

“You need anything?” Adrian asked as Sydney hurled daggers at the targets, landing each one in the bull’s-eye. Her eyes were glued unwaveringly to what was ahead of her, refusing to meet his line of sight.

“From a Strigoi like you? No chance.”

“I thought I heard you talking about me. You said, ‘I think Adrian is looking extra fine today.’”

She threw her last dagger, relaxing her shoulders as it pierced the innermost circle. She turned her gaze towards him.

“Just because we are inhabiting the same space right now does not mean that I have lost my mind. Now, if you would excuse me, I need to retrieve my knives,” she murmured.

Sydney dashed towards her beloved daggers, her only pride in life. To her disappointment, Adrian closely trailed behind her to annoy her further, his only pride in life.

“Not so fast. The Director assigned us to the same mission. That means *you* have to work with *me*. I’d like you to wear your red amour when we go out. I like that color on you,” Adrian smirked.

Sydney was a part of the Alchemists, a select group of humans who team with other races to defend Moroi, witches who protect the world by controlling the earth’s elements. Despite the Alchemists’ quick reflexes and healing abilities, they were usually assigned background roles in battle. This was a routine occasion for Sydney and Adrian, her pleading to give Alchemists a greater role and Adrian teasing her each time she failed.

“Right,” Sydney snapped, “The same color as your blood when you inevitably fail us. Don’t you have something better to do?”

“Admit it, Syd. You. Think. I’m. Irresistible. At least I can admit that you’re gorgeous.”

Sydney threw a dagger straight towards Adrian, putting her entire body into this one fling. With a deft movement, Adrian caught the knife in midair and handed it back to her.

“Don’t ever call me that again,” she retorted, her face turning red with embarrassment.

Adrian summoned his Ambush Orb, casting a net around her ankles so all Sydney could do was squirm.

“We’re not supposed to use spells on each other in the training arena. I’m going to tell the Director,” she said, lifting her leg to discover that she was stuck in place.

“How are you going to do that if you can’t move? Besides, you just threw this,” Adrian snatched a dagger from her hand, “at me.”

“What’s it going to take for you to free me?”

“I want *you* to compliment *me*,” Adrian smiled.

Her demeanor transformed from frustration to complete deadpan, as she tried to lift her leg again to no avail.

“You have to be joking.”

“I’m waiting,” Adrian said, tapping his foot.

“I’m not going to compliment you. Besides, there’s nothing to even compliment in the first place.”

Sydney crossed her arms in front of her. There was no way in hell she’d be caught giving Adrian this level of satisfaction. She would rather retire from Alchemy than let a Strigoi get one over on her.

“Did you hear that? My stomach is-”

“I didn’t hear anything,” Sydney interrupted.

“As I was saying, my stomach is getting pretty empty. I think I’m going to take lunch. I’ll catch you later tonight?”

In fact, Adrian had just eaten lunch. He turned and punched the air in victory, with the full knowledge that his wit had served him well this time.

“Stop!” she groaned, “Fine, come back.”

“I’m ready, gorgeous.”

“For a conceited, thoughtless race like Strigoi, you have moments of strength despite making me want to gauge my eyes out.”

Never had such words of praise been uttered out of Sydney’s mouth in reference to Strigoi. She sent a silent prayer that the Alchemist gods would forgive her for this betrayal.

“Strength? You think I’m strong? Moments like these are once-in-a-lifetime because Sydney confessed her deepest desire for me. To her, I’m strong.”

Adrian lifted his biceps to his lips, kissing his arms in a display of power as the net around Sydney’s feet retreated. Right as she was about to say her next comeback, a voice boomed over the speakers.

“Men, women: Please report to the Sphynx Gate immediately. Moroi Queen Lisa has been kidnapped!”