# **The Shadows of Fate**

Book 1 of the Brigante Ark Series

BORT PATGIA

If you’re reading this, then I am sure you heard of us. We live our lives that were defined by the battles we have experienced, and I’m afraid because of what we did, it will lead to more battles that are yet to come – and that is our fault.

You may know us by our actions that spread throughout the land. Some of us fought for the truth and justice, others for the leisure of liberty, and some fought to have control of their lives. We stride with different motives, yet it destroys us. There’s a point where we stood for each other for the greater cause, but it did not last long.

I don’t know by what means these words will reach you, but I am relieved to know if someone is reading this because what I’m about to tell you is about how it came to a point where our failures, hatred, and hypocrisy brought catastrophe into this world.

I want you to know where it all began.

# Historian’s note

In Radiya’s year, it is 5433. While on Earth, it is 2023. The 306th War of Blights ended 22 years ago.

On the Atmas continent, the six countries have merged into an alliance and driven the enemies offshore and turned the tide of war. But the damage brought by the war left some countries scarred and took some time before they could stand again. It affected many nations because of the Hayan Empire’s invasion. Some sold their land and the others pledged their allegiance to the Empire. Due to this, several nations were hesitant to trust others.

In the new age, warfare wasn’t led on confrontation by advanced weaponries anymore, but it is the battle of information.

A specific group, Glade, has been rampant and continues to exploit the people's evil deeds with no attempt to unveil themselves. They became the center of attraction along the Spades.

In this time of technology and new strategic warfare, the distrust among the nations from the Atmas continent had grown and became distrustful within the factions.

Now that each other has shown their poison, it’s only a matter of time before another war would break loose.

# Chapter 1

‘**L**et go of the hate. Let go of your fear. Let go of your emotions. A sympathy with no borders is self-destruction.’ Those were the words that my brother Meil told me once when he left the Glade. I never took him as a man who values philosophical knowledge, but he was without a doubt a warrior who has shared experiences on the battlefield. Nonetheless, I always find myself in situations where it is hard to uphold the mantra. For many reasons in this season, there’s a pull that keeps me luring off my space into some unknown conjunction. I believe normal people refer to this as the Call of Fate. If I were a normal person, I might agree with that, but I’m not, and I say it’s a bull. At least, I used to call it a bull. This time around, there’s a force working and I can’t help to think that maybe I’m wrong. Maybe there is something that’s conspiring to change the world and I’m being part of it.’ – From Alastor’s Memoir

\*\*\*

Alastor arrived in the alley as soon as he was able to find a dark enclosure, but it was too late. A thug was able to follow him from behind. Everything happened quickly from thereon. When the thug pulled the trigger, the bullet missed the target due to poor visibility. However, the shot became a beacon of attraction to the enemies like a moth to a flame.

Here, in the Northern Sector of Kayon City, east of the Jules Market, some of the surrounding buildings appear to be abandoned and unkempt, but still, others are living in this slump for the reason they do not have enough money to live in the metropolitan area. The silhouettes of people turn off their lights, afraid of the brewing conflict outside.

Alastor moved hastily and jumped from the ladder to the roof. He leaped to another building and dove head first to the ground, his legs shaking spasmodically. It was his poor attempt to confuse the enemy of his whereabouts, but it did not last long. The thug was able to deduce his location and saw him crouched behind a crate. He scolded himself for his mistake.

“There’s nowhere to run, jackass!” one thug shouted, his voice was hoarse due to his earlier yelling.

Despite being outnumbered, Alastor’s confidence remained unshaken. He froze as he heard them yelling and running towards his location. His back pressed against the cold brick wall. His eyes scanned for any escape routes, but with fifty armed enemies closing in, he was overwhelmed by the odds.

“If you give us the device now, we promise a painless death,” the thug declared. Alastor peered and studied the man in front of him, weighing his options. The thug grit his teeth together. “I’ve got over fifty men, all armed. Come out now!”

Alastor saw their silhouettes scurrying around to watch out for any possible escape route.

“Looks like you brought the big guns,” he mused.

“Poor choice of words, kid,” the thug threatened, his eyes flashing with frustration at Alastor’s words. He took it as a refusal.

In the midst of their hub-hub of profane and yelling, Alastor discreetly pulled the pin of a smoke bomb and he stepped off the narrow passage, he threw the bomb, sent it rolling, and exploded, causing a brief explosion of thick smoke that engulfed the alley, making their vision blurry and eyes teary. Despite the obscure vision, Alastor could still make out through their shifting noises and coughs.

“What the hell? Damn you, bastard!”

The once tranquil alley was turned into a battlefield. They fired their guns, aiming blindly into the smoke. The cacophony of gunshots echoed and not too long, he heard magazines clattered. They clumsily reloaded with their teary eyes and some magazines fell while others could push it on the well. Alastor peered and chuckled lightly. He almost felt sorry for them, but that was the big difference between a regular mercenary and someone from the Glade, they have different mindset and training designs that made them formidable foes unlike the thugs who didn’t know better than to learn how to handle a gun.

The smoke swiftly dispersed as a powerful gust of wind swept through. The brush of coldness did not bother him.

Alastor ran to the nearest enemy. The mercenary knocked an enemy with the back of his sword after he saw him gesturing for his comrade to come closer. He leaped, twirled, his blade glinting briefly and swish sharply as he deftly dispatched his foes one by one. They all came out flying onto the street. Wounded and decapitated. Their blood streak broadly on the road. Alastor threw another smoke bomb, releasing smoke that spread from the alley to the narrow road. He was running around in the dark, waiting for the right time to strike.

“He’s using the haze to his advantage,” the leader said in a disgusted tone.

One by one, his men retreated, cowed by their adversary. The leader turned abruptly.

“Don’t even think about fleeing, it’s just one person!” he yelled at his subordinates.

A voice rang out in protest, sounding discouraged, “I’d rather take a beating from the boss than get killed because of some lunatic!”

“Are you idiots?! He’s the one who'll kill you if you don’t do your job!” The leader yelled back.

The rattling gunshots were music to Alastor’s ears. Aware of the enemy’s numbers, he remained concealed in the darkness. He had seven smoke bombs left. The alleyways of this part of the city created a network, offering ideal hiding spots for Alastor, but analyzing his current position provided a limited advantage. Deciding to look for the best opportunity, he climbed to the ladder and sprang to the top of a nearby building. The enemy remained oblivious of his presence, which worked for him. Alastor cracked his stiff neck, moaned, and swiftly grabbed his handgun just as bullets pelted his previous position. He reacted instinctively, leaping from the building. His legs absorbed the impact of the landing, pain erupting through his bones. Despite the pain, he pushed forward, not allowing himself to rest. After all, the enemies aren’t going to wait for him to recover. He looked at the handgun he stole, served as a backup and put it back to the holster. When his phone vibrated, he pressed the button of his earplug. A loud static noise erupted before he could properly hear the person’s voice.

“Linda, where are you now?” Alastor asked.

“We slipped into the metropolitan area, thanks to you. I’m so sorry, Al. The police are on the move. You have to escape on your own; we have no choice but to return to headquarters,” Linda said.

“Don’t sweat it. I’m already used to it. Is Ken alright?” Alastor said.

“Don’t worry about me, man. Ugh,” Ken’s voice came from the other side. “Help me. My wounds…”

“You’ll live,” Linda replied to him.

“Bitch,” Ken gasped. “I’m dying.”

“Just stay put, okay? Anyway, you need to hurry. The police are on their way, and stay out of their sight.” Linda paused for a second, her breathing was shallow and her voice was brittle. “I’m sorry if we couldn’t help you.”

“Hey. Don’t worry about it. I’ll take care of these guys. Then, after this, I’ll be back. Just make sure the items are safe. I’ll handle these guys; yeah… that’s – that’s a simple task.”

“Thanks. I promise, somehow, I will make it up to you.” Linda’s last reply.

Alastor returned the phone to his pocket.

They finally noticed that he already moved around and he heard their footsteps echoing with loud thuds toward his direction. Alastor was about to hide behind the concrete wall, but the enemy caught him out of the corner in his eyes. Before he could shoot, Alastor already initiated a fire. The bullet pierced through his skull. Alastor took cover as the thugs returned to shoot at him. The mercenary dragged his right feet behind, but a bullet rang one inch away from his eyes. His eyes felt the sharp heat, winced, and shook his head. Alastor hesitated to swing his sword because there was no room. He doesn’t want to further blunt his sword. So, he threw another smoke bomb as soon as the smoke dissipated which gave him enough time to find a better cover.

Suddenly, there were few raindrops that fell followed by drizzle, and the weight of the gloomy clouds endured fell onto the earth in heavy torrential sheets that pelted over the soiled land. The rain dampened his cloak. His raven hair was plastered against his face. The boots were damp, and every thump of it, there was a dull sound of a splash. The water seeped through his socks, numbing and distressing his movements. Alastor breathed heavily and could feel the coldness of the evening rain penetrating through his wet clothes to his skin. The lightning sliced the sky. He wiped up a strand of his hair, allowing his eyes to have sight even though the rain was pelting over his face.

As he heard the thugs were closing in, he threw the smoke bomb in front of them and then charged forward. For a second, the smoke blinded them and they couldn’t see a thing, but that didn’t last long enough for him to properly consider other options. Alastor ran to the closest enemy, he kicked the thug’s hand and his gun flew, thudding against the stone-paved street. The thug was flabbergasted to not even respond accordingly due to being blindsided. Then, Alastor gripped his arm with his brute strength, seizing it. There was a loud crunch when the mercenary twisted the arm. The thug howled and wailed, kneeling. Alastor stole the gun, pointing it at the hooligan. The loud bang resounded in their ears. The blood splashed onto his face down to his dark coat and streamed down along with the rain. He cast his eyes around, the smoke was being pushed away by a powerful gust of wind. He was well aware what he did was a gamble, and a risky one. He was underwhelmed by the pressure for a brief moment. He was left with no choice, but to put his trust in the thick smoke to buy himself enough time to at least take down some more thugs.

They were startled and began to approach the source in this hazy place with caution but were hesitant to even lift their guns to avoid friendly fire. Upon breaching through, Alastor emerged and charged using the hooligan as a meat shield. They began to fire as soon as they saw the nose of the gun pointing at them. The guns rain on the dead body. Alastor returned with random shots at them, hoping that it would hit someone.

Luckily, some of them fell and while others lay injured. His meat shield on the other hand finally lost its purpose and he tossed aside. Their guns finally ran dry. They unlocked the chamber. Some were clumsy when they put their magazines on the well, it slid again. Their clumsiness made Alastor chuckle a little. He decided to switch to his handgun and shot back at them before they could finish reloading. It was evident that the enemies, especially the leader, were in awe of his aggressive, nonchalant approach, with their longed faces watching him leap nimbly out of their weapons range.

Alastor pointed it directly to the thug’s face and shot point blank. The chunks of flesh spread on the cold pavement. He showed no urge of repugnance nor did he fear the odds of facing them. They rattled and clumsily reloaded.

The leader seemed to be agitated about Alastor’s change of tactics. He pointed his gun at Alastor and then shot. They hesitated to shoot as it would likely turn into some friendly fire within the narrow and tight spot of the alley.

“Just shoot! Kill that bastard!”

“But sir -” One of his men hesitated.

“No more buts! Kill that fucking asshole!”

The leader discharged his weapon at Alastor, who was recklessly darting and sliding around, ignoring his subordinates. He ignored their doubtful expressions and objections. In spite of this, a few men displayed enthusiasm to carry on, whereas others obeyed reluctantly.

Dodging the gunshots, Alastor closed his hands and began muttering a spell. “Cinque parete invisibile,” he whispered. Instantly, five radiant walls materialized, shielding him and fending off the gunfire. The shells bounced off and rang when it made contact on a concrete road. Another smoke bomb followed.

The goons stopped when they thought their gunfire was in vain, but the leader persisted. “Keep shooting! Eventually, it will tear down!” he cried out.

Hesitation flickered among them, but they obeyed their leader.

“They’re so persistent,” Alastor muttered. Spotting a pathway to his left, he entered it while the other party continued to fire to the walls. The smoke was gradually clearing, but slowly enough for Alastor to think of a new plan.

The rain was so heavy that it felt like needles hitting them, making it almost impossible for him to see. He wiped them away and maintained his assault on Alastor’s barriers. The enemy leader couldn’t see Alastor, and realization dawned upon him—the walls Alastor summoned weren’t tall enough. Spotting a metallic staircase at the end of a wider alley, he climbed with haste, reaching the top. One of his subordinates approached and handed him a grenade launcher. Alastor, who was already running around them, smiled grimly.

He pulled the trigger, and the explosion consumed its target. Silence followed the blast.

“Did you blow up into pieces? That’s too bad.”

There were no response.

The gentle breeze rustled the leaves and cleared the air of any lingering dust and smoke. The rain poured down in a steady rhythm, pattering against the earth. The bodies of his men lay across the street, drenched in red liquid, yet he caught no glimpse of the perpetrator’s body.

“That’s not possible. An explosion like that would turn his body into chunks.”

His confidence returned as he pondered this, but his cheerful thoughts were disrupted when his ears caught a thumping noise. He spun at once and saw Alastor swiftly moving like a shadow from behind, wielding a sword that dispatched half of his men with precise and fatal strikes. They were cut down with splendid maneuvers.

“What the –” Fear licked down his spine, his stomach sinking with icy dread. His mouth hung wide in awe, resembling a fish, as his eyes locked onto the figure of the man who aimed the double-edge sword at him.

The men that were standing near him were now cut in half. The blood that smeared the silver sword was now being washed away along with the rain. A strong push of the wind made a rhythm on the torrent.

“Did you think that would kill me?”

Being able to wield magic and obscure combat skills surprised the thug. Not all the adventurers and hunters there in Kayon City could fight like that, ever since the country imposed a law that restricted the use of magic within the walls of every major city within the country.

“Y-You’re a mercenary, aren’t you?”

Alastor paused for a moment, as though he were ignoring the question. The thugs were closing in. He pressed the tip of his sword against the leader’s neck.

“You shoot, he dies,” Alastor threatened, his voice resonating with confidence.

“Not if we kill you first.”

Fear overcame the leader’s confidence as his men spoke out with aggressive boldness, their lack of common sense was evident in their actions. However, the mercenary didn’t budge. Not an inch.

“You’ve already seen how fast I am. A single move would be enough to kill your leader. The choice is yours.”

The leader grunted, “What do you want?”

Alastor took his moment, closing his eyes. His ears caught the wailing sirens of approaching police vehicles echoed in the distance. His eyes popped open as his attention returned.

“Waste your time.”

Alastor abruptly leaped from the building and sprinted toward the clustered structures. Thunder cracked and lightning flashed. He vanished from their sight.

\*\*\*

“Only one person and you didn’t even manage to kill him?! I didn’t pay you a lot just to slack off!” His boss growled at them. He lowered his head, apologizing to their boss. If he could catch the perpetrators, his credibility and reputation wouldn’t have been gone, kaput and would have forced him to quit the job, or worse his boss would have killed him, but their boss was considerate despite the lack of his attitude.

He deeply breathed, gathered his thoughts, and expunged the anxiety.

“I am so sorry I didn’t catch them, sir! Give us one more chance and then we will show you the results.” To the least, he already gained the trust of his boss. In the past few years, he accomplished many tasks without fail. He knew when he saw that mercenary use magic, he was bound to fail. Unlike what he faced before, he dared to deal with them by using guns, but now, their enemies can use magic, and this bothered him. Obviously, someone must have hired those mercenaries.

His attention returned to his boss. Even though his boss wore formal attire, his rotund figure still transcended and his belt couldn’t hold the plumpness.

“It was beyond my anticipation that those bastards could conjure magic.”

His boss snorted, “Enough with the excuses. It looks like you are just squabbling now. Where did the best of you go, eh?”

Again, he defended the honor he once held, “I could still fight just like before.” His jaw clenched, stopping the tremble overtaking his reasons.

“If that was true then, what were you doing right now?! Idling like a fool. To hell with all of you! If none of you could return those items, I would have hired another gang and made them kill you all!” He warned, his beard filled with sweat.

\*\*\*

He wandered down the sidewalk, bitter. It was early in the morning, the sun was about to rise at any moments. Further below the stairway, he saw the wooden door and the fluorescent tubes twisted into forming letters, Dove Alley.

He pretended to be surprised and showed an energetic attitude to the kids who tried to scare him by wearing a Halloween mask as he entered. The last time he saw them, they were thin, unrecognizable, but now they were healthy and energetic. Together with his friend, who ran a bar, they could help the kids grow up in an environment with supportive adults.

“Oh, I see you kids must’ve been playing a lot,” he said and offered a weary smile.

“Hmm, I thought you were going to visit this Saturday. Why early?” This time his friend got out of the kitchen then walked to the server station.

He kneeled down to the level of the children and greeted them with a tired smile.

“Hey, why don’t you guys play over there? Uncle Henry and I need to talk. Okay?”

“Adult stuff again?” one of the kids replied with a grumpy face.

“Uhm, yes. Don’t worry. The next time I come here, I will bring a gift for all of you,” he promised.

“Really?” they said in unison.

“I promise,” he said.

“Okay then. Bye,” they said before running off to play tag somewhere else.

He sighed and could not hold the tiredness anymore. “Listen, the reason I came here is that I need my weapons, Henry.”

He stopped and gave a serious look at him.

“Is it serious this time?”

“The prey can use magic and high combat skills; I might need to be serious this time,” he replied.

He could not be careless as he already faced the enemy and underestimated their capabilities. He must be in top-notch condition. Henry signalled him to follow and they went to the basement. There, Henry opened a secret wall that revealed weapons and armour.

Out of concern, Henry asked him, “Port, what kind of enemy are you facing now?”

Port didn’t know who they were, but he must be prepared next time like this. There is little else he could do now that they’re in hiding. He must perform diligently or he wouldn’t be able to feed the kids he took care of. Worse, they would become the target of his boss’s wrath.

“I don’t know who they are, but I’m sure that they’re mercenaries hired to steal items that my boss is obsessed with,” he said as he grabbed a giant case and started to choose weapons.

“When are you gonna stop this job? I know it’s not my concern,” Henry asked.

Port showed a wry smile and said, “You know I can’t leave this way of living. I’ve grown with it, and I’ll die with it.”

Henry let out a sigh as if he already anticipated his answer, but still, he wished that it would be different this time.

“Besides, I have a debt. I cannot just waltz away. He might target you guys. Just do not worry about me, take care of those kids.”

“You can still go back,” Henry said.

Ignoring Henry’s comment, Port locked the door behind him and pulled a sack full of money from underneath his coat. Henry’s eyes widened in shock.

“I know that your business’s income is low, but with this, you can compensate for it,” Port said.

“Where did you get this?” Henry asked.

“Doesn’t matter. Just use it.” Port said.

Henry hesitated for a moment before reluctantly accepting the money. “Thanks for the concern, but actually… where—alright, I’m not gonna ask anymore, just be careful, okay?”

Port nodded, “No problem. I won’t be here for a while.” He began to look for a bag in the cabinet. “I’m going somewhere.”

Henry raised a brow. “To where?”

Port walked through the counter where his weapons were locked and started to pack. The pain in his ribs made a soft crunch when he crouched. He suppressed the pain so that Henry won’t nag about it.

“It would be better if you don’t know.”

“You’re going to get yourself in trouble.”

“That’s an understatement. I’m always in trouble.” A loud hoarse of voices began to ring from outside even though muffled by the thick walls, the commotion was considerably loud. “I think you should go now, things are getting busy out there.”

Henry left the room and Port retrieved a box from his coat’s pocket. He walked towards the desk, pressed his palm against the brick wall, and felt for the slightly different texture of the bricks. He pressed it, and a faint moan sounded as the wall opened and groaned. Port grabbed a flashlight and walked down the stepping stone leading into the unravelled darkness. The door closed behind him.

A few moments later, Port was sitting in the corner. The weapons are in his bag. He let out a long sigh before leaving the place. Port considered the fact that it maybe the best if he would relocate to other station.

As he got out on the street, he was greeted by man wearing in black cloak. Unsure what he had to say, Port let him approach. What he wasn’t expecting was news that will completely changed his mind.

\*\*\*

Alastor gripped the doorknob and turned with care the custom made wooden door, though installed, it was poorly crafted as it eerily creaked when he opened it. The room beyond was dimly lit, but it was enough for him to make out the first thing that caught his eye was a burly man standing by the forge, pounding hard at a hot rod with his hammer in a precise and calculated manner. The clanging sound echoed through the room with each strike at the anvil. His eyes squinted from the blinding radiance of the molten iron. A brief clang from the tongs rang when the blacksmith held it and followed by the hiss of steam as he submerged the rod in a nearby barrel of water. Then, the room was filled with the hiss of hot metal. Meil’s face contorted as he went to continue his work.

The man, Meil, was a striking figure, six or seven feet tall with broad shoulders, spiky hair, a thick beard, and shallow eyes. He had a chiseled physique that showcased his impressive six-pack abs. His physique made an intimidating impression. The place was quite a mess, their few papers laying off far from the workplace, blueprints he created, and plates that haven’t been able to be washed indicating how busy he had been for the past few days.

The room was cluttered with a few items on display; medieval swords, armours, and various weapons hanging on the walls. He leaned back against the woolen counter, the long-wrapped object clothed in white, which contained his sword, hidden in his suitcase that was resting at the side. He kept his eyes on Meil.

Meil’s gruff voice broke the silence, “Kid, didn’t I tell you to knock before you enter and where the hell is your pass card?!”

Alastor sighed, his fatigue apparent in his tired reply, “Sorry, I forgot.”

“I told you that if you want my service, leave a card at the post office before you come here!” Meil barked.

Alastor glanced at the counter where a few cards scattered. “Meil, why bother leaving a card when I can just visit here directly?”

“Because I don’t want to be bothered by the police, you dumbass!” Meil snapped, reaching for a rag to clean the desk.

“Right.” Alastor said. He knew better than to argue with Meil.

Meil smirked, “I heard that you guys have gotten pretty cocky these days, eh?” he laughed, “And also, all of you are dead meat.”

Alastor’s expression remained unchanged. He anticipated the news of their gang’s activities would spread fast, and he knew that other gangs would come after them for their advanced technology.

“That’s not surprising,”

Meil’s tone turned grave, “Hey, be serious. You never know who you might bump into; you guys might want to lie low for now.”

“That’s what we’re currently doing,” Alastor said. His arms crossed.

Meil finished cleaning the desk and pulled out a cigar from under it, lighting it at the fireplace. He took a puff, blowing the smoke towards Alastor, who swayed his hands to drive it out from his face. Alastor’s eyes scanned the workshop. Despite the disorganization, Alastor knew that Meil was a skilled craftsman, and he was the best person to go to for several gangs’ weapons and armour needs.

“I’m curious, how many years has it been since you left the Glade?”

Meil leaned back in his armchair, taking a puff of his cigar before replying, “I think it’s been around fifteen or sixteen years. I’m still doing some gigs there though.”

“How did it go?” he asked out of curiosity.

Meil threw his cigar into the fireplace before responding. “At first, people wouldn’t stop bothering me, especially the ladies. I guess they saw me as a rich guy, even though I have nothing but a bucket full of Haz when I arrived here with no connections or reputation.”

“And I’m guessing you beat a few of them up to earn their respect?” Alastor said, amused.

Meil grinned, “You bet I did. So, how’s the Glade doing?”

Alastor groaned in response, he held his eyes on him. “Same as always, with those damn training programs.”

Meil chuckled, “Holm sure knows how to train a professional mercenary.”

Alastor shook his head in disagreement. “I wouldn’t call myself a professional. Learning doesn’t stop once you’ve graduated. There’s so much out in the world that you can’t learn from books or instructors. I didn’t even know what cake was until I left that hellhole. Besides, I’m not a big fan of following instructors’ directions in the Glade.”

“Your attitude reminds me of someone I knew before.” Meil smiled.

Alastor raised his eyebrow, “Who?”

Meil’s expression turned distant, and he shook his head. “It’s nothing,” he said before abruptly standing up. Alastor could sense a shift in mood.

“Meil, is everything okay?” Alastor asked with concern.

“It’s nothing, really. So, what brings you here? You didn’t come all this way just for a chat, did you?”

“Actually, I do have a favour to ask. It’s about my sword, it got pretty rusty since my last fight.”

Meil’s was interested due to the fact that he made an adjustment with his sword last month. Alastor opened the suitcase and revealed the cherished sword wrapped in white cloth. Meil noticed the broken hilt and a few scrapes on the blade, but he was confident that it was nothing he couldn’t fix. As he inspected the sword, Meil realized it was considerably dull.

“Oh damn,” he muttered under his breath. “The hilt will only break if used against a hard surface. Also, considering the dull blade that I just sharpened last month, cutting flesh could have caused the dullness, but the damage could be extensive from within.”

Meil turned around to gather his tools and prepare to reconstruct the blade. “Ya want me to reconstruct it?” he asked without looking back.

“Please do, but make sure the handle is comfortable and not heavy.”

“Sure thing.” Meil said. “You can have it the next day.”

Alastor bowed and left a bag of coins, but before he could walk away, Meil’s tense voice stopped him. “Hey.”

Alastor turned around, wondering what he could possibly want to talk about. Meil had something else on his mind. “How are you holding up with your teammates?” he inquired.

Alastor furrowed his brow, slightly confused. “We’re just doing fine. Is there something we shouldn’t be fine with?”

“No. I’m just a little worried about you. I was wondering if your relationship with them is okay. Since we know that, you know what I mean.”

Alastor understood Meil, but was appalled by the irony. Meil was the one who told him ‘Sympathy with no borders is self-destruction.’ A surge of frustration told Alastor to argue with him, but the reason in him kept his thoughts in check. He wanted to tell him, he wanted to shout, and to call out his hypocrisy, but he won’t, and he is not going to understand him.

“I know. Don’t worry, we’re fine,” he said, offering a wry smile.

Meil smiled back, but his eyes betrayed a sense of worry. Alastor noticed the concern and felt grateful for Meil’s friendship despite what happened. They knew each other for a long time, and Meil helped Alastor during his tough times. He won’t hate Meil for the things that he had done.

Meil broke the tension, “Just remember, kid, they’re the only ones who you can rely on if you want to survive in this kind of business.”

“Hey, stop it. You’re being weird. I’m not used to cliché sayings,” Alastor protested, his lips curving up in a half-smile.

Meil’s expression turned serious as he replied, “Kid, just make sure you hang tight with your friends. They’re the ones you can rely on.”

“You got that being tight is right, but the wrong thing is that they’re not my friends, and I rely on myself,” Alastor retorted.

“It’s not always about yourself, kid,” Meil murmured thoughtfully.

“I know that. Sometimes, I wonder how I can get rid of that part of me.” Alastor admitted, his voice tinged with vulnerability.

“All you have to do is open yourself to them,” Meil advised, his voice soft, and reassuring.

Alastor considered Meil’s advice, but his independence and orphanhood taught him to be self-reliant. He couldn’t help but question whether Meil’s advice would work for him and his teammates. Despite this, he managed a wry smile and told Meil, “I don’t think it will work.”

“You just think that it wouldn’t work. I mean, look at us. We became best buds. How come you aren’t able to see and treat them the way you’re fond of me?”

“It’s different when it comes to you. You took care of me since I was a child and taught me things until you left the Glade,” Alastor explained, his tone softening.

Meil fell into silence, leaning against the wall and giving a heavy sigh. “Alright, if I cannot change your mind, suit yourself.” He rubbed his spiky hair, stood up, and continued his work. Meil added. “You don’t seem to be a greedy person. You rarely complain, and if you do, it’s constructive criticism. But being so conservative, seemingly so desireless, you make me worry and feel sorry for you. Why are you like that?”

Alastor explained, “Because I saw how desires ruin people. They claim that they have enough, but in fact, nothing is more than enough. I don’t want that. I detest that. I want to avoid that.”

“Is that the reason why you keep your distance from them?”

“Who knows what they will become in the future? I don’t want to tie myself to those people who can’t help themselves.”

Alastor dragged the solid wooden door, and as he was leaving, Meil warned him, “You gotta also be careful. I heard that the Canaries are here in town.”

Alastor left without responding, and Meil’s words bugged him for the next few days. He couldn’t shake off the feeling that something terrible was looming over them. Meil’s words about the Canaries kept running through his mind, and he wondered if he should be more cautious about his surroundings.

\*\*\*

Dove Alley was intended to be a bar for everyone, but the owner’s primary intention was not fully realized due to the mercenaries, hunters, and adventurers who often gathered there. Most of the time, mercenaries occupied the place, especially at night. When the sun broke out, the bar would be filled with drunkards. The owner found it challenging to handle formal customers mixed with troublesome patrons from three guild branches. Adventurers rarely set foot in the place, unlike the mercenaries.

Henry did not expect any guests, but three people suddenly entered. They were all dressed in white coats with earthly faces. The youth approached Henry and asked, “Hey, mind if you cook us a steak?”

“Sure, as long as you have money to pay for it,” Henry replied promptly.

However, one of the men in the group intercepted, his jaded eyes flickered. “Forget it, we’re leaving.”

“Ugh, but we just came here. Come on, don’t be such a killjoy, Lance. We’ve been working nonstop these days. Right, Ina?” The youth raised a protesting tone.

“I thought the reason we came here was because of your information. Nah, we’ll just go. Do whatever you want.” Ina said.

Lance and Ina seemed to be alike in their strictness, but their friend, Gary insisted. He was the least tense among the group. He scratched his head and said, “Dude, you know what? Just shut up and eat something healthy, okay?” He then stood up and pushed the two of them to sit on the woollen chairs. They gave up. Besides, their stomachs growled.

Henry gave each of them a menu. Their eyes were heavy as if they hadn’t slept for a couple of days. The man who seemed to be the leader of the group sighed, forfeiting against the energetic youth. He fixed his sight on the wooden floor, lost in thought. The woman, Ina, sat beside him, noticed his contemplation and disturbed him of his daydreaming by clicking her fingers. Lance expelled the air that made him feel heavier than he would normally be.

“So, have the two of you already picked your delights?” Henry asked.

Ina pressed the tip of her finger on the menu as though she was selecting a dish. He noticed just now her tied red hair, her glamour, and her radiant skin, along with her red lips, attracted the attention of other customers. Henry cautiously glanced at the corner of the pub and saw five drunk men gazing at the woman. They didn’t even bother to hide their lustful glances. Deciding what to eat, she raised her hand and gently pressed her tip to it.

“I want this and this,” she said.

Henry glanced over to the man, waiting for his order. It didn’t take long.

“Also, steak and a cup of coffee.” Lance sharply said, putting down the menu and resting his arms on the table.

“Coming right up.” Henry proceeded to the back, listed down the orders, and gave them to the chefs in the kitchen.

“We shouldn’t be here,” Lance said without moving his eyes on the table.

“Relax, chill, and enjoy the food,” Gary replied, not even bothered with Lance's words.

Gary yawned in stress as his stomach growled in hunger. They waited patiently, and it wasn’t too long until Henry came back with a tray, placing the plates one by one in front of them. Upon accepting the payment, he went to the counter and counted the amount of money they earned that evening.

“Hey, not bad.” Gary used the fork and knife to slice a portion of steak before tasting it. He could feel the tenderness and the juiciness that slipped down his throat. His comrades silently ate their food.

Henry’s eyes darted when he noticed the men staring at the lady, rose, and walked toward them. “This could be trouble,” he muttered. Lance caught the phrase and felt the presence approaching them. They were about to get closer, but a seven-foot-tall man holding a butcher knife stood in front of them, threatening them with his glare. “You already gave us trouble last time. We were quiet on what you did. If y’all insist on doing it again, then you’ll be facing all of us.” The kitchen staff were ready to throw some knives at them.

“Tsk. Fine,” the five of them had no choice but to retreat.

Observing the situation, he got closer to the chef, thanking him, “You saved us from trouble, thanks.”

“It’s nothing. Besides, those men have been a pain in the ass for the past few days. I guess it’s time for them to learn their lesson.” He gave a smile before returning to the kitchen.

Lance lay down, drank his coffee, and pulled out cash from his pocket, handing it to Henry. “Hmph, we should go now,” Lance said, pulling on his trench coat before walking out. Ina nodded in assent and pinched the young lad, pulling him over.

“Ow, ow. Hey, I haven’t finished eating yet!” Gary yelled.

“Forget it. We need to get out of here,” Ina replied.

“Oh, man,” he sulked.

\*\*\*

As soon as their presence resurfaced from the alleyway below, he took a deep breath. The moonlight illuminated the area like a strip film. The lights of the buildings and the bustling noise of the crowds sank the loud clamour of vehicles as they made their way away from the metropolitan. They had a hard time jostling through.

“Dude, I haven’t finished eating yet,” Gary said.

“Forget it, Gary. We don’t want to attract any attention, especially from the criminals lurking around here,” he snorted as his plain white hair gently swayed in the air.

“Whatever,” Gary hissed.

They stopped at the pedestrian lane, waiting for the stop signal.

“We came here to investigate, not to go sightseeing,” she interjected with an indifferent tone.

“Yeah, I get it. But we need to rest. I mean, look at our eye bags,” Gary emphasized. He tried to put on a smile, but his tired, saggy skin would pull it back to his tired expression.

Ina looked at Gary’s face as if he were about to have a mental breakdown. She sighed, “I understand why you’re worried, but it’s our job to keep an eye on Kayon City.”

It has been two months since they were assigned to this city. Their superior officer ordered them to investigate the unusual crime that had been escalating for the past year. They were working non-stop to unveil further cases, such as missing persons, rumours about bio-weapons, and smuggling.

“So much for the past months we spent investigating, but we still ended up with nothing. Even the riot that happened last week didn’t give us any clues,” Gary murmured, sulking while crossing the street.

“Not for long,” Lance said as he looked at him, wondering what was on his mind. Gary noticed that they were taking an unknown route, at least for him. The two of them followed him. A few meters away, the odour of graffiti lingered in the air. The words written on it were more like an eyesore with profanity about the treaty of other nations.

“You remember what happened in the Elfin Region?” Lance questioned Gary as he began to walk steadily. He limited his breathing as he could taste the strong smell of odour coming from the spray can that the delinquent used.

“Oh yeah, a tension between their nations has arisen. If I remember correctly, it’s because of the commotion about the boundaries when they found minerals lurking in the Alfahon Mountain. Am I right?” Gary replied.

“Not exactly. That was two weeks ago. There’s a new issue rising,” Ina intercepted.

“Do you know about the Ylfon Kingdom’s King Jven Teralhan?” Lance asked.

“Yes,” Gary replied.

“He died. With the loss of their king, it has shaken the alliance and the inner circle of the country, which means a civil war is probable, much worse than that if the other nations will see it as an opportunity to declare war.” Lance explained.

“But that’s impossible! Together with The Ylfon Kingdom, the six nations have formed a treaty to stop an unnecessary war.”

“You didn’t hear about the rumours?”

“Huh? What about him?” he grunted indifferently. His face looked perplexed, unable to grasp the information.

Lance’s eyes darkened for a moment. “He died three days after the hearing between the nations, at the state of Crohan where the chosen high nobles live. They declared the cause of his death to be natural, but there were doubts about. Neither of them can be trusted, thus, suspicion stained trust.”

“Now that’s alarming. He has no son to rule the kingdom; he has two daughters. I doubt that balance will remain unshaken for the next few months.”

“You might have thought that, but his first daughter is rather competent, unlike her sister,” Lance said.

“Are you saying they allowed a woman to rule a kingdom?”

“What’s wrong with a woman ruling a kingdom?” Ina asked, her spirited voice growing serious. Lance and Gary exchanged a glance, and Gary could feel the intensity radiating from Ina’s presence.

“Well, I guess it’s new for me to see one. Most of the time, the women I knew were a little bit emotional and unreliable,”

Ina’s brows met. “Are you saying I’m emotional and unreliable?”

“Did I mention your name? I said most. Are you sure you’re one of them?” Gary sardonically said.

“Well, I never saw you with another woman aside from me before, so…” Ina trailed off.

“I don’t know if I should be glad or be insulted, but fine,” Gary could hear the low tone of Ina’s chuckle as it wafted off along the breeze.

“You can guess, but the point is that it is not necessary for a ruler to have a partner or not. You are your own person, and you can be competent if you have the wits to withstand the odds. So, I think her credibility is not questionable. Other than that, she has the council to consult,” Ina said.

“I guess you’re right,” Gary conceded.

“Since the two of you are done arguing, I thought you might want to know that our fellow agents are on the move, and here is what is interesting,” Lance said, shooting them with a serious look. “This is supposed to be confidential, so don’t tell anyone.”

“Cross my heart,” Gary said.

“Reports from our fellow agents said they saw soldiers meeting secretly at Thebasas canyon, wearing the banner of each respective kingdom, Indine Nation, and Hayan Empire.”

“That’s impossible. They will never ally with that country, not after what they did thirty years ago. I am sure the Ark Renevaes and the other kingdoms and countries will not just be at standby if they know those sly foxes are plotting something,” Gary said.

“That is a question that has not yet been answered,” Lance said.

Gary’s eyes altered, noticed by the punks that were doing it. They walked through a dark passage under a bridge, taking many paths that led to an unknown part of the city. Gary showed a perplexed expression, disturbed, then he asked, “Where are we supposed to be going?”

“Meeting Ground of the scums,” Lance said.

“Meeting Ground? Care to elaborate?” Ina inquired, turning to see Lance’s well-known untethered composure.

“What are we supposed to do there, and what do you mean by Meeting Ground?” Gary asked.

“We’re going to pretend to be mercenaries,” Lance said briskly.

“Mercenaries?!” Gary snapped.

“What the hell?” Ina uttered in disbelief.

Gary breathed heavily, trying to calm down his racing heartbeat.

“I know this is a little crazy, but we have no choice.” Lance said.

“Anyway, how the hell did you find out about this place?” Gary asked.

“I put a tracer on one thug we met earlier.”

“Them? How did you know that they’re involved in this?” Ina asked.

“A hunch,” Lance said.

A gentle wind passed by as the sounds of birds chirping echoed in the air. Gary stiffened, lost in thought. Listening to their plan made him feel guilty, considering the principles they held as patrolmen of the Canary.

“I don’t know, dude. I think we might end up getting into trouble. Don’t you think so, Ina?” he asked.

Ina stopped in her tracks. “I agree. We don’t have a proper plan, and we have no idea what kind of people are in there.”

“What do you think I just said right now? It’s an impromptu plan.”

“An impromptu is not an actual plan.” Gary responded.

“This is not the first time we’ve done a cover-up mission. This will be a cinch,” Lance confidently replied.

“Perhaps going in and pretending to be one of them would give us a clue about what’s happening in this city,” Ina agreed.

“Um, hello? Dude, if we get busted, dozens of hunters and mercenaries will come to kill us!” Gary said.

“Not if you shut your mouth,” Ina replied, annoyed.

“Relying on the police won’t do anything good for us. We must move on our own,” Lance said. Ina and Gary glanced back at each other, giving a nod as they agreed with his reasoning. “Who knows? Those pig heads might be working under bribes.”

“Alright, we’ll tag along.” Gary said.

As they entered the gloomy alleyway, they uncovered the revelries of outlaw deviants dwelling in perilous residences. Ahead of them, a luminous neon hue emitted by the fluorescent tube accelerated the excitement as people inside danced on the floor. The flashing lights inside the bar were visible through the higher windowpane.

“Is this the place?” Gary said.

“I think so. The tracer stopped blinking when they came inside,” Lance replied, looking at his radar.

The bar was a large one, bustling with crowds entering it. At first, Lance doubted that this was the place. He could have sworn that there was something wrong with it, its openness. As they passed a street filled with prostitutes, Gary observed his comrades. Ina’s eyes were filled with disgust at the women lining themselves up with no regard for their dignity, but gloom by a realization. The government could have done something for them, and as an asset of it, she felt that was also on her.

Gary tapped her shoulder, and she noticed, giving him a wry smile before looking straight ahead as if pretending not to see him. “Relax, we have to go inside if we want to know,” Lance tiredly replied.

“Oh man, something tells me that this isn’t going to end well,” Gary murmured.

The trio walked with a certain guise, trying to look like they belonged there. They stood in front of the bar, gazing up at the fluorescent tube forming the letters “Cassa Hal.”

A metallic door stood before them, its small grid carved into it. Lance knocked on it while the other two stood beside him, trying to look casual. The door’s peephole opened, giving them a glimpse of the revelries inside. As Gary leaned in closer, a pair of fierce eyes peeked out and grunted at him, causing him to shriek in surprise. Ina gave him a disapproving look, and Gary gathered his thoughts, pretending as though nothing had happened.

“What do you want?” a deep voice flared from behind the door as the loud music pounded in their ears.

“I heard this is the place for outlaws,” Lance replied.

The man behind the door eyed them suspiciously, “Hm, you don’t look like one.”

“Well, let’s just say that we came from far away. We want to make a name here and provide some services to the Hoarder,” Lance said, trying to sound confident.

The man continued to scrutinize them, intensifying their sense of suspicion. Lance noticed this and continued to make playful words, “You don’t want to lose an asset, do you? I heard that Hoarder is looking for a valuable ally?”

Giving in to his words, the thug gave them the last advice, “Fine, just don’t give us a headache.”

“Of course,” Lance replied.

The metallic door squealed as the bodyguard pulled the lever and lifted the lock. They entered the bar. The place was much more intense and provoking than outside as the jock’s music kept the audience grooving. Three disco balls hung tight, emitting different colours of lights dancing that seemed like exploding with wild throbbed of rhythm. The noise was deafening, and it was difficult to relay his words as they proceeded sideways, avoiding the bustle of dancing crowds.

“Hey! Where is this guy called Hoarder?!” Gary said through gritted teeth.

“Huh!? I couldn’t hear you!” Lance replied, his voice barely audible over the loud music.

Ina gripped Lance’s shoulders tightly, afraid to let go as the music lowered and the lights focused on a man walking onto a semi-circular podium above them. Two guards opened a closed red curtain, revealing the man of the show himself.

He was dressed in a dramatic red leather cape, resembling a king, with a trimmed beard and shaggy hair adorning his hat, tight red jeans, and white boots. As soon as the audience noticed his presence, they sat down on their benches, and the mixed lights switched to a single white light, marking the Hoarder.

“Well, it looks like we won’t be wasting our time finding him,” Gary murmured.

The microphone emitted a static sound that rang through their ears, deafened them by sharp noise for a moment before the Hoarder confirmed that it was working properly and announced, “It is a lively night, indeed. The food, the drinks, the freedom!” Applause and cheers filled the room for him. “Ladies and gentlemen, let us proceed to our main event and introduce the newest collections for sale!” he shouted.

Ina grumbled in disbelief as the Hoarder revealed the slaves that lined up on the stage, chained and illuminated by white light.

“What the hell?” Ina uttered in disgust.

“Now, I know that the police have been quite hectic about recent incidents, and because of that, of course, our operation had been delayed, with lots of delays, so fuck them,” the Hoarder continued. “But, with the help of my crew and colleagues, we could deliver you guys our lovely products, whose rarity is at its best!”

The Hoarder introduced some slaves, but one caught Lance’s attention. The elf wore dirty rag clothes, had pointy ears, silver eyes, and attractive auburn hair that fell over her eyes. Encored by light, they strained their eyes and had to cover themselves.

“I know that they would famish you all for the surprise that I will spill into you because their race is far beyond this region that we knew. Nonetheless, this precious being was found by my endearing hunters and presented to you, the magnificent being of nature, a part of the race we knew as Elves!” the Hoarder declared.

The audience gasped in astonishment. Right in front of them, a mystical being was being sold like a material possession. Not too long, several people from the crowd yelled their price. The Hoarder hushed them.

“Now, I know that you all want to get a grip on its magnificent existence, but now is not the right time, as others might not have yet readied their leverages. We will hold this meeting on Friday night! So, please be ready on that day, because things might go wild if you know what I mean. He-he-he.”

As he bent down, lowering his hat to his chest, showing courtesy to the audience, his thin smile widened, and the light slowly vanished with the clapping.

“Lance, this is…” Ina frantically tried to say something, but Lance interrupted her.

“I know what you were thinking, but we have our top priority. We would take care of that matter later,” Lance said as if he had no intention of letting it interfere with their main objective. Gary, on the other hand, was thinking of something different. Ina interrupted Gary by waving her hand, and Gary nodded and followed Lance.

As they slipped through the people to the edge of the corridor, they saw the thugs guarding the red door. They did not need to know what was inside, but they already had some ideas.

“Halt, this place is for VIPs only,” the thug blocked the way.

“We came here for the Hoarder,” Lance replied.

“You have insurance?”

It puzzled the three of them over what he said.

“Pardon?”

“Insurance...invitations, money, name on the list,” the thug elaborated.

“Let’s just say that we don’t have any of those, but we have something to offer him.”

The thug grunted and walked away with a suspicious glance. The trio noticed it, and Gary gulped in anxiousness, wiping his sweaty forehead using his hand. Ina was concerned about it and couldn’t help but whisper to Lance, “What are we going to do if things go south?”

“I have no such plan,” Lance said and stiffened, gulping at what he realized.

“What?” Ina said.

“Relax, we’ll just bust our way out of here,” Lance confidently replied.

“Oh, man,” Gary mumbled, putting his palms on his face.

He picked up the sudden change in the atmosphere. Lance gave a glance to his left and then to his back. Thugs holding guns came close to them. He cursed, “Damn.” And Lance muttered, “Prepare for the worst.”

The two picked up the pace and showed a sullen expression as they encircled them. “The boss wants to see you.”

“Lead the way,” Lance said.

The trio proceeded with the lead of the grunt in the narrow-wide space of the white platform with the white hue giving sight to their way. Turning to the southerly path, they observed each room they happened by, which was guarded, or if not, a grunt would freely assist them. A person came crashing into Ina as someone hurriedly came out of the room.

“Oh, do forgive me, miss,” he hissed. Ina covered her mouth as his breath stank of alcohol, and the man held her left hand. “Hey, have we met before?”

“Uh no, probably you mistook her for someone else, sir,” Gary interjected, creating a gap between Ina and him.

“Surely I met you somewhere before, and it wouldn’t be easy for me to forget such a beauty like you.”

Gary snapped and turned to wave his hand at those who were trying to catch Ina. “Seriously, you should go back to where you came from,” he said, his irritation escaping his breath.

The guy would dare to persist, however, the thug interjected and firmly clutched his hand.

“Please go back inside, sir,” the thug said.

“Okay, okay, no need to be so brash,” he muttered, throwing another flirty glance at Ina. “Call me if you’re bored.” Chuckling, he walked back into the room.

“What a creep,” Gary muttered in disgust. “Are you alright, Ina?” he asked, turning towards her.

“Yeah, I’m never bothered by that,” Ina replied calmly.

They continued to walk, and three guards joined them, with one walking ahead and guiding them to a room at the end of the corridor. The path had no windows or stairs, only a thick wall that limited their options for escape.

Once they reached the room, the thug who was leading them left them in front of the door, with two grunts guarding outside. Lance turned the doorknob, hearing the creaking sound, and they entered the room.

The Hoarder called out to them as they entered.

“If it isn’t our guests.”

Lance threw a conspicuous glance at him, wary of any danger.

“Now, now, don’t give me that look. It’s not like I’m going to do something bad to you guys, hee-hee, not if you don’t give me any reasons to do it. Now, come in, no need to be shy.”

Gary felt unreasonably chill that glided in his spine as he entered the room. The Hoarder’s words and intentions frightened him, and he could sense that Ina was worried too. However, their leader, Lance, showed no expression and cautiously observed the Hoarder.

“I know you were wondering why an important person like me would want something from you guys, but clearly, you’re the ones who want something from me,” the Hoarder said, smirking as he pulled away his red cape, threw it to a red cushion, and sat down on it. He tapped his hand on the cushion, implying for them to sit down too. They lounged at the opposite side of him.

“I have been in this kind of business for a few years, and each guest and businessman that comes here gets to know me first, so it wouldn’t be surprising to lead you guys to meet me here. Tell me, what do you want?” he questioned them forthrightly.

“We came from a very far place and just got here now in a hurry,” Lance said, tapping his feet rhythmically on the ground and crossing his arms, while the two beside him listened.

“Far away, eh? To where? Leaf region, Iziol?” the Hoarder asked.

“Not exactly. Somewhere in the Coastal Region,” Lance replied.

The Hoarder showed a surprised expression, but hid it. “Coastal, you say? Now, this is interesting. I know someone who wasn't able to get out of that savage region of tribes that is currently at war. Tell me, what brings you here?”

“The reason is quite complicated, and we can’t reveal it to you. It’s a matter of privacy,” Lance said.

“Oh dear, you must know that in business, one must trust their partner and open themselves up to create a strong bond. That’s the foundation on which I built my empire. Well, if you’re not willing to tell me, then I can’t trust you guys, which means you won’t get what you came looking for, no?” the Hoarder said, his tone turning cold.

Lance fixated his eyes, deep in thought about which words to choose. Ina and Gary could feel the tension growing. They were anticipating that the Hoarder might not fully trust them, and it confirmed their suspicions when one of his men reported back about them.

It seemed that he hit the right nerve.

“Cat got your tongue. Tsk, okay kiddo, getting straight to the point, do you have any leverage to compensate for my service?” The Hoarder asked.

Lance was still lost in his thoughts, trying to think of what they could offer in exchange. Gary noticed the change in the Hoarder’s demeanor and guessed that he must be getting angry due to Lance’s consecutive non-response. Gary decided to intervene, knowing it could get dirty.

“To be honest, we’re broke,” Gary said, cutting through the tension.

“Oh, that’s not nice to hear at all,” the Hoarder frowned.

“But we could offer you our service,” Lance replied confidently.

The Hoarder looked at them, judging them. “Kids, with white funny clothing, need to work on their interpersonal skills. I see no good in all of you.”

Gary hushed and changed his voice, saying “We bombed the state of Taronda, launched a bio-attack at the Iziol Region, and caused a civil war among the tribes in Leafol. Would you still neglect our accomplishments?”

The Hoarder showed a mocking smile, wanting to be impressed by their claims. “Well, there’s one way to find out.” He snapped his fingers, calling out the thugs hiding in the shadows.

Gary’s expression stiffened, and he looked at Lance, he returned with a nod, and they both threw a glance at Ina. Lance jumped out from behind, as if the thug was about to attack him, but Lance’s movements were quick, and he could guard himself with his left arm, then throw an uppercut punch into the thug’s chin, sending him flying. Lance then turned to face the grunt, and the two exchanged heavy punches.

Meanwhile, Gary and Ina were facing four other grunts. Gary delivered a right hook, but he missed as the grunt swayed his body and countered with a hook of his own. It wasn’t something Gary couldn’t withstand, but he might lose a tooth there. He spat blood. The grunt tried to grab him, but Ina came crashing down with her knee on his face.

The grunts closed in on them, holding batons. There were only four left, and they had no assurance of how things would turn out. Both Gary and Ina smirked as they pulled out sticks hidden in their coats. Gary wiped the blood dripping from his nose and rushed towards the enemies, as they parried and strengthened themselves with sheer force, gripping their weapons.

When Lance moved his head back, the enemy saw his feint and came much closer to deliver a quick blow on his face. Lance’s nose bled, and he took another blow from the enemy. Lance adjusted his dishevelled glasses and delivered another punch to the enemy’s gutter. The enemy grunted, and his eyes began to drift in a haze. The two of them were coughing hard, spitting out blood. Lance saw an opportunity and tried to pull the enemy up and prepare a stance to throw him at the enemies in the back, where Gary and Ina were facing, but it was futile. The enemy rose wobbling on his feet and held onto Lance’s neck, then threw him at Gary. Gary was taken aback, and stumbled at the two grunts on top of them.

“Oh, crap,” the two muttered.

“Get off on top of me, please.” Gary said and huffed.

Lance stood up, turning his attention to the enemy. Lance sheepishly said, “Screw it,” as he held his breath and hardened his fist.

When the enemy caught Ina’s arm, her knees slammed against his groin. The poor bastard was on his knees, screaming in pain. Gary, who was beginning to recover, used a metallic stick to slam it into the face of the stiffened enemy and punched the enemy on his left side. Ina used her heels to stomp the enemy’s feet, causing him to let go and crouch to his knees. She pirouetted and her feet landed on the enemy’s face.

The enemy swept his leg to Lance, but he caught it. Shoving it aside, a clenched fist devastatingly made contact to the enemy in the gut, causing him to cough up blood. With sheer force, he delivered another roundhouse kick. The man howled in pain as he dropped, his face first on the pavement.

The Hoarder was clapping at the side line. “Well-well, I thought y’all just talked, but I see you can fight as well.”

Lance glanced at him with a fiery look as he walked towards him. The Hoarder raised his brow as he stepped back, wary of the change in the guests’ attitude.

“I guess this is it. Tell me what you want, and in exchange, you’ll serve me,” the Hoarder said.

“Yeah, well, I changed my mind,” Lance said furiously as he pushed the Hoarder against the wall. “You’re going to tell us what’s happening in this city.”

“Oh, come on. We both know what will happen if you’re going to do something for me. Well, it’s not like mocking your abilities, but you could barely handle those goons. Imagine what would happen if all of my men gang the three of you?” he chuckled, mocking them.

“Don’t underestimate us,”

Lance gripped the Hoarder’s shoulder tightly.

“Don’t threaten me,” the Hoarder said as he shoved Lance’s hands aside and pushed him with his palm. The two caught him. Lance felt terrified by the sheer force the Hoarder performed.

“Before I started this business, they once knew me as a mercenary. An experienced man, if you would say, but I’m not into it anymore, well not directly,” the Hoarder said.

Lance was surprised and made a gap between them. “Tell me, you’re the agents of Canary, am I right?”

“How did you know?” Gary asked. He braced Ina’s shoulder.

“I don’t need to be psychic to know what’s inside your mind. Entering here with confidence and talking about being invited without knowing what’s inside tells a different tale. That’s right, your expressions when you first saw the auction,” the Hoarder explained. “I’m awfully mindful of my surroundings. You should have worn different colours to make you inconspicuous.”

“Well, congratulations, you’re a seer. Why not kill us now?” Ina said.

“Oh no, my dear. I’m not that idiotic to waste such an opportunity. You want something on me, right? Let me guess about the mysterious incidents happening for a couple of months?”

“Yes,” Lance replied as he softly huffed and crossed his arms. “It’s about the disappearance of people in this city.”

“About that, I can give you a clue.”

“Why?”

“Because first, there is something that I want you to do.”

“What is it?”

“You think we can trust him?” Ina asked.

“We have no choice.” Lance said.

The Hoarder chuckled and said, “Where were we again? All right, let’s talk about your plea.”

Gary nervously gulped and folded his hands.

“There is someone that I want you to take care of.” The Hoarder said.

“Who is it?”

The Hoarder’s face lit up with a cheerful smile, revealing his joyous eyes. He narrated everything that he wanted them to do, but the three had no choice but to accept his offer, unaware of his true intentions.

\*\*\*

The first thing that he saw as he woke up was the shaft of moonlight piercing the darkness in his room through the window which face his bed. He shook his head to decline drowsiness that was threatening him back to sleep. He sat up and stared at the clock then to the window, he was surprised that he slept more than his regular sleeping hours.

The cloudless night sky above Kayon City was blotted by thousands of stars, too many for the human eyes to count, but he did anyway just to pass time and tire his mind to put asleep. He was about to go back to sleep when he heard chants outside.

A chilly breeze washed over him when he opened the shutters. He observed the outside world: cars racing by, a dragon-shaped figure swaying down the street, and a marching band playing music, drummed pounding hard that prompted some people to dance on the sidewalk. Although he found it all unfamiliar, it was entertaining for him.

Unnoticed by Alastor, Linda walked in quietly and took a seat next to him. She was observing silently. His eyes remained fixed by the parade outside, while Linda observed him with curiosity and concern. She understood that the previous mission exhausted him and was grateful for his efforts. After a while, he heard a rustle of clothes. Linda was waiting patiently.

“Al, would you mind telling me what’s on your mind?” she asked. Ever since his position moved up, the Grandmaster made considerations and sent Alastor to Kayon City as a pledge member of the Glade. This is his first mission for a while. Though, he was still adjusting to the unfamiliar culture of the city and to them of course.

The chilly wind found its way through the room again, and Linda’s blonde hair fluttered. She grew tired of waiting for his attention and persisted, “It wouldn’t hurt if you talk to me, right?” At last, Alastor spun around and she asked, “What’s bothering you?”

He sighed and sat with his back straight up and said, “I couldn’t help but feel intrigued and amazed by all of this. It’s kind of new to me.”

“I was like you before. The first time I got out into the Glade, the outside world amazed me, but the mission kills the fun.” Linda offered a half-smile.

“Isn’t it terrible to be in debt?”

“What do you mean?”

“The Glade sheltered us, but we have to repay it by getting sent to the field then they expect us to fight for the cause we are not familiar with.”

Linda shook her head. “We all have purpose, Al. The Glade did not force us to take missions, we could have chosen other paths, yet here we are, unable to bear just to watch people struggle, but you already understood that. And to respond with your second statement, I believe that every mission we had has a purpose. The glade wouldn’t just throw us into the battle we knew nothing of.”

There was silence.

“So, what’s your story?” Linda asked after a while.

Alastor was puzzled by what she was talking about and replied, “Story about what?”

Linda rose and walked towards the window, peering out.

“Well, about your life,” Linda clarified.

Alastor keenly gazed at Linda, and she noticed it and became startled. “Are you angry?” Her heart began to throb faster than normal, and she couldn’t look directly at him.

Alastor didn’t want to talk about anything related to his past and subconsciously gave Linda a cold stare. He noticed a sudden change in Linda’s facial expression, likely from him being undoubtedly cold. It wasn’t that he intended to do it, but more like it was a habit he couldn’t get rid of.

He sighed and tried to steer the conversation to the last few minutes, saying, “Don’t worry. I’m not angry about it. Just don’t ask that kind of question. I have no idea what to say about that.”

Despite his reassurance, the tension in her heart persisted, and her conscience grew. “Ugh, I apologize. It’s not like I purposely want to intrude on your privacy. What I want to say is—is…” She paused, realizing that her words were lost in thought.

“What do you want?” He asked, his voice was instigating something which made her even more uncomfortable. He was doing it on purpose.

Linda bit her lips, and the awkward atmosphere grew intense. “Maybe I just want you to be more open with us. We barely talk in private, and as a leader, I think the connection is essential to trust. You purposely lagged behind to face the enemies alone. You could get hurt, you should have told me that you were planning that in the first place.”

“But I didn’t and I’m fine.” Alastor’s rested legs moved to the floor, and he stood straight, facing Linda. She was intimidated for a moment because of the height difference, but she managed to maintain her composure despite the difficulty of making out of his reaction. Alastor was tall with healthy light skin and eyes deep and dark. “I guess that’s why you guys are sometimes uptight when we have a meeting, especially you.” he remarked.

“I am not uptight. You’re uptight.”

Alastor sighed. “Listen to me. I don’t talk too much, but it doesn’t mean I don’t have faith in you guys. I’m different, alright and I don’t care. It’s none of my business to change whatever you think about me. What matters is the mission; personal information would hinder each of us in fulfilling our mission.”

“You’re so strange,” Linda said.

Alastor let out another heavy sigh, expelling the air weighing on his chest, as he ambled towards the door, pressing the switch to turn on the lights. He realized what Linda was wearing - a long T-shirt that covered down near her knees, with her slender legs exposed, and her silken blonde hair ponytailed with a ribbon.

Linda noticed his gaze and shouted, “What are you looking at?!”

Alastor realized the tense atmosphere and averted his eyes, pretending to ignore her words. He walked back and sat near her while staring back to the view. He fell silent for a few moments before saying, “Yeah, well, thanks to you the drowsiness is gone. Tell me, Linda. Do you believe everyone is destined for something?”

“Not really. You?”

He shook his head. “No, but I hope so.”

“Hm. I’m curious, what is your goal? The Glade doesn’t restrict our people as much. Some people I knew left and lived their life. I’m sure you have something else set on your mind after this mission.”

Alastor looked away and stared down the plaza. The people halted and lined at the sidewalk. They watched several participants in the costume parade. On top, in the sky, fireworks exploded with beautiful colours that he couldn’t forget.

“I wished to be wrong.”

Linda’s brows met.

“What do you mean?”

“Ever since then, I believe that nothing comes good in this world. I am trying so hard to be optimistic like you guys, but… you know where we came from. You know what the directors instilled in us. I am the only encumbering factor in this group.”

“That’s not true.” Linda cut in. “You are just as important in this team. You did something unthinkable and lured the enemies off our back.”

“No. I am no better than them. I kill because I have no purpose. The thing that keeps me here is because I am nobody and the Glade, it’s the only thing that serves my life a purpose.”

“What about the people we’re helping?”

“What about them?”

“Aren’t you doing this because you feel sorry for them?”

Alastor looked down. “Of course, I do, because they have something that I don’t; life.”

“Don’t you think you’re being too hard on yourself?”

“The truth is hard to swallow, Linda, and that’s a good thing. It’s what strives us to keep in touch in reality.” He briefly paused before continuing, “You guys are lucky that you had something in the past to hold onto, to remind you what you are, and to believe what you are meant to be. I didn't have anyone before I joined.” Alastor withdrew his eyes from below and shot her a look, the kind of one who’s seeking empathy. “I want everything I know to be wrong. I want someone to prove it to me. So that I won’t remain neutral.”

“There’s a belief, a century old passed down by the wisdom of old men alike – that each one of us are fated on something, whether it’s glorious or tragic; a Call of Fate. That is something powerful that no man can turn their back against. You will find it, Al. Someday you will.”

Linda rose from her seat and walked to the door, quite enough that Alastor thought she was still there until he looked around. She was about to open the wooden door when someone knocked first. “Al, have you seen Linda? She’s not in her room,” a boyish voice said, rattling Linda.

He looked at her, and Linda gestured to be silent about her being in his room. Alastor knew what she meant.

“No, I haven’t seen her. I just woke up, and I’m watching the parade up here,” he replied.

Tin added, “Oh, about that, Cid is here, and he has something to tell us. Come to the meeting room, okay?”

Tin left and Linda exhaled loudly.

“What was that again?” she asked.

“Cid is here. She wants us to come to the meeting room,” he replied.

Alastor opened the cabinet, grabbed a towel, and proceeded to the bathroom. He turned to face Linda and said, “The next time you come here, don’t wear that. They might think differently about us.”

“I know that!”

When Linda left the room, a totem caught his attention, a rather odd one shaped like a monk wrapped with a tiny ribbon. He smiled. He hid it in his pocket before going out.

\*\*\*

Opening the door, he heard the rumbling noise of people inside. It was past eight o’clock in the evening when the man summoned the gang. Alastor knew the importance, but he just hoped that whoever he was, he should make an exemption for the timing. Tin and Ken were arguing. Although Alastor couldn’t get the gist of the topic, he wanted to make them shut up. The thing that conveyed his thoughts was his behaviour. The grim look in his eyes sent a chill down Ken’s spine even without looking at him.

“Hey, what’s up with you again? Why the gloom? Looks like someone skipped a meal,” Ken jested, his way of warding off Alastor’s grim presence.

“Just leave him be, Ken. Come back here; we’re not done arguing,” Tin said. They rambled again.

“Could you guys please shut up for a couple of minutes? Why aren’t we starting to discuss this meeting yet?” Alastor asked flatly.

“Uhm, because the pretty boy is not here, and Linda is – Oh, there they are.”

The chamber doors opened. Linda entered the room with a man clad in a flamboyant outfit. He was wearing a flamboyant outfit, red long-sleeve polo along with trousers and a red scarf twist on his neck. His name is Cid Philson. Despite his rare appearances in a mission like this, he was considered a reliable asset to the organization. He was working with their group for the past few months, with the exception of meeting Linda occasionally. Normally, a spy like him would solely focus on his designated task given by his superior, alone, but Linda requested his assistance from the director for this assignment due to the lack of social network.

“What took you so long?” Ken asked.

“Oh, you know, I have to pick this guy up at the entrance because he doesn’t want to get lost,” Linda explained.

“What are you, a nine-year-old?” Ken mocked.

“Well, let’s just say that I have a terrible sense of direction.” Cid scoffed.

 Alastor was confused by how they casually talked.

“You guys know each other?” Tin asked.

Alastor offered a shrug as he had no idea who he was. They met once before he visited their hideout, and other than that, he could not recall any other occasions they had met.

Ken came closer to his ears, whispering, “Dude, back when we were in the Glade, he was our senior. He’s famous for being known as a ladies’ man.”

“Why are you whispering?” Tin suddenly joined and startled Ken.

Linda sighed and felt sorry for Cid. “Just don’t mind them, and please have patience.”

“Nah, don’t worry about it. I’m used to it,” Cid shrugged off the comment.

However, their conversation was soon interrupted by a commanding voice.

“Hey! Will you guys stop gossiping!?” Linda squawked. “Tin and Ken, will you guys act according to your age?”

“We are acting based on our age!” the two replied in unison. Alastor struggled to recall who Cid was, but a flash of recognition hit him as he noticed the resemblance in his face. Cid now has blonde hair and a shaved beard, whereas he used to have dark hair. The only similarity that remained was their ochre-colour eyes.

“Listen, we all have one chance to expose, get inside and extract the data bank. If we mess up, they might increase their security.” Cid started with a caution. The bright glow of the white bulbs illuminated the spacious room, which featured a large table at its center, surrounded by control panels and buttons. Tin was decoding a device they stole from the Jules market, with everyone listening intently to Cid’s explanation.

“You’ve gotta be careful too, aside from those armed guards, they also have weapons inside, and they’re not happy with what you did. So, listen to me, alright? Tin, are the blueprints ready?” Cid asked.

“Just wait, here we go,” Tin replied as she pressed a button. A giant, old chemical factory appeared on the screen, with a massive cylindrical-like structure standing tall behind a large building.

“This is Kayon Chemical Factory. It’s been abandoned for the past eight years until now,” Cid explained, swiping through the profile list until he found the person involved in their mission. The others marked as eliminated were small fries that they already dealt with over the past few months. When he found the person he was looking for, he pressed the button. “This fatso, Don Trifalgo, he’s the one who bought that plantation. That place had turned into a delivery service partner of Kelby Hives. Now, I know that you guys know this pig.”

“Of course, we stole his item at the Jules market, and our superiors have already briefed us. Why are you repeating this discussion?” Ken said.

Cid snorted, indicating his boredom before continuing, “Yes, Atta boy, but that’s not all of that. He’s just a puppet, a proxy. Your actual target is this guy.”

Cid pressed the search bar and entered his code at the top of the login members. Linda paused her movement and keenly observed who he was talking about as he opened the secret files of the Glade. The figure of a man in a white trench coat and all black tuxedo caught her attention.

“His name is Theo Koel Juvel. He is the CEO of the Kelby Hives, and while they may not have known him, he is a certified ‘King of Douchebags’. He is the number one suspect of those rumours of biological weapons that were circulating. This guy is a different kind of monster.”

Ken sat and rested his arms at the table. “I don’t think we should dig in that much. Look, we have the pieces of evidence from the stolen Data Bank and the energy dampener in our possession. Why don’t we just copy a file to another Data Bank and wait for the right moment to assault them, and then give the evidence to the police?”

“Wow, that’s a great idea. We should have just given a copy to the police and assault them as the clients wanted, without digging deeper into their menace. You’re a genius, Ken.” Cid said. His tone was sarcastic.

“Yeah, right?” Ken happily congratulated himself, but the others were stuck in their pace, trying to comprehend the situation. Then, Cid’s loud voice cut through the silence.

“No! We will not hand them a copy, and we will not stop right there. Listen to me, they might have already created a bioweapon generated from the experiments.” He cleared his throat. “Powerful weapons and if we’re not careful, things might go critical. We can’t trust anyone under any authority. If Trifalgo managed to get passed by the authorities despite being a criminal, you could also imagine that Theo had some gripped of several officials.”

