlett seems to be a weakness for me. It’s a strange experience for someone like me to find out that another person can be a weakness, instead of something obvious like a bad knee or a blindside or a shitty fucking defensive stance that wouldn’t keep out a kitten.

And I’ve never had any of those problems, either, but I’ve seen them in trainees.

Never realized you could have this kind of weakness, though. Curvy brunettes with eyes you could drown in, who give as good as they get. In street fights and in bed.

My mouth is on hers before I know it, little more than a collision of tongues lips and grasping, desperate hands competing to see who can strip the other first.

It's right there, in a delirious storm of sensation, it all clicks for me. I understand her in a way I never have before. The hunger that simmers just beneath her skin, the need to prove herself...

I have it too.

We're alike, Scarlett and I, and it's not just because of Grandmother. We were built, DNA-up, from the same stuff, and that's why she calls so effortlessly to the need in my soul.

There's violence in her, yes. A potent, red-hot core of barely restrained savagery and menace that I used to have, too, before I figured out how to contain it. But there's a softer undercurrent woven into both of us, too, that I don't think either of us would have the chance to find with anyone except the other.

For me, sex has always been about need and dominance.

But with Scarlett, I can let go a little. Explore. Test.

Enjoy.

Just like I'm enjoying her now as I shove her back on the bed, her legs hanging over the side. I hit my knees before she can even take a breath, splay her pretty pink pussy wide open, and dive in. She's already dripping wet for me, her sweet taste filling my mouth, and I push my tongue in deep, no teasing. I want to taste the depths of her, find out every atom of her tight heat. I swirl my tongue around, find exactly how to tease her as she rocks up against me, her body meeting my face with insatiable hunger. Her fingers dig into my scalp as she grinds me down on her and I'm full up

with the taste of her, mouth and nose buried in her as I eat her out.

But I want more.

I jump up, pounce on her, and grab those luscious tits, pinching at her nipples as she writhes around under me, trying to get some friction back on that demanding little clit. “Kitty needs attention, huh?” I smirk into her face as I say it, enjoy watching the fire catch in those striking eyes.

“Eat it or fuck it,” she demands, panting, “or I’ll do it myself.”

“I don’t think so.” I grab her wrists, pinning them above her head?—

But I forgot who I was dealing with for a split second, because she flips me over before I figure out what’s going on, climbs on top triumphantly. Now I’m the one pinned down, her strong thighs tight on my waist, and damn if she isn’t the hottest thing I’ve ever seen. Her eyes glitter with victorious glee as she mirrors my own smirk back at me. “Are you going to be a good girl for me, Lyssa?” she singsongs.

“The absolute fucking best,” I promise. “How about you sit on my face and see?”

Her eyes go wide and dark at the suggestion. “Hell, yeah,” she breathes out. “I like that idea. Only I think I have an even better one.” She swings off me, but I’m intrigued enough to stay right where I am. It was the right choice, I discover a moment later, as she pivots and mounts me in a 69, positioning that delicious, glistening cunt directly over my face. I reach up to grab her ass as she descends, spreading her wide so she’s completely open and available to my tongue.

“You are so fucking gorgeous,” I manage to get out, right before her wet flesh engulfs me. I moan into her folds, my tongue encouraging more of her juice, rubbing my face right into her.

She's fucking ambrosia.

And then I feel those soft, warm tits press into my belly as she leans forward, licking at my slit, pulling my thighs apart so she can feast on me just like I'm feasting on her. Every movement of my tongue is echoed back to me, her skilled tongue sliding, teasing, swirling. I let my tongue dart higher, stab bluntly at her tight little asshole while I get a hand on her clit, too, and go to town on it.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

She groans into my cunt, the sound vibrating through my core. I spread my legs wider, a silent invitation, and she doesn't disappoint, nuzzling her nose right into my slit before taking my clit in her lips and sucking gently while her hips rock back and forth. I reach down blindly with my free hand to grab a handful of those incredible tits that I fucking dream about, pinching hard and rolling, the same way she did to me in the shower that very first time. It's like there's a direct connection to her cunt, because I'm rewarded with a fresh flood of her juices, and her groans deepen, get more frantic.

I roll my hips up to meet her face, grinding my clit against her nose, her mouth, her tongue. I'm so goddamn wet myself, dripping all over the bed as I suck at her cunt, every sensation caught up in her—touch, sound, smell, taste, and sight, oh God, the sight of her when I shove her up a little to get a good look, her pussy puffy and red and soaked.

She pulls her mouth away from me to hiss, "Don't stop," so I oblige, flicking my fingers fast over her clit and getting my tongue deep into her drenched channel. She cries out, rocking back onto my face again, and I make sure to tug hard and sharp at her nipple again—and she practically levitates off the bed.

Oh yeah, this is it. This is what I've been missing out on all those years with other women. This is what happens when you mix violence and sex and a little bit of pain together and serve it all up on a creaky, saggy motel mattress.

She responds like no one else I've ever been with. Her body was fucking made for mine.

She shoves two fingers into my pussy as if in agreement with my thoughts, fucking them in and out as her tongue writhes around my clit. And I'm drowning in her, happily drowning, swallowing her down as she drenches me in her release. I can hear her crying out, getting louder and louder, like the orgasm is still building, still peaking?—

And then she slumps forward again, devouring me just as I've devoured her, pushing me almost painfully into an orgasm so hard I think I might break the bed. It thuds through me in time with my heartbeat, fierce and hot, as if every cell in my body has been jolted awake. I can feel my pussy clenching, my back arching, my muscles locking, and I'm screaming into her wet folds, her warm thighs clamping down around my face as she comes again, frantically grinding into me.

She collapses off me and onto the rumpled sheets, both of us gasping for air, a tangle of arms and legs, sweat pouring off us. "Well?" I pant out.

"Well, what?"

I grin down at her, her head resting on my thigh. "Was I good girl or not?"

She smirks back until she can't help giggling, and runs a hand up my perspiration-shining belly. "You are a very, very bad girl," she tells me with a mock frown.

I laugh. "You too, Scar. You too. If we were back at Elysium, I'd pull out a few props to help punish you."

"Oh, yeah?" She props her head up in her hand, looking interested. "You got a kinky sex dungeon out there or something?"

"I argued for one in the rebuild, but Hadria nixed it," I sigh, and then laugh with her. I reach down for her hand, twine my fingers in hers. "Wish you could see it, though.

Elysium.”

“You sound like you miss it.”

“God, I do. So much. Can’t wait till it’s done. Maybe when it is—” I break off, horrified at what was about to come out of my mouth.

Scarlett really is a weakness for me. There’s no other explanation for how stupid-dumb I get around her. I was about to tell her I’d fuck her brains out in my new room, when the reality is...

The reality is, she’ll never see Elysium. Or if she does, it’ll only be a place of terror and pain for her.

“What?” she prompts, and I can see she’s still caught up in the sweet post-org bliss where everything is sunshine and roses.

But I can’t let myself forget where this ends. “You thirsty?” I ask, ignoring her question.

She’s quiet for a minute, and I see her smile die down as she, too, remembers reality. “Yeah,” she says. “You stay here. I’ll get some water.”

A heavy curtain of silence falls over us as she rolls off the bed and goes into the bathroom, punctuated only by the creak and groan of the ancient motel plumbing as she turns on the tap in there.

She grabs her water bottle on the way back, hands it to me so I can slake my thirst.

As if water could do that. Not when I have her on tap.

But this has to stop. These little interludes might mean nothing to her, but I'm starting to find I want them.

Need them.

And that is very fucking far from okay.

CHAPTER 26

Scarlett

I wait a little while, and then, when I'm sure Lyssa is asleep, I slide out from her octopus-like limbs and have a quick shower in the awful motel bathroom, washing away the evidence of what we've been doing for the past hour.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:33 pm

I wish I didn't have to. I wish I could walk around with her scent still on me, comforting and heady. Because this is the last time I'll have her all over me like this.

The last time.

After I dress, I grab together my shit and pause to look down at her one last time. She's out fast, the mild sedative I slipped into the water keeping her well under.

I could do it now. Easy mark. Cut her throat or slide my stiletto blade into her heart like all the rest. But I don't. It wouldn't be...

It wouldn't be fair.

I turn away from her, away from the horrible guilty knot that's getting tighter and tighter in my chest, and pull out my phone. The tracker signal pulsates strong and clear, showing me exactly where Aurora Verderosa is right now.

Still out shopping for wedding stuff, it seems.

I couldn't believe it when she walked right up to me in that cafe. It was fate, I decided then and there. I'd been going back and forth in my own mind, wondering whether to come clean to Lyssa, beg for her help...

But then, like a sign from the Universe, the very woman I was looking for strolled up to me. Invited me to her goddamn wedding. Hugged me, so that slipping a tracker into her large, oddly unstylish handbag, was easy as pie.

And she's still wandering around Chicago now, as Grandmother's haunting ultimatum replays in my mind.

Grandmother had a gift for me, and I knew I wasn't going to like it. But I still wanted my vengeance. And one way or another, I planned to get it. Carefully. Slowly, if need be. But I would put Adam's killer in the ground, no matter who they were.

I just had to be sure, first. And if it was Grandmother who gave the order...

"Ah, that must be my sweet little Scarlett," Grandmother's saccharine voice rang out from the sitting room as the elevator doors opened on her penthouse. "Don't be shy, dear. Come let me lay eyes upon you."

For a moment my head swam, and I heard myself muttering under my breath, "Grandmother, Grandmother, what big eyes you have." But I headed on, into the sitting room where Grandmother reclined in her high-backed wing chair like a queen, tented fingers pressed to her pursed lips as she studied me with reptilian focus.

"Ariadne said you had a gift for me?" I forced the words out, keeping my tone neutral.

Careful. Ariadne's warning still hung in my ears. She knows.

