

Chapter One

Knives ready. Pistol loaded. A cord of rope is spooled on the mortar expanse beneath my feet, knotted off on a spike I drilled in. Its other end is tethered to a harness inside my coat, at the small of the back. The drill lies discarded.

I glance about. Nazi-Chicago. The sky is moonless, soaked with radiation. Crumbling under the sheer weight of fallout, with certain sections of the tarred atmosphere plunging to an uncaring city.

When one is up on the highest rooftop of the city, in the thick of the miasma, there is only blackness. Isotropy. The roof's outline, one large square, is detectable only due to its being a duller black than everything else. The cityscape, far below, is a mere outline, like Braille text on a canvas made of smoke.

All to say, my work is made a little easier. I shove my trench coat's collar further forward, prop up the cloth covering the lower half of my face, and, with a hand laced in Muay Thai ropes, grip the rope.

I step up to the roof's edge, the toes of my boots hanging over. The night is still and silent. I take a breath, grit my teeth as noxious effluvium singes my nostrils and tickles the back of my throat.

I tip over. Into an abyss, I fall free. My footsteps patter lightly against the building-side, which, like the roof, is no more than a plain of mortar.

Air whistles around me. Minutes pass. Pat, pat, pat.

A balcony emerges. Something that seems like a figment of imagination at first. Then, the murky impression of something real. Then, a half-oval of flags, with a smudged figure idling in its center. An Elite Soldier. The dread in the streets far below, the units of the army stuffed in this tall palace. The Warlord's minions.

The balcony rises, rises, rises...

I cinch my protected palm, my bare fingers, about the rope, kick off the wall, twirl through the murk, slash the rope with a knife, and drop free to the floor, my dark coat following in a loose circle. Like ink plopping to the floor.

Silhouetting the Elite is a square of brilliant orange from which no light spills. It's a gaping doorway where interior lamplight crashes against the thick zephyr of the atmosphere. An even, wrong divide.

It takes the Elite a second to realize that something black has morphed from the gloom, and then he sees that said thing wears a trench coat and has a covered face. He jumps in recognition, gives a terrified squeal that's mechanized through a helm of glass, sounding like a death rattle.

His instincts kick in. An automatic rifle, which rested across his armored arms, swings to

a crouched position. Great blinding light and thunderous sound shear the night, lacing the flags around me. He's too late, though. There is one breeze in this night, and it's me. I dance around the fire, swirling over knees and hands, my trench coat matching my movements like a partner in perfect step. I bring my boot about in a great arc and kick the rifle side. It twirls into the fog. I shift my momentum from a crouched position to a leap, and my shoulder rocks the chin of the Elite's helm. The smooth glass snaps back, makes him stumble, rattles my shoulder. I dive forward, not giving the man a chance to think or breathe. I tackle him to the ground, sit atop him, reach and scrabble for his arms. He slips them from my grip, batters my sides with them. I catch hold of one wrist, and another, pin them down. He starts bucking with his hip, snaps his helm into my nose. The cartilage in my nostrils trembles with pain, blood escapes, but that all can be ignored. I flick one of the wrists pinning his arm down. A stiletto pops from the sleeve, point pinging against an armor plate on the forearm. I snatch the hilt and plunge the knife beneath the helm, into the fleshy spot between chin and neck. The man gives a staticky gurgle, and the body goes limp.

Another addition to my ledger. *There is only forwards.* I gave him a quick death. That was the best mercy I could afford. I wipe the stiletto on a swatch of fabric between the man's pauldron and bicep plate, then fit it back into the strap in my sleeve.

I plug on, into the inside, my world switching from irradiated darkness to pleasant warmth in an instant. I'm forced to squint as my eyes adjust. Firelight radiates from the chandeliers, reflects off the plain coats of red covering the arched ceiling and the walls.

My feet sift through a thick, foresty, oriental carpet. There are two rows of paintings, one on either side of this hall. All grand, all with identical dimensions, all portraying images of

bloody war. Standing strong before each painting, like sentinels, are busts resting upon chest-high plinths. The faces of history's most wicked Nazis, glowering across the hall at each other, giving the sense of a great battle about to ensue. Some faces I recognize from the World War II era; others that rose to prominence afterward, in this world, I don't. Fortunately, my target is one quite familiar. I pass by the busts, scanning the faces—

Clomp, clomp, clomp. Footsteps, coming from around the corner at the hall's end. My fingers curl around a smooth, cylindrical object in my coat.

