

CHAPTER 7: The Price of Truth

The words didn't just echo; they settled. Like radioactive dust after an explosion, they clung to my skin, filling my lungs until it was hard to draw a clean breath.

I opened my mouth, ready to argue, ready to scream that I was nothing like him, but the protest died in my throat. Eliot stood from the sofa with a predatory grace, setting his glass down with deliberate care. The soft *clink* against the glass table sounded like a gunshot in the oppressive quiet of the cabin.

"You steal," he continued, his voice a low, honeyed rasp that made the hair on my arms stand up. "You break into places that aren't yours. You knock men unconscious without knowing if they'll ever wake up again. You work for people who do kill—even if you pretend your hands are clean by never checking the pulse."

He stopped just inches away from me. I could smell the sea salt and the expensive bourbon on his breath.

"And yet you draw the line at intent," he whispered, tilting his head. "That's the lie you tell yourself to sleep at night, Zabrina."

I clenched my fists so hard my nails bit into my palms. "I don't enjoy it," I snapped, my voice trembling. "I don't watch people die and call it a 'necessary tool.' I'm not a monster, Eliot."

His green eyes darkened—not with anger, but with a weary, ancient kind of sadness. "You think I enjoy it?" He didn't challenge me; he just asked, as if he were genuinely curious about the version of him I had built in my head.

I couldn't look away. It was like looking into a mirror I had been avoiding for years. The silence between us stretched, heavy with the things we couldn't say.

"The difference between you and me," Eliot said, his voice dropping an octave, "is that I stopped lying to myself. You hesitate because you still believe the world plays fair. You think if you don't cross a line, the line will protect you." He stepped closer, his heat radiating through my damp dress. "But it won't. It just waits until you're weak enough to be pushed."

I let out a short, hollow laugh. "So that's your gospel? Kill first so you don't get pushed?"

"I eliminate threats so they don't come back for the things I care about," he corrected himself harshly.

"And who decides who's a threat? You?"

"Yes."

There was no doubt in his eyes. This wasn't the boy who used to wait for me after class. This was a man who had rebuilt himself out of the ashes of betrayal. I looked at him and realized,

with a sinking horror, that he was right. I was a weapon for Black Base, pretending I had no edge.

"Could you just leave me alone?" I whispered, my eyes burning. "Please. I need to think."

Eliot stared at me for a long beat. His hand rose as if to touch my cheek, but he caught himself and curled his fingers into a fist. Without another word, he turned and walked out. The heavy thud of the door felt like a final sentence.

The walls of the cabin felt like they were closing in. Every shadow looked like a ghost of the people on that ship. I needed air. I needed to breathe.

I made my way to the upper deck. The night air was freezing, biting through the thin white dress Elise had given me, but I welcomed the pain. It was better than the numbness. I leaned against the cold railing, staring into the black abyss of the ocean.

Am I really no different? I wondered. I had joined Black Base to find the truth, but I had stayed for the power it gave me over my own fear.

"Still sulking, kitten? I thought the sea air was supposed to clear the head, not freeze that stubborn pout to your face."

I stiffened. I hadn't even heard him approach. I turned my head to find Eliot leaning against the railing a few feet away. The moonlight hit the sharp angles of his face, making him look breathtakingly dangerous.

"I am not sulking," I hissed, trying to regain my composure. "I am reflecting."

"You've been 'reflecting' for four hours. At this rate, your brain is going to short-circuit." He sauntered toward me and stopped just shy of touching me, leaning down so our eyes were level. "What is it? Do you need a distraction? Or..."

He leaned in closer, his voice a low, mocking vibrate against my ear. "Why are you still sulking? Do you want me to cuddle you? I hear I'm very good at keeping people warm."

"In your dreams, Eliot!" I snapped, my face heating up. I shoved past him, my skin tingling where our arms brushed.

He let out a soft, low chuckle. "Just an offer, Zabrina! Don't catch a cold!"

CHAPTER 8: The Devil is the Father

The sun was blinding when I finally woke up. My head throbbed—a parting gift from the emotional exhaustion of the night before.

I stepped out onto the deck. Eliot was already there, drinking champagne and wearing sunglasses, looking every bit the billionaire tycoon on a weekend getaway. Amanda was nearby, oblivious to the world of secrets we lived in, happily folding paper birds.

“Young master, I was told that Young mistress Zen is looking for you.” I heard **Bill Joseph** say.

My ears perked up. Zen Takahashi. The syndicate’s golden girl.

“She’s there,” Eliot said, gesturing lazily toward a helicopter approaching from the horizon.

As the rotor blades whipped the air, I felt a surge of tactical panic. If Zen was here, she was looking for the **Hope Diamond**. My mission was already failing; if she got that stone, I’d never get it back to Black Base.

I couldn’t let her see me as Zabrina Francisco. If a Takahashi heiress identified me as a Black Base operative, it would trigger a war. I needed a mask.

The helicopter landed, and a sharp-featured woman stepped out. Zen Takahashi. She looked like she was born to rule, every inch of her screaming wealth.

“Eliot!” she screamed. “I’ve been searching for you! Where is the necklace? Give it to me now!”

I turned to **Bill Joseph**. “What is she talking about?”

“The young master was told to give the necklace to the one he’s going to marry,” **Bill Joseph** whispered. “If Zen gets that stone, she is legally his fiancée in the eyes of the syndicate.”

My heart hammered. I didn’t know *what* was so special about that diamond other than its price, but I knew I couldn’t let her have it.

I took a deep breath. It was time to play a different game.

“What necklace is she talking about, honey...?” I said, my voice dripping with honey.

I walked over and took Amanda’s small hand, pulling her toward Eliot. Zen stopped in her tracks, her eyes widening.

“And who the hell are you?” Zen spat.

I blinked, acting innocent. “Oh,” I said. “Pardon me. I’m **Zara**. And this is Amanda, our daughter.”

I used the name **Zara**—an old alias from my early training days. It was close enough to my real name to respond to, but far enough to keep 'Zabrina Francisco' dead and buried.

“Our daughter?” Zen’s jaw dropped. “Eliot, what is this bitch talking about?”

I put a hand to my chest, feigning a gasp. "How could you call me that in front of our child?" I looked at Eliot, my eyes pleading, challenging him to play along.

Eliot's lips curled into a slow, devilish grin. He reached out and wound an arm around my waist, pulling me firmly against his side. The heat of him was distracting, but I held my ground.

"I apologize for not informing you, Zen," Eliot said, his voice smooth and cold. "But I don't give the necklace to strangers. I give it to my wife."

He looked down at me, and for a split second, the lie felt terrifyingly real.

"I guess this devil is the father, huh?" I whispered so only he could hear.

"And you're the devil's wife, Zara," he whispered back.

CHAPTER 9: Smart Kitten

The silence that followed Eliot's declaration was thick enough to choke on. Zen stood frozen on the deck, her face cycling through shades of pale white and furious red. She looked at me, then at Amanda, then back to Eliot, her manicured fingers trembling.

"Wife?" she finally choked out. "You... you expect me to believe you married a nobody and had a child in secret? Eliot, my father won't just let this go. There are contracts between the Takahashi Syndicate and the Skullz. You can't just break them for... for *this*."

Eliot didn't flinch. He just tightened his grip on my waist, his thumb grazing the fabric of my dress in a way that made it hard to keep my breathing steady. "The only expectation I have, Zen, is for people to stay out of my private affairs. Now, unless you've come to congratulate us, I believe we were about to have breakfast."

He didn't wait for her to answer. He turned, guiding me and Amanda toward the dining area, leaving Zen to either follow like a jilted ghost or leave in shame.

She followed, of course.

The breakfast table was a battlefield of fine china and unspoken threats. Amanda sat between us, quietly eating the pancakes Samantha had prepared, while Zen sat across from me, staring as if she could set me on fire.

I kept my "Zara" mask firmly in place. Every time she threw an insult, I just countered with a polite, devastatingly sweet smile.

"I don't believe you," Zen snapped, pushing her plate away. "You didn't marry her. You're just using her to get out of the arrangement."

I leaned back, dabbing the side of my mouth with a silk napkin. "It's a shame you feel that way, Miss Zen. But if Eliot wanted to get out of an arrangement, I don't think he'd need a wife to do it. He's quite capable of saying 'no' on his own."

I looked at Eliot, hoping he'd back me up, but the jerk was just sipping his mango shake, watching us with that maddeningly amused glint in his eyes. He was letting me do all the work.

"Enough, Zen," Eliot finally said, his voice dropping the playful tone for something sharper. "Zara is the woman of this house now. You will respect her, or you will leave."

Zen's eyes welled with frustrated tears. She pivoted, trying a different angle. "I'm not just here for the marriage, Eliot. The Takahashi Corporation is in chaos. Vivian is moving to take over the board, and she's using her father's status to do it. If she succeeds, your alliance with my family is dead."

Vivian Takahashi. I knew that name from the Black Base files. She was a cunning shark who had recently paid a high price for some "document disposal."

"Vivian doesn't deserve that seat," Zen hissed. "She's the daughter of an adopted son. She has no blood right to lead the syndicate!"

"And you think her lack of 'blood' is what's stopping her?" I interjected. "Vivian isn't winning because of her father. She's winning because she destroyed the only evidence that proves her father was never legally adopted into the Takahashi main line."

The table went silent. Zen blinked, her confusion overriding her rage. "What?"

"Check the archives for the 1998 registry," I said, leaning forward. "The elder Takahashi never signed the final adoption decree. He used the name, but on paper, he's a stranger to the estate. If you find the original registry, Vivian's 'credibility' vanishes, and the board will have to turn back to you."

I knew this because Black Base had been paid to burn those files. Vivian didn't know we always kept digital backups for leverage. I wasn't giving Zen the files—I was just pointing her toward a ghost she didn't know how to hunt.

Zen gaped at me, the gears in her head finally turning. For the first time, she wasn't looking at me like a rival. She was looking at me with a terrifying kind of respect.

Eliot reached out, his index finger hooking under my chin to tilt my face toward his. His touch was cold, but his eyes were burning with a new kind of curiosity.

"Smart kitten," he murmured.

He looked at Zen, his expression turning back to stone. "You have your lead, Zen. Go handle your family business. My wife and I have things to discuss."

Zen didn't stay for coffee. The moment she realized she had a weapon against Vivian, her survival instincts as a Takahashi kicked in. She left the deck in a whirlwind of fury and newfound purpose, her helicopter lifting off and leaving us in a spray of sea salt and silence.

