

JUMPING AT SHADOWS
SASHA NIKIROV

CHAPTER 1

I. Aiming High
Shadow

July 8, 2180

11:48 P.M.

Red splatters across the window.

The man slides down against the wall of the apartment and onto the ground, his head falling forward to his chest. Across from me the door rattles and flies open. A middle aged man stumbles in, eyes wide at the body bathed in shadow, the only light in the room coming from the moon's glow. Before he can get a word out, I lift my silencer.

He collapses next to his companion and I toss a glance over my shoulder to check the rest of the scene. Holstering the gun at my thigh, I reach for the button at the side of my mask and it releases with a hiss. Pulling the front up, I give myself a break from breathing in hot air. The artificial black and white of my vision sensors is replaced by blue, my eyes adjusting to the darkness. I saunter forward to pull the red soaked ID out of the first man's pocket, leaving the rest of his belongings behind on the floor.

Slinging a gloved hand over my leg, I look at my reflection in the mirror hung at the end of the narrow hall. In the darkness I can just see the outline of my lean frame and wipe away the spot of blood on my neck.

Alarms start ringing.

I click my mask back into place and slide the card into my pocket. The mask muffles the screaming tone of the alarm and I skip over to the living room window, humming a tune. I flick my knife open, scoring the glass with an X.

Another man bursts through the front door, but this time it's one in uniform.

"Hey! Stop right there!"

“Nothing to see here, officer,” I drawl, holding my hands up.

He races forward, his hand outstretched to grab me. Once he’s close enough, I deftly twist out of the way. He stumbles and looks up, eyes wide. I smile. And I kick him straight through the window.

The bloodstained glass separates, twinkling like diamonds as the officer flails, his hat swept off his head and into the wind as he plummets soundlessly from the skyscraper. I pull out a line from my belt, hitting a button on my remote for the winch I set up on the roof to drop down. The black rope peeks into view in front of me.

Then I’m on nothing but air, attaching my line to the rope before it jerks me up at break-neck speed. I keep one hand on it as I twist, watching my great city churn below. Neon lights reach my eyes, windows and lampposts and cars filling the space with a brightness that makes me giddy with laughter.

I climb over the roof’s edge once I get to the top, unhooking the line as my phone buzzes. I tap the side of my helmet and connect the call. *“Eighty-five degrees west,”* a voice threads through, sound waves visible on my display. *The next target is at the discussed location. Have you completed the first half?”*

“When have I ever faltered?” I ask, blinking three times to take pictures of the two IDs in my grasp before sending them over the encrypted line. He hums. *“Very good. Proceed.”* My equipment is already out, so I pop the lock on the case before me. “Yes, sir,” I mumble as I twist the barrel onto the sniper rifle.

Once the apartment complex is in my line of sight, I put one leg up onto the brick, my combat boot grinding against the old stone as I heave the rifle up onto my knee. I peer into the scope, the red circle glowing brighter as the viewfinder draws closer to the pre-programmed target. The outline of a figure appears and I focus until his face comes into view. With dark skin and dark curling hair to his neck, he’s clad in some kind of silky dress shirt.

Once I line up my shot I whisper, “Target acquired” and pull the trigger. The bullet explodes from the chamber, whistling as it flies through the air. He falls out of view, the glass window cracking. “Target down.” I take another picture and send it over to my client.

I hear a breath. *“Your payment will be routed shortly.”* The line clicks off and my phone vibrates. A new bank notification of 690 million yen anonymously deposited in one of my many accounts. I smirk, breaking up the pieces of my gun to fold back into its case. The extra outfit smuggled within is a simple gray hoodie and black jeans with new boots to replace the ones flecked with blood. Searching the rooftop, I find no trace of said blood.

Good.

Detaching the winch and rolling it back up into a pouch, I wipe an abrasive rag against the anchorage point to take off any metal debris. I tuck my mask into my duffel bag and change into the new clothes. A gust buffets against my bare face as I seal all of my equipment away, hefting it over my shoulder as I push the roof access door open and plod down the steps.

A woman passes me when I reach the apartment's hall on the thirty-fifth floor and she smiles. I give a polite smile back, waiting on the elevator as she unlocks her door and waves, none the wiser of my questionable activities on a late Saturday night.

CHAPTER 2

II. Dodging Bullets

Roman

THREE YEARS EARLIER

July 11, 2177

12:36 p.m.

