***BAD OMEN***



# ~ CHAPTER 1 ~

**Archway, Islington borough, London…**

*Tap! Tap! Tap!*

It was at the peak of noon and rain was drizzling. The once clear sky about ten minutes ago was now covered with thick gray clouds that rumbled softly.

It was spring after all, the inhabitants of the little town didn’t mind the sparse downpour and continued in their routine endeavors. The jingling bells of bicycles didn’t stop, neither did the honking of vehicles. Although the latter was hardly heard due to the sparse amount of vehicles on the road. The cyclists had already worn raincoats ahead of the rain so they weren’t bothered.

At the rear end of a silver KIA car, stood a lady that held up a black umbrella and was clad in a brown raincoat. The raincoat was quite transparent so one could—though a bit blurry—see the knee-length, red gown she wore within. The glitter on the gown twinkled ever so slightly.

Her blue constellation eyes were a bit dilated as they glistered with optimism, her lips pursed to hold in a smile… or a laugh?

Even under the drizzling rain that threatened to increase its intensity, she stood at the curb of the road, almost bursting with excitement.

She dipped her right hand into the raincoat’s side pocket and buckled her left knee, resting on her toes, fiddling with the rain water that flowed by her feet. Though, she made this act of hers inconspicuous to avoid weird stares from the people that walked by.

*Come on! Where are you?* she blurted internally, her gaze fixated on the brown wooden door of the bungalow at the other side of the street. It was the only standalone building in the entire street. The rest were terrace houses.

She kept moving her left foot in anticipation as she stared solely on the door. One would think she was trying to open the door with some kind of unnatural force, considering how undeterred her gaze was.

But it was only natural for any lady in their mid-twenties. She was waiting for her date. Normally, he was supposed to be the one to pick her up, but her place of work was just a few blocks away. She decided to surprise him by showing up early, but then the heavens cried.

A part of her was telling her to cross and knock on his door, but another part of her refuted and opted that she waited. If he was to come out and see her waiting in the cold, under the rain, he’d become sentimental and feel guilty, which meant he'd treat her way better and value her more. Naturally, her ego got the best of her and she waited. She was only ten minutes early anyway.

*Sigh…* She exhaled, exuding a cold whitish breath from her mouth and she sniffled.

*Maybe this was a bad idea,* she smiled tersely, rethinking her strategy.

Just then, the door to the white bungalow opened and she finally blinked. She had been staring for so long that she blinked over five times before focusing on the door again.

Her eyes fell upon a man in a blue raincoat locking the door shut. He then picked up the folded umbrella by the wall and turned to walk down the stairs of the balcony.

Her lips curved up to a relieved smile as she saw his lush brown hair and deep brown eyes. He had full groomed beards.

It was him, Noah Patel, the date she had been frantically waiting for. They met two weeks ago and quickly connected. This would be their first date, so her excitement was to be expected.

Showing all her sparkling dentition, she drew her right hand from her pocket and raised it high, waving it at the young man. He quickly spotted her due to the bright color of her raincoat. He smiled warmly and nodded, taking a step over the curb to cross to the other side. The road was empty, no cars, no bicycles, just an old truck parked about ten feet away by the curb.

As he stepped over the curb, placing his rubber boots on the road…

First came a loud splash, immediately followed by a loud bang.

The sudden bang rang across a few houses; the lady’s eyes went wide. She didn’t really see what happened, but one moment, Noah’s foot was on the road, the next moment, a truck speedily drove by along the same path. It happened so swiftly that she had to rub her eyes for a moment before looking back at Noah.

But the young man was no longer there, just one of his boots. Her eyes went stale as she trailed the path that the truck had taken. Then she saw his other boot laying dormant in the middle of the road. However, Noah was nowhere to be found, likewise the truck that hit him.

The lady was dumbfounded, she kept staring at the boot in the middle of the road, her eyes quivering in shock, her heart palpitating.

The other pedestrians that were walking by had stopped for a while to sightsee the accident that had just occurred, but soon continued their stroll since there really wasn’t anything to see. The man that was hit and the truck that hit him had disappeared.

“Dude, the speed of that truck! It must have been so fast, it carried the man all the way to the next street and probably dumped his body there,” a teenage boy whispered to his friend as they walked past the lady from behind.

She stood so still, until all the voices around her completely faded. She could only hear her raging heartbeat and the drops of rain pattering on the discarded boots on the road. She didn’t even realize when her umbrella fell from her hand, exposing her body to the downpour that was getting heavy. Thanks to her Sou’wester—the black rain hat on her head—her light-blonde hair was kept dry, except its fringes that stuck out of the hat.

Subconsciously dropping to her knees, splashing the water on the ground all over her body and her face, her eyes narrowed and she muttered…

“What the hell?”

# ~ CHAPTER 2 ~

“Heh… There I was, standing like a fool with much hope that he was definitely going to be the one,” she sighed depressingly. Then she scoffed wryly, “He was just like the others. Even worse in fact.”

The blue-haired lady by the desk, pushed her glasses up with two fingers and shook her head as she sighed, “Don’t talk like he isn’t— wasn’t human, Kyla.”

Laying nonchalantly on the couch like an exhausted child that had just returned from a long day at school, Kyla covered her eyes with her forearm and grunted. The glitter on her short red dress twinkled incessantly under the showering rays of the big white bulb that dangled beside the ceiling fan.

The curtains in the room had all been dropped, giving this sense of enclosure and safety to its occupants. Kyla was laying on the couch that was placed beside the widest window, while the blue-haired lady and her desk were opposite the couch.

Her sea-blue hair was tied into a bun behind her with two strands dangling from her temples. Her shirt was white, spotless and firmly ironed. She had its sleeves folded twice.

She twitched her glasses once again, her piercing brown eyes pale from exasperation, “There’s probably more to this that we don’t know. Maybe he and the driver of the truck that hit him had some kind of dispute or something.”

The blonde-haired Kyla raised her forearm and turned her head to size the lady up. She scoffed after three seconds and shook her head, facing the ceiling, “What does it matter? Why do you talk like this was the first time, Freya?”

Freya blinked and kept silent.

Kyla rubbed her glabella as she continued, “Every one of them usually falls prey to one silly predicament or the other. Every single guy I have dated, or about to go out with, they either end up dead or mysteriously disappear. It’s happened so frequently that I’ve lost count.”

As Freya listened, she tapped the rim of her mug with one of her long red nails and picked it up to have a sip. By the time she was done, Kyla was no longer talking. She dropped the small mug on its saucer and cleared her throat, “And yet, you keep going out there, hanging out and agreeing to any proposal brought to you.”

Kyla rolled her eyes.

“It’s as though you no longer value the life of men, since you know damn well what happens to anyone that has feelings for you. If anyone asks me, this is all your fault,” Freya shrugged and picked up her mug.

About two minutes of silence ensued between the ladies. Well, if one ignored the regular slurping from Freya and her mug of coffee, it was totally silent.

Kyla just kept staring at the white ceiling as though something interesting was on it. As the silence stretched on to three minutes, she grunted and sat up, leaning forward with interlocked hands.

Freya placed her mug aside as she noticed this.

“Remember Julian?” Kyla asked.

Freya raised a brow, “The talkative guy that fell into the sewers on his way back from your date?”

“Ahh… So you actually remember him,” Kyla nodded.

“Why wouldn’t I? That was like what… two months ago? And you guys dated for almost three weeks, the longest you’ve ever been in,” Freya simply shrugged.

“I know, right? I thought he was the ONE…” Kyla scoffed.

“And you swore to remain single if anything ever happened to him,” Freya reminded, with this expression on her face that read, “Yet you’ve dated two guys after him.”

Kyla chuckled tersely, “Okay, listen to this. After his sewer accident and losing both legs, he relocated to the suburbs to live a secluded life. I was hurt, I grieved even though he wasn’t dead. I knew I would never see him again--”

“And yet, here we are,” Freya replied with a snicker.

Kyla rolled her eyes, “Would you just let me finish?”

“Sure…” Freya had her eyes on her sheen silver watch. “Your session is almost over anyway.”

Kyla rolled her eyes to the ceiling, then to the ground and exhaled, “After a few days that he abandoned me, I… I don’t really know how to explain it, but I completely forgot about him… not until now.”

Freya paused what she was doing and looked at her friend, the latter seemed serious. Then she stood up and walked away from her desk, “So what are you implying? That you experience temporary amnesia with every guy you’ve dated? And that’s the reason why you’re in an endless cycle of short-term relationships?”

Kyla rubbed the back of her neck, “I guess so… If you put it that way.”

Freya had already rolled up the curtains and sat beside Kyla, who closed her eyes and placed her head on her chest. The blue-haired lady was quite blessed up there, so it was more than enough to serve as a warm pillow for Kyla, who exhaled in satisfaction.

Freya smiled, rubbing down her friend’s blonde hair, “Then you agree with me that something or someone is behind this? It’s just insane knowing that any guy that dates you dies or experiences a life-changing accident.”

Kyla sighed, “It’s like I’m jinxed.”

“Normally, as a scientist, I’d argue that there’s no such thing as luck or bad luck, but things have really gotten out of hand,” Freya kept rubbing Kyla’s hair.

Kyla scoffed, “You’re only a therapist.”

“Still falls under science,” Freya defended proudly.

Kyla was already dozing off on Freya’s chest and motherly touch. She yawned, “Advice me, Freya. What do I do from here?”

“It’s quite simple actually…” The therapist withdrew herself and placed her hands on her client’s cheeks. “You have to steel your resolve this time around. Noah is going to be the last one.”

Kyla shrugged, “Yeah, sure.”

Freya squinted her eyes, “Say… it.”

Kyla grunted before placing a hand on her chest, “I promise myself, Noah Patel is going to be the last one… hopefully.”

“Seriously?” Freya dropped her brows.

Kyla smiled, “Just kidding.”

Freya shook her head, “And you’re an officer of the law for God's sake. Shouldn’t you have started investigating the happenings around you?”

Kyla chuckled sheepishly, “I tend to forget. Besides, I end up spending my day helping other people and have little to no time for myself. The cops are meant to see the civilians as top priority, you know?” she shrugged.

“Hmm,” Freya stood up and walked back to her desk. She sat down and took a glance at her watch, “Just be careful from now on. Go home and have some rest, my next patient will be here any minute now.”

Kyla got on her feet after a few seconds of staring. She pulled down the helm of her gown, took her raincoat from the couch and walked over to the side for her umbrella and hat.

As she wore the Sou’wester and picked up her umbrella, a knock came from the door.

“Come in,” Freya raised her voice a bit, sitting in this stern position, exuding this serious professional aura. Kyla just scoffed.

The door was opened and a man walked in.

“Doctor Freya Hall?” He asked with a shaky voice before taking another step in.

With a warm smile, Freya nodded and swayed her hand towards the couch, “Yes. Please, have a seat.”

Kyla didn’t really pay attention, but she couldn’t miss his lush white hair that stood curled on his head. He walked past her without a word and sat on the couch, his legs shaking every now and then. He looked petrified and confused.

She shrugged, it wasn’t her business. It was her therapist friend, Freya’s job, to help him.

Kyla waved her goodbye before walking out of the office.

~

She closed the door behind her and locked it. Almost immediately, she pulled off her rubber boots and tossed them aside, dropped her umbrella in its racket and lazily hung her raincoat and Sou’wester.

After she left Freya's office, she sat at the reception and waited till her therapist friend answered the last patient. By then, it was a few minutes to eight in the night. She used the time to catch up on the movies she had missed during the week, since she was so busy planning for the date with Noah Patel.

Freya made sure to escort her home with her own car too. She made it certain Kyla had entered before driving off.

“Ugh…” she grunted as she walked away from the corridor into the dark living room.

Using muscle memory, she found the switch and turned the lights on. The white light from the fluorescent bulb washed over the entire living room, dispelling the thick darkness.

The place was quite small and there was no demarcation between the living room and the kitchen. There were two double-seater couches, a glass center table over a blue rug and a small flat screen TV.

She didn’t waste time walking past the living room and into her room. She came out two minutes later, clad in pale black shorts and a skimpy white singlet that stopped above her belly button.

She hadn’t taken two steps further when goosebumps dotted her skin completely. It was still very cold from the downpour earlier. She scurried back to her room and put on a black sweatshirt and black sweatpants. Even after turning the thermometer up for the house, her limbs still shook from the chilly atmosphere.

She put on the TV and entered the kitchen. She walked into the living room almost twenty minutes later with a tray that conveyed a mug of hot chocolate and a few pieces of freshly baked biscuits.

She took a seat and took a sip of hot chocolate. She smiled to the warmth that slid down her throat and filled her body. She was about tuning the channel to a show that would soon start, when a light, scrawny voice filled the living room….

“F-Forgetting something? Forgetting something?” It was akin to the sound of a robot.

Kyla recognized the voice pretty quickly and her eyes dilated. She stood up immediately and strolled into the kitchen. Hanging from the ceiling was a bird cage and inside the cage was a parrot with green, yellow and purple feathers.

She smiled as she leaned on her toes to open the cage, “Hey, Pilot, sorry for leaving you all alone again.”

She carried the bird in her hands and went back to the living room.

She had barely sat down when the parrot began singing, “Always forgets, always forgets…”

Kyla chuckled sheepishly, “I’m sorry. These days have been really hectic. But mere seeing you now, I’m at peace.”

It wasn’t that obvious, but she could tell that it was squinting its eyes at her.

She scoffed, “You must be hungry. Here… Have some biscuits.”

She placed the tray on her lap and broke a biscuit into crumbs for him to feed on. She tuned in to her show, gradually sipping from her mug, while rubbing her parrot’s feathers.

About an hour passed in a flash and that episode for the show ended. It was just too good a series that an hour felt like ten minutes.

She was still contemplating whether or not to look for something else to watch or go to bed, when her phone rang beside her.

She took it and brought it close to see who was calling, but it was from an unknown number.

Normally, she’d ignore such calls to avoid any trouble, but with the recent happenings around her, nothing else could shake her.

*What could go wrong?* she clicked her teeth and picked the call.

“Hello--”

A faint screech interrupted her.

“Kyla! Kyla!...”

Her heart skipped a beat for a moment as the distressed voice sounded familiar, very familiar. Her mind whirled and had come to a conclusion but she couldn’t believe it.

“They…. I’m not… It’s them!...” the caller’s words kept breaking due to recurrent screeches. “… You have to help me!... Kyla!... No!...”

The call ended and the living room was left in total serenity.

She couldn’t really piece what the caller was saying together, but the voice, the voice of the man rang a bell in her head. She knew that voice. It was him.

Dropping her phone from her ear with a raised brow, she muttered, “Noah?”

# **~ CHAPTER 3 ~**

Kyla was stupefied... Frozen. The man she had thought dead earlier today, had just called and spoken to her. Was he a ghost? Was she dreaming? One would wonder...

“It-It can’t be... Noah was... I saw him get rammed by the truck...” Kyla stuttered, staring blankly at the TV screen. “No one could have survived that. No one.”

Her hands quivered so much, her phone dropped from her grasp to the tiled floor. The subtle clang jolted her from her daze and she flinched. It took her a few seconds to compose herself, then she picked her phone from the floor and dropped it on the center table.

She relaxed back on the sofa, an absurd smile slowly creeping on her face, “A miracle. Is the universe finally smiling on me? Has my curse been lifted?”

Her smile soon depreciated to an expressionless face, then to a dazed one. She leaned forward to grab her phone, “Damn it, he sounded like he was in trouble! What could have happened?”

She picked the phone and dialed the number he used to call her. However, the line didn’t go through. It either said, “the number you’re trying to call does not exist,” or it never even rang at all.

Frustrated after over five minutes of trying, she tossed the phone back on the table and raised her head to the ceiling, sighing ruefully.

“Just when I thought things would be positive again...” she grunted. “What the hell is going on?”

*But how could anyone have survived such a fatal accident? He was hit point blank... s*he delved into thought. *Okay, let’s say he somehow survived... Where is he? How did he get my number to call me? It wasn’t his number that called me and we’ve barely known each other for him to memorize my number. Or...* she dropped her head, her lips twitching to a slight smile. *Does he love me that much?*

*Oh, shut up!* she palmed her face. *This is why I keep dating over and over. Freya was right. I’m too susceptible.*

She remained silent for over a minute, processing and putting her thoughts in order. She sighed, *He’s definitely injured and might die if I don’t find him as quickly as possible,* she looked over at her phone on the table. *I’ll get Malcolm and his team to track the number tomorrow. That should lead us somewhere... Hopefully.*

With a grunt, she stood up, picked up her phone and turned off the TV. She was about to leave the living room when she noticed Pilot fast asleep on the sofa. She smiled warmly like a mother and carried him carefully in her hands. She trotted over to the kitchen, put him in his cage and locked it shut.

“G’night,” she whispered, still smiling before turning off the lights and heading for the bedroom.

“Tomorrow better be good,” she yawned, ruffling her hair.

~

**Archway Police Department.**

Parking her silver KIA car in the parking lot, she hopped down and walked briskly towards the station.

Her uniform was blue and well ironed. The long-sleeved shirt was of a lighter hue though. Her boots were black and dazzling.

She kept walking fast but steadily, in order not to spill the cup of coffee in her left hand. In her right hand was a small briefcase.

She came to a sudden halt as she got to the back of the station. The parking lot was built behind it.

Her breath was a little undulating as she felt really nervous. She had taken permission to leave early yesterday because of her proposed date with Noah Patel. But with the way things had turned out, she felt anxious to be amidst her co-workers.

For one, she hated the sympathy she would receive for losing a loved one. However, what made her perturbed the most was that they might have already been connecting the dots. Everyone she’s had an affair with always met misfortune, one form or the other. Once was a mistake, twice, a coincidence, but this wasn’t the third, hell not even the tenth!

She was actually surprised no one had it figured out here. But it was just a bomb waiting to go off anyway...

“Hmm. What’s so interesting about this wall?” whispered a masculine voice and Kyla turned in a flinch, almost shrieking.

Her eyes fell on a man that was taller than her, his hair brown and neat, likewise his well-groomed beards. He was wearing the same uniform as hers, just that his badge was golden, while hers was silver.

Recognizing the man, she tossed her briefcase to her other armpit and quickly stood erect, saluting with all seriousness, “Good morning, sir!”

The man smiled tersely, “Don’t be so tense, Kyla. I’m no monster.”

She dropped her hand and reached for her briefcase, “My apologies. Y-You startled me.”

He scoffed, “There you go again. And you only behave like this when you’re anxious about something. Did the date not go well?”

*Of course. Uncle is one of those who supports me to keep dating. “The right one will eventually come,” he always said,* she sighed. Her brows furrowed as soon as she realized something, *He doesn’t know about the accident?*

“That bad, huh?” he asked with folded hands.

She raised her head, “Uncl—Captain George... Sir... I don’t think it’s okay to talk about domestic affairs on official duty.”

The Captain scoffed, gesturing for them to walk towards the station’s entrance, “And who makes the rules, huh? Come on. It couldn’t have been that bad.”

*How couldn’t he have known? It happened publicly. Is he messing with me? No, he’s not that kind of person... Sigh...*

She exhaled before answering him, “He got hit by a truck.”

The smile on Captain George’s face depreciated. His expression was neutral. He clicked his tongue, “Ooh... Can’t say I didn’t see that coming, but damn. Sorry, Ember.”

*Stop calling me that,* she groaned inwardly.

“I’m over it,” she shrugged.

“You’ve gotten strong. I’m proud of you,” he tapped her shoulder.

Kyla rolled her eyes and snapped. She looked him fiercely in the eye, “You really need to rethink your whole definition of pride. I just lost someone close to me and you’re ‘proud of me’?” she said with an air quote at the end. She didn’t give him a chance to reply before walking into the station.

Captain George stared blankly at the swinging door. He sighed after a couple of seconds, *Did I… say something wrong?*

~

She walked over to her desk in brisk steps, her gaze straight and fixed. The few officers that came across her greeted her but she only responded with nods, till she got to her desk at the end of the room. It was situated before one of the windows on the ground floor. There were other desks around, while a glass wall and door demarcated the Captain’s office.

She dropped her briefcase and cup of coffee on the table with an exaggerated sigh, before sinking into the cushioned chair.

“Everything okay?” the man seated by the desk next to her, asked casually. He had his brown eyes on her, taking sips from his hot cup of coffee.

Kyla didn’t have to look at him to know who was talking. His accent was just too profound. Sure, almost everyone in Archway used British accents, but his own was just unique and somehow ancient.

With her head raised towards the ceiling, she answered, “Yeah. It’s just my uncle... Sorry, the Captain.”

He slurped once more, crossing his legs. He wasn’t in uniform unlike Kyla. His black shirt and black trousers were neat with acute edges.

“Heh... You and the captain again? It’s like a father-daughter bond. It never gets old.”

She looked at him and scoffed, “It still surprises me how he got married and has kids, all girls. He knows little to nothing about how to communicate with ladies.”

With a smile, the brown-eyed man shrugged, “He does have the charming looks. That could be a reason.”

Kyla just shook her head smilingly and went on to open her briefcase. She brought out the files that were in it and dumped them on the empty table.

The man tapped the rim of his cup for quite a while before clearing his throat and clicking his tongue, “Uhm... Kyla...”

She turned her attention to him as soon as she heard her name.

“I heard what happened yesterday. Sorry for your loss,” the words felt forced out of his mouth. He was a little nervous and was being cautious of how she would react.

Kyla surprised him with a shrug, “Yeah. It happens. Thanks, Malcolm.”

He raised a brow, “You don’t seem sober at all. Wasn’t he your boyfriend?”

While rummaging through the files, she corrected, “We weren’t official yet. The date yesterday was supposed to be for that. But... Oh well...” she sighed.

“Well... I guess...” he ruffled his black hair, trying to organize his words. “But didn’t you love him? I mean, you seemed very excited yesterday.”

Kyla paused what she was doing for a moment and sighed with closed eyes. She opened her eyes and continued sorting the files, “If I stayed in all day, moping, crying, what difference would it make anyway? I’ve had too many setbacks in my life already. It’s best I just... Move forward.”

Before Malcolm could say a word, she turned to him, “Don’t get me wrong. I loved Noah... Still do. I just don’t want what happened to weigh me down.”

Malcolm simply nodded and smiled, “I was expecting you to say that.”

She nodded and faced what she was doing.

*That actually worked? I didn’t know what to say. That was just an afterthought. Phew,* Malcolm sighed in relief.

“Ah... Found them,” Kyla smiled tersely, holding up a bunch of files held together by rubber straps like a trophy. “These guys have been a menace.”

“Who?” Malcolm rolled his chair close to her. They were the only ones in the office area. Not everyone came to work today and those that did were either on patrol or just wandering the station till something comes up.

She flipped open the file wide enough for the two of them to read through, “The same unnamed group that has been terrorizing Archway for months now. Kidnapping, robbery and even pet theft.”

Malcolm scanned through and sat back, “Oh, you mean the Cascaders. Heh.”

Kyla raised a brow, “That’s what they’re called now?”

“Yeah,” Malcolm shrugged. “They actually transmitted a broadcast not too long after you left the station, and said they were the Cascaders at the end.”

“What was the broadcast about?”

“Something about a heist tomorrow and the time, but not the place.”

“Yeah, right,” Kyla said sarcastically and shook her head.

“I’m being serious, Kyla.”

Her eyes dilated, “They actually said so? For a group that has been giving us and the town’s government a run for our money, that was pretty dumb.”

“I say it’s scary,” Malcolm chipped in.

“How so?”

He leaned forward, “Think about it. Not only have they been successful on every robbery or break-ins they have done, they never actually cover their tracks, but they still remain untraceable. It’s like they just... Disappear afterwards. Look at the kidnapping of the mayor’s son. Not only did it happen in broad daylight, the location for the money exchange wasn’t even secluded. The mayor had taken a few officers with him to ambush them, but it was all futile. As soon as the payment was made and the mayor’s son was returned, the officers jumped into action but were easily taken down. And according to one of them that survived, there were only three masked men. Three of them took down ten police officers!”

*Now he’s just being dramatic,* Kyla chuckled inwardly as he kept stressing about how dangerous the Cascaders were. But she could also see the point he was trying to make.

“And now they’re alerting every single force in the town, if not the entire Borough, of their scheme, also adding the time it would be carried out. That takes a lot of confidence. It actually is... Scary,” Kyla said after thinking the situation through.

“Exactly,” Malcolm sank back into his seat.

She closed the file and turned her chair to face him, “So, what do we do now? Even if we mobilize each unit to every bank or potential heist spots, we could lose everyone since the locations might have been trapped. I fear they are more than capable of pulling that off, considering what they’ve done in just a few months.”

*Or could it all be a bluff, to scare and put us in disarray?* she kept the second opinion to herself.

Malcolm nodded, “I put that into consideration and did some risky digging. Visited downtown last night.”

Kyla was flustered, “Alone? That’s suicidal.”

Malcolm smirked, “I know. Risky digging. But it was worth every second of it. I was able to pinpoint where the heist will be held tomorrow night.”

Kyla’s eyes shrunk, “You... Did?”

“Aye,” he was still smirking. “Took some boastful words and bottle-breaking, but I was able to snuff it out of them bastards.”

She smiled and shook her head, “I never knew you had it in you, English man. I’m impressed.”

“You lot really need to stop calling me that,” he rolled his eyes.

“With that profound accent? I doubt it,” she laughed.

He grunted and rolled back to his desk, “Just get ready. We’ll mobilize there in the morning.”

“That early?” She was already fatigued before the actual day came. Laziness was like her twin.

He scoffed, “The Cascaders said the heist would be at 9 in the night, but I know they aren’t that foolish to actually do it then. We can’t be too safe.”

“Oof...” Kyla sighed and placed her head on the desk. “We’re going to need a lot of coffee then.”

Malcolm nodded, “Obviously.”

# ~ CHAPTER 4 ~

**Later that night.**

**Archway’s Central Bank.**

He sneezed into his handkerchief for the fourth time and the woman in front of him squeezed her face in disgust.

He couldn’t see her immediate reaction as he still had his eyes closed a few seconds after. He took the wet handkerchief and tossed it into the bin beside his chair. Ruffling his thick brown hair, he cleared his throat and faced the customers with a smile.

There was a line at the other side of the counter, a line of people waiting frustratingly as the man that was supposed to attend to them kept attending to his running nose instead.

He noticed the foul mood emanating from them and just smiled nervously.

The middle-aged woman in front of him shook her head and dropped a bundle of money on the counter, “I want to make a deposit.”

He nodded and was about to grab the money when the woman shot him this malicious glare. He quickly understood what it meant and reached for the hand sanitizer on his desk.

Another man dressed in a suit like the former, walked in with a briefcase in his grasp. He grabbed a key from the desk, “What is wrong with you, Erving? You’re upsetting the customers.”

The man with the running nose applied the sanitizer to both palms and rubbed them together, “You can’t blame me. I called in sick but the manager said no one was willing to take my shift.”

The man shrugged, “Of course--”

He froze. No, everyone in the bank froze as the entrance door swung open and a woman walked in. It was as though she had this psychic ability to make everyone stop whatever they were doing and face her. But that wasn’t it. She was just too beautiful. She was middle-aged but her beauty was mesmerizing. Her red gown was also sleeveless with slits from hip downward.

On a closer look, her deep cleavage might have been the sense of attraction.

She didn’t mind the piercing gazes from everyone. Although it felt like they could unclad her with their eyes, she kept walking elegantly towards the counter.

The man that was referred to as Erving didn’t appear to be moved. He looked at everyone with a raised brow, “She looks like a grandma. I mean, look at the hair on her head. Grey and dark.”

“You must have switched your eyes with that of raccoons. You don’t know what beauty is,” his colleague shook his head.

“Tch. Who’s she anyway?”

“Kristen Hayek. A woman of status and wealth,” he adjusted his tie and began to walk away. “She’s coming this way. Make sure to treat her well.”

“What do you mean by--” Erving was interrupted by Kristen’s voice. She had boycotted the long line and stood beside the woman that was at the front.

“Hey, honey. I’m here for a quick transaction,” she smiled warmly. The woman beside her was already boiling and was on the verge of pouncing on her. But she knew who Kristen was; that alone made her curb her anger.

Erving was puzzled, “I’m sorry ma’am, but you’ll have to wait in line like everyone else.”

She smiled, “I knew you were a fresh one when I saw you. I don’t recognize you. Your colleagues wouldn’t hesitate to help me.”

“Sorry, but I’m not them. Please, wait in line,” Erving couldn’t care less. And also because he couldn’t stand straight staring at her cleavages.

She sighed, “Come on, sport. Look around, no one is complaining.”

Erving looked at the other woman by the counter, “You’re okay with this, ma’am?”

She didn’t have a choice but to sigh, “Just be quick.”

“You heard her. Let’s go, love,” Kristen sang with a wide smile and walked further into the bank.

Erving just rolled his eyes and followed her briskly.

He led her to an inner chamber in the bank where the safe was. He opened the large safe door after some combinations and they entered.

There were a lot of shelves attached to the walls with multiple cabinets. He traced the number she called till he found it written on one of the cabinets. He unlocked it and pulled it out of the shelf.

He walked over to one of the steel tables situated in the safe room and placed the metal box on it. She stood beside him, staring at the box.

The staring went on for over ten seconds before Erving came to a certain realization. He rubbed the back of his neck, “Oh, my apologies. I’ll leave you to it.”

She smiled tersely, “Hm-hmm.”

She made sure to watch him leave the safe and chamber completely before sighing in relief.

“I’m not being paid enough for this,” she dropped her red purse on the table.

“Quit complaining and plug in the chip,” the thick voice of a man muttered from the tiny earbud in her left ear.

“You better make this work, Monday. We can’t get caught, at least not yet,” she brought out a thin-green device from her purse and attached it to the lock on the metal box.

“Have some faith, Deana,” said another male.

She rolled her eyes, “We wouldn’t be in this situation if it wasn’t for you, John. You don’t have the right to talk about faith.”

John chuckled, “It was self defense. She tried to run away and I shot her. Could have been worse.”

*She didn’t attack you. How was that self-defense?* she shook her head in thought.

White streaks of light began to run across the chip in no specific pattern.

“You were supposed to interrogate her for the code. You could have shot her leg. You killed her to satiate your stupid fetish,” Kristen kept tapping a finger on the table, waiting in anticipation.

“Well you stole her face and now act like her. Couldn’t you have done the same with her memories?” the first man that had spoken to her—Monday—chipped in.

She grunted in exasperation, “How many times do I need to tell you knuckleheads? My shapeshifting only allows me to steal one’s appearance and a bit of their personality, not their old or deepest memories.”

Monday scoffed, “So you’re saying they lie in the movies?”

“Bro...” John whispered.

“What?”

She sighed, “You’re lucky we still need someone behind the computer, Monday. I had to live with her family for a month, in hopes of getting the passcode but it seems she didn’t trust anyone enough to tell it to. Just make sure this works.”

