



the Elites

NEVER BE AFRAID TO FALL

NATASHA NGAN

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*To my parents, who have always encouraged
me to chase my dreams.*

And to Callum, who chases them with me.

Prologue

There is a rumour that the Elites don't bleed.

As the boy stands in the corner of the small, shadowy room, his whole body trembling, he thinks, *If only I could be an Elite*. Clenching and unclenching his hands, he tries to stop the shaking. *An Elite wouldn't feel anything*, he thinks. Then: *But I will feel it all*.

His mother is talking to the doctor by the operating table. They have their backs to him and are almost whispering, but he can still hear the insistence in their voices, the tension. Their murmurs rise over the room's electronic ticks, the muffled throbbing of a generator nearby. The boy tries to focus on the shapes of their bodies, bent over like trees in the wind, but his eyes keep getting pulled away to the rest of the room.

The room and its contents scare him. Twists and coils of wires hang from the low ceiling, their ends feeding into strange machinery the boy does not recognise. Here and there he spies a familiar piece of technology; the round face of an air-tram light hanging above the operating table, casting a pool of liquid yellow in the darkness. And there, built into the wall, is a mosaic of screens that look as though they have been ripped from tablets.

Though their screens are blank, every movement his mother or the doctor make sends a slice of light across their dark surfaces. It makes the boy feel as though the room is alive, watching him.

Then he spots a case of sharp metal instruments on a tray beside the operating table; the blade of a scalpel gleams in the low light. A shiver runs down the boy's neck. Breathing slowly, he focuses on the conversation between his mother and the doctor, trying to block out the horrible room and its ominous metal instruments and its rotting smell of death.

'What about two forty, *sensei*?' his mother asks.

'No,' the doctor snaps. 'Three hundred. Lowest.'

The doctor's voice has a curl of an accent in it, but the boy isn't able to trace it. Afronese? New Indian? *Things are so muddled in the Limpets*, he thinks. *Even blood.*

The boy's mother shakes her head. 'Two sixty –'

'Two eighty.'

'Two sixty-five.'

'Two seventy. Last offer.'

The boy's mother hesitates for a second, then nods.

'Good.' The doctor holds his hand out. 'Pay now.'

'N-now?' she asks. 'Can't it wait until *after* Sauro's operation?'

He shakes his head. 'No guarantee. Must be now. What if it not work, then afterwards you don't want to pay?' He waves his open hand. 'Must be before.'

Sauro's mother glances back at him. He has a sudden urge to shout out to her, to ask her not to make him do

this. To grab her hand and run out of the room. But then his mother pulls out her purse and turns back to the doctor, and all too soon, Sauro is strapped down on the operating table, his face pushed through a hole and his head clamped tight in the jaws of the metal.

The doctor prepares for the operation. Sauro hears the pings and clangs of sharp metal – the noises make his teeth ache – but all he can see is the warped linoleum lining the floor of the room. It is covered in dark smudges. *That must be . . .* he thinks, then pushes the thought away. *I am an Elite*, he tells himself firmly. *I am an Elite, and I don't bleed. I can't bleed.*

His mother has been sent to wait outside. Sauro wishes she could stay with him for the operation. He feels stupid for wanting it; a twelve-year-old boy shouldn't need his *mummy*. But suddenly he can't help it, and suddenly it's all too much, and he's struggling and trying to get his head out of the clamp and the doctor is holding him down, hissing at him with sour, stinking breath, 'Stay still! Stay still! Do you want me to cut your head off?', and he feels a hot, sharp bite in the side of his neck and he screams.

Part I

NEO-BABEL

The Banquet

Silver was standing outside her own bedroom, one ear pressed against the door. She couldn't hear anything apart from the thudding of her heartbeat, which hadn't calmed since finishing that afternoon's training session. Her whole body ached – even her hair seemed to hurt – and she wanted more than anything to take a nap before the banquet that night, but she couldn't bear facing Ember, her Elite senior. She pressed her ear harder against the cool metal of the door, listening for sounds that suggested Ember was inside.

