

CYBER BLADE

01. Night's Shadow

All had gone well.

Devon Roark straightened his tie—*again*. He must have done so over a dozen times within the last hour. The mannerism was so ingrained in his subconscious that it proved impossible to shake, though not for lack of trying. And yet, he couldn't bring himself to care. The simple act of adjusting his tie was a habit done only when he had achieved victory. And tonight Roark had been, without question, victorious.

The V-77 Skybolt helicopter waited on the roof's helipad. As requested, it was prepped for takeoff. The rotor blade spun with a thunderous rhythm and a half dozen navigation lights flickered on the aircraft's gunmetal gray armor plating.

Between the wind generated from the helicopter and the chilly night air, Roark couldn't help but shiver—nor could he any longer conceal the smirk that had been tugging at his lips since his impromptu business meeting with Terrance Gorst had ended. Roark was the epitome of a corporate man, not afraid to get his hands dirty and, in many cases, the dirtier they got, the better. These days he kept most of his attention honed on Valkor Industries, where his primary investments lay, but that didn't stop him from allowing his interests to trickle down to other megacorporations. West Delta was one such company that Roark had never forgotten.

To his credit, Gorst brought West Delta from humble beginnings to megacorp status. This had everything to do with transitioning the business model from the manufacture of global-positioning satellites to developing low-orbit weapon platforms. Military applications had always been where the money was. Gorst knew it, but no one knew it better than Roark. Through some of his less than ethical—but always reliable—contacts, Roark discovered that a splinter group in the Eastern Bloc, with prominent political connections and no shortage of financing, was interested in securing black market orbital weaponry. If some self-proclaimed People's United Front wanted weapons and were willing to pay top-dollar, Roark would see that they were accommodated.

Roark's prior dealings with Gorst were mostly of the legitimate sort, but when he approached the West Delta CEO about the possibility of this lucrative side deal that excluded, and in turn violated, his government contracts, Gorst was, as expected, unreceptive. That was until Roark presented his trump card—enough dirt on Gorst to bury his corporation deeper than the lowest sub-level catacomb in the Kurtow Ruins. Early career embezzlements, irregular allocations of funds, displacement of shareholder profits, Gorst had quite the scandalous record. If leaked, the media would have a field day.

Now, 275 meters above the concrete streets of Pallad City, Devon Roark stood triumphant at the top of West Delta Tower, basking in the shimmering silver moonlight. Tonight, everything had gone according to plan. By the end of the week, the People's United Front would be paying West Delta generously for their satellite weaponry, and Roark would be taking a handsome cut of the profits.

“Are you ready, sir?” Major Kristov asked.

Roark, with a lingering smile, nodded, “My business here's done.”

In response, Kristov gestured to a pair of armored guards standing at attention near the roof's entrance. They broke from their rigid statuesque posture and stepped forward in unison.

Roark advanced toward the awaiting helicopter. Behind him, the two armored guards followed close behind, along with the Major, each armed with RN-47 assault rifles and outfitted in black military-grade bodysuits that left no hint of skin exposed. Even their eyes were covered, shielded by data-scan visors capable of providing real-time Intel via augmented reality overlays—a system that offered complete situational awareness should any conflict arise. It was all in stark contrast to Roark's

finely pressed business suit.

Only steps away from the helicopter, Roark briefly considered what the People's United Front could have planned to do with the satellite weaponry. Would the orbital platform be used to eliminate political opposition, suppress insurgent uprisings, or be directed toward an enemy country? In the end, how the weapons were used or how many lives they claimed was of little concern. Roark was a business man and, as with any business, success hinged on old-fashioned supply and demand. If he could provide the goods and his clients could afford to pay, then that was all there was to it. It was the way of the world. He'd leave morality to the politicians, even if most of them were bought and paid for—and there were already more than a few in his pocket.

Before entering the helicopter Roark straightened his tie one final time. Then he felt a wet splash against his face.

Major Kristov jolted in place, his body tightened, spine stiff and limbs rigid. Arching back, he let go of his rifle. The weapon swung down to his side, still fastened to him by its nylon sling. His hands reached out, clawing at the air in spastic desperation.

The pair of armored guards reacted with uncertainty, heads titled in the direction of their commander.

“Uh, Major...?” one guard began, his voice trailing off in confusion.

Roark winced. Again, he could feel wet droplets splatter against his cheek.

Blood gushed from Kristov's chest. Something had struck the Major, penetrating into his lower back and out his upper body. Something that Roark *couldn't* see. It was as if Kristov had been impaled by an invisible blade. A thin, glistening trail of blood hung motionless in front of him, revealing the partial outline of a pointed spectral object.

The other guards, catching on to what was happening, raised their assault rifles, but found no target to direct their sights on.

Kristov remained upright, his feet seemingly frozen to the ground while his body was wracked by an intense series of twitches and spasms. He tried to speak, but the words were gurgled and incoherent.

