

SHADOW

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ZAFFRE

First published in Great Britain in 2019 by
ZAFFRE
80–81 Wimpole St, London W1G 9RE

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library.

Hardback ISBN: 978–1–78576–520–9
Trade paperback ISBN: 978–1–78576–521–6

Also available as an ebook

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset by IDSUK (Data Connection) Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.



Zaffre is an imprint of Bonnier Books UK
www.bonnierbooks.co.uk

ONE

Through the window of the carriage, the close ranks of the fir trees crowded in along the sides of the railway line. The green of their foliage was dark enough to be almost black in the splash of light spilling from the fast-moving train. They blurred into a single mass, a wall of gloom supporting a heavy night sky that threatened rain.

Jakobs turned away, rubbing the bridge of his nose, deliberately blinking to force away his growing fatigue. The repetitive pattern of the view would have a soporific effect if he allowed it, lulling him, robbing him of his necessary edge.

It was important to stay absolutely focused. Too much was at stake to let his attention slide now, even for the briefest of instants.

He rocked with the motion of the train, standing in the vestibule that connected this carriage to the next. He considered the locked door in front of him and the cargo in the compartment beyond it.

How long had it taken to get to here? How many man-hours, how many false leads and failures, how many deaths? The bill coming due was lengthy and Nils Jakobs knew every last detail of it by heart. He carried those losses on his shoulders – not that he would ever have been allowed to forget them. His commanders in the Federal Police, in their comfortable offices in Brussels, would not permit that.

For years, they had said that the singular dedication Jakobs showed towards his quarry was barely on the right side of obsessive, but they tolerated him because he got the job done. His fixation meant that he would never rise above the rank of *aspirant-inspecteur principal*, but the men in Brussels told him that as if they thought it was a criticism. Jakobs didn't care. All he had ever wanted was the job, and his job was to catch the worst men in the world.

The one Jakobs wanted the most was on the other side of that door, in manacles. Marking off the hours until they crossed into

Belgian territory and he became property of the nation he was born in. The nation he had shamed.

The quality of the light through the window changed suddenly as the train thundered through a rural station – Jakobs caught sight of the name *Východná* as it flashed past at speed – and then the dark treeline was back in place. The train wouldn't stop until it reached the border with Austria several hours from now, moving swiftly through the Slovakian countryside, following the northern edge of the Low Tatra mountain range and then down towards Bratislava. Jakobs would have to get a little sleep at some point, but that thought was disconnected and vague. He couldn't shake the sense that something would be missed if he wasn't there to observe every second of the prisoner transfer.

Without warning, the sliding door leading to the passenger carriages juddered open and a civilian was revealed in the connecting tunnel, a man of narrow build with an oily black beard and a rumpled jacket. He almost bumped into Jakobs and held up his hands apologetically.

'Sorry! Sorry! Looking for the toilet . . .'

Stale breath that smelled of cheap tobacco wafted up, and Jakobs thought of how long it had been since his last cigarette. He'd quit six years ago, on his fortieth birthday, but the urge for a smoke was suddenly right there, testing his resolve.

Jakobs deliberately stepped across to block the man's path. He'd picked up a little Slovak during a secondment to Interpol, enough to warn the civilian that this car was off-limits. To underline the point, he peeled back the lapel of his jacket to reveal his police badge hanging from a chain around his neck. The action also exposed the butt of the Smith & Wesson semi-automatic pistol in Jakobs' belt holster, and the man's eyes widened as he caught sight of it.

From behind Jakobs, through the locked door, someone let out a noise that was half-laughter, half-snarl. It was an animal sound,

full of threat and hate, and it startled the civilian even more than the sight of the handgun.

He made a show of looking past Jakobs' broad-shouldered frame towards the door, giving a nervous chuckle.

'What do you have in there, a dangerous animal?'

Jakobs gave a solemn nod. 'In a way.'

He gestured towards the front of the train and the civilian got the message, retreating through the sliding doors. He waited until the bearded man was out of sight, then turned back and used the thick metal key the train conductor had given him to open the locked door.

His prisoner looked up at him as he entered, but Jakobs didn't return the courtesy. Briss and Stodola, the two escorting officers from the Slovak Republic's National Police, met his gaze and said nothing. Still, Jakobs couldn't miss the way that Stodola was nursing his knuckles, or the new bruising on the face of the man in the steel chair bolted to the floor of the otherwise empty cargo wagon.

'I stopped a civilian coming up,' he told the two cops. 'That shouldn't happen.' He jerked a thumb at the door and nodded to Stodola. 'Stand your post out there. Discourage anyone else who wants to take a look, yes?'