As soon as they began the training programme, all juniors were paired with an older Elite to be their mentor. Silver had moved into the bedroom she shared with Ember when she was thirteen years old. She was fifteen now. Two years of living with her Elite senior had taught Silver enough to know that if she found Ember waiting in their bedroom now, she'd end up feeling even worse than she did already.

Silver pulled away from the door. She hadn't heard a thing. Sending a quick prayer to the gods that Ember was elsewhere – and ignoring the thought of what her parents would say if they knew she'd asked the gods for

help with such a trivial matter – she unlocked the door by touching her hand to the panel at its side. Then, carefully, she pushed it open.

The room was empty.

‘Thank you, gods!’ Silver smiled, stepping inside.

The room was just as she’d left it that morning. To the right, the shutters of her and Ember’s bedpods were open, and at the far end of the room the blinds for the plastiglass outer wall were pulled up, letting in a wave of pale light from the setting sun.

Silver shut the door behind her and dropped to the floor. She lay spread-eagled on her back, grinning widely. It felt so good not to be on her feet. Training had been intense that afternoon; five hours of stamina, stealth and fighting sessions. She could already feel the bruises forming on her body where the blows of her trainer had landed. Now, lying on the floor in the warmth of the sunshine, she felt her muscles relaxing, her limbs softening. Fighting had never been Silver’s strong point. She was quick and agile, which suited her to the covert assignments Elites were given by the Council, but even after years of training her combat skills were poor.

‘I’m not moving *all* night,’ she announced out loud to herself. ‘I’ll just have to miss the banquet. No one will care.’ She snorted. ‘And Ember will be thankful that she won’t have to sit next to me, pretending to be nice –’

‘Oh, is that right?’

Silver scrambled up so quickly she banged her forehead into the door.

‘Careful now,’ said the voice behind her. ‘We don’t want you injured for your big day tomorrow.’

‘I’m fine,’ muttered Silver, getting to her feet.

Ember was leaning in the bathroom doorway. She had changed out of her uniform and was wearing a silk kimono tied loosely at her waist, slipping off one shoulder to reveal a curve of white skin. Her flame-red hair was wet and dark from the shower. Even without make-up she was beautiful, and Silver felt the familiar pang of jealousy as she took in Ember’s womanly figure, her large green eyes bright and sharp as jade stones.

‘It doesn’t look like you’re fine.’ Ember crossed her arms, the corners of her lips curled in a sneer. ‘After that pathetic performance at training today, I’m amazed Senior Surrey didn’t remove you from the Elite programme right away.’

Silver ignored this. She went to move towards her bedpod.

Ember stepped in her way. ‘But then,’ she said, leaning her face down to Silver’s, ‘maybe he’s finally realised how irrelevant you are to the Council.’ The orange blossom fragrance of her perfume was sickly sweet, clogging in Silver’s throat.

‘Look, Ember –’

‘Perhaps he’s working out who to replace you with tomorrow.’

Swallowing down an angry retort, Silver tried to push past her, but Ember grabbed her shoulders, leaning her face so close to Silver’s their noses almost touched.

‘You know,’ Ember whispered coldly, ‘I always ask him

how it came to be that a *Red* would have the exceptional DNA needed to be streamed into the Elite programme –

‘Don’t *call* me that!’

It came out louder than Silver had expected. For a few breathless seconds they stared at each other. Ember’s wide eyes were unreadable. Then, slowly, her mouth tightening, Ember straightened.

‘I will call you a Red, Silver,’ she said, ‘because that is what you are.’

Silver hung her head, her cheeks burning. She didn’t look back up until she had heard Ember move away, slamming the bedroom door as she left.

Every year, a banquet was held the night before the parade. It took place in the Eboria Building, the main offices of the Council and home to the Elites. It was nicknamed the Stacks due to its hollow centre criss-crossed with walkways and jutting prayer gantries. The preparations for the banquet had been underway all day. Enticing aromas wafted up from the east-wing kitchens as the city’s best chefs created an elaborate menu featuring dishes from every kind of cultural cuisine, while geisha maids in pretty kimonos ritualised the banquet space.

