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Eternity's War

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One

The First Day

A soft tropical breeze brushed against Skye's face as he stared toward the city. After another long and restless day for the team, they were still no closer to completing their mission. One by one, the lights in the skyscrapers began to turn off, as they did every evening in the inner metropolis.

His shoulder-length hair gently swayed back and forth in the warm wind. As he stared absent-mindedly at the towering buildings in the distance, he tried to forget about the dangerous deadline that loomed—one that would change the fate of the country forever.

A small nation, but an economic powerhouse nonetheless, Athenia was created with limitless funding from the wealthiest neighbouring governments, and countless years of land reclamation. Slowly, the lights in Shangwu Qu, the nation's business district, faded into darkness. Skye couldn't help but feel it was a relevant metaphor for what he and his group were experiencing—much like the evening's light pollution, their chances of success were quickly diminishing.

He rose from the steel-grated balcony, the unspoken place of solitude and reflection. He took a last look at the skyline, which always reminded him of his home back in Xiaguo, then retreated inside the warehouse, descending the spiral staircase back to ground level. The others had retired for the evening, leaving an eerie silence in their base.

The only other person still awake was Ren, a middle-aged woman from Shizudera. She didn't even notice Skye walk back inside; her attention was fixed on the two large monitors mounted on the wall in front of her. She sat at her desk uncomfortably, typing commands into her glass keyboard screen.

"Anything?" Skye asked hopefully, noticing her bloodshot eyes. While he knew their friendship had been horribly strained as of recent, he still admired her tenacity. Unlike himself, she never once gave up, determined to see their mission through to the very end, and at any cost.

"Nothing," she muttered back. Skye asked her the same question on an almost hourly basis lately, and she always offered the same curt response.

Skye was hardly surprised by the answer. It was not an easy task finding the most protected man in the country. He looked down at the glowing clock on his wrist communicator. "We're running out of time, Ren. We need to find him."

Ren ignored him and continued typing, needing no reminder that time was running out. She tried to relax her shoulders, which had been tense since the countdown to the inauguration began four months earlier.

Skye took a step closer. "We're cutting it close. If we don't kill him by tomorrow, we may as well give up."

Ren stopped typing and turned her attention to her comrade, shooting him an aggravated glance. "I know that. What do you think I'm trying to do?" She shook her head and resumed hacking her way into the government's internal system. Highly encrypted, breaking into it was an immense challenge, even for someone as skilled as Ren. It didn't help that the system was sophisticated enough to constantly lock her out, sending her back to the beginning. So far she had retrieved very little

information from the president's ever-changing itinerary, but wasn't willing to admit defeat until the man was dead.

Skye leaned against the wall and surveyed his metallic surroundings. Though bland and drab, not unlike an oversized prison cell, he had called it home for little over a year now. He tried to distract his mind from dwelling on what the newly elected president would do to the country once he came into power. A fierce and unscrupulous individual, he had to be taken out at all costs.

A beep interrupted the silence. Skye jumped as his wrist vibrated, startling his paranoid thoughts. He looked down at his comm and waved his hand over it, opening the new email and letting out a disappointed groan.

"Who is it from? Nikolai?" Ren asked as she brushed her silver hair out of her eyes.

Skye glanced at her and raised an eyebrow, not bothering to respond. She knew as well as he did who it was from.

Despite her tired mood, a smirk crept across her face. "Does he want to meet up with you?"

"Of course he does," he moaned. The weekly meetings with Nikolai had become tedious at best. "I don't have time for this. I'll tell him I'm not going."

"You should go," she urged. "It might do you some good to get outside and clear your thoughts. Plus it's very distracting when you just stand there and watch the screen over my shoulder."

He knew she was right. The last thing he wanted was to hinder Ren's efforts in any way, but until she was able to tell him the location of the president, he could only stand idly by and wait.

Skye stroked his beard. "Fine, I'll go. Maybe this time he'll have some useful information to share."

"I doubt that."

Nikolai was wealthy and resourceful, but relying on him to kill the president for them was not an option. Nikolai hated Athenia's new leader more than anyone, and wouldn't think twice about having him executed, but no risks could be taken when the stakes were so high.

Skye let out a loud yawn. "I should get some rest. If you find anything, wake me."

"Shall do."

He headed for his quarters. Every day that passed was one day closer to anarchy for the Athenians. Skye had witnessed it firsthand last year, and was determined to not let it happen again. Killing the president, it seemed, was the only road to peace for the small nation.

Two

The Second Day

Skye stared across the promenade, carefully watching Nikolai sitting casually outside the cafe. It was another busy day in Shangwu, the citizens going about their daily business. Most of them, men and women both, wore black suits made of the

finest materials. They walked with haste and spoke loudly into their headsets.

It was a standard sight for the business district of the city-state, but it fascinated Skye to no end, despite living here for so long now, to see such drab colours amid the beauty and vibrancy of the remainder of the island. It confounded him to think that they sauntered down the busy promenade completely oblivious to one of the world's most dangerous men sitting among them.

Skye's green shirt and faded jeans contrasted to the shaven faces and tailored suits surrounding him, but the Athenians took no notice—they were far too invested in discussing how to trade their stocks and currencies at optimal prices. Skye stood still, listening to the different languages around him. He had lived in Athenia for four years now, having spent most of his life in his native Xiagu.

The signs of trouble for the young nation were obvious: graffiti on the walls and pools of dried blood in the streets. Pieces of its violent history that hadn't yet been erased from the country's records. The citizens either chose to ignore it, as they had been taught to, or they were blindly unaware of it. Harmony was a deeply instilled cultural trait for the country, but Skye knew that even the grandest of virtues sometimes stood no chance against emotional corruption.

Skye glared at Nikolai. Aged in his early forties, Nikolai sat peacefully, yet powerfully, his posture perfect, his gaze lost in the large newspaper in his hands. Skye wondered if perhaps Nikolai had not yet sensed his presence. It could be the perfect opportunity to kill him and finally put a stop to the chaos before more innocent lives were lost. A public execution was not ideal, and against all he stood for, but there were few, if any, chances for him to slay his adversary. His list of enemies seemed to be growing, but Nikolai and the newly elected president were both at the top of it.

Outside the cafe, Nikolai slowly turned his head to see Skye standing on the opposite side the street. He smiled broadly and held his hand up, politely beckoning Skye to come and join him.

Skye let go of his sword's hilt and sighed deeply to himself. He felt foolish that, for a moment, he thought he stood a chance at killing him.

Almost involuntarily, he crossed the street, keeping his gaze fixed on Nikolai's warming smile. He took one step after the other, dodging the sea of corporate personnel, not in any hurry to engage in yet another pointless conversation. He arrived at the table shaded under the large parasol.

Nikolai stood up gentlemanly and opened his arms wide, offering his former friend a hug. Skye sat down quickly, not interested in sharing any affection with the man. Almost an entire head taller than Skye, Nikolai had a large, muscular chest, with his dark hair slicked back neatly. Nikolai would be a formidable opponent even without the unrivalled skills he possessed.

The towering man sat back down, still smiling fondly, his face hidden behind large sunglasses. "It's wonderful to see you again."

Skye rolled his eyes. "It's been a week. Are you going to tell me what we're debating this time?"

"Is this not one of the most incredible things you've ever seen?" Nikolai gestured to their surroundings. "I refer not to the country's natural beauty, which has been all but destroyed by the ever-modernising society and towering infrastructure, but rather to the fact that its citizens go about their daily business, with absolutely no regard for their true yearning." Their regular meetings usually began with a philosophical rant from Nikolai, and the topic of corporate slavery was almost always on the agenda.

Skye frowned with disapproval. "Obviously they have no idea." He had thought the same thing himself on many occasions, but did not want to give any indication that their reflections were on par. He detested their weekly meetings, yet at the same time felt validated by their regular thought-provoking discourse. His conflicting feelings left him confused, and he hoped Nikolai couldn't sense that a small part of him actually enjoyed being there. "And I wouldn't exactly call a man-made island a 'natural beauty'."

"This place never ceases to amaze me," Nikolai continued, ignoring the comment. "I've seen such exquisite beauty all around the world, but never have I seen a nation that represents such a vast juxtaposition between the eastern and western worlds, as well as the upper and lower classes. I daresay Athenia deserves a category of its own when it comes to interpreting and discerning its social values."

Skye couldn't help but smirk as he fondly remembered the long and meaningful discussions they used to have in their early days of friendship. The two had met in Athenia, instantly becoming the best of friends. They would sit and talk for hours at the university bar, pondering and debating the future of the world. Only a year ago, living a life free from oppression with his dearest friend and conversing about such things would have been a dream come true. But in this moment, he resisted the urge to slice the man's head off. It was a painful reminder that people, despite being so resilient, can change at any time in their lives. Impermanence is something that all humans are susceptible to.

Nikolai opened the newspaper to a page in the economics section and pointed to an article. "The yuan is almost trading at an all-year high."

"Or maybe your federal dollar is just getting weaker."

"The price of war," Nikolai chuckled. "Nevertheless, I'm intrigued to see how much stronger the yuan can get."

"Maybe you should discuss that with the new president instead of wasting time sitting here all morning."

Nikolai took a sip from his coffee. "Perhaps. Would you care for a beverage?"

Skye pondered the offer for a brief moment before nodding once. "Sure."

"Ah, very good. Excuse me, Ying!" Nikolai called out.

A young woman emerged from inside, smiling politely. "Yes, doctor?"

"A coconut milk latte for my old friend here, please."

She acknowledged with a slight nod, then walked back inside.

Skye eyed the newspaper with intrigue. "How much did that cost you?"

"Quite a bit. But you know me—while I may openly embrace and comply with modernity, I'm nostalgic at heart. I found a store in Xindian Qu that prints them upon request."

He reached for the holster sitting firmly on Skye's waist. His face filled with glee as he removed the weapon. To an onlooker it appeared to be a handle with no blade attached.

Nikolai held it up curiously, admiring its beauty and light weight. "Where did you manage to find this? It's quite beautiful, well crafted." The logo on the side indicated that it belonged to the East Yue Union military. While Nikolai had never before seen a weapon such as this, he knew exactly what it was, and was impressed by the level of ingenuity involved in its creation.

"It was a gift," Skye said.

"Did Charlie send it to you?"

"No. Ren ordered it."

Nikolai scoffed. "You needn't lie to me. I'm all too familiar with the law on

imports, and I can see no way of this making its way into the country." A smile crept across his face. "Well, at least not legitimately. How much did this cost Ren?"

Skye returned the smile. "A lot."

Nikolai laughed softly. "Well, you're wise for choosing to arm yourselves at long last. We lead dangerous lives. It's also good to see that she's investing my money in ways to kill me. Nevertheless, I'll have to send Archibald a stern letter asking him to review the procedures when it comes to imports. I can't have people with military weapons roaming the streets of my home now, can I?"

Skye raised an eyebrow at the thought of Nikolai negotiating with the new president. The leader had a dark past with both of them, and the duo had been searching for him for the past year. Despite being enemies, they unanimously agreed on one thing, and one thing only: kill Archibald Denning on sight.

The blade handle slowly left Nikolai's hand as though it was being pulled by an invisible force. Using his mind, Skye controlled it as it hovered in the air between them.

"What are you doing?" Nikolai asked, surprised but impressed at his friend's bold manoeuvre. He glanced around but no one was watching. "You're doing this in public? That's not like you at all."

A sharp blade ejected swiftly from the handle toward Nikolai. It happened in the blink of an eye. The blade would have pierced both Nikolai's chest and the chair he sat on, but he was too fast. He put his hand up and stopped it, smiling at the vain attempt on his life.

"That's not the only thing I'll do in public," Skye warned, his voice low. "Stop playing games with me and tell me why we're here." The blade of the sword retracted back into the handle, then lowered itself safely back inside the holster.

Nikolai laughed loudly, lightly smacking his old friend on the arm. "I've missed this," he said. "I miss us. We must do this more often!"

Skye groaned, exasperated. His threats were empty, only appealing all the more to the ego of the madman sitting opposite. He let out another long sigh, knowing that he'd have to play along if he was to get any useful information out of Nikolai.

"Oh, come now," Nikolai said. "You needn't keep up appearances with me. I'm sure you love this lifestyle as much as I."

Skye masked his feelings carefully and gave no response, staring blankly at his foe.

"How's Ren?" Nikolai asked, changing the topic. "Is she well?"

"She's fine. A little stressed though."

"Undoubtedly. I can only speculate as to how much of her time she's investing in stopping the new president. And what of the others? How are they all faring?"

"They're fine too," Skye admitted. "Training hard."

The answer pleased Nikolai. "That's what I like to hear. They'll certainly need the training. They fight like a lawless rabble. Pitiful warriors, in my opinion. They could have spent years training, yet they foolishly waited for a life-threatening impetus to arrive. I would hazard a guess that they've made little progress over the last three months."

Skye rolled his eyes, not bothering to respond.

"Nevertheless," Nikolai continued, "do send my love to Ren."

"I always do."

The young waitress returned with a mug of coffee, gently placing it down on the table.

“Thank you, Ying,” Skye said with a smile, not wanting to pervade his ill-tempered mood on her. She nodded, then turned around and went about her business. The cafe was deserted, as usual. The workers in the district were far too busy to waste time sitting idly by. But Nikolai was fond of the old social custom, frequenting the cafe on a near-daily basis.

“And how are Charlie and Delta? Still on the hunt?”

“Yep.”

“I can't imagine they'd have much luck in their situation. The people they hunt are rather elusive. Still, it does intrigue me that you all have the gall to judge me for my actions, yet *your* people feel as though it's justified for them to run around like assassins, killing people left, right, and centre. I think you'd best not associate with people like that.”

Skye cocked his head “What? You think I should avoid *them*? They haven't killed anyone. And they're not the enemy; *you* are.”

“Oh, I'm not suggesting they're the enemy, but rather that they're foolish and hypocritical. And you know I care not for hypocrites. People should act as they themselves are.”

Skye shook his head, unable to understand the illogical poetry that his former friend spewed out. “Please don't lecture me on hypocrisy, otherwise we'll be here all day.”

“*Change*, my friend. People change. You can't compare the man I am now to the man I once was and label me a liar. Based on your views, humanity would completely hinder any chance of growth or atonement, rendering life itself inert. The sooner you accept that, the better.” He took a long sip from his coffee, a pleased murmur escaping from his mouth. “Ah, now that is a fine brew.”

Skye changed the subject. “And how is everyone in 'Black Dawn' doing?” He emphasised the absurd name that Nikolai had chosen for his group.

“My subordinates are just fine.”

Skye laughed, a shocked expression forming on his face. “Subordinates? You're ridiculous.”

“I don't see how. I'm their leader, and they work for me obediently. Therefore, they're my subordinates.”

“And you're a leader who orders them to kill.”

“Justifiably so. No death is without merit or warrant. I'm a hero,” he corrected.

Skye narrowed his eyes at him. “Hero?”

“Is ridding the world of evil not the definition of a hero?” Nikolai asked.

“'Murderer' is a better term for you, I think.”

“I have murdered no one. But, perceive of me what you will.” He drank the last of his coffee and placed the mug silently on the table. “How is Marion doing?” He turned his head to look up at the woman watching them from the top of the building opposite, knowing she had been there all along.

“Fine.”

“Did she insist on coming?”

“She did.”

Nikolai smirked. “An act of desperation on her behalf. But it certainly is an interesting tale. I can't help but wonder if she'll be of any benefit to you during the next two days or so. She may decide to be selfish and fixate on her own petty vendetta.”

Skye took a sip from his hot coffee. “Nikolai, we both know that if she had her vengeance, you wouldn't have any sympathy.”

“No. No, I would not. They all need to die at some point.”

Skye looked at the clock on his wrist comm. “Well, since you’re wasting my time anyway, we might as well share information. Do you have anything to help us find Archibald?”

Nikolai put his hands up innocently. “I’m afraid not. I’m almost ashamed to say that I can’t locate him.”

He wasn’t the only one. The little information Ren had uncovered suggested that Archibald hadn’t spent much time in Government House, the most fortified building in the nation. It would be the obvious place to hide, but, strangely enough, he had rarely checked in there, giving Skye and Ren hope that they might find him somewhere more accessible. Breaking into Government House and escaping unscathed would be an impossible feat.

Nikolai gave his friend a sly grin. “What are we going to do, Skye? We don’t have much time left before the inauguration. If we can’t find the old fool before it’s too late—”

“I know. You don’t need to remind me. That’s why I don’t appreciate you sitting here all morning. You should be out there looking for him.”

“You know I can’t do that. I’m resourceful, yes, but I have my doubts that we’ll ever find him. Perhaps we should just accept the inevitable and turn our attention to other pressing matters.”

“No. I can’t accept that. We need to kill him. Today.”

“Today, you say? Well, that would certainly be ideal. But that sounds quite challenging. We haven’t seen him for a year. What makes today any different?”

Skye gritted his teeth. “We’re out of time. We need to kill him *today*,” he said again.

“And what if we were to fail?”

Skye glared at him and remained silent.

When Nikolai saw the look on his face, he couldn’t help but laugh again. “Oh, Skye, you truly are my best friend.” He glanced down at his comm, checking the time for himself. “If only it were after midday, then it would be socially acceptable for us to have an ale or two. But alas, it’s not.” He held his wrist up to Skye’s face.

“I know what time it is, thank you,” Skye said, not appreciating Nikolai’s complacency. “Is there anything else you want to discuss?”

“No.” Nikolai crossed his legs and relaxed in his chair. “That will be all for now.”

Skye pushed his unfinished coffee away, wanting nothing more than to return home. He touched a button on the bright screen on the table, then did the same on his comm. He held his wrist over the screen, waiting for the faint beep.

“Skye, I invited you here,” Nikolai said. “The coffee was my treat.”

“I don’t need your money.” Skye stood up and began to walk away.

“Of course—you already have a torrent of my money,” Nikolai joked.

Skye turned to see Nikolai still sitting comfortably. “Aren’t you leaving too?”

Nikolai thought about the question for a brief moment and grinned. “No, I think I’ll stay.”

Skye raised an eyebrow, looking him up and down suspiciously. They usually departed at the same time after their bizarre meetings. He slowly walked away, wondering what he was up to.

“Skye!” Nikolai called after him.

He stopped and looked back, his face impatient.

Nikolai’s grin widened. “Good luck killing the president.” He said it loudly,

causing several bystanders to stop and stare at the two.

Skye cringed. He turned around and walked away from the alarmed stare of the Athenians.

"Ying!" Nikolai called musically, prompting the waitress to reappear from inside. "A splendid coffee, as usual. Would you be so kind as to make me another?"

She smiled politely. "Of course, doctor."

Nikolai sat and smiled to himself, staring up at the pale blue sky. He took in a long breath, filling his lungs with the crisp, clean air, then shifted his focus to a small restaurant across the promenade from him.

"And now, we wait."

Three

Marion, code-named Sierra, drove through the streets of Nanping Qu. Home to Athenia's low-level industry, it was significantly more quiet than Shangwu. It housed more warehouses than it did apartment complexes, which made it the obvious choice for Skye, Nikolai, and Ren to establish a base there the year before.

Sierra parked the old van outside the large warehouse. She was shorter than Skye, but a much more adept fighter. She wore an oversized poncho and a tall, broad hat, both of which cloaked her body and face well. Skye exited via the passenger side and held his comm up to the handle, locking the vehicle securely. They opened the front door to the warehouse and walked inside, shutting it tightly behind them.

The warehouse was much more hospitable during the day. Long skylights brightened its interior and helped to eliminate its dull lifelessness. But the atmosphere inside was one of tension, and had been that way for some time now.

Skye walked across to Ren, who was working away at her desk once again. She'd managed to squeeze in a few hours sleep but decided to wake up and resume her efforts at finding the president.

"How did it go?" Ren asked without looking up. "Pointless?"

"Absolutely."

She let out a short laugh. "Did he have any useful information?"

"No, just the usual. He sends his love again."

Ren scoffed and shook her head, not relishing the thought of being the recipient of the obscure man's affection.

Skye stood behind her and directed his gaze to her computer monitor. "Have you found anything?" he asked cautiously, not wanting to anger her with his persistent hopefulness.

"No. Although it looks like Archibald is back inside Government House. He checked in earlier this morning."

Skye rubbed his eyes, hoping that the president would not stay there for long. The duo looked to each other, each wondering what to do. As long as Archibald was housed in Athenia's primary political stronghold, they were powerless to stop him.

Sierra stood in front of Skye and stared up at him. "Shall we train?"

"Already?" Skye groaned. "We've only been back for a few seconds." He stared into the eerily vengeful eyes of the short woman. He had spent months trying to guess her age, which she never once bothered to disclose. Her face was neither young nor old. He closed his eyes and sighed. "Fine. I'll be right out."

She said nothing, walking off silently.

Ren laughed. "She's just eager."

"There was one thing that I thought was a little odd," Skye said, changing the subject back to Nikolai. "He didn't leave the cafe. I asked him if he was going, and he said that he was going to stay. Usually we part ways at the same time."

She thought about his words. "You think maybe he's planning something in Shangwu?"

"Maybe. I just assumed he'd be too busy this week to be sitting around drinking coffee all day. Plus he was acting a little suspiciously. It's almost as though he wanted me to question why he was still there."

"That sounds like Nikolai, but it's probably nothing. Remember, it's always a game with him."

"I know. But he doesn't seem too concerned about finding Archibald either. It sounds like he's given up."

Ren shook her head. "I doubt that very much."

Skye looked down to the ground and tried to push the confusion from his mind. "Maybe I'm thinking about it too much. Maybe I'm just desperate for a lead."

"Probably," she agreed. "But anything is possible with him. I'll ask Juliet to monitor it."

"Good idea." He walked toward the back of the warehouse. "Let me know if she finds anything."

The sun was fully risen and shone brightly against the rich blue sky. The clouds were pristinely white and the cool ocean breeze blew gently across the city, a comforting change from the constant tropical humidity.

Skye sat in the grass. He slowly inhaled, focussing his mind on only his breath. He stared down at the lush green grass, watching it sway softly in the wind. A peaceful sensation enveloped his body, relaxing his muscles.

"Ready?" Sierra asked. She stood opposite him, several metres away. She held a single blade of grass between her fingers, her arm outstretched to the side.

Skye stood up. His face was shrouded beneath a black graphene mask, another military acquisition. With the exception of the eye and mouth holes, it protected his entire face and offered suitable protection during their rigorous training regime.

He took another deep breath, calming himself for a final time. His sword was firmly fastened in its scabbard around his waist. Using his mind, he removed it from the holster and held it out in front. The sharp blade opened suddenly, extending upward. During his recent training, the collapsible katana had proven to be a weapon that was as dangerous as it was easy to conceal.

He concentrated hard, using his telekinesis to hurl the sword at Sierra's arm with great speed. It flew above her hand, missing the blade of grass by several inches. She didn't flinch, despite how close the deadly weapon came.

She turned to see the sword lodged in the wooden fence behind her. "You missed again. But you were closer than yesterday."

Sierra had no katana, instead opting for a military-grade compact crossbow, which was fastened to her left forearm. Although it was limited to holding only four bolts at any one time, it had immediately become her new weapon of choice. Her incredible speed allowed her to reload the weapon as quickly as it could be fired.

She held the crossbow up at eye level. "My turn."

She fired, sending a steel bolt outward at tremendous speed, piercing the air. Skye moved his arm up and caught it, stopping it in its path. He twitched slightly, his body unable to hide its apprehension at being fired upon from such a close range. He placed the bolt down gently on the ground.

Sierra retrieved the sword from the fence and threw it back at him. "Let's try again," she suggested. "This time, aim for my face."

The blade hovered in the air in front of Skye as he caught it with his mind. He did his absolute best to never physically hold the weapon with his hands. The more he trained his telekinesis, the more powerful he became. He had slowly improved over the last five years, but not without difficult and intense training sessions.

He quickly focussed outwards, sending the steel flying with deadly speed. Once again it missed its target and went to the side of Sierra's head. She reached up and grabbed the handle before it flew past.

"I said to throw it *at me*," she said. "Unless your aim was off?"

"I can't throw it at you. I don't want to take your head off."

"You won't kill me. I'm faster than you." Her voice was flat, as though part of her didn't care whether she stopped the blade or not.

Skye groaned. "I know, but it's harder to focus when I'm attacking one of my teammates."

"You think too much." She swiftly held the crossbow up again and fired another bolt. Before Skye even had time to gasp, he reached out and grabbed it, narrowly preventing it from ripping through his body. "You need to practise training under pressure more," she said. "Your movements should be instinctive. You don't have time to think."

Skye frowned, trying to read the woman's face. Her words had a profound truth to them, but her voice lacked almost all inflection. He didn't know whether to take her advice seriously or not. Nevertheless, she was a far better fighter than he was, and many lessons could be learned.

"Sometimes you're too serious," Tango said. A tall and muscular man with short hair, he sat lazily by on the grass, only barely paying attention to the nearby war of projectiles. His accent was similar to Nikolai's.

Skye shook his head. "And you're not serious enough," he said, reluctantly defending his training partner. "Are you going to train today, or just sit there staring up at the sky?"

Tango waved his hand, dismissing the idea. "I'll train tomorrow. I think it might be too hot today."

Sierra frowned. "It's hot every day. If you don't train, you'll be killed like your friend Foxtrot."

The remark sparked a sudden rage within Tango. His mind thought back to Foxtrot's brutal murder three months earlier. He stood up, growling at the comment made by the thoughtless Sierra. "Don't *ever* say that again."

He tried to lunge at her, but she saw the attack coming and jumped behind him. She grabbed the back of his head and roughly rammed it into the large tree he was sitting underneath. Tango let out a squeamish sound as he removed his face from the sharp bark.

"That's enough, Sierra!" Skye snapped, leaping in between her and Tango.

"Tell your friend to stay away from me," she said calmly. "I'm going to the woods to train by myself." As they were located in the industrial district, the woods

were almost always deserted, making it an ideal place for Sierra to train without any civilians noticing her abnormal speed.

“Fine,” Skye breathed, glad to have a spare moment when she would not be pestering him. In the blink of an eye, she was gone.

Tango stood up and wiped the blood from his forehead. “Can we *please* get rid of her? Every day with her is agony.”

Skye removed his mask, his face refreshed by the warm air. “I think ‘agony’ is a little dramatic. I’ll admit she seems to only think about herself, but she’s a great asset.”

Tango stared back at him, aghast. “Asset? Did you not just witness her attack on me?” He placed his hand on his head again and wiped away another trickle of blood. “If you ask me, I think she’s getting impatient with Tahlia, and now she’s taking it out on us.”

Skye shrugged. “Maybe. But we need her.” He knew that Tango had a point, but his mind was far too distracted by their impending mission to care about his friend’s trivial complaints.

“Skye,” Tango said seriously, “do you really think that she is going to help us? As soon as she kills Tahlia she’ll run off and we’ll never see her again. She doesn’t care about us.”

Skye smirked and placed his hand on Tango’s shoulder. “Of course she doesn’t care about us—you don’t make her feel welcome.”

“But she’s *not* welcome here. She could kill us all in an instant.”

“She won’t. She wants our help, which is why she agreed to stay here. This vendetta is all she lives for, so we should use that to our advantage when we start searching for Black Dawn again.”

Tango gasped loudly. Skye turned around and saw Sierra standing behind him.

“Why do you want to use me to your advantage?” she asked, having heard the conversation. “I have no intention of killing your president.”

Skye thought about his words carefully. Sierra had never once agreed to assist White Shadow with any matter aside from the execution of Tahlia, but Skye remained hopeful that she would help them kill the nation’s new leader.

“You’re one of us now,” he said. “I told you that we’d help stop Tahlia if you joined us, so maybe you’ll help us stop Archie.”

“No.” She didn’t even consider the offer. “I’m only here to kill Tahlia. And anyone else who gets in my way.”

Tango grimaced, hoping that the second statement was not directed at him. He turned around and retreated back inside the warehouse. Skye attempted to follow, but Sierra appeared in front of him and blocked his path.

“On second thought, let’s keep training,” she suggested.

Skye stared down into her cold eyes. He choked back his apprehension to resume placing his life on the line for her unconventional training workouts. “Fine.”

Four

Outside the cafe Nikolai sat poised, like a warrior waiting to slay his opponent from the shadows. Next to him sat a woman with short black hair. Her lipstick and

eye shadow were as dark as her shirt, and her trousers were torn at the knee, exposing colourful tattoos.

“How long do we need to wait here?” Tahlia asked.

Nikolai smiled. “Patience, my friend. The boy will come eventually.”

She slumped back into her chair roughly.

“If you're bored, let us discuss life,” he suggested.

“No, thank you,” she said, afraid of having another meaningless discussion with her leader. She had endured listening to his inane philosophical banter during their time together and had grown quite proficient at smiling and nodding while not paying attention at all. Most topics were of no interest to her, while others were simply incomprehensible.

“Then quit acting like a child and sit still.”

As the morning passed, more businessmen and women flooded the promenade of the district. Nikolai watched them intently, wondering how they could live such a lifestyle, something that he pondered often.

Another man slowly crept along and sat at the table next to Tahlia. He wore a dirty tuxedo and top hat. His thin moustache was dark against his pale skin, and his cheeks were smeared with streaks of dried mud. Several civilians stared curiously at the strangely dressed man.

Tahlia's face twisted with horror. “What is that disgusting smell?” she shrieked.

Nikolai glared at the man. “Night, have you been digging up those things again?”

A disturbing expression spread across Night's face as he smiled with enthusiasm.

“I told you *not* to do that!” Nikolai's voice boomed. “Those things are absolutely vile.”

“You said you wanted me to train,” he defended.

“Yes, on the *living*.”

Night's body crunched as he lifted one leg and rested it awkwardly on the other. “Do you want me to leave?”

Nikolai let out a loud and disappointed moan. “No, I need you here. But you smell terrible.”

The trio sat in silence at the table. Ying emerged from the cafe when she saw the newcomer, but turned and retreated upon stumbling into the decaying odour. A businesswoman nearby groaned with disgust as she walked past.

Nikolai gritted his teeth. “On second thought, this is absurd. You're drawing attention to us. Go and sit in the limousine until I come for you.”

The odd man stood up and left without saying a word, hobbling back down the promenade. Tahlia giggled to herself.

“And just what do you find so amusing?” her superior demanded.

“You said that he's drawing attention to us because he smells bad. But the three of us sitting here, dressed like this, is not ... conspicuous.”

“*Inconspicuous*,” he corrected. “Your Alexan needs work.”

Tahlia rolled her eyes, although unsurprised by yet another correction.

“Don't be like that,” Nikolai said, catching sight of her expression. “I honestly don't know how you're not fluent in Alexan given your country's proximity.”

“I *am* fluent,” she muttered. “Forgive me if I don't know every word in your language. I don't suppose you're fluent in Rouvian?”

Nikolai grimaced, reluctant to admit defeat. He waited for several seconds before eventually breaking into a smile. "Very well. You make a fair point. I know some Rouvian, but hardly enough to hold a conversation."

Tahlia folded her arms smugly and relaxed in her chair. "Thank you."

"Not that you can blame me though," he continued. "Alexans needn't learn any other language. We have the strongest economy in the world."

Tahlia sniggered quietly. "Sounds like a typical, arrogant response from an Alexan."

"Perhaps. Although I doubt it will be long before the Union surpasses us." Nikolai watched as Night retreated further down the promenade, eventually climbing into the front seat of the limousine in the distance. "On that note, have you been practising your Xiayu?"

"No. I don't have time."

"No time?" Nikolai scoffed. "My friend, you have all the time in the world!"

Tahlia rolled her eyes again. "Fine, then I don't want to do it. Most people speak Alexan here."

"Yes, they do. But that's not to suggest that the language won't prove useful to you in the near future."

She slowly turned her head in his direction. "Is that a hint? Are you suggesting what I think you are?" Clues from Nikolai were a rare gift. She often didn't know her orders until the beginning of each day. The lifestyle was, in its own bizarre way, relaxing in that it offered the freedom of truly living in the moment. But it also seemingly meant that each and every day would become boring and repetitive. Tahlia felt as though she had lived the same day for three months straight now.

Nikolai held his hands up. "I'm not suggesting anything. Not that my master-plan is hardly a secret. Besides ..." He looked at her with a smirk. "... I bet your friend Marion has no problem learning Xiayu."

Tahlia's shoulders tensed. "Don't mention that name."

"You possess a grand gift, being an elite," he continued, "yet you choose to squander it. People would kill to do what we do. You could master hundreds of languages if you committed to it."

"Just leave me alone," she pleaded, already exhausted by the debate. "I might be working for you, but that still doesn't mean you're the boss of me."

Nikolai laughed, first softly, then loudly. Tahlia stared at him, perplexed.

"You would laugh too," he said, "if you knew what true power was."

She ignored his confusing statement and continued to stare across the street at the restaurant.

When Tahlia did not pry further into his statement, Nikolai began speaking again. "You claim that I'm not your boss, yet here you are, serving me. I could give you a myriad of orders, and you would follow them without question. Is that not what a boss is?"

"I like your cause. That's why I'm helping you."

"Indeed. You like my cause, as well as the fact that you're enticed by a lifestyle offering asylum and stability, and protection from your friend Marion. Nevertheless, I am your boss."

Tahlia decided to save her strength, not bothering to argue back.

The two sat in silence once again. Several minutes passed. Nikolai's gaze wandered back and forth from the restaurant to the corporate personnel surrounding him. The business district was seldom quiet during the day.

“Skye earlier informed me that he wants the president killed today,” Nikolai said. “I certainly admire his ambition, but you and I both know he'll never succeed.”

“What if Ren finds him?” Tahlia asked.

Nikolai scoffed. “I have no doubt that Ren is fully aware the president is sitting inside Government House as we speak, but she'll never find a way to end his life.”

Tahlia closed her eyes and basked in the tropical sun. “Maybe she's stupid enough to break inside.”

Nikolai turned his head and frowned at her from beneath his sunglasses. “Please don't refer to Ren as stupid. She's perhaps the most intelligent person I've ever met in my life. But to answer your question; no, she'd never consider such a bold move. No one is getting inside Government House. It would be a massacre, and I wouldn't be able to live with myself if any harm were to befall Ren or Skye.”

He turned his attention back to the promenade and watched the sea of employees and entrepreneurs. “Although,” he continued, “I do admit it would be handy if the others were eliminated. They're certain to get in my way this weekend.”

Tahlia shook her head at her superior. Nikolai always talked about ways of killing the remainder of White Shadow, yet he never took any action. The two warring factions seemed to be caught in the middle of an unspoken ceasefire.

Nikolai leaned forward in his chair, his jaw slowly dropping. He turned his gaze back to his lieutenant, a delighted smile emerging across his face. “I just had a wonderful idea.”

He had finally succeeded in piquing Tahlia's interest. “What?”

Nikolai rose from his chair and pondered for a moment, lost in his obscure thoughts. “Skye wants to kill Archibald today, and I would like a way to take out White Shadow.” He stared down at the ground, his mind placing the final pieces to his idea in place. He sniggered to himself quietly when he was certain that his plan would work.

“If you want them dead, go and kill them right now,” Tahlia hissed impatiently with her distinguishable Rouvian accent. “You're strong enough to kill them.”

He held a hand up, dismissing her idea. “It matters not how strong I am. Killing them right now would be pointless.”

Tahlia buried her head in her hands and gave up on the conversation. While Nikolai justified killing, he was not one to order an execution if he believed it lacked merit. His planning was always meticulous, much to the dismay of the woman in black; as long as Marion lived, Tahlia would be in danger. She had requested numerous times for Nikolai to deliver on his promise and kill Marion, but he never seemed to show any interest in doing so.

“Nikolai,” Tahlia suddenly said, interrupting the silence, “he's back.”

He turned and faced her as he sat back down. “Who? The boy?”

She shook her head. Her face was grave. “No. One of the Tianzu. We haven't sensed him since ...”

Nikolai's lips turned upwards, pleased with the sudden development. “Where is he?”

“Approaching from the southwest,” she said, pointing a finger to her left.

The pair sat patiently. Nikolai's ability to sense others was not as developed as Tahlia's, which made her a valuable addition to Black Dawn.

Several more moments passed before Nikolai was able to detect the man too. A strange, yet somewhat familiar sensation enveloped his body as he finally felt the presence of another. “You're right; he's back.”

It had been three months since the man's presence was felt in Athenia. Nikolai had never personally met him, yet he knew exactly who he was.

More minutes passed before a man in a blue shirt slowly peered out from the roof of a nearby office building. He stared down at Nikolai and Tahlia, his face calm and composed.

"Why would he be here?" Tahlia asked as she studied the man. It was the first time she'd actually seen him. "Are they going to attack?"

"Maybe," Nikolai said with a grin, barely able to contain his excitement. "How intriguing that he's decided to return, and during such an important time. It's clearly no coincidence." He started to laugh to himself. "This day has just gotten even better."

Tahlia frowned, perplexed by her superior's outlandish enthusiasm. "What are we going to do about him?"

Nikolai's smile broadened even further as he stared up at the timid man. "Absolutely nothing. We'll leave him for the time being."

Tahlia looked up nervously. She was powerful, but the constant stress of being hunted by Marion had taken its toll on her. The last thing she wanted was another foe on their growing list. She sometimes wondered if she would've been safer if she never joined Black Dawn.

Nikolai finally turned his attention back to the restaurant opposite. "I've got all day," he muttered to himself with a smirk, waiting for a certain young man to appear. "But for now, I should call the president and tell him my new plan for tonight."

Five

Tango climbed the spiral staircase to the catwalk above. He stepped outside onto the steel balcony and saw Juliet sitting with her legs crossed. Her mind was in a deep trance, but she turned around as soon as she heard Tango's footsteps.

"Sorry," he said, "I didn't mean to disturb you."

"That's alright," she said happily. A young and vibrant woman of eighteen, she was always full of energy.

"Have you found anything?" he asked with curiosity.

"I'm not too sure. I think Nikolai is still in Shangwu, but it's hard to locate him. Tahlia might be there too, but their energy keeps fading. I'm doing my best, but it's difficult."

"I can imagine," Tango said, impressed with her telepathic abilities. "Don't push yourself too hard. You've come up here every morning lately."

"It's okay, I like sitting here. It's relaxing, and I think I'm getting stronger each week."

He smiled. "That's good to hear. You've come a long way. Just keep at it and you'll be as powerful as Skye and Sierra."

"How about you? Are you training this morning?"

Tango stretched his arms upwards and let out a soft yawn. "Maybe." He'd lost all enthusiasm since the death of his comrade three months earlier, usually spending his time lazing outside.

"You really should train," she said.

Tango shook his head upon hearing the suggestion. "Not you too. Everyone

keeps insisting that I train today.”

“Ren said that we all have to train.”

“Yet Ren herself never trains. She wastes her time on her computer.” He threw his hands up and turned around. “I’ll train when I’m ready,” he groaned, and walked back down the stairs.

Juliet sat, wondering why he was so easily offended. A caring individual, she only ever wished to help the others in White Shadow. She didn’t appreciate being spoken to in such an irritable manner, especially when she only meant well.

“Juliet,” Tango said, reappearing in the doorway, “I’m sorry. I’m just ...” he trailed off, unsure how to express himself.

She turned back around, giving him her attention. “What is it?” She was curious to know what was on his mind, despite already sensing his sadness.

“It’s everything,” he admitted. “Ever since Foxtrot was killed I’ve felt like a different person. I want to kill those who took my friend’s life, but I sometimes wonder if I’ll ever find them.”