“Done.”

The lines on the chip turned green and the lock opened. She removed the chip and opened the box.

“Wait. It--”

Before Monday could finish, she had opened the box completely and grabbed what was inside—a 6-inch metallic tube with intricate designs.

The alarms went off immediately. The entire safe-room went red.

“... Also requires a special voice activation, to cancel the alarm,” Monday completed with a rue exhale.

She threw the tube into her purse and dashed for the exit, “And you couldn’t have said that sooner?!”

“I was about to--”

“Shit!” she cursed, stopping in her tracks. Guards had arrived at the exit.

“Try to punch through. The squad is on their way,” John instructed rather calmly.

“Not like I have a choice,” she sighed, hanging her purse. By the time she dropped her hand, she was longer the beautiful fifty year old woman. She was more slender with black hair and brown eyes. She even looked more gorgeous.

She was no longer Kristen Hayek. She was Deana Breigh—her true identity.

“What the... Hell?” The guards were mesmerized.

“Hello, boys,” she smiled maliciously before lunging at them.

~

The doors to the bank burst open, masked armed men trooping in. There were six of them, donned in black combat uniform and bullet proof vests.

They sprayed bullets into the ceiling with their automatic rifles, instilling fear into everyone in the bank. The customers and staff fell on their faces.

“I knew I shouldn’t have come to work tonight,” Erving shivered as he lay down.

The rest of the guards in the bank rushed at them with batons. The armed men could only laugh.

Bringing a sword to a gun fight was pretty dumb.

The guards realized this and halted. They weren’t paid enough to lay down their lives for some strangers. They had families to go home to. With a quick exchange of glances, they dropped their batons and knelt down before laying on their faces.

“Wise choice,” one of the armed men chuckled. He swept his eyes across the hall, “Where’s the damsel in distress?”

“Right...!”

A guard flew out of the inner chambers of the bank and skidded across the ground, stopping by the counter.

“... Here!” Deana walked out, dragging an unconscious guard with her by the collar. She tossed him aside as soon as she saw the armed men.

One of them scoffed, “Looks like we weren’t needed.”

“Lazy ass twerps,” Deana walked past them like they never existed.

They turned and watched her cross the road to the van parked across the street.

“Women. Very ungrateful creatures,” one of them shook his head.

They wasted a few bullets in the air again to make sure everyone stayed down before bolting out of the bank. They got into the van and it bolted down the road. John was the driver.

“Phew. That was a close one,” Monday sighed in relief, closing the laptop. He was dark skinned with a low cut. He was seated between Deana and John, who was focused on his driving.

“It’s taking everything in me not to punch you right now,” Deana grumbled.

Monday chuckled nervously, “My bad. Sorry.”

“Did you plant it though?” John asked, taking a glance at her.

She smiled, “But of course.”

Back at the bank, a sudden explosion broke out from the inner chambers. The entire safe had been destroyed.

“You did what?!” Monday was shocked. They didn’t tell him.

“What?” Deana shrugged. “Those rich cunts deserved it.”

~

**The next day.**

**The Bomb Factory Art Foundation.**

*Should I tell him? I should, but... What if he thinks I’ve gone crazy due to trauma or something? But I still have to. Someone has to know eventually.*

Kyla was divided on what to do. She initially wanted to tell Malcolm yesterday, about the call from Noah the other night, but the whole issue concerning the Cascaders made her hold it in. And even if she did, Kurt Winston, their computer guy wasn’t around yesterday; there was no means to track the number. At least legally.

Like things couldn’t get much worse, Archway’s bank was robbed last night, coupled with an explosion that caused fatal injuries. It was already obvious who was behind it. The Cascaders. This resulted in a bit of turmoil within the station and town at large, since everyone had had expected the heist to happen today.

“Thank you,” she nodded smilingly at the man in the food cart as he gave her two white paper bags, whilst she paid him.

She was clad in her uniform, her silver badge gleaming under the afternoon sun. She turned away from the cart and approached Malcolm who stood beside his cruiser, in front of the building. About ten other officers were around, all in uniform, patrolling the premises.

She reached Malcolm, gave him one bag and stood beside him, resting her back on the Cruiser.

“Hmm,” he nodded in appreciation as he rummaged through the contents of the bag. He took out a donut and a cup of smoothie.

He sighed ruefully and began to devour the donut. He didn’t even take a sip from the drink before reaching for another donut and chomping it down.

Kyla was still on her first donut. She shook her head as she noticed his glutinous behaviour, “Slow down or you’ll choke.”

He stuffed the last donut in his mouth and chewed. He removed the straw from the cup of smoothie, flicked its lid away and drank from it till he satiated. He exhaled afterwards.

“Eeeshh...” Kyla frowned.

“Sorry. I’m just too stressed,” he coughed.

“Just because we’re a bit short-handed doesn’t mean we can’t pull this off.”

He looked at her with lowered brows, “Short-handed? I doubt we’re up to ten.”

Kyla chuckled softly, “Now you’re just being hyperbolic. And I don’t want you to blame the Captain. The Cascaders pulled their heist before the selected day. We were all taken off guard. No one would want to believe that it was all a ruse to make us stand down today.”

Malcolm closed his eyes and sighed.

“And we can’t tell the Captain how we got to know that, now, can we?” she put the straw in her mouth and slurped.

He opened his eyes and chuckled, “Yeah. If he knew I got the information from criminals, I’d be dead. But he should have at least listened to me that they’ll still attack today, instead he made all the men we had gathered withdraw. It would have just been the two of us if the rest didn’t stand their ground to stay.”

“It’s because we trust you and I’m sure we’ll apprehend the Cascaders,” Kyla shrugged.

“You seem really hopeful today. That’s unlike you,” Malcolm smiled.

His phone rang before Kyla could reply and he picked it up.

“Hello...”

“Hmm... Oh... Oh shit!”

The call ended with his eyes wide open.

“What’s the matter? Who was that?” Kyla looked at him in concern.

“The Captain knows about downtown and has called me in,” he grunted and entered the Cruiser.

Kyla stepped away with a straight face, “This is bad.”

“I know,” he blew a raspberry and ignited the engine. “Well, wish me luck.”

Kyla nodded and watched him drive out of the premises.

“Oof... I can do this,” she whispered while facing the building.

It was a simple two-story building that housed prestigious Artworks. From paintings to murals and the likes. According to Malcolm’s intel, this was where the Cascaders were going to strike next.

# **~ CHAPTER 5 ~**

Hours wounded by like days as the few policemen and women moved around the premises, waiting in exasperation for the ‘proposed’ heist.

Night had finally fallen and the silver crescent moon was out, as though it was a silver claw on a black canvas. There were no stars tonight, no clouds either.

Kyla checked the time and realized it was almost ten. She rallied the officers and positioned them to different spots around the building. There was no fence and it was located at the edge of town, between some commercial buildings. Archway was a really peaceful town ever since it was established, so the old folks found no need for concrete security. Plus most of the prestigious artworks in the building had been moved to the museum in the state. Those that were left were of menial worth and funny enough, no one worked there.

This made Kyla White wonder: What were the Cascaders really after?

Kyla sat on a stool beside the building as her legs fely heavy. An hour had already passed and nothing had happened. She yawned and began to type away on her phone, chatting with Freya Hall about her current situation. She was even beginning to doubt Malcolm.

And just then, a loud bang erupted within the building, smoke funneled out of the shattered windows.

Kyla jumped to her feet, stupefied, “What the hell?”

She unclipped her holster and drew her Glock-19, “How did they get in?”

“Kyla! From above!” an officer ran up to her. Another followed briskly.

She raised her head to the sky and saw some figures plummeting toward the roof of the building in wing suits.

*I did not see that coming. At all,* she was lost between being impressed and shocked.

She shook her head and yelled, “We’ll block every exit in duos and wait for them to come out! We can’t go in. The smoke is too thick!”

“But they came in wingsuits. What makes you think they wouldn’t flee with jetpacks?” the male officer beside her asked with a tint of humor.

She scoffed, “Just leave that to me.”

With that, they dispersed to their designated locations and formed a barricade in duos. Some had their heart in their mouth as they began to rethink what they were doing. They only wielded pistols, while the enemy had an array of arsenal. The plan was to startle the enemy with the element of surprise, but the latter pulled a reversed Uno on them.

Some of them even tried radioing the station, but the signals were jammed. The Cascaders came very prepared.

Kyla ran towards the ladder attached to the wall of the building that led all the way to the roof. She unbuttoned a few of the top buttons of her shirt before climbing with a fast pace.

She got to the top in only a minute but didn’t just jump on the concrete roof. She kept her head down to scan if the coast was clear first. Affirming that it was clear, she got on the roof, her Glock pistol pointed forward, her eyes darting here and there.

She noticed the abandoned wingsuits and a wide hole that punctured right through the roof.

“They blew their way in...” she took cautious steps towards the edge and looked down. Most of the smoke had cleared, she could see what was going on inside.

There were only five men, donned in black combat uniforms and armed with automatic assault rifles. Four of them stood back-to-back around a painting, while the last man picked it up and sealed it in a black bag.

*It’s just the painting of Archway’s first railroad. What’s so important about it?* Kyla was perplexed.

“Let’s go!” one of the men muttered and they all looked towards the hole in the roof.

“Shit!” Kyla had barely stepped back when they opened fire. She still evaded in time.

Her eyes flitted to the ropes tied around the AC vents and led down the hole. She quickly drew her pocket knife and cut them all.

“Stupid bitch!” the men cursed from within.

She scoffed, packing the wingsuits and tossing them over the roof’s edge.

At that moment, she heard multiple gunshots from the hole. She could tell from the intervals between each shot that it wasn’t the men that were shooting. Those were pistol shots.

Her eyes dilated, “Shit! Shit! I told them not to engage!”

She dashed for the hole and looked down. Four of the officers had walked in and were shooting at the Cascaders. The latter had taken cover behind some stands.

“Guard the bag. We’ll take care of ‘em!” one of them said, the one with the bag nodded.

The remaining four sprang out of cover and opened fire immediately. Before any of the cops could even pull the trigger, their bodies were punctured with multiple bullets. Blood seeped out of the wounds and they dropped lifelessly to the ground.

“Let’s go!” The five men ran for the exit.

Kyla didn’t even know how to react. Her heart was palpitating; four of her comrades had just been killed as though they were mere dummies.

But this wasn’t the time to get sentimental. She could still save the lives of those that remained. They were outmatched by a mile, the only reasonable option was to fall back.

*Did Malcolm set us up?* she couldn’t help but ponder. He insisted they waited, left since noon and never came back. It was too convenient to be a coincidence.

She grabbed her walkie-talkie and yelled into it, “Get away from the exits! Retreat! We can’t take them!”

The signal was still jammed, but their screams and gunshot reverberated across the starless night.

She ran towards the edge and climbed down the ladder in haste.

By the time she got to the entrance, only two officers were left and somehow, two of the Cascaders had been taken down. Her face brightened up a little as a trickle of hope flowed through her.

The one with the bag wasn’t armed, leaving only two more to take down.

*Maybe we could actually pull this off.*

She glued her body to the edge of a wall and began to fire at any opening she got. She got one in the leg and they began to retreat towards an alley.

“Don’t let them get away. This is our only chance!” she yelled, bolting after the Cascaders.

The two officers remaining ran after her with pants. They had been shot in some of their limbs.

Kyla halted as she got to the entrance of the alley, her eyes dilating like they would burst out of their sockets. The officers stopped behind her and reacted the same way.

Standing at the other side of the alley were five extra Cascaders, excluding the remaining three. They weren’t running away, they only led the cops into their trap.

*Never thought it’d end this way…* Kyla just accepted her fate as the Cascaders raised their Automatic rifles at them and fired sporadically.

The cops had barely taken a step back when their bodies got punctured by multiple bullets. Kyla saw the scenery revolve around her as she dropped to the ground... Dead.

Oh, wait... She could still feel her limbs and the pain she felt some seconds ago had vanished.

*Eh--*

An explosive migraine struck her suddenly. It was as though a bomb had gone off in her head. The pain was so excruciating, she began convulsing like an epileptic patient.

“Huh? What the...?”

The Cascaders were stunned by her absurd reaction.

“Who the hell lets someone with severe health issues into the police force?” one of them said and burst into a round of laughter. It was contagious as his companions laughed along.

He then pulled out a pistol from behind and drilled three bullets into her head, “Disgusting.”

Kyla stopped moving, blood all over her body and brain matter drooling out of the holes in her skull.

The Cascaders laughed in mockery of how foolish the Police were and began to walk out of the alley.

“Lady Breigh. The object is secured and we’re on our way...”

He dragged the last part of his words and dropped his phone as a disturbing screech echoed throughout the alley. It was subtle but so potent that their ears began to bleed.

At that moment, a chilly ambience descended and goosebumps dotted their skin.

They turned back in perplexity. But what they saw next made them freeze. They were so frightened of what was before them that they couldn’t move a muscle.

No matter hard they looked, the features of whatever was in front of them was incomprehensible. ‘IT’ looked… surreal.

They couldn’t tell if it was their imagination, but the claw-shaped moon had become a full circle and shone so brightly, they were enveloped in the shadow of whatever was before them. All they could see was darkness. The darkness felt so thick, they began to shudder from the pressure. It was like it would crush them. They could barely breathe.

The darkness became turbulent as IT lunged at them swiftly.

They didn’t even see ‘IT’ move. Only ITS loud piercing noise could be heard...

*Shriek!*

# **~ CHAPTER 6 ~**

*Buzz!*

The slow, yet disturbing screech rang through Kyla’s head in and out. She couldn’t hear anything else for that moment.

She grunted inwardly as she struggled to block out the noise, but she ended up opening her eyes instead. Her vision was so blurry that the entire scenery looked like wet paint. She could tell that it wasn’t just the usual blurriness from just waking up, it felt different—moist.

It was when she decided to wipe her eyes, that she discovered that her entire body felt like a big lump of steel. She felt heavy. But she couldn’t remain like that forever. She tried to move.

*Huff...*

She could only exhale sparsely as her throat ached badly. It took a while before she was able to get on her knees and sigh in relief. She wiped whatever was blocking her sight and gazed at her hands.

Her brows constricted. Matted on her hands were stains of a deep red liquid and it felt sticky. No one needed to tell her that it was blood.

But who’s blood? She wasn’t in any pain whatsoever to tell that she was bleeding or something.

Out of curiosity, she looked around where she was. Just a few feet before her was a wide pool of blood that served as a blanket for broken bones and a couple of jelly-like objects. She recognized one as a human’s intestines.

*Huh?* She turned on her knees and met eye-to-eye with the bulged eyes of her fellow officers. Their bodies had a lot of holes that blood drooled out of.

It was at that moment that it all came back to her; the memory of what happened before she passed out came flooding in like tides in the sea. Her eyes dilated, she couldn’t shut her mouth.

*I—I died! Those guys shot the three of us and I... I... I don’t know what happened after that.*

Her mind was in disarray, trying hard to remember every frame of what transpired after she collapsed from being shot at. She had questions; a lot of questions.

Even if—which still doesn’t sound plausible—she somehow survived as the bullets missed her vital organs, she should have bled out during the time she fell unconscious. It didn’t even sound right to say she had survived, because, from the horrified expressions on the other officers’ corpses, they died on the spot. So why was she alive? And not just alive, uninjured.

She dropped her head to scan her body. Her uniform had bullet holes, dried blood was on her skin but there was no form of injury, not even a single scratch. She quickly touched her head—where she was shot before everything went dark. Her head was intact with no hole in it.

She felt she should be grateful for this miraculous circumstance, but it was too mind boggling and mysterious.

She turned back to the pool of blood, bones, and internal organs. She stuck her tongue out and retched dryly.

Her mind couldn’t even fathom what happened there.

From the corner of her pale eyes, she spotted some assault rifles and a pistol scattered on the ground. She deduced that they belonged to the Cascaders.

*Does that mean…* she stared at the irritating mixture before her. *... But how?*

*Huff... Huff...*

Her breathing became uneasy, her heart began palpitating.

*~ Shriek! Ahh!! No!!! ~*

Overlapping wails and horrified cries sang in a babel within her. She could hear and feel it from the crown of her head to the last skin cell on her toes. It was as though she would implode from the inundating noises.

And then, in an instant…

*Flick!*

Like turning something off with the flick of a switch, the noises stopped in an instant, her irises rolled up to the back of her head and she dropped to the ground like a felled log.

**~**

**The Next Day.**

It was past ten in the morning, Malcolm Allen took a sip from his hot mug of coffee and gently placed it on the table. With crossed legs, he took the newspaper from the bed and opened it up, his brown eyes reading through the headlines succinctly.

In front of him was a sleeping Kyla White on the hospital bed. A spotless white cloth was spread over her and stopped at her neck. There was a heart monitor at the other side of the bed. It showed a steady heartbeat.

A few drip stands were behind the bed but they weren’t connected to her. The doctor and nurses couldn’t find a use for them as she appeared to be perfectly healthy. She wasn’t short of blood or bodily fluid; everything about her seemed okay, which was absurd, considering the clothes she was brought in with had multiple bullet holes, neither was she wearing a bulletproof vest within.

They first theorized that she got to the scene late and collapsed from the shock of her colleagues.

They could only come to the conclusion that she was extremely tired from the immense shock, that’s why her nervous system shut down temporarily—hence, the reason for her unconscious state. Though there was no explanation for the bullet holes in her clothing. The medical practitioners began to doubt themselves.

“But of course, it’s on the news already,” Malcolm grumbled, half-shouting. He rubbed his glabella for a few seconds before flipping the page over to continue reading, “It would seem the Cascaders are unstoppable... Over a dozen cops found dead at the Art Foundation... The Cascaders did give the time they were going to strike, and the police force still couldn’t do a thing... Is this incompetence or are the Cascaders too… Stupid reporters! What do they know?!”

Malcolm dropped the newspaper and palmed his face. He remained like that for a while before whispering, “This is all my fault.”

“Can you please lessen the noise? I’m trying to get some sleep here,” Kyla muttered and yawned.

He dropped his hand at the sound of her voice and looked at her. His eyes regained their luster and he smiled tersely, “Kyla...”

She grunted, “Didn’t you hear me? Quiet.”

“Oh... Sorry?” he didn’t know what to say at that point.

He sighed and relaxed his back on the plastic chair, watching her rub her head, roll from side to side and then yawning again.

*Now she’s just being dramatic,* he shook his head.

She finally sat up and rested her back on the pillow. She was clad in a white hospital gown designed with blue dots.

“You done?” Malcolm asked in humor.

She went along with it, stretching her arms and neck, “Yeah. I had to rid myself of your disturbing voice before getting my body in order.”

Malcolm scoffed.

“And I’m okay by the way, thanks for asking,” her entire posture and tone loudly spelt sarcasm.

He rubbed the back of his neck with a sheepish chuckle, “Sorry. I was just... Flustered.”

“Flustered that I woke up?” she raised a brow.

*More like disappointed that I didn’t die from your ambush last night!* the blonde lady’s inner eyes were glaring at Malcolm like daggers.

He moved his hand from his neck to his hair and ruffled it, “No. Yes. I mean... This whole situation is just bizarre.”

“How so?” Kyla was slowly losing her composure. She just decided to act calm and oblivious, in order for Malcolm not to raise his guard against her. If he did, she wouldn’t know the truth about what transpired yesterday.

“You were the only one that survived, Kyla. Not only that, you were only knocked unconscious. No bruise, no wound. It’s kind of baffling.”

“So you’re saying I should be dead,” she lowered her brows.

“Yes...” his eyes shrunk as he realized what he had said. He quickly raised his hands and waved them continuously, “I mean no, no! Of course not!”

Kyla just scoffed.

He calmed down with a depressing sigh, *What is wrong with me?*

He looked at her once more, “By normal standards, you should be dead, but, personally I’m just glad you’re alive.”

Kyla hummed in reply.

*What is he playing at? He looks so innocent.*

“The thing is, I’m just confused as to how you survived unscathed. And then we found this messy mixture of broken bones and some internal organs in a wide pool of blood. We also found some assault rifles and--”

“So you think I killed them?”

“What?! No!” Malcolm was more frustrated than sorry this time. He wondered why ladies kept jumping into conclusions before getting facts.

Kyla smiled in satisfaction. The urge to tease him was heavy on her. Even though he was her prime suspect currently, they were still colleagues. The subtle kicks and laughs was part of them already.

She sighed with closed eyes. She opened her eyes and calmly said, “I am equally as confused as you are. You wouldn’t believe me if I said I actually died last night.”

“Eh?”

“I probably have two lives or something,” she chuckled wryly. “But that isn’t even my problem now. The biggest problem I have now is you.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. The supposed call from the Captain, you not coming back at all, the Cascaders jumping down in wingsuits...”

*Jumpsuits?* The black haired man was puzzled.

“And now you show up acting all concerned. I bet you were planning to kill me in my sleep,” she narrowed her eyes. At this point, she could tell that Malcolm might be innocent. It was just unlike him. And her detective-sense inclined towards the same conclusion.

Malcolm’s face twitched, “You think I laid an ambush?”

“It’s not a suggestion. I know you did.”

“Just how low do you think of me?”

“That’s not an answer,” she folded her arms.

He leaned forward, tapping a finger on his lower lip, “Well I guess the whole situation makes it look like I did so, but it was all a coincidence, I swear. I would never do something like that. What do I have to gain from it? Or do you want me to call the Captain?”

“No, no. It’s fine,” she exhaled depressingly. “I thought so too, but it was just too convenient for you.”

He leaned back, “Captain had me run an errand at the next city. I just arrived this morning and heard what happened.”

“Hmm. I guess that’s… convincing enough. But it doesn’t mean you’re off the hook yet. We all know you’re a very good liar,” she snickered.

He scoffed, “Well, I had always wanted to be a lawyer. Can’t blame me.”

Before she could say anything, he chipped in with a look of concern, “But seriously though, how are you feeling?”

“Pretty good actually,” she unfurled her arms and bulged her left bicep for him to see. “Might not look it, but I feel like I could life a car.”

Malcolm laughed and shook his head, “Can’t say you’re bluffing at this point.”

They chatted casually for a while, then Kyla had this intense hunger like she would die at any moment from the lack of food. The nurses rushed in with a plate of bread and tea, but that wasn’t enough. Malcolm had to dash out and get a full bag of burgers and soda for her. Even with that, she was barely satiated.

Kyla burped softly after emptying the last can of soda and stood up. Her first steps were a bit wobbly but she found her footing.

“Whoa, whoa. Easy there,” Malcolm stood up to assist her but she was already standing straight. They were very close so he could see the middle of her head, while she stared at his chest. The height difference was too evident.

She backed away and sat down, “I need to go home for a change of clothes and then head to the Art Foundation.”

“You still need some rest. You haven’t even been discharged yet.”

“Do I look like I need some rest?” she did an air quote and stood up. She stretched herself a little before walking towards the door.

“Kyla...”

“It’s better we check it out now and dig some clues to solve this mystery,” her voice trailed off as her body vanished from his view.

Malcolm relaxed on the chair with a sigh, “There’s no changing her mind.”

**~**

**The Bomb Factory Art Foundation.**

The entire building was barricaded with red-white strips, policemen and reporters were scattered across the street. The arrangement and atmosphere was akin to the usual aftermath of a crime scene.

A silver KIA drove-by at a steady pace. Everyone was so engrossed in asking and answering questions that they didn’t notice it drive past them. It came to a stop beside an alley, Kyla and Malcolm came out of it.

Kyla was wearing a blood-red hoodie, black trousers and a pair of white sneakers. Her blonde hair was packed into a bun. Malcolm was in his police uniform.

They stopped by the entrance to the alley, which was now covered by a long black tarp and two state officials stood at either side of the entrance. They were donned in cooperate suits and all.

Kyla and Malcolm stood before them with indifferent faces.

“No one is permitted to enter,” the men in shades chorused simultaneously.

The duo brought out their badges and showed it to them.

The officials took a glance at it before returning to their previous posture in silence.

“Is that a yes... Or?” Kyla raised a brow.

“No one is permitted to enter,” the men chorused again.

“They’re like robots,” Malcolm muttered under his breath.

“But the entirety of Archway is under our jurisdiction. Who the hell are you to prevent us from doing our job?” Kyla frowned.

“They are obviously from the state. The Governor’s men,” Malcolm said while rubbing his chin.

“But we can’t just leave,” Kyla was getting irritated.

“Kyla? Is that you?” a masculine voice half-yelled from the other side.

“Uncle? Yes!”

“Let them in. They’re in this too,” the Captain’s voice ordered.

The men in shades took a glance at the duo in front them, before lifting the tarp for them to go through.

Kyla rolled her eyes at them as she walked into the alley, Malcolm shone his teeth to mock them.

They met the brown-haired captain amongst other men in suits, flaunting different devices here and there as though the small alley was a part of Area 51.

“What’s going on?” Kyla asked as she looked from side to side.

“My precious Ember…” Captain George embraced her warmly. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

She could see claw marks being erased from the walls as though they were never even there. The blood pool from earlier was also gone. It was a norm to clean scenes like this after some forensics but this just felt... unusual to her.

She pulled herself away after some seconds, “Who exactly are these guys?”

“Oh, nothing to worry about. They are special officials sent from the state. They call themselves the Cleansers or something. And as you can see, that name isn’t just a bluff,” he pointed at the damaged spots that had now being repaired.

“But why go through the stress to send them? Normal construction workers could fix and rebuild this place,” Malcolm stood beside Kyla.

“What is even there to fix? Some blood, bullet holes and scratches?” Kyla seconded.

Captain George folded his arms, “Well, you see, they’re also collecting samples. They’re like forensics, but way more advanced. They’ll be able to solve this case in a jiffy.”

“Hmm...” Kyla couldn’t stop thinking about the claw marks. They were very wide and as long as four feet each. And the way the so-called officials wiped them like erasers to pencil marks, so easily. Something was off. She couldn’t just put a finger on it.

“You should go home and get some rest, Ember. There’s no need to stress yourself over nothing,” Captain George advised.

*That is a very suspicious tone, uncle,* Kyla muttered to herself, folding her arms.

“What about the claw marks? How did they come to be?” she couldn’t help but ask.

“Well, according to them, a bear might have been here last night and massacred everyone and fled,” the Captain spoke with a tone of uncertainty.

“But that doesn’t make any sense, I was here when it all happened. We were as well dead when we entered the alley. The Cascaders shot at us and everything went black,” Kyla swept her hand through her hair.

“Just like you said, everything went black. You weren’t conscious to know all that transpired,” the captain nudged his head.

Malcolm grunted, “Then by that logic, Kyla should be dead. Would the bear just let only her live? Why?”

Captain George sighed in defeat, “To be honest, I’m also in the dark. We’re just speculating currently, that’s why I left the investigation to these guys. They have the funds and equipment. But the bear story is the only reasonable explanation now. Could have been another animal entirely, but that’s what we’re going with for now.”

*Reasonable? You’re not being reasonable. No one is!* Kyla just kept her thoughts to herself. *From that strange call from Noah to this? What in the world is going on?*

The vibration in her pocket jolted her from her thoughts. She took out her phone and stared at the screen. It was a call from Freya.

She swiped up and placed the phone to her ear, “Hey--”

The therapist cut in immediately, her voice uneasy, “Kyla, Kyla...!”

Kyla felt agitated, “Is everything okay? Freya?”

“Yes. A little. Well, not really.”

“Which is it?” Kyla rolled her eyes.

A sigh came from the phone, “Okay, I need you to calm down, Kyla. Do not panic as I tell you this.”

“Tell me what?!” Kyla almost shouted. Freya’s words to calm her down did the exact opposite.

“I told you not to panic.”

Kyla grunted, “Just spill it.”

“Okay, okay. This might be hard to take in, but...”

Kyla pinched her nose impatiently.

“... Noah Patel is alive.”

# **~ Chapter 7 ~**

With her phone glued to her ear, Kyla stared blankly into the distance. Her facial expression was indifferent. She was so shocked to hear the news that she felt nothing. Or it was probably because she had received that strange call and concluded long since then that Noah Patel was alive…

Either way, she wasn’t sure how to react.

“Kyla. Kyla? You there?” Freya’s voice pierced her ear.

She stuttered, “Yeah, yeah. It’s just… Are you sure? What made you say so?”

“I don’t think explaining over the phone will cut it. You should come to my office, as quickly as you can.”

“Alright,” Kyla nodded and ended the call. She dipped the phone into her pocket and faced her uncle. “I guess you were right. I really need some rest. I’ll be going now.”

He nodded with a fatherly smile.

She smiled back and left the alley in haste, Malcolm jogging after her.

“Where are you going?” he asked as he finally caught up to her.

“To see a friend,” she replied and unlocked the car doors.

“Okay. I also have somewhere to go. You don’t mind dropping me off at the station?”

They entered the silver KIA almost simultaneously.

“At all. I’m heading that way too,” she ignited the engine and shifted the gear to D.

She took one last glance at the barricaded alley before driving out of the premises.

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Kyla walked down the hallway in haste. She had this intense urge to just let loose and dash to her destination, but she had to control herself. She was in an official building for therapists and psychiatrists; they might as well just term her as someone who had lost her mind and detain her. It was best to act calm, even though her insides were churning with mixed emotions.

She got to the last door in the hallway and stopped.

Written at the top of the brown door was a name—Dr. Freya Hall.

As her right hand reached for the doorknob, she closed her eyes and exhaled slowly. She opened her eyes and twisted the knob, pushing the door in. It made no sound as it opened gradually.

Kyla poked her head in at first, before entering completely and closing the door gently.

Inside the well-structured office, the blue haired Freya Hall was seated by her desk as usual, her legs crossed. She was wearing a blue blazer, a white shirt within and blue palazzos . This made it very hard to see the black heels she wore. She exuded this… Stylish, yet, compassionate demeanor as she stared at the man seated on the three-seater couch by the window, opposite her desk.

Kyla couldn’t see his face as he had his head dropped, his hands clamped around his knees as he shuddered here and then. But his lush white hair was just too conspicuous.

Taking a closer look at the color of the man’s hair, Kyla hummed as she remembered something, *Where have I seen him before?*

“Um… Kyla. You know it’s rude to just stand there and stare,” Freya said casually while gesturing her hand for Kyla to take a seat.

Kyla flinched a bit but quickly found her composure. She smiled tersely, “Heh… sorry.”

She walked over to the couch and sat beside the shivering man. Finding his behavior weird and uneasy, she nimbly shifted to the other end of the couch.

“Err… Good afternoon?” she muttered, not knowing what to say.

The man’s body stopped shaking at the sound of her voice and he sighed twice.

“Good afternoon,” his voice was deep and bold, but also tender in a way.

Kyla felt a tug at her heartstrings. Her eyes dilated, and for a moment there, she couldn’t say anything, just staring at the man in utter disbelief.

From what she had observed when she walked in, she thought of him as a terrified patient in dire need of therapy, but his voice—which she found charming—took her off guard. She had a lot of questions.