I didn't move until the sound of the rotors faded. My heart was still hammering a frantic rhythm against my ribs. I had just successfully lied to one of the most powerful women in the underground, used a child as a prop, and leaked classified Black Base intel—all to protect a mission I was currently failing.

I felt Eliot's gaze before I heard him. He was leaning back in his chair, his mango shake forgotten. He looked at me with a terrifyingly sharp intensity, his green eyes scanning my face as if reading the fine print of my soul.

"Bill Joseph," Eliot said, his voice low and steady. "Take Amanda to her mother."

"Yes, young master." Bill Joseph stepped forward.

Amanda looked at me, her big eyes curious. I knelt down, smoothing her hair. "Go on, baby. Go find mommy." I gave her a small smile, one that felt heavy with the guilt of using her innocence for a charade.

Once they were gone, the deck felt unnervingly empty.

"Zara, was it?" Eliot's voice broke the silence. He stood up, slowly closing the distance between us. "An old name for a new life?"

I didn't back away. "It's a name that kept the Takahashi syndicate from declaring war on the Skullz. You should be thanking me."

"Oh, I'm very thankful," he murmured, stopping so close I could see the golden flecks in his eyes. "But I'm also curious. How does a 'thief' from Black Base know about the 1998 Takahashi registry? That information is buried in a grave that was supposed to be salted."

I tightened my grip on the railing. "I told you, I'm good at strategy. I remember things."

"Don't lie to me." He reached out, trapping me between his arms, his hands gripping the railing on either side of me. He leaned down, his face inches from mine. "That wasn't strategy. That was insider leverage. Your organization *handled* that file."

His proximity was suffocating. I could feel the heat radiating from his chest.

"Does Logan know you're handing out Black Base secrets like party favors?" he asked.

"I did what I had to do to keep the necklace within my reach," I snapped. "If Zen takes that stone, it's gone. At least with you, I still have a chance to steal it."

Eliot let out a soft, dark chuckle. "Is that what this was? A tactical play to keep your target close?"

"What else would it be?"

He tilted his head, his gaze dropping to my lips for a split second before returning to my eyes. "You're a very good actress, Zabrina. For a moment there, you almost sounded like you meant it. 'The father of my child.'"

"It was a role, Eliot. Don't let it go to your head."

He straightened up, finally giving me room to breathe. "Keep the name Zara for now. We're docking in an hour. We're going to my estate in the city. If you want that necklace, you'll have to find it there."

He started to walk away, then stopped. "And Zabrina? Don't try to contact Logan. If I catch a signal leaving this ship that isn't mine, the 'Smart Kitten' gets a cage."

The shift in atmosphere here is crucial. Zabrina is beginning to realize she's a piece on a board she didn't even know existed, but her loyalty to Logan—the man who took her in when she had nothing—is her anchor.

Here is the revised **Chapter 10**.

CHAPTER 10: The Glass Cage

The Ignacio Estate was a fortress of glass and steel, perched on a cliff overlooking the city like a silent sentinel. It was beautiful, cold, and crawling with security that moved with the synchronized precision of a clockwork machine. Eliot had been silent since we left the yacht, his "Devil" persona firmly back in place—focused, distant, and commanding. He had vanished into the west wing for emergency meetings, leaving me to wander the halls under the silent, watchful eye of **Joseph**.

I had one goal: find the diamond.

I walked through the corridors, realizing this place wasn't a home. It was a museum of power. There were no family photos, no personal touches—just expensive art and high-tech sensors.

Until I found the door at the end of the third-floor gallery. It was locked with a biometric scanner. I looked back; **Joseph** was at the far end of the hall, his back to me. I reached into the hidden pocket of my dress, pulling out a small thermal scanner X had given me.

"Looking for your room, Zara?"

I spun around, my heart hammering against my ribs. Eliot was standing a few feet away, his suit jacket discarded and his sleeves rolled up. He didn't look angry; he looked... observant.

"I told you I was going to steal it," I said, lifting my chin to mask the tremor in my hands.

"And I told you that you were welcome to try." He walked toward the door and pressed his thumb to the scanner. The door slid open with a hiss.

Inside wasn't a vault. It was a sterile, high-tech map room. Monitors lined the walls, showing live feeds of shipping routes and shifting data. And there, in the center, resting on a pedestal of black obsidian, was the **Hope Diamond**.

"You've barely been on this job a week," Eliot said, stepping into the room and standing just behind me. "Does Black Base even tell you *why* they suddenly want this? Or did they just tell you it's a high-value asset?"

"It's a priceless diamond, Eliot. In my world, that's all the 'why' I need."

"Is it?" He walked to the pedestal. "Priceless things are usually just distractions, Zabrina. People focus on the diamond so they don't look at what it's actually protecting."

I frowned, moving closer. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm saying you're a Rank Third operative being sent to do a Rank One job," he said, his voice dropping into a low, dangerous register. "Don't you find it strange? They sent *you*—the one person they knew I wouldn't kill on sight because of a library and a few shared summers."

I froze. A cold shiver raced down my spine, turning my blood to ice. "How... how do you know about that?"

Eliot turned to face me, his expression unreadable. "I know everything about you, Zabrina Francisco. I know about the fire. I know about the years you spent hiding. And I know that Logan Black knew exactly who I was when he gave you this assignment."

The realization hit me like a physical blow. The air felt thin, suffocating.

Logan knew. He knew Eliot was the boy from my past. He knew the history we shared, the connection I had tried so hard to bury. He hadn't sent me because I was the best strategist; he had sent me because I was the only person with a "key" to Eliot Ignacio's mercy.

He used me as bait, a small, traitorous voice whispered in my mind.

But I shoved it down. Logan had saved me. He had given me a purpose when my world was nothing but ash and grief. He wouldn't manipulate me like that. He couldn't.

"You're lying," I snapped, my voice shaking with a mixture of shock and fury. "Logan is the only person who hasn't lied to me. He sent me because he trusts me. You're just trying to get into my head."

Eliot stepped closer, his shadow looming over me. "Loyalty is a noble thing, Zabrina. But in our world, it's usually just a blindfold."

I opened my mouth to retort, but the floor suddenly groaned. A deafening explosion rocked the estate, shattering the floor-to-ceiling glass windows.

"Get down!" Eliot roared.

The Mask Gang didn't know our past. They didn't know I was his childhood friend. To them, I was just a stray operative in the way. But as the countdown on the diamond's pedestal began to blink—**00:10**—I realized they were testing him.

"Zabrina, get out! Now!"

"I'm not leaving without the diamond!" I yelled, reaching for the glass case.

00:02.

Eliot lunged. He didn't even look at the stone. He tackled me away from the pedestal, shielding my body with his own as he pulled me under his heavy mahogany desk.

00:00.

A massive electromagnetic pulse thrummed through the room, followed by a hiss of neurotoxin. Eliot pressed a damp cloth over my mouth, holding his breath as he took the brunt of the falling debris. He was the most powerful man in the city, but here he was, acting as a human shield for the girl sent to ruin him.

When the gas cleared, the diamond sat perfectly intact. Eliot sat up, coughing, his eyes sharp.

"You... you chose me over the diamond," I whispered.

He wiped blood from his brow, a cold smirk touching his lips. "Don't get sentimental, kitten. Did you really think I'd leave the real Hope Diamond on a pedestal in a room with glass windows? Especially when I knew a thief like you was coming?"

I froze. "You mean..."

"This is a decoy. A high-grade synthetic." He stood up, towering over me. "I don't let people steal from me, Zabrina. And I don't leave my most valuable assets where just anyone can grab them."

He leaned in, his breath hot against my ear. "You saved me back there. You chose my life over your organization's prize. Remember that when you're lying in bed tonight."

He walked out, leaving me cold and breathless. I had a mission to finish, but as I looked at the fake diamond, I realized Eliot wasn't just my target anymore. He was the only person who seemed to be telling me the truth.

Here is the revised **Chapter 10**. I've integrated your requests: changing "Bill Joseph" to **Joseph**, ensuring the diamond remains intact, emphasizing their unintentional protection of one another, and concluding with Eliot's reveal that he wouldn't make it that easy for her to steal.

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He used me as bait, a small voice whispered. But I shoved it down. I refused to doubt Logan. He had saved me when I was nothing. He wouldn't manipulate me.

"You're lying," I snapped. "Logan trusts me. You're just trying to get into my head because you're losing your grip on that stone."

Eliot stepped closer, his shadow looming over me. "Loyalty is a noble thing, Zabrina. But in our world, it's usually just a blindfold."

Suddenly, my earpiece crackled. "Z... respond... the Mask Gang is hitting the estate. Get out—"

The roar of an explosion rocked the foundation, shattering the glass windows. Shards rained down like lethal needles. Instinct took over. As a massive jagged piece of glass soared toward Eliot's unprotected back, I lunged. I tackled him, my weight driving us both behind the obsidian pedestal.

We hit the floor hard, my body pressed firmly against his. "Nice save, Zara," he rasped, his hand gripping my shoulder.

"Don't get used to it," I snapped, scrambling up. "I just can't steal from a dead man."

The Mask Gang moved in. "Joseph! Sector four!" Eliot barked into his comms. He grabbed my wrist as I looked at the pedestal. "The hell you are. That room is a kill box. Move!"

A flash-bang rolled in. Eliot didn't hesitate—he threw himself over me, shielding my eyes and ears with his own body as the world dissolved into white roar. Even through the haze, I realized: he hadn't protected the diamond. He had used his body to dampen the blast for me.

"You're an idiot," I coughed.

"And you're still talking," he replied, firing a suppressive burst to stall the men in porcelain masks. "Panic room. Three doors down. Lock it."

"And you?"

"I have to clean up my house."

I saw a red laser dot settle on Eliot's chest from a sniper across the courtyard. My hand moved faster than my brain. I drew my silenced pistol and fired. The sniper tumbled. Eliot glanced at the body, then back at me. "I thought you didn't kill unless you had to."

"I had to," I said. "He was in my way."

We moved back to the map room, cornered. Eliot was a force of nature—lethal, precise, and terrifyingly calm. When a mercenary dropped from a vent to strike at my throat, Eliot threw his empty gun to knock him off balance, then finished him with his bare hands.

He pulled me up, his grip like iron. "I told you. You don't die unless I say so."

Suddenly, the monitors flickered green. "Check the pedestal," a voice rasped.

Under the diamond, a display activated: **00:45**.

"Magnetic seal," I whispered. "If we lift it, the floor blows. If we wait, the gas vents trigger."

