

VOLUME 1



THE FOX

MARKED BY THE VALE

THE WRAITH CODE

Volume 1

STORY PULSE CREATIVE

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STORY 1

“THE FOX”

LOCATION: Varnum City –*Eclipse Lounge*, Rooftop VIP Area

Time: 1:12 AM – Four Days Before the Global Tech Expo

POV Character: Fox

Fox leaned against the railing that ran around the perimeter of the roof. His back was to the city, each arm resting on a sleek metal bar. A glass of water, mostly ice, with a lime wedge lodged onto the rim, was in his left hand. He didn't want to refill it for the fiftieth time, so he chewed the ice instead. He wanted something stronger, but not drinking on the job. EDM music pulsed as people moved their bodies to the beat. He put his eyes back on Chole Reddick, heiress to Varnum City real estate tycoon, Steward Reddick. It was her twenty-first birthday, and daddy had rented out the entire lounge so the apple of his eye could get blackout drunk, and she was doing a pretty good job. He'd lost count of what number drink she was on, but the one nestled in her hand was almost gone as she ground on her fourth security guard of the night.

Fox sighed. If this was what the future of his career would be, babysitting intoxicated trust fund babies, then he'd rather lean a little further back and take a trust fall off the side of the building and see what happened. Sure, this was easy money, but she would have been in more danger in a McDonalds play pen from risk of infection than she was here. He glanced at the Richard Mille on his wrist. Forty-five more minutes until the lounge closed. He hoped Stew hadn't paid extra for them to stay open as long as his daughter wanted.

A young woman with hazel strands streaked through her brown hair and exposed cleavage that made her top seem like a footnote offered him yet another drink, and again he declined. Fox popped a piece of ice into his mouth and pushed it into his cheek as he opened the notes section of his phone and navigated to the *Mission Notes* folder. The sheet open for that evening had the job, client, and objective columns blank. It wasn't even worth filling in. He went back to the job from last week, preventing a planned burglary at a

high-end jewelry store, and recapped what he'd learned. He filled in some additional notes with intel he thought might be useful to remember for his future work. *If something feels too quiet, check the ceiling*, he typed.

Fox's eyes darted from the phone screen to the opposite side of the rooftop the moment he heard commotion. A man in a powdered blue dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows leaned over the edge of the railing. *And that's absolutely disgusting*, Fox thought as he went back to scrolling through the notes of previous jobs. When he'd run out of seemingly trivial, but useful advice, he returned to people watching. His favorite was a guy who'd been making his rounds the whole evening, gabbing at any woman with ears, clearly trying to get one of them to go home with him. He was batting zero percent. The runner-up was a group of women, presumably friends, who'd gotten escorted out of the lounge for getting into it with the bottle girls for not letting them hold the sparklers when they'd brought their drinks out.

He looked for Chole again, but she'd vanished from his field of vision. His eyes probed the rooftop. For a second, he thought about leaving his post and doing a lap. *Where have you gone, sweet Chole?* Then—he heard it. The rooftop erupted into cheering. Dirty blond hair, nose ring, and a dress so short it needed to be paid overtime to cover anything, Chole let out a howl as she stood barefoot on a table swinging a leather jacket, definitely not hers, in a circle above her head. Fox rolled his eyes. He'd had enough. Five-thousand-dollar suit, thousand-dollar shoes, and a watch that trumped both of them, and this was what he got to use them for.

He moved from the railing, glass still in his hand, lime and all, and wondered inside. He could do the last half an hour of his job from the car and still collect the same pay. As he walked past the bar, pushing through the mosh pit of people dancing in the open space of the room, his phone buzzed. A text. Strickland.

How's Chole? It read.

Hammered, he replied.

The three dots appeared, and then, stop *by later. Got a contract with your name on it. Something big.*

Fox smirked and shoved the phone back into the pocket of his suit. “About damn time,” he said.

LOCATION: Varnum City – Abandoned Rooftop Parking Garage, Midtown

Time: 9:03 AM – Three Days Before the Global Tech Expo

POV Character: Fox

The high beams of the Jag cut through the dense, morning haze like a surgeon's incision. The top level of the garage was vacant except for a man standing at the edge of the parking lot, facing the city. Fox killed the engine and stepped out onto the concrete.

“Was starting to think you weren't going to show,” the man said as Fox approached. Under his trench coat was a sweater over a collared shirt and khaki pants. Most would have taken him for a high school math teacher, not a key cog in a world full of killers, liars, and criminals.

“The bed was—convincing, when I finally fell asleep. Rough night.” He couldn't admit that it was the anticipation that kept him up.

James Strickland handed Fox the manila folder stuffed with papers and adjusted his glasses. Fox took the dossier, but didn't open it.

“You got called back up to the big leagues,” Strickland said.

“By who?”

“Rohan Samar, CEO of First Vision Solutions. He's unveiling some new world-changing AI at a global expo in Scottsdale three days from now. He wants extra security.”

“Then tell him to hire extra security. How is this the big leagues?” Fox complained flipping through the documents, but not reading any.

Strickland crossed his arms. “For starters, the pay is more than all the jobs you've done over the last two years combined. Also, he has reason to believe someone doesn't want this tech getting out and hired another wraith to make sure it doesn't.”

“Takes a wraith to stop a wraith. Everyone else was busy, huh?”

“Does it matter?” Strickland turned toward Fox, who stared off into the distance absently. “This is high profile. You make this

happen, your name starts catching waves again. That stench on you stops smelling so rotten.”

Fox’s nose twitched. “Who’s the other wraith?”

“Why’d I spend all that time putting the info together if you’re not going to read it?”

“You know I am, I’m just curious.”

“Harvey Dennison, goes by Tombstone.”

“Never heard of him.”

“He’s old school, no gimmicks, no special gadgets or tricks. He’s mostly retired now, but pops his head out every once in a while, for the right job. He’s never failed a hit. They tell ghost stories about men like him.”

“I don’t believe in ghosts,” Fox mocked.

“I don’t think I need to tell you to take him seriously. He’d be top ten on the index if he were still officially active. This is your last chance. You blow this, and Los Angeles hangs around your neck like an albatross forever. You’d be lucky to get asked to work security at a high school football game.”

“I get it.” Fox finally turned and met eyes with Strickland. As if the sixtycharred corpses weren’t enough.

“Good. Samar’s head of security is expecting you, ASAP, your flight leaves at one-thirty.”

“I’ll need to make some stops.”

“Your flight leaves at one-thirty.”

Fox nodded and headed toward his car.

“Fox,” Strickland called. Fox stopped and looked over his shoulder. “Are you ready for this?”

“I’ll have to be.”

LOCATION: Varnum City – Nicole’s Apartment, Uptown High-Rise

Time: 10:27 AM – Three Days Before the Global Tech Expo

POV Character: Fox

Bugs Bunny held his hands up above his ears with a half-eaten carrot in his mouth as Elmur Fudd stuck his rifle to Bugs’ forehead. On the other side of the forty-five-inch flat screen, Nicole lounged on her couch in an oversized sweatshirt that said *On Air* with a microphone silhouette above the letters. She scrolled her phone with her feet in Fox’s lap as he watched the TV, but not really.

“You okay?” she asked, looking up from TikTok.

“Nope. I can’t mess this up.” He’d been able to keep up his usual confidence standing next to Strickland, but the whole time he fully understood the weight of this next job.

“Then don’t,” Nicole said, going back to her phone.

“Wow, doc hadn’t thought of that,” he said, flicking her ankle.

Nicole smirked. “Glad I could help.” She batted at his cheek with her foot in retaliation. Fox swatted it away, trying to hold in a chuckle. “Seriously though,” she continued. “What about it has you brooding. You don’t brood.”

“It shouldn’t be that bad. Protect billion-dollar tech man from a fossil with a gun.”

“But?”

Fox shifted to face her. “I keep thinking about all those people that got killed because I got cocky.”

“You’ll always be cocky, but this time you’ll be prepared too.”

“This Tombstone guy is supposed to be some kind of legend. *He’s never failed a hit,*” Fox said, mocking Strickland’s voice.

Nicole dropped her phone into her lap and pulled her legs underneath her. “If he’s been around for so long, that means there’s a lot of him to study, people who know how he works. I’m sure Strickland can pull some strings. Stop worrying so much and do what you do.”

“At what point do you stop being right?”

"I'll let you know when I find out." She paused. "You know I've never been to Arizona."

"I did not."

"How about when you're finished, Rohan Samar is safe and sound, *and* Mr. Tombstone is dead or alive, up to you, I take a couple days off and get a post-job, exclusive interview with Isaiah the fox Duran." She scooted toward him and walked two fingers up his arm.

Fox leaned in and pressed his lips to hers, letting the moment linger before pulling back.

"Is that how you treat all reporters?"

"I don't do interviews," he said.

"I think you'll make an exception." Nicole went in for another kiss before snuggling against his chest and resting her head beneath his chin, her big curls pushed into his face. Fox wrapped his arms around her. He wanted to stay like this forever. Nicole sighed. "I can't wait for the day when this doesn't end in you leaving to put bullets into your gun."

Fox's stomach tightened. He didn't know what to say back. He'd never thought of a time when it wouldn't and hadn't planned on starting now. He kissed the top of her head in response. "Which slot do they have you working next week?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Umm, I actually think Dave has me set for the ten o'clock block, why? It's not like you can get VBS Channel eight out west."

Every chance he got, Fox watched the news whenever Nicole anchored. It didn't matter what time, how boring, or unimportant he found what she was reporting on. He watched for *her*.

"Just wanted to know," he finally answered.

"Tell Strickland to push your flight back."

Fox tried to get his face around her hair to catch her eye contact. "What?"

"He flies you private anyway. The plane isn't leaving without you. You said take-off was at one-thirty, make it two-thirty."

"Nicole, Samar's security—"

She turned to look at him, and that look was all he needed. Within seconds, he had his phone in hand, and Strickland's text thread was on the screen.

LOCATION: Varnum City – Rich’s Workshop, Backroom of a Sneaker Shop

Time: 12:39 PM – Three Days Before the Global Tech Expo

POV Character: Fox

A bell chimed as Fox pushed through the front door of *Heat Check*, a local sneaker shop that was never without the latest kicks and without the outrageous prices. R&B played low from the speakers as he worked his way around the customers and toward the back of the store. He gave the cashier, Ty, an upnod before passing by the glass display and through the door to the storage room. There were boxes upon boxes of shoes everyone wanted their hands on, but what Fox was more interested in was the rusty elevator door behind all of the goods.

He took the elevator down to the basement level. When he got off, the smell of oil and gunpowder sucker punched him. He’d never get tired of that.

“The Fooooooxxxx,” Rich called smoothly from the other side of his workshop.

The large basement was a maze of workbenches topped with ammunition, disassembled firearms, and other weaponry. A chain-linked cage held wooden crates stacked halfway up to the ceiling, and had both a keypad and a padlock. Tupac thumped in the background as Fox made his way over to Rich. He slid back from his computer, revealing a pair of *Ferrari 14* Jordans, and dapped Fox up.

“Damn, what have I done to be graced with an unexpected visit from Fox Duran. I know you didn’t come by just to get your ass handed to you in pool,” Rich paused, “or did you?”

Fox leaned against the table. “Next time. I’m on a tight schedule. Strickland’s got me going to Arizona, like right now. I need a few things, low profile. Suppressor, knife for the ankle strap, almost James Bond type shit.”

“Kinky, what’s the occasion?” Rich got up and went to a tall cabinet behind a different cage and punched on the keypad. It was the armory he kept specifically for Fox.

“Protection for some CEO that someone wants whacked, Rohan Samar.”

“Doesn’t ring a bell, but sounds more *important* than what you’ve been doing lately.”

“It is. Apparently, some Wraith they call Tombstone is the hitman.” Rich paused with his back to Fox, cabinet full of pistols just exposed like a skinny dipper. “What?” Fox asked.

“Nothing,” Rich said with a shrug of his shoulders and then went to fingering through the guns.

“Rich.”

“Nah, nah. It’s just—that’s a name. I heard he’s legit.” Fox raised an eyebrow as Rich returned with a pistol and two separate silencer attachments, before wandering off again. “Don’t give me that look. Just because I don’t deal to the big dogs doesn’t mean I don’t make it my business to know who’s in the pound.”

“Strickland said he’s never missed a hit.”

“Mmm,” Rich said, returning with a knife that had a blade small enough to be cute. “You ready for that?”

“I pull this off, and *The Fox*, that stops being a silly nickname. It’ll start carrying some weight.”

“I know, that’s why I asked if you’re ready.” Rich sat back in his chair and put his hands behind his head.

“I’m ready. Los Angeles was two years ago. I’m good.”

“I didn’t bring up Los Angeles, you did.”

“You didn’t have to.” Fox opened his small travel bag and loaded the knife, pistol, magazines, and attachments into the hidden compartments.

“Look,” Rich said, leaning in to catch Fox’s attention. “I know you want this, bad. You not gonna get it all back with one swing, but this is a *start* treat it like that. Don’t skip steps. This is business as usual, alright?”

Fox nodded.

Rich eyed the pool table across the basement. “Half a game?”

Fox smirked. “Nicole took up your pool time.”

“Good man.” They dapped each other up again, and Fox

headed back toward the elevator. “You have to pay for that!” Rich called after him. Fox kept walking and stuck up his middle finger before hitting the up arrow on the control panel.

LOCATION: Private Charter Jet, En Route to Arizona

Time: 3:14 PM – Three Days Before the Global Tech Expo

POV Character: Fox

Fox sank into the plush upholstery of his seat, sparkling water sitting on the round table in front of him. He swiped his finger across his tablet and began reading through the profiles from the dossier Strickland had given him. He'd be meeting up with Rohan Samar and his *inner circle* at a compound that was set up a few miles outside of Scottsdale. He went through roll call, committing the names and quirks to memory. Dahlia Kincaid was his head of security. She was ex-military and allegedly had about as much fondness for outsiders as bulls had for the color red. He was sure she threw a massive temper tantrum when Rohan had asked to bring in a wraith. Next were the two other braincells outside of Samar. Jared Lin was the lead developer on the Genesis project and longtime friend of Samar's. He was a smart cookie. Graduated from MIT at twenty, top of his class.

Priya Voss was the *lead engineer*. Fox didn't understand what the difference was, but decided it didn't really matter. She was also a sharp pencil, graduating from Cal-Tech top of *her* class, and was known to have an attitude big enough to match all of her brain power. Lastly, was Samar's personal assistant, Leon Martel. There wasn't anything particularly interesting about him. He was the assistant, and he kept Samar's schedule—and probably got him a really bougie coffee every morning.

He was less interested in Rohan Samar himself than the people around him, but he did his due diligence anyway. Immigrant parents, decided to skip college, and adopt artificial intelligence early, and by thirty-six had built a multi-billion-dollar tech giant in Silicon Valley, of course, that continued to push the boundaries of what AI could be capable of. Fox understood why buttocks were puckering. In any movie ever, pushing the bounds of science always led to catastrophe.