A mountain of gleaming black enters, standing in the middle of a T-intersection. A massive Elite, adorned in a reflective helm, a wide breastplate emblazoned with a crimson swastika, bulging pauldrons, and armored limbs. A menacing thing.

His helm freezes as it makes sense of what's on the balcony—the faint outline of his comrade. Then, it swivels to me. "*The Demon has come at last. Finally.*" He raises his rifle. I fling forward the object, a cylinder of cool silver. It rolls through the air—*poof*. Grey, stuffy smoke fills the space around me. I duck away from brilliant, deafening streaks of gunfire. I slither along one of the rows of busts until the Elite is barely in view through the haze, take careful aim with my pistol...

One shot, where the eyes would be, cracks the helm, jolts him backward, sends the rifle toppling. A second, into the breastplate, knocks him onto his back. I sprint down the hallway, coat flickering behind me, stone faces and images of bloodshed whizzing past on either side. The Elite scrambles to his armored feet, but not before I'm flying through the air, boots outstretched, thudding them right into the breastplate. He crashes against the long wall of the intersection, and I fall onto my back with a shock roiling through my legs.

Onwards. *The moment you stop is the moment you lose*, said the Grey. I rise up and struggle forward. The Elite is as relentless as I am. He pushes off the wall and throws a punch. I side-step it just in time, let it slide across upraised forearms, and punch him with roped-up knuckles right into the abdomen, where the armor is lightest. He bends over, gives a gasp. The punch was strong. It's enough to—

Movement, down the adjoining hallway. I dive back into the hallway of busts as a line of fire spatters against my combatant. He jerks and reels back against the wall. The fire stops in a rush. The huge Elite props himself against the plaster with an outstretched arm, catching a breath that statics through the helm. Meanwhile, I hear his partner hurrying for us with heavy, armored footsteps. A third Elite.

I rise to my feet, catching my breath. One thing about fighting, it's easy to tire. The Elite nearest rotates his helm toward me, and I can feel the glare spilling through the glass. Man, he's big. And very heavily armored.

In a sudden rush of movement, he snaps a pistol up from its holster. I do the same, faster, and fire at his weapon. Steel, blood, and finger-bits explode from his clutched hand, the one area lacking in armor. He roars in pain, clutching the stump, then sets off at a charge for me, a bull for the red flag. "Shit," I hiss. I seize my pistol's grip with both hands and deliver a flurry of gunshots. Sparks spring from his breastplate, his helm, a blinding showerwork of fire. It barely slows him down. My reflection looms in the helm's reflection, and he barrels into me, a rolling wave of brick. My feet leave the ground, pain shudders through me. I tumble through the bristly carpet, scramble to knees and elbows—

A comet of black hurtles for my head. I throw two forearms up just in time for the boot's

sole to smash against them, smacking my arm bones against my skull, shocking everything, sending me to my back. Stars loll against the ceiling. The Elite, his form blurry, stands above my head. He raises the same boot he just kicked me with, the sole aimed for my eyes. A fitting end for a—

No. Not done yet. Adrenaline bursts through me, sharpens my vision. I scramble for my sidearm—it's not in its holster. The boot comes down—

And my stiletto, instinctively popped from my sleeve, is brought to my face, held in two hands, point quivering up. Falling rubber meets skinny steel. The tip niggles through the sole, then through cartilage, and out through a plate of steel; the hilt hits my head like a piston. The Elite screams horribly and tips over, his spitted foot flailing wildly.

Stars. A swimming smear of color as I raise myself up. Blood washes over my eyes, from out my nose, stains my mask.

A second enemy. Yes, there's another, I remember now. Shit, I hear him. He's about to turn the corner. *Pistol, cover, pistol, cover, Victor!* Pistol. Five fingers, in slow motion, wrap around it. *Cover.* A big, black blob next to me. I find a handhold in it, the corner of some metal plate, heave it up, and spin it before me just as gunfire rakes its back. My cover jerks, releases garbled sounds; I totter back and fall onto my knees, teeter to the side, and my shoulder meets the side of a plinth.

My vision shifts into focus yet again, and I see my stretched, ragged, bloody reflection in the Elite's helm, my breath making smoky spots on it. I'm holding the man up. My reflection morphs and jitters as the impacts of bullets thud across his backside.

The fire comes to an abrupt halt. "*Move aside, Fred!*" yells the gunman from way back.