Juliet offered a soft smile, trying to empathise with him. “Is that why you don’t want to train?”

“Partly. It’s partly because I wonder if there’s any use in training, and partly because I just don’t know what’s right anymore.” He retreated down the stairs, the fatigue and defeat in his voice evident.

Juliet sat alone, concerned. Tango’s words stayed with her. He spoke of revenge, much like Sierra, Ren, Skye, and Echo. Their group was one of righteousness, but their strange infatuation with killing in the name of peace made her wonder if she too would inevitably become more cold and heartless. Skye had warned her on several occasions that she needs to be careful in setting out her path in life; it did not seem to take much to become lost and soulless, like those who worked for Black Dawn.

She pushed the thought out of her mind, focussing outwards toward the city centre once again.

Skye walked in through the back door of the warehouse, staring down at the long scratch on his mask. “That was too close. You need to be more careful.”

“This is how we need to train,” Sierra said as she walked in behind him. “We need to train intensively, or not at all.”

“You’re forgetting that you’re the strongest one here. We can’t train as intensively as you can.”

Skye looked across to Ren, hoping that the assumed leader would share her input on the matter, but she was far too invested in her computer monitors. He decided against distracting her and turned away. Finding Archie was a far more pressing matter.

“Tahlia won’t go easy on you,” Sierra warned.

“Tahlia is *your* enemy; not mine.” In truth, he considered Tahlia a very high threat, but didn’t want to give Sierra another reason to prioritise killing Nikolai’s lieutenant over the president.

“I’m going out to train,” she said. A gust of wind blew out the back door with her as she ran off to the surrounding woodlands.

Skye exhaled with relief, pleased to have some time to himself. Training with her was invaluable, but she never settled for anything less than what she was

capable of. He was the only one even remotely fast enough to train with her; the others would be slaughtered within seconds.

“Are you okay?” Ren asked without looking up, having overheard.

“I’m starting to regret giving her that crossbow.” He walked over and sat on Ren’s desk, showing her the carving from the bolt.

“Don’t worry about her. I know she can be difficult to deal with, but she’s a huge asset.”

Skye sniggered. “I said the same thing to Tango less than an hour ago. I don’t doubt that she might prove to be useful, but training with her can be a savage ordeal.”

Ren looked away from the monitor and gave her attention to her friend. “Have your reflexes improved since we recruited her?”

He paused, knowing he had lost the debate before it had even begun. “I suppose they have.”

Ren grinned back at him. “Then the training is worth it.”

“Any luck?” Skye asked, looking at the monitors. He felt that enough time had elapsed since he last checked in with her to ask again.

“Not yet, but I’m not going to give up.” Her hands slid across the keyboard screen, her fingers tapping the glowing buttons gracefully.

“Keep me posted. I’m going to speak with Juliet to see if she’s sensed anything in Shangwu.”

“I doubt it. Don’t focus too much on Nikolai—we have far more important things to worry about right now.”

Skye considered her suggestion and tried to take it on board, but he was unable to shake his concerns. “I’ll try.”

Six

Adam walked down the hallway with haste, offering a slight nod each time he passed one of his colleagues. He was impeccably dressed, wearing a dark suit and tie, and a pin of the red and white Athenian flag fastened to his lapel. He carried a thin tablet computer under his arm.

He stopped outside a set of double doors with six men and women standing around it. All of them wore thick armour and held large automatic weapons. To an outsider, they looked to be an elite battalion preparing for a covert attack, but this was the normal attire for members of the Presidential Guard.

Upon seeing Adam arrive, one of the men stood aside and allowed him access to the room they were protecting. Adam opened one of the doors and closed it tightly behind him. A confused look spread across his face when he saw two unfamiliar people sitting at the table.

“Adam,” the newly elected president said, surprise in his voice. He was an elderly man with grey hair, dressed just as exquisitely as Adam. He sat in his chair, facing the mysterious duo. “Perhaps this isn’t the best time.”

Adam looked cautiously at the two guests who sat in front of him. On his left was a large tattooed man with bulging muscles and cold eyes. On his right was a young woman with piercings in her face, who looked to be no older than twenty. Her long scarf loosely touched the ground. Neither of them were dressed appropriately for the president’s chamber.

“Sir, who are these two?” Adam asked, a sense of fear evident in his voice.

“Who are you?” the girl retorted.

“I’m Adam Price, the president’s chief counsel,” he proudly declared.

The two ominous faces glared at him. A chill ran down his spine.

“Sir,” he continued, looking away from the duo, “I’ve just been informed that you’ve given the order to relocate to a private villa in Dongtan Qu until further notice. I must advise against this. You’ll be much safer if you stay here in Government House.”

“Adam, please,” the president requested, “we’ll need to discuss this later.”

“How did you gain clearance to this room?” he asked the strangers. He tried his best to intimidate them, but his lack of tenaciousness was far too evident.

The girl stared back at him. “You should leave,” she whispered.

“Tell me your names at once,” he said as he opened a document on the tablet. When neither of them uttered a word, he asked his leader. “Sir, who are these two? What are their names?”

Archibald pinched the bridge of his nose as he looked down awkwardly. He knew his staff would eventually run into the strange pair, but he had hoped it would not be until after his impending inauguration. “Their names are Sabina and Aurelius.”

Adam stared at the screen. It only took him a few seconds to confirm what he already knew. “You’re not listed on the manifest. Tell me how you gained clearance to this room or I’ll have you arrested.”

“Adam!” Archibald hissed, warning his counsel to cease the interrogation.

Sweat began to bead on Adam’s forehead. He looked nervously back and forth between the two pairs of unrelenting eyes. The looks on their faces told him that they were very dangerous, whoever they were. He couldn’t help but shake the feeling that they wanted him dead for interrupting their meeting.

Adam cleared his throat. “Excellent weather outside today, isn’t it, sir?” He stared at his leader, intently waiting for his response. It was standard protocol among high-ranking Athenian officials for the question to be used when duress was suspected. If a president was to respond with a remark about the weather being cloudy, it would secretly inform his or her staff that the leader was in danger.

The president took a deep breath and hesitated for a moment. “The weather is lovely,” he agreed.

Adam stared at his leader momentarily, half expecting him to change his mind and give a different response. When only silence followed, Adam nodded and left the room, closing the door gently behind him.

He looked at the members of the Guard, who stood poised. “Who are those people in the chamber?” he asked anxiously.

The men and women stared back at him blankly. “Sir?” one of them asked.

“Those people,” he repeated. “That man and girl in the chamber. When did they arrive?”

“Sir, no one but the president has entered. We’ve been stationed here all morning.”

Adam’s expression became further perplexed. “You haven’t seen anyone enter apart from the president?”

“Correct, sir.”

The counsel rubbed his jaw, trying to piece together what was happening. All visitors to the chamber needed to be pre-approved. Worse still, he’d never seen the

two in his life, and he didn't trust the response to the duress signal. He didn't have the time to be dealing with such an odd situation, but was determined to uncover the truth nonetheless. He walked back down the hall, shocked and confused.

Seven

"Skye!" Ren called out.

Skye ran back inside the warehouse no more than a second later. He'd been outside meditating, training his mind and telekinetic ability. "What is it? Did you find something?"

"East Tower," she said, excitement in her voice. "Tonight at 8:00. The president is attending a meeting there, according to his itinerary."

Skye gasped. "Are you sure? Is it legitimate?"

"I'd say so. It was incredibly hard to find. I was only in there for a few seconds before their network locked me out."

Skye smiled broadly. "Well done." He walked over to Ren and placed his hand on her back. "All hope isn't lost after all."

"I never lost hope," she said sarcastically.

"So, what's the plan? Should we storm the tower?" Skye asked, taking in a breath and suddenly feeling very enthusiastic, yet slightly overwhelmed. Situated at the far end of Shangwu Qu, East Tower was the tallest commercial building in Athenia, and a status symbol for the island nation's powerful economy. If the president was indeed there tonight, it would be the perfect opportunity they needed to finally take him out.

"Absolutely. Take the team with you and kill Archie once and for all." Ren started to giggle with excitement. They'd spent an entire year trying to find the man, who had all but vanished from society. He was elusive, and despite Ren's hard work, White Shadow had always been met with cold trails or fabricated itineraries. It was only by sheer luck that Ren had discovered this new information, which was the most promising lead they'd had in a long time.

"Will Tahlia be there?" Sierra asked, suddenly appearing behind Skye. A slight gust came in with her and blew a handful of old paper documents from Ren's desk.

Ren frowned and retrieved the paper from the ground. "I doubt it. She has no way of knowing the president will be there. But it doesn't matter anyway. This is far more important than your petty vendetta right now."

"My vendetta is no more petty than yours. We both want someone dead."

"Sierra," Skye began to lecture, "you want Tahlia dead for personal reasons. And yes, we want the same for Archie after everything he did, but it's so much more than that. If he becomes president, he'll run this country with an iron fist."

"And that will have a ripple effect on the rest of the world," Ren added. "Athenia commands a lot of power in Yuezhou. We can't let him rule. Our primary objective is to kill *him*."

Skye nodded with agreement. "Once we stop Archie, I promise we'll put all of our resources into finding Black Dawn and Tahlia again. Then you can have your revenge."

"Why don't you call Nikolai and invite him to come to the tower tonight?" the short woman suggested.

"Out of the question," Skye groaned, annoyed that Sierra chose to ignore the

gravity of the situation. “We can't risk having an all-out war with Black Dawn while the president skulks off into hiding again.”

“We're already at war with them, Skye,” Tango said, emerging from the dormitory. Echo, a man taller than everyone else in the room, was by his side. “It was their fault that Foxtrot was killed.”

“Can we please not start this again?” Ren pleaded. “We have a job to do.”

“Fine. But if Black Dawn or the Tianzu are there, I won't hesitate to kill any of them.”

Skye rubbed the exasperation from his face. “Tango, you need to focus on killing Archie. He's the imminent threat. Once that's done, we can look at stopping the Tianzu.”

“You just said that we were going to stop Tahlia after the president,” Sierra muttered. “Which is it? Tahlia or the Tianzu?”

Ren slammed a fist on her desk. “Enough! We'll get to that later. Sierra, you will have your revenge, but it won't be tonight. And Tango,” she turned to face her colleague, “I've told you before; it was hardly Black Dawn's fault. Foxtrot was a—”

“It was their fault,” he interrupted. “Nikolai invited the Tianzu here.”

Ren bit her lip in an attempt to control her rage. “Foxtrot was a dear friend of mine too, but standing here arguing isn't helping anyone. Charlie and Delta are doing their best to find the ones responsible.”

“And what was the last update?” he argued. “It's been three months and they haven't found a thing! We should be helping them, not trying to assassinate an eighty-year-old man.”

“He's right,” Echo admitted, his voice husky. “The Tianzu have decimated our team. *They* are the enemy, and our fight should be with them. We all know that we'll never stop the president—it's a dead end.”

“And do you really think the Tianzu are weaklings?” Skye asked. “Any *one* of them could kill everyone in this room.”

Tango shot him a sideways glance. “Thanks for the confidence, Skye.” It was obvious to everyone that he'd been suffering from terrible mood swings since the gruesome death of Foxtrot, and often went back and forth between choosing acceptance and choosing retribution. His ideals seemed to change on a daily basis, which made it all the more difficult for the group to function in an amicable manner. Tensions had been high during the last three months, and such debates had become a regular occurrence. Although Ren was thought to be the leader of White Shadow, there was no sufficient hierarchy in place to keep order.

“It doesn't matter anyway,” Skye said, interrupting the tension. “Black Dawn couldn't possibly know that the president will be there tonight. We'll be alone, which is for the best.”

“Ren!” a voice shrieked from above. The group looked up and saw Juliet standing on the catwalk, her expression serious.

“What is it?” Ren called. “Did you find something?”

The girl nodded. “There's someone in the business district with Black Dawn. Nikolai and Tahlia are there, but there are also two others.”

“Are you sure it's not just the others from Black Dawn?”

“No.” Juliet shook her head. “I've never sensed them before. They're new to me.”

Tango and Echo exchanged glances. “The Tianzu are back.”

“We can't possibly know that,” Skye said, although not confidently. “It could be

anyone. Are you sure one of them isn't Night?" he asked, despite knowing that the peculiar man was unable to be located. Neither Juliet nor Delta had ever successfully sensed his presence.

A slight breeze brushed his face as Sierra returned from the dormitory. She grasped several large clips of bolts and was loading them into her military-grade weapon. "Tahlia is there. Let's go."

Skye stroked his short beard. "This might explain what Nikolai was up to this morning. He's obviously been there all day waiting for someone."

"Maybe he's recruiting again," Ren thought aloud. She pondered their next move momentarily and sighed. "Fine. Skye, take them with you. See what it is. But if it's the Tianzu, you need to get out of there immediately."

"No!" Tango shouted. "If they're there, we're going to fight them."

Ren didn't bother arguing. She had no way to convince Tango that his strength was insignificant in comparison to that of the Tianzu. They were a group that were unrivalled in skill, with the exception of perhaps Nikolai and Sierra. She instead turned her attention to Skye. "Whatever happens, please try to avoid being seen. I've worked too hard on this. The last thing I need is for Archie to go back into hiding."

Tango and Echo headed to their rooms to grab their armour. Battling was a rare duty for the group, but Ren was wise in recently acquiring military weapons and graphene chest plates for everyone. Despite being numerous times stronger and more skilful than an ordinary human, they were still just as vulnerable.

"Sierra," Ren said, her voice anxious, "if you do find Tahlia, *please* don't kill her in front of any civilians. We can't risk a military lockdown of the city or we'll never find the president."

"It's too risky for her to kill Tahlia right now," Echo said as he returned from his room. "If she does, Black Dawn will come after us."

Skye let out a short laugh. "Nikolai couldn't care less about Tahlia or any of Black Dawn. They're expendable to him."

A small piece of metal flew through the air and lodged itself in the wall next to Echo. His eyes widened when he realised it was a bolt. He turned to Sierra, who stood by the door with her bow raised.

"Hurry up," she muttered.

Eight

"Like ants, aren't they?" Nikolai stated, observing the busy citizens going about their business. It was now midmorning, and there were even more men and women walking through the promenade than earlier. Seldom did the business district of one of the world's most foremost commercial centres slow down. "Working as hard as they can, running from place to place. It's such a peculiar lifestyle they've chosen. But to what avail? Will they look back on their lives with fond happiness, or with deep regret?"

He turned to Tahlia, who was hardly paying attention to what he was saying.

"They'll never truly know the joys of life as we do," he continued. "They'll never reach a higher stage of consciousness. Not at this rate anyway."

"I'm sure they could," Tahlia chimed in. "If they wanted to."

"Exactly," her leader agreed. "But that is my point. None of them want it. They are simply content with being content; living a lifestyle that they have been

conditioned to. If they strived for something higher, they could surely attain it, yet it eludes them because they're unaware that anything exists beyond their realm of deceit and lies.

"You know, I too used to be like them. I had a promising career as an economist, but I was just not happy down in my core. I chose that path because it was seemingly expected of me by society. So I left and became a university professor instead. To me, there was no greater honour than educating the next generation of promising young minds. To impart my knowledge to them would fill me with such an incredible feeling of self-worth." He turned back to the busy citizens. "But it wasn't enough—I craved more."

"You broke free," Tahlia said, unwittingly fuelling his ego further.

"That I did. I was not convinced that life was as black and white as these people dress. I just knew that, beneath all of the contracts and deadlines and arbitrary social obligations, there was an entire spectrum just waiting to be discovered. It's not that I judge these people individually, but rather I judge society as a whole for what it has become. We live our lives in accordance with what society believes individuals *should* do. I think it's a ludicrous concept. We shouldn't live our lives based solely on past events. The world is ever changing, evolving, and so are we. We should bear that in mind.

"And," his speech resumed, "this nation in particular fascinates me to no end. It lies in the heart of the East Yue Union, yet it possesses so many Western cultural qualities that make it a uniquely hybrid nation. At times I see such strong family orientation that is distinctly inherent of the East, but then at others I feel as though I could be back in Reddingham, caught up in financial chaos. And here, especially in this district, I hardly feel like I'm truly in this part of the world."

"Is that what made you become who you are now? You wanted to evolve?" Tahlia asked, merely feigning interest to pass the time. Despite having conversations like this one dozens of times already, it was seemingly impossible to stop Nikolai's incessant rants. Sometimes she'd catch him pacing around, back and forth, addressing an imaginary audience.

The great man pondered the question. "Partly. I believe that half the transformation occurs because we believe in it and we allow it to happen. The other half is from an external source that has pushed us beyond what we comprehend to be our threshold of human capacity. At least that's what happened in the case of myself. Of course, I could also argue that I undertook another transformation some years later." His expression became distant as his mind went back into the past. "I'll never forget that day. I'll never forget the rain. And, as pure as it was, I'll never forget how it could not wash away the blood."

Tahlia watched his face, trying to wonder what it was that had twisted Nikolai's mind. He'd never told anyone in Black Dawn. Or maybe it was nothing out of the ordinary at all, she thought. Maybe he'd always been this way—obscure and eccentric.

"Break free, friends. Dare to be yourselves," he whispered, still watching the locals walk in a synchronised pattern with one another. They took one step after the other in a robotic fashion. He looked back to Tahlia. "And that's why it's so difficult; people don't know who they are. Almost everything they do is because they've been conditioned to do it. From the clothes they wear to the music they listen to, it is instilled in their minds from birth that this is who they are. But is it really? Humans are the most advanced species on this planet, capable of being fully self-aware. But if one can not think or feel for themselves, then they're no different to any other

species of mammal.”

Something suddenly caught Nikolai's attention from his left. He turned his head sharply, spotting a young man in the distance, walking on the other side of the promenade. He had short hair and looked to be in his mid-twenties. He stood out from the other adults nearby in that he wasn't wearing a jacket over his shirt and tie. Tahlia looked and saw the man too.

Nikolai snapped his head back to the woman in black, shooting her a vicious glance. “Thank you for informing me of his arrival,” he said, irritated she wasn't keeping a watchful vigil.

Tahlia said nothing. His tirade had sent her into an inattentive stupor.

“The humans choose death, my friend,” Nikolai continued, finishing off his speech. “Not in the physical sense, but in the sense that has subconsciously placed limitations on themselves. And so they live long, ambiguous lives. They drown in their ambiguity, and then one day cease to exist, having never realised true greatness, and rarely ever having left a lasting legacy. Such a waste.”

He held his wrist comm over the small computer screen and paid for his morning beverages. The towering man stood up and stretched his arms outwards, having been sitting in the chair for most of the morning.

“What do you want me to do?” Tahlia asked.

“Find yourself a nice vantage point. If in the impossibly unlikely event that the boy is stronger than myself and kills me, avenge my death for me. I live life with no regrets, but I would surely lament dying in vain!” he said with a grin.

Tahlia nodded at the command, although could not understand all of what was instructed. She walked off, obeying what she perceived to be his orders.

Nikolai gracefully crossed the promenade, walking slowly with his hands behind his back. He looked up at the man in the blue shirt high above, who was still watching him attentively. Nikolai smiled at him. The man did not return the smile, but neither did his face contort in anger; he simply watched on with curiosity.

Nine

Roman walked into the small restaurant and approached the counter. The young man knew he was dressed less formally than those around him, but still appropriately enough to maintain employment in Athenia's business district.

“Hi. What can I get you?” the barista asked him with a smile.

“Just a medium walnut decaf please,” he responded politely. When he saw the order appear on the screen in front of him, he held his comm up and paid for the coffee. Most restaurants and cafes in Shangwu had long ago implemented self-ordering systems, which greatly increased the efficiency of the venue, but also made them more popular and crowded choices for the other commuters. Roman chose this restaurant because the slightly slower service often resulted in it being less busy.

He waited a moment until the man behind the counter handed him his warm beverage. He usually came here on a daily basis, as it was a relaxing place to take his morning break and prepare himself for the mammoth amount of work left for him in the afternoon. It wasn't his ideal career, but it was a desirable alternative to working in the northern districts, which usually comprised of less stable employment, as well as higher levels of crime.

He made his way over to a vacant booth and sat comfortably, picking up an

idle tablet from the table in front of him and scanning the headlines. Nothing jumped out and grabbed his attention. The headlines were boring, but it usually indicated that all was well and relatively peaceful in the small nation.

“Freedom,” a booming voice said. “What does it mean to you?”

Roman looked up to see a tall figure standing over him. He had large black sunglasses that almost covered his entire face. The man had slicked back hair and wore a long, dark trench coat—an unusual choice for a tropical nation. He sat down at the table without invitation.

“Can I help you?” Roman asked, feeling intimidated by the presence of the odd man. Something about him felt very ominous and eerily unnatural.

“Freedom,” Nikolai said again, “tell me what it means to you.”

Roman frowned with confusion. “What?”

“Answer my question, Roman,” Nikolai said impatiently.

The young man was taken aback by the statement. “How ... did you know my name? Who are you?”

“May I join you?” Nikolai asked, despite already sitting at Roman's table.

“... okay,” Roman slowly replied.

“Thank you kindly. Now, what does freedom mean to you?”

“I'm afraid I don't understand the question,” Roman said, still confused by the bizarre conversation taking place.

“Philosophy, politics, international relations, sociology. You've studied these all at ANU, have you not? So surely you're no stranger to the topic. Do you truly not understand the question? Or did my sudden appearance startle you?”

“Yes,” Roman conceded. “That one. You startled me. I don't believe we've met.” He tried to maintain a polite demeanour but secretly wished the man would leave him alone. He tried to figure out how the stranger knew his name and what he studied at university.

“My name is Dr Nicholas Sweeney,” Nikolai said. “And I ask you this question because I wish to propose something to you. It could potentially mean that you join an elite faction whose ideals involve promoting freedom and protection. Conversely, it could mean death for you. Your fate will be decided by how you answer my question.”

Roman's heart started to race. The man only came across as strange a moment ago, but now the sudden threat of death began to frighten him.

“Look,” he said, “I'm just here to have a coffee and then go back to work. I'm not looking for trouble.”

“Then answer my question—freedom; tell me of it. What is it?”

Roman sighed, but was willing to do what it took to rid himself of the annoying man. “I suppose freedom is people having free will. People have the ability to work where they wish and go where they want.” His heart continued to pound as he tried to gauge the man's reaction. He wondered if he would approve of his opinion and leave him be.

“I agree ...” Nikolai finally said. Roman breathed an internal sigh of relief. “... to an extent though. Let us dive deeper. How much freedom do people deserve? Do they deserve the freedom to kill one another?”

“Well, no,” Roman said. “I don't condone murder.”

“And nor do I. Unless it's justified, of course.” The man then started laughing to himself manically.

Roman became more uncomfortable by the second, fearing that he may be attacked.

"You know," Nikolai continued, "humans are capable of just about anything. They can promote peace and harmony across all walks of life, or they could destroy everything that has been created with one cataclysmic push of a button, not unlike what's happening back in my home country. So where do we draw the line?"

"Do we give them just enough freedom so that they may live long, full, happy lives? Or do we give them complete control over the universe itself? Do we allow them to hold the fate of civilisation in their hands and merely *hope* they don't destroy it?"

"Well, yeah, I'd say so," Roman said. He looked around the restaurant to see if anyone was watching the pair, but no one seemed to be taking any notice of the bizarre situation. "I suppose true freedom gives someone the power to make all decisions, even if that decision may affect other people. We can't control them."

"Can't we now?" Nikolai's tone became serious. "What if someone tried to kill you? Would you let them do it? Or would you stop them?"

"Of course I would try to stop it," Roman said, tired of the never-ending debate.

"What if you could prevent it from happening altogether? What if society was too afraid to even commit murder?"

"Well, I think a society without murder is a good thing. But I don't think they should live in fear."

"It is this fear that creates peace," Nikolai retorted. "It is this peace that creates freedom."

Roman had reached the end of his tether. "Look, can we please stop talking about this? I just want to be left alone." His voice became loud and flustered.

Nikolai smirked and laughed to himself. "Very well. I shall leave you be. I just have one final question for you."

Roman buried his head in his hands. "What? What is it?"

The odd man leaned in closer and took a dramatic deep breath. "Utopia. Can this be achieved?"

Roman thought about the question for a moment, searching his own feelings. It had been the strangest few moments of his young life.

"No," he finally said. "I want to say yes, but ... we are corrupt by nature. This kind of peace doesn't exist and never will."

Nikolai stared at him briefly before forming a broad smile. He raised his hand and removed the large sunglasses from his face. Underneath were two gaping holes where eyes once sat. He glared at Roman, who gasped at the gruesome sight of the eyeless man.

"Wrong answer," Nikolai said, his voice happily sinister.

Roman started to tremble at the presence of the foreboding figure. He sat frozen, expecting the psychotic man to remove a weapon and publicly execute him.

But the man did nothing of the sort. Instead, he returned his sunglasses to his face, rose from the booth, and slowly strode out of the cafe with his arms behind his back.

Roman sat alone, left in a state of shock by the terrifying visitor. His pounding heart became deafening as adrenaline surged through his body.

"What just happened?" he whispered to himself.

Ten

"He's leaving," Tango said. He sat perched on the roof of the two-storey building opposite, watching Nikolai as he left the restaurant and began to casually saunter down the promenade.

"Another one for us, I suppose," Skye said, sighing with relief. He sat next to his comrade and watched Roman through the window of the restaurant. Neither of them wore their masks out of fear they'd be spotted by civilians on the street below.

"Do you think that's one of them? Without Juliet here, I'm not sure."

"It has to be. Why else would Nikolai interrogate him?"

Tango stared in Roman's direction, who still sat frozen in his booth inside. "I thought he'd be one of the Tianzu, but he looks innocent enough. Still, are we sure we want to recruit him?"

Skye shot him a confused glance. "Of course we're sure. What's the alternative?"

Tango didn't answer the question. They both knew what Nikolai would want to do to the boy. It was merely a matter of when.

"Where's the other one that Juliet mentioned?" Tango asked curiously. "She said there were two in Shangwu."

"*They're still there. I can sense them,*" Juliet said, her voice sounding through their headsets. Their comms were synchronised with one another in order for them to communicate freely. She remained back on her balcony in the warehouse, still monitoring the city for them.

"They could be anywhere," Skye said, knowing that Juliet's ability to track other elites was highly inaccurate, and especially from such a long distance away. "We shouldn't waste time. If it's one of the Tianzu, we need to leave. Let's just grab the boy and head home."

"*Any sign of Tahlia?*" Sierra's voice asked.

Tango let out an obvious groan. "No."

Skye stared at Nikolai, who continued walking at a leisurely pace, a pleased expression on his face. "What are you up to, Nikolai?"

"*I wonder where he's going,*" Ren said. She too was back inside the warehouse, watching a live feed of the street on her set of monitors via the government's surveillance system.

Nikolai stopped walking. He turned his head and looked straight at the White Shadow duo from across the street. He offered Skye a respectful smile, as if to hold him in high regard.

The gesture was not returned as they watched on, but Nikolai wasn't phased by the scowl from his former friend. He resumed walking along with his beaming smile, weaving between the many businessmen and women on the bustling street.

"You'll have to beat me to him," Nikolai muttered to himself. He arrived at the end of the car-free zone and entered the rear door of a black limousine that was parked nearby.

Tango cocked his head to one side. "I didn't know he owned a limousine."

"*He doesn't,*" Ren said. "*Those are government plates.*"

Tango looked into the distance, but couldn't quite see what Ren saw, despite his evolved vision. "Why would he steal a government vehicle? Is it so he catches

their attention? Is this his lazy way of trying to find Archie?"

Inside the limousine, Nikolai sat opposite the pale Night, who looked as though he hadn't slept in an eternity.

Nikolai frowned, his body tensing. "It smells absolutely revolting in here!"

"Alone, I see," the ghostly man spoke, ignoring the observation.

"The boy was far too much of a conscientious objector," Nikolai said, removing his sunglasses. "I assume that the quiet ones often become the most dangerous, as in the case of yourself. Kill him for me."

No more words were said. The strange Night awkwardly clambered out of the vehicle with a cane in hand and casually limped back down the street toward the restaurant. Once again, his peculiar attire caught the attention of numerous people.

"Skye, look," Ren gasped.

Skye saw it at once and groaned. "He's wasting less and less time, isn't he?"

"*What is it?*" Echo asked, also listening in on the conversation.

"Night's coming for the boy," Tango explained.

Skye bit his lip. "This is bad. I didn't think Nikolai would order the boy's death straight away."

"He knows we're here. Maybe he's just doing it to toy with us."

"*You're going to have to be very careful, Skye,*" Ren warned.

"I don't have time to be careful. Night's going to kill the boy."

"*Skye, you can't risk attacking him in public. You'll be arrested in minutes.*"

"What else can I do?" he asked, a little bewildered. He watched as Night took one shambolic step after the other, slowly edging closer to the restaurant. "I can't let him die."

"*Of course not, but our priority is the president. You can't let yourself be seen attacking Night. I don't want a lockdown.*"

Skye gritted his teeth at the impossible situation. The last thing he wanted to do was cause any sort of panic or draw attention to himself. Finding the president had so far proven to be an impossible task, and would be further complicated with a military closure of Shangwu. Archie was scheduled to be at East Tower later that night, which might be their final chance to stop him before it's too late.

But Skye also couldn't risk allowing his relentless foe to slaughter the young man inside the restaurant.

His mind was made up. In one swift movement he leapt from the roof, across the promenade and landed gently in front of the doorway to the restaurant, shocking and surprising the bystanders around him. Night saw the display and kept walking forward.

"Good morning, Skye," he called. "Beautiful day, isn't it?"

Skye's handle floated outward from his holster and hovered in the air in front of him. The blade shot outward, facing Night's direction. A handful of civilians nearby screamed when they saw the deadly weapon. The Athenian commuters quickly dispersed away from the danger.

"*Skye! What are you doing!*" Ren's voice shrieked. She could hardly believe what she was watching on the monitors in front of her.

Night walked right up to Skye and stopped only inches away from the tip of the blade, which was pointed right at his face. "Not the best idea," he said, glancing upwards at the surveillance cameras strategically scattered along the promenade.

"Get out of here," Skye warned him, all too aware that what he was doing

could potentially jeopardise everything they'd worked so hard for.

"No need to be rude," the strange man smiled. "You could have asked politely."

"Now!" Skye roared.

Night stepped forward and slowly began pressing his face against the sword's tip. He had no reaction as the metal tore into his cheek. The screaming from the terrified locals intensified as they witnessed the gruesome display.

Skye wasted no time. He left the blade hovering in place and then burst into the restaurant. He turned right and ran straight to the young man sitting in the booth, whose jaw had dropped after watching the entire encounter through the window.

"Come with me," Skye said, grabbing the boy's arm.

Roman let out a terrified wail. "Help! Someone help me!"

His cries fell on deaf ears. Everyone inside was too shocked to even move. Skye picked Roman up by the torso and flung him over his shoulder. He then ran back outside and, with relative ease, leapt upwards. The blade ripped itself from Night's face and followed. Skye flew up and landed softly on the roof of the building he was sitting on earlier. He placed Roman back down on his feet beside Tango.

"Please don't kill me!" the boy pleaded.

"We're not going to kill you," Skye assured him. "We're here to save you. But you have to come with us right now or you'll die." His voice had a strong sense of urgency to it.

"*What have you done!*" Ren shouted.

"That wasn't a smart move," Tango cautiously agreed.

"I know!" Skye snapped back, not appreciating his colleagues stating the obvious. "But what else could I have done?"

Roman tried to keep calm, but his heart felt as though it was going to explode out of his chest. "I don't understand," he admitted, his voice trembling with fear. His eyes widened as another wave of adrenaline surged through his terrified body.

"You will. Right now, all you need to do is run."

"Look out!" Tango screamed as he tackled Roman to the concrete. Less than a second later a glowing black ball crashed into the large air vent where he was just standing. The metal buckled as the vent caved in on itself.

Roman shrieked, and looked up at a neighbouring tall building. On top stood Tahlia. She moved her hands in a trance-like gesture, skilfully crafting a ball of black energy in her palm. She thrust it downwards at the building below.

There was no time for practising his telekinesis. Skye grabbed his sword with lightning speed and sliced the ball in half before it reached them, dissipating the dark energy and sending scorching black embers across the rooftop. Roman's panicked state intensified.

"Let's go, now!" Skye ordered. He picked Roman up and placed him on his shoulder again. He held him with his left hand while carrying the sword in his right, and started running. Roman, frozen with terror, lay seemingly lifeless while draped over Skye's shoulder.

"*What's happening?*" Ren asked. "*I can't see where you are.*"

"Tahlia's attacking us. There's another coming!" said Tango, gazing up at another ball of energy.

The woman in black held the ball, ready to throw it at her fleeing targets. She turned around suddenly, distracted by something that caught her

attention. A second later she screamed in agony as a crossbow bolt ripped through her forearm, wedging itself deep in her skin. Blood seeped from the wound and dripped onto the roof below. She released the dark energy, which vaporized into nothingness. Tahlia winced as she crouched down and then vanished into the air.

"Thanks, Sierra," Skye said to the short woman who landed next to him from high above.

"Quickly, let's go," she said, her facial expression blank. She grabbed Tango, awkwardly carrying him in the same fashion as Roman, then leapt onto the roof of another nearby low building. Skye followed without a second thought. They ran along the rooftops, running as fast as they could to escape any further danger.

"Echo, start the van," Skye said into his headset.

"*Already have,*" Echo's voice spoke back.

They jumped onto the next structure; a car parking facility. They sprinted down the ramp, running past the luxury sedans typically found in the district, and made their way to their old yellow van nearby. Echo was standing outside waiting for them.

"We've made it back to the van," Skye informed Ren.

They placed Tango and Roman back on their feet. Echo grabbed the side door and opened it for them. He was startled to see Nikolai sitting inside.

"Going somewhere?" Nikolai asked as he climbed out. Roman shrieked when he saw the man.

Skye stood tall. "He's coming with us."

Nikolai laughed softly. "Obviously."

Tango jumped forward and swung a fist at Nikolai, who stepped aside and grabbed his arm, thrusting him into the door of the van. Echo joined in on the attack, raising his leg in an attempt to kick Nikolai in the face. Nikolai vanished and reappeared behind Echo, grabbing him by the neck and throwing him down to the concrete.

"I don't know why you bother," Nikolai laughed. He grabbed Roman's torso with one arm, lifting him off the ground. The boy screamed, filling the silent parking facility with a terrified roar.

Skye pressed the small button on his sword handle, ejecting the blade outwards. He threw it at Nikolai, who raised his arm and grabbed it before it could slice his neck.

Skye dropped down and tried to kick Nikolai in the knee, but the towering man instead knelt Skye in the face, stunning him and knocking him back to the ground.

"Apologies, brother," Nikolai said, regretting attacking his former friend. He turned his attention to Sierra, who simply stared up at him. "You're not going to assist your comrades?"

"Where's Tahlia?" she asked, changing the subject to one that was more to her liking.

Nikolai laughed at the odd question. "An enigmatic one, you are. Your friends need your assistance, yet you offer them nothing."

"*Is that Nikolai's voice?*" Ren asked through the headset, disappointed.

"It is," Skye replied as he climbed to his feet. Tango and Echo picked themselves up too.

The four figures stood facing the powerful man in a silent standoff. Moments passed. Skye stared up into the gaping eye sockets of his towering enemy.

"Kill him!" Roman screamed as he tried to wriggle his way out of Nikolai's powerful grasp. No one made any attempt to do so. They all stood poised, waiting for

the stalemate to cease.

"They can't," Nikolai admitted with a grin. "They know they can't, yet they still try. Admirable, but foolish."

"I said he's coming with us," Skye warned, narrowing his eyes at his enemy.

"As you've already informed me," Nikolai said. "Alternatively, I can have him killed swiftly right now. Surely it's better than a slow and dishonourable death, much like our friend Foxtrot at the hands of the Tianzu."

Tango took a step forward, but Echo held his hand in front of him, indicating to stay back.

Skye gritted his teeth and briefly contemplated launching another attack, but knew it would be a pointless manoeuvre. "He's innocent. He doesn't pose a threat to you."

"And you said the same thing about Jacinta," Nikolai said, referring to Juliet, "yet she sits back at your base attempting to locate me. How am I to know that this boy won't be breaking into my quarters months from now and attacking me in my slumber?"

The friction between Skye and Nikolai intensified as they glared at one another.

"Last chance," Skye threatened for a final time.

"It will be a swift death, I promise. Just say the word," Nikolai grinned, placing his free hand around Roman's neck.

Skye took a step forward. "You'll have to kill us first," he declared confidently. Sierra looked up at him and noticed a slight smirk on his face.

Nikolai laughed loudly, pleased with the coup. "The answer that I was secretly hoping for." He removed his hand from Roman's neck and placed it on Skye's shoulder. "Let us have a little fun then, shall we?"

He hurled Roman at Skye, knocking him back to the ground. Echo knelt down and helped the two climb to their feet.

Nikolai stared down at Skye and offered him a sadistic grin, clearly pleased with the prospect of getting to hunt Roman slowly. He held his hand to his head and offered a respectful salute to his friend, before vanishing into nothingness.

Wasting no more time, Sierra climbed into the driver's side of the van. Tango and Echo ushered Roman through the side door.

"He's gone, Ren. We're on our way home," Skye said.

"Where am I going?" Roman asked, his voice trembling from the extraordinary last few minutes.

"It's okay," Skye offered as he climbed in behind him. "You'll be fine. We're here to help."

He closed the sliding door after Echo and Tango were inside, and the van started driving down the ramp toward ground level.

"Who are you people?" Roman asked, frantically looking back and forth between them all.

Echo gasped loudly. "Look!"

The others all turned to see what he was staring at outside the window. A short distance away, high up on a nearby building stood a man in a blue shirt. He watched the van speed away but made no attempt to pursue it.

"He's just staring at us," Echo continued.

"What is it?" Roman asked with panic, uncertain what he was looking at.

"Do you think he's one of them?" Tango asked, ignoring the boy's question. "Juliet said there was one more elite in the city."

Skye watched on. There was no doubt in his mind that the man they were looking at was one of the Tianzu. "Absolutely."

Tango gritted his teeth, not wanting to lose the opportunity to pursue the man. "Stop the van!"

"No!" Skye yelled back. "We need to get out of here before the others arrive," he said, referring to the remaining Black Dawn personnel.

Tango didn't protest any further. As much as he wanted to fight, he knew that Skye was right. The four of them would be greatly outnumbered if they stayed. Their best strategy now was to return to base and plan their next move.

"*What is it?*" Ren asked. "*What's happening?*"

"The other person Juliet detected," Skye said. "He's one of the Tianzu."

Ren paused for a moment. "*Do we know him? Have we seen him before?*"

"No. He might be the one that Delta sensed before she left Athenia." The man in blue stared downwards, never once taking his gaze away from them.

"*Get back here as fast as you can,*" Ren said. "*Don't go near him.*"

Tango stared out the window, barely able to contain his rage. "We won't."

The van continued driving through the streets until the man disappeared from sight.

Eleven

The van navigated its way through the busy streets of Shangwu Qu. While the vast majority of commuters opted to ride the subway into the city, there were still more than enough cars filling the roads. In order to combat accidents and traffic jams, the government wisely eliminated vehicles from much of the district by transforming several of the roads into a series of interconnecting promenades.

Sierra turned right and proceeded down Jalan Raya. Stretching from the east end of the island to the west, it was the main arterial that intersected Athenia. Roman lay on the floor of the van, trying to keep his breathing under control.

