

## Chapter 1

Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them!

But woe to the earth and the sea,

Because the devil has gone down to you!

(Revelations 12:12)

*St. Petersburg, Russia; present day*

*It's surprising, Starr thought, how often I get shot.*

Her heart hammered as the gun barrel trembled in the Russian mobster's grip. A little more pressure on the trigger and this would be the second time this month.

No.

Third.

The alley off Nevsky Avenue lay drowned in shadow. One failing streetlight bled a sick jaundiced glow into the dark, too weak to cleanse it, only strong enough to reveal the filth. The stench of spoiled garbage hung thick in the damp air. An overturned dumpster had spilled its guts across the cobblestones, and above it a rusted iron fire escape threw broken shadows that twitched and swayed as if the alley itself were breathing.

Footsteps faded somewhere beyond the mouth of the lane. For a moment, she feared someone might wander in before she got what she wanted.

"Traitor," her assailant said. His pupils were blown wide with chemicals, black and bottomless. *Krokodil*, if the track marks along his arms meant anything. His aura writhed above him in a muddy shimmer, dark and diseased of a ruined soul.

Her spine stiffened.

He knew her.

“That hurts my feelings,” she said, smiling because sarcasm was easier than fear and because distraction had saved her life almost as often as violence. Running was not an option. Not here. Not with the gun already leveled.

He blinked with the slow, delayed stupidity of the heavily drugged. “I thought you were supposed to be some badass hunter. You’re bothered by a little name-calling?”

A laugh spilled from him, crazed and ugly, flashing a single gold tooth in the yellow light.

“Hey, jerk!” she said. “I’m working on it with my therapist.”

A fallen angel with PTSD.

Fantastic.

She edged forward.

His finger twitched on the trigger.

She froze.

She needed to get the gun away from him before—

His brow knotted. His hand tightened.

The shot broke loud in the alley.

Pain detonated in her shoulder and drove her back against the wall hard enough to crack her skull against the stone. A gray haze bled in around the edges of her vision.

Not again.

Time thickened.

Adrenaline flooded her, bright and merciless, sharpening every sensation to a razor’s edge. Smoke tendrils curled from the hole the bullet had torn through her coat. Briny wind off the Neva River wound its icy fingers through the shredded fabric, finding the ruined seam and

the hot blood sliding down her arm beneath it.

Another jacket ruined.

At least he hadn't used silver bullets.

Relief came strange and almost laughing through the pain.

She rode the rush, the throbbing intense, as her body pushed the bullet back out. Bone and tissue knitted back together with a sickening spasm. Two blocks away, a streetlight crackled, as clearly as if it had sparked beside her ear. Her sight snapped back into focus, the alley sharpening like a lens turned by an unseen hand. The mobster's aim had been too unsteady to hit anything vital.

Lucky him.

Lucky her.

She pushed away from the wall, but her boot slid on an oil-slicked scrap of cardboard. The second shot carved the air beside her face, missing by inches.

The man stared at his own gun, astonished by the failure.

She crossed the distance before surprise could leave him. Her hand clamped over his wrist. She twisted hard.

Bone broke with a dry, satisfying crack.

He dropped to his knees screaming, just another lost voice in the night.

A glance at the tattoos on his hand confirmed it.

*Famulus.*

One of the branded human servants bound to a fallen angel's will.

In a swift motion she drew her pistol and pressed the carbon-steel barrel to his temple. "Why," she whispered in his ear, leaning in, "do we always have to do things the hard way?"

He went rigid. His own gun slipped from his grip and splashed muddy water at her boots.  
Her brand-new boots.

She shrugged her wounded shoulder, then adjusted the tight ache of her wings beneath the coat and tucked them back along her spine. Russia in the fall was not among her favorite corners of the world. The cold reminded her too much of that first exile of the vast and godless void where they had been thrown before matter had shape, before the world existed to soften the punishment.

“What’s your name?”

“Daniil,” he managed, shuddering as he cradled his ruined wrist.

“This,” she said, pressing the pistol a little harder into his skin, “is a Desert Eagle. Semiautomatic. Chambered in .50-caliber silver Action Express. Imagine what a round like that would do to a fallen angel.” She tilted her head. “Now imagine what it would do to somebody as disappointingly mortal as you. Who do you work for?”

“Seraph—Seraph Technologies.”

The name hit her like the draft through her torn coat.