A breath of awkward calm. “*You cur!*” Fred screams at me. He claps the side of a fist into my temple, makes the world rock. I hold him nonetheless, desperate. “*Keep shooting the bastard!*” he hollers to his comrade. I jutt my hand deep into the breastplate, clench the fabric beneath, pull Fred against me. I reposition my knees and duck beneath his body and the bust just as the gunfire begins again. Fred hammers the side of his good fist against my skull, my neck, my shoulder as the other arm hangs limp, blood squirting from the stump. The hailstorm of bullets, beginning again, puts his body into an angry dance against me, botching his strikes. Bits and clouds of stone puff from the bust and dais. Pain stabs at me from what are now loose elbow strikes by Fred, my vision jolting this way and that. I curse, shove the pistol beneath Fred’s armpit, and fire at the gunman. What do I have—less than ten shots left? My shots land haphazardly around the hall, coming nowhere near the shooter. Meanwhile, the stone beside me splinters and crumbles, armor shatters on Fred’s backside, the air around us vibrates with heat.

This is—I’m clocked in the temple, barely keep myself righted—*not working*.

Click—the rifle-fire stops. Magazine emptied, reload begins. I peer over Fred’s shoulder and take aim—

His elbow crushes into my jaw. Pain. I shake it off, somehow. *New plan*. I tip onto my back, bringing Fred with me, his comrade still working the magazines. Fred becomes a wide-spread, knobbly blanket pressing me down. He plants the palm of his good hand and his elbow on the floor, pushes up and to the side, trying to escape my grasp and leave me open to fire. I reel him in tight, keeping nearly the whole of my forearm beneath his breastplate.

He cracks an armored-knuckled fist into my ribs. Breath leaves me. I gasp. I try to breathe, but no air enters. The gunfire begins again, raining down around me and on Fred. The

floor shakes, debris flakes off. Bullets and shards of stone thinly slice my sides, the cacophony growing louder as the Elite pads closer. I worm the pistol, somehow still in my hand, up through the crack between my chest and Fred's breastplate, turn my jaw aside. Fred figures out what I'm doing, pushes his mutilated forearm, gurgling with blood, against the muzzle, keeping it from the underside of his helm. I squeeze my eyes shut.

I fire. Flesh and bone squelch between us, glass spits into my cheek, the bullet impacts the helm's side and knocks it askew. I stab the pistol's muzzle beneath the helm, right against the fleshy neck. Fred struggles and squeals in a final act of desperation. I squeeze the trigger. His helm echoes with noise, and the body, dead, twitches limply to the rifle bursts.

Okay. Now, I can clock where the shooter is. I hear him, several strides away, circling to Fred's side for an angle on me. I dig my heels into the floor and swivel, readjusting Fred.

In a fight, a man tires. Or, gets impatient, said the Grey.

Still without angle on me, the Elite fires into Fred, keeps circling, keeps approaching, keeps firing into Fred as I keep adjusting him. I wait, and wait...

Click. He begins the reload. Mistake. I shove Fred's torso off me and fire my remaining three bullets into the shooter's breastplate, stumbling him against a bust. I slide out from under Fred, scramble to my feet, and charge with a horrible roar. Our collision smothers the bust to dust, and we wheel onto the floor, interlocked, like star-crossed lovers. We scramble apart, onto our knees. The Elite swings a punch, and I dive inside it, toppling him to the floor, me on his chest. He punches me, hard, in the ribs. I gasp with pain, return a punch, an effective one that grates his helm against the floor. Gives me time to flick my wrist, draw my other stiletto. The Elite thrashes and bucks, punches and kicks my sides and buttocks. I punch the helm again,

stilling it. My arm rattles up to the elbow, but it gives me the chance, amidst his struggling, to push the helm onto its side, my fingers spread apart, body-weight pressed against the cool glass. The Elite finds a weakness in my pin, starts to wiggle his hips out. I slide the stiletto, smoothly, up inside the jaw.

His limbs drop. I fall against him, sucking air. *Still not dead, huh?* I chuckle.

Right on cue, the lights shut off. Dark red emergency lights turn on, and a horrible alarm screeches.

I groan, push myself off the body, and stagger down the hall. ‘Kay. The Martin Bormann bust, on the right—no, the left, since I’m facing the balcony now. It should be on my left, seven from the open doorway. I locate it.

He had a mustache in this world’s history. Interesting.