*His voice is much different than I imagined. I wonder what he really looks like?* reflexive thoughts began to take over her mind.

Freya could almost roll her eyes at Kyla’s reaction, but she had to maintain a sense of orderliness before her patient.

*Is she really falling for this guy? Again?! When will she learn?*

Freya dropped her leg and cleared her throat, snapping Kyla from her reverie. The latter looked at the therapist and chuckled sheepishly. Freya’s face was stern.

“Seated beside you is Mr. Alan Hunt, a regular patient of mine. I’m sure you guys met a few days ago,” Freya introduced with a curt smile.

*Oh… That was him?* Kyla remembered walking past him as she left the office, the day Noah supposedly died.

Alan Hunt curled his hands to fists to control his shaking body and raised his head. He turned to face the blonde lady with a warm smile. He had crystal-blue eyes and a chiseled jawline.

Though he struggled, he managed to open his right hand and extend it for a handshake, “Nice to meet you, Miss Kyla.”

No matter how hard Kyla tried, she couldn’t take her eyes off his crystal-blue eyes. It was as though he had the blue clear sky and some clouds implanted into his irises. She could also see twinkling dots like stars. It was beautiful.

She also couldn’t stop staring at his eyes because of the other tempting features of his face. She was tense enough as she was.

Funny enough, she had seen other handsome men, some as criminals, others as victims that came to report in the station. But there was just something different about this man before her, something… unique.

*Pull yourself together, Kyla,* she tried her best to ward off the explicit thoughts that tried to invade her mind.

She took his hand swiftly and shook it stiffly, “N-Nice to meet you too, Mr. Alan.”

He nodded with a smile and retracted his hand. Afterwards, his body stopped shaking.

Kyla’s smile faded gradually as she dropped her hand, “Wait, how did you know my name?” she couldn’t recall Freya telling him her name.

Alan rubbed the back of his neck, “You might not know, but you are actually a well known cop in Archway and I’ve been to the station a few times.”

“I’m… well known?” Kyla was puzzled.

“Well, your uncle never misses the chance to say your name anytime he’s giving a speech or at a crime scene. He always addresses you as the best man… woman, in the police force,” Freya decided to chip in.

“That makes sense,” Kyla scoffed.

“You were also the only survivor of the Art Factory incident,” Alan muttered under his breath, but loud enough for the two ladies to hear.

“Yeah, I was just lucky,” Kyla felt melancholic at that moment. She soon remembered why she had come to see Freya.

As though Freya could read her mind, she leaned forward on her chair and tapped a finger on the table, “Mr. Alan here is the reason why I called you. He’s been coming to see me for quite a while, after he lost his fiancé and her parents in a car crash.”

“…” Kyla was at a loss for words.

“I won’t go into details though. It’s a therapist-patient kind of secret. Anyway, Mr. Alan came rushing in some hours ago and told me he recently made contact with Noah Patel.”

Kyla raised a brow, “How recent?”

Freya adjusted her glasses, “Just last night.”

“Eh?” Kyla couldn’t believe her ears. “L-Last night?”

“Yes,” Freya nodded.

“Then where is he? Is he okay?” Kyla was getting agitated.

Freya put her palms forward, “Take it easy, Kyla. Mr. Alan will explain it to you. And, don’t interrupt him.”

“Sure, sure,” Kyla didn’t linger to move closer to Alan.

With a sigh, he clamped his hands together and began, “That evening, I had just returned from my daily sessions with Miss Hall. I inserted my key into the keyhole and tried to unlock the door, only to discover that it had already been unlocked. I was flustered at first and wanted run away, probably to the station, but then I remembered how disorganized I have been lately. I can hardly remember what I have done some hours ago and I don’t think straight. So I concluded that I had just forgotten to lock the door; wouldn’t be the first time.

“I entered my house with that thought in mind, only to see a trail of blood right from the doorstep to the living room. At this point, I dropped the grocery bags I was holding and was about to make a run for it, when someone whispered for me to stop. Though their voice was low and cracked, I could tell who that person was. It was Noah…”

*And then what?;* Kyla tapped her feet. She was waiting for him to get to the part that’d disclose how Noah was fairing.

“… I dragged my feet to the living room and saw Noah half-asleep on a couch, injured almost everywhere. He was pressing a roll of cloth against his side, but that didn’t stop the bleeding. I didn’t even know what to do for over a minute. I couldn’t watch him bleed to death, so I grabbed my first aid kit and treated his wounds in my own little capability. I was able to stop the bleeding with bandages. When I confirmed that his condition was stable, I grabbed my phone to call an ambulance but he stopped me. He said he didn’t what anyone to know where he was…”

“Oh, you guys are friends?” Kyla couldn’t help but ask. She couldn’t find any other reasonable reason for Noah to trust Alan if they weren’t close.

“More or less,” Alan shrugged with a bitter face.

“Kyla,” Freya said with a stern gaze.

“Sorry, sorry. Please, continue,” Kyla urged Alan.

He nodded and continued, “I first threw the question of how he was still alive. I thought he had died after he was hit by that truck. He gave a vague answer and I didn’t really understand, but I was just glad that he was alive. Though he pointed out the fact that some people were after his life. He knew that they were aware of his survival. He had to lay low but he couldn’t trust anyone, except me…”

“Except you? Why couldn’t he come to my place?” Kyla narrowed her eyes.

“This is not the time for that, Kyla,” Freya shunned and motioned for Alan to continue.

Alan looked into Kyla’s eyes as he spoke, “He did mention you. He couldn’t go to your place because of the danger it’d pose; he was protecting you. I was even surprised he still cared for someone else in his critical condition.”

Kyla’s cheeks flushed red as she smiled. “So, where is he now? Resting?”

Alan’s brows twitched and he chuckled dryly, “I wish that were the case. We agreed to go to one of his warehouses at the next town once it was dawn. It was too risky to move at that time of the night. I had insisted we went to the police station first, but he was very adamant against it.”

“Why?” Kyla and Freya chorused.

“He wouldn’t say. I had to ensure his safety first, so I didn’t give it much thought. We had dinner and had slept for an hour or so, when I heard a knock from the door. Noah was fast asleep, so I decided to go check it myself. I reached the door and asked for a name, but there was no response. I figured it was a prank or something and was about to leave, when the door got blown to pieces. I was thrown back by the explosion and was almost knocked unconscious.

“With my blurry vision, I could see some men searching through the house and yelling Noah’s name. They were also armed. After a while, the men stood before me and began to ask where I hid Noah. I denied knowing him, while also wondering why they hadn’t found him. The door to my bedroom was opened and there wasn’t any secret passage or compartment in my house. Honestly, I can’t remember what happened after that. I think I was struck in the head and passed out. When I came to, it was morning already and I rushed out of the house. Miss Hall’s office was the only safe haven for me,” Alan sighed and rested his back.

Kyla kept blinking in succession, puzzled by the white-haired man’s story. Some parts didn’t make sense to her.

“So you’re saying Noah fled?”

“That’s the only answer since they couldn’t find him,” Alan shrugged.

“I’ve given it a little thought and surmised something,” Freya rolled her chair back and stood up. “It seems Noah Patel was dealing in some shady business. Drugs, theft, who knows? Probably made a deal with the wrong group and now they’re after his life. That’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“B-But he told me he was an accountant,” Kyla defended in a stutter.

Freya shook her head with a scoff, “Accountant? In what bank or organization?”

“Well, he didn’t mention,” Kyla muttered in defeat.

Alan took his gaze from Freya to Kyla, “Miss Hall is right. I too don’t know what kind of job Noah does. He told me he was a consultant for a local firm. But with what you’ve said, it seems he lied to us.”

“Tch,” Kyla was disappointed. Even if the incident hadn’t happened, she’d have been dating a drugs dealer or something.

Freya sunk her hands into her pockets and moved away from her desk, “I know it must be hard, but you have to accept it. At least till he’s found and tells you everything himself.”

“I know, I know. It’s just…” Kyla rested her back on the couch and stared at the ceiling. “This is new, you know? They’re either bed ridden or dead.”

“Eh?” Alan couldn’t hide his shock, which was more inclined to fear. *What does she mean by dead?!*

Freya took note of his fearful expression and quickly cleared the air, “Let’s just say she isn’t the luckiest lady when it comes to dating.”

Alan narrowed his eyes, *That still doesn't explain the casual death talk!*

“It’s fine. Nothing to worry about,” Freya smiled. Alan shuddered.

“Ah, whatever the case, we have to find him,” Kyla blew a raspberry. “And we have a lead. So that’s something.”

“Yeah, the warehouse,” Freya nodded. “He must be heading there.”

“Walthamstow or Hackney?” Kyla asked Alan.

“It’s at Walthamstow, about 8 kilometers from Archway,” Alan answered.

Kyla stood up, “Good. Let’s get going.”

“Just the three of us?” Freya interjected.

“You have someone else in mind?” Kyla raised a brow.

Freya hesitated as she answered, “You know… T-The cops?”

Kyla grunted, “Oh, please. You know we can’t do that. They won’t believe me, they’ll think I’ve gone crazy from grief. And it’s also possible that we don’t find him there. I can’t risk my job.”

*More so, this incredibly handsome Alan might have gone crazy for real and is just spouting nonsense,* she took a glance at him. But no matter how hard she tried to make him look guilty, he looked too innocent. Maybe it was her infatuation that clouded her judgement.

“Hmm. Let me pack my things,” Freya walked back to her desk and sat down. “We leave in an hour.”

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**The Bomb Art Factory.**

A black power bike zoomed past the barricaded factory, took a sharp turn and stopped before an alley.

The rider alighted without taking off his helmet.

The tarps that were used to barricade the alley had been removed. The entire alley looked normal like any other alley.

“Hmm…” the rider tapped a button at the side of his helmet and proceeded into the alley. He tilted his head from left to right, gazing at the walls and floor. The helmet’s visor was now an infrared lens. He saw nothing unusual. He switched to ultraviolet and other parts of the light spectrum but the result was still the same.

He sighed in defeat and rested his back on a wall, “Are you sure this is the place, Diana?”

“I’m certain,” a feminine voice replied through the comms in his helmet.

“I can’t see anything out of the ordinary here. Maybe it’s the wrong alley?”

“No, it’s definitely here. Use the specimen.”

The man grunted, “Ugh… That goo again? If you were to be a random client, the price would have doubled.”

The woman laughed, “Oh come on, stop complaining. It’s not like you don’t get to explore other things than my money.”

“Heh…” the man scoffed and stepped away from the wall. He brought out a vial from his pocket and crouched down.

He raised the vial to the helmet’s visor. Inside was a black gooey liquid that squirmed as though it was sentient.

He opened the lid and poured out its contents.

At that moment, the entire alley shook as though an earthquake had commenced. Then it let out a loud shriek, so loud that the man’s visor shattered to pieces, the helmet squeezed, almost crushing his head. He quickly pulled his head out and fell to the ground, panting.

Out of the apertures in the brick walls of the alley, black liquid oozed out of them and coagulated around the black goo that came from the vial. The man couldn’t really tell what was going on, but it seemed that the vial goo was consumed by the coagulated black liquid. It then compressed to the size of a toddler’s eye and the ‘earthquake’ stopped.

Screeches came from the compressed helmet, but the man could tell that the woman from the comms was calling his name.

He crawled over to the compressed goo with a wry smile and managed to stuff it into the vial. He closed the lid immediately.

With bleeding orifices, and a shard of glass lodged beside his glabella, he raised the vial with a smile…

“You were right, Diana. She is here.”

# ~ CHAPTER 8 ~

**Downtown, Archway.**

At the southern part of Archway was a somewhat desolate area that was as big as an average estate. It took about 12-15% of the entire town’s land mass. Most of the buildings here were uncompleted, and those that were completed looked very fragile and depleted, as though they’d collapse by a slight shift in the wind. The roads that cut between streets were tarred but riddled with multiple potholes. There were a few standing light poles, but one could easily tell that they were no longer functional.

The air here was a bit foggy and damp. Foggy from the many areas that smoke wisped out from. Smoke from automobiles, smoke from cigarettes and the likes. Even though the area looked uninhabitable, it was quite filled with a decent population. Although, at daytime, anyone hardly walked the streets. Downtown was usually alive at night.

It was like a stain on a pure white dress, if compared with the rest of Archway...

Inside a bar, seated at the far end was the man with jet black hair, with a scar on his forehead, just beside his glabella. The scar was a bit red and looked fresh.

Unlike the desolate exterior, the interior of the bar was actually very decent and exuded this fancy theme. From the chairs, to the tables, counter, floorboards and walls, they were all made of fine-glossy wood. That of the counter was so neatly polished that one could see their reflection when looked at. In contrast to the classy decor of the place, the customers here were big rough men with cold expressions. One could even catch a glimpse of the hidden weapons they had on them.

Albeit, the mood of the bar was like any other one. The usual casual chatter as they had their drinks, and a few yells.

The man with jet black hair had his attention solely fixated on the vial in his right hand. Inside it was a black liquid that kept squirming. His black irises wouldn’t move, as though they were hypnotized by this strange liquid.

On the table was his phone with a blank screen. He had his head tilted toward it as though he was speaking to it.

“It seems other people also detected the Abnormal’s presence and tried to cover it up, because I doubt an entity of that level would just manifest and the structure of that alley would still be intact,” he whispered to his phone. But in real truth, he was communicating through the earbud in his right ear. He was seated among thieves and shady traders; it was best not to garner any attention. They might see him as some well-to-do man that had stumbled into the wrong bar.

“That is very possible, considering the rate at which Abnormals are getting silenced these days,” a familiar feminine voice replied via his earbud.

“The Cascaders?” he took his cup of cocktail and shook it gently.

“I highly doubt that. Their men were slaughtered and their heist was hindered. They’re just a group of petty thieves, but they sure do know how to hype themselves.”

“Hmm,” the man sighed. “I think they’re more than just some random petty thieves. They are coordinated and always one step ahead of the cops. There’s more to them than meets the eyes.”

“I guess so, but saying that they tried to erase the Abnormal’s presence is too far fetched. It was done by a more standard organization,” Diana still stood on her point.

After a short moment of silence, they both muttered, “G.A.T.E.”

The man scoffed, “But of course. That’s by the way anyway. At least we’ve confirmed her location, now we just need to know who she really is.”

Diana hummed, “That’s if she really is a SHE. I was only able to come to that conclusion because of the tests results from the goo, but the gender might be wrong.”

“Ugh... This is becoming a hassle, honestly,” the man shook the cup once more and drank a bit to sweeten his dissatisfactory mood. He dropped the cup and smacked his lips, sighing afterwards.

“This is too bland,” he clicked his tongue and stood up, walking over to the counter.

“Come on, we’re saving the world here,” Diana said with a soothing voice.

He scoffed, “I don’t remember signing up for that. I’m just a mercenary that gets paid for my services. This really isn’t my style...”

He got to the counter and tapped a finger on it till the barman stood before him.

“You got something stronger? This isn’t cutting it at all,” he dropped the half-drank cup on the counter.

The barman nodded, “Understood.”

As the barman went to prepare another drink for him, he rubbed his chin and whispered, “Now that I think about it. Isn’t calling her an Abnormal a bit... Disrespectful?”

“Thought I lost you there for a second,” Diana replied swiftly. “I get where you’re coming from, considering how absurd of an entity she is. But that term was originally coined from her kind, so there’s no way around it.”

“Her... kind?”

Diana sighed, “Didn’t you read the mission’s file I sent to you?”

“I did, at least some part of it. ‘Twas getting too long and uninteresting. I’m more of a gun and fist man. The supernatural world is not for me,” he shrugged.

The barman dropped a glass cup on the counter. In it was a gold colored drink that the mercenary didn’t seem to recognize. He picked it up and walked back to his seat.

“This better be good,” he muttered as he sat down. He took a gulp and squeezed his face for a second or two before dropping the cup. “Ah... This is the good stuff.”

~

A small bell by the top edge of the door rang as someone walked in. No one flinched on his entrance and he couldn’t be more glad.

He roughened up his black hair before walking towards the counter. His black jacket had patches like someone that had fallen off his bike many times and had to stitch the torn spots. His thick blue jeans had crazy holes and designs. His feet were clad in brown cowboy boots.

He looked like an everyday Downtown person, but on a closer look, it was Officer Malcolm Allen. He had come to set things straight.

His choice of outfit was for him to easily blend in, but also not to garner much suspicion for what he was about to do.

*Tap... Tap... Tap!*

His movement was steady and sturdy as he looked ahead with confidence. He got to the counter and took a seat. Right next to him was a scrawny looking man with scattered orange hair and different piercings on his face. He also had tattoos at different places. He was only wearing a sleeveless black jacket with no shirt within, black trousers and black boots.

Malcolm didn’t stand on ceremony. As soon as he told the barman what type of drink he wanted, he placed his hands on the counter and calmly said, “Jasper...”

The scrawny man raised a brow as he heard his name. He was so busy dragging his cigarette that he didn’t notice Malcolm sit beside him.

“Have you suddenly turned deaf?” Malcolm added without changing his tone.

“And who the hell are you?” Jasper frowned without turning to look at Malcolm. He was lost in the bliss of his weed.

Malcolm chuckled tersely and raised his head to look at Jasper, “It’s me. Mac.”

Mac was the name he used whenever he came to these parts for intel.

Jasper suddenly froze at the sound of the name. He pulled out the stick of cigarette from his mouth and turned to look at the man beside him. What followed were his irises shrinking in shock and disbelief.

“Y-You’re... How are you still alive?”

“Oh...” Malcolm smiled. “So you really did know about the ambush.”

“No, I didn’t. But I heard the news. Thought you were a goner,” Jasper scoffed. His highness had superseded his surprise rather quickly.

“Is that so?” Malcolm paused as the barman tapped him and dropped his drink. He responded with a nod before facing Jasper, “Then why were you so surprised to see me?”

Jasper grunted, “Didn’t you hear me, man? It was all over the news. Didn’t you say you were going to stop them or something? I thought you died in the ambush.”

Malcolm had taken intel from Jasper in the guise of being a mercenary that was hunting the Cascaders, and needed to know their whereabouts.

Malcolm sighed, “I paid you for the intel, Jasper. Why did you lie to me?”

“Ugh. Don’t get so worked up, man. Just be glad you’re alive,” Jasper shrugged and took a puff. As he exhaled, he extended his half-burnt cigarette towards the latter, “Here. Just a drag to clear your head.”

Malcolm sized the lanky man up in disgust. It took everything in him not to pull out his revolver at that point and gun him down. But he’d be at the loosing end as the other men in the bar would attack immediately. Though they were all shady dealers, they cared for everyone in the hood like brothers.

*This isn’t working. A little persuasion, maybe?* Malcolm pondered as Jasper kept smoking and muttering nonsense.

He had come here to confirm two things: One was to find out where Jasper was getting his info from so that he could strike directly at the source. He had a hunch that the wasted man might be working with the Cascaders. If that were so, it’d narrow down their way of taking down the organization.

Another reason was to clear the suspicion Kyla had on him. He had to gain concrete evidence to justify his claim, that he knew nothing about the ambush and he wasn’t there all by coincidence.

Infuriated by Jasper’s carefree attitude, Malcolm snapped. He grabbed his drink and drank up its content in one gulp. His head buzzed a bit from the concentrated alcohol.

Then he stood up and struck the glass cup on the counter. It shattered on contact, grabbing everyone’s attention. He held a shard, forcefully pulled Jasper up and pinned his back to the counter, the sharp shard caressing the lanky man’s neck.

By now, most of the men in the bar had risen to their feet, staring at Malcolm with stern gazes.

The man at the far end of the bar also stood up, “Everyone calm down. It’s just a little misunderstanding...” he turned to Malcolm. “Right?”

Malcolm was a little puzzled but he answered, “Yeah. Just a little persuasion. We’re good...”

He pressed the shard of glass against Jasper’s neck, “Right, buddy?”

Jasper shuddered and swallowed hard, “Y-Yes. W-We’re... We’re good.”

“Gentlemen, please,” the man with the jet black hair, urged with a gentle smile and they all sat back down.

*Why did he help me? Who is he?* Malcolm was curious about this man. He was also thankful though, else who knows if a bar fight wouldn’t have broken out. And they’d mostly gang up on him.

He shoved the thoughts aside and glared at the terrified Jasper, “You ready to say something reasonable now?”

Jasper gulped. His fear of death cleared the fog of weed in his head.

He stuttered, “I had no idea about the ambush. I swear! I only got the information from someone in the Cascaders.”

“I thought as much. So you work for them?” Malcolm narrowed his eyes.

Jasper shook his head, “No, no. Well, I tried to join but I was rejected...”

“Are you expecting me to console you?” Malcolm raised a brow.

Jasper ignored and continued, “But my friend was accepted, so he feeds me info and I sell it out to mercenaries like you. The one I gave you was authentic, I swear, except my guy lied about it.”

Malcolm clicked his tongue, “And who is this guy?”

Jasper closed his eyes, “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you. Besides, he’s dead. So what’s the point?”

Malcolm scoffed and pushed the shard further into Jasper’s skin, causing the latter to fling his eyes open with a wince.

“His name?” Malcolm’s face was stern.

Jasper exhaled in melancholy, “Noah Patel.”

# **~ Chapter 9 ~**

**Walthamstow.**

A black Toyota jeep drove steadily past the small bridge and finally arrived at the town. It continued its steady journey through the town that bustled with excitement and festivity.

People were smiling at each other as they walked by. It was a small town, so it wasn’t far-fetched if one said that everyone knew each other in Walthamstow.

Inside the jeep, Alan Hunt was behind the wheels, while Kyla sat beside him. Freya was seated at the back, scrolling through her iPad with crossed legs. The way she carried herself made it seem like Alan was her driver, and Kyla was her bodyguard or escort.

Kyla had her elbow rested on the door frame, while her fist held her chin as she stared at the happenings within the town. Most of the houses here were old terrace buildings, but still very well kept. She also noticed that the citizens preferred to eat outside, around a plastic table, under a canopy. Her eyes drifted here and there, taking in the wholesome scenery.

She felt as though she had come to an island reserve for a vacation. Everyone was just too friendly and carefree.

She could no longer resist as she pressed her thumb against the button by the door, winding down the window.

Sniff... With closed eyes and a warm smile, she took in the pleasant air of the town, her blonde hair billowing softly. The air here felt more fresh than that of Archway.

Just as she was beginning to get lost in her tourist mood, her belly buzzed. It buzzed again and she brought her head in with a slight frown. She reached for her torso and dipped her hand into her hoodie’s two-sided pocket. She brought out her ringing phone and looked at the screen.

“Ugh, not now,” she exhaled exasperatedly. After about two seconds of contemplating, she dragged the green icon up and placed the phone on her ear, “Hello...”

“Officer White, where are you?”

She winded the window up to hear more clearly, “At home. Why?”

“At your house? I’ve been knocking for over five minutes and there’s been no reply,” the man’s voice hinted his suspicion towards her.

She rolled her eyes, “Why are you at my house, Mark? You could have taken the initiative to call first.”

“There’s been a complaint at Upper Holloway. The residents said they heard an explosion overnight. Most likely a break in.”

Alan took a glance at Kyla as he heard the name of his street. Though her phone wasn’t on speaker, one could still hear what the caller was saying, faintly.

Kyla also turned her head to look at Alan, so they locked eyes. He gave a nod, she also responded likewise before facing the other way and replying the caller.

“Well, you guys handle it. Can’t you all do anything without me?”

“Ha ha,” Mark laughed in sarcasm. “Very funny. You’re supposed to be on duty today. It was also an order from Detective Joe.”

“I’m still recovering from yesterday’s incident. Didn’t uncle... I mean the Captain, didn’t he tell you?”

“We haven’t seen him in the station today.”

*He’s probably still at the Art Factory,* Kyla surmised.

Then she faked a groan, “You guys should go check it out yourselves. I need my rest, please.”

“Doesn’t sound like you’re resting though. Are you driving?”

Her eyes shrunk, then she coughed, “No, I’m watching a movie. I’m hanging up now.”

She hung up and dropped her phone on the dashboard.

“Seems like your neighbors heard the little scuffle between you and the men that came for Noah,” Freya said immediately Kyla cut the call.

Alan chuckled nervously, “Yeah. They’ve been looking for a way to call the cops on me anyway, because of... You know... The way I’ve been lately. This was the perfect chance for them to act.”

Freya hummed, “I just hope it doesn’t turn into a big case once they get to your house and do not meet you at home. They might think you’ve been kidnapped, or worse, you’ve finally gone crazy and blew your door open.”

Alan’s hand became stiff on the steering as he heard this. He gulped, his heart palpitating.

“Easy...” Freya beckoned with a soothing voice.

“You don’t have to worry about that. It’s not even an issue. If Mark and the others use their heads, they’d contact Alan’s therapist first before jumping into absurd conclusions...” Kyla pointed out with a straight face.

“Oh...” Freya’s expression was blank. Why didn’t she think of that? For the first time in a long time, Kyla thought ahead of her.

“And if they don’t do that, they’ll inform the captain. I’d have called him to call you and ask,” Kyla shrugged.

Alan smiled tersely in relief, “Hopefully, that’s how it goes.”

He took a left turn and drove further for about ten seconds before coming to a stop. He shifted the gear to P and unhooked his seatbelt, “We’re here.”

Kyla and Freya looked out the window with narrowed eyes. They turned their heads a few times and still couldn’t find what they were looking for.

With a curled brow, Kyla asked, “Where is here exactly? There’s no warehouse in sight.”

“Oh. I must have forgotten to tell you, sorry. We have to get the key to the warehouse first before heading there,” he smiled sheepishly as the ladies stared at him with squinted eyes. He rubbed the back of his neck, “It’ll be quick. We just have to get it from her.”

He unlocked the doors and came down from the car. Kyla alighted almost immediately, grabbing her phone from the dashboard in succession. Freya on the other hand, took her time to get down, one heel after the other. She closed the door and tugged at her blazer, to smoothen any wrinkles.

“This house,” Alan pointed at a duplex by the road where they had parked.

As the ladies walked side by side behind Alan, Kyla couldn’t stop staring at him with a scrutinizing gaze. Freya noticed this and groaned.

“What?” Kyla asked without taking her eyes off him.

“You know ‘what’. Stop it,” Freya ordered like she was talking to a child.

Alan climbed the short flight of stairs and pressed the doorbell.

Kyla put her hands into her hoodie’s pockets, “He’s quite tall, you know.”

“Okay... So that gives you enough reason to start crushing on him?”

“Huh?” Kyla creased her brows. “Your mind goes too far, Freya. I’m just... Admiring. There’s nothing wrong in admiring.”

With crossed arms, Freya scoffed, “Admiring. Of course.”

No one had come to open the door and it had been over a minute. Alan exhaled and rang the doorbell twice.

Kyla could feel the weight of sarcasm that came from her friend, cajoling her to face her, “I’m being serious. After what happened with Noah, you can’t expect me to get infatuated towards another man...”

Freya just scoffed.

Kyla faced the stairs, “Even though he’s tall and gorgeous. Especially those peculiar eyes of his...”

Freya shook her head, “The next time you come to my office for another dating-disaster therapy won’t be for free.”

“Ease up, boss lady,” Kyla nudged Freya’s shoulder. “We aren’t in the office.”

Frustrated, Alan raised his hand to ring the doorbell again, but the creaking hinges of the door stopped him.

“Finally...” he took a step back as the door opened. Freya and Kyla climbed the stairs and stood behind him.

A boy poked his head out and sized the three adults up. After looking at them for five seconds, he asked, “Who are you?”

“Children nowadays lack manners,” Freya looked at the boy in disdain. She never liked children to begin with.

“Is Mrs Patel home? We’re friends of Noah’s,” Alan said with a feigned smiled.

The boy raise a brow, “Uncle Noah’s people? Hmm. Give me a minute.”

He closed the door. Alan and the ladies could hear his quick receding footsteps. The door was opened again a minute later, but fully this time.

The boy was standing at the other side, “Come in. She’ll be down soon.”

“Thank you,” Alan smiled as they walked in.

The boy poked out his head and observed the street before closing the door.

The trio were welcomed with a babel of noises as soon as they stepped foot into the living room.

Kyla counted with a gaze and she was sure to have seen seven children in the living room, excluding the boy that was at the door. Some were running around playfully, while others watched the extremely loud television. They hardly paid attention to what was on the TV as they also played with the toys on the floor.

All Freya could see was nothing but a total mess. It made her skin crawl. She just wanted to leave as soon as possible.

“Just who did we come to see?!” Kyla asked with a raised voice while covering her ears.

“Noah’s mum!” Alan replied with the same pitch.

Kyla’s eyes widened and the noises seemed to reduce as she dropped her hands, “Noah has a mom?”

“What kind of question is that? Did you expect him to have fallen from the sky like an angel?” Freya was disgusted already, she laid her frustration on her shocked friend.

“Well, he told me he lost his parents a few years ago, so this came as a surprise,” Kyla replied, her love for Noah Patel dwindling gradually. First, he lied about his job, now this. And there was also the possibility of him being a drug dealer.

A part of her felt relieved that he was hit by that truck.

*Tap... Tap... Tap!*

A woman in her early sixties walked down the stairs slowly, one foot at a time. She was wearing a pink gown that shimmered with glitter. Covering her head and shoulders was a dupattā—a long scarf commonly worn by Indian women. Without considering her facial features, her nationality was pretty obvious from her dressing.

*Oh, Noah PATEL. Now that makes sense,* Kyla nodded to herself in enlightenment. *But he said his parents were... And his accent... Sigh... I can’t believe anything he has told me at this point.*

Alan moved forward briskly and helped her down the stairs. As they crossed the last step, the woman embraced him like a mother would.

“Oh, mera mithaee Kumar**[1]**...” she hugged him tighter.

“Nice to see you too, Amaya,” Alan found it a bit hard to speak, clutched in the woman’s firm hold.

She disengaged and touched his hands, chest and face as though he was her son that had not visited home in years, “Where have you been, meree pyaaree Kumar**[2]**? I thought you had forgotten about me.”

Alan smiled sheepishly. It was a bit embarrassing, especially in front of the ladies that had accompanied him.

“I’ve been busy with work. Although I always told Noah to send my regards anytime he visited.”

At the mention of that name, the whole place went silent. There was a subtle chill that blew into the living room. The children stared at Alan with cold faces.

Kyla and Freya moved their gaze from Alan to the children, and then back. They were surprised by the sudden, eerie reaction.

Alan fisted his left hand as he realized what he had just said.

*Shit! Shit! I shouldn’t have said that!* He could almost palm his face. He felt as though the ground should just open and swallow him at that point. *How do I fix this? Think... Think!*

Just then, Amaya patted Alan’s face with a smile, “He was a very good uncle to them. They miss him so much.”

“I’m so sorry,” Alan apologized, staring at his feet.

