

JAVI'S DECISION

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A bonus chapter from Javi's point of view, taking place during the Liberation Day Celebration.

As I crossed the plaza filled with joyful faces, sparkling glitter, and colorful confetti, adrenaline raced through my body. Today, we would show the people of Ailene how weak and useless the Council really was. Disposing of them would be a good first step toward a better world—a world in which people could be free rather than controlled by that imperious Council.

Sure, some people might get hurt, I reasoned, but it would be worth it in the long run . . . right? What was it that Elesio always said? *Improvement doesn't exist without sacrifices*. I just wasn't sure if it was up to me to choose to sacrifice someone else's life.

With every step forward, more doubt wormed its way into my mind, wrenching my heart all the while. Working mostly on the sidelines of the Initiative until now, I had only indirectly been a part of the other attacks, but I'd seen the images on the news. Innocent people had died needless, gruesome deaths. What if today resulted in more of the same?

I wiped confetti off my shoulder, agitated. The small bits of paper looked bright and colorful, a stark reminder we were about to ruin a perfectly happy day. I told myself to stop having doubts. What we were going to do wasn't really right, but it would make things better.

All the Initiative had ever done had always been for the greater good. At least, that's what I kept telling myself.

I was close to the Tower of Arts when my eyes fell on the Timbrian ambassador. I'd never met him in person, but I'd heard so much about him and seen so many photos, it almost felt like I knew the guy. And I despised *everything* about him. He was selfish and power-hungry, always trying to control everyone. Most people were stupid enough to fall for his charms, but those of us at the Initiative knew better. *I* knew better.

When Collins got close to the door, a girl in her early teens grabbed the sleeve of his suit jacket. "Mr. Collins?" Her voice sounded overly cheerful, as if this was the happiest moment of her life.

I quickly joined a group of people setting up food stalls close to the Tower and pretended to be one of them. Here, I could safely watch Collins from a distance and still be within earshot.

The Council member turned to the girl and smiled. "Yes?"

The girl's face flared with excitement. "Oh my goodness! I can't believe this is happening. I've dreamed about this moment, and now it's finally here!" she rambled eagerly. "I am actually talking to Alexander Collins!" Her eyes widened. "Wait . . . *is* this really happening? Am I really talking to you? Or is this a dream? *Please*, don't let this be a dream!"

The corners of Collins's mouth crinkled with amusement. "I am fairly positive this isn't a dream."

This seemed to reassure the girl for a moment, but then she started pinching her arm. I couldn't help but smile as it reminded me of the silly things I used to do, too, whenever something good finally happened to me. But I had stopped doing that—partly because I got older, mostly because things were only bad now.

Collins chuckled. "What are you doing?"

The girl shrugged, letting go of her arm. "Just checking. I mean, wouldn't you also say I wasn't dreaming if I *was* dreaming?"

Smiling, Collins briefly put his hand on the girl's shoulder. "I like the way your brain works. It kind of reminds me of myself."

"Really?" The girl's eyes grew wide. It was the same way kids looked on Las Luces morning when they opened their presents. A pang of sadness shot through me, knowing that experience had never been mine. Mom *hated* Las Luces. Said it was just another stupid holiday to force people to waste money on things they didn't need . . . as if she wasn't already wasting all of our money on booze and drugs.

"Really," Collins answered, bemused. He gazed at the entrance to the tower. "I should head inside . . ." He hesitated before showing the girl a warm smile. "But I'm sure they can wait for another moment. Is there anything I can do for you?"

The girl nodded eagerly. "My best friend lives in the Wastelands. We connected online through our shared interest in you." A blush appeared on her cheeks. "Err, I mean, politics, and . . . you know. Anyway, her parents used to be slaves, but you freed them."

"I freed them? Mrs. Jaymes was the one who petitioned to end slavery in the Wastelands. Back then, I was merely her assistant."

The girl leaned forward conspiratorially as if telling him a secret, but I could still hear every word. "I know that's what everyone thinks, but my friend told me you were the one who traveled to the Wastelands to see it all for yourself. You did all the research, and you were also the one who convinced Mrs. Jaymes it was worth the effort. I'm pretty sure she was the one helping *you*, not the other way around."

"It doesn't really matter who did what," the Council member answered modestly. "What matters is that they are free now."

I felt a tug at my heart. The Initiative considered Alexander Collins one of the most dangerous Council members. No matter how universally adored he was, this man was solely out for power. He didn't care about the people; he just wanted to be the one calling the shots. At least that's what I'd been told. But didn't this kind of attitude contradict all of that? Why would this guy go to great lengths to help slaves only to have another person take full credit for his work? Wasn't that a perfect example of selflessness?