"What's happening? Who are you people?" he asked again, desperate for an answer. "Who were *those* people?"

"We'll explain everything soon," Skye said. "For now, just keep calm."

"Calm?" Roman retorted. "How can you possibly expect me to keep calm! They just tried to kill me!"

The van drove along in silence. The other four knew there was little they could say or do at this stage. Roman would eventually have to accept the dangerous game that he had just entered.

"He sees you as a threat," Skye finally explained. "That's why he wanted to kill you."

"*Me?*" he asked, astonished. "How could *I* possibly be a threat?" Roman's mind was in a state of shock.

"You recently had a realisation. You reached a certain conclusion and you felt something change within you. Do you remember that?"

Roman stared at him, puzzled. "How? How did you know that? How did he know my name?"

Skye said nothing. It was the same transformation that they'd all undertaken.

"Let's wait until we get back to base," Echo suggested. "Give him a chance to relax a little first."

Skye nodded in agreement. Roman continued staring at them, wide-eyed and eager for answers, but no more words were exchanged for the rest of the trip.

The van proceeded through Nanping. Roman kept his gaze out the window, trying to piece together what was happening. He seldom visited Nanping, instead usually spending most of his time in the more heavily populated Xindian Qu, located north of the business district.

The van eventually came to a halt outside the small warehouse. Skye extended a friendly hand outwards toward Roman, who just looked at him with vacant eyes.

"Come on," Skye urged softly. "Everything's going to be okay."

After a moment's hesitation, Roman climbed across the van and exited the side door.

Skye put his arm around the young man and escorted him to the entrance of the old and rusted warehouse. He exhaled noisily, not wanting the burden of recruiting another member for their group at such a busy time. Explaining everything was a long and cumbersome task, and Skye's mind could only think about breaking into East Tower and killing the president later that night. Nevertheless, he maintained a polite demeanour and opened the metal door for the newcomer. "Welcome home."

Roman looked around their headquarters. Immediately on his right was an open kitchen. Beyond that was a cordoned-off hallway with several adjacent offices, which appeared to function as makeshift bedrooms. The rest of the warehouse comprised of a handful of tables and computers. His eyes then focussed on the large, empty space at the back of the room.

"For training," Skye said, catching sight of his attentive gaze. "We sometimes train over there, and outside."

Roman slowly walked around on his own accord, taking in all of the furniture. The inside of the warehouse was neither modern nor outdated, unlike its bleak exterior. His attention turned to the silver-haired woman sitting by the left wall. She didn't look away from her computer monitors.

"This is where you live?" he asked, curious as to how a group of fighters could permanently live in the metallic prison.

"This is our home," Skye admitted with a smirk on his face. He placed his unused mask down on the large table in the middle of the kitchen.

Echo handed Roman a glass of water. "Here—have a drink and sit."

The young man drank the water quickly and sat at the table as instructed, still shaking and breathing erratically.

"What's happening?" he asked. "Why am I here?"

"Hello," a bright voice said from behind. Roman turned around to see a girl standing behind him. Her skin was light brown, not unlike his own. She had a pleasant smile on her face and looked to be only a few years younger than himself. Seeing another youth there brought him a little relief.

"Hi," he said, not hiding the confusion and fatigue in his voice.

"This is Jacinta," Skye said. "But you can call her Juliet. She's our newest recruit apart from yourself."

“Recruit?” he asked.

“Nice to meet you,” Juliet said.

“You too.” He wearily returned her smile.

Ren approached the table and stopped in front of Skye, shooting him a fierce glance. “What have you done?” she asked, trying to keep herself calm.

“I didn’t have a choice,” Skye defended, holding his hands up. “Night was going to kill him. I had to intervene.”

“I told you not to expose yourself like that,” she hissed back. “Especially not now. There’s already a warrant for your arrest.”

Skye closed his eyes and winced. He’d feared that his actions might have led to this, but he also knew that there was no other option at the time. “Can you delete the warrant?”

“I’m trying, but the system is difficult to override.”

Skye looked down at the floor. “I don’t like that there’s another Tianzu here,” he said, changing the subject. “The timing is—”

“I know,” Ren agreed. “This isn’t good. Let’s pray they’re not about to stage another attack.” She turned and looked at Roman, who sat timidly at the table. “But then again,” she continued, “how do we know that he hasn’t been in Athenia the entire time? Maybe he never left.”

Skye nodded, although not confidently. “Maybe.”

Ren approached Roman at the table. “And who have we here?” she asked, her voice blunt and her mood sour from the morning’s events.

He stared up at the woman, still trying to process everything that had just occurred. He wasn’t certain whether his mind was telling him to be afraid or not. “I’m Roman,” he admitted sheepishly.

“Roman, is it?” Skye asked, uncertain of the boy’s name himself. “I’m Xia Qiuyu, but you can call me Skye,” he introduced. “And this is Ren.”

Ren offered a weak smile but made no further attempt to make the boy feel welcome. The immense stress she’d been under recently had taken its toll. She looked exhausted.

“So, who’s going to tell him?” Skye asked. “You’re usually good with speeches.”

Ren scoffed. “Sure, I’ll bring him up to speed. Or at least try to.”

The others went about their business, leaving Ren, Skye, and Roman alone. They took a seat opposite the newcomer and looked him in the eyes.

“How are you feeling?” she asked, trying to ease into the topic.

“I don’t know. I think I’m okay,” Roman said, clearly drained from the ordeal. “Maybe.”

“You seem relatively calm. That’s good—you’ll need a clear head to process everything that I’m about to tell you.” The boy could certainly prove to be an asset, she thought to herself, but there was simply no time to train him.

Roman shifted his position in the chair, making himself more comfortable to hear what she had to tell him. Now that he was a little more relaxed, he was eager for answers.

Ren paused as she tried to think of an appropriate way to start explaining everything. Her mind was occupied with other matters, and she wanted to get the conversation over with. “As you already know, I’m Ren. This is Skye.” She gestured to the long-haired man sitting on her right. “You’ve also met Juliet and Sierra, and

Tango and Echo. And this is our organisation that we call 'White Shadow'. These are our headquarters.”

“Okay.” He was satisfied with the explanation. “And who were the people who were trying to kill me?”

“Well, there's no simple answer to that question,” the silver-haired woman said. “That was another organisation called 'Black Dawn'.”

Roman cocked his head to one side, then suddenly started laughing, perhaps a little delirious from his recent experience. “Black Dawn and White Shadow?” he mocked. “Who thought of those names?”

Skye turned to Ren and saw the anger on her face. White Shadow was a group she was proud of; she didn't take well to hearing him ridicule its existence.

“I started White Shadow years ago,” she said sternly. “I started it because I had seen enough corruption and wanted to make a difference.”

Her furious glare pierced straight through Roman, making him feel very uncomfortable all of a sudden.

“We fight for justice and peace,” Skye added, trying to diffuse the tension. “I suppose you could call us vigilantes.”

“And you clearly haven't seen the things we've seen,” Ren spat. “We just saved your life, so show me some respect.”

Roman nodded nervously, apologetic for his burst of laughter.

“How do you do the things that you do?” he asked, changing the subject. He turned to Skye and remembered seeing his floating sword earlier.

“I'm afraid I'll have to give you the abridged version of the story,” Ren said, a sense of urgency in her voice. She was eager to return to her desk and attempt to fix the mess that Skye had made. “We're running out of time, and you're in for a long night. Skye and I run White Shadow. Black Dawn is run by Nikolai, who you met earlier. He used to work with us, but he started his own counter-faction. Nikolai believes that he can eliminate all evil in society by having everyone live in a constant state of fear, whereas we believe that people deserve free will to make their own decisions. Nikolai is willing to kill to get what he wants, and he *will* kill you if you don't defend yourself.”

“Why does he want to kill *me*? I'm not evil. Did I fail his test before?”

“Most likely,” Skye said. “What did he discuss with you in the restaurant?”

Roman shrugged. “He asked me about my views on freedom.”

Ren rolled her eyes. “That was the same process he put Juliet through. If he had seen you as an ally, he would've recruited you. But he obviously saw you as a potential threat that may overthrow him, so he tried to have you killed.”

Roman's head started to spin. “How could I possibly overthrow him?” he asked, his gaze shifting down to the table. The question was more for himself than for the others.

Skye exchanged a glance with Ren, then turned back to Roman. “You're a shengxian, like us.”

Roman looked back up at the pair. “A what?”

“A shengxian. Or an 'elite', as Nikolai puts it,” Skye explained. “Someone whose mind, body, and spirit have evolved. Someone who has undergone an immense transformation and is then able to reach a higher plane of human consciousness. The mind evolves, and so does the body, allowing you to do things that no ordinary man or woman ever could.”

Roman's jaw dropped as he tried to comprehend what was being said. “This

must be a joke. I'm not *evolved*. I just had a recent realisation and then—”

“Exactly,” Skye interrupted. “But more of a revelation than a realisation. You were finally able to understand the true meaning of life, and your mind has never felt more free, has it? You feel like you're one with existence itself.”

The words startled Roman. His recent experience was unlike anything that he'd ever felt before, and it amazed him that this group of people were able to understand everything he felt and express it so accurately. He nodded, agreeing with Skye.

“We need to hurry this along,” Ren said. “We'd usually deliver a more heartfelt speech, but we don't have time for this right now.”

“Why? What's happening?” Roman asked, starting to sense the urgency.

Ren looked first to Skye, and then back to Roman. “Tonight, we're going to kill the president.”

Twelve

Sweat began to bead on his forehead as Adam Price stared at the computer monitor in the new security command centre. He had just finished scanning two hours' worth of footage of numerous personnel entering Government House. All of them were faces he recognised. He scoured for the two mysterious people who sat in the president's chamber earlier that day, but had so far uncovered nothing.

He rubbed his eyes, confused as to what events could possibly be unfolding. He turned away briefly and looked at another monitor, which showed a live feed of the entrance to the villa. Several staff members were carrying in bags and equipment. It was nothing short of unprecedented that the president had ordered them to relocate to the beachside villa in Dongtan Qu. While it appeared to be a large stronghold, its security was inferior to that of Government House, which was safely located in the neighbouring Zhengfu district.

Adam was alone with the head of the Presidential Guard, who was referred to as Guard One. All members of the Guard were military trained and were to refrain from using their real names. They were simply employed to protect and, if need be, die for their leader. Approximately two dozen were stationed all across the villa at both random and strategic positions while the vast remainder were ordered to remain behind in Government House until further notice.

Guard One finished scanning the footage. “Nothing, sir. No young woman with a scarf, and no large man with tattoos.”

“This doesn't make any sense,” Adam muttered. “How did they get inside? There's only one way inside that room.”

A knock on the door interrupted the confusion. A middle-aged woman entered the room with a concerned look on her face.

“What is it, Adam?” she asked. “Why did you ask me here?”

“Quiet,” he whispered as he closed the door behind her. “I need your help, Karen.”

“Okay,” she said as she glanced down at the time on her wrist comm. Karen Bowden was the president's deputy counsel, and had worked alongside Adam for many years inside Government House. “So, why are we in this dark room?”

“This room is going to be the new security command centre for the Guard,” One explained. “Well, at least while we're stationed here.” The room lacked the size

of the former centre, but there were few free rooms in the villa that could accommodate the electronics required to observe and monitor the premises. At present, only a sole computer and two monitors had been set up. The remainder of the equipment was still in transit.

“And why am I in here?” Karen asked, impatient.

“Because something's happening, and I don't know who I can trust,” Adam explained.

Karen raised an eyebrow at her colleague. “Well of course you can trust me, Adam! But you'll need to start talking; I have a lot to do today and can't stay long.”

“Two people were sitting in the chamber earlier, back in Government House,” he began, not wasting any more time introducing the problem they faced. “I walked in to speak with the president and they were already there, but there were no names on the manifest, and there's no sign of them entering the building on the surveillance feed.”

“Right,” Karen said, beginning to understand the situation. “Who were they? Have you seen them before?”

“No,” he resumed in a quiet tone. “They wore plain clothes. I think they were ordinary civilians, but the president seemed very flustered when I walked in.”

“Well they couldn't possibly have gotten into that room without authorisation. Did you ask the Guard who they were?”

“Yes, but none of them saw anyone enter or leave the room, except for the president. I went back in there later and the room was empty. The Guard were still in place too, and said that no one else had left except for the president.”

“Okay,” she said, trying to think of a logical explanation. “You could always ask the president himself. He obviously knows who they are.”

“No, he's not here. He left the villa, Karen. The manifest says that he signed out ten minutes and has a dozen of the Guard assigned to escort him, but they're all still here!”

“It's true,” Guard One confirmed. “None of my staff have left the villa or Government House, but the manifest says the president is being escorted.”

Karen let out a large gasp as she placed a hand over her mouth. Her heart began to pound as she realised they may now have a national crisis on their hands. “Quickly, alert all of the Guard now! We need to find him!”

“No,” Adam said, “not yet. That's why only the three of us know. I think there is something bigger happening than we realise.”

“What!” Karen snapped. “Adam, the president of Athenia is missing. We need to report this immediately. It could be an act of aggression against the state or the Union.”

“I think he's fine,” he said, trying to ease her fears, “but he may be under duress. I believe it has something to do with those two individuals from the chamber. And this.” He gestured at their surroundings. “Why would he choose a private villa over Government House? None of it makes any sense.”

Karen nodded, believing that her colleague may be correct. The new president had insisted that the villa on the Athenian coast would offer greater security than Government House due to its inconspicuousness. Only his direct staff and the Guard with the highest clearance had been ordered to accompany him, however, with the vast majority of personnel still working at the usual headquarters, completely unaware that he wasn't even there. Those working in the villa were forbidden from disclosing the information or their location to anyone.

“So what should we do?” she asked, beginning to panic.

“That’s why we need your help. We don’t know how to proceed. He won’t be roaming the streets on his own. We need to find a way to locate him. We’ve been watching footage from Government House to see if we could follow the pair from the chamber.”

“What about his tracker?” Karen asked. “Is it active?”

Adam shook his head. “It hasn’t been implanted yet; not until after he is officially sworn into office.”

Karen opened her mouth, about to suggest the option of locating him via his comm, but remembered that all government communicators were encrypted for security.

An idea suddenly came to Guard One after thinking for a moment. “Let’s search for his limousine,” he suggested. “His limousine’s tracker will be active.”

“Excellent idea!” Adam said. “Let’s hope that he’s taken the vehicle with him.”

One slid his fingers along the touchscreen and typed in several commands. Within seconds, a map of the island projected onto the wall in front of them, showing a bright red dot in Xifeng Qu, located on the western end of the city.

“What’s he doing out there?” Karen asked aloud. “And how could he possibly have gotten there in ten minutes?”

Adam stared at the projection and wondered the same thing himself. In the years that he’d known the new president, Archibald was not one to break protocol. “I’m not sure, but we need to bring him back at once. Arrange for a contingent of the Guard to meet me in the garage,” Adam ordered One. “And don’t share this with anyone.” He walked out of the room.

“I’m coming with you,” Karen said, following closely behind. The sudden news of Archibald’s disappearance had come as a shock to her, and if the president was indeed in any danger, the threat had to be eliminated immediately.

Thirteen

“Juliet will have to take over,” Ren said, walking away from the table with Skye right behind. “We need to start preparing for tonight.”

Roman sat at the table, even more wide-eyed and bewildered than before. “Wait, you want to ... kill the president? Have you lost your mind! You’re no better than the people trying to kill *me!*”

“That’s not true,” Juliet said with a smirk as she walked over and sat opposite Roman. She looked reassuringly into his eyes, trying to convince him that everything will be alright. “I didn’t really believe them at first either.”

Roman began to calm down. He found it easier to trust someone from his generation. “Your accent—you’re Athenian?”

She nodded. “I was born here. My parents emigrated from Lanesia.”

“Mine too.” It brought Roman even more comfort to know that he was in the presence of one of his compatriots. Everyone else he’d met that day were foreigners. “How long have you been here? With them, I mean. In this warehouse.”

“About three months,” she said. “Black Dawn almost killed me too.” She turned her gaze momentarily to Ren, who was busy studying her monitor. “White Shadow came to my rescue.”

"But why do you want to kill the president? I thought you said you were vigilantes."

"Of course. But the president is corrupt and dangerous."

It took Roman a few seconds to react. He raised an eyebrow, wondering if perhaps she'd been brainwashed by these strange people. "You can *not* be serious. You're trying to tell me that the new president is dangerous?"

"Absolutely," Skye called from his office bedroom, overhearing the conversation. He appeared in the doorway. "Archie poses a huge threat to this country. And the world, for that matter. Trust us on this one."

Roman shook his head at the ludicrous accusation. "No. I voted for Archie. His policies are genuine, and I really can't see him being corrupt. He's always smiling on the news, and donating money, and helping people! He promised to make Athenia a safer place for everyone."

Silence filled the room as the others stared at Roman.

"What?" he asked innocently. "What did I say?"

"Roman," Skye said with a slight grin, walking out from the doorway. "I know Archie seems like he has good intentions, but that couldn't be further from the truth. If you knew what other policies he had planned, you'd feel the same way."

"What policies?" Roman frowned and crossed his arms. "Tell me why you don't trust him."

"Later. It's a long story. Oh, and be careful when you watch the news. The media is completely operated by the Athenian government. Archie makes his own news."

Roman buried his head in his hands. For a moment, he was actually starting to believe what these people were saying. But their fear of the new president suddenly dissolved a great deal of their credibility for the young man.

"You're conspiracy theorists," he finally said. "Please don't tell me that you're hiding from the government."

Skye took a deep breath, trying to compose himself. It had been a difficult topic for discussion when they first met Juliet too, especially considering that she, much like Roman, had lived a certain way for her entire life, and was only now being told the truth. Skye knew that they needed to get Roman up to speed quickly.

"We're not hiding from anyone," Skye said. "We were fully supportive of the former government; it's just Archie we don't trust."

"And so you're going to kill him?" Roman fired back. "You're going to stage some sort of coup?" He stood up and began walking to the door. "You people are crazy!"

He tried to open the front door, only to have Skye appear in front of him and block his path. Roman yelped with fright.

"We're not crazy," Skye said in a reasoning tone with his hands held up. "If you had seen what we've seen, then you'd know that we're fighting for the right reasons."

"I... I'm not killing anyone!" Roman stammered, stepping backwards. "I just want to go home."

"No," Ren called from the other side of the room without looking up, dismissing the idea at once. Her gaze was still fixed on her large computer monitors.

"If you go outside, you'll be killed," Skye said flatly. He tried to deliver a more compassionate dialogue, but there was much work that needed to be done, and Roman was adapting to the situation at a typically slow pace. "Black Dawn will be

looking for you. The only chance you have to survive is to stay with myself or Ren. You were almost killed before, but there's only one reason why he let you live ...”

“Because you people saved me?” Roman groaned. He looked across at Juliet, whose smile had disappeared.

“Far from it,” Skye said. “We don't stand a chance against him. He let you live for ...” he paused as he tried to find an appropriate explanation, “his own enjoyment. I suppose you could say that he likes to play games with us.” He turned around and walked back into his room, preparing himself for the battle ahead.

Roman raised an eyebrow at the dramatic statement. “What do you mean he let me live? You were there. You stopped him!”

“He knew we were there the entire time,” Skye called from his room. “Believe me, if he really wanted you dead, you'd be killed instantly. He would've sent Tahlia into the restaurant; not Night. He knew that we'd intervene. He's hunting you slowly.”

“Skye's right,” Ren called. “Nikolai is a man who thinks himself a god. He despises the idea of living a wasted life, so he'll spend his eternity playing this endless game with us.”

Roman's face once again became contorted with confusion. “What do you mean his 'eternity'?”

“Oh, they didn't tell you?” Juliet gasped.

“Tell me what!” he shouted, his impatience boiling over. He returned to his chair and slumped into it. “No one's told me anything! I don't understand any of this.”

Ren walked back over to the table, unconvinced by Skye and Juliet's method of bringing the newcomer up to speed. She crouched next to Roman so that she could look him in the eye. “Those who have evolved have cells that can regenerate at a very rapid rate. It allows us to heal quicker than usual. It also means that we don't age.”

“So ...” Roman paused, speculative of the absurd suggestion, “you're saying you can live forever?”

She nodded. “Pending that nothing else kills us, yes.”

“What do you mean? If you're immortal, how can you die?” Roman was once again vexed by the information.

“We're still human,” she said. “Although we resist old age and illness, we're still vulnerable to any other form of death. A sliced artery or gunshot wound is more than enough to kill us. We're far from immortal.”

“You expect me to believe,” he began in a low, cynical tone, “that I can live forever?”

“Maybe it's time for a break,” Ren suggested, changing the topic. “Why don't you lie down? You've had a very interesting morning.”

“I have to go back to work,” he muttered. Tango laughed sarcastically in the distance as he heard the remark.

“Not today,” Skye said, beginning to grow impatient himself. He knew that it was hard for Roman, but he didn't have the time or energy to offer him a proper induction. He beckoned the young man to a spare office bedroom. “Just lie down. We'll talk again soon.”

Roman reluctantly obeyed, but his head felt as though it would explode at any moment. He knew that his surroundings were real, as were the dangerous events that had just unfolded, but every part of his mind tried to convince him that it was all a dream.

“I don't understand,” he whispered as he dawdled into the room and lay on the

bed.

"He's not taking it very well," Skye said as he emerged from the room.

"Of course he's not," Ren said, disinterested. "Come and look at this."

Skye paced across to her desk and looked at where her finger was placed on one of the monitors. He ran his eyes up and down the large screen, scanning the information. He recognised the Athenian emblem in the corner of the screen, but the remainder of the words and icons were unfamiliar to him. "What is it? What am I looking at?"

She turned and looked up at him. "You're in luck; your arrest warrant has been removed."

His muscles instantly relaxed as he heard the news. "Excellent!" he remarked, placing his hand on Ren's shoulder. The decision to brandish his weapon in public was questionable, but his actions had saved Roman's life, and the warrant had now been removed from the police system. "Good work."

"I didn't do it," Ren admitted, shaking her head. "It only happened a minute ago."

Skye's smile slowly faded as the words sank in. "So how was it removed then? Who would've done it?"

"I'm not sure. But only a handful of people in the country would have the authority to do it."

Skye frowned and stroked his beard, attempting to understand why anyone would retract the warrant. The Athenian surveillance system had captured him committing a serious offence, and had subsequently issued an automatic order to all authorities to arrest him. "It couldn't have been Archie, could it? He knows we want him dead, so why would he help us out?"

"Don't worry about it for now," Ren suggested. "You should keep preparing yourself for tonight. I'll let you know if I find anything else."

As Skye turned to leave, he caught a glimpse of Sierra walking straight toward him. "Let's train," she muttered.

Skye grimaced at the thought of training with her again so soon. "No, thank you."

"I shot Tahlia earlier and missed," she whispered back. "We need to train."

"You hit her in the arm and saved us. You didn't miss."

"I was aiming for her head."

"He doesn't have time right now," Ren dismissed. "Leave him alone, Sierra. Go and train by yourself."

Sierra looked back and forth between Ren and Skye, annoyed that her request had been denied. She turned around and vanished through the back door.

"Thanks," Skye said.

Ren shot him a sly grin. "I can't have you getting killed before tonight, can I?"

Fourteen

"I'm so excited," Nikolai exclaimed. "I've been waiting for this moment for a long time." He gazed upon the beautiful city below from the eightieth-floor penthouse of West Tower in Xifeng Qu. It was the tallest residential building in Athenia, and stood opposite the country's economic centrepiece, East Tower, located on the other

end of the city in Shangwu. The sun was now at its zenith, blanketing the island in a bright glow. The tall skyscrapers reflected the colourful blue sky. "But on the other hand," he continued, "it has only been a year or so. *Your* wait has been far more enduring."

In the room with him was the elderly president-to-be, along with Sabina and Aurelius. Using her ability, Tahlia had transported the trio to and from Government House in secrecy.

"Although," Nikolai said, "your involvement began last year, but I've wanted to run this country for some time. From the moment I first moved to Athenia, I knew that I never wanted to leave. It's far more hospitable than the vile, corrupt wasteland that is Alexa."

Sabina and Aurelius turned their heads to Nikolai, both gawking at him with blank expressions.

"Don't look at me like that," Nikolai defended. "I'm not going to deny the atrocities that our homeland has committed. No nation should claim rule over another sovereign state the way they do."

"You're referring to the war?" Sabina asked.

Nikolai frowned. "Of course I am. It sickens me. Don't think that I truly despise Alexa—I'll always have fond memories of living there—but I'm glad to be done with that country."

"Well, it's still my home," she said. "You shouldn't talk about it that way."

"Quite frankly, I don't care," Nikolai groaned. "Alexa was my home too, but its citizens were betrayed by their government. Surely someone such as yourself with an evolved mind can agree that the country has gone too far."

"No, I agree with the war."

Nikolai chuckled softly to himself. "Too many Alexans do. It's not a healthy attitude to adopt, and it's half the reason why I defected." He turned his gaze back to the city outside. "I'll never understand why they do it. Their desire for power was a catastrophic step in the wrong direction, and it will be their downfall."

Archie looked to the floor. He couldn't help but feel that Nikolai too had an unquenchable thirst for power, although it was certainly incomparable to the war happening a world away. Nevertheless, he wisely kept his thoughts to himself.

"And what of yourself, Your Excellency," Nikolai said, spinning around and facing Archie. "What's your opinion of the war between Alexa and Kaipura?"

Archie swallowed hard, despite the fact that Nikolai already knew his stance. "I'm opposed to it, like the other member states in the Union."

"That is the correct answer. The war is pointless; I won't stand for it. And I certainly look forward to your first global summit as president, as it will give you the perfect opportunity to voice your opinion."

"Absolutely. Although, the Union has condemned the war since it began, so I doubt my opinion will have much impact."

"I agree. The Alexans are too stubborn to listen to anyone else. Anyway, let us not discuss what's happening in the Federation any longer," Nikolai said, quickly changing his tone. He walked over to the elderly Archie and stood over him. "To our success," he said, raising up a glass of whiskey and tapping it against the old man's. "I rarely drink the substance as I believe it lacks the fraternal culture that is inherent of that of an ale, but I can't help but feel the need to celebrate my victory. So why wait?"

They both took a large gulp from their glasses and let the strong spirit course

through their veins. Sabina resumed sitting idly, as did Aurelius. The pair barely even paid attention to their surroundings.

"I guess it's true then," Nikolai continued, pacing around the room. "One man can make a difference. Many years ago, I never would have thought I could run this country. I never would have suspected that I could accomplish the things I've done to this day." He turned around and faced the nation's new leader. "The only thing in life that can stop us is self-doubt."

"Agreed," Archie said, feigning interest in the conversation.

"A year, Archibald. A year of planning has gone into this," Nikolai said again. "I just can't believe it's here!" He started laughing with jubilation. He raised the glass and swallowed the remainder of his drink, then walked back over to the old man. "It has also been a year since those riots, and not a day has passed that I didn't wish something could have been done. The lesson here is that there's *always* something that can be done. And now that it is here, I don't know how to react."

"Well I think it might be best if I stay in my office in the villa," Archibald suggested. "I know you like to have me somewhere where you can guard me, but my staff will sound the alarm if I'm missing."

"Then tell your staff to leave you be," Nikolai retorted, his mood suddenly changing. "I didn't waste all of this money for some imbecile to suspect foul play and then cause a panic!"

Archibald cringed at his superior's sudden change of mood and shifted nervously in his chair. "Well, can you at least let me have some privacy?" He motioned to Sabina and Aurelius, who sat on either side of him. They'd hardly left him since he won the election.

"Privacy?" Nikolai repeated, then started laughing, his mood happy again. "You want privacy? My friend, I don't think you've fully grasped the role you're about to play in the world. You're about to be the headline of every media outlet around the globe."

Nikolai stood rigid, his mood changing yet again, a frustrated expression forming on his eyeless face. "Besides," he said, suddenly running over and wrapping his powerful hand against the old man's throat. He lifted him up with one arm and pressed him hard against the ceiling above. "You had plenty of privacy while you were hiding in the shadows like a coward." He dropped Archibald, who crashed to the ground with a sickening crack. The old man screamed in agony as his weak body recoiled from the impact. "Don't think that I'll ever forget what you did to this country," Nikolai muttered over the man's screams. "You deserve worse than death."

He glanced down and watched Archibald twitch with anguish. The leader groaned. "Tahlia!" Nikolai called.

A moment later, Tahlia walked into the room, her face one of agitation.

"What is it? What's the matter?" he asked curiously.

The woman held up her arm, showing the scar where Sierra's bolt pierced through it. "Look how close she was!" she moaned. "I was almost killed!"

"How tragic," Nikolai moaned unsympathetically. "Please tend to the president's wounds," he ordered.

Tahlia walked over to the wailing man and knelt beside him. She held her hands over his torso and began to heal his broken bones from the outside. Half a minute later the pain subsided, and the screaming stopped. Her ability to heal others was a unique one, making her role in Black Dawn all the more important.

"There," Nikolai said, "now you're all healed." He picked the president up like

an infant and placed him back in his chair. “I understand you may be a little daunted working for me, Mr Denning, but do keep in mind that *you’re* the villain here; not I.”

Archibald looked up into the gaping holes in Nikolai’s face and nodded, not wanting to further anger the powerful being.

“Bittersweet, isn’t it?” Nikolai asked. “The price of power. If you want to run this country, then you’ll need to accept that you may just be subjected to the occasional torture session. It’s either that or you can atone now for what you’ve done.”

Archibald nodded again. He was beyond terrified for his well-being but knew in every cell of his body that he deserved nothing less than torture. It is because of the atrocities he had committed the year before that he was forced into hiding. Fortunately for the elderly man, only those involved with Black Dawn, White Shadow, and the Tianzu were aware of his treasonous history.

Changing the country for the better was the only thing he could think of to make up for the evils he had done. He knew that he’d make an excellent leader, but Nikolai’s involvement would ensure that he would never be able to have a positive impact on Athenia. With each and every day, he regretted ever agreeing to work with Nikolai.

“Now,” Nikolai said, “I believe it’s time to get you back into hiding.” He smiled, pleased with himself for heeding the president’s request. “You see? I’m not totally inconsiderate, even if the petition does come from someone as worthless as yourself.”

Fifteen

“I don’t like it. She insists on killing Archie and that’s all she seems to care about,” Tango complained into the hidden microphone. While many wealthy civilians had elected to have their headsets embedded into their skin, the accepted norm was still to place the device in one’s ear.

“I know,” the voice on the other side responded, *“but keep in mind how much stress she’s under. Archie did a lot of damage, and she’s only acting in the best interest of the nation.”*

“But what about us, Charlie?” Tango protested. “We’re sitting here doing nothing while the Tianzu are out there. I don’t want Foxtrot to have died for nothing!”

“Neither do we. That’s why we’re doing everything we can to try and find them.” Charlie was one of the more polite and mature members of White Shadow, always trying to look out for the best interests of everyone in the team and keep the peace.

“Have you found anything yet? It’s been three months!”

Charlie laughed in agreement. *“Believe me, we know. We’re trying to stay positive, but they’re incredibly hard to find.”*

“So you’ve found nothing?” Tango prompted.

There was an audible pause before Charlie answered. *“No. Nothing.”*

“Well maybe you two should consider coming back to Athenia and helping Echo and myself.”

“No, we can’t,” he dismissed, his voice solemn, *“not until we’ve avenged Foxtrot’s death.”*

“Then you might be interested in what I have to tell you—Nikolai found

another elite. He was in a restaurant. Black Dawn attacked, but we saved him just in time.”

Charlie was surprised by the news. It had been a very quiet three months, and now Black Dawn had suddenly shown up and attacked. *“Was anyone hurt?”*

“No, but the young man we saved is in quite a state of shock. Skye is taking care of him.”

Charlie sniggered quietly, knowing how difficult the process is for a newcomer to grasp. *“Well, take care of him, okay? We’ll meet him once we’re finished here.”*

Tango took a dramatic pause. “Charlie ... there's more. There was someone else in the city today. We think he might be another Tianzu.” He heard Charlie gasp on the other end.

“Are you certain?” Charlie finally asked.

“Absolutely. We think it might be the man Delta sensed before you two left.”

There was a period of muttering as Charlie relayed the information to Delta, who was most likely by his side.

“What's he saying?” Echo asked, who was sitting patiently on the grass. They were out the back, away from Ren and the others' prying ears. Tango held his hand up to indicate that he'd explain in a moment.

“What did he do?” Charlie asked, returning to the conversation. *“Did he attack you?”*

“No, he just stood on one of the buildings in the city and watched us. He didn't attempt anything.”

“Okay. Well, you all need to be careful. We can't trust any of them after what happened to Foxtrot.”

“Agreed,” Tango said. “We're not sure if he's working with Black Dawn or not.”

“Anything is possible. Nikolai has recruited three of them so far, and he can be quite persuasive. If you see anything else, call us immediately.”

Tango sighed. “Charlie, I really think you should both come back. Things are getting a little heated here. It just seems very coincidental that more of the Tianzu are arriving so close to the inauguration. And clearly you're not having any success there. We could use the help.”

“I can't,” he admitted, gritting his teeth on the other line. *“The boy is here somewhere. Delta can feel it. We think he keeps travelling back and forth between Nishihama and Azuma-jo, but he's somewhere nearby at the moment. We can't risk losing him again.”*

Tango let out an exasperated moan. He was torn between wanting his friends to assist them and having them exact revenge for their fallen comrade. “Fine,” he relented. “But please come back as soon as you can. The morale here is getting low.” He waved his hand in front of his wrist comm, terminating the call.

“They're not coming back?” Echo asked, assuming the obvious.

Tango shook his head as he sat opposite his companion. “They're wasting their time. He said Delta can sense that the boy is nearby, but she's not a skilled tracker. They should be here, helping us.” He lay back and rested his head on the soft grass. The shade of the tree did little to ward off the summer heat.

“If Charlie thinks that it's best for them to stay, then I'm fine with that.”

Tango groaned with disagreement. “Echo, I trust Charlie with my life, but he's acting a little foolishly. They've been there for three months and found nothing. How much longer are they going to stay there? We don't even know how many Tianzu there are.”

Echo stared down at the grass and sat thoughtfully. He now began to question Charlie's decision himself. "Whatever happens, I just want them both to stay safe. Foxtrot's death was one too many."

"As do I. And I want that boy to suffer tremendously for what he did. But there are now four Tianzu in Athenia. I can't help but wonder if it's best to focus our efforts here." He stared up at the beautiful sky above, his thoughts and feelings contradicting one another. "But then again, I do want that boy to die."

A soft breeze brushed past his hair as Sierra appeared out of nowhere, looming over him. "You want that boy to die, and I want Tahlia to die."

Tango grunted and rolled over. He was not in the mood to justify how he felt to the cold woman. "Please leave."

"We all want someone dead: I want Tahlia dead, you want that Tianzu boy dead, Ren wants the president dead, and Nikolai wants you all dead."

Echo rolled his eyes. "What's your point, Sierra?"

"My point is that you should stop complaining and start training. Help me find Tahlia. If we find her, we'll find the other three Tianzu."

Tango let out a sarcastic laugh. "First you say that you don't want anyone to kill Tahlia but yourself, and now you're asking us to help you kill her?"

"No," she dismissed. "Help me *find* her. I'll be the one to kill her."

Tango exchanged glances with Echo, before holding up his hand to reject the ludicrous proposal.

She stood impatiently, waiting for the conversation to continue. When no more words were exchanged, she turned around and made her way back into the woods.

"I do wish she wasn't here," Tango remarked, not taking any precautions to hide his aversion toward Sierra. "She's only complicating matters further."

"Maybe we should consider helping her," Echo suggested. "Charlie and Delta haven't found the boy after three months of searching. Sierra might be a useful ally."

Tango shot him a dark glance for even considering the offer. "Do you really believe she'll help us if we help her? The moment she kills Tahlia, she'll flee the country and never be seen again." He rolled onto his back, basking in the shade of the tree once again. "Either that or she'll kill us all in our sleep."

Sixteen

Three oversized black vans pulled to the side of the busy road outside the luxurious West Tower, a renowned landmark in the city-state. None of the civilians took any notice of the vehicles until they saw countless armoured men and women climb out, each holding a large automatic weapon. The Athenian emblem was clearly evident on the back of their chest armour and helmets, rousing the curiosity of the passersby.

The battalion walked swiftly in formation into the parking area on the ground level of the tower. They immediately broke into three different units and fanned out, each one searching for the president's limousine. At the rear of the middle unit were Adam and Karen, both of them fully armoured and each holding one of the large guns.

"Hold true," Guard Two ordered quietly, the sound of her voice emitting through a small speaker in each helmet. The Guard followed their leader with haste. With Guard One spending most of his time in the security command centre

overseeing the president's safety, Two was the leader during most field operations.

Adam turned around to see that a small crowd of curious spectators was beginning to form at the entrance, eager to catch a glimpse of what was happening in their city. A couple of the Guard held their positions at the entrance, informing the public that they need to remove themselves from the area immediately.

The soldiers silently stormed through the cavernous facility, passing dozens of parked cars. Adam's heart started to pound as he began to brace himself for what they may find. He hadn't served Archibald for long, but the counsel was loyal to both his country and his leader. If anything was to happen to the president, Adam himself may be subject to prosecution for failing at his duties.

"I've discovered the limousine," Guard Two said seconds later, spotting a conspicuous black vehicle toward the end of the lot. "And a bogey, unarmed," she whispered, informing the rest of her group that a potential threat had been sighted. Adam looked straight ahead to see a man wearing a tuxedo standing beside the limousine. He casually leaned on his cane to one side.

The unit converged on the man in the blink of an eye. He wasn't wearing the mandatory government pass around his neck, indicating that he wasn't a member of staff.

"Good afternoon," Night said in a polite manner to the unexpected guests.

Guard Two fired a dart at him, hitting Night in the chest at point-blank range. He didn't flinch as the tiny piece of metal pierced his flesh.

"I mean you no harm," he said with a sadistic grin on his face. He sported the unhealed wound from Skye's sword on his cheek.

The armed woman stepped closer and rammed the butt of her submachine gun into his knee with a sickening crack, causing him to fall to the ground in a heap. His top hat rolled away from his head. The remaining two units of the Guard caught up and surrounded the black vehicle.

"It's empty," one of them observed.

"Two," another guard said to his leader, "the dart is having no effect on him."

"Acknowledged." She turned her attention to the odd man lying on the floor. "Where is the president?" she asked in a low, but serious tone.

"I'm uncertain," Night lied, his voice muffled by the ground.

One of the guards let out a soft groan as the smell of rotting flesh hit his nose. He did his best to compose himself and maintain his uncompromising demeanour.

"Tell us where he is," Two ordered, "or you'll be arrested and tried for acts of aggression against the Union."

Night let out a quiet, manic giggle. "I can't be tried for anything."

Adam approached him. "Where's Archibald Denning?" he asked, sounding not quite as formidable as Guard Two.

Night's neck cracked as he twisted unnaturally to look up at his captors. "Eightieth floor," he admitted with a smirk. "Penthouse suite number one."

"You four," Two said, pointing to a small group of her soldiers, "stay here with him. Everyone else, follow me."

They turned and stormed back across the lot, and strode through the large side entrance to the lobby. Confused workers and patrons saw the group enter and watched them with surprise. The battalion moved swiftly as they filed into the reception area. Two men approached the counter and spoke quietly to the concierge, who nodded and handed them a keycard a moment later. They joined the remainder by the lift.