"Joseph! Get the staff to the sub-basement!" Eliot shouted. He turned to me. "Zara, get out. The ventilation shaft. You have thirty seconds."

"I'm not leaving without the diamond," I said. "And I'm not leaving you."

"The stone is a trap! They came to see if I'd let you die for it!"

I looked into his eyes. We had both stopped playing roles. We were just protecting each other.

"Ten seconds," I whispered.

He didn't run. He pulled me behind the reinforced pedestal, shielding me with his body. We braced for the end.

00:00.

A massive electromagnetic pulse thrummed through the room, followed by a hiss of neurotoxin. No explosion. Eliot pressed a damp cloth over my mouth, holding his breath as he took the brunt of the falling debris.

When the gas cleared, the diamond sat perfectly intact. Eliot sat up, coughing, a cold smirk touching his lips.

"You... you chose me over the diamond," I whispered.

He wiped blood from his brow. "Don't get sentimental, kitten. Did you really think I'd leave the real Hope Diamond on a pedestal in a room with glass windows? Especially when I knew a thief like you was coming?"

I froze. "You mean..."

"This is a decoy. A high-grade synthetic." He stood up, towering over me. "I don't let people steal from me, Zabrina. And I certainly don't make it easy. You're going to have to do better than that."

He walked out, leaving me cold and breathless. I had a mission to finish, but I realized the terrifying truth: I just saved the devil.

CHAPTER 11: The Devil's Guest

The safe house wasn't a home; it was a reinforced concrete bunker buried beneath a nondescript vineyard on the outskirts of the city. The air inside was recycled and smelled of ozone and expensive leather.

Eliot had barely spoken since we left the estate. He had sat in the back of the armored SUV, typing commands into a tablet while **Joseph** drove with white-knuckled focus. I sat across from him, my dress torn and stained with soot, the weight of the silenced pistol still heavy against my thigh.

"Clean yourself up," Eliot said, eyes glued to his screen as the elevator doors hissed open at the sublevel. "**Joseph** will show you to the guest quarters. Don't try the vents; they're pressurized."

"I saved your life," I said, my voice sounding raw. "A 'thank you' would be the traditional response."

Eliot finally looked up. The green in his eyes was muted, replaced by a cold, calculating frost. "You saved a decoy and the man who holds the keys to what you want. That's not a favor, Zabrina. That's an investment. Don't confuse the two."

He turned and walked toward the command center, leaving me with the stinging realization that to the Devil, everything—even life—had a price tag.

My "quarters" were a masterpiece of psychological warfare: a luxury suite with no windows and a door that only opened from the outside.

I waited until I heard **Joseph's** footsteps fade down the hall before I retreated to the bathroom. I turned the shower on high, letting the steam fill the room to muffle any hidden microphones. Then, I pulled the small, flat comms disc from the hem of my dress.

I tapped it three times.

"Report," Logan's voice crackled. It was calm, devoid of the chaos I had just survived.

"The estate was hit by the Mask Gang," I whispered. "Eliot moved the diamond. He... he knew I was coming, Logan. He knew who I was."

There was a long pause. "He's a smart man, Zabrina. I expected as much. Did you secure the diamond during the extraction?"

"No," I lied, the word tasting like copper. "It was a decoy. He's kept the real one hidden. I'm currently at a secondary safe house."

"A decoy?" Logan's voice dropped an octave. "You had him in a position of vulnerability. You should have pressured him. You have the ultimate leverage: Zen Takahashi."

"Zen?" I frowned. "She's his fiancée. What does she have to do with my mission?"

"She's the key to the Takahashi alliance," Logan said, his tone turning clinical. "If Eliot doesn't produce the real diamond to seal that marriage contract, the alliance breaks. Zen is desperate, Zabrina. Use that. If Eliot won't give you the stone, make Zen believe he's already given it to you. Force his hand. Break their trust until he has no choice but to move the real asset."

I felt a coldness spread through my limbs. *Use his marriage?* Logan was asking me to dismantle Eliot's only standing alliance, to throw him to the wolves of the Takahashi syndicate just to flush out a stone.

"Logan, if I trigger a war between the Skullz and the Takahashis, I might not get out of here alive."

"The girl I saved doesn't fear death, Zabrina. She fears failure. Get the diamond, or don't bother coming back."

The line went dead.

I stared at the comms disc before crushing it under my heel. My world was fracturing. On one side was the man who had given me a life, telling me to spark a syndicate war. On the other was the man who had just put his body between me and a grenade.

I stepped out of the bathroom, startled to find the bedroom door open.

Eliot was leaning against the frame, his shirt changed, a glass of amber liquid in his hand. He looked at the crushed disc on the floor, then up at me.

"Logan sounds disappointed," he said quietly.

"How much did you hear?"

"Enough to know that your 'father' is getting desperate." He walked into the room, stopping a foot away. He held the glass out to me. "Drink. You're shaking."

I took the glass, my fingers brushing his. The contact sent a jolt through me that I couldn't blame on the EMP.

"I'm not his pawn," I said, though it sounded weak.

"No," Eliot murmured. "You're his best player. But even the Queen is sacrificed to win the match. He told you to use Zen, didn't he? To break the 'fiancée' ruse."

I didn't answer. I didn't have to.

"Zen is a business arrangement, Zabrina. A shield against her father," Eliot said, his voice turning cold. "If Logan thinks threatening a political marriage is going to make me hand over the real diamond, he's more desperate than I thought."

He leaned down, his eyes locking onto mine. "The real diamond isn't a dowry, and it isn't a paycheck. It's a death warrant. And if you want to find it, you're going to have to stop pretending you're on the side of the angels."

The industrial hum of the elevator signaled Zen's arrival before she even stepped out. A moment later, the frantic *clack-clack-clack* of designer heels echoed down the concrete corridor, cutting through the sterile silence of the bunker.

I stood by the door of my quarters, watching through the crack as Zen Takahashi swept into the command center. She was a vision of disheveled elegance, her silk trench coat fluttering as she rushed toward the center of the room.

"Eliot!" she cried out, her voice echoing off the reinforced walls.

Eliot, who was leaning over a digital map with **Joseph**, didn't even turn his head. His posture remained rigid, his focus entirely on the data flickering across the screens. "You shouldn't be here, Zen. This location is classified for a reason."

She didn't care about his tone. She blurred the distance between them, reaching out to grab his arm, her fingers digging into his sleeve with a possessive, frantic energy. "I heard about the estate! The explosion—they said the Map Room was leveled! I thought you were... I stood there thinking I'd lost you!"

She tried to pull him into a hug, her body leaning heavily into his, but Eliot stood like a statue. He was cold, unresponsive, his arms remaining at his sides. When she tried to reach up to touch his face, her hands trembling as she searched for injuries with a clingy, desperate hunger, he caught her wrist mid-air.

"I'm fine," he said, his voice flat. He dropped her hand as if it were a minor inconvenience. "The estate is being handled. You're overreacting."

"Overreacting?" Zen's voice hit a shrill note. She didn't back away; instead, she moved closer, her hand sliding back onto his shoulder, trying to force a closeness that clearly wasn't there. "My father is breathing down my neck, Eliot. He thinks the diamond is at risk. If that stone is gone, our engagement is the only thing keeping the Takahashi board from pulling their support. You need me."

"I need you to go home, Zen," he replied, his gaze finally shifting to her, but there was no warmth in it—only a chilling, professional frost.

"How can you be so cold?" she whispered, her lip trembling as she tightened her grip on his arm. "I'm your fiancée. I should be the one here with you, not hidden away in some hotel while you're down here." Her eyes suddenly darted toward the hallway—toward me. "And where is she? Zara? Joseph said she was with you."

Eliot's gaze followed hers, locking onto the crack in my door. I didn't pull away this time. I stepped out into the light, my torn dress and soot-stained skin a sharp contrast to Zen's pristine silk.

"I'm right here," I said, my voice steady.

Zen's face contorted with a mix of jealousy and confusion. To her, I was still the mysterious "Zara," the woman Eliot had claimed as his wife on the yacht to appease her father. She looked at Eliot, then at me, her hand sliding down his arm to grip his hand. He didn't hold it back; his fingers remained limp in hers.

"Why is she still here, Eliot?" Zen demanded, her voice dripping with venom. "The yacht was one thing, but bringing her to a safe house? To your inner sanctum? If people find out you're keeping your 'wife' and your fiancée under the same roof, it will be a scandal the Takahashis won't overlook."

Eliot finally moved. He didn't move toward Zen—he stepped toward me, pulling his hand out of her grasp with a sharp, dismissive motion.

"She's not just a guest, Zen," Eliot said, his voice dropping into that low, dangerous register that made my heart skip. He didn't look at Zen as he spoke; his eyes were fixed on mine. "She's the reason I'm still standing. Now, Joseph will escort you to the surface."

"Eliot!" Zen cried, reaching for him again, her clinginess turning into a desperate sort of grief. "You can't mean that. I'm the one who's going to marry you! She's just a... a placeholder!"

"Joseph," Eliot barked, his patience finally snapping.

Joseph stepped forward with a silent, apologetic nod to Zen. "Miss Takahashi, please. The Young Master has work to do."

As Zen was led away, protesting and casting one last hateful glare in my direction, the bunker fell back into a heavy silence. Eliot didn't go back to his maps. He stayed where he was, watching me.

"You're a terrible fiancée," I noted, leaning against the doorframe and crossing my arms.

"And you're a terrible wife," he retorted, though the coldness in his eyes had softened into something far more complicated. "But at least you're a brave one."

I looked at the elevator doors where Zen had disappeared. Logan wanted me to use her jealousy to break them apart. Seeing her there, it would be so easy to push her over the edge. But looking at Eliot, I realized I wasn't sure whose side I was actually on anymore.

CHAPTER 11: The Devil's Guest

The silence following Zen's departure was thick, vibrating with the residual energy of her desperation. Eliot stood in the center of the room, the harsh fluorescent lights of the bunker

casting sharp shadows across his face. He looked every bit the "Devil"—isolated, powerful, and entirely unreadable.

I stayed by the doorframe, my mind spinning. Logan's voice was still echoing in my head: *Use the fiancée. Break the alliance.* But looking at Eliot, I knew it wasn't that simple. If I pushed too hard, I'd lose the only lead I had to the real diamond.

"She's a liability," I said, my voice cool and professional, betraying none of the turmoil inside. "The Takahashi syndicate doesn't like being sidelined, especially for a woman whose background check is a series of dead ends."

Eliot finally turned to face me. He didn't look angry; he looked like he was dissecting my statement. "The Takahashis tolerate my 'wife' because they fear my reach. As long as I maintain the illusion of control, Zen is nothing more than a noisy ghost in the machine."

