

# CHAPTER 19

## CHAPTER 19: The Wrath of the Skulls.

I looked at Eliot's hand, then back at the burner phone where Logan's voice was still a frantic whisper of "get out." The agency had raised me to be a shadow, but tonight, they had tried to bury me in it.

I reached out and gripped Eliot's hand. His palm was warm, his grip like iron.

"I'm tired of being a 'best tool,' Eliot," I said, my voice dropping the last of its hesitation. "Let's show them what happens when the thief decides to steal the whole board."

Eliot's lips twisted into that familiar, arrogant smirk—the one that didn't promise safety, but absolute control. "That's the spirit, *Assistant*."

He turned to the men standing behind him. Joseph was already moving, his face a mask of stone. Beside him was Mark, a massive Skullz enforcer whose tactical vest strained over muscles that looked like corded steel.

"Joseph, tell the control room to activate the 'Ghost' protocols," Eliot commanded, his voice dropping into that terrifyingly quiet register he used when he was done playing. "I want the city blinded. Mark, grab the heavy gear. If a Reaper breathes on this convoy, end them."

"On it, boss," Mark grunted. He pulled two heavy, black batons from his thighs, the metal extending with a sharp, hydraulic hiss.

The move to the Cathedral wasn't a getaway; it was an invasion.

The Skullz didn't use sirens. Five blacked-out, armored SUVs roared out of the bunker, driving with a synchronized aggression that forced every other car off the road. In the center vehicle, I sat between Eliot and Mark, the silence in the car vibrating with the hum of high-end tech.

"Incoming," Joseph's voice crackled over the comms from the lead car. "Director's overheads are active. Three drones, high-altitude. They're locking on."

"Mark," Eliot said simply, sounding bored.

Mark didn't even blink. He stood up through the sunroof, the wind whipping his hair. He didn't use a standard launcher; he pulled a customized Skullz rail-gun from the rack. There was no smoke, no trail—just a blur of kinetic energy that punched a hole right through the first drone.

*BOOM.*

Debris rained down on the highway. "Two more," Mark called out, pivoting. "They're diving."

He fired again. The second drone spiraled out of control, smashing into an empty billboard. The third veered off, its sensors fried by the sheer power of the Skullz's jammers.

"Air support is down," Mark said, sliding back into his seat. "But the Reapers are massing at the Cathedral. They're setting a kill box."

We slammed to a halt in front of the Old Cathedral. The grand stone steps were crawling with Reapers—Black Base's finest, armed to the teeth and wearing specialized night-vision gear.

"Zabrina, stay behind me," Eliot said, his hand instinctively moving to shield me, his voice dropping to that deep, raspy tone.

"Not a chance," I replied, checking the magazine of my stolen 1911. "I didn't come this far to hide."

The moment we stepped onto the pavement, the world turned into a chaotic symphony of gunfire. But the Skullz didn't take cover. They advanced.

Joseph was a ghost in the middle of the storm. He moved with a silenced pistol and a long, serrated combat knife. I watched as three Reapers rushed him; Joseph didn't even break his stride. He ducked under a spray of bullets, his knife flickering like a silver tongue as it found the gaps in their neck armor.

On the other side, Mark was a wrecking ball, his electric batons shattering tactical helmets like glass.

In the middle of the chaos, my earpiece buzzed. It wasn't Logan this time. It was the cold, robotic voice of X.

"Z transmitting..." X said, his tone as bored as if he were ordering takeout. "I've seized the Director's main feed. I'm looping the security cameras so he can't see your location. But the tactical analysis is... unfavorable."

"Unfavorable how, X?" I yelled, ducking behind a stone lion as a bullet chipped the marble.

"The Director knows he has lost air superiority," X continued. "He is pulling out the drone command. He has authorized the 'Sanctuary' protocol."

Logan's voice suddenly cut in, overriding X, frantic and breathless. "It's not a protocol, Z! It's a demolition charge! He's rigged the basement. He sent the Reapers in to pin you down so he could bury you all inside. He's cutting the line!"

I froze. The Reapers weren't the executioners. They were the distraction.

"Eliot! The Director rigged the basement!" I screamed over the gunfire. "It's a trap!"

Eliot paused, shooting a Reaper point-blank without even looking. He didn't look panicked; he looked annoyed, like someone had spilled wine on his carpet. "Of course he did. Cowards always leave a mess."

He looked at Joseph. "Change of plans. Joseph, find that charge. Mark, hold the doors. Nothing gets in."

"And the Director?" I asked, my heart hammering.

"He's already running," Eliot said, his lips curling into a sneer. "He saw the Devil in the daylight and realized he was outclassed."

He stepped toward me, grabbing my arm to steady me as the ground vibrated from a distant, muffled thrum in the lower levels. The timer was running.

"Mark! Give them a reason to quit!" Eliot shouted.

Mark roared, vaulting over a stone balustrade and dropping into the thick of the Reaper line, a whirlwind of black carbon-fiber.

I was pinned behind a heavy gothic pillar, my breathing ragged. I leaned out to take a shot, but a spray of high-caliber fire chewed into the stone, showering my hair with grit.

Suddenly, a hand gripped my waist and pulled me back. I stumbled into a solid, warm chest. Eliot.

He trapped me between the cold stone and his heat, his arm hooked firmly around me. The chaos of the battle seemed to fade into a dull hum.

"You're shaking, kitten," he murmured, his voice incredibly calm against the madness.

"It's adrenaline," I snapped. "And the fact that we're standing on a bomb."

Eliot let out a soft, dry chuckle. He reached up, his thumb brushing a streak of black soot off my cheek. His eyes, usually so guarded and snobbish, were burning with something raw.

"You're a terrible liar, Zabrina," he whispered. His gaze dropped to my lips. "But you're a magnificent fighter. Stay with me."

"This is a very bad time for a moment, Eliot."

"The Devil thrives in bad timing," he smirked. He leaned in, his forehead resting against mine. "We survive this. And then we hunt."

*BOOM.*

A massive explosion from the North side of the Cathedral shook the foundation.

"Boss! Joseph found the primary charge!" Mark's voice boomed from the comms. "It's a Viper-class setup! X says it's encrypted!"

Eliot straightened up, the 'Devil' mask sliding back into place.

"Go," Eliot said, shoving me gently toward the stairs. "You know their codes. I'll hold the line here."

I nodded, gripping my gun. I took two steps before looking back. "Eliot? Don't get recycled."

He grinned—sharp and lethal. "I have too much cereal to eat, Zabrina. Go."

I bolted down the stone spiral staircase, bursting into the crypt where the glowing red light of the charge cast long, dancing shadows across ancient tombs.

Joseph was crouched over a black box, his hands hovering over a spiderweb of fiber-optic wires.

"It's a dead-man's switch," Joseph said calmly. "Black Base tech. If I cut the power, the backup capacitor triggers."

"I know this build," I said, dropping to my knees. "X helped design it."

I plugged my burner phone into the interface. "X, are you seeing this?"

"Affirmative," X's voice crackled, devoid of emotion. "You have forty-five seconds. The Director changed the override. It is no longer a rhythmic sequence. It is a biometric hard-lock."

"Biometric?" My blood ran cold.

"It requires a Rank 3 signature or higher to cancel the mission," X explained. "The Director assumed no operatives of that rank would be left alive to countermand the order."

I didn't hesitate. I pressed my thumb against the phone's scanner.

*Signature Recognized: Operative Zabrina. Rank 3 (Third). Status: Deceased.*

The screen flickered. The red light on the bomb turned a solid, peaceful green. The timer stopped at 00:04.

Joseph let out a single, slow breath. "Nice work, Agent."

We scrambled back up the stairs, emerging into the main hall just as the last of the Reapers were scattering into the night. The Cathedral was a wreck, but standing near the altar, chest heaving and shirt torn, was Eliot.

He walked toward me, ignoring the destruction. He stopped right in front of me, grabbing my hand and squeezing it so hard I could feel his pulse.

"You're a very loud sleeper," he murmured, his voice low and rasping, "but you're a hell of a technician."

I looked up at him, the adrenaline still humming through us both. "We need to go. The Director won't stay gone forever."

"Let him come," Eliot said, his thumb brushing my knuckles, his eyes promising a war the world wasn't ready for. "He's about to find out that the Devil doesn't just keep his diamonds. He keeps his people, too."

# CHAPTER 20

## CHAPTER 20: The Sanctuary of Shadows.

The drive to the Skullz's primary villa was a blur of high-speed turns and the smell of ozone clinging to my hair. The estate was hidden deep in the coastal hills, a fortress of glass and black stone that looked more like a modern museum than a criminal hideout.

By the time we stepped through the reinforced mahogany doors, the sun was beginning to bleed over the horizon, painting the sky in shades of bruised orange and gold. My body felt like it was made of lead, every muscle screaming from the night's brutality.

"Get her some water," Eliot directed his staff, his hand hovering near the small of my back—not quite touching, but close enough that I could feel the protective heat of him.

I collapsed onto a leather sofa in the center of the vast living room. But the quiet didn't last long.

The security monitors in the hallway began to chime—a specific, rhythmic frequency that I recognized instantly. It wasn't an attack. It was a handshake code.

"Boss, we have a breach at the North gate," Mark shouted, hand on his baton. "Three signatures. They're... they're walking right in. The gate just opened for them."

Eliot stiffened, his eyes narrowing as he looked at me. "Your friends?"

Before I could answer, the doors swung open.

It was Logan, Crystal, and X—who looked so human in the daylight that using his real name, Christian, felt like the only option. They looked haggard. Crystal's tactical gear was scorched, and Christian's usual stoic mask was cracked with exhaustion.

"Zabrina!" Logan's voice broke the silence.

He didn't wait for a greeting or a report. He sprinted across the marble floor, his boots skidding, and threw his arms around me. He pulled me into a hug so tight it felt like he was trying to fuse us together, his face buried in my shoulder. I could feel him trembling—the raw, unfiltered terror of a man who thought he'd watched his best friend die.

"I thought you were gone," Logan whispered, his voice muffled against my tactical suit.

"When the feed cut out at the Cathedral... I thought I lost you."

I slowly wrapped my arms around him, resting my head against his. "I'm okay, Logan. We're okay."

Christian stood a few paces back, his arms crossed, watching the scene with a rare, softened expression. "The Director has initiated the scorched earth protocol," he said, his voice low. "He's purged the databases and taken a black-ops team to a secondary location. He's burning the Agency to the ground to cover his tracks. We're all that's left."

Crystal stepped forward, checking her weapon before holstering it. She looked at Eliot, then back at me with a smirk. "Nice place. A bit much on the black marble, but I can see why you stayed."

Eliot stepped forward, his eyes tracking Logan's arms still wrapped firmly around me. He didn't look threatened, but the "Devil" wasn't exactly known for sharing.

"The Director made a mistake," Eliot said, his voice echoing in the large room. "He tried to kill my associates and he tried to take my diamond. Now, he's brought the rest of my guest list right to my door."

Logan finally pulled back, though he kept his hands on my shoulders, searching my face for injuries. "We have his last known coordinates. But we can't do this alone. We don't have the hardware anymore."

Eliot walked over, standing just behind me. He looked at the remnants of Black Base—the spy, the tech, and the stoic lead—and then at his own enforcers, Joseph and Mark, who were watching from the shadows.

"You have the intel," Eliot said, a slow, predatory grin spreading across his face. "I have the army. I think it's time we showed the Director what happens when you try to burn down both ends of the world at once."

I looked at Logan, then at Eliot. For the first time in my life, I wasn't a tool, a weapon, or an asset. I was part of a team that wasn't defined by ranks or protocols.

"Let's go hunting," I said.

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The tension in the villa was thick enough to cut with a combat knife. You had the elite remnants of a government agency standing in the living room of the world's most dangerous underground organization. Christian and Eliot were already huddled over a holographic map in the corner, speaking in low, clipped tones about satellite blind spots, but the rest of the room was restless.

"So," Crystal said, breaking the silence as she paced the length of the marble floor. She stopped in front of Mark, who was currently sharpening a wicked-looking blade. She looked him up and down, her eyes landing on the heavy batons at his waist. "You're the one who took out a drone with a rail-gun? Compensating for something, or just a fan of loud noises?"

Mark looked up, a slow, gravelly chuckle vibrating in his chest. He stood up, towering over her, but Crystal didn't flinch. She just tilted her head, a playful, lethal glint in her eyes.

"It gets the job done," Mark grunted. "And you? I saw you at the Cathedral. You move fast, but you're light. In a real scrap, I'd snap you like a toothpick."

Crystal laughed, a sharp, melodic sound. "A toothpick? Why don't we test that theory, Big Guy? I'd hate to go into a final mission thinking my backup is all talk."

## The Sparring Ring

The villa had a sub-level training deck—a matted floor surrounded by racks of blunt training weapons and high-tech biometric sensors. Eliot, Logan, and I drifted toward the observation rail, the heavy weight of the Director's betrayal temporarily sidelined by the spectacle unfolding below.

Mark stepped onto the mat, shedding his tactical vest to reveal a grey tank top stretched to the limit. Crystal stood opposite him, discarding her jacket.

"First touch wins?" Mark asked.

"First one to beg for mercy wins," Crystal corrected with a wink.

Mark moved first. For a man his size, he was deceptively quick. He swung the right baton in a wide arc meant to floor her, but Crystal wasn't there. She dropped into a slide, her movements fluid and gymnastic, passing right between his legs. Before he could pivot, she delivered a lightning-fast kick to the back of his knee.

Mark stumbled, grunting in surprise. "Nice. But predictable."

He spun, using his momentum to launch a dual-strike. Crystal leaped, twisting in mid-air—a move that looked more like dance than combat—and landed on his shoulders. For a split second, they were a blur of motion. She tried to lock an arm-bar, but Mark's sheer strength won out. He reached up, grabbed her by the waist, and swung her off.

Instead of hitting the mat, Crystal used his momentum to backflip, landing perfectly on her feet.

"You're strong," she panted, a strand of hair falling across her face. "But you're heavy on your left side. Old injury?"

Mark paused, his eyes narrowing with a new kind of respect. "Shrapnel in '22. You've got a good eye, Blondie."

"I have a good everything," she shot back.

They went at it again, but the rhythm changed. It stopped being a test of power and started becoming a conversation. They were matching each other's beats—Mark's crushing force meeting Crystal's redirection. At one point, they ended up in a clinch, Mark's arm locked around her neck and Crystal's foot hooked behind his heel.

They were inches apart, both breathing hard, the heat of the exertion radiating between them. Mark looked down at her, the usual hardness in his gaze replaced by something curious, almost appreciative.

"Not bad," he whispered, his voice dropping an octave. "For a government girl."

"Not bad yourself," Crystal replied, her hand resting momentarily on his bicep. "For a criminal."

She shoved him back with a smirk, ending the match just as the tension in the room shifted from competitive to something... different.

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I felt a presence beside me at the railing. Eliot was watching them, but his gaze drifted toward me. Logan had gone to check the comms link with Christian, leaving us in a pocket of relative privacy.

"They make a terrifying pair," Eliot murmured, his shoulder brushing mine.

"They do," I agreed, looking at my hands, which were still stained with the grit of the Cathedral. "It's strange seeing our worlds mix like this. A week ago, Crystal would have been authorized to put Mark in a holding cell."

"And a week ago, I was planning to disappear the moment I had the diamond," Eliot said. He turned to face me, leaning back against the rail. The morning light was hitting the side of his face, making him look less like the 'Devil' and more like the man who had teased me about cereal. "But plans change. People change."

"Do they?" I asked.

"I think so." He reached out, his hand hovering near mine on the railing. He didn't grab it, but he let his pinky finger hook around mine, a tiny, grounding connection. "We're going after the Director tonight, Zabrina. After that... there's no Black Base to go back to. You'll be a ghost."

"I've been a ghost my whole life, Eliot. I'm used to it."

"Maybe," he said softly, his eyes locking onto mine with an intensity that made my breath catch. "But even ghosts need a place to haunt. My villa has plenty of room."

I didn't answer, but I didn't pull my hand away. Down on the mat, Mark was helping Crystal up, his hand lingering on her waist a second too long, and for the first time in a long time, the future didn't feel like a mission briefing. It felt like an open door.

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The sliding glass door clicked shut, sealing us in the sudden, sharp silence of the balcony. The Atlantic roared below, but up here, the air felt heavy—stagnant with everything we hadn't said since we escaped the Director's reach.

Logan stood at the railing, his fingers drumming a restless, erratic code against the stone. He looked exhausted.

"The salt air," Logan murmured, his voice barely audible over the wind. "It's supposed to be cleansing, right? That's what they say in the movies. You go to the coast to forget."

I leaned against the pillar beside him. "We aren't in a movie, Logan. And salt just stings if the wound is still open."

He let out a dry, hollow laugh that didn't reach his eyes. He turned his head to look at me, his gaze lingering on the soot still smudged across my jawline. "I tried to wipe it all away, you know? Every time I cleaned your mission logs, or encrypted your location so the Director's Reapers couldn't find you... I thought I was washing the blood off. I thought if I made you invisible, you'd be safe."

He reached out, his hand trembling as he finally let his fingers graze my forearm, tracing the edge of a jagged scar peeking out from my tactical sleeve. "But every time you came back from a job, you were a little colder. A little quieter. You started walking like him. Looking like him."

His voice dropped to a pained whisper. "I realized tonight, while I was watching you through the Cathedral cameras, that I've been lying to myself for eight years. I've been telling myself I saved you."

He stepped into my space, his hands now gripping my shoulders with a desperate, crushing intensity. "But I can still smell it, Z. The moment I close my eyes, the smell of the smoke and the copper... it comes back. It's been living in my lungs since 10th grade."

The air didn't taste like oxygen anymore; it tasted like hot metal and melted plastic.

I remember the way the hallway looked—distorted by the heat. But the fire wasn't the loudest thing in the house. The loudest thing was the silence coming from my parents' bedroom. I had crawled through the vent, my 10th-grade blue school dress hooked and torn, the hem blackened by embers.

I remember the weight of the air, thick with the smell of copper. Blood. When I reached the doorway, the world stopped. They weren't just gone. My father was slumped against the bedframe, his chest a map of jagged wounds. My mother... she was on the floor, her hand stretched toward the door, her eyes fixed on nothing. There was a knife handle protruding from her collarbone. They were bathing in it—a dark, viscous pool reflecting the flickering orange light.

The fire was a lie. A curtain drawn over a slaughter.

I didn't scream. I couldn't. I just stood there, watching the flames lick at the rug, turning the red blood into a bubbling, blackened crust. I wanted the fire to take me, too.

I don't know how I got out. I just remember the cold rain hitting my face. I was wandering, my dress a tattered rag of charcoal and blue. I was fifteen, and I was dead.

Then, the boots. It was Logan, my schoolmate. He dropped to his knees in the mud. "Zabrina," he choked out. "I'm here. I've got you." He reached into his pocket and pulled out that silver compass. "Don't look back. My father... he can protect you."

I took his hand. But protection was a slow, surgical erasure.

The months that followed were a cold transition. The Director didn't comfort me; he gave me a handgun. He didn't offer therapy; he offered a shooting range. I remember the first time I hit the bullseye. I didn't feel proud; I felt nothing. And that was the goal. I traded my blue

dress for Kevlar, my laughter for tactical silence. By the time I turned eighteen, the girl who liked biology was a ghost, and Operative Rank 3 was the only thing left in the mirror.

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"I watched him take my friend and kill her bit by bit until there was nothing left but a soldier," Logan said, a single tear finally escaping. "I'm so sorry I led you from one fire into another."

I reached up, cupping his face with my hands, my thumbs wiping away the salt on his cheeks. I felt the Rank 3 ice in my chest melting, replaced by the fierce, protective heat of the girl who still remembered his school jacket.

"Logan, stop," I said, my voice a firm, loving command. "You think you failed me? You were the only light in that building. When the Director was pushing me to be a machine, you were the one who reminded me I had a name."

I squeezed his hands, grounding him. "You didn't lead me into the fire. You were the one who held my hand through it. If you hadn't been there, I wouldn't have become Rank 3—I would have just become a monster. You saved the only part of me that matters."

I pulled him into a hug, letting him hear my heart—steady and alive. "We're going to end his reign, Logan. And then, we're going to find out who we are when the guns are put away."

Logan let out a long, shuddering breath, finally relaxing. The weight he'd been carrying seemed to shift, shared between us now.

In the shadows of the doorway, Eliot stood perfectly still. He wasn't the "Devil" in this moment; he was a man witnessing a bond so deep it transcended the violence they had all been born into. He watched them—the spy and the hacker—and for the first time, his green eyes showed a flicker of envy. Not for me, but for the years he had missed.

"Zabrina," Eliot said softly, stepping onto the balcony. He didn't interrupt the moment; he joined it. "Christian has the coordinates. The Director isn't running anymore. He's waiting."

I looked at Logan, and for a fleeting second, I didn't see the man who had just saved my life with a signal jammer. I saw the boy who had knelt in the mud with a silver compass.

The Director was a monster—a cold-blooded architect of misery—but he was still Logan's father. I felt the familiar, hollow ache in my chest, the one that had lived there since the night of the fire. I knew the weight of that void. I knew what it felt like to have your world cauterized by a single moment of finality. Even after everything, I didn't want Logan to feel that. I didn't want him to carry the burden of a dead father, even a father who didn't deserve the title.

I looked at Eliot, the "Devil" who had spent the night tearing through the city for me. I sighed, the sound heavy with a weariness that went deeper than bone.

"We find him," I said, my voice barely a whisper, "but we don't end him. Not like that."

Eliot didn't ask why. He didn't argue about the risk or the tactical disadvantage. He stood there, his green eyes scanning my face, reading the lines of grief and the flicker of mercy I

was trying so hard to hide. He felt the shift in me without a single word being exchanged. He knew that if he forced me to witness another execution, he'd be losing the woman he had just fought so hard to find.

"I understand, Zabrina," Eliot said, his voice dropping to a low, resonant tone. He looked at Logan, then back at me. "The Skullz will handle the extraction. We'll contain him. No blood."

Logan let out a breath he seemed to have been holding for eight years, his shoulders finally dropping. "Thank you, Z."

# CHAPTER 21

## CHAPTER 21: The Devil's Mercy

### Eliot's POV

The safehouse was a concrete bunker buried thirty feet beneath the industrial district. It wasn't a panic room; it was a command center. Men like the Director didn't hide to survive; they hid to plot their counter-attack.

I stood in the threshold, the heavy steel door sealing shut behind me with a pneumatic hiss.

The room was stark. Cold.

Three of the Director's personal mercenaries stood between me and the desk. These weren't street thugs; they were ex-special forces, men who charged seven figures to kill without asking questions. But as I stepped into the light, they didn't raise their rifles. They froze.

They looked at the long black coat. They looked at the face that owned the city's skyline. They knew the hierarchy of predators, and they knew they were out of their depth.

"Leave," I whispered. The word was soft, barely disturbing the stagnant air.

They didn't hesitate. They didn't look at their employer. They dropped their weapons—expensive, custom-milled carbines clattering loudly onto the concrete—and walked past me, choosing unemployment over a closed casket.

I didn't watch them go. My eyes were locked on the man sitting behind the heavy steel desk.

The Director. The "Big Boss" of Black Base.

He didn't look scared. He looked annoyed. He sat back in his leather chair, a glass of amber liquid in one hand, his other hand resting casually near the edge of the desk. He was a man used to being the most dangerous person in the room.

