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**THE IMPERIAL GUARD CHRONICLES: CONUNDRUM**

# **CHAPTER ONE**

̴ Crimson Eyes in the Fog ̴

“Ahh… Clockshire. Another day, another chase…” Altair Blackwood groused as usual, holstering his two revolvers.

He gazed down through the small window of the plane and creased his brows, his vision slightly obscured by the puffing smoke and floating soot.

Retracting his deep crimson eyes from the window, he sat back and sighed, “You know… It’s still very surprising how we’ve survived this long under this dense pollution.”

“Would you please, stop whining and get on with your mission? The Ivory Claw members are getting away!” a feminine voice announced through the speakers, from the cockpit.

Altair reluctantly put on a pair of black leather gloves, “Shouldn’t we wait for Gwen? I can’t fight a dozen men alone. And I hear 90% of the Ivory Claw possess Blessings.”

“Not a dozen men. Just 11 of them.”

Altair pinched his nose bridge, “What’s the difference?”

“Just get on with it!” the voice snapped.

At the same time, the passenger door opened automatically, whilst Alistair was getting thrown to his feet by the chair. He balanced himself immediately, gazing at the chair with a slight frown, ignoring the intense wind that funnelled into the jet.

“I told you to stop doing that,” he muttered to no one in particular, his brows twitching at the chair that had just ejected him.

“Just go already.”

He shook his head and cracked his neck, “Fine. Let’s just get this over with.”

He flaunted a leg over the edge and pushed himself forward, free falling from a distance of 5,000 ft. The wind violently slapped against his body, causing his black coat to flutter noisily.

‘Shit,’ he quickly covered his mouth and nose as he dove through a cloud of smoke.

Other smoke clouds filled the air, almost creating a second layer of clouds beneath the firmament. But this was a norm to see in a city like Clockshire, and most other cities in Gearloom.

Altair wanted to cough as he exited the smoke cloud, but he could barely part his lips under such intense wind. His eyes were wide open though, his deep crimson irises fixated on a part of the mechanical city below.

His descent was quite rapid, planting his boots on the side of a skyscraper in less than a minute. Putting his gathered momentum and inertia to use, he took a leap toward another skyscraper. He went back and forth, descending in an uncoordinated zigzag, until he made a touchdown on the concrete roof of a building.

Without a moment of rest, he vaulted off the edge of the building and landed in an alley.

Eleven men in ragged leather clothing came to a halt as they saw him land a few metres away. Their clothes weren’t dirty or worn out; they were just designed to give off this ‘thug life’ look. You know, patches and all that.

One of them narrowed his eyes to scrutinise the figure before them. His eyes were immediately attracted to the silver badge attached to the left side of the man’s long coat. On the badge was a rather simple design—an eye, but the lashes were made of gear teeth.

“Shit! It’s an Imperial Guard!” he panicked with dilated eyes. “There could be more of them. Turn around!”

His cohorts had already taken to their heels before he gave out the warning. He felt betrayed as he turned to run.

Watching the men run for their lives, Altair heaved a long, relieved sigh and gently leaned against a wall, “Whew… I can finally catch my breath.”

Plummeting from such a ridiculous height without a parachute and breaking his landing with the skyscrapers took a lot out of him. He had to act poised before the Ivory Claw gang, or else he would lose his steeze. He couldn’t lose face as an Imperial Guard.

It had been six seconds since the gang ran the other way.

Altair took his time in drawing both revolvers, flicking out their cylinders to check the loaded tungsten bullets, before clicking them back in place.

With that done, he moved.

…

The buildings in this area were quite interconnected, creating winding alleyways. It was like a maze.

The gang must have chosen to elope here simply because of that, so that they could disorient any Imperial guard that would try to come after them. But now, they were the ones regretting that decision. Running away in panic had made them lose their sense of direction—they were lost in the alley-maze, ensnared in their own trap.

“This way!”

“No, it’s that way!”

“We missed the turn!”

“No--”

As they argued amongst themselves, a subtle, hot gust of wind blew past them, settling in front of them.

The wind was hot, but a cold chill coursed through their bones.

Standing before them, once again, was the silver-haired Altair Blackwood, his deep crimson eyes holding a hint of mischief.

