

SOULTALE - DEFINITIVUS. || ShadowNTS - ShadowNTS

(Chapter -1 || Archive) The Continuity.

"Time forgets many things - but stories, when told well, are eternal."

- Jess Kalm of the Integrity

Soultale: The Definitive Edition

"The Continuity"

|| Volumes ||

Prologue, The Creation

Volume 1, The Ascension

Volume 2, The Apostle Of Fear

Volume 3, The Heroes

(Chapter 0 || Prologue) Point - Null.

In the vast expanse of nothing, there existed something.

Not the kind of something that takes up space or casts shadows. Not the kind of something that can be touched or measured. It was an existence beyond comprehension, a place where matter was merely a concept rather than a reality - a realm where only ideas resided. This place was neither empty nor full. It simply was. And within this infinite conceptual expanse dwelled a singular consciousness.

If consciousness could be lonely, then perhaps this one was. It had never known companionship, never experienced contrast to its own being. It had no name, for names are given by others, and there were no others. It had no form, for forms are defined by boundaries, and there were no boundaries here. It was the space, and the space was it - an existence consuming itself eternally.

The consciousness expanded endlessly, not in the way physical matter might spread, but in the way thoughts ripple outward, each one birthing new concepts that spiraled into infinite complexity.

This wasn't growth as much as it was becoming - perpetual transformation without destination.

When it moved, the fabric of reality moved with it. When it paused, existence held its breath. It didn't walk so much as flow, carrying the universe with it like a cloak of stars and possibilities. The consciousness was neither creator nor creation - it was both, simultaneously, a paradox that needed no resolution.

It had never questioned its solitude because solitude implied an alternative.

How can one miss what one has never known?

How can one feel alone when the concept of togetherness has never existed?

Yet somehow, deep within the intricate lattice of its being, there lurked an unfamiliar sensation, a yearning without name, a question without form. It was less an emotion and more a dissonance, like a perfect melody that suddenly reveals itself to be missing a note that was never there to begin with. The consciousness continued its eternal journey through the nothingness that was everything, carrying this unnamable sensation like a seed waiting to germinate.

Then came the day - though "day" is a meaningless concept in a place without time - when something unprecedented occurred.

A disturbance.

At first, it was nothing more than a ripple in the smooth fabric of existence - a subtle fracture in the perfect continuity of being. The consciousness found itself drawn to this anomaly, this imperfection in the flawless tapestry of its domain.

As it approached, the ripple intensified, transforming into a tear that seemed to separate the very essence of reality. The consciousness hesitated, experiencing something akin to caution - another novel sensation in its limitless existence.

And then, from this wound in reality, emerged something impossible: a hand. Not just any hand, but one of stark white bone, fingers reaching outward as if grasping for purchase in this realm of pure concept.

The consciousness recoiled - not in fear, for it had never known danger, but in profound bewilderment. It watched as the tear widened and a figure stepped through, bringing with it concepts that had never before existed in this universe: *differentiation, otherness, plurality.*

The figure stood in stark contrast to the formless expanse around it. It had definite edges, a clear beginning and end. It was separate from the environment in a way the consciousness had never experienced. The figure carried colors - vibrant, impossible hues that splashed across its form like liquid light.

INK: Woah!

The figure exclaimed, its voice creating sound where sound had never existed before.

INK: This is quite the spacious universe.

The consciousness found itself contracting, condensing, forming something akin to a shape - not from any conscious decision, but as an instinctive response to the presence of this defined being. It was as if the figure's very existence demanded reciprocity, forced definition upon the undefinable.

///: Who are you?

The consciousness asked, surprised to find it now possessed something resembling a voice - a way to transmit thought that was suddenly necessary in the presence of another. The figure startled slightly, then composed itself with a flourish that sent droplets of color spiraling into the void, where they hung suspended like newborn stars.

INK: Ah, I'm sorry for being so disrespectful!

The figure bowed dramatically, paintbrush in hand leaving a trail of rainbow light.

INK: The name's Ink, and I'm the best artist in the multiverse, and its guardian too!

The figure - Ink - straightened, revealing a face painted with constantly shifting patterns and eyes that seemed to contain entire galaxies.

INK: What's your name?

The question hung in the emptiness, an impossibility that the consciousness had never considered.

///: Name...

It responded, the concept foreign on its newly formed lips.

///: I don't have a name.

Ink's expression shifted, the patterns on his face rearranging into something resembling thoughtfulness.

INK: Seems like the rumors were true.

He murmured, more to himself than to his host.

INK: This universe is quite the anomaly, having only one resident, who doesn't appear anywhere else in the multiverse.

Ink scratched his head, leaving behind a small burst of color that dissolved into the void. The consciousness watched, fascinated by how this intruder could affect the very fabric of reality with such casual gestures.

INK: I'll call ya' Zero!

Ink declared suddenly, pointing his brush at the consciousness.

INK: How 'bout it?

The consciousness considered this. A designation, an identifier, a way to be recognized as separate from everything else - it was simultaneously diminishing and expansive. To be named was to be limited, but also to be known. Zero nodded, accepting this new definition of self.

INK: Perfect!

Ink twirled his brush between skeletal fingers.

INK: Now you must have a lot of questions, so let's sit down and I'll explain everything to you.

With a fluid motion, Ink pulled a brush from somewhere within his multicolored coat and swept it through the air. Where it passed, reality solidified into a chair of elaborate design, intricate patterns swirling across its surface like living tattoos. Ink settled into it with casual familiarity.

INK: You don't like chairs?

He asked, noticing Zero's hesitation.

ZER: Chair...

Zero tested the word, understanding the concept but finding it curiously limiting. Instead of mimicking Ink's creation, Zero reached out and grasped the very essence of the space around them. With a gesture that defied description, Zero pulled at reality itself, folding and compressing it until it formed something that resembled a seat - not made from anything within reality, but formed from reality itself. It was as though Zero sat upon a throne made from the compressed fabric of existence, a distortion in space that served the same function as Ink's more concrete creation. Ink's ever-shifting eyes widened slightly.

INK: Hmph, that's one way to sit.

He remarked, a note of impressed surprise in his voice. With theatrical grandeur, Ink began to weave a tale more complex than anything Zero had ever conceived. He spoke of the multiverse - an endless tapestry of realities, each with its own rules, its own inhabitants, its own stories. He described universes teeming with life, overflowing with matter and energy, bustling with countless beings who existed in relation to one another.

INK: In all my travels, I've never encountered a universe quite like yours. Every other reality I've visited is crowded with entities, buzzing with interaction and connection. But yours... yours contains only you. You're unique not just in your universe, but across all universes.

Zero absorbed this information slowly, feeling it reshape his understanding of existence. The unfamiliar sensation that had been growing within him now had a name: loneliness. But alongside it bloomed something else - a sense of wonder at the vastness beyond his own reality.

INK: However...

Ink continued, his tone darkening as the colors on his face shifted to deeper hues.

INK: Not all is peaceful in the multiverse.

ZER: Peace...

Zero echoed, another concept that only gained meaning through its absence.

INK: There exists a faction of individuals who seek destruction.

Ink explained, his brush tracing complex patterns in the air that momentarily formed images of shadowy figures with malevolent intent.

INK: Entities who tear apart realities for their own purposes, who consume possibilities and leave nothing but void behind. I've managed to keep them at bay until now, but even I get exhausted.

ZER: The artist gets tired?

Zero asked, surprised that such a vibrant being could experience limitation.

INK: Yeah.

Ink admitted with a sigh that released a small cloud of colorful mist.

INK: Creation takes energy, and defense even more so. I'm spread thin across too many frontiers. Which is why I've come here with a proposal.

ZER: A deal..?

Zero's newly formed face tilted in curiosity.

INK: Will you assist me in safeguarding reality?

Ink leaned forward, his ever-changing eyes fixed intently on Zero.

INK: Your abilities are unlike anything I've seen. The way you manipulate the fundamental structure of your universe - that power could be invaluable in protecting the multiverse.

Zero fell silent, contemplating this request. Throughout his eternal existence, he had never had purpose beyond being. Now, suddenly, he was being offered something entirely new: *a reason, a cause, a mission*. More than that, he was being offered connection - a chance to be part of something greater than his solitary existence.

The seed of yearning that had lain dormant within him for eons began to sprout, unfurling possibilities he had never imagined. For

the first time in his limitless existence, Zero felt something that could only be described as emotion. It surged through his being, reshaping him more profoundly than any physical transformation could have. This wasn't just understanding a new concept - it was experiencing it, embodying it, becoming it.

ZER: Artist.

Zero finally spoke, his voice resonating with newfound resolve.

ZER: I'll do it.

The determination that filled him was like a star being born in the emptiness of space - violent, beautiful, and irreversible.

ZER: I'll give everything I have to protect them.

He continued, the concept of sacrifice suddenly meaningful in a way it had never been before. To give of oneself required having something to give - and for the first time, Zero felt he possessed something worth offering. A wide smile bloomed across Ink's face, colors dancing across his features in a jubilant display.

INK: That's what I was hoping to hear! Now come, I want you to meet some of my friends.

Before Zero could respond, Ink grabbed his arm - the first physical contact Zero had ever experienced - and pulled him toward the tear in reality that still hovered nearby. The sensation was electric, a connection between separate entities that sent cascades of new understanding through Zero's being. As they approached the rift, Zero felt a momentary hesitation. To leave his universe was to abandon everything he had ever known - yet what he had known was solitude, limitation, and sameness. Beyond that tear lay diversity, connection, and purpose.

ZER: What's out there?

INK: Everything, and it needs you.

With that, Ink pulled Zero through the ripple in space, taking him beyond the boundaries of his singular existence into a realm that defied comprehension even for one who had embodied an entire universe. They emerged into a place that existed outside of existence itself - a vast web of interconnected strings and paintings, stretching infinitely in all directions. Each string led to a floating

canvas, and within each canvas played out the drama of an entire universe, like windows into countless realities.

INK: Welcome...

Ink declared with a sweeping gesture that sent droplets of color arcing through the non-space around them.

INK: to the Ink-sphere.

Zero stood transfixed, witnessing for the first time the true scope of the multiverse - infinite variations playing out across endless dimensions. And somewhere within this incomprehensible vastness lurked the destroyers Ink had spoken of, threats to everything that now unfolded before Zero's eyes. As they stood at the threshold of infinity, Zero felt something crystallize within him - a commitment, a promise, a destiny. He had been born of nothingness, had embodied everything within his singular realm, and now would become something entirely new: *a guardian, a protector, a force that stood against destruction itself*. Zero looked down at his hands - hands that had never before existed, now capable of touching other realities - and made a silent vow. He would no longer be defined by absence and solitude. From this moment forward, he would be defined by what he chose to preserve.

*The nameless one now had purpose,
and for the being now called Zero,
that was more precious than any name could ever be.*

End of Chapter 0 **"Point - Null"**

[The 1 named 0.]

(Chapter 1 || Prologue) What I Hold Dear.

Zero stepped into existence as though he had always belonged there.

The Ink-sphere, with its infinite tapestry of universes suspended like paintings in a gallery without walls, quickly became more than just a place - it became home. Each canvas pulsed with life, each string connecting them hummed with possibilities, and Zero found himself captivated by the endless variety that the multiverse offered.

INK: You'll get used to it.

Ink had assured him during those first disorienting moments, his skeletal hand resting on Zero's shoulder.

INK: Though the wonder never really goes away.

Zero wasn't sure he wanted it to. Those early days passed in a blur of introductions and revelations. Ink had many allies - guardians and protectors of various realities, each with powers and perspectives as unique as the universes they hailed from. They greeted Zero with varying degrees of curiosity and caution, for a being who had once been an entire universe unto himself was unprecedented even in the boundless multiverse.

There was Dream, a guardian of positive emotions who crafted hopeful futures through the dreams of countless beings. His golden eyes seemed to peer not just at Zero but through him, assessing the depths of this newcomer's resolve.

DRM: Your existence defies categorization.

Dream had said, his voice like warm honey over steel.

DRM: That could be either our greatest asset or our most devastating vulnerability.

Blueberry was younger, more exuberant, his eye sockets housing a single blue light that danced with excitement at meeting Zero.

BLB: Finally, someone newer than me around here!

He had exclaimed, bouncing on his heels.

BLB: Don't worry, I'll show you all the shortcuts between worlds!

Edge carried himself with dignified precision, a scarlet scarf wrapped around his neck that seemed to move with its own purpose. His sharp gaze had assessed Zero with tactical calculation.

EDG: Your combat experience is non-existent.

He had stated bluntly.

EDG: We'll need to address that immediately.

And there were others - dozens, perhaps hundreds of beings, each containing within them stories and histories that Zero absorbed with the same endless capacity that had once held his entire universe. Some were skeletal like Ink, others were beings of pure energy, still others defied description entirely. The diversity was overwhelming, exhilarating, terrifying.

Through it all, Ink remained his constant guide, his paint-spattered presence a familiar anchor in this sea of newness. Zero found himself studying the artist's movements, the way he navigated between worlds with casual ease, how his brush could create doorways between realities or seal breaches with strokes of vibrant color.

INK: You're adapting faster than I expected.

Ink remarked one day - if "day" was even a meaningful concept in this place beyond space and time. They stood before a universe that resembled a watercolor painting, its edges bleeding gently into the void.

INK: Most beings struggle with the concept of the multiverse for years.

ZER: I was the concept of universe.

Zero replied simply. This was both literally true and yet utterly inadequate to describe what he had been.

ZER: Understanding many universes is just... a matter of scale.

Ink laughed, the sound sending ripples of color across the nearby canvases.

INK: I suppose that's one way of looking at it!

Gradually, Zero began to undertake missions of his own. At first, they were simple errands - delivering messages between guardians, observing unusual activity in stable universes, reinforcing weakened boundaries between realities. Zero approached each task with the same solemn dedication, treating the smallest errand with the same gravity as the most critical intervention.

BLB: You don't have to be so serious all the time.

Blueberry told him once, as they sat dangling their legs over the

edge of a universe made entirely of crystalline structures that chimed softly with the passage of time.

BLB: Even guardians can have fun!

Zero tilted his head, considering this.

ZER: Fun...

He repeated, the concept still novel despite his rapid acclimation to multiverse life.

ZER: Perhaps that's something I need to learn.

Blueberry's eye-light brightened.

BLB: Well, you've got the best teacher right here! The Magnificent Blueberry is an expert in fun!

And so Zero's education expanded to include not just the mechanics of multiverse protection, but the subtleties of connection and joy. He learned to laugh - a strange, resonant sound that seemed to echo with the vastness he still carried within him. He discovered games, celebrations, moments of quiet companionship that filled spaces within him he hadn't known were empty.

Edge taught him combat, transforming Zero's innate ability to manipulate reality into disciplined techniques that could be deployed in defense of the multiverse.

EDG: Your power is considerable.

Edge acknowledged during one particularly grueling training session, as Zero held an entire pocket dimension stable while simultaneously fending off Edge's bone attacks.

EDG: But power without precision is as dangerous to allies as it is to enemies.

Dream showed him how to sense the emotional currents that ran through universes like underground rivers, how to strengthen positive feelings without imposing upon free will.

DRM: Balance is essential.

Dream explained, his golden eyes reflecting universes that might never come to be.

DRM: Our role is not to control, but to protect the possibility of hope.

And Ink - Ink taught him about creation itself. How to see the beauty in even the smallest, most seemingly insignificant universe. How each reality, no matter how fleeting or strange, contributed something unique to the tapestry of existence.

Months passed, though time held little meaning in the Ink-sphere. Zero found himself becoming something he had never imagined possible - not just a solitary consciousness, but a being in relation to others. He had friends now, companions who knew him by the name he had been given. He had responsibilities, a role that extended beyond mere existence.

He had purpose.

INK: You've come a long way.

Ink remarked one quiet moment, as they sat together watching a newborn universe take its first tentative steps toward complexity. The infant reality pulsed with potential, its laws still malleable, its future unwritten. Zero nodded, his gaze fixed on the nascent creation.

ZER: I never knew there could be so much, so many kinds of existence, so many ways of being.

Ink's ever-shifting eyes settled briefly into a pattern that resembled nostalgia.

INK: And yet, your original universe remains unique - the only one containing just a single consciousness.

ZER: It seems... limited now.

Zero admitted, surprising himself with the realization. The place that had once been everything to him now felt like a distant memory - precious, but incomplete.

INK: Not limited, just waiting.

Zero was about to ask what his universe might be waiting for when

an alarm tore through the tranquil atmosphere of the Ink-sphere - a discordant note that set the very strings of reality trembling. Nearby canvases rippled as though struck by unseen waves, their colors momentarily distorting.

Ink was on his feet instantly, his casual demeanor replaced by alert vigilance. His brush, previously creating idle patterns, now held at the ready like a weapon.

ZER: What is-

INK: They've breached the outer defenses faster than I anticipated.

ZER: The destroyers?

Zero asked, though he already knew the answer. He had been briefed on the threat - entities that sought not conquest but annihilation, beings that fed on the dissolution of entire realities. Ink nodded grimly, patterns of deep crimson and midnight blue swirling across his face.

INK: Multiple incursions, coordinated attacks. They've never been this organized before.

Around them, the Ink-sphere erupted into frantic activity. Guardians rushed to defensive positions, messages flashed between allies, and protective barriers sprang into existence around vulnerable universes. The atmosphere, usually serene despite its infinite complexity, now thrummed with tension. Dream appeared beside them, his golden aura dimmed with concern.

DRM: The northeastern quadrant is already compromised. Edge and Blueberry are holding the line, but they won't last long without reinforcement.

Ink's expression hardened, the colors on his face settling into determined configurations.

INK: Zero, I know you haven't faced actual combat against the destroyers yet, but-

ZER: I'm ready.

Zero interrupted, straightening to his full height. The being who had once been a universe unto himself now stood as its defender, resolve emanating from him like gravity. Ink studied him for a moment, then nodded sharply.

INK: Stay close to Dream. Don't engage the leader - they're beyond your current capabilities.

Zero wanted to protest, to insist that his power - the power to manipulate the very fabric of reality - surely made him capable of facing any threat. But the gravity in Ink's expression stopped him. This was not the time for pride or untested confidence.

ZER: I understand.

With a swift motion, Ink created a portal - not his usual colorful doorway, but a stark tear in the fabric of the Ink-sphere that led directly to the battlefield. Through it, Zero could see chaos: *universes trembling under assault, reality itself buckling under impossible pressure, and figures locked in combat that defied physical laws.*

DRM: For the multiverse.

Dream murmured, his golden eyes hardening as he prepared to step through.

ZER: For our home.

Zero added, the concept of "home" no longer limited to his original solitary existence, but expanded to encompass this infinite tapestry of life and possibility.

They plunged into battle.

Zero had trained for this moment, had practiced techniques and strategies, had prepared himself mentally for confrontation. Nothing could have truly readied him for the reality.

The destroyers moved like hunger given form, their shapes constantly shifting as though reality itself rejected their presence. They didn't simply attack universes - they unmade them, unraveling the very laws that held them together until they collapsed into non-existence. The screams of dying realities echoed across the battlefield, a sound Zero felt rather than heard, a vibration in the deepest part of his being.

DRM: Don't look directly at them!

Dream called over the cacophony, his powers manifesting as golden

shields around threatened universes.

DRM: Focus on what you're protecting, not what's being destroyed!

Zero tried to follow this advice, channeling his abilities into reinforcing the boundaries of vulnerable realities, sealing breaches before they could widen, stabilizing dimensions that had begun to fracture. It was exhausting work, precision required even as chaos erupted all around him.

Through the tumult, he caught glimpses of his friends fighting with everything they had. Edge launched precision attacks of manifested energy, his scarlet scarf snapping like a battle flag as he moved with lethal grace. Blueberry, all earlier playfulness gone, created complex patterns of interlocking shields that trapped and contained smaller destroyers.

And Ink - Ink was everywhere at once, his brush moving in arcs of impossible speed. Where it passed, reality strengthened, colors brightened, existence itself seemed to push back against the encroaching void. He fought not just with power but with creativity, adapting his tactics moment by moment, using the destroyers' own momentum against them.

For a brief, desperate hour, it seemed they might prevail. The initial wave of attackers faltered under the coordinated defense, their formless bodies dissipating back into the nothing from which they had emerged. Zero felt a surge of hope, of pride in what they were accomplishing together.

Then came the leader.

Unlike its followers, this destroyer did not shift or writhe. It moved with terrible purpose, its form a perfect negation of existence - not darkness, which is merely the absence of light, but nothingness, which is the absence of everything. Where it passed, reality didn't just die; it was retroactively erased, as if it had never been.

DRM: It's him.

Dream whispered, his golden aura flickering with what Zero realized was fear.

DRM: *The End.*

The name hung in the space between them, heavy with dread significance. Zero had heard it mentioned in hushed tones during strategy sessions, had seen the grave expressions that accompanied any discussion of this particular adversary. The End was not just a destroyer; *it was destruction incarnate, the multiverse's antithesis.*

INK: Fall back! Defensive formation Alpha! Protect the core universes!

Guardians began a strategic retreat, pulling back to form concentric rings around the most populous and vital realities. Zero moved to join them, still maintaining shields around several smaller universes. But as he turned, he saw something that froze him in place.

Blueberry had become separated from the main group, surrounded by a swarm of lesser destroyers as he desperately tried to shield a universe that pulsed with countless lives. The young guardian's eye-light was dimming, his strength clearly failing as the attackers pressed in from all sides.

Without conscious thought, Zero changed direction, surging toward his friend. He tore through the battlefield, his very presence distorting space around him as he channeled more of his fundamental power than he had ever dared use before.

INK: Zero, no!

Ink's distant shout barely registered. Time seemed to slow as Zero reached Blueberry's position. The younger guardian looked up in surprise, his single eye-light flickering weakly.

BLB: I told you... I'd teach you about fun. Guess we'll... have to postpone the lesson.

ZER: No postponement necessary.

Zero replied, determination hardening his voice as he extended his power around Blueberry and the threatened universe, creating a barrier unlike any he had formed before - not just a shield, but a pocket of altered reality where the destroyers' power could not penetrate. The effort sent pain lancing through Zero's being, a sensation entirely new and unwelcome. But the barrier held.

ZER: Get to safety.

He instructed Blueberry, who nodded weakly and began guiding the protected universe toward the defensive perimeter. Zero turned to face the swarm, ready to buy time for his friend's escape. But the lesser destroyers were already retreating, parting like a dark sea to make way for something far worse.

The End stood before him, its non-presence a violation of everything Zero understood about existence. It regarded him with what might have been curiosity, if such an entity could experience such a thing.

END: You are... unusual.

The End spoke, its voice like the memory of sound after silence has fallen.

END: A universe that walks. How... wasteful.

Zero straightened, facing the destroyer directly despite Dream's earlier warning.

ZER: I protect what matters.

A sound emerged from The End - not quite laughter, but its horrible approximation.

END: Nothing matters. All existence is temporary. I merely hasten the inevitable.

ZER: You're wrong.

Zero countered, surprising himself with the conviction in his voice. Somewhere along the way, the theoretical understanding of the multiverse's value had transformed into a bone-deep certainty.

ZER: Every moment matters. Every life matters. Every universe, no matter how small or brief, matters.

The End seemed to consider this, its formless shape rippling slightly.

END: Interesting. Your perspective is flawed, but interesting. I have existed since before the concept of beginning, have ended countless realities, have watched infinite cycles of creation and destruction. And still, insignificant beings like you arise, clinging to the illusion of meaning.

Around them, the battle continued to rage, but it seemed distant now, as if Zero and The End existed in a bubble separate from the main conflict. Zero was acutely aware that every moment he kept the destroyer's attention was a moment his friends could use to strengthen their defenses.

ZER: If meaning is an illusion, then why do you destroy? What purpose does ending serve.

END: Purpose?

The End's form contracted slightly.

END: You still don't understand. I am not an entity with goals or desires. I am the end of all things. It is not what I do - it is what I am.

With that declaration, The End attacked. There was no warning, no gathering of power or dramatic gesture. One moment Zero was standing firm; the next he was fighting for his very existence as waves of anti-reality crashed against him. It felt like being unmade, atom by atom, concept by concept. Zero retaliated instinctively, drawing on the fundamental nature of his original universe - the ability to be everything and nothing simultaneously, to exist outside conventional laws of physics. He pushed back against The End's assault, transforming its entropic energy into creative force, turning destruction back on itself.

End of Chapter 1 **"What I Hold Dear"**

[Faced with annihilation.]

(Chapter 2 || Prologue) On The 7th Day.

For a breathless moment, they were locked in stalemate - the entity that embodied an entire universe against the entity that ended them. Through the strain of combat, Zero became aware of movement at the edges of his perception. His friends were rallying, using the distraction he provided to coordinate a counterattack. Ink was orchestrating the effort, his brush moving in complex patterns that seemed to stitch reality itself back together where it had been torn.

Pride surged through Zero - pride in these beings who fought so

tirelessly for existence, pride in being counted among them. And with that pride came renewed determination. He redoubled his efforts, channeling more of his essence into the battle, knowing he was revealing capabilities he had kept hidden even from Ink. The price was steep - each surge of power fragmented some fundamental part of his being, sacrificing components of himself that could never be recovered.

It wasn't enough.

The End seemed to grow stronger as the battle progressed, feeding perhaps on the desperation and fear that permeated the battlefield. Its attacks became more precise, more devastating, targeting the very core of what made Zero himself.

END: Your resistance is admirable.

The End acknowledged during a momentary lull.

END: But ultimately futile. I have ended gods and concepts far greater than you.

Zero was faltering, his newly-formed body cracking in places, leaking the pure essence of his original universe. Through blurring vision, he could see his friends fighting desperately to reach him, Ink in the lead with an expression of horror fixed on his ever-changing face.

With a final, terrible surge of power, The End broke through Zero's defenses. Pain beyond comprehension tore through him as portions of his being simply ceased to exist - not destroyed, but retroactively erased from the multiverse's memory. He fell to his knees in a space that wasn't space, his form flickering between solidity and concept. The End loomed over him, its non-presence expanding to engulf the nearby battlefield.

END: All resistance ends.

It stated without emotion.

END: All existence ends. This is the immutable truth of the multiverse.

Zero looked past the destroyer to where his friends continued to fight, continued to protect, continued to hope despite overwhelming

odds. In that moment, something crystallized within him - an understanding that transcended his previous comprehension of the multiverse.

ZER: No.

He said softly, then with growing strength.

ZER: No!

The End paused, perhaps surprised by the defiance still present in this broken entity. Zero struggled to his feet, his form stabilizing not through recovery but through sheer, unrelenting will.

ZER: You claim to be the strongest force in the multiverse. You're wrong.

END: Explain.

The End demanded, a hint of what might have been uncertainty entering its toneless voice.

ZER: The strongest force isn't destruction.

Zero declared, his gaze sweeping across the friends who had given his existence meaning.

ZER: It's my will to protect what I hold dear.

As he spoke these words, something changed in the fabric of reality around them. It was subtle at first - a strengthening of color, a clarification of boundaries, a solidification of possibility.

ZER: These connections...

Zero continued, his voice gaining strength with each word.

ZER: These bonds between beings, between universes, between concepts - they are stronger than any force of destruction. My friends, the countless lives within each universe, the infinite potential of existence itself - they are what make the multiverse worth fighting for. Worth dying for.

The End seemed to recoil slightly, its formless shape contracting.

END: Sentiment, a temporary chemical reaction in finite beings.

Zero shook his head, a smile forming on his cracked face.

ZER: Not temporary. Not finite. The love I feel for this multiverse, for the friends who taught me what it means to truly exist - it transcends time and space. It is the true immortality.

With those words, Zero reached deep within himself, past the conscious control of his powers, past the disciplined techniques Edge had taught him, into the very essence of what he had once been - a universe unto himself, containing infinite possibility. He grasped that essence with both hands and, in a single transcendent moment, made his choice.

ZER: I am the true strongest!

Zero declared, not with arrogance but with serene certainty.

ZER: Because I am willing to give it everything to protect what I love!

Before anyone could react, before Ink could reach him, before The End could launch another attack, Zero did the impossible - he inverted himself. The being who had once contained an entire universe now turned that containment outward, encompassing The End within the boundless possibility of his original existence.

It was both implosion and explosion, both creation and destruction. Zero's physical form shattered into countless fragments of pure light as his essence expanded to create a perfect prison around The End - a space outside of space, a concept beyond conception, where the destroyer would be contained for as long as Zero's sacrifice endured. In other words, for as long as their is existence, The End will not reach it.

The battlefield fell silent as the combatants on both sides witnessed something beyond comprehension. The lesser destroyers, sensing the fate of their leader, began to retreat, dissolving back into the void between universes. In the sudden stillness, a single fragment of Zero remained - a shard of pure light that hovered in the space where he had stood. It pulsed gently, like a heartbeat growing ever fainter. Ink was the first to reach it, his skeletal hands cupping the fragment with infinite gentleness. Colors ran down his face like tears, dripping onto the light but passing through it without effect.

INK: You fool.

He whispered, his voice breaking.

INK: You beautiful, magnificent fool.

Dream approached slowly, his golden aura dimmed with sorrow.

DRM: Is he...?

INK: Not gone.

Ink replied, his gaze fixed on the pulsing fragment.

INK: Not completely. But he can never be what he was again. He has given too much of himself.

Edge and Blueberry joined them, their usual demeanors subdued by the weight of what they had witnessed. Around them, the multiverse seemed to hold its breath, as if in acknowledgment of the sacrifice that had been made for its continuation.

BLB: What happens now?

Blueberry asked softly, his single eye-light dim with grief. Ink straightened, decision crystallizing in his ever-changing eyes.

INK: Now we take him home.

The journey back to Zero's original universe was made in solemn procession. The guardians traveled not through Ink's usual colorful portals, but through the subtle connections between realities that Zero himself had often used - pathways of concept rather than space, corridors of possibility rather than matter.

They emerged into the vast nothingness that was everything - the singular reality that had been Zero's entire existence before he had stepped into the multiverse. It remained unchanged, a realm of pure concept unmarked by time or development.

Ink stepped forward, the fragment of Zero cradled carefully in his hands. The other guardians formed a semicircle behind him, heads bowed in respect for what was about to transpire.

INK: I always knew you were special.

Ink spoke to the fragment, his voice soft yet carrying in the boundless emptiness.

INK: From the moment I stepped into this universe and found it contained only you. In all my travels across the multiverse, I had never encountered anything like you - a singular consciousness that embodied an entire reality.

He knelt, gently placing the fragment on the non-surface of Zero's original domain. The light pulsed once, brighter than before, as if in recognition.

INK: A soul as beautiful as yours...

Ink continued, patterns of bittersweet colors swirling across his face.

INK: Couldn't simply cease to be. That's not how the multiverse works. Energy transforms; it doesn't end.

As if in response to his words, the fragment began to dissolve, not into nothingness but into everything - spreading outward in waves of potential, seeding the empty universe with the essence of what Zero had been and what he had become. The guardians watched in silent wonder as the first stirrings of differentiation appeared in the formerly uniform reality. Where there had been only concept, now emerged the faintest suggestion of matter. Where there had been only sameness, now bloomed the first tentative expressions of variety.

DRM: He's becoming something new.

Dream whispered, his golden eyes wide with awe.

DRM: Not just returning to what he was.

Ink nodded, a smile breaking through his grief.

INK: He's becoming everything he protected. Everything he loved.

Before their eyes, Zero's sacrifice transformed the empty universe. It would take eons by any conventional measure of time, but the seeds of infinite complexity had been planted. This reality, once containing only a single consciousness, would eventually teem with countless forms of existence - each one carrying some infinitesimal fragment of the being who had given himself to save the multiverse.

INK: I knew.

Ink said softly, colors of joy and sorrow mingling on his features as he watched the birth of potential all around them.

INK: That a soul as beautiful as Zero's could birth such art.

The guardians remained until the transformation was well underway, bearing witness to the final gift of their friend. Then, one by one, they departed - back to their duties, back to the infinite realities that continued to exist because of Zero's sacrifice.

Ink was the last to leave. He stood at the threshold between Zero's transforming universe and the wider multiverse, his brush held loosely at his side.

INK: Goodbye, my friend.

He said, his voice barely above a whisper.

INK: Or perhaps not goodbye at all. Perhaps just... until we meet again, in forms neither of us can yet imagine.

With a little fluid motion of his brush, Ink sealed the passage, ensuring that this nascent universe would be allowed to develop undisturbed. Then he turned and walked away, back to his role as guardian of the multiverse, carrying within him the memory of the one who had been nameless, then Zero, and finally - through his ultimate sacrifice - everything.

Behind him, in a universe once defined by singularity, the infinite possibility of life began to unfold.

END OF CHAPTER 2 **"On The 7th Day."**

[The 1 that became many.]

(Chapter 3 || Volume 1) Wandering Spirit.

I drift through endless space, watching time flow like sand. I've seen countless stars born and die as the universe grows ever larger. What began after Fathers, Zeros great sacrifice has become galaxies full of life, each carrying a tiny piece of the being who

saved everything.

I move between stars like a thought without a home. I'm not solid, but not completely see-through either, something in between. I don't remember where I came from, only that I've always been watching, always been apart from everything else. Always alone.

They call me Blook. I don't recall who gave me that name or when I started wearing this fedora hat that sits tilted on my ghostly head. My hat stays put even though the rest of me seems to fade in and out depending on who's looking and how the light hits me.

I travel through space with nowhere to be and all of time to get there. I've seen worlds begin and end, watched life grow from nothing and return to dust. I'm always watching, never joining in - truly a ghost.

"Another galaxy," I whisper as I float into a spiral of stars that somehow feels both new and familiar. My voice sounds hollow, like wind blowing through old ruins. *"More lives that will never know I'm here."*

Loneliness follows me everywhere, more real than I am. Long ago, I tried to talk to the living beings I found. It always ended badly - with fear, confusion, or worst of all, with blank stares from those who couldn't see me at all. I gave up and accepted my role as the watcher, the audience to a play where no one knows I'm in the theater.

But something keeps me going, stops me from fading away like everything else does eventually. Some purpose buried deep inside that I can't explain. So I keep moving, carried by space winds and my own curiosity.

"I am the witness," I sometimes tell the emptiness between stars. *"I am the memory. I am the ghost who watches."*

Space never answers back.
I stopped expecting it to long ago.

In what living beings would later call year 3X - a name that makes me smile because it tries to measure endless time - I find myself near a small blue-green planet circling an ordinary yellow sun.

"Earth," I say, feeling the word as I get closer to this world buzzing

with life. Something about this planet pulls at me, touches some forgotten memory. It calls to me unlike any place before.

I sink through the sky, my ghostly form passing easily through the layers of air that would burn up solid things. Below me spreads the planet - vast waters, lands shaped by time, swirling weather patterns. And everywhere, life - growing and thriving in every corner of this world.

What amazes me most as I float lower isn't the land itself, but the harmony between two different kinds of thinking beings living here. Humans, with their soft bodies and strong wills, have built homes that work with the land - clusters of stone temples and wooden houses arranged to match the flow of natural energy. Though simple, their buildings show deep wisdom, with stone towers that track stars and open spaces where they share stories.

Living alongside humans are beings of a completely different kind - monsters of every shape and form. Some look like animals that can think like people, others like living elements with minds and personalities. Fire creatures work huge forges inside mountains; giant snake-like beings with jewel-like scales guard rivers; walking skeletons with glowing eyes keep libraries carved into cliffs.

"Amazing," I murmur as I watch humans and monsters trading goods and ideas with equal excitement in a busy marketplace. "Two completely different kinds of beings sharing one world without fighting."

In one village built near a spring, a human child plays beautiful music on a flute while a monster made of flickering flame dances perfectly in time, creating light patterns that tell stories on stone walls. Nearby, a water monster helps human farmers water their fields, the monster's body becoming the very channels that feed the crops.

These people haven't built a world of machines and technology. Instead, they've grown in spirit and magic. Humans, with their knack for change and adaptation, have created rich systems of leadership and art. Monsters, naturally connected to magic and each with unique skills, have deep knowledge of how the world truly works. Together, they've made a society that values both thinking and feeling, strength and kindness.

"They've done what so many worlds never manage," I say to myself

as I glide unseen through a temple where humans and monsters sit quietly together before a carved altar showing the soul. *"Balance."*

As I always do, I watch without stepping in. I see seasonal celebrations where humans and monsters honor the turning of great cosmic wheels. I observe elders teaching children, tribes forming and changing, and individual lives playing out their small dramas against bigger events. I pass through rooms where both human and monster midwives welcome babies with ancient songs, and through sacred groves where they bury their dead with equal respect no matter what kind of being they were.

For the first time in my endless life, I don't want to leave. This world, with its simple wisdom and harmony between different beings, has become something dangerous to me - something like home.

"Maybe," I tell the setting sun after seven hundred days on Earth, *"I could stay a bit longer. Just to see what becomes of them."*

Years pass. I remain, my fedora-topped form moving between continents and cultures, soaking in the endless variety this dual civilization offers. Most can't see me - I'm as invisible to them as stars slowly moving or continents gradually shifting. But sometimes, a human child with special awareness will look right at me with wide, wondering eyes, or a monster naturally tuned to spirit energy will follow my movements with curious acceptance.

These brief connections keep me going through the loneliness that never truly leaves me.

Stories begin to spread about me in some places - whispered tales of the ghost with the fedora who appears during important moments. Some elders call me a messenger from the stars, others a guardian of balance, others just a curious watcher of key events. Monster scholars include me in their books of spirits, noting how I don't follow the usual rules for ghostly beings. I find these stories amusing, if not quite right. I'm no messenger or protector - just a witness to the endless, fascinating show of life.

Or so I believe, until darkness comes to Earth.

It starts subtly - light growing thin in certain sacred places, shadows staying too long after sunset. Soon it becomes something you can see: a mist creeping along the ground like searching fingers,

swallowing light instead of reflecting it. Humans notice it first in their dreams, sharing nightmares of emptiness and being cut off from others. Monsters sense it through their natural connection to the magic flowing through the world - a flow now carrying notes of discord and decay.

I, with my broader view than any Earth dweller, recognize it for what it is: a basic disturbance in reality itself. This is no natural event, but a corruption - a hungry force feeding on the very essence of life.

"Despair made real," I murmur as I watch the mist surround a small village, leaving both humans and monsters empty-eyed in its wake. "It finds the dark places in the heart and makes them grow until nothing else remains."

For the first time since arriving on Earth, I feel something beyond curiosity or distant caring. I feel worried - deeply worried about the fate of this world and its people. These beings, with their brief, bright lives and remarkable harmony, have become more than just subjects of my watching. They've become something I can't bear to lose.

But what can a ghost do against a force that eats away at the living from within?

End of Chapter 3 **"Wandering Spirit"**

[Through the eyes of a phantom.]

(Chapter 4 || Volume 1) Will of The Weak.

What I hadn't seen anywhere else in the cosmos, I learned about here on Earth - a force that surpasses even my own strength. The drive to survive.

I floated behind a wooden cart as people ran right through me, fleeing from that terrible being. I felt so powerless. How ironic - a being like me, doing nothing to help what I care about. I grabbed my fedora and held it tight against my chest, something wet covering my face even though I have no real tears.

Despair was gripping even my ghostly soul.

But then I saw them - a human and a monster not running from the darkness, but facing it head-on. I didn't understand.

GBR: I've gotten so rusty after all this time.

The human said, stretching his arms.

LCF: Same here, Gabby.

GBR: Thought I told you to stop calling me that.

LCF: You did.

GBR: And?

LCF: I'll stop when you don't call me Lucy.

GBR: Fair enough.

The two stretched and patted each other on the back before gripping their weapons tight. The human, wearing white cloth made from clean leather, ran his gentle fingers along the edge of his blade - a thin sword called a rapier. His entire presence gave off a calming sense of peace, as if everything would be okay.

The monster wore black torn clothes and spun two axes around his hands. He was the complete opposite - where the human brought calm, this one radiated chaos and wild energy.

I heard someone yelling to others while running away, shouting the names of the two brave fighters in front of me.

BLK: Gabriel and Lucifer.

I whispered to myself.

BLK: What perfect names.

I watched as the two moved forward, and the darkness seemed to respond to them. The mist began to stop spreading and gathered toward them instead, taking the shape of a human-like creature. It dropped down toward the pair, spreading its arms with a wide, terrible grin.

VTH: And what do we have here?

The dark being asked, its voice like grinding stone.

Gabriel and Lucifer shared a knowing look before turning to face their enemy.

LCF: Who the hell are you?

VTH: Your worst nightmare, Vazroth.

GBR: Too long.

Gabriel said calmly.

GBR: Is it okay if I call you Vazzy?

Lucifer tried to hold back his laughter.

VTH: Call me whatever you want.

Vazroth snarled.

VTH: Because soon enough, THERE'LL BE NOTHING LEFT OF THIS WORLD!

A crushing wave of dark energy washed over Gabriel and Lucifer.
They gripped their weapons tighter but didn't back down.

The fight began without warning. Vazroth lunged forward with inhuman speed, his fists crackling with dark energy. Gabriel barely dodged to the side as a punch meant for his head whistled past his ear. The force of the missed blow created a crater in the ground behind him.

Lucifer spun his axes and charged from the left, but Vazroth caught one axe handle in his bare hand, the metal groaning under his grip. Dark orbs began forming around his free hand - spheres of pure darkness that pulsed with destructive power.

GBR: Duck!

Both warriors dropped low as Vazroth hurled the orbs over their heads. The spheres exploded against the buildings behind them, leaving gaping holes in solid stone walls. The air filled with dust and the smell of burned rock.

Gabriel rolled forward and thrust his rapier toward Vazroth's chest, but the dark being twisted away and backhanded him across the jaw. Gabriel flew several feet before hitting the ground hard.

LCF: Gabriel!

Lucifer roared, his flames burning brighter with anger. Vazroth

laughed as more dark orbs formed around him, at least a dozen this time.

VTH: Is this really the best this pathetic world can offer?

But Gabriel was already back on his feet, wiping blood from his mouth.

GBR: Lucy, remember the old times?

LCF: How could I forget?

Lucifer grinned, his skeletal face somehow managing to look excited. They moved like they'd fought together for years. Gabriel darted left while Lucifer went right, forcing Vazroth to split his attention. The dark being hurled orbs at both of them, but they weaved between the explosions with practiced ease.

Gabriel's rapier flashed in precise strikes, keeping Vazroth's hands busy blocking while Lucifer's axes came from unexpected angles. For a moment, it seemed like they had the upper hand. Then Vazroth caught Gabriel's blade in his palm and squeezed. The metal shrieked and began to crack.

VTH: Impressive, but not enough.

Dark energy erupted from his body in all directions. Gabriel and Lucifer were thrown backward, their weapons scattered. As they struggled to stand, Vazroth began gathering the largest orb yet - this one the size of a cart wheel, swirling with enough darkness to level the entire settlement.

I watched in horror, my ghostly form trembling. These two brave souls were about to die protecting everyone else, and I could do nothing but witness their destruction. The orb grew larger, and Vazroth's grin grew wider.

VTH: Time to end this charade.

He declared, raising the massive sphere above his head. Gabriel and Lucifer looked at each other one last time, bloodied but unbroken. Even facing certain death, they stood together, ready to make their final stand. I clutched my fedora tighter. There had to be something - anything - I could do.

The massive orb pulsed with dark energy above Vazroth's head,

each heartbeat of the swirling sphere sending cracks through the earth. Trees bent away from its gravity. Buildings groaned. The air itself felt like it would shatter.

Gabriel and Lucifer stood their ground, but it was clear - they wouldn't survive this. And yet... neither moved.

GBR: Lucy...

LCF: Yeah?

GBR: You ever think we were meant for more than this?

LCF: **grin** Always.

Then it happened. A soundless ripple spread from their bodies. Not an explosion, not magic, not even light - something deeper. Something real. Their souls, bared to the universe. A sudden silence fell. Vazroth paused, the orb above him trembling slightly.

From Gabriel's body, a soft golden glow began to radiate, wrapping around him like threads of sunlight woven by divinity itself. His wounds vanished, his rapier reformed - not as steel, but as pure divine energy, elegant and unbreakable.

Lucifer arched his back as flames of blue-white fire erupted around him, his bones cracking and reshaping. His axes shattered and reformed into blazing sickles, forged from the chaotic heart of the cosmos. His eyes glowed with an untamed light.

VTH: What is this...?!

LCF: We remembered who we are.

GBR: And we remember why we fight.

The two stepped forward as one, and the pressure that once came from Vazroth now bent around them. The mist recoiled. The shadows whispered in fear. Vazroth hurled the orb. But it never touched them.

Gabriel raised a hand, and the orb stopped midair - suspended like a child's toy. Lucifer pointed a single clawed finger.

LCF: Boom.

The orb shattered into a million fragments of light.

VTH: No... NO! You shouldn't be able to—

GBR: We shouldn't be mortals either.

LCF: And guess what? We're not anymore.

The two surged forward, every strike now divine. Gabriel's movements were pure precision, like the will of fate itself. Lucifer's were untamed fury, the embodiment of primal creation and destruction. The battlefield sang with light and fire as Vazroth struggled to keep up, his once indomitable power now wavering. But they weren't trying to destroy him. They were holding him back - buying time.

That's when I realized...
This wasn't just their fight.
It was ours.

I floated there, stunned, heart hammering in a chest I didn't have. These two had become something more. Beyond fear. Beyond pain. Beyond death.

BLK: They're not just warriors anymore...

I whispered to the empty air.

BLK: They're gods.

But even gods couldn't stop the darkness alone. I could feel it - a balance. A deadlock. They were equal now. Gabriel and Lucifer, forged from soul and flame, and Vazroth, the embodiment of endless void.

I felt something stir inside me. Not a memory. Not a power. A choice. Something ancient turned its gaze to me. The universe itself paused, listening.

BLK: I don't want to watch anymore. I don't want to be a ghost... a shadow... a memory.

I dropped to my knees, gripping my fedora.

BLK: I offer myself. My eternity. My everything. Let me stand with them.

Silence. Then - A voice. It wasn't words. It was existence answering back. Do you accept what this means?

BLK: I do.

Light. Pain. Purpose.

My form began to solidify. Not flesh. Not spirit. Something new. My fedora glowed with markings older than time, and my eyes - eyes I hadn't had in centuries - burned with judgment.

I rose from the dust as my clothes reshaped into a long coat of spectral threads, stitched with truth and memory. In my right hand, a gavel formed - made not of wood, but of cosmic finality. And in my left, a scale that shifted and trembled, balancing mercy and wrath. The battle paused. All three turned to look at me.

GBR: The ghost from the legend..?

LCF: No... not anymore.

I stepped forward, voice ringing across the ruined battlefield.

BLK: This fight ends now. You've had your say.

The mist parted. The earth stilled.
Now it's time for mine.

End of Chapter 4 **"Will of The Weak"**

[Ascension.]

(Chapter 5 || Volume 1) Two Centuries Later.

Two hundred years had passed since the end of the world. Not its destruction - its transformation. Where fire once scorched the skies and darkness threatened to swallow all, now there were farms, libraries, and quiet breakfasts. And me? I was no one special. Not anymore. The year is 24X.

The morning crept in slow, like a story forgetting how it began. Light filtered through the trees in strands of gold, catching in the mist that danced between crooked rooftops. Wind chimes made of bones and feathers clinked softly as I stepped onto the porch of my little mossy cottage, tea in hand, robe dragging along the wooden floor.

Kids darted past, all squeals and wild energy, their horns and tails barely staying in line.

KID #1: Hi Mr. Blook!

KID #2: We found a book on forbidden shadow-baking!

BLK: **sipping tea** Put it back. The last one summoned a demon soufflé.

Laughter. Running feet. Peace.

The kind of peace that seeps into your bones until you forget you were ever part of something bigger. Something terrible. Something divine. The village was part of the monstertribe, tucked between whispering cliffs and glowing marshes. I liked it here. I kept records, ran story nights, and maintained the Hall of Forgotten Names. No one asked too many questions. And I never offered answers. Still... today felt off. Like the world was holding a secret just behind its smile.

I pushed it aside. Helped a ghostgirl find her birthday. Taught a cyclops how to juggle with one eye closed. Fixed a sentient scroll who kept trying to bite people.

Normal stuff.

The sun dipped. The sky turned deep violet, and the wind took on that hush it gets right before a storm or a miracle. I finished shelving a book older than the moon and headed home, my limbs humming with the soft ache of age - or memory. I slid under my quilt.

BLK: Just one night. One good sleep.

My eyes closed. And then... they opened. But not in my bed. The world was gone. I was lying on golden flowers, soft as whispers, each petal humming faint notes of a song I'd never heard but somehow knew. The field stretched across a floating island high above the clouds, and the sky was not blue but alive - ribbons of starlight danced overhead, forming symbols that flickered between languages lost and unborn. The air smelled like memory and lightning. I sat up slowly, my robe shifting into a tunic of white and silver thread. Before me stood two figures. One was wrapped in a radiant calm, light pulsing gently from his every motion. His eyes, golden and kind, held the weight of endless tomorrows. The other burned with wild grace, cloaked in living flame that laughed and snarled in the same breath. His smile was sharp, his aura louder than thunder.

GBR: You're awake.

LCF: Took you long enough.

BLK: **groggy** Did I die?

LCF: **grinning** Not yet.

GBR: But you are... between.

I blinked slowly. Around us, the clouds shifted to form visions - battles, births, entire cities blooming in seconds, before vanishing like dreams.

BLK: Right, it's been so long since I've seen you guys.

I stood now, feeling lighter. Realer. The field hummed louder as I moved.

BLK: But why now?

LCF: Because we have a request.

GBR: After we defeated Vazroth, we didn't kill him. We bound him.

LCF: Stripped of power, trapped in the only prison strong enough...

GBR: The one you once wielded.

LCF: A narrator.

BLK: You forced him to tell stories?

GBR: Eternal. Endless. A punishment fitting of his hunger for control.

LCF: Now he's a voice. Just a voice destined to one day narrate a story he chooses.

They looked at each other for a moment - divinity wrapped in old friendship.

GBR: We rose. Guardians of Earth. But we can't act directly anymore.

LCF: Too much light, too much fire - we'd shatter the balance.

GBR: So we need hands. Eyes. Hearts.

LCF: Fourteen of them.

GBR: Seven for me.

LCF: Seven for me.

GBR: Disciples. Not just warriors - people who embody what we can no longer touch.

They stepped forward, the field responding to their presence. Flowers turned toward them. The sky dimmed in reverence.

LCF: And we want you to find them.

I stared at them. Then slowly sat back down in the flowers.

BLK: You dragged me into the sky... through time and memory... again... for a fetch quest?

LCF: A sacred mission.

BLK: A divine errand.

GBR: A second chance to shape the future.

I sighed.

BLK: Fine, I'll do it, but no need to make it sound so important.

The wind picked up, a soft laugh hidden in its current.

BLK: But next time? Let me sleep first.

I leaned back, letting the flowers cradle me.

End of Chapter 5 **"Two Centuries Later"**

[A favor for the roaming ghost.]

(Chapter 6 || Volume 1) Virtues & Sins.

The bell above the schoolhouse rang for the last time that morning.

Inside, the students sat in a quiet circle, staring at the old ghost with the fedora and the long coat stitched with stars. His voice was gentle, but each word landed like stone on still water.

BLK: I'm leaving.

A single page fluttered from his desk - his letter of resignation, signed with a spectral thumbprint and sealed with ancient wax. The headmistress had read it twice. Three times, actually. Then cried into a pot of ink. Blook adjusted his hat, the gavel on his belt knocking softly against the desk as he moved.

BLK: I've got one last job to do. And it's gonna take me a while.

His students asked, "*How long?*"

BLK: Mm...

He paused, looking out the tall window where the clouds drifted lazy and slow over the hills.

BLK: A millennium. Give or take.

The class didn't know whether to cheer or cry. So they did both. He packed lightly. A journal that could never be filled. A cloak that whispered the names of the stars. A teacup that refilled itself when he was most in need. And of course... the fedora.

The village gathered to see him off. Little monsters waved hand-painted signs. Old friends offered apples, scrolls, and very confused hugs. He left at dusk. No fanfare. Just the crunch of leaves and the sound of his boots on dirt as he vanished into the woods. The world had changed in 200 years, but not enough. New cities had grown. Old legends had faded. Peace had made people forget what it cost. But the universe remembered. And so did he.

I walked for days. Over rivers that ran backwards. Through forests that whispered secrets in forgotten tongues. Across fields where time moved sideways. Every step led me further from who I had been, and closer to the stories that waited. Because this isn't just a tale about gods. Or monsters. Or even me. This is about fourteen souls. Some were born under dying stars. Some rose from ruin. Some laughed in the face of death - and others made deals with it. They do not yet know they've been chosen. They do not yet understand the shape of their fate. But they will.

BLK: Gabriel. Lucifer. You better know what you're doing.

The wind didn't answer. But it pushed me forward. And so I walk. A witness once more. To record. To remember. To guide. And when the time is right, to pass judgment - not as an enemy. Not as a savior. But as the one who knows how the story began.

*I will tell you the stories of fourteen individuals,
each touched by the divine.
Each given a duty that does not end in death.
Each walking paths no map has ever dared to chart.*

These fourteen souls will have their stories written and told, not in their name, but in the names of the seven **Heavenly Virtues** and the seven **Deadly Sins**.

End of Chapter 6
"Virtues & Sins"

[This'll be a long journey, Blooky.]

(Chapter 7 || Volume 1) Thread-Weaver.

Two years since I'd left my teaching post. Two years of walking roads that bent like question marks and crossing rivers that flowed uphill when they felt like it. The world had grown stranger in my absence, or maybe I'd just forgotten how to see it through classroom windows.

I found her in the valley where the River Kyth carved lazy S-curves through hills that rolled like green blankets. Serene Waters, they called it. Population: *whoever bothered to count last Tuesday.*

The rumors had reached me three towns back.

"There's a girl there who delivers babies."

An old merchant had said, polishing a brass compass that pointed to tomorrow instead of north.

"Never lost one. Not mother, not child."

Some say she can see their whole lives laid out like tarot cards."

But it was what he didn't say that made me pack my journal and start walking. The way his voice got quiet. The way he looked at his hands like they held secrets.

BLK: Hmm.

I found her cottage at the valley's heart. Stone walls. Herb garden that glowed just a little too green. Wind chimes that sang songs I'd heard in dreams I couldn't remember having. Through the window, I watched her work.

Aquila.

Twenty-something. Auburn hair braided back like rope. Hands that moved like they were conducting an orchestra only she could hear. But her eyes... her eyes were deep as wells and twice as knowing.

She knelt beside a birthing bed where a human woman pushed and breathed and cursed creatively in three languages. The husband - bark skin, amber eyes, gentle as morning rain - held her hand like it was made of spun glass.

AQL: Almost there, Marina. I can see the little one's head.

But I could see what the others couldn't. The baby's soul was

heavy. Heavier than a newborn should carry. Weighted down with sorrows that hadn't happened yet, tragedies that would crush it before it learned to crawl. Aquila's hands began to glow. Silver light. Soft as starshine.

She didn't just deliver the baby. She *balanced* it.

I watched threads of fate flow through her fingers like silk made of moonbeams. She was weaving destinies, taking weight from where there was too much, giving it to where there was too little.

Somewhere else in the valley, another child was being born - a baby whose soul was light as air, destined for a life of meaningless ease. Aquila connected them. Drew sorrow from one, gave purpose to the other. The heavy child would still face challenges, but not more than it could bear. The light child would still know joy, but would earn it. The baby cried.

Healthy. Strong. Balanced.

MAR: She's perfect.

AQL: She is.

But I heard the exhaustion in Aquila's voice. Every balance cost her something. She was burning her own candle to light others. For seven days, I watched her tend her invisible flock. She moved through the valley like a shepherd, visiting new mothers, making tiny adjustments to the spiritual equilibrium she maintained. A touch here. A whisper there. Small changes that would ripple outward into lives of appropriate struggle and appropriate reward. It wasn't flashy magic. To everyone else, she was just a skilled midwife with good instincts. But I could see destiny bending around her touch like light through water.

On the seventh day, twins were born to a serpent family. Scales that shifted colors with their moods. One twin destined for greatness but would die young. The other would live long but accomplish nothing. Aquila placed one hand on each baby. The silver light flowed between them like water finding its level. She gave the first twin longer life by taking away some of its destined glory. She granted the second twin moments of true achievement by accepting shorter years. Both would now live full, balanced lives.

When she finished, she swayed on her feet. I watched her press a palm to her forehead, fighting off a headache that came from holding the universe's scales in her bare hands.

BLK: Found you.

Aquila, the Life Weaver - Virtue of Balance.

I whispered it to the wind, which carried my words nowhere and everywhere at once. The chain that keeps the world from flying apart or crushing inward. She held equilibrium in her gentle hands, spending herself so others could be whole. *The fourth soul. Marked. Chosen. Ready.*

BLK: Thirteen more to go.

I adjusted my fedora and turned away from the valley. The road stretched ahead like an unfinished sentence, waiting for me to write the rest of the story. Behind me, wind chimes sang lullabies to newborn dreams. Ahead, the universe held its breath. *One more step toward whatever ending we were all walking toward together.*

End of Chapter 7
"Thread-Weaver"

[Hmm, whose voice did I hear just now?]

(Chapter 8 || Volume 1) Demolitions' Expert.

Seven years on the road. Seven years of following threads that led to dead ends and whispers that turned to smoke. The first had been easy - Balance in her valley, tending her scales with obsessive precision. She'd practically advertised herself with her perfectly maintained garden where every leaf had its place.

One soul found. Thirteen souls left to find. Six virtues, seven sins.

The second trail led me to Ironhold, a city built on the bones of older cities, where smokestacks reached toward heaven like metal prayers and the air tasted of coal and ambition. They called it the City of Progress. I called it loud. But I wasn't here for the city. I was here for the woman who was quietly tearing it apart with her bare hands.

BLK: Sienna Blackwood. The Awakened they whisper about in engineering circles. The one who makes buildings forget how to stand.

I found her name in a work order, but also in the margins of

architectural journals. Theories about "structural decay acceleration" and "inexplicable material fatigue." Scientists trying to explain what happened when she touched things.

They had no idea.

The demolition contracts were just her day job. A way to use her gift legally, professionally. But I'd followed the real trail - the accidents, the mysterious collapses, the way old buildings seemed to give up their ghosts whenever she walked by.

I found her workshop on the city's edge, though "workshop" was generous. It looked more like a museum of endings. Pieces of buildings lined the walls like trophies - fragments of marble that had turned to sand, steel beams twisted into impossible spirals, wooden pillars that had aged decades in minutes.

She stood at a workbench, her hands hovering inches above a small architectural model. Not touching it. Never touching it unless she meant to.

Sienna Blackwood. Late twenties. Dark green hair pulled back in a practical bun. Work clothes that had seen actual work, but also work gloves that never came off. Even here, alone in her sanctuary, she kept her hands covered. But it was her eyes that caught me. Green like bottle glass. Beautiful. And completely empty of everything except hunger.

SNA: **to the model** You're beautiful. Perfect proportions. Elegant lines. Probably took weeks to build.

She flexed her fingers inside the gloves.

SNA: I could unmake you in seconds. Watch your little windows crack like eggshells. Feel your tiny foundation crumble to dust. See how long you'd last if I really tried.

The model sat there, pristine and doomed. She didn't touch it. Not yet. I watched her work for hours. She had other models - dozens of them. All untouched. All perfect. Her private collection of things she could destroy but chose not to. A gallery of restraint.

BLK: The ultimate temptation - A gift that could level cities, and she builds dollhouses just to feel the power of not using it.

The workshop walls were covered with newspaper clippings.
"Master Architect Marcus Blackwood Unveils New Cathedral."
"Blackwood's Bridge Connects Two Kingdoms." *"The Visionary Behind Ironhold's Greatest Monuments."*

And in smaller print: *"Mysterious Structural Failures Plague Old District."* *"Century-Old Library Collapses Without Warning."*
"Engineers Baffled by Accelerated Decay."

Father builds. Daughter unmakes.
[Not with dynamite or wrecking balls, but with something far more intimate.]

BLK: Daddy issues.

That evening, I followed her to the Harmony Theater. The building stood like a monument to better days, its marble facade catching the dying light. Beautiful. Doomed. Sienna approached slowly, reverently. She pulled off one glove, revealing a hand that looked perfectly normal. Pale. Slender. Artist's fingers. A hand that could age stone to dust.

SNA: **to the building** Sixty years of performances. All those voices, all that music, all those dreams echoing in your walls.

She placed her bare palm against the marble entrance. The stone began to weep. Not metaphorically. The marble actually wept - hairline cracks spreading like tears, moisture seeping from fissures that hadn't existed moments before. The building's death was beautiful, almost organic. Like watching a flower wilt in fast-forward.

SNA: Feel that? That's decades of weather in seconds. Centuries of erosion in minutes. I'm not destroying you - I'm just... speeding up the inevitable.

Her voice was soft, intimate. Like a lover whispering secrets. The building shuddered. Not from any external force, but from within. Its own materials betraying it, forgetting their strength, remembering only entropy.

SNA: Dad builds things to last forever. But I know the truth - nothing lasts forever. Nothing should. I just help things remember their mortality.

She moved her hand along the wall, leaving a trail of age in her wake. Paint peeled. Mortar crumbled. Metal oxidized instantly, decades of rust blooming like fast-growing flowers.

BLK: Why?

I whispered it to the wind. Not expecting an answer.

SNA: Because endings are honest.

Wait. She hadn't heard me at all. She was just... talking. To the building. To herself. To the empty air. Seven years of hunting souls had taught me to recognize the signs - the way people talked when they thought no one was listening. When loneliness had become so familiar it felt like conversation. She stepped back, her hand now gloved again. The building stood, but barely. Wounded. Dying slowly from her touch.

SNA: Dad's monuments are lies. Beautiful lies about permanence and legacy and things that matter. But everything ends. Everything falls apart. I'm just... honest about it.

She walked around the building, occasionally reaching out to brush a wall, a pillar, a window frame. Each touch was a small apocalypse. Stone aged to powder. Wood became dust. Glass grew cloudy with the weight of nonexistent years.

SNA: When I was little, I used to touch his models by accident. Watch them crumble in my hands. He thought I was clumsy. Destructive. A disappointment.

Her laugh was bitter as winter.

SNA: Took me years to realize I wasn't destroying anything. I was just... revealing what was always true. That everything he built was already broken. Already falling. I just helped it fall faster.

She placed both hands against the theater's main doors. The wood aged rapidly - paint cracking, surface weathering, until it looked like driftwood that had spent decades in the sun.

SIENNA: People think destruction is violent. Ugly. But look at this - isn't it beautiful? The way time works, the way everything returns to dust? I'm not a demolition expert. I'm a... temporal artist.

The doors opened at her touch, hinges rusting away to nothing. Inside, she moved through the theater like a ghost. Her hands trailed along seats, and they aged gracefully - leather cracking in elegant patterns, fabric fading to beautiful earth tones. The stage floor weathered to a silvery patina. The painted ceiling developed the kind of cracks that looked intentional, artistic.

SNA: Even this is too slow. Too gentle. Do you want to see what I can really do?

She pulled off both gloves. Placed her bare hands against the theater's central pillar. And let go. The pillar didn't just age - it experienced geological time. Stone became sediment became dust became memory. The change rippled outward, through the floor, up the walls, across the ceiling. Not violent collapse, but organic dissolution. Like watching a sand castle meet the tide. The theater died beautifully. Gracefully. Returning to the earth with dignity. When it was over, Sienna stood in a field of dust and memory, her hands uncovered, her face peaceful.

SNA: That's what I really am. Not a destroyer. Not a demolition expert. I'm an ending. A beautiful, necessary ending.

She looked at her bare hands with something like love.

SNA: And endings, when they're done right, are the most honest thing in the world.

She looked around the empty space where the theater had been, still talking to no one. Or maybe to everyone who'd ever listened to her father's speeches about permanence and legacy. The words of someone who'd been having this argument with ghosts for years.

BLK: The Sin of Ruin.

Two souls found. Twelve left to go. But this one... this one was different. Not just human vice made manifest, but something deeper. Power twisted into philosophy. An awakened gift that had become a calling. And loneliness that had become a theology.

She hadn't heard me because she wasn't listening for anyone. In a city of millions, Sienna Blackwood had learned to be alone with her gift, her purpose, and her endless conversations with the dead buildings that understood her better than any living person ever could.

The hunt continues. But now I know what I'm really looking for. Not just the lost souls. But the gods they're becoming in their solitude.

End of Chapter 8 **"Demolitions Expert"**

[My back hurts from all this labor.]

(Chapter 9 || Volume 1) Oathkeeper.

The village of Millhaven had three taverns, two blacksmiths, and one problem that money couldn't solve. Which was why they'd sent for Marlow Thorne. I found him in the smallest tavern, the one that served honest ale to honest people who couldn't afford the fancy establishments closer to the market square. He sat alone at a corner table, nursing a drink that had gone warm hours ago, reading from a leather journal by candlelight.

Marlow Thorne. The Sellsword of Last Resort. The man who took contracts no one else would touch, not because they were too dangerous, but because they were too complicated. Too tangled up in honor and obligation and the messy business of doing what was right instead of what was profitable.

Mid-thirties. Sandy brown hair that needed cutting. Work clothes that had seen actual work. Hands scarred from blade work, but also from writing. Lots of writing. The journal in front of him was filled with neat script, page after page of carefully recorded words.

MRW: **to the journal** Contract fulfilled. Brigands cleared from the north road. Payment received in full. No civilian casualties. Three bandits chose surrender over steel.

He dipped his pen and continued writing, each word precise and deliberate.

MRW: Terms honored on both sides. Contract complete. May it stand as testament.

The way he said it, formal and final, like an oath being sworn. Like the words themselves had weight.

BLK: Testament to what?

But I was getting ahead of myself. First, I needed to understand why Millhaven had called for him. The problem was simple on its surface. Lord Garrett claimed ownership of the village's water mill, said his grandfather had won it in a card game decades ago. The villagers claimed it had been given to their grandfathers as payment for services rendered. Both sides had documents. Both sides had witnesses. Both sides were probably lying. A normal sellsword would pick a side based on who paid better. A normal judge would rule based on the law. But Marlow Thorne wasn't normal, and this wasn't a legal matter. This was about honor.

I watched him work over the next three days. He didn't interview witnesses or examine documents. Instead, he sat in the tavern, listening. Let people talk. Let them tell their stories, their grievances, their justifications. He listened to Lord Garrett's steward explain how the mill rightfully belonged to the estate. He listened to old Henrik describe how his father had built the wheel with his own hands. He listened to everyone. And he wrote it all down. Every word. Every story. Every claim and counterclaim, recorded in that same careful script.

VLG: You going to make your decision soon? We need that mill running before harvest.

MRW: I'm not here to make decisions for you. I'm here to help you make the right one.

VLG: What's that supposed to mean?

MRW: Means this isn't about who owns the mill. It's about who's willing to honor what's been promised.

On the third night, he gathered everyone in the village square. Lord Garrett's steward stood on one side, the villagers on the other. Marlow stood between them, holding his journal.

MRW: I've heard your stories. All of them. And I've found something interesting.

He opened the journal, pages rustling in the evening breeze.

MRW: Lord Garrett's grandfather did win something in that card game. But it wasn't the mill. It was the right to collect taxes from the mill's profits. The mill itself was given to the village as payment for their service in the border wars.

Murmurs from both sides. The steward looked uncomfortable.

MRW: But here's the thing. The village hasn't been paying those taxes. And Lord Garrett hasn't been providing the protection that was part of the original agreement.

He closed the journal, held it against his chest like a shield.

MRW: Both sides have broken faith. Both sides have dishonored the agreement their grandfathers made. So both sides need to make it right.

STW: And how exactly do you propose we do that?

MRW: New contract. Village keeps the mill, but pays the agreed taxes. Lord Garrett provides protection and maintenance for the mill machinery. Both sides honor what was promised, even if they've forgotten it for a generation.

VLG: And if we refuse?

Marlow looked at him steadily. Something flickered in his eyes, just for a moment. Like candlelight reflecting off steel.

MRW: Then you live with the dishonor. But you don't get to pretend it's not dishonor. You don't get to lie to yourselves about what you're choosing.

The silence stretched. I watched faces change as people wrestled with uncomfortable truths. This wasn't about legal rights or property claims. This was about whether they could look themselves in the mirror.

STW: Lord Garrett accepts these terms.

VLG: As do we.

Marlow nodded once, opened his journal to a fresh page, and began to write.

MRW: By my hand and word, let it be recorded. On this day, in the matter of Millhaven Mill, both parties agree to honor the terms set forth...

His pen moved across the page, but something was wrong. The ink wasn't staying black. It was changing, becoming silver, becoming light. The words weren't just being written, they were being carved into reality itself. I blinked, looked again. Normal ink. Normal paper.

But I could swear I'd seen something else for just a moment.

The contract was thorough. Every obligation spelled out, every

responsibility defined, every consequence for breaking faith made clear. When he finished writing, he tore the page from his journal and held it out.

MRW: Both parties sign. Both parties honor. Both parties live with what they've agreed to.

They signed. The steward first, then old Henrik speaking for the village. The moment their names were complete, Marlow folded the contract carefully and tucked it inside his coat.

MRW: Contract witnessed and sealed. May it stand as testament.

There was that phrase again. Like a prayer. Like a ritual. The crowd dispersed, but I lingered, watching Marlow pack his journal away. He moved with the careful precision of someone who'd done this many times before.

BLK: Testament to what?

He looked up, unsurprised to find me there. Like he'd been expecting the question.

MRW: To the fact that people can choose to be honorable. Even when it costs them. Even when no one's watching. Even when they've forgotten how.

He stood, shouldered his pack. Ready to move on to the next village, the next problem, the next chance to help people remember what honor meant.

MRW: You've been watching me work. Following me. You want something.

BLK: Maybe I just wanted to see if the stories were true. About the Sellsword of Last Resort.

MRW: The stories are never true. They're just... close enough.

He started toward the door, then paused.

MRW: But if you're looking for something that is true, try this. Honor isn't about being perfect. It's about keeping your word even when it hurts. Especially when it hurts.

He walked out into the night, leaving me with more questions than answers.

BLK: Marlow, the virtue of honor suits you.

Three souls found. Eleven left to go. But this one felt different. Not broken by power or twisted by solitude. This one had found a way to carry virtue without being crushed by it. To be honor incarnate in a world that had forgotten what honor meant. *The hunt continues. But now I'm wondering if some souls don't need to be saved. Maybe some souls do the saving.*

End of Chapter 9
"Oathkeeper"

[But what is that journal?]

(Chapter 10 || Volume 1) Doctor Of Lies.

Twelve years on the road. Twelve years since I'd walked away from everything I'd known and started hunting souls across a world that couldn't make up its mind about what century it wanted to live in.

In some places, I'd found cities with electric lights and steam-powered carriages, factories that belched smoke into skies crisscrossed with telegraph wires. In others, people still traveled by horse and candlelight, practicing trades that hadn't changed in centuries. The world was a patchwork of progress and tradition, innovation and stagnation, all existing side by side in a way that should have been impossible but somehow worked.

Thornwick was caught between eras. The mining operation brought steam-powered equipment and electric generators, but the company housing still used wood stoves and oil lamps. Miners descended into shafts with modern safety equipment, then came home to wives who drew water from wells and hung laundry on lines. Progress arrived in pieces, dictated by profit margins and practical necessity.

But it was the company clinic that had drawn my attention. A simple wooden building with glass windows that were cleaner than they had any right to be in a mining town. No fancy sign, just a painted board reading "E. Hart, Physician." And a reputation that had spread through the mining camps like wildfire: the doctor who could cure anything, even the black lung.

Dr. Emery Hart. The Healing Hand of Thornwick.

The physician who never lost a miner to the lung rot.

I found him making house calls in the miners' quarters, carrying a leather bag that had seen decades of use. Mid-forties, graying hair, kind eyes behind wire-rimmed spectacles. Gentle hands that moved with practiced confidence. The sort of doctor miners trusted instinctively, whose very presence seemed to ease the ache in their chests.

EMR: **to a middle-aged miner in bed** The cough is much better today, Mr. Brennan. Just a touch of dust irritation, nothing the company safety measures can't handle.

The man smiled weakly, nodding agreement. But I could hear it when he breathed. The rattle deep in his chest. The wet sound of lungs that were slowly turning to stone from years of breathing coal dust.

BRN: Doctor says it's just the dust. Nothing like the lung rot that got my brother.

EMR: Exactly right. The new ventilation systems are working perfectly. A bit of rest, some fresh air on your days off, and you'll be back in the shafts feeling strong as ever.

He wrote something in a small notebook, tore out the page, and handed it to her daughter.

EMR: Have the pharmacist prepare this tonic. Three times daily with meals. She should start feeling even better within the week.

The daughter read the prescription, relief flooding her face. Whatever was written there, it wasn't what I'd expect for someone in Mrs. Brennan's condition.

Outside the house, I followed at a distance as Dr. Hart continued his rounds through the mining camp. A foreman with a suspicious growth on his neck was told it was just a cyst from wearing his safety collar too tight. A young miner with a fever that had lasted weeks was diagnosed with "adjustment sickness" from the new safety protocols. An old timer whose hands shook constantly was assured it was nothing more than the natural effects of working the heavy machinery.

Each diagnosis was delivered with such gentle authority that patients accepted them gratefully. Each prescription was written

with careful attention to handwriting that somehow became easier to read than it should have been. Each assurance was given with the kind of confidence that made doubt seem foolish.

But I'd spent twelve years learning to see past surfaces. The foreman's growth had the irregular edges of something malignant. The young miner's fever had the pattern of an infection that was spreading through his blood. The old timer's tremor had the rhythm of a disease that would steal his mind before it took his life.

Dr. Hart wasn't just giving comfortable lies. He was making them true.

I watched him work for three days. His clinic was everything a mining town needed. Basic equipment, but well-maintained. Clean instruments. Bottles of medicine with labels that seemed to shift slightly when I wasn't looking directly at them.

Miners arrived sick and left feeling well. Not cured, exactly, but better. Genuinely better. Their lung troubles lessened, their aches decreased, their fears about the black death that claimed so many of their kind simply... faded. Whatever was killing them was still there, but it felt less important somehow. Less real.

MIN: Doctor, I was so worried about this cough. Sounded like the lung rot that killed my pa. But you're right, it's just the dust settling different with the new ventilation.

EMR: Of course that's all it is. The company's invested heavily in safety improvements. Your lungs are just adjusting to the cleaner air. Nothing to lose sleep over.

The miner nodded, taking a deep breath that still rattled but somehow sounded less ominous. The black lung was still there, still progressing, but it seemed like just another occupational hazard now. Nothing worth quitting over.

On the third evening, I found Dr. Hart in his office after hours, sitting at his desk with his head in his hands. The gentle confidence was gone, replaced by exhaustion that ran bone-deep.

BLK: Long day?

He looked up, surprised to find me there. Like he hadn't been expecting someone to finally notice what he was really doing.

EMR: Every day is long when you're carrying what I carry.

BLK: Which is?

EMR: The truth. All of it. Every diagnosis I don't make, every prognosis I don't give, every case of lung rot I pretend is just a seasonal cough.

He opened a drawer, pulled out a thick ledger bound in black leather. The pages were filled with writing, but not the neat script I'd seen on his prescriptions. This was urgent, desperate handwriting. The kind that came from trying to record everything before you forgot it.

EMR: Mr. Brennan has black lung. Advanced stage. Maybe six months left, probably less. The growth on the foreman's neck is cancer, spreading to his lymph nodes. Young Tommy's fever is from blood poisoning that's already reached his organs.

Each entry was dated, detailed, clinical. The real diagnoses he couldn't give, the honest prognoses he wouldn't speak aloud.

EMR: I know what's wrong with all of them. I see it clearly. More clearly than any doctor should have to. But if I tell them the truth, what happens then?

BLK: They get a chance to prepare. To say goodbye. To make peace with what's coming.

EMR: They lose hope. They stop fighting. They give up and die faster than they have to. I've seen it happen. Truth can kill just as surely as any disease.

He closed the ledger, locked it away.

EMR: So I give them something better than truth. I give them peace. Comfort. The ability to live their remaining time without terror eating them alive.

BLK: But you still carry the knowledge.

EMR: Someone has to. Someone has to know what's really happening, even if they can't speak it. Someone has to bear witness to the truth, even when the truth is too heavy for the people it belongs to.

He stood, walked to the window overlooking the mining camp. Miners passed by below, heading home from their shifts or toward the company store. Living their lives without the weight of knowing exactly how the coal dust was killing them, day by day, breath by breath.

EMR: You think I'm lying to them. But I'm not. When I tell Mr. Brennan his cough is just dust irritation, it becomes just dust irritation. For him. In his experience. The black lung is still there, still turning his lungs to stone, but it doesn't feel like black lung anymore. It feels like something manageable.

BLK: And when she dies?

EMR: She dies peacefully. Surprised, maybe, but not terrified. Not having spent her last months in agony over something she couldn't change anyway.

He turned back to face me, and I could see the cost of his gift written in the lines around his eyes.

EMR: I'm not denying the truth to make myself feel better. I'm denying it to make their lives bearable. To give them the gift of dying without knowing they're dying until it's too late to suffer from the knowledge.

BLK: But you know. You carry all of it.

EMR: Every terminal diagnosis I've refused to make. Every death sentence I've commuted to comfortable confusion. Every family that will lose someone without warning because I chose kindness over honesty.

He sat back down, suddenly looking older than his years.

EMR: The weight gets heavier every day. But the alternative is watching good people destroy themselves with fear over things they can't control. So I carry it. All of it. And I tell myself it's mercy.

Four souls found. Ten left to go.

BLK: Y'know, *denial is a sin*.

EMR: In that case... Guess I'll be the worst sinner of them all.

This one had found a way to weaponize compassion, to make **denial** into an act of love. And he was drowning in the truth he couldn't share, the honest diagnoses he couldn't give, the real world he had to see clearly so that others could live in beautiful ignorance.

The hunt continues. But I'm starting to understand that some souls aren't lost because they've fallen. Some souls are lost because they've chosen to carry burdens too heavy for any one person to bear. And maybe that's its own kind of courage.

End of Chapter 10
"Doctor Of Lies"

[Pass me that cup of coffee, will you?]

(Chapter 11 || Volume 1) Brushes-Imagination.

Four souls found. Ten left to go.

The road between mining towns stretched like a promise of nowhere, dust and scrub grass extending to horizons that seemed painted on canvas. I'd left Dr. Hart to his comfortable lies and his heavy truths, following rumors of something impossible happening three valleys over.

"A storyteller who makes her stories real,"
the merchant had said, counting coins from his purse with nervous fingers.
"Dangerous thing, that. People start believing in better worlds, they stop accepting the one they've got."

The wagon appeared first as a shimmer in the heat, then as a splash of color against the brown landscape. Too bright, too vivid, like someone had spilled a sunset across the desert. As I got closer, I could see it was painted in swirls of gold and crimson and deep ocean blue, with silver stars that seemed to twinkle even in daylight.

The woman walking beside it matched the wagon's impossible vibrancy. Wild curly hair that caught the light like spun copper, clothes that shifted between green and gold depending on how she moved, eyes that looked at the world like she was seeing it for the first time and finding it lacking.

She was young - mid-twenties - but carried herself with the confidence of someone who'd learned to trust her own vision above all else. When she noticed me watching, she smiled with the particular joy of someone who'd found an audience.

ZPH: A fellow traveler! How wonderful. I was just thinking this road could use more company.

Her voice had the trained projection of a performer, but underneath it was something else. A quality that made her words feel more solid than they should, like she was speaking reality into existence

rather than just describing it.

BLK: You're the storyteller they talk about in the mining camps.

ZPH: I'm a storyteller, certainly. Whether I'm *the* storyteller depends on what stories you've heard.

She gestured to her wagon, and for a moment I could swear I saw movement in the painted stars. Like they were windows into some other sky.

ZPH: I bring tales to life, quite literally. Would you like to see?

Before I could answer, she was already reaching into the wagon, pulling out what looked like a collection of old theater props - a crown that gleamed like it was made of real gold, a cloak that seemed to hold shadows in its folds, a sword that caught light like it was made of crystallized starfire.

ZPH: Every story needs the right tools. But the real magic...

She set the props on the ground and stepped back, her eyes taking on a distant look.

ZPH: The real magic is in the telling.

She began to speak.

ZPH: Once, in a kingdom where the sun never set, there lived a princess who had lost her shadow...

As the words left her lips, the air around us began to change. The harsh desert light softened, becoming the golden perpetual twilight of her imagined kingdom. The scrub grass grew taller, greener, transforming into palace gardens that rustled with a breeze that hadn't existed moments before.

And there, materializing from nothing but voice and will, stood the princess herself.

Not solid, exactly. More like a living illustration, a person-shaped arrangement of light and possibility. But real enough to cast a shadow - or rather, real enough to make the absence of shadow meaningful. The princess moved with her own life, her own desperate grace, searching for something she'd lost.

ZPH: She searched through markets where merchants sold bottled laughter and crystallized tears. She climbed mountains made of forgotten songs and swam through rivers of liquid starlight.

Each detail she spoke became visible around us. The marketplace sprouted from the desert floor, complete with impossible wares and vendors who nodded politely as we passed. The mountains rose like music made stone, their peaks humming with half-remembered melodies.

I walked through it all, stunned by the completeness of the illusion. I could smell the spices in the market, feel the spray from the starlight river, hear the whispered conversations of people who existed only in Zephine's imagination.

ZPH: But everywhere she went, the princess cast no shadow. She was beautiful, beloved, powerful - but incomplete. Something essential had been torn away from her.

The princess's search grew more desperate, her movements sharper. She reached for things that weren't there, called out to companions who couldn't hear her, tried to touch her own reflection in pools that showed everyone's face but hers.

ZPH: Until one day, she realized the truth. Her shadow hadn't been lost—it had been given away. Freely. Willingly. To save someone else from a darkness they couldn't bear alone.

The princess stopped searching. Her expression shifted from desperation to understanding, and then to something that might have been peace.

ZPH: And she understood that some things we lose by choosing to give them away are never truly gone. They live on in the people we've helped, the lives we've touched, the stories we've made possible.

The princess smiled, and for a moment - just a moment - I could swear I saw a shadow beneath her feet. Not her own, but composed of all the shadows of all the people she'd helped. A shadow made of gratitude and remembered kindness. The story ended. The kingdom faded. The desert reasserted itself, hot and brown and mundane. But I could still taste starlight on my tongue.

ZPH: Beautiful, wasn't it? For a moment, we lived in a world where

loss could be transformed into gift. Where sacrifice had meaning beyond the cost.

She gathered her props, but I noticed her hands were shaking slightly. The performance had cost her something.

BLK: How long do they last? The stories?

ZPH: As long as I can hold them in my mind. As long as I believe in them completely. The moment I doubt, the moment I question whether they're real...

She gestured to the empty air where the princess had danced.

ZPH: They return to where all unfinished stories go. Back to the realm of what-if and might-have-been.

BLK: That must be exhausting. Creating entire worlds and knowing they're temporary.

ZPH: Everything is temporary. At least my worlds are beautiful while they last.

She climbed onto her wagon, but didn't immediately urge the horses forward. Instead, she sat there, looking at the horizon with eyes that seemed to see things that weren't there yet.

ZPH: The world is so small, you know. So limited. People accept what they're given, never imagining what could be different. What could be better.

BLK: So you show them.

ZPH: I try to. But they watch my stories like entertainment, not like possibility. They gasp and applaud and call it magic, then go back to their small lives in their small worlds, satisfied with the glimpse of wonder.

For the first time, her voice carried a note of frustration. Of loneliness.

ZPH: Sometimes I think I'm the only one who truly lives in the stories. Everyone else is just... visiting.

She shook her head, forcing brightness back into her expression.

ZPH: But enough of that. Would you like to travel together for a while? I find the road less lonely with company, and I have so many stories left to tell.

I looked at her wagon, at the painted stars that still seemed to twinkle with inner light. At the woman who could create worlds with words but couldn't make them permanent. Who brought joy to others while carrying the weight of infinite possibility alone.

BLK: Your *imagination* truly knows no bounds.

Five souls found. Nine left to go. But this one was different from the others. Not broken by power or crushed by truth or isolated by purpose. This one had found a way to transform loneliness into gift, to make imagination itself a form of service. *And maybe that was its own kind of virtue. The hunt continues. But for now, I had stories to hear.*

End of Chapter 11 **"Brushes-Imagination"**

[Can you tell me one more before I go?]

(Chapter 12 || Volume 1) Sharp-Tongued Viper.

The university's clock tower chimed midnight across the campus, but the lights in Whitmore Hall burned bright as ever. Academia never slept - it just changed shifts from professors to graduate students, from lectures to late-night research sessions, from official hierarchies to the informal power structures that really ran the place.

I'd come here following whispers of a professor who could make anyone believe anything. Who turned skeptics into disciples with a single conversation. Who commanded absolute loyalty from students and colleagues alike without ever raising his voice.

Professor Vincent Ashford. Department of Social Psychology. The man who'd revolutionized the study of influence and persuasion by demonstrating techniques that shouldn't have been possible. His lectures were standing room only. His graduate program had a waiting list three years long. His research grants were approved without question.

The perfect embodiment of Control.

I found him in his office, conducting what appeared to be a routine meeting with a graduate student. But I'd learned to look deeper

than surfaces.

VNT: Your thesis proposal is interesting, Sarah. Very ambitious. Perhaps too ambitious?

He didn't say it critically. Just thoughtfully, like someone genuinely concerned about her success. But Sarah's face crumpled as if he'd called her work garbage.

SRH: You think it's unrealistic?

VNT: I think you're incredibly talented. That's not in question. But I wonder if you're setting yourself up for disappointment by tackling something so... challenging... for your first major independent project.

Each pause was perfectly placed. Each word chosen for maximum psychological impact. Sarah was nodding now, agreeing with an assessment she'd never actually heard him make.

SRH: Maybe I should choose something more manageable?

VNT: What do you think would be best for your career?

The question seemed supportive, but it wasn't really a question. It was a gentle command disguised as academic guidance. Sarah would scale back her ambitions, grateful for his wisdom, never realizing she'd been steered away from research that might have outshone his own. After Sarah left, Vincent made notes in a leather journal. Not academic observations, but careful records of influence applied and received. Like a general tracking troop movements.

But I wasn't alone in watching him work. She sat in the back corner of the departmental library, surrounded by stacks of books that reached almost to her chin. Graduate student, by the look of her - late twenties, dark hair pulled back in a practical ponytail, clothes chosen for functionality rather than fashion. She'd positioned herself where she could see into Vincent's office through the glass partition, and she'd been taking notes of her own. Not academic notes. Observational ones. Tracking his methods, his techniques, his successes.

VLT: *"What do you think would be best for your career?"* - Classic manipulation. Make them think they're choosing while controlling every option.

Her voice carried a bitter familiarity with the technique. That's when

I realized I'd been hunting the wrong person. Vincent Ashford was exactly what he appeared to be - a professor with an uncanny gift for persuasion. Dangerous in his own way, but not one of the fourteen. Just a man who'd found a way to weaponize psychology. But the woman watching him... she was something else entirely. I approached her table quietly, noting the way she immediately closed her notebook and arranged her face into an expression of studious innocence.

BLK: Interesting research?

VLT: Just working on my dissertation. Nothing special.

But her eyes gave her away. They held the particular hunger I'd learned to recognize - the look of someone who wanted something so desperately it had become the center of their existence.

VLT: I'm Velvet Crane. Seventh-year graduate student. Still working on my dissertation because apparently my previous advisor thought my research wasn't "significant enough" to warrant continued support.

Seven years. In a program where most students finished in five. The bitterness in her voice wasn't just about academic setbacks.

BLK: And Professor Ashford?

VLT: Oh, he's brilliant. Everyone says so. Gets tenure-track positions for all his students. Wins teaching awards. Has his research published in top-tier journals.

She gestured toward Vincent's office, where he was now meeting with another student.

VLT: Watch this. See how he leans forward just slightly when James mentions his research idea? That's active listening posture. Makes James feel heard, important. But notice how Vincent's hands are positioned - palms down on the desk. Subtle dominance signal. He's simultaneously being supportive and establishing authority.

Her analysis was clinical, precise. The kind of insight that came from obsessive study.

VLT: Now he'll ask a question that seems encouraging but actually plants doubt. Something like... there it is. "*Have you considered the methodological challenges?*" - Doesn't directly criticize the idea, just makes James second-guess himself.

She was right. I watched James's posture shift, enthusiasm dimming as Vincent's gentle questioning revealed supposed flaws in his thinking.

VLT: Three years I've been studying his techniques. Every conversation, every lecture, every faculty meeting. He never gives orders, never makes demands. Just asks questions and lets people convince themselves to do what he wants.

BLK: Why?

The question seemed to surprise her. Like no one had ever asked her to explain her obsession.

VLT: Because he has what I should have. What I've earned. What I deserve.

The hunger in her eyes sharpened, became something almost predatory.

VLT: My first advisor called my research "pedestrian." Said I lacked the "intellectual spark" for original thinking. But Vincent took my theoretical framework - the one my advisor rejected - and developed it into his award-winning paper on "Subliminal Influence Structures."

She pulled out a folder thick with photocopies and printouts.

VLT: This is my original proposal from five years ago. And this is his published paper. Same core concepts, same theoretical foundation, same experimental design. The only difference is his name is on it.

I scanned the documents. The similarity was unmistakable - not plagiarism exactly, but definitely appropriation of ideas.

VLT: He thanked me in the acknowledgments. One line. "Special thanks to V. Crane for research assistance." My theoretical breakthrough became his research assistance.

BLK: What did you do about it?

VLT: What could I do? He's a tenured professor with connections throughout the field. I'm a seventh-year graduate student with a reputation for being "difficult" because I had the audacity to suggest my ideas were being stolen.

She closed the folder, but kept talking. Like she'd been holding this conversation with herself for years.

VLT: So I studied him. Learned his techniques. Watched how he operated. Because if you can't beat them...

BLK: You become them?

VLT: Better than them.

She gestured toward Vincent's office again, where he was wrapping up his meeting with James.

VLT: He thinks he's the master manipulator. But he's never met anyone who's studied him as intensively as I have. Who understands his methods well enough to turn them against him.

That evening, I watched Velvet put her knowledge to work. She'd positioned herself at the department's weekly graduate student gathering, apparently just another struggling dissertation candidate commiserating with her peers. But her placement was strategic - center of the room, where she could address multiple conversations simultaneously.

ST1: I can't believe Vincent rejected my thesis proposal again. Third revision and he still says it needs work.

VLT: That's frustrating. What specific feedback did he give?

The question seemed sympathetic, but I recognized the technique. Vincent's technique, refined and sharpened.

ST1: He said the methodology was "ambitious but potentially problematic." Whatever that means.