Lately, it had been everywhere, always half-heard, passed in whispers.

“What do you want?” he asked.

She lifted the gun. “Give it to me.”

“I don’t know what you mean.” His words had begun to slur now that the fear was overtaking the drugs.

“The passkey for tonight’s auction.”

Information on the underground auctions of St. Petersburg had been easy enough to gather. The location, however, had stayed hidden. Daniil would be useful for that, whether he

wanted to be or not.

He nodded shakily toward his coat pocket.

She slipped her hand inside and found the cold impression of metal. When she drew it out, a golden card flashed in the dim light, engraved with an eight-pointed star.

The thieves' star.

*Bratva.*

Her mouth tightened.

The Russian mafia, then Seraph Technologies working together.

“What’s being auctioned?” she asked. “What does Seraph want?”

“*Khuy tebe,*” he cursed.

She gave him a tired look. “The last thing I plan on doing in this alley is screwing myself.” She thumbed back the hammer. “I may not be the baddest girl on the block, Daniil, but there are plenty of fallen angels in hell because of little old me.”

His bladder gave out before his courage did. Dark wetness spread down his jeans.

“I—I don’t know,” he choked. “I swear. They keep me in the dark. It’s secret.”

That, at least, she believed. Redimere had done much the same with her. They had sent her here to retrieve an ancient Crusader relic but had not told her what it truly was or why it mattered. Just another task. Another breadcrumb. Another promise that if she followed far enough, endured enough, obeyed enough, it might lead her at last to the one thing she had wanted from the secret Catholic organization.

*Redemption.*

“Give me something, Daniil.”

“The Ice Bar,” he stammered. “Anton. The bartender. He knows. He brings the girls.”

Her face hardened. “What girls?”

“For the auction.”

Heat flashed in her cheeks.

Human trafficking.

Of all the filth men had devised, that one stirred something particularly murderous in her.

“Where?”

He nodded. “One block that way.”

She slipped the keycard into her pocket. “Thank you.” Then she looked down at him.

“Now, what am I supposed to do with you?”

The sputtering streetlight washed his pockmarked face in a corpse-pale light. Sweat glistened on his upper lip. He stared back at her with a strange emptiness, somewhere between terror and hollow defiance. “Shoot me.”

She de-cocked the pistol and lowered it toward the ground. “Can’t.”

His throat bobbed. “They’ll do worse when they find out I talked.”

“It’s not that I object to violence,” she said. “I was once told to *turn the other cheek* by somebody I cared about. Also, murder doesn’t look especially good on my redemption bingo card.”

There were other ways to break a man besides bloodshed.

She caught his chin in her hand and forced him to meet her gaze.

His pupils expanded like spilled ink spreading across a blank page. The whites narrowed to crescents, then disappeared entirely, transforming his stare into a vast, empty void.

She reached out with invisible fingers to touch his mind the way one slips a blade between the ribs—quietly, expertly. She followed the chemical wreckage of his memories back

to his last high and planted the suggestion there deep enough to hurt.

“Check yourself into rehab,” she murmured. “Gasoline and paint thinner are used to make the poison you inject. It’s killing you.”

She released him.

The dark trance loosened. Daniil swayed, disoriented, tears streaking suddenly down his face as if they belonged to someone else.

She stepped past him, leaving him wrapped in the fog of suggestion.

There. One good deed for the day.

She felt no remorse at all for the broken wrist. He had, after all, shot her.

Outside the alley, she drew the golden keycard from her pocket and ran her thumb along its etched star. Redimere had told her that tonight would begin a chain of events leading toward her redemption in God’s eyes. She lived on that miserable, starving hope. The hope that if she piled enough good deeds high enough, if she bled enough, hunted enough, obeyed enough, then perhaps God would one day set down his impossible grudge and look at her again.

*Mammoth grudge*, she thought bitterly.

No.

*Monumental*.

*Astronomical*.

The ache returned then, as it always did when she let herself think too long. Not just for the fall. Not just for heaven. For what had come after. For the things she had done that no amount of suffering could unwind. Grief and sorrow hollowed her from within, old and patient as tidewater, settling where love had once lived.

She still had work to do. An auction run by the Bratva. A relic from the Crusades. A

secret Redimere refused to name. And somewhere inside it all, perhaps, the next key to the thing she had sought for centuries.

*No pressure, Starr.*