He smiled tersely, raising his revolvers, “Who gave you lot the permission to run away?”

They all took a step back. They could tell that this man—as casual as he seemed—wasn’t someone to be trifled with.

He sighed, “You know how this goes. On your knees, hands behind your backs… something along those lines.”

“Wait… You came alone?” one of the men summoned enough courage to ask, his pride causing him to turn deaf ears to his survival instincts.

Altair scoffed, twirling his revolvers, “Of course not. Heaven and Nevaeh are always with me.”

A short moment of silence enveloped the alley as the gang stared at the Imperial Guard in disbelief. He had just given names to some pieces of metal. To them, he was a crazy man.

“I say we stand and fight. He might be strong, but there’s ten—eleven of us,” one of them suggested in a whisper.

They all agreed with a nod and faced Altair with fisted hands.

“Yeah, right. That stupid ego and confidence. All criminals are the same…” Altair muttered stoically, pointing his revolvers forward, his index fingers twitching. “But then I do this…”

*Bang!!*

He took a simultaneous shot, the tungsten bullets whizzing out of the barrels in a flare of condensed heat.

They lodged into the shoulder of their targets, burned bright red and came out of the other side, moving toward their next victims.

Two seconds flickered by and four men were down, crying in pain as their shoulders and blood burned. It was as though that part of their body was melting.

The others shuddered in shock and fear.

They had the numbers advantage? It was just one man? How wrong were they.

They didn’t even give it much thought before bolting away from Altair, abandoning their downed comrades.

Altair was about to chase after them when the hairs behind his neck went taut. He relaxed with a nervous smile, “Poor guys. They should have just stayed with me.”

Little had he rested, when rushing footsteps filled his ears. Almost immediately, he saw the men running toward him in cold sweat. Even when they saw him still standing there, they didn’t lessen their pace. Not one bit. For whatever or whoever they were running from, they were much more terrifying.

However, there was no one coming after them, just a small cloud of white smoke.

# **CHAPTER TWO**

̴ Through the Smoke and Shadows ̴

The white smoke continued pouring in from a bend in the alley, slowly drifting toward the running men, reaching their waists.

Noticing that the men showed no sign of stopping, Altair raised his revolvers once again and shot two gang members down. Their thighs burned red hot.

This forced the remaining men to halt in their tracks and turn around aimlessly. There was no longer a place to run. They were trapped between two impediments, one more dreadful than the other.

By now, the white smoke had filled the entire alley, rising high above their heads.

They wanted to cover their nose and mouths, to avoid getting choked by the burnt carbon. Albeit, the smoke had no smell or harmful effects. It was just damp and vision impairing. It was like mist… Like a surreal fog.

Discombobulated and scared for their lives, the men finally decided to stick together, holding hands, so as not to get lost in the fog.

But then came a whoosh, immediately accosted by the sound of a splash. A simultaneous yell followed.

No one could see what had happened, but those that were splashed with whatever had spilled, shuddered in fright. They could sniff its metallic smell, they could taste the saltiness. It was blood, their comrades’ blood.

Those that had yelled repulsed from each other as they had just lost a limb each. Whoever had attacked them, had made sure to server the hands they held together.

The fog shifted as the silhouettes of a pair of hands loomed behind two other men. The hands grabbed their heads and bashed them together with so much force, a subtle crack emanated from their skulls. They dropped to the ground instantly, their lights turned out.

More yells and thuds resonated across the fog as the pair of hands moved in a flurry.

“Just about… now!” Altair stared at the second hand on his analogue wrist watch, and, as though his words were a trigger, the ‘fog’ cleared rapidly.

Standing buoyantly amidst the cleared ‘fog’, was a 5 '7 lady in a dirty brown tweed suit and a fine pair of brown trousers that stopped at her ankles. Her formal outfit was overlaid with a pitch black, full-length trench coat, matching the colour of her patent leather shoes.

She stood poised amidst the unconscious men, her head slightly cocked to the side, wisps of smoke swirling out of her smoke pipe. Her deep grey newsboy cap casted a shadow over her eyes, but that wasn’t enough to hide her deep black irises that spelt nothing but scrutiny.

Taking her right hand out of her trousers’ pocket to steady her smoke pipe as she took a puff, she squinted her eyes a bit, “Al, is that you?”