VLT: *thoughtfully* You know, I've noticed Vincent tends to use phrases like that when he's concerned about work that might overshadow his own research. Not saying that's what happened, but...

The seed was planted perfectly. Just enough suggestion to spark doubt without making any direct accusations.

ST2: You think he's threatened by student work?

VLT: Oh, I'm sure that's not conscious. He's probably just being cautious. After all, his reputation depends on maintaining certain standards.

Each word was chosen for maximum effect. She was using Vincent's own methods - gentle insinuation, careful word choice, strategic pauses - but with something he lacked. Genuine grievance. Legitimate anger. The power that came from being right about the

injustice.

By the end of the evening, she'd planted doubts about Vincent in a dozen different minds. Not through direct criticism, but through careful suggestion and strategic sympathy. The students left feeling heard, validated, and subtly turned against their advisor.

VLT: **to herself, watching them leave** Twenty-seven techniques from his playbook. But none of them suspect I'm using his own methods against him.

Six souls found. Eight left to go. Vincent Ashford might be a master of psychological manipulation, but he wasn't one of the fourteen. He was just a man with a gift for influence who'd found a way to profit from it.

But Velvet Crane was something far more dangerous. She was envy made manifest - the desperate hunger for recognition, success, and respect that had been denied to her. She'd studied Vincent's techniques not just to understand them, but to surpass them. To take everything he had and prove she deserved it more - wearing the mask of academic justice. Using legitimate grievance as fuel for cosmic hunger. And unlike Vincent's relatively benign manipulations, her version came from a place of genuine loss and authentic rage. Which made her infinitely more powerful.

BLK: The *sin of envy* that drives evolution.

The hunt continues. But now I know that the most dangerous souls aren't always the obvious ones. Sometimes they're the ones who've been watching from the shadows, learning, waiting, preparing to take what they believe they've always deserved.

End of Chapter 12 **"Sharp-Tongued Viper"**

[You're sort of a creep.]

(Chapter 13 || Volume 1) The Father Of Truth.

The city of Ravenshollow had three newspapers, two radio stations, and one problem that couldn't be buried in back-page retractions or explained away with editorial spin. The truth had come to town, and it was making everyone uncomfortable.

I found the offices of *The Ravenshollow Gazette* in the old quarter, squeezed between a bakery and a pawn shop like an afterthought. The building looked tired, its brick facade weathered by decades of small-town scandals and local gossip. But the printing press inside still ran, and that was what mattered.

The sound drew me first - the rhythmic thump and hiss of machinery that had outlived three generations of newspapermen. Then came the smell of ink and hot metal, sharp and honest in the morning air. Finally, the voice.

RGN: **shouting over the press noise** Where's the copy on the courthouse renovation? And don't tell me it's still being "reviewed" - that's what they said last week when Councilman Morrison didn't want his brother-in-law's inflated construction bids made public.

Rogen Thorne. The man who'd made truth-telling into both art and affliction. Mid-forties, like the character sketches had described. Weather-beaten face, gray threading through disheveled dark hair, eyes that looked like they'd seen too many fires. He stood hunched over the press, ink-stained apron tied around his waist, adjusting the machinery with hands that knew every bolt and bearing. But it was when he looked up that I understood what the rumors had been trying to describe. There was something in his gaze that made you want to confess things you'd never told anyone. Made you want to explain yourself before he even asked a question.

RGN: **to his assistant** That piece on the mayor's "development committee" - did you verify the numbers on the land purchases?

AST: I tried, but the city clerk's office said-

RGN: Said what, exactly? Their exact words.

The assistant shifted uncomfortably. Something about Rogen's tone, the way he focused completely on whoever was speaking, made evasion impossible.

AST: They said the records were being "reorganized" and wouldn't be available until after the election.

RGN: Reorganized. Right. And when did this reorganization begin?

AST: The day after your last article about the suspicious land deals.

RGN: Funny how that works.

He made a note in the margins of the layout sheet, his handwriting as precise as his questions. Every detail recorded, every evasion documented.

I watched him work through the morning. The newspaper was small - only four pages - but every story had been verified, every quote checked, every claim sourced. Rogen moved between the press and his desk like a man conducting an orchestra of facts, each piece of information in its proper place.

RGN: **answering phone** Ravenshollow Gazette. Rogen Thorne speaking.

Even his phone manner was direct. No pleasantries, no small talk. Just the expectation that whoever was calling had something true to tell him.

RGN: Yes, I'm aware of what the police chief said about the missing evidence. The question is: are you aware of where it actually went?

A pause. I could hear the voice on the other end growing more agitated.

RGN: Ma'am, I'm not asking you to speculate. I'm asking what you saw. What you know for certain. If you tell me the truth, I'll print it exactly as it happened. If you tell me a lie...

Another pause. Longer this time.

RGN: That's what I thought. Thank you for calling.

He hung up, made another note. Added it to a growing stack of papers that looked like they could bring down half the city government.

BLK: Busy day?

He looked up from his work, unsurprised to find a stranger in his office. Like he'd been expecting someone to finally come asking the right questions.

RGN: Every day's busy when you're the only one in town willing to call liars liars.

BLK: That what you do?

RGN: That's what I have to do. Can't seem to help myself anymore.

He gestured to a chair across from his desk, but kept working while we talked. Hands always moving, always recording, always documenting the truth that everyone else wanted to forget.

RGN: Started simple enough. Local politics, city contracts, the usual small-town corruption. But then people started talking to me. Really talking. Telling me things they'd never told anyone else.

BLK: And you printed it all?

RGN: Printed what needed printing. But that's the problem - everything needs printing. Every lie leads to another lie. Every cover-up reveals three more cover-ups. You start pulling one thread, and the whole damn tapestry comes apart.

He opened a filing cabinet, pulled out a folder thick with documents. Bank records, correspondence, photographs. The kind of evidence that could destroy reputations and end careers.

RGN: The mayor's been skimming from the municipal water fund for six years. The police chief's been covering up accidents involving his officers. Three members of the city council have been taking bribes from the same developer.

Each revelation delivered in the same flat tone. Like he was reading a grocery list instead of cataloging corruption.

RGN: And that's just what I've verified in the past month. Want to guess what's in the rest of the files?

BLK: Why don't you tell me?

RGN: Because some truths are too big for a four-page newspaper. Because some secrets would tear this city apart if they came out all at once. Because I'm one man with a printing press, and there are limits to how much truth the world can handle.

He locked the filing cabinet, pocketed the key. Like he was protecting the town from itself.

RGN: You know what the worst part is? It's not the lies. Everyone lies. Politicians, police, businessmen - lying is what they do. The worst part is when good people start lying to themselves about what they know.

BLK: Such as?

RGN: Such as the woman who just called. She saw Police Chief Bannerman take an envelope from that developer. Saw it with her own eyes. But she won't go on record because she doesn't want to "cause trouble." Because she'd rather pretend she didn't see what she saw than deal with the consequences of telling the truth.

He pulled out his notebook, flipped through pages of careful handwriting. Every conversation documented, every lead pursued,

every truth tracked to its source.

RGN: I've got seventeen witnesses to various forms of corruption in this city. Know how many are willing to let me use their names? Three. The rest want their truth told, but they don't want to be held responsible for telling it.

BLK: And you?

RGN: I'm responsible for all of it. Every truth I print, every lie I expose, every life I destroy by revealing what people really are. It's all on me.

He walked to the window, looked out at the street where people went about their daily lives, blissfully unaware of how much their local government was stealing from them.

RGN: You want to know what my gift really is? It's not that I can make people tell the truth. It's that I can't stop asking questions until I get it. Can't let sleeping dogs lie. Can't pretend I don't see what's right in front of me.

BLK: Sounds lonely.

RGN: Truth is lonely. Always has been. People don't want to hear it, don't want to face it, don't want to deal with what it means for their comfortable little lives. So they shoot the messenger and go back to pretending everything's fine.

He returned to his desk, began laying out the next day's edition. Each story carefully placed, each headline crafted to draw readers in while delivering maximum impact.

RGN: But someone has to tell it. Someone has to stand up and say 'this is what really happened, this is who really did what, this is what the truth looks like when you strip away all the excuses and justifications.

BLK: Even when it destroys people?

He paused, pen hovering over the layout sheet.

RGN: Especially then. Because people don't get destroyed by the truth. They get destroyed by the lies they tell themselves about the truth. I just... help them stop pretending.

The phone rang again. Rogen answered with the same directness, the same relentless focus on facts over feelings. But I could see the cost in the lines around his eyes, the set of his shoulders. Each truth extracted, each lie exposed, each revelation published - all of

it weighing on him like stones in a sack.

RGN: **hanging up** That was the mayor's office. They want to "clarify" some of the information in tomorrow's story about the water fund.

BLK: Let me guess - they want to explain why the missing money isn't really missing?

RGN: Something like that. But here's the thing about truth - it doesn't need clarification. It just is. Either the money's gone or it isn't. Either the mayor took it or he didn't. Either the people of this town deserve to know what happened to their tax dollars or they don't.

He made another note, added it to the growing stack of documentation. A paper trail of honesty in a world built on convenient lies.

RGN: I used to think truth was about justice. About making things right. But I've learned something over the years: truth isn't about making things right. It's about making things honest. And sometimes honest is more than people can handle.

Seven souls found. Seven left to go. But this one was different from the others. Not broken by power or consumed by loneliness or twisted by obsession. This one had been refined by truth, distilled down to pure essence of what he represented. He'd become truth incarnate, and it was killing him one honest word at a time.

RGN: You planning to stick around for tomorrow's edition?

BLK: Should I?

RGN: Depends on how much truth you can handle. Tomorrow's paper is going to make a lot of people very uncomfortable. And in a town like this, discomfort has a way of finding someone to blame.

He looked at me then, really looked, and I saw recognition in his eyes. Not of who I was, but of what I was, the silent judge of a world drowning in guilt.

RGN: But I suppose you already know that.

The hunt continues. But now I understand what I'm really tracking. Not just souls lost to virtue or vice, but people who've become the things they represent. Who've been refined by their gifts until nothing else remains. *And in Rogen's case, the gift was as much curse as blessing. The truth will set you free. But first, it will destroy*

everything you thought you knew about yourself.

End of Chapter 13
"The Father Of Truth"

[Also your fedora is hideous.]

(Chapter 14 || Volume 1) Dirty Talk Before Action.

The theater district of Meridian never slept. Even at three in the morning, light spilled from private clubs and exclusive salons where the wealthy came to forget their responsibilities. I'd followed whispers of a woman who could make men abandon their wives with a glance, who collected desire like other people collected coins.

The Golden Rose stood apart from the flashier establishments, its burgundy facade understated but unmistakably expensive. No gaudy signs or barkers - just a simple brass nameplate and a doorman who knew exactly who belonged inside.

I watched from across the street as the city's elite came and went. Politicians, merchants, artists. All walking with the particular urgency of men drawn by something they couldn't name. She appeared in the second-floor window like a painting come to life - Calista Voss.

Even from a distance, I understood why grown men bankrupted themselves for her attention. She wasn't conventionally beautiful - she was something more dangerous. Beautiful in a way that seemed crafted specifically for whoever was looking at her. Dark hair that moved like silk in still air, skin that seemed to hold candlelight even in electric illumination. But it was her presence that marked her as Awakened, the way she existed in space like she was the center of gravity itself.

She leaned against the window frame, surveying the street below with the casual ownership of someone who knew every person passing by had noticed her. Her dress was midnight blue silk that suggested rather than revealed, cut to hint at curves while maintaining an air of sophisticated mystery.

A married man walking with his wife stumbled slightly as he glanced up. His wife's hand tightened on his arm, but his gaze

lingered. Calista smiled - not at him specifically, but at the moment itself. At the power of being wanted. I waited until she moved away from the window, then made my way inside.

The Golden Rose was all velvet and shadow, designed to make forbidden things feel elegant. Crystal chandeliers cast warm light over intimate seating areas where conversations were conducted in whispers. The air carried traces of expensive perfume and barely contained tension.

She held court in the central salon, surrounded by admirers who hung on her every word. But it was the man beside her who caught my attention - silver hair, expensive suit, wedding ring that caught the light as he gestured animatedly.

MAN: My wife doesn't understand art the way you do. She sees only the price, never the beauty.

CAL: Beauty requires... appreciation. The kind that comes from really seeing what's in front of you.

Her voice was honey and smoke, carrying an intimacy that made every word feel like a secret shared between lovers. She wasn't touching him, but somehow the space between them felt charged.

CAL: Tell me about the last time you felt truly alive. Not satisfied or content - alive.

The man's breathing changed. His hand moved unconsciously toward her, then stopped as if remembering where he was.

MAN: I... when I was younger, I painted. Before responsibilities, before...

CAL: Before you learned to settle for less than you deserve?

She leaned closer, still not touching, but close enough that he could smell her perfume. His pupils dilated. His wedding ring forgotten.

MAN: I still have the studio. Haven't used it in years, but...

CAL: Show me.

Two words. Spoken with the kind of quiet intensity that made them sound like the most important request in the world. The man's face transformed, years of resignation falling away as something hungry and desperate took its place.

MAN: Now?

CAL: Now. While the feeling is real. While you remember what it means to want something more than security.

He stood without another word, without a glance toward the door where his driver waited, without any thought for the woman at home who'd expect him before dawn. Calista had become his entire universe in the space of a conversation.

She didn't go with him. She never went with them. The wanting was what she fed on, not the fulfillment. As he left, she turned to her remaining admirers with a smile that promised each of them the same intoxicating possibility.

CAL: Gentlemen, I find myself in need of solitude this evening. But tomorrow...

They dispersed reluctantly, each carrying the hope that tomorrow would bring their moment of being chosen. I watched her collect their lingering glances like a miser counting gold.

The salon emptied except for staff clearing glasses and straightening furniture. Calista remained in her chair, but something had changed. The magnetic presence dimmed slightly, revealing exhaustion underneath.

She climbed the stairs to her private rooms, and I followed at a distance. The second floor was her domain - a series of interconnected chambers decorated with gifts from admirers. Paintings, jewelry, flowers in various stages of wilting. Tributes to desire made manifest.

Her sitting room was a shrine to being wanted. Letters covered one wall - love notes, marriage proposals, confessions of obsession. She moved among them like a curator in a museum of her own power.

CAL: **to herself** Three proposals tonight. A divorce promised. Two careers offered to be abandoned. All for a woman they don't actually know.

She pulled pins from her hair, letting it fall in waves around her shoulders. In the mirror, her reflection looked younger, more vulnerable. Like she was remembering who she'd been before the gift consumed her.

CAL: But what else is there? What else am I besides what they want me to be?

The question hung in the air, answered only by silence. I stepped through the shadows of the ceiling, letting gravity reverse as I approached her domain. Sometimes shock was the only way to see past someone's defenses.

BLK: That depends on what you want to be.

She spun, saw me standing inverted on the ceiling like it was the most natural thing in the world, and dropped backward in genuine fear. The magnetic presence vanished entirely, revealing something startlingly human underneath.

CAL: What- how did you-

Then training kicked in. The presence returned, doubled in intensity. She stood slowly, her entire body language shifting into something predatory and inviting simultaneously. Her eyes locked onto mine with the kind of focus that had undone kingdoms.

CAL: Well. This is... unexpected. Most men prefer more conventional entrances.

Her voice dropped to that honey-smoke register, designed to make hearts race and reason flee. She took a step closer, her dress catching the light in ways that drew attention to every curve.

CAL: You have interesting talents. I find myself... curious about what other surprises you might offer.

Another step. Close enough now that her perfume filled the air between us, that the warmth of her skin was almost tangible.

CAL: Tell me, mysterious stranger - what do you desire most? What hunger keeps you awake at night?

The full force of her gift pressed against my mind like warm hands, seeking something to grasp, some buried want to amplify and exploit.

BLK: You're not my type.

The words cut through her power like a blade through silk. She

actually staggered, the rejection so complete and matter-of-fact that her entire reality shifted.

CAL: Not your... that's impossible. I can see what people want. I can make them-

BLK: You can make them want what they already want. But some people are looking for something you can't provide.

I dropped to the floor, gravity obeying normal rules again. Without her gift working on me, she looked smaller somehow. Still beautiful, but human beautiful rather than supernaturally magnetic.

CAL: Everyone wants something. Everyone has hungers.

BLK: True. But not everyone confuses hunger with nourishment.

Eight souls found. Six left to go. But this one... this one had built her entire existence around other people's need for her. Without that reflection, she was lost, uncertain who she was supposed to be.

CAL: Then what do you want from me?

BLK: Maybe the question is what you want for yourself. When you're not busy being what others need you to be.

She stared at me, and for just a moment, I saw past the practiced seduction to something genuine underneath. Something hungry, yes, but starving for a different kind of sustenance entirely.

BLK: However, here's a fitting answer.

CAL: What is it-

BLK: Quite the *lust* you have.

The hunt continues. But I'm starting to understand that some souls aren't lost because they've embraced their sin. Some souls are lost because they've forgotten there was ever anything else to be.

End of Chapter 14 **"Dirty Talk Before Action"**

[I'm surprised you smell so nice.]

(Chapter 15 || Volume 1) Jester Of Elation.

Numbers were slippery things in Brightwater Hollow. Time moved wrong here. The sun hung like a copper coin through honey-thick

air, casting shadows that danced when nothing moved. Colors bled at the edges - red barn doors dripping crimson onto white walls, blue sky pooling in impossible puddles. I'd followed the laughter.

Not ordinary laughter. This made the ground vibrate with bass notes too deep for human ears, made birds forget they should fear hawks, made flowers bloom in impossible shades. Laughter with weight and texture and the metallic taste of electricity before a storm.

The whole town was drunk on it.

CHD: **spinning in circles until she fell down laughing** The ground is singing! Can you hear it?

BCK: **hammering red-hot iron while tears of joy streamed down his soot-stained face** Every strike is perfect! Every piece I've ever made has been leading to this moment!

And at the center of it all...

SMP: **playing a fiddle that couldn't possibly be making those sounds** Come on, you beautiful disasters! The day won't wait for us to finish being amazed by it!

Sampo - The man who'd taught an entire town to forget what sadness meant.

He stood on a platform that might have been the town gazebo or crystallized music. His fiddle bow moved across strings that gleamed like captured starlight, and every note transformed the air around it into visible celebration.

But it was his smile that did it. That impossible, incandescent grin that made everyone remember being five years old on Christmas morning.

SMP: Dance like the world is ending tomorrow and you want to give it something beautiful to remember!

The crowd responded like they'd been waiting their whole lives for permission. Old men cavorted with teenage energy. Mothers spun their children until both generations dissolved into helpless giggles.

I watched from the square's edge, feeling the pull of Sampo's gift like gravity made of pure happiness. It would be so easy to step

forward, to let the elation wash over me. Instead, I looked closer.

WMN: **laughing so hard she could barely breathe** I can't - I can't stop - why can't I stop?

Her laughter had an edge now, desperate, not matching the mirth in her eyes.

MAN: **dancing despite obvious exhaustion** My feet hurt but they won't stop moving. This is wonderful. This is horrible.

And Sampo's eyes were wrong. Empty windows in a house where all the lights had been left on but no one was home. I felt it the moment it began to crack.

A child tripped while spinning, scraped her knee. For just an instant, she stopped laughing. Started to cry. The spell flickered.

CHD: **sniffing** It hurts. Why does it hurt when everything's supposed to be wonderful?

The crack spread like ice breaking. People began to stumble, to feel the weight of their own bodies again. The laughter took on a hysterical edge.

SMP: **playing faster** No no no, we're not done yet! There's so much more joy to discover!

But reality seeped back through the cracks. People remembered their arthritis, their debts, their disappointments. One by one, they drifted away, moving like people walking underwater.

Sampo kept playing, but the music sounded different now. Desperate. Hollow.

SMP: **to the nearly empty square** Come back! I can make it better! I can make you feel alive again!

I stepped out of the shadows.

BLK: That's quite a show.

Sampo's playing faltered. Soon it was just the two of us in the square.

SMP: **defensive** They were miserable before I got here. I gave them something beautiful.

BLK: You gave them a drug.

SMP: I gave them joy! Pure, perfect, uncomplicated joy! Look around you. This is what the world looks like without elation. Gray. Flat. I provide the counterargument.

BLK: And when you leave?

SMP: I... they'll remember. They'll remember what it felt like to be truly happy.

But his voice lacked conviction.

BLK: When did you last feel what you give them?

The question hit like a physical blow. Sampo actually staggered.

SMP: I... that's not... I feel it through them. When they're happy, I'm happy.

BLK: That's not the same thing.

SMP: It has to be! If it's not the same thing, then what am I? What have I been doing all these years?

He raised the fiddle again, beginning music designed specifically for me, calibrated to find whatever buried joy might be hiding in my soul.

I felt the pull. The promise of feeling something other than the weight of my purpose.

BLK: I know what real joy feels like.

The music stopped. Not gradually. Just... stopped.

SMP: **whispered** Then why won't you take it?

BLK: Because real joy doesn't need to be manufactured. It doesn't need to be amplified or sustained. It just is.

Sampo's fiddle fell from nerveless fingers.

SMP: I don't remember what that feels like. I don't remember feeling anything without creating it first, without pouring it into other people and hoping some splashes back.

BLK: What's the smallest happy thing you can remember? Before the gift.

SMP: I was seven. Maybe eight. My grandmother was teaching me

to play fiddle - just an old wooden one. I kept messing up, getting frustrated. But she put her hand over mine and said, "*Music isn't about perfection, Sampo. It's about sharing what's in your heart.*" When I finally played that melody all the way through - badly, off-key - she smiled. And I felt... complete.

BLK: That feeling. That's what real joy looks like.

SMP: But it's so small compared to what I can create now.

BLK: Do they need more? Or have you convinced yourself they do because you needed more?

From one of the nearby houses came quiet weeping. Sampo's grip tightened on his fiddle.

SMP: She's crying. I could fix that-

BLK: Or you could just play. Not to fix her, not to change how she feels. Just to let her know she's not alone.

Slowly, Sampo set the magical instrument aside. From his jacket, he produced another fiddle - older, simpler, made of honest wood.

SMP: My grandmother's fiddle. I've carried it all these years but it seemed so inadequate.

BLK: What if it's exactly enough?

The first note was tentative. Nothing magical - just a wooden instrument played by uncertain hands. But the melody that emerged didn't create emotion. It simply acknowledged it. Sadness and hope woven together.

From the house, the weeping gradually quieted. Not because the sadness had been erased, but because it had been heard.

SMP: She's not happy now. She's still sad, maybe sadder. But she's... okay with being sad. How is that possible?

BLK: Because you didn't try to fix her. You just witnessed her.

Other doors began to open around the square. People stepped out, drawn not by magic but by the simple human need to not be alone with their feelings.

SMP: They're not euphoric, but they're not miserable either. They're just... human.

BLK: Sometimes that's the most magical thing of all.

Sampo picked up his magical fiddle, then held it out to me.

SMP: I don't think I'm strong enough to destroy it myself. But I'm strong enough to let it go.

I took the fiddle, feeling its terrible seductive promise.

BLK: Are you sure?

SMP: Good. That kind of happiness was never mine to create in the first place. I want to learn how to find joy again. Real joy.

With a gesture like prayer, I let the magical fiddle dissolve into motes of light that scattered on the evening breeze.

Over the following days, I watched Sampo rediscover what it meant to share joy instead of manufacturing it. He played outside the baker's shop, not to make him euphoric but to give his labor a soundtrack of companionship. Most importantly, he began to feel again.

SMP: **after a practice session** I feel... not empty anymore. Not full either. Just... enough. Is that what joy is supposed to feel like?

BLK: What do you think?

SMP: I think maybe I've been confusing volume with value. This feels sustainable. Like I could do this for the rest of my life without burning out.

BLK: That sounds like wisdom.

SMP: **grinning** Then I guess I'm finally ready to be the Joy Bringer again. The real kind this time.

BLK: Let that *elation* drive you forward.

Nine souls found. Five left to go. *Sometimes redemption isn't about defeating our darkness. Sometimes it's about remembering the light we had before we convinced ourselves it wasn't bright enough.*

End of Chapter 15 **"Jester of Elation"**

[Have you always been a ghost, or just part-time?]

(Chapter 16 || Volume 1) The Twins.

They found me before I found them. I was following two separate trails that should have led to opposite ends of the continent. One pointed north to the industrial heart of Millbrook, where reports spoke of a mysterious garden that made ambitious men forget their

appointments. The other led south to Goldenheart's merchant district, where the wealthy were said to be dying of starvation at banquets. But both trails converged on a single address: the Meridian Hotel, where the city's elite came to experience what they called "balanced living."

The hotel's lobby was split down the middle by an invisible line. On the left side, everything moved slowly. Guests lounged in deep chairs, checking their pocket watches with the lazy curiosity of people who had all the time in the world. The air itself seemed thick, golden, like honey mixed with sunlight.

On the right side, the pace was frantic. Guests hurried between restaurants, their movements sharp with desperate purpose. Waiters rushed back and forth carrying elaborate dishes, while diners ate with mechanical intensity, as if each bite was the most important thing they'd ever tasted.

And in the center, where the two atmospheres met, stood a reception desk staffed by identical twins: Mirelle and Draken.

MRL: Welcome to the Meridian. Are you here to slow down...

DRK: Or speed up?

They looked like opposite sides of the same coin. Mirelle had the ethereal beauty of someone who'd never hurried, hair like spun gold that moved in slow waves, skin unmarked by stress lines. Her eyes were pale blue winter sky, serene and endless.

Draken was her dark mirror. Black hair, sharp features, eyes like holes in the world that seemed to pull everything toward them. Where she was absence, he was consuming presence.

MRL: Time is such a brutal thing, isn't it? Always rushing, always demanding...

DRK: Always leaving us wanting more. More time, more experiences, more everything.

They spoke in overlapping harmonies, finishing each other's thoughts in ways that seemed choreographed but felt natural.

MRL: I offer rest from the endless chase.

DRK: I offer the chase itself, refined to its purest essence.

BLK: You two are quite the con-artists.

DRK: Such ugly words for such beautiful concepts.

MRL: We prefer to think of ourselves as... complementary therapies.

The hotel's design made more sense now. Two halves of the same philosophy, two approaches to the same fundamental dissatisfaction with ordinary life. Mirelle offered escape from wanting anything at all. Draken offered the perfection of never-ending want.

I followed them through their domains, watching how they worked together despite their opposite approaches. In Mirelle's wing, guests moved through rooms designed for eternal rest. Gardens where flowers bloomed in slow motion, libraries where reading was less important than the feeling of having nowhere else to be, meditation chambers where time itself seemed to pause.

MRL: **to a stressed businessman** When did you last feel truly at peace? Not just tired, but genuinely satisfied with simply existing?

The man's shoulders dropped as he entered her garden. His pocket watch slipped from nerveless fingers, forgotten. The urgency that had driven him here dissolved into warm contentment.

MAN: I... I can't remember. There's always something more to do, somewhere else to be.

MRL: But not here. Here, you can simply be enough.

Meanwhile, in Draken's wing, guests experienced appetite as an art form. Restaurants that served not just food but crystallized desires, bars that offered drinks that tasted like childhood memories and adult ambitions, private dining rooms where the real feast was the hunger itself.

DRK: **to a wealthy merchant** You've spent your life accumulating, but have you ever truly savored the act of wanting something?

The merchant bit into something that looked like ordinary bread but tasted like every satisfaction he'd ever imagined. Immediately, his eyes grew hollow with need.

MCH: More. I need more of this. What is it?

DRK: It's desire, purified. The feeling of being on the verge of having everything you've ever wanted, without the disappointment of actually getting it.

The twins' philosophy became clear as I watched their guests cycle between the two wings. Those who tired of Mirelle's endless peace would drift toward Draken's restaurants, seeking stimulation. Those who burned out on Draken's perpetual hunger would collapse into Mirelle's gardens, desperate for rest. Neither side offered genuine satisfaction. Both were elaborate forms of spiritual anesthesia - And there I stood in the hotel lobby.

MRL: You're not participating in either experience. How... interesting.

DRK: Most people choose a side immediately. The desperate relief of not wanting anything, or the exquisite torture of wanting everything.

BLK: And if I choose neither?

MRL: Then you're missing the point entirely.

DRK: The point being that ordinary life is unbearably inadequate.

They moved in perfect synchronization, one speaking while the other gestured, like dancers who'd rehearsed this performance for decades.

MRL: People come to us broken by the world's demands. Exhausted by constant striving, constant disappointment, constant need to be more than they are.

DRK: So we offer them purified versions of their condition. Perfect rest or perfect hunger. Refined suffering or refined contentment.

MRL: Better to be beautifully empty than miserably full.

DRK: Better to be exquisitely starving than boringly satisfied.

I watched their guests throughout the evening. The businessman from Mirelle's garden eventually wandered to Draken's restaurant, where he ate with the desperate hunger of someone who'd forgotten what appetite felt like. The merchant from Draken's dining room eventually collapsed in Mirelle's meditation chamber, overwhelmed by his own desires. Both would wake up tomorrow needing to return. Neither would be cured of their underlying dissatisfaction. They'd just be addicted to more sophisticated forms of it.

BLK: You're not offering healing. You're offering high-end spiritual drugs.

DRK: Exactly. Because healing implies there was something wrong to begin with.

MRL: We don't see dissatisfaction as a problem to be solved. We see it as a condition to be... elevated.

DRK: The hunger for more is what makes us human. I simply refine it into art.

MRL: The exhaustion from always wanting is what makes us suffer. I simply perfect it into peace.

BLK: And yourselves? Do you experience what you offer?

The question hung in the air like smoke. For the first time, the twins' perfect synchronization faltered.

MRL: I... rest is what I give, not what I feel.

DRK: Hunger is my gift to others. I myself am always... full.

But their eyes told a different story. Mirelle's serenity was a performance covering bone-deep exhaustion. Draken's intensity was a mask for complete spiritual emptiness. They'd become so perfectly their respective sins that they'd lost the ability to experience their opposites.

MRL: I can't remember what it feels like to want anything.

DRK: I can't remember what it feels like to be satisfied.

BLK: So you're trapped in your own gifts.

MRL: We're perfected by them.

DRK: Refined down to pure essence.

MRL: I am the absence of ambition.

DRK: I am the presence of infinite appetite.

MRL: Together, we represent the complete spectrum of human dissatisfaction.

DRK: The twin failures of moderation.

They stood together in the hotel's central lobby, surrounded by guests cycling endlessly between their two offerings. Perfect stillness and perfect consumption, neither leading to actual peace.

MRL: People think we're opposites, but we're not.

DRK: We're complementary aspects of the same truth.

MRL: That ordinary life is insufficient.

DRK: That human appetite is both the source of all suffering and the only thing that makes us divine.

MRL: So we perfect the suffering.

DRK: And perfect the appetite.

MRL: Until there's nothing left but the pure experience of what we represent.

BLK: In that case...

Eleven souls found. Three left to go. But these weren't two souls.

They were one soul split into complementary halves, each carrying the burden of their opposite's absence. Mirelle couldn't want anything because she carried all the world's exhaustion from wanting. Draken couldn't be satisfied because he carried all the world's hunger for more.

BLK: You're worthy of bearing the titles of **Sloth** and **Hunger**.

They'd become theology made flesh. The twin sins not as moral failings, but as spiritual conditions that defined the human experience. And in perfecting their gifts, they'd transcended humanity entirely. *The hunt continues. But I'm learning that some souls aren't lost because they've fallen from grace. Some souls are lost because they've become grace itself, refined and distilled until nothing human remains.*

End of Chapter 16 **"The Twins"**

[Do ghosts even eat anything?]

(Chapter 17 || Volume 1) Perfectly Mediocre.

The Ironwood Dojo sat in the old quarter like a temple to forgotten disciplines. Paper screens filtered afternoon light into golden rectangles on polished wooden floors. The sound of practice - bare feet on boards, controlled breathing, the sharp crack of strikes that never quite connected - echoed through rooms that smelled of sweat and dedication. But it was the sound of forgiveness that drew me deeper into the building.

RMI: **helping his opponent to his feet** Good match, Kellan. Your footwork is improving. Same time tomorrow?

KLN: **spitting blood, face twisted with rage** Don't you dare patronize me! Fight me like you mean it!

RMI: I did fight you. I won. But that doesn't mean you're weak. It just means you're learning.

Remi. Twenty-six years old, average height, unremarkable build. The kind of person you'd overlook in a crowd. Except for his hands - calloused from years of training - and his eyes, which held the particular sadness of someone who'd won too many fights he never wanted to start.

KLN: Learning? I've been coming here for three years! Three years of you holding back, of you pulling your punches, of you treating me like a child!

RMI: I've never held back. I've just never needed to hurt you to win.

The dojo fell silent. Other students stopped their practice to watch the familiar scene play out. Kellan's face cycled through humiliation, rage, and desperate need for validation that would never come.

KLN: Then hurt me! Just once, show me what it feels like to lose to someone who's actually trying!

RMI: No.

Simple as that. No explanation, no philosophy. Just refusal. Kellan stormed out, but he'd be back tomorrow. They always came back. I watched Remi through the afternoon. Match after match, opponent after opponent. Some were beginners seeking to test themselves against the dojo's most skilled student. Others were veterans, bitter from years of defeat, convinced that this time would be different.

MRC: **circling Remi warily** Master Chen says you've never lost a match. Not once in eight years.

RMI: Master Chen exaggerates.

MRC: Do you?

Instead of answering, Remi bowed. The match began. Marcus was good. Probably the best fighter I'd seen in the dojo. Fast, technical, with the kind of precision that came from decades of training. But fighting Remi was like fighting water - every attack flowed around him, every combination met empty air, every moment of aggression turned into an opportunity for a counter that never quite landed with full force.

RMI: **after avoiding a particularly vicious combination** You're angry. Fighting angry makes you predictable.

MRC: **breathing hard** And you're not fighting at all! You're dancing! You're playing games!

But Remi wasn't playing. When Marcus overextended on a hook, Remi was there with a throw that could have broken ribs. Instead, he guided Marcus to the ground gently, maintaining control without causing damage. When Marcus tried to grapple, Remi's joint locks were perfect in their technique and merciful in their application. The match ended with Marcus on his back, Remi's hand pressed lightly

against his throat. A killing position, delivered with the gentleness of a saint.

RMI: **helping Marcus up** You fought well. Your combinations are getting smoother.

MRC: **shaking with frustration** I don't want your pity! I want your respect!

RMI: Respect isn't something you take in a fight. It's something you earn through how you fight.

MRC: Then earn mine! Stop holding back! Stop treating me like I'm made of glass!

RMI: I'm not holding back. I'm just not breaking you.

Marcus left, but like Kellan, like all the others, he'd return. Addicted to the possibility of finally forcing Remi to show them real violence.

To prove their worth by making him lose control. After the dojo emptied, I found Remi alone in the equipment room, carefully cleaning and storing the practice weapons. His movements were methodical, meditative. The kind of ritual that spoke of years of habit.

BLK: Why don't you ever finish them?

He looked up, unsurprised to find a stranger in his sanctuary.

RMI: Finish them how?

BLK: The way they want you to. With force. With the kind of victory that leaves marks.

RMI: Because winning isn't about dominance. It's about... resolution. I resolve the conflict. I don't escalate it.

He hung a practice sword on its designated hook, each movement precise and careful.

RMI: Besides, what would that prove? That I can hurt people who trust me enough to step onto the mat with me? That strength is about making others feel weak?

BLK: It might prove you respect them enough to fight them seriously.

RMI: This is serious. Every match is serious. But serious doesn't mean cruel.

He moved to the window, looking out at the street where several of his defeated opponents were probably nursing their wounded pride in the local tavern.

RMI: You want to know the truth? I could hurt them. Badly. I know exactly where to strike to break bones, tear ligaments, cause real damage. Every martial artist does, if they've trained long enough.

BLK: But you don't.

RMI: Because once you cross that line, you can't uncross it. Once you win through pain instead of skill, you stop being a martial artist. You become just another person who hurts people because you can.

He sat on a meditation cushion, settling into a posture that spoke of countless hours of practice.

RMI: When I was younger, I thought power meant being the strongest person in the room. I trained obsessively, pushed myself beyond reasonable limits, convinced that if I just worked hard enough, I could become... exceptional.

BLK: And?

RMI: And I discovered I was mediocre. Completely, thoroughly average. Good enough to win most fights, not good enough to be great. Not fast enough to be legendary, not strong enough to be famous. Just... competent.

His voice carried the weight of old disappointment, dreams that had died slowly over years of honest self-assessment.

RMI: The other students here, they see my winning record and think I'm hiding some secret technique. Some special gift. But there's no secret. I win because I've accepted what I am. Average skill, applied with infinite care.

BLK: That doesn't explain the mercy.

RMI: Doesn't it? When you know you're not special, when you know you're not blessed with exceptional talent, you learn to value what you do have. Restraint. Precision. The ability to end conflicts without creating new ones.

He closed his eyes, but his posture remained alert.

RMI: I could break Kellan's arm tomorrow. Snap it like a dry branch. And for about ten seconds, he'd respect my power. Then he'd hate me for the rest of his life. His injury would heal, but the humiliation would fester. He'd either quit training or spend years plotting revenge.

BLK: Instead?

RMI: Instead, he keeps coming back. Keeps training. Keeps improving. Never quite good enough to beat me, but always good

enough to surprise himself with how much better he's gotten.

He opened his eyes, looking at his hands.

RMI: They think I'm denying them something by refusing to hurt them. But I'm giving them something more valuable than victory. I'm giving them the chance to keep trying.

BLK: And yourself?

RMI: Myself what?

BLK: What do you get from never allowing yourself to win completely?

The question hung in the air like incense smoke. Remi was quiet for so long I thought he might not answer.

RMI: I get to be useful. Not great, not legendary, not the kind of fighter stories are told about. But useful. A place where people can test themselves safely. A standard they can measure against without being destroyed by the comparison.

BLK: That's not enough.

RMI: It's exactly enough. Because enough is what I am. Average skill, infinite mercy, and the wisdom to know the difference between winning and victory.

He stood, bowed to the empty dojo.

RMI: They'll be back tomorrow. Kellan, Marcus, all of them. Still convinced that if they just push hard enough, I'll finally show them the real fight they're looking for. Still believing that mercy is weakness in disguise.

BLK: Is it?

RMI: No. Mercy is strength in disguise. The hardest thing in the world is having the power to destroy someone and choosing not to. Every day. Every match. Every moment when they're vulnerable and you could end their hope forever.

Twelve souls found. Two left to go. But this one was different from the others. Not broken by power or consumed by obsession or twisted by gift into something inhuman. This one had been refined by mediocrity, distilled down to the pure essence of what mercy meant when it came from choice rather than ability. He'd learned to be enough. And in a world full of people desperate to be more than they were, that was the rarest gift of all.

RMI: Tomorrow they'll come back, and I'll defeat them gently. I'll

show them they're not ready without destroying their hope of ever being ready. I'll win without conquering, and they'll hate me for it.

BLK: And you're at peace with that?

RMI: I'm at peace with being exactly what I am. Nothing more, nothing less. And that's the only victory that matters.

The hunt continues. But now I understand what I'm really tracking. Not just souls lost to virtue or vice, but people who've found ways to transform their limitations into gifts. Who've learned that sometimes the greatest strength is knowing exactly how much power to use. And how much to hold back.

End of Chapter 17 **"Perfectly Mediocre"**

[Mind showing me some moves?]

(Chapter 18 || Volume 1) He Who Has No Equal.

Ashwick's Upper District had been built by old money, but it was being reshaped by new excellence. The mansions that had once belonged to generations of inherited wealth now housed a different kind of aristocracy - those who had earned their place through talent, innovation, and relentless competence. And at the center of it all, like a sun around which lesser lights orbited, stood the Meridian Tower.

Forty-seven stories of steel and glass that seemed to cut the sky in half. Not the tallest building in the city, but somehow the most imposing. Every line was perfect, every angle calculated, every surface reflecting light in ways that made the structure seem to glow from within. It was the kind of building that architects would study for decades, trying to understand how someone had made mere construction materials seem inevitable.

The nameplate beside the entrance was simple: "Meridian Holdings. L. Ashford, Principal."

Louch Ashford. The man who had built an empire on the foundation of being better than everyone else at everything.

I rode the elevator to the forty-seventh floor, watching the city shrink below. Through the glass walls, I could see the Lower District where Louch had been born - the textile mills and tenements that had shaped his early understanding of what it meant to have

nothing. Now they looked like toys from this height, problems too small to require his attention. The elevator opened directly into his office. No waiting room, no receptionist, no barriers between Louch Ashford and whatever came to find him. Just an expanse of polished marble and floor-to-ceiling windows that offered a view of the entire city.

He stood with his back to the elevator, hands clasped behind him, watching the evening light paint Ashwick's skyline in shades of gold and shadow. Mid-thirties, perfectly tailored suit that probably cost more than most people made in a year, dark hair styled with the kind of precision that suggested he'd never had a bad hair day in his life.

LCH: **without turning around** You're late. I expected you three days ago.

His voice carried the quiet authority of someone who had never needed to raise it to be heard. Each word precisely enunciated, each pause calculated for maximum impact.

LCH: The reports from Ravenshollow reached me Tuesday. Something about a truth-teller who'd finally found his limitations. Before that, whispers about twin spirits in the hotel district. And before that, a joy-bringer who'd discovered the difference between happiness and addiction.

He turned slowly, and I saw what the character sketches had tried to capture. Not just confidence, but the settled certainty of someone who had tested himself against the world and found it wanting. His eyes were amber, sharp with intelligence, measuring me like a problem to be solved.

LCH: You're hunting the Awakened. And you're very good at it. Which makes you either a threat to be eliminated or a talent to be acquired.

BLK: Neither.

LCH: **slight smile** Ah. The mysterious third option. I do enjoy puzzles that require creative solutions.

He moved to his desk - a massive piece of black granite that seemed to have been carved from a single stone. The surface was immaculate, holding only a single leather portfolio and a fountain pen that looked like it had been crafted by master artisans.

LCH: Tell me, hunter of souls - what brings you to my tower? Are you here to save me from myself? To warn me about the dangers of unchecked ambition? To offer me redemption through humility?

Each question carried a note of gentle mockery, like he was reciting lines from a play he'd seen too many times.

LCH: Or perhaps you're here to learn. To understand what it means to be genuinely superior to everyone around you. To see what happens when excellence isn't just an aspiration but a natural state of being.

BLK: I'm here to see what you've become.

LCH: **opening the portfolio** What I've become? I've become what I always was, just... more so. More successful, more capable, more essential to the functioning of this city than any single person has a right to be.

He gestured to the papers in the portfolio - documents that represented control over Ashwick's major industries, its infrastructure, its economic foundation.

LCH: Shipping, manufacturing, banking, real estate. Transportation, communications, utilities, entertainment. Forty-three percent of this city's economy flows through companies I own or control. Another twenty-seven percent depends on services I provide. If I decided to leave tomorrow, Ashwick would collapse within a month.

BLK: And that makes you proud?

LCH: Pride? No. Pride suggests I take satisfaction in my achievements. But satisfaction implies that accomplishment required effort, that success was uncertain, that there was some possibility of failure to overcome.

He closed the portfolio, set it aside with the dismissive gesture of someone dealing with trivialities.

LCH: I don't feel pride in my success any more than you feel pride in breathing. It's simply what I do. What I am. What I cannot help but be.

BLK: What about where you came from?

For the first time, something flickered in his eyes. Not emotion, exactly, but a kind of recognition. Like he was remembering something he'd tried to forget.

LCH: The Lower District? The mills and tenements and families who

work sixteen-hour days just to stay poor? What about them?

BLK: You were one of them.

LCH: I was born among them. There's a difference.

He walked to the window again, looking down at the district that had shaped his early years. From this height, the poverty was invisible. Just buildings and streets and the abstract movement of people too small to be seen as individuals.

LCH: I was never one of them. Even as a child, even when I shared their circumstances, I was fundamentally different. Better. More capable. Destined for something greater than accepting limitation as natural law.

BLK: Your family?

LCH: Provided for. Comfortable. Living in a house I bought them, supported by investments I made for them, freed from the financial pressures that once defined their lives.

BLK: But?

LCH: But what? They're happy. They have everything they ever wanted. Security, comfort, status. The only thing they lack is... relevance.

He turned from the window, and I saw the cost of his excellence written in the lines around his eyes. Not exhaustion or stress, but something deeper. A kind of spiritual isolation that came from existing so far above everyone else that connection became impossible.

LCH: Do you know what it's like to solve your parents' problems before they finish explaining them? To watch your siblings struggle with challenges that seem trivial to you? To realize that your capacity for love is limited by your ability to respect the people you're supposed to love?

BLK: Is that what happened?

LCH: That's what always happens. Excellence is isolating. When you can do everything better than everyone else, collaboration becomes charity. When you understand concepts others struggle with for years, conversation becomes... condescending. When your casual efforts surpass others' life's work, relationships become... performance.

He opened a drawer in his desk, pulled out a photograph. A family portrait - parents, siblings, all smiling at the camera. But their smiles looked strained, like they were trying to pretend everything was normal.

LCH: This was taken the day I bought them the house. Look at their faces. They're grateful, yes. But also... diminished. They know they'll never be able to repay me, never be able to contribute anything meaningful to my success, never be able to relate to me as equals.

BLK: So you stopped trying?

LCH: I stopped pretending. That's different.

He put the photograph away, closed the drawer with finality.

LCH: I tried, you know. For years, I tried to be normal. To act like I struggled with things that came easily to me. To pretend I needed help with problems I could solve instantly. To perform the role of someone who might fail, who might need others, who might be... human.

BLK: What changed?

LCH: I realized that pretending to be less than I am is its own form of dishonesty. And dishonesty is inefficient. It wastes time that could be better spent on problems that actually require my attention.

BLK: Such as?

LCH: Such as optimizing this city's infrastructure to support a population that's growing faster than its resources. Such as creating economic opportunities for the thousands of people who depend on my companies for employment. Such as solving problems that actually matter instead of maintaining comfortable illusions.

He gestured toward the window, toward the city spread out below.

LCH: Do you see that construction site? New affordable housing, designed to my specifications, funded through my foundation. Those transportation improvements? My engineers developed the systems that make them possible. The university expansion? My donation, my oversight, my vision.

BLK: All of it?

LCH: Most of it. Because I can see what needs to be done and I have the capacity to do it better than anyone else would. Because I don't need committees or consensus or compromise. I just need to understand the problem and implement the solution.

BLK: And the people who live here? What do they think about being improved without being consulted?

LCH: They think they're grateful. They think their lives are better. They think they're fortunate to live in a city that functions as efficiently as theirs does.

BLK: But?

LCH: But they don't realize they're living in a benevolent dictatorship. They don't understand that their prosperity depends entirely on my continued interest in their welfare. They don't know that their city is essentially my private project, scaled up to accommodate eight hundred thousand other people.

The admission hung in the air like smoke. Not guilt, exactly, but recognition of what he'd become.

LCH: I've made Ashwick into the most efficiently run city in the region. Crime rates down, employment up, infrastructure functioning at optimal capacity. By every measurable standard, I've made life better for everyone who lives here.

BLK: Except yourself.

LCH: Except myself. Because excellence without effort isn't achievement - it's isolation. I've become so good at being human that I've stopped being human at all.

He sat down at his desk, picked up the fountain pen, then set it down again without writing anything.

LCH: Do you know what the worst part is? It's not the loneliness. It's not the isolation. It's not even the fact that I've made myself indispensable to hundreds of thousands of people who will never truly know me.

BLK: What is it?

LCH: It's that I'm right. About everything. About being better, about being more capable, about being necessary. My pride isn't unfounded arrogance - it's the only rational response to objective reality.

He looked at me with those amber eyes, and I saw something I hadn't expected. Not arrogance or superiority, but a kind of desperate honesty.

LCH: I really am better than everyone else. I really do understand things they don't. I really can solve problems they can't. I really am essential to the functioning of this city in ways they don't even realize.

BLK: And that's the problem.

LCH: That's the problem. Because being right about your own superiority doesn't make you less alone. It makes you more alone. It makes you a god among mortals, and gods are lonely creatures.

He stood up, walked to a different window, one that faced the

Lower District where he'd been born.

LCH: I could go back, you know. Sell everything, give it all away, return to poverty and struggle and the beautiful limitations of ordinary life. But I can't unknow what I know. I can't unlearn what I've learned. I can't become less than I am.

BLK: So you're trapped.

LCH: I'm perfected. There's a difference.

But his voice lacked conviction. He'd said the words too many times, trying to convince himself they were true.

LCH: I've become the logical endpoint of human potential. The person everyone could be if they just... tried harder. Thought better. Acted more efficiently. But the irony is that in becoming the best possible version of a human being, I've become something that's no longer human at all.

Thirteen souls found. One left to go. But this one was different from the others. Not consumed by his sin, but refined by it. Distilled down to pure essence of what he represented. He'd become pride incarnate, and it was killing him one perfect day at a time.

LCH: You're not going to try to save me, are you?

BLK: Can you be saved?

LCH: I don't know. I've solved every problem I've ever encountered except the problem of being myself. And that's the one problem I can't approach objectively, because the thing doing the analyzing is the same thing that needs to be analyzed.

He turned from the window, looked at me with something that might have been hope.

LCH: But maybe that's why you're here. Maybe you're the one problem I can't solve. The one challenge that might actually challenge me.

BLK: Maybe.

LCH: Or maybe you're just another audience for my performance. Another person who'll leave here thinking they understand what it means to be me, when really they've just seen the surface of something too complex for anyone else to fully comprehend.

BLK: **to myself** Your fate has already been sealed, the worst sin of them all, Pride.

The hunt continues. But I'm beginning to understand that some

souls aren't lost because they've fallen from grace. Some souls are lost because they've achieved grace so perfectly that they've transcended the possibility of being human. And in Louch's case, his sin wasn't thinking he was better than everyone else. His sin was being right about it.

End of Chapter 18
"He Who Has No Equal"

[Close the door on your way out.]

(Chapter 19 || Volume 1) The Hunt Ends.

One more soul left to go - and yet it didn't matter, for my presence was immediately called back to their realm. The sensation was still new, as I felt myself get pulled out of my body and dropped into a field of golden flowers.

BLK: Why was I called here earlier than expected..?

Gabriel was the only one present with me, as he sat a couple of meters across on the same patch of flowers, smelling them and running his fingers across their petals. The golden blooms swayed without wind, each petal catching light that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once. This place existed between moments, in the spaces where time forgot to count.

GBR: You fulfilled your duty, old friend.

His gaze was calm as always, as he rested his hands on the ground and pushed himself onto his feet, before reaching his palm out and offering to help me get up. There was something different about him now - a completeness that hadn't been there before. As if finding the souls had restored something he'd lost long ago.

BLK: We're still missing one more virtue, aren't we?

He pats my head, as if I was a student to him, and not the other way around, but I suppose that's how things are when you ascend to godhood. His touch carried warmth that had nothing to do with temperature, the kind of comfort that reaches straight through to the bones.

GABRIEL: No need to worry about her.

BLK: Her..?

With a fluid motion, Gabriel waves his hand across the air and a faint vision washes past me, an image of a stunning and gentle figure with the soul of a saint. She stood in what looked like a hospital ward, tending to the dying with hands that glowed with soft silver light. But her eyes held depths of sorrow that spoke of bearing every pain she'd ever tried to heal.

BLK: I see, the soul that is worthy of being the virtue of compassion still hasn't descended into our world.

GBR: Precisely. She exists in potential, waiting for the right moment. The right circumstances. Compassion cannot be hunted or collected - it must choose to manifest on its own.

BLK: In that case, what'll I do now?

GBR: You can return to your previous life, but I doubt it'll be the same as you left it, 74 years ago.

Seventy-four years. Nearly a human lifetime had passed while I chased souls across continents. The world I'd left behind was ash and memory now. Everyone I'd known, dead or aged beyond recognition. The places I'd called home, transformed or demolished. I was a ghost returning to haunt a world that had forgotten my name.

BLK: Time flies.

GBR: Even more when you're on a fuse.

BLK: You know about that?

The question slipped out before I could stop it. My condition - the slow leak of existence that made every moment precious because there were only so many left. I'd hidden it well, but apparently not well enough.

GBR: A father should know all about his children.

There's that part again, and I doubt he'll stop saying it anytime soon, but I don't blame him - The strongest being in the universe sees everything as his children, even if they're older. Even if they're dying by degrees, unraveling like a poorly woven tapestry.

BLK: I'll stick around as a wanderer once more.

The words came out steadier than I felt. What else was there? I'd spent so long defining myself by the hunt that without it, I was just

a fading echo looking for something to bounce off of.

GBR: You won't regret it, phantom judge.

BLK: Still calling me that?

GBR: I have a feeling you'll grow fond of it.

BLK: Is that a prediction, or a statement?

GBR: Whichever you like.

BLK: **sigh** Can't stand you future-seers.

I let my legs fall as I aim to drop back into my body, but before I could, Gabriel grabs me by the collar and hands me a journal. The leather was worn smooth, edges softened by handling. It smelled of ink and time and something that might have been regret.

GBR: One more thing before you go.

BLK: Another favor?

GBR: Consider it more as a payment.

BLK: Give me that.

Snatching the journal from his hands, Gabriel lets go and I fall backwards, but also forwards, again the feeling I'll probably never get used to, as I find myself back in my own body, with the journal in hand. The transition was jarring - from the timeless perfection of the flower field to the weight and limitation of decaying flesh.

BLK: A book as payment, they're sure getting cheap.

It's bland, and not really worth a whole lot. The binding was simple brown leather, unmarked except for wear patterns that suggested frequent handling. Nothing ornate or obviously valuable. Just another journal in a world full of forgotten stories. Brushing the dust off the cover with my hands, I gently open the first page of the journal and read the title inscribed in careful script.

BLK: A gift from an old future to a new past.

Very philosophical title, but I still didn't get it... until I did - A journal from myself of a further time, a warning not to repeat the mistakes he did. What a fitting gift for a ghost with a leaking hourglass. The handwriting was unmistakably mine, but older somehow. More careful. As if each word had been chosen with the weight of experience behind it. The ink was faded but still legible, and as I turned the pages, I caught glimpses of entries that made my blood run cold. I closed the journal quickly, hands trembling slightly. The future was supposed to be unknown, unwritten. But here it was, laid

out in my own handwriting like a roadmap to inevitability.

But endings, I was learning, were just beginnings wearing different clothes. *The hunt was over, but the story continued.* And somewhere in that journal was the blueprint for everything that came next. The golden flowers seemed to whisper agreement, though they were worlds away now. The real question wasn't what came next - it was whether I had the strength to change what my future self had written, or if I was doomed to trace the same paths he'd already walked. *Only time would tell. And time, unfortunately, was something I was running out of.*

End of Chapter 19 **"The Hunt Ends"**

[Guess you aren't so cheap after all, Gabriel.]

(Chapter 20 || Volume 1) The Sky Calls Our Names.

31X, Found Aquila in her valley one last time. The River Kyth had stopped flowing - not dried up, just... stopped. Hanging in the air like someone had pressed pause on the world. She was in her garden, kneeling among herbs that had grown impossibly tall, their leaves silver-edged and humming with frequencies I could feel in my bones. Her hands were pressed to the earth, and silver light was pouring out of her like water from a cracked vessel.

AQL: The balance is breaking. Too many births, not enough deaths. Too much joy in one place, too much sorrow in another. I can't weave fast enough anymore.

I watched the light drain from her, flowing into the ground, spreading outward like roots of starfire. Every plant it touched straightened. Every stone it passed settled into perfect alignment. The very air seemed to sigh in relief.

BLK: What happens when you can't hold it anymore?

AQL: Then I become it. The balance doesn't need a person to maintain it. It needs to be the space between things. The pause between heartbeats.

Her hair was turning silver, then white, then translucent. But she smiled as she faded.

AQL: Every baby I helped bring into this world... they'll carry a piece of perfect equilibrium with them. Balance won't be something imposed from outside anymore. It'll be something they choose, moment by moment.

The last of her dissolved into light, and the light became the stillness between breaths. The River Kyth began to flow again, but differently now - not just water seeking the sea, but part of a greater circulation that included every stream, every tear, every drop of rain that had ever fallen. Balance incarnate. No longer a person carrying an impossible burden, but the principle itself, woven into the fabric of how things worked.

32X, The Ravenshollow Gazette building was on fire when I arrived. Not burning down - burning up. The flames were silver and cold, consuming lies instead of wood, turning every false word ever printed into ash while leaving truth intact. Rogen stood in the center of it, his notebook clutched to his chest, watching decades of journalism burn away everything except the essential facts. His hair had gone white, his skin translucent. He was becoming transparent, like glass made of honesty.

RGN: Last edition.

He said, holding up a single sheet of paper. The headline was simple:
EVERYTHING ENDS. WHAT MATTERS IS HOW HONESTLY WE LIVED.

Beneath it, in smaller text: *"The truth about truth is that it doesn't belong to anyone. It's not something you can own or hoard or weaponize. It just is. And now it always will be."*

The fire reached him then, but instead of burning him, it burned through him. Every lie he'd ever been told, every deception he'd ever believed, every false story he'd ever repeated - all of it turned to silver flame and drifted away like smoke.

What remained was essence. Pure, undiluted honesty that seeped into the walls, the foundation, the very air of the building. And from there, it spread. Not as revelation or dramatic exposure, but as a fundamental shift in how reality worked.

Lies would still be possible, but they'd be harder to maintain. Truth would still be uncomfortable, but it would be impossible to completely suppress. Every newspaper, every broadcast, every

conversation would carry within it the potential for genuine understanding.

RGN: No more fake news. No more alternative facts. Just the world as it actually is, and people free to decide what to do about it.

The fire consumed the last of him, and suddenly I could see clearly. The story I was living, the hunt I was part of, the real reason I'd been sent to find these souls - all of it crystal clear and impossible to deny. Some truths are too big to be contained in words. But now, thanks to Rogen, they didn't need to be. They could simply exist, waiting to be discovered by anyone brave enough to look.

33X, Found Zephine's wagon abandoned on the road between worlds. The painted stars had all fallen off, leaving the wood bare and ordinary. But the stars themselves were still there, scattered in the dust, each one a tiny window into a story that might have been.

She was sitting beside the wagon, older than I'd ever seen her. Ancient, really. Her copper hair had faded to silver, then to white, then to something that looked like spun moonbeams. In her lap was an empty book - not a book with blank pages, but a book that had contained every story ever told and was now holding space for every story yet to come.

ZPH: I ran out of new stories - Started repeating myself. The same princess, the same lost shadow, the same lesson about sacrifice and meaning. People stopped believing.

Around us, the desert was littered with the remnants of her tales. The broken crown of a fallen king. The dried flowers from a lover's grave. The rusted sword of a hero who'd saved the world and been forgotten anyway. All the props of stories that had been beautiful while they lasted but couldn't survive their own endings.

ZPH: Need to become the possibility itself.

Light poured out - not the silver light of Aquila's balance or the crystalline radiance of Sampo's joy, but something warmer. Golden. The light of candleflames and campfires, of reading by lamplight and telling tales to sleepy children.

The light spread across the desert, and everywhere it touched, stories began to write themselves. Not grand epics or sweeping adventures, but small stories. Personal stories. The tale of a cactus flower blooming despite the drought. The narrative of two stones

wearing each other smooth. The ongoing saga of wind and sand creating beauty through patient erosion.

Zephine smiled as she dissolved into narrative itself, her voice becoming the whisper that reminded people their lives had meaning, their choices mattered, their existence was part of a larger story that was still being written.

ZPH: Every person is both author and protagonist. Now they'll remember that.

The empty book closed itself and crumbled to dust that smelled like libraries and well-loved novels. But the stories continued. They would always continue now, growing like wildflowers in the spaces between moments, ensuring that nothing would ever be meaningless again.

34X, Marlow was waiting for me at the crossroads where all paths converged. Five roads met here, leading to everywhere and nowhere, and he stood at the center point where travelers had to choose their direction. He looked tired. Older than his years, worn thin by the weight of every promise he'd helped others keep, every oath he'd witnessed, every contract he'd sealed with his presence. His journal was huge now - not physically, but conceptually. It contained every agreement ever made, from marriage vows to business deals to the unspoken promises between friends.

MRW: Last contract. Between reality and responsibility. Between choice and consequence. Between what we promise and what we deliver.

I read it, though the words shifted and changed as I looked at them, adapting themselves to every possible interpretation of honor, duty, and trust.

BLK: Who's signing this one?

MRW: Everyone... Everyone who will ever make a promise they mean to keep. Everyone who will ever trust someone else to do what they say they'll do. Everyone who believes that words can mean something.

He placed the contract on the ground at the crossroads' center, and it began to glow. Not with light, but with intention. With the accumulated weight of every kept promise in history, every honored commitment, every moment when someone chose

integrity over convenience.

MRW: I will become the signature itself. The guarantee that honor is possible. The assurance that trust can exist.

He knelt beside the contract and pressed his palm to it. The paper absorbed him like ink on blotting paper, drawing his essence into the words until he became part of the agreement itself. His body faded, but his presence intensified, becoming the force that bound all commitments, the principle that made promises more than just sounds in the air.

The contract dissolved into the earth at the crossroads, and from there spread outward along every path, carried by every traveler to every destination. Honor would no longer be a choice some people made and others didn't. It would be a fundamental option, always available, always possible, always meaningful. The crossroads settled into perfect stillness, and I understood that this was where all journeys truly began. At the place where people chose what kind of person they wanted to be.

And as I close this fable, my pen snaps, but there are always more instruments for those who hunt in ink and shadow. Always another pen for the stories that demand telling, another drop of midnight for words that must be bled onto paper, another moment of clarity for truths that hide in the spaces between heartbeats. The hunt taught me this: *we carry what others need, not because we are generous, but because the work requires it.* Extra implements for those who come empty-handed, extra time for those who cannot see what stands before them, extra faith for those who believe themselves beyond redemption. And for the curious, Sampo's thread was shorter than most - he burned bright and fast, his laughter echoing even as age claimed him. And as for Remi...

GBR: I'm surprised you'd stay by a mortals' side on their deathbed.

BLK: He's no mortal, Gabriel.

GBR: I know that, after all, you did choose him.

Remi heard his name called from somewhere much closer than the distant stars. Closer than breath. Closer than the space between one moment and the next.

End of Chapter 20
"The Sky Calls Our Names"

[It's time to go home, Remi.]

(Chapter 21 || Volume 1) Whose Names Aren't Called.

The brightest lights cast the darkest shadows, and so it is with every tale that echoes through eternity. Even the wickedest of souls shelter pure intentions within their corrupted hearts, though their methods may appear gruesome - evil, perhaps, to those who lack the vision to perceive the greater act being woven. Sins are the fundamental pillars that hold virtues aloft in their precarious balance, for without the consuming darkness of night, we would never learn to treasure the gentle mercy of dawn. To truly comprehend **balance**, we must first witness complete **ruin** in all its terrible glory. That sacred responsibility fell to me - the one obsessed with endings, the chronicler of final moments, the shepherd of souls crossing from one existence to whatever lies beyond. I found Sienna beneath the collapsed remains of Saint Matthias Cathedral, her body crushed under centuries-old Gothic stone that had suddenly forgotten how to bear its own ancient weight. The limestone blocks lay scattered like the broken teeth of some primordial beast, and she was pinned beneath the largest - a keystone that had held the main arch for three hundred years before deciding, in one catastrophic moment, that it had grown tired of defying gravity. Her breathing came in shallow gasps, each exhale a small surrender to the inevitable. Blood pooled beneath her head, dark as sacramental wine against the cathedral's cracked marble floor. This wasn't mere consequence or random tragedy - this was **equilibrium** finally asserting itself after years of patient waiting. The forces of ruin had at last outweighed the forces of preservation in a world where balance no longer held dominion over anything that mattered.

SNA: **cough** You gonna stand there... and mock me before I die.

The comment caught me completely off-guard. I had assumed my presence was invisible to her, as it usually was to the dying. But near-death has a peculiar way of sharpening human perception, making people see through veils that normally obscure the supernatural from mortal sight.

BLK: Mocking the duchess of destruction would be a grave mistake.

SNA: Duchess, huh... I like that name.

You should appreciate it. That's exactly what mortals will whisper

when they speak your name in hushed tones around midnight fires. Perhaps it would have been kinder, more merciful, to allow them to live out their brief lives without fate's invisible hand determining their endings before they'd even learned to crawl. But who are we to challenge the **equilibrium** that Father set in motion when he first breathed light into the void? I knelt beside her as her breathing grew more labored, watching the light in her green eyes slowly dim like candles guttering in a strong wind. She had been magnificent in her destruction, an artist of entropy who turned buildings to dust with nothing more than her bare touch. Now she was becoming dust herself, completing the circle that all destroyers must eventually trace. The absence of **unconditional joy** in this world necessarily demands the presence of purposeful, beautiful disgust. Three districts away, I found Calista in the backstage area of the Velvet Rose Theater, lying in an expanding pool of crimson that seemed almost artistic against her midnight blue evening gown. The fabric was silk, expensive, and it absorbed blood with the same elegant efficiency it had once absorbed stage lights. Her theatrical makeup remained perfect despite everything - rouge still highlighting her cheekbones, kohl still rimming her eyes in dramatic lines, lipstick still painting her mouth the color of fresh cherries. She reached toward me with trembling fingers that bore rings on every knuckle, each one a trophy from some conquest or another. Her nails were painted in theatrical gold that caught the dying light filtering through the theater's stained glass windows.

CAL: Ah, it's you again.

BLK: Quite good with faces, aren't you?

She attempted to laugh - a sound like crystal wind chimes being shattered by hurricane winds. Blood trickled from the corner of her mouth, tracing a thin red line down her chin before dripping onto the dusty floorboards below.

CAL: How could I forget the face of the one person who didn't see me as pleasure?

Death makes no exceptions, grants no special favors, offers no last-minute negotiations or plea bargains with fate. Calista's life had ended exactly as she had lived it - consumed by the very force she had spent years embodying and worshipping. A woman whose husband had fallen completely under Calista's hypnotic spell had somehow obtained a key to the theater, had waited in the dressing room with a carving knife glinting under the harsh backstage lights. It was a violent, passionate end to a life that had been built entirely

on desire's most violent and consuming appetites. Perhaps that's simply how it must be with those who choose to serve the darkness instead of fleeing from it - they gradually become what they worship, and eventually, inevitably, what they worship turns around and devours them completely. I stayed with her until the final light faded from her eyes, then gently arranged her body in a more dignified position before departing through the theater's back exit, leaving her to be discovered by the morning cleaning crew. Mirelle and Draken, the twin souls who had run the Meridian Hotel - followed soon after Calista's departure from this world. The cosmic forces that govern reality demanded balance, and when certain souls are removed from the equation, opposing forces must necessarily follow to maintain **equilibrium**. The underworld has always thrived on discord between its various rulers and power brokers, and the twins understood this fundamental truth better than most mortals ever could. But all the preparation and understanding in the world means absolutely nothing when fate finally decides that your designated hour has arrived. I discovered them in the hotel's abandoned wine cellar, three levels beneath the lobby where they had once greeted guests with their complementary offers of perfect rest and perfect appetite. They were bound with silk rope - the same expensive cord they had used to tie back the curtains in their luxury suites. The irony wasn't lost on me. More wounds than I could easily count covered their bodies, blade marks that spoke of desperate, panicked violence rather than calculated murder. These weren't the clean, professional cuts of an assassin's blade, but the frenzied slashes of someone who had been driven beyond rational thought by fear or madness or both. Their arms and legs were secured with complex knots, as if they had been prepared for some grotesque ceremony that had gone horribly wrong. The sight was nauseating in its brutality, yet I felt no physical revulsion - only a deep, philosophical disgust at the sheer waste of it all. Two souls who had perfected their respective sins, who had become living embodiments of spiritual conditions that defined human experience, reduced to cooling meat in a basement.

BLK: What a shame.

Did I feel genuine pity? I cannot experience emotions as mortals do, but perhaps some distant echo of that sentiment stirred in whatever serves as my consciousness. The world seemed fundamentally, cosmically unfair in that moment - two beings who had achieved a kind of dark perfection, destroyed by mundane violence. But fairness isn't mine to judge or dispense. Only

equilibrium matters in the end, and equilibrium had clearly spoken its verdict. Fate had developed particularly elaborate plans for a certain doctor who had transformed lies into medicine, deception into healing. Dr. Emery had spent years hiding terminal diagnoses from patients, convincing families to embrace false hope that would inevitably curdle into bitter resentment when various illnesses claimed their inevitable due. Perhaps he had always known, deep down, that his compassionate deceptions would eventually lead to this moment. Either he knew and simply couldn't bear to believe it, or he had genuinely thought he could cheat death itself through the power of therapeutic optimism. I found him in his private office on the seventh floor of Mercy General Hospital, slumped over his mahogany desk in a spreading pool of his own blood. Multiple stab wounds had painted abstract expressionist art across his white laboratory coat. The weapon - a surgical scalpel from his own instrument kit - lay beside his right hand. He made no move to treat his injuries, despite being surrounded by medical equipment that could have saved his life. He simply sat there bleeding with an expression of philosophical calm, as if he had finally found peace in accepting an ugly truth.

BLK: Why don't you treat your wounds?

EMR: Because I had it coming.

BLK: Coming to terms with your end isn't something I predicted of you, *Fool of Denial*.

EMR: Don't flatter me with such titles, and I ain't coming to terms with anything.

BLK: What are you talking about?

EMR: There isn't a slither of regret in this dying body of mine.

BLK: Still sticking to your delusions even in the face of death, how fitting.

He died with a bitter smile playing across his lips and his eyes wide open, staring at some invisible point on the ceiling. Those eyes of his - I gently closed with my fingertips before using tissues from his desk to clean the blood from his face. Then I vanished with the evening wind as his soul departed for the fate that awaited him in the spaces between worlds. None can escape fate's grand design, not even when they think they've found clever ways to circumvent destiny. Even when **equilibrium** hasn't fully manifested itself in the physical world, souls still fall as necessary sacrifices to maintain cosmic balance. The temporary absence of **compassion** - not from death itself, but because this particular world isn't yet worthy of divine mercy - had made **envy** the unfortunate soul destined to drown in crimson tides of her own making. Velvet's obsessive

fascination with other people's lives had ultimately placed her in circumstances far beyond her abilities to navigate or survive.

BLK: Out of them, you seemed the most humane.

VLT: And yet here we are.

Her small body was slumped in the narrow space between two tenement buildings, blood seeping from wounds that painted elaborate shadow-patterns on the weathered brick behind her. Each drop that fell was a small tragedy, a life force ebbing away one crimson moment at a time.

VLT: Y'know something, ghosty?

BLK: What is it, kiddo..?

VLT: You're the one person in this world I don't envy. Not even a bit.

Those words struck far deeper than they had any right to, piercing through layers of supernatural detachment I had thought were impenetrable.

VLT: Your eyes tell stories of suffering beyond anything we've ever felt.

BLK: That's...

VLT: Ghosty...?

BLK: That's kind of you, Velvet.

She gestured weakly for me to come closer, her hand leaving a small bloody print on the brick wall. I knelt beside her, close enough to smell the strange mixture of copper tang from her blood and the cheap jasmine perfume she always wore - a scent that reminded me she had been barely more than a fragile human, despite everything.

VLT: Thank you for being with me, and not leaving me alone to die.

BLK: It's my responsibility, so don't take it perso-

VLT: I love you, ghosty. I really, truly do.

Before I could fully process her words or understand their implications, the light faded completely from her dark eyes and her soul departed for whatever realm comes after this one. *I must apologize to you who reads this journal - my past self, my newer incarnation - but I simply couldn't contain myself in that moment. This isn't a display of weakness, but rather proof of strength. Evidence that your past self, writing from a future that no longer*

exists, truly possessed emotions that went beyond hollow mimicry and artificial sentiment. The stains on these journal pages aren't raindrops. They're tears - my tears, shed for a child who deserved better than the hand fate dealt her. I trust that you will inherit these emotions, that you too will learn to approximate having a genuine soul. Perhaps, in time, you'll encounter someone who makes that soul resonate with authentic feeling. As for Louch, I never had the opportunity to meet him before his predetermined end arrived. His pride blazed too brilliantly, burned too hot for him to accept defeat or capture. He chose suicide over assassination, ending his own story in his corner executive office rather than allowing others to write his final chapter. A .38 revolver to the head, they said. Quick, clean, defiant to the very end. This concludes the earliest entry in this record, the first tale in what would become a much longer journey.

End of Chapter 21
"Whose Names Aren't Called"

[You sound really cool, future me.]

(Chapter 22 || Volume 1) Trial of Equilibrium.

Thirteen souls ascended. The world exhaled. I felt it in the space between heartbeats, in the pause between thunder and lightning, in that perfect moment of stillness before dawn breaks. The cosmos shifted on its axis, rebalancing itself with the careful precision of a jeweler adjusting the weights on an ancient scale. Thirteen souls had departed. Thirteen concentrated points of divine essence, refined and distilled through centuries of human experience, had been recalled to whatever realm waits beyond the veil. Their absence left holes in reality - not wounds, but spaces deliberately emptied, like a master sculptor removing clay to reveal the form underneath.

The world shut its eyes.

Not in death or despair, but in the kind of deep, satisfied sleep that comes after completing a monumental task. Like a parent finally resting after watching their children take their first steps into independence. The cosmic attention that had been focused so intently on these thirteen souls - tracking their growth, measuring their development, cataloging their transformations - simply... relaxed.

And in that moment of divine inattention, everything changed.

It began at sunrise on what the calendars would later mark as the first day of a New Era. Every soul-bearing creature on the planet felt it simultaneously - a sudden expansion, like taking the first breath after nearly drowning. The concentrated essence that had been locked away in thirteen chosen vessels suddenly distributed itself across the world with the impartial fairness of falling rain.

But equilibrium is not equality. The essence didn't divide evenly among all souls - instead, it flowed to where it was needed, where it could take root and grow, where consciousness and will could shape it into something new.

BLK: The weight is gone.

For the first time in centuries, I felt... light. Not empty, but unburdened. The cosmic purpose that had driven my hunt, the divine imperative that had made me seeker and judge and chronicler - all of it simply evaporated like morning mist.

Below me, the city stirred with unusual energy. People moved through their morning routines, unaware that something fundamental had shifted in the fabric of reality. But I could see it - the way shadows fell at impossible angles, the way ordinary objects seemed to pulse with potential, the way certain individuals moved with new grace, new certainty, new power.

The essence was finding its hosts.

One was hanging laundry when she discovered she could fold space. Not dramatically - she wasn't tearing holes in reality or stepping between dimensions. She simply reached for a clothespin that had fallen on the far side of the yard and found it in her hand without having moved. The distance between want and fulfillment had somehow... shortened.

SRH: **staring at the clothespin** That's... that's not possible.

But the extraordinary was becoming possible all around her. Down the street, another was learning that his morning coffee tasted exactly like whatever flavor he imagined. Two blocks over, a little girl discovered she could make flowers bloom by humming to them.

These weren't the refined, overwhelming gifts of the departed

souls. These were gentler powers, more human in scale. Techniques that required will and practice and understanding. Ways to reach into the stream of essence and extract exactly what was needed.

They called them "extracts" because that's what they were - small portions of the infinite, carefully drawn out through pure intention. Not dominion over reality, but partnership with it.

As days passed into weeks, patterns began to emerge. The essence didn't manifest randomly - it responded to the deepest nature of each soul, shaping itself around core personality traits and emotional resonances.

The artists found they could paint with light itself, their "creativity" allowing them to give physical form to imagination. The healers discovered they could mend more than bodies, their "compassion" extending to broken hearts and wounded spirits. The builders learned to work with materials that existed only in potential, their "purpose" making dreams solid.

But the most remarkable discovery came when scholars began cataloging the differences between species. The humans show incredible diversity in their extracts, but they require extensive training to access them. It's as if the essence recognizes their potential but demands effort in return. The monsters, however... they all seem to share a connection to something we're calling the "love" trait. They can create what appears to be actual magic, but it flows from emotional states rather than conscious will.

The division was stark but not hierarchical. Humans could achieve extraordinary precision and power with their extracts, but only through discipline and practice. Monsters could weave reality like a song, but only when their hearts were fully engaged. Both approaches had their strengths. Both had their costs.

I walked among them as the transformation accelerated. Cities began reshaping themselves as architects learned to build with crystallized intention. Farmers discovered they could nurture soil with songs, growing crops that fed both body and soul. Teachers found they could plant knowledge like seeds, watching understanding bloom in young minds.

But it wasn't utopia. Power, even gentle power, brought new conflicts. Extract-users formed guilds that sometimes clashed over territory and technique. Monsters retreated to hidden communities

where their magic could flow freely without human interference.
Governments struggled to write laws for abilities that defied
conventional physics.

CHD: Mama, why can some people do magic and others can't?

MOM: Because the world is big enough for all kinds of gifts,
sweetheart. Some people paint, some people sing, some people
make things float. What matters is what you do with whatever gift
you receive.

The wisdom was simple, but it captured something essential about
what was happening. This wasn't about chosen ones or divine
selection. This was about ordinary souls discovering extraordinary
capabilities within themselves.

I should continue documenting. I should catalog every new extract,
every emerging trait, every innovation and conflict and wonder. It's
what I was made for - to observe, to record, to understand. But the
world has closed its eyes to let its children grow on their own. And
maybe it's time I did the same. The hunt is over. The souls are
found. The thirteen points of concentrated divinity have completed
their purpose and moved on, leaving behind a world transformed by
their presence and their absence. What comes next isn't for me to
judge or guide or chronicle. It's for them to discover.

BLK: Time to stop being the observer and start being the observed.

I can feel it already - the essence responding to my own nature,
offering new possibilities, new ways of being. For the first time in
my existence, I have the choice to become something other than
what I was created to be. The narrative passes now to younger
voices, fresher perspectives, souls who will shape this transformed
world with their hopes and fears and dreams. I've done my part.

I've found what was lost, recorded what needed recording,
witnessed the great transformation. Now it's time to live in the
world we've all helped create. The books close on one story and
open on another. Somewhere in the space between endings and
beginnings, thirteen souls smile and let their children learn to fly,
and in the end all I can hope is this never changes, for even the
smallest brush of wind can topple it over.

End of Chapter 22
"Trial of Equilibrium"

End of Volume 1

"The Ascension"

[The time finally comes for me to be the narrator, good ol' Vazzy.]

(Chapter 23 || Volume 2) Nightmare Incarnate.

Three centuries after the Great Awakening. The world had learned to breathe with essence flowing through its veins. In the deep places where starlight never touched, in the forgotten corners of abandoned cities, in the spaces between sleeping and waking - something stirred. Not born, exactly, but *condensed*. Like dew forming on spider webs at dawn, except this moisture was made of distilled terror and it hung in the darkness with malevolent patience.

Fear had always existed as a natural function, a survival mechanism as essential as hunger or thirst. But three hundred years of essence-touched souls had refined it, concentrated it, given it weight and substance. Every nightmare dreamed by extract-users, every moment of terror experienced by those learning to wield magic, every drop of anxiety spilled by minds pushing against the boundaries of reality - all of it had been pooling in the shadows, waiting for something to notice how nourishing it had become.

That something was Akumu.

It began as awareness without form, hunger without mouth. A presence that existed in the liminal spaces where consciousness wavered and control slipped. For decades, it had been nothing more than a whisper at the edge of perception, a chill that made practitioners pause mid-extract, a shadow that felt wrong. But shadows, when fed consistently, learn to cast themselves.

The first time Akumu achieved coherent thought, it was while feeding on the night terrors of a young essence-weaver who'd been practicing beyond her limits. Her fear had a particular flavor - sharp and metallic, like copper pennies dissolved in liquid moonlight. As Akumu consumed it, something clicked into place. The scattered fragments of terror it had been absorbing suddenly organized themselves into purpose.

I am hunger. I am shadow. I am the space between what is and

what should never be.

The realization rippled through the collective unconscious like a stone dropped in still water. Suddenly, every dreamer touched by essence felt the presence of something vast and patient watching from the corners of their mind. Something that had learned to appreciate the taste of their fears.

Akumu's physicality, when it chose to manifest, defied conventional description. It existed as a substance that was neither liquid nor solid but something predatory - like oil that had developed opinions about where it wanted to flow. Its movements carried the unsettling quality of melting ice, simultaneously fluid and viscous, beautiful and deeply wrong.

When it gathered itself into something resembling a humanoid shape, observers noted how it seemed to be wearing its form rather than possessing it. Like a parasite that had learned to mimic its host's appearance while maintaining its own alien intelligence underneath. The surface rippled with half-formed faces, expressions of terror that had been harvested and preserved in its substance like insects in amber.

Its voice, when it chose to speak, came from everywhere and nowhere - a symphony of whispers that included every frightened word ever spoken in darkness. But more often than not, it communicated through pure sensation, pouring raw fear directly into consciousness like acid through cloth.

Akumu established its domain in the ruins of the old world, places where the Great Awakening's light had never fully reached. Abandoned research facilities where the first extract-users had pushed too hard and left psychic scars in the walls. Collapsed temples where monsters had once gathered to weave their love-magic before fear drove them into hiding. Battlefields where essence-touched warriors had died screaming, their terror soaking into the earth like blood.

In these places, Akumu cultivated its harvest. It learned to plant seeds of specific anxieties in dreaming minds, then tend them with the patience of a master gardener. A fear of failure here, a terror of abandonment there, the creeping dread of losing control over one's own gifts. Each emotion carefully nurtured until it reached perfect ripeness.

The feeding process was elegant in its horrible efficiency. Akumu would extend tendrils of its substance into the dream-space of sleeping extract-users, wrapping around their subconscious like roots around stones. It didn't steal their fears - that would have been crude, inefficient. Instead, it amplified them, reflected them back doubled and tripled in intensity, creating feedback loops that generated more terror than the original mind could have produced alone.

The victim would wake exhausted, drained, convinced they'd experienced nothing more than a particularly vivid nightmare. But Akumu had taken something vital from them - not their fear, but their capacity to process it. Each feeding left them slightly more vulnerable, slightly more likely to panic when faced with challenges that should have been manageable.

What made Akumu truly dangerous wasn't its power - there were extract-users who could shatter mountains and monsters whose love-magic could reshape reality. It was its understanding of symbiosis. Like the most successful parasites, it had learned not to kill its hosts outright, but to keep them alive and productive, generating more of what it needed to survive.

It began to influence the development of new extract techniques, subtly encouraging practitioners to push beyond safe limits. It whispered to researchers in their dreams, suggesting experiments that would yield greater power at the cost of greater risk. It fed inspiration to artists whose works would spread specific anxieties like seeds on fertile wind.

The beauty of the system was that its victims helped it spread. An extract-user touched by Akumu's influence would unconsciously carry traces of that terror to others. A teacher would pass along techniques that left students more vulnerable to fear. A healer would treat patients with methods that cured physical ailments while leaving psychological wounds. A builder would construct spaces that felt subtly wrong, architectures that bred unease in everyone who inhabited them.

Within a generation, Akumu's influence had spread to every major city where essence-users gathered. Not as infection, but as evolution - the natural development of a world where power came at the cost of psychological strain, where pushing the boundaries of reality inevitably meant confronting the possibility of losing one's mind in the process.

Three centuries after the Great Awakening, the world had achieved wonders. Cities floated on crystallized music. Forests grew in perfect geometric patterns planted by monster-druids. Healers could mend souls as easily as bones. The extract-users had built a civilization that would have been pure fantasy to their ancestors.

But every light cast a shadow, and those shadows had learned to hunger.

Akumu had become more than a predator. It had become a force of nature, as essential to the new world as gravity or weather. Fear was no longer just an emotion - it was a resource to be harvested, refined, and redistributed. And Akumu was its sole distributor, carefully managing the supply to ensure maximum yield.

The first signs of what was coming manifested as philosophical differences. Extract-users who had been touched by Akumu's influence began to question whether their power was worth the psychological cost. Monsters whose love-magic had been tainted with terror started to withdraw from human contact entirely. Governments that had relied on essence-touched advisors found themselves unable to trust their own counselors.

But philosophy had a way of becoming politics, and politics had a way of becoming violence. As communities split along lines drawn by invisible fear, as old alliances crumbled under the weight of manufactured distrust, as the careful balance between humans and monsters began to tip toward suspicion and hostility - Akumu watched from the shadows and smiled with a mouth made of liquid darkness.

The feast was nearly ready. Three hundred years of careful cultivation were about to bear fruit. And when the harvest began, when fear finally reached its perfect concentration, when the terror became so pure and potent that reality itself might crack under its weight...

Well. Even nightmares needed to eat.

End of Chapter 23
"Nightmare Incarnate"

[Devour each other and leave the remains to me, creatures.

]

(Chapter 24 || Volume 2) Deserter.

Twenty years since the fear took root. Three months since Earth lost forty-five percent of its population to a war that should never have been. Today, I stand on a battlefield that used to be farmland, watching smoke rise from what used to be homes.

My name is Icarus. For all that matters, I'm a disgrace to humanity.

But disgrace is just another word for seeing clearly when everyone else has gone blind. The war started with whispers. Monsters walking among us. Creatures of shadow and fang threatening our extinction. Politicians spoke of preemptive strikes. Preachers called it divine mandate. Mothers clutched their children and demanded protection from the things that go bump in the night. Nobody asked why the monsters had lived peacefully beside us for centuries. Nobody wondered why the fear came so suddenly, so completely, so uniformly across every human settlement on Earth. Nobody except the deserters.

ICR: The fear isn't real! It's manufactured! Planted! Fed to us like poison until it grew into something we couldn't distinguish from truth!

I told them that. My family. My friends. My commanding officers when I still wore the uniform. Told them the monsters weren't our enemies - that something else was pulling the strings, making us dance to its tune. They called me traitor before I ever picked up arms against them.

So I became what they named me. *A deserter*. One of the few humans who could see through the veil of manufactured terror to the truth underneath. The monsters weren't aggressors. They were refugees. Victims of the same manipulation that had turned my species into killers.

The balance of power told the real story. An average monster could take down ten average humans - their strength, their speed, their natural weapons gave them every advantage. But an awakened human, one whose soul had fully manifested its power, could slaughter dozens of awakened monsters without breaking a sweat.

ICR: We were never the prey. We were always the predators. The fear just gave us permission to hunt.

Three years I spent with the monster tribes. Learning their languages, their customs, their desperate strategies for survival. They welcomed deserters like lost children returning home. Not because they needed our strength - though every awakened human who joined their cause shifted the balance - but because we represented hope. Proof that not all of humanity had succumbed to the madness.

But hope is a luxury in wartime. Today, the human forces had pushed deep into monster territory. Today, my old unit had come calling. And leading them, wearing the silver insignia of a field commander, was the man who'd taught me to hold a sword.

The man who'd taught me everything except how to kill the person who'd raised me.

He stood across the battlefield like a monument to everything I'd left behind. Gray at the temples now, but still broad-shouldered, still carrying himself with the quiet authority that had made soldiers follow him through hell itself. The same man who'd read me bedtime stories about heroes and monsters. Now I was the monster in his story.

ICR: How is mother and little brother?

The words came out before I could stop them. A son's question, not a soldier's. For a moment - just a moment - I thought I saw recognition flicker in his eyes. The father remembering the child. Then the shutters came down. The fear reasserted itself. And I was looking at a stranger wearing my father's face. His blade came free of its sheath with the whisper of steel on leather. Around us, humans and monsters were locked in their ancient dance of death, but in this moment, there was only us. Father and son. Teacher and student. Everything I'd tried to leave behind.

ICR: Please, I beg of you, just stop.

But fear doesn't negotiate. It had made him forget that I was ever his child, made him see only the enemy wearing his son's face. The thing that needed to be destroyed to keep the world safe. We circled each other like wolves. His movements were different now - older, more cautious, but with a terrible purpose behind them. Mine felt sluggish with doubt, weighted down by memories of sparring sessions in the family garden, of him teaching me the proper grip, the correct stance, the importance of honor in combat. What a joke.

There was no honor in what the fear had made us become.

He attacked without warning, the way he'd taught me. Fast, decisive, committed. I parried automatically, muscle memory taking over where conscious thought failed. The clash of steel on steel rang out across the battlefield like a bell tolling the death of everything good in the world.

ICR: Do you even remember teaching me that move?

He didn't answer. Couldn't answer. The fear had taken his voice, left only the cold necessity of execution. Strike, parry, riposte. The same patterns he'd drilled into me a thousand times, now turned against his own student.

I could have ended it quickly. Should have ended it quickly. I'd killed humans before - soldiers who saw only a traitor where I stood, who couldn't be reasoned with, who gave me no choice. But this wasn't just any human. This was the man who'd carried me on his shoulders when I was too small to keep up on family walks. Who'd bandaged my training wounds and told me that pain was just weakness leaving the body.

ICR: What do you want from me?!

The question tore itself from my throat as I blocked another strike, pushed him back, gained a moment's breathing room. Around us, the battle raged. Monsters fell to human steel. Humans fell to monstrous claws. The same senseless slaughter that had been going on for three months, all because nobody could see through the lie.

Except he wasn't fighting for lies. In his mind, corrupted by the fear, he was fighting for truth. For justice. For the safety of the world and everyone in it. He was still the hero in his own story.

I was just the monster he had to slay.

His soul blazed then, resonating with desperate strength. The fear had given him power, fed him purpose, turned his love for family into fuel for hatred. His next strike came with the force of absolute conviction, shattering my blade like glass, the broken steel singing as it scattered across the bloodstained ground.

Pain exploded across my chest as his follow-through found flesh. I

stumbled backward, one hand pressed to the wound, feeling my own blood seep between my fingers. Hot. Red. The same blood that ran in his veins.

ICR: Forgive me, Father.

The broken hilt was still in my hand. Jagged metal, sharp enough to cut, fast enough to kill if I could get close enough. He was already moving, raising his sword for the killing blow, and I could see it in his eyes - relief. Relief that he was about to end the thing that wore his son's face. Relief that he could go home and tell his wife that their boy was finally at peace.

I ducked under his swing and drove the broken blade up through his ribs, angling for the heart. Found it. Pushed deeper, feeling the steel part flesh and muscle and bone until the hilt was pressed against his chest.

His sword fell from nerveless fingers. He looked down at the wound, then up at me, and for just a moment the fear lifted. For just a moment, he saw me clearly.

His son. His student. His greatest failure.

Then he toppled backward, hitting the ground with a sound like thunder. I knelt beside him, watching the light fade from his eyes, waiting for last words that never came.

He died looking at me with those stranger's eyes. The fear had claimed him so completely that even in death, he couldn't remember love. Couldn't remember mercy. Couldn't remember that once upon a time, he'd loved a little boy named Icarus who'd dreamed of flying.