"But still, you are awesome!" The girl pulled her communicator out from her pocket. "I was wondering if you could make a quick

video for my friend? She'd be over the moon!"

Collins smiled kindly. "Of course."

As the Council member recorded a message for the girl's friend, I slipped inside the Tower, easily sneaking past the Council members to head upstairs. I'd quickly mastered how to move around unnoticed back when I was a kid living on the streets. It was always best to stay under the radar, especially when you had to pickpocket for a living.

When I joined our group on the second floor, Initiative Agent Xia glared at me. "You're late," she whispered tersely. "Did you bring a gun?"

"Of course I did," I snapped between clenched teeth, slightly annoyed at the question. Sure, I could be reckless sometimes, but I always came prepared. I carried my handgun at all times. I'd made it myself, and I was proud of it. It had two barrels—one for lasers, the other for sedative-laden darts—making it the perfect tool for all kinds of missions.

One of our reconnaissance agents slipped through the door connecting the staircase to this floor. "They are all present," he announced.

"What about Mayfair?" Xia asked. "Did Yon manage to hold her up?"

The agent nodded. "He just texted me that she's still at our base. She's in a hurry to leave, but she won't be here in time to witness what we're about to do."

"Excellent," Xia said. "Let's get moving, then."

I kept having to remind myself we were doing the right thing—especially as we held the Council members at gunshot. Apart from being both angry and terrified, they looked like nice and decent people. Not at all like the terrible monsters the Initiative had made them out to be.

Two Initiative agents grabbed one of them by the shoulders and shoved him up against a wall. I watched as they carefully strapped a

bomb to his chest. It wasn't set, not yet, but I could tell its presence was already enough to frighten everyone in the room.

I tried not to imagine what would happen to this guy once the bomb went off, but I failed miserably. Images flashed before my eyes of all that would be left of him, which wasn't a whole lot. Probably next to nothing. My stomach churned at the thought. This wasn't what I'd signed up for, was it? I'd joined the Initiative to help people, to make the world a better place. Could something this cruel really be the answer?

I once again pushed my doubts aside. *They* were the enemy. This was what needed to be done to defeat them.

"Let him go!" Collins demanded as he entered the doorway, taking a few steps toward them. Of course he would act like he was some kind of hero.

"I wouldn't do anything stupid if I were you," I warned. I pointed my gun at Collins, assuming he would slink off with his tail between his legs the moment it got too dangerous. He surprised me when he didn't; Collins tensed, but he didn't back down.

As he gazed at me, his features softened. I hated that he looked at me like that—like he actually cared—because I knew it was all an act. "You're a good person," he said with certainty. Surely he was a great liar—he couldn't possibly know that by just looking at me. "Please, don't let them do this to us," he added. "To Ailene, and to so many innocent people all over the world."

"Oh, just shut up," Xia snapped.

"I know you don't want to hurt anyone," Collins continued, unfazed, as if she hadn't spoken. He gave me a warm smile, one that said he had faith in me. I hated even more how good that made me feel. "And you don't have to. You can still do the right thing."

My finger hovered over the trigger. I reminded myself this man was used to charming people into getting them to do whatever he wanted. I simply couldn't trust him. The problem was that his eyes, his voice, really *everything* about him seemed so genuine.

In that moment, I knew nothing for certain. I wasn't sure about Collins's intentions, or the goodness of my own actions. But what if I

was right and he was a danger to everyone? Letting him live could be the mistake of the century.

Still . . . killing Collins was something I couldn't take back. I was good at being reckless, but this wasn't the time or place. I needed more time to think this through.

"Alexander. Please, don't," a Council member, the one with the bomb strapped to his chest, pleaded. "Getting yourself killed isn't going to help anyone."

Collins clearly didn't agree. Still staring at me, he gave me a hopeful smile just before he lunged forward to help his colleague.

My fingers danced anxiously over my gun. In one swift move I pushed a button, switching the barrels, and pulled the trigger. Some of the Council members let out a horrified yelp as I shot Collins in the stomach. The guy let out a surprised gasp. I think he'd hoped I'd shoot my own people, but come on, man, what was he thinking?

Collins's gaze stayed fixed on me as he slowly slumped to the ground, but before he lost consciousness, I saw a small smile tug at the corner of his lips. I think he knew what I'd done.

It would take a while before the Initiative found out he was still alive, that I'd only sedated him. I wasn't sure how I was going to explain myself when that time came, but I'd cross that bridge when I got there. For now, all that mattered was that he was still alive.

Only time would tell if I'd made the right decision.