"Indeed I do, dear girl." Grandmother rose and crossed the room to where I stood rooted. "The gift of loyalty, Scarlett. Of true loyalty and devotion to this noble sisterhood you find yourself in."

I had no idea what she meant.

Her bony fingers feathered along my jawline, and I fought not to recoil from her touch. "You'll do anything I ask to prove yourself," she murmured, not a question but

a statement of certainty that made my skin prickle with foreboding. “Won’t you, Scarlett?”

“You know I will.” The words only fueled the anger that had become my constant, simmering companion. But I forced them out, meeting Grandmother’s dark stare. “So...what is it that you want from me, Grandmother?”

A slow, satisfied smile split Grandmother’s lips as she withdrew her hand. Turning, she crossed to an intricately carved credenza and retrieved an electronic tablet. She tapped it on, bringing up the feed in the torture rooms here behind her bedroom, the one that she used as some kind of sick entertainment as she watched her trainees punish each other.

And as Grandmother offered it to me, the tablet’s weight seemed to magnify, so that it sagged in my hands.

“Look at it,” Grandmother commanded with glacial calm. “Let us understand each other fully, Scarlett.”

I lowered my head and looked. There, staring up at me with terror-glazed eyes, were Mom and Dad—bound, gagged, and clearly at the mercy of their captors, four of those highly-trained male guards that hovered around the high-rise all the time.

My head snapped up. “You—” I choked out, and then swallowed, breathing hard. “What do you want? Money? I’ll get you anything, just please?—”

“Money?” Grandmother let out a peal of laughter, cruel mirth making her face screw up in delight. “Oh no, Scarlett. As I said, this is about loyalty...and you’ll prove yours through obedience, like any good soldier. That is my gift to you, you see. To make you understand the value of loyalty.”

“But I am loyal,” I insisted.

Taking the tablet back, she leveled me with a look of cold appraisal. “Please don’t treat me like a fool. I know that you have been tempted by a particular...deserter. I know you have been meeting with her regularly. In secret.” Her lips curled with disgust.

“You want me to kill Lyssa? I’ll do it.”

“You can’t.”

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

“I can—I will, I promise, I’ll?—”

“You’ve tried,” she said flatly. “And failed. Several times. I shall send Ariadne instead. No. I want you to do something else for me. Something easier, since you’ve been unable to prove yourself so far.”

And then she told me what she wanted: Aurora Verderosa.

“You want me to kill Hades’ fiancée?” I burst out. It seemed even more impossible than killing Lyssa. For one thing, I’d never get near the girl.

“No,” Grandmother said coldly. “I want you to bring her here, to me. The killing of her is a pleasure that you don’t deserve, Scarlett.”

I felt sick, then. “But?—”

“I’m not asking.” Grandmother’s tone left no room for argument. “You’ll do as you’re told, or your parents’ lives are forfeit. And you wouldn’t want that on your conscience, now would you?”

I found myself agreeing, just like the obedient soldier Grandmother wished me to be. Because in the end, she had given me no choice—not if I wanted to keep what little family I had left alive.

“I will kill Aurora Verderosa myself,” she said, “and with her death, I’ll destroy this wretched Styx Syndicate from the top down. This Hades, as they call her, will only be able to blame her Wolf, as soon as she realizes it was you who took her fiancée. And

then she and Lyssa will destroy each other—and the whole Syndicate in the process.”

I wasn’t so sure. But Grandmother only smiled at the fleeting doubt that crossed my face.

“You don’t think so?” she asked. “Wait and see. Love is a terrifying thing, Scarlett. And losing it? Cities have been destroyed over less. I think it will be very interesting to see, one way or another. And it is what I desire. Understand me?”

“I understand.”

“And you will obey?”

“I will obey.”

For Mom and Dad...for my family, I would do what needed to be done. I would follow orders, just like Lyssa.

Even if it meant forsaking every last shred of my own humanity along the way.

I’m close to my quarry now, watching the pulsing dot as much as I watch the street. She’s right around this corner...

I’ll have to deal with the bodyguards, of course. Find a way to incapacitate them, or at least distract them. Then once that’s done?—

But as the signal’s source comes into view, my belly flips over with dread. It’s not Aurora Verderosa, walking down the street, stopping here and there to look into windows.

It’s Mrs. Graves. Mrs. Graves, holding that old-fashioned, too-big handbag as she

window shops, the bag I slipped the tracker into.

No...

Oh God, no. I've failed. Failed again—killed my parents as surely as if I held the knife myself?—

Realization drenches me in an icy sweat. Aurora must have offered to carry Mrs. Graves' handbag for convenience, since they were both so weighed down already with bags.

I turn, dazed, and go back around the corner, my first instinct to get back to Grandmother's house as fast as I can, to battle my way through all those guards—through Ariadne, too, since she'll be there of course—and save my parents...

No.

I choke out a sob as I realize it's futile. I might be able to get through a handful of them on my own, but not all of them. Maybe if Lyssa were with me?—

Lyssa.

I'm near hyperventilating as my mind races. I could go back to the motel right now and wake Lyssa, slap her awake, tell her everything. Beg for her help.

She wouldn't help me. Why would she? She means to kill me, I know that. Despite the intimacy we've shared, I know it doesn't make any difference. Her orders are to kill me, and she follows orders to protect her family.

Family...

Page 54

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

A memory sparks in my mind—Lyssa’s rare openness as she spoke of the woman who’d been a mother to her. The soft, indulgent smile on Mrs. Graves’ face when she looked at Lyssa in the cafe this morning.

Their bond was undeniable.

I thought fate had served up Aurora Verderosa to me, but maybe I have the next best thing right around the corner.

Part of me recoils, screaming to turn back before it’s too late. Mrs. Graves is an innocent. I might have fooled myself into thinking killing Syndicate members was acceptable, but to harm her would be unforgivable, a line I can never uncross.

But then I think about Mom and Dad, bound and terrified, at Grandmother’s cruel mercy. If I fail this mission, they’re dead.

I can’t let that happen. I won’t.

And as I peek around the corner again, I see something that hardens my resolve. Mrs. Graves has no bodyguards with her. She’s easy pickings.

With a deep, steadying breath, I paste on my most disarming smile and approach her, praying she doesn’t glimpse the darkness flickering behind my eyes.

“Mrs. Graves!” I call in a bright, friendly tone. “Hi, there! Do you remember me from the coffee shop this morning?”

She turns, wariness flickering across her expression before softening into polite recognition. “Why yes, you’re Lyssa’s friend, aren’t you? Ruby, if I recall correctly?”

Playing the part of the sweet girl-next-door is second nature to me now—the same act that fooled so many hardened Syndicate members.

Even Lyssa.

I let my smile broaden another few molars, eyes crinkling with false innocence. “That’s right. Ruby. Fancy running into you again—wow, you look like you’ve got quite the haul there again!”

Glancing down at the shopping bags weighing her down, Mrs. Graves lets out a soft chuckle. “You could say that. These wedding plans are turning into a bit of a production. Aurora has gone back home but I wanted to take a last look around, make sure there weren’t any other options we might have missed.”

Her eyes crinkle with undisguised affection, and a pang of guilt lances through me. She truly cares for her people.

But so do I. I care for my parents. And I can’t let sentiment cloud my judgment. With a reassuring smile, I step closer.

“Here, let me give you a hand with those bags.” I reach out, gently relieving her of one overladen tote. “Wouldn’t want you tuckering yourself out before the big day.”

Relief washes over the older woman’s features as the burden eases. “You’re very kind, dear. It seems Lyssa surrounds herself with good people these days.”

I force myself to maintain my easy demeanor, and give a demure laugh. “I do my best. Now, where were you headed? I’d be happy to walk with you a ways.”

Shifting the remaining bags to a more comfortable position, Mrs. Graves gestures down the sidewalk with a grateful nod. “Just this way, if you’re sure you don’t mind. I was planning to meet the town car in ten minutes, just a street away. It’s not far.”

I follow her lead, every step carrying me closer to the point of no return. This gentle woman deserves so much better than the cruelty I’m about to unleash upon her...but what choice do I have? My parents’ lives hang in the balance.

I can’t lose them. Not after Adam.

“Why don’t we take this alley?” I say, grabbing her elbow and steering her.

She tries to pull away, puzzled. “I don’t think so, Ruby—that’s not the way I—” Her eyes go wide as she looks down between us to the knife I’m pressing into her side.

For one breathless heartbeat, our eyes meet, and I watch hers slowly rounding with a dawning sense of betrayal as she recognizes the danger in my stare.

“Don’t scream,” I murmur. “Just keep walking. We have someplace to be.” Mrs. Graves stiffens, and she takes a breath, until I press the knife harder into her. “I’ve killed any number of Syndicate members much tougher than you,” I tell her. “Don’t make me kill you, too. If you come with me...” The lie is difficult, but I get it out. “...you won’t be hurt.”

She doesn’t believe me.

But with a resigned slump of her shoulders, she nods. For a moment, I almost feel sorry for the woman...before the memory of Mom and Dad’s terrified faces rushes in. I need to see this through, no matter how much it costs me.

I know Lyssa will come for me. I know she’ll kill me. But as long as my parents are

safe, I can go gladly to my grave.

CHAPTER 27

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

Lyssa

I jerk awake, the thin hotel sheets twisted around my legs in a mockery of sensual disarray. The last of the daylight filters through the thin curtains on the windows, and I blink away the vestiges of sleep, my body still carrying the phantom traces of Scarlett's intoxicating touch.

Slick skin, swollen lips...the hunger in those forest-pool eyes as she rolled on top of me...

My breath catches at the vivid recollection, a simmering ache low in my belly. I stretch lazily, calling out, "Scar?"

She's not here.

It's a little disturbing to me that she was able to slip out of here without me hearing her. Normally I'm a light sleeper...

Something about her really knocks me out. Literally.