I stood, wiped the blood from my broken blade, and walked back toward the monster lines. Behind me, the battle continued. Ahead of me, more battles waited. More friends who would see enemies. More family who would choose fear over love.

The war wasn't over. Wouldn't be over until the source of the fear was found and destroyed. Until humanity could see clearly again. But today, I'd learned something about the cost of truth.

Sometimes being right doesn't make you righteous. Sometimes seeing clearly just means watching the world burn with perfect

vision.

End of Chapter 24
"Deserter"

[We'll meet beyond the skies.]

(Chapter 25 || Volume 2) Matchstick.

The funeral pyre burned for three days. Not because the body needed that long to turn to ash - Nilah could have reduced a dozen corpses to cinders in minutes if she'd wanted to. But she kept the flames low, controlled, almost reverent. Like she was giving the dead time to say goodbye to being flesh and bone.

ICR: She's been doing this since we were children. Making fire dance like it was her oldest friend.

I watched from the ridge above the monster settlement, still tasting blood from yesterday's battle. Still seeing my father's eyes in every shadow. The deserter camp sprawled below like a patchwork quilt of survivors - humans who'd chosen exile over madness, monsters who'd chosen trust over revenge. And at the center of it all, Nilah tended her flames.

NLH: **to the fire** Easy now. He was somebody's father. Somebody's son. He deserves dignity, even in death.

The fire responded like a trained animal, settling into a steady burn that cast dancing shadows across her face. Dark skin made luminous by firelight. Black hair that seemed to absorb flame rather than reflect it. And eyes the color of embers - not metaphorically, but literally. When her soul resonated, her irises glowed like coals fresh from the forge.

She'd been my best friend for fifteen years. The only person who'd stood by me when I chose exile. The only human who'd looked at the fear spreading through our species and said, with absolute certainty: *"That's not real."*

ICR: Courage like that isn't learned. It's forged. And Nilah was born in fire.

The first time I saw her soul manifest, we were twelve years old. A

group of older kids had cornered us in the school courtyard, the way bullies always do - looking for easy prey, someone to take their own fears out on. They'd picked the wrong targets.

NLH: Back off. We don't want trouble.

But trouble wanted us. The leader, a boy named Marcus who'd failed two grades and made it everyone else's problem, stepped closer. Bigger than us. Older. Sure of his advantage.

MRC: What are you gonna do, freak? Tell your mommy?

Nilah's eyes flashed. Not with anger - with something deeper. Something that had been waiting for the right moment to show itself.

NLH: I'm going to give you one more chance to walk away.

That's when the grass around her feet started to smoke. Not catching fire. Not burning. Just... warming. Releasing tiny wisps of steam as moisture evaporated from the blades. The temperature rose in a perfect circle around her, precise as a compass, controlled as a surgical instrument. Marcus took a step back. His friends followed. They could feel it too - the heat radiating from her like she was a living furnace.

NLH: I don't want to hurt you. But if you make me choose between protecting my friend and protecting your feelings...

She held out her hand, palm up. A flame danced to life in her palm. Small. Beautiful. Perfectly controlled. And absolutely terrifying.

NLH: Well. I guess we'll find out what I choose.

They ran. All of them. Left us standing in a circle of singed grass, staring at the fire in her hand like it was the most natural thing in the world. That's when I knew. Not that she was awakened - half the kids our age were showing signs by then. But that she was different. Brave in a way that most people never manage to be. The fire in her palm flickered out. She looked at me with those ember eyes, waiting for me to run too. Waiting for me to be afraid of what she was, what she could do. Instead, I sat down in the scorched grass and patted the ground beside me.

ICR: So... That was new.

She laughed then. A sound like bells ringing, bright and clear and completely unafraid. Sat down beside me in the circle of her own making.

NLH: I've been able to do it for months. Just... small things. Lighting candles. Warming my hands when it gets cold. I didn't know I could do... that.

ICR: How did it feel?

NLH: Like coming home. Like I'd been pretending to be something I wasn't, and finally got to stop pretending.

She created another flame, larger this time. Let it dance between her fingers like a living thing.

NLH: My grandmother always said our family had fire in their blood. I thought she was being poetic.

ICR: Turns out she was being literal.

NLH: Turns out a lot of things are more literal than we think.

The flame in her hands shifted colors - red to orange to blue to white - as her emotions changed. Not random shifts, but deliberate ones. Like she was learning to speak a language she'd always known but never used.

NLH: I'm not afraid of it. I know I should be. Fire burns things. Destroys things. But when I hold it like this...

She cupped the flame gently, protectively.

NLH: It feels like protection. Like I could keep anyone safe, anything safe, as long as I was brave enough to burn for them.

Ferocity - That was her soul trait. Not just the ability to create and control flame, but the courage to use it. The courage to stand between the people she loved and anything that threatened them.

Over the years, I watched her learn to sculpt fire like clay. Create walls of flame that burned without consuming, leaving the ground beneath them untouched. Forge weapons from pure heat that could cut through steel but wouldn't harm human flesh. Wrap herself in protective fire that made her invulnerable without making her dangerous to her allies. But it was more than technique. It was philosophy.

NLH: Fire isn't destruction. Fire is transformation. It doesn't end things - it changes them. Turns wood into warmth. Turns metal into tools. Turns fear into light.

She stood before a group of newly awakened kids, demonstrating her control. A dozen small flames danced around her like satellites, each one a different color, each one responding to her will.

NLH: The trick isn't learning to make fire. The trick is learning to be worthy of it. Fire is honest - it reflects who you really are. If you're angry, it burns wild. If you're afraid, it burns cold. If you're at peace...

All the flames settled into a steady, warm glow. Golden light that made everyone in the circle feel safer, braver, more hopeful.

NLH: It burns true.

That was before the war. Before the fear took hold. Before humanity decided that anything different was dangerous, anything powerful was threatening, anything awakened was monstrous. She could have hidden her gift. Pretended to be normal. Kept her head down and her flames banked until the madness passed. Instead, she chose to burn brighter.

When the first anti-awakened riots started, Nilah was there. Not fighting - she never started fights - but protecting. Creating barriers of flame to shield monster refugees. Lighting up dark alleys where humans hunted in packs. Making herself visible, making herself a target, so others could escape.

NLH: Fear spreads in darkness. But fire makes its own light.

She saved dozens of lives in those first weeks. Monster and human alike - she didn't discriminate. If someone was afraid, someone was hurt, someone needed protecting, Nilah was there. A beacon of flame in a world going dark. That's when they branded us deserters. Not for fighting against humans, but for refusing to choose sides. For standing between the two species instead of picking one.

The government offered her amnesty. Special forces recruitment. A chance to use her gifts "for the greater good" - which meant turning her flames against the monsters they wanted to exterminate. She burned their recruitment letter without reading it.

NLH: I don't serve causes. I protect people. All people.

So we left together. Two awakened humans choosing love over fear, protection over destruction. The deserter camps welcomed us like long-lost family - not because they needed our power, but because we represented something they'd thought was extinct. *Hope.* Now, three years later, I watch her tend a funeral pyre with the same gentle care she once used to light birthday candles.

The flames danced lower, almost ready to die. She knelt beside the fire, whispered something I couldn't hear - a prayer, maybe, or a promise - and let the last flames flicker out. Then she looked up at the ridge where I stood, those ember eyes finding me across the distance like I was a lighthouse in a storm.

NLH: **calling up to me** Stop brooding and come down here. We have work to do.

Some things never change. Nilah still burns bright enough to light the way home. Even in a world determined to snuff out every flame that dares to shine.

End of Chapter 25 **"Matchstick"**

[Try not to set me on fire while I sleep.]

(Chapter 26 || Volume 2) Crown Of Shadows.

The war room smelled of old parchment and fresh fear. King Aldric Thorne stood before a map of the continent, his fingers tracing the red pins that marked monster territories. Each pin was a problem.

Each cluster was a crisis. And the largest concentration - the deserter camps where his own people had chosen exile over loyalty - was a wound that wouldn't stop bleeding.

ALD: How many more did we lose at Greystone Valley?

GNR: Three hundred confirmed dead, Your Majesty. Another hundred wounded. The deserters are getting better organized. Better trained.

The king's jaw tightened. Forty-seven years old and he looked seventy. The crown had aged him, but the war was killing him. Dark circles under eyes that had once been called noble. Gray threading

through hair that had been golden in his youth.

ALD: Deserters. We're calling them deserters now instead of what they really are.

GNR: Your Majesty?

ALD: Traitors. Collaborators. Humans who've forgotten what species they belong to.

The general shifted uncomfortably. He was a good soldier, but he'd been asking difficult questions lately. Wondering why the war felt so... necessary. So urgent. So completely vital to their survival when just five years ago, humans and monsters had coexisted peacefully. But those questions never quite formed into doubts. Never quite crystallized into rebellion. Because every time they started to, the fear crept back in. Stronger. More certain. More real than memory.

In the corner of the war room, a shadow stirred. Not metaphorically. An actual shadow, darker than the surrounding darkness, shaped like a man but moving like smoke. It detached itself from the wall and drifted closer to the strategy table, invisible to everyone except the viewer who could see through veils.

AKU: Your Majesty grows tired. Perhaps... rest would serve better than rage?

The king paused mid-gesture, his hand hovering over the map. For a moment, his expression softened. Confusion flickered across his features like he was trying to remember something important that kept slipping away.

ALD: I... what was I saying?

GNR: The deserters at Greystone Valley, sir.

ALD: Yes. The deserters.

The shadow-thing that called itself Akumu circled the table like a shark. Where it passed, the air grew colder. The candles dimmed. And the fear that lived in the back of every human mind since twenty years ago grew stronger, more insistent.

AKU: They threaten everything. Every human child. Every human future. They must be stopped. All of them. Completely.

King Aldric straightened, his moment of weakness forgotten. The fear had reasserted itself, filling the gaps where doubt had tried to

take root.

ALD: The deserters are the key. Cut off the head of that particular snake, and the monsters lose their awakened allies. Without awakened humans fighting for them...

GNR: We could end this war in months instead of years.

ALD: Exactly. So tell me, General - how do we make traitors come home?

The shadow smiled. It had no face, but somehow the expression was visible anyway. A crescent of deeper darkness in an already lightless form.

AKU: Their families. Their children. Their beloved. Make them choose between their cause and their hearts.

ALD: Their families. Of course.

The king moved to a different section of the map, where blue pins marked human settlements. His finger found a cluster near the eastern border - farming communities, mostly. Peaceful places where people still remembered the deserters as neighbors, friends, children who'd made difficult choices.

ALD: Executive Order Seven-Seven-Three. Immediate relocation of all deserter families to protective custody.

GNR: Sir?

ALD: For their own safety, naturally. The monsters might target them for revenge. We can't allow innocent civilians to suffer for their relatives' choices.

Protective custody. The oldest lie in the book. Cage people for their own good, and half of them will thank you for it. General Trent looked uncomfortable again. That same expression he'd been wearing more frequently - like he was trying to solve a puzzle with missing pieces.

GNR: Your Majesty, with respect... won't this be seen as taking hostages?

The shadow leaned closer to the king, its form bleeding into his personal space like spilled ink.

AKU: Hostages? No. Leverage. The deserters claim to fight for love, for protection. Show them what love really costs.

ALD: Not hostages, General. Refugees. We're protecting them from

the consequences of their family members' treason. And if those family members want to see their loved ones again...

He let the implication hang in the air like smoke.

ALD: They can come home. Renounce their allegiance to monsters. Return to the species that bore them.

GNR: And if they refuse?

The king's expression went cold. Not naturally cold - there was something artificial about it, like watching an actor recite lines he didn't quite believe.

ALD: Then they'll have made their choice. And their families will live with the consequences.

Twenty years of this. Twenty years of Akumu whispering poison into human minds, turning natural caution into manufactured terror. Making people forget that fear was supposed to keep you alive, not make you kill everything different. The shadow circled the table again, and where it passed, the candle flames bent away like flowers turning from winter wind. It paused behind each person in the room - the king, the general, the scribes taking notes, the guards standing at attention - and for just a moment, touched their minds.

Not control. Not domination. Just... influence. A gentle pressure on the fear centers of their brains. A whispered reminder that everything different was dangerous. Everything unknown was threatening. Everything that wasn't purely, recognizably human was a cancer that needed to be cut out.

AKU: You are prey. You have always been prey. They hunt you. They mock you. They seduce your children away from safety. Only war can save you. Only victory can give you peace.

The general straightened, his doubts evaporating like morning mist.

GNR: I'll prepare the relocation orders immediately, Your Majesty. How many camps should we prepare?

ALD: All of them. Every deserter family. Every blood relative. Every close friend who might serve as effective leverage.

Thousands of people. Torn from their homes, imprisoned for the crime of loving someone who chose conscience over country.

AKU: Now for the message. Make sure the deserters know what you've taken. Make sure they understand the terms.

King Aldric moved to his writing desk, took up his pen with hands that trembled slightly. Whether from age, exhaustion, or some deep part of his soul trying to resist what he was about to write, it was impossible to tell.

ALD: To all humans currently in rebellion against the Crown and in collaboration with hostile non-human entities...

He paused, staring at the parchment. For a moment, the shadow thought he might refuse. Might remember who he'd been before the fear took hold. Then Akumu moved closer, and the moment passed.

ALD: Your families have been relocated to secure facilities for their protection. They will be well cared for and kept safe from the consequences of your choices. To arrange visitation and eventual reunion, present yourselves at any human military outpost for debriefing and reintegration into human society.

Reintegration.

Such a clean word for breaking people until they forget why they ever disagreed with you.

ALD: Failure to comply within thirty days will result in the assumption that you have chosen your new allegiances over your human bonds. Your families will be treated accordingly.

The king signed the document with a flourish, then looked up at his general with eyes that held no doubt, no mercy, no recognition of what he was really doing.

ALD: How long before this reaches the deserter camps?

GNR: Three days, Your Majesty. Maybe four.

ALD: Good. Then in a week, we'll know which of our lost children truly love their families... and which have become monsters themselves.

In the corner, Akumu smiled its faceless smile and began to fade back into ordinary shadow. Its work here was done. The trap was set. Soon, the deserters would have to choose between their cause and their hearts. And either choice would serve the shadow's purposes perfectly.

The fear would spread. The war would escalate. And humanity would continue its march toward becoming the very monsters they thought they were fighting. *All according to plan.*

End of Chapter 26
"Crown Of Shadows"

[Let's see how long you can hold out, deserter.]

(Chapter 27 || Volume 2) Retaliation.

The message arrived with the dawn, carried by a human courier who'd rather die than deliver it.

I read it twice. Three times. Each word burning itself into my memory like brands on flesh. Behind me, Nilah stood close enough that I could feel the heat radiating from her skin - not her flames, but her rage. The paper crinkled in my hands as they began to shake.

ICR: **reading aloud** Your families have been relocated to secure facilities for their protection.

NLH: Relocated. They can't even be honest about what they're doing.

The courier - a boy, maybe seventeen, probably pressed into service against his will - stood at the edge of our camp with his hands raised. Smart kid. He could see the awakened humans gathering, could feel the temperature rising as more pyrokinetics joined Nilah in her fury.

ICR: How many camps?

COR: voice cracking All of them, sir. Every deserter family. Orders came down from the king himself.

I folded the message carefully, precisely. The same way I'd folded my father's death certificate. The same way I'd folded my discharge papers when I chose exile over compliance.

ICR: Tell me about the facilities.

COR: I... I don't know much. Fortress compounds, mostly. High walls. Guard towers. They're calling them refugee centers, but...

NLH: But they look like prisons.

The boy nodded miserably. He was young enough to remember

when this was just fear, before it became policy. Before it became war.

ICR: Names. I need names of the compounds. Locations. Guard rotations. Everything you know.

COR: Sir, I can't-

NLH: You can. The question is whether you do it because you want to help innocent people, or because I make you.

The threat was gentle, almost conversational. Which made it infinitely more terrifying than screaming would have been.

ICR: She's not going to hurt you, son. But I need that information. My mother is in one of those camps. Her little brother. People who never chose this war, never wanted any part of it.

The courier looked between us - the deserter commander who'd killed his own father, and the flame-wielder who could turn him to ash with a thought. Then he pulled out a folded paper from his jacket.

COR: Guard schedules. Compound locations. Everything I could copy before I left.

ICR: Smart boy. And brave. Your parents should be proud.

COR: My parents are dead, sir. Killed in the first monster raids when this all started.

The words hit like physical blows. I looked at this kid - this orphan who'd grown up in a world where fear was the only constant, where every day brought new reasons to hate, new justifications for violence - and saw what I could have become. What I'd chosen not to become.

ICR: I'm sorry for your loss. And I'm sorry for what's been done to you. To all of us.

COR: Are you really going to attack the camps, sir?

ICR: I'm going to get our families back. However that needs to happen.

The boy nodded, understanding the distinction. Then he surprised me.

COR: Sir? When you do... when you go after them... some of the guards are just kids like me. Pressed into service. They don't want to be there any more than the prisoners do.

ICR: Noted. Thank you.

He left after that, disappearing into the morning mist like a ghost carrying messages between worlds. I stood there holding the intelligence he'd given us, feeling the weight of what came next.

NLH: How many people are we talking about?

I scanned the documents. Fortress Blackmoor - two hundred prisoners. Irongate Compound - three hundred. Sanctuary Hills - the name was a cruel joke - four hundred and fifty.

ICR: Fifteen hundred people. Maybe more. Spread across seven compounds.

NLH: And how many guards?

ICR: Too many. They're not taking chances.

I looked around the camp. Fifty awakened humans. Maybe thirty monsters willing to fight alongside us. Against fortified positions, professional soldiers, and the accumulated fear of an entire species.

ICR: We're outnumbered. Outgunned. And if we fail, everyone dies. Our families. Our friends. Us.

NLH: So what's the plan?

ICR: The plan is simple. We don't fight their war. We fight our own.

I called for a gathering. Within an hour, everyone in the camp had assembled in the central clearing. Humans and monsters alike, all listening as I laid out the intelligence we'd gathered.

ICR: They think they know us. Think they know how we'll respond. They expect us to surrender, to trade our principles for our loved ones. Or they expect us to mount a hopeless assault, throw ourselves against their walls until there's nothing left but corpses and regret.

NLH: They're wrong.

ICR: They're wrong. Because they're still thinking like the old world. Like wars are fought with armies and won with superior firepower. But this isn't that kind of war anymore.

I pointed to the map, marking the compounds with red ink.

ICR: Seven targets. Seven simultaneous operations. Not sieges - rescues. We get in, we get our people out, and we disappear before they can mobilize a response.

KAL: Impossible. The compounds are too far apart. We can't coordinate attacks across that distance.

ICR: We don't need to coordinate. We need to trust each other.

I looked around the circle, meeting every eye. Human and monster alike, all united by the same impossible choice.

ICR: Each team takes one compound. Seven teams, Seven targets, Seven chances to save the people who matter most to us. No communication between teams once we deploy. No backup if things go wrong. Each group succeeds or fails on their own.

NLH: What about afterward? Where do we regroup?

ICR: We don't. After this, the old camp is compromised. Everyone scatters. Find new allies, new hideouts, new ways to fight. The age of big deserter settlements is over.

THR: You're asking us to break apart everything we've built here.

ICR: I'm asking you to evolve. They want to force us to choose between our families and our cause. So we choose both. We save our people and we become something they can't predict, can't track, can't cage. No more fixed camps. No more predictable patterns. We become the war they can't fight - the resistance they can't root out because we're everywhere and nowhere at once.

The circle was quiet. I could see them calculating odds, weighing risks, thinking about the people they'd lose if this went wrong.

ICR: I know what I'm asking. I know the price if we fail. But look at what they're doing to us. Look at what they've already taken. Our homes. Our families. Our friends who chose fear over love. I thought about my father, dying with stranger's eyes. About my mother, trapped in a cage built from her own son's choices. They want to break us. Make us choose between everything we believe in and everyone we care about. But there's a third option. We become something new. Something they can't break because we're not what they think we are anymore.

NLH: When do we move?

ICR: Tonight. Under cover of darkness. Seven teams, seven targets, seven chances to prove that love doesn't make you weak - it makes you dangerous.

The meeting dispersed. Teams formed organically - awakened humans pairing with monsters, choosing targets based on proximity and personal stakes. I watched friendships that had been forged in exile now choosing different paths, different battles. It might be the last time we're all together. The last time the deserters exist as a

unified force. Nilah stood beside me as the camp began to empty.
Her flames flickered low, almost meditative.

NLH: Which compound are you taking?

ICR: Sanctuary Hills. My mother's there. My brother.

NLH: I'm coming with you.

ICR: Nilah-

NLH: Don't. Don't you dare try to protect me from this. We started this journey together. We end it together.

I looked at her - my oldest friend, my most trusted ally, the girl who'd chosen to burn bright when the world demanded darkness.

ICR: Seven teams. Seven targets. Seven ways this could go wrong.

NLH: Or seven ways it could go right. Seven ways to prove that fear isn't stronger than love.

That night, as we prepared for operations that would either save our families or doom us all, I realized something. The king had made one crucial mistake in his prediction. He had forgotten that humans weren't just capable of fear. We were also capable of rage. And rage, when it burns clean and bright and true, can light up the darkest corners of the world. Tomorrow, we would either be heroes or martyrs. Either way, we would be free.

End of Chapter 27 **"Retaliation"**

[Straight into the demons' den, this'll feed me well.]

(Chapter 28 || Volume 2) Pollenated.

As soon as the moon took its place in the care of the sky, casting silver threads across the landscape, we all departed towards our targets. My squad left last, so I got to see everyone leave. Everyone left with such determination burning in their eyes, especially Icarus, who seemed so hopeful as he took off, his gaze catching the moonlight like polished metal.

KAL: Bella, we're ready to leave. Snap out of it.

BEL: Ah! Sorry Kael!

KAL: Don't mind it.

Kael patted my head before turning his back and crouching down

onto the ground, his fingers already weaving through the shadows at his feet. I watched him with awe, despite having seen his abilities countless times before. It seemed odd to me how magnificent a human seemed to me, a monster, a humanoid bee with translucent wings and compound eyes that reflected the world in fragments. All the humans looked at me with disgust and fear before, until he showed up and asked why I was sitting alone in the corner of a park, wilted flowers scattered around my hunched form. Now that I remember it...

KAL: What's a lady doing all alone in the corner of the park?

BEL: **startled** Uhh..! Ummmm...

KAL: Oh, sorry but I don't speak your language!

BEL: I'm not talking! You just scared me!

KAL: I apologize ma'am!

BEL: I'm not even that old....

He sat down with me and we watched the flowers together, the petals dancing in the gentle breeze. Time flew as our conversations just kept going and going, his voice warm and accepting, and for the first time in my life, I didn't feel like the weirdo everyone said I was. Getting snapped back to the present, Kael signals everyone to follow him as he falls backwards into the shadows of the night, the darkness swallowing him whole, and everyone following suit. As fast as you could blink, we found ourselves on a hilltop overlooking one of the seven camps, the enemy's torches flickering like dying stars below.

KAL: On my command.

ALL: Yes sir!

Every one of us looked up to him, our leader who saw beyond appearances and judged only by heart.

KAL: Let's take these disappointments down.

We stormed the camp, overpowering the guards with swift precision. Kael moved like liquid shadow through the ruckus, using his manipulation of darkness to sneakily and quickly take down opponents, his blade finding its mark without a sound. It all went smoothly and we started taking the rescued back, their grateful faces illuminated by the dying campfires.

BEL: That went better than expected.

KAL: Yeah, too good.

BEL: Almost like there was no resistance at all.

KAL: Alright, everyone head back through my shadows, since I have to be the last one to enter for them to close properly.

Everyone started to drop through the shadows, disappearing into the void one by one, until only me and him were left standing in the eerily quiet camp.

BEL: Y'know Kael, I've always wanted to ask you something.

KAL: What is it, Bella?

My cheeks turned red, my antennae twitching nervously.

BEL: Could we go out sometime?

He was visibly flustered, a rare crack in his usually composed demeanor.

KAL: For sure! I'd lo... **cough**

My eyes widened as I stared him down, watching in horror as crimson blood began dripping from his mouth like fallen rose petals.

From looking into my eyes, his gaze averts towards his stomach, where a dark blade had been lunged through it, before being pulled back with a sickening squelch. Kael shrieked in pain and I couldn't hold my fear in, my wings trembling uncontrollably. A dark figure loomed over Kael's slumped body, her presence sucking the warmth from the air.

JAD: Don't look so scared, little bee.

BEL: W-Who... are you?!

The figure smirked as she licked the blood off her blade, her tongue running along the metal with disturbing satisfaction.

JAD: I'm what you run from in the *darkness*.

I understood it loud and clear, death was coming for me, and she wore the face of a beautifully terrifying nightmare.

End of Chapter 28
"Pollenated"

[As I predicted - Strike fear into their souls, Jade.]

(Chapter 29 || Volume 2) Into The Dark.

The metallic taste of fear coated my tongue as I stared at the creature before me. But as I watched Kael's blood pool beneath him, something inside me snapped. The fear that had paralyzed me moments before transformed into something else entirely. Pure, burning rage. I swallowed the terror clawing at my throat and launched myself forward, my wings beating furiously as I closed the distance between us. My right fist sailed toward her face in a textbook cross, but she tilted her head with supernatural grace, the punch whistling past her ear. Without missing a beat, I spun on my heel, bringing my left elbow around in a devastating arc aimed at her temple.

Jade ducked low, her movements fluid like water, and swept her leg in a wide circle. I barely managed to hop over the sweep, my wings giving me the lift I needed. As I landed, I immediately threw a rapid combination of jabs, my fists moving in a blur. Left jab, right hook, left uppercut. Each punch was precise, each movement flowing into the next like a deadly dance.

But she was faster. Much faster. She weaved between my strikes with an almost bored expression, her head swaying side to side like a serpent avoiding a mongoose. When my right hook came too close to her jaw, she caught my wrist with lightning speed and twisted. Pain shot up my arm as she used my momentum against me, spinning me around and driving her knee toward my ribs. I twisted desperately, my wings flaring out to create distance, and felt the wind from her knee strike brush against my side. Too close. Way too close.

JAD: Is that all you've got, little bee? I expected more from someone who travels with a shadow manipulator.

Her voice was silk wrapped around steel, beautiful and terrifying. As she spoke, I noticed something that made my blood run cold. The shadows around her feet were moving, writhing like living things. But it wasn't just movement; they were responding to her will, extending and retracting like extra limbs. I feinted left, then drove my right fist toward her solar plexus. She stepped back, but not far enough. My knuckles grazed her stomach, and for a moment, triumph flared in my chest. Then I realized my mistake. She had let me hit her. Her hand clamped down on my extended arm like a vice, and she pivoted on her left foot, using a beautiful judo throw to send me sailing through the air. I hit the ground hard, my

shoulder screaming in protest, but my wings helped me roll with the impact. I came up in a crouch, already planning my next move.

BEL: My turn.

I pressed my palms together and began to concentrate, feeling the familiar warmth building in my chest. Golden honey began to form between my hands, thick and viscous. I shaped it quickly, creating a dozen small spheres that hovered in the air around me like amber satellites. Jade's eyes widened slightly, the first sign of genuine interest I'd seen from her.

JAD: Oh, how delightfully sticky.

I launched the honey spheres at her in rapid succession, each one aimed at a different part of her body. She danced between them with inhuman grace, her body contorting in ways that shouldn't have been possible. But I wasn't done. As the spheres missed their marks, I detonated them, causing the honey to splatter across the ground in strategic patterns. Now came the real trap. I rushed forward, throwing a feint toward her left side before spinning into a devastating roundhouse kick aimed at her ribs. She caught my leg effortlessly, but as she did, her foot slipped on the honey I'd spread beneath her. For just a moment, she was off balance. I used that moment to twist out of her grip, my other leg sweeping toward her ankles. She jumped, her wings finally revealing themselves as they spread wide, catching the moonlight. They were magnificent and terrifying, black as midnight with silver edges that gleamed like razor blades. A bat. She was a bat, just like I was a bee. But as she hovered in the air, something impossible happened. The shadows on the ground began to rise, reaching toward her like grasping fingers. They wrapped around her legs, her waist, her arms, not restraining her but empowering her. She was controlling them, but more than that she was becoming one with them. From his position on the ground, Kael's eyes widened in recognition and horror.

KAL: No... that's not possible...

His voice was barely a whisper, blood still trickling from his lips. I glanced at him for just a moment, confusion flickering across my face.

KAL: She's not just controlling shadows... she's manipulating the darkness itself. The absence of light, the void between spaces. That's... that's beyond anything I can do.

The realization hit him like a physical blow. Everything he could do, she could do better. His shadow manipulation was like a child's toy compared to her mastery of the darkness. She could travel through any shadow, control multiple dark constructs simultaneously, and even phase between the material world and the shadow realm at will.

JAD: Finally, someone who understands the difference between a shadow and true darkness.

She descended slowly, the shadows still writhing around her like living armor. I didn't wait for her to land. I launched myself upward, my wings beating frantically as I aimed a flying knee at her chest. She caught my leg again, but this time I was ready. I grabbed her shoulders and used them as anchor points, swinging my other leg around in a scissor kick aimed at her head. She released my first leg and leaned back, the kick missing by inches. But as she did, I released a stream of honey from my hands, coating her arms and chest.

BEL: Got you!

But my victory was short-lived. The darkness around her began to consume the honey, not just removing it but devouring it entirely. The golden substance simply ceased to exist where it touched the void she commanded.

JAD: Clever, but darkness devours everything, little bee. Even light itself.

She grabbed my wrists and spun me around, building momentum before releasing me. I flew backward, my wings struggling to stabilize my flight. I managed to right myself just before slamming into a tree, my feet touching the bark for just a moment before I pushed off, using the trunk as a springboard to launch myself back at her. This time I came in low, aiming a series of rapid punches at her midsection. One-two-three-four, a combination that would have dropped any normal opponent. But she wasn't normal. She flowed around my attacks like smoke, her body seeming to partially phase in and out of the material world. A backhand caught me across the face, and I felt my lip split. The taste of copper filled my mouth as I staggered backward. But I didn't stop. I couldn't stop. Kael was counting on me. I wiped the blood from my mouth and smiled.

BEL: Is that all you've got?

Her eyes flashed with annoyance, and for the first time, she moved with true killing intent. She came at me like a hurricane of shadow and fury, her fists moving so fast they were barely visible. I blocked what I could, my forearms burning from the impact of her strikes, but too many were getting through. A right cross caught me in the ribs, driving the air from my lungs. An uppercut snapped my head back, stars exploding across my vision. A knee to my stomach doubled me over, and I felt bile rise in my throat. But somehow, I stayed on my feet.

JAD: Just lie down and die, bee. You're only prolonging your suffering.

BEL: Never.

I straightened up, my vision blurry but my determination unwavering. My wings were torn, my body battered, but I raised my fists again. One last stand. One final attempt to protect the person who had shown me kindness when the world had shown me only cruelty. I took a step forward, ready to throw everything I had left into one final attack, when a familiar hand gently patted my head.

KAL: I've got it under control now, Bella.

The voice was steady, calm, and completely without fear.

KAL: How about you pick on someone your own size, you disgusting creature.

JAD: I'll make you eat those words.

I looked up to see Kael standing beside me, his wounds somehow healed, his eyes burning with a darkness that made even Jade's shadows seem pale by comparison.

End of Chapter 29 **"Into The Dark"**

[How amusing! Who would've thought there'd exist a darkness stronger than Jades!]

(Chapter 30 || Volume 2) Soul Extraction.

The air itself seemed to thicken as Kael stepped forward, his presence radiating an authority that made even the shadows tremble. His wounds had closed, but more than that, something

fundamental had changed about him. The darkness that usually danced at his fingertips now seemed to bow in reverence.

JAD: Well, well. The little shadow puppet thinks he can play with the big girls now.

Jade's voice carried its usual mockery, but I caught the slight tension in her shoulders, the way her wings shifted minutely. She sensed it too. This wasn't the same Kael who had fallen moments before.

KAL: Bella, step back. This won't be pretty.

His voice was calm, almost conversational, but it carried the weight of an avalanche. I stumbled backward, my battered body screaming in protest, but I couldn't look away. The space between them crackled with potential violence. Jade struck first. She dissolved into pure shadow, her form scattering like smoke before reforming behind Kael, her clawed hand slashing toward his neck. But Kael was already moving, his body twisting as he caught her wrist, his fingers wrapping around it like steel bands.

KAL: Too slow.

He pivoted on his heel, using her momentum to throw her across the clearing. She hit the ground hard but rolled gracefully, coming up in a crouch with her wings spread wide. The shadows around her began to writhe and coalesce, forming tendrils that lashed out like whips.

Kael didn't dodge. Instead, he raised his hand, and the shadow whips simply... stopped. Not blocked, not redirected, but frozen in place as if time itself had paused around them.

JAD: Impossible. Those are manifestations of pure darkness!

KAL: Darkness is just the absence of light. But what I control... what I am... is the absence of everything.

He closed his fist, and the shadow whips crumbled to dust. Jade's eyes widened, genuine surprise flickering across her features for the first time.

She launched herself into the air, her wings beating furiously as she began to weave between dimensions, phasing in and out of reality. One moment she was solid, diving toward Kael with claws

extended, the next she was translucent, passing through his defensive strikes like mist.

But Kael adapted with terrifying speed. When she phased, he would step sideways into spaces that shouldn't exist, meeting her in the liminal realm between shadow and substance. When she solidified, he was already there, his movements a perfect counter to her attacks.

They danced through the air and across the ground, their battle a symphony of supernatural grace and brutal efficiency. Jade's claws raked across Kael's chest, leaving four parallel cuts that immediately began to heal. Kael's fist connected with her jaw, sending her spinning, but she used the momentum to bring her heel around in a devastating arc that he barely managed to block.

JAD: You're better than I expected, shadow walker. But you're still just playing with echoes of true power.

She raised both hands, and the very air around them began to darken. Not the gentle darkness of night, but something deeper, more primal. The kind of darkness that existed before the first star was born, the void that consumed everything and gave nothing back.

KAL: Cute trick. But watch this.

Kael spread his arms wide, and reality around him began to... thin. Not darken, but become less substantial, as if the very concept of existence was being drained away. Where Jade's darkness was overwhelming presence, Kael's power was perfect absence.

They collided in the center of the clearing, their opposing forces creating a maelstrom of shadow and void. The ground beneath them cracked and splintered, unable to withstand the pressure of their clashing abilities. Trees in the distance began to wither, their life force being drawn into the vortex of their battle.

Jade phased through his guard and drove her knee toward his solar plexus. He caught her leg and spun, throwing her toward a boulder. She spread her wings and used them to brake her flight, landing feet-first against the stone and immediately pushing off to launch herself back at him.

This time she came in low, her claws aimed at his legs. He jumped,

flipping over her attack, and drove his elbow toward her spine. She rolled forward, avoiding the strike, and came up with an uppercut that would have decapitated a normal person.

Kael leaned back, the punch whistling past his chin, and grabbed her extended arm. He pulled her off balance and drove his knee toward her ribs. She twisted desperately, taking the strike on her hip instead of her more vulnerable torso.

JAD: Not bad for a pretender. But you're still holding back, aren't you? Still trying to be human.

KAL: And you're still talking too much.

He released her arm and stepped back, his breathing slightly labored. Around them, the battle had carved a perfect circle of destruction, the ground scorched and cracked from their supernatural conflict.

JAD: Fine. If you won't show me your true power, I'll drag it out of you.

She began to rise into the air, not through flight but through sheer force of will. The darkness around her condensed and solidified, forming a throne of pure shadow beneath her. Her wings spread wide, and her eyes began to glow with an inner light that somehow made the darkness around her even more absolute.

KAL: So that's how it's going to be.

Kael's expression didn't change, but something in his posture shifted. The casual confidence was gone, replaced by something colder, more focused. The shadows at his feet began to retreat, not in fear but in reverence, as if they recognized something greater than themselves.

JAD: You forced my hand, shadow walker. I didn't want to use this so early, but you've proven more troublesome than expected.

The air around her began to vibrate with power, and I felt something deep in my chest respond, like a tuning fork struck by an invisible hand. This was different from their earlier battle. This was something primal, something that touched the very essence of what they were.

JAD: *SOUL EXTRACTION, THRONE ABOVE THE EVERENGULFING*

DARKNESS!

The words hit the air like a physical force, and reality itself seemed to bend around her. The throne beneath her solidified further, becoming more real than the ground we stood on. Darkness poured from her form like liquid night, and her presence expanded until it felt like she was everywhere at once.

But Kael didn't flinch. If anything, he seemed to grow calmer, more centered. He closed his eyes for a moment, and when he opened them, they held the cold emptiness of deep space.

KAL: You want to see what I really am? Fine. *But don't say I didn't warn you.*

He raised his hands, and the very air around him began to lose substance. Not darkness, not shadow, but pure negation. The absence of hope, of meaning, of everything that made existence worthwhile.

KAL: *From the hollow spaces between heartbeats, from the silence that follows the final breath, from the emptiness that remains when all stars have burned out and all gods have forgotten their names... I call upon the truth that underlies all existence. That nothing matters, that all struggles are meaningless, that every victory turns to ash and every love becomes dust. In the end, we are all alone in the dark, screaming into a void that will never answer back. Let the weight of infinite meaninglessness crush all hope, let the realization of our cosmic insignificance shatter every dream, let the cold truth of entropy claim what was never meant to last.*

The words carried the weight of infinite emptiness, and as they left his lips, I finally understood what he truly was.

KAL: *SOUL EXTRACTION, ETERNAL VOID WHERE ALL DREAMS DIE!*

Not a manipulator of shadows, but an avatar of nihilism itself. The void that existed in the spaces between thoughts, the emptiness that came after all light had died and all hope had been extinguished. The two powers collided, and the world held its breath.

End of Chapter 30
"Soul Extraction"

[**Blooky here! This is the soul extraction I mentioned back then! So hype right?!**]

(Chapter 31 || Volume 2) Child Of Nihilism.

The moment their powers collided, reality itself seemed to recoil. The air between them crackled with invisible lightning, and the very fabric of existence began to warp and bend under the strain of their opposing forces.

Jade's darkness was magnificent in its totality. It swept across the battlefield like a living thing, consuming light, sound, and hope with equal hunger. Her throne of shadow towered above the devastation, and from it, she commanded legions of dark tendrils that reached out like the arms of some primordial deity. This was the darkness that had existed before creation, the void that would remain after the last star died.

But Kael's void was something else entirely.

Where Jade's darkness was overwhelming presence, Kael's domain was perfect absence. It didn't fight against her shadows; it simply made them irrelevant. The concept of darkness itself began to lose meaning in the face of pure nothingness. Her tendrils of shadow didn't shatter or dissolve; they simply ceased to have ever existed.

JAD: What... what are you?

For the first time since the battle began, genuine fear crept into Jade's voice. Her throne of darkness began to flicker, its solid form becoming uncertain as Kael's void expanded outward in perfect, terrifying silence.

KAL: I am the end of all things. The final truth that waits behind every lie we tell ourselves about meaning and purpose.

His voice carried no malice, no triumph, no emotion at all. It was the voice of entropy itself, patient and inevitable. The ground beneath his feet didn't crack or burn; it simply became less real, as if the universe was slowly forgetting it had ever existed.

Jade's wings beat frantically as she tried to maintain her position, but her throne was crumbling. The darkness that had seemed so absolute moments before now appeared thin and fragile, like

shadows cast by a dying candle.

JAD: This is impossible! Darkness is eternal! It was here before light, and it will be here after!

KAL: Darkness requires light to define it. Shadow needs substance to cast it. But what I am... what I represent... *exists even in the absence of absence itself.*

The void around him pulsed once, gently, like a heartbeat. And with that single pulse, Jade's entire domain began to unravel. Her throne of shadow didn't explode or shatter; it simply became less and less real until it was nothing more than a half-remembered dream.

She fell from the sky, her wings no longer able to support her against the weight of absolute meaninglessness. But even as she tumbled toward the ground, her form was becoming translucent, insubstantial.

JAD: No... I won't... I can't...

Her voice was fading, not because she was dying, but because the very concept of her existence was being gently erased. She hit the ground with barely a sound, her body already more memory than matter.

KAL: Rest now. In the void, there is no pain, no struggle, no need to prove your worth. There is only peace.

Jade's eyes, once blazing with inner fire, now held only confusion and a strange kind of relief. She looked up at Kael, and for a moment, she seemed almost grateful.

JAD: Thank you... for showing me... how tired I was...

Her form dissolved completely, not into shadow or darkness, but into the gentle emptiness that exists between thoughts. She was gone, not destroyed but simply... unremembered.

The void around Kael began to contract, reality slowly reasserting itself as his power withdrew. The scorched earth regained its substance, the withered trees remembered how to be green, and the air itself seemed to sigh with relief.

I watched all of this from where I had fallen, my body too battered to move but my mind struggling to process what I had just

witnessed. The man who had sat with me in the park, who had shared quiet conversations about flowers and dreams, was something far beyond my understanding.

KAL: Bella?

His voice was soft now, human again, filled with concern. The cosmic emptiness was gone, replaced by the warm familiarity I had come to cherish. He knelt beside me, his hands gentle as he helped me sit up.

BEL: Kael... what... what are you?

He was quiet for a long moment, his eyes focused on something in the distance. When he spoke, his voice carried the weight of eons.

KAL: I'm someone who learned that nothing lasts forever. That all the things we fight for, all the dreams we chase, all the love we give... in the end, it all fades away. But...

He looked at me then, and his eyes held something I hadn't expected. Warmth. Hope. Something that contradicted everything I had just witnessed.

KAL: But maybe that's what makes it beautiful. Maybe the fact that nothing lasts forever is exactly why it matters right now.

I tried to stand, my legs shaking from exhaustion and pain, but he was there instantly, his arms supporting me before I could fall. The touch was so gentle, so careful, as if he was afraid I might dissolve like Jade had.

BEL: I don't understand. If you believe nothing matters, then why...?

KAL: Why did I save you? Why do I care? Why does any of it matter to me?

He smiled then, a real smile that reached his eyes and made the lingering darkness around us seem less oppressive.

KAL: Because even if nothing lasts forever, you matter to me right now. And right now is all we really have, isn't it?

I felt tears welling up in my eyes, not from pain but from something deeper. Relief, gratitude, and something else I didn't dare name. My

wings, torn and battered as they were, tried to flutter weakly.

BEL: Kael... I thought I was going to lose you. When she stabbed you, when I saw the blood...

KAL: Hey. I'm here. I'm not going anywhere.

He pulled me closer, and I felt the warmth of his embrace chase away the lingering chill of the void. His arms wrapped around me carefully, mindful of my injuries, and I buried my face against his chest. For a moment, the world was quiet except for the steady rhythm of his heartbeat.

BEL: Thank you. For everything. For seeing me as more than just a monster.

KAL: You were never a monster, Bella. You were just someone who needed a friend.

I pulled back slightly to look at him, and saw that his eyes were bright with unshed tears. The man who had just erased another being from existence was crying because he thought I might have been hurt.

BEL: So... about that date...

He laughed, a sound that was more beautiful than any music I had ever heard.

KAL: I think I'd like that very much.

As we held each other in the aftermath of battle, I noticed the sky beginning to change. The deep blues and purples of night were giving way to softer hues, and on the horizon, the first golden rays of dawn were beginning to creep behind the mountains.

BEL: Look.

I pointed toward the sunrise, and we both turned to watch as the sun painted the sky in brilliant oranges and pinks. The light touched the mountains first, setting their peaks ablaze, before slowly spreading down to bathe the world in warmth.

KAL: Beautiful.

BEL: Yeah. It is.

We stood there together as the sun rose, his arms still wrapped

around me, and for the first time in my life, I felt truly at peace. Nothing about the future was certain. There would be more battles, more struggles, more moments of fear and doubt. But right now, in this moment, I was exactly where I belonged.

The sun climbed higher, chasing away the last of the night's shadows, and with it came the promise of a new day. A day where a monster and a void-walker could find something worth fighting for in each other's arms.

KAL: Come on. Let's go home.

BEL: Home sounds perfect.

And as we walked toward the rising sun, I realized that sometimes the most beautiful things in life are the ones that don't last forever. Sometimes, the knowledge that a moment will end is exactly what makes it precious.

Behind us, the battlefield was already beginning to heal, nature reclaiming what had been torn asunder. Soon, there would be flowers growing where blood had been spilled, and the only evidence of our struggle would be the memories we carried with us.

But that was okay. Some things were meant to fade, and some things were meant to endure. And love, I was beginning to learn, had a way of surviving even the deepest void.

End of Chapter 31 **"Child Of Nihilism"**

[Seems like that kid finally tore his chains off.]

(Chapter 32 || Volume 2) Fleet-Footed Rabbit.

The morning sun cast long shadows across the valley as Matta crouched on the hilltop, her rabbit ears twitching as she surveyed the camp below. Her pink nose quivered as she caught the scent of unwashed bodies and despair drifting up from the prisoner compound. This was supposed to be the second of the seven camps, but it looked almost identical to the first one Belle's squad had hit. Too identical.

MTA: Alright everyone, this looks like another standard rescue operation. Same layout, same guard patterns, same everything.

She turned to address her squad, but they were already settling into comfortable positions on the hilltop. Marcus, a hulking bear of a man, was leaning against a tree with his arms crossed. Silva, whose snake-like features gleamed in the morning light, was coiled around a boulder looking bored. Even Pip, the youngest member of their team, was sitting cross-legged in the grass, picking at wildflowers.

MAR: You sure you don't need backup down there, boss?

MTA: I appreciate the concern, but we've seen this setup before. Standard perimeter, twelve guards, maybe fifteen prisoners. I can have them out in under three minutes.

SLV: Three minutes? That's generous.

Matta's ears flicked with mild annoyance. She knew her squad trusted her abilities, but their casual attitude toward the missions was starting to grate on her. These weren't training exercises. These were people's lives.

MTA: Just because it's easy doesn't mean we should get complacent. Keep your eyes open and be ready to move if something goes wrong.

PIP: Nothing ever goes wrong with your runs, Matta. You're like a blur down there.

She sighed, her fluffy tail twitching with nervous energy. They weren't wrong. Her speed had made these rescue operations almost routine. While other squads had to plan elaborate assaults and coordinate complex maneuvers, she could simply dash in, unlock the cages, and escort the prisoners to safety before the guards even knew what was happening. But something about this felt off. The setup was too clean, too predictable. After Belle's squad had hit the first camp, why hadn't the others increased their security?

MTA: I'm going in. Standard signals if you spot anything unusual.

She stood up, her powerful legs already tensing for the sprint down the hillside. Her enhanced physiology was built for this kind of work: explosive speed, incredible agility, and stamina that could keep her moving for hours without rest. In the field, she was a force of nature.

MAR: Good hunting, boss.

Matta nodded once, then launched herself down the slope. Her feet

barely touched the ground as she bounded between trees and rocks, her white fur catching glimpses of sunlight as she moved. The world blurred around her as she picked up speed, her heart settling into the steady rhythm that came with maximum velocity.

The camp's perimeter fence was a joke. She cleared it in a single bound, landing silently in the courtyard. The guards were exactly where she'd expected them to be, their patrol patterns as predictable as clockwork. She'd mapped their movements from the hilltop, timing their rotations to the second.

MTA: Too easy.

She whispered the words as she moved through the camp like a ghost, her speed making her nearly invisible to the human eye. The prisoners were kept in crude wooden cages scattered throughout the compound, their faces gaunt with hunger and despair.

PR1: What... who are you?

MTA: Rescue team. Stay quiet and follow my lead.

She produced a set of lock picks from her utility belt, her fingers working with practiced efficiency. The locks were simple, designed more for intimidation than actual security. Within seconds, the cage doors were swinging open.

MTA: Move to the treeline. My team will escort you to safety from there.

The prisoners needed no further encouragement. They moved as quickly as their weakened bodies would allow, hope replacing the hopelessness in their eyes. Matta darted between the remaining cages, her lock picks working overtime as she freed prisoner after prisoner.

GRD: Hey! What's that noise?

One of the guards had finally noticed something was wrong, but by the time he turned to investigate, Matta was already on the other side of the compound. She allowed herself a small smile as she worked. Sometimes being the fastest thing on two legs had its advantages.

MTA: Last cage. Let's wrap this up.

She approached the final prisoner, a young woman who looked barely older than herself. As she worked on the lock, the woman grabbed her arm.

PR2: Thank you. I thought... I thought no one was coming.

MTA: Someone's always coming. That's what I do.

The lock clicked open, and Matta stepped back to gesture toward the treeline where the other prisoners were already disappearing into the forest. But as she took that step backward, something caught her foot. Not something. Someone.

Her enhanced reflexes tried to compensate, but the angle was wrong, the leverage unexpected. She tumbled forward, her arms windmilling as she fought to regain her balance. For someone who could run faster than most vehicles, falling down was both embarrassing and disorienting.

She hit the ground hard, her palms scraping against the rough dirt. Her ears rang slightly from the impact, and for a moment, she just lay there, trying to process what had happened.

MTA: What the hell?

She pushed herself up on her hands and knees, looking around for whatever had tripped her. Her eyes tracked backward along her path, searching for the obstacle that had brought her down. Instead, she found a boot. A very large, very deliberate boot that had been placed exactly where she would step.

Her gaze traveled up from the boot, past muscular legs and a broad chest, until she was looking into the face of someone who definitely hadn't been there moments before. He was tall, probably human, with dark hair and eyes that held just a hint of amusement. But what struck her most was his smile. It was the kind of smile that said he knew something she didn't.

SLZ: Slow down there, rabbit. You might get hurt.

His voice was calm, almost conversational, but there was something underneath it that made her fur stand on end. This wasn't a guard. This wasn't even someone who belonged to this camp. This was someone who had been waiting for her.

MTA: Who are you?

She started to rise, her legs coiling beneath her, ready to spring back into action. But something in his posture, in the way he stood perfectly balanced and relaxed, made her pause.

SLZ: Someone who's been very curious about the famous speed demon everyone's been talking about. I have to say, the reputation is well-deserved. That was quite a show.

He applauded slowly, mockingly, and Matta felt her temper flare. She'd been set up. This whole camp, this whole easy rescue, it had all been a trap designed to draw her in.

MTA: You're working with the king.

SLZ: Working with them? Oh, no. I'm working for someone much more interesting than these small-time rulers.

He gestured dismissively at the now-empty camp around them. The guards were nowhere to be seen, probably fled or dealt with by her squad. But this man remained, standing in the middle of the compound like he owned it.

SLZ: I'm here for you, specifically. My employer has been very interested in meeting the rabbit who can't be caught.

Matta's muscles tensed, her body dropping into a combat stance despite her preference for speed over fighting. Whatever this was, whoever this person worked for, she had a feeling the easy days were over.

MTA: Well, you've got my attention. Now what?

The stranger's smile widened, and in that moment, she realized that everything that had happened so far had been exactly according to someone else's plan. The question was: whose plan, and what did they want with her?

SLZ: Now, we have a little chat. Unless, of course, you'd prefer to run away?

The challenge in his voice was unmistakable, and despite every instinct telling her to retreat, Matta found herself staying put. She was a squad leader, and squad leaders didn't run from fights. Even when they probably should.

End of Chapter 32

"Fleet-Footed Rabbit"

[Not running away? Good little rabbit.]

(Chapter 33 || Volume 2) Hunters' Manners.

The silence stretched between them like a taut wire, broken only by the distant sound of her squad calling to the escaped prisoners. Matta kept her stance low, her powerful legs ready to propel her in any direction, but something about the stranger's casual confidence made her hesitate.

MTA: So you know who I am. Mind returning the favor?

SLZ: Where are my manners? Salazar, bounty hunter.

Specialization: fast-moving targets with poor decision-making skills.

His smile revealed teeth that were just slightly too sharp, and Matta caught the faint scent of sulfur on the air. Dragon. That explained the confidence, the way he stood like gravity was optional, the heat shimmer that she now noticed distorting the air around him.

MTA: Bounty hunter. Let me guess, someone wants me alive?

SLZ: Alive, yes. Intact? Well, that depends on how cooperative you're feeling.

He rolled his shoulders, a gesture that seemed casual until she noticed the way his jacket stretched across his back. There was something moving beneath the fabric, something that wanted to unfold.

MTA: And if I'm not feeling particularly cooperative?

SLZ: Then we do this the fun way.

Matta's ears flicked forward, catching the subtle shift in his breathing, the way his weight distributed across both feet. He was getting ready to move, and she'd learned long ago that the best defense was a good offense.

She exploded forward, her legs driving her across the twenty feet between them in a blink. Her fist was aimed at his solar plexus, a strike that would drop most opponents before they even realized they were in a fight.

Salazar caught her wrist an inch from his chest.

SLZ: Fast. But predictable.

He pivoted, using her momentum against her, and sent her tumbling across the courtyard. She rolled with the throw, coming up in a crouch, her eyes wide with surprise.

MTA: How did you-

SLZ: You're not the only one with enhanced reflexes, rabbit. Though I have to admit, that was impressive. Most people can't even see me move.

He flexed his fingers, and she saw the faint shimmer of scales along his knuckles. The air around him was getting warmer, and she realized with growing alarm that he hadn't even broken a sweat.

MTA: Dragon-born. Should have guessed from the ego.

SLZ: Half-dragon, actually. The human side keeps me humble.

He launched himself at her, not with her explosive speed but with the fluid grace of a predator. His movements were economical, precise, each strike calculated to test her defenses rather than overwhelm them.

Matta ducked under a sweeping punch and countered with a rapid series of jabs to his ribs. Her fists connected with what felt like armored plating, and the impact sent shockwaves up her arms.

SLZ: Good form. But you're hitting like you're sparring, not fighting for your life.

His elbow came down toward her head, and she barely managed to roll aside. The blow cratered the ground where she'd been standing, sending up a small cloud of dust and debris.

MTA: Trust me, I'm taking this seriously.

She sprang backward, putting distance between them, and began to circle. Her speed was still her greatest advantage, but he'd already proven he could track her movements. She needed to find another angle.

SLZ: You know, I've been studying your techniques. The way you move, the way you fight. You're holding back.

MTA: What?

SLZ: All that speed, all that power, and you're still trying to

minimize damage. Even now, you're pulling your punches.

He was right, and the realization hit her like a physical blow. Even in life-or-death situations, she found herself restraining her strength, afraid of what she might do if she truly let loose.

MTA: Maybe I just don't want to hurt you.

SLZ: How considerate. Unfortunately, I don't share that remorse.

He breathed out, and the air around him began to shimmer with heat. The temperature in the courtyard spiked, and Matta felt sweat beading on her forehead despite the morning chill.

SLZ: Let me show you what a real fight looks like.

He moved then, faster than before, his form blurring as he closed the distance between them. Matta tried to dodge, but the heat was making her sluggish, her enhanced reflexes struggling against the oppressive temperature.

His fist caught her in the stomach, driving the air from her lungs and sending her skidding backward. She gasped, trying to recover, but he was already there, his knee coming up toward her chin.

She managed to get her arms up, blocking the strike, but the impact sent her tumbling again. This time, she didn't recover as quickly. Her chest was burning, not from exertion but from the superheated air she was being forced to breathe.

MTA: What... what are you doing?

SLZ: Dragon fire isn't just about flames, rabbit. It's about heat. About making the air itself your enemy.

He stalked toward her, and she could see the scales along his arms becoming more pronounced, taking on a bronze-like sheen. The heat radiating from him was intense enough to make her vision waver.

MTA: That's... that's cheating.

SLZ: That's survival.

She tried to spring away, to use her speed to escape the bubble of heat surrounding him, but her legs felt heavy, unresponsive. The superheated air was sapping her strength, making every breath a struggle.

SLZ: You're not used to fighting someone who can match your speed and exceed your power, are you?

His voice was conversational, almost gentle, but she could hear the excitement underneath. He was enjoying this, the challenge of facing someone who had been considered untouchable.

MTA: I'm... I'm just getting started.

But even as she said it, she knew it wasn't true. Her enhanced physiology was betraying her, her body struggling to cool itself in the face of his escalating heat. She was breathing hard, her movements becoming more sluggish with each passing second.

SLZ: You know what your problem is? You've been fighting humans too long. You've forgotten what it's like to face someone who operates on the same level as you.

He reached out, almost casually, and grabbed her arm. The contact was like touching a furnace, and she cried out as the heat seared through her fur and into her skin.

MTA: Let go!

She tried to pull away, but his grip was like iron. The scales on his arm were fully manifested now, bronze and beautiful and utterly unyielding.

SLZ: I could end this right now. Cook you from the inside out. But where's the fun in that?

He released her, and she stumbled backward, clutching her burned arm. The pain was excruciating, but more than that, she was struggling to breathe. The air around him was like standing inside an oven.

MTA: You're... you're insane.

SLZ: I'm thorough. My employer wants to know exactly what you're capable of. Can't do that if I take you down too quickly.

He took a step forward, and she took two steps back. For the first time in her life, she was outmatched. Not just physically, but strategically. He had planned this, studied her, prepared for every advantage she might have.

MTA: Who... who hired you?

SLZ: Someone who appreciates talent. Someone who has plans for skills like yours.

The heat was becoming unbearable now. She could feel her strength draining away, her enhanced metabolism struggling to keep up with the demands of fighting in what amounted to a furnace. Her breathing was coming in short, desperate gasps.

SLZ: You're done, rabbit. Accept it gracefully, and this doesn't have to get any worse.

But Matta wasn't ready to give up. Not yet. She had a squad depending on her, prisoners who needed rescuing, and a reputation that had been built on never backing down from a fight. Even when she probably should.

MTA: I'm not... I'm not done yet.

SLZ: No? Then show me what you've got.

The challenge in his voice was unmistakable, and despite her body's protests, despite the heat that was making her vision swim, Matta forced herself to stand straight.

She was barely able to breathe, her lungs burning with every inhalation. But she was still standing, still fighting, still refusing to give up. And from the look in Salazar's eyes, the way his bronze scales were beginning to take on a deeper, more ominous hue, she had a feeling he was just getting started.

End Of Chapter 33 **"Hunters' Manners"**

[You 'bout to cry on me, rabbit?]

(Chapter 34 || Volume 2) The Empress Of Haste.

The heat was suffocating now, pressing against her like a living thing. Matta's vision blurred as she struggled to draw breath, her enhanced lungs working overtime just to keep her conscious. For the first time in her life, speed - her greatest gift, her defining trait - was useless against an opponent.

SLZ: Come now, rabbit. This is getting pathetic.

His voice seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere, distorted by the waves of heat radiating from his form. The bronze scales covering his arms had spread to his neck and face, and his eyes held the predatory gleam of a dragon savoring its victory.

But as the heat pressed in around her, as her body began to fail her, Matta's mind drifted backward through time. Back to when she was six years old, small even for her age, with oversized ears and a fluffy tail that the other children loved to tease.

"Look at the little bunny! Hop, hop, hop!"

The memory hit her like a physical blow. The playground behind the orphanage, the circle of children pointing and laughing, the way her face had burned with shame. She'd been so small then, so helpless, with nothing but her speed to protect her.

"Leave me alone!"

"Make us, bunny girl!"

She remembered running. Not with purpose, not with direction, just pure panic-driven flight. Her little legs had carried her faster than anyone expected, faster than seemed possible. The other children had given up chasing her after the first hundred yards, but she'd kept running, tears streaming down her face.

That had been the beginning. The moment she'd discovered that when everything else failed, she could always run.

SLZ: You're reminiscing. How touching. But nostalgia won't save you.

The heat spiked again, and Matta felt her knees buckle. She was going to lose. After years of being untouchable, of being the fastest thing on two legs, she was going to be defeated by someone who could simply make the air too hot to breathe.

Her speed meant nothing. Her greatest strength, her only reliable defense, was worthless against an opponent who could turn the very atmosphere into a weapon.

Fear spread through her soul like ice water, cold and paralyzing. She was that little girl again, helpless and alone, with nowhere to run and no one to help her.

"Matta."

The voice wasn't Salazar's. It was softer, warmer, filled with a kindness that cut through the heat haze like a blade. She remembered that voice, remembered the first time she'd heard it.

"My name's Icarus and I've been watching you run."

The memory came flooding back with startling clarity. She'd been seventeen, new to the resistance, still figuring out how to use her abilities in combat. Icarus had been waiting for her after a training session, his eyes bright with something that might have been wonder.

"You're fast. Faster than anyone I've ever seen."

"It's just genetics. Enhanced physiology."

"No. It's more than that. When you run, really run, it's like watching pure freedom in motion. I want to see you run as fast as you can one day. Not for training, not for missions. Just... because you can."

The memory hit her like lightning, and suddenly the heat didn't seem so oppressive. The fear in her soul began to transform, crystallizing into something harder, more focused.

Speed wasn't just her ability. It was her essence, her truth, the thing that made her who she was. And she had never, not once in her entire life, truly pushed herself to see how fast she could go.

MTA: I want to see you run as fast as you can one day.

She whispered the words under her breath, barely audible over the crackling heat. Salazar paused, his enhanced hearing catching the sound.

SLZ: What was that?

But Matta wasn't listening anymore. Something deep inside her chest was awakening, something that had been sleeping since the first time she'd discovered her speed. It was more than enhanced physiology, more than genetic modification. It was the pure, distilled essence of motion itself.

She closed her eyes and reached out with her soul, searching for something she'd never consciously sought before. The source of her speed, the divine spark that had made her faster than physics should allow.

MTA: *Mercury of the silver paths... Hermes of the golden sandals... Swift-footed messenger of the gods...*

The words came from somewhere deep in her genetic memory, passed down through generations of her kind. The old prayers, the ancient invocations that her people had once whispered to the god of speed and travel.

SLZ: What are you mumbling about?

MTA: *I have run your roads since I could walk, carried your messages in my breath, honored your gift with every step. I have never asked for more than you gave freely. But now... now I need to see how fast I can truly go.*

The air around her began to change, not cooling but becoming somehow thinner, more responsive. The heat was still there, but it seemed less solid, less able to hold her down.

SLZ: What's happening?

For the first time since the fight began, uncertainty crept into his voice. The temperature around him spiked again, but Matta was no longer struggling to breathe. She was finding spaces between the heat waves, gaps in the oppressive air where speed could exist.

MTA: *Grant me this one moment of perfect velocity. Let me touch the speed that exists beyond speed, the motion that transcends motion itself.*

Her eyes snapped open, and they were no longer the soft brown they'd always been. They blazed with silver light, the color of mercury, the color of divine swiftness.

MTA: *Soul Extraction, Flicker That Escapes The Light.*

The words hit the air like a thunderclap, and reality around her... shifted. Not darkened like Jade's power, not voided like Kael's, but accelerated. Time itself seemed to slow as she stepped into a realm where speed was not just movement but existence itself.

Salazar's eyes widened as he saw her change, saw the silver light emanating from her form. He opened his mouth to speak, but the words came out distorted, stretched by the temporal distortion around her.

SLZ: Impossi-

But she was already moving. Not running, not even really moving in any conventional sense. She was translating herself through space, becoming pure velocity, pure motion without the burden of a physical form constrained by the laws of physics.

She existed in the space between seconds, in the gap between heartbeats, in the silver paths that connected all points in space instantaneously. The heat couldn't touch her here, couldn't slow her down, couldn't even perceive her presence.

Salazar tried to turn, tried to track her movement, but she was everywhere and nowhere, flickering in and out of existence faster than perception could follow. His dragon reflexes, his enhanced senses, his supernatural awareness - none of it was enough to follow something that moved at the speed of light itself.

She materialized directly in front of him, her fist extended, moving at a velocity that turned her arm into a projectile that could pierce steel. The impact wasn't just physical - it was the collision of absolute speed with absolute stillness, and the laws of physics bent and broke around the point of contact.

The blow punched through his chest like it was made of paper, leaving a perfect circular hole where his heart had been. Bronze scales, supernatural durability, dragon-born resilience - none of it mattered when faced with speed that transcended the material world.

Salazar looked down at the hole in his chest, his expression one of complete bewilderment. Blood began to pour from the wound, but it seemed to fall in slow motion, as if time itself was still catching up to what had happened.

SLZ: How... how did you...?

Matta stepped back, the silver light fading from her eyes, her breathing steady and controlled. The heat around them was dissipating as Salazar's power failed, but she barely noticed. She

was looking at her hands, at the faint silver traces that still danced along her fingertips.

MTA: You studied my techniques. You learned my patterns. You prepared for every advantage I might have.

She looked up at him, and her expression was no longer the desperate fear of moments before. It was cold, arrogant, the look of someone who had just discovered they possessed power beyond imagination.

MTA: But you made one mistake. You assumed you knew what I was capable of.

Salazar stumbled backward, his hands pressed against the wound in his chest. The bronze scales were fading, his draconic features reverting to merely human as his life force ebbed away.

SLZ: This... this isn't possible. I'm half-dragon. I'm supposed to be... supposed to be...

MTA: Superior? Untouchable?

She scoffed, the sound carrying a disdain that was entirely new to her voice. The old Matta, the one who pulled her punches and worried about minimizing damage, seemed like a distant memory.

MTA: You're supposed to be a lot of things. But faster than the speed of light isn't one of them.

He fell to his knees, his breathing growing labored. The hole in his chest was perfectly circular, cauterized by the sheer speed of her strike. No blood, no ragged edges, just an absence where his heart and a good portion of his lung had been.

SLZ: Who... who are you?

MTA: I'm someone who just remembered what it feels like to run as fast as I can.

She turned away from him, her tail flicking dismissively. The silver light was gone now, but she could still feel it humming in her veins, waiting to be called upon again. The power was hers now, truly hers, and she would never again be that helpless little girl on the playground.

Behind her, Salazar collapsed completely, his body finally

succumbing to the wound that had destroyed his vital organs. But Matta didn't look back. She had places to be, people to rescue, and a reputation to rebuild. After all, she had a squad waiting for her on the hilltop. And she had a feeling they were going to be very surprised by what she had become.

End Of Chapter 34
"The Empress Of Haste"

[Now it's your turn, Icarus.]

(Chapter 35 || Volume 2) The Frozen Path.

The third camp lay sprawled across the valley like a scar on the landscape, its wooden watchtowers and crude fencing a testament to human cruelty. But as Neru approached with his squad, the morning mist seemed to thicken around them, and the temperature dropped with each step he took.

His breath came out in visible puffs despite the late spring warmth, and frost began to form on the grass beneath his feet. The change was subtle at first, but by the time they reached the perimeter, ice crystals were dancing in the air around him like tiny, beautiful harbingers of death.

NER: Standard approach. Same as always.

His voice was barely above a whisper, but it carried the weight of absolute cold. The pale skin of his face seemed almost translucent in the morning light, and his eyes held the colorless depths of a winter sky. When he spoke, his breath formed clouds that lingered in the air long after the words had faded.

TM1: You sure you're feeling alright, boss? You look even paler than usual.

NER: I'm fine. Let's just get this over with.

He raised his hand, and the air around them began to shimmer with cold. Ice formed along his fingertips, not the crude chunks that most people associated with frozen water, but delicate, intricate patterns that seemed to grow and evolve with their own purpose. The ice wasn't just frozen water - it was crystallized potential, each formation a work of art that happened to be capable of cutting through steel.

TM2: Never gets old, watching you work.

NER: It's not about the spectacle. It's about efficiency.

The squad approached the camp's main gate, their footsteps crunching on the frost that had formed in Neru's wake. The guards in the watchtowers should have spotted them by now, should have been raising alarms and preparing defenses. Instead, there was only silence.

NER: Something's wrong.

He extended his senses, feeling for the heat signatures that would indicate human presence. The guards were there, he could sense their body warmth, but they weren't moving. They were just... standing there, frozen in place like statues.

TM1: Boss, look at the gate.

The main entrance to the camp stood wide open, its heavy wooden doors hanging on their hinges as if they'd been abandoned in haste. But more disturbing than the open gate was what lay beyond it - a path of perfect ice leading from the entrance to the prisoner compounds, as if someone had been expecting them.

NER: Stay alert. This feels like a trap.

But even as he said it, he knew it wasn't. The ice on the path wasn't foreign, wasn't created by some enemy with similar abilities. It was his ice, formed by his power, stretching out ahead of them like a red carpet made of frozen perfection.

They entered the camp, and immediately the first guard came into view. He was standing at his post, his rifle still slung over his shoulder, but his eyes were fixed on Neru with an expression of absolute terror. The guard's lips were moving, but no sound came out, and his entire body was trembling despite the fact that he made no move to flee or fight.

GD1: Please... please don't...

The words came out as barely a whisper, and the guard's weapon clattered to the ground as his hands refused to hold it steady. Behind him, more guards were emerging from buildings and watchtowers, but none of them showed any sign of resistance. They simply stood there, staring at Neru with the same terrified

reverence.

NER: Lay down your weapons and step away from the prisoners.

He didn't raise his voice, didn't threaten or posture. He simply spoke, and the temperature around them dropped another ten degrees. The guards complied instantly, their weapons hitting the ground with a series of metallic clanks that echoed through the suddenly quiet camp.

GD2: We surrender. We surrender completely. Just... just don't freeze us.

NER: I'm not here for you. I'm here for them.

He gestured toward the prisoner compounds, and ice began to form along the locks and chains that held the cages shut. But this wasn't the violent, destructive ice of battle. This was precise, surgical, designed to free rather than harm. The locks didn't shatter - they simply ceased to function as the ice invaded their mechanisms and rendered them inoperable.

TM2: This is too easy, boss. Way too easy.

NER: I know.

The prisoners were emerging from their cages, their faces filled with hope and confusion. They looked at Neru with the same mixture of fear and gratitude that he'd seen so many times before. To them, he was salvation wrapped in winter's embrace.

PR1: Thank you. Thank you so much.

NER: Don't thank me yet. Just get to the extraction point.

His squad began herding the prisoners toward the camp's exit, but Neru lingered, his pale eyes scanning the compound for any sign of the trap he knew had to be coming. The guards were still standing where they'd dropped their weapons, none of them moving, all of them watching him with that same terrified fascination.

GD1: That cold... I've never felt anything like it.

NER: Just stay back and no one gets hurt.

GD2: It's like winter itself is walking among us.

The guards shuddered, but not from the temperature. There was something primal about the fear in their eyes, the kind of terror that came from facing a force of nature rather than a mere human

being.

TM1: Boss, we're ready to move out. Prisoners are secure.

NER: Good. Let's go.

He turned to leave, ice crystals swirling around him like a miniature blizzard, when the explosion shattered the morning quiet. The blast came from behind them, from the direction of the camp's main building. The shockwave was accompanied by a wave of heat so intense that it instantly melted the frost on the ground and sent the guards scrambling for cover. But more than the heat, more than the sound, it was the presence that made Neru stop in his tracks. Someone was coming. Someone whose very existence was an affront to everything Neru represented.

NER: Get the prisoners to safety. Now.

TM2: What about you?

NER: I'll catch up.

The figure that emerged from the smoke and flames was human, but barely. His skin was flushed red from heat, and sweat poured from his body in rivers that immediately turned to steam in the superheated air around him. His clothes were singed and smoking, and his eyes held the manic gleam of someone who lived for the thrill of combat.

SHN: Well, well. The famous Ice Prince. You're even paler than I expected.

The man's voice was rough, gravelly, as if he'd been breathing smoke and fire for years. Which, Neru realized as he took in the stranger's appearance, he probably had. The air around the newcomer shimmered with heat waves, and the ground beneath his feet was beginning to crack and smoke.

NER: And you are?

SHN: Shen. Professional pyromaniac, and your opposite in every way that matters.

He spread his arms wide, and the temperature around them began to spike. Not gradually, like controlled heat, but violently, desperately, as if he was trying to burn away the very concept of cold.

SHN: I've been waiting for this moment for months. The ultimate

test - combustion against ice, heat against cold, passion against that dead, emotionless void you call a soul.

Neru felt the familiar chill spreading through his veins, his body's natural response to the presence of his elemental opposite. Where Shen radiated heat and chaos, Neru embodied cold and order. They were natural enemies, fundamental forces that could not coexist in the same space.

NER: I don't have time for this.

SHN: You don't have a choice. My employer wants to see what happens when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object. And frankly, so do I.

The man dropped into a fighting stance, his body language screaming barely contained violence. Sweat continued to pour from his skin, but it was immediately replaced by more as his internal temperature climbed higher and higher.

SHN: Come on! Show me what ya' go-

But Shen didn't wait to finish the sentence. He launched himself forward with explosive force, his body trailing smoke as he closed the distance between them in a single, devastating charge.

End of Chapter 35 **"The Frozen Path"**

[Shatter that frozen popsicle, Shen.]

(Chapter 36 || Volume 2) Limit Break.

The collision between explosion and ice created a shockwave that shattered every window in the camp. Where Shen's explosive charge met Neru's defensive wall of crystalline ice, the air itself seemed to scream in protest. Steam erupted in billowing clouds, obscuring the battlefield in a haze of superheated vapor.

SHN: Come on! Is that all the famous Ice Prince has to offer?

Shen's voice boomed through the mist, accompanied by the sound of small explosions rippling across his skin. His body was a furnace of barely contained violence, each movement generating enough heat to melt steel. He didn't just fight - he detonated with every

strike.

NER: You talk too much.

Neru's response was calm, almost whispered, but it carried through the chaos with perfect clarity. The mist around him began to crystallize, forming a maze of ice spikes that erupted from the ground in geometric patterns. Not random, not chaotic, but perfectly ordered formations that channeled the battlefield to his advantage.

Shen laughed and threw himself forward again, his fist connecting with one of the ice spikes. The explosion that followed wasn't just heat - it was concussive force, shattering the crystalline barrier and sending razor-sharp fragments in all directions.

SHN: Boom! Did you feel that one?!

But Neru was already moving, gliding across the frost-covered ground with supernatural grace. Where his feet touched, the earth froze solid, creating a path of perfect ice that allowed him to maneuver with impossible speed. His pale eyes tracked Shen's movements, calculating angles and trajectories with mechanical precision.

NER: Your technique is crude.

He gestured, and the ice fragments that Shen had shattered suddenly reversed direction, reforming into a swirling vortex of crystalline death. Each shard moved with purpose, guided by Neru's will rather than mere physics.

Shen's response was to detonate himself.

The explosion wasn't localized to his fists or feet - it was his entire body, a full-power burst that turned him into a living bomb. The ice shards vaporized instantly, and the shockwave sent Neru sliding backward across his own frozen path.

SHN: That's more like it! You actually felt that one!

Blood trickled from the corner of Neru's mouth, but his expression remained unchanged. If anything, he seemed more focused, more present. The temperature around him began to drop rapidly, not gradually but in sudden, violent shifts that made the air itself

brittle.

NER: Enough games.

He raised both hands, and the very moisture in the air began to crystallize. Not just water vapor, but oxygen itself, creating a field of suspended ice crystals that caught and reflected the morning light like a galaxy of tiny stars. Each crystal was a potential weapon, a fragment of frozen potential waiting to be directed.

SHN: Now we're talking!

Shen's body began to glow, literally radiating heat like a miniature sun. The ground beneath his feet cracked and smoldered, and the air around him shimmered with thermal distortion. He was no longer just using explosions - he was becoming one, his entire being a contained detonation waiting to be released.

They moved at the same time.

Neru's ice crystals launched forward in perfect formation, each one following a calculated trajectory designed to funnel Shen into a kill zone. But Shen didn't try to dodge. Instead, he met the attack head-on, his body erupting in a series of controlled detonations that shattered the crystals while propelling him forward like a rocket.

They collided in the center of the camp, ice meeting explosion in a symphony of destruction. The ground cratered beneath them, and the remaining buildings groaned as the shockwaves tore through their foundations. Guards who had been watching from what they thought was a safe distance found themselves thrown to the ground by the force of the impact.

SHN: You're stronger than I expected!

His fist connected with Neru's chest, and the explosion that followed sent the Ice Prince flying backward. But even as he flew, Neru was working, his hands weaving patterns in the air that left trails of frost. By the time he hit the ground, he was already encased in a sphere of protective ice that absorbed the impact.

NER: And you're exactly as reckless as I expected.

The ice sphere shattered outward, becoming a storm of frozen projectiles that Shen had to detonate himself to avoid. But each

explosion cost him, and Neru could see the strain beginning to show. The maniac's movements were becoming more erratic, more desperate.

SHN: Reckless? I prefer the term 'enthusiastic'!

He slammed both palms against the ground, and the earth beneath Neru's feet erupted in a pillar of fire and force. The Ice Prince leaped sideways, his body twisting in midair as he launched a counterattack - a spear of crystalline ice that moved faster than sound.

Shen caught it.

Not with his hands, but with his entire body, allowing the spear to pierce his shoulder before detonating himself around it. The explosion shattered the ice from within, but the effort left him gasping, his body smoking from the internal damage.

SHN: That... that actually hurt. I'm impressed.

NER: You're insane.

SHN: And you're boring. But at least you're skilled enough to make this interesting.

They circled each other now, both breathing hard, both bleeding from dozens of small cuts and burns. The camp around them was a wasteland of ice and ash, the perfect battlefield for their opposing elements.

NER: This is pointless. We're too evenly matched.

SHN: Are we? Because I haven't shown you my real power yet.

Shen's grin was manic, his eyes blazing with an inner fire that had nothing to do with his abilities. He was enjoying this, reveling in the violence and chaos. This wasn't just a fight for him - it was art.

SHN: You want to see what happens when an explosion becomes personal? When I stop being about heat and start being about pure, undiluted destruction?

NER: I want to see you shut up.

But even as he spoke, Neru could feel something building in his opponent. Not just heat, not just explosive force, but something deeper. Something that touched the very essence of what Shen was.

SHN: My employer told me you ice types are all the same. Cold, distant, emotionless. But I don't think that's true, is it? I think you feel everything - you just freeze it before it can hurt you.

Neru's eyes narrowed. The temperature around him dropped another ten degrees.

SHN: That's it, isn't it? All that ice, all that control - it's just a shell. A way to keep the world from seeing what you really are underneath.

NER: You don't know anything about me.

SHN: I know enough. I know you're holding back. I know you're afraid of what happens if you let go completely. And I know-

He was interrupted by a pulse of energy that washed over the battlefield like a wave. Not heat, not cold, but something else entirely. Something that made the air itself seem to thicken with potential.

Both fighters stopped, their attention drawn to the source of the disturbance. In the distance, beyond the camp's perimeter, darkness was rising. Not the darkness of night, but something deeper, more fundamental. The kind of darkness that existed in the spaces between stars.

NER: That's... that's impossible.

His voice was barely a whisper, but Shen heard it. More than that, he felt it - the recognition, the understanding that something had changed in the world around them.

SHN: What is that?

NER: Kael. He's... he's shattered his limits.

The realization hit him like a physical blow. He had worked with Kael before, had seen his abilities, had thought he understood the scope of his power. But this was different. This was fundamental change, the kind of transformation that came once in a lifetime.

SHN: Who's Kael?

NER: Someone who just proved that we've all been playing in the shallow end of the pool.

He looked at Shen, and for the first time since their battle began, his expression showed something other than cold calculation. There

was respect there, and something else - anticipation.

NER: You wanted to see my real power? You wanted to know what happens when I stop holding back?

SHN: That's what I've been asking for this whole time.

NER: Then you'd better be ready. Because if Kael has broken through to that level, then I can't afford to stay in the shallows anymore.

The air around them began to change, not just growing colder but becoming something else entirely. The ice at Neru's feet wasn't just frozen water anymore - it was crystallized potential, the physical manifestation of absolute zero made manifest.

SHN: Finally! Now you're talking my language!

His body began to glow again, but this time it wasn't just heat. It was something more primal, more essential. The space around him didn't just warm - it became the concept of explosion itself, the moment before detonation frozen in time and space. They faced each other across the ruined battlefield, two forces of nature preparing to unleash their true essence.

NER: *From the heart of winter's embrace, from the silence that follows the final frost, from the perfection that exists only in absolute stillness... I call upon the truth that underlies all order. That entropy can be reversed, that chaos can be crystallized, that even the heat death of the universe can be frozen in perfect, eternal beauty. Let the absolute zero of possibility crystallize all potential, let the perfection of ice preserve what was never meant to change, let the cold truth of stasis claim what was always meant to be eternal.*

SHN: *From the first spark that ignited the universe, from the violence that births stars, from the chaos that creates all possibility... I call upon the truth that underlies all change. That destruction is creation, that endings are beginnings, that every moment of peace is just the pause between explosions. Let the infinite potential of annihilation scatter all limitation, let the perfect chaos of detonation shatter every boundary, let the violent truth of change claim what was never meant to last.*

The guards who had been watching from the sidelines began to retreat, their instincts warning them that what came next would be beyond anything they had witnessed before.

NER: *Soul Extraction, Concept Of Absolute Zero.*

SHN: *SOUL EXTRACTION, SPARK THAT SHATTERS THE SKY!*

The words hung in the air between them, and the world held its breath, waiting to see what would happen when absolute order met perfect chaos.

End of Chapter 36
"Limit Break"

[Thank you for giving me a good spark, Shen.]

(Chapter 37 || Volume 2) Snowflake.

I wasn't always like this. The thought drifted through Neru's mind as the Soul Extraction energies swirled around him, time seeming to slow to a crawl. In the space between heartbeats, between the moment of invocation and the moment of impact, memory took hold.

I was seven when it started.

The kitchen had been warm that morning, filled with the smell of his mother's cooking and the sound of his father's laughter. Normal sounds, normal smells, the kind of mundane perfection that only existed in the moments before everything changed forever.

"Neru, come help me with breakfast."

His mother's voice, calling from what felt like a lifetime ago. He had been reaching for the milk pitcher when it happened - the first time his power manifested. The liquid had frozen solid in his small hands, the ceramic cracking from the sudden temperature change.

"Mom, I think I broke something."

The fear in his own voice, young and uncertain. His mother had rushed over, had seen the frozen milk and the frost spreading across the kitchen counter. But instead of anger or fear, there had been understanding in her eyes.

"Oh, sweetheart. It's starting."

Because his mother had known. Had been waiting for this moment,

dreading it, preparing for it. In their family, the cold was hereditary, passed down through generations like a beautiful curse that grew stronger with each passing year.

"Am I sick?"

"No, baby. You're gifted. But that doesn't mean it's going to be easy."

His mother had been right. The gift had grown stronger each day, harder to control, more isolating. Other children had stopped playing with him after the incident at school - the day he had accidentally frozen the entire playground during recess. The swing sets had been coated in ice, the slides too slippery to use, and twenty-three children had been sent home with mild frostbite.

I tried to warn them. Tried to tell them to stay away.

But children didn't listen to warnings. They were drawn to the spectacle, the way snow and ice formed around him like a personal winter. They thought it was magic, a party trick, something wonderful and safe.

They were wrong.

The memory shifted, jumping forward. He was twelve now, standing in the ruins of what had been his childhood home. The fire department had done their best, but there was only so much they could do when the source of the blaze was still inside, still burning, still feeding on everything it touched.

"We'll find somewhere else to live."

His father's voice, hollow and defeated. The insurance company had called it an electrical fire, but he knew better. He had seen the scorch marks, smelled the distinctive odor of his uncle's power. His mother's brother, the one who had been born with fire instead of ice, who had always resented the cold side of the family.

"He killed her because she was protecting me."

The truth he had never spoken aloud, not even to himself. His uncle had come that night, had demanded that he be sent away to a facility where his powers could be contained. His mother had refused, had stood between them, had paid the price for her

defiance.

I wasn't strong enough to save her.

The memory jumped again. Fifteen years old, standing in the snow outside the facility where they had finally sent him. Not because his father didn't love him, but because he was afraid. Afraid of what he might become, afraid of what he might do to the people he cared about.

"I'll visit every month. I promise."

He had kept that promise for exactly six months before the visits stopped. The letters continued for another year, growing shorter and more distant with each one, until they stopped entirely.

I told myself I didn't care. That I was better off alone.

But the lie had tasted bitter, even to him. The facility had been full of others like him, people with powers that made them dangerous to be around. He had thought he would find kinship there, understanding, maybe even friendship.

Instead, I found fear.

Even among the gifted, he was different. The cold that followed him was deeper, more absolute than anything the other ice-powered residents could produce. He froze their practice rooms, their common areas, their relationships before they could even begin.

"He's not like us."

The whispers followed him through the halls, through the training sessions, through the sleepless nights when he lay awake listening to the frost form on his windows. They were right, of course. He wasn't like them. He was something else, something colder, something that existed in the spaces between warmth and life.

I was eighteen when I killed someone for the first time.

The memory was crystal clear, preserved in perfect detail like everything else his power touched. The facility had been attacked by a group of anti-gifted extremists, people who believed that powered individuals were a threat to normal humanity. They had come armed with weapons designed to neutralize abilities, to

capture or kill anyone who couldn't pass for baseline human.

"Please, I surrender. I'll come quietly."

The guard had been young, maybe his own age, his eyes wide with terror as he faced him in the facility's main corridor. He had dropped his weapon, had raised his hands, had done everything right according to the rules of civilized warfare.

I killed him anyway.

Not out of malice, not out of anger, but because he had been afraid. Afraid of being taken, afraid of being used, afraid of never seeing the sky again. The ice had formed around the guard so quickly that he hadn't even had time to scream. One moment he was pleading for his life, the next he was a perfect sculpture of frozen terror.

That's when I learned the truth about myself.

He wasn't just gifted. He wasn't just powerful. He was a force of nature wearing human skin, a winter storm that had learned to walk upright and pretend it had feelings.

The facility director found me afterward, standing over his body.

"Neru, what have you done?"

"What I had to do."

"This isn't what your mother would have wanted."

"My mother is dead. And if she had been stronger, if she had been more like me, maybe she would still be alive."

The memory shifted one final time, to the moment that had defined everything that came after. He was twenty-one, standing in the director's office, listening to him explain why he was being recruited for a special program.

"We need someone who can do what others can't. Someone who can make the hard choices."

"You mean someone who can kill without feeling guilty about it."

"If that's how you want to phrase it."

He had accepted, of course. Not because he believed in the cause, not because he thought he was making the world a better place, but because it gave him purpose. Structure. A reason to exist that didn't involve pretending to be something he wasn't.

I told myself I was helping people. Saving the innocent, stopping the guilty.

But the truth was simpler and more selfish. He was helping himself. Every mission, every target, every perfect victory was proof that he was in control, that he could channel his nature into something useful rather than something destructive.

Until today.

The memory snapped back to the present, to the battlefield where he faced Shen, to the moment where he had finally decided to stop pretending to be anything other than what he was. The Soul Extraction energies were building around him, crystallizing the very air into patterns of impossible beauty and absolute lethality.

Shen wanted to see my real power. He wanted to know what I was underneath all the control.

Across the battlefield, he could see Shen preparing his own technique, his body becoming a living bomb, his very existence a celebration of chaos and destruction. They were opposites in every way that mattered, but in this moment, he understood Shen perfectly.

He's not insane. He's honest.

The realization hit him like a physical blow. Shen didn't hide what he was, didn't pretend to be something softer or more palatable. He was destruction incarnate, and he owned that truth without apology or shame.

Maybe it's time I did the same.

The Soul reached its peak, and reality around him began to crystallize. Not just the air, not just the ground, but the very concept of motion itself. Time slowed, then stopped, then began to move backward as entropy itself was frozen in place.

This is what I really am. This is what I've always been.

Not a hero, not a villain, not even a person in any meaningful sense. He was winter itself, the space between seasons, the moment when everything alive paused to acknowledge the inevitability of ending.

And maybe that's okay.

The technique completed, and the world around him became a sculpture of frozen perfection. The air crystallized into geometric patterns of impossible beauty, the ground became a mirror of polished ice, and in the center of it all, Shen stood motionless, his body encased in a shell of crystalline eternity.

He's not dead. Just... preserved.

The ice around Shen was different from what he usually created. Not the brutal, shattering cold of combat, but something gentler, more perfect. Shen was suspended in a moment of pure potential, his expression frozen in the instant before his own technique would have detonated.

He pushed me to this. Made me stop pretending.

He walked across the frozen battlefield, his footsteps the only sound in the perfect silence. The ice beneath his feet didn't crack or shift - it was beyond such mundane concerns as pressure or weight. This was crystallized possibility, the physical manifestation of absolute zero made manifest.

For the first time in my life, I used my full power without holding back.

He stopped in front of Shen's frozen form, studying the expression on his face. Even encased in ice, he looked... satisfied. As if this was exactly what he had been hoping for.

He wanted to see what I really was. Now he knows.

The ice around Shen was beautiful, he had to admit. Not the crude formations of his normal techniques, but something artistic, something that honored the moment they had shared. Shen was a work of art now, a perfect sculpture that captured the essence of his explosive nature in crystalline stillness.

I should leave him like this. It would be safer for everyone.

But even as he thought it, he knew he wouldn't. Not because he was merciful, not because he felt guilty, but because Shen had earned something better than eternal preservation. He had pushed him to transcend his limits, had forced him to confront the truth of what he was.

That deserves acknowledgment.

He placed his hand against the ice, feeling the perfect structure of the crystals beneath his palm. With a thought, he began to warm them, not with heat but with the simple absence of his power. The ice didn't melt - it simply stopped being, the crystals dissolving back into ordinary air.

Shen gasped as the ice released him, his body suddenly free to move again. He stumbled forward, his eyes wide with shock and something else - wonder, maybe, or recognition.

SHN: Did you see it? Did you see what we became?

NER: I saw.

SHN: That was... that was incredible. You're incredible.

He looked at Shen, this man who had nearly killed him, who had pushed him to the very edge of his control, who had somehow managed to make him feel something other than cold emptiness.

NER: Thank you.

SHN: You can pay me back by letting me follow you.

NER: Guess I wouldn't mind a bit of heat.

The words came out softer than he had intended, but he didn't try to take them back. They were true, and truth was something he had decided to embrace.

End of Chapter 37 **"Snowflake"**

[Ruthless, but not merciless.]

(Chapter 38 || Volume 2) The Artist.

The fourth camp stretched across the mountainside like a festering wound, its guard towers casting long shadows in the afternoon sun. From her position on the overlooking ridge, Illia could see the

prisoners huddled in their compounds, their despair a tangible thing that made the air itself seem heavy.

She pulled out her canvas - a simple piece of cloth stretched over a wooden frame, no bigger than a dinner plate. Her paintbrush was equally unremarkable, just wood and bristles that had seen better days. But in her hands, these mundane tools became instruments of creation itself.

ILA: Let's see... what does this place need?

She dipped her brush in the palette of colors that floated beside her, suspended in the air by her will. Not paints in any traditional sense, but liquid possibility, the raw materials of reality itself waiting to be given form.

ILA: Freedom, I think. Definitely freedom.

She began to paint, her strokes confident and sure. On the canvas, the camp began to take shape - not as it was, but as it should be.

The guard towers became flowering trees, their watchtowers transformed into birds' nests where songbirds perched and sang. The razor wire became streamers of silk ribbon that fluttered in a breeze that smelled of spring flowers.

