

Chapter 1

Supernova

Part 1/3

Nova stalked Selena Ansari through the catacombs, the slow, steady pace of his breathing coinciding with each step. The plan was unfolding seamlessly. Then, the lantern floating above his target paused at the end of the hallway. He slipped into an alcove.

Leaning into a mosaic of decayed skulls, the wool of his coat melded into the dark. His nose wrinkled under the facemask at the sickly sweet odour that clung to the tunnels. Gross. This place was disgusting. Between the old dead people and the new dead people, he'd have to douse himself in bleach to get clean.

The pitter-patter of water blended into a soft buzz and echoed voices. They were close. He'd planned to incapacitate Selena after she led him to the gang's meeting place but she'd noticed him much faster than expected.

"Show yourself," she commanded. As her words bounced off the hallway walls, their footsteps drifted into silence. She'd definitely heard him. Her infernal rifle clicked.

Nova's heart raced. After months of gathering information on Selena, he'd finally get to see her in action. The lieutenant of the Ravagers and her notorious rifle. The only person in the gang who refused to buy his gifts as a 'psychic'.

"I won't ask again," Selena said. "Show yourself."

Should I take your gun and shoot myself too?

She'd taken one look at his over-the-top visions and tried to pull the curtains on his con. If it weren't for the gang's curiosity – and their odd superstitions – he would've been screwed. No matter how cool he thought she was, he'd destroy her credibility with the Ravagers today. Lieutenant or not.

He crouched and drew his gun from its holster. If one thing moved out of place, Selena would shoot. And if any of those bullets landed near him, they'd break apart and hit him. Damn, he should've listened to Kalani. This wasn't the greatest place to have a shootout.

Selena's lantern floated down the hallway towards Nova. The shadows receded from the walls and showcased an arrangement of crumbling bones and brick opposite to him. Swarmed by flies, two bodies lay strewn over rocks.

A beetle drone crawled out of his coat's inner pocket and settled on his shoulder. It's beady eyes locked onto Nova. He could feel Kalani's condescending look watching him through the beetle.

"What was that, No?" Kalani's voice rang out from the comms. "Didn't need one of my drones?"

She was so much more annoying through the earbuds. *I legit love you*. Annoying, but so insanely smart.

The beetle crept down Nova's arm to the ground and scuttled around the corner, using rocks and pebbles as cover. His contact lenses blurred. Everything disappeared. The beetle's visual field shifted into his.

The sight of rubble and Selena's steel-toed boots greeted him. Like a predator waiting to catch sight of her prey, she had her infernal rifle pointed in Nova's direction. 'SCATTER' inscribed the underside of the rifle's barrel. The letters, lined in the ruby red of allodium, gleamed in the lantern's light. Allodium, the precious metal that he'd steal from the Ravagers today and blame on Selena tomorrow.

The lantern sunk.

A bullet whizzed past Nova. He covered his ears as a crack reverberated through the hallway. The bullet split into shards and bombarded the walls. Bone and rock infused into a

cloud of dust. His vision shifted back from the beetle. That was Selena's warning. He needed to make his move soon.

The air of the catacombs chilled; a shiver crawled up his spine. The band on his middle finger, or rather its inscription, burned. Invisible to Selena, wisps of silver threads took shape beside him and swirled into the stretched smile of a Cheshire cat. *If she doesn't kill you first*, it whispered in his voice from the corner of the alcove.

It was right. If one of the infernal rifle's shards struck him, he could die. If she collapsed the ceiling, it would block Nova's path back to his starting point. That'd force him to traverse deeper into the tunnels with no one to track and a dwindling comm signal. Unlike Selena, his maps weren't detailed enough to navigate him out of the catacombs without Kalani's help.

The lantern resumed its path down the hall. Selena's footfalls echoed. She was getting closer. First, a distraction. Then, he'd take her out. Locking eyes with the beetle, he spread his fingers wide and covered his face.