I slide sideways as dust explodes from across the street, shaking the foundations of every apartment complex on the block. The blast throws me to the floor while screams rise to the air, rubble falling like rain from the sky. Stumbling back to my feet with my heart pounding in my chest, I throw the front door wide open, my breath coming out in rough bursts.

Three or four families dart out from a strange cloud of gray until I realize that it's heavy smoke. Bright, twinkling embers whistle through the air. This wasn't an earthquake.

As I take a step out from the porch to descend the stairs, a flurry of gunshots makes me leap back as bullets pierce through the haze, taking down one, three, five people running in the middle of the street. A middle aged man goes down first, clutching his chest. His blood coats the unforgiving asphalt beneath him. I hunch behind the iron railing of the stairs, peeking around the edge in horror as the shooters slink out of the shadows like wolves on the hunt.

Even in the way they're dressed, all sporting ragged and worn clothes that hang from their frames, they don't seem quite human. My breath quickens as I recognize swirling Yakuza tattoos on exposed forearms and necks, terrifying masks lowered over each face.

Then a lone figure steps out from the thick smoke. My breath stops altogether and the group disperses at the raise of his arm. It's a man from what I can tell, tall and thin with bright blue hair. More bombs erupt down the street, supported by smoke bombs of neon blue, purple, and a sickly green that looks like mossy water to hide their attacks.

Unfazed by the chaos, the leader continues onward as a group of young men dressed in matching blue race pass only to be brought down by bullets, bats, and shining knives from the masked ensemble. His face is covered from the nose up, but his brilliant white smile is visible. He grins like a devil as he holsters his handgun. I'm not close enough to see his eyes, but for a second I think he's looking at me as he saunters through the wreckage of my neighbor's house, casually stepping over broken concrete like you would a pebble on a trail.

Footsteps behind me make me flex, but I pause when I see my mother's face. Her eyes are wide as they take in the scene. She grips the door jam like death. "Get away from there, Roman!" she snaps, pulling me back in and locking the door behind us.

My father comes down the stairs next, a hand on my head to keep me low as we crawl under the kitchen table. He wraps his arms around us, planting a firm kiss on my mother's brow as her sobs come out in chokes, her hair a mass around her face.

We all flinch as another bomb sounds and over the near deafening volume I can hear my mother fervently praying under her breath as glass shatters somewhere away from us. I find myself praying as well. Shouts of wicked joy reverberate in the streets. I keep my eyes clamped shut as we wait for the vicious cycle to end, collectively shaking under our battered kitchen table that acts as the only defense we have.

I've lived to see many things in this city.

I've seen muggings, assaults, thefts, and drug deals go down blocks from here. But I've never been so frozen by a person's face. My muscles were so tight I was afraid they'd splinter apart if I moved an inch. I don't know if I would've been able to get out of there if my mother hadn't had the sense to rescue me.

And as soon as that man came, the sounds disappear like a vacuum strips the world of noise all at once. It'd be a relief. But the tragic and threatening silence hangs above us, lurking. We sit for ten minutes. Fifteen. Then twenty until we find enough peace in the quiet to scramble out from our poor cover.

I glance out the kitchen window, but my father yanks me away, guiding me upstairs to a more secure area. But a brief glance told me enough.

I saw the blood.

Saw the empty shell casings and the fires still flickering at neighbors' doors and the spray painted symbol on the cement wall in scarlet and black, the paint not yet dry, dripping down over the letters scrawled below the icon. A conclusive stamp of the horrific event.

In even and clear writing was the word *SHADOW*.

July 11, 2180

10:23 a.m

Captain Cornelius scatters a stack of crisp papers onto my desk as he passes and I groan exaggeratedly, throwing my forehead down to the table. The lean, short man only a couple of years older than me clicks his tongue. "Hurry up and heal and you won't have to see another paper for months, Roman. Lord knows you're not very timely with it," he notes, flicking out a sheet in his hand as he wanders over to the espresso machine. The poor thing hisses with the pressure, squeaking out a thin and sporadic stream into his chipped mug.

It might be time to put it out to pasture.

I lean back in my swivel chair to look at the thick white cast wrapped around my right leg. It sits on my body like an anchor. It's not even a nice electric brace, but one of the old fashioned casts the doctors have to saw off after you're stable. "You could get shock therapy," Mandy suggests from across the room, her dyed blonde bob bouncing as she lifts her head.