I reach for my phone and as soon as I glimpse the screen, I sit up in bed. Silenced notifications have been flooding the screen while I've been asleep—missed calls, urgent messages. I scroll through the barrage of alerts from the crew. Words like "emergency" and "Mrs. Graves" and "gone" jump out at me, a cold knot forming in my gut.

And once again, I call out, "Scar?" I get out of bed, checking for her phone. She's

definitely gone—like I should be. Mrs. Graves is in trouble, and I’ve been fucking napping.

At the back of my mind, a suspicion builds. The water she gave me...

But Scarlett has no interest in Mrs. Graves, surely. Her only target so far—Grandmother’s target—has been me.

Still, where the hell is Mrs. G?

I pull on my clothes in a frenzy and race back to the Empire Grand, and head straight for Hadria’s suite. The guards at her door just wave me in, and that’s not a good sign. All eyes turn to me as I burst into the suite—Marco, Ricky, Aurora, a few other Syndicate seniors. And Johnny the Gentleman.

Johnny de Luca, Juno Bianchi’s consigliere and sometime-Chicago resident, is also present. That...can’t be good.

“Thank you for finding time in your schedule for us,” Hadria says coldly to me.

That really can’t be good.

“I—”

She holds up a hand. “We don’t have time.” She gives Johnny a nod, and says, in that deceptively mild tone that I know means trouble, “Show them.”

He casts video from a tablet to the TV mounted above the fireplace. Grainy security footage plays, and for a second I really think I’m going to be sick all over the luxe carpet of the Bianchi Family’s Empire Grand hotel.

Because there she is—Scarlett, that waterfall of dark chestnut hair unmistakable, even in the lower-quality video. And I know the woman with her as well as I know my own reflection.

It's Mrs. Graves.

Scarlett is pulling her along, making her drop all her bags, pulling her hard along an alley until...

Until they go out of view.

Hadria rewinds to the one moment where Scarlett looks behind her, looks at the camera, and I feel like she's looking straight at me.

That scheming little viper...

All the vulnerability she's shown me, the glimpses of a shattered heart that made me ache to soothe her demons—it was all a ploy?

“But Lyssa...isn't that your girlfriend Ruby?” Aurora's soft, bewildered voice shatters the shocked silence.

I flinch like she's slapped me, and I can't look at Hadria, even though she's staring at me. Scarlett got closer to me than anyone in decades, so close I dropped my guard like a naive recruit.

But for what? To steal away the person I consider a mother? It makes no sense...

All at once, the room erupts in a maelstrom of shouts and frantic accusations as the others process the footage. Marco and Ricky talk over each other, demanding answers I don't have.

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

“Why the fuck is the assassin still alive?”

“I thought you were going to ice her, Lyssa! What is this shit?”

“Did you know about her bullshit this whole time?”

Chaos reigns until Hadria’s glacial tone cuts through the din like a frigid Arctic wind.

“Everyone. Out. Now.”

No one dares defy her. They scatter, leaving me alone to face the wrath of our leader. The door clicks shut with a sense of grave finality, and I can’t stand up anymore. I collapse on a sofa.

Hadria’s pale gray eyes bore into me, blazing with a rage colder than I’ve ever seen. When she finally speaks, I wish she’d just scream instead of use that soft, lethal tone that’s a million times worse. “You have let your goddamn feelings compromise everything.” I open my mouth, but she silences me with an upheld hand. “I could see something was going on, but I trusted you, Lyssa. I trusted you. I believed you when you said you had everything handled. But now, because of you, Mrs. Graves is a hostage. The woman I consider my mother?—”

“And mine,” I say weakly. My chest constricts with each agonized breath. “Hadria, I didn’t know?—”

“Don’t insult me with your pitiful excuses. If anything happens to that woman...” She shakes her head slowly. “I will never forgive you. Ever. Do you understand?”

Pleading is probably useless, I know, but I have to try. “Hadria, please...give me one more chance. I’ll get Mrs. Graves back, I swear on Elysium. And I’ll kill Scarlett and Grandmother as soon as Mrs. G is safe. No more fucking around. You know I can do it. You know I can.”

I can. And I’m her best shot, and she knows that, too. But when she finally answers, there’s still no trace of warmth.

“One chance. That’s all you get. Don’t waste it, because I will fucking skin you alive if you fuck this up.” And then, to my surprise, she blows out a long breath, and when she speaks next, the cold crime queen has disappeared. “Lyssa, I swear to God, if she dies...” She puts a hand to her mouth, and I’m shocked to see that it’s shaking.

Seeing Hadria’s fear bolsters me, somehow. I’ve always been a rock when others need me. I can be that now. For Hadria. For Mrs. Graves.

I get to my feet and go to her, take her by the shoulders, shake her hard. “Get your shit together,” I tell her in a low, firm voice. “You can be pissed at me later. Hell, I can be pissed at me later. But we don’t have time for that now. You need to get your head in the game.”

Under my hands, she straightens up, and I’m relieved to see the fear in her eyes harden to resolve. “You and me,” she says at last. “Together. That’s our best shot. We go in together—surgical strike.”

Just like the good old days.

The good old days, before we had to worry about things like the Bianchi Family and Chicago becoming destabilized and people kidnapping the woman we both love like a mother.

I'd rather do it alone, because I feel like I need to pay for my foolishness. And I'd like to look Scarlett right in the face as I drain the life from her.

I'd like to do that privately.

But I can see Hadria is working to put aside her rage and her fury and come up with the best plan. Like me, she can focus when it counts. "Okay," I say. "Together. What else do we need?"

"We'll need some men to help manage ingress and egress," she says. "Johnny de Luca managed to get footage of Scarlett's car all the way to a particular high-rise building, so at least we know where they are. He's getting hold of the blueprints now so we can find a way in."

I nod. I should have known Hadria was already working on a plan. She's always ahead of the game, and that's the one thing that gives me hope right now.

Then she reaches up, putting her hands on my shoulders too, drawing me close to put her forehead against mine. "And once Mrs. Graves is safe, you will kill this Scarlett, Lyssa. That is an order."

"Yes, Boss."

I don't need the order.

Nothing on earth could stop me from putting down Scarlett now.

CHAPTER 28

Scarlett

I can't stop shaking as I usher Mrs. Graves into the warehouse. The shadows in here seem to shift and dance, making me jumpy, which in turn makes Mrs. Graves jumpy. She keeps glancing back at me.

This underworld I chose to dive headfirst into has slowly stripped away everything from me, leaving me a hollow shell consumed by rage and an insatiable thirst for vengeance. I see that now...

But that wasn't how it was supposed to go.

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

I was meant to be the avenging angel, the hand of justice striking down the monster that took my brother from me. Lyssa, with her cold, ruthless reputation as the Styx Syndicate's infamous "Wolf." She deserved to pay an eye for an eye, to have her life stripped away as cruelly as she stole Adam's.

But Lyssa didn't kill my brother.

And all I've done was kill on instruction for the last few years. I'm no better than any of the people I've been hunting down.

I've dragged an innocent woman, a mother figure to both Lyssa and Hadria, into danger. Made her a pawn in my dangerous game.

Mrs. Graves settles onto a wooden crate without a word of complaint, the picture of steadfast resilience, though she keeps staring at me, watching me. Despite the gloomy shadows distorting the corners of the room, she exudes an aura of calm certainty that seems to mock the anguished storm raging within me.

"Ruby, dear," she says in a soft, soothing tone. "Why don't you sit and catch your breath?"

I ignore her, pacing like a caged animal before her. How can she be so unruffled? So at peace when her life is in peril because of the decisions I've made, the paths I've chosen to walk?

"Ruby—"

“Scarlett,” I mutter.

“I beg your?—”

“My name is Scarlett, not Ruby.”

“I see. Scarlett, then. Why don’t you have a seat?”

“Don’t you get it?” I snap, whirling to face her again. “This wasn’t the plan. You weren’t supposed to be involved in this...this nightmare.”

“And yet, here we are,” she replies, her tone carrying no rebuke, only gentle understanding.

“We’re not even supposed to be here,” I say miserably. “I’m supposed to bring you to...” I trail off. I don’t want to scare her more than I already have.

I’m not a monster. I just—I just play one, very convincingly.

Mrs. Graves is quiet for a while as I pace back and forth, but at last she says, “Tell me, Scarlett, what compelled you to bring me here instead of to your...employer?”

The question gives me pause, and I search her placid features, her warm eyes, for any hint of trickery. But I find none, only that same empathetic compassion that likely prompted her to take in Lyssa and Hadria.

And even more strangely, perhaps, I see no judgment or condemnation.

“Please don’t ask me.” I sound like a child to my own ears.

“Now, Scarlett,” she says, in a brisk, no-nonsense tone, “if I’m going to die, I’d like

to know the reason. I think you can tell me that much, at least.”

Ouch.

“My parents...” I begin, my voice trembling until I steady it with a fortifying breath. “Grandmother has them. She said if I didn’t do exactly as she commanded without question, if I disobeyed or failed in my mission, she’d...”

I choke on the words, the breath catching in my throat as the horrific image of my parents’ lifeless bodies floods my mind’s eye. The thought of losing them too, of failing them as I failed Adam, is overwhelming. It clouds my vision until all I can see is their vacant stares, accusing me.

“Who is your grandmother?” Mrs. Graves asks, leaning forward. “Scarlett—listen to me.” I stop pacing again and turn to her. “Is she your grandmother involved in organized crime, or?—”

“No! No, she’s...she’s not my grandmother, she’s...” I suck in a breath, and then I find myself sharing...

Everything. Adam’s death. His funeral. The strange, veiled woman who offered me vengeance.

“And so you chose this path,” Mrs. Graves says at last. The gentle rebuke, stated with compassion, still stings like the lash of Grandmother’s whip. But she’s right, of course.

“I chose this,” I say dully.

And I’ve been so consumed by my single-minded pursuit that I lost sight of everything.

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

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this,” I murmur, sitting down all at once on the dusty floor. “I just...I just wanted justice for Adam.”