By the time Silver arrived, the hall was filled with the buzz of voices. Hundreds of Council members milled around, sipping sake and commenting on the performance of the musicians playing on a stage at the far end of the hall. Some Council members had their heads bowed deep in conversation, perhaps discussing the parade

taking place the next day. Would the president stumble in his speech? Would there be a repeat of last year's minor disturbance? Protestors were common at these events. There were low sniggers as many imagined the punishments awaiting troublemakers.

Silver hovered near the doorway. She tugged at the neck of her cheongsam, a traditional dress of the Chinese cultures of the Red Nations. She hadn't meant to wear it, but after Ember's comment earlier about her nationality – Reds was the derogatory term for the Chinese ethnicities of the Red Nations – she'd put it on in a little act of defiance. Silver was now starting to feel like it was a bad idea. The bright red colour of the dress and the slit hem which exposed the olive skin of her thigh was drawing looks from some of the male Council members, and she regretted wearing her long black hair loose. It made her look older than her age.

A Council member nearby caught her eye, smiling. As he started towards her, Silver rushed off into the crowd. *Your fault for wearing a dress like this!* she thought angrily to herself. She was just turning to check whether the man had followed her when she walked straight into someone, her head thumping against their chest.

'I'm so sorry!' Silver gushed, stepping back, but she broke into a smile when she saw who it was. 'Butterfly!'

Though he looked smart in a fitted silk shirt and slim black trousers, Butterfly's messy brown hair still fell into his blue eyes as it always did, and he was holding himself a little stiffly, as if he was uncomfortable in his clothes too. He was tall for his sixteen years. Unlike

Silver, who was as slim as she'd always been, years of Elite training had defined the muscles in Butterfly's body. She caught a couple of pretty female Council members nearby watching him hopefully, their eyes trailing over his broad shoulders, his defined cheekbones and freshly shaved jaw.

Silver's grin widened.

Butterfly raised an eyebrow. 'What?'

'Nothing,' she said quickly, stifling a giggle. She gestured at his clothes. 'You just look nice, that's all.'

Butterfly smiled; only a second and then it was gone. Having been best friends with Butterfly since she'd joined the Elites training programme a year after him, Silver was used to that. He didn't smile very much, and when he did it was a fleeting thing, gone as soon as it had come. She remembered a time when Butterfly had smiled easily, but that was before the explosion.

'Have you seen any of the others?' Silver asked, changing the subject. She and Butterfly were close friends with some of the other Elites.

'Not yet.'

She glanced round the crowd to see whether she could spot any of their friends. 'I can't wait for this to be over,' she murmured. 'Three hours stuck with Ember isn't going to be fun.'

Butterfly nodded. 'And this shirt is so uncomfortable. It's really irritating my wings.'

Silver knew that if she reached a hand round his back, she'd feel two raised wing discs and the folds of his wings beneath his shirt. The Council had implanted the

discs in Butterfly when he was a year into his Elites training to assess the practicalities of developing aerial surveillance. His wings were a secret kept within the Elites and their associated Council members, and Silver was one of the only people who had ever seen him in the air. Flying was still a contested subject after the Red Nations made the planes come down all those hundreds of years ago.

‘It’s a shame you still can’t fly on assignments,’ Silver said. ‘Where are they stationing you tomorrow?’

‘I’ll be on the stage with Ember,’ Butterfly replied. ‘And you?’

‘Hemmingway House rooftop. Right across from the stage.’ She hesitated. ‘I’m . . . I’m the only one that’s going to be there.’

Surprise registered on Butterfly’s face for a split second before he composed himself, flashing another quick smile. ‘That’s great! Senior Surrey must really be starting to trust you.’

Silver scrunched up her nose and looked away. ‘I doubt it. We all know I’m the worst Elite. Gods know why he’s given me such a big responsibility.’ Ever since she’d found out about the assignment, she’d wondered whether it was a challenge from Senior Surrey and the Council to see whether she really had the skills and confidence to be an Elite. She swallowed nervously. She didn’t like to think what would happen if she *didn’t* prove herself to them tomorrow.

‘Hey,’ said Butterfly, touching her shoulder. ‘Don’t doubt yourself. He’s given you the responsibility for a

reason. And just think – after tomorrow, you won't ever have to take Ember's abuse again. She might even be *proud* of you.'

