2420 Uncharted Territory  
  
A few minutes earlier, Ray rose from the floor and studied the four Awakened robbers guarding the hostages. His Dormant Aspect Ability did not make him invisible, but it did make him hard to notice - people and Nightmare Creatures both paid him littlе attention, and his presence was very subtle. Still, there was a limit to that Ability. He could take one of the bandits down, but unless he was careful, the rest would immediately notice it. Even if they did not notice Ray himself, they would see one of their own going down - his targets, after all, did not possess the same power.  
  
'Four of them.' Awakened were unpredictable and often possessed tricky Aspects, but usually, taking down four would not pose a problem to Ray - not after the training he had received in the Shadow Clan, at least. Taking them down quietly and while making sure that no hostage was harmed, however, was a different matter.  
  
He glanced at the black blade in his hand, then sighed and placed it on the ground.  
  
A moment later, Ray was gone.  
  
In seconds like these, his best friend was a distraction.  
  
Nothing happened for a dozen seconds, and then, one of the hostages suddenly reeled back and screamed:  
  
"S - snake! Snake!"  
  
The four robbers simultaneously turned to the source of the disturbance, aiming their rifles up. The man was awkwardly trying to crawl back, even though there was nothing in front of him.  
  
The robbers looked at each other and then headed toward him.  
  
Well, three of them did, at least.  
  
The one furthest away from the shouting hostage, and therefore behind the line of sight of his allies, suddenly found an arm wrapping around his neck. Ray got the man in a chokehold and squeezed with vicious strength, putting him to sleep. Since he made no noise whatsoever, and everyone's attention was focused on the frightened hostage, no one noticed him gently laying the unconscious robber on the floor.  
  
The other three, meanwhile, reached their destination. They glanced at the pale hostage, and then, one of them said in an angry tone:  
  
"Shut the hell up, moron. There's nothing here!"  
  
The hostage, however, shook his head.  
  
"N - no! There was a snake here just a moment ago! I swear!"  
  
The robber sighed and opened his mouth to curse at the tied - up man.  
  
It was then that a black snake suddenly slithered up his body and wrapped itself around his neck. Its mouth opened, and a chilling hiss resounded in the foyer.  
  
"What the."  
  
The other robbers were starting to raise their rifles, but just then, Ray appeared near one of them, bringing down an alloy pipe - which he had scavenged nearby - onto his head. The man toppled like a tree, and by the time his partner jerked the barrel of the rifle in that direction, there was no one there.  
  
Ray's Awakened Ability, on the other hand, did allow him to become invisible - even if there were some limitations to that Ability, as well.  
  
In any case, he only needed half a second to reach the remaining robber, this time. Ray ruthlessly kicked him in the stomach, grabbed his rifle to prevent it from accidentally going off, and then slammed his knee into the man's chin as he bent down from the initial blow. By then, his Mark had already dealt with the robber it had been strangling.  
  
All four bandits were down, laying on the floor in motionless heaps.  
  
The black snake slithered across the floor and climbed up his leg, disappearing into his sleeve a moment later.  
  
Ray looked at the hostages, who were staring at him in shock and fear.  
  
He remained still for a moment, then raised a hand and brought his index finger to his lips, as if telling them to be quiet.  
  
Then, he suddenly disappeared, leaving only four motionless bodies in his wake.  
  
Now, all he needed to do was get to the bank's grid control room and wait for Corsair's signal.  
  
Fleur was also in the vault, and while Ray was not happy about being separated from her during a dangerous mission, he knew that she could fend for herself. His sweetheart was a healer, yes. but she had received the same training he did. Plus, Rain and Tamar were there as well.  
  
'Only I am stuck running boring chores.'  
  
Sighing bitterly, he remembered the blueprints of the bank they had studied in advance and rushed to the grid control center.  
  
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June listened to the exchange between the Vault Keeper and the Tyrant without showing any interest in it. Of course, in truth, he was following the conversation quite intently.  
  
'Six Awakened combatants, one Master.' The situation was not great, but it was not awful either.  
  
As long as the Ascended was taken down rapidly, the rest were not going to pose a problem.  
  
Of course, June was not going to attack the enemy Master before learning what, exactly, had the man come here to steal.  
  
Then, the Tyrant went and summoned a Fallen Echo.  
  
That spoiled June's mood somewhat, but not by much. Nothing really changed - quickly killing the leader of the zealots was still his primary goal. When the Tyrant died, his Echo would disappear with him. His first mission as a member of the Shadow Clan was truly quite precarious. June was supposed to learn what the cult was searching for and take the zealots down, despite the fact that their leader was an Ascended. At the same time, he had to make sure that the hostages weren't hurt or at least not hurt too badly.  
  
The decision on how far the zealots were allowed to go was left to his discretion. Take the Vault Keeper, for example. Was he supposed to let the Tyrant torture her? Or would that be crossing the line?  
  
Usually, June would have had strict parameters for a job, but the Shadow Clan gave its members a lot of autonomy. He was not merely a hired gun anymore - he was expected to exercise his own judgment and make decisions that would benefit the clan of his own accord.  
  
Which was already uncharted territory, and now there was also an unpredictable VIP added to the equation.  
  
The princess. Worse still, the adversary was in possession of a Fallen Echo. The question of whether or not June would allow the Vault Keeper to be tortured was moot now - the Tyrant had decided to go straight for murder.  
  
The murderous zealot, meanwhile, was speaking once again:  
  
".So, Vault Keeper, you have a choice. You can either get to know my friend better, or hand over a Memory called the Key of Ascension voluntarily."  
  
June smiled faintly behind the mask.  
  
'Ah, thank you kindly.'  
  
The man just offered June the name of the Memory the cult was searching for. Which meant that June did not need him alive anymore.  
  
Suppressing his killing intent - some enemies were quite sensitive to it - June took a step forward while manifesting his Mark into a weapon and stabbed it into the Tyrant's skull.  
  
There was no warning, no indication that he would attack. Just a rapid and ruthless strike that was supposed to end the zealot's life.  
  
But that was the thing about fighting Awakened. Awakened were very hard to predict.  
  
The second his weapon met the adversary's head, it felt as if he was trying to pierce metal. The bastard must have possessed a powerful defensive Aspect.  
  
'Well, crap.'  
  
June activated his own Awakened Ability, slowing down time.  
  
"Ray, now!"  
  
Somewhere far away, Ray heard his voice through a special communication Memory shared between the three members of the team and cut the power.  
  
The artificial lights, the video walls, the climate control systems, everything in the vault that needed power to function was immediately disabled, plunging the spacious room into utter darkness. And darkness was the territory of the Shadows.