Genesis would take facial recognition to a whole new level. Whereas fingerprinting relied on having an individual's prints in a database, Genesis could take a person's facial scan and scrub an enormous amount of footage to identify someone. Its defining feature was the bone structure analysis, allowing it to link people to photos or video regardless of what age they were and even if something was covering their face. On top of that, using CCTV footage, social media, or anything connected to a network in any way, it could essentially locate anyone, anywhere in the world, at any time. It would revolutionize law enforcement, government operations, and more. Fox figured if he was a career criminal, he'd do everything in his power to stop it from getting out, and if he was a businessman, he'd want it in his hands first.

He finished off his deep dive into Rohan Samar and swiped to the last section of the documents. He felt his pulse speed up before settling back to normal Rhythm. Harvey Dennison, aka *Tombstone*. He'd been an active wraith for thirty-seven years with over a hundred confirmed kills and plenty of time in the top five of the global wraith index. He was one of the first of their kind. He worked for most of his career with a broker that no one saw once; they only went by the nickname Axiom. After that, he went solo, which in their line of work set off alarm bells. A wraith seemingly working under their own agenda with no way to get a hold of them was scary as hell. He retired *officially* five years ago, but Fox found it hard to believe he was spending his free time on the golf course now.

If there was anyone close to as thorough as he was, it was Strickland. Maybe Strickland's thoroughness allowed him to be so thorough. He didn't know if the chicken or the egg came first, but there was a separate folder with rows of video feed from across the years. None was more than thirty seconds long, but each contained at least seven seconds of Dennison in action. If he could consume enough of the footage, it might give him an edge if he ever had to go against him one-on-one, *or* it could be a major waste of time. Either way, it was better to be prepared. Although if he could avoid direct

confrontation, that would be ideal. Dennison had to be six feet three inches of pure meat who had years of experience mangling humans and fought with his knuckles turned upward. He was taller, heavier, and more experienced. *Should be no problem at all*, Fox thought.

LOCATION: Scottsdale, Arizona – FVS Private Compound

Time: 5:56 PM – Three Days Before the Global Tech Expo

POV Character: Fox

By the time Fox made it to the compound's boardroom, he'd cleared at least ten layers of security. Two guards stood outside and opened the double doors for Fox as he approached. Five sets of eyes fell on him as he stepped into the room. Within moments, Dahlia Kincaid was the first to greet him. She was in all black, a blazer over a t-shirt with a handgun large enough to put down an elephant on her hip. Her black hair was tied up, and her eyes hadn't an ounce of nonsense in them.

"Welcome, Mr. Duran. Dahlia Kincaid. I lead Mr. Samar's security detail, but I'm sure you already knew that."

"Fox is fine," he said, shaking her hand, her grip nearly dislocating his bones.

"We were expecting you an hour ago."

"Turbulence."

"Mhm." She turned toward the room. Everyone had seemingly gone back to what they were doing before he walked in. "I'll make introductions."

"Honestly, I read up on all of you guys already so we can skip that part." Fox cleared his throat. "Hello everyone. I'm Fox. I'm a wraith, and over the next seventy-two hours, I'm gonna keep Rohan here and hopefully all of you from getting killed."

The color drained from Jared's face, Priya looked up from her laptop, Rohan whispered into the speaker of his phone and hung up his call, and Leon didn't so much as blink.

"You did tell them, right?" Fox asked Dahlia.

He could sense her teeth grinding behind closed lips. "They're aware of the threat," she said coldly.

"Good, for starters, I'm going to need one-on-one interviews with each of you starting now."

Priya scoffed and went back to typing on her laptop. Jared

started babbling about keeping the schedule for final demos. Leon said nothing, and he felt Dahlia's eyes burn a hole through his face.

"I'm not sure what expectations were communicated to you, but I lead the security efforts. Think of yourself as more of a *very* quiet consultant. *If* you're capable of doing that."

"That's not really how it sounded, but in that case, my first piece of consulting is that I speak to each of you privately."

"Everyone here has been cleared."

"Not by me."

Dahlia stepped within inches of Fox. He could smell her hair gel. He didn't budge.

"Dahlia," Rohan's voice penetrated the tension. "I hired him so you two could work together on this. Let him do his job, please."

Let me do my job, Fox mouthed.

Dahlia looked like she wanted to decapitate him on the spot. Her nostrils flared as she exhaled. "I'll prep a room," she said without taking her eyes off of Fox.

"Good, because I'm starting with you."

"Me?"

"Who clears the clearance?" he said with a smirk.

Fifteen minutes later, Fox had moved down the hall from the boardroom and was in a private meeting room with slanted windows between steel beams. Tight-lipped and fuming was Dahlia with her blazer unbuttoned and white-knuckled hands folded tightly on the table. Fox stared at her a bit, and she stared back.

"Is there a point to this, Mr. Duran, or did Rohan actually hire a smart-mouthed idiot who doesn't know what he's doing?"

"Ouch," Fox said. "And I told you, Fox is fine." He leaned back and slung one arm over the back of the metal chair. "You ever leak sensitive information when you were with the military?"

Dahlia's eyebrows dipped in the middle. "No."

"You sure? If you did, I won't tell. Wouldn't matter to me, and you wouldn't be the first."

"I have never leaked sensitive information."

"That's funny because in this world you generally won't get

unless you give, or unless you have a reputation as someone who repays favors.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“How’d you know Harvey Dennison is going to make an attempt on Rohan’s life. I don’t think he sent an RSVP.” The corner of her mouth twitched. Fox leaned forward. “You told Rohan that a wraith was after him because you knew he would then request *additional* resources, enter Fox stage right, *and* it would look like Dahlia Kincaid, super strategic security advisor did all she could in the wake of Tombstone putting Rohan’s brains all over the compound walls.”

Fox searched her face. He waited for her hand to slam against the table or for her to hurl obscenities his way, but neither came. Instead, she just glared at him with that same ice-cold stare.

“You know what I think?” she asked, not breaking the stride of her death stare.

“Do tell.”

“I think you wraiths are a tool, nothing more. I’ll even admit you’re all useful under the right circumstances. I think you all play into that to separate your conscience from what you do. But *you*, there’s something else there. You have an extra layer to peel back. You’re no idiot, that’s clear, but the smart-ass routine, that’s not really you. It’s a costume you put on to hide, to make yourself *feel* more confident than you really are. I’ve read your file too, *Fox*. I know what happened in Los Angeles. You sure you’re not just playing dress up to hide from all of those people you got killed?”

Fox let her words simmer. He absorbed the painful truth at the tip of the knife she’d just twisted into his side and let it sting.

He smiled slightly. “How’d you know Tombstone was coming for your boss?”

Fox could feel Priya rapidly tapping her foot against the floor. She checked her watch every couple of minutes as a pointed sign that she was in a hurry.

“Somewhere to be?” Fox asked.

“Actually, yes. Wasn’t sure if you knew, but we have a massive product that’s about to change the world, that’s about to be displayed to the entire planet in seventy-two hours.”

“What’s the difference between lead developer and lead engineer?” he asked, ignoring the jab.

Priya rolled her eyes, but answered anyway. “Jared worked closely with Rohan to develop the map for Genesis, the function, the overall vision of how it operates. I lead the team that’s responsible for the hard product, developing the code, making sure it *actually* works.”

“Sounds like Rohan and Jared are drinking old fashions at two in the afternoon on a Thursday, and you’re stuck doing grunt work.” She didn’t respond, but her eyes sold her out. “You’re smarter than Jared, always have been, but he’s got Rohan’s ear.”

She chuckled slightly. It was a chuckle that said *I’m vindicated*. “Your words, not mine.”

“Jared’s had his ear for years. Before all of this,” Fox twirled his index finger in the air. “You’d never be able to have that, no matter how hard you tried. No matter *what* happened with Genesis. Before you, before First Vision, there was Rohan and Jared. You’ve capped out at third on the food chain.”

Priya snorted. “Jared’s a fraud. He hides behind his stupid accolades, *Oh MIT, oh suma cum laude*, but if he and I had to switch and he had to come up with this stuff, then Genesis would have crashed and burned before it ever got off the ground.”

“Is it Jared’s fault or Rohan’s for enabling a monster?”

Jared sipped what smelled like coffee from a steaming white mug with *FVS* printed on it. It had to be coffee, unless he was a psychopath drinking hot chocolate in Arizona’s ninety-degree heat. Fox took his phone out of his jacket pocket and placed it on the table. Jared eyed it.

“We recording?” he asked.

“Uh, no. It started feeling heavy,” Fox replied. “Anyway, big week, huh?”

He sighed. “You have no idea. Not only are we trying to put finishing touches on things, but it’s been all this security talk, blah, blah.”

“I mean, someone *is* trying to kill your boss.”

“I get that, but guns on the roof everywhere? Pat downs every time I walk into the compound? It’s like a warzone. I can barely get any time to myself without the barrel of a gun breathing down my fucking back.”

“Right. So, I have to know,” Fox leaned toward Jared as if two friends were about to share a dark secret. “Whose idea was Genesis really?”

“We developed it together,” Jared said, surprised.

Fox smiled. “Sure, but *someone* had to put the food on the table first. You guys were hanging out, a bunch of drinks deep, then someone says *hey man, I got this crazy idea.*”

Jared also smiled. “You’ll have to ask Rohan about that story.”

Fox punched his next entry into the war of guarded smiles. “How’s it been working with Priya? This thing seems pretty big. Stuff like that usually comes with some friction, especially when working in a team. She’s the lead—” Fox let his words trail off as if thinking of the word.

“Engineer.”

“Right. That basically makes her your boss. Between you and me, she doesn’t seem like the easiest person to work with.”

“Everyone has their quirks. She’s really good at what she does, and the product is ready for launch. Everything else is just footnotes.”

Fox pointed at him. “I like that, footnotes.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“I don’t see why not.”

“Is someone really trying to kill Rohan, or is Dahlia just being a paranoid tight ass?”

Fox took a deep breath and locked eyes with Jared. “Yeah—they are.”

Leon Martel's fingers paraded up and down atop the table as he sat attentively in front of Fox. His hoop earrings glistened in the lighting of the room. Unlike the others, he was first to speak.

"Rohan's going places," was all he offered before running his hand through his curls that looked like a mess of barbed wire.

"What do you mean?"

"People only try to kill you when you upset the status quo. MLK, JFK, Archduke Ferdinand."

Fox wasn't sure about the last one, but took his word for it. "What's got people so afraid?"

Leon shrugged. "I don't know anything about the Genesis project; you'd have to dig that out of those two walking computers, Jared and Priya. But I know Rohan. He's fearless. He wants to change the world and doesn't care what boat he rocks. He's willing to die for this. He knows someone wants him dead and he's still getting up on that stage in—" Leon paused, checked his watch, then recited how much time was left until the expo down to the second.

"How long have you worked for him?" Fox asked, taking back control of the conversation.

"From the beginning," Leon said proudly. "He and Jared may be childhood friends, but I'm much more valuable. Rohan's world works because I keep it working. He's too busy to concern himself with trivial things. My job is to make it as if those things don't even exist."

"Seems like a heavy burden."

"It is. It's a thankless job."

"That bother you at all?"

Leon laughed. "I know my worth. Those who don't couldn't do this for more than a few months without getting their panties in a bunch. Without me, Rohan crumbles even if no one will admit it. I'm grateful to be on the right side of history."

Fox nodded.

"If you're trying to see if I have anything to do with any leaks in

the security protocol, I can tell you I didn't, to which you wouldn't believe me, but I'm telling you anyway, hopefully to save you some time. Whatever you're doing, please do it quick because once Rohan stands up on that stage, the world changes forever, and whoever wants him dead will move heaven and earth to make sure he doesn't make it to Tuesday."

LOCATION: Phoenix, Arizona – Global Tech Expo Center (Interior & Exterior Grounds)

Time: 8:03 PM – Three Days Before the Global Tech Expo

POV Character: Fox

Fox slowed his pace to match Dahlia's as they returned to the front entrance of the venue. The exterior flood lights roamed the ground, forming moving yellow circles in the grass. They'd covered all exterior access points of the aggressively modern building made of glass and steel. Had the expo center been anywhere but the outskirts of the city, he would have deemed it impossible to protect anything in this place. With all of the exposed windows, a sniper could probably close their eyes, pull the trigger, and kill whoever they wanted. Dahlia explained where the external security stations would be, how they planned to manage the crowds, incident response protocols, and the *perimeter beyond the perimeter*. It was an impressive and tight operation, but Fox wasn't worried about Dennison walking through the front door.

“What's your count on total security personnel?” Fox asked as they moved inside.

“Forty-five. We've contracted out twenty from private security; the venue will have fifteen security guards employed by the venue for general crowd control; they're not to engage with any major threats. Five officers from Phoenix PD will be assigned mainly to help with parking and give the illusion of security. Lastly, I have five handpicked guards that will report directly to me. They won't be seen unless they need to be, but they'll be there.” She stopped walking, hands still folded behind her back. “Would you like to interview all of them as well?”

Fox gave her an insincere smirk. “Nah, I trust you. You passed.”

They walked the wide-open floor plan of the venue with its floating staircases, suspended glass bridges, and LED screens everywhere.

“Your approach was theatrical, but I would have wanted to do the same,” Dahlia said without looking at him.

“Glad I passed the *what would Dahlia do* exam. You ready to tell me how you knew about Tombstone?”

It was now her turn to smirk. “I was interviewing you as you were interviewing me, just with fewer words. I needed to see if you were the real thing or just a pumped-up head full of hot air.”

“And?”

“Not as much hot air.” Dahlia pointed out a few things pertaining to the interior security before lowering her voice. “I have a contact who makes it their business to keep an eye on FVS’s competition. They know the right rooms to be in and the right strings to pull and where to put their ear. They tipped me off to a rumor saying that people want Rohan off the map. A little more digging and here we are.”

“You don’t strike me as the type of person who puts much stock into rumors.”

“In this business, rumors are as close to the truth as you can get. Either way, I’d rather be wrong than sorry.”

“Fair.” As he was about to speak again, something caught his eye as they moved past the VIP staging zone. He could have easily missed it. He *should* have missed it, but for some reason, he didn’t. There was a small gap between two of the ceiling tiles that someone could have mistaken for a shadow if they weren’t paying attention. It could have been something or maybe nothing. He took mental note, kept quiet, and kept moving. “How’d you know it was Harvey Dennison specifically?”

“Call it creative investigation.”

“What if I staged this, and Rohan’s actually *my* target?”

“Then I hope someone somewhere has started an obituary.”

The two of them finished their sweep and returned to the center of the venue. Fox glanced around the upper balconies before lowering his voice. “I don’t trust Jared.”

Dahlia raised an eyebrow. “Why?”

“He’s good at deflecting, but he runs his mouth too much.”

“That’s it?” she said with a frown.

“Keep tabs on him.”

“I don’t think—”

“Humor me—please.”

Dahlia sighed, then gave a single nod.