'Sir.'

Stodola straightened up and did as he was told.

Jakobs waited for the door to slide shut and the key to turn in the lock before he finally graced his captive with his direct attention.

'Your boy is easy to needle.' The man in the chair deliberately spoke in Dutch, a language he knew the Slovaks didn't understand, and his face split in a wide grin.

Jakobs had always thought the prisoner had too many teeth in his head, as if it unbalanced the hard, rectangular shape of his aspect. The ones at the front were uneven, chipped in street brawls and prison fights. The man's hands came up to run over his shorn scalp and scratch at the blue-black tattoos poking up over the collar

of his featureless penal jumpsuit. The handcuffs holding his wrists together and the chain fixing them to the floor jangled with each movement.

The prisoner's grin held firm. 'Not like you, Nils. You don't crack a smile. Not even when you and I were part of the team.'

'You were *never* part of the team,' Jakobs replied without thinking, then cursed inwardly, annoyed at himself for allowing the man to goad him into a reply.

'This says different.'

The prisoner pulled up a sleeve to show the tattoo of a winged dagger above a scroll that read *Nooit Overgave*: 'Never Surrender' in Dutch. The symbol of the Belgian Special Forces Group was surrounded by larger, showier designs, bellicose imagery of lightning bolts, lions and spindly Norse runes.

'Any idiot could get that kind of ink,' Jakobs replied. 'But no real soldier ever would.'

That touched a nerve, and the prisoner scowled. But this man had been, if only for a short time, a member of Belgium's most elite soldier corps, as repellent as that truth was. Jakobs remembered the day that Noah Verbeke had joined his unit, grinning that cocky predator's grin, winning over the top brass with his obvious skill and cunning, even though he was a complete fucking prick.

That had been years ago, and a lot had changed since then. Now Jakobs was an officer in an anti-terrorist police unit and Verbeke . . . well, he was still a fucking prick. But no one had realised how ruthless and hateful he was until it was too late.

There was a trail of death and terror across Europe, and a slick of poisonous ideology that wound back and forth in Verbeke's wake. Not a day passed when Jakobs didn't wish that he could turn back the clock to that day in the barracks, to step into the moment and use it to snap the other man's neck.

'You have always been a miserable shit,' Verbeke told him, meeting his gaze. 'Even now, after your Slovak friends caught me, you

still cannot be happy about something. It is not in you.’ He made a back-and-forth motion with his fingers. ‘When this is the other way around, I will smile and smile.’

‘You will not slip away this time,’ Jakobs countered. He nodded towards the walls of the train carriage. ‘Did you wonder why we are transporting you by rail in the dead of the night, instead of by road or by plane? Interpol knows about your network of white power hooligans and alt-right sympathisers. We made sure they didn’t get word of your transfer.’ He leaned in. ‘No one will know where you are until we trot you out like a whipped dog, in front of the General Commissioner’s office for the TV cameras.’ Jakobs considered that for a second. ‘I might smile then.’

‘That is a pretty little fantasy,’ replied Verbeke. ‘But you and the rest of these worthless mongrels are never going to get what you want.’ He snorted loudly. ‘When are you going to wake up, Nils? How deep does the tide of immigrant rapists and foreign parasites have to get before you finally accept that we are at war?’ He jabbed a finger in his direction. ‘You are the whipped dog, but you will not accept it. You are a race traitor.’ He shook his head. ‘It is actually very sad. You could be—’

Jakobs came forward and snatched at the chain, jerking it so Verbeke jolted forward, choking off his words in mid-sentence.

‘If you try that *we are not so different* bullshit on me, you will regret it.’

‘My mistake.’

Verbeke recovered quickly, shrugging off the moment, but there was a murderous glitter in his eyes. Jakobs had seen footage of his prisoner at rallies, whipping up his supporters with the same words – and other images too, of him beating people with bricks and kicking a helpless man into a gory mess.

Noah Verbeke was crafty, but he had a thug’s manner and the morality of a violent child. In the end, that had been what allowed the Slovaks to arrest him. A night of sinking beers in a drinking

pit in Košice had spilled out into a fight on the street, and Verbeke would have slipped away, if he'd been able to resist the urge to get his hands bloody.

But that's not in him, thought the police officer, silently echoing the other man's statement. *He can't see weakness without wanting to stamp on it.*

'When we are done with you,' Jakobs began, savouring the thought as he spoke, 'daylight will be a distant memory. You will spend the rest of your wretched life in a tiny concrete box. It will be much more than you deserve.'