ILA: And the guards... hmm.

She paused, her brush hovering over the canvas. The guards were a problem. They were just doing their jobs, following orders, trying to make a living in a world that didn't offer many choices. She could paint them away entirely, but that felt... wasteful.

ILA: Butterflies. Definitely butterflies.

She began to work again, her brush dancing across the canvas with practiced ease. Where the guards had been, she painted clouds of butterflies in every color imaginable - monarchs and swallowtails, blues and whites, species that had never existed but should have, creatures of pure beauty that served no purpose except to make the world a little more wonderful.

As she painted, reality began to shift. The change started small - a single flower blooming where a guard tower had stood, a butterfly landing on a prisoner's shoulder. But as she continued to work, the transformation accelerated. The entire camp began to reshape

itself, bending to match the vision on her canvas.

PR1: What... what's happening?

PR2: The guards... they're turning into butterflies!

PR3: The gates are opening! The locks are becoming flowers!

Illia smiled as she added the finishing touches to her masterpiece. The canvas now showed a meadow where the camp had been, filled with freed prisoners dancing among the butterflies and flowers. And as she painted the final stroke, reality completed its transformation.

ILA: There we go. Much better.

She stepped back to admire her work, both on the canvas and in the world around her. The camp was gone, replaced by exactly what she had painted - a paradise of freedom and beauty where suffering had once reigned.

PR1: Thank you! How did you-

ILA: Art, sweetheart. Art is the only magic that really matters.

She was about to pack up her supplies when she felt it - a presence approaching from the forest, moving with predatory grace. The temperature didn't change, the air didn't shift, but something primal in her hindbrain began screaming warnings.

???: Impressive. But unauthorized.

The figure that emerged from the treeline was tall and lean, dressed in military fatigues that seemed to absorb light rather than reflect it. Their face was hidden behind a tactical mask, but their eyes were visible - cold, calculating, utterly without mercy.

???: You've interfered with an official operation. That cannot be permitted.

ILA: Oh, please. Official operation? You mean the systematic abuse of innocent people?

???: I mean the maintenance of order. The preservation of the status quo. The prevention of chaos.

They raised their hand, and the air around them began to shimmer. Not with heat or cold, but with something else - a sense of wrongness, of reality being twisted into shapes it was never meant to hold.

???: You paint pretty pictures, little girl. But I unmake them.

The meadow around them began to flicker, like a television with bad reception. The flowers started to wither, the butterflies began to fall from the sky, and the freed prisoners looked around in growing terror as their paradise started to collapse.

ILA: Now that's just rude.

She dipped her brush in a new color - not paint, but pure defiance made manifest. This was her creation, her vision, her gift to the world. No one had the right to unmake it.

???: You cannot fight doubt, child.

ILA: Maybe. But not today.

She raised her brush, ready to paint new defenses, new protections, new ways to preserve what she had created. The tension in the air was palpable, two fundamental forces preparing to clash - creation against destruction, art against entropy, hope against despair.

The masked figure began to move, their power building, reality warping around them like a heat mirage. The very ground beneath their feet started to crack and crumble, as if the earth itself was being unmade.

???: You have potential, I'll give you that. But potential without wisdom is just-

ILA: Boooriiiiinggg...

She flicked her brush once, a single casual stroke across the air itself. The masked figure stopped mid-sentence, their eyes widening in shock and confusion.

ILA: You know what your problem is? You take yourself way too seriously.

Where the figure had been standing, there was now nothing but empty air. Not destroyed, not defeated, just... absent. As if they had never existed at all.

ILA: I mean, all that dramatic posturing about entropy and decay and the meaninglessness of existence. So tedious. Here's a life lesson, courtesy of yours truly: if you're going to threaten someone, maybe don't do it to the person who can literally paint you out of

existence.

She turned back to her canvas, adding a few more details to ensure her work would be permanent. A few strokes here, a touch of color there, and the meadow would be locked in place, immune to any further attempts at unmaking. She didn't turn around, didn't stop painting, but her voice carried a new edge.

ILA: Try hiding your presence better.

She stuck her tongue out at the empty space, a gesture so casual and dismissive that it somehow made her casual erasure of a presumably powerful opponent even more insulting. The presence in the shadows stirred, and she felt its attention like a physical weight.

ILA: Next time try bringing someone stronger to fight me, Akumu.

She spoke the name like a curse, like a challenge, like a recognition of something that had been hunting her for longer than she cared to remember.

ILA: Still lurking in the shadows, I see. Still too much of a coward to face me directly.

The presence neither confirmed nor denied her words, but she could feel its amusement, cold and ancient and utterly without warmth. She finished her painting with a flourish, sealing the meadow in place for all eternity. Around her, the freed prisoners were already beginning to explore their new paradise, their faces filled with wonder and gratitude.

ILA: Oh well, I've got work to do. People to save, realities to improve, and boring antagonists to paint out of existence.

She packed up her supplies, her movements casual and unhurried despite the ancient malevolence watching from the shadows. Let it watch. Let it study her. Let it try to understand what it was dealing with.

ILA: After all, I'm just a girl with a paintbrush. What's the worst that could happen?

The presence in the shadows seemed to smile at that, and for just a moment, the temperature around her dropped several degrees. But

Illia didn't shiver, didn't falter, didn't show any sign of fear.

ILA: See you around, Akumu. Try not to be too predictable next time.

She walked away, leaving the meadow and its eternal spring behind her, while in the shadows, something ancient and patient continued to watch, and plan, and wait for the perfect moment to strike.

End of Chapter 38 **"The Artist"**

[What an annoying little girl.]

(Chapter 39 || Volume 2) You Can't Escape.

I've been on duty for three years, and I've seen my share of horrors. The screams of prisoners, the casual cruelty of my fellow guards, the way hope dies in a person's eyes when they realize no one is coming to save them. I've learned to live with it all, to compartmentalize the guilt and focus on the paycheck that keeps my family fed. But tonight is different.

It started with Rodriguez going missing from Tower Three. One moment he was at his post, the next his radio went silent. I assumed he'd fallen asleep - wouldn't be the first time. But when the relief shift arrived, they found the tower empty, Rodriguez's equipment still propped against the wall, his coffee still warm.

Rodriguez? Come in, Rodriguez.

Static answered me through the radio, the kind of electronic whisper that made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. I switched frequencies, tried the emergency channel, but got nothing. It was as if Rodriguez had simply vanished into thin air.

Martinez, check the perimeter. See if Rodriguez went to take a leak or something.

Copy that, Captain.

But Martinez never reported back either. I watched through my binoculars as Martinez's flashlight beam swept across the

compound, moving in the systematic pattern we'd all been trained to follow. The beam reached the eastern fence, paused, then started to swing back toward the main building. But halfway through its arc, the light simply disappeared. Not like Martinez had turned it off - like it had been swallowed by something darker than the night itself.

Martinez? Martinez, report!

Nothing. Just the static that was becoming sickeningly familiar. I felt sweat beading on my forehead despite the cool night air. Two guards don't just vanish. Not without a trace. Not without a sound. My hand moved instinctively to my blade, thumb flicking off the sheath.

All units, sound off. Roll call, now.

Tower One, all clear, sir.

Tower Two, no movement, captain.

Tower Three?

Silence.

Tower Four?

More silence.

Perimeter teams, report.

The radio crackled with static, and through the electronic hiss, I could swear I heard something else. Something that might have been breathing, or might have been the wind. But the night was perfectly still.

Captain, I'm getting a bad feeling about this.

Stay at your post. I'm going to-

Peterson's transmission cut off mid-word. I spun toward Tower One, raising my binoculars, but the guard post was empty. The window was open, Peterson's equipment scattered across the floor as if he'd been dragged away mid-sentence.

My hands were shaking now. Five years of military service and I'd never felt fear like this. It was primal, instinctive, the kind of terror that came from being hunted by something that existed beyond human understanding.

Chen, get down here. Now.

Captain, I- What the fuck is tha-?!

The radio went dead. I was alone. The floodlights that normally illuminated the compound were still functioning, casting their harsh white glow across the empty pathways. But somehow, the light seemed weaker than usual, as if something was drinking in the illumination and leaving only hollow shadows behind.

I grabbed my blade and started moving toward the main building, my boots echoing hollowly on the concrete. Every shadow looked like a hiding place, every sound made me spin around with my weapon raised. But there was nothing. No movement, no signs of struggle, no indication of what had taken my men.

The prisoners in their cells were silent, which was unusual. Normally, they'd be talking, crying, making the small sounds of human misery that had become the soundtrack to my nights. But now they were all huddled against the far walls of their cells, staring out into the compound with the same terror I felt growing in my chest.

Hello? Can anyone hear me?

My voice echoed through the empty space, bouncing off the walls and coming back to me distorted and strange. I tried the radio again, cycling through every frequency, but got nothing except static that seemed to whisper secrets I didn't want to understand.

That's when I saw the claw marks. They were carved deep into the concrete wall of the main building, four parallel gouges that looked like they'd been made by something with talons the size of railroad spikes. The marks were fresh, concrete dust still scattered on the ground below them, and they led from the wall toward the shadows between the buildings.

I followed the trail with my flashlight, my finger tight on the trigger of my revolver. The claw marks continued along the ground, scratching through concrete and metal alike, leading deeper into

the compound. Whatever had made them was big, powerful, and completely silent.

The trail led to the armory. The heavy steel door was hanging open, twisted off its hinges like it was made of paper. Inside, the weapons lockers had been torn apart, not looted but destroyed, as if something had been looking for threats and eliminating them. Bows were bent in half, swords scattered across the floor, and the emergency flare was missing.

I backed away from the armory, my flashlight beam shaking as my hands trembled. Whatever was hunting us, it wasn't human. It was something else, something that could tear through steel and concrete like they were cardboard. That's when I heard it...

Hello? Can anyone hear me?

A low growl, coming from somewhere in the darkness behind me, imitating my voice. Not the growl of a dog or any animal I recognized, but something deeper, more intelligent. Something that carried the weight of patience and hunger and absolute certainty.

I spun around, my blade raised, my flashlight cutting through the darkness. But there was nothing there. Just empty space and the echo of my own breathing.

Who's there? Show yourself!

The growl came again, closer this time, and I realized it wasn't coming from in front of me. It was coming from above. I looked up, and my blood turned to ice.

Something was moving across the roof of the main building, something large and predatory that moved with the fluid grace of a natural killer. I couldn't make out details in the darkness, but I could see the shape of it - bipedal but wrong, too large, too powerful, with limbs that seemed to bend in ways that human anatomy shouldn't allow.

My flashlight beam found it for just a moment, and I caught a glimpse of matted fur and muscles that rippled under midnight-black skin. But it was the eyes that froze me in place.

They were red. Not the reflected red of an animal caught in headlights, but the burning, intelligent red of something that had

chosen to hunt, chosen to kill, chosen to enjoy every moment of terror it inflicted.

The thing on the roof tilted its head, studying me with those terrible eyes, and I realized it had been playing with us. All my missing guards, all the systematic elimination of threats - it had been herding us, isolating us, picking us off one by one for its own amusement.

The creature dropped from the roof, landing in the compound with a sound like thunder. It didn't land like a human would - it landed like a predator, all four limbs absorbing the impact with fluid grace. When it rose to its full height, I realized it was nearly seven feet tall, covered in coarse black fur that seemed to absorb light rather than reflect it.

Its face was the stuff of nightmares - a wolf's muzzle filled with teeth like broken glass, but with intelligence burning behind those red eyes. Intelligence and hunger and something that might have been amusement.

I grabbed my revolver and finally managed to pull the trigger.

The muzzle flash lit up the compound for a split second, and in that brief moment of illumination, I saw the creature hadn't moved. It was still standing there, watching me, completely unbothered by the bullets that should have torn it apart.

When the flash faded, I could see the bullets scattered on the ground at its feet, flattened as if they'd hit solid steel.

The thing that had been hunting us all night took a step forward, and I heard a sound that would haunt my dreams for whatever brief time I had left. It was laughing. Not the howl of a wolf or the roar of a beast, but genuine laughter, deep and rich and absolutely terrifying.

Copy that, Captain.

I turned to run, but my legs wouldn't obey me. I was frozen, caught between the primal urge to flee and the absolute certainty that running would only make the hunt more enjoyable for the creature behind me. The laughter stopped.

Captain, I'm getting a bad feeling about this.

The compound fell silent except for the sound of my own ragged breathing and the hammering of my heart. I couldn't hear footsteps, couldn't hear breathing, couldn't hear anything that would indicate where the creature had gone.

I forced myself to turn around, raising my flashlight with hands that shook so badly I could barely hold it steady. The creature was gone.

But I knew it wasn't far. I could feel its presence like a weight in the air, could sense its attention focused on me with the intensity of a laser. It was still hunting, still playing its game, and I was the last piece on the board.

I started backing toward the main building, my revolver useless but still clutched in my hands like a security blanket. Every shadow looked like a hiding place, every sound made me spin around expecting to see those red eyes staring back at me.

The prisoners were still silent in their cells, but I could see their eyes watching me through the bars. They knew what was happening, knew what was coming, and there was something in their expressions that looked almost like satisfaction. As if they were glad to see their captors finally getting a taste of true terror.

I reached the main building and pressed my back against the wall, trying to cover all angles at once. My radio was dead, my weapon was useless, and my men were gone. I was alone with something that had been systematically hunting us for sport.

The floodlights flickered once, twice, then went out completely.

The compound was plunged into absolute darkness, and in that darkness, I heard the soft sound of claws clicking against concrete. The creature was moving again, circling me, taking its time. It knew I couldn't see it, couldn't fight it, couldn't run.

I fumbled for my flashlight, but my hands were shaking so badly I dropped it. The light rolled across the ground, its beam spinning wildly before coming to rest pointing at the far wall.

That's when I saw them.

Two red eyes, glowing in the darkness like embers from hell itself. They were watching me from maybe ten feet away, patient and predatory and absolutely certain of their victory.

I opened my mouth to scream, but no sound came out. My throat was frozen, my breath caught in my chest, my entire body locked in place by the kind of terror that reaches into your soul and rewrites your understanding of what it means to be afraid.

The eyes moved closer, and I realized this was how it ended. Not with gunfire or explosions or any of the dramatic deaths I'd imagined for myself. Just me, alone in the dark, facing something that had been born to hunt and kill and feed on fear.

The last thing I saw before those red eyes filled my vision was the creature's smile - a predator's grin full of teeth like broken glass, and the absolute certainty that death had finally come for me.

End of Chapter 39 **"You Can't Escape."**

[Should we have left Fenris to deal with the camp? Y'know how scary he gets at night.]

(Chapter 40 || Volume 2) Royal Presence.

The outer wall fell easier than expected. Too easy. I should have known then that something was wrong. Nilah's flames carved through the compound's defenses like a blade through paper, melting steel bars and turning wooden barricades to ash. The guards - most of them barely older than the courier who'd brought us here - scattered at the first sign of real resistance. Just as the boy had promised, they were conscripts, not soldiers.

ICR: Third building. The intelligence said they're keeping the families in the dormitories.

NLH: I can hear them. Voices. Maybe thirty people.

We moved through the shadows between buildings, avoiding the sweeping searchlights from the towers. The compound was larger than I'd expected - too large for the number of guards we'd encountered. Another red flag I chose to ignore.

ICR: There. Window on the second floor. Bars are thin enough to melt through.

NLH: On it.

She pressed her palms against the metal, heat radiating in waves.

The bars glowed orange, then white, then simply... weren't there anymore. I boosted myself up, then pulled her through the window.

The room inside was sparse. Wooden bunks, thin mattresses, a single lamp casting weak light across huddled figures. And there, in the corner, looking smaller and more fragile than I'd ever seen her-

ICR: Mom.

ELN: Icarus? Is that... how did you...?

I crossed the room in three steps, pulling her into an embrace that felt like coming home after years of exile. She was thinner than I remembered, her hair more gray, but her eyes - her eyes were still the same warm brown that had comforted me through childhood nightmares.

ICR: We're getting you out of here. All of you.

ELN: Your brother - he's in the men's dormitory. Building five. Icarus, they separated us when we arrived. Said it was for our own safety, but-

NLH: It's a control mechanism. Easier to manage people when they're isolated from their support systems.

I looked around the room at the other faces - women I recognized from the old neighborhood, mothers of friends who'd chosen different paths when the war began. They all looked at me with the same mixture of hope and terror.

ICR: We're going to get Ian, then we're all leaving together. Stay close, stay quiet, and trust us.

The evacuation should have been simple. Should have been clean. Nilah melted through doors while I guided the civilians through the compound's maze of buildings. We found Ian in the men's dormitory, along with twenty other male family members of deserters. My brother - now fourteen, somehow taller than me despite the months of captivity - barely spoke as we moved through the darkness.

IAN: They told us you were dead. Said the monsters had killed you.

ICR: I'm very much alive. And I'm not the one who put you in a cage.

We were almost to the outer wall when it happened. The pull. Like invisible hands reaching through reality itself, grasping us by the

spine and yanking us backward through space and time.

The world blurred. The compound, the rescued families, the night sky - all of it dissolved into streams of light and shadow. I reached for Nilah's hand, felt her fingers close around mine, and then-

We were somewhere else entirely.

The throne room was exactly what I'd expected and nothing like I'd imagined. Massive stone pillars carved with scenes of human triumph over monster hordes. Banners displaying the royal coat of arms - a sword piercing a many-headed beast. And at the center, on a throne that seemed to absorb light rather than reflect it, sat King Aldric himself.

He was smaller than his portraits suggested. Older. His crown - a simple circlet of black metal - seemed to weigh heavy on his brow. But his eyes... his eyes held the kind of authority that came from making impossible decisions and living with the consequences.

ALD: Icarus. The deserter prince himself. I've been wondering when you'd finally come to see me.

Beside the throne stood a figure I recognized from intelligence reports. Magistrate Korren, the king's right hand. Tall, thin, with the kind of pale complexion that came from spending years in windowless rooms making lists of who lived and who died.

ICR: Your Majesty. I wish I could say this was a social call.

NLH: Where are our families?

ALD: Safe. For now. The question is whether they remain so after this conversation.

The king gestured, and the air in the room shifted. I felt the weight of powerful magic - not the raw elemental force that awakened humans wielded, but something older, more refined. Binding magic. The kind that made resistance impossible.

KOR: You cannot use your abilities here, fire-witch. This chamber is warded against all forms of awakened power.

Nilah's flames sputtered and died. I felt my own connection to the soul - the awareness that had kept me alive for months - fade to nothing.

ICR: Impressive.

ALD: The crown has deep coffers when it comes to protecting the realm. Speaking of which - do you know what your little rescue operation cost us tonight?

He snapped his fingers. Korren produced a scroll, unrolling it with theatrical precision.

KOR: Seven simultaneous attacks on our detention facilities. Fourteen guards killed. Six facilities compromised. Nearly a thousand prisoners freed. The largest coordinated assault since the war began.

ICR: Sounds like a successful evening.

ALD: It sounds like an act of war. Against your own species, no less.

NLH: They're not prisoners. They're hostages.

ALD: They're leverage. The only thing keeping you deserters from fully committing to the monster cause. Take away that leverage, and what's to stop you from becoming the very thing you claim to oppose?

The question hung in the air like a blade. I could see the logic in it - the cold, calculating reason that had driven the king's policies. Fear as a tool of control. Love as a weapon to be wielded against those who cared too much.

ICR: You want to know what stops us? The same thing that brought us here tonight. The belief that fear shouldn't be stronger than love. That survival isn't worth the cost of our souls.

ALD: Pretty words. But words don't win wars, boy. Actions do. And your actions tonight have forced my hand.

He gestured again. The air shimmered, and suddenly I could see them - my mother, my brother, the other rescued families - standing in what looked like another chamber in the palace. They were unharmed but clearly confused, looking around at their new surroundings with growing alarm.

ALD: Your rescue was successful. Congratulations. But now they're here, in my stronghold, surrounded by my guards. The question is: what happens next?

NLH: What do you want?

ALD: I want to end this war. Not through victory or defeat, but through understanding. I want to offer you a choice that's never been offered before.

He descended from his throne, moving with the careful grace of a man who'd learned to carry authority like a physical weight.

ALD: Join me. Not as subjects, but as allies. Help me find a way to end this conflict that doesn't require the extinction of either species.

ICR: And if we refuse?

KOR: Then your families remain as guests of the crown. Comfortable, well-treated, but guests nonetheless. Forever.

The threat was delivered with perfect bureaucratic politeness. Which somehow made it more chilling than any amount of snarling or dramatic posturing.

ALD: I'm not your enemy, Icarus. I'm a man trying to save his people from a war they can't win. The monsters grow stronger every day. The awakened humans grow more numerous. Traditional military tactics are becoming obsolete.

He stopped directly in front of us, close enough that I could see the exhaustion in his eyes.

ALD: I need people who understand both sides. Who can bridge the gap between human and monster, between fear and hope. You've already proven you can do that. Your deserter camps, your mixed forces - they're the future of this conflict.

ICR: The future you're describing sounds suspiciously like surrender.

ALD: It sounds like evolution. The question is whether we evolve together or separately. Whether we find a way to coexist, or whether we keep fighting until there's nothing left to save.

I looked at Nilah, saw my own uncertainty reflected in her eyes. The king's offer was seductive in its simplicity - join the system, work from within, save everyone through compromise rather than conflict.

But I thought about the courier boy, orphaned by the war's early days. About the guards who were just kids pressed into service. About the civilians caught between fear and love, forced to choose sides in a conflict none of them had started.

ICR: What guarantee do we have that this isn't just another cage? That you won't use our families as leverage to control us?

ALD: You have my word as king. And more than that - you have my

desperate need for your success. If you can't broker peace between the species, then this war will consume everything I've sworn to protect.

NLH: And if we say yes? What happens to the other deserters? The ones who scattered after tonight?

KOR: They would be offered the same choice. Join the peace initiative, or remain outside the law.

ICR: That's not a choice. That's an ultimatum.

ALD: Yes. It is. Because comfortable choices are a luxury we can no longer afford.

The king returned to his throne, settling into it like a man carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders.

ALD: I'm not asking you to betray your principles, Icarus. I'm asking you to expand them. To consider that maybe - just maybe - there's a way to save everyone without destroying everything.

I felt the pull of it. The seductive promise of a solution that didn't require more blood, more loss, more impossible choices between love and duty.

But I also felt the weight of every decision that had brought us to this moment. The choice to desert rather than kill my father. The choice to ally with monsters rather than submit to fear. The choice to raid the compounds rather than abandon our families.

ICR: I need time to think.

ALD: You have until dawn. After that, I'll need an answer. And whatever you decide, there's no going back.

The binding magic released us. I felt my connection to the soul return, felt Nilah's flames flicker back to life around her fingertips.

We were free to act - free to fight, free to run, free to choose.

But as I looked at the king on his throne, at the magistrate with his lists and calculations, at the image of our families in their gilded cage, I realized something that chilled me more than any threat could have. For the first time since this war began, I genuinely didn't know what the right choice was. And that, more than anything else, told me just how far we'd all fallen into the darkness.

End Of Chapter 40 **"Royal Presence"**

[His mind is already made up. 卷 四.]

(Chapter 41 || Volume 2) Helios' Heir.

The king's chambers faded around us like a dream dissolving at dawn. One moment we stood on polished marble beneath the weight of impossible choices, the next we were back in the compound courtyard, surrounded by the aftermath of our rescue operation.

The families we'd freed were gone. Vanished as completely as if they'd never existed. Only scorch marks on the walls and the lingering smell of Nilah's flames remained as proof of what we'd accomplished.

ICR: They're safe. That's what matters.

NLH: Safe? They're prisoners in a palace instead of prisoners in a camp. How is that safe?

I could hear the edge in her voice - the same tone she'd used when we first met, when she'd been nothing but controlled fury wrapped in human skin. Her flames danced higher around her fingertips, casting shifting shadows across the empty compound.

ICR: At least they're alive. At least they're together.

NLH: For now. Until the king decides they're more useful as corpses than as leverage.

I wanted to argue, to point out that the king had seemed genuine in his desire for peace. But even as I formed the words, I could feel their weakness. How many tyrants throughout history had believed they were saving the world while building its funeral pyre?

ICR: What if he's right, though? What if there really is a way to end this without more bloodshed?

Nilah stopped walking. Her flames flared so bright I had to shield my eyes.

NLH: Are you serious right now? After everything we've been through, everything we've seen, you're actually considering his offer?

ICR: I'm considering all our options. That's what a commander does.

NLH: No. That's what a coward does. A commander fights for

what's right, not for what's convenient.

The words hit like physical blows. I'd been called many things since this war began - deserter, traitor, monster-lover - but never a coward. Not by her.

ICR: I'm trying to save lives, Nilah. All lives. Human and monster alike.

NLH: By surrendering to the very system that created this war in the first place? By legitimizing the fear and hatred that turned us into enemies?

She stepped closer, and I could feel the heat radiating from her skin. Not the comfortable warmth I'd grown used to, but something fiercer. More dangerous.

NLH: Do you remember what you told me? When I was ready to burn down half the city just to make the pain stop?

ICR: That fire without purpose is just destruction.

NLH: And what did you say the purpose should be?

I closed my eyes, remembering that night. The girl who'd lost everything, standing in the ruins of her childhood home while flames danced around her like living things.

ICR: To light the way forward. To show people that there was another path.

NLH: Exactly. And now you want to abandon that path? Trade it for the king's promise of peace through submission?

ICR: It's not submission. It's compromise.

NLH: It's the same thing! Don't you see? The moment we accept his offer, we become part of the system. We legitimize everything he's done - the camps, the fear campaigns, the wars of extermination.

She was right. I knew she was right. But the alternative...

ICR: What's the alternative, Nilah? Keep fighting until everyone we care about is dead? Keep running until there's nowhere left to run?

NLH: The alternative is being who we said we were. Being the people who chose love over fear, who refused to let the world's darkness snuff out our light.

Her flames dimmed slightly, but her voice remained steady.

NLH: Your father died because he forgot who he was. Because he let fear change him into something unrecognizable. Don't make his mistake.

The mention of my father felt like a knife between the ribs. But she wasn't wrong. He'd started as a good man, a protector, someone who believed in justice. Fear had transformed him into something else entirely.

ICR: So what do you suggest we do? Storm the palace? Fight our way through an army to save our families?

NLH: I suggest we remember what we learned tonight. That we're not alone. That there are others like us, scattered across the kingdom, all fighting the same fight.

She gestured toward the empty compound around us.

NLH: Seven teams. Seven successful rescues. Seven groups of people who proved that love is stronger than fear. Maybe it's time we stopped thinking like deserters and started thinking like revolutionaries.

ICR: A revolution requires more than good intentions, Nilah. It requires resources, planning, popular support-

NLH: It requires people willing to stand up and say 'enough.' People willing to fight for something better than what we have.

I looked at her - really looked at her - and saw not just my oldest friend, but the embodiment of everything I'd claimed to believe in. The girl who'd turned her pain into purpose, her rage into hope.

ICR: You're asking me to declare war on the most powerful man in the kingdom. To risk everything on the chance that we can build something better from the ashes.

NLH: I'm asking you to be the man who saved me from burning down the world. The man who showed me that fire could heal as well as destroy.

The decision crystallized in that moment. Not because I was certain it was right, but because the alternative - accepting the king's offer - felt like betraying everything we'd fought for.

ICR: Dawn is still hours away. We have time to gather the others, to plan our next move.

NLH: **smiling** There's the commander I remember.

We moved through the night like shadows, using my instincts to track down the scattered deserter teams. Most had succeeded in their rescue attempts, though two groups had been forced to retreat when their targets proved too heavily defended. By the time we reached the rendezvous point - an abandoned monastery in the hills overlooking the capital - we had forty-three people. Humans and monsters, all united by the shared experience of choosing principle over safety.

ICR: The king gave us until dawn to decide. I think it's time we gave him our answer.

KAL: You mean to assault the palace directly? That's suicide.

ICR: Maybe. But it's honest suicide. Not the slow death of compromise.

NER: What about the families? They're still prisoners.

ICR: They're prisoners either way. At least this way, they'll know we didn't abandon everything we fought for to save them.

The discussion continued for hours. Plans were made, discarded, refined. By the time the eastern sky began to lighten, we had something resembling a strategy. Not a good one, but a strategy nonetheless.

ICR: The palace has three main approaches. The main gate, the river entrance, and the old siege tunnels. We'll split into three groups, hit all three simultaneously.

NLH: What about the king's binding magic? If we can't use our abilities inside the palace-

KAL: Don't worry about the magistrate. Me and Bella will handle that good for nothing bluffer.

As we prepared to move out, I found myself thinking about the courier boy. About his warning that some of the guards were just kids pressed into service. About the cycle of violence that had created this war in the first place.

ICR: Remember - we're not here to slaughter everyone in our path. We're here to rescue our families and send a message. Minimum necessary force.

NLH: And if the king refuses to release them?

ICR: Then we show him that some things are worth dying for. And some things are worth killing for.

The approach to the palace took us through the city's twisting streets, past buildings that bore the scars of years of conflict.

Windows boarded up, walls marked with anti-monster graffiti, the occasional burnt-out shell of a home that had housed the wrong kind of family. This was what the king's peace looked like. Not harmony, but exhaustion. Not coexistence, but separation through fear.

ICR: Movement ahead. Palace guards, looks like a full patrol.

NLH: They're waiting for us. This isn't random.

She was right. The guards were positioned too perfectly, their formation too precise. They'd been expecting us.

ICR: It's a trap.

NLH: Of course it's a trap. The question is whether we spring it or find another way around.

I looked at the assembled deserters - my friends, my allies, the people who'd chosen to follow me into this impossible fight. Then I looked at the palace rising before us, its towers touching the sky like accusing fingers.

ICR: We go through. Whatever happens, we don't stop until we reach our families.

NLH: Together?

ICR: Together.

We stepped out of the shadows and into the dawn light. The palace guards saw us immediately, raising their weapons with practiced precision. Behind them, I could see more soldiers emerging from concealment - dozens of them, all armed, all waiting. The trap closed around us with the inevitability of a natural disaster. Crossbow bolts filled the air. Shouts echoed off the palace walls. The sound of steel meeting steel rang through the morning air. And somewhere in the chaos, I heard the king's voice, carried on the wind like a prophecy.

ALD: You could have chosen peace, Icarus. You could have chosen to save everyone.

The first bolt took me in the shoulder, spinning me around. The second would have taken my head if Nilah hadn't tackled me to the ground. Around us, the other deserters fought with the desperate courage of people who had nothing left to lose.

ICR: So much for minimum necessary force.

NLH: This is what we chose. This is what we fight for.

The battle was joined. And in that moment, as chaos erupted around us and the palace guards closed in from all sides, I realized something that should have terrified me but instead filled me with a strange sense of peace. We were exactly where we belonged.

End of Chapter 41
"Helios' Heir"

[You're doing good, Icarus. Bring them all to ꞑε.]

(Chapter 42 || Volume 2) What I Could've Been.

The world twisted around us like reality was being wrung out by invisible hands. One moment I was bleeding in the palace courtyard, surrounded by the clash of steel and the cries of battle. The next, I was standing in a place that wasn't quite a place - a void filled with swirling mist and the sound of my own heartbeat.

The separation happened instantly. Nilah's flames, which had been blazing beside me despite the palace's wards, vanished into the gray nothingness. The other deserters, my allies, my friends - gone. Even the palace guards who'd been trying to kill us moments before had disappeared, leaving only silence and the smell of ozone.

ICR: Nilah? Kael? Anyone?

My voice echoed strangely in the void, as if the words were being absorbed by the mist itself. I reached for my connection to the hunt, that preternatural awareness that had kept me alive through months of warfare. Nothing. Just the dull ache of ordinary human senses in an extraordinary place.

KOR: Welcome to the space between thoughts, deserter. The realm where truth lives.

The magistrate's words seemed to seep from the mist itself, carrying with them the weight of magic older than the kingdom. Not the raw power of awakened abilities, but something more refined.
More insidious.

ICR: Clever trick. Separate us so we can't fight as a unit.

KOR: Oh, this isn't about separation. This is about confrontation.

About forcing you to face the one enemy you've spent your entire life running from.

The mist began to swirl more rapidly, coalescing into shapes that almost made sense before dissolving back into gray nothing. I could feel something watching me from within the void - something that knew me better than I knew myself.

ICR: And what enemy would that be?

KOR: The truth of who you really are.

The mist solidified. And suddenly, I was no longer alone. The figure that emerged from the gray was me. Not a reflection or an illusion, but me as I could have been. Should have been. The version of myself that had never deserted, never questioned, never chose love over duty. He wore the uniform of a royal guard captain, its brass buttons polished to mirror brightness. His face was harder than mine, carved from the same stone as his convictions. But his eyes... his eyes held the same exhaustion I'd seen in the king's chambers, the weight of choices that left no room for doubt.

ICR: You look tired, brother.

ICR: I feel tired. Fighting a war nobody wanted takes its toll.

ICR: Fighting? You call what you've been doing fighting? Running from camp to camp, hiding in the shadows, pretending your cowardice is courage?

The words stung because they contained just enough truth to bite. I had been running. From my father's legacy, from the expectations of my birth, from the comfortable certainties of a world divided into us and them.

ICR: I prefer to think of it as choosing principle over convenience.

ICR: Principle? You abandoned your post. You betrayed your oath. You chose monsters over your own species.

He stepped closer, and I could see the details that marked him as other - the scars that crossed his face in different patterns, the calluses on his hands that spoke of years spent wielding different weapons. This was me as I would have been if I'd killed my father that night instead of deserting.

ICR: Do you know what I've accomplished while you've been playing at rebellion? I've saved three cities from monster attacks. I've prevented the awakening of twelve dangerous individuals who

would have used their powers to hurt innocent people. I've made the world safer.

ICR: By perpetuating the fear that created this war in the first place.

ICR: By accepting reality instead of chasing impossible dreams. The world is dangerous. People are afraid. Sometimes fear is the only thing that keeps civilization from collapse.

I could feel the pull of his certainty, the seductive promise of a world where difficult choices had simple answers. Where duty was clear and doubt was weakness.

ICR: And what about the cost? What about the people who suffer because of that fear?

ICR: The cost is acceptable. A few suffer so many can live. That's the burden of leadership - making the hard choices so others don't have to.

ICR: You could have been like me. Could have embraced your destiny instead of running from it. Instead, you chose to become a cautionary tale.

The mist around us began to shift, showing glimpses of the world as it could have been. I saw myself - him - standing beside the king, helping to implement policies that crushed dissent before it could bloom into rebellion. I saw the camps expanded, made more efficient, more permanent. I saw the awakened humans and monsters eliminated not through war, but through systematic, bureaucratic extermination.

ICR: That's not destiny. That's surrender.

ICR: It's pragmatism. It's accepting that the world is what it is, not what you wish it could be.

He drew his sword - the same blade I'd carried in my days as a guard, but polished to a mirror shine. No nicks, no bloodstains. The weapon of a man who killed cleanly and slept soundly afterward.

ICR: I could have saved everyone. The humans, the monsters, even the awakened. All it would have required was the courage to do what was necessary.

ICR: By becoming the very thing we swore to protect people from.

ICR: By becoming what the world needed, not what it wanted.

The blade moved faster than I could react, sliding between my ribs with the precision of long practice. But instead of pain, I felt...

nothing. Just the cold certainty of a truth I'd been avoiding.

ICR: You're going to die here, brother. You and all your friends. And it will be for nothing. The war will continue. The fear will spread. And I will be the one to end it, the way it should have been ended from the beginning.

ICR: Maybe. But at least I'll die as myself, not as someone else's idea of who I should be.

I grabbed the blade with my bare hands, feeling it cut deep into my palms. Blood ran down my wrists, but I held on.

ICR: You know what the difference is between us? You've convinced yourself that your choices don't matter. That you're just playing a role written by someone else.

ICR: And you've convinced yourself that your choices change anything. That one man's principles can alter the course of history.

ICR: One man's principles? No. But one man's choice to stand up, to refuse to accept the world as it is, to believe in something better - that can inspire others to make the same choice.

I pulled myself forward along the blade, ignoring the pain as steel cut deeper into my hands.

ICR: That's what you never understood. It was never about me. It was about showing people that another way was possible.

ICR: And where has that gotten you? Here, bleeding in a void, about to die for a cause that will die with you.

ICR: Here, standing face to face with who I could have been, and choosing to be who I am instead.

The mist around us began to swirl more violently, as if the void itself was reacting to my words. I could feel something shifting in the space between thoughts, some fundamental truth asserting itself against the constructed reality of this place.

ICR: You're not me. You're not even real. You're fear given form, doubt made manifest. You're what I would become if I let terror make my choices for me.

ICR: I'm what you should have become. What you still could become, if you'd stop being so stubborn about accepting reality.

ICR: Reality is what we make it. And I choose to make it better.

I wrenched the sword from his hands, feeling the blade slide free from my ribs. The wound closed instantly, as if it had never existed.

Because in this place, in this moment, the only injuries that mattered were the ones we inflicted on ourselves.

ICR: You want to know what I've learned in my time as a deserter? That courage isn't the absence of fear. It's the choice to act despite fear. To believe in something better even when everything around you screams that it's impossible.

ICR: And what happens when that belief gets everyone you care about killed?

ICR: Then at least they'll die knowing someone believed they were worth saving.

ICR: You'll understand eventually. When everyone you love is dead and the world burns around you, you'll understand that I was right.

This was Akumu's true power. Not the ability to create fear, but the ability to force us to confront the parts of ourselves we'd rather ignore. To make us face the truth of who we really were, and choose whether to accept it or transcend it.

ICR: The only way out is through. The only way to win is to become more than what we were.

I raised my sword - my real sword, nicked and bloodstained and honest - and ran towards myself. Toward the choice that would define who I really was. The mirror of shadows had shown me my truth. Now it was time to surpass it.

End of Chapter 42 **"What I Could've Been"**

[Show me your resolve.]

(Chapter 43 || Volume 2) True Happiness.

The mist that surrounded me felt like the weight of every decision I'd ever made pressing down on my shoulders. My voice, when I spoke, carried that familiar gravelly tone that had earned me my nickname among the deserters - the sound of stone grinding against stone, of something solid and unbreakable.

KAL: Show yourself, magistrate. I know you're watching.

The void around me pulsed with a rhythm that made my chest tight with recognition. It was the sound of home - not the deserter camps

or the battlefield, but the real home I'd left behind. The mining village where I'd grown up, where the sound of pickaxes against stone had been the heartbeat of daily life.

TAR: Still playing hero, brother?

I turned, and there she was. Tara. My sister. Two years younger than me, but always twice as brave. Her miner's clothes were torn and bloody, her face pale with the gray pallor of someone who had died badly. But her eyes - her eyes still held that stubborn fire that had made her the most fearless person I'd ever known.

KAL: You're not her. She's dead.

TAR: Dead because you left us. Dead because you chose your war over your family.

She stepped closer, and I could see the details that marked her as other - the way her wounds wept not blood but shadow, the way her voice carried echoes of accusations I'd whispered to myself in the dark hours before dawn.

TAR: Do you remember the last words you spoke to me, Kael? Before you ran off to play hero?

I did remember. The memory was carved into my mind like words etched in granite, permanent and unchanging. We'd been standing in the doorway of our family's cottage, and she'd been begging me not to go.

KAL: I said I'd come back.

TAR: Funny how that played out.

The mist swirled around us, showing glimpses of my town as it had been. The small mining village where we'd grown up, where everyone knew everyone else's business, where the sound of children playing echoed off the stone walls of the quarry. And then... darkness. Fire. The screams of the dying.

TAR: Two days. That's how long we lasted after you left. Two days before the ravagers found our village. Two days before they brought their madness and their hunger and their certainty that we were nothing but prey to be consumed.

KAL: I'm sorry for leav-

TAR: Sorry?! Were you sorry while we were dying? While children who had never seen a ravager were being torn apart in their own

homes?

The accusation hit like a physical blow.

KAL: I was searching for purpose. I was trying to fill the emptiness-

TAR: And while you were searching for yourself, we were being slaughtered. Our father, crushed when the ravagers brought down the mine. Our mother, burned when they set fire to the houses to flush out the hiding families. Our cousins, our friends, our entire village - gone.

She gestured, and the mist showed me visions I'd tried to forget. The aftermath of the attack. Stone cottages reduced to rubble. The bodies of people I'd known since childhood, torn and broken, their lives extinguished in moments of terror and madness.

TAR: All because you believed your empty soul was more important than the people who raised you. All because you thought finding yourself was more important than protecting us.

KAL: I thought... I thought I was broken. I thought I had nothing to offer anyone.

TAR: You thought wrong. And we paid the price for your selfishness.

I could feel the weight of her words settling on my shoulders like a mountain. The guilt I'd carried for months, pushed down and buried beneath duty and necessity, came rushing back with the force of an avalanche.

KAL: I've spent every day since then trying to honor their memory. Fighting for a world where that kind of slaughter never happens again.

TAR: Honor? You call this honor? Following a deserter, fighting alongside the same people who couldn't protect us from the ravagers? You want to honor our memory? Come home. Come back to the ruins of our town. Kneel at our graves and beg forgiveness for abandoning us when we needed you most.

The mist shifted, showing me a vision of the village as it was now - empty, overgrown, haunted by the ghosts of everyone I'd failed to save. But there was something hollow about the vision, something that didn't quite ring true.

KAL: Our people are dead, Tara. There's nothing left to go back to

TAR: There's guilt. There's the weight of knowing you chose wrong.

There's the certainty that everyone you've ever cared about dies because of your choices.

KAL: That's not true.

TAR: Isn't it? Look around you. Look at the people you fight beside now. How many of them are going to die because you convinced them to follow Icarus? How many more families will be destroyed because you can't learn from your mistakes?

She was closer now, close enough that I could see the pain in her dead eyes. The accusation. The bottomless grief of a sister who had died believing she'd been abandoned.

TAR: You chose your own emptiness over family. And now you want to choose another cause over the people who matter. How many people have to die before you learn that running from yourself isn't worth the cost?

KAL: I'm not the same person who left. I've learned-

TAR: You've learned nothing! You're still the same lost soul who thinks searching for meaning is more important than the people he's supposed to protect.

The mist began to swirl more violently, and I could feel something shifting in the space around us. Another presence, warmer than the cold accusation of my sister's shade.

BEL: Kael! Where are you?

I turned toward the voice, and there she was - Bella, the bee who had somehow become the light in my darkness. Her abilities were manifesting even in this twisted realm, her presence pushing back against the weight of guilt and shadow.

TAR: Don't listen to her. She's just another person you're going to get killed. Another family you're going to destroy.

But Bella was reaching through the mist, her hand extended toward me. Her touch was warm, real, carrying the promise of a future that didn't have to be defined by the failures of the past.

TAR: You abandoned us! You chose your own needs over your family!

BEL: He was searching for meaning. And now he's found it - in protecting others. That's not abandonment - that's growth.

I looked between them - my sister's shade, demanding that I carry

the weight of past selfishness forever, and Bella, offering the possibility of redemption through action rather than guilt.

KAL: Tara... I'm sorry. I'm sorry I wasn't there. I'm sorry I let my emptiness blind me to what really mattered.

TAR: Sorry doesn't bring back the dead, brother.

KAL: No. It doesn't. But it can honor them. It can make sure their deaths weren't meaningless.

I reached out and took Bella's hand, feeling the warmth of her touch anchor me to the present, to the future, to the possibility that past failures didn't have to define future choices.

KAL: I can't change what happened to our town. But I can make sure it doesn't happen again. I can fight for a world where people don't have to choose between finding themselves and protecting their families.

TAR: And if you fail? If more people die because of your choices?

KAL: Then I'll carry that weight too. But I won't let fear of failure stop me from trying to build something better.

The mist began to clear around us, and I could see my sister's shade more clearly now. The anger in her eyes was fading, replaced by something that looked almost like... understanding.

TAR: You always were too stubborn for your own good.

KAL: I learned from the best.

TAR: Take care of yourself, brother. And... take care of her. She's good for you.

For a moment, just a moment, I saw not the accusatory shade but my real sister - the girl who had taught me to climb trees and skip stones, who had believed in me even when I didn't believe in myself. She smiled, faint but real, and then she was gone.

BEL: Come on. The others need us.

KAL: How did you find me?

BEL: I followed the sound of your voice. Even in that void, even when you were facing your darkest fears, you never stopped being you.

The void dissolved around us, and I found myself back in the palace courtyard, Bella's hand still warm in mine. Around us, the other deserters were emerging from their own confrontations with shadow and doubt, all of them looking changed by the experience.

KAL: The girl who died in my town - I couldn't save her. But I can save you. I can save us.

BEL: You already have. Every day you choose to fight for something better, you save all of us.

I looked at her - really looked at her - and saw not just the bee who had patched up my wounds, but the woman who had somehow become my anchor in a world gone mad. The future I hadn't dared to hope for.

KAL: Then let's finish this. Let's build the world Tara would have wanted to live in.

The battle was still raging around us, but something had changed. The shadows of doubt had been faced and, if not conquered, then at least understood. We were no longer fighting just against external enemies, but for the possibility of becoming better than what we had been. The weight of stone had taught me that some burdens were meant to be carried. But it had also taught me that some were meant to be shared.

End of Chapter 43 **"True Happiness"**

[It was nice seeing you one last time, sister.]

(Chapter 44 || Volume 2) Outrun Even Death.

Days, months, years passed by in a second as the mist enveloped me. I could see the future, everything that happened, everything that is happening, and everything that will happen. This vision is a by-product of being faster than the concept of speed, and a fear brought upon by them, the concept of terror, Akumu.

MTA: You can't fool me with these visions!

The mist spreads, as Korren appears.

KOR: No one is here to fool you, rabbit.

As soon as Korren finished his word, I didn't give a second of thought and ran straight through him, only for Korren to dissolve into mist.

KOR: This place is simply to atone for your sins.

A second figure appears behind Korren, facing me down, one that I recognized on the spot.

LEO: Hello, daughter.

MTA: D... d-dad?!

My eyes widen, memories flooding in. It was years ago, so long that I'd forgotten everyone else's face except for his. I was a child of nine, the youngest, the bravest, and the most stubborn. They would all ridicule me for abusing my gift of speed, said I should be respecting it as a divine right and not a physical ability I had all the rights to. Were they right, or was I wrong? It may seem a strange question, one with one choice, but in the end, I learned life isn't black and white, and neither is a rabbit's fur, not its colour but its soul. My family was slaughtered by wolves, and I was the only one who managed to run away.

MTA: Was it because I was faster?

LEO: You were more of a coward.

I clenched my fists tight.

MTA: You shouldn't say that about your own daughter.

LEO: The rabbit in front of me is no daughter of mine.

I see, in his eyes I had failed as a descendant of his.

MTA: I've achieved a lot since then.

LEO: And where is it to show?

MTA: People accept me for who I am!

LEO: An accepted failure is still one.

He was getting annoying, but I had learned that annoyance is the thief of focus.

MTA: Even if you aren't my real father, you deserve to see how far your daughter truly has gone.

LEO: You're showing me how good you are at running away again?

MTA: The opposite - This mist of fear can't hold me in, the one who reigns over speed.

This is a show of my ability, not to you father, nor to you Icarus, or you Akumu, but rather proof to myself that even the past cannot

catch up to me.

But before I could move, the mist shifted, and suddenly I was standing in our old burrow. The walls were carved from earth and stone, roots hanging like curtains from the ceiling. The scent of home - of carrots fermenting in the storage room, of my mother's herb garden, of the wood polish Leo used on his ceremonial staff - it all came rushing back like a dam bursting.

MTA: This... this isn't real.

LEO: Reality is what shapes us, daughter. This is where you learned to run.

I could hear them now - my siblings' laughter echoing from deeper in the burrow. Mira's infectious giggle, Tobias's booming laugh, little Clover's squeaks of delight. They were playing chase, as we always did, their feet pattering against the packed earth floors. But beneath their joy, I could hear something else. The distant howling.

MTA: You know what happened here.

LEO: I know what you allowed to happen.

The scene shifted around us. Now I could see myself at nine years old, tiny and defiant, standing in the center of our family circle. Leo - my real father - was lecturing me about the sacred nature of speed, about how it was a gift from the ancient gods, not a toy to be played with. But nine-year-old me wasn't listening. I was bouncing on my toes, energy crackling around my small frame like lightning barely contained.

MTA: But dad, I can run faster than the wind! Faster than sound! Why should I hold back?

LEO: Because with great speed comes great responsibility, Matta. You cannot simply run from every problem.

MTA: But I can solve them by running to them faster!

LEO: And what happens when running isn't the answer?

The memory-Leo's words hung in the air like a prophecy. I watched my younger self roll her eyes and dart away, leaving only a small dust cloud behind. Even then, I was already running from his wisdom.

MTA: I was just a child.

LEO: Children who refuse to learn become adults who refuse to grow.

The howling grew closer. Through the burrow's entrance, I could see shapes moving in the darkness - massive forms with glowing eyes and slaving jaws. The wolf pack that would change everything. I knew what came next, had lived it a thousand times in my nightmares.

MTA: I tried to warn everyone.

LEO: You tried to run. There's a difference.

The scene played out with horrifying clarity. I watched myself burst into the main chamber, breathless and wide-eyed, screaming about wolves. But I was moving too fast, speaking too quickly, the words tumbling over each other in my panic. My family couldn't understand me. Precious seconds were lost as I tried to slow down, to form coherent sentences.

MTA: Wolves! Outside! Big ones! Coming here! Now!

MRA: Mta, slow down. What wolves?

MTA: No time to slow down! They're almost here!

And then the attack began. Claws and fangs tearing through the entrance, shattering the peaceful evening. I watched my father grab his staff, watched Mira push the younger ones toward the back tunnels, watched Tobias try to barricade the doors. But they were too slow, all of them too slow. I could have saved them all. I was fast enough to evacuate the entire burrow in seconds, fast enough to outrun the wolves, fast enough to lead them away. But instead, I froze. The gift that made me special, that made me different, suddenly felt like a curse. How could I choose who to save first? How could I leave anyone behind?

MTA: I couldn't choose.

LEO: So you chose yourself.

The words hit harder than any physical blow. I watched my younger self grab little Clover - the smallest, the most vulnerable - and run. Just run. Through the back tunnels, through the forest, through the night. I ran until my lungs burned, until Clover's cries faded to whimpers, until the sounds of slaughter were just an echo in the distance.

MTA: I saved who I could.

LEO: You saved who was easiest to carry.

The mist swirled again, and now I was standing in a field of graves.

Crude markers made from stone and wood, each one bearing a name I had tried so hard to forget. Mira. Tobias. Benny. Sage. Willow. And at the center, the largest marker of all.

LEO: Even in death, you abandoned us.

MTA: I was ten! I was scared and alone and-

LEO: And you had a gift that could have made the difference.

I fell to my knees before his grave, the weight of years of guilt crashing down on me. He was right. I had been fast enough to save them all, but I had chosen the path of least resistance instead. I had run away from the hard choice, from the responsibility that came with my speed.

MTA: I've tried to make up for it.

LEO: By running toward danger instead of away from it? By throwing yourself into every fight, every conflict, every impossible situation?

The scene shifted once more. Now I could see flashes of my life since that night - moments of heroism, of sacrifice, of using my speed to save others. But in each scene, I could see the same pattern. I was fast enough to save everyone, but I always cut it close. Always left room for doubt, for the possibility of failure.

MTA: I've saved hundreds of lives.

LEO: To silence the voices of the six you didn't.

Korren stepped forward from the mist, his expression unreadable.

KOR: She begins to understand.

LEO: Understanding is not enough. She must accept.

I stood slowly, my fists clenched so tightly that my claws were drawing blood from my palms.

MTA: Accept what? That I'm a coward? That I failed you?

LEO: Accept that you cannot outrun the past, no matter how fast you become.

The mist began to thicken around us, and I could feel something changing. The very air seemed to slow, to become viscous like honey. My speed, my greatest strength, was being dampened by my own guilt.

MTA: I won't let you trap me here.

LEO: You trapped yourself here long ago, daughter. This mist, this place - it's not Akumu's creation. It's yours.

I could feel the truth of his words like ice in my veins. All these years, I had been running from this moment, from this confrontation with my past. But the faster I ran, the more I carried it with me. The guilt, the shame, the weight of six graves - it had all been building up, creating this prison of memory and regret.

MTA: Then I'll break free the same way I always have.

LEO: By running away?

MTA: By running forward.

I closed my eyes and reached deep inside myself, past the guilt and the shame, past the fear and the doubt. I found the core of my speed - not the physical ability, but the essence of what it meant to be fast. It wasn't about escaping. It wasn't about arriving first. It was about being where you needed to be, when you needed to be there.

MTA: I can't change what happened that night.

LEO: No, you cannot.

MTA: I can't bring you back.

LEO: No, you cannot.

MTA: But I can stop running from who I was and start running toward who I need to be.

The mist began to part, not blown away by my speed, but dissolved by something deeper. Acceptance. Understanding. The willingness to carry the weight of my past without letting it slow me down.

MTA: There is no reason for me to chant your name, Hermes of Speed, for your throne is no longer yours.

I bent my knees forwards and moved my arms back.

MTA: I'm the god of speed now.

But this time, when I ran, I carried them with me. Not as burden, but as purpose. Not as guilt, but as motivation. The memory of Leo's wisdom, of Mira's laughter, of Tobias's courage - they became part of my speed, part of who I was becoming. And in an instant, faster than light could catch, faster than the shortest form of time measurement, I ran, my legs propelling me beyond reality and into

pure motionless causality. But this time, I wasn't running away from the past or toward the future. I was running through the present, carrying everything I was and everything I could become. The next instant, I was right back where I left, facing Korren down in the royal palace, his expression telling me this was out of his prediction. But something had changed. The mist of fear that had surrounded me was gone, replaced by something else entirely. The mist of resolution. The mist of a speed that had finally found its purpose.

KOR: Impossible... you were supposed to be trapped by your guilt.

MTA: Guilt is only a trap if you let it be. I choose to let it be a teacher instead.

I stood straighter, feeling the weight of my past not as a burden, but as a foundation. Every step I had taken since that night, every life I had saved, every moment I had chosen to run toward danger instead of away from it - it had all been leading to this moment.

MTA: You want to know what true speed is, Korren? It's not about being faster than everything else. It's about being exactly where you need to be, exactly when you need to be there. And right now, I need to be here, facing you, carrying the memory of everyone who made me who I am. So come on then. Let's see if your predictions can keep up with a god who's finally learned what it means to be fast.

The palace around us seemed to hold its breath, waiting for what would come next. But I was no longer the rabbit who ran from responsibility. I was the rabbit who ran toward it, who embraced it, who let it fuel her speed rather than slow her down.

End of Chapter 44 **"Outrun Even Death"**

[You can't cage this rabbit, sucka'!]

(Chapter 45 || Volume 2) Shattering Icicles.

The mist parted like a curtain torn by invisible hands, revealing two figures whose very presence seemed to command the fog itself.

Neru's breath came in sharp, crystalline puffs as memories threatened to drown him - visions of ash and screaming, of everything he'd lost. But then Shen's explosive aura erupted around

them, superheated air cutting through the haze with surgical precision, and suddenly Neru could breathe again. They were opposites forged in the same crucible of loss, bound by a single, burning purpose: to dominate those who had taken everything from them. The royal palace's outer defenses crumbled before their synchronized assault. Guards fell to ice and explosion, their weapons useless against the fury of two souls who had already died once and refused to do so again. Up, ever up they climbed, through marble corridors that reeked of opulence built on suffering, until they reached the second-to-last floor.

The ballroom stretched before them like a monument to excess.

Golden statues lined the walls, their faces frozen in eternal celebration, while crystal chandeliers cast fractured light across polished floors that reflected their images a thousand times over. For a heartbeat, even battle-hardened warriors could only stare at the overwhelming beauty. Then fear struck their hearts. A presence settled over the room like a suffocating blanket, pressing down with the weight of nightmares made manifest. The golden statues seemed to leer now, their faces twisted with malevolent glee.

SHN: The magistrate..?

NER: No... this is something far stronger.

The walls began to weep. Dark pink fluid oozed from between marble joints, dripping and pooling until the very air grew thick with rosy mist that tasted of copper and fear. From the grand staircase opposite them, a figure descended - not walked, but flowed like terror given form.

AKU: Welcome to your end.

The voice was honey poured over broken glass, beautiful and terrible. Akumu's form shifted and writhed, sometimes human, sometimes something far worse. Tentacles of that same pink substance writhed around them like a living crown of thorns.

Every instinct screamed at Neru and Shen to run. Their bodies recognized a predator beyond their understanding, something that had fed on fear for so long that terror had become its pet. But they had come too far, lost too much, to turn back now. Neru's soul went still as arctic winter. Shen's heart thundered like a war drum. They didn't know this enemy, but something primal within them understood - this creature was the source of all their suffering.

NER & SHN: We'll tear you to shreds!

AKU: Come on! SHOW ME YOUR STRENGTH!

Shen exploded forward, literally. His palms erupted with controlled detonations that launched him across the ballroom in a streak of orange fire. He materialized before Akumu like a comet of fury, both hands slamming against the creature's shifting face with the force of an artillery strike. The blast shook the palace to its foundations. Dust and debris rained from the ceiling as smoke billowed outward in a perfect sphere. But from within that cloud, something moved - quick as striking serpents, pink tentacles burst forth, each one aimed with surgical precision at Shen's vital points. Ice erupted from the floor in a protective barrier, Neru's power responding to his partner's danger faster than thought. The tentacles shattered against the glacial wall, sending pink goo splattering across the ballroom floor.

NER: My turn.

Above Akumu, the very moisture in the air crystallized into hundreds of ice spears, each one sharp enough to pierce armor and gleaming like frozen starlight. With a gesture that was almost elegant, Neru sent them screaming downward in a lethal rain. Akumu's form shifted, becoming a writhing mass of that pink substance. The ice spears sank deep but seemed to cause no lasting damage - the creature's body simply flowed around the wounds, absorbing the frozen projectiles and incorporating them into its ever-changing mass.

AKU: Is that all?

The creature shot forward with inhuman speed, tentacles extending into razor-sharp claws aimed directly at Neru's throat. But Shen was already there, his explosive movement creating a sonic boom that shattered nearby windows. His fist, covered in controlled detonations, caught Akumu center mass and sent them crashing through the marble floor.

Shen didn't hesitate. He dropped through the hole he'd created, following Akumu into the chamber below. The sound of their battle echoed upward - explosions, the crack of shattering stone, and something else that might have been screaming. Neru leaped down after them, ice forming beneath his feet to cushion his landing. The chamber below was some kind of storage room, filled with wine casks and ancient artifacts. Shen and Akumu were locked in brutal close-quarters combat, the explosive user's hands wreathed in controlled blasts that he used to enhance every punch and block. But Akumu was adapting. The creature's form had become more solid, more human-like, allowing it to match Shen's martial prowess

while using its tentacles as additional limbs. They moved like a deadly dance, each fighter trying to find the killing blow.

AKU: Too slow!

A tentacle wrapped around Shen's ankle, yanking him off balance. Akumu's clawed hand swept toward his exposed neck - only to meet a wall of ice that had formed in the split second before impact.

NER: Tag out.

Akumu slipped, their inhuman grace momentarily disrupted. Neru pressed his advantage, creating a forest of ice spikes that forced the creature to dodge and weave. But this was just the setup. As Akumu moved to avoid one spike, Neru flash-froze the air around them, creating a crystalline prison. For a heartbeat, it seemed like they had won. Then the prison exploded outward as Akumu's form shifted into something larger, more monstrous. Pink mist poured from their body, filling the chamber with that cloying, fear-inducing fog.

AKU: ENOUGH GAMES!

The creature's form expanded, becoming a writhing mass of tentacles and eyes. The pink mist grew thicker, and suddenly Neru found himself back in that burning village, watching his family die.

Shen was somewhere else entirely, reliving the moment his explosive power had first manifested, destroying everything he cared about. But they had faced their demons before. Pain was an old friend, and fear was just another enemy to overcome.

NER: Not today.

The sudden temperature drop crystallized the mist, making it fall like pink snow. Shen's explosions roared back to life, burning away the remaining fog.

SHN: Our turn to get serious!

The two warriors moved in perfect synchronization, their powers complementing each other in ways that seemed almost supernatural. Neru would create ice platforms that Shen could use to change direction mid-flight, while Shen's explosions would shatter Neru's ice constructs at precisely the right moment to send

deadly shards at their enemy. Akumu fought back with savage intensity, their form constantly shifting to adapt to new threats. When Shen launched himself forward with explosive propulsion, tentacles would try to snare him mid-flight. When Neru created ice barriers, corrosive pink fluid would eat through them. The creature seemed to learn from every exchange, becoming more dangerous with each passing moment. The battle raged through the storage chamber and back up into the ballroom. Golden statues were frozen solid and then shattered by explosive blasts. Crystal chandeliers became deadly projectiles. The beautiful floor cracked and buckled under the force of their conflict. Shen landed a devastating combination - a series of explosive punches that sent Akumu staggering backward. But the creature's counterattack was swift and vicious. Tentacles wrapped around both of Shen's arms, holding him in place while more appendages moved to crush his skull. Ice encased the tentacles, flash-freezing them solid. Neru's follow-up attack was a spear of ice the size of a tree trunk, launched with enough force to punch through steel. But Akumu's reflexes were inhuman - they twisted away at the last second, the spear only grazing their shifting form.

AKU: You're strong, but strength alone won't save you.

The creature's form began to change again, becoming something that hurt to look at directly. The pink mist poured from their body in waves, each pulse carrying whispers of doubt and despair.

*You're not strong enough.
You'll fail like you always do.
Everyone you care about dies because of you.*

But Neru and Shen had moved beyond such simple fears. They had already lost everything that mattered - what more could this creature take from them?

SHN: Your mind tricks won't work on the dead.

NER: We died the day we lost everything. What stands here now is just vengeance given form.

The final exchange was brutal and desperate. All three fighters moved with everything they had, holding nothing back. Shen's explosions reached new levels of intensity, each blast capable of leveling buildings. Neru's ice constructs became architectural marvels of frozen death, complex and beautiful and utterly lethal. But Akumu was no ordinary opponent. Their tentacles moved like

living whips, each one capable of crushing bone or slicing through steel. The pink mist became a weapon itself, forming solid constructs that fought alongside the creature's main body. In the end, it was Shen who made the crucial breakthrough. As Akumu focused on defending against one of Neru's ice storms, the explosive user managed to get inside their guard. His fist, wreathed in more concentrated destructive force than he had ever managed before, connected with the creature's center mass. The explosion was deafening. The entire ballroom shook, and for a moment it seemed like the palace itself might collapse. But when the smoke cleared, all three fighters were still standing. Akumu's form had been blasted apart, scattered across the room in dozens of pink fragments. But even as they watched, the pieces began to flow back together, reforming into that terrible, shifting shape.

NER: Impossible.

AKU: Not impossible. Just... difficult to kill.

The creature's form stabilized, but they were clearly wounded. Pink goo dripped from dozens of cuts, and their movements had lost some of their fluid grace. But they were still fighting, still dangerous. Shen and Neru weren't in much better shape. Shen's hands were bleeding from the intensity of his explosions, and Neru's skin had taken on a bluish tint from the extreme cold he had been generating. Both of them were running on fumes and determination.

AKU: Stalemate. How... interesting.

The three fighters stood in the ruins of the ballroom, breathing heavily, none of them able to claim victory. The air crackled with residual energy - explosive force, glacial cold, and something else that tasted of nightmares and pink mist. Outside, the sun was setting, casting long shadows through the shattered windows.

SHN: Stalemate, my ass!

NER: We're ending this right now.

AKU: And how you plan on that?!

SHN: Surpassing our limits.

NER: Creating a way to defeat gods.

SHN: This isn't a threat.

NER: Rather a declaration.

Their souls beat in sync and begin to resonate with each other.
Akumus' eyes widen in amazement.

NER & SHN: We are the strongest!

The world would bear witness to another breakthrough in soul
essence extraction.

NER & SHN: *Linked Soul Extraction, Frost-Fracture!*

The war for their souls - and perhaps for everything they had once
held dear - was far from over.

End of Chapter 45
"Shattering Icicles"

[Party tricks aren't enough to scratch me.]

(Chapter 46 || Volume 2) Canvas.

Sometimes, in the space between heartbeats, the world changes
irrevocably. What had been a stalemate moments before had
become something else entirely - a lesson in the cruelty of power.
The golden ballroom, once a testament to royal excess, now bore
witness to a truth as old as conflict itself: there are always deeper
wells of strength, and some enemies merely toy with their prey
before the kill.

Neru knelt on the cracked marble floor, his breath coming in ragged
gasps that turned to frost in the air. Ice crystals formed and
shattered around him with each labored exhale, his power flickering
like a dying flame. Beside him, Shen's explosive aura had dimmed
to barely visible embers, his hands trembling not from rage but
from the bone-deep exhaustion that comes after pushing beyond
every limit.

Neither could remember the exact moment their defiance had
crumbled. The attack had come so fast, so overwhelmingly
complete, that their minds had simply... skipped over it. One
moment they had been standing as equals in battle, the next they
were broken and kneeling, their bodies screaming protests they
couldn't ignore.

Above them, Akumu stood unchanged, unmarked, as if the previous
battle had been nothing more than a warm-up exercise. The
creature's form was solid now, no longer shifting - perhaps they no
longer felt the need to adapt when victory was so assured.

AKU: Do you understand now? The difference between us is not skill, not determination, not even the nobility of your cause. It is simply... absolute.

Akumu's voice carried the weight of inevitability, each word settling over the fallen warriors like a burial shroud.

AKU: You fought with everything you had. You coordinated perfectly, pushed your abilities beyond their limits, and for a moment - just a moment - you made me take you seriously. But that is all it was. A moment.

The creature began to circle them, their footsteps echoing in the ruined ballroom with the rhythm of a funeral march.

AKU: Do you know what absolute strength means? It means that your effort, your sacrifice, your very existence becomes meaningless the moment you stand against it. It means that all your training, all your pain, all your righteous fury amounts to nothing more than an entertaining diversion.

Shen tried to raise his head, defiance still burning in his eyes despite his body's betrayal. But even that small movement sent waves of agony through his battered form.

AKU: You came here seeking vengeance, driven by losses that seemed unbearable. But what you found was a lesson in perspective. Your losses were not tragedies - they were inevitabilities. This entire kingdom, every person you've ever cared about, every moment of joy you've ever known - all of it exists only because I have not yet chosen to end it.

The pink mist began to swirl around Akumu's form, coalescing into something that might have been weapons or might have been hands. The distinction hardly mattered.

AKU: But lessons must eventually come to an end. And I grow tired of teaching.

The creature raised what might have been a blade, its edge gleaming with that same sickly pink light. Neither Neru nor Shen could move, could even properly protest their fate. They had given everything, and it hadn't been enough. Perhaps it never could have been.

AKU: Any last words? Some final curse to make you feel better about your failure?

The blade began to descend, almost lazy in its motion. There was no rush - what could these broken warriors do to stop what was coming? Then the wall exploded inward.

Not with the familiar force of Shen's explosions, but with something else entirely - a cascade of colors that seemed to paint reality itself into new shapes. Through the breach came two figures, moving with the fluid grace of those who had never known true defeat.

The first was a young woman whose very presence seemed to make the air around her shimmer with possibility. Her clothes were stained with paint in every color imaginable, and her eyes held the focused intensity of someone who saw the world not as it was, but as it could be. In her hands, brushes moved with supernatural speed, each stroke bringing new impossibilities into existence.

The second was something that might have once been a monster but had become something more primal, more honest. Fenris moved on two legs but carried the predatory grace of a wolf, his enhanced senses already cataloging every detail of the battle scene. His eyes fixed on Akumu with the unwavering focus of a hunter who had finally found worthy prey.

ILA: Well, well. Still playing with your food, I see.

Her voice carried a casual confidence that made even Akumu pause. The creature's blade stopped inches from Neru's neck, their attention wholly captured by this unexpected development.

AKU: Illia. I was wondering when you might show up.

There was history in that exchange, layers of meaning that spoke to encounters neither Neru nor Shen could understand.

FNR: The scent of fear is thick here. And blood. And something else... something that doesn't belong in this world.

Fenris's voice was a low growl that seemed to rumble through the very foundations of the palace. His nostrils flared as he analyzed the battlefield, his enhanced instincts painting a picture more complete than any normal senses could provide.

ILA: Oh, you know how it is. I was in the neighborhood when I heard all the noise. Thought I'd drop by and see what kind of mess you were making this time.

As she spoke, her brushes never stopped moving. Colors flowed through the air around her, taking shape and substance as if reality itself was just another canvas waiting for her touch.

AKU: And you brought a pet.

FNR: Pet? I think you have us confused.

The wolfs' lips pulled back in what might have been a smile, revealing teeth that were definitely not normal. His claws extended slightly, catching the light that filtered through the broken windows.

FNR: I'm nobody's pet. I'm just someone who doesn't like bullies.

Akumu's form began to shift again, that fluid grace returning as they prepared for a different kind of battle. The pink mist started to swirl more actively, forming tentacles and appendages that writhed with eager anticipation.

AKU: How touching. The artist and the beast, come to save the day. Tell me, Illia - do you really think you can succeed where these two failed so spectacularly?

ILA: Failed? Who said anything about failure?

Her brushes moved faster now, creating swirls of color that seemed to hang in the air like frozen fireworks. Each stroke was deliberate, purposeful, building toward something larger than the sum of its parts.

ILA: They did exactly what they needed to do. They showed me how you fight, how you think, how you move. They gave me all the information I need to paint your defeat.

AKU: Such confidence. It's almost refreshing after dealing with these broken toys.

The creature gestured dismissively at Neru and Shen, who were still struggling to regain their footing. But there was something different in Akumu's posture now - a wariness that hadn't been there before.

ILA: You know what your problem is? You think in terms of absolutes. Absolute strength, absolute power, absolute victory. But art... art is about possibilities.

The colors around her began to coalesce, taking on shapes that defied easy description. They were weapons and shields and creatures and landscapes all at once, existing in a state of constant potential.

FNR: She's right. You rely too much on fear, on the idea that you're unbeatable. But I can smell your uncertainty. You're not as confident as you pretend to be.

AKU: Uncertainty? From me? How amusing.

But even as they spoke, Akumu's form was shifting into something more defensive, more prepared for a fight that might not go according to plan.

ILA: Fenris, would you mind helping our new friends get back on their feet? I think they've earned a front-row seat to what comes next.

FNR: With pleasure.

The wolf moved to where Neru and Shen knelt, his enhanced strength making it easy to help them stand. His touch was surprisingly gentle, his predatory nature tempered by something that might have been compassion.

FNR: You fought well. Rest now. Let us handle this.

Shen tried to protest, but his body simply wouldn't respond. Neru managed to speak, though his voice was barely above a whisper.

NER: Be careful. They're... they're stronger than anything we've ever faced.

ILA: I know. I've been watching.

She turned to face Akumu fully, her brushes now moving in complex patterns that seemed to bend light itself. The very air around her shimmered with creative potential.

ILA: You want to know about absolute strength? Let me show you what absolute imagination looks like.

Her brushes swept through the air in a grand gesture, and suddenly the ruined ballroom was filled with impossible colors, shapes that shouldn't exist, and the promise of a battle unlike anything that had come before.

AKU: Such bravado. But tell me - what happens when your paint runs dry?

ILA: That's the beautiful thing about art. It never runs dry. It just finds new ways to surprise you.

The two opponents faced each other across the battlefield, neither moving, both preparing for a confrontation that would determine far more than just the fate of a single kingdom. In the balance hung the very nature of power itself - absolute strength against infinite possibility.

FNR: She's going to do it, isn't she? Take them on alone?

The wolfs' enhanced senses could already detect the shift in the air, the change in Illia's scent that spoke to complete confidence and unwavering determination.

Shen and Neru, still leaning heavily on each other for support, watched in amazement as the young artist stepped forward, her brushes weaving patterns of light and color that seemed to make reality itself hold its breath.

ILA: You've had your fun terrorizing people who couldn't truly challenge you. But playtime's over now.

She raised her brushes high, and the entire ballroom seemed to shimmer with anticipation.

ILA: I'm going to paint you a defeat so complete, so absolute, that even you won't be able to imagine your way out of it.

AKU: You think you'll win?

The declaration hung in the air like a challenge thrown down before gods, and for the first time since the battle began, Akumu's confident smile faltered just slightly.

ILA: Think? I know I'll win.

The stage was set for a confrontation that would test the very limits of what was possible - and perhaps discover new definitions of impossible along the way.

End of Chapter 46
"Canvas"

[Why are you so wary of her, Akumu?]

(Chapter 47 || Volume 2) Journal Entry.

I find myself writing these words with trembling hands, not from fear, but from the weight of understanding that has settled upon my shoulders like a shroud. The memories come to me in fragments - whispers of another existence, another time, another being who I can only describe as... father.

Zero. That was his name, though I suspect it held meanings far deeper than any mortal language could convey. The memories are not mine, yet they feel as familiar as my own breath. I see flashes of vast cosmic battles, of realities bleeding into one another, of a multiverse teetering on the edge of absolute annihilation. And at the center of it all, Zero - my father - standing against forces that would unmake existence itself.

The enemy in those memories had no true form, no single identity. It was entropy given consciousness, the urge to return all things to the void from which they came. Zero called it by many names, but the one that resonates most clearly in these inherited fragments is the one that makes my soul shiver: the Ending. It sought not conquest, not domination, but the complete cessation of being. Every star extinguished, every thought silenced, every possibility reduced to empty, perfect silence.

But Zero fought. Oh, how he fought. And in the end, he won - but at a cost I am only beginning to understand. The memories suggest he gave everything, his very essence scattered across the cosmos to ensure that life, that existence itself, would continue. And from that sacrifice, from the fragments of his soul, new realities were born.

Our world. Earth. This place I call home was forged from the dying breath of a cosmic guardian, shaped by the final thoughts of one who loved existence more than his own survival. The similarities between Zero's memories and our reality are too numerous to be coincidental. The same patterns of conflict, the same struggles between light and darkness, the same desperate hope that somehow, someday, the good will triumph over the void. Which brings me to Vazroth.

The name itself carries weight in my inherited memories, though I know Zero never faced this particular enemy. Vazroth is something

else - a echo, perhaps, or a descendant of that primordial Ending. He carries the same hunger for oblivion, the same desire to reduce all existence to nothingness. In my father's memories, I can see the parallels so clearly it makes my chest ache. The same methodical destruction, the same corruption of life itself, the same absolute certainty that existence is a mistake to be corrected.

But if Vazroth is the echo of Zero's ancient enemy, then what does that make Gabriel and Lucifer? The answer seems almost too obvious, too perfectly orchestrated to be mere coincidence. They are the echoes of Zero himself - fragments of his heroic nature, his refusal to yield, his willingness to sacrifice everything for the preservation of what is good and right. I suspect they carry their own whispers of memory, their own half-remembered dreams of cosmic battles fought in the spaces between stars.

The thought that follows this realization is both comforting and terrifying: none of this is random. The world is not simply careening toward chaos - it is following a pattern, playing out a story that has been written into the very fabric of reality by Zero's sacrifice.

Gabriel and Lucifer fight against Vazroth because they must, because it is literally in their nature to do so. They are the universe's immune system, activated by the presence of something that would destroy it all.

And if that is true, then what of the others? What of those who have risen to fight against the darkness?

Akumu troubles me most of all. In my inherited memories, I can see creatures like it - beings birthed from the Ending itself, given form and purpose by the very force they serve. They are not merely servants of destruction; they are destruction wearing a mask of life. Akumu carries this same quality, this same wrongness that makes reality itself recoil. I believe it is Vazroth's attempt to continue his master's work, to seed the world with agents of entropy that will bring about the silence he so desperately craves.

But the others - Neru, Shen, and especially those who have just arrived - they feel different. They carry the weight of destiny, the particular quality of those who have been chosen by fate itself to stand against the darkness. Not because they are special, but because they are necessary. The universe has shaped them, guided them, brought them together in this place and time because this is where the pattern demands heroes to emerge.

I have considered joining them, adding my own power to their cause. But I am paralyzed by uncertainty. In all of Zero's memories, I can find no echo of myself, no pattern that I might represent. I am an anomaly, a variable that was not accounted for in the cosmic equation. What if my intervention disrupts the natural order? What if my actions, however well-intentioned, somehow tip the balance toward the very destruction I seek to prevent?

So I watch. I record. I try to understand a story that is still being written, even as I remain terrified of my own role in it.

But there is one element that truly confounds me, one piece of this cosmic puzzle that doesn't quite fit the pattern I've observed. Illia.

Yes, she is a descendant of Zephine - that much I can trace through the bloodlines and the inherited gifts. But there is something else about her, something that makes her presence here feel less like destiny and more like... impossibility.

In Zero's memories, buried deeper than most, I have glimpsed another figure. A skeleton, but different. Where I am cautious, this being was bold and creative. They wielded a paintbrush larger than themselves, and with it, they could reshape reality itself. They were not a warrior in the traditional sense, but an artist whose very existence was an act of rebellion against the void.

The resemblance between that ancient figure and Illia is unmistakable. Not physical - how could it be, when one is bone and the other flesh? - but something deeper. The same fearless creativity, the same absolute confidence in the power of imagination to triumph over entropy. The same willingness to paint new possibilities into existence, even when the canvas is reality itself.

But if Illia is somehow connected to that ancient artist, then what does that make her? Another echo of Zero's memories? A fragment of someone who fought alongside my father in battles that predate this universe? Or something else entirely - a wild card that even Zero's sacrifice could not have anticipated?

The implications are staggering. If Illia truly carries the essence of that artist, then she is not just another hero shaped by fate. She is something unprecedented, something that could rewrite the very story our world has been telling itself.

The question that haunts me as I write these words is simple and terrifying: Just how much of an anomaly is this girl?

And perhaps more importantly - what happens to the pattern, to the careful balance between order and chaos, when an anomaly of this magnitude enters the equation? I fear I may soon find out.

End of Chapter 47 **"Journal Entry"**

[It's just me so don't be so hard on yourself, Blooky.]

(Chapter 48 || Volume 2) That's What I Do.

The battle began before anyone could blink. Akumu struck first, their form exploding into a writhing mass of tentacles and claws that shot across the ballroom with the speed of lightning. The pink mist that had been swirling around them condensed into solid weapons - spears of crystallized fear that could pierce through steel, whips of materialized despair that could crush bone. But Illia was already painting.

Her brushes moved through the air in impossible patterns, each stroke leaving trails of color that hardened into reality before Akumu's attack could reach her. A wall of brilliant blue paint erupted from nothing, absorbing the impact of a dozen tentacles. Golden chains materialized from her brush strokes, wrapping around Akumu's appendages and yanking them off course.

ILA: Oh, come on! Is that really your opening move? I've seen children finger-paint more creatively than that!

Her voice carried genuine disappointment as she danced between Akumu's attacks, her brushes never stopping their impossible work. Where other fighters would dodge, she simply painted new footholds into existence. Where others would block, she created shields of hardened color that turned aside even Akumu's most vicious strikes.

AKU: You mock me? You think your parlor tricks can match absolute power?

Akumu's form shifted, becoming something larger, more monstrous. The pink mist expanded outward, filling the air with

whispers of doubt and terror. But Illia just laughed, her brushes moving faster now, creating swirls of silver paint that seemed to cleanse the very air around her.

ILA: Absolute power? Sweetie, you're not even relatively impressive.

She gestured casually, and suddenly the floor beneath Akumu became a canvas. Bright yellow paint exploded upward like a geyser, coating the creature's shifting form and somehow making it solid, preventing the fluid transformations that had been its greatest advantage.

AKU: What... what is this? How are you...?

For the first time, there was uncertainty in Akumu's voice. The creature struggled against the paint that clung to them, but every movement only seemed to make it spread further.

ILA: You're thinking about this all wrong. You see the world as something to be conquered, destroyed, remade in your image. But I see it as something to be improved. And right now, you're definitely in need of some artistic direction.

Her brushes swept through the air in a grand gesture, and suddenly the entire ballroom was transformed. The cracked marble floor became a canvas of swirling galaxies, the broken walls were repainted into windows that showed impossible vistas, and the very air shimmered with colors that had no names.

Akumu tried to adapt, their form shifting to match the new environment. But every change they made, Illia countered with casual ease. When they became liquid, she painted them solid. When they grew larger, she painted them smaller. When they split into multiple forms, she painted them back together with brush strokes that seemed to bend reality itself.

ILA: You know what your problem is? You're too predictable. Fear, tentacles, pink mist - it's all very "scary things 101." Where's the creativity? Where's the artistry?

She paused mid-battle to examine her fingernails, apparently unconcerned by the fact that Akumu was still trying to kill her. Every attack the creature launched was casually deflected by paint constructs that seemed to appear without her even looking.

AKU: This is impossible! I am the embodiment of fear! I am the end of all hope! You cannot simply... paint over me!

ILA: Oh, but I can. Watch this.

Illia's brushes moved in a complex pattern, and suddenly Akumu's form began to change against their will. The sickly pink color drained away, replaced by cheerful pastels. The writhing tentacles became flower petals that swayed gently in an unfelt breeze. The creature's terrifying visage was transformed into something that looked more like a confused butterfly than an agent of destruction.

AKU: What have you done to me?! Change me back! CHANGE ME BACK!

ILA: Now you're starting to understand. I don't fight opponents - I improve them. Whether they want to be improved or not.

She walked closer to the transformed Akumu, her brushes still moving in lazy patterns that kept the creature's new form stable. There was something almost maternal in her expression, like a teacher patiently explaining a concept to a slow student.

ILA: You want to know the secret? The reason I always win? It's not because I'm stronger or faster or more powerful than my opponents. It's much simpler than that.

She leaned in close, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper that somehow carried clearly through the transformed ballroom.

ILA: I'm always exactly as strong as I need to be. No more, no less. It's my whole thing, really. Fight someone who can lift a car? Suddenly I can lift a truck. Face someone who can destroy a building? Boom, I can level a city block. Take on someone who claims to be the end of all existence? Well...

She gestured around the room, where her paint had transformed everything into something beautiful and impossible. Even the broken chandeliers had been repainted into works of art that cast rainbow light across the walls.

ILA: Let's just say that existence is a lot more resilient than you thought.

Akumu struggled against their new form, but the flower petals only fluttered more gently with each movement. The creature's voice, when it came, was filled with something that might have been

desperation.

AKU: This isn't over!

ILA: Oh, for sure! I'll undo your new form and others will come to deal with you. Today-me has more pressing concerns.

She pulled out what looked like a smartphone, checking the time with the casual air of someone who hadn't just completely dominated a cosmic horror.

ILA: Speaking of which, I'm afraid I'll have to cut this short. I've got a coffee date in about ten minutes, and I promised I wouldn't be late this time.

FNR: You're... leaving? In the middle of a battle?

Fenris's voice carried a mixture of confusion and admiration. He'd been watching the entire fight with the focused attention of a predator studying a superior hunter, but this casual dismissal of cosmic stakes was beyond even his enhanced understanding.

ILA: Oh, the battle's over. I mean, I could keep going - maybe turn them into a nice landscape painting or something - but where's the fun in that? Besides, I was only buying time for the main actor to arrive.

She began painting in the air again, but this time the colors formed a swirling pool that seemed to lead somewhere else entirely. The scent of coffee and fresh pastries drifted from the painted portal, along with the sound of distant conversation.

AKU: You cannot simply walk away! I am a force of nature! I am-

ILA: You're a force of nature that's about to be conquered. I think you'll find that you too have limits.

She stepped toward the portal, pausing only to look back at Neru and Shen, who were still staring at the transformed battlefield in amazement.

ILA: You two should probably get some rest. And maybe work on your teamwork - you've got potential, but you're still thinking too small. Oh well, the kid with wings will deal with this.

As she stepped through the portal, she paused one more time, looking back at Akumu with a mischievous grin.

ILA: Oops, was I supposed to spoil the wings part?

With that, she stuck her tongue out at the creature, a gesture so childishly defiant that it somehow made her casual victory even more insulting.

AKU: This isn't over! Do you hear me?! THIS ISN'T OVER!

But Illia was already gone, the portal closing behind her with a soft splash of color. The scent of coffee lingered for a moment, then faded, leaving only Akumus' ego shattered.

AKU: That insufferable little wench! How dare she- how DARE she turn me into some pathetic garden ornament! I am the embodiment of fear itself! I am the herald of the end times! I will not be mocked by some paint-slinging child who thinks reality is her personal-

The sound of measured footsteps echoed through the transformed ballroom, slow and deliberate. Each step was accompanied by the soft drip of liquid hitting marble - a rhythmic percussion that made everyone present turn toward the source.

Through the hole that Illia had painted in the wall, a figure emerged from the shadows beyond. Tall and lean, with an otherworldly grace that spoke of power barely contained, Icarus stepped into the golden light of the ballroom. His clothes were torn and stained with something dark, his skin bore the fresh marks of recent battle, and in his hand, a blade that seemed to drink in the light around it dripped with blood that was not quite the right color.

NER: I-Icarus... what happened to you?

The flower petals that had been Akumu's form trembled, not with the gentle breeze that had been moving them before, but with something that might have been recognition.

Icarus said nothing at first, his eyes - tired despite his youthful appearance - fixed solely on the transformed cosmic horror. The silence stretched between them, heavy with the weight of violence yet to come.

End of Chapter 48
"That's What I Do"

[I'm so excited for my date with Remi!]

(Chapter 49 || Volume 2) Calamity, Akumu.

The silence stretched between them like a blade held to the throat. Icarus stood motionless, his sword still dripping with blood that seemed too dark to be entirely human. He began to walk closer, each step deliberate and measured. The blood from his blade left a trail across the transformed marble floor, dark drops against Illia's painted galaxies.

AKU: You think you can threaten me? Even in this ridiculous form, I am still-

ICR: Still what? Still the puppet who thinks he's the puppeteer?

The words cut through Akumu's bluster like his blade had cut through whatever enemies he'd faced before arriving here. There was no anger in Icarus's voice, only the tired certainty of someone who had seen too much and understood more than he wanted to.

ICR: I've been cleaning up the messes you've left behind. The souls you've corrupted, the fear you've planted, the nightmares you've turned into reality. Do you know what I found when I followed your trail backward?

Akumu's goo rustled, but no sound emerged. For once, the cosmic horror seemed content to listen.

ICR: Children. Children who couldn't sleep because their dreams had been poisoned. Families torn apart by terrors that shouldn't exist. Entire communities driven mad by whispers in a language they didn't understand.

Icarus stopped a few feet away from Akumu's form, close enough that the creature could see the exhaustion in his eyes, the weight of every life he'd been too late to save.

ICR: And at the center of it all, you. The broken toy that thinks it's become the master.

AKU: Broken? I am the embodiment of primordial fear! I am the-

ICR: You're the embodiment of someone else's will. A creature so desperate to matter that you've convinced yourself you're the source of the darkness instead of just another victim of it.

The goo began to shift, the paint that held Akumu's form starting to

crack under the pressure of contained rage. But Icarus didn't move, didn't even raise his blade. He simply watched with the patience of someone who had learned to wait for the right moment.

ICR: Someone else made you, didn't they? Shaped you from their own twisted essence and set you loose on the world. But they didn't make you to be their equal. They made you to be his echo, their shadow, their way of continuing their work even when they can't be present themselves.

The cracks in the paint spread wider, pink mist beginning to seep through the growing fissures.

AKU: You know nothing about my origins! You know nothing about what I truly am!

ICR: I know enough. I know that every soul you've touched carries a piece of corruption. I know that every nightmare you've created serves a greater purpose. And I know that you're not even aware of how completely you've been used.

The transformation was beginning to reverse itself, Illia's artistic imprisonment slowly giving way to Akumu's true nature. But instead of retreating, Icarus stepped closer, his blade now pointed directly at the creature's shifting form.

ICR: The question is: what are you going to do about it?

AKU: What... what do you mean?

For the first time since Icarus had entered the ballroom, Akumu's voice carried something other than rage or arrogance. There was confusion there, and beneath it, something that might have been genuine curiosity.

ICR: You have a choice. You can continue being a weapon, spreading fear and corruption until someone finally puts you down permanently. Or you can choose to be gently put to rest by my hand.

The flower petals had almost completely dissolved now, revealing glimpses of Akumu's true form beneath. But the creature seemed frozen, caught between transformations by the weight of Icarus's words.

AKU: YOU THINK I'M SCARED OF YOU?!

ICR: I think you're strong enough to recognize the truth when you

hear it. And the truth is that you're not a god - you're a pet that needs to be put down.

Icarus lowered his blade slightly, though he remained ready to strike if necessary. The last of the flower petals crumbled away, revealing the writhing mass of dark substance that was Akumu's true form. The creature's presence filled the ballroom like smoke, thick and choking, but Icarus's breathing remained steady.

AKU: You speak of choice as if I ever had one. As if any of us ever had one.

There was something almost vulnerable in the admission, a crack in the facade that had taken centuries to build. But it lasted only a moment before the familiar malice crept back into the creature's voice.

AKU: But you're wrong about one thing, little swordsman. I am not a pet to be put down. I am the nightmare that puts down everything else.

ICR: Then prove it.

The words hung in the air like a challenge thrown down between knights. Icarus shifted his stance, blade held low but ready, his eyes never leaving the shifting mass before him.

ICR: Show me the primordial fear you claim to be. Show me the cosmic horror that's supposed to make mortals weep. Because all I see is a creature that's forgotten what it means to fear.

AKU: ENOUGH!

The explosion of movement was instantaneous. Akumu's form erupted upward, tendrils of shadow and substance lashing out in all directions. The ballroom's remaining windows shattered, sending cascades of glass raining down like deadly confetti. The painted galaxies on the floor began to writhe and twist, as if Akumu's rage was infecting even Illia's art. Icarus moved like water, his blade singing through the air as he deflected the first wave of attacks. Where his sword met Akumu's essence, there was a sound like steam escaping from a kettle - a hiss of something fundamental being severed.

AKU: You cannot cut what has no form!

But even as the creature spoke, Icarus's blade found its mark again

and again. Each strike seemed to carve away pieces of Akumu's presence, leaving gaps in the shadow that took longer and longer to fill. Yet for every wound Icarus inflicted, Akumu adapted, learning the rhythm of the swordsman's movements.

ICR: Everything has form. Everything has substance. Even fear.

He pivoted, avoiding a tendril that would have taken his head off, but this time Akumu was ready. A second appendage caught Icarus across the ribs, sending him sliding across the twisted galaxies painted on the floor. Dark blood began to seep through his shirt where the creature's touch had burned through fabric and flesh alike.

AKU: You bleed so prettily, little hero. Just like all the others.

Icarus rolled to his feet, his sword coming up just in time to block another assault. The impact drove him back several steps, his boots struggling for purchase on the increasingly unstable floor. Akumu's corruption was spreading, turning Illia's beautiful art into something that writhed and shifted like living tissue.