"Two groups," the leader instructed. "Half with me; half will ascend in the next lift. My group will enter the suite immediately. The second group will provide cover if needed." All members of the Guard stood poised, not needing to acknowledge the command verbally.

The silver doors opened and the first group narrowly managed to squeeze inside. A soldier waved the keycard in front of the glowing panel and pressed the button for the fortieth floor, the highest floor available in the lift.

Adam's heart began to pound even harder as they ascended. It had been some time since he'd been involved in any form of combat. He took a deep breath to calm his nerves and shifted his focus to finding their missing new leader. The lift rose silently, stopping at the fortieth floor seconds later.

The infantry climbed out and crossed the hall to the lift opposite. The sensor above registered the group's presence, and the doors opened as soon as the lift was ready. They stepped inside and waved the keycard again, this time pressing the button for the eightieth floor. None of them uttered a word. The Guard were trained to remain composed and suppress emotions, letting logic dictate instead.

The lift opened, and the group filed outwards onto the eightieth floor. In front of them was a large set of double doors with the numbers '8001' inscribed in a golden plaque above.

"The door is open," Adam whispered, beginning to expect the worst.

Two led the way, holding her weapon high. She cautiously entered the suite with her fellow soldiers. They filed into the large room and immediately took in their surroundings. They stopped when they saw a lone man sitting in front of them.

"Where's the president?" Two demanded, aiming her weapon with precision. The others did the same.

Nikolai sat comfortably in his chair, with one leg resting on the other. His hands were clasped against one another, and a broad smile was spread across his face. Karen's jaw dropped when she realised that the man had no eyes.

"Now this is what I love to see," he said. "Who is the commanding officer here?"

Two fired a dart straight at Nikolai, who tilted his head to the side before it even left her rifle. Adam let out a quiet gasp as he watched the eyeless man move as fast as lightning. The dart flew into the thick glass window behind him and fell to the floor.

"Tell us where the president is or you'll be charged with acts of aggression against the Union," Two's voice boomed.

"Allow me to ask again," Nikolai said, ignoring her. His pleasant mood was not diminished by the projectile being fired at him. "Who is in charge here?"

"I am," Adam admitted warily, stepping forward. "Where's the president?"

"It's alright," Archibald responded, emerging from one of the many rooms in the suite. Several guards ran over to him and inspected his well-being.

Tahlia walked out after him and shot Nikolai a concerned glance. Unbeknownst to the Guard, the president wasn't housed in the suite until only seconds ago. As soon as she heard the group charge inside, she immediately transported herself to Archie's bunker and retrieved him. Nikolai looked back at her, not sharing the same concern.

"He's unharmed," one of the Guard observed after inspecting the elderly man up and down.

"Of course I'm unharmed!" the president scoffed, as though the notion of him

coming to harm was ridiculous.

"Sir, what are you doing here?" Adam asked, not hiding his frustration.

"You shouldn't talk to him like that," Nikolai said, standing up and walking toward the significantly shorter Adam. "After all, he is your president. Or at least he will be soon enough. What is your name?"

"I'm Adam Price, chief counsel to the president of Athenia," he asserted with defiance. His gun, as well as the other soldiers', were all still trained on the towering eyeless man.

"Chief counsel?" Nikolai repeated, sounding a little confused. "I think perhaps you may have been misinformed, boy. Did His Excellency not tell you that I am his chief counsel?"

"Sir," Two said, turning her attention to the president, "is this man holding you captive against your will? Are we to place him under arrest?"

"No!" Archibald shouted. "He is not. I order you all to lower your weapons at once!" He did his best to diffuse the tension as quickly as possible. While he was pleased that his loyal contingent had come to his rescue, he knew that Nikolai would not think twice about having them all killed.

The Guard lowered their guns instinctively and stood down. Adam and Karen still held theirs high.

"Sir," she said, "what's happening here? Who is this man?"

"Like he said, Ms Bowden," Archibald took a step forward, "he's my chief counsel. I was going to make the announcement today."

Adam's face fell, astonished by what he had just heard. "Sir? Who is he?" he asked, unconvinced that the president was there on his own accord.

"Dr Nicholas Sweeney," Nikolai's voice boomed. "And I would appreciate it if you lowered your weapons in my home."

Adam gritted his teeth, but reluctantly obeyed, lowering the large gun. Karen did the same.

The second contingent of the Guard walked into the room and surveyed the scene before them. As soon as they saw that Guard Two had her weapon lowered, they followed suit.

Nikolai took a step closer to Adam and towered over him. "You've been demoted, I'm afraid. I'm not too familiar with the hierarchy of Government House, but I'm sure we can find a job for you somewhere. Perhaps you can tend to the gardens of my villa." A comical look appeared on Nikolai's face.

"Sir," Adam whispered, rushing over to Archibald, "you're promoting this man to chief counsel? He just said he doesn't even know the hierarchy!" he protested, infuriated by the ludicrous events that were unfolding in front of him.

The president sighed. "Adam, please don't make this any harder than it is."

"I do congratulate you on a job well done at finding him," Nikolai admitted. "The Guard truly does live up to their reputation."

Adam turned his attention back to his leader. "Excellent weather, isn't it, sir?" he asked for the second time today, not convinced in the slightest that Archibald had authorised the change of rank. He shuddered as Nikolai appeared behind him and placed a large hand on his shoulder.

"That will be all today, Mr Price," Nikolai said. "Take your soldiers back to the villa. I'll personally escort Archibald across when our business here is finished."

Adam was far from impressed by the order given by his supposed new boss. "Sir," he objected, talking to the president, "I'll leave some of the Guard here for your

protection.”

Karen began to quiver with fear at the growing hostility in the room. She felt just as shocked as Adam to burst into the room and find their president quarantined under such suspicious circumstances. Yet until their leader cooperated with them, they were powerless to intervene.

“Oh, that won't be necessary,” Nikolai stated cheerfully. “We have our own army here.” He motioned his head to the other side of the penthouse.

Adam turned around. His jaw dropped when he saw Sabina and Aurelius emerge from behind a corner, staring ominously at him. Having already known that something was awry, Adam's suspicions were finally confirmed as soon as he laid eyes on the menacing duo from the president's chambers.

“Guards!” he screamed. “Place them *all* under arrest!”

The room became silent as the Guard stood upright with their weapons by their side. Not one of them made any attempt to seize the hostiles. Rage filled Adam's face as he realised they would only take orders from the president, the chief counsel, or the supervising guard. Adam's reign had been terminated in mere seconds.

“Guards,” Nikolai declared, “return to my villa, and take Mr Price with you.”

They surrounded Adam in a cautious manner and led him out of the room. They were trained to only follow orders; never to question them.

Adam was astonished. He turned around a final time and tried to protest, but knew there was nothing that could be done. The president gave him a weak smile as he was escorted from the room.

Karen stared at Archibald incredulously, not certain of what to make of the situation. She looked up at Nikolai, who pointed to the door, signalling for her to take her leave.

Seventeen

“So what's the plan?” Tango asked, only half interested.

“According to the itinerary,” Ren began, “the president is attending a meeting at East Tower at 8:00, and the Presidential Guard will be stationed there too.” All of White Shadow knew that she was an expert hacker, and no one ever questioned how she managed to retrieve the information, despite how heavily encrypted or inaccessible it was.

“Which floor will he be on?”

“I'm not sure. The itinerary didn't say.”

Tango rolled his eyes. “And how many of the Guard will be there?”

Ren narrowed her eyes at him and his incessant questions. “I didn't see. The itinerary was only open for a moment before the system locked me out.”

Tango leaned forward in his chair and stared at his leader. “So all you know is that the president has a meeting at the tower tonight, but you don't know which floor or how many guards he'll have?”

“That's enough,” Skye said, holding a hand up. “This is the best information we have. I want the president dead tonight.”

“East Tower is quite sophisticated,” Tango said, staring at the others around the table. “How are we going to break in there without being seen? Last time we

went there it was during business hours.”

“That’s exactly what we’re trying to figure out,” Ren said. “So let’s put our heads together and think of a plan.”

“You’re the genius. Why don’t you think of one?” Tango suggested, his feet resting on the table. Tensions in the group had been high since Foxtrot was killed three months earlier. Tango and Echo continuously insisted that White Shadow concentrate their efforts on finding the Tianzu, but Ren had repeatedly told them that nullifying the threat Archie posed was their main priority.

“Tango,” Skye sighed, “are we really going to do this again? Let’s keep the arguing to once a day, please.” He turned his attention back to Ren and the topic at hand. “East Tower is an office building. It should be vacant by then.”

“Correct,” Ren agreed. “According to its security system, all workers must be checked out by 6:30, and the entrance is then automatically armed at 7:00.”

“Well I assume the system won’t be armed if Archie and the Guard are going to be inside,” Skye thought aloud.

“Most likely. But I’ll monitor it from here anyway. If the entrance does arm itself, I’ll do my best to shut it down. The same goes for the cameras.”

“Should I come?” asked Juliet, sounding both frightened and excited by the adventurous prospect.

Skye and Ren exchanged glances, searching the other’s eyes for their opinion. Juliet was usually restricted to the warehouse with either of the two assumed leaders. They both knew she was a potential threat for Nikolai, and therefore a target, but she’d be safe with either of them. Although neither stood a chance of defending themselves against Nikolai, they knew he’d never order an attempt on the girl’s life in front of them out of respect for his former comrade and his former love.

“That depends on whether Black Dawn will be there or not,” Skye said. “I don’t imagine they would be, as Nikolai would have no knowledge of what’s taking place tonight. Of course, knowing him, I wouldn’t be surprised if he decided to follow us.”

“Doubtful. That’d be too easy for him,” Ren said. “He likes a challenge. Stalking you is not exactly in accordance with his ‘beliefs’.” She turned to Juliet. “That being said, if Black Dawn are there we could benefit greatly from your telepathy, but it would also mean putting you directly in harm’s way.”

“I’m in danger either way,” she protested. “I would really like to come.”

“Let her come. She’s probably sick of living in this prison, like the rest of us,” suggested Tango, not necessarily caring for her well-being. He was usually a polite and caring man, but the recent events had scarred him deeply.

“I agree,” Echo chimed in. “She’ll never truly develop her ability if she doesn’t leave the base.”

Ren took a deep breath in an attempt to compose herself. “I agree, but she’s not yet ready for combat. Her abilities are only a few months old. She needs to learn to defend herself at the very least.”

“She’s right,” Skye said, turning to Juliet. “Sorry, but it’s for the best. Leave it to us four.”

“Three—I’m not going,” Sierra muttered.

Ren slammed her fist on the table, restraining herself at the last minute to not smash it to pieces. “What do you mean you’re not going!” she roared.

“I’ll only go if Tahlia will be there,” was the simple response.

Skye shook his head. Catering for everyone’s conflicting demands was

impossible, the stress almost too much to bear. Nevertheless, he took an impartial stance and tried to look at the situation logically before the meeting became any more tense than it already was. “Ren, what are the chances of Black Dawn being there?” he asked, trusting the judgement of the smartest and wisest person in the room, although already knowing the answer himself.

“Not likely,” Ren replied through gritted teeth, glaring at Sierra and her eleventh-hour protest. “Sierra, you promised to help us when you joined White Shadow.”

“I agreed to join you, but I never once promised to help,” Sierra corrected. “I’ll only go tonight if Tahlia will be there. I’m not killing your president.”

“And we will *help* you find Tahlia once the president is dead!”

Stress and silence filled the room. Everyone stared at each other, uncertain how to proceed amicably. Each of them wanted to pursue their own endeavours.

“Let’s face it—White Shadow is dead,” Tango said flatly. “We’re outnumbered by both Black Dawn and the Tianzu. Sitting here debating how to kill the president is not going to get us any closer to stopping either of them.”

“Tango!” Ren screamed, forgetting that Roman was asleep in the dormitory. “I can’t believe what I’m hearing! You saw what Archie did to this country!” Angry tears began to well in her eyes. “Have you forgotten everything that we stand for?”

“Have *you*?” he retorted. “You’re obsessed with finding this president. Stopping him will do nothing. We need to avenge Foxtrot’s death!”

“We’re not avenging anything at the moment,” Skye uttered, trying to keep his own temper at bay.

Tango scoffed. “We’re not avenging anything, you say? What about all those who were killed in the riots? By killing the president, you’re avenging their deaths.”

“That’s because their deaths are more important!” Skye finally snapped. “Foxtrot was my friend too, Tango, but we need to prioritise. Once the president is dead, we can start looking for the Tianzu.” Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Sierra opening her mouth. “*And Tahlia*,” he hissed, knowing exactly what she was going to complain about.

Juliet gasped, interrupting the heated debate. Her eyes widened. She tilted her head upward and stared at the catwalk above.

“What has become of my former team?” a deep voice asked. A tall figure stepped out of the shadows and began to descend the stairs.

Everyone stared at Nikolai in disbelief. Sierra looked left and right, hoping that Tahlia had come with him.

“Tango,” he said, “I do hope you’re not causing any grief for Ren.”

He walked over to White Shadow and sat at a vacant chair between Ren and Juliet. His unorthodox visits were rare, but also relatively harmless, usually only consisting of taunting or pointless topics for conversation. He was never a welcome visitor, but everyone in the room was aware that there was nothing that could be said, nor done, to coerce the powerful man to leave.

“Skye, my friend,” he continued, “it’s good to see you again. It’s been far too long,” he said, despite seeing him only hours earlier. “I congratulate you on evading the afternoon news, what with that gruesome attempt on Night’s life. And Ren,” he turned to his former partner, “you are always a sight for sore eyes.”

Juliet let out a sickened groan at the very mention of what were once his eyes. He turned his attention to the young girl.

“Jacinta, I see that you’ve developed your power significantly since our last

encounter. This time only mere seconds had elapsed before you detected my presence.”

She stared at the foreboding figure, not forgetting that he had ordered her execution a few months earlier. To this day, she often wondered whether it was luck or fate that White Shadow had rescued her just in time.

“To what do we owe the pleasure?” Ren asked sarcastically, not impressed by his spontaneous arrival.

“Odd times, my love, odd times. Archibald is on the verge of being sworn into office as president of Athenia, and we can't have that now, can we? So I came to check in with you all, to see where we stand. Now, what are we discussing?” Nikolai asked enthusiastically.

Ren and Skye groaned at the same time. They were always very reluctant to share any information with him. While there were benefits in teaming up with Black Dawn to face a common enemy, Nikolai was far too sporadic and peculiar to be trusted. He could just as easily turn on them and vanquish the entire group. Black Dawn now had eight members, whereas White Shadow only had five, excluding Charlie and Delta, as well as Juliet and Roman.

When no one spoke, Nikolai continued. “I assume you saw that man in the city earlier. He's one of the Tianzu, no doubt.”

“We did,” Skye said. “Is he working with you?”

Nikolai frowned. “No, not at all. Don't be daft. It's hard enough having three of them stay with me in my—” He stopped, realising how close he was to confessing that he lived in a villa. He'd gone to great lengths to keep it hidden from White Shadow.

“Well who is he then?” Skye pressed. “Do you have any information on him?”

“Regrettably, no. I haven't felt his presence since the day Foxtrot was killed.”

Skye's face fell. “So it is him. He's the one that Delta felt before she left.”

“Yes, the man was here that day, and the other Tianzu met up with him. Whether or not they work with him, or for him, I'm uncertain.” Nikolai glanced down at his comm. “Speaking of which, I haven't seen my Tianzu recruits all day. I'm assuming they're off meeting with him right now, no doubt to share what little information they have on me.”

“This is bad, Nikolai,” Skye said, not appreciating the smug look on his adversary's face. “You should be taking this more seriously. If more of the Tianzu are here, they might be preparing for another attack.”

Nikolai shrugged. “Probably.”

“Where's Tahlia?” Sierra asked in an aggravated tone.

“She's off sulking over that wound you gave her. She healed herself, but she's feeling a little dishevelled over how close you came to ending her life. Of course, if you ask me, an expert tracker such as herself had clearly let her guard down.” The sinister man smiled at the small warrior. “If I may give you a suggestion,” he stated politely, “your crossbow is not very effective from such a long range. Perhaps keep that in mind the next time she's in your sights.”

Everyone else at the table stared at Nikolai, wishing he would leave.

“Now, what are we fighting about?” he asked again. Before anyone could think of an answer to give him, the man had disappeared. Seconds later, his voice was heard from the other side of the room. “East Tower?” He was standing in front of Ren's computer. She cursed quietly when she realised that she had left a map of the building displayed on the large monitor. “What's happening at East Tower?” he asked

curiously, reappearing at the table.

"We think the president might be stationed there tonight," Ren admitted. Nikolai had improved his ability to read digital displays, she thought to herself.

"I see, I see. And you're all going, I assume? You'll put a stop to his campaign?" he asked excitedly.

"That's right," Skye answered, disappointed that Black Dawn was now privy to the secret.

"No," Tango said, "I'm not going. And neither is Sierra. So it's just Skye and Echo."

"I'm not going either," Echo declared. He was quieter and often more friendly than Tango, but was also hurt deeply by the loss of his teammate and, while he agreed that Archibald was an enemy, his personal vendetta against him was not as extensive as his hatred for the Tianzu.

Nikolai let out a loud laugh. "Dissension in your ranks, Ren? And what of yourself, young one?" He turned back to Juliet. "Will you be an assassin tonight too?"

"Absolutely not," Ren dismissed on her behalf. "She's staying here. Especially if there are more Tianzu in the city."

Nikolai rose and began to pace around the table. "Well, that is most unfortunate. You see, I'm afraid you wouldn't be able to guarantee her safety if she were to stay here."

Both Skye's and Ren's hearts skipped a beat. They shot each other a horrified glance upon hearing the subtle warning.

"What does that mean?" Ren asked, beginning to panic.

"It means, my love," Nikolai explained, "that it's time to change the rules of the game. Indeed, I've experienced my share of fun lately, but it has also been rather mundane in that you've kept her quarantined in this stronghold. It hardly gives me a chance!"

"Nikolai ..." Skye began, attempting to reason with his nemesis.

"From here on out," Nikolai's voice thundered with a smile, "your subordinates are no longer safe here. Or anywhere, for that matter. I feel that we've somehow slipped into a ceasefire, and I don't care for that."

"Nikolai! Please don't do this," Ren pleaded. Tango and Echo were equally as horrified after realising that the warning meant Black Dawn could launch an attack anywhere, and at any time.

"Fear not, my friends," Nikolai continued, "for I will grant you a rather large incentive to come out of hiding. I'll bring my men and women with me tonight to East Tower. In fact, we can make a game of it— whoever kills President Denning first wins! And yes, Tahlia will be there," he said, turning to Sierra, then shifting his gaze across to Tango and Echo. "And I shall also bring my three Tianzu recruits. I'm sure you're curious to interrogate them for information on Foxtrot's killer."

The atmosphere in the room was anxious. Ren and Skye didn't know how to react to the sudden announcement. Tango and Echo were equally as confused, but Tango appeared to be pleased by the sudden revelation, having been given a chance to find out more information on the Tianzu and the boy who claimed his friend's life.

"And you, my dear," Nikolai said, looking down to Juliet, "I may just see you tonight too. In fact ... I highly recommend it."

Nikolai had to move quickly. Ren grabbed a small knife from the table and leapt at him, swinging it wildly. He grabbed her forearm carefully, not wanting to

injure her, then spun her around, knocking her off balance.

"Skye, help!" she screamed.

For a moment Skye hesitated, wondering if attacking Nikolai was worthwhile in the slightest.

Ren spun back around and removed a carbon pistol from her belt, raising it to Nikolai's face. Before she could pull the trigger he'd already disarmed her.

Skye decided to step in. He grabbed his sword handle and threw it at Nikolai. Using his mind, he pressed the button on its side, forcing it to extend outward. Nikolai grabbed the blade effortlessly with his free hand.

"And just what is the meaning of this?" he asked, somewhat impressed by the attack.

Ren didn't give up, knowing that Nikolai would never harm her. She threw herself forward again, using her immunity to her advantage and swinging her fist at his face. His speed was far greater than hers. He stepped to the side and nudged her gently, sending her off balance once again.

Nikolai turned and faced the defenceless Tango. "Game over," he said in a dark voice. He shifted his grip on Skye's sword down to the handle, then swung the blade downwards with incredible force.

Tango's eyes widened as he watched the steel fly toward him. He pushed himself away from the table and onto the ground, just as the sword tore through his chair, sending splinters flying into the air.

Echo jumped up, not willing to allow Nikolai to attack his comrade. He leapt over the table and flew toward the towering enemy.

Nikolai smiled. He dropped the sword to the ground and wrapped his hand around Echo's head. He raised his arm up, holding Echo high, and aimed the pistol at his heart at point-blank range. Everyone in the room froze. They held their ground and watched on with fear, not wanting to provoke Nikolai. While it was not in the great man's nature to pull the trigger, provoking him and his odd personality was an unwise strategy.

"What an interesting weapon you've chosen for yourself, Ren," he remarked as he saw the military insignia on its handle. "I didn't think you'd ever arm yourself with something so modern."

"Put him down," Skye pleaded, caution in his voice. "You don't have to do this."

Ren glared at Nikolai with malice, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of showing him fear. She tried her best to suppress it, but knew Nikolai could surely already sense how nervous she was that he might indeed kill Echo. "We all know you won't kill him," she said, attempting to call his bluff.

Nikolai snapped his head right and looked into his former partner's eyes. "And why do you assume that? Is it because I've never killed anyone with my own hands? Assumptions like those could leave your group with one member less, my love." His voice was cold, sending a shiver down her spine.

Skye looked at Sierra, who stood idly by. She had not once stepped in, despite being the fastest and most lethal in the room. She saw his wandering gaze and stared blankly back at him.

"The question you should ask yourselves," Nikolai said, "is whether or not I was actually intending to kill Tango. Was Tango merely lucky in escaping being sliced in half? Or was it that I could sense he was going to move in time?"

No one said a word. They watched on in horror, praying that Nikolai wouldn't

commit his first murder in front of them.

"What do you want from us?" Skye finally asked. He didn't wish to have to resort to negotiating, but Nikolai stood poised, not showing any sign of leaving them alone.

"I still don't know why you bother attacking me. I've hardly done you any wrong. An unprovoked act, it is, and a needless one at that!"

Skye ignored him. "What do you want?" he repeated.

"Bring them all to the tower tonight, including Jacinta and Roman."

"Why? So you can kill them there?"

"That's none of your concern," Nikolai said with a sly grin. "Bring them to the tower tonight."

"They're not going!" Ren shouted. She looked into Echo's terrified eyes and tried to think of another strategy to end the standoff.

"If I truly wanted them dead, I could have them killed right now," Nikolai said reassuringly. "You've nothing to lose. Bring them tonight."

Skye turned to Juliet and saw tears well in her eyes. Only minutes earlier she was eager to accompany them on their impending mission, but now that Black Dawn were also attending, the prospect of death was far from alluring.

Ren gritted her teeth and shook with rage. "Fine," she whispered.

Nikolai laughed and shoved Echo to the ground. "Good. Now you may all relax. Although you clearly don't know me at all; if I was ever going to take a life, it would not be with something so crude as this." He held the gun up and admired its light weight. "An elite using a firearm is an absurd concept, don't you think, Ren?" He dropped the gun and kicked it away.

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief, with the exception of Juliet, who started trembling with fear. Echo shot the man a furious glance, then slowly crept away from him.

Roman appeared in the doorway and gasped when he saw Nikolai.

"Good afternoon, young man," Nikolai greeted in a happy voice. Without a second thought, Roman ran back into his bedroom and hid.

Nikolai let out a soft chuckle. "It's amazing, isn't it? The power of fear."

"Get out of here," Ren warned, tired of his endless games.

Nikolai looked about his former group. "Well, I'm pleased to hear that you'll be joining me tonight on the quest to kill Archibald. Although, on the other hand, you're all fools too."

Skye punched the table, unable to control his rage any longer. "Why are we fools!" he screamed. "Because we decided to let Echo live?"

Nikolai shook his head. "You're fools because you found yourselves cornered. You were trapped between two choices. A wiser person would have created a third for themselves."

"Get out of here, now," Ren threatened again, staring at the pleased grin on Nikolai's face.

"Very well," he laughed. "I shall leave you all be, for now. Bring Jacinta and Roman to the tower. I'm sure they'll find the experience enlightening." His face fell momentarily, his mind retreating into the past. "I don't have fond memories of East Tower. It reminds me of *that* day."

Tango helped Echo up from the ground and continued glaring at Nikolai. "You weren't even in the tower that day."

Nikolai bit his lip in an attempt to hold back his anguish. “No, I was not. But I wish I was. I’d much rather have been in the tower than down on the streets.” He turned his attention back to Juliet. “Seeing the things I saw ... they change you. And how we’ve all changed since that day.”

The group stared at one another, waiting for their enemy to take his leave.

Nikolai snapped out of his trance and shrugged, smiling to his former friends. “Come to the tower.” He placed a hand on his forehead and gave a friendly salute to White Shadow. “Until then,” he said, vanishing from the room.

Eighteen

“This is bad, Ren,” Skye muttered, alone with his leader and comrade by her computer. The warehouse had become silent and tense since Nikolai’s sudden declaration. “We can’t risk having Juliet and Roman come out with us tonight if Black Dawn are there. They’ll be killed on sight.”

Ren grunted in agreement, not pleased with the situation either. She was somewhat protective of Juliet, not necessarily because she cared for the young girl, but rather because her telepathic ability to locate others was a major asset to their faction. With Delta in Shizudera, Juliet was White Shadow’s only remaining tracker, even if her ability was new. Ren had so far done an excellent job of keeping the girl safe in their base, but Juliet was now about to be thrust into the open where danger waited.

“Are we still going to do this tonight?” Skye asked, uncertainty in his voice. “I want Archie gone, but I don’t want to see our own murdered in front of us.”

Ren let out a long sigh and buried her head in her hands. “Neither do I. But we can’t assign the mission to the other three alone. We both know they’ve got their own priorities. Sierra will be chasing Tahlia, and Tango and Echo will be chasing the Tianzu.”

“Could we leave it to Nikolai?” he suggested. “Black Dawn is more than enough to stop Archie. Nikolai wants him dead more than we do.”

Ren briefly considered the proposal before dismissing it. “What if something happens? We can’t risk Archie escaping the tower. I wouldn’t put it past Nikolai to let him leave just so they can hunt him for sport.”

Skye shook his head, exasperated. “I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what’s right,” he admitted.

“Nothing’s right anymore.” Ren placed a reassuring hand on Skye’s shoulder. “But one thing I do know is that Tango had a point earlier—White Shadow is falling apart.”

“It doesn’t have to. We can fix this. But it’s impossible to do so when we can’t function as a team.”

The two sat in silence, gazing around the vacant warehouse. Their group was once strong and prosperous, but what used to be small rifts had now grown into large fractures, threatening to split them all apart.

“I miss the old days,” Ren said. “They were simpler times.”

“They were. Less exciting though.”

Ren raised an eyebrow. “Exciting?”

Skye quickly corrected his mistake. “Sorry—wrong choice of word.”

Ren continued staring at him, her face one of suspicion. “I take it you’re glad

you weren't part of the original White Shadow back in Novabourne?"

Skye tried to hide his smirk, but doing so seemed impossible. He knew that Ren had seen straight through him. "Hunting petty criminals doesn't sound overly appealing."

"Well what does? Hunting other shengxian? You and Nikolai sure seemed eager to join us when I first moved here."

He didn't respond. He instead turned away and resumed looking about the empty room. "I don't think we have a choice tonight," Skye said, changing the subject. "I'll have to take Juliet and Roman with me."

Ren nodded slowly. "Keep them safe, but remember that our priority is killing Archie."

Skye shot her a perplexed glance. "You say that as though Juliet and Roman are expendable."

Ren looked behind her to ensure that no one was within earshot before speaking. "If it means putting a stop to Archie, then yes, they're expendable," she whispered. "But Roman is especially expendable. I want Juliet alive while Delta's gone."

He stared at her momentarily, taken aback by her words. "What do you mean that Roman is expendable?"

"I mean that his protection is not a priority. If you have the opportunity to kill Archie at the expense of Roman's protection, then I expect you to take it. It was only by chance that you even managed to save his life earlier today."

Skye's eyes widened. His face contorted with bewildered rage upon hearing the callous remark. "Please tell me you're not serious."

"Of course I am!" she hissed back. "The president has to be stopped, Skye. You said it yourself—you want him dead today. If it means making sacrifices, then so be it."

Skye stared at her blankly, uncertain if his ears were deceiving him. Ren had always been a stern, yet caring individual. In the past, she would not have spoken so bluntly. But her obsession with finding and killing Archibald Denning has had a profound and devastating effect on her.

"Ren," he began, "if you truly believe that, then you're not fit to lead this group. If you're willing to sacrifice anyone for that goal, then you're as sadistic and twisted as Nikolai."

"Don't *ever* compare me to him!" she scowled, rising from her desk and pressing her face against his. "I have absolutely *nothing* in common with him. And I only said I'd be willing to sacrifice them for the greater good, so don't assume that I actually *want* them dead. I'm not a monster, Skye. You said yourself that you don't know what's right anymore."

He walked away from the conversation, not willing to reason with her any further. She seemed to lack his morals, but something told Skye that there was perhaps some truth to the words.

"If anything," she continued, calling after him, "*you're* the one who's as twisted as Nikolai."

Skye stopped and spun around, his jaw slack. "Excuse me?"

"You just admitted that this lifestyle is exciting for you. A lifestyle with the 'thrill' of being hunted by Black Dawn, yet with Nikolai's promise of immunity. It sounds like you're playing right into Nikolai's hand—you're playing the game with him."

Skye clenched his fists, unable to listen any longer. "That's not at all what I

meant," he muttered.

He retreated to his quarters and lay on the bed, his mind locked in an eternal debate regarding what is right and just. Is Ren right, he thought to himself. Is my judgement clouded because Nikolai will never harm me? Am I enjoying this lifestyle too much to make a rational and responsible decision regarding the well-being of Juliet and Roman?

He stared blankly at the wall next to him and traced his finger along the chipped paint.

No, he thought. I'd never endanger anyone for my own enjoyment. That's what separates me from Nikolai.

But could the deaths of the others be justified if it meant saving this country from a ruthless regime? Or is there another way to peacefully accomplish both? Or, worse still, are the deaths of Juliet and Roman at the hands of Black Dawn a horrendous inevitability? And, if so, is it meaningless to worry about and ponder such an eventuality?

Skye closed his eyes and tried to push the thoughts out of his mind. Regardless of the unforeseeable outcome, the only certainty was that the impending mission was just as perilous as it was imperative.

Out the back stood Tango and Echo, conversing in hushed tones.

"We need to find the Tianzu," Tango said.

"Agreed. Tonight is our best opportunity."

"I suggest we go along with the objective of finding the president, but as soon as we see one of those three, we go after them immediately."

"Four," Echo corrected. "Don't forget that man in Shangwu earlier. But maybe we should focus on just one," he suggested. "The four of them combined might be too much for just the two of us. If we get one, we might be able to retrieve information from them."

Tango peered up the side of the warehouse, seeing Juliet perched on the small balcony. She was out of range of their conversation, but he could clearly see the worry and fear on her face.

"We should keep an eye on her tonight," Tango said, concerned for the youngster's safety. Although he and Echo had an objective of their own, they were still a team, and still cared for their friends.

"She must be terrified."

"And rightfully so. She has seen what the others can do." His mind trailed back to the devastating day when White Shadow and Black Dawn fought ferociously before the Tianzu intervened. It was remarkable that Foxtrot was the only casualty.

"Just leave Tahlia to me," Sierra warned, sitting atop the roof of the building. Tango snapped his head up when he heard the words. He realised that she had heard their conversation, the sound of their voices travelling in the wind.

Tango stared at the strange woman. Since her arrival four months earlier, he had never once considered her to be an ally. The woman was too fixated on her vendetta, far more so than he was on his own. She lacked all amicable traits, he thought, and he often wondered why Ren and Skye continually allowed her to remain a part of the group. She may be powerful, but her incessant infatuation with murdering Tahlia meant she was hardly of any benefit to them.

"Don't threaten me," he spat. "You were asking for our help a few hours ago."

"You're welcome to help find her, but don't kill her."

"Tell me why you want her dead," he called up. "Then I might agree to help you."

She said nothing.

Tango rolled his eyes at the cryptic woman. "Fine," he agreed. "You have your priorities, and we have ours. You just make sure you leave at least one of the Tianzu for us to interrogate," he cautioned.

She glared down at them with cold eyes, again saying nothing.

Nineteen

Tahlia stared at herself in the mirror, frowning at the scar on her arm. Her unique ability to heal herself and others so quickly had proven to be beneficial. Such a wound could be fatal to the non-elite.

"Too close," Tahlia sighed to herself.

"I can barely notice," Night observed as he entered the room, trying to sound helpful.

"Thanks for knocking," she said sarcastically. "Look at my arm. I can't believe I let my guard down."

"Well, you've done a good job of healing it."

"I don't care about how it looks—I could've been killed!"

"You are lucky to be alive," the peculiar man agreed. He saw the bloodstained bolt on the sink. He picked it up and examined how sharp the deadly projectile was. "Death is a prospect that all of us must face in our profession."

Tahlia raised her eyebrow at Night's vain attempt to sound wise. "That's easy for you to say. She's never gotten that close before. Usually I sense her from over a kilometre away. She must be getting stronger and faster," Tahlia admitted, trying to come to terms with the near-death experience she just had with Sierra. It was another reminder for the woman in black that she would spend the remainder of her life looking over her shoulder, at least until her relentless foe was killed. Nikolai's promise that he would eliminate Sierra for her was proving to be even more of a farce with each day that passed. "Or maybe I just lost focus for a moment."

"Don't worry too much about it. If she had killed you, it wouldn't have necessarily meant the end of your life," Night joked.

Tahlia stared at him, disgusted by the thought of being controlled as though she was a marionette. "If I die," she warned, "don't ever bring me back. I don't want to be one of your ... things."

He grinned slyly at her as he left the room. He slowly walked back into the lounge of the suite and sat on Nikolai's velvet chaise. The room, much like the rest of the villa, was comprised of an oddly diverse assortment of furnishings which spanned numerous eras and cultures. Nikolai's residence was indeed an eclectic one, encompassing no sense of uniformity whatsoever.

Gazing out of the large window, which spanned the length and height of the room, Night watched the sunlight glisten against the ocean below. "Do you prefer the view here or back in West Tower?" he asked his comrade, passing the time. Nikolai's most frequently given order was usually to sit and await further instruction. Seldom did he divulge the finer details of his obscure plans.

Tahlia smiled to herself at Night's antics. She felt closest to him of anyone in

Black Dawn—he was simple and easy to get along with, unlike Sabina and Aurelius, who rarely ever said a word. “Both,” was her response. “I like the city, but I also like the ocean.” Most of their time was spent inside the villa, but Nikolai had often ordered them to spend time in either West Tower or his bunker, both of which had become very recent acquisitions.

She walked away from the bathroom, no longer wanting to be reminded of the day's events. She sat on the long couch opposite Night and allowed herself to relax. “You shouldn't lie on this,” she cautioned. “You're dirty. Nikolai won't be happy.”

Night's crooked grin reappeared. “I don't think he'll mind. And even if he did, there isn't much he could do about it.”

Tahlia smiled, knowing that he was right. Night's defiant attitude toward Nikolai always pleased her, although she tried not to show it while their leader was present. She sunk deeper into the chaise and stretched her arms outwards. “Comfortable?” she asked.

Night shot her an odd glance. “I imagine so.”

“Night!” a booming voice shouted from behind. He turned around and saw Nikolai standing in the doorway. “One of those things is out in the hallway. I told you not to bring them back to my villa!”

Night laughed at the strange complaint. Nikolai acted like a great and powerful man, he thought, but he also acted like a spoilt child. “It means no harm.”

“I don't care!” his senior retorted. “It stinks! Get rid of it! I can't have anyone working for the president see it. How could I possibly explain what it is? Furthermore, don't lie on my chaise. Do you have any idea how much it cost?”

Night looked to Tahlia, who tried to hide her grin. “Quite a bit?”

Nikolai nodded. “Yes. A lot. The chaise cost me more than it did bringing you to Athena.”

“My presence is worth it,” Night joked.

“Is it? You've hardly contributed anything at all. At this stage you've been nothing more than a needless expense.”

“I thought money wasn't a problem for you.”

Tahlia cupped her hand over her mouth, once again trying to suppress her amusement.

“It isn't,” Nikolai said through gritted teeth. “But that's not the point. Now, get rid of that thing, please.”

Night frowned, feeling as though no one had any respect for his unique craft. He got up and hobbled out into the hallway.

Standing nearby was a rotting corpse with dull eyes. It stood lifeless, but firm. Its skin was brown with decay, filling the hall with an unimaginably repulsive odour. Its clothes were dirty and torn to shreds.

“Don't listen to him,” Night said, striding over until he was face-to-face with the dead creature. “I think you're beautiful; a work of art!”

He turned and started retreating down the hall, away from the suite. The body slowly crept after him obediently, dropping decomposed skin onto the silk carpet with each step.

Roman sat patiently at the table in White Shadow's base. He began to feel a little calmer after his short nap, but now more confused than ever. Skye sat opposite at the table and had already begun to bring him up to speed on the current situation and the problems they all faced.

"I don't want to go back out to the city," the young man admitted, fear in his voice. "I just want to go home."

"I know," Skye acknowledged with a smile, doing his absolute best to reassure him. "But it's not safe there for you. Nikolai will come for you anywhere. The safest place is with me."

Roman groaned, his mind starting to become numb and delirious. "This is ridiculous," he muttered under his breath.

"It is," Skye agreed. His strategy was to try and befriend Roman so that he felt somewhat safe and comfortable. It would be the best way to ease him into the new lifestyle. "We live strange lives here, and sometimes I question why we're even doing this."

"Then why are you?" the curious boy asked. "Why can't you and Nikolai just leave each other alone?"

"It's not that easy," Skye laughed. "Nikolai and White Shadow are caught in an endless game of cat and mouse. And to be honest, I don't see it ending any time soon. Or ever, for that matter."

"Can't you just kill him? I'm against murder, but if he's such a bad person, and if your lives are at risk, just kill him and be done with it."

The suggestion was one that Skye had heard from both Sierra and Juliet in the past, but he still did not quite know how to respond to it. He paused and thought about which words to use. "We can't," he finally said. "We can't kill him."

The strange statement baffled Roman. "Nikolai said that earlier back in Shangwu. You *can't*, or *won't*?"

"Can't," Skye said. "Believe me, we want him dead. It would make our lives so much easier. But to put it quite simply, he can't be killed."

Roman raised an eyebrow and started laughing at the incomprehensible notion. "So nothing can stop him?"

"That's right."

"You can't use your sword, or shoot him?"

Skye paused again. The conversation was far from easy for anyone to grasp. "Yes, physically he can be killed. He's still human, like all of us. But we can't get close enough to him. He possesses a powerful type of telepathy in which he knows when an attack is imminent. He can read your intent."

Roman sat and pondered the explanation. "So you're saying that if you tried to kill him, he would know?"

"Correct. And he would evade the attack with ease."

"But how?" Roman asked. "He doesn't even have eyes."