“For what? It’s not your fault, mera bachcha**[3]**,” she rubbed his cheek, her smile unwavering.

“Wow. She’s handling this better than I did,” Kyla mumbled under her breath.

“That’s because you’re always too attached to everything,” Freya whispered immediately as though she’d been waiting for the chance to say that.

“Sheesh, I know, I’ve learnt my lesson. But I don’t think that those are the right words to use at this moment,” Kyla looked at Noah’s mother in melancholy.

Amaya stepped back and turned to the boy that had opened the door, “Rasheed, take your siblings upstairs and prepare some tea for our guests.”

The boy grumbled under his breath before answering, “Yes, daadee**[4].**”

Freya watched as he spoke to the other children and coordinated them upstairs. She nodded, satisfied to some degree, *At least that one has some composure.*

Amaya tilted her upper body sideways to have a look at the ladies behind Alan. She waved at them with a smile, “Hello.”

Freya and Kyla were frozen for a moment. They didn’t know how to respond; were they to kneel or bow? How did they greet in their country?

They later gave up and waved back with quivering smiles, “Good afternoon, Mrs. Patel.”

~

Freya and Kyla sat together on the two-seater sofa, while Alan and Amaya sat on the single sofas, at either sides of the double sofa.

The TV had been turned off and the toys had been cleared.

Freya was currently seething in rage, having stepped on a Lego piece while taking her seat. She could only wince as it happened and shot Rasheed a glare as he packed the toys without a single word of apology. Kyla laughed silently.

“What pains me the most is that there’s no body to be cremated. After killing my son, they still wouldn’t let me see him one last time?” Amaya cleaned her eye bags with a piece of her dupattā.

*This is going to be harder than I thought. Her son is still alive but I can’t tell her,* Alan felt sorry for the old woman.

The trio looked at each other in awkwardness.

“First it was his elder brother and my daughter-in-law. They died the same day, and now I’m left to take care of their children,” Amaya sighed, the water in her eyes getting dry.

“Eh?” Kyla was stupefied. *Those children belong to one mother? Nine of them! Damn!*

“I’m not complaining. I love them wholeheartedly. It’s just... Noah, my pyaare bete**[5]**, used to be a lot of help. An old woman like me can’t handle those tiny devils effectively...” she chuckled to her words. “Now they miss him more than you can imagine. They won’t even talk to me like before.”

*She looked fine when Alan mentioned his name. It was probably an act not to scare those little misfits any further,* Freya pondered.

The trio listened attentively as Amaya poured her heart out. It was a bit awkward since they knew Noah was still alive, somewhere. Freya would chip in words of encouragement from time to time.

They couldn’t just say that her supposedly dead son was alive. Not only would it sound absurd, they had no proof to back it up. Though they couldn’t read each other’s thought, they all had it mind to tell her once they found Noah in the warehouse. IF he was still there.

The ten year old Rasheed walked into their midst, holding a tray that held a jug and three mug cups. He dropped the tray on the centre table and began pouring the jug’s contents into the mugs.

Three of his siblings carried small stools and dropped them in front of each guest. They giggled and skipped away afterwards.

Rasheed had finished pouring the brown liquid that the English people called tea. He took the mugs and placed them on the stools one after the other.

Kyla looked at the mug and smiled at the boy, “Thank you. But, if you don’t mind, I’d like some milk and sugar.”

*‘The guts of this lady!’* Rasheed wasn’t smiling at all. He was being forced to do this. He had abandoned his online game upstairs just because of these guests. But he dared not refuse if he didn’t want to see the angry side of his grandma.

He gritted his teeth as he sized her up. He just shook his head and left.

“Is that a yes or...?” Kyla traced him with her eyes as he walked away.

“My apologies. I thought all English people drank tea like that. I should have known,” Amaya apologized.

“Yeah, the old people,” Kyla chuckled. “I’m not a fan of tea anyways.”

“Kyla,” Freya cautioned with a stern gaze. Then she turned to Amaya with a smile, “Thank you. This is okay.”

Rasheed came back to the living room with a small box of milk and pack of sugar. He dropped it on Kyla’s stopped and left briskly.

“Thank you,” she muttered at his receding footsteps.

As she poured the milk into her tea and dropping cubes after cubes of sugar, Alan leaned forward with a solemn expression, “Amaya, I understand what you’re going through...”

He paused and shook his head before continuing, “Well, that was a blatant lie. I have no idea what you’re going through. I could only imagine.”

She nodded with a depressed sigh.

“And do not worry, I’ll come and spend some time with you and the children. But first, do you still have the keys to Noah’s warehouse?”

“Yes. His and yours. Why?” she loosened her dupattā and rolled it across her shoulders again.

“Um... I...” Alan was speechless. He hadn’t thought of the lie he was going to tell.

Freya quickly chipped in, “The warehouse is owned by the two of them, so Alan has some important items stored there. And as his therapist, I asked him to get those things and discard them, since they are linked to his deceased fiancé.”

“Oh...” Amaya was surprised. “I know Alan hasn’t been the same since Lara’s death, but I never knew it was that bad.”

Freya twitched her glasses, “It’s not every feeling one can expose or explain to others easily. That’s where my job comes in.”

Amaya nodded in understanding, “Hmm. I can see he has made a lot of progress too...”

She grunted as she pulled herself up, “Let me get the key.”

Freya nodded and Amaya went upstairs.

~

*Click! Click!*

Alan twisted the key twice and the metal door creaked as it rolled upwards.

The mild afternoon sun flooded the warehouse and the three of them walked in, tilting their heads as they observed the wide storage room. Just that, the place was oddly empty. There were a bunch of crates and open boxes laying around. Some rusted barrels too.

“Uh... Are you sure this is the place?” Kyla had to ask, seeing how nigh-desolate the place was.

Alan creased his brows, utterly confused about what he was seeing, “Y-Yeah, I think so. Where did all my stuff go?”

“Maybe Noah packed them...? No, that’s impossible,” he shook his head.

“Where is Noah himself?” Freya sat on one of the boxes. Walking to and fro with those heels were tiring.

Kyla spotted some blood stains on a pillar and approached it. She was about placing her hand on it, when she spotted a trail of dried blood. She followed it till she got to a wooden chair. On it was a blood stained, white shirt and a small piece of torn cloth.

Alan had gotten to her side and he said, “That’s my shirt. I gave him to wear when we about to sleep last night.”

“So he was here,” he added in a whisper.

“Why didn’t he wait? Didn’t he think you’d come for him?” Kyla asked, unable to take her eyes off the shirt.

“Heh. He probably thought I was dead, fleeing like that and leaving me with those armed men,” Alan scoffed, but one could tell he was disappointed by Noah’s actions.

“Hmmm...” Kyla bent towards the chair and picked up the piece of cloth.

Written on it with blood was—GIOVANNI.

“Giovanni?” Alan took the cloth.

“Given that the blood stains are only at this area, I’d say he reopened his wound to write this down,” Freya analyzed, her blue eyes scanning the warehouse.

“So you’re saying he knew we’d come?” Alan looked at her.

Freya shrugged, “If not us, maybe you or someone else he trusts. Which makes me wonder what kind of people he had wronged, that he can’t stay still for just half a day.”

Kyla placed a hand under her chin, deep in thought, “Giovanni... Giovanni... I’ve heard that name before. Very familiar--”

At that moment, the skin at the back of her neck crawled and immediately, a loud bang resonated and echoed across the warehouse’s metallic walls, causing the trio to shudder in reflex.

Using her experience, Kyla urged Alan and Freya to take cover behind the pillars and pile of boxes close to them respectively.

They soon heard incoming footsteps, and they could tell that they belonged to more than five, if not ten people.

Then they heard voices, voices of men conversing among themselves. But they weren’t speaking English or Spanish. It was an entirely different language.

Unable to comprehend what these odd men were saying, the three of them could only mutter, “What the hell?!”

~

**[1]**— My sweet son.

**[2]** — My son.

**[3]**— My child.

**[4]**—Grandma.

**[5]**— Dear son.

Note: They were all derived from search engine translations, I can’t ascertain that they are a 100% correct.

## **~ Chapter 10 ~**

**/***Dialogues that begin with (\*) have been translated/*

Eleven men grumbled amongst themselves as they trotted towards the warehouse, which was a few meters up ahead. It was the only man-made structure in this area, surrounded by shrubs and trees.

The men were clad in tracksuits and sneakers, each person to a color; they had matching white stripes though. They also looked alike, as though they were born from the same mother, on the same day. Silk black hair, chiseled jaws, wide eyes and a pointed nose—were the similar features that they all possessed. Though there were some slight variations for some.

However, even a five-year old child could tell that they were Hindi men.

They kept dragging their feet towards the warehouse, rubbing and brandishing the melee weapons in their hands. There was a man that led them, a baseball cap propped on his head. He had a revolver in his right hand and a crowbar clutched in his left.

\*“Just when the club was getting lit, she had to call us,” one of them muttered amidst the grumbling.

\*”She keeps sending us on unnecessary errands as though we are children,” another said.

The man in front just sighed in exasperation at the incessant complaints. He checked the rounds of his revolver before stopping at the open door, \*“Let’s just do as we’re told and get this over with.”

Sighting three people at the end of the warehouse, he raised the hand gun up and pulled the trigger.

Bang!

Before he could even drop his hands, the three people had scattered like cats to a cucumber.

~

As the deafening echoes of the gunshot reverberated through the now cold, silent warehouse, Kyla, Alan and Freya, pressed themselves against the crates and barrels that cluttered the dimly lit space. The acrid smell of gunpowder hung heavy in the air, mixing with the musty scent of old cardboard and rusted metal.

Alan's heart pounded in his chest like an incessant drumbeat. He exchanged frantic glances with his accomplices, his eyes wide with fear and nothing but fear. From his petrified perspective, he could see shadows dance eerily into the warehouse. His breath became heavy.

The unknown men were closing in, their footsteps echoing ominously on the concrete floor.

With a bated breath, Kyla knew they had only seconds to decide their next move. The warehouse was a labyrinth of crates and barrels, offering both cover and concealment. But the unknown men were closing in, their voices growing louder and more menacing with each passing moment.

Kyla’s mind raced, searching for an escape route or a way to turn the tables. She clutched to the piece of evidence they had found earlier, the key to unraveling the mystery that had brought them to the warehouse in Walthamstow in the first place.

It was now a race against time, a battle of wits and courage in this… suddenly tense moment. The warehouse held secrets, and Kyla, Freya and Alan were determined to uncover them, even if it meant confronting the unknown men that had barged in.

Well, mostly Kyla and Freya had that thought in mind as Alan was more or less a damsel in distress right now. He was hyperventilating as though he had been thrown into a den of beasts. His PTSD had been awoken once he heard the gunshot.

Freya could hear his incessant pants, cajoling her to turn her head at him.

*‘Come on, now’s not the time for this!’* she sighed in exasperation.

She placed her left palm on the cold floor and leaned towards him a bit, but still within the breadth of the barrel she had used for cover.

She tapped her palm twice, “Calm down, Alan. There’s nothing to worry about…”

“Huff… Huff… Huff…” No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t stop himself from the continuous panic.

“Listen to me, Alan. You’ll only make things worse--” she froze as one of the unknown men spoke up.

“Yo! English men, what are you doing in our crib?”

*‘Indian men?’* Freya creased her brows as she noticed the similarity between the man’s accent and Amaya’s.

“Their crib? What do they mean by that?” Kyla whispered, but loud enough for Alan and Freya to hear.

“Come to think of it, it all makes sense now. They must have cleared Noah and Alan’s things from here, and made the place their hideout or something…” she added, bringing out her phone.

“Are you all deaf? Do you know where you are right now?!” the man with the baseball cap hollered, pulling back the hammer of his revolver.

Kyla turned deaf ears to whatever the man was saying, she had something else in mind. She put her phone to Do-not-disturb and clicked the power button once, putting it to sleep. She then stretched her hand out of the cover of the pillar, tilting the phone’s screen in such a way that she could see who the unknown persons were.

Freya caught sight of this and nodded to herself. She faced the ceiling and half-yelled, “What makes you think we’re English men?”

“What?” the men murmured amongst themselves.

“You called us English men without seeing our faces. We could be Mexicans for all you know.”

“Ha ha ha! You make me laugh, English man… woman,” the man wearing the baseball cap laughed, and his cohorts joined in the mocking gesture.

“You talk like one. It’s so obvious, a toddler would know,” he shrugged.

*‘Just who are these noodles-for-brains? They’re so carefree,’* Freya rolled her eyes.

But she didn’t mind, as long as it bought Kyla enough time. She could also see that Alan was easing up a bit, due to the lower tension in the atmosphere.

She scoffed loudly, “If we go with that logic, you guys are Indians, right?”

The intruders were taken aback by this, their wide eyes moving from one man to another.

“Again, you make me laugh! You all think everyone that speaks this way is Indian. Stupid stereotypes!” he raised his hand and shot again, a bang resonating throughout the warehouse, and echoing via the rusted barrels.

*Thump! Thump! Thump!*

Alan’s heart kicked into overdrive again. His legs were folded to his chest, his hands quivering incessantly.

*‘Ten… Eleven of them. That’s… not what I was expecting. But the lesser the better, I guess,’* Kyla noted as she retracted her hand. She had been forced to use her phone’s camera in order to get a zoomed image of who the men were.

She took note of their outfit, body build and weapons. It was only the man with the baseball cap that had a gun, so it put her mind at ease. More so, these men were just standing there, as though they had all the time in the world to capture the three of them. And they were easily distracted by Freya’s bickering.

It made her wonder: Just what type of group was this?

*‘Probably amateurs. An upcoming gang of criminals,’* she surmised, raising her hoodie and drawing out a Ruger GP100 revolver.

She flicked it, popping out the cylinder to check the rounds; it was fully loaded. She popped it back in and slung the hammer, which emanated a slight sharp sound.

It was as she did this, that something occurred to her. She could smell the acrid gunpowder from the two shots taken by the man, whom she presumed to be the leader.

*‘A Colt M1889. Heh. They can’t even afford a modern pistol.’*

Heaving a long sigh, she turned her head and whistled, catching Freya’s attention. The latter got the non-verbal gist and simply nodded, keeping quiet afterwards.

“What do you want from us!” Kyla finally spoke up.

“Ooh, another lady…” the baseball cap man chuckled. “I am Jamal, and with me are my brothers. You have committed the offense of trespassing, and the corresponding punishment for that is death!”

“Ooh… Scary,” Freya shuddered in sarcasm. She just couldn’t take these people seriously.

“I could spare you ladies, if you agree to become my wives. But the man dies,” Jamal grinned.

“Go to hell!” Kyla and Freya retorted.

Jamal scoffed and stepped back. With a simple nudge of his head, his brothers brandished their melee weapons and marched forward.

“They’re coming. Get ready…” Kyla tossed a pocket knife over Alan’s head and Freya caught it swiftly. “We can take them, they’re amateurs. Just be weary of the guy with the gun.”

Freya nodded, getting on her feet.

Kyla stood in succession and looked down at the shivering Alan, “Um… You, stay here.”

She couldn’t tell if he could hear her as the man kept shaking like he had seen death. The pedestal she had set him upon in her heart, cracked.

She just shook her head and sprang out of cover, likewise Freya.

She held the revolver with an experienced pose and pulled the trigger…

*Bang!*

Its sound was way deeper than that of Jamal’s. The bullet didn’t hesitate to find a victim, drilling into a man’s thigh speedily. He dropped to his knees and laid pressure on the thigh to prevent blood from gushing out.

Kyla had jumped towards a nearby crate immediately she shot, and crouched for cover. She had to be extremely cautious of Jamal. He might have sent his brothers forward as a form of distraction, so that he could stand back and aim properly to fire a kill shot. She didn’t lax just because they were amateurs. In fact, she had to be extra careful, because of what they called ‘rookie’s-luck’ back in the station. It was a common phenomenon whereby newbies tend to pull massive stunts and achieve what the old timers had been struggling to do, rather easily.

What she would term a misfire from Jamal, might very well be the shot that’d find a way into her heart.

She flicked her wrist, weighing her hand gun. She still had seven bullets left to use.

~

Freya’s blazer fluttered by her sides as she moved forward rather swiftly, ignoring the inconvenience from her heels.

She ducked under an arm that was aiming a pipe at her face, turning ever so slightly on her heels as she simultaneously got hold of the arm. With a hard yank and slight crouch, she picked the man off the floor and threw him over her. The man struck his back against the concrete floor, puffing out his chest in pain.

Freya couldn’t care less as she drilled the tip of her shoe into his temple, turning his lights out. A malicious grin crept on her face. In contrast to her work as a therapist, she actually enjoyed watching her opponents squirm in pain and discomfort.

It would make one wonder why she even became someone that tended to people’s psychological traumas in the first place.

Just as soon as she kicked the man in the head, another kick came for her, hitting her shoulder and throwing her off her feet. She collided against some crates, shattering them on contact.

Unlike Kyla who had been trained to work in the force, Freya was a martial arts trainee. Though she was a woman of class and prestige, she had no choice than to sign up for it. She was pushed to do it after getting duped by a client that had asked her out during her first year as a therapist. She was still young and inexperienced, so she easily fell for him. However, after almost three months of dating, the man ended up emptying one of her accounts and fled.

She wasn’t like Kyla who would become a wet noodle before a man, or get depressed just because he broke up or ran away from her. In Freya’s case, it was anger; pure and undiluted. The only thing she had on her mind at that moment was nothing but revenge, which led her to study martial arts—albeit, only basic techniques—and beat the hell out of this guy. Crazy, right?

She’d been single since then.

“Sigh…” Freya Hall picked her pair of glasses and dusted the lenses. She took her time to stand up, adjust her blazer and flick some hair strands back, as though there weren’t five agile men standing before her.

She finally drew the pocket knife, a disturbing smirk creeping on her face.

~

Kyla had taken down three more men, but missed two shots, leaving her with only two bullets left. She had to make the last two count.

But then, as she moved out of cover and raised her hand to shoot, she realized that there was no one else to shoot. The rest of the men were after Freya.

She took a glance at the other side and her expression turned sour immediately. Freya was literally making the men daydream their worst nightmare.

*‘This is why I try not to anger her,’* Kyla chuckled sheepishly.

*Bang!*

A shot rang aloud and Kyla ducked. She didn’t know why, but she just did. It was as though her body reacted without her giving the command.

*Pak!*

She raised her head to see a bullet puncture the pillar beside her. Her eyes dilated. She had just dodged a bullet!

Even though the revolver was an antique, any normal human being wouldn’t be able to evade the speed of a bullet, not to mention even seeing it coming.

Kyla was puzzled, dazed, but still… grateful for whatever had made her duck.

Jamal couldn’t believe his eyes, his outstretched hand frozen as he stared at the crouching Kyla. She didn’t see him shoot, and yet she bent down at the right moment for the bullet to fly over her head.

“Laanat hai!**[1]**” he muttered in bedazzlement.

“Huh?” He spotted a shivering man tiptoeing through the fighting women and men, his hands over his head. He would have made it out if Jamal hadn’t stopped him.

“What a coward,” Jamal pushed Alan forward, clutching his shoulder and placing his gun close to his head.

“Yo, ladies! A friend of yours?” he asked with a smile.

Kyla had just walked over to Freya’s side, when they heard a whimper, followed by Jamal’s voice. They faced the entrance and saw what was going on.

“Shit,” Kyla gripped her gun tightly.

Freya palmed her face, “So much for your prince charming. He tried to run away.”

Kyla frowned at her friend, “He wouldn’t…”

“Oh, he very well did,” Jamal laughed. “Now drop your weapons before I blow his brains out.”

Kyla didn’t hesitate to let go of her gun that clattered on the floor.

The two women raised their hands up in surrender, whilst thinking of the safest way to get out of this predicament.

Jamal only scoffed, “Heh…”

He jabbed Alan’s head with the butt of his revolver and pointed it at the ladies. Before any of them could run for cover, he fired twice.

*Bang! Bang!*

It all happened so fast, that the next thing Kyla and Freya would feel was a nauseating sensation that churned from their abdomen and spread throughout their body. They collapsed to the floor, their limbs heavy and their head as light as air.

Kyla blinked consecutively, trying to overcome the dowsing sensation, but it was just too much to bear. However, she noticed the stream of crimson liquid that flowed out of her.

“B-Blood…?” she muttered before her eyelids went shut.

~

**[1]** — A dazzled expression, like “Damn!”

# **~ CHAPTER 11 ~**

Words... Words... More words... Loud words...

In her fuzzy state, Kyla could hear different voices conversing but she couldn’t comprehend what they were saying. But she knew they were saying something, so all she heard were words upon words. They first sounded distant and in echoes, but over time, they got closer and at a stable frequency.

“Ugh...” She groaned, opening her eyes gradually, seeing dim blurs.

At that moment, a loud voice pierced her hearing, “Kyla!”

It was like a trigger, causing Kyla to fling her eyes open, and all the overlapping voices became audible.

She raised her head with a groan. It still felt very light.

“Ugh... It’s like there’s nothing on my neck right now.”

“Yeah, I feel that too,” Freya’s voice answered.

Kyla looked at the side to see her blue-haired friend seated on a wooden chair, her hands tied behind her. The usual ever-so-classy therapist looked so pale and frail, her hair scattered all over her face. Her blazer was drenched in crimson liquid, likewise a part of her face.

Kyla scoffed. It had been a while since she saw Freya in such an incoherent state.

Her brows furrowed as she noticed the blood stains on Freya’s body, *‘Shit! We were shot!’*

She looked down at her body to see her hoodie soaked in blood too. Well, she could hardly see it since the color of her hoodie was almost the same as her blood. But she could feel the stickiness of the liquid and the heaviness of her clothing.

“Hmm...” she creased her brows. She couldn’t feel any pain, not in the slightest. At least she was expecting a piercing sting in her abdomen where she was shot.

She raised her head to size Freya up once more. Her friend only looked fatigued and frustrated but didn’t seem to be in pain too. That was odd.

Kyla surmised—although she didn’t accept a hundred percent—that she had somehow healed from the gunshot, since she literally rose from the dead just yesterday after the encounter with the Cascaders. But Freya’s case was different; yet she was also still alive.

*‘What the hell is going on?’* Kyla looked away to envisage her surroundings.

In front of her were the men that they fought in the warehouse earlier, well, about 6 of them. The others were still unconscious, and even those before them had swollen faces and bandages wrapped around their injuries. She narrowed her eyes further, as a woman had her back towards Freya and herself, while she conversed inaudibly with Jamal—the only man that was still unscathed.

Kyla sniffled, she didn’t give what was happening much thought. They had probably been taken hostage, even though them being alive was still an eerie mystery.

She tilted her head as much as she could. She could see a TV, couches, foreign wallpapers, the stairs and every other feature of a normal house. She spotted a small boy peeping from the stairs and her eyes dilated.

Her lips quivered, “R-Rasheed?”

“How...?” she looked at Freya, who was also looking at her with this expression that said, “I’m just as surprised as you are.”

*‘If Rasheed is here, it means we’re back at the same house, and...’* she took another glance at the back of the woman.

As though the woman could hear Kyla’s thoughts, she giggled and turned on her heels, the glitter on her pink gown shimmering under the radiant white bulbs. She adjusted her dupatta with a smile and folded her hands.

“Amaya?!” Kyla and Freya chorused with wide eyes. They had already gotten the gist of where they were and who had captured them, but it was still a hard pill to swallow. This was the same woman that seemed so emotional and motherly a few hours ago. What changed? Were they under a trance or something?

“Oh, you’ve come to already. I’m glad,” Amaya said in smiles.

Kyla was still dazed by the turn of events, while Freya just shook her head and scoffed wryly.

“Of course, like Mother, like son. Or in this case, like son, like Mother? I don’t even know,” Freya sang. “Tch.”

Kyla’s eyes dilated even further as Freya’s words sunk into her. It was then that everything started to make sense. For Noah to be on the run from a group of people that wanted nothing but to end his life, must mean that he had been in this crime world for a long time. A rookie wouldn’t dare get involved in dangerous trades and transactions, hell, he wouldn’t even have the clearance for that.

For Noah to have been involved this long only meant one thing—he was groomed into it from a very young age. And who was better at drilling culture and behaviour into a child other than his mother? If Noah was a drug dealer, it was no surprise that Amaya was some kind of mistress over a small crime syndicate.

Kyla looked at Amaya in a new light, her brows furrowed.

“Come on. Don’t look at me like that,” Amaya waved her hand as though she was gently swatting a fly. “I hope my boys didn’t engage too violently. Or were they too rough?”

Kyla and Freya locked eyes, then retracted their gaze back to Amaya, their eyes stern.

“What’s the meaning of this, Amaya? Why didn’t you just come out clean, instead of going through the stress of acting like a concerned mother?” Kyla was still shuffling the right questions in her head, but this was the best she could come up with at the moment.

“What do you mean? I still mourn the loss of my pyaare bete**[1]**,” she placed a hand on her chest and closed her eyes. She raised her head to the ceiling and muttered in melancholy, “Oh, unakee komal aatma ko shaanti mile**[2]**.”

Kyla and Freya didn’t understand the foreign language she spoke, but they surmised she was praying for Noah’s soul or something. Either way, they weren’t moved. She was probably faking it again.

“What is the point of all this? You could have killed us right when we stepped in, if you wanted to. Why give us the key to the warehouse, and then attack us?” Freya asked with squinted eyes. Her vision was a bit blurry without her medicated glasses. The scenery before her looked akin to a bold drawing smeared with oily paint, which would cause the painting to lose form with time, and become wavy.

“Ahh...” Amaya sighed and snapped her fingers at Jamal.

He nodded and gestured for one of the men to bring him something. The man next to him nodded and trotted into the dining room. He came back with a wooden chair and set it down behind Amaya.

She held her gown up and sat down. It took her a couple of seconds to straighten her dress and adjust herself on the chair till she felt comfortable. Those moments felt like slow minutes to Kyla and Freya.

“You see, business has not been... How do I put it? Going smoothly like before. Unlike when we first came to the UK, when Noah’s father was still alive, things were going well for us. Then he passed, and Noah had to take over. But he had been so integrated with the corporate system that he seldom had time for our organization…”

*‘Business? Organization? Big words for a group of foreign criminals,’* Kyla retorted inwardly as she glared at Amaya, who kept talking about history.

“Everything was still okay, but not like before when we went on heists almost everyday. Then Noah came up with a new tactic. Since he was already used to how the system of government worked in the country, he planned to plant several of our men into specific positions and all, so that we’d have eyes everywhere and we could eat into the system gradually...” she sighed and closed her eyes. “It was a good plan, but then came a fallout. Most of our men, led by Giovanni Gustav, formed a separate faction to rebel against his idea. They were impatient and hot-headed. There was a fierce fight, resulting in casualties from both sides. Giovanni and his men later retreated and we haven’t heard from them since.”

“Giovanni!” Kyla and Freya chorused loudly, looking into each other’s eyes.

It was the same name that was written on the piece of clothing at the warehouse. The missing pieces were starting to come together.

*‘Hmm... Although I feel like there’s more to this. If not, why didn’t Noah just tell his mum that Giovanni was back? They could have rallied all their men and fought back. And isn’t it odd for Giovanni to kill Noah out of the blue? He would know that Amaya and her men would later find him,’* Kyla delved into thought. Something didn’t add up.

“Oh, you’ve heard of him?” Amaya asked.

“Um...” Kyla looked at Freya, who was also staring at her. They couldn’t trust Amaya enough yet to tell her that her son was still alive, at least in speculation.

They nodded in a non-verbal agreement and faced Amaya.

“I’ve heard about him at the station every now and then,” Kyla shrugged and she wasn’t even lying. She had remembered where she knew that name from. The Archway police had never had enough allegations to take him in. He was a slippery man.

As Kyla raised her shoulders, the rope around her hands got tense, but also light like cotton. She felt she could snap the rope with one yank, but it was probably just her imagination.

“You’ve made me side-track,” Amaya shook her head.

*‘Just get to the point already!’* Freya was tired of the long talk.

“Our mode of operation was heavily destabilized after the fallout. Not only were we short of manpower, our minds were still recovering from the sudden turn of events. It was a very sad situation, honestly.

“It was at that time that Noah made a call. He suggested that we stopped doing what we were doing--”

“What were you doing exactly? Drug trafficking?” Kyla asked.

“Um, let’s see...” raising one finger after the other, she listed their ordeals one by one. When she ran out of fingers to count, she shrugged, “Basically what any of you would refer to as a criminal act. But it was just our means of survival.”

“Tch,” Kyla looked away.

“Now, please. Let me finish. No more interruptions,” Amaya warned. She placed a hand on her chin, trying to remember where she stopped before Kyla had interjected.

She soon recalled and dropped her hand with a smile, “Ah, yes. Noah suggested that we stop. He said we had made enough money, that we should go into investments and buy stocks. I agreed. I was getting old anyway and I had my grandchildren with me. I wouldn’t want them to follow the same path that their uncle and grandma did. Some of the men also agreed and left, but the rest stayed...” she pointed to Jamal. “Just a bunch of them, led by Jamal. They still run petty transactions every now and then, but only within the town. They also source for the latest happenings in the black market. No ‘criminal’ as you would call them,” she gave an air quote. “... Can come and go through Walthamstow without us knowing. So, one way, you could say we’re doing the town a favor by protecting them.”

“Still doesn’t make sense...” Kyla raised a brow. *‘And why is she telling us everything? No one asked.’*

“I know, right? I thought Noah had turned a new leaf, only for this to happen,” Amaya sighed.

That wasn’t what Kyla was referring to, but she replied anyway, “So you know who killed him?”

“The only name that comes to mind is Giovanni. Or Noah lied to me about stopping, and still engaged in shady businesses, which got him...” she sighed and sniffled, feeling very sympathetic.

*‘An overly emotional crime mistress,’* Freya looked at Amaya with a frown.

“So, how does this tie with almost getting us killed at the warehouse?” Freya finally voiced out.

“Oh...” Amaya chuckled. “That was me just making sure they were still agile. They’ve been too docile for some months now. It would be bad if some gang attacked us and my men can’t even pull a trigger, right?” she laughed softly.

“And what, we were your test subjects? I almost had a bullet through my head! Hell, we were shot!” Kyla retorted.

“But how come we’re not dead? By all rights, we should have stopped breathing a long time ago,” Freya asked the question that was bothering the two of them.

Amaya half-turned and called, “Jamal?”

Jamal pressed down his baseball cap further before drawing his archaic pistol. He moved closer to Amaya and dropped the gun on her palm.

She weighed it in her hand as she adjusted herself on the chair. She pointed it at Kyla, the latter got tense immediately. Amaya simply scoffed and lowered the gun. She ejected its cylinder and popped a bullet on her palm.

Jamal didn’t wait for her to talk before he took the revolver from her, and returned to his position behind her.

She held the small round bullet betwixt her thumb and index finger. The brown bullet had various spikes around it. One could tell they weren’t that sharp, else Amaya’s fingers would have been bleeding.