Silver let out a bark of laughter. She was about to say exactly what she thought about *that* when a gong sounded.

The clamour of the hall hushed immediately. On the stage, the musicians put down their instruments as a man in a brilliant blue tunic and slim metallic trousers stepped out in front of them. A man Silver had only ever seen from afar at events such as this; the city's president, Tanaka.

Tanaka gave a deep bow. He was a kindly faced Japanese man, with greying hair and small, almond-shaped eyes similar to Silver's own. Though there was nothing particularly striking about his appearance, there was something about him that gave the impression of a calm assuredness, and despite his slender frame and average height, he commanded attention.

'Council members!' Tanaka beamed. 'I am delighted to be President of Neo-Babel for yet another year, and to celebrate our Council's leadership with you all one more time. But tonight is not the time for speeches. You will all have to sit through one tomorrow, and I don't want you to fall asleep before having the chance to sample the fine food our chefs have prepared for us tonight!' There were twitters among the crowd. 'Now,' he continued, gesturing at the tables spaced round the hall. 'Let us take our places, and enjoy the finest food and company Neo-Babel has to offer!'

‘Good luck,’ said Butterfly, brushing Silver’s arm as the room burst once again into noise and activity.

‘For what?’ She gave him a grim smile. ‘The parade tomorrow or three hours with Ember tonight? I’m not really sure which I’m dreading more.’

He didn’t return her smile. ‘Don’t worry about it,’ he said, turning to leave. ‘You’ll be great tomorrow. Tanaka’s in safe hands with you.’

It didn’t take Silver long to find her seat in the busy hall; Ember’s shock of fiery red hair was easy to spot. As she sat down, Ember’s eyes travelled slowly over her, taking in her loose hair and cheongsam.

‘Well, don’t you look nice,’ Ember said acidly before turning back to the Council member on her other side.

Ember stayed in that position for the entirety of the banquet, for which Silver was thankful. With no one else to talk to, she was left alone with her thoughts. Her mind wandered to the gift she’d bought for her father’s birthday in a few weeks’ time, an antique musical instrument from before the Great Fall. It had cost her the best part of her yearly salary, but with little else to spend the money on, she hadn’t minded. Silver was close to her parents, spending much of her free time outside of her Elites schedule with them. She smiled, imagining how delighted her father would be with her gift. Hopefully, he’d not try and play it though; she doubted the strange string instrument sounded much better than the ear-splitting Chinese opera her mother and father were so fond of.

But as nerves at the next day’s assignment settled in,

Silver could soon think of nothing else, and she picked listlessly at course after course, drinking far too much sake than she ought to to ease her anxieties. *Less than twenty-four hours to go*, she kept thinking. *Just one more sleep, and then I'll be up on that roof, responsible for keeping Tanaka and the others safe from danger*. She was so caught up in going over every little detail from her training sessions and briefings that the banquet passed in a whirl. Before she knew it, it was past midnight and she was standing to leave.

Ember grabbed her arm. 'Not so fast,' she hissed. 'No late-night trip to boyfriend Butterfly tonight, I'm afraid.'

Silver felt her cheeks redden. 'He's *not* my –'

'I don't care. You need all the rest you can get if you're not to screw everything up tomorrow.'

Ember steered her roughly across the banquet hall towards the line of senior Council members waiting by the door. Having grown up in the Stacks, Silver was used to the customs of the Council, whose members were mainly Japanese like Tanaka, or of Mainland ethnicities, as Butterfly and Ember were. At the door, she bowed deeply to each member in turn. Just as she turned to leave, the person at the end of the line spoke.

'Silver. A word, if I may?'

She spun round to see Tanaka smiling at her. Immediately, her throat went dry.

He pulled her gently aside so they were out of earshot of the Council members still milling around. 'You are one of our junior Elites, am I correct?' he asked.

Tanaka's kindly expression did nothing to settle Silver's surprise at finding herself talking to Neo-Babel's president. 'Y-yes, sir.' She nodded. 'My senior is Ember, sir.'