Verbeke showed his teeth again.

'That is not going to happen.'

Behind them, something heavy – like a body – slammed into the locked door, making it judder on its slides.

It had rained the night before, and the humidity hanging in the air convinced Susan Lam to wear a baggy cotton dress to work over her underclothes. Soon enough, she would be in her lab coat and work trousers, inside the perfectly climate-controlled environment of the research laboratory, but the industrial campus where it was located was a good drive from her home in Dempsey Road, skirting around the traffic flooding into the city core of Singapore.

She would be hot and sweaty if the journey caught her in the wrong place, and that was no way to start her day. Today they were going to start the trials of the newest drug batch, with the modified T-lymphocyte structure, and she was eager to get started. Months of preparation and incremental advances had brought Susan and her team to this point. If this test series performed well, it would be a major milestone in the project.

She paused over the cup of black tea in her hand, inhaling the aroma and considering the situation. A part of her – the clinical, reductionist element of her persona that was the unemotional

scientist – weighed the value of her work against the rewards it had brought her. The other part of Susan Lam – the wife and step-mother, the woman in her late forties with her cosy life and her nice, colonial-era home – basked in the feeling.

A decade ago, she would have dismissed the life she had now as a foolish pipe dream. She would have rejected it outright as worthless and decadent.

So much has changed, she thought.

Bare feet slapped on the tile floor of the kitchen and Susan turned to hear a stifled yawn. Michael wandered in from the living room, the child rubbing at his face with one hand, feeling his way along the countertop with another. Her stepson had slept badly the night before, recovering from a stomach bug spread to him by one of the other boys at his school.

‘Hello, drowsy,’ she said gently.

He looked better, still a little dehydrated, but nowhere near the same bundle of tears and vomiting he had been a day ago. Susan boxed up the annoyance she felt and crouched so she was at eye level with the ten-year-old. For all the money they paid to that expensive private school, she expected them to take better care of the children. Susan made a mental note to talk to her husband about formulating a sternly worded complaint for the next parent-teacher meeting.

‘Can I have juice?’ Michael peered up at her, blinking in the morning light.

‘You can,’ she agreed, watering down some straw-coloured apple concentrate for him.

‘Do I have to go to school today?’

‘No. Rest up.’

She handed him a plastic beaker and he sipped at it. Michael was definitely not his usual self. Under any other circumstances, such an admission would have made him clap his hands with glee.

‘Okay.’

The boy shuffled dolefully back across the room, pausing to meet his father as he entered.

Simon paused to ruffle his son's dark hair and Susan felt a pang of joy at the simple warmth of the moment. Father and son shared the same pleasant moon-face and brown eyes, the same openness that had drawn her to the man she had decided to marry. Every day she was quietly thankful that fate had fallen in her favour, that it had opened up a path to lead her to this new life. Susan never felt quite as happy as she did in Simon's arms. And while Michael wasn't her child, having lost his mother before he could walk and talk, the boy treated her as if he was.

'What?' Simon was looking at her, one eyebrow quirked upward.

'Nothing,' she said, around a smile.

'All right.' He shrugged. 'I'm going to work from home today. Keep an eye on . . .' He patted Michael's head again. 'I have some lecture notes to prepare. We don't need to call the nanny.'

Simon taught in the degree programme on Law and Life Sciences at the National University of Singapore, where he and Susan had first met at a faculty mixer event, but his son always took precedence over his job.

Michael wandered away, out into the cavernous hallway, as Simon came to Susan's side, offering her a good-morning kiss.

'He'll be fine,' she told her husband.

'I know.' Simon rolled his eyes. 'Such drama.' He poured himself a cup of tea. 'Today's the new trial set, right? Are you going to celebrate?'

'It's just test tubes and Petri dishes. It's not a party.'

She automatically downplayed the importance of the work. It was a reflex she had never been able to break.

He smirked at her, trying to draw her out.

'Are you kidding? You keep telling me, if MaxaBio make this work it could mean—'

'Don't jinx it.'

The words came out more harshly than she intended them to. But that non-scientist part of Susan Lam didn't want to say it aloud, in case the act of doing so changed the way everything would play out.

Simon hugged her.

'Things aren't as fragile as you think they are,' he said, with a baseless confidence.

'Hey . . .' Michael called from the hallway, his voice echoing, and a note of worry in it. 'C-can you come here a second?'

'I'll go,' she said. 'He might have thrown up again.'

'I can call the maid in early,' Simon said, smiling widely.