"You're trespassing, Nicholas," the Director said, his voice steady, authoritative. "And you've just cost me three very expensive employees."

I didn't answer. I began to walk toward him. Slow. Rhythmic. The sound of my boots on the concrete echoed like a clock ticking down.

"Stop," the Director commanded. He didn't shout. He expected to be obeyed. "You think because you have a few hackers and a scary nickname, you can walk into my base? I built this city. I own the judges. I own the police. You touch me, and I will have the Skullz designated as a terrorist organization by morning."

I stopped at the edge of his desk. I looked down at him, my expression blank.

"You're still negotiating," I said, my voice flat. "You think you still have chips on the table."

"I *am* the table," the Director sneered. His hand moved—fast—toward the underside of the desk. A hidden holster.

I didn't flinch. I moved.

It was a blur of violence, precise and surgical. Before his fingers could graze the handle of his weapon, I grabbed his wrist. I didn't just hold it; I slammed it down against the steel surface of the desk with enough force to shatter bone.

*CRACK.*

The Director screamed, a guttural sound of shock and pain, dropping the glass of whiskey. It shattered, soaking his expensive suit.

"You *were* the table," I corrected, my voice unchanged. "Now? You're a liability."

I leaned in, forcing him to look at me. "I bought your debt an hour ago. I own your servers. I own your offshore accounts. I own the air vents pumping oxygen into this room."

The Director was panting, sweat beading on his forehead, but the arrogance wasn't fully gone. It was stubborn.

"You... you can't kill me," he gasped, his eyes darting to my face. "The vacuum... it will cause chaos. You know what happens when there's no order. Chaos killed your father. It killed that girl's parents."

The mention of my father didn't make a beast roar. It did something worse.

It turned the world absolute zero.

"You think I fear chaos?" I whispered, leaning in until I was the only thing he could see. "I was born in it. I thrived in it. You killed my father and you thought it would break the Skullz. Instead, you gave the throne to me."

His face was turning a sickly shade of purple, his good hand clawing uselessly at my forearm. His eyes were bulging, finally showing the terror I had been waiting for.

"And Zabrina..." I hissed, my grip tightening on his throat. "You took a child and turned her into a weapon because you were too cowardly to do your own killing. You stole eight years of her life."

"I... made... her..." he choked out.

"You broke her," I said. "And now I'm going to break you."

I felt the urge then. The dark, seductive pull to crush his windpipe. To finish it. It would be so easy. A twitch of my thumb, and the Director of Black Base would be a corpse. Justice would be served.

But then I remembered the look in Zabrina's eyes outside the Cathedral. *No more blood, Eliot.*

She didn't want justice. She wanted to be free. Killing him would make me the monster he claimed I was. Leaving him alive... that would make me the King.

I let go.

The Director crumbled to the floor, gasping, clutching his throat. He looked up at me, confused. Alive.

"Why?" he wheezed.

I looked down at him with pure, unadulterated disgust. "Because Zabrina asked for your life. And since she is the only person in this world I answer to, you get to keep it."

I pulled a black envelope from my coat pocket and dropped it onto his chest.

"Inside is a passport," I said coldly. "New name. New history. You are now a retired accountant living in a village where the snow never melts and the internet doesn't work."

"Exile?" He looked at the envelope, horrified. "I am a king!"

"You are a ghost," I said, my voice thundering in the small room. "If you stay in this city, I will feed you to the rats. If you speak the name 'Black Base' or 'Zabrina,' I will find you. And I won't be this polite next time."

I turned my back on him. The ultimate insult.

"Logan," I said, not looking back. "He's all yours."

Logan stepped out of the shadows. He had been silent, watching the man who had controlled his life for a decade be reduced to a shivering heap on the floor.

"Goodbye, Dad," Logan said, his voice hollow.

I walked out of the bunker. The heavy steel door hissed shut behind me, sealing the Director in his tomb of irrelevance.

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The night air outside was sharp, carrying the metallic scent of the nearby shipyard. I took a deep breath, letting the cold fill my lungs, purging the smell of the Director's cheap cologne and fear.

And then I saw her.

Zabrina.

She was leaning against the hood of the armored SUV, her arms crossed over her tactical suit. She was staring up at the smog-choked sky, her profile illuminated by the harsh streetlights. She looked exhausted, her posture slumped with the weight of the night.

My chest tightened. It was a physical ache—terror.

For eight years, I had convinced myself she was dead.

I remembered the night of the fire. The rain slicking my hair against my skull. The heat of the flames warping the air as the roof collapsed. But it wasn't just the fire. It was the timeline of agony that preceded it.

Three days before that fire, I had found my father's body. The man who tried to legitimize the Skullz, who tried to choose peace over power, butchered by his own kind. I hadn't even washed the blood off my hands when I ran to Zabrina's house, desperate to save the one clean thing left in my life.

And then I watched her burn.

I stood there, eighteen years old, and I realized the truth: Mercy had killed my father. Weakness had killed Zabrina.

The boy who wanted to be a lawyer died in that rain. I realized that the world didn't respect men; it respected monsters. To survive—to keep the vultures from tearing the Skullz apart and killing my sister—I had to become something worse than them. I became "The Devil" not out of spite, but out of necessity. I buried my heart in that cemetery so no one could ever use it against me again.

I spent nearly three thousand days ruling through fear, convinced that love was just a weakness waiting to be exploited.

And then... the vault.

A month ago.

It felt like a lifetime had passed since that night, but the memory was sharp enough to cut. I had walked into my secure wing because the silent alarm tripped. I walked in with my Desert Eagle raised, safety off, finger on the trigger. I was prepared to blow the brains out of a thief who dared to steal from me.

I had the gun pressed to the back of her head. I was a millisecond away from killing her.

*"Turn around,"* I had ordered.

And when she turned...

I still have nightmares about that moment. The way the air left my lungs. The way the gun, which usually felt like an extension of my hand, suddenly felt like it weighed a thousand pounds.

It wasn't a stranger. It wasn't a thief. It was Zabrina.

Alive. Breathing. Pointing a gun at my chest.

The shock nearly broke me. My heart, which I had hardened into stone, hammered against my ribs so hard I thought it would crack them. It wasn't just surprise; it was horror. I had almost killed her. I had almost executed the only person I had ever mourned.

I had to force the "Devil" mask back on that night. I had to smirk. I had to call her "kitten" and act arrogant because if I didn't—if I let myself feel the reality that I had almost murdered her—I would have fallen to my knees right there in the map room and wept.

Now, looking at her leaning against the car after weeks of fighting, lying, and bleeding together, that same fear washed over me. She was alive. Which meant I had a weakness again.

She heard my footsteps and turned. Her eyes searched mine. She wasn't looking for the Boss of the Skullz. She was looking for Eliot.

"Is it done?" she asked, her voice barely a whisper.

I stopped inches from her. I kept my hands in my pockets, afraid that if I touched her, the adrenaline in my system would make me shake.

"He's gone," I said, my voice low, raspy. "He's exiled. The Base belongs to Logan."

She let out a long, shuddering breath. Her shoulders dropped. The tension that had held her together since she was fifteen years old finally snapped. She slumped against the car.

"Thank you," she whispered. "For listening."

I couldn't help it then. I reached out, my hand cupping her cheek. My thumb brushed over the bruise on her jawline. She leaned into the touch, her eyes fluttering closed.

"I don't listen to anyone, Zabrina," I murmured, the truth of it hanging in the air between us. "But for you... I would burn the world if you asked. And I would spare it if you wanted."

She opened her eyes. They were glassy, tired, but they held a warmth I hadn't seen in years.

"So," she said, a faint, weary smirk playing on her lips. "The Director is retired. The war is over. What does a master thief do now?"

I looked at her—my equal, my weakness, my ghost. I opened the car door for her, a ghost of a smile touching my own lips.

"We improvise, kitten. We improvise."

# CHAPTER 22.

## Chapter 22: The Weight of Silence.

The silence inside the armored SUV was heavy enough to crush bone.

We were moving at eighty miles per hour down the coastal highway, cutting a path through the storm that had swallowed the city. Rain lashed against the bulletproof glass in violent sheets, blurring the world outside into a smear of grey and black. It was a sealed capsule of leather and tension, isolating us from the chaos we had just left behind.

I sat in the back, my head resting against the cool window. My body felt distant, a heavy thing that I was merely inhabiting rather than controlling. The adrenaline dump had hit me twenty minutes ago, turning my blood into lead and my muscles into aching, bruised knots. I traced the condensation on the glass with my eyes, watching a single droplet fight gravity before being whipped away by the wind.

It felt like a metaphor for my life.

Eliot sat beside me. He had not spoken a word since we left the industrial district. He had shed the theatrical persona of the "Devil" the moment the heavy door clicked shut, leaving behind a man who looked stripped down to his foundations. His tailored suit was rumpled and stained with the grey dust of the bunker. His tie was gone. His top button was undone, revealing the hollow of his throat where a pulse beat with a slow, steady rhythm.

He was staring straight ahead at the partition, his hands resting loosely on his knees. I found myself studying those hands. They were large hands. Capable hands. They were the hands of a man who could dismantle a bomb or break a neck, but right now, they looked strangely still. There was a smear of black engine grease on his left knuckle. It was a small, dirty imperfection on a man who curated perfection like a weapon.

It made him look terrifyingly human.

I shifted my weight, trying to find a position that didn't aggravate the deep bruise forming on my shoulder where I had hit the bottom of the laundry chute. A sharp hiss of pain escaped my teeth before I could stifle it.

Eliot's head turned. It was a slow, deliberate movement. The passing streetlights cut across his face, highlighting the sharp angle of his cheekbone and the muted, tired green of his eyes.

"You're counting," he said. His voice was a low rumble that seemed to vibrate through the leather seat.

I blinked, caught off guard. "What?"

"You're counting the mile markers," he murmured, turning his gaze back to the front. "You're wondering if we have enough fuel to make a secondary extraction point if the Villa is compromised."

I swallowed the lump in my throat. He was right. I was always calculating. It was the only way I knew how to breathe.

"Old habits," I whispered. "We don't stop working just because the shooting stops."

"Neither do Kings," Eliot replied softly.

The conversation died there, suffocated by the lack of oxygen in the car. We were two soldiers returning from a war that nobody else knew was happening. We had toppled the Director. We had rewritten the criminal underworld's constitution in a single night.

And yet, it didn't feel like a victory. It felt like a stay of execution.

"Joseph," Eliot called out, his voice gaining a hard edge of command. "Status."

Joseph's eyes met mine in the rearview mirror before flickering to Eliot. "We are two minutes out, Boss. The perimeter is green. Silas is waiting at the main gate."

Eliot's jaw tightened. A muscle feathered in his cheek. "Is he alone?"

"He has the honor guard," Joseph said carefully. "And... Miss Janien is with him."

The air in the car shifted. The temperature seemed to drop ten degrees. Eliot sat up straighter, the exhaustion vanishing behind a wall of cold resolve. He buttoned his jacket. He adjusted his cuffs. He rebuilt the Devil piece by piece, right in front of my eyes.

"Janien shouldn't be out in this storm," Eliot muttered, more to himself than to us.

"She insisted," Joseph said. "You know how she gets when the alarms go off."

We slowed as the massive iron gates of the Villa loomed out of the rain. The estate was a fortress of black stone and glass, clinging to the cliffside like a dark parasite feeding on the ocean view. It was beautiful in a brutal, uncompromising way. It was a house built by paranoia and funded by fear.

The gates groaned open, hydraulic arms pushing back tons of steel to reveal the circular driveway.

And there they were.

A group of men in black suits stood under large umbrellas, their faces stoic. At the center stood Silas. He looked like an ancient tree that had weathered a thousand storms. Tall, gaunt, with grey hair pulled back severely from a face that seemed incapable of smiling. He stood with his hands clasped behind his back, his posture rigid. He didn't look angry. He looked disappointed. He looked like a father waiting for a son who had crashed the family car.

Beside him, looking like a splash of paint on a charcoal canvas, was a young woman. She wore a bright yellow raincoat over a sundress, and she was bouncing on the balls of her feet.

She clutched a ragged stuffed rabbit to her chest with one hand and waved frantically with the other.

Janien. The sister. The secret.

The car stopped. Joseph killed the engine. The silence returned, louder than the drumming rain.

"Stay here," Eliot said. It wasn't a suggestion. It was a directive.

"I can walk, Eliot," I said, my hand reaching for the door handle. "I'm not an invalid."

He caught my hand. His grip was firm, warm, and calloused. He didn't look at me. He looked out the window at Silas.

"I know what you are, Zabrina," he said quietly. "You are a weapon. But right now, you are a weapon that is out of ammo. Silas isn't an enemy you shoot. He represents the old blood. He represents the tradition I just spat on by letting the Director live. This isn't a battlefield. It's a courtroom. Let me handle the verdict."

He squeezed my hand once—a brief, grounding pressure—and then let go. He opened the door and stepped out into the deluge.

Joseph followed, snapping open a large black umbrella, but Eliot ignored it. He walked straight toward Silas, the rain soaking his suit within seconds. He didn't hurry. He moved with a languid, predatory grace that commanded attention.

I watched through the tinted glass. It was like watching a silent film.

Silas didn't bow. He nodded, a stiff, jerky motion. He spoke, his gestures sharp. He pointed at the gate. He pointed at the ground. He was asking for the body. He was asking for the proof that the threat was neutralized.

Eliot stood perfectly still. He let Silas vent. He let the old man pour out his frustration and his fear. And when Silas was finished, Eliot stepped closer. He placed a hand on Silas's shoulder. It looked like a gesture of comfort, but I knew the weight of that hand. It was a reminder of who was holding whom up.

Eliot said something. Silas froze. The old man looked down at the wet pavement, his shoulders slumping. The fight went out of him. He nodded again, slower this time, and stepped back.

The Boss had spoken.

Then the dynamic shattered. Janien ducked under Silas's arm and launched herself at Eliot. She didn't care about the rain. She didn't care about the hierarchy. She wrapped her arms around his waist and buried her face in his soaked chest.

Eliot's reaction was immediate and heartbreaking. The stiffness left his spine. He wrapped his arms around her, shielding her with his body, his hand coming up to cradle the back of

her head. He whispered something into her hair, and for a moment, the Devil was gone. There was only a brother trying to keep the world from touching the one pure thing he had left.

I looked away. A sharp pang of envy twisted in my gut. It wasn't romantic jealousy. It was the ache of a child who had stood in a burning hallway and realized that no one was coming to hold her. I had learned to weather the storms alone. Seeing someone else get an umbrella... it burned.

The door on my side of the car opened.

Logan stood there. He was drenched, his tactical gear heavy with water, his hair plastered to his forehead. But his eyes were bright. Relieved.

"He signaled for us," Logan said, offering me a hand. "You ready to face the music?"

"I'd rather face a firing squad," I muttered, taking his hand.

"Good," Logan smiled, pulling me out into the rain. "Because I think that's exactly what this is."

We walked up the grand steps of the Villa. The main hall was a cavernous space of black marble and crystal, smelling of ozone and expensive flowers. It felt less like a home and more like a museum dedicated to the concept of intimidation.

The merged crews of Black Base and the Skullz were already inside, an awkward ecosystem of predators trying to figure out who was top of the food chain.

Crystal was perched on the back of a velvet sofa, cleaning her crossbow with a silk throw pillow she had clearly stolen from a guest room. She looked entirely at home in the luxury, like a cat that had finally found a sunbeam worthy of her.

Christian—X—had commandeered a massive antique desk in the corner. He had pushed aside a priceless vase to make room for his server towers, his face illuminated by the blue glow of code as he tried to patch the holes in our digital armor.

Mark stood by the archway, arms crossed, watching Crystal with a look that hovered between suspicion and fascination.

Eliot walked to the wet bar in the center of the room. He poured a glass of amber liquid, his movements precise. Silas stood a few feet away, dripping onto the marble, looking like a wet vulture.

"The captains are restless, Eliot," Silas said, his voice echoing in the large room. "They know about the Director. They know you went into the bunker. They expected a victory. You brought them a liability."

"I brought them the new head of Black Base," Eliot corrected, gesturing to Logan with his glass. "The Director is gone. His infrastructure is ours. His secrets are ours. That is a victory."

"And his enemies?" Silas asked pointedly, his eyes darting to me and Logan. "We have welcomed wolves into the sheepfold, Boss. These people... they are Black Base. They are trained to destroy us. They don't follow our code."

"We're freelance now, old man," Crystal piped up from the sofa, not looking up from her weapon. "And frankly, your security protocols are embarrassing. I could have breached this house with a bobby pin and a stick of gum."

Silas bristled, his face flushing red. "Insolence."

"Competence," Eliot said. He set his glass down. "The Director's exit created a hole in the city. The Mask Gang isn't just probing the perimeter anymore. They are moving in. They hit the shipyard twenty minutes ago. They intercepted a container."

"What was in the container?" Logan asked, stepping forward. He stood differently now. He wasn't just a handler anymore; he was the owner of the organization he had just helped dismantle. He carried the weight of it.

Eliot looked at him. "A-Series prototypes."

The silence that followed was absolute.

"A-Series," I whispered, the blood draining from my face. "That's impossible. That tech was decommissioned after the Fire of '18. It was supposed to be scrap metal."

"Your father was a hoarder, Logan," Eliot said coldly. "He didn't destroy the weapons. He stockpiled them. And now, a group of anarchists has rail-gun capacitors and thermal cloaking tech. We aren't fighting gang bangers anymore. We are fighting ghosts armed with lightning."

"So we hunt them," Mark rumbled from the doorway.

"We will," Eliot said. "But not tonight. Tonight, we secure the house."

He looked at me. His gaze felt physical, a touch across the room.

"Zabrina," he said. "Upstairs. Second door on the left. The guest suite. It has a lock. Use it."

"I can help Christian with the tracking," I said, my voice sounding thin even to my own ears. "If I calibrate the-"

"You can barely stand," Eliot interrupted. He walked toward me, ignoring Silas, ignoring Logan. He stopped inches away, invading my space, forcing me to look up at him. "You are shaking, Thief. Your adrenaline is gone. You are running on stubbornness. Go to sleep."

"I don't sleep in strange houses," I said.

"This isn't a strange house," he murmured, loud enough only for me to hear. "It's my house. And as long as I am breathing, nothing crosses that threshold without my permission. Not the Mask Gang. Not Silas. Not even your nightmares."

He reached out. For a second, I thought he was going to hold me. Instead, his thumb brushed a smudge of dirt from my cheek. The contact was brief, electric, and terrifyingly intimate.

"Go," he whispered.

I nodded, my resistance crumbling. I walked toward the grand staircase. As I ascended, I looked back. Eliot was already turning to Silas, his face hardening back into the mask of the King. He was shielding me again.

I reached the second floor and found the room. I slipped inside and leaned against the heavy oak door, listening to the tumblers of the lock click into place.

The room was massive. It was a study in minimalism—cream walls, charcoal furniture, a bed that looked large enough to sleep a platoon. One wall was entirely glass, looking out over the turbulent, black ocean. Rain hammered against the pane, a violent lullaby.

I walked into the bathroom. It was larger than my entire apartment. I stripped off the tactical suit, the Kevlar, the boots. I stood in front of the mirror, naked and shivering. My body was a map of violence. A purple bruise bloomed across my collarbone. A yellow lattice of trauma wrapped around my ribs. A jagged red scrape ran down my forearm.

I looked into my own eyes. They were hollow. The eyes of a stranger.

I turned on the shower. I stepped under the spray, letting the water run hot, scalding the numbness away. I scrubbed my skin until it was pink and raw, trying to wash off the feeling of the tunnel, the smell of the explosive, the memory of the Director's fear.

I stayed in there for a long time. When the water finally ran cool, I stepped out and wrapped myself in a plush white robe I found hanging on a hook. It smelled of lavender and starch. It smelled clean.

I walked back into the bedroom. Someone had been there.

On the bedside table, a small tray waited. A bowl of steaming tomato soup. A glass of ice water. And a box of Honey-Nut O's.

I stared at the cereal box. My throat tightened. It was ridiculous. It was a joke. But it was also the most thoughtful thing anyone had done for me in years. He remembered. In the middle of a war council, dealing with a traitor and a stolen weapons shipment, the Devil had remembered I liked cereal.

A knock at the door shattered the moment.

I stiffened, my hand flying to where my gun should have been. "Who is it?"

"It's Logan."

I exhaled, unlocking the door. Logan slipped inside, closing it quickly behind him. He had changed into dry clothes—jeans and a grey t-shirt that looked borrowed. He looked weary, but the frantic terror was gone. He looked like the boss now.

He walked over to the armchair by the window and sat down heavily. He didn't look at me. He looked at the rain.

"We found something," he said quietly. "Christian decrypted a fragment of my father's personal ledger before the server wiped itself."

"Money?" I asked, sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Names," Logan said. He turned to face me. "Zabrina, my father wasn't just selling weapons. He was buying protection."

"From who?"

"From someone inside the Skullz."

I felt a cold knot form in my stomach. "Who?"

"The name was erased. A ghost account. But the payments were massive. Millions of dollars, funnelled through shell companies. The payments stopped three days ago."

"When the Director decided to run," I whispered. "He stopped paying, so his protection evaporated. That's why he panicked. He wasn't running from us, Logan. He was running from his partner."

"Exactly." Logan leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. "There is a traitor in this house, Z. Someone high up. Someone who sits at the table with Eliot. Someone who sold out the organization for Black Base money."

"Silas?" I asked. It was the logical conclusion. The old guard. The man who hated the new ways.

"Maybe," Logan said. "Or maybe that's too easy. Silas is loud about his complaints. Traitors who last this long are usually quiet."

"Does Eliot know?"

"I don't think so. Christian is trying to trace the IP, but it's bouncing all over the globe. We need physical access to the Skullz internal financial records. We need the hard copies."

I rubbed my face with my hands. "So the mission isn't over. We just changed targets."

"The mission is never over," Logan said sadly. He stood up and walked over to me. He placed a hand on my head, a brotherly gesture that felt like a benediction. "Get some sleep. We are in the lion's den, Z. We need to be sharp tomorrow."

"Lock the door on your way out," I said.

"I will."

He left. I locked the door again. I crawled under the heavy duvet, the weight of it comforting. I stared at the ceiling, listening to the storm.

A traitor. Someone in this house had helped kill my parents. Someone here had taken the Director's money and looked the other way while my life burned down.

I closed my eyes, but sleep was a distant country.

An hour later, the lock clicked.

My eyes snapped open. I didn't move. I listened. The distinct metallic slide of a pick engaging the tumblers. The soft *thunk* of the bolt retracting.

The door opened silently. A shadow fell across the carpet.

I shifted my weight, my muscles coiling, preparing to launch myself at the intruder.

"Relax, Thief. It's just me."

The air left my lungs in a rush. I sat up, clutching the duvet. "You have a terrible habit of breaking into bedrooms, Eliot."

Eliot stepped into the room, closing the door and locking it behind him with a casual flick of his wrist. He had shed the jacket and tie. His white shirt was unbuttoned halfway down his chest, sleeves rolled up to reveal his forearms. He held a glass of whiskey in one hand and a tablet in the other. He looked exhausted, stripped of his armor, but still undeniably dangerous.

"It's my house," he said, his voice low and raspy. "Technically, you are squatting in my guest room."

"You told me to sleep here."