Ken finally realized the gravity of the situation and looked down, pulling a face.

“Uh, question,” Alastor raised his hand, “I’m curious. This blueprint. Are we looking at the new or outdated one?”

“Uhh, the outdated one.”

“Figures,” Alastor mumbled, disappointed.

“Look, there’s no way I can get an actual blueprint of the place. So please bear with my presentation, okay?” Cid said.

“Do you think we should skip the part where we plan on how to take him down and consult with the directors about the change of circumstances? Our original mission was to gather data, but the preceding info changed a lot of things for the worse. We can’t ignore this.” Tin said.

Cid promptly replied, “Here’s the thing, kid. I am an agent, a spy, if you will. There’s a mission that is waiting for me, and the higher-ups won’t stop bothering me. So, yeah, my time is limited, and I can’t jeopardize the trust of my collaborators. Are we cool with that? Because I know that any of you can find a way to convince them.”

As Cid looked back at the screen, Linda pressed a button, opening a tab for a video call. Cid was about to cancel when an image of a man appeared on the screen. He was surprised by whom Linda was calling. It was one director of the Glade, Rod Hidalgo Fey

Cid let out a sigh and cursed under his breath, “Oh, shit.”

Rod’s face was emphasized on the screen, forehead was profuse with sweats, the papers behind was disarranged and the attendant hastily move from places to places. Cid stood back as if he had seen a ghost. Linda pushed a button underneath the table and dragged the tab to the giant screen, causing the image to be displayed on the wall. “Sir, there have been changes in circumstances regarding the mission,” Linda began to narrate what Cid explained to them, and the plan was laid out. The mission was scheduled to proceed that night, and they hoped that they would uncover the secrets of the man.

Rod’s face twisted in a scowl as he listened to Linda’s report. “What kind of changes?” he asked gruffly.

Linda took a deep breath and continued, “The information that we have gathered suggests that there may be a bioweapon in development at the Kelby Hives, and we believe that the CEO, Theo Koel Juvel, is responsible. We cannot afford to wait any longer, sir. We need to act fast.”

Rod’s expression softened slightly as he considered Linda’s words. “Very well,” he said. “Proceed with the mission as you see fit. But be careful. We don’t want any unnecessary casualties.”

Cid was delighted by the fact the mission was still on go, but with him being part of it, he could feel his soul leaving his body. He had something else to do other than securing information that he was feeding them. He wished he could just have ignored their request before.

\*\*\*

“I’m heading out,” Alastor said as he snatched his sword back from resting against the wall. He left the building, pulling the door shut behind him. Tin was still inside, assembling her weapon, and she gave a slight nod as she sat staring back at him.

Alastor looked down the building, his eyes scanning the railways for transportation, and then a shrill noise came from a train. Its wheels flashed as it braked and finally, it halted. He took a deep breath, a long sighed. He took out his grappling hook and then without thinking twice, he jumped. The hook spurted on the building, swinging around until he leapt and landed on top of the train. He entered the dark, shabby carriage and closed the door, his sword resting on the dusty ground. In a few seconds, his eyes felt heavy, so he shook his head to wane off the dizziness.

When Alastor heard a sharp whistle, he got up and peered through the window. The rumbling wooden floor and the roar made him wobble and flinch, but then he took caution as he might miss the destination of their mission. He checked his wristwatch; the handset pointed to ten o’clock in the evening. He peeked at the slightly closed wooden door and noticed that the destination was nearby. Beneath him, he could feel the train gradually slowing down. He lowered his hands, felt the coldness of the wooden floor, standing straight from resting his back on the quaking wall. The train broke, and Alastor hardly held the pole to keep his balance. After it stopped, he reclaimed his sword. His fingerless gloves reached out to the taut red leather that surrounded the thin handle of the double-edged silver sword. He swung it from left to right, passed it onto his other hand, testing the weight and balance. When he was satisfied with the upgrade, he hung it back to its scabbard.

Once the train stopped by, he opened the door. The doors were weak, made of wood, and could be opened easily. It was not surprising that they used this extension of the train as a carriage of transportation for food as they did not want to waste money. The transportation processes of this city elevated questions.

He stepped out from the shabby carriage into the shadowy edge of the buildings that were a few meters away from the chemical factory. A few lamps shone with brightness, and the others were stuttering, making a buzzing noise.

As he moved to the dark enclosure, the engine started to rumble and moved along the narrow path. He swiftly ran away from the crowd, next to an empty road then took a right turn. They could have used transportation services to get there quickly, but they don’t want to leave any traces by the security footage. Besides, their suits could gather some unwanted attention, so they decided to split up.

He took cover as soon as the presence of the guards showed up. There were three of them, but they couldn’t be underestimated; they had guns and wore tight, dark tuxedos. “Well, that’s not suspicious,” Alastor said, astounded by the enemies’ outfits. His dark, tight jacket camouflaged him in the shadow of the wall, and his presence went unnoticed.

He wore the mask and placed the headphones over his ears before attempting to call his accomplice. The operating system finally functioned, just as expected from the computer expert’s talent. The phones began vibrating in each member’s pockets.

“Hey, what’s up?!” Ken energetically replied.

“Where are you right now?” Alastor questioned him.

“Wait, aren’t the two of you supposed to be together?” Tin asked.

“Wait, we’re supposed to be in the same location?” Alastor was surprised.

“Ken, you idiot! You should’ve joined Alastor!” Linda said. Her voice was laced with annoyance.

“Dude, it’s not entirely my fault. Al was the one who jumped on the train and didn’t wait for me,” Ken excused himself.

“Do you realize that if he waited for you, then he would have been in the same situation as you?” Linda calmed herself and didn’t want to make a commotion as it would likely distract them from the mission.

“Look, we all have one chance to expose this guy. If we screw up, then we’ll likely have a hard time meeting him again.”

“Okay, I’m sorry. I’ll just follow Al. I’ll take a reroute.

The plantation’s grounds were vast, comparable to a district. Several warehouses were operational, but some of them appeared to be non-functional. The silhouette emerged behind the building, largely in the shadow, the undercover branch of Kelby Hives.

Alastor patiently waited for the others to divide their way. He was about to engage the enemy when Tin stopped him, “There’s a watchman at the rear. How could you not see that?”

Alastor looked up and noticed it.

“Of course, the security. Tin, take him down.”

In an abandoned eight-story building, Tin was sitting and watching out in the compartment, just a few blocks away from the plantation. She was preparing her sniper, reloading the magazine, but instead of bullets, it was filled with injections.

“Roger.” She attached the stand of the sniper and crouched. Her sniper adjusted to the target, and when it was focused, she pulled the trigger. The timing was perfect, and the hooligan landed gently on the chair, appearing as if the occurrence was normal.

Another enemy was approaching, while the other two were likely checking other alleyways. As the enemy drew closer, Alastor leaped in front of the foe and jabbed his Adam’s apple, causing him to flinch, followed by a series of punches that knocked him down. The enemy lay sprawled awkwardly on the concrete ground.

At the end of the narrow road, he could see the guard flying and making a light thud as he fell on the floor. The silhouette of a man revealed himself as the light reached his dark face mask. Clad in a tight jacket and plain pants, his knuckles were brimming with light.

Alastor gestured that one enemy remained, and Ken nodded. Alastor began to jog across the platform, the dull thumping of his boots echoing in the yard. The last guard, alarmed by the noise, immediately returned from the alley he came from. They swiftly climbed on at the side of the wall, and got behind the guard. They emerged and knocked him down before he could react.

“Are you sure it’s okay to leave them here?” Ken asked.

“Try answering your own question,” Alastor said.

Ken gave him a look.

“No, we must hide the bodies, covering the possibility of suspicion,”

Ken let out a sigh and scratched his scrawny dark hair.

“Ok then, you go first. I’ll take care of these.”

“Are you sure?”

“Don’t worry, besides, Tin is up there, she’ll watch out for me.”

“Right.” Tin said.

Alastor nodded and proceeded with caution, jogging towards the entrance at the rear of the location. However, the entry required a member’s login, so Alastor pulled a squared piece of machinery out of his pouch, a device that kept blinking, and placed it on the screen.

“I’m on it,” Cid announced and started to fiddle with his laptop, and a bunch of binaries showed up. He logged into their surveillance and changed the actual live recording to a previous recording. There was a loud beep and the light turned green, the door opened. They ran inside and made a huge turn on their light to avoid the guard at the watchtower. “Damn, how the hell did I end up helping them?”

“How are we doing, Cid?” Alastor asked.

“Oh, me? Nah, I’m fine, just watching the--”

Alastor intercepted, “That’s not it. I’m talking about security.”

“Oh, there’s not that much security at the rear entrance of the place. Just be careful, sometimes guards were roaming there,” Cid added. He was hiding inside the van parked between two buildings. He pressed the cancel button of a tab and focused back on the mission.

As they emerged from the shadows and snuck behind a huge crate, Ken felt his heart double in speed. He looked at Alastor, envious of how collected and calm he was. They waited for the guards to waltz away.

“Do you know why I dislike women?” Ken asked.

“How is that even relevant?” Alastor thought.

“Because they get mean for no reason at all.”

Alastor let out a sigh. His eyes trained forward.

“Is this the part where you start playing guitar in the lobby?”

“That’s not the only reason. When I asked Tin to taste my cooking, she abruptly spit it out even though it was fairly good and started calling me mean names.”

Alastor replied, “Well, I don’t know how to respond to that. Don’t ask me about women. I don’t know anything about them.”

“Wait, you were there when I was practicing my guitar?”

Alastor hesitated at first, but then admitted, “Yeah, I was. And I think you should play in public.”

“Are you serious?”

Alastor peered around and noticed that the guards were gone. He gestured for Ken to follow as they continued to scurry further. Alastor waited for a few seconds as Cid decoded the binary codes flashing back and forth on the screen. He watched as the entry blinked green and there came a faint groan before it began to open. Alastor concealed himself in the shadow, avoiding the white hue as he jogged across the platform. Ken followed from behind.

The huge cast of shadow from behind was an enormous edifice that served as a place for their experiments. At the end of the narrow alleyway at the side of the building, he saw the emerging presence of someone he knew. It was Linda, wearing a red tight jacket. Her red lipstick stood out as the light made its way to her milky skin.

“Where is your mask?” Alastor asked.

“Right, I forgot, sorry,” she replied, pulling out her mask and covering her face. She turned back and sneaked in, with Alastor and Ken following closely behind.

They entered the downward side of the building until they reached an open concrete way. Alastor asked, “Hey, where are we going next?”

Linda pointed out the stairs behind the parking lot. “Once we reach the twentieth floor, there will be a ventilator that is connected to the panel bridge.”

“Bridge?” Alastor questioned.

Cid began to explain, “Yes, kid. The bridge that connects to the Experiment Sector, which is inside that gigantic industrial furnace, requires two keycards that need to be simultaneously entered. The panel is at the same level. You just have to look around the office.”

Linda raised her brow. She couldn’t understand how Cid knew this.

“I thought you have no idea about the place,”

“I said there’s no way I could get an actual blueprint of the place,” Cid replied.

“Then how did you know this?” Linda said.

“I have a, uh…”

“Let me guess. You hit one of their staff, didn’t ya?” Ken asked.

“I wouldn’t say ‘hit’. I prefer the words ‘infiltrating with perks,” Cid explained with enthusiasm.

“I guess you’re the only spy who could do that,” Tin said and snorted.

The heavy breaths produced by their tired lungs softly echoed through the stairways as they climbed. Finally, they reached the ventilation, and Linda snatched a lapel out of her pocket. She pressed the button of the flower head figure, and its shape turned into a screwdriver.

“What is that?” Alastor asked.

“This is a tool for thieving,” she huffed as he reached for the bolts of the ventilation filter. The width of the duct surprised Linda upon opening the ventilation filter.

“Well, this is convenient,”

Alastor followed her lead while Cid guided their way to the designated level. He kept changing the direction of his gaze, and Linda could feel his inconspicuous gaze coming from behind her.

“What were you looking at?” she asked. He altered his sight, and his poker face seemed rather convincing. She let out a sigh and proceeded without saying anything.

As boredom set in, Ken broke the silence.

“Hey, Cid, where did you hit the lady?”

“Ken, will you shut your mouth?” Linda asked.

“There was no ‘hit’ happening,” Cid protested.

“I doubt that,” Ken replied.

The air inside the duct was unpleasant and irritating to breathe, and clouds of dust fell over their faces. The shrill mechanical sound produced from the propeller rotating ahead of them added to the discomfort. After a few turns, they found themselves cornered.

“Crap,” Linda muttered.

“Let’s get out of here,” Alastor said. He leaned back and proceeded to the left side, disarraying with a quick pull of the shaft, creating a metallic sound that he held. Linda followed him, and the two found themselves in the promenade part of the building.

“Where are we, Cid?”

“You’re on the eighteenth floor. Let me check the population of the next floor,” Cid replied. He continued tapping on his laptop, creating a rhythm that coincided with the tapping of Linda’s foot. Alastor’s eyes narrowed as he scanned the surroundings, waiting for Cid’s confirmation.

“Lucky for you guys, apparently there is no personnel from the thirteenth to the nineteenth floor. So, it’s best to use the stairs,” Cid said.

“Stairs? We can’t use elevators?”

“No, company policy. They’re using a card reader in every corner of the office in this building,” Cid explained.

“We’ll be damned,” Alastor said.

“Don’t worry, I know how the building’s system works. Going to the next ladder and finding another ventilation duct is the best option we have right now,”

Just as Cid finished speaking, an alarm began to ring loud, flashing in red lights.

“You were saying?”

“Heh-heh. Sorry,” Cid replied.

The two of them hurriedly jogged to the dark entry underneath the ascending floor to the elevator. As they moved, there was a bleep from the elevator entry. They emerged in the dark enclosure, halting their motion and slowly walking through their way. The patrolmen came down laughing, unaware of the duo hiding in the darkness. They could hear them talking about their fellow patrolman’s rattled reaction to the false alarm. The two glanced at each other, nodded, and proceeded.

They found the ventilation and scurried inside without a flinch, taking a few routes until they found the exit of the ventilation they sought. They hid and observed from the ventilation shaft as the footsteps of the dozen drew closer. Once they saw the individual walking casually at the platform with a bunch of bodyguards, they already knew it was an important person. They couldn’t see the face as the hooligans surrounded him, but they could hear the angry, distressed voice echoing in the marble pavement of the edifice. The voice was deep, hoarse and distressed.

“Now, I want you to redo it! This is the fifth time it failed!” The scientist scolded and turned around, looking frustrated. “Mister Theo wouldn’t be pleased if he found another failure again! Look, I am being considerate here because I am kind, but these failures are getting on my nerves. So, chop-chop, make the salary worth it.”

As they entered the elevator, they could see the two guards entering their keycards and disconnecting the bridge through the translucent window. They finally left.

“What the hell is happening here?” Ken asked. He appeared out of nowhere.

“What took you so long?” Alastor asked as he cowered down to open the filter.

“I went to some places. Hey, would you mind if we get out now?” Ken asked.

“Stay close and stop wandering around.” Alastor shrilled a whisper.

“Wait, Cid, what’s next?” Linda asked.

“Okay, listen to me. Though it may seem like there are no guards, they are together in one room,” Cid explained.

“Are you sure?” Linda asked suspiciously.

“Yes, I am sure. That’s what my computer is showing,” Cid affirmed.

Alastor nodded, agreeing to what he said, “He’s right. They may be slacking because they thought that the security of the other levels is enough.”

“Wow, I wonder if their boss knows about this. I mean, he didn’t even suspect the quietness of the place,” Ken said.

“Those who get cocky get dissed off first,” Alastor said with enthusiasm.

Linda suspiciously gazed at Alastor and he asked, “Why give me that look?”

“I wonder sometimes how old you are,” Linda replied.

“What do you mean ‘old’?” Alastor didn’t get it.

As the guard sipped his hot coffee, he lay off his feet onto the empty part of the panel, unwinding with the music. His partner seemed a bit off and couldn’t resist the urge.

“Hey, I’m gonna go jingle. Would you mind looking out for me?” he said as he hurriedly reached the door. “Don’t worry, it’s not like someone might hack and break the security systems,” he said before leaving.

After releasing himself, he washed up and proceeded back to the control panel room as the gang knocked him down. Even though jazz music echoed in the room, he still heard a loud thump near the door. He decided to go out and found his fallen partner. He turned on his walkie-talkie to call for backup, but it was too late, and Ken delivered a round kick, stopping the guard. Ken almost felt sorry giving the guy a black eye.

“Room secured,” Linda reported.

“Good, now I want you to insert a plugin into one computer,” Cid requested.

Alastor pulled out a box from his jacket that had an antenna and a connector. After inserting it, binaries showed up, and in a couple of seconds, there was an alert requiring a passcode.

“It needs a passcode,” Alastor said. Linda and Ken watched outside the room, scouting the area, wary of the possibility of patrolling guards.

“Okay, how about we use the key card? That might work,” Cid suggested. Alastor inserted the key card – the one he used at the entrance – into the hole and the hunch was right. Cid began decoding the system and breaking down the codes. After he entered the passcode, he began downloading files in the frame.

“What are you doing, Cid?” Alastor asked.

“I am copying the files from their previous activities. We might find a use for them.” He has no idea how wrong he was.

Linda and Ken was at the opposite side when they slid the keycards at the same time. The disconnected bridge created a low hum sound. The engine rumbled faintly as the two separated the channels that connect. After this, there came the rumble of machinery, and with a faint groan, the door began to part.

Walking on the metallic bridge, Alastor looked up at the main building. Its size was incomparable to what it looked like outside the industrial furnace. With a blank expression on his face, the gloom began to spread out. He couldn’t help but teeter, letting out a heavy sigh, dispelling his thoughts.

Alastor noticed that the building was much bigger than he initially thought when he was outside. The cylindrical chimney made it look like a normal chemical factory. But if one looked at it from the inside, their perspective might change. The exterior has many quarters, most of which were operational, while others served as a stockroom or their office’s meeting room.

The giant doorway closed as they entered the Experiment Sector. They didn’t waste time and continued to explore. They encountered some guards, but they slipped by them as they moved through the shadows and hid in crates. They covertly knocked down the enemies before they could ask for help, leaving their bodies hidden in the stockroom or locker where they could hide them and not alert other guards.

After searching this part of the section, they entered another slim pathway. They tried to use the keycards, but it kept blinking the word ‘error.’ Alastor put the device he used before, and Cid began hacking the system. It didn’t take too long, and the door opened.

“Done deciphering,” Cid said.

They could hear Cid sipping something liquid, and this annoyed Ken. “Dude, are you drinking coffee?” he asked.

“Yeah… It helps me stay focused and awake,” Cid roughly replied, and they could hear the shrill sipping sound.

Ken interjected, saying, “Will you stop doing that?”

“Stop what?” Cid asked.

“That sound, that sipping sound,” Ken said, almost annoyed.

“Is it bothering you?” Cid asked.

“Yes,” Ken replied.

After hearing those words, Cid grinned and continued to make sipping sounds louder, provoking Ken’s reaction more aggressively. “Hey… asshole!” Ken shouted.

“Hey, how about both of you stop acting like children and be mindful that we’re in enemy territory?” Linda intercepted the argument.

Alastor was observing them with a blank expression and decided to leave them behind to proceed with entering the room. “There’s no need for me to be distracted by their sappy argument.”

They noticed that he was already a few meters away from them, so they followed and stopped arguing. They checked every room they passed, most of which were composed only of transparent glasses, but it didn’t look like the usual glass that could be broken by any traditional means.

Ken decided to punch one of them. He moved his right foot backward, aligning it with the other, and his right fist pulled close to his chest, concentrating power in his hands. He pulled the string, and the fist met the target. Instead of breaking the glass, the windowpane vibrated. Ken’s hands made a crunchy sound in the most uncomfortable way. The others noticed his face squirmed.

“Wait… did you try to punch that window?” Alastor asked.

“Yes, I was just trying to confirm if it was breakable or not,” Ken replied, grunting and holding his fist.

“Are you okay?” Linda asked.

“Don’t worry, I’m already used to it,” Ken offered a confident smile, but Linda could still see the pain on his face.

Alastor turned his eyes away, ignoring Ken’s pain and continuing to stroll ahead.

They entered one of the doorways hoping to find what they were looking for, until they found themselves standing in front of a giant circular door.

“I see no security. It seems safe for you to proceed. But I cannot breach it for you,” Cid said.

“Why not?” Linda asked.

“Well, let’s just say it might be connected to the mainframe, and I don’t want to mess up. You’ll have to find another way to hack it,” Cid replied cautiously.

“Scared cat.” Tin snorted.

“The previous computers were connected to another dummy server, so there would be no problem if I fail. I can just disconnect and change to another laptop so they wouldn’t be able to find me. But now that we’re in the Experiment Sector, it’s probably connected to the mainframe, and I don’t dare to place my bet on it,” Cid explained.

“Whatever,” Tin hissed while cleaning her gun.

Linda began to open the lock of wirings of the panel and started to rewire it.

“This could take a while,” she said.

Meanwhile, Alastor scoured his glance at the surroundings. Ken noticed the way he looked, “Dude, do you realize how terrifying you look?” he asked, a bit anxious.

“What do you mean?” Alastor asked, confused.

“That look you have, it scares me to death,” Ken replied.

“Oh dear,” Alastor murmured. Once he figured out the cause, he tried to decide what to do. “I don’t think there’s anything wrong with it,” he justified.

“Yes, there is. You look like you’re about to kill someone,” Ken retorted.

“Why do I care about how I look? It’s not like the way my look will hurt somebody,” Alastor said.

“Obviously duh, but someone might misinterpret those looks,” Ken replied.

“I don’t see the point,” Alastor mumbled as he still conspicuously altered his gaze to the environment, wary that there may be a possibility of security.

“Maybe that’s the reason you’re still single,” Ken joked.

“And you’re not?” Alastor responded dismissively.

“Finally, the door is opening, let’s go,” they heard Linda call out. The metallic circular door rumbled open, and they were about to enter it when a silhouette of machinery appeared in front of them. Its dull sound of metal clanging got louder as it got closer, and they could see that it was a missile targeting them. The gang side rolled, evading the incoming attack, but the missile still landed near them, hurling them in the air. Their backs landed heavily on the cold ground, gasping for breath.

Alastor sat up, everything was still ringing. He blinked twice before he carefully turned his neck, peering back at the entrance where the attack came from. A semi-bipedal machinery emerged from the bright light that came inside the room. The choke on its four metallic legs created steam produced by extreme heat, and its four-sided head attached to the tank-like body has a curved surface. The camera visuals of the robot zoomed in on them, scanning the surroundings for enemies.

Thankfully, the door to the Experiment Sector was closed, preventing outside enemies from hearing the commotion within. However, there were adversaries that the group did not anticipate.

“What the hell is that?!” Ken exclaimed, gritting his teeth as he stood up.

“It’s a defense security robot… It must have been set by one of the technicians to detect any anomalies,” Linda groaned as she struggled to regain her posture.

“Al, you can speak its language, right?” Ken asked. Alastor dubiously looked at him. “Cuz… you know, you’re a robot.”

Alastor ignored Ken and pulled out his silver sword. He was cautious over the adversary and his wariness was correct. The robot’s metal chassis emitted a high-pitched squeal as it charged towards them. The gang swiftly scattered and ran around, managing to avoid the attack unscathed. Alastor was first to rose, he brandished his sword, and was measuring his enemy. His adrenaline surged through his veins, allowing him to maintain his focus.

“Cid!” Linda raised her voice, calling for his aid.

“On it,” Cid replied as he tapped on his computer, hacking the doorway behind them and locking them inside.

“What the hell are you doing?” Ken demanded to know.

“The guards may find us, so it’s better to stay in here and fight,” Linda explained.

“Do you have a plan to escape this thing?” Ken shouted, growing frustrated.

“Like Linda said, we stay and fight,” Alastor declared, his grip tightening around the hilt of his sword as he charged towards the enemy.

As the thumping of the robot’s feet echoed through the room, Alastor slid and side-rolled repeatedly, dodging the attacks of the four-legged tank-like machine. As it relentlessly assaulted him with its foot stomping to him, he found himself backed into a corner. Taking a deep breath, he propelled himself up the wall, jumping and rolling in mid-air to evade the enemy’s reach. Landing gracefully on the surface of the robot’s body, he plunged his sword deeply into the metal. Feeling the thickness of the iron, he realized his strength alone would not be sufficient to pierce it.

Suddenly, he heard a screech, the result of the insides grinding and a loud steam of release. The hatch opened, a Gatling gun emerged, aimed directly at Alastor. Quickly reacting, he threw himself off the machine’s body and fell, narrowly avoiding the attack. As he looked up, he saw the weapons emerging from underneath the tank, countless armaments appearing before his eyes.

“Al! Over here!” Linda called out, conjuring magic and creating five transcended walls. Alastor ran towards them, and the weapons of the enemy turned their focus towards the group.

“Heads up!” Alastor declared, bracing himself for impact as the countless missiles surged towards them. Ken muttered under his breath, crackling his hands and preparing himself for battle. Linda focused her mana on the walls, raising her hands and pouring her energy into them. She struggled to maintain her focus as the walls began to break apart under the relentless assault of the missiles and machine guns. A rigid crack appeared on the concrete, and the walls started to crumble.

“I can’t hold it much longer!” Linda cried out in distress, the concentration of her mana gradually diminishing. At a certain point, the last missile broke through the fourth wall. Just as the enemy’s attack seemed unstoppable, it ceased its motion, a steamy smoke rising from its body and dissipating into the air. He just noticed that there was an imprinted name at its side, with the words ‘MB42’. Linda fell on her knees, catching her breath.

“You okay?” Ken asked.

“Don’t worry about me,” she said, “attack while it’s vulnerable now.” Linda was trying to catch her breath and her eyes seemed to droop as she crawled. Alastor, however, seemed unfazed by her condition and his dark eyes were fixed on the enemy.

“Ken, go help Al,” she huffed as she sat down.

“No, we can’t do this. We have to retreat, Al!” Ken called out.

“No,” Alastor replied. His eyes trained forward.

“What do you mean no?! Dude, she’s not in good condition! We need to get out of here!” Ken shouted at him.

“We can’t. It’s too risky for us to go back now. If we let this thing loose, they might know we’re here,” Alastor explained.

Ken could only grit his teeth. The cold breeze from the ventilators made Linda’s consciousness drifted, but she was still clinging on. Ken shifted his gaze from Linda to the robot. “It seems that things are vulnerable now. Linda, lay low for a while. Come on, Al!” He howled and charged towards the enemy.

Alastor shouted at him, “Wait!”

Ken leaped forward at the enemy with his fist wearing metallic gloves, intending to reach the robot’s head. Upon landing, the machine jumped backward, evading the attack. The metallic ground sparkled and cracked due to its weight.

“What the –” Ken was surprised.

The robot’s legs penetrated again, and it jumped towards Ken.

Alastor dashed towards Ken, jumped, and pulled him away. A loud crash exploded behind.

“It seems that thing doesn’t have any bullets left,” he said.

“Are you sure about it?” Ken asked.

“Yeah, I’m sure of it,” Alastor grunted as his eyes remained fixed on the circling enemy. Linda was hiding at the edge of the crate’s corner. Once again, the tank-like robot’s springs penetrated down again, jumping upwards, but this time it became aggressive.

Ken murmured lowly and grunted, dashing away from the attack. “Do you have any idea how to beat this thing?”

“Nope,” Alastor groaned in tiredness.

“Then what are we supposed to do?!” Ken cried out.

“We’ll wait for the right moment,” Alastor snorted.

Not too long after, the robot’s internal machines began to show signs of complication. Its body started to spark, and wirings blew out from it. The legs made a screeching sound, deafening to the ears, but stopped after a few seconds.

“This is it. Aim at the legs!” Alastor howled, and Ken followed him. Alastor dragged his feet around, cutting the leg in half. He had no intention to let the opportunity slip away. Soon after, the wires and the metallic cables comprising the legs gave up. The robot knelt as it lost its balance. It could no longer move.

Ken grabbed it and aimed at its head, then he heavily breathed, kneeling at the surface of its body and raising his elbow while his fist faced downward. Alastor did the same thing to its legs. He cut another one of them and noticed the change in contemplation of his fellow mate. He decided to go at it. In the last throes of defeat, the robot’s curved surface unleashed another weapon, but before the machine gun activated, Alastor cut the gun in half. He felt his shoulder ache.

Ken pressed his fist to the enemy. The legs of the creature couldn’t withstand the weight of his power, causing its parts to explode and leaving his hand buried in its body. To ensure that it was finished, he raised his left fist and brought it crashing down. The machine’s light began to blink before it lost all power. The duo landed a safe distance away as it exploded.

Linda approached them with a smile, having regained her composure. “Are you guys okay?” Ken asked, to which Linda replied with a nod. Ken couldn’t help but feel that Alastor’s intense attitude was still present, as he was careful not to let his guard down after their recent fight.

“Dude, we defeated the enemy. There’s no need to worry anymore,” Ken said, trying to ease the tension.

“Don’t get carried away by defeating a small fry,” Alastor snorted.

“Small fry? It almost got us killed, and you call it small fry? Besides, if it weren’t for me, you would have become dead meat.”

“Don’t be so full of yourself. The enemy we fought was defective,” Alastor explained and elaborated. Linda was nodding in agreement. “When I first hit it with my sword, I noticed that the wirings at the back of its head were jumbled and has some abrasions, which would explain why its body sparkled and the wirings were popping out. In short, we got lucky.”

“Okay, we’ll be more careful from now on,” Ken conceded. “Now, what do we do?” Ken asked, looking towards the lab’s entrance.

“Since Cid already shut the door, we have no choice but to move forward,” Linda instructed, and Alastor nodded in agreement.

The three of them proceeded with extreme caution, and what they saw inside was beyond their comprehension. Dozens of glass tubes filled with what appeared to be human and machine hybrids lined the lab. Some were offline, while others were being made at the factory below.

“What the hell are they planning to do with these?” Ken asked, horrified at the sight.

“This is inhumane,” Linda added, her eyes reflecting pity for the poor souls trapped in the tubes. Alastor, however, didn’t show any emotion towards the heinous act they just witnessed.

They followed the path and took a stroll down the stairs. Together, they uncovered the inhumane acts of the people working there. The person’s body parts had been replaced by a metallic hand, similar to others who were mutilated.

“There are no signs of Theo here.” Linda announced.

“There’s nothing we can do about it.” Cid said.

They continued down many stairways and conduits until they reached a room occupied by hundreds of types of technology. Behind a transparent window, a row of computer panels lined the behind at the wall, operating on their own. In the center of the room, a giant screen hung on the wall, displaying blueprints of various projects. As they approached, the door automatically slid apart, and they entered the place without triggering any alarms or crossing any security.

All that remained was the buzzing noise of computers and the bubbling water coming from the chemical tubes. Looking at the widescreen, different blueprints loaded back and forth. Alastor and Linda started examining the computers, while Ken focused on the files arranged in front of the widescreen.

“Project Amalgam.” Linda muttered in a low voice.

Alastor leaned forward from resting in the chair and asked, “You found something?”

She entered the file and showed a dozen notes and videos. Clicking one of them, she played the video. They could hear the charismatic voice of a man behind the audio-visual as he narrated the experiment.

“Experiment test no. 1, human subject 2401. The subject is being tested as a potential candidate for the experiment. The subject is healthy, and his stats are normal. The candidate is caged inside a four-sided glass plane. One minute from now, the subject will be exposed to a gas that comes from a newly discovered rock called Hemil Klust.”

Tubes connected inside the glass cage released a violet gas that spread at once. The man’s body changed, and his nerves thickened. Within seconds, he started exhibiting violent behaviour. Before long, his body started to degrade and liquefy. The man behind the video narrated and gave orders, *“Human subject 2401’s body structure shows an aberration. The substance is inadequate for human cellular use, and nerves are impaired at the synapses connecting to the brain. The extension of its capabilities is yet to be known, but no worries, this is the first experiment. The development will start to show in the next ones. Clean it up, boys; we will proceed to the next one.”*

“This is unpleasant,” Alastor said, but his expression remained unshaken.

Linda changed the directories of the output and inserted a flash drive. “Cid, can you copy all of this?” she asked.

Cid was thrilled and replied, “Oh yes, this is a big catch. I wonder how they will react when they find out how I am going to destroy their mainframe.”

“Good, because we are not just going to destroy their work, we are also going to blow this place,” Alastor said.

“Are you out of your mind? Those are people, living beings. They’re the victims here and you want to blow this place?!” Ken yelled.

“Yeah, well, that’s the thing kid. Look at them, do you think that they will be pleased with their current situation? Their bodies are now mutilated, we don’t even know if they’re human anymore. It’s best to reprieve them off their torment.” Cid calmly explained.

“Ken, I know it’s hard, but we have to do this. At least, we may honor their sacrifices by stopping their doings,” Linda also justified. “We can’t let these people be turned into weapons.”

“But— “

“You’re a mercenary. We were hired to stop them, whatever it takes. So, you must toughen your guts… and besides, it’s none of our business if they die or not, consider them as collateral damage,” Alastor added. He was beginning to be annoyed.

“I don’t know how you guys can handle this,” Ken murmured.

“Our priority is to fulfill the mission,” Tin chimed in.

“I know that.”

“Then we must do what we must do to fulfill the request. Besides, we can’t even say if they’re humans anymore,” Tin continued. The signal began to stutter.

Alastor noticed Ken’s contemplation changing and decided to advise him, “Ken, remember. In our job, ethics apply too little. Look, I get it, you don’t want to kill, and you think this job is quite dirty, but that doesn’t mean that all our missions are out of being human. I mean, look at this. Theo uses humans for his ridiculous ideas, and if you think about it for them, what would happen only ‘if’ they regain their selves? This is worse than dying. Their sacrifices wouldn’t be useless. It would likely prevent Theo from creating more possibilities of such conflict in this city.”

“I guess… you’re right…” Ken conceded, falling into silence and in deep thought.

\*\*\*

Meanwhile, Tin rested her back on the four-sided metal pane of a fan filter, catching her breath from climbing the stairs of the abandoned building. She figured that it would be better to watch at the top of the building rather than stay in the compartment of the structure that limits her vision. She held down the sniper and turned off her communication device because she didn’t want to lose her concentration while preparing her weapons. Besides, they already infiltrated the site, all that was left was fulfilling their objective.

“It has been a long time since I’ve used these babies,” she muttered to herself as she unloaded the magazines from the guns, checking if they were loaded with bullets.

As soon as she was finished checking her weapons, she turned on the communication device. She altered her gaze at the lunar light and gasped at the breath-taking beauty of it. Tin listened to them while taking turns monitoring outside the factory.

Clad in green combat and a closed button brown trench coat, and equipped beneath a vest. She kept her entire body warm from the passing breeze of the night that blew a strand of her hair across her eyes. She pulled herself from the metal panel, stretching her body. The edifice was abandoned and surrounded by countless empty buildings, making it convenient to not be noticed by people who were celebrating festivities.

She wailed as soon as the crackling bones sounded from the stretching legs. Preparing for the worst, Tin rested the guns and opened the bag revealing dozens of hazardous items. Two handguns rested in her waist, flash bombs hung in the utility belt, and a knife in her leg. The assault rifle hung slant in her back, while the shotgun clung to the trench coat holder in a horizontal position. The magazines suspended in her chest and in the midriff. The shotgun shell was horizontally applied to her belly.

This over-composure in equipping weapons was but a bad habit that she developed ever since she was in training back at the haven. Tin was madly attracted to weapons and she was considered a protégé in the art of armaments with her innovative mind in weapons making.

She held the sniper and adjusted the scope to the factory. She noticed that the place became quiet, and there was no presence of the worker.

“Hey, the outside became quiet, something’s fishy about it,” Tin warned.

“Don’t worry, we’re just about to get rid of this place,” Alastor replied. The three of them started to fiddle on computers.

“How are you going to do it? You don’t have any explosives left,” Cid asked.

“We don’t need explosive devices to blow up this place. We will just improvise,” Linda replied. They breathed heavily jogging across the platform, taking the south route, which led them to the electric chamber. Upon entering the room, they saw dozens of electric conduit containers.

Tin rose, gazing afar at the factory before nodding in confirmation there is no reason to be alert. She crouched to grab the bag, but a wandering red dot aiming caught her eyes. Traversing towards her body, she knew what it aimed for. Her heart skipped a beat.

“Oh, crap.” She rolled and evaded the gunshots. She drew out her pistols, shooting as she ran and hid behind a squared metallic fan filter.

“Whatever you have to do; you better do it fast. We got some company here.” Tin called through the mic. A few of his shots missed and grazed the nearby filters. She laid down her sniper and switched to an assault rifle. When she heard there were no movements, she assumed it stopped. She returned fires to where it came from. Tin strongly gripped the handle and caressed it to withstand the recoil. Bullets came striking as she rolled, hiding behind a cement wall.

“I don’t know who you are or where you came from, but creeping out in the back… is so unmanly.” She howled, hid, and reloaded, then clutched the charging handle for another round.

A few seconds passed and the entire field became quiet. She huffed softly, considering her surroundings, her eyes suspended at the back. She called Cid, “Hey, would you check if there are more enemies?”

“I don’t think my computer’s working properly, there’s no one there but only you,” Cid reported and continued to tap the computer. “Wait a sec. Hide around! He’s on the right side of the other building!” he shouted.

Tin stumbled as the bullet narrowly missed her cheek. She leaned back, rolled to the side, and took cover behind the fan filter on the other side. Quickly, she inserted a 30-round magazine into the well of her rifle, firmly clouting the bottom of the magazine to ensure it was seated properly. She then pulled back the charging handle, allowing the bolt to snap forward with a cracking sound, chambering a live round. As soon as she heard the soft thumping of boots moving to another position, she initiated an attack on the enemy’s location. Her gun’s nose followed the man as she pulled the trigger. The loud noise of her gunshots echoed in the air, creating a sound of death. The bullets only grazed his black cloak.

Tin crouched and unloaded the magazine, then reloaded it, gazing back at the enemy. She realized that he was only standing and staring at her position. “What the hell?” she muttered to herself. Looking underneath his black garb, she saw a dozen magazines resting vertically, trailing to his shoulder and chest. The last thing she noticed were the hood trailing a coat down to beyond his knees and the gas mask he wore, the eyeglasses of which glowed red, the eyes of grim reaper.

Tin stood, clutching the charging handle, ready to pull the trigger when a clanging sound caught her ears. A one-foot silver container was thrown four feet away from her, and the ticking sound of the bomb made her heart forget his early intention. Without hesitation, she ran to the edge of the building. The last words she heard from the mysterious man were ‘Boom.’ The canister exploded, and she felt the shockwave that sent her hurling off the building with a grown. She reached behind her and pulled something, shooting the grappling hook at the ledge near a window and landing safely on the ground.

She looked back at the man but found nothing. I could hear only the sound of debris from the explosion. She left the scene. A van stopped in front of her and Cid opened the window, calling her name.

“Hey, we need to get out of here,” he said urgently. She climbed into the van, and they proceeded to the factory.

The mysterious man was left standing, gazing at the rushing vehicle, with no intention of pursuing them.

\*\*\*

“So, would you mind sharing with me what you were doing?” Ken stood before Alastor, discerningly observing what he was doing, he was done double checking the security.

“We were using this energy container to connect in the core reactor,” Alastor replied. He was busy connecting wires to the container of energy. Meanwhile, Linda was unbolting the gas tube.

“The tube contains methane gas; this would be enough as a trigger to blow this place,” she added. Linda walked hastily at a control panel, reaching for the tube to unbolt it. Seven containers were connected, wired up, and only needed to be plugged in.

“Again, how do these things blow up?” Ken still could not grasp the plan.

“We will use these energy containers to overload the core reactor. The core will explode and ignite the methane gas, or if not, a single spark of it would be enough,” Alastor explained.

“That’s why we need to get out of here fast after we finish wiring these containers,” Linda huffed and jumped from reaching the connecting tube. In a second, the gas hissed and came out from it, filling the room with fumes.

“This should be enough,” Alastor pulled his hands out of the small hole of the core reactor and rose from crouching. Thirteen energy containers were finished wiring.

“Hey, help me connect this to the reactor,” Alastor asked Ken.

Ken stopped in motion and hesitantly did it. “I don’t know, man, maybe I’ll leave this thing up to you.” He walked outside the room, while Alastor gave Linda a look, and she shrugged, then proceeded to help connect the container.

The white luminous light emitted by the lampshade gave light in this distressing place. The cold breeze of the atmosphere that came from the air conditioner was numbing, penetrating the nerves starting from Ken’s neck down to his body.

“How could they easily kill them? Without knowing if they’re still human or not?” Ken was still concerned about the humans that were included in the experiment. He knew deep inside his heart that it was wrong to kill innocent people, but Alastor’s words kept resounding inside his mind.

“Ugh, I don’t know what I am supposed to do anymore,” he grunted. Ken was raised by monks at the Alfahon Mountain in the far east of the Jafal Region, before the Glade took him care of. He was taught the importance of life and why we should respect and take care of it. In the present, the place he was raised was now in ashes, when the Grand Military Empire – the Hayan Empire – decided to declare war against the Gahoda Kingdom. The monks helped the people who were victims and used their sanctuaries to be their temporary home. But with the advanced mechanisms they possessed, the enemy could track the refugees, and because of that, they were killed. The monks tried to fight back but proved ineffective with the enemies using advanced weapons. After the gruesome battle, he was found by a member of the Glade and brought to their base.

He continued to walk, trying to figure out what he should do, until he noticed the dim-witted eyes of a woman. Dozens of outlets that restrained her injected her. The only thing that was replaced was her hands, which were made of iron. Her expression which lacked life was giving an impression of wanting to be saved. Her eyes seemed to call out to him, her mouth moving as if trying to say “Help… me.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll get you out of there,” Ken reassured her as he approached the computer panel near the glass chamber. Although the operating system was somewhat different, he could still understand it. He pulled down the lever that turned off the light and the opening hole underneath her feet sapped the water, he immediately caught her.

“Hey, don’t worry. You’re safe now,” Ken whispered to the girl who was drifting to sleep. He carried her and headed back to where the others were. Alastor and Linda already finished connecting the devices, and the image at the control panel showed the power percentage increasing until it hit one hundred percent and then beyond.

“We need to go now,” Alastor urged. He went out first.

“Cid, where’s the nearest exit?” Linda asked.

“There’s supposed to be a ventilation shaft on the next floor that will slide you down outside the building. You’ll need to use a grappling hook,” Cid said.

Tin grabbed the laptop and looked at the blueprint. “Since when did you have these blueprints?” she asked.

“Dude, I extracted them when I was gathering information. Hey! Get those feet of yours down where they’re supposed to be!” Cid growled.

“Okay-okay, jeez,” Tin snorted.

Cid observed Tin as she typed on the laptop. “What are you doing?” he asked with uneasiness caused by her bratty look.

“Just doing something funny.” she grinned.

The two of them hurriedly walked, knowing that it would be a matter of time before the building exploded, and when that time came, the authorities would be alerted.

“Hey, where’s Ken?” Linda asked.

“I don’t know, I don’t care…” Alastor replied flatly.

Linda pressed the button to call Ken and he responded, his voice audible as though he was nearby. As he elevated up the stairs, Linda noticed that he was not alone, he brought an unwanted guest.

“What are you doing?!” she shouted. “You’re jeopardizing our mission!”

“No! She’s alive and she needs help… Just please, at least—” Ken tried to justify his actions, but Cid interrupted.

“Hey, we might learn what they’re up to if we could bring one of their samples, so let him,” Cid suggested.

Alastor ignored the discussion as he looked below and saw countless silhouettes approaching their location. “We’ll talk about it later. They are coming, let’s get out of here,” he warned with an urgent tone and ran to the staircase. They needed to alert the authorities once the subject was released. Maybe there was a silent alarm somewhere.

Ken sighed and leaned the girl against him, holding her. Behind them, the guards pointed their guns, locking their aim with a firm grip on the charging handle. They pulled the trigger, and the bullets volleyed towards them.

“Don’t let them escape, no matter what happens!” someone shouted.

Alastor reached for his sword, hissing against the scabbard and gleamed for a moment. He deflected the incoming bullets with his swordsmanship, swinging back and forth as he let himself be the last line of defense to protect them. The bullets grazed his cheeks and somewhere on his legs, but most bounced against his blade. He cut off the wires of the barrel-like structure letting it roll over them.

Ahead, Linda led them, and Ken was in the middle of the chase, carrying the unconscious woman on his back. A guard reached the other side and was about to aim at them with his gun, but Linda threw a bolt of lightning magic at him, instantly knocking him down.

They reached the available ventilation shaft at the center of the wall in the open space metallic stage, but the position was convenient to the enemy, leaving Alastor to deflect the attacks. He calmly assessed every parried attack and only deflected those that could hit them. In the end, he resorted to magic, conjuring green constructs that blocked the attacks.

“Hey, get in. We’re going to get out of here!” Linda pulled the lock and entered the duct, sliding down then kicking the filter that led her outside, falling in the large chemical industrial factory. She grabbed the grappling hook and shot it randomly, luckily clinging to the ledge.

“You go first!” Alastor said while deflecting every attack of the enemy. His strange speed of deflecting left some enemies in awe, but they furiously assaulted him. With every bullet he deflected, more followed, pushing him to the edge.

Ken retorted, “But you can’t hold it any—”

“Just go! Leave it to me!” Alastor shouted.

“I owe you one.” Ken leaned his back upward as they slid to the wide duct.

Alastor couldn’t take his chances to slide to the duct as long as the enemies kept shooting at him. Hence, he slowly moved backward, preparing for an opportunity. Unfazed by the aggressors, he didn’t notice that the others were taking a reroute. The loud noise of the striking bullets enabled him to foresee it. He breathed roughly, his boots creating friction when he took a step back. The cold atmosphere was slowing his muscle movements.

Before the indiscreetly approached enemy could get near him, gas leaked from the tube hanging up sideways. The electric wirings sparked and grounded the lights, turning them off and on until it reached the enemy. Some of them were blinded by the gas, and others were electrified. The loud shrieking noise of the spark resounded where they came from, and some of the machinery began to explode.

The explosion intensified as the canisters exploded, and the methane gas flickered, producing a vindictive flare that flowed in the ventilation duct, creating a chain of explosions across the platforms. The building shook and so was he. The enemy’s reaction couldn’t catch up to the immediate blast, burning them alive. The continuous screams of the guards dissipated as the entirety began to collapse.

Even though some of them were willing to take chances of surviving the blast and tried to get rid of Alastor, they couldn’t fight back against the destructive flame. He lost his balance as soon as an explosion came at his right side. He used his sword to support him, regaining his composure. His eyes strained to focus as he felt that his head was heavy. The mercenary forced the air on his mouth to ease his heart and mind. After collecting himself, he glanced back at the escape route that was now covered in piled boulders.

His teeth grinded, scolding himself for failing. However, he knew that giving up was not an option. The growling explosion of flames halted, and he could once again hear the swarming presence of the enemies. The sights of the automatic rifles were fixated on him. He quickly rose, gripping the holder, prepared for the next wave. A deafening roar of volleying bullets came, and he sprinted towards them, deflecting the bullets with rapid swinging and skillful sword movements. As soon as they ran out of bullets, he didn’t hesitate to take the chance and fixed his sword towards their flesh.

Alastor aimed low then swung back and forth, threw the gun, kicked the guts hard, and the enemy fell. Soon, the others fired at him, aiming for a convenient position. The once calm fire raged again, succumbing to the aggressors. Along with the blast, water leaked next to him. He decided to remove his mask and shower in the leaking water before wearing it again to prevent unwanted smoke from entering his nostrils.

Alastor risked a glance at the top to confirm any means of escape. Beyond the rows of glass tubes, he saw the window as he snapped the neck of the enemy. Large pieces of technology blocked the stair. He looked for another way as he took cover. He saw a path that led up, but it would be bothersome to circle the route, and the enemy might catch up to him. So, he chose to take the easy way. He jumped and clung to the ledge. His strong arms pulled him up, and he met another enemy. He threw his sword at the foe, plunging it deep into his chest. Running, ducking, sliding down, and reclaiming the sword back into his hand. He struck at the enemy’s chest.

Once he reached the window, he grabbed the grenade from the fallen enemy, threw it into the air, and shot it as soon as it got close to the window. Alastor knew what was about to happen and rested his sword while the opportunity was there. The flame came after him. The hotness was threatening, and the frightened mercenary could feel that the unstoppable blaze was behind him as he knelt, jumped, clung, and pulled himself up. He didn’t think twice and jumped at the building. The height was high, and probably the length of the hook couldn’t do the job, so he waited to find the right timing. He grabbed the grappling hook and then shot it at the deformed wall. The vehicle was parked behind the walls of the factory. Cid looked at the upcoming party, Linda and Ken landed safely. Cid noticed the woman clinging to Ken’s back.

“What the hell?” he exclaimed. Tin grabbed the handle of the door and opened it, making a way for the hurrying comrades. Ken caressed the lady to the comfortable seat, and then he grabbed a towel, covering her nakedness.

Cid leaned forward to the woman, then to Ken. “Hey, is she one of the…?”

“Yes, she is,” Ken promptly replied.

They could hear the explosion. They gazed up to the cylindrical furnace and saw the smoke trailing up to the sky, then came the explosion. The debris fell across the place until they saw Alastor from the higher echelon, falling as though the roaring flame came out. Alastor decelerated and while in mid-air, the ledges crumbled, and the hook held no longer, leaving Alastor to free fall. Ken estimated the distance and timing. When Alastor drew near, he leaped towards him, cushioning his fall and altering the force of the impact. They both hit the hard pavement with a loud thud and let out a groan of pain.

“I got ya,” Ken muttered and moaned, standing up and holding his waist.

“This is gonna hurt tomorrow.” Alastor struggled to catch his breath as Ken helped him up. Together, they stumbled into the waiting vehicle and drove away from the scene, leaving behind the wailing sirens of the police and fire-fighters rushing to the exploding building.

The brimming night sky was shrouded by thick columns of black smoke, a haunting reminder of the danger they just escaped.

# Chapter 2

**A**t the end of another day, a young woman came rushing from upstairs. The wooden floor rumbled but proved not to be disturbing as the joyous music from the drunken men downstairs dominated the entire place. "*Geez, they’re so early."* She retorted in her thoughts but couldn’t do anything but follow the orders of her boss.

Grabbing a tray from the table, she was called by the chef in the open kitchen area. The kitchen released smoke when it opened, a brief reprieve for those whose inside. She hissed, coughing as she passed through the smoke-filled kitchen.

As Sherry hurried down the stairs, more groups of rowdy customers entered the pub. They laughed, cheered, teased their friends, and some even got into a fight. Others attention was on her. The attraction was not surprising even among her closest friends. Sherry was tall with blonde hair tied back in a red ribbon. She wore a black and white maiden outfit that went down to her knees, revealing her long legs. The way she moved was with care and grace. She taught herself the etiquette as soon as she was hired as a waitress in order to showcase her femininity and attract customers. It was evident to the customers’ reactions that her efforts were not in vain.

As she approached the party of men, she cheerfully smiled and said, “Bean soup for table 54!” The guy at the table thanked her as he received his food.

One of the staff members called out to Sherry again, “Would you kindly throw the trash bags outside?”

“Wait a minute, I’m quite busy here!” Sherry yelled as she cleared the plates and cups from the table. She scanned the room, counting the tables she needed to clean. Most of the table didn’t need too much effort to clean, but some was left by some ill-mannered customers. A bubble gum was stuck beneath the table. She had to spray it with vegetable oil just to remove it.

Her friend came over to her and whispered, “Hey, can I leave that guy in the corner to you? He’s creeping me out.” She pointed out the man in the formal suit, who was staring at them.

“Okay, I’ll handle him after I take out the trash,” Sherry said. She got up and arranged the plates and spray to the stroller.

Sherry went to the employees’ room on the right side of the counter, where dozens of trash bags were piled up. She spent a few minutes carrying them outside.

As Sherry walked out, a gust of wind blew past her, making her shiver. She heard footsteps and turned around but saw nothing. The anxiety grew stronger, given the recent news of mysterious disappearances in the area. When she confirmed there was no one, she reached for the doorknob. Suddenly, she noticed a shadowy figure coming towards her. She tried to use her elbow to defend herself, but the attacker overpowered her, and a towel covered her face. She lost consciousness.

\*\*\*

Her body twitched as a ray of light focused on her eyes, and they wearily opened. She altered her gaze from the light, darting around the room to make out what was in her surroundings. She noticed the blood pressure monitor blinking and monitoring her status. Few small tubes were attached to her. Her senses were intact, and she could feel her feet, but she could also smell the porridge that rested around the table at the far corner.

The last thing she noticed was her hands, composed of metallic fabrics and golden sheeting with a few grids carved onto them. There was no trace of any organic compound. Thinking that something was wrong with them, she lifted them up to her elbows. She observed the pink dotted black shirt and white pajamas she was wearing, and her expressionless face turned into a sullen one, followed by teary eyes. She couldn’t explain why she was having these feelings, a sensation of being incomplete. Wiping away the tears, she raised her upper body and saw the man at the corner of her eyes, sleeping on a blue cushion. A loud snort exploded from the man wearing a blue jacket and jogging pants.

Sherry observed the young man, with no intention of approaching him nor able to grasp why she was there. Her head was a little fuzzy, and she couldn’t recall anything about her past whereabouts.

“Who am I? Where is this place?” she asked.

She altered her gaze from the young lad to her replaced hands and stretched them, creating a crippling sound.

“Hey, you finally woke up. I got some porridge for you,” the unknown man said, yawned, and stretched his body as he proceeded to the tray.

“I know you’ve been through a lot, but don’t worry, we’ll take care of you. Though one of my friends is pissed about it. Nah, just don’t worry about it. Say, what is your name?” he inquired.

She looked at him blankly, not sure about what happened to her, only that she could remember her name.

“S-Sherry.” she uttered.

“Sherry, pretty name, eh. I’m sure you’re quite famous among boys. I gotta tell ya, one of my friends is a lady’s man, so you gotta be careful when he’s around, okay?”

Her expressionless face worried the young man.

“Are ya alright? Is something bothering you?” he asked.

It didn’t take an answer to know, as her belly began to growl.

“Oh, right. Sorry, I talk a lot. Here, have some of this,” he handed it over to Sherry. As she touched the bowl, Sherry could feel the warmth of the food. Caressing the spoon, she tasted the porridge. Her mouth spat it out; the taste was bittering her tongue.

He nervously laughed and apologized, “Sorry, it doesn’t fit your taste. No one else is around, and I don’t know how to cook. Oh, wait here, I think there are some carpel nuts left in the fridge.” He took off from the room in a quick burst. She decided to walk out, removing the blanket from her feet. As she walked, she passed countless empty rooms with a view of the city from the higher echelon of the window. She halted her movements, mesmerized by the view outside the windowpane.

Suddenly, unknown images flooded her mind, searing, ringing, and she struggled to process the images. A voice interrupted her thoughts, trying to cling to her head as she cowered. Her consciousness was in an alarming state of a siren, she braced at the table, but fell. Her senses dulled. Her sight became distorted into pitch blackness.

\*\*\*

A piercing whistle from the entryway could be heard, jolting her back to reality. Just as she tried to move, her body became numb. She observed her surroundings with her drifting consciousness and saw men busy fiddling with control panels and heard the rhythmical tapping of keyboards.

She noticed the men in black who just arrived, pushing a giant glass tube that held a man who appeared to be sleeping. The tube was connected to wires and tubes that ran from his body, but she felt powerless to act. All she could do was yelp and saw them take his container and proceed to the elevator.

The scientist turned his attention back to the young woman. “Hey, Experiment 432 is awake. Take her to the Experiment Sector,” he called out someone on the communication device. “Hm, looks like it’s our lucky day. Seven consecutive successes for today,” he said with a grin as he started to tap at the nearby panel on the right side.

“Is everything ready?” a voice flared out of nowhere, clad in a blue blazer with a small metallic head of a tiger attached to the chest, accompanied by guards.

“Everything is ready, Mister President.” The scientist curtly bowed. “We’re waiting for your orders. Shall we start the experiment?”

“Do as you wish. Show me the results when it’s done,” he said, his eyes starting to observe around. “Also, report to me about the progress of the experiments, because I will be busy negotiating with the mayor and that lowlife mob,”

“I do believe that you don’t need his help. You have connections inside the government, and you can explain the expansion easily,” the scientist said.

His eyes narrowed as if he was looking down at the scientist. “Sometimes we have to play behind the curtains. It would be easy as you say to explain the expansion, but that would also harbour suspicion, especially with the media. Rather, we will use someone to blame for all of this.”

“Please pardon me if I am a short-sighted person,” the scientist lowered his head.

The President’s attention was caught by the woman in the tube. His white hair briefly flashes from the lights of the giant computer. She could make out his dazzling face and nose crafted perfectly.

“And this…?” he asked.

“Ah, this woman will be a candidate for our symbiotic transplant,”

“Very well, I’ll be going. I’ll leave things in your hands.” Leaving the staff in the room, the scientist called out to the men to detach the containment and transfer it. Before she lost consciousness, the scientist said something to her that she couldn’t forget.

“Everything went as I planned, and it won’t be too long, the empire he had built will rot,” he laughed, dissipating as he walked outside, leaving his men to do the job.

\*\*\*

Sherry let out a heartfelt grunt as she opened her eyes, narrowed, and wiped it. The familiar fluorescent light the familiar grumbled from the young man from her side. She looked around wearily.

Ken appeared next to her, yawned, stretched, and asked, “Are you alright?”

She flustered and replied, “Uhm, not quite. My head still feels dizzy.”

“You really shouldn’t strain yourself,” Ken said laced with concern. “Luckily Cid found you outside. Don’t make us worried sick, okay? We know that you’ve been through a lot, and don’t know what should be done, but we’re here to help, so don’t force yourself.”

A few moments passed, and Sherry ate the curry while Ken slept on the blue cushion beside her, snoring loudly. Linda entered the room and sat down on the chair near Sherry. “I heard you collapse this morning,” she said. “You really shouldn’t have strained yourself.”

“I’m sorry to worry about you. Who are you guys?”

“We’re the ones who saved you from those douchebags,” Cid interjected as he entered the room, looking dazzling in his half-unbuttoned red polo and white pants. “You’re quite promising. I didn’t notice it last time we –”

“Cid, cut the crap,” Alastor interrupted.

“Hey! I was just being nice here,” Cid cried.

“Don’t mind him,” Linda sighed. She glanced back at Cid and signalled for him to stop.

“I know that you’re confused about why you’re here, but I assure you, we will help you. Just tell us what they are planning.”

“I-I am not sure what to say,” Sherry said. Her eyes roamed around.

“What do you mean?” Linda asked.

“I couldn’t remember…”

Linda reached for a glass of water on the table and muttered, “This is going to be difficult.”

“Hey, mind if we talk about this outside?” Alastor interjected.

It was night time, and thick clouds slightly covered the view of the moon. Alastor appeared upfront and bothered Linda with his serious demeanour. Linda knew that there was something else that had been bothering him. She didn’t want to speak about it, not until he was ready. Although, she has some ideas.

“What is it?” Linda asked.

“Well, that girl could have become a threat to us,” Alastor replied. “We might get rid of her.”

“A threat? She could barely move, and you could see that she’s not a fighter at all,” Ken said, sounding a bit annoyed.

“That’s not it,” Alastor said. They heard birds singing outside, but they paid no mind to it. Alastor’s eyes were filled with disgruntlement. “Her hand was not the only thing that was replaced. We found a hardware circuitry that linked to her cerebral cortex, and an energy source was detected in the middle of her ribcage.”

Linda raised her brow. “Are you supposed to report to me if you were planning to do something with her?”

“Hm, since you guys were busy, we initiated it,” Alastor said.

“We?” Linda asked, confused.

“I requested Tin to scan her.” Alastor said.

“I have to stop you right there. I can’t believe this. Tell me what you saw,” Linda demanded.

“What’s happening here?” Cid asked as he walked in. The spy leaned his shoulder at the wall.

“Something about her,” Alastor said.

“What do you mean?” Cid asked.

“It’s best if Tin explains all of this,” Linda interjected.

The five of them sat down in the meeting room, each lost in their own thoughts. Cid looked at the projector on the table while Tin stood in front of the monitor, busy swiping through the information they obtained. Linda sat opposite Cid at the table, crossing her arms, while Ken paced back and forth in front of Alastor, who sat on the sofa.

“Will you stop doing that?” Alastor asked. His eyes lifted to Ken.

Ken didn’t notice the disturbed young man and kept pacing.

“Hey! Sit down. It’s not like walking idly will solve this,” Tin said, starting to get annoyed.

Ken stopped and thought for a moment. “What if we kidnapped one of the scientists from their lab and made them fix her?”

“You know that’s kidnapping, right?” Alastor returned.

“You’re just asking for trouble,” Linda said. She sat properly this time.

“Ken, chill out or I’m gonna have to kick the shit out of you,” Tin warned.

“But…” Ken started.

“No more buts!” Tin yelled.

Ken finally sat down on the sofa, stealing the pillow that Alastor was leaning on. Alastor blankly stared at him, but Ken didn’t notice. “What?” he asked.

“Nothing,” Alastor replied, looking away as though his thoughts was interrupted.

“Ok, guys, come closer. I have something to show you,” Tin said, getting their attention.

They all stood and looked at the monitor table, where images of human physiological systems appeared. There were videos and schematics about human gene reconstruction, as well as some about inventing a new type of robot. Tin swiped the tablet towards the monitor, which was linked to it.

“This rock is called Hemil Klust, a new element that was found at the abandoned mine in the City of Kalum. The Kelby Hives were not the first to find out about this rock. Some miners were messing with it, selling it to some merchants with proper compensation of course, until this…” Tin swiped and showed them an image of a male adult with pallid skin who was so thin that it looked like his soul was sucked out. Some parts of his skin were starting to shred.

“How many days before he died?” Cid asked.

“Not a day, only five hours,” Tin said and continued to swipe, showing more victims of the element. “The merchant was with his friends, drinking and going to the toilet. They started to suspect him of taking too long, and when they entered, they found him in a degrading state. It also happened to a seller whose wife had found him degrading.”

“Then it spreads like an epidemic,” Alastor continued.

“Right, and that’s where the Kelby Hives come in. They close the entire city to ensure that no one can relay information to the outside world,” Tin explained.

“This doesn’t explain why the mayor didn’t stop him,” Cid said.

“He couldn’t. President Theo had him under blackmail, with information about approving illegal operations within his city,” Tin replied.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if the mayor were under his influence,” Linda concluded.

“So, how did they solve this?” Cid questioned.

“They haven’t. They gathered the infected ones and continued their research at the Vesoga Plain,” Tin explained.

They all froze. Cid, however, was interested.

“That place is a den of monsters. How the hell did they manage to build an HQ there?” Cid asked.

“They have their ways, Cid. Further research has been done and the researchers demand more specimens. That’s when they started to kidnap innocent people. Theo must’ve realized that it is more convenient to move his lab somewhere near the city. So they chose Kayon City and started to find collaborators, which led to Don Trifalgo,” Tin said. “They created many designs, specifically on bio-human engineering. They found a way to use it, one of them is converting it into gas, and the other is to use it as an energy source. They called it ‘Project Amalgam’. From what I could make out of the files from the Data Bank, Theo aims to build an army surpassing human limitations with the use of Hemil Klust. Sherry is a primary example of their experiment. They implanted her with a small portion of Hemil-Klust at the middle of her ribcage. The energy is being regulated by nanomachines that are living inside her along with the metallic plate that’s monitoring the energy and facilitates neuron information dissemination. Her hand is directly connected to it and can be switched to weaponize. Schematics showed a hardwired circuit connected to her cerebral cortex, and the computer detected a tracking device on it. Don’t worry, I disabled it when she was asleep, of course. Thanks to the security systems of our building that blocked any outside signals, our safety is guaranteed,”

“How come you didn’t tell me about this, Tin?” Cid asked.

“About what?” Tin replied.

“About sneaking into her room,” Cid said.

“Because you’re a pervert,” Tin replied, sarcastically.

Alastor observed at the screen, which showed the blueprints of the design, and a sudden thought flickered in his mind. “Say, is there any possibility that Theo is aiming to build an army?”

The rest of the gang looked at him with surprise, but Cid disagreed. “No way, a guy like him would be interested in building an army. Building a militia would be out of the queue for his resources. The expenses could be too much.”

“Let’s assume my crazy idea. If there is any chance he would use these meta-human robots, or his crazy war inventions, what are the chances that the government’s army would win?” Alastor asked.

Tim explained thoroughly, “I haven’t read all of the projects, but seeing the previous anomalies with the unknown substance he carries and reinventing humans into cyborgs, I’d say that this guy might have the upper hand if he completes his projects. But hey, there are still unknown variables that might balance the current circumstances.”

Tin lowered the tablet to the table, thinking as if having a second thought about it.

“What’s the problem, Tin?” Linda said.

“Uhm, nothing.”

“Tell them, Tin.” Alastor insisted, “No need to keep hiding.”

“We would love to know what you have to say.” Ken said.

“Uhm, it’s about Sherry’s condition. I don’t think Sherry is going to last much longer.”

“What? How?” Ken said. He was bedazzled at most.

“There’s something in her blood, mixed substances entered her system, and I don’t know what kind of substances it is. She was exposed to a lot of treatment, and there’s no telling what it could be. We may have technology, but it’s not surgical material, and I’m not a doctor.”

Ken looked down, discouraged, clenching his fist.

“How many days does she have left?”

“I don’t know. She looks healthy. Best to say that it would probably be less than a year before it spreads up to her brain.”

“That much.” Ken sighed.

“It’s not like she’s our priority.” Alastor murmured.

“The only thing that is inside your head is only the mission, isn’t it?” Ken asked, almost exasperated from his words of disapproval.

“We were given a task that must be accomplished, and we did, but you got us nearly killed when you brought that girl.” Alastor raised his voice just enough for Ken to perceive that he was angry at his reckless decision.

“I don’t know what the hell is wrong with you, man.”

“The only one who is wrong is you.”

“You would sacrifice someone just to accomplish your mission?”

“If it is for the greater good, then I would. In this job, we must kill our moral compass and follow our code of arms.”

“Both of you stop it. We don’t need to argue about something that cannot be undone.” Linda interjected, cutting off the tension between the two.

“Alright, since things are getting clearer now, I gotta go. I still have business to attend to,” Cid said.

“Where are you going?” Tin asked.

“I’m a spy, remember? I need to gather information for my assignment,” Cid reminded them.

“And what is your assignment again?” Alastor asked.

“That is a secret that you will never know.”

“Fine, you already helped us. I think we can handle it from here.”

“Ciao,” Cid cheerfully said, winking as he walked through the door.

“Where does that leave us now?” Ken asked.

“We need to think about this.”

“There will be a lot of commotion in this city after the building explodes. It may be best to lay low for now.”

“You guys can rest; I’ll keep monitoring her,” Linda offered.

“You sure?” Ken asked.

“Yeah, Tin will replace me tomorrow.”

“Okay, just call us if anything happens,” Ken said, yawning as he marched to his bedroom.

Tin followed, her eyes closed as she stretched her neck. Once the two of them left, Alastor began to talk.

“You’re not just gonna let this slip, are you?”

“We can’t kill her, Al. This may be an opportunity for us to know what way they’re planning to go. I’m gonna report this back to headquarters. I’m sure Rod will be interested,” Linda elaborated. She was beginning to see the advantage of Ken’s disobedience.

“Hm, maybe you’re right. Carrying insurance would help us after all.”

“You should go to sleep.”

“Right.”

When Alastor left, Linda proceeded to the patient’s room where she busied herself scanning the entire body structure of the half-humanoid.

“Just what the hell is that thing?” Linda muttered as she looked at the energy floating inside the core of Sherry.

It was early in the morning when Linda finished checking on Sherry. She called out for Tin to take over. When Linda left and everything was still, Sherry’s eyes opened in blinding red light.

