

A Kill to Make

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“I want information,” Neera announced to her captive. He sat bound to her dentist chair, sneering at her and seemed ready to laugh when she stepped from the shadows holding a drill. She was used to this sort of reaction. She was petite, a few inches over five feet with her lab coat coming down to her ankles, and she barely weighed one hundred and fifteen pounds. She wasn’t considered intimidating by any stretch of the imagination, at least not until she proved she could cause just as much pain as any interrogator he may have dealt with in the past.

“And what are you willing to *trade* for this information?” the slimy man asked, his tongue sliding over his yellowed front teeth as his bloodshot eyes swept over her form. She was used to this reaction too, so she brushed it off. Just because she was a woman meant all concern from waking up to find themselves bound to a dental chair, slid away from her captives.

Especially given her size.

They started thinking of their situation as a porno instead of an interrogation and were always surprised to find the experience much less pleasurable than they imagined.

“You tell me who leads The Elite and where I can find him, and I’ll let you live.”

He did laugh then, a deep, throaty sort of laugh that made her hackles rise with rage. “You’re looking for The Shadow himself, no one knows his name.”

“And his whereabouts?”

He turned his arrogant smirk onto her, his eyes flicking again over the full length of her, and the last remaining speck of her patience evaporated.

Stepping closer to him with her chin raised and spine erect, she set the drill next to him then took out her mouth-prop tool to insert between his jaws. His eyes widened as he looked at it, some of that fear returning to his expression to her satisfaction. “W-What are you—”

“Open wide,” she said pleasantly. There was a strap around his forehead already holding him in place, all she had to do was tighten it to keep him from thrashing then wrestle the mouth-prop between his jaws. Once it was in place and he was moaning and cursing her, she raised the drill and angled it to insert into his plaque-infested tooth. “Been awhile since you saw a dentist,” she accused, finally securing her own face mask over her raven black hair, the plastic shadowing her silver eyes so no splatter of bloody spittle could touch her.

He screamed loud and high when she kicked on the drill and pressed it into the hard bone straight through to the sensitive nerve. Blood splattered against her plastic cover and apron, droplets hitting his face before being swept away by his tears.

Neera considered herself a good person. Not that that mattered... her father was a good person and look what happened to him. Caught in the middle of a battle that wasn’t even his. Her father had been so gentle. He never hurt anyone, especially not her, yet he was gone now, all because of the filthy terrorists who terrorized the country.

Well, she’d get her revenge; she’d make them pay.

Make *him* pay.

‘The Shadow’ was what everyone called him. The leader of those barbarians calling themselves The American Eagle Elite Force or The Elite for short. The Shadow had caused the death of her father with his lunacy and complete disregard for the consequences of his deadly actions, and as soon as she found him, he would pay with his blood.

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SHADOW PACED before the board he’d been strategizing on. His tasks written out in almost OCD straightness. He hadn’t been the leader of The Elite for long. Though they hadn’t been The Elite before him, either. They hadn’t had a name before he declared himself their leader.

He had taken charge of an operation of theirs that had gone sour. They’d been surrounded by The Buranian Royal Guard’s forces, a branch of military that hunted him diligently now. He’d intercepted their radio frequencies and taken charge, and under his command he’d lured the Royal Guard into the mountains where he had slaughtered them all.

He’d used nature as his main weapon in that fight, causing an eruption in the dormant volcano to crush his opponents, though some of the lava had gone off its marks and into the city below. The military had had it evacuated, but some stubborn individuals still stayed behind and eighty-eight Buranian deaths were reported, with nine ‘other’ deaths. He had snorted at that news broadcast, the segregation of Buranian and American never surprised him. Not anymore.

He’d assassinated a corrupt captain at the beginning of his takeover, his first kill, though they multiplied quickly following his debut.

The bloodshed only continued from there as he and his Elite were constant targets now of even higher branches of military,

and soon were declared public enemy number one. Something he was quite proud of, but it meant more danger for his people. More opportunities to lose them, but also to conquer and make a statement.

He felt torn.