"I did." He walked to the window, staring out at the violent sea. "But I realized I forgot to give you the briefing packet for tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" I groaned, flopping back onto the pillows. "Can't we have one day? Just one day where we don't have to save the city or steal a national treasure?"

"The Mask Gang doesn't take days off," Eliot said, turning to look at me. The lightning flashed, illuminating his face in stark monochrome. "And neither do traitors."

I went still. "Logan told you."

"Logan tells me everything. He is a very open handler when he is terrified for your life." Eliot swirled his drink. "He thinks it's Silas."

"And you don't?"

"Silas is a dog," Eliot said. "He barks. He growls. He snaps if you try to pet him. But he is loyal to the house. He wouldn't burn it down. He loves the Skullz more than he loves me. He thinks I am too soft. Too merciful. But he wouldn't sell us to the Director."

"Then who?"

"That is what we are going to find out." He walked over to the bed and placed the tablet on the mattress. "Tomorrow night, the Takahashi Syndicate is hosting a charity gala. An auction for 'ocean preservation.' Zen will be there."

"Zen," I repeated. "Your business partner."

"She has been trying to verify your identity since the safe house. She has been pulling threads. If she finds out you are Black Base, the alliance breaks. If the alliance breaks while the Mask Gang has rail-guns, we lose the war."

"So I stay hidden," I said.

"No," Eliot said. A slow, wicked light entered his eyes. "You attend. As my wife."

I stared at him. "You want me to walk into a room full of Yakuza, flanked by the woman who wants me dead, pretending to be married to the Devil, while we hunt for a traitor?"

"Exactly." He picked up the box of cereal from the nightstand and shook it gently.

"Multitasking, Zabrina. It is a necessary skill."

"You are insane," I whispered.

"I am desperate," he countered. The playfulness vanished. He sat on the edge of the bed. The mattress dipped under his weight. He was close. I could smell the whiskey and the rain and the heat of him.

"I have enemies at the gate and enemies in my hall," he said softly. "I cannot trust my advisor. I cannot trust my captains. The only person in this city I trust is the woman who tried to rob me."

He looked at me. Really looked at me. It wasn't the look of a boss to an underling. It was the look of a drowning man finding a lifeline.

"Help me find the leak, Zabrina," he said. "And I will give you whatever you want. Money. A new name. A way out."

I looked at him. I thought about the passport he had given the Director. I thought about the snowy village. I thought about freedom.

"I don't want a way out," I said. The truth of it surprised me.

Eliot went still. "What do you want?"

I reached out and took the glass from his hand. I took a sip. The burn was grounding. I handed it back, our fingers brushing. A spark jumped between us.

"I want to know who sold you out," I said. "And I want to be there when you make them pay."

Eliot stared at me. A slow smile spread across his face. It wasn't the Devil's smirk. It was something real.

"Careful, Assistant," he murmured. "You are starting to sound like one of us."

"Maybe I am," I whispered.

He stood up. "Get some sleep. The gala is black tie. And Zabrina?" He paused at the door. "Wear something sharp. Zen is going to be bringing knives."

"I'll bring a bazooka," I muttered, sliding down under the covers.

Eliot chuckled, a low, warm sound in the dark room. "Goodnight, Thief."

"Goodnight, Devil."

The door clicked shut. The lock engaged.

I lay in the dark, the taste of whiskey on my tongue. For the first time in eight years, I didn't count the exits. I closed my eyes and listened to the storm, knowing that the monster outside couldn't get in.

Because the monster was already inside, and he was on my side.

# CHAPTER 23.

## Chapter 23: The Devil Wears a Tuxedo

The dress was a weapon. I knew that the moment I saw it hanging on the back of the door in the guest suite.

It was emerald green silk. The color of envy and old money. It was backless with a slit that ran dangerously high up the thigh. It was designed to distract. To seduce. To conceal the ceramic knife strapped to my leg.

I stood in front of the floor-to-ceiling mirror. My tactical mindset warred with the reflection staring back at me. The bruises on my shoulder were covered with a heavy layer of foundation. My hair was usually pulled back in a severe knot. Now it cascaded in loose dark waves over my shoulders. The woman in the mirror didn't look like Rank 3. She didn't look like a soldier.

She looked like a high-end fraud. A beautiful lie wrapped in silk.

The door behind me opened. I didn't turn. I watched in the glass as Eliot walked in.

He stopped dead.

He was wearing a tuxedo that fit him like a second skin. Black velvet jacket. Crisp white shirt. A bowtie that had been tied by hand. He looked lethal. He looked like the Devil on his way to a coronation. But as his eyes landed on me the mask cracked. Just a fraction. His gaze traveled from the hem of the dress up to my eyes. They were dark and unreadable.

"I told you to wear something sharp," he said. His voice was lower than usual. "I didn't tell you to bring a nuclear warhead."

"It was in the closet," I replied. I smoothed the silk over my hips. My hands were shaking slightly but I hid them in the folds of the fabric. "I assumed you put it there."

"I had a stylist send over options. I didn't think you'd pick the one that..." He trailed off. He cleared his throat. He walked over to the dresser and picked up a small velvet box. "It's missing something."

He opened the box. Inside lay a necklace that made my breath hitch. It was a single massive emerald teardrop suspended on a delicate gold chain. It looked heavy. It looked expensive enough to buy a small country.

"Eliot," I warned. "I'm not wearing that. This is a cover. Not a marriage. That rock is a liability."

"It's not a rock," Eliot said softly. He stepped behind me. "It's a jammer."

I froze. I looked closer at the stone in the mirror.

"The emerald is synthetic," Eliot explained. He lifted the hair from the back of my neck. "It houses a high-frequency pulse emitter. It scrambles facial recognition algorithms within a

three-foot radius. To the naked eye you are stunning. To the Takahashi security cameras you are a blur of green pixels. A shadow."

I felt the cold metal of the chain against my skin. Then the warmth of his fingers as he clasped it at the nape of my neck.

"And the chain?" I asked.

"Bone conduction," he murmured. His fingers lingered on my skin a moment too long. "It connects directly to my comms. No earpiece needed. I can hear your heartbeat Zabrina. And I can whisper instructions without moving my lips."

I shivered. It wasn't from the cold. The idea of him being inside my head. Listening to the rhythm of my pulse. It was an intimacy I wasn't prepared for.

"Zen is going to hate this," I murmured. I watched his eyes meet mine in the mirror.

"Zen hates everything she can't control," Eliot said. He leaned in. His mouth was dangerously close to my ear. "Let her hate it. Tonight you belong to the Skullz. You play the part. You smile. You hold my arm. And while I keep Zen distracted with business talk you find the server room and get the file."

"The Red Ledger," I confirmed.

"The Red Ledger," he repeated. "The hard copy of the transactions. It contains the truth about who helped the Director and who is betraying me. It's the key for both of us."

He stepped back. The distance between us suddenly felt cold. He offered me his arm.

"Ready to go to war Mrs. Ignacio?"

I took a deep breath. I slipped the mask of the socialite over the face of the soldier. I took his arm.

"Drive fast Devil. I hate being late."

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The Takahashi Gala was held at the Maritime Museum. It was a massive glass structure built on the edge of the harbor. It was ostensibly a charity event for "ocean preservation." This was ironic considering the Takahashi Syndicate made most of its money dumping toxic waste and smuggling contraband through these very waters.

The rain had stopped. The air was thick and humid. The red carpet was a gauntlet of flashing cameras and reporters.

We stepped out of the limousine and the world exploded in light.

Eliot was effortless. He waved. He smiled. It was that terrifying shark-like smile that made the photographers frenzy. He guided me with a hand on the small of my back. A possessive weight that branded me. I played my part. I tilted my head. I laughed at things that weren't

funny. I looked at him with adoring eyes while mentally scanning the perimeter for exit routes and security checkpoints.

"Four guards at the entrance," I whispered through my smile as we walked toward the glass doors. The necklace hummed slightly against my collarbone. "Concealed carry. Probably subcompacts."

"Six," Eliot's voice resonated in my skull. Clear as a bell through the bone conduction. He didn't move his lips. "Two on the roof. Snipers."

"Showoff," I muttered.

We entered the main hall. It was a cavern of blue light and floating displays. Waiters in white tuxedos drifted through the crowd of Yakuza bosses and politicians. A string quartet was playing a haunting version of a pop song I couldn't place.

"Eliot-kun."

The voice was cool. Precise. Dangerous.

I tensed as Zen Takahashi glided through the crowd. She was striking. She stood nearly five-seven in her heels. She matched Eliot in presence if not in height. She looked me dead in the eye. She was wearing a dress made of what looked like pink feathers and diamonds. Her hair was piled high in an elaborate traditional style held in place by lethal-looking golden pins that I knew were dipped in neurotoxin.

She stopped in front of us. She ignored me completely to place a hand on Eliot's arm. It was a familiar. Claiming gesture.

"You are late," Zen said. Her lips curved into a smile that didn't reach her eyes. "I was beginning to worry my fiancé had gotten cold feet."

I felt Eliot stiffen slightly beside me.

"Business partner Zen," Eliot corrected smoothly. He gently removed her hand from his arm. "And I brought my wife."

Zen laughed. It was a brittle sharp sound. She finally turned to look at me. Her gaze raked over the emerald dress. Then the necklace. Her eyes narrowed into slits as she studied the stone. She suspected something. Zen was the head of the Takahashi tech division. She knew jewelry didn't hum.

"Wife?" Zen scoffed. "Eliot you are so funny. I didn't know you had adopted a stray. We have an understanding. The Takahashi and the Skullz are to be united. That means *us*."

"Arrangements change," Eliot said. His voice dropped to that low register that signaled violence. "This is Zabrina. Treat her with the same respect you treat me."

Zen stepped closer to me. She smelled of jasmine and ozone. She loomed slightly. Her height advantage was minimal but she used it well.

"It's a lovely piece," she hissed. She reached out as if to touch the emerald. I flinched back just an inch. "Though it looks a bit... heavy. Be careful. In this world accessories can drag you down to the bottom of the ocean."

I smiled. It was the smile I used before I broke someone's nose.

"Thank you Zen. And I love your dress. It's so brave of you to wear something that looks like a flamingo exploded. It really distracts from your... desperation."

Eliot choked on a cough that sounded suspiciously like a laugh.

Zen's face flushed a dangerous shade of red. She looked at the emerald around my neck again. I saw genuine hatred flare in her gaze. She wanted Eliot. She wanted his power. And she saw me as a bug on her windshield.

"Enjoy the party," Zen said. Her voice was ice. "Try not to break anything. The glassware is worth more than your life."

She spun on her heel and marched away. She barked orders at a terrified waiter.

"You have a way with people," Eliot murmured in my head.

"She's delusional," I whispered. I took a glass of champagne from a passing tray. "She really thinks you're going to marry her."

"She thinks she can buy me," Eliot said. "She thinks power is a transaction. Now focus. The server room is in the private office behind the shark tank. Keycard access only. Zen has the master key on her wrist."

"The bracelet?" I asked.

"The bracelet," he confirmed. "I'll draw her attention. You get the key. You get the data. You get out."

"And if I get caught?"

Eliot looked at me. The humor was gone.

"Then the alliance ends. The war begins. And we probably die in a hail of gunfire before dessert."

"Sounds like a Tuesday," I said.

---

The plan was simple. The execution was messy.

Eliot did his job perfectly. He cornered Zen near the massive aquarium display. He engaged her in a heated discussion about shipping lanes and territory. He flattered her ego. He leaned in close. He made her believe she was the only woman in the room. Zen ate it up. She was preening. She touched his arm. She laughed too loudly.

I moved through the crowd. A green shadow. I bumped into a waiter. I created a small commotion of shattered glass. Heads turned. While eyes were on the mess I slipped past the velvet rope and into the staff corridor.

The noise of the party faded. It was replaced by the hum of ventilation and the click of my heels on the linoleum. The necklace hummed against my throat. A silent reassurance that I was invisible to the cameras mounted in the corners.

I counted the doors. One. Two. Three.

The office.

I didn't have the keycard yet. That was the tricky part. But I had something better. I pulled a small device from my garter. A frequency cloner provided by Christian. I held it against the lock.

*Searching... Searching...*

"Come on," I whispered. I glanced down the empty hallway.

*Click.*

The light turned green. Christian was a genius.

I slipped inside. The room was dark. It was illuminated only by the blue glow of a secondary aquarium built into the wall. Sharks circled silently in the water.

I went straight to the desk. The computer was a fortress but I wasn't trying to hack it. I was looking for the hard line. The backup. The "Red Ledger."

I found the safe behind a painting of a tsunami. Predictable. I used the stethoscope app on my phone to crack the tumbler. Right three. Left seven. Right... click.

The safe swung open.

And there it was. A single red external hard drive.

I grabbed it. I shoved it into the hidden pocket of my sash.

"Hey! You!"

I froze. A guard stood in the doorway. He was huge. He held a flashlight in one hand and reached for his radio with the other.

I didn't think. I reacted.

I grabbed a heavy crystal paperweight from the desk and threw it. It smashed into the aquarium glass next to his head. A spiderweb fracture appeared. It didn't break but it was enough to make him flinch.

I sprinted.

I hit him with a shoulder check that would have embarrassed a linebacker. I used my momentum to knock him into the wall. He grunted. He grabbed at my dress. The silk tore.

I spun. I drove my elbow into his throat. He gagged and dropped.

I didn't wait to see if he was unconscious. I ran.

I made it back to the hallway but I could hear shouting. The alarms were silent. Zen didn't want to panic the guests. But the security team was active. They were sweeping the floor.

I couldn't go back to the main hall. I'd be intercepted.

I turned left toward the terrace doors.

I burst out into the night air. The terrace was empty. It was a long stretch of concrete overlooking the harbor. The wind whipped my hair across my face.

"Zabrina!"

Eliot.

He was coming from the side entrance. He looked calm but he moved with urgency. He saw the torn dress. He saw the wild look in my eyes.

"I have it," I gasped. I patted my waist.

"They're coming," he said. He grabbed my arm and pulled me into the shadows of a large stone pillar. "Security sweep. They know someone was in the office."

We were trapped. The terrace was a dead end. The doors behind us were about to burst open.

"Don't move," he whispered. His voice dropped to a gravelly command. "They are looking..."

"Z. They knew about the mission. Abort..." Logan's voice crackled briefly through the tiny comms in my ear before cutting to static again.

I cursed under my breath.

"Now give it to me," Eliot hissed. His eyes searched the terrace behind me. "The ledger has a sensory detector. If you leave with it now you'll never make it to the gate. The scanners will pick it up on you. Leave the ledger to me and let me deal with it. I'll have it delivered..."

Before he could finish the sound of heavy footsteps echoed nearby. A group of men in black suits. Minister's security or something worse. Takahashi enforcers. They were scanning the alcoves. Their flashlights cut through the darkness. Their eyes darted toward our shadow.

We looked suspicious. A woman in a torn-slit gown and the King of the Skullz huddled in the dark. They were already walking toward us.

"Damn it," Eliot muttered.

Suddenly I felt his hand grip mine. He squeezed firmly as if telling me to stay still. To trust him. Before I could protest his face blurred closer. His hand came up to the back of my neck. He tangled his fingers in my hair and pulled me in.

And then I felt his lips on mine.

It wasn't the kiss of a stranger. It was a collision.

My heart stopped. I realized instantly what he was doing. He was using the oldest distraction in the book to hide our faces and justify our presence in the dark. A lovers' tryst. A stolen moment.

But as his lips pressed against mine the "mission" faded into the background. For a heartbeat I wasn't a spy. He wasn't a mob boss.

I was just a girl lingering in the tiniest comfort I had left in this world.

The moment his lips met mine the world didn't just go quiet. It vanished.

It was supposed to be a distraction. A tactical maneuver. But as Eliot's mouth moved against mine the cold calculated logic of a Rank 3 operative shattered. His kiss was a collision of everything he had become. Dark. Overwhelming. Heavy with a desperate crushing intensity. It tasted of scotch and danger. It wasn't the soft hesitant kiss of the boy I used to know. It was a silent territorial claim that made my knees weak beneath the emerald silk.

His hand tightened in my hair. He tilted my head back to deepen the angle. His other hand splayed across the small of my back. It burned through the thin fabric. He pulled me so close that there was no air left between us. His thumb grazed my jawline with a tremor he couldn't quite hide.

For a heartbeat I wasn't an agent and he wasn't the Devil. We were just two ghosts colliding in the dark. Breathing the same air for the first time in a decade.

*Focus Zabrina.*

The professional in me. The one trained to kill and disappear. She clawed her way back to the surface through the haze of desire. While his lips worked to convince the approaching guards that we were nothing more than high-society lovers caught in a moment of heat my hands moved with the silent lethality I'd spent eight years perfecting.

I didn't pull away. Instead I leaned into him. I rose on my tiptoes. I made the kiss look deeper. Hungrier. My right hand slid down the side of his tailored jacket. My fingers were nimble and ghost-light. I felt the opening of his inner breast pocket. With a single fluid motion I transferred the cold metallic weight of the Red Ledger from my sash into his suit.

I felt the slight thump as it settled against his chest.

Eliot's breath hitched into my mouth. He felt the weight transfer. He knew what I had done. But he didn't break the contact. If anything his grip on my waist tightened. He pulled me so flush against him that I could feel the rapid heavy thud of his heart through the fabric of his

vest. It was a frantic uneven rhythm. One that didn't match the cold composed man he pretended to be.

"Clear," a muffled voice grunted from a few feet away. A flashlight beam swept over us. It lingered for a rude second before moving on. "Just some rich bastards getting a room. Move on."

The footsteps receded. The heavy thud of boots faded back toward the ballroom.

Eliot didn't pull back immediately. He lingered. His lips softened against mine for a heartbeat longer than the distraction required. It was a second of pure unscripted vulnerability that felt more dangerous than the mission itself.

When he finally drew back his forehead rested against mine. We were both breathing hard. The condensation of our breath mingled in the cold air. His green eyes were dark. Blown out. They were fixed on my mouth as if he were trying to memorize the sensation for the next eight years.

He didn't say a word. He didn't need to. The way he was looking at me—like I was the only thing keeping him grounded in this dark world—said everything he was trying to hide.

"The sensor is your problem now," I breathed. My voice trembled despite my best efforts to remain professional. I reached up. I smoothed the lapel of his jacket. My fingers lingered over the spot where the Ledger now sat.

I looked at him. I searched for the boy I loved but I saw only the man who now held my life in his pocket. I felt the warmth from his hand still burning on my waist. A heat that made the emerald silk feel like it was on fire.

"Get it out of here," I whispered. I finally stepped out of his reach. My lips felt swollen. My heart felt bruised. "If I stay with you the Base will flag me as a traitor before I even hit the lobby."

Eliot straightened his suit. The "Devil" mask slid back into place with a sharp jagged edge. Though his gaze never left mine. He looked like a man who had just won everything and lost it all in the same breath.

"Go," he said. His voice was low and roughened. "I'll handle the lobby. I'll handle Zen."

I didn't look back. I couldn't. I walked toward the service elevators. The taste of him still burned on my lips. The crushing weight of that "wrong" feeling grew heavier in my chest. I had given him the asset. I had trusted the man I didn't recognize. And for the first time in my life I wasn't sure if it was the spy in me or the girl who was still in love with a memory.

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The extraction point was a rusted-out pier three miles north of the Atheneum. It was the kind of place where things went to disappear. The smell of brine and rotting wood was a sharp contrast to the expensive perfumes of the gala.

I sat on the hood of a nondescript sedan that Logan had left for me. The emerald silk of my gown was hiked up to my mid-thigh. It exposed the tactical boots I'd swapped my heels for the second I hit the parking garage.

I looked ridiculous. A million-dollar dress. Combat boots. A ceramic blade resting on my lap.

The adrenaline from the gala was starting to cool. It was replaced by a nagging irritating sensation on my lips. The kiss. It wasn't just a distraction. It was a problem. A variable I hadn't accounted for. My mind kept replaying the way his heart had thundered against mine.

*He's playing you.* I told myself. I checked my watch for the fifth time. *He's the King of the Skullz. He needed the drive to check for his own name. If he finds out he's implicated he will destroy it.*

"You always were impatient Thief."

The voice came from the shadows behind a stack of shipping containers. I didn't jump. I was too good for that. But my hand instinctively tightened around the hilt of my blade.

Eliot stepped into the moonlight.

The lethal obsidian statue from the ballroom was gone. He'd ditched the velvet suit jacket. His white dress shirt was unbuttoned at the collar. The bowtie was gone. His sleeves were rolled up to reveal forearms corded with muscle and faint jagged scars. He looked less like a Mafia King and more like the boy who used to jump off the roof of the garden shed just to see if I'd catch him.

He was tossing a small metallic object into the air and catching it with effortless grace.

The Red Ledger.

"You're late," I snapped. The relief hit me harder than I cared to admit. It washed over me. It made my limbs feel heavy.

"I had to deal with a few persistent fans in the lobby," Eliot said. A slow playful smirk spread across his face. He walked toward me. The gravel crunched under his expensive loafers. "They weren't very good dancers. They kept tripping over their own feet. And their own teeth."

He stopped just a few feet away. He leaned casually against a rusted pillar. He looked at me. Really looked at me. Taking in the torn emerald silk and the muddy combat boots.

"Nice look," he chuckled. "Is that the new Base 'Post-Apocalyptic Prom' collection?"

"Give me the drive Eliot," I said. I held out my hand. I kept my voice flat. Professional.

He didn't give it to me. Instead he held it up between two fingers just out of reach. The moonlight glinted off the red casing.

"Now why would I do that?" he mused. "I do all the heavy lifting. I take on the hitters. I provide a world-class distraction on the terrace... and I don't even get a 'thank you'?"

"The 'distraction' was your idea," I reminded him. My eyes narrowed. "And you enjoyed it way too much."

Eliot's grin widened. His green eyes danced with a familiar mischievous light I hadn't seen in years. It was the look he used to give me right before we got in trouble.

"I'm a professional Zabrina. I commit to the role. Besides." He took a step closer. He invaded my personal space with the ease of someone who knew he was untouchable. "You didn't exactly fight me off. In fact I think I felt you lean in."

"I was securing the asset," I lied. My face heated up. Betraying me.

"Is that what we're calling it now?" He laughed. A low rich sound that vibrated in the salt air. "Securing the asset."

He suddenly tossed the Ledger toward me.

I caught it out of the air instinctively. I clutched the cold metal. But before I could pull my hand back he reached out and caught my wrist. His grip wasn't a restraint. It was a lingering touch. Warm and surprisingly gentle.

"I could have kept it you know," he murmured. The playfulness vanished. It softened into something more grounded. "I didn't open it. I don't know whose name is inside. But I know that whoever it is they are an enemy to both of us."

I looked at him. Surprised by the admission. "You trust me to open it?"

"I trust you to find the truth," Eliot said. "Christian has the decryption keys. Take it to him. If the name inside is someone I know... if it's someone in my house... I need you to tell me."

"I will," I promised.

"Good." He reached out with his free hand. He flicked a loose strand of hair away from my face. His fingers brushed my cheek. I leaned into the touch before I could stop myself.

"Take it to Logan," he whispered. "This isn't just about the Director anymore. It's about survival. For the Base. And for the Skullz."

"We're working together," I stated. It felt strange to say it out loud.

"We always have been," Eliot said. A sad crooked smile touched his lips. "Even when we were trying to kill each other."

He leaned down. His face was inches from mine. That dark playful glint returned to his gaze.

