

DEADEYE

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Her eyes were closed when she pulled the trigger, but she knew her shot hit home. A true deadeye never missed, and Lydia Burnette was the best sniper at the academy, level D though she was.

After finally wiping the perspiration off her nose, she readjusted her eye against the scope. On the asphalt several stories below, a few cadets ran across her reticle. Everything always looked more chaotic below. Cadets dashed from the warehouse into the cramped alleyway, picking around motorcycles, gathering with their partners. They got to fight with theirs, but on every mission, Lydia was assigned to fellow *animo*, Koleman. As soon as Lydia had shown an affinity for sniping, she and her partner rarely worked together in the field. He preferred to face any challenge up close, while Lydia liked the safety of rooftops.

She peeked sideways at her squad mate. Belly-flat on the roof, Koleman swiveled his gun and mimed shooting the cadets, mouthing *pop* with every pretend kill.

Lydia glared. His safety wasn't on. With one mental tweak, she activated it. He didn't notice.

"This is boring," he muttered. "What are your kills?"

She swallowed what felt like glass. It didn't slough away the shame. The temptation to lie came, but seven years of partnership with Ethan had ingrained in her the importance of honesty.

"Four," she mumbled.

"Four?" This news distracted Koleman from his sport; he turned to gape. A pink circle – an indication he hadn't properly used his scope – traced one of his eyes. "You're lying," he said.

She told him she wasn't. He sneered, then returned to his game.

That number of kills for a D *was* impressive. Four Grifters dead by the graceful sweep of her finger. It was an honorable achievement. Yet it felt as if she'd stolen more than Grifter lives.

The MTA had never taught cadets to feel remorse; Lydia couldn't explain where hers originated from, or why she struggled to share the triumphant mood whenever her classmates discussed the dwindling number of Grifters. The creatures were evil, and certainly without the doubts that bothered her. They didn't deserve anything but a bullet to the head.

Why can't I think like everyone else? she wondered.

“Look,” Koleman suddenly hissed. “A rat.”

Lydia returned her attention to the rooftop, then followed Koleman’s gaze downward. Below one of the warehouse’s barred windows, a small Grifter struggled to jump for the ledge.

The sight confused Lydia. She’d never imagined a young Grifter before. Part of her had assumed they didn’t exist – that Grifters were born as tall and strong as they were evil.

Koleman took aim. Lydia decided to let him have this kill, though she could have easily stolen it. She shut her eyes, severing any telekinetic ability, as he stroked the trigger. Nothing happened. A moment later, he muttered a curse, and Lydia remembered she’d activated his safety. This filled her with satisfaction, though not much. It would take only seconds for him to disengage the safety and aim again – not enough time for the Grifter to escape.

Of course it shouldn’t escape, she firmly reprimanded herself. It could hurt civilians.

And yet, as Koleman’s shot rang, she pictured that slim, silver bullet failing to hit its mark. It would veer just slightly left, missing the Grifter by centimeters, striking brick instead of flesh. The Grifter would vanish through the window, and the bullet would be forever embedded in the building.

Koleman swore again, then fired another. He must have missed. This bullet, Lydia imagined, would come nowhere near the Grifter. It would hit the ground and explode with a haze of concrete dust. She could almost feel the imagined bullet responding to her telekinesis. A tingle in her veins raised the hair on her arm.

Since a third shot never pierced the air, Lydia guessed that Koleman had succeeded. She ignored the gnaw on her heart.

“You made me miss,” came Koleman’s surly voice.

Lydia opened her eyes. Though she was reluctant to see the dead Grifter, she searched anyway and found no body; only a broken window, metal bars wrenched free and tossed to the ground.

“You missed?” she said, and the pressure inside her faded some.

“Don’t pretend you’re surprised. You interfered.”

“I wasn’t even looking.”

Koleman glowered. That failed to intimidate her. He usually glared. Maybe he wanted to substitute his inches with glares, as if his peers would

be so distracted by his sour face that they'd forget how short he was. Vires called him *servant stock* whenever he could. But Vires looked down on everyone.

"You're so —" Koleman began, but an alert pinged on their bracers.

DEADEYES MOVE IN, came the order from CG Regis.

Lydia stiffened, as iron-hard as her gun. Move in?

A scuffling along the roof indicated the arrival of Harper, their officer-in-charge. "Pack up your gear," Harper called, slinging herself over the ledge. She clutched her gun as easily as a training staff. "Regis doesn't trust either of you to safely handle your weapons at close range."

"Finally, something to do," Koleman said, rising in an instant.

Lydia was not eager to move closer, especially without her gun.