A few hours later, Fox was back at the expo venue. Everyone was long gone except for a few guards around the perimeter working the nightshift. He nodded to them as he walked past. Thanks to Dahlia, he now had full security clearance and badge access to everywhere on the grounds. Fox stood in front of the VIP staging area, looking up at the ceiling. The moonlight shone through the half-windowed roof. It was just enough light to see it. That misalignment in the panels. It was still there. He took to the upper level, jaw tight, eyes analyzing every inch of everything. He moved to the overhead service grid, taking the catwalks as close to the misaligned panel as he could. From above, it seemed even more obvious. He leaned over the railing of the catwalk and stared as one panel slightly overlapped the other. He zeroed in on a small, gray mark beside the panel. Looking around at the others, there was nothing similar. *Was this him?*

He wanted to think it was nothing, that it was a simple indication by the maintenance crew that it needed to be addressed before the big day, but he knew he didn't really believe that. It felt eerier. It was unsettling to think Tombstone was here, ahead of him, his plan in motion already, and he was finding the crumbs. A smug acknowledgment of his presence, a dark misdirection, an arrogant *hello*.

LOCATION: Phoenix, Arizona – Hotel Room

Time: 1:15 AM – Three Days Before the Global Tech Expo

POV Character: Fox

Fox rubbed at his tired eyes like a cranky baby as he sat in the chair in the corner of his hotel room, tablet resting on both knees. He downed some water, yawned, then shook his head rapidly. For the last hour, he'd been obsessing over every scrap of information he had on Dennison. He reviewed targets, method of execution, and timelines. He was now back on the video clips. Dennison was clinical, efficient, and never seemed to waste any motion. He was fundamental like an old-school basketball player, back to the basket, middies, and bank shots. He tapped pause on the screen and moved to his phone. Pulling up Nicole's text thread, his thumbs danced across the keyboard. *You up? Stressing and need a break.*

A few minutes went by, and three dots appeared on the screen, then: *Can't sleep either, probably not for the same reason.* The next message was a gravestone emoji with a question mark after it.

Not yet, I think he's already here. Found something weird, not sure if it's him or I'm paranoid. He sent the text, waited, then started typing again. *Trying to study him, but not enough time. So much experience and too much I don't know about him.*

Talk to someone who does.

Fox rolled his eyes at how simple she made things in his job seem sometimes. If it were that simple, he would have—Fox paused and stared at the still-made bed. He scrolled his contacts and dialed Strickland. The phone rang four times before the call finally connected.

“This is never a good sign,” he said, voice full of sleep and agitation.

“I need a favor.”

“I'm guessing it can't wait for five more hours.”

“The world of the wraiths never sleeps. I know you said Dennison has never failed a job, but I need you to find someone, *anyone* who's survived him, worked with him, who might be willing

to talk. I need a better feel for when and how he might strike. I need to *know* him better, and I don't have much time. I think he's already here. I could be days behind and not even know it."

"Fox, what you're asking is—"

"I know what I'm asking, and I wouldn't if I didn't think you could pull it off."

There was silence on the other end of the line for a few moments. "I'll see what I can do, but I can't promise you anything. Don't make this your only play."

"I won't."

Fox hung up the phone and hit the play button on the screen of his tablet just in time to see Dennison drive a knife through someone's throat.

LOCATION: Scottsdale, Arizona – FVS Private Compound

Time: 10:22 AM – Two Days Before the Global Tech Expo

POV Character: Fox

Fox walked the hallway of the compound toward the boardroom. The doors opened, and Leon Martel exited at a fast pace. He held a tablet and was laser-focused on the screen as he tapped at it with his index finger. Just as Fox thought he'd pass without a word, in one swift motion, Leon hooked his arm around Fox's and spun him around. Fox matched his pace as they moved in the opposite direction.

"You didn't hear this from me, but Jared has been leaving the compound on his lunch breaks. No one watches too closely, but we've been ordering in since we've been here," he said without looking up from his tablet, as if he were talking to himself.

"So, what? He thinks you guys have bad taste in food."

A condescending smile formed on Leon's mouth. "Funny, wraith. Could be nothing. I might look into it if I were you, but I'm not you. Bye Foxy."

Leon broke free, sped down the hallway, and disappeared, leaving Fox with a puzzled expression. *Foxy?* When he got to the boardroom, Dahlia and Rohan were sitting at the long, marble table talking. They looked up as he came in.

"Morning," Fox said.

"Are late starts something we should expect from you?" Dahlia replied flatly.

"Had to look into something."

"Hmm," was all she offered at first, then, "Security logs from last night showed entry to the expo venue around eleven."

"Okay,"

"It was your badge that was used to gain access."

There was a grinding moment of silence as both she and Rohan stared at him.

"I think we should talk in private." He locked eyes with Dahlia, and they got on the same page.

“Everything okay?” Rohan asked with a concerned expression. His eyes roamed from Dahlia to Fox.

Dahlia glared at Fox.

“Yeah, yeah, just security stuff,” said Fox.

“Well, it is my security. I think I should be in the know.”

Fox looked at Dahlia to get a read on what to do next, but she offered him nothing but a tight-lipped frown.

“I want to know,” this time Rohan’s voice was sterner.

“Okay,” Fox said after a sigh. “I saw something yesterday while we were walking the venue. One of the ceiling panels above the VIP staging area was misaligned. I didn’t know if it was significant or not, so I went back to check it out from the service grid.”

“And you didn’t think that was important to mention to me twelve hours ago?”

Fox stuffed his hands into his pants pockets. “I wasn’t going to sound alarms if it was nothing.”

“You don’t determine if it’s nothing.”

“And you do?”

“I’m the head of this security detail, Fox. *Everything* goes through me. If someone gets a drop of piss outside of a urinal, I need it documented.”

Alright, stop being dramatic he thought.

“Look, I get why you’re upset, but—”

“Do you? This isn’t one of your solo ops. Collateral damage matters. We’ve got too much ground to cover and too little intel to go on for you to be playing lone wolf.”

Fox was annoyed, but she wasn’t wrong. “You’re right. I should have said something earlier.”

“You’re damn right.”

“Hey,” Rohan cut in, “reprimand him later.” He looked at Fox. “Did you find anything when you went back and looked?”

“There was a gray slash next to the panel. It could have been maintenance.”

“What does your gut say?”

Dahlia raised an eyebrow as she looked at Rohan.

Fox rubbed the back of his neck. “I don’t have anything concrete to go on, but I think it was a message from Tombstone. Almost like an eff you, I’m here, and I’m letting you know you can’t do anything about it.”

Rohan swallowed hard and looked as though he were trying to pass a kidney stone.

“That’s a big leap,” Dahlia said.

“He asked for my gut.”

“Well, what’s the next move?” Rohan asked. “We can’t just sit here and do nothing, right?”

“I just need to talk to Dahlia in private. No offense, but it’s not exactly easy talking about security in front of the object of said security.”

Rohan looked at Dahlia, who closed her eyes, shook her head, and sighed. “Could you please just give us a moment?” Rohan didn’t say anything, only got up from the table and walked out into the hallway. When the doors closed, Dahlia’s scowl returned. “Don’t you ever pull anything like that ever again. If it happens again, you’re done. You check *everything* in with me. Do I make myself clear?” She looked him dead in his eyes.

“Got it,” Fox turned away and took a couple steps toward the windows. “In light of our new terms, you’ll want to know this.” He turned back around and began to speak in a low voice. “Leon stopped me in the hall on my way over here. He said Jared leaves the compound for lunch.”

“He does. Someone from the security detail goes with him. That’s your big piece of information?”

“You said you wanted to know everything. Leon said we should look into it.”

“So now you’re taking direction from someone with zero experience in any sort of security matters.”

“Look, you said you’d watch him. I’m just asking that you follow him today, *personally*. Leon has no ulterior motive and seems like the kind of guy, while eccentric, knows stuff and sees everything. You said it yourself, you’d rather be wrong than sorry.”

Dahlia chewed the inside of her cheek. “Fine, but that means

you do not leave Rohan's side while I'm gone. He likes to go for walks around the compound after lunch. *You* will be there."

"Sure—one more thing—" Fox's phone began to vibrate. He pulled it from his jacket pocket. It was Strickland. "What's up?" he said, putting the phone to his ear.

"Can you talk in private? I've got something, but if you wait too long, you might lose your chance. I can connect you now. If not, window's closed."

"Okay, give me sixty seconds." Fox muted the phone and looked at Dahlia. "Can you kill all audio and video feed to the private meeting room?"

"What's going on?"

"I can't explain right now."

She glowered at him.

"I know. I swear I'll clue you in after. You just have to trust me."

They stared at one another, and finally, Dahlia took a few steps away and placed a finger against her comms and began to speak.

LOCATION: Scottsdale, Arizona – FVS Private Compound (Secure Call)

Time: 10:57 AM – Two Days Before the Global Tech Expo

POV Character: Fox

Fox stood inside the private meeting room, watching the door as he waited for the call to connect. When it did, he was the first to speak.

“Hello?”

“You have two minutes; after that, I’m gone, and you’ll never hear from me again.” It was a woman’s voice, calm, but worn.

“Who is this?”

“A.”

“A?”

“You’re wasting time.”

“If we’re talking, you already know why I needed to speak to you. I need to know everything you know on Dennison. I’ve scrubbed every ounce of available intel on him, and I still feel like I don’t know anything.”

“That’s how it is with him. No amount of preparation feels like enough. He’s always a step ahead. If I were you, I’d just walk away from whatever you’re doing that has you on the opposite side of him. Unless you’re his target, then you’re a dead man; the job’s already done.”

“Why’d you even take this call if you weren’t gonna be remotely helpful?” Fox paused. “You were hoping I could kill him.”

Silence then, “Look, he has his reputation for a reason. He calculates, he rehearses, does his job, then vanishes. His codename isn’t a gimmick. It’s finality for a reason.”

“Yeah, yeah. He doesn’t miss. If he’s so mythical, why are you still alive?”

“More silence, this beat longer than the previous. “I didn’t. He took everything from me. He killed me.”

Fox thought for a moment. *He killed me.* “You faked your death.”

“Harvey kills during what he calls *the quiet window*, it’s the twenty-four to thirty-six hours before you expect a hit to go down. No one

ever expects it, and that's always the mistake." Fox went over the timeline in his mind. "Your time's up. I'd tell you good luck, but he seems to transcend that."

"Wait, one more thing. How do you know all of this?"

"I was his broker."

Axiom.

Click.

Dahlia's arms were crossed as she stood in front of the door to the private meeting room. Fox sat on the table across from her with his hands folded between his thighs.

"Ready to tell me what that was about?" she asked.

"I phoned a friend. I just talked to Dennison's former broker. For some reason, he tried to kill her, and she faked her own death in order to get away."

"Okay?"

"She didn't offer much, but what she did we might be able to use. She said that he executes hits twenty-four to thirty-six hours before the most likely timeframe. If we consider the morning of the expo as the anticipated kill window, then we're about twelve hours outside of Dennison's preferred window. But, if we're smart—"

"We consider the night before as the preferred window, already putting us on the clock."

"Exactly."

Dahlia took a deep breath and put her hands on her hips. "What are you thinking?"

This surprised him. "We need to review Rohan's travel logs for the next two days. We have to assume Dennison will have eyes on him at every moment he leaves the compound. We flag anything that might cause heightened vulnerability. We take these away, and we force him out into the open. We're on the clock, but he is too."

"Not bad. I'll get started on that now."

Fox shook his head. "This is going to sound crazy, but this can wait. It shouldn't take long. I still need you to tail Jared. As long as

Rohan is here at the compound, he's safe." Dahlia hesitated. "I know," he said, getting ahead of her words. "I need you to trust me, but if you can't, trust that Dennison wouldn't be stupid enough to try and break into a heavily guarded compound."

Dahlia's eyes looked like they wanted to believe that Rohan would be okay, but her body was still stiff like she'd never move from Rohan's side. "I—"

"I won't let you down." It was the sincerest thing he'd said since he'd stepped foot in the Arizona heat.

LOCATION: Scottsdale, Arizona – FVS Compound, Perimeter Garden

Time: 12:48 PM – Two Days Before the Global Tech Expo

POV Character: Fox

Fox and Rohan walked side by side on the concrete path that snaked around the compound. The landscape was filled with bushes, mulch, and sniper rifles. The security team wasn't even trying to be inconspicuous and stuck out like a zit on a forehead. Fox scrunched his toes. This was their third time around, and his feet were beginning to hurt. The soles of his dress shoes weren't exactly made for cross-country. *Insoles might not be a bad investment*, he thought.

“What’s it like?” Rohan asked, breaking the silence.

“What’s what like?”

“Being a wraith.”

“Lately, boring.”

“And before that?”

Fox rubbed the back of his neck. “Every day feels like you’re Dr. Jeckel and Mr. Hyde. One moment you’re paying bills, or trying to figure out what to eat for dinner, the next you’ve got the dossier for a new contract in your hands, you’re scouting, gathering more intel than you’ll probably need—” Fox could feel his blood pumping. “It’s a rush. The prep, the hunt—they’re always better than the kill.”

That one made Rohan chuckle. “Do you ever get scared out there, scared that when you leave, you’ll never come back?”

“The moment you decide to live this life, you make peace with death.”

“You actually believe that?”

“I can’t afford not to.” Fox rolled up the sleeves of his dress shirt as the sunlight intensified.

“Who wants you dead?”

Rohan kicked a pebble they’d passed several times. “It could be anyone. People are afraid of what Genesis could become. It’s scary, an artificial intelligence that’s basically able to track anyone to virtually any place in the world. It’s going to change the game for a lot of

people with a lot of money. I don't blame them for trying to stop me."

"If you know it's so dangerous, why take the risk? Why not shut it down, or at least sell it in secret?"

"If you developed something like this, would *you*?" Rohan stopped, turned, and looked at Fox. "Look, if I didn't come up with this, it was only a matter of time until someone did. Better it in my hands than someone who would want to use it for unspeakable things."

"I guess." Fox didn't understand someone wanting that level of unnecessary responsibility. "Why'd you hire me? I can't imagine I was on Dahlia's short list of *consultants*."

Rohan continued walking. "Dahlia thinks I just pointed and shot, but I'm not nearly as dumb as she thinks I look. I asked around about this Tombstone guy after Dahlia told me that there were rumors that he'd been sent to kill me. I told her to find me a wraith to go toe-to-toe with him. You were at the very bottom of her list; she actually strongly advised against you. Something about something in Los Angeles."

Fox's throat tightened.

"I told her to let me read your file. What stood out to me was that it said you prepared meticulously *and* dressed like millions of dollars."

"You trust me with your life because you like my wardrobe?"

"Detail is important to you, down to what you wear. That's why I trusted you with my life."

Detail was everything.

"You don't beat experience with experience. You beat it by figuring out how to be what it hasn't seen, outsmart it, outmaneuver it. I also read about what went down in LA. You deserve a second chance."

"Wow, Rohan, you're going to make me cry." The joke was forced, but Fox stayed in character. "Let's just hope you chose right."

"Anything good yet?"

Fox sighed. "Your team is pretty clean. Dahlia was ruled out

immediately. Priya's holding a shit ton of animosity toward you, but she's clean. Leon is clean," Fox paused.

"And Jared?"

As Fox opened his mouth to speak, his phone began to buzz. He put up his index finger and slid it out of his pocket. "Yeah?" The phone was pressed against his ear.

"I think you were right." Dahlia was on the other end. "I'm headed back to the compound now."

"Everything okay?" Rohan asked from over his shoulder.

"You're about to find out."