A heavy silence stretches between us. But finally, Mrs. Graves speaks again, her voice laced with bone-deep sorrow. “I know what it’s like to have an all-consuming rage claw at your soul, that desperate need to make someone pay for an unforgivable crime...” She trails off.

But I want to know more. “What...what happened?”

“When my daughter was taken from me by cruelty and violence...” Her voice fractures but she pushes on. “The rage, that driving need to inflict that same agony on her killer...it nearly destroyed me, Scarlett.”

“What did you do?”

“I hired two young girls with a reputation for enacting street justice.”

Hadria and Lyssa. “And...did they?”

It takes a moment for her to answer, a single nod of the head. I watch her, transfixed and suddenly, strangely, afraid, as she relives her past in her own mind.

“Did it help?” I whisper. “Getting that eye for an eye...did it help?”

She shakes her head, her lips curving in a rueful, heartbroken smile. “No, child. It didn’t. Lyssa asked me that recently, you know. And I—I lied to her. Told her I felt

some measure of justice. But I didn't. Because I didn't want justice, did I? That wasn't what I wanted and it wasn't what I got."

For the first time, I truly think about where this insatiable quest for vengeance will lead. Is this what Adam would have wanted for me? For me to sacrifice my humanity, to damn my own soul?

To kill, like he was killed?

I blink back the burn of tears clouding my vision as Mrs. Graves reaches across the divide and covers my hand with her palm. "I think you have a good heart beneath all that pain, Scarlett," she murmurs, squeezing my hand. "Don't let it consume you, like mine did."

"You don't understand," I say miserably. "I don't have a good heart. I—I'm the one who killed all your Syndicate members."

She stares at me for a long time. Ashamed, I keep looking down.

"I'm sorry to hear that," she says at last. I look up at last, find her somber and still. "Very sorry indeed."

I open my mouth, desperate to respond, to find absolution. But this woman can't give it to me, any more than killing my brother's murderer could bring me peace. I see that now.

And I see, too, that I can't take her to Grandmother. I'd be signing her death warrant. One more life on my hands. One more terrible deed. And I can't bring myself to do it. So the only thing I can do is let her go, and try to free my parents myself.

I get up and walk a few paces away. "You need to go."

She doesn't move.

"Mrs. Graves, I'm not kidding. Go. Now. Please," I add, when she still doesn't move.

"Why are you just sitting there? This isn't a trick. I've changed my mind. I..."

She gets up and crosses to me and takes me by the shoulders. "You have done terrible things, Scarlett. But what about your parents—are they bad people?"

I stare at her in horror. "Of course not! They're completely innocent. This is all my fault, they had nothing to do with it. They have no idea I'm..." I feel sick at the idea of them finding out what I've done, too.

"Then you need to do whatever you can to free them. Right now, that means taking me to this—this Grandmother."

"I can't take you to her," I whisper, dragging in a ragged breath as fear wars with shame in my chest. "If I do, she'll kill you." The look of pity that crosses Mrs. Graves' features surprises me.

"No, she won't."

"I can assure you, Mrs. Graves, she will."

"We'll have to agree to disagree. But either way, you must take me to the people you're working for."

I stare at her. "But...why?"

"Because I won't be the cause of two innocent lives being taken. And I, Scarlett, no matter what you might think when you look at me, I am not an innocent in all this. I understand my girls all too well, and the business they run. So you will take me to

this Grandmother, and we will hope that she keeps her word and releases your parents.”

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

My heart clenches at her selflessness. How can she be so willing to sacrifice herself for people she's never met? For me, the person who has killed so many Syndicate members? "No. I can't let you do that. She'll kill you, and it will be my fault."

She hugs me close, tight, before releasing me and fixing me with that same pitying look from before. "Scarlett, I'm very sorry for what you've been through. And I'm sorry for what's coming, too."

"What do you mean?"

Mrs. Graves looks at me with a deep sadness. "My girls will come for me, Scarlett. And when they do..."

She holds my gaze for a soul-searing moment, and I see she's right. She's no innocent, this woman. She's brave and she's honorable, but she's done terrible, wicked things in her life, just like I have.

"When they come for me," she says softly, "they will kill you. But before then, I think we should at least give your parents a fighting chance. What do you say?"

CHAPTER 29

Scarlett

By the time I'm leading Mrs. Graves out of the elevator and into Grandmother's penthouse suite, my heart is pounding against my ribs like it wants to burst out to freedom. But Mrs. Graves is a steady presence beside me, her face a picture of calm

despite the circumstances.

How can she be so composed when I feel like I'm about to shatter into a million pieces?

And how can she have such perfect trust in "her girls"? Even I, who knows exactly what Lyssa is capable of, have my doubts that she'll get here in time to save her mother-figure.

But Mrs. Graves insisted on coming. She made it impossible not to take her, threatening to become...

Difficult.

She's very used to dealing with killers, that's for sure. I wonder if she takes the same no-nonsense approach with Lyssa and Hadria. I wonder...I wonder, if I'd known about the Styx Syndicate when Adam died, whether I might have gone to them to ask for help. But I didn't have the chance. Grandmother got to me first.

And now Grandmother herself emerges from her sitting room, eager to see her prize. Downstairs, when I reported in to the guards, I said only that I had a gift for Grandmother.

I feel some small measure of satisfaction now as her eyes land on Mrs. Graves, quick shock rippling across her usually unreadable face.

It's like watching a stone statue crack.

"What is the meaning of this, Scarlett?" Her voice is thin, sharp, lashing at my already frayed nerves.

I launch into my story. “I know you wanted Aurora Verderosa, Grandmother, but I thought Mrs. Graves would be a better hostage. She’s like a mother to both Hadria Imperioli and Lyssa. Her life means everything—to both of them. Your plan will work better with?—”

But Grandmother’s face contorts with rage. She’s already moving fast, faster than I’ve ever seen her move, and strikes me across the face. I taste blood, feel it trickling from the corner of my mouth, and raise a hand to delicately touch it.

“You stupid, stupid girl!” Grandmother hisses. “How dare you defy my orders? Do you have any idea what you’ve done?”

“I thought?—”

“You thought wrong,” she snarls, raising her hand again. I brace myself, waiting for the next blow.

But it doesn’t come. Mrs. Graves has stepped forward, her eyes blazing, putting herself between Grandmother and me. “Stop it!” she snaps. “Leave the girl alone.”

Grandmother pauses, arm still raised, and laughs. “Who do you think you are, giving me orders?” She looks Mrs. Graves up and down, a cruel smile playing at her lips. “Do you have any idea who I am, housekeeper?”

Mrs. Graves lifts her chin, meeting Grandmother’s gaze without fear. In that moment, she seems taller somehow. “No, I do not—and frankly, I don’t care to.”

I stare at her, awed by her courage and—unfortunately—I want to giggle at the expression on Grandmother’s face. It’s just nerves, but it won’t help if I start laughing now.

Grandmother's smile has faded, replaced by a look of cold fury. She opens her mouth to speak, but before she can, the elevator doors open again and one of her guards rushes in.

"Ma'am, we have a—a situation," the guard says, slightly out of breath. "There's a group here, attempting to breach the building."

My heart leaps into my throat.

She's here. Lyssa's here.

I wasted a lot of time with Mrs. Graves in the warehouse, long enough for the Syndicate to notice her missing...and long enough for them to find Grandmother's house, the high-rise.

Grandmother, though, seems almost irritated by the interruption. "Then take care of the problem," she snaps at the guard.

Part of me wants to run down all those flights of stairs, to fall down in front of Lyssa and beg for forgiveness. But another part, the part that still fears death, is just on the edge of panic.

But my parents are the only thing that matter to me now. Mrs. Graves and I agreed before we came here—whatever we needed to do to save them, we would do it.

Grandmother's eyes narrow into slits. She turns to me. "I hope you understand that your parents' lives are at stake."

"I do," I tell her, completely truthfully.

"Then take this housekeeper to one of the safe rooms below. Lock her in and guard the door. I want her in complete isolation, understood? No one is to have access. No one. Not even Ariadne. When this little mess is dealt with, I will come and see you, Scarlett."

For a moment, I stare dumbly at her. Does she not see how much peril she's in, right

now? This isn't some little mess, like the wrong delivery truck turning up.

This is the wolf howling at her door.

But I just nod, my stomach twisting. "Yes, Grandmother."

"Then get out of here," she says, motioning at the elevator.

I'm torn. I know my parents are here, in the penthouse, in the torture room hidden behind a door at the end of her walkthrough wardrobe. I could run through right now, unlock the door, and free them?—

It's too risky. The guard has a semi-automatic rifle and I know he won't hesitate to use it if ordered. Better to play the part I agreed on with Mrs. Graves. I grab her arm and pull her back into the elevator, stabbing at the button to take us down one floor.

The doors close and I sag against the wall, glancing over at Mrs. Graves. "Why isn't she more concerned about the Syndicate?" I ask her, bewildered. "About Lyssa?"

I don't really expect Mrs. Graves to know the answer, but I'm even more surprised when she laughs. "Her reaction is quite usual, you know. So many people underestimate my girls. So many regret it afterward. This Grandmother has quite a shock coming her way."

I'm still perplexed. "But Grandmother trained Lyssa. Surely she?—"

"What?" The doors open on the floor below just as Mrs. Graves grabs my arm, and I realize I've said the wrong thing. "What did you just say?" I try to exit the elevator, but she pulls me back. "Scarlett, do you mean to say?—"

"Mrs. Graves, please," I say desperately. "I think...if anyone is going to tell you

about all that, shouldn't it be Lyssa? You can ask her yourself when she comes for you."

Because I have no doubt now, like Mrs. Graves herself, that Lyssa will come.