"Well, he can sense," Skye explained. "He senses everything around him. He doesn't even need eyes." He smiled inwardly, mindful of how ludicrous the concept must sound to the newcomer. "And, to be honest, he can actually see better than any of us, even without eyes. Well, that's what he claims anyway."

Roman glanced at him speculatively, unsure of what to make of the peculiar revelation. It only further fuelled his growing level of overwhelming bewilderment.

"As Nikolai puts it," Skye continued, noticing the bemused expression upon his junior's face, "it's the mind that sees; not the eyes."

Roman stared blankly at Skye, allowing himself enough time to process what he was hearing. "So he can somehow see, even without eyes. And you can't attack without him knowing. Is that why you didn't attempt to stop him earlier in the city?"

"That's right. We've given up, more or less," Skye admitted.

Roman frowned. "Given up? What do you mean?"

"I mean," Skye explained, "we've given up trying to kill him. We don't know how to stop him, so we have to learn to live with him."

Roman's face was one of pure shock. "I don't understand," he said. "So you're telling me that White Shadow is trying to stop Nikolai, but you don't know how?"

Skye grimaced. He was aware of the answer but didn't want to admit it in such a moment when he was so earnestly trying to prove his faction's credibility. "Yes," he admitted. "But there's more to it than that. Ren started White Shadow long before she ever met Nikolai or myself. When she and the others moved to Athenia, we were a simple vigilante group fighting for justice. Eventually, Nikolai turned against us, and he has been the enemy ever since. But that's a story for another day. In the meantime, we need to tell you more about Black Dawn and the threat you face."

Roman let out an obvious moan, reluctant to learn any more about the different ways in which he might be killed.

Skye got up and knelt beside the young man, placing his arm around him. "I know," he said quietly, acknowledging the stress of the situation. "I know it's hard, and I'm so sorry that you have to go through all of this. It can't be easy. But I give you my word that I won't let anything happen to you." He placed a large tablet on the table in front of Roman. "And if you know your enemy, it might just save your life tonight."

Twenty-one

"I don't know what to do," Adam said as he walked nervously into the security control room of the villa with Karen behind him. They closed the door tightly, away from the prying ears of anyone else nearby. They were alone with Guard One.

"We're in the middle of something big," Karen admitted. "That man, Nicholas Sweeney, is somehow controlling the president. He said that this is *his* villa, which explains why Archibald suddenly ordered us to relocate here during such a busy week."

"And why didn't he have any eyes?" Adam asked himself, shuddering at the distressing memory of Nikolai.

"Sir and madam," Guard One politely interrupted. "I want to show you this. It was recorded while you were out." His deputy, Guard Two, had reported to him moments ago, informing him of the events at West Tower. One had known Adam for many years and, despite being told that there was now a new chief counsel, wasn't about to deny his own concerns regarding the president's safety. Above all else, his duty was to protect his leader.

He pressed several buttons on the screen and a series of pictures began to come to life on the wall in front of them. Adam and Karen stared at the footage, not sure what to make of it.

"This was taken a short time ago at the main entrance here," One informed them. It showed the double-door entryway at the front of the villa, with four members of the Guard stationed around it.

"Who's that?" Karen asked, frowning with confusion, watching a tall man in a tuxedo and top hat stroll inside proudly, yet awkwardly. He had a staff pass around his neck; none of the Guard bothered to stop him as he walked between them. "That's the man from the parking garage of the tower," she gasped.

"He wasn't wearing a staff pass earlier. Did he check in when he arrived?" Adam asked, equally as confused.

"He didn't, sir. There's more you might wish to see."

Adam and Karen kept their gaze focussed on the projection, baffled by the number of unauthorised people that had somehow managed to infiltrate the government ranks in one day. In the distance, a mysterious figure lurched forward. It was filthy and moved at a very slow pace. Neither of them could make out its face.

"And who is that?" Karen asked.

"*What* is that," One corrected. "Keep watching."

The footage showed the Guard blocking the front door as they saw the undead creature with no staff pass creep forward. They held their guns at it. It hobbled forward a few more steps before they opened fire, causing it to collapse in a disgusting heap.

Adam and Karen both gasped. "The Guard killed it."

"It's not over yet," One said.

The footage continued, showing the four armed men and women walk over to the corpse and inspect it. Night suddenly emerged from inside the villa and ran over to them, shouting something inaudible at them. The Guard stared at the odd man briefly, then resumed their positions by the front door. Night bent over the deceased and placed his hands on its face. Adam let out a horrified gasp as he watched the body reanimate and stand up on its own.

Night then tried to negotiate with the four soldiers, but they stood firm by the door, not allowing the odd corpse to enter.

"He then goes inside and retrieves a pass for it," One said as he sped up the footage. He pressed another button and the recording played at its original speed, showing Night emerge from the villa several minutes later with a pass. He placed it around the body's neck, and the pair then walked inside without any further hindrance.

Adam and Karen stared at each other, both lost for words. Neither of them could comprehend the strange events that were occurring before their very eyes.

"What's going on?" Karen muttered. She'd worked at Government House for many years but had never been subjected to such extraordinary and alarming events.

"The most recent footage shows the man in the tuxedo escorting the bogey to one of the storage rooms near the president's suite, only moments ago. There are no cameras in the room though, so I can't show you."

Adam clasped his hands, trying to wrap his head around the situation. "Let's go to the storage room. I want to see what this thing is." His eyes could see that it was a rotting carcass, but his mind refused to believe it.

"I can't authorise any of my staff to join you, sir," One explained. "If anyone finds out that I've shown you this, I could be charged with treason."

"I know. Thank you, One. I'll go alone. Which room is it?"

"309. Please be careful, sir. If you're seen ..."

Adam nodded, aware of the consequences he faced. He was temporarily allowed back into the villa to retrieve his possessions and had been ordered to then

return to Government House. He only hoped he'd be able to uncover any information about the president's new entourage in the short time.

He thanked the head guard a final time and left the room in silence with Karen. They waited until they were out in the hallway alone before speaking.

"I'm coming with you," Karen whispered.

"No, you should stay. You haven't been dismissed from your position yet."

"I don't care," she protested. "If anything happens to the president, then I've failed at my duties."

She smiled and nodded as they passed another member of government personnel. Once they were out of range again, she continued. "I've taken an oath to serve the president, and I'm just as liable as you are for his well-being. Whether I come with you, or whether I stay here and take no action, I could be charged with treason too."

Adam rubbed the stress and fatigue from his eyes. "Alright," he agreed. "Let's go before we're seen. Sweeney might already be on his way back here." They turned left and moved quickly down the hallway.

"What was that thing?" Karen whispered, thinking back to the disturbing footage.

"I don't know," he admitted, both disgusted and afraid.

"What if it's a weapon?" she asked cautiously.

Adam took a deep breath, just as confused and frightened as his friend. "I don't know," he said again.

Twenty-two

Skye placed his fingers on the tablet and navigated through a few different screens before stopping on the front page of a recent electronic newspaper. It showed Archibald raising his hands in front of a cheering crowd.

"Archibald Denning," Skye's speech began. "The newly elected ninth president of the Athenian republic. He formerly worked with a man named Paul Winterton. Have you ever heard of him?"

Roman shook his head innocently.

"I didn't think so," Skye said. "Few Athenians would ever know who he was. He and Archie were the two behind the riots last year, but I don't suppose you heard about those either?"

Roman sat thoughtfully. "I remember something happened. The people were acting very strange around that time."

Skye scoffed. "Strange is an understatement. Well, that's all thanks to Paul and Archibald. It eventually culminated in a large riot in the city, in which a lot of people lost their lives. Of course, it didn't make the news. Officially, it never happened, but a lot of the citizens know. This country has never been the same since."

"You think that maybe the media purposely didn't report it?"

"We don't think; we *know*," Skye corrected. "It's not hard to do when there aren't any privately owned media outlets in Athenia."

"That's right," Roman said, agreeing with him. "We discussed that in my economics class. Athenia doesn't really have any anti-monopolisation laws like other

countries do.”

“Correct, and the media here is state owned, which is a really great way to stop false information or rumours from being spread. But if corrupt people are in power—such as Archie—it can be a nightmare. The biggest problem Athenia faces is that this country is a democratic autocracy; the president alone can impose new laws without approval from any other chamber of government.”

“But why wouldn't Archie want the riots to make the news?”

Skye shrugged. “We assume that it was in his best interest to contain it. And perhaps in this instance I actually agree with it. It's for the best that the rest of the country, and the world, doesn't know what happened on that day. People sometimes have a tendency to get needlessly angry about issues they know nothing about, which causes them to take sides, and quite often just causes more problems. In this instance, the lack of media coverage gives us a chance to fix everything. Or at least attempt to.”

“But on the other hand,” Roman said, “the people have a right to know what's happening. Where do you draw the line?”

“Exactly,” Skye said with a smile. “It's a fine line. I agree with the laws, but I don't agree with having Archie in power. Even before he won the election he had a lot of power in Government House.”

“I'm starting to regret voting for him,” Roman admitted. He looked down at the photo of the cheerful old man. “You really think he's capable of causing those riots?”

“Absolutely,” Skye said without a single doubt. “To this day, I don't know what Archibald was trying to achieve. I don't know whether it was his or Paul's idea.”

Roman sat and took in the information. It began to make sense to him. He often wondered what had actually taken place in Shangwu the year before, but no one ever really knew. “What were the people rioting against?”

“The Federation ... Alexans ... I'll have to save that story for later. It's too long to explain right now, and even I don't know all of the details. You'd have to ask Archie.”

“The Federation?” Roman repeated, but didn't pry any further into the subject. “What about the other man though?” he asked. “Is he still out there too?”

“Paul Winterton? No, he's dead,” Skye said. “That's another interesting story.”

Roman opened his mouth to ask about the circumstances surrounding Paul's death, unable to contain his curiosity, but Skye had already waved his hand in front of the tablet, displaying a photo of a woman in the street.

“Tahlia Labelle,” Skye continued. “She's Rouvian, like Sierra. She joined Black Dawn and is Nikolai's lieutenant. You might have caught a glimpse of her earlier in Shangwu. Sierra absolutely despises her after what she did.”

Roman looked across to the office bedrooms but couldn't see the short woman.

“Probably out back training,” Skye said, noticing Roman's wandering gaze.

“What did Tahlia do to Sierra?”

Skye shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine. Sierra never speaks about it. Stay away from Tahlia by any means necessary. She's by far the most skilled and dangerous member of Black Dawn, aside from Nikolai. She has a large range of abilities that make her an elite assassin. She's also an excellent tracker, and can locate any of us within a certain range.”

Roman gasped loudly, his eyes widening with fear. “She can locate us at any time?”

“Yep, she can find any shengxian within a few kilometres or so, and with incredible accuracy. You should be safe with us though,” Skye said without looking up. He moved his hand and revealed another image. This one was of a man in a tuxedo wearing a top hat and walking with the aid of a cane.

“Meet Timothy Basterfield. You saw him outside the cafe. He joined Black Dawn and Nikolai renamed him 'Night'. He has the ability to possess and take complete control of anyone he touches. Stay away from him too. In fact, stay away from all of them.”

“He can ... *what?*” Roman's eyes widened even further. He looked at the photographs intently, staring into the eyes of the incredibly dangerous warriors that had suddenly entered his once peaceful life. “Where did you get these photos? They look like they're from—”

“The surveillance system in the city? That's right. Ren hacked into it and downloaded the photos.” The next image was revealed, showing two more foreboding figures. “Sabina Friedrich and Aurelius Mancini. These two don't have any specific or unique traits as far as we're aware. They're certainly dangerous, but they're also arguably the weakest of the group.”

“No unique traits?” Roman asked. “So they're not telekinetic or telepathic?”

“Correct. Not everyone has a specialised ability. Tango and Echo are the same, for example. They're far stronger and faster than the average human, but don't possess any further abilities beyond that.”

Roman took control of the screen, going back and forth between the images and trying to memorise their faces for his own safety. “Are any of them Athenian?”

Skye shook his head. “No. Aside from Tahlia, they're all Alexan. Last year, Nikolai went on a recruiting campaign. He returned home to Reddingham and found Tahlia, and she helped him find the others. I went too, to try and stop him.” He reminisced back to when he and Sierra pursued Nikolai and Tahlia. His intentions in stopping the man were pure, but he couldn't help but feel a slight sense of excitement when it happened.

“Are you from Xiaguo?” Roman asked with intrigue. “You mentioned your name was Qiuyu. And your pronunciation is heavier than those from Haiguo.”

Skye smirked, impressed with the boy's perceptiveness. “Correct. I grew up in Xiaguo until I moved here four years ago.”

“And the others?” Roman asked, gesturing his head to the rest of the warehouse. “They sound Alexan.”

“Ren is originally from Shizudera. Everyone else here is Alexan.”

“Don't dwell too much on where anyone is from,” Ren called from her computer. “Nationalities are meaningless when it comes to one's ideologies. What's important is what we believe in and stand for as individuals. White Shadow is made up of different people from different parts of the world, and so is Black Dawn, and so is the Tianzu.”

Roman frowned. “Tianzu?”

Skye grabbed the tablet from Roman. “Let me explain. There are three more who are currently working with Black Dawn,” he said, returning to the topic at hand. He browsed through the files on the tablet until he found the one he was looking for, and handed it back to Roman.

Roman looked down at yet another surveillance photo. It depicted a tall man with short hair. Standing by his side was a woman wearing a red shirt.

“This is Kai, another Alexan,” Skye said, pointing to the photo. “And this is his

Shizuno wife, Hana. We don't have much information on them at this stage.”

Once again, Roman scanned their faces in an attempt to memorise his growing list of enemies. “And the third person?”

Skye shook his head. “We don't have any photos of him. His name is Daye. He's originally from Kaipura, although he lives in my home city of Daixuan. He came to me five years ago when I first became a shengxian.” Skye took the tablet back from Roman. “We think that these three joined Black Dawn a few months ago, around the time when we first met Juliet. Shortly after, all hell broke loose.” He tried to shake off the painful memory.

“We're outnumbered,” Roman said, cringing. “How can you possibly take them all on?”

“Well, the situation gets a little more complicated. Those last three are also members of the Tianzu, the group that Ren just mentioned. They're a powerful faction operating across Dong Yue. I don't know why they're working with Black Dawn, but I assume that Nikolai is just using them for information. Well, I hope so anyway. If he's going to use them against White Shadow, it won't end well for us.”

Roman's eyes became even more fearful. “That's comforting,” he muttered.

“It makes no sense though,” Skye continued, half attempting to understand the situation himself. “Nikolai hates the Tianzu, which is why he went out recruiting in the first place. From what Nikolai and I have seen, the members of the Tianzu are more powerful than most of us.”

The admission made Roman tense. “So you're saying that we're all going to be killed?”

“Hopefully not,” Skye responded with a smirk. “But the Tianzu are Nikolai's main focus, apart from Archie, which means that killing you is probably not a priority of his.”

The statement offered Roman little comfort. “Well, are the Tianzu actually your enemy?”

Skye paused; the answer to the question was one that had created a very serious rift in White Shadow. “Yes and no,” he began to explain. “They killed Foxtrot, one of our own, but Ren and I are reluctant to start a war with them. We're stuck in an endless cycle of not knowing whether to attack them or not. If we try to avenge Foxtrot's death, it would mean we'd be involved in a war that we're unable to handle, or possibly even survive, for that matter.”

Roman watched as Skye's eyes became grave and distant. “I tried to warn Nikolai not to pursue them,” he said. “As I said, I first met Daye five years ago. Earlier this year, Nikolai insisted on meeting them too. We went to Daixuan and met up with them, and he instantly became infatuated with the prospect of eliminating them, as they're his biggest threat. I did my best to keep the peace between them and us, but that all changed three months ago when they attacked.”

Roman sat mindfully, understanding the pressure this group must feel on a daily basis. He admired White Shadow's decision to not engage in a pointless conflict with the Tianzu, but could also see how not avenging their friend's death caused them so much anguish.

“Tianzu ... the Heaven Clan? Is that their name?” he asked curiously, translating the Xiayu word.

Skye nodded. Roman, an Athenian citizen, was unsurprisingly multilingual. Although, it was also quite common for the shengxian to master several languages if they chose to. Nikolai had no problem learning Xiayu, but he never became fluent in

Shizugo or Lanesian, the other two Athenian languages.

"They need to be stopped," Tango called as he walked across the room, hearing the mention of the Tianzu. "They're the ones who killed Foxtrot."

"Stop brainwashing him," Skye pleaded. "I'm trying to ease him into everything slowly."

"No time for that," the defiant man dismissed. He snatched the tablet from Skye's grasp. "Roman, listen to me. The Heaven Clan need to be killed. They're far too powerful and dangerous to just be walking around the streets." Tango found the image he was looking for on the tablet and handed it to Roman. "These two are especially dangerous. They're the ones who killed Foxtrot."

Roman stared at a blurry image of two mysterious figures: a man whose face was covered by a hooded mask, and a boy who looked like he was only a teenager.

"Don't listen to him," Skye said to Roman. "Yes, someone from the Tianzu killed Foxtrot, but we don't know why. As I said, we can't risk starting a war with them right now."

"And now there's another one in the city," Tango added. "There seems to be no end to them."

Roman put the tablet down and buried his head in his hands. The conflicting information was too much to take in all at once. He felt that he was beginning to understand only minutes ago, but the divided group made everything exceedingly difficult to grasp. He got up silently and retreated back to his room.

"Why?" Skye asked, shooting an aggravated glance up at Tango. "He doesn't need this right now. He was almost killed today."

"He needs to get his priorities straight. *You're* the one brainwashing him about Archie."

Skye took a deep breath to calm himself, weary of the endless bickering. "It's not going to be the same, is it? We're never going to function as a group again."

Tango walked off. "The game has changed, Skye."

"What about saving innocent people?" he called after him. "I thought White Shadow was about justice."

Tango stopped and turned around. "It *is* about justice; justice for our brother, Foxtrot."

"So you're not going to help anyone else anymore? You're just going to focus your attention on finding his killer?"

"Exactly. We can't save everyone, Skye."

Skye shook his head in frustration. "You're far too focussed on revenge. You're going to turn into Sierra."

"And you're too heroic. You're going to get us all killed." He stormed out through the back door of the warehouse.

Skye turned to Ren, who sat idly by at her workstation on the other end of the room. They knew that a divided group severely hindered their chances of success, and would only lead to more needless deaths. They both looked equally as worried and exasperated over what White Shadow has become.

Twenty-three

Adam and Karen strode swiftly down the hallway, passing and greeting

numerous different personnel working for the newly elected president. The villa was buzzing with dozens of frantic staff, all of them swamped with work. Some were desperately trying to prepare everything for the impending inauguration, whereas others were taking the necessary steps required for the change of government leadership.

Adam smiled and nodded at anyone who looked up at him, and they smiled back. He wondered if perhaps they hadn't yet been informed of his dismissal.

They reached the end of the foyer and ascended the stairs to the third floor. Home to numerous vacant rooms and living quarters, this level was much quieter than the rest of the heavily guarded compound. They turned right, and then left, and arrived at yet another long hallway, with the president's suite located at the end.

"There it is," Adam said, spotting a small and insignificant door halfway down the corridor. He thought back to the footage they'd just watched with Guard One of the strange corpse that had entered the villa. He wasn't sure what to expect, but hoped it wasn't a weapon that was going to be used against Archibald or the Athenian people.

They approached the room cautiously. They were the only people in the hallway, but crept forward slowly and silently, keeping a vigilant watch on their surroundings. Adam placed his hand on the door handle and began to turn it.

"Careful," Karen whispered. "Don't open it too quickly."

Something in the corner of Adam's eye caught his attention. He stopped turning the handle. Both of them looked to their left to see Nikolai emerge from the suite.

It took Nikolai a moment to speak. "Oh," he said with a frown, surprised by their arrival. "Mr Price and Ms Bowden. What are you doing up here?"

Adam stared at Nikolai, his eyes wide with surprise. He didn't think Sweeney would be back in the villa so soon. "Where's the president? Is he safe?" Adam asked, concerned for his leader's safety.

"Of course. He's back at West Tower," Nikolai responded, strolling toward them with a confident gait. His gaping eye sockets looked down at them both. "And what are the two of you up to? I was under the assumption that you were returning to Government House, Mr Price."

"I am," he replied quickly. "I was just collecting the remainder of my possessions."

Nikolai took another step forward. "Is that so?" he asked sceptically. "And what brings you to this floor? I don't recall seeing you spend any time up here today."

Karen wasted no more time discussing the matter. "We believe there's a bogey in this room," she said, not avoiding sharing her obvious suspicions of him.

"A bogey, you say?" Nikolai took another step closer. "Well, I assume this word is perhaps an idiom of sorts that pertains to threats to the president?"

"That's right," Adam said. He swung the door open, uncertain of what was waiting on the other side. He only hoped that, whatever it was, it could be used as evidence to prove Nikolai was conspiring against Athenia.

The foul stench of rotting flesh poured out into the hallway, causing all three of them to flinch and recoil in disgust.

"What *is* that?" Karen asked, distressed from the vile odour.

Nikolai pushed in front of them and kicked the door off its hinges in rage. Light flooded into the room, revealing a lone corpse standing inside. Nikolai clenched his fists and let out a loud growl at the sight of the hideous creature.

“You two are dismissed,” he said, composing himself momentarily. “Go home.”

“What?” Adam asked, confused. “But what is that—”

“I said go home,” Nikolai interrupted. “As your new chief counsel, I’m ordering the two of you to vacate the building at once.”

“I don’t understand,” Karen admitted, not taking her eyes away from the strange and horrendous sight of the body. She realised that Nikolai knew what the bogey was, but he was clearly surprised to see it in the villa.

“Tahlia!” Nikolai’s voice boomed from the hallway. A moment later, the woman in black appeared in the doorway of the suite. “Find Night. Tell him to get rid of this thing immediately. He’s probably outside somewhere.”

Tahlia closed her eyes and crouched down low. Adam and Karen shrieked as they watched her vanish into thin air.

Adam could hardly believe his eyes. He stared at the empty doorway where Tahlia stood only a second ago, wondering how she could have possibly disappeared like that.

Nikolai spun around to see that the pair were still standing there, both with frightened looks on their faces. He flared his nostrils, pondering what to do with the bystanders. They had seen far too much for his liking.

He leaned forward and placed an arm around each of their necks. “Go home. Don’t come back here again,” he ordered in a quiet and reasonable tone. In one quick movement, he ripped their staff passes from their necks.

Adam shot Nikolai an aggressive glance. His mind was reeling from what he had just witnessed, and he knew that they faced an incomprehensibly powerful enemy. Every instinct told him to leave immediately, but he was frozen to the spot. Whoever these people were, they were highly dangerous and posed a very serious threat to the nation.

Karen grabbed his arm and started leading him away from the towering foe.

“Let’s go,” she whispered.

Without a second thought, they both turned and started running back down the hallway, away from Nikolai and the suite.

Twenty-four

Skye sat against a large tree in the woods surrounding the warehouse and Nanping district. It had often proven to be a comforting refuge for whenever he needed to be alone with his thoughts.

He looked up at the late afternoon sun through the sparse canopy. The past three months had been far more challenging than he could have ever anticipated, provoking his mind to cast doubts over White Shadow and what it was they were fighting for. At times, even he himself was uncertain. It had so far been a long day, and was set to be an even longer night.

Sierra dropped from the tree above him and landed silently on the ground. He let out a quiet shrill, startled by the short warrior.

“Please stop doing that,” he begged after calming himself.

“Stop doing what?” she asked.

Skye shook his head. “Forget it. What are you doing out here?”

“Training.”

The two stared at each other in silence for a long moment. Skye looked into her vacant eyes, waiting for her to take her leave. Several more moments passed.

“Sierra,” he spoke, breaking the unpleasant silence upon realising she wasn't going to leave him be, “I have a bad feeling about tonight. I'm a little worried that someone might get killed.”

“Tahlia will,” she said definitively.

“I meant one of us,” he corrected.

“Tango and Echo might—they're reckless. Juliet and the boy might too—they don't know how to fight.”

Skye began to regret bringing up the topic. “You never worry, do you?” he asked.

“Why would I worry?”

“Because you might be killed at any moment. Tahlia can trace your location to just about anywhere on half of the island. What if she decides that she's tired of looking over her shoulder? What if she decides to take your life?” He would never ask any of his other teammates such blunt and callous questions, but he couldn't help but pry into the woman's intriguing mentality.

“I hope she does,” was the response. “I can't track Tahlia. If she comes to me, I'll be able to kill her sooner.”

“That's not what I meant. How is it that you're always so calm?” he pressed, eager for information.

“Because I have no reason to feel any other way.”

Skye scoffed. “In other words, you don't care about anyone's regard, including your own. You don't have any problems, so you don't need to care.”

“No,” she corrected, “I don't care, therefore I don't have any problems.”

Skye stared back at her for several seconds before letting out a soft chuckle. “You can be wise when you want to be,” he admitted. “It's just a shame that you enjoy killing people more than you do teaching them.”

“I don't know why you all assume I'm a killer—I've never killed anyone. But I'm prepared to kill Tahlia and anyone else who gets in my way.”

“I'm sure you will,” Skye said without a doubt in his mind. He looked back up at the glowing rays of sunlight high above, counting down to their perilous mission ahead.

“You should worry less,” Sierra suggested. “You told me that Nikolai will never kill you, so you have no reason to worry.”

“That doesn't protect me from the Tianzu,” he countered. “But I'm more concerned about Juliet and Roman. I really don't want to bring them tonight, but they're not safe here either. It's an impossible situation. Maybe Tango was right.”

“Right about what?”

“He said I was trying too hard to be the hero. But I'm just trying to keep everyone in our group alive.”

“You can't protect everyone,” she replied simply.

Skye sighed. “I know. And I know that it's not always my job, but I can't help but wonder how frightened Juliet and Roman must be right now.”

She nodded with agreement. “Of course they're frightened. That's why they need to train.”

He let out a soft groan. “All you seem to think about is training.”

She turned and faced him. “And none of you seem to think about it enough.”

You live very dangerous lives, and have more enemies than you can count. All I ever hear is complaining from your group, yet no one ever seems willing to train themselves enough to be able to kill their assailants.”

Skye stared back at her for several seconds before eventually letting out a short laugh. “Again, you can be wise when you want to be.”

“Maybe I’m just realistic. Everyone in White Shadow judges me because all I care about is killing Tahlia, and I spend every second of every day training myself so that I can kill her. If your group did the same, you wouldn’t have any enemies. It’s as though you want the results without putting in any effort.”

Skye nodded. “A good observation. You’re not wrong. Tango and Echo are obsessed with finding the Tianzu, but they have no idea what they’re getting themselves into.”

“I agree, which is why I said they might die tonight.”

Skye cringed. “Please don’t say that.”

“But it’s true, Skye. I’m not going to deny the truth about what might happen tonight.”

“I feel the same way, but you don’t have to say it like that. You’re one of us now. You should show some compassion to the others.”

Sierra groaned. “You think I lack compassion?”

“Absolutely,” he said without even pondering the question. “I feel as though if any of us were killed, you wouldn’t be bothered in the slightest.”

“I wouldn’t be,” she admitted. “But how I feel is no one’s business. Your group shouldn’t judge me just because I don’t believe in your cause.”

“We’re a team, Sierra. You *should* believe in our cause.”

“Well I don’t. We have a common enemy, and that’s all. I have other things to focus on.”

“Like what?” Skye asked, his mood shifting. “Killing Tahlia? Letting your friends die?”

“That’s enough,” she said, her eyes starting to show rage. She grabbed Skye by his shirt and pulled his face in close to hers. “I’m not going to let any of you die. I’m not a monster like Nikolai, and you need to stop treating me as though I am. If you knew what I had been through before we met ...”

Skye swallowed hard, taken aback by her sudden admission. “What? What did you go through?” he asked cautiously. “It’s okay, you can trust—”

“No, I can’t. Don’t ask me to trust you, Skye. I can’t trust anyone ever again.” She dropped her gaze to the ground, her eyes becoming distant. “Tahlia took everything from me. She ruined my life. And the lives of others ...” She looked back up to Skye, a lone tear falling down her cheek. “... so she needs to die.”

Skye nodded, bewildered by Sierra’s sudden reaction. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“No, *I’m* sorry,” she said sarcastically as she stood up. “I’m sorry if I don’t consider any of you to be my friends. I’m sorry if wanting to kill Tahlia is too selfish for White Shadow.”

Skye looked up at her, unsure what to say or do. He’d never before seen Sierra show any anger.

“And,” she muttered. “I’m especially sorry if I have no interest in killing your elderly president. You keep telling me how corrupt he is, but none of you have any idea about corruption.”

Skye had heard enough. “Really? And *you* do?”

He flinched as a crossbow bolt lodged itself in the tree behind him, narrowly missing his cheek. Before he had time to react, Sierra had grabbed his shirt again with one hand and lifted him from the ground effortlessly.

"Yes," she hissed, her eyes furious. "I do." She dropped him to the ground, then trudged off through the woods.

Skye caught his breath and watched as she walked away. His head span from what had just taken place. When she was gone from view, he tilted his head up to the golden sun once again. Sierra's admission had taken him completely by surprise. He was curious to know about Sierra's past with Tahlia, but again decided not to pry. She was right in saying it's none of his business, he thought.

And for the moment, he had much more pressing issues plaguing his own mind that he needed to focus on.

Twenty-five

"I'm going to say this one final time," Nikolai spoke through gritted teeth. "I don't want any of those things in the villa ever again. If you insist on resurrecting the dead, go and do it in the forest surrounding the bunker. I can't have anyone see them."

"Nikolai, if I may interject ..." Night said, lazing casually on the large chaise in the suite, "you're no fun. You need to lighten up and enjoy yourself. This whole campaign has caused you too much stress."

Nikolai's face twisted unnaturally. "I'm no *fun*?" he retorted. "You think I'm stressed?"

Night nodded his head, so vigorously that his top hat almost fell off.

Nikolai started laughing as he walked over to the large window overlooking the ocean. "Let me assure you, Night, that I'm a very fun-loving individual. It's the only way one can sanely pass the time over the course of his or her lengthy eternity in this realm. However, I must point out that I do *not* appreciate having the smell of rotting corpses filling my villa. I'm doing everything I can to stop the public, and the president's staff for that matter, from uncovering the truth of this operation." In the blink of an eye, he appeared in front of Night, their faces inches away from one another. Nikolai was cautious enough to not make contact with him, aware of what would eventuate from a simple touch. "Do you have any idea how difficult that is!" he roared.

"You see?" Night asked, turning to Tahlia. "He's stressed, isn't he?"

The woman in black suppressed a soft laugh. She averted her gaze and said nothing, not wanting to get involved in the pointless argument.

Nikolai tried to compose himself. "Sometimes I wish I never asked you to join Black Dawn," he muttered.

"You need me," Night said, a large grin on his face.

"And stop lying on my chaise!" Nikolai shouted. "You're going to ruin it."

The door to the suite opened. Sabina and Aurelius quietly entered the room with Archibald in front. Six guards were behind them. While Nikolai preferred having Tahlia transport the old man from place to place, he agreed to Guard Two's request of having her soldiers escort Archibald back to the villa. For the sake of his mission's success, he knew that keeping up appearances was imperative.

"Out!" Nikolai screamed—the Guard instantly retreated back outside. He

turned his attention to the new president. "Well, at least your soldiers are obedient. Have you told the rest of your staff of my promotion?"

Archibald shifted his weight nervously. "Nikolai," he stammered, "that's actually your job as chief counsel."

"I don't think so," he dismissed. "I believe I've endured my share of menial chores in recent times. You can send the communique out yourself."

The president let out a long groan. It has been a lifelong dream of his to reach the position he was finally in, but he now began to fear that Nikolai was truly uncertain how the Athenian chain of command worked, and that he'd constantly pester him with incessant orders for the entire five-year term.

"Nikolai," Archie began, trying to conjure enough strength to stand up for himself, "I can't do that. I'll be running an entire country soon. I don't have time to do small tasks like that."

"Then make time," Nikolai said, staring out at the beautiful blue ocean. "Remember, this is *my* country."

Archie's head fell. He knew that Nikolai would never understand how running a country worked until it was too late. He already regretted making the deal with him in the first place, but was now in over his head. Archie would have no choice but to push on and take solace in the fact that as long as he was president, he was somewhat safe from Nikolai slaughtering him for his past crimes. Nevertheless, the government would have to operate effectively, or else his contracted term could abruptly end.

"Nikolai," he started again, trying to sound wiser than he was, "you can have the country, but we need to maintain a functioning government in order to succeed."

"And that we will. I have faith in you, Your Excellency."

Archie swallowed hard. "But I need your cooperation. If you're going to take on the role of chief counsel, you'll need to also take on all of its duties."

"I think not," Nikolai responded without removing his gaze from the ocean. "As I just stated, I've worked hard enough to get us both to where we are, and spent more than enough money on this campaign. I'll gladly accept my title, but I have no intention in undertaking any tasks that are of no interest to me."

"Nikolai," Archie said for a final time, trying to hide his impatience, "I think you're taking this a little too lightly. Without a proper government, cracks will start to show, and the Athenians will be unhappy. If they're unhappy, there'll be unrest. If there's unrest, there'll be—" he paused, immediately realizing his mistake. His heart began to pound loudly in his chest.

Nikolai slowly turned around, his eye sockets burning with rage. "Uprising? Riots?" he asked, finishing the president's sentence. "Is that what you were brazenly warning me of? That if I do not perform my duties as chief counsel, there will ultimately be a wave of riots in the streets of Athenia, like the ones you yourself instigated?"

Archie took a step backwards, fearing for his life yet again. He turned to Night for assistance, but the odd man just stared back at him with a pleased grin. The gazes of Sabina and Aurelius were cold and unsympathetic, as always.

Nikolai stepped forward, but stopped when the door opened again. A man with brown skin and short hair walked in, not in any apparent hurry.

"Well, look who it is!" Nikolai shouted as he cocked his head to one side.

"Hello, Nikolai," Daye greeted with a polite grin.

Archie backed away from Nikolai and took a seat on a nearby chair, grateful

for the well-timed distraction. Furthermore, he always felt safe in the presence of Daye. It was as though the man always brought with him a distinct feeling of peace.

Kai and Hana walked in no less than a second later, their faces expressionless.

“And just where have you three been?” Nikolai curiously asked, his frustrated mood shifting to the three Tianzu.

None of them said a word; they simply stared at him blankly, not feeling the need to justify themselves.

“I think I know where you ran off to,” Nikolai said, moving closer toward them. “I’m not a fool, you know. Perhaps you forgot that Tahlia and I can monitor your location.”

Again, the Tianzu said nothing.

Nikolai frowned. It frustrated him that his attempts to intimidate the Tianzu were often futile. “I saw your friend in the city earlier today. He was watching me for quite some time. You were meeting with him, weren’t you?”

“Of course,” Daye said, his smile still present. “He’s their leader, Nikolai. We were updating him on the current situation in Athenia.”

“*Their* leader?” Nikolai asked, looking at Kai and Hana. “And what of yourself, Daye? Do you not have a leader? Or do you simply roam the plains like the lazy vagabond you are?”

“I serve another,” he said.

“You serve *me!*” Nikolai thundered.

Tension filled the room as the Tianzu trio stared at Nikolai. Unlike the others in Black Dawn, they were defiant, and never hesitated to show it. None of them once swore allegiance to this group, and none of them ever would.

Nikolai stared back at them, trying to hide his confusion and intrigue. He knew that Daye served as emissary to the leader of the Tianzu, but had now just learned that Kai and Hana had a separate leader. Any information on the Tianzu was exceedingly difficult to extract from these three, and Nikolai’s lust for knowledge on the group only grew all the more.

Nikolai cleared his throat and lowered his voice. “What I meant to say is that you agreed to work directly for me in the interim. Therefore, you serve me.”

The three stared at Nikolai and the ridiculous statement he just made. While it had been commonplace over the past three months for them to disregard his wishes, this was the first instance in which they had disappeared for an entire day, making Nikolai even more suspicious of them than he already was.

“Very well,” Daye said, his smile widening. “I shall serve you, my lord.”

Nikolai scoffed. “Something tells me that you’re lying. How typical of you to try and keep the peace, even if it means feigning loyalty. But I shall accept your subservience for the time being.” He turned to Kai and Hana, who stood rigid in the corner of the room, their usual place in the suite. “Do you wish to serve me too?”

They said nothing.

“I can assure you,” Nikolai declared, “that if you were to completely join Black Dawn, you’d live far more thrilling lives than you do in the Tianzu.”

“I doubt that,” Kai muttered under his breath. “Your group’s cause is based on domination. Ours is based on peace.”

“Is that so?” Nikolai asked smugly. “I was under the impression that Black Dawn and the Tianzu shared a common cause.”

“Far from it. Your version of peace justifies the death of civilians.”

Nikolai nodded in agreement. "Well, you are somewhat accurate, but that is only because a certain level of domination is required to achieve true peace."

"That's not true," Hana spoke confidently.

"Don't assume that I'm going to give the order for civilians to be murdered. Far from it, in fact," he rebutted. "But if I have cause to believe a civilian is a threat to the state, then yes, of course I'd justify—"

"And that's where we differ," Hana interrupted.

"Nikolai," Tahlia said, knowing that the room was about to erupt in another giant debate, or worse, "we should prepare for tonight."

"Ah, very good, my dear." Nikolai glanced down at the time on his comm and saw that the light in the day was indeed running out. "Archibald, would you rather stay here tonight, or the bunker?"

"Here," the old man said without even considering the question. He had so far spent a short time in the bunker, and it was far from hospitable.

"Yes, I thought you might say that. Unfortunately, that's not part of my plan. I need Sabina and Aurelius to come with me tonight, so you'll have to be relegated to the bunker."

Archibald cringed at the thought of going back in there. "I think it would be best if I stayed here," he said. "The Guard are here, and they'll keep me safe."

Nikolai burst into laughter. "Keep you safe from whom? Skye will be busy looking for you at East Tower tonight. Furthermore, I don't trust you alone. In fact, I don't trust you at all!" He twisted his head and pointed to the three lonely Tianzu in the corner. "You either."

"Likewise," Kai said.

Nikolai stepped forward and placed both hands on the elderly Archie's shoulders. "I feel that the bunker will be the best place for you this evening."

Archie looked down at the ground and hid his scowl. "What if he stayed here with me?" he asked, pointing a cautious finger at Night, who grinned at the thought of guarding the president.

Nikolai looked back and forth between Archibald and Night, considering the proposal. "Very well," he accepted. "But I would advise you not to try anything foolish. You know full well what he's capable of doing to you."

Archie looked at Night, whose sadistic and hungry eyes stared back into his. Part of him wondered if staying in the suite alone with Night was actually a wise decision.

"Promise me that I'll be safe from Marion tonight," Tahlia requested, changing the subject.

Nikolai put his hand on his chin and thought about his response. "I can't make that promise," he finally said, and started laughing to himself. A look of despair spread across her face.

Kai and Hana exchanged confused glances, wondering how anyone could work for such a callous individual. Their leaders were far more compassionate, and put the highest emphasis on all of their lives. While their clan was one of peace, they were very protective of their kin. If any of them were to be killed, it would almost certainly mean war.

"If you see anyone that poses a threat, run. Run and hide," Skye instructed. He sat on Roman's bed, trying his best to prepare him for the dangerous night ahead.

"Can't you just drop me off home on the way?" Roman reluctantly asked, despite already knowing the answer.