"But Zabrina..."

"What?"

"The next time you want to 'secure an asset' you don't have to wait for a mission. I'm usually available on Friday nights."

He winked. Actually winked. And stepped back into the shadows before I could think of a retort that didn't involve me stuttering like a rookie.

"See you around Thief," he called out. His voice faded into the sound of the waves.

I stood there on the pier. The cold Ledger in one hand and my heart doing a very unprofessional dance in my chest. He was the most powerful man in the city. A literal devil with the world at his feet. And he was out here playing games on a rusted pier.

I looked down at the drive. He'd given it back. He had handed over the smoking gun that could bring down his own empire because he trusted me to aim it correctly.

"Idiot," I whispered. A small traitorous smile tugged at the corner of my lips.

The aftermath of the Gala had been a blur of high-stakes lies. I'd successfully handed over the "Red Ledger" to Logan. I cemented my status as the Base's golden operative. But the taste of Eliot's kiss still felt like a brand on my skin. A lingering irritating reminder that I wasn't as detached as I pretended to be.

The war was just beginning. And for the first time we were fighting it on the same side.

# CHAPTER 24.

## Chapter 24: The Down Payment

The air in the Bunker had changed.

A week ago it smelled of desperation and fear. It smelled of a dying regime and men waiting for the axe to fall. Now it smelled of ozone. Burnt coffee. And the manic electric hum of servers running at capacity.

Black Base was no longer a government shadow. We were rogue. We were independent. We were a ghost ship sailing in waters that didn't appear on any map.

I sat on the edge of the steel table in the main command hub. I was sharpening my ceramic knife. The rhythmic *shhkk-shhkk-shhkk* of the blade against the whetstone was the only sound I allowed myself to make. My hands were steady. My heartbeat was slow.

I felt different.

Before the Director's exile I was a soldier following orders. I was a tool kept in a box until it was time to break something. But now the box was open. The Director was gone. Logan was in the chair but he wasn't my master. He was my partner.

I wasn't just Rank 3 anymore. I was the Ghost. And the silence inside my head was finally starting to feel like armor rather than a cage.

"It's stubborn," Christian muttered.

He was hunched over his console in the corner. His face was bathed in the blue light of three different monitors. He hadn't slept in two days. Empty energy drink cans were stacked like a pyramid of garbage next to his keyboard.

"The Red Ledger?" I asked. I didn't look up from my knife.

"The encryption is a nightmare," Christian said. He ran a hand through his greasy hair. "It's not standard government code. It's not even standard military. It's... architectural. It rebuilds itself every time I try to peel back a layer. It's like trying to solve a Rubik's cube that fights back."

"Can you crack it?" Logan asked. He was standing by the map wall. He looked tired. The weight of leadership was heavier than the tactical gear he used to wear.

"I can crack anything," Christian snapped. He sounded offended. "But I have to be careful. This drive... it has a heartbeat. It pings a remote server every six hours. I'm currently wrapping it in a digital Faraday cage. I'm encrypting our own signature so when I do break it the sender doesn't see us looking back."

"Keep at it," Logan said. "We need to know who the traitor is. If someone inside the Skullz was paying my father we need a name before Eliot finds out."

"Eliot might already know," I said. I tested the edge of the blade against my thumb. A thin line of red appeared. Perfect. "He gave me the drive. He knows what's on it."

"He gave you the drive because he wants us to do the dirty work," Crystal said. She was cleaning her crossbow on the couch. "The Devil doesn't dig in the trash. He hires janitors."

"We aren't janitors," I said cold. "We are the only reason this city isn't burning."

Crystal smirked but she didn't argue.

"Heads up," Christian called out. His fingers flew across the keyboard. "We got a hit on the police scanner. And the dark web chatter."

"What is it?" Logan asked.

"The Remnant," Christian said.

The room went cold. The Remnant. The loyalists. The men who had served the old Director and refused to accept the new order. They were loose ends that we hadn't managed to cut yet.

"Location?" I asked. I sheathed the knife.

"Pier 44," Christian said. "Intel suggests they intercepted a shipment meant for a biotech firm in Sector 1. A crate of bio-neurological processors. Experimental stuff. If they plug that into a weapons system they could override the city's automated defenses."

"They're trying to re-establish a foothold," Logan said. He grabbed his sidearm. "They want leverage."

"They want a war," I corrected. I stood up. I felt the familiar cold slide of the mission persona slipping over me. "Let's go tell them they already lost."

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Pier 44 was a graveyard of rusted metal and rotting wood.

It sat on the far edge of the shipping district. The fog was thick here. It rolled off the black water in heavy suffocating waves that tasted of salt and diesel. The rain had started again. It was a cold miserable drizzle that soaked into your bones.

We moved in silence.

Logan took the lead. He moved with the efficiency of a man who had spent his life in shadows. Crystal was high above us. She had climbed a crane tower and was providing overwatch. I was on point.

My boots made no sound on the wet concrete. I breathed in the fog. I counted the shipping containers. I counted the exits.

"Three bogies," Crystal's voice crackled in my ear. "North side of the warehouse. Armed. Automatic rifles. They look nervous."

"Copy," Logan whispered. "Zabrina. Take the left flank. I'll take the right. We meet in the middle."

I broke away from the shadows. I moved like smoke.

The Remnant soldiers were sloppy. They were desperate men working without a leader. They checked their watches. They paced. They smoked cigarettes that glowed like beacons in the dark.

I came up behind the first one.

He never heard me. I didn't use the gun. Gunshots were loud. Gunshots drew attention. I used the ceramic knife.

I clamped a hand over his mouth. I drove the blade into the soft spot between his collarbone and neck. He stiffened. Then he went limp. I lowered him to the ground gently.

"One down," I whispered.

"Two down," Logan replied a second later.

We convened at the warehouse door. It was a massive corrugated steel structure. Light leaked from the edges of the bay doors.

"They're inside," I said. "Christian. Are you seeing this?"

"I'm hacking the internal security feed," Christian's voice came through the comms. "Yeah. I see them. There's about twelve of them. They have a crate in the center of the room. It's marked with a bio-hazard symbol. They... wait."

"What?" Logan asked.

"They aren't opening it," Christian said. "They're selling it. There's a buyer."

"Who's the buyer?" I asked.

"I can't see his face. He's wearing a hood. But the body language... he's not local."

"We breach on three," Logan said. He checked his mag. "Flashbangs first. Clean sweep."

I nodded. I pulled a flashbang from my belt.

"One," Logan counted.

"Two."

"Thr-"

*BOOM.*

The explosion didn't come from us.

It came from the skylight above the warehouse.

Glass shattered. A massive dark shape dropped from the ceiling like a meteor. It landed in the center of the room with a force that shook the ground.

"Hold!" Logan hissed. He pulled me back into the shadows.

We watched through the gap in the doors.

The dust cleared. A man stood in the center of the Remnant soldiers. He was huge. A mountain of muscle clad in black tactical armor. He held a weapon that looked like it belonged on a tank—a massive magnetic rail-gun.

Mark.

"Skullz," I whispered.

The Remnant soldiers raised their rifles. They screamed orders. They opened fire.

Mark didn't even take cover. He just laughed. A deep booming sound that was more terrifying than the gunfire. He raised the rail-gun. The air hummed with magnetic charge.

*THWUMP.*

A metal slug the size of a fist slammed into a stack of crates. The impact force sent three men flying like ragdolls.

Then the side doors burst open.

Joseph slid in. He moved like water. He wielded a hydraulic baton in one hand and an auto-shotgun in the other. He was a blur of violence. He didn't speak. He didn't scream. He just dismantled people. He broke arms. He shattered knees. He moved with a terrifying silent efficiency.

It wasn't a fight. It was an extermination.

The Remnant never stood a chance. Within thirty seconds the warehouse was silent. Twelve men were on the floor. Groaning or unconscious.

Mark cracked his neck. He looked bored.

"That was barely a warm-up," Mark grumbled. He kicked a rifle away from a fallen soldier.

"What are they doing here?" Logan whispered. His voice was tight. "This was our intel. Our mission."

"They're clearing the room," I realized. A cold feeling settled in my stomach. "They aren't here for the tech. They're the ushers."

"Ushers for who?"

I didn't have to answer.

The main bay doors groaned. The metal screeched as the hydraulic gears engaged. The doors rolled up slowly.

The fog rolled in first. Thick and white.

And then he walked in.

Eliot.

He wasn't wearing the tuxedo tonight. He was wearing a long black wool coat with the collar turned up against the damp. Underneath he wore a charcoal suit that looked sharp enough to cut skin. He walked with his hands in his pockets. He stepped over the unconscious body of a Remnant soldier without even looking down.

He looked like he owned the air he was breathing.

He walked to the center of the room. He stopped in front of the bio-tech crate. He inspected it. He ran a gloved hand along the edge of the metal.

"You can come out now," Eliot said.

He didn't shout. He didn't look toward the door where we were hiding. He just spoke to the empty room.

"I know you're there," he continued. "I can smell the cheap government detergent you use on your tactical gear."

Logan looked at me. He nodded.

We stepped out of the shadows.

We walked into the warehouse. Weapons raised but pointed at the floor. It was a standoff. But it was a standoff where one side held all the cards.

Mark turned to look at us. He grinned. He rested the rail-gun on his shoulder. Joseph just watched. His eyes were blank behind his tactical goggles.

"Eliot," Logan said. His voice was steady. "You're far from the Villa."

"And you are trespassing," Eliot replied. He finally turned to look at us. His green eyes were sharp. Amusement danced in them. Cold dangerous amusement. "This implies a lack of manners Logan. I thought your father taught you better."

"This is an unauthorized sale of Class-A bio-weaponry," Logan stated. "It's a threat to the city. That makes it Base jurisdiction."

"Jurisdiction," Eliot repeated the word. He tasted it. He found it funny. "You think because you changed the sign on the door and stopped taking government paychecks that you have jurisdiction? Look around you Logan. Look at the floor. Look at the walls. Who owns this pier?"

Logan stayed silent.

"I do," Eliot said. "I own the concrete. I own the steel. I own the rats living in the walls. And I certainly own the shipment you were trying to... liberate."

"This is your shipment?" I asked. I stepped forward.

Eliot looked at me. The amusement faded slightly. It was replaced by something heavier. Something possessive.

"Zabrina," he said. "Still playing soldier I see. The black suits you. Though I preferred the green."

"The Remnant stole this from a biotech firm," I said. "Are you telling me the Skullz are trafficking neurological weapons now?"

"I'm telling you that the biotech firm pays me for protection," Eliot corrected. "They pay me to ensure their property arrives safely. When the Remnant stole it they didn't just steal from a corporation. They stole from me. And nobody steals from the Devil without paying a tax."

He walked around the crate. He looked at me. He looked at Logan. He looked at the wreckage of the men his crew had destroyed.

"You are small," Eliot said softly. "The Base. The Agency. Whatever you call yourselves this week. You are children playing with flashlights in the dark. You rush in here thinking you are saving the day. But you didn't even notice the sniper on the north ridge until five minutes ago."

I stiffened. Crystal.

"Crystal is fine," Eliot said. He waved a hand dismissively. "My men have her pinned. They won't hurt her unless she twitches. But it illustrates my point. You are out of your depth."

Logan took a step forward. His hand tightened on his gun. "We are independent now Eliot. We don't answer to you."

"You exist because I allow it," Eliot snapped. The playfulness vanished. The temperature in the room dropped. "I let the Director live. I let you keep your little bunker. I let you breathe. Do not mistake my mercy for equality."

He looked at me. His gaze locked onto mine. It was a physical weight.

"And you," he said. He walked toward me. He stopped inches away. He towered over me. I had to crane my neck to look him in the eye. "You returned to them. You handed over the ledger. You went back to being a ghost."

"It's who I am," I said. My voice was steady. "It's what I do."

"It's a waste," Eliot murmured. "You trade your freedom for a mission that never ends. You scrub floors for men who don't know your value."

"And what's my value to you?" I challenged. "A thief? A wife? A pawn?"

"An equal," Eliot whispered.

The word hung in the air.

"Christian," Eliot said suddenly. He didn't look away from me. "How is the decryption coming along?"

I froze. "How did you-"

"I told you," Eliot said. He tapped his own temple. "I hear everything. Is he struggling? The encryption on that drive is... nasty. It has layers."

"He's handling it," I lied.

"He's encrypting your location," Eliot guessed. "He's scared I'll track it back to the Bunker. Smart kid. Paranoid. But smart."

He stepped back. He turned to Mark.

"Load up," Eliot ordered.

"The crate?" Mark asked.

"No," Eliot said. "The bodies. Get this trash off my floor."

Mark looked confused. "And the tech? Boss. That crate is worth twenty million on the black market."

"Leave it," Eliot said.

Mark's jaw dropped. "Leave it?"

"You heard me," Eliot said. He looked back at me. "Let them take it."

Logan looked suspicious. "Why? You just said it was your property. You said we were trespassing."

"You are trespassing," Eliot said. He buttoned his coat. "But I'm feeling generous. Consider it a donation to your startup. You're going to need the money if you want to afford better gear."

He walked toward the exit. Mark and Joseph exchanged a look but they followed. They began dragging the unconscious Remnant soldiers out the side door.

Eliot paused at the bay door. He looked back at me.

"Don't thank me," he said. His eyes were dark. Shadowed. "It's not a gift Zabrina."

"Then what is it?" I called out.

"A down payment," he said.

"For what?"

He smiled. It was the smile of a predator who had already calculated the exact moment the trap would snap shut.

"For you," he said.

The words hit me like a physical blow.

"I'm not for sale Eliot," I snapped. "I don't belong to anyone."

"Not yet," he said. "But the war is coming. The real war. Not this skirmish with the Director's leftovers. When it starts you will realize that the Bunker is too small for you. You will realize that ghosts need a haunted house to live in."

He turned away.

"Check the crate," he called over his shoulder. "And tell Christian to stop using a VPN from 2024. It's insulting."

He walked out into the fog. The mist swallowed him whole.

The warehouse was silent again. The only sound was the hum of the bio-tech crate and the pounding of my own heart.

Logan walked over to the crate. He inspected the seals.

"It's intact," Logan said. He looked at me. "He actually left it. Why?"

I stared at the empty doorway where the Devil had stood. I felt the phantom weight of his gaze still pressing against my skin.

*A down payment.*

He wasn't buying the tech. He wasn't buying loyalty. He was investing in the inevitable. He believed—with an arrogance that made my blood boil—that I would end up at his side. He was clearing the board. He was funding his future queen's army because he knew that eventually, the army would be his too.

"He thinks he's winning," I whispered.

"Is he?" Logan asked.

I touched the cold metal of the crate. I thought about the Red Ledger. I thought about the kiss on the terrace. I thought about the way he had looked at me tonight—not as an enemy but as a wayward piece of his soul that just hadn't come home yet.

"He's not winning," I said. I holstered my weapon. "He's waiting."

"Let's get this moving," Logan said. "Before he changes his mind."

"He won't," I said. "Eliot doesn't change his mind. He just changes the stakes."

We loaded the crate. We moved out. But as we drove back to the Bunker through the rain-slicked streets I couldn't shake the feeling that we hadn't secured a victory. We had just accepted a loan from the Devil.

And the interest rate was going to be astronomical.

# CHAPTER 25.

## Chapter 25: The Ghost in the Machine.

The air in the Bunker was thick with the smell of ozone, burnt coffee, and the stale sweat of people who had forgotten how to sleep. We had successfully hauled the bio-neurological drive back into our territory—a victory on paper—but the taste in my mouth was ash.

Every time I closed my eyes, I could still feel the phantom pressure of Eliot's gaze. The way he had stood in that warehouse, surrounded by fog and violence, and called the tech a "down payment." He hadn't fought us for it. He hadn't even negotiated. He had simply let us take it, like a king tossing a coin to a beggar he planned to employ later.

"Z, you've been staring at that wall for ten minutes," Logan said. His voice was gentle but probing. He was hunched over the terminal, his face washed in the pale blue glow of decrypted data streams.

"I'm just thinking," I replied, pulling my chair closer to his station. The metal screeched against the concrete floor. "About how easily he let us walk away with it. Eliot doesn't just give things away, Logan. He trades."

"He didn't let us walk away with it," Logan corrected, his fingers never stopping their frantic dance across the keys. "He let *you* walk away with it. There's a difference."

I sighed, rubbing the back of my neck where the tension had formed a hard knot. "What's the status on the drive?"

Logan's expression shifted. The fatigue deepened in the lines around his eyes. "That's the thing. The Remnant didn't just hijack tech. They were looking for something specific hidden in the sub-partitions. It's encrypted with a 512-bit key, but the header... Zabrina, look at this."

He pointed to the screen.

The file header was a string of numbers. Coordinates.

"That's the old high school," I whispered.

"And the file path?" Logan highlighted a line of code. "It's named after your old residential address. The house from eight years ago."

My heart skipped a beat. The world tilted slightly. "What?"

"I'm working on it," he whispered, his eyes darting across lines of code like he was reading a language only he understood. "But someone went to a lot of trouble to hide this. It's not just tech, Z. It's a ghost."

---

An hour later, the base was silent.

Crystal had gone to the barracks to nurse a bruised shoulder—a souvenir from the Remnant skirmish. Christian was in the upper levels dealing with logistics, arguing with a supplier about server cooling units.

I was alone in the training room.

I was punishing a heavy bag. *Thud. Thud. Thud.* A rhythmic series of strikes, trying to drive the memory of Eliot's voice out of my head. *A down payment.* I hit the bag harder. *For you.*

The security monitors in the corner flickered.

I stopped mid-swing. My breath hitched.

A single figure was standing at the secondary extraction entrance—a hidden door disguised as a maintenance hatch in the alleyway above. He wasn't trying to break in. He wasn't looking for a keypad. He was just standing there, looking directly into the hidden camera lens as if he could see me watching him through the fiber optics.

Eliot.

I didn't call for backup. I didn't alert Christian. A strange, magnetic pull drew me toward the service elevator. I knew why he was here. The bill for the down payment was due.

When I opened the hatch, the freezing night air rushed in, carrying the scent of rain and expensive tobacco. Eliot was leaning against the brick wall, a dark silhouette against the city lights. He looked perfectly composed. His long wool coat was buttoned up, the collar turned against the wind. He looked like a noir detective who had already solved the case and was just waiting for the confession.

"You're late," he said. His voice was a low, melodic rumble that cut through the wind. "I expected you to be halfway through that drive by now."

"How did you find this entrance?" I asked. My hand rested instinctively on the ceramic knife tucked into my waistband. "This is a blind spot. It's not on the city schematics."

Eliot took a slow step toward me, entering the dim pool of light from the streetlamp. His green eyes were unreadable—not cold, but deep, like a forest at twilight.

"I built half the infrastructure in this district, Zabrina," he said. "Did you think a few layers of Agency shielding would keep me out? I poured the concrete for this alley myself."

He stopped just outside my personal space. The tension between us was a physical thing, crackling like static electricity. He didn't reach for me this time. He just watched me, his gaze lingering on the pulse point at my throat.

"I didn't come here to talk about your security flaws," he murmured.

"Then why are you here?"

"I wanted to see if the soldier had finished her report," he said. A ghost of a smirk played on his lips. "And to remind you that the drive you're holding... it wasn't stolen from a vault. It was intercepted. Someone was sending that to you, Zabrina. Long before the Remnant got their hands on it."

I frowned, the cold air biting at my exposed arms. "Who?"

Eliot stepped closer. So close I could feel the heat radiating off him. He reached out, his hand hovering near my face for a split second before he pulled back. It was a gesture of restraint that was louder than a touch.

"That's the debt," he whispered. "I know who sent it. I know what's in the final partition. And when you realize you can't break that encryption on your own... you'll know where to find me."

He turned to leave. He paused, looking back over his shoulder. The rain caught in his dark hair like diamonds.

"The Villa is much warmer than this hole in the ground, Zabrina. Don't wait until you're freezing to come home."

---

I practically ran back to the command hub.

Logan was standing up. His face was pale, drained of blood. He was pointing at a single file that had finally blinked into existence on the main screen.

"I got through the first layer," Logan gasped. "Z, look at the timestamp. This data was uploaded to a cloud server thirty minutes after the fire started eight years ago. And look at the authorization tag."

I looked at the screen. It was a digitized document—a partial scan of a Black Base logistics report from that same night.

At the bottom of the page, under the section for 'Asset Extraction,' my parents' names were listed under a sub-header: *Neutralize and Cover*.

Next to it was the Director's personal digital signature.

The air left my lungs. The room spun.

"The Director..." I whispered. My voice trembled. "He didn't just 'find' me that night, Logan. You found me because he sent you to make sure the job was finished."

Logan froze. His hands dropped from the keyboard as if it were red hot. "No. No, Z, that's not true. He told me there was an emergency. He told me your house was on fire and I had to go find you because we were friends. I ran there because I wanted to save you!"

"He used you, Logan!" I shouted. The realization hit me like a physical blow, shattering the foundation of the last eight years. "He sent his own son to the scene of a murder he authorized so that you would 'rescue' me and bring me straight to him. He didn't find a survivor—he recruited a witness he could control."

Logan stared at the screen. Tears of rage and horror welled in his eyes. He looked like a child again. "My father... he murdered them? He let me think I was a hero for bringing you to Black Base, but I was just his delivery boy?"

I looked at the code again. Something felt off. The Director's signature was there, but the tactical notes were encrypted with a secondary frequency. A frequency I recognized.

Skullz-grade encryption.

"He authorized it," I hissed. "But someone else was in that house with a knife and a gun. Someone else did the dirty work. And someone else has been holding the proof for eight years."

I looked at Logan. "I'm going to the Villa."

"Z, wait!" Logan called out. He reached for me.

"Eliot knows exactly what happened in that room," I said, backing away toward the door. "He's been waiting for me to find this file so I'd have no choice but to go back to him."

"Z!"

I was already gone. I was tired of being a weapon in other people's wars. It was time to find out whose blood was really on the floor that night.

---

The rain didn't just fall; it screamed against the windshield of the black Agency sedan I had stolen from the motor pool.

I was pushing the engine to its absolute limit. The tires hydroplaned as I tore through the coastal highway. My knuckles were white on the steering wheel. My breath came in short, shallow gasps.

The Director. The man who had been my "savior." The man who gave me a badge and a gun. He had authorized the hit.

Every memory of the last decade felt like it was being dipped in acid. The way he told me I was the daughter he never had—it was all a curated lie. He had signed the order to neutralize my parents and then let his son "find" me so he could recruit the survivor. He didn't save me; he collected me.

When the silhouette of the Villa appeared through the mist, I didn't stop at the gates. I skidded to a halt at the main entrance, leaving the car door open as I stormed up the marble steps.

The guards didn't stop me. They knew better.

I kicked the doors of the master suite open. My chest was heaving.

Eliot was standing by the floor-to-ceiling windows. He was watching the lightning strike the Atlantic, a glass of whiskey in his hand. He looked like a statue carved from obsidian—cold, distant, and untouchable.

"You knew," I rasped.

My voice sounded like it belonged to a stranger. I walked toward him. My hand was shaking as I stood there, feeling utterly lost in the vastness of the room.

"The signature... the encryption on this drive... it's all there," I choked out. Tears finally burned my eyes, hot and angry. "The Director signed the order to kill my parents. And the frequency on the file... it belongs to the Skullz."

I let out a broken sob. The weight of the betrayal crushed the air out of my lungs.