They have no idea what kind of monster they brought.

\*\*\*

Although the explosion only damaged the upper left part of the chemical building, some sections of the structure remained unstable. Under the cover of darkness, Port moved with haste and quietly through the ruins of the Kelby Hives secret chemical factory. He scanned the area, trying to piece together what happened. Having bypassed the building’s security by crawling through the sewers and accessing a nearby hatch, the stench didn’t bother him. All he cared about was discovering what went wrong in this place. He stood on what appeared to be the remains of a balcony and looked down upon Kayon City. The icy air made him shiver a little.

“Where did he go wrong?” Port muttered to himself.

He reached up and pulled back his hood, then he scanned his surroundings. This is not the right place he was looking for. After a few moments of walking, he found a place that was not fully destroyed and saw empty glass cages, he altered his look at the left side and found a computer blinking on and off. He tried to operate it, but it didn’t respond. Out of annoyance he slammed his hand to the panel, banging it hard enough to force it on. He began to tap at the keyboards and one by one he opened the files. His eyes widened on what he just saw. He clenched his hands as he witnessed the hideous act of the man behind all of this.

“I didn’t expect it to be this bad,” he muttered.

A man emerged from the darkness. The eyes from his gas mask glowed in red, and his black coat trailed behind him as he walked with his guns dangling at his back. Port raised his own gun, pointing it at the man.

“Relax, it’s just me,” the man said.

“I thought you were still searching for those kids.” Port said and let out a sigh of relief.

“I am, and I found one of them that night,” the man replied.

Port returned his attention to the computer, brow furrowed. “Those kids knew what they were doing. If it were me, I’d lay low for now. But to get this close to the building, they must have an insider.”

The mysterious man approached Port and watched as he searched through the files. “Glade,” he muttered, lost in thought.

“Do you think they’re involved in this mess?” Port asked.

“I think at first too,” the man replied. “They may be skilled, but that doesn’t mean they’re part of that organization.”

Port nodded. “That’s a good point. But you also have to consider that no sane mercenary would take a job like this unless they knew they had a chance of taking down a huge company like this, especially one that has super-soldiers.”

“Hm, I guess so,” Port said as he clicked on a video file in the folder of saved security camera footage. He fast-forwarded to the night in question and quickly realized that the kids he fought before were responsible for the wreckage.

“It seems that they’re on the move again,” Port said.

“I met one of those kids when I was scouting outside the area,” his companion responded.

“What do you think about them?” Port asked.

“Reckless yet resourceful,” his companion replied.

“Hm, why does it feel like you’re complimenting them?” Port said as his companion began to walk up the staircase.

Port followed him, sensing that his companion picked up a lead.

“Where are we going, actually?” Port asked.

“Vault,” his companion replied.

Port fell into silence as he followed his companion up floor after floor. Eventually, they arrived at what Port believed to be the highest level of the building.

“We’re here,” his companion muttered.

Port looked around the empty room, which was illuminated by the moonlight. “I’m not sure what you’re thinking, but I see no vault in here. This is a dead-end,” he said irritably.

“You don’t understand. Our friend Theo likes to hide his toys so that even his intruders can’t find them,” his companion said as he knelt down and knocked on the floor.

It didn’t take long enough to find what he was looking for as when he changed his position to knock again, it sounded not alike to the other, it was a metal sheet covered the same to the colour of the floor. Port knelt opposed to him. He reached and plucked out the wood. Below was a hidden compartment that locked the item they sought.

“Well, what are we waiting for? Let’s go get it,” Port said.

“Wait, this could be a trap,” his companion cautioned.

Port grabbed a flashlight and shone it on the glass tube that held the item they sought.

“What do you think about this?” he asked.

“I see no opening in the glass tube. Perhaps it’s a pressure bomb?” his companion replied.

Port and his companion nodded in agreement, preparing for the worst. Port held the glass tube tightly, his palms sweating.

“Three,” his companion said.

Port strengthened his knees, and his companion readied his grappling hook.

“Two.”

Port return his eyes on him once more with a nod of confirmation to let go. When they felt they were holding the glass tube, they ran as fast as they could and jumped outside the building.

“One.”

The blast came roaring and the tremendous force can be felt from behind as he shoots the grappling hook, clinging at the ledge, slowly descending to the surface just outside the premises, as they landed outside the building, they knew they only have two minutes before the area is going to be flooded by securities and another minute for them to issue a lockdown.

But as they were wrong, a dozen soldiers appeared.

“You were saying?!” Port shouted irritably.

“Scram!” his companion yelled as he reached for his guns, taking out the soldiers without breaking a sweat. The shells fell with loud ringing as it volleyed to their flesh. The soldiers ran and hid.

They ran as fast as they could across the alleyways behind the train tracks.

“I think we’re safe now,” Port said.

“You know the plan,” his companion replied.

Both of them nodded and went their separate ways, blending into the darkness.

“Whoever they are, they’re far more dangerous than I could ascertain.” Port uttered as he ran by and slipped through the roads. He could no longer hear the yells from behind.

\*\*\*

“Boom, you lost!” Ken shouted as his eyes gleamed, raising his palm to Tin. The two of them were sitting on a couch playing a video game that was now displaying the words GAME OVER.

“Err, uhm, I think I left my money in my room,” Tin said, trying to stand up. However, Ken stopped her by grabbing her right hand. “No escaping.”

“I promise I left my money in my room,” Tin said hesitantly, uncertain whether Ken would trust her.

“Really?” Ken asked, looking at her suspiciously.

“R-Really,” Tin replied. By then, she was on her feet.

“Kay, fine,” Ken said, relenting. Tin felt confident at that moment and tried to hide the grin that was forming on her face as she turned around. However, Ken noticed and threw a threatening word at her. “Hey, if you’re not gonna pay up, I’m gonna mess up your toys.”

Tin snapped at his words, “Both of us know you’re not gonna do that.”

“Oh yeah? Try me,” Ken provoked.

“Hey, stop it, you two,” Linda interrupted, trying to calm them down.

Ken and Tin grunted as they averted their gazes from each other. Alastor entered the room and asked, “What’s the commotion all about?”

“Nah, kids fight,” Linda said dismissively. She walked by the shelf and read a magazine in the living room.

“Right,” Alastor replied, blankly looking at them before turning his attention to Linda. “Anyways, how’s she doing?”

“Getting better,” Linda replied without looking back.

“Really? Fill me in,” Ken said eagerly. He finally looked up.

“Hey, calm down, lover boy,” Alastor interjected. “She can barely mutter five or three words, and we’re not sure if she’s not or a liability to us.”

“Hey, how ‘bout we talk to her and help her remember some things,” Ken suggested.

“Interrogation?” Alastor questioned.

“No, talk to her like a normal person, a soldier boy. She has amnesia; an interrogation is not a freaking pep talk,” Ken retorted.

Alastor thought about it for a moment before grunting and walking outside the premises with an unexplainable reaction. “That guy has a serious problem,” Ken added, as though he was mocking Alastor.

“Al is a bit, um, how do I say this?” Linda struggled to find the right words.

“Edgy?” Ken suggested.

“Edgy, right,” Linda agreed. “Yeah, I know. Some cadets get hang-ups even though he’s not looking at them.”

“The way he looks strikes fear into people,” Ken observed.

“Ken,” Linda warned.

“What?”

“Just don’t get it into you, alright? He’s a lot more complicated than you think,” Linda cautioned.

“Right, I can already see it. I’ll suck up the tension and use happy imagination,” Ken said, trying to lighten the mood.

\*\*\*

Alastor grunted as he opened his eyes to the buzzing and sirens of his alarm clock. He took a deep breath before deciding to stand up. After glancing at his phone and reading Linda’s message about the elevators not working, he proceeded to the bathroom to do his usual routine. As always, he proceeded to the bathroom, doing the same routine, brushed his teeth, bathed, put on his favorite white and black striped shirt, and wore short black pants. As he proceeded outside of his room, he saw Sherry at the end of the hallway, staring aimlessly down beyond the window. She wore a white dress with a red lace tied to her hair. The wind made her ponytail fly when she opened the window, met by a gust of wind.

Alastor observed for a few seconds before he decided to go down to the lounge when he heard a voice as he stepped towards the stairs.

“Hey,” Sherry called out.

“Yes?” he said without looking back at her.

“I just want to-to…” she trailed off.

“To what?”

“To thank you.”

He tilted his head to see Sherry’s face. “Look, if you think we saved you out of goodwill, then you’re lucky because we only saved you to find a use for you.”

Sherry paused her movements and looked discouraged about what he said. “Is that so?” she frowned.

“Yeah. If that’s all, then I will go downstairs.” Alastor left Sherry with a worrying thought clinging to her head. She tried to toughen herself, but a single tear crept out, and she shed it.

As Alastor proceeded to the lounge, the energetic man, Ken met him. “Yo! Have you seen Sherry?” Ken questioned.

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“Outside my room. She was staring out the window.”

Ken intervened when Alastor headed towards the kitchen. “You realize that it’s breakfast, right?”

“Yeah, that’s why I came down here to eat.”

“Then why didn’t you invite her?!”

“Must’ve slipped my mind,” Alastor said.

“Dude!”

Alastor didn’t respond anymore, only with a grunt gesturing that he was getting annoyed, but Linda came in and threw him a look as if she were saying, ‘Calm down.’ She sat down on the sofa holding a book and started to read it.

“If you want to, go upstairs and invite her.”

“You don’t seem to care about her, d’ya?” Ken said, and he ran up the stairs.

When he left, Alastor decided to go to the kitchen, but Linda’s voice reached out to him. “You seem to be in a bad mood.”

“Isn’t he always?” Tin added as she walked towards the table holding a tray full of desserts and coffee from the hallway.

Alastor grunted as he walked without saying a word. Linda turned her attention to Tin, dragged because of the food she brought. “Since when does dessert qualify as breakfast?” Linda asked.

Tin looked at her without a trace of annoyance, only a display of a poker face. “My tummy, my rules,” she said and started to eat.

\*\*\*

Ken panted as he reached the 8th floor where Alastor’s room could be found. “Damn, why the hell are the elevators not working?” he grunted, catching his breath. “Oh well, this is also good exercise for me.”

Ken searched the area where Alastor directed him, but he couldn’t spot the woman. He walked toward the window, then turned right and glimpsed Sherry walking. He shouted, “Sherry!” She turned back with a blank expression, but Ken still greeted her with a smile as he ran towards her. “Where are you going?”

“Just walking, catching some fresh air,” Sherry replied.

“Well, it’s good to get some air, but it is eight o’clock in the morning, and our patient needs to eat,” Ken said.

“I’m fine,” Sherry said, but her tummy growled before she could finish her sentence.

“Well, your tummy doesn’t look fine. Come on,” Ken said as he grabbed her hands.

Sherry paused, and Ken asked, “Is it about Al? Did he say something stupid to you?”

“No,” Sherry replied.

“Don’t take what Al said seriously. I mean, the guy eats pizza and burgers for dinner. Weird, isn’t it? Now, let’s go. It’s not good to eat cold food.”

“Alright,” Sherry agreed.

They sat down at the wooden table, which was full of food of varying standards. Ken sat beside Sherry, and Tin sat on her left, still eating dessert. Linda grunted at Tin and said, “Tin, did you know that eating too many sweets can lead to obesity, heart failure, early high blood pressure, and tonsillitis?”

“Yeah, yeah. Alright, I’ll eat something different. I just want to enjoy this while we’re still here because I don’t know if I’ll be sent to some random place or forest by the directors.” Tin replied.

Tin stopped eating dessert and grabbed a bowl of salad, gesturing to Sherry if she wanted to try it. Sherry shook her head. Ken was enjoying the pasta, while Alastor was eating a piece of bread.

“Hey, try this,” Ken said as he took a portion of pasta and fried meat and served it to Sherry’s plate.

Alastor looked at them and asked Linda, “Is it alright if Sherry eats this type of food?”

“Don’t worry, her digestive system is still intact, which means she can still eat as long as she doesn’t inhale nitrous sulphur. If that happens, she’ll explode,” Linda joked.

Everyone stared at Linda with an unexplainable reaction.

“Relax, I’m just kidding,” Linda said as she sipped her coffee and read a magazine.

Ken bit into the chicken wings and then the pasta, saying, “Mmm, this is good. Who cooked this?”

“That would be me.” Tin claimed proudly.

“You?!” Ken exclaimed in surprise. “The woman I know who loves to carry guns when going on missions and thinks about nothing but shooting range or cleansing guns?”

“Hey!” Tin yelled. “I know how to cook, dumbass. Before I got out of the Haven, I was taught different things.”

“This can’t be happening. You of all people?” Ken said and then stopped to act. “Ugh, guys, don’t eat it. There’s poison. Ow! Cut it off, cut it off!” he shouted as Tin punched him and pinched his ears. “I’m just being silly,” he added.

“At least you could have appreciated my work before tripping me. And if I did poison you, I would make sure that you would die instantly,” Tin said.

Alastor and Linda didn’t mind the commotion and continued eating quietly.

Ken fought back by pinching Tin’s cheek, but she countered it by slapping him. In the heat of the moment, they weren’t cautious enough and accidentally hit the bowl of pasta, sending it flying towards the man they both agreed not to mess with. As they continued with their fight, they felt a heavy ambiance. His cold glances crept them out, and they felt a chilly sensation all through their bodies.

Alastor was glaring at them with utter annoyance as they disturbed his gracious breakfast. “Heh-heh, I kinda slipped out - Eeeh,” Ken stuttered, but their squeals were cut short by Alastor’s cold glance creeping down their spines.

“Sorry,” Tin uttered, avoiding his gaze. “Linda,” Ken mumbled, but she pretended not to hear, avoiding their eyes.

A few minutes later, Alastor was smiling, his clothes cleaned up, and now eating.

“We’re so sorry,” Ken and Tin said in unison.

“Nah, don’t worry about it anymore. It’s in the past; let’s forget about it. After all, you’re gonna take my duties, right?” They sighed; the chores that Alastor was supposed to do were now passed onto them, a burden they had to carry because of the mistake they had made.

Tin had tried to raise her voice, but she had stopped when she looked at Alastor’s eyes and then at his grin stretching ear to ear. “Oh, shit,” she spat.

“Any problems?” Alastor asked.

Ken thought to himself, “How can we say that there’s a problem when you’re grinning at us like that?”

Their thoughts floated out of the environment, but Alastor snapped them out of it.

“Hey, you alright?” Alastor asked.

“Huh? Yeah-yeah, we’re cool.” Ken looked at her. “We’re cool, right, Tin?”

“Ah, yes-yes, I’m cool with it,” Tin responded. “Good.”

They continued eating in silence until they were finished. Ken then asked Sherry, “So, Sherry, how do you feel? Does your head still hurt?”

“No, I feel light these days, though my memory…”

“Alright, who agrees that we should go out and help her bring her memories back?”

Everyone stared at him.

“Seriously?” Tin said. Her eyes are full of judgement.

“That’s not a good idea,” Alastor added.

“Why not?” Ken asked.

“Dude, half-human, remember?” Tin had frankly. “No offense.”

“We’re the Glade; surely no one would suspect if we chose clothes for her undercover, right?”

“It’s too risky,” Alastor retorted. “You’re just compromising our security.”

“Hm, maybe if you shut your mouth and calm down. We’ll go undercover,” Ken replied.

Alastor sighed in disappointment, as had Linda.

“Look, I know you just want to help, but it’s too risky,” Linda said. ”Let’s not forget they might recognize her.”

“Fine,” Ken grunted as they continued eating.

Sherry noticed a change in his demeanor and contemplated the situation. “I understand. Don’t worry, there are many ways to regain my lost memories.”

After they finished their meal, they all went their separate ways. Ken was left to do the dishes, Tin went to the underground basement in the practice shooting area, Alastor watched TV in his room, and Linda was in the lounge reading a book. Sherry attempted to help Ken, but he stopped her.

“Sherry, you don’t have to help me. Besides, it’s my turn to wash the dishes.”

“I want to help. After all, you saved me.”

“You don’t have to thank me. To be honest, there were others like you, but I couldn’t save them. I feel responsible for their deaths. It’s my decision, but still…”

Ken looked down at the plate he was holding, and Sherry sympathized.

“You don’t have to feel bad about it.”

“But it’s still wrong.”

“I don’t think you made the wrong decision. If you could save them, how do you think they would react seeing themselves, like me?”

“But you didn’t break down. I guess you were a tough cookie before you lost your memories.”

Sherry chuckled. “I didn’t break down because I don’t have any memories. Without them, my emotions wouldn’t matter.”

Ken thought deeply and continued washing the dishes. “You seem calm about it. Aren’t you worried if someone is looking for you?”

“I’m not worried because I don’t think things would go back to normal if they saw me like this.”

“Family, eh? Maybe they would still accept you even though you’re like that.”

“It’s not that simple. I can’t show myself to them if those people who kidnapped me are still looking for me.”

He glanced at her, then returned his attention to the dishwashing. “Even though your memory is gone, your attitude may be the same as before.”

“Do you think so?” Sherry asked.

“Yeah.”

After he washed the dishes, Ken grabbed two cans of orange juice and threw one to Sherry. “You work for someone, right? This organization you called Glade? What do you think will happen to me after this is all over?”

Ken looked down. “I don’t know, but I’ll try my best to help you.”

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

\*\*\*

It was just like any other day with families enjoying an outing, peers drinking, and couples strolling while gazing at the sunset. Vendors were selling lucky charms, and staff from various offices were hanging lanterns to celebrate the lantern festival. Suddenly, a loud explosion disrupted the tranquillity of the day. Alastor and Ken were out doing some grocery shopping when a robbery occurred on 13th Avenue, just past the grand mall. Nearby police spotted the incident and called for backup using his walky-talky. As they got passed by in a safe distance, the frightened screams rang loud, evenly surpassing the cop’s siren. The establishment behind was wrecked, the scattering of bricks, shards of glass, and several appliances lay upon the street. Plumes of thick black smoke from the building’s ceiling began to soar and bleached the sky.

The police officers guided the people to hide in safety in a state of panic. Ken watched in awe as the officer exchanged shots with the robbers. Eventually, they have to move away, but enough for them to make out what was transpiring ahead of them.

“Should we help?” Ken asked Alastor.

“Are you serious?” Alastor responded without looking back.

“So, that’s a no?” Ken questioned.

“Obviously,” Alastor said, turning away to walk, but Ken continued to stare at the police officer.

A loud siren blared, ringing in everyone’s ears. Ken pointed to the top of the building, and they saw black mechanical robots dropping from the sky. The robots encircled the robbers, warning them in a mechanical tone, “Surrender your firearms, for you have violated the law in Article 43 under the institution. You are hereby…”

Alastor paused and looked on in amazement as the automated bots held out a new type of weapon. One of the robbers was still persistent and threw a bomb at the talking robot, but it didn’t go well as a shot came through the smoldering smoke and hit him in the knee. Another gunshot followed it, aiming for the other robber’s knee, which immobilized them both. The human police officers began to gather around the suspects as soon as they were on their knees and whipped them with batons and a few kicks before locking them up in their vehicles.

“Holy shit, that’s police brutality.” Ken muttered.

It was as bright as the day who was going to win. The rest was history.

\*\*\*

As Ken entered the lounge, he asked, “Did you see what’s on the television?”

Linda, wearing a white dress with a red ribbon in her hair and pink shoes, gently placed her teacup on the tray. “Yes,” she said simply without looking back while reading a magazine. “We might consider that Theo has his eyes on us now.”

“Yeah, no kidding,” Tin said as she descended down the circular staircase. “This time, he’s not letting his guard down.”

“So, what’s the plan?” Ken asked.

“The plan is that we will still lay low,” Linda explained.

“That’s the plan? What happened to figuring out and stopping the bad guy?” Ken questioned.

“We’re not heroes, Ken. We never were. For now, we will wait for further instructions from our superiors,” Alastor said and went to the kitchen. He started to sort out the groceries before putting them into the freezer.

“That means we will do nothing until we receive further notice from our superiors?” Ken asked again.

“That’s right,” Tin confirmed.

“Can I go out?”

Tin looked at Linda, waiting for her response.

“Yes, you can go, but you have to come home early,” Linda replied.

Ken beamed, “Okay!”

“But don’t do anything foolish,” Linda warned.

“You can count on me,” Ken replied, leaving with a grin on his face.

“You’ll regret telling him that,” Alastor quipped as he walked by.

\*\*\*

Later that evening, Ken visited Sherry in her room. He knocked twice and felt the doorknob turn. He entered and saw that Sherry looked tired. She was watching television.

“Is this a bad time? Sorry,” Ken apologized.

Sherry weakly smiled. “No, it’s okay…” She motioned for Ken to come in. “What can I do for you?”

Ken hesitated for a moment, then asked, “Um, do you want to…?”

“Do what?” Her gentle voice made Ken blush.

“Uh, do you want to go out?”

“Where?”

“Outside. Today is the lantern festival.”

“Oh. About that…”

“Don’t worry about it,” Ken reassured her. “…It won’t take long, and we don’t have any missions until we receive further instructions from our supervisor.”

“What about Al?”

“Al-Al-Al, are you afraid of him?”

She didn’t answer, but her expression revealed the truth.

“Come on, it’ll be fun. Just dress to cover your machine parts.”

“Don’t tell me you don’t miss going out?”

“I lost my memory, remember? I have no reason to miss it.”

“Right, I know that. But that’s why we should go out. Maybe something will trigger your memories.”

She hesitated for a moment, considering whether to trust Ken. She was spiraling and in debt, not just to Ken, but to others who gave her shelter. She couldn’t decide.

“I know you don’t want to be seen like this, but I promise we’ll just go out to have some fun and maybe… just maybe your memories will come back a little.”

“Fine,” she relented, feeling like she has no other choice with Ken’s persistent nagging. “But if anything goes wrong, we leave, okay?”

“Okay, I’m fine with that.”

A few minutes later, Ken shivered as a gust of cold wind passed by. “So freaking cold.” He pulled up his hoodie to cover his head. Sherry didn’t feel anything, but she still had to wear clothes that would conceal her metallic arm. She wore black gloves, a blue hoodie jacket, and black boots.

“Maybe it’s because winter is approaching,” Ken said.

“Is that so?” Sherry replied.

The two of them strolled across the plaza, where a gigantic lantern floated, tethered by ropes. Crowds of people gathered, enjoying the vendor’s stands.

“You want something to eat?” Ken asked.

“Uh, sure,” Sherry replied.

They found themselves standing outside a food stand. As they entered, the aroma of the cooking food filled their noses. Ken’s eyes scanned the area, and he noticed the chef who was serving a dish. I gently covered the fried meat in soy sauce.

Sherry held Ken’s arm and guided him to a corner table. Ken picked up the menu and noticed that Sherry seemed uncomfortable. “Hey, relax. I’m right here,” he reassured her. She nodded.

“Um, you go first,” Sherry said, eyeing the unfamiliar menu.

Ken perused the menu before looking up at Sherry. “How about duck flail and cordon meat?”

“I’ll just go with that too.”

“Are you sure? These are spicy ones that might make you throw up.”

“Trust me, I can handle it.”

“Okay,” Ken said as he stood up and proceeded to the chef to place their order.

After a few minutes, the food was served, and the two of them began to dig in. Ken’s face was burning red due to the spicy meal, while Sherry struggled to handle the heat. “Whoa, this is hot,” she said as she drank water.

“I told you,” Ken said, chuckling.

Ken finished his food, while Sherry observed him, curious about how he could handle such spiciness. “You should get an award for being the king of spiciness,” she remarked.

“You think so?”

“Yeah, I can’t imagine how your gut handles it.”

“Ha! I’m used to it. There’s this time in the Glade when my handler brought me on one of his missions, and we got stuck in enemy territory. We have to blend in, so we challenged some ass grunt to an eating contest. My handler sold that match because he’s not well, but because of that, we got caught and had to face the whole army.”

“Wow, I can’t believe there could be an ass in the Glade.”

“You bet on it. They’re always trying to pick a fight while I’m in the Glade.”

Sherry smiled as Ken continued to talk about his past. The sound of fireworks interrupted their conversation exploding outside. “Let’s go,” Ken said as he grabbed her hand.

As they stepped outside, they witnessed the continuous raining colours of fireworks. The fireworks end as a single lantern flows in the sky, indicating that it already started as other lanterns follow. It was a splendid display.

 “Whoa,” Ken said in amazement.

The beautiful scenery transfixed Sherry, and a certain image of a young girl flashed in her mind.

“Sherry, yoo-hoo,” Ken called out.

Sherry snapped out of her reverie, shaking her head.

“Did the food make you want to throw up?” Ken asked, grinning.

“Uh, sorry, I kind of spaced out.”

“How about we go to the market, maybe we can find something awesome there.”

\*\*\*

Back at the headquarters, in Tin’s room, she was browsing on her laptop, using facial recognition software to hack into the government’s private network files.

“Did you find her identity?” Alastor asked.

“Not yet. I’ve been using facial recognition, but I’ve hit a dead end.”

“They probably wiped out every piece of data about the individuals they kidnapped.”

“This is going to be tough.”

“Yeah, no kidding,” Tin replied.

“I mean, I’ve looked at every profile of these individuals, yet still no Sherry.”

“Why didn’t you just look into the memory device?” Alastor asked.

Tin retorted, “Well, you see, I might crack some device system or debunk some data, but that doesn’t mean I’m a damn genius about it. This thing is designed with a multi-layered security system. Every section of it is encrypted by complex codes. So before you go yada-yada about cracking this damn memory device, you should check my background first,” almost yelling at Alastor.

“Err, I think I should rest now. You can leave that work for later,” Alastor said.

“Good. For quite some time, it looks like I’m the only one who’s working at this,” Tin sighed.

As Alastor left, he saw Linda standing before the window looking at the fireworks display.

“I thought you were busy doing kinky business,” she joked. Alastor grunted.

“Do you mind your own business?” Alastor said to her, and the lanterns came out for the show, floating up to the sky.

“Do you still imagine yourself living a normal life?” Linda asked, breaking the silence.

“Why would you think that?” Alastor replied.

“Because you always lurk in the corner, like a hollow.”

Alastor smirked, “No, I never think of having that.”

Linda wondered, “I kind of wonder what a normal life could be, not living for killing.”

Alastor shook his hands dismissively.

“You never want to have that kind of life?” Linda asked.

“Like I said, no. Even if I want to have a normal life, what would I become? I have no family to live for. Plus, this is the only thing I can do for a living.” Alastor stretched his neck, and his arms protruded with bones crackling.

Linda’s eyes gently laid at his nakedness. She observed his eyes as if she was reading him. “You’re sad,” she remarked.

“What?” Alastor asked.

“Nothing,” Linda avoided his strict eyes.

“Okay, I’m gonna head back to my room,” Alastor said.

“I don’t think you should go to sleep right now,” Linda warned.

“What are you talking about?” Alastor asked.

“Ken and Sherry went outside. They haven’t returned yet.”

\*\*\*

Sherry and Jake were discussing the lucky charm bracelet with a lantern attached to it when Sherry bumped into a man in a tuxedo.

“Excuse you,” he said.

“Oh, sorry. I wasn’t paying attention,” Sherry apologized. For a split second, when the man walked away, Sherry’s pace was disturbed by a vision of his face. It was not detailed, but her gut told her that he was not one of the good guys. She grabbed Ken’s arm, pulling him away. This raised concern for him.

“You know him?” he whispered. The man turned his back to them, with confused faces lashing their backs.

When she felt that they had gone far enough, she stopped in her tracks. “What the hell happened back there?” she asked breathlessly.

“I don’t know that guy. I’m sure I’ve met him somewhere,” Sherry replied, her voice rattling with fear.

“Hey, how about we go home?” Ken suggested.

“Well, that’s not my preference,” a voice called out of nowhere.

“Who are you?” Ken demanded.

“I’m supposed to be the one who’s asking,” the stranger replied, his eyes fixed on Sherry. “You, however, I’ve seen before. You’re that girl. I thought you died in the explosion.”

“Well, unfortunately for you, she survived,” Ken retorted, pulling Sherry back towards him. “She’s not going anywhere, numb-nut. You have to get through me first.”

“I don’t intend to make this easy,” the stranger replied, stepping forward.

Ken prepared himself, but he was surprised when Alastor suddenly appeared and delivered a round kick to the enemy’s head. The enemy crashed into a concrete wall, his eyes shutting as he lost consciousness.

“We need to get out of here,” Alastor said, sweating and panicking. “You should’ve listened to me. You have no idea how many rats are roaming around here.”

“Yeah, well, maybe you shouldn’t have let us stick around in there, not finding any solution to our problem,” Sherry shot back.

“You’re the problem here, doofus. We should’ve waited for instructions from our supervisor before we went out clueless about what we should do next,” Alastor argued.

“I’m just taking the initiative here. Bringing back her memory might help us,” Sherry insisted.

“That’s just an excuse to roam around like an open casket,” Alastor countered.

Alastor’s mobile device pinged, and he pulled it out from his dark trench coat. “Well, thanks to you, we’ve got enemies closing in. We need to get out of here now!”

“Come on, Sherry,” Ken groaned, pulling her arm. Her memory was flashing back to her, taking over her consciousness.

“Hey, we need to get out of here,” he said urgently.

“Okay,” Sherry replied, snapping out of her daze.

Ken held onto Sherry’s arm as they walked. The three of them made their way through the bustling crowd. Alastor suddenly stopped, causing the other two to do the same.

“Ow!” a young girl cried out as she bumped into Sherry.

Sherry pulled back her arm and helped the child, picking up her teddy bear.

“Were you okay?” she asked as she handed over the toy. The young lady was hobbling, her knee scraped.

“Let me take a look.”

“We don’t have time, Sherry,” Ken said.

“Just wait.”

Sherry pulled out a white cloth and wrapped the wound.

“Here you go.”

When the young girl raised her head, their eyes met. A familiar face flashed, and the young girl couldn’t take her eyes off Sherry.

“Sherry?” she asked out of nowhere.

“You know me?”

Ken pulled her away from the child amid the crowd. Sherry struggled to free herself from Ken’s grip. “Let me go!”

“I know you have a lot of questions, but we need to go now!”

“She knows who I am. We need to get her back.”

“And then what? We have enemies on our back. She might be in danger if we take her with us.”

Thinking it through, Sherry couldn’t agree more with Ken.

“That’s what I thought.”

They met at a narrow alley, far enough to run away from the enemies.

“How many times do I have to tell you to stick with me?” an annoyed voice spoke out.

“Yeah, well, spare us with the nagging parents’ lecture-style, Al.”

“We’ll enter that tunnel over there. In the meantime, use this to our advantage.” Alastor handed out three night-vision goggles.

“Where the hell did you hide these? I actually don’t want to know the answer.”

The three of them jumped off the bridge and entered the tunnel.

Ken couldn’t help but ask, “Why the tunnel?”

“If the enemy enters here, we would have the advantage against them.”

“Because of the darkness, right?”

Alastor nodded.

They could see the end of the tunnel, with only the dim light of the moon seeping through the cracks of the ceiling. Oblivious, someone was already eyeing and waiting for them. When they finally reached the end of the tunnel, Alastor suddenly blocked Ken, he hinted to them to stop. His guts told him that there’s something wrong and with that, he picked up a rock, and threw it on the ground aimlessly, it bounced at the end of the tunnel when at a certain point it landed, there was an explosion.

“Trap.” Alastor muttered.

\*\*\*

Gary observed outside the tunnel, hidden in a compartment. He saw a rock bouncing towards the trap, and exploded.

“Well, trap 1 failed guys. Shall we use trap number 2?”

Lance responded through a transmission device, “Affirmative,”

An explosion occurred on the other side of the tunnel, leaving them with no choice but to run outside.

“Trap number 2 is a success. So, tell me, Lance. What’s trap number 3?” Gary asked.

Ina then jumped out and landed in front of Ken.

Ken exclaimed, “What in the actual fuck?”

Ina already made a huge leap. She punched him in the gut and attempted another kick, but Alastor caught her leg and threw her to the ground. Ken groaned. Alastor pulled out his sword hidden under his coat to attack her, but a baton came flying towards him, which he caught and threw back to Lance.

Sherry tended to Ken and realized how useless she is. Ken saw her frustrated eyes and reassured her with a smile.

Lance then pulled out another baton and attacked Alastor with all his might. The two furiously exchanged blows, and Alastor’s sword scraped Lance’s skin through the coat. Lance shielded the attack and kicked Alastor in the gut. Alastor’s sword fell, leaving him with only his hands to protect him. He caught Lance’s arm and turned its bones around, and the two exchanged hits on their faces. Ina then stood up next to Lance and Alastor asked Ken for help. They were severely outmatched.

Ken grunted as he stood up from receiving a bat from Ina and said, “We’re kinda screwed, aren’t we?”

Lance and Ina then pulled out an earplug and put it in their ears.

Gary asked, “I thought you weren’t going to use plan number 4.”

Lance responded, “Yeah, well, I changed my mind,” and Gary pressed the button. Four sirens planted outside the tunnel produced a high-pitched sound, deafening everyone, excluding the agents of Canary.

Everyone was on their knees except for Ken, who tried to run towards Lance, but he punched him. With Ina’s help, they kicked Ken, and he flew back to the crumbled tunnel, losing consciousness as he was drowned by the debris. Sherry and Alastor also lost consciousness at the last second.

\*\*\*

Linda ran clueless in search of her gang at midnight. She found herself at the end of a crumbled tunnel and muttered, “Oh, crap.” Linda went around and followed the end of the tunnel. He found Ken lying on the ground, battered.

“What the hell happened?” she asked.

“Canaries happened,” Ken replied, he was barely breathing properly. He lost consciousness. With that, Linda’s eyes widened.

At the end of the night, the last lantern flew in the sky, and the howl of a hound was the only life in the silent twilight.

\*\*\*

He felt the gentle wind enter the cracked walls. Bashful frostbite crept on his flesh wounds. Though he clung to mindfulness, his wounds remained untreated, and he couldn’t imagine overcoming the temptation of drowsiness. He raised his head to observe the room. The place looked old, the wooden walls could be easily knocked, and the moss spewing from the corner indicated that he was in a solitary place. The familiar foul smell of moss and smoke came to wrap his nostril which drew his head from his drench jaws.

The blood flowing out of his wounds. It sting a little, but it was nothing new to him. He was subjected to several simulations; one of them includes pain tolerance. Many things were told to him by his superiors back in the Glade. Some of them promised to help him get out of there or to give him money if he passed the test. However, the biggest lie he ever heard was that ‘This won’t hurt, it will be easy.’

It was the time of the last year of their training. Once he finished his hand-to-hand combat training, his superior along with twenty of his comrades were ordered to take a special test. He thought that this *special test* she was saying will be difficult like the previous ones, where you will have to improvise a bomb or solve a puzzle to get the key before they will get drowned or infiltrate a dungeon made by higher levels without getting caught. However, his expectation had betrayed him. They were held inside a white room, and hours passed without anything happening. Suspicion, discontentment, and speculation filled the room. Hours passed, and silence took its place. It was then, eeriness fell onto his shoulders when. In an instant, the room was filled with haze. They were taken on a fleeting vision into madness that cascaded their sanity. They were put under psychological and physiological torture. The trainees were shown their greatest nightmares, experiencing what it felt like to be burned alive, fell from an inconceivable height, and stung by a hundred, maybe a thousand needles. Few recovered after that test, and others were listed in the medic station. Only God knows when they will recover. Him, on the other hand, recovered in two weeks and was the second one to break into it. He wondered who was able to recover ahead of him, but that information was concealed to them, so there is no way to learn the name.

It was about time.

When he was about to fall asleep, the door opened. A man greeted Alastor with a smile. His hair looked so funny, shaggy style is way out of date.

“So, do you know who they’re working for?” the man asked.

“I don’t know. I just found them hanging around with one of the escapees,” he replied.

“Okay, there’s only one way to get the information,” the man chuckled. “Okay boys, do it!” he shouted, ordering the grunts to do the dirty job.

After Alastor insulted him with every profane word that the dictionary could contain and even the creative new ones, Lance came close to him and whispered, “It wasn’t personal. We have a lot of dirty jobs we must do for this country.”

“Screw you,” Alastor spat with blood on his face.

As Lance stepped outside, a tall man with a knife took over the interrogation and lashed at his chest. Alastor grimaced, but it was nothing he couldn’t stand.

“I see you’re a tough guy,” the man said, placing the knife on the table. He wore black rubber gloves and pulled out two flyers with a giant battery.

He smirked, “This is going to get dirtier if you don’t tell us who you’re working for.”

“Do your worst,” Alastor said, as if he was inviting him to try.

\*\*\*

Later outside, when Lance and the Hoarder went out, Lance asked him, “What are you planning to do with that guy?”

“Well, as part of our deal, I expect you to know your boundaries, but with the fruit you showed to me, I will be considerate. If you want to win a war, you must know the enemy like the back of your hand. That guy, inside there, I’m certain he’s working for an organization, a big one.”

“Ah-huh. What about the girl?”

“Ah, about her. I’m going to sell her at the upcoming auction.”

“What?” Lance couldn’t believe what he just heard. It was rational to think that the girl might be of use to him. Maybe he could hire a scientist to investigate her bio-components. But to sell her wasn’t what he expected.

“Let’s say it's good old-fashioned revenge. Theo, the asshole, once threatened me that he would bring down my enterprise if I didn’t cooperate with him.”

“So, you will plot fake information and go around until he bites your trap?”

“Yes,” the Hoarder said, grinning naughtily. “What about you? How did you find those mercenaries?”

“Ah, well, we just followed our hunch that Theo’s men are also roaming the area to find the kids. It’s easy enough to hack their radio system, so we followed their pattern while doing our research.”

“I’m impressed. You know your toys, mate. Maybe we should work together often.”

“No, this will be the last time. A deal is a deal. Now, give me the files.”

“As a man of my word, I will comply rightfully,” the Hoarder said, handing over a box full of folders and a small storage disk locked in a plastic cover.

“As a token of friendship, I added some files you might be interested in - records of corrupt officials, conspiring, and acts of negligence.”

Later, Gary and Ina met him in a graveyard.

“Is that it?” Ina asked, looking at the box.

“Yes.”

“I hope he’s not lying. It would be a waste of time if he is,” Gary said skeptically.

\*\*\*

The sun settled on the horizon as its ray of light touched the city. A flock of birds landed at the rooftop of the building, squawking. Ken leaned his back against the wall, looking down at the casual scenery of normal people making their way to their respective world. He wished he could have a day like them. Ken’s rib stung again, and his eyes narrowed as the sun’s rays cantered on his vision. He winced and endured for seconds before he closed the curtains and went back to sleep, but his conscience was bugging him. He knew that taking an important asset like Sherry outside was a compromising thing to do, yet he still did it, and now they were messed up.

Ken felt heavy from the thorough mending of his wound on his stomach and arm that was wrapped with bandages. He had bruises, cuts, and stitches on his neck.

When he heard the tilting doorknob, he turned his back against it and faced the wall. Linda brought in a tray with soup, water, and medicines and accidentally slammed the door inward. The smell of the food lingered in the air, reaching Ken’s nose, and his stomach began to growl.

She noticed that he was pretending to be asleep and said, “You know moping around isn’t going to help. You need to eat something.”

“I’m not moping,” Ken tiredly replied. He opened his eyes.

Linda raised her brow as she sat down. “Then what do you call all of that pretending to be…?”

“I’m not pretending. I’m resting. Those guys beat the crap out of me.”

“If you weren’t such a brat, then it wouldn’t go down like this,” Linda sighed. “There’s no use blaming anyone right now. Look, all I asked is for you to recover. Please eat something while Tim and I go out and find out more about these guys.”

\*\*\*

The sharp wind touching Alastor’s wound made it much worse than he could have imagined, it was searing with pain, but his eyes didn’t seem to care at all. His wound isn’t going to heal soon, as he could tell by the non-stop bleeding on his forearm and the lashes on his torso. The only light that provided his unbearable view was the cracks of bricks at his back. Provided that the strong ray of light meant it was daytime. He couldn’t recall how many days had passed since he arrived, whether it was three, seven, or two whole weeks. The only thing that kept revolving in his mind was when he was going to escape. No matter what simulations he could think of, nothing seemed to work. He had no way of removing the chains without breaking a part of his arms or legs, and even if he did, he might face the whole gang waiting outside, putting him in a perilous position.

Alastor was unsure when his team would be able to daringly save him. It was unlikely that they would find him anytime soon, and he would consider himself lucky if they could save him at the right time. But those scenarios were impossible to happen. Judging by the exterior of the place, the enemy made sure that they were in an isolated area, suggesting that people don't communicate with conventional mobile phones, he could tell that they have transmitter jammers. However, there was one thing that they could use to communicate: a walkie-talkie that used radio waves and didn’t require a satellite.

He turned at once when he heard the door creaking open. What lies behind was an astonishing individual that could be considered rare to see, an elf; they were considered one of the rarest creatures that could be hardly seen in a lifetime, because they close the window of their kingdom to the world of humans, hidden in the woods ever since two-hundred years ago. He bet that she is much older than what beauty could be seen.

Considering her clothes, he already knew why she was here, a slave for sale. She wore such ragged clothes, that it could only hide its precious parts. She brought a beaker that filled water and a towel hanging on her shoulder, with the bandages held by her fellow slaves.

“I thought elves were not supposed to stray out in the forest.”

The elf didn’t reply, her face showed no indication of any kind of reaction. Not at all.

“Not talkative, eh?” Alastor said, “Hm. Let me guess. You were captured while you strayed from your home or there’s some cunning man bested out of you?”

Still, no response. She responded only the pulping wet cloth met his wounds, and the dirt cleansed off. The other slaves began to put on bandages. He flinched as the wound's sting was caused by the covering of the wound.

“You mind being careful?” Alastor said. Just like her, the boy didn’t respond. Suggesting their attitude there is no way he could be sure that they will help him. He didn’t realize the reason behind the callous act, until now. He observed their faces, no trace of hope nor any kind of volition to fight back, their soulless eyes tell it all. Still, he hadn’t lost hope yet. “If you release me from these chains, I will help you and free the other slaves.”

“It’s no use. The Hoarder would kill them if we ran out.” The boy said pulling a stool then stepping on top of it to reach and clean his face.

“I promise you; I will save them.”

“No point in struggling, young man.” Finally, the elf responded. She didn’t bother looking into his eyes.

“I hate to break it to you but, I’m a mercenary, I can help you even without paying me. Free.”

“You have no idea who you are dealing with.”

“A band of cock heads?”

“You may jest but eventually you won’t be seeing the daylight anymore.”

When the elf and the other slaves finished doing their job, they began to depart reaching the wooden door.

“What do you mean by that?” Alastor asked. The elf-shot him with a blank look. “What will they do to me?”

There was no response as the guard called them out.

“Bloody hell.”

\*\*\*

On top of a hill, staring below where a small village settled, Lance stopped from trekking, gasping for air. Overlooking at the village a few miles away from Kayon City, five people came out from the semi-trailer truck parked in front of the inn, they went in the back unlocking it. They joked and laughed then heaved the boxes, carrying it inside the inn.

The village was considerably small, and vulnerable in some ways, but there are several officers and adventurers staying in. It was more like a clustered, disconsolate shack where the houses were situated away from the muddy square. The fountain was no longer bearable to see. The way the houses were spread out made it seem like a big one. The last time he visited there alone, it was a dusty and annoying place. It’s even more annoying when they come across a few straggling patrons out of the bar, yelling and shouting as though they own the street.

The highway was even less desirable to travel on because the rain caused it to become muddy. Although the rain already stopped, the wind was still blowing fiercely, frightening him to the bone. Gary sneezed and wrapped himself up in his maroon scarf. Lance’s shoulders tightened as another chilling gust of wind blasted on their faces. Ina, on the other hand, seemed unaffected and she was somewhat amused by their change of attire. Normally, Lance wouldn’t allow them to not wear their proud uniforms as members of the Canary, but time requires them to adapt in casual styles.

Ina gazed at Lance’s back. She picked up a dried leaf that landed on his brown jacket. Lance didn’t mind and strode forward, his black boots smudged by the mud.

“So, what could the Kelby Hives be doing in this place?” Ina asked.

Lance’s tireless eyes remained forward. The afternoon walk was testing the endurance of his throat. “If the Hoarder is correct, this is where the Kelby Hives temporarily hide their shipments before spreading out across the region.”

“Dude, do you think it’s a good idea to operate without the mayor’s permission? I mean, he’s going to kill us if he finds out about this,” Gary said.

Lance took a deep breath. Unknown to Gary, Lance already told the mayor about their knowledge of Kelby Hives’ illegal activities. Instead of taking action, the mayor reprimanded them and claimed that Kelby Hives had a base in the village for transportation that there wasn’t need to investigate further. That was obviously a lie. Why would a multi-billionaire like Theo waste his time on trivial business? The mayor even went as far as to say that they shouldn’t meddle with it and that they should rest assured that everything was fine. That was alarming enough. The mayor’s behaviour was out of ordinary and even so when he restricted people for some time from entering the place. He added that Theo provided military strength to the city. To hell with that pig, corrupted by Theo’s sweet talks. The officials were corrupted, and even the citizens didn’t realize what was going on in the city anymore.

“The city is rotten at its core. We must act on our own, with or without their assistance. After all, they’re not our superiors, so there’s no need to worry about it,” Lance said through gritted teeth.

Gary sighed. “I hope you’re right.”

They looked up at the sky, and for a second, there was a drop. A small raindrop wet Lance’s face, and then another until it fell hard onto the field.

They entered the pub, escaping the biting, cold wind as they heaved the door shut. Inside, the smell of ale seemed to hang in the air like mist. There were bloody drunk bastards arguing in the far corner, but to Lance and his companions, it was all rubbish and insensible to think about.

Other people minded their own business, hunching over their tankards, talking in low voices while the cold evening away with whispers and gossip. Some were in group’s playing cards, rattling the dice with cups, and laughing and joking. They banged their tankards, demanding more ale. The barmaid appeared from the back room, bringing another round ale. Lance’s eyes roamed around the room and fell on the far corner where he heard arguing. He already knew who they were as he recognized their faces from the files that the Hoarder gave to him.

All were minding their own business until Gary interrupted them stomping on the ground, trying to get rid of the mud in his boots. The loud chatter in the pub hushed, turning into a low murmur. Ina shot him a look. “What?” he asked. Since they were on an undercover mission, the best way to maintain their secret identity was to not attract any kind of attention, and Gary just blew it.

He brushed his brown hair, plastered down by the rain. The entire gang looked wet, but the men’s eyes didn’t linger on Gary long enough as they saw the redheaded Ina. They moved across the room, their boots clicking on the wooden floor. A man whistled, but Ina didn’t mind it. She must have realized that even if Gary hadn’t attracted attention, she would somehow attract attention, specifically from men. Her hand reflexively shoved away the hand from a man aiming to touch her buttocks.

Considering that some men are perverts, her eyes surveyed the pub, letting them know that she was not intimidated by her surroundings. Some licked their lips; others didn’t bother anymore to study the woman, though some watchful eyes still regarded her, amused by her bewitching beauty. She took it all in and continued to move to the counter where people made their way to sit on wooden stools, arms resting on the serving board. The barmaid walked over, her lips pursed, her hands reflexively went to her hips, and her chest wiggled as she looked at Lance. Ina’s brows arched.

“Good evening,” she greeted. “What can I do for you?”

“You have anything warm for us to eat?” Lance asked.

“Lucky you, there is. We already started to cook, though it would take some time to prepare.”

“We can wait. Could you get me some ale?” Lance asked.

“Me too,” Ina added. Lance looked at her, she nodded, her eyes telling him that she wouldn’t drink too much. Gary sneezed for the second time.

It took three minutes when the barmaid returned with soup and a lump of fried meat sizzling hot with chili toppings. The three started to eat. Ina was enjoying the moment of silence when a man shoved the guy sitting beside her. “Good evening, ma’am. I believe you’re not here as a tourist, are you? Well, if you are, then I assure you that you would find yourself carved in my heart.” His breath stank of ale. Ina didn’t mind the man sitting at her right.

“I see,” Ina’s voice was steely.

“May I know your name?” He asked again.

She didn’t respond this time. “Did my charm best you that even a single word won’t come out caused by an uncontrollable throbbing heart?”

“No,” she said.

“Come on. I’m sure it caught your heart,” he said. “Look, you have to consider it. I’m handsome; you’re beautiful. Think of the possibilities.”

She turned, her face was deadpan at first and she smiled, but inside her mind she was stabbing him. Her smile was like that of an angel, at least in his eyes, but then she replied, “I have a hand, and you have a face. Think of the possibilities.” Hearing her response, he couldn’t help but frown and she added, “You must consider it.”

Gary almost choked and burst out laughing, not because he found the drunkard’s choice of words amusing, but he could imagine how Ina would tear him apart if he’d do that out of her work. Lance ignored the situation, he was confident that she would handle it. For a moment, Gary nearly puked, but he managed to stop himself and regain his breath. Meanwhile, the men behind them were laughing even harder. Ina could hear them saying that the guy’s pick-up lines were off the charts for the redheaded gal. He was oblivious to the surroundings, not realizing the shift in atmosphere as a man stepped up and sat alongside him. It turned out to be his boss.

“I’m very sorry if this guy interrupts your evening.”

The man who was bugging them received a hard slap and fell asleep, and his men laughed even louder.

Lance peered and recognized his face. He hit Ina’s knee with his leg, and she understood what it meant.

“It’s alright.” Ina turned around. “I’m kind of used to it. He’s drunk, so I forgive him for forgetting his manners.”

“This bloody bastard is hitting every woman he bumps into. I’m glad you didn’t let yourself get into trouble.”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“So, what business do you guys have here? I saw the first time you entered that you’re not from here. Are you travellers, perhaps?”

“Well, yes,” Lance said.

“We’re actually from a far place and kind of want to be independent of our parents. So, we aim to find a job in Kayon City.”

“Really? What are you guys good at?”

“Well, this girl and I are exceptionally good at computers, and this guy knows auto-mechanics.”

“Oh, I see. But I’m afraid you guys might have a hard time finding a job.”

“Why is that?”

“Companies or any other work you can think of have low demands for employees.”

“Is that so?”

“Crap. Then, how will we be able to make some money? I mean, we can’t go back now that we’ve spent most of our money,” Gary murmured.

The man fell silent, thinking, and then took a deep breath. His mind was telling him that he might regret this decision. “Well, I know of other jobs I can recommend to you if you want. This job is not like the others.”

“And I suppose this is illegal?” Gary said.

“No, no. This is completely legal and safe. Just don’t tell others about your job. It’s quite confidential.”

“Well, if that’s the case then we’re in,” Ina said.

“Alright my name is Port.”

\*\*\*

Gary sank into the sofa, moaning and closed his eyes.

“So, we’re working for them now? I didn’t expect that.”

They were at the inn, resting for the night before heading out to the base of operations in Port the next day. He crossed his feet and moaned over tiredness.

Ina confirmed, “Temporarily, yes. But it doesn’t mean we’re loyal to them. We need to understand how they operate and work, especially in the Vesoga Plain. They use the monsters there to cover up their operations. Gathering information is crucial, and our investigation will likely provide us with broad insights.”

Lance was done drying his hair with his towel and sat down to check his phone. His white hair obscured his vision, but when he brushed it aside, he was startled by Gary’s sudden movement as he put his feet down and slammed his hands on the wooden table; he was fired up unlike before.

“What will we do if we confirm it?” Gary asked.

“We’ll contact HQ and wait for further instructions. We must remain observant in case the situation changes.” Lance said.

Ina added, “Another thing to consider is the information we received from that guy.”

“The Hoarder.” Gary said.

Ina nodded. “Yes, that guy. He gives me the creeps. Anyway, the information he gave us indicates that they’re making biological weapons. We need to gather evidence to present at the trial.”

“Alright, everyone, the discussion is over. We need to get some sleep early, as we have a schedule to follow,” Lance concluded.

They slept properly that night.

\*\*\*

As they set out on their mission, Port sat in the front seat of the truck, wiping his profusely sweating forehead. He opened the right front window and rested his legs on the portable footstool while smoking a cigarette and enjoying the view. His recruits, however, was uncomfortable and opened the side window. The smoke from Port’s cigarette made it difficult for Lance to breathe. He exhaled one last puff before throwing it outside.

To Lance, nature’s intense retaliation was more dangerous than a bullet flying on the battlefield. The sun blazed down through the impending crispy, dry air, and for the newcomers, it might have been surprising to feel its intense heat so early in the day. But for Port, it was no surprise, as they were heading to a savannah field, where the climate was extreme.

In broad daylight, the temperature exceeded forty-three Celsius, which was too hot for normal birds to survive. At night, it was cold like the biting wind from a mountain’s peak. Only monsters could survive in such extreme conditions.

“Have you ever been here before?” Port asked Lance.

“No,” Lance replied, shaking his head. His eyes were ahead and his hands on the steering wheel. “The extreme weather, the monsters lurking around every corner, and the long road to the city make this the only inhabitable place in the world.”

“Do you believe that?” Port inquired.

Lance shook his head again. “Not really. We’re heading straight for the heart of the hell-hole, so that tells me otherwise. What about you?”

“What about me?” Port asked.

“Do you believe that this place is uninhabitable? If your boss was able to pull this off, do you think he could build a city?”

“That’s exactly what I’m trying to say,” Port said. “My boss has no intention of doing that. He’s unlike any person I’ve ever met – cunning, smart, and fearless.”

“Hmm,” Lance said. “Sounds like you admire him.”

Port chuckled. “Cunning and smart, yes. But about being fearless, absolutely not,” he shrugged.

“Why not?” Lance asked.

“A man who knows no fear is a man who knows no boundaries.”

“What does that even mean?” Lance asked, confused.

“You’ll see,” Port replied mysteriously.

As they drove, frequent vibrations could be felt at Port’s waist. His mobile device’s screen was flashing in green. For a moment, he took a long breath and exhaled. They already crossed the woods and were greeted by flashing orange and yellow lights phasing through the crack of the cumulus clouds.

On their left, the view of the forest below their position faded over their speeding vehicle. As they took a right turn, Lance noticed a sandstorm charging on the right across the road they were following. Its gale reached their ears, drowning out the whispering grass and harmonic chirps of the birds.

Their distance was far, but it was enough to conclude that it was massive, and Lance thought it was just a normal phenomenon here, as Port explained to him about the extreme conditions of Vesoga Plain. So, he proceeded, oblivious to the hazardous gale.

Lance was about to speed up, but Port stole the wheels and slammed on the brake. The entire vehicle rocked wildly, the tires were screeching, almost they could hear the rim giving out with a loud grinding against uneven road.

“What the hell?!” Lance was taken aback, rattled as Port swerved the vehicle away from the sandstorm and parked it far away.

“What’s going on?” Lance asked again.

“Observe,” Port said, his eyes focused on the billowing sandstorm.

Lance’s eyes followed Port’s gaze back to the sandstorm. After a few seconds, a large figure beneath the thick sand storming across the barren land roared loudly and deafly. In a certain distance, opposite to its direction, a twenty-foot tall creature like an alligator was drawn out of the forest, its claws brimming under the peak sunlight. Its mouth opened widely as it yawned in relief, and saliva started to drip from its jaws. Its eyes glowed red as it stared at the beast beyond the sandstorm. The monster was touted by many names, but the most notable one was Savanah Bale Lord.

“The monster hiding in the sandstorm is what we called Sand Gloth, and the other one who emerged from the forest is the ‘Savannah Bale Lord.’ Both of them are bad news, shit,” Port explained to his companions.

“Were you sure it’s safe to stay here?” Lance inquired.

“Obviously not, but I suppose we are out of their sight, so we should be fine,” Port replied confidently. He turned back and opened the peephole to check on the situation. Gary, Ina, and the other three comrades were tightening the leash of the boxes.

“Dude, what the hell?!” Gary shouted in distress. “You are the worst driver ever!”

“Calm down, something is happening out there,” Port said.

It was only then that they noticed the two gigantic monsters beginning to brawl. After a long howl as if they were testing each other, they launched into a monster onslaught. They charged at each other, the sharp claws of the Savannah Bale Lord digging deeper as it crawled fast towards its enemy. The sandstorm cover of the Sand Gloth intensified, the surging wind creating a mini shockwave as it bashed against its enemy head-to-head. Lance could feel the sudden heavy atmosphere emitted by their power play. The wind died down, and the monster’s breath could be heard, heavy as their movements.

The two monsters took a step back, making a distance between each other. They stood facing each other, as if testing each other’s stunning visage.

“Is that a fucking Savana Bale lord?” one of Port’s comrades exclaimed in disbelief. “And not just that, Sand Gloth?”

Gary peeked through the hole and saw the two monsters charging towards each other. “We’re gonna die!” he screamed.

They began to pick up their wallets and handed their money to Port.

A smile crept onto Port’s face. Something told him that he was looking forward to this. “You know the drill, boys. No scamming, no pissy losers, and no acting like a douche, alright?”

Just when they thought the fun would begin, their vehicle shook.

“What in the actual—” Lance stopped mid-sentence and looked outside to discover what was happening. A humanoid with blue scales and grey eyes effortlessly jumped and clung onto their vehicle, its blade brimming with light.

Port peered over and caught a glimpse of the rear mirror; he already knew what it was. He pulled Lance’s head back inside, and in that moment, a shimmering blade cut through the air, narrowly missing Lance’s head.

Lance gulped, shaken, and he remained fixated in his position. Port began to count and gave back their money.

“What are you doing?” one of his men asked.

“We can do it next time,” Port said. He took Lance's position. “No time to explain. Hang on tight!”

Their vehicle lurched forward, and they sped off into the distance, leaving the monsters and the humanoid behind.

Ina and Gary looked confused and were about to ask a question when a blade suddenly pierced through the air above them. As the blade was dragged out of the hole it left, Port muttered, “Ah shit. They’re back.”

“What in the world is that?” Lance frantically asked.

“Two words: Murderer Molous.” Lance frantically asked.

Lance shouted, sweating profusely as he processed what he just heard. “What?!”

“That’s right. Don’t pretend to be shocked. I know you guys heard them before,” Port said and laughed.

Ina yelled at him, “This is not the best time to make fun of it!

 “Yeah, yeah, I know.”

As they wheeled across the desert, the tumultuous blast of wind rained sand down on them. The two gigantic monsters showed off their strength. The ‘Savanah Bale Lord’ opened its mouth wide and amassed a ball of fire. When it sent it out, the ball of fire became larger than its original composition, leaving no means for the enemy to escape.

Watching behind the ‘Sand Gloth’, Lance felt helpless as the giant ball of flame came across to them. Their comrades began to pull out their guns and pointed them at the locked door which was the source of the banging.

Ina agitatedly asked, “What the hell are you guys doing?”

“Killing the enemy so that we will secure the item,” Port replied. They began shooting, just enough to scare the monsters away. Looking back at the monstrous fight, Port sped up their vehicle as he felt, along with the rest of them, the intense heat increasing as the fireball got closer.

The Sand Gloth, on the other hand, remained in its position. Instead, the sandstorm that covered its enormous body began to expand, and its wind disrupted not just the desert, but the savannah itself. Its body hidden in the sandstorm began to expand, its wings enlarged, and with a single snap, hell broke loose. The fireball that the fellow monster created stopped in motion, then was followed by the riotous wind in the Savanah Bale Lord direction. The monster didn’t anticipate the turn of events, and it remained in shock in its position. It became a backlash to it, and it openly accepted the attack, burning half of its body. The ‘Sand Gloth’, on the other hand, raised its head and inhaled more oxygen through its nose. A long, loud cry rang over, and for the last time, it sent a shockwave throughout the field, wherever it might reach.

The monsters that were harassing their vehicle were washed along with the repercussions. They cried out as the last of them held tight with its blade stuck to the vehicle, but not for too long, as the only thing it could grab onto was untethered. The vehicle did not remain firm as it was also caught by a large disruptive wind. It began to roll away, and when it finally stopped, somehow, their vehicle was not destroyed, and it was put back to its position just as before.

“I think I landed on my balls,” Gary groaned as he slumped back, lifeless.

\*\*\*

It had been two hours since that happened, and they continued their way without saying anything, but they remained vigilant, as there might be an enemy lurking and waiting for the right time to strike. The road was nothing less than an unpaved one. Old trail tracks marked the road, which may have been left intentionally so they could easily remember it. Lance squinted up, staring at the blue sky as the impending heat from the sun travelled through the crisp atmosphere.

“We’re here,” Port said, interrupting Lance in his thoughts. Lance realized it just then; he could see the greenery paint job of the buildings hiding beyond the large trees. Over there, a certain man, fat as a barrel, was waiting for them. After confirming their identity, they continued until they could see the gate. The gate opened on its own, and they entered. The buildings occupying the land were incomparable to what the Kelby Hives had in Kayon City.

Port and the others began to pull out the items in the cargo. Gary and Ina were dumbfounded too about the hidden factory here, but Lance snapped them out of their daze. They began to help carry the boxes as they followed Port and entered the facility. Gary couldn’t help but gape in awe. Creating a facility in the middle of a den of monsters should be impossible. He wondered what kind of person would be able to pull this off. No matter what he imagined about the process of making the enormous structures, he failed to grasp it.

“It took four years to build this place,” Port said. “This place was built by thousands of workers with the help of mercenaries. I’m one of those people who helped to build this place.”

Gary looked at him, confused. “Huh?”

“In case you’re wondering,” Port clarified.

Gary altered his gaze and remained fixated on the machine, which looked like an energy container. “I was thinking of when we will start to work,” he said.

“I’ll take you to your quarters,” Port replied. “Let’s talk about it tomorrow. For now, you should rest.”

# Chapter 3

**E**ven now, she could still remember the time when the elder of her tribe gave her a task to go to the outside world – to search for his vision of a certain element, an element that might become a foundation for the next calamity that he prophesied. As one of the priestesses, it was her duty to answer his request and make her travels to the human world.

Her parents were so proud back then. They saw her not as a girl but as a capable woman who bore a mighty fate. What they didn’t know was how deeply unwilling she was to fulfill this request. She only accepted it so her parents wouldn’t lose face in front of the council, especially her father. He was proud and never once thought her to show any kind of remorse. Only a heart of steel could protect her from her enemies. Even now, she could still remember the hard whip of his wooden sword hitting her back, jaw, and frail arms during the daytime.

She missed the wind fluttering the leaves as it travelled through the woods, wandering from south to west, while she and her friends played and swam in the river. She never felt so alone now that she managed to survive travelling by herself. For months, she travelled through the woods and faced countless monsters on her way, even though she was a priestess. Her father didn’t want her to be weak, and he had always taught her that normalizing was not good for the community. He believed it was a parasite that poisons minds, disabling them from moving forward and hindering evolution. One should not stop searching just because the once insatiable desire had been fed up. Being content with what you’ve gained would open you up to vulnerability. Exploring and being open-minded would lead to more prosperity; not in wealth, but in intelligence.

They hadn’t given her enough concrete plans on what she should do, only to disguise herself as a human and join a guild to travel around the world to be their eyes and ears. However, it was not that simple. She was unlucky as she stumbled upon a group of hunters that enslaved her. They held her captive for months, and she can still remember back then - those lustful, unforgiving eyes like a wild animal, allured by her beauty, bothered her most of the time. It seemed that fate was not kind to her. She was put under the spell of chains, nullifying her powers, but not entirely. She still had some tricks hidden up her sleeves. But she couldn’t help to stop them from their watchful gaze, even attempting to touch her. She may have been ignorant about the outside world, but she wasn’t dumb enough to be ignorant on what those licentious behaviours and shameless gazes meant.

She was compliant, but not to all their wishes. Whenever they tried to make a move on her, by pinning her alone in an empty room, she would use a spell to put them under her hypnosis - a delusional spell for a delusional person.

She was held captive for four months, rarely setting her foot outside, nor feeling the sunlight under her skin. She may have been trapped, but she was not alone, not at all. She met these youngsters - children who were held captive for slave selling. She heard their tales of how rough their lives were, the gruesome deaths of their parents robbed of their fortune, and how they were sold by their flesh and blood. The more stories she learned, the colder her heart grew towards the men in this world, but it would be imprudent to think so narrowly on one quality they described. She did not yet completely forget her mission to study humans and to find out about what the elder prophesied. Until now, sadness and hatred bore on her heart from their stories. She may not know what other value this world had, but soon enough, her ill feelings would be shaken by a certain man.

After helping to deliver the cargos, she was ordered to look after a prisoner, an unpleasant one. It had been two weeks since he was brought there, and all he did was try to convince them to retaliate. He must have been a fool to not recognize that their souls were broken. Even though they were treated harshly, they were given the right amount of ration and a bed to sleep. She entered the room and before picking up the first-aid kit and filled the bucket, she arranged her cellmate’s bed sheets. She never thought she would meet a more annoying man than the despised bastards. At first glance, he appeared patient and able to tolerate silence, but whenever he smirked and spoke, it annoyed her.

Carefully walking down the old stepping stones in the underground dungeon, she bent low, but the webs caught her auburn hair, forcing her to pull back and shake off the cobwebs clinging to her body. She gently placed the first aid and water bucket aside and returned to the trail, passing two right turns before stopping in front of a considerably sturdy wooden door. Hearing the creaking sounds, he lifted his gaze, smelling the familiar fragrance. The elf walked in with a firm face, reflecting her personality or what she wanted to show him. She only tended to his wounds after the torturers finished with him, muttering a few words and showing no emotion, although she was disgusted inside. By now he should realize she did not like him and was not capable of helping or showing care to their fellow kind. Blood washed along with his profuse sweating as he endured the throbbing wounds from his back to his chest, torso, and legs. The torturers left lasting marks on him.

“Silent treatment again, huh. Did I tell you my name? I don’t remember.” The mercenary looked at her and made an attempt to make a conversation.

Soaking the white towel in water, she squeezed it and approached him, emotionless. “Hold still,” she said, kneeling to his level.

“Do you know any more words besides ‘Hold still’ or ‘Don’t move’? Cuz I’m pretty sure you’re not an idiot.”

Without hesitation, she carelessly washed his wounds, removing the dirt. He tried not to move despite the rough treatment, but his wounds pulsed harder, and the pain intensified whenever she grazed them. He flinched and shuddered violently, pleading with her to be gentler. He attempted to make eye contact with her, but she rejected it, continuing her harsh treatment.

“Okay, since you weren’t talkative. Can you tell me why you are doing this? I didn’t do anything wrong to you. Did I piss you off?”

After she cleaned his upper body, she reached for the first-aid kit. Drawing out the alcohol and cotton, she poured and cleaned his wounds. The moment it touched his skin, he flinched but endured the pain. This pain was only a fraction of what he previously experienced, and it would be shameful to be succumbed by this.

“My name is Alastor,” he said. She didn’t look back at him, but she was surprised that he willingly gave his name to her and not to his enemies. She wondered why he did it since his identity meant everything to him. She gave him a dubious look.

He looked at the chains that bound him and then back at her. “Nah, I assure you. Nothing will come out when they search about me,” he confidently said. “Other than that, I trust you.”

“And why is that?” she asked, reaching a lock of her hair that was insistently dangling on her sight.

“Because I know that you’re going to help me.”

“How are you so sure?” This time, she got up, washed the towel and prepared some medications.

“How are you planning to get out of here without leaving those children behind?”

She stopped; her lips were sealed. She was stunned by that realization. For the past four months, she was planning to escape this hellhole with the children, but she always found herself back at the idea that she was alone and couldn’t fight without risking or leaving the children behind. She might die if she ever faces their captors alone. She might consider rescinding her earlier plans.

“Look, I know a place where they will be safe. A haven where they will be safe and so that they wouldn’t have to be part of this. They will be given a choice, a shelter, clothes, food, and a life they never had.”

She looked interested in his proposal, but her stern gaze remained unchanged.

“Tell me more.”

Those words are more than enough for Alastor to perceive it as acceptance. He looked at the chains wrapping him and then back at hers. She got the cue.

