

The Scheduled
by *Samantha Hoshin*

Zinni the Q strapped her gun across her back, and strode through the last forest on earth. Her boots crushed the grey leaves, but the rest of the forest was in silence. There were no songs of sweet birds in the forests, for only the ravens remained. Only an occasional *caaaw* could be heard, far off in the distance.

The sun filtered through the clouded air, leaving muddy streaks before the Q's eyes. She thought about her ancestors, who lived in the times when the air didn't need recycling, and it could be looked through, like glass. She longed for those days, when wires and buttons were not a way of life, when people outlived their machines, when flavor and color were natural aspects for whoever desired them. When black was a mourning color.

A crow landed on the ground at her feet. Its left wing was at a strange angle. It let out a weak screech. Zinni crouched next to it, and picked it up. A bullet had hit the bone in its wing. Zinni cursed, there weren't many animals left in the forest, let alone ravens. She crooned to it, and stroked its feathers. It died in her hands.

The Q's reflexes kicked in as she heard a rustle of leaves behind her. Her fingers dashed to her gun and she spun quickly around behind a bush. The wind blew through the trees and whispered secrets into her face. She smelled the man, heard his name, and knew his weapons, for she had known him for many years.

Faan the X's boots came into view. Zinni stood from her crouch and faced him, pushing the balls of her feet into the dirt. He was handsome, young and arrogant. His black curls swayed as he leaned on one hip, with his arms crossed.

Zinni the Q...I have been expecting you. His tone was mocking. Your walk has been pleasant, I presume?

The Q glared back at him. *It was moderately peaceful... until you staggered in*, she replied, in a pointedly annoyed voice, with a hint of venom. He sneered. *Not without good reason my dear Zinni. The Master needs you. He said it was important, something about your dear lover's health.* He paused, watching her reaction. *Oh my, did I say health? Forgive me; what I meant was something more significant...was it...death? Perhaps?* Zinni's eyes narrowed. She strutted past him, quickly, as though there was little significance to what he said. She didn't look back until she was sure he couldn't see her.

Then she ran. The forest seemed to move out of her way as she flew through it. Her breathing turned quick and ragged. Her face was pale, despite the exertion. The underbrush turned to a dusty path, which sprouted many other smaller paths, leading to other buildings in the area. The largest path lead straight, and she sprinted until she reached a massive gate. Behind the gate was a vast onyx dome with an enormous round door. Large ferns and other lively, prehistoric-looking plants surrounded the building.

It was the home to the world's best assassins, who all answered to the Master.

Please state your name and - Zinni interrupted the artificial voice. *The Q. Number 40888.* There was a pause, then: *The Master has been expecting you. Please leave your weapons and ammunition at the desk.* The gates opened, but in a very sluggish manner, so the Q shimmied through the slowly widening gap.

She met the onyx door. The doorknob was cold, and the glare of its black sheen sent shivers up her arms. She pulled it open with difficulty; it was heavy. When she got inside, she threw off her

back pack as soon as she reached the front desk. She kept her gun and ammunition. Alarms went off, and red lights flashed. She ignored them.

Weaving through an intricate labyrinth of walls, steps, and platforms, she finally reached the core of the dome, her destination. The Master stood in the center of the round room. At his feet was a body.

Zinni froze.

Her eyes widened, and she choked on the air she could not get enough of a few minutes ago. She dashed to the body. *Naam*, She breathed. *Naam*. She could sense the Master watching her, calculating all she did. *Naam!* She cried out again in anguish. She shook him, and he opened his eyes, and looked into hers for a brief moment. Then, Naam exhaled his final breath and entered the void, his eyes still open.

Zinni stared at his blank face for a moment, shaking, and raised clawed fingers towards the glass ceiling in agony. She opened her mouth in a silent scream before ducking her face into her lap, her hands clutching her hair in a frenzy.

YOU! Killed! Him! she shrieked. And again, this time grabbing the collar of his shirt: *You, KILLED HIM!* The Master plucked her off his clothes, and laid her in a heap on the ground, saying nothing. She looked at him accusingly. He crossed his arms and stared back, with an air that shamed her for even thinking that he would do such a thing.

She broke down. The Master stood above her the whole time. The room's atmosphere turned icy as she finally calmed down.