Eliot turned slowly. He saw the wreck of the woman standing before him. He set the glass down. He reached out, his hand moving as if to touch my face, but he stopped midway.

"AND THEY WERE MY PARENTS!" I shrieked. My voice broke. "I've been sleeping in the house of the man who murdered them!"

I collapsed. My knees simply gave out.

But I didn't hit the floor.

Eliot was there in a heartbeat. His arms caught me, pulling me into the hard, warm line of his chest. I broke down completely. I buried my face in his neck and wept. My hands clutched his coat as if it were the only thing keeping me from falling into the abyss.

"I have nothing," I whispered against his chest. My voice was raw. "Everything I built... it's all a lie."

Eliot pulled back just enough to look me in the eyes. His thumbs brushed away the tears. His touch was uncharacteristically gentle.

"You have me," he murmured. His voice was thick with a conviction that made the air feel still.

I stared at him. My lips parted a little while I looked into those deep, green eyes. I felt the heat of his skin against mine. The steady, grounding warmth from his hand on my hand.

*I have him.*

The words echoed in my mind. But as I looked at him, a sharp, hollow ache settled in my chest.

*Why does it feel so wrong?*

He had grown up so much from eight years ago. As the lightning flashed, illuminating the sharp angles of his jaw and the cold intensity of his gaze, I could see he still had the same features. He had matured, filled out into a man of power and shadows, but it was the same face I loved to look at eight years ago. It was the same face I had memorized in the quiet moments of our childhood. The face I used to look for when the world felt too big.

But... he wasn't the same person.

The eight years had changed him so much that I didn't truly recognize the soul behind those eyes anymore. I searched his expression, desperate to find the boy who used to laugh with me in the garden, but all I found was the "Devil." I couldn't find the same comfort I found in him back then—the angel I adored before the fire took everything.

Right now, he had the same features... but not the same feeling. There was a darkness in him now. A lethal edge that made him feel like a beautiful, dangerous stranger.

But... I was too sad tonight. I was too broken. Too hollowed out by the Director's betrayal to care about the darkness. I found myself lingering. Clinging to the tiniest shred of comfort I still had. Even if he was a stranger, he was the only piece of my past that wasn't a lie.

"I'm going to help you find the truth, Zabrina," he whispered. His grip on my hand tightened as if he could feel me slipping away mentally. "I promise you. Every name, every secret. We will find it all."

I didn't pull away. I couldn't. I just stayed there in his arms, caught between the boy I remembered and the man I feared, letting the rain wash away the girl I thought I was.

# CHAPTER 26.

## Chapter 26: The Sinking Kingdom.

The fluorescent lights of Black Base felt like needles against my eyes.

Walking back through those reinforced steel doors felt like stepping into a tomb. Every hum of the server racks and every sterile scent of floor wax reminded me that I was a tool being sharpened by the very hand that had broken my life. The revelation about the Director—about the order to neutralize my parents—hung in the air like toxic smoke. It coated my throat. It made it hard to breathe.

I wasn't mad at Logan. When I saw him in the hallway, his face pale and eyes bloodshot, I didn't feel rage. I felt a hollow, aching pity. He was just as trapped in this cycle as I was. He was a technician trying to fix a machine that was built to break us both.

"Z," he whispered, stepping into my path. He looked like he hadn't slept in a week. "I... I'm so sorry. About the data we found. I didn't know."

I stopped. I looked at him. For a second, I saw the kid who used to share his lunch with me in the courtyard. I saw the boy who had unknowingly been the bait in his father's trap.

"I know you didn't, Logan," I said. My voice was flat. "Don't carry a weight that isn't yours."

"We can stop," he said desperately. "We can shut down the Base. We can go underground until the heat dies down."

"We can't stop," I replied, adjusting the strap of my gear bag. "The Remnant is still out there. The Mask Gang is still hunting. If we stop now, we're just waiting to be executed. The only way out is through."

I brushed past him. I had a role to play. If I was going to find the truth about who really pulled the trigger eight years ago—the person the Director hired—I had to stay deep undercover. I had to be the Ghost.

But the Agency doesn't believe in recovery time. A new player was moving on the board, and the stakes were shifting from shadows to high-level politics.

The Mission: Intercept a digital hand-off involving a new surveillance law on the *USS Sovereign*—a decommissioned destroyer turned into a floating museum for the world's elite.

The Variable: The "Iron Guard." A private security force hired by the ministers. They were rumored to be more lethal than most national armies.

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The sea air was biting. A cold salt spray stung the small cut on my cheek as I crouched in the shadows of the *Sovereign's* upper deck. The ship was a massive beast of grey steel, repurposed to host champagne parties for the people who sold wars.

Below me, on the main deck, the elite mingled. The sound of string quartets and polite laughter drifted up on the wind, masking the dangerous currents underneath.

"Comms check," I whispered.

"Loud and clear, Z," Crystal's voice chirped in my ear.

I looked up, catching the faint glint of her thermal goggles from her perch a hundred feet above me on the radar mast. She was invisible to the naked eye, just another shadow in the rigging.

"I've got eyes on the target," Crystal reported. "The Minister is moving toward the engine room. He's got four guards. They aren't the usual suit-and-tie types. These guys are strapped for a war. Kevlar. Carbines hidden under trench coats."

"Copy that. I'm moving in," I said.

I slipped through a maintenance hatch. My movements were silent and practiced. The interior of the ship smelled of diesel, rust, and old paint. I moved down the narrow companionways, counting the steps. Counting the exits.

I didn't expect the Skullz to be here.

As I neared the lower decks, the humidity rose. The thrum of the auxiliary generators vibrated through the metal grating under my boots. I turned a corner, my hand going to my blade instantly as a shadow detached itself from the bulkhead.

"Easy, Thief. I'm on your side tonight."

I froze.

It was Mark. Eliot's right hand. The mountain of a man was decked out in full Skullz tactical gear, looking like he'd already been through a meat grinder. He was checking the magazine of a suppressed pistol, looking entirely unbothered by the fact that he was trespassing on a government vessel.

"What are the Skullz doing on an Agency op, Mark?" I hissed, keeping my weapon leveled at his chest.

"Eliot's orders," Mark grunted. He holstered the gun and crossed his massive arms. "The Iron Guard isn't here to protect the Minister. They've rigged the engine room with C4. They're erasing the witnesses. Ministers. Agency. Everyone. We're here to make sure you don't go down with the ship."

My blood ran cold. This wasn't a hand-off. It was an execution. A false flag operation designed to look like a terrorist attack.

"Crystal, did you hear that?" I whispered into the comms.

"I heard," she replied. Her tone sharpened, losing its usual dry wit. "Mark... watch your six. There are two hostiles moving your way."

"You handle the charges," Crystal ordered him through the open channel. "I'll keep the deck clear. Z, you get that drive and get out."

"Since when do you take orders from her?" I asked Mark, raising an eyebrow.

Mark shrugged, a rare grin touching his scarred face. "She's scary when she's mad. Let's move."

We didn't argue. We burst into the engine room just as the lead Iron Guard was pressing a barrel to the Minister's temple. The Minister was on his knees, clutching a silver briefcase, sobbing.

Mark was a battering ram. He took the door off its hinges. His weapon barked twice, taking out the perimeter guards with brutal efficiency before they could even turn around.

The room erupted into chaos.

I dropped from a catwalk, my ceramic blades flashing through the steam. I landed beside Mark. Our backs hit as we were surrounded by the remaining guards. It was a dance of violence in a confined space. Gunfire rang out, deafening in the steel chamber.

"You're a long way from the Villa, Mark!" I shouted over the hiss of a ruptured steam pipe. I ducked a swinging rifle butt and drove my knee into a guard's stomach.

"Eliot said if I let anything happen to you, he'd bury me in the garden!" Mark shouted back. He leveled a guard with a heavy shoulder check that sounded like a car crash. "I like being alive, Zabrina!"

Suddenly, a guard leveled a shotgun at Mark's blind side.

"Mark!" I screamed.

I lunged to intercede, but an arrow whistled through the steam-filled air. It pinned the guard's hand to a wooden crate with a sickening thud. The shotgun blast went wide, shattering a pressure gauge and filling the room with white noise.

"Thanks for the cover, C!" Mark yelled toward the ceiling.

"Less talking, more moving!" Crystal's voice echoed from a high ventilation window. "The timers are live!"

The floor groaned. A deep, metallic shriek vibrated in my teeth. The ship lurched violently to the left.

"The first charge," I gasped, grabbing the railing to stay upright. "Stern is hit."

"The drive!" Mark yelled, pointing at the briefcase the Minister had dropped in his panic.

I lunged for it, snatching the encrypted unit just as the room tilted forty-five degrees. The water was already rushing in, black and freezing, swirling around our ankles.

"Z, the stern is going under!" Crystal screamed in my ear. "Get to the deck now! The lifeboats are compromised!"

We scrambled up the listing companionway. The angle was steep, the metal slick with oil and water. I grabbed Mark's vest, helping him limp as a piece of shrapnel had caught his thigh during the firefight.

We burst through the hatch onto the main deck.

Panic. Absolute panic. The guests were screaming, sliding across the teak deck as the *Sovereign* began its slow, agonizing descent into the harbor. The Iron Guard had sabotaged the lifeboat release mechanisms. We were trapped on a sinking monument.

"Jump!" Mark roared, dragging me toward the railing.

"It's fifty feet!" I yelled back, looking down at the churning black water.

"Better wet than dead!"

Then, the sea exploded.

A matte-black interceptor boat roared out of the fog. It hit a swell and launched into the air like a predatory bird, its engines screaming. It slammed back into the water, veering alongside the sinking hull with terrifying precision.

Eliot was at the helm.

He wasn't wearing a mask. He wasn't hiding. He looked like a god of war in a dark tactical turtleneck, his hair whipped by the wind, his eyes fixed on the deck. He had hacked the ship's PA system. His voice boomed over the sound of the sinking steel, cutting through the screams.

"You three look like you're having a very bad day."

His voice was smooth. Mocking. Utterly confident.

"Jump. Now."

We didn't hesitate. I helped Crystal, who had slid down the rigging, guide a limping Mark over the railing. We leaped into the dark.

The cold was a physical shock. It punched the air from my lungs. I went under, the salt water burning my eyes, the heavy current of the sinking ship trying to drag me down.

I kicked hard, breaking the surface, gasping for air.

Eliot brought the boat around, the hull drifting dangerously close. He reached over the side. His hand clamped onto my tactical vest with a strength that felt like it could lift the whole ship. He hauled me onto the deck like I weighed nothing.

I landed in a heap of wet gear, coughing up seawater.

Eliot didn't let go. He pulled me up, his eyes scanning me for injuries. He checked my face. My hands. Then he settled into that infuriatingly handsome smirk.

"You really need to pick better venues for your dates, Zabrina," he said. His hand lingered on my waist to steady me as the boat roared into a high-speed turn, putting distance between us and the dying ship.

"I had it under control," I panted, holding up the waterproof drive. "Asset secured."

"Of course you did," he murmured. His thumb traced a small, possessive circle on my hip through the damp fabric of my suit. "But I do love a good rescue. It adds to the mystique."

In the back of the boat, Crystal was already fussing over Mark's leg. Her hands were surprisingly gentle as she applied a field dressing. Mark was leaning back, his head resting against the bench, watching her with a dazed, lopsided grin that had nothing to do with the blood loss.

"You're shaking," Mark murmured to her. His voice was barely audible over the wind.

"I am not," Crystal snapped. She tightened the bandage, causing him to wince. "I just don't want you bleeding on the upholstery. Eliot looks like the type to charge for cleaning."

Eliot caught my eye from the helm. A knowing, playful quirk touched his lips. He didn't say anything. He didn't have to. He was letting this happen. He was letting his right hand fall for an Agency sniper. For a man who lived by rules and blood, that was the loudest statement he could make.

He turned back to the wheel, navigating the chop with one hand.

"Don't get used to it, Ghost," he whispered to me, his voice carrying over the engine's roar. "I just didn't want the Agency to lose their best asset."

I looked at the drive in my hand. Then I looked at him. The wind whipped his hair back, revealing the sharp, stoic profile of a man who had just risked a diplomatic nightmare to pull me out of the ocean.

The mission was a success. But as I watched the *Sovereign* slip beneath the waves, I realized the real war was no longer about data. It was about the man holding the wheel.

---

The ride back to the shoreline was a blur of salt spray and silence.

By the time we hit the private docks—Skullz territory, naturally—I had already made my decision.

"Crystal," I said, catching her arm as we climbed out of the boat. "The report. We were ambushed by the Iron Guard. We jumped. We swam to a civilian fishing craft. We made our way back. That's it."

She looked at me. Her eyes darted to Mark, who was being helped up by two other Skullz soldiers. She knew what I was asking. If the Agency knew the Skullz were there—if they knew Mark had saved her life—the Director's successors and the Remnant would tear her apart. They'd label her a security risk. They'd take her away from the only person who made her look at him like that.

"No Skullz," Crystal whispered. A look of profound relief washed over her face. "Just a lucky escape."

"Exactly."

Eliot walked past us. He pressed a small, crumpled piece of paper into my hand. He didn't stop. He didn't look back. He just walked into the darkness of the warehouse, disappearing into his kingdom.

I waited until I was alone on the rooftop of Black Base before I opened it.

*Friday night. The Obsidian Club. No missions. No silk. Just you.*

I looked out over the city lights. The taste of salt was still on my skin. I was a spy. I was a ghost. I was a woman whose life was a series of fabricated identities and lies. But as I thought about the way Eliot looked at me when the world was literally sinking behind us, I realized I was tired of playing the part.

I folded the note into a tiny square and shoved it into the back of my pocket.

A "date."

The word felt foreign. Like a dialect I'd forgotten how to speak.

---

Friday night came with the kind of heavy, humid air that promised a storm.

I stood in front of my mirror in the barracks. The emerald gown from the gala was draped over a chair, a shimmering reminder of the role I was supposed to play. Eliot expected the siren. He expected the silk, the heels, and the curated elegance of a woman who belonged at his side in a ballroom. He expected "Mrs. Ignacio."

"Not tonight, Devil," I muttered.

I turned away from the dress.

I pulled on a pair of faded black jeans. I pulled on a well-worn charcoal t-shirt that clung to my frame. I laced up my scuffed combat boots. I threw a leather jacket over my shoulders, hiding the Glock tucked into the small of my back.

I didn't do my hair. I let it fall in messy, natural waves. I wiped off every trace of makeup until I looked exactly like what I was: a woman who had spent the last decade in the trenches of a black site.

I wasn't going there to be his trophy. I wasn't going there to be a diplomat. I was going there to remind him who he was dealing with.

The Obsidian Club was tucked into a converted cathedral in the heart of the old district. It was Eliot's territory—sleek, dark, and intimidating. Stained glass windows depicted saints who looked like sinners, backlit by pulsing red lights. The bass from the music vibrated in the cobblestones outside.

The bouncers at the door started to block my path. They were massive men in suits, their eyes scanning my dressed-down attire with disdain.

"Private event," one grunted, moving to intercept me.

Then he saw my face.

The recognition was instant. He blanched. He stepped aside as if I were carrying a live grenade.

"Ma'am," he stammered. "My apologies. The Boss is on the mezzanine."

I walked in. The club was a sensory overload of shadows and neon. I ignored the crowd. I found the stairs to the VIP level.

I found Eliot in a secluded booth overlooking the dance floor.

He was a stark contrast to my grit. He was dressed in a crisp white shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, the top buttons undone. A glass of amber liquid sat in his hand. He looked like he owned the shadows, relaxed and lethal all at once.

When he saw me, his glass paused halfway to his lips.

His eyes raked over the jeans. The t-shirt. My bare face.

He didn't look disappointed. He didn't look angry. He looked like he'd finally found the missing piece of a puzzle he'd been staring at for years. A slow, dangerous heat kindled in his gaze.

"You look..." he started, his voice a low, amused rumble that I felt in my chest.

"Like I have a job to do tomorrow?" I finished, sliding into the booth opposite him. "If you wanted a fashion show, you should have invited Zen. Or someone who actually enjoys wearing tape to keep their dress up."

Eliot set his glass down. A slow, genuine smirk tugged at his mouth. It wasn't the Devil's smile. It was Eliot's.

"I invited Zabrina," he said softly. "It seems she showed up after all. I should have known better than to expect the 'Mrs. Skullz' persona tonight."

He didn't reach for my hand. He didn't try to close the distance. He just sat there, letting the tension hum between us like a live wire. He appreciated the rebellion. He respected the defiance.

"You hate the dress code," he observed.

"I hate the lie," I corrected. "I'm not a socialite, Eliot. I'm the girl who breaks into your house and steals your hard drives."

"And that," he whispered, leaning forward, "is why you are the only one allowed at this table."

"Z," he whispered suddenly.

His tone changed. The playfulness vanished in a split second. His eyes didn't move from my face, but his entire posture shifted. The relaxed lean turned into the coiled tension of a viper.

"Don't turn around," he commanded.

I didn't need to. I could feel the shift in the air. The sudden, heavy silence that preceded a slaughter. My hand was already on the hilt of the knife hidden in my jacket sleeve.

"The Mask Gang?" I breathed.

"They never know when to quit," Eliot muttered. "They tracked you."

The glass railing of the mezzanine shattered.

A heavy projectile slammed into it, spraying shards over the booth. Screams erupted from the dance floor below as men in white ballistic masks dropped from the rafters on high-tension wires.

"Joseph! Chloe! Report!" Eliot barked into his comms, flipping the heavy oak table over with one hand to create a barricade.

"North exit is compromised!" Chloe's voice crackled through the bone-conduction chain I was still wearing. "They're flooding the lower level, Boss. These aren't just street runners—they're tactical."

"South side is heavy!" Joseph added, his voice strained over the sound of breaking glass. "I'm holding the stairs, but we've got more coming through the service entrance. Mark's team is still sixty seconds out!"

"You really need to work on your security, Eliot," I said. I kicked the table legs to settle it, crouching behind the heavy wood.

"I was distracted by a girl in a t-shirt," he shot back. He drew two gold-plated pistols from holsters strapped under the table.

The first wave hit the mezzanine.

I didn't wait for them to fire. I vaulted over the overturned table. My combat boots found the chest of the nearest masked attacker. I spun, drawing my Glock and putting two rounds into the neck of a second man who was leveling a submachine gun at Eliot's head.

Eliot was a whirlwind of calculated violence. He moved with a terrifying, fluid grace. His pistols barked in a rhythmic cadence. *Bang. Bang. Bang.* Every shot was a kill. He wasn't just defending himself; he was clearing a path to me.

"Get to the back exit! Joseph will cover you!" Eliot shouted over the roar of gunfire.

"I'm not leaving you to clean up your own mess!" I yelled back. I slammed an empty magazine into the well of my gun and racked the slide.

"Chloe, flank the rafters!" Eliot ordered.

"Already there!" Chloe yelled back. A second later, a masked man aiming at us from the balcony above plummeted to the floor, a crossbow bolt protruding from his neck.

Five Mask Gang members were advancing from the stairs. They moved in formation.

A metal sphere thudded onto the carpet between us.

Grenade.

Eliot didn't think. He didn't hesitate.

He lunged. His body collided with mine, tackling me toward the service lift alcove. He shielded me with his own back, curling around me as we hit the floor.

*BOOM.*

The explosion rocked the floor. A wave of heat and debris washed over us. My ears rang. For a second, I was pressed beneath the weight of him. The scent of his sandalwood cologne mixed with the acrid smell of smoke and cordite.

He looked down at me. His face was streaked with soot. There was a cut on his forehead, bleeding sluggishly. But his eyes were burning with a dark, protective fire that terrified me more than the bomb.

He didn't kiss me. He didn't even touch me gently. He gripped my shoulder, his fingers digging in with a possessiveness he couldn't hide.

"If you die in my club," he rasped, "I'm never going to hear the end of it from Logan."

"Then don't let me die," I snapped. I pushed him off so I could take aim at the next wave.

Behind us, Joseph burst through the service door, his auto-shotgun clearing the immediate area in a spray of buckshot.

"Boss!" Joseph roared. "Chloe's pinned on the balcony! Mark's here, but... we have a problem."

"What problem?" Eliot demanded, helping me to my feet.

"The scanners," Joseph said, his face pale. "The Agency's internal sensors just pinged this specific location. And not just general surveillance. It's a targeted kill order."

My heart stopped.

If the Agency was pinging this location, it meant the Remnant—the Director's loyalists—knew exactly where I was. And they weren't sending a rescue team. They were sending a cleanup crew.

"They used the Mask Gang to flush us out," I realized. "It's a trap."

Eliot looked at me. He checked his ammo. He checked the exit. Then he looked back at me, and the Devil smiled.

"Then let's make them regret it," he said.

He handed me a spare magazine.

"Ready, partner?"

I gripped the cold steel.

"Always."

# CHAPTER 27.

## Chapter 27: The Ghost in the Machine.

The explosion didn't just rock the mezzanine. It rattled my teeth in my skull.

I lay there for a heartbeat. I was pinned under Eliot's weight. The world was muffled by a high-pitched ring in my ears that sounded like a scream that wouldn't end. The scent of his sandalwood cologne was being choked out by the sharp acrid smell of scorched velvet and cordite.

He didn't move immediately. He stayed over me. A human shield in a tailored white shirt that was now ruined by black ash and debris. When he finally pulled back his eyes were scanning my face with a frantic silent intensity. He checked my eyes. He checked my throat.

"You're bleeding," he rasped. His thumb caught a small cut on my temple. The blood looked stark against his skin.

"It's not mine," I snapped. The adrenaline finally overrode the shock. I pushed against his chest. Not to get away but to get back into the fight. "Logan just pinged my comms. He's seen the thermal spikes from the Base. He's trying to scrub the satellite feeds but he can't hold the blackout forever. We have to finish this."

Eliot stood. He pulled me up in one fluid motion. He didn't let go of my hand until I had my Glock leveled at the stairs.

"Joseph! Chloe! On me!" Eliot roared.

Chloe dropped from a lighting rig like a shadow. She landed in a crouch beside us. She was breathing hard. Her tactical gear was splattered with drywall dust and glass.

"The main exit is a chokepoint Boss," Chloe reported. She checked the bolt on her wrist-mounted crossbow. "They've got a sniper on the clock tower across the street. He has the angle on the front door."

"I'll take the sniper," I said. I was already moving toward the shattered glass of the upper window.

"Zabrina wait," Eliot started. He reached for me.

But Joseph burst through the debris of the bar. His shotgun rested on his shoulder. He looked like a statue of war that had been dragged through hell.

"Boss. Mark is at the perimeter but he's being squeezed," Joseph reported. His deep voice was calm despite the chaos. "The Mask Gang isn't trying to kidnap you anymore. They're trying to bury us all in this club. They rigged the supports."

I looked at Eliot. This was his territory. His people. But the way he looked at me—the way he leaned into my space even as bullets whistled through the air—reminded me of the boy who used to trust me to lead him through the dark garden at the estate.

"Logan is holding the door open for us," I said. I pointed to the blinking red light on my HUD. "He's hacked the city's traffic grid. If we get to the black SUV two blocks north in ninety seconds we vanish. If we stay we're a headline."

Eliot's jaw tightened. He hated retreating. It went against every instinct in his blood. But he wasn't a fool. He was a King who knew when the castle was burning.

"Chloe. Joseph. Cover the Ghost," Eliot ordered. "We're moving."