LOCATION: Scottsdale, Arizona – FVS Private Compound

Time: 1:26 PM – Two Days Before the Global Tech Expo

POV Character: Fox

Jared entered the boardroom, and the color in his face abandoned him. Everyone in the room looked at him. Rohan sat at the head of the long table, Priya was adjacent to him with her laptop in front of her, Leon stood in the corner of the room, tablet in hand, but with a slight, mischievous curl to his lips, Dahlia stood beside Rohan, arms folded with a resolve crushing deadpan stare, and finally Fox reclined in the middle seat with his feet propped up on the table.

“Jared!” An insincere smile stretched across Fox’s face. “Have a seat.” He gestured to the one across the table from him.

Jared did as he was told, but with extreme caution. “We good?” he asked, rolling the chair toward him.

“How was lunch?”

“Good. I had Mediterranean.”

Fox was annoyed at how he was trying to shift the balance of power. “I didn’t ask what you had. You meet anyone while you were eating Mediterranean?”

Jared’s expression was one of amused suspicion. He turned to Rohan. “Seriously, guys. You can cut the shit, what’s going on? This a prank?”

“Answer the question, Jared,” said Rohan coldly.

Jared looked back at Fox and poked the inside of his cheek with his tongue. “I met a friend. We have lunch together sometimes. He lives in the Phoenix area. We’ve been talking about getting to catch up since I’d be out here for so long. I like my team, but no offense, I haven’t enjoyed being stuck with them all day, every day for the last two weeks.”

“Uh huh. This your friend?” Fox snapped his fingers twice above his head. Leon moved from his corner, dropped his tablet on the table between Jared and Fox, then returned to where he was standing.

There was an image of a white male with shoulder-length blond

hair and piercing green eyes, displayed on the screen. Fox studied Jared as Jared studied the photo.

“Who is this?” Jared asked.

“Swipe.”

Jared swiped his finger across the screen. The next photo was of Jared getting into the backseat of a black truck. On the opposite side of the truck was the man from the previous image. Fox didn’t think Jared could have gotten any paler even if they’d taken two liters of blood.

“You tell me. And, if you lie again. Make it a good one this time.”

Jared’s eyes darted around the room. “I-I—”

“You, you what? Were checking in to make sure the plans to kill your best friend were still good?”

No one flinched except for Priya, who had gone from mildly interested in Jared’s ball-busting to fully engaged in the drama. Jared floundered helplessly.

“You’re cooked. We know. Call off the hit, now, and I won’t have to break every bone in your body.”

“I-I can’t,” Jared said.

Dahlia took a step toward him, but Fox held up his hand to stop her.

“What do you mean you can’t?”

Rohan watched intently.

“I can’t because I didn’t order the hit. I didn’t know about it until Dahlia brought it up.”

“Bullshit,” Dahlia cut in.

Jared turned to her, his hands pressed against the marble table top. “I swear to God.”

“Then who were you meeting with, Jared?” Fox snapped.

Jared’s eyes went to Rohan; they begged for forgiveness for the next thing he would say. “He’s a silent liaison and information dealer. He brokers deals between people who have information and people who want it.”

“You little weasel. You were selling out Genesis,” Priya said from across the table.

Silence filled the room.

“Who was it?” Rohan finally spoke. He and Jared locked eyes.

“Ro I—”

“Who, was it?”

Jared swallowed. “It was S.I.C.”

Rohan closed his eyes and shook his head.

“Who is S.I.C.?” asked Fox.

“Signet Intelligence Corporation,” Dahlia replied. “They’re an Australian competitor based out of Brisbane.”

“They’ve been trying to replicate what we’ve done with Genesis for years,” Priya added. “Why would you get in bed with second place?” she asked, glaring at Jared.

“Because they have the missing piece,” Jared shot back. “What we’ve got, with Genesis. It’s fine for the beta stage, but for it to reach its full potential, there’s key pieces of code that they’ve cracked, and we haven’t.”

“I’m not a tech expert, but if you were going to screw someone over, wouldn’t it have made more sense for it to be SIC?” asked Fox.

“Unless they made him an offer he couldn’t refuse,” answered Rohan. “They offered you a share of the company, didn’t they?”

Jared’s gaze lowered to the table top.

“Pathetic,” said Priya.

“That’s all I did,” said Jared.

“That’s all,” Fox mocked.

“They didn’t order the hit. They only wanted Genesis’s base code. They were going to let it go live for the Beta stage, then, when we struggled to roll out the final version, that’s when they’d overtake us. They don’t want Rohan dead. There’d be no point.”

Fox stared at Jared a little longer before turning to Dahlia and nodding. They both looked at Rohan and shook their heads.

Rohan stood from the table and waved his hand in the air. “Get him out of here. If I see his face again, maybe I’ll be hiring a wraith for a different reason.”

“Rohan, I’m sorry. I had to.”

Dahlia moved around the table and stood next to Jared as he got up from his seat.

Rohan's eyes narrowed. Like a lion stalking prey, he walked toward Jared, meeting him face to face. Fox leaned forward in his seat. "I loved you like a brother, and you betrayed me, our friendship, everything we'd built. Now you'll get to see what I *have* to do."

Rohan turned his back before Dahlia escorted him out of the boardroom.

In the ensuing hour, Rohan was back at his seat at the head of the table, pinching the bridge of his nose, as he stared at the floor. Fox sat atop the table, and Dahlia sat a few seats down from Rohan.

"First someone's trying to kill me, now this. Are we any closer to figuring out anything about this hit?" There was an edge in Rohan's tone that wasn't previously there.

Dahlia spoke first. "As of right now, no, but we do have a new lead."

Rohan looked from Dahlia to Fox, then back to Dahlia. "Well, what is it?"

Dahlia and Fox looked at each other with glances that debated how much to reveal.

LOCATION: Phoenix, Arizona – Dahlia’s Hotel Room

Time: 8:17 PM – Two Days Before the Global Tech Expo

POV Character: Fox

Dahlia sat at the small desk in the corner of her hotel room. Her blazer lay at the foot of her bed, and her pistol sat on the nightstand. Fox sat beneath lamplight in the recliner with his hands laced behind his head.

“Run that one more time,” Fox said.

Again, Dahlia recited Rohan’s schedule for the next thirty-six hours. Fox visualized the timeline in his head. There were four events tomorrow that would require Rohan to be away from the compound: an early morning workout at a private secure gym in Phoenix, a mid-morning walkthrough of the Genesis demo at the expo’s venue, media availability, also at the venue, and finally a private dinner with an investor that evening.

“We can rule out anything at the venue. Security will be too tight to try anything.”

Dahlia spun around to face Fox, holding the tablet. “We’ll go through standard security checks at the restaurant for the dinner. The security protocol was developed weeks ago and gets updated daily if anything remotely changes. Transport routes are in the open and public.

“If we assume Dennison is watching our every move *or* has access to Rohan’s schedule—”

“His morning workout will be the biggest vulnerability,” Dahlia finished.

“I can’t imagine the city will be too active at five a.m. Show me the route.”

Dahlia brought up the planned route on the tablet. Fox scooted to the footstool and analyzed the map. He pointed to a stretch highlighted in blue. “No matter what route you take, you’ll still have to come through here. It was a good choice for privacy, but there’s low visibility and too many vantage points. That’ll be where he’ll hit.”

“Rohan doesn’t like to deviate from his routine, but he’ll have to

get over it. He can do pushups and crunches in his room.” Dahlia set the tablet back on the desk and began to rise from her seat. “I’ll go talk to Rohan and let him know we’re canceling.”

Fox chewed the inside of his cheek. “Or maybe don’t.”

Dahlia glared at him with her head turned to the side.

“You’re going to punt me out this window, but before you do, hear me out. This is Dennison’s window. Let him keep thinking he’s ahead, and we’re unprepared, then,” Fox smashed his fist into his palm.

“Absolutely not,” Dahlia said, frowning. “Rohan will not be bait.”

“If he doesn’t get his preferred window, that doesn’t mean he’s going to give up and go home.”

“Fine, it’ll just be that much harder.”

Fox pointed to the tablet. “If we get him here. It’s over. I just need an opportunity. I can do the rest.”

“No, Fox. That’s not a gamble I’m willing to take.”

Fox gritted his teeth and looked to the ceiling. Then, an idea sparked in his mind. “Okay, what if we don’t use him as full bait?”

“What does that even mean?”

He got up and started to pace the room. Dahlia’s eyes tracked him. “If this is his play, he’s already studied this route, and he’s going to again tomorrow. He doesn’t have his reputation by leaving anything to chance. He has where he thinks will be the best place to take his shot at Rohan, but don’t think for a second that if he shows up to do his prep tomorrow morning and he doesn’t like what he sees, that he won’t change that.”

“Okay?”

“If he thinks it’s business as usual, he *will* prep, and that’s where I can get him, but he has to think nothing’s changed.”

“I don’t like this.” Dahlia was now standing, and the two stood a couple feet apart with eyes locked in a stalemate.

“If anything feels too off, we kill it. I can do this.”

Dahlia continued to stare at him. He knew she was wavering. “I swear to you, if you give me this chance, I will end this tomorrow morning.”

LOCATION: Phoenix, Arizona – Hotel Rooftop Balcony

Time: 10:41 PM – Two Days Before the Global Tech Expo

POV Character: Fox

The wind blew, but it was only moving hot air from side to side. It'd cooled down to a modest eighty-one degrees from the day's high of ninety-nine. Fox leaned over the railing of his hotel room's balcony as he looked out over the city. He held his phone to his ear as he took in the specs of white light scattered across the horizon.

"It's late. Everything still okay?" Strickland asked.

Fox filled him in on the day's events, including Jared's betrayal, finishing with their new plan to catch Tombstone.

"That's risky."

"He's got the experience. I'll never track him down before he gets to Rohan. I have to outmaneuver him."

"If this works, are you prepared for what comes next?"

"I can't afford not to be."

The image of dead bodies spilling out of a hotel courtyard flickered across his mind. His nose twitched. The smell of burning flesh.

LOCATION: Phoenix, Arizona – Industrial Corridor Near Private Gym

Time: 4:51 AM – One Day Before the Global Tech Expo

POV Character: Fox

The sky was purple, and morning haze hung in the air. Fox had already ditched the tie, opting for an open collar. It was already eighty. He stepped out of yet another alleyway. *Another* blind spot. The final stretch to Rohan's private gym would take the convoy through a quarter mile of abandoned buildings and warehouses. Plenty of rooftops, plenty of hiding spots, plenty of places for Tombstone to put a bullet through Rohan's skull. He could spin around in a circle with his eyes closed and find a solid vantage point. He wiped sweat from his forehead and checked his watch. It was almost five, and he'd been at this for nearly an hour and didn't feel comfortable.

Dahlia would be expecting a go/no-go soon. Fox went a few buildings over and took the rusted fire escape to the top. He had a pretty good view of the rest of the rooftops from this one. He did his best to hide himself behind the legs of the dented rooftop water tank as he scanned the terrain. He hadn't tried *that* hard to be conspicuous. If Tombstone were here, he'd already spotted Fox. Fox just hoped that he was too confident to let his presence stand in the way of his assassination attempt.

Fox's eyes caught something a few buildings over and across the street. The louvers on the rooftop HVAC were all tilted at the same angle, except for one. It was a little *too* off for Fox's liking. Just adjusted enough for a sniper bullet to not get clipped by the louver on the way out. On his way back down the fire escape, Fox got a text from Dahlia.

Are we good or not?

I think I got something. Hold for now.

Fox's heart thumped in his chest as he crossed the street and made his way down to the building. This was it. He was here. There was a single ladder that went up the side of the building in its alley-

way. The rungs were rough against his palms. He glanced through each window before climbing past. Tombstone had the entire building as his playground. The barrel of his Beretta went over the ledge first, then he followed, slowly. The HVAC ducting was a maze. He couldn't see over them, and the slit beneath them wasn't large enough for him to see underneath.

Nostrils flaring, he stayed tight to the ducting as he snaked his way through, both hands gripping his gun. Gravel crunched beneath his feet. Sweat dripped down the bridge of his nose. He was directly behind the duct with the shifted louvers. The barrel of his gun pressed against the sheet metal, his face now beside it. The shifting of the duct wall was all his ears needed, and he almost didn't catch it in time. Fox pulled back as a mass of black crossed his vision and slammed into the duct wall. Before he could react, his gun was dislodged from his hands and skidded across the rooftop out of reach. The suppressor was snapped in two. Fox glared as *he* stood a few feet away, the unscrewed duct panel lying between them.

He had broad shoulders and a chest as wide as the state of Kansas. His black trench coat flapped as a breeze blew in. They locked eyes. This was Tombstone. Fox's eyes flipped to the pistol holstered on his hip. At the same time Dennison reached for it, Fox sprang forward, got a grip, and removed the slide, and released the magazine. He kicked it beneath the ducting and backed up. As if what had just happened was as routine as flossing, Dennison tossed the gun aside.

He smirked and rubbed the white stubble on his face. "Fox Duran."

Fox raised an eyebrow. "You know me?"

Dennison didn't answer. Instead, he charged like an angry bull. Fox had seen enough footage to know that the mistake Dennison's opponents always made was thinking that blocking would protect them. Dennison unleashed a furious combo. Fox evaded, but the last punch dented the side of the ducting. Dennison had power, but he was also deceptively quick for someone his size and age. Fox went on the defensive again, but the pace picked up, forcing him into a block

on the last punch. He felt his forearm explode with heat, but used Dennison's forward momentum to push him aside into the HVAC.

Fox dipped around a corner, concealing himself and resetting. He gritted his teeth and rubbed the aching muscle.

"You did your homework. More than most would ever do," Dennison called out.

Fox went on offense and rushed him as he came around the corner. He was quick, but Dennison was quicker. Nothing connected. They faced each other again.

"Do you even know what you're protecting?" Dennison asked as he moved sideways at a stalking pace. Fox moved with him.

"Whoever hired you wants Genesis gone or wants it for themselves. Let's not make this more complicated than it is."

Fox lunged in, throwing a faint up top. Dennison was too slow to counter, and his shoulder blades jerked upward as Fox caught him square in the stomach. It was like punching a bag of sand, but he knew he'd felt it. Fox's head jerked sideways as a meaty fist crashed into his cheek in retaliation. They both backed up. Fox spat blood onto the ground, his vision dancing a bit. He'd gotten cocky, just for a second, and it cost him. Fox blinked several times to compose himself, and Dennison sucked in air.

"You're sharp," Dennison said, "but you don't see the whole picture."

"If you're about to give a self-righteous monologue about Rohan Samar being a necessary sacrifice, you can save that shit. I don't care. I don't get paid for idealism. I get paid to keep him alive and kill you if need be."

Dennison shook his head. He circled again. Fox steeled himself for another clash. "You're smart, but you still just don't get it. I like you, so I'll help you out." He stopped moving. "You've been watching the wrong target. *Everyone's* a target." Dennison crouched, pulling a compact pistol from beneath the ducting. Fox threw himself backward behind the cover as a gunshot rang out and put a hole in the HVAC wall next to him. By the time he got to his feet, Tombstone had vanished. Fox snaked his way back to open space, but when he'd cleared the HVAC maze, the rooftop was empty. He

rushed to the edges and scanned the alleyway. Nothing. The streets, nothing.