He slipped an infernal dagger out of his sleeve and coiled to strike.

"You're welcome." Kalani said.

The beetle flung itself onto Selena's face. It screeched. The infernal rifle clanged to the ground. She crumpled and clawed at the beetle.

Thank you.

Nova sprung out from the alcove and clamped his hand over Selena's mouth. He wrenched her to the hallway's floor. "Shh..." he whispered, pressing his dagger into her back. She grabbed her infernal rifle and smashed it into the side of his face. Blood flooded his mouth as he clutched onto the rifle's barrel.

He threw himself against the walls of the hallway and yanked the barrel. Selena crashed into the corpses. He plunged his infernal dagger into her side. Under the stain of her

blood, the red inscription of the dagger sizzled until the writing became clear. It read ‘SLEEP’. As the gangster went limp, Nova exhaled. Pain was a stranger to him, but he hoped she didn’t feel any of it in her dreams.

He spat a tooth out. It was a molar. Not one of his front teeth. Good. He had to act the part, not look like it too. His mouth twisted into a sly smile. “If plans never fell apart, they’d never be fun.”

“Stop it.” Kalani sighed.

“I’m getting into character.”

“The smile ruins the atmosphere and the dialogue is too desperate for most ‘actual criminals’.”

“We’re not going for ‘actual criminals’.” Nova pushed his blond curls to the side. She needed to give him another haircut. “We want more of an unhinged psychic vibe. Like you want my help but you’re scared of me.”

He yanked Selena away from the corpses and dislodged his infernal dagger. Her blood clung onto the dagger like a clew of leeches, he couldn’t even shake it off.

Small remnants of the beetle lay beside her in the debris of their fight.

“So”—He knelt and picked up one of the beetle’s thin legs—“I may have killed Zero.”

“No, really? I definitely didn’t notice the video feed getting cut,” Kalani said. “The drones are in position and Akira is almost at the port.”

“Good.” Nova eyed the infernal rifle. “I got Akira a present.”

“He’ll hate it.”

“You don’t even know what I’m talking about.”

“Lieutenant Ansari’s infernal rifle,” Kalani said.

“Selena can’t haunt shit. She’s not dead.” If she was, the infernal rifle would consume her before she could do anything.

“He’ll probably store it into one of his protective cases.”

“Again, she’s not dead.” Nova glanced at Selena. Blood from her wound seeped into the ground. Shit. The dagger only needed a drop of her blood. He’d overshoot by a million. “I don’t think she’s dead.”

The lantern clattered to the ground. It couldn’t be a coincidence – if the lantern was an infernal object, it would be linked to Selena. If he killed her, the lantern’s commands would cease until activated by a new owner. *How many of these objects did the Ravagers have?* She might be dead.

“Tell me you didn’t take the dagger out.” Kalani demanded.

“I took the dagger out.” No use mincing words now.

“The entire plan relied on her being *alive*.” Kalani was definitely seething. “How’re you going to find their meeting location now?”

Nova slid Selena’s blazer off and rustled through it. Nothing. He walked to the end of the hallway where Selena had caught him. It led to a small cavern that fed into three pathways. Sounds of the catacombs fused into each other as he weighed his options. Three choices, no clues. Nova glanced at the alcove. Four choices.

"I'll be there in ten." He shut off the communication line before Kalani could stop him.

His stare bore into the corner of the alcove. It was waiting for him. *Fathi*. The ring on his middle finger glowed. The silver threads returned, dancing into a formless shape. The shape wrapped into the silhouette of a person. Of silver skin and golden eyes, Fathi towered over Nova at six-foot-six.

"Hello, friend," Nova murmured, "I need a little favour."

The djinn named Fathi turned its head to Nova and stretched its lips into a creepy smile. It wore that same grin each night that it plagued him in his dreams. But, this wasn't a nightmare and he was very much awake.

He smiled back. *Try it, I'll kill you.* His friend, his prisoner.