We moved as a single unit. A lethal choreography of Skullz muscle and Black Base precision. I took point. I cleared the corners with surgical efficiency while Joseph provided the heavy cover. Every time a masked gunman poked their head out a bolt from Chloe's crossbow or a round from Eliot's gold-plated pistols silenced them.

We reached the shattered remains of the club's entrance. The cool night air hit my face. It was a relief after the heat of the fire.

Eliot grabbed my arm. He pulled me behind a stone pillar just as a bullet chipped the masonry where my head had been.

"Why are you doing this?" he asked. His voice was low. A stark contrast to the gunfire outside. "You could have signaled Logan to extract just you. You're risking your standing for my team. You're risking exposure."

I looked at him. My bare face was streaked with soot. My black t-shirt was torn at the shoulder. I looked like a mess but I felt more like myself than I had in years. I wasn't the spy in the silk dress. I was the soldier in the trenches.

"I'm not doing it for the Skullz Eliot. And I'm not doing it for Black Base."

I stepped out. I took a precision shot at the sniper's flash across the street. The recoil vibrated up my arm. I saw the shadow in the clock tower slump forward.

"I'm doing it because I don't like people touching my things," I muttered.

The "Mrs. Skullz" joke might have been funny an hour ago. But standing in the ruins of his club I realized the humor was just a mask. It was a mask for the fact that we were the only two people left in this world who actually understood each other.

"Logan we're out," I whispered into my comms as we hit the sidewalk.

The black SUV screeched to a halt in front of us. It was an unmarked tactical vehicle that Logan had scrubbed from the government database years ago.

"Keep the trail clean," Logan's voice came through. He sounded relieved but exhausted. "Just get home. All of you."

I didn't give Eliot a choice. As we scrambled into the SUV I signaled the driver—one of Logan's remote-operated units—to floor it.

"We're going to my ground," I said. My voice left no room for debate. "Logan has a clean-site prepped. It's off the Skullz's grid. It's away from the Remnant's tracking algorithms. It's the only place I can guarantee isn't bugged."

Eliot settled back into the leather seat. His chest heaved as he stared at me. He could have easily signaled Mark to intercept us. He could have ordered Joseph to take the wheel. With a single word he could have reclaimed control.

But he just watched me. A slow tired smile ghosted his lips.

"Lead the way Ghost," he murmured. His posture relaxed into the seat. "I'm just a guest tonight."

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The drive was silent. Tension filled the car like water filling a lung.

I watched the rearview mirror. I checked for tails. I checked for drones. My mind was still racing through the tactical analysis of the ambush. The Mask Gang had been precise. Too precise. They knew the shift change. They knew the blind spots in the club's architecture.

Eliot sat beside me. He didn't speak. He took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the blood from his cheek. He looked out the window at the city he ruled. A city that was currently trying to kill him.

"They knew the layout," Eliot said softly. He didn't look at me.

"I know," I replied. "They breached the structural supports. That takes blueprints. Blueprints that are supposed to be offline."

"Silas," Joseph grumbled from the front seat. He was reloading his shotgun. The sound of shells sliding into the chamber was rhythmic and soothing.

"Maybe," Eliot said. "Or maybe we have more than one leak."

The SUV turned down a narrow alleyway in Sector 4. This was the old industrial district. It was a graveyard of factories and warehouses that had been abandoned when the economy collapsed ten years ago. It was the perfect place for ghosts to hide.

The car stopped in front of a derelict laundromat. The neon sign buzzed with a dying 'OPEN' light. The windows were grime-streaked and barred.

"Here?" Chloe asked. She looked skeptical.

"It's better than it looks," I said. "Out. Move fast."

We exited the vehicle. I scanned the rooftops. Clear.

I led them to the service door in the back. I punched a sixteen-digit code into a keypad hidden behind a loose brick. The door hissed open.

We stepped into the darkness.

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The safehouse was a nondescript basement located thirty feet beneath the old laundromat.

It was cramped. It smelled of bleach and ozone. It was packed with enough monitors to launch a satellite. It was one of Logan's "bolt-holes"—emergency locations he had set up in case the main Bunker was compromised.

Logan's digital avatar blinked on the main screen the moment we stepped inside.

"Z! You're alive," Logan's voice echoed from the speakers. It was thick with relief. "I've scrubbed the club's CCTV. I looped the street cams. As far as the city is concerned the Obsidian Club had a gas leak and a very loud electrical fire. The police are cordoning it off now."

"Thanks Logan," I said. I dropped my gear onto a metal table. My shoulders ached. "Meet the neighbors."

Joseph and Chloe stepped into the light. They looked around the sterile room with wary eyes. Joseph immediately started checking the perimeter. His hand never left his shotgun. Chloe climbed onto a high counter. Her legs dangled as her eyes fixed on the monitors.

"Nice place," Chloe remarked. Her voice was dry. "A bit... minimalist. Do you have a coffee machine or just despair?"

"It's safe," I clipped. "And the coffee is terrible. Don't touch it."

Eliot leaned against the far wall. His white shirt was torn and stained. He looked entirely out of place in such a gritty setting. He looked like a fallen angel who had crashed into a hardware store.

He watched me. He watched as I pulled a first-aid kit from the wall. I walked over to him. I didn't say a word. I pulled a disinfectant wipe from the pack.

"Sit," I ordered. I pointed to a metal folding chair.

Eliot obeyed. He sat down. He looked up at me. The heat from the earlier adrenaline was still simmering between us. It was a low thrumming energy that made the air feel thin.

I stepped between his legs. I began dabbing the wipe at the gash on his cheek.

He didn't flinch. He didn't hiss in pain. He just watched my eyes.

"You really brought the King of the Skullz to a laundromat basement," he whispered. His voice was intimate. Soft. "Your boss is going to have a heart attack when he finds out."

"Logan isn't my boss. He's my friend," I corrected. My fingers lingered near his jaw. I could feel the rough stubble against my skin. "And right now you're not a King. You're just a target. Kings get assassinated. Targets get extracted."

"Is that what I am to you?" Eliot asked. He reached up. His hand wrapped around my wrist. He stopped my hand from moving. "A target?"

I looked at him. I looked at the blood on his face. I looked at the darkness in his eyes that mirrored my own.

"You're the down payment," I whispered. "Remember?"

A small smile touched his lips. He released my wrist. He let me finish cleaning the wound.

"Boss," Joseph interrupted. His voice dropped an octave.

I pulled away from Eliot. The moment shattered.

Joseph walked over to the center table. He was holding a white ballistic mask he'd snagged from the club floor. It was cracked down the center.

"You need to see this," Joseph said.

I walked over. Eliot stood up and joined me.

Joseph turned the mask over.

Etched into the interior plastic near the bridge of the nose was a faint laser-engraved serial number. It was small. You would miss it if you weren't looking for it.

### **A-77-G.**

My heart hit my ribs like a hammer. The blood drained from my face.

I knew that prefix. I knew that font.

Every piece of equipment in the old Black Base inventory started with 'A'. The '77' was the year code for the tactical division. And 'G'... 'G' was the designation for Ghost Protocol.

"That's a Base serial," I breathed. My voice was barely a whisper.

"The Mask Gang isn't just a rival syndicate," Eliot said. His voice turned cold. Sharp. "They're being supplied by your people Zabrina. Or they *are* your people."

"Logan," I barked. I turned to the screen. "Check the inventory logs for the A-77 series. Now."

The screen flickered. Logan's fingers flew across his keyboard miles away in the main Bunker.

"Searching..." Logan's voice came through. "Z. That series was marked as 'Decommissioned and Destroyed' three years ago. It was supposed to be melted down after the Director's purge. It shouldn't exist."

"Well it's currently trying to kill us," I muttered. "And it's doing a damn good job."

I looked at Eliot. Then I looked at Joseph and Chloe.

We were standing in a room built for one person. We were hiding from a threat that wore the same face as my employers. The weapons used to attack the Obsidian Club were my weapons. The tactics were my tactics.

The lines weren't just blurred anymore. They were gone.

The Director. The Remnant. They weren't just holding a grudge. They were arming an army with the ghosts of Black Base's past.

Eliot took a step toward me. His presence was suddenly overwhelming in the small room. He didn't say 'I told you so.' He didn't gloat. He didn't remind me that he had warned me about the Director's reach.

He just looked at the mask. Then he looked back at me.

"Looks like we're both ghosts now," he said quietly.

I stared at the serial number.

If the Mask Gang had A-Series gear... what else did they have? Did they have the tracking codes? Did they have the safehouse locations?

"Logan," I said. "How secure is the Bunker?"

Silence on the line.

"Logan?"

"I'm tracking a signal," Logan said. His voice was tight. Panic edged into the syllables. "Z. The mask. It's not just a mask. It's a beacon. It's transmitting."

I grabbed the mask from the table. I threw it onto the floor and stomped on it. The plastic shattered. The circuitry inside crunched.

"It's too late," Logan said. "They have a lock. Not on you. On the frequency."

"What frequency?" Eliot asked.

"The frequency of the serial numbers," Logan explained. "They aren't tracking the mask. They are tracking the matching sets. They are tracking *all* the A-Series gear."

I looked at Joseph's shotgun. I looked at Chloe's crossbow. Then I looked at my own Glock.

They were all A-Series. We had stolen them from the Director's stockpile. We had armed ourselves with beacons.

"We're lit up like a Christmas tree," I whispered.

Eliot looked at me. He didn't panic. He just adjusted his cuffs.

"Then we change the game," Eliot said. "If they know where we are... we stop hiding."

He looked at Joseph.

"Call Mark. Tell him to bring the heavy transport. We aren't staying in this hole."

"Where are we going?" Chloe asked.

Eliot looked at me. His green eyes were hard.

"We're going to the one place the Remnant can't touch," Eliot said. "We're going to the Villa."

I hesitated. Going to the Villa meant giving up. It meant admitting that Black Base couldn't protect itself. It meant walking into the lion's den and closing the door behind me.

But looking at the shattered mask on the floor... I knew he was right. The Bunker wasn't safe. The safehouses weren't safe. The only safe place left was the fortress on the cliff.

"Okay," I said. "We go to the Villa."

Eliot nodded. He walked past me. His hand brushed mine. A silent promise.

"Welcome home Zabrina," he whispered.

# CHAPTER 28.

## Chapter 28: The Death of a Schoolgirl

The safehouse was quiet. It was the kind of heavy, pressurized silence that usually came right before a bomb went off.

We had thirty minutes before Mark arrived with the heavy transport to take us to the Villa. Thirty minutes to pack up a life. Thirty minutes to scrub the digital footprint of Black Base from this damp laundromat basement. The air smelled of bleach and overheating electronics, a chemical stinging that coated the back of my throat.

Logan was hunched over the main terminal. His fingers flew across the keys with a frantic, rhythmic clatter that sounded like rain on a tin roof. He was collapsing the firewalls. He was encrypting the drives. He was burning the digital bridges we had spent months building to ensure the Remnant couldn't follow us home. Joseph and Chloe were by the service entrance, checking their weapons and watching the perimeter feeds with the paranoia of hunted animals.

I sat at the metal table in the center of the room.

My Glock 19 was disassembled in front of me. The slide. The barrel. The recoil spring. The frame. I wiped each piece down with a cloth soaked in solvent. The smell of gun oil was sharp and familiar. It was a grounding scent. It smelled like control. It smelled like the only thing in my life that functioned exactly as it was designed to.

Eliot was leaning against the far wall.

He hadn't moved in ten minutes. He was watching me.

He looked out of place in the sterile, fluorescent-lit room. His white shirt was stained with soot and blood from the club, the top buttons undone to reveal the hollow of his throat. His hair was messy, damp with sweat and rain. Yet he still carried that effortless, suffocating gravity. He was the most powerful man in the city. He was the Devil of Z City. He could have been barking orders. He could have taken command of the room. He could have told Logan to work faster or Joseph to stand straighter.

But he didn't. He stayed silent. He stayed passive. He let me be the center of gravity.

I picked up the barrel. I inspected the rifling, holding it up to the harsh overhead light. It was clean. It was a perfect, spiraling tunnel of steel.

I looked up. My eyes met his.

For the last hour, we had been running on adrenaline. Gunfights. Explosions. The revelation about the Director. The shattered A-Series masks. But now, in the quiet, the adrenaline was fading. The chemical high was crashing, leaving behind a raw, exposed nerve. What was left in the silence wasn't the operative and the kingpin. It was the ghost of the girl I used to be and the man he had become.

"Why didn't you show up that day?"

The question was out before I could stop it. It was random. It was unprompted. It lingered in the air like smoke from an extinguished candle, heavy and suffocating.

Logan paused his typing for a split second. The rhythm of the keys faltered, then resumed, pretending he hadn't heard. Joseph shifted his weight by the door, his eyes fixed studiously on the floor.

Eliot stopped midway from reaching for one of my spare combat knives on the rack. His hand stayed frozen for a second. Then he slowly turned back to look at me.

"What day?" he asked.

His voice was smooth. But there was a forced casualness to it. A slight deflection. He was trying to be oblivious. He was trying to spare me the indignity of the memory.

I didn't let him.

I looked him dead in the eye. My fingers were tight around the cleaning rag, squeezing the oil into the fabric.

"The day I was planning to confess my feelings to you," I said. My voice was steady, surprising even me. "I waited for hours. In the library garden. Under the oak tree. You knew I was there. You looked right at me from the balcony. And then you walked away."

The playfulness he'd carried since the pier vanished. The "Devil" mask slipped, the arrogance dissolving to reveal something tired and human underneath. He let out a soft, dry chuckle. He cocked his head to the side. His gaze dropped to the floor for a moment, studying the scuffed concrete as if the answer was written in the dust.

"We were children back then, Zabrina."

The answer stung more than the bullets at the club. It was dismissive. It reduced the most defining moment of my adolescence, the moment my heart had first broken, to a playground memory.

"Did you ever like me?" I asked. The words tumbled out, raw and unguarded. "Before everything went black? Before the fire? Did I matter?"

He looked at me for a long time.

The silence stretched between us. It was thick. Suffocating. I could hear the hum of the servers. The drip of a faucet in the corner. The beat of my own heart, slow and heavy in my chest. I watched his eyes, searching for a flicker of the romance I had invented in my head for eight years. I searched for the tragedy of star-crossed lovers separated by circumstance.

He eventually turned his gaze toward the gun parts scattered on the table. His expression was unreadable. Calm. Detached.

"I never thought of that," he said in a low voice.

The words were a cold splash of water.

It was clear now. After eight years of wondering. Of holding onto a memory like a lifeline. Of thinking that maybe, just maybe, the connection between us was a tragic romance interrupted by war. Of thinking he had stayed away to protect me.

I was finally getting the rejection I never had.

"I never thought of you that way," he continued, his voice devoid of cruelty but heavy with truth. He looked up. Those familiar green eyes locked onto mine. For a moment, the crime lord was gone. He looked exactly like the senior I used to follow around. "You were my junior. A very studious girl who loved learning about the law. You were always so serious. Even then."

He chuckled softly. It was a warm sound. A memory of a girl with thick books and a stubborn streak.

"To me," he said gently, "you were a student. Nothing more."

I waited for the pain. I waited for the heartbreak to shatter me. I waited for the tears that I had held back for a decade to finally spill over.

But they didn't come.

Instead, I felt a strange sensation in my chest. Not a sharp pain. But a slow, cooling ease. Like ice settling over a burn.

The tension that had been coiled in my heart for nearly a decade finally began to unfurl. The "what if" died. The romanticized memory of Eliot Ignacio—the boy who might have loved me if the world hadn't ended—dissolved into the ether.

He didn't love me then. He didn't love me now.

And that meant I didn't have to love him either.

"That was funny," I said.

I let out a small, genuine laugh. It was dry. It was hollow. But it was real. I smiled back at him, though it felt a little bittersweet.

"I was very young then," I admitted, wiping a smudge of oil from the slide. "Never had a boyfriend... I spent all my time liking my senior and dreaming about courtroom dramas."

It was one-sided. All of it. The stolen glances. The heart-pounding moments in the library. They were mine alone. He had seen a student. I had seen a world.

He didn't say anything else. He just offered a faint, lingering smirk and turned his attention back to the weapons on the rack. His profile was silhouetted against the monitors. He didn't look at me anymore.

I looked down at the gun.

I picked up the slide. I slid the barrel into place. *Click*.

That click was the sound of a door closing.

I picked up the recoil spring. I snapped it into the assembly. *Snap*.

That was the sound of a lock engaging.

I slid the upper assembly onto the frame. I pulled it back. *Clack-clack*.

The weapon was whole again. It was cold. It was efficient. It was ready to fire.

And so was I.

The girl who had waited in the garden was gone. The girl who had looked at Eliot with stars in her eyes was dead. She had died in this basement, killed by the truth.

I wasn't a student. I wasn't a junior. I wasn't a heartbroken teenager pining for a boy who didn't see her.

I was Rank 3. I was the Ghost.

I stood up.

The movement was sharp. Sudden. The metal chair scraped loudly against the concrete floor, echoing in the small room.

The energy in the room shifted instantly.

Logan looked up, startled by the sudden noise, his hands hovering over the keyboard. Joseph straightened his posture by the door, his hand going to his weapon. Even Eliot turned, sensing the change in the air. He looked at me, expecting to see tears or anger.

I didn't look at Eliot with softness anymore. I didn't look at him with history. I looked at him and saw a variable. An asset. A temporary ally in a war that I intended to win.

"Logan," I said. My voice was ice. "Status on the data wipe."

Logan blinked, surprised by the sudden authority in my tone. He looked at me as if he didn't recognize me. "Uh... eighty percent. I need five more minutes to scrub the cache."

"You have two," I ordered. I didn't shout. I didn't have to. The command was absolute. "Pull the hard drives. If the wipe isn't done by the time the transport gets here, we use thermite. Nothing gets left behind. Do you understand?"

Logan swallowed hard. He nodded, seeing the steel in my eyes. "Yes. On it."

He typed faster.

I turned to the door.

"Joseph. Chloe."

The two Skullz operatives looked at me. They were Eliot's people. They answered to the Devil. They were killers who owed allegiance only to the Villa. But right now, they were looking at me.

"Check the alley," I commanded. "I want a two-block perimeter scan. If the Remnant has a spotter, I want them neutralized before the transport stops. Silent takedowns only. We don't make noise until we're moving."

Joseph looked at Eliot. He was waiting for permission. Waiting for his King to overrule the Black Base operative who dared to give orders to the royal guard.

Eliot didn't speak. He was watching me. His eyes were wide, a flicker of something new dancing in the green depths. It wasn't amusement. It wasn't pity.

It was respect.

He gave Joseph a subtle nod. *Do as she says.*

"On it," Joseph said. He signaled Chloe, and the two of them slipped out the back door without a sound, weapons drawn.

I holstered the Glock. I grabbed my tactical vest and shrugged it on. I tightened the straps across my chest, feeling the armor settle like a second skin. I checked the ceramic knife in my boot. I checked the comms unit in my ear.

I felt lighter. Stronger. Dangerous.

I turned to Eliot.

He was still leaning against the wall. But he wasn't looking at the weapons rack anymore. He was looking at me. He looked like a man who had been trying to tame a wolf, only to realize the wolf had finally chewed through the chain.

"We move in five," I told him. It wasn't a question. It wasn't a request. "When Mark gets here, you take the lead vehicle. I take the rear guard. If we get hit, you push through to the Villa. I'll hold the line."

Eliot stared at me. A slow smile spread across his face. But this time, it was different. It was the smile of a general recognizing another general on the field.

"You're giving orders now?" he asked softly.

"Someone has to," I said cold. "This is a war, Eliot. Not a reunion."

I walked past him. I didn't brush his arm. I didn't smell his cologne. I didn't feel the magnetic pull that had defined my life for eight years. I walked straight to the monitors to oversee Logan's progress.

I could feel Eliot's eyes on my back.

He had lost something tonight. He had lost the leverage of my affection. He had lost the soft, vulnerable underbelly of my past that he could poke and prod whenever he wanted control.

He had killed the girl who loved him.

Now, he had to deal with the woman who didn't need him.

"Transport is one minute out," Logan announced, ripping a hard drive from the tower. "Drives are pulled. Thermite is set."

"Good," I said. "Burn it."

Logan hit the enter key. A low hum filled the room as the servers began to fry themselves, erasing Black Base from the grid.

"Let's go," I said.

I kicked the back door open and stepped out into the rain. I didn't look back to see if Eliot was following.

I knew he was.

Because for the first time in eight years, I was the one leading the way.

# CHAPTER 29.

## Chapter 29: The Devil's Wrath

The docks were a graveyard of rusted steel and salt-crusted secrets.

We had diverted from the route to the Villa. The signal Logan tracked from the destroyed mask hadn't pointed to the Remnant's headquarters. It pointed here. To Warehouse 14. A black smear against the skyline where the power grid was drawing enough energy to light a small city.

"Stay low," I whispered to Chloe.

My heart was a rhythmic, hollow thud in my chest. I felt lighter. That clarity I'd found in the basement—that cold acceptance that Eliot saw me as nothing more than a student—had turned my blood to ice water. I wasn't a girl looking for a boy anymore. I was a Ghost. My movements were surgical. My focus was so sharp it felt like it could cut through the humid night air.

"Warehouse 14," Chloe murmured, checking her wrist computer. Her breath hitched. "Logan's trace ends here. Look at the power draw... it's off the charts. What do they need that much juice for?"

"We're about to find out," I said.

The side door hissed open under my bypass kit. We stepped into a cathedral of chrome and cold light. It wasn't a depot. It was an altar to something unholy.

Rows of white masks sat on assembly lines like eyeless skulls. But beyond them were the glass stasis pods.

Inside the glass, men floated in blue-tinted fluid. Their skin was translucent. Mapped with glowing circuitry that pulsed like a slow, artificial heartbeat. They were suspended in a dreamless sleep, wires trailing from the base of their skulls.

"They're making them," Chloe breathed. Her hand trembled as she reached for her crossbow. "The Mask Gang... they aren't men. They're shells. They're growing soldiers."

The horror of it hit me. The Agency wasn't just using gear. They were playing God. They were taking the "Ghost Protocol" literally, stripping humanity out of the equation to build weapons that didn't bleed or question orders.

I reached for my comms to alert Logan.

"Found you."

The voice dropped from the rafters like a shroud.

Before I could look up, the world exploded. A heavy-caliber round slammed into the concrete inches from my boot, sending shards of stone biting into my skin.

"Ambush!" I yelled.

A door at the far end of the warehouse screamed open. A dozen handlers in matte-black tactical gear poured out. They didn't move like people. They moved like a single, monstrous organism.

I dived behind a heavy steel crate. My Glock barked. *Bang. Bang.* I felt the recoil vibrate through my bones. A familiar, grounding sting. Beside me, Chloe was a blur of movement. Her bolts found targets with lethal precision. But we were being squeezed. The crossfire was a wall of lead.

I pivoted to cover Chloe's flank. My eyes tracked a handler on the catwalk. I had him in my sights.

*Crack.*

The sound was different. Not the metallic snap of a Glock, but a wet, sickening thud.

My breath left me in a sudden, violent rush. A searing, white-hot heat bloomed in my side. It spread across my ribs like liquid fire.

I tried to scream. My lungs felt like they had collapsed into ash.

I fell.

