

# Surviving the Theseus

## Epilogue

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Regina had never discharged so many of her weapon's gooey slugs before. She covered her ears after pulling the trigger, but not before the explosion erupted. Her ears were now ringing. A wave of warm air washed over her. With the door hinges obliterated, the door fell forward, smashing into pieces on a cobbled walkway.

And then... nothing. The sentry gun did not fire, yet three bodies she assumed were part of the dipshit gang lay dead just feet away from the pub amongst the tree-lined footpath.

She scrunched her eyebrows, holding both weapons at the ready.

And then, a familiar voice. "Regina," Michael said from around the building. "I'm coming out."

Were the SPARS there? Had they known about the attack?

Michael, well dressed, like he was on a date, strolled around the corner and smiled at her. He liked to dress up whenever they met up. So, she didn't even consider it as anything other than Michael being Michael.

"Surprise," he said. "You're always early so thought I would be too, for once. I'm with some people who killed these men. Lucky they were here because that man"—Michael pointed to a goateed dead man—"had a gun to my head. Listen to them. Okay?"

"Umm, okay." Her eyes narrowed. "What's going on?"

"I'll take that one," a tall lanky man said as he came around the same corner Michael had. His complexion paled to anyone she'd ever met. His face and head were hairless; he didn't even have eyebrows or eyelashes. He and the five that followed behind him were also hairless and wore all black. Each of them carried an assault rifle, something she'd not seen before—it was a heavy looking weapon with a narrow barrel atop a wider one that would fit a twelve-gauge shotgun shell.

With his rifle strapped around his shoulder, he walked up to Regina and stuck his hand out. She shook and his grip was firm. Michael stood beside her facing the newcomers. "Hello, Miss Valensky. I'm Chip."

"How do you know that name?" She glared at Michael. "Did you tell them?"

Michael shook his head. “No, I would never reveal that. They know who you are, who I am, the SPARS, and what happened on Pyramid.”

Regina stepped back, putting distance between her and Chip. “How do you know all this?”

Chip’s lips curled into a smarmy smile. “We need to trust one another first.”

“Not gonna happen, Chip.”

“Hmm, we’ll see. Your superiors say otherwise. And, come on”—Chip waved his hand in a wide arc behind him—“methinks you owe us some gratitude. We took out ten men.”

Why would her captain know these people? She couldn’t even say *men* because there were two bald women amongst them as well.

“Tell me what you want,” Regina said. “I trust Michael, and he said to listen to you, so talk.”

Chip waved his arms out. “Our benefactor, Maximus, needs your help.”

She almost blurted it out but stifled herself. *Benefactor* meant nothing more than *rich asshole*, and the name Maximus added to the assholiness.

Chip continued. “One of Max’s people has been taken. A person like us. We pled fealty to the benefactor, and then he ensured it. I won’t go into details, but it is the reason we are hairless. We cannot betray him, nor would we ever want to. We are loyal to the death. Without question, ill intent is afoot, and the footage captured with our optical enhancements confirms that notion.”

With the snap of his fingers, a young man who Regina assumed was an underling, brought over a scroll, unfurled it, and a screen came to life. Chip held it in front of Regina. A short, stout man with dark, square-framed eyeglasses, and a wispy mustache, gaped at whoever took the footage. And then it smiled, teeth larger than they should be; a horrible site she never thought she would see again.

Chip pulled the device away. “Familiar?”

“I think you know the answer to that,” Regina said.

He nodded. “Hmm, yes, that we do. The one that got away, shall we say. If that’s not enough to pique, let me expand further. If I’m not mistaken, I believe your superiors neglected to share a tidbit that will...how shall I say...? Get your juices flowing.”

The twig of a man enjoyed whatever piece of information he had over Regina. A smug smile emerged from his otherwise veiled expression.

“The SOAD officers who have departed far too soon, their bodies, nowhere to be found.”

Regina glanced at Michael, his face a question mark. She holstered one weapon and while glaring at Chip, said, “Primary Active.”

Chip glanced down and smirked.

“Regina,” Michael said, attempting to be a voice of reason.

“Oh, no worries,” Chip said. “I feel no fear. And I know you won’t fire on me. As you can see, my crew knows it too. Not one of them has budged.”

“Enough of the games, Chip,” Regina said. “I need you to skip all the fucking fluff, or I’m walking away.”

He held his hands up in a calming gesture. “You’re right; apologies. I meant no disrespect. But I am being one hundred percent honest. Your captain can verify. Every murdered SOAD is missing. And only dead SOADs are missing from morgues—no other bodies were taken. The same from cemeteries, and those slated for cremation—only SOADs. Taken before their family’s last wish fulfilled.”

“Why?” Regina asked. “For what purpose?”

“We don’t know, but we believe the disappearance of ours, and the taking of yours, are linked somehow by the same mystery man. You have been—how shall I say?—reactivated. Please, by all means, confirm with your superiors, but you are to help us find this man, posthaste.”

“Well, Chip—how shall I say...? I don’t work well with others.”

“That’s not my understanding at all. You worked well with the SPARS on Pyramid One.”

Regina looked at Michael. “Did I now?”

Michael smiled.

“Well,” she said, “that was out of necessity. And to be fair, nothing we did changed anything.”

Chip shrugged. “It matters not to us, nor to Maximus. Someone farmed out those SOAD deaths, as you experienced firsthand. If you think the threat is over because you took out some disgruntled miners, you’re in for a shock.”

“Oh,” Regina said, “probably one corrupt government or another.”

“Hmm, maybe, or maybe something worse.”

TAT! TAT! TAT!

The sentry gun unleashed among the throng into a tree just beyond where they all stood. A man fell; not a word or scream uttered. The sentry gun shredded him down to the ground where he no longer moved.

As silence re-emerged, she couldn't help but smile that two of Chip's people, younger ones, jerked when the gun went off. Fear—natural, primitive, undeniable, and in one circumstance or another, no one escapes it.

Regina holstered her weapon.

Chip and his people spread out, maneuvering in pairs, and checked every tree in the vicinity.

As both Michael and Regina watched them, Michael asked, “What did this *mystery* man do that put him on your radar?”

“It's been a couple years,” Regina said. “Figured him dead by now with his brazen method of slaughtering, using tech no one has seen before. Do you recall the Malory incident?”

Michael puffed out a whoosh of air. “That was this guy? The Malory Brewhouse?”

“Yep.”

“Really? One guy liquified over a hundred people, sucked it all up, and took it with him?”

“That's the thing though,” Regina said. “Don't know that you've seen the security footage of said event, but”—Michael shook his head—“there are gaps in the footage. It shows everyone shimmering, shaking, and turning into one big blob all over the floor. And then there are clear edits—someone tampered with it. It cuts to the mystery man staring at the camera, then to static and no more recording. The Malory incident is one of many odd bloodbaths where he's been captured on video.”

“He's either the biggest idiot in the universe,” Michael said, “doesn't give a shit if he's caught, or a scapegoat.” Michael nodded at the bald patrol. “Are you going to help them?”

“I'll confirm,” she said, “but sounds like I don't have a choice. Do you trust them?”

“Nope. You?”

“Not even a little.”