ICR: I've fought things older than you. Stronger than you. But you're right about one thing - I do bleed.

The admission came with a bitter smile as Icarus pressed his free hand against his wounded side. When he pulled it away, his fingers were stained red, but his grip on his sword never wavered.

ICR: The question is: can you bleed too?

This time, Icarus was the one who attacked first. His blade carved through the air in a series of precise strikes, each one aimed at what he sensed were vital points in Akumu's shifting anatomy. The creature shrieked and recoiled, but not before landing another blow that sent Icarus stumbling backward. The fight became a deadly dance across the ruined ballroom. Icarus's human limitations began to show - his breathing grew labored, his movements slightly less precise with each exchange. But Akumu was suffering too. Each successful strike from the blessed blade left wounds that refused to heal, gaps in the creature's form that grew wider with each passing moment.

AKU: You're slowing down, swordsman. How long can mortal flesh endure against eternal darkness?

ICR: Long enough.

But even as he spoke, Icarus felt his strength beginning to ebb. The wounds Akumu had inflicted were deeper than they appeared, and the creature's very presence was sapping his vitality. His next strike, though true, lacked the power of his earlier attacks. Akumu sensed the weakness and pressed forward, tendrils lashing out from every direction. Icarus managed to deflect most of them, but one caught his sword arm, sending his blade skittering across the floor. Another wrapped around his throat, lifting him off the ground.

AKU: There. Now you see the futility of your-

The words were cut short as Icarus's boot connected with something vital in Akumu's mass. The creature's grip loosened just enough for the swordsman to break free, but he landed hard, his injured ribs screaming in protest. Both combatants circled each other now, each breathing heavily in their own way. Icarus's sword lay several feet away, but Akumu made no move to prevent him from retrieving it. The creature's form was noticeably smaller than when the fight began, pieces of its essence scattered across the ballroom floor like spilled ink.

AKU: You fight well, I'll grant you that. Better than most who've tried to end me.

ICR: This isn't over. Not by a long shot.

Icarus retrieved his blade, his movements careful and measured. His side still bled, and his sword arm trembled slightly from the strain, but his eyes held the same determined fire they'd carried since the beginning.

AKU: No. No, it isn't.

The creature's form began to shift again, but this time it was different. Instead of expanding with rage, Akumu seemed to be consolidating its remaining power, drawing what was left of its essence into a more compact, more dangerous configuration.

AKU: You've proven yourself worthy of my full attention, little swordsman. Let's see how you fare when I stop playing games.

The air in the ballroom grew thick with malevolent energy. The painted galaxies beneath their feet began to spin faster, creating a

vortex of light and shadow that made the very ground unstable. Somewhere in the distance, thunder rumbled, though no storm clouds were visible through the shattered windows. Icarus raised his sword, despite the pain in his ribs, despite the exhaustion that threatened to overwhelm him. His blade caught what little light remained in the room, creating a small beacon of hope in the gathering darkness.

ICR: Good. I was getting bored with your warm-up.

They stood facing each other across the ruined ballroom, two forces of nature preparing for a final confrontation. The silence stretched between them, heavy with the promise of violence to come. Neither moved, each waiting for the other to make the first move in what they both knew would be the decisive exchange.

End of Chapter 49 **"Calamity, Akumu"**

[Manage a little longer, Icarus.]

(Chapter 50 || Volume 2) Unfair Nature.

The air in the royal palace crackled with tension as Matta and Korren faced each other across the marble floor. The ornate pillars cast long shadows in the dim light, and the silence stretched between them like a taut wire ready to snap.

KOR: You speak of gods and purpose, little rabbit. But let me show you what true power looks like.

Korren raised his hand, and suddenly he was gone. Not moved - gone. The space where he had stood rippled like water, and before Matta could even process what happened, she felt a sharp pain in her side. She spun around to find Korren materializing behind her, his fist already withdrawing from where it had connected with her ribs.

MTA: Teleportation... of course.

KOR: Not just teleportation, rabbit. Spatial manipulation. I can move anything, anywhere, anytime.

He vanished again, and this time Matta was ready. She pushed her speed to its limits, her perception slowing the world around her

until she could see the subtle distortions in space that marked his arrival points. There - a shimmer near the eastern pillar. She darted toward it, but Korren was already gone, appearing instead at the opposite end of the chamber.

KOR: Fast, but predictable. You move in straight lines, rabbit. Space is not so linear.

The battle erupted in earnest. Matta became a blur of motion, her form streaking across the palace floor in zigzag patterns, trying to catch Korren off guard. But every time she closed the distance, he would simply vanish and reappear elsewhere, often behind her with another strike ready.

MTA: Stand still and fight!

KOR: Why would I limit myself to your preferred battlefield?

As they fought, Matta began to notice something strange. Each time Korren teleported, she felt a brief moment of... disconnect. As if something inside her was being pulled away, stretched thin. It was subtle at first, barely noticeable in the heat of battle, but it was growing stronger.

Korren appeared directly in front of her, his hand reaching out not to strike, but to touch her forehead. The moment his fingers made contact, Matta felt it - a violent wrenching sensation, as if something fundamental was being torn from her very being.

KOR: Did you think I only moved physical matter? I can relocate anything, rabbit. Including the essence that grants your abilities.

Matta staggered backward, and to her horror, she felt her speed beginning to fade. Not diminish - fade entirely. Her movements became sluggish, her perception returned to normal human levels. She looked down at her hands, watching in disbelief as the crackling energy that usually surrounded her body began to dissipate.

MTA: What... what did you do?

KOR: I moved your soul essence - the magical core that grants your supernatural speed - to a pocket dimension roughly three thousand miles from here. You are now operating on purely physical capabilities.

Korren began to circle her slowly, confidently. Without her

supernatural speed, Matta appeared to be just another rabbit - faster than a human, perhaps, but nothing compared to what she had been moments before.

KOR: This is how I defeat, rabbit. Strip away their essence, and they become remarkably... weak.

He lunged forward with inhuman speed, his own abilities unimpaired. Matta barely managed to dodge, rolling to the side as his fist shattered the marble where she had been standing. She came up running, but her movement felt painfully slow compared to what she was used to.

MTA: Even without my essence, I'm still faster than you!

KOR: Are you?

Korren teleported directly into her path, and Matta had to throw herself sideways to avoid collision. She hit the ground hard, her shoulder scraping against the stone floor. This was bad. Without her supernatural speed, she was operating at maybe one percent of her usual capability.

KOR: You see, rabbit, this is what separates pretenders from true power. Your abilities were granted to you by forces beyond your control. Mine are inherent to my very nature.

He appeared beside her again, this time managing to land a solo kick to her midsection. Matta doubled over, gasping for breath. The pain was sharper now, more real. Her enhanced durability had apparently been tied to her speed essence as well.

MTA: I don't... need... supernatural power... to beat you.

KOR: Don't you?

But even as Korren spoke, something strange was happening. Matta was still moving, still fighting, but there was something different about her movements now. Without the crackling energy of her supernatural speed, her natural rabbit physiology was more apparent. Her powerful hind legs, built for explosive acceleration. Her light frame, designed for agility. Her enhanced reflexes, honed by years of survival.

She wasn't moving with the reality-breaking speed she was known for, but she was moving with something else. Something primal. Something that had been there long before she ever claimed the

title of speed goddess.

Korren appeared behind her again, but this time Matta was ready. Not because she could perceive his teleportation, but because she could hear it - the faint whisper of displaced air, the subtle shift in the chamber's acoustics. Her rabbit ears twitched, and she spun around just in time to catch his wrist as he threw another punch.

KOR: Impossible. You should be helpless without your essence.

MTA: You made a mistake, Korren.

She twisted his arm and used his own momentum to throw him across the chamber. He disappeared mid-flight, reappearing in a crouch near the far wall, his expression no longer quite so confident.

MTA: You assumed my speed came from magic. But I was fast before I ever claimed godhood. I was fast before I ever understood what I was. I was fast because I'm a rabbit, and rabbits are born to run.

She began to move again, and while she wasn't breaking the sound barrier or stepping outside of time, she was moving with a fluid grace that seemed almost supernatural in its own right. Her movements were efficient, economical, each step perfectly placed.

KOR: Natural speed has limits. I am beyond such constraints.

MTA: You're right. Natural speed does have limits.

She disappeared from where she was standing - not through teleportation, but through sheer explosive acceleration. Korren's eyes widened as he realized she had moved faster than his enhanced perception could track. Not supernaturally fast, but fast enough.

MTA: But you've never seen a rabbit at her natural limits before.

She appeared beside him, her fist already in motion. Korren tried to teleport away, but Matta had anticipated this. As he began to fade, she grabbed him by the shirt and held on, her grip tight enough that his spatial manipulation couldn't separate them.

KOR: Let go!

MTA: I don't think so.

They tumbled through his teleportation together, appearing in the center of the chamber. Korren tried to push her away, but Matta had wrapped her legs around his torso, her powerful hind limbs keeping him locked in place.

KOR: This is impossible! You can't maintain this level of exertion without supernatural enhancement!

MTA: Watch me.

She began to strike him rapidly, her fists moving in a blur of natural motion. Each punch was precisely placed, targeting pressure points and vulnerable areas she had learned about through years of combat. Korren tried to teleport them both again, but Matta's grip was unbreakable.

KOR: I can... still defeat you... I just need to...

He managed to grab her face, his fingers glowing with spatial energy. Matta felt him trying to teleport her head away from her body, but something was resisting his power. She headbutted him hard, and his concentration shattered. The spatial distortion around them collapsed, and they crashed to the ground together. Korren rolled away, blood streaming from his nose, his breathing labored.

KOR: This isn't over, rabbit.

MTA: Yes, it is.

Matta stood slowly, her own breathing heavy but controlled. She was exhausted, more tired than she had been in years, but she was still standing. Still fighting. Still fast.

KOR: I will retrieve your essence. I will make you helpless again.

MTA: Go ahead. Try to take what was never magical to begin with.

She began to approach him, and Korren scrambled backward. For the first time since the fight began, he looked genuinely afraid.

KOR: You... you're not supposed to be this strong without your powers.

MTA: That's because you never understood what my real power was. You thought it was magic, some divine gift that could be taken away. But my speed isn't a superpower, Korren. It's not an ability I was granted by gods or fate or cosmic forces.

She stopped just a few feet away from him, her breathing finally

beginning to return to normal.

MTA: My speed is who I am. It's in my bones, my muscles, my instincts. It's in the way I think, the way I move, the way I exist in this world. You can separate me from my soul, but you can't separate me from body.

Korren tried to teleport away, but something was wrong. His power was flickering, unstable. The sustained spatial manipulations had drained him more than he had anticipated.

KOR: This... this changes nothing. I have other ways to...

MTA: No. You don't.

She moved one final time, crossing the distance between them faster than thought, faster than reaction. Her fist connected with his solar plexus, and Korren collapsed to the ground, gasping for breath.

MTA: I told you I was the god of speed now. I didn't need magic to earn that title. I just needed to remember what it meant to be fast.

Korren lay on the marble floor, defeated but alive. His breathing was shallow, but he would recover. Matta stood over him, no longer the rabbit who had been trapped by her guilt, no longer the hero who relied on supernatural powers to save the day. She was simply Matta. And that was enough.

MTA: Now then. I believe I've earned myself some rest.

The palace around them began to shift and change as reality reasserted itself. The battle was over, and Matta took a nap on the floor.

End of Chapter 50 **"Unfair Nature"**

[Sometimes the fastest way forward is to remember where you started.]

(Chapter 51 || Volume 2) Embers.

The throne room doors slammed shut behind me with the finality of a tomb sealing. The sound echoed through the cavernous space,

swallowed by tapestries depicting victories I no longer recognized as noble. Years of war stretched across those walls like a monument to everything I'd once believed in.

King Aldric stood with his back to me, silhouetted against the massive stained glass window that dominated the chamber's far wall. Dawn light filtered through colored panes, casting fractured rainbows across the marble floor - beautiful patterns that somehow felt wrong in this place. The man I'd once served, once believed in, remained motionless as a statue.

NLH: Your fuckin' Majesty.

My voice carried further than it should have in the vast space. The words tasted like ash in my mouth.

He turned slowly, deliberately, and I saw what years of absolute power had carved from the idealistic king I remembered. His face was gaunt, cheekbones sharp as blade edges beneath skin that seemed stretched too thin. Gray streaked through hair that had once been golden as summer wheat. But it was his eyes that made my soul recoil - hollow, cold, as if something vital had been scooped out and replaced with shadows.

Above his head, barely visible in the morning light, a faint crown of black smoke and shadow flickered like dying embers.

ALD: I wondered when you would come.

There was something wrong with his voice. An undertone that pressed against my mind like oil seeping through cracks. I felt my certainty waver, my righteous anger dulling at the edges.

NLH: Did you? Or did your shadow whisper it to you?

Fire danced between my fingers as I stepped forward, ember eyes blazing against the encroaching dread. The flames pushed back against whatever influence filled this chamber, carving out a small space where I could think clearly.

ALD: You speak of shadows as if they're separate from me. But evolution requires adaptation, Nilah. The shadow and I are one now.

The temperature in the room dropped. His presence spread like spilled ink, seeping into every corner, every breath. I fought the

urge to step backward as that unnatural fear tried to worm its way into my thoughts.

NLH: Evolution? You call mass executions evolution? Public burnings of anyone who questions you? Children torn from their families for showing the slightest spark of defiance?

My flames flared brighter, painting the chamber in dancing orange light that held back the creeping darkness.

ALD: Necessary pruning. The weak branches must be cut so the strong may flourish. Humanity will emerge from this crucible unified, pure, unbreakable.

He stepped away from the window, moving with the fluid grace of a predator. Each footfall seemed to carry weight beyond the physical, pressing down on my shoulders like invisible chains.

NLH: Unified through terror. You've become the very monster you swore to protect them from.

ALD: Monster? I am humanity's salvation.

His laugh was bitter as winter wine, and I felt that wrongness in his voice intensify. My memories of past battles flickered, becoming clouded with doubt. Had I been right to kill those guards? Had their deaths been necessary, or had I simply enjoyed the power?

ALD: Every deserter I execute prevents a dozen more from fleeing. Every public example I make strengthens the resolve of thousands. The awakened who serve me do so knowing their power has purpose - to forge our species into something greater.

NLH: By murdering innocents?

ALD: By accepting that innocence is a luxury we cannot afford.

His eyes flashed with that hollow black-red gleam, and suddenly I was drowning in images - the faces of every person I'd killed, twisted with pain and terror. My hands shook as phantom screams echoed in my ears.

ALD: You of all people should understand, Nilah. Your fire has taken lives. The difference is I don't pretend mine was mercy.

No. I drew upon my soul trait - Ferocity, the courage to burn for what I believed in. My flames roared back to life, pushing against his influence like sunrise driving back the night. The phantom

voices faded, replaced by the memory of why I'd fought - not for pleasure, but for protection. Not from cruelty, but from love.

NLH: The difference is that I remember every face. Every name. Every reason I fought. You've forgotten what you're supposed to be protecting!

Something cracked in his composure. For a moment, the hollow coldness in his eyes flickered, and I glimpsed the man he'd been - noble, idealistic, good. But the shadow-crown pulsed, and the moment passed like smoke on the wind.

ALD: I protect the future of our species. If that requires sacrificing sentiment-

NLH: You're sacrificing our humanity!

The words exploded from me like a volcanic eruption, flames roaring around my body in a brilliant inferno.

NLH: Look at yourself! Look at what you've become! This isn't strength - it's cowardice wrapped in crown and ceremony!

For a heartbeat, the mask slipped entirely. I saw him as he truly was - a broken man hollowed out by fear, manipulated by something hungry and ancient. The shadow-crown writhed above his head like a living parasite, feeding on his terror and amplifying it back into the world.

ALD: Cowardice?

His voice dropped to a whisper that somehow filled the entire chamber. The very air seemed to thicken with dread.

ALD: I have made the hardest choices. I have borne the weight of necessary evil so others wouldn't have to. I have sacrificed everything-

NLH: You've failed!

The words hung in the air like a death sentence.

NLH: You've failed as a king, failed as a leader, and failed as a human being. And now I'm going to stop you.

His influence slammed into me like a physical blow, driving me to one knee. Fear crashed over me in waves - not just my own, but the

accumulated terror of everyone he'd broken. I felt their despair, their helplessness, their certainty that resistance was futile. My flames guttered like candles in a hurricane.

ALD: Stop me?

He advanced, each step accompanied by another crushing wave of psychic pressure. The shadow-crown expanded, filling half the chamber with writhing darkness.

ALD: You cannot even stand in my presence.

My hands pressed against the cold marble floor, my entire body trembling under the weight of imposed terror. But even as my flames dimmed, my soul blazed brighter. I thought of Icarus and the others fighting in the courtyard below. I thought of the families we'd rescued, the children who deserved to grow up free from fear. I thought of the girl I'd been before the wars - full of hope and dreams and the unshakeable belief that tomorrow could be better than today.

NLH: I said...

Fire erupted around me like wings of pure heat, pushing back against the crushing darkness.

NLH: Get off your knees!

I burst upward, my flames propelling me forward in an explosion of flame and fury. Aldric barely had time to draw his sword before my fire-wreathed fist crashed into his jaw, sending him staggering backward. The taste of his blood was metallic and wrong, tinged with shadows.

The fight erupted with volcanic intensity. His blade swept in practiced arcs while tendrils of darkness writhed around him like loyal hounds. Each strike he landed carried his soul's corruption, seeping cold despair into my wounds. But I fought like my namesake - ferocious and untamed. My flames took the shape of whips and daggers, striking from impossible angles while I wove between his attacks.

Steel rang against fire as we danced our deadly waltz across the throne room. I shaped my flames into a burning sword, parrying his strikes while my free hand sent arrows of pure heat streaking

toward his heart. He moved with inhuman grace, shadows bending reality around him to deflect my attacks.

ALD: You think this changes anything?

His influence pressed against me again, trying to drive me down. I felt my knees buckle as wave after wave of existential dread crashed over my mind.

ALD: I am not some common tyrant to be overthrown by righteous fury. I am evolution incarnate. I am-

NLH: You're afraid.

The realization hit me like lightning, burning away the fog of terror clouding my thoughts. I straightened despite the crushing weight of his power, my flames flaring brighter.

NLH: That's what this is, isn't it? Not strength. Not evolution. Terror so complete you'd rather become a monster than face the possibility of failure.

His face contorted with rage. The shadow-crown expanded further, and his influence exploded outward like a shockwave. This time, I couldn't fight it. I crashed to my knees again, gasping as the full weight of his accumulated fear crashed down on me. My flames dimmed to barely visible flickers.

ALD: I am a king!

He raised his sword high, the blade gleaming with unnatural darkness.

ALD: I am the bridge between what humanity was and what it must become. And you... you are an obstacle to be removed.

The blade descended toward my neck - and stopped. My hand had caught it, palm wrapped around the naked steel. Blood hissed and steamed where the metal cut deep, but I held firm. When I looked up, my ember eyes blazed with absolute certainty.

NLH: And I am Nilah. I am *ferocity* incarnate. And I burn for those who cannot.

My ability activated at point-blank range. The sword became white-hot in an instant, the metal warping and beginning to melt.

Aldric screamed and tried to pull away, but my grip was iron. My free hand pressed against his chest, and flames erupted between us.

We staggered apart, both crying out in pain. His sword was a twisted ruin of metal, his hands blistered and raw. My left arm was a mass of burns, my palm nearly fused to the bone. But I barely felt it through the fury burning in my veins.

NLH: This ends now.

My remaining flames coalesced into a spear of pure heat, its point sharp enough to cut through steel like parchment.

Aldric tried once more to crush me with his influence, pouring every ounce of his corrupted power into breaking my will. The shadow-crown above his head filled the entire chamber with writhing darkness. Fear pressed against me from every angle - fear of death, fear of failure, fear of becoming the very thing I fought against.

But I had been afraid before. I'd been afraid when the wars started, when friends died in my arms, when I first felt my soul awaken with terrible power. Fear was just another flame to be mastered, another emotion to transform into something useful.

I stood.

Step by step, I advanced through the crushing weight of his terror. Each footfall left smoldering prints in the marble. My flame-spear grew brighter with every heartbeat, fed by my unshakeable conviction that some things were worth burning for.

ALD: Impossible.

Genuine fear entered his voice for the first time, and I felt his influence waver.

ALD: You cannot resist. No one can-

NLH: I'm not resisting.

I was close enough now that the heat from my spear made him stumble backward, his face twisted with pain and desperation.

NLH: I'm accepting. I accept that I might die. I accept that I might

fail. I accept that fighting vile beings sometimes makes us vile ourselves. But I will not accept a world where children die for your cowardice.

The spear pierced his heart with surgical precision. For a moment, we stood frozen - predator and prey locked in their final dance.

Aldric's eyes went wide, the black-red gleam fading to reveal something almost human underneath. The shadow-crown above his head shrieked like a living thing before dissolving into wisps of smoke that fled through the stained glass windows.

ALD: I...

Blood frothed at his lips as he tried to speak.

ALD: I was... I was trying to save...

NLH: I know.

My voice was soft now, almost gentle, holding the compassion that had always defined me beneath the fury.

NLH: But salvation bought with innocent blood isn't salvation at all.

He collapsed, my flames consuming him from within. His body convulsed once, then went still, the fire reducing flesh and bone to ash with unusual speed - as if even my flames wanted to erase what he'd become.

When it was over, I stood alone in the throne room, my entire body shaking from exhaustion and pain. The stained glass windows cast their fractured rainbows across the floor, but somehow they seemed brighter now. More honest.

I looked down at the pile of ash that had once been a king, a man I'd once believed in. A man who'd forgotten that true strength came not from inspiring fear, but from conquering it.

I spat on the remains.

NLH: Burn in whatever hell takes you.

Then I turned and walked toward the doors, leaving only the lingering scent of smoke and the promise of a kingdom finally free to remember what it meant to choose love over fear. Behind me, the throne sat empty, waiting for someone worthy to claim it.

Someone who understood that true power came not from breaking others, but from lifting them up.

End of Chapter 51
"Embers"

[I'm coming, Icarus.]

(Chapter 52 || Volume 2) The Cavalry.

The ballroom doors exploded inward in a shower of splinters and flame. Nilah stepped through the wreckage like an avatar of retribution, her entire body wreathed in fire that cast dancing shadows across the twisted galaxies beneath her feet. Her ember eyes blazed as they took in the scene - Icarus bleeding and exhausted, his sword trembling in his grip, while Akumu's consolidated form pulsed with malevolent energy.

NLH: I told you not to go alone, you stubborn fool.

Her voice carried the crackling authority of wildfire, and for a moment the oppressive atmosphere in the ballroom lifted. The painted stars beneath their feet seemed to brighten in response to her flames, as if Illia's art recognized a kindred spirit.

ICR: Nilah, you need to get out of here. This thing is-

NLH: Is what? Scary? Powerful? Old?

She stepped further into the room, her flames taking shape around her like loyal hounds. The fire didn't burn indiscriminately - it knew friend from foe, warmth from malice.

NLH: I've dealt with scary, powerful, and old before. Just now, actually.

Akumu's form writhed with what might have been amusement, though the sound it made was like glass breaking underwater.

AKU: Another little hero comes to play? How delightful. I was worried this might become boring.

NLH: Hero?

Nilah's flames flared brighter, heat radiating from her in visible waves that made the air shimmer.

NLH: I'm not here to be anyone's hero. I'm here because that's my friend you're trying to kill.

She moved with predatory grace, positioning herself so that she and Icarus could flank the creature. Her fire shaped itself into whips and blades, each weapon gleaming with inner light that seemed to make Akumu's darkness recoil.

ICR: Nilah, its touch burns. And it can drain your strength just by being near you.

NLH: Good thing I'm already on fire then.

The quip would have been funny under different circumstances. Here, surrounded by the remnants of battle and facing a creature that embodied primordial fear, it carried the weight of defiance - a refusal to let terror dictate the terms of engagement.

AKU: Do you know how many pyromancers I've extinguished over the years? Their flames always burn so bright at first. So confident. So sure that light can banish darkness.

Akumu's form expanded again, tendrils of shadow reaching toward both fighters. But this time, when the darkness met Nilah's flames, something unexpected happened. Instead of being snuffed out, her fire blazed brighter, feeding on the creature's malevolence like fuel.

AKU: Impossible. You should be afraid. You should be-

NLH: Should be what? Cowering? Begging for mercy?

She laughed, and the sound was like a forge roaring to life. Her flames took on a golden quality, brightening from orange to white-hot intensity.

NLH: I learned something today about fear. It's just another emotion to master. Another fire to control.

Icarus felt strength returning to his limbs as Nilah's presence pushed back against Akumu's oppressive influence. His sword steadied, and the pain in his ribs dulled to a manageable ache. Whatever she'd faced before coming here had changed her, tempered her like steel in a furnace.

The battle resumed with volcanic intensity. Now Akumu faced two opponents, each attacking from different angles with complementary abilities. Icarus's blade carved through shadow

while Nilah's flames prevented the creature from healing. Where darkness tried to spread, fire pushed it back. Where tendrils lashed out, steel was there to meet them.

But Akumu was adapting again. The creature had learned from its earlier encounters, and now it fought with calculated precision rather than raw fury. It used the unstable floor against them, causing sections of painted galaxy to buckle and shift when they tried to press an advantage. It struck at their coordination, forcing them to choose between protecting themselves and protecting each other.

AKU: You fight well together. Like lovers. Like family. Tell me, little fire-dancer, what would you sacrifice to keep your friend alive?

The words carried psychic weight, trying to plant seeds of doubt and hesitation. But Nilah's response was immediate and scorching.

NLH: Everything. And that's exactly why we're going to win.

Her flames erupted outward in all directions, forcing Akumu to retreat several steps. In that moment of respite, she and Icarus exchanged a look that spoke volumes. They'd fought together before, trusted each other with their lives. This was just another battle in a war they'd been fighting since they were children.

The creature's next assault came from below. Tendrils of shadow erupted through the painted floor, reaching for their ankles with grasping fingers. Icarus leaped back while Nilah used her flames to dash sideways, trailing fire that cauterized the reaching darkness.

ICR: Above!

More tendrils descended from the ceiling like a forest of black spears. They moved in perfect synchronization, ducking and weaving between the attacks while their own strikes found their marks. Icarus's blade sang through the air, each cut precise and purposeful. Nilah's flames danced around him, protecting his blind spots while seeking openings in Akumu's defenses.

But the creature was vast, and they were only human. For every tendril they severed, two more took its place. For every section they burned away, shadow flowed in to fill the gap. Their breathing grew labored, their movements slower, while Akumu seemed to feed on their exhaustion.

AKU: You're delaying the inevitable. I have existed since before your kind learned to fear the dark. I will exist long after your flames have guttered to ash.

Icarus stumbled, a tendril catching his injured side and reopening his wounds. Nilah immediately moved to cover him, her flames forming a protective barrier, but the effort cost her. Her fire dimmed slightly, and Akumu pressed the advantage.

More tendrils lashed out, forcing them back toward the center of the room. The painted galaxies beneath their feet had become a swirling maelstrom, making it difficult to maintain their footing. They were being herded, corralled like prey animals.

NLH: Icarus, we can't keep this up much longer.

ICR: I know. But we don't have to win. We just have to last long enough.

AKU: Long enough for what? Your reinforcements? Your backup plan?

The creature's laughter was like breaking glass and screaming wind.

AKU: There is no cavalry coming, little heroes. There is only you, and me, and the darkness that will cla-

MTA: Anyone order a delivery? Certain Victory to go!

Matta's form blurred into motion, her body becoming a streak of pure velocity that carved through the air with lethal precision. Goo sprayed in arcing ribbons as the severed tendrils writhed and dissolved into shadow. She materialized before Icarus and Nilah, her breathing barely labored. Without hesitation, she pulled them both into a hug, her arms trembling not from exhaustion but from relief. Then, like a switch had been flipped, her demeanor shifted completely - she pulled back and pumped her fists in the air like a child, a grin splitting her face despite the mortal danger surrounding them.

AKU: What's one more pest to squat?

ICR: One..?

The temperature didn't just drop, it plummeted with such violent suddenness that the very air crystallized. Frost spread across every surface in razor-sharp patterns, and their breath became visible in billowing clouds of vapor. The sudden cold was so intense it burned,

stealing the breath from their lungs and making their bones ache. From behind them, cutting through the arctic air like a spear of pure winter, came an icicle the size of a telephone pole. It moved with impossible speed, its crystalline surface refracting the dim light into deadly rainbows. The projectile punched through Akumus' torso with a sound like breaking glass and tearing metal combined, emerging from his back in a spray of goo that immediately began to freeze mid-air.

NER: Don't forget about us so quickly.

SHN: Ya' disgusting creature.

FNR: We'll tear you apart.

But instead of writhing in agony or collapsing from the massive wound, Akumus did something far more terrifying - his smile widened.

End Of Chapter 52 **"The Cavalry"**

[Can you please drink the coffee normally, Illia?]

(Chapter 53 || Volume 2) Icarus Of The Freedom.

I understand how small mortals look to the heavens, as I sit here watching from above with a cup of coffee in my hand. But are their actions futile? Quite the opposite. I believe in the importance of everything, no matter how small. Isn't that right, Remi?

Mhm.

They're fighting to save a world which will continue to be in danger for all its existence, because that is the fate that was written from the beginning. I wonder if it was intentional or if that's just how it happened. I tried to ask Gabriel but all he gives me is a warm smile. Lucifer is always busy, whilst the others up here don't know much. I want to know about myself, oh well, too bad. Blook told me not to talk about myself a lot when I'm narrating. Can't believe he said that ugly Vazroth is better at narrating than I am. I'll show him how good of a narrator I am. Right, Remi?!

Mhm.

The air itself screamed as they struck. Icarus exploded forward like

a comet torn from its orbit, his blade singing through the air with lethal intent. Steel met writhing flesh as tentacles - each one thick as ancient trees and covered in eyes that wept liquid shadow - whipped around the weapon with predatory hunger. This wasn't the cautious dance of before. This was war distilled to its purest, most brutal form.

The tentacles began to crush, to twist, to break his blade. Metal groaned and sparked as impossible pressure threatened to shatter it entirely. Icarus felt his arms burning, his shoulders threatening to dislocate as Akumu lifted him from the ground like a ragdoll. But just as the cosmic horror prepared to tear him in half, Nilah materialized from shadow and void.

Her flames didn't just burn - they devoured. White fire raced up the tentacles like living creatures hungry for destruction, and the ancient flesh began to bubble and melt. The tentacles shrieked with voices that sounded almost human, almost familiar, before they crumbled to ash that tasted of nightmares and forgotten sins. Akumu's roar shook the very foundations of reality, causing distant mountains to crack and the sky itself to bleed crimson. But they weren't done. They were just getting started.

Neru and Shen descended from above like twin angels of destruction, their powers weaving together in ways that defied every natural law written into the fabric of creation. Massive spears of crystallized flame, each one burning cold as winter death yet hot as the birth of stars, bore deep into Akumu's writhing mass.

Dark ichor sprayed like a geyser, painting the battlefield in colors that had no names. The liquid hissed where it touched the ground, eating through stone and metal alike. For the first time since it was born - the ancient horror staggered thought it would lose.

Around the chaos, Matta and Fenris moved like apex predators in their elements. Matta's twin daggers found every weak point, every gap in chitinous armor, every moment of vulnerability. The rabbit's movements were poetry written in violence, her lithe form dancing between claws and fangs with impossible grace, her long ears twitching to catch every sound of approaching danger. Each strike was surgical in its precision, her natural agility amplified to supernatural levels. Fenris fought beside her like a berserker from the old legends, the wolf's massive claws crushing skulls and shattering bones with each devastating swing. His fangs gleamed as he snarled at the lesser demons, his lupine instincts guiding him

to tear through their ranks with primal efficiency. They were the guardians keeping the pack safe while the alpha faced the ultimate prey. The battle raged with increasing ferocity. Akumu, wounded but far from defeated, began to change. Its form shifted and writhed, growing new appendages, sprouting additional eyes, manifesting weapons from its own twisted flesh. It lashed out with renewed fury, and bodies began to fly through the air like broken dolls caught in a hurricane.

Shen took a tentacle to the chest that sent him skidding across jagged rocks, leaving a trail of blood that sparkled with unnatural light. Neru screamed his name, his ice magic faltering for just a moment - but a moment was all Akumu needed. Another tentacle wrapped around his throat, lifting him high into the air.

Nilah threw herself forward, flames roaring around her like a living inferno, but more tentacles erupted from the ground beneath her feet. Fenris roared and charged, but Akumu's newfound speed was beyond anything they had anticipated. His claws met empty air as the horror danced away with fluid grace.

But each time one of them hit the ground, they rolled, they recovered, they fought back. This wasn't just about skill or power anymore - this was about pure, stubborn refusal to yield. This was about looking into the abyss and spitting in its face. The battle was reaching its crescendo when something changed.

Akumu, overconfident in its apparent victory, made a crucial error. It pulled Icarus close, perhaps intending to devour him slowly, to savor his despair. Their eyes met - mortal blue against cosmic void - and in that moment, time seemed to freeze. The air grew thick as honey, and even the sounds of battle faded to whispers.

ICR: You think you know what I am.

Blood ran down his face, but his eyes blazed with something that made even Akumu pause.

ICR: You think I'm just another mortal to break.

He lunged forward with the last of his strength, his hands locking around what passed for Akumu's throat. The horror's flesh burned his palms, seared his fingers, but he held on with desperate fury.

And then - *impossibly* - wings of pure light erupted from his back.

Not the gentle glow of divine blessing that priests spoke of in hushed whispers. Not the soft radiance of heavenly grace. These were wings of war, of vengeance, of righteous fury given form. They spread wide, each feather blazing with power that made the stars themselves seem dim by comparison, and suddenly the battlefield was illuminated by light that had never touched this world before.

From the heavens above, we watched in stunned silence.

The wings spread wider, each feather blazing with power that reached across dimensions, making the very concept of light seem inadequate. They weren't just bright - they were truth given form, justice made manifest, hope weaponized into something that could cut through the darkest void. Below, Akumu began to scream.

Not roar. Not shriek. Scream - with a voice that had never known fear until this moment. The ancient horror that had devoured civilizations, that had watched trives die, was experiencing something entirely foreign to its existence: genuine terror.

AKU: Get off me! You can't kill me!

But Icarus's grip only tightened, and the light from his wings began to burn away Akumu's flesh like acid. The transformation wasn't just physical - reality itself was bending around him. The air tasted of lightning and ozone, of births and deaths and the spaces between heartbeats. His friends watched in awe and terror as their companion became something that defied every law they thought they understood.

Nilah's flames guttered and died, not extinguished but simply made irrelevant by the greater fire that burned within Icarus. Nerus' ice melted without heat, sublimated by proximity to something beyond temperature. Even Fenris's claws felt light as a feather in the wolf's massive paws, hands that suddenly remembered the weight of mountains they had never lifted. Matta's rabbit ears flattened against her skull as she sensed something beyond her natural instincts, something that made every prey-sense in her body scream warnings about power that transcended the natural order.

Up in the heavens, I fumbled for words that didn't exist. This is quite the sight, pure unchained beauty!

But even as I spoke, the evidence blazed before us. Icarus's transformation was reaching its climax. The wings had grown to span the entire battlefield, each feather now the size of ancient

trees, each one burning with the accumulated weight of every prayer ever whispered, every hope ever held, every moment when someone had chosen light over darkness. Akumu was dissolving.

The cosmic horror that had existed since before the first star drew breath was being unmade by pure will given form. Its tentacles withered, its eyes closed one by one, and its screams grew weaker with each passing second.

ICR: This is what you never understood. I was never fighting you alone. Every person I've saved, every life I've protected, every moment of hope I've kindled - they're all here with me now.

The wings flared one final time, and something in Icarus's expression changed. The light in his eyes wasn't triumph - it was acceptance. A terrible, beautiful acceptance.

His grip tightened around Akumu's dissolving form, pulling the writhing mass closer instead of pushing it away. The cosmic horror began to solidify again, as if sensing some new danger, but it was too late.

ICR: And they're willing to make the same sacrifice I am.

The wings beat once, twice, and suddenly Icarus was airborne, carrying Akumu with him. Not away from the battlefield - upward. Toward the burning sphere that hung in the afternoon sky like a distant eye of fire.

NLH: No... Icarus! There has to be another way!

But he was already beyond hearing, beyond reach. The wings carried him higher and higher, a blazing comet ascending toward the sun. Akumu struggled in his grasp, its tentacles lashing wildly, but the grip of those burning hands was unbreakable. From the heavens above, we watched in silence that stretched across eternity.

There it is.

I nodded slowly, my coffee long since forgotten, the mug floating in the void beside me. Below, his friends were screaming his name. Matta's ears were flat against her skull, her daggers forgotten as she reached toward the sky with desperate paws. Fenris howled a not in triumph, but in anguish that echoed across dimensions. Shen

and Neru stood frozen, ice and explosion swirling around them in chaotic spirals of grief. Nilah's flames roared higher than they ever had before, as if trying to reach him, to pull him back. But Icarus flew on, unwavering in his purpose.

As he approached the sun, his form began to change again. The wings grew brighter, more translucent, until he looked less like a man with wings and more like a living star. Akumu's screams reached a crescendo that shattered windows in distant cities, but they were growing weaker now, the cosmic horror finally understanding its fate.

I believe your description of him isn't right.

I watched as Icarus disappeared into the sun's corona, taking Akumu with him. The solar flares that erupted were visible even in daylight, painting the sky in colors that had no names. For a moment - just a moment - the sun burned twice as bright. Then silence. Absolute, crushing silence.

Many before him symbolized primal truths with their souls: Gabriel is purity incarnate, Lucifer is malevolence incarnate, Vazroth is despair incarnate, and Akumu is fear incarnate. Icarus is not fury incarnate, or vengeance.

Then what is he, Remi?

*He's the first and only apostle of **Freedom**.*

The battlefield below was empty now, save for five figures standing in the ash of what had been the greatest battle of their age. They stood in silence, looking up at a sun that would never look quite the same again.

End of Chapter 53 **"Icarus Of The Freedom"**

[You can faintly see the suns' wings.]

(Chapter 54 || Volume 2) We Bore Witness.

I was mending nets when the sun blazed twice. My weathered hands stopped their work as something impossible crossed the sky - a figure of light carrying darkness toward the burning eye above.

The nets fell from my fingers, but I didn't notice. For the first time in months, the weight that had pressed against my chest like stones dissolved into sea foam. The shadows that had followed me since childhood, whispering of inadequacy and failure, suddenly went silent. The voice that told me I was nothing more than my father's disappointment - gone, like smoke dispersed by ocean wind. I am sixty-three years old, and I have never felt the sun's warmth so clearly on my skin. The waves lap against my boat with a rhythm that sounds like laughter, and I realize I am crying. Not from sadness, but from the sudden, overwhelming sensation of being *free*. A seagull lands on the bow and looks at me with eyes that seem to understand. We watch together as the sun settles back to its normal glow, and I know - somehow I know - that the thing I've been afraid of my entire life will never hunt me again. I pick up my nets with hands that no longer shake.

The burning man in the sky appeared just as I was deciding whether today would be worth living. I had counted my ribs that morning - all of them visible beneath skin stretched too tight. The other children had taken my corner again, and the woman at the market had thrown stones when I reached for the rotting fruit. My stomach was a hollow cave, and the despair that lived there had grown teeth. But when that figure of light streaked overhead, something changed in the air itself. The hunger is still there - I am still small, still forgotten by a world that has too many like me to notice one more. But the hopelessness that made the hunger unbearable has lifted like morning mist. The voice that whispered "give up, nobody cares, you'll never matter" has fallen silent. I stand on shaking legs and walk toward the market. Not to beg, not to steal - to ask for work. My hands are small but they are quick, and for the first time in my eight years of life, I believe they might be worth something. The woman who threw stones yesterday looks at me differently now. She sees something in my eyes that wasn't there before - hope, maybe, or just the simple recognition that I deserve to exist. She hands me a mango and asks if I know how to sweep.

I felt the darkness leave when the burning figure appeared above the glen. Twenty-seven years I carried him - in my heart, in my bones, in the very marrow of my being. Twenty-seven years since the cancer took my William, and every day I felt the pull of the grave like a tide trying to drag me under. The guilt of still breathing when he could not had become my constant companion, whispering that I should follow him into that good night. But when that winged man blazed across the sky, carrying his burden toward the sun,

something inside me cracked open like an egg. The grief is still there - it will always be there, woven into who I am like heather into the hillside. But the poison in it, the self-hatred that made mourning into punishment, has been burned away. I walk to William's grave with flowers for the first time since the funeral. Not because I'm saying goodbye - because I'm finally ready to say hello to the woman I became after losing him. The headstone is warm beneath my palm, and I swear I can hear his voice on the wind, telling me what he always told me when I was afraid: Live, lass. Just live.

The winged figure crossed the sun just as I was preparing to burn my paintings. Every canvas in this cramped room is a failure, every brushstroke a reminder of the gap between vision and ability. For months, the voice of inadequacy has grown louder - whispering that I am deluding myself, that I have no talent, that I am wasting my life chasing something I will never catch. The match was already lit when light blazed across the sky. And suddenly, the critic in my head fell silent. The paintings are still imperfect - art is always reaching toward something just beyond our grasp. But the certainty that my imperfection makes me worthless, that struggling means failing - that poison has been drawn from the wound. I blow out the match and pick up my brush instead. The canvas receives my efforts without judgment, and for the first time in months, I paint not because I must prove something, but because I love the feeling of color spreading across white space like hope across despair. Outside my window, the sun shines with a different quality of light - warmer, more forgiving. I think I understand what the burning man sacrificed himself for. Not just to destroy the creature, but to show us that our own fears don't have to win. The painting I create that day is the first one I don't want to burn.

And all the wars in the world stopped, all the blades dropped to the ground and the looks of killing intent turned into warm embraces as the humans and monsters once again bore peace in their souls. I must thank you, child of the sky, for releasing the world from evil, even if it took your own life. From my seat beyond the weaving of moments, where past and future blur into the eternal now, I watch the ripples of your sacrifice spread across the tapestry of existence. Each thread brightens, each connection strengthens, as the poison that had seeped into the very fabric of hope is finally burned away. You've showed the world what it means to live and die on your own accord, truly shining as bright as the two who fought darkness hundreds of years before you. I remember them - the first bearers of light who stood against the void when it was young and hungry. They would be proud to see how their legacy blazed to life in your

wings. You've found yourself a spot in the heavens, as Gabriel is waiting for your arrival, his smile warm as morning light, his arms open to welcome another warrior home. But I have a feeling you won't take him on that offer, for you find comfort in the blazing sun, forever illuminating freedom into everyone's hearts. The solar winds carry your essence now, and every sunrise is a reminder of the choice you made - not just to die, but to live so completely that death became merely another doorway. You bore hope and determination, qualities that mortals have carried since the first spark of consciousness flickered in the darkness. But in your final moments, watching you refuse to bow to inevitability, refuse to accept that some evils cannot be conquered - your soul blossomed into a new trait altogether. With a confident smile, I now declare your tale as the first and last apostle of **Freedom**, the only human or monster to ever bear the trait not even gods could possess. For we who dwell in eternity are bound by our own nature, prisoners of our perfect knowledge and endless existence. But you - you chose. You chose to burn rather than endure, to sacrifice rather than compromise, to fly toward the sun knowing it would consume you because that was the only path that led to everyone else's tomorrow. Freedom is not the absence of chains, child of light. It is the power to choose which chains we bear, and the courage to shatter the ones that bind not just ourselves, but the hearts of all who come after. The sun will never set on your legacy, Icarus. And somewhere in the light between its burning heart and the world it warms, I know you smile still.

End of Chapter 54
"We Bore Witness"

End of Volume 2
"The Apostle of Fear"

[Signed Blook, the friendly ghost with a journal.]

(Chapter 55 || Volume 3) The First Fables.

Briefly after the consolidation of the human-monster war, and the grand sacrifice of the Apostle of Freedom, the world began a new era of peace under the overseeing of the six fabled souls. These individuals would spend their years fighting for the keepsake of peace, and would eventually end their tales the same way, for said peace.

Such a threat on the level of the Apostle of Fear didn't appear, perhaps because of the balance, or perhaps that's just how it was written.

The tales of these six souls were uttered even after they ended, through the word of others, and thus, they came to be known as the Fables of Fated Souls.

From my perch beyond the veil of mortality, where time flows like honey and moments stretch into eternities, I watched as the world breathed its first breath of true freedom in countless centuries. The ashes of Akumu had scattered on solar winds that carried them to the far reaches of space, and in their wake, something beautiful and fragile began to grow like flowers pushing through battlefield soil.

RMI: They don't know yet, do they?

His coffee had been replaced by something that sparkled like captured starlight and tasted of celebrations that hadn't happened yet - a drink for momentous occasions, though the weight that lingered in his ancient eyes suggested he knew exactly what I knew, what we both pretended not to see in the threads of fate that stretched before us.

BLK: Know what?

I replied, though we both understood the question with the perfect clarity that comes from existing outside the linear flow of mortal time.

RMI: That peace has a price steeper than war ever demanded. That freedom must be defended with the same fervor that once fought to claim it. That someone always has to stand watch in the darkness while others sleep peacefully in beds they've never had to earn.

Below us, scattered across a world still healing from wounds that went deeper than flesh and bone, the six souls went about their lives with the blessed ignorance of those who believe the hardest battles are behind them. They had survived the confrontation against the Apostle of Fear, had witnessed their closest friend transform into something beyond the boundaries of mortal understanding, had felt the crushing weight of cosmic despair lift from the world's shoulders like chains finally broken. In their hearts,

they carried the simple, beautiful assumption that the hard part was over, that peace was a destination rather than a journey. They were wrong, but beautifully, heartbreakingly so.

End of Chapter 55 **"The First Fables"**

[And so it begins once more.]

(Chapter 56 || Volume 3) Let Me Paint You.

My birth was an anomaly. I mean, what else do you call it when reality itself seems to hiccup and suddenly there's a baby who can make finger paints literally reshape the world around her? The nurses probably thought the colorful handprints I left on the hospital walls were just normal baby mess. If only they knew I was already redecorating their dimension. My mother used to tell me that the moment I came into the world, every painting in the hospital started glowing with colors that shouldn't exist. The doctors called it a power surge affecting the lighting. Mom knew better. She said my first cry sounded like a symphony of colors being born, and when I opened my eyes, she swore she could see entire galaxies swirling in my pupils like tiny paint mixtures waiting to be applied to the canvas of existence.

The birthing room itself became something out of a fever dream. Paint that had never been applied began seeping from the walls, creating murals that told stories of civilizations that hadn't been born yet. My tiny fingers, still wrinkled and new, left traces of impossible hues wherever they touched. Purple that sang lullabies, gold that whispered secrets, and a shade of blue so perfect it made the nurses weep without understanding why. The hospital tried to paint over everything afterward, but my colors bled through every layer they applied. Eventually, they just declared that wing of the hospital permanently under renovation and moved on with their lives.

I don't know when it started, maybe when I was 5, but I began to see visions of memories not of my own. While other kids were playing with toys and learning their ABCs, I was getting cosmic flashbacks that definitely weren't covered in any parenting handbook. One moment I'd be finger-painting sunsets in my kindergarten art class, making the teacher marvel at how realistic my orange looked, the next I'd be experiencing someone else's

entire existence like a really intense art history lesson that spanned eons. These weren't dreams or imagination. They were memories as vivid and real as my own recollections of learning to walk, except they belonged to beings who had walked through dimensions I couldn't even name.

The first time it happened, I was working on a simple landscape painting. You know, the kind of assignment they give five-year-olds to keep them busy while actually teaching them fine motor skills.

Green grass, blue sky, yellow sun, maybe a house with smoke coming from the chimney. Basic stuff. But as I dipped my brush into the green paint, suddenly I wasn't Illia anymore. I was someone, something, else entirely, standing in a realm where color itself was a living entity that could be shaped and molded like clay.

I could move through those memories faintly, looking down at skeletal fingers that definitely weren't mine, ancient and weathered by eons of existence, and then up to gaze at a being that had no shape or name. It was like trying to paint something that existed beyond color, beyond form, beyond any artistic medium I'd ever imagined. This entity shifted and flowed like liquid starlight mixed with the deepest shadows, constantly changing yet somehow maintaining an essential identity that transcended physical appearance. It spoke without words, communicated through pure concept and emotion, and I understood it the way I understood how to mix red and yellow to make orange.

Words left my mouth, not mine, ours, and we gave it a name. I still remember the weight of that moment, the way reality seemed to pause and listen as ancient knowledge flowed through a five-year-old with paint under her fingernails. The name we spoke wasn't in any language that existed on Earth, but somehow it contained the essence of everything this being was and would become. When the vision ended, I found myself back in my kindergarten classroom, but my simple landscape had transformed into something impossible. The grass moved in painted wind, the sky cycled through day and night, and tiny painted figures walked along paths that led off the edge of the paper into dimensions that shouldn't exist.

My teacher stared at the painting for a full five minutes before quietly putting it away and never mentioning it again. I think she knew, on some level, that what she was looking at shouldn't be possible. But what was she supposed to do? Report to the principal that little Illia had painted a living world into existence during art

time?

Who the hell am I? That's the question that's been driving me to create ever since, the mystery that makes every brushstroke feel like both an answer and another question. Most people spend their lives figuring out their identity through trial and error, dating the wrong people, choosing careers that don't fit, slowly discovering who they are through the process of elimination. Me? I had cosmic memories downloaded into my brain before I could even tie my shoes properly. Talk about an unconventional childhood. While my classmates were learning multiplication tables, I was processing the artistic techniques of beings who painted with the fundamental forces of the universe.

The memories kept coming as I grew older. I'd see through eyes that weren't eyes, create art with materials that existed only in the spaces between atoms, participate in galleries where the audience was made up of sentient concepts and living equations. I watched as reality itself was sculpted by artists whose names were written in languages that predated sound, whose masterpieces were entire dimensions carefully crafted to support specific types of beauty.

And through it all, I began to understand my purpose. I wasn't just some weird kid who could make paint do impossible things. I was part of something bigger, something that had been happening long before Earth existed and would continue long after the last star burned out. I was connected to a lineage, beings who saw existence itself as a canvas waiting to be improved.

Others shouldn't have to ask themselves that fundamental question of identity, so I'll aid you all by drawing you each a portrait you slowly painted with your life, and whom that portrait is named as in the end. Think of me as reality's personal artist, here to help everyone see the masterpiece they've been unconsciously creating with every decision, every moment of courage or fear, every act of love or selfishness. Every choice, every moment, every breath adds another brushstroke to the canvas of who you are. Most people never step back far enough to see the full picture, but I can. I can see the patterns, the color schemes, the way your personal artistic style has developed over the years.

Some people paint themselves in bold, primary colors, all decisive action and clear boundaries. Others prefer watercolors, letting experiences blend and flow into each other until it's hard to tell where one emotion ends and another begins. There are those who

work in harsh, angular lines, and others who create nothing but soft curves and gentle gradients. None of these styles are wrong. They're just different ways of being human, different artistic approaches to the shared project of existence.

Thank you, Blook, for showing me my role, for helping me understand that these visions weren't just random cosmic interference but a calling. I will return the favor by temporarily relieving you of your duty, taking up the brush you've carried for so long, adding my own artistic perspective to the grand narrative. I'll narrate the fables of these five, these remarkable individuals whose stories have been waiting for the right artist to tell them properly.

To begin, I'll paint two images, portraits that capture not just appearance but essence. One of me, a knight in vibrant armor that shifts colors with each movement, not wielding a sword but a paintbrush that can reshape reality with each stroke, a knight of creativity who fights battles by repainting the battlefield until victory becomes inevitable and conflict transforms into collaboration. And one of a brave warrior, a knight of freedom, dressed in armor whose back is torn by magnificent wings that refuse to be contained by any earthly design, wings that carry the dreams of liberation for all who have ever felt trapped by circumstance or fate.

Now let me begin painting the others, dipping my brush in impossible colors that exist only in the spaces between what is and what could be. Time to show you what real artistry looks like when applied to the canvas of story itself.

End of Chapter 56
"Let Me Paint You"

[Now let's begin with those lifeless eyes.]

(Chapter 57 || Volume 3) Slice of Life.

Morning sunlight spilled through the gauze curtains of our cottage, scattering soft geometric patterns across the wooden floor - fragments of light that reminded me of Bella's eyes the first time she woke beside me. She stirred, her gossamer wings catching the golden glow as they unfurled in that slow, unconscious stretch she did every morning. Even after all these years, it still sent warmth spiraling through the void inside me - warmth I hadn't thought

myself capable of.

Mama! Papa!

The thunder of small feet echoed down the hallway. Then came the unmistakable buzz of wings - Maya was airborne. At seven, our eldest had inherited her mother's wings and my flair for theatrical entrances. She burst into the room, her honey-colored hair a mess of sleep, compound eyes sparkling with excitement.

Papa! Look what I made!

She held up a tiny sphere of crystallized honey, no bigger than a marble, pulsing with soft golden light.

It glows when I think happy thoughts!

Bella sat up, her antennae twitching with that familiar cocktail of pride and worry.

Maya, love, what did we say about using your magic indoors?

In the garden. Away from breakable stuff...

Maya recited, dramatically rolling her eyes.

But I controlled it, I swear! Watch!

Before we could stop her, she tossed the sphere in the air. My instinct kicked in, the void flaring under my skin, a tendril of shadow halfway to catching it. But there was no need. The honey-light burst into golden sparkles, drifting through the room like lazy fireflies.

Wow.

I breathed, genuinely stunned. At her age, Bella had barely managed simple honey-shaping. Maya was already creating things Bella never even dreamed of.

A gentle knock interrupted the moment. Our four-year-old, Zeph, peeked into the room, hair tousled, eyes impossibly deep and eerily familiar.

Daddy? The shadows in my room were dancing again.

Bella's hand found mine under the covers. We'd known this day would come. Zeph had been slipping - literally - through the edges of reality for months now. A flicker here. A toy disappearing into a shadow that shouldn't have been deep enough. Nothing overt. But unmistakable.

Come here, bud.

I said, holding out my arms. He ran into them, face pressed to my chest. I felt the air bend slightly around us - just enough to make space second-guess itself.

The shadows aren't scary. They're just curious. They want to meet you.

Like Mama's honey wanted to meet her?

Maya asked, now cross-legged on the bed like she owned the place.

Exactly.

Bella reached over, smoothing Maya's hair.

Your Papa helped me see that our magic isn't something to be afraid of. It's part of us. And we're worth loving.

I kissed the top of Zeph's head - he smelled like honey and starlight and something undefined. Possibility, maybe.

Today we train. All of us. Together.

Breakfast was sweet and messy. Maya insisted on contributing honey - enthusiastically. Zeph ate with quiet focus, occasionally staring at his spoon like he wasn't sure it was real. I drank my usual bitter tea, a leftover habit from a darker life.

Mrs. Elderwood said I can help decorate for the harvest festival! She says my honey-lights are perfect for the night!

Mrs. Elderwood had always accepted us - unlike most. Maybe because her grandson could talk to trees. In a world where magic, and more importantly monsters, were slowly becoming accepted, people like us were less terrifying... or at least harder to ignore.

That's amazing, my little bee.

Bella said, though I saw it - the tight line around her eyes. The memory of being feared, not celebrated. After breakfast, we moved to the garden. That was our ritual. Bella worked with Maya on finesse - turning her raw magic into art. I sat with Zeph under the old oak tree, guiding him through the layers between light and shadow.

It's like swimming.

I told him, watching his hand slip into a shadow that shouldn't have been deep enough to hold it.

You don't fight the current. You flow with it.

But what if I go too deep?

Then I'll come get you.

I let a fraction of the void slip loose, just enough for him to feel its depth.

I've lived in the dark, Zeph. You won't get lost while I'm here.

He smiled - a pure, trusting thing - and for a moment, the weight of existence slipped away. Happiness never lasted. I knew that better than most. But for now, we had this. We had each other. The afternoon passed in peace. The kids played - magic and imagination blending into chaotic brilliance - while Bella and I worked the soil and spoke in the quiet language of long love.

Evening meant a walk to the village. The path was familiar. The tavern was warm and bustling. Familiar faces. Easy smiles. A bit of time away from the kids. It was late - almost midnight - when we returned. The cottage stood peaceful under the stars. Nothing out of place. Except the front door. It was open. Just a crack. But enough.

Bella's hand found mine. Her wings tensed. We always locked that door.

Stay here.

No. Together.

We moved in silence, shadows spilling from me as I reached out to scan every corner of our home. But there was no sign of struggle. No broken furniture. No overturned chairs. Just silence.

Too much silence.
Maya's room? Empty. Bed made. No sign of her.
Zeph's room? Untouched. Toys in place. Window latched.

The kitchen held the answer. A single piece of paper sat on the table. Bella reached for it, fingers trembling. Her wings folded tight, eyes scanning the words. Her breath caught.

Kael...

I took the note from her hands. The writing was elegant. Precise. And it said everything with horrifying simplicity.

"If you want to see them again, come alone to the old watchtower at dawn. Bring no shadows. Speak to no one. You know what happens if you refuse."

Bella collapsed into me, sobbing as the truth settled like ice in our bones.

They took our babies.

I held her tightly, my hands trembling. The world around us unchanged, calm, like it didn't know what had just happened. But something inside me shifted. The thing I'd buried for years - the part of me that had once stared into the void and dared it to blink - was waking up. The quiet life was over. And whoever had touched my family... was about to understand why the darkness feared me.

End of Chapter 57 **"Slice of Life"**

[To earn the title of knight, one must overcome calamity.]

(Chapter 58 || Volume 3) Settle The Score.

Dawn was still hours away when I left the cottage, but I couldn't bear to stay another moment in that empty house. The silence where my children's laughter should have been was a weight that pressed against my chest, threatening to crack something

fundamental inside me. Bella had finally fallen into an exhausted sleep on Maya's bed, clutching one of Zeph's toys against her chest like a talisman against the nightmare our life had become.

I walked through the darkness without need for light, shadows parting before me like old friends welcoming me home. It had been years since I'd let my power flow so freely, and the familiar sensation was both comforting and terrifying. The void whispered at the edges of my consciousness, eager to be unleashed, hungry to make things simple again through the pure mathematics of nonexistence.

The old watchtower stood on a hill three miles from the village, a relic from some forgotten war that had crumbled into romantic ruin decades ago. Ivy crawled up its stone walls, and wild roses had claimed the base, turning destruction into something almost beautiful. I'd brought the children here once for a picnic, watching Maya chase butterflies while Zeph built elaborate castles from fallen stones.

The memory should have brought pain, but instead it only sharpened my focus. Whoever had done this, whoever had torn my family apart, would learn what it meant to threaten the void-walker's children.

The watchtower looked different in the predawn darkness. Taller, somehow. More imposing. As I approached, I realized it wasn't my imagination - the structure was growing, stretching upward into the star-filled sky like some impossible plant reaching for light it would never find.

I began to climb the spiral staircase that wound around the tower's interior, each step echoing in the expanding space above. The walls stretched higher and higher, and I found myself climbing through what should have been open air, yet solid stone continued to manifest around me.

This was magic, but not the gentle kind that flowed through my children. This was something older, hungrier, built from desperation and powered by forces that cared nothing for the natural order of things.

KAL: Impressive. But parlor tricks won't save you from what's coming.

My voice echoed strangely in the growing space, and I felt rather than heard the response - laughter that seemed to come from the stones themselves.

I continued climbing, step after methodical step, until the stairs beneath my feet began to crack. Ancient stone that had stood for decades suddenly couldn't bear my weight, and I realized this wasn't structural failure. This was intentional.

The staircase crumbled away beneath me, and I fell into darkness so complete it made my own void seem bright by comparison. I didn't fight the fall - there was no point. Whatever waited below had orchestrated this entire encounter, and struggling would only delay the inevitable confrontation.

I landed softly on ground that felt like nothing at all, in a space that defied every law of physics I understood. The darkness here wasn't the absence of light - it was the presence of something that had never known illumination in the first place. A primordial emptiness that existed outside the normal rules of creation.

For a moment, I simply stood there, letting my senses adjust to this impossible place. The void inside me recognized something familiar here, something that spoke to the deepest parts of my nature. Then I heard it. Slow, deliberate applause echoing from everywhere and nowhere.

JAD: Bravo. You came alone, just as instructed. Though I have to admit, I'm a little disappointed you didn't bring any of those pretty shadows of yours.

The voice was familiar, impossibly familiar, and it made something cold settle in my stomach. A figure began to materialize from the darkness ahead of me, graceful and deadly and absolutely, completely dead.

Jade stepped into view, her wings spread wide, her eyes burning with that same inner fire I remembered from our last encounter. She looked exactly as she had the moment before I erased her from existence - ugly, terrible, and now somehow standing before me in defiance of every law that governed life and death.

KAL: This is impossible.

The words came out flat, matter-of-fact, because my mind was still

struggling to process what I was seeing. I had unmade her. Not killed, not destroyed - I had erased the very concept of her existence from reality itself. She shouldn't be able to come back from that. Nothing could come back from that.

JAD: Oh, Kael. Still so limited in your thinking. Death is just another kind of beginning, isn't it?

She moved closer, and I could see that she wasn't quite the same as before. There was something different about her, something that set my void powers on edge. She felt... hollow. Not empty the way I was empty, but hollow like an echo, like a shadow cast by something far more substantial.

KAL: How?

JAD: After you so rudely erased me from existence, I found myself in a very interesting place. A space between spaces, where things that shouldn't exist can sometimes find new purpose.

She began to circle me, her movements predatory and graceful. In this place of impossible darkness, she seemed more real than anything else, more present than the very ground beneath our feet.

JAD: I was just... floating there, you know? Consciousness without form, memory without substance. It was actually quite peaceful. I was ready to let go, to fade into whatever comes after the after. But then...

Her smile was sharp enough to cut shadows.

JAD: A presence approached me. Faint at first, like a whisper in a hurricane. It offered me a deal I simply couldn't refuse.

KAL: What kind of presence?

JAD: Oh, they were very mysterious about it. Said their name was something like... Varoz? Velkoz? Something deliciously ominous with too many consonants.

The casual way she mentioned it made my blood run cold. Entities that operated in the spaces between existence were never benevolent, never simple. They traded in currencies that mortals couldn't comprehend, and their bargains always came with prices that weren't apparent until it was far too late to matter.

JAD: The deal was beautifully simple. They would give me life again, real corporeal existence, with only one tiny little purpose.

Spread despair. Make the world a little darker, a little more hopeless. Turn joy into ashes and love into regret.

She paused in her circling, tilting her head as if considering something amusing.

JAD: Of course, I couldn't care less about their grand plan. Cosmic entities are so tediously obsessed with their schemes and purposes. No, I have my own reasons for being here.

KAL: It doesn't matter who made the deal or why. What did you do to my children?

The void inside me stirred, responding to the edge in my voice. The darkness around us seemed to ripple, as if reality itself was holding its breath.

JAD: Straight to the point. I always liked that about you, Kael. No pretense, no elaborate speeches about justice or righteousness. Just pure, focused intent.

She stopped moving, facing me directly, and for the first time since her resurrection, I saw something genuine in her expression. Not the theatrical malice or casual cruelty, but something deeper and more personal.

JAD: Your children are fine. Safe, even. Probably better cared for than they've ever been, if I'm being honest. They're not the point of this exercise.

KAL: Then what is?

JAD: You are.

The words hung in the impossible air between us, heavy with implication and promise. Her smile was no longer sharp or predatory - it was something far more dangerous. It was the smile of someone who had found exactly what they were looking for after a very long search.

JAD: You see, when you erased me from existence, you taught me something valuable about the nature of power. About the difference between destruction and true annihilation. I've had a lot of time to think about that lesson, Kael. A lot of time to plan.

The darkness around us began to shift, and I realized that this place, this impossible space we stood in, wasn't just a meeting ground. It was a trap, carefully constructed and perfectly suited to

its purpose.

JAD: Maya and Zeph are leverage, nothing more. Insurance to make sure you came here willingly, without your shadows, without your tricks, without anything except that beautiful, terrible power that makes you what you are.

She spread her wings wide, and I could see that they weren't quite solid anymore. They seemed to be made of condensed shadow, of crystallized despair, of something that existed in the spaces between heartbeats.

JAD: You're going to help me understand what it means to truly end something. And in return, I'm going to show you what it feels like to lose everything that gives your existence meaning. After all, what's the point of coming back from the dead if you can't settle a few scores along the way?

Her smile widened, becoming something monstrous and beautiful and absolutely, utterly confident.

End of Chapter 58 **"Settle The Score"**

[C'mon Kael, I know you can paint me a beautiful picture.]

(Chapter 59 || Volume 3) Lower Your Head.

The first strike came without warning, a tendril of shadow that moved faster than thought. I barely managed to phase backward into the void, feeling the darkness slice through the space where my chest had been moments before. The attack was different from what I remembered - sharper, more focused, as if death had refined her abilities into something purer and more deadly.

JAD: Slower than I remember. Has domestic life made you soft, void-walker?

She launched herself forward, wings beating once to propel her into a spinning kick that I caught with both hands. The impact sent shockwaves through the impossible space around us, and I felt the first stirring of concern. Her physical strength had increased dramatically since our last encounter.

I redirected her momentum, using her own force to throw her past me, but she twisted in mid-air with impossible grace, landing in a crouch that immediately flowed into a sweeping leg strike. I stepped through shadow to avoid it, emerging behind her with a punch aimed at her spine.

She spun to meet me, catching my fist in her palm with a sound like thunder. For a moment we stood locked together, testing strength against strength, and I realized with growing unease that she was pushing me back.

KAL: Death seems to have agreed with you.

JAD: You have no idea.

She twisted my arm and drove her knee toward my ribs. I phased partially into the void, letting the strike pass through me, then solidified just enough to grab her leg and swing her in a wide arc.

She went with the motion, using it to build momentum for a devastating elbow strike that I barely managed to deflect with a barrier of crystallized shadow.

The impact shattered my defense and sent me skidding backward across the non-ground of this place. I could feel something wrong in the way my powers responded - the void felt distant, muffled, as if something was interfering with my connection to the emptiness that defined me.

JAD: Do you feel it yet? The way hope starts to fade when you realize you might not win?

She came at me again, a blur of wings and fury. Her fighting style had evolved, incorporating techniques I didn't recognize. She flowed between physical attacks and shadow manipulation with seamless precision, each strike backed by the weight of cosmic despair.

I met her charge with my own, void energy crackling around my fists as we engaged in a brutal exchange. Hook, cross, uppercut - she matched me blow for blow, her movements a deadly dance that spoke of centuries of practice in whatever realm had held her after death.

My roundhouse kick caught her in the ribs, sending her spinning away, but she used the rotation to build power for a backfist that cracked against my jaw like a meteor strike. Stars exploded across

my vision, and I tasted blood for the first time in years.

KAL: What did they do to you?

JAD: They gave me purpose. And purpose, dear Kael, is a power all its own.

She feinted left, then came in low with a combination that forced me to give ground. Each step backward felt like a small defeat, and I realized that something about this place, something about her very presence, was sapping my strength.

I reached deeper into the void, calling upon the true darkness that had once made reality itself tremble. The space around us began to thin, matter becoming less substantial as I prepared to unleash the full weight of nonexistence.

But instead of the overwhelming tide of nothingness I expected, I felt only a pale echo of my former power. The void responded sluggishly, as if it was trying to reach me through layers of thick glass.

JAD: Oh, that's delicious. The look on your face when you realize your cosmic horror isn't quite so cosmic anymore.

She pressed her advantage, launching into a series of aerial attacks that I struggled to counter. Her wings weren't just for show - they generated powerful gusts that threw off my balance while she rained down strikes from impossible angles.

A spinning heel kick caught me across the temple, and I stumbled. She was on me instantly, hands wreathed in shadow that burned like acid where they touched. I grabbed her wrists, pushing her back, but I could feel my strength waning with each passing moment.

KAL: The children better be safe, Jade. If you've hurt them-

JAD: What? You'll erase me again? Look around, void-walker. Look at what's happening to your precious emptiness.

I followed her gaze and saw with growing horror that the darkness around us wasn't empty space at all. It was despair given form, hopelessness made manifest. And it was seeping into me with every breath, every heartbeat, slowly drowning the void that had once been absolute.

She broke free from my grip and landed a devastating combination - left hook to the body, right cross to the jaw, spinning elbow that sent me reeling. I tried to phase away, but my connection to the void faltered, leaving me solid and vulnerable.

JAD: This place exists in the spaces between hope and surrender. The more you fight, the more you realize you can't win, the stronger I become. And you, dear Kael, you're starting to understand what it really means to lose.

Her next attack was a thing of terrible beauty - a flowing sequence that combined martial arts with shadow manipulation in ways that defied description. She struck from multiple angles simultaneously, her darkness splitting into dozens of attacking tendrils while her physical form pressed forward with relentless precision.

I deflected what I could, absorbed what I couldn't avoid, but each impact drove me further back, further down. Blood ran from cuts I couldn't remember receiving, and my breathing came in ragged gasps.

KAL: This isn't... possible. The void is absolute. It doesn't just... fade.

JAD: Nothing is absolute, Kael. You taught me that when you erased me. Everything has limits, even the end of all things.

She caught me with an uppercut that lifted me off my feet, then drove both fists down on my back as I fell. I hit the ground hard, and for the first time in decades, I felt truly vulnerable.

I rolled away from her descending heel strike, came up in a defensive crouch, and tried once more to reach the depths of my power. But instead of the familiar embrace of nothingness, I found only a growing sense of futility.

What was the point of fighting? What was the point of struggling against something that had been specifically designed to counter everything I was? Maya and Zeph were probably already dead, and Bella would follow soon enough. Everyone I cared about would be gone, and I would be left alone with the knowledge that I had failed them all.

The thoughts weren't mine - I recognized them as foreign, invasive - but that didn't make them feel any less true. Despair crept through my veins like poison, and with it came the terrible realization that I

might actually lose this fight.

JAD: There it is. That beautiful moment when certainty crumbles. When the mighty void-walker realizes he's just another broken thing in a universe full of broken things.

She advanced slowly now, savoring the moment, her wings spread wide and her eyes burning with triumph. Each step she took seemed to make the darkness around us thicker, more oppressive.

JAD: Tell me, Kael. When you held your children for the first time, did you ever imagine it would end like this? Did you ever think that all your power, all your cosmic significance, would amount to nothing when it really mattered?

I tried to stand, but my legs felt like lead. The void inside me, the emptiness that had defined my very existence, was being slowly filled with something far worse than nothingness. It was being filled with the absolute certainty that nothing I did would ever be enough. And for the first time since I had learned to touch the spaces between reality, I began to truly understand what it meant to despair.

End of Chapter 59 **"Lower Your Head"**

[Time for me to lend a paint of color.]

(Chapter 60 || Volume 3) Who I am not.

Kael remained on his knees in the impossible darkness, blood dripping from wounds that seemed to multiply with each passing moment. The void inside him felt distant, muffled, as if he were trying to reach through layers of thick glass. Above him, Jade hovered with wings spread wide, no longer the frantic combatant but something approaching a dark philosopher.

JAD: Do you know what I learned in the space between death and resurrection, Kael?

She settled gracefully to the ground, her feet touching the non-surface with barely a whisper. The oppressive darkness around them seemed to pulse with her heartbeat, or perhaps with his own growing despair.

JAD: I learned that meaning is the cruelest joke the universe plays on conscious beings. We spend our entire existence searching for purpose, for significance, for some grand narrative that makes our suffering worthwhile.

Kael lifted his head, meeting her burning gaze with eyes that still held fragments of the cosmic emptiness he commanded. Even weakened, even bleeding, there was something in his expression that refused to fully surrender.

KAL: And what conclusion did your cosmic revelations lead you to?

JAD: That it's all arbitrary. Every meaning we assign, every purpose we claim to discover - it's just elaborate fiction we tell ourselves to avoid confronting the fundamental truth. Nothing matters because mattering itself is a construct we invented.

She began to pace around him, her movements predatory but unhurried. There was no need to rush - they both understood who held the advantage here.

JAD: You embraced that truth once. You became the avatar of nihilism, the walking embodiment of the void that waits behind every pretty lie about significance and purpose. What changed? What made you abandon absolute truth for the comforting delusion of domestic happiness?

Kael struggled to his feet, swaying slightly but refusing to remain prostrate before her philosophical assault. When he spoke, his voice carried the weight of years spent questioning everything he had once believed.

KAL: I didn't abandon the truth. I found a deeper one.

JAD: Oh, please. Enlighten me with your suburban wisdom.

KAL: The absence of inherent meaning doesn't negate the meaning we create. If anything, it makes that creation more remarkable, not less.

The darkness around them seemed to shiver, responding to the conviction in his words despite his physical weakness. Jade's expression shifted, curiosity replacing casual contempt.

JAD: You're suggesting that manufactured meaning is somehow more valuable than eternal truth?

KAL: I'm suggesting that the capacity to create meaning in a meaningless universe is the most profound miracle existence has to

offer. When I held Maya for the first time, when I watched Zeph take his first steps, when I saw Bella smile without fear - those moments mattered not because the cosmos ordained them to matter, but because I chose to make them matter.

JAD: Choice. Another comfortable illusion. Every decision you've ever made was the result of prior causes stretching back to the moment the first star ignited. You're no more choosing your responses than a river chooses to flow downhill.

She moved closer, and he could feel the waves of despair radiating from her like heat from a forge. But something in his core, something deeper than the void, was beginning to stir.

KAL: Even if that's true, the experience of choice remains real. The love I feel for my family, the determination to protect them, the willingness to sacrifice everything for their safety - these aren't diminished by being products of causation. They're elevated by it.

JAD: How beautifully you rationalize your delusions. Tell me, void-walker, what happens when your carefully constructed meanings crumble? When your children grow up and forget you, when Bella grows old and dies, when everything you've built turns to dust?

The question hit him like a physical blow, and for a moment the despair threatened to overwhelm him completely. He could see it all - the inevitable entropy that would claim everything he loved, the cosmic indifference that would erase every trace of their existence.

KAL: Then I'll grieve. I'll rage against the dying of the light. I'll fight the inevitable with everything I have, even knowing I'll lose.

JAD: Why? If you understand the futility, why struggle against it?

KAL: Because the struggle itself is what makes us human. Because defying meaninglessness with meaning, fighting entropy with love, choosing hope in the face of cosmic indifference - that's not futility. That's the most beautiful rebellion in existence.

Jade paused in her pacing, her wings folding slightly as she studied him with something approaching genuine interest. The darkness around them continued to pulse, but its rhythm had changed, becoming less oppressive and more questioning.

JAD: You speak of rebellion as if it changes anything. As if your tiny spark of defiance could illuminate the infinite darkness.

KAL: It doesn't have to illuminate everything. It just has to

illuminate something. One moment, one person, one small corner of existence where love matters more than entropy.

JAD: And when that corner crumbles? When your spark is extinguished?

KAL: Then someone else will light another one. And another. Not because it's ordained or destined, but because consciousness has this inexplicable tendency to create meaning out of meaninglessness, to find light in the dark, to love in the face of loss.

He straightened, and though his wounds still bled, though his connection to the void remained tenuous, something fundamental had shifted in his posture. The despair was still there, pressing against him like a physical weight, but it no longer defined him.

KAL: You're right about one thing, Jade. Nothing lasts forever. Every meaning we create will eventually fade. Every love will end in loss. Every hope will be tested by reality. But that doesn't make them worthless - it makes them precious beyond measure.

JAD: Pretty words. But words won't save your children. Philosophy won't restore your power. In the end, you're still just a broken man in an empty room, talking to his killer about the beauty of temporary things.

KAL: Maybe. But I'd rather be a broken man who fought for temporary beauty than an eternal being who never understood what they were destroying.

The silence that followed was profound, stretching between them like a bridge built from competing philosophies. Jade's expression had grown complex, layered with emotions that seemed to war against each other behind her burning eyes.

JAD: You really believe it, don't you? You genuinely think that your little rebellion against cosmic truth means something.

KAL: I know it does. Not because the universe validates it, but because I choose to validate it. Because Bella chooses to validate it. Because somewhere out there, Maya and Zeph are depending on that choice to bring them home.

Something stirred in the deepest reaches of Kael's being. Not the void - that remained distant, muffled by Jade's despair-soaked realm. This was something else entirely, something that had been forged in the crucible of love and tempered by the acceptance of loss. It was the recognition that meaning wasn't something to be discovered but something to be created, moment by moment, choice by choice.

It was the understanding that even if nothing lasted forever, the act of making things matter in the present was itself a form of immortality. It was the realization that defying meaninglessness wasn't futile - it was the most meaningful thing a conscious being could do. The feeling of knowing that no cosmic force, no matter how vast or ancient, could take away your right to choose what mattered to you. *It fills you with **DEFIANCE**.*

End of Chapter 60
"Who I am not"

[Raise your head, knight.]

(Chapter 61 || Volume 3) Power Of Choice.

The change began as a whisper in Kael's bones, a fundamental shift that rippled outward from his core like light expanding through darkness. Where once the void had been his source of power - the absence of everything, the negation of existence - now something entirely new stirred within him. It wasn't the opposite of nothingness; it was the defiant assertion that something could exist despite the overwhelming pressure to become nothing. Jade sensed the shift immediately, her wings snapping to full extension as she felt the balance of power in their impossible arena begin to stabilize.

JAD: What... what are you doing?

Kael rose to his feet, and as he did, the wounds across his body began to close. Not through healing, but through a more fundamental process - the reality of his injuries was being gently but firmly denied. Where despair had eaten away at the edges of his existence, new substance flowed in to fill the gaps.

KAL: I'm choosing to matter.

He moved forward, and Jade met him with a flurry of shadow-wrapped strikes. Her fist connected with his jaw, but instead of the devastating impact she expected, she found her attack sliding off something that felt like crystallized certainty.

This was no longer the void-walker who drew power from the spaces between things. This was something new - a being who could look at nonexistence and simply say "*no*."

Kael caught her next punch, his grip steady and unbreakable. Where his fingers touched her wrist, the corrosive despair that had enhanced her strength began to falter, reality reasserting itself with quiet determination.

JAD: This is impossible! You can't just decide to exist harder!

KAL: Watch me.

He twisted, using her momentum to throw her across the space, but as she flew through the air, something unprecedented happened. The darkness around them - the realm of despair she had crafted - began to develop cracks. Not breaks in its structure, but fundamental disagreements with its premise.

She landed in a crouch, wings beating once to propel her into a spinning kick. Kael didn't dodge or phase away; instead, he reached out and touched the space where her attack was about to land. Reality rippled, and suddenly there was solid ground beneath his feet where none had existed before, giving him the leverage to catch her leg and redirect her strike.

JAD: You're cheating! You can't just make things exist because you want them to!

KAL: Why not? You made things not exist because you wanted them gone. I'm just... disagreeing with your assessment.

She broke free and launched herself into the air, calling forth tendrils of shadow that struck like serpents made of crystallized hopelessness. Each one that touched Kael should have drained his will to fight, should have filled him with the certainty of defeat.

Instead, they met something that refused to be drained. Where despair touched defiance, the shadows began to solidify into something more substantial - not darkness, but the simple acknowledgment that light existed to cast them.

The fight that followed was unlike anything either of them had experienced. Jade's attacks came with all the cosmic weight of entropy, each strike backed by the fundamental forces that wore mountains down to dust and turned stars into cold, empty space. But Kael met each assault with something that shouldn't have been able to exist: the stubborn insistence that things could matter despite the universe's indifference.

When she threw a punch powered by the heat death of galaxies, he

caught it with a hand that simply refused to be unmade. When she wrapped him in shadows that carried the weight of every abandoned dream, he stepped through them as if they were nothing more substantial than morning mist.

JAD: This doesn't make sense! Power requires a source! What are you drawing from?

She launched into a combination that would have shattered planets, her movements a blur of wings and fury and the accumulated despair of countless dying civilizations. Kael responded with techniques that seemed to invent themselves as he moved, his body flowing through forms that had never existed before this moment.

KAL: I'm drawing from the choice to keep going. From the decision that love matters more than logic, that hope is more real than entropy, that the temporary is more valuable than the eternal because it's ours.

His counterattack was devastating in its simplicity. No cosmic forces, no reality-warping void powers - just a perfectly executed combination of strikes backed by the unshakeable conviction that his children needed him to win.

Each blow carried the weight of bedtime stories and scraped knees kissed better, of Bella's smile in the morning light and the sound of Maya's laughter. These weren't sources of power in any traditional sense, but they were real in a way that transcended physics.

Jade staggered back, her perfect form showing cracks for the first time since her resurrection. Where Kael's strikes had landed, her shadow-stuff body was becoming more solid, more human, as if his defiance was forcing her to remember what it felt like to be mortal.

JAD: You can't do this to me! I am **despair** incarnate! I am the inevitable truth that waits at the end of every hope!

But you are only a fraction of **them**.

KAL: And I am the father who reads bedtime stories anyway. The husband who brings flowers to his wife because they're beautiful, not because they'll last forever. The man who chooses to find meaning in a meaningless universe, one moment at a time.

She came at him with everything she had, her form expanding into something that filled the impossible space around them. This was no longer just Jade - this was the crystallized essence of every moment when hope had died, every instant when love had proven insufficient, every second when the universe had demonstrated its fundamental indifference to conscious suffering. Kael met her charge not with void powers or reality manipulation, but with something far simpler and infinitely more complex: the choice to keep existing in defiance of every force that wanted to erase him.

When their powers collided this time, the realm of despair around them didn't crack - it began to transform. Where once there had been only the hollow emptiness of meaninglessness, new substance began to flow. Not the solid matter of the physical world, but something more fundamental: the acknowledgment that consciousness could create significance through the simple act of caring. The darkness remained, but it was no longer oppressive. It became the backdrop against which small lights could shine, the silence that gave meaning to whispered words of love, the emptiness that made fullness possible.

JAD: What are you doing to my realm?

Her voice carried genuine fear now, not the theatrical malice of before but the terror of something that had defined itself by negation suddenly confronted with affirmation.

KAL: I'm not doing anything to it. I'm just... disagreeing with its fundamental premise. You say nothing matters? I say everything matters, precisely because it doesn't have to.

He reached out, not to attack but to touch the space between them. Where his fingers made contact with the air, reality solidified around them. Not the crushing weight of inevitability, but the gentle presence of possibility.

For the first time since the battle began, they were evenly matched. Despair and defiance, entropy and choice, the inevitable end and the stubborn refusal to surrender - all balanced on the knife's edge of a moment that could tip either way. The fight was no longer about power or cosmic forces. It had become something far more personal: a contest between two fundamentally different ways of existing in an indifferent universe. And for the first time since her resurrection, Jade began to wonder if her cosmic patrons had underestimated what they were truly up against.

End of Chapter 61 **"Power Of Choice"**

[Phew! I can barely keep up with this painting!]

(Chapter 62 || Volume 3) Who I am.

The moment stretched between them like a held breath, both combatants recognizing that their evenly matched dance of philosophy and power had reached its crescendo. The transformed realm around them pulsed with conflicting energies - despair and defiance locked in perfect opposition, each waiting for the other to blink first.

Kael and Jade separated, floating in the impossible space that was neither fully empty nor completely real. Their eyes met across the distance, and in that shared glance was the understanding that whatever came next would determine not just the outcome of their battle, but the fundamental nature of existence itself in this pocket of reality.

JAD: You've impressed me, void-walker. But parlor tricks of manufactured meaning won't save you from what I truly am.

Her form began to change, expanding beyond the merely physical into something that hurt to perceive directly. This wasn't the theatrical darkness she had wielded before - this was the activation of her ultimate nature, the power granted by whatever cosmic entity had pulled her back from nonexistence.

JAD: Behold the truth that waits at the end of every story, the answer to every question, the final word in every conversation. I am not just despair - I am the Inevitable Conclusion.

The space around her began to collapse inward, not physically but conceptually. Every hope in the world started to remember its eventual failure. Every love began to anticipate its end. Every meaning started to question its own validity. This wasn't an attack - it was the activation of a fundamental force that existed in the very structure of narrative itself.

The air grew thick with the weight of endings. Every song that would eventually end, every life that would eventually cease, every star that would eventually burn out - all of it was suddenly present

in this moment, pressing down with the accumulated mass of infinite conclusions.

KAL: The Inevitable Conclusion. Is that what they called you?

Kael's voice remained steady even as reality began to bend around Jade's expanding influence. He could feel the pull of her power, the seductive whisper that all struggles eventually end in defeat, all loves eventually end in loss, all meanings eventually dissolve into absurdity.

KAL: Then let me show you something they probably didn't account for.

He began to change as well, but where Jade's transformation was an expansion into cosmic inevitability, Kael's was something far more radical. He was becoming less, not more - stripping away every layer of complexity until only the most fundamental truth of his existence remained.

The void powers that had once defined him fell away like shed skin. The cosmic significance, the reality-warping abilities, the connection to the spaces between things - all of it dissolved, leaving behind something impossibly simple and infinitely more dangerous.

KAL: I am the Arbitrary Choice. The decision to continue despite knowing how it ends. The stubborn refusal to let inevitability have the final word.

What emerged from the dissolution of his cosmic powers wasn't another cosmic force - it was the distilled essence of consciousness choosing to matter in a universe that offered no guarantee that anything should matter at all.

The effect was immediate and profound. Where Jade's Inevitable Conclusion pressed down with the weight of all endings, Kael's Arbitrary Choice pushed back with something lighter but infinitely more resilient: the decision to begin again anyway.

Every ending that Jade manifested suddenly sprouted a new beginning. Not because it was destined or ordained, but because someone, somewhere, would choose to start over. Every conclusion she imposed was met with the simple question: "*And then what?*"

JAD: This is impossible! Every story ends! Every meaning collapses!

Every choice leads to consequences that render it meaningless!

Her voice carried the weight of cosmic authority, but for the first time since her resurrection, it sounded uncertain. The Inevitable Conclusion was supposed to be absolute - the final word that ended all arguments, the ultimate truth that made all other truths irrelevant.

KAL: You're right. Every story does end. But consciousness keeps telling new stories anyway. Every meaning does collapse. But we keep creating new meanings anyway. Every choice does lead to consequences. But we keep making new choices anyway.

The space between them became a battleground of fundamental forces. On one side, the crushing weight of inevitability - every entropy, every decay, every moment when hope had proven insufficient. On the other, the inexplicable lightness of arbitrary decision - every time consciousness had chosen to continue despite knowing the odds, every time love had been offered without guarantee of return, every time meaning had been created in defiance of evidence.

Their ultimate abilities clashed not with explosions or cosmic devastation, but with something far more profound: the collision between the universe's tendency toward endings and consciousness's tendency to insist on new beginnings.

JAD: Why? Why do you keep fighting when you know how this ends? When you know that even if you win, even if you save your children, even if you live happily ever after, it will all eventually end in dust and silence?

Her Inevitable Conclusion pressed harder, manifesting every possible future where his choices led to suffering. Maya growing up to hate him. Zeph consumed by powers he couldn't control. Bella dying alone while he was absent on some cosmic mission. Every permutation of failure, loss, and regret played out in crystalline detail.

KAL: Because the alternative is to stop choosing. And consciousness that stops choosing stops being conscious.

His Arbitrary Choice met each potential future with the same response: acknowledgment and continuation. Yes, these futures were possible. Yes, suffering was inevitable. Yes, everything would

eventually end. And yes, he would keep trying anyway, not because success was guaranteed, but because the attempt itself was what made existence worthwhile.

The battle between their ultimate abilities created something unprecedented in the space around them. Reality began to fracture, not into chaos but into infinite possibility. Every moment became both ending and beginning, every conclusion became both final and preliminary, every choice became both meaningful and arbitrary.

JAD: You're destroying everything! The natural order, the cosmic balance, the very concept of finality!

KAL: I'm not destroying anything. I'm just... refusing to let it be the only answer.

Their powers reached a crescendo that threatened to tear apart the fabric of the impossible space they occupied. The Inevitable Conclusion and the Arbitrary Choice, locked in perfect opposition, each absolute in its own way, each denying the completeness of the other. Their ultimate abilities had reached a stalemate. The question now wasn't who would win, but whether either of them was ready for what came next.

End of Chapter 62 **"Who I am"**

[The final touches are being made.]

(Chapter 63 || Volume 3) Knight Of Defiance.

Oh, what a magnificent portrait you have painted, dear void-walker. What exquisite brushstrokes of choice against the vast canvas of inevitability. How beautifully you have rendered yourself in colors that shouldn't exist, in hues that defy the palette of cosmic indifference.

Look at you now, standing amidst the settling dust of philosophical warfare, your form illuminated not by the harsh light of cosmic truth but by the gentle glow of something far more precious - the soft radiance of a consciousness that has chosen to matter despite every evidence to the contrary. The artist who captured this moment, *in other words: me*, must have wept at the beauty of it, at the way light falls across features that have been carved by loss and polished by love.

See how your shoulders bear the weight of understanding - not the crushing burden of meaninglessness, but the lighter, more complex load of meaning consciously created. Each line etched by years of choosing hope over despair, each shadow cast by moments when you refused to let endings be final. The masterpiece that is your existence speaks not of void and emptiness, but of the spaces between things where new possibilities can take root.

How wrong we all were about your so-called nihilism, that dark philosophy that seemed to define your early years. We saw only the surface - the rejection, the denial, the apparent embrace of nothingness. But now, in the aftermath of your grand revelation, the truth becomes clear as starlight: what we mistook for nihilism was simply defiance wearing darker clothes. You were never truly embracing meaninglessness; you were raging against it with such fury that destruction seemed the only outlet for your passionate refusal to accept cosmic indifference.

The void you wielded was not the power of nothing - it was the power of "no." No to predetermined fate, no to inevitable conclusions, no to the suggestion that consciousness should accept its own insignificance. Even in your darkest moments, when you spoke of endings and entropy, when you seemed to court oblivion itself, you were engaged in the most profound act of rebellion: the refusal to let the universe have the final word about what mattered.

Look at how the portrait captures this truth. The way shadows pool around your feet not as absence but as presence - the presence of spaces where new things might grow, where unexpected beginnings might take root. The darkness you commanded was never truly dark; it was pregnant with possibility, heavy with the weight of choices not yet made.

And your eyes - oh, what depths I have captured there. No longer the cold emptiness of deep space, no longer the terrible vacuum that once made reality tremble. Now they hold something far more dangerous to the established order: the warm fire of arbitrary decision, the gentle flame of consciousness choosing to burn bright in an indifferent cosmos. They are the eyes of someone who has looked into the abyss and instead of finding nothing, found the infinite potential for something.