The concrete was freezing against my cheek. I looked down, my vision swimming, and watched as my charcoal t-shirt turned a dark, heavy crimson. My blood was leaking out onto the floor. It steamed slightly in the cold warehouse air.

"Z!" Chloe's scream sounded like it was miles away. Muffled by the roaring in my ears.

I tried to raise my gun. I wanted to fight. I wanted to be the Ghost. But my arm was a lead weight. The floor was pulling me down. Down into the dark.

One of the handlers stepped over the crates. He loomed over me, the muzzle of his rifle cold and dark. He looked at me with the eyes of a man killing an insect.

"The Ghost is finally dead," he stated. His voice was flat.

He tightened his finger on the trigger.

I closed my eyes. A single, stray thought flickered through my fading mind. *I never got to say goodbye to Logan.*

Then, the world didn't just break. It shattered.

The massive industrial bay doors—built to withstand a hurricane—were torn from their hinges. The sound was a primal scream of tortured metal.

A black armored SUV roared into the warehouse. The tires screamed as it drifted at eighty miles per hour. It hit the stasis pods in a spray of glass and blue fluid, crushing three handlers instantly.

The vehicle hadn't even stopped when the driver's side door was kicked off its frame.

Eliot stepped out.

I had seen him playful. I had seen him arrogant. I had seen him as the boy in the library. But I had never seen the Devil.

The air in the warehouse didn't just turn cold. It turned oppressive. A physical weight that made it hard to breathe. His aura was a crushing, absolute darkness.

He didn't take cover. He didn't draw a gun. He just walked.

The handler over me turned his rifle toward the shadow. "Get back!"

Eliot didn't flinch. He didn't blink. With a speed that felt like a glitch in reality, he closed the distance. He grabbed the barrel of the rifle with one hand and snapped the steel like it was a dry twig. With the other, he gripped the man's throat and lifted him off the ground.

"You touched her," Eliot said.

His voice wasn't a shout. It was a low, vibrating growl that seemed to rattle the very foundation of the warehouse. It was the sound of a man who had left his humanity at the door.

He didn't just kill him. He dismantled him. With a sickening crack, he broke the man's neck and tossed him aside like a broken doll.

The other handlers opened fire. The air was filled with lead, but Eliot moved through it like a ghost—ironically, the very thing I was supposed to be. He drew his gold-plated pistols, and the world became a symphony of rhythmic, cold-blooded execution.

He didn't use a single bullet more than necessary. Every shot was a headshot. He moved with a feral, murderous grace, kicking over pods, using glass shards as blades, turning the warehouse into a slaughterhouse. He was a whirlwind of black silk and blood, his eyes glowing with a terrifying, unholy light.

He wasn't protecting a junior. He wasn't following a lead. He was erasing an insult to his soul.

In less than a minute, the only sound left was the hiss of escaping steam and the heavy, thudding footsteps of the King of the Skullz as he walked toward me.

He dropped to his knees, the blood on his white shirt still steaming. His hands—the hands that had just ended a dozen lives—were shaking as they touched my face.

"Zabrina," he whispered. His voice was ragged. Broken. Stripped of all its armor. "Zabrina, look at me."

"I... I had it..." I coughed, the metallic taste of blood filling my mouth. "I was fine..."

"Shut up," he growled. But his eyes were wet. They were dark with a mixture of rage and a fear so profound it made my heart ache. He scooped me up, pulling me against the heat of his chest. He held me so tight I could feel the frantic, terrified drum of his heart beating against mine.

"Joseph! Chloe! Get the medic!" he roared, his voice shaking the rafters. "If she closes her eyes, I will burn this entire city to the ground. I will leave nothing but ash!"

I looked up at his jaw. At the blood splattered across his skin. I had told myself he didn't care. I had accepted the rejection in the basement. But as he held me, his breath hitching as he tucked my head under his chin, the darkness finally took me.

---

The first thing I noticed wasn't the pain. It was the smell.

It didn't smell like Black Base. There was no cold, bleach-filled air or the scent of ozone and stressed metal. Instead, it smelled like him. A mix of expensive cologne, worn leather, and that faint, woody scent of sandalwood that had followed him since we were kids.

I tried to take a deep breath.

That's when the pain hit.

It felt like a hot, jagged knife was dragging across my side. A brutal reminder of the bullet that had almost ended me. I forced my eyes open. The dim, warm lights of a private room slowly came into focus.

I wasn't in a basement. I wasn't in a hospital. I was in a high-tech medical room that looked more like a luxury hotel suite. The walls were cream. The monitors were silent and sleek.

Then I saw him.

Eliot wasn't in a chair. He was slumped on the floor right next to my bed, his back against the wall. His legs were sprawled out on the expensive carpet. His fancy white shirt was gone, replaced by a simple black t-shirt, but he hadn't even washed the dried blood off his arms. His head was tilted back, eyes shut, and his jaw was covered in thick stubble.

The "Devil" looked exhausted. He looked human.

Even in his sleep, he looked stressed. His hand was resting on the edge of my mattress, his fingers twitching as if he were still fighting someone in his dreams. This was the side of him he'd hidden for eight years—the man who wasn't always smirking. The man who stayed on a hard floor just to be a few inches closer to me.

I moved my hand slightly. A small gasp of pain escaped my lips.

His eyes snapped open instantly. He wasn't groggy at all; he was wide awake and ready to fight, until his eyes landed on mine.

"Zabrina," he breathed. He scrambled to his feet, hovering over me. His hands looked like they wanted to touch me, but he kept them back, like he was terrified I'd break if he got too close. "Don't move. The stitches are still fresh."

"How long?" I rasped. My throat felt like I'd swallowed sand.

"Fourteen hours," he whispered. He grabbed a glass of water from the table and gently held the back of my head so I could take a sip. "The doctor said you were lucky. Half an inch to the left and..."

He didn't finish. His jaw tightened so hard I could hear his teeth grind.

"You stayed," I said, my voice barely a whisper. "On the floor."

Eliot looked away, looking actually embarrassed for a second. He tried to get his cool attitude back, wiping a hand over his face, but it was failing. "The bed was taken."

"Eliot..."

"Don't," he said, his voice sounding thick. "Don't ask me why, and don't look at me like that. I told you, I just don't want Black Base losing a good worker."

But the lie didn't work this time. It felt like a shield he was holding up with shaking hands. I looked at the blood still on his skin—the blood he'd spilled to save me—and I finally saw the truth.

"The warehouse," I said, the memory of those blue tanks rushing back. "Chloe. Joseph. Did they get the info?"

Eliot's face went dark. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a tablet, sliding it onto the table over my bed. "They got more than info, Zabrina. They brought back one of the tanks that didn't break. We have a prototype in containment."

I reached for my phone on the nightstand, my fingers hovering over Logan's contact. My head was spinning. If Black Base was behind the cloning, did Logan know? My heart said no—Logan was the one who helped me find the warehouse. He was my only anchor in that den of spies. But the doubt was a cold, oily slick in my mind.

I set the phone down. I couldn't face Logan yet. Not while I was still processing the sight of my own world crumbling.

Eliot noticed my movement. He didn't say anything, but he reached for a fresh roll of gauze and a bottle of antiseptic. He sat on the edge of the bed, his movements incredibly gentle as he began to peel back the old dressing from my side.

For a man who had just dismantled a warehouse full of soldiers with his bare hands, he was being agonizingly careful. The contrast made my chest ache.

"I saw you that day," he said suddenly.

I froze, looking at him in confusion. The room was quiet, the only sound the soft crinkle of the gauze. "Saw me... what?"

"Eight years ago," he said, his eyes fixed on the wound he was cleaning. He didn't look at me. "You were standing by the garden gate. The wind was blowing your hair, and you were clutching a small envelope. You looked excited... nervous, maybe?"

He paused, dipping a cotton swab into the antiseptic and dabbing it against my skin. I winced, but the sting was nothing compared to the shock of his words.

"I saw you," he repeated, his voice low. "But I didn't go near you."

The realization hit me like a physical blow. He was talking about the day I'd waited for him. The day I'd planned to tell him everything.

"Why didn't you?" I asked, my voice trembling. "I waited for hours, Eliot. I stood there until the sun went down."

"Because I was leaving already," he said, finally looking up. His green eyes were dark, filled with a heavy, old sorrow. "My father's men were waiting in the car. If I had walked over to you, I wouldn't have been able to get in that car. And if I didn't get in that car, they would have hurt you to get to me."

"Then why did you tell me last time that you forgot?" I pressed, my heart aching. "Why tell me you never thought of me that way?"

"Because I do not feel the same way anymore, Zabrina..." He cut me off, his hand pausing over my side. He took a shaky breath, struggling with the words. "But I did... I did like you then. More than I could ever explain."

I felt a lump form in my throat. The cold clarity I'd felt earlier in the basement was shattering, replaced by a flood of warmth and regret.

"I loved you then," he continued, his voice barely a whisper. "But what did I even know about love? We were kids, Zabrina. We didn't even know how to define our feelings. We were just two people trying to survive the worlds we were born into. So what did we even know?"

As he spoke, the memories came rushing back—sharper than ever. I remembered him looking at me shyly after football practice, pretending he wasn't thirsty just so he could linger near me while I held a bottle of water. I remembered his laughs, his terrible jokes, and the way he'd ramble about nerdy law facts just to see me smile.

"If..." I started, my voice cracking. "If those things never happened to us. If our worlds hadn't exploded... would you have accepted my confession then?"

Eliot stopped cleaning the wound. He looked at me, and for the first time in eight years, the mask was completely gone. The King was gone. The Devil was gone.

He reached out, his thumb grazing my cheek, and he smiled—a soft, sad, beautiful smile that belonged to the boy from the garden.

"I would have confessed first before you could even open your mouth," he said softly.

He leaned in, his forehead resting against mine for just a second. It wasn't a kiss, but it was more intimate than anything we'd ever shared. It was an acknowledgment of a life we never got to live. A parallel universe where we were just Eliot and Zabrina, not the Devil and the Ghost.

The silence lingered, sweet and heavy. It was a fragile bubble of peace.

Then the door to the medical wing burst open.

Chloe stood there, her face pale and her crossbow already drawn. The reality of the war came crashing back in.

"Boss! Zabrina!" Chloe shouted, breathless. "We have a problem. The monitors just picked up a breach at the perimeter. They tracked the transport."

# CHAPTER 30

## Chapter 30: The Mirror Project

The alarms didn't sound like alarms. They sounded like a heartbeat.

A low, thrumming bass vibrated through the floorboards of the medical suite. It was synchronized with the pulsing red emergency lights that bathed the cream-colored walls in the color of fresh blood. It wasn't the erratic shriek of a break-in. It was the steady, rhythmic pulse of a siege.

Chloe stood in the doorway. Her chest was heaving. Her crossbow was gripped so tightly her knuckles were white.

"The breach isn't at the gate," Chloe said. Her voice was steady but tight with a fear I had never heard from a Skullz operative. "It's at the cliff face. They're climbing up the sea wall."

Eliot was on his feet in an instant. The vulnerable, exhausted man who had just confessed a decade of silence vanished. The Devil returned. He grabbed his blood-stained shirt from the floor but then discarded it. He reached for a tactical vest hanging by the door. He strapped it on over his black t-shirt. The Kevlar covered his heart. His face was pure stone.

"The cliff face is three hundred feet of sheer granite," Eliot said. He checked the load on his gold-plated pistol. "Nothing climbs that without heavy equipment. And heavy equipment triggers the seismic sensors."

"They aren't using equipment," Chloe whispered. "Boss. You have to see the monitors. They aren't climbing. They're swarming."

Eliot looked at me. His eyes dropped to the fresh bandage on my side.

"Stay here," he ordered. "Lock the door. If anyone tries to enter who isn't me, you shoot them through the wood. Do not open it for anyone. Not even Logan."

"Eliot," I rasped. I tried to sit up. The pain was a jagged lightning bolt that tore through my midsection. It stole my breath. "If they're climbing the cliff, they're bypassing the main defense grid. They know the blind spots. This isn't a random attack. It's a retrieval mission."

"Retrieval?" Eliot paused at the door.

"The drive," I said. "The one I stole from the warehouse. The one Logan is decrypting. They want it back."

"Then they will die wanting it," Eliot snapped. "Stay. Put."

He turned and marched out the door. Chloe followed on his heels.

I waited exactly three seconds after the door clicked shut.

Then I swung my legs over the edge of the bed.

The room spun. Grey spots danced in my vision. I gritted my teeth. I forced the nausea down. I grabbed the table for support. My fingernails dug into the wood. I wasn't going to die in a luxury hospital bed while an army of monsters stormed the castle.

I grabbed my holster from the chair. I didn't have my tactical vest. Just the thin hospital gown and a pair of stolen sweatpants. I strapped the gun belt around my hips. I winced as it pressed against the wound.

"Adrenaline," I whispered to myself. "Do your job."

I stumbled to the door. I unlocked it. I stepped out into the hallway.

The Villa was in chaos.

Servants were running toward the panic rooms. Skullz soldiers in full armor were sprinting toward the rear terrace. The air smelled of ozone and fear.

I made my way to the main command room. The double doors were open.

Inside, the scene was a nightmare bathed in blue light.

The massive wall of monitors showed the rear of the Villa. The storm was raging outside. Rain lashed against the cameras. But through the grain and the water, I saw them.

They were white shapes against the black rock.

Chloe was right. They weren't using ropes. They weren't using pitons.

They were clawing their way up the rock with bare hands. Their fingers were digging into the stone. They found purchase where there was none. They moved with a jerky, unnatural rhythm. Like spiders.

"They don't feel pain," I whispered.

I walked up to the tactical table where Eliot, Silas, and Logan were gathered.

Silas looked like he was about to stroke out. "This is impossible! The wind shear alone should blow them off the face! No human grip strength can hold that wet rock!"

"They aren't human," Logan said. He was typing furiously on a laptop he had plugged into the Villa's mainframe. "I'm reading their density scans from the perimeter lasers. Their bone structure is reinforced. Carbon-fiber lacing on the skeleton. Increased muscle density. These aren't men, Silas. They're biological tanks."

Eliot looked up as I approached. His jaw tightened when he saw me standing there, swaying slightly. But he didn't waste time arguing. The situation was too critical.

"How many?" I asked.

"Fifty," Eliot said. "Fifty of them. And my perimeter guards are reporting that they aren't stopping when they get hit. They take rounds to the chest and keep moving."

On the screen, a Skullz guard on the terrace opened fire. Tracers lit up the night. I watched a 5.56 round slam into the shoulder of the lead climber as he crested the railing.

The climber didn't flinch. He didn't scream. He didn't even slow down. The impact spun him around, but he simply used the momentum to swing a fist into the guard's helmet.

The guard collapsed. His visor was shattered.

The climber turned to the camera.

He was wearing the white ballistic mask. But half of it had been shot away.

Underneath, there was no fear. There was no rage. There was just a face. Pale. Smooth. And utterly blank. His eyes were wide and black. Dilated to take in every photon of light.

It was the face of the man in the tank. The face of the shell.

"The Mirror Project," Logan whispered, staring at the screen.

"The what?" Eliot demanded.

"The file I just decrypted," Logan said. His voice trembled. "It wasn't just shipping manifests, Z. It was a genetic database. Project Mirror. The Director wasn't just buying weapons. He was building replacements."

"Replacements for who?" Silas asked.

Logan looked up. His face was ghostly pale.

"For us," Logan said. "For the top operatives. For the leaders. He wanted an underworld he could control. And you can't control people like Eliot or Zabrina. So he decided to copy them."

The realization hit the room like a bomb.

"They're breaching the terrace doors!" Joseph's voice crackled over the comms. "We're falling back to the Great Hall! Bullets aren't stopping them unless we sever the brain stem!"

"Pull back," Eliot ordered. "Lead them into the kill box."

"Eliot," Silas shouted. He slammed his hand on the table. "We must initiate Protocol Obsidian! Seal the panic room! Leave the house to them! If they want the server, let them have it!"

"This house is my legacy, Silas," Eliot snarled. "And that server contains the names of every person they plan to replace. I don't abandon my people to be recycled."

He turned to me. He grabbed a tablet and shoved it into my hands.

"Can you shoot?" he asked.

"If I don't have to run," I said.

"Good." He pointed to the mezzanine level overlooking the Great Hall. "Get to the sniper nest. Mark is there with the railgun. Cover the stairs. Do not let them get to the server room."

"Go," I said.

I limped toward the stairs. Eliot watched me for a second. A flash of torture was in his eyes before he turned and drew his gold pistols. He walked toward the double doors of the Great Hall to meet the monsters at the front door.

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The sniper nest was a concealed balcony hidden behind a tapestry on the second floor.

Mark was there. He was prone. The massive magnetic railgun was set up on a bipod. He looked up as I entered. His eyes widened when he saw the blood seeping through my shirt.

"You look like hell, Z," Mark grunted.

"You should see the other guy," I muttered. I sank down beside him. I rested my back against the pillar. I drew my Glock. I racked the slide. "Status?"

"They're inside," Mark said. He pressed his eye to the scope. "And they aren't fighting like grunts. They're fighting like pros."

Below us, the Great Hall was a killing field.

The massive mahogany doors burst open. The storm blew in. It brought rain and the smell of the sea.

And the Hollows poured in.

They moved in eerie unison. They wore black tactical gear but no insignia. Their white masks gleamed in the chandelier light. They didn't take cover. They didn't shout tactical commands. They just ran. A silent sprinting wave of death.

The Skullz soldiers formed a phalanx at the bottom of the grand staircase. They opened fire.

The noise was deafening.

But the Hollows didn't stop. I watched a clone take three rounds to the chest. He stumbled. Blue fluid sprayed from the wounds instead of red blood. He corrected his balance and kept running. He leaped over a marble table. He tackled a Skullz soldier. He tore the man's throat out with a combat knife.

"Watch their movements," I whispered to Mark. "Look at how they move."

I watched a Hollow disarm a guard. It wasn't a brute force attack. It was a Krav Maga disarm. Perfect form.

I watched another Hollow scale a pillar. It used the same parkour technique I had taught the recruits at Black Base.

"They aren't just bodies," I realized. "They have our training. They have our muscle memory."

"Headshots!" Eliot's voice roared over the din.

Eliot was in the center of the fray. He was a blur of violence. He moved faster than I had ever seen. He ducked under a swinging machete. He spun. He put two rounds into the eye socket of a Hollow.

The Hollow dropped instantly.

"Brain stem," I whispered. "Disconnect the puppet from the strings."

I rested my arms on the balcony railing. I took a breath. The pain in my side flared. I pushed it down. I locked it away in a mental box.

I aimed.

A Hollow was flanking Joseph near the fireplace.

*Exhale.*

*Squeeze.*

The Glock bucked. The round flew true. It struck the Hollow just below the ear. He collapsed mid-stride. He slid across the polished floor.

"Nice shot," Mark muttered.

He pulled the trigger on the railgun.

*THWUMP.*

The magnetic slug hit a cluster of three Hollows near the door. It didn't just kill them. It liquified them. The force sent limbs flying and painted the far wall in blue gore.

"They're trying to flank!" I shouted. I spotted movement near the kitchen service entrance. "Three bogies. Nine o'clock!"

Mark swiveled the big gun. *THWUMP.* Two down.

But there were too many. They were swarming like ants. They were climbing the pillars. They were digging their reinforced fingers into the marble. They were pulling themselves up toward the mezzanine.

Toward us.

"Mark!" I yelled. "They're climbing!"

A hand—pale, wet, and incredibly strong—gripped the railing right in front of me.

A mask rose over the edge.

I fired point-blank. The mask shattered. The face underneath was a ruin of synthetic flesh and wire.

But the hand didn't let go.

The Hollow vaulted over the railing. It tackled me.

We hit the floor hard. My gun skittered away.

The creature was heavy. Unnaturally heavy. It felt like being crushed by a bag of wet cement. Its hands found my throat. They were freezing cold.

I gasped. I clawed at its wrists. Its eyes were dead. Empty. It didn't blink as it squeezed the life out of me.

My vision started to tunnel. The pain in my side was a screaming agony. My stitches had definitely torn.

"Get... off..." I choked.

I reached for the knife in my boot. My fingers brushed the hilt.

I drew the ceramic blade.

I didn't stab the chest. I didn't stab the neck.

I drove the blade upward. Under the chin. Aiming for the brain.

The Hollow convulsed. A harsh static-like screech emitted from its throat. Not a scream. But the sound of feedback.

It went limp. Its weight crushed me.

I shoved the body off. I gasped for air. I crawled backward. I retrieved my gun.

"Z!" Mark shouted. He was fighting off two more climbers with the butt of his railgun. "We're compromised! Fall back to the server room!"

I looked down at the Great Hall.

The Skullz line was breaking. There were too many of them.

Eliot was fighting back-to-back with Joseph. They were surrounded by a ring of white masks. Eliot was out of ammo. He was using a karambit knife. He moved with a desperate savage grace.

"Eliot!" I screamed.

He looked up. His face was smeared with blue fluid.

"Seal the room!" he roared at me. "Lock it down! Destroy the drive if you have to!"

"I'm not leaving you!"

"That's an order!"

A Hollow lunged at him. Eliot ducked. He sliced the hamstring. But another one slammed into him from behind. They went down in a tangle of limbs.

"No!" I scrambled to the edge of the balcony.

But then a sound cut through the chaos.

A high-pitched whine. Like a jet engine spooling up.

It came from the server room behind us.

The door flew open.

Logan stood there. He was holding a device that looked like a modified satellite dish hooked up to a car battery.

"Everyone cover your ears!" Logan screamed.

I dropped my gun. I slapped my hands over my ears. Mark did the same.

Logan flipped a switch.

*SCREEEEEEEEEEEECH.*

The sound wasn't just noise. It was a sonic weapon. A focused EMP blast on an audio frequency.

The effect on the Hollows was instant and catastrophic.

Every single clone in the room froze. They spasmed violently. The blue lights in their veins flared bright white. Then they went dark.

In unison fifty monsters collapsed to the floor.

The silence that followed was deafening.

I slowly lowered my hands. My ears were ringing.

Below in the Great Hall the Skullz soldiers were looking around in shock. The piles of bodies were motionless.

Eliot pushed the dead weight of a Hollow off his chest. He stood up. He swayed slightly. He looked up at the mezzanine. He looked at Logan.

"What..." Eliot panted. "What was that?"

"Feedback loop," Logan called out. His voice cracked. "I hacked their local network. I sent a kill signal to their neural chips. It fried their motor functions."

He slumped against the doorframe. The device smoked in his hands.

"They're offline," Logan whispered.

I looked at the body of the Hollow I had killed. The face was slack. The eyes were still open. Staring at nothing.

I felt a wave of nausea.

I reached out and pulled the collar of the black tactical shirt down. I needed to know.

There. Tattooed on the base of the clone's neck. A barcode. And under it a designation.

**SUBJECT: ELIOT-09**

My blood froze.

I looked over the railing at Eliot.

He was staring at the body next to him. He had seen it too. He had ripped the shirt open.

Eliot looked up at me. His face was a mask of absolute horror.

"They aren't random," he whispered. The sound carried in the silent hall.

He looked at the sea of dead clones.

"They're me," he said. "They're all me."

Logan shook his head from the doorway. He was holding the decrypted tablet. His hands were shaking.

"No," Logan said. "They aren't just you."

He walked over to the railing. He tossed the tablet down to Eliot.

"Look at the file manifest," Logan said.

Eliot caught the tablet. He swiped the screen.