“It’s a rubber bullet, with a red dose of anesthesia in it. The little-little spikes on it is just to make you feel pain, you know, to make it feel as though you had been hit with a real bullet,” she explained with a casual demeanor.

Kyla’s brows twitched, “One of those made a dent in a concrete pillar! It would have gone through my head if I hadn’t dodged it.”

“You dodged a bullet?” Freya was stunned.

“Yeah, it just kinda happened,” Kyla pouted her lips.

Amaya narrowed her eyes, “Jamal?”

Jamal flinched, “There weren’t enough rubber bullets so I added two wooden ones.”

“Eh?” Kyla didn’t even know whether to be pissed, or to feel pity for the man’s height of foolishness.

*‘To condense wood to be as heavy as a real bullet, plus the force of the trigger. It could have gone through me!’* she shook her head.

Amaya frowned, “What’s wrong with you, Jamal? She was my daughter-in-law.”

She yelled some words in Hindi before keeping quiet.

“So you sent those men after us, because you were bored, or rather because you wanted to rejuvenate their skills, and you gave them rubber bullets because you had no intention to kill us, correct?” Freya asked calmly just to be sure.

“Sahee**[3]**,” Amaya nodded.

“Bulls! That’s utter bull shit!” Freya lost her cool. Though she didn’t understand what Amaya just said, the nod signified a yes.

Freya and Amaya kept going back and forth in a not-so-heated argument, since Amaya wasn’t reciprocating in the same angry tone as Freya. Freya just kept lashing at her with words.

Kyla decided to keep quiet and watch to see what would happen. It was not until then that she heard some trembling whispers beside her.

It was the voice of a man, a voice she hadn’t heard in quite a while.

“Alan?” she turned to face him. She had been so immersed in the turn of events that she didn’t even notice him by her side, plus the man hadn’t uttered a single word.

He had his head dropped, his lips moving and muttering in a whisper, “I’m a failure, I’m a failure...”

“Thank God you’re okay,” Kyla said, but the man kept whispering to himself.

She tilted her head, “Stop saying that, you’re not a failure...” Then she remembered how he had tried to abandon them back at the warehouse. “Well, you did what you had to do for your survival, right? It was probably your PTSD doing its worst.”

“What are you going to do with us?” Freya asked with a frown.

“Nothing. I’ll just let you go, if you tell me your real purpose for going to Noah’s warehouse,” Amaya raised her shoulders.

“You wouldn’t believe us if we told you,” Kyla faced her.

“Are you sure it’s okay to tell her?” Freya asked, sizing Amaya up ruefully.

“We don’t have a choice, do we? And she might have some important intel on Giovanni too,” Kyla answered without looking at her.

“And what is this news that you hold so greatly from me?” Amaya asked, smiling with curiosity.

Kyla dropped her head with a sigh, “Your son, Noah, is very much alive.”

~

[1] — My dear son.

[2] — May his gentle soul rest in peace.

[3] — Yes.

Note: They were all derived from search engine translations, I can’t ascertain that they are a 100% correct.

# **~ Chapter 12 ~**

**Downtown, Archway.**

*Krr... Krr... Krr...*

A faded green scooter came to a rickety stop next to a small grassland at the side of the road. It didn’t jerk continuously because of the many potholes in the abandoned tarred road; the engine itself was barely kicking. The gears and motors overworked themselves every now and then, causing fumes of thick black smoke to swirl out of the apertures in the scooter.

The orange-haired and scrawny Jasper, was the one riding the scooter, his face still pale from the faded highness. Seated grudgingly behind him was Malcolm Allen, or rather, Mac as of now.

The scooter finally stopped moving, accompanied by a loud churn and bang. More smoke swirled out of the engine and every part of the small vehicle overheated. The two occupants jumped away from the scooter in quick reflex.

Jasper clutched his hands between his legs, sighing in relief. His knew his balls would have gotten boiled from that much heat, if he hadn’t acted quickly.

The frustrated Malcolm kicked the scooter with his boot and it toppled over like a hollow aluminum tin can. He had been holding that in for quite a while now. They have had to stop a few times from the same overheating problem. He felt Jasper was stalling for time or something, so he stood high on his guard and didn’t say anything. But now... Now, his bottom almost got fried.

Jasper simply shrugged, taking a glance at the broken scooter, “Well, she did serve me well since high school.”

*‘High school?’* Malcolm creased his brows. But now wasn’t the time to dillydally over the former’s childhood. He was here for a mission, time wasn’t on his side.

Malcolm’s lips parted slightly, exhaling softly. He dipped his hands into his jacket’s pockets as he turned to survey the small land filled with dying grasses. There was a small house on the land, and from the way it shifted with the wind, he could tell that no one had been here to maintain it in ages.

“This is the place?” he asked with his eyes fixated on the house.

Jasper crouched to lift his scooter, “Yeah. Noah found the place first and told me about it. We use it as a rendezvous point and discuss business.”

*‘Business... What a silly term for illegal transactions,’* Malcolm couldn’t help but scoff.

Noticing the other man’s absurd silence, Jasper raised a brow, “I brought you here as you asked. Can I go now?”

Malcolm half-turned and took a glance at him, “We’re not done yet. Take me in.”

Jasper shook his head as he scoffed, pushing his scooter towards the house, “I don’t know if you moonlight as a ghost catcher or something, ‘cause Noah is dead. You won’t find anything.”

“What I’m here to do doesn’t concern you. You’re just a tour guide,” Malcolm replied curtly as he walked after the scrawny man.

Jasper, with great care, leaned his scooter on the house. The house responded with a slight shift and creak. He crouched down and reached for a small hole in the wall. He brought out an old rusted key and stood up. However, he made sure to press his palm against the wall as he rose to his feet. He heard a subtle hum and he smiled tersely.

“What’s so funny? Are you that high?” Malcolm asked, standing right beside him.

His sudden appearance made Jasper’s skin scrawl. It took all he had to maintain a calm demeanor. He kept up his smile, “I guess I am.”

He brushed his shoulder against Malcolm as he trotted towards the bleak red door of the house. He inserted the key into its hole and was about to twist it, when the door opened slightly on its own accord.

Jasper felt his brows knit closely, “That’s odd. I remember locking it the last time I was here.”

“And when was that?” Malcolm asked, standing behind him.

“The same day Noah died. I had come here to clear my things, you know, just in case some of them Bizzies raided the hood,” Jasper muttered, taking a peak through the small space of the open door.

“Bi-zzies?” Malcolm was puzzled. He had this short moment of Deja vu. The word was familiar to him, but he couldn’t remember where he heard it before, or what it meant.

Jasper scoffed, “You know, the shitty cops.”

“Oh...” Malcolm muttered, balling his hands within his pockets. He could remember how the criminals that were brought into the station yelled the word as an insult. It never sat well with him. Jasper was just lucky the former was undercover.

“You said only you and Noah know about this place, right?” Malcolm asked, but didn’t wait for a response before adding, “This could only mean that Noah somehow survived and came here recently.”

Jasper felt a shiver run down his spine, “But he got hit point blank. No one can survive that. And even if he managed to stay alive, his body would be a mash of flesh and shattered bones.”

Malcolm scoffed and walked ahead of Jasper to open the door, “Ever heard of miracles?”

“Since when do mercenaries believe in the supernatural?” Jasper was being sarcastic.

The rusted hinges creaked loudly as Malcolm pushed the door in, “Trust me, there are things out there, concepts, that can’t be comprehended or conceived by our fragile minds. I don’t do religion, but this is just how the world works.”

Jasper’s lips twitched and his brows constricted, he could barely understand a word. His brain was so clouded with drugs that the only word he could spell without stuttering was: weed.

Malcolm figured it out, since the usually-chatty man behind him kept mute. He couldn’t care less, what was before him piqued his interest.

The house had no rooms or demarcations. It was like a hollow rectangular box. There was a long table at one side, with various kinds of things scattered on it. Aside from that, the house was empty. He couldn’t even call it a house at that point, it looked akin to a mini-warehouse.

However, what boggled him the most was the size of the building’s interior. It seemed wider and larger than one could have thought. He stepped back and took a lap around the house, to measure its exact length. It was around 1000-1300 square feet, which was still standard for a normal economical house.

“What is it now?” Jasper grunted as Malcolm jogged back to the entrance.

Malcolm exhaled sharply, “Hmm. It’s nothing. After you.”

Jasper shrugged and walked casually into the house. Malcolm followed with narrowed eyes. Something wasn’t right, but he couldn’t tell what if was, at least not yet.

“Okay... Someone was definitely here,” Jasper said, jumping over a splash of blood on the floor. There were other drops of blood on the floor in no specific pattern. Multiple bullet casings on the floor rolled to the wind that funneled in from the open entrance.

Malcolm’s eyelids dropped as he spotted the blood and bullet casings, *‘Noah is really alive?’*

He actually never believed that Noah had survived the accident, but he had to act like he did, in order to pressure the nonchalant Jasper. His real motive coming here was to source for clues that linked Noah Patel to Jasper, so he could have enough evidence to back up Jasper’s claim. But with the way things were going, his gut was telling him that Archway had a dead man walking its street.

*‘This is crazy, but if Noah had survived, and came here, did he have a fight with someone or some people then?’* he asked himself as he tried to find a reason behind the empty shells on the floor. The trail of blood was pretty self explanatory, since Noah must have walked in injured and bleeding profusely.

He made sure to keep his thoughts to himself and walked closer to the random blood trail. He brought out a small box of cotton swab from his trousers’ pocket and rubbed it on the blood, that was a little stiff but fresh at some areas. He took out a small transparent polythene that was usually used by forensics to keep specimen and sealed the cotton swab within it.

This way, he could take the blood to the station and let the CSIs analyze it for a match.

Jasper watched silently from the side-lines as the so-called mercenary did his thing. He folded his hands and let out a sigh. He watched Malcolm put on a rubber glove and pick up a bullet shell, sealing it in another transparent polythene.

“You know, for a mercenary, you’re well prepared and meticulous. You don’t see that everyday,” he finally voiced out, fancied by Malcolm’s cautious behavior.

Malcolm let out a subtle grunt as he stood up, “You think all we do is point a gun and kill targets?”

“Isn’t that supposed to be your job?” Jasper shrugged and started walking towards the long metal table.

“You’re so naive. Is there anything you actually know?” Malcolm asked genuinely this time. Jasper had hardly said anything reasonable ever since he knew him. The guy always behaved like someone with a broken mental state.

“Well, I brought you here, didn’t I? And you found your clues. That should count for something...”

Jasper’s voice trailed off in Malcolm’s head as he took off his gloves. The distance between him and Jasper seemed to have increased. The spot where he took the bullet shell was less than five feet away from the table, and now, Jasper was standing beside the very table. That distance of five feet had somehow stretched to almost double its length.

Malcolm narrowed his eyes. That odd and tingling sensation he had when he first opened the door began to feel more real to him. He quickly thought it through and felt he had taken some steps back, so he turned on his heels to check how close he was to the door.

“Huh?” he muttered subconsciously, stunned by what he was seeing. The distance between him and the open entrance had also elongated in someway. He calculated the distance in his head using a simple measurement, and gave a rough estimate.

*‘About ten feet? I don’t even think I took up to eight steps in... What’s going on?’*

From the lap he took around the small square house, each side was about 12 meter each, which was an average length for a normal house. But when he opened the door, it looked like 3 meters had been added to each side. He didn’t give it much thought then, since the calculations were just off the top of his head and he might have been wrong. Albeit now, with the sudden expansion from all sides, he could tell that there was an external force in play.

*‘But there are no Phenoms***[1]** *in Archway. At least none that I know of...’* he put a pause in his thoughts, distracted by the slow grinding of metal behind him. He turned with lowered brows and was about to tell Jasper not to disturb him, only to see a faint glint of light spinning towards him speedily.

His innate reflexes kicked in and he jumped back and sideways. But it was too late already, whatever that was coming at him, struck his nose with the force of a swung mallet, before clattering to the floor.

“Bullocks!” Malcolm pressed his right hand against his broken nose. Blood poured out of the space between his fingers like his nostrils were pumps.

It stung deeply as though he had needles shoved up his nose and into his brain. He rummaged through his back pockets and took out a white handkerchief. He used it to buffer his bleeding nose, while his eyes darted to the silver metal on the floor. It was a wrench as big as his forearm, now smeared with his blood.

“What the hell...?” he was still trying to comprehend what just happened, when he caught another shiny object shooting towards him from the corner of his eye.

Not taking any chances this time and trusting his instincts, he crouched down immediately. What flew over him was a red plier.

With the momentum at which the plier spun, it was supposed to have flown out of the house, but it couldn’t, as the distance seemed to have no end. It dropped to the ground after expending all its kinetic energy.

Malcolm was already on his feet before it fell, his dilated eyes on a grinning Jasper. The latter had a crowbar in his grasp, and a spanner in the other hand.

Malcolm wanted to be shocked about the absurd turn of events, but he had anticipated Jasper to backstab him at one point. He was a criminal that consumed alcohol and drugs for every meal. He knew Jasper would try to fight back, but not like this. What he did not expect was for the latter to be somewhat superhuman—that was the only explanation for the stretching distances.

Malcolm groaned in pain as he pressed the handkerchief harder on his nose. He looked at Jasper in disdain, “So this was your plan all along? How petty.”

Jasper chuckled, “Petty? You were the one that interrupted my good time and put a piece of glass to my throat. You didn’t expect me to simply nod and follow you like a dog.”

Malcolm ignored the complaints and asked to confirm something, “So you’re like a Phenom now?”

Jasper raised a brow, “You mean those guys with supernatural abilities? Now, why would you think that? We don’t have those in Archway.”

Malcolm furrowed his brows, “Then what’s with the increasing length within the house? That’s not natural.”

Jasper scoffed, “Oh, that. That is one thing I won’t tell you, even if you had a gun to my head.”

Malcolm removed the hanky from his nose, the bleeding had ceased. There was clotted blood around his face. He scoffed, “To be honest, I don’t care for that information right now. Let me walk out of here and I won’t bother you again.”

He wasn’t here to fight, and even if he was, his opponent was a superhuman who could distort distances to an extent. He thought it best to avoid combat and walk out in one piece. He had gotten what he came here for after all.

Placing the crowbar on his shoulder, Jasper smiled, “So you’re gonna run out with your tail in between your legs like a coward? Heh. That would be fun to watch, but I can’t let you leave. I’ll be compromised.”

Malcolm let go of the ablood hanky with a sparse exhale, “You leave me no choice then. I’ll have to beat you up and take you to the station.”

“The station?” Jasper was puzzled. Most mercenaries didn’t give a damn about justice, and were usually enemies with the police. It was odd to hear Malcolm say that.

Malcolm swung his arms around to get his blood pumping, “Deactivate or power down whatever effect you have on this place and let’s settle this like able men.”

Jasper smirked, “You’re so naive.”

He tossed the spanner in his left hand up, caught it and threw it forward. Malcolm had seen him move his arm to throw it, so he had the chance to dodge. He lifted himself from the floor and moved to the side.

However...

He landed with the mind that he had evaded the spanner, only to see it coming at him head on. He had been moved by ‘something’ to stand in the path of the spinning spanner.

He couldn’t dodge properly this time. He managed to tilt his head aside and the spanner struck his shoulder instantly. He could have sworn to hear cracks from his clavicle where he was hit. Even if he didn’t, the inundating pain from the point of contact told him that something had been broken.

He clutched his shoulder with his right hand instinctively, whilst racking his brain on how to handle this situation and not die. His reddened eyes were fixated on Jasper by the table, who looked so afar off.

At that moment, he felt a tug on his jacket and found himself standing three feet in proximity to Jasper.

He fought through the pain and raised his left forearm up immediately, blocking the incoming crowbar just at the nick of time. A bang and crack filled the air as metal struck flesh and bone.

The force from the impact pushed him to the side by a few centimeters, his entire left arm droning like a tuning fork.

Jasper withdrew his hand and brandished the crowbar, “Impressive. Your will to live is strong, and so is your body too.”

Malcolm dropped his limp arm, smirking, “If I get my hands on you--”

“I’m right here!” Jasper interjected sharply, now standing face-to-face with Malcolm, whose eyes slowly dilated in shock.

Jasper buckled his right knee and drilled it into Malcolm’s torso. The latter’s eyes could almost pop out as he got the air knocked out of him. He forcefully pulled himself back to gain some distance.

Jasper shook his head, “That’s useless, you know. You can’t run away from me.”

“Just shut up and fight,” Malcolm said in a raspy voice. His ego was unnerving.

He summoned all his latent strength and rushed at Jasper, balling his working hand to a fist. The grinning Jasper just stood there as he approached.

Malcolm grunted as he threw a punch, but before it connected, in an instant, he found himself further away from the target. He didn’t understand what Jasper’s abilities were actually doing to him and the house, but he couldn’t just stand in one place forever. He held up his fist again and bolted forward as fast as his legs could carry him.

He attacked and attacked from different positions, but the distance between the two of them expanded and contracted continuously. Jasper was either too far away to touch, or so close that his own attacks were impossible to dodge. Malcolm would jerk from side to side as he got pummeled by the crow bar.

It was as though the floor was a puzzle board filled with puzzle pieces, that got moved around randomly. At least, that was what Malcolm could comprehend it as.

To test this theory, he took the spanner that had gotten close to him and flung it towards Jasper. The spanner got a feet close to Jasper, but couldn’t traverse any further. It just spun and spun till its force depleted, dropping to the floor afterwards.

Malcolm creased his brows, *‘Even the air isn’t excluded. It’s like he can bend... Space? What an annoying ability!’*

His pale brown eyes regained some luster as an idea struck him. Jasper had been standing on a single spot ever since the fight commenced.

“Hmm...” Malcolm gave it a thought. He stood up, clutching his side. He had broken bones, punctures and fractures. But they weren’t severe. He only had to settle things here and go to a hospital before the injuries became life threatening.

As he predicted, he was drawn closer to Jasper as soon as he stood up. He was getting used to Jasper’s mode of attack, so he could tell where the latter would be swinging from.

Jasper raised his right hand and lunged the crowbar in his grasp towards Malcolm’s side, aiming to impale and torture him further. Just as Malcolm had predicted.

Malcolm brought down his right hand to stop the crowbar. Jasper’s eyes shrunk and shifted space again.

However...

In that split second that Jasper realized that he was going to be countered, Malcolm had shot his left arm forth and latched his fingers around Jasper’s wrist. Malcolm knew that Jasper wouldn’t let him touch him and would want to elongate the distance between them again. That was why he brought down his right arm as a decoy, while his left arm reached for the goal. Jasper wouldn’t have expected that since he had completely written that left arm off. He must have thought it was completely paralyzed.

Hence, as Malcolm got pushed back in the ever-expanding house, Jasper was moved with him, caught in the clutches of his bloody left arm.

Jasper’s eyes went wide in disbelief, “How--”

His face went in like dough as Malcolm hammered it with his right fist. His head swayed backwards instantly, blood spilled from his broken nose and torn lips.

With a tight grip on his wrist, Malcolm tugged him closer and dropped another punch on his face, which was immediately accosted by a jab to the torso and a kick to the knee cap.

Jasper jerked from the hits and opened his mouth wide to gasp for air. He fell to his knees as though his legs were spaghetti.

“All that superhuman power and you can’t tank a few punches. Tsk,” Malcolm clicked his tongue. He had expected Jasper to have some durability, but it seemed he was still human by body.

He didn’t hesitate to yank Jasper’s wrist, pulling him forward, whilst his buckled knee stood hung in the air.

*Bam!*

Jasper’s head collided with the knee. He got knocked out instantly, his eyes completely white as he collapsed to the ground.

Malcolm finally let go of the former’s wrist and staggered back, heaving a sigh of relief. His body still ached badly, his insides still churned from the punctures. He silently prayed that the broken bones within him hadn’t pierced a vital organ.

He huffed and huffed, resting his back on a wall. Wait... He moved away from the wall with bewildered eyes. He could finally move around freely. Jasper’s abilities had been nullified.

He lips twitched as he smiled tersely, “Kyla won’t believe me if I told her.”

He slouched forward a bit and grabbed Jasper’s wrist. He pulled him along with a grunt, heading towards the entrance.

He walked and pulled, walked and pulled... He continued walking and pulling, but he seemed to still be on a spot.

“Huh?” he dropped his head to check what was holding him down. He saw nothing. He took a glance at the door, it was just a stone throw away. What was happening?

He gazed down at the unconscious Jasper with narrowed eyes, to see if he had woken up. But no, the scrawny man had the life knocked out of him.

*‘What the hell is going on?’*

He let go of Jasper and burst into a sprint, running as fast as he could. It was just a waste of energy though, he couldn’t leave that spot.

He dropped to his knees after so many attempts, exhausted and frustrated, “I guess this is it... Huh?”

*Rumble!*

The house shook and Jasper was spat out of the house. Malcolm stared at Jasper’s unconscious body outside, utterly flabbergasted.

If Jasper wasn’t the one that had been bending the space within the house... Does that mean that someone else was here?

Malcolm felt enlightened in that moment, *‘But of course, that explains it all. Jasper could have taken me out even before we got here if he was superhuman. And that was why he couldn’t move from a spot, while I was pushed around. Sigh... No wonder he couldn’t buffer my punches. He has an ally close by? But I didn’t see anyone.’*

Still on his knees, he took quick glances around the house before gazing at the ceiling, “Uh... Are you up there?”

He felt he should at least confirm his theory before he was killed. Dying without knowing the cause wasn’t a honorable departure from the physical world.

The house responded with another tremor and Malcolm dropped his head. There was no hope for him.

As though his loss of hope was a trigger, an immense pressurizing force suddenly descended on him, forcing his body to the ground. He dropped on his limp left arm in an instant. Amassing his body’s weight and the pressure from the unseen force, every bone in that arm, cracked erratically and shattered like ice, impaling the muscles, veins and arteries that were around them.

There’s this common feeling of numbness that comes with a sudden rush of immense pain. The pain would be so excruciating that it fades as soon as it comes. It’s like that feeling one gets after starving for so long, that they don’t just feel the hunger anymore.

Some people would pass out when their body can’t handle the strain to their nerves, while others would just feel numb in that area. There were lucky people like that.

However, Malcolm Allen wasn’t among the lucky few.

He felt the excruciating pain thoroughly. His nerves ululated in a frenzy. It was as though he had his arm on a rock, while someone took a sledgehammer and broke each of his bones, bit by bit. He had never felt such a thing before. The anguish was just too much!

Tears streamed out of his eyes and formed a pool around his face. He was still getting compressed against the floor from the stupendous pressure, his body creaking continuously. The pressure was akin to someone pressing down a finger on an ant. It would get squashed eventually.

He saw glimpses of his life flash across his watery eyes. This was it... This was the end for him.

And then...

*Tweep! Thud!*

He heard a silenced shot, followed by a thud on the roof. The pressure eloped him instantly like it was never there.

He could only force out a relieved sigh. He could barely move a muscle at that point. He managed to raise his head a bit as he heard some approaching footsteps.

Through his blurry vision, he could see the figure of a whistling man holding what seemed to be a long gun, walking steadily toward the house.

~

**[1]** — Basically Super-humans, mutants, meta-humans. Whatever you choose to call them.

# **~ Chapter 13 ~**

**Downtown, Archway.**

A black power bike came to a stop at the other side of the road, directly opposite the small swaying house. The rider turned off the ignition whilst flicking down the bike’s stand with his boot. He was the mercenary from the bar earlier.

He tilted the bike till it could stand on its own, before dismounting it. He still had his full-black helmet on as he stared at the house meters away from him. At a casual glance, it looked normal, like every other abandoned infrastructure that was at the brink of collapse. But his gut told him otherwise.

He could feel it, he could sense the oddity swirling around the house. It wasn’t just odd, it felt sinister. He knew if he took any step closer to the rickety house, he might as well be walking himself to death’s abode.

The rider was very much accustomed to the feeling and those behind it. He could only drop his head with a sigh.

“An Abnormal? I didn’t expect to encounter one in these parts,” he muttered as he pulled up the back seat of his slanted bike. Then he scoffed, “Which is quite ironic, since I’m here to capture one... Well, the mother of them all, but still...”

“You’re really enjoying this, aren’t you?” Diana’s sarcastic voice filled his helmet.

He took out a black box and set it on the tarred road. He crouched before it and opened the lid. Inside were the few dismantled parts of a firearm, alongside a box of bullets.

He didn’t say anything until he started assembling the firearm, “Why wouldn’t I enjoy this? This town has been so uneventful. The so-called Cascaders are pretty much fodder, and Archway has no Phenoms. Stumbling upon an Abnormal like this is a blessing.”

“You do understand that Abnormals aren’t like Phenoms, right? Their abilities tend to ignore the laws of physics, and even logic, even in world full of super humans. Your chances of winning against the weakest of them is very slim.”

He screwed the last past of the firearm and raised it above his head. It was a Barret M98B sniper, deep grey, slim and sleek. He made sure to add a silencer at its muzzle.

“I’m not that dumb to step into their range. That’s why I have this baby with me,” he stood up and cracked his neck.

Diana sighed, “You’re so—Wait, how do you know an Abnormal is here? I can see what you’re seeing thanks to the visor on your helmet, but everything looks normal.”

“That’s because you’re not exactly here, Diana. You can’t feel the odd ambience from way over there. And I have also been having this foreboding feeling ever since I left that alley.”

Diana hummed, “Hmm. The lash backs are probably kicking in. It’s simply a defense mechanism by the specimen. It somewhat distorts your senses. You’ll be superhuman when it comes to observation. Those that are weak-willed would go crazy from the impulsive information, and even those that are strong-willed will break eventually. As long as you’re not its host, it’ll do anything to get away from you.”

The rider just stood there listlessly with the sniper on his shoulder. She didn’t tell him that before he came here.

“Hey? Are you still there?” Diana called after some seconds of stillness and silence.

“What the hell, Diana? You made me carry a slow-killing poison close with me for days, without telling me the aftereffects till now?” He finally voiced out and began moving towards an abandoned factory close to him.

“I felt you wouldn’t agree to take the mission if I told you,” she defended with a slight chuckle.

“Of course I wouldn’t. You know how I feel about the supernatural world. Sure, I can kill them for the right amount, but having them touch or invade my body is out of the question,” he grumbled as he ran up the winding stairs till he got to the roof.

He walked over to the edge and perched there with his sniper.

“Don’t worry, you have a strong will, and I injected you with a temporary deterrent before you left. It won’t protect you completely, but will slow down the process. You just have to wrap up what you’ve been sent to do in a few days and get back.”

“Easy for you to say.”

He switched his visor’s vision to Infrared and scanned the entirety of the house. He could see a weak heat signature outside the house, there was a weaker heat signature inside the house. The latter’s signature depleted gradually as though they were having the life usurped from them.

“Hmm,” he looked closer and could see a third heat signature, but it was spread over the house like a dome. It was as though that person was at every nook and cranny of the house.

“This one has the ability to control enclosed spaces?” he pondered in a whisper.

“Something like that. Aim for the part with the hottest heat signature,” Diana chipped in.

“Sure, sure,” he put a lock on the hottest part of the house—the pinnacle of the roof—and took off his helmet. His jet black hair danced softly to the gentle wind.

He turned the scope of his sniper twice, switching it to an infrared lens, before looking through it with an eye. He aimed at the flaring roof and pulled the trigger.

*Tweep!*

A bullet flew out of the barrel with little to no sound and recoil, cutting through the air like a needle through water. It shattered a part of the roof to splinters as it broke in. What followed was a muffled wince and a loud thud.

He made sure to confirm if the blazing heat signature had died down, before taking his eye away from the scope. The odd feeling in the atmosphere had also eloped him, so he was sure the Abnormal was dead. He stood up and took the stairs to the ground floor.

He casually crossed the road, his sniper in his right hand, his index finger tapping lightly on the trigger just in case of the unexpected. He hopped over Jasper’s unconscious body and approached the open entrance as he whistled a melody.

He stopped by the entrance as soon as he saw a familiar man laying flat on the floor, as though he had been pressed by a big hot iron.

“Hmm...” he crouched before the man as he took out a blue vial from his pocket.

~

Malcolm coughed repeatedly as he woke up. He opened his eyes and inhaled deeply. He immediately remembered what happened before he lost consciousness, and checked himself out. He was shirtless with no wound or broken bones. It was as though he had just experienced a nightmare, but he could tell that it was real. The pain and anguish still lingered in his psyche as an everlasting torment.

“Are you done?”

A man’s deep voice asked from his side. He tilted his head sideways to see a black-haired man seated beside him, casually taking sips from a small bottle.

Malcolm dropped his head and stared at his hands as he folded and unfurled them, “What... What happened to me? I feel so alive.”

The Mercenary took one last swig from his rum bottle and exhaled in satisfaction, “You almost died and I saved you.”

“Eh?” Malcolm blinked twice.

“You make yourself sound like a god,” Diana reprimanded via the Mercenary’s earbuds.

“Aren’t we all?” he replied with a shrug. He took a glance at Malcolm, who looked so lost, “I injected you with a healing serum. We have advanced technology where I come from, so don’t be shocked.”

*‘Healing serum?’* Malcolm wasn’t buying it. “Where you come from, does it have a name?”

“Classified,” the Mercenary replied curtly.

“Hm-hmm,” Malcolm nodded. He was very curious about what the man did to him and how all his injuries were completely healed. Was the man a magician? Or was he a man of science that produced such profound serums? Whatever the case was, he decided to let it slide. The man wasn’t ready to answer his questions anyway.

*‘At least I’m not dead,’* he heaved a sigh of relief.

His eyes dilated as he remembered something, “What about Jasper and the other Phenom?”

“The lean man is still unconscious and the Abnormal is dead,” the Mercenary pointed at the two bodies before them.

Malcolm didn’t even notice them until now. The dead Abnormal looked like an exact replica of Jasper, just that his hair was deep red. They were probably twins or normal siblings.

Malcolm retracted his gaze to the nonchalant mercenary, mystified and somewhat terrified. First of all, the man distorting the space of the house seemed to be everywhere at once. Not only was the mercenary able to pinpoint his exact location, he was also able to somehow bypass his ability and kill him. That was just too absurd!

“Are you also a Phenom?” Malcolm blurted. That was the only possible explanation at this point.

The Mercenary froze for a second there before chuckling tersely, “I would rather die than have myself become one of them.”

“Then how--?”

The Mercenary cut in, “The kind of job I do has made me an expert in taking down Abnormals like him. My bullets aren’t normal and it’s their bane.”

Malcolm nodded, understanding the mercenary to some extent. Then he asked, “Why do you keep calling him an Abnormal? I thought the term for the super humans was Phenom?”

“Should I tell him?” the Mercenary whispered as he faced the polluted sky.

“He is a cop. It’s high time one of them found out what is happening in their city. Besides, you could use this to gain his trust and make him your inside man,” Diana replied instantly.