"Is that why you let her get that close? To maintain the illusion?" I asked, a hint of a challenge in my tone.

Eliot walked toward me, his boots echoing on the concrete. He stopped just inches away, his presence looming. "I let her close because it's easier to watch a threat when it's trying to hold your hand. Surely a Rank Third operative understands the value of proximity."

I didn't flinch. "I understand that you're playing a dangerous game, Eliot. If Zen finds out I'm not who you say I am, she won't just leave. She'll burn this entire estate down with us inside."

"Then make sure she doesn't find out," he murmured, his gaze dropping to the soot on my collar before returning to my eyes. "Stay in character. If she thinks you're a threat to her position, she'll stop looking at the business and start looking at you. That's exactly where I want her focus."

He was using me as a lightning rod. I was the distraction while he moved the real pieces on the board.

Suddenly, the monitors behind him began to pulse with a low, rhythmic beep. **Joseph** appeared on the main screen, his expression grim.

"Young Master, Miss Takahashi's vehicle hasn't returned to the city. She's diverted toward the neutral sector—Sector 7."

My heart did a slow, heavy roll. Sector 7 was a gray zone, a place where information was bought and sold by people who didn't care about syndicate wars. It was also the closest drop point for Black Base couriers.

Eliot's jaw tightened. "She's not going to her father. She's looking for a way to verify 'Zara' on her own terms."

I crossed my arms, my brain already running through the tactical implications. "If she goes to the brokers in Sector 7, she'll find the holes in my story. My 'wife' persona won't survive a professional deep-dive."

"Then we don't let her finish the dive," Eliot said, reaching for his coat. He looked at me, his green eyes burning with a dark, calculated intensity. "Logan wants results, doesn't he? Well, so do I. We're going to intercept her."

"In the neutral zone? That's a suicide mission for someone in your position," I noted.

"Which is why you're coming with me," he retorted, a ghost of a smirk touching his lips. "A husband and wife out for a late-night drive. It's much less suspicious than a hit squad."

He walked past me toward the armory, but paused at the door. "Change your clothes, Zabrina. We're going to a place where people only talk to you if you look like you've already bought their soul."

I watched him go, my hand instinctively reaching for the pocket where my crushed comms disc lay. I was supposed to be dismantling his life, yet here I was, about to protect the very alliance Logan wanted me to destroy—all to keep my own cover from blowing.

I spent exactly five minutes in the guest suite, stripping out of the ruined dress and scrubbing the soot from my skin. I chose a tailored, charcoal-grey suit from the closet—Eliot's taste was predictably high-end and monochromatic. I tucked a fresh blade into my boot and my silenced pistol into the small of my back.

When I returned to the command center, Eliot was waiting. He had swapped his tactical gear for a dark cashmere overcoat, looking less like a warlord and more like the billionaire the world believed him to be.

"Sector 7 is neutral for a reason, Zabrina," he said, not looking up as he checked the chamber of his own weapon. "The brokers there don't take sides, but they do take tips. If Zen offers enough, they'll give her a name. And if that name isn't 'Zara Ignacio,' we both have a problem."

"I know how the neutral zone works," I replied, my voice steady despite the adrenaline. "But Zen is a Takahashi. She's used to people bowing. She'll be loud, and she'll be arrogant. That gives us the advantage."

Eliot looked at me then, his eyes tracing the line of my jaw. "You're very calm for a woman whose 'father' just told her to burn the world down."

I didn't blink. "I'm a strategist, Eliot. Emotions are a luxury I haven't been able to afford since I was ten years old."

We moved to the garage, where an inconspicuous black sedan was idling. **Joseph** was already in the driver's seat, his eyes meeting mine in the rearview mirror with a look that was impossible to read.

As we pulled out of the vineyard and onto the darkened highway, the city lights blurred into long, neon streaks. Eliot sat beside me, the space between us charged with the silent weight of things unsaid. He knew I was keeping secrets. I knew he was playing a deeper game than just protecting a diamond.

"Why Sector 7?" I asked, breaking the silence. "If she wanted to verify me, she could have gone to her father's intelligence branch."

"Her father would ask too many questions," Eliot said, his gaze fixed on the road ahead. "Zen wants to handle this herself. She wants to be the one to present my 'betrayal' to the board. It's not about the syndicate for her anymore; it's personal."

"Jealousy is a powerful motivator," I murmured.

"So is survival," he countered.

We reached the outskirts of Sector 7 thirty minutes later. The area was a maze of narrow alleys, neon-lit bars, and high-security data dens. It was the underworld's counting house.

Joseph pulled the car into a shadowed alcove behind a club called *The Vault*.

"She's inside," **Joseph** reported, checking his tablet. "Meeting with a broker named 'The Whisperer.' He specializes in deep-cover identities."

Eliot opened the door, but he didn't get out. He turned to me, his face half-hidden in the shadows of the car. "Logan told you to break my alliance with Zen. If we walk in there and 'save' her from making a mistake, that alliance stays intact. Is that really what you want, Zabrina?"

He was testing me. He wanted to see if I'd sabotage the mission right here, right now. If I let Zen find out the truth, Logan got what he wanted. But if I did that, I'd lose Eliot's trust—and the trail to the real diamond—forever.

"I want the diamond, Eliot," I said, my voice cold. "And I can't get it if the Takahashis are hunting us both across the city. Let's go."

We stepped out into the damp night air. The entrance to *The Vault* was guarded by two men who looked like they were carved out of granite. They didn't even ask for ID; the moment they saw Eliot's face, the doors swung open.

The air inside was thick with the scent of expensive cigars and electronic static. We moved through the crowded floor, Eliot's hand settling firmly on the small of my back—a gesture that looked protective to any observer, but felt like a warning to me.

We reached a private booth in the back, shielded by a heavy velvet curtain. Eliot didn't knock. He swept the curtain aside.

Zen was sitting across from a thin, nervous-looking man with cybernetic implants in his eyes. She was leaning forward, a stack of high-denomination credits on the table.

"...every record of her," Zen was saying, her voice tight with desperation. "I want to know where she was born, who her parents were, and exactly when she—"

"Zen."

Eliot's voice was like a whip cracking in the small space.

Zen jumped, her hand flying to her throat as she spun around. Her face went pale, then a furious, blotchy red. "Eliot! What—how did you—"

"The meeting is over," Eliot said, his voice terrifyingly quiet. He didn't even look at the broker. He looked at Zen, his eyes darker than I'd ever seen them. "You're coming home. Now."

"No!" Zen cried, standing up and pointing a trembling finger at me. "She's a fraud! I know it! The Whisperer was just about to find the link. She isn't your wife, Eliot. She's a ghost!"

The broker started to back away, but Eliot's gaze snapped to him. "Leave. Now. If I see your face in this sector again, it will be the last thing you see."

The man didn't need to be told twice. He vanished through a side exit.

Zen turned back to Eliot, her clinginess replaced by a sharp, jagged anger. "Why are you protecting her? Why are you siding with a stranger over me? I've been loyal to you for years!"

"Loyalty is earned, Zen," Eliot said, stepping into the booth. "And you just tried to sell my private life to a Sector 7 rat. That's not loyalty. That's treason."

I stood by the curtain, watching the scene play out. I could see the moment Zen's spirit broke. She looked at Eliot, then at me, and I saw the realization dawn on her—he didn't care if she was right. He didn't care if I was a fraud. He had chosen his side.

But as I watched them, my eyes caught something Zen hadn't noticed.

On the table, among the credits, was a small, black transponder. It wasn't the broker's. It was Black Base tech.

Logan wasn't waiting for Zen to find the truth. He had already planted the evidence for her to find.

I didn't wait for Eliot to respond to Zen's outburst. My eyes were locked on that transponder. It was a "Siren" model—designed to look like a generic data drive but capable of broadcasting a high-frequency burst of pre-loaded dossiers the moment it was connected to a network.

Logan hadn't sent me here just to find a diamond. He had sent me to be the match that lit the fuse, and Zen was the powder keg.

"Eliot, don't," I said, my voice sharp enough to cut through the tension.

Zen looked at me, her eyes red-rimmed. "Don't what? Don't expose you? You're terrified, aren't you?"

She lunged for the table, her hand closing around the transponder. "The Whisperer said this was the key! Everything Logan Black knows about you is on here!"

The name dropped like a lead weight in the small booth.

Eliot's entire demeanor shifted. The coldness didn't just deepen; it calcified. He didn't look at Zen. He looked at me, his gaze heavy with a silent, lethal question. *Logan Black*. The man who had raised me. The man who was currently trying to dismantle Eliot's world.

"Give it to me, Zen," Eliot said, his voice a low, vibrating growl.

"No! I'm going to show everyone!" She backed away, her heels catching on the velvet curtain.

I moved. I didn't go for Zen; I went for the table, sweeping the remaining credits aside to see if there was anything else. But Eliot was faster. He intercepted Zen in two strides, his hand clamping around her wrist with enough force to make her gasp.

"You're hurting me!" she cried, but she didn't let go of the drive.

"You have no idea what you're holding," Eliot hissed. "That isn't a dossier. It's a beacon."

"He's right, Zen!" I shouted, stepping forward. "If you activate that, you're not just 'exposing' me. You're signaling Black Base's tactical units to this exact coordinate. You're calling in a hit on your own head!"

Zen froze, her chest heaving. She looked from me to Eliot, the desperation in her eyes flickering with a moment of pure, unadulterled doubt. "You're lying. You're both lying to protect each other."

"Check the frequency light on the side," I said, stepping closer, my hands raised in a gesture of peace I didn't feel. "It's pulsing blue. That's not data transfer. That's a live uplink."

Zen looked down at the small device in her hand. The blue light was rhythmic, like a heartbeat.

In that second of hesitation, the heavy doors of *The Vault* didn't just open—they were breached.

A flash-bang detonated in the main hall, the white light bleeding through the gaps in the velvet curtain. Screams erupted from the club floor. Logan wasn't waiting for Zen to make a choice. He had seen the beacon go live the moment she picked it up.

"Joseph! Extract!" Eliot roared into his comms.

He didn't wait for Zen to hand over the drive. He wrenched it from her hand and shoved her toward me. "Get her out of here! Go through the service tunnel!"

"Eliot, the transponder—"

"I'll handle the transponder!" He pulled his pistol, his face a mask of grim determination. "If they get their hands on it while it's active, they'll have the override codes for my estate's remaining servers. Move, Zabrina! That's an order!"