Had Ethan not fought down below — and had he not been, after all, her rule-following partner — she would have hesitated longer before saying, "Yes, ma'am." Lydia scooted on her belly, then pushed herself upright.

The deadeyes stowed their weapons in their respective sleeves and fastened each package around their torso. Once Harper made sure they'd left behind no evidence, other than nicks in the rooftop from the kickback, she motioned Lydia and Koleman toward the ground, where they set their guns by the bikes. Harper reminded the two D cadets to unlock the safety on their bracers, briefly detailing their new mission: create some mayhem right before the metas lured the Grifters to the rendezvous, where agents would finish them off.

As every footfall brought her closer to the fight, Lydia struggled to remember her training, the techniques to ignore her nervousness. She had never fought a Grifter in close proximity. Ethan had, and he'd warned her that any amount of hesitation would get her killed.

What if that doubt came, the same feeling that had made her close her eyes when Koleman fired his gun? What if, at close range... Lydia couldn't do it?

A few yards from the window, she was distracted by a glint of silver on the ground. There, burrowed into the concrete in a heap of gravel, lay a bullet. Koleman's shot had landed right where Lydia had hoped it might. She was surprised he'd missed by so many yards.

Near the broken window, she saw another silver shine. This bullet jutted out of the building, narrowly left of where Lydia was certain the Grifter had been. She'd imagined Koleman hitting this very spot.

Strange, she thought.

"You two ready?" Harper said, and Lydia shook her stupor away.

"Yes, ma'am," she answered, then winced as she heard her lie.

Koleman clambered inside first, but Lydia lingered, feeling duty bound to admit the confusing hesitation in her heart. Maybe it would be safer for the cadets if she remained far away from any Grifters.

"OIC Harper?" she began.

Harper clasped Lydia's shoulder. "When in doubt, find Sheedy," she said. "He'll cover you."

This wasn't about fear, though—or was it? Lydia couldn't pretend to feel Koleman's eagerness for battle, or Ethan's calm. She *was* scared. But she was mainly conflicted. That worried her more.

"Hurry up," Harper said.

Swallowing a panicked question and finding herself no less unsure, Lydia pulled herself over the ledge and dropped.

A musty smell, the combination of dust and sweat, plugged her nose. Harper scooted around her with a sharp command, but Lydia froze by the window and gaped across the concrete floor stained with blood. Clashing in a mix of shadows, Grifters and metas seemed oblivious to her. As predicted, Grifters attacked with chaotic blows while metas fought more calmly. Those planned, precise Macto techniques were supposed to give the metas an advantage over the brutal Grifters; but, now that Lydia saw how the two collided, she wondered how the MTA could have the upper hand. The Grifters were so *vast*, seemingly immune to every attack.

Koleman charged forward and locked himself in battle, but Lydia couldn't move. She had just spotted Ethan. His opponent stood much taller and broader. Every cadet in her peer group knew Ethan was the strongest of their class. Now, he seemed fragile, and Lydia was reminded of every lesson she'd ever been taught about the nature of Grifters. The fire of loyalty made some of her hesitation melt. She could kill a Grifter if it meant protecting Ethan.

At least, she hoped so.

Lydia took a step toward him, bypassing a tower of wooden crates. Once she moved, the battle realized she was there. Suddenly, cadets dashed by. A Grifter threw a spear after. Noise and energy whipped around her like an angry storm. Someone knocked her sideways, and she cried out in alarm. Lydia covered her head, picturing where she'd last seen

Ethan. One more step forward.

Pain stabbed the back of her head. She gasped, staggered, then collapsed against the crates. Black spots appeared in her vision, and she fell unconscious.

Time passed in uncertain details. Snatches of reality blurred with fragments of dreams. The battle continued: yells and bangs that never ended. She thought she must have been awake, but she couldn't feel her legs, and everything felt foggy.

A cry – an angry one – rang forcefully enough to break Lydia from the mist. Her eyes snapped open. Above her, dust swirled in the sunlight passing between the wooden rafters high in the ceiling. She lay on her back, limbs uncomfortably tangled, square crates tossed around her. That furious cry still echoed, but everything else sounded quiet. The sounds of battle had disappeared. The cadets hadn't gone to the rendezvous without her, had they?

She used a crate as leverage to push herself up, wincing at the ache in her muscles. A small gasp escaped her when she scanned her surroundings. How long had she slept for?

The warehouse lay empty of all but dead bodies. Everyone had left. Including Ethan. He must have assumed she'd gone ahead to the rendezvous. Lydia bet the crates had hidden her from view.