He kicked at the gravel. “Fuck.” He took steady breaths to slow himself down. He took out his phone, a missed call and two texts from Dahlia. He stared at the screen. *I’ve been watching the wrong target?*

LOCATION: Phoenix, Arizona – Dahlia’s Hotel Room

Time: 6:03 AM – One Day Before the Global Tech Expo

POV Character: Fox

Fox paced the common space between the bathroom and the door to Dahlia’s hotel room. Rohan sat in the chair a few feet away, and Dahlia stood between them with her arms crossed.

“Are you sure he wasn’t just trying to get in your head?” Dahlia asked.

“No, I’m not.”

“If he’s not just here to kill me, who else is he after?” Rohan asked.

“I don’t know.” Fox’s voice trailed off, and he patted his mouth with the palm of his hand.

“Do you think he’s going to hit the expo tomorrow?”

“I don’t know,” Fox repeated. The truth was, it’d be a buffet for Dennison.

“I’ll get you some ice.” Dahlia reached for the ice bucket next to the microwave.

“I’m fine!”

She turned her head and looked at him through a side eye.

“I’m fine. I’ve gotten it worse. When I get my next shot at him, I’ll take him.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,” Dahlia said.

“Sure, but if it does, I can take him.”

Fox continued to spin the possibilities in his mind. Who else was Dennison after?

“We can’t stall here,” Dahlia said, shifting her hands to her hips. “The expo is in twenty-four hours, and if Dennison wasn’t just fucking with you, we potentially have a catastrophe on our hands.”

“Stay with Rohan and run through the security protocol for the expo again. You should also probably reach out to the security detail for other high-profile people who’ll be attending.”

“That’s a hell of a lot of ground to cover. I don’t have time to rework the system in a day.”

Fox had finally stopped pacing and looked her in her eyes. “You’ll have to.”

“And what are you going to do?”

“Think.”

Dahlia raised her right hand and let it fall. “Seriously?” She rolled her eyes and looked at Rohan.

“This is why we’re paying him,” he said.

“Yeah, you’re paying me too,” she grumbled. “Well, if you want me to do all that, then it’s best we cancel the dinner. I can’t—”

“We can’t cancel the dinner,” Rohan said.

“How am I supposed to re-examine the entire security plan for an event this big in a few hours *and* keep you safe?”

“I don’t know, but you’ll figure it out. I have to have this meeting. This deal is key to the future development of Genesis. I *cannot* miss this opportunity.”

It was as serious as Fox had seen him in the last few days, and anything short of restraining him to his hotel bed wouldn’t be enough. This had to be massive to risk his entire life for.

With an expression laced with resignation and defeat, Dahlia said. “Fine.”

Rohan was the first to depart, and Fox followed shortly after.

“A word,” Dahlia said as he was about to step into the hallway.

He took a deep breath and turned in the doorway. “What’s up?”

She examined his face. “Are you good?”

“I’m good.”

Dahlia stepped in closer. “Are you *really* good? I don’t need you unraveling on me.”

“I just need some time to think,” Fox broke eye contact halfway through the sentence.

Dahlia snorted, as if disgusted with the answer. “The man I saw two days ago is gone. Find him. We need him back.”

LOCATION: Phoenix, Arizona – Fox’s Hotel Room

Time: 4:36 PM – One Day Before the Global Tech Expo

POV Character: Fox

Fox’s dress shirt was in a pile on the floor, and an empty mug, previously filled with coffee, sat on the desk. He was scooted to the edge of his bed with his head drooping between his shoulders and his hands clasped together. His head throbbed, and his jaw throbbed harder. He ran every scenario his brain could think of, and there felt like there were an infinite amount of possibilities to chase, but not nearly enough time to chase them. He picked up his phone and stood up from the bed. He pressed it to his ear as it rang, his other hand plastered over his face.

“Hey,” Nicole said. “Can I call you b—”

“I can’t do it.”

Silence lingered.

“Hang on,” she said.

He heard her talking to someone away from the phone before she finally came back. “What do you mean you can’t do it? What’s going on?”

He spent the next fifteen minutes verbal vomiting everything that happened over the last day and a half. As always, she calmly listened. “I can’t get this wrong. I screw this up, and that’s it.”

“You’re fine, Fox.”

“No, I’m not. I don’t know what to do.”

“You’ll figure it out, that’s what you’re gonna do.”

“What if I don’t?”

“You always do.”

“I didn’t in LA.”

Silence.

“Is that what this is about?” He didn’t answer. She spoke more quietly this time. “I don’t know what *this* is like. I’m not even going to pretend, but sometimes you don’t get the benefit of one-hundred percent certainty. It’s easy for me to say this, but you need to trust your gut and let what happens happen.”

Silence.

“And if my gut’s wrong?”

“Then it’s wrong, and you deal with what happens after.”

LOCATION: Phoenix, Arizona – Global Tech Expo Center

Time: 5:02 PM – One Day Before the Global Tech Expo

POV Character: Fox

Fox arrived at the expo venue, casually strolling through the security checkpoints. He'd ditched the jacket and wore only his button-up dress shirt and black suit pants. The venue had all but taken its final form. All areas had been roped off in accordance with the security plan, stages were set up with displays and equipment needed for demonstrations, and there were even personnel from a few companies going through final run-throughs of their presentations. He slipped past the venue's staff that zig-zagged from one end of the main floor to the other, babbling undistinguishable chatter. His eyes were fixed once more on the ceiling above the VIP staging area. The tiles he'd seen just forty-eight hours prior had been fixed. Properly aligned, just like all the others, as if nothing had ever happened. He didn't need them to still be out of place to find them. He hadn't forgotten.

Fox took the stairs back to the catwalk, putting him above the ceiling. In the daytime light, it was different, almost like a completely new environment for him to investigate. He didn't know what Dennison's plan was, who all he was targeting, or how he'd go about making his assassination attempts, but he couldn't believe he just let this detail fall off his radar just because he talked to Dennison's former broker. A high vantage point was always an advantage, and it'd been there since the start. He scoured every inch of the service deck again, thinking if he was sent to commit mass murder how he'd do it. He went a step further: if he were *Tombstone*, how would he do it?

Maintenance and security guards gave glances out of their peripheries, but didn't interfere. He knew he looked crazy and maybe even suspicious, but if he could just figure this out, he'd prevent tragedy that they had no idea they were so close to. Fox checked every corner of the deck, the cables holding the catwalk, *beneath* the catwalk, and the ceiling tiles one by one. The mark on

the misaligned tiles was still there, partially hidden, now that they'd been set back in place. He grunted as he hunched over the railing of the catwalk and listened to the commotion below.

Even from a hidden position up here, even a single kill would be messy, let alone multiple. Security would lock down the venue, and Dennison would be trapped, but if that was his play, he certainly had an escape route planned already, maybe someone on the security team he'd turned. It'd be up to Dahlia to identify that. Maybe he didn't plan to get out. Maybe this was just to make a statement for whoever his employer was, and there was no exit strategy. Fox's mind was spiraling. *Should I check the auxiliary exits? Dahlia could have missed something, just like the ceiling tiles.* He didn't have that kind of time. If he went back and checked everything again, he'd be there all night. He tilted his head back in frustration. Looking at the ceiling tiles again, his breath caught. *Everyone's a target.* He backed away from the railing. That couldn't be it. There would be thousands of people here and possibly thousands dead if Dennison were planning something of that magnitude. *It'd be a massacre,* Fox thought. *It'd be just like...* he bumped against the railing behind him as the realization set in.

LOCATION: Phoenix, Arizona – Skyline Lounge Rooftop, Private Dining Pavilion

Time: 7:41 PM – One Day Before the Global Tech Expo

POV Character: Fox

Skyline was on the top floor of a downtown Phoenix skyscraper, the entire restaurant rented out for Rohan's private meeting. Secluded. Civilian. Normal. A perfect place for an assassination, especially when everyone was busy staring at the obvious angles. Dahlia hadn't been careless. No one had. They'd just hardened everything that looked dangerous and left the rest to habit. It was like a good chocolate chip cookie. Tough on the outside. Soft where it actually mattered.

Sweat soaked through Fox's undershirt and darkened the armpits of his button-up as he rapidly pressed the elevator button. His frantic entrance into the lobby had drawn stares from civilians. He tapped his foot, the elevator seemingly moving slower and slower with each floor.

He put his phone to his ear and tried Dahlia again.

Five rings. Voicemail.

“Shit.”

The elevator chimed. A man with over-the-ear headphones bobbed his head as he took a step forward without looking up from his phone. Fox grabbed his shoulder and launched him out of the elevator.

“Move!”

The man yelled as he collapsed onto the ground, but the doors were already closing. The elevator climbed, and Fox untucked the back of his shirt and removed his gun. He released the magazine, then popped it back into the grip. His heart pounded. When he reached the top floor, he scanned the scene. The host lay against the bar, his eyes staring at nothing as his head lay limp in an unnatural position. Several of the tables were collapsed, with the chairs scattered around the dining area. Where was Dahlia? Where was the rest of the wait staff?

Fox rushed to the door labeled *rooftop*, both hands secured around his gun. He checked the stairwell before going in. Dahlia's unconscious body was sprawled across multiple steps. Her face was bruised, and trickles of blood ran down from her forehead and the corner of her mouth. He knelt down and checked her pulse; she was alive. He took the stairs two at a time, and the Arizona heat hit him again as he stepped out onto the rooftop. A mix of purple and orange painted the Phoenix horizon, and he could see the entire city from where he stood. At the far end of the roof, the only occupied table, Rohan sat across from Dennison, who was dressed in a black button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled up and an apron draped down his front.

Rohan was the first to turn, and Dennison wasn't far behind. Before Fox could get a clear shot, he had already moved and positioned himself behind Rohan, using him as a shield.

"Impressive," said Dennison dryly. "Maybe you've got a future in this business after all."

Fox walked closer, his eyes focused on the front sight of his gun. "You're a legend for a reason. You set me up for checkmate from the beginning."

Dennison grunted out a laugh, but his mouth didn't move. "Only made possible by how perceptive you are. And only works if you find the ceiling tiles. Not many would have."

Fox pressed forward. Dennison held his ground with Rohan restrained and preventing a clear shot. "You knew if you could get me to turn my head just long enough, you'd have the window you needed. You knew LA haunts me, and all I had to do was sniff that it might happen again."

"And maybe had you figured it out sooner, you could've prevented this." Dennison inched backward toward the edge of the roof.

"What are you doing?" Rohan cried. "Are you crazy? You—"

"It's over, Fox. You played the game well," Dennison said.

Dennison slipped a blade from his belt. Fox was out of time. He aimed at Rohan and shot. Dennison stumbled backward, and

Rohan dropped to the ground, holding his shoulder as blood gushed between his fingers.

“You shot me!” Rohan cried out.

Dennison was already recovering, and as Fox pointed the gun at him, his blade went airborne and sliced his hand across the top, causing him to drop the gun. Fox grunted, wringing out his right hand as blood oozed from the slit that’d open above his knuckle. When he looked up Dennison was already charging at him.

“Shooting him to hit me,” Dennison threw a massive upper hand, but Fox slipped it just in time, “you’ve got some nuts on you.”

It was a risky play, and as he figured, the bulletproof vest on Dennison stopped any penetration, but it’d done what he needed it to do. Dennison continued a flurry of punches, Fox evading each one. Fox backed, scooped a chair from a nearby table, and swung it at Dennison’s six-foot-three frame, connecting. It caused him to stagger, but he recovered quickly and followed up with a left hand that caught him by surprise. Fox’s teeth crashed together as the punch sent him off his feet and skidding across the rooftop. His vision blurred, and he tasted blood.

He wasn’t able to come to before his body was hoisted off the ground by the collar of his shirt. Fox forced both hands together and smashed them against either side of Dennison’s head. He howled and dropped Fox, his body collapsing a table. He stumbled to his feet and wasted no time, getting in several shots while Dennison was staggered. He felt like he was punching the heavy bag with bare knuckles, and it didn’t seem to deal much damage. Dennison planted his back foot, blocked a punch, then countered. Fox ducked, gave ground. He knew had that one connected, he’d be trying to pick his brains off the rooftop with a vacuum cleaner.

He stole a glance at Rohan, who was still on the ground holding his shoulder. *Stay alive*, Fox thought. He and Dennison traded blows as he continued to give ground. It didn’t matter how well he countered; the size and strength difference were beginning to become apparent. His knees wobbled as a well-timed block sent him to the ground again.

Dennison spat blood from his mouth as he advanced. “You can still walk away right now. You don’t have to die here.”

“I can’t let you kill Rohan,” Fox mumbled, exhausted.

“Yes, you can.”

Dennison was now standing over him, his shadow engulfing Fox’s entire body as if he were sitting in front of a house.

“You’re just gonna have to kill me then.” Fox gritted his teeth. “Because if I leave, having fucked this up again, I might as well be dead.”

Dennison smirked. “So be it. I respect you, Fox Duran.”

Dennison reached over to grab Fox, and as he did, Fox slipped the ankle knife free and jammed it into Dennison’s abdomen. He grabbed two fistfuls of shirt and pulled as hard as he could. The blade stunned him, and it was just enough to get Dennison to stumble forward. Fox slid his feet beneath Dennison’s stomach with bent knees. Rolling backward, he kicked up with everything he had, like he was hitting a new personal record on the leg press. Dennison flung overhead, and Fox let go of his shirt as the massive man went over the edge of the roof.

His legs dropped to the ground, and his arms were stretched out from exhaustion. The sound of Dennison hitting the ground was like a cannon going off, and the screams of pedestrians came soon after. Fox closed his eyes and sucked in air like it was the first time he’d ever taken a breath.

LOCATION: Scottsdale, Arizona – FVS Private Compound

Time: 7:14 AM – Day of the Global Tech Expo

POV Character: Fox

Fox stood off to the side in the covered parking lot as the Black SUVs sitting in a single file line began to fill up. From Rohan's team, Priya was first. She was so absorbed in whatever was on her tablet and mumbling to herself, she didn't even look up as she walked past. Leon was next, carrying a small bag with him.

He winked at Fox as he walked to the car. "Nice job, I get to keep my employer after all." He hopped into the second car from the front and shut the door.

Minutes later, Rohan emerged from the compound. He wore a black suit that was probably worth the price of one of the SUVs and a dress shirt with no tie; the sling on his left arm completed the look. He approached Fox, and the two stood face to face.

"Sorry, I had to shoot you," Fox said.

"Did you really have to?" Rohan smirked.

"I guess we'll never know."

Rohan used his good hand to shake Fox's. "Thank you."

"It's why you paid me."

"Any way I can get you to stay the extra day? The least I can do is buy you the most expensive steak in the city."

"There isn't."

Rohan nodded, then followed someone from security to the same SUV Leon had gotten into. Finally, after several checks and conversations with the rest of the present security team, Dahlia Kincaid was the last to say goodbye.

"You look like shit," Fox said.

Dahlia raised her eyebrows. "I never got to ask. How'd you know to come to the restaurant?"