Boots clomp in the neighboring halls—a storm of Elites, headed my way. I swallow, regard the bust, heart racing, breath entering my lungs in ragged lurches. *Alright, Stahl. You better be right about this.* I clamp Bormann’s ears and push in opposite directions. The bust groans, twists. When the eyes are glowering in the four o’clock position, it clicks to a stop. The painting that backdrops it, a depiction of the invasion of the Floridian coast, pops from the magnetic clamps on one edge and opens like a door. Writhing darkness waits on the other side.

Into the rabbit hole I go, fingering the frame and swinging the painting back closed. The bust, its old bones creaking, swivels back to its initial position.

Around me is a tunnel of rock made for someone far smaller than I am. The air is damp and cold. Very cold. Rising before me, visible only by the red light leaking through the painting’s canvas, is a climb of mishappen stairs, less wide than my shoulder-width. So, I twist, and I begin

the ascent, shoulders scraping on cool, coarse walls, head bowed beneath the low ceiling, trench coat flapping off my calves.

#

The fortress thrums with noise. Men shout. Boots stomp. Safeties click off. Machines of war hum.

I peer through slits of light as towering, reinforced metal doors screech on the other end of the chamber, revealing a great, barren hall. Elites stand at attention on either wall. A man and a woman stride between them and enter the room, and the doors are brought shut by attendants dressed in forest-green.

The man speaks in German, and his voice is oh-so familiar. “The generator halls?”

“Fortified,” replies the woman.

“By a whole battalion?”

“Two.”

“And our perimeter?”

“Moated by an army. Thermals monitoring the parapets.”

“Have lights cast upon them too. Make it daylight.” The Victor floats past her with hands clasped behind him. “This room. It’s been scoured?”

“Gordon himself inspected it.”

“And he—”

“Reported downstairs. Yes.”

I look down at Gordon, who’s snuggled between my knee and the closet’s corner, right against the hidden panel that leads to the secret passage. *Ah, Gordon. Head of security, still using*

Face ID, eh?

The Victor lets out a long breath and speaks with a dismissive tone. “That will be all, then, Frieda. Thank you.”

“Uhm, sir. Are you sure you wouldn’t like...” Her voice lowers. “Some company?”

“No.” Frieda doesn’t move. “I’ve warned you of our enemy’s capabilities.”

“The Demon is one man.” Something in the Victor’s countenance makes her gulp. “I’ll let myself out.”

A door clicks closed. The Victor goes to it and slides a series of heavy, iron locks into place. The room’s only entrance, sealed off. *Stahl spilled his secrets to the wrong Victor, it seems.*

I slink out.

A kaleidoscope of torchlight sprays onto a checkerboard floor. It glints brilliantly off the medallions decorating the Victor’s forest green uniform, form-fitted so tightly it could be a second skin. Poor guy. The cost power brings.

His hair—or, more accurately, his wig—is thick, slick, and the color of chocolate. Like the other wealthy Nazis, he wears a wig to cover his bald head. Except he isn’t balding. He probably shaves his head every day in order to maintain appearances.

I aim my sidearm at his ear. He’s fidgeting, foot-to-foot, fingers drumming against his sidearm’s holster. I get it. The not-knowing. The lack of control. It’s enough to drive a Victor mad.

I re-holster the sidearm. Won’t be necessary. Yet.

Maybe I could speak up this time instead of waiting. Perhaps it’d trigger a different fear response. But, no. I won’t turn callous in the final moments. I won’t let months—no, years, if

you think about it—of work diminish my carefully sculpted reputation. This method is tried and true.

My Victor spins at last and sees a pupil of shadow burned against a visage of luxury. Fear—great, sickening fear—flickers across his face. It transforms to calm so rapidly that if I wasn't also a Victor, I wouldn't have noticed.

Frightening another me. Still a surreal feeling.

“You—”

“*Quiet,*” I gutturalize in my ugly, infamous accent. Theatrics. A necessary step.

The Victor frowns at the voice. “Who sent you? Lehrman? Stahl?” I give him my blankest stare. He speaks airily, “What am I? Number ten? Eleven?” False confidence. I know it. *Does he know I know it?* “Hm. How did you sneak in, *Victor?*” He saunters toward me.

Lots of questions. He's not searching for answers. Of course not. But, I must wait.

And wait.