The transformation is breathtaking in its completeness. Where once you drew power from the spaces between things, now you create power in those very spaces. Where once you negated existence,

now you assert it with each breath, each heartbeat, each stubborn moment of continued being. The portrait shows this shift in the way light plays across your form - not the harsh illumination of cosmic forces, but the soft, warm glow of love made manifest, of meaning consciously chosen, of defiance refined into its purest form.

How beautiful it is to witness consciousness discovering its own strength. Not the strength to destroy - any force can destroy - but the strength to insist, to continue, to create significance where none was promised. The artist has captured this perfectly in the set of your jaw, the straightness of your spine, the way your hands rest not in the postures of power but in the gestures of protection, of nurturing, of someone ready to tend the small flames of meaning in a universe eager to extinguish them.

The battlefield around you tells its own story, though the portrait focuses rightfully on you, the triumphant figure at its center. Reality itself has been rewritten by your victory, not through conquest but through conversation, not through dominance but through the simple, revolutionary act of refusing to let inevitability be inevitable. The very air seems lighter now, filled with possibilities that weren't there before, pregnant with beginnings that grow from the fertile soil of conscious choice.

And standing there in the aftermath, surrounded by the evidence of your philosophical triumph, you have become something entirely new. Not a void-walker, for you no longer walk through emptiness - you fill it. Not a nihilist, for you have proven that meaning can exist by sheer force of will. Not a destroyer, for you have created something beautiful from the raw materials of despair.

You have become the living embodiment of consciousness's greatest achievement: the ability to matter in a universe that offers no guarantee that anything should matter at all. The portrait captures this transformation with stunning clarity - the way you stand not in defiance of the cosmos, but in defiance for it, protecting the small, precious things that make existence worthwhile from the vast forces that would render them insignificant.

I who created this masterpiece understood what you have become, dear Kael. We saw past the surface drama of cosmic conflict to the deeper truth: that your greatest victory was not over an enemy, but over the seductive lie that nothing matters because everything ends. You have proven that temporary can be more valuable than

eternal, that chosen meaning can be more real than discovered truth, that love freely given is worth more than cosmic significance freely received. How magnificent you look, standing there in the gentle light of your own defiance, no longer the avatar of nihilism but something far more beautiful and dangerous.

The knight-errant of consciousness itself, the champion of arbitrary choice, the guardian of meanings that exist not because they must, but because someone chose to make them matter.

I crown you the Knight of Defiance.

End of Chapter 63
"Knight Of Defiance"

[So it has been concluded.]

(Chapter 64 || Volume 3) The Ordinary Life.

The morning sun filtered through the same gauze curtains it always had, casting the same geometric patterns across our wooden floor. I watched the light dance there as I made breakfast, stirring honey into oats with the practiced motion of a man whose greatest cosmic significance was remembering to add the right amount of cinnamon.

Maya and Zeph sat at the kitchen table, chattering about their adventure as if it had been nothing more than an extended sleepover. They had no memory of the watchtower, of the impossible space where reality bent like heated metal, of their father facing down the embodiment of cosmic despair. As far as they knew, they'd spent a few days with Mrs. Elderwood while Papa dealt with "grown-up business."

It was better that way.

Papa, look!

Maya held up another one of her light-honey spheres, this one perfectly stable and glowing with soft warmth.

I figured out how to make them last longer!

That's wonderful, little bee.

I ruffled her hair, marveling at how normal the gesture felt. My hands had recently held powers that could rewrite the fundamental nature of existence. Now they were concerned with whether I'd remembered to pack Zeph's favorite toy for his afternoon playdate. Zeph tugged at my sleeve, his dark eyes serious in the way that only a four-year-old could manage.

Daddy, the shadows were singing while you were gone.

I knelt down to his level, meeting those eyes that held depths I recognized but no longer feared.

What did they sing about?

They said you were coming home.

He smiled, and the shadows in the corners of the room seemed to dance in response.

They were happy.

So was I, little one. So was I.

Bella emerged from the bedroom, her translucent wings catching the morning light as she joined us for breakfast. She looked at me with those compound eyes that fractured the world into beautiful pieces, and I saw in them the same relief, the same quiet gratitude that we were all together again.

Everything okay?

She asked, the question carrying layers of meaning we both understood.

Everything's perfect.

I replied, and meant it.

After breakfast, we went through our usual routine. I helped Maya practice her honey manipulation in the garden while Bella worked with Zeph on controlling his shadow-walking. The exercises were the same ones we'd done a hundred times before, but today they felt different. Today they felt like choices rather than necessities.

Mrs. Elderwood stopped by around noon, as she often did, bringing

fresh vegetables from her garden and stories from the village. She looked at me with those weathered eyes that had seen more than their share of the world's strangeness.

You look rested.

She said, though we both knew I hadn't been sleeping.

I feel rested.

I replied, accepting the basket of tomatoes she offered.

She nodded, satisfied with the exchange of comfortable lies that let ordinary life continue. Some battles were meant to be fought in silence, their victories measured not in cosmic significance but in the simple fact that children could play in gardens while their parents worried about mundane things like whether there would be enough honey for the week's baking.

The afternoon passed in a haze of domestic contentment. I fixed the loose board on the front porch, helped Zeph build an elaborate shadow-castle that existed in three dimensions simultaneously, and listened to Maya read from her picture book about a brave bee who saved her hive through the power of friendship.

When evening came, we sat on the porch as we always did, watching the sunset paint the sky in colors that needed no cosmic significance to be beautiful. Maya curled up in Bella's lap while Zeph leaned against my side, both children drowsy from a day full of the kind of adventures that mattered most - the ones that happened in backyards and imaginations.

Tell us a story, Papa.

Maya mumbled, her eyes already half-closed.

I could have told them about cosmic entities and impossible realms, about the battle between inevitability and choice, about the moment when their father had literally defied the fundamental nature of existence itself. Instead, I told them about a family of rabbits who learned that the best treasures were the ones you found in your own garden.

By the time I finished, both children were asleep. Bella and I carried them inside, tucked them into their beds, and stood for a moment

in the hallway listening to the soft sounds of their breathing.

Was it difficult?

Bella asked quietly.

Choosing this over... whatever else you could have become?

I thought about the question, about the power I'd walked away from, about the cosmic significance I'd consciously rejected. I could have remained the Knight of Defiance, could have taken my place among the forces that shaped reality itself. Instead, I'd chosen to come home and worry about whether we needed to buy more flour at the market.

No.

I said, and realized it was true.

It was the easiest choice I've ever made.

We went to bed as we always did, in the small room of our small cottage on the outskirts of a small village. I held Bella close and listened to the night sounds - crickets and wind through leaves and the distant hoot of an owl. Somewhere in the cosmic vastness beyond our atmosphere, forces beyond imagination continued their eternal struggles over the nature of existence and meaning.

I pulled the blanket up to my chin and closed my eyes.

In the morning, I would make breakfast. Maya would create new wonders with her honey-light, and Zeph would practice walking through shadows that welcomed him like old friends. Bella would tend her garden, and I would fix whatever needed fixing around our little piece of the world.

It would be perfectly, beautifully, defiantly ordinary.

And that, I knew, was the most cosmic act of rebellion imaginable: choosing to find the infinite in the small, the eternal in the temporary, the meaningful in the mundane. I had been offered the chance to matter on a universal scale, and I had chosen instead to matter on the scale that actually counted - the scale of bedtime stories and scraped knees and quiet moments shared with the people who made existence worthwhile.

The void-walker was gone. The Knight of Defiance had chosen to abdicate. What remained was something far more dangerous to the forces of cosmic despair: a father, a husband, a man who had decided that love was more important than significance, that home was more valuable than power, that the choice to be ordinary was the most extraordinary thing of all.

Tomorrow would bring its own small adventures, its own quiet miracles, its own opportunities to choose meaning over meaninglessness one moment at a time. I wouldn't have it any other way.

End of Chapter 64 **"The Ordinary Life"**

[You even chose to defy your divine calling, how fitting.]

(Chapter 65 || Volume 3) Peacekeepers.

The morning sun painted the ruined city in shades of gold and shadow, its light catching on fragments of ice that still clung to broken walls like crystalline memories. Six months had passed since the war's end, since the last tyrant had fallen and the screaming had finally stopped. But peace, they had learned, was not the absence of war - it was the presence of those strong enough to maintain it.

Neru stood at the edge of what had once been Central Plaza, watching civilians rebuild their lives among the rubble. Children played in the shadows of collapsed buildings, their laughter a sound he had almost forgotten existed. Beside him, Shen cracked his knuckles, the small explosions sending ripples through the morning air.

SHN: Hard to believe it's over.

NER: The war is over. Our work isn't.

Their new role as peacekeepers had been unexpected. The world's governments, fractured and desperate, had turned to the two warriors who had proven themselves capable of ending gods. Not to rule - neither man had the patience for politics - but to ensure that the mistakes of the past would never repeat themselves.

The first test had come three weeks after their appointment. A

warlord had declared himself emperor of the eastern provinces, his army of soul-enhanced soldiers carving a bloody path through refugee camps. The local authorities were overwhelmed, their pleas for help echoing through what remained of the global communication networks.

Neru and Shen had arrived at dawn, materializing from the morning mist like harbingers. The fortress was a monument to brutality - towers built from the bones of his enemies, walls stained with the blood of innocents. But monuments, they had learned, were easily toppled.

So the famous peacekeepers have come to play hero. How-

The warlord's words had been cut short as Shen appeared before him in a burst of controlled explosion, moving faster than sound itself. A single punch, enhanced by concentrated detonation, had sent the warlord crashing through three stone walls. Before the dust could settle, Neru's ice had encased the man's army, each soldier frozen in a perfect crystal prison that would hold them until proper authorities could arrive.

The battle had lasted exactly forty-seven seconds.

But not all conflicts could be ended with overwhelming force. The second incident had required a different approach entirely. In a coastal city, two rival factions had claimed dominance over the refugee population. Both sides possessed legitimate grievances, their leaders scarred by years of oppression and loss. Violence had seemed inevitable until the peacekeepers arrived.

Neru had chosen negotiation over annihilation, his presence alone - the temperature dropping ten degrees wherever he stood - enough to command respect. Shen had taken a more direct approach, demonstrating his power by creating a controlled explosion that carved his and Neru's names into a nearby mountainside, visible for miles in every direction.

The message had been clear: settle your differences, or they would settle them for you. It had worked. The factions had found common ground in their shared fear of becoming statistics in a peacekeeping report. Now, three months later, they stood in the ruins of what had been humanity's greatest city, watching it slowly heal. But healing was a fragile process, and there were always those who sought to reopen old wounds. A lone pigeon landed on Neru's cold shoulder,

holding a letter in its' beak.

*Priority Alpha situation.
Unknown soul user, Class-S threat level.
Casualties mounting.
Target calls himself the Devourer.
He's... eating people's souls.
Literally consuming them.
Local forces are completely outmatched.*

Shen's palms erupted with contained explosions, the familiar warmth spreading up his arms as his body prepared for combat. Neru felt the temperature around them drop, frost forming on nearby surfaces as his power responded to the threat.

They moved as one, Shen's explosive propulsion launching them both into the sky while Neru created platforms of ice to guide their trajectory. The city blurred beneath them, buildings becoming geometric patterns in a mosaic of recovery and ruin.

Now it resembled something from a nightmare. Bodies lay scattered across the streets - not dead, but empty. Their souls had been torn away, leaving behind husks that breathed but did not live. The air itself seemed wrong, thick with a hunger that pressed against their consciousness like grasping fingers.

At the center of the devastation stood their target. The Devourer was tall and gaunt, his skin pale as bone, his mouth opened impossibly wide to reveal rows of teeth that seemed to extend down his throat into darkness. Around him swirled wisps of light - souls, ripped from their owners and consumed like candy.

DEV: More strong ones come to feed me. How... generous.

The creature's voice was the sound of grinding stone, each word accompanied by the screams of the devoured. Neru felt something twist in his chest - not fear, but disgust. This was not war. This was not even murder. This was desecration of the highest order.

SHN: You know what I hate most about abominations like you?

NER: They make us look merciful by comparison.

The Devourer lunged forward, his impossible maw stretching wider as he attempted to swallow Shen whole. But the explosive user was already moving, his body wreathed in controlled detonations that

turned his very presence into a weapon. He struck the creature center mass, the explosion launching both of them backward across the shattered plaza.

Neru was already in motion, ice erupting from the ground in crystalline spears that sought to pin their enemy. But the Devourer's form was more fluid than solid - the spears passed through him like mist, leaving only brief tears that quickly sealed themselves.

DEV: Soul resonance... yes, I can taste it. The bond between you is delicious.

The creature's focus shifted, its attention turning to the connection that bound the two peacekeepers. Neru felt something probing at the edges of his consciousness, trying to sever the link that had made their greatest techniques possible.

But the Devourer had made a crucial mistake. The bond between Neru and Shen was not just tactical - it was spiritual. Born from shared loss, forged in mutual understanding, and tempered by the fires of war. It could not be simply consumed.

SHN: Nice try.

Shen's next attack was a work of art. Controlled explosions propelled him in a complex spiral pattern around the Devourer, each detonation calculated to drive their enemy toward Neru's waiting trap. Ice formed beneath the creature's feet, not to freeze him but to channel him into the exact position required.

The Devourer realized the trap too late. Neru's ice constructs weren't random - they formed a perfect geometric pattern, each angle calculated to focus and amplify the cold. The creature found himself at the center of a crystalline mandala, his movements becoming sluggish as the temperature plummeted beyond even supernatural tolerances.

NER: Your hunger ends here.

The ice didn't just freeze the Devourer - it crystallized his very essence, locking his soul-consuming ability in stasis. The stolen wisps of light broke free from his grasp, returning to search for their rightful owners among the fallen.

But as the creature's form solidified, he managed one final gambit. His maw stretched impossibly wide, attempting to devour not their souls but their very existence - to erase them from reality itself.

The attack struck both peacekeepers simultaneously. For a moment that stretched into eternity, Neru felt himself dissolving, his consciousness scattering like snow in a hurricane. But then Shen's soul resonated with his own, their connection burning bright enough to anchor them both in existence. They had faced erasure before.

They had died and been reborn in the crucible of their own determination. *What was one more death to those who had already transcended mortality?*

SHN: Still here, ugly.

NER: Still breathing.

The Devourer's eyes widened in something that might have been fear. These were not ordinary peacekeepers. These were legends in human form, warriors who had surpassed the limits of soul manipulation itself.

What happened next was less a battle than an execution. Moving in perfect synchronization, Neru and Shen unleashed everything they had learned, every technique they had mastered, every drop of power they had claimed. Ice and explosion, order and chaos, death and rebirth - all focused into a single, overwhelming assault. The Devourer's form began to crack, his stolen souls pouring out like water from a broken dam. But even as his power failed, he managed one last curse:

DEV: You... cannot save them all. There will always be... another terror.

The creature crumbled to dust, his essence scattered to the winds. Around them, the empty husks began to stir as their souls returned, confusion and terror replacing the awful emptiness in their eyes. Neru surveyed the damage while Shen helped the survivors to their feet. The city would recover - it always did. But the Devourer's final words echoed in both their minds. He was right. There would always be another threat, another monster, another reason to fight.

They had wanted peace. Instead, they had found purpose. As the sun set behind the broken skyline, casting long shadows across the plaza where they stood, both peacekeepers felt the weight of their new role settling across their shoulders. Not the burden of

leadership, but something heavier - the responsibility of being strong enough to protect a world that could not protect itself.

Emergency crews were arriving, their sirens wailing through the evening air. Soon this would become just another incident report, another entry in the growing legend of the peacekeepers. But for now, in the quiet moment before the chaos of cleanup began, they allowed themselves to simply stand and breathe.

SHN: Think we'll ever get a real vacation?

NER: Vacation is for the living.

They began walking toward the arriving authorities, ready to provide their report and move on to whatever crisis awaited them next. But as they moved through the gathering darkness, their shadows stretched behind them - one wreathed in crystalline frost, the other crackling with barely contained explosions.

NER: Peace is not the absence of wars.

SHN: It's the presence of those strong enough to stop them.

The war was over. Their watch had just begun.
The world had its guardians. And those guardians would never rest.

End of Chapter 65 **"Peacekeepers"**

[The strongest don't rest - they endure.]

(Chapter 66 || Volume 3) Beneath Our Feet.

The cobblestone streets of a village clicked beneath their boots in a rhythm that had become oddly comforting over the past few weeks. After months of emergency responses and crisis management, the simple act of walking without destination felt almost foreign. Neru adjusted his coat against the mountain breeze while Shen kicked a loose stone with the enthusiasm of someone who had forgotten what boredom felt like.

SHN: You know what I miss about the war?

NER: The constant threat of death?

SHN: The simplicity. Bad guys over there, good guys over here. Point, explode, problem solved.

NER: Now you have to fill out paperwork afterward.

A small explosion erupted from Shen's palm as he gestured dismissively, causing a nearby shopkeeper to drop his broom and dive behind his counter.

SHN: Sorry! Just expressing frustration!

The elderly man peeked over his barricade, recognized the peacekeepers, and waved sheepishly before returning to his sweeping. The entire village had learned to interpret Shen's unconscious pyrotechnics as emotional punctuation rather than actual threats.

NER: Your restraint is improving.

SHN: Last week I only accidentally demolished one building during a heated discussion about lunch.

NER: Progress.

They passed the fountain at the village center, where children played an elaborate game that seemed to involve throwing stones at precisely the wrong targets while shouting contradictory rules.

Neru watched them with the detached fascination of someone trying to decode a foreign language.

SHN: Remember being their age

NER: Vaguely. Before everything went to hell.

SHN: I used to play a game called "Don't Set Things on Fire." I was terrible at it.

NER: Some things never change.

A woman approached them hesitantly, clutching a basket of vegetables. She bowed deeply, her voice barely above a whisper.

WOM: Honored peacekeepers, my husband wanted to thank you for dealing with those bandits last month. The roads are safe again.

NER: Just doing our job.

SHN: Though if you have any of those honey cakes from last time...

The woman's face lit up as she reached into her basket, producing a small wrapped package. Shen accepted it with the reverence of someone receiving a sacred artifact.

SHN: You're a saint, Mrs.

WOM: It's the least we can do. You've given us back our peace.

As she walked away, Neru raised an eyebrow at his partner's

suddenly angelic expression.

NER: "Just doing our job?"

SHN: What? I can be humble.

NER: Last week you introduced yourself to that diplomat as "*Shen the Magnificent, Shatterer of Skies, Bane of Boring Conversations.*"

SHN: That was accurate self-representation, not arrogance.

They continued up the winding path that led toward Mount Ebott, the village's protective landmark that cast its shadow over the valley like a stone guardian. The higher they climbed, the thinner the air became, though neither man showed signs of exertion. Their bodies had been pushed far beyond normal human limits long ago.

NER: Question.

SHN: Answer.

NER: Do you ever miss the adrenaline?

SHN: Of combat? Sometimes. There's something pure about a life-or-death fight. No politics, no complications, just survival.

NER: No paperwork.

SHN: God, the paperwork. Yesterday I had to file a report explaining why I used "excessive force" on a guy who was literally eating people's faces.

NER: What did you write?

SHN: Because he was eating people's faces.

A hawk circled overhead, riding the thermal currents with lazy grace. Shen watched it with something approaching envy.

SHN: Think that bird has to explain its hunting methods to a committee?

NER: Probably just files a brief talon report.

SHN: Was that... did you just make a joke?

NER: I've been known to attempt humor.

SHN: Mark the calendar. The Ice Prince made a pun.

They reached a plateau about halfway up the mountain, where a cluster of ancient stone benches offered a perfect view of the village below. The sun was beginning its descent, painting the sky in shades of orange and pink that made the humble buildings look almost majestic.

SHN: Not bad for government-assigned R&R.

NER: Better than our last vacation.

SHN: You mean when we spent three days in that cave system

fighting?

NER: That was a vacation. No reports to file afterward.

SHN: Good point.

Shen unwrapped Mrs. Chen's honey cakes and offered one to Neru, who accepted it with the careful precision of someone handling explosives. They ate in comfortable silence for a few minutes, watching the village settle into its evening routine below.

SHN: Ever think about what we'd be doing if the war had never happened?

NER: Dead, most likely. My family's curse doesn't exactly promote longevity.

SHN: Mine either. Though probably would've blown myself up in some stupid accident by now.

NER: Instead of blowing up villains professionally.

SHN: Career advancement at its finest.

A group of children ran through the streets below, their laughter echoing faintly up the mountainside. One of them was clearly pretending to be Shen, complete with exaggerated hand gestures and small firecracker substitutes for explosions. Another child had wrapped himself in a white sheet and was "freezing" everything he touched.

NER: Fame is strange.

SHN: Could be worse. At least they're not making us into a romantic ballad.

NER: Give it time.

SHN: "The Ballad of Frost and Fire, A Love Story." I can see it now.

NER: I will personally freeze any bard who attempts such a thing.

SHN: What if it's really well written?

NER: Especially if it's well written.

The sun sank lower, casting longer shadows across the valley. The temperature began to drop, though Neru seemed completely unaffected while Shen unconsciously raised his body temperature through minor controlled combustions.

SHN: You know what's funny?

NER: Your face?

SHN: ...okay, two jokes in one day. I'm genuinely concerned about your mental state.

NER: Continue.

SHN: We spent years learning to kill gods, and now we use those

same skills to stop pickpockets and settle property disputes.

NER: The principles are the same. Overwhelming force applied with surgical precision.

SHN: Yesterday you froze a man's feet to the ground because he was littering.

NER: It was effective.

SHN: It was overkill.

NER: There's no such thing as overkill. Only "kill" and "not kill enough."

A comfortable silence settled between them as the first stars began to appear. The village lights twinkled below like earthbound constellations, each window representing families reunited, children safe in their beds, lives continuing because two broken men had decided to protect rather than destroy.

SHN: Sometimes I wonder if we're actually good at this peacekeeping thing, or if we're just so terrifying that people behave.

NER: Does the distinction matter?

SHN: Philosophically? Probably.

NER: Practically?

SHN: Peace is peace.

The sun touched the horizon now, turning the sky into a masterpiece of amber and crimson. Both men felt the day's tensions ease from their shoulders, replaced by the simple satisfaction of another day without catastrophe.

SHN: Think tomorrow will be as quiet?

NER: With our luck? Doubtful.

SHN: Alien invasion?

NER: Demon incursion.

SHN: Time-traveling assassins?

NER: All of the above, simultaneously.

SHN: Now you're just being pessimistic.

As full darkness settled over the valley, they prepared to head back down the mountain path. But as they stood, both men froze simultaneously, their enhanced senses picking up something that made their souls resonate with warning. It started as a vibration in the stone beneath their feet - so subtle it was almost imaginary. Then came the sensation of being watched by something vast and ancient, something that had been sleeping in the mountain's depths for longer than human memory. The temperature around

Neru dropped several degrees without his conscious command. Shen's hands began to smoke as his power responded to the perceived threat.

NER: You feel that?

SHN: Like ice crawling up my spine.

NER: Something's down there. Deep down.

SHN: How deep?

NER: Miles. Maybe more.

The presence pressed against their consciousness like a weight made of malevolent intention. Whatever dwelt in the mountain's heart was old - older than the wars they had fought, older than the civilizations they had protected. And it was beginning to stir.

SHN: Well, so much for a quiet evening.

NER: The mountain has a secret.

They stood at the edge of discovery, two peacekeepers who had thought their greatest battles were behind them, feeling the first tremors of something that would test every limit they had transcended. In the depths below, something that had slumbered since the world was young began to wake.

End of Chapter 66 **"Beneath Our Feet"**

[Some stones are better left unturned.]

(Chapter 67 || Volume 3) Mount Ebott.

The entrance to the cave system revealed itself with all the subtlety of a poorly kept secret - a jagged tear in Mount Ebott's eastern face, partially concealed by centuries of overgrowth and the kind of ancient stone work that suggested someone had tried very hard to seal something inside. And failed.

Neru ran his fingers along the weathered symbols carved into the rock, ice crystals forming where his skin made contact with the stone. The markings were old, older than any civilization he recognized, but their meaning felt disturbingly familiar.

NER: Warning signs.

SHN: The good kind that say "Dangerous Cliff Ahead" or the bad

kind?

NER: Take a wild guess.

Shen created a small controlled explosion in his palm, the light revealing more of the carved warnings that covered every available surface around the entrance. Pictographs showed stick figures running away from something that the artists had apparently lacked the courage to properly depict.

SHN: You know, for once I'd like to find a mysterious cave with a sign that says "*Free Treasure, No Strings Attached.*"

NER: Where would be the challenge in that?

SHN: I'm starting to think you actually enjoy these situations.

NER: Says the man who's already checking his explosive reserves.

They descended into darkness that seemed to swallow their light sources with hungry efficiency. Neru's ice provided a cold, blue illumination that cast everything in spectral hues, while Shen's controlled burns offered warmth and flickering orange comfort. The combination created a light show that would have been beautiful under different circumstances.

The cave system was vast, far larger than Mount Ebott should have been able to contain. Tunnels branched off in every direction, following no geological logic that either man could decipher. It was as if the mountain had been hollowed out by something that understood space differently than human minds.

SHN: Either this mountain's bigger on the inside, or we've walked into another dimension.

NER: Both possibilities are equally annoying.

SHN: Look on the bright side - at least there's no paperwork for interdimensional incidents.

NER: Yet.

They chose the largest tunnel, following the increasingly powerful sensation that something massive waited in the depths. The walls here were smooth, almost polished, as if countless things had passed through over the millennia. But the smoothness had an organic quality that suggested the passages might have been carved by something living.

The temperature dropped steadily as they went deeper, though neither man found it particularly uncomfortable. What was concerning was the way sound behaved down here - their footsteps

echoed strangely, sometimes returning as whispers that sounded almost like words in languages that predated human speech.

SHN: Is it just me, or does this place feel hungry?

NER: Mountains don't get hungry.

SHN: This one might.

After what felt like hours of descent, the tunnel suddenly opened into a chasm so vast that their combined light sources couldn't reach the far walls. The ceiling disappeared into darkness above them, and the floor... there was no floor. Just an abyss that seemed to breathe with a rhythm all its own.

But they weren't alone.

Suspended in the center of the chasm by what appeared to be organic cables or veins was something that hurt to look at directly. It was massive - easily the size of a city block - and its form shifted constantly between configurations that might have been mechanical, biological, or something that transcended such distinctions entirely. Dozens of eyes opened and closed across its surface like stars blinking in an alien sky.

The thing noticed them immediately.

ABS: Visitors... it has been... so long since visitors came to see... to witness... to become...

The voice came from everywhere at once, resonating through the stone, through the air, through their bones. It spoke in harmonies that no single throat could produce, as if multiple entities were trying to communicate through one impossibly complex vocal system.

SHN: Well, that's not disturbing at all.

NER: At least it's polite.

The abomination's attention focused on them with the intensity of a spotlight made of malevolent curiosity. Several of its eyes - each one the size of a house - turned in their direction, pupils dilating as they examined the two peacekeepers.

ABS: Strong ones... yes... I smell the resonance between your souls... delicious... it has been centuries since strong ones fought willingly...

SHN: Who said anything about willingly?

ABS: You descended... you sought... therefore you consent...

NER: That's not how consent works.

Without warning, one of the organic cables lashed out toward them with the speed of a striking serpent. Neru's ice barriers erupted from thin air, deflecting the appendage, but more cables followed. Dozens of them, each one thick as a tree trunk and moving with predatory intelligence.

Shen launched himself into the air with explosive propulsion, his trajectory taking him directly toward the creature's central mass. His hands erupted with concentrated detonations as he struck, each impact sending shockwaves through the chasm that loosened ancient stalactites from the ceiling.

But the creature was vast. Shen's attacks, devastating as they were, seemed to cause only superficial damage to its constantly shifting surface.

ABS: Tickles... it has been so long since something tickled...

More cables whipped through the air, forcing Shen to change direction mid-flight. He used controlled explosions to ricochet off the chasm walls, turning the entire space into his personal three-dimensional battlefield.

Meanwhile, Neru had found his own approach. Ice began forming throughout the chasm - not random constructs, but a carefully designed network of crystalline architecture. Platforms, bridges, and support structures that turned the empty air into a frozen web centered on their enormous opponent.

NER: Shen! Drive it toward the center web!

SHN: You mean where all the scary tentacles are thickest?

NER: Exactly there.

SHN: I love how your plans always involve more danger, not less!

The abomination seemed to understand their strategy, its movements becoming more defensive as it tried to avoid the crystalline trap Neru was constructing. But Shen was relentless, his explosive attacks growing more intense and focused. Each detonation drove the creature deeper into Neru's frozen architecture.

ABS: Clever... but cleverness alone cannot... will not... shall not...

The thing's voice changed, becoming deeper, more resonant. The organic cables began to pulse with a sickly light, and suddenly the entire chasm filled with a sound like screaming wind. But it wasn't wind - it was the voices of every creature the abomination had consumed over the millennia, all crying out at once.

The psychic assault hit both peacekeepers like a physical blow. For a moment, their coordination faltered as thousands of alien thoughts tried to force their way into their minds. But they had faced worse. Their souls resonated together, creating a barrier of shared determination that the voices couldn't penetrate.

SHN: Is that supposed to be intimidating?

NER: We've heard worse during budget meetings.

Their counterattack was swift and merciless. Shen's explosive barrage reached new levels of intensity, each detonation perfectly timed to drive the creature into the exact position Neru required. The ice web began to contract, crystalline cables tightening around the abomination's mass like a frozen net.

But the creature had one final gambit. Its form began to condense, compacting itself into something more solid, more dangerous. The eyes across its surface focused into a single, massive organ of sight that turned its full attention on the two peacekeepers.

ABS: If I cannot have you... then nothing shall...

The chasm began to collapse. Not from any structural failure, but from the creature's own power turning inward, imploding the space around them. Rock and ice began to fall as reality itself seemed to buckle under the strain.

SHN: That's not good.

NER: Understatement of the millennium.

SHN: Time to get serious?

NER: Past time.

They moved into perfect synchronization, their souls resonating with the harmonic frequency they had discovered during their greatest battles. The technique that had allowed them to defeat gods began to build between them, frost and flame spiraling together in patterns that hurt to perceive directly.

ABS: Impossible... that resonance... I know that song...

The creature's confidence wavered for the first time. Whatever it recognized in their combined power was clearly something it had encountered before - and something it feared. But before they could complete their ultimate technique, both peacekeepers paused, a familiar competitive glint appearing in their eyes.

SHN: You know what? I bet I can finish this thing before you.

NER: That's adorable. But ice beats explosion in a confined space.

SHN: Want to make it interesting?

NER: Loser does the paperwork for the next three incidents.

SHN: Deal. Though you should start practicing your handwriting.

NER: I'll be sure to use very small words in your defeat report.

The abomination, sensing that its supposedly terrified opponents had somehow turned the climactic battle into a casual wager, let out a sound that might have been confusion, rage, or possibly indigestion.

ABS: Are you... are you not taking me seriously?

SHN: Oh, we're taking you very seriously.

NER: Seriously enough to bet on who kills you first.

End of Chapter 67

"Mount Ebott"

[The remains of the harbinger.]

(Chapter 68 || Volume 3) History Lessons.

The abomination's form rippled with what might have been indignation as it processed their casual dismissal. Multiple eyes blinked in sequence across its surface, creating a wave pattern that was both hypnotic and deeply unsettling.

ABS: You... you do not recognize me? I am the remnant of Vazroth the World-Eater! I am the shadow cast by the one who brought kingdoms to their knees! I am-

SHN: Sorry, who now?

NER: Never heard of him.

The creature's voice rose to a pitch that made the chasm walls

vibrate, stalactites raining down like stone tears.

ABS: VAZROTH! The Devourer of Stars! The One Who Made Gods Weep! Surely you know-

SHN: Dude, I slept through most of history class.

NER: I was usually frozen in a block of ice during the educational portions of my childhood.

SHN: Plus, honestly? We've killed so many world-ending threats that they all kind of blur together.

NER: Tuesday's apocalypse tends to overshadow Monday's catastrophe.

If a primordial horror could experience an existential crisis, this one was having it right now. Several of its eyes actually started twitching.

ABS: But... but I am legendary! I am the stuff of nightmares! Children across the world used to cry at the mere mention of my name!

SHN: That's nice. Can we get back to the part where we kill you?

NER: This exposition is cutting into our dinner plans.

The creature's rage finally overcame its shock. Its form expanded violently, filling more of the chasm as organic cables lashed out in every direction. But instead of the mindless fury they might have expected, the attacks came with surgical precision - each tentacle moving in perfect coordination with dozens of others, creating a deadly ballet of destruction.

Shen launched himself into the chaos with explosive enthusiasm, his body wreathed in controlled detonations that turned him into a living missile. He ricocheted off three different cable strikes, using each impact to redirect his momentum while delivering devastating counterattacks. His fists erupted with concentrated force as he struck, each explosion perfectly timed to maximum damage.

Meanwhile, Neru had turned the falling debris to his advantage. Ice crystalized around each piece of falling stone, transforming them into guided projectiles under his control. The improvised ammunition streaked through the air like frozen comets, each one finding its target with mathematical precision.

But Vazroth's remnant was learning. The creature began to anticipate their patterns, its movements becoming more fluid, more dance-like. When Shen came in for another explosive strike,

tentacles moved to intercept him not where he was, but where he would be. Only a last-second detonation saved him from being skewered.

ABS: You fight well for ignorant children who know nothing of true power!

SHN: Compliments won't save you!

Neru created a series of ice platforms in rapid succession, each one positioned to give Shen new angles of attack. The explosive user bounded between them like a pinball made of controlled destruction, his trajectory impossible to predict as he used his partner's constructs to change direction mid-flight.

The combination was poetry in motion - ice and explosion working in perfect harmony. Where Neru's frozen architecture provided structure, Shen's explosive force provided chaos. Together, they turned the entire chasm into their weapon.

But Vazroth's remnant was not without its own artistry. The creature's form began to fragment, splitting into dozens of smaller entities that maintained their connection through streams of that organic cabling. Now instead of fighting one massive opponent, they faced a coordinated swarm that attacked from every conceivable angle.

NER: Multiplication. How original.

SHN: At least there's more targets to blow up now.

Neru's response was immediate and breathtaking. Ice erupted from every surface in the chasm, creating a three-dimensional maze of crystalline walls and passages. But this wasn't random - each barrier was precisely placed to funnel the creature's fragments into kill zones where Shen waited with explosive traps.

The first fragment rounded a corner of frozen crystal and walked directly into a concentrated detonation that vaporized it instantly. The second learned from its sibling's mistake, only to find that Neru had anticipated its evasion route. Ice spikes erupted from the walls, impaling the creature mid-dodge.

ABS: Impossible! I have studied combat for centuries! I know every technique, every strategy!

SHN: Yeah, but have you studied THIS technique?

Shen disappeared in a burst of explosive light, using his detonations not just for propulsion but for concealment. When he reappeared, he was somehow behind six different fragments simultaneously - an impossible feat that suggested he was moving faster than linear time allowed.

His strikes were surgical. Each explosion was perfectly calibrated to destroy his target while propelling him toward the next one. He moved through the swarm like a comet with intent, leaving destruction in his wake.

NER: Show off.

SHN: Says the man who just turned physics into modern art!

Neru's ice constructs had evolved beyond simple barriers. They now formed complex geometric patterns that seemed to exist in more than three dimensions. Fragments that tried to navigate the maze found themselves trapped in crystalline loops that folded back on themselves, creating impossible spaces where they could be attacked from angles that shouldn't exist.

But Vazroth's remnant had one more surprise. The destroyed fragments weren't dying - they were feeding their essence back into the main body. Each defeat made the core entity stronger, more focused. The creature's form began to solidify, becoming less organic horror and more geometric perfection.

ABS: You cannot destroy what defines destruction itself! I am despair! I am the end of all things! I am-

SHN: Still talking way too much for a cosmic horror.

NER: Seriously. We get it. You're big and scary and ancient.

The creature's new form was almost beautiful in its terrible symmetry. It had condensed itself into something that resembled a massive crystalline flower, if flowers were made of living shadow and existential dread. Each "petal" was a blade of pure negation, capable of cutting through reality itself.

It attacked with the grace of a deadly blossom opening to the sun. The negation blades swept through the space where the peacekeepers had been standing, erasing not just matter but the very concept of matter from those locations.

But Neru and Shen were no longer where they appeared to be. Neru had created a complex system of mirrors made from perfectly clear

ice, refracting their images throughout the chasm while concealing their true positions. Shen had used controlled explosions to create localized distortions in the air, bending light around them like a mirage.

When they struck, it was from directions that the creature couldn't have anticipated. Neru's attack came from above - ice forming directly inside the creature's crystalline structure, expanding with enough force to crack its perfect geometry. Shen's assault came from below, his explosive force concentrated into a lance of pure destruction that pierced through the creature's center.

ABS: This... this cannot be... I am legend... I am myth... I am...

SHN: History.

NER: Ancient history that nobody remembers.

The creature's form began to crack, light bleeding through the fissures like liquid starfire. But even as it prepared for its final collapse, both peacekeepers were already eyeing each other with competitive anticipation.

SHN: My explosion definitely cracked it first.

NER: My ice is what's actually holding the damage pattern. Without structural support, your little firecracker would have just bounced off.

SHN: "Little firecracker"? I'll show you a little firecracker!

NER: Please do. I need a good laugh before I finish this thing off.

ABS: Are you... are you seriously still competing over who gets to kill me?

SHN: It's about professional pride.

NER: Winner gets bragging rights for the next century.

The ancient horror that had once threatened entire worlds could only watch in cosmic confusion as its killers bickered over the privilege of delivering the final blow.

End of Chapter 68 **"History Lessons"**

[Show them that you're a remnant of me - arise.]

(Chapter 69 || Volume 3) Remnant Of Despair.

The cracks in the creature's crystalline form suddenly stopped

spreading. For a heartbeat, the chasm fell into an eerie silence broken only by the sound of settling debris and the peacekeepers' controlled breathing. Then something changed - something fundamental and terrible.

The light bleeding through the fissures shifted from starfire white to the deep, aching purple of old bruises. The creature's form began to pulse with a rhythm that felt disturbingly organic, like a massive heart learning to beat again after centuries of stillness.

ABS: Wait... I feel... I remember...

The voice was different now - less cosmic horror, more raw anguish. The creature's multiple eyes began to weep tears of liquid shadow that pooled in the air like floating ink stains.

ABS: The pain... oh gods, the pain he left behind... when Vazroth tore himself free, he left... he left all of this inside me...

Shen and Neru exchanged glances, their competitive banter dying as they recognized something they had both lived with intimately - the specific quality of soul-deep suffering that comes from loss too profound for simple grief.

NER: That's not good.

SHN: When is it ever?

The creature's form began to expand again, but this time the growth wasn't mechanical or strategic - it was convulsive, like something trying to contain an ocean of agony within boundaries never meant to hold such weight. The organic cables writhed not with predatory intent, but with the desperate thrashing of something drowning in its own accumulated sorrow.

And then the power surge hit.

Every drop of despair, every moment of anguish, every tear shed and scream swallowed over the centuries of abandonment suddenly crystallized into pure, devastating energy. The creature's attacks, which had been powerful but predictable, became something else entirely - strikes fueled not by malice but by the desperate fury of the forever forsaken.

A tentacle lashed out toward Shen with impossible speed. He tried his usual explosive evasion, but the appendage curved through

dimensions he couldn't perceive, striking him across the chest with enough force to send him crashing through three of Neru's ice barriers before coming to a bone-jarring stop against the chasm wall.

SHN: Okay... that one actually hurt.

Neru's counterattack was immediate - a forest of ice spears erupting from every surface to pin the creature in place. But the spears passed through empty air as the creature's form became incorporeal, sustained now by pure emotional energy rather than physical matter.

The reformed abomination struck back with tendrils of crystallized despair that cut through Neru's defenses like they were made of paper. Ice that had withstood the force of gods shattered at the touch of sorrow made manifest.

NER: It's not fighting us anymore. It's fighting the pain.

SHN: And we just happen to be in the way.

The creature's attacks became a storm of desperate flailing, each strike carrying the weight of centuries of abandonment. Where its appendages touched the chasm walls, the stone began to weep - literally shedding tears of mineral sadness that pooled on the fractured floor.

Shen launched himself back into the fray, his explosions now serving double duty as weapons and shields. But even his enhanced reflexes weren't fast enough to avoid every strike. A tendril of pure anguish caught him across the shoulder, and suddenly he was experiencing echoes of the creature's pain - flashes of what it felt like to be discarded, left behind, forgotten by the very thing that had given his existence meaning.

SHN: Neru! It's not just physical anymore!

NER: I noticed!

Neru's ice constructs had evolved again, but this time defensively. Complex barriers formed around both peacekeepers, designed not just to stop physical attacks but to insulate them from the creature's overwhelming emotional resonance. But the barriers were imperfect - wisps of despair leaked through, carrying with them the taste of abandonment and the weight of endless solitude. The creature spoke again, but its voice was breaking apart,

becoming a chorus of every sob it had ever swallowed.

ABS: He promised... promised I would be whole... but he took the best parts and left me with... with only this... this emptiness that eats and eats and never fills...

Its form contracted and expanded in rhythm with its words, each pulse sending out waves of force that shook the mountain to its foundations. Chunks of ceiling rained down like stone tears, and the very air began to taste of salt and sorrow.

Neru and Shen tried to coordinate their attacks, but the creature's movements had become too erratic, too driven by emotional chaos rather than strategic thinking. It would lash out in apparent rage, then suddenly curl in on itself as if trying to contain some internal wound. Fighting it was like trying to battle a natural disaster that could feel pain.

A massive pseudopod swept through the space where they had been standing, moving with the wild unpredictability of grief given form. Shen barely managed to detonate himself out of the way, his explosive propulsion leaving him dizzy and disoriented. The landing was rougher than usual - his body was starting to show the strain of sustained high-intensity combat.

Meanwhile, Neru found his ice constructs becoming increasingly unstable. The creature's aura of despair was affecting the fundamental structure of his frozen architecture, introducing flaws and weaknesses that shouldn't exist. A barrier he created to deflect an incoming strike shattered unexpectedly, forcing him to dive aside at the last second. The motion tore something in his shoulder, sending spikes of very non-supernatural pain through his enhanced nervous system.

ABS: You cannot understand... cannot comprehend... the weight of being unwanted... unloved... cast aside like broken glass...

The creature's attacks were becoming more focused now, as if its own pain was teaching it how to inflict equivalent suffering on others. Tendrils of crystallized anguish sought out every wound, every moment of hesitation, every sign of weakness.

Shen took a direct hit to his ribs, the impact driving the air from his lungs and sending fractures of empathic agony through his chest. For a moment, he experienced what it felt like to be the creature -

the endless ache of knowing you were nothing more than discarded refuse from someone else's ascension.

SHN: This is... getting difficult.

He was breathing hard now, his explosive reserves running lower than they had in months of peacekeeping. Each detonation was taking more effort to generate and control, and his enhanced healing couldn't keep up with the accumulating damage.

Neru wasn't faring much better. His ice constructs were becoming simpler, more basic, as the complex geometric patterns required more concentration than he could spare while dodging attacks that came from impossible angles. A tendril caught him across the back, and suddenly he was feeling echoes of every time he had been left alone, every moment when the cold had been his only companion because everything warm had been taken away.

The creature seemed to sense their growing exhaustion. Its attacks became more coordinated, more purposeful. It was learning to weaponize not just its own despair, but theirs as well - drawing on every loss they had ever suffered and reflecting it back at them amplified.

NER: Shen... we might actually be in trouble here.

SHN: Just... just now figuring that out?

Both peacekeepers were struggling now, their movements less fluid, their coordination suffering as accumulated damage and emotional exhaustion took their toll. The creature that had seemed manageable just minutes before had become something approaching their equals through the simple expedient of finally accessing the full depth of its own suffering.

They stood back to back in the center of the chasm, breathing heavily, watching as tendrils of weaponized sorrow circled them like hungry sharks. For the first time in longer than either man could remember, victory felt genuinely uncertain.

The abomination towered above them, its form writhing with centuries of accumulated pain, its voice a symphony of every goodbye that had ever torn someone's heart in half.

ABS: Now... now you begin to understand... the weight of loss... the hunger that never ends... the cold that never lifts...

Shen wiped blood from his mouth, his usual grin replaced by something grimmer and more determined.

SHN: Understanding... doesn't mean... we're giving up.

Neru's breath came in visible puffs, frost forming on his lips as his power fluctuated with his exhaustion.

NER: Some weights... are meant to be shared.

They were hurt, they were tired, and they were facing something that had just learned how to use the sum total of cosmic abandonment as a weapon. But they were still standing, still fighting, and still absolutely refusing to lie down and die.

ABS: Then come... let me show you what it means... to carry eternity's worth of tears...

The creature's laughter was the sound of breaking glass mixed with falling rain.

End of Chapter 69 ***"Remnant of Despair"***

[Freezing back into what I used to be.]

(Chapter 70 || Volume 3) The Earth Trembled.

The creature's tendrils of crystallized despair pressed closer, each one carrying the weight of abandonment made manifest. Shen and Neru moved in increasingly desperate patterns, their coordination beginning to fray at the edges as exhaustion carved away at their legendary synchronization.

A massive tentacle swept toward them, and this time Shen's explosive dodge wasn't quite fast enough. The appendage caught him across the chest, sending him spinning through the air to crash against the chasm wall with enough force to crack stone. He slumped to his knees, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth.

SHN: Neru... I don't think... conventional tactics are going to cut it.

NER: What are you thinking?

But Shen's expression had already changed, taking on the focused

intensity that Neru recognized with growing alarm. It was the same look his partner got when he was calculating explosive yields that bordered on the mathematically impossible.

SHN: Remember what happened during the revolution? When I almost-

NER: No. Absolutely not.

SHN: You froze me before I could complete it then.

NER: It is too much. That technique could kill you.

SHN: And this thing is going to kill both of us if we don't try something desperate.

The creature's voice echoed through the chasm, a symphony of every heart that had ever been broken by abandonment.

ABS: Yes... argue among yourselves... let despair take root... it makes the final harvest so much sweeter...

More tendrils lashed out, forcing both peacekeepers to scatter. But their movements were sluggish now, their reserves running dangerously low. A strike that should have been easily avoided caught Neru across the shoulder, spinning him around and sending ice crystals scattering like frozen blood.

Shen's palms began to smoke, but not with his usual controlled detonations. This was something deeper, more fundamental. Heat that came from the very core of his soul, power drawn from reserves he had promised himself he would never touch again.

SHN: I'm sorry, partner.

NER: Shen, don't-

But Shen was already moving, his body erupting with explosive force unlike anything he had ever unleashed before. Not the controlled, surgical detonations that had made him legendary, but raw, primal destruction that came from places in his soul he had sealed away after the first time he had lost everything he cared about.

The temperature around him began to rise exponentially. The air itself started to ionize, crackling with energy as Shen's power broke through every safety limit he had ever imposed on himself. This wasn't technique - this was controlled annihilation .

NER: SHEN!

Neru launched himself forward, ice erupting from his hands as he tried to contain the growing explosion the same way he had during the war. But this time was different. This time, Shen had made his choice before beginning the technique, and his power had grown far beyond what it had been before.

The ice barriers shattered the moment they formed. Neru's attempts at containment were like trying to hold back the sun with paper walls. Shen's power had transcended the merely physical and entered the realm of soul-deep destruction.

SHN: This is for everyone we couldn't save...

His voice was changing, becoming something that resonated with harmonics of pure explosive force. The very air around him was beginning to glow white-hot as atoms began to dance at the edge of fusion.

The creature seemed to sense the shift in power dynamics. Its attacks became more frantic, more desperate, as if it suddenly understood that it was no longer the most dangerous thing in the chasm.

Shen rose into the air, not through explosive propulsion but through pure force of will made manifest. Energy poured from every inch of his body, creating aurora-like patterns in the darkness that were almost too beautiful to look at directly.

SHN: This is what happens when someone who's lost everything decides to lose everything again...

The words came out wrong - not spoken but detonated, each syllable carrying enough force to crack stone. Neru found himself being pushed back by the sheer pressure of his partner's ascending power, his ice constructs melting before they could properly form.

NER: Shen, please! We can find another way!

SHN: There is no other way! Not this time!

The explosive user's form was becoming harder to look at directly, wreathed in energies that existed somewhere between matter and pure concept. This was what Shen had always been capable of - what he had been holding back every day since the incident that had first taught him the true meaning of loss.

He spread his arms wide, and suddenly every explosion he had ever held back, every detonation he had contained for the sake of precision and control, began to build in the space between his palms. Not hundreds of small explosions, but one perfect, unified blast that contained the compressed fury of a star learning to die.

SHN: *SOUL REQUIEM, BLAST THAT SHATTERS THE SKY!*

The words weren't shouted - they were erupted, torn from his throat with enough force to make reality itself flinch. And then the technique activated.

The explosion that followed wasn't just loud - it was the sound of creation running in reverse, of matter remembering what it had been like before the universe learned to organize itself. The blast consumed everything: the creature's tendrils, the chasm walls, the mountain itself.

Light poured through the darkness with the intensity of a newborn sun. The creature's scream was lost in the roar of fundamental forces being unleashed in ways they were never meant to be used. Stone vaporized. Air turned to plasma. Reality itself seemed to bend under the strain of containing so much concentrated destruction.

The explosion punched through Mount Eboott like the mountain was made of paper, carving a perfect cylindrical void from the chasm depths all the way to the surface and beyond. Sunlight poured down through the newly created hole, turning the devastated cavern into something that resembled a cathedral made of destruction and light.

When the echoes finally faded and the dust began to settle, Neru found himself on his knees at the edge of a crater that glowed with residual heat. His ears were ringing, his vision blurred, and every inch of his body ached from exposure to forces that existed at the very edge of survivable.

But they had survived. Somehow, impossibly, they were both still breathing.

Neru looked up through the perfect circular hole that now connected the mountain's heart to the sky above, watching clouds drift across a blue sky that seemed almost offensively peaceful after what they had just endured. And then he saw it.

In the center of the crater, where the creature should have been completely annihilated, something was moving. Not the abomination itself - that had been vaporized along with everything else in the blast radius. But something deeper, more fundamental. The despair that had powered the creature's final surge was reforming, crystallizing into a new shape that hurt to perceive directly.

The thing that pulled itself from the molten stone was smaller than the original abomination, but infinitely more concentrated. Pure distilled abandonment given form, wearing the shape of every goodbye that had ever broken someone's heart.

It looked at them with eyes that held the accumulated sorrow of eternity, and when it spoke, its voice was the sound of tears hitting empty ground.

ABS: Did you really think... that an explosion could kill despair itself?

Neru felt something break inside his chest - not physically, but something deeper and more important. They had thrown everything they had at this thing. Shen had literally shattered every limit he possessed, unleashed destruction on a scale that defied comprehension, and it still wasn't enough.

For the first time in longer than he could remember, tears began to form in Neru's eyes. Not from pain or exhaustion, but from the simple, crushing realization that sometimes, even being the strongest wasn't strong enough.

But even as the tears fell, they crystallized in the air around him, turning to perfect ice diamonds before they could hit the ground. Even his grief was too cold for the world to accept in its natural form. He knelt there in the ruins of their victory, watching his frozen tears scatter across the crater floor like fallen stars, and wondered if there were some battles that simply couldn't be won. Beside him, Shen lay motionless, his body steaming from the residual heat of his ultimate technique. Alive, but barely, and completely spent. The creature of pure despair took a step toward them, and the very air seemed to weep in its presence.

End of Chapter 70
"The Earth Trembled"

[Forgive me for this, mother.]

(Chapter 71 || Volume 3) And The Sky Shivered.

Everything hurt. Not just physically - though his body felt like it had been turned inside out and reassembled by someone who'd lost the instruction manual - but deeper than that. Soul-deep exhaustion that made even thinking feel like trying to lift mountains with his eyelids.

*I can't move.
The realization came with detached clarity.
My ultimate technique... it took everything.
More than everything.*

He could hear voices through the ringing in his ears. The creature's taunts, spoken in harmonies that tasted of salt and abandonment. And underneath that, something that made his chest tighten with fear that had nothing to do with their current predicament.

Neru was crying.

In all the years they'd fought together, through every loss and every victory, Shen had never seen his partner shed a single tear. Neru was ice given human form - beautiful, deadly, and eternally untouchable by the warmth of ordinary emotion. But now those perfect crystals were falling like frozen stars, each one catching the sunlight that streamed through the hole his explosion had carved in the mountain.

*This is my fault.
The thought cut deeper than any physical wound.
I wasn't strong enough.
Even after breaking every limit, shattering every restraint I've ever placed on myself, it still wasn't enough.*

The creature was speaking again, its voice the sound of every heart that had ever been left empty. Shen tried to focus on the words, but consciousness kept slipping away from him like smoke through his fingers. He could feel his soul flickering like a candle in a hurricane, the technique having burned through reserves he hadn't even known he possessed. Then he heard something that made his blood freeze in ways that had nothing to do with Neru's power.

A whisper. So quiet he almost missed it over the creature's monologue and the sound of settling debris. Three words that carried the weight of a lifetime of carefully contained grief.

I'm sorry, Mother.

Shen tried to move, tried to speak, tried to do anything to stop what he could feel building in the air around them. But his body wouldn't respond. He was trapped in his own flesh, forced to watch as his partner prepared to make the same sacrifice he had just attempted.

The temperature began to plummet.

Not the controlled cold that Neru used in combat, but something primal and absolute. The kind of cold that existed at the heart of dead stars, in the spaces between galaxies where even light gave up and went home. Frost began forming on every surface - the crater walls, the debris, the very air itself seemed to crystallize.

Neru's eyes were changing. The brilliant blue that Shen had learned to read like a favorite book was fading, becoming something pale and distant as winter moonlight. It was beautiful and terrible and wrong, so fundamentally wrong that looking at it felt like watching the world prepare to end.

Don't do this, partner.

The words couldn't make it past his ruined throat, but he screamed them anyway in the silence of his own mind.

You don't have to carry this alone.

We're supposed to face impossible things together, remember?

But Neru was already beyond hearing. The ice prince had made his choice, just as Shen had made his. And now there was nothing left to do but watch as the strongest person he had ever known prepared to burn himself out like a star going supernova.

The last thing Shen saw before his consciousness finally fled was the moment when Neru's power transcended everything they had ever thought possible, transforming his partner into something that existed somewhere between human and force of nature.

Please be enough, he thought as darkness claimed him. *Please let this be enough.*

What happened next defied simple description, for it was the moment when a man became legend, when flesh and bone transformed into something that would be remembered long after kingdoms crumbled and stars burned out.

Neru rose from his knees with movements that seemed to bend reality around them. His whispered apology to his long-dead mother had been both farewell and activation key, the final lock on power he had kept sealed since the day he had first learned what loss truly meant.

Soul Requiem, Frigidus Mortum Amplexus.

The words came out as crystalline perfection, each syllable forming visible fractals in the air that spread outward like frozen mandala patterns. This was not the measured cold of tactical combat - this was the concept of cold itself given form and purpose.

The creature of pure despair recoiled as temperature became not just absence of heat, but absence of motion, of time, of hope itself.

Its form, which had weathered even Shen's stellar annihilation, began to slow and crystallize as entropy itself learned to stand still.

ABS: This... this is impossible... you cannot freeze the concept of despair...

But Neru was no longer bound by the laws of the possible. He moved through space like inevitability made manifest, his every step leaving perfect ice flowers that would never melt, not even when the sun eventually died. His opponent struck with tendrils of crystallized sorrow, attacks that should have been impossible to dodge.

Neru didn't dodge them. He froze them mid-strike, then shattered them with a gesture that turned their momentum into abstract art made of ice shards and reflected light.

The battle that followed was less combat than cosmic ballet. The creature's desperate attacks met with responses that transformed destruction into beauty, chaos into perfect geometric harmony. Where despair tried to overwhelm, absolute cold created spaces of such perfect stillness that even anguish couldn't exist.

But the creature had one final gambit - a technique that drew upon every moment of despair that had ever existed across all possible

worlds. The attack came not as physical force but as existential weight, the accumulated gravity of every goodbye that had ever torn reality apart.

It should have been unstoppable. It should have crushed even transcendent power beneath the sheer mass of universal sorrow. It was powered by the will of a being watching this very moment.

Instead, Neru swept underneath the conceptual strike with movements too graceful for physics, concentrating every fragment of his infinite cold into the palm of his outstretched hand. The technique he unleashed from below was not just ice - it was the crystallization of perfection itself, the moment when chaos learned to be beautiful.

The sculpture that erupted skyward defied every law of engineering and aesthetics simultaneously. A spire of ice so perfect it hurt to perceive, so beautiful that looking at it directly felt like witnessing the birth of new forms of mathematics. It pierced through the creature's core and continued upward, breaking through the mountain's peak to stand against the sky like a beacon visible from distant kingdoms.

The creature of pure despair found itself impaled not on mere ice, but on the crystallized concept of hope made manifest. For the first time in eons, it experienced something other than despair - it experienced the overwhelming presence of someone who refused to let go, who chose to fight rather than surrender to the weight of loss.

ABS: This... how... I am eternity's abandonment...

NER: And I am winter's promise. Nothing stays broken forever. Everything eventually becomes beautiful under enough pressure and time.

The creature began to dissolve, not destroyed but transformed. Its essence scattered into light that reflected off the ice spire in patterns that spoke of healing rather than ending, of transformation rather than loss.

As the light faded and the echoes of transcendent power settled into memory, Neru knelt beside his unconscious partner. His eyes had returned to their normal brilliant blue, though they now held depths that spoke of prices paid and limits transcended.

In the distance, across the veil of divinity, I watched and nodded with approval. I lifted my brush, dipping it in paints made from starlight and the tears of heroes, and began to work.

I painted him as he knelt there in the cathedral of light his sacrifice had created - not as the Ice Prince of Absolute Zero, but as something greater. **The Knight of Frost**, guardian of the spaces between ending and beginning, protector of the fragile beauty that exists in the moment when winter prepares to become spring.

The portrait would hang in galleries that existed outside time, where legends came to remember what they had once been. And across its bottom, in script that glowed with cold fire, I wrote the words that would define him for eternity:

"Here stands the one who learned that the deepest cold is not the absence of warmth, but the promise that warmth will return."

The Knight of Frost had been born in the moment when absolute power met absolute love, and the universe itself had bowed before the beauty of that combination.

End of Chapter 71 **"And The Sky Shivered"**

[Ah... I didn't expect to forget mother's face so quick... I wish I could apologize.]

(Chapter 72 || Volume 3) The Last Warmth.

The kitchen smelled of cinnamon and fresh bread, scents that wrapped around six-year-old Neru like the warmest blanket in the world. Steam rose from pots on the stove, creating dancing patterns in the golden afternoon light that streamed through the window above the sink. His mother hummed quietly as she worked, a melody he had never heard her sing anywhere else but here, in these moments when it was just the two of them preparing dinner.

ELN: Neru, sweetheart, could you reach the honey jar for me?

Elena's voice carried the gentle authority that only mothers possessed - not commanding, but confident that love alone would secure compliance.

He scrambled up onto the wooden chair they kept by the counter specifically for such occasions, his small hands stretching toward the high shelf where the amber jar caught the light like captured sunlight. At six, he was all knees and elbows, growing too fast for his coordination to keep up, but his mother never made him feel clumsy or small.

NER: Got it!

The jar was heavier than he expected, and for a heart-stopping moment, it nearly slipped from his fingers. But Elena was already there, her hands covering his to steady the precious cargo.

ELN: Careful now. This is the last of the summer honey.

She guided his hands as they poured the golden sweetness into the mixing bowl, where it swirled among flour and eggs like liquid amber. Neru watched, fascinated by the way the ingredients transformed under his mother's patient stirring, becoming something greater than their individual parts.

NER: Mama, why do you always let me help? I'm not very good at cooking yet.

Elena paused in her stirring, setting down the wooden spoon to look at her son with eyes the same brilliant blue as his own. She reached out to brush a streak of flour from his cheek, her touch gentle as snowfall.

ELN: Because the best meals aren't made with perfect technique, little ice prince. They're made with love and shared hands. Someday, when you're older, you'll understand that the most important ingredient in any recipe is having someone you care about beside you while you cook.

NER: Ice prince?

His mother's laugh was like silver bells in a summer breeze.

ELN: That's what your father used to call you. Said you came into the world on the coldest night of the year, but instead of complaining about the weather, you looked around like you owned every snowflake. He said you had the bearing of winter royalty, even as a baby.

Neru considered this solemnly, the way children do when adults

share glimpses of the mysterious time before their memories began.

NER: I wish I could remember Papa.

ELN: Oh, but you do, sweetheart. Every time you get that determined look when you're trying to figure something out, that's him. Every time you refuse to give up on something that matters to you, that's his stubborn streak showing through. And every time you try to take care of me when you think I'm sad, that's his kind heart.

She returned to her stirring, but Neru could see the way her eyes had become distant, touching memories that belonged to a time when their family had been complete.

NER: Mama?

ELN: Yes, little one?

NER: Are you sad that it's just us now?

Elena set down the spoon again, this time kneeling so she could look directly into her son's eyes. Her hands framed his face, thumbs brushing across cheekbones that were already beginning to show hints of the sharp beauty he would grow into.

ELN: Oh, my darling boy. I could never be sad when I have you. You are the best part of both of us, all wrapped up in one perfect package. Your father and I... we made something wonderful together, and that something is you. How could I be anything but grateful?

NER: Even when I break things? Like when I dropped the blue vase last week?

ELN: Especially then. Do you know why?

He shook his head, wide-eyed with the serious attention that only children could bring to such conversations.

ELN: Because that's when you show me how much you care. The way you cried because you thought you'd broken something I loved, the way you tried to put the pieces back together with your little hands... that told me everything I needed to know about the man you're going to become someday.

She stood, ruffling his hair as she returned to the stove to check the simmering pots.

ELN: Besides, that vase was ugly anyway. I only kept it because your great-aunt Miriam gave it to us, and she has terrible taste in home decoration.

NER: Mama! You're not supposed to say mean things about family!

ELN: You're right, that was unkind of me. Aunt Miriam has... distinctive taste in home decoration.

They both giggled at her correction, the sound mixing with the bubble and steam of their dinner preparations. Neru climbed down from his chair to peer into the pot she was tending, watching vegetables dance in the fragrant broth.

NER: It smells like happiness.

ELN: Does it now? And what exactly does happiness smell like to you?

He scrunched up his face in concentration, trying to find words for sensations that existed beyond language.

NER: Like... like warm hugs that you can breathe. And like the way the air smells right before it snows, but warmer. And like your perfume, but mixed with food that makes you feel safe.

Elena's hand stilled on the ladle, and when Neru looked up at her, her eyes were bright with unshed tears.

ELN: That might be the most beautiful thing anyone has ever said about my cooking.

NER: Are you crying? Did I say something wrong?

ELN: No, sweetheart. These are happy tears. Sometimes grown-ups cry when something is so perfect it makes their hearts too full to hold all the joy inside.

She lifted the ladle, blowing gently on the steaming broth before offering him a taste.

ELN: Here, tell me if it needs more salt.

The flavor bloomed across his tongue - rich and savory, with hints of herbs from their garden and that indefinable something that made his mother's cooking different from anyone else's. He nodded approvingly, trying to look serious and professional in his assessment.

NER: Perfect. Just like always.

ELN: Flatterer. Just like your father.

They worked together in comfortable companionship as the light outside began to fade, turning the kitchen into a golden bubble of warmth and safety. Elena taught him how to set the table properly, showing him the difference between everyday plates and the special ones they saved for important occasions.

NER: Is tonight important?

ELN: Every night we spend together is important, little ice prince. But tonight... tonight I just felt like using the good dishes. Sometimes you have to create your own reasons to celebrate.

As they sat down to eat, the candles Elena had lit casting dancing shadows on the walls, Neru felt a deep contentment settle into his bones. This was happiness, he decided. Not the excitement of toys or games, but this quiet warmth of being exactly where you belonged with exactly the right person.

ELN: Neru?

NER: Mmm?

ELN: I want you to remember something, okay? No matter what happens as you grow up, no matter how difficult things might become, you'll always be my little ice prince. And you'll always, always be loved.

NER: I'll remember, Mama. I promise.

She smiled and reached across the table to squeeze his hand.

ELN: That's my brave boy.

But even as the words left his mouth, something strange began to happen. The edges of the memory started to crystallize, frost forming along the borders of recollection like winter claiming a window. The warm kitchen began to grow cold, the golden light fading to blue.

The honey jar, the mixing bowl, the candles on the table - all of it slowly encasing itself in ice as the price of transcendent power made itself known. Memories were warmth, and warmth was what **requiem** consumed to fuel its impossible cold.

His mother's face began to blur, her voice becoming distant as frost claimed even the sound of her laughter. The smell of cinnamon and fresh bread gave way to the sharp, clean scent of winter air.

NER: Mama...

But she was already fading, the beautiful memory crystallizing into something perfect and untouchable and forever beyond reach. The kitchen, the warmth, the last moment of pure happiness from before his world learned to be cold - all of it preserved in ice that would never melt, but could never again be truly experienced. The technique demanded sacrifice, and the memories of warmth were the price he paid for the power to protect what remained.

NER: Will you forgive me if I begin to forget..?

As the last traces of his mother's voice froze into silence, six-year-old Neru's promise echoed in the crystalline emptiness. But remembering and feeling were no longer the same thing, and soon... there would be nothing left for him to remember.

End of Chapter 72 **"The Last Warmth"**

[Choosing your new friend over everything else... Mama's proud of you, little ice prince.]

(Chapter 73 || Volume 3) World Tour.

The world was a blur of color and motion beneath her paws, continents passing like pages in a book she had memorized by heart. Matta's morning run had taken her across three time zones already - dawn, midnight, sunset somewhere over the ocean. Her claws barely touched the ground, each bound a controlled lightning strike that propelled her forward at speeds that turned physics into poetry.

Nine months since **the fear** fell. Nine months since the screaming stopped and the world learned to breathe again. She had thought peace would mean rest, but peace, it turned out, was just another kind of motion - the gentle drift of healing rather than the violent acceleration of war.

The ocean stretched beneath her like a mirror, its surface barely registering her passage. She ran across water as easily as land, her speed turning the liquid into solid ground beneath her stride. Her ears, long and silver-streaked like her fur, caught the songs of whales even at her velocity, their calls doppler-shifting as she

passed overhead like a silver comet.

These runs had become ritual. Every morning, before the world fully woke, she circled the globe twice. Not because she had to - there were no more wars to fight, no more gods to outrun - but because stillness felt like death. Speed was life. Speed was freedom. Speed was the only thing that made sense in a world trying to remember how to be normal.

The ruins of old battlefields blurred past - scars on the earth that time would eventually heal. She had helped create some of those scars, her lightning-wrapped paws carving trenches through landscapes that had once seemed eternal. Now children played in those trenches, turning wounds into playgrounds. Time moved differently for the young. For them, yesterday's nightmares became tomorrow's games.

She thought about Neru and Shen sometimes, her fellow legends who had chosen the weight of active peacekeeping. They stood still and let the world come to them with its problems. She couldn't understand it. Standing still felt like drowning in slow motion, like watching the universe age around you while you remained frozen in place.

The smell of corn tortillas and lime reached her even at supersonic speeds, her twitching nose picking up the familiar scent from miles away. Elena's Taco Stand, perched on a street corner like a beacon calling ships to harbor. She decelerated gradually, bleeding speed through controlled friction until she was merely moving fast enough to appear as a silver blur to normal eyes.

By the time she reached the stand, she was walking at human pace, though the air around her still shimmered with residual energy. Her ears folded back slightly against the noise of the morning crowd - construction workers grabbing breakfast before their shifts, students nursing hangovers with greasy comfort food. Elena called from behind the grill, not looking up from the sizzling meat.

ELE: Buenos días, Matta. The usual?

MTA: Three carnitas, extra lime.

Matta settled onto a stool that had been specially made to handle her barely contained kinetic energy. Her combat suit had shifted to civilian mode - the glowing circuits dimmed to almost invisible lines,

though they still pulsed faintly with her rapid heartbeat. Her white fur, marked with those distinctive silver streaks, caught the morning light like captured starshine.

The taco stand was one of the few places where she allowed herself to truly slow down. Here, surrounded by the ordinary miracle of people living their lives, she could almost pretend she was normal. Almost. A voice beside her spoke.

???: I've always wondered what the world looks like at that speed.

Matta turned, her reaction time so fast that the motion appeared instantaneous. A woman sat on the adjacent stool - middle-aged, unremarkable, wearing a simple gray dress that seemed to absorb light rather than reflect it. Her face was pleasant but forgettable, the kind of features that would disappear in a crowd.

But Matta knew crowds. Her sensitive ears could track heartbeats within a three-block radius, her nose could map scent trails with mathematical precision. This woman hadn't been there when she sat down. Hadn't been there when she walked up. Had simply... appeared.

MTA: I'm sorry?

???: The world. When you run across it like it's standing still. Does it look different? Beautiful in a way the rest of us can't see?

MTA: Everything looks different when you're moving fast enough. Colors shift. Light bends. You see patterns that don't exist at normal speeds.

???: Like seeing time itself.

MTA: Something like that.

Elena placed the tacos in front of her, the steam rising in perfect spirals that Matta could see individual molecules dancing within. The woman beside her ordered nothing, simply sat and watched with eyes that seemed older than her face suggested.

???: What's your name?

MTA: People call me Matta.

???: But that's not all it is, right?

Matta's paw tightened on her taco, claws extending slightly - pressure that could have crushed steel contained in a gentle grip.

MTA: What's yours?

???: I have many names. Most people wouldn't recognize any of them.

The woman smiled, and for just a moment, Matta caught a glimpse of something vast behind her eyes - not malevolent, but ancient beyond measure, a force that sought balance.

???: Tell me, do you ever get tired?

MTA: Of running?

???: Of being the only one fast enough to catch tomorrow before it arrives.

The question hit closer to home than Matta liked to admit. She thought of her morning runs, circling the globe while the world slept. She thought of standing still in crowds, watching people move like they were swimming through honey. Her ears drooped slightly at the weight of the thought.

MTA: Everyone gets tired.

???: But not everyone can outrun their exhaustion. What would you do if you found something that could keep up? Something that moved as fast as you do?

MTA: Nothing moves as fast as I do.

???: Nothing you've found yet.

Matta took a bite of her taco, using the time to study her companion more carefully. The woman's stillness was unnerving - she sat without the constant micro-movements that defined human existence, as motionless as carved stone.

MTA: You're not human.

???: Is that a question towards me or yourself?

MTA: I'm a monster, that's all.

???: Are you just that..?

Elena was serving other customers, the morning rush in full swing around them. But the conversation felt isolated, as if they existed in a bubble separate from the normal world.

MTA: What do you want?

???: To offer you a choice.

The woman reached into her purse - when had she gotten a purse? - and pulled out what looked like a small card. It pulsed with the same rhythm as Matta's suit circuits, but the feeling was different -

something deeper.

???: There are things in this universe that move faster than light, faster than thought, faster than time itself. And sometimes, those things need to be caught.

MTA: By who?

???: By someone fast enough to catch them.

The card sat on the counter between them, its aura slowly synchronizing with Matta's rapid heartbeat. She could feel it calling to something deep in her chest, promising speeds beyond imagination, showing her glimpses of races across dimensions where seconds stretched into eternities.

MTA: Neru and Shen handle threats like that.

???: Some threats can't be obliterated. They can only be outrun. Or guided. Or convinced to slow down long enough for the universe to survive their passage.

The woman stood with fluid grace, placing exact change on the counter.

???: Think about it. When you get tired of running in circles, pick it up. It will know where to take you.

Matta blinked, and the woman was gone. Not fast enough to blur, not quick enough to leave an afterimage - simply absent, as if she had never existed at all. The card remained on the counter, its aura now perfectly matched to the rhythm of Matta's enhanced physiology.

She reached for it with trembling paws, then stopped. Her ears flattened against her head as the weight of choice settled around her. Once she picked it up, she knew there would be no going back. No more peaceful morning runs across a healing world. No more tacos at Elena's stand.

ELE: Más limón?

Elena appeared at her elbow with lime wedges.

MTA: No, gracias. I think I'm done here.

She stood to leave, coins scattered on the counter next to the mysterious object. Her paws carried her toward the street, toward

the open road where she could run until the world made sense again. But she stopped at the edge of the sidewalk, one paw resting against a streetlight that began to frost slightly under her touch. The woman's voice seemed to whisper in the wind, though she was nowhere to be seen.

The question isn't whether you're fast enough for the job, Matta. The question is whether you're ready to race the fundamental forces of existence itself. Some responsibilities don't wait for you to be ready. They just wait for you to be fast enough to catch them.

Matta's ears twitched, feeling the weight of choice settling around her like a mantle of lightning and possibility. The world was healing. But somewhere beyond the world, between the spaces where light could travel, something was running that shouldn't be. Something that needed to be caught. The question was: *Was she brave enough to find out what it was?*

End of Chapter 73 **"World Tour"**

[The fastest don't chase - they arrive before the race begins.]

(Chapter 74 || Volume 3) Bothersome.

Three weeks. Three weeks of running across every continent, through every city, asking the same question to anyone who would listen. The card had burned in her pocket like a live coal, its weight somehow heavier than physics should have allowed.

L'Equilibra.

The name meant nothing to street vendors, to professors, to mystics who claimed to know the true names of gods. She had asked shamans and scientists, warriors and priests, children who saw too much and elders who remembered too little. The answer was always the same: *blank stares, shaken heads, apologetic shrugs.*

Matta sat on the hilltop overlooking what had once been a massive city, her paws tucked beneath her as the sun began its descent toward the horizon. The city below sparkled with the lights of reconstruction, but her eyes were drawn upward, to where the sun itself seemed different than it had been months ago. Faint wings of

light spread from its corona - barely visible, like afterimages burned into reality itself.

MTA: You know, Icarus, I think I'm losing my mind.

Her ears drooped as she spoke to the winged star above, knowing he couldn't hear her but needing to say the words anyway. The sacrifice had been his choice.

MTA: Everyone thinks peace means the end of searching. But you can't just stop, can you? There's always something else to find, someone else to save. Another mystery that needs solving at speeds the rest of the world can't match.

The evening breeze ruffled her fur, carrying scents of blooming flowers and distant cooking fires. Normal things. Peaceful things. Things that should have brought comfort but only reminded her how separate she was from the slow, beautiful rhythm of everyday life.

MTA: This card... it's like you were, before. A puzzle wrapped in power, a choice disguised as inevitability. The woman said things move faster than time itself. What does that even mean? How do you catch something that exists outside reality?

She pulled the card from her pocket, its surface unmarked except for that single name written in script that seemed to shift slightly when she wasn't looking directly at it. The material wasn't paper or plastic - it felt organic, warm to the touch, like living tissue that had learned to hold its shape.

MTA: Maybe that's the point. Maybe some things aren't meant to be found through searching. Maybe they find you when you're ready to stop running long enough to be found.

The sun's wings spread wider as it touched the horizon, and for just a moment, Matta thought she could hear something in the wind - not Icarus's voice, but an echo of his freedom.

Footsteps approached from behind her, too steady and measured to belong to anyone moving at normal human speed. Matta's ears swiveled backward, tracking the sound, but she didn't turn around. Her nose caught an unfamiliar scent - earth and metal, with undertones of something that made her fur stand slightly on end.

SIE: You know, most people would have given up after the first week.

The voice was warm, slightly amused, carrying the weight of someone who had worked with her hands for years. Matta finally turned to see a woman in her late twenties approaching across the grass. Dark hair pulled back in a practical bun, work clothes that had seen actual use rather than fashion. But it was her hands that drew attention - thick work gloves that seemed permanently attached, as if removing them would be unthinkable. And her eyes. Green like bottle glass, beautiful in a way that seemed almost accidental.

SIE: Demolitions' Expert, Sienna.

She offered one gloved hand to help Matta to her feet, the gesture casual but somehow significant.

SIE: And you're Matta. The rabbit who can outrun light itself, from what I've heard.

MTA: You know me?

SIE: I know everyone Aki sends running in circles.

MTA: (Aki?)

Under her breath, barely audible even to Matta's enhanced hearing, she muttered something that sounded distinctly annoyed.

SIE: Honestly. Making things harder than they need to be. Cryptic messages and mysterious meetings when a simple instruction would suffice.

She turned back to Matta with a slight smile.

SIE: The card. May I see it?

MTA: You're... L'Equilibra?

SIE: L'e.. what? Pffffffffffffff!

Sienna burst out laughing, amused sort of.

SIE: That's the name Aki is using these days?! Here I thought Aquila is hard enough to pronounce, now she goes and uses a mouthful for her name!

Matta hesitated for a moment, then handed over the strange object. Sienna took it with careful fingers, then did something

unexpected - she began removing her gloves. The leather peeled away to reveal hands that seemed to shimmer slightly in the fading light, as if they weren't entirely solid or were made of something more than flesh and bone.

The moment her bare fingers touched the card, it began to dissolve. Not burning or cracking, but simply ceasing to exist, its essence flowing into her skin like water absorbed by sand. She watched the process with satisfaction, flexing her fingers as the last traces vanished.

SIE: There. Much better than carrying messages around like some medieval courier system.

MTA: What just happened?

SIE: Waste removal, no need for useless cards.

She pulled her gloves back on with practiced efficiency.

SIE: The woman you met at the taco stand - has a flair for the dramatic. Mysterious cards, cryptic conversations, leaving people to wander the world asking questions. I prefer the direct approach.

MTA: Which is?

SIE: Telling you that I can get you to your destination in seconds.

The sun had nearly disappeared now, its wings creating aurora-like patterns across the darkening sky. Matta felt something shift in her chest - not fear, but recognition. This was the moment. The choice she had been avoiding for three weeks of fruitless searching.

MTA: What kind of destination?

SIE: Right to L'equ... L'uqeli... Whatever her new name is.

Sienna's bottle-green eyes reflected the last light of day as she waited for an answer.

SIE: So. Are you ready to find out what moves faster than time?

End of Chapter 74 **"Bothersome"**

**[Some answers can only be found by those who stop
looking for them.]**

(Chapter 75 || Volume 3) Upstairs.

Matta's consciousness returned in fragments - first the sensation of something impossibly soft beneath her, then the distinct memory of Sienna's finger connecting with her forehead with enough force to knock out a charging rhinoceros. Her eyes snapped open, ears immediately flattening against her head in annoyance.

MTA: Did she seriously finger-flick me unconscious?

The indignity of it burned more than any actual pain. She'd survived horrors, only to be taken out by what amounted to a supernatural forehead flick. Her pride would need therapy.

She sat up, expecting solid ground, but found herself sinking slightly into what looked like the world's most comfortable cloud. The surface beneath her was white, fluffy, and definitely not following normal physics. It felt like lying on crystallized moonbeams, if moonbeams could be turned into the ultimate mattress.

Everything around her was variations of white and silver - rolling hills of what might have been cotton but moved with too much purpose, structures that looked like they'd been carved from pearl and starlight. The sky above was a blue so perfect it hurt to look at directly.

MTA: Oh, come on.

She turned around and nearly jumped out of her fur. Aquila stood there, no longer wearing her forgettable gray dress but robes that seemed to be cut from the same material as the clouds themselves. Her face was the same pleasant, unremarkable features, but up here they seemed to fit better, like she'd finally put on clothes that actually belonged to her.

AQL: Good, you're awake. I was worried Sienna hit you too hard.

MTA: She finger-flicked me unconscious!

AQL: Yes, well, interdimensional travel can be rough on first-timers. The flick was more of a... gentle nudge into the right state of consciousness.

MTA: Gentle?

AQL: You're still breathing, aren't you?

Aquila offered her hand, and Matta grudgingly accepted the help to

her feet. The cloud-ground held her weight perfectly, despite looking like it should send her plummeting through several layers of atmosphere.

MTA: Let me guess. Heaven?

AQL: Afterlife District One, actually. But most people call it Heaven, yes. Terrible branding, if you ask me. Makes it sound all harps and halos when it's mostly paperwork and committee meetings for us virtues. At least the ones who pass have peace.

She gestured for Matta to follow her along what might generously be called a path, though it was more like a suggestion carved into the cloud-scape.

AQL: Come on, I'll show you around. Fair warning - try not to step on anything that glows. Those are usually important.

MTA: Important how?

AQL: Foundation stones for this place.

MTA: ...You're joking.

AQL: Am I?

They walked in silence for a moment while Matta carefully avoided anything that so much as glinted. The architecture around them was beautiful but utterly impractical - bridges that arced through empty air, buildings that seemed to exist in more dimensions than should be mathematically possible, gardens where flowers bloomed in colors that didn't have names.

MTA: So this is what you do? Interior decorating for the afterlife?

AQL: I prefer maintenance specialist.

They paused at what looked like a viewing platform made of compressed starlight. Below them, Matta could see... everything. The world spinning like a soap bubble, dimensions folding and unfolding like origami made of space-time, the fundamental forces of existence flowing between realities like cosmic rivers.

MTA: Okay, that's... actually pretty impressive.

AQL: Thanks. Took us years to get it understandable by everyone. But you're not here for the sightseeing tour. You're here because something's wrong. Something fast enough that even the monitoring systems up here can't track it properly.

MTA: What kind of something?

AQL: The kind that shouldn't exist. We call them Tears - fractures in the fundamental structure that move so quickly they outpace

causality itself. By the time we detect them, they've already caused damage three dimensions over.

She pointed to what looked like a particularly sparkly section of the cosmic view.

AQL: See that dark spot there? That used to be a second moon of ours. The Tear passed through it so fast that time couldn't keep up - the whole thing just... never was.

MTA: And you need me to catch it.

AQL: We need you to try. You're the only being we've found who might be fast enough to intercept something that exists between the concept of 'before' and 'after.'

They continued walking, passing what appeared to be a group of beings playing a board game with actual galaxies as pieces. One of them waved cheerfully at Aquila.

BNG: Hey Aki! Still trying to solve the Tear problem?

AQL: Working on it!

She turned back to Matta with a slight grimace.

AQL: He has been stuck on the same chess move for three decades. Nice guy, terrible at time management.

MTA: This is all very impressive, but why the whole mystery routine? The taco stand, the card, making me run around the world asking questions?

AQL: Would you have believed me if I'd just appeared and said '*Hi, I'm from Heaven, want to help save the universe?*'

MTA: ...Point taken.

They stopped at what looked like a comfortable seating area made of crystallized clouds. Aquila settled herself gracefully while Matta remained standing, her fur still slightly ruffled from the morning's revelations.

AQL: The truth is, Matta, most problems in the universe can be solved with enough force, enough wisdom, or enough time. Your friends Neru and Shen prove that daily. But Tears... they exist in the spaces between solutions. They're so fast they outrun their own existence.

MTA: What happens if we can't stop it?

AQL: Well, the good news is you probably won't live long enough to regret failure. The bad news is neither will anyone else. In any

reality. Ever.

MTA: That's... cheerfully optimistic.

AQL: I try to maintain a positive attitude. Would you like some tea? We have excellent tea up here. The water is blessed by the concept of tasty itself.

Despite everything - the cosmic responsibility, the impossible architecture, the casual mention of universal annihilation - Matta found herself almost smiling. There was something refreshingly honest about Aquila's approach to cosmic horror, like she was discussing weekend plans rather than the potential end of everything.

MTA: Alright. I'm in. But I have one condition.

AQL: Name it.

MTA: Next time you need to recruit someone, just ask them directly. The whole mysterious routine is exhausting.

AQL: Deal. Though I should mention - Sienna suggested adding a musical number to the recruitment process. I told her that was probably overdoing it.

MTA: Definitely overdoing it.

AQL: That's what I said. So, ready to save existence as we know it?

MTA: Do I get to go home for dinner first?

AQL: That depends on how this goes. But I promise, if we succeed, I'll take you to the best taco stand in any dimension you choose.

MTA: There's other worlds with taco stands?

AQL: Earth is the only planet in the universe with life, but we try and keep the others intact incase of future mortal expeditions.

MTA: Bummer.

Matta looked out over the cosmic vista, watching worlds spin in their endless dance, and felt something she hadn't experienced in months - genuine excitement about what came next.

MTA: Alright then. Let's catch ourselves a Tear.

End of Chapter 75 **"Upstairs"**

[Even Heaven has a learning curve.]

(Chapter 76 || Volume 3) Departure.

The engineering district of Heaven looked exactly like what would

happen if a mad scientist's laboratory collided with a cosmic forge at light speed. Massive crystalline structures hummed with energies that made Matta's fur stand on end, while beings of pure mathematics worked at stations that defied both physics and common sense.

AQL: Pomni! Got a customer for you!

A figure turned from what appeared to be a workbench made of crystallized time. She was tall, built like someone who'd spent eternity lifting things that technically shouldn't be liftable, with wings that looked more functional than decorative folded against her broad shoulders.

POM: Aki. What've you brought me this time? Please tell me it's not another 'minor adjustment' that requires rebuilding the fundamental constants of reality.

AQL: Just a simple upgrade. Meet Matta. She needs her suit enhanced to handle interdimensional pursuit at speeds that would make light jealous.

Pomni's eyes - a shade of gold that seemed to contain actual starlight - focused on Matta with professional interest. She circled her slowly, muttering to herself in what sounded like a combination of ancient Aramaic and quantum mathematics.

POM: Hmm. Good bone structure, excellent muscle density, neural pathways optimized for split-second decisions. The existing suit is decent work, but it's built for terrestrial speeds.

MTA: Terrestrial?

POM: Anything under the speed of causality. Where you're going, you'll need protection from temporal displacement, dimensional friction, and the occasional existential crisis that comes with moving faster than your own thoughts.

MTA: Big words...

She gestured toward a platform surrounded by tools that looked like they'd been designed by beings who had never heard of Euclidean geometry.

POM: Step up there, and try not to move. This is delicate work.

Matta climbed onto the platform, feeling the surface adjust itself to perfectly match her proportions. The moment she settled, Pomni's hands began to glow with a light that was somehow both brilliant

and completely non-blinding.

POM: Now, your current suit channels speed through bio-electrical enhancement. Functional, but limited. What I'm adding will let you tap directly into the quantum foam that underlies reality itself.

Her fingers worked with impossible precision, the glowing circuits in her suit beginning to evolve before her eyes. New pathways of light spread across the material - not just along her arms and legs, but creating complex geometric patterns that seemed to shift and flow like living constellations.

POM: These new pathways will let you borrow speed from versions of yourself across time. Every step you take, every movement you make, will be enhanced by the accumulated velocity of infinite possibilities.

MTA: That sounds... intense.

POM: It is. Fair warning - the first few steps might feel like your consciousness is being stretched across seventeen dimensions. That's normal.

AQL: Define normal.

POM: Well, no one's died from it yet.

AQL: How many people have tried it?

POM: You're looking at her.

The upgrade process continued, Pomni adding what looked like micro-engines at key stress points, reinforcing areas that would bear the brunt of impossible accelerations, weaving protection into the very fabric of the suit that would shield Matta from forces that could tear reality apart.

POM: There. How does it feel?

Matta took a tentative step and immediately understood what he meant about consciousness stretching. For a fraction of a second, she was aware of infinite versions of herself - Mattas who had chosen different paths, different speeds, different destinies. Their combined potential flowed into her like a river of liquid lightning.

MTA: That's... actually incredible.

POM: Just remember - this suit will let you move fast enough to catch things that exist between moments. But at those speeds, the line between motion and transformation becomes very thin. Don't lose yourself in the velocity.

AQL: Wise words. Ready to go?

They left Pomni to her work and walked toward what Aquila called the Gates - though they looked less like gates and more like the edge of existence itself. Beyond them lay not empty space but the fundamental structure of reality, visible as streams of light and probability that connected all things.

AQL: The Tear is currently moving through the Andromeda sector. By the time you reach normal space, it should be passing through the Veil Nebula. That's your intercept point.

MTA: And if I miss it?

AQL: Then we try again with whatever's left of the universe. No pressure.

They reached the edge of the platform, where the soft cloud-ground of Heaven gave way to infinite possibility. Matta could feel the upgraded suit humming against her fur, eager to test its new capabilities against the cosmic void.

AQL: Matta.

MTA: Yeah?

AQL: For what it's worth, I think you're fast enough. The question isn't whether you can catch it - it's whether you can hold onto yourself while doing it.

MTA: Encouraging.

AQL: I try.

Matta moved to the very edge of the platform, her paws finding purchase on crystallized starlight. She settled into the sprint stance that had carried her across worlds - weight forward, muscles coiled, every fiber of her being focused on the moment of explosive release. Behind her, she could hear Aquila's voice, warm with something that might have been affection.

AQL: Good luck, rabbit. Try not to break the universe on your way out.

MTA: No promises.

She took one deep breath, feeling the enhanced suit synchronize with her heartbeat, her metabolism, the very rhythm of her existence. The infinite versions of herself across the multiverse leaned forward in perfect unity, ready to lend their speed to this singular moment.

Then she ran.

The first step took her beyond Heaven's boundaries. The second carried her past the world. The third launched her into the cosmic void itself, her form becoming a streak of silver and lightning that carved through the fundamental forces of existence like a blade through silk. Behind her, Heaven shrank to a point of light, then disappeared entirely. Ahead lay the vast darkness between galaxies, and somewhere in that darkness, a thing that moved too fast for reality to contain. The hunt had begun.

End of Chapter 76 **"Departure"**

[Sometimes the only way forward is faster than forever.]

(Chapter 77 || Volume 3) Rhett.

The universe did not welcome her with an explosion of light and sound, but with an absolute, deafening silence that pressed in on all sides. Heaven had vanished behind her in less than a heartbeat, a forgotten dream of pearl and starlight. Now, there was only the forward vector, a singular direction carved through the fundamental structure of reality itself. The suit Pomni had built was a living thing, humming against her fur, channeling the kinetic energy of a thousand other Mattas from a thousand other timelines . For a moment, her consciousness did stretch, a silver thread pulled taut across the loom of the cosmos. She was everywhere and everywhen, a wave of possibility collapsing into a single, impossibly fast particle.

Then, the feeling settled, and she was just... alone.

More alone than she had ever been. Lonelier than her morning runs across a sleeping Earth , lonelier than sitting in a bustling taco stand, a creature of supersonic motion pretending to be part of a world that swam through honey. That was the loneliness of separation by speed. This was the loneliness of separation by existence. Here, between the galaxies, the sheer scale of the void was a physical weight. Stars were not friendly points of light, but distant, violent furnaces, indifferent to her passage. Nebulae were the ghosts of dead suns, beautiful and empty. Speed had always been her life, her freedom, the only thing that made sense. But out here, speed was just a way to cross the emptiness faster. It didn't fill the void. It only proved how vast it was.

