2272 Shady Business  
Autumn was slowly surrendering to the tyranny of winter, and frigid winds were blowing across the crowded streets of NQSC.  
  
Awakened June had neglected summoning a PTV, so he had to walk quite a distance from the nearest public transport terminal to his destination. It had seemed like a good idea at first, but by now, he was regretting his choice.  
  
He found himself weary of cold weather ever since returning from Antarctica. But then again, he also found himself weary of hot weather ever since returning from Godgrave. Sinking deeper into his coat, June sighed.  
  
Truly, nature has nothing good to offer at all.  
  
People of his generation were truly unfortunate.  
  
There was a reason why he had decided to walk, though. June had not been to his hometown for a long time, so he was curious to see how much NQSC had changed.  
  
The changes were subtle, but undeniable.  
  
The buildings were the same, the roads were the same, and the crisp tastelessness of the filtered air was also the same — here in the center of the city, at least. However, the atmosphere was entirely different.  
  
It was both much more lively and much more feverish, with excitement and fear mixed together in equal measure.  
  
Most of the people seemed oddly uplifted and confident. They were full of energy. It was as if bright sparks were shining in their eyes — metaphorically speaking... for most.  
  
June found it odd that they looked so vibrant despite knowing that the world was coming to an end.  
  
But on the other hand, he understood. Even he, once a bitter cynic, felt the same. It was hard not to feel awed after having his life saved by the miraculous flames of a living goddess. People everywhere had spent decades living in a world that they secretly knew was dying.  
  
Now, its death sentence had been officially pronounced — but, at the same time, they were given hope and shown an unambiguous path to salvation. They had been given a clear goal.  
  
More than that, there was someone to guide them on that thorny path.  
  
A person who exemplified the very ideals of benevolence, virtue, and righteous power.  
  
Changing Star of the Immortal Flame Clan... a living legend, someone who was known to make miracles happen.  
  
In simple terms, she had a stellar reputation and a proven track record of leading people out of impossible situations. So, instead of giving up, people were reinvigorated, throwing themselves into working toward a common goal with abandon.  
  
Of course, not all of them.  
  
That was why the atmosphere in NQSC was so feverish. There were also those who were panicking, surrendering to despair, and just plain losing their minds. As June walked, he noticed the carcasses of several burned PTVs on the side of the road.  
  
The walls were marred with scars left by the war. A crowd of protesters had gathered near a tall barrier constructed around an active Nightmare Gate. Not all of them were consummate killers — there were those with Utility Aspects, as well. In fact, those were often much more precious than the combat specialists.  
  
But most of them were.  
  
Smiling amicably, June nodded at the Awakened elites and took a seat.  
  
‘I do wonder what it’s all about.’  
  
The reason he had returned to NQSC and was now sitting in front of an unmarked office was a bit strange. It was a rumor... no, more of an urban legend among the seasoned government grunts like him.  
  
A scary story about an absolutely separate, intangible elite force that operated in the shadows of the Human Domain. A force more elite than even the exalted Fire Keepers themselves, and arguably more deadly.  
  
Most people dismissed these rumors as a scary story, but some dug deeper.  
  
June was one of those who had investigated the rumors more seriously. As a result, he found himself paгticipating in a vicious and, quite honestly, more than a little shady trial.  
  
Having ruthlessly defeated all other contenders, he finally found himself here.  
  
His curiosity was going to be sated. He spent about an hour in the waiting room before being summoned into the office.  
  
There, an Awakened woman was sitting behind a desk, checking something on the screen in front of her.  
  
She had a petite build, with mousy hair and an unassuming face.  
  
However, her gaze was calm and confident, making June feel a little flustered.  
  
"Awakened June?"  
  
He nodded.  
  
"I am Awakened Kim. Please take a seat."  
  
June sat on the only free chair in the office and looked at Awakened Kim quietly. After checking her screen one last time, she turned to him and said in an even tone:  
  
"June. City of origin: NQSC. Infected by the Nightmare Spell at age sixteen, Awakened an Aspect of the Ascended Rank — supposedly.  
  
Stellar marks at the Academy, joined the government after Awakening. Member of the First Evacuation Army... Second Irregular Company, East Antarctica.  
  
Distinguished service. Later retired from service, employed at various private outlets as a security specialist and bodyguard. In Godgrave... soldier of the Sword Army — Vanishing Lake expedition, Godheart, Siege of the Greater Crossing... rejoined the government forces six months ago."  
  
She paused and looked at June, who smiled.  
  
"That's me."  
  
Awakened Kim nodded.  
  