'It's fine.'

But as it turned out, that was a long way from the truth. Susan was three steps into the hallway before she saw what the problem was.

'What's the matter . . . ?'

She never finished the sentence, the words turning to bitter ash in her mouth.

Michael was frozen, shrunk up against the dresser by the wall like a cornered cat, still clutching the plastic cup in his hands. He was staring fixedly at the intruder standing inside the front door, who held it open a few degrees.

The stranger was a white woman. *Very* white in fact, to the point that she seemed to have deliberately enhanced her paleness through the use of cosmetics. Slender and angular, she wore a simple black pantsuit, matching flat shoes and matte gloves. She was in the process of pulling down a dark muslin scarf to the neck of her collarless jacket, as if she had been wearing it like a mask before Susan appeared. Her lips were red like fire and she had hard, searching eyes that swept over Susan in an instant, measuring her for purpose.

That was a familiar look, an experience Susan knew too well from her old life. Through the half-open door she could see movement

out in front of the house, men in black outfits similar to the woman's emerging from a pair of windowless blue vans, walking up the drive. They carried guns and their heads were lost under shapeless muslin masks that stole away every definition of their features.

All the hope and joy and goodness in Susan's life dropped out of her in a single bleak instant, swallowed into the earth like floodwater rushing down a sluice.

How many times had she dreamed of this, or something like it? How many times had she bolted awake in the darkness, her heart thudding against her ribcage? How many times had Simon held her as she cried, as she lied to him about the reasons for her nightmares?

The white woman raised a gloved finger to her lips.

'What happens next,' she said quietly, the words issuing out in a French accent made of brittle glass, 'that's up to you.'

Jakobs had his pistol drawn and held down at his side, his finger resting on the Smith & Wesson's trigger guard, as Briss stepped forward. The Slovakian had not pulled his own gun, opting instead for a collapsible baton which snapped out to its full length with a flick of his wrist.

The two men exchanged glances and an unspoken question: *Could Verbeke have someone on the train?*

Every possible precaution had been taken to avoid the details of the prisoner transfer from getting out. Interpol's circle of information was tiny, just a few of the Slovaks and some of the men in Jakobs' unit. He had personally vetted them, making sure to pick people with an axe to grind against the prisoner. His biggest fear had been that one of them might exercise their grudge and kill the man before they made it to Belgium, but never that there would be a leak.

'Knock knock,' said Verbeke, as if he was reciting a nursery rhyme. 'Who is at the door?'

Jakobs had a hand-held radio in an inside pocket, and raised it to his lips, squeezing the push-to-talk button.

‘Stodola. Answer me.’ When he got no reply he tried again, this time trying to raise the man he had brought with him from Brussels. ‘Gatan. You there?’

‘Not them,’ continued Verbeke.

‘Open it,’ said Jakobs, nodding to Briss and taking aim at the door with the pistol.

He was thinking about the man with the smoker’s breath who had blundered up the train. That seemed less and less like a coincidence with each passing second. He stiffened and put his finger on the trigger.

‘Yes!’

Verbeke shouted out the word as Briss put his hand on the lock, and the mechanism exploded inward, blasted from the other side by a shotgun shell. The Slovakian cop was showered with splinters of wood and hot metal fragments that tore up his arm.

Briss reeled back, clutching his ruined hand, as the door slammed open on its runners and a figure lurched into the compartment. It was Stodola, his eyes blank and sightless, a second red mouth opened across his throat. Someone shorter than him was behind the dead police officer, shoving his body forward as a meat-shield, with the Slovakian’s weapon pointing out from beneath his armpit. The barrel of the dead man’s .38 revolver twitched in Jakobs’ direction and spat fire.

The Belgian threw himself aside, the motion exaggerated by the rocking of the train as it rounded a turn in the hills, and he bounced off a support pillar. Jakobs returned fire, but the shot was wide, more to break the intruder’s concentration than to hit him.

Stodola’s body pitched forward and fell to the metal decking with a loud crash, revealing the train conductor behind him, the young cop’s pistol in his hand. The man that Jakobs questioned before they set off had seemed mousy and ineffectual, thoroughly invested

in remaining ignorant of whatever the policemen on his train were doing. That had clearly been a ruse. The conductor's florid face was devoid of emotion, his eyes cold.

Jakobs had seen that expression in the mirror. It was a soldier-face, an assassin-face. The aspect of someone who had been trained to kill.

He put another shot in the conductor's direction, no longer giving him the benefit of the doubt, but a second shotgun blast filled the air with lead pellets and he flinched away.