“Fine. I’ll help. Only if you keep your promise.”

“I am a man of my word. I can reassure you that I already have a plan for that,” he said.

He stopped midway as he heard heavy footsteps echoing across the hall. “The success rate is low though. I don’t know about this land, but you can tell me about this place so that I can make it work.”

The footsteps were getting closer. She had to agree to this plan, or else he would die, and she would fail her mission.

“What’s it going to be?” he asked.

“Fine. I’ll come back.”

“Glad to hear it. I think I’ll survive for a few rounds.”

The guard yawned as he loosened his belt a little bit. His fellow guard jested. “Looks like junior can’t hold it back anymore, huh.”

“It’s been four days since I pumped that girl.”

“So, are you going to make a move on her right now?”

“Don’t tell the boss about this. He will be pissed and might kill me.”

“Relax, I know the rules. Besides, I’ve already made my move on her too. All of us have.”

“For real? I guess I’m not the only dead one, huh.”

The two of them laughed, their voices echoing at the end of the dungeon. When they entered the prisoner’s room, they greeted him with a whip on his face. They played with their batons and lashed him again. The elf just stood aside as they continued to batter him. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath before opening them again.

She could feel it again, those mocking, lustrous eyes creeping behind her.

“Did you learn your lesson?” the guard asked.

Alastor lifted his head, his jaw purple and bloodied. “What lesson?”

The guard furrowed his brow. “I’m damn sure you know what I’m talking about.” He whipped Alastor again.

“I know what you found in his pocket,” the other guard said, holding up the totem Linda left for Alastor. The guard gave him a mocking look. “So, you’re the weakest in the litter. I wonder how you survived longer than the other men or even became a mercenary. You must have fooled those you worked for, faking your possession of some artifact.”

“I heard he can conjure barriers,” the other guard said.

“So, you’re a ‘Mana Folder’?” the guard stepped back, assessing him. “But still, you look weak. That must be the reason they left you behind.”

He realized the totem bore unknown power and felt foolish for not noticing it earlier. The totem had a specific magic symbol engraved on it, elemental magic that lent its power to the user only if its element was compatible with the holder. Alastor was enlisted as a ‘Mana Folder’ because he couldn’t conjure any kind of elemental magic. He only knew the magic that did not require any kind of elements but only pure incantation, or some required imagination with the use of mana. He could heal himself without relying on herbs, but his healing abilities could not deal with symptoms based on chemistry, such as poison or hallucination. He could’ve used that totem to assist him earlier.

“I guess there’s no need for me to tell you, but you’re going to die here. Instead of being hard on yourself, you can tell us everything and stop being a useless cunt.”

The guard punched him, trying to break his spirit. But Alastor’s darkened eyes met his mocking gaze, glowering that showed a hunter lurking within. The bloodlust was overtaking his sanity.

“You’re a dead man,” the guard said as he stepped back, breathing heavily.

“And you,” he said, turning his attention to her. “Someone is going to buy you, so you might as well enjoy the remaining time before they take you away.”

The other guard held her as she was dragged outside. She threw a glance at Alastor, and he nodded. She was led into a room while being held. It was the same room where they attempted to make a move on her. In the corner of the room, there was a wooden bed with only a single old pillow. As they started to unbuckle, they felt dizzy. A glistering light showered them, causing their bodies to drift and float as if the light itself was guiding them to the bed.

Cautiously, she walked into the room, considering whether to trust the man who led her there. However, she had no choice as the Hoarder already found a buyer for her. If she failed her mission, she would also fail to save the other slaves she promised to protect.

After that night, they began to work together. She would visit him once or twice a day under the guise of tending to his wounds. Whenever the guards were not around, she would gather and share information about their whereabouts. It turned out that they were located between the outskirts of Aethenarenfe and Vesoga Plain, as she suspected. They set up a camp outside an abandoned dungeon, which was one of their stations for exporting slaves and other merchandise.

As far as he could remember, Aethenarenfe was close to the border of the Leafol Region, where the green scenery rose high under cloudy skies. The gusts of wind would flush his face and dry his spores, bringing down his temperature. He recalled the breathtaking view from atop the mountain when they travelled to Kayon. However, it was also dangerous as flying monsters from the Vesoga Plain would sometimes nest there, feeling threatened by other monsters. They would also inspect the main road, hoping to find prey.

“Maybe we could run to Aethenarenfe and take shelter there before moving on?” she suggested.

“No, that would be too obvious. They would target that town first, wreaking havoc and killing innocent people. Even if they went the other way, we don’t have enough resources to pay for an inn,” he replied.

Her serious face turned into a scowl as she ground her lips. “Then how about Vesoga Plain, the place you mentioned earlier?”

“Only an idiot would go there,” he said. The chains made a dangling heavy noise whenever he moved his arms or limbs. “Consider yourself a dead man if you ever set foot in there. That place is full of dreadful monsters that wouldn’t hesitate to kill those kids and you, no matter how charming you are.”

“You said the mountains at the border of the Leafol Region are filled with flying monsters. Could that buy us enough time to make it to the next town?”

“I’m sorry if you haven’t noticed, but I’m bruised, tired, hungry, and weak. Do you think I can protect all of you in this condition?”

She ground her lips even harder this time, continuing to wash his face and naked body.

“What choice did we have?” Alastor kept his gaze fixed below the broken and mossy floor. “Are there any other slaves capable of fighting?”

“No, there is none.”

He fell silent, his mind racing. “Did you see anyone else arrive after me?”

“I never saw you when they dragged you here. The first time I saw you was when they beat you up.”

“And has anyone else been added to your ranks since then?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

He let out a sigh that made a small puff visible for a second. “There is another one, a woman. I think she could be useful. It would be helpful if you could find her for me.”

“I’ll give it a shot, by any means necessary.”

A hard knock rumbled the door, and the low voice of the burly guard shouted at them. “Hey! What’s taking so long?”

“I’m finished!” she shouted back at him.

“You better not have sucked his cock. I’m gonna beat you if I ever find out,” he warned.

Before leaving, the elf looked back at Alastor. “There is someone you must worry about. He calls himself the Timber. He is strong, but we shouldn’t worry about him for now. He has been given a task by the Hoarder.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I want you to be careful. He’s not like any other man I have seen.”

She noticed the doorknob turning slowly. When it unlocked, she placed everything back in her first-aid kit and made her way to open the door. The guard slipped and stumbled, his face hitting the dirt. She continued without looking back.

“Damn bitch,” he swore as he stood up. Alastor looked at him, and the guard scowled. “What are you looking at?!”

Alastor avoided eye contact. He didn’t want to take another beating, he already had enough for the day.

\*\*\*

At night, the elf walked at the upper level of the dungeon. Her slender legs moved slowly, barely making a sound. She waved the cobwebs that were blocking her path. The light piercing through the broken ceiling made it easy for her to tread with care.

She relied solely on her instincts as she walked carefully. She halted as she saw a guard holding a torch, descending the stairs not too far away. When the flames faded and the footsteps were echoing away she quickened her pace.

The elf held onto a nearby metal bar as the earth shook and the pillars holding the fort cracked. The monsters that were locked in the underground chamber were howling. She retained her balance and pressed forward.

She moved sluggishly for a few seconds until the tremors subsided. She inspected every cell, searching for the comrade Alastor mentioned. He spoke about her as if she were reliable. Even if she might not be helpful, she would still try to help her, as she would try to help everyone she could.

In every cell she inspected, they smelled the same foul stench that hovered, reaching out of the premises, a mix of disturbing smells accumulated over the past years of dirt. The room she was staying in also smelled rotten, but not worse than these cells.

Growing impatient, she moved quickly from cell to cell, row to row, until she found her at the end of the corridor. The prisoner inside was hanged and was chained down to the point where her legs couldn’t support her weight, restraining every limb. She looked at her chest and was drawn back by the faint purple light pulsating under her shirt.

Her lips trembled, and her legs lost their strength as everything became blurred. When she looked around, everything seemed to be distorted.

\*\*\*

She did not know where she was or what she was doing here, as if her memories were slipping into her consciousness. Everything was so vague at that time, not until her playful mind took her to another place.

Looking below the mountain, she saw a thousand flying armadas, machines she is not familiar with. The birds that were once singing were interrupted by a long howl of a machine that flew away, and soon every monster spread out, away from the invaders. Somewhere above, the mightiest of them prepared its cannon, energy focused on a single tipping point, and steamed as if it were relieved. She looked back to see where it was pointing at. It was a city, but she was unfamiliar with it, with a dragon symbol-laden on the ship’s nose. It adjusted and let out a screech coming from its engines, ear-breaking.

The screeching stopped, and silence took its place. Then, a light hovered relentlessly, beaming in a terrifying cry. The trees parted and burned. In an instance, the city she saw was erased in a blinding light. The city was no more.

She shuddered. The tears escaped from her lids as she flailed and stumbled. Her breathing became heavy almost as if there was no air for her to inhale.

She felt her stomach ache, but only for a few seconds. She looked down and saw the flames stretching everywhere. The sky turned dark, and the moon turned to blood. Watching the smoldering ground, she couldn’t help but feel trapped.

Hope was lost, and everything became grey just as the clouds darkened, stretching as far as her eyes could see.

\*\*\*

Sherry was sure she heard someone gasping, a frightful one. She lifted her eyes and saw a woman outside of her cell panting. She tried to move to help her, but she forgot she was restrained by heavy chains.

Unlike Alastor, Sherry was left here, chained, but she wasn’t tortured by them. She was only left dangling by the chains. She remained in this kind of treatment to limit her movements. It seemed they were afraid of her. Even if she tried to free herself, she knew to herself that she was incapable of fighting.

She heard another yelp, and now she was trembling, her arms shaking as she covered herself while sprawled on the ground. Tears welled and streamed down her face.

“You needed to snap out of it!”

If she wasn’t chained, she would have slapped her by then.

“Hey, hey, breathe, breathe.”

The girl’s voice was calming and reassuring.

Sherry was unsure of what was happening to her, but she knew she is not going to get anywhere better if she stood idly by.

“Listen to my voice. You’ll be alright. Breathe, breathe.”

The girl listened, and pulled herself up slowly. Her eyes brightened, and the tears on her cheeks glistened then she wiped it off. She tried to maintain an expressionless face, but it sunk back to a whimper.

“What happened?” Sherry whispered.

“I saw visions.”

“What?” Sherry was unsure what to make out of her words. She quizzically lifted her brow.

She shook her head, “It doesn’t matter now.”

“Alright.” Sherry gulped, “Who are you, and do you know where they’re taking us?”

“Apparently not, but we have a plan to escape this place.”

“A plan?”

“Yes, a plan. Tell me, are you Sherry?”

Sherry nodded and asked, “Is Alastor here?”

“He’s in the lower level of this dungeon.”

“I’m glad he’s safe.” Sherry sighed in relief. “It’s my fault why we’re here. Is he angry with me?”

“No, I don’t think so. He needs your help.”

“What could I possibly be of use to him? I don’t know how to fight; I’ve never killed a person before.”

“He told me you’re special. You can do things that others can’t. He wants you to lead us slaves to escape.”

“I don’t know if he’s delusional or what, but I don’t have abilities that can help.”

“Believe.”

“What?”

“You just have to believe in yourself. It seems like you don’t know the position we’re in, so I’ll tell you: they’re going to sell us, kill us, or sell our organs on the black market. Those kids don’t deserve that, do you understand?”

“Fine. Either way, I’m not going to end up in a good place. After all, I have a family I need to return to. You said I’m going to lead the others to escape. What does he mean?”

Her lips twisted into a smile.

\*\*\*

After the beating, Alastor closed his eyes and his mouth moved as if he were counting. Blood streamed down his cheek onto his jaw, and he gasped for air, exhaling widely. The door opened and an elf entered, carrying a bag fashioned from tattered clothes. Alastor scanned her and noticed his sword was missing. The wrinkles on her forehead deepened as she arched her brows.

“I don’t see my sword. Where is it?” Alastor asked.

“I don’t know. Someone must’ve taken it,” she replied.

“That’s alright. All I need is a knife.”

“I have one here.”

“Good. Now, I want you to do something for me.”

“What is it?” she asked.

“I want you to use your magic to untie these chains.”

“What?” she exclaimed.

“You’re not good at lying. I know you can use magic. Don’t ask. The other guard will come back here, and he’s going to tell the others if he finds out.”

Defeated by the mercenary through reasons, the girl reluctantly obliged. She kneeled and placed her hands on the chains. The chains changed colour and returned to normal.

“What did you do?” Alastor asked.

“My spell will be in effect for a few minutes,” she explained.

Alastor gave her a confused look.

“You don’t want him to see you unshackled, now, do you?” she said as she hid the knife behind him.

“Wait, I forgot to tell you. This heaven I’ve told you about is very far. You might need help. I know a guy. His name is Henrick. He’s stationed in Anargond, and he will help you. Just tell him the passcode, ‘Lie’nest d’falcot.”

She nodded and hid the bag at the corner where the door could conceal it. Taking the stairs outside the dungeon, she was greeted by the lustful grin of the guard.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“I came because I was ordered to check his wounds.”

“He’s going to be fine. However, I am not.”

“I guess we can treat that wound after you hear what the prisoner says.”

“I’m afraid his time has passed.”

“He’s now willing to comply. After all the effort to make him talk, you’re just going to stop now?”

“Alright. I’ll consider it. After that, let’s get on to business.”

She replied with a smile and proceeded outside. The guard headed back to Alastor’s cell and glowered at him. He lashed out and walked to the desk, where he drank.

“The girl said that you’re going to talk. I thought you were going to stick with that punk attitude. I guess you too have a limit.”

“I’m going to lash your mouth from ear to ear,” Alastor replied, conveying an icy chill that slither on the enemy’s spine.

He turned around and with his foot steady on the ground, earnestly observed him.

“Do you believe in God, boy?” the guard asked.

“I’m afraid not. I don’t believe in any religion’s gods, but I do believe that there is one. I am not a religious person,” Alastor replied.

“Interesting. Well, you better pray. You might meet him soon enough.”

The guard came closer to him. His right hand grabbed the knife on his back as he knelt.

“Can you send my regards to him?”

“I don’t think heaven is my place.”

“Are you admitting that you deny God?”

“No, what I’m saying is that I’m sinful.”

“Hm,” the guard chuckled. “Good for you.”

The knife was aimed and swung down towards Alastor. With bolt lightning reflex, the mercenary shielded himself with the chains that were unshackled. The thug was stunned and stammered back, the knife fell. They exchange glances, but before he could react, Alastor was one inch away from picking up the knife and bashed it on top of the attacker’s head, down to the jaw. Blood crept out onto the lifeless body, soiling the earth. Alastor didn’t waste any time and put on the clothes left by the elf. He smelled them, but they didn’t stink, or maybe it was just his mind playing tricks on him. By now his nose must’ve gotten used with the rotten smell of the dungeon.

Alastor carefully walked out of the chamber and glanced to the left and right. He was playing with the two knives in his hands. Choosing the right path, he caught a glimpse of light and knew it was the exit. As Alastor approached a shadowy figure, he dared to march forward, not even bothering to hide his presence by walking silently. The guard was startled by the shuffle of noise.

“Is someone there?” he babbled.

The guard walked sluggishly, then turned and lifted his head, to finally see a knife flying glinting and striking his head. The guard’s body fell onto the gravel with a loud thump. Alastor pulled out the knife and carried the lifeless body to an empty room.

He could feel it, a sensation he long wanted to experience. The cold wind brushed against his hair and face. He looked down to the camp as he walked outside. Just like what she said, there were a lot of them. Their number was greater than he anticipated, which was evident from the number of tents out there.

Alastor turned his attention from the entrance to the upper part of the dungeon. It was the elf along with the children and Sherry. The chains that once shackled her left marks all over her body. Alastor signalled for them to follow him discreetly behind the bushes.

They squatted, hiding behind the tall bushes and became wary of their surroundings.

“It seems that you were right. They’re having a revelry,” Alastor prompted.

“They seem busy. Let’s go,” the elf said impatiently.

“We can’t go out. There are monsters out there.”

“So, what will it be? If we stay here, they will inevitably find us, and if we go out there with no weapons, we are still dead.”

“You need to be patient.”

“I am trying.”

Alastor looked at Sherry. “Can you move?”

“Yes,” Sherry nodded. Although, she felt her arms and legs weary from being chained.

“Good. Elf, do you know where they hide their weapons?”

“I know it’s in one of their tents. I didn’t hear which one, though.”

His eyes scanned the surroundings, checking for enemies. When he concluded that the perimeter was clear, he decided to head out.

“Just wait here. I’m going to check something.”

“Wait,” the elf stopped him. “I’ll help.”

Even though he didn’t want her help, there was no time to argue. Sherry noticed it and raised her voice. “I’ll help. Let us do it.”

“Be careful, okay.” The elf said.

\*\*\*

The night was cold, and the sweatshirt that the guard was wearing was not enough to keep him warm, nor was the fire. He looked back at the tents where his comrades were enjoying the revelries. He hated this, being picked on by others. He was always the one guarding the post during revelries, despite being a newcomer. They said it was just part of the ritual, like hazing, but less torturing. His boss did not condone humiliation and told everyone not to mess with each other. He heard a whisper and was sure of it. He stood up and turned around, walking with his weary eyes scanning the area. He saw a shadow behind the tent and followed it, but once again, he was spooked by the cold wind and turned around. There was no one there, but he saw the shadow move again.

“Who goes there?” he asked.

Little did he know that someone was sneaking up behind him, exerting effort to silence their hasty footsteps. He noticed it and saw it getting closer to him. He drew out his knife and slash the tent, but he was wrong. His imagination must be playing tricks on him. What didn’t know that he was right. Alastor jumped out from the bushes, his arm immediately locked on the guard’s neck and snapped it like a twig. He hid the dead body in the bushes and entered the tent, only to find it was nothing more than a stock room.

They pressed inside on another tent, but Alastor’s cautious eyes caught sight of a man walking ahead of them. He passed by without noticing them.

“Should we take him out?” Sherry asked.

“Too risky. First, we must find their weapons,” Alastor replied.

He guided Sherry to the next tent with a discreet movement.

The guard who was taking a leak noticed a scarf lay on the ground. He finished his peeing with haste and went to look at it, only to witness the lifeless body of the newcomer with a twisted neck and wide-open eyes, suggesting he was caught by surprise.

He pulled out his flashlight and raised his arm straight up, shooting it into the sky. They saw a red flash trailed to the sky and then glimmer apart.

“Fuck,” Alastor cursed, dragging Sherry to the next tent where they found guns arranged accordingly inside the crater.

“Grab as many as you can,” Alastor commanded. Sherry didn’t think twice and carried two crates, surprising Alastor.

“Are you gonna stare there or what?” Sherry asked.

Alastor was brought back to reality and carried one of the crates. They retrieved the guns and got back to their cover.

“Take these guns,” Alastor handed them out to the elf and children. The elf stopped him, her eyes displeased.

“They’re just children. You do realize that you’re taking their innocence away?”

Alastor let out a heavy sigh. “Their innocence has already been taken ever since they were abducted by those fucktards. There is no need for unfitting remorse.”

“Unfitting? What kind of man are you?!” The elf snapped.

“Would you shut your mouth?” Alastor asked irritably. “If you don’t want them to kill for their survival, then you will have to kill for their sake.”

Sherry tapped his shoulder, “He’s right. But for now, let’s go. Remember the plan, are you ready?”

The elf nodded, and with a flat palm, she placed it lower down his mouth. With a single breath, the wind began to storm the tents. The wind began to command the fire into starting to lick the tents. The gas that Alastor left sparked a fire, and the firewood flew towards the tents. It spread quickly. The men who were enjoying the revelry ran outside the tents, howling and yelling at each other.

Alastor already explained the plan earlier. Since the enemy had a larger force, they needed to play smart. One of the factors they must eliminate was the weapon disadvantage. The enemies had a large stock of weaponry, and they had not identified where it lay behind the tents. However, they managed to steal two crates of it. But having weapons did not mean they could win the fight, which is why they needed to get rid of the enemy’s weapons by burning all the tents. They did not know how many stock rooms the enemies had for their weapons.

Alastor did not think that the elf, Sherry, and the children were of any use to him, which is why he planned to lure the enemies and steal their attention while the others made a run to the route he explained to the elf before they executed the plan. If he could survive, he would follow them.

All of them looked confused about what just happened, but their instincts did not dull. They went first to the slave’s chambers. One man shouted that they escaped, and the other noticed that the number of crates was reduced.

“All of you, run!” Alastor commanded.

Sherry tapped his back, “Come back alive, okay. I owe you my life.”

They ran across the forest and Alastor lifted his eyes. The sky was clear with stars blotting, and the wind made contact that ease his pain a little. His focus sharpened.

Alastor was able to detect his first target. He jumped and threw his arms. His knives were flung and cut through the air. The blades stuck to the target’s eye and chest, but he pulled them out and ran around to meet the enemy. He was surprised and did not react quickly, so Alastor stabbed him in the throat, and the enemy let out a long groan before life left his body. He pulled the knife back and inserted the gun into his pants. As much as possible, he did not want to create any unnecessary attention while killing his opponents one by one.

The flame grew wild and spread in the forest before his eyes. Alastor limited his breathing to a minimum, fearing he might lose consciousness because of suffocation. His knives found their prey again, and blood spurted onto his clothes and face as he dragged it, splitting his head from his neck.

The enemies were breathing hard as they were greeted by thick smoke trailing everywhere. Some of them had been ordered to retrieve the crates for the vehicles, while others went to check on the whereabouts of the slaves. They didn’t know that one by one, they were being taken down.

Alastor smeared the tattered tent with the blood of his knife and made his way inside. The tent had not yet been fully engulfed by the fire. What he did not expect though was a fist launched onto his face as soon as he entered. He stumbled back, but he regained his balance and stood straight. When he looked back, he saw the nose of the gun.

Alastor shifted his weight and ran away from the enemy. He kicked hard against the ground, leaping in an instant. The bullets flew and put a hole across the tents and hit the pole. He hid behind the barrels, his position beyond three tents from the enemy’s position. He recognized him. A single glance was enough to identify him; he was the man who mocked him once before. What pissed him off the most was how he handled Alastor’s sword that was now dangling on his waist. He was glad that the rest of the enemy was dead from suffocation or was now running away from this hellfire of his making.

“You know what….”

“Please, don’t say ‘I should’ve killed you when I have the chance.’ So damn cliché.”

Hearing the source, he shot the barrels. Alastor side-rolled, evading the bullets piercing through, and ran around for a surprise attack, but his opponent was clever. The enemy was well aware that these blazes were his doing. The enemy was confident because he knew that Alastor won’t last long and he knew that he would use this as an advantage to take them down one by one. He glanced from right to left at the empty road and the blazing tent. His eyes caught on a certain shadow peering at his presence as silent as a cat. He estimated Alastor’s position and shot it.

Alastor was two steps ahead and already moved away. He heard a loud crash of barrels and the spilling of water and wine when the enemy charged across the tent. He heard him profane.

“I wonder, is it my men’s recklessness that gave you the opportunity, or did you seduce the elf? Heh, it’s not like it matters now.”

“Uhm, I’m pretty sure it matters because I am going to kill you, but you don’t deserve a quick death. First, I’m going to impale your knees and shoot your arms both left and right. After that, I’m going to put a knife in your arm, shoot your knees and torso until you won’t be able to move your legs, and I will leave you here to die.”

“So smug. Just make sure you’re not all bark but with no bite!”

In an instant, bullets stormed towards Alastor’s position. He moved out from the crouching position and charged towards the enemy. The enemy followed him with his gun. He ducked and allowed the foe to continue rattling his gun.

Alastor held the knife with his teeth and pulled out his gun. The enemy backed off, stopping one by one, and pausing when he heard a sound. The man with the gun approached cautiously, raising his weapon. What he didn’t expect was to find Alastor. He thought he could avert Alastor’s gun by stepping back, but it was a feint he didn’t aim for the upper part of his body. Alastor lowered his wrist, and as he promised, he shot his knees, firing three bullets into each one. The thug grunted in pain and fell to his knees, firing aimlessly in front of him. Alastor was already gone. The enemy groaned as the bullets hit his right arm. Despite gaining the advantage, his enemy can still move. It goes with the saying, the more desperate someone is, the more they are eager to survive. Suddenly, Alastor’s knife flew through the air and cut through the tent, striking the enemy’s left arm. With great effort, Alastor raised his gun and fired where the blade came from. Unfortunately, he missed again, and for the first time, the bullets grazed his legs. Alastor rolled. He already estimated his position and shot. He heard a loud cry. The enemy was now trapped and unable to move. Alastor slowly walked in front of him. The fire already spread to the dungeons and the forest.

“Fuck you,” the enemy spat.

Alastor looked at him with a bored expression in his eyes and raised his gun. “I guess I have to kill you.”

“You have the chance before. Why now?” the enemy asked.

“I guess I just have to prove you something,” Alastor replied.

“I see. Humiliation then.”

Without letting him finish his sentence, Alastor put a bullet in his brain.

He retrieved his items and placed his scabbard on his back. He ran towards the forest, where he told them to wait.

\*\*\*

A vehicle stopped nearby, and a man who was around seven feet tall jumped out from behind it. He walked briskly and witnessed the disaster that fell upon his men. The man in charge of overseeing the torture of the captives ran towards him, coughing heavily.

“What the fuck happened here?” the man with the deep voice asked.

The thug looked up and saw the right-hand man of the Hoarder. Although the fire made it difficult to see his face, his stature was unmistakable. The thick cyan beard blowing in the crisp wind reminded him of the brute man.

He stammered, “B-boss. It seems that the slaves revolted and managed to escape.”

“Didn’t I tell you to be careful and guard the area twenty-four hours a day?” The man’s voice was hoarse, and although he tried to appear calm, his annoyance masked his worry. He glared on his men, and a shiver skittered down their spines.

“I take it that you were outwitted by that mercenary,” he said.

“We didn’t know, sir,” the man replied.

“You didn’t know? There are a hundred of you here, and you didn’t know?” The boss grunted and looked back at his men. The station guards were scarce, with only thirty left, but none of them were in any condition to follow his orders. He looked back at the twenty men he brought and announced.

“No one’s going to stop until you all retrieve them back to their cages!”

His men shouted in sync. “We will hunt them until they have nowhere to hide!”

“Spread out!”

\*\*\*

Alastor sprinted at top speed, shifting from left to right to evade the trees. The fire was now far behind him. Jumping down the low terrain, he hung on a sturdy branch and landed on his feet. He paused in an open space of the forest, taking in the lustrous view of the moon ahead. Alastor prepared for another run; he couldn’t let his tiredness get ahead of him. He had to endure the pain, or else they might find him.

“I see. So, you’re a hunter as well,” a man called out from the shadows. “No. Not yet. You’re not in your prime.” Unveiling from the darkness, the man’s cyan beard shone under the moonlight, and his thick hair was plastered on his back. His club was playing on his right hand. Alastor arched his brows.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Alastor observed the man as he marched forward.

“Are you the Timber?”

“Does it matter?”

“Well, it does now.”

The Timber smirked.

In an instant, he disappeared along with the shrill sound of the wind. Alastor drew his sword and held it aloft in the air.

“Damn it.”

Just as quick as the Timber disappeared, Alastor responded instantly to his attack. He shielded himself from the blades of winds hammering to him, making his boots dig and crack on the ground. He gritted his teeth.

The wind screeched away and Timber returned to his physical form.

“No wonder my men are dead right now. They underestimated you.”

He braced himself as another blast of wind disrupted his senses. The Timber disappeared again. Alastor closed his eyes, focusing. The tip of his fingers produced a light that wrapped around his sword.

“You’re a Mana Folder, eh?” The Timber revealed himself. Alastor took the opportunity to aim his blade at him. It seemed that the Timber did not plan to run; instead, he did the same thing as Alastor, but with a slight difference - the wind wrapped around his club.

“For a low-class sellsword, you’re pretty good.”

“For an intimidating old man, you’re pretty talkative.”

As their weapons clashed, some nearby trees were sent flying. The shockwave of Timber’s wind power cut through the air and grazed Alastor’s cheek. Surprised by the power of Timber, Alastor leapt backward.

“Don’t hold back now,” Timber taunted him.

Alastor cracked his neck and limbered up. The two of them dashed at each other, exchanging attacks, and furiously swinging their weapons. Each of Timber’s attacks cut sharply through every part of Alastor’s body, scraping his clothes from his legs to his shirt and face.

“Oh you poor little fucker. You don’t even know the extent of your frail existence,” Timber taunted him.

Alastor realized that if this continued, he would be the first one to fall, or he might die. It was his mistake, he should have run when he had a chance. It was too late which is why he decided to show Timber one of his techniques hidden up his sleeve.

His hand began to emit light as he pulled out a knife and engulfed it. His weapons rang against Timber’s attack. At that moment, Timber didn’t expect it. Alastor threw his knife towards his face. His head moved sideways to evade the knife, but something was different about it. The knife was surrounded by a faint light that faded as Timber’s glance momentarily caught it. He looked down and saw that the real knife had not been thrown. Timber drew back, and that was when he grasped that the knife that flew was nothing but a mere replica made by his mana. It was too late for Timber to evade the strike as Alastor had thrown the original knife at his abdomen. He lurched back, kicking the land to somehow lessen the degree of impact, although it was a futile attempt to assume that he would not receive any damage. The knife struck halfway through his stomach, he lost his grip, and the wind wrapping his weapon dissipated.

Timber swung his club down when Alastor tried to make a run and jinked down, disappearing momentarily from his field of vision. But then he did something he couldn’t believe. Alastor used his arm to shield against the club, and pain erupted through his bones, the impact must’ve broke his arm. Nonetheless, the damage didn’t slow him down as his sword brimming in light cut through and pierced his stomach deep within, the tip of his sword coming out of his back.

The Timber coughed up blood and momentarily lost his balance as his legs turned to jelly. “No doubt about it, you have the blood of a hunter,” he said.

“It’s over now.”

“No, it’s not,” the Timber coughed. “As long as this body pumps blood and breathes, I will never go down. But for you, fate will not be kind unless you understand what you truly are.”

“What? I’ve had enough with you, damn lunatic.”

Blood gushed out from the Timber’s wound as Alastor pulled out his sword and sheathed it back into its scabbard. He raised his knife and was about to finish Timber’s life when his flesh began to twitch, disturbing his mind. He kneeled in distress as his mind began to be usurped with pain. The pain of his arm throbbed twice. The mercenary cast healing magic on his forearm.

The Timber looked fascinated.

“It’s already started.”

“What the hell did you do to me?”

“This one is not on me. I told you that you don’t know the existence of your frail existence.”

It didn’t last for a minute, and the twitch was gone. Just as he raised his knife, he was blown by a strong gust of wind. When he looked back at the Timber, he was already gone.

\*\*\*

Under the light of the moon, Alastor walked slowly and finally caught up to them. Sat before the bonfire, there he could see the children, Sherry, and the elf. He was about to get closer, but he was greeted by an unexpected guess.

\*\*\*

“Have you ever used this thing before?” The elf asked as she raised her gun. Sherry, the elf, and the rest of the children ran through the forest.

“No, I’m just a poor bystander. Shooting and killing aren’t my skill set. How about you? You’re an elf, right? You guys don’t kill living beings, do you?”

“That’s an understatement.”

A light caught their eye. Sherry gestured to stop and crouched, hiding in the thick bush.

“Fuck, fuck,” Sherry swore repeatedly in a low voice, controlling her breathing to a minimum.

“What should we do?” The elf asked.

“I don’t know. I’m not used to killing people.”

Sherry looked at the children and felt her conscience pricking her. She glanced back cautiously at the enemy, who were spread out across the forest, which favoured them.

“We shouldn’t engage them. We must continue to hide until we’re far enough away from them,” Sherry said. The youngsters looked confused. “We’ll play hide and seek, okay? Don’t worry, I won’t let them touch you again. Never again.”

The children seemed to grasp the game’s notion and followed Sherry. Advancing discreetly, there were times when Sherry had to stop them. She would have to go out and find a way to distract the enemies, either by throwing rocks or knocking them down by swinging the rifle at their heads. It was a long and tiresome hide-and-seek.

Sherry ordered the elf and the children to sneak and hide behind a large rock before she walked behind the enemy unnoticed. She held the rifle high, and a snake jumped on her. She rattled and accidentally threw it off to the thug.

The thug shouted, and the rest were alarmed.

“Shit!” Sherry swore as she glanced at the elf’s location.

The elf already knew what it meant and led the children sprinting away from them.

Sherry kicked forward and followed them. She looked at the rifle and frantically aimed at the enemy and pulled the trigger, but it wouldn’t fire. She swore more.

“Fuck! Why won’t you fire?! Useless piece of shit!”

At that moment, her vision changed. The machinery in her chest stuttered. Her eyes changed, glowing in red. Data and numeral directories, foreign words, and strange mechanics embedded in her sight, becoming an annoying framework to her surroundings. Still, her body instinctively moved on its own, and she was able to decipher it.

She unloaded the jammed bullets and replaced them, holding her hands while running. Her hands switched off the safety and pulled the trigger.

Her aim was perfect. Smoke smouldered in the air as the bullet pierced through, straight to the thugs’ heads. A small lump of brain struck his comrade’s vest. She decided to roll over as the bullet grazed her cheek and hid in the shadow of the tree, leaning against it. The enemies hid as she fired against them and they returned fire when she hid to reload. Eventually, they stopped, and she took a risk to take a glance. They were reloading.

Sherry sprinted away, the enemy yelled and dashed after her. Her breathing was heavy, but her feet did not recognize tiredness. In time, she stopped and walked slowly. Her feet became numb and lost their strength. The adrenaline may have been the reason she could not feel the pain of the bullet piercing through her calf.

“Shit,” Sherry cursed as she crawled behind the tree. She loaded her rifle and fired back. The others was hiding, while some was worried about the risk and chose to sneak up on her left. A single thug managed to blind spot her as she was busy firing back while sitting down and leaning in the tree, with her legs spilling blood on the ground.

Sherry felt the gun cocked behind her and remained motionless. Her lips were sealed and dried. She closed her eyes, waiting for the moment for him to pull the trigger. Seconds passed, and she did not feel anything. She was still breathing. She turned around, and the thug was impaled by vines gripping every part of his body. His neck was twisted as the vine crept and engulfed his body. It was the elf that saved her. She raised her hand, fisting it, and the vines grew, impaling the enemy and killing them instantly.

“What the fuck are you doing?!” Sherry asked the elf.

“I’m not gonna leave you behind.”

“What about the kids?”

“They’re fine. For now—” Her words were cut short. Blood splashed out of nowhere in her sight. She trembled when she realized that it was from her abdomen. She fell on her knees. Her lungs were aching as she coughed up blood.

Her sight slowly faded. She was losing every sense that catenated her mind in this world. Sherry caught her and caressed her head to her lap. She looked at her wound and wailed. Tears welled up and began to stream down her cheeks as she restrained herself from letting out a cry by covering her mouth. She whimpered and hugged the elf.

“I didn’t even know your name,” she said, looking up at the elf.

Her doleful eyes stared at the moon brightening up the forest. The wind hummed and feathered, fluttering the leaves, and they rustled as they finally fell, softly swirling in the wind. She closed her eyes, waiting for the short crunch of footsteps approaching.

Her calm breathing turned into short-term breaths. She did not want this, did not ask for this, and did not want to die. There was so much she wanted to know. There was nothing more painful than dying without knowing her identity. She did not know if there was anyone that would mourn for her. Permanent death was the befitting description of her thoughts; she would be trapped in a cycle of thoughts in what-ifs until her death without knowing herself.

The gun was pointed at her head. Her heart raced faster and tears began pouring down her face onto the elf’s face. She clicked her tongue and wiped her tears. That was when there was a shadow streak across the moonlight. She had to blink twice to make sure if she was hallucinating or not.

The shadow appeared again, and this time a sharp object flew in her direction. She prepared herself for what was to come, but it wasn’t meant for her. Instead, the blade pierced the grunt.

“Can you move?” he asked. His baritone voice was well-suited to his manly silhouette.

Sherry inspected her ankle and tried to twist her foot. She stood up, hanging the elf’s hands on her neck, and carried her. Although her right ankle was hurt, she was able to bear the pain.

“I think I can,” she said.

“Good. I’ll cover for you. Don’t look back. I’ll catch up to you.” he said as he stepped out of the shadows and revealed his identity. He wore a brown leather coat with sharp teeth hanging on his neck as a necklace. His eyes brimmed with violet as his long silver hair swayed gently in the wind.

He pulled out his knife and chanted magic. Sherry began to walk at a slow pace in the opposite direction. She could hear the terrified screams of the enemies as a turbulent wind came that dulled her senses. She slid down to a lower part of the terrace and stumbled for a moment before picking up the elf and moving forward. She raised her guard as she noticed the bushes rustling. Her heavy footsteps ceased like a conversation halted by an awkward silence.

She waited for a second and sighed in relief when she realized it was just one of the children. She followed the little youth and was led to an open space in the forest. The alarmed children lowered their guns and returned to their positions. She heard a faint grumble of a stomach from one of them. It seemed that she wasn’t the only one who was tired and hungry. She sat down and caressed the elf’s head on her lap while her back leaned against the tree. She kept her eyes wide open, waiting for him.

It took longer than she anticipated for the man to arrive. He appeared with blood spilling from every part of his body. Sherry comprehended at last that the man was also an elf, just like her. She didn’t notice his pointy ears at first because she only had a glimpse of his face when they first met – so little time to familiarize him.

Now that everything seemed clear as crystal, she already guessed what he came for.

“Are you –” she began.

“I’m fine,” he intercepted. “We should be worried about her.”

Sherry looked at the unconscious elf on her lap.

“What should we do?” she asked. “I don’t know how to treat wounds.”

“I can.”

He pulled out a palm-sized white feather and placed it on her wounded abdomen. He mouthed his mantra, and a faint light began to emit from the feather. The feather faded into the thin air, and at the same time, no traces of the wound were left to be seen.

“Since you helped her, I take it that the two of you are friends.”

“Uh, no. Not really. I—it just happened that we’re on the same side.”

“Is that so?” he flatly said. What came next was his suspicious glance at Sherry. His hands gripped the knife’s handle.

“Tell me. What do you know about the Hemil Klust?”

She shook her head, failing to comprehend his question.

“I don’t know. Is that something to eat?”

The man was about to pull out his knife but was stopped by a hand. The elf raised her frail hand. He looked at her, and his mood softened.

“Reia. What happened to you?”

His voice was filled with worries as he kneeled, guiding her to sit down and lean against the trees. Her gloomy eyes brightened slightly as she saw the familiar face.

“Glox. What are you doing here? Do the elders know about this?”

“They granted me permission to go out and aid you in your travels. I’ve been traveling alone for two months. I must say that the human world has a lot to offer. But that matters not, I should’ve looked at you first before going on alone.”

“Don’t be hard on yourself. You must not blame yourself for something that is out of your control.” Her voice was stirred by contemplation.

He observed her stature for a moment before facing her with a serious expression.

“How did you end up like this?”

Sherry took a deep breath and narrated what she remembered. When she finished telling how she got here, he nodded. Given their current circumstances, he came to an absolute conclusion.

He looked at the frail young children. Discontentment filled his thoughts.

“Are you certain that you will assist these children in the haven you spoke of? I do think that this man Alastor is capable enough to abide by your role.”

“Are you doubting my decision, Glox?”

He stiffened for a moment before returning his stern gaze.

“I believe I don’t have to remind you about the task that has been given to you.”

Even after reminding her about the mission, her decision remained unaltered.

“Even so, I am still a priestess. My duty is to preserve life that includes nature and the people, it stands above all of what I am.”

“You of all people should know that the elder’s words are important as to the world’s fate.”

“I know, but you have to understand that these children needed help more than ever.”

Glox let out a deep sigh and expelled all his negative thoughts. “I understood where you were coming from. It looked like I’ll end up helping you after all,” he said.

Sherry, who was listening quietly for a while, interrupted. “Um, I’m glad that you’ve resolved your arguments, but don’t you think we should come up with a plan on how to escape from those assholes?”

“I can handle them,” Glox said confidently.

“Wow, those are the cockiest words I’ve heard in a long time, but don’t forget they have guns while you only have a knife and magic. On top of that, they’re a private army. Do you really think you can handle them for long?” Sherry retorted.

“I’ll find a way.”

“Well, consider yourself damned,” the elf responded. “There’s a guy named Henrick who can help us.”

“Okay, if you’re fine with it. It’s not like I’m going with you guys anyway.”

“What do you mean?” Glox asked.

“I have to find my way back to Kayon city to reunite with my family.”

“I see. So, I guess tomorrow I’ll bid you farewell.”

“It’s been nice knowing all of you. I hope this won’t be the last time,” Sherry said.

After a while, Glox decided to cut down some wood and set it on fire with his magic to warm the shrivelling children as they huddled, warming themselves. As he walked towards the elf, he heard a faint shuffling of bushes coming from the dark part of the forest. He drew out his knife, keeping a steady position. He was about to attack the incoming intruder, but he was stopped by Reia. They waited for a moment. Sherry stared into the darkness.

“Should I be worried about that guy?”

Alastor stepped out of the shadows. His eyes remained fixed on Glox. Reia and Glox exchanged glances. Glox nodded and sheathed his knife.

“No, he’s a friend. My friend,” Reia said.

“Right,” Alastor said, realizing the similarity of their faces. He walked and sat down beside the children. “So, would you mind telling me your name?” he asked.

Glox and Reia were unsure who was being addressed, but it seemed that the question was for her. “Fine. Since you’ve already helped us, I don’t mind sharing my identity with you. My name is Reia, and this guy is-”

“Glox,” he added.

“Glox?”

“Yes.”

“What a strange name.”

Glox did not respond. An awkward silence fell upon them.

Out of boredom, Alastor asked them a question, “Is there any chance that you could tell me why someone inconspicuous like you is here?”

“It’s none of your business,” Glox replied.

“Wow, you’re quite bold. I understand.”

Glox didn’t know whether to take that as a compliment or an insult. There were some humorous words that he didn’t understand, and it bothered him. Reia saw the sour mood of Glox and decided to intervene before the tension rose.

“I can’t tell you that. It’s a matter of privacy.”

Alastor snickered. “Alright, no need to worry. I can live with that.”

Glox did not like the way the man spoke to Reia. Something told him that this guy did not see her as an equal. Glox swore to Reia’s family that he would protect her throughout the journey and fulfill her role that included any men that are ill-natured.

“Do you have any idea who you’re talking to?” Glox asked.

“I don’t know and I don’t care,” Alastor replied.

Glox raised his brow, furrowing his forehead.

“I’m sorry if I can’t tell you. I know that I owe you a lot, but I can’t tell you about us,” Reia apologized.

“Don’t worry. I understand. We should rest. We’re going out early.” Alastor said.

“Who’s going to stay up all night and watch our backs?” Glox asked.

Alastor observed him for a moment. “You will. You’re the least injured guy here,”

Glox sighed, lengthening his patience.

\*\*\*

As the others slept, Glox remained awake, patrolling the area. His eyes were imbued with magic, enabling him to see through the darkness and detect the presence of any dangerous beings scouting in the area. Hours passed, and he grew confident that there were no monsters lurking around. He decided it was time to get some sleep. He doesn’t want to travel without proper sleep.

As his back leaned at the tree, he felt the shrill wind closing around. He rose and tried to determine its location. Glancing around the corner, his magic failed him, and he was blown away by an unknown force, relentlessly crashing into a tree.

Alastor woke up from the commotion. His hands drawn to his sword as he saw Glox struggling to stand up. He drew his sword and held it.

“Sherry, Reia, wake up,”

As soon as Reia saw Alastor’s sword brimming under the influence of the moon’s light, she got up and woke up the kids.

“Take the kids somewhere safe. We’re going to handle it. Stick to the plan,” Alastor said.

“Right,” Reia nodded.

The kids prepared themselves, and along with Sherry and Reia, they sneaked out. Sherry once again looked back at Glox.

“Are you going to be alright?” she asked.

“Was that a question?” he asked.

“No, that came out wrong. I just wanted to-”

“There you go again. Always cutting off during an emergency,” he interrupted.

“I just wanted to say-”

“Please don’t say Good luck. Most of the time the opposite comes out,” he warned.

Alastor saw a sharp light heading towards him. With quick reflexes, he bent his shoulder and moved his arms diagonally, deflecting the attack against his sword.

“Now, go!” he yelled.

Sherry sprinted out of the forest, saying, “Please, don’t die.”

With Sherry gone, Alastor could focus on the enemy. He glanced at Glox, who rose from his knees and was standing next to his feet. He was surprised at how sturdy the guy was, but he would have been more disappointed if he was easily taken down.

“Are you ready for a royal beat down?” Alastor asked.

“More than ever,” Glox said.

“Perfect,” Alastor said, steeling himself as he held his sword high and swung it down as the menace behind the shadows sprang forward. The head of the red, slinky, and human-like monster was split into two. He saw another one leapt off the darkness.

Alastor rolled over as the enemy attempted to graze him with its claws. The shadow leapt back to the forest and its green eyes flashed before it disappeared into the darkness. Glox chanted physical barrier magic to raise his defense. He and Alastor stood and leaned against each other’s backs. They were repeating this tactic for ten minutes, yet neither of them had shown any signs of fatigue.

“Do you have any idea what it is?” Glox asked, his eyes scanning his surroundings.

“Nope. This is a new one for me.” Alastor said. “*Could it be Pharax or Kalisas?*” Alastor thought, trying to recall any similar monsters he encountered.

“How the hell can you not know about this?” Glox asked in frustration.

“I’m not a damn book!” Alastor shouted as he tightened his grip on his sword, noticing the monster’s green eyes flashing in the dark. “It’s in front of me!” he yelled.

Glox rolled sideward to Alastor’s right side and twisted around, preparing his knife.

“I got this,” Alastor said, and as the monster hovered out of the darkness, he swung his sword. The monster, however, evaded it like a fluid shadow. It went for Glox and caught him off guard.

“Don’t just stand there!” Alastor yelled.

“I know,” Glox said.

With knives in both hands, Glox swung them as the enemy entered his range. The shadow kicked the ground like a loud beat from a drum and fluently dodged them, leaping straight up. Like a ballerina, its slender right foreleg bent and kicked Glox.

Pain pierced through Glox’s jaw like a knife, trembling and coursing through his brain and spine, hazing his consciousness. He leaped backward and threw knives at the enemy. It let out a warrior’s cry as if its lust for battle found another worthy adversary, and with just a mere battle cry, the knives were repelled.

“Just what is this thing?!” Glox shouted, hissing as he wiped the blood from his chin.

Alastor's once calm demeanor was replaced by an annoyed visage. He raised his sword and fortified his stance down to his feet. Out of all the monsters he faced, this one is different. Like a judge, he observed it from its dark skinhead down to its feet.

“Maybe…?” Alastor glanced at Glox. “This one may be a demon.”

“What?” Glox uttered in disbelief. “Are you sure about this?”

“That’s why I said maybe. So, I’m not sure.”

Glox shielded himself against the creature, and with his violet eyes shining, he saw the red smoke spewing out of its body.

“Miasma,” Glox let out the words as if they drained his curiosity.

Glox lurched back, but with a bountiful strike, he managed to graze the enemy. He pulled himself forward, drew out his knife, and went for a strike.

“We’re in Vesoga Plain. Everything is possible,” Alastor replied when Glox expressed his disbelief. “What I mean is this being. They are supposed to stay in the underworld. I don’t understand by what means this thing was able to pass.”

Alastor guarded himself against the attack, his blade flashing as he repelled the enemy’s fleshy white spike. “Worry about that later. This thing needs a beating,” he exclaimed.

“If that’s the case…” Glox said hesitantly.

“Hey, I wouldn’t mind you helping me,” Alastor said.

“No, you lure that demon. I shall pursue and guard Reia.”

“What?! You can’t be serious.”

“I leave this one to you. There might be another demon lurking around and might harm Reia and the others.”

Alastor hissed as he stepped back. “Fine. Do whatever you want.”

Glox nodded and threw a smoke bomb. He sprinted away as he threw another knife at the monster. The blade tore through the small space of the armour.

“For once you did something useful.”

The monster muffled a groan as it pulled the knife out of its back. Its expression laced with annoyance. The wind howled and the leaves from the trees beating against the ground in a torrential sheet.

Alastor made a leap, his sword brimming in light. He successfully cut the enemy’s shoulder down to its torso. The faltered enemy spurred back to the pitch darkness, and he could hear the loud screech coming from the blackness.

Once again, beyond the black pit of the forest, the enemy moved - encircled him like a sharp wind, whispering in the darkness. Prepared for the worst, Alastor steeled himself and fortified his ground. He made a sigh out of exasperation before retaliating against the incoming enemy.

Time slowed down as the enemy pressed on Alastor. Its sharp claw reached him within one foot away. He jumped to the right side and held his sword high. When the shadow enemy came to his line of sight, the heavy sword arched like the scythe of death, beckoning to kill its prey.

The enemy cried out and was drawn backward, attempting to attack him once more, but the wounded beast’s speed faltered. Alastor did not flinch and he diagonally attacked the unknown beast.

It howled in anguish as it took a step back, mist-like blood spilling over the air. It screamed like a child throwing a tantrum as it dispersed like a mist until it was gone.

Alastor’s face tinged with pain as he held his twitching chest. He lost his grip and briefly kneeled, panting strongly, followed by heavy breathing as if there was not enough oxygen pumping inside his body.

The world became a thick haze, the field within his vision stretching as if madness took over his mind. He gnarled and gritted his teeth. Images flashed in his mind like a stripling film from an old movie. Frame by frame, unknown images came to dull his senses.

He pounded hard on the ground, trying to regain his sanity. It miraculously worked. He observed around, ignoring his fist bleeding. The enemy retreated. He should be able to walk. He doesn’t want to waste any more time.

He heard a loud explosion far away from his location. A tower of blaze shone under the moonlight.

“This could be the doing of that monster,”

Alastor stood up. His soulless eyes struggled to find support until his hands touched the trees, and he walked past the glade with a sluggish gait. His eyes wandered around the forest and walked ahead for a couple of hours, and yet he could not see the main road. A portion of his strength from the last fight was restored and was prepared to face any anomaly, but so far, there was none. He could find no monster, and this bothered him.

Alastor bent down as he heard a sharp shrill coming from behind him. He hid behind the tree as he saw what seemed to be an odd black shape, a sharp object stuck on the tree. He stole a peek at the source of it. The land began to rumble. Leaves fell one by one as the man in silver armour walked past the bushes and Alastor, picking up the blade with a shadow in liquid form absorbing it.

“Another demon?” Alastor whispered.

Alastor’s blade unsheathed, and he pressed forward. His sword rang against the armour and briefly sparked as it bounced back. His hand shortly numb, shaking his stance before leaping back.

The enemy glanced back and saw him writhing in discomfort, looking at his hand. The sword materialized out of the black liquid oozing out of its body. It held it like its weight was equivalent to a toy. Alastor raised his blade. Its quick movement caught him by surprise. The moment its black sword swung towards him, he fortified his body and watched for incoming attack. He flicked his sword forward to repel.

With only one swing, his bones screamed in pain. His entire body flew like a baseball hit hard by a bat. His face creased in agony as his back landed on a tree. The shockwave coming from the blade numbed his strength, and he could not muster balance anymore.

“Fuck,” he swore.

He struggled to find balance and held his cracked sword. With great effort, Alastor charged forward, jinking from side to side, trying to confuse the enemy. Its menacing demeanor waned his confidence. He shook his head, he dragged his feet to the left and swung his sword. His precision was perfect, but felt that his strength was not enough to pierce the armour. He retreated out of cautiousness. He heard a grunt coming from the colossal helmet as if it was disappointed by his effortful assault.

Alastor refused to give in to unconsciousness as he bit his lips. The enemy jumped forward with its sword held high. Alastor raised his palm towards the enemy and chanted a spell. “Cinque parete invisibile!” he shouted.

Five transcended walls appeared. The greatsword from the enemy made contact with the barrier. It cracked at first, and he thought that it could take it and repel, but one by one, the walls shattered as glass fell to the ground. For a moment, everything went bright.

It was unclear how Alastor managed to get there. Everything seemed to be foggy as he tried to remember what happened, but what mattered now was that he survived. He travelled for almost four hours now. He still couldn’t seem to find the right path to the city and walked around with a looming face. His breathing was drawn to exasperation as he walked past the forest. Any moment now, his body wouldn’t make it. He stumbled over the roots and rocks, and his legs felt like lead weights. The heat from hours of walking tolled him and was beating down on him mercilessly. His mouth was dry. He felt like he was walking for days that even his eyes grew weary and light-headed from the exhaustion. And then his strength declined.

\*\*\*

Linda strode across the road and made her way inside the alley in a casual manner, but she never took this route before. She discreetly avoided the main road, fearing that the new model of robots might have identified them and exposed their true identity.

Although Linda wanted to spend her time leisurely, there were many pressing matters at hand. She spent the past few days investigating every den of ambitious criminals she knew, traipsing all over the city under different disguises. However, none of them knew the location of her lost teammate and the asset. With no other options left, she had to turn to a certain spy who had unique resources. She searched for the man but couldn’t find any trace of him until Tin spotted him doing some fishy business in a five-star hotel cafe. Tin heard about a mission involving infiltrating women’s bathrooms.

The neighbourhood in the alleyway was far from friendly; the befitting description would be uncomfortable. Linda overheard a gang whispering with malicious intent while skulking around the corner. She had a feeling they had a despicable plan to execute, or maybe it was just her imagination. These days, she couldn’t help but be suspicious when he knew that the enemy profiled them. She knew that there’s a chance that they could profile them, but Linda still let Ken and Sherry go out. They needed answers about their enemies and they wouldn’t get it if they’re hiding behind their hideout. That was her mistake, she took the risk, a stupid bet.

It was nothing less than a den of scums, and she shouldn’t stay too long. Linda kept her stern gaze up straight, even though she wanted to scan the environment for potential suspects or informants. She couldn’t risk being exposed. Linda knew she might sound paranoid, but she couldn’t let her guard down, not after what happened to her team. When she reached the end of the road, she came out on an old playground outside of school. It was a good thing she came out in the evening, as she might have appeared suspicious if she came here in broad daylight. Parents were protective these days, and it was no wonder why, with news of missing people, including children being abducted by some street dwellers who pretended to be good people on the playground. Behind those playful words, a hideous plan was at hand.

Regarding their infiltration of the Kelby Hive, it seemed that some paparazzi were able to sneak in and grab some scoop. However, they were taken into custody, while their work managed to slip through before the police could contain them. The information they had was posted on various media platforms, and suspicion and conspiracy theories began to circulate. The citizens did not yet voiced their concerns, but it was only a matter of time before the bomb exploded, and the city would become a hellhole.

Linda passed through the playground, turned left, and entered another alley. She then turned right and walked straight ahead. Her unfriendly composure left an unpalatable mood among the residents. She didn’t want to act this way, but she had to come across as strong without creating too much attention that might compromise her cover, just intimidating enough so that the unlawful abiding delinquents would not go near her. Ahead of her, Linda could see the lanterns casting white light under the arched and ponderous roof tiles, but her view became blurred as a man stepped in front of her, offering a brochure. She ignored it and shoved the man out of her way, deciding not to pay attention anymore. Walking fast, her gait was heavy.

She stood in front of the traditional spa house, feeling a bit uncomfortable. She had never been to a spa before, nor ever shared the same bathroom with other women. She dialled Tin and asked, “You sure this is the place?”

Tin replied confidently, “Yep, one-hundred percent sure. That’s what I heard he was heading.”

After paying a fee of three-hundred Haz, Linda entered the premises and contacted the attendant. She changed into a bathrobe and entered the women’s bathroom. The steam warmed her body as soon she sat in a nearby seat, closed her eyes, and dozed off.

If she remembered correctly, Tin said they should be here at nine. She was about to give up because they were ten minutes late, but then a group of women entered. Scanning the party, Linda noticed a certain woman with an odd physique who was chattering along with them. Her blonde hair looked silky and did not look haggard the moment she entered the spa.

The women’s topic was all about their travels and spots they’ve enjoyed with little engagement of their businesses. When their gaze met, the odd woman avoided Linda’s cynical eyes. After a while, the odd woman rose and headed to the locker room. Linda saw her peering over her shoulder and followed her, discreetly.

When Linda went out, she couldn’t find the odd woman. Heading back, someone grabbed her mouth. She kicked the feet and twisted her hand. A wig that fell caught her attention, and distracted, she was pinned to the wall.

“Calmed down,” said by the manly voice that unmasked his cover.

Linda recognized the voice, and at that moment, her spine shivered, and eeriness crept into her spine.

“Cid? What the hell are you doing here?” she asked.

“As you can see, I’m on an undercover mission,” he replied.

“Undercover? In a women’s bathroom?”

“I know it sounds weird, but I had to do it.”

Linda remained sceptical, “Is it just me, or do you just want to look under their towel?”

Cid used a clip to maintain the towel covering his body, and Linda noticed it just then.

“Wow, I feel like my professionalism is being questioned here. I’m very offended.” Cid walked back, one at a time.

“Then, tell me why you’re disguised as a woman?”

“You know I can’t tell you that. Enough about my spy life. Tell me, what exactly do you want?”

“I need you to tap into your resources to find Al.”

“What happened to him?” Cid’s eyes tightened.

“They somehow tapped into our profiles and found out that Ken and Sherry were strolling outside –”

Cid cut her off, “We both knew they would come after you guys after what we did back in Kelby Hives. And you let them do whatever they wanted? You shouldn’t have let them go outside.”

“I know it was my fault. It was my job to maintain our cover,” she said, making eye contact with him. Tears illuminated in her eyes as she spoke.

He sighed, softened by her theatrics. “This is the first time that I’ve been disappointed with someone. If you’re asking for my help, I’m afraid you’ve run out of strings to pull me on, Linda. On top of that, I have a mission to carry on.”

“What kind of friend wouldn’t help another one?”

“I know we’ve had our shared moments, but my hands are tied right now,” he replied.

Linda wiped her tears and moved closer to him. Her aroma allured him, but he remained firm in his decision.

“Alastor is going to die if you don’t help me,” she pleaded.

Cid looked down, his brows wrinkling in concentration. It was hard to be stern when she was appealing like that. “I’m afraid that’s on you. Rod gave me a task that needs immediate action.”

“Fine,” Linda took a step backward, giving enough space for Cid to have a breather. “If that’s your decision, then I won’t stop you.”

“I’m so sorry,” Cid said as he picked up the wig and wore it before he entered. The door shut softly. Linda pulled a chair and blocked the doorknob. She looked at the clip once more before throwing it and waited for a few minutes until she heard the ladies’ yells and squeals.

A loud rumble overtook the sound of the showers and a man yowling as he hastened his movements. He tried to open the door, but the knob wouldn’t budge.

“Linda?! Are you there?!” Cid shouted.

“Yes?” She asked.

“Open the door, please?” Cid begged.

“I’m so sorry, my hands are tied, literally,” Linda replied.

Cid looked back and heard footsteps marching closer to him.

“Uh, I don’t appreciate the sarcasm. Fine. I’ll help. Now, could you open the door, please?”

She lifted the chair and tossed it aside. Cid unlocked the door and made a run.

“Second floor, room forty-three,” Cid whispered as he made a run to the right. The women that were after him asked Linda where he went, and she led them in the opposite direction. When she was finally dressed up, she went to the room.

\*\*\*

She knocked three times and heard the voice that it was not closed. She entered and casually walked, observing her surroundings. Through the transparent sliding window door, she saw a mini garden outside the room, with flowers hanging laden and extended, leaving no space. Their aroma was refreshing and relaxing. Inside, there was a flat-screen T.V. hung on the wall, and a DVD player placed on a desk down from it. The walls were lined with a smooth paint job, and its pale-yellow walls matched the soothing atmosphere. Linda sat down on the comfortable sofa, crossing her arms over her maroon top and her legs over the small table in front of her. The air conditioning’s cold temperature seeped through her senses, and her eyes felt heavy. She moaned under the relaxing atmosphere and forgot why she was there. Everything seemed peaceful until she heard a gun cocked on her head. She was about to rise when someone placed their palm on her shoulder and forced her back down into the seat.

A frightening voice crept up behind Linda, “Give me one reason why I shouldn’t blow your head off?”

Linda remained composed. “Because you would be branded a traitor if you blew off my head,” she replied. Linda breathed a sigh of relief as Cid put it back in its holster.

“What makes you so desperate to come at me?”

“As I said, I need your help,” she responded.

“You sabotaged my cover and –”

“You mean you got cockblocked?” Linda scoffed.

“One of the women I joined is a big shot arms dealer and smuggler.”

“So, you still haven’t identified your primary target?” Linda asked.

Cid pulled up a chair and sat opposite her. “As I said, I don’t intend to share any information with you.”

“Well, you have to reconsider that,” Linda gasped. “If we can’t bring them back, then this mission will be considered a failure.”

“Not my problem. If you don’t get paid, find another job. It’s simple.”

“You don’t understand,” Linda pleaded. “This mission isn’t just a request from the client. It is also labeled as code blue.”

“You don’t say,” Cid said.

“Of course, I wouldn’t. This was kept a secret among my teammates. Only I was told by Rod. Our main objective is to expose Theo’s wrongdoings. If we can’t bring them back, this city will be under siege. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Cid took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “And how do you intend to do it?” he asked.

“We assassinate him and give some information to the authorities,” Linda replied.

“Assassinate him? Have you lost your mind? There’s no way we can take him out,” Cid said. He paused and glanced at Linda with utter disappointment written on his face. He began to pace back and forth. “I hate to break it to you, but I don’t think you can pull this off. Did you report this to Rod?”

“Of course not,” Linda replied. She rose and faced him. “He trusted us with this mission, and I’m not going to fail him. Look, I know it may be hopeless, but you need to help us.”

Cid halted and rested his chin with his hand. Linda grew tired of the charade and stood up. Her smooth palm landed on his shoulder.

“Are you going to help us?” she asked.

“Obviously, yes,” Cid replied.

“Then, what was bothering you? I mean, you have a lot of resources at your disposal,” Linda asked, concerned.

“That was exactly what I was worried about. If the enemies were able to identify you, then there was a possibility that they were on my back and the contacts I have may turn against me. I should have argued with Rod about not helping your team,” Cid replied.

Linda firmly held Cid’s shoulders and looked into his eyes, reassuring him, “Whatever is on your mind right now, I will support you. Isn’t there anyone you can trust, someone who shares an interest with you?”

“There is someone, and I think he can pull some strings.”

\*\*\*

It was nine in the evening when they arrived at the bar that Linda did not know. Cid already filled her in on the details. She learned about the Hoarder’s illegal transactions and how close he was to being untouchable. Although it may sound preposterous, given the fact that Hoarder managed to cover his operations, it was impressive, and he had a real talent for hiding his tracks. Everything seemed so strange now. She never thought they would go down so low as to ask for help from an illegal smuggler and slave seller. Not to claim their job was any less dirty than this, but at least their goal was worth enough to be considered heroic, unlike people like Hoarder, who didn’t regard human life.

Most countries claimed that the Glade was one of the worst terrorists recorded in history. They may not give the Glade merit for some heroic actions they’ve made, or maybe they just don’t know it, but some people considered them a league of heroes allied to the people and perhaps selfless warriors who travel across the lands to help people. The only thing they were wrong about was that they were selfless. It may sound like it, but some missions they accepted led to saving countless lives, in which you might consider the merits as extra baggage.

Because of the continuous success they made ever since the end of the previous War of Blights, they managed to gain some allies across countries and other regions and nations from other continents. But that was not all. In every accomplishment, some people were put in a disadvantageous position, hence they also created various enemies who wanted to put an end to them. They may not have known it, but they needed to be careful about entering the territory of poisonous snakes like the Hoarder, as he may be one of those enemies of Glade.

After presenting Cid’s VIP card, the door opened, and the guard let them in. Linda’s eyes did not let go, following the back of Cid as he entered the Cassa Hal. She pulled him back, getting close to him when she noticed that Cid was walking with an uneasy, observant eye. The place was nothing like before. The bustling crowd, the cherry wine, and the keg being passed by familiar faces he met before, any trace of those revelries could not be found now. There were only a few people who entered here, but those few were dangerous people, people who they clearly should not be messing with.

“Why are you sweating?” Linda dropped the question.

Cid realized the sweat pouring down to his shirt. Even the air conditioner couldn’t help to drop down his rising temperature.

“Something’s going on.”

The bar was filled with an assortment of people, ranging from businessmen in black suits to those in casual attire. Some were even accompanied by mercenaries wearing light armours. As Linda and Cid made their way through the crowd, they were met by a sullen-faced individual blocking their path.

“Cole.”

“Hello, Cid.”

“What’s going on?”

The informant’s face did not expect Cid’s lacked of information about the current case. Thus, he grimaced.

“Oh, boy. We need a room.”

Cole led them to the back of the bar and down a hallway, where a bouncer escorted them to a private room. As they sat down on the couch, Linda was left on her own.

“Tell me, what’s happening?” Cid asked.

“You don’t know? You’re supposed to be a spy.”

“If I knew, I wouldn’t have come here to ask you, my most trusted asset, what’s going on.”

“Right. I know you’re busy.” Cole opened the door and peeked outside, checking for any unwanted residents. “Look, do you remember the robots that were given as gifts to the police? It turns out they are gathering information and identification of citizens under the impression of the new resident’s rights bill imposed by the mayor. Do you know what this means?”

“What are you talking about?” Linda interrupted.

“A clean slate,” Cid said.

“What?”

“Theo is going to eliminate those who don’t belong here in Kayon. In other words, they are targeting people with dirty businesses and those who may hurt his enterprise. That means us.”

“He’s taking over the city, is that what you’re saying?”

Cole nodded.

“Whether I like it or not, I’m going to be dragged into this mess.”

“You should leave this city soon before they take over,” Cole suggested, lifting the couch and opening a small compartment to retrieve a bag. “I know an underground tunnel that they don’t know about.”

“Not yet. I’m not going anywhere. I still have a mission.”

“Suit yourself.”

“Wait, I need your help. Our comrades have been kidnapped, and we have no idea where to find them.”

Linda pulled out her phone and showed Cole pictures of Alastor and Sherry.

“I know them.”

“Really?”

Linda’s face lit up.

“They’re unforgettable, especially that guy.” He pointed at Alastor. “They were brought here by those canaries to the Hoarder.”

“Great, do you know where they are being held?”

“Obviously not here. The Hoarder was prepared if Theo did something like this. They were transferred to another location last week or before that.”

“Did you hear where it is?”

“No, but I know a guy. He’s part of a gang that Theo gave power to as a front cover for his operation.”

“Don Trifalgo.”

“Exactly.”

“Either way, he’s the only one I know whose smart enough to pull some strings under Theo, so don’t do anything that might turn them against you guys.”

With that, Linda and Cid devised a plan on how to sneak back into the facility.

# Chapter 4

**I**t wasn’t something that he expected. An order that only involved repairing a fuse box suddenly turned into a hunt, except in this case, Gary was the one being hunted. One moment, Gary was sorting out his toolbox after he finished repairing the fuse box in an old basement, then a part of the ceiling collapsed. He was able to avoid it, but the heavy fall out of the debris caused the frail cobble floor to breakdown. Gary was dragged along and fell into an underground tunnel.

Slipping through a small space between the collapsed walls, Gary struggled to move as a mutt monster chased after him, its acidic saliva spitting in the air and melting the crowbar that was stuck on the ground. Gary managed to break through, leaving the mutt behind with a sleeve of his shirt torn apart from grazing with its sharp claw.

He reached for his phone in his pocket and dialled someone. “Hello? Is somebody there? It’s Gary, the new guy. I’m kind of stuck here in an underground tunnel, and I would appreciate it if you could come and rescue me. Oh, and uh, you might want to send a big gun, a lot of big guns.”