What she said next, however, made June freeze and feel a cold shiver run down his spine.  
  
"Clandestine alias: Corsair. Black market nightmare creature hunter, enforcer... assassin. Seventy-six confirmed contracts — actual number unknown. Ninety-four percent success rate. Fallen Nightmare Creatures, unhinged Ascended... an unsanctioned Death Zone expedition? Impressive."  
  
June remained silent for a few moments, hiding his shock and unease. Eventually, he coughed.  
  
"Uh... that's also me."  
  
Awakened Kim — whomever the hell she was — seemed to know everything already, and in chilling detail at that. So, there was no reason to play coy.  
  
She studied him intently for a bit, then asked with a hint of curiosity:  
  
"Say, the Pandavar massacre... that wouldn’t happen to have been you, by chance?"  
  
June met her gaze, considered his next words for a moment or two, then smiled.  
  
"Those guys? Well... they got into some really abominable business for a fallen noble house. Otherwise, the bounty on their heads would not have been that high."  
  
Awakened Kim lingered for a few moments, then chuckled suddenly.  
  
"A corsair hunting down pirates, huh? The irony..."  
  
She paused and seemed to hesitate for a short while. Eventually, she asked:  
  
"You are Vandal's grandson, aren't you? I met your grandfather in Antarctica. He was a great Awakened."  
  
June looked at her for a few long seconds, his expression turning. But under the unassuming woman’s calm gaze, his laughter slowly died down.  
  
Wait, is she serious?  
  
He stared at her in silence.  
  
Therе were... all kinds of Aspects out there.  
  
"...He wasn’t great enough, I guess. Otherwise, he would have survived."  
  
Awakened Kim raised an eyebrow:  
  
"Any questions?"  
  
June contemplated his answer a little, then shrugged and nodded readily.  
  
"Only one. The most important question."  
  
He paused for a moment and with a glint in his eyes:  
  
"How’s the pay?"  
  
The unassuming woman blinked a couple of times, then looked down and sighed.  
  
"Oh, she’s going to like this one..."  
  
Shaking her head, Awakened Kim raised her head and gave June a piercing look.  
  
"The pay is stellar."  
  
He nodded in satisfaction.  
  
"Great. Where do I sign?"  
  
Standing up from behind her desk, she smiled.  
  
"There’s no need to sign anywhere."  
  
Awakened Kim paused for a moment. "The pay is stellar."  
  
Awakened Kim paused for a moment, then added hesitantly:  
  
"Oh, but I should ask. How do you feel about tattoos?"  
  
"That's the current roster. You’re replacing Master Reaper."  
  
"Reaper’s out?"  
  
"He passed away recently. Old age."  
  
"Damn... that’s a loss."  
  
"You’ll be the new Corsair. We usually give it to older, more experienced Awakened, but you’re a better fit."  
  
"What's the job?"  
  
"Cleaners exist outside of the chain of command. We are a... failsafe."  
  
"...Failsafe?"  
  
"If something goes wrong, if someone starts acting suspicious, if anything looks out of place... we are called in to clean up. Corpsеs, buildings, cities, organizations, Clans, governments... anything that needs to disappear."  
  
"And how does that work?"  
  
"That depends on the cleaner. Each of us has our own methods. What matters is results."  
  
"Right... so what are your methods?"  
  
"Poison and fire."  
  
"Subtle."  
  
"It works."  
  
"Can’t argue with that."  
  
"You will be supplied with information, equipment, support, and other resources as needed. In return, we expect results."  
  
"And if I fail?"  
  
"You won’t."  
  
"Right."  
  
"Now, hold out your arm."  
  
"...You’re not going to tell me what’s happening?"  
  
"No."  
  
"...That’s fair."  
  
June extended his arm.  
  
The woman drew a sigil on it with a glowing brush. It felt warm — not unpleasant. Then, she pressed a crystal shard against the sigil.  
  
There was a flash of light, and the sigil sank into his skin, leaving behind a dark tattoo. The lines were intricate and sharp, like an ancient rune or a branding mark.  
  
"What is it?"  
  
"A key. It gives you access to Cleaners’ secure channels and systems. It also makes sure we can track you down if you ever decide to run."  
  
"I see..."  
  
She offered him a small badge.  
  
"This is your identification. It'll change appearance depending on what you need. Don't lose it."  
  
"Got it.”  
  
He pocketed the badge and looked up.  
  
"...What should I call you?"  
  
"My code name is Witch."  
  
June smiled faintly.  
  
"Witch and Corsair, huh? Sounds like a pulp novel."  
  
"We do our best.”