The floor was cold, she noticed numbly. She breathed onto it and watched particles of dust fly away before the marble fogged up. The floor held countless memories of the past, and now it swept

this one away into its collection. A memory of her weakened state, her crying on the floor, no more than a gutless, feeble— *No*. The Master looked at her questioningly, gauging what she would do next. *No*, she said to the floor.

Zinni's head snapped up, her eyes were wild with accusation. *Why*, she snarled, baring her teeth, *did you let him die! You could have saved him. I know you could have. Yet you choose*, she paused, emphasizing the word, *to sit and watch. You wished me pain*, she snarled. *Selfish son of a bitch!*

The Master surveyed her coolly, his hands crunched into fists. No one had ever dared to challenge him in any manner, ever. He walked over to his desk and picked up an onyx sphere, a symbol of his authority and power. He rolled it around in his palm, his face tense and slightly red. The corners of his mouth tightened and he waited for her to go on, his face ever calculating.

Zinni continued her insults. She stomped around the room, destroying anything in her path. Then she would break out in a crying attack, and quiet down. The cycle repeated itself several times. The space around her eventually went quiet. *Bring him back*. She looked into his icy grey eyes. *Bring him back*.

The Master surveyed her and finally spoke. *I have an assignment for you. Silence. There is someone you must shut down. He is getting too powerful, too arrogant, too controlling. When you are finished, I will reunite you with your dear Naam. Who is it?* she murmured. The Master lowered himself to whisper in her ear.

Number 17059, the X.

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Faan the X smirked as he walked away from the glass dome building. He had visited it early in the morning, when the Master gave him a new mission. Faan knew he was above everyone else for

being chosen. The Master had to get rid of the Q and the P; they were getting too close to each other, which was unwanted. Naam had been arguing with the Master, talking about how he and Zinni wanted to leave the community of assassins and start a life together. Zinni had become sulky and wasn't performing her duties. Their time was through. And Faan was just the right man to finish it. He would get promoted, something he had been yearning for since he started.

He walked into the forest, ducking behind the underbrush. He positioned himself in a way that he could see the onyx dome and waited.

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Zinni swung open the round door. Her gaze was obsessive, slightly delirious, and had all the intensity of a psychotic asylum escapee. Her black hair, usually sleek and pulled back, was untidy. But her movements were still swift. She knew Faan would be nearby, probably sucking up to the assassins of higher rank.

She slithered from tree to tree, using shade's cover. Her gun was at hand and cocked as she preformed a weaving dance, heading towards the lounge, which was located about a mile from the Headquarters. She melted off the path, her feet soundless on the dead leaves, her breathing quick and inaudible, like a rabbit's.

She heard the sound of a crow, and flinched.

Her training taught her that birds made noise to warn others of the approach of potential dangers. Zinni had made friends with the birds long ago, she became one of them. She knew that they were warning *her*. Her muscles tightened, and she spun on her heels.

She was instantly met by a gun, with Faan's fingers wrapped around it. He pulled the trigger and shot.

The last thing Zinni saw was Faan's gloating face as he lowered his gun. A black lens covered her vision. She heard her name, being called through time and space. Her back arched as she fell, slowly at first, then almost too fast. Faan watched her body hit the forest floor before swaggering away.

Zinni kept falling. She fell through the ground, into the blinding heat of the earth's core. It swallowed her whole. Her ears cringed as she plummeted through constant layers of sound. The voices of glass breathing screeched in her ears. She heard every bullet she had ever released all at once, the screams of terror, and whispered last words of every victim she had claimed. She heard Faan's laughter.

The light was blazing; all she could see were layers of time: past, present, future, all at once. Eternity. Colors, all colors—colors without names—appeared in her vision. Emotions and thought, lightning quick, of every living soul ate away at her own. She felt godly, for a passing moment. She heard her name was called again, closer now. And this time she answered. *Naam!*

Zinni's eyes opened, and the incredible awareness of the universe disappeared. Naam was sitting cross-legged in front of her. She was sitting in the same manner as he.

She stared into his eyes, his sad, knowing eyes, and smiled. He studied her face, and his face burst into a glowing grin.

He opened his arms to her, and she dove in.