Pacing in front of his board he debated his next course of action. Did he move in and challenge these forces at the scheduled public execution of some of his alleged ‘followers’ tomorrow, or wait it out? He knew no one on the execution list. It could be a trap, but if it wasn’t and it was just citizens claiming to support him, he’d have to save them, or it sent a bad message that he didn’t protect his own. It felt too soon though, their last battle had only been a few days prior...

Decisions, decisions.

“Shadow?” Commander Matthew, his second in command, called to him. Matthew was a former Marine and had been a great asset in battle and in rallying The Elite. Something Shadow wasn’t always good at, so he was glad to have someone like Matthew. He could focus on the strategizing while Matthew handled the people. People pleasing had never been Shadow’s best quality.

“What is it?” Shadow asked curtly, still studying his board.

“Barnaby has been reported missing, he was last seen at our celebration dinner last night.”

If he had one complaint about his Elite, it was that they celebrated too much. He allowed it per Matthew’s suggestion, saying some relaxation time was needed to bond the team together and to move past the blood they knew they had shed.

Shadow didn’t know many of his troop’s names, so if he did recognize one it was usually a bad sign. Barnaby was one who was a constant irritation to Shadow. The man had no propriety, was known for his sexism towards the women within his force and always questioned Shadow’s authority. If it was anything like

the past disappearances, Barnaby wouldn't be coming back, and Shadow wouldn't miss him.

He had added finding out what was happening to his guards and why they were disappearing to his to-do list. He had just thought they were deserters, but the number was becoming suspicious. One deserter a year typically before a big battle was expected, but there had been three in the last few months. Still not *too* suspicious, but worth checking into.

"I'll assign Devon to it," Shadow promised, General Devon being his third in command. A busy body she was, chomping at the bit for something to do until their next move. He'd happily hand this task over to her if it would keep her out of his hair for a few days.

"And your decision on the executions tomorrow?"

Shadow sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I suppose we'll have to swoop in, if for nothing else than to prove we support those who support us."

Shadow caught the little smile that pulled at Matthew's usually still mouth. Matthew typically wore a scowl, but he was more expressive than people gave him credit for. In that one upturn of the mouth, Shadow saw which decision Matthew had been rooting for. "I'll announce it and give everyone their positions," Matthew said quickly before turning towards the main lounge where most of the recruits were nursing their hangovers.

"Send Devon in while you're at it."

Matthew grunted his compliance as he slid from Shadow's private quarters. They camped underground though their base moved frequently which was absolutely necessary to avoid detection. They used the subway system to move about or the ancient pipeline that had long since been drained. It helped The Elite move freely throughout nearly the entire country. For now, their base was within a deserted ghetto in New York City, as safe a place as any for them.

"You wanted to see me?" Devon's gruff voice asked from the

doorway. Devon was a mix of things as most Americans were; her brunette hair was cut back into a pixie cut, her skin a sheen of bronze while her eyes a muddy brown. She, unlike Matthew, was not in the military before the fall of the world. She was a mechanic, a specialist who designed mobile prosthetics for amputees which was probably why machinery handling was Devon's specialty. Making her an amazing asset in warfare today.

"Barnaby's missing," Shadow said simply, erasing a task from his board and writing up a new one. A new strategy formed within him even as he talked to his underling.

"Good riddance," Devon snorted, and Shadow finally turned to her. One negative about Devon was her explosive emotions. She was impulsive.

"Be that as it may," Shadow said stiffly, "I'm assigning you to find out what is happening to our recruits."

"They're deserting," Devon said, practically spitting with disgust. "Fucking cowards, that's all."

"Find out for sure," Shadow ordered and turned back to his board.

Devon lingered for a few seconds more before cursing under her breath, "Fuck. What about the mission tomorrow? Rescuing our followers before they're executed?"

"This is a task for your own time."

"Shit," Devon cursed again quietly to herself, but didn't refuse or argue any further before she slid from his chambers. Filthy mouth that girl, though perhaps that was why she was the star of most of her comrades' wet dreams. That filthy mouth was the desire of most of The Elite, but not Shadow's desire. He desired vengeance. He desired total domination. He wasn't like the others, lust simply wasn't something he'd let effect his decisions, or his mind.

NEERA CLEANED HER INSTRUMENTS, reciting the information she had received from Private Barnaby's whining and pleading.

She certainly preferred his begging to his flirting.