Knowledge of her total isolation caused a shiver. At least the Grifters had gone too. Wrapping her arms around herself, Lydia searched for her entry point: the broken window. She started toward it. To make any progress, she had to step around another heap of crates. Spilling out of one of the fallen boxes was a gray form. A...

Lydia froze.

A Grifter. A *small* Grifter, the very one Koleman had failed to kill. The tiny creature had a bald, scabby head like the rest of its kind. It wore a gray uniform, clearly too big. It wheezed, oblivious to the girl standing feet from him. Perfectly vulnerable.

Duty and training urged her to kill it. If she didn't, the creature's strength would multiply, like a thorn bush choking flowers.

Her fingers curled. One blow, properly aimed, against a temple so small – it would be easy. If she moved quickly, it would never know its death neared. That thought comforted her.

When her foot jerked forward, a sound from the creature stopped her. It

had begun whimpering, pitiful as a hurt animal. Grifters couldn't feel pain. So why did it whine?

Confusion twisted her heart. She couldn't explain the emotion that tugged at her, as powerful as a telekinetic pull. "You are so small," she murmured.

The Grifter flinched. It curled its limbs to its chest, a protective movement. "Please... do not... hurt me," it said, and Lydia was surprised at how such a raspy voice could sound so young.

Compassion fought years of training. Metas did not speak to Grifters. They did not help them, and they certainly didn't ignore the chance to kill one.

Her kill number, big enough to boast about, pressed against her conscious like a knife. She'd killed four today. Koleman was incredulous, Ethan would be proud.

And Lydia was ashamed.

"I won't," she said, and once she heard herself, she knew she had to follow through. Lydia reached for the Grifter's shoulder, forgetting that she'd never touched one. "Can you move?"

The little creature stiffened. It was afraid of her. That knowledge twisted her chest so roughly, she had to gasp for breath. Lydia got a grip on its arms and gingerly lifted it to full height. "I don't see any blood," she said. She searched the boxes it must've fallen from. "Were you supposed to be in those boxes? Does your... does someone know you're here?"

"I—I am not allowed to talk to you."

"I'm not going to hurt you. You can trust me." Lydia couldn't guess what prompted her to say these things. "What's your name?"

"Dur—Durgson," he whispered, for it was a boy; she could see that now.

"I'm Lydia."

Her first name? Had she really shared her secret with a *Grifter*?

"It'll be all right, Durgson. First, you need to listen to me." Her tone, firm yet soft, reminded her of Ethan. She crouched so they were level with each other. "I'm going to search and see if any Grifters are still here, all right? If so, I'll see if I can lead them to you, though I can't linger because that would be unwise. Do you understand, Durgson?"

"What is a Grifter?"

It had never occurred to her that a Grifter wouldn't know its label. What did they call themselves? Her lips fumbled for a reply, until she finally managed, "Someone... someone like you."

When Durgson's head lifted in hesitant acknowledgement, she straightened. "I'll return shortly. If I don't find any —"

Sudden noise drew her speech short. Lydia recognized footsteps too late. She gasped and turned, in time to catch movement diagonal to her position. Dread sucked the moisture out of her mouth. Five Grifters, broad and armed, strode into the warehouse. These were nothing like young Durgson. They were soldiers.

And she was alone, with neither her partner nor her weapon.

"Pa!" Durgson fled past her, but not in the direction of the Grifters. He raced toward — Lydia's heart felt icy — a sixth Grifter, this one guarding the warehouse's other entrance.

How long had he been standing there?

Durgson flung his arms around the adult Grifter's legs. The adult didn't acknowledge the little body strangling his limbs. The father's attention was for Lydia, and Lydia alone. She could guess what he was thinking. After all, what would *she* have concluded had she stumbled upon a Grifter towering over an injured cadet? She realized the situation might've looked threatening, but she felt a strange assurance that she could make Durgson's father understand. Surely he knew she could've killed the child if she'd wanted to. Durgson could tell him that she'd only meant to help.

"I wasn't going to harm him," she called.

"An unarmed elak," spoke one from the army of five. "Good work, my harsk."

Durgson's father must've been their leader. That gave her a further surge of confidence. He could defend her from the others, if she could make him see the truth. As they stared at each other, however, and the father showed no sign of understanding, that hope faltered. Doubt began a rapid creep.

"Please," she whispered. "I... I wasn't going to hurt him...."

The pause after her words stretched a painful length that sent her nerves on edge. Then, the father grabbed Durgson's hand and steered him outside without another glance.

She didn't understand why he'd left — why that act had felt like

betrayal, a rip through the fragile hope she'd stupidly allowed to develop. For a long moment, she watched his retreat, wondering why she'd expected anything different.

Why would a Grifter care?

But she'd cared.