“The one and only,” Altair gave a terse bow, tipping his illusory hat.

She straightened her neck and walked over to him, “Why did you take so long to handle them? They even had the chance to escape.”

“I was only getting a kick out of their confusion. Can’t let it be like the same old chase almost every day,” he answered, holstering Heaven and Nevaeh. “It gets boring, you know?”

“But this is not a game, Al. It’s our job,” she reminded him with a serious expression on her face, standing before him. There was a wide difference of six inches in their height, and yet, she looked more intimidating.

“Ah, Gwen. I know,” he let out a soft sigh. “But where’s the fun in that? It’s not like we actually get to use our Blessings against a real threat.”

“Well, you have a point there,” Gwendolyn reasoned, stretching her black bowtie.

“I mean, look at your dramatic entrance just now…” Altair pointed at the unconscious men behind her. “You shook eight men to their bones and took down five of them in less than a minute. I’m sure you enjoyed that.”

A small smile escaped the side of her lips, “Oh, I very well did.”

“Wait…” Altair creased his brows as he realised an oddity. “There were eight men running back at me. I shot two, you knocked down five…”

“… There should be one more,” Gwendolyn completed.

“Exactly--”

At that moment… *Bang!*

A shot rang out loud.

Gwendolyn had half-turned, steam wafting around her left index finger and thumb, a .44 magnum bullet stuck in between.

Altair took a glance at the bullet and then they locked eyes, before turning toward the other end of the alley.

The missing man was standing right there with an old revolver in hand. His mouth was left open agape as he stared at Gwendolyn, mystified and horrified. The expression on her face was so casual, as though she hadn’t just caught a bullet that was shot at her blind spot.

Even among other *Divines*, not everyone could come out and boast of catching a bullet. The speed and perception needed was just ridiculous.

“Oh, you must be the last guy that mysteriously disappeared!” Gwendolyn raised her voice a little, making sure that he heard her from that distance. She dropped the bullet on Altair’s waiting palm, her gaze fixated on the last guy, “I guess you’re here to turn yourself in, then?”

As though he had all the time in the world, the man shifted his gaze to the ground, where his fallen comrades lay. He couldn’t even tell if they were dead or not.

The reasonable thing to do would have been to nod and turn himself in, if he had some sense—if he didn’t want to turn out like the rest of his gang.

But no… ego! Or just plain foolishness in this case.

He raised his head and gritted his teeth, his eyes gradually glowing bright red.

“So… I guess that’s a no, huh?” Gwendolyn slowly raised her left hand.

*Bang!*

Another gunshot echoed throughout the alley.

Gwendolyn quickly held onto her newsboy cap before it flew off her head from the explosive force of the gunshot. She adjusted her short auburn hair that was weaved into braids behind her, and pressed the cap firmly on her head.

The last man now had a hole in his head, his eyes still glowing as he staggered like a drunken man.

*Tick… Tock…*

Gwendolyn turned to face Altair with a raised brow, who was busy holstering Nevaeh.

He could feel her gaze, cajoling him to look up. Crimson met pitch black and he smiled tersely, “What? I couldn’t let you have all the fun—And I know, I know. It’s not a game of some sort.”

She shook her head, pointing at her cap, “You almost put a hole in it. It’s quite expensive, you know?”

“How would you know? It was given to you as a gift,” Altair looked over her shoulders. The man hadn’t died yet. He was still swaying on his feet, moving forward, his eyes and the bullet in his head glowing brighter.

Gwendolyn stood beside him and turned when she sensed the odd occurrence, “It was gifted to me by Rowan. THE Rowan. You should know that, as a noble, he wouldn’t go for something cheap.”

“Yes, but of course,” Altair resisted the urge to roll his eyes at the mention of Rowan. Then he pointed at the man lumbering toward them, his glowing head pulsing like a ticking bomb, “So… About that.”

*Tick… Tock…*

“He’s about to explode. I can feel the radiation on my skin,” Gwendolyn deduced, caressing her honey-sand face. “I wonder why he ran with the rest of them when he could have simply done this. It matches your Blessing.”

“I know, right? I’m almost jealous,” Altair stepped forward, taking off his gloves and tossing them over his right shoulder. Gwendolyn caught them with a slight frown.