I grabbed a sobbing, hysterical Zen by the arm, hauling her toward the back exit. I looked back once, seeing Eliot standing alone in the center of the booth, the "Devil" preparing to face the shadows Logan had sent for him.

I realized then that Logan hadn't just sent me to find the diamond. He had sent me to ensure Eliot was distracted enough to be killed. And I had played my part perfectly.

This version tightens the action, highlights Zabrina's combat prowess, and centers the relief of her reconnecting with the real Logan.

CHAPTER 12: The Price of Loyalty

The service tunnel was damp, smelling of salt and old machinery. I was practically dragging Zen, whose designer heels were snapping against the uneven concrete. She was a mess—sobbing and clutching my arm with a grip that was surprisingly strong for someone so fragile.

"He's going to die," she wailed. "Eliot is going to die because of that thing I found!"

"Shut up, Zen!" I hissed, shoving her against the wall as the muffled *thud-thud-thud* of heavy-caliber gunfire vibrated through the ceiling. "If you want to live, keep your mouth shut and keep moving."

I reached the end of the tunnel where the black sedan was idling in the shadows. **Joseph** was standing by the door, his face a stone mask. He didn't ask questions. He simply grabbed Zen by the arm and ushered her into the back seat with a firm, professional grip.

He gave me a singular, sharp nod—a silent acknowledgment of the chaos I was about to run back into. He slammed the door and peeled away into the night, the tires screeching against the wet pavement.

I didn't hesitate. I checked my magazine—eight rounds—and sprinted back toward the club. I wasn't just a strategist; I was a fighter trained to survive the impossible. I scaled the fire escape, my movements fluid and silent, and dropped through the rooftop skylight just as the velvet curtains in the booth were shredded by gunfire.

Below, the club was a graveyard of broken glass and drifting smoke. Three Black Base "Reapers"—the elite tactical unit—were moving toward the back bar with surgical precision. They moved with military discipline, but they hadn't accounted for a shadow falling from the rafters.

I dropped onto the first Reaper, my knees hitting his shoulders as I drove him into the floor with the full force of my weight. Before his teammates could swing their barrels toward me, I drew my silenced pistol and fired two shots in rapid succession. One Reaper went down; the other dove for cover behind a marble pillar.

"Eliot! Left flank!" I screamed.

Eliot surged from behind the bar. He wasn't just pinned; he had been waiting for the opening. He moved like a blur of lethal elegance, closing the distance to the third Reaper before the man could even chamber a round. Eliot caught the man's wrist, snapped it with a sickening crack, and delivered a brutal, bone-shaking strike to his temple.

By the time I stood up, the room was silent except for the hiss of a broken soda line. Eliot stood over the bodies, his chest heaving, a trail of blood running down his temple from a graze. He looked at me, his green eyes burning with a mixture of fury and something that looked dangerously like respect.

"I told you to get to the tunnel," he rasped.

"And I told you I can't steal from a dead man," I retorted, scanning the exits.

Before he could argue, my earpiece crackled. It was **Logan**.

"Z? Z, are you there?" Logan's voice was shaking, the cold authority of our earlier briefing replaced by a frantic, terrified whisper. "I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry, Zabrina. My father... he's watching the heat maps. He saw the engagement. He thinks I've lost control of you."

I felt a massive wave of relief wash over me. *This* was the Logan I knew. Not the man telling me to use children or political pawns as bait. Eliot had been messing with my head, trying to make me think Logan would betray me, but I knew better.

"Logan, damn you. Why were you acting like a totally different person earlier?" I breathed, my hand going to the comm, my eyes flicking to Eliot, who was watching me with a cynical tilt to his head.

"My father's monitoring me," Logan panted, sounding like he was on the verge of a panic attack. "He was in the room, Z. You know I won't betray you."

"I know," I whispered, the weight lifting off my chest.

"The estate is compromised, the safe house is hot—if I don't get that diamond now, the mission is a total loss," I said, my professional mask snapping back into place.

"You should probably just retreat for now," Logan said, his voice dropping as if he were hiding. "My father is moving more units. Get out while the perimeter is still soft."

I looked at Eliot. He had moved closer, his hand settling on my shoulder. His touch was heavy and warm, a stark contrast to the cold fear in Logan's voice.

"We aren't retreating," Eliot murmured, his voice loud enough for the comms to pick up.

"Zabrina? Who was that?" Logan asked, his voice sharpening.

"And you're a very expensive mark," I replied to Eliot, ignoring Logan's question for a second. I looked back at the doors, hearing the distant wail of sirens. "Now, let's just focus on us getting out of here."

Eliot's hand tightened on my shoulder, his gaze locking onto mine with a dark intensity. "Then let's move, Zara. Because my hospitality ends where a tactical extraction begins."

The sirens were a fading choir of doom, their wails echoing off the concrete as I led Eliot through a labyrinth of back alleys I'd memorized weeks ago. This wasn't his territory anymore; the high-rise offices and polished boardrooms were useless here. This was a world of shadows and rusted steel, and I was the only one who knew how to disappear into the cracks.

"This way," I commanded, my hand locked firmly around his.

Eliot didn't argue. For a man who usually dictated the rotation of the earth, he followed my lead with a quiet, observant trust. We slipped through a narrow maintenance crawlspace that opened into a darkened delivery bay. Waiting there, the engine of the black sedan humming like a low-growling beast, was **Joseph**.

He stepped out the moment he saw us, his eyes scanning Eliot for injuries with the clinical efficiency of a war medic. He didn't waste a single word; he just opened the back door.

"Get in," Eliot rasped, his voice strained under the weight of the night. "The perimeter is closing."

The drive to the secondary safe house—a discreet, high-security loft tucked away in the industrial district—was heavy with silence. Once inside, Joseph took his post at the reinforced steel door, leaving us alone in the living area. The adrenaline was finally ebbing, replaced by a dull, bone-deep ache.

Eliot slumped onto a leather sofa, the harsh overhead lights making the blood on his face look like jagged war paint.

"Sit," I said, my voice softer than it had been all night.

I grabbed a first-aid kit from the marble counter. My hands, usually steady enough to pick a high-security lock in total darkness, were trembling. I sat on the edge of the sofa beside him, dabbing a cotton ball with antiseptic.

"This is going to sting," I murmured.

As I pressed the cotton to the graze on his temple, Eliot hissed. His hand flew up, catching my wrist. His grip wasn't violent; it was grounded, almost desperate. He pulled my hand back slightly, those green eyes searching mine with an intensity that made the room feel like it was shrinking around us.

"You came back for me," he said, his voice a low, gravelly rasp. "Logan told you to retreat. He told you to leave me to the Reapers."

"Logan was worried," I defended, though the relief of hearing his real voice through the comms still hummed in my chest. I gently pried my wrist from his grip and went back to cleaning the wound. "And I don't always do what I'm told."

"No. You don't."

The silence stretched between us, filled only by the rhythm of our breathing. I moved the cotton down to a bruise forming on his jaw, my fingers brushing his skin. The air in the loft suddenly felt electric, thick with the weight of everything we hadn't said. I was so close I could see the golden flecks in his eyes and the way his pupils dilated as I lingered.

I looked down at his lips, then back at his eyes. For a heartbeat, the Thief and the Devil vanished. There was no mission, no Black Base, no false marriage. I found myself leaning in, my heart hammering a frantic, uneven rhythm against my ribs—

"ELI-OT!"

The heavy door was shoved open, and **Zen Takahashi** practically tumbled into the room, her hair a tangled mess and her makeup smeared from crying. She didn't even notice the medical kit or the fact that our faces were inches apart. She threw herself at Eliot, her hands clutching his torn cashmere coat.

"You're alive! Joseph wouldn't let me out of the car until the area was clear!" she sobbed, her voice gratingly loud in the quiet loft. She buried her face in his chest, her clinginess returning with a suffocating vengeance. "I thought they got you! You have to come back to my father's tower. You're not safe with... with *her!*"

She cast a glance over her shoulder at me, her eyes narrowing into slits of pure venom. "Look at him! He's covered in blood because of your 'strategy.' You're supposed to be his wife, but you're just a magnet for bullets!"

Eliot didn't hug her back. He stood up slowly, prying her hands off him with a cold, weary finality. He looked at me over the top of Zen's head, the moment we had just shared shattered beyond repair.

"Zen, go to the other room," Eliot said, his voice flat.

"But Eliot—"

"Now."

As Zen was led away by a silent, stoic Joseph, still protesting about "alliances," I stood up and began packing the first-aid kit. The quiet bubble had popped, and the cold reality of our situation rushed back in.

I looked at Eliot, the 'Devil' mask firmly back in place. "She's right about one thing," I said, my voice regaining its professional frost. "I am a magnet for bullets. And as long as I'm looking for that diamond, so are you."

Eliot smirked, a playful, dark glimmer returning to his eyes despite the blood. "Oh yeah? And being the big boss of the Skullz makes me safe to be with?" he teased, his voice dropping into a low, smooth register. "You're being dramatic, Zabrina. Even if you're not here, my life is always in chaos—simply for being the one who you all call the Devil."

He took a step toward me, ignoring the fact that Zen was just in the next room. "Plus, I told you... I'd like you to keep trying to steal the Hope Diamond from me."

He tilted his head, watching my reaction. "It keeps things interesting, don't you think?"

CHAPTER 13: The Cold Return

The return to **Black Base** was never a homecoming; it was a re-entry into a vacuum.

The request had come through at 0400 hours, a high-frequency burst that bypassed my phone's silencer and vibrated directly into the marrow of my bones. **X**'s voice had been a distorted, digital rasp: *"Operative Zabrina. Status: Compromised. Report to Sub-Level 4 for immediate debrief. Do not deviate."*

I had left the safe house while the city was still draped in that bruised, pre-dawn purple. By the time the pressurized titanium doors of the Base hissed shut behind me, I had shed every lingering emotion from the field like a second skin, leaving it on the wet pavement outside.

The air in Sub-Level 4 was recycled, sterile, and chilled to a sharp 18°C. I walked down the long, white corridor, the rhythmic *click* of my tactical boots the only sound in the hallway. Analysts and lower-tier agents scurried past, their eyes glued to their tablets, avoiding the gaze of a Rank 3 operative who had just survived a mission gone sideways.

The heavy obsidian doors to the war room slid open with a pneumatic sigh.

Inside, the lighting was dim, dominated by the cool blue glow of the holographic glass consoles. **Logan** was there, leaning heavily over a tactical map, his silhouette sharp against the light. Standing in the shadows behind him was **X**, his arms crossed over his chest, his face an unreadable mask of disappointment.