"I didn't. Every part of the man who let hundreds of people die in Los Angeles was screaming at me not to. The one who wants to become the greatest wraith of all time told me I had to. This time I listened to the right one."

“I didn’t take you for the philosophical type.”

Fox shrugged.

“You did well. I wouldn’t mind working with you again if the situation called for it.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t.”

The two of them shook hands. “Take care of yourself, wraith,” Dahlia said.

They exchanged one last glance of approval, and Dahlia walked to the lead SUV. As the vehicles began to file out, Fox began to get a call.

“You made quite the mess,” Strickland said on the other line, “but I’ll take it.”

“Next time I’ll make sure I throw my target off of a shorter building.”

“Rohan Samar is alive, and the Fox kills the legendary Tombstone. The underworld’s going to take notice after that headline.”

Fox took a deep breath and stared out onto the horizon. “Good.”

STORY 2

“MARKED BY THE VALE”

LOCATION: Varnum City – Le Marbre

Time: 8:12 PM

POV Character: Fox

Terrence Hailey dove his fork and knife into his Poulet au Champagne and tore off a piece of chicken.

“Nicole told me you just got back in town,” he said between bites. “Vermont?” He pointed the fork at Fox, the reduction dripping from the prongs onto his own plate.

“Venice,” Fox corrected.

Terrence nodded, wearing a practiced look of surprise. “You travel a lot for work.”

Fox shrugged, leaned back in his seat, and sipped his water. “I’m a consultant. I consult where needed.”

“Nicole said you did contract work.” Terrence raised an eyebrow.

Nicole immediately set her glass of wine back on the table and glared at her father. “Dad.”

“It’s fine,” Fox said coolly. “I usually work on a contract basis. It can be anywhere between a few days to a few months.”

“What exactly is it that you consult on?” Terrence asked.

The question sounded genuine enough, but Fox took no chances. “I usually have to sign an NDA at the beginning of every job. My employers generally don’t like loose lips.” He smiled and finished his water.

“Sophisticated.”

“How’s your business going? Clearly, still well, I’m guessing.” Fox gestured to the scenery. Le Marbre was a Michelin three-star restaurant, and the process to get on the reservation waiting list might as well have been a job application. The poorest person sitting under the dim light of the dining room probably made no less than a million dollars a year and wiped their asses with twenty-dollar bills. There was complimentary shoe shining on the way in, personalized menu recommendations for each guest, and linen napkins replaced the moment they touched the table.

Terrence laughed, and it came deep from within his stomach. This too sounded genuine. “Very well, thank you for asking.”

Terrence Hailey’s corporation bought private properties all across the globe and sold them at a slightly discounted price in exchange for using his resources for renovation and construction. The company printed money like newborns pooped. The conversation devolved into idle small talk as the entrée plates were cleared and the dessert menu came out. Fox and Nicole looked it over, but Terrence seemed to have little interest in sweets. He cleared his throat. Nicole peeked, but Fox remained invested, trying to decide between the Tiramisu and the German Chocolate lava cake.

“Alright, enough bullshit. I think it’s time we talk about it,” said Terrence.

“Talk about what?” Nicole asked with trepidation in her voice.

It was the word *bullshit* that grabbed Fox’s attention.

“When’s it happening?”

Nicole’s eyelids squeezed shut. The skin was stretched so tight, Fox thought it might rip.

Fox played dumb. “When’s what happening?”

Terrence leaned forward onto the table and cocked his head toward Fox. “Come on, you two have been together for what, three years, four?”

“Two next month,” said Fox.

Both sets of Nicole’s fingertips were pressed against her cheeks as she shook her head.

“Might as well be six. When am I going to be walking my baby girl down the aisle to some slow-ass R&B song? When am I getting my grandkids?” Terrence rocked back and forth, exaggerating his shoulder movement.

“Dad!”

Terrence looked at Nicole. “I’m not getting younger. Who knows how long I’ve got left?” He turned to Fox expectantly. Fox’s expression remained unchanged as the two of them stared at each other for several seconds, the world seemingly going still around them. The tension broke as Terrence finally cracked a wide smile.

“I’m just messing with you. Don’t rush into anything. If you two

are happy, then I'm happy." Terrence laughed again, and once again it seemed genuine. "The look on your face," he said, wiping a tear from beneath his eyelid.

"You're a comedian," Nicole said, rolling her eyes.

"He's right," said Fox, a seriousness coming over him. Nicole's eyes darted toward him. Terrence slowly raised an eyebrow. "Nicole means everything to me." He turned to face her. "In a world where my job takes more and more of me every day, she keeps me grounded, on the best days and on the worst days, she's there. She didn't run when she could have, and she loves me for who I am. There's no one I'd want the opportunity to spend the rest of my life with."

Nicole opened her mouth to speak, but it closed immediately. Her eyes told him everything. Surprise, sincerity, love.

"Well damn," said Terrence. "I knew there was a reason I liked you."

"Fox I—" Nicole started.

He simply nodded and said, "I mean it."

LOCATION: Varnum City – Nicole’s Apartment

Time: 9:34 PM

POV Character: Fox

Fox parked against the curb in front of Nicole’s apartment and walked her in. She flipped the switch, turning the kitchen light on, and left her heels at the door. She hopped onto the bar stool and massaged her left foot with one hand and took out one of her earrings with the other.

“You are full of surprises, Mr. Duran,” she said as he approached her. Fox kissed her twice, sliding his hands onto her hips. She smiled against his lips, her perfume still as vibrant as when she’d put it on. “Just, next time let me know so we can rehearse.” She kissed him again, but he pulled back.

“It wasn’t an act,” he said.

“I know, but you didn’t have to go that hard just to impress him. He really does like you.”

“I know he does, but I meant everything I said. Everything I do, I couldn’t, if I didn’t have you. This couldn’t be anyone else.”

“Wow, okay.”

He couldn’t tell if it was the shock of what this potentially could mean or if she didn’t feel the same way. “Unless you—”

Nicole dropped down from her seat and pressed her body against his, kissing him again. “No, I do,” she said as if reading his mind. “We’ve just never talked about like, *how* serious we wanted to get.”

“Well, we’re going to have to talk about *how* serious we want it to be,” he said, mocking her.

She faked a wince. “Like now? Because I kind of just wanted to eat my dessert.” Nicole bit her lip.

Butterflies rippled through his entire body. “Definitely doesn’t have to be today, there is always tomorrow.”

“I like tomorrow,” she said in a low voice that sent a chill down his back.

“Me too.”

Fox glided down the stairwell as if he were floating. Cars zipping past on the expressway were the only sound he heard as he stepped beneath the night sky. He circled the Jag, opened the door to the coup, and sank into the red leather. The engine crackled to life, lighting up the dash. His breath caught. Something was off. The air in the car felt different. It could have been that it was warmer than it should have been, or a scent he didn't recognize lingered in the cabin. Instinctually, he reached for the gun strapped to the bottom of the seat and held it in his hand. The barrel was warm, not from use, but from body heat. He checked the magazine; all bullets were accounted for. He began to take them out one by one, and when he got to the third one, there was a winking face etched into the casing.

He gritted his teeth and got out of the car. Surveying his surroundings, he racked the slide, his heart pounding in his ears.

Silence.

He thought about going back up to check on Nicole, but as alarmed as he was, this didn't feel threatening, just annoying. He got back into the car, returned the gun to beneath the seat and reached toward the glove compartment. The corner of something black and flat stuck out from the barely closed glove compartment door. Not nearly enough to know it was there, but just enough to spot it if you were looking. He pulled it free. It was a three-by-five card folded in half. A simple, blue letter *V was* printed on the front of the card. Inside, two lines, an address, and a time.

LOCATION: Varnum City – Ormond Diner

Time: 7:27 AM – *The Next Day*

POV Character: Fox

The Ormond Diner was cozy and had a rustic look about it. There was *a lot* of wood, a fire place that probably got turned on late fall and into the winter, and deep greens to complement *a lot* of wood. They opened at six-thirty, the card told him to be there at seven, and he showed up at six-ten to stake it out. Nothing that raised any alarms, yet. Two minutes to seven, he'd gone in and sat down, declining to get anything. It was an order your own stuff and find a seat type deal. At ten past seven, he was antsy. A minute later, a man with a newspaper came in, ordered a coffee, black, and sat all the way on the other side. He wasn't here for Fox.

At seven-seventeen, he was annoyed and got up to order tea. In recent weeks, coffee had begun to feel too strong for him and made him jittery. At seven-twenty-seven, the bell above the door rocked back and forth as it sent a low-pitched chime throughout the diner. A woman walked in, sand colored skin, sunglasses perched on top of her head, and hair tied messily into a bun that said *I didn't try, but it still works*. Cropped leather jacket, jeans, and confidence that felt like it tilted the entire world. She was trouble with legs.

She sat in the booth across from Fox and didn't say anything, only looked him over as if trying to decide if he was who she was here to see. He waited patiently.

"I thought you'd be taller," the woman said.

"Sorry to disappoint you."

"Can't be disappointed if expectations are already low. You always dress like this?"

He was in one of many custom suits, navy, dress shirt, no tie. Fox smirked. Feisty. She clearly liked to talk, so he'd let her. The woman reached across the table, grabbed hold of the mug holding his tea, steam still rippling from the top, and took a sip. That one caught him off guard.

She made a face and spit the tea back into the cup. “God, that’s horrible, you drink this shit?”

Fox ignored her. “Your artwork was cute, but I don’t appreciate you messing with my stuff.”

The woman reached across the table and tipped the mug, sending tea across the table. “Whoops.”

Fox pulled back and scooted to the side, some of the hot liquid spilling onto his thigh. He grabbed a handful of napkins and spread them out on the table. He felt his temple pulse. “Why’d you invite me here?”

The woman draped one arm over the back of the booth and slouched into a reclined position. “Seattle, shotty, work. Fox,” she grimaced mockingly, “interesting methods, I wouldn’t have done it that way, but I guess it worked. The Durango job—eh. Venice, better, but—still pretty sloppy.”

Fox’s skin sizzled beneath the fabric of his shirt. “Thanks for the report card, I’ll be sure not to show mom.” The delivery didn’t have his usual confidence, and he knew it. “You want to keep playing around or are you just going to waste my time?”

“Don’t be so sensitive. You’ll get better. But—” she pointed a finger at him, “despite your slightly above amateur work, people have taken notice. *Important* people.”

“And are *you* important people?”

“I am important, but no, not me.”

“Then who?”

“This evening at eight-thirty, you’re going to show up at the Velvet Room, hopefully dressed a little better than this. They’ll let you in because you’ll be expected. You’ll know who you’re looking for when you get there. There’s an opportunity for you that if you’re as serious about all this as you think, you won’t want to pass up on.”

“That’s vague.”

“That’s what you get.” The woman shrugged. “And, you probably are already thinking this, but keep this our little secret, i.e., no Strickland. If he knows, we’ll know, and this is off the table.”

He didn’t like how much she knew about him. “Why would I not tell him?”

“Because you want what you think this might give you.” The woman stood up from the booth. “You’re swimming with sharks now, guppy. Don’t screw this up.” She walked up to him, lowered into a squat, and lightly slapped him on the cheek a couple of times. “Don’t think about it too hard.” She stood again and started to walk past him. “Nicole’s cute by the way, but the car screams *I’m compensating for something*.” Then, she was gone.

Fox’s fist was so tight his nails dug into his palms. He blew air out of his nostrils and let himself simmer. She was trying to rattle him. It worked, but he didn’t have to let it keep working. Even still, there was an uneasiness that settled in his stomach.

LOCATION: Varnum City – Fox’s Apartment

Time: 7:43 PM

POV Character: Fox

Fox sat on the edge of the bed, his hands clasped, his head drooped, and a tightness in his stomach. He was dressed, sharply. He’d told himself his fingers just happened to land on this particular suit, but he knew it’d been intentional that he’d pulled out his best one. Seemingly simple, but the fabric of the light gray turned heads. The shirt was molded to him like clay, and the subtle diamond pattern on the tie was electric. Normally, when he wore this, he felt on top of the world; this evening, he’d be lucky if he was even at the earth’s core.

He’d kept quiet, no check in with Strickland, his texts to Nicole went out with intentional delay. When he’d gotten out the shower, he picked up his phone for a moment, wanting to call Strickland to have him vet this, the woman at the diner, the symbol on the card left in his car, but he told himself he was overreacting. What he really knew was that he didn’t want to know if this was all too good to be true, and as long as he didn’t have anyone to tell him otherwise, he could believe that it wasn’t. He got up, shut the lights off in his bedroom, and grabbed his keys. He drove to the Velvet Room in silence. He initially turned the radio on, but the background noise made him more anxious.

He played it cool with the valet and flashed a smile with no emotion behind it as he handed him the keys. He was determined to fake it until his confidence came back. The Velvet Room was a suave jazz lounge with drinks marked up to the moon and a dress code stricter than a black-tie wedding. Fox traveled a long, dark corridor to the sound of music. There was a winding staircase roped off with a security guard in a black suit standing beside it. There didn’t need to be a sign for him to know it was VIP. As he approached, he opened his mouth to say he was expected, but the security guard didn’t even let him get a word out before unclipping the velvet rope and gesturing toward the stairs.

Running his hand along the edge of the balcony, he traveled another hallway. Another set of double doors. Two more security guards pulled both open and he walked through. A separate band played a low melody that featured a sax and a muted trumpet; it was like he was in a spy thriller, the casino scene where everyone knew the stakes. The room was a good size with a private bar, dance floor, and private booths elevated from the carpet. No one looked at him as he entered and walked beneath the chandeliers that barely gave off any light. He scanned the room. *You'll know who you're looking for when you get there.*

In the center booth, a woman with blond hair, wearing a navy-blue dress with a halter neck, sat alone with a martini glass, still full, sitting in front of her. Her back was perfectly straight, and even from a seated position, she looked as tall as the Empire State Building. Fox walked to the center booth and took the seat across from her. She didn't look up, only took a quick sip from the glass. When she finally did look at him, her icy blue eyes pierced him like a stake through a vampire's heart.

"I'm glad you decided to make it," she said monotone. She, in fact, did not sound glad. "Selene Vale—you've caught my eye, Fox Duran."

She said it as if the name was supposed to ring a bell. Fox unbuttoned his jacket. "Seemed like a lot of work just for a meeting. It would have been easier to just call Strickland."

Her mouth didn't so much as twitch. "How is James?"

"Cautious."

"Clearly, his wraith falls far from the tree."

"Your little messenger made your instructions very clear. She's a piece of work."

"Rhea can be theatrical, but she's mostly harmless."

"Mostly?"

"I have a job for you."

"Jobs go through Strickland, but I know you know that."

Selene ignored him. "A man by the name of Denton Carmichael is hosting a fundraising gala at his estate the night after tomorrow. I want you there. You're not to make contact. You will

observe him, his movements, his mannerisms, who he talks to, *everyone* he talks to, and report what you find back to me.”

Fox narrowed his eyes. “Is that a joke?”

“Do I look like I’m joking?”

“Just go to his party, watch this random man, then leave, that’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“Who is he to you?”

“None of your business. Should you accept, you’ll find that I pay very well.”