He scoffed as he dropped his head, “That’s why you’re the one behind the desk and I’m out in the field.”

Malcolm stared at him blankly, wondering who he was talking to.

The Mercenary looked at him, “Abnormals are different from Phenoms. We both know how the Phenoms came to be some time ago, and they’re all over the world. But the Abnormals are like horrific lab rats that are now out in the streets. In population, they’re not as much as Phenoms, but their abilities make them a force to be reckoned with.”

“Oh... No wonder, I knew something was off. We have no Phenoms in Archway according to the census. I was confused when the house began to distort like someone was using a superpower,” Malcolm ran his hand through his black hair. “It all makes sense now. Well, some of it.”

“There’s a lot going on in this town, right under your nose, that you cops don’t know.”

Malcolm narrowed his eyes, “How did you know I’m a cop?”

“I took down an Abnormal in one shot, healed you instantly like it was nothing, and this is what bothers you?” the Mercenary raised a brow.

Malcolm rubbed the back of his neck, “Well, I can’t be too careful.”

“But still...” he was about to talk again, but the Mercenary grumbled in exasperation. Malcolm smiled tersely, “Just one more question. You saved me from starting a brawl in the bar, followed me here and saved me again. No one is that benevolent. Do you want something from me?”

The Mercenary sighed, “Nothing, really. I was only curious when I saw what transpired between you and the drunk man. I kinda overheard your conversation, and it aligns with what I’m here for.”

“And that is?”

“The heist that took place last night. You talked about how both sides were massacred. I’m also after the Cascaders, any lead you have on them will go a long way.”

Malcolm creased his brows, “That’s it?”

The other man shrugged, “And info on what exactly transpired, I guess.”

Malcolm adjusted himself. Where they sat had no place to rest their back.

“I don’t really know what happened. I was supposed to be among them, but I had to attend to something else. I returned this morning and heard the news. But my friend survived though. She was really lucky.”

The Mercenary was startled but kept his cool on the outside, ‘Well, well, well... Who would have thought?’

“So she really is a she,” Diana muttered.

The Mercenary ignored her and faced Malcolm, “Your friend? What’s her name?”

“Kyla--” Malcolm paused and scoffed. “I wasn’t supposed to tell you that.”

“And yet you did,” the Mercenary rose to his feet with a folded sniper rifle.

Malcolm could only narrow his eyes as he raised his head to take a glance at the man, “Just who are you exactly?”

The Mercenary exhaled shortly, “I’m merely a concerned citizen.”

# **~ Chapter 14 ~**

**Walthamstow.**

The living room was enveloped in silence that stretched for over a minute. It would have been a totally silent atmosphere, if not for the ticking analogue clock on the wall.

*Tick... Tock! Tick... Tock!*

The consecutive ticking sounded very mild to everyone, except Kyla, who kept twitching her ears with closed eyes, trying to shut out the noise. The subtle ticks that any normal person would hear, sounded like massive gongs striking against each other, over and over. Her head throbbed with a splitting headache.

Normally, she was blessed with this innate, kind of enhanced perception that a few other humans were blessed with. You know, like being able to see farther than others, hear high pitched frequency, and all that. But this one was different; it felt as though her head was splitting in half.

Just then, the deep thrumming in her head warped away, replaced by a light laughter from Amaya. Kyla raised her head with beads of sweat rolling down the sides of her face. She raised a brow, puzzled by the woman’s reaction.

Her son was in danger, and the next thing she could think of doing was laugh? Or had the news made her lose her rationality?

Amaya held a hand over her mouth as she laughed, shaking her head while at it. Jamal and the other men also joined in the absurd laughter, even though they were completely oblivious to why she reacted that way.

She coughed a bit as she stopped laughing and dropped her hand, “You almost had me there, Kyla. That was a good one.”

Kyla still had her brow raised, “That was a good--? You think I made it up? I’m being serious here, Amaya. Noah isn’t dead.”

Amaya scoffed, crossing her right leg over the other, “And what evidence do you have, to backup such a bold claim?”

“Well...” Kyla leaned back. “Nothing concrete... As of now. But Alan here has made contact with him recently, after the truck accident.”

She shifted her chair close to Alan, and nudged his shoulder, urging him to say something. Amaya looked towards him.

Alan finally raised his head and spoke, his voice cracked, “Y-Yes. He was in my house last night, very injured.”

“And where is he now?” Amaya decided to play along with their game. Although, a part of her was really in high hopes that they were telling the truth and her son was alive, she still felt it was too good to be true. No normal human would have survived getting hit by a truck at such a speed.

Alan sighed, dropping his head, “He left that same night. But he really is alive, Amaya.”

Amaya exhaled slowly, tilting her head down as she rubbed her glabella, “That doesn’t even make sense. Why would he leave? And why hasn’t he called me yet? Do you take me for a fool?”

Alan simply shrugged. Though their current situation wasn’t too friendly, he wasn’t really bothered about it. For one, he was sure Amaya wasn’t going to kill or torture them. He had a police officer and a well-known therapist with him; the cops would easily trace them here if they went missing for too long. He surmised she needed something from them, because it would be nothing but foolishness for her to reveal her true identity with no goal in mind.

Another reason he was so nonchalant, was because of his shattered pride. He had tried to run away from the warehouse, while the two women fought with all they had. He couldn’t call himself a man at that point.

Kyla noticed Alan’s absentmindedness and sighed. She faced Amaya, “Maybe this will make you believe us.”

She subconsciously reached for her hoodie’s pocket, but had become unconscious of the fact that her hands were still tied. However...

*Snap!*

She easily broke the bind on her wrists and froze for a second there, “Oops...”

She didn’t give it much thought and put a hand in her pocket. She brought out the piece of clothing she had found and extended her hand towards Amaya, who had leaned back in shock, likewise Jamal and his cohorts. Even Freya was stunned. The blonde lady had just snapped the plastic bind like it was just a thin thread.

Amaya recovered from her daze rather quickly, and gestured for Jamal to take the piece of clothing.

As he grabbed it and gave it to her, Kyla chipped in, “Remember how we were kind of surprised when you mentioned his name? That’s why.”

Amaya had straightened the cloth whilst the former spoke, her mouth widening to release a gasp. She took a glance at Kyla, then retracted her gaze back to what was written on the cloth.

Her lips twitched, “Giovanni? So he really is behind this! But who wrote this...?”

Before Kyla could respond, Amaya muttered an, “Oh...”

“Yeah. Your son did,” Kyla shrugged.

Amaya massaged her temples, muttering under her breath, “But... How? It doesn’t make sense at all. He could have contacted me or come home. We would have rallied up and ended Giovanni.”

“He probably has his reasons. I also didn’t believe that he survived at first, but this is solid proof that he’s being hunted down. He needs our help,” Kyla said while twisting her sore shoulder joints.

An ambience of silence descended again as Amaya kept rubbing her temples with closed eyes, trying her best to keep the tears in.

Kyla and Freya looked at each other and shrugged.

After a minute or so, Amaya sat up with a long exhale, her pupils a little red, her eye bags wet.

“That was why you visited his warehouse,” she said with a soft tone.

“Uh, yeah. And we might have gone further in the investigation if your men hadn’t shown up,” Freya decided to say something. She didn’t pity the grandma one bit. Not only had she infringed on their freedom of movement by tying them up, she was also a crime mistress.

Amaya sighed once more, “The main reason why I sent them was because of you, Kyla.”

Kyla felt her brows curl together, “Me?”

Amaya nodded, “You’re a cop. You’d get suspicious since the warehouse had been cleared and replaced with other things. I didn’t feel safe letting you linger there for too long. We have never been caught; I wasn’t taking any chances. And also because I suspected you had a hand in Noah’s death--”

“Eh?” Kyla cut in sharply.

“I looked into you after the accident. You never last long in a relationship, javaan aurat**[1]**. The men with you always seem to meet one form of misfortune or the other. I felt it was some kind of ritual practice you indulged in,” Amaya shrugged.

Alan looked at Kyla, unable to believe what Amaya said.

Kyla noticed his stare and she faced Amaya sternly, “Please, don’t bring that into this. And no, it’s not some ritual practice. I’m just very unlucky.”

Amaya nodded, “That suspicion has been cleared anyway.”

“So are you going to untie us or what?” Freya asked with lowered eyelids.

“Oh, right. Sorry,” Amaya flicked two of her finger back and forth.

Her men understood and proceeded to cut the binds around Freya and Alan.

“Ah...” Freya exhaled in relief, twisting and rubbing her wrists.

“What I intentionally wanted to do, was to ask you some questions, and then ask you to make a deal with us. You’d be our eyes and ears at Archway, just in case. And also maybe threaten you, so that you won’t reveal any of this,” Amaya explained as she stood up.

*‘Why tell us now anyway? Besides, that’s a very crude plan. No one is that susceptible. She thinks we’re still in the 90s or something,’* Kyla creased her brows.

“But now that everything has changed, I think it’s best we work together to find Noah, and save him before it’s too late. Taking care of Giovanni wouldn’t normally be a problem, but he now has Noah’s life as leverage. That’s why I ask for your cooperation,” Amaya instigated, clapping her hands.

“Hmm...” Freya and Kyla hummed simultaneously. What the old lady had proposed was actually a decent option, but was she trustworthy enough to work with?

Kyla clicked her tongue, “Sure. As long as you promise to shut a door on this... Crime life of yours, once everything is settled. My conscience won’t let me rest if I know there’s a crime syndicate over here, and I haven’t done something about it.”

Amaya nodded, “You don’t have to tell me twice. Noah was right, if only I had listened to him.”

“Okay. Um, we have a deal then,” Kyla nodded casually. Her casual expression turned into an irritated one, as a very pungent smell wisped into her nose. She stuck her tongue out as she retched dryly.

The same disgusted expression was on everyone’s face. Freya’s own was worse; she could almost puke.

“Shit!” Rasheed cursed under his breath, springing to his feet and running up the stairs.

Amaya caught a glance of him leaving. She figured he had been listening in to their conversation. She frowned, yelling some words in Hindi.

“One of his little cousins must have popped. Ack!” Kyla shook her head.

Freya pinched her nose with a squeezed face, “This is why I don’t have children.”

Kyla scoffed, “Heh. A silly excuse for not having a boyfriend.”

Freya rolled her eyes and looked away.

One of Amaya’s men took out an air freshener and sprayed the entire living room, dispelling the icky smell. The living room soon smelled like a fresh floral garden. Everyone released their breaths in relief.

“Sorry about that,” Amaya apologized, urging the three of them to seat on the couch.

They stood up, but didn’t follow her.

“It’s best we leave now. It’s getting dark already,” said Kyla.

Amaya took a seat, exhausted emotionally and physically. She felt embarrassed for doing what she did. They were trying to help her and she sent people to harm them.

She nodded, not sure of what face to make, “Alright. Make sure to keep in touch. And please, try to overlook what transpired here today. I was ignorant.”

Freya scoffed. Kyla smiled tersely, “Sure, sure.”

They left the house, and as soon as they stepped outside, they released relieved breaths. They were finally free.

The sun had almost disappeared into the horizon, dispelling a faint orange glow throughout the land. The soft billowing wind had gotten chilly, dotting their skins with goosebumps.

Freya took a glance at her wrist watch, “Crap, it’s almost seven. I didn’t even sign out for the day at the office.”

She took the key from Alan and walked briskly towards the Jeep.

Walking side-by-side with the sighing Alan, Kyla hummed, “You good?”

“I’ll be fine,” he sniffled.

She didn’t really know the guy, so she just kept quiet till they got to the jeep. Freya was the one that drove them back home. Kyla dropped at her house and watched the black jeep vanish from her sight.

She took out her keys and unlocked the door. She walked in and locked it shut.

It wasn’t until she walked into the living, that she realized something. Her eyes dilated, “Crap, Pilot!”

She turned towards the kitchen in haste. Not only did she not return home last night, she had only come back to get a change of clothes this morning, and headed straight for the Art Factory. Feeding her pet Parrot completely skipped her mind.

She got to his cage and opened it. Pilot showered her with complaints, at least with the words he was able to learn and pronounce.

“Sorry, it’s been a busy day,” she rubbed his feathers as she held him to her chest.

She looked around the kitchen, thinking of what to cook for dinner. She was so tired, she almost settled for cereals. It was when she opened the fridge for milk, that she spotted a leftover mac and cheese from yesterday. She took the plate out and took a sniff.

“Still smells good,” she shrugged, shutting the fridge. She microwaved it for some minutes and sauntered into the living room, holding a tray, that carried two plates and a glass of water. Pilot sat on her shoulder.

She plopped on a couch and turned on the TV as she ate. The other little plate was for Pilot, so he dug his beak into it.

She fell asleep immediately after eating. Pilot took comfort on her lap and delved into sleep too, while the Television continued playing.

~

**[1]** — Javaan aurat

Note: It was derived from a search engine translation, I can’t ascertain that it is a 100% correct.

# **~ Chapter 15 ~**

“Caw!”

A raven’s croak resonated throughout the entire plane of black and white.

Nothing seemed to exist in this colorless, never-ending expanse of land, except for the somehow oily and wavy greyish texture of the atmosphere. It was as though it was raining endless strings of black and white hues, that weaved together continuously.

This... Place, was like an oil painting, but in 3 geometrical dimensions.

At least, that was what Kyla could deduce it to be as she walked through the odd place. She didn’t know how she got here or for how long she’d been walking. It could have been minutes, days, years. She couldn’t tell as she seemed to forget anything that had happened a minute prior—An endless cycle of rebirth.

“Caw! Caw!! Caw!!!”

More ravens swarmed around her, spawning out of nothing. They were the only life form, except her, in this odd plane of existence.

She couldn’t see anything for a few seconds, her vision obscured by the ravens flying around her in circles. She raised her right hand and waved it forward, to disperse the ravens in front of her, only for her to jerk forward and she found herself laying sprawled on the floor.

The scenery also seemed to have changed, but there was still no color. She was in an alley with three men standing some meters away from her.

The life in her was slowly losing its vibrancy, when a sudden surge of abundant energy exploded within her. She felt her body gradually lift off the ground. It wasn’t until that moment that she got a chance to check herself out. Her hands were drenched in blood and she could feel the perforation in different parts of her body.

Her eyes dilated as she instantly remembered where she was. However, before she could begin to ask herself questions, wisps of darkness funneled out of her skin pores and gradually formed another layer over her entire body.

Long claws replaced her fingers, and soon, the creeping darkness covered her face, suffocating her till she lost consciousness.

~

*Huff!*

Kyla’s eyes sprang open with a sharp breath. Her heart had been palpitating, even before she woke up. The beads of sweat on her forehead, trickled down her face and fell to the... The floor?

Kyla’s dilated eyes widened even further as the tiled floor of her living room seemed so far away, likewise the TV and furniture. They weren’t just at a distance, she could see them from an aerial perspective.

It was at that moment that she realized she was suspended in the air, her back against the ceiling. And just as she attained that knowledge, whatever that was keeping her airborne, lost its grip on her and she dropped to the floor with no restraints.

She collided headfirst with the floor and squirmed in pain. She could have sworn to hear some of her bones crack. However, the pain receded as fast as it came, causing Kyla to simply remain on the floor and stare at the ceiling with a blank expression.

She wanted to be surprised, she really wanted to, but after her experience that night with the Cascaders, she had half-heartedly accepted her fate of being cursed or something. At first she thought it was all in her head, and she had passed out during the fight. But the bullet holes in her uniform debunked that notion. Although it didn’t in any way help clarify how she was still alive.

She was still trying to solve that mystery and this just had to happen. Well, aside from the sudden and short-lived power of flight, and the fall that almost killed her, she felt something good came out of her experience this morning.

The dream. Yes, the part where she could somehow relive that night at the alley and was given the chance to catch a glimpse of what happened to her. She didn’t understand what exactly happened though, but at least she could come to a conclusion that...

“I’m possessed?” she muttered subconsciously. “T—That actually makes sense.”

She sat up with a groan and rose to her feet. She did a few stretches and gazed down at Pilot, that was still asleep on the couch. She smiled, relieved that she hadn’t flown to the ceiling with him, else she might have crushed him when she fell.

“Oof...” she ruffled her blonde hair and walked into her room, whilst trying to wrap her head around the changes happening to her.

She was well aware that she wasn’t normal. Hell, even Freya once confirmed that she was cursed, since the men she loved kept having their fates twisted by misfortune. But this... This was on a whole other level. It seemed so surreal, like it was all a figment of her imagination, but Kyla could tell that, that wasn’t so.

While still in thoughts, she brushed her teeth, took her bath, and did other things that usually kept ladies in the bathroom for over half an hour.

She sauntered into the living room in her blue uniform and black boots, her blue eyes fixated on the kitchen.

The coffee maker rattled as she brewed herself a hot cup of coffee. She turned to the kitchen island to prepare Pilot’s food.

When she was done, she raised her head and faced the living room, that had no demarcation with the kitchen. She had barely muttered a word, when Pilot swooped in with his petite fluttering wings.

This forced out a wide smile from Kyla. She took sip after sip from her hot beverage, while the parrot pecked at his food.

Almost six minutes later, she put Pilot in the cage and locked it shut.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be home early today,” she poked a finger through the bars and rubbed his head.

Pilot didn’t say a word as she left the house, leaving her concerned as he was usually so talkative. She shrugged it off as nothing and headed to the station.

~

**Archway Police Department.**

**The Archives.**

Kyla sneezed once more as she walked deeper into the archives.

The room was quite spacious, but was densely congested with shelves and boxes. The space between each aisle was wide enough to accommodate only one person at a time.

Due to technological innovation, anyone hardly came over to the archives. They could easily check their computer, login to the Borough’s database, and search for whatever they wanted to know or do. But, they still made sure to print hardcopies and dump them here, biannually, just in case of any technological mishap.

Yeah, they had their online database linked to the cloud, but one couldn’t be too safe.

If it wasn’t for the fact that some officers came here for the dump twice a year, Kyla would have been walking through a non-symmetrical nest of webs.

But there was still lingering dusts at every corner, causing her to wrinkle her nose every now and then, and sneeze at intervals.

She pulled at her nose and sniffled.

“Giovanni... Giovanni...” she muttered half-heartedly, her watery eyes focused on the tags attached to each box on the shelf.

“Ooh...” her eyes widened at the sight of the name. Using the back of her hands, she wiped off the water below her eyes bags, before grabbing the box from the shelf.

She sniffled once more as she crouched, cautiously dropping the box on the floor, to avoid riling up the dust on it. She took of the lid and overturned the box, scattering all the files inside on the concrete floor.

She quickly skimmed through one of the files to see if it had what she was looking for. Her lips twitched to a terse smile as it didn’t hold any important information. It wasn’t a good thing, but it also meant that she could use the file for something else.

She placed it underneath her and sat on it. Her knees were getting sore in that crouched position.

“Oof...” she exhaled heavily as she began to read each file with a scrutinizing gaze.

Giovanni Gustav had grown quite powerful in his ‘business’. So much so that he had a member in almost every area of work. Lawyers, doctors, hotels, the police, even those that sold ice cream. No one could tell how it happened, but one of his members was able to hack into the Police database and clear everything that was related Giovanni. The little leads they had on him, subtle evidences and all that; they were all wiped. Even the backup in the cloud wasn’t spared.

If they hadn’t made it a custom to print the hardcopies, they’d have nothing to tell about him.

That was Kyla’s reason for coming here. She was going to read every record existing about him and try to get a lead from there.

She hummed, flipping through one page after the other, *‘He has a brother? Bosco Giovanni. He’s also like Gustav and has never been apprehended...’*

Her eyes squinted as they fell upon a familiar name, *‘Bosco wouldn’t even have been put in records, if not for the Sharpshooter, who singlehandedly razed down one of his cartels, bringing him to the spotlight of the press.’*

“The Sharpshooter,” she muttered in a daze, a finger pressed on her lower lip. “If only we had someone like that in Archway.”

She cracked her neck and resumed her reading. She almost got frustrated the further she read. There wasn’t anything here in the files that was beneficial to her. Well... Almost. She noted down the different locations that he’d been spotted, and also the suspected addresses of some of his cartels.

She and Freya could visit those places, and if they were lucky, they would stumble on one of his close subordinates, and question them for his exact location. It was worth a try.

Amaya and her men were also on the search for him, it was only a matter of time that he’d be forced out of hiding. And then, she could finally save Noah from him.

Noah was even harder to look for, that was why she currently settled for Giovanni’s whereabouts first. One way or the other, Noah would be drawn to them.

She took some pictures, arranged the files back in the box, and stood up with a grunt. She shoved the box back into the shelf and sighed.

~

“Hm?” Kyla felt her brows scrunch as she walked back to her desk.

Seated calmly on the desk next to hers, was the black-haired Malcolm Allen, slurping slowly from the mug of coffee in his hand, while his eyes were fixated on his laptop’s screen.

Her body buzzed with this odd sensation as she came close to him. It felt familiar, but she couldn’t wrap her head around it.

He heard the creak from her taking a seat and diverted his gaze at her. She was already staring at him, causing him to raise a brow, “Uh...”

“You were late today. That’s very unusual,” she leaned back on her chair, her eyes solely fixated on him. There was something off about him, but she couldn’t put a finger on it.

He rubbed his glabella with the base of his palm, “I know, I know. I woke up this morning to this splitting headache. It wasn’t just the normal migraine, it really felt like my head was gradually being split in half.”

She creased her brows, “What caused it?”

“I honestly don’t know,” he took a slurp from the mug.

“Sounds like a hangover. Where were you last night?”

He spaced out for a moment there, staring intently at the milky coffee in his mug. He raised his head and shrugged, “I was at home. Didn’t take any alcohol.”

“Hmm...” her gaze was unmoving.

“I took a few pills and it’s subsided. It should be gone before tomorrow,” he smiled tersely. Before she could say anything, he chipped in, “What about you? Where did you go to throughout yesterday? You weren’t at home.”

Kyla was startled, but she masked it like a pro, shrugging as though she and two others didn’t almost die yesterday. “I was at Freya’s.”

“Oh... Right,” Malcolm nodded. He couldn’t see through her ingenuity.

“Speaking of which...” she took her phone and car keys. “I’m heading over to her place now.”

Malcolm took a glance at his wrist watch, then he retracted his gaze back to her, “It isn’t even twelve yet. We still have over 6 hours till we close.”

She stood up and nudged her head in the direction of the Captain’s office, “Technically, I’m still on my second day off. I only came to check a few things.”

“Oh...” Malcolm laid back.

“See ya,” she waved and trotted away.

Malcolm dropped the mug on the table and rubbed his left arm as though it hadn’t been there until yesterday. He lifted his gaze and stared at her back, *‘Should I tell her?’*

~

Kyla bowed tersely to the old lady that walked out of the office. She slid through the open door and stepped into the office.

Freya pulled down her glasses when her friend walked in. The latter was no longer in uniform, but clad in a baggy white sweatshirt and black joggers.

Freya dropped her eyelids, “You’re late.”

Kyla closed the door with her black trainer, and sauntered into the office whilst rubbing the back of her neck, “Sorry. I actually left early, but I stumbled on my uncle outside. He forced me to go to his house for lunch. I got distracted playing with my nieces.”

“For 6 hours?” Freya dropped her palms on the table.

“Y-Yeah,” Kyla chuckled as she took a seat. “I’m serious. Those girls were adorable.”

Freya scoffed it aside. She didn’t want to start talking about those ‘devil spawns’ people call children.

“Any leads on Gustav?”

Kyla was relaxed, “Not much. Only a few addresses. We can check them out tomorrow and hopefully get something tangible out of it.”

Freya sat back with a sigh, “That’s still alright. Don’t be late this time. We have to find Gustav first, before he finds Noah.”

Kyla clawed at her hair and leaned forward, “What if he’s found him already, Freya? What if Noah is--”

“I highly doubt that. I don’t like him, but Noah is a smart guy. And for him to have survived that truck accident, there might still be a lot more we don’t know about him,” Freya said, her azure irises stern like a strict teacher.

“I hope so, I hope so,” Kyla muttered and dropped her hands. She raised her head at a sudden realization, “Where’s Alan?”

“He didn’t show up for his session today.”

Kyla twitched her lips, “We also agreed to meet here to talk about Giovanni. Why didn’t he show up?”

Freya exhaled shortly, “My guess is, he’s still in shock concerning what happened yesterday. He probably also blames himself for almost leaving us alone in the warehouse.”

Kyla raised a brow, “Hm? But I told him we were cool with it.”

“Patients like him aren’t just destabilized mentally, their emotions are also very fragile,” Freya explained curtly. Then she smiled, “Besides, he’s a man. His pride must have been hurt.”

“That’s just silly,” Kyla clicked her tongue. “I’ll go check on him.”

~

*Ding Dong!*

She withdrew her finger from the doorbell and adjusted her posture, standing before the cream-colored door.

There was no response from inside the house. Just like it had been for over five minutes now. Kyla was getting frustrated.

She exhaled to calm her nerves and she clicked on the doorbell again.

*Ding Dong!*

Silence fell after the ring as usual. But then...

“No one is at home!” hollered Alan’s timid voice from inside.

Kyla could almost roll her eyes, “Are you kidding me?”

She reached for the door knob and twisted it, “Will you please come and—Oh!”

The door opened at her twist. Alan had forgotten to lock it like he seldom did.

She simply shook her head and walked in.

Alan must have heard her footsteps, because he rushed to the corridor, muttering, “Shit. I forgot to--”

He froze at her piercing gaze. It was as though she could see his soul through his eyes.

In real truth, she was looking upwards in order not to get distracted from his bare chest. For a man that shivered at the prick of a finger, he was muscularly well-built.

“K-Kyla, what brings you here?” he smiled nervously.

With folded hands, she shrugged, “Wanna grab a drink?”

# **~ CHAPTER 16 ~**

The sun was barely visible from the horizon, just its little arc that spewed a very deep orange glow across this side of the earth.

Anyone that paid attention to the horizon, would see the small arc—in the span of just a few minutes—sink completely, taking along with what was left of the daylight, paving way for the dim silver ball of light to gradually rise in its illuminated glory.

Alan White shuddered to the cold gentle breeze that swept past them. The hard goosebumps that dotted his skin, poked at his black hoodie from underneath. He dipped his hand into his kangaroo pockets and sniffled.

There was a follow up sniffle, but it wasn’t his. He raised his head a bit and shifted his gaze to the left. Only the cap of her blonde hair was visible to him from that angle. He had to push himself forward a bit and look toward her in a somewhat 45° angle.

Stroking down her hair, Kyla pouted her lips as she felt his gaze on her. She turned her head and looked up with narrowed eyes, “What?”

He quickly retracted his gaze and rubbed the back of his neck, “Nothing, nothing. Uh... It’s pretty cold tonight.”

“I know, right? My hair’s getting a little stiff,” she dropped her head and resumed stroking her hair. “It’s hardly this cold in spring.”

“It’s probably going to rain soon,” Alan shrugged, then took a glance at the star-dotted, night sky. “Hmm. No clouds have gathered though.”

“They better not. At least, not until we get home,” Kyla said half-heartedly, her eyes fixated on a bend a couple meters ahead. Multi-colored light beamed out of the bend in flickers. “Ooh, we’re almost there.”

Alan instantly recognized where they were headed, his brows twitched, “Uh... There are other joints around. We don’t have to go there.”

She raised a brow, “Why? Just a few more steps and we’re there.”

Alan felt the skin on his forehead knit closely, “You just had us walk almost a kilometer from my house, and we’ve passed different diners before getting here.”

“Now you’re just exaggerating,” she scoffed. “Besides, it’s cheaper here.”

“Hmm...” Alan was holding back on his words.

“I also didn’t want the people in your street to see you. Things could get... Noisy...” she took a glance at him. “We both know it’s not good for your condition.”

*‘That’s the thing. I’m well known at this joint too,’* he sighed.

“Y-Yeah, right,” he forcefully muttered.

They finally got to the bend and stopped as soon as they turned.

About a stone’s throw away from them, was a diner, adorned with quite a number of neon lights. They shone so vibrantly, one would think the walls and roof were neon lights themselves.

Kyla had a warm smile on her face, her hands dipped in her pockets, “Ah... It’s been a while.”

As they inched closer to the diner, Alan couldn’t help but ask, “How do you know this place? You live at the other side of town.”

“My uncle’s wife used to own a coffee shop at the other side of the street, when I was little. Well, not so little. I was in high school then, and I lived with them till I graduated...” she chuckled as Alan stepped in front of her and opened the door.

Immediately they stepped foot into the diner, it was as though they had traversed into another world entirely. The lively chatter, the deep purple light, the wafts of different savory scents. It wasn’t the usual order and eat diner. There was this sense of familiarity and love.

This was ***ANNE’S CRAVE KITCHEN.***

“I’d come over to the coffee shop when I close from school, to help her through the evening,” Kyla continued as they made their way to the counter.

Alan hummed, “Wouldn’t she have done most of the work already? People mostly consume coffee in the morning to start the day.”

“We sold pastries too.”

“Oh.”

“That’s too much salt, Catherine. Someone’s going to choke and die from that!” a short, old lady, hollered from the stool she stood upon, behind the counter.

The young lady that prepared a customer’s order, scrunched her brows and was this close to crushing the salt bottle in her grasp.

It had been a norm for the old lady to correct any little mistake she spotted with a yell, as she stood atop the stool like a dwarfed dictator. After over a year of working here, Catherine thought she’d get used to it, but the old lady’s hoarse voice rattled her skull every single time she raised her voice.

“... You guys really came here everyday? What about dinner at home?” Alan asked with a raised brow.

Kyla shrugged, “The girls hadn’t been born then. My uncle had no choice but to join us. And when she finally gave birth, the whole family made this place their second home. Some days are exempted though.”

She placed her left forearm on the counter and leaned on it. She looked straight into the old lady’s eyes with a smile, “Anne. You’re still as vibrant as ever.”

The sternness on the old lady’s face dissolved at the sound of Kyla’s voice. She had to put on her glasses and size Kyla up just be sure she wasn’t seeing or hearing things. When she confirmed that it was actually Kyla, she returned to her prior demeanor, “Are you her ghost?”

Kyla chuckled, “I know, I know. It’s been a while since I last came here.”

“It’s been years. Don’t call that ‘a while.’ I felt you had left Archway, or died during one of them patrols you law enforcers do,” Anne rolled her eyes.

“Eh?” Alan couldn’t tell if the old lady was joking or being serious.

Kyla chuckled again, “Come on, Anne. I’m sorry, I’ve been so busy with work and some other things.”

“I still don’t see how that stops you from branching to grab a quick bite,” Anne clicked her teeth. She dipped the tip of the spatula in her hand, into the gravy that Catherine had just finished making. She had a taste and her already-wrinkled face, squeezed further. “Ugh! There’s no salt in this, Catherine. How could you forget such a basic ingredient?”