The Shadow rarely stays in one place for more than a week, his whole compound moved with him making it a massive shell of a hideout. Hard to move unnoticed. For now he was in the ghetto, which was little help to her. The ghetto had grown over recent years, doubling in size as poverty increased. The Shadow could be anywhere, except for tomorrow. Tomorrow, Private Barnaby was certain, The Elite would launch an attack to defend their followers set to be executed, because there is nothing The Shadow cares more about than his image.

Predictable Americans.

She'd launch an attack of her own then, at the very least to find out whom she was dealing with. She had only ever seen The Elite on the news, never in person. She'd get close tomorrow, but for today she would stake out the ghetto slum, see what she could find out there. Neera packed her hand-made tranquilizer gun with midazolam filled darts from her orthodontist surgical drug storage. Her sedative of choice for all her surgeries, and now for her kidnapping and interrogating career.

After she had disposed of Private Barnaby's body, she walked through the Buranian portion of New York City with her hood pulled up over her black hair, but her silver eyes in full view. Whether run by Americans or Buranians, walking down Broadway was an assault on the senses. At one time the cursing and honking vehicles were like a never-ending symphony of noise she had heard, but now the main sense being assaulted was her eyes. Private transportation was a thing of the past. Not many had personal vehicles outside the government though delivery trucks and public transit was still available. Movement was restricted for the average citizen, so the honking through the city was gone, and Buranians had no need for yelling so there

was a peaceful silence through the streets, though the buildings were now painted in intense colors. Silver, gold or violet—the colors of Burania.

As she walked down the street once known as Manhattan, she watched the buildings become more rustic and unkempt. The ghetto held different sounds and smells and was where most of the impoverished Americans lived.

She slipped sunglasses on over her silver eyes but removed her hood. Here, in the slum, Neera had to wear shades to hide her eyes. She had to also keep her hair dyed to prevent people from uncovering her true race. Buranians were genetically altered, their emotions drained from them to make them more accurate soldiers and better citizens, but as a result every Buranian had white-blond hair and either silver, gold, or violet eyes. They weren't hard to uncover in a crowd, especially in a place filled with Americans, so she had to conceal herself and tread carefully.

The buildings were falling down around the unaltered, their clothes ratted and faces drooping with hopelessness. Neera doubted any of them would notice even if she didn't have her shades on, too distracted by their own pathetic existences. She circled through the piles of filth, the run-down buildings almost as beaten as whom they sheltered. She couldn't ask about The Elite, though she was certain some of these maggots knew exactly where they were hiding out.

Their support had grown almost as profusely as the ghetto slum itself. She couldn't torture some random American however, there would be no way to tell who knew what she needed to know and who didn't. She may have become more ruthless since her father's death, but she wasn't ruthless enough to torture random people until she happened upon one who knew the answers she sought.

She wasn't that desperate yet.

She had circled every street of the slums twice before she was



satisfied that she wouldn't just stumble across The Elite's hideout, so she changed her course of action. She knew where The Shadow would be tomorrow, so she'd just have to find a good place to view the party.

She knew the executions would take place in Summit Square, formally known as Times Square at the center of Manhattan. They had built a stage there, very medieval: dramatic and unnecessary.

When she returned to Manhattan, her shades off and hair covered, she touched the modern stage, the oak stained red either from blood or to make it seem like it was. Or both.

Looking up, she examined the extravagant buildings that the Buranians had preserved when they took over the country. Tall skyscrapers, some taller than others overlooking the stage below. She could find a safe place above to watch the festivities. Far enough away not to get caught in the crossfire like her father had been. She felt her fists clench against her sides, her jaw setting in a hard line and back tense with determination. Her revenge would be tomorrow, she could feel it. Almost taste it on the tip of her tongue.

*I'll avenge you, Papa, just watch.*

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SHADOW LED his brigade into the storage unit where they stored their weapons. This, like the rest of their hideout, traveled with them, which was simple with its design: capable of being loaded onto the back of a few trucks. They just looked like abandoned steel boxes used for storage on first glance, though they were much more complex than that. They snapped together and even had compartments for rooms and bunks built in. Originally their purpose was to be a bomb shelter, which made them all the more useful for Shadow and The Elite.