The device began to stutter and became a shattering static. Gary shut it down and began to tread his way into a room just above the curb platform. He tried to open it, but the doorknob wouldn’t budge. So, he proceeded with a different approach. With enough distance between him and the door, Gary charged at it with his arm, hammering his way in. The door stumbled down along the clustered weights barred inside.

Red and yellow flashed on the panel under the hanging screen. Just as he thought, the entire place was abandoned. He guessed that this must have been an old developing railroad that was cut off due to some unforeseen circumstances. The thing that worried him the most was the fact that he might not find his way out of this place.

The cobwebs dangling around the corner creep him out. Suspiciously, he looked at the chair and touched it, but it crumbled down. His attention was brought back to the panel and the monitor.

As of now, Gary was trying to get the computer working, but some keyboards were not responding. He opened the latch under it and found out that the wires were messed up. There was no way it could be fixed in that condition. Out of frustration, he slammed his fist on the panel. For a few seconds, the monitor above flashed and showed numbers flashing on the screen.

He began to look for alternatives on how to reach out to them when suddenly, a faint rumble from the ceiling caught his attention. The broken ceiling fan shook, and the monitors hanging on the walls fell. The rumble outside the premises stopped on top of the railway.

He covertly looked at the window, waiting for what was going to happen. His expectation came true, there was something out there as he saw a huge figure fall on the roof that collapsed. A large figure of shadow stood tall in the middle, and with a single swing of his sword, the dust shook off. The monsters creeping out in the darkness wagged their tails off and ran quietly back to the hole whence they crawled.

Gary took the liberty of using his phone and taking a picture. Sweating profusely due to a frantic heartbeat, he forgot the first lesson he was taught back in academia: always be discrete no matter how tempting it is. A single flash from the phone would be enough to cause unnecessary attention. Now, with a flick of the camera, the ray from its eyes, coming from the hole beneath its menacing twisted helmet, stalked down to Gary.

“Shit,” he muttered under his breath.

The shadow pressed, each step causing the ground to tremble. Its menacing appearance was intimidating, and with one hand, it effortlessly lifted a large piece of debris out of its way. Gary cowardly gasped for air, hiding behind a panel near the corner of the door, peering out as the shadow brandished its giant sword with one hand. The figure eerily stayed outside and was observing around to find its prey. Once satisfied, it turned and walked away slowly. Gary breathed a sigh of relief and cautiously approached the panel. The shadow darted back into the room with lightning speed, catching Gary off guard. He shuddered before bolting out of the door to save his life.

The shadow lifted its sword with both hands and swung it with a mighty force, obliterating the barrier between them. Gary could feel the palpable fear in his chest as he ran through the hallway, dodging the debris caused by the shadow’s colossal steps. Looking back, Gary saw the shadow’s full stature. It was adorned in silver armour that covered its entire body, from twisted horns to its sparkling legs, shimmering in the dimly. Gary felt its malevolent intent emanating from its violet eyes. He stopped for a moment, staring at the silver armour, before the shadow increased its pace, forcing Gary to snap out of his trance and run. Just then, Lance’s voice crackled through the phone, asking if Gary was there. The man in armour began to close in, destroying everything in its path. Gary struggled to be heard over the static-filled line.

“Dumbass, I’m being chased by a lunatic in an underground tunnel. Do you have a plan to get me out of here?”

“The rescue team is assembling now. Hang in there,” Lance replied.

Gary reached the end of the corridor, the shadow loomed behind him, increasing its pace. With a long, bone-chilling howl, it charged at Gary, who frantically rushed out the door. The darkness outside was filled with bats fluttering and flying into the open window. He found himself in a stockroom for cargos. He ran to the right, skillfully hiding behind crates to avoid being spotted by the enemy. Suddenly, a man in silver armour burst through the walls, enjoying the thrill of the hunt. Gary felt a vibration in his pocket, but it wasn’t the phone Port gave him; it was the canary’s regular phone. He groaned as he answered the call, relieved to hear Ina’s voice.

“Thank goodness you’re still alive,” Ina said.

“Can you tell me what’s going on here? Why haven’t they sent a rescue team?” Gary asked.

“We could, but the door they used before is stuck due to the collapse of the pillars and some walls,” Ina explained.

“Does that mean I’m stuck here?” Gary asked, concerned.

“Yes, but there might be a way out. You need to investigate the area. I’ll search for any records we have on this place,” Ina suggested.

“Why does it feel like you guys are behind all of this?” Gary accused.

“Because we are,” Ina admitted.

“What?!” Gary exclaimed, just as he heard the enemy’s helmet screeching against its gorget, tracking him down.

Gary frantically scanned his surroundings and spotted an open window. However, he hesitated for a moment due to its height. As he glanced behind him to locate the enemy, he couldn’t see it. When he looked back at the window, the ten foot tall in silver armour raised its greatsword.

“Shit,” Gary muttered, rolling to the side to avoid the attack. The devices, debris of walls, and other equipment was torn off when the greatsword slash through. He glanced back, saw the sword briefly stuck in the ground, and sprinted towards the window. Gary jumped, shimmied through the small spaces between craters, hopped, and hung from the window. Meanwhile, the enemy raised its sword like a spear and hurled it at Gary.

Gary’s heart raced as he felt the sword’s pressure behind him. He let go of his left hand and kicked the wall, shifting his position and felt a sharp whistle from the sword as it sliced through the air and the wall, cracking nearby ledges that Gary hoped to hold onto. Determined to reach the window, he fortified his legs and jumped, climbing up and landing on the small space between the crack walls. Even behind it, he could hear the faint rumble of metal coming closer. He held his breath to slow down his heart rate, then slowly moved forward. He noticed a knife stuck on the wall and pulled it out. However, he made a mistake by removing it as the man in silver armour noticed the wall’s crack. With lightning bolt speed, the enemy punched through the barrier, breaking through the wall Gary was hiding behind. Fortunately, Gary bent down to his knees just as the enemy punched through. He covered his mouth to silence his breathing and remained still as the enemy pulled its arm out of the wall. He gradually stood up and moved cautiously, hoping to avoid detection. However, the walls in front of him cracked, drawing the enemy’s attention back to him. The enemy raised its sword high and hurled it towards Gary.

Gary struggled to move due to the debris obstructing his path. Rather than trying to remove the rubble, he bent low. Suddenly, a sword swung through the air and sliced through the craters, narrowly grazing Gary’s cheek. He could hear footsteps coming towards him, so he quickly raised his arm and pressed his palm against the wall behind him. “Trembler de Terre,” he chanted, causing the wall to shake and dust to fly out from the corners. He repeated the phrase, but the wall remained still. With the man charging towards him, Gary chanted the phrase one last time, pouring all his mana into it. The ground shook, and cracks began to trail in every corner of the room. “Trembler de Terre!” he yelled, and the ground collapsed beneath him. He fell to the lower level and moaned as he pushed debris off of him. The room was filled with gas tanks, wires in disarray, and sparking cut-offs on the ground.

Gary looked up and saw the man in silver armour again. “You again? Why won’t you leave me alone?” he muttered, hiding behind the gas tank. The enemy’s eyes scanned the entire room, and Gary observed his surroundings. He noticed the door just beyond the open space of the gas tanks, a generator that had not been activated, and a wire that sparkled conveniently near the generator. He silently ran towards the generator and tapped the keyboard to activate it. The wire sparked violently, and for the final phase of his plan, Gary threw his knife to make a hole in the gas tanks, spewing gas out and going for the closer ones. He diverted the enemy’s attention by throwing a pebble, then ran towards the door. The enemy charged towards him, but Gary already made it through the door.

As he heard the gas leak spark and flames trailing back to their source, Gary could feel the heat behind him. The gas exploded causing a chain reaction that set ablaze the nearby tanks, which trampled down the enemy. The pillars gave up, and fragments fell on top of him, burying him with the flames expunging from the ground. Gary crouched on the ground, covering his head. When he opened his eyes, the room was filled with dust circling the bare-lit room. Broken glass was scattered everywhere, and some stones rolled over.

Gary groaned as he spoke through the phone. “So, do the two of you have any intention to tell me why I’m the magnet?”

“This is the perfect opportunity for us to gather some information,” she replied.

“The fuck? Do you have any idea how scary it is here? There’s someone who’s after me.”

“We are well aware of that,” she said.

“Then why take the risk? I’m gonna die here.”

“You are a member of the elite agents, Canary. Do you think we didn’t think this through? We know you are capable of fending off monsters all by yourself. Besides, you can still use your magic.”

“That’s the problem. There’s so many monsters that’s creeping around here. I won’t last long.”

“I know this is hard, but you need to do it. While the rest of the security team was occupied with opening the gate and rescuing you, we were able to gather information about the scale of their operation,” Ina said.

“Fine, but I need you to tell me where I should go,” Gary replied.

“I reviewed the previous records of the area’s layout. There’s supposed to be an escalator platform in the B1 square area. I suggest you look at the hallway to orient yourself.”

Gary took a brief moment to stretch his muscles before walking outside. He saw the map hanging on the wall across the three-way intersection. There were several papers and flyers on the walls, but they were of no importance. He went down the hallway.

If his deduction was correct, he was in the reception area of the research and development department. The B1 square area was to the right beyond the walls of the security room, situated between the main laboratory and the technology testing area, which led through the A1 square area.

“Ina, I’m in the research and development area on the ground floor,” Gary said.

“Good. There’s supposed to be a weapon stockroom on the left side, behind the directory room. Grab a weapon and proceed to the right side of the platform.”

Gary followed the path, but he couldn’t shake off the feeling that someone was following him. He picked up his pace, but soon regretted his hastening as his footsteps were echoing throughout the hall.

“Is someone there?” he called out, looking over his shoulder. “Of course, if I was stalking someone, I wouldn’t say anything.”

He stopped abruptly and grabbed a chair, hurling it at the glass case of an axe. Gary unsheathed the knife from its scabbard and raised the axe, glancing over his shoulder once more with a menacing gaze before proceeding forward.

With sheer strength, he destroyed the doorknob and entered the room. There were plentiful guns hung on the wall and some were kept on the crates. Gary found the right keep for the axe and strapped on guns that he could easily carry. Overloading himself with guns would hinder his progress, so he chose his weapons carefully. He raised his gun and pointed it forward, along with the flashlight, as he moved discreetly through the darkness.

When he emerged into a well-lit section of the area, he scanned the unlit part of the hallway. Suddenly, the bulb above him flickered and shattered, raining down on him, but the source of the problem was ahead of him. Gary quickly brought up his gun as soon as he heard whispers in the darkness.

Gary aimed his gun ahead. With the weight of the pressure bearing down on his shoulders, he walked faster with a steady gait and a vigilant eye. He didn’t hesitate for even a moment as he strolled through the darkness. He heard it again, an inconceivable whispering through the darkness. He looked behind him and was sure of it, the whisper was coming from a creature that was stalking him.

Gary’s flashlight stuttered and for a moment, he caught a glimpse of the creature. Its skin was pale and had long hair, its skinny frame revealing the bones stretching over it. As soon as the light touched its skin, it crawled back into the darkness. Without wasting any more time, Gary shot the creature relentlessly until his gun ran out of bullets. He reloaded, but in that moment of diminished attention, another one of the creatures emerged from the darkness, eyeing at him.

His lips trembled and he gulped down the remaining saliva in his mouth. He placed his handgun back into its holster and equipped the submachine gun. The creatures crawled, slowly and nimbly as if they had no bones to break. Their whispers were calling him to join in the darkness. Gary, who momentarily lost focus, returned to the environment as one of the creatures got closer to him. Gary aimed and pulled the trigger out of panic. The muzzle friction flashed with every bullet that sputtered out of its nose. The monster shrieked, blood was spilled all over and it fell. Soon after, others follow. A loud screech reverberated and vibrated throughout the section, causing Gary to flinch and cover his ears from the shattering noise. He sprinted away as the other monsters crawled after him. He shot without looking behind.

Instead of facing them, Gary reached the part of the hallway where the light from outside was visible and dashed away from the nightmarish creatures. He managed to evade one of the enemies and killed it with his gun. He did not want to use his mana, but it seemed that the situation required an extreme reaction. He fisted his right hand and began to recite the magic, “Blanã de aer.” He opened his hand towards behind him and a blast of air pushed over the enemy, covering all four corners of space. He stole a glance for a moment. Some of the creatures were impaled from the broken steel pipes, some had broken limbs, disabling their movements, but the majority were dead. He let out a heavy sigh before walking ahead on the path. As Gary turned once more, he saw a hundred eyes watching him in the darkness.

For one last time, he ran.

“Ina! Is there any place I can hide?” he shouted into his communicator.

“Go to the lower level. It’s supposed to automatically lock when there are monsters around,” Ina replied.

Following Ina’s instructions, Gary headed down to the lower level. The door automatically slid open and he stopped, waiting for a few moments. Shadows started hurtling towards him. One of them stopped and stood tall, glaring at Gary through the window. It screamed as it saw him standing in the middle of the stair.

As soon as the door automatically opened, he went in, drew out his handgun and shot the monster in the head before it could even get close. He evaded the lifeless body as the other monsters heard the gunshot and quickly turned back to the source. Frantically, Gary looked around for something that could help him. The emergency button caught his attention and he sprinted towards it, slamming his fist into it. A barrage emerged, blocking the way. Six monsters managed to pass the barrier, and there were two others that cut through half of the barrier, but they were no longer as threatening. Gary wiped the thread of sweat off his face, pulled out his axe, and swung it at the closest enemy. The rusty smell of blood spewed out as the head rolled down the stairs. He held it aloft with both hands and threw it at the enemy, along with the axe that was stuck in its body. The blood began to soak the floor.

Gary sidestepped the other two monsters, drew out his handgun, and threw its knife at the enemy in front of him. He raised his gun to the enemy’s face and pulled the trigger. Gary then looked back at the remaining two enemies and cracked his neck. He chanted a spell, “Blanã de aer,” and the two monsters stumbled back from the fierce blast of wind. Gary reloaded his handgun and drew out his submachine gun. With a hard grip on both guns, Gary relentlessly rained bullets on the enemies, and their voices could not be heard over the continuous rhythmic loud bang echoing through the place. The monsters retreated. He pressed forward.

He found a safe room not far from the stairway he came from. The place was not too shabby, unlike others that were left unkempt and smelled indifferent to those monsters he fought before. It was the only room Gary could tolerate, although it was not good; it was the best of the worst rooms he checked. Gary found no suitable bed to sleep in, and the foul odour lingered in the air. He took a nap by leaning against the wall. His eyes were tightly shut, but his mind remained alert. It took ten minutes of silence before he fell into slumber. Two hours passed since he was stuck there, and he napped for thirty minutes, but he had no luck finding edible food. The refrigerator in the safe room was nothing but garbage, with worms crawling out of it, and flies hovering around it.

Gary placed his things back into his holster, reloaded and equipped his weapons, and then allowed his physically and mentally tired body to fall and slump back against the wall. He breathed heavily before going out for another chapter of the horrifying adventure. The company’s phone vibrated and the screen lightened up before declining back to silent. Gary thought it was a bug until the vibration made him stiffen, and a jolt scuttled down his spine. He caught up with his breath and picked up the call, answering it.

“Gary? Are you still there, buddy?” Port asked.

“Yes!” Gary’s face brightened. “I am well and still kicking to survive. Now, when will you plan to save me in this hellhole? And how is there an underground facility here?”

“This tunnel was built thirty years ago, during the War of Blights,” Port explained.

“I have my suspicions, but what the hell.” Gary said.

“You heard it right. Bastards from the east once took over the Vesoga Plain and built underground railways to gain an advantage against the united front army of the six countries. The army found out about this and bombarded the small facility on the ground. Theodore and other investigators suggested that not all of them got killed in that incident. Instead, they got stuck here. We don’t know what happened, but some mad scientists stayed here and continued their beloved research. Though, I think you can already guess what happened here.”

“So, you’re saying that they were killed by their experiments?” Gary asked over the phone.

“That’s right,” There was a brief pause before he continued. “And those experiments may be one of those creatures you have met,”

“That makes a lot of sense. I never recognized any of them,” Gary said, nodding to himself.

“Tell me, where are you now?” Port asked.

“I’m on the right side of the lower level of the research and development section. I’m in a safe room,” Gary answered.

“Stay there. We’re coming to get you.”

“Wait! I activated a system that summons a barrier, a thick layer of a barrier,” Gary interrupted.

“Why?”

“I was chased by a horde of freaking she-like monsters,” Gary explained, his voice trembling in fear.

But it was too late to warn them about the monsters. Gary could hear gunshots ringing through the phone. A few moments later, the gunfire stopped, and he could hear the rustling sound of the breeze.

“Port. Hello. Is anybody there?” Gary asked, hoping for a response.

Someone coughed through the phone before replying, “We’re alive. Some of my men got minor injuries.”

“I’m glad that none of you were killed,” Gary replied, relief flooding through him.

“Thank you for not giving us a warning,” Port said.

“You are aware that we’re in an old abandoned station built during the War of Blights? Anything could happen here,” Gary said.

“I know, smartass,” Port said, before dropping the call.

Gary noticed a shadow passing through the blurred window. He pulled out his handgun and unlocked its safe. Holding it high, he pointed it straight at the door, waiting patiently for the incoming intruder with the utmost vigilance to his surroundings. Gary held his gun as he slowly walked towards the door. There it went again, a shadow overlapping, passing through. He kicked the door and aimed at the presumed position, but it was only a rat, rather large, just as big as a cat. Gary shrieked and shot it. He hesitantly looked at the other rats creeping around the corner with beads of sweat streaming down his chin. As he tried to open the door, it crumbled down on itself. He backed away, observing at the hinges and noticed that they were rusty. He sighed in relief, thinking that if he did not remove his hand from the door, he might have been injured or worse, infected.

As of now, Gary was taking the route to the engine room on another lower level in the right section of the research and development area. He was drawn there by a strange noise coming from below. A loud clanging of metals caught his attention. So far, he has not encountered any monsters. Not that he was complaining, but it was better to have the rats as his company than being chased by a horde of freaks.

On his way back, an old model of a camera caught his attention, and he remembered what Lance told him before about gathering evidence. Thankfully, the camera was still working, and the storage was oddly empty. “*Who could’ve bought this without using it?*” he thought. “*It’s better to have one than none.*”

Entering the dark engine room, he tried to turn on the switch, but only a few of them worked. Of all places, the only section of the facility that was normally working was in the research and development section. All the energy from the previous location was either non-operational or barely operative. Over the walls, the window of the operation panel, and the machines, blood was smeared like an abstract painting on a canvas all over the place. The foul stench of ripped-off organs hurt his nose, and no matter how he covered it, the strong odour managed to find its way to his snout. He held his breath while walking.

The door was unlocked, and he entered the room. The panel appeared to be functioning properly. He read the notes and found out that its function was to maintain the level of energy supply to the other sectors. Gary decided not to mess around with it. Even if he wanted to, this knowledge was beyond his expertise. Instead, he took a picture of it and the machines, including the gruesome parts.

Gary decided to follow the trail, so he prepared his axe as he entered the engine room and another unknown sector. Nothing would be more insane than to come out unprepared. A flickering light across the hallway, the sound of falling objects from the unknown, and the loud wheezing were enough to put him in a state of near-paranoia. But that was not enough to hamper him.

There was no mistaking it. Gary heard a footstep coming from the left side at the four crossways. He ducked and hid in the fallen craters near the room. His watchful gaze waited for the incoming person. His hearing was right. There is someone. One step closer to his sight, he could already hear the insensible low tone of yattering of an old man speaking alone. His hands kept plastered to his bald head as if he had hair to curve. He paused for a moment and looked down at his charts. He picked out a pen from his white lab coat and began to write something.

He yawned and arranged his disarrayed glasses, lining them up on his sight. His freckles were saggy, as were his eye bags. When he was done, he moved forward out of Gary’s sight. Gary opened the door and ran in a hushed movement and came out of the other one.

His eyes trailed back to the man and followed him with a discreet gait. Gary made a sprint to the turning point, to the right where the old man went. He turned on his camera and captured the old man’s back.

Gary continued to follow him, but he noticed that there was something amiss in the place. No monster dared to get close to him. He wondered why. The old man stood in front of the door. His face was grey, then shifted into a frantic one as he looked back at his charts and to his tablet. He seemed to be in a hurry but reluctant to languish.

Throughout the weeks that Gary spent in headquarters, doing paperwork and being a lapdog, he became familiar with the distinct look of distress on his own face. His thoughts were written all over his face, and it was obvious that he was troubled. It was clear that the old man had done something that would make his superiors angry.

Gary kept his watchful gaze fixed on the old man as he got up from crouching and walked away. He followed him at a safe distance as he made his way to a small sector laboratory, passing through wooden crates and up the stairs to the panel room. Gary carefully climbed the ladder and stared down at the scientist.

Before long, Gary heard the door slide open, and the scientist gasped. Gary could only see the feet of the person who entered. He moved closer to the right and unloaded the ladder down carefully near the door, so as not to make any noise.

He moved and crouched quietly and listened behind the transparent glass. Just as he settled in, the old scientist shouted at the man wearing a red trench coat. The man’s long, plain, goldenrod hair covered his bored expression, and a smirk twisted on his face.

At a certain point in their conversation, the old scientist burst out in anger.

“What d-d-do you mean delay?!” he shouted as he slammed the chart on the table. “Do you have any idea how delicate the experiment is?”

“Calm down, doc,” the man in the trench coat replied. “The circumstances are out of our hands. With the previous explosion – the public has been eyeing us. On top of that, there are still unknown variables that need to be unveiled. We can’t afford to continue without expanding our security first. Lest you want the Canary to find out what we’re doing here?”

The old scientist sounded defeated as he clenched his fist.

“If that’s your decision. So be it. But you need to get the girl from that lowlife Hoarder. She’s the only survivor of our successful experiments.”

“We’re working on that.”

“How hard can it be? Just pay the bastard.”

“It’s not that simple,” he clicked his tongue. “We threatened him, remember? I don’t have evidence, but I know he will drive a hard bargain just to take advantage of us.”

“Perhaps you’re right. We have been facing a lot of mishaps ever since Don Trifalgo’s men failed to protect the product we purchased from the black market in Rauthin.”

“I understand your concern, doc. There’s no need to fear Theo. He’s not dumb enough to think that this inconvenience is your fault. Certainly, he wouldn’t lash out in anger at you. That’s why we’ve lent our automatic robots to the city’s police so that we have an eye on the citizens, including adventurers, hunters, and mercenaries.”

As Gary listened in on their conversation, he couldn’t help but wonder what kind of experiment they were working on and what they meant by the girl being the only survivor. The mention of the black market and Don Trifalgo’s men added another layer of mystery to the already puzzling situation.

The old scientist walked to the drawer and tried to reach the folder on top of it. He raised his body on tiptoes as his hands made it through. As he drew back to normal, his back ached, and his bones crackled as he groaned. The old man’s legs wriggled to balance.

“My back is killing me again. Do you mind helping this poor old man, Cain?” he asked.

Cain grunted and dragged a roller chair to the old scientist’s position. The old man sat down, and his face showed relief as his tottering body eased.

“Glen, how was my father?” Cain asked. “Is he in his quarter?”

Glen’s eyes tightened. “I’m afraid he’s out,” he said.

“I see.” Cain felt crestfallen hearing about the condition of his father, although he expected it.

Cain gazed around the room, looking for something. His disquietude prevailed stronger as he heard an explosion earlier. Finally, he stood in front of a panel and looked at the monitor, which was connected to a closed-circuit television in some parts of the ruin.

Since monsters were lurking in other sectors, they decided to place security cameras in certain sectors where the monsters couldn’t reach. The way was either blocked by barriers or guarded by automatic weapons.

His eyes squinted as the light brightened and focused on the surroundings. He noticed that one of the security cameras was not working. That part was set in the hallway at the entrance of the Research and Development area. It only captured the shockwave in front of the door.

“Do you have any idea how the gas tanks exploded?” Cain asked.

“I have no idea. But this is not something you should be surprised about. It happens sometimes,” Glen replied. He looked at the folder he clutched to his armpit, pulling the chair close to Cain. “Although, I can’t say that we should allow this routine further.”

“What do you mean?”

Glen did not move, did not stir, his expression remained unfettered from the impending predicament. He leaned forward to the table and opened the folder. He began to read the charts, vitals, and results from the various tests he conducted.

“Your father might have fallen under numerous psychological disorders if the stigma of Blight can’t be controlled,” Glen said.

“What?” Cain stared down at Glen. “You said he has a few more years.”

Glen sighed. “The beast inside of him is the reason he’s like this. It keeps struggling to gain control. No matter how much medicine we give him, it can’t hold him down.”

Cain slammed his hands on the panel in frustration.

“Damn it,” Cain exclaimed.

“We should have considered taking him down,”

As Glen prompted the words off his mouth, Cain stabbed him with a murderous stare.

“What I meant was to restrict his movements,” Glen explained, staggering back. “He may have the collar dampener beneath that armour, but he still possessed a destructive physical power that could level this entire facility. You, of all people, knew the extent of what your father was capable of.”

Cain stood silent for a moment, his eyes seeming distant as if staring off to a faraway sea. His thoughts were filled with worries, not for himself but for the future of his father. A single snap of his fingers brought him back to reality. Glen hesitated for a second before speaking the right words.

“I know it’s hard. Believe me. As a scientist and as a researcher, I have to neglect my emotions to achieve fruitful results for the betterment of the many,” Glen said. “Your father is no different than that. He served his country well and yet—”

“And yet, they turned a blind eye to his condition,” Cain interrupted. His eyes reflected disgust. “After what he did, the sacrifice he made during the war, they mocked him behind our backs. How ungrateful they could be. They even attempted to steal his title as a lord, claiming they have the right to take over since he was incapable of thinking, a wrathful beast that must be exterminated.”

His words were not only filled with sadness, but his heart was also filled with loathsomeness for certain people.

“You truly detest them, huh. I can’t blame you,” Glen concurred. “They will do everything to broaden their power. Very few in the Arbiter council I knew that remained pure to our goal.”

Hearing those sympathetic words allayed Cain’s expression. He sounded at ease now.

“If it weren’t for Nephirius and his son Theo, our position in the empire wouldn’t have lasted long.”

“Speaking of which, who is ruling your land now?” Glen asked.

“My mother.”

“Ah, I see.”

In all the years he spent working with Cain, Glen learned two or more things about him. He was a man like his father, calm but outrageous in battle. He had the gravitas of a commander, but at the same time, his procrastinating attitude often bested the good parts of him. He worked hard all day, but the rest was equal to twice as much. He was kept here to help plan the route for supplies, weapons smuggling, money laundering, and other unspeakable activities that they have done. Almost all the tasks given to him, he accomplished.

Cain fell into silence and thought deeply before accepting the cold-hearted decision. What choice did he have?

“I’ll handle this situation,” he said with certainty in his voice. “I can’t let this be a hindrance to Theo’s plan, and certainly, my father won’t forgive himself if he ever becomes a liability. We came here for healing and to stay away from mishaps back home, but it seems we’ll eventually become a burden to Theo.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, Cain,” Glen said, trying to comfort his friend. “Nephirius supported the effort to improve your father’s recovery. He was the one who ordered Theo to help you, and he willingly complied. If it weren’t for Thebas, your father wouldn’t be in pain right now.”

“I wish I could meet that bastard and have my revenge, but he’s dead. All of my murderous thoughts were for naught.”

“Don’t be a fool. If he were alive, you wouldn’t stand a chance against him.”

“Was he really that strong?”

Glen nodded. “He fought Nephirius all by himself and came out alive.” He rubbed his chin and closed his eyes, as if remembering. “I can still remember back then, when the unforgiving flames scorched the land, and I was younger. They fought with incredible battle prowess that shook the land, but in the end, none of them could best each other. The fight ended when the bomb that Nephirius’s men created led to the destruction of Taronda.”

“I never heard of that.”

“That’s because you weren’t born at that time, neither was Theo,” Glen said. “Theo’s father, Nephirius, was ordered to take over Taronda, but he failed many times to slay the five great generals of King Ignis. When he gained a foothold on the bay, that’s when it began. With the power of the Blight, enemies succumbed to hysteria, resulting in large-scale killing. But Thebas, who was immune to it, fought the entire armada and prevented them from marching forward.”

“A one-man army, huh?” Cain said. “And what happened to this Blight you spoke of? I heard it only exists in bedtime stories.”

“No, it really does exist. Nephirius found it and culminated it into a weapon of destruction, but it didn’t last. Blight was sealed by none other than Thebas’s master, Ace Kosturi.”

“But clearly, that’s not all of it, right?”

“Of course not. I speculate that the Hemil Klust is the remnant of the lost fragment of what the legends call Brigante Ark, a powerful weapon that once subdued humankind. Theo and his father intend to test its capabilities, to see whether it has the same prowess as the last one they found or not.” Glen looked down and stared at his reflection in the window. “But I do not think that’s what they’re looking for or could hope to control.”

“What do you mean?” Cain asked. “Is Hemil Klust truly uncontrollable?”

“Yes and no,” Glen sighed. “Long before the end of the War of Blights, the first one, the plague, spread across the land. There was a powerful clan of hunters that didn’t fall into madness and the plague sealed by the power of Brigante Ark. But no matter how we try to make sense of it or research it, we cannot find any correlation as to how the Brigante Ark stopped it or where it went.”

“Are you talking about the House a Retoliam? The clan that’s not immune and is called Hunters?”

“Their bloodline is false.” The old man hunchback. “Even if their claim was true, the dominant genes had long been diluted to none. They are no longer the formidable clan that they had once been.”

“Because it happened five thousand years ago,” he replied.

Glen returned a look. “That’s right. The annals of those events have disappeared, and there is no telling what they have done since then, only speculations,” he said, brushing his chin. “If we could ever get our hands on Thebas’ remains, I could examine his DNA structure and gain an idea of how he could resist the power of the Blight. Maybe, just maybe, I could compile his genetic information and apply it to human subjects.”

“What makes you think his remains have value?”

“Aren’t you paying attention?” he asked, gazing at him with disappointment for a moment before returning to normal. “As I said, he’s immune to the Blight.”

“Hmm, I can see where you’re coming from.”

“Have you heard of the Discarded Genes Possession Theory?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“This was explained by none other than Roydo seventy years ago. It’s a fascinating theory. It’s an evolutionary theory that emphasizes the possession of the same genetic information from the individual ancestor to the far ahead lineage of bloodline through the affirmation and the process of clustering of scrap genetic information. The first-generation dominant genes pass to the next and could become recessive of the previous dominant possession. The process will repeat again, and the genetic information will be discarded as scrap information and will continue to be hidden until a certain bloodline possesses the hidden scrap information, mixed and triggered, becoming the dominant genes. I believe that Thebas had undergone that process and became dominant, and that is why he was immune to the Blight. I wouldn’t be surprised if he has an ancestor with a similar stature.”

“I know that passing genes abides by filtering the genetic information so that there could be no error in genetic makeup happening to future offspring. How could he possess it?”

“A stroke of luck. That is one of the billions of chances to acquire those genetic traits,” Glen amusingly said. “His bloodline coming from both of his parents must have been connected to the family of the first line of the Hunters.”

“A genetic information reincarnation, so to speak.”

“Right,” Glen agreed.

Glen’s phone began to vibrate. He answered it and nodded before turning to Cain with a serious expression. “I understand. I’ll let him know,” he said, putting the phone back in his coat and standing still for a moment. His back felt better now. “Just so you know, the lone survivor subject escaped from the Hoarder’s men.”

“What?” Cain said in surprise. “That bastard can’t be trusted after all.”

“Theo has no choice but to kill him.”

“I understand why he’s being cautious,” Cain said. “But is killing a mass of the city the only option? Is there no other way to avoid bloodshed?”

“He’s being prudent.”

“Prudent?!” Cain shouted. “How is killing a mass crowd of the city being prudent?!”

Hearing those words, Gary was surprised.

“Because we will create a distraction and have the Glade mercenaries take the blame.”

Cain hissed and walked towards the exit. “I’ll have no part in it,” he flatly said. “I’ll prepare to extract my father.”

“Perhaps that’s best for you.”

“When will he carry out the plan?” Cain asked.

“I don’t know.”

After that, Cain left without saying another word. The gloomy appearance engulfed him as he walked out.

Gary looked beyond the countless glass tubes and panels and saw the exit that led to the Testing Area. He crawled to the stairs and crouched. Whenever he saw Glen looking behind him, he moved forward and hid behind the machines before probing for another one.

Finally, he noticed a sharp look creeping behind him, and when he looked back, the old scientist was nowhere to be found. Gary didn’t mind where he was gone and proceeded to the automatic sliding door.

Meanwhile, Glen walked down the hallway with his phone to his ear, talking to someone. “I found him. Don’t worry, he’s still on track,” Glen said. “Yes, please. I would like you to kill that snivelling runt. He knows too much now.”

Glen nodded. “Good thing you caught those worms. I wonder how they managed to get here.”

He chuckled hearing the reasons why. “Damn that Port. Now those bastards not only heard our plans, but they also know how our operations work. Well, I’m glad Port has taken responsibility for the decision he made.”

As Glen walked down the hallway, the lights flickered and the bulbs stuttered before coming back to life. He noticed that the old man was no longer there, and the only sound was the beeping coming from the screen on the elevator, with flashing letters going back and forth. Suddenly, the room went completely dark.

\*\*\*

There was nothing *they* could do to Gary’s situation so they considered the unplanned distraction for Ina and Lance to sneak into the server room. They proceeded quietly to avoid drawing attention. As they passed countless rooms, they stopped knowing that a key card was required to enter the server room. Ina pulled something out of her pocket and presented it to Lance.

Lance frowned, “When did you get this?” he asked.

“Yesterday,” Ina replied. “I seduced one of the guards.”

“You seduced him?” Lance said, surprised.

Ina stared at him sternly. “Not to offend. I just kinda didn’t expect you could, you know.”

Lance nervously looked away from Ina’s stern gaze. He slid the key card to the reader, and the door opened. The room was open as the staff were busy finding a way to open the door. Ina grabbed a chair and hurried to the mainframe in the middle of the room.

Lance pulled out a cord and connected it to his mobile device and to the mainframe plug-in. Ina started decoding and transferring the files to Lance’s device. She looked back at Lance who was attempting to reach Gary, but the signal was not in their favour. Lance rose from sitting and gazed covertly outside. When the loading was finished, Ina pulled out the cord and walked steadily. Their footsteps walked silently until they saw two shadows turning their way.

Lance instinctively pulled Ina and squeezed through to the small-tight space of the hallway. Their legs crossed over one another, and Lance glanced away from Ina as he could smell the fragrant scent of a white flower emanating from her. Ina, too, was in an awkward position, her slender legs locked in between Lance’s. They avoided each other’s gaze, and both could feel their body temperature rising as if they were in a state of convulsion along with their hard breathing.

When Ina noticed that the guards were gone, she told Lance, “I think they’re gone. We should hurry and notify Gary where he should go.”

Lance nodded, “You guide him out, and I will review the information we got.”

The two struggled to move out, took a deep breath before parting ways. Ina went to the weapon stockroom and hid there. Since Gary was in the old underground facility, she needed to stay there to maintain the signal that connected him to Gary.

After reviewing the map she gained, she learned that three routes led outside from the underground facility to the old abandoned station post to the surface. B1 area was near Gary, in between the testing area and the main laboratory. The other two were dangerous parts to take, as they were more populated by monsters, and Gary would not make it alone.

Ina glanced down to check her vibrating phone. As she opened it, she heard gunshots volleying and the hushing wind overlapping the call.

“Lance?” Ina asked.

“We’ve been made. You need to get out of there!” he yelled.

“What about Gary?” she asked.

“We can worry about him later,” Lance said.

The communication cut off. Ina drew out the gun hidden on her waist and walked outside the room with unparalleled attention to her route. She heard the low sound pitch of the alarm coming from the siren hanging on the wall.

\*\*\*

Gary crouched as soon as he heard that familiar faint rumble. It was the man in silver armour. The tall man gazed at the surroundings and ran to the small spaces between the craters to the rooms and sprinted around the room where inside, broken technologies lay on the ground that the enemy scoured.

Hiding in the computer panel lining what seemed to be a control room, Gary ran towards the room, his back against it, examining if the enemy was still there. The man hung his sword into its magnetic bracer on his back. Just opposite Gary’s direction, he decided to go around and proceed to the automatic slide door, and somehow, he succeeded. He tried to open it, but it got stuck. The space was not enough for him to squeeze through. He opened the latch and tried to spark the wires.

The moment the power came back, the entry beeped. The enemy heard it, as it was loud enough to be noticed.

Gary swore, “Damn, fuck.”

He risked a glance back at the entry and said, “Power restarting in one minute.”

The heavy metallic boots pounded harder than Gary’s heart. He dashed back around as he was now being chased by the enemy. He stood firm at the corner of the squared technology room. His handgun was held high and aimed at the enemy. He pulled the trigger, and it flashed in the dim-lighted area. The enemy didn’t faze and instead kicked the ground, sprinting towards Gary. Gary rolled over to his left and reloaded while running away from the enemy, then shot it again while walking backward.

“Forty-five seconds left. I can survive it. Yeah, I can.”

Gary took a deep breath. The tactic remained the same for the next twenty seconds, but even if the enemy took all his attacks, it didn’t show faltering movements; instead, he seemed to be enjoying the hunt.

Gary ran around and stopped, noticing the enemy was gone, but he was wrong. He already knew that his tactic wouldn’t work for long as the enemy came crashing out of the technology room. His burly arms caught Gary and grabbed him outside.

Ten seconds.

He raised his palm to the enemy and struggled to chant the magic. ‘Blanã de aer.’

The enemy stumbled back as the ball of wind accumulated in Gary’s palm exploded right into his face. He glanced back at him, but Gary already rolled over down between his legs.

“Look down,” Gary said. “I left you a parting gift.”

In three seconds, Gary sprinted to the door as the bomb exploded, sending a shockwave that destroyed the facility and threw his body forward. He stood up and walked slowly across the connecting hallway, still stunned by the explosion. Despite the difficulty, he pushed forward. When he reached the end of the hallway, the door wouldn’t budge to open, which made him shout, “The fuck?!” He slammed his fist against the screen, begging the machine to open.

Just when he thought the blast slowed the enemy down, the pile of stones shook and was removed from the way. The man in silver armour pushed his way in, and the structure shook for a moment. A speck of dust found its way in, and the pile of rocks blocked the way out. However, the man remained unscathed, though parts of his armour turned into crisp black. Gary was now trapped with the menacing man.

“I’m dead,” Gary said, “but I’m not going down alone.” His eyes gleamed with determination as he pulled out his gun. He limbered and cracked his neck before dashing towards the enemy. Before the enemy’s fist reached Gary’s chest, he rolled sideways into a small space and positioned himself behind the man. The bullets flashed as Gary pulled the trigger, but they uselessly bounced back. The enemy struggled to turn back because his stature was nearly the same size as the narrow way.

Just as the enemy turned around, Gary threw a flash bomb right in front of him. The canister exploded, and the enemy was stunned again. Gary shot him relentlessly, and before the enemy could regain his senses, Gary changed his position and rolled forward, passing between his legs.

The ammo was empty, and Gary needed to reload, but the enemy’s heavy roar made him rattle. With no other choice, he threw another flash bomb, but the enemy didn’t care as much. With its metallic gloves, the enemy held the bomb and threw it to his back. The cold concrete pavement rumbled with its mere footsteps as it got closer to Gary, who turned away from the explosion. As he shook while holding the magazine to the gun well, Gary realized the big gap in strength when the enemy kicked him, and he crashed into the door. He coughed blood and shut his eyes. He stumbled back.

The door opened, and Gary stumbled back. He was caught by a muscular arm.

“Are you alright?” Port asked.

Gary looked up and stood straight, but his back was aching. “Yeah,” Gary said. “You guys are late.”

Port gave a wry smile as his eyes trailed towards the enemy. “Let me guess, a tyrannical bastard that has been fucking you all the way here?” he asked.

Gary nodded. “More like a stalker,” he corrected. His eyes wandered around and counted that there were only seven of them. “I thought you brought the cavalry?”

“I did,” Port said. “They’re behind that door - in the Main Laboratory.”

He pointed to the door, far away from them. In the middle is a large platform that had a lever and was attached to the metal that was gliding in the upward slope. The space was enough for the platform to fit in.

Port never leave his sight of the enemy and prepared five bombs inside a single bag.

“Prepare the platform,” Port ordered one of his men. “Gary, you should go first.”

“Are you sure?” Gary asked.

“Relax, I’m not going down that easily. Besides, you’re the one who’s beaten here.”

Gary started walking with one of his men and settled on the platform. Port was riled up because of the tension and gloomy aura emitted by the enemy. It walked slowly and with no intention to draw back. His men raised their weapons and began to shoot. The enemy raised his arm to cover his face as the bullets grazed his armour. One of Port’s men pressed the button after he threw the bag inside it.

They started running away from the door, and just as they settled on the platform, it exploded. The blaze spurred, licking and sweeping through the area. The other men came out from the Main Laboratory. They hadn’t been the only ones who came out from the hellhole. There had also been a horde of monsters that followed them. One of them was injured, the other one unconscious and being carried on the back. The remaining thirteen soldiers managed to catch onto the platform as they were covered by Port.

The platform rumbled faintly and began to elevate. There were twenty or more monsters that managed to hang onto the ledge. Port and his men didn’t waste any time and began to shoot. The monsters couldn’t be described just by mere words. Their creation wasn’t based on nature but rather on a horrific experiment. There were she-like monsters that chased Gary as if there was no end to their stamina. Others were mutilated and had the head of a griffin, with the body of raratmashka, arms of a dwarf, and legs of a horse.

“Shoot, shoot, shoot!” Port shouted as he reloaded. Gary’s ears stung as the soldiers shouted.

“Why are you shouting?” Gary asked.

Port answered, “It’s not a shout.” He glanced back at the enemy, evading the attack and stomping it, restricting its movements, and finally shooting its head. “It’s a war cry.”

Gary joined them in the bout and held his handgun high. He charged, delivering a roundhouse kick to the enemy that cornered one of his allies and shot it before it could get up.

“Thanks,” the man said.

“No problem.” Gary rolled sideways and shot the enemy that leapt towards him. It lost its life as it fell on him. He shoved it aside and joined Port.

“You have more ammo?!” Port asked, shouting as the rhythmic piercing bullets rang loudly.

Gary looked at his leather strap from his waist to his chest. “I have a lot of ammo.”

Port snickered. “Good,” he smirked. “Because this is going to be a bumpy ride.”

Gary strode with his handgun aimed at the enemy, carefully shooting without letting his bullets stray off to his comrades. He looked back and saw the she-like monster leap towards him. He stood frozen for a moment.

Port pulled the trigger, and the bullets drove the monster away. Its purplish blood and chunks of flesh soaked and warmed the cold atmosphere. Port stood beside him. Another enemy came and attacked them. Port stopped Gary as the range of their guns might catch their comrades.

As the enemy leapt, the two evaded sideways. The mutt’s claws nearly grazed Gary’s cheeks, but they managed to avoid it. The opportunity to strike presented itself, and Port kicked the enemy, followed by Gary’s thrust punch. Then, having enough distance, the two began to shoot at it, and it howled, drawing its last breath.

Before Gary realized it, he joined in their war cry. He kneeled on the ground, his eyes struggling to steady as he gathered the strength to stand up. His eyes landed at the end of the horizon, and Port stumbled down as he struggled to break free from the enemy. Gary raised his handgun, pointing it at the enemy, and he pulled the trigger straight to its head. The bullet pierced through its head, and blood spilled on the ground. A chunk of brain stained Port’s clothes, and Gary lent him a hand.

“Are you alright?” Gary asked.

“Yeah, I can still fight,” Port said. He noticed Gary’s concern as he saw his men becoming weary. No one was dead yet, but there were many injured. They covered each other’s flanks.

“It would take a hundred for me to go down,” Port said.

The enemies are dead, but none of them cheered as they could hear continuous screams from the ground. Gary glanced from the elevating platform and saw the horrifying enemies climbing from one another on the sloping road.

“There’s no end to it!” a man shouted.

“Do you have an explosive device?” Port asked.

“There is none, sir,” one of his men shouted.

“No, I have a time bomb.”

“How many?”

“Five.”

“Not enough,” Port said.

Port glanced around the corner, thinking of alternatives. As soon as they reached the top, Port took the time bomb and handed it one by one to his teammates, including Gary.

“What are you planning to do?” Gary asked.

“You see those pillars?” Port pointed out the old pillars towering and supporting the ceiling. Far away was a door at the side of what seemed to be a guard room and a giant gate that was blocked by fallen debris. “We’ll use these explosives to destroy this place, burying it for good.”

Gary looked at the pillars Port was referring to. They were massive and looked like they were there for centuries. He could see the intricate designs carved into them. He wondered who built them.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Gary asked.

“We don’t have any other options,” Port said. “We have to do whatever it takes to stop them.”

Gary nodded, understanding the gravity of the situation. They had to do whatever it takes to survive.

The remaining soldiers, including the wounded, were prioritized and sent outside first. Only seven soldiers remained to cover them. Gary, Port, and three others attached the time bombs to the pillars. Only five of the pillars were covered by the bombs, but the explosion would be enough to affect them all. Port could hear the enemy crying like children throwing tantrums as they climbed onto one another. The horde swept the floor like a flash flood, and the soldiers began to shoot. They turned on the activation system and sprinted to the metallic swing door. The soldiers covering them aimed with precision, careful not to hit their comrades. Port held the trigger as he dashed outside. They came out, and the door was locked and barred by fallen debris as Port pulled the trigger.

Hurrying to pull the trigger, they were knocked over the ground by the shockwave of the explosives inside the warehouse. The place shook vigorously, like an old cart wobbling in a street before collapsing and engulfing in flames. The monsters inside screamed, and none of them were spared by the explosion. Their cries echoed in the darkness until there were none.

“That took care of the burial,” Gary said.

“The first problem is done,” Port continued. “Now, for the second.”

Gary met Port’s chestnut brown eyes as Port and his men raised their guns against him.

“What are you doing?” Gary asked. “Enough messing with me.”

“Oh boy. You’re the one who keeps messing with us,” Port replied. His eyes remained stern. “Your friends snuck into our server room and gathered data while our tired ass was busy down there.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Gary defended.

“Stop playing games with me!” Port shouted. “You’re one of them, aren’t you?”

“One of what?”

“Glade,” Port said.

“No,” Gary continued. “Where did you get that idea?”

“If you’re not one of them, then what organization do you belong to?” Port asked.

No matter how Gary denied it, they wouldn’t believe him, not after Port saw the video of Ina and Lance in the hidden video camera while they were resting in a room.

“You were never one of us in the beginning. Of course, I have my suspicion, that is why I brought you here, knowing that you would drop the charade and have the entire armada against you,” Port explained. “But I never thought that you were that good.”

Gary looked away for a moment, feeling dispirited. He thought that everything was going well for him, even though they didn’t spend much time together. He believed that he was a good person and that they could have been allies if they were on the same side. Port thought the same thing. He considered Gary to be a capable person and a friend he could trust.

However, Port noticed the vigilance in Gary’s eyes and spoke authoritatively, “Don’t move,” he warned, “As much as I want to shoot you right now, my boss wants you alive.” He slowly approached Gary, never taking his gun off of him.

Gary remained calm, his eyes fixed on the gun pointed at him. In a quick reflex, he tried to shove Port’s nose, but Port was ready and caught him, twisting Gary’s arm and shoving the nose of the gun into his gut. Gary groaned and kneeled before him.

“You’re good, but not that good,” Port said, “Stay down!” he shouted. Gary remained in position, waiting for further instructions. They waited for several minutes, Gary was still in the same position while Port and his comrades pointed their guns at him.

Suddenly, the ground rumbled and a vehicle flanked by three military trucks settled behind Port. A man stepped out of the vehicle, and Gary recognized him instantly. “Leoad Enzoid,” he muttered.

Port straight off pointed his gun at Leoad and his eyes were demanding to know who he was.

“Relax,” Leoad said, “I am not an enemy.” Port remained wary, keeping his gun trained on Leoad. Gary was shocked to see Leoad there, as he was one of the Big Heads in the Canary task force and one of Gary’s supervisors during his camping days.

Gary shouted at Leoad, “What the hell is the meaning of this?! You were working with them?!” He tried to lunge at Leoad, but Port shoved him back to the ground, and his men restrained him before he could do anything else.

“I thought your boss already told you.” Leoad stood for a moment. He feign ignorance of Gary. His expression was unsettled.

“I have no idea who you are, but I don’t like you prowling on my prisoner. Now,” Port said. “Who are you?”

“I’m one of your boss’s associates. He wants me to handle the people who have infiltrated.”

Port looked at Gary, trying to gauge his reaction. “No,” he said, “How can you verify that you are the right guy?”

Leoad looked at his phone and began to send a message.

“Wait a sec,” he said. He pressed the send button, and in less than five seconds, Port’s phone began to ring.

“Who’s speaking?” he answered.

His eyes squinted the moment he heard Glen’s voice through the phone.

“Let him have the prisoner,” Glen said.

“Yes, sir,” Port replied.

Without waiting for further ado, Port gave Gary to Leoad. “Thank you for your cooperation,” Leoad expressed his gratitude. “Don’t worry, I won’t do anything that will put Theo at a disadvantage, even if he already is.”

Port didn’t remove his unfriendly gaze from him as he ordered his men to take Gary inside the vehicle. They chained him as he was led into the vehicle.

\*\*\*

“What the hell is the meaning of this?!” Gary shouted at Leoad. The intensity of his voice disappeared, washed away from the rumbling noise coming from the tires grating against the rocky road.

“You’re a traitor,” Gary concluded. “You’re the one who’s been tipping off Theo.”

“Do not misunderstand me, boy,” Leoad said. “There are a lot of mishaps you don’t even know about.”

“Then, explain to me what you’re doing here,” Gary said. There was still a suspicion in his voice.

“I’m an insider. An agent.”

“You mean the double agent?” Gary corrected. “Do even the higher-ups know about this?”

“Of course not,” Leoad said. “No records of top-priority missions like this can be written on the record. Only a few people would know about this. That includes you. If you already knew the imminent threat of this, I wouldn’t have to tell you why I got so deep.”

Gary fell silent, processing what he just heard. “Then, what will happen to me?” Gary asked.

“You will be locked in my quarters, of course. There, you will work for me.”

“As a double agent?”

“Yes,” Leoad said. “You have no choice.”

Gary displayed dissatisfaction on his face. “Is that really necessary?”

“You think you’ll be safe if I let you go?”

“No,” Gary said. “They will be eyeing me.”

Given the fact that they already knew him, it would have been wise to follow Leoad’s suggestion. There was only one thing that bothered him the most.

“How will you convince them?”

“I will convert your mindset into that of a double agent.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Your personality will change, and your beliefs will be altered.”

“Basically, you’re going to crack my head?”

“Yes,” Leoad said. “You can put it that way.”

“You did it to yourself too, didn’t you?”

Gary now noticed why Leoad was the way he was. The cold gaze, the calm demeanour, and his dazzling gait.

Leoad nodded. “Yes. It’s a way to convince them that I switched sides.”

Gary’s voice rang out, “Isn’t lying enough? I don’t want to lose my identity,”

“The process won’t mess with your memory. It will only change your personality. Your loyalty to the mission will remain. Don’t worry there’s a safety mechanism to revert back to normal.” Leoad replied.

“But still…” Gary hesitated.

“No time for unnecessary sentiments. You are a Canary,”

Gary looked down and his thoughts were fleeting like sea waves. “I hated many things,” Gary started. “People who refuse to give the truth, those who manipulate and abuse others. Most of all, I hate those people who lie to themselves.”

“Lying is involved in our job. It is inevitable. The only thing that keeps us sane is remembering what we fought for.”

“Is that what you keep telling yourself? Just to make the lying easier?” Gary asked.

Leoad shook his head. “No. It’s what makes me strive forward.”

Gary felt at ease hearing Leoad’s unfettered grip on his belief.

“How are you going to do it? The conversion you speak of?” Gary asked.

“I know someone that can do it. We have our fair share of resources. She won’t deny my request, I am sure of it,” Leoad replied.

“What about Ina and Lance?”

“They will be part of this too, of course,” Leoad said. “By the way, where are they?”

“I don’t know,” Gary said. He fell silent for a moment, thinking, and led to a realization. “I know one or two things about them. Since they’re busted, they will have to save themselves first. Given the fact that we’re in the Vesoga Plain, they will go straight back to the city.”

“I see. So, they’ve abandoned you.”

“I understand them,” Gary said, with no hint of disappointment. “It’s either I’m the only casualty or all of us will die.”

“I can see that. So, where do you guys stay?”

“We sleep in a hotel,” Gary replied.

Leoad raised his brow. “You guys waste your money on a five-star hotel?”

“No,” Gary said, chuckling. “We chose a place that doesn’t attract too many people. We haven’t forgotten the basic principles of covert missions. Our leader, Lance, is extremely conspicuous. He’s not the kind of guy who would go out without a proper plan… most of the time.”

“Are you guys’ newbies?”

“Hey!” Gary shouted. “We’re five-year veterans.”

“More like a sophomore,” Leoad grunted.

“By the way, where are we going?” Gary asked.

“We’re going back to Kayon city.”

“Right. I have to contact them.”

“Before that, there is something that I should tell you.”

“What is it?”

Before Leoad could speak, the vehicle wobbled, shook, and stopped, like a peal of thunder rumbling under the gloomy sky. The vehicle screeched pugnaciously and rolled over a few times. Leoad groaned as he stood up. His mind was hazy when he glanced at Gary. He pulled out the key and unbuckled the chains from the unconscious Gary. He shook him until he moaned, and his eyes slightly opened.

“What the hell happened?” Gary asked.

“It looks like someone attacked us,” Leoad replied.

Gary stood up and with great effort, he and Leoad pushed open the stuck vehicle door. They stepped out of the battered vehicle. Gary who still felt dizzy gazed up at the cloudless sky, illuminated by the moon that stretched out across the field.

Leoad inspected the other vehicle, which was brutally destroyed. The soldiers under his command were sprawled on the ground. One soldier’s neck was twisted, and his veins popped out. Reddish liquid streamed down his forehead from his eyes. Leoad inspected the driver in the front, who was murdered. A blade pierced through his heart. The rest of the soldiers were burned alive by the explosion and attacked brutally at their weak spots.

Gary said low-spiritedly, “Who could have done this?”

“A monster,” Leoad softly said.

The fire stretched across the horizon and burned the nearby grass, slowly making its way to the forest. Gary inspected the destroyed vehicles, looking for any signs of life. Suddenly, a cry caught their attention.

They walked past the destroyed vehicles, carefully setting their footsteps in silence as they strode. At a certain point where the smoke trailing from behind couldn’t reach them, they could clearly see the man in a blue trench coat – choking the soldier who was resisting to fight for his life. He pressed on, and the soldier’s neck snapped. His hand fell along with his head hung as he was thrown on the ground.

His grey hair softly swayed along the cold wind passing on the south. The light from the moon touched his tan rough skin as his cold eyes gazed at them.

“You’re still alive?” The man said as he moved one feet away from them.

Gary was in awe, realizing his identity. He may rarely appear in public, but there was no mistaking it; from the tall stature to his recognizable face, he was the one they were eyeing onto.

“Theo,” Gary muttered.

Leoad looked surprised as well. The last time he heard about him, Theo was out dealing with some business in the Elfin region.

“What the hell is the meaning of this?” Leoad said. His eyes glowered at him. Theo didn’t flinch as he stopped. “I asked you a damn question!”

“I’m taking care of the rubbish,” he replied.

“What?!” Leoad vociferate. “We’re allies! Why are you doing this?”

Theo didn’t reply. His eyes landed on Gary. Leoad noticed it.

“You possess a forbidden knowledge,” Theo said. “You must be removed from the equation.”

Leoad said and turned to Gary, “What is he talking about?”

Gary overheard everything about Cain and Glen’s and that was why Theo personally came to eliminate the threat. He understood the threat he posed to them, but for Theo to come and face him off and be willing to sacrifice an irreplaceable asset just to cover the truth was odd to think. Given the fact that Leoad proposed turning him to their side, he couldn’t seem to rationalize why Theo would deny that and even lie to him. He remembered it now. He couldn’t think of any correlation as to why he was worried about it, but he was sure that was the reason why he was so vigilant.

“Leoad, do you know anything about Nephirius?” he asked.

Leoad’s eyes widened. “What about him?” he replied. “How are they connected?”

“Because he was Theo’s father,” Gary said.

“So, you do know about it,” Theo said, stepping forward. “I shall not allow you to live.”

Theo lunged at Leoad, and before he could finish his sentence, Theo flew and landed his feet upon Leoad’s guts. Everything happened so fast. Gary couldn’t keep his eyes following Theo’s movements. He stood frozen, unable to comprehend what just happened.

Theo limbered up and jabbed Gary’s face, then his right hook went to Gary’s chest. Gary’s body shook as he stumbled back, struggling to find balance as he vomited blood. Theo pulled his hair to level his face.

“How unlucky,” Theo said. His palm thrust forward into Gary’s stomach, pushing him and crashing on the boulder. His body fell to the ground as if a magnet pulled him to it.

“And here I thought the Canary was supposed to be smarter, more diligent. You disappoint me.” Theo’s hand formed a blade embedded in white light. “I’m sure no one will miss you.”

Gary’s soulless eyes stared at him. Every strength he cultivated from his previous experiences seemed to be meaningless against Theo. Not only in prowess but also in knowledge, the gap was too big.

“Die.”

His hand arched and flashed as Theo flung it towards Gary. With great effort, Leoad chanted powerful fire magic that blasted Theo a few feet away from Gary. The flame dissipated, but Theo was unaffected as his left hand opened widely to create a barrier.

“Impressive,” Theo said. “That one nearly burned me alive. Too close, but it won’t do anything good to you, except burn my clothes to ash.”

“He’s a tough bastard!” Leoad groaned as he healed his chest. He stared at Gary. “Gary, you must run and tell the others.”

“I can’t allow that,” Theo said as he chanted fireball magic.

“Oh no, you won’t.” A white barrier appeared before Gary, shielding him from the attack.

“For another one.” Leoad gritted his teeth. “I’ll return it to you.”

Theo’s eyes squinted as Leoad performed the same magic he just used. Theo gracefully evaded it, jinking continuously as Leoad adamantly attacked him. The fireballs passed its target.

“Gary, you need to run now!” Leoad shouted.

“What about you?”

“Don’t worry about me.” He chanted a spell. “Feuer wall.”

Four corners of towering flames appeared, trapping Theo inside of it.

“Do as I say!” Leoad shouted. “You have no match against him.”

No matter how Gary tried to stand up, his legs wouldn’t cooperate, as if they were stuck to the ground. His heartbeat was faster than ever. This must be the effect of Theo’s attack. Leoad peered at the wall of fire, which was peeling like a banana or tearing a paper by Theo.

“Useless effort.” Theo said.

Leoad asked, his anger not bothering to mask nor fade into contempt, “After what I’ve done for you, you chose to betray me?!”

Theo spoke flatly, “I betrayed you? Let me correct that remark. It is you who betrayed me. You were supposed to work for me with loyalty and exterminate those pests who brought inconvenience to me. Instead, you insisted on turning them against the Canary with no assurance that you would succeed. I did consider keeping you in my ranks since you proved your worth to me. Well, I don’t mind sacrificing you since the next phase of my plan does not require your service anymore.”

Theo didn’t waste any more time, and his feet sprung forward. Leoad prepared for the worst and chanted barrier magic that engulfed his body.

“Erdkörper,” Leoad spoke aloud.

Leoad braced himself as he posed in a defensive position against Theo. The gap between them was clear as crystal. Leoad already recognized that he couldn’t possibly hope to reach Theo from his current strength. Of all the people he knew and encountered, only Theo was fearsome on top of all. He was the strongest enemy he fought in a while, ever since the War of Blight twenty years ago.

Leoad was not surprised by Theo’s inhumane prowess, since he already took a hint about Theo’s bloodline. Nephirius genes coursed through Theo’s blood. There was no doubt about it. Theo was the son of the infamous Nephirius Barban Gantaros. On top of his lineage, he came to the most hateful country of all twelve continents and eighty-nine countries and kingdoms, the Hayan Empire. Leoad could only hope that his magical barrier would protect him against the brute strength and fast movements of Theo as he stood there, waiting for a counter-attack.

“Auge von Mysthrry,” Leoad again chanted. His eyes glowed in green. With the effect of the magic, he could clearly see Theo’s movement. From his perspective, time slowed down. He stepped back, raised his fist, and swung it at Theo.

He grinned as he was sure that it would hit him. The only thing he misunderstood was that Theo wouldn’t mind accepting it. Theo understood the effect of the magic and didn’t bother to evade the attack as if he was confident. Leoad’s attack bounced back against the steely skin of Theo. He couldn’t believe it. His attack didn’t affect Theo at all. It was too late to evade as Theo grabbed his shoulder with his left hand. His hand steadied his fist and punched him right in the face.

The impact was hard and bounced him off on the ground. Leoad was glad that his magical barrier lessened the damage he received. He stood and wiped the blood on his face coming from his mouth and grinned. He spat out a tooth. Leoad felt his head spinning as he got a grip and bit his lip to focus. Theo launched at him again. Leoad was astounded and chanted another barrier spell. The only thing he could do was to buy time for Gary to escape, but it seemed that he was not in the right mind to think. As much as he wanted to knock some sense out of him, he couldn’t. Theo was charging against him.

With a thundering crash, the barrier broke and Leoad hurled, suspended in the air. Leoad received fatal damage once again, and he groaned as he rose to his feet. “You’re much more capable than the other one,” Theo commended. “I’m impressed. Let’s see if you can stop this one.” However, before Theo could attack, he was blasted by a fireball out of nowhere.

Lance stopped and went straight to Gary. “Are you alright? What happened?” Gary didn’t reply; his eyes were empty. Lance shook him off, saying, “Get a grip, man!”

“Huh?” Gary muttered, looking at Leoad.

“It was that bastard who beat him,” Leoad said.

“And who are you?” Lance asked suspiciously.

“Leoad,” he introduced. “I’m from the Canary.”

Leoad was about to approach them, but Lance raised his guard, questioning him, “How do I know you’re one of us?”

“There’s no way I can prove to you that I am one. After all, this is top-classified information. Please, you have to trust me.”

Gary nodded and said, “He helped me from getting caught.”

“Is that so?” Lance said. “Fine. I wouldn’t mind returning the favour for saving my comrade.”

“Lance?” Gary said. “Why did you come after me?”

“You’re a valuable and irreplaceable agent of the Canary,” Lance replied. “On top of that, you’re our friend.”

“Thank you,” Gary said, feeling his spirits lift with those simple words. He stood up and gave a wry smile.

A voice rang behind the curtains of flames. “Another pest has come and made things easier for me. How convenient. What a stroke of luck.”

The flames dissipated in a single scythe of sharp wind, revealing the mark they were familiar with now that Theo’s upper body was naked. The torn clothes detached, and they could finally see the mark that they’d been focused on.

“Shit,” Lance swore, feeling a mixture of fear, anger, panic, and confusion.

“What the fuck is the meaning of this?!” Lance shouted. “What do you want?!”

Leoad tapped his back, saying, “I understand your rage, but don’t let it consume you.”

Lance took a deep breath before he could gather his marbles. Gary stepped forward to see if what he was seeing was real.

“Is he what I think he is?” Gary asked.

“Yes,” Lance said. His eyes remained fixed on the man. “He’s an Arbiter.”

Theo marched forward with a serious expression. The rest waited and steeled themselves as the epiphany of menace came towards them.

“Well, then, on your knees,” Theo said.

In a split second, Theo vanished into thin air. Leoad glanced from right to left and noticed the shadow enlarging beneath them. He looked up and saw Theo chanting. A handful of a ball of fire formed as Theo waved his hand.

“Incoming from above!” Leoad warned.

The three of them began to sprint away. Each of them was chased by three fireballs. There wasn’t enough time to outrun it, so Lance shielded himself by firing lightning magic. It exploded and he stumbled back. Lance glanced back at Theo as he landed on the ground. He sprinted towards him when his attention was on the other. He kicked the ground and leaped to him. Lance swung his fist furiously strapped to his violent emotion.

His eyes widened as Theo evaded it without looking back, as if he had an eye on the parietal part of his head. His feet dragged across, arching and turning around, leaning forward, and caught Lance’s arm with his left hand, placing it to his deltoid, decentralizing the force and having him slam onto the ground.

Lance groaned as he lifted his gaze and saw Gary evaded the attack by flipping continuously. The fireballs landed on the ground, but without letting Gary avoid the aftershock and bowled on the dirt. He felt a tingle on his leg fleeting through his joints and to his ankle, losing its ability to muster the strength. His expression was stirred with pain and discomfort as Theo kicked his gut and pulled him up by choking him.

Leoad didn’t receive high damage because of his magical barrier, and he carried on to stop Theo from fully harming Lance. Theo glanced from right to left, seeing the desperate faces of Leoad and Gary. He threw Lance to Gary and pursued to face Leoad. Gary caught Lance as they tripped on the ground.

Leoad thrust his feet forward and stopped in motion. His waist twisted to the right, and his arm protruded back, just like a charging handle from a gun. He clutched it and swung it towards Theo. Just as he expected, Theo caught onto it as he also stopped from charging and took a step back. Leoad shifted his weight and his feet to a big leap. His left hook swung again, and he failed miserably twice.

“*Just like that*,” Leoad spoke on his thoughts.

Theo hissed as he evaded it. Theo stood for a moment, and his eyes squinted, realizing something, but he proceeded with a doubt in his mind. Leoad smirked and saw the opportunity. His left hand arched, and fireballs formed, blasting Theo, and engulfed him in flame. The explosion hoisted him a few feet away from them.

“I don’t know how tough you are, but with that short distance,” Leoad gasped. “It would do fatal damage.”

Leoad dragged himself as he headed to Lance and Gary.

“It’s over,” Leoad said.

“Did you kill him?” Gary asked.

Lance remained silent as Theo remained in the fire.

“I think so,” Leoad replied.

“That would be a correct assumption if your enemy were less skilled than you.” Theo walked out of the flames, unscathed.

“Impossible.” Leoad muttered in disbelief. Theo looked over his shoulder at the fire before closing his eyes and turning his head forward.

“I understand now,” Theo said as he opened his eyes.

Leoad knew what it meant, and his fear came true.

“Lance, Gary,” Leoad said, “You need to run and flee back to the city.”

“What?! We have a chance to kill him if we work together.” Gary said.

“We can’t defeat him here.” Leoad said. “Don’t worry about me. I can take care of myself. You guys go; I’ll be the decoy.”

Lance shouted, “Gary, this is our chance. If we all die here, no one will know the truth.” Gary nodded, and they sprinted away. Theo raised his palm and pointed it at them, and a ray of light hovered, piercing through the air toward them. Before it reached Gary and Lance, a wall of crimson fire blocked it and spread, encircling them.

Theo gave a mocking look and said, “No matter how hard you try, you will not reach me, but you already knew that.”

Leoad threw a sharp glance at him, observing for any opening. Leoad sprinted with his palm engulfed in flames, and Theo dashed intently, allowing himself to be hit and pierced by Leoad’s attack. Leoad was surprised by this but knew it was no luck. Theo purposely allowed him to feel the joy of feeling the flesh burn with his fiery hand for only a second. Leoad felt a tingle that crept up his spine, and he looked up at Theo, unfazed and confident.

“I already figured out your tactic. You allow your enemies to think they’re gaining the upper hand, but you’re just scanning their attacks and utilizing it with your own Inquiara magic. Your Replica Inquiara magic can copy and enhance it by your will, at the expense of much more mana, nevertheless,” Theo explained.

Leoad tried to pull his hand out from being stuck on Theo’s chest, but Theo gripped his arm and forced it to stay inside him. Leoad tried every magic he knew and repeatedly attacked him, gritting his teeth and hitting Theo when he ran out of ideas to make him stop.