"You know I don't trust that," I counter. "I have a cousin that got struck by lightning once! He got these wicked scars on his arms for it and talked funny for months. It was ages until he could even hold his head up straight."

She laughs. "Girls like scars! Besides, it's perfectly safe and thankfully *nothing* like a lightning strike! People wouldn't do it all the time if there was a high chance of injury. We can handle some electricity, just not too much. You're full of electricity, you know. It's basic science." A pause. "How is Andrew doing, by the way?"

“Is he still with your old girlfriend?” Jax teases and I huff, turning around to smack him as he passes behind my desk. He scampers off, ducking into an empty meeting room before I hurl my pen at him next. I suppose I could break the glass if I threw it hard enough, though.

“Is he?” Mandy repeats when I don’t answer.

Even the captain shifts, trying—and failing—to covertly eavesdrop at the machine. “Yup. They’re getting married in the fall, I think.” I know. I got the invitation three nights ago.

“Sorry, buddy,” Cornelius consoles, sipping his coffee loudly. He blinks his pale green eyes extra hard as if the caffeine has already reached his brain. His freckled face and sandy hair seem to gain more color when he’s actually awake, but that’s fairly rare.

“I dodged a bullet. We wouldn’t have worked out, anyways. Besides, I have Emmy. I wouldn’t trade her for the world.” He tips his head up, pointing to the mess of paper on my desk and the empty cans of Shock III hanging precariously on the edge. It was rough last week.

“I’m sure you did. Now clean up your station. I want that grouping finished by noon tomorrow at the latest.”

“Yes, sir.” I sigh and thread my arm over the back of my chair. “I just don’t know why I have to keep going through counterfeiting cases..”

“Wanna trade?” Mandy asks, heaving up a stack of papers three times as thick as mine. “Try traffic reports. For as many gangs we have in Nenshō, I bet there are five times as many bad drivers. You know how many of these people have had their licenses revoked just today? A hundred and twelve! And it’s not *evennoon!*”

“Nenshō does have a population of *fifty-four million* people,” Akash adds, pushing his thin glasses up on his curved nose as he types a report. He’s of Indian descent with dark skin and short coiled hair that bounces when he moves his head.

I look back to Mandy. “As kind as that offer is, I’m going to have to take a rain check on that.” She scowls, her slanted eyes narrowing all the more. She’s almost full blooded Japanese, which—even here in Japan—is a rarity. It has become a melting pot rivaling America. With the dramatic increase in cross racial births across the world, it makes pureblood anything scarce.

Officer Joon Byun races into the room, the door slamming behind him. He comes to a screeching halt at the captain’s desk and Cornelius sighs, glaring. “What is the *matter*, Officer? Can’t I have five minutes to drink my coffee?”

“Turn on the news! You need to see what’s going on. 84th has already been dispatched,” he heaves, his chest rising and falling. Cornelius grabs the remote and turns the screen on.

“Channel 12,” Joon adds. He switches over until he settles on the feed of a news reporter yelling into his mic at his station, pointing to an image on screen.

“—the Massacre of Setagaya-Dori has returned. Those in downtown Old Tokyo district are urged to evacuate as quickly as possible. There are twenty-eight confirmed deaths and dozens of injuries on site already. The third precinct has sprung into action to hem in the damage and six official arrests have already been made.”

My heart leaps.

The Massacre of Setagaya-Dori. He's back. Shadow.

The whole 10th precinct quiets, watching with bated breath. The scene is basked in swaths of flames, gunfire, and horrid close up shots of those unfortunate enough to get caught up in it all.

“According to eyewitness reports, the Shadow group, or at the very least its leader, has come back in full force, but he has evaded all video appearances at this juncture. Courageous NPD officers are doing all they can to keep the violent gunmen and bombers at bay.” The camera pans to a woman sitting next to the news anchor.

“From what we can tell, the target is yet another sector of the Blue Boys, one of Japan's infamous color gangs involved with the popular illicit street drug known as Kagami Kagami. Also known as Mirror Mirror, it's responsible for the drastic mind and memory alteration to give users the sensation of a relapse in time. This is active territory for gang operations, just blocks from one of their last headquarters that was busted by military operations only three months ago.”

Soft whispers drift through the station, my comrades staring at the flames with glossy eyes. If someone didn't lose a friend or lover in the massacre, they've lost someone to KK. For that, everyone in this city is a victim. My breath is tight in my chest. I attended more than a few of my neighbors' funerals after that day.