He stopped the man by placing a hand on his head, trying to absorb the heat energy in his head.

“Eh? Why can’t I…” Altair was left puzzled for a moment there as he failed to accomplish the task. “No way… This is… It feels quite intoxicating. Nuclear radiation? But how?”

“What?” Gwendolyn’s brows twitched.

*Tick… Tock…*

“I can absorb it, but it requires a lot of concentration and time, because of its toxic nature. The latter we don’t have to spare,” he muttered, trying his best to keep his composure.

But then, the man’s head got squishy like a blob. He was going to explode right there and then.

*Tick…*

“Hand him over!” Gwendolyn hollered.

“There’s no time!” Altair would have said, but then that would mean they had a few seconds to spare, which they didn’t.

*Tock!*

He flung the man upward at the very last nanosecond.

The man had barely gotten to the roof of a one-story building, when he exploded widely, quaking the earth in a ten-metre radius, shattering the windows of nearby buildings.

Fearful screams filled the street.

Altair and Gwendolyn were at a considerably safe distance from the explosion, but they knew they had messed up either way.

“Well, shit,” Gwendolyn flicked at the front of her cap.

Watching the smoke cloud gradually dissipate into the already smoke-filled atmosphere, Altair rubbed the back of his neck, “The Captain’s not gonna like this one bit.”

# **CHAPTER THREE**

~ Echoes of the Explosion ~

Gwendolyn placed her elbow on the car’s armrest, a side of her face pressed against her fist as she took in the flitting view of Clockshire.

The air was thick with a blend of coal smoke, this metallic tang, and a faint scent of oil. At either side of the cobblestone road, buildings rose like mechanical giants, their facades adorned with intricate gears, cogs, and rivets. Brass spires pierced the sky, crowned with weathered weathervanes shaped like clockwork birds.

She caught sight of a few airships that drifted lazily, punctuating the rising smoke and steam.

This was a usual sight for anyone in the city, but she decided to focus on them, so as to take her mind off something. Something…

As though Altair could read her mind, he called her attention, his eyes fixed on the road, his hands firm on the steering wheel, “You know we can’t ignore this forever, right? We should at least come up with an alibi.”

“It’s no use. You know how stubborn the captain can be,” she replied immediately, as though she had been waiting for him to instigate the conversation.

Altair let out a tense grunt, “I know, I know. But we still have to tell him something. The explosion is already all over the radio.”

“Well, we’ll just tell him that we were ambushed by the last man—not ignoring the fact that we didn’t know he possessed a Blessing—and he just… kinda… exploded?” her voice trailed off at the end of her sentence, her brows furrowing in uncertainty.

Altair stole a glance at her and shook his head as he focused on the road, “The captain might be stubborn, but he’s not a blockhead.”

They got to an intersection and the car came to a momentary halt at the single gesture from the traffic warden.

Donned in a deep-blue stylish uniform and white gloves, the traffic warden happily gestured for the vehicles at the other side to drive by. His white gloves had changed colour. His right glove—which he used to direct the moving vehicles—shone green, while his left hand—that was opened wide in the direction of the stopped vehicles—flickered red.

Watching the vehicles honk and drive by, Gwendolyn retorted, “Well, do you have a better idea?”

Altair let out a sigh, dismissing the street vendors that stood by the rolled-down window, “Not really.”

“Then we either go with my story, or think of something better before we get to the station,” she shrugged.

“Hm. It shouldn’t be so hard. We have time,” Altair shrugged along with her.

“I know, right?” she smiled tersely.

“Finally…” Altair muttered under his breath as the traffic warden’s left glove turned green.

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“You two put innocent lives in danger at the expense of your nonchalance!” a brown-bearded man hollered, slamming his palm on the desk. The office shook mildly to the slam.

Altair Blackwood ruffled his silver hair, glancing around the office to avoid eye contact.

Gwendolyn stood beside him with her hands lost in the pockets of her trench coat, her smoke pipe unlit. She wasn’t shaken by the man’s fury, but she dared not talk back at that moment. For one, there was this subtle inundating aura that spewed from the angry man, making it a little difficult to move.

More importantly, he ranked higher as an Imperial Guard; the highest in the district.