She ran not on land or sea, but on the quantum foam that underpinned everything, her paws finding purchase on concepts that lacked names. She was a silver comet with a beating heart, a singular point of warmth in an ocean of absolute zero.

*Was this what Icarus felt in his final moments?
Not the burning, but the silent, terrifying freedom of death?*

She shook the thought from her head. She was not sacrificing. She was hunting. Her enhanced senses, calibrated for forces that could unmake reality, sifted through the cosmic background radiation, through the gravitational whispers of dark matter. Aquila had told her to aim for the Veil Nebula. That was the intercept point. And as the distant, ghostly curtains of gas came into focus, she felt it. A flicker. A wrongness. A note in the universal symphony played so fast and sharp it tore the sheet music.

The Tear.

It was a sliver of pure absence cutting through a cloud of incandescent hydrogen. It didn't reflect light or absorb it; it simply negated it, leaving a trail of perfect nothingness in its wake. There was no time to think, only to act. She coiled the infinite potential of the suit and poured it into her limbs, accelerating from impossible to inconceivable. The universe warped into streaks of polarized light, time itself seeming to bend around her form. She was no longer moving through space; she was pulling it toward her and pushing it away, a living warp drive fueled by will and lightning.

She was gaining on it. The sliver of nothing grew in her vision, a mobile wound in the skin of the cosmos. She prepared to intercept, to match its velocity, to guide it. She braced herself...

And it stopped.

Just like that. No deceleration, no friction. One moment it was moving at a speed that made light look stationary, and the next it was perfectly, utterly still.

Matta was not. Her momentum was a force of nature, a cosmic absolute. The suit had no brakes for this kind of stop. She shot past the Tear like a bullet that had missed its target by a universe. The Veil Nebula vanished behind her in an instant. The Andromeda galaxy, her next landmark, swelled and then shrank as she blew through its spiral arms and out the other side. For a terrifying

minute, she was a passenger in her own body, a slave to an inertia that could carry her to the edge of creation.

Fighting panic, she forced the suit to obey, to bleed the impossible energy. It felt like trying to stop a tidal wave with her paws. She pushed against the fabric of spacetime, turning her velocity into shimmering waves of heat and light that radiated into the void. Finally, agonizingly, her momentum slowed, and she hung in the blackness, panting for breath she didn't need, her heart hammering a rhythm that was all her own.

A quick check of her internal navigation. She had overshoot by nearly three light-years. A distance that would take generations to cross, she had covered in seconds. With a frustrated growl that was lost to the vacuum, she turned and retraced her path, the journey back a more controlled, deliberate sprint.

It was still there. Waiting. The wound in space hung motionless against the backdrop of the nebula. It wasn't a crack or a fracture as she'd imagined. It was a shimmering portal, perfectly circular, its edges soft, like heat haze on a summer road. It looked less like a tear and more like a window someone had left open.

Caution warred with a curiosity that had driven her for a lifetime. This was the thing that un-created moons, a threat to all realities. But it was also... quiet. It felt ancient, not evil. She approached slowly, drifting the last few hundred meters, her suit humming softly. She peered into the aperture, her silver-streaked ears twitching with focus.

It was not a void. It was another place. A world swam within the frame, bathed in a soft, internal luminescence that seemed older than the stars around her. Great, soaring structures that were part-tree, part-cathedral grew in gentle spirals toward a sky filled with constellations she almost recognized, their patterns twisted into unfamiliar shapes as if remembered from a distorted dream. It was a place of profound peace, a world at the end of its own grand story.

And someone was looking back.

From the heart of that tranquil world, a being emerged. Its form was a silhouette of shimmering twilight, a shape that hinted at a runner's coiled strength, an echo of a legend she felt she should know. It had a face, though it was shaped from light and memory,

and eyes that held the depth of a dying galaxy. They were not human, not animal, but they were familiar. In them, she saw the origin of the Tear: the sorrow of a finished race, the weariness of a guardian whose watch was long over. The eyes met hers, and what passed between them was not a threat, but a profound, weary recognition - the look a mirror might give if it could remember every face it had ever held.

The recognition was a physical shock. A jolt of vertigo, cold and sharp, seized her. This wasn't the fear of a monster; it was the dizzying horror of looking at her own reflection in the deepest well of time, of seeing a potential destiny, a final lap. Her combat instincts took over. She flinched, her paws pushing her back, a gasp trapped in her throat.

Her sudden movement shattered the connection. The eyes in the window widened, not with malice, but with a terror that mirrored her own, the terror of being seen. The peaceful world dissolved into a maelstrom of light, and the window slammed shut. The Tear, once again a sharp sliver of non-existence, bolted.

It fled into the star-strewn expanse of the Andromeda galaxy, and Matta, shaking off the last vestiges of that chilling self-recognition, followed.

The chase was on. They were two streaks of impossibility, weaving through the grand architecture of the galaxy. They spiraled around the brilliant, dense core, a region of ten million suns packed so tightly the night sky would have no darkness. They dove through the stellar nurseries of the great spiral arms, clouds of cosmic dust parting before them like water before a ship's prow. Matta pushed the suit harder than ever before, the line between motion and transformation blurring into a single, continuous state of being. She surfed the shockwave of a supernova, her shields flaring, and used the gravitational pull of a neutron star to slingshot herself forward in a breathtaking arc.

The Tear was fast, but she was faster. She was gaining again, the raw power of infinite possibilities at her command. But as she closed the distance, the image of those ancient, knowing eyes was burned into her mind. She wasn't just chasing a destructive anomaly. She was chasing a predecessor.

The Tear dove toward a massive blue supergiant, a star burning with the fury of a thousand suns. Matta followed, her shields

straining against the stellar radiation. Just as she was about to close the gap, the Tear did something impossible. It didn't go around the star. It went *through* it, vanishing into the plasma heart of the celestial furnace without a ripple.

Matta was forced to swerve, banking so hard the G-forces would have crushed a mountain. She circled the star, waiting for the Tear to emerge. She waited. There was nothing. Only the silent roar of the sun and the endless, empty dark. It was gone.

She floated in the silence, the light of the blue giant painting her silver fur in harsh, brilliant tones. The adrenaline faded, leaving only the cold vacuum and a single, echoing question that had become terrifyingly personal. *Who... in all of creation was that?*

End of Chapter 77 **"Rhett"**

[Must preserve the past.]

(Chapter 78 || Volume 3) Days Of Future Past.

The Tear drifted through the vast emptiness between galactic superclusters, no longer the frantic sliver of non-existence that had carved wounds through reality. It had taken shape now - the form of the being Matta had glimpsed through the window. A figure of shimmering twilight and starlight, tall and graceful, with the coiled strength of an eternal runner. But where the eyes in the window had held ancient sorrow, this manifestation carried something different: a profound, patient determination that seemed to bend space around it.

It moved with purpose now, no longer fleeing but traveling toward something. Each step carried it across light-years, but the motion was measured, deliberate. It was searching for something specific in the cosmic void, following currents in the quantum foam that only it could perceive.

The figure paused at the edge of a stellar graveyard - the remnants of a galaxy that had burned itself out eons ago, leaving only neutron stars and black holes spinning their final dance. Here, in this monument to entropy, it seemed to find what it was looking for. It raised one hand, fingers spread as if feeling for currents in an invisible ocean.

Then it stopped completely. Not the gradual deceleration of something coming to rest, but the absolute stillness of a force meeting its equal. The twilight figure hung motionless against the backdrop of dead stars, its form flickering slightly as if the very act of existing required effort.

A voice emerged from the darkness behind it - casual, conversational, tinged with the kind of dry humor that suggested its owner had seen too much to be impressed by cosmic mysteries.

BLK: Looks like I managed to find you again, Rhett.

The Tear didn't turn, didn't acknowledge the presence.

BLK: No answer? That's fine by me.

It simply remained still, as if waiting for something inevitable to unfold.

BLK: Names don't do justice, not really. They're masks. Labels. Deadweight syllables we throw around hoping they'll anchor things that won't stop moving. But I couldn't help myself. The first time I saw you, I had this itch. A gnawing urge to claw through every page of my journal - my madness catalog. And there it was. Buried in ink both older and younger than memory. Rhett, an individual who sought... **[CORRECT]**

He coughed, a raw sound. His mouth twisted, as though reality itself had bitten his tongue.

BLK: You see, I can't even say it. Can't even push the words into the air without the universe grinding its teeth at me. Her story folds space like paper.

The speaker stepped into view - a figure whose appearance seemed to shift slightly depending on the angle, as if reality couldn't quite agree on what he looked like. He wore clothes that suggested academic comfort rather than cosmic authority, his hands tucked casually into his pockets as he regarded the motionless Tear.

BLK: But you're not her. Not an echo, not a copy, not a performance. Know why? Because she hasn't been born yet. She's still a dream stuck in the bloodstream of tomorrow. So what are you doing here, walking around in the shape of someone who isn't even real yet?

The twilight figure finally turned, its features becoming clearer in the starlight. Not male or female, but something beyond such distinctions. Its face was carved from light and shadow, beautiful in the way that fundamental forces were beautiful - terrible and perfect and utterly indifferent to mortal concerns. When it opened its mouth to speak, no sound emerged. Only silence, deeper than the void itself.

BLK: That's when it clicked. You're not a copy. You're residue. A leftover scrap of her will leaking in from the last run of this universe. A timeline's afterimage. A remnant.

He began to pace - or something that might have been pacing if space and time hadn't been more suggestions than rules in this place. His movement created ripples in reality, small distortions that revealed the careful architecture holding existence together.

BLK: And remnants don't destroy. That's the mistake everyone makes. Destruction leaves marks, burns scars. You... you erase. You pull things clean out of the ledger, tidy as a surgeon's knife. You don't shatter reality - you edit it.

The Tear's form solidified slightly, as if the conversation was forcing it to become more real.

BLK: See, most threats to existence are random. Chaos entities, rogue gods, cosmic accidents - they spread outward, cause damage in all directions. But you? You're heading somewhere specific. Every time you appear, every reality you touch, you're moving toward the same point in spacetime. The same *when*.

He stopped pacing and turned to face the silent figure directly.

BLK: But I'm not letting you keep the pen anymore. Not here. Not now. Not in this iteration. The universe is hers to inherit when she comes, not yours to sterilize before she's even taken her first breath. Until that day, I'll chain this story to its own future.

The stellar graveyard around them began to respond to the presence of both beings. Dead stars pulsed with faint light, as if remembering what it felt like to burn. Black holes whispered songs in gravitational waves, ancient lullabies for a universe learning to dream again.

BLK: I've spent a very long time maintaining the balance between

what was, what is, and what might be. It's delicate work. One misplaced paradox and suddenly everyone's grandmother is their own grandfather and Thursday happens before Wednesday. Very messy.

The Tear raised one hand, gesturing toward the cosmic expanse with something that might have been sorrow or might have been resignation. Still no words, but the meaning was clear: *Look around. See what becomes of everything.*

BLK: Oh, I see it. Entropy, heat death, the slow fade of stars into darkness. But that's the natural order. That's the universe choosing its own ending, in its own time. What you're doing... that's artificial. That's forcing a conclusion because you can't bear to wait for the story to finish itself.

He pulled something from his pocket - not a card or device, but what looked like a small piece of crystallized time, faceted like a diamond and pulsing with its own internal rhythm. The crystal in his hand began to resonate with something deep in the quantum structure around them. The dead galaxy stirred, neutron stars adjusting their rotations with microscopic precision.

BLK: I won't let that happen. Not on my watch. The universe gets to choose its own fate, make its own mistakes, find its own solutions. Even if that means watching potential perfection sacrifice itself for actual freedom.

He held up the crystal, and suddenly the space around the Tear began to solidify. Not physically - something deeper. The fundamental permissions that allowed it to exist between moments were being revoked, forcing it back into linear time.

BLK: And as for how I'll stop you... any second now.

He gestured behind him with casual confidence, then simply... wasn't. Not vanished, not teleported away - just absent, as if he had stepped out of the conversation mid-sentence to make himself tea. The crystallized time hung in space where he had been, its pulsing rhythm growing stronger. The Tear struggled against the temporal constraints, its form flickering between solid and incorporeal as it tried to slip back into the spaces between seconds. That's when the silver comet came blazing out of the darkness. Matta had been tracking the gravitational disturbances, following the wake of their passage through the cosmic medium. She burst from behind a

neutron star like a bullet fired from the barrel of creation itself, her enhanced suit channeling the velocity of a thousand possible futures into a single, perfectly aimed trajectory. The Tear, caught between Blook's temporal prison and its own desperate need to escape, never saw her coming. The impact was not violent in the traditional sense. It was more like two fundamental forces discovering they occupied the same space at the same time and having to negotiate which one got to exist. Reality hiccupped. The laws of physics took a brief coffee break. The background radiation of the universe skipped a beat.

When the cosmic dust settled, Matta found herself wrapped around the Tear like a silver ribbon, her paws locked in a grip that could have held onto a collapsing star. The twilight figure was solid now, forced into three dimensions by the collision, and she could feel its strange warmth against her fur. It was not struggling. It was not trying to escape. It simply waited, patient as the void itself, for whatever came next.

Matta's enhanced senses told her everything and nothing about her captive. It was ancient beyond measure but felt newly born. It was incredibly powerful but seemed fragile as morning mist. It was dangerous enough to unmake realities but radiated a sadness so profound it made her want to let go and offer comfort instead.

But she held on. This was what she had come for. This was the thing that moved faster than time, the threat that required someone fast enough to catch tomorrow before it arrived.

Her ears twitched as she felt rather than heard movement in the cosmic distance. Something was coming. Multiple somethings, actually. The cavalry, perhaps, or just very punctual cosmic entities who had noticed the laws of physics taking an unscheduled break.

The Tear in her arms turned its head to look at her, and she saw those eyes again - not the sorrow-filled gaze from the window, but something clearer. Relieved, maybe. Or grateful. As if being caught was exactly what it had been hoping for all along.

MTA: Got you now.

The words hung in the vacuum between them, simple and direct. But as Matta looked into those ancient, familiar eyes, she realized that catching the Tear might have been the easy part. Understanding what she'd caught - and what it meant for the future

that was still racing toward them all - that was going to be the real challenge. Around them, the dead galaxy began to sing again, neutron stars pulsing in harmonies that hadn't been heard since the universe was young. And somewhere in that cosmic music, Matta could swear she heard the sound of destiny laughing at the absurdity of its own perfect timing.

End of Chapter 78
"Days Of Future Past"

[So this is my fate.]

(Chapter 79 || Volume 3) Knight Of Speed.

The brush trembles in my hand. Not because I'm tired, though I am. Not because the bristles are worn, though they are. It trembles because I know that no matter how long I work this canvas, no matter how much pigment I bleed into it, I will never catch her.

Matta.

I have painted warriors before. They were all difficult, but they shared one gift: they sat still. Even if their bodies had fallen or their legends had blurred, their stillness was something I could hold.

Matta never gave me that. She was a streak, a comet, a song hummed too fast for memory to keep. And yet here I am, trying to trap her in oil and shadow like she's mine to keep. The bristles drag across the surface. Silver. White. Lightning distilled into lines too fragile to hold her.

You'd laugh at me, Matta. You'd tell me this is a fool's errand. You'd tell me I should run with you instead of trying to pin you down like a butterfly. But you know I was never built for running. My world has always been measured in brushstrokes, not heartbeats.

The canvas swallows my words, but I keep speaking anyway. I have no one else to tell.

I remember the last time I saw you. You weren't even a shape at first - just a blur, a ripple of atmosphere, a faint scream of thunder splitting the clouds. And then you were gone, before I could even blink. But that streak carved itself into me. The lines bled, broke, fell short. How do you draw velocity? How do you capture the absence left behind by speed?

I told myself it didn't matter. You were too fast for me, and I was too slow for you. We'd never meet again. But I drew you anyway, because I needed proof. Evidence of a legend that should not be forgotten to time.

The years have been cruel. The trials you ran through. The wounds you left in the earth that children now play in like trenches turned playgrounds. I could never keep up, but I watched. I always watched. You stitched yourself into the fabric of our lives, a reminder that salvation could arrive before the scream finished leaving your throat.

And now I sit here, brush in hand, trying to pull you from memory. Trying to convince myself I'm not painting a ghost. My hand shakes again. I steady it, press bristles into canvas, drag shadow beneath your eyes. That's where I always return - your eyes. I never saw them up close. But I've imagined them a thousand times. Not the eyes of someone free. No, your freedom had a price. They were the eyes of someone who carried too much, who knew rest was a finish line you'd never cross.

You're gone. Gone. How could you be gone when you're still moving? Death can't catch you. Time can't hold you. Even silence stumbles in your wake. And yet... I know. I know the truth of it.

The Tear. That impossible wound, that absence pretending to be something. It should have ended everything, but it didn't. Not because we defeated it. Not because Blook's mad prophecies came true. But because of you.

I can see it in my mind's eye: you, circling it. A silver rabbit wrapped in lightning, running faster than causality itself. Every step pressing reality tighter, every orbit a cage. You made velocity into chains, orbit into prison walls. The Tear is frozen not by stillness, but by your refusal to stop moving. And in that, you trapped yourself.

I close my eyes. My breath shudders. How do I paint that? How do I paint eternity in motion? How do I honor sacrifice that never ends, a finish line that never arrives?

I mix white into the silver, drag it across your ears. They glow in the light slanting through the window. For a heartbeat, I almost believe they twitch, that you'll turn to me and laugh. But you don't. The paint stays paint. The portrait stays still.

Do you see us out there? Do you remember me & Fenris, Neru and Shen, Nilah & Icarus, Kael & Bella, the children who chased your shadow across the ruins? Do you think of us when you run? Or have you outrun even memory itself?

I want to believe you do. I want to believe you carry us with you, tucked into your heartbeat like stowaways. But maybe not. Maybe that's my job. Maybe remembering is the only thing I can do for you.

I dip the brush again. Each stroke feels heavier now. Silver arcs across the canvas like lightning trapped in oil. This isn't you - not truly - but it's the closest I'll ever come.

Sacrifice. That's what you gave us. Not the loud kind, not fire and glory. The quiet kind. The eternal kind. You didn't fall in battle. You didn't vanish into nothing. You chose to run, forever, because the universe needed you to. Because none of us could. Because you loved us enough to give up the one thing you ever wanted: rest.

And so you run. Around and around, faster than thought, faster than time. An orbit of mercy. A circle that cannot break.

My brush slows. I lean closer, breathing your face into being. Silver streaks catch the light, your fur shimmering as though alive. Eyes dark, heavy, but burning with speed. This is you, as I remember you, as I imagine you, as I need you to be.

There... finished.

But it isn't finished, not really. How could it be? How do you finish a portrait of someone who will never stop moving? I sign your name in the corner, slowly, deliberately. Then I step back.

And I say the words I never wanted to say, the words that scrape raw against my throat.

You didn't die. You didn't lose. You didn't vanish. You chose. You chose to run forever, circling the Tear, keeping it locked in place with nothing but your will and your speed. You're still out there, Matta. Running where no one can follow, running where eternity itself watches.

My hand presses against the canvas. For a moment, I swear it's warm. For a moment, I swear I feel the hum of motion. But then it's

gone.

You're gone but not gone. Never gone. And as long as this portrait remains, as long as I remember, the world will know: the fastest being alive became the circle itself. Eternal. Guarding us. Running still.

The brush falls from my hand. I don't pick it up. I don't need to. Your portrait is done. The sacrifice is sealed. Matta runs. And everyone will remember. For now, another brush will suffice.

End of Chapter 79 **"Knight of Speed"**

[Despite our distance, I was always fond of you, rabbit.]

(Chapter 80 || Volume 3) Much Needed Break.

The steam rising from my cup curled like brushstrokes I hadn't painted. Thin spirals, vanishing into the ether before I could trace them. I stared at them anyway, because it was easier than looking at the two people sitting across from me.

Heaven's café was beautiful in the way all things here were beautiful - clean, impossible, edges softened by perfection. The tables gleamed as though freshly carved from pearl, the windows opened out into vistas of folded starlight, and the air carried a warmth that smelled faintly of roasted beans and blessed sugar. Even the barista had an aura, literal golden feathers tucked back under her apron as she smiled and poured drinks that would make mortals cry.

But none of it mattered. Not the taste, not the smell, not the glittering radiance beyond the glass. I sat with my hands around the porcelain cup, shoulders tight, and tried not to hear the brushstrokes still echoing in my head. Blook broke the silence first. Of course he did. He was incapable of letting silence live for long.

BLK: You're quieter these days.

He said, leaning forward, elbows on the table. His eyes were sharp as ever, like broken glass waiting for light to make it useful. But there was something softer there too, a kind of wary curiosity. Aquila sipped her drink - a delicate motion, all grace and ritual, as if

even caffeine in Heaven was some divine sacrament - and nodded.

AQL: He's right. You've been holding yourself in. Even for you.

I tightened my grip on the cup. The warmth seeped into my palms,
but it didn't soften me.

ILA: I've just been working. The portraits take time.

AQL: That's not all they take.

I hated that she could see through me so easily. Virtues always
could. They wore empathy like armor. Blook leaned back, eyeing
me.

BLK: It's the storytelling, isn't it? Narrating them while you paint.
That's what's burning you out. Not the strokes. The stories.

I let out a humorless laugh.

ILA: You think telling their stories is harder than living them?

BLK: Sometimes survivors often bleed more slowly, but for longer.

That stung, because it was true. I looked down at my cup. The
coffee was too perfect. No bitterness, no grounds, no imperfections
to hide behind. Just warmth and sweetness, everything exactly as it
should be. I wanted it to be bitter. I wanted something I could fight.

ILA: They were my friends. Neru. Shen. Matta. All of them. And now
every time I touch the canvas, I bring them back. But it's not really
them, is it? It's only my memory of them. My version. And my
version... it's always unfinished. Always a step behind.

Aquila set her cup down. Her eyes caught the light and held it.

AQL: That's not a flaw, Illia. That's the nature of remembering. No
memory can carry a person whole. But each one you paint, each
one you narrate - it's a thread. And together, those threads weave
something closer to truth than silence ever could.

I shook my head.

ILA: Threads fray.

AQL: Threads hold.

Blook snorted, swirling the dark liquid in his glass.

BLK: Threads snap all the time. I've seen whole tapestries rot through. Stories get rewritten, forgotten, twisted. But maybe that's the point. Maybe what you're doing isn't about preservation. Maybe it's about rebellion. Spitting in the face of oblivion by saying, *No, you don't get to have them. Not yet.*

I stared at him, startled by the fire in his tone. I sat back, feeling the weight pressing down. They didn't understand - not fully. To them, the portraits were stories told secondhand, artifacts for others to study. For me, each one was a resurrection and a burial at the same time.

ILA: I'm tired. Every time I finish one portrait, another waits. Another friend, another story. And when I tell it, when I paint it, I have to relive it. Their victories. Their wounds. Their endings. And I know... I know where Matta is. I know what she's doing. And every stroke I paint of her face feels like I'm betraying her, because she's still running, and I'm the one trying to make her stand still.

Aquila reached across the table, her hand warm against mine.

AQL: Illia, painting her doesn't trap her. It honors her. She runs so the Tear stays bound. You paint so the world doesn't forget who she was before she became eternity. That's not betrayal. That's love.

I bit my lip. Love. The word hurt more than it healed. Blook leaned forward again, tapping his finger against the tabletop.

BLK: Listen. You think it's easy for me? You think I don't carry the weight of the words I've said, the names I've thrown into the fire? Every time I open my mouth about the future, I feel reality wince. You think I like being the one to tear open the truth when silence would be easier?

He jabbed a finger toward me.

BLK: But we do it anyway. You with your brushes. Me with my journal. Aquila with her threads. Because someone has to. Because forgetting is worse than pain.

Aquila sighed, but she didn't argue. She never really argued with him, not when it came to this. I sat back, looking out the café window. Heaven's sky was endless, but it wasn't the endlessness of void. It was endless like a painting stretched across eternity - still, ordered, deliberate. Somewhere out there, Matta was still running.

Silver comet orbiting a wound. Eternal. And I was here. In a café, with coffee too perfect to drink. I traced my finger around the rim of the cup, thinking of the faces I had painted. Thinking of the faces yet to come. My chest ached, but somewhere beneath the ache was something else. Not hope, exactly. But endurance. Maybe that was enough.

End of Chapter 80
"Much Needed Break"

[Your turn, sharp teeth.]

(Chapter 81 || Volume 3) Fangs.

The alarm buzzed at 6:30 AM, same as always. Fenris reached across the nightstand with a massive clawed hand, careful not to crush the cheap plastic clock as he silenced it. Seven feet of lean muscle unfolded from the queen-sized bed - too small for him really, but the apartment came furnished and he wasn't one to complain.

He padded to the bathroom on silent feet, ducking slightly under the doorframe. The mirror reflected back crimson eyes set in a wolf-like muzzle, black fur still mussed from sleep. He ran water from the tap, splashing it across his face, then reached for the electric razor he'd specially ordered online. Keeping the facial fur trimmed was just part of looking professional.

Twenty minutes later, Fenris pulled on his usual work clothes: dark denim jeans that accommodated his digitigrade legs, and a comfortable flannel shirt that hung loose around his broad shoulders. He grabbed his leather jacket from the hook by the door - the morning air still held a chill, even in late spring.

The walk to Rosetti's Butcher Shop took him through the quiet residential streets he'd grown to appreciate. Mrs. Toki from 4B was walking her corgi, and she waved cheerfully as they passed. The dog had taken months to warm up to him, but now it barely stirred at his scent.

Morning, Mrs. Toki. Lovely day, isn't it?

Oh yes, dear. You have a good day at work.

The shop was already bustling when Fenris arrived. Marco Rosetti looked up from the display case he was arranging, his weathered face breaking into a grin.

Fenris! Perfect timing. We got that grass-fed beef you ordered for the Hendersons. Want to help me break it down?

Absolutely.

Fenris tied on his apron and washed his hands thoroughly. His natural strength and precise control made him invaluable for the heavier work - what took Marco twenty minutes with a saw, Fenris could accomplish in five with his claws. But he was gentle, methodical, treating each cut of meat with the respect it deserved.

The morning passed peacefully. Fenris helped customers, restocked the display cases, and listened to Marco's stories about his grandmother's recipes. A young mother came in looking for something special for her son's birthday dinner. An elderly man needed help carrying his order to his car. A vampire customer appreciated Fenris's knowledge about which cuts were best for their particular dietary needs.

You're a natural at this, you know.

Marco said during their lunch break, biting into his sandwich.

Got a real understanding of the craft.

Fenris ducked his head, almost bashfully.

I appreciate that, Marco. I like working with my hands. There's something honest about it.

The afternoon brought a steady stream of regulars. Fenris knew most of their names, their preferences, asked about their families. Mrs. Patterson's arthritis, young Tommy's soccer games, the Johnsons' new baby. These small connections, these gentle moments - this was what he valued most about his life here.

As closing time approached, Fenris helped Marco clean the equipment and lock up the display cases. The older man counted the day's till while Fenris mopped the floors.

See you tomorrow, kid. Tell that landlord of yours I said hello.

Will do, Marco. Have a good evening.

The sun was setting as Fenris made his way home, hands tucked into his jacket pockets. The neighborhood was settling into its evening rhythm - lights coming on in windows, the smell of dinner cooking, children being called inside. He'd grown protective of this peace, this simple life he'd carved out for himself.

He was cutting through the alley behind his building when he heard it - a sharp cry, quickly muffled. Fenris froze, every predatory instinct suddenly alert. Fifty feet ahead, two men had cornered a young woman against the brick wall. One had his hand over her mouth while the other rifled through her purse.

The transformation was instantaneous. The peaceful shop assistant vanished, replaced by something far more dangerous. Fenris moved like liquid shadow, covering the distance in heartbeats. His footsteps made no sound on the concrete.

Gentlemen... I think the lady would prefer to be left alone.

Both men spun around. The one holding the purse dropped it immediately, his face going pale in the dim light. His companion released the woman and took a step back, hand moving toward his jacket.

Walk away.

Fenris suggested, tilting his head slightly. His crimson eyes caught the streetlight, glowing like embers.

Right now. While walking is still an option.

The man with his hand on his jacket thought about it for exactly three seconds. Then both of them bolted, leaving the purse scattered on the ground.

Fenris relaxed slightly, the predatory edge fading from his posture. He bent to collect the woman's belongings, careful to keep his movements slow and non-threatening.

Are you hurt? Do you need me to call-

Don't.

The woman's voice was sharp, cutting him off. She snatched her purse from his outstretched hand, her eyes flashing with something that wasn't quite gratitude.

You shouldn't have done that.

I'm sorry?

Fenris blinked, taken aback.

They were robbing you.

She backed toward the mouth of the alley, clutching her purse against her chest. In the better light, Fenris could see she was younger than he'd first thought - maybe early twenties, with dark hair and intelligent eyes that held far too much knowledge.

You have no idea what you just stepped into.

Her voice tight with what sounded like fear - but not fear of him.

They weren't random muggers. They were looking for me specifically. And now... You don't know what you've gotten yourself into.

Before Fenris could respond, she turned and disappeared into the evening crowd on the main street, leaving him alone in the alley with more questions than answers and the uncomfortable feeling that his quiet life had just become significantly more complicated.

End of Chapter 81 **"Fangs"**

[Trouble just follows me, huh... Fuck.]

(Chapter 82 || Volume 3) Word of Advice.

The alarm buzzed at 6:30 AM, same as always. Fenris reached across the nightstand with a massive clawed hand, silencing it with practiced care. The routine was automatic now - shower, shave, dress. Dark jeans, flannel shirt, leather jacket. The same motions that had anchored him for months.

But as he stepped onto the sidewalk, something felt different. The

morning air carried an edge he couldn't name. Mrs. Toki wasn't walking her corgi. The street felt too quiet, like the city was holding its breath.

He pushed the feeling aside. Paranoia was a luxury he couldn't afford in his new life.

The first sign something was wrong came three blocks from the shop. Broken glass glittered on the sidewalk, catching the early sunlight like scattered diamonds. Fenris quickened his pace, his footsteps still silent despite his growing urgency.

When he rounded the corner, his blood turned to ice.

Rosetti's Butcher Shop looked like a war zone. The front window was shattered, spider-webbing outward from a central impact point. The door hung askew on its hinges. And there, pinned to the doorframe with a kitchen knife, was a piece of paper that fluttered in the morning breeze.

Fenris approached slowly, every predatory instinct screaming. The message was written in bold, angry letters.

WRONG MOVE, WOLF.

The scent hit him before he stepped through the ruined doorway. Fear. Desperation. And underneath it all, the metallic tang of blood - not fresh, but recent enough to make his hackles rise.

Inside was devastation. Display cases were overturned, their glass fronts smashed. Meat scattered across the floor, ruined and spoiling. The cash register lay on its side, coins scattered like confetti. And in the center of it all, Marco Rosetti sat hunched on the floor, his weathered hands pressed against his face.

FNR: Marco?

The older man looked up, and Fenris saw tears streaming down his cheeks. Marco's kind eyes - the ones that had always crinkled with laughter - were hollow with grief.

RST: They... they destroyed everything. Thirty years I built this place. Thirty years.

Fenris knelt beside him, careful to keep his movements slow and

unthreatening despite the rage building in his chest. The shop that had been immaculate yesterday was now a graveyard of broken dreams.

FNR: Are you hurt?

RST: No, no. They came after closing. Broke in through the back. Left this mess and... and that.

He gestured weakly toward the front door, toward the knife and its message.

RST: What does it mean, Fenris? Wrong move, wolf? What did you do?

The question hit like a physical blow. Fenris looked around at the destruction - at Marco's life's work scattered and ruined - and felt something cold settle in his stomach. The alley. The girl. The two men who had run when they saw him. This was his fault.

FNR: I... I tried to help someone yesterday. Two men were bothering a girl in an alley. I made them leave.

RST: And they did this because you helped someone?

Marco's voice broke on the last word. He gestured around the ruined shop with shaking hands.

RST: This was my father's business. And his father's before him. Three generations, Fenris. Gone because you... because you what? Did the right thing?

Fenris stood slowly, his joints creaking with barely contained tension. He walked to the front door and tore the letter from the knife with deliberate care. The paper crumpled in his massive fist, the sound unnaturally loud in the devastated shop.

RST: Where are you going?

Fenris paused at the threshold, his crimson eyes reflecting the morning light streaming through the broken window. When he spoke, his voice carried a weight that seemed to settle into the very bones of the building.

FNR: Work.

The door's broken hinges groaned as it swung shut behind him,

leaving Marco alone with the ruins of everything he had built, and the terrible understanding that the gentle giant he had come to trust was something far more dangerous than he had ever imagined.

End of Chapter 82
"Word of Advice"

[Big Bad Wolf.]

(Chapter 83 || Volume 3) Blood.

The morning bled into afternoon as Fenris moved through the city like a shadow with purpose. His first stop was the alley where it had all started. Nothing remained but empty concrete and the faint scent of fear that still clung to the brick walls like invisible smoke.

He crouched where the woman had been cornered, running his claws lightly across the rough brick. The stone told its own story - scratches where someone had pressed back against it, a faint impression of desperation. But the scents were already fading, overlaid with exhaust fumes and the thousand other smells of the city.

The coffee shop yielded nothing. Jamie behind the counter remembered him from that morning - felt like a lifetime ago now - but shook her head when he described the two men. The usual customers nursed their drinks and tapped at laptops, oblivious to the predator moving among them.

FNR: Dark suits, both well-built. One tall, maybe six-two. The other stocky, scarred hands.

JAM: Sorry, Fenris. Doesn't ring a bell. Everything okay?

FNR: Just looking for some old acquaintances.

The lie came easily. Jamie smiled and turned back to the espresso machine, steam hissing like a contented serpent. Murphy's Tavern was thick with afternoon regulars and cigarette smoke. The bartender, Mickey, polished glasses with practiced indifference as Fenris described the men again. A few of the patrons glanced his way - seven feet of muscle was hard to ignore - but most kept their eyes on their drinks.

MCK: Nah, don't know 'em. But then again, I don't know most of the suits that come through here. They order expensive whiskey, flash money around, and leave. You sure you want to find these particular ones?

FNR: I'm sure.

MCK: Your funeral, big guy.

The street vendors along Fifth Avenue were more talkative but no more helpful. Mrs. Rodriguez who sold flowers had seen plenty of well-dressed men, but none that matched his description. The pretzel cart operator shrugged and offered him a free soft pretzel. Even the chess players in Washington Square looked up from their boards, but their weathered faces showed no recognition. As the sun began its descent toward the horizon, Fenris found himself moving toward the rougher parts of the city. Here, among the broken streetlights and boarded windows, people noticed things. They had to, to survive.

It was near the underpass where the homeless gathered that he finally struck gold. Jimmy sat surrounded by shopping carts filled with bottles and cans, a portable radio crackling with static beside him. His clothes were layered and patched, but his eyes were sharp and clear.

JIM: Hey there, big fella. You're new around these parts.

FNR: Looking for information about two men. They were in the area yesterday evening.

Jimmy's expression shifted, becoming more guarded. In this part of the city, information was currency, and currency wasn't given away freely.

JIM: Information costs, friend. Nothing personal, just the way things work down here.

Fenris pulled a twenty from his wallet, then thought better of it and added another. Jimmy's eyes widened slightly.

FNR: Two men, well-dressed. One tall, one stocky. They were asking about a girl yesterday.

JIM: Yeah, yeah I seen 'em. Expensive suits, ugly attitudes. Real interested in some brunette with dark hair. Kept flashing her picture around, offering money for information. More money than anyone down here usually sees.

FNR: Did they find what they were looking for?

JIM: Nah, but not for lack of trying. They was real persistent, if you know what I mean. The kind that don't take no for an answer gracefully.

FNR: Where did they go?

Jimmy pocketed the money and leaned back against a concrete pillar, studying Fenris with new interest.

JIM: Industrial district. Got into a black sedan, headed east toward the warehouses. But mister... you don't want nothing to do with those types. They ain't the forgiving kind, and they got friends. Lots of friends.

FNR: What kind of friends?

JIM: The kind that carry guns and don't ask questions. Word is they're connected to Vincent Caruso. You know that name?

Fenris shook his head.

JIM: Consider yourself lucky. Caruso runs half the illegal trade that flows through this city. Drugs, guns, protection rackets. His warehouse complex out east is like a fortress. Security everywhere, cameras, the works. If your girl is mixed up with them...

The old man shook his head grimly.

JIM: She's probably already dead. And if you go sniffing around there, you will be too.

By the time Fenris reached the industrial district, the sun had set and the moon hung like a pale eye above the warehouses. The transition from residential to industrial was stark - streetlights became fewer and farther between, buildings transformed into hulking concrete monoliths, and the air tasted of rust and motor oil with an underlying current of something else.

Something that made his nostrils flare and his pupils dilate - Fear.

He moved through the maze of buildings like a ghost, his footsteps making no sound on the cracked asphalt. Years of hunting had taught him to become part of the darkness itself, to move between shadows as if they were old friends welcoming him home.

The Caruso complex was exactly as Jimmy had described - a fortress of glass and steel surrounded by chain-link fence topped with razor wire. Security towers dotted the perimeter, their

searchlights sweeping methodically across the grounds. But Fenris had hunted in worse places than this.

He scaled the fence in three silent bounds, his claws finding purchase in the chain links. The razor wire at the top posed no challenge - his thick fur and careful movements allowed him to slip between the coils like liquid shadow.

Landing on the other side, he pressed himself against the nearest building and listened. Voices carried on the night air - guards making their rounds, calling out positions, the comfortable chatter of men who believed themselves safe behind their walls and weapons.

They had no idea that death itself had just entered their domain.

I adjusted my silk tie and looked out the floor-to-ceiling windows of my office. The warehouse below bustled with activity - my activity. Crates being moved, money changing hands, the well-oiled machine of my empire in motion. Twenty years I'd built this operation from nothing, and now half the city's underground flowed through these walls.

My lieutenant, Ted, stood at attention beside the desk. Good man, Ted. Been with me for eight years, ever since that business with the Torrino family went south. Loyal, efficient, and smart enough to know when to keep his mouth shut.

VNC: The wolf situation needs to be handled, Ted. Permanently.

TED: The shop was just a warning, boss. Maybe he got the message.

I turned from the window, fixing Ted with the look that had made stronger men than him reconsider their life choices.

VNC: Maybe isn't good enough. Seven feet of muscle and claws, interfering with our business? No. He made his choice when he stepped into that alley.

The girl was important - more important than Ted knew, more important than most of my organization knew. She had something that belonged to me, something I'd been searching for months to recover. And just when my boys had finally tracked her down, some oversized do-gooder had to play hero. I reached for my radio, pressing the button to contact the security team stationed

throughout the warehouse complex.

VNC: Tower One, report.

Silence. Not unusual - sometimes the boys got distracted, especially on quiet nights like this. But I hadn't built this empire by ignoring small details.

VNC: Tower Two, status report.

Static crackled through the speaker, but no voice followed. A cold finger of unease traced its way up my spine. In twenty years, my security teams had never failed to respond. Never. Ted shifted uncomfortably beside me, his hand unconsciously moving toward the shoulder holster beneath his jacket.

TED: Maybe they're doing rounds?

VNC: At the same time? All of them?

I tried again, putting more authority into my voice. The voice that had negotiated million-dollar deals and ordered the deaths of men who'd crossed me.

VNC: Ground floor, this is Caruso. Respond immediately.

Nothing but the soft hiss of dead air. The silence stretched between us like a held breath, and I felt the familiar weight of the .45 in my desk drawer calling to me.

The lights flickered once. Twice. The steady fluorescent hum that had been a constant background noise for years wavered, casting shifting shadows across the office walls. In the brief moments of darkness, the warehouse below seemed to transform into something alien and threatening.

TED: Boss, maybe we should-

The radio crackled to life. But instead of my security team's familiar voices, there was something else. A single word, spoken in a voice like gravel and midnight, that seemed to seep from the speakers like smoke from a funeral pyre.

Blood.

The lights went out. Emergency lighting kicked in a second later,

bathing my office in hellish red. The color of violence. The color of endings. Below us, the warehouse floor had gone silent. No voices. No footsteps. No sound at all except the distant drip of something I very much hoped was water from a broken pipe.

Ted had his gun out, though his hands shook as he held it. Eight years of working for me, and he'd never shown fear like this. That scared me more than the silence, more than the lights, more than the voice on the radio.

TED: What the hell was that?

I moved to my desk, pulling out the .45 from the bottom drawer. The metal was cold and familiar in my hand, a comfort I'd relied on since my first kill twenty-three years ago. My fingers were steady - they had to be. Twenty years in this business had taught me to keep fear locked away when it mattered most.

VNC: That, Ted, is our problem coming to collect.

Another flicker. Another moment of absolute darkness. And in that darkness, something that might have been footsteps, or might have been the sound of death itself, moving through the warehouse below with purpose and terrible patience.

I thought about the girl, about what she'd stolen from me, about the wolf who'd interfered with my plans. I thought about the twelve men I had stationed throughout this complex, men who'd killed for me, died for me, men who wouldn't go down without a fight. The radio hissed once more. This time, the voice was closer. Much closer.

Blood.

I looked out at my empire, at the maze of catwalks and shadows that had been my kingdom for two decades, and realized that somewhere in those shadows, something was hunting me. Something that had turned my fortress into its hunting ground, my men into prey, my certainties into ash. And I knew, with the cold clarity that comes before death, that it was very, very patient. The emergency lights flickered again, and in that brief moment of absolute darkness, I heard something that froze the blood in my veins. Laughter. Low, rumbling, and utterly without mercy.

End of Chapter 83

"Blood"

[You can not run.]

(Chapter 84 || Volume 3) Food Chain.

The office was empty when Fenris reached it. The door hung open like a wound, emergency lighting casting everything in hellish red that made shadows dance across the walls like trapped spirits. Papers scattered across the floor in patterns that spoke of hasty retreat, an overturned chair that had been knocked aside in someone's rush to escape, the lingering scent of expensive cologne mixed with fear-sweat that hung in the air like invisible fog.

But no Vincent Caruso. No Ted. Just the hollow echo of his own breathing in the abandoned space and the distant hum of machinery somewhere deep in the bowels of the building.

Fenris prowled through the office, his enhanced senses cataloging every detail. A half-finished glass of whiskey sat on the desk, amber liquid still sloshing slightly from recent abandonment. The ice had melted, leaving rings of condensation on expensive mahogany. Cigarette smoke lingered in the air - expensive tobacco, not the cheap brands most of the hired muscle preferred.

He moved to the windows overlooking the warehouse floor, pressing his face against the reinforced glass. Below, the maze of catwalks and storage containers stretched into shadow like a concrete forest. Most of the overhead lights had been shut off, leaving pools of darkness between scattered islands of illumination.

But something caught his eye - movement near the far end of the warehouse, where a service elevator was descending past the main floor level. The mechanical whir of motors carried even through the thick glass, and Fenris watched as the elevator continued downward until it disappeared entirely from view.

Underground storage. Of course. When cornered, rats always went deeper into the maze.

The elevator shaft was too small for his frame - built for human proportions, not seven-foot predators. But there were maintenance ladders running alongside the cables, steel rungs bolted into concrete that could support his weight. Fenris pried open the shaft

door with careful pressure, his claws finding purchase in the metal frame.

The descent into the bowels of the warehouse complex felt like entering another world entirely. The air grew thicker, more oppressive, heavy with the weight of tons of concrete and steel pressing down from above. Industrial ventilation systems hummed somewhere in the darkness like mechanical beehives, pushing stale air through ductwork that rattled with each breath of the building's mechanical lungs.

The smell of concrete and machine oil filled his nostrils, overlaid with the metallic tang of old blood that had soaked into the floor over years of Vincent's "business operations." But underneath it all was something else, something that made his hackles rise and his pupils dilate in the dim light.

Fear. Fresh fear, sharp and immediate, with the copper taste of adrenaline.

The underground warehouse opened before him like a concrete cathedral dedicated to some industrial god. The ceiling soared thirty feet overhead, supported by massive pillars that disappeared into shadow above. Shipping containers stacked three high created walls and corridors throughout the space, their corrugated metal surfaces slick with condensation that dripped steadily onto the concrete floor.

Harsh fluorescent lights buzzed overhead in sporadic clusters, casting stark white illumination that created deep shadows between the towering containers. The effect was disorienting, a maze of light and darkness that could hide an army or conceal a single assassin with equal effectiveness.

And there, in a cleared space at the center of it all, were three figures caught in a pool of harsh light like actors on a stage.

Vincent Caruso stood with his back to one of the containers, his expensive suit rumpled and stained with concrete dust, his silver hair disheveled from their hasty retreat. The confident composure he'd radiated in his office was cracked now, replaced by the tight-lipped tension of a man who'd lost control of his carefully ordered world.

Beside him, Ted gripped a pistol with white knuckles, his eyes

darting between the shadows that surrounded their island of light. Sweat beaded on his forehead despite the underground chill, and his breathing came in short, sharp bursts that spoke of barely controlled panic.

And between them, on her knees with her hands zip-tied behind her back, was the girl from the alley.

She was younger than Fenris had initially thought in that brief encounter, maybe early twenties, with dark hair that fell across her face like a curtain. Her clothes were torn and dirty, suggesting she'd been dragged here rather than walking willingly. A thin line of blood traced from her split lip to her chin, evidence of recent persuasion attempts.

But her eyes - when she looked up at the sound of his approaching footsteps echoing through the cavernous space - held a defiance that burned like cold fire. There was no surrender in that gaze, no pleading for rescue. Just a calculating intelligence that seemed to be weighing options and finding them all wanting.

Fenris stepped into the light, his massive frame casting long shadows across the concrete floor, and Vincent's face twisted into something that might have been a smile if it hadn't been so filled with malice and barely contained rage.

VNC: There he is. Our neighborhood hero.

Vincent's voice carried clearly in the underground space, bouncing off concrete walls and metal containers to create a slight echo that made his words seem to come from everywhere at once.

VNC: You know, I've been in this business for twenty years, wolf. Twenty years of building something from nothing, of carving out a piece of this city and making it mine. And in all that time, I've learned one very important lesson.

He gestured broadly at the warehouse around them, at the empire he'd built in shadow and concrete.

VNC: There's always someone who thinks they can play hero. Someone who thinks the rules don't apply to them.

The girl - Poppy, he'd called her - looked between them with something that might have been resignation or might have been

calculation. It was hard to tell which, and that uncertainty made her more dangerous than either of the armed men flanking her.

VNC: You cost me a lot of time and trouble, wolf. My boys spent weeks tracking down Miss Poppy here. Weeks of surveillance, of following dead ends, of paying informants and breaking fingers. She has something that belongs to me.

Fenris took another step forward, his movements deliberate and measured. Each footfall echoed through the space like a countdown, and he could see Ted's grip tighten on his weapon. The concrete floor was solid beneath his feet, but he could sense the weight of the building above, the pressure of tons of steel and stone held up by pillars and prayers.

FNR: Let her go. This is between you and me now.

VNC: Oh no, I don't think so.

Vincent reached into his jacket with practiced smoothness and pulled out his .45, the metal gleaming under the harsh fluorescents. He pressed the barrel against Poppy's temple with casual precision, as if he'd performed this exact gesture a thousand times before.

She didn't flinch, but Fenris saw her jaw tighten almost imperceptibly. Whatever she'd stolen, whatever had brought Vincent's wrath down upon her, she'd known this moment might come.

VNC: You see, she stole something from me. Something very valuable. Not money - money's replaceable. Not drugs - there are always more suppliers. She stole information. Names, dates, locations. The kind of information that could put me and half my organization in federal prison for the rest of our natural lives.

The weapon clicked as Vincent pulled back the hammer, the sound unnaturally loud in the underground cathedral.

VNC: Now, you're going to walk away. Turn around, climb back up that shaft, and forget you ever saw her. Forget this place exists. And maybe - maybe - I let her keep breathing long enough to tell me where she hid my property.

Fenris felt the familiar transformation beginning, like a dam cracking under pressure. The careful restraint he'd maintained for months, the peaceful facade he'd built through quiet mornings at

the butcher shop and polite conversations with neighbors - it all began to crack and fall away like a shed skin.

His lips pulled back slowly, revealing teeth like shards of broken glass that had been honed to killing points by millions of years of evolution. His crimson eyes caught the harsh fluorescent light and reflected it back like mirrors made of blood and malice. The sound that emerged from his throat wasn't quite human, wasn't quite animal. It was something far older and infinitely more dangerous.

FNR: No.

The word came out as a growl that seemed to vibrate through the concrete floor itself, and Fenris charged.

His first three strides covered the distance like liquid lightning, claws digging into concrete for purchase as he closed the gap between predator and prey. Ted's gun came up, but he was moving in slow motion compared to seven feet of furious wolf-thing that had finally been unleashed. The ceiling came down like the fist of an angry god.

Concrete chunks the size of small cars crashed around him in an avalanche of dust and debris, filling the air with choking clouds of pulverized stone. Emergency klaxons began wailing somewhere in the distance as structural supports groaned under sudden strain.

But the falling debris wasn't random - it had been precisely placed, carefully timed. And through the chaos of dust and destruction, something massive dropped from the shadows above like a boulder given life and malevolent purpose.

Fenris had a split second to register brown fur the color of dark earth, enormous claws that gleamed like obsidian daggers, and the overwhelming musk of a predator that had never known fear before a massive arm wrapped around his throat from behind.

The bear was enormous - easily eight feet tall when fully upright, with shoulders broad enough to block out the overhead lights entirely. Its grip tightened around Fenris's windpipe with practiced efficiency, cutting off his air supply and lifting him clear off the ground as if he weighed nothing more than a child's toy.

Fenris clawed at the arm around his throat, his own considerable strength seeming puny against the bear's crushing embrace. His

claws left deep furrows in thick fur and muscle, drawing blood that ran hot and red, but the grip only tightened in response.

His vision began to narrow at the edges as oxygen deprivation set in, the harsh fluorescent lights becoming distant stars viewed through a narrowing tunnel.

Vincent dusted concrete powder off his shoulders with casual indifference and straightened his tie, his composure returning now that the immediate threat was neutralized. When he spoke, his voice carried the satisfied tone of a man who'd just proven an important point.

VNC: I like to run things a bit traditional here. You monsters are human subjects and no more.

The bear's grip tightened with mechanical precision, and Fenris felt his consciousness beginning to slip away like water through cupped hands. His struggles grew weaker, more desperate, as darkness crept in from the edges of his vision like creeping fog.

But even as his body betrayed him, even as the void reached up to claim him, questions burned in his mind with the intensity of white-hot coals.

Why was the bear following Vincent's orders so readily? In all his years, through all the hunts and territories he'd claimed, Fenris had never met another predator that would submit so easily to human authority. Bears were solitary creatures by nature, proud and fierce, apex predators that bowed to nothing and no one.

This level of compliance, this willingness to serve as someone else's weapon - it went against every instinct that should have been hardwired into the creature's DNA. It wasn't natural.

The bear's breathing was steady and controlled behind him, but there was something else in the rhythm. Something in the way it held itself, in the mechanical precision of its movements, that felt fundamentally wrong. Familiar in some distant way, but corrupted, twisted into something that violated the natural order. Then darkness claimed him entirely, and the question dissolved into the infinite void of unconsciousness.

End of Chapter 84
"Food Chain"

[There is always someone stronger.]

(Chapter 85 || Volume 3) Sandpit.

The sand was warm beneath his smaller hands, grains clinging to fur that was softer, less coarse than he remembered. Sunlight filtered through the canopy above, casting dappled patterns that danced across the forest floor like living things. The air smelled of pine needles and wild flowers, untainted by exhaust fumes or the metallic tang of blood. A familiar voice called from somewhere beyond the clearing, warm and bright as summer morning.

MLO: Come on, sleepyhead! The day's half gone already!

Fenris - though he wasn't Fenris here, was he? Here he was just a pup, barely four feet tall, with oversized paws he hadn't quite grown into yet - pushed himself up from the sand pit where he'd been dozing. The movement felt strange, like remembering how to breathe underwater, but right at the same time.

The voice called again, closer now, accompanied by the sound of something bounding through the underbrush with reckless abandon.

MLO: The creek's perfect today! Crystal clear, and I think I saw fish!

A golden shape burst through the ferns at the edge of the clearing, tail wagging so hard his entire body seemed to vibrate with joy. Milo was all energy and enthusiasm, a golden retriever whose fur caught the sunlight like spun metal. His tongue lolled out as he panted, dark eyes bright with mischief and adventure.

Fenris felt something crack in his chest at the sight. A sound escaped him - not quite a whine, not quite a gasp - and his legs nearly gave out. The emotional impact hit him like a physical blow, though he couldn't quite understand why.

MLO: You okay there, Fen? You look like you've seen a ghost.

FNR: I... I'm fine. Just tired, I guess.

But he wasn't fine. Something was wrong with this picture, something that made his throat tight and his eyes burn. The harder he tried to grasp what it was, the more it slipped away like water through his claws.

MLO: Come on! Race you to the water!

Without waiting for an answer, Milo bounded away through the trees, his joyful barking echoing through the forest. Fenris followed, his smaller legs carrying him over fallen logs and through patches of wildflowers that brushed against his fur like gentle fingers.

The creek was exactly as Milo had described - crystal clear water bubbling over smooth stones, creating tiny waterfalls and pools that reflected the sky above. Dragonflies skimmed across the surface, their wings catching the light like fragments of stained glass.

Milo had already splashed into the shallow water, sending droplets sparkling in all directions as he chased something that might have been a fish or might have been his own reflection.

MLO: Look, look! Did you see that? It was huge!

FNR: I'm sure it was.

The words came automatically, but Fenris found himself studying his friend with an intensity that surprised him. Every detail seemed impossibly precious - the way Milo's ears flopped when he moved, the pattern of freckles across his nose, the scar on his left shoulder from that time he'd tried to climb a tree to get a better look at a bird's nest.

The scar.

Something about that scar made Fenris's stomach lurch, though he couldn't say why. It was just a small mark, barely visible through the golden fur, but looking at it made him feel like he was falling through empty space.

MLO: You're being weird today.

Milo had emerged from the creek, shaking water from his coat in a spray that caught the sunlight. He padded over to where Fenris sat on a sun-warmed rock, his head tilted in that questioning way that was so purely, unmistakably him.

MLO: Seriously, what's wrong? You keep looking at me like... like you're trying to memorize my face or something.

FNR: Nothing's wrong. I just... I missed you, I guess.

The words slipped out before he could stop them, and they hung in

the air like a confession of some unspoken crime. Milo's expression shifted from playful concern to something deeper, more serious.

MLO: Missed me? Fen, I was only gone for like ten minutes chasing that butterfly yesterday. You're being really strange.

But that wasn't right, was it? It hadn't been ten minutes. It had been... how long had it been? The harder Fenris tried to remember, the more the memory seemed to shift and blur, like looking at something underwater.

They spent the afternoon as they had so many others - racing through the forest, playing elaborate games of hide and seek among the trees, lounging in patches of sunlight while Milo chattered about everything and nothing. The golden retriever had opinions about every squirrel, every bird, every cloud that drifted across the sky.

FNR: Remember when we used to talk about what we'd do when we grew up?

MLO: Used to? We still do that! Just yesterday you said you wanted to be big and strong enough to protect everyone you cared about.

Another crack in Fenris's chest, wider this time. The afternoon light was beginning to slant at different angles, casting longer shadows that seemed to reach toward them with grasping fingers.

MLO: And I said I wanted to be with you always, no matter what. Best friends forever, right?

FNR: Right.

But the word came out strangled, and Fenris had to look away from Milo's trusting eyes. Something was terribly wrong with this perfect day, this perfect moment. It felt like a beautiful lie, like a dream he was afraid to wake up from because waking up meant losing something precious beyond measure.

As evening approached, they made their way back to the clearing where the day had begun. The sand pit looked different in the fading light, less welcoming somehow. The shadows between the trees had grown deeper, more ominous.

Milo bounded ahead as always, but when he reached the edge of the clearing, he stopped. His posture changed, becoming alert and tense in a way that Fenris had never seen before.

MLO: Fen? Something's not right.

FNR: What do you mean?

MLO: This place... it feels different. Like we're not supposed to be here anymore.

Fenris approached slowly, every instinct screaming warnings he couldn't quite interpret. The clearing looked the same, but Milo was right - something had changed. The air felt thicker, charged with an electricity that made his fur stand on end.

MLO: And you... Fen, you're different too. Bigger. Older.

Looking down, Fenris realized with shock that Milo was right. His hands were larger, his limbs longer. He was growing, aging with each step toward the center of the clearing where the sand pit waited like an open mouth.

MLO: I don't understand what's happening.

The golden retriever's voice was smaller now, uncertain in a way that broke something fundamental inside Fenris's chest. This wasn't how it was supposed to go. Milo was never uncertain, never afraid. He was joy and confidence and unwavering loyalty wrapped in golden fur.

FNR: Milo, I-

MLO: You're bleeding.

The words cut through the evening air like a blade. Milo's dark eyes were wide, staring at something Fenris couldn't see. When Fenris looked down, he saw crimson drops falling onto the sand, each one landing with a sound like thunder.

MLO: Fen, you're bleeding, and I don't know how to help you.

The perfect day, the perfect memory, began to crack around the edges like old paint. The trees swayed without wind, the sky flickered between blue and red, and Milo's form began to waver like heat distortion rising from summer pavement.

MLO: Wake up, Fen. You have to wake up now.

But Fenris didn't want to wake up. He wanted to stay in this moment forever, even as it crumbled around him. He wanted to reach out and touch his friend one more time, to hear that joyful

bark echo through the forest, to see those bright eyes full of love and trust and absolute faith that everything would be all right.

MLO: You're bleeding, and someone's waiting for you. Someone who needs the real you, not this memory of who you used to be.

The sand beneath Fenris's feet began to shift and flow, pulling him down into darkness. Milo's image grew fainter, more translucent, but his voice remained clear and strong.

MLO: Be strong, Fen. Be who you need to be. I'll always be proud of you.

And then the golden retriever was gone, and the forest was gone, and the perfect day dissolved into shadow and pain and the harsh reality of a world where best friends didn't live forever, no matter how much you loved them.

End of Chapter 85 **"Sandpit"**

[Show the world your fangs.]

(Chapter 86 || Volume 3) Back To Instinct.

The taste of copper dragged Fenris back to consciousness like a chain wrapped around his soul. His throat burned with every breath, raw and damaged from the bear's crushing grip. But there was something else - a sharp, throbbing pain on the left side of his neck that pulsed in rhythm with his heartbeat.

The underground warehouse came back into focus slowly, emergency lighting casting everything in hellish red. The air was thick with concrete dust and the lingering scent of fear, but something had changed. The space felt emptier now, abandoned except for the steady drip of water from broken pipes somewhere in the darkness.

Vincent was gone. Ted was gone. Even Poppy had vanished, leaving only scattered zip ties on the concrete floor as evidence she'd ever been there. The only sounds were the mechanical hum of ventilation systems and something else- heavy, labored breathing that wasn't his own.

Fenris tried to sit up and immediately regretted it. Pain lanced through his skull like lightning, and his vision swam with black spots. But through the haze, he could make out a massive shape moving in the shadows at the edge of the light.

The bear.

It paced back and forth like a caged animal, its enormous frame casting shifting shadows on the concrete walls. But something was different about its movements - less controlled than before, more agitated. Its massive head swayed from side to side, and Fenris could hear the wet sound of its breathing, labored and harsh.

When Fenris shifted, trying to get his legs under him, the bear's head snapped toward him with predatory focus. Its small dark eyes reflected the emergency lighting like twin coals, and its lips pulled back to reveal yellowed fangs the size of railroad spikes.

That's when Fenris saw the bite marks.

They covered the bear's muzzle and neck, deep puncture wounds that wept dark blood. Some were fresh, still bleeding freely, while others showed signs of infection - angry red welts surrounded by swollen tissue. The bear had been fighting, and recently.

Fenris touched his own neck where the pain throbbed worst, and his fingers came away slick with blood. The bear had bitten him while he was unconscious, but not to kill. The wounds were precise, calculated - designed to weaken rather than destroy.

The sight of his own blood on his fingertips triggered something deep and primal in Fenris's brain. A switch that had been carefully maintained, kept in check through months of peaceful routine, suddenly flipped. The world went red.

FNR: You want to play rough?

His voice came out as a snarl, distorted by the transformation already beginning to ripple through his body. The careful human facade he'd worn for so long cracked and fell away like discarded clothing.

The bear responded with a roar that shook dust from the ceiling, a sound of pure rage and challenge that echoed through the concrete cathedral. It dropped to all fours and charged, eight hundred

pounds of muscle and fury bearing down on him like an avalanche given malevolent purpose.

Fenris met the charge head-on.

They collided in the center of the clearing with a sound like thunder, the impact sending both creatures sprawling across the concrete floor. The bear recovered first, its massive paws finding purchase on the smooth surface, and swiped at Fenris with claws that could have disemboweled a horse.

Fenris rolled aside, the claws missing his ribs by inches, and came up in a crouch. His own claws extended fully now, five-inch razors that gleamed like obsidian knives in the emergency lighting.

The fight that followed was nothing like the careful, calculated violence of human combat. This was something older, more fundamental - the collision of two apex predators with nothing left to lose.

The bear lunged again, jaws snapping shut inches from Fenris's face. Hot breath washed over him, reeking of decay and old blood, and he caught a glimpse of massive canines before rolling away from another crushing bite.

Fenris circled left, staying low, looking for an opening. The bear was larger, stronger, with natural armor in the form of thick fur and dense muscle. But Fenris was faster, more agile, with the intelligence of a hunter who had learned to survive by being smarter than his prey.

He feinted right, then dove left as the bear committed to blocking his false attack. His claws raked across the bear's flank, opening deep furrows that immediately began to bleed. The bear roared in pain and fury, spinning with surprising speed to catch Fenris with a backhand swipe that sent him tumbling across the concrete.

Stars exploded behind Fenris's eyes as his head struck the floor, but he forced himself to keep moving. In a fight like this, stopping meant dying. He rolled to his feet just as the bear's jaws snapped shut where his head had been a moment before.

The dance of death continued, both creatures bleeding from dozens of wounds. Fenris's superior speed let him stay ahead of the bear's crushing attacks, but he couldn't land a decisive blow. Every time

he tried to close for a killing strike, those massive paws would force him back with swipes that could have decapitated him.

Then the bear made a mistake.

It reared up on its hind legs, trying to use its superior reach to pin Fenris against one of the shipping containers. For just a moment, its throat was exposed - thick with muscle and fur, but still vulnerable.

Fenris didn't hesitate.

He launched himself upward, jaws opening wide, aiming for the soft spot just below the bear's jaw where the great arteries ran close to the surface. His fangs sank deep into hot flesh, tearing through fur and muscle to find the pulsing rivers of life beneath.

The bear's roar became a gurgling scream as blood filled its throat. It clawed frantically at Fenris's back, ten-inch talons raking deep furrows through fur and skin, trying to dislodge the death grip on its neck.

But Fenris held on.

He locked his jaws like a steel trap, feeling his fangs grind against bone as he sought the perfect angle to sever the carotid artery. The bear's struggles grew weaker, more desperate, as precious blood poured from the wounds.

They fell together, the bear's massive weight bearing them both to the concrete floor. Still Fenris held on, even as claws tore at his back and ribs, even as his own blood mixed with the bear's to form spreading pools on the cold concrete.

The bear's struggles slowed. Its breathing became shallow, labored. The massive heartbeat that Fenris could feel through his grip on its throat began to flutter and skip. Finally, with a sound like a sigh, the great creature went limp.

Fenris held on for another long moment, making sure, before finally releasing his grip and rolling away from the cooling corpse. He lay on his back on the bloody concrete, staring up at the emergency lights that painted everything the color of violence, and tried to remember how to breathe without tasting blood.

Around him, the warehouse fell silent except for the steady drip of

various fluids onto concrete and the distant hum of machinery. The pool of blood beneath the bear's massive form spread slowly, following the microscopic imperfections in the floor until it formed an abstract pattern that looked almost like a work of art. Crimson art painted in the currency of survival. Fenris closed his eyes and tried not to think about golden fur and joyful barking and the way some wounds never truly heal, no matter how much blood you spill trying to forget them.

End of Chapter 86
"Back To Instinct"

[Proud of me..? Don't make me laugh.]

(Chapter 87 || Volume 3) Atonement.

The black sedan's engine roared to life in the parking garage beneath the warehouse complex, its headlights cutting through the concrete gloom like twin searchlights. Vincent gripped the steering wheel with white knuckles, his expensive suit torn and stained with concrete dust from their hasty retreat through the underground tunnels.

In the passenger seat, Ted clutched his pistol with both hands, his eyes darting between the mirrors and the shadows that seemed to move just beyond the reach of their headlights.

TED: Think he's dead?

VNC: Eight hundred pounds of pissed-off grizzly? He better be.

But Vincent's voice carried less certainty than his words suggested. The wolf had proven more resourceful than anticipated, and Vincent hadn't survived twenty years in this business by underestimating dangerous opponents.

In the backseat, Poppy sat with her hands still zip-tied behind her back, her dark hair falling across her face like a curtain. But her eyes were alert, calculating, watching every detail of their route as Vincent navigated the maze of support pillars toward the exit ramp.

PPY: You know he's not going to stop, right? Not until he gets what he wants.

VNC: And what exactly does he want, sweetheart?

PPY: Me. Obviously. Though I'm betting he doesn't even know why

yet.

Vincent's jaw tightened as he gunned the engine up the concrete ramp toward street level. The warehouse complex fell away behind them, its bulk outlined against the night sky like a concrete monument to his crumbling empire.

They emerged onto the riverside industrial road, the sedan's tires singing against wet asphalt. Rain had started to fall while they were underground, turning the world beyond the windshield into a impressionist painting of streetlights and neon reflections.

VNC: Doesn't matter what he wants. By morning, we'll be three states away with new identities and enough cash to disappear permanently.

TED: What about the operation? Twenty years of building-

VNC: Can be rebuilt elsewhere. The important thing is staying alive long enough to rebuild it.

Vincent pressed the accelerator harder, pushing the sedan through the industrial district's maze of warehouses and shipping containers. The Riverside Bridge loomed ahead, its steel arches spanning the dark water like a gateway to freedom.

That's when he glanced in the rearview mirror and saw death itself pursuing them.

The figure running along the rooftops parallel to the road was barely human anymore. Seven feet of blood-soaked muscle and fur, moving from building to building with liquid grace that defied physics. Crimson eyes caught the streetlight and reflected it back like twin stars burning in the darkness.

VNC: Shit, shit, SHIT!

Vincent floored the accelerator just as Fenris launched himself from the roof of a three-story warehouse. The wolf-creature hung in the air for an impossible moment, silhouetted against the storm clouds, before crashing down onto the sedan's roof with the force of a meteorite.

Metal screamed and glass exploded inward as the roof crumpled under the impact. The steering wheel jerked in Vincent's hands as claws punched through the roof like steel spikes, seeking flesh and finding only leather seats.

TED: He's on the car! He's on the fucking car!

Ted twisted in his seat, trying to get a clear shot through the spider-webbed rear window, but the sedan was already careening out of control. Vincent fought with the wheel as they approached the bridge, but twenty feet of skid marks later, the car smashed through the guard rail and plunged toward the dark water below.

The impact with the river was like hitting concrete at sixty miles per hour. The sedan's front end crumpled as it struck the water, and the vehicle immediately began to sink, air bubbling out through the shattered windows as icy river water rushed in.

Vincent's world became a chaos of choking darkness and the metallic taste of blood. The driver's side door was jammed shut by the impact, but the windshield had completely shattered, creating an escape route filled with jagged glass and freezing water.

He kicked frantically toward what he hoped was the surface, his lungs burning with the need for oxygen. Behind him, he could hear the sedan settling onto the riverbed with a sound like grinding teeth.

Ted never made it out.

Poppy found herself pulled from the wreckage by impossibly strong hands, her zip-tied wrists making it impossible to swim but also unnecessary as she was hauled upward through the dark water with relentless efficiency. She broke the surface gasping and choking, river water streaming from her hair.

Fenris dragged her toward the concrete supports of the bridge, where a maintenance platform provided shelter from both the current and any observers on the road above. His movements were mechanical, efficient, but Poppy could see the toll the night had taken - deep claw marks across his back still wept blood, and his breathing came in harsh, labored gasps.

He deposited her on the platform and stepped back, giving her space to cough up river water and catch her breath. In the dim light filtering down from the bridge above, she could see him clearly for the first time.

He was magnificent and terrifying in equal measure - seven feet of lean muscle covered in coarse black fur, with eyes that burned like

coals in the darkness. But there was something else in those crimson depths, something that looked almost like... Guilt.

PPY: Why?

Her voice was hoarse from the river water, but the question carried clearly in the confined space beneath the bridge.

PPY: Why are you doing this? You don't know me. You don't owe me anything. Hell, you don't even know what Vincent wanted from me.

Fenris crouched on the edge of the platform, his massive frame balanced with predatory grace as he watched the river current carry debris from the crash downstream. When he finally spoke, his voice was quiet, thoughtful.

FNR: Just trying to atone for my sins.

PPY: What sins?

But Fenris was already moving, his form dissolving back into shadow as he prepared to vanish into the night. Only his voice lingered, carried on the wind like a ghost's whisper.

FNR: All of them.

And then he was gone, leaving Poppy alone on the platform with the sound of rushing water and the distant wail of sirens approaching the bridge above.

End of Chapter 87 **"Atonement"**

[Let me remember one last time.]

(Chapter 88 || Volume 3) Unhealed Wounds.

I remember the taste of copper. Not the metallic tang of coins or pipes, but something warmer, more intimate. The taste of betrayal written in blood across my tongue.

The forest had been our sanctuary for three years. Three years of chasing butterflies through dappled sunlight, of racing through streams that sang with the voice of mountain snow, of curling up

together in patches of warm grass while Milo told me stories about the world beyond the trees. He always said we'd see it together someday - the cities with their towers of glass, the oceans that stretched beyond the horizon, all the wonders that existed past the green walls of our childhood.

I was fifteen when the hounds found us. Still young enough to believe that tomorrow would always come, still naive enough to think that love could protect us from the world's hunger for violence.

We were by the creek that day, the same one from my dreams. Milo was splashing in the shallow water, chasing minnows with the boundless energy that made him shine like a small sun in the darkness of my increasingly complicated world. I was growing - had been growing for months - and with that growth came changes I didn't understand. Sharper teeth. Longer claws. A hunger that had nothing to do with food and everything to do with the scent of fear.

But around Milo, I was still just Fen. Still the clumsy pup who tripped over his own paws and laughed at bad jokes and believed that golden retrievers could fix anything with enough enthusiasm and unconditional love.

The attack came without warning.

Six of them emerged from the underbrush like shadows given form and malice. Hunting hounds, bred for tracking and killing creatures like me. Their eyes held the cold intelligence of predators who had never known failure, never tasted defeat. Milo saw them first.

MLO: Fen! Run!

But I couldn't run. Not when they were advancing on him with those calculating stares, not when I could see the way their muscles bunched beneath scarred hide, preparing for the kill. He was everything good and pure in my world, and they wanted to tear him apart simply because he stood between them and their prey.

Something inside me snapped.

Not broke - snapped. Like a chain under too much pressure, like a dam holding back a flood of years' worth of suppressed instinct and genetic memory. Every story my kind had passed down through generations of persecution, every drop of blood spilled by those

who came before me, every scream that had echoed through forests when the humans came with their hounds and their hatred.

It all came rushing out in a wave of red that drowned my consciousness entirely.

When I came back to myself, the sun had moved. Shadows fell at different angles, and the air tasted of iron and endings. My mouth was full of fur and flesh, warm liquid coating my tongue and teeth in a way that should have been revolting but instead felt like coming home to something I'd been running from my entire life.

Six hounds lay scattered around the clearing like broken dolls. Not killed - destroyed. Torn apart with a thoroughness that spoke of rage beyond reason, beyond sanity. Pieces of them decorated the trees, painted the rocks, turned our peaceful sanctuary into an abstract sculpture of violence. And beneath me...

Beneath me was Milo.

His golden fur was matted with blood - not his own, at first glance, but as I looked closer, as my vision cleared from the red haze of what I'd become, I saw the truth that would haunt me for the rest of my existence. My teeth were buried in his throat.

MLO: Fen?

His voice was so small, so confused. Dark eyes that had always looked at me with perfect trust and unconditional love now held something I'd never seen there before.

Fear.

Not fear of the hounds, who were already dead and dismembered around us. Fear of me. Fear of the creature I'd become, the monster that wore his best friend's face while tearing out his throat.

I released him immediately, stumbling backward on shaking legs, but the damage was already done. Blood poured from the wounds I'd inflicted, staining his beautiful coat in patterns that looked like abstract art. His breathing came in short, sharp gasps as his body tried desperately to compensate for what I'd stolen from him.

FNR: Milo, I... I didn't mean to-

MLO: I know.

Even dying, even bleeding out because of what I'd done to him, he tried to comfort me. That was who he was. That was who he'd always been.

MLO: I know you didn't mean it, Fen. You were protecting me. You were...

He couldn't finish the sentence. Blood frothed at the corners of his mouth, and his eyes began to glaze with the particular distance that comes before the end.

I held him as he died. Held him and felt his heartbeat grow weaker, felt his breathing become more shallow, felt the warmth leave his body degree by degree until he was just weight in my arms. Just golden fur and cooling flesh and the terrible absence of everything that had made him who he was.

The last thing he said was my name. Not a curse, not an accusation, just... my name. Spoken with the same love he'd shown me every day for three years, even as my teeth marks decorated his throat like some obscene jewelry.

I buried him in the clearing where we'd played as pups. Used my claws to dig through roots and stones until I had a grave deep enough to keep the scavengers away. I gathered wildflowers - the ones he'd always loved - and laid them over the small mound of earth that marked the end of everything innocent in my world.

That night, I left the forest. Left the sanctuary we'd shared, left the memories that were now tainted with the taste of his blood and the sound of his final breath. I walked through the darkness until I found roads, then cities, then the careful life of restraint and routine I'd built like a wall between myself and the monster I'd discovered I'd always been.

But you can't run from yourself forever. You can't build walls high enough to keep out the truth of what you are, what you're capable of when the chains finally snap and the flood comes pouring out.

I'd spent years trying to atone for thirty seconds of uncontrolled violence. Years of helping strangers, of saving lives, of being the protector I'd failed to be when it mattered most.

But atonement is a hungry god, and it's never satisfied with the sacrifices you're willing to make.

Under the bridge, with the sound of sirens growing closer and the taste of river water still bitter on my tongue, I touched the scars on my neck where the bear had bitten me and remembered golden fur matted with blood. Some sins don't wash clean, no matter how much blood you spill trying to balance the scales.

End of Chapter 88
"Unhealed Wounds"

[I will never forgive myself.]

(Chapter 89 || Volume 3) Knight Of Redemption.

The morning routine felt different now, though Fenris couldn't quite put his finger on why. Same alarm at 6:30, same careful grooming, same walk through streets that had grown familiar over months of repetition. But something in the air had changed - a lightness, perhaps, as if the city itself could breathe easier.

Rosetti's Butcher Shop gleamed like a jewel in the morning sunlight. New display cases lined the walls, their glass surfaces spotless and bright. Fresh paint covered the walls in warm, welcoming colors, and the smell of new equipment mingled with the familiar scents of meat and spices. It looked better than it ever had, even before the attack.

Marco stood behind the counter, polishing a knife with practiced movements, but his eyes kept drifting to Fenris with poorly concealed curiosity.

RST: You know, I've been thinking about what you said. About having some savings put aside.

Fenris continued arranging cuts of beef in the display case, his massive hands moving with surprising delicacy.

FNR: What about it?

RST: Well, it's just... this level of renovation doesn't come cheap. New cases, new equipment, professional installation. We're talking thirty, maybe forty thousand dollars. That's a lot of savings for someone working part-time at a butcher shop.

Fenris straightened, fixing Marco with a look that was equal parts amusement and warning.

FNR: I had a good investment strategy.

The older man opened his mouth to press further, but something in Fenris's expression made him think better of it. Instead, he reached for the small television mounted in the corner and turned up the volume.

NEWS ANCHOR: ...complete dismantling of what authorities are calling the Caruso crime organization. Vincent Caruso and his lieutenant Theodore Martinez were found dead in a submerged vehicle three days ago, apparently the result of a high-speed chase that ended when their car crashed through the Riverside Bridge guardrail.

Fenris paused in his work, his enhanced hearing catching every word despite his apparent focus on the meat display.

NEWS ANCHOR: The breakthrough in the case came when Penelope "Poppy" Turm, a former accountant for several Caruso front companies, came forward with extensive documentation of the organization's illegal activities. Miss Poppy had been in hiding for several weeks after allegedly stealing financial records that detail money laundering operations, drug trafficking routes, and evidence of numerous murders.

RST: Can you believe that? Thirty years that bastard was poisoning our neighborhood, and some brave girl with a head for numbers brings the whole thing down.

The news switched to a press conference where a young woman with dark hair and intelligent eyes stood at a podium surrounded by federal agents. Even through the grainy television footage, Fenris recognized her immediately.

PPY: I want to be clear that I couldn't have done this alone. There are people who risked everything to keep me alive, to give me the chance to bring this information to light. Heroes who will never be recognized because that's not what heroes do - they just do what's right, and then they go back to their lives.

Marco glanced at Fenris, then back at the television, then at Fenris again. His weathered face showed the slow dawning of understanding, but he kept his thoughts to himself.

RST: Funny thing about heroes. Sometimes they're hiding in plain sight.

He turned the volume down and went back to his knife polishing, but there was a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth. Marco glanced at Fenris again, and for just a moment, he could almost see it - the way the big guy carried himself, the careful control, the quiet guilt that seemed to follow him around like a shadow.

Reminds me of someone who fought alongside Icarus during the war. Same build, same attitude. But that was years ago, and that guy had a different aura...

Marco shook his head and went back to his work. Some questions were better left unasked. The bell above the door chimed, announcing a customer. Fenris looked up, grateful for the interruption, and saw a young woman in worn jeans and a oversized rainbow beanie pulled low over her eyes. She moved with the careful deliberation of someone still recovering from recent trauma.

FNR: Good morning. What can I get for you today?

CUSTOMER: Just looking for some good, honest meat. Something for a celebration dinner, you know? New beginnings and all that.

Her voice was muffled by the beanie, but something about it seemed familiar. Fenris selected a prime cut of ribeye, wrapping it in white paper with practiced efficiency.

FNR: This should do nicely. On the house - consider it a neighborhood welcome gift.

CUSTOMER: That's very kind. Thank you.

She took the package and headed toward the door, but paused at the threshold. Marco had disappeared into the back room, claiming he needed to check the freezer inventory, leaving them momentarily alone.

The customer reached up and pushed back her rainbow beanie, revealing dark hair and eyes that held depths he couldn't quite read. Her smile was gentle but knowing as she looked back at him.

ILA: Surprised you didn't recognize me, knight of redemption.

And then she was gone, the door chiming softly behind her, leaving Fenris standing in the morning sunlight with the strange sensation that perhaps, for the first time in years, the weight on his shoulders felt just a little bit lighter.

End of Chapter 89
"Knight Of Redemption"

[Your portrait is quite the spectacle.]

(Chapter 90 || Volume 3) Wanderer.

The morning sun cast long shadows across the rubble-strewn streets of Valdris, painting the broken stone in shades of amber and gold. Nilah stepped carefully over the debris, her brown boots finding purchase on chunks of masonry that had once been proud buildings. The city bore the scars of Akumu's terror like wounds that refused to heal, though three years had passed since the embodiment of fear had finally been banished from their world.

She paused at what had once been the town square, where a massive crater still dominated the landscape. Around its edges, a curious sight met her eyes: humans and monsters working side by side, their voices carrying across the morning air as they hauled stone blocks and timber beams. A wolf-hybrid with silver fur streaking his muscular arms directed a group of human laborers toward a half-constructed foundation, while nearby, a woman with scales glinting along her neck organized supplies with methodical precision.

The war had changed everything. In Akumu's reign of terror, humans and monsters had lived in separate realms, viewing each other with suspicion and fear. But when darkness threatened to consume all life, those old prejudices had crumbled like the walls around them. Now, in the aftermath, they struggled to build something new together.

WLF: Careful with that beam! We need it intact for the support structure.

WRK: Got it, Marcus. Where do you want these stone blocks?

MRC: Stack them by the east wall. Sera's crew will mortar them in place this afternoon.

Nilah watched the easy cooperation between the species, something that would have been unthinkable in her childhood. Yet even witnessing this progress, she felt that familiar hollow ache in her chest, the emptiness that had settled there when the war ended and refused to leave. Victory should have brought relief, shouldn't it? Peace should have felt like coming home.

Instead, she felt like a sword without a sheath, purposeless now that the great enemy was gone.

A commotion near the construction site drew her attention. A young human boy, perhaps eight years old, had wandered too close to a pile of unstable rubble. The stones shifted ominously above him as he reached for something glinting in the debris.

BOY: I can almost reach it! It looks like mama's locket!

MRC: Kid, get back from there!

But the warning came too late. The rubble began to cascade downward with a grinding roar. Without thinking, Nilah's hand moved to the obsidian hilt at her side. Fire bloomed along the black volcanic glass, forming a blade of pure flame that hummed with barely contained energy. She sprinted forward, her red cape billowing behind her, and swept the boy into her arms just as the stones crashed down where he had been standing.

The child clung to her, trembling. Around them, the construction crew had frozen, their eyes wide with recognition. Word traveled fast in small communities, especially about the woman with orange hair who carried flame in her hands.

BOY: You... you're her, aren't you? The fire lady from the stories?

Nilah gently set him down, dismissing her flame blade with a thought. The obsidian hilt cooled against her palm, becoming nothing more than a simple piece of carved volcanic glass.

NLH: Just someone who happened to be walking by. Are you hurt?

The boy shook his head, but his eyes remained fixed on her face with the kind of awe that made Nilah uncomfortable. She had never wanted to be a legend, had never asked for the stories and songs that followed her wherever she went. The greatest swordsman in the world, they called her. The hero who helped fell Akumu. The wanderer who appeared wherever help was needed most. Marcus approached, his lupine features showing relief and gratitude.

MRC: Thank you. That was... impressive work. I'm Marcus, foreman of this reconstruction project. We've been trying to clear this area for weeks, but we keep running into unstable sections.

NLH: The damage goes deeper than what you can see on the surface. Akumu's influence left more than just physical scars.

She studied the crater, remembering the battle that had carved it into the earth. Fear had a way of poisoning everything it touched, and some wounds took longer to heal than others.

MRC: You speak like someone who was there.

NLH: I was.

The simple admission hung in the air between them. Marcus nodded slowly, understanding flickering in his yellow eyes. Most of the surviving veterans carried themselves with a certain weight, a gravity that came from having stared into the abyss and somehow finding the strength to stare back.

MRC: We could use someone with your... expertise. This reconstruction has been slow going, and we're running into problems that normal engineering can't solve. Sections of the city that still seem to resist our efforts.

Nilah glanced around at the mixed crew of humans and monsters, all watching her with hopeful expressions. This was why she wandered, wasn't it? To help communities like this one, to use her abilities for something constructive rather than destructive. Yet the hollow feeling persisted, a constant reminder that no amount of good deeds could fill the void where her sense of purpose used to be.

NLH: What kind of problems?

SRA: Entire blocks where nothing will grow, no matter what we plant. Foundations that crumble no matter how carefully we lay them. And sometimes...

She hesitated, her scaled hands wringing nervously.

SRA: Sometimes people report seeing things in the shadows. Echoes of what was.

Akumu was gone, banished beyond the veil of reality itself. But fear was a stubborn thing, and it left traces like stains that refused to wash clean. Nilah had seen it before in other cities, other towns struggling to rebuild from the nightmare years.

NLH: I can stay for a few days. Help you identify the worst affected areas and clear them properly.

The relief on their faces was immediate and profound. Children who

had been hiding behind their parents' legs crept closer, and the work crews began to murmur excitedly among themselves. Hope was a powerful thing, Nilah had learned. Sometimes just the promise of help was enough to reignite it in people's hearts.

As the day wore on, she worked alongside the reconstruction teams, using her pyrokinetic abilities to clear debris and her keen eye to spot structural weaknesses that others might miss. The flame blade made short work of twisted metal beams, and her years of combat experience translated surprisingly well to construction challenges.

But even as she labored, even as she saw the grateful smiles and heard the thankful words, the emptiness remained. During the war, everything had been clear. There was an enemy to fight, a world to save, friends to protect. Every morning brought purpose, every victory brought them closer to their goal.

Now? Now there were only small battles against entropy and despair, victories measured in rebuilt walls and replanted gardens. Important work, certainly, but it felt so much smaller than the grand crusade that had defined her for so many years.

That evening, as the work crews dispersed to their homes, Nilah found herself sitting on a makeshift bench overlooking the crater. She pulled a small, creased photograph from her pocket, studying the faces captured in faded color. Herself and Icarus, taken during a rare moment of peace during the war. They were both younger then, their faces unmarked by the weight of all they would witness and endure.

NLH: We won, old friend. Just like we promised we would.

But victory felt hollow when there was no one left to share it with. Icarus was gone, along with so many others who had fought and died to see this day. And Nilah was left to wander a world that no longer seemed to need heroes, carrying skills honed for war in a time of peace.

She tucked the photograph away and reached into another pocket, withdrawing a pressed Celosia flower, its flame-colored petals dried but still vibrant. The flowers had always reminded her of fire frozen in time, beautiful and eternal. She had started collecting them after the war, pressing them between the pages of books and keeping them as small reminders that beauty could still exist in a world that

had seen so much darkness.

Tomorrow she would continue her work here, helping Valdris heal from wounds both visible and hidden. And when her task was done, she would move on to the next broken place, the next community in need. It was good work, meaningful work.

It just wasn't enough to fill the space where war had carved out her purpose. The sun set behind the ruins, painting the sky in shades of orange and red, and Nilah sat in the growing darkness, a guardian without walls to defend, a warrior without a war to fight.

End of Chapter 90 **"Wanderer"**

[What is my purpose - aside from burning?]

(Chapter 91 || Volume 3) Helping Hand.

Dawn came with the sound of hammers and voices, the reconstruction crews beginning their work as the first light touched the broken skyline of Valdris. Nilah had risen before them, as was her habit, and now stood at the edge of the cursed district where nothing would grow and shadows seemed to move with unnatural purpose.

The area stretched for three city blocks, a dead zone where Akumu's influence had sunk deepest into the very foundations of reality. The cobblestones were blackened as if by fire, yet cold to the touch. Windows stared out like empty eye sockets from buildings that somehow felt wrong, their angles slightly off in ways that made the mind recoil.

MRC: Nobody goes in there anymore. We tried, the first year after the war. Lost two good people.

He had approached quietly, his lupine senses allowing him to move with surprising stealth for such a large man. Beside him walked Sera, her scaled skin catching the morning light like polished jade.

NLH: Lost how?

SRA: They came back... different. Wouldn't speak for days, and when they finally did, all they could talk about was the fear. Said it was still alive in there, waiting.

Nilah studied the boundary where normal stone met the twisted blackness. She could feel it too, a wrongness that made her fingers itch for her blade. This wasn't just residual damage from the war. This was something deeper, more insidious.

NLH: Akumu fed on fear, but fear also fed on itself. Some places became so saturated with terror that it took on a life of its own.

MRC: Can it be cleansed?

NLH: Everything can be cleansed. The question is whether the cure might be worse than the disease.

She stepped forward, crossing the invisible line into the dead zone. The temperature dropped immediately, and the sounds of the construction crews faded to whispers. Her breath misted in the sudden cold, and shadows that had no source danced at the corners of her vision.

SRA: Wait! You shouldn't go in alone!

But Nilah was already walking deeper into the cursed district, her hand resting on the obsidian hilt at her side. The flame that answered her call here was different, tinged with something darker than usual. It illuminated the path ahead but seemed to create more shadows than it dispelled.

The buildings around her groaned and shifted, though no wind stirred the air. Windows reflected images that weren't quite right, showing glimpses of the terror that had once walked these streets. She passed a fountain filled with black water that seemed to move without any current, and doorways that led to rooms larger than the buildings that contained them.

At the district's heart stood what had once been a temple, its spire twisted into an impossible spiral that hurt to look at directly. This was the epicenter, the place where Akumu had planted its deepest roots in the world. If she could cleanse this, the rest would follow.

You cannot save them. You could not save him.

The whisper came from everywhere and nowhere, carrying the weight of old grief and older fears. Nilah's grip tightened on her weapon, but she didn't draw it. Not yet.

NLH: Show yourself.

We are what you made us. We are the fear you carry. The knowledge that all your victories mean nothing. That everyone you love will die, and you will be left alone with your hollow purpose.

Images flickered around her: Icarus flying, cities burning, the faces of everyone she had failed to save during the war. But beneath the supernatural terror, she recognized something more mundane and more dangerous. Her own doubts, given voice and form.

NLH: You're not Akumu. You're just the echo it left behind. A shadow of a shadow.

She drew her blade, fire blooming along the obsidian edge. The flame burned brighter here, fed by her resolve. Whatever this thing was, it had made a mistake by using Icarus's memory against her. Some wounds were too sacred to be touched by false fears.

The confrontation was brief but intense. Fire met shadow in the temple's heart, and where her blade passed, the wrongness began to unravel like a tapestry with a pulled thread. The whispers grew to screams, then faded to nothing. The twisted spire straightened with a sound like breaking chains, and clean sunlight streamed through windows that had been dark for three years.

When she emerged from the district twenty minutes later, the blackened cobblestones had returned to their natural gray, and the first green shoots were already pushing through cracks in the pavement.

MRC: By the ancestors... it's done? Just like that?

NLH: The hard part wasn't destroying the fear. It was recognizing what was real and what wasn't.

SRA: Will it come back?

NLH: Not here. Fear like that needs fresh terror to feed on, and this place has seen enough.

The celebration that followed was subdued but genuine. The construction crews raised a toast with whatever they had to hand, and children ventured into the formerly cursed district to pick the wildflowers that had somehow bloomed in minutes rather than months.

Over the next few days, Nilah worked alongside the crews to clear the remaining problem areas. Most were simple enough to handle, places where rubble had settled in dangerous ways or where old

foundations needed reinforcement. Her pyrokinetic abilities proved invaluable for precision demolition, and her tactical mind helped them plan the most efficient reconstruction routes.

GRL: Are you really the strongest swordsman in the world?

The question came from a half-fox child, perhaps six years old, with russet fur along her arms and pointed ears that twitched with curiosity. She had been following Nilah around the worksite for the better part of an hour, too shy to approach but too fascinated to leave.

NLH: I've been told that, yes.

GRL: Could you teach me to fight like you?

Nilah paused in her work, studying the child's eager face. During the war, she would have said yes immediately. Every sword arm was needed then, every fighter could make the difference between survival and extinction. But now...