She seems to accept that, but she keeps trying to pull me back into the elevator. "Your parents. Shouldn't we?—"

I shake my head. "They're up in the penthouse, where we just came from. I didn't want to endanger you by starting something with that guard around. Besides..." I try to keep my voice even, hold back the fear. "There's no guarantee they're still alive. But if they are, the penthouse is probably the safest place for them right now, if the Syndicate is attacking. Don't you think?"

My answer finally seems to assuage her, and I pull her out with me, checking the hallway for anyone. Grandmother ordered our isolation, but I'm in no hurry either to have anyone see Mrs. Graves. Strangers are very noticeable here in Grandmother's house, and they cause a lot of suspicion.

I've only come down one floor, and this is not the floor my room is on. But I certainly don't plan to be sitting pretty in my own room if Grandmother decides Mrs. Graves will be more use as a physical shield to keep the Syndicate back.

No. I need to focus on keeping Mrs. Graves safe now, and trust that my parents are still alive. So I pick one of the doors along the hallway at random and pull Mrs. Graves in with me. It's the exact same set out as my own place a few floors below, and offers about the same amount of protection.

Zero.

But it has the advantage of being completely random, and empty of any occupants.

I sometimes wondered why there were so many empty rooms in this high-rise, but now I think I'm starting to understand. Grandmother planned to fill it one day. A high-rise stuffed full of trained killers who would follow her commands.

It's sick. And my own selfish plans for vengeance completely blinded me to what I was supporting.

I take Mrs. Graves' hands. "Listen to me. When Lyssa gets here—or Hadria—after they..." I swallow. "If I don't make it out of here, promise me that you'll tell them about my parents. Ask them to free my parents, and make sure that they do. Will you promise me?"

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

“Of course.” She looks sad again, the same sadness she had back in the warehouse.

“Mrs. Graves, if I could let you go right now, I would. But with all the guards and the others—I don’t think it would be safe to—”

Mrs. Graves places a gentle hand on my arm. Her touch is warm, comforting. I don’t deserve the smallest kindness from her, but she gives it anyway. “I know, dear. And I appreciate that. But don’t you worry about me.” She’s looking around with eyes that get wider and wider as she takes in the near-empty rooms, the shitty furniture, the bare walls.

When she turns back to me, I don’t like the fresh light of understanding in her eyes.

“Listen to me, Scarlett,” she says slowly. “I think...I think you need to run. Now. Get as far away from here as you can. I’ll wait here for Hadria and Lyssa, and I’ll tell them about your parents. They will save them. But if they find you here with me...”

I know what they’ll do. But I still shake my head. “I won’t leave you. Not with Ariadne still around somewhere. She’s too unpredictable—all of the trainees are. I think Grandmother worries that they might kill you without stopping to think, to ask questions. That’s why she wants me guarding you.”

“But—”

“Please,” I say quietly. “Mrs. Graves, please—just let me do this one good thing in my life. For my brother’s sake, at least.”

Adam's face flashes before my eyes, his smile bright and carefree. He was always the strong one, the one who protected me. And look what I've turned his memory into.

"Alright," Mrs. Graves says at last. "Alright, Scarlett. If that's what you really want."

I'm about to tell her it is when the electricity goes off, sending the room into total darkness.

CHAPTER 30

Lyssa

The high-rise, when we arrive, is just as Johnny de Luca's sources described. I look up at the imposing structure, its dark windows like vacant eyes staring back at me. One of our men has just cut the power, and another is working on the alarm system.

We're trying to be as inconspicuous as possible, because we don't want the law involved. But something tells me they'll hold off, even if they do get a call. This dark high-rise is the kind of building they tend to look away from, just as they look away from the Empire Grand hotel, and from Elysium, too.

No, I think they're more likely to let us take each other out and then clean up the dregs. That's their usual play. And I hope for their sake they follow the same playbook tonight.

Beside me, Hadria is a picture of cold determination, her jaw set and her eyes narrowed. She gives a curt nod when the tech guy, tapping away on a laptop, calls over, "Systems down."

"Go," she orders Marco, and I watch as he and his chosen men start to heave the battering ram at the door, the sound of splintering wood and the shrieking metal of

twisting locks filling the air.

The door is down in moments, and Hadria and I enter the building together, just the two of us. The first floor is empty, and I don't just mean empty of people, but empty of everything. No furniture in the lobby. No computers. Nothing at all. The air is dusty, almost stale. I nod my head toward the fire stairs and Hadria follows my lead.

The stairwell is cold and empty as we begin our ascent. Grandmother stayed on the top floor of the building where I grew up, and I bet she'll be on the top floor of this one, too, so it'll be a long climb. The elevators are down, of course, and wouldn't be strategically sensible anyway. My grip tightens on my gun, adrenaline starting to sing in my veins as the familiar feeling of battle comes over me.

But today I don't have the sense of fun that I usually get.

No. This is going to be the opposite of fun.

We hit another turning of the stairs, the door to the right solidly announcing the sixth floor with a giant "6" painted on it. I try this door, like I've tried them all so far, but it's locked, as they've all been. We pause, ears straining for any sound. It's dead quiet still.

The building feels more like a tomb than a hideout. I glance at Hadria, who seems to share my wariness.

We go up another flight of stairs, steady and fast and noiseless. Another and another, until we hit the tenth floor, and this time?—

This time, the handle gives under my fingers. Open, I mouth at Hadria. And then I raise a questioning eyebrow. Do we take our chances, walk into this very obvious trap? Or do we keep making our way up the stairs, a bottleneck that could end up

being just as dangerous for us?

There were no good options when we looked at breaking in here. We knew that from the start. It's a matter of taking the least-bad route.

And then the rhythmic thud of boots on concrete reaches us, coming from far above. I tense, motioning for Hadria to move back behind me. There's no way in hell I'm letting her put herself in the line of fire.

There are a lot of them, from the sounds of it. And then there's an open door to my right with God-knows-what waiting behind it.

I turn to Hadria, my decision made. "Go back down," I murmur. "I've got this." Her eyes narrow, but I cut off her protest before she can make it. "Go back down, Hadria. I mean it. This is my mess to clean up."

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

“We said we’d do this together.”

“And we will. You’ll wait down there to get Mrs. G the hell out of here when I bring her down. And then I’ll go back up and take care of Scarlett and Grandmother.” She doesn’t move. “Listen, I don’t want Suzy kicking my ass if you get hurt,” I try.

“I’m not going to get hurt,” she scoffs.

I’m done messing around. “Get out of here. That’s an order from your second, Boss, whether you want to hear it or not. You need to be somewhere safe in case?—”

In case I don’t make it back.

The unspoken words hang between us, and something close to vulnerability flickers across Hadria’s face.

“We don’t have time to argue about this,” I mutter. “And you know I’m right.”

For a moment, I think she’s going to refuse again. But then her expression softens, just a fraction. She offers her arm, and I clasp it, two warriors wishing each other well on the battlefield. “You better come back alive, Wolf. That’s an order.”

“You know me, Hades. I always follow orders.”

And then she turns and heads back down while I take a minute to figure out my next move. I know exactly what’s coming down the stairs, so I guess I’ll take the mystery option—door number 10.

I step out cautiously, and find myself in what looks like a hotel or apartment block hallway with a score of doors leading into apartment units. I sweep through them rapidly yet thoroughly, senses on high alert for any ambush.

But there's nothing—literally nothing. All these apartments are exactly the same: empty, completely unfurnished, and no signs of life, just layer upon layer of dust.

Only silence and emptiness surround me, pressing in as flashes from my childhood under Grandmother tear through my mind. While I didn't grow up here, it's still horribly familiar. All these rooms, barren of any comforts...

And that ever-present fear coiling in my gut...

I grit my teeth, my breaths coming short and sharp as memories batter at the edges of my consciousness. Not now. I can't afford to get caught up in the past, not when Mrs. Graves' life is at stake. Not when Scarlett?—

The thought of her, of the gutting betrayal and the confusing tangle of emotions she's stirred up in me, hardens my resolve. I force myself to focus, breathing slow and steady until my body's nervous system regulates itself once more.

Moving back through the corridors, I search for a way up, for the fastest route to the upper levels. But as I approach the elevators, a plan starting to form, I catch a movement in my periphery.

I whirl, gun raised, and find myself staring at?—

Me.

No. Not me. But the wolf mask is too familiar, hiding the upper part of the face. The lower part is free, and the woman wearing it smiles in mockery as I take a cautious

step back.

The lethal grace in her stance reminds me of Scarlett, and for a split second, I think it is Scarlett, and some traitorous part of me jolts with...something. Relief? Anticipation?

It's quickly extinguished as the woman launches herself at me.

This isn't Scarlett, and disappointment makes me slower than I usually would be, slow enough that my shots are way off. I deflect her first few blows, falling into an instinctive defensive rhythm as I assess her skills. She's good—really good—and I bet I know who she is.

Ducking beneath a high kick, I call out, "Ariadne, right? The one who killed Adam?"

If my words faze her, she doesn't show it. We exchange a blistering series of attacks, her ferocity lending every strike a weight behind it.

But she lacks precision.

"I've killed scores of people," she finally bites out, falling back a little to look me over. "You'll have to clarify which one you mean."

"Scarlett's brother."

For the first time, her movements hitch, just a fraction. "Yeah, that was me." There's a savage sort of pride in her admission, but it rings hollow. "Family is nothing but a useless diversion."

"Is that what Grandmother told you?" I laugh. "She told me the same thing. And she's wrong. Very fucking wrong." I skip back, narrowly avoid her fist slamming into

my jaw. “You’re pretty good,” I commend, ducking and weaving through the confined space of the hallway.

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

She is. But she's not as good as me. She just doesn't realize it yet.

"I'm the best," she corrects me. "I should have been the one sent to eliminate you. Scarlett is weak." Another flurry of attacks drives me back, but I give as good as I get, landing a solid hit to her ribs that seems to surprise her. She shakes it off fast, though. "But I'll kill you now and take pleasure in it," she pants out.