He smiled. 'Ah, yes. Ember is one of Senior Surrey's favourites. Well, I just wanted to tell you personally how pleased I am at having you on assignment tomorrow. I understand it is your first time working the parade?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Enough with the sir!' he laughed. 'Tanaka, please. Now, I must see our other guests out, but let me say once again how much I appreciate the hard work you – and all the Elites – put in to protecting and serving the Council. Your input is vital to making our city the success it continues to be. I hope you remember that, Silver, as I give my speech tomorrow.'

'I will, sir,' she said, bowing as Tanaka left.

Later that night, lying awake in her bedpod, still warm with a glow from Tanaka's words, Silver made a promise to herself that tomorrow she would be the best Elite out there, smiling at the thought of how pleased Tanaka would be, and the look on Ember's face as he told her how well Silver had performed.

Silver's Mistake

The parade began at midday at a dock on the Outer Circle of the river. Since dawn, a flotilla of boats had gathered. Large commuter ferries sat patiently on the water, while floating shisha cafes – engulfed by clouds of sweetly smelling smoke – and delicate little plastiwood dhows jostled against their sides. River vendors squeezed their boats through the busy waterway, shouting out their wares.

'Teh, sweetened with honey!'

'Beer-soaked sausages, made with top-quality grade-three meat!'

'Mango rice and coconut sauce, hot or cold!'

The streets along the dock were just as packed as the river. People from the nearby Limpets and residential condominiums haggled with merchants offering shishas and handmade trinkets out of grubby metal cases strapped to the sides of their bikes. Groups of men, already tipsy from drink, stumbled through the crowds. Their crude language drew faceless stares from the masked police patrolling the thoroughfares in silence. At the street edges, children ducked the railings to sit with their feet dangling over the water, daring each other to jump across to nearby boat decks.

For now, the atmosphere in the city was one of celebration, moods buoyed by the free food being handed out from the Council tugboats. Intoxicating cooking smells wafted across the streets, tempting the people who watched the proceedings from tiny balconies studding the walls of nearby condominiums. Music drifted out of open doors and windows; the city anthem, old pop songs from before the Great Fall. From some rooms came chanting as their residents recited morning prayers.

At one o'clock, the gongs rang. Slowly, stretching out like a lazy caterpillar, the procession went on its way. It moved through the city waterways until reaching the Council District four hours later. There, on a stage in Pantheon Square, stepped out the Council officials, resplendent in their grey tunics and silver robes which fluttered behind them in the growing wind.

And up in a building at the corner of the square's southern edge, above a sea of heads bobbing to hear the president's speech, a hunched figure edged out onto a balcony and raised its gun.

Silver was dreaming of swimming; a clear sea, open and vast. Sunlight slanted into the water, dappling the blue with trembling puddles of light. Her long black hair fanned like seaweed from her head. She smiled in her sleep, enjoying the coolness of the water, the openness of the ocean.

Then the water began to churn. Huge currents came out of nowhere. They slammed into her, rolling her body

to and fro. She twisted against them, trying to get out of their grip, and in her sleep she punched her arm straight into her bedpod shutters.

Silver snapped awake with a cry. She lay still, cradling her throbbing hand and staring at the metal that encased her bedpod. The sea's roaring from her dream lingered, and as her brain began to wake, she realised it was not just an echo from her dream but that there was actually a muffled rumble coming from somewhere nearby.

She slid open the shutters and stepped out of her bedpod. Sunshine poured into the bedroom from the plastiglass outer wall, casting a slice of shadow across the empty bedpod beside her own, the shutter half open. *Strange*, Silver thought as she ducked into the bathroom to make sure Ember wasn't in there; she hadn't forgotten her lesson yesterday. *I'm sure I was meant to go with Ember for training today.*

She wandered over to the glass wall, yawning and stretching her arms above her head. Her eyes were adjusting to the light, and she could now see clearly the broad avenue of Noda Parkway stretched out below. An elegant strip of trees ran down its centre, city flags billowing from light posts. As one of the main streets in the Council District, Noda Parkway was usually fairly busy, but today it was packed with people, a sea of rippling heads bobbing by.

For a moment, Silver couldn't understand why there were so many people. Then, with a sickening jolt, she remembered –

The parade.