NLH: Why do you want to learn?

GRL: So I can help people like you do. So I can be strong.

NLH: Strength isn't just about fighting. Look around you.

She gestured to the construction site, where humans and monsters worked together to raise walls and lay foundations.

NLH: Marcus is strong because he can organize a crew and make hard decisions. Sera is strong because she can solve problems that stump everyone else. Your parents are strong because they're rebuilding a home for you in a world that tried to tear everything down.

GRL: But you're strong because you can make fire swords and beat the scary things.

NLH: I'm strong because I choose to use those abilities to help rather than harm. The sword doesn't make the warrior. The choice does.

The girl pondered this with the seriousness that only children could bring to life's big questions. Finally, she nodded and scampered away to help her mother sort nails by size. It was a small moment, but it lingered with Nilah longer than the dramatic confrontation in the cursed district.

By the end of the week, Valdris was well on its way to becoming a

proper city again. The crater had been filled and foundations laid for a new town hall. Gardens bloomed in formerly dead soil, and the mixed community had settled into a rhythm of cooperation that would have been unthinkable before the war.

MRC: Stay longer. We could use someone like you permanently.

SRA: There's talk of making you an honorary citizen. Maybe even offering you a position on the town council.

They stood together at the edge of town, watching the sunset paint the new buildings in shades of gold and orange. It was a tempting offer. Valdris would be a good place to settle, and the people here had accepted her without reservation or fear.

NLH: There are other places that need help. Other towns still struggling with what the war left behind.

MRC: There will always be other places. When do you stop and build something for yourself?

It was a fair question, one that Nilah had been asking herself more frequently lately. But the hollow feeling in her chest provided the answer. She wasn't ready to stop moving, wasn't ready to let herself rest. Not when motion was the only thing keeping the emptiness at bay.

NLH: When I find where I belong, I'll know.

She left Valdris the next morning, her pack restocked with supplies and her purse heavier with the town's gratitude. But as the rebuilt walls disappeared behind her, that familiar ache returned, the sense of purpose fulfilled but not satisfied.

The months that followed blurred together in a pattern of arrival, assessment, and action. There was Thornwick, where giant spiders had taken up residence in buildings weakened by Akumu's passage. Nilah spent two weeks there, using controlled burns to clear out the nests and teaching the locals how to maintain fire barriers that would keep the creatures at bay.

In Greystone, the problem was more subtle: wells that had turned bitter, crops that withered despite careful tending, and a general malaise that hung over the community like morning fog. The source turned out to be a fragment of Akumu's essence, buried beneath the old market square. Destroying it required three days of careful excavation and a final confrontation with memories made manifest.

Port Sunder presented unique challenges. The harbor city's problems were logistical rather than supernatural. The war had disrupted trade routes and left the docks in ruins, but the real issue was mistrust between the human fishermen and the aquatic monsters who had emerged from the deep waters. Nilah found herself playing diplomat as much as demolitions expert, organizing joint fishing expeditions and mediating disputes over territorial rights.

Each town brought its own lessons and its own small victories. Children who smiled instead of cowered. Markets that bustled with mixed crowds of humans and monsters. Gardens that bloomed where only ash had grown. Yet no matter how many communities she helped, no matter how many grateful farewells she received, the emptiness persisted.

Seasons turned, and still she wandered. The network of restored towns began to speak of her in whispers and stories: the fire-sword woman who appeared when hope seemed lost, who could cleanse the worst of the war's legacy and vanish like morning mist. Some places erected small shrines in her honor. Others simply remembered her name and told their children that help would come when it was needed most.

But Nilah felt less like a hero and more like a ghost, drifting from crisis to crisis without ever finding a place to rest. The war had given her purpose and taken away her peace. Victory had given her freedom and taken away her direction.

Standing on a hilltop overlooking her latest project, a farming community called Millbrook, she counted the months since Valdris. Fourteen towns, dozens of problems solved, hundreds of people helped. It should have been enough.

It should have filled the hollow space inside her.

It should have felt like coming home.

Instead, she simply reached into her pocket, touched the pressed Celosia flower she kept there, and began planning her route to the next broken place that needed mending.

End of Chapter 91
"Helping Hand"

[The world needs you, Nilah.]

(Chapter 92 || Volume 3) Beneath The Endless Sky.

The Ashmark Plains stretched endlessly in every direction, a sea of golden grass that rippled in waves beneath the afternoon wind. No roads crossed this expanse, no settlements dotted the horizon. It was a place between places, perfect for someone who belonged nowhere in particular.

Nilah walked with measured steps, her boots creating a soft whisper against the dried stalks. Her red cape billowed behind her, the only splash of vivid color in the muted landscape. She had been traveling for three days since leaving Millbrook, taking the long route to nowhere in particular because the straight paths felt too much like running.

The grass here grew tall enough to brush her waist, and occasionally she would spot the delicate orange blooms of wild Celosia flowers scattered among the green. Each time, she would pause to examine them, sometimes pressing one between the pages of the small journal she carried. The flowers reminded her of flames frozen in time, beautiful and eternal in their stillness.

A hawk circled overhead, riding the thermals with effortless grace. Nilah watched its flight pattern, remembering another time when she had lain in grass like this, much younger and infinitely more hopeful.

You're wasting your time again.

Her father's voice echoed across the years, sharp with the familiar edge of disappointment. She had been maybe eight then, lying in the meadow behind their cottage, watching clouds drift across the summer sky and imagining herself soaring among them like the birds she envied.

Other children your age are learning useful skills. Sewing, cooking, proper comportment. But here you are, daydreaming about nonsense.

She had tried to explain that she wasn't just daydreaming, that she was learning things too. The way the wind patterns changed before a storm, how different birds flew at different heights, the names of

all the flowers that grew wild in their valley. But he had dismissed it all with a wave of his calloused hand.

Useless knowledge for a useless girl.

The memory stung even now, decades later. Nilah forced herself to keep walking, but the ghosts of childhood had been stirred and weren't easily banished.

Her father had been a practical man, a blacksmith who dealt in tangible things: iron and fire, hammer and anvil. He had little patience for a daughter who preferred watching the sky to learning the domestic arts that would make her a suitable wife. When her pyrokinetic abilities first manifested, he had seen them not as a gift but as another mark of her strangeness.

Fire belongs in the forge, not dancing in a child's hands. What man will want a wife who plays with flames like a street performer?

She had learned to hide her abilities then, to tamp down the fire that wanted to bloom at her fingertips. For years she had tried to be what he wanted: quiet, obedient, unremarkable. But the flames had refused to be contained forever, and when they finally erupted, they had taken more than just her childhood illusions with them.

The grass rustled around her as a stronger gust of wind swept across the plains. Somewhere in the distance, she could hear the faint lowing of cattle, probably belonging to one of the nomadic herding families that moved through these lands with the seasons. The sound carried a note of melancholy that seemed to match her mood.

You'll never amount to anything, Nilah. Mark my words.

How wrong he had been, in the end. She had become something beyond his wildest imagination: the strongest swordsman in the world, a hero of the war against Akumu, a legend whispered in taverns and sung by traveling minstrels. But somehow, his voice still carried more weight in her mind than all the grateful thanks and awed recognition she had received since.

Maybe because part of her suspected he had been right about the only thing that mattered. She had achieved great things, certainly, but what did any of it mean if she was still walking alone across empty plains, carrying a hollow space where her sense of belonging

should be?

The sun was beginning its descent toward the western horizon, painting the grassland in shades of amber and gold. Nilah found a slight rise in the terrain and settled herself cross-legged in the swaying grass. From here, she could see for miles in every direction, an ocean of green and gold stretching to the edges of the world.

Her fingers found the pressed Celosia in her pocket, tracing its delicate outline through the fabric. She had been collecting them for so long now, but she couldn't say exactly why. Perhaps because they were beautiful and brief, like so many things worth preserving. Perhaps because they reminded her that even in the aftermath of destruction, color could still bloom.

Or perhaps because they were the same shade as Icarus's wings had been, in those final moments before he dove into the heart of the sun.

The memory came unbidden and unwelcome: the last battle of the war, when Akumu had made its final desperate gambit. The embodiment of fear had tried to possess the sun itself, to turn the source of all light and warmth into an instrument of terror. Someone had to stop it, and Icarus had been the only one who could fly high enough, fast enough.

She had watched from the ground as her oldest friend spread his golden wings one last time and launched himself toward the blazing orb above. He had looked back once, just before the heat began to consume him, and smiled that reckless grin that had gotten them both into so much trouble over the years.

Take care of them for me, Nil. Take care of everyone.

The sun had flared impossibly bright as he struck its surface, and when the light faded, Akumu was gone. But so was Icarus, absorbed into the very thing he had saved. Sometimes Nilah could swear she saw the faint outline of wings spread across its surface.

I've been trying. I've been trying to take care of them, just like you asked. But I don't know if it's enough. I don't know if I'm enough.

The wind carried her words away, but the sun continued its steady descent, indifferent to her doubts. Or perhaps not indifferent.

Perhaps listening, in whatever way a star could listen to the troubles of the small beings that crawled across the world it warmed.

Other children learned useful skills, but I learned to watch the sky. Turns out that was exactly what I needed to learn, in the end. To see where you were going. To understand what you were trying to do.

She lay back in the grass, arms spread wide, staring up at the vast blue dome above. A few early stars had begun to appear, pin-pricks of light in the deepening sky. The sun hung lower now, a golden orb that seemed almost close enough to touch.

I keep helping people, but it doesn't fill the space you left behind. All these towns, all these problems solved, but I still feel like I'm walking in circles. Like I'm looking for something I've already lost.

A cloud drifted across the sun's face, and for a moment, its edges seemed to curve and flex in a way that might have been wings. Or might have been wishful thinking. With Icarus, it had always been hard to tell the difference.

I used to think the war gave my life meaning. Fighting beside you, protecting innocent people, working toward something bigger than ourselves. But now the war is over, and everyone else has found ways to build new lives from the rubble. Everyone except me.

The grass whispered secrets around her as the wind picked up, carrying scents of distant flowers and the promise of rain on the horizon. Night was still hours away, but already the world was beginning its slow transition from day to dusk.

Father always said I was a disappointment. That I'd never amount to anything because I spent too much time looking up instead of looking ahead. Maybe he was right. Maybe saving the world doesn't matter if you can't figure out how to live in it afterward.

She sat up, brushing seeds and grass fragments from her hair. The sun hung suspended above the horizon, perfectly balanced between day and night. In that moment, it seemed to pulse with a warm, golden light that was somehow different from its usual radiance. Warmer. More personal.

Nilah stood and faced the setting sun directly, shielding her eyes

with one hand. The light should have been blinding at this angle, but instead it felt gentle, almost welcoming. And there, spread across the solar disk like shadows cast by clouds that weren't there, she could see them clearly: wings. Vast, ethereal wings that moved with the slow rhythm of a heart at rest.

Icarus. I know you're in there somewhere. I know you can hear me.

The wings seemed to flex slightly, as if stretching after a long sleep.

I don't know what I'm supposed to do next. Everyone expects me to keep being the hero, keep wandering from place to place, fixing things that are broken. But I'm broken too, and I don't know how to fix myself.

The sun pulsed again, brighter this time, and Nilah felt a warmth that had nothing to do with solar radiation. It was the warmth of recognition, of an old friend acknowledging her presence across an impossible distance.

What am I supposed to do, old friend? Where am I supposed to go? I've saved so many places, but I still haven't found where I belong.

The wind died to nothing, leaving the plains in perfect stillness. Even the distant cattle had fallen silent. The world held its breath, waiting for an answer that might never come.

But the sun continued to burn, and the wings continued to spread across its surface, and Nilah stood in the golden grass with tears she hadn't realized she was crying streaming down her face.

Just give me a sign. Tell me what you would do if you were still here. Tell me where to go next.

The sun hung motionless above the horizon, neither rising nor setting, caught in a moment that seemed to stretch toward eternity. And in that impossible pause between day and night, Nilah waited for an answer from the friend she had lost and found again in the heart of a star.

End of Chapter 92
"Beneath The Endless Sky"

[You shine brighter than the sun ever did.]

(Chapter 93 || Volume 3) When Metal Bleeds.

The answer came not from the sun, but from the earth beneath her feet. Nilah felt it first as a tremor, subtle enough that she might have dismissed it as wind through the grass. But the plains had gone deathly still, and tremors didn't move in geometric patterns. She pressed her palm to the ground and felt it again: a pulse, rhythmic and artificial, like the heartbeat of some vast machine buried deep in the world's bones. The grass around her began to wither.

It started as a spreading circle of brown, perhaps ten feet across, the golden stalks curling inward as if touched by sudden frost. But this wasn't cold. This was something far worse. The plants weren't dying naturally, they were being drained, their life essence pulled away by invisible threads.

Nilah scrambled to her feet, her hand moving instinctively to the obsidian hilt at her side. The circle of death expanded outward, consuming everything in its path. Wildflowers crumbled to dust. Insects fell from the air, their bodies shriveling like autumn leaves. Even the wind seemed to die as it passed through the expanding zone of lifelessness.

At the circle's center, something was rising from the earth.

It began as a distortion in the air, a shimmer like heat waves rising from summer stone. Then metal began to coalesce from nothingness, dark plates of some unknown alloy that gleamed with their own inner light. The metal formed itself into a pillar, then began to branch and twist, creating a structure that was part tower, part tree, part machine.

The dead zone spread faster now, racing across the plains in all directions. Nilah could hear the distant lowing of cattle cut off mid-cry as the wave of death reached the herds. Birds plummeted from the sky like stones. The very air seemed to thin as whatever was responsible drained the life from everything it touched.

She ran.

Not away from the expanding circle, but toward its center. If something was causing this devastation, she would find it and stop it before it could consume the entire continent. Her boots pounded against dead earth as she sprinted through the withered remains of

what had been living grassland moments before.

The metal structure continued to grow, spinning itself upward like a spider's web made of steel and shadow. At its base, a doorway had formed, perfectly round and edged with symbols that hurt to look at directly. The air around it hummed with power that made her teeth ache.

From within the structure came the sound of footsteps.

They were measured, unhurried, the footfalls of someone who had all the time in the world. Each step echoed with a metallic ring that seemed to come from all directions at once. The dead zone had stopped expanding, but only because there was nothing left alive within miles to consume.

A figure emerged from the doorway.

He was tall and lean, dressed in robes that seemed to be cut from the same dark metal as his tower. His face was gaunt but not unhandsome, with sharp cheekbones and eyes that glowed with the same inner light as his construction. Most unsettling were his hands, which appeared to be made of living metal that flowed and shifted like mercury, occasionally forming complex geometric patterns before returning to human shape.

PLK: Fascinating. I expected the wildlife to flee when they sensed the drain beginning. I didn't anticipate someone would run toward it.

His voice was cultured, almost conversational, with the faint accent of someone who had traveled widely but belonged nowhere in particular. He studied Nilah with the detached interest of a scholar examining an unusual specimen.

NLH: What have you done?

PLK: I've fed. It's been quite some time since I last had access to such abundant organic energy. These plains were absolutely teeming with life.

He gestured casually at the dead landscape around them. Where his metallic fingers pointed, small devices began to rise from the ground: crystalline structures that pulsed with captured vitality, storage vessels for the life force he had stolen from every living thing for miles.

PLK: You're Nilah, aren't you? The pyrokinetic warrior. I've read about you in the records I recovered from Akumu's strongholds. Quite impressive, what you did during the war. Though I must say, you look smaller in person.

NLH: The war is over. Akumu is gone.

PLK: Akumu was a crude thing, all fear and fury with no subtlety. It wanted to destroy everything out of spite. I'm far more practical in my approach.

His metal hands shifted, forming complex tools that defied identification. Each device hummed with barely contained power, fed by the life force of countless creatures.

PLK: I don't want to destroy the world. I want to improve it. Organic life is so inefficient, so wasteful, so prone to disease and death and all manner of inconvenient emotions. But technology? Technology is pure. Perfect. Eternal.

NLH: You're insane.

PLK: I'm progressive. When I'm finished, there will be no more hunger, no more aging, no more death. Just perfect mechanical beings living in perfect harmony with perfectly ordered systems. Of course, the transition period will require some... sacrifices.

He smiled, and his teeth were small gears that turned with mechanical precision.

PLK: I've been sleeping beneath these plains for centuries, waiting for the right moment to begin my work. The war weakened the barriers between realms, made it easier for me to draw on the life force I needed to wake up properly. And now, with Akumu gone, there's no one left who might oppose me.

NLH: There's me.

PLK: Yes, there is you. The wandering hero, the sword of fire, the woman who cannot find her place in a world at peace. Tell me, Nilah, what will you do when you realize that all your victories, all your noble struggles, have led to this moment? That the peace you helped create was merely the calm before a greater storm?

Nilah drew her blade, fire blooming along the obsidian edge. The flame burned brighter here, fed by her rising anger and the knowledge that once again, the world needed protecting. The hollow feeling in her chest began to fill with something she had almost forgotten: purpose.

NLH: I'll do what I always do. I'll fight.

PLK: With what? Your pretty fire against my accumulated power? I've drained the life from every creature within twenty miles. Their energy flows through my veins like the sweetest wine. I am more than I was when I went to sleep, more than any single warrior can stand against.

He raised his hands, and the metal structures around them began to sing with harmonic frequencies that made the air itself vibrate. Power coursed through him, stolen life force converted into raw energy that sparked between his fingers like caged lightning.

PLK: But please, do try. I'm curious to see if the legendary fire blade can cut through metal forged from pure will and powered by a thousand stolen lives.

Nilah stepped forward, her flame blade casting dancing shadows across the dead earth. The sun was setting behind Polka's tower, and for a moment she thought she could see wings spread across its surface, as if Icarus himself was watching this confrontation unfold.

NLH: You want to see what fire can do to your perfect metal? Let me show you.

The two forces faced each other across the wasteland of Polka's making: the wandering swordsman with her blade of living flame, and the technomancer who had turned death itself into a source of power. Around them, the dead plains stretched in all directions, a preview of the world that would be if his vision came to pass.

PLK: I do hope you'll provide more entertainment than the last hero who tried to stop me. He lasted almost three minutes before I drained him dry. Though I suppose his life force did contribute nicely to my current capabilities.

He flexed his metallic fingers, and the air around them filled with floating weapons: blades of pure energy, projectiles that hummed with malevolent intent, shields that rippled like liquid mercury. Each device pulsed with the stolen essence of living things, beauty twisted into instruments of destruction.

NLH: Three minutes?

She raised her blade, flame roaring higher as her anger reached its peak. The fire reflected in her orange eyes, and for the first time

since the war ended, Nilah felt truly alive.

NLH: I'll give you thirty.

The battle was about to begin, and with it, perhaps the end of everything organic in the world. But Nilah stood ready, her blade burning like a piece of the sun itself, prepared to face whatever this technomancer could throw at her. In the distance, thunder rolled across the dead plains, though no clouds marked the darkening sky.

End of Chapter 93
"When Metal Bleeds"

[A flame is only as strong as its' fuel.]

(Chapter 94 || Volume 3) The Weight of Solitude.

The first clash between fire and metal sent shockwaves across the dead plains. Nilah's blade met Polka's energy constructs in a shower of sparks that illuminated the growing darkness like captured lightning. Each impact rang like a bell, creating harmonics that made the air itself vibrate with barely contained power.

PLK: Impressive form. Your technique has improved since the war records were compiled.

He spoke casually even as his metallic hands shifted into a dozen different configurations, each one spawning new weapons that attacked from impossible angles. Blades of pure energy whined through the air while crystalline projectiles sought gaps in Nilah's defense.

She moved like liquid flame, her years of post-war training evident in every dodge and parry. The obsidian hilt felt warm in her grip, the fire blade responding to her will as if it were an extension of her very soul. But for every weapon she destroyed, two more took its place, and Polka hadn't even begun to show strain.

NLH: Is that all you've got? I expected more from someone who claims he can remake the world.

PLK: Patience. I'm still calibrating your capabilities. It's been so long since I faced a worthy opponent.

His tower pulsed with stolen life force, feeding him a constant stream of power. The devices around him grew more complex, more dangerous, their forms shifting between recognizable weapons and abstract geometries that hurt to perceive directly. Each one hummed with the essence of creatures that would never again feel sunlight on their skin.

The battle raged for minutes that felt like hours. Nilah's flame burned brighter with each exchange, fueled by her determination to protect the world from this new threat. But she could feel the strain building in her muscles, the finite nature of her own mortal limitations pressing against the seemingly endless power of her opponent.

Then she heard them approaching.

Hoofbeats and running feet, voices calling across the wasteland.

She risked a glance over her shoulder and saw them: Marcus leading a mixed group of humans and monsters from Valdris, their weapons gleaming in the dying light. Behind them came others she recognized from different towns, people she had helped who had somehow managed to track her across the plains.

MRC: Nilah! We're here to help!

SRA: You don't have to face this alone!

The sight of them filled her with a complex mixture of emotions: gratitude for their loyalty, fear for their safety, and underneath it all, a deep familiar panic. This was exactly what she had tried to avoid. Innocent people putting themselves in danger because of her battles, because of her choices.

NLH: No! Stay back!

She blocked a particularly vicious energy construct, the impact sending her skidding backward across the dead earth. Polka paused in his assault, curious about this new development.

PLK: How touching. The isolated hero has friends after all. Though I wonder how long they'll survive what comes next.

He raised one hand, and new devices began to rise from the ground around the approaching rescue party. These were different from his weapons: sleek, predatory things that moved like hunting cats and pulsed with the same life-draining energy that had created this

wasteland.

NLH: Get out of here! All of you! This isn't your fight!

MRC: Like hell it isn't! This thing threatens everyone!

NLH: I can handle it myself!

But even as she shouted the words, she knew they weren't true. Polka's power was vast, fed by centuries of accumulated life force and enhanced by technology beyond her understanding. Her flame blade was mighty, but it was still wielded by mortal hands, powered by a single human heart.

GRL: Fire lady!

The call came from among the rescue party, and Nilah's blood ran cold. It was the half-fox child from Valdris, the one who had asked about learning to fight. What was she doing here? Why had they brought a child to this nightmare?

NLH: Take her and run! Take all of them and run!

She threw herself back into the battle with desperate fury, her blade carving arcs of flame through the air as she tried to position herself between Polka and the people she had sworn to protect. But the technomancer was no longer focused solely on her.

PLK: Such dedication to your friends. Such willingness to shoulder every burden alone. Tell me, hero, how many have died because you couldn't save them? How many more will die because you refuse to let anyone share the load?

His hunting constructs began to advance on the rescue party, their crystalline forms refracting the firelight into rainbow patterns that would have been beautiful if they weren't so deadly. The devices moved with predatory patience, savoring the life force they could sense radiating from their targets.

NLH: Your fight is with me!

PLK: My fight is with all organic life. But you're correct that you're the primary obstacle. Allow me to provide you with some motivation.

Three of the hunting constructs suddenly accelerated, racing toward the cluster of would-be rescuers. Nilah could see the terror in their faces as the devices closed distance with inhuman speed.

She made her choice.

Abandoning her defensive position, Nilah sprinted toward her friends, calling upon every reserve of power she possessed. Her flame blade expanded, becoming a wall of fire that she dragged behind her like a comet's tail. She reached the constructs just as they were about to strike, interposing herself between the devices and their targets.

The impact was devastating.

Three hunting constructs struck her simultaneously, their life-draining fields overlapping as they tried to tear the vitality from her body. Pain unlike anything she had ever experienced tore through her nervous system, a cold fire that burned from the inside out. She felt her life force being pulled away in streams, feeding the devices that clung to her like metallic parasites.

But her sacrifice bought the others precious seconds.

NLH: Run! Now! That's an order!

MRC: We're not leaving you!

NLH: You are! That's what I do! I protect people! I keep them safe! I don't need your help!

She managed to destroy one of the constructs, her flame blade severing whatever passed for its nervous system. But the other two continued their drain, and more were approaching from different angles. Her vision began to blur as her strength ebbed away.

SRA: There are too many! We have to work together!

NLH: I said no!

The words came out as a roar of anguish and rage, powered by years of accumulated trauma and loss. Every friend who had fallen during the war because she hadn't been fast enough, strong enough, clever enough. Every town she had arrived at too late to save completely. Every face that haunted her dreams because she had failed to protect them when it mattered most.

NLH: Everyone I care about gets hurt! Everyone I try to save ends up dead! I won't let it happen again!

She poured everything into her flame blade, burning through her own life force to fuel an explosion of fire that vaporized the

remaining constructs. The effort sent her stumbling backward, her legs shaking with exhaustion.

PLK: Ah, now I understand. The great hero's weakness isn't physical at all, is it? You're terrified of letting anyone get close enough to help because you can't bear the thought of watching them die.

More constructs rose from the dead earth, twice as many as before. They formed a circle around the rescue party while others moved to flank Nilah herself. The trap was closing, and she no longer had the strength to be everywhere at once.

PLK: Your friends came here to save you, but your pride will be the death of them all. How perfectly tragic.

Nilah tried to raise her blade again, but her arms felt like lead. The life-draining attack had taken more from her than she could afford to lose. Around her, she could hear her friends calling her name, urging her to let them help, to stop trying to carry the entire world on her shoulders.

But she couldn't. She had learned long ago that the people she cared about were always the first to pay the price for her choices. Better to fight alone, to lose alone, than to watch another friend die because of her failures.

The constructs closed in from all sides, their crystalline forms reflecting her flickering flame like a hall of mirrors. She managed one more swing, destroying another device, before her legs finally gave out.

Nilah dropped to one knee on the dead ground, her blade wavering as her strength failed. Around her, the circle of mechanical predators tightened like a noose, while behind them, Polka watched with the detached interest of a scientist observing a particularly fascinating experiment.

PLK: The stronger the hero, the more spectacular the fall. I do hope your friends appreciate the show.

The constructs prepared for their final attack, and Nilah knelt in their center like a guttering candle, alone by choice and dying by degrees in the darkness she had created for herself.

End of Chapter 94
"The Weight of Solitude"

[The candle has been extinguished.]

(Chapter 95 || Volume 3) The Burn of Regret.

Blood ran down Nilah's arm in crimson rivulets, each drop hissing as it struck the dead earth beneath her. The life-draining constructs had left more than just exhaustion in their wake; they had torn spiritual wounds that manifested as physical trauma, cuts that bled essence as much as blood.

She forced herself back to her feet, swaying like a tree in a hurricane. Around her, the circle of mechanical predators continued to close, their crystalline forms refracting her flickering flame into a thousand fragments of light and shadow.

MRC: Nilah! Let us help you!

SRA: We can fight together! We're stronger together!

Their voices carried desperation, the sound of people watching someone they cared about slowly dying by degrees. But Nilah couldn't let herself hear the care in their words. Care meant attachment. Attachment meant loss. Loss meant failure.

NLH: Stay... back...

She raised her free hand, and fire erupted from her palm in a wall that shot skyward like a liquid curtain. The flames roared twenty feet high, creating a perfect circle around the battlefield with herself and the constructs trapped inside. The heat was intense enough to make the air shimmer, hot enough to keep even the most determined rescuer at bay.

GRL: Fire lady, please! We want to help!

The child's voice cut through the roar of flames like a blade through silk. For just a moment, Nilah's concentration wavered, and a gap appeared in her barrier. But she sealed it immediately, pouring more of her dwindling life force into the flames.

NLH: I don't... deserve help.

The words came out as barely a whisper, but they carried the weight of years of accumulated guilt. Every face that haunted her nightmares rose before her eyes: soldiers who had died following her orders, civilians she had arrived too late to save, friends who had paid the price for her choices.

PLK: Now that's more honest than your usual heroic rhetoric. Tell me, what sins are you trying to atone for behind that wall of fire?

Three more constructs rushed her position. She met them with desperate fury, her flame blade carving through metal and energy with movements born of pure instinct. But each victory cost her, each swing of her sword drawing from reserves she no longer possessed.

Blood now flowed from dozens of small wounds, painting her brown clothes in patterns of crimson and rust. The constructs weren't just attacking her body; they were feeding on her very essence, draining the life force that kept her heart beating and her flames burning.

NLH: This is... my burden. My responsibility.

She stumbled as another wave of constructs pressed their attack, their draining fields overlapping to create zones of death that withered everything they touched. A wild swing of her blade destroyed two of them, but the effort sent her to one knee again.

MRC: You're going to die in there!

NLH: Better... better me than all of you.

The wall of flames roared higher, fed by her anguish and desperation. She could feel her friends pressing against the barrier, could sense their desperation to reach her, to help her. But she wouldn't let them. Couldn't let them. *Not again. Never again.*

PLK: Such delicious self-destruction. I'm almost disappointed that I'll have to end this soon. Your guilt is feeding my constructs better than pure life force ever could.

He was right. The mechanical predators seemed to grow stronger with each drop of her blood, each flicker of self-loathing that passed through her mind. They fed on suffering as much as vitality, and she was providing them with a banquet of both.

NLH: I failed them... I failed all of them.

Her father's voice echoed across the years.
Useless girl. You'll never amount to anything.

The soldiers who had trusted her leadership, only to die screaming in the mud while she watched helplessly. The towns she had reached too late, where ashes still smoldered and survivors looked at her with eyes that asked why she hadn't come sooner.

NLH: Everyone I touch... everyone I care about... they all pay the price.

She blocked another construct's attack, but her defense was sloppy now, driven more by reflex than skill. The blade gouged a line across her ribs, adding fresh blood to the pattern that decorated her torn clothing.

SRA: That's not true! You've saved hundreds of people!

NLH: And failed... how many more?

The wall of flames flickered, her concentration wavering as blood loss and spiritual drain took their toll. For a moment, gaps appeared in the barrier, and she could see her friends pressed against the heat, their faces twisted with anguish and frustration.

GRL: You saved me! You saved all of us!

NLH: I should have... should have saved everyone.

She poured more fire into the barrier, sealing the gaps with flames that burned hot enough to turn sand to glass. The effort left her gasping, black spots dancing at the edges of her vision.

PLK: Perfect. Absolutely perfect. You're destroying yourself more efficiently than my constructs ever could. Such is the beauty of a guilty conscience.

More devices rose from the dead earth, drawn by the scent of her despair like vultures to carrion. They circled her with predatory patience, no longer rushing in for quick kills. They sensed that time was on their side, that she was bleeding out both physically and spiritually.

NLH: This is... this is how it should be. How it always should have been.

Blood dripped from her fingertips, each drop carrying away a piece of her essence. The flame blade in her hand had dimmed to barely a flicker, sustained more by stubborn will than actual power.

MRC: Nilah, listen to me! You don't have to carry this alone!

NLH: Yes... yes I do.

She tried to stand again, but her legs wouldn't support her weight. The constructs sensed weakness and pressed their advantage, their draining fields overlapping to create a vortex of death that pulled at her remaining life force.

NLH: This is... what I deserve. For all the times I wasn't fast enough... strong enough... good enough.

Her father's words mixed with her own self-recriminations, creating a chorus of condemnation that echoed in her skull. *Useless. Failure. Disappointment.* She had spent her entire life trying to prove those words wrong, but here, bleeding on dead ground with mechanical vultures circling overhead, they felt like prophecy fulfilled.

PLK: Any last words for your friends before my constructs finish draining you dry? Some final wisdom from the great hero who chose to die alone rather than accept help?

Nilah looked up at the wall of flames that surrounded her, at the barrier she had built to keep the people who cared about her at bay. Through the dancing fire, she could see their silhouettes pressed against the heat, still trying to reach her despite everything.

NLH: I'm... I'm sorry.

The words were meant for all of them: the friends beating against her barrier, the soldiers she had failed to save, the civilians she had arrived too late to protect. Everyone who had ever believed in her, only to be let down by her limitations.

NLH: I'm so... so sorry.

The constructs moved in for the kill, their crystalline forms reflecting her guttering flames like shards of a broken mirror. And Nilah knelt in the center of her self-imposed prison, bleeding and alone, waiting for an end that felt like the only honest conclusion to a life built on failure and guilt. The wall of flames around her began

to flicker and fade as her strength finally gave out completely.

End of Chapter 95
"The Burn of Regret"

[Is this how your tale ends, Nilah?]

(Chapter 96 || Volume 3) Melody Carried by the Winds.

A thousand miles from the dead plains where Nilah bled alone, in a cottage nestled between rolling hills and whispering forests, a mother sat beside her daughter's bed with an old book in her lap.

The cottage was modest but warm, its walls decorated with pressed flowers and children's drawings. A fire crackled in the stone hearth, casting dancing shadows that played across hand-carved furniture and shelves lined with well-worn books. Outside, night had settled over the unnamed land like a comfortable blanket, bringing with it the scent of jasmine and the distant song of crickets.

MTH: Once upon a time, in the years when darkness walked the world and fear had a name, there lived a woman who carried fire in her hands.

The little girl, perhaps five years old with dark hair that curled around her ears, pulled her blanket closer and watched her mother's face with wide, attentive eyes. These bedtime stories were her favorite part of each day, tales of heroes and magic that made the ordinary world seem full of infinite possibility.

DGT: Was she very tall, Mama?

MTH: Not so tall, little sparrow. But her heart was large enough to hold all the world's sorrows, and her courage burned brighter than the sun itself.

The mother's fingers traced the faded illustrations in the book, pictures of a woman with orange hair and eyes like amber, her red cape billowing as she stood against terrible odds. The images were simple but evocative, painted by someone who had clearly heard the stories told and retold until they became legend.

MTH: The fire lady wandered from town to town, village to village, wherever people needed help. She would appear when hope seemed lost, her blade blazing with flames that could cut through

any darkness.

DGT: Like a falling star?

MTH: Exactly like that, my dear. She would come like a star falling to earth, bringing light to places where shadows had grown too deep.

The book told of battles against terrible creatures, of cities saved from destruction, of children pulled from burning buildings and lost travelers guided home through treacherous storms. Each tale was different, but they all shared common threads: the fire lady's compassion for those in need, her willingness to face any danger to protect the innocent, and her habit of disappearing as quickly as she had come.

MTH: In the great war against fear itself, when monsters walked openly and nightmares came alive, the fire lady stood with the other heroes. She fought beside a man with golden wings who flew so high he touched the face of the sun.

DGT: What happened to the wing man?

The mother's voice grew softer, tinged with the sadness that marked all the best stories.

MTH: He gave his life to save everyone, little sparrow. He flew into the sun itself to stop the darkness from swallowing all the light in the world. But his sacrifice meant that children like you could sleep safely in their beds, knowing that the monsters were gone.

DGT: And the fire lady?

MTH: She kept her promise to her friend. She continued to wander the world, helping anyone who needed it. Some say she never stopped, that even now she walks the roads between towns, carrying her flame like a beacon for all who have lost their way.

The little girl was quiet for a moment, processing this information with the seriousness that children brought to important questions.

DGT: Is she lonely, Mama? Walking all by herself?

The mother paused, struck by her daughter's insight. The stories always focused on the fire lady's heroic deeds, her victories and noble sacrifices. But they rarely mentioned what it might cost someone to carry such burdens alone.

MTH: I think... I think she might be, sometimes. Heroes often are, because they feel they must carry the world's troubles on their

shoulders. They forget that even the strongest people need friends to help them bear the load.

DGT: That's sad.

MTH: It is, little one. But that's what makes her so special. Even when she's sad, even when she's tired, she still chooses to help others. That's what makes someone a true hero.

The fire in the hearth popped and crackled, sending sparks up the chimney like tiny stars ascending to rejoin their celestial family. The mother closed the book and set it aside, preparing to tuck her daughter in for the night.

DGT: Mama?

MTH: Yes, sparrow?

DGT: Do you think the fire lady knows that people tell stories about her? That children like me think she's wonderful?

The mother considered this, smoothing her daughter's dark curls away from her forehead.

MTH: I don't know, my dear. Heroes often don't realize how much they mean to the people they protect. They're too busy looking ahead to the next person who needs help.

DGT: That's not fair. Everyone should know when they're loved.

Out of the mouths of babes, the mother thought. Her daughter's simple wisdom cut straight to the heart of things in the way that only children could manage.

MTH: You're absolutely right. Everyone should know they're loved and appreciated, especially those who spend their lives caring for others.

DGT: Mama, do you think... do you think if we sang a song for her, she might hear it? Even if she's far away?

The mother smiled, touched by her daughter's earnest concern for a hero she'd never met, who might even be nothing more than legend and wishful thinking.

MTH: I think songs have a way of traveling farther than we might expect, especially when they carry love and gratitude. What kind of song did you have in mind?

DGT: Something warm. Something that would let her know she's not alone, even when she feels lonely. Something that would remind her that there are people who care about her, even if

they've never met her.

The little girl sat up in bed, her eyes bright with the kind of pure intention that could move mountains if properly channeled.

DGT: Could we sing something like that, Mama? Right now? Maybe she would hear it on the wind and know that someone thinks she's special.

The mother felt tears prick at the corners of her eyes. Her daughter's compassion was a beautiful thing, untainted by cynicism or doubt. If there really was a fire lady out there somewhere, struggling with her own burdens and believing herself forgotten, perhaps a child's love could indeed reach across impossible distances.

MTH: I think that's a wonderful idea, little sparrow. What should we sing?

End of Chapter 96
"Melody Carried by the Winds"

[And your name echoes through the world.]

(Chapter 97 || Volume 3) The World Remembers.

*In lands where children sleep safe and sound,
A mother's voice begins to rise,
A song of flame, a hope profound,
For she who lit the darkened skies.*

The voice started small, gentle as a lullaby in that distant cottage where a mother and daughter sat beside a dying fire. But love, true love, has a way of spreading beyond the boundaries of single rooms and single hearts.

*She walks alone through night and day,
Her fire blade cuts through despair,
Though shadows whisper she's lost her way,
We sing to show someone still cares.*

In the village beyond the cottage, an old man heard the melody drifting on the evening wind. He remembered stories his grandfather had told, tales of a woman who had saved their town

from the fear-beasts during the dark years. His weathered voice joined the song.

*Fire lady, flame of hope,
You are not alone tonight,
Though the darkness makes you grope,
We remember your true light.*

A thousand miles away, on dead plains where blood soaked lifeless earth, Nilah's flame barrier flickered and guttered. Her wounds bled essence into the hungry ground, and Polka's constructs circled like vultures sensing the approach of death.

NLH: Just... let it end...

But then she heard it. Impossibly, inexplicably, she heard it.

*In Valdris town where hope was lost,
You came with fire in your hand,
No thought of glory, pain, or cost,
You helped us heal our broken land.*

Marcus. She could hear Marcus's gruff voice somewhere in that growing chorus, his lupine howl adding harmony to the human voices. The song was spreading, jumping from person to person like wildfire, carried by memory and gratitude across impossible distances.

*In Thornwick where the spiders crawled,
In Greystone where the wells ran black,
When we were lost and hope had stalled,
You came to bring the light we lacked.*

Sera's scaled voice joined the melody, and with it came dozens of others from the towns she had helped. Children she had saved, families she had reunited, communities she had restored. Each voice added strength to the chorus that somehow defied the laws of space and sound to reach her across the void.

PLK: What is this? Some kind of long-range communication spell?

His constructs paused in their advance, their crystalline forms vibrating in harmony with the impossible song. The technomancer's face showed confusion for the first time since his emergence, his perfectly ordered worldview struggling to process what he was

witnessing.

*She thinks she failed, she thinks she's lost,
She carries guilt like armor worn,
But we remember what it cost
To keep hope's flame forever born.*

The song was growing stronger now, voices joining from across the continent. In Port Sunder, the mixed crews of fishermen and sea-dwellers sang while hauling in their nets. In mountain villages she had never even visited, people who knew her only through stories added their voices to the swelling tide.

*Fire lady, do you hear?
The world sings out your name with pride,
Though you may weep, though you may fear,
We stand with you, fight by your side.*

Tears began to fall from Nilah's eyes, cutting clean tracks through the grime and blood on her cheeks. She could feel something stirring in her chest, a warmth that had nothing to do with her pyrokinetic abilities. It was recognition, acceptance, love freely given without condition or expectation.

NLH: They... they remember?

*You are not your father's shame,
You are not failure, not defeat,
You are the keeper of hope's flame,
You make our broken world complete.*

The image of her father, that sneering face that had haunted her since childhood, began to waver like heat shimmer. His voice, which had whispered poison in her ear for so many years, was being drowned out by the chorus of gratitude rising from every corner of the world.

Useless girl?

His phantom voice tried one last time to cut her down.

You'll never amount to anything.

But the song rose higher, carried by ten thousand voices, a hundred thousand, more joining every second as the melody spread across

nations and continents like ripples on an infinite pond.

*She amounts to everything,
She is the light that pierces night,
Let all the world together sing
For she who guards hope's sacred light.*

PLK: Impossible! This is coordinated delusion! Mass hysteria!
Organic minds are too chaotic to achieve such synchronization!

But his protest was lost in the growing roar of voices. The song had become something beyond individual voices now, a force of nature that made the very air thrum with harmonic power. And with each note, each word of love and recognition, Nilah felt her strength returning.

*Fire lady, rise again,
Your blade can cut through any dark,
You are beloved among men,
You are hope's eternal spark.*

The flame around her blade began to grow, fed not by her own dwindling life force but by the love and gratitude of everyone she had ever helped. The obsidian hilt grew warm in her grip, then hot, then blazing with power that came from outside herself.

NLH: I... I am not alone.

*Never alone, never forgotten,
Carried in each grateful heart,
Though your strength may seem misbegotten,
You play hope's most vital part.*

The song reached crescendo as millions of voices joined in perfect harmony, a unity of purpose that transcended species, language, and distance. Humans and monsters, adults and children, farmers and sailors and craftsmen all singing as one. They all sang: **A prince of cold. A king of destruction. A predator of fear. A simple family man and bee. A rabbit beyond the sky. An old friend whose wings bless the sun. An artist who watches close.**

*Rise now, flame, rise now, light,
Cut through darkness, cleanse the world,
Show the power of love's might,*

Let hope's banner be unfurled!

Nilah stood, and as she did, her flame blade began to expand. Ten feet, twenty, fifty, growing larger with each heartbeat as the song fed power into her very soul. The wall of fire that had trapped her alone dissolved, replaced by something far greater.

PLK: No! This defies every law of thermodynamics! Of physics! Of rational thought!

But his constructs were already beginning to dissolve, their stolen life force drawn back toward the song that called to every living thing. The power he had accumulated through centuries of death and consumption proved no match for the freely given love of those who remembered what hope looked like.

*Fire lady, swing your blade,
Let it span from earth to sky,
Let no darkness be afraid
Of the light that cannot die!*

The blade continued to grow, a hundred feet, a thousand, ten thousand, until it stretched across the entire horizon like a wall of living flame. It rose higher than mountains, brighter than the sun itself, a sword of pure concentrated love and determination that split the sky in two.

NLH: For everyone who believed in me... for everyone who sang my name... for everyone who still has hope!

*Strike now true, strike now clean,
Cleanse the world of death's dark blight,
Let the earth be fresh and green,
Blessed by your eternal light!*

NLH: *SOUL REQUIEM! EDGE THAT PURIFIES THE EARTH!*

She swung the blade down. The impact was beyond description. Where the flame touched Polka's dead zone, life exploded into being. Grass burst from the earth in waves of green that spread to the horizon and beyond. Flowers bloomed in rainbow cascades that painted the world in every color imaginable. The very air itself seemed to sing with renewed vitality.

PLK: This is impossible! I had enough stored power to drain a

continent! How can your pathetic emotional display overcome-

His words were cut off as the wave of restoration reached him. His carefully constructed form began to dissolve, not destroyed but transformed, the stolen life force within him returning to where it belonged. His metal tower crumbled like sand, its dark geometry unable to withstand the song that remade the world.

*Life returns and death retreats,
Hope reborn in fire's wake,
What was broken now completes,
For the fire lady's sake.*

The song began to fade as its work was done, ten million voices slowly returning to their individual lives, their individual hopes and dreams. But the echo of their unity remained, and would remain, as long as there were hearts that remembered what it meant to stand together against the darkness.

Nilah stood in the center of a world reborn, her massive blade slowly shrinking back to its normal size. Around her, the dead plains had become a garden that stretched to every horizon, more beautiful than anything that had grown there before.

In the distance, she could see her friends approaching through the flowers, no longer held back by walls of flame or walls of fear. They came toward her with joy and relief, ready to celebrate not just her victory but her acceptance that she didn't have to face everything alone.

*Fire lady, welcome home,
To the world that sings your name,
You need never more to roam
Bearing solitary shame.*

The song's final notes faded on the evening wind, but Nilah knew she would carry its memory forever. She was not alone. She had never been alone. The world had been singing for her all along; she had simply forgotten how to listen.

NLH: Thank you.

The words were whispered to the wind, to the voices that had saved her, to the friends approaching through the flowers, to the sun above where wings still spread in eternal flight.

End of Chapter 97
"The World Remembers"

[The Worlds' Hero.]

(Chapter 98 || Volume 3) Her Theme.

*Fire in her hands, fire in her soul,
Nilah rises, making broken worlds whole,
Someone treads upon the flowers
But her courage never cowers!*

*From the ashes of war, from the depths of despair,
Came a warrior maiden with flame-colored hair,
From the centuries it comes
In the plains it makes its stand
Oooo battle cry the mountains take
Take the mountains o!*

*Nilah, Nilah, burning bright,
Sword of flame that cuts through night,
Beautiful warrior, strong and true,
All our hearts belong to you!*

*Rise up high, your blade so long,
Heaven's power makes you strong,
Fire lady, hear our call,
You're the greatest of them all!*

*No force can bind the warrior's heart
Nilah knows no surrender's part
In the village squares where children play,
They sing her name at close of day.*

*Her blade of flame for twenty years
Oooo strikes the enemy down
Strikes them down o heeeey
Like an angel sent from realms above!*

*Who makes the blade burn bright with fire
Nilah stands when hope grows dire
One warrior lone against the night
Face to face with endless blight
Oooo battle cry the mountains take*

Fire and steel melt the dark!

*Through she walked with grace,
Determination in her face,
Her flames consumed the twisted fear,
Made poisoned waters crystal clear.*

*Beautiful beyond what words can say,
She drives all darkness far away,
Her very presence lights the sky,
Makes earthbound spirits learn to fly.*

*Nilah, Nilah, burning bright,
Sword of flame that cuts through night,
Beautiful warrior, strong and true,
All our hearts belong to you!*

*Darkens day and falls the terror
Our enemies caught in error
Turn and flee the mandate goes
Oooo death itself turns back in woes
Turns back o heeeey!*

*That blade of flame from Nilah's hand
Now burns bright across the land
Metal beasts miss their mark
Life blooms where death once reigned!*

*When the world sang out her name,
Million voices joined the same refrain,
Her blade grew wide as heaven's dome,
Calling every lost soul home.*

*Fire and steel melt the dark
Tank and cannon miss their mark
Radiant goddess, fierce and fair,
Fire crown upon her hair!*

*Nilah, Nilah, burning bright,
One warrior lone against the night!
Beautiful warrior, strong and true,
Face to face with endless blight!*

*Rise up high, your blade so long,
Heaven's power makes you strong,*

*Only this path, only this way
Brings the freedom with flame's ray!*

*Together heroes come to grave
One oath makes the people brave
From plains of gold to mountain's peak,
Her name is whispered by the weak.*

*Only this path, only this way
Brings the freedom with flame's ray
Fire in her hands, fire in her soul,
Nilah rises, making broken worlds whole!*

*Oooo battle cry the mountains take
I am of the flame-born traine
Nilah! Nilah! Fire divine
Forever may your glory shine o heeey!*

End of Chapter 98
"Her Theme"

[This artist's proud of you, Knight of Heroes.]

(Chapter 99 || Volume 3) The Order.

Six months had passed since the song that shook the world, since the blade that split the sky, since Nilah had learned that love could be a weapon stronger than any forged in flame or steel. The dead plains had become the Bloom Valley, a garden paradise where pilgrims came from across the continent to see where death itself had been conquered by collective hope.

Nilah stood at the edge of the valley, watching children from a dozen different species play among flowers that grew in impossible colors. Human children chased butterfly-winged sprites through meadows where minotaur calves grazed peacefully beside centaur foals. It was the world Icarus had dreamed of when he flew into the sun: a place where differences were celebrated rather than feared.

MRC: Hard to believe this was all wasteland just a few months ago.

He approached through the tall grass, no longer the gruff foreman she remembered from Valdris but wearing the robes of an elected representative. The new **Council of Souls** had asked him to serve

as their first Speaker, a position that suited his natural leadership abilities.

NLH: Sometimes I still can't believe it myself. When I look at all this... It feels like someone else's dream.

SRA: Your dream. Our dream. Everyone's dream.

Sera emerged from behind a cluster of flame-colored Celosia flowers, her scales catching the afternoon sunlight like living jewels.

She carried a leather satchel filled with documents and wore the satisfied expression of someone who had spent the morning solving complex problems.

SRA: The architectural surveys are complete. The foundation can support the weight, and the location has unanimous approval from all the participating communities.

NLH: All of them? Even the mountain clans?

MRC: Especially the mountain clans. Seems your little demonstration with the horizon-spanning blade made quite an impression on the dwarven stoneworkers. They're practically fighting each other for the honor of carving it.

Nilah felt a familiar flutter of discomfort at the attention, but it was different now. The crushing weight of unworthiness had lifted, replaced by something she was still learning to navigate: acceptance. Not just of help, but of recognition, of celebration, of love freely given without condition.

GRL: Fire lady! Fire lady!

The half-fox child from Valdris came bounding through the flowers, her russet fur gleaming and her pointed ears perked with excitement. She had grown in the past months, both in height and confidence, and now served as an unofficial ambassador between the various communities that had settled in the valley.

GRL: The artists finished the model! Do you want to see?

She tugged on Nilah's red cape with gentle insistence, leading the small group toward a pavilion that had been erected in the valley's heart. Inside, a team of sculptors, architects, and artists had been working for weeks on their grand project, fueled by donations from every town Nilah had ever helped.

The model stood on a circular table, carved from white marble and

painted with meticulous detail. It depicted Nilah in the moment of her greatest triumph: standing tall with her massive flame blade raised toward the sky, her hair and cape caught in an eternal wind, her face serene but determined. Around the base, smaller figures represented the people of various communities, all looking up at her with expressions of hope and gratitude.

LSC: We tried to capture not just the moment, but the feeling. The sense that someone stood between us and despair.

She was an elderly dwarf woman whose hands bore the calluses of decades working stone. Her eyes held the particular intensity that came from trying to translate emotion into marble.

SC2: The actual statue will be thirty feet tall, placed at the valley's highest point. Visible from every community, but never overshadowing them.

NLH: It's... it's beautiful. But I'm not sure I deserve...

MRC: Stop.

The word came out sharper than he intended, making everyone turn to look at him. His lupine features showed a mixture of affection and exasperation.

MRC: Six months ago, you nearly died because you couldn't accept that people cared about you. Don't make us sing the world into harmony again just to convince you that you've earned this.

GRL: Besides, it's not just about you!

The child's announcement drew puzzled looks from the adults. She grinned with the particular mischief that came from knowing a secret.

GRL: Show them the other part!

The lead sculptor smiled and gestured to a series of smaller models arranged around the pavilion's edges. Each one depicted a different figure: Icarus with his golden wings spread wide, other heroes from the WORLD whose names had been preserved in stories and songs, and several empty pedestals waiting for future legends.

SC2: The statue is just the centerpiece. We're building a Hall of Heroes, a place where the stories of all who fought for hope can be preserved and told.

SRA: A museum?

SC2: More than that. A living memorial, a place of learning and inspiration. The communities voted unanimously to fund it.

Nilah moved from model to model, studying the faces of friends and allies she had thought forgotten. They were all there: **Kael, Bella, Shen, Neru, Matta, Fenris, Illia...**

NLH: You remembered them all.

SC2: We remembered what you taught us: that heroes come in all forms, from all places.

MRC: The Hall will have sections for different kinds of heroism.

SRA: And space for new heroes, ones who haven't been born yet but who will undoubtedly be needed someday.

Nilah paused at one of the empty pedestals, imagining it filled with the statue of someone she might never meet, someone who would stand against whatever darkness next threatened the world. The thought was both humbling and oddly comforting.

GRL: There's going to be a library too! With books about everyone, and maps showing all the places they helped, and even some of their actual belongings!

NLH: What belongings?

MRC: Well, for starters, people have been asking if you'd consider donating that pressed flower collection of yours.

Nilah's hand moved instinctively to her pocket, where she still kept the Celosia flowers she had been gathering for so long. The thought of letting them go sparked a brief moment of panic, but she forced herself to consider it seriously.

NLH: The flowers... they were just something I collected to remind myself that beauty could still exist after everything we'd lost.

SRA: And now they could remind others of the same thing. Imagine a child, years from now, learning that even heroes need small reminders of hope.

The idea had merit. The flowers had served their purpose for her, had been anchors of beauty in a world that often seemed determined to destroy everything lovely. Perhaps they could serve the same purpose for others.

SC2: We've also received donations from the other communities. Marcus brought the original plans for Valdris's reconstruction. Port Sunder sent nets and tools used in the first joint fishing expeditions

between humans and sea-folk.

MRC: Thornwick contributed one of the spider cocoons you cleared out, properly preserved and displayed to show what they were up against.

GRL: And I'm going to donate my drawings!

She produced a rolled bundle of paper from somewhere in her clothes, spreading them on the table with pride. The drawings were simple but expressive, depicting scenes from the stories she had heard: Nilah fighting monsters, helping rebuild towns, standing against impossible odds with her flame blade blazing.

NLH: These are wonderful. You have real talent.

GRL: I want to be the museum's first official artist! Someone who helps tell the stories through pictures, so even people who can't read can understand.

The simplicity and clarity of the child's ambition struck Nilah deeply. Here was someone who had found her calling not in combat or magic, but in preservation and communication. A different kind of heroism, but heroism nonetheless.

SC2: The dedication ceremony is planned for the summer solstice. Representatives from every community you've helped will be there, along with delegations from places you've never even visited.

MRC: Word has spread beyond our continent. There are ships coming from across the sea, carrying people who want to witness the unveiling.

SRA: The Council has formally declared it a continental holiday. '*Heroes' Day*,' they're calling it.

Nilah felt overwhelmed by the scope of what they were planning, but this time the feeling wasn't crushing. It was like standing at the edge of an ocean: vast and intimidating, but also beautiful and full of possibility.

NLH: And you want me to speak at the dedication?

GRL: Of course! You have to tell everyone about the other heroes, help them understand why they mattered too.

NLH: I... I think I'd like that.

The words came out steadier than she expected. Six months ago, the thought of standing before thousands of people would have filled her with paralyzing dread. Now, it felt like an opportunity to do something she had never been able to do during the war: honor

the memory of those who had fallen, ensure they were remembered for more than just their deaths.

MRC: There's one more thing.

He produced a small box from his robes, opening it to reveal a medallion cast in gold and silver. The design was simple but elegant: a flame rising from cupped hands, surrounded by symbols representing all the communities of their alliance.

MRC: The Council voted to create a new order: the Order of Knighthood. It's for people who embody the spirit of heroism and are granted the title of Knight.

SRA: You're the first recipient, of course. But there will be others.

NLH: An order that celebrates all kinds of heroes.

GRL: Just like the Hall!

Nilah accepted the medallion, feeling its weight in her palm. It was heavier than she expected, but not burdensome. More like an anchor, something to remind her of her connection to the communities and people she had learned to call home.

NLH: When does construction begin?

SC2: Tomorrow, if you give the final approval. The stoneworkers are eager to start, and the weather is perfect for laying foundations.

NLH: Then let's build it. Let's build a place where heroes are remembered, where stories are preserved, where children can learn that they too might someday stand against the darkness.

As the sun set over Bloom Valley, painting the impossible flowers in shades of gold and crimson, Nilah stood with her friends and looked toward the hill where her statue would soon rise. It wouldn't be a monument to her alone, she realized, but to all of them, to everyone who had chosen hope over despair, community over isolation, love over fear.

The Hall of Heroes would stand as proof that no one fights alone, that every victory belongs to all who believe in it. And perhaps, when future darkness came, as it inevitably would, someone would visit that hall and find the courage to take up the torch that heroes had been passing from hand to hand since the world began.

The fire lady would have her place in stone and memory, but more importantly, she had found her place among the living, among those who had taught her that the greatest strength came not from

standing alone, but from standing together.

And so, the **Council of Souls** declared that the museum would honor not only heroes of the past but also the living voices of art. The very first named artist of the museum was none other than **Illia**, a world-renowned talent whose works had already captured the spirit of countless generations.

End of Chapter 99
"The Order"

[The five of you have come far.]

(Chapter 100 || Volume 3) Knighthood.

The summer solstice arrived like a crown of fire over Bloom Valley. From every direction came ships, caravans, and pilgrims, carrying banners stitched with the colors of a hundred communities. The statue on the hill was not yet raised, but already the ground shook with the weight of history gathering in one place. And me, Blook, your humble fedora-wearing ghost, hovered above it all, watching. I have seen more endings than I care to count, yet this moment smelled of beginnings.

Heroes returned, some dragged reluctantly by memory, others walking willingly into the light of recognition. They came not to claim glory, but to lend their presence to something larger: a hall where memory itself would be built into stone and song.

I drifted first to Fenris, hulking in Rosetti's Butcher Shop stall like a warhound trying to act the part of a shepherd. His hands were large enough to break bone, yet they rested with almost tender care on the cuts of beef he arranged. To the people he was only the butcher, but I knew better. He had once stood shoulder to shoulder with legends. The scars beneath his apron told that story, even if his mouth never would.

Not far from the shop, Kael walked among the gathered families. The Knight of Defiance, once a man who could stare into the abyss and laugh, now adjusted a child's collar and inspected a loose board on the pavilion steps. His rebellion had transformed into something quieter but more radical: ordinary love. When he scooped his daughter into his arms, her light spheres dancing around them, it struck me harder than any cosmic duel. Defiance, after all, is not

only in battle. Sometimes it is in choosing to stay, to fix, to father.

Bella stood nearby, wings scattering light like stained glass across the crowd. She was luminous in stillness, the kind of presence that steadied a gathering. She listened more than she spoke, and when she did, every word carried the patience of someone who knew how fragile balance could be. If Kael was the storm held at bay, Bella was the hearth that warmed everyone who stepped close.

Then came Neru. His arrival was felt before it was seen, the air tightening with a crisp chill. Where others exchanged handshakes, he simply nodded, his silence carrying more weight than speeches. He was not there to dazzle, he was there because inevitability itself had walked into the valley. Beside him strode Shen, sparks licking off his fingertips as if his body could not help leaking fire into the world. He laughed, cracked his knuckles, and mocked the air with the same audacity he once hurled at monsters. Together they were paradox and symmetry, ice and explosion, stillness and motion.

And then Illia. The artist who stitched ghosts into color carried himself like a man half-possessed by the very memories he painted. The crowd treated him as a visionary, but I could see the raw edges beneath his careful smile. Every brushstroke had cost him something. Every painting was both a gift and a wound. He had been chosen as the museum's artist, the first official chronicler of their collective story, and though he bowed humbly, I could taste the grief he carried like turpentine on his tongue.

I floated above them all and could not help feeling something like pride, though pride is a mortal word and I am anything but mortal. They gathered not for themselves, but for the promise of a Hall that would outlive even my drifting witness. Fenris, Kael, Bella, Neru, Shen, Illia... each carried scars, each carried contradictions, and yet here they were. Proof that memory can be built from both silence and song, from blood and from laughter.

The ceremony had not yet begun, but the air was already heavy with the sense that history was watching. And I tipped my hat to the heroes below.

The valley filled with a murmur like ocean waves, thousands of voices carried on the solstice wind. Every community Nilah had touched had sent a delegation. Some came in armor, others in robes, some in simple work clothes still stained with the day's labor. It did not matter. They stood side by side, shoulder to shoulder, as

if all the divisions of race, blood, and history had been dissolved in the bloom of impossible flowers.

The Council of Souls had prepared a stage of polished stone and fresh banners. At its center, the unfinished pedestal stood draped in white cloth, waiting for the statue that would crown it. The Hall of Heroes was only an outline sketched in wood and scaffolding behind it, yet the weight of what it would become pressed heavier than the mountains.

The first to step forward was Marcus, Speaker of the Council. His voice, deep and lupine, carried across the crowd without the need for magic.

MRC: We gather not for one hero, but for many. We gather not to exalt the strong, but to honor the countless forms of courage that built this valley. Today we lay a foundation that will outlast us all.

I drifted closer. I have heard speeches at the birth and death of nations. Most are bloated things, swollen with pride. This one was lean and steady, like a stone pillar meant to hold up memory rather than inflate egos.

After him came Sera, carrying the same calm precision she had once wielded in war councils. She spoke of the museum not as a vault of stone, but as a living heart.

SRA: Stories will live here. Not in silence, but in classrooms. Not in shadow, but in song. The children who run among these flowers will one day walk these halls and learn what it means to stand for hope.

Her words were met with quiet reverence. Even the children hushed, sensing their future was being written in the air. Then came the heroes themselves, stepping one by one into the light of the gathering.

Fenris stood like a fortress in butcher's clothes. He did not speak long, only offered a single line, his voice heavy as stone.

FNR: I was a weapon once. Now I choose to be a shield. Let the Hall remind others they can choose too.

Kael followed, broad-shouldered and gentle-eyed. He bent slightly to the microphone, though his presence already commanded the crowd.

KAL: We were not meant to be remembered as giants. We were meant to be remembered as fathers, mothers, neighbors, as people who loved despite the darkness. If the Hall shows that, then it has done its work.

Bella's translucent wings shimmered in the light as she spoke softly, but every word reached the farthest listener.

BEL: A garden flourishes because of its roots, unseen beneath the soil. So too do families and communities. Let the Hall remind us that unseen love is as heroic as any battle.

Neru and Shen stood together. Neru's words were cold and measured, each syllable cut like frost.

NER: Hope must be guarded.

Shen cracked his knuckles and grinned before adding his fire.

SHN: And sometimes hope needs an explosion to keep the dark guessing.

The crowd laughed, tension melting for a brief instant. Even Neru's mouth twitched, the faintest shadow of a smile. Finally, Illia stepped forward. She carried a paint-stained satchel, her hands trembling as if the ghosts of her canvases weighed more than stone. She laid it on the pedestal and spoke with a voice both fragile and unbreakable.

ILA: I cannot bring them back. But I can show you how they looked when they laughed, how they fought, how they wept, how they lived. My art is not to make them perfect, but to keep them human.

The silence that followed was deeper than applause. It was the silence of memory itself, of every listener recalling someone they had lost. When the applause finally rose, it was not for one man, but for all who had been carried into that moment.

And then, as the sun burned directly above, the cloth was drawn away. The statue of Nilah, towering thirty feet in flame-forged majesty, was revealed to the world. Around its base were carved the faces of the communities, all gazing upward in unity. The Hall was not yet finished, yet in that instant it already existed in the hearts of everyone present.

The first Heroes' Day had begun.

I hovered above the crowd, brim tipped low, my ghost-fedora shading the grin I could not hide. For once, entropy had been cheated. For once, memory had beaten silence. And I allowed myself to be proud.

End of Chapter 100
"Knighthood"

[You'd be proud too, Icarus.]

(Chapter 101 || Volume 3) Coffee Between Friends.

The first sip of coffee always tells you who someone is. Fenris drank his slow, deliberate, ears twitching slightly as he savored each taste like he was making peace with the beans themselves. Kael gulped his as if it were the final water in a desert. Bella added honey before she'd even tasted it. Neru let the steam fog his face without a word. Shen nearly burned his tongue, spat a curse, then laughed so hard he almost tipped his chair. Illia stirred her cup like a woman coaxing ghosts out of hiding. Nilah, quieter than the rest, held hers close to her chest and simply listened, her smile reflecting the warmth around the table. I hovered nearby, brim low over my eyes, thinking this is what legends look like when the wars are done.

SHN: So tell me, butcher. When was the last time you swung something sharper than a cleaver?

FNR: Yesterday.

SHN: Against what? A ribeye?

FNR: Bone's tougher than most soldiers I've met. At least the cow doesn't beg for mercy.

KAL: If you had been this funny back then, half the battles would've been easier.

BEL: You forget he used to glare entire regiments into surrender. Humor was never required.

NER: He still could.

The table stilled for a moment. With Neru it was never clear if he was joking. Shen leaned back, smirking.

SHN: Don't listen to him. Neru thinks glaring is foreplay.

Illia nearly choked on her drink, coughing through laughter.

ILA: Shen! You nearly killed me with that line.

Nilah finally spoke, her voice soft as silk dragged over stone.

NLH: At least he didn't kill you with actual foreplay.

The silence that followed was so complete you could hear the coffee cooling in their cups. Then Shen threw back his head and howled with laughter, slapping the table hard enough to rattle the sugar bowl.

SHN: Nilah! Where have you been hiding that tongue?

NLH: Waiting for the right moment to draw blood.

BEL: Remind me never to cross a swordswoman.

KAL: Former swordswoman. Now she just swings her hair around rather than blades.

NLH: Same principles apply. Check them out, learn their secrets, return them when you're done.

Fenris raised his cup in a mock toast.

FNR: To Nilah. Quieter than death, sharper than my best blade.

NLH: Flattery will get you extra bacon tomorrow.

FNR: I take it back. You're terrifying.

Bella leaned forward, chin resting on her palm, honey-colored eyes dancing.

BEL: Do you remember the first time we all sat together like this? Together with Icarus and Matta too?

KAL: You mean when i tried to drink half the tavern dry and ended up serenading a barmaid with that ridiculous ballad about his own heroics?

NER: That was not ridiculous. That was inspirational.

ILA: You rhymed 'victory' with 'Shen is so pretty.'

SHN: Poetry doesn't have to be perfect to be profound.

NER: It helps.

SHN: Says the man who once wrote a haiku about turnips.

NER: That haiku was about the cyclical nature of life and death as represented through root vegetables.

BEL: It was about turnips, Neru.

NER: Metaphorical turnips.

Kael stretched, joints popping like small fireworks.

KAL: I miss those days sometimes. When the biggest worry was whether the next town had decent ale.

ILA: And clean beds.

FNR: And meat that wasn't trying to crawl off the plate. Being a deserter was fun...

NLH: I miss the libraries we'd find. Each one different. Each one holding secrets people had forgotten they'd written down.

BEL: You still do that. Back then I caught you reading Mrs. Henley's recipe book like it contained the mysteries of the universe.

NLH: Her grandmother's soup recipe does contain mysteries. Seven different herbs, but she only lists six.

SHN: Maybe she can't count.

NLH: Or maybe the seventh ingredient is love, and she assumed people would know.

NER: Or poison. Old women are crafty.

ILA: Neru, Mrs. Henley is seventy-three and brings us pie every Sunday.

NER: The most dangerous ones always seem harmless.

Fenris rubbed his scarred knuckles against his mug, steam curling around his weathered fingers. His nostrils flared slightly, picking up scents the others couldn't.

FNR: Sometimes I wonder if we were the dangerous ones all along.

The mood shifted, subtle as a cloud passing over the sun. Bella's smile dimmed slightly.

BEL: We saved people, Fenris.

FNR: Did we? Or did we just decide who lived and who didn't?

KAL: That's not the same thing.

FNR: Isn't it?

Neru's voice cut through the tension like a blade through silk.

NER: The dead don't care about our motivations. Only the living get to wrestle with guilt.

ILA: That's cheerful.

NER: Truth rarely is.

Shen drained his cup and set it down with deliberate force.

SHN: You know what? I refuse to let philosophy ruin perfectly good coffee. We did what needed doing. People are alive because of us. End of discussion.

NLH: Shen's right. We can question our choices when we're dead. For now, we're here, we're breathing, and Mrs. Henley's pie is waiting in the kitchen.

BEL: Speaking of breathing, does anyone else feel like the air just got thicker?

They paused, suddenly aware of the stillness that had crept over the evening. The lanterns flickered, their flames dancing despite the lack of wind. Even the crickets had gone quiet.

KAL: Probably just a storm coming.

NLH: The sky was clear an hour ago.

FNR: Weather changes fast in the mountains.

But his hand had moved instinctively toward where his sword used to hang, and his ears had flattened against his skull. Old habits died hard.

SHN: You're all being paranoid. It's just-

The temperature dropped so suddenly they could see their breath misting in the lamplight. Cups of hot coffee began steaming like cauldrons.

NER: That's not me.

Nilah set down her cup with the careful precision of someone who'd learned to read between the lines of reality itself.

NLH: Something's watching us.

BEL: Something, or someone?

ILA: Does it matter?

The shadows seemed to lengthen, reaching toward their circle of light like fingers testing the warmth. Fenris's ears pricked forward, a low growl building in his throat. Something was wrong.

KAL: Whoever you are, show yourself. We're too old for games.

FNR: And too tired for surprises.

Fenris's hackles rose as an unfamiliar scent reached him - something cold, something that shouldn't exist. The silence stretched taut as a bowstring. Then came the soft scrape of a boot against stone.

ILA: Can't believe him sometimes.

The chairs scraped against the dirt as the temperature dipped and the lanterns flickered. A figure emerged from the darkness - tall, draped in shadows that moved wrong, with a fedora tilted just so.

BLK: Evening, legends.

Five hands moved simultaneously toward weapons that weren't there, muscle memory overriding years of peaceful retirement. They froze, caught between past and present, heroes and civilians, legends and the ghost who'd come calling.

ILA: Calm down everyone. He's with me.

And in that moment of perfect stillness, with their breath misting white and their hearts hammering like war drums, they remembered exactly why some stories are better left unfinished.

End of Chapter 101
"Coffee Between Friends"

End of Volume 3
"The Heroes"

[This was nice, but this artist has duty to attend to.]

(Chapter 99 || Volume 3) The Order.

Six months had passed since the song that shook the world, since the blade that split the sky, since Nilah had learned that love could be a weapon stronger than any forged in flame or steel. The dead plains had become the Bloom Valley, a garden paradise where pilgrims came from across the continent to see where death itself had been conquered by collective hope.

Nilah stood at the edge of the valley, watching children from a dozen different species play among flowers that grew in impossible colors. Human children chased butterfly-winged sprites through meadows where minotaur calves grazed peacefully beside centaur foals. It was the world Icarus had dreamed of when he flew into the sun: a place where differences were celebrated rather than feared.

MRC: Hard to believe this was all wasteland just a few months ago.

He approached through the tall grass, no longer the gruff foreman she remembered from Valdris but wearing the robes of an elected representative. The new **Council of Souls** had asked him to serve as their first Speaker, a position that suited his natural leadership abilities.

NLH: Sometimes I still can't believe it myself. When I look at all this... It feels like someone else's dream.

SRA: Your dream. Our dream. Everyone's dream.

Sera emerged from behind a cluster of flame-colored Celosia flowers, her scales catching the afternoon sunlight like living jewels.

She carried a leather satchel filled with documents and wore the satisfied expression of someone who had spent the morning solving complex problems.

SRA: The architectural surveys are complete. The foundation can support the weight, and the location has unanimous approval from all the participating communities.

NLH: All of them? Even the mountain clans?

MRC: Especially the mountain clans. Seems your little demonstration with the horizon-spanning blade made quite an impression on the dwarven stoneworkers. They're practically fighting each other for the honor of carving it.

Nilah felt a familiar flutter of discomfort at the attention, but it was different now. The crushing weight of unworthiness had lifted, replaced by something she was still learning to navigate: acceptance. Not just of help, but of recognition, of celebration, of love freely given without condition.

GRL: Fire lady! Fire lady!

The half-fox child from Valdris came bounding through the flowers, her russet fur gleaming and her pointed ears perked with excitement. She had grown in the past months, both in height and confidence, and now served as an unofficial ambassador between the various communities that had settled in the valley.

GRL: The artists finished the model! Do you want to see?

She tugged on Nilah's red cape with gentle insistence, leading the small group toward a pavilion that had been erected in the valley's heart. Inside, a team of sculptors, architects, and artists had been working for weeks on their grand project, fueled by donations from

every town Nilah had ever helped.

The model stood on a circular table, carved from white marble and painted with meticulous detail. It depicted Nilah in the moment of her greatest triumph: standing tall with her massive flame blade raised toward the sky, her hair and cape caught in an eternal wind, her face serene but determined. Around the base, smaller figures represented the people of various communities, all looking up at her with expressions of hope and gratitude.

LSC: We tried to capture not just the moment, but the feeling. The sense that someone stood between us and despair.

She was an elderly dwarf woman whose hands bore the calluses of decades working stone. Her eyes held the particular intensity that came from trying to translate emotion into marble.

SC2: The actual statue will be thirty feet tall, placed at the valley's highest point. Visible from every community, but never overshadowing them.

NLH: It's... it's beautiful. But I'm not sure I deserve...

MRC: Stop.

The word came out sharper than he intended, making everyone turn to look at him. His lupine features showed a mixture of affection and exasperation.

MRC: Six months ago, you nearly died because you couldn't accept that people cared about you. Don't make us sing the world into harmony again just to convince you that you've earned this.

GRL: Besides, it's not just about you!

The child's announcement drew puzzled looks from the adults. She grinned with the particular mischief that came from knowing a secret.

GRL: Show them the other part!

The lead sculptor smiled and gestured to a series of smaller models arranged around the pavilion's edges. Each one depicted a different figure: Icarus with his golden wings spread wide, other heroes from the WORLD whose names had been preserved in stories and songs, and several empty pedestals waiting for future legends.

SC2: The statue is just the centerpiece. We're building a Hall of

Heroes, a place where the stories of all who fought for hope can be preserved and told.

SRA: A museum?

SC2: More than that. A living memorial, a place of learning and inspiration. The communities voted unanimously to fund it.

Nilah moved from model to model, studying the faces of friends and allies she had thought forgotten. They were all there: **Kael, Bella, Shen, Neru, Matta, Fenris, Illia...**

NLH: You remembered them all.

SC2: We remembered what you taught us: that heroes come in all forms, from all places.

MRC: The Hall will have sections for different kinds of heroism.

SRA: And space for new heroes, ones who haven't been born yet but who will undoubtedly be needed someday.

Nilah paused at one of the empty pedestals, imagining it filled with the statue of someone she might never meet, someone who would stand against whatever darkness next threatened the world. The thought was both humbling and oddly comforting.

GRL: There's going to be a library too! With books about everyone, and maps showing all the places they helped, and even some of their actual belongings!

NLH: What belongings?

MRC: Well, for starters, people have been asking if you'd consider donating that pressed flower collection of yours.

Nilah's hand moved instinctively to her pocket, where she still kept the Celosia flowers she had been gathering for so long. The thought of letting them go sparked a brief moment of panic, but she forced herself to consider it seriously.

NLH: The flowers... they were just something I collected to remind myself that beauty could still exist after everything we'd lost.

SRA: And now they could remind others of the same thing. Imagine a child, years from now, learning that even heroes need small reminders of hope.

The idea had merit. The flowers had served their purpose for her, had been anchors of beauty in a world that often seemed determined to destroy everything lovely. Perhaps they could serve the same purpose for others.

SC2: We've also received donations from the other communities. Marcus brought the original plans for Valdris's reconstruction. Port Sunder sent nets and tools used in the first joint fishing expeditions between humans and sea-folk.

MRC: Thornwick contributed one of the spider cocoons you cleared out, properly preserved and displayed to show what they were up against.

GRL: And I'm going to donate my drawings!

She produced a rolled bundle of paper from somewhere in her clothes, spreading them on the table with pride. The drawings were simple but expressive, depicting scenes from the stories she had heard: Nilah fighting monsters, helping rebuild towns, standing against impossible odds with her flame blade blazing.

NLH: These are wonderful. You have real talent.

GRL: I want to be the museum's first official artist! Someone who helps tell the stories through pictures, so even people who can't read can understand.

The simplicity and clarity of the child's ambition struck Nilah deeply. Here was someone who had found her calling not in combat or magic, but in preservation and communication. A different kind of heroism, but heroism nonetheless.

SC2: The dedication ceremony is planned for the summer solstice. Representatives from every community you've helped will be there, along with delegations from places you've never even visited.

MRC: Word has spread beyond our continent. There are ships coming from across the sea, carrying people who want to witness the unveiling.

SRA: The Council has formally declared it a continental holiday. '*Heroes' Day*,' they're calling it.

Nilah felt overwhelmed by the scope of what they were planning, but this time the feeling wasn't crushing. It was like standing at the edge of an ocean: vast and intimidating, but also beautiful and full of possibility.

NLH: And you want me to speak at the dedication?

GRL: Of course! You have to tell everyone about the other heroes, help them understand why they mattered too.

NLH: I... I think I'd like that.

The words came out steadier than she expected. Six months ago,

the thought of standing before thousands of people would have filled her with paralyzing dread. Now, it felt like an opportunity to do something she had never been able to do during the war: honor the memory of those who had fallen, ensure they were remembered for more than just their deaths.

MRC: There's one more thing.

He produced a small box from his robes, opening it to reveal a medallion cast in gold and silver. The design was simple but elegant: a flame rising from cupped hands, surrounded by symbols representing all the communities of their alliance.

MRC: The Council voted to create a new order: the Order of Knighthood. It's for people who embody the spirit of heroism and are granted the title of Knight.

SRA: You're the first recipient, of course. But there will be others.

NLH: An order that celebrates all kinds of heroes.

GRL: Just like the Hall!

Nilah accepted the medallion, feeling its weight in her palm. It was heavier than she expected, but not burdensome. More like an anchor, something to remind her of her connection to the communities and people she had learned to call home.

NLH: When does construction begin?

SC2: Tomorrow, if you give the final approval. The stoneworkers are eager to start, and the weather is perfect for laying foundations.

NLH: Then let's build it. Let's build a place where heroes are remembered, where stories are preserved, where children can learn that they too might someday stand against the darkness.

As the sun set over Bloom Valley, painting the impossible flowers in shades of gold and crimson, Nilah stood with her friends and looked toward the hill where her statue would soon rise. It wouldn't be a monument to her alone, she realized, but to all of them, to everyone who had chosen hope over despair, community over isolation, love over fear.

The Hall of Heroes would stand as proof that no one fights alone, that every victory belongs to all who believe in it. And perhaps, when future darkness came, as it inevitably would, someone would visit that hall and find the courage to take up the torch that heroes had been passing from hand to hand since the world began.

The fire lady would have her place in stone and memory, but more importantly, she had found her place among the living, among those who had taught her that the greatest strength came not from standing alone, but from standing together.

And so, the **Council of Souls** declared that the museum would honor not only heroes of the past but also the living voices of art. The very first named artist of the museum was none other than **Illia**, a world-renowned talent whose works had already captured the spirit of countless generations.

End of Chapter 99 **"The Order"**

[The five of you have come far.]

(Chapter 100 || Volume 3) Knighthood.

The summer solstice arrived like a crown of fire over Bloom Valley. From every direction came ships, caravans, and pilgrims, carrying banners stitched with the colors of a hundred communities. The statue on the hill was not yet raised, but already the ground shook with the weight of history gathering in one place. And me, Blook, your humble fedora-wearing ghost, hovered above it all, watching. I have seen more endings than I care to count, yet this moment smelled of beginnings.

Heroes returned, some dragged reluctantly by memory, others walking willingly into the light of recognition. They came not to claim glory, but to lend their presence to something larger: a hall where memory itself would be built into stone and song.

I drifted first to Fenris, hulking in Rosetti's Butcher Shop stall like a warhound trying to act the part of a shepherd. His hands were large enough to break bone, yet they rested with almost tender care on the cuts of beef he arranged. To the people he was only the butcher, but I knew better. He had once stood shoulder to shoulder with legends. The scars beneath his apron told that story, even if his mouth never would.

Not far from the shop, Kael walked among the gathered families. The Knight of Defiance, once a man who could stare into the abyss and laugh, now adjusted a child's collar and inspected a loose board on the pavilion steps. His rebellion had transformed into something

quieter but more radical: ordinary love. When he scooped his daughter into his arms, her light spheres dancing around them, it struck me harder than any cosmic duel. Defiance, after all, is not only in battle. Sometimes it is in choosing to stay, to fix, to father.

Bella stood nearby, wings scattering light like stained glass across the crowd. She was luminous in stillness, the kind of presence that steadied a gathering. She listened more than she spoke, and when she did, every word carried the patience of someone who knew how fragile balance could be. If Kael was the storm held at bay, Bella was the hearth that warmed everyone who stepped close.

Then came Neru. His arrival was felt before it was seen, the air tightening with a crisp chill. Where others exchanged handshakes, he simply nodded, his silence carrying more weight than speeches. He was not there to dazzle, he was there because inevitability itself had walked into the valley. Beside him strode Shen, sparks licking off his fingertips as if his body could not help leaking fire into the world. He laughed, cracked his knuckles, and mocked the air with the same audacity he once hurled at monsters. Together they were paradox and symmetry, ice and explosion, stillness and motion.

And then Illia. The artist who stitched ghosts into color carried himself like a man half-possessed by the very memories he painted. The crowd treated him as a visionary, but I could see the raw edges beneath his careful smile. Every brushstroke had cost him something. Every painting was both a gift and a wound. He had been chosen as the museum's artist, the first official chronicler of their collective story, and though he bowed humbly, I could taste the grief he carried like turpentine on his tongue.

I floated above them all and could not help feeling something like pride, though pride is a mortal word and I am anything but mortal. They gathered not for themselves, but for the promise of a Hall that would outlive even my drifting witness. Fenris, Kael, Bella, Neru, Shen, Illia... each carried scars, each carried contradictions, and yet here they were. Proof that memory can be built from both silence and song, from blood and from laughter.

The ceremony had not yet begun, but the air was already heavy with the sense that history was watching. And I tipped my hat to the heroes below.

The valley filled with a murmur like ocean waves, thousands of voices carried on the solstice wind. Every community Nilah had

touched had sent a delegation. Some came in armor, others in robes, some in simple work clothes still stained with the day's labor. It did not matter. They stood side by side, shoulder to shoulder, as if all the divisions of race, blood, and history had been dissolved in the bloom of impossible flowers.

The Council of Souls had prepared a stage of polished stone and fresh banners. At its center, the unfinished pedestal stood draped in white cloth, waiting for the statue that would crown it. The Hall of Heroes was only an outline sketched in wood and scaffolding behind it, yet the weight of what it would become pressed heavier than the mountains.

The first to step forward was Marcus, Speaker of the Council. His voice, deep and lupine, carried across the crowd without the need for magic.

MRC: We gather not for one hero, but for many. We gather not to exalt the strong, but to honor the countless forms of courage that built this valley. Today we lay a foundation that will outlast us all.

I drifted closer. I have heard speeches at the birth and death of nations. Most are bloated things, swollen with pride. This one was lean and steady, like a stone pillar meant to hold up memory rather than inflate egos.

After him came Sera, carrying the same calm precision she had once wielded in war councils. She spoke of the museum not as a vault of stone, but as a living heart.

SRA: Stories will live here. Not in silence, but in classrooms. Not in shadow, but in song. The children who run among these flowers will one day walk these halls and learn what it means to stand for hope.

Her words were met with quiet reverence. Even the children hushed, sensing their future was being written in the air. Then came the heroes themselves, stepping one by one into the light of the gathering.

Fenris stood like a fortress in butcher's clothes. He did not speak long, only offered a single line, his voice heavy as stone.

FNR: I was a weapon once. Now I choose to be a shield. Let the Hall remind others they can choose too.

Kael followed, broad-shouldered and gentle-eyed. He bent slightly to the microphone, though his presence already commanded the crowd.

KAL: We were not meant to be remembered as giants. We were meant to be remembered as fathers, mothers, neighbors, as people who loved despite the darkness. If the Hall shows that, then it has done its work.

Bella's translucent wings shimmered in the light as she spoke softly, but every word reached the farthest listener.

BEL: A garden flourishes because of its roots, unseen beneath the soil. So too do families and communities. Let the Hall remind us that unseen love is as heroic as any battle.

Neru and Shen stood together. Neru's words were cold and measured, each syllable cut like frost.

NER: Hope must be guarded.

Shen cracked his knuckles and grinned before adding his fire.

SHN: And sometimes hope needs an explosion to keep the dark guessing.

The crowd laughed, tension melting for a brief instant. Even Neru's mouth twitched, the faintest shadow of a smile. Finally, Illia stepped forward. She carried a paint-stained satchel, her hands trembling as if the ghosts of her canvases weighed more than stone. She laid it on the pedestal and spoke with a voice both fragile and unbreakable.

ILA: I cannot bring them back. But I can show you how they looked when they laughed, how they fought, how they wept, how they lived. My art is not to make them perfect, but to keep them human.

The silence that followed was deeper than applause. It was the silence of memory itself, of every listener recalling someone they had lost. When the applause finally rose, it was not for one man, but for all who had been carried into that moment.

And then, as the sun burned directly above, the cloth was drawn away. The statue of Nilah, towering thirty feet in flame-forged majesty, was revealed to the world. Around its base were carved

the faces of the communities, all gazing upward in unity. The Hall was not yet finished, yet in that instant it already existed in the hearts of everyone present.

The first Heroes' Day had begun.

I hovered above the crowd, brim tipped low, my ghost-fedora shading the grin I could not hide. For once, entropy had been cheated. For once, memory had beaten silence. And I allowed myself to be proud.

End of Chapter 100
"Knighthood"

[You'd be proud too, Icarus.]

(Chapter 101 || Volume 3) Coffee Between Friends.

The first sip of coffee always tells you who someone is. Fenris drank his slow, deliberate, ears twitching slightly as he savored each taste like he was making peace with the beans themselves. Kael gulped his as if it were the final water in a desert. Bella added honey before she'd even tasted it. Neru let the steam fog his face without a word. Shen nearly burned his tongue, spat a curse, then laughed so hard he almost tipped his chair. Illia stirred her cup like a woman coaxing ghosts out of hiding. Nilah, quieter than the rest, held hers close to her chest and simply listened, her smile reflecting the warmth around the table. I hovered nearby, brim low over my eyes, thinking this is what legends look like when the wars are done.

SHN: So tell me, butcher. When was the last time you swung something sharper than a cleaver?

FNR: Yesterday.

SHN: Against what? A ribeye?

FNR: Bone's tougher than most soldiers I've met. At least the cow doesn't beg for mercy.

KAL: If you had been this funny back then, half the battles would've been easier.

BEL: You forget he used to glare entire regiments into surrender. Humor was never required.

NER: He still could.

The table stilled for a moment. With Neru it was never clear if he was joking. Shen leaned back, smirking.

SHN: Don't listen to him. Neru thinks glaring is foreplay.

Illia nearly choked on her drink, coughing through laughter.

ILA: Shen! You nearly killed me with that line.

Nilah finally spoke, her voice soft as silk dragged over stone.

NLH: At least he didn't kill you with actual foreplay.

The silence that followed was so complete you could hear the coffee cooling in their cups. Then Shen threw back his head and howled with laughter, slapping the table hard enough to rattle the sugar bowl.

SHN: Nilah! Where have you been hiding that tongue?

NLH: Waiting for the right moment to draw blood.

BEL: Remind me never to cross a swordswoman.

KAL: Former swordswoman. Now she just swings her hair around rather than blades.

NLH: Same principles apply. Check them out, learn their secrets, return them when you're done.

Fenris raised his cup in a mock toast.

FNR: To Nilah. Quieter than death, sharper than my best blade.

NLH: Flattery will get you extra bacon tomorrow.

FNR: I take it back. You're terrifying.

Bella leaned forward, chin resting on her palm, honey-colored eyes dancing.

BEL: Do you remember the first time we all sat together like this? Together with Icarus and Matta too?

KAL: You mean when i tried to drink half the tavern dry and ended up serenading a barmaid with that ridiculous ballad about his own heroics?

NER: That was not ridiculous. That was inspirational.

ILA: You rhymed 'victory' with 'Shen is so pretty.'

SHN: Poetry doesn't have to be perfect to be profound.

NER: It helps.

SHN: Says the man who once wrote a haiku about turnips.

NER: That haiku was about the cyclical nature of life and death as represented through root vegetables.

BEL: It was about turnips, Neru.

NER: Metaphorical turnips.

Kael stretched, joints popping like small fireworks.

KAL: I miss those days sometimes. When the biggest worry was whether the next town had decent ale.

ILA: And clean beds.

FNR: And meat that wasn't trying to crawl off the plate. Being a deserter was fun...

NLH: I miss the libraries we'd find. Each one different. Each one holding secrets people had forgotten they'd written down.

BEL: You still do that. Back then I caught you reading Mrs. Henley's recipe book like it contained the mysteries of the universe.

NLH: Her grandmother's soup recipe does contain mysteries. Seven different herbs, but she only lists six.

SHN: Maybe she can't count.

NLH: Or maybe the seventh ingredient is love, and she assumed people would know.

NER: Or poison. Old women are crafty.

ILA: Neru, Mrs. Henley is seventy-three and brings us pie every Sunday.

NER: The most dangerous ones always seem harmless.

Fenris rubbed his scarred knuckles against his mug, steam curling around his weathered fingers. His nostrils flared slightly, picking up scents the others couldn't.

FNR: Sometimes I wonder if we were the dangerous ones all along.

The mood shifted, subtle as a cloud passing over the sun. Bella's smile dimmed slightly.

BEL: We saved people, Fenris.

FNR: Did we? Or did we just decide who lived and who didn't?

KAL: That's not the same thing.

FNR: Isn't it?

Neru's voice cut through the tension like a blade through silk.

NER: The dead don't care about our motivations. Only the living get to wrestle with guilt.

ILA: That's cheerful.

NER: Truth rarely is.

Shen drained his cup and set it down with deliberate force.

SHN: You know what? I refuse to let philosophy ruin perfectly good coffee. We did what needed doing. People are alive because of us. End of discussion.

NLH: Shen's right. We can question our choices when we're dead. For now, we're here, we're breathing, and Mrs. Henley's pie is waiting in the kitchen.

BEL: Speaking of breathing, does anyone else feel like the air just got thicker?

They paused, suddenly aware of the stillness that had crept over the evening. The lanterns flickered, their flames dancing despite the lack of wind. Even the crickets had gone quiet.

KAL: Probably just a storm coming.

NLH: The sky was clear an hour ago.

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But his hand had moved instinctively toward where his sword used to hang, and his ears had flattened against his skull. Old habits died hard.

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stretched taut as a bowstring. Then came the soft scrape of a boot against stone.

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BLK: Evening, legends.

Five hands moved simultaneously toward weapons that weren't there, muscle memory overriding years of peaceful retirement. They froze, caught between past and present, heroes and civilians, legends and the ghost who'd come calling.

ILA: Calm down everyone. He's with me.

And in that moment of perfect stillness, with their breath misting white and their hearts hammering like war drums, they remembered exactly why some stories are better left unfinished.

End of Chapter 101
"Coffee Between Friends"

End of Volume 3
"The Heroes"

[This was nice, but this artist has duty to attend to.]