The corner of his lips flicker. *And, now.* Cool metal coils around my neck. The space between moments, between precision and the great pull, unveils. I shove my fingers beneath the chain and throw all my weight forward. The chain whiplashes, and I sense someone light-weighted flying, swinging over me in a great arc. It's a woman, thin and all in black. Her spine crunches on the floor; a braid of blonde following. *Ouch.*

She clambers to hands and feet, snarls animalistically, and lunges with clawed hands. *Paramour number two, perhaps?* In an easy instant, I jab a hand into my coat, find a hilt, and with both hands guide its tip to its target. There's a low crunch as it embeds itself into hair, skull, and brains. The woman flops unceremoniously to the floor. A corona of pink spreads beyond the

knife's hilt.

I know what I'd do if I were the other living person in this room who's not me. Indeed, a glint of metal catches the corner of my eye. But he's slow. I whip out my sidearm and fire through another pistol-wielding hand. "Gah!" cries the Victor. The shot echoes loudly. A commotion stirs outside, and the large, oak doors buck uselessly against the locks.

The Warlord has fallen to his knees, cradling his misshapen hand. The injury is not serious, not nearly as bad as the Elite's was.

His eyes, hot with rage, pivot to mine, and I return his gaze with a stare flat as glass. "You," he growls, "and those you care for will be—"

"Where is the key?" I say, my voice natural now, unadulterated by accent. He raises his brows. "No theatrics." *Anymore*. I move closer to him, my footsteps as delicate as a cat's. "You know who I am beneath this mask. What I've done to others of our kind. What I'm capable of."

He regards me for a moment. "You're going to torture me?"

"That is up to you."

"For...what? Answers?"

"Answers."

"To what?"

I cock my head. His face twists into a sickly sneer. "The stories I hear—how true are they, really? You, with your questions. You, carving the flesh from Victors?" *Carving, huh?* "Pulling their teeth?" *I suppose*. "Crushing their bones?" *Hmm...* I pull a bundle of glass from my coat. "You know, rumors are easier said than the truth..." His voice trails off as a string of clinking vials, all stoppered, unfurl from my hand. I let gravity tug them, one by one, from my

hand. They're connected and tied off by a string of yarn. Soon, the vials are snaking from my grip and coiling about the floor. Each vial, sparkling under the chandelier's light, is stuck with a square of tape. On each square, inkily written, is a unique world number. What's most notable, though, is the dark crimson swimming behind the tape. My garland of blood reflects in the Victor's eyes. He pales slightly. "Whatever do you need those for?"

"You know why."

He works it out in his mind. "To sneak through the multiverse, huh? You fool—what do you even seek?"

I bend down, putting roped hands, stained by blood, on my knees, and come nearly nose-to-nose with him. "The conglomerate of Victors. Each intent on domination. Led by a Victor who calls himself Alienus. Am I correct?" The Victor's raises an eyebrow. Feigned ignorance. "I want verification of those facts, evidence. I want to know which world you base yourselves in. And..." *Time for the uncomfortable bit. For us both.* I tug his wig off, let it drop to the floor, bring my blood-smothered face closer, so his eyes fill my vision entirely, "Most importantly, I want that world's key." *A multitude of truths. Pieces of a puzzle that together form an image I seek.* I clamp my roped palm and pink fingers on the crown of his glistening head. My breath smokes through my mask, grossly washes over him. He bristles; his face reddens. "You will tell me these things." *He will tell me one thing. Give me only a piece of the puzzle, keeping its image muddy. A false victory. Once my side project in this world is complete, I'll move on to the next Victor, and glean my next piece. A scythe to butter.*

A muscle beneath his eye twitches, his face grows more red. "How arrogant must you be to play at a monster in a realm of polymaths?" he drawls.

In this case, the arrogance seems warranted. I draw my pistol and thrust the muzzle, hard as I can, square between the eyes. He topples, sound asleep.

Oh, wait. I left my stiletto in the man's foot down there.

Oops.

I stride to the still-bucking door. It should hold. But, best be safe than sorry, and I need the time. I find a dresser and push with all my strength. It gouges tracks in the floor as it grates against the door. I locate another dresser, slightly smaller, and push it beside the first.

I pant a little, surveying the room. There, the bed. Four tall, spindly posts of wood, draped with silk. Layers upon layers of thick, white, rolling bedsheets, like ocean waves.

That should do.

I swallow a lump. Now, for the truly ugly sequence. I approach the bed, draw a thick, serrated knife, and get to work.

* * *