“How does it feel that your own tactic was used against you?” Theo asked. “Are you done struggling?”

“Fuck you,” Leoad swore.

“Before I will kill you, I have to ask, why did you choose to betray me? You convinced me once that you didn’t like the government of this country anymore and despised the system you lived in. Why the change of heart?’”

“I lied, and you had it wrong. My loyalty has never been to the government or to you. It belonged to the people that I wanted to protect. I swore to help the system become better so that future generations wouldn’t have to endure the days as you bastards ignited.”

Theo grunted and said, “Is that so? You’re willing to go beyond lengths even if you won’t be recognized as an iconic hero?”

“I don’t have to be a hero. All I need to do is guide them behind the curtain,” Leoad replied.

Reaching his limit, Theo broke Leoad’s wrist, causing him to scream in pain.

“I trust no one will mourn for you?” Theo said. “This ends now.”

Theo raised his hand and fist to strike Leoad.

“If I’m going to die, I might as well kill you along with me.”

Leoad clench his fist, and the crimson walls tightened and enclosed around them. He closed his eyes, recalling his younger, callous, and thick-headed self. He had many regrets, one of them being unable to make it in time to see his wife deliver their child. A complication occurred, and his wife’s heart gave out. In the middle of it, their children were choked by the umbilical cord and didn’t make it. Instead of wasting his time in sorrow and grief, he poured himself into his job and entered the Kelby Hives as a double agent. He barely recognized himself after undergoing psychological treatment to change his personality and convince Theo that he was one of them.

Now, in the twilight of his life, Leoad finally found peace.

\*\*\*

Gary stopped moving forward as he heard a loud explosion blow off the wind in their direction. He lifted his eyes and witnessed the fiery blaze towering high in the sky. Lance noticed this too and tapped Gary.

“We have to go now,” Lance said, pointing his finger to the sky and shooting a small light towards it. “I’ve given Ina the signal. She’s supposed to catch up to us now.”

Gary spoke no words as they ran inside the forest.

“You won’t be forgotten,”

# Chapter 5

**T**he sunrise dawned on him. Alastor found respite in the beautiful flower-field. The chrysanthemums swayed gently in the wind, and their sweet fragrance made him feel at ease. He inhaled the air and refreshed his rasping lungs. His heart sank in relief. Alastor’s body began to relax, he was free from fear. However, the reality of his condition was much harsher. The result of yesterday’s bout haunts his body with tremendous ache. His ribs surging with unbearable pain, he could feel there was a crack. The legs also became numbed from hours of walking and fighting. His temple felt the remains of the hard ringing of pain. Most of all, his left arm throbbed with tenacious, abominate, and burdensome pain. The healing magic he applied earlier may have cured the nerve endings, but the damage on the bones could not be mended by it. It might need some time before he could recover. Alastor’s body couldn’t cope with the exhaustion, and he fell on his knees. His throat was dry.

A gentle voice reached his ears.

“Hello? Are you alright? What happened?”

“I’m… Let me rest. Just for now.”

“Did you get lost, baby boy?”

Whether it was her attempt to make a friendly conversation or something else, he found her obnoxious. He had an urge to slap her.

Alastor’s eyes were half-shut, but even in blur he could still make out to see a girl’s worried face. The first thing his nose smelt was the fragrance of cherry apple hung in the air. Then he saw her face, her beauty was similar to those he read in the books.

“An angel?”

She chuckled and waved a strand of her jet-black hair from itching her eyes, “Not quite, but I’ll take that as a compliment.”

As Alastor realized that this was not a dream, he rose and jumped away. He withdrew his sword, and pointed at her.

“What’s wrong with you? I didn’t do anything,” she said, her voice trembling.

Alastor couldn’t trust her, not while they were in the Vesoga Plain. The chance of an innocent girl was improbable to get in here.

“You’re an adventurer?” she asked. “Did you think I was a monster? How rude.” The girl sighed and explained. She rose, attempting to ease him. “First of all, I may be short, but it doesn’t mean I can’t handle my own weight. Secondly, as you can see, we’re in a flower field. I’m an artist.”

Alastor looked around and noticed the camera dangling from her neck. He lowered his sword and gave them both a break.

“Are you an adventurer?” she repeated.

“Something like that,” he replied.

“What are you doing out here?”

“I accepted a job to slay a monster.”

The girl observed him and said, “I guess it didn’t go well. You were badly beaten. Come here, let me see what I can do.”

Alastor slightly raised his weapon but she reassured him, “Relax. I’m not going to hurt you. Well, the treatment will speak otherwise.” She carefully approached him, one step at a time, and pulled out a med kit from her backpack.

The mercenary looked and scanned her. She didn’t pose any danger. She was but a petite young lady who happened to be in the wrong place at the right time. Confirming that her intention was ill-meant. Alastor sat down and let her do her thing. He saw no harm in letting her tend to his wounds. She started by cleaning his wounds, and Alastor put down his shirt and black jacket on the ground. She squeezed the white cloth and cleaned his back. As she did, she noticed the numerous scars stretching all over his back. The girl opened her medpack and mixed several herbs before dampening it to his back.

Alastor's face writhed. He supressed his voice as much as possible. He could smelt and tell several herbs she mixed; roatfoam for the damaged nerves, acrophregm for cracked bones, and eirhedtreit as a painkiller.

“Not to pry or anything, but these wounds look so bad. You should see a doctor,” she said.

Alastor nodded. “I will as soon as I get back to the city.”

“Where?” she asked.

“Kayon.”

She poured alcohol onto the cotton and gently stroked it onto the wound on his back. Alastor’s entire figure quivered and hissed as he writhed in pain. His eyes roamed at the flower field, which expanded across the forest in a semi-circular form. Far beyond as the flower could reach were the tall trees which were quenched by the river, which flowed through a small hole between the spaces of the low level of a terrace.

“Do you come here often?” Alastor asked.

“No. Actually, I rarely visit this. When I was a child, my mother used to bring me here. I remember playing here with my sister while my mom sat down on that terrace and painted.” She spoke softly. “When she finished painting, she would always hang it in our house. I thought she would sell it, but it turns out she just liked to show it off to everyone.” She wryly smiled. “This is the only place she ever spent time almost as if she was at peace in here.”

She continued to tend to Alastor’s wounds.

Even he couldn’t deny his bewilderment as his eyes were fixed on the scenery. Some animals were hardly ever seen in the Vesoga Plain. Over the river, a family of deer gently lowered their heads to drink the water, while a bird landed on her nest and gave her child the food she brought. A wind passed by, surrounding the trees with humming, bending the branches and rustling along with melody. His eyes never left the scene as if his mind was under some spell.

“I can’t believe this place exists,” Alastor said.

“Why? Because this place is in the middle of hell?”

Alastor nodded. “It was surprising that a beautiful place like this managed to survive for so long.”

After she finished wrapping Alastor’s wounds, she sat beside him.

“My mom used to tell us that this was once a garden of God, and even now that he is gone, his power still protects this place.”

“What a dumb fairy tale,” he replied.

“No, she said it was the real deal. Although she didn’t have any shred of evidence, she seemed to believe it. My mum knows a lot of things.”

“What about you?” Alastor asked. “Do you believe that this is protected by God?”

“I don’t know. Honestly, I don’t know what to believe in right now,” she replied, her eyes turning grave and hollow. Alastor saw her eyes were tired and lost some of her enthusiasm. He let her fall into silence, in deep thoughts and didn’t probe her any further.

“But this place doesn’t have any awful monsters, so he exists.” She said after the long silence.

“We’re the same,” he muttered.

“What?” she asked, blinking twice. “We’re not.”

He shook his head. “We have different lives, but you and I are in the same situation – we don’t know what to believe in.”

She denied his thoughts and looked at the sunrise. Somehow, it didn’t hurt anymore to look at it. “No. Maybe you just haven’t seen or realized the bright side.”

“Or maybe there is no bright side at the end of the road,” he said flatly.

“You must not look at things that way,” The girl dismissed his pessimistic words. “Think of the wind, we cannot see it, but we know it’s still there. We cannot touch it, but we can sense. Even if it is invisible, we know it is always in the right place.”

Somehow, he felt relieved by those words.

“If you ever find your beliefs are in haywire and you are beginning to think you will fall, take a deep breath and step backward, one at a time, and look for an answer within yourself.”

“How would you know if you found one?”

“I don’t know,” she paused. “But if you saw a glimpse of hope or realization, then that will do.”

“You seem like someone who has seen a lot of terrible things.” He said and she turned her eyes on him. Alastor broke eye contact.

“I do.”

He didn’t need to reply, he could see it in her eyes.

“The world is corrupted, but it doesn’t mean you have to let it corrupt you too.”

They continued to observe quietly at the field of flowers. The chrysanthemums bloomed and they danced when the breeze came by.

“Which route did you take to get here?” Alastor asked.

“Well,” she pulled out her map and pointed to the main road leading to Kayon City. “You have to cross a forest in Enlean and head west towards the river. There was a small bridge that we could cross, so don’t worry about it.”

She settled back under the tree in the middle of the forest’s open space and looked at him. “When will you start your journey?”

Alastor examined his wounds before putting his clothes back on. He was satisfied. “It looks like the wound will heal faster. I should be able to continue my journey. Thank you.”

She didn’t say anything and just gave him an empty look. Alastor’s strength wavered, and he crouched down. His stomach grumbles.

“Are you sure you want to go? It looks like your stomach can’t handle it anymore.” Alastor looked over his shoulder and saw her preparing some food and placing it on a blanket.

His stomach growled again. The two made eye contact, and she gestured for him to join her, but he hesitated. The aroma of the fish and crab were fleeting in the air. Alastor looked away, but his stomach couldn’t deny its emptiness. He was about to leave, but she pinched him and grabbed his arm to sit down. She handed him a fork and knife and started eating without saying a word. When he didn’t move, she scolded him.

“Dig in. The food will get cold.”

Without hesitation, Alastor savored every bite like someone who hadn't eaten in days.

As soon as they finished eating, she packed up her things. Alastor looked down and realized he ate more than his share, feeling guilty.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

He didn’t respond, avoiding eye contact. Heat began to flush his cheek.

“Do you have indigestion?” she asked. “Did you not like the food?”

“No, it’s not that,” Alastor finally spoke up and shook his head. “It was actually really good.”

“Good. I would have been disappointed if you lied to me, given that you ate a lot,” she commented.

“Sorry,” Alastor apologized.

She shook her head. “It’s okay. No worries. I've had enough too.”

“How can I ever repay you?” Alastor asked.

She brushed her chin, her eyes gleaming like a child. “Stay with me for a while.”

“What?” Alastor replied.

“I’ve been traveling alone recently. It would be nice if I someone to talk to or have company,”

Alastor considered her request for a minute. He couldn’t deny her kindness, and ignoring it would only lead to guilt. His eyes softened when he looked at those vibrant and wide russet eyes.

He nodded. “Alright.”

Even if he wanted to leave now, his stomach would be upset from moving without resting. He leaned against a tree and watched her sit down on a trunk. She pulled out her sketchbook and colouring materials. She started to draw while the mercenary was beneath the shades of the tree where lay comfortably. The gentle cold wind touched Alastor’s face, and his eyelids slowly fell.

When Alastor woke up, the orange rays of light coming from the clouds focused on his lenses. He covered his face as he rose up and moved forward to the girl’s location. She smiled over her shoulder.

“Are you done?” he asked.

She nodded. “Yep,” and handed him her sketchbook. He reluctantly accepted it and looked at the flower field before looking at the sketchbook. The drawing was an accurate representation of the field ahead of them. He was stunned at her talent.

“What do you think?” she asked.

“It’s quite good,” he commended. Alastor wasn’t an artist, so he couldn’t determine the standard of what was considered good, but he genuinely liked it.

She smiled. “Glad to hear that.”

Alastor couldn’t determine where the sorrowful smile on her face was coming from. He thought she was expecting more. He moved to sit next to her and felt the breeze washing over their faces. Alastor glanced back at the sketchbook and flip through the pages. She drew other paintings, some on canvas, and some in unfamiliar places, but they all possessed the same aptitude and were beautiful.

“A real artist,” he said softly. “I can see it now.”

“If you like it, then congrats,” she smiled. “You have good taste in art.”

“So, where are you going next?”

“I haven’t thought of that yet. You?” she asked.

“Never thought of that. I was thinking of resting for a while.”

Alastor gazed at the horizon and saw a flock of ravens bullying a single bird. A premonition washed over his face. His face remained unfettered from his thoughtful mind and fixed on the flower field as if he savored the last minute of peace. He sighed and turned around.

The girl waved at him, beckoning him to come over.

“After Enlean, where are you heading?” he asked.

“I’ve decided, I’m gonna go back to Yuelon. I’m going to visit my sister.”

Yuelon is the capital of the Ylfon Kingdom, located in the Leafol region. It’s a country surrounded by large mountains and green scenery. The majority of the airships he knew originated from there. Although they may sound prosperous due to their main item for exportation, poverty was still the biggest problem they faced, leading to countless crimes. The taxes were high, making it horrendous for them to earn so little from the capital’s prices.

“You should head south if you want to enter the Leafol region,” Alastor said.

“What?” she asked.

“Trust me, you won’t like it following the main road,” he replied, his face expressionless.

“Alright,” she agreed.

The moment she looked into his cold gaze, she knew there was something that made him feel uneasy. She didn’t bother to ask him anymore. The two stared back at the scenery. The fleeting petals caught their entire attention.

 “You’re gonna be alright traveling alone?” Alastor asked. “You do know that there are a lot of bandits scouting on the main road, right?”

“As I’ve said, I can handle my own weight. Besides, I will rent a carriage so I won’t get into trouble. Comodo runs faster than a bolt.”

“Right.”

The two began to travel according to the girl’s map and route. They passed a small-scale savannah and entered a forest. They stopped at a certain waterfall, and Alastor voluntarily filled their container with water. Then, they followed the river and saw the bridge arching to the end of the other side. Alastor made sure to hold onto the woody sidebar. The girl, on the other hand, was shaking. He was able to grip her shoulder as she nearly tripped. She was one breath away from falling to the streams when he held her hand and guided her until they reached the end.

“Are you afraid of heights?”

She nodded. “Always have been.”

He didn’t ask for more and continued forward. Alastor used his sword to cut off the large bushes blocking their way.

Alastor protected her against the monsters they hit on the road. They were defeated and never became a bother to them. They came out of the forest and followed the upward sloping road which led them to the top of a hill.

The village stretched out before Alastor’s eyes, from the stable where Comodo’s rider kept his horse, to the pub and town’s inn on the first row across the street. He scanned every inch of it. The girl was already ahead of him, so he slid down to catch up.

Entering the inn, they were welcomed by a cheerful attendant. Alastor decided to sit down on the couch.

“Are you going to make a reservation for one room?” she asked, as if she predicted their cause.

The girl hesitantly looked at Alastor and answered, “No, I would like us to have separate rooms.”

“Is that so?” The attendant looked disappointed. “I thought the two of you were a lovely couple.”

“No, no. We’re just travellers passing by,” the girl frantically said.

“Oh, sorry if I mistook you, but there’s only one room left.”

“Is this the only inn in this village?” the girl asked.

“No, but you wouldn’t like the other one,” the attendant replied, her face turning hollow.

“Why?” the girl asked directly.

“The other inn near the pub is now crawled with a bunch of creeps, mercenaries.”

“We’ll take your offer,” Alastor intercepted. He looked at the girl. “It’s better to be safe than sorry.”

She didn’t retort and accepted his suggestion. After she paid for their room, she went down to the lobby and to the dining room to order food, while Alastor was having a shower. She never felt this hungry, and the trip must have exhausted her.

Alastor walked down with a wet look, feeling fresh and reborn after taking a shower. All the stress and tiredness washed away with the water, cleansing his body.

He came closer to her and hesitantly handed her a small bag filled with coins.

“What is this?” she asked, still staring at his palm and continuing to gnaw at the fried meat with her fork. He chose to place it on the table.

“Repaying your kindness.”

“How many times do I have to tell you? I did it because you needed help, and I did it for free. Besides, you voluntarily stayed and protected me from the monsters.”

“Well, I kind of felt guilty since I may have barged in too far.”

“Are you thinking of sharing the room? Don’t worry. I know you won’t do anything foolish.” She glared at him. “If you’re not dumb, you won’t peek if I’m having a shower in the bathroom.”

He was taken aback. “No, no. I won’t. I promise.”

Her stern gaze changed back to normal. “Good.”

She continued to enjoy her food and handed him back the money.

“I know you’re broke. You don’t have to repay me. I have enough money to travel. How do you think I’ve travelled without resources?”

“Are you selling your pictures and paintings?”

“I am,” she said. “I’ve been selling my best artworks to certain collectors. They’ve paid me a lot.”

“I’m going to the pub.” He stood.

“What? But the lady said…”

“Don’t worry. I can handle myself,” Alastor pointed at his sword hanging on his back.

Alastor walked out the door. He put his money back in his pocket. He looked once more to see her, but she was already walking in the opposite direction.

\*\*\*

Alastor didn’t put any effort into pushing the two swing doors open as he entered the pub. The pub was filled with different kinds of people: adventurers, hunters, and mostly mercenaries. He scanned the surroundings before walking past the tables. Some drunkards who dwelled around the corner gave him a mocking look, but the rest were minding their own business. He went directly to the bar table and sat down on the stool. He ordered a beer, and the barkeep examined him.

“You look like you’re still underage,” he said to Alastor.

“I didn’t know that this country gives a damn about minors,” said Alastor. The barkeep didn’t intend to break down. He sighed. “I’m not a minor anymore. Rest assured,” he said flatly.

One of the drunkards stepped up and walked briskly, trying to fight off the alcohol taking over his mind. Alastor glanced over his shoulder at the pockmarked, bald man walking towards him.

“You little shit!” The pockmarked man shouted. “This place is for real men only. A pretty face like you isn’t allowed in here. This place is not for a rich kid like you. I didn’t train this far just to be insulted by a heavyweight like you.”

“Since you’re drunk, I’ll forgive you for forgetting your manners,” Alastor said. “Go back to your seat.”

The pockmarked man pressed his fist on him. Alastor bellowed, his hands caught the arm, and redirected to crash on the table. The thug got up, but Alastor pulled him closer with his palm thrusting forward to his guts. The pockmarked man was drawn back, he felt the pit of his stomach turn upside down, and he vomited.

The other men stood up, their hands holding the handles of their weapons.

“Give it a rest, will you?!” A man intercepted. “You’re all drunk and all. The guy has done nothing to you. Your comrade is the one who backed down first.”

With that said, they laid down their weapons and carried their fallen, ill comrade back to their table.

“What’s up with them?”

“The city has been deserted,” the barkeep informed Alastor. “Kayon city is on lockdown at the moment. They are eliminating the criminals, adventurers, and hunters alike who have taken refuge in the city’s den.”

Alastor froze as he realized the implications of this news. The barkeep placed a mug of beer in front of him, which he grabbed and drank.

“What happened there? How did it start?” Alastor asked.

“The mayor declared that there was a terrorist threat that needed to be eliminated immediately. Those mercenaries were caught in battle while attempting to leave the city. The others were incarcerated and are being interrogated.”

The barkeep refilled Alastor’s mug. He paid and left the tavern with a serious expression replacing his once calm demeanour.

He made his way to the stable where the riding animals were kept. The keeper just finished feeding the animals and was leaving. Alastor approached him directly.

“What is your fastest mount?” he inquired. “I am in a hurry.”

The keeper gave him a stern look. “Sorry, young man, but they are only used for pulling carriages.”

“How much do you sell them for?”

“What?”

“How much for a Comodo? I only need one, just for you to know.”

“Are you sure you want to buy one? It will cost you a lot.”

“Just tell me the price.”

“One hundred and twenty Haz.”

Alastor only three hundred and forty Haz, excluding the money in his bag.

“What kind of Comodo do you have?”

“I can only offer you a fighting and sprinting Comodo. The others are younglings and cannot be relied on.”

“That works for me. Is it in good condition?”

“Absolutely. However, it has a tough attitude.”

Alastor was unfazed by this and was actually pleased that it was a fighter. They entered the stable and followed the keeper to the end of the row.

“Come on, buddy, wake up,” he said gently.

Comodo Raiders were known for their speed and incredible fighting abilities. They could pull a carriage for up to five hours without getting tired, but such a performance required a lot of nutrition.

The Comodo’s eyelids opened and lifted to see them. Its pale green skin shone in the moonlight as it rose to its two feet with a loud yawn. Its long yellow beak pointed towards them, the thick green fur rustled among the hays, and gave a bored look to them.

“He seems like a tough one,” Alastor said.

“You need to feed him if he ever becomes tired, or else things will get rough. He gets cranky if he’s hungry,” the Keeper said.

“Have you named him yet?”

“No,” he glanced at Comodo. “From now on, he is your new master.”

The Comodo looked at Alastor and stood with a proud face.

“How much for the food?” Alastor asked.

“You have to add forty Haz, which is enough for two days.”

“I’m not so sure about it,” Alastor thought for a moment. “It might hinder his speed.”

“Don’t worry about it. As I said, this is one of my toughest breeds. It will only weigh four kilos for two bags.”

“If that’s true, then let’s get on to business.”

The keeper set up the saddle, tied up by the girth at the back of the Comodo. Alastor mounted its back. His hands held the rein, and he rested his feet on the mounting block. The two bags of green peas were tied at the side of the saddle. Alastor felt uneasy knowing that the weight that the Comodo was carrying was heavy.

Alastor said to Comodo, “Just stop if you’re tired.”

It neigh in returned.

It was best not to force Comodo to its limits. No doubt it will take some time to reach the city, but at least his travel would be safe. The Comodo hoarse and gave a look over the shoulder at him as if it was telling him not to worry. Comodo’s gaze made him feel a familiar scene before, but he couldn’t remember when. He shook his head, then gently kicked Comodo’s side to walk forward and outside the stable. The Comodo made a bobbing rhythmic gait, eyes were filled with joy.

“So, you’re going to leave without saying goodbye to me?” the lady who saved him, asked. She was waiting outside for quite some time. He didn’t notice her until she called out to him.

“I need to go back. There’s an emergency,” Alastor said without looking at her.

Alastor pulled the rein, balancing the Comodo, and put pressure on the right side to walk forward. For a second, guilt washed over his face. He never intended to go out without saying goodbye to her.

“Sorry, if I have to leave too soon,” he said.

She shook her head. “It’s okay. If it’s an emergency, then I guess I have no right to stop you.”

“Farewell,” Alastor said.

The Comodo sprinted as Alastor pulled on the leash.

\*\*\*

Alastor left the place with a cloud of billowing dust as the Comodo ran. He looked down at Comodo, thinking for a moment.

“Would you like a name?”

The Comodo cried in agreement.

“Hmm, what about Liber?”

Comodo cried again.

“You like it? Okay, Liber it is.”

Alastor gazed in front as they passed the forest and up to the terrain where the moon settled.

\*\*\*

“Why are you running?” Cid asked as he pursued the man wearing a hood through the narrow alleyway – where the garbage can was placed outside the establishments. The man that Cid was chasing stumbled down as his feet landed inside the trash can. The garbage rolled out as he rose and entered the bustling crowd. Cid didn’t know what happened to him. The first thing was that they approached him outside of the night club, then in a second, when he recognized his face, he started to run.

It was one of his informants that he relied on gathering information in terms of Don Trifalgo’s action ever since after the time they blew up the experiment sector, but he rarely sees him as he was busy on his given assignment.

Cid looked at the surroundings and jostled his way to the crowd. He caught a glimpse of his target entering another alleyway. Cid pressed his earphone.

“Linda, our mole is getting away again.”

“Don’t worry, I’m on my way.” She replied.

Linda thrust her way into the bustling crowd. Her eyes caught the man on her side – running in the alleyway. She sprinted faster as she got out and with a push on her feet against the ground, she bumped the target and crashed in the dumpster. Her back ached as she found support to stand up.

Cid caught up and grabbed him in the neck, pulling him up.

“I promise man, it wasn’t me.” He said.

“What?”

The perplexed face returned to normal; relief engulfed his heart for a moment.

“So, you didn’t come here to kill me?”

“No, we want to know where the hell is Don Trifalgo. We can’t find the bastard. We look everywhere but it seems there’s no mark of his presence.”

He breathed heavily, “I thought you came to kill me because I said that you’re an agent.”

“What?!” shouted Cid.

“Look, I’m sorry, okay? Guilty as charged. Those bastards threatened me.”

“How did they find out?”

“Well… I kinda snuck into one of their warehouses and saw something that I shouldn’t have, then one of his goons caught me and asked me who I am working for.”

“You son of a bitch.”

“Look, I didn’t tell you what you look like, okay. I said that you only meet me at the bar in a disguise to gather information. I didn’t tell them who you are, I promise.”

Linda held Cid’s shoulder and stepped forward.

“You said you saw something you shouldn’t, what is it?” Linda asked.

The guy jogged up his memory trying to remember the words they said when Don’s goons transferred a cargo.

“It’s something about, ‘The spear is ready. All we need is confirmation.’ Yeah, that’s what they said.”

Linda and Cid exchange glances. Their faces stiffened.

“You sure you heard it right, about the *part of the spear*?” asked Linda, breaking the silence.

He said, “Yes, yes. I am sure of it. What does it mean by the way?”

Cid muttered the words he couldn’t believe, “Nukes.”

“You mean the thing that exploded and goes kaboom like a big mushroom puff they’ve said happened in the Taronda Kingdom?”

Cid nodded and clenched his fist.

A single flash caught their attention on the gloomy sky, and then there was another one, followed by a hundred more sparkling lights as they fell and ceased under the faint moonlight.

“Let’s start again.” Cid said. “How did you know that they’re going to unload the nukes in that warehouse and what happened to that fat bastard?”

“Hey, have pity on the nearly dead man. First of all, I didn’t know that they’re gonna unload those nukes in that warehouse and how would I know the meaning of *spears* or whatever that is. I only knew that they were being sketchy and careful with their movements after someone blew up the building. Don Trifalgo since then has appeared very few times. Said by one of my associates that they’re busy exporting products and unloading them to that site, they’ve been avoiding using the main road, and obviously, it caught some of the people’s attention. I only confirmed their items when I snuck last week in their warehouse. By the time I was about to get out of the fence, one of his men caught me and I was held for the entire day. They tortured me, man, they threatened me to hurt my family if I don’t cooperate. I have no choice.”

Cid’s face remained unchallenged and strict.

“I’ve told you before, your job was just an informant. Infiltrating and sneaking was up to me.”

He scratched his head, “Yeah, I know. But they might change their location if I don’t make a move. Besides, the mayor has no intention to do anything about this. He was wrapped around Theo’s finger. I can’t let the bad guys do as they want them to do.”

Linda eyed Cid beckoning him to let her take over.

“Where is this warehouse that you’re talking about?” Linda asked.

“Southeast of the Jules Market. You’ll see abandoned establishments there.”

“Why am I not surprised? It’s always been abandoned buildings.” Linda said. She gazed at Cid. “You okay?”

Cid shook his head. “I’m fine. I can’t seem to process what’s happening right now. The more we divert to our mission – the more the enemy is gaining an advantage.”

“What do you suggest?” Linda asked.

“Let’s split up. I’ll infiltrate Don Trifalgo’s warehouse, while you’re going to infiltrate the city’s bank system and look for any records on where those cargoes are going.”

“Do you think this is a good idea, about splitting up? This might be a trap. We don’t know how our enemies think.”

“Do you think we have a choice?”

“No. This is a must. I got a bad feeling about this – that they’re going to do something, and it’s a big one. Sooner or later, they’re gonna cause a wreck in this city.”

“No doubt about that. For now, we must take a step.”

Cid’s informant called them. “Can I go home now?”

Cid sighed, “Just don’t tell anyone about this, okay?”

“I promise, I’ll keep my snout away from them. I learned my lesson now.”

Linda and Cid stood outside the alleyway. Cid pulled out a cigarette and the fire burn the tipping point.

“You smoke?” Linda asked.

“Sometimes. When things are a little bit out of hand.”

The two walked in the opposite direction and they vanished among the crowds. The clouds began to accumulate and stretched across the sky, covering the moon.

\*\*\*

As Cid caught his first glimpse of certain trucks avoiding the main road in the metropolitan, he already knew who they were. He kicked the ground, sprinted, and entered the tight alleyway. He jumped from wall to wall until his hands pulled him up to the rooftop. He glanced down and followed the trucks without faltering his speed.

Cid used the ladder to get down and take the road. He crouched and hid behind a dumpster waiting for the guards to open the main gate. One of the goons squatting inside the truck came down and caught a glimpse of the craters inside the thick black mantle.

The goon pulled out a keycard and slid it into a keyhole. The metallic frame hissed sharply from its rusted locks and raised with a loud groan. The trucks entered one by one. Cid seized the opportunity and sprinted, hiding on the side of the final truck.

As soon as he entered, he went to hide in tall unused tent. His breath remained at a minimum as his watchful eyes scanned the area. The trucks were parked row by row. The goon that opened the main gate stood in front of the wall. He slid down the key card and the platform began to moan, it parted and the floor began to descend.

Cid ran and hid beneath the truck, lying flat on the ground. He held his breath as he saw the huge light and the feet of the goon coming over on his position. He calmed down when the enemy turned around and climbed up the truck.

As soon as the platform landed, he could hear the engines of the vehicles roaring. It was too late to find something to hold onto as the driver pumped the gas and drove fast.

He rose from lying flat on the ground and scanned the area. It appeared to be that he was in an old underground pathway. The only thing that lights the poor construction was coming from the poor lights aligned row-to-row, it doesn’t work properly as one of the bulbs shattered.

Cid raised his palm and chanted magic. “Agni.”

A small ball of fire formed in his hand and he let it float behind him as he ventured further. Cid quickly drew back and hid in the wall as he saw flashlights aiming in his way. He stole a peek when he noticed the lights faded in his direction.

He moved out the moment he confirmed the guard left. If ever the enemy came back again, he can just hide between the small spaces and have his magic cut off to avoid an attraction. At a slow pace, Cid walked as he approached the oblivious enemy. When he was sure enough, Cid jabbed the enemy’s neck – in which the weapon the guard held fell to the ground. He pressed on and inserted his right hand to the armpit, tightly locking it, along his left arm barring the enemy’s neck. With great effort, Cid forcefully lifted the enemy, and the enemy felt the pressure on his neck before slamming him to the ground.

Cid seated the handgun on his back and stole ammo, hiding it in his jacket. He dragged the body to the small space between the walls, leaving the enemy in an awkward position and he proceeded forward. He crouched and had to wait for a few moments before pressing on.

Entering the dark corridor, Cid heard a faint rumble coming from seeing a silhouette of a cart pushing past the northern path. It was the enemy who was entering a dungeon. Cid followed him with the utmost caution. His fire guided him to the dungeon. There, he saw hundreds of craters towering and covering the entire place.

His magic vanished and followed the goon. Knocking the enemy out cold, Cid took his clothes and dragged the cart. Cid pulled down the cap to not make him look suspicious.

He followed where the enemy came from and saw two guards at the end of the road. Cid with an unease pace brought suspicion to the guard. The guard blocked his way.

“Where’s your ID?” he asked.

Cid rattled and searched for his clothes. His hands caught a solid plastic card and when he pulled it out, the guard let him pass.

“Wear them always so you won’t get shot.

Cid nodded and entered the huge metal door. On his side there was a sliding road for the vehicles to park, his eyes caught the trucks parking ahead of the room. Down were people that seemed to be working on packaging parts of machines inside the crater, passing from row to row with their tools to seal it off.

He made it to the room where the inside can be seen through the transparent glass. Cid pulled the wheeler to the back and unload the crate. He got out and followed the tunnel where it led to a certain room.

He didn’t need to press his ears to the door as he could hear the loud noises coming from behind.

“Tell them, if they’re not gonna give what I want, there will be more delays to come. You might want to rethink your statement, boy! Should Theo know about this, he will have our deal cut-off and you will receive no supplies from us! Do you hear me?!”

 Wind pushed the door and slightly opened. From that, Cid caught a glimpse of Don Trifalgo’s stout figure.

“The audacity of those bastards!” Don Trifalgo shouted. “If it weren’t for us, they wouldn’t gain an upper hand on their, p-p-puny civil war and now they demand a share of us ‘cuz they helped us assist exporting the products? Unacceptable!”

Out of the shadow, a person stepped out under the impression of a daunting one, wearing a coat with the hood covering the head. The light flickered and blindingly came back to life. Don Trifalgo sat on a wooden chair with his hand gently holding the handle of a cup of coffee.

If anything Cid learned about women, was that they possessed the same traits. They were born to have the same smooth skin as he caught a glimpse of the person’s hands.

“Looks like someone is not in a good mood.”

“I am not in the best mood, bitch.”

“Should we dispose of them?”

“No.” Don Trifalgo replied, “We don’t want to instigate any unnecessary conflict. Theo specifically said that we shouldn’t do anything to harm them. And who do you think you are?! You’re just another client begging for another beating.”

“You could say, Theo and I have a special bond. You see, I can do a lot of things besides just being a petty beggar.” Her soft hands landed on Don Trifalgo’s shoulders and massaged Don Trifalgo. “One of them is performing excruciating torture.”

She pressed the tip of her blade on his neck. She press it until the surface bled.

“You made your point! Ow! Stop it!” He shouted.

“The next time you talk to me like that again, I’ll have your tongue out of your wobbly mouth.” She said icily and finally let go of him.

Don Trifalgo grabbed a tissue from his desk and covered the small wound. He was still shaken by the woman’s blood appetite.

“It’s just a minor wound, no need to be nag about it.” She said and walked towards the craters. The waved her hand and it began to float on her command. “I’ll be taking these now. I’m pretty sure Theo wouldn’t mind if I get this in advance.”

“You bitch! How dare you?!” He shouted. Don Trifalgo was about to grab a gun at his desk and confront her but before he could reach his gun, it moved on its own away from him.

“Relax, Theo requested me to deliver these weapons for him.”

“He ordered you?”

“A request.” She corrected. “Your boss is planning to make a move, ain’t he?”

“I don’t know. He won’t trust me with his plans, except for this shitty transportation. Even so, I’m gaining a fair share of the number of his operations, so I can’t say offensive things to him. I don’t want to piss him off either.”

“Well, it’s not like it’s my business. I only came here to get what our organization needs.”

“Whose side are you on?”

“No one.”

“What about us?”

“Us?” she said. Her tone was dismissive. “We only work together to gain benefits. There is no alliance, do not misinterpret our deeds.”

“I thought so. You guys only want to do more harm to that kingdom than good.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.” She scoffed and turned on her heels. “Our goals are beyond your understanding.”

“Do you know the reason why King Ignis failed to protect his kingdom?”

“He’s weak and presumptuous and lacks discernment.”

“That is truly what a barbaric man as you would say. King Ignis did not lose because he’s a weak old man. He loses because he didn’t have a decisive choice to seize win; an important factor that a leader must have. And that lack of discernment leads to his death.”

“And you’re saying this, why?”

“I want you to consider this as advice.”

“Why would the fuck I want advice from a woman like you?”

“Let me ask you this question.” She said, “Have you ever seen him do anything to make those pests go to ashes? Did you see him subjugate that man, Hoarder, to lessen the competitors?”

Her words make him think and doubt for a moment.

“I’m saying this because I want you to think about what’s best for yourself. You know it, you can feel it. Theo’s fort will not last for long. So, I suggest bugger off and walk away while there’s still time.”

Don Trifalgo’s face went blank and stared back at her.

“I don’t believe you.” He said with no doubts.

“Suit yourself.”

The lady along with the floating crate walked toward the door.

“Are you gonna go back to the Vesoga Plain?” he asked.

“No. I’m going back to my comrades.”

“One last thing. You might want to get rid of the rat skulking around the corner.”

Don Trifalgo’s eyes squinted for a moment before coming to the realization as the lady went out. He grabbed the gun and shot at the door. He heard someone hissed as he stood up and reached out his radio without altering his eyes to the door.

Cid stood up and looked at his elbow that got grazed against the bullet. He can hear Don Trifalgo’s loud voice calling out for his men, echoing throughout the tunnel. Cid bolted as lightning in the passageway when he saw the silhouette of the enemy.

“You, useless piece of shit. How come you let an intruder sneak inside?! I didn’t pay a hundred thousand Haz just to get sneaky by a snivelling runt! Go! And kill that bastard!”

Cid crouched with his watchful eyes. He sprinted further away from them and hid whenever the flashlight came in his direction. He took down two out of Don’s men by breaking their neck. All was well, not until his phone began to ring a moan of a woman.

“Oh fuck.”

He accepted the call from his earphones as he accepted the call coming from Linda.

“Great. Good timing. Now, what? I’m busy here. There’s like ten guys fucking me behind.”

“We’ve been made!” Linda said, her voice was urgent.

“What?!”

“They’ve found our hideout. I don’t know how they know but the entire building is on fire.”

Cid slid as he sprinted in the right way. His hands clapped and he muttered a spell. An earth barrier erupted from the ground, blocking the way of the enemies. He turned right and his nose caught the foul smell of the canal behind the railings.

“What about Ken and Tin?”

“I don’t know, but I think they’re in the underground hideout.”

“You have an underground hideout?”

“Always have been.”

“Good. So, did you manage to sneak into the bank system?”

“Negative. There are too many securities.”

“Well, you don’t have to do it anyway. I know where Alastor was held captive and you’re not gonna like it.”

“Spill.”

“Vesoga Plain.”

“For fucking real?”

Cid heaved the old rusty door and what greeted him was a gunshot from a few meters away from him. He rolled aside, evading the gunshots. He sprinted the other way and muttered a spell.

“Cinque parete invisible.”

Cid was engulfed by two transparent semi-circular walls as he got away from the enemy.

“Do me a favour, Linda. Stay in cover.”

“That’s what I’m doing right now.”

He cut off the transmission and chanted another magic.

“Inglameur.”

Out of nowhere, the haze began to fill the tunnel and blinded the enemy. They stopped pursuing him and felt something different, something made of darkness. Each one began to scream as if they’d seen terrifying creatures horrifying their mind.

“That should do the trick.”

Cid made a run and went out on a much larger scale of the tunnel. From there and there, the strong reeking smell coming from the water came out from the hole. Cid looked from left to right, looking for a way to get out.

Cid stopped from running as he felt the ground trembled. His gaze was unsettled from the surroundings, until the ceiling collapsed and revealed from the crumbling walls and the billowing dust was a giant rat-like monster. If it weren’t for the crashed, Cid would most likely fail to identify it due to its thick black fur that camouflage it on dark surroundings.

“You gotta be shitting me.”

At his back, enemies were already in formation that blocked the way. His teeth gritted. His options were scarred.

“Halt! That’s as far as you go.” The security leader roared.

“Which one?” Cid contemplated.

He gazed at his barrier that remained untethered. Without thinking, he sprinted towards the hoard of the enemy. Bullets bounce off his barrier as he charges. The rat monster too shrieked and sprinted towards Cid.

Like peeling a banana, Cid’s shield began to tear to fully shred as he dashed and repelled the enemies. The foes stumbled side to side as Cid’s barrier stunned them. He leaped, turned to the right, and jumped down the hole. Lucky for him, water coming from the sewer didn’t flow on that pathway and landed safely. The spy was glad that there were few lights on the sewer and cracked on the walls for the light to pierce through.

He heard their yells and cries ringing above as the rat monster began to crush them.

“Control the monster, damn it!”

Cid winced as his nose caught the foul smell getting stronger by the minute when he was observing the structure. It appeared he was in the main section of the sewer system. There’s a giant hole on top and was covered by metal with holes for the water to come out. A water meter caught his attention, it was hung on the wall. The meter was purposely hung high so that water won’t reach it, but it was large enough for anyone to observe.

The meter indicated that the water was beginning to accumulate on one pathway and was about to come for six to seven minutes. It's time estimation depends on the water pressure that the other meter calculated.

Cid was about to press on, but he was shaken as the ceiling collapsed. The rat monster shrieked as its eyes laid to Cid. Cid leapt away as the monster charged. It shrieked again.

“Easy there, Fido. We’re in an underground sewer, but then again, you don’t care, you don’t have a brain after all.”

His right hand began to emit lightning and he threw it to the enemy. The rat jumped, evading his attack. Cid laughed out of amusement.

“Whoa, you know a trick. Can you be my house pet?”

The rat cried and kicked the ground. Cid pulled out his grappling hook and shot towards the higher part of the wall and remained in that position while looking down at the rat.

“Don’t mind me. I’ll just wait for the stinky water to wash your ass outta here.”

The rat snarled and looked at the wall.

“Fuck off. You can’t reach me. I have the higher ground.”

The rat began to bump its head to the wall. Cid’s face was stiff as he realized what the monster was doing. The crack began to trail across the wall.

“Shit.”

For another one, the part of the wall that the claw of his grappling hook was holding on started to degrade. The rat looked up with its mouth open wide. Its sharp teeth shimmered as it waited for Cid to fall.

In the free fall, Cid curled and pushed his feet against the wall, changing his trajectory, rolling in the air, and managing to land a kick on the rat’s nose. The monster stammered and began to scratch its face before screaming sharply.

Cid’s lightning bolts unfaltering strike the enemy. The rat was stunned and shook, enduring the pain as it stuttered. Cid lurched back and flashed a grin.

“You almost got me.”

The rat stopped moving and fell. Its massive body was being washed by sewers as Cid walked down the tunnel.

Ahead of him, there was debris from the broken walls mounting against the metal stairway attached to the wall. Cid glanced back to the main hole as he could hear a faint rumble, like a sound of a turbulent wind rushing from behind. He looked over at the water meter and that was when he realized what was about to happen. Cid sprinted and leaped over the debris and onto the metal stairway.

The surging water groaned and sprayed with the most terrible smell mixed with every disgusting thing of human’s waste as it began to fill the place and trail the two-way tunnels. He witnessed below him the billowy burst of water rushing over the path. Along the waste flowing with the darkened water was the rat monster, washed away with its heavy body.

Cid took the liberty and jumped over the next high ledge and onto another until his eyes laid off to a certain tunnel that was not within the reach of the ravaging waves. He hopped from ledges to ledges until he landed and mustered balance from nearly tripping over the wet surface. He glanced back watching the body of the monster washing away over the stream.

“That took care of the garbage disposal.” Cid backed off as the water spray came to wet his coat. “I smell a reek. It’s gonna take a lot of showers to take this stink off.” Cid said.

He pressed on.

\*\*\*

Linda skidded as she turned right and sprinted away as she glanced up to their base. Their hideout was on fire. She opened her mobile device and called Ken and Tin through her earphones. It kept ringing until the phone halted from vibrating.

She stopped as she could hear sirens erupting throughout the city. Deviants from corners sprung out like children caught in hiding and seek. Police along with the automatic robots’ haunt down the deviants either by killing them or by using force to pin them down.

The city suddenly became hell. The mercenaries, hunters including the travellers were excluded and hunted down with no remorse. Everything is chaotic, fire was crawling and trouncing across the city, smoke trailing under the gloomy sky. The residents locked themselves inside their respective houses. The police locked down several roads to further their search.

Linda evaded the road and went into an empty and less populated area. When she found a safe spot, Linda called them again. This time, someone answered.

“Ken, Tim?! Are the two of you alright?”

“Yeah. Somehow, we managed to get into the underground chamber.” Ken coughed.

“What about the items?” she asked.

“They’re safe here. Tin was a little bit … disoriented, after what happened.”

“I’m gonna regroup with you guys as soon as I pass the metropolitan.”

Somehow, she felt relieved hearing that they were safe. It gave her another reason to continue. Linda sprung back and someone emerged from the dark enclosure and slashed the sword in front of her.

“What the hell do you want?”

She knew what the man wanted. Since the entire city is in chaos, it is to be expected that thieves like him would appear.

“Your belongings.” He stared at her necklace. “Give it to me.”

“Oh, this?” She flexed her necklace. “I’m afraid, I can’t do that. This is my family’s heirloom.”

“Then it’ll be worth the price.”

Before the man could come close to Linda, she already chanted the magic.

Across the street, deviants who are running away from the authority were blasted along with the man by Linda’s fire magic.

The automated robots glance at her. Scanning at her stature and when they come to the realization that she was not part of the city’s citizens, they begin to walk and their eyes glow red. Their weapons, Taser guns, rifles, and batons were pointed at her.

“Identity unknown. Come with us for authorization or you shall be executed.” Said in a robotic voice.

Linda was two steps ahead of them. She already threw a smoke bomb before jumping on the wall and running away.

“I have no time for this.”

Her pocket once again vibrated and when she reached for her earphone, the walls crumbled and the automated robots appeared beside her.

“Miss,” the robot said. “We’d appreciate it if you peacefully come with us. Theo would like to have a word with you.”

Linda’s mouth dropped slowly as her forehead wrinkles for a brief moment. She muttered the spell and her ice magic began to crawl on it. Its internal core was frozen and with a burst of explosion within, the automated robots were destroyed in an instant. She focused onward.

\*\*\*

Alastor screamed sharply as Libel jumped down the cliff. Wind flushed over his face as he gripped hard not to fall out. Libel felt his sharp gaze. The Comodo cried out as if he was telling him that *you’re in a hurry, right?*

Alastor snorted and cautiously glanced ahead. Beyond the woods, he saw the outpost of the city’s guard was destroyed. Police and robots were deployed outside the gate. He can hear the citizens cry beyond the wall and the gunshots reverberating like an orchestra in a room.

Alastor pulled the rein and Libel stopped. He led the Comodo across the field where the enemy couldn’t see them. They stopped on a sewer filter. Libel stepped back, disgusted by the foul smell coming from both of the tainted hollow river and the hole. His boots were smeared by the dirt of the muddy ground as he jumped down. He plunged his sword on the iron filter and with might, he removed the sealed filter.

He was about to get inside but was taken back as he remembered Comodo. He beckoned the animal to come.

“Come on,” he said. “There’s so much we need to do.”

Libel backed off. The disgusted expression written all over the face tells it all. Alastor came closer and pulled the reign over. Libel did not budge. Alastor was pissed by the attitude that Libel was presenting.

“Damn it.” He swore. “Listen, I have no time for your crankiness, man up and enter the damn hole.”

Libel looked away. Alastor gave himself a benefit of consideration and took a deep breath. He didn’t have any background knowledge regarding Libel’s Comodo race, only he was taught about their efficiency in combat strategy. The notion of mounting an animal these days is strange just as the traditions of the outside world. Comodo may be different from other animals, they have traits that are well known; they can be obedient when it comes to treats.

“Fine. I’ll give you a treat. A rather large one. You like meat, right?”

Libel cried in happiness of his offer.

“I’ll give it to you, once we’re over this.”

They entered the filthy sewage and landed on the higher level of the walkway. Alastor pulled his sword out of the scabbard and held it high.

“Can you do magic?”

Libel cried in assent.

“Good. I’m not really that used in synchronizing combat and magic. It drains a lot of stamina for me. It’ll be great having you to assist me in battle.”

The path they took led them to a higher level, in which, the water pathway was drought due to the recent flushed out. Several rats scrawled over the cornerback to their hole. There were a few damaged sewers pipes, all disconnected as if they were cut by a sharp object.

Libel stretched and glanced all over. Alastor too felt an object cutting through the air and with a quick response, they evaded the attack. He pointed his sword at what it seems to be an arachnid that can spew out its web and mold it into a sharp object.

“Here we go!”

\*\*\*

Cid never thought that he would fail to notice the motive of the monster. He thought that his lightning magic would do enough damage to kill it, but it came back from being drowned like a cockroach lingering to life. The enemy had staged itself to be defeated and came back unexpectedly in an inconvenient manner. There are few monsters that are quite a brainer and possess high intelligence, but only when it comes to hunting. This one showed an intellect similar to a primitive human. Cid was attacked while he was pissing over the corner of the sewage. Until now, he can still feel the tingling pain from the head of his crotch as it got nearly stuck in between his zipper. Cid glared at the enemy before making a break.

“For fuck sake, let me piss in peace man!”

He was on the run, using the ruins as obstacles to somehow decelerate the speed of the rat monster that ensured the high chances for Cid to evade the monster’s attacks and for his advantage. He slid over and leaped onto the higher ledges until he tripped over the rock. He stumbled on the ground as he muttered his spell.

Just as the monster’s fangs reached to him, Cid managed to pull off the shield magic and pushed the enemy at bay with five transparent semi-circular walls protecting him from the monster’s attack. Cid’s smile crept ear to ear seeing the bamboozled expression of the enemy.

“Not so tough now, eh?”

The monster growled. Its red eyes flashed in the darkness.

“That’s right, go and fuck yourself.”

Cid slowly retreated. The rat’s scratch attacks remain only grazed on Cid’s protective walls. It would be a matter of time for it to tear it down. He wasn’t going to wait for that to happen and sprinted away.

Cid felt his blood rushing over his brain down to his feet and his heart pump faster than ever. The last time he felt like this was the time he was undercover, his job was to assassinate a politician, but being reckless he was, he got tricked by a maiden and got involved in a gunfight. It took him another month to fulfill his mission and by that time his salary was deducted. Nevertheless, he was still able to finish the job.

Cid halted. He noticed the change in the ground’s aptitude. There were no shaking and disturbances in the surrounding, only his hard gasping and the large filtration fan behind the enemy. The rat monster only stood a few kilometres away from him with its soulless eyes staring at him, jaws gnawing on bones and meat it found over the way here. The putrid meek of saliva reached his boots.

“You nearly got my dick shish kebab, you fucking asshole!”

Cid investigated for a moment as to why the sudden change of behaviour. His eyes caught the rising heat from its belly glowing in red. No matter how he thought of it, he couldn’t rationalize the strange phenomena. Since the enemy doesn’t care for him anymore, Cid made a break to the door ahead of him.

There it goes again; he felt the rise of the temperature. He gazed back and noticed the belly of the rat monster got brighter than before. Just as the enemy opened its mouth, Cid realized what it was doing.

“OH, MOTHER---!”

A tornado of flame burst out from the rat’s mouth, destroying, and incinerated the obstacles, turning them into ashes. Cid closed his eyes as he felt the brightness burn bright.

Just as when he thought that he was already screwed up, he felt someone pulled him away from the range of the attack.

\*\*\*

Alastor’s blade shone in flame tied in by Libel’s magic. Alastor used it as an advantage and burned the webs out of the way that the spiders created. Libel too was efficiently knocking back the enemy with its fire magic. With masterful swordsmanship, Alastor swung magnificently and exterminated the enemies.

He rarely used coercive magic; he had not performed it since he got out in the glade. A Coercive Magic is a spell system that allows the user to enchant an item or weapons to boost its attacks. His magical fire sword is an example of it. This technique was used very rarely because they have not found a need for it since most people knew how to use magic. However, that was not the case for Alastor. Since he can’t use any kind of elemental magic, he needed assistance from his allies, but this only became apparent when they faced an enemy that was likely extreme for them to take on.

Not being able to use elemental magic was the downside of being a Mana Folder. The only magic he can do is non-elemental magic such as cure, wall, or barrier spells. He was cursed before for being born without the talent of conjuring elemental magic, he was discriminated against and was belittled by his companions. The only one who comforted him and encouraged him the most was Meil, but accompanied by his encouragement was the need to become more stoic and numb away any unnecessary emotions for him to keep moving forward without any hesitation. Meil was disheartened with Alastor’s resolution but was not able to keep his innocent smile because Meil had to go on his missions and inevitably retired and lived in Kayon City.

“Whew, that took care of the bug problem.”

Alastor gave Libel a pat and continued to follow the way. Considering that he does not know the layout of the sewage, he decided to stop dawdling and must find a way out. The underground sewer was like a maze, with too many spots, yet no spaces left to serve as a safe spot. It was truly bothersome for him.

Libel stopped from following Alastor and gazed at the wall as if there was something beyond. Alastor was disturbed by the light peck of the Comodo.

“What?” Alastor asked.

Libel pointed his beak to the wall. Alastor was puzzled by Libel’s gesture.

“What the hell are you pointing at?”

Libel snorted and walked forward and gestured for Alastor to ride on his back.

“You sure you can handle another more ride?” There’s sympathy in his voice.

Libel cried. Alastor nodded and mounted. It seemed that Libel had an idea to lead them out of here. Alastor hung tight as Liber jumped off and kicked wall to wall away from the countless monsters that were hoarding. Liber’s eyes reflected eagerness and focus on what was up ahead. He hissed as Liber nearly dropped him from rolling over in the air. At a certain point of the exploration, Alastor felt the temperature rise and the heat oddly boiled the water.

“Liber, it’s not what I supposed to think it is!”

Alastor caught a glance of the monster spewing fire out of its mouth as Liber turned and sprinted ahead of the other way.

“You dumbass shit!” Alastor yelled. “Why would you take us on that damn monster?!”

Liber didn’t mind him and halted. Alastor fell off and stared at Liber. Liber pointed to his beak and Alastor finally understood why Liber took him there.

Before the blazing tornado caught Cid, Alastor dragged him out of the range. Cid opened his eyes slowly and widened before realizing that he got saved by Alastor. Cid glanced back and blinked twice then pinched himself to confirm he was not dead. He could not believe with his own eyes that Alastor was still alive and standing in front of him, well and strong.

“Al?!” Cid observed him from top to toe.

“Yeah, I’m back. You look beat up.” Alastor said.

“No, you’re the one who looks beaten up,”

“About that, it’s a long story.”

Alastor glanced at the monster who was charging against them. Its movement was sluggish but steadying. That attack must have heavily taxed the physical body. Cid muttered and raised his palm against the enemy, multiple fireballs emanated and disrupted the enemy’s senses. The monster growled and halted every inch of its muscles.

“Girlfriend of yours?” Alastor asked.

“More like a stalker.” Cid replied.

“Do you have any plans to beat the mouse?”

Of course not, if Cid planned to defeat the monster, he would have done it without a heart of doubt. Instead, he chose the coward but smart path.

“First of all, no, I was planning to run. Second, it’s not a mouse, it’s a sewer rat, a giant sewer rat.” Cid explained.

“Whatever, they look the same.”

Cid noticed Comodo staring at them.

“You bought a Comodo?” Cid asked. “That’s expensive.”

“He’s quite useful. I actually liked it.” Liber smiled with a proud face. “I bought Liber as soon as I heard the city is on the siege.”

Cid may have spent most of his night down the sewer but he knew that the uprising already started a few hours ago. The thick bricks and slabs did not conceal the conflict up the city’s surface.

“Yeah, shits happened.”

“Tell me that later, the enemy is coming.”

“Do you have any plans?”

“We’ll attack it where its claws and fang do not reach us. We’ll attack both sides.”

“You want to bang it?”

“Bang?” Alastor asked.

“Never mind. I’ll take the front you go behind.”

Alastor mounted Liber and sprinted back. Alastor drew out his sword and ran towards the monster. Cid sprung and flipped backward evading the roll attack of the monster.

Alastor saw an opening and slashed the monsters behind. Its tail was cut in half and the enemy’s back that was wounded oozed blood. The monster shrieked and rolled behind to slap Alastor away. Alastor was momentarily stammered before getting up.

Cid threw fireballs around it and closed his hands. The flames burst as they enclosed the enemy. With wind magic, the rat was covered in dust, blood was frizzled, making its rusty smell hanging in the air. The rat monster howled. Its reddish eyes grew brighter. Claws grew and sprung towards Cid.

Cid side-rolled and made another fireball, throwing it to the enemy. The monster only shoved it back to Cid and lunged at him. Alastor moved forward and swung his sword against the skin of the enemy.

The rat too noticed his presence and rolled over away from Alastor evading his attack. The enemy’s movement did not falter; instead it became quicker, more precise, and steadier than before. The monster swung its short arm to Alastor before the blade could make contact with the flesh. Alastor back hardly met the wall and stumbled. He coughed blood as he used his sword to stand up. Liber used fire magic to point towards the monster as its attention was on Alastor.

“Liber! Tie your fire magic to my sword!” Alastor shouted.

Liber nodded and to its beak, the fire began to accumulate and eventually led to Alastor's sword. He then ran, encircling the enemy and confused it to outflank it. Cid was in the back regaining his strength, waiting for the right timing to launch an attack.

Alastor jinked sideways and swung furiously at the enemy’s back, causing more wounds to bleed and ooze out. The monster jumped away from him. It gasped for air. The monster finally showed physical distress and shuddered in an attempt to stand in balance.

Cid threw another set of fireballs.

“Turn into ash!”

He closed his hand and the fireballs attacked the rat. The monster’s lids close, its body smeared in charred.

“Is it dead?”

Alastor’s eyes remained at the billowing dust and saw the physique of a monster that is still clinging to life.

“Not yet.”

“It’s gonna take longer than I expected.”

The monster growled and stabbed them with its murderous stare. Its belly began to go more brightly than before. The mouth gently dropped as it pointed against them.

“What’s it doing?” Alastor asked.

“It’s going to do what he did back then.”

“Shit.”

Before the enemy could finish accumulating the firepower out of its mouth, something fell from the ceiling and crushed the rat. The monster’s chunks of flesh spread across the place. The putrid smell of blood grossed their noses. Cid who was hiding stood up and gazed at the menacing figure with its violet red eyes pulsating in the dust.

“What the hell is this?” Cid asked.

“I’m asking the same thing.” Alastor said.

The figure stepped out from and with a single wave from her hand, the dust cleared away and unveiled herself.

“Sherry?” Alastor muttered. “You weren’t supposed to be here.”

“Fill me in,” Cid said.

“Long story short, someone else helped us to escape in exchange to give the child prisoners shelter. They were supposed to go to Anargond to meet Henrick.” Alastor explained.

“Now I get it.” Cid said.

Cid was supposed to greet her but Alastor stopped him from getting closer. He felt a tingling twitch of his flesh that told him to be wary.

“What?”

“There’s something wrong with her.”

Alastor’s sceptical eyes scanned Sherry’s stature and noticed the violet pulsating on her chest. Her soulless eyes reckon murderous intention.

“A little bit judge-e, don’t you think?” Cid ignored his warning. Alastor shook his head in response. “She must be tired. Women can be a little bit grumpy when they’re hungry. So, I think you should pack up the saddle and chill the eff out.”

Alastor sighed and allowed Cid to make contact with her. Sherry’s hands were twitching and clenched his hand as Cid got close to her. Sherry was steady in her position, not until Cid came.

The moment that Sherry’s pulsating light stopped from flickering, Alastor’s head began to throb, pounding hard, sharp, and heavy as a boulder. It felt as if everything was being blended by grey and distorted into madness.

His hands tried to reach Cid.

“Cid… no…”

Cid heard his faint voice and just as he looked behind, Sherry swung her fist. Cid was dumb but not that dumb not to realize the sudden change in atmosphere. He sprung and rolled over to evade and pull a distance between him and Sherry. Cid quickly got up before Sherry could land a hit on him.

“Oh, so you’re hitting on me, eh,” Cid smirked. “Can’t pass a hit from anyone, but I’ll have to pass with you. You’re going to end me up with a broken jaw.”

With great effort, Alastor put himself together, and eventually, the headache subsided. He observed her and saw the possible cause of the outrageous attack.

“That thing,” Alastor said, pointing to the light in her chest. “That’s the reason why she’s not on herself.”

“Hemil Klust.” Cid murmured. He casted his eyes at the source of her killer intent.

“That’s right.”

“What should we do?”

“I don’t know anything about it.” Alastor said, still trying to figure out what’s the next step. “Should we take her out?” He asked.

“No.” Cid disagreed. “I’m going to try something.”

Sherry leaped so quickly that she caught off his guard and went over his back. She delivered a round-house kick to Cid. He flew over the wall, spat blood before he dropped. Alastor sheathed his sword and proceeded with hand-to-hand combat.

This was the first time he saw Sherry show masterful counter blows against his attacks. From blocking his right swing to synchronizing his kicks, Sherry was gaining the upper hand over time. Sherry blocked Alastor’s fist by catching it and head-butted him. Alastor stammered and tried to counter her by sweeping his fist after a feint left swerve, but she was quick and before he could land an attack, Sherry already lunged at his guts. Alastor puked saliva and was on his knees.

“Sherry.” Cid said. Sherry looked back at him. “Look at me.”

“She is looking at you, dumbass.”

“Look at my handsome face.”

Alastor put his palm on his face. His face grimaced.

Cid’s goal did not go well at his end. Instead, Sherry remained furious and became more vicious. Her attention was on Cid.

“Shit.” Cid swore. “Did you just hold a grudge on me?”

Sherry stride almost ran until she made a sprint towards him. Her fist raised and jumped over Cid. With precision, Cid sidestepped and allowed her fist to pass through. Alastor saw her crash and her hand was stuck on the wall.

“How come a woman holds a grudge on me?” Cid asked Alastor.

“I don’t know!” Alastor yelled. “Maybe, it is because you have an attitude that correlates to trash.”

“Dude!”

Water sprouted out of the hole and showered Sherry as she pulled out her hands from the hole she made. Her power emerged and shot out, but they avoided it and were prepared for her next attack.

“For your information, I did not intend to sneak into your room. Secondly, forgive me for what I am about to do to you.”

For a brief moment, there was a spark on Cid’s snapped fingers. Without intending to back down, Cid conjured lightning magic that shocked Sherry, crippled and knocked her out. It was quick, yet violent. He have to electrify her so she would lose consciousness. Cid caught her before she fell to the ground.

“Whew, that was quick.” Cid said, “From a hundred to zero.”

Alastor stood and observed her. The strong spiteful sensation subsided.

“Impressive.” Alastor commended.

“I know. I find it hard to believe that I’m a damn genius.” Cid smiled.

“Now I regret saying that.” Alastor whispered to himself, “What a total dumbass.”

Since Sherry was knocked out, she was taken first priority and rode on Liber, while Cid and Alastor walked over. They followed the path ahead. They shared their stories on what happened for the past days and stitched the stories to create speculation about the objective Theo.

“You said weapons like nukes were being transported over the Vesoga Plain?” Alastor asked.

“Ah-huh. It seems that they have a hideout there. They appear to sell weapons all over the city, they could also export all of those weapons all over the region and only God knows what those are.”

“Where did you get that info?”

“I have never seen those nukes that my informant said to me, but I saw dozens of craters and weapons being stock and put on the cargo.”

Alastor fell silent and trapped in his thoughts.

“What are you thinking?” Cid sad.

“There’s a lot of variables to see, but I don’t think he only wants to gain profits out of smuggling,” Alastor explained.

“What’re you suggesting? Like he wants people to go against each other and have to supply them with weapons?”

“Exactly,” Alastor said with a certainty in his eyes. “Come to think of it, he rarely appeared in public and his so-to-be vice president always handles public information dissemination.”

“I still don’t get how it connects to getting people to kill each other.”

“You’ve said before, Don Trifalgo is busy transporting and having his men export those weapons across different places?”

“So?”

“So, we could concur that Theo is the only one who handles transactions and negotiations with different kinds of people.”

“That wouldn’t make sense. He has his minions.” Cid said.

“Not if you’re a cynic. I would do that if I want to know who I’m dealing with, to ensure the flow of negotiation. He could have negotiated with several politicians across the continent.”

“Hmm.”

“Simple to speak, Theo might want to incite a geopolitical economic war.”

“That’s insane!” Cid shouted and held Alastor’s shoulder. “It’s like he’s asking for another war of blights.”

“Not all of us want to see the world in peace, some men want to see it in chaos.”

Alastor removed his hand from his shoulder and stood back away from him.

“Are you sure of what you’re saying?”

“No. I don’t have any evidence, but his activities are provoking this kind of catastrophe. He’s a threat that needs to be dealt with.”

“I believe you, but we need to tell this to Linda and ask Rod for instruction.”

Alastor nodded. “We need to get back to the headquarters.”

“About that…”

“What about what?”

“The building got destroyed.”

“Well, we have an underground base. We’ll just have to cross the abandoned train station and go for another trip in a sewer.”

“What about Liber?” Cid asked.

Alastor looked at Liber. “You’re right. I guess we’ll stay in the sewer then.”

Cid’s eyes caught a shadow moving. His hands flickered in lightning. Alastor saw it and nodded.

“Before that,” Cid said. “We must take care of the pest problem.”

“I agree.”

With a quick movement, Alastor summoned a transparent wall behind them and dragged it out the shadows. The four pairs of long legs was the first thing that caught their eyes, its red eyes were made of dozens that can detect any small amount of object. The arachnid made a rasping sound by rubbing its horny ridges.

Alastor already leapt, slipped between its legs, allowing the sharp tipping point of its legs and cut its behind. The mercenary sprang above and cut the spider in half.

Once they finish taking care of the enemy, they cross countless sewer pathways. They didn’t waste any more time and ran over them. If Alastor’s memory was correct, they should be in the metropolitan area. The abandoned train station was in the east of Jules Market, crossing the way, they would find an empty warehouse in which they could use to get in the underground tunnel that led to their underground base.

All of the sudden, they heard a loud grumble, which rattled them.

“What the hell is that?”

“An earthquake?”

“Gruu.”

They looked back at Liber that reflected in his eyes the tiredness he endured during this whole time. Then another growl from his stomach came abruptly.

“Are you hungry?” Cid asked.

Liber shook his head.

“He’s also tired.” Alastor asked. “Alright, you can have that one sack of green peas.”

Remembering what the keeper said before, it was best to rest and give Liber some food. Liber earned it and should be praised.

“I can’t believe you’re tired. You didn’t do anything.”

“Just for you to know, Cid. Liber is the one who leads me to you and saves your ass from getting barbecued. You gotta thank him for that.”

“Oh,” guilt overtook him. “Sorry. I guess I owe you for saving my ass.”

Cid remained on guard as Alastor sat down with his back against the wall. Sherry was seated in front of him, she is still unconscious. Still, Liber is not yet done eating.

Without restricting, he allowed his eyes to fall and go to slumber.

Everything seemed to be real, but at the same time, everything looked so strange.

\*\*\*

He was back in the Haven, the Glade.

Everyone looked so happy. There is no conflict, no people fighting over something stupid. All is well and all the people he knew were there, almost.

Over the corner, he saw Ken happily chatting with his friends. Tin was less boyish and was talking with girls, but they were interrupted by Cid who dared to come close to them. Linda on the other hand was more feminine. She was clad in a beautiful dress, mask by powder and lipstick.

He gazed at the barstool, where he would sit in the corner and ordered his favorite wine. He was enjoying and savouring the taste of it, holding the perfect shape of glass when someone interrupted his moment of silence.

It was a woman, the hateful woman he detest the most. She was the one who put him in the psychological terror he did not think he would survive. He never forgotten her. After all, she was the one who put him in a six days coma and another eight days of psychological recovery.

“You?!” Alastor shouted. His eyes couldn’t believe it. She wasn’t supposed to be here. Under the supervision of Rod, she was taken into custody and locked in a cell for two years.

Alastor was greeted by a woman who wore a seductive red dress. Her eyes, hallowed with innocence and purity, sent a chill onto his spine. His throat dry when she peered at his sullen eyes. She sat beside him, curled her black hair and gazed at him with a lustrous grin.

“You like my outfit?” she asked.

“Maine…”

“Hm?”

“How come you’re here? You’re supposed to be…”

There was a pause. Alastor realized what happened.

“Oh. About that, I was given a chance when I take the plea not to put the students in that hellish torture again. Although, I was kind of disappointed. Torture is the only way to make a person realize things and make them stronger than before. I don’t expect that an empty shell like you would understand what I mean, but I hope you would accept its benefits.”

Alastor gritted his teeth, annoyed by her remorseless remark.

“You bitch tortured us for fun!” Alastor bawled. He quickly rose but was stopped as if his body was being controlled.

“Shh. Lower your tone. You’re ruining the night. You’re always such a buzzkill even before.”

“I don’t believe any of this. Why won’t you show yourself and let’s end this in real life?!”

With her bewitching smile, everything became distorted until the Glade became a house of fire. The flame began to slither and consumed everything in its reach.

“What the fuck do you want from me?

Maine voice rang across the place. “I want you to join us.”