Skye looked back to Ren, who was standing in the doorway, shaking her head. Neither of them knew what else they could do to comfort the boy. He was trapped in a hopeless situation, and it was almost impossible for him to comprehend everything in such a short time.

"Roman," Ren said after clearing her throat, "tonight we have a mission to attend to, so this couldn't have come at a worse time. I know it's a lot to take in, but you'll have to listen carefully to what I'm about to say." A small part of her pitied him, but her patience was beginning to wear thin, and she didn't have time to console him like a child. She took a deep, dramatic breath, watching as Roman's solemn eyes stared up at her. "This isn't going to end. There is no going home. You can either stay with us and fight for our cause, or you can leave and be killed by Nikolai. It's your choice."

"What she means," Skye corrected, scowling at Ren for expressing herself so freely—despite the fact that he agreed, "is that you don't have to join our cause if you don't want to. But you might not have much choice in siding with us. Nikolai already wants you dead."

Roman let out a loud groan and buried his face in his pillow.

"Just leave him," Ren said. "There's nothing else we can do. You need to get ready."

Skye got up and left the room in silence. He turned right and started ascending the steel staircase, eager to see how Juliet was feeling. As expected, she was sitting up on the balcony alone, watching the sky turn pink as the sun set.

"How are you?" he asked.

She turned around and smiled, but her sullen face revealed her fear.

"Everything will be fine," Skye tried to reassure her. "We'll be fine."

"I hope so," she whispered. Usually a much happier and brighter person, the sudden news of Nikolai's threat had hit her hard. She was no longer safe, and the reality of their dangerous lifestyle had become apparent very quickly.

Skye sat beside her on the cool metal grate. "You know, Nikolai and I used to always discuss how our fears and worries are linked to our overthinking." His attempt at comforting her had little effect, and his words didn't quite sound as profound as the ones Sierra used a short time ago.

"That's easy for you to say, Skye. Nikolai won't kill you. Of course *you* can be so carefree."

He kept his face hidden as he nodded sheepishly. "I know," he admitted. "You're right—it's easy for me to not worry as much about my life. But Nikolai still can't be trusted for any reason, and he could just as easily turn on me or Ren."

Juliet faced him with a raised eyebrow. "He won't. He's obsessed with the two of you."

Skye sniggered quietly in agreement. "He certainly is. But even if Nikolai treats me as an ally, it doesn't mean I'm always immune, especially against the Tianzu."

She winced at the statement. "You're not helping. If *you're* killed by the Tianzu, I don't stand a chance against anyone."

Skye bit his lip, running out of ways to reassure the young woman. “Well, the Tianzu have no reason to attack us, so don't worry about them. My point is you shouldn't sit up here worrying that you might be killed. It won't help.” He didn't believe his own words. The Tianzu had already launched an unprovoked attack on them months ago, resulting in the death of one of their own. They were as dangerous and sporadic as Nikolai. Probably even more so, he thought.

“But I'm not like you or Sierra. I'm not strong enough to defend myself. If I was, you wouldn't have kept me hidden here for the last few months.”

Skye nodded, realising he was unable to console her. None of them could deny that the evening ahead was filled with risk. “You're right; I'm sorry.” He rose and began to walk back inside the warehouse. “Just don't dwell on something that might not happen.”

“Skye ...” Juliet's quiet voice stopped him. He turned and faced her once again. “I know you're only trying to help me, but it's not your job. There's nothing you can say to help me right now. I just need to sit here alone for a while.”

Skye stared at her blankly. Tango had told him that he was trying too hard to be the hero, and it was obvious that Juliet now felt the same way. “I'm just trying to do the best I can to help.”

“Thanks. But I'll be fine,” she said, smiling up at him. He returned the smile and walked back inside.

Juliet's smile turned into a frown when she sensed an odd feeling of excitement from within Skye. She ignored it, turning her gaze east to the pink horizon. As she tried her best to compose her fear, she hoped that she hadn't taken her beautiful island home for granted.

Twenty-seven

Daye sat crouched on the beach and traced his fingers along the soft sand, his gaze focussed on the gentle waves in front of him. The sky was bright, and the slow-moving ocean reflected the different shades of pink and orange.

“I admire what you're trying to do,” Kai said, “but we can't defy Raien's orders.”

“I agree,” Hana added. “We want peace too, Daye, and this is how we're going to achieve it.”

Daye shut his eyes and listened to the soft sound of the water lapping against the shore. “I can't justify Raien's orders. These people are not the enemy.”

“Of course they are,” Kai said, tired of having to repeat himself yet again. They'd had the same conversation several times that afternoon after their meeting with Raien. “I don't know what further justification you need, brother. They're going into the city tonight with the intention of killing the president. How can you possibly stand by and not take any action?”

“He's right, Daye,” Hana said. “You know as well as we do that our duty is to protect the citizens of the world.”

Daye's chest tightened upon hearing the words. He was all too familiar with the Tianzu's doctrine, and certainly needed no reminder of what they stood for—what *he* stood for.

“I'll go tonight,” he said, “but you also know I won't be taking anyone's life.”

“Of course,” Hana nodded. “We're not asking you to. We just want for you to

understand our goal. And to not stop us from doing what's right.”

Daye froze. Are they doing what's right for the world, he thought. Or are they doing what's right by Raien?

Kai knelt beside Daye and placed a hand on his shoulder. “I know you don't serve Raien, but you should respect his orders.”

Daye turned and faced his comrade. “You saw what happened when he issued his last order. He's obviously provoking White Shadow. Don't you feel that his desire to start a war with them is needless?”

Hana shook her head. “Not at all. None of us want a repeat of what happened two decades ago, which is why he ordered for us to take action.”

Daye rose to his feet and stared at the glowing horizon. “It makes no sense though, Hana. You say that he wants the Tianzu to take action, but why now? Why would he wait three months? If he truly believed this clan was a threat to society, why would he not give the order then?”

Kai and Hana looked at one another. Despite their loyalty to Raien, it was something they'd often wondered about too. It was odd for Raien to order for them to originally attack White Shadow, only to then retract the command immediately after. What followed was a three-month ceasefire, until Raien reissued the command earlier that day.

“I don't know,” Kai eventually admitted. “But we're not in any position to question Raien.”

“Don't you question the fact that he said to do so slowly?” Daye asked. “Again, why would he order for you to take your time eliminating the enemy? It makes no sense.”

Kai's shoulders tensed. While he would never admit it aloud, it did come across as strange that his leader would issue such a command. Raien's exact words were to ensure that they killed no more than one of their enemies per day.

“I agree,” Hana said, almost unable to believe that she was siding with Daye. “It doesn't make any sense. But as Kai said, we're not to question Raien.”

Daye bit his lip, knowing the situation was bleak. There was no convincing his fellow clansmen not to intervene tonight. The hierarchy within the Tianzu was firmly in place, meaning they would follow the directives of their leader, regardless of what they believed themselves. The order to resume eliminating White Shadow had been given, and there was nothing he'd be able to do to stop it.

They stopped talking when they heard a shuffling sound. The trio turned and saw a corpse slowly make its way toward them through the sand. They knew better than to continue their conversation while Night's bizarre creation was within earshot.

The corpse stopped before them and stood silently.

“Such a horrific ability,” Hana whispered, looking the rotting body up and down.

Kai nodded. “I agree. This is not an ability anyone should possess.” He stared into its decayed, lifeless eyes. “Have you no respect for the dead, Night?”

The corpse didn't answer.

Tahlia appeared out of nowhere in front of the group. “Nikolai said to hurry up. It's time for us to leave.”

Daye looked back toward the villa a short distance away. In the third-floor window of the suite he saw Nikolai standing tall, watching them all intently. Daye offered a polite smile, which was not returned.

“Let's go,” Tahlia beckoned, and began walking away.

The Tianzu obeyed, and starting making their way back to the large compound.

“We need to do what's right,” Kai said to Daye. “I respect your reluctance to murder another, but we need to do what's right for the people of Athenia and the Union.”

Tahlia turned around. “If you see Marion, please kill her for me.”

Hana shook her head. “Don't make the assumption that you're our ally. We won't kill her for *you*—we'll only kill her for the sake of protecting the world.”

Tahlia laughed. “I don't care about the reason,” she said. “Just kill her.”

Twenty-eight

Roman sat nervously at the table and watched Skye eat an apple.

“You don't have much of an appetite,” the young man observed, suddenly realising that none of them had eaten in front of him all day.

“Correct,” Ren said, not lifting her gaze from the large tablet she was holding. “You might say that we're more efficient at expending our energy than a regular person. We don't need to eat as much, or as often.”

Roman looked back and forth between her and Skye before a shy grin spread across his face. “That explains why I haven't been very hungry lately,” he said, the relief in his voice evident. “I thought I was sick, or stressed.”

Skye smiled back at him. “Far from it.”

“Take this,” Ren said, handing Roman a small computer chip. “Place it in one of your comm's ports. We all use them—it overrides the hardware and prevents you from being tracked.”

He took the chip and placed it in his wrist communicator obediently. “I thought you said that Tahlia can locate us at any time. Isn't this a little useless?”

“It's just to be safe,” Skye explained. “If we succeed at stopping Archie tonight, and you're seen by the country's surveillance system, it will help prevent the government from being able to locate you.”

Roman nodded, satisfied with the response. White Shadow was a very organised group and seemed to have already thought of everything. “Wait,” he said, a curious thought suddenly forming in his mind, “aren't you able to track Nikolai? They must use comms.” It was rare to meet anyone in the modern era who didn't wear one.

“They do,” Skye admitted, pleased that the newcomer was beginning to think of possible solutions to their endless list of insurmountable problems, “but Black Dawn also block their comms from being tracked. Ren's an expert hacker. If she could access their comms, she would've found them within minutes.”

“That also means I can't track you,” Ren added, “so try not to get yourself lost.”

Roman frowned at the demeaning warning. “I've lived here my entire life. I'm not going to get lost.”

“Shall we?” Tango asked, walking proudly into the room with Echo.

“No,” Roman muttered to himself.

“Let's go,” Sierra said, already standing by the front entrance. The sun outside had almost finished setting, casting a dark shadow over the beautiful island.

“Just wait!” Ren shouted, glaring at the impatient woman. She turned her attention back to the others. “Tango, Echo, before you go, I have something to say.” She took a deep breath, attempting to add drama to her short speech. “I know you’re both devastated by the loss of Foxtrot. He was like a brother to me too. But I’m asking you, as a friend, don’t attack the Tianzu. If they’re there, defend yourselves like last time, or run, but please don’t provoke them. If we start a war now, we’re all as good as dead.”

Tango opened his mouth to protest. “Ren, the Tianzu attacked us first—”

“I know,” she interrupted, “you’re exactly right; they attacked us, unprovoked. And it causes me agony that they’ve gotten away with it. But the best thing we can do right now is let Charlie and Delta do their job. Let them find some information on the Tianzu. Maybe even Nikolai will share some with Skye.” Skye frowned at the thought of another painful meeting at the cafe. “Just think about it, please,” she said quickly, stopping Tango from starting another debate. “Think it over.” She walked back to her desk without looking at them.

Tango and Echo exchanged glances. While part of them knew there was truth to their leader’s words, neither of them knew how to suppress the fury they felt for the Tianzu after what they’d done to their group.

“Put this on,” Skye said to Roman, handing him a large, padded vest. “It’s bulletproof.”

Roman cringed. “Bullets are the least of my worries.”

“If the Presidential Guard are there, they won’t hesitate to kill you. This might just save your life. Take this too.” Skye revealed a grey mask not unlike his own to the young man, placing it in his hand.

“It’s light,” he stated. He ran his fingers around the perfectly crafted curves of the graphene mask. “I think a friend of mine has a mask like this hanging on his wall.”

“I doubt that,” Skye dismissed. “Very few people will ever see these masks and live.”

Roman frowned with confusion. “Where did you get them?”

“Nowhere legal.”

Roman studied both the vest and mask and noticed the letters ‘DYM’ engraved on both, which stood for the Xiayu words ‘Dong Yue Meng’. Or, as it was referred to in Alexan, the ‘East Yue Union’.

“DYM ... do these belong to the government?” Roman asked.

“More or less,” Skye said. “They belong to the military. So does this,” he held up his retractable sword, “and so does Sierra’s crossbow.”

“And this,” Ren added, removing her pistol from her desk drawer.

Roman shook his head. “Are you trying to tell me that you stole these from the military?”

“No, not at all,” Skye said. “We bought them.”

Ren smirked. “... from someone who stole them first,” she whispered.

Roman dropped the mask in panic. “You ... I can’t believe—”

“We had to,” Skye defended, not wanting to be lectured by the young man. “We didn’t have a choice. We need to be armed if we’re going to survive tonight.”

Roman folded his arms across his chest. “I’m not comfortable with any of this.”

Ren muttered something inaudible from her desk. Roman couldn’t quite hear it, but he was certain it was something obscene.

"I trust you have a plan for tonight?" Tango asked Skye, a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

"My plan is to not let anyone die."

Juliet took in several deep breaths, trying to relax herself for the terrifying encounter before her.

"We should give him a code-name," Echo suggested, causing everyone to turn their attention to Roman.

"His code-name would be an obvious one," Ren said. "It wouldn't sound any different from his actual name."

Roman looked at the others, confused by the conversation taking place.

"What code-name?" he asked innocently.

"R for Romeo," Skye explained.

"Let's go," Sierra said again from the doorway, still waiting for the rest of White Shadow.

"Yes, time to go," Skye agreed, grabbing Romeo's arm and helping him out of the chair.

"Wait, I'm not ready," he cried, the reality suddenly sinking back in. "I don't think I can do this."

Skye walked on, still holding his arm. Skye would usually have been happy to offer the support and encouragement Romeo may have needed. But he himself was uncertain of the night's outcome, and debated whether or not bringing the boy was the right decision. Regardless, he knew they had to press on. It was only a stroke of luck that Ren was able to hack into the president's itinerary, and it may be their only chance to kill him before he is sworn into office.

They all walked over to the door where Sierra stood waiting. She double-checked that her crossbow was securely fastened to her left wrist. Tango, Echo, Juliet, and Romeo stepped out into the night, each holding armour and masks.

Ren watched as they left. She looked at Skye and offered a hopeful smile. "Good luck," she said.

He weakly returned the smile, unable to hide his concerns over the impending mission. "Thanks."

Sierra stared back at Ren for a brief moment, maintaining her warrior-like expression. Her blank eyes showed neither hope nor fear. She closed the door noisily behind them.

Twenty-nine

Romeo's head was buried in his hands as the van drove back toward Shangwu. His mood had been fluctuating all day, but his fear and anxiety were now beginning to boil over again. It was all too much to bear in such a short time.

"It took me a while to understand everything too," Juliet said with a quivering voice, sitting opposite him in the back. She was just as frightened as he was, but still wanted to offer her comrade her support.

"There's nothing to understand," he replied, confused and exasperated. "None of this can be real. People don't live forever. People don't possess any strange abilities."

"We've all done it, Romeo, and we all know how hard it can be." Skye spoke

as slowly and empathetically as he could. "You live life a certain way and then suddenly everything is different, with no going back. And I'm sorry we've had to rush you into everything, but tonight is an important night for Athena. Just try to stay close and you'll be fine," he lied.

Sierra had volunteered to drive the van on all outings. She insisted that because she had the fastest reflexes in the group, she'd be the best to commandeer the vehicle in the event of an attack. She continued driving in silence until Romeo asked his next question. "Do you think I'll have an ability too?"

"It's hard to say. Your mind and body are changing," Skye explained. "If you train hard, you might find that you have a unique ability." He had already discussed everything with Romeo earlier in the warehouse, but he was mindful that it might take more than one conversation before the boy began to accept his new life. After having a similar experience when he first met Juliet, Skye wanted to be as patient as possible.

"But how? How can this happen?"

"The mind is capable of just about anything," Skye pointed out. "Humans are already such an advanced race. If you evolve your mind, you can accomplish even the wildest of dreams."

Romeo sat and pondered the statement. Part of him believed what was just said, but part of him was trapped in the realm of what he still perceived to be reality.

"It was so sudden," he said. "I was living normally until a few weeks ago. And then I reached a point when everything I knew just didn't really matter." He'd accepted that he recently had a very deep and profound realisation, but never once thought it would lead him to this present moment in time.

"That's good," Skye said. "It's good that you can see the correlation between your mind and your cells evolving. Quite a lot of people would struggle to see the connection."

Romeo closed his eyes and sat quietly. Bright lights began to filter into the van as Sierra entered the outskirts of the city. Tango sat beside her, while Echo was in the back with the others.

Skye stared down at the floor of the van, his mind racing. He had no idea what the night ahead would possibly bring. He only hoped that it wouldn't end in bloodshed for his team. With any luck, they'll finally kill Archibald Denning and then move on to stopping both Nikolai and the Tianzu.

But the situation was a challenging one, and his group could barely function in the state it was in. Even if they were to succeed at eliminating Archie, there was still so much work to be done. Even if White Shadow was fortunate enough to escape death tonight, it wouldn't guarantee their immunity—not from the Tianzu.

Thinking about their future made Skye's chest tighten.

We don't even know how many of the Tianzu there are, he thought.

Romeo started laughing to himself, breaking the nervous atmosphere. "Is this actually happening?" He was beginning to sound delirious.

"It is, and you've handled it quite well," Skye said, snapping out of his daze. "You've done what only a handful of others have done. Everyone has the potential to access deeper parts of their minds, but their everyday lives block the truth. They live simply and contently, not daring to venture into the unknown."

Romeo sat quietly and took in the words. "You sound so wise," he mumbled with half-closed eyes.

Skye smiled at the compliment. "I've spent quite a bit of time with Nikolai.

We'd have conversations like this on a daily basis." The fond memories of the previous four years with his former friend always had a euphoric effect on his mind and body. It was a time that he often wished he could return to. It was a time free from the chaotic life he now lived.

"Why do you have code-names?" the curious boy asked.

"Ren's idea," Tango muttered, adding to the conversation for the first time.

"She thought it would be more exciting to have them when she started White Shadow with Charlie and Delta, and it creates a sense of anonymity," Skye continued. "I'm not overly fond of using one, so I kept my real name."

"And ironically, so did Ren," Tango complained from the front seat.

"Oh, I thought 'Skye' was your code-name," Romeo said.

Skye shook his head. "No, that's just the Alexan name I chose for myself growing up in Xiaguo."

Romeo yawned loudly, his mind starting to drift to sleep. "So you're telling me that I could live forever if I wanted to?"

"Essentially, yes," Skye said. "If you take care of yourself, you can live for a very long time."

Romeo didn't miss a beat before asking his next question. "How long?"

Skye's jaw clenched for a brief second. The conversation was dragging on, and he'd much rather use the time to focus on the mission. "As far as I'm aware, for an eternity. Although we don't really know much about the shengxian ourselves, aside from what Daye told me. He's the oldest one I've met."

"How old is he?"

Skye saw Juliet smirk out of the corner of his eye. "I don't know," he admitted.

Romeo dismissed the notion. "I still don't believe you can live forever."

"Neither could I, at first. But it's really not so hard to believe now."

"It's impossible," he fired back. "Life has to end at some point. The thought of living forever feels a little ..."

"Overwhelming?" Skye asked. Romeo nodded. "You're right—it can be overwhelming, which is why you need to be cautious with your mindfulness. Your eternity can turn against you if you're not mindful. But that's a conversation for another time."

The van rolled on quietly. The impeccably built Athenian roads made for a smooth and comfortable ride. Romeo sat and stared blankly, yawning again.

"Try to stay awake," Skye suggested. "You might be in for a big night."

"Watch out," Tango warned.

"I see him," Sierra said.

Romeo's wandering mind snapped awake. He turned his head to the front to see what had caught their attention. A short distance away was a hooded man walking toward them, dragging a metal bar on the ground behind him. Sierra drove the van around him, allowing ample room to ensure that he didn't swing the bar at their vehicle.

"I never come into the business district during the evening," Romeo said. The sight of the strange figure sent a shiver down his spine.

"You can thank Archie for that," Skye murmured in agreement. "Shangwu Qu used to be safe. Nowadays, the evening is home to the violent outcasts that Athenia has forgotten."

"I remember when it used to be safe. It wasn't that long ago. It seemed to just

get dangerous overnight.” Romeo turned his attention to the rear window and watched the homeless man slowly disappear into the distance. “Why doesn't the government intervene? This is such a beautiful country, but the violence in the city at night needs to be stopped.”

“Agreed,” Skye said. “The current government has tried to take action over the last year, but it's not a problem that can be solved any time soon. It didn't take Archie and Paul long to ruin everything this country has worked so hard for, but stopping the violence is not just a matter of stationing more police officers around the city. The people committing these crimes had their minds altered by Paul, and they can't be rehabilitated. Seeing what a man like Paul can do is why Nikolai is so cautious of other shengxian.”

Romeo's jaw dropped. “Paul was a shengxian?”

Skye nodded. “The only Athenian that we know of, apart from Juliet and yourself.”

Romeo sat and stared at the lifeless metropolitan streets. There were no other cars or pedestrians in sight. It was well known that few Athenians were brave enough to enter Shangwu after the sun had set nowadays. During the day, it was one of the world's busiest and most important commercial centres. But at night, the district became a standstill and shut itself down.

“I think the world has a right to know what happened here,” Romeo said, an annoyed tone in his voice. “I know you said before that you agree with it being kept from the news, but this country needs help. Maybe the Union can help?” It used to come as a relief that he could freely read the news without being reminded of the country's problems. But after learning about Athenia's recent history from Skye, he began to feel angered that the state-run media had turned a blind eye.

“Athenia plays a powerful role on the world stage,” Skye explained. “I agree that the people have a right to know, but I also believe that promoting peace is the first step to actually achieving peace.”

Romeo nodded, understanding his elder's point of view, but also far too fatigued to fight back. “Maybe you're right. It's just that I've never really stopped and questioned the state of Athenia until now, and it suddenly makes me sick to call myself a citizen of such a corrupt country.”

Skye laughed quietly. “Don't be surprised to find yourself questioning things a lot more. It's a trait of the evolved mind. But don't feel any hatred toward Athenia; it's a wonderful country with wonderful people, and corruption is something all world governments fight on a daily basis. Only Archie is to blame, and killing him might just be the beginning of change here. Alternatively, if he comes into power he'll finish what he started, and it might just destroy this country once and for all.”

Romeo cringed upon hearing the ultimatum, suddenly remembering the danger he was being placed in by accompanying them.

The van came to a stop.

“This is close enough,” Sierra said. “We walk from here.”

Thirty

“This gear is so light,” Romeo said to himself as he climbed out of the van. “Are you sure it's actually bulletproof?”

No one acknowledged him; they were far too invested in the mission ahead.

They placed masks and vests over their faces and bodies.

Skye surveyed his surroundings. He prayed that Archibald Denning would be tonight's only victim. "Juliet, can you sense anyone nearby?"

She sat on the ground and closed her eyes. It helped her concentrate more when she was sitting. Her ability was helpful, but also far from fully developed, and it expended much of her energy. Skye assured her that with regular practise she would perfect it. "No. No one's here."

"... yet," Tango muttered.

"Link your comms," Skye ordered. The group selected the appropriate settings on their wrist comms. Skye grabbed Romeo's and configured it for him. "Can you hear us, Ren?"

"Loud and clear. What's your location?" Much like their wrist comms, Ren had disabled the van's satellite system to prevent it from being remotely tracked by the authorities.

"We're on Huang Jie, not far from the tower."

The van was parked idly in the shadows. They were on the southern edge of Shangwu, the bright glow from the skyscrapers illuminating the city before them. There was no one else in sight, but Romeo still peered around nervously, looking for any violent homeless civilians.

"So do we have a plan yet, boss?" Tango asked.

"We need to split up," Sierra chimed in before Ren could even speak. "Tahlia will already know we're here."

"Out of the question. You need to stay together."

"Absolutely," Skye agreed, not appreciating Sierra's bold suggestion. "Juliet just said Tahlia isn't here. It won't do us any good if you—" Before he finished his sentence, the woman had vanished into the night. Skye gritted his teeth underneath his mask.

"I think it's a good idea," Tango said, wishing to pursue his own endeavours.

"No splitting up!" Ren shouted through their headsets. *"Stay together and go to the tower."*

"Sierra's already gone." Skye paused and waited while Ren cursed under her breath. "Let's move," he ordered. He emerged from behind the trees and crossed the deserted street, walking north toward the tower. The others followed reluctantly.

Romeo's eyes darted left to right, frantically looking for any incoming threats. He wasn't sure if he was more afraid of other Athenians or Black Dawn.

"Relax," Echo said, opening his mouth for the first time that evening.

They pressed onwards, walking down the dimly lit road. The buildings on either side of them stretched upwards for hundreds of metres. Romeo gasped aloud as they walked past a man sitting in the dark, watching their every move.

"Don't worry about him," Skye said, not feeling threatened by the deranged derelict.

"Can we go down a brighter street?" Romeo asked, an edge of fear in his voice.

"We'll be fine. And this is the most direct route to the tower without being seen."

"It might also be the most direct route to the deaths of these two," Tango remarked, pointing to Juliet and Romeo.

"That's enough, Tango," Ren hissed. Skye bit his tongue, saying nothing.

Romeo began to shake uncontrollably, as did Juliet.

"There's no sign of her," Sierra said, reappearing out of nowhere. "Ask the girl to find Tahlia."

"No!" Skye said, trying to keep his voice low. "We're not here to find Tahlia! And she already told you that she couldn't sense anyone nearby." He'd grown tired of the pointless debate, and was beginning to accept that the mission might fail before it even began. Their team was on the verge of a meltdown. "This is ridiculous."

They continued walking again, crossing several blocks and passing the occasional homeless civilian. With every step, they edged closer to East Tower. Skye looked up at the glowing skyscraper, wondering if the president was already inside. It was closing in on 8:00.

Juliet gasped loudly and almost fell back in fright, interrupting the silent march.

"What is it?" Skye asked. "Are they here?"

Juliet nodded. "They've just arrived. Nikolai and Tahlia must have transported them all at once."

"How many? All of them?"

She nodded again. "Most of them. I can sense six."

"Are the three Tianzu here?" he asked.

"I can sense Kai and Hana. I can't sense Daye."

"Daye will be here," Skye said. He knew that Daye was able to project his mind elsewhere, meaning he could be present without his physical self. Night could also be present, but was unable to be tracked.

"What about the other Tianzu?" Tango asked. "The one you sensed today. Is he here?"

Juliet paused. "No. I can't sense him."

Tango looked to Echo. "The others are here though. We need to find them."

"No," Ren ordered. "*You need to find the president.*"

"Where are they?" Skye asked Juliet. "Are they in the tower?"

She lowered herself back down to the ground and focussed her mind outwards. "No. They're splitting up," she said weakly.

Skye shut his eyes. If Black Dawn were splitting up, it almost certainly meant they were forming a trap.

"What do we do?" Romeo asked, his teeth chattering loudly.

Sierra grabbed Juliet. "Where's Tahlia?"

Juliet pointed northeast. "She's heading away from the tower."

"Sierra, don't!" Skye screamed, but it was too late. A gust of wind blew his hair as the short woman vanished once again.

"Where are the Tianzu?" Tango demanded. "Tell me."

Skye stepped in front of him and grabbed his vest. "That's enough! You're not leaving us."

Tango wriggled free from Skye's grasp. "You have your priorities, Skye, and we have ours." Without saying another word, he turned and ran north, with Echo alongside him.

Skye briefly contemplated chasing after them, as their speed was no match for his own, but he suddenly realised that Juliet and Romeo were now alone. If he left their side, he had no doubt they'd be killed.

"Don't leave me," Romeo cried, grabbing Skye's arm.

Skye shook off the terrified boy and stared into the distance, dumbfounded. His team had abandoned him. He looked down at Juliet and Romeo, studying the fear in their eyes. They knew as well as he did that they were Black Dawn's highest priority.

"Tango, please don't do anything stupid," Skye growled into his headset, unable to hide his frustration. It was more of a plea than an order.

"We'll be fine," Tango said. *"Go after your president."*

Skye began to shake with rage. *"My president?"*

"Tango, if you do anything to harm the Tianzu, it will be the death of us all," Ren warned. He offered no reply.

Skye let out a loud and furious moan. "Ren, what am I going to do? I can't kill the president and protect these two at the same time."

The trio stood in silence while they waited for their leader's response.

"You need to proceed with the mission," she ordered.

"Did you not hear me? The others have left. I can't do this mission alone. Someone will be killed."

"I know it's risky, but this might be our only chance to stop Archie. Try your best to protect Juliet and Romeo. Tango and Echo have deactivated their comms."

Skye stood silent, betrayed. After everything he had endured with Tango and Echo in their time together, they'd now left to pursue their own selfish and meaningless endeavour, oblivious to the danger they all faced.

"Once I've killed Tahlia, I'll help you kill the president," Sierra offered. Her comm was still on.

"If you kill Tahlia," Skye pointed out.

He tried to think of his next move. Ren had ordered for the mission to proceed, but he was far too concerned for the safety of Juliet and Romeo. He wouldn't be able to forgive himself if they were killed. He hoped that Nikolai would find the president first and complete the mission for him.

"Juliet, if you sense any of them coming toward us, tell me immediately."

She nodded, then stood back up.

"Let's keep moving," he instructed, and began walking north to the tower again. Juliet and Romeo cautiously followed, both praying they would escape the city unscathed.

Thirty-one

Tango and Echo ran through Shangwu, looking for the three Tianzu warriors. They were now on the opposite side of East Tower, far from where they left the others.

"When we find them, we can't kill them," Tango said as he ran. "We need at least one of them alive for information."

"Agreed," Echo said.

They turned right and ran down a narrow and deserted street, trying to cover as much ground as they could.

"They must be here somewhere," Tango said.

Echo dropped to the ground instinctively, narrowly avoiding a sword fly toward his neck. He dove forward and rolled out of the way. Tango saw the attack too and

stepped back, away from the danger.

They both snapped their heads right to see Aurelius emerge from the shadows. He held a long chain with a sword attached to the end, and swung it like a flail. It flew forward again and headed straight for Echo.

“Look out!” Tango screamed as he leapt forward. He quickly grabbed hold of the chain and flung the sword back at Aurelius. The bulky man jumped out of the way of his weapon.

Tango wasted no time. He ran at Aurelius and kicked him hard in the torso, knocking him through the window of a small supermarket behind him.

Echo felt something crash into his back. He looked down to see a small knife fall to the ground. His vest had saved his life. He turned his head just in time to see another knife fly toward him. It smacked him hard in the face. Once again his armour saved his life, but the force from the throw knocked him back down to the ground.

Sabina crept forward and revealed half a dozen throwing knives in her palm. She threw one at the distracted Tango across the road.

“Tango!” Echo screamed, warning his teammate.

Tango inched to the side, the small knife narrowly missing his unprotected leg. The knife continued forward into the supermarket, embedding itself in Aurelius' bulky forearm. The large man let out a painful grunt as the blade ripped through his skin.

Tango spun around and saw the sinister Sabina march toward Echo, who still lay on the ground. He rushed over to protect his friend, just as Sabina threw another of her weapons. Tango's reflexes were better than hers; he grabbed the handle of the projectile while it was mid-flight.

He rotated the knife and was ready to throw it back at Sabina, but his eyes widened as he saw a ball of black matter soar through the air, heading straight for him. His armour would be ineffective against an attack from Tahlia.

Sierra landed in front of him and sliced the ball in half with her short sword, saving his and Echo's lives. She ripped the knife from Tango's hand and threw it at Sabina, who managed to avoid it by a mere inch. Sierra turned right and fired several crossbow bolts at Tahlia. The woman in black skilfully evaded all of them. Sierra gave chase as Tahlia ran down the street, away from the altercation.

Echo jumped to his feet, only to feel his chest crushed by a powerful weight. He looked down and saw Aurelius' bloody arm wrapped around him, squeezing the air from his lungs.

Tango leapt forward and swung his fist at Sabina. He hit her in the jaw, delivering a sharp crack and knocking her down to the ground. He snatched a knife from her hand, then turned to assist Echo. Tango stabbed the knife into Aurelius' other forearm. The man grunted loudly again, releasing his grip on Echo.

Tango suddenly felt his life drain from his body. He struggled to breathe. His legs buckled, and he fell to his knees. Tango knew that Hana must be nearby—it was a trait of hers to absorb the energy of anyone nearby.

Echo saw a glow to his right. He tilted his head to see a golden ball of energy fly toward him. He dropped to the ground again, avoiding certain death as it sped past him.

Kai landed in front of them. Tango and Echo stared up at him, staring into the relentless eyes of the Tianzu warrior. The sight of the short-haired man brought back a wave of excruciating memories for the pair. They hadn't seen him since the day Foxtrot was killed.

Tango summoned strength he didn't know he had and launched himself

upwards. He tried to tackle Kai to the ground, but the man stepped around him effortlessly.

Echo swung his leg in an attempt to kick Kai in the face, only to have Hana appear in front of him. She was much faster than he was—she raised her knee and delivered a sharp blow to his jaw, lifting him from the ground momentarily. The mask offered little protection as he slumped back down to the concrete, unconscious.

Tango spun around, ready to attack, but was stopped by an invisible force. Once again, he felt his energy being ripped from his cells. He looked at Hana, who held one arm toward him, and held Kai's hand in the other, transmitting the energy to him.

Tango started choking on blood as his body began to wither on the inside. His terrified eyes watched on as Kai summoned another glowing ball of golden energy. Sabina and the bloodied Aurelius stood by the side of Kai and Hana, eager to see them take the lives of Tango and Echo.

Tango knew there was nothing he could do. He was paralysed, his muscles too fatigued to escape the clutches of Hana. The glowing ball grew in size, lighting up the street around them. His life would be taken from him within seconds.

In his final moments of living, he thought about Foxtrot and the fear that he must have felt as his mind left this realm.

"That will be all," Nikolai said, appearing before them. He held a hand up to Kai and Hana, signalling them to stop the attack. Sabina and Aurelius stared at their leader, confused.

Kai did not release the energy. Instead, he held it high, ready to finish Tango off. "What's the meaning of this?" he asked.

"I said that will be all," Nikolai said with a sly grin. "We shall let these two live."

Kai and Hana exchanged angered glances.

"No, we won't," Hana said.

Nikolai frowned. "Excuse me?"

"We're not letting them live. We have our orders."

"Correct—and your order is to let them live."

Hana clenched her jaw. "Don't interfere with our business," she warned.

This pleased Nikolai. "I admire your determination. But I can't allow the four of you to kill these two when they're unarmed and outnumbered. It's hardly fair. Furthermore, letting them live will prolong the game."

Kai shot him a defiant glance. "But the *Tianzu* want them dead. They're a threat to civilians." He tried to throw the energy down, but Nikolai had already grabbed his wrist.

The eyeless man glared down at him. "Let it go, I said. Release the energy."

Kai stared into Nikolai's eye sockets for several seconds before finally releasing the energy into the air. It evaporated, casting darkness in the street once again. Hana lowered her arm and stopped draining Tango's energy.

"You would be wise not to become an enemy of the *Tianzu*," Kai cautioned.

"Don't threaten me," Nikolai spat. "I want them dead too, but I've decided against it for the time being."

"We don't *want* them dead, Nikolai," Hana said. "Unlike Black Dawn, we don't kill for pleasure. The only reason we intend to kill these two is because we believe they're a threat to civilians."

Tango stared up at his captors. "You're the threat!" he screamed, his voice

weak. "You killed Foxtrot!"

Kai stood tall. "Only because your group is an enemy to civilians. We're not a threat to anyone. The Tianzu serve the people of the world. We need to protect them from rogue shengxian."

"Oh, please," Nikolai scoffed. "The Tianzu serve themselves; not the people of the world. Don't act so righteous."

Kai turned his attention to Nikolai. "If you believe that, then you know nothing of our clan."

"Of course I don't," the great man laughed. "You tend not to divulge much information."

"And why would we?" Hana defended. "I just told you that we don't kill for pleasure. Taking another's life is not something that should be done lightly. For you, it's a game. For us, it's a painful decision, even if it's necessary."

Nikolai crossed his arms across his broad chest. "Again, stop acting so righteous. You accuse my former friends here of being rogue elites, yet they're hardly a threat to you. Can you blame them for wanting to seek revenge for Foxtrot's death? Could you honestly say you wouldn't seek revenge if any of your fellow clansmen were killed?"

Kai clenched his fists. "That's enough, Nikolai. The difference between our groups is that we don't kill people idly, as both of your factions seem to do. If the Tianzu choose to eliminate one's life, it's a justified decision."

Nikolai let out a short laugh. "Justified, you say? According to whom? Tell me what cause the Tianzu need to end another's life. What are the criteria? Perhaps I should take note so I can avoid becoming your biggest enemy." He stared into the burning eyes of the two warriors. "Unless, of course, I already am the Tianzu's highest priority," he said with a grin. "That would explain why that woman in Daixuan was actually willing to agree with my request."

Kai and Hana turned and walked away, not willing to hear any more. "Again, I would advise you to be careful, Nikolai," Kai called back. "You do *not* want to make an enemy of the Tianzu."

Nikolai's smile broadened. "What a frightening prospect that would be," he muttered sarcastically to himself. He watched them walk away. "I could say the same for you two." Since first encountering the Tianzu earlier that year, he considered them to be the biggest threat of all. He knew that eliminating every one of them was an inevitable task. "That will be all this evening," he called out after the pair. "Return to base."

Kai and Hana ignored him and kept walking.

Tahlia appeared by his side, dishevelled and out of breath. She held up a bleeding arm. He offered no sympathy for her wound.

"Did you have any luck in ending Marion's life?" he asked.

Tahlia scowled at her leader and shook her head.

"Well, that hardly comes as a surprise," he bluntly admitted. "She's a lethal fighter. She doesn't hesitate, unlike yourself."

Before Tahlia could object, Nikolai had turned his attention back to Kai and Hana, who had since disappeared into the shadows of the city.

"Defiant, aren't they?" Nikolai groaned to himself. He glanced at Tahlia. "Retrieve them for me, if you would. I don't want them doing anything reckless."

Tahlia pushed aside the frustration that came from working for the negligent man. She nodded obediently, and vanished.

Nikolai looked down at Tango and Echo. "I say, they are a foolish bunch, those Tianzu. Wouldn't you agree?"

Tango slowly picked himself up from the ground, his body trembling as it desperately tried to recover from Hana's attack.

"Save your strength, my friend," Nikolai said. "I know you're keen to attack me, but my advice would be to live and fight another day."

Tango shot Nikolai a menacing look from beneath his mask, then fell back down to the ground.

Nikolai knelt down and patted him on the shoulder. "That was quite the fight the two of you put up. Perhaps you've been training after all. You seem to move a lot faster than when you and I used to spar."

He rose and casually strode back down the street with Sabina and Aurelius behind him.

Tango watched as Nikolai walked away. His life had been spared, he thought to himself, but he had been mere seconds away from death. Black Dawn and the Tianzu could have killed him in an instant. He was only spared by Nikolai and his peculiar lust for prolonging his pursuit of White Shadow.

In that moment, Tango realised his revenge against the Tianzu had been foolish. He and Echo were greatly outclassed in every way. It was ludicrous for him to think that he even stood a chance against them.

They had betrayed their comrades. And the only way White Shadow would ever succeed is if it worked as a team for the greater good.