"If Scarlett's so weak, why did Grandmother send her instead of you in the first place?"

The barb hits its mark—Ariadne doesn't answer, her focus wavering as her anger takes over, and she charges head-on at me.

I let her slam me back into the wall, then jam a hard elbow right into her spine, making her drop me and stagger away. I land a series of sledgehammer strikes that have her reeling back, drawing me further down the hallway.

Ah. She's just stalling me.

I chuckle as we both regroup. "So you're here to slow me down, huh?"

Her response is a wordless cry of rage, the fury of her attacks intensifying yet again as she drives me back.

Okay, message received. But now I'm getting impatient. The clock is ticking, and I need to get to Mrs. Graves, then to Grandmother.

And to Scarlett.

I quit holding back and take the opportunity when one of her kicks goes wide, launch into an offensive, blow after calculated blow.

Ariadne falters, stumbling back as I hammer through her defenses. She gives a frustrated growl as she realizes she's losing ground.

And then she rips something from her belt and hurls it toward me. Thick, choking smoke billows out, engulfing the hallway in an impenetrable gray haze. I cough, backing up fast, the acrid fumes stinging my eyes as I try to track Ariadne's movements. I hear the unmistakable sound of the fire stairs door slamming shut.

Cursing liberally, I fan the air in a bid to disperse the smoke. Classic Scarlett move—just like the bullshit she pulled during our very first fight.

Scarlett. The thought of her sends a pang through my chest. The rage, the determination I saw in Ariadne...it's so similar to Scarlett, and just like Scarlett's first few attacks on me, it felt...

Personal.

But I can't dwell on that now. I have to keep moving.

I should've expected that trick with the smoke bomb. I need to be way fucking smarter about this.

I take a deep breath, cover my eyes with my arm, and run through the smoke with the other hand on the wall to guide me, heading for the elevators again.

The smoke is dispersing now, and the elevators are pretty clear. With a little effort, I

manage to force the doors apart and stare down into the shaft, then up into a deep, consuming darkness.

The elevator is above me, because when I turn on the flashlight at my shoulder and lean out into space, I can juuust make out the bottom of the shaft below, and there's no elevator there.

If the elevator starts coming down while I'm climbing up...

Well. No point thinking about that until or unless it happens. The electricity is off, at any rate, so the odds are decent.

Squaring my shoulders, I grab onto the maintenance ladder and begin to climb, hauling myself upward. Here and there, the ladder cuts out or switches sides, and I have to use the scaffolding of the shaft itself to continue upward. The metal bites into my hands, the strain burning in my muscles—but I don't let up.

Up above, Mrs. Graves is waiting for me. She'll know I'm coming, for sure. I'm not going to let her down.

Grandmother is up there, too.

And so is Scarlett.

That thought, in particular, is the one that gets me climbing faster and faster.

CHAPTER 31

Scarlett

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

The few pieces of furniture in this apartment are functional rather than comfortable, but at least they're solid. I shove the heavy sofa in front of the suite door, the only way to keep the door barred since Grandmother refuses to allow her trainees even the basic privacy of locked doors. The room feels claustrophobic even though it's practically empty, the dim light from the single bulb making my eyes hurt.

As I listen to the distant sounds of feet stamping, of shouts, of the occasional slamming doors somewhere below, I feel torn.

I need protect Mrs. Graves.

But I have a desperate urge to get to my parents, too.

Mrs. Graves seems to sense my inner turmoil. "Scarlett, I really do think you should go." It's about the fourth time she's said it, now. "Free your parents. I'll be alright here," she says, her voice soft but firm.

"I'm not leaving you alone."

Mrs. Graves smiles sadly. "Sometimes, we have to make difficult choices to protect the ones we love."

"You promised me you'd tell?—"

Before I can get any further, I hear quick, soft footsteps outside in the corridor, the sound of doors opening and closing growing louder. I hiss at Mrs. Graves, "Get in the bathroom and shove whatever you can up against the door. Now."

She hesitates for a moment, but the urgency in my voice propels her into action. She hurries into the bathroom just as the suite door opens and bangs into my sofa barricade.

I back up, my gun steady in my hands, ready to defend Mrs. Graves and myself against whoever is trying to force their way in.

God, I hope it's not Ariadne.

Because if I go up against her, the rage that seems to have died down in me for now might rise up again, demanding blood for blood. Demanding vengeance. And Lyssa was right—that rage doesn't serve me. Doesn't make me a better fighter. It sends me out of control, that's all.

I need to keep a cool head, and?—

The door shudders as the person on the other side shoves harder, the sofa scraping against the floor. I brace myself as, with a final heave, the door swings open.

It's not Ariadne.

It's Lyssa who stands in the doorway, her blonde hair disheveled and her brown eyes hard. There's dirt all over her, a black smear across her cheek. When she looks at me, there's death in her eyes.

The Wolf.

And I've never been happier to see her.

A strange relief floods through me. Despite everything that's happened between us, my lies and betrayal, all the terrible things I've done that I now regret—I'm still

drawn to her.

I lower the gun. “Lyssa, I?—”

She lunges at me, striking hard and fast. I barely have time to defend myself, stumbling backward as I try to block her blows. “Lyssa, wait!” I gasp, my voice tinged with desperation. “Please, Mrs. Graves is?—”

Lyssa doesn’t listen, her attacks cold, brutal, effective. It’s all I have in me to dodge her blows. She pauses only when I vault away and yell, desperately, “Listen to me!”

“I’m done listening,” she tells me. “You took her. How could you?—”

“I didn’t have a choice!” I shout, my own anger rising. “Grandmother has my parents!”

Lyssa falters for a moment, something like understanding in her face—but then her expression hardens again, and I brace for another attack. But before she can launch at me, Mrs. Graves runs from the bathroom, her voice ringing out, “Lyssa, stop! Please, stop!”

Lyssa freezes, her chest heaving as she turns to Mrs. Graves. “Mrs. G? What the—are you okay? Did she hurt you?”

Mrs. Graves shakes her head, her expression gentle but firm. “No, I’m fine. But Scarlett’s parents...they’re in danger. Lyssa, listen to me. She chose to protect me over her own flesh and blood.”

Lyssa’s gaze snaps back to me, confusion and suspicion warring in her eyes. I take a deep breath, my voice steady as I declare, “It’s true. And I’ll help you and Mrs. Graves escape. But...then I need to come back for my parents.”

“Or I kill you here and now, like I should have long ago,” Lyssa counters.

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

“No,” Mrs. Graves says sharply, and Lyssa turns to her in disbelief.

“Do you have any idea what she’s done?” she demands. “She’s a killer, Mrs. G. If you knew?—”

“I do know. Just as I know you, Lyssa. Please, let the girl save her parents. We can go now and bring them down with us?—”

“Absolutely not. You are my priority—and Hadria’s, for that matter. I have my orders,” Lyssa goes on sharply, as Mrs. Graves tries again to argue. “I find you, bring you down. Then I come back and...” She looks at me. “Clean up.”

“She protected me from this—this Grandmother,” Mrs. Graves says. “Lyssa, we can trust her. And don’t you think, if we have her parents with us, she’ll fight hard for their lives as well as mine?”

Lyssa stares at me. “But she...” She trails off.

Mrs. Graves interjects, her voice filled with quiet authority. “Lyssa, enough. We need to trust her—for now, at least. We get her parents, and then we head down.”

Lyssa sighs, re-tightening her ponytail with a frustrated expression. That little gesture, so familiar, makes my heart hurt.

“Please,” I say again. “My parents are innocents. Doesn’t the Syndicate have rules about that?”

For a moment, I think I should have kept my mouth shut. But at last, Lyssa snaps, “Fine. But again, my priority is getting Mrs. G out of here safely. You understand?”

“I do,” I say quickly. “My parents are on the floor just above us, behind Grandmother’s bedroom. She has a...a special room there...”

“I’ll bet she does. Don’t suppose the old lady will conveniently be there, too? Two birds, one stone?”

I shake my head, uncertain. “Maybe?”

“Well, we’ll deal with...everything else later. Come on.”

I’m already moving towards the door. “Did you—did you see Ariadne out there?”

Lyssa tilts her head to one side. “Still want your vengeance, Scarlett?” she asks, in a tone I don’t like. I say nothing, and she goes on, “I did—but way down below. She was trying to slow me down.”

“Did you kill her?”

I’m looking out the cracked-open door, but I turn back in time to catch the small face Lyssa makes. “She pulled that damn smoke bomb trick,” she admits.

I stare at her for a second. “Well, you should’ve seen that one coming.”

“Yeah, I should,” she agrees stiffly. “There are a whole lotta things I should’ve seen coming. And next time, I fucking will.”

I look down, unable to keep her gaze.

“Now let’s move,” she says. But then she leans in and drops her voice so that Mrs. Graves can’t hear what she says next. “And Scarlett? If you make any move I don’t like, I’ll open your throat. Understand?”

I give a small nod, and motion Mrs. Graves forward.

We head out into the deserted hallway: me first, then Lyssa, then Mrs. Graves. As we pass the open elevator doors, I glance over my shoulder at Lyssa, who shrugs in confirmation.

“It’s another option if we need it,” she murmurs.

“It most certainly is not,” Mrs. Graves says stoutly.

I smother a smile, surprised I can find humor in the moment. But it’s all a part of the confusing tangle of emotions I feel towards Lyssa.

I know she wants me dead. But I still feel a glimmer of hope, even as I accept that not both of us will leave this high-rise alive. I just want a chance to prove to her that I’m not a monster. That I could have chosen better. That we could have been...

We could have been good together.

We’re at the fire door now that leads into the enclosed stairwell. “Ready?”

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

“I’m always ready,” Lyssa says coolly. “Mrs. G, you stay the fuck behind me.”

“You don’t need to swear at me, Lyssa,” she says primly. “I have no plans to do anything else.”