Fox rubbed his chin. In the wraith world, nothing was as simple as it seemed, and this was as simple as it got. He had every question. Why him, why now, who was Denton Carmichael, and what did this Selene Vale want with him? *Who was Selene Vale?*

“And if I decide this isn’t worth my time?”

Selene took another sip from her glass. This time, a fraction longer than before. “There is no greater name than mine in this line of work. If I say you’re valuable, then everyone thinks you’re priceless. I specialize in *making* people. Isn’t that why you’re here?”

It was like those stupid blue eyes read his soul. “There’s a lot of other wraiths out there.”

“You’re correct. You’re not special, but I chose you. You’ll have to accept that.”

Fox turned it over in his mind. Surveillance, public, only a few hours. It truly was simple; if anything was off, he’d be able to spot it. It was as much of a layup as one could get in this business. And if this turned into something he didn’t like, he could always get out any time he wanted.

“Alright, I’ll bite.”

“Good choice. I expect that you can handle getting yourself entry into the gala.”

“Yeah, I got that covered. When I’m done, how do I get in touch with you, or are you just going to send your carrier pigeon again?”

“We’ll be in touch. I think this goes without saying—”

“No, Strickland,” Fox tapped his temple twice. “I follow directions remember.”

“I look forward to seeing your work. Have a good night, Fox.”
Fox got up from the booth and left the Velvet Lounge.

LOCATION: Varnum City –Heat Check

Time: 10:16 AM

POV Character: Fox

Fox had spent the better part of the evening and that morning digging up everything he could on Denton Carmichael. He'd even had Rich scrounge the web for any surveillance footage he could come up with on his movements over the past year. He was a well-connected philanthropist who'd amassed the majority of his fortune from inheritance and smart investments after that. His money was clean, no criminal ties that he could find, and he was unproblematic on social media, with almost all of his posts exclusively tied to his charity work. This job was feeling sillier and sillier by the hour.

Fox walked into Heat Check, bypassed the counter, and headed into Rich's workshop. He wore an apron over a white t-shirt and had a half-mask respirator over his face. Mist from spray paint dissolved into the air, and a pair of air force ones sat atop separate stands, paint tape covering the Nike swoosh on each one. Rich set the airbrush gun down on the workbench and pulled the respirator off.

"I'd much rather sell you weapons than information. That shit's so boring, and I'm not that good at it."

"Good enough," Fox said as he and Rich dapped each other up.

"Isn't Strickland supposed to be doing this anyway?"

"He's busy."

"Too busy with what to be doing his only job?"

"This is freelance work," Fox said.

Rich raised an eyebrow. "Freelance work? Why don't I like the way that sounds?"

"Damn, Mom, you got my stuff or what?"

Rich peeled off the black, nitrile gloves and walked toward the desk with his laptop on it. "Easy, I got it right here." He picked up a sealed manila envelope and handed it to Fox.

Fox opened it and pulled out the Virginia driver's license. "Larry?" he asked, looking up at Rich.

Rich grinned. "Is there a problem, Larry?"

Fox rolled his eyes and slipped the license back into the envelope.

"Hey, it could have been Eugene."

"Thank you," Fox said sarcastically, pointing the envelope at Rich.

"Seriously though, you going to tell me what this is about? What interest do you have in trust fund philanthropists if it didn't come from Strickland?"

"It's just a good deed. Some light surveillance, that's it."

"Mhm. Well, when you're done with your light surveillance the I'm going to need a generous donation, getting all that on short order wasn't cheap."

"When have I ever not made good on the money?"

"Just don't want you to forget."

"Thank you, Rich," Fox called as he made his way back to the elevator.

LOCATION: Varnum City (East Varnum) –Carmichael Estate, Fundraising Gala

Time: 8:39 PM

POV Character: Fox

The Carmichael estate might as well have been Varnum City's version of the Palace of Versailles. It was a massive Beaux-Arts mansion sitting on sixty acres of land. Multiple fountains dotted the property, and there was a stone bridge that connected the estate to the main road. The gala was being held in the mansion's ballroom and was filled with elites yucking it up between hor d'oeuvres and alcohol. There weren't just Americans there; from the bevy of accents, Fox deduced that the event was open to multi-millionaires around the world. Fox Duran aka Larry Washington, moved about with a charm and ease that suggested his money was in abundance, and he was confident enough to not need to try too hard. An early investor in Invidia with a passion for ending homelessness was his story, and had wooed everyone he'd talked to that evening.

Fox finished off half of a crab cake as he searched the room for Denton Carmichael who had been elusive up to that point. He wandered near one of the two staircases that led to the balcony overlooking the ballroom. His eyes flicked around the room, and he nearly choked as he sipped the water he'd been nursing for the last several minutes. He blinked twice to make sure he saw what he'd seen. In the corner, talking with what seemed to be a couple well into their seventies was Terrence Hailey. Blending in with many of the others, he wore a simple black tux and bowtie, but his lapels had just a bit more shine to them than everyone else's.

What was he doing here? It wasn't like it was impossible for him to be within a crowd like this, but it still surprised him. Fox angled his body so he faced away from him. It was best that he kept his distance to avoid complicating things. He glanced toward the balcony and spotted Carmichael laughing with an Indian woman in a strapless dress. Carmichael was balding, with hair remaining only on the sides of his head. He had a large nose that felt like it took up

the majority of his face and big ears. *Good for him that he has money*, Fox thought.

For the next hour, he worked his way around the floor, always opposite Mr. Hailey, as he watched Carmichael. He would *randomly* converse with every third person Carmichael spoke with, using the same one-liners that became more exhausting to him, the funnier they became to the guests. At ten, Denton Carmichael made a speech thanking everyone for coming, discussing the story behind his fundraiser to open schools in Malaysia, and gave a toast to a better and more generous world. Fox couldn't understand how someone like him would in any way be connected to the wraith world. He was beginning to think this was just an errand to see how well he could follow directions or test his attention to detail, and that this wasn't the real job. After another half an hour of smooshing, Fox headed out back for air. He stood atop the stone terrace overlooking a golf course bordered by a small forest. He leaned over the edge and gazed into the night sky. He relished the opportunity to finally have some peace and privacy.

"Fox?"

Fox's heart skipped a beat, but he didn't turn. Maybe if he didn't respond, he'd go away.

Terrence Hailey joined him. He had a nearly empty glass in one hand. "I thought I saw you, but I thought, *what the hell would he be doing here?*"

"Mr. Hailey, wow. Didn't expect to see you here," he said, trying to sound as though he was supposed to be there.

They shook hands and leaned sideways against the balustrade of the terrace facing each other.

"Denton's a good friend of mine," Terrence said. "He's always got some charity thing going on. Makes me feel less greedy when I can contribute, *and* the man knows how to throw a party." Terrence looked him over skeptically. "Work?"

Fox swallowed. "No, actually, my uncle donated to the project and wasn't going to be able to make it, so he sent me in his place. It's honestly not really my crowd, but he wanted there to be

someone from the family there, and I guess he thought I was the best person to go.”

“Ah, who’s your uncle?”

Fox spit out the first name he could think of. “Larry Washington.”

“Never heard of him.” Terrence studied him and Fox played it cool, focusing on normal breathing. “What’s he do—”

Terrence’s body went limp, and he collapsed at Fox’s feet. The glass shattered as it hit the ground.

His head swiveled, looking for a threat. Fox got to his knees and tapped Terrence’s face lightly. “Mr. Hailey.” He checked his pulse. Still there. He looked at the liquid that had darkened the stone beside them. Was it poison? He glanced across the terrace; no one inside paid them any attention. He scanned his surroundings again. Darkness, quiet, no one was there. *What the hell?* He felt a pinch in his neck, and shortly after, his vision danced. He saw a dark figure that looked like a shadow just before his eyes closed, and he passed out beside Terrence.

LOCATION: Varnum City (City Outskirts) – Abandoned Warehouse

Time: 12:06 AM

POV Character: Fox

Fox squeezed his eyelids shut before blinking several times. His head throbbed. There was a dried streak of blood running from the top of his forehead down his cheek. He tried to move his arms, but his hands were bound behind his back, rope digging into his wrists like wire. His knees ached as they pressed against the cold floor. He tried to inch forward, but he couldn't move. The rope that bound his hands was tied to a beam that went from the floor to the ceiling. He looked around. It was massive with crates everywhere and a forklift stashed in the corner. *Warehouse, he thought, but where?*

He blinked again and looked across the room. His heart thudded quicker. Terrence Hailey was several feet away, bound in the same way he was. His head still hung between his shoulders. *What happened?* He tried to remember anything that was out of place outside on the terrace. He remembered the figure he'd seen before he passed out, but it still felt foggy.

"Mr. Hailey, are you okay?"

He didn't respond. Then—footsteps.

Click, clack. Click clack.

Selene Vale emerged from the shadows, stepping into the moonlight that bled through the windows. She wore a dark gray dress, much more conservative than what he'd seen her in at the Velvet Room, heels, and a long black coat with black fur around the collar. She ignored him, walked over to Terrence, and examined him before slapping his face several times. His body jerked to life. He struggled against his restraints, slightly more animated than Fox had been, but not completely panicked.

"What the hell is going on?" Fox asked.

Selene looked at him with disdain and then left his line of sight. *Click clack. Click clack.* When she returned, she carried a wooden chair. She sat it halfway between him and Terrence, but didn't block

their view of each other. She took a seat and crossed one leg over the other with that annoyingly perfect posture.

“Are you going to start talking or what?” He continued to pull against the rope.

“You wanted to be made. You wanted to be something greater than you were. I can give you that, but there’s always a price.”

He narrowed his eyes. “What are you talking about. *You* gave me this job.”

The blue eyes just stared at him. “And you took it.”

Fox thought for a moment. “This was never about Denton Carmichael, was it?”

“No,” Selene answered.

“Fox, what’s going on?” Terrence asked. “Does this have to do with someone you’re working for?”

Fox didn’t answer him. In his mind, he was still trying to preserve his secret.

If such a thing were even possible, Fox swore he saw the slightest smirk on Selene’s lips.

“Cut the act, Terrence. Do you really want your final moments to be more lies?”

Fox looked at Terrence, who didn’t seem surprised in the least by her words. “What is she talking about?” *More lies?*

“He knows you’re a wraith,” Selene interrupted. “He knows because everyone in the criminal underworld knows who the wraiths are.”

Criminal—what? “He’s not a part of this. Just let him go and I’ll—I” Fox turned back to Terrence. “I don’t know what she’s talking about. Just—Just tell her your company buys land and does construction and—and you give away money to the poor.” Back to Selene, “I don’t know who you think he is, he’s not.”

Selene shook her head.

“She’s telling the truth,” Terrence said, breaking his silence.

“What? No. You’re not—”

“It’s all true. I know you’re a wraith. I always have.”

Fox pulled closer to the beam. “Why didn’t you say anything? Why would you let Nicole—”

“Because it’d make it that much easier to cash in on a favor when he needed one,” Selene said.

“I didn’t think *I’d* ever have to be the one to go first. I was waiting for you to slip up, do something that would make you have to tell me the truth. It never happened,” Terrence said.

“This is insane,” Fox said quietly.

“The empire that Terrence Hailey has built is as dirty as any. He’s profited off the back of extortion, deceit—murder. He keeps his pile of shit shiny, but he’s not the man he claims to be.”

“Neither am I. Few people are. I don’t care. He doesn’t need to die.”

“Yes, he does,” Selene continued. “But, not for anything he’s done.”

Selene snapped her fingers. Fox’s eyes widened. As if materialized from thin air, a figure wearing a sleek black body suit and matching mask that covered its face appeared next to Selene. It was a woman. *The figure from the terrace*. A knife with a six-inch blade was strapped to each thigh. The woman reached for the mask and pulled it off. It was the woman Fox had met with at the diner. The woman Selene had called *Rhea*. Her hair paraded down her cheeks as she shook out her curls.

“Surprise,” she mocked. She walked over and squatted in front of Fox. “Don’t look so happy to see me.” She caressed his face with one hand and kissed his forehead. What came next was a slap that sent his head sideways. His ears rang, and the taste of blood filled his mouth. It was stronger than it should have been, reminding him of the hook he’d caught from Tombstone.

“I don’t know what he did to you, but you don’t have to do this,” Fox said, looking at Terrence, then Selene.

“Oh, I won’t be doing anything,” Selene said.

Rhea unsheathed one of the knives and, with one motion, cut his hands free. “Get up,” she said.

Fox just looked at her.

“Get—up.”

She grabbed hold of his shirt and forced Fox to his feet.

She put the knife to his throat. Even its light touch felt like it cut

his skin. “Try anything, and I’ll gut you and watch your intestines spill on the floor. Now walk the plank, big boy.” She pointed the knife toward Terrence and shoved him forward.

Fox moved slowly. He didn’t even think of an escape route. He didn’t dare test the woman’s threat. When he was only a couple of feet away from Terrence, he could see the sweat on his forehead as they looked at each other. Rhea handed him the knife. The blade glistened in the moonlight. Engraved on one side was the word *GONE*.

“What am I supposed to do with that?”

“I think we both know,” Rhea said.

Fox’s throat tightened. “I can’t.”

“Aw, is your wittle girlfriend gonna be sad?”

“You’re sick!” Fox turned his head to Selene. “I’ll do whatever. I’ll—I’ll, I’ll work for you, I’ll kill Denton Carmichael I’ll—”

“Take the knife, Fox,” Selene said.

Rhea lifted it toward him. He stared at it for what felt like years. His hand trembled as he finally took it. He looked at Terrence, and what he saw wasn’t fear, it wasn’t anger, it was acceptance.

“What did you do?” Fox pleaded with him.

“This day was inevitable,” Terrence said. “I just didn’t think it’d be this soon.”

“I can’t,” Fox’s voice trembled.

“Welp, that’s not an option,” the woman said. She kicked the back of his leg, and he collapsed to his knees. She unsheathed the other knife. Engraved on its blade, the word *HERE*. “Don’t make me tell you again.”

Fox looked at the knife and then at Terrence. There was a faint smile on his face.

“It’s okay, Fox. I’m leaving Nicole in your hands. Protect her. Can you promise me that?”

“I—I—”

“Promise me, Fox.”

“I promise.”

“She can never know. She can never know what I’ve done. Can you promise me that too?”

His cheeks were burning. His whole body trembled. "I promise."
"Good, now do what you have to do."

"Make it slow," Rhea said.

He allowed himself to black out for the next few seconds. He leaned forward. The blade didn't face much resistance, just slight pressure, and then a grunt escaped Terrence's mouth. The blade continued to sink into his flesh, Fox kept going until the warmth of blood touched his hand.

"Holddd it," Rhea said, gloating.

The groan echoed in Fox's ears, the gurgle of blood. Terrence's body eventually slumped against Fox's. He pulled the knife free, and Terrence's body hung lifelessly, held up by the restraints. Fox wanted to throw up. He couldn't breathe. His eyes stung as he stayed on his knees.

"Good boy. I'll take this." The woman pulled the blade from his grasp and wiped the blood on Fox's shirt.

Silence, then once again *Click, clack. Click, clack.*

He didn't need to see her. He felt Selene's presence over him.

"I'm going to kill you," Fox said in a low growl.