Alastor scoffed. He looked up angrily to her.

“Join you? Go and fuck yourself.”

“Oh well, as I expected. I never thought that you would want to come anyway.”

“How come you’re able to escape?”

“That’s another riddle for you to solve. I only came here because my boss wants you to join us, even though I warned him not to. You’re far too innocent to see things beyond your little preconception of worldly ideas.”

“The only thing you’re good at is to torture and piss off other people. You’re a coward, hiding in a mere low key illusion.”

“Careful of your words. You might regret that. How do you think you were able to see through my illusion? It’s because of me. I told you there’s a benefit out of pain.”

“Like what? Lobotomizing people and having them crippled to near-death? What a fucking joke!”

“Don’t be such a buzzkill. I’m not here to fight. Like I said, my boss wants you to join us.”

With a firm grip Alastor came to an unwavering decision, “No. I know that all of you will only do worse.”

“Oh well.”

“What’s exactly the point of all of this? Why come after me, knowing that I won’t come after you?”

“Let’s just say we want to know how you’re going. Did you ever fill that void in your heart? Have you come to the realization that everything you’ve fought for means nothing?”

“Enough with this nonsense! Show yourself!” Alastor demanded. The grip no longer bind his body.

The blazing inferno was suddenly distorted and the venue changed like a film in a theatre. He was now in an open space of a forest, beyond the woods was the mansion of their Haven. The Glade, behind him was a flower field, in which he does not remember that such a thing exists. He felt terrified by the wind flushing hard bearing omen as it burst the flames into a wild licking snake that spread around.

A certain voice of a man rang behind him.

“Come with us Al.” A man, dark of colours, eyes jaded and sharp as his jaw. He had pale white skin and had a symbolic tattoo that is all over his face. He had all the same reason as to why Alastor would hate him the most. He continued. “Everything is burning, can’t you see it? Don’t pretend to be blind. You know to yourself that hell will break loose and everything you’ve cherished will become naught.”

The forest, including the mansion, was on fire. Soon after, everything is red.

“You are?”

“We haven’t officially met. I am Augustus.” He softly said.

“What do you want from me?”

“We want you as one of our ranks. You are one of all people who were able to resist and survive the ‘Blank Catastrophe’ of Maine.”

“For what cause?”

“The True Haven. The clock is on the run, there is no hiding from it. The War of Blights is coming and there is no stopping it. So, why not join us and help us to create our True Haven? A haven in this hellish paradise.”

Alastor shook his head and unsheathed his sword out of its scabbard.

“Never.”

“What does it take for your blind eyes to see the black flames scourging around us.”

“Enough with this nonsense!”

“Pity you.”

As Alastor sprinted towards him, he waved his hand and everything went black. Alastor fell into the infinite darkness.

“I hope the next time we meet, there will be a change of thought about our proposal.”

\*\*\*

A heavy slap woke him.

Alastor blinked twice and glanced at Cid who was in front of him. Cid noticed that Alastor was murmuring and it turned out eventually he realized that he was having a nightmare.

“You were having a nightmare.”

“How many hours I’m out?”

“Thirty minutes. What exactly did you dream about? You scream like a girl.”

He blankly stared at him. Knowing that they’re on a mission, he couldn’t risk adding another burden for them.

“Nothing.” Alastor said. Indifferent like any of his other replies.

“Alright.” Cid decided not to probe anymore.

Alastor glanced at Comodo. Liber was able to finish two sacks of green peas, he then remembered what the keeper said.

“Two days my ass.” Spat Alastor. “The Comodo already ate two of it.”

Liber woke up from Alastor’s snap. The Comodo stretched and waited for Alastor to carry Sherry onto his back. The three walked and gazed ahead, wearily observing.

Alastor kicked the steel filter and went out first. He scouted for a minute before giving a signal to them that it was clear to come out. There may be no commotion in that place but the conflict was near and can be heard a few blocks of roads away from them.

They chose the route where they couldn’t be seen and discreetly moved from corner to corner. They passed the countless houses of slums and proceeded to a warehouse. Before they could enter the gate, a stray bullet nearly hit Cid.

“What the fuck is that?!”

Cid was shaken and stumbled behind. His boots trudged on dirt.

“Shh. Lower your voice.” Alastor scolded him.

Alastor observed the bullet that got stuck on the wall.

“It’s nothing but a stray bullet. Let’s go.”

They entered the vicinity and went around to get inside the warehouse by breaking the knob of the backdoor. Alastor glanced around and went to the corner. He pressed what seemed to be a dusty, old button.

Ahead, the ground was divided apart and unveiled a downslope tunnel.

“And that’s our secret tunnel.” Alastor said. “The original purpose of this tunnel was an escape route whenever shits happen. I never thought that we’d use this tunnel in this manner.”

They heard a loud gunshot from outside. Alastor looked around and noticed the bullet pierced through.

“We must hurry.” Cid said.

Alastor nodded and led the way. As they entered, the indicator shone bright and the way through the entrance closed.

# Chapter 6

**B**ehindthe walls of the city was people in rampant. Countless buildings were burning as the smoke ascended in sheets towards the sky. Outlaws and deviants exchanged fires against the police. Port was accustomed to it, but not to this extent. Their struggle against the police had brought damage to the locale’s establishments. Several civilians was being assisted to safety, while others were trying to flee. This could drive an economic crisis.

Thinking back then, he never thought his choice of the side would backfire at his end, and he regretted it now. Never once does he want innocent people to suffer by some senseless horrid desire. The only thing he thought about was how to earn money, no matter how dirty it was.

It was two years ago when he joined Don Trifalgo’s ranks. Port’s first job was to guard the cargos that were being delivered across the region, but ever since he failed to protect the product that Don bestowed on him, he was designated to Vesoga Plain. He never even got a chance to retrieve it even though he promised to bring it back.

Port knew that there was something behind that decision but he was not entirely sure about what it was. He only knew what Theo was trying to do when he was approached by the man in a black cloak. He was the one who stopped him during his hunting of the individuals who pickpocket them. Port thought of him as a suspicious individual but when he showed him footage about a man who was involuntarily put on an experiment, he was horrified at the scene. That was the time he knew he needed to do something about it.

The man in the black cloak said to him that Theo is planning to use his inventions to level the city and put it into ashes. He spent these past few months gathering information about his connection and the whereabouts of his other base. So far, he only knew a few about it, but the man said that it should be enough. He was not allowed under any circumstances to get caught that he was leaking a piece of information, if so then his friends and those kids he had taken care of will be affected.

“You can still go back.”

Henry’s voice rang inside his head. He regretted it now that he did not listen to his friend, but this is no time to be conflicted by some unnecessary thoughts. He should be focusing on what lies ahead, which is the thugs that are hijacking a truck by what seems to be Henry’s, that was parked outside the residence.

The thugs felt his mocking gaze.

“What’re you looking at?! Scram!”

One thug shouted. His gun leaned up to him.

No matter how you look at it, Port was at a disadvantage. There were five of them and he only had his gun at his side. Other than that, their weapons possessed higher firepower than his.

Port stepped back, looking for another alternative. He observed their fingers, which were locked on their weapons. He noticed in the shadow across the street, the man in black carefully approached them from behind. He signalled Port to wait and climb up the establishment.

Port moved forward.

“That’s as far as you go!” The man shouted and gave a warning shot to Port.

This man was serious. He knew how to wield and handle the gun very well.

“You don’t want to do this.” Port started. “If there’s still decency in your soul, please, don’t”

One of the men keenly observed him.

“I know who you are.” The man said. “You’re Port.”

Port gulped. He too realized who this guy was. They were once partners when they robbed the bank, but he was abandoned during the chase. He had no choice, if he helped the wounded man, he would’ve been caught.

“You traitorous bastard! You left me dying in there!”

“In my defense, if none of us would’ve escaped, our effort would be wasted.”

“Agreeable. But it doesn’t justify why you didn’t share the money with me.”

He was about to pull the trigger but suddenly he paused. Something prevented him from uttering those words. His men gazed at him. He fell while his soulless eyes remained open and as his comrade observed his head, they saw a hole in his temple, piercing through the other side. Port knew what this meant and he quickly unlocked the safety of his gun and pulled the trigger, killing the two remaining enemies. Their blood spread and flowed to the nearest canal.

The man in a black cloak landed behind him.

“I thought you were never gonna shoot.” Port started.

“I thought you’re just gonna allow them to kill you.” He replied.

Port chuckled. “I was waiting for your signal.”

“Really?” the man said, “In any case, you should’ve chosen to avoid them.”

“Can’t do that. My friend owns this truck.”

He nodded and moved on. “So, he already snapped?”

“Yes. The Canaries managed to infiltrate Theo’s base of operation in the Vesoga Plain.”

“Good. Continue to proceed with the plan and we’ll surely win.”

“And what about the counter agent?” Port asked.

“It is still in the works. Theo’s poison gas is hard to reverse engineer. But my friends are close to reversing it. It would take a few more hours to fully incorporate it to strengthen the healthy cells of humans. For now, your job is to infiltrate Theo’s building to know when he’s gonna release the gas.”

“Just in case your friend is late, I’m gonna engage to stop Theo from doing his plan.”

“Don’t be a fool. You have no chance against him.” The man in black cloaked warned.

“Only if I don’t try.”

“Listen to me. Stick with the plan. There’s no guarantee that you will win against him.”

“I’m not just gonna wait and allow him to release that poison gas in the city.”

The man in black cloak sighed, “All right. Do your worst. But don’t expect me to save your sorry ass.”

“Noted.”

The man in black cloak shot his grappling hook at the building.

Before he could leave, Port asked him, “If this plan is successful, will you allow me to join you guys?”

He grunted, “I’m not the leader, but I’m sure he’ll give it a thought. Since you helped us stop Theo, I guess you deserved some merit.”

The mysterious lad pressed on and left Port before he could ask more.

Port used his spare key to unlock the knob. Just as what a normal civilian would do, behind the door, large appliances were barged on the door keeping intruders from entering the restaurant. He decided to enter the backdoor, but it was still locked. He glanced up to the window and came up with an idea. His gun broke and entered the premises.

He silently walked on the second floor, which is the room for everyone lined up. He glanced thoroughly and was careful not to damage any paintings and furniture as he went down.

The entire place was so dark that he didn’t even notice that there was a gun pointed behind him as he walked to the switch to turn the light on. He had been here on many occasions and used to sleep here if he had no money to pay the rent or if he had no place to go beside the Vesoga Plain.

When he pressed the lights on, the gun leaned forward. Through the single touch of the head of the gun, he can feel the uncontrollable shaking of the man.

“If you resist, I will not hesitate to put a bullet on your head! Lie down!” he shouted.

Instead of following his orders, Port turned around and saw Henry profusely sweating as he held the gun.

“Port?!”

“Yeah, it’s me. You can put the gun down. Please, you might accidentally kill someone the way you hold it.”

Port was careful to guide Henry to hold down his gun and place it on the table.

“I’m so sorry if I freak you out.” Henry apologized.

Port was not completely angry at all. In fact, he was glad that Henry had the guts to man up for himself. Although he was worried about Henry’s mental capacity, for all this time, he knew that Henry never once held a gun and fighting was not one of his fortes.

“Seriously man, where have you been?”

“I’ve fixed some strings to loosen my end.”

“Huh? In any case, I’m glad you’re here. I’ve been on guard alone throughout the night.”

“Ah-huh. What about the others?” Port asked.

“They’ve fled the city. Ever since the mayor went nuts, hell break loose. What was he thinking?!” Henry said. He stood and kicked the wooden chair.

“What actually did he tell the citizens before this happened?”

“He declared that the city will be under martial law. Said by the bastard that we’re on national alert. There’s a terrorist group that was involved in destroying that fat-ass Don’s building and quite a few infrastructures. He decided to use Theo’s invention to instigate everyone to find out the terrorist that was lurking here.”

Port sat down and collected his thoughts for a moment. Even their suspicion is sound, it was like finding a ghost amidst hell. He felt something was off with their sudden acts.

“I’m beginning to see a pattern here, and I’m not sure if I’m gonna like it.”

“You said something?”

“Nothing.” Port shook his head. “Where’s Millie and Liam?”

“Upstairs. They’re hiding in the panic room.”

“Good. You should be hiding too.”

“What?!”

“Look, something is going to happen and I’m not overselling that there might be catastrophic events that are gonna happen so soon.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Just hide. Please. Hide in the panic room.”

“What about you?”

“I’m going to prepare. I’m not just gonna sit here and wait for the hell to take over this city.”

Henry held Port’s arm to see it in his face, the unwavering resolution.

“What about we leave this city?”

“What?”

“We should pack up and leave. Start a new life.”

“Are you nuts? This is our home. I’m not just gonna let that shitbag ruin this city where we grew up.”

“It’s – It’s a big risk! Can’t you see it?! This city is going to become a ruin. It’s going to destroy everyone’s lives.”

There was a pause. Behind his retorts, he knew what the right thing wasn’t, but he can’t just allow the enemy to win over his city. It was nothing less than a man’s pride, but as a citizen and warrior who can make a difference in this hell.

“No. If no one’s gonna stand up to stop their evil doings, they will continue their evil bidding until no one can stop them anymore.”

“And what about us?”

“You have money. You have friends you can turn to for help.”

Henry sighed. “Why can’t you change your mind just once?”

“I have no choice.”

“You do have a choice.”

Port walked across the barstool and to the manager’s office.

“The man gotta do what he has to do.”

“Fuck.” Henry said.

Port picked up the gun and went to the underground chamber. This time he is going to go all out. He never wanted to be like this, to be a thief, a mercenary, and lastly a lapdog.

He can still remember back then when he was a child, he would’ve stolen foods for him to have a full stomach. He joined various gangs until it led him here to his current state.

Henry, his friend, was once too homeless. His father died due to a gang fight and his mom did not end up well. She became a prostitute. Henry never knew what her job was, not until she died outside the bar she was working at. Since then, Port was the one who looked at him. How can a spoiled kid possibly survive the harsh reality outside his luxurious zone?

Port was the one who helped him to get through this point, and in return, he gave him a home that he never thought he could hope for. Even though he only visits once in a while, he never allowed Port to feel like an outsider despite the achievement he received.

Now that things have turned upside down, Port can’t wag his tail on something he was involved in to help bring a disaster to this breaking point. Knowing that this is a one-way trip, he must equip himself with powerful weapons and artefacts. He may not know any kind of magic, but he had artefacts that can boost his physical prowess and allow him to level up to the enemy’s aptitude, or so he assumed. He saw what happened back in the Vesoga Plain, Theo executed out of ordinary abilities. That terrifying scene had left him a chill that still crawls by just imagining it. Comparing himself to him, it would look like trying to crack an egg at its ends, which it was nearly impossible. Besides, he was not gonna fight alone, some people can help him accomplish his goals.

He was sure that they won’t deny his request, not this time, they’re facing a national threat that could wipe out everyone in this city. Port tightened the leash of his braces and the armour that carried his guns and his ammo.

Clad in various artefacts, Port marched outside to the battlefield.

\*\*\*

As they pressed forward, Cid noticed the faint rumble coming from above the ceiling. There were no lights, so they could only rely on the fire magic that was floating above as they walked through the darkness. The heart-wrenching darkness seized his mind from being cautious to his surroundings. His eyes remained unsettled as it glanced back and forth hearing faint noises coming from nowhere, or perhaps there is something that they should be afraid of, he did not know.

“Are you sure this is safe?” Cid had to ask. He needed to feel assured that they’re not in a hellhole. The last time he went down, a giant monster came munching after him.

“Don’t worry. This place has remained empty. No monsters can penetrate through that door. Only we have access to this place.” Alastor responded. “Is there something bothering you?”

“No.” There was a pause, “I’m fine.”

Alastor did not fail to notice the profuse sweating of his forehead pouring down as like he was washed in a rain.

“Chill up. Even Liber is ballsier than you.”

Liber smiled. Cid hissed.

At the end of the tunnel, they saw a metal door that had buttons and it appeared it needed four digits code to open. Alastor began to type the passcode.

“So, you guys had a plan to tell me that this existed before?”

“No.”

“What the hell?”

“Linda might have thought that it is not necessary to tell you. Since you’re on a mission.”

Cid did not ask further and waited behind the Comodo, watching their backs as the door opened.

“C’mon,” Alastor said.

Unlike their upper headquarters, the safe room was built with ten layers of aluminium steel. It would take more than five thanks to get through the thick-coated room. The lights were powered by a solar panel that charged the backup generator. There was a plateau shaped kind of panel. On the other side was a tent for the wounded.

All fears and worries washed away when Alastor saw the familiar hunchbacked of someone. It was Ken who was tending the wounds of Tin. Ken’s face was washed of worries, negative thoughts seized his mind from realizing that someone was already in there besides them.

Ken was startled when Liber gently pecked his back. His breath caught on his throat.

“What the hell?” Ken shrilled and squeaked.

“Calm down.” Alastor said. “It’s my Comodo.”

Ken blinked and looked around. “Al? Cid? You guys still alive?”

“If we’re dead, why do you think we’re standing and talking right in front of you?”

Ken glanced at him, “I’m so sorry man. If I just listen to you…”

“Don’t be…” Alastor cut him off. “There’s no need to linger on something that’s already been done. What matters now is to create a strategic plan on how we should take down Theo.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Linda said as she entered the room where Alastor and Cid came from.

“You got any news for us?” Cid asked, turned around, and sat at the nearby seat. Alastor went to the cabinet and drank a potion in order to soothe the pain he was enduring throughout the journey.

“The only glimpse of the gist,” Linda said.

“Please elaborate.” Alastor pleaded.

“Aside from commanding the shoot-out on the criminals in this city, Theo is mobilizing a unit and has been transporting trucks outside the city, just on the northeast. Whatever his transporting, it must be important.”

“I think I know what they’re transporting.” Alastor said.

“What is it?” Ken asked.

“Weapons.” Cid replied.

“Weapons? What kind of weapons are we talking about here?”

“I don’t know. There’s a lot of it, Don Trifalgo is assisting him in delivering those cargos across the region.” Cid paused and glanced at Alastor. There’s a dirty pattern he can see by stitching up the actions that Theo and his companions had done so far.

Alastor caught his glance and said, “So, d’ya believe me now, aren’t ya?”

Cid nodded.

“Believe about what?” Ken asked.

“When I was sneaking into Don’s hideout,” Cid started, “I heard that they’re transporting the products across the continent and supplying certain terrorists to incite a civil war.”

“So?”

“That means,” Alastor interjected. “Theo’s plan does not only stop on experimenting subjects. He’s also amassing weapons and exporting them across different countries.”

“Simmer it up. What exactly are you pointing out?” said Linda.

“What I’m trying to say is that he’s inciting a geopolitical economic war.”

“I’m sorry, what?” Ken asked. The two of them were unable to comprehend what Alastor said just now. “Is he trying to start another War of Blight?”

“His idea may be far-flung to the current evidence, but there’s no denying the possibility.” Linda said.

“Look, Linda.” Cid said as he stepped forward. “You need to contact Rod about this. There’s no way we can take him out without any kind of backup. He’s a threat that needs to be dealt with extreme prejudice.”

“I can see what you’re afraid of, but something happened” Linda muttered, a tense silence ensued before she responded. “We can’t call for backup for now.”

“What the fuck do you mean?” Alastor looked sharp and stood straight.

“All radio towers have been locked and out of service.” This time Linda stared up to him and glance around them.

“Like any smartass would do. Cutting off communication prevented us from calling for backup.” Cid scoffed.

“There are ways out of this city, other than striding across bunch puppeteer cops.” Alastor said.

“Where?” Ken asked.

“Sewer.”

“Err. I thought it would be something less dirty.”

“Well, you can’t be picky when your life is in danger.”

“Yeah, you have a point.” Ken said, “So, what’re we going to do now?”

Linda walked back and forth. Her thought was trapped in a cynical mindful idea.

“We’ll plan an assault against him.” Linda’s eyes left no trace of doubts.

“You sure?” Ken asked. “Is there any other way to avoid having contact with him?”

Linda shook her head. “I’m afraid not. Now that there is no way to contact The Glade outside the city, we should take care of the problem ourselves. I’m sure that Rod would order the same considering that he’s threatening a large sum of people in this city, which includes us – there’s no way that we should let him live and do what he wants.”

“So, what’re you suggesting?” Cid asked.

“We take him out like the old style.”

“So, we’re not gonna chill our ass-es here?” Around that time Ken already finished tending Tin and returned the medpack on the table.

“No, as I said, we’ll take it seriously this time and have his head.”

“Okay then, with no further ado, let us decide what steps should be taken.” Alastor said.

The four of them walk towards the screen and swipe the touchscreen showing the layout of Kelby Hives. Unlike the chemical factory, the Kelby Hives building stood tall at fifty-story heights. The briefing did not come out smoothly, the pathways that led to Kelby Hives were paved with monsters and robots. There was no assurance that they would not pass unscathed of all the enemies. It would take a lot of manpower to deal with those opponents and it will deal a heavy toll for a fruitful success. If they take the stinky route, it would take longer than the underground tunnel, in addition, the number of enemies was uncertain, it could take a while which would make it not worth their time.

“How the hell are there a hundred monsters crawling out in the city?! It could take us hours.” Cid asked.

“He’s right.” Alastor conferred. “The remaining roads will take us few hours to reach him and the main roads are being raided.”

“It doesn’t matter if they’re in the way. What we should think for now is how to gain access to the site.” Linda said.

“Right.” Cid responded. “We should look for weak points.”

“There are no weak points.” Alastor started, “All entrances are blocked by the robots and who knows what they’re capable of.”

“We have no choice. We have to force our way in.” Linda said.

“You actually consider that?” Ken asked a tad bit thoughtless considering their number of options.

“What choice do we have?” Alastor asked.

“We can’t do that. That would risk not just our identity but our affiliation.”

“Then, what do you suggest?”

Alastor snapped his finger, “Linda’s right. Tanking them is the only way.”

“Dude, we’ll sustain damage before we can even put up a fight against Theo.”

“Who said we’re the only ones who are going to raid Kelby Hives?” Alastor said.

Perplexed, Cid probed, “What do you mean by that?”

A thin smile stretched on Alastor’s face.

\*\*\*

Cid patience was wearing thin as he loomed over the dark part of the alley. His face was unsettled and remained intact from puffing the cigarette. He did not wait for any further and walked inside the establishment through the backdoor. His eyes were vigilant as the red light coming from the ceiling guided his way. If it were not for Alastor’s suggestion he would not have come here. It is part of his plan. Cid was to convince the remaining mercenaries to join them to fight against the enemies.

“What’s taking so long?” Cid asked as he entered the room.

There, the entire gang of mercenaries sat down in their own stool and table, savouring their drinks as if it was their last cup.

A man approached him. “This is the man you are talking about?”

Cole rose, “Yes, he is.”

The man stood before him, his eyes judging his gravitas. The leader of the pack.

“Hmm.” He grunted.

“Is there something wrong?” Cid questioned.

The atmosphere became heavy, but not all threatening. Their eyes weighing them.

“Nothing.” The man turned his back and sat down.

Cid raised his eyebrow, “You sure? Because I can tell that you’re measuring me.”

The man smirked, “Everybody does.”

Cid’s eyes scanned. They are all giving him an intimidating look. Cole patted his back as if his eyes told him to let him handle it.

“As you can see,” Cole started, “Theo is taking over the city from inside. That means it—”

“Spare us with that crap!” one of the men shouted. “I don’t see anything that would benefit us.”

“So, you’re gonna let the bastard win? There is no way out in the city. All roads have been blocked. The only thing we can do now is to fight.”

“And what about the money?” Another man asked, “Since you’re the one who suggested it, I take it you’re gonna pay us?”

Cole was stunned into silence.

“Yeah, I thought so.” The man said. “No man is insane enough to fight without proper compensation.” He slammed the tankard down the table.

“Hold down your horse.” Their leader ordered.

The man did not listen and continued the yattering, “There’s nothing good—”

The leader grew bored and stabbed his hand with the fork. The man shouted in pain as he kneeled and quickly compressed it with the towel.

“Stop being a bitch and hear the man out.”

Cid could not take it anymore and so, he stood for himself, “Look, I don’t have anything to offer you all, but if Theo will take over the city, then there will be no hunting business anymore.”

“Even if your words are promising, you forgot one thing: we can just pack up and leave here. Start a new life in another country.”

Cid shook his head, “Suit yourself.”

Cole gave him a blank look, pretending not to be shocked.

“Your mom sure raised a wuss.”

“What did you say?!” the man shouted. The table shook when he slammed his hand. “I don’t know what’s inside your head, swindle knot. But you do not have the right to call names here! Who do you think you are?!”

“I’m the bearer of the truth.” Cid said. “You think that the problem will be gone if you just walk away? No, though it may not seem to be sound, Theo’s going to expand his connections, control the underground, and limit our actions. Innocent people will die if you let him do what he wants. Only the gods above know what he will do.”

“Tell me, what makes you persist this much?” the man asked, “No, there’s more than this. You lot are onto something. Tell us.”

Cid gulped his own saliva, “I do not know what you’re talking about. I only came here to speak out and convince all of you to fight.” He glanced around. “Will you comply with his demands or are you gonna stand up against him?”

“Your words remained empty. Do you think these men would be foolish enough to fight a war that was never their right to fight?”

“But I believe that all of you don’t want this city to end up manipulated by that man.”

“We don’t care.” Said one of the men. “We care more about our life than this city.”

Cole already knew that this conversation is going nowhere, considering that these men are committed enough to wag their tails off the fight.

Cole asked Cid, “Can we talk outside?”

The two men walk outside. Cole offered him with a grave look.

“So, what?” Cid asked.

“You know what’s up with those guys.” Cole said. His eyes are still on Cid. “They won’t work unless there’s proper compensation. And you sir, have no offer to give.”

Cid scratched his head. “I thought I could convince them with words.”

“What do you expect of them? Patriots? You guys are alike, you all work for money. Now, unless you have something to offer, those guys won’t go with you.” Cole sighed. “I’m saying this to spare you the trouble. At first, I thought that you have something incentive, but after I saw your sappy moves, I was lost.”

“What do you suggest?” Cid asked.

“I don’t know. Tell your teammate that your plan was fucked up.”

“I can’t.”

“Why?”

“Because they’re already heading to the rendezvous points.”

“What?” Cole asked surprisingly, “You guys honestly expect that talking with these guys will turn the table?”

“We ought to use them as a cover for us to get inside the Kelby Hives.”

“And here I thought you guys are professionals.”

“Hey, we’re in a desperate situation here, so simmer down on being a judge-e.”

Cole looked down. His face is in a serious expression, thinking deeply.

“What to do? What to do?” Cole repeatedly asked himself.

Cole looked up to Cid, “You owe me a hundred-thousand haz.”

Cole walked back inside with an uptight visage.

“Seventy-thousand haz. Help us take care of Theo and you’ll get seventy-thousand haz.”

One of the men dumbfoundedly allowed dropping the mug from hearing the price that Cole said.

“And after that, you will get another thirty-thousand. Deal?”

“The leader of the mercenary group stood up.

“That is what we call our business. We’re in. Boys! Mugged your drinks, we’re going to war!”

Cid hearing those words coming out of his mouth, grabbed his shoulder.

“Are you serious?”

“There’s no other way. And hey, I only lend my money to you guys, so pay me up next time.”

Cid sighed. “Shit. Looks like my reward ain’t goin’ anywhere for me.”

\*\*\*

Cain grew tired watching Glen walking back-and-forth as if he was losing his mind. The tipping point of the pen continues to click as Glen’s eyes gaze around. Cain stood up from sitting on the couch and walked towards the windowpane, looking down at the chaotic scene everywhere in the Kayon City – or so at least in his side of view.

“What was he thinking?” Glen asked out of nowhere. “This decision of his will only brought more problems. We already have our hands full. What could possibly he could attain from this?”

Cain shrugged. “Don’t ask me. Even I can’t even make sense of what’s in his mind. All this time, Theo didn’t bother to tell us what the deal was.”

“I can’t seem to rationalize if he’s a man or just a brat. Everything he ordered seemed to be rushed. Specifically, when he reluctantly made a connection to those renegades. Only if he would listen to my advice, then it wouldn’t have come to this.”

“Really? I can’t seem to recall that I have an obligation to heed your request, Glen.”

Glen’s face turned pale as he saw Theo walk through the hall. As of now, they’re in the middle level of the higher echelon of the Kelby Hives building.

“I’m sorry…”

“Hold it.” Theo interfered. “Save your breath. I have no need for your apology. Although, I can understand where your discontentment is coming from and I cannot blame you for thinking like that. I assure you there’s nothing you should worry about.”

“Then what is it then?” Cain probed. “What could we possibly achieve out of this chaos?”

“Misdirection.” Theo replied.

Glen raised a brow. He does not know whether he was hearing a word from a madman or from impulsive childish desire.

“Do explain.” Glen pleaded.

“Very well.”

There’s a broad smile crept ear to ear and a deep nod as he peered closer to the window, looking down at the chaotic state of the city. As time passed by, the vast flames stretched out across the edges of the darkness in the city. Men, women, and children either fled, hid in their residence, or died as they were caught in the fight. It was an unsightly view.

“I am certain the two of you are well aware of the resistance creeping down below.” They nodded. “These past few months they have managed to tamper with our plans and hinder our progress.” Theo’s eyes narrowed, welling in anger.

“But we have progressed and succeeded to use the Hemil Klust to our ends. So, why put heat in this city. I am sure there is no need for it. This only will result in the fruition of discontentment to the people here. We have so many problems that we should take care of.”

“Except that they’ve already known the webs I concocted. That is why we must leave.” Theo said.

“What?!” Glen said. “After all these years, you’re giving up now?!”

Clearly, anyone would be intimidated by Glen’s standing point, but Theo did not waver, only shrugged. “Let me rephrase that remark. We’re simply moving so that there will be no disturbances. We are not giving up our work.”

“What gives then? Why bother setting up a conflict?”

“As I’ve said, misdirection. We will stage a conflict…”

“…And blame the Glade for all of this,” Cain added.

Theo didn’t bother to hide his smile. “It seems that someone is using his brain.”

“Don’t flatter me, Theo.” Cain scoffed. “I do not approve of this method of yours.”

“Why is that?”

“There’s too much blood on our hands.”

“Yet little use of them for our cause.”

“I have no ear for a lunatic.” Cain dismissed him.

“Oh, but you did listen, that is why your father is in my care.”

Cain did not respond nor care about his words of endearing madness. Instead, he left with a heavy heart.

\*\*\*

Her fine silks and array of vases illuminated under the neon light coming from the lanterns inside the residence they’ve rented. The catwalk echoing was drawn to halt and glance around as she threw the towel on the bed, allowing her red hair to wobble for a few seconds. She put on her white uniform and equipped a sword at her waist. She went outside and saw them waiting for her.

“So, what now?” Ina asked and groaned as she slumped on the cushion.

“We’ll wait for the right opportunity.” Linda said.

“And you?” Ina looked at Gary’s right arm that was shot by a bullet. Before they came here, they were interrogated, but it was different from what they’d imagined. Thanks to Lance’s intuition, they were able to escape before they could’ve killed them.

“You gonna be alright?” Lance asked.

“Yeah.” Gary touched his arm. It was wrapped with white fabric. There was still a stain of red phasing through, but still, he could barely move his arm properly even though the pain had subsided. “I’ll be fine.”

“Then what’re we waiting for? Let’s move out.” Ina asked.

“Hold it.” Lance restricted her before she misinterpreted. “I said, we’ll wait for the right opportunity.”

Given the fact that the law enforcement themselves turn themselves over Theo, they can’t recklessly go outside and are allowed to be caught. Their options are limited so they must deduce carefully for their next step.

“There’s no mistaking it, Theo is making a move.”

“What is he actually trying to do?” Gary asked.

“Judging from their actions, it looks like Theo’s planning to eliminate any kind of competition. From identifying everyone to draw out the scums in this city to weaponing their company, I reckon that he’s also hunting those people who hurt his enterprise these past few months, which includes us.”

“So, what now? Laying down is not an option, right?” Ina asked

“No. We’ll wait for the right opportunity. I doubt that the Glade or other mercenaries will go down without putting up a fight.”

“And then we’ll attack Theo from behind?” Gary responded.

“The last thing we want is to get caught again should we have no choice. We learned that kind of price must be more valuable than anything we have. His attention will be diverted in front. Therefore, he will not expect us to come from behind.”

Lance nodded. There was no denying that there was no other way. They have to settle this matter with their hands.

\*\*\*

The grinding of what it seemed to be coming from the metals clamoured their reverberations across the streets. Alastor stole a glance at the metropolitan wherein the two parties of mercenaries and police along with the inventions of the Kelby Hives fired at each other.

The mercenaries somehow managed to put up a good match against enforcers. Although it may seem to be that they have the advantage because they were able to use magic and empower the weapons, the enforcers have advanced technological devices in means of countering their magic. Such as the robots, can nullify magic to some certain degree, but had to use shields if they can’t take the damage any longer.

Alastor along with Linda and Ken, they’ve sprinted across the alleyway, avoiding any unnecessary fights. With Alastor leading the way, Linda and Ken were able to focus watching their back and remain their guard high. Alastor glanced cautiously at the road. The road and the establishments are empty. This part of the city was one of the liveliest places that most people from outside visited, because of the foods they served. But due to the recent upbringing, this city was good as a ghost.

For once, Alastor felt unhappiness seeing how this place was wretched and was torn into pieces by the fight that they had nothing to know nor involved about. The once lively grill shop was closed and barricaded; the lanterns that were once displayed were left hanging and shut down. The sharp whistle of breeze was the only life recognizable.

Alastor was ahead of them. He scanned the surroundings and confirmed that there was no threat.

They moved with haste on their feet and spread out to their position as they skulked out. The Kelby Hives should be across the street down the straight path ahead, but the problem was that the road to the company was two kilometres long. They might want to keep up the pace because there was no telling when Theo will be pissed and decide to use all of his weapons at his disposal against the mercenaries.

“Holy shit,” Ken said. His heavy breathing created a white puff and quickly it disappeared. “Two fucking kilometres. We’ll be fully drained before we get there. I am not built for this.”

“Stop complaining!” Alastor sniffed due to the cold. “We’ve wasted enough time on this bullshit. We’re not gonna fail our mission.”

“To be honest,” Linda started, “I never thought that we’d be able to get this far. I… I should have been more careful and been direct to you all. It wouldn’t have come to this if I did not let this happen.”

Alastor did not respond. Her words were true. If she had been more assertive rather than being passive, the group wouldn’t break apart and maybe they would have been able to stop this commotion earlier.

“I was not built for being a leader.” Linda exclaimed. “Forgive me, Alastor.”

“Hey,” Ken said, “We all make mistakes. No matter how much effort we put in, we will always be bound to make mistakes. Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

Alastor saw a hint of regret in her eyes, “Forget it. It doesn’t matter. We should focus on what’s up ahead.”

Alastor’s eyes fixated forward.

“That’s right.” Linda nodded, concurring with what he said. It seemed that Alastor had forgiven her. Though, unsure with the thought since he barely talks anything.

As they reached the security door they were stopped by men in armour. Their weapons apparently are different from before, their guns have a different design and aside from that, they also have a rod that is unknown what it can do.

“This is as far as you go!”

The patrolman shouted. There were a lot of them. They’re clearly waiting and patiently hold their position for an ambush if there was anyone trying to take the fight in the Kelby Hives.

“Damn it.” Ken muse, “I thought they’re supposed to be inside the facility.”

“Well, we’re wrong,” Alastor said. “We could use some back up here.”

Their position was solid to the finest. Barricades came to the surface beneath the land blocking the way and having the position guarded at each corner, making it impossible to break through.

A patrolman broke off and moved forward. He was observing them thoroughly. It was a good thing that they had a mask and put it on. For now, their identity is safe. The man got closer and watched as the three stood frozen. When he came to the realization of where he saw them, he held his gun towards them.

“I know who you are.” He said, “You’re the one who messed with Don Trifalgo.”

“Crap,” Ken said. “It’s nice knowing you guys.”

Scarcely to put a thought on this, they were disturbed by something. Everything around them trembled, moving with a pattern, from right to left, until the earthquake gradually stopped.

“Stop!” the patrolman demanded.

“We’d like to, but it’s not us,” Linda said.

Before the man could find a grip from the sudden earth-shaking, land split, and the patrolmen screamed as they fell. Some survived but the big shots did not.

The patrolman didn’t hesitate and pulled the trigger.

Linda raised her palm creating a shield that protects them against the bullets. There was something different about it. The bullets were covered in light. The magic wall barely stood against the bullets, but they were given enough time to see the enemies stop as their weapons began to spark.

“What the hell?!” asked one of the patrolmen. “What did you do?!” he shouted.

“Nuh-uh. It ain’t us.”

The earth trembled, this time cracked trailed like from a broken glass, until the terrain crumbled, swallowing half of the infantrymen. Their screams became echoes as they were consumed by the pit hole.

The wobbly land gradually slowed down as it returned to normal. The leader of the infantry ambush unit gritted his teeth. His movement was sluggish but was determined to put an end to it.

Alastor and his team were shaken by the attack too. A question continued to linger in his mind, why does it seem to be that the attack was meant for them? Or perhaps, someone intentionally attacked them.

Unfortunately, his deduction was scarcely put into realization as a bullet grazed his ankle. Alastor fell down on his knees as the infantryman came to him. He was about to finish Alastor but his fellow soldier came to him, rushing.

“Sir,” he whispered to him.

The leader showed a bitter face as he heard the report of the soldier.

He put up a tough face and said to him, “Theo demands you to yield.”

A triumphant grin formed, not because of the fact that a large amount of the enemy was dead, but Theo recognized them as worthy enough for his attention, at the same time, this put their position at risk.

“You can tell Theo he can suck on this…” Alastor said as he raised his middle finger.

The man hissed, “You are in no position to oppose. We outnumber you.”

Alastor glanced at his back, Ken and Linda seem to be in the middle of gathering their strength. Alastor already knows how perilous their position they are in. The threat was clear as crystal, abide or die? What choice does he have?

Alastor lay flat on the ground and called the two to do the same.

Before the enemy could do what he was ordered, land trembled again, this time a broad man appeared from below, tossing everyone with strength as the private militia struggled to gain hold of their lines. It didn’t hold much long. They were utterly beaten into pulp.

When he finished the leader off, he walked towards Alastor.

“You pretty screwed up, eh.”

Alastor recognized the gruff voice.

“Meil? Why are you here?”

Alastor got up. The others were hesitant, but got closer.

“My business is down and it’s because of Theo. So, here I am, helping to take down his ass.”

“Everyone, this is my friend, Meil.”

“Hi.” Linda greeted and gave Alastor a look, “I’m surprised Alastor has a friend.”

“Let’s keep that to ourselves,” Alastor said.

“Thank you, for saving our ass-es.” Ken expressed his gratitude.

“Don’t sweat it. Rod paid me to assist you all. Although I am a retired Glade mercenary, I’m more reluctant to keep my nose from this mess.”

“Glade, what?” Linda asked.

“I’m a rank A Glade ex-mercenary, well, back in the old days. So, tell me, what’s the plan?”

Linda explained, “Our plan is to sneak up while waiting for the mercenaries to distract the private militia and assassinate Theo when he least expects us.”

“That’s it?” Meil asked, eyes reflected on disappointment. “That is the dumbest plan I’ve ever heard.”

“Allow us to hear your wisdom.” Alastor provocatively said.

“Well, uhm…” Meil was dumbfounded. “Anyway, since you already have one, let’s go with your plan. My job is only to assist you, not to lead.”

“Yeah, I thought so.” Alastor dismissed. “Cid we’re waiting for you to commence the attack and after that, we’ll sneak up behind.”

“Great, so, where are they?”

“I don’t… they’re supposed to be here at any moment.”

Just as he expunged the air out of his lungs, a shadowy figure came past them.

“What the hell is that?” Ken asked.

Above them, a giant bird known as the Blue Klitz in a form similar to the kin of Comodo and few other species, it had the face of a bird but its beak was sharp as a bee, the brow was solid as molten rock. Its pale blue feather illuminated under the moonlight. It glided down as the wings became steady, it graciously made its way to the Kelby Hives.

They were pretty sure that they saw ten or more people riding Blue Klitz. Everything will be clarified as the man they’ve been waiting for finally came with a hundred more mercenaries charging.

“What the…?” Linda was astonished.

Liber, carrying Cid, stopped and jumped down.

“Pretty neat, huh? Is this enough?” Cid asked them.

“Well, yeah,” Ken replied.

“Alright, then.” Linda began to explain. “This is where the hardest part begins. We have to make sure that their attention will focus on the front.”

“Not to brag, but, with this force, Theo won’t see us coming.” Ken confidently said.

“Let’s set aside that false hope, we’re not sure what we are dealing with here,” Alastor said. His stern face struck fear in Ken, again.

Nevertheless, he knew what partakes will put them to the test. The man itself is the epiphany of mystery. The only thing they know was that the man itself posed a threat that likely would cause a war, but until now, the goal remains a mystery. To what end does this conflict he drafted will gain him power, money, or perhaps status?

Such questions revolve inside their mind, the Glade wanted to know what Theo wants, but time is a luxury that they could no longer afford, death was the only thing they can grant now to him.

The mercenaries valiantly fought the private militia of Kelby Hives. Perhaps Alastor was underestimating them, but certainly, after watching how things unfold, he couldn’t seem to imagine how they’re going to succeed like this. The last thing Alastor wanted to witness was how the mercenaries are going to be able to pull it off, something that will surpass his expectation. But it turned out, they flunked. Well, they’re not completely overwhelmed with force, but the barrier the enemy made makes it harder for the mercenaries to charge as the enemies fortified their positions with no means to bring them down, even though they managed to gain a foothold on the wall. Add to it, the enemies have the higher ground, their blasters make it harder for them to breach.

Alastor gazed from his position away from the wall that the Blue Klitz destroyed.

“Cid, I thought they’re going to help solve our problem? I can’t see that they’re doing it right now. You guys are completely doing the opposite.” Linda said through the earphone.

“Hey! Spare us the lecture.” Cid yelled as he glanced at the Leader who conjured an earth wall to protect them. “I thought that you would make things easy for us.”

The Leader spared him the glare as he countered the attack of the enemy.

“We are. Just shut up and watch.”

The silhouette of the bird monster past, behind them. It stretched and flew away up in the sky. The Leader whistled and the bird glided down with its mouth open wide. The wings produce blue flames.

“Take cover, kid. It’s going to be a blast.”

Cid deliberately got inside the protective wall along with the other mercenaries.

“What are they doing?” Alastor said. “We’re not fucked up, aren’t we?”

“No, have faith, kid.” Meil said with a condescending tone. “I’m pretty sure Rod would be proud of you guys deciding to let another third party to mix on your mission.”

“Really?” Ken asked.

“He’s being sarcastic, Ken,” Alastor replied. “That’s the last thing we want to hear for now.”

The bird dived as its glowing body began to form and launch their energy towards the enemy’s direction. The building of the army’s fortress exploded and the walls crumbled down, making way enough for the second party to sneak in.

The enemies were helpless against the attack of the creature. The only thing that sets them aside was the impending path they have to follow. Kelby Hive was much larger than the Chemical Factory they infiltrated last time. That would mean this place would prove more dangerous.

The wall that the mercenaries created crumbled down. The Leader looked at the surroundings, enemies fell in one swoop of strike with the bluish flames of the monster he tamed.

“This is the chance that we’ve been waiting for. Tell your friends, they gotta do what they have to do because we won’t last long to see this end.”

The second party made their way on the far side of the wrecked wall and sneaked past through the buildings.

They’ve noticed that the atmosphere has changed. The ground was shaken by something.

“What the hell was that?” One of the mercenaries asked.

“The big guns.” the Leader said. His face became serious. His tone changed as his men turn their attention to him. “Listen to me, just like the previous routine, we hit the knee, and attack all that we’ve got. We may be scum, but we’re not going to bend to an oppressive bastard. Spare no one, if you die then you die, it is what it is. But we will die as warriors with pride!”

His words lifted their spirit as they raised their weapons and a war cry began to emit as if their lungs knew no tiredness.

The tanks along with the modified soldiers and weapons began to emerge. They steeled themselves as they charged on one another.

The battle entirely wrecked the environment. Both sides displayed impressive skills, but the mercenaries proved to be superior to the modified soldiers and the machines they used.

“You may use every machination you have, but a talent with no proper tactic to use would befall to naught.” The Leader said. His sword swung down to the arm of the soldier, ripping it off. He shifted and attacked another one, he mercilessly cut off every piece of their body.

His reaction was quick as a bolt. If the enemy would be able to get behind his back, he would use the dead body to shield himself, if not he would conjure magic to blow the head off. Unfortunately, not all of his men were talented as he is. It was estimated that the initial men he had were three hundred, and now, they were scarce by ninety.

It was then they realized they were half-wrong; the machines don’t have their talents, but they outnumbered them. If it weren’t for the monster they have, the Blue Klitz, they wouldn’t manage to keep the death toll at a minimum. His compatriots began to change their tactics and began to charge tanks in more erratic movements to confuse it.

The mercenary conjured magic that shook everything and had the wheel stuck, immobilizing the vehicle. The others cut down the submachine gun attached to it and threw a fireball at the nose of the tank. They watched the tank explode into pieces as they took cover by the magical wall they conjured. Hell broke loose when the bird launched another set of attacks against the enemy.

“Forward!” He shouted. “Let us show those bastards what we’re made of!”

They showed a valiant effort, and with their high level magic, they managed to sway them off from marching forward and were beginning to hold the fort on their position. The Leader glanced at the party and grinned.

\*\*\*

From sitting high above the building, Theo can see the crisis taking over. His smile distorted from the dissatisfaction that his army was being bested by mere mercenaries.

“The pests are coming.” Theo uttered, barely above a whisper

His murderous thoughts were briefly thwarted when Cain came in. He too was disconcerted by this attempt to overthrow them, what made this feeling grow more annoying is the fact that Theo might have prevented all of this if he had acted sooner, but he knew already about this trepidation and he still allowed this to happen.

“Just as you have said, all of the important items have been delivered in Vesoga Plain.”

“Good.”

Theo stood up from his chair and went to the table. The monitor lit up and showed catalogues of information. He swiped it until it showed a draft of an exoskeleton, the humanoid machine representing a striking resemblance of one of the astral beings that was known to humans, Ashura. The replica stood tall at around thirty feet, it had a broad body armour that covered its sensitive interior parts, a faceless figure with the crown of thorns adorn on his head. It had four arms that are in proportion to its blades hanging behind it, big enough to wield it.

“What’re you up to?” Cain asked.

“I’m sending these out, to make things even. I suggest you head out now. The destruction of this place is now near to completion.”

“Theo, tell me, what’re you really planning? Why are you willing to throw all of this away?”

Theo smirked. “Cain, don’t be so oblivious. You already know the rumours about our company, it’s only a matter of time for these people to raise their voices and weapons. So, I thought why not bring it down myself?”

“I don’t get—oh.” Cain paused in his realization. “I can see where you are getting at.”

“Now, do listen to me. Go. I will give them the satisfaction they need, but they will never see through the charades that I have laid.”

“Then, I must see myself now.”

“That would be wise.”

Theo stared at the monitor for a moment before pressing the button. He sat down back on his chair looking down at the scenery of the commotion. Such explosions were displayed as if they were fireworks. Up in the sky, his eyes met the Blue Klitz as if they were testing each other. Sensing the danger from him, the Blue Klitz charged towards Theo.

Theo lifted his finger pointing at the monster.

“So, they have a high-level monster on the field, eh. No wonder why they were able to get through our defenses. I’m taking you out.”

\*\*\*

In a split second, a ray of light, fast as lightning hit the monster’s wing. It squealed in pain as it lost its balance to flight. The Blue Klitz crashed into a few buildings before hitting the paved ground. The Blue Klitz groaned as it tried to stand up on its feet. The Leader saw what happened and gathered his strength to sway off the enemies that were trying to harm the Blue Klitz, but the bird’s flame was turning to red.

“Men! Stand your ground!”

His fellow mercenaries stood and attacked the enemies.

“Does anyone know healing magic? The big bird is in trouble!”

Few allies came to heal and defend the bird, but it took a toll on them to stand against the enemy. The enemies fell but did leave a huge scar in their ranks. What baffled them was that the enemy was retreating.

“What the hell are they doing?”

“Retreat!” one of the enemies shouted. “They’re sending the Ashura-Tenrei.”

“Ashura-Tenrei? What the hell is that?”

“Reinforcement.” The Leader said.

An earthquake took over the place. Some of the building collapsed, but it passed for a few moments as if the source groaned to halt. Then, two large shadows sprung up in the sky. All of them glanced up, and in a flash, something landed in front of the two parties. Alastor and the others look up at the large figure as it rises from kneeling. Ken felt his soul leave his body the moment that the giant was drawn its weapon. Fortunately, Meil blocked the attack with his bare hands.

“Snap out of it!” Meil yelled.

The gang heard his voice and prepared.

“No! You go to the damn building.” Meil commanded and looked around. His eyes fixed on the rumbling ahead. “I’ll take care of this.”

“But!” Alastor said.

“No more buts! Just go!”

Linda pulled them away from the fight and sprinted the other way.

“There’s no way he can handle that thing!” Alastor reprimand.

“Don’t you trust him?” Linda asked.

“You don’t know anything about him,” Alastor replied.

“And you do?”

“He stopped for a reason, okay. Look, I know he joined because of a request, but I can’t let him fight that thing alone.”

“Relax.” Ken said. “Just like you’ve said, he’s a veteran. It’s not like he’s going down that easy.”

Linda gently held his shoulder, “He’s gonna be fine.”

After a few seconds of thinking, Alastor bared his teeth and listen to reasons.

“All right.”

\*\*\*

Meil stumbled upon the pebble as he tried to evade the enemy. He conjured one of his Inquiara magic, Maximum Defense, it’s a skill that raises the person’s defense when facing danger, the more dangerous the situation was – the higher the Inquiara magic reacted. His body was able to hold off the devastating attack of the enemy’s sword. He leaped out of the ground and coughed.

“There are a few more things I would like to confirm about your features, but what the hell. I’m just gonna do it like the old style.”

Meil charged against the enemy, he blocked every attack with his bare skin twenty times harder than metal. Getting the closure he wanted, Meil leapt towards the chest, his fist was flaring, and hit the enemy, pushing it back as it lost its balance. The force was enough to shake the land and pushed the dust off the clearing. Meil quickly regained his footing and observed the result of his attack. His attack barely bent the metallic chest of the Ashura-Tenrei and quickly cooled off.

“Not only fast, but also has an exceptional defense. Looks like it’s going to take a few more punches to take this thing down.”

He heard the sharp whistle of the Blue Klitz right at eight o’clock. He clearly saw that the Blue Klitz grabbed the very same monster that was on his face right now. He saw the Leader that they contracted.

“Focus on the ground forces! I’ll take this thing away from here!”

His men withdraw and march forward to the remaining force.

The Leader saw Meil fighting the same thing. The two met their glances, and nodded, as if they already know what was inside their mind. Meil casually shielded the attack of the Ashura-Tenrei, and with a sheer stroke of his fist, the being flung high. Convenient to the Blue Klitz position, the similar Ashura-Tenrei was dropped to the other one.

\*\*\*

Linda, Alastor, and Ken reached the Kelby Hive building, they take a deep breath before taking a few steps on the adjacent staircase. Alastor felt something odd about the place, thus, choosing to halt them.

“Isn’t it weird that everything seems off?”

“Yeah.” Linda agreed. She glanced and noticed a small red dot blinking. “It’s a trap!”

They jumped away before the bomb exploded. They were far away enough to not get caught in the blast radius. They felt the explosion rip the walls and several machines, the crackled and sparks were evident as the results.

“Well, that’s quite a welcome.” Ken said, peering behind uneasily.

“Yeah, you think? That’s gonna hurt our body tomorrow.” Alastor said urbane with his thoughts.

“Shrugged it off.” Linda said. “Well, if we can’t get through the entrance where should we go?”

The three glanced up to the window and to the walls. They glanced at each other. They already knew what to do.

“You’re thinking what I’m thinking, right?” Alastor said.

“Yeah. Now, the last thing we need is a distraction.”

With a stroke of luck, Cid with Liber arrived.

“Hey, guys.” Cid got down. “What’re we up to now?”

“Just at the right time.” Linda shrugged. “We could use your help.”

The soldiers perched and aimed their rifles at the entrance. Their senses heightened the moment they heard the explosion take over outside. They already barricaded the entrance from inside, so that no one could enter the building. The commander of the squad already assessed the situation. There was no other way around for the enemy to get inside. The ground floor was completely swarmed by the private army forces of Theo.

“Maybe they’re dead?”

“Let’s hope so, but we can’t expect that all of them are dead.”

“Right.”

The men are in the position. All of them occupied the grandiose ground floor for the incoming attack. They already expected that the barricade forces won’t be able to fend off the enemies because over seventy percent of their forces lend to the city’s combat unit to subdue every criminal in the city.

“We’ll wait for the reinforcement. For now, we’ll hold them off.”

The atmosphere changed, the temperature rose.

“Something’s coming.”

The barricade was shaken by the attack of the enemy. They can already guess that it was a fire magic.

“Hold your line!”

Their weapons aimed steadfast to the single barricade that was driven by the force of the enemy. The moment the attack stopped; they fell into relief, but it was a false hope they clung onto.

The barricade didn’t make it. It tore apart. Then, they commence a deafening rain of gunshots. It was overkill in an attempt that they did. The bullets sprung like a firework to the hole that the enemy made. The commanding officer seized them to attack.

He waited for a moment to see if they killed the enemies, but no luck. Fireballs came to enter the premises and burned his men into ashes. The attack sent several fragments of flames on the beautiful ornaments of the building, burning it.

A moment of silence came. The wind came and washed off the flames. Some of his men were not able to find cover and got caught by the fire. The burnt crisp of their comrade’s dead bodies hung in the air. They did not flinch at the sight but were irritated by the foggy and ashes in the atmosphere it left.

For the moment they are waiting for is the element of surprise of the enemy. He was sure they would come only at the available entrance; they just blew the hell up. But alas, his analysis betrayed him. He caught a glimpse of the shadow on the giant window above. A moment of distraught, which was what the enemies wanted. And now, everything went to hell.

The walls blew and the fireballs flared inside, adding more casualties.

That was when he knew that they completely misread the situation. Whether they barricaded the ground floor, they can still blow up the walls or use magic, and won’t stop them from climbing to the walls just to get inside. Yes, he already heard them, but he did not expect the lengths they could go.

The shadow from above swung and leaped through the window, falling off along the debris. He heard his sword sheath and undeniably came for him. There was a sharp swish that phased through the fog onto his neck. His breath drew out to his lungs as his body fell onto the ground.

The moment Alastor made his landing, a torrent of bullets rained down on them. Alastor made a sprint to his left, deflecting the bullets with his rapid and skillful sword movements. He came to hide behind the pillar. Cid and Liber came in, and his rifle exploded into life against the enemy while Liber graciously used his fire attacks against the enemy. Cid casted shield magic to make sure Liber wouldn’t take a hit and continue to support the trio with fire magic.

Linda and Ken made a sprint to hide in pillars. The bullets whizzed over their heads and buzzed as they came past their ears. Linda produced an ice sword, several spikes strung out in each sword. She slash the blades in the air and the ice spikes flung towards them, killing them with its frostbite.

Ken almost stumbled down but regained his balance afterward. His erratic movements confused the enemy and did not manage to land a hit on him. Ken thrust his fist to the enemy’s guts. The brute strength forced its way in and destroyed the armour that protected the soldier.

Alastor broke into a dash. His legs pump harder and leaped over the ledges, then to the ladder and to the upper level. He purposefully threw his sword to the enemy. The remaining forces stood was too slow to react.

“Swords are overrated, don’t you think? So, why don’t we level down the playing field?”

Alastor grabbed the gun and punched the enemy to his chin. He quickly changed to a handgun and used the enemy as a shield. The mercenary twirled around and threw the enemy to the others and quickly pressed forward. The gun trained its next victim, he was aiming for a headshot. He drew his attention to the remaining ones who were toppled by the dead body and shot them. Unbeknown, the other soldier already prepared a rocket launcher. Before Alastor could see it, the trigger was already pulled.

Linda who foresaw the event quickly chanted her magic. From a distance, she summoned a wall of ice that protected Alastor from the blast. Alastor was tumbling behind, and growled. Although the shards broke and cut through Alastor’s skin, he was considered to be fine. Linda felt his sharp gaze.

“Hey, you’re welcome,” Linda said.

\*\*\*

“So, do you have any idea how to bring these shitheads down?!” The leader sprung back, evading the attack of Ashura-Tenrei that plummeted to the ground.

Meil blocked the other one’s attack and punched to its chest. For a while now, he had been observing what kind of elements the machine was made of. He had already come up with a few ideas about its nature.

“I may have some idea about the nature of its compound.”

The Blue Klitz fended off the Ashura-Tenrei allowing the Leader to have the momentum to strike the enemy, but just like before, it was not enough to take it down.

“Do share with me.”

“A being like this—requires an enormous source of energy, which suggests it’s somewhere on its body, but I can’t pinpoint where it is. But we can still take it down by heating its plate until it reaches its boiling point, but the problem is the firepower.”

“How can you say that heating is enough?”

The two continued to talk while they avoided each of the enemy’s attacks.

“Well, if the engineer of the machine itself would want these machines to hold and last longer, they would want to make its defense made by the hardest material known. My guess is its armour system was made in iron reinforced by tungsten to withstand firepower of the enemies.”

“Now, come to think of it. These machines were designed to withstand firepower. What was Theo planned on using this for?”

Meil couldn’t help but think of it, this invention was enough to be feared as a national threat. Yet, Theo was willing to show his inventions.

“Fire magic would do the trick, right?”

“Again, the metal has a high melting point, which requires a huge amount of firepower.”

“We have Blue Klitz here. I’m sure he can handle it.”

Cornered, Meil ducked as the enemy swung its arm sideward. He quickly got inside the building to have the higher ground. The Ashura-Tenrei followed him inside the compounds squeezing through the small pathways.

“That’s right, follow me.”

Meil quickness was enough to save the time of getting caught by the enemy. When he saw the distance between the two gigantic beings, he stopped and looked up against the enemy. He raised his hands, pronouncing the magic. Suddenly, the ground shook and the buildings trembled, including the foothold of the enemy, it collapsed. The Ashura-Tenrei fell and was trapped in the collapsed building.

The Leader rode the Blue Klitz and guided it to fight the enemy. They flew high out of its reach to evade its attack. The remaining Ashura-Tenrei glanced up and sprung, but it was interrupted by none other than Meil by channeling his frustration on its feet with continuous blows to overthrow the balance and position, having it fall down in fetal position. The Leader took this as an opportunity and ordered the Blue Klitz to dive down.

“Now!”

The Blue Klitz nodded and flares spurt out of its mouth raining the enemy with its powerful fire magic. Its hands emerged to grasp, but the phoenix were able to swerve away and continued to deliver flames around it. When the Blue Klitz couldn’t hold it any longer, they left out.

“The bird is on its limit. It’s up to you now!”

Meil leaped on top of it, he could feel the heat through his boots. He raised his fist and in his fortified position, he gritted his teeth as he concentrated his power on his fist. He settled on it, his fist went down and the ground trembled as Ashura-Tenrei’s armour was being torn with his inhumane strength, but it only cracked it. A disappointment was written on his face.

“Not enough, eh? Then, how about this?”

With a quick shift of position, Meil proceeded with a one-inch punch. He broke through but the machine was still alive and still trying to get up. Meil raised his left hand, fist closed, and with that, he destroyed the machine. Seeing the Leader of the mercenaries’ relief expression, he couldn’t help but yell at him.

“Don’t relax. There’s another one.”

Meil face turned sour, “I know. You don’t have to tell me.”

They saw how the humongous being leaped out of being trapped from the pit that Meil made. The Ashura-Tenrei raised its fist and slammed it down at Meil. With his Inquiara Magic ‘Maximum Defense’, he enhanced every muscle of his body and shielded himself against the attack. He felt that the pit of his stomach turned upside down. His body momentarily ached. Riding on Blue Klitz, the Leader jumped off and with his sword scratched his face. His attack was not effective, but it was enough to draw its attention on him. The Blue Klitz used its fire magic to blast off the enemy. Meil was able to regain his senses and pull himself together from being nearly crushed.

“We need to finish this quickly. I don’t know how long I’m able to hold on longer.” Meil said.

“If you’re approaching your limit, then I will lead the attack.”

“Oh yeah, I didn’t catch your name.”

“Lid.”

“All right, Lid. Since you lack the firepower and apparently do me, we’ll rely on the bird’s power. To kill that thing, we’ll focus on one part.”

They gazed at the enemy. The three measure each other’s strength and when they forfeit the tension, the enemy lunges. The enemy became wild and attacked flippantly, making it more unpredictable.

“Damn it!” Lid shouted. “It’s getting smarter the more it fights.”

Meil focused and once again activated his Inquiara Magic. His fist steeled and was ten times stronger than before and met it with the enemy’s fist. The ground trembled with their might contesting against each other. The Blue Klitz showered the enemy with powerful fire magic and forced it to back off. Lid leaped to its chest and clad his sword with mana. He pierced his sword to its chest and manage to crack its surface, but before he could claim their victory, he was flickered away by the enemy. Unbeknownst to it, Meil pushed himself to the edge and with all his might he broke through the enemy and finished it.

\*\*\*

Getting past the frontline enemies was not an easy task. It took a heavy toll on their strength. Nonetheless, the four of them march forward. Alastor held aloft the sword as they walked on their way on the designated floor. Now that they’re on the unknown territory of the enemy, they can’t just waltz in when they have no backup.

The mercenaries carefully threaded forward and climbed to the third floor. They were shivering not because of Linda’s ice sword but because of the damaged walls, the wind entered the premises and desisted their senses from a quiver.

“Damn, I’m freezing,” Cid complained.

“Well, get used to it.” Linda’s eyes focused onward. “It’s not like you have never been through this before.”

“Easy for you to say.”

The entire time the place remained dormant as they tried to find the stairs or elevator. They entered a stadium of some sort and struggled to adjust their eyesight because of the darkness. Ken used magic to conjure fire magic.

“Something’s not right,” Alastor said.

Alastor glanced around and noticed one-by-one, dim red lights shining in the darkness.

“On your feet, they’re above us!”

One by one, shadows fell and surrounded them. Its silver and gilding were salient due to the fractions of light that came from the dim light. The insentient whizzed and buzzed when they rotated their wrist and arms. Its legs began to twitch and reconfigured to become functional legs. Their heads had an angular head, its jaw and parietal had a sharp point. They began to rise.

“Before we start, why did you make Liber go back to the base?” Cid asked.

“Because it would be a waste of money for him to die,” Alastor replied.

They were able to interpret the enemies’ sketches but weren’t sure what they were. It’s like a puppet. They can rotate part of their bodies unlike any other human can do. Blades sprung out of their hands.

“Ken, we need a better vision if we want to live,” Linda said.

“Roger,” Ken answered.

Ken conjured a fireball. The fire eventually grew and floated on top of them. The light it produced was enough for them to see within ten feet away. A moment of tension took over. Their eyes remained unsettled on the enemies. There’s a lot of them. They’re unsure how many of them filled this place. The enemies gazed over them and remained stationary.

“I think they’re docile,” Ken suggested. “Should we go, now?”

“No. It’s not finished yet.” Linda said.

“Then it is better if we give it to them first,” Cid said. “Here I go!”

Cid used his gun and shot the enemy. It was unexpected witnessing the downside of his attack as the enemy quickly evaded it and moved fast like a liquid, traversing his way. Its hands began to mold into a sword.

“It’s fast,” Alastor said.

Cid stood in shock, dumbfoundingly allowed the enemy to get near to him, nearly costing his life, but Linda’s blade swung from below and repelled the attack. Linda chased off the enemy and swung the spikes into the air. The automaton shifted its weight to its left, pirouetting graciously, its blade deflected the ice spikes. Linda moved forward. Her attacks were direct, heavy, but her steps were elusive. As the automaton twirled, she summoned another ice blade, and blocked the automaton’s blade on her left and right. Linda extended the tip of her ice blades that tore through its chest, destroying it within.

The rest of the enemies alerted and started to attack them. They fought valiantly and managed to keep the tide on their side. What made them at disadvantage is that their attacks are impossible to outmanoeuvre because of the lack of space to retreat. The enemies’ defense was not tough as to them, but faster and quicker.

Alastor raised his sword as the automaton branded its molded blade at him. Ken stomped on its knee and Alastor severed its head. An ice wall barricaded the enemies in front of them. Peering off Alastor's shoulder, he saw Cid duck and rolled below, passing behind the automaton before conjuring fire magic that blasted it away and tore another two.

Although, they may seem winning the kindest fate had not offered them the best chance to hold on longer.

“There’s no end to them!” Alastor shouted. “Linda!”

“I know!” Linda replied.

Linda conjured magic and an ice wall emerged keeping them at bay safe from the enemies.

“We need a plan. Stat.” Cid said.

“There’s a whole bunch of enemies out there and I don’t think our combined strength would be enough to finish them off. Our stamina would get drained before we can get past them.” Ken said.

Time might seem not on their side to give them a viable option. The walls showed an indication of crack. They prepared and made their stand.

“So much for a few minutes out,” Alastor said.

They’re prepared and about to make amends of their carelessness but apparently, they were spared of the trouble. A bolt of lightning flew and flung the automatons above mid-air, before destroying them into pieces. There are two of them, they dance around the fireball and move in inconceivable speed destroying the enemies.

They drew into a halt and walked towards the crystalline wall. Their reflection was not clear and scattered around by the dancing ball of flames that Ken produced, but they remembered, especially Alastor who saw their spitting image.

“More enemies! Ken!” Alastor shouted.

Ken directed his palm to the fireball floating above and closed it, dragging it down. The fireball multiplied into pieces and crashed onto them. Linda undone the spell, she was still unsure who Alastor was talking about, but she knew, if he reacted like that, it was not good news. Alastor didn’t hesitate and leaped towards the enemies, his sword swung down but was parried by a baton. He backed off and evaded Ina’s attack.

Lance and together with the fellow members of the Canary made their presence known as they leapt into action.

“You again?” Alastor asked. “What do you want from us? We don’t have time for this.”

“And neither do us,” Lance said. “My name is Lance.”

“Like I care!” Alastor pushed forward and swung his sword in front of them which Lance returned with an equal force of strike. “Let’s settle it this time.”

“We did not come here to fight,” Lance said, he parried his attack and in a flash, he was gone. “We have the same goal.” Lance teleported behind him. “Taking down Theo is our top priority. It just happened that you guys were on our way.”

Alastor was about to draw his weapon towards his throat, Linda stepped in and caught his hand before it fell to Lance.

“Alastor, stop,” Linda said. “I think we should hear what they say. As far as I’m concerned, we need everyone’s help. That includes those people who are on our bad side.”

Alastor calmed down and stand down

“This is not a good idea,” Alastor said.

“What is it you want?” Cid asked. His stern gaze remained checked to their weapons.

“Theo’s head, of course. He’s the center of this mess. Our boss is quite pissed about the recent development that Theo made.” Gary said and moved closed.

Linda closed her eyes and gave a moment of thought about their proposal.

“All right, let’s do it then,” Linda said.

“Hey! How come are you sure that they won’t double-cross us?” Alastor asked. “We’re wanted, people.”

“I’m glad you know.” Lance added.

“I know that, but there’s no way we can make it on *him* if we don’t have any help,” Linda explained.

An unexpected surprise came to them. Someone walks in the middle of their conversation. They caught a glimpse of him. He was covered by thick armour and was equipped with various items. The Canaries, they knew him well.

They quickly guard themselves the moment they see him.

“Who the hell are you?!” Alastor asked. Although, he remembered by then the semblance from the one he fought that night when they stole the data bank.

Port didn’t show any kind of signs of hostility. He was calmed and collected. The man who’s clad in a thick layer of armour stepped forward.