I don’t miss the quick quirk of Lyssa’s mouth before she gives me the nod. “Go,” she says.

I push open the door and head in. From way down below, we can hear shouts and boots on stairs. But they have a long, long way to get up this far. “We have time,” I say.

“Move,” is all Lyssa says, propelling me upward with a hand in the small of my back.

I head up the stairwell to the penthouse level, where we find the door open. “One good thing, at least,” Lyssa mutters, and then points at the next flight of stairs that continues on up to the roof. “What’s up there?”

“Helipad,” I say, and Lyssa and I exchange a look. “Grandmother will be up there. And...probably some of the other trainees, too. Like Ariadne.”

I don’t like the way Lyssa is looking at me—something like contempt in her eyes. “Then make your choice,” she says, her lip twisting. “Your parents? Or vengeance?”

The question doesn’t even warrant consideration. “My parents,” I respond immediately.

Nodding, Lyssa pushes open the door and leads us into the open penthouse suite. I point out the door at the back of the sitting room—the entrance to Grandmother’s private chambers, beyond which lies the torture room.

Together, Lyssa and I sweep the room, checking for hidden enemies. But it’s empty.

My breath hitches as we approach the bedroom, dread and hope warring within me. There are no guards.

No Grandmother.

Lyssa pauses, ever cautious, but I can’t contain myself a moment longer. I rush forward, bursting through the wardrobe to the room beyond.

There, still bound to chairs with ropes biting into their skin, are my parents. They don’t move at the noise of me bursting in, and I freeze in dread. “Mom? Dad?” I choke out.

For a moment, there’s nothing. And then they both lift their heads a little, a little more, eyes widening as they see me.

They’re alive.

Oh, thank God.

Tears blur my vision as I drink in their appearance, frozen for another heartbeat before racing to them. With trembling hands, I slice through the rough bindings.

“Scarlett,” my father rasps. “What on earth?—”

“There’s no time to explain. We have to go, now!”

They nod dumbly, too stunned and weakened to protest as I help them to their feet. Shooting a grateful look at Lyssa, we head in a train back to the stairwell.

“My name is Lyssa. And all of you,” Lyssa commands, looking around our little group, “you stay behind me, and behind Scarlett. Heads down. If anyone is coming down the stairs behind us, you shout ‘Alert!’ and then duck. Any questions?”

“But Scarlett—what’s going on?” my mother asks, her voice quavering. “Where have you been?”

“We don’t have time for small talk,” Lyssa says, but she’s gentler than I expected, and I’m grateful for that.

Grateful for Lyssa.

“When it’s over, Mom,” I murmur. “I’ll—I’ll explain everything then.” Mom nods, but she can’t stop herself from pulling me into a hard hug, which Dad joins in as well.

“We missed you so much,” he tells me softly. “Oh, Scarlett?—”

“Please,” I say desperately, trying to hold it together. “Let’s just focus on getting out of here.” They finally let me go, standing back with Mrs. Graves.

Lyssa motions me over. “I’ll go first, Scar,” she says in a low voice, and doesn’t seem to notice she’s used the nickname she gave me. “And we’ll do this together.”

Page 67

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

“Like the Sokolovs,” I say for some reason.

She gives me a long look. “Like the Sokolovs,” she agrees. “Keep it tight. Watch my back, and I’ll watch yours. Ready?”

I give her the same response she gave me when I asked a few minutes before. “I’m always ready.”

She gives a nod of approval that makes my heart flip over, and we head into the stairwell once more.

CHAPTER 32

Scarlett

Lyssa wasn’t wrong—the stairwell is challenging. There are scores of guards in here, and they really, really want to kill us.

We don’t hit the first wave until about halfway down, and I’m just grateful we’re heading down instead of up, because it gives us the higher ground, and means less physical exertion on our part.

But the men in here are fierce, and they aren’t fucking around. The Sokolovs in the alley were child’s play compared to this.

And making sure that my parents and Mrs. Graves are safe only makes things more difficult.

But Lyssa...

Lyssa moves with a deadly, athletic grace, her strikes powerful but precise. Now that my eyes have been opened, I see exactly why she's so good—there's no anger clouding her view. Her cool head lets her see every opportunity, and she takes each one, exploiting it to the full. I start to match her rhythm, our movements not synchronizing, but complementing.

Grandmother's operatives keep coming, but Lyssa and I make an incredible team. We're in the zone, and for the first time in a fight, I feel like her equal, as if—as if we were made for this.

I take an acrobatic wall-run, using the narrow confines of the stairwell to my advantage, launching myself off the reinforced concrete to jump down a full flight and take out a gunman before he can even raise his weapon. And Lyssa is right behind me, tucking into a roll over my bent back, using me as a springboard to take down another assailant with a savage knee to the face.

Lyssa smirks, clearly impressed by my skills as I land in a deep crouch beside her. Even streaked with sweat and splattered with blood, she looks...

Intensely formidable and inexplicably beautiful.

"Not bad," she pants, before ducking a shot. I take out the guy myself with a well-placed chest shot, and glance up behind, hoping my parents didn't see.

"Don't worry about them," Lyssa commands, and then sweep another attacker's legs out from under him with a bone-cracking kick. "Mrs. G will let us know if anything's coming down behind us."

That's not exactly what I'm worried about, but I shove aside the shame I feel, along

with the guilt for dragging my parents and Mrs. Graves through this.

It is my fault, but the only thing I can afford to focus on right now is getting through the onslaught.

Finally, after what feels like an eternity in the choked confines of the stairwell, there are no more guards. No more attacks. We make our way as fast as we can down to the first floor, but Lyssa pauses before opening the door.

“You,” she says, putting a hand in my chest. “You stay here. You don’t exit this door.” She drops her voice. “The Syndicate are out there. If they see you?—”

I take a step back.

She points at my parents. “You two, you’re coming with me. So if you’ve got something to say to your daughter, now’s the time.” She turns away as I embrace them both again, hushing their confused questions.

“I love you both,” I tell them. “And you’re going to be just fine. I’ll be back with you soon, I promise, and I’ll explain everything then.” My lie is convincing enough, it seems, because when Lyssa motions them forward, they go along with her and Mrs. Graves.

Mrs. Graves turns back at the last second, grabs my hand, and mouths, Run.

I just smile at her and squeeze back at her hand. “Go be with your people,” I tell her, and push her out the door.

I watch through the cracked-open door as my parents and Mrs. Graves follow Lyssa across the cavernous, harshly-lit lobby. Then I see them—Hadria Imperioli, tall and black-haired, standing among a knot of Syndicate muscle.

Hadria pushes through them to grab Mrs. Graves in a hug, and then gives a quizzical look at my parents. Lyssa says something brief, and Hadria seems to accept it, giving out an order that has the Syndicate members hustling my parents out of the building with them.

I let the door close, and sit on the steps, heart hammering because I think I know what's coming next. And I'm ready to let it happen.

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

A moment later, Lyssa returns through the door, tall and strong, expression utterly inscrutable as those dark brown eyes look down at me.

“Thank you,” I tell her. “For my parents.”

“I told the Syndicate to take them back to a safe house of ours,” she says flatly. “And I’ll arrange protection for them at their home, after all this is...over.”

“Thank you,” I say again.

I stand up. If I’m going to die, I’d rather die on my feet.

“You were good today,” she says slowly, looking back up the stairwell. “Impressive. Kept your head.” I stay silent, a little confused at the praise. “And we have unfinished business,” she goes on. The air in here is getting unpleasant, given the number of dead we left on the stairs. “The cops are nowhere to be found—yet. So that gives me a little time to deal with Grandmother, unless she’s caught that ride yet.” She looks back to me. “You could take your shot at Ariadne, too. If you want.”

If I want?

I don’t even hesitate. “Let’s go.”

“Wait.” Her hand shoots out, grabs my wrist as I turn to mount the stairs.

“But we don’t have time to w?—”

She yanks me close to her and cuts me off with a kiss, a searing, passionate kiss that steals my breath. I wrap my arms around her neck instinctively, heart jackhammering against my ribcage as I give myself over to her.

Completely. Utterly.

She breaks away from my mouth only to kiss down my neck, clutching onto me with a desperate hold, and I'm on fire for her, instantly. "Lyssa—I'm so sorry," I choke out, desire warring with all the regret and all the guilt I feel.

"Shh," she says, capturing my mouth again for a moment, before pushing me back into the wall. "I understand," she mutters, nipping at my throat, making me arch into her with a groan. "I do, Scar. I do understand—all too well. And I..."

"Yes?" I ask breathlessly.

Maybe there's hope? Maybe she can find it somewhere in her to forgive me for the awful things I've done?

She presses her forehead against mine, looking straight into my eyes. "And I'm sorry, too," she says.

A stabbing pain lances into my neck. The world tilts sickeningly, my knees buckling, giving me no time even to struggle, as I remember far too late...

Anything can be a weapon. Sex can be a weapon.

Love can be a weapon, too.

I'm still in her arms as she lowers me gently, she's still got me, still holding on, but everything is going black...Oh, God, I wish I'd had a chance to tell her that I—

CHAPTER 33

Lyssa

I walk through the front entrance of the Empire Grand hotel much more slowly than last time, when I was desperate to find out what had happened to Mrs. Graves. But now my feet are slow, too heavy, the warm luxury of the surroundings at odds with the events that have just transpired.

For now, I focus on putting one foot in front of the other.

I head up to the interim war room that the Syndicate has been using, and as I push open the door, it's less "war room" and more "party room." I'm greeted by a blast of celebration. The place is filled with my fellow Syndicate members, faces flushed with joy and relief at Mrs. Graves' safe return.

And as I push through the crowd, I'm met with nods of respect and admiration, hands clapping me on the back, voices raised in congratulation.

I spot Hadria across the room, surrounded by a small group—Ricky, Marco and Aurora. She catches my eye and beckons me over with a slight tilt of her head. I weave through the throng of well-wishers, trying to smile, trying to pretend the congratulations don't cut as deep as Scarlett's switchblade stiletto.