'Fuck me!' Jakobs heard Verbeke shout out the curse. 'Watch where you are fucking shooting!'

The shotgunner was the civilian, the smoker. He ratcheted the slide on a pistol-grip pump-action weapon, swarming into the compartment on the heels of his comrade. Dropping into a crouch, Jakobs put two 9mm rounds from the Smith & Wesson into the man's chest and blew him off his feet.

The sound merged with the thunder of the .38 as the conductor used it to kill Briss with a head shot. The other Slovakian slid down the wall of the cargo wagon, his hand flapping at the pistol he had been too slow to pull.

Jakobs pivoted, bringing his gun to bear on the conductor, but then a blast of pain flared in the side of his head as Verbeke booted him in the skull. In the chaos of the gunfire, the Belgian had fallen back, close enough that his prisoner could strike out and hit him.

It was enough to rob the older man of vital seconds. Verbeke was up off the metal chair, spitting and straining at his chains like an angry dog at the end of its leash. He managed to hook one of the policeman's ankles and pull it. Jakobs went down, and immediately tried to bounce back up, but a blow from the butt of the revolver hit him in the same place Verbeke had kicked him, and he crumpled.

Someone pulled his pistol out of his hands and planted a boot in his belly. He blinked through the pain and saw the smoker rolling

over, gingerly getting up. The bearded man swore violently in English, and pulled open his jacket to paw at a bulletproof vest beneath.

‘Time?’ shouted the conductor.

‘Three minutes.’

The smoker consulted his wristwatch before hanging his weapon on a strap over his shoulder. He produced a tiny skeleton key and jammed it into the cuffs to free the prisoner.

Jakobs lurched over on to his side, wheezing through the pain.

I never should have come, he told himself, his gaze finding Stodola’s and Briss’s bodies, knowing that Gatan was as dead as they were. *Should have sent someone younger and faster.*

He had leaned on the man who had prepared his last fitness report, ‘encouraging’ the doctor to give him a clean bill of health so he could remain field-rated. If only to see this transfer to the end, if nothing else. Now he was going to pay the price for that hubris.

For my obsession.

Verbeke shrugged off the cuffs and the chain, and then, with deliberation, he walked over to Jakobs and kicked him three more times. They were sharp, vicious blows that landed in his belly and his crotch, burning the air out of his lungs in jolts of ragged pain.

‘We have some fresh clothes,’ said the conductor, signalling to the smoker to bring in a sports bag.

Verbeke stepped away and emptied the bag’s contents on to the chair, stripping off his prison attire. He grinned as he listened to every wheezing, agonised breath that Jakobs took.

‘So who are you two?’ he asked, glaring at his rescuers. ‘I do not know you.’

‘We were paid to get you out,’ said the conductor.

‘All right.’

Verbeke accepted that and flexed his arms as he bared his chest. Jakobs saw the full tapestry of the man’s tattoos in the harsh illumination from the overhead fluorescent light. It was a chaotic mess of violent imagery. Runic symbols co-opted from Nordic myth,

graphic depictions of screaming skulls and tortured demons, and fascist iconography of all kinds. Noah Verbeke's skin was his heraldry, his manifesto. It was the outward expression of the hate that drove him on.

Pride of place was given to the portrait of a male lion captured in full-throated snarl, bigger than any other design upon him. Rendered across Verbeke's back and shoulders, the gold and black tattoo sat above a scroll bearing a single word in Gothic script: *Leeuwenbrul*.

The Lion's Roar – every police force in Europe knew the name of that particular far-right group. They knew about their campaigns of firebombings, their assassinations. The riots they started and the toxic climate of hatred they stirred up against anyone who didn't match the group's idealised model of racial supremacy.

Verbeke shrugged on a T-shirt and a military-style jacket over the top of it.

'That's better,' he said to the air, before his gaze dropped back to Jakobs. And out came the grin again.

'One minute,' said the smoker.

He moved to the loading door in the side of the cargo wagon and used the shotgun to blast off the lock holding it closed.

'We don't have time for you to play around,' added the conductor, offering Stodola's revolver to Verbeke. 'Hurry up.'

Jakobs drew himself shakily to his knees, as a dreadful sense of the inevitable settled upon him.

Verbeke sniffed and his grin became a frown.

'I'll make the most of it,' he said, and unloaded the last two rounds from the .38 into the Belgian police officer.

The white woman ushered Susan Lam, her husband and his son into the lounge at the point of a gun. She made Susan sit on one of the sofas and Michael and Simon on the other, so that they were facing each other.