Even the reporter looks rattled, running a hand through his once perfect hair. “We have reason to believe the Blue Boys antagonized the Shadow group by their actions three days prior to a mass attack in Shibuya where they infiltrated a civilian apartment complex and forcibly drugged a majority of the inhabitants with Kagami Kagami.”

“Due to their flagrant disapproval towards their production and distribution of Kagami Kagami, shown in their mimicking of the smoke-like hallucinations KK users experience, it's highly probable they've resurfaced to crack down on the drug once again. Residual members of the color gang that managed to escape arrest in the initial lockdown of the warehouse three months ago have been shot and killed today. There have yet to be any known survivors of the Blue Boys at the moment.”

Mandy has her hand to her mouth, eyes wide. “How awful,” she breathes. “Are you sure there's nothing for us to do? That they don't need our help?” Cornelius shakes his head. “A few

of the other captains in Nenshō sent out a progress link.” He looks down at his phone, no doubt scrolling through a barrage of messages. “There’s five other precincts that would do and are doing better than us. But we’re on watch in case they call.” His eyes slide over to me, gauging me.

He sighs.

“Don’t let it get to your head, Slater.”

“I’m not,” I bite. “Just wishing this cast could be off so I could actually do the work I’m meant to,” I respond, eyes unmoving from the news channel. He takes a sip from his mug and the television goes black with a click. “You don’t need to be out there. I get that this case is important to you—”

“It’s beyond that, captain. I don’t mean to be rude, but you don’t understand. You didn’t see it firsthand, seeing all that destruction right outside your home. I had friends die that day. I’d never felt so helpless. But that’s changed. I can contribute now.”

“Just because you can doesn’t mean you should,” he warns. “There are thousands of officers in this city. Good ones at that. And even decades of experience rolled together led to hard dead ends. You’re a rookie, but even you know that good cops throwing themselves into bad situations always get burned. The best ones avoid the fire. So don’t stick your hand in the flame, okay? No good comes out of looking for a war.”

“But—”

“End of discussion,” he says firmly, thin brows drawing in. Akash stops his furious typing from across the room. “You’re already bedridden in the precinct, so you have no excuses. There are reasons we keep injured officers on desk duty. So unless Shadow himself comes barreling in here himself, I want you to stay out of it. Am I clear?”

I look down at my desk, picking up my pen to start signing papers. “Crystal.”

Cornelius downs the rest of his coffee in one fell swoop before standing, tossing his mug into the sink as he steps into a meeting room. Akash resumes his typing, but slower than before. Mandy peeks up over the divider and gives me a little nod. I nod back, focusing on reading the page in front of me, droning out as I sign my name on line after line.

I’m tempted to reach over to Cornelius’s desk to turn the television back on, but I think against it. Shadow inspired me, really, on that fearful and wretched day. My parents were so proud of me when I graduated from the academy saying that I had such a pure heart to devote my time and life to the citizens of Nenshō after that.

But I didn’t only do it for them.

I think of that man everyday. I think of that first debut that terrified all fifty-four million of us. He could've died or gone out with a copycat to take his place, using his reputation for their own influence. I don't know much of his motives. It isn't my job to run extensive psych evals on criminals. Just to hunt down whoever is causing the most chaos.

CHAPTER 3

III. Swimming South

Zephyr

July 11, 2180

12:14 p.m.

“Jump, jump, jump!”

The crowd chants over and over, imploring the college student perched against the edge of the adjacent building from mine. The piece of metal he stands on barefoot is about the width of my wrist. His hands grip the coarse wall behind him, eyes focused on the water beneath him. The onlookers stand around the pool laughing, dancing, drinking, and recording the scene. Music blasts out of two slim speakers that rest precariously on two foldout tables.

It's an eighteen foot drop easy. Probably more. He could miss the deep end of the pool if he's not careful. Clip the edge of the concrete or worse. I don't know how much he's had to drink.

A girl with a glass whoops, sloshing the liquid onto the cracked and unkempt concrete. “Ugh,” I whisper to myself, pulling my headphones up from around my neck to my ears. Their voices begin to muffle, but I still watch as they count down from ten when the boy finally jumps. With arms flailing, he hits the water and it splashes the group with delighted shrieks of joy. A little too loud for my liking, I close my window for good measure, which all but silences them.

Why did I ever think college was for me?