Scarlett.

"Hey," I say, when I reach Hadria, and then my arms are full of sweet-smelling sunshine as Aurora throws herself at me, bursting into happy tears as she thanks me for bringing Mrs. Graves home. "You're welcome, Suzy," I say, spitting out her hair and returning her firmly to her feet. "God, calm down."

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

“I’m just so relieved,” she bawls, and I take a half-step back, just in case I get attack-hugged again.

“Speaking of Mrs. G,” I say quickly, “where is she?”

“The woman of the hour? Over there, getting loved on,” Marco says with a grin, nodding across the room. I can just make out Mrs. Graves’ iron-gray hair in the middle of a group of Syndicate members, each pressing plates of food or glasses of champagne on her.

I catch Hadria’s eye again, and she takes a step away, lowering her voice as she speaks. “The parents are safe, as you asked. Once we get protection arranged, we can return them to their house.”

“Thank you.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Anything to report?” she prompts.

“Grandmother and many of her trainees escaped. We’ll have to keep an eye on them, watch whether they come slinking back into Chicago.”

“But—?”

I nod, keeping my voice steady and emotionless. “But Scarlett is dead.”

Relief crosses Hadria’s face, followed quickly by a triumphant grin. She turns to the rest of the Syndicate, raising her voice to be heard over the din. “The assassin is

dead!”

The room erupts in cheers, a deafening roar of triumph and elation. Glasses are raised, expensive liquor sloshing over the rims as the Syndicate members toast to our success.

And then they start chanting, a celebration of my victory.

Wolf! Wolf! Wolf!

I raise a hand to stop it, but if anything, they only get louder and louder until I have to fake a smile and laugh along. But in the sea of jubilant faces, I catch sight of Mrs. Graves standing apart from the crowd now, her eyes fixed on me. The color seems to have drained from her face, her usually warm and lively features now drawn and somber. As I watch, she turns her back on the crowd and quietly slips out of the room.

I feel a pang of guilt, a sharp twist in my gut that I quickly shove down. I grab a drink from a passing tray and force myself to join the celebration, clinking glasses with my fellow Syndicate members, laughing and agreeing with Ricky as he tells me it was about damn time, and Marco gives a shame-faced apology for ever doubting me.

But as the party goes on around me, I can’t shake the image of Mrs. Graves’ face, the sorrow and disappointment in her eyes. I finish my drink and slip out of the room.

I make my way to the elevator, my arms aching as I remember that climb up the high-rise shaft—I’ll be happy to never have to do that again—and I walk down corridor that leads to Mrs. Graves’ room. In contrast to the room I just left, these hallways are quiet and deserted.

More in keeping with my mood.

I'm not proud of myself, that's for sure.

I pause outside Mrs. Graves' door, suddenly unsure. But I need to see her. I need to explain, to...I don't know what. So at last I knock gently and enter at her call.

The only light is coming from a floor lamp beside the sofa where Mrs. Graves sits, her eyes red and puffy from crying. I cross to her quickly. "Did Scarlett hurt you?" I ask, voice soft but edged with concern. I kneel down next to her, looking up into her face.

Mrs. Graves' gaze is fierce. "Of course not!" she snaps, her voice sharp and brittle. Then, softer, trembling, "Oh, Lyssa...did you really kill her?"

I feel my face harden, and I stand again. "Yeah. I really did."

"But how could you," she whispers, tears welling again.

"It was Hadria's order—and I agreed with it. Scarlett murdered our people, Mrs. G. So if you want to cry, cry for them."

Mrs. Graves takes a deep, shuddering breath, wiping away her tears with the back of her hand. She looks at me, eyes filled with a mix of sorrow and understanding that I can barely stand to see. "But she was the woman you were talking about, wasn't she? That night when you spoke to me?—"

"Keep that quiet," I say stiffly. "No one needs to know."

"But it must have been very hard for you," she says gently, her hand reaching out as if to touch me, but stopping short, hovering in the space between us.

I shake my head, a sharp, jerky motion. "She deserved to die, just like the man who

killed Sarah.”

Mrs. Graves seems to age before my eyes, her shoulders rounding, her face lined with grief and exhaustion. When she speaks, her voice is low and heavy. “I’ve come to believe that vengeance is the wrong path, Lyssa. If I could do it over again, I would never have sent you and Hadria after my daughter’s killer. I was...I was wrong to do it.”

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

I pause, my mind spinning. “If you hadn’t,” I say slowly, carefully, “Hadria and I would never have met you. Never had you care for us.”

Mrs. Graves says nothing, her silence louder than words could ever be. But I’m pretty sure I know the truth she can’t bring herself to voice—that the alternative path, the one where she never knew us, never loved us, would still have been better.

Better for everyone.

I back away abruptly, my legs feeling weak and unsteady. I turn to leave, my movements slow and deliberate, as if I’m moving through water, through a dream. At the door, I pause, looking back at the woman who is the closest thing I ever had to a mother.

“Rest well, Mrs. G,” I say, my voice thick in my throat.

I slip out of the room, closing the door quietly behind me, leaving Mrs. Graves alone with her thoughts, and walk away.

What have I done?

What have I become?

The questions plague me as I navigate the hallways, no destination in mind, just the need to move, to escape my actions.

But I can’t escape, not ever. The weight of what I’ve done hangs heavy on me, a

burden I can't even begin to shed. I think of Scarlett, of her fierce determination, her beauty and her fragility.

And I think of the moments we shared, the connection we forged at the heart of the chaos and violence we both chose to step into.

Because I did have a choice.

Despite everything that Grandmother did to me, I had a choice when I left her clutches. I could have run much further than I did, shed the skin of the person she'd made me into.

But I didn't. I chose not to. Just like Scarlett chose to enter Grandmother's house as well.

"Enough," I sigh at last, my thoughts buzzing around in my head like angry bees. It's exhausting, all this thinking. So I head back to the celebration, back to the role I've chosen, the path I've set myself upon.

Back to being the Wolf, the loyal soldier, the ruthless enforcer.

CHAPTER 34

Lyssa

The morning sun is just beginning to peek over the horizon the next morning as I ride through the quiet countryside on my motorbike, the wind whipping over me. Chicago feels a world away, even though I'm only an hour from the city limits.

I push the bike faster, eager to arrive at my destination.

Scarlett taught me several lessons. One of them is that I'm not as unfeeling as I thought. That inside the Wolf there's a woman, too, with the dreams and desires of any woman. And right now, I just want a little time alone with those dreams and desires.

An old, abandoned farm comes into view over the rise in the road, still a ways in the distance, and I slow down a little, make sure nothing's behind me or ahead as I take the turn off.

I have to be careful on the road leading to the farm; it's deteriorated over the years. This place holds memories for me. It's where I used to sleep rough after I ran away from Grandmother, before I found the courage to return to Chicago. Not even Hadria knows about it. It's my secret, my sanctuary.

I don't come here often. Only when I need to clear my head.

I park the bike and take a quick look around, making sure there are no signs of life. When I'm satisfied, I head to the old barn, unlock the padlock and shoving the door open against rusty hinges. The musty scent of moldering hay and wet wood fills my nostrils. The day has been cloudy, so it takes a second for me to let my eyes adjust, and then I move through the space, not bothering to hide the sound of my footsteps, until I reach a horse stall at the back.

And there she is, just where I left her after drugging her back at the high-rise.

Scarlett.

Bound, gagged, propped up against the best of the hay that I could find. The chain on her ankle is still solid—I check it with a perfunctory tug, and then I make sure her ropes are still tight, rolling her this way and that.

She lets me do it. She looks exhausted, defeated, but there's still a defiant gleam in her hazel eyes when she meets my gaze.

When I'm sure she's still bound up tight—and that I'm not going to get an unexpected stiletto blade in my heart—I crouch down beside her and gently remove the gag. She works her jaw, licking her dry lips.

“Water?”

“How about the bathroom?” she counters in a raspy voice.

“Let’s start with water.” I offer her the bottle, holding it to her mouth. She drinks greedily, spilling it down her chin, until she coughs and splutters, and I pull it away.

“Are my parents okay?” she asks, her voice still hoarse. I nod, and she slumps back with relief, before looking at me with suspicion again. “Why am I here? Why haven’t you killed me?”

I cap the water bottle, considering my words. “You’re here because we have unfinished business,” I say finally, my tone even. “With Grandmother. With Ariadne. With each other.”

Scarlett lets out a mirthless laugh. “Unfinished business? Is that what you call it? You and I both know you follow orders. You had orders to kill me. So why haven’t you?”

She sounds absolutely furious about it.

“Because I blame myself for what Grandmother did to you. You’re my creation just as much as you are hers. She took everything from me, just like she tried to do with you. Just like she’s done to countless others. And it has to stop, Scarlett. You’re going to help me stop it.”

“Why not just go after her yourself?”

I lean in, my face inches from hers. “Because as much as I hate to admit it, we’re stronger together. Because you’re the only one who truly understands the threat that Grandmother presents. And because...”

I trail off, the words sticking in my throat.

Because I can’t bear the thought of a world without you in it.

Because despite everything, I still want you.

Because I...

But I don’t say any of that. Instead, I stand again. “Just think it over.”

“I don’t need to think it over. I’m in.”

There she is, that brave, determined warrior that I saw fighting alongside me against the Sokolovs. Against Grandmother’s guards. That’s the Scarlett I need for this job.

“There’s one more thing you need to understand,” I tell her. “After we’ve dealt with Grandmother...I’ll be coming for you. Because like you said, Scar—I do follow orders.”

She laughs, scratchy and hard. “That old tune? You need to find a new one, Wolf.”

“That’s the deal. Take it or leave it.”

She looks down for a moment, but then her chin comes up, determined and proud, those hazel eyes glowing fiercely. “I’ll take it.”