Three men, who also appeared to be Europeans, came in and secured the front door behind them. Without speaking to one another, the two more muscular of them broke off and conducted a search of the house. The third, who revealed a mop of curly hair and an acne-scarred face beneath his muslin mask, stood behind Susan's husband. He held his pistol at the ready a few inches from the back of her stepson's head. Michael still had the juice in his hand, and he chewed on the rim of the plastic glass.

'What do you people want?' said Simon, straightening in his chair, attempting to maintain some degree of authority in the situation. 'Money? Valuables? Is that it?'

He seemed to assume that this was a robbery, and Susan wanted so much to believe that too.

'We'll take those,' said the woman, and for a moment Susan dared to hope that maybe this *was* just about that. But the pale woman's next utterance killed that possibility dead. 'It will give the police the wrong idea.'

The woman moved and perched herself on the side of the sofa where Susan was sitting.

'Don't hurt them,' Susan whispered. '*Please.*'

'How long have you been married?' The woman's tone was casual. 'Please—' repeated Susan, but she was waved to silence.

'I already know the answer,' came the reply. 'Five years. You met a few months after you came to work at MaxaBio. The genius biochemist who did not talk about her past, and the great lawyer-turned-professor with the sad story of his dead first wife.'

Simon stiffened at the glib description of his personal tragedy, and he pulled closer to his son.

One of the men came back into the room and gave the woman a nod, no doubt to tell her that there was no one else on the lower floors. A moment later, the other returned from upstairs.

'Found a safe,' he grunted.

'Empty it,' said the woman. Then she looked at the acne-scarred man. 'Get your kit.'

‘Okay.’

He nodded and stepped away, gathering up a hard-shell plastic case that he had brought with him.

The woman’s attention returned to Simon.

‘Do you know how many lies your wife has told you in those five years? It has to be at least one a day. *At least*. Two thousand lies or more, I would estimate.’

‘What the hell are you talking about?’ Simon’s face hardened, and he took on the tone he used with students who disrupted his lectures. ‘Take what you want and go!’

‘What is the biggest one?’ The woman went on, asking herself the question. ‘Oh, I know. *Her name*. It isn’t Susan. It never has been.’

‘Is that true?’ Michael asked, eyes widening.

‘Yes, yes, little man,’ said the woman, before Susan could answer. ‘You look like you are clever. You must wonder why it is your step-mother does not speak about where she grew up, or the family she had before you and your papa. Yes?’

Michael shot her a look that cut like a razor, full of unanswered questions and formless fears.

‘Her real name is Ji-Yoo Park. She isn’t from Busan in South Korea. But that isn’t the worst thing she hid from you, no.’

‘I don’t care what you are saying,’ Simon said firmly. ‘I won’t hear it. I won’t listen to you try to torment the woman I love.’ He stared at his wife imploringly. ‘Susan, look at me.’

But she couldn’t bring herself to do it, not when she knew what was going to come next.

‘Ji-Yoo Park is a liar and a fake, and she is responsible for the deaths of dozens of innocent people.’ The pale woman relished the secret’s revelation.

‘That’s not true!’ shouted Michael, throwing his cup to the ground. ‘No! She is a good person!’

‘Are you going to lie to them again?’ Tears streamed down Susan’s cheeks as the pale woman studied her. ‘Go on. *Lie*. One more atop the others won’t make any difference.’

‘Susan?’ said Simon, and that single word was enough to break her. Contained within it was the doubt from every single instance when she had deflected his questions about her past.

She tried to form a denial, but nothing came. Her chest ached with the wrenching churn of her emotions, trapped between the cold cruelty of the pale woman’s words and the inescapable reality these intruders had brought into her home.

The acne-scarred man was indifferent to it, carefully removing a number of devices from his case – a video camera with a wide-angle lens, a laser scanner, and other equipment she didn’t recognise. He set up the camera on a tripod and nodded to the woman.

‘Ready to roll.’

‘Get up.’

The pale woman pointed with her gun, and when Susan – *no, remember her birth name* – when Ji-Yoo didn’t move fast enough, she grabbed her arm and dragged her up.

Simon bolted to his feet, coming to her defence, but one of the gunmen grabbed his shoulder and forcibly slammed him back into the sofa.

‘You’re coming with us,’ said the woman. ‘This must be familiar to you.’ She gestured with the gun again. ‘You’re going to do what we tell you. If you disobey, these two will die. Just like old times.’

A whimper of fear escaped her throat.

‘I’ll do it,’ she said. ‘You don’t have to hurt them. They don’t need to be involved.’