“...” Catherine’s lips parted open, but no words came out. She was at the crux of frustration and would snap any moment soon. But it wouldn’t make a difference though; Anne’s voice would simply go higher.

The young lady exhaled heavily and grabbed the salt bottle, “Sorry. I’ll add some salt.”

“Take it easy on her. What happened to the other workers?” Kyla asked in melancholy.

Anne brandished her spatula and answered with an air of confidence, “I sent them away.”

“Huh?” Kyla and Alan chorused.

“Why?” Kyla asked further.

“Now, why would I tell someone who has abandoned me for ages?”

Kyla laughed tersely, “Just say you miss me.”

*‘God, my legs are hurting,’* Alan managed to keep a calm demeanor on the outside, even though his legs were quivering at intervals. They had really walked a great distance and he wasn’t someone that could endure stress. Yes, he had the body of an athlete, but the mind of a fragile old man. The constant psychological pressure usurped quite a lot of stamina from his body.

He was hungry too.

He finally found the courage to raise his hand and tap Kyla, when he noticed her drawing Anne close and hugging her. The old lady resisted at first, but finally gave in and relaxed.

Kyla withdrew from the hug with a smile, “Are you... Crying?”

Anne pursed her lips and twitched her eyelids to stop the tears from falling, “No, of course not. Are you here for the usual?”

“Yup,” Kyla nodded.

Anne rubbed her eyes and smiled tersely, “I was talking to Alan.”

Kyla raised her brows, “Oh...”

Alan placed a hand on his head and avoided eye contact with Anne, *‘She still recognizes me? I’ve only been here once!’*

“You know him?” Kyla was curious.

“Aye. He came here some months ago, draping with depression or something. I don’t really know what happened, but I saw him snap at the slightest touch of another man, and a fight ensued.”

Back and forth, Kyla rolled her eyes from Anne to Alan, “Alan fought?”

“Yeah. Well, more like he got his ass handed to him,” Anne laughed her heart out. She coughed, “I feel he would have won if it was just him and the man though. He was a stranger in a world where everyone knew each other. They ganged up against him and kicked him out.”

Kyla stared blankly at Anne, “T-That’s...”

Alan felt as though the ground should open up and swallow him at that moment. Kyla would begin to see him differently after hearing that.

Anne told them to take a seat, while Catherine prepared their order. Kyla ordered her ‘usual,’ since Alan wouldn’t say anything.

“Alan, did that really happen?”

Alan sighed and turned to face her, “It was a week after my fiancé and her parents died. I know that’s not a valid excuse, but I wasn’t myself.”

“Oh.. Hope you were able to land a few hits though?” Kyla smirked as she took a seat on the rubbery-cushioned chair.

Alan sat down opposite her and spaced out for a moment there. He wasn’t excepting her to react that way. He stuttered, “Uh... Well, my head was all fuzzy. I can’t remember most of what happened that night.”

“Hm. Okay,” Kyla nodded and stared out the transparent-glass wall, watching the vehicles on the road moving to and fro.

Alan stared at the side of her face intently, *‘She’s just so reserved about everything.’*

Catherine walked up to their table about ten minutes later, and cautiously placed the tray of food on the table.

“Sorry I took so long,” she bowed.

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” Kyla waved.

Catherine nodded and walked back to the counter, where Anne was grudgingly waiting for her.

Inside the tray was another tray, two plates of gravy, and two pairs of cutleries. Catherine came back a minute later to drop two cups of cocktails and left.

Staring at the food in the smaller tray, Alan furrowed his brows, puzzled by what it was. He could see four sausages, that seemed to have been baked together with cake, or was it pie? He couldn’t tell. The sausages were half-submerged in the brown stuff.

He saw Kyla dip her fork into it and his eyes widened. It was actually really soft and creamy, like...

“It’s pudding batter,” Kyla finally voiced out after noticing the perplexity in his eyes. “Don’t tell me this is your first time having this?”

Alan laid back on the chair, “What... Is this exactly?”

“Toad in the hole. A very common dish among the locals,” she shrugged. “But how come you haven’t heard of it? Where have you been all this time?”

“Detroit. I only moved to the UK a few years back,” he ruffled his hair with a slight chuckle.

Kyla clicked her tongue, “Ah, I knew it. Well, it was only a speculation. The accent, the name... I knew something wasn’t adding up.”

“Yeah,” he shrugged with this expression that said, “Obviously.”

“Try it out. It’s really good,” she struck her fork on the tray’s edge.

He nodded and scooped some into his plate. He packed a spoon full of the pudding batter and put it his mouth. There was this subtle buzz in his brain, as this thick, creamy and moderately sweet taste exploded on his tongue in splendor. He took a few more spoons before tasting the gravy and sausages; they all tasted so good. Combining them even made it better.

“Ah... Sometimes I just want to trim it short,” Kyla murmured, picking out the crumbs that her hair combed up. She packed the long blonde hair back and tied it to a bun on her head.

“Much better,” she sighed.

For a moment there, Alan couldn’t take his eyes off her. Her face was more exposed, her blue constellation eyes were more vivid, though they were now a much darker shade of purple in response to the purple light that filled the entire diner.

He didn’t know how or why, but there was something much different about her. She looked... He couldn’t find the right word... Brighter?

He had lost most of these feelings after his great loss, making it a bit hard to really make sense of what he was looking at.

Kyla chewed and swallowed. She raised her head to reach for her cup, when she noticed him staring at her. This wouldn’t be the first or second time he would be doing that tonight.

She squinted her eyes, “Seriously, what? Is there something on my face?”

Alan snapped out of his reverie and cleared his throat, “W-What did you say?”

“Hmm...” she took out her phone and looked at her reflection. “Looks normal to me. Why do you keep spacing out like that?”

Alan ruffled his hair and chuckled nervously, “Uh...”

*‘I’ve never seen someone with such beautiful eyes? Your face is so comforting to look at? Ugh... I’d sound like a creep!’* he was panicking internally.

Kyla sighed after almost two minutes of silence. She took her cup and took a sip.

“Hmm...” she closed her eyes as her body got refreshed by the cold drink that flowed down her throat. She opened her eyes and looked at him, “If this is about yesterday, you seriously have to let it go. I said it was fine. Freya too.”

Alan froze. He was relieved that she changed the topic. He put on a straight face, “I know you did. It’s just... I still feel guilty. I mean, what if those guys really wanted to kill you and Miss Hall? It’d be my fault.”

“I object,” Kyla folded her hands. “Even if you had tried to fight, the result might have been the same. One of them had a gun. We’re not superhumans or invulnerable to bullets.”

Alan sighed, “I’ll try to forget about it.”

“Please, do.”

The rest of the meal would have been in silence, if Kyla hadn’t chipped in some small talk every now and then. They finished the entire tray and ordered some fish and chips to go.

Alan made sure to pay the bills. Kyla could tell that he was well to do, she didn’t argue about his decision.

~

“It’s even colder now.”

The two of them shuddered as they walked down the street.

Alan squeezed his fists inside his kangaroo pocket, “Yeah. Something’s not right about tonight’s weather.”

“Global warming exists. Can’t even say I’m surprised at this point,” even with the unnatural cold in the atmosphere, she didn’t stop taking out chips and eating them from the foil wrap in her grasp.

Alan gazed ahead. His house still hadn’t come to view and they’d been walking for over ten minutes, *‘Ugh... Such a pain!’*

Kyla pinched a part of the fried fish in the foil wrap, only for her fingers to slide across its body. She brought it under her gaze and her eyes dilated. The fish and chips were completely frozen and exuded this whitish, cold fume.

“What the...?” she breathed out the same white air as she tried to speak.

She and Alan locked eyes. They could barely even move as their joints gradually got stiff. They managed to tilt their heads up.

It was snowing. But winter wasn’t due until after two more seasons. What was this?

*Bang!*

They flinched at the sound of the loud bang that filled the air, their bodies instinctively turning in the direction that it sounded the loudest.

Their eyes squinted as they saw a black ball plummeting diagonally towards them, which seemed to grow bigger the closer it got, its color gradually changing from black to faded green.

Alan’s eyes went wide. It wasn’t a ball. It was... A person?!

Kyla also saw the person and dove at Alan, pushing him out of the way just at the nick of time.

*Bam!*

The person collided with the sidewalk, bounced off in a right angle and struck their back against the wall of a house.

Kyla and Alan stood up with grunts. It was getting really hard to move. Kyla could feel her body get warmer though.

They stared at the figure in an army-green cloak and hazard mask, who grudgingly rose to their feet and punched the wall behind them.

The cloaked person looked towards the building they had just been hurled over from, “Shit! She’s a monster!!”

It was the voice of a man.

# **~ Chapter 17 ~**

**Some moments earlier.**

Crouched near the edge of a building was a figure, wrapped in an army-green cloak that stood still, even under the influence of the riling wind up there.

“Are you sure this is the place?” The figure asked in a whisper. Their voice was masculine and deep. A little hoarse though, due to the hazard mask that covered his face.

“Yes. At least, it should be,” a familiar feminine voice replied casually through his comms.

He leaned forward a bit, his right hand clamped on the concrete edge, “Seriously, Diana? You’re not even sure about this one too? This is the third spot I’ve visited tonight.”

“Calm your horses, darling. The Cascaders are much more cautious than we thought. They are very hard to track. But from the data I’ve gathered, this is definitely the right spot...” she cleared her throat. “I think.”

The Mercenary simply shook his head and looked down the edge.

Diagonally opposite the building where he was perched, at about thirty metres away, was a small retail store. It wasn’t any bigger than a gas station’s supermarket. The walls were made of bricks and the windows were tinted, making it nigh impossible to see what was going on inside.

Behind the retail store, was a concrete wall that stretched from one end of the alley to the other end. It was also quite tall, almost competing with the height of the building that the Mercenary stood upon. One would wonder what was at the other side of the wall, or fence?

Black vans drove into the alley from one end, and parked in a straight line before the retail store. Men hopped out of the vans and opened the rear doors. In fine unison, they began to offload different boxes and tossed them from one man to the other, till it got to those at the door, who would then carry the boxes in.

The Mercenary laid back a bit and sighed, “This is pointless without my helmet. I can’t see what’s happening inside.”

Diana scoffed, “Just use the mask.”

He sized himself up, parting the cloak aside to reveal a body-fitted, mechanical suit, with turning gears at the joints. It looked like an outfit that had been pulled from the steampunk age.

“Now that I take another look at it, it looks similar to Hazard’s suit—Wait, don’t tell me this is that maniac’s suit!”

He could hear her giggle as he adjusted the cloak back to its prior position. He nudged his head sideways, “God, why do I have to wear this? So heavy and I look like a freak.”

“Trust me, you’re going to need it tonight. Who knows what kind of Abnormal could show up here? You won’t survive in close combat, even with the weakest of them.”

“Yeah, that was obvious already. You didn’t have to say it,” he grunted. He paused for a moment there as he suddenly realised something, “Hold up, if this is Hazard’s suit, does that mean I’m gonna get injected by his deadly toxins to temporarily make me superhuman?”

She giggled once more.

He rolled his eyes under the mask, “This is not funny, Diana. That’s what eventually killed him.”

She cleared her throat, “You really need to stop overthinking things. Yes, it’s Hazard’s suit, but it has been modified. Most of its functions have been removed, like the toxic needles and gases. It’s been modified as a prototype combat suit. And not just against anyone, it was specifically built to counter Abnormals... At least the few ones with basic abilities.”

“And what if the one that might show up tonight isn’t one of those few?”

“It’s quite durable. You can take a few hits as you try to run for your life,” she said it so casually.

“My blood is on your hands, Diana,” he said as he tinkered with the buttons at the side of his mask. “How does this thing even work?”

“Leave the buttons. Simply think about what you want to do. The mask and suit will pick up the electric signals from your brain and perform the action.”

“Hm. Okay...” he focused his gaze on the retail store as he thought of having an infrared vision.

The mask’s visors switched from transparent to red in two seconds, and he could see the heat signatures blazing inside the store.

He nodded his head and hummed, “I’m impressed.”

“I know, I know. You can kiss me later.”

He watched what was going on inside the store for a while. The men that carried the boxes inside would walk around the store in a spiral pattern for some seconds, before suddenly disappearing from his electromagnetic sight. Their heat signatures vanished without a trace. He also noticed that the boxes had no heat signatures, as though nothing was in them.

“That’s odd,” he muttered after seeing the vanished heat signatures reignite at another part of the store.

“Yeah, I see it too,” Diana responded with a serious tone. “It seems there’s a secret door in the store, and from the way the men were moving, it’s probably underground.”

“Ugh... More complications,” the Mercenary groaned. “I just want to know what’s in those boxes and get some sleep.”

“You also have to take one of the men along for questioning. That can lead us to one of the higher ranked Cascaders, then we can finally know what they’re building,” Diana reminded.

“Yeah, that shouldn’t be too hard. But what makes you sure that they’re building something for her? They could be aiming for world domination or some shit,” the Mercenary kept observing with a stern gaze.

“The details will bore you. You just have to trust me.”

“Oh, I do. It’s just that I can feel another foreboding--”

Diana interrupted him, “Hold on. Who are those? Coming from the third van...”

He shifted his gaze to the third van. Three people alighted the van and trotted towards the store. Their heat signatures weren't t just abnormally high but a glitch would occur at very short intervals. It wasn’t the usual, hot red flares that radiated in and out of human beings; theirs seemed to shift to other sides of the light spectrum, making them somewhat invisible at times to the Mercenary’s infrared vision.

“Abnormals?” his mind instantly clicked.

“Yes. Do a facial recognition.”

He exhaled slowly and thought deeply about what he wanted to do next. The red lenses on the mask’s visors, retracted and switched to a green, convex lens.

The three persons had stopped at the entrance and were conversing with the men at the door, giving him enough time to scan each of them.

The first man had blonde hair and deep grey eyes, the collar of his long brown coat flayed below his chin. The man next to him had a dark skin, deep black hair and black irises. The lady amongst them was quite slender, her hair black and silky, her irises brown.

“John Colton, Monday Sunday, and Deana Breigh...” the Mercenary muttered as their names and other basic information displayed on the visors. He scoffed, “Who names their kid Monday Sunday?”

Diana sighed, “Focus. If we could capture one of them...”

“I feel like I could take on the three of them,” he placed a foot on the edge.

The atmosphere became chilly.

“We don’t even know their abilities yet. You could as well be jumping to your death.”

“Their auras are weak though--”

The rest of his words hung in his throat as his senses went haywire. The foreboding that had been dormant in his guts, dissolved and spread into every nerve ending in his body.

Something was coming. Something fast. Something dangerous!

Just as soon as his senses tingled, a large mallet that seemed to be made entirely out of ice, flew across the roof like a pendulum and struck him point blank. It was akin to whacking a golf ball with a golf stick.

Concrete rubbles scattered in the air as his body broke through the roof’s edge and flew across the alley. He collided splat with the sturdy wall at the other side, like a fly, and plummeted to the ground.

“Ack... Ack!” he recoiled on the floor like an epileptic person. It hurt everywhere.

But that was it; he only felt the pain, but his body was still intact, thanks to the suit.

He reeled back and forth, sticking his tongue out under the mask, to catch some breath.

“Ugh!” he pressed his metallic gloves against the ground as he pulled himself up. He staggered on his feet a few times before gaining some composure.

“Did you slip and fall?” Diana only heard some scuffle and grunts from her end.

“More or less,” he cracked his neck. “There’s another abnormal other than those three.”

“You must have a death wish to try and spy on us!” the shapeshifting Deana, half-yelled from the retail store.

As the Mercenary approached them steadily, he saw someone swoop in from the sky in a trail of ice. He raised a brow as the person landed. It was a lady with snow-white hair and a body completely made of ice. He couldn’t even tell if she was human or not.

A certain radius of the sky had turned hazy as snow began to fall.

“And he still approaches,” Monday muttered in surprise. “He really does have a death wish.”

“T’must be the same guy that’s been checking out our other hideouts,” John rubbed his chin.

“Oh...” Deana smiled as she faced the Mercenary. “Seems you want something from us. But first, who might you be?”

The Mercenary adjusted his shoulder sockets and spread out his arms, “Oh, you can’t tell?”

They twitched their brows, oblivious to what he was trying to prove.

He checked himself out and grunted, “It’s because of this stupid suit, ‘cause there’s no one that wouldn’t recognize the Sha--”

“Shut it! You can’t let them know or we’ll be compromised!” Diana hushed.

“I know, I’m just trying to buy time to scan this... Ice Queen. The scanners aren’t picking up anything on her though,” he whispered back.

“He has an accomplice. Heather, take him out,” Deana ordered.

The ice-bodied Abnormal nodded and slouched forward.

*Thoom!*

A blast of cold dust was left in her wake, almost blowing the trio off their feet.

Heather crossed the distance between the retail store and the Mercenary in just a second. The Mercenary could sense that she was coming, but his body wasn’t fast enough to react. However, the suit kicked into overdrive, pushing his fist forward in time, blocking Heather’s fist.

*Boom!*

A shockwave emanated from the point of impact, flinging the Mercenary backwards into the air.

Heather, with great agility, shot off the ground and planted her feet on the long wall behind the retail store. She shot off the wall immediately and cuddled herself just as soon as she reached the hurling mercenary.

*Bang!*

The collision flung him over and away from the building he once was, while she was sent spinning back from the immense inertia.

~

Before the Mercenary could do anything at all, he had hit the ground, and like that wasn’t enough, he bounced off and struck his back against a wall.

He ejected himself from the wall and punched it, hyperventilating, “Shit! She’s a monster!!”

“You can take her. You just have to work in sync with the suit,” Diana said in uncertainty.

“Easy for you to say from behind your desk,” he cracked his neck once again.

“Hm?” he turned his head to his side. He saw a white-haired man and a blonde lady, clinging to each other in fear. “Oh, great... You guys should get out of here, it’s too dangerous!”

The hair on Kyla’s body stood on ends and her gaze flitted to the building across the street. She could see someone running across the roof. She didn’t know how or why, but she could see this icy aura brimming around this mysterious person.

The Mercenary had also sensed her coming. He looked upwards with clenched fists, “This suit better have flamethrowers.”

“Remember, you only have to imagine what you want,” Diana said with a less stressed voice. “Here she comes.”

“Oof...” he exhaled and shot towards the incoming Heather.

In mid-air, as she descended speedily, big hands of ice emerged from her shoulders and caged the Mercenary in their grasps. He struggled to break free, but the hold on him was too strong and extremely cold. Frosts of ice spread around his suit.

*Thoom!*

They finally struck the ground, tearing through the earth till they got stopped by a wall.

Kyla had to push the frozen Alan out of the way of the shockwave and flying stones. They scurried behind a car and sat on the floor.

They would have run as far as they could, if Alan hadn’t gotten stiff from fear again.

“This isn’t the time for this! Get yourself together!” Kyla was at the verge of slapping him.

Alan pulled his knees to his chest, shuddering, “S-Sorry. It’s my body... It doesn’t want to move.”

She placed a hand on his shoulder, “No, your body is grounded by the fear in your mind... At least, that’s what Freya told me. You have to break free!”

Another boom erupted and reverberated across the street. A bone-racking aftershock spread wide, accompanied by a chilly gust of wind. The car that they used for cover, flew over them after getting lashed by the wind.

“Ahh!” she shrieked and reflexively covered Alan with her body. They got thrown some meters away.

The Mercenary slid backwards to a stop beside them. Breaking off the frost on his fists, he noticed Alan and Kyla. He grunted, “Come on, I told you guys to beat it! I can’t start worrying about some lives as I try to think of a way to beat this freak!”

Kyla didn’t know where she got the courage from, but she responded sternly, “We’ll be fine. And if something were to happen, it’s your fault for interrupting our stroll.”

The Mercenary simply shook his head and bolted off. The suit made him move almost three times as fast as a regular human, and it was just enough for him to sidestep whilst in motion and dodge the ice spears thrown at him.

He punched his way through the last spear and was this close to grabbing Heather’s neck, if an omnidirectional blast of cold air hadn’t exploded from her body.

The explosion lobbed him across the air, but he managed to land on a knee and slide back.

“This is getting annoying,” he pulled out two Glock-20 pistols from their holsters behind him. They were already loaded, all he had to do was jam their magazines against each other.

“What are you gonna do with those?” Diana sighed in exasperation.

His cape fluttered behind him as he dashed across the street, spinning rims of ice skidding past his back, one after the other. He jumped forward, set his feet against the wall of a building and sprang off in a twisted back flip.

He landed on his right shoulder and rolled to cushion the impact. He got on a knee and set his glocks in Heather’s direction. He cocked his head slightly with an open eye, before squeezing the triggers simultaneously.

*Bang! Bang!*

A bullet flew out of each barrel, scaling the distance between him and his target, well, at the speed of a bullet.

They would have logged into Heather’s skull if she hadn’t erected a wall of thick ice.

*Thuck! Thuck!*

The bullets could barely make it halfway through the wall, before losing kinetic energy.

*Bang! Bang!*

More shots were fired. His aiming was so precise, the other bullets that were spat out, slipped into the same hole that had been drilled by the first two bullets, giving them a new found boost, pushing them further through the wall.

By the time another set of bullets joined the line, two holes were punctured at the other side and the bullets fell out. They clattered to the ground like pebbles.

Heather had moved away from the wall anyway, skiing towards the Mercenary on a trail of ice.

His arms jerked as he fired some shots at her before jumping to the side. The air around her was so cold, the bullets got stiff and slow the closer they got to her.

She swatted the bullets aside and released a linear blast of ice towards the Mercenary, but the latter had thought ahead and moved out of the way.

He ran backwards as she changed course and moved speedily towards him. Running backwards had halved his boosted speed already, and if he were to turn at that moment, she’d easily catch up to him. He only had one thought in mind as she inched closer. He jumped higher this time around and slanted his body in the air...

As his boots keft the ground, a trail of ice swiftly crept beneath him.

*‘Perfecto!’* he appraised internally with a terrible Spanish accent as he descended.

Due to his slanted posture, only the side of his boots touched the ice floor. He slipped with his arms spread wide. Heather had already gotten too close, having it in mind to impale him with an ice dagger in her right hand. She hadn’t expected him to make such a ridiculous move.

Her right hand went over his shoulder, while her torso kissed his face. Instantly, he clamped his arms around her and twisted his body in the direction she was moving at. He let go off her as soon as they turned and her momentum did the rest for him.

She got yeeted for meters, skidding across the asphalt like an icy bowling ball.

What the Mercenary did was a simple martial arts counter technique, but at a more quicker and precise pace. Any miscalculation and he might have slipped across the road, or get stomped by her cold feet.

“Well, that was silly. At least it got you a breather,” Diana scoffed.

He stood up and stretched his arms, “I needed some time to think.”

“About what?”

Police sirens suddenly filled the air.

“A way to put her to sleep. If I’m lucky, it kills her,” the right sleeve of his suit gradually broke apart and clattered to the ground. He dropped one of his postils amidst them.

“You’ll need a very large amount of energy to electrocute someone of her mass,” Diana quickly figured it out.

He looked ahead as he heard Heather yell from the distance, “I know. Just... How did you say it? Ah, yes... Just trust me.”

The mechanical parts on the floor, merged with the pistol, breaking further apart and rearranging themselves till a long-barreled gun was formed. He picked up the scope-less marksman and fixated his open eye atop the slim iron sight. His suit pulsed with energy, that snaked around his body and down his left arm, charging up the gun.

Heather was blasting her way towards him, moving speedily on a rolling wave of ice and wind.

He locked his eye on his target and pulled the trigger.

*Boom!*

The marksman exploded to bits at the release of a ball of electricity. The Mercenary was only thrown some feet back. He would have been blown away if he hadn’t used his firearm expertise to steady the gun well, and brace for impact.

He didn’t waste time in drawing out his second Glock pistol and took aim.

The human-sized ball of electricity didn’t do anything to stop the rolling ice wave. It honed solely on Heather, whose eyes dilated. She pulled at the air and dragged it upwards. The wave underneath her transmogrified into a rubbery state and rolled upwards like a blanket, shielding her from the blast.

The ball of crackling electricity collided with the wall. Most of the ice liquefied, while the other sides crumbled. The ball didn’t seem to carry much charge as she had expected. Even Diana was puzzled.

Then came a bang and a whap.

A bullet impaled Heather’s neck and she slapped it in out of reflex. The bullet rattled within her and exploded into highly charged sparks of electricity, that snaked across every part of her body.

*Poof...* Her brain short circuited. Smoke wafted out of her orifices, her eyes had gone white.

Her body plopped to the ground, liquidized and transparent. Her head was the only solid thing about her.

Smoke snaked out of the barrel of his Glock pistol. He had shot at a wall just adjacent her, it ricocheted and pierced her neck. He was the kind of man that never missed a shot. That’s why they called him the...

“I did not see that coming,” Diana was impressed.

He dropped his arm and the suit crumbled off his body, leaving only the mask and cloak. He was wearing a vest and a pair of trousers underneath.

He pulled off the hazmat mask and inhaled the icy-air, “I should leave. The others may be on their way.”

“What about that couple?” Diana asked out of concern.

He grunted, “They’re probably fine.”

“It wouldn’t kill you to check.”

“It actually would, if the other Abnormals come here,” he turned his head a few times, before spotting Alan and Kyla helping themselves to their feet.

“Kyla, are you alright?” Alan asked, dusting ice crumbs off her hair.

She nodded, “Yeah. You?”

“Kyla...” The Mercenary and Diana muttered simultaneously.

“Is she the one?” he asked as he approached them.

“Can’t say. Make sure to memorize her face. Don’t let her see yours,” Diana’s voice was brimming with an underlying excitement.

“Uh... You guys seem okay,” he stopped a few feet away from them, his hood casting a shadow over his face.

Kyla sized him up, “Who are you? What just happened?”

“Wish I could tell you, miss. You don’t need to bother yourself about it...” his voice trailed off as he noticed some approaching police vehicles. They had to go round some obstacles and upturned cars.

“Just give the cops a compelling story. I doubt they’d believe what you guys just saw,” he took a step back as he took out a grappling gun.

Kyla raised a brow, “Huh? I’m a cop--”

“Note that,” Diana instructed.

The Mercenary scoffed, shooting a grappling hook to the roof of a building beside him, “She’s making this too easy.”

The grappling line whirred and he was pulled upwards in a whim.

Alan and Kyla stared at the roof blankly as his figure disappeared from their sight. The police vehicles inched closer.

# **~ CHAPTER 18 ~**

Kyla dropped her head as the police vehicles pulled closer.

Alan was still a little shaken up by the sudden experience, but he managed to keep his cool, using the breathing technique taught to him by Freya.

Three police cruisers parked in an arc before the two of them, their spinning roof lights dancing around the premises.

Police men and women alighted the cruisers, their faces stern, their dominant hands on their gun holsters, ready the draw and fire at the emergence of danger.

Alan took a step back, while Kyla simply sighed and mouthed, “Finally.”

The first officer to reach them was Malcolm Allen, busy adjusting his belt buckle.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but why do you guys only appear after the damage has been done?” Kyla sunk her hands into her pockets and casually stretched the joggers apart.

A terse smile escaped a corner of Malcolm’s lips, “We weren’t informed on time, and by the time a distress call got to us, no one wanted to believe that someone in Archway could shoot icicles from their hands.”

“There are no Phenoms in Archway,” Alan muttered to himself.

Malcolm pointed at him, “Exactly. But then, we got more calls reporting the same issue, and we came as fast as we could. It took a while getting around the debris and upturned cars.”

“Hm-hmm,” Kyla nodded, whilst taking subtle glances at the other officers that surveyed the street. There was melted frost at every corner. The road itself was layered with melted ice and scattered shards of ice.

“What really happened here?” Malcolm took out a note from his chest pocket, alongside a pen.

Kyla raised a brow, “You’re going to interrogate us?”

“It’s simple procedure, Kyla,” Malcolm shrugged.

She sighed, “Ah... Well, it depends on whether or not you choose to believe it.”

“I’m all ears.”

“I don’t know what started it. We just heard a loud bang...”

She went on to explain what happened from her perspective.

Malcolm would seldom gasp a bit or force his eyes wide open, just to show that he was stunned. He already had a hunch that this was caused by one of those Abnormals that the Mercenary at downtown mentioned yesterday. He was still conflicted on whether he should tell her about what went down at downtown or not. At first, he thought she wouldn’t believe him, but with what she saw tonight, there might be a chance she wouldn’t freak out.

“He took her down with just a bullet?!” he interrupted with a raised brow.

“I know, I’m as surprised as you are,” she shook her head.

“He also seemed to be speaking to someone as he fought. Probably an accomplice...” Alan chipped in, trying to give the officer any lead that could help with the investigation.

“Or he’s just that crazy that he talks to himself,” Kyla scoffed.

*‘Talking to someone else? Just like the man that saved me at downtown. Could it have been him?’* Malcolm hummed in thought.

“You believe us, right?” Kyla asked, wondering why her partner was so quiet.

Malcolm looked at her with a slightly raised brow. He cleared his throat, “Sure, of course. It’s just that there isn’t much evidence to make the others believe. We’ve had cases of arsonists burning places up with flamethrowers...” he backed up a bit and pointed at the frosts close to them. “This could have been done by someone with a bag-sized freezer or something.”

“Huh?” Kyla and Alan twitched their brows.

He smiled and raised his hands, “Just trying to be factual, guys. I know you wouldn’t make it all up. I mean, we have over ten witnesses now. The problem now, is with the Captain and other higher ups.”

Kyla folded her hands, “True. Archway hasn’t had any Phenom case since they existed. No one would want to believe that they’re here now.”

“Which brings the question: Why are Phenoms appearing in Archway now?” Alan asked rhetorically.

“It probably has something to do with the Cascaders--” Kyla froze as her eyes caught the glimpse of a black man running down a building, grabbing Heather’s head and wobbly body, then running up the building and disappearing out of sight.

“Did you guys see that?” she asked, taking a step back.

But the response she got were the winces and grunts from all around her. Malcolm wasn’t standing before her, neither was Alan next to her again.

“Huh?” she looked around and her eyes narrowed. Everyone was on the floor, gradually pulling themselves up. Their clothes were wet too.

“What happened?” she blurted, confused and disturbed.

Malcolm finally rose to his feet, ruffling his hair to get most of the moisture out. He took a glance at Kyla and his brows arched down, “You didn’t feel that?”

“Feel what?” she responded sharply, dusting off the sand from Alan’s hoodie.

“There was this sudden gust of wind the hit us...”

“I saw a blur.”

Malcolm and Alan narrated respectively.

Kyla spaced out for a moment there. She soon realized what was going on and her eyes went wide, “He was that fast?”

“Who?” the two men had their eyes on her.

“Uh, I-I saw... I thought I saw a man run back and forth on the side of a building... Ah, never mind. I was probably imagining it,” she shook her head, not sure if her eyes were deceiving her, or her perception of things was just that heightened.