‘Oh gods!’ she groaned. ‘Oh gods! Oh no, no, no, *no!*’

Still cursing, Silver stumbled into the bathroom, where she undressed, popped a mouthwash tablet between her teeth, and splashed her face with water. Back in the bedroom, she pulled on her Elite uniform – black jumpsuit, flexivinyl boots and gloves, her comms cuffs, her stungun – before hurtling out of the room, down the corridor and onto the floor’s landing platform at the hollow centre of the Stacks.

No one was around. Silver took a plastiglass lift down to the atrium, tying her hair into a ponytail. The pathways and prayer gantries lining the centre of the Stacks like a vertical maze were empty. She checked her comms cuff and groaned again; it was seven minutes past five. Tanaka’s speech was due to begin in just twenty-three minutes, which meant she should have been at Hemmingway House over an hour ago.

Silver squeezed her hands into fists. How could she have let herself be so late on the biggest assignment she had ever been given? *Especially* after what Tanaka had said to her last night. It must have been all the sake she’d drunk at the banquet.

Thanks for waking me, Ember, she thought sarcastically, scowling. *I can always count on you.*

By the time the gongs were sounding, signalling the start of Tanaka’s speech, Silver had made it to Hemmingway House. It was a squat, ten-storey building on the southern edge of Pantheon Square, built with the same granite-blend material as most of the buildings in the Council

District. Its polished surface shone in the sun. Two masked policemen stood outside the building, and Silver threw them an apologetic look, touching her hand to the panel beside the door.

Just as she slipped inside, she heard one of the policemen grumble under his breath, 'Stupid Red. They can't do anything right.'

A statement like this would have usually hurt her, but today she was in such a rush she barely noticed. Besides, she'd not forgotten the promise she'd made last night. She was determined to be the best Elite at the parade today for Tanaka, Red or not.

Silver took an elevator to the roof. As soon as the doors opened, wind hit her. It buffeted her small frame as she ran bent over to the northern edge, her ponytail flapping wildly about her face, her eyes watering. She reached the parapet lining the edge of the roof and knelt down, taking her lookout position, just as Tanaka began to speak.

'Welcome, dear citizens, to our annual parade. A celebration of our fine city, Neo-Babel!'

The square erupted into cheers. Silver grinned, feeling a flush of excitement at the energy of the crowd. Down below, Pantheon Square was packed. Pockets of colour from city flags flecked the crowd, and there were vendors selling balloons with the faces of popular Council officials on them. Tanaka's was there, and even Senior Surrey's, who was the Council's Head of Security, as well as being in charge of the Elites.

The real Council members were on the stage at the

opposite end of the square, guarded by a row of masked police. Tanaka stood at the front. His hair was hidden beneath the official broken-winged cap all the Council members were wearing. As he looked round at the crowd, his silver robe fluttered in the breeze.

‘Once, our great city was just the seed of an idea,’ Tanaka began, his voice magnified by the small microphone strapped to the collar of his tunic. ‘A seed born from the riots that spread through the three great continents – the Mainland, Afrika and the Red Nations. A seed that was planted in the late twenty-fifth century, when what was left of the Global Council agreed upon the build of a city in the deserted lands of the former Eastern Europe. They dreamt of a place where civilisation could continue and flourish, where the disastrous effects of the sea-level rises, economic collapse and cultural dilution could be forgotten. A fresh start made.’ He raised his arms, his voice growing louder. ‘A city where history could be outrun, and in time, overcome. A city of hope, of sustainability, of unity. A city, dear citizens, named Neo-Babel!’

The cheers of the crowds drowned Tanaka’s voice. The atmosphere of Pantheon Square was electric, as though their leader’s words were charged with some fantastic energy that danced in the air, slipping into people’s veins. Even alone on the rooftop, Silver was getting caught up in the speech, forgetting her job as lookout.

‘Yes,’ Tanaka said, dropping his arms. ‘Neo-Babel was born. But then came the Great Fall.’

The crowd hushed, listening eagerly.

‘We were a young city, not yet equipped to survive alone, and the wars were savage. We saw the deaths on our tablet screens – whole cities and countries obliterated under the touch of nuclear weapons. We watched as the oil ran out and the planes came down. We hoped that would mark the end of it, but we all saw with horrified eyes as countries continued to fight without their aerial armies, using bioweapons and foot soldiers instead.’