‘Ah, but they do,’ countered the woman. ‘You are such an experienced liar, Mademoiselle Park. We need to make sure you are telling us the truth.’

As the pale woman guided her out of the room, she took a last look at her husband and her stepson. The man with scars was pressing a sheet of paper into their hands.

‘Don’t look at her, look at me,’ he snapped, aiming the camera at them. ‘You first, Daddy. Read the words out loud, if you don’t want your little runt crippled in front of you.’

Simon clutched at Michael's hand and reluctantly began to speak. *'The beige hue on the waters of the loch impressed all, including the French queen . . .'* He glared at the man. 'What is this? It's nonsense!'

'Say it. Don't mess it up. Then the kid goes next,' said the scarred man.

'Move it,' snapped the woman, prodding Ji-Yoo in the shoulder with the barrel of her gun.

'Twenty seconds.'

The call was the signal for the man who had freed Verbeke to haul open the sliding hatch on the side of the train carriage, and he gave it a forceful shove. The hatch slipped back, as the endless wall of fir trees beyond retreated away to become a shallow bank of hillside, falling down towards a river a few hundred metres below. In the dark of the night, the river was a ribbon of black glass, snaking up alongside the railway.

The carriages rocked and began to decelerate as the train entered a shallow curve.

'Driver has to slow the train to make the turn,' the man in the conductor's uniform explained to Verbeke. 'This is where we get off.'

He jerked his thumb at the open hatch, pausing to button up his jacket.

'Tuck and roll when you land,' began the bearded man. 'Then you—'

'I know what to do. Stop talking to me unless you have something useful to say.'

Verbeke gave them both a sneering look, and stooped to help himself to the pistol that Briss had not fired.

'Whatever,' said the man with the beard. 'Time!'

Verbeke's military training had included numerous parachute jumps, both daylight and night-time drops, so he drew on the skills he had been taught to orient his body and make the fall from the moving train without breaking any bones.

He would have liked to do something more with the body of that shit-rag cop Jakobs. Maybe mutilate him so that he couldn't have an open casket funeral, just to leave his mark behind, but there wasn't the time for it. Verbeke leapt into the dark and the night air embraced him, whirling around.

Then there was the juddering impact against the damp grass and he rolled, pulling tight to protect himself, bleeding off the energy of the jump until he slowed to a halt. He was on his feet in a heartbeat, the stolen pistol drawn and ready.

The chatter of the train over the rails rattled on and faded as it disappeared around the turn and into the treeline. Verbeke panned the gun around, finding the two men who had freed him as they stood up from where they had landed in the thick, wet grass. He took a deep breath and nodded to himself, enjoying the moment of liberation. *Of course he was free.* His enemies could not hold him.

Verbeke thought about killing his rescuers while they were still disoriented from the jump. In the darkness, they would never see it coming, and he could be away in moments. *Find a car, a telephone, reach out to his people . . .*

He hesitated. There were too many questions that only these men had the answers for. And then he was awash in bright light and it didn't matter any more.

Pivoting instinctively towards the illumination, he saw the headlights of a 4 × 4 pickup as it bounced along the bank of the river. The vehicle turned around, orienting itself to speed them away, and Verbeke watched as a densely built man climbed out. The man's searching gaze found the three figures up in the grass and he beckoned to them.

'Move quickly,' he called. 'We need to be away from here.'

Verbeke heard the accent – Japanese, it sounded like – and he sneered reflexively. He jogged down to the vehicle, still dangling the dead cop's revolver at the end of his arm.

'Who are you, eh?' he demanded. 'My welcoming party?'

He had been right about the driver's ethnicity. *Another foreigner.* The man moved like he was a fighter, but he favoured one side as if unconsciously protecting the site of an old injury.

'My name is Saito,' said the Japanese, in clipped and mechanical English. 'You have my employers to thank for facilitating your escape.'

Verbeke's knuckles whitened as they tensed around the revolver, a passing memory rising to the front of his thoughts.

'I know who you are,' he said, thinking it through. 'Oh, yes. The little soldier for the rich men.' He brought up the gun and waved it around carelessly. 'Did you forget that conversation we had? I told your masters to go fuck themselves.' He turned his head and spat. 'You want to get into bed with the blacks and the ragheads, that's up to you, but the Lions don't want any of your shit.'

'You would prefer us to put you back on the train?' Saito said evenly.

'You can try.' Verbeke punctuated his statement by cocking the revolver's hammer.