"You're late," X said, his voice flat and echoing.

"I was busy dodging the Director's Reapers," I shot back, my voice echoing his coldness. I stopped at the edge of the console, the blue light flickering across my face. "It's hard to keep a schedule when your own agency is trying to level the building you're standing in."

Logan looked up then. The guilt on his face was palpable, etched into the dark circles under his eyes. He stepped away from the console, moving toward me with a hesitant, almost desperate energy.

"Z... I'm sorry," he whispered, his voice cracking. "Truly. About the Cathedral, about the pressure. My father was in the room, monitoring every byte of data. I had to play the part of the cold handler. I had to act like I didn't care if you made it out, or he would have sent more teams."

I felt a slight thaw in my chest. This was the Logan I knew—the one who was just as trapped in this machine as I was. "I know," I said, my voice softening just a fraction. "Just don't let him get in your head again. I need to know you're on my end of the comms, not his."

Logan sighed, rubbing his face with his hands before swiping the holographic screen to clear the tactical maps. "X and I have discussed the current trajectory. The **Skullz** job... it's become too high-profile. The Director is furious about the failed extraction and the loss of the Reapers. He thinks you've been compromised."

He hesitated, his eyes darting to X before returning to mine. "We were going to hand the Hope Diamond mission over to **Sebastian**. Rank 1 has the clinical distance to handle the fallout from the Skullz leader."

The name felt like a slap. Sebastian. He was a human machine—efficient, heartless, and utterly devoid of the intuition required to survive in the field.

"Sebastian?" I snapped, stepping into Logan's space. "He couldn't find a lead on the Skullz if it was branded on his forehead. I've spent weeks building this cover. I'm the one who's in the inner circle. You pull me now, and you don't just lose the diamond—you lose the only window we've ever had into the heart of their organization."

Logan looked at X, an unspoken argument passing between them. Finally, X gave a stiff, reluctant nod.

"Fine," Logan whispered, turning back to me. "You stay on the Skullz. But my father needs a win tonight, Zabrina. He needs a high-profile scalp to justify keeping you on the mission. He needs blood."

He tapped a file on the screen, and a face populated the hologram: **Senator Harold**.

"He's a ghost in the legislative branch, but a kingpin in the gutters," Logan explained. "He owns an underground club called *The Gilded Cage*. It's a front for illegal arms laundering and human trafficking. We need the encrypted ledger of his buyers, and we need a filmed confession. You're going in tonight with **Crystal** and **Marielle**."

THE MISSION: THE GILDED CAGE

By 2200 hours, the cold air of the Base was a memory. The atmosphere in *The Gilded Cage* was thick with the scent of expensive cigars, spilled bourbon, and the underlying metallic tang of hidden desperation.

I stood in the wings of the small, velvet-draped stage, adjusting the shimmering obsidian silk of my performance outfit. It was a masterpiece of distraction. **Crystal** stood beside me, checking the hidden receiver in her headpiece, while **Marielle** gave a thumbs-up from her perch in the rafters above the VIP lounge.

"Target is in the center booth," Marielle's voice hummed in my ear. "He's on his third scotch. He looks like he's ready for the main event."

"Let's give him a show he'll never forget," I replied.

The music started—a slow, predatory bassline that vibrated through the floorboards. The curtains swept back, and we stepped into the spotlight. The choreography was a masterpiece of Black Base training: fluid, hypnotic, and calculated to keep every guard's eyes on our silhouettes rather than the exits.

I moved with a practiced, feline grace, my eyes locked on Senator Harold. He was a bloated man, watching me with a slow, greasy smirk as I moved through the routine.

When the music hit its crescendo, the other girls retreated into the shadows, but I didn't. I slid off the edge, my hips swaying in a slow, deliberate lure as I walked straight toward the Senator's booth. His two massive guards stepped forward, but Harold waved them back with a flick of his jeweled fingers.

"And who might you be, little bird?" he rasped as I reached the table.

"Your lucky charm," I murmured, my voice a sultry purr.

I slid onto his lap, the silk of my outfit frictionless against his expensive suit. I leaned into his ear, whispering nonsense while my fingers worked with lightning speed. With a surgeon's precision, I reached into his inner breast pocket, my fingertips finding the cold, hard edge of the encrypted ledger.

Click. The drive was in my palm.

But the "siren" act ended there. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Crystal move. In two silent blurs of motion, she neutralized the guards at the booth's edge with silenced dart pens. They slumped into their seats before they could even blink.

I felt Harold's hand slide toward my waist, his touch disgusting and possessive. I didn't wait.

In one fluid motion, I drew my compact 9mm from its hidden thigh holster. The cold steel of the barrel pressed firmly into the soft flesh under his chin, jerking his head back against the leather upholstery.

The music was a wall of sound, masking the sharp, terrified gasp he let out.

"Don't scream, Harold," I hissed, my voice now a jagged, lethal blade. "The music is loud, but a bullet is faster. Look up at the rafters. Look at the camera. And tell the world exactly how much you made on the shipment of illegal rifles you moved through the docks last Tuesday."

"You... you're Black Base," he stammered, his face turning a sickly, ashen grey. "You can't do this. I have immunity!"

"Immunity doesn't work when your brain is on the carpet," I growled, digging the barrel deeper until he whimpered. "The world is watching, Senator. Give me the names of your buyers, or I'll let this trigger finish the interview."

Harold began to sob, the words spilling out of him in a frantic, pathetic rush—names of offshore accounts, dates of shipments, the identities of his buyers. It was a goldmine of filth.

As I held the gun to his throat, I realized that while I was still the perfect weapon for Black Base, my mind was already calculating the next move for the Hope Diamond. This mission was just the warm-up.

I didn't give him the mercy of a quick exit. I held the barrel of the 9mm against his jaw until I heard the heavy, rhythmic thud of the tactical police units breaching the front entrance. Logan had timed the tip-off perfectly; the local precinct had been waiting for a reason to take down Harold for years, and we had just handed them a silver platter.

"That's your cue, Senator," I whispered, the cold silk of my outfit brushing against him as I stood up.

Crystal and Marielle melted into the shadows of the VIP lounge just as the first flashlights cut through the club's haze. I didn't look back. I slipped through a side service door, stripped the shimmering obsidian silk to reveal a matte-black tactical bodysuit underneath, and vanished into the night air.

BACK AT BLACK BASE: 0200 HOURS

The atmosphere in the war room had shifted. The tension that had been thick enough to choke on earlier was gone, replaced by the low, satisfied hum of success. On the main monitor, the news was already breaking: *Senator Harold Arrested in Shocking Midnight Raid*.

X was standing by the console, tapping a rhythm on his arm. He didn't smile—X never smiled—but the rigidity in his shoulders had loosened. "The confession is being uploaded to the secure cloud as we speak. The Director is... satisfied. Your standing has been restored, Zabrina."

Logan walked over to me, handing me a glass of water. His eyes were brighter than they had been in days. "You did it, Z. That win bought us the time we needed. My father has officially called off Sebastian. The Skullz mission is yours, and yours alone."

I took a sip of the water, feeling the cool liquid settle my racing heart. "Good. Because I'm not done with them."

"We know," Logan said, his voice dropping to a serious tone. "While you were at the club, we ran a preliminary scan on the ledger you swiped from Harold. It's encrypted with a high-level ghost-code, but we found a recurring transaction linked to a shell company we've seen before."

He swiped the screen, showing a series of payments totaling millions. "The Skullz haven't just been stealing assets; they've been buying influence. And the last payment was sent forty-eight hours ago."

"To where?" I asked, my eyes narrowing.

"To a private terminal at the Old Cathedral district," Logan replied. "It looks like they're preparing for a massive off-shore transfer. If the Hope Diamond is going to move, it's going to move through there."

I set the glass down. The win with the Senator felt good, but it was a distraction. The real prize was still out there, guarded by a man who called himself the Devil and played with shadows for a living.

"I need to go back," I said. "If I'm not there when the Skullz make their move, we lose our window."

Logan nodded, but his hand caught mine for a brief second. "Just remember, Zabrina... the Director is watching. If you slip up again, I won't be able to stop him from sending the Reapers back in. This is your last shot."

"I don't need another shot," I said, pulling my hand away and heading toward the armory. "I only need one."

CHAPTER 14: The Devil's Welcome

The rain began to fall as I reached the outskirts of the district, a cold, needle-like drizzle that blurred the neon signs into smears of bleeding color. I had ditched the tactical gear for a dark, expensive trench coat, slipping back into the role of the "wife" as I approached the secondary safe house.

I let myself in through the service entrance, moving with the silence of a ghost. The loft was dark, save for the rhythmic amber blink of the security console by the door. No alarms tripped. No lasers swept the floor. It was too quiet.

I moved toward the bedroom, my hand resting on the small of my back, fingers inches from my concealed blade. I expected to find him asleep, or perhaps gone.

Instead, I found him waiting.

Eliot was sitting in a high-backed velvet armchair in the corner of the room, draped in shadows. The only light came from the glowing tip of a crystal glass half-filled with amber liquid. He hadn't changed his clothes; his shirt was still unbuttoned at the collar, the bandage I had applied earlier stark white against his tanned skin.

"You're late for dinner, Zara," he said, his voice a low, smooth vibration that seemed to crawl up my spine.

I didn't flinch. I let my hand drop from my weapon and stepped into the center of the room. "I had errands to run. Logistics to settle."

"Of course. Logistics." He stood up, the movement fluid and predatory. He walked toward me, the ice clinking softly against the glass. He stopped just inches away, his presence suddenly overwhelming the small space. "Funny thing about logistics. They usually don't

involve a high-velocity police raid on a Senator's club three blocks away from where my associates do business."

I kept my face a mask of bored indifference. "The city is a messy place, Eliot. People get arrested every day."

Eliot smirked. It wasn't the playful smirk from before; it was the look of a man who was holding all the cards and enjoying the view. He reached out, his fingers trailing down the sleeve of my coat until he caught my wrist. He pulled me slightly closer, his gaze dropping to my neck.

"You still smell like the Gilded Cage," he whispered, his breath warm against my ear. "Expensive perfume, cheap cigars... and a hint of cordite. It's a very becoming scent on a thief."

My heart hammered against my ribs, but I didn't pull away. I looked him straight in the eye. "If you think I'm working for the police, you're losing your touch."

"The police?" Eliot chuckled, a dark, melodic sound. "No. The police are too clumsy for you. You move with a precision that only comes from a very specific kind of cage."