One of the units contained their fighter bots. The fighter bots

could curl into themselves and become compact for transporting, another useful feature though now they stood fully erect, their battery packs charged and ready for battle. They stood nearly twenty feet high with their steel exteriors gleaming after a fresh waxing in multiple colors, though mostly Buranian colors so to confuse their enemy. Silver, gold, and violet, just like the unnatural irises of the Buranian race.

The faces of the fighter bots looked like the faces of their riders, a strange sort of technology that morphed the appearance of the machine to its rider. A fighter bot was loyal, it bonded to its first rider, absorbing the consciousness and adapting to it. Making it harder for fighter bots to get stolen by terrorists, but luckily The Elite now had allies that gifted them never used bots so they would have no issues bonding or driving them.

Used bots were regularly thrown into the trash as the newer models were released, and there had been a time, Devon, being the mechanic she is, had to disarm and then reprogram them in order for The Elite to drive them. Even after her expert touch however, they still refused their new rider some of their special weapons. No matter how much reprogramming Devon did, they had permanently locked anyone but their original rider out of certain systems.

Inconvenient to say the least.

Driving the military bots took a special mindset. Most doubted Americans were even capable of driving them given their emotions were constantly present, but Devon was one of the best he had ever seen, and Matthew held his own as well.

They had to wear special suits and have suction-cups placed against their temples so the bot could connect with their subconscious. They were then inserted into tight tube-like coffins with oxygen masks tightly secured around their mouths and noses. They didn't drive the bots, they *became* the bots. The fighter bots inheriting the conscious mind of the driver, so the driver had a

whole new nervous system in place so as to control the movements of the machine.

One might think that time would have progressed technology, but really it had regressed for the general public. All the high-end equipment was reserved for the military only, the military also claiming sixty percent of tax dollars to build their fighting bots.

Finally, The American Eagle Elite Force was well known enough to be recognized and receive funding through other enemies of Burania who preferred the less direct approach. They no longer had to settle for the scrap bots they were able to find, and instead were gifted high end military bots that could give those soldiers a run for their money.

And under Shadow's command, they had.

He and his Elite were now considered public enemy number one though a great percentage of the public stood behind him instead of against him in support of the un-winnable battle to regain their independence. He gave them hope it appeared, so many doors had opened for him over the years. Too many for him to be able to tell the Americans that it was a pipedream, completely unobtainable. He would not be able to beat Burania forever. Eventually power would shift back to them, it was just a matter of time.

Getting into gear, Shadow zipped up his full-body suit that stuck to him like a condom. Extraordinarily little breathing room, but it was necessary to not have anything loose while driving a fighter bot. Shadow slicked back his russet hair, pressing an oxygen mask to his nose and securing the strap tightly as he climbed into his fighter bot.

There was a mechanism that lowered when it sensed him near for him to step into and be delivered to the control center of the bot. Once inside, he opened his specific coffin and climbed in. His arms and legs were quickly engulfed by the cushy material within and his nerves quickly numbed as they were absorbed into the machine.

Suction cups attached themselves to his temples and he quickly faded into the controls. His vision went from human to machine, his eyes opening into a green, heat sensor light as he checked his system, touching his mechanical fingers together one by one.

“Systems check,” he said over the radio.

“Check,” Matthew answered.

“Check,” Devon’s voice echoed over the line followed by several others from his platoon. About fifteen voices, all Shadow cared to assign to this mission. Probably overkill, but better safe than sorry.

“Good, today we wander into a trap to rescue our own followers. Keep your heads and follow my orders.”

“Roger!”

Shadow disconnected his bot from the battery unit, the sound of steam echoed as each of the bots in his chosen unit did the same. “Now, launch!”

At his lead each of the bots followed as the fighter bots began speeding through the ghetto towards Manhattan. Cheers from the American citizens lit their way as people lined the streets, knowing they would come to rescue their followers. Having such blind faith in him, almost brought a tear to his eye.

Times Square, now referred to as Summit Square, was within a mile and the execution was set to start in thirty minutes. “Matthew, lead group two around and see what we’re up against.”

“Roger,” Matthew confirmed, steering off with five fighter bots.

“Devon, take group three to set up the perimeter. I don’t want any surprises.”