A couple of years ago, after they had started making an impact on the European scene, men with money and flashy cars had tracked down Noah Verbeke and offered him suitcases full of euros in exchange for doing them 'a few favours'. They had a list of targets they wanted to be hit, and for a generous cash payment, they wanted the Lion's Roar to do it for them.

It was coming back to him now. Toussaint, that arrogant crone who ran a dozen TV stations – she had been behind the meeting. This Jap had been there, lurking in the background like he thought he was some kind of ninja. His presence had immediately pissed Verbeke off, and in the end the Lions rejected the offer. They fought for white nations, for white men and white men's hegemony – and that didn't involve making pacts with a gang of trust-fund assholes who were willing to sell out anything and partner with anyone, as long as they stayed wealthy.

‘The Combine,’ he said, sounding out the name, ‘can eat my shit.’

That was what the group called themselves, a shadowy meaningless designation that was designed to obscure fact and encourage disinformation. Verbeke knew enough of the truth about them, though – quaking old bastards and overripe bitches in their billion-dollar bubble, who traded power and influence between themselves like poker chips among card players. They had built their fortunes on having no cause of any kind other than making a profit, selling weapons to all sides and pouring fuel on the fire to keep everyone scared. His disdain for them was all jealousy and dismissal. These were weaklings who allied themselves with animals and traitors. They had no code.

He stepped back, getting enough distance to keep Saito and the other two men in sight. The one with the beard had his shotgun at the ready, while the second was changing out of the train conductor’s jacket, seemingly oblivious to the tension in the cold night air.

‘If I may?’ Saito reached into a deep pocket of the coat he wore, making no sudden movements, and removed a satellite phone. He flipped up a tube-like antenna and hit a speed-dial button. ‘My employers are aware of your issues with them. But they are also aware of the problems that have plagued your confederates in recent months.’

Verbeke’s jaw hardened, annoyance flaring as Saito’s words brought up a truth he had no business knowing. The fact was, the Lion’s Roar was on the back foot. A concerted effort by Interpol, led by that asshole Jakobs, had seen them lose a dozen of their safe houses in as many weeks. Two of their high-profile backers had been arrested on trumped-up charges, and a handful of Verbeke’s best soldiers were trawled up in raids across Central Europe.

He was arrested in Slovakia because circumstances forced him to be there, for a meeting with representatives of a neo-Nazi collective that the Lions were looking to ally themselves with. They needed numbers and support, but no one was supposed to be aware

of that. His scowl deepened. *Had somebody talked?* If so, he would lock them in a cage and burn them alive.

‘You don’t know a fucking thing,’ he spat.

‘I know at this moment in time you have limited options.’

Saito was infuriatingly calm about the whole thing. The sat-phone connected with a beep, and he offered it to Verbeke.

‘What is this?’

He took the phone warily, eyeing the encrypted dialling code on the illuminated display.

‘Speak to your comrade before you decide what to do next.’

‘Piss off!’

Verbeke’s anger was building at the Japanese man’s emotionless affect, and he thought about how much he would enjoy using the phone handset to beat him. Still, he raised it to his ear.

‘Yes?’

‘*Hello, Noah,*’ said a familiar voice. ‘*How was the Bastille?*’

‘Axelle . . .’ Like her pale face, the French woman’s words were cold and honey-sweet, but his annoyance prevented Verbeke from being distracted by them. ‘What took you so long? They had me for nearly two months!’

‘*Are you grateful?*’ She purred the question. ‘*You don’t sound grateful.*’

‘Don’t play games with me,’ he retorted, and he heard her sharp intake of breath. She knew she had stepped over a line.

‘*The police made you hard to find. I had to take steps.*’ She paused, becoming contrite. ‘*You’re angry.*’

He glared at Saito. ‘This was the best you could come up with?’ When the Combine had first come to them, Axelle had been one of the few Lions who wanted to work with the group. It made sense that she would have turned to them for help – but he was furious she had done so. ‘You’ve made us weak by doing this.’

‘*Connard!*’ she shot back. ‘*You would still be rotting in a prison cell if I hadn’t done this. Don’t be too arrogant to see the opportunity here!*’

Something in her words gave Verbeke pause. He would not admit it, but the woman was the smartest of his people, smarter than him and as loyal as she was sadistic.

‘What opportunity?’ he asked, at length.

‘*I made a deal to get you out,*’ Axelle told him, and a chill smile came into her words. ‘*Trust me when I tell you . . . you’re going to like it.*’

Verbeke listened to her explain the high points of the arrangement, and gradually his annoyance faded, in turn replaced by a feral grin.