"No, you won't," Selene said. "I own you now. You can keep living your life, business as usual, but when I call, you answer, and you don't even think about asking why. I don't think I need to tell you what your motivation should be."

He had no rebuttal, no witty comeback, nothing.

"Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes."

"Good."

Click, clack. Click Clack.

"You can't tell her," he managed to say.

The noise stopped, then, *click, clack. Click, clack.*

LOCATION: Varnum City - Fox's Apartment

Time: 6:02 AM

POV Character: Fox

Fox hadn't even considered sleep. He thought it might be a while before he was able to, a few days at least. He sat in the corner of his bedroom, back to the wall, knees pulled close, and arms draped over each thigh. He hadn't moved from that spot since he'd gotten home nearly five hours prior. He stared at the door as if expecting someone to barge in. Terrence Hailey's blood was still dried on his hand, his clothes rigid from sweat. His phone vibrated. His heart throbbed, and he clenched his muscles. He didn't need to look at the screen to know who it was.

"Hello?"

The sobs came first. "He's," *sniffle*, "Dead." *Sniffle*. Nicole moaned.

Her voice nearly choked him. *Play your part, Fox*, he told himself. *Play your fucking part.*

LOCATION: Varnum City - Varnum City Cemetery

Time: 11:24 AM (Three days later)

POV Character: Fox

Nicole gripped his arm as the continuous train of tissue worked its way across her eyes. He wanted his feet to sink into the soil beneath him and drag him down with the rest of the bodies. The funeral had been kept small. Twenty people were there, including the minister. Nicole sobbed, but he couldn't hear her. The minister spoke, but he couldn't hear him. They were all muffled sounds as he stared at Terrence Hailey's brown casket from behind his sunglasses. His eyes darted off to the distance. Amongst the tombstones, a tree. For a brief moment, he could have sworn he saw Rhea appear. He blinked, and no one was there, but that didn't mean that she hadn't been.

Netflix was paused, and Nicole was curled into Fox with her feet up on her couch. He'd suggested an unstructured evening of takeout and whatever movie she wanted to let her just be and not try to fix anything. However, it was really for himself. *He* needed to be distracted. *He* was the one who wouldn't be able to hold up under the silence. As the day had dragged on, funeral, visitors, and now, he'd prepared himself to tell her everything. It would take some time, but she'd forgive him. She had to. It wasn't his fault; It was Selene and Rhea who'd made him. He opened his mouth, but then he heard Terrence's voice as if he were standing behind him.

She can never know. She can never know what I've done.

The sobbing started again. He pulled her tighter, but her touch felt numbing.

Nicole pulled away, just enough to be able to look him in the face. Her cheeks were wet, blood vessels zig-zagging across her eyes. "I want you to kill them."

"What?" For a moment, he thought she knew.

“I want you to find who did this and kill them,” Nicole said.

“That’s not going to bring him back.”

“I don’t care. Talk to Strickland, have him make calls or whatever it is he does and find them. *And* I want to be there.”

“I hate to be the one to tell you this, but that’s not a good idea, for anyone.”

Nicole narrowed her eyes into slits, turning her head to the side. “So *now* you have a problem with murder?”

“You know that’s not fair.”

“What’s not fair is my fucking dad is dead!”

Fox took a deep breath. “Nicole—”

“Don’t. I don’t want to hear any bullshit. I want you to promise me you will.”

The words *promise me* pulled him back to the warehouse. The knife was in his hands, Terrence Hailey knelt in front of him, their eyes locked into the moment that would define the rest of their lives, however long, however short. The blood was on his hands, first wet, then dry.

Promise me.

Just like before. “I promise,” he said.

Don’t let her know.

He pulled her in closer, not for her, but for himself. He didn’t deserve this, but she sank into him anyway.

LOCATION: Varnum City – Fox’s Apartment

Time: 3:12 PM (Two Weeks Later)

POV Character: Fox

The plastic bag from the previous night’s takeout was still blossomed open and filled with condiments and utensils. The Tai food had made it to the fridge, but that was it. The napkins were still crumpled next to the bag, a few of them used and darkened with grease. Fox reclined on his couch, legs outstretched, staring at the ceiling. He checked his phone for the seventeenth time that hour. He was babysitting his texts from Nicole, hyper-focused on any perceived change in her mood. It was the guilt starting to take over. She was the only person he’d talked to or seen in the last two weeks. Every few days, they’d hang out, eat in silence, maybe watch a movie, but conversation was choppy, getting there, but still very choppy. She was working more; he figured it was a distraction from the grief, and he didn’t blame her.

There was the occasional text to Strickland for proof of life, if one could call that talking, but he was ducking his calls. Even worse was the ever-present anxiety of *when* Selene Vale would pull his number. It’d been radio silence from both her and Rhea since the warehouse. There were days where it didn’t seem like it happened, like it was a nightmare and he could go on living his normal life, but then the vision of Terrence Hailey’s corpse lying on that concrete floor and Nicole’s sobs on a random Tuesday that reminded him it’d been anything but.

There was a knock at the door. Fox sat up and stared at it a while. Another knock. Was this it, his first penance? He got up, hood draped over his head, and adjusted his sweat pants, that’d twisted themselves at the waistband. He didn’t bother looking through the peephole. If someone was here to kill him, they could do it. He unlocked the door and pulled it open. It was Strickland.

“I had to see it for myself,” he said. His expression was just short of horrified.

“I’m busy, can we make this a phone call later?”

He forced his way in. “No, you’re not—and, you haven’t returned any of my calls anyway.” He looked around at the state of Fox’s apartment, dissatisfied.

Fox sighed and closed the door behind him. Strickland flicked on the lights, and Fox shielded his eyes. He’d forgotten what the place looked like, fully lit.

“You want to tell me what’s going on?” Strickland asked. He folded his arms.

“I’m grieving,” Fox said flatly.

“Mhm. May I ask what about *Nicole’s* father’s death you’re taking so hard?”

Fox gritted his teeth. “She’s my fucking girlfriend.”

Strickland walked into the kitchen and ran his hand along the island. “And I’m sure it’s been very difficult for both of you, but again you’ll have to help me understand how the death of a man you barely knew has turned you into a recluse.”

“I’m an empath.”

“Cute.”

Fox frowned. “Did this visit come with a purpose?”

“It did.” Strickland’s voice, now sterner. “In case you were unaware, in this line of work, you can’t just disappear. Especially not after the run you’ve been on. I’ve got contacts blowing me up for the services of Fox Duran and what do I have to tell them? He’s in mourning? When you stop working, you become irrelevant, your reputation tanks, your name no longer carries the protection it should, and survival isn’t as guaranteed.”

“They can wait,” Fox said, putting his hands into the pouch of his hoodie.

Strickland chuckled. “You may think that, but there are whispers that you’re a fluke, uncommitted, *unreliable*.”

“You know that’s nonsense.”

“Is it?” Strickland approached Fox. He wasn’t the most intimidating figure, nor did he have much swagger, but he wasn’t afraid of Fox. He never had been. “Have I ever explained to you how the *Index* works?”

Fox shrugged.

“Of course, not because you’d never been relevant enough for it to matter.”

That one stung.

“The Wraith Index is an ever-shifting backlist of the top fifty most dangerous wraiths alive. No one claims ownership, and no one even knows how it works. Some think it even updates in real time based on performance on a given job. What matters is that every client checks the list before hiring a wraith. I think you can understand the higher you are on the list, the bigger the job, the bigger the job, the more the money, but more importantly, the higher the rank, the more you matter in this world. If you’re in the top fifty, you matter; if you’re not, you’re just background noise. You’re in the top fifty.”

“Where?”

“Don’t worry about it. Just know you can be off the list just like that.” Strickland snapped his fingers. You once told me you wanted to be the best.”

“I do.”

“Then get it together or leave the game. You have a week.”

Strickland brushed past him, unlocked the door, and walked out without closing it. Fox didn’t turn around to watch him leave; he just stood there staring at nothing.

LOCATION: Varnum City – Fox’s Apartment

Time: 6:46 PM (Four Days Later)

POV Character: Fox

Fox came down the hallway toward his unit, a large duffel bag slung over his shoulder. The long-sleeve t-shirt clung to his skin from sweat. He was still out of breath even after the drive home. Today had been much better than yesterday, and tomorrow would be better. There was a small, private compound, Strickland had turned into a small training facility. Target practice, infiltration simulations, rooms fitted with adaptive combat dummies, it had everything. Since Strickland’s visit, he’d been running two-a-days. As annoying as it always was, he was right; he couldn’t go silent in this business. On top of that, if there was going to be any chance he’d find Selene Vale and kill her, he’d have to be sharp, and today, he felt sharp, more so than he’d ever felt. Someone like that would be well protected with the best security money could buy; she had Rhea, the woman who could somehow turn invisible, lurking around. She would be a major problem.

He unlocked the door, came inside, and let the duffel bag drop to the floor. The lock hadn’t even finished clicking before he had his gun out and pointed at his couch. There was a woman lounging on his couch like she owned the place. It was Rhea. She wore shorts and a large nondescript sweatshirt. Her foot bobbed up and down as one leg dangled over the other.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Fox said from behind the sight of his gun.

She peeked around the screen of her phone, the light from the screen glowing on her face. “Waiting for you. You’re not bad with that thing,” she said, pointing to the gun. “At least when you’re shooting at metal cutouts that can’t shoot back.”

“Did Selene send you?”

She put her phone down. “No.”

“Are you a wraith?”

“Obviously.” She got up from the couch. Fox stepped closer with the gun.

“What’s stopping me from putting a bullet in your head right now?”

Rhea flapped her lips. “Are you always this rude to guests?”

“You made me kill my girlfriend’s dad.”

“I didn’t *make* you do anything. You chose to. You could have always said no.”

Silence lingered.

She bounced her eyebrows. “We need to talk.”

“No, we don’t.”

“*Yes*, we do.”

“Then talk.”

She snorted. “Not here. I’m a lady. You’re taking me to dinner.” She looked at her watch. “Isaiah Duran has a reservation for two at Montrose Bistro at eight andddd, he’s paying.” She looked up at him with the tips of her fingers over her mouth. “He’s paying. What a gentleman.”

She padded barefoot across the living room and into his bedroom. He followed her, annoyed and gun now pointed at the floor.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“Well, I can’t go like this? And you’re not going like that. Get yourself cleaned up.” she slipped into the bathroom carrying a Goyard overnight bag. Fox stepped toward the bathroom to stop her, but she shut the door. “You have a girlfriend, mister, careful.”

He wanted to take his gun and empty the clip through the door. He fumed at the sound of his shower cutting on. His blood boiled. He went to the closet and picked out something simple, black, no tie. She didn’t deserve that. He went to the second bathroom to freshen up and get dressed. He didn’t know what he was doing or what this was, but something in him felt like there wasn’t a choice, and right now, compliance was the only tool he had. After he was dressed, he sat at his table aimlessly scrolling his phone, opening apps he hadn’t in months. He was fidgety.

The door to his bedroom finally opened. His throat tightened,

and he looked away, but it'd already been too late. She was stunning. It was a power play, and he knew it. The red dress with the open back, the flutter of eyelashes when she looked his way, all, a goddamn, game. He got up, but kept his distance.

"Aren't you going to compliment me?" she asked, closing the small black Louis Vuitton wallet.

Fox did his best to show disinterest as he looked her over. "It's loud."

They left, and Fox walked with a hurried pace, even if there was no one around to see, or no one around to care, he didn't like being seen with her. Rhea, on the other hand, took her time, seemingly basking in the moment. The drive was quiet. Rhea spent most of it gazing out of the window. Fox turned on the radio and kept it low to give himself a distraction. When they arrived at the restaurant, the valet took the keys, and they went to the host stand. The reservation was, in fact, under Isaiah Duran and not Fox. They were seated upstairs in a secluded section of the restaurant. His skin grew hot as they turned heads. Their table sat by the window overlooking the city. It was a beautiful view, and he was sure it'd be an expensive one.

They sipped water with lemon, both declining alcohol from the waiter. Rhea once again was staring out the window.

"You don't seem like the type of person who likes silence."

She smirked. "Don't act like you know anything about me."

"Why am I here besides you wanting to make a show and embarrass me?"

Rhea took a breath and looked at him. "You probably think I'm some sadistic monster. I'm not."

"I don't know what you are."

"You need to understand something, and you need to understand it very clearly." Her tone had changed. It was no longer playful, sarcastic, or mocking. It was—sincere, almost *real*. "Whatever Selene tells you to do—you need to do it."

"Yeah, you guys made that clear."

"I'm serious, Fox."

He looked at her.

“She will take everything from you, and she will enjoy it. She’ll take your reputation, she’ll take Nicole, she’ll take anything you think you can hold on to.”

“Is that what happened to you?” The condescension was only half of his motive; he was also genuinely curious.

“Don’t get it twisted. I’m a wraith, and she’s my broker, you’re the marionette.”

“Until I kill her.”

“Okay,” she said, sitting back. “Test that if you want to.”

“Why do you care what happens to me?”

“I don’t.”

Fox sipped more of his water and looked toward the ceiling, turning her words over in his mind.

“Fine. Let’s say I do take your advice. What does she want? When is *this*,” he pointed from her to him, “over?”

“Never. The best you can hope for is that you get to enjoy the life working for Selene Vale gives you. As long as you play your part, it’s not so bad.”

“Do you know what the Wraith Index is?”

“Of course.”

“Are you on it?”

“Obviously.”

Fox chewed on his tongue before asking the next question. “Where?”

Rhea smirked. She pushed back from the table and stood up. “I’ve gotta go to the bathroom, order the fried cheese when the waiter comes back.”

She walked away, but just as she was about to pass out of sight, she turned back, holding up the number two with her fingers. His shoulders tightened. She was bluffing; she had to be. He pushed it out of his mind and thought about her words. *She’ll take anything you think you can hold on to.* The waiter eventually came back, and for a reason he didn’t understand, he ordered the fried cheese. Minutes ticked by, but Rhea didn’t come back. He glanced at the wallet, still sitting on the table across from him. He looked around the room to

make sure she wasn't watching. He grabbed the wallet and opened it.

Empty.

He got up from the table and walked downstairs. There was no sign of Rhea. He tightened his right hand into a fist. The host said they hadn't seen her leave. Fox stepped outside and walked to the valet stand. He pulled his ticket from his jacket pocket and handed it to the man he'd given his keys to earlier. The man looked at him with a confused expression.

"What's the problem?" Fox asked.

"Your fiancée said she had an emergency, and you told her to take the car," the man said.

"My what?" He felt a blood vessel pulse in his forehead.

"You were with the woman in the red dress, right?"

"Yeah, but she's not—you let her take my car without the ticket?" Fox leaned toward the man with outstretched arms.

He shuffled his feet. "She said you'd lost the ticket."

Fox looked to the sky and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"She did leave this, though."

The man dug into the pocket of his jacket and handed him a small card. On one side was information for the restaurant, on the other side, a note written in black ink. His heart rate skyrocketed, and his whole body shook as he read the words.

I'll return it in the morning...probably. Remember what I said. See you around, blind spot.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Stay on the lookout for Volume 2!

Story 3 - "THE QUEEN'S PUPPET"

Story 4 - "A FRIEND IN NEED"