He let go of my wrist, but instead of backing off, he walked behind me. I felt his hands settle on my shoulders, his thumbs rubbing the tension there through the fabric of my coat.

"I know you're here for the diamond, Zabrina," he murmured.

I froze. He had used my real name—the one Logan used, the one Black Base had assigned me.

"And yet," he continued, his hands moving up to cup my face, forcing me to look at him in the mirror across the room. "I find I don't really care. You're the first person in years who has managed to surprise me. So, I've decided to play along."

He leaned in, his cheek brushing mine. "Go ahead. Keep playing your games. Keep reporting back to your handlers. I'll even give you a head start."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the velvet pouch. He didn't hand it to me; he simply dangled it between two fingers, the weight of the Hope Diamond swaying like a pendulum.

"The off-shore transfer at the Cathedral is still happening tomorrow night," he said, his voice dripping with an almost taunting sweetness. "I'll be there. The stone will be there. The question is... when the time comes to pull the trigger, will you be aiming at the stone, or will you be aiming at me?"

He dropped the pouch back into his pocket and stepped away, leaving me cold in the center of the room. He walked toward the bed and lay back, crossing his arms behind his head as if we hadn't just stood on the edge of a knife.

"Get some sleep, Zara," he said, closing his eyes. "You have a big night of stealing ahead of you tomorrow."

I stood there, my mind racing. He knew. He had known the whole time, and he was letting me stay. He was playing with me, turning my mission into a twisted game of cat and mouse where the cat was inviting the mouse to dinner.

CHAPTER 14: The Devil Wears Pajamas (Sort Of)

I waited.

I stood in the middle of the room for a full ten minutes after Eliot closed his eyes, listening to the steady, rhythmic pull of his breath. He looked remarkably peaceful for a man who had just admitted he knew his "wife" was a high-ranking corporate spy.

He's playing you, Zabrina, I told myself. He's probably not even asleep.

But the velvet pouch was right there. I could see the slight bulge in the pocket of his discarded trousers draped over the foot of the bed. If I could get the diamond now, I could be out the window and halfway to Black Base before he even realized the "mouse" had escaped the trap.

I shed my trench coat and crept forward. I moved like a ghost, shifting my weight so perfectly that not a single floorboard dared to groan. I reached the edge of the bed. My fingers hovered over the fabric of his trousers.

Almost there...

Just as my fingertips grazed the velvet, the "sleeping" man moved with the speed of a strike-team breach.

Before I could even gasp, my world flipped.

Eliot didn't just grab me; he pivoted his weight with a grace that was frankly offensive. In a blur of motion, I was flat on my back on the mattress, and Eliot was pinned over me, his forearms braced on either side of my head. He wasn't wearing his shirt anymore, and the proximity was... distracting.

He looked down at me, a lazy, lopsided grin playing on his lips.

"You know," he murmured, his voice thick with sleep and amusement. "Most wives wait for an invitation before they start rummaging through their husband's pants."

"I wasn't rummaging," I hissed, trying to shove his shoulder, which felt like it was carved out of solid granite. "I was... organizing. Your tailoring is atrocious."

"Organizing? Is that what the kids are calling grand larceny these days?" He leaned down, his face inches from mine. "You're very bad at this, Zabrina. Or whatever your name is on Tuesdays."

"I am a Rank 3 elite operative," I whispered indignantly. "I am not 'bad' at this."

"Oh, you're terrible," he teased, his eyes dancing with mischief. He shifted his weight, making sure I wasn't going anywhere. "You know, in the movies, some spies actually offer their bodies to distract the mark. It's a classic move. But as of now? You're just being a nosy spy who works really, *really* bad."

I felt the heat climb up my neck. "I don't do 'distractions' like that. I'm a professional."

"A professional who just got caught by a guy in pajama bottoms?" Eliot chuckled, his nose brushing against mine. "If this were a performance review, I'd give you a 'Needs Improvement' for stealth, but an 'A-plus' for being adorable when you're caught red-handed."

"I am not adorable. I am lethal," I snapped, though it's hard to sound lethal when you're being used as a human pillow.

"Lethal-ly cute, maybe." He grinned, clearly enjoying my frustration. He reached out with one hand, gently poking my cheek. "What's the plan now, Agent? Are you going to karate-chop me, or are we going to discuss how you failed to notice I've been awake since you stepped into the hallway?"

"I hate you," I muttered, huffing a breath that blew a lock of hair off my forehead.

"I know. It's the highlight of my day." He rolled onto his side, but kept one arm draped firmly over my waist, effectively anchoring me to him. He pulled the duvet up over both of us, tucking me in like a captured prize. "Now, go to sleep, little thief. If you try to move, I'll be forced to use more... restrictive measures. And I think we both know I'm much better at pinning people down than you are."

I laid there, stiff as a board, plotting eighteen different ways to knock him unconscious. But the bed was soft and the room was warm.

"By the way," he whispered, his eyes closed but that smirk still present. "The diamond isn't in the pants. I moved it to the cereal box in the kitchen. Just in case you got hungry for a multi-million dollar snack."

I sat bolt upright. "Wait, what? *Which cereal?* If you put the Hope Diamond in the marshmallows, Eliot, so help me—"

He just let out a sleepy, satisfied hum and pulled me back down by the waist. "Goodnight, Nosy. Try not to dream about Fruit Loops."

CHAPTER 15: Snap, Crackle, and Grand Larceny

I laid there for twenty minutes, listening to the silence of the loft. Eliot's arm was a heavy, warm band across my midsection, his breathing so deep and steady it felt like a lullaby designed to trick me.

The cereal box. It was the most absurd, insulting place to hide one of the most famous gems in human history. It was probably a lie. Actually, it was *definitely* a lie. But the mere thought of the Hope Diamond sitting in a box of generic toasted oats was enough to make my professional pride itch.

Slowly, millimeter by millimeter, I eased out from under his arm. I held my breath as his hand slipped from my waist to the mattress. He didn't stir. He just mumbled something that sounded suspiciously like "don't forget the milk" and buried his face deeper into the pillow.

I slid out of bed, my feet hitting the cold floor with silent precision. I didn't stop to grab my shoes. I crept into the kitchen, the moonlight filtering through the floor-to-ceiling windows and casting long, skeletal shadows across the marble island.

I reached the pantry. My heart was thumping—not from fear, but from the sheer ridiculousness of the situation. I opened the door. There they were: three boxes lined up like suspects in a lineup.

Honey-Nut O's. Bran Flakes. Sugar-Glazed Stars.

"You've got to be kidding me," I whispered to the dark.

I grabbed the Sugar-Glazed Stars first. I stuck my hand inside, the sugary dust coating my skin. Nothing but cardboard and processed carbs. I tried the Bran Flakes. Nothing but fiber and disappointment.

I reached for the Honey-Nut O's. I tilted the box, my fingers sifting through the bottom, when—*clink*.

My heart skipped. I reached in and pulled out a small, hard object wrapped in a plastic sandwich bag. I unwrapped it with trembling fingers, expecting a fake, a marble, or perhaps a note that said '*Gotcha again.*'

Instead, a deep, crystalline blue shimmered in the moonlight. The Hope Diamond.

"Unbelievable," I breathed, the weight of the stone feeling like a lead weight in my palm. "He actually did it. He put it in the cereal."

"I told you I was a man of my word."

I jumped, nearly knocking the Bran Flakes onto the floor. Eliot was leaning against the kitchen archway, his arms crossed over his bare chest. He looked tired, messy, and far too smug for three in the morning.

"You really found it," he said, pushing off the wall and walking toward me. "I was beginning to think I'd have to start coughing to give you a hint."

"You left the most valuable asset on the planet in a box of O's!" I hissed, clutching the stone to my chest. "Do you have any idea how many health code violations that is? Not to mention the security risk!"

"Safety is boring, Zabrina," he said, stopping right in front of me. He reached out, his hand settling on the marble island, effectively pinning me between the counter and his body—again. "Besides, I knew it was safe. Because the only person skilled enough to find it was currently sharing my bed."

He looked down at the diamond in my hand, then back at my eyes. His expression softened, the teasing light fading into something a bit more genuine.

"So," he murmured, his voice low and vibrating in the quiet kitchen. "You have it. The prize. The win for your handlers. Are you going to run? Or are you going to stay and finish your breakfast?"

I looked at the diamond, then at him. My comms were silent. Logan was waiting for a signal. But as I stood there in the moonlight with a man who treated international heists like a game of hide-and-seek, the win felt... strange.

"I'm not hungry," I whispered.

"Liar," Eliot teased, his hand moving from the counter to gently tilt my chin up. "Your stomach has been growling since the safe house. But if you're going to steal my diamond, the least you can do is let me make you some coffee first. It's a long walk back to Black Base."

He didn't try to take the stone back. He just stood there, waiting to see what the Rank 3 elite operative would do when she finally got exactly what she wanted.

CHAPTER 16: Cold Brew and Hot Lead

The silence of the kitchen was shattered not by a confession, but by the sharp, pressurized *hiss* of a flashbang canister skittering across the marble floor.

"Down!" Eliot roared.

He didn't wait for me to move. He lunged, his weight slamming into me and sending us both sprawling behind the reinforced industrial kitchen island just as the world turned into a blinding, white-hot scream. The explosion rocked the loft, blowing out the floor-to-ceiling windows in a rain of crystalline daggers.

My ears were ringing, a high-pitched whine that drowned out the world. I felt the Hope Diamond cold and hard against my palm, my fist clenched so tight my knuckles turned white.

"Black Base?" Eliot rasped, his voice barely audible over the ringing. He was crouched over me, his hand reaching for a concealed drawer beneath the marble lip of the island. He pulled out a sleek, suppressed submachine gun.

"No," I coughed, shaking my head to clear the stars from my vision. "Logan wouldn't breach like this. This is a scorched-earth entry."

Shadows moved through the swirling smoke—six figures in charcoal tactical gear, wearing night-vision HUDs that glowed like predatory insect eyes. They weren't using the door. They

were rappelling from the roof, swinging through the shattered windows with synchronized lethality.

"Reapers," I hissed, recognizing the jagged crest on their shoulders. "The Director sent them to finish what they started at the club."

"Well," Eliot muttered, checking the chamber of his weapon with a grim, practiced flick of his wrist. "I hope you like your coffee black and your mornings violent."

The lead Reaper rounded the corner of the island, his rifle raised. I didn't have my gun—it was still in my coat in the bedroom—but I had something better. I grabbed a heavy, cast-iron skillet from the hanging rack above us and swung it with every ounce of my Rank 3 training.