Thirty-two

Skye came to a halt outside the courtyard of East Tower. It was a large concrete complex, with the Athenian flag and statue of the nation's first president at its centre. The area was barren and lifeless, with no one in sight. He gazed up at the foreboding tower.

"We're here," Skye said. Juliet and Romeo arrived behind him.

"*What can you see?*" Ren asked, eager for an update.

"Nothing. The lights are on, but the building is empty, as expected. They must be at the top."

"*My system says the entrance is armed. The cameras are active and the alarm is on. I'm trying to disable them now.*"

Juliet pondered. "If the entrance is armed, how did they get inside?"

"Skye, over there," Romeo said, pointing to the main entrance at the end of the courtyard. Two members of the Guard stood rigid, blocking the entrance.

Relief filled Skye's face. "They're here, Ren. The Presidential Guard is blocking the entrance."

"*Excellent!*" she exclaimed, sounding hopeful for the first time that evening. "*I've almost disarmed the security system.*"

"How are we going to get past them?" Juliet asked, motioning her head to the Guard.

"*No lethal force,*" Ren reminded before Skye could open his mouth.

"Skye, look!" Romeo shrieked.

The group saw it immediately; they had already been spotted. The two guards

began walking toward them in regimental unison.

"*What's happening?*" Ren demanded.

"They've seen us," Skye said, amazed that they were spotted so easily and quickly in the shadows.

"*Skye, get in there now! They'll warn the others! I've disarmed the building and the magnetic locks.*"

"Tahlia's coming!" Juliet screamed, pointing east, feeling her presence suddenly close in on them.

"*I'm right behind her,*" Sierra said.

The two guards broke into a sprint, barrelling towards them with no sign of slowing down. They raised their guns, holding them high.

"They're going to fire," Romeo gasped.

"Get behind me, quickly," Skye instructed. Juliet and Romeo did as he said without a second thought.

"*Skye! Get inside!*" Ren roared.

Skye's mind raced. There was no time to make a decision. His first priority was to protect Juliet and Romeo. He removed his sword and began charging toward the two guards. He had no intention of harming them, but disarming them may just keep Juliet and Romeo alive. Once the sentries were subdued, he'd be able to infiltrate the tower.

He ran forward, waiting for them to open fire. His reflexes were fast, and he was confident he could avoid being hit by their bullets.

But they made no attempt to pull the trigger.

Skye stopped in front of them and swung his sword downward in an attempt to knock their guns out of their hands. His eyes widened as he watched the blade pass through the gun as if it were smoke.

The pair stopped running. Skye looked up at them. They stood poised, rigid. Their stance was perfect, faultless.

In an instant, Skye had realised what was happening; the guards weren't real. He placed his sword handle back in its holster.

"Daye," he said, wheeling himself around to see the man standing beside him. It had been months since he'd last encountered the Tianzu warrior. They first met five years earlier, shortly after Skye's transformation. Daye never made any attempt to inflict harm on White Shadow, but Skye still considered him to be an enemy. "They're an illusion, aren't they?" he asked, despite already knowing the answer.

Daye smiled weakly and nodded. He was a powerful telepath, capable of creating any reality or illusion, and implanting it in one's mind. The image of the two members of the Presidential Guard was not a real one.

"*What's happening?*" Ren asked again, desperate for information.

"Daye's here. The guards weren't real." The illusion disappeared.

"*Good. There's still a chance the president doesn't know you're there. Get inside and kill him. Forget about Daye.*"

Skye stood confused. "Why?" he asked, not feeling threatened by the Kaipuran man, but also wondering why Daye had gone to such efforts to impose the illusion.

"I've been ordered by Nikolai to come here and protect the tower," was the simple response.

"Why would he want to *protect* the tower? The president's inside. And why

would you take orders from him?" Skye turned around to see Juliet and Romeo watching on, equally as perplexed. They could hear Skye's words through their headsets.

"To keep the peace," Daye responded with a smile. "I don't serve him, but if it means keeping everyone alive, I'll do what I can."

Skye frowned, still uncertain what to make of the situation. "You didn't answer my question. Why would you need to protect the tower? Isn't Nikolai planning to storm it and kill the president?"

Daye said nothing.

"Skye, stop talking and get inside!" Ren whined.

"Fine," he said after Daye's obvious silence. "If Black Dawn won't kill Archie, I'll do it myself." He turned and started walking toward the tower. "Juliet, Romeo, come with me." They obeyed and started crossing the courtyard.

"Skye, wait," Daye called. "Please don't kill the president."

Skye turned around, baffled by the outlandish request. "What?"

"Find forgiveness," Daye requested. "Archibald Denning has many regrets surrounding his past actions. Killing him would be unjust, and would solve nothing."

Skye stared at the man, dumbfounded. The odd plea was the last thing he was expecting tonight. He wondered if it was a feeble attempt to waste time.

Juliet and Romeo strode past Daye, who offered them a polite smile and nod.

"Is this a ploy?" Skye asked. "Are you trying to distract us while your friends take out Tango and Echo?"

"Skye, stop talking to him! Get in the tower immediately!" Ren shouted impatiently.

"Far from it," Daye admitted. "I don't wish for any harm to come to them. Or anyone, for that matter. You know I'm a man of peace."

Skye cocked his head to one side. "I don't know a thing about you, Daye. You came to me years ago and preached about living a righteous life, but then you joined Black Dawn, and your clan killed Foxtrot. So I have nothing to say to you." He turned and resumed moving toward the tower.

"I'm asking you to walk away. Leave the president be."

Skye stopped again, twitching with rage. The dialogue was beginning to infuriate him. "What are you talking about, Daye? The president needs to die."

Daye shook his head. "I admit he has caused harm in the past, but there's nothing stopping you from forgiving him and moving on. I've spoken with him, and he's quite repentant for the crimes he has committed."

Skye's jaw dropped. The words made no sense. "What do you mean, you've spoken with him? When could you have possibly spoken with him?"

"Killing him will leave the country without a leader," Daye responded, ignoring the question. "You'll do more harm than good."

Skye's patience had worn thin. He turned and resumed walking to the entrance of the tower with haste. "Let's go," he ordered.

Juliet and Romeo followed, keeping a close eye on Daye the whole way.

Skye reached for the door. Before he could grab the large handle, Daye appeared by his side once again.

"Please don't," he requested a final time.

"Why are you acting like this?" Skye asked, irritated and perplexed. "None of this makes any sense. Do you work for the Tianzu or Black Dawn?"

Daye smirked at the apt observation. "You're right—it doesn't make sense. My relationship with the Tianzu is a complicated one. But I don't trust you enough to tell you the truth of any of it. Your heart seems to be in the right place, Skye, but you're just as guilty of causing disharmony as the others. That's why I'm asking you to reconsider what you're about to do."

Skye shook his head. "You can't possibly believe that. Your clan killed our friend. You're the one causing disharmony—not me, and not White Shadow." He pushed the glass door to the lobby with excessive force, damaging its hinges.

Daye sighed. "It's unfortunate. I was hoping you wouldn't open that door."

Skye turned his back on the conversation and marched into the lifeless lobby. Juliet and Romeo followed closely behind.

"I'm trying to end this war before it begins," Daye called out. "But I'm yet to find a solution. There's no reasoning with my leader, and there's certainly no reasoning with Nikolai. I was hoping that perhaps you'd be open to helping me, but that's clearly no longer an option."

"*What's he talking about?*" Ren asked. She could barely hear the conversation.

"I have no idea," Skye admitted angrily. "I think he's stalling us. It might be a trap after all." He strode over to the lift door and pressed the button, hoping he was wrong.

"Which floor do we go to?" Romeo asked.

Skye shrugged. "We're not sure. We'll start at the top and work our way down."

"Tahlia's turning," Juliet said. "She's not coming this way anymore."

Daye's face fell, his smile replaced with a pained expression. "Oh, Skye ... if only you knew the truth. I'm so sorry that your friend lost his life at the hands of the Tianzu, but trust me when I say the clan itself is righteous in its core. If you seek revenge on them, the situation will become a never-ending cycle of hate." He looked to Juliet and Romeo. "Take care of yourselves. I'll help you where possible, but please understand what you're involving yourselves in. I only ask that you don't take sides when it comes to ideologies—that's how war begins."

"Enough!" Skye erupted, removing his sword and hurling it outwards with his mind. It stopped mere inches from Daye's face. "You're our enemy. Why shouldn't I kill you right now?"

"*Skye, stop! Don't hurt him!*" Ren shouted, begging him not to provoke the Tianzu. "*Get up there and stop the president before he leaves!*"

Daye stared into Skye's enraged eyes. "Humans are quite amazing. They're capable of promoting peace, and they are equally as capable of wreaking havoc. I thought I could find an unlikely ally in you, but I suppose I assumed incorrectly."

Juliet and Romeo watched on in horror, waiting to see what Skye would do. His sword remained firm in its position. The lift door startled him as it opened.

"Even if you were hostile toward me," Daye continued, "you couldn't harm me."

Skye stared at his foe for a moment before lowering his sword. "Another illusion," he whispered, realising that Daye wasn't even present in his physical form, which is why Juliet was unable to sense him.

Daye nodded. "It is sad that we must sometimes take such protective measures. Humans may be corrupt by nature, but I'm certain we can achieve peace if we all work hard enough, and together."

Romeo screamed at the top of his lungs. Skye turned to see that Nikolai held him high by the vest.

"Hello again," he cheerily greeted.

"No!" Skye shouted. He recalled his sword and swung it at Nikolai, careful to avoid Romeo. Nikolai moved out of the way of the blade and vanished from the room.

"Please stop attacking me," Nikolai requested. He was standing back outside in the courtyard.

Skye flew through the front door and launched himself at Nikolai, his sword held high.

"That's quite enough, brother," Nikolai said. He raised his arm and disarmed Skye, ripping the sword from his grasp. In the blink of an eye, Nikolai held the blade to Romeo's throat. "Don't come any closer."

Skye stopped instantly, not wanting to provoke his enemy.

"*Is that Nikolai?*" Ren asked, defeat in her voice.

"It is. Let him go, Nikolai."

"And why should I do that?" Nikolai asked. "Is it because you care for his life? Or is it because you have other matters you need to attend to in the tower?"

Skye narrowed his eyes at the towering man. "Both."

"Please let me go!" Romeo cried. Juliet walked back out into the courtyard and watched on, wide-eyed, as did Daye. The group stared at Nikolai, wondering what his next move would be.

"And what are you up to there, Daye?" Nikolai asked. "I thought I ordered you to attack them on sight."

Daye stared back at him. "Nikolai, please don't do this," he begged. "He's innocent."

"For now, yes. But what's to stop him from coming to kill me at a later date? Who's going to protect me then?" he asked sarcastically.

"I won't kill you!" Romeo shouted through panicked sobs. "How could I possibly be strong enough to kill you?"

Nikolai dropped him to the ground like a stone. "That's the correct answer, my boy. You won't ever be strong enough to kill me. But with proper training, you might just become lethal." He threw the sword back to Skye, who caught it with his mind.

Nikolai looked down at Romeo and watched him tremble. He could sense the young man's fear. It brought a smile to Nikolai's face. "You know," he said, "you remind me of a young Skye. Well, despite your fear, that is. You seem determined and wilful. Ready to take on the world. Ready to make a difference." He stroked his chin and stared at him thoughtfully. "Perhaps I'll let you live for the time being."

Skye, Juliet, and Daye all exhaled with relief. Romeo was still shaking. He crawled along the ground, back to safety.

"Nikolai," Skye said, changing the subject, "the president's inside. This is our last chance to stop him."

Nikolai waved his hand, dismissing the idea. "I have no intention of going in there."

Skye's face fell. "So you only came out here to attack us?"

Nikolai appeared beside him and clapped him on the back. "I admire your resolve, Skye. You came to young Roman's aid. You care more for your subordinates than I do for mine."

Skye pushed his powerful hand aside. "You didn't answer my question."

Nikolai held his hands up innocently. "I'm afraid I must confess. The only reason I brought my warriors here was to eliminate White Shadow, which, in hindsight, was unsuccessful. But then again, perhaps I could say that the evening was a success, as I've managed to once again prolong—"

"Enough!" Skye screamed. "Archie's inside the tower! Are you going to help me kill him or not?"

Nikolai looked down at Skye. He smiled broadly, then erupted in a fit of laughter. He held his hand to his head and saluted Skye, then disappeared.

Skye looked around to ensure that Nikolai was indeed gone. "Are we on our own? Is Nikolai in the tower, or has he left?"

Juliet gasped. "He's gone. But, I think the others are coming—Kai and Hana."

Skye gritted his teeth at the thought of the impending threat. "I don't know what to do."

"You've been misled; the president's not inside," Daye admitted, his expression grave.

"*Skye, enough!*" Ren screamed once again, tired of listening to the pointless dialogue. "*Get up there!*"

"Juliet and Romeo are in danger," he said into his headset. "I need to get them out of here before the others come." He turned to Daye. "And what do you mean the president isn't inside? How could you know that?" he demanded.

"Goodbye, Skye," Daye said. "You'd best get them to safety." He took one last look at the defenceless youths before his illusion vanished.

Skye stood momentarily, confused and agitated. He was uncertain what to do next. He didn't know whether or not to believe that the president wasn't inside. If he ascended the tower, he risked Juliet's and Romeo's lives. If he left, the mission would be an utter failure, but the others might just live through the night. He had to decide quickly.

Without warning, Juliet slumped to the ground, unconscious. Skye caught her before her head hit the ground. "No," he gasped. He was too late.

"Juliet, are you okay?" Romeo asked, surprised.

"It's Hana. She absorbs energy from a distance and transmits it to Kai. Romeo, get out of here now. Run!" he ordered.

It took Romeo a moment before his legs started moving. He sprinted back in the direction they came, terrified once again for his safety. His heart pounded in his chest as he ran as quickly as he could, not daring to look back.

Skye stood up, swinging his sword high as he did. He had seen the technique and tactic before, and knew to expect a deadly projectile in the form of energy, not unlike Tahlia's craft.

His inference was accurate; he swung with precision, just in time to slice the golden ball in half before it hit him. Bright yellow energy lit up the courtyard and tower before scattering on the ground like embers from a fire.

He looked around, trying to locate the hidden enemy, but Kai and Hana were nowhere to be seen.

"*Skye, are you alright? Talk to me.*"

"I'm fine. Kai and Hana are here. But I don't think the president is inside."

In the distance he saw a bright glow; another projectile was coming his way. He turned and ran, leading them away from Juliet's unconscious body and Romeo.

"That's impossible! Don't believe a word that Daye said. The itinerary said that they'd be stationed there right now."

Skye spun around and dove out of the way of the deadly yellow ball. It crashed into the concrete path, sending sparks of energy into the air.

"Skye," Sierra called, emerging from the darkness, "I've lost Tahlia."

"Incoming," he said as he watched another glowing ball of energy fly at them.

Sierra held her crossbow up and fired clean through the deadly sphere, dissipating it into the night sky.

"We need to get out of here," Skye said.

"Skye, you need to get inside that tower! The president must be in there!"

"Ren, it was all a trap!" A wave of frailty began to surge through Skye as he felt his life being sucked from his body by an invisible force. "Hana's attacking me." He forced his legs to move. He flew into the shadows, away from the threat. He found a nearby tree and took shelter.

"How could Daye possibly know that?" Ren demanded.

"I don't know. I can't talk right now. Sierra, what's your position?"

"Behind you," she uttered, startling Skye.

"We'll have to get back to the van," he said. "I feel exhausted already. We need to stay away from Kai and Hana."

"Agreed."

"Skye, no! This might be our last chance to stop Archie!"

"We need to grab Juliet," he instructed, ignoring Ren.

He turned and carefully ran out from behind the tree and back into the exposed courtyard, with Sierra inches behind. His mind felt lethargic by the sudden loss of energy. Kai dropped from out of nowhere and landed in front of them, swinging a long glowing stream of energy at them like a whip. Skye reacted instantly, throwing his blade at Kai. Sierra held her crossbow up and fired several bolts at the man.

He deflected the sword and bolts with his beam of energy, then swung it at them again. It appeared to have a mind of its own as it pierced through the air at a strange angle and headed straight for Sierra. She dropped to the ground and avoided it with ease—her speed was enough to save her life from the deadly stream.

Skye used his mind to recall his sword as it fell to the ground. He hurled it at his opponent one more time. Kai saw it coming and held the beam up. His reflexes were fast enough for him to wrap the energy around the sword, stopping it mid-flight. Skye jumped forward and grabbed the hilt. With one quick movement, he pulled the sword back and dislodged it from the beam.

Sierra fired two more bolts from her crossbow, one aimed at each of Kai's legs. He saw the attack and dragged the energy downwards, deflecting the bolts and only just stopping them from tearing through his limbs.

Skye saw the opportunity to attack and, in the blink of an eye, jumped upwards and raised his steel high, ready to slice off the head of his enemy. But Kai saw his intentions and raised his beam again, clashing with Skye's sword and countering the attack. The force sent Skye flying backwards. He turned his body in the air and landed on the ground with perfect precision.

He gasped when he felt his life drain from his body once again. His muscles went rigid as severe fatigue enveloped him. He knew Hana was sucking his energy, but he couldn't see where she was hiding. He fell to his knees, his mind and vision starting to fade.

Sierra fired another bolt at Kai, aiming straight for his face. Again, the man saw the flying metal projectile and deflected it. Sierra then turned around with lightning speed and fired another bolt behind her. This one was not aimed at Kai—it was aimed at the woman in red who suddenly appeared behind them.

Sierra hit her target perfectly. It pierced through Hana's clothing and ripped a hole through her abdomen. A horrified sound emerged from her mouth as her organs were severed by the bolt.

"No!" Kai screamed. He released his energy stream and raced over to his wife, catching her just before she fell to the ground. Blood began to pour from her wound.

Skye turned around, only half conscious, and watched him cradle her head in his arms.

"Sierra," Skye whispered, suddenly realising she had directly attacked the Tianzu. She may have just started the war that he and Ren had been trying so hard to avoid.

Kai stared down at his soulmate's bloodied torso. His eyes filled with both fear and rage.

A moment later Tahlia appeared, surprised by the sight before her. She bent over and grabbed onto them.

Sierra wasted no time in aiming her crossbow at her nemesis. Tahlia stared at Sierra abhorrently, her face contorted with rage. Sierra fired, just as the trio disappeared into the evening. The bolt flew off into the shadows.

Skye struggled to his feet, swaying a little. It took all of his might to stop from collapsing with exhaustion. "We need to keep moving," he said, barely audible.

Sierra ran over to Juliet, who still remained unconscious, and picked her up.

"Skye, are you inside the tower?"

"We were attacked," Sierra explained. "We're coming back to base."

"Out of the question!" Ren roared.

Skye shook his head, disgusted that Ren didn't even ask if they were alive. "It's over, Ren. We're coming home. It was all a trap."

"Impossible!" she shrieked. "*Black Dawn could not have possibly fabricated this itinerary. Nikolai doesn't have the abilities to do so.*"

"Ren, that's enough!" Skye barked back, expending vital energy with his rage. "We're lucky to be alive."

"Skye!" Tango called, stumbling into the courtyard with Echo draped over his shoulder. "Are you alright? Echo's unconscious."

"So is Juliet. Apart from that, we're fine," he responded.

Tango looked around. "Where's Romeo?"

He never received a response. Skye grabbed Tango and threw him roughly to the ground. Echo's body fell in a heap. "You could've killed us all!" Skye blared. "You left us to die!"

Tango shot him an angry glance. "I was doing what I thought was necessary." He climbed back to his feet and pressed his mask against Skye's. "I was trying to find Kai and Hana."

Skye kicked him hard in the abdomen, sending him to the ground once again. Skye swayed, his body at its limits. Sierra watched on, confused by the altercation.

Tango winced in pain. He looked up at Skye, his eyes burning with fury, but also knowing that Skye had every right to feel the way he did.

"It's over, Ren," Skye loudly declared. "White Shadow is officially dead. Tango and Echo abandoned us, and we were almost killed. And then Sierra shot Hana with her crossbow." He looked across at Sierra, who just stared back vacantly.

"*What?*" Ren asked, more shocked than infuriated.

"I said she shot Hana. Sierra has just declared war on the Tianzu for us. So now we're all as good as dead." He terminated the call, not willing to discuss the matter any further.

Cautiously, Romeo emerged from hiding, creeping toward the others, terrified. "Is it over?" he asked, his voice a frightened whisper.

Skye rubbed his eyes. "No, it's not over," he admitted wearily. "In fact, it's only just beginning."

"I didn't have a choice," Sierra defended. "They were trying to kill us."

Skye shook his head. "They were never going to kill us. Nikolai won't allow anyone to kill me." Part of him wondered if he even believed his own words. Kai had launched the spheres of energy with deadly accuracy, and had certainly shown no signs of feigning an attack.

"But they were trying to kill *us*, Skye!" Tango bellowed back. "We have a right to defend ourselves!"

Skye stared down at his teammate. "Is that so? And do you also have the right to abandon your friends? If we had stayed together, they wouldn't have attacked!"

Silence fell across the courtyard. White Shadow stared at each other, uncertain of what to do, or what to make of the situation.

Skye stared up at East Tower, unclear as to how they were able to fall for the trap. It suddenly dawned on him that their mission was over, and that Archibald was going to be sworn in as the ninth president of Athenia. Once in office, he'd pick up from where he left off last year with Paul, and spread heinous propaganda once again. The beautiful nation was about to enter its darkest hour yet.

"Let's go home," Skye murmured as he started walking back to the van. Sierra followed, with Juliet still draped over her shoulder. Tango lifted himself from the ground and picked up Echo. Romeo stood motionless, in awe of what he had just witnessed.

"We're all as good as dead," Skye moaned aloud one last time.

Thirty-three

The van drove along in silence. Juliet remained in a deep sleep on the floor while Sierra drove back to their warehouse headquarters in Nanping.

Romeo sat in the back, exhausted and petrified with fear. The whole day had been a struggle for him, and it was certainly not getting any easier. "What was that?" he asked while removing his mask with a trembling hand. "What just happened?"

Skye rubbed the fatigue from his eyes. He didn't have the strength to be a mentor to Romeo right now, but nevertheless leaned over and placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "It was a trap, and they had planned it from the beginning."

"We were almost killed ... again."

"I know," Skye acknowledged. "And I'm afraid this is the life we live. Any of us could be killed at any time. This is why we always stick together." He scowled at Tango, who sat over Echo's unconscious body.

"We found Kai and Hana. Or, they found us," Tango spoke through gritted teeth, justifying their absence. "I think it's safe to say we're at war now, Skye." Tango glared at Sierra, trying to shift the blame to her.

"Ren wants to know our whereabouts," Sierra said, adding to the conversation. Her comm was still linked.

"Tell her we're on our way home," Skye said.

"We're on our way home," she repeated. Seconds passed. "She's ordering us to go back to the tower."

Skye reached across and waved his hand across Sierra's wrist communicator, terminating the call.

"How could they have planned it, Skye?" Tango asked, changing the conversation away from one of blaming each other.

Skye shook his head. "I don't know. It's impossible." He looked out the front window and stared absent-mindedly at the city streets. "Maybe Nikolai somehow fabricated the itinerary to lure us to the tower."

Romeo put his head in his hands and started to weep to himself. It was too much for him to bear. Skye clenched his fists, annoyed. Keeping his team in check was already beyond difficult, let alone tending to Romeo's innocent needs. Once again, Skye shook his rage off. He climbed into the back of the van and put his arm around him in an attempt to comfort the distraught young man.

"I know it's hard," he said, trying to empathise. He felt compassionate earlier in the evening, but now lacked the time, strength, and patience to lead. "It's a lot to take in. But I promise you'll soon understand everything. And you'll become a much stronger person than ever before."

Romeo wiped away his tears and groaned loudly, trying to compose himself in front of the others. "How can you be so ... calm? You look like it doesn't even phase you. Is it because you know they won't kill you?"

"No. Far from it, in fact. Nikolai won't kill me, but Kai and Hana are a little more independent with their thinking. Nikolai would rip them to shreds if they harmed me, but it doesn't exactly mean they're his most obedient soldiers either." The attack certainly came as a surprise to Skye, but he knew that it wouldn't be unlike Kai and Hana to defy Nikolai. The thought of the Tianzu actually obeying Nikolai was ludicrous.

Romeo looked up at his senior. "So how do you do it? You seem so normal."

"Practise," he replied, "training, time, growth. Remember, you've come this far, so it's only natural for you to evolve even further. Don't be too hard on yourself for being human. After all, you lived a typical life a few weeks ago. It's a difficult change for anyone to grasp."

Romeo sighed. "It just doesn't seem real. I feel like I'm in a dream."

"It hasn't sunk in yet. And it probably won't sink in any time soon either." He cut the conversation short, and climbed back into the front of the van.

Romeo began to calm down a little after revealing his feelings.

"Were you like me?" he asked. "When you first changed, did you find it hard to cope?"

"Of course," Skye replied, secretly hoping the questions would end. His mind was too drained and confused to discuss the matter. "But it was a little easier for me because I wasn't pursued by Black Dawn. So I can imagine how hard it is for you at the moment." He turned and looked down at Juliet, who breathed deeply in and out. "She had a very hard time coping too. She's a little younger than yourself, so it was

especially hard. But now she's doing fantastically. And she's really training herself to control her ability.”

Skye slunk deeper into his chair, reminding himself that the inauguration was getting closer with every second that passed. He was confident they would have killed Archie by now, but the opportunity had since been lost. The prospect of success was rapidly deteriorating.

His vibrating comm caught his attention. He didn't bother to answer Ren's call, as she refused to believe that the president was not present. Instead, he closed his eyes and rested his head against the back of the chair, impatiently waiting to return home.

Thirty-four

Hana gulped in deep breaths of air, calming her body and nerves from the near-fatal attack on her life. Usually a careful and adept fighter, she had greatly underestimated Sierra.

Kai examined her abdomen and the deep wound that Tahlia held her hand over. Within seconds, the gash had been healed, leaving a dark scar.

“Thank you,” Kai said, not normally willing to show gratitude to Black Dawn.

Tahlia offered a courteous smile, a little surprised to hear the words. She walked across to the large window of Nikolai's penthouse in West Tower and gazed at the city below. In the heat of the earlier moment, it seemed to be the safest and easiest place for the three of them to retreat to. The villa was far too crowded, and the risk of the president's staff seeing the bleeding Hana would have raised many questions.

Kai held the crossbow bolt up, carefully studying the deadly projectile. “That woman will die for this,” he declared. “I'll kill her myself.”

Tahlia spun around, pleased to hear the warning. “That would be wonderful,” she admitted. Nikolai had hardly offered her the protection which he had promised. Ending Sierra's life would bring Tahlia a great deal of peace.

Kai embraced his wife, wrapping his arms around her and resting his head against hers. “How could you be so careless?” he asked, more relieved than aggravated. “You should have stayed hidden.”

She nodded with agreement, disappointed in her actions. After everything she'd endured in her long life, a simple and honest mistake had almost resulted in her death.

“We need to kill her, now,” Kai said again. “No more games. No more waiting. Tahlia, where do we find them?”

The woman in black shook her head. “We can't kill her right now. We need to ask Nikolai what he wants to do.”

“I don't care what he wants,” was the abrupt dismissal. “They've just attacked the Tianzu. Once I report this to my leader, they'll all be killed. Tell me where to find them. Where's their base?”

Tahlia had to think carefully before she chose her response. She wanted Sierra dead more than anything, but an unauthorised attack would not sit well with the strange and sporadic Nikolai. He had warned on several occasions to only kill when ordered to. “I can't say,” she finally said.

He rose slowly and marched across to her, almost pressing his face against

hers. "These people are dangerous, Tahlia. And Nikolai is no leader. He orders us to attack the others, but then not to harm them. What's the purpose of issuing such a command? Tell me."

She frowned, uncertain what to say. While she swore allegiance to Nikolai, she hardly felt any solidarity working underneath him. "I don't know," she admitted.

Kai shook his head, frustrated. "It's all a game to him. Can't you see what he's doing? He's using you all to keep White Shadow at bay, but he secretly has no intention of killing anyone. If you keep this up, you'll all die. He's playing a dangerous game with these warriors and the lives of the Athenian people." He walked back across the room and crouched by Hana's side. "We need to stop the others. I don't care what Nikolai wants—tonight I was prepared to kill."

Tahlia gasped. "Did you try to kill Skye?"

He nodded. "Of course. They all need to die. They're a threat to humanity."

Her jaw dropped upon hearing the revelation. "If you harm Skye, Nikolai will kill you."

Hana glared at Tahlia with vengeful eyes. "I doubt that."

The confidence of the Tianzu came as a surprise to Tahlia, especially when Hana was foolish enough to let her guard down. "I think you underestimate Nikolai. He's the most dangerous person you will ever meet."

Hana stared back at her. "He's not more powerful than the Tianzu."

Kai turned to his wife. "We need to find them," he said. He purposely said it in Shizugo so Tahlia wouldn't understand.

"Of course," Hana replied in her native tongue. "This clan is a far bigger threat than Raien realised."

"I don't understand why he'd order for us to eliminate only one of our enemies per day. None of it makes sense."

"What are you talking about?" Tahlia asked, unable to hide her curiosity.

Kai stepped forward again. "Tell us where to find White Shadow," he said in Alexan, changing the subject to the more pressing matter.

"I already told you, I can't," Tahlia defended, aggravated by his repeated demand.

"If we don't stop them, they'll kill innocent civilians. Is that what you want?"

"If you condone taking innocent lives, then you're an enemy of the Tianzu too," Hana added.

"I'm not your enemy," Tahlia said. "But I can't tell you where to find them. You'll need to ask Nikolai." She stared back at them, wondering if they would turn on her.

"Why do you serve Black Dawn?" Kai asked. "Do you actually agree with their cause?"

"Yes," she nodded. "I agree with Nikolai's view on peace."

"His peace involves killing anyone who stands in his way," Hana hissed. "Don't be a fool and think that he won't kill you if he needs to."

Tahlia frowned, confused by the conversation. "But you want to kill White Shadow."

"It's not the same," Kai said, his tone serious. "We kill to protect our clan and innocent people. Nikolai kills to protect himself."

Silence filled the room. Kai and Hana glared at Tahlia, waiting for her to speak, but she kept her mouth closed. She was reluctant to preach Nikolai's credo too proudly and unintentionally instigate a skirmish with the duo.

“Perhaps you could join the Tianzu,” Kai suggested. “We'll happily eliminate Sierra for you. All we ask is that you disclose her whereabouts, and that you devote yourself to a life of protecting others.”

Tahlia's jaw dropped. The offer took her by surprise. She was desperate to rid herself of the threat of Sierra, but Nikolai had told her repeatedly not to trust a word the Tianzu said. “I'm sorry—I can't.”

Kai stared back at her with a smirk. “Very well.”

The room fell silent once again. Tahlia looked into the eyes of Kai and Hana, wondering if their offer was indeed a genuine one. “We should return to the villa,” she suggested, wanting to put the events of the evening behind her. “Nikolai will want to know where we are.”

“Yes, we should update him on our attack of the others. I'll tell him that we tried to kill Skye.”

Tahlia's eyes widened with fear. “Please don't. I told you—he's far more powerful than you think.”

Kai grinned. “And the Tianzu are far more powerful than *you* think.”

Thirty-five

Nikolai paced back and forth in his suite impatiently, staring down at the vacant beach below. Every few moments or so he would glare at the time on his wrist comm.

“Where are they?” he asked himself, his voice lacking any genuine worry. “I can sense that they're still in the city. Surely nothing has happened to them; I can sense Skye and the others heading south.”

Sabina, Aurelius, and Night all ignored him. They watched on as his paranoia increased.

“What are they up to?” Nikolai asked aloud. “And where's Daye? I can't sense him anywhere. Is he meeting with his Tianzu comrade again?”

“If you're concerned for Tahlia,” Night interrupted, “why don't you transport yourself back into the city and ask them what's taking so long?”

Nikolai raised an eyebrow. “I think not, Night. I don't take orders from the likes of you.” He stopped pacing and stood in his usual spot by the window. “Besides, I'm not necessarily concerned for Tahlia's well-being. I just don't like to think that she's conspiring against me with the Tianzu.”

Night sniggered from his spot on Nikolai's chaise. “Stop complaining.”

Nikolai growled as he spun around and looked down at the lazy Night. “I don't understand how many times I need to ask you to stop lying on my chaise! You've completely ruined it now! I can smell it from here.” He gritted his teeth as he tried to think of a way to remove Night from the furniture without coming into physical contact with him.

The arrival of Tahlia, Kai, and Hana took the room by surprise. She transported the three of them to the centre of the suite.

“That took far too long!” Nikolai shouted. “I told you to return to base at once!”

“Sorry,” Tahlia said. “Marion shot Hana.”

Hana showed the scar to him, substantiating the excuse.

Nikolai stared down at the dark mark on her abdomen. “Twice in one day,” he

said, sounding almost as though he admired the wound Sierra had inflicted. “I daresay that she's becoming a better marksman by the hour. And it serves you right for disobeying me anyway.”

“You need to kill her, right now,” Kai warned, furious that his wife almost died in front of him. “She's far too dangerous.”

“I will be doing nothing of the sort. I have no qualms with the woman,” he responded, not appreciating being given orders by his lowly subordinate.

“But she's a threat to this organisation. Isn't that what your credo is—to kill anyone who stands in your way?”

Nikolai beamed. “To an extent, absolutely. But she's not an idealistic warrior. I assume that she merely attacked you out of defence. I'm sure her mind could be just as easily moulded to suit Black Dawn's ideals.”

“I agree with Kai,” Tahlia said. “She's not going to stop until I'm dead. We can't wait around for her to hunt us all down one by one.”

Nikolai let out a short laugh. “Well, wouldn't that be a pity?” he asked sarcastically. “But unfortunately, it doesn't fit in with my plan.” He began to pace around the room again. “We're going to wait until Archibald is sworn into office. Once I feel he's safe enough, we'll move on and begin the next stage. How does that sit with you all?”

Hana exchanged a curious glance with her husband. “What next stage?” she asked, probing for information.

“Oh, the next stage is a rather grandiose one. Something tells me that you'll find it to be somewhat enthralling.” He glared at them with sinister eye sockets.

“We need to kill that woman,” Kai repeated. “We need to kill all of them right now. They're a threat.”

Nikolai stood tall, unopposed. “I heard you the first time. And as I advised you a moment ago, I'll be giving no such order tonight. My priority is Archibald's safety.”

Tahlia turned her head to Kai and Hana; both of them stood with clenched fists.

“But you just ordered us to go into the city and kill them,” Tahlia said, siding with her unlikely Tianzu allies.

“Indeed I did. But the day is now over. I'll reassess the situation in the morning.”

“You need to kill them now, or our arrangement will be terminated,” Hana warned. “We'll return to Shizudera, and you'll be left to guard your president yourself.”

A sly smile crept across Nikolai's face. He was pleased with the threat. “Interesting. This whole time I thought you were mindless soldiers who only took orders from your superiors back on the mainland, but perhaps you can think for yourselves after all. That being said, however, your threat is meaningless to me, and I cordially reject it.”

Kai turned and grabbed the door handle to the bedroom, where he believed Archie rested. “You need to kill the others, or you won't have a president,” he cautioned.

Nikolai's face fell, his mood shifting in an instant. “I see,” he muttered. “Well, then I thank you for showing me your true allegiance. But I'm afraid I must inform you that you've cornered yourself in this instance.” In the blink of an eye, he stood in front of Kai, towering over the shorter man.

“The president is not here,” he continued. “You've proven me correct in that

I'm not to trust any of the Tianzu. And even if he were in there, you'd never harm an innocent civilian, as that is your highest law. Furthermore, you forgot that I can read your intent, and I knew that you'd never follow through with such an empty threat. So perhaps you should think twice before showing off your weaknesses."

Kai stared up at him and smirked. He had been instructed by his Tianzu leaders to gather as much information on Black Dawn as he could to prove how much of a credible threat Nikolai was. In this moment, Kai knew that Nikolai was now the largest threat the Tianzu had faced in decades. "The reason why we were so late returning here tonight is because I tried to kill your friend Skye."

Silence fell among the group. Several moments passed before anyone moved. Nikolai grabbed Kai roughly by his shirt and threw him against the wall. Instinctively, Hana held her arms up, ready to come to her husband's aid and absorb Nikolai's energy, only to be stopped by the cool metal of the dagger that Sabina held to her throat. Aurelius grabbed Hana's arms and held them pinned.

The door opened slowly as Daye walked in. His jaw dropped when he saw the sight of his two fellow Tianzu being restrained in front of him.

"The lazy vagabond returns!" Nikolai exclaimed, dropping Kai back to the floor and marching over to the newcomer. "And just what took *you* so long to return here?" he demanded.

"I had to walk," the peaceful man responded simply, unsure what to make of the strange situation.

"Perhaps. Or perhaps you were busy liaising with your friend from the city earlier. Raien is his name, is it not?"

He made no attempt to respond to the question.

Nikolai turned around and stared at Kai and Hana with a grin. "I can sense your confusion. Is it because you're wondering how it is that I know Raien's name?" He'd overheard the word 'Raien' mentioned a few times during the past few months, but only in passing, and it was usually nothing above a whisper. He kept this information to himself however, hoping that the Tianzu would be foolish enough to reveal more secrets in the same manner. Aside from the name of another Tianzu though, he'd uncovered little else.

"Where are you, Daye?" Nikolai asked, eyeing him up and down. "I can sense that you're not really here. Why would you only send an apparition of yourself? Do you not feel safe enough to house your physical self here?"

"Not quite," Daye said.

"I see," Nikolai laughed. "And why the change of heart? You were physically present here earlier today."

Daye looked back at him and said nothing.

Nikolai placed his hands on his hips. "Well, it's nice to know that the three of you don't trust Black Dawn. All the more reason for Black Dawn not to trust the Tianzu." He turned and surveyed the room. "Anyone who dares to harm Skye or Ren in any way will be killed," he asserted loudly, changing the subject to a more pressing matter.

Kai and Hana glared back at the man with dark eyes. "You're quickly becoming an enemy of the Tianzu," Kai warned, unimpressed by Nikolai's disparaging behaviour and attitude. The pair remained resilient, knowing they were outnumbered in the room. They'd have to wait and endure the antics of the dangerous man for at least another day or two. Raien earlier mentioned that he may order them to return home after the inauguration.

Nikolai sniggered. "Thank you for the reminder, but frankly, I don't care for the Tianzu," he dismissed. "Now, it's beginning to get rather late. We should all retire. It has been a long and laborious day, and I imagine tomorrow is set to be an eventful one as well."

Sabina and Aurelius filed out of the room silently. Kai shot Nikolai a final defiant glance before following the others out of the room. Hana and Daye left too, each walking down the corridor toward their respective living quarters.

"You there," Nikolai said, pointing to Night, "don't even *think* about staying inside the villa tonight."

Night smirked. "Offended you, have I?"

"Yes—your odour offends me. There'll be a lot of staff stationed here tomorrow. I can't risk having to evacuate the building due to your stench."

"A pity," Night said, feigning sadness, "I was looking forward to a peaceful sleep."

"You don't need the comfort. Now, out," he raised a finger and pointed to the door.

"As you wish." Night's body cracked as he limped out of the suite.

Tahlia looked to her superior once the room was empty. "Should I retrieve the president? Or should I leave him in the bunker?"

Nikolai stroked his chin. "Leaving him in there for the night is tempting. It's what he deserves, after all. But I suppose I should allow him to have a good night's rest." He glanced at his comm one last time. "The inauguration looms. I'll need him to be ready."