“Just men of consequence.” Port replied as he came closer. “Just like the Canaries, I came here to help,”

“Things just got a lot more complicated,” Ken said.

“Why the change of heart?” Gary asked.

Port turned on him. “If Theo destroy this city, where the fuck do I live?”

“Point taken.”

“We don’t have much time. We have to end this madness.” Lance said.

“Are we seriously doing this?” Alastor asked Linda.

“Yes.” She replied.

Linda observed all of them, “Supposed to be we’re in the lower level of the higher echelon of this building. We encountered a lot of enemies, so don’t expect that this would be easy.”

Together they travelled at the upper echelon. It was not like any other part of the floor. The entire place was infested by some sort of parasitic machine. In the middle of the room, they saw a giant circular figure, blinking and loading back and forth, then it stopped, the light formed its eyes and gazed at them.

“This is my pit stop,” Ina said. “The rest of you go, if there’s any volunteer, then good for me.”

“I will stay,” Linda said.

“Me too.” Gary and Ken replied.

The enemy produced a laser beam and attacked them. Likewise, Linda conjured an ice wall to protect them. It may not be physically effective, but the pristine surface deflected the enemy’s attack while it slowly melted the ice.

“Scram!” Linda shouted.

The rest of the members sprinted towards the stairs. The enemy didn’t miss them and was about to attack them, but Linda was one step ahead of the enemy and conjured another ice wall to protect them.

Ina used her lightning magic to enhance her speed. She ran around to get its attention. The eye did follow her and emit a ray that burned the objects of the facility. She evaded the enemy’s laser attacks and leaped. She threw a lance made of lightning. The enemy didn’t flinch and graciously accepted the attack. It bleeped and sounded as if it was happy. Ina pulled back and hid behind the debris.

“It seems that lightning magic does not work on it,” Gary said.

“Yeah, we can see that,” Ina replied.

\*\*\*

Alastor, Lance, Port, and Cid made it safely to the next floor thanks to Linda. They walked through the maze and were vigilant to their surroundings. They encountered some of the previous puppet foot soldiers, but they exterminated them.

They were in the middle of approaching an arena when Lance broke off the silence.

“So, who hired you guys?” Lance asked.

“Does it matter?” Alastor said. “And why do you care?”

“Well, it makes me wonder, why would they rely on low mob hit men.” Lance replied.

“You got some pretty cojones for saying that to my face,” Alastor said.

“Because it is true.”

“Don’t speak like that when you know how corrupt the government is. You know what the mayor did.”

“His actions do not represent us as a whole.”

“But it makes people sick. You give a crap about people relying on external forces because they have you, but have you considered to think that they lose their faith in those people who said they’re going to protect them? If the government does not comply rightly with their duty, don’t be surprised that they would want a revolution. People don’t want that system to be carried to the next generations when they see the worst in this one.”

“But that does not solve the problem. It’ll just bury on the ground and eventually resurface.” Lance replied.

“Why solve it when you can just start all over again?” Port said. “You know where did you get wrong? You think that you’re so rightful you missed the fact of what the law meant to be.”

“And what would a scum like you know about the law?” Lance asked.

“Truth, liberty, and justice,” Port said. “These three words were forged for all of us and do you know how these words became demeaning throughout these years? It became privileged to those people who have wealth and power. What’s good about the law if it does not protect the people? What’s good for the government if they let their people die? Some would say they should burn, let all of this burn, but we cannot allow that, because there’s a future generation that has not yet seen the beauty of life. And the only solution to all of this problem is revolution.”

Port did not probe anymore. There is no use to state their sentiments. He doesn’t want to arouse conflict.

“You may be right, but do you think it would be unfair to those people who crawled their way up only to be red labelled as one of those corrupted? I think not.” Lance said through clenched teeth.

“Consider them as collateral damage,” Alastor said. “In every war, there will always be collateral damage.”

A creaking came to their hearing as they entered the arena. They glance through and witness the puppet soldiers crawling from the walls and landing in front of them. Cid didn’t wait for the enemy to initiate the attack and grabbed his pistol shooting the nearest enemy. It appeared that he hit the right spot.

Port used one of his bracelets and conjured fireball magic. His entire body briefly set ablaze when wave his hand to disseminate his attacks and utterly turn the enemies into ashes. Alastor dashed and swung his sword, slashing every enemy who stood against him. Alastor didn’t notice that the range of his sword nearly cut through Lance but he parried it before it came to reach him.

“Watch it. You’re not the only one who’s fighting here.” Lance said.

Alastor hissed and parted away from them. Careless he was, Alastor was pinned by the enemy. Lance threw lightning magic to give Alastor room to escape, but Alastor was still relentlessly attacking the enemy. He saw the puppet soldiers amassed from the hole they whence came.

Alastor raised his palm and conjured a magical wall.

“Cinque parete invisibile.” Alastor muttered.

A four transparent wall emerged and pushed forward, crushing the enemies and blocking the hole they came from. While his transcendent wall was by far the strongest, using a transparent wall was far more versatile as it does not consume too much mana. Alastor joined them.

“That’s neat,” Port said as he cut down the enemy with his katana while holding his gun.

\*\*\*

Gary momentarily lost his balance as he used shield magic to cover Ina as Ken and Linda led the attack. Ken shone from there and there evading the enemy’s laser beams while Linda used ice shards to the enemy but it was melted with its beam. They ran around and the enemy maintained stationary.

“This is rough. Not only is the enemy capable of multitasking, it also has high firepower.” Gary said. “You okay, Ina?”

“Yeah.” She replied. “Hey, how do you feel like throwing everything at that thing?” Ina asked Linda.

The eye tore objects with its repulsive force of lasers, scattering it off to find them. Soon enough, the giant mechanical eye saw their shadows. It turn its attention to the debris and shot it. An Ice Wall emerged and deflected the laser beam. The damaged extended further other rooms.

“Good idea. Let’s keep its attention to us and put it on the edge. Ken, you want to become the sacrificial lamb?”

“Nuh-uh. You want me to become a lump of fried meat?” Ken asked.

“We will distract that thing so you can get behind it,” Ina explained.

“Fine,” Ken said.

“On the count of three,” Linda said. “Three… one!”

Linda used the remains of the Ice Wall and broke them down into shards and sprung to the enemy.

“You skip two and count opposite!” Ken shouted as he sprinted towards the enemy.

Ken kicked up and flawlessly evaded the laser beams. The metallic eye detached itself from the wirings and came closer. Linda and the others throw everything they’ve got, fire magic, ice magic, and lightning magic to the enemy; all whirled into a ferocious tornado, burning and freezing everything on its path. Linda poured more mana to conjure more ice shards to destroy the wirings that the mechanical eye summoned. They pushed through as the cablings expelled around and pelted towards it. The enemy exploded into tiny millions of pieces with no sign of reviving.

\*\*\*

His breath left his lungs as Alastor had a look at the panel. They made it to the top floor, but it was enormous. Unlike the lower floors, the positions of the offices on this floor made it look like a maze. There was no alarming presence around, nor did they encounter any kind of abominations. He entered the room first. Ahead of them, they saw a large door with the name of Theo hung above it.

“Big red door and the name of the main man of the show hung above the room. Yep, this is where the big bad wolf is hiding.” Alastor said. “You guys ready?

Lance’s baton sparked as he arrayed his glass at the tip of his finger. “Yes.” He nodded. “Just to be clear, after this, we’re back on killing each other again.”

“Do what you want. It’s not like you would be able to catch us by surprise the next time we meet.” Alastor replied.

Cid and Port nodded. Together, they pushed the door and caught a glimpse of the man who was slack jaw watching the battles on the ground. They walked, determined to be undetected, but such an idea was a mere trifle. Theo jerks his head slightly to his right.

“No need to exert effort for inconspicuous surprises. I know that you’re all here.” Theo said. “Honestly, you took longer than I expected.”

“Well, maybe pulling off your monsters would help us to get here,” Port said.

“Then it would be unfair to me. There’s only me against all of you.” Theo replied.

“What a crappy excuse. Drop the act. We know what you are.” Lance said.

“Are you sure of that?” Theo asked. “I don’t seem to think that you told your friends about the knowledge you possessed.”

“What did he mean?” Alastor asked.

“You should see it for yourself,”

“There’s no need for a battle of words nor any nonsensical rambling. There’s only one thing we can agree on… and that is to fight.” Theo said.

“Before we could get to it. Would you spare us to know what you could possibly gain after this conflict?” Alastor asked, he must ask this question lingering on his mind. He already calculated his possible agendas, but the only thing that made his mind at ease is by hearing those words coming from the man who started all of this.

“Power. Absolute power. It is every one that craves. Without it, you cannot hope to accomplish anything nor be able to protect anyone let alone yourself. As you can see, what’s happening right now was proof of my might.” Theo replied.

“You know I’ve met a lot of people who has their kinks and shits, but you – you’re just a pure dick.” Port said. The rings on his fingers began to glow.

Lance had enough of it. Hearing his reason, he can only suggest what kind of man he was. A lunatic through the bone.

“Befitting words from a madman,” Lance said.

Theo chuckled. He rose from his seat. His white hair dangled. “Please, we’re all madmen in our own way. We all do not know, but there’s a demon inside of us that is sleeping, waiting to be poked and wake up from the dream we call reality. The only thing that keeps us blind is what we call hope.”

“Please, do explain to us how sane it is to cause an uproar in the city?” Lance scoffed. “People who’s in power like you are the reasons why men suffer.”

Theo’s eyes squinted. “Don’t compare me with you fools. I am not doing this for selfish needs unlike the people in your country. *We* don’t want to torment people just for the sake of entertainment. We want to rule because we saw the fragility of this world. Here’s the truth for you boys; men and women alike claim they want to be in the desirable positions that people need them to be, but they don’t want the responsibilities, only the power, because the burden is too great for them to bear. Thus, the illusory system filled your society. A fragile work of irresponsible adults! And you’re wondering how come I manage to stay still in this position? Idiots. You will die the same as those people outside.”

“You’re insane,” Alastor said. “You think killing us would mean that you’re going to win. Some people are going to replace us and will come after you.”

“How ironic coming from a hired hitman. Speaking of virtues when he has no idea about his true self. You are merely mimicking those words just to make yourself feel righteous in this rotting world, not knowing the hideous truth lurking beneath yourself that you’re denying all this time. You were raised in a home that is ruled by hitmen. I doubt that you have an identity you can claim.” Theo replied.

“You do realized that you’re fucked right? Even the word damn and screw won’t be sufficient enough to say how fuck you are.”

“We’ll see about that.” Theo boorishly replied.

“Shut up!” Alastor shouted.

Alastor grew impatient with their conversation and charged towards Theo and swung his sword down to him. In a fleeting moment, Theo avoided his attack with almost no effort. The seat was cut in half.

“Did I hit the right nerve?” Theo asked.

Theo sprang, he lifted his right leg and made Alastor feel a glimpse of his power. As Theo’s knee met Alastor’s stomach, he shook violently and blinked blurrily. He crashed against the cold wall, which as well contributed to his vomiting of blood. His body shuddered, he groaned and shot him a look.

“Damn it.” Alastor said in a strangulated voice.

“Don’t attack carelessly,” Lance said. “We have to attack him, together.”

“I honestly grew tired of this bantering,” Theo said. “Let’s dance, shall we?”

Before they can prepare, Theo already sprang to Cid. There was no time to process the plan as he was caught and surprised by Theo’s speed. He pulled out his gun and frantically shifted it, aiming at Theo. The aim was redirected when Theo caught his wrist, punching Cid.

Theo pulled back when Lance attacked him. The baton swished sharply behind and the desk was destroyed. Cid shot him and Theo evaded it with blurry and inconceivable speed.

“It is not best to attack accompanied by agitated actions,” Theo said.

Cid grunted and raised his palms. “Agni Magus!”

Dozens of fireballs emanated and flew towards Theo like rocket launchers set out to destroy. Theo flipped evading a few of them and when he was pinned to the wall, he materialized his sword. He grasped and in a single swift the fireballs deflected, tearing the walls and allowing the cold wind to get inside.

Alastor went for it and dragged his sword on ground, hissing and flashing as he swung it upward which was blocked with no effort of looking at his sword. Theo swerved their swords out of his way and smacked Alastor’s face before he caught the tip of his sword. Theo pushed him back. Unbeknown, Port snuck behind him. His ring glowed in red and a vortex of flame launched onward turning the air into crisp amidst the cold breeze finding its way inside. The flame seethed, the searing flame engulfed Theo. To the least extent, he expected that it would do damage to Theo but it did not. Theo stood unscathed and remained composed. Port raised his arm that produced a shield as he accepted the attack of Theo.

Theo smirked. “Not half bad, but not good enough either.”

The ring he wear rang and the orb became weak. Theo whipped his fist, this time his attack made through Port’s armour. Port felt a part of his ribcage was broken when Theo’s fist made contact. By then, Port groaned and rolled aside when he saw a glimpse of Lance preparing an attack.

Lance hissed and embedded his palms together. A spark cracked and whizzed until it roared into a chain of lightning. It sparked wildly and shone that could even blind them even a few feet away. Theo peered through his shoulder, he remained calm and collected as he prepared for his enemy to make a move. What he didn’t expect was that Lance already activated his Inquiara Magic.

Theo felt a tingling sensation and when observed thoroughly, Lance was already gone. In the next second, Lance was already in front of him. It was too late to react as Lance laid off his magic and everything went bright.

The lightning did damage to the electronics and most of the machines that were displayed on that level of the building. At first, there was only a brief, minor explosion below, until everything erupted, reverberating across once serene air, shattering the stillness with its unholy symphony. The explosion can be heard throughout the building and observing from below, the entire echelon was affected by it.

Through the smoke and debris, Port and Alastor struggle to find their comrades as they stumble to gain balance of their footing. Out of the grave, they saw a hand reach out. Alastor immediately grabbed it. It was Lance who’s been inside of it. Lance coughed as he observed the place.

“You could have warned us.” Alastor said. “It wrecked the upper echelon of this building. I wonder how the others doin’.”

“You have to forgive me for that. I didn’t even expect that it would do that kind of damage.” Lance replied.

“Where’s the other one?” Port asked, massaging his ribs.

“I’m right here,” Cid replied as he walked towards them, wobbly. “Looks like you fell on the previous floor.”

They observed and noticed that the explosion made a hole and destroyed the top floor. Confident that they won, the atmosphere changed, the rubbles, a few debris rose, and with a strong expulsion, the wind surge was drawn in one direction. They looked in front of them as Theo stood with a malicious desire. His body emanated a dark-red aura.

“You son of a bitch. You nearly killed me.” Theo uttered.

Lance’s assumption failed him. Theo was still alive, breathing well, and was not yet seeping his strength as he was now showing a tremendous prowess usurping their mere presence by his heavy aura. His stride became more ominous and malevolent.

“What the hell?” Alastor asked.

Theo’s torn clothes are no longer to hide the marks on his body. It is the sign of an Arbiter.

“I didn’t expect you to be one, but what the hell, you came from *that country*, of course, you’re one of *them*,” Alastor said uneasily.

“If you can’t defeat me back in Vesoga Plain, what makes you think you can beat me now?” Theo gave Lance a look.

There were no words that would come out of Lance’s mouth. He too hoped that with this team-up they would be able to defeat Theo, but the current situation showed that he was too much for them. A strength that goes beyond their limits stood after them.

“‘Tis weaklings suffer from great usurpation when they face greater challenges than them. I do not blame you for feeling inferior, had you yet faced the fact of greater existence that is superior to all of you. Know this, all of you are mere, weak, petulant warriors. You cannot hope to defeat me. I am the bridge that you cannot cross. Blame your heritage for being weak and die.” Theo said.

Alastor firmly gripped his sword. His face writhed in pain as he removed a small trunk that pierced his stomach. The wound immediately healed as he placed his palm on it and used healing magic to stop the bleeding.

Alastor charged towards Theo and leaped, bombarding him with combos. He went to his right, a feint, he was aiming at his head. He leaped, his sword brimmed briefly as he engulfed it with mana but it was all for naught as Theo impeccably parried every ounce of strength poured on his sword. Theo deflected his attack which made Alastor drawback.

Alastor moved back. He whirled, he felt Theo’s parry and a loud ting. He grimaced. Alastor jumped aside and executed an illusory thrust. Theo did not bother to move and used the surface of his broadsword to block. Alastor clenched his sword tighter and he spun to his right – no – it was feint, he brushed his sword past Theo’s ear and leaped. The sword arced downward, but his attack was repelled by Theo’s fire magic that forced him to revert and flip backward. Alastor got up. He felt the heat of Theo’s magic. He backed away. Alastor conjured a magical wall to defend himself against Theo’s merciless flame. When the smoke was pushed by the wind. Theo looked down on him.

“So, you are a Mana Folder? I thought you were something better than them, but it seems that you’re no better.” Theo said. “You are the weakest of all of them, yet you show callousness in this disconsolate situation. I commend you for that, but I’m afraid you are out of time.”

Theo sprang on his knees, quickly almost with no sound. His feet crashed right into his guts and pushed him out of his way. Then, he lurched to Alastor’s allies. Theo was about to land a hit on Lance, but someone pushed him aside and blocked Theo’s attack. The ice melted against the heat of his sword.

“I hope we’re not too late,” Linda said. “So, would anyone care to explain to me what the explosion is all about?”

Linda’s twin ice swords flashed against Theo’s. Her jaw clenched as Theo effortlessly exerted more strength. She knew by then, he was out of her league. Her weapon started to crack. Gary tried to use his fire magic against Theo but it was shoved off with ease like it was nothing.

Alastor couldn’t deny that he felt relieved seeing that they were here to back them up, but it was a momentarily hope.

“To make it clear to all of you, I’m going to show you a glimpse of my true strength,” Theo said.

With a single swift of his greatsword, a portion of the building was cut off and for another one, the building trembled. With each pillar and steel bars gradually torn, the stepping floor that they stand collapsed.

Theo wasn’t bothered, only watched how they would react to this situation. There was no need for him to worry about this. He flew out through the window.

Linda, Cid, and Ken used their grappling hook to other buildings and safely made it to the ground. Cid quickly noticed that Alastor is missing and nowhere to be found. Ken grunted, he rolled his shoulders the moment the wire returned.

“Hey, where’s Al?” Cid asked.

While free-falling, Alastor’s grappling hook won’t work. He noticed that there was a sound of small rocks shaking inside of it.

“Shit! The charging handle was clogged!” Alastor profane.

Alastor jumped over from debris to debris trying to calculate what should do. When there was no debris to set his foot onto, a certain hand grabbed him. It was Port. He held Alastor as they flew together down to the ground.

“You can fly?” Alastor asked.

“No. It was thanks to this ring.” Port replied. “It grants me the ability to fly.

Meanwhile, the canaries used their lightning Inquiara Magic to teleport. Just as they reunite, they hear someone behind the piles of rubbles and ashes.

“I am impressed. Despite the physical limitation, you were able to surpass it. Marvellous.” Theo said. “Now, let us see how well you do with this.”

A horde of half-human and half bio-techno beings appeared, pinning them. They were all from Theo’s genetic experiment. They may have the looks of a human, but they became an abomination as they became mindless monsters that are modified to do one thing, to kill.

“I daresay that they can overcome all of you,” Theo said. “And for the final act.”

Theo raised his hand up to the air. He conjured a rare spell, Para-shift: Black Horizon.

In a split second, the sky filled with bright stars was gone in a swift way. The darkness spread across everywhere and was engulfed by the void when the nightfall only submerged the compound of the Kelby Hives. The pulsing shadows teemed as far as it could reach with darkness. Their visibility declined.

“Now! Prepare!” Theo shouted.

The horde of abominations came after them. Their much distorted figure, like the nightmare, took a physical form. They fear that this may be the end, but have left no choice to fight for it. They fought a beast that goes beyond their comprehension but this imbued darkness made their fears stronger with the abominations.

Alastor evaded the whip of the tentacle abomination and leaped backward. He used his sword to defend himself against the other enemy. The mercenary spun and swung his sword with grace, cutting off the tentacles as he moved forward and cut off the very root of its tentacles before making a huge leap backward. He thought that it would do the trick but it just regenerated the limb and attacked him all over again.

Their effort extracted a great toll on their body. Their breaths were short and on the verge of slugging their movements. All they could do was to defend themselves against the monsters, not until Port showed them how to kill it. Port threw a smoke bomb and leaped away. He used fire magic to it and the smoke combusted into a flare that killed five of the enemies.

“Fire magic will do the trick!” Port shouted. “Those who can’t use fire magic cover those who can and protect them at all cost! And as for me, I don’t need one.”

They ran to aid Cid, Gary, and Ken, since they were the only ones who could put a stop to this abomination. After a while, they found themselves pinned down. They’re drained. No matter how hard they tried, the abominations still outnumbered them. The lack of visibility contributes to their tiredness.

“There’s no way all of you can stop them.” Theo said. “I suggest letting them condemn you all to hell.”

“Why don’t you come over here and we can show you how it’s done?!” Lance shouted.

“Why should I? When I can let all of my spawns do the job.” Theo said.

This matter became more apparent than they had thought. This is beyond them. Seemingly hope is lost, they braced themselves. A loud boom echoed and crashed in front of them. It was Meil and Lid.

“Another problem arrived?” Theo said. “Will you grant me the pleasure to witness how pathetic you are or will you show me a real challenge?”

“You bet I am!” Meil shouted. “Lid you think you can take care of all of these abominations?”

“You saw what I can do. Besides, I have Blue Klitz by my side.” Lid replied.

Meil steeled himself and surprised Theo with his speed. He was big and expected to be sluggish out of all of them, but proved to be agile. Probably much more agile than the rest of them. Theo chanted a spell to put a barrier shielding himself against Meil’s attack. They flew up in the sky with Meil’s strength outbalancing Theo. He was astounded to the extent that Meil was able to break the barrier; he created another shockwave with his fist taking down Theo to the ground.

“I’m going to take you out ten-fold!” Meil shouted.

“We will see about that,” Theo said.

Theo launched and attacked him with incredible speed. With only bare hands, Meil blocked each of his attacks and managed to draw Theo to his edge. He returned with a wide hook. The Arbiter paid no mind and took the attack head on. He crashed at nearby establishments. Meil saw a crack of smile when he got up.

\*\*\*

The Blue Klitz used fire magic to create a barrier between the abominations and the injured party. Lid drew his sword out of his scabbard and lunged.

“I never felt this much excitement! Bring it on!” Lid shouted. With swordplay mastery, he cut down the enemies at ease, and with the Blue Klitz, he was able to hold the fort. He has yet to know the extent of capabilities of the abominations. One of them jumped to the barrier of fire. He was confident that it would do the damage, but he was shocked as well as the others that the monster stood straight.

“Undo the magic!” He shouted to the Blue Klitz.

The Blue Klitz did it. The barrier was undone and the injured party was prone to assault.

“I’m going,” Lance said. “Five minutes of rest is enough. I may not be able to do fire magic, but my Inquiara Magic may be able to hold them for a while.”

“I might as well go too,” Port said. “I can’t let these bastards run amok in this city. They may be human once, but I am sure that they wish to be put out of their misery.”

The abominations made their way to them, but a loud gunshot reverberated and exploded, killing a lot of enemies.

“Glad we made it through.” Tin said.

Tin rode Liber back to the place of the conflict, fully equipped with weapons.

“Are you guys alright?!” Sherry asked

“Tin!” Linda shouted. “You weren’t supposed to be here!”

“You are welcome.” Tin said. “So, you look like crap. I’m pretty sure you need guns for this one.”

Tin pulled out her shotgun, and shot point blank, killing one of the abominations. Her shoulder shuddered against the hard recoil.

“I couldn’t agree more. There’s no end to them.” Alastor said.

“Lucky for you, I’ve brought the big guns.” Tin said.

Tin threw a triangular case in the air and soon released small bombs that exploded, killing dozens of more enemies.

They jumped off the battlefield. Tin gleefully made her way as she engaged in close combat. She may be a ranged fighter but she had tricks hidden on her sleeves. Tin disconnected the cover head of a container and threw it. The container produced gas and as she shot it. It sparked and produced blue flames and lightning decapitating enemies within the range. While using the enemy as a meat shield, she was busy taking them one by one.

\*\*\*

The ground trembled as the two monstrous men fought with immeasurable strength. Each parried attack produced tremors that degraded the buildings around them. Meil evaded another slash of Theo and answered back with a punch that is equivalent to titanium. Theo’s broadsword was not just any like other metal, it was made by a pure element of what we called black ordinite. Although the equivalent strength varies, it was undeniable that Meil’s strength was putting too much strain on Theo’s side.

“Astonishing,” Theo said. “I have never faced someone like you. You’re the second one who enthralled me.”

“I’m glad I satisfy your masochistic needs. Now, where were we?” Meil asked.

“I am merely warming up. When the time is nigh, all of you will know despair.” Theo said. “For now, I’m gonna have to use one of your comrades for the time being… just for entertainment.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Meil asked.

“Your comrades think so highly of themselves; they didn’t even notice that there’s a poison on their side that remains dormant for a long time,” Theo said. “Let us welcome chaos.”

They’re gaining an advantage this time. With the leading of Lid and Tin and others who are capable of doing fire magic, they vanquished most of the enemies. There are only fourteen left alive to this point.

They were prepared to finish them off when suddenly something crashed in front of them. Through the swelling dust, a figure stood with a strong aura of bloodlust. In a single swift, it unleashed hell on earth. The enemies were absorbed into the being and as it unveiled herself, they were shocked recognizing who it was.

“Sherry. I thought she’s sleeping back there.” Tin said.

“Alastor said she’s out of control and he doesn’t know why,” Cid explained. “But I know there is something different about her.” Cid pointed the thing inside of her chest. A violet light pulsating.

“The Hemil Klust,” Ken said.

“Given that she became a monster, should we kill her?” Lance asked.

“No!” Ken shouted. “She’s just an innocent girl. She didn’t want this. We’ll reach out to her.”

“Your friend is susceptible to killing himself. You know that, right?” Lance asked Linda.

“I know, but let’s give him a shot. If things don’t go his way, we’ll take her down.” Linda replied.

Ken came closer to Sherry. His undying devotion will not allow her to get killed. Despite being a trained mercenary and assassin, there was a part of being a young monk that lives inside of him.

“Sherry, I know you’re in there. Please, come with us. I’m sure we will figure this out.”

Sherry was shook as he approached and back off. She continued observing them while Ken was talking to her.

“I promise you; we won’t hurt you. You don’t remember me? It’s me, Ken. We went once to the festival and we had fun. Although, it didn’t end well, still…”

Her pulse slowed down. Her eyes glistened for a second and a glimpse of the shared memories flashed on her mind.

“Don’t listen to him!” Theo shouted. “Just kill them!”

His words were enough to bring back the demonic side of her. Her pulse rushed and the violet pulsating heart grew stronger. Meil chased off Theo once again as they continued their battle on the other side.

Sherry’s arm distorted and molded into a silver blade. She came with the intent to kill. Ken was about to be cut off, but Linda came to shield him with her twin ice swords.

“There’s no coming back for her. She’s gone.” Linda replied.

Lance used his Inquiara Magic to enhance his speed and attack Sherry. Her other arm sprung into a blade and guarded herself against Lance’s hard whip with his baton. Sherry’s arm began to mold again and Linda and Lance’s weapons stuck to the ground as she disconnected the solidified mold. She kicked Linda aside following an uppercut to Lance.

Alastor and Port exchanged attacks with her. They take each turn and attack in sync. But Sherry’s obscure strength got the best of them and knocked them out of the field.

She was about to attack the remaining combatants but a voice called out to her. A familiar voice of a young girl.

“Big sis Sherry?” Millie asked. Her innocent voice opened up the locked memories and remembered the smile she cherished. Millie and Liam meant everything to her, but it’s been months since she last saw them. Even the time she was held captive, she always worried about them, after all, she was the only one who looked after them. Just like her, she was abandoned by her parents and had to work at an early age just to eat enough for her stomach to push her ongoing. Her memories drifted away when they began to experiment on her. She did not know by what means they survived. All that matters now was that they were here.

Her soul screamed to break the chain that binds her beneath the monstrous manipulation of Theo. She backed away when the two children wanted to get close to her.

Port’s calm demeanor broke when he saw the two of them, he ran after them and held them away from Sherry.

“What the hell are you doing here?!” Port asked. “You should’ve stayed with Henry.”

“But we saw sis. We only want to see her.” Liam said.

Port glanced at Sherry.

“She’s your missing sister?”

Sherry fought hard to regain control of the program inside her head. She did not want them to close. She does not know what she was capable of, and if there’s something bad happening to them, she doesn’t think she can forgive herself.

With a scream she made it through, she somehow bypassed the control and with her strong will, she had taken over back her mind. She glared at Theo and furiously leaped towards him. In her palms the power of Hemil Klust rotated in a violent vortex of energy. She bombarded Theo with the power of Hemil Klust, blasting him along Meil to the ground. Meil managed to get away because he was not the main target, but he still received some of it. He looked at his arm which was burned by the purple light.

“You fool! You dare betray me?! You dare?!”

Theo was furious seeing how his own creation turned against him. His body moaned with smoke and showed such burns caused by the purple lights that were bombarded to him.

“You will regret doing that!” Theo shouted.

In an instant, he leaped and kicked Sherry to the ground. An intolerable pain coursed through her body as she can feel that her ribs gave out. She molded her arm into a shield as Theo came crashing down using his sword.

Sherry side-rolled and distorted her arm to hold Theo’s arm and sword. She then concentrated her power on her palm. Theo gasped as he received a full blast of ray right into his face. Sherry backed away from him and she withered as she saw Theo was still alive. A white light engulfed him and protect against the blast, but it managed to damage him as he was now coughing blood.

“Bitch. How is such a lowlife like you strong in the Blight?” Theo spat blood.

Sherry’s restriction came undone. She kneeled down the ground as the effect of using the Hemil Klust abrupt her entire system. Her head felt heavy.

“Sherry, finish him now!” Alastor shouted.

“You’d wish,” Theo said.

His magic, Black Horizon, was gone. The moon’s light finally pierced through and the sky illuminated under the stars.

Theo tried to stand up but he was pinned down by Meil along with Lance, Linda, and Gary.

“This is the end,” Lance said.

Theo glanced at all of them. “Kiddo. This is not the end. You only know half of the story.”

Sherry forced herself to stand up. “You’re going to pay for what you’ve done. All those people who suffer, they will hunt you down.”

“Maybe, but what about you? Because of me, you will become the worst version of yourself. The Blight is strong within you, girl. The power will intoxicate you, and bring out the deepest and darkest part of yourself.” Theo replied.

“Drop the jest. It’s unbecoming.” Alastor said.

“You too, boy. I sense the Blight with you. It will grow stronger and you will know yourself.” Theo replied.

Before he could say another word, Alastor took the liberty of stabbing him.

“I’ve had enough of your bullshit,” Alastor said.

“There is nothing you can do about the Blight.”

Sherry shivered not because of the wind, but because of what he sensed about Theo. Something dark is usurping within him. She backed away from him as she sensed and eerie malevolent aura beginning to turmoil.

“What?” Alastor asked.

The force blew them over.

“I said,” His voice grew deeper and creepier. “There is nothing you can do with the Blight!”

A red light shot out to the sky from Theo’s body and threw them away with the shockwave coming from him. He stood tall with his red eyes glowing. His tattoo spread around his body like graffiti. His mundane appearance becomes more baleful than it already is.

The sky whirled around the light that Theo emitted. The wind shrieked over the horizon and the dark sky rumbled. The ray of light was slowly submerging back to him. All those efforts turn flipped aside as Theo transcended once more.

“Don’t get cocky. I’ve been playing around but you’ve proven that you will become an inconvenient figure in the near future.” Theo said. “Oh, don’t worry. I will not kill all of you for your fates are already sealed. You should have run away while you still had a chance. Dabbling with fire is a dangerous endeavour.” He paused and scanned around. “Actually, there are two potential people here that I might use for my goal.”

Theo flung and kicked Tin and Ken. Linda lunged forward, her sword chillingly hissed, but Theo step aside and bellowed, he thrust his fist to her guts. She croaked, felt her stomach turned upside down and the pain that coursed through her body seeped all her strength.

Before Theo could get near Gary and Ina, Meil stood in front of him. Meil strengthened and poured the very last bit of his mana to harden his body. The downside of his doing is that it dropped his speed and as of now, Theo sidestepped and made a quick leap behind, avoiding his attack. He sprung, one feet in the air, and landed a kick on his face. Meil didn’t budge, his body was hard as titanium, maybe even closer to a diamond. Ina leaped; she chanted her lightning Inquiara Magic to Theo. On the madman’s side, he too was adamant enough to withstand the attack.

Theo conjured a light, throwing it right into her face. She fell unconscious on the ground. Gary bombarded Theo with his fire magic and did not hesitate to let his attack also catch Meil. The smoke withdrew its last breath when a wind came, it disrupted his senses momentarily, when it came back, Theo was already in front of him.

“Too slow,” Theo said and broke Gary’s arm before putting him down. The canary could only muffle his pain.

“Don’t you think you can get past me!” Meil shouted.

“Oh, I think I will,” Theo replied with a smirk.

Theo’s sword materialized and leaped over Meil. His hard skin deflected against Theo’s attack but Meil’s attack wouldn’t hit him. Theo excelled in the use of his mana. The moment he poured his all mana to toughen his body, his speed dropped. This is the moment that Theo expected to happen. Meil’s Inquiara Magic couldn’t hold it any longer, thus this became an opening for Theo. Theo imbued his sword with a magenta aura and slash Meil. The wound splat diagonally and the blood spurred on the ground when his body fell.

“I don’t need the rest of the pests. As I said, I only need the two potentials.” Theo said. He glanced at Alastor and Sherry. He didn’t bother to take down Port, as he was nowhere to be found by then.

“I wonder, will the bomb completely dissolve their body or somehow they’ll survive it?” Theo asked himself. “Oh, well. It’s not like it matters now.”

“Bomb? What do you mean bomb?!” Alastor asked.

“Wait, did I skip the part where I’m going to blow up half of this city? Oops. Must’ve slipped it into my mind.” Theo playfully said.

“Just answer the damn question!” Sherry demanded.

“Yes. I’m going to give you a clue. It’s here, but not here.” Theo replied. “Uh, one of your friends destroyed it. The divine image of an astral being.”

“You mean Ashura-Tenrei?” Meil asked. He croaked and rose, his legs shuddering, but his wounds are not enough to put him unconscious.

“Yes.” He replied.

“You’re insane. Your enterprise will go down. What’s the point of all of this?” Lance asked.

“Tomorrow, on the front-page news, Theo will be on the front page, dead along with my acolytes,” Theo replied. “The destruction of this city will be my cover and so on, I will become a free man once again. My name will be buried and again free of worries of the future.”

Theo swung his sword and created a circling pool of energy emitting a shrill noise. He smirked and walked towards Alastor and Sherry. They already understood what his attention was and they’re not willing to be his followers. Before Theo can get a grip on them, Alastor kicked Sherry aside and conjured a barrier and with all his might he pushed back Theo inside the portal and they together drift inside of it. Sherry grunted as she stood – it was too late to save Alastor now that he was inside of Theo’s pocket dimension.

“Where the hell did Theo take him?!” Sherry asked.

“I don’t know, but I’m sure they’re still in the pocket dimension. That bastard Theo, not only he’s a para-shifter but he’s also a reality shifter.” Meil said.

“How can we take him back?!” Linda asked, she was growing frantic.

“We can’t, it’s someone else’s pocket dimension. We can’t just pull him out without any link to that place. The only way he can come out is when the owner of it decides for himself.” Meil explained. “For now, we must worry about what Theo’s talking about. By the way, where is Lid?”

“Hey, I’m right here.” Lid appeared out to the debris that clustered.

“You’re hiding there the whole time?” Meil asked. “Do you have any idea what hell we’ve faced?”

“The contract says I only have to help you push through here. ‘Not fight some crazy guy.” He replied. “Besides, he’s gone now.”

“Yeah, but there is still a bomb here,” Linda replied.

Ina woke up and saw Gary writhing in pain. She went to help him. When the rest woke up, they gathered around.

“We just lost, didn’t we?” Lance asked.

“Yes, but right now, we need to worry about the bomb. Theo said he’s planning to detonate and destroy half of the city. So, it must be a big one to destroy half of Kayon city’s structure.” Meil replied.

“What? Do you know where it is?” Ina asked.

“Ashura-Tenrei.” Meil said.

“That’s the thing we fought before.” Lid said.

“Right. Are there any people who are capable of taking it away or disarming it?”

No one said a thing, except for Sherry.

“I do,” Sherry said.

“Can you defuse it?”

“No, but I can take it away from here as far as possible,” Sherry said.

“No!” Ken shouted. “You’re going to die. You know that, right? I can’t let you do it. There must be another way.”

“There is no other way, Ken. I appreciate what you had done to me – to all of you who take care of me when I don’t have my memory, but right now, I must do it. This is my life; I decide what to do with it and decide to save this city and the people living in it.” Sherry said.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Meil asked. “There is no coming back after this.”

Sherry nodded. They rushed to the Ashura-Tenrei and soon found the hexagonal pod that was beeping over and showed foreign languages. These indescribable words confused them.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Ken asked.

“Consider that we only have a few minutes to bring this thing away from here,” Lance said.

They began to detach one by the tubes that were attached to the bomb. Sherry glanced once more at the city, reminiscing the times when things weren’t supposed to be the worst. Without a shadow of a doubt, she will do it.

\*\*\*

Alastor and Theo came out from the portal and crashed down to the foreign place. Alastor was able to observe the scenery. On the sky, a comet striking across the horizon was painted in orange and magenta sky. There were oddly violet flowers that sprung on the ground and around them are hills where vines along the flowers spread.

Alastor immediately side-rolled as his instinct kicked up and felt a presence coming for him. He evaded Theo’s attack by stepping aside, barely catching the sword in his face, and in the second attempt, Alastor shielded against the attack with his blunted sword, but he was able to hold off it as Theo’s strength is far stronger than his. He was pushed aside as he couldn’t handle the opponent’s prowess.

“You fool,” Theo said. “You would go to that length just to spare your comrade? How noble, but also foolish.”

“You think so? Heh.” Alastor asked.

“No matter. My plan will not fail.” Theo said.

“You sound like overcompensating. Don’t you think you’re getting over your head too much? We’ve screwed you before and we’re gonna do it again.” Alastor replied.

Theo gawked at him and spat. “Please, you’re a dead weight. It was the other abomination who did much of the work.”

Alastor played his sword in silence before lunging forward. Theo hung his eyes lightly on Alastor’s sword, mustered a grip, and then moved with haste in a short burst, his sword flashing against the light. That was Theo’s mistake, he was looking at the sword, he did not notice Alastor managed to turn with quick footing. Alastor mustered every strength and poured mana on it, coating his sword with light and thrust forward. Theo flashed a grin. He rolled his wrist, manoeuvring the broadsword to change the direction of Alastor’s thrust into the ground. The mercenary grabbed his sword, jinked from the Arbiter’s swings. He arched back, bent, and ran around leaving several traces of his image behind in which caught Theo’s interest. The Arbiter was keen to learn that the mercenary had something else to show. Alastor leaped, deflected again, he kneeled, swerved around to aim the torso, and was parried with no effort.

Alastor leaped and moved back. He panted. Theo was observing intently.

“I admire your bravery, but gallantry is not enough to bring down something beyond you,” Theo said. “Power is the only thing that makes everything possible. The power makes you right and without it, you cannot achieve anything… witness.”

Once again, Alastor was thrown back as Theo began to emit energy. Red and white light shot out to the sky from him. The clouds deformed and they swirled around as well as the purplish-red sky. The reality distorted as Theo slashed, waving off the light that covered him. Alastor kneeled down, catching up with his breath.

Theo was coated by his silver armour. The horns of his helm twisted as it erected upward just as his pauldron gleamed with hard carvings. There were no eye holes on his helm, only strange markings that are the same as before that trailed down to his chausses. On his plate, the mark of Arbiter was embedded in red along with gold markings on its spaces.

“This is the power of an Arbiter.”

Theo’s voice changed, but not for the better. His tone was deeper and frightening.

“Out of curiosity and do not deny.” Theo started. “Does a Glade mercenary like you have a reason to live or a speck of reason for what you’re fighting for?”

Alastor did not reply. He doesn’t have any answers for that. He just followed the instructors’ orders and completed them without a question. He was a tool for assassinating people. In fact, that is the only reason he fights, to be a weapon and to say the least, the desire to want something more did not come to his mind.

“I heard that there are people who came from Glade, travelled around the world and found their purpose in life aside from being a sellsword. Tell me, are you like any of them?”

Alastor shook his head. He looked down. This is nothing but a pathetic attempt to sway his will. “If this is your way to distract me. Forget it.”

“Poor little boy. He does not even know what to do with his life. It’s precisely why people like you are easily subjugated by people who are wise, because you don’t desire to be something better, something bigger. I intend to flip the world of chaos into my hands and free everyone from slavery.”

“And slave them on your own.” There was no need for Alastor to hear his response, the silence was enough. “Has anyone told you that you’re a fucking nutjob?”

Theo raised his broadsword and slashed it vertically. Alastor did not know what was coming, but he knew its bad news. So, he conjured five walls and to this extent of his strength, he was in shock as to how his walls were destroyed in a single swift. The wall shattered with sparkles of light flickering and finally vanished into thin air. He immediately coated his sword with mana and used every strength he had to defend himself against the shockwave.

The violet flowers were destroyed along the process as he was dragged by Theo’s attack. When the attack halted, Alastor took a deep long breath. Suddenly, his body trembled as he held his sword aloft. His strength seemed to leave his body after that attack.

“That’s right… tremble. Without fear, you wouldn’t survive the upcoming torment.” Theo said.

Theo raised his palm and bombarded Alastor with fire magic. Alastor flipped and jink, he was trying his best not to get caught by the attack. He used the transcendent walls to defend himself as he sprinted. His sword deflected some of the attacks and finally, he was close enough to Theo.

His arms bent and slash it on Theo. Just as before, Theo effortlessly parried it, but he kept attacking him over and over, and again his attacks were being deflected. His mind was determined, but the tip of his sword was blunted.

Whenever he was able to spot an opening, Theo’s armour only deflected it, there was even no scratch on it and when he hit it. He felt that Theo was reluctantly allowing him to feel the hardness of his protective armour. Alastor did not let the situation get to his mind. He spun, cutting from his side, then pirouetted with wide swing, he aimed low and thrust his abdomen but reflected. A chip of his blade flung. Until then, Theo did not bother to raise his sword anymore.

“Are you done?” Theo asked.

Alastor drew back out of instinct as Theo’s sword began to emanate a red aura.

“When you venture into the darkness, something will reach back at you.” Theo announced. “I am your consequence.”

*Run.* That was the first word that popped in his mind and so on, Alastor dashed away from him as he can feel an immense heat emitting from the sword. Every time he got away, the sword became hotter, which was odd, because he wasn’t supposed to sense it that way as he was running away from the source. When he looked back, Theo was not there, but his vision betrayed him because as he looked forward Theo was standing in front of him.

Theo’s sword pointed forward to Alastor. The energy from it was released and a bright light usurped the surroundings. Its range was wide and surely Alastor wouldn’t be able to escape it. In this dire situation, Alastor desperately used all of his mana to build ten transcended walls. The wave of red light easily ate away Alastor’s walls one by one. He pushed himself to the edge to strengthen the remaining three walls that stood up against the heat of the energy against him. His nose bled from the strain that he was enduring. His arms numbed, his mind was slipping and as for his walls, it started to decay. The wave broke the third and devoured the second one. Alastor gave up. There was no stopping it from reaching him.

Just as the last wall began to break, everything slowed down and his mind began to take him back to a scene he had forgotten a long time ago.

\*\*\*

He was in a garden, but he was not sure whether it was where it was or when it happened. In that memory, he held an archer. Arrows were stuck everywhere. It seems that in his vision he was trying to hit the apple from a tree. A hand patted his head. He looked up at the man, his face was blurry and distorted. This memory was strange for him, he had no recollection that he had encountered this conversation.

“I know this is tough for you but you have to do your best if you want something you want. The important thing to remember is it’s not about worrying about what would and what it should be, it’s about doing your best in the present so there will be no regrets. Do what you can do now and don’t expect from the future, but brace yourself for what is yet to come.” The man said.

Everything seemed so strange, yet so familiar. The man held him and hugged him. It was heart-warming and so endearing. His small body automatically struggled to set free but his grip was hard enough.

“I hope you would remember what I’ve told you this day Al or any other things that I’ve taught you because soon, you will be alone and there’s no one you can rely on. So, you must grow strong.”

\*\*\*

The man’s voice began to drift as his mind pulled him back to the present. Something inside of him snapped out.

Alastor’s spirit shivered as if he was about to explode. Just as the last wall was torn apart, Alastor screamed, but not in despair but for control. His body emitted light, his mana surged through his body and travelled to the tipping point of his sword. The wave of energy split apart as Alastor’s own power pierced through it. Theo’s attack vaporized the nearby hills. The heaven split apart from two directions that were caused by Alastor’s attack. Although Theo’s attack was not destroyed, Theo couldn’t help but be astonished to witness the sudden charge of the prowess of Alastor.

Alastor’s spirit calmed down. His breath was running low as he could not feel the strength on his feet. Theo came closer to him.

“What is that power? That did not come from the Blight.” Theo said.

Alastor coughed blood. The red liquid covered his face. “I don’t know. It just happened.”

“I am enthralled,” Theo said. “I will take you with me and know your origins.”

“Fuck you.” Alastor profane. “I’d rather be dead.”

“Do not speak so lowly about your life. You may have some value aside from being a mercenary.”

When Theo was about to carry Alastor, a faint light emitted from Alastor’s pocket and blasted Arbiter away. Alastor didn’t expect that the totem that Linda gave him would be of any use.

\*\*\*

Sherry and Linda felt an odd feeling as something was calling them. They felt the heavy emotion being transferred to them. Beyond space and time, something breached and reached out to them.

“What’s the matter?” Ken said as he disconnected the tube.

“I don’t know,” Sherry said.

They jumped down from the humongous body and glanced around as if they were finding something. Linda also didn’t know what had gotten onto her, but she knew something was wrong. She felt that someone close to her was hurt.

“Al,” Linda said.

“It’s him, right?” Sherry asked. “He’s reaching out to us.”

Just as then, Sherry’s pulse grew bright and shot light in front of her. The blast created a crack in reality. Behind that, they saw Alastor clinging to the totem Linda gave to him.

“It’s Al!” Linda shouted.

The others began to come over and called him out.

Alastor heard them as he stared back. He immediately stood up but failed to muster strength as he fell to the ground. He felt every fibre of his being breaking. His bones were aching and his arm offered no support for him to balance.

Theo immediately backed up and saw the aberration. Somehow, they managed to make a bridge to his pocket dimension. The Arbiter was awed.

“This is impossible.”

Theo leaped over but an invincible force pushed him back.

Alastor crawled to the portal. Linda and Sherry saw the edge of the crack that is slowly closing the door to their world and so Linda’s hand entered the portal and reached out to him. Alastor grabbed it and Sherry and the others pulled it out to him. It was too late for Theo to claim back Alastor as the door closed. They heard an eerie, echoing howl.

“You looked beaten,” Ken said.

“Thank you for stating the obvious, Ken.” Tin said.

Alastor lost his consciousness. He was confident that he was in safe hands now.

“He’s out cold. I can’t blame him.” Lance said.

Meil was too relieved that Alastor made it out from the hellhole, but this is not the time to be at ease.

“Hey!” Meil shouted. “It seems you’re all forgetting that we have a bomb here!”

Meil glanced at the bomb and saw that the pattern changed. The lettering grew brighter in red. The timer changed and then became consistent again.

“Shit! We have one minute to get out of here!” He shouted.

“Uh, Meil. We have another problem here.” Lid said. “There’s another bomb.”

“Shit.”

Sherry drew out her molded arm and grabbed the two bombs. She sprung above. Her distorted liquid left hand held the two bombs as she used her right hand to produce energy for her to fly.

“Where are you going?!” Lance shouted.

“I’m going to take these bombs up to the sky!” Sherry replied.

When Sherry gained enough distance, she intently propelled, flipping in the air, and threw it up. She used her energy to boost and blast it away up to the sky. She immediately dove away and free fall. A few moments later, she heard a spark, and then the explosion came, disrupting everyone’s senses. The cold dark sky suddenly turned into a hellish night. It was like the sun exploded bright into the night sky as its remnants spread over the city. They were blinded by the light.

Meil glanced up above and felt the pressure coming down on them. The expansion of the explosion was not over yet as they felt its compression of space. He halted and looked at them.

“It’s too late,” Meil said.

Lance knew what he meant, but it was too early to conclude. He made a dome of lightning. Ina strengthened the barrier with her lightning magic too. Linda used her ice magic next to it. Cid conjured two transcended walls and Tin used water magic to create a wall. Meil gritted his teeth as he struggled to concentrate his mana, out of all of them, he was the one who had a small portion of mana left. Meil then found his focal point and created a dome of earth, covering them from the incoming explosion.

They felt the gale fall in silence, what came next was the pressure, and the heat they all could feel inside. The barriers broke one by one. When the water wall evaporated, the earth wall cracked, and light pierce through, then there came another one until all crumbled, the bright light overtook their presence.

At the end of the journey,

The Hypocrite, The Martyr, and The Heretic,

Will come together to end the world’s order,

And the sun’s crimson shall pierce over the horizon.

Nothing will ever be the same.

# In his eyes: The traveler who saw the end

**H**ow long has it been, since the Blight purged the unkind, the merit, the purveyor, and the conqueror?

I have seen the horrors of war and saw the end of those who have waged, but winning the war didn’t change anything. The end causes more hate and distrust among the remaining men.

Perhaps, the gods have been too kind to let the men survive the Blight. They should’ve let us all burn.

I too was a warrior. I fought for the justice I believed in before, but the country I served betrayed the people and to that extent, we failed to rise up against the usurpers.

I do not know what will come next, but I know it will be worse. Not even the Oracles, Arbiter, the righteous Ark Renevaes nor the Hunters – the Jaegers so to speak, can foresee what was about to come.

‘Tis fear is the reason why people are paralyzed, some see fear as motivation, others for manipulation. I, too fear, but none of those that have been mentioned, but for the future. And I will prepare for the battle that has yet to come.

# Debriefing: The Canaries

**L**ance stood tall as he watched down the main capital of the Indigium Region, Tharalas. He had been pondering for the past months about what happened in Kayon City. They had to resort to another way to put an end to the madman’s doing.

“Canaries are not enough.” He murmured lowly.

The top heads of the Canary made sure that everything was covered. From the riot and the explosion, they made sure that Theo’s doing was covered up with stories. They told people through the media that the riot was caused by an uproar of criminals in the city. The police force tried to contain every criminal but failed to do so. Of course, that was utter bullshit. If they’re going to make a believable story, they wouldn’t have arrested the mayor, but there would be an uproar among the citizens if the mayor wouldn’t be arrested since, in the make-up story, he didn’t create any pre-emptive plan to make sure that the citizens wouldn’t be hurt, that would be more sensible to hear. The downside was that the Canary had been dragged down along with the name of the mayor. They also blame the agents of the Canary that they weren’t able to stop the riots sooner, if only they knew the horror they faced.

The upbringing of the Arbiter still struck fear in his heart. That power was beyond them. They were lucky that the girl was able to damage him. The question is, *what power does that girl possess?* If they were able to get her first, then maybe they would have a fighting chance against beings like Theo. What’s more pressing was Theo’s plan, that man had thought it through, he was planning all this time to fake his death as a free ride of getting caught. It seems that he knew that his mere presence would shake the balance of this world.

There’s a balance in this world, actually, there are nine factors that keep this world at balance. The third are the six allied nations, The Ark Renevaes, and the Arbiter. But out of the nine, the Arbiters from the Hayan Empire are the ones threatening the most. They didn’t spare anyone during their quest of expanding in the past thirty years. They have conquered thirty-four countries excluding the towns they turned into barracks for amassing armies like they’re planning to conquer the world through an iron fist. Fortunately, their rivals the Ark Renevaes and the royalties from the Retoliam Kingdom, led the attack and stopped the Hayan Empire from ever-expanding.

Lance was disturbed by his pondering as Ina flicked her hand in front of his face.

“Stop sulking.”

“I am not.”

“Yes, you are.”

Lance sighed. “What is it?”

“The board directors want to meet you.”

Lance and Ina bowed at the directors. The men in uniform applaud them and probe them to start.

“First of all, I would like to thank you for coming and hearing my proposal.”

“Spare us the introduction. We only have a little time. So, why not cut to the chase?”

“I understand. Well then, I would like to talk about my proposal, ‘Project Watcher’.”

It had been two weeks since the board approved his proposal. The purpose of the project is to enhance human capabilities and bridge the gap between the strength of humans and monsters. Unlike Theo’s horrid way, they will conduct the experiment with the willing specimens to undergo specific trials. Theo, Gary, and Ina will be part of the experiment, of course, they’re also part of the canary, and they will also take part of it.

“It seems that everything is going smoothly.”

“I never thought that they would go along with your plan.”

“Of course, they will. The knowledge of the existence of Arbiter within our country brought distraught to our leaders. It is something that we cannot simply allow to slip. We all know what they had done during the previous war.” Lance paused and continued, “Theo’s strength alone testifies the might of the military empire.”

“Who would’ve thought that he’s capable of tricking our intelligence network?”

“How would you be able to see his actions if even the person who’s supposed to lead that city was also corrupted.”

“I can’t deny that.”

“This country needs a lot of fixing. We almost let that man incite a big stunt of a terrorist act on our borders without bringing our attention. It’s shameful that the Glade’s mercenary was part of the trepidation and had to cooperate with them to end his ambition.”

Ina contradicted his thoughts. “But without them we cannot hope to stop him, alone enough if he had amassed that large army. If it weren’t for them, we wouldn’t be able to make it out alive.”

“You don’t think I don’t know that?” Lance’s voice slightly grew furious. “I can’t believe that we had to rely on them. They were supposed to be the criminals.”

What was more humiliating was the fact that they had to take the credit for taking down the bandits that caused the massive uproar of the city. Of course, they wouldn’t tell anything about the existence of an Arbiter that was the main reason why it all happened, that alone would cause a commotion among the countries and would raise conflict that might lead to future strife that is something that must not allow happening.

Lance walked the upper echelon glancing down the training as he saw the old and new members of the Canary sparring while waiting for their commander for the upcoming announcement.

There were over 300 people. Although the numbers of members of the squad are considerably high, most of them are agents that were pulled out of the cities and continents they were assigned to. Some little crews volunteered to join. So, might as well be said that this upbringing resulted in some disadvantageous and risky result that is now unavoidable.

The first disadvantage of this formation is the survival rate of the experiment. Given that the Canaries are regarded as an important part of the intelligence network of the region, they had to reduce the number of agents, which would lead to the second problem. If the trials would fail, it was not only the networks of information would be weakened, but also the force and the resources they had spent on the enhancement that Lance spoke of, but considering the existence of Arbiter, they were put in a position that led them with paranoia and had to make a choice that would give them a military advantage against an Arbiter. Who knows, there could be more than two that are lurking within this continent.

Of course, this is a top-secret project. If the nations would know that they’re developing new weapons, their interest would rise to keen and might be motivated to send spies and develop on their own that will also match theirs. This is the dilemma and cycle that the countries within this continent must bear. This distraught is enough proof of how perilous the Arbiter is. If it would’ve been an Ark Renevae then every nation would flood over its heels to compliment how noble their country they had.

All of them were serious in their training and he could only hear the faint laughter of a friendly fight or the gasping lungs of the people. Lance went down the stairs and already made an impression without even saying any words. The members realized the man and lined up with a stiff expression. Their initiative amazed Lance.

“It seems that you already knew about me.” He started. “And I think I don’t need to say any word as to why all of you are here.”

His gravitas is enough for them to understand why he was chosen as their commander. They even barely made eye contact with him.

“Well, then, without further ado, let us start…”

# Debriefing: The Radical

**H**e had been waiting over the canyon just a few miles away from the city. He puffed out the cigar and stomped it. He threw a smirk over his shoulder before looking back at the man that wanted to meet him.

“Well, if it isn’t the bastard himself.” Port snarled.

Before he contacted him, he bid farewell to Henry and to the kids. It was heart-wrenching. He didn’t want to do this, but there’s a world out there for him to see and he must become strong, for him to protect those he cares about. Thus, he accepted the invitation of the man who backs him up after he left Theo’s ranks.

“About time.” He said, raspingly.

“What’s this all about?” Port asked. “I hope that it won’t do anything related to Theo anymore. I nearly died during that night.”

“No, don’t worry. The emergence of his power is no longer our concern.”

“The gas?”

“Settled flawlessly. Thanks to you.” He said. “We want to invite you to join our ranks.”

Port raised his brow, “Ranks? You mean a party?”

It would totally sound right that he would be invited to be part of a group of adventurers, but he felt that there is something different in his tone. He was not only an adventurer but he can also be regarded as a mercenary. The thing that bothered him was why he is working behind the scenes, what is his motive?

Either way, if the offer is related to adventure, he’ll go along, if not, he’ll pass. The reason why he wants to become an adventurer is to train himself to become stronger. He realized that staying in the city disclosed his potential to become stronger. He might have the magical items hidden on his stash, but he doubted that it would be of any use when it comes to enemies like Theo, hence, he very much appreciated it if his request would go with adventure.

“No. ‘Something different.”

“Then I’ll pass.”

“What?”

Port sighed. “I don’t want to be merc anymore. I want to be an adventurer. The reason I want to become one is to hone my skill and if I would be stuck again within a merc branch, then I’ll be damned. There would be no point of letting go with my previous occupation if I were to join another damned mercenary.” Port remained to him, unfazed. “Might as well look for another candidate. Try those punks who fought Theo, maybe they’ll become more useful to you.”

“You think that being alone is the right answer, it is not.”

“It’s not being alone, it’s playing hardcore. I’ve been fooled once by a madman. I’m not going to make the same mistake.”

“I understand, but please hear me. You won’t regret this.” He said with sincerity in his voice. “I promise you; it’ll be worth it.”

Port tilted his head. “Spill.”

“I’m from an organization called ‘Spades’.”

Port’s eyes open wide hearing the name. He heard them before. They’re a group of nomads that was causing trouble in Izion and in Torgo. They can be somewhat called revolutionary. They’ve been liberating people and assassinating people in the higher ranks so that good men with good intentions can find their way to help. They may not be active these few years, but their reputation precedes them.

“No shit. I’m out!”

“Don’t turn your back. We need people like you. We need people who are willing to stand against those who oppressed people.”

“It’s a hard pass.”

He doesn’t completely trust them. If he will join them, then it was likely he will be caught in a spiral of trust and mistrust again. Their agenda will make it more complicated for him to move on to the next level. And even if their operation will ring his wallet, he had no ears for orders.

“Listen, we will help you regarding the finances and allow you to make travels as an adventurer, but if we need help, you’ll come with us and lend us your hand.”

So, that’s how it goes. He thought.

Given that they will make a call with you even if you’re far away giving a hint that they have a wide operation. His offers sound good to him. Come to think of it, he will only follow the orders of the organization through messages, it would give him some time to make money and train, which is convenient.

He smiled. “I’m listening.”

He began to explain the whole operation. It didn’t take long for him to explain their networks. What was important was the profit they can provide to him.

“That’s not a bad offer after all.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself. You’ll have to take up the call when the time comes. In the meantime, you’ll go as planned.”

“Where are you going?”

“I’ll report back to the headquarters.”

“Where will that be?”

He walked to the edge of the cliff and threw a card on him. Port caught it. It was nothing special at first glance, the card was made in wood. He does not know what this is made of, but he can tell that this is imbued with magic.

“You will know soon. Now is not the time.”

“And this?” Port waved the card.

“That will allow us to have communication. Don’t lose it. It’ll come in handy, I promise.”

Port gazed back at the card and noticed symbols that shifted in each second, but before he could open his mouth, *he* jumped off the cliff.

“If you’re going to ditch me in a flashy way, ‘might as well don’t skip the part of explaining to me how to use this thing!” He shouted.

Port began to walk on an old route that everyone does not have to use. It’s an off-charted path that even the police force does not know about. He made it safely to the next town. He can see the adventurers that are entering the guild house from the top of a hill. The town was fashioned with the use of bricks. So far, the guild house is the biggest structure in the town. It gave a vibe similar to a temple. The roof was made of red tiles and had lanterns hung on the ceiling. It has four floors that are designed with different uses.

Port’s eyes glimmered and finally, he went to start an adventure that awaits.

# Debriefing: The Glade

**T**he mind numbing fear woke him up.

The day broke. He heard the leaves blasted outside his room. He sat straight, his hands were on his face. The mercenary could still remember that day. He sighed exasperatedly, expunging his worry. He is safe now.

He watched how the leaves travelled through the guidance of the breeze. This scenery that he had not seen in a while.

“I’m back in the glade? Am I dreaming?” He asked himself.

Everything seemed to be strange. He remembered that he was saved by his compatriots from getting trapped on that pocket dimension along with Theo.

“This is not a dream. We made it back here.” Linda said. She brought a soup and a glass of water for him. “After what happened in Kayon City, you’ve been sleeping for six days.”

Alastor sighed. “Is that so? How’s everyone?”

“Fine. Noisy as usual. Nothing to worry about, but we have another problem.” Her face turned grave for a moment.

“What do you mean?”

“It would be better if you see it for yourself. Before that, you’d better leave the bowl empty.”

Left alone unattended, Alastor made his way outside. He will never forget the halls, every corner, and the rooms of this humongous mansion, except that when he went outside, everything was different. The walls are charred in black; some rooms were completely destroyed; the halls were blocked by debris from the upper floor. He decided to go through the garden which is the center of the mansion. It was filled with different kinds of flowers. At the center, there’s a fountain and bench to sit down.

“What has happened here?” He pondered.

Before Alastor walked through there, an unfamiliar girl went to him. She picked up the tray held.

“Sir Rod wants to see you in his office.” She said and went ahead of him.

Along the way, Alastor met a certain face he had not yet seen in months. It was one of his batchmates, Nathaniel. He was one of the boys that had been admired by the ladies in the Glade, but now, it seemed that he was past his prime. He was in a wheelchair and covered in a bandage.

“Hey, Al.”

“Nat.”

“Dashing as always.”

“Couldn’t say the same thing to you. What happened?”

“A devil snapped and burned this building.”

“What do you mean?”

“You haven’t filled in with what happened?”

“Apparently, I slept for six days. So, a heads up would be appreciated.”

Nat sighed. “The renegades betrayed us.”

The Renegades, they’re an elite group that played a big part during the War of Blights for the past 30 years. Although, he knew little things about them, especially about the members.

“You’re not gonna believe it, but that freak Maine joined their club. Along with its leader Augustus, declared independence on the Glade and attacked us.”

“What about the Rooks? They weren’t able to stop them?”

“You know how it goes, buddy. One time they’re hanging here, the next day they’re out doing special assignments. Rod said that they’re recruiting and building another branch across the Shahaya Sea.”

Even though they’re strong, more members in the Glade could take them on, such as the 10 Rooks, they’re the members of the Glade that had a high bounty on their head.

The Rooks were classified as a band as rank S mercenaries within the ranks on Glade. They’re experienced and powerful people.

“Holy crap.”

The attack was planned. Without the 10 rooks, the entire mansion was left vulnerable. Even though this is the home of the mercenaries, not all of them are destined to stay here, others left here to make their own name while remaining their association on the Glade unknown. The only people that were left here are under the ranks A to D. There were only a few ranks A mercenaries here but that doesn’t mean all of them are capable of defending this place.

“I know, those bastards attack us when we’re left vulnerable, but hey… it’s no use to mourn now. I’ll train harder so next time; I’ll repay them the favour.”

Alastor was already at the door. He was self-conscious as he tilted the doorknob. He knew that they would receive harsh treatment, after all, they had been reckless. It was nothing like common, sometimes the plan doesn’t go to the flow, there are times that it would go sideways, but this one is unacceptable. Not only the Kayon City was nearly destroyed, they even let Theo escape.

Alastor heard the last words that Linda muttered. It was all about the summary of what happened in Kayon City.

“I get it now,” Rod said.

Rod sat down on the chair. His finger’s playing with the pen. Just like others, he looked beaten. He was covered in bandages and his left arm had been cemented. He had suffered the same treatment as well as the others.

“An Arbiter, huh? I guess I can make some considerations. Now that he’s not in Kayon City anymore, we fulfilled the request of our beloved customer.”

“What about the Renegades? Are you just gonna allow them to run amuck?” Linda asked.

“You know what we do to those who waged war against us. Of course, we’re going to punish them. Another reason is that, if we let them on the loose, the nations will associate them with us. We can’t have an entire nation hunt us that would be bad for business.”

“Then what are we waiting for?” Alastor asked.

“Patience boy. The other Glade mercenaries are busy building another lair across the Shahaya Sea, but the situation reckoned emergence, so two members of the Rooks will be joining the hunt for the Renegades. In the meantime, heal. You have been through a lot. Especially Alastor. You’ve fought that Arbiter in full strength. I can’t imagine the fear you felt.”

“It was terrifying, indeed. I can’t fathom what they had to offer to gain that kind of strength.” Alastor said.

“The Blight.”

“What about it?”

“Nothing. Listen, now that we confirmed that there’s an Arbiter hiding in the shadows, you must not tell anyone about this. His identity must remain secret.”

“Why?” Ken asked.

“It would cause an uproar among the countries. Thus, it would be another reason for a War of Blight to occur again. We cannot let that happen at all costs. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” They replied.

“For the time being, Alastor, you will train the new member.”

“Me?” Alastor asked. “We both know I suck at magic. Surely, others are willing to comply.”

“I know… that is why I chose you. Since the two of you worked in the past, I am sure you can handle *her*.”

“Her?”

The door behind opened. Alastor turned and his eyes squinted with interest. She wore the same uniform that they used. Plain jacket and tailor-made pants.

“I am sure you already knew Sherry.”

“I’m pretty sure Ken is willing to teach her,” Alastor said.

“Speak for yourself. As much as I wanted to, we were assigned food supplies.” Ken replied.

“Sucks to be you.” Sherry said. Ken snickered.

“Your training will start tomorrow.” Alastor said, turning his head around. Sherry stood straight out of instinct when Alastor stared at her. “Meet me at the ruin, across the east.”

“We’re not going to start now?” Sherry asked. A disappointment fell on her face.

“I just woke up. Do you think I’m a morning guy? Hell no. I’m gonna go back to sleep.”

“I guess that sums up everything. You all can now leave.”

Alastor thought that his life from now would be easy. Sleeping and eating would be the only thing that revolved around his lifestyle, but it turned out, he will have to train Sherry as a new member of the Glade. Even if she possessed such abilities, her training would require more than three years or more than that to be considered qualified to accept missions.

Alastor glanced at the clouds through the window. His head felt light and relaxed.

“Something tells me that this is going to be a rough ride.”

# About the Author

Bort Patgia was born in 2001. He studied psychology for four years. There are numerous things that inspired him to write novels, but the first thing was video games. Also, western literacies and Japanese novels had great influence when he started writing his first novel in late 2017. Bort loves to read fantasy and action novels; they stimulate his mind for creative instances. Sometimes, he chases dogs for thrills, sometimes the opposite. Lastly, he loves to drink coffee before sprint writing.

# Novels by Bort Patgia

**Brigante Ark Series**

The Shadows of Fate

The Strife of Tribunal

**Jaeger Series**

Season of Blood Moon

# Copyright

The Shadows of Fate

Copyright © 2019 by Bort Patgia.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events and incidents either are the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

For information contact:

bortpatgia@gmail.com

Cover Design: Bort Patgia

First Published in 2019

This Edition Published in 2023

*Thanks for reading! Please add a short review and let me know what you thought!*