I pull my cheap red curtains closed so I won't get distracted. The window was cheaply installed too, so anything to better insulate the heat. It's a cool day. I turn back to my desk where my computer lays on idle mode, turning down the opacity levels with a flick of my finger to see

the poster hammered into the wall directly behind it. I touch the collage with the edge of my finger, lingering on the faces of my little sister Victoria and my older brother Carlos.

Something like a semi-truck passing on the highway sounds behind me, but it's just my roommate. He sleeps half off the bottom bunk, mouth open as he snores, his black hair swept away from his flat, abused pillow. He naps frequently and like the dead. I've hardly seen him conscious, so he's a perfectly unobtrusive roommate most of the time when he isn't imitating a monster truck. I unlock my phone to check my bank balance again as if the numbers will magically grow the more often I look.

Current balance: 6164.24 Yen (JPY)

I rub my eyes. I wouldn't get a cheap hotel room in America for this price. Got class at three. I have time to kill. Slipping my computer into its protective sleeve, I throw my ragged denim bag over my shoulder and take a look back at Ryota's sleeping form before giving a silly two finger salute and closing the door behind me.

A flurry of soccer players rush pass me in the hall, a black and white ball bounced around between skilled feet. I crank the volume up in my ears to drown out their shouts, shrinking back against the wall so I won't get smashed into it by one of the unobservant students. After passing several dozen white dorm room doors, I come to a bright red one.

The bass thrums in my ears as I slip down the fire escape stairs. The elevator's always broken and it gets unbearably hot when the mechanism sticks and you get stuck. I've gotten more than a few tardies for placing my faith in that busted piece of machinery. They sure could update some stuff around here. But this wasn't an expensive college.

Once I'm off campus, stepping into the cloudy day where the air's anything but fresh, my phone vibrates in my pocket. I tap my forefinger and thumb together twice to redirect the call through to my headphones.

"Where are you at?" Reagan's voice threads through. There's hefty interference, so he's probably on the subway. "Going to The Prince," I murmur, stepping onto the busy sidewalk where a girl in a LED-strip lined dress walks past, the blue light making a hazy silhouette around her. She blows out a bright pink bubble from her chewing gum.

"Be there in ten. Coffee's on you if you decide to show up. I don't have enough to spit." He laughs through the other line, the subway squeaking around him. "I might have a remedy for

that. I'll be there in seven, so you best book it unless you want to pay an overdraft fee." I sigh. "Not fair, Reagan." I pick up the pace, slipping through a grimy alley to cut an extra block or two off my route.

"Get with the times, Z! You'll be filled with new knowledge today even if your pockets are empty." I roll my eyes. "Doubt it. And I gotta run. You're distracting me. I want the usual!" His voice cuts off as I click my tongue, ending the call.

I duck as a man with a big wicker basket of raw fish passes precariously, skirting an open market where an old man yells out prices to haggle with natives and rip off the bright-eyed tourists. My sneakers clomp against the uneven brick pathways of the Old Tokyo district. It merged with other cities to become the mega-city Nenshō. Only a couple kilometers down is the ocean, but you'd never know you were this east if you saw the shiny skyscrapers contrasted with all the cracked, slanted roofs covered in traditionally Japanese red tiles. A suspensor drag car drifts stories up above me, a new and rare occurrence only afforded to the richest of the rich.

Running a little faster, I peek up at the layers and layers of grated iron walkways fused between buildings, climbing higher and higher above me. Can't see much of the sky from down here. You have to use your imagination and think of the levels like they're rope bridges strung between trees in the wide berth of a forest, leaves blocking out the sky. I'd like to have some green, but I guess I can see the appeal in the pulsating neon lights adorning every shop window and door in flexible strings.

Once I meet the edge of the market street, I bound up the steps, making a harrowing journey across one such metal bridge, looking down through the gaps at all the open air beneath me. Makes my stomach drop every time. I can't look down very often. I only climb another flight of tall stairs, a handmade wooden set with nails in the side and everything, before I have to squeeze myself sideways between a clothing store and a restaurant where the kitchen's steam slips out of an unsealed edge, dampening my hair for a moment.