Tanaka paused, and the crowd was so quiet in its eagerness to hear their president’s words that Silver thought she heard a click from somewhere nearby. She turned. The rooftop was empty.

‘But though the Great Fall destroyed the rest of the world,’ continued Tanaka, his hands in fists at his sides, ‘it only made Neo-Babel stronger! We lived up to our motto – *A Place for Everyone* – and not only the Council but every single citizen worked hard to ensure that our city remained fair and just. To this very day, we strive to maintain our legacy as a city of hope, of sustainability, of unity. The legacy our Global Council fathers envisioned for us.’ His voice grew suddenly low, dangerous. ‘Yet despite this, there are those that challenge our system. There are those that fight *against* us, disrupting the routine that has kept us alive and well, that has supported us all these years. And it is my duty as our city’s leader to tell those individuals that *this* is the year they are stopped.’

There was a tense silence now at the turn Tanaka’s speech had taken, but Silver wasn’t listening any more.

She was sure of what she'd heard a minute before; it *had* been a metallic click. Quietly, lightly, she crouched and skirted the perimeter of the rooftop. Nothing. She went back to her original position, paused for a second, thinking, then leant forward over the parapet, gripping the edge tightly, and saw –

A man knelt on the balcony below, clutching a gun aimed straight at the stage.

Silver swung back behind the parapet, stifling a gasp. *Oh gods, oh gods!* she thought desperately. *An assassin, here in my lookout zone, and I was late, and I didn't find him, and now he's got a gun pointed at Tanaka!*

She shook her head, pushing her thoughts away. It was no time to panic. She thought about calling Ember on her comms cuff, but the man was just twelve feet away with a gun in his hand. Any second now he could shoot. There was no time. And, though she didn't want to admit it, there was the thought of how catching the assassin alone would prove to everyone – to Ember, to Senior Surrey, even to Tanaka – that she was every bit an Elite as the others.

I can do this, thought Silver, nodding to herself. She took out her stungun. A deep, slow breath. Then –

She flipped herself over the parapet. Her legs jarred as she landed on the balcony below. The man swung round at the noise. His arm arced towards her with the gun, but he didn't shoot, and she charged at him, firing her stungun.

He danced out of its range. In the second it took for the stungun to recharge, the man lunged – his face a

blur of stubble and bright brown eyes – and wrestled the stungun out of her hand, pushing her to the floor. She jumped up, ready to fight with her fists, but the man was stepping back from her, holding out his hands.

‘Silver!’ he said, in a low, urgent voice. ‘Please understand. I have to do this!’

But she didn’t understand. How did he know her name?

For the first time since Silver had landed on the balcony, she had time to take in his appearance. The man was a Red, like her. He had a weather-beaten face, skin darkened by the sun and etched with lines and scars. There was a shadow of stubble on the lower half of his face, and more shadows under his small eyes, as though he hadn’t slept in days. He wore simple, factory-worker clothes; khaki-coloured shirt, trousers and boots. He looked just like any other worker in the Industrial District, but there was something about his eyes that drew her attention. She saw flecks of gold in them and felt a strange stirring of memories.

‘I have to do this,’ the man repeated, stepping towards her. His eyes were wide, pleading. Silver could smell shisha smoke on his clothes, and, beneath it, a scent she almost recognised. A scent that somehow seemed *familiar*. They looked at each other for a moment and she could feel the man’s name on the edge of her tongue, curling and solidifying into –

Then he darted forward and pushed her down and crouched back in position at the balcony ledge, raising his gun. Silver jumped up, running to him just as he pulled the trigger.

The sound shocked her into stillness. She jerked to a halt at the edge of the balcony, but she could still see what had happened, what *was* happening, and a single thought: *No*.

It was as though the bullet froze the second it hit Tanaka's forehead. There was no explosion, no spilling of brains. Even his eyes stayed open, gazing blankly in front of him at the horrified crowd. As Silver watched, too stunned to move, the ghostly half-smile on his face seemed to twist into a snarl. Then his head disappeared in a cloud of red. The smell of wet metal hit her like a wall, and the screaming began.