Tahlia closed the door to the suite once Night had vanished down the hallway. "You know, the Tianzu are right. We should kill Marion."

Nikolai groaned. "Not you too. Do I not deserve a moment of peace in my own home?" He strode across to his armchair and sat comfortably in it. He grabbed a glass from the table beside him and half filled it with whiskey. "Why is it that I spend every second of every day tending to the needs of you people?"

Tahlia shot him a disgusted look. "That's enough, Nikolai," she said, the words escaping her mouth before she could consider what she was saying. "If you want to run this country, you need to be prepared for these things." She flinched for a brief moment, wondering how Nikolai would react to what she said. She didn't mean for it to sound as harsh as it did, but nor was she willing to take it back.

Tahlia breathed a sigh of relief when she saw Nikolai smile.

"Right you are," he said. "If I truly am to consider myself the leader of a nation, I suppose I'll need to be able to handle the demands of everyone." He took a sip from his glass. "As for your first suggestion though, the answer is no. I won't be giving the order to kill Marion."

Tahlia squeezed her eyes shut, the answer hardly surprising her. "Well, at least stop provoking the Tianzu then."

Nikolai laughed. "I hardly consider them a threat. They act like such a virtuous clan, but in actuality they're nothing more than a rabble of people who have squandered their chances of enlightenment." He rose and stood by the window, staring down at the dark beach and ocean below. "And once the president is sworn into office, and is safe, I'll see to it that every one of the Tianzu is dead."

Kai sat on his small bed, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"You shouldn't have threatened to kill the president," Hana said. "It made us

look weak.”

“I know,” he sighed. “It was a mistake.” He turned his attention to Daye, whose illusion stood in the corner of the room. “Did you meet with Raien again?”

Daye nodded. “I did. He said he may go to Nikolai's penthouse tomorrow to look for information.”

Kai shook his head. “He's not going to find anything there. He's wasting his time. What did he say about eliminating White Shadow?”

Daye's body tensed; he was always reluctant to discuss such a delicate topic. “The orders remain unchanged at this point.”

Kai bit his lip and paced around the windowless room. It was tiny; one of the smallest in the villa, yet it somehow housed all three of the Tianzu. It was no secret that Nikolai did not think very highly of their existence.

“What is Raien thinking?” Kai muttered, no longer able to keep his feelings to himself.

“His strategy is not very effective,” Hana agreed. “We could have easily eliminated two of White Shadow earlier, but Raien insists on killing them one at a time.”

Kai stood by the door and held his ear to it, ensuring that no one was listening. “It's not in our ways to defy our leader, but I'm not quite certain what Raien is trying to achieve by doing this.”

“We should meet with him tomorrow. If we tell him we were attacked, he might amend the order so that we can eliminate White Shadow immediately, and in its entirety.”

Kai and Hana froze as they heard footsteps along the carpet outside. The shengxian were able to hear what would usually be inaudible to most.

Kai stood aside from the door just as Nikolai shoved it open. The man stood tall, his whiskey glass in hand.

“Can we help you?” Kai asked.

Nikolai smiled. “No more chitchat,” he said. “I believe my orders were to retire for the evening. Get some rest.” He flicked the light switch off, sending the room into darkness, then slammed the door shut behind him.

Kai placed his ear to the door again and waited until Nikolai had retreated back down the hall. “I can't stand this prison any longer.”

“Two more nights,” Hana reminded him, “then we may be returning home.”

“Maybe. Although we shouldn't be so certain. How do we know Raien won't order us to stay here longer?”

While Kai and Hana vented their anger, Daye stood alone in the corner, afraid of the looming war. When he met with Raien earlier, the Shizuno man was just as eager as ever to have White Shadow eliminated. Daye knew that he was running out of time. There were countless lives at risk, and he would not be able to save them all.

Not by himself, anyway.

But he was alone in his quest, with no one to turn to for help, it seemed.

Thirty-six

The van stopped outside the warehouse. Sierra shut the engine off. She

grabbed Juliet from the back, who still slept, and took her inside. Skye and Romeo followed not far behind, along with Tango and Echo, who had since woken up. The sombre group opened the front door and slowly marched in, their morale evidently low.

Ren was waiting for them inside. She stared at Sierra with fierce eyes. "What have you done?"

Sierra ignored the question and carried Juliet to her bed.

Skye thought it best to speak first in an attempt to diffuse the already tense situation. "The Tianzu attacked. She didn't have a choice," he admitted.

Ren cocked her head with surprise. "Don't defend her actions, Skye. She has just single-handedly killed us all!"

"No, she hasn't. It's obvious—the Tianzu want us dead. They attacked us three months ago, and they attacked us again tonight. It's time we start defending ourselves."

"He's right, Ren," Tango chimed in, siding with Skye for the first time in quite a while. "I know you're trying to prevent a war with the Tianzu, but I think you're actually just postponing the inevitable."

"Irrelevant," Ren dismissed. "Your priority was killing the president. Instead, you were distracted by Daye, and you wasted enough time to allow them to attack you."

"I had to defend myself," Sierra muttered as she returned to the room.

"No, you didn't!" Ren screamed back with fury. "You don't *have* to attack them! We all know you're the strongest one here, and you could have easily exercised restraint."

Skye clenched his jaw. "You're wrong, Ren. The Tianzu are clearly instigating war. You should stop kidding yourself."

Ren stared at him condescendingly. "The only one kidding themselves is you, Skye."

Tango walked in between the pair and held his hands up. "That's enough, Ren. Skye and Sierra aren't to blame. Echo and I abandoned them."

Skye stared at his teammate, dumbfounded. The confession took him completely by surprise.

"We left to find the Tianzu," Tango continued. "And we did find them, but we didn't stand a chance against them. We're lucky to be alive."

Ren rolled her eyes and buried her head in her hands. "You're only just realising that now?" she groaned. "I've been telling you that for months!"

"I know," he agreed. "I know. And I'm sorry. It's just that ..." he paused and read Echo's face, knowing that he was thinking the same thing. "Since Foxtrot was killed, I just ..." Tears welled in his eyes as the admission came out. "I don't know what I'm doing."

Ren frowned and stood with her hands on her hips, curious to see where his speech was going.

Tango was unable to hold on to his emotions any longer. He lowered himself to his knees and sobbed loudly. "I'm so sorry," he cried. "Foxtrot was our brother ... and now he's gone. We let our brother down."

Echo came to his aid and knelt beside him. Skye and Ren exchanged shocked glances. Since Foxtrot's death, none of them had ever once opened up about their true feelings. They simply moved on to the mission of trying to locate Archie, and never allowed themselves time to grieve.

"It's okay," Skye said. "I'm sorry too." He lowered his hand and helped Tango to his feet.

Ren looked into Tango's tearful eyes and saw the pain that he felt. It was pain that she felt too, but she had decided months ago to accept that she couldn't bring their comrade back. All she could do was stop Archibald to ensure Athenia's safety.

Tango wiped his eyes. "I'm sorry," he apologised again. "I've been obsessed with the Tianzu for the last three months. But when Kai was ready to kill me earlier, I realised that I'd made a mistake. The only way we're going to succeed now is if we stay together."

Skye couldn't believe his ears. He was unable to hide the smile from his face as the words were said. He placed a brotherly arm around Tango. "Agreed," he said.

Romeo watched on, confused, but happy to see White Shadow finally get along. In his short time there, he had wondered on several occasions how they were possibly able to function as a team.

Ren looked to the floor and smirked, also relieved to hear the confession. "You're forgiven," she said, pleased to have her teammate back at long last. "I know you were only doing what you thought was right, and I can't blame you for that." The smile on her face quickly faded. "But it's too late. We missed our only opportunity to stop the president."

"Maybe not," Skye said. "There's still time to find him."

Ren glanced down at her comm. "The inauguration is less than thirty-three hours away. It's not much time, Skye."

"I'm not giving up," he said confidently. "I know you don't believe that Nikolai lured us to East Tower, but it's the only explanation I can think of right now."

Ren turned away from the group and took a deep breath. "I believe you, Skye. I know the president wasn't there."

Skye's jaw dropped, as did Tango's and Echo's.

Ren turned back around, reluctant to admit what she was about to say. "Nikolai emailed me ten minutes ago. He congratulated us for putting up a good fight tonight."

Skye stared back at her, astonished. "What did he say about Archie?"

"He said he purposely created the itinerary so that we'd go to East Tower. He admitted it."

Skye looked down at the ground, unable to comprehend the words. He theorised that Nikolai had somehow planned the entire evening's events, but wasn't sure if his mind had actually believed it. "How? How did he do it?"

"He didn't say," Ren shrugged. "Nikolai is no hacker. He must have an inside source. Or maybe he paid someone to do it."

"Unbelievable," Tango growled. "He purposely lured us into a trap to kill us. And then he let us go."

"It's all a game," Echo said. "He's playing with our lives."

"I'm not surprised," Skye said. "None of us should be. But Tango is right in saying that we need to work together, otherwise we're all as good as dead. We have three enemies right now: the president, Black Dawn, and the Tianzu. We need to take them all out."

Tango and Echo nodded. "We should start with the president," Tango said, finally agreeing with the mandate. "We only have one day until the dawn inauguration."

"I'll help you," Sierra added.

Ren raised an eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

"I said I'll help you. I can help to find your president and Black Dawn, and the Tianzu."

Ren stared at her, even more puzzled.

"I know what you're fighting for," Sierra continued. "I understand your cause. But I need your help finding Tahlia." She looked down at her crossbow, which was still fastened to her left arm. "I thought I could kill her on my own, but ..."

"It's impossible?" Skye suggested, finishing the sentence for her. "I can imagine. We have the same problem when it comes to killing Nikolai."

Sierra offered a weak smile. "Yes, it's impossible," she admitted. "I can't get anywhere near Tahlia without her sensing my presence. I have no idea how to stop her."

"You were close earlier today," Tango said, thinking back to the short battle outside the promenade in Shangwu.

"I know. It's the closest I've ever gotten to killing her. Which is why I need your help. Tahlia will still be my highest priority, but I'll help you kill your enemies if you can help me kill mine."

"Absolutely," Skye said without even considering the proposal. His smile grew even further. "We'll help you in every way we can if you help us back."

Sierra walked toward the group. "If the Tianzu are coming for us, we should guard the warehouse. I'll take the first watch." Before anyone could agree with her, she had raced outside and launched herself onto the roof of the base.

Ren and Skye looked at one another, their minds still reeling from the conversation taking place. It had been so long since they were all able to function as one. They both smiled with relief.

"So what's the plan?" Romeo asked.

"Rest," Skye instructed. "I'll take the second watch. I doubt Nikolai would allow anyone to attack, but Sierra's right—we can't take any chances."

"And I'll keep digging into Archie's itinerary," Ren said. "If we're lucky, I might just find something useful. And hopefully authentic, this time."

Tango and Echo marched off to their living quarters with Romeo, leaving Skye and Ren alone in the remainder of the warehouse.

"I'm a little shocked," Skye said, laughing softly.

Ren smiled back. "As am I. I wasn't expecting everyone to finally agree for a change."

"I suppose they all realised the dangers they face. None of us are safe, and we all need to work together if we're going to survive, as Tango said."

"But our main priority is still the president. We're not going to look for Nikolai or the Tianzu until Archibald Denning is dead. Agreed?"

Skye nodded. "Agreed," he said. He reached his arm out and shook hands with Ren.

"Then White Shadow is back," she said with a grin.

Thirty-seven

Sierra sat atop the roof of the warehouse, watching the quiet world around her. It was well after midnight, and Athenia had shut down for another day. In the

distance, the towering skyscrapers of Shangwu appeared lifeless and abandoned.

Skye leapt onto the roof and sat alongside her. "I take it you haven't seen anyone?"

"No."

"I didn't think so. Juliet is still sleeping, so we can't use her tracking ability. You and I will just have to guard everyone the traditional way."

The moon was bright, flooding the roof and surrounding woodlands with a white glow.

"Earlier you said that you understand our cause," Skye said. "Why the sudden change of heart?"

She shrugged. "I finally decided to accept that I can't kill Tahlia by myself. It might be a wise move to work alongside you."

Skye smiled. "Thank you. It's a relief to have a functioning team again."

Sierra paused, her eyes growing distant for a brief moment. "I'm sorry about what happened in the woods before."

Skye held a hand up. "Don't be. I'm the one who should be apologising. I know that none of us have been very welcoming. Our group has been divided since Foxtrot was killed."

"You're forgiven. But I still regret what I did. I shouldn't be taking my hatred out on anyone except Tahlia. It's just that ... what she did to me ... it's unforgivable."

"It's okay," Skye said, "you don't have to tell me what she did. I admit that I'm very curious to know, but it's also none of my business."

"I'll tell you one day," she said. "But not right now. It's far too painful to even think about."

"Well, if you ever want to tell us, you can. Only when you're ready though."

Sierra nodded. "Thank you. It's not a pleasant story. In a past life, Tahlia and I once fought for the same cause. In fact, it was a similar cause to White Shadow's. Maybe that's another reason why I'm happy to help you. We can't stand for corruption."

"No, we can't," Skye agreed. "Archie needs to go. And time is running out."

Sierra looked at the black trees around them. "What will you do if you can't stop him in time? You only have one more day."

Skye cringed. He needed no reminder of how long until the inauguration began. "I don't know. Hopefully we won't have to find out." He turned and faced her. "What about you? What will you do after Tahlia is dead?"

Sierra stared blankly at her surroundings. "I'm not sure. I think about it quite often. I could always return to my original cause. There's still plenty of work to do back in Viesta Roux. But then again, maybe there's no point. Everyone I cared about is now dead." Her eyes became distant and began to well with tears. "The only cause I believe in now is killing Tahlia."

Skye offered her a weak smile. It brought him relief that he finally felt close to her to be able to converse about deeper issues. No doubt the others would still tiptoe around her with their opinions, so as to not enrage Sierra, but Skye was no longer afraid of her. Like himself, she was a shengxian who had her own feelings, and was just as vulnerable to the stresses of everyday life.

"Tonight reminded me how dangerous the situation is," Skye said, changing the subject back to the one plaguing his mind. "Kai and Hana were willing to kill. Maybe my immunity from Nikolai clouded my judgement after all."

"Maybe," she agreed.

It was liberating for Skye to express himself freely, but he was reluctant to speak his mind constantly, lest he risked turning into Nikolai, a man who spoke whatever peculiar thoughts popped into his head at any given time. Of course, Skye also knew that Nikolai, who was virtually immortal, need not concern himself with offending anyone.

"I don't understand any of it, Sierra. What went wrong tonight?"

"You're confused that we were attacked?"

"No," he corrected. "I'm confused because Nikolai admitted that he fabricated the president's itinerary. How could he have possibly done that?"

She shrugged lightly, offering no explanation.

"I wonder where the president is right now," he thought aloud.

"Maybe Nikolai killed him?"

Skye let out a sarcastic laugh. "I doubt that. Nikolai hates Archie even more than I do. If he had killed him, he'd probably be knocking on our door with an expensive bottle of wine in one hand, and a severed head in the other." The image almost brought a smirk to his worried face. "Besides, Nikolai has never killed anyone. If anything, he would've ordered Night to do it for him."

Skye continued staring up at the beautiful moon. The moon was of significant importance for his home country, Xiaguo. The ancient imperial capital was named Yuejing after the Xiayu word for the moon. Even the continent itself was, still to this day, referred to as Yuezhou.

"But it doesn't explain how he created that itinerary," he continued.

"Maybe Nikolai's working with the president," Sierra suggested.

"I doubt that very much," he scoffed at the ludicrous accusation. "Nikolai has been searching for that man for a year. The last thing he would be doing is entering into a partnership with him."

"You're the one who's always saying how Nikolai is playing a game with you. Maybe this is all one of his plans?" She looked at him with serious eyes.

"No. Impossible. I know Nikolai better than anyone else."

Sierra looked down at her wrist comm and observed the time. "Since you're here now, I'm ending my shift," she said, no longer interested in listening to Skye ramble on. Before Skye could even bid her goodnight, she had leapt over the edge.

He lay alone on the slanted roof, still staring up at the celestial body above. It often brought him a sense of tranquillity whenever he felt stressed. He permitted himself a large smile as he thought about the image of Nikolai and Archibald in the same room, discussing politics and philosophy. He let out a tired laugh as he considered how ridiculous a thought it was. Nikolai detested Archibald for what he had done; Nikolai was never the same after the riots last year. He had become audacious, maniacal.

If it were true though, he pondered, it would be the perfect opportunity for Nikolai to come into power. The great man had often spoken to Skye of power and control, and how to wield it. After the riots, he told Skye that people have the freedom to think, and are therefore dangerous, and consequently need to be controlled. This was his sadistic vision of a utopia, albeit an immoral and unjust one. But Nikolai, despite being physically strong and intelligent, wielded no political power, so befriending the leader of a nation would certainly be an easy way to exert one's authority in a clandestine manner.

As the moon disappeared behind a dark cloud, the smile on Skye's face began to fade. Suddenly, he felt as though he couldn't breathe. The air had been

knocked from his lungs. His body began to tremble, his mind began to race. He lifted himself to a sitting position.

"No," Skye whispered, shaking his head from side to side. It's impossible, he thought. He tried to process the concept of Nikolai carefully procuring his master-plan; controlling Archibald, scrutinising and overseeing his every move, and threatening him with a very painful death if he didn't comply. The notion was a bizarre and brazen one, but was eerily plausible. A dizzying wave fell over Skye as his mind started to believe the terrifying idea. It made more sense than any other explanation he could think of, and it was in Nikolai's nature to act in such a sporadic and mysterious manner.

His breathing became loud. Every cell in his body began to shake violently as the realisation dawned on him. Nikolai had been playing him the entire time. Sierra was right; it was all a game, and Skye had already lost. Nikolai was multiple moves ahead at every moment, and had abruptly decided earlier that day to revoke any possibility of safety at the warehouse. It had become a perilous situation, and anyone could be killed at any moment by Black Dawn.

Skye could barely control his rage. His vehement hostility towards his nemesis had violently heightened in a matter of moments. His fists clenched. Both Nikolai and Archibald had to be killed immediately.

The first rays of sunlight appeared on the horizon, bringing a beautiful new day to the Athenian island. Skye still sat atop the warehouse, staring east at the golden glow. He'd had an exhausting night, with sleep evading him entirely. He had forgotten to wake anyone to take over his shift of guarding the base. He'd simply sat alone, daydreaming and contemplating. If an attack did suddenly occur, he may even miss it.

Skye pondered their next move. The president remained hidden, and they had no leads whatsoever. For countless hours, he had thought over and over about Nikolai's deceit. He knew that he had fabricated the president's itinerary in a bid to lure White Shadow into a trap. Was it to keep everyone in check, so that White Shadow wouldn't focus their attention on the president? Or was Nikolai finally ready to put an end to his former group? Or both, Skye wondered, trying to solve the mystery alone.

The notion of the president working with Black Dawn may have been nothing short of absurd, but Nikolai had always talked of power and domination. It was not out of the question for the man to blackmail the new president to do his will. The original threat of Archibald running the country was still a very real one, but the thought of Nikolai in command was far more terrifying.

Worse still, the assault on the Tianzu would have dire consequences for them all. Skye knew the Tianzu were a very personal and protective clan, promoting safety as their first priority. Now that war with the Tianzu was inevitable, White Shadow was in its most dire hour yet. Skye began to feel sick from the stress he was causing himself from his sleepless night. The events played themselves in his mind over and over again, and Skye had no doubt that it was all carefully orchestrated. Regardless of the truth to his suspicions, Skye had convinced himself that he was right.

For hours now, he had desperately tried to think of a way to stop his formidable foe, but the answer would not arrive. Nikolai was one of the most elite individuals he'd ever met, and killing him had always been an impossible endeavour.

But the situation was grave, and Skye knew that something had to be done. For the sake of his team, and for Athenia, and even the world, he had to take action now. He had to tell Ren to get to work and start locating Black Dawn again. They had paused their efforts as soon as Archibald had emerged from hiding. He now knew that somehow Nikolai had found him first and chose him as a suitable presidential candidate.

He gasped aloud when the comm on his wrist started vibrating. His eyes began to burn with fatigue from the restless night. Skye looked down and saw that he had received an email from Nikolai, incidentally inviting him out for coffee again. It took him a moment to react to the luck that had suddenly presented itself. A meeting with Nikolai would be the best chance of finding out where the president was being held, and possibly even to kill the eyeless man. He knew the chances of successfully slaying his enemy were virtually nil, but he also knew that Nikolai would not retaliate, meaning he had nothing to lose by attempting to assassinate his sinister opponent. He carefully climbed off the roof, his muscles slightly aching from the previous evening.

It could be a trap, he suddenly thought to himself. It would not be unlike Nikolai to summon him to a spontaneous meeting while Black Dawn and the Tianzu slaughtered the others in their sleep. But on the other hand, none of them were safe regardless. They could just as easily be killed if they accompanied Skye to the meeting, or if he remained with them in the warehouse. He decided the best course of action would be to wake Sierra and have her guard the warehouse in his absence. Warning the others of the possibility of an attack was also a wise idea, but they may not believe his theory. For the time being, he decided to keep his suspicions to himself.

He placed his hand on the rear door of the warehouse and paused. His plan to attempt to kill Nikolai was worthwhile, he thought, but his highest priority right now would be to find Black Dawn. If he finds them, he'd also find the president. And the best person to assist him in locating Black Dawn would be the only person in their group who was able to track the location of others. He needed to bring Juliet with him. He opened the door and marched inside the warehouse.

At this stage, with no leads on the president's whereabouts, and only twenty-four hours until the inauguration, he had to take a chance, albeit a reckless one.

Preview

Eternity's Deception

The First Day

Nikolai strode proudly down the promenade, his hands placed respectfully behind his back. He kept his head up, basking in the beauty of the morning sun. Whenever a citizen turned their attention to him, he would look at them and offer a polite greeting. He was in an exceptionally good mood today, knowing that he was less than twenty-four hours away from becoming the nation's new ruler.

It pleased him all the more that he could sense Skye nearby. It was unlike his long-haired friend to arrive at Ying's coffeehouse before the great man, which only roused his curiosity even further. *Why the early arrival, he thought to himself. Is Skye truly this eager for another meeting? Or is he perhaps just keen to slay me in public?*

With each step Nikolai took, his smile grew wider. As he closed in on Skye's location, he could sense his friend's intent. As he had correctly surmised, Skye was intending to kill Nikolai.

A short distance away, he spotted the coffeehouse, his usual location of choice for his morning beverage. It often brought him comfort to sit on the promenade and gawk at the passersby; he was grateful for a lifestyle that meant he didn't have to aspire to be one of them. His time wasted as a businessman was now several lifetimes ago, and nothing more than a happy memory—happy because it proved to be the perfect stimulus he needed to drive himself to the current way of life he deemed to be somewhat satisfactory.

"There's no use hiding, Skye," he whispered to himself. He could sense that Skye was sheltered in an alleyway up ahead. Nikolai picked up his pace, curious to see what Skye had in store for him.

The moment Nikolai reached the opening of the alley, a steel blade swung out at him. Nikolai tilted his head right and narrowly avoided being sliced open by the weapon. He maintained his confident gait and resumed walking to Ying's.

Skye leapt out from the shadows, dissatisfied with his feeble attempt. He launched himself forward and held his sword outward, ready to drive it into his foe's back.

Nikolai spun around and grabbed the steel edge with one hand, and Skye's head with the other. Effortlessly, he threw Skye into the concrete veneer of the building beside him. Skye hit the wall with tremendous force, but was saved by his graphene mask.

"And what is the meaning of this, brother?" Nikolai asked, pleased with the effort. He looked Skye up and down, immediately noticing his chest armour. "Dressed for battle again, are we?"

Skye offered no response. He pushed himself away from the wall and swung his sword like a madman. Nikolai evaded each attack with ease, and resumed walking once again.

Panic filled the street as the citizens began screaming and fleeing in terror. The peaceful promenade had erupted in chaos within a matter of seconds, the

second such incident in two days. Ying emerged from inside her shop, her jaw dropping at the bizarre sight in front of her.

“Brandishing that weapon of yours in public is most unwise,” Nikolai warned. He turned and snatched the handle from Skye's grasp, and forced the blade to retract back inside.

Skye didn't give up. He threw his body at his enemy, only for Nikolai to appear behind him and grab his arms. Skye was held pinned to the spot, unable to move.

Nikolai turned his head and saw the alarmed owner of the coffeehouse. “Good morning, Ying! I would absolutely love it if you could brew my usual, if you would.”

Ying stared back at him, lost for words. She looked into the hostile eyes of Skye as he struggled against Nikolai's powerful grasp.

“Oh, don't worry about him,” Nikolai reassured her. He reached up and ripped the mask from Skye's face, then tightened his grip on him.

Ying watched on, confused, but nodded obediently. She retreated inside and began brewing a coffee for her most loyal customer.

“Thank you for accepting my invitation,” Nikolai spoke, casually taking a seat at his usual outside table, all the while holding Skye pinned. “Though I'm once again baffled by your incessant attempts on my life.” He looked around and stared at the frightened civilians littering the street nearby. “I thought that you weren't one to strike fear into the hearts of the Athenians. Yet here you are, destroying their peaceful society.”

“Where's the president?” Skye asked, not wasting any more time than necessary.

“You look a little tired,” Nikolai observed, the anguish in Skye's eyes evident.

“No thanks to you. I've been up all night guarding everyone from the Tianzu.”

Nikolai laughed. “I doubt that. As strong as you are, it would take all of you combined to be able to stop even one of them. I hate to admit that they're a strong clan, but I'm also not a naïve fool.”

“Sierra didn't have much trouble putting a stop to Hana.”

“So I heard,” Nikolai said, the grin on his face growing. “But don't get too excited—Tahlia healed Hana's wound. Although I don't know why. I never gave such an order, and nor would I have. Our tale would be a lot more fascinating if one of the Tianzu were dead.”

Skye cringed. He'd suspected that Black Dawn would have healed Hana's wound, but part of him also secretly hoped they were now one enemy less. But on the other hand, Hana's death would also have led to White Shadow's bloody end.

“Sierra's quite the marvel, isn't she?” Nikolai continued. “Perhaps you and I should trade. Sierra for Tahlia?”

“Where's the president?” Skye asked again, more serious this time.

“It also confounds me that you brought young Jacinta with you,” Nikolai said, turning and staring in the direction where Juliet hid. “Fortunately, I'm alone today, and you know how I feel about killing people myself—not favourably!”

“I know you're working with Archie,” Skye changed the subject back to the more pressing matter.

Nikolai frowned with confusion. “I'm afraid I don't follow,” he said, denying the accusation. “But you'd best speak quickly. I imagine the authorities will be here any moment.”

Sweat began to bead on Skye's forehead. He looked up at the camera on the exterior of the building in front of him, knowing that a warrant for his arrest would

have already been issued, much like the day before.

"Stop changing the subject," Skye said, almost beginning to shake with rage. "You're working with the president." He clenched his fists, trying to compose his fury.

"Working *with* the president? That's a rather odd thought," Nikolai laughed. "My friend, the moment I lay my eye sockets on the man, I'll tear his beating heart from his chest."

Skye launched himself into a frenzy, freeing his body from Nikolai's grasp. He used his mind to retrieve the sword handle. He threw it at his enemy's face and watched as it shot out with deadly speed. Once again, Nikolai moved out of the way with minimal effort.

"Enough of this," Nikolai groaned. "I invited you here for a coffee, not to go to war with me on the busiest street in the country."

Skye slammed his fist on the table, smashing the computer screen to pieces. "Where is he!" he roared at the top of his lungs. The commuters grew even more nervous as they watched the altercation.

Nikolai laughed. "You tell me! I've exhausted all of my resources trying to locate the old fool. Alas, he eludes me still."

"No more games!" Skye screamed. He grabbed hold of his sword, ready for another attempt, but Nikolai appeared behind him in a blur, pinning his body down against the table. Skye swung the sword wildly at Nikolai, who tilted his head left and right, evading the steel. Nikolai grabbed Skye's arm and stopped the attack.

"As far as I can recall, I've done nothing to offend you, Skye." He paused and surveyed the scene before him, staring into the terrified eyes of everyone around him, and instantly realising his mistake. "Hmm, perhaps moving as fast as I did just now was not sensible." He turned his head and called inside the cafe. "Ying, would you mind pouring that into a paper cup for me? I'd best be off, actually."

Nikolai released Skye and handed him back his weapon. Skye shook uncontrollably. He tried to calm his fit of rage, knowing that another attack was pointless, but Nikolai was nothing short of infuriating.

Ying emerged with the latte in a disposable cup. She frowned with frustration when she looked down and saw the broken screen and cracked table.

"A thousand apologies, Ying," Nikolai offered. "Skye broke your tablet. But fear not, for he shall reimburse you the full cost." Nikolai reached into his pocket and handed her a ten-yuan note for his beverage. He turned back and faced Skye. "Well, brother, I'm sorry that our meeting this morning was short lived. I was hoping to discuss those three members of the Tianzu in my troupe, and their mystery friend. They're a rather pesky lot! However, your company is indeed always a privilege, regardless of the duration." He nodded his head politely and began to walk away.

Skye's face reddened with anger as dozens of onlookers still watched intently, yet carefully. He put the retracted blade back into his holster and stood up, grabbing his mask from the table. "I'm sorry, Ying," he whispered, without stopping to offer any compensation for the damaged electrics. He began to walk off in the opposite direction to Nikolai, not wishing to stay for a moment longer. The police would arrive at any minute after the violent skirmish.

Juliet ran across the promenade, moving between the dumbfounded businessmen and women. She stopped in front of him, blocking his path. "What have you done!" she shrieked, lost for words. "What was the point of any of that?"

"I know what I'm doing," he dismissed, walking around her. "But we need to get out of here, now." The sea of people parted as he strode toward them. They

turned and ran into surrounding buildings, desperate to escape the deranged assailant.

“Skye!” Nikolai called after him. He turned around and glared at the tall man in the distance. “Archibald sends his regards.”

Skye's face twisted with rage. Before he could even process the remark, he forced his legs to keep moving, away from the countless eyes that faced him. For a brief moment, he contemplated chasing Nikolai once again, but knew it would only lead to his arrest. He had to leave the promenade at once. If he acted quickly enough, his plan might just work.

Two

Ren sat down in front of her computer monitors, ready to resume the hunt for Archie. It had been a restless night for her, but she knew she had to press on. The inauguration was set for dawn the next day, and they had to put all of their resources into finding the nation's most powerful and protected man.

She began typing several commands into her keyboard, eager to hack her way back into the president's itinerary. It had proven to be all but a useless strategy the day before, but it was also the most logical place to start. Several minutes passed before she managed to break her way through the first of several firewalls, each more impregnable than the last.

The sound of footsteps startled her, breaking her concentration. She spun around to see Tango walk in through the rear door.

“Morning,” he said, considerably cheerfully.

“Hello,” she responded with a frown. “Why are you up so early?”

“I've been training outside.”

Ren looked him up and down, both surprised and proud. She couldn't recall the last time he was awake at this hour. “That's good to hear,” she said with a smile.

Tango returned the smile. “I've got quite a bit of catching up to do. It's amazing how unfit one can become after three months of laziness.”

She laughed at the remark, but was pleased to see that he was finally taking his role in White Shadow seriously again.

“What are you doing? Trying to hack into the government's system?” He walked over and joined her at the desk.

Before she could respond, she turned her attention back to the monitor and noticed that she'd been locked out of the firewall already. Ren let out a disappointed growl. “Yes. If I'm not fast enough, I have to start over.”

“I suppose it's a system that's intended to be hack-proof,” he admitted.

Ren's wrist began to vibrate. She glanced down at her comm to see Skye's name appear. She waved her hand over it. “Skye? Where are you?” she asked, confused.

“I'm in Shangwu. Nikolai's working with the president.”

Tango watched as Ren's eyes widened with bewilderment.

“What?” she asked, stunned by the words. “What are you talking about? Why are you in the business district?” She pressed a button on her communicator, allowing Tango to join the conversation.

“Ren, he's working with Archie. He practically just admitted it! I need your

help.”

Tango and Ren exchanged surprised glances. Neither of them realised that Skye wasn't even inside the warehouse.

“Ridiculous,” Ren dismissed. “Nikolai will kill Archie the first opportunity he gets.”

“It's true, Ren!” Skye shouted back. *“How else can you explain what happened yesterday? They're in it together.”*

“Skye, have you been up all night?” Tango asked, concerned for his friend's well-being.

“Just listen to me!” Skye screamed, his patience wearing thin. *“Nikolai has spoken to me for years about running Athenia himself. Using Archie as a puppet is the best way for him to do this. He wants Archie dead, but above all else he wants to fix this country.”*

Tango let out a short gasp, seeing the truth to Skye's words.

Ren was unconvinced. “I don't know about that, Skye. I wouldn't put it past Nikolai, but it's too much of a gamble, and we don't have time to start looking for Black Dawn right now. We need to focus on finding Archie before tomorrow morning.”

“If we find Black Dawn, we'll find Archie. This should be our new priority.”

“No, forget about it, Skye. There's no time, and I can't take that chance. Come back to base and help us here.”

“Too late, Ren. I tried to attack Nikolai this morning at Ying's. The police are going to be coming for me any second.”

Ren could hardly believe her ears. She looked back at her monitor and quickly began to work her way into the public security system. Unlike the system used by Government House, this one was far easier to breach. “There's a warrant for your arrest,” she muttered as she read the words on her screen. She stared blankly for a moment before slamming her fist into her desk. “What were you thinking!” she erupted.

“Just trust me, Ren!” he shouted back. *“We're never going to find Archie on our end. The best chance we have is if we find where Black Dawn are hiding.”*

“Skye, you'll never find them on your own,” Tango chimed in.

“I will. I've got Juliet with me.”

Tango looked at Ren, who was too enraged to speak. “You can't be serious,” he said. “Then why are you trying to get yourself arrested?”

“Why on earth would you take her with you!” Ren screamed.

“Because if Athenia goes into lockdown, they'll delay the inauguration.”

Ren slammed her fist into her desk once again, splintering the wood. “No, they won't! The inauguration is going to proceed regardless. If the country is in lockdown, it just means they'll hold a private ceremony. You've just ruined our chances of finding the president, Skye!”

The call was terminated from the other end. Tango and Ren stared at each other, shocked by what they just heard.

“Unbelievable,” Tango said as he tried to wrap his head around the situation. “What do we do?”

Ren stared up at the monitor with bleak eyes. “I have to try and delete his warrant.” She pounded her fingers into her glass keyboard screen, trying everything she could to revoke the order from the system. “What was he thinking?”

Tango buried his head in his hands. "Skye, what have you done?" he whispered to himself. He knew that Ren was right—Skye's decision to take the mission into his own hands was a poor decision, and it may just ruin everything they'd worked so hard for during the last few months.

He turned to Ren and saw that she had stopped typing. Instead, she stared absent-mindedly at the screen, her mind deep in thought.

"What?" Tango asked. "What is it?"

"His warrant," she began. "He was issued an arrest warrant yesterday morning, but it was later removed from the system. I've been thinking about it ever since it happened."

Tango listened attentively, waiting for her to continue. "And ... ?"

"Who removed it?" she asked, looking up at him. "Only one person on the island would've put a stop to Skye's arrest."

Tango began to see her point. "Nikolai."

"And only someone in a position of power could have actually removed it."

"The president," Tango said, his mind reeling from the conversation.

They stared at each other in silence as they began to convince themselves that Skye's theory might be true after all.

"So what do we do?" he asked.

"Wake the others," Ren said. "I'll do everything I can to have the new warrant removed, but I doubt I'll have much luck. Maybe Nikolai will remove it for me."

She went back to work, gliding her fingers across the screen. Skye's strategy that morning was nothing short of audacious, but she had to ensure he wasn't arrested. The inauguration drew closer with every second, and the last thing White Shadow needed was for Athenia to go into lockdown.

Three

"You've lost your mind," Juliet hissed as she ran behind Skye. They tried to cut through as many alleyways and small streets as they possibly could to avoid being seen.

"No, I haven't," he said, annoyed. "I know Nikolai better than you. This is all part of his plan."

"Why didn't you tell me any of this earlier when you woke me?" Skye had simply marched into her bedroom and said that he urgently needed her help, but he never once told her that it would involve trying to locate Black Dawn while on the run from the authorities.

"There was no time," he said as he peered cautiously around the corner. Once he was certain it was safe, he continued running through Shangwu.

Juliet looked up and watched as the cameras mounted on the buildings all turned and followed Skye as he raced past. "Slow down!" she yelled, barely able to keep up with him. A slow pace for Skye was still faster than Juliet's top speed.

He turned and faced her, ignoring the handful of civilians around. None of them were present on the promenade, and had no idea that Skye was a wanted man. "Hurry up!" he ordered, waiting for Juliet to catch up. Once she was close enough, he continued moving at a pace he deemed fit.

"Your eyes are bloodshot," she said. "Did you sleep at all last night?"

“Nope.”

They pressed on, running from street to street. A short distance away, sirens could be heard. The authorities were closing in on them.

“We’re not going to make it,” Juliet said.

“Yes, we will. And stop panicking—the police aren’t after *you*. They don’t know you’re here.”

“But Nikolai knows. What if he orders them to arrest me too?”

Skye stopped running. He wheeled around and looked Juliet in the eyes.

“That’s enough,” he whispered. “Stop worrying. I know what I’m doing.”

She looked at her leader with doubt. In the months she’d known him he had always been calm and collected, but in this moment she actually began to feel afraid of him. She had never seen him act so recklessly and deranged.

“Do you?” she asked. “Do you actually know what you’re doing? This plan doesn’t make any sense.”

He bit his lip as he tried to hide his anger. None of them had any faith in what he was trying to achieve, and it was beginning to infuriate him.

He took a moment to compose himself. “Listen,” he said quietly, “the inauguration is tomorrow morning at dawn. We’ll never find the president by then. We’ve searched for him for an entire year, and we haven’t come close once. The best thing we can do right now is to focus our efforts on finding Black Dawn. Wherever they are, Archie will be too.”

“But causing a lockdown of the city isn’t going to help anyone!” she protested. She spoke too loudly, rousing the attention of a nearby businesswoman.

Skye looked at the woman, and then back to Juliet. “Quiet,” he warned. “Just trust me. Nikolai is always one step ahead of us. The only way we’ll succeed today is if we take a risk. He wouldn’t expect a lockdown. It will either delay the inauguration, or it will force Black Dawn out of hiding. Either way, it gives us a chance.”

Juliet shook her head, still sceptical. Something suddenly caught her attention. She tilted her head up with a worried look on her face. “We’re not alone.”

Skye’s eyes widened at the warning. “Who is it? The Tianzu?”

Juliet nodded. “The one I sensed yesterday. He’s back in Shangwu.”

Skye paused and glanced around him. The warrior in blue was in the business district for the second day in a row, he thought to himself. *Does he know we’re here? Or is he searching for Nikolai?*

The blare of sirens snapped him out of his daze.

“They’re getting closer,” he said. “We need to get back to the van.” He turned and started running again. “I need you to find Black Dawn. If we find them, we’ll find Archie.”

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Ruben is a writer and coffee addict from Melbourne, Australia. When he's not writing, he loves to surf, binge-watch Netflix, and travel the world with his partner. Eternity's War is his debut series, and the first of many to come.

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