A visible electric sizzle sparked to life behind the Major. Bluish-white streaks of electricity danced and crackled through the air, giving birth to the potent scent of ozone. The surging currents intensified, rushing back and forth in rapid succession before taking the form of a human body.

Roark could hardly believe his eyes. A girl who appeared no older than the age of eighteen stood before him dressed in a bizarre outfit of purples and blacks. She held a sword in one hand and withdrew another from the Major's back. As she did so, the blood-soaked blade began materializing, not fully tangible until it was pulled out completely.

All had gone well.

Kijo Kage was able to scale West Delta Tower with relative ease and, thanks to the wonders of active camouflage, now stood within arms reach of her target.

The man she had just run through with her sword staggered to the side. One uneven step later and he tumbled over, crashing to his knees. Kijo could see the squad emblem emblazoned on his armored sleeve—a smiling skull with an hourglass symbol on the forehead and eight spider-like arms reaching out from the rictus death's-head. She was familiar with the insignia. The men were hired guns for Death Widow, a private security contractor profiled as one of the best in the world. They also held an unsavory reputation for employing ruthless mercenaries who weren't opposed to high body counts or civilian casualties. But Death Widow's impeccable track record of protecting their clients' lives was second-to-none and, clearly, Roark spared no expense when it came to safeguarding his own.

To Kijo, this was of no consequence. In her eyes they were mere bodyguards, at best. Mercenaries with guns were nothing to one trained in the clandestine teachings of *The Way*. Whatever skills they had would offer no protection against a ninja of the Kage Clan.

The bleeding Death Widow merc crumpled over, a final gasp of breath escaping his lips. Prior to

her attack, Kijo had spotted another decorative military crest, this one on his left soldier pad. The triangular design with an arrow through it meant he held a higher rank than the other two guards, neither of which had any identifying badges, aside from the Death Widow symbol. *Strike down your deadliest foe first.* It was a lesson she remembered well.

The surviving guards were just rookies. Their hesitation gave it away. Both had already been too slow to react, even at the sight of their fallen commander. Kijo doubted if they had seen real combat before, and she about to make certain they wouldn't again.

One of the guards brought his weapon to bear and opened fire, but Kijo was already gone. Somersaulting over his head in a magnificent display of acrobatics, Kijo distanced herself several meters away before landing on the ground. She rolled to her feet and dashed at the attacker.

Taken aback by the scene unfolding before his eyes, the guard could barely keep sight of the young girl, or the lightning fast blade that streaked through his neck.

Kijo heard the unceremonious *plop* of the guard's head making contact with the concrete behind her. The remaining Death Widow mercenary raised his rifle but, before the barrel could be pointed in her direction, she sliced the firearm in two with her *Izanami*. Following through with her second sword, *Izanagi*, Kijo slashed down across the guard's hardened DuraShield-plated body armor. The titanium dipped tri-weave fibers may have been able to resist a bullet, but did nothing to repel her blade.

Crimson mist sprayed out of the wound extending from the guard's chest to his waist. Kijo had already moved out of the spurting blood's path, sidestepping the merc before he could collapse into a puddle of his own arterial gore.

Kijo's attention shifted to the helicopter. Roark had already scurried inside and was struggling to close the cabin door. The V-77 Skybolt's wheels began lifting away from the roof—it would be fully airborne within seconds. With no time to waste, Kijo ran forward and, using one of the nearby HVAC units that littered the roof as a springboard, vaulted into the air.

An instant before Roark has succeeded in slamming the door shut, she had made it inside. From the corner of her eye, she spotted the helicopter's only other occupant—the pilot—turning around in his seat, a Halvok 45 tight in his grip. He squeezed the trigger.

Kijo retaliated with split-second reflexes, raising a sword to deflect the incoming bullet. The shell ricocheted off the blade and streaked back towards the pilot, shattering his flight helmet's visor and entering his skull. He slumped over, smashing into the controls.

The V-77 jerked downwards, and a fierce shudder sent Kijo stumbling backwards and launched Roark in the adjacent wall. Beneath her, Kijo felt the Skybolt's wheels give way, being crushed under the aircraft's hefty weight as it crashed, belly first, onto the roof.

Frantic, Roark crawled for the cabin door, his fingers shuffling to pry it open and escape.

Kijo approached, both swords held down at her sides.

Roark turned, back pressed against the door and arms raised. "T-this must be some kind of mistake, you're after the wrong man! You don't know who I am, I'm—"

"Devon Roark," Kijo said flatly, continuing her advance.

"L-look, I've got money, much more than whoever's paying you, that I can promise," Roark pleaded. "Think about it—just name your price! I'm worth *more* to you alive!"

"No," Kijo raised her sword, "you're *not*." And with one swift motion, she swung the blade down.

All had gone well.