

## Also by Ruben Stelliswolfe

Eternity's War

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## One

### The First Day

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I doubt that."

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

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

"Shall do."

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

## Two

### The Second Day

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It was a gift," Skye said.

"Did Charlie send it to you?"

"No. Ren ordered it."

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

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

Skye returned the smile. "A lot."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Skye rolled his eyes, not bothering to respond.

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

"I always do."

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

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

"And how are Charlie and Delta? Still on the hunt?"

"Yep."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"My subordinates are just fine."

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

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

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

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

Skye narrowed his eyes at him. "Hero?"

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

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

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

"Fine."

"Did she insist on coming?"

"She did."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“And what if we were to fail?”

Skye glared at him and remained silent.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Skye!” Nikolai called after him.

He stopped and looked back, his face impatient.

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

causing several bystanders to stop and stare at the two.

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

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

She smiled politely. "Of course, doctor."

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

"And now, we wait."

### Three

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

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

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

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

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

"Absolutely."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She said nothing, walking off silently.

Ren laughed. "She's just eager."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Four

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

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

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

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

She slumped back into her chair roughly.

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

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

"Then quit acting like a child and sit still."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You said you wanted me to train," he defended.

"Yes, on the *living*."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"*Inconspicuous*," he corrected. "Your Alexan needs work."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No. I don't have time."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What if Ren finds him?" Tahlia asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Five

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You really should train," she said.

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

keeps insisting that I train today.”

“Ren said that we all have to train.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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