Malcolm tried his best to get her to talk, but she was quite stubborn.

He held his waist and let out a sigh of defeat, “Hop in. I’ll drive you guys home.”

*‘Thank God,’* the tired Alan was about to move towards the cruiser, when he heard Kyla decline the offer.

“We’re fine. His house is just up ahead.”

Malcolm knitted his brows, “Are you sure? I don’t think it’s safe--”

She swooped her left arm around Alan’s pocketed right arm, “Trust me, okay?”

“Ugh... Fine. Just call me if anything comes up,” Malcolm smoothened his hair.

“We’ll see at the station tomorrow,” she waved and turned with Alan to continue their interrupted stroll.

“Yeah,” Malcolm waved, but froze a bit as Alan turned his head with a melancholic face, muttering some unclear words. It seemed as though Kyla had held him hostage, and he was begging to be set free.

Kyla pulled Alan closer, “Come on, it’s not that far.”

Malcolm didn’t give it much thought. He simply smiled and opened the door to his cruiser.

~

“Ah, that was a disaster!” The Mercenary palmed his face, his legs dangling by the edge of a building.

“At least now we know that the Cascaders aren’t to be taken lightly from here on out,” Diana said with a comforting voice. “And what’s more, we might have just identified who she really is.”

“Hmm. I feel she really is the one though. Her name is Kyla, and is a cop, just like that other cop described her as,” he took out his phone and began to scroll away.

“We still have to be a hundred percent certain. If she isn’t the one you went there for, you’d have innocent blood on your hands.”

“Shit! I missed the match!” He grunted, staring at the highlights of his favourite sports match that just ended 10 minutes ago or so.

Silence encompassed the roof for about a minute as he continued to read through the scores.

He put the phone back in his pocket and sighed, “You know, I feel like I should have just used the Release technique on that Abnormal. I mean, how would I improve if I don’t use it on real opponents?”

Diana sighed, “This wasn’t just any opponent. She was an Abnormal. You also haven’t mastered it yet, it could kill you.”

He scoffed, “Don’t fret. I’ve had some practice here.”

Diana simply hummed and didn’t say a word.

He touched his earbuds just to make sure they were working.

“Uh... Diana?”

“So you’ve been going around, sleeping with other women?” Her voice was grumpy.

He chuckled, “Come on. You should know I only have eyes for you.”

The ‘Release Technique’... Well, it involved some sensual closure.

“Can we forget about that? What’s out next move?” he gazed down at his swinging boots.

She inhaled deeply and exhaled, “Now we’re sure that the Cascaders are definitely working on something big, to have so many Abnormals at their disposal. You’ll have to tread carefully from now on, and try to avoid combat. That suit was one of a kind, you won’t survive the next contact with an Abnormal.”

“Tch.”

“You also have to find a way to get closer to her. I’ll tell you what to do from there.”

“Hm. That shouldn’t be too hard,” he shrugged.

“You can have your rest now...” her tone went lower. “Or do you plan to visit another brothel tonight?”

“Heh...” he laughed and pulled himself up, teetering on the edge of the tall building. “I was only teasing you. The women here are so bland and formal in their speech.”

“Hmph.”

He pinched the lower edges of his cloak and spread his arms. He flaunted one leg over the edge and fell from the roof.

The cloak took the form of a crescent moon and went taut. He glided his way down and around a few other buildings.

~

“Am I disturbing you?” Kyla stopped by the curb of the sidewalk, her blue irises solely fixated on Alan, who stopped after two more steps.

He turned to face her and scrunched his brows, “Why would you think that?”

“You wouldn’t stop moving the arm I was holding, like I was forcing you to walk with me,” she had this blank expression on her face, making it hard for Alan to tell her current mood.

She did it on purpose just to bring Alan out of his shell. After the little they had been through, she felt obligated to help him with his condition. Freya had also told her to always try to make him talk at any random time. That’d keep him from reminiscing on his pasts and fears.

Freya also added that he needed a more casual touch, rather than her formal approach at every session.

Not only did Kyla feel pity for him, she felt now was the time for him to get better, with the whole Gustav and Noah thing going on. He was more or less a potential target for Gustav to use as a bait, to lure Noah out of hiding. His sturdy physique would be useless in defending himself, if his mind was all mumbo jumbo.

Kyla also saw it as a way to get her mind off of the things that made her worry every now and then.

Alan wasn’t aware of this. He felt she was annoyed or something. He rubbed the back of his neck, “Uh... I... I didn’t mean to. My arm got sore.”

She looked up and sighed, “You could have just said so, Alan. You really need to learn how to express yourself more often.”

He sniffled, “I try my best. I tell Miss Hall how my day went at every session.”

“That’s the thing. Freya is your therapist, of course you have to tell her. I’m talking about the world outside her office. Try to be more interactive.”

Alan’s nervous face dissolved into a smile. He took her hand and led her towards his house a few metres away, “You sound more like Miss Hall now.”

Kyla smiled, “We’ve been friends for years. I’ve gotten used to her tactics.”

“Not all. She’s so scary at times,” he faked a shudder.

Kyla giggled, “I’m not supposed to tell you, but that’s all a ruse to make you listen and open up.”

They reached the front of his house in less than a minute. Alan brought out his keys and unlocked the front door.

He opened it and pushed it in slightly, “Uh... You can come in for a cup of hot chocolate, if you want. It’s still a little cold outside.”

She held onto her smile, “Sounds delicious, but I’ve left Pilot all alone since morning. He’ll be pissed if I get home late.”

“Pilot...?” he muttered subconsciously.

Ignoring his question, she made a straight face, “We’ve moved the meeting to tomorrow, at noon. That’s actually why I came to meet you. Please, try to be there.”

“I will, I will. And sorry for--”

“It’s fine, Alan. I’ll see you tomorrow,” she did a short wave and walked down the street a bit, whilst turning towards the road, hoping for a cab to show up soon.

She didn’t take her car on purpose.

Alan waited and watched till she boarded a cab. He sighed and entered the house, locking the door shut.

# ~ Chapter 19 ~

**Highgate, Islington borough.**

*Huff... Huff... Huff...*

With a bang, he punched the door apart with his body and kept running through the second office. His hands had multiple cuts, drenched in blood.

Those in the office he had just burst into, scampered away in shock and fear. Some reached for their cell phones to call 911.

However, another loud bang shook the floor as the mysterious, hooded man shot through the other door and stormed through the next office.

Before anyone could gain composure or piece together what was going on, a couple of armed men swooped into the office from the windows and bolted after the hooded man.

*Bang! Bang! Bang!*

He kept bursting from one office to the other, while those that were in pursuit, shot sporadically whilst in motion. Of course, a couple of the office workers got caught in the crossfire and were brutally injured. A few died.

That was of no relevance to the chasers and their target. They didn’t stop for a millisecond.

The hooded man slightly raised his head as he dashed through the last office on that floor. A glass-partitioned windowed wall was just up ahead. If he didn’t stop on time, he’d be falling to his death.

Albeit, he couldn’t care less. He had more pressing matters to sort other than losing his life. Well, it wasn’t as if a fall from the 40th floor of a 42 story building was going to do him much harm.

But as luck would have it, as he inched closer to the windows, the view outside got clearer and his eyes fell on a lower building just across the street. Now the probability of him actually getting hurt had been cut in half.

He didn’t hesitate to leap at the windows, whilst curling himself up like a ball. He made contact...

*Shatter!*

Multiple shards of glass scattered around him as he plummeted from the building. He quickly unfurled himself and pushed his body forward by kicking his legs forth as much as he could.

*Tweep! Tweep! Tweep!*

Bullets whizzed past him from behind. The men that were after him had stopped by the broken windows and opened fire. They couldn’t advance further, but at least they had a better aim.

A few bullets lodged into his right arm and back. A few more grazed his clothes, but that didn’t stop him from making a touchdown on the concrete roof of the building he had locked onto. He swiftly dove into a forward roll, not only to cushion his descent, but to also evade the bullets being fired at him.

*Huff...*

He sprang to his feet and shot across the roof, moving sideways over and over to destabilize his shooters’ aim. Blood dripped continuously from his body the farther he moved, but his speed didn’t falter.

He got to the roof’s edge and vaulted off without locking on a landing spot.

The wind blew through his outfit, caressing his skin like incorporeal fingers. His hands flayed about, the breeze whipped his hood open, leaving his damp brown hair to flutter haphazardly.

By the time he veered his bearing in place and managed to look down, he was already so close to the roof of a red sedan that had just been parked. He didn’t have time to twist and brace for impact.

*Bam!*

He slammed into the car’s roof like a bowling ball against foil paper, compressing it till it almost broke off from the four ends.

“Ugh...!” The pain was so much, it was nauseating. It hurt everywhere. It stung. His bones tweaked, his innards churned.

It was as though he should just lay there and drift to sleep. His body was about to go limp. Fatigue washed over him in tides.

However, the thought of his ultimate goal—the sole reason why he put his life at so much risk—tugged at his nerves. He couldn’t let it end here.

“Ugh!!”

He struggled to move, but he was able to turn on his back and face the sky, his breath uneven.

He reached for his right pocket and was about to bring his hand out, when he caught the sight of someone jumping off the building he had just jumped off from. Whoever they were, they were diving straight at him.

He didn’t know where the latent strength came from, but he rolled away just in time, landed on both feet and hopped back.

*Boom!*

The car exploded as soon as the person landed, quaking that part of the street. A few bystanders were punctured by the flying shards. The owner of the car fell to her knees, her eyes dilated in despair, her lips quivering.

Walking out of the flames was a 5’5 man with pure white skin. Not yellow, not orange or whatever... It was as white as the clouds that drifted by that morning.

His white Grandad collar shirt almost blended with the tone of his skin. His black trousers were attached to his upper body via black suspenders. His black shoes were quite big and shiny.

Any mundane person could tell that it was a Mime.

But then again, it wasn’t just any Mime. One could tell from the destruction of that sedan, and also the way the hooded man shuddered, his brown eyes dilated. He knew who this Mime was, and the latter was the last person he wished to come in contact with.

“Shit!” He turned on his heels and ran for his life.

He had barely traversed a distance of five metres, when he got repulsed by nothing. Or rather, he had struck himself against an invisible wall.

The impact almost pushed him to a fall, but he steeled his body and got his balance. He turned to face the Mime, accepting his fate that there was no longer anywhere to run.

The Mime smiled, raising a finger and waving it at the man. It was his own way of saying, “There’s nowhere to run.”

“I know...” the man took out a small vial, uncapped its lid with a thumb and emptied its black contents in one swig.

The Mime slowly approached him, adjusting his white gloves.

“Ah...” the vial fell from his hand and shattered on the asphalt.

Steam seeped out of his body as his wounds healed completely. This came with a heavy lash back, but he could worry about that later.

First, he had to find a way to take down this mime, or if he was lucky, find a way to escape. Either way, he couldn’t die here.

Wait a minute, now that his hood had been taken off, on a closer look, this man... The dirty brown hair, deep brown eyes, and trimmed beards... This man really had a very striking resemblance to the walking dead, Noah Patel.

~

**Archway, Islington borough.**

“He’s been acting so strange lately. Quiet, observant, shivering every now and then. Pilot is quite the talkative, even though I don’t get all the words. He has never caught a cold or something, neither is he scared of anything; he once won a staring contest against a bulldog, and Pilot’s eyes are lateral!” Kyla paused for a moment, gently stroking Pilot’s feathers, her legs pumping up one after the other.

She flicked the dangling strands of hair over her face backwards, and sunk her jaw into her cupped palm, “What do I do? Is he sick?”

The blue-haired Freya Hall, tipped her glasses down and stared straight into Kyla’s eyes, “You do know I’m not that kind of doctor, right? Just take him to a vet.”

“I already did. We’ve gone to three vets this morning already.”

“Okay. What did they say?”

Kyla took a glance at the Parrot on her lap and rubbed the center of his head with her index finger. Pilot cooed and shrunk in satisfaction.

A sigh escaped her lips, “He went feral.”

Freya scrunched her brows, “Feral... As in?”

“He attacked the vets, all three of them. Once they try to touch him, he’d fly around their heads and scratch at their hair with his claws.”

“Ooh...” Freya leaned back, a little sympathetic for the doctors that now had claw scars etched on their skulls. She was also taken aback by Pilot’s irrational behavior. He was the smartest bird she had ever come in contact with. Attacking people was never his thing.

“Did they do or say something to upset him?” She asked.

Kyla shook her head, “They were being so nice.”

“When did his strange behavior start?” Freya put her right hand forward, flicking her wrist back and forth.

Kyla caught on and placed Pilot on her palm, “Yesterday—Oh, that reminds me, I had this absurd dream...”

She explained what she saw in the dream and how she was airborne for a while.

Freya narrowed her eyes, “And you didn’t bother to mention this yesterday?”

“Sorry. I completely forgot. The whole Gustav case kept me occupied,” Kyla rubbed the back of her neck.

“Hm-hmm,” Freya simply nodded as she observed the Parrot for a while. Everything looked fine to her. It didn’t stop her from probing further though, “What’s wrong, Pilot?”

The beautiful bird sized her up a bit before extending one of his petite wings towards Kyla, “M-Monster.”

“Huh?” Kyla leaned forward.

Freya remained unmoved. She asked him another question, “Monster, who, Kyla?”

Pilot cooed.

“Why?”

He didn’t say anything.

Kyla hummed and thought about it for a while. A not-so-surprising realization dawned on her and she raised her head, “Oh... Or is it because he saw me floating close to the ceiling yesterday?”

Freya wanted to say something, but Kyla shook her head, “Nah, I doubt it. He was asleep when I woke up.”

“Well, he must have seen something to be this shaken. Something happened while you were asleep and he saw it. The shock probably put him to sleep,” Freya shrugged at the end, to show that she wasn’t too sure of her theory.

“Ugh...” Kyla threw her head backwards. “We’ll never know what happened during that time. He’s the only witness and he won’t say anything.”

“Take it easy on him. He’s still in shock.”

Pilot wasn’t your everyday Parrot, that only said a few words, phrases, or some incoherent mumbo-jumbo. He could speak very fluently for a bird… Most of the time. He had been the one keeping Kyla company ever since she lost her brother many years ago.

She named him Pilot, in respect to her twin brother’s aspiration.

The bird also seemed to never age. No one knew how or why. Kyla had seen more weird things in her life, an immortal, fluently speaking Parrot only added to the list.

“Can you read minds?” Freya asked out of the blue.

Kyla raised a brow, “Huh? Why would I be able to do that?”

“Well, you can fly now, you also dodged a bullet back at Walthamstow. I’m only considering a possibility,” the therapist shrugged.

“To be honest, I’ve been seriously trying to convince myself that those were just mere illusions, but they’re not. It’s just weird, I’m not a Phenom, my parents are completely normal, then where did these strange abilities come from?” Kyla rubbed her glabella.

Freya sat back, “You did say you’ve never fallen ill and your skin is almost impenetrable, ever since you were little. Maybe you were born with the gift.”

“Gift?” Kyla scoffed. “I’m a freak, Freya.”

“No, you’re not...” Freya dropped her eyelids. “We have people out there breathing fire, shaking cities as they walk, and you simply dodged a bullet. The disparity is too large to call you a freak.”

Kyla pouted her lips, “Was that supposed to encourage me or what?”

Freya smiled tersely, “On a serious note though, I think it’s high time we looked into what you can actually do. Who knows, it might just be what we need to save Noah.”

Kyla stared at Freya with melancholic eyes, “Thank you for being so cool with all of this. Other people would have freaked out if they knew what I was capable of.”

“We’re friends, what did you expect? Stop being so sentimental,” Freya wasn’t moved.

They kept talking about random things till Alan showed up. He joined in the conversation too.

Amaya had told them to be on standby. There had been a recent sighting of someone with a close resemblance to Noah Patel earlier today. She had sent some of her men to the town to check it out.

Another fifteen minutes passed by and a call came in through the landline.

Freya picked it up, “Hello?”

It was Jamal’s voice, “We found him.”

# **~ CHAPTER 20 ~**

**Highgate, Islington borough.**

*I should have died from that...*

*The impact force alone should have crushed my bones and splattered my innards on the road. It was a fucking truck and I was just a man.*

*Well, at that very point in time, I was more of a freak than a man. If I hadn’t taken my first dose that day, I wouldn’t have survived.*

*I was reluctant about consuming such a weird substance, which was said to make me superhuman. It wasn’t like I doubted its effect. I mean, Deana Breigh and her cohorts are living proof. I wasn’t just comfortable with having to consume a vial at least once a week. And if I didn’t, not only would the abnormal abilities fade from one’s body, the mind would start to implode on itself and one could die from the mental chaos.*

*I only took it that day as a failsafe, just in case Kyla went haywire on the date or something. At least, that was what Mr. A said. If she had attacked me, I would have had a means to protect myself.*

*I know, I know, she was my date, and, even though... Sigh... I really liked her. I still like her.*

*The plan was simple: Get closer to her and bring her to the forte, so we could use her DNA to perfect the vials that made us Abnormals. There wouldn’t be the need to consume a vial every week or so. We’d be perfect and reign supreme over the Phenoms. Albeit, Mr. A always ranted about a different scheme or something, but I never paid any attention to it.*

*Oh, and yes, I work with the Cascaders. That should be obvious already.*

*Everything was going on as planned until I got hit by that truck. That wasn’t supposed to happen. For that to have happened, I could only deduce two things:*

*It was probably done by someone that had a beef with the Cascaders or personally with me. But with the kind of power I held in the organisation, it was stupid for anyone to try that.*

*The second reason that came to me, which still sounds unbelievable, was that I got betrayed by my own men.*

*Either way, after managing to survive the truck accident, I found somewhere to spend the night and tend to my wounds.*

*Then an old rival gang resurfaced and were after my life. It was Gustav Giovanni and his men. I know we didn’t leave things on good terms but why come after me now? It was also a silly move, since my mum could easily send our entire arsenal after him.*

*Or was it just a ploy to distract me from what was really going on?*

*I couldn’t tell, especially with the few Abnormals I’ve faced in the last few days. Gustav knows nothing about the existence of Abnormals, except the Cascaders. Someone from the Cascaders must have hired him to come after me and reinforced him with a few Abnormals.*

*Knowing that I couldn’t do this alone, I left a clue for Kyla. Hopefully, she’s able to deduce it in time and make it here before I die. Even if she can’t control her abilities, she can’t die. Her instincts would kick in and eliminate any threat before her. All I’d have to do is hide.*

*I also have to find a way to tell her about the Cascaders and Mr. A. She isn’t safe.*

*Sigh... I later had to break into a Cascaders’ base at Highgate and steal some vials. I couldn’t skip a dose or else I’d run mad.*

*Well, now, I might die either way. They’d sent The Mime.*

*I know, not a scary name, but his ability—which I’ve surmised out of my own knowledge—is annoying.*

~

Noah Patel clicked the side of his tape recorder, to save what he had just said. He had postponed doing this or writing it in a journal, because he never felt safe and there was no time.

Although, now was definitely not the best time to do something like that, he had to risk it before it was too late, or else all his efforts would have been in vain.

He was about standing up on the roof when a subtle grinding noise resounded in his ears. Still crouched down, he turned with a frown. His face relaxed and his eyes dilated as the water tank behind him started moving unnaturally.

Its four metal stands twisted and broke apart. Noah quickly bounced to his feet and took some steps back. The water tank was already in the air, groaning as it got compressed by... Transparent fingers?

Noah could see—though not vividly—the outline of large fingers around the shrinking tank. His mind clicked instantly and he deduced who was doing this.

*‘Shit! He found me already?’* he didn’t even wait for the tank to shrink further, or to look for where The Mime was standing; he turned on his heels and made a run for it... Again.

Yes, every attempt he’d made to run had been futile as The Mime would find a way to block his every path one way or the other. Noah wouldn’t even see it coming. He had also been holding back because of the innocent civilians around.

His brown eyes lit up as he caught the glimpse of a roof just up ahead. It was the roof of the same warehouse he had infiltrated earlier. Everyone that worked there had scattered throughout the town to find him. The warehouse would be empty, and more so, it contained more Abnormal vials—that was the only hope he had to beat this annoying mime.

Though, he had a disturbing thought that this would only give The Mime a territorial advantage, since it was an enclosed space. Noah would have nowhere to run.

As he planted his right boot on the edge of the roof, the water tank reached its compression limit and burst in a wide splash. He leaped off the roof, put his chest out and rotated his arms to propel him forward.

The exploding body of water washed across the roof and poured down the building.

Noah curled himself like a ball as he got in proximity to the aluminum roof. He punctured the roofing sheets rather easily, but the steel bars were a problem. Sure, he was able to dent and break through them due to the speed at which he fell and his enhanced body, but it was extremely painful—he broke in with his head.

He landed splat on the floor and remained there for five seconds. He endured the pain and pulled himself up whilst his head rang for a while.

He pulled his left shoulder joint back in place and staggered back till he met a wall. Amid his heavy pants, he scanned the warehouse with a stern gaze, marking the boxes that contained the vials he needed.

He sniffled as he reached for his pocket. He felt for the tape recorder; it was still in one piece. Then he took out the last vial he had on him, flicked its lid open and emptied its black, gooey contents down his throat. It was tasteless, making it easy to consume.

Once again, steam exuded his body. His fatigue and injuries were usurped from him and kept in a corner; they’d come back to haunt him when the dose wore off.

Like on cue, the warehouse door opened gradually and the mime, that was called The Mime, walked in with his hands in his pockets. He wasn’t the one pushing the door open.

Well, it was him, but not directly.

Noah surmised that he could bring his gestures to life. Just like how every mime knocks on invisible doors, or pulls an invisible rope. The Mime brought those into reality. He was only limited by his thoughts.

Even if Noah could understand his gestures, he couldn’t see The Mime’s psychic constructs. It was truly an annoying ability.

Noah just sighed as The Mime stopped and rested his left side on a pillar. Unlike The Mime, Noah’s Abnormal ability was more physical. He didn’t know what he could really do yet, but he could tell he was way stronger and faster than other Abnormals.

However, that wasn’t his innate ability. There was something else and he had to find out to have any chance at defeating The Mime.

*‘He’s mocking me,’* Noah clicked his teeth as The Mime just stood rested on the pillar, looking at him placidly, hands in pockets.

Noah fisted his hands and ran at the Mime.

It wasn’t a wise decision, he knew. But he didn’t have the time to just stand there and strategize. For one, time wasn’t on his side. The Mime might as well be buying time for the others to get here.

He also felt he could put The Mime in a corner by showing his superior strength and speed.

The Mime didn’t react even as Noah’s fist touched his nose. Instead, something suddenly popped up between them, and Noah was repulsed across the warehouse like a wacked ball of cricket.

Noah could easily tell that he was thrown back by a bubble. He twisted himself in mid air and landed on his feet, facing the Mime, who had stood straight, gesturing for Noah to come at him again.

*Huff...* Noah exhaled and shot forward again, whilst thinking, *‘He can create constructs without making gestures? Tch. Just when I thought he couldn’t be more annoying.’*

He quickened his pace as he didn’t go for a direct hit this time. He blitzed around the warehouse at the speed of sound, if not faster, because his movements had gotten blurry. He moved from corner to corner, pillar to pillar, while maintaining such speed.

Something was telling him to forcefully break through a wall and run but that’d only wear him down, and he didn’t have any more vials to rejuvenate his fatigue.

The Mime turned and turned, his eyes darting here and there as he tried to get a lock on Noah. He shrugged, pulled his hands out of his pockets and took a golfer’s stance.

He gently put his invisible golf stick near his invisible golf ball before taking a random shot.

*Whack! Whack! Whack!* The ball went, hitting and bouncing off any surface it touched.

Noah didn’t pay any attention to it as he finally got to a blind spot behind The Mime. But then he noticed that the golf ball was now moving as fast as him. He couldn’t see it, he could barely hear it.

Not taking any chances, he shot at The Mime, who had his right hand on his forehead as he traced the path of his golf ball.

Noah got in proximity and threw a punch at The Mime’s cervical spine, only for the unexpected to happen. The Mime shifted his head to the side, allowing Noah’s fist to slide across his shoulder.

In an instant, The Mime grabbed Noah’s hand and pulled it down. The latter’s wrist snapped like briskets. The Mime didn’t even give him any time to wallow in pain as he pulled Noah from behind and pushed him forward.

Noah didn’t see it but he felt it. The golf ball that he had avoided earlier, smashed into his face from nowhere. He staggered back to a near fall but forcefully stopped himself and ran to the side, away from The Mime.

His broken nose was dripping with blood, the pain poked at his nerves like he had been impaled with a thousand pins, but he had to endure it. His survival here meant the survival of many lives, if not the whole world.

As his wrist bones clicked back into place, he wiped off the blood from his nose with the back of his palm, while circling around and standing before The Mime, who flashed a smile at him.

*‘I thought he was a long and mid-ranged fighter. But he was fast enough to notice me from his blind spot, and that move... His hand to hand skills are good. Is this how I’m gonna die?’*

Noah couldn’t think of any good counter again. Just when he thought he could dazzle The Mime with speed, the latter made him look like an inexperienced sloth. Nothing was working. This wasn’t even a fight to begin with.

Noah was stronger when it came to brute force, but what good was that if he couldn’t even touch his target?

And the more it dragged on, the more his body would wear down.

He was about moving towards a box of vials, when The Mime pulled out an invisible arrow from its quiver behind him, placed it in his bow and took a shot at Noah, who caught it out of pure instincts.

Noah frowned, snapping the arrow in two. He could tell that The Mime was simply mocking him. The arrow was fired in a very obvious path, making it easy for Noah to catch it.

The Mime surprised Noah by reaching for something in the air and dashing at him. The Mime raised whatever he was holding and swung it down at his opponent. Noah reacted quickly by throwing his forearms before him.

It was hard and heavy.

Though he successfully blocked it, the force surrounding it threw him a few meters back. He landed rigidly on his feet and moved sideways as The Mime swung at him again.

As The Mime missed, he struck the floor with his invisible weapon. The concrete cracked.

Fixating his eyes on the radius of the crack, Noah’s eyes went wide, *‘A mallet!’*

He balanced on his feet and lunged at the Mime before he could raise his big weapon.

Still holding onto his mallet, The Mime jumped back to dodge a punch from Noah. The air rippled as Noah’s fist shot through the space.

The Mime turned round in his backward jump. He used his landing force to lift the mallet, which he brandished and flung at Noah.

Noah sidestepped, grabbed the handle by instincts and flung the weapon back at its conjurer. For the first since the fight began, The Mime was surprised. His eyes went wide as the mallet spun at him faster than he had thrown it. He quickly raised his right hand and dispersed it to nothing before it hit him.

He could have dodged it but Noah was already coming at him from the side; it’d have been a distraction to evade the mallet.

Or maybe he should have dodged it after all and gained some distance, because as soon as he dropped his right hand and made to turn towards Noah, something dense and heavy pressed into his face out of nowhere. His face was pushed in like dough and the force of the collision shot him back like a bullet. He broke through a concrete pillar and crashed against a wall.

Retracting his blood-stained fist, Noah creased his brows as The Mime landed on his feet and dusted his clothes after taking a skull-shattering hit to the face. The Mime’s durability almost made Noah sigh and give up. He put his all into that punch.

There was a big noticeable change from The Mime though. Not only was he bleeding from his nose and lips, he was grinning widely like a crazed man. He clawed his fingers and smeared his blood around his face in no specific pattern.

Then he raised both hands and flicked them at Noah.

Noah felt a chill run down his spine at The Mime’s gesture. He could feel... Death.

The warehouse shook. Loud grinding noises erupted from everywhere.

Noah’s instincts went haywire. He had been able to sense The Mime’s constructs only at the last moment, which was very risky. But that was one construct at a time. This time around, he could sense them from everywhere.

They were inching closer. He had to move, he had to move! But to where and when? Timing was also key.

*‘Oh, fuck it!’* he snapped as he sighted a few vials rolling on the ground a few meters beside him. Their box must have broken during the course of the fight.

He moved towards them.

It had only been three seconds since The Mime flicked his fingers.

As he dove for the vials, something spinning flew over him. Another of the same construct grazed his back and calves, tearing through his muscles easily. He deduced that they were spinning discs with very sharp edges; they also seemed to be made of metal.

He grabbed two vials on his descent and flipped into a forward roll. He wasn’t given a chance to uncap them as the sharp discs diced at his body from all sides.

He was going to die if he didn’t take another dose. Without thinking, he threw the vials in his mouth and crushed the glass with his teeth, chewing on them and swallowing their contents. The glass shards pierced every corner of his mouth but the reward was befitting of the anguish.

The black liquid washed down his throat and dissolved into his systems. A thicker form of steam seeped out of his body this time and he stopped.

The air rippled as the spinning discs took a sharp turn and came for him at once.

*Whoosh!*

He jumped out of the steam with a fist forward, facing the sharp discs head on. A transparent vibrational field emanated around his right fist and he punched through all of them. Wait, no. They got erased by his touch.

Noah didn’t understand what he had just done. He didn’t even know what drove him to jump at them, but the adrenaline rushing through his body wouldn’t let him stop. He had to keep moving.

The Mime’s eyes dilated as he saw his discs vanish without a trace. Noah was also coming at him, and this time around, he could barely see him as a blur. The latter had gotten faster.

In panic, The Mime erected spiked walls and pushed them at his opponent, while constructing a dome of the hardest material he could think of around him. He wasn’t taking any chances.

The walls dissipated to nothing as soon as they got in contact with Noah’s right fist. The man just kept moving, punching and erasing the dome around the Mime. Not like he knew there was a dome there anyway.

It all happened so fast that The Mime didn’t even know that his dome had been erased. The last thing he saw was a glimpse of Noah’s curled fist.

*Bam!*

Noah drilled his first through The Mime’s face... Literally. He couldn’t stop his massive momentum, his fist went through The Mime’s face and came out the other end whilst in motion.

His bloodied hand went through a wall of the warehouse before he could stop. His inertia alone blew a wide hole through the wall.

He staggered outside and got bathed by the mild sunlight that afternoon.

*Huff... Huff... Huff...*

His breath was heavy and slow. He gently retracted his hand from The Mime’s head, blood, brain matter and his squashed eyes splashing on the ground.

Anyone would puke from that but Noah wasn’t just anyone at that moment. He was so angry, frustrated, and in so much pain, that he couldn’t feel a thing. He just wanted to keep going.

Erasing non-living objects, albeit physical or abstract, was his innate Abnormal ability. And perhaps, he hadn’t been able to unlock it yet since he hadn’t been pushed to the brink like this. Taking doses upon doses in such a short span of time must have triggered it, and it seemed to have overwhelmed his sense of reasoning at that moment.

However, as he staggered back with a blood dripping hand and steaming body, a black Toyota jeep screeched to a stop before him.

The first person to alight the car in haste was a blonde lady with blue constellation eyes and...

Noah’s face relaxed as he muttered, “Kyla?”