Clang.

The Reaper's head snapped back, his helmet denting as he collapsed into a heap. I scrambled for his dropped sidearm, a tactical 1911, and rolled into a firing position.

"Eliot, ten o'clock!"

Eliot didn't even look. He spun, firing a controlled three-round burst that caught a Reaper mid-air as he swung through the window. The man crumpled, his rope swinging uselessly against the building's facade.

"They're not here for the stone, Zabrina!" Eliot shouted over the roar of a second breach charge blowing the front door off its hinges. "They're here to tie up loose ends. That means us!"

"I'm not a loose end!" I barked, popping up to put two rounds into the chest of a tactical operative charging through the smoke.

We moved in a lethal, back-to-back symmetry. Eliot was a storm of precision, his movements fluid and ruthless, while I provided the surgical cover. We were an impossible team—the Thief and the Devil, dancing through a hail of 5.56 rounds in a kitchen filled with Sugar-Glazed Stars and shattered glass.

"The elevator is a death trap!" I yelled, sliding across the floor to take cover behind the sofa as bullets shredded the upholstery. "We have to use the laundry chute to the basement!"

"The laundry chute?" Eliot ducked as a spray of plaster exploded above his head. He looked at me, a wild, dangerous glint in his eyes. "You really have a thing for tight spaces, don't you?"

"Unless you want to try flying!"

I fired my last three rounds to pin down the remaining two Reapers in the hallway. I grabbed Eliot's hand—the diamond still tucked into my waistband—and we sprinted toward the narrow utility closet.

Behind us, the loft was being dismantled by high-caliber fire. The Director wasn't just trying to kill us; he was trying to erase the very memory of our existence.

"On three!" I yelled, kicking the chute door open.

"Zabrina," Eliot said, catching my eye for a split second as the Reapers rounded the corner, their muzzles flashing. "If we die, I'm haunting your cereal for eternity."

"Shut up and jump!"

We dived into the darkness just as a grenade bounced into the room behind us.

CHAPTER 17: Into the Devil's Den

The slide down the laundry chute was a frantic, bone-jarring blur of cold metal and darkness. We hit the bottom—a mountain of industrial-sized linen bags—with a dull *thud* just as the explosion from the loft above sent a muffled shockwave through the building's core. Dust and debris rained down the chute like gray snow.

"Nice landing," Eliot wheezed, rolling off a pile of towels and extending a hand to me. Even covered in soot and plaster dust, he looked infuriatingly composed. "Though I usually prefer my bedroom exits to be via the front door."

"Quiet," I hissed, checking the chamber of the stolen 1911. "The Reapers aren't stupid. They'll have a containment team on the perimeter in sixty seconds."

I touched my earpiece, but all I got was a burst of static. The Director had likely jammed the entire block. Logan was blinded. We were officially off the grid.

"We can't go to the street," I said, my mind scanning the tactical maps of the city I'd memorized. "Black Base owns the skyline. If we show our faces, they'll have a drone on us before we can hail a cab."

Eliot wiped a smear of blood from his cheek and looked toward the back of the dark basement. "Then we go where the drones can't see. My city has more layers than your handlers realize, Zabrina."

He led me toward an old, rusted service grate tucked behind a massive furnace. With a grunt of effort, he wrenched it open, revealing a ladder descending into a tunnel that smelled of damp earth and ancient stone.

"Welcome to the catacombs," he murmured. "The Skullz built this city's foundation. Literally."

We climbed down, the light from the basement fading into a sliver above us until Eliot kicked the grate shut. He pulled a small, high-intensity flare from his pocket and cracked it. A deep, crimson light flooded the tunnel.

"This leads to the Old Cathedral district," he explained, walking with a confident stride that suggested he'd been here a thousand times. "My people will be waiting at the sub-level terminal."

We moved in silence for a while, the only sound the steady *drip-drip* of water and the distant rumble of the city above. The adrenaline was starting to fade, leaving a sharp, throbbing ache in my shoulder where I'd hit the chute.

"The diamond," Eliot said suddenly, not looking back. "You still have it?"

I reached into my waistband, feeling the cold, hard edges of the stone through the fabric. "I have it. Why? Are you going to try and take it back now that we're in your 'den'?"

Eliot stopped and turned around. In the flickering red light of the flare, his eyes looked like emeralds set in shadow. He leaned against the damp wall, a small, tired smile tugging at his lips.

"Actually, I was going to ask if it was comfortable," he teased. "Most people find carrying a cursed multimillion-dollar gem in their pants a bit... distracting."

"I've carried worse," I retorted, though I couldn't help the small smirk that tugged at my own mouth. "And for the record, your cereal box plan was the most stressful part of my week."

"It kept it safe, didn't it?" He took a step closer, his presence narrowing the tunnel until I could feel the heat radiating off him. "Admit it, Agent. You've had more fun in the last forty-eight hours with me than you've had in three years at Black Base."

"Fun isn't a metric we use for mission success," I said, my voice dropping.

"Then your metrics are broken." He reached out, his thumb catching a smudge of soot on my forehead, his touch lingering just a second too long to be accidental. "You're a hell of a fighter, Zabrina. It's a shame you're wasting it on people who try to blow you up the moment you get them what they want."

The moment was interrupted by a low, rhythmic vibration coming from further down the tunnel—the sound of a heavy iron door being unbolted.

"Boss? That you?" a voice called out.

Eliot stepped back, the 'Devil' mask sliding back over his features as his posture straightened. "It's me. And we have company."

As we rounded the corner, a massive iron gate swung open, revealing a hidden bunker filled with high-end monitors, weapon racks, and half a dozen men in Skullz tactical gear. This wasn't a hideout; it was a command center.

CHAPTER 18: The Devil's Mainframe

The air in the bunker was thick with the hum of cooling fans and the sharp scent of gun oil. It was a mirror image of Black Base, but where my home was sterile and white, this place was draped in shadows and exposed brick. These men didn't look like government-sanctioned soldiers; they looked like hunters who had made the darkness their home.

"Clear the perimeter," Eliot commanded, his voice echoing with an authority that didn't need to be raised. "And get a satellite ghost-link. I want eyes on every Black Base signature within ten blocks."

The men moved instantly. They didn't ask questions; they didn't hesitate. It was a level of loyalty that made my skin prickle. In Black Base, we followed orders because of the hierarchy. Here, they followed Eliot because he was the center of their universe.

"Stay here," Eliot said, gesturing toward a heavy oak desk in the center of the command room. "Joseph is bringing a medic. That shoulder looks like it's bothering you."

"I'm fine," I lied, though the dull throb in my joint was turning into a sharp, white-hot sting.

Eliot gave me a look that said he knew exactly how much I was lying, but he didn't push it. He turned his back to me, leaning over a console to speak with his lead tech, a wiry man with a face full of tattoos.

This was it. My chance.

I leaned against the desk, my hand sliding into the hidden pocket of my tactical bodysuit. I felt the micro-tracker—a device no larger than a grain of rice, capable of bleeding a mainframe dry of its encrypted data and sending it directly to Logan. If I planted this now, I wouldn't just have the diamond; I'd have the names, the bank accounts, and the entire infrastructure of the Skullz.

I looked at Eliot. He was pointing at a heat map, his brow furrowed in concentration. He was completely exposed. He was trusting me in the heart of his empire after I'd already stolen his greatest prize.

Do the job, Zabrina.

I palmed the tracker, my hand moving toward the underside of the mahogany desk where the primary server cables were routed. My fingers were inches from the port. One flick of the wrist, and Black Base would win.

"You know," Eliot said, his voice quiet, not turning around. "My father used to say that a person's true character isn't revealed in the light, but in how they behave when they think no one is watching."

I froze. My hand remained hidden, but my heart hammered against my ribs like a trapped bird.

"Is that so?" I managed to say, my voice steady despite the adrenaline.

Eliot turned around slowly. He didn't look angry. He looked... disappointed. He walked toward me, stopping just a breath away. He reached out, not for my weapon, but for my hand—the one clenching the tracker.

He didn't force it open. He just held my wrist, his thumb stroking the pulse point there.

"The Director doesn't care about you, Zabrina," he whispered. "He sent the Reapers to kill you tonight. He's already replaced you in his mind. Why are you still trying to be his hero?"

"It's not about being a hero," I snapped, pulling my hand away and slipping the tracker back into my pocket. I couldn't do it. Not like this. "It's about the mission. It's about the stone."

"The stone is just a rock," Eliot said, his eyes burning into mine. "And the mission is a lie. You're more than a Rank 3 asset. You're the woman who just took down a Senator while wearing silk and holding a skillet. You don't belong in a cage, even one made by Black Base."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, encrypted burner phone, sliding it across the desk toward me.

"Call him," Eliot said.

I stared at the phone. "What?"

"Call Logan. Tell him you're safe. Tell him the Reapers failed." Eliot's smirk returned, though it was weary. "I want to hear what he says when he realizes his favorite operative is currently standing in the one place he can't touch."

I took the phone, my fingers trembling slightly. I dialed the emergency frequency. It picked up on the first ring.

"Z?" Logan's voice was frantic, breathless. "Z, thank God. Where are you? The loft is a total loss—the Director reported you KIA. He's already signing the scrub orders for your files."

"I'm alive, Logan," I said, my eyes locked on Eliot. "The Reapers... they didn't just try to extract the stone. They tried to execute us."

There was a long, heavy silence on the other end. "I know," Logan whispered, his voice sounding broken. "I tried to stop him, Z. I swear. But he's moved to the final phase. He doesn't want the diamond anymore. He wants the Skullz eliminated, and he's using the diamond as bait to draw their entire leadership to the Cathedral tonight. He's going to level the whole district with a drone strike."

My blood turned to ice. "Logan, the Cathedral is in the heart of the city. There are thousands of civilians—"

"He doesn't care!" Logan hissed. "Zabrina, you have to get out of there. If you're with the Skullz leader, you're in the center of the target zone. Leave the diamond. Leave him. Just run."

I slowly lowered the phone. The room felt cold.

Eliot was watching me, his expression unreadable. "What did he say?"

"The Cathedral," I whispered. "It's not a transfer point. It's a kill zone. Your people, the diamond... it was all a trap to get you in one place."

Eliot didn't flinch. He just nodded, as if he'd suspected it all along. He turned to his men.

"Change of plans. We're not going to the Cathedral to hide. We're going there to take down a Director."

He looked back at me, reaching out his hand. "Are you coming, Agent? Or are you still waiting for your performance review?"