I breathe a sigh of relief once I escape the hot steam and I pop through, tightening the strap of my bag. Pushing the door open to the small, low roofed building ahead of me, I see The Prince. The sign on the door is handwritten in kanji by a steady hand, little stickers decorating the glass door by new arrivals. There's hundreds of them from kittens to unicorns to stickers of swords and video game emblems. I touch the sticker I put up years ago of a blue robin, the colors half rubbed away by bumps and bruises over the years. It's everyone's own little way to make their mark. That by coming to this hole in the wall cafe it means something in the grand scheme of the world.

I glance around the open room, seeing no sign of Reagan, and take an empty seat at the side of the room by a tall set of bookshelves. I drop my bag down on the ground, pulling my computer out. A young girl with brown hair tied into a low ponytail and an emerald green apron swings by the round table with a paper and pen. “Anything I can get for you today?” She doesn’t look at me, only flips the page of her little notebook.

I don’t look at her either. Brush a hand through my black hair. “A friend of mine should be here soon. I’ll want a minute to look over the menu,” I say quietly. She nods, skulking away to another table where a bored man sits with his book, three empty mugs next to him. The door rings a few minutes later and Reagan comes in panting, one hand on his thigh. He taps his little lightning bolt sticker before approaching me.

“Dang it! How’d you get here so fast? I don’t know how you do it.” I shrug, pulling out the seat next to me. He sits, leaning over to choose something from the menu.

“I’ll get your usual today. I’m craving a croissant after all that running. A drink won’t fill me up.” I nod, letting him order when he waves the employee back over, pointing out the pictures of what we want. His Japanese reading skills still aren’t the best, so he’s always happy to have pictures. He’s only lived here for four years—he’s not a local like me.

Once my black coffee and his croissant come steaming hot, he chows down, messily licking the crumbs off of his fingers when he’s finished. He drags his chair closer in and sets his elbows on the table. “You know that cash flow remedy I told you about?” I nod. “Well, I may or may not have stumbled across an interesting job offer.”

“Do you mean illegal? That usually means illegal.”

He shushes me, though I’m already speaking under my breath. “I’m definitely not supposed to tell you it pays bank and definitely not supposed to share that it involves some hacking.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Is it a reputable source?”

He sighs. “It’s the black market, buddy. If it was reputable, it’d be legal. But I’ve heard enough about it to know it’s legit. I got a buddy on the inside who took a temporary job from the supplier for a short time and was real happy about it. Problem is that the prerequisites are demanding and upkeep of the job can be even harder. You have to make sure the boss likes you or you’re out. He got tossed because he rubbed him the wrong way, I guess.”

“Why do you think I’d be a good fit for this?”

His eyebrows furrow together. His dirty blonde hair sticks up at all angles this afternoon like he just rolled out of bed. Knowing him, he might have. “What are you talking about? It’s not like you lack talent!” He chuckles, snagging my coffee.

“I got the details printed out here. Just look it over. I know you’re desperate for cash and more than a little bored at school. It could be promising. But I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t nervous about it,” he admits, scratching the back of his head.

“What’s the work for?” I ask, opening the paper.

“It’s very hush-hush. It might be out of your comfort zone. The employer’s objective is breaking into different facilities. Coding is all over the board. My old buddy said the boss man was fixated on some gang, but he can’t remember which one. I think that was his way of saying I’m not telling, so I didn’t dig. Besides that, it doesn’t give you much information. There’s a test you gotta take to pass.”

“This sounds like a school exam.”

He holds his hands up. “I wouldn’t know. Just got a new hacker pop-up on my page. I’m looking for new income too, but I’m a newbie. It called for more experience.” I look at the requirements again. “I’ll need to fudge my age and experience years on this,” I note absently.

Reagan sits up, scanning it. “Yikes. Didn’t notice that.” He grimaces. “I don’t know then, man. It could be Yakuza ready to rip out your throat if they find out you lied. No, when they find out you lied.”

I shrug again, pointing to the hourly pay. “See how many zeroes there are? I’ll win ‘em over with my skills. They won’t even care when I show them what I’m worth.” Reagan shakes his head. “You’re crazy. I already think it’s nuts to go off the black market, but you want to alter official documentation records on top of it?” I think back on those college students jumping for the thrill of flying and falling.

“Apparently you don’t think that it was too crazy otherwise you would never have told me.” He doesn’t deny it, polishing off my coffee before leaving the tip for our waitress beside the receipt. “You’re gonna die trying one day, Z.” I crumple up the paper and shove it into the inner lining of my jacket, nudging Reagan that I’m ready to go.

“Just prayin’ that day isn’t today.”