Noting a shuffling sound, she whipped her attention toward the five remaining Grifters. They were advancing. She forced her confusing pang elsewhere, to a darker corner of her heart. Lydia lunged for the window. No sooner had her fingertips found the sill when an assault of boxes swirled around her, some blocking access to her escape while the others knocked against her knuckles with such force that she lost her grip. Panicked now, Lydia jumped again. Her head smarted against a floating crate. Desperately, she challenged the Grifters' telekinesis with her own. The boxes began jerking; the resistance tingled up her arms. A sliver of window crept into view. If she could just—

She was yanked backward by her collar. Choking, flailing about, Lydia tried to free herself, but Grifters were stronger than metas, and there were five of them. Some gripped her arms, another pinned her legs. They held her in the air, and the pummeling began. Lydia cried out. The next smack landed on her mouth.

Four years of training at the academy had thickened her skin against beatings, but those had come from Ethan, who always reigned in his strength and asked her, afterward, if he'd hit too hard. She wanted so badly for him to appear by her side, to save her, like Durgson's father should have done. Ethan would've stood before her and absorbed every impact, giving her time to escape. The desire for him burned as painfully as the bruising.

She thought she was shouting, but she couldn't hear it. Eventually, her throat closed. The Grifters kept her alive. They knew how to end a meta with one strike, but these blows were tame enough to hurt without killing. She was their toy.

If all five were holding her or only one, she couldn't tell, as pain and despair sapped her awareness. She was meant to die with Ethan. Not like this.

"Release it."

The punching paused after the voice spoke. It sounded distant. Her hearing must have been damaged.

"The others have gone," the voice continued. "We must leave."

An attacker inches from her face called, "We should eliminate one while the opportunity is here. Another dead elak is another victory."

"No."

Lydia's hope had vanished, so she wasn't surprised when her attacker tightened his grip instead of obeying the voice's command.

"I have spoken," the voice said, firmer.

Still, the fingers hardened. The Grifter leader was not much of a leader, after all.

Then, Lydia was falling. She smashed the boxes. A groan escaped her lips. She lay trembling, wet all over, not sure what was blood, sweat, or tears.

With effort, she managed to lift her head. Her attackers were leaving. There, by the exit, Durgson's father watched her. His frame was a blur, outlined by a haze and the swollen skin around her eyes. She couldn't guess why he continued watching. Perhaps he wanted to inspect the extent of her injuries as one might admire a statue chiseled away. This thought brought a shudder of pain, somehow worse than the fire beneath her skin. A Grifter had wounded her where she'd least expected it.

Lydia was a fool. A Grifter would always be a Grifter, young or old, father or son.

He left her shaking on the floor. Alone.

Lydia seemed trapped in a hollow tube, where darkness clung to every inch of space. Cloaking her. Listlessly, she lay. *Ethan*, she tried to whisper. Her throat was raw. Every part of her was. Raw and cold. Even her heart felt that strange, icy exposure. It seemed never-ending, as if she'd always been stuck in this void. She wondered if anyone would find her, then thought no one would. Surely the blackness hid her like a tarp.

All alone, she knew.

A single word broke through the fog like a pierce of light.

"No!"

She heard the shout, recognized Ethan's voice, and found the will to close her eyes. The pain slightly muted. Finally, he had come.

In another moment, gentle hands rested on her cheek. "Look at me, Lyd," he said.

“Ethan....”

“I’m here.”

She groaned when he lifted her off the floor. Her head wouldn’t stay upright; he had to guide his elbow beneath it. When he moved, securing her against his chest, fire burned her ribs. She sobbed against his jacket, clutching the leather. It was safe to go to sleep now, so she did.

Nothing in particular awoke Lydia. She was aware of dreams, and then felt the foggy peel away.

She first recognized the steady beep she associated with the clinic. It soothed her, pressing memories down. She knew that opening her eyes would bring the memories to focus, so she stayed for a moment in the lull where nothing unpleasant had to happen. But her body didn’t like the stillness. Trained to be ever alert, ever observant, Lydia couldn’t ignore the aches that interrupted her peaceful state, like water slipping through cracks. Pain grew with every breath, until she opened her eyes in search of a distraction.

The clinic lighting illuminated the beds stretched from wall to wall. All of them empty, the whole room empty – except for a chair between the medical cart and the vitals machine near her bedside. Ethan sat there, frowning with the expression that brought wrinkles to the corner of his eyes.

Instant comfort, more soothing than any medicine, warmed Lydia. He’d stayed by her beside. Of course he had.

“Ethan,” she softly called.

He bolted up and stood at her bedside in a second. Even in the dim lighting, his blue eyes shone bright. Serious as ever, they scrutinized her. “Can you move?”