I saw his eyes widen. I saw the color drain from his face.

"It wasn't just my file," Eliot whispered. He looked at Joseph. He looked at Mark. Then he looked up at me.

"It was everyone's," I realized. The horror settled into my bones like ice.

"Every name I knew," Eliot read from the list. "Every legend. Every monster. Every operative Rank 3 and above."

He turned the screen so I could see it.

It was a catalog. A shopping list of the underworld's most dangerous people.

**Subject: IGNACIO. Subject: FRANCISCO. Subject: BLACK. Subject: TAKAHASHI.**

"Labeled like inventory," I whispered.

The Remnant hadn't just cloned the King. They had cloned the entire kingdom. They weren't just trying to win the war. They were trying to replace the players.

They wanted a world where the Devil, the Ghost, and the Director were nothing more than products on a shelf. Controllable. Replaceable.

And they had almost succeeded.

Eliot dropped the tablet. It clattered on the marble floor.

"They wanted to erase us," Eliot said. His voice was low. Dangerous.

He looked at the dead clone at his feet. He looked at his own face staring back at him from the floor.

"Then we return the favor," I said.

I stood up. I ignored the pain in my side. I ignored the blood.

"We don't just defend the Villa anymore," I said. "We find the factory. We find the Mirror Project. And we shatter it."

Eliot looked up at me. The horror in his eyes hardened into resolve.

"Yes," he said. "We shatter it all."

# CHAPTER 31.

## Chapter 31: The Unholy Trinity

The solution was simple. The execution was suicide.

We were standing in the deepest sub-level of Black Base. This was Sector Zero. It was a level that didn't appear on the blueprints. It was a level that Logan hadn't even known existed until we decrypted the file manifest from the warehouse.

The air down here was different. It was recycled so many times it tasted metallic. The walls were unpainted concrete that sweated condensation. The only light came from the emergency strips on the floor, casting long, jagged shadows that danced around our boots.

"The Mirror Project," Logan whispered. He was tapping away on his wrist-mounted deck, his face illuminated by the harsh blue glow. "The server farm is behind that blast door. It's completely air-gapped. That means no remote hacking. We have to physically plug in to scrub the drives."

"And if we don't?" Eliot asked.

He was standing to my right. He had cleaned up since the medical bay, trading the ruined clothes for a fresh tactical rig provided by Joseph. He looked lethal. He looked like a weapon that had been unsheathed and was waiting for a target.

"If we don't," I answered, checking the load on my Glock, "then the data stays. My DNA. Your DNA. The genetic maps of every top-tier operative in the underworld. As long as that data exists, the Remnant can print soldiers like they print paper."

"We become inventory," Eliot murmured. The distaste in his voice was palpable. "I don't like being a product, Zabrina."

"Then let's break the factory," I said.

I looked at the team.

Logan. The Brain. The man who could talk to machines better than he could talk to people. He was our eyes.

Eliot. The Muscle. The King who had descended from his throne to fight in the mud. He was our shield.

And me. The Ghost. The Key.

"The door is bio-locked," Logan said, pointing to the massive steel slab ahead. "It requires a genetic handshake. Palm scan. Retinal scan. And a blood sample."

"The Director really didn't want anyone getting in," Eliot noted.

"He wanted *me* getting in," I corrected. "I'm the only one with the clearance. Or at least, the template of me is."

I stepped forward.

"Let's do this."

---

We moved down the corridor.

It felt like walking through a haunted house where I was both the victim and the ghost. I knew these halls. I had trained in the levels above this. I had eaten lunch in the cafeteria. I had slept in the barracks.

But I had never been *here*.

This was the Director's true legacy. Not the missions. Not the national security. But the collection.

"Camera," Logan whispered.

He didn't need to tell me. I had already spotted the lens swivel in the corner.

"Looping it," Logan said. "You have ten seconds before the pattern repeats."

We moved.

Eliot surprised me. For a man who usually announced his presence with gold guns and explosions, he moved with terrifying silence. He matched my pace step for step. He didn't stomp. He rolled his feet heel-to-toe, absorbing the sound. He was a predator adapting to a new jungle.

"Guard patrol," Eliot signaled. He used hand signs. Skullz tactical signs.

I nodded.

Two guards turned the corner. They weren't clones. They were Remnant loyalists. Old men in grey uniforms who believed in the Director's vision.

They never saw us.

Eliot took the left. I took the right.

I slipped behind my target. I wrapped my arm around his throat, cutting off the carotid artery. He struggled for three seconds. Then he went limp. I lowered him to the ground without a sound.

I looked over. Eliot had already dispatched his man. He hadn't killed him. He had simply applied enough pressure to the nerve cluster in the neck to shut him down like a light switch.

"Efficient," I whispered.

"I'm learning," Eliot replied. A small, dark smirk touched his lips.

We reached the blast door.

It was massive. Twelve inches of reinforced steel. In the center was a console that looked like a medical device.

"You're up, Z," Logan said. He plugged a cable into the side panel to monitor the internal sensors. "Do it fast. As soon as that door opens, the internal atmosphere pressure will drop. The silent alarms might trip."

I stepped up to the console.

I placed my hand on the glass scanner.

A red laser swept under my skin.

*Scanning...*

The machine whirred. A small needle shot out, pricking my finger. I didn't flinch.

*Genetic Match Confirmed.*

The screen flashed green. Text scrolled across the display.

**WELCOME, SUBJECT: GHOST-01. ACCESS GRANTED.**

I stared at the screen.

"Ghost-01," I whispered. The air left my lungs.

"Z?" Logan asked gently.

"I wasn't just an agent," I said. My voice was hollow. "I was the prototype. The first one. The template."

"Zabrina," Eliot said. His hand landed on my shoulder. It was heavy. Grounding. "You are not a number. You are the woman holding the gun. Remember that."

I took a breath. I nodded.

"Open it," I commanded.

The bolts retracted with a deafening *clank-clank-clank*. The hydraulic hiss of air equalization filled the corridor. The massive door swung inward.

We stepped into the vault.

It wasn't a room. It was a library of souls.

Servers lined the walls from floor to ceiling. They hummed with a low, blue light. But in the center of the room, there were holographic displays. Spinning strands of DNA. Facial maps. Psychological profiles.

Logan rushed to the main terminal. He jacked in.

"Oh god," Logan breathed.

"What is it?" Eliot asked. He was scanning the perimeter, his gun drawn.

"It's not just you two," Logan said. He pulled up the directory.

Rows of faces appeared on the screens.

I recognized them.

**Subject: IGNACIO. Subject: FRANCISCO. Subject: TAKAHASHI. Subject: KAIN.  
Subject: VANCE.**

"The Yakuza," I realized. "The Mercenary Guilds. The freelance hitmen."

"Everyone," Logan said. His voice trembled with the magnitude of it. "The Director wasn't just building a squad. He was cataloging the entire underworld. He collected DNA samples from every major player in the last ten years. Medical exams. Blood left at scenes. Hair from a comb."

"He was going to replace us all," Eliot said. His voice was cold rage. "He was going to kill the originals and replace the leadership of every faction with obedient copies. He wanted to own the city by owning the people who run it."

"A Ghost Army," I whispered. "An army of leaders who take orders from him."

"Burn it," Eliot ordered. "Burn it all."

"I'm initiating the purge," I said. I pushed Logan aside gently and took the keyboard. I knew the override codes. I knew the Director's syntax.

I typed.

*DELETE ALL. CONFIRM.*

A progress bar appeared on the main screen.

**PURGE INITIATED: 0%**

The room turned red.

A siren began to wail. Not silent this time. Loud. Screaming.

"We tripped the hard line!" Logan shouted over the noise. "The system is locking down! Security is inbound!"

"How long?" Eliot barked.

"Three minutes!" I yelled back, my fingers flying. "The files are massive. It has to overwrite every sector to prevent recovery!"

**10%**

The door behind us hissed.

"Company!" Eliot roared.

He turned. He stood in the center of the doorway. He looked like a titan holding back the tide.

A squad of heavy security droids rolled into the corridor. They were followed by human tactical teams. Remnant elites.

"Open fire!" a voice commanded from the hall.

The air filled with tracer rounds.

Eliot didn't retreat. He advanced.

"Finish the job!" Eliot shouted over his shoulder. "I'll handle them!"

He went full Devil mode.

He moved with a violence that was almost beautiful. He fired his gold pistols until they clicked dry, then he holstered them and drew the karambit. He ducked under a swinging baton. He shattered a knee. He used a guard as a human shield against the droid fire.

He was a one-man war.

**45%**

"Come on," I hissed at the screen. "Faster."

Logan was working the secondary terminal, keeping the automated turrets offline. "They're trying to cut the power, Z! I'm rerouting from the auxiliary generator, but I can't hold it forever!"

**60%**

A grenade rolled into the room.

"Down!" I screamed.

Logan dived under the desk.

Eliot kicked the grenade back into the corridor a split second before it detonated. The explosion shook the room. Dust rained down from the ceiling.

Eliot stumbled, but he stayed on his feet. He was bleeding from a cut on his forehead, but he was smiling. A feral, terrifying smile.

**85%**

"Almost there," I said.

Then the screen flashed.

**ERROR. SECONDARY AUTHENTICATION REQUIRED. INSERT PHYSICAL KEY.**

"No," I whispered. "No, no, no."

"What is it?" Logan yelled, popping up from under the desk.

"There's a hardware lock!" I pointed to the slot on the console. "It needs a physical keycard for the final deletion! The Director must have kept it on him!"

"The Director isn't here!" Logan panicked. "The key could be anywhere!"

I looked at the monitor. The purge had paused.

**85%... WAITING...**

"The Commander!" I shouted. "The security commander outside! The Director would have entrusted the override to the head of defense!"

I grabbed my radio.

"Eliot! I need a keycard! Blue lanyard! It's on the Commander!"

Eliot was busy. He had a guard in a headlock and was fighting off two others.

He heard me.

He didn't ask questions. He didn't look back.

He shoved the guards away. He scanned the hallway.

There.

A man in heavy armor was shouting orders from the back. He had a blue lanyard around his neck.

Eliot charged.

He took three rounds to his vest. He didn't stop. He slammed into the Commander like a freight train. They hit the wall. Eliot ripped the helmet off the man. He punched him once. Twice. The Commander went limp.

Eliot grabbed the keycard. He ripped it from the lanyard.

He was twenty feet away. The door was closing. The automated lockdown was sealing us in.

"Z!" Eliot roared.

He didn't look. He didn't aim. He just threw it.

It was a silver blur spinning through the air.

I stepped away from the console. I reached out.

Time seemed to slow down. The gunfire faded. The sirens muted.

I caught it.

It slapped into my palm. A perfect catch.

I slammed the card into the slot.

**AUTHENTICATION ACCEPTED.**

I hit the enter key.

**100%**

The screens turned green. Then they turned black.

**DATA DELETED. NO BACKUPS FOUND.**

The spinning DNA strands vanished. The faces vanished. The list of names—my name, his name—dissolved into digital nothingness.

"It's done!" I screamed.

The sirens cut out. The automated defenses powered down as the system rebooted into safe mode.

The sudden silence was shocking.

Eliot stood in the doorway. He was heaving breaths. His vest was shredded. His face was bruised. He looked at me.

We weren't inventory anymore. We weren't templates. We weren't prototypes.

We were just us. Irreplaceable. Finite. Mortal.

And it was the most beautiful feeling in the world.

"Clear!" Eliot shouted.

He ran to me. He grabbed my hand. His grip was iron.

"We leave," he said. "Now."

"Logan!" I called.

Logan grabbed his deck. He looked at the empty screens one last time. A look of pure relief washed over his face.

"Let's get the hell out of here," Logan said.

We ran.

We sprinted through the corridors, stepping over the unconscious bodies of the Remnant guards. We moved as a unit. The Unholy Trinity. The Hacker, the Muscle, and the Ghost.

We burst out of the sub-level and into the main hangar bay.

Mark was waiting with the transport engine running.

"Go! Go! Go!" Mark yelled, revving the engine.

We dived into the back of the transport. The ramp hissed shut behind us as Mark punched the gas. The vehicle roared up the tunnel, breaking out into the daylight.

I sat on the floor of the transport, leaning against the wall. I was gasping for air. My side burned, but it was a good burn. It was a living burn.

Eliot sat opposite me. He wiped the blood from his eyes.

He looked at me. He didn't smile. He just nodded. A slow, solemn nod.

"We're safe," he said.

"We're unique," I corrected.

I looked at my hands. They were just my hands again. Not the hands of Ghost-01. Just Zabrina.

Logan laughed. It was a hysterical, high-pitched sound. "We did it. We actually deleted it. The Director's legacy... it's gone."

"Not gone," Eliot said. He looked at me. His eyes were intense. Possessive. "Just... privatized."

I leaned my head back against the metal wall.

The mission was done. The clones were stopped.

But as I looked at Eliot, at the way he was watching me with that terrifying mix of hunger and relief, I knew the real danger wasn't over.

We had destroyed the mirror. Now we just had to survive the reflection.

# CHAPTER 32

## Chapter 32: The Broken Glass

[POV: ZABRINA FRANCISCO]

The adrenaline crash was worse than the bullet wound.

We were back in the Villa. The storm outside had passed, leaving the ocean calm and black, but inside the fortress, the air was thick with the scent of antiseptic and wet tactical gear. We had won. We had burned the Director's legacy to ash. The Mirror Project was gone. The servers were melted slag. The backups were erased.

But as I sat on the edge of the examination table in the medical wing, watching the doctor re-stitch my side, I didn't feel like a victor. I felt like a survivor of a shipwreck who had just washed up on an island full of cannibals.

Eliot was pacing.

He hadn't stopped moving since we got back. He was still wearing his shredded tactical vest, his arms crossed over his chest, his eyes fixed on the floor. He looked like a caged tiger. Every few seconds, his jaw would tighten, a muscle feathering in his cheek.

"Stop pacing," I said. My voice was raspy. "You're making me dizzy."

Eliot stopped. He looked at me. The green in his eyes was dark. Turbulent.

"We missed something," he said.

"We got the data," I argued. "Logan confirmed the wipe. 100%. No recovery possible."

"We got the *data*," Eliot corrected. He walked over to me. He rested his hands on the metal rails of the bed. "We destroyed the inventory. But we didn't find the supplier."

I went still.

He was right. We had destroyed the clones. We had wiped the genetic maps. But someone had ordered the stock. The Director was exiled. He didn't have the resources to run a facility like the one under Black Base anymore. He was a ghost. Someone else had kept the lights on. Someone else had funded the cloning tanks.

"The Mask Gang," I whispered.

"Exactly," Eliot said. "Why were they at the warehouse? Why did they attack the club? They weren't just trying to kill us, Zabrina. They were trying to *secure* us. To bring us back to the pods."

The door opened. Logan walked in. He looked pale. He was holding a tablet like it was a live bomb.

"You need to see this," Logan said.

He placed the tablet on the bed between us. On the screen was a paused video feed. It was grainy. Recovered from the helmet cam of one of the Mask Gang soldiers we had killed at the warehouse.

"I managed to decrypt the local storage on one of the masks," Logan explained. "This is from three days ago. Inside their base of operations."

I leaned forward. I ignored the pull of my stitches.

The video played.

It showed a room. It looked industrial. Like a slaughterhouse. Rows of men sat on metal benches. They were shirtless. Their bodies were covered in scars. Surgical scars. Mismatched skin grafts.

They were shaking.

One of them turned to the camera. He wasn't wearing a mask.

I gasped.

It was Joseph.

But it wasn't Joseph. The face was wrong. The eyes were too far apart. The jaw was lopsided. The skin was pockmarked with lesions. It was a distortion. A bad copy.

"A failed clone," I breathed.

"The Mask Gang," Logan said. His voice was grim. "They aren't a syndicate. They're the disposal unit. They're the rejects. The clones that didn't come out right. The ones with genetic defects. Unstable aggression. Physical deformities."

"That's why they wear the masks," Eliot realized. His voice was a low growl. "To hide the flaws."

"They cover their faces because they can't bear to look in the mirror," Logan added. "And they hate us. They hate the originals because we are everything they failed to be. We are the perfection they were promised but never achieved."

The video continued. A figure walked into the frame.

It was a man. Huge. Armored. He wore a mask painted with a red vertical stripe.

**Kain.** The mercenary leader.

"The failures will be purged," Kain's voice boomed from the tablet speakers. "The Architect demands perfection. If you cannot be the reflection, you will be the hammer that breaks the glass."

"The Architect," I repeated. "That's who we're looking for."

"Kain is just the muscle," Eliot said. "He's a gun for hire. He doesn't have the vision for genetic engineering. He takes orders."

"From who?" I asked.

The video cut to static.

Logan pulled the tablet away. "That's all I got. But the metadata on the file... it didn't ping off a remote server. It pinged off a local node. A hardline connection."

"Where?" Eliot demanded.

"That's the problem," Logan said. He looked at Eliot nervously. "The signal originated from the city's primary fiber-optic trunk. The one that runs under the Financial District."

The room went deadly silent.

I looked at Eliot.

"That's your network," I said. "The Skullz own the grid."

Eliot's face was unreadable. But his knuckles turned white on the bed rail.

"Someone is using my own infrastructure to hunt me," Eliot whispered. "Someone with high-level clearance. Someone who knows the encryption keys to the city's backbone."

"Silas?" I suggested.

"Silas is old guard," Eliot said, shaking his head. "He barely knows how to use a tablet. He couldn't hide a signal like this. This is sophisticated. This is..."

"Architectural," Logan finished.

Eliot stood up. He walked to the window. He looked out at the dark ocean.

"We have a ghost in the machine," Eliot said. "And they are sitting at my table."

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### **[POV: THIRD PERSON - THE ARCHITECT'S LAIR]**

The room was suffocatingly dark.

The only light came from a massive wall of monitors that displayed the chaos of Z City in high definition. Every street corner. Every dock. Every shadow. It was the view of a god looking down on an ant farm.

Kain stood in the center of the room.

He had removed his mask. His face was a map of scars, a testament to a life of violence that usually terrified anyone who looked at him. But in this room, Kain looked small. He looked like a child waiting for the belt.

He was speaking to a screen on the far wall. The image on the feed was distorted. Scrambled audio. A digital silhouette that pulsed with a cold, blue waveform.

"The facility is gone," Kain reported. His voice was gravel, but it trembled slightly. "The Ghost and the Devil... they destroyed the server. The Mirror Project is offline. We lost the data."

Static crackled from the speakers. A synthesized voice filled the room. It was genderless. Pitch-shifted to remove any trace of humanity.

"Disappointing."

The word hung in the air like poison gas.

"We can rebuild," Kain said quickly, sweat beading on his forehead. "We have the prototypes. The Mask Gang is ready. We can take them by force. We can storm the Villa."

"No," the voice said. "Force is a blunt instrument, Kain. You think like a soldier. The Mirror was elegant. It was supposed to be a silent replacement. A coup without a shot fired. We were going to replace the King while he slept."

"But the Mirror is broken," Kain said.

"Then we use the shards," the voice snapped.

The waveform on the screen spiked red.

"The reflection failed," the Architect continued. "So now we switch to the Hammer. You said the Mask Gang is ready? Good. Mobilize the rejects. All of them. The monsters. The defects. Unleash them on the streets."

"The target?"

"Chaos," the voice said. "Burn the docks. Burn the slums. Attack the police precincts. Create a noise so loud that Eliot cannot hear the knife coming for his throat. He will be so busy saving his city that he won't see me standing behind him."

"And the girl?" Kain asked. "Zabrina Francisco?"

"She is the variable," the voice hissed. The synthesizer distorted, sounding almost angry. "She is the glitch in the code. She turned the Devil into a man. She made him weak. Kill her. Make it painful. Make Eliot watch his weakness die."

"And Eliot?" Kain asked. "Do we kill the Devil?"

There was a pause. A long, heavy silence that made Kain shift his weight.

"No," the voice said. "Bring him to me."

"Alive?"

"Broken," the voice corrected. "Bleeding. Defeated. But alive. I want to look him in the eye when I take his crown. I want him to know exactly who beat him."

Kain nodded. He put his mask back on. The red stripe gleamed in the low light.

"It will be done, Architect."

The connection cut. The screen went black.

Somewhere in the city, hidden behind layers of encryption and steel, the Architect smiled. It was a smile that no one saw. A smile that promised the end of the world.

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### **[POV: ZABRINA FRANCISCO]**

I couldn't sleep.

The pain meds had dulled the fire in my side to a dull throb, but my mind was racing. I sat on the balcony of the guest suite, wrapped in a heavy blanket, watching the moon reflect off the black water.

"You should be in bed."

I didn't turn. I knew his footsteps.

Eliot walked onto the balcony. He had showered. He smelled of soap and fatigue. He wore loose grey sweatpants and a black t-shirt that hugged his frame. He held two mugs of tea.

"I can't sleep," I said.

He handed me a mug. "Chamomile. It helps."

"I don't need help sleeping," I said, taking the warmth into my hands. "I need answers. Who is the Architect, Eliot? Who has access to your grid?"

Eliot leaned against the railing. He looked out at the horizon, his profile sharp against the moonlight.

"There are five people with admin access to the city grid," Eliot said. "Silas. Mark. My chief of finance. My head of legal."

"And the fifth?"

Eliot hesitated. He took a sip of his tea.

"Zen," he said.

I froze. "Zen Takahashi?"

"Her syndicate builds the hardware," Eliot said. "It would make sense. She has the tech. She has the ambition. And she hates you."

"She called you 'fiancé'," I recalled, the memory of the gala rushing back. "She acts like she owns you. Maybe she wants to own you literally. Replace you with a clone that actually loves her. A puppet King she can control."

Eliot let out a dark laugh. "A clone that loves Zen... that would be a feat of engineering even the Director couldn't pull off."

He turned to face me. The moonlight softened the sharp angles of his face, stripping away the Devil mask to reveal the man underneath.

"We will find them," Eliot said. "Whoever they are. But tonight... the war is paused. Tonight, we just survive."

He reached out. He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. His fingers lingered on my cheek, warm and rough.

"How is the wound?" he asked softly.

"It hurts," I admitted.

"Good," Eliot said. "Pain means you're still real. It means you're not one of them."

He stepped closer. The space between us vanished. He wasn't the King tonight. He was just a man standing in the wreckage of his own kingdom, looking for something solid to hold onto.

"You asked me if I liked you back then," Eliot whispered.

My breath hitched. "Eliot..."

"I didn't just like you," he said. His eyes searched mine, intense and vulnerable. "I watched you. Every day. I knew you hated the cafeteria food so you ate apples in the courtyard. I knew you studied in the library because it was the only quiet place. I knew you wanted to save the world."

He leaned in. His forehead rested against mine.

"And I knew," he murmured, "that if I ever got close to you, I would ruin you. My father's world... it destroys everything it touches. So I stayed away. I became the Devil so you could be the hero."

"You didn't ruin me," I whispered. "You saved me."

"Not yet," Eliot said. "But I will."

He pulled back. He didn't kiss me. He let the moment hang there, fragile and perfect, suspended in the salt air.

"Go to sleep, Zabrina," he said. "Tomorrow, we hunt a ghost."

He turned and walked back inside.

I watched him go.

The Mirror Project was destroyed. But the Architect was still out there. And they had access to everything.

I looked down at the dark water crashing against the cliffs.

Somewhere in this city, someone was pulling the strings. Someone who knew us. Someone who hated us.

And they were just getting started.