“On it,” she took five more off in the opposite direction.

“Group one with me. Everyone stay hidden until they bring out the prisoners.”

“Roger!” came everyone’s quick reply. Shadow switched off

his system's tracking, making him invisible to any scanner and every system, but it also put his radio down and restricted his movements. This was fine for now; he'd need to get close and he didn't need to do it especially quickly.

Summit Square was even grander than it had once been. It was made into a trophy showcase for Burania's victories to further humiliate the Americans. Each building was 'preserved' or changed to suit the Buranian Empire. Painted silver or gold, making New York the richest city in the United States. The only thing ugly about it was the stage used for public executions. It stood in the center of the grandness, a wooden stage smeared with blood and red stains to make it extra intimidating. It sat for all passing Americans within the workforce to gaze upon. An ugly warning.

Shadow got into position, watching the crowd of mostly Buranians gather to watch the execution. It wasn't long before the prisoners were walked through the crowd that shouted insults such as: "Vermin! Traitorous rats! American scum! Terrorists!"

As uncreative as ever.

As they were loaded onto the stage, Shadow watched the televisions. They had once displayed blinking advertisements, but now had become a close up of the execution. As if at a concert, the screen became a zoomed in, live film of the stage so anyone who wasn't close enough to see could still catch every detail. A gruesome transition for the enormous television screens to take.

He kicked his system back on and accepted the radio transmission from Devon and Matthew.

"There are several enemy bots stationed above," Matthew declared. "About twenty, you were right about this being a trap."

"Their weakest point is the tallest skyscraper, it's too far for them to set a proper attack pattern so they left it unmanned," Devon added.

"That'll be our escape then, once we rescue the captives,"

Shadow instructed as the executioner took the stage and started his spiel.

“On this day, three American traitors will be executed for their support of The American Eagle Elite Force.”

Hisses of hatred filled the crowd below the stage to the executioner’s satisfaction. “This is not discrimination, it is *differentiation*. The Americans have proven themselves to be a brutal and belligerent race—” he continued though Shadow didn’t hear the rest, instead radioing Devon.

“You’re our best tactical force, go in and grab the prisoners and guard them from the open fire I know they’ll issue as soon as they see you.”

“You flatter me,” she said into the radio. “On your mark then.”

“Matthew, cover the citizens of Burania, I don’t want there to be many casualties that aren’t soldiers.”

“Roger,” Matthew said with approval.

“On my mark,” Shadow waited until the executioner brought forward the first casualty then radioed, “Now!”

An explosion erupted as Devon shot from within a silver-plated building, scattering shrapnel as she rushed the stage. As Shadow had suspected, enemy forces opened fire and Devon crouched over the stage so none of the prisoners would be hit. Matthew and his forces shielded the crowd as three of Devon’s guards scooped up a prisoner each and retreated.

Shadow sent his troops to keep the opening for their escape clear, and as they rushed off Shadow lined his gun at the building occupied by the most enemy forces and fired along the beams of the complex, causing it to cave in on itself and eliminate most of the enemies stationed on top.

“It’s raining bullets,” Devon said cheerfully through the radio as she launched into action, catapulting herself into the air as bullets pelted down on her. She had two enemy bots by the

throats, spewing steam before exploding, then she was rushing off to encounter the next enemies.

Shadow too ran up the nearest building and wrangled with the three enemy bots stationed there. With the crowd below having scattered, Matthew came to his aid and with well-aimed shots, they eliminated the three enemies.

“Shadow! They’re coming down on us hard here!” came group one’s report as they struggled to hold their escape route open.

“Retreat,” he ordered smoothly. “We’ve rescued our civilians and so our mission is a success. Retreat!” he ordered again, and Devon and Matthew came down to assist in getting everyone out. They stood before the opening; guns aimed for the enemies flanking them. They each provided cover fire for their units then Shadow himself before following them. Devon and Matthew ripped holes into the buildings directly beside them, which caused a collapse behind them as they fled, slowing down their pursuers.

“This mission was a success ladies and gentlemen, now return to base and celebrate,” Shadow said, irritated with the amount of cheers from his underlings. There was little to celebrate, but as Matthew had said before, they should celebrate every victory. Even the insignificant ones.