She tried lifting an arm. It felt stiffer and heavier than her gun. Her fingers wiggled freely, though. “A little. How long has it been?”

“Two days.” He swept his chair closer and set it to rest near her elbow. Ethan sat, leaning on the cot, nearer than before but not so close he bumped her arm.

She wished he would. Sometimes, she wanted Ethan to come closer than he ever had. These feelings made no sense to her.

His frown thickened. “Koleman shouldn’t have left you alone,” Ethan said. “He claims he couldn’t find you. What happened, Lydia?”

"I don't want to talk about it." She said it quickly and swallowed. The throb in her throat was nothing compared to what swirled in her chest. Lydia pulled from years of training and narrowed in on her surroundings. The fibers of the blanket came into focus. Ethan's pulse thumped like something underwater. Most sharply came the stinging in her skin. Lydia drew everything that was outside *in*, and tried to shove her insides out. The vibrant details of everything she heard, saw, and felt couldn't erase the scene brimming to surface. She didn't think of the pummeling or her kills or the fear in her gut as the Grifters cornered her. She thought of one stony face, one Grifter who hadn't cared.

Once the Grifter's presence was unlocked, a swell began, harsher than the swirls of confusion and regret. It rushed with enough force to flatten Ethan's comfort, a rage that weakened Lydia's breaths but strengthened everything else. When it had cloaked her and she thought again of Durgson's father, she saw the incident clearer than the threads of the bedspread. He had set five adult Grifters on a young girl. For her compassion, he'd rewarded her with just enough pain that she would live to feel her mistake. Lydia may have been a fool, but Durgson's father had been unfair – and Durgson, even worse, hadn't bothered explaining how she'd helped him. Gratitude wasn't in a Grifter's nature.

If only I'd killed more than four.

Lydia didn't like that thought. Bitterness was a heavy load. She turned to Ethan for help. He would understand her anger, would share in it. He hadn't been able to defend her before, but he could now, and that would make the burden lighter.

"There was a Grifter," she said, surprised to hear an unfamiliar tightness in her voice. "A little one. I tried to help him. Then, five of them found me. The Grifter's father, too. He let his guards attack me, and the young one didn't care."

"I'm not following." Ethan leaned his elbows on the bed. "You... you helped a *Grifter*?"

"I didn't do anything wrong, Ethan, and they attacked me. Why are they so unfair?"

"Lydia..." He spread his hands and took some time to find his response. "What were you thinking? Why would you risk your life for a Grifter? You were alone. You could've died."

"I didn't know the others were there!"

“But when you saw the Grifter, you should’ve left or killed it. Not *helped* it. Of course none of them cared. They’re Grifters. Why did you expect anything else?”

Her mouth moved, but she was dumbstruck. This conversation hadn’t gone at all the way she’d wanted. Ethan was supposed to defend her, but he seemed more annoyed with her than with the Grifters.

He scanned her injuries, arriving slowly at her face. Where she had hoped to see outraged loyalty, she saw only the shake of his head as he said, “You can’t ever do anything like that again. It doesn’t matter how young a Grifter is. You’re smarter than that, Lydia. You should have known better.”

She hadn’t expected that he’d find her compassion so... disappointing. He must’ve thought she was stupid, just as foolish as the Grifters probably believed her to be.

Anger grew so hot it stung. Though she didn’t enjoy the force against her chest, something in the new emotion satisfied her. It felt right. And it smothered her sorrow, which hurt far worse than an angry burn.

“Look at me.” Ethan waited until she did, then said, “I won’t always be able to protect you. You need to stop being hesitant. I don’t want to hear you talk anymore about feeling sorry for Grifters. Be tough, Lydia. Understood?”

“I don’t feel sorry for them,” she said through clenched teeth.

“That’s not true. You’ve told me—”

“I *don’t* feel sorry for them.”

He paused a moment. Then nodded. “Good,” he said.

If only she could explain how much she wanted *him* to feel sorry for *her*. She felt that she could have pushed past this new anger, if only Ethan had rebuked the Grifters instead of her. Could she tell him this? Peeking at him, she searched for the right words.

“Do you remember any of their names?” he asked. “We should tell Leader.”

Ethan had already moved past their discussion. One of the most perceptive cadets in the field, he’d never excelled at reading his partner. He understood Macto far better than people.

“It doesn’t matter,” Lydia said dully, speaking more to herself. “The next time I see a Grifter, I’ll... I’ll kill it, no matter what it’s called.”

That didn’t sound much like a lie.

And, she thought, if I see Durgson again... I'll do what a deadeye should do.