She simply glanced down at the golden nameplate on the desk, everything on it dishevelled from the man’s slam.

*Captain Thaddeus Claive*, was written with a black, bold font on the nameplate.

‘Or maybe we should have said we didn’t see him?’ she pondered, remembering how they went with her alibi when the captain questioned them, seemingly incurring his wrath.

After letting all of his frustration out, Captain Claive sat down on his high swivelling chair, assuming this domineering demeanour, “So… How did it happen? That explosion was something that could have been easily curbed by either of you.”

Altair straightened his neck and answered, “I’m not sure what the guy’s Blessing was, but he could somehow produce nuclear energy. I guess he could shoot them as ocular beams, but I shot him in the head just as he was about to.”

Captain Claive’s brows twitched, “So, in one way, you triggered the explosion.”

Altair smiled wryly, “Let’s not focus on the little details, Captain. I might have been able to absorb his energy, but my body isn’t used to such harsh radiation, and there was no time for Gwen to intervene. I didn’t have a choice but to toss him up. And so…. Yeah… That’s pretty much it.”

The captain leaned forward, placing his hands on the desk as he stared at the two of them, scrutinising any slight shift in their emotions.

Ten seconds flitted by and he cleared his throat, “Hmm… I still feel you could have handled the situation better, but we digress. You should find some time to go shopping, specifically for something classy. Not too fancy, but appropriate for a formal gathering.”

“Uh, why?” Altair and Gwendolyn chorused.

Captain Claive sat back, “Kreel Industries is holding a conference tonight.”

“Oh, come on. Another one?” Gwendolyn didn’t hide her irritation at all, rolling her eyes to the ceiling. “That’s like the fourth one this month alone.”

Altair simply sighed and accepted his fate. They couldn’t say no.

“We’ve been assigned to guard the venue, considering how many failed assassinations Dr. Maelstrom has been through these last few months. But we have to be discreet about it; that’s why we’ll be attending as guests,” Captain Claive informed curtly, bringing his fingers together.

Gwendolyn took out her right hand from her pocket and scratched her chin with a finger, “Will we at least be getting paid?”

Captain Claive’s eyelids lowered, “Lyn, this is Dr. Maelstrom Kreel we’re talking about. A prestigious man of science that has brought Clockshire this far in technological advancements…”

There was a brief moment of silence between the three of them. Altair and Gwendolyn locked eyes.

Captain Claive rubbed his hands with a chuckle, “Of course we’re getting paid.”

# **CHAPTER FOUR**

~ A Bet too Far ~

“You know what? 20 Solis that they get suspended, for at least a day,” a vibrant young lady said in smiles, reaching for her shirt’s breast pocket.

The young man seated on the desk across from her, ruffled his brown hair and answered with little to no interest, “I doubt the captain will go that far. Maybe a few harsh words or two. They are, after all, his favourites.”

“Hey, the captain treats all of us fairly,” the lady responded with creased brows, taking out a dull green note. A picture of Gearloom’s president was etched on one side of the money, while the country’s insignia was on the other side—a flux of interlocked gears.

“Have you seen the way he relates with Gwen? Sometimes it’s as though he fears her or something,” the stoic young man said with no change in emotion. He was just speaking facts.

“Don’t say that, Elijah. You know that Gwen is an ano—ugh, just forget it already. I don’t like talking about it,” she let out a heavy sigh, swaying the money in her hand aimlessly.

He simply shrugged, “Okay, then. 20 Solis if you’re wrong, right?”

Her warm smile returned, “Yes. And what will you drop if I’m right?”

He managed to twitch his lips to form a small smile as he answered, “I’ll double it.”

His smile dwindled immediately after.

The young lady couldn’t help but scoff, “Don’t go back on your words when the time comes, Elijah.”

The door to the captain’s office creaked open, Altair and Gwendolyn walking out one after the other.

Closing the door with much care, Altair turned and asked, “How much do you think Dr. Kreel is willing to pay each of us?”

“I don’t know, but I’m sure it’s something big,” Gwendolyn smirked, already daydreaming the kind of weapon she’d get next. She was so lost in thoughts that she almost stumbled on the translucent porcelain glass wall—one of the walls that separated the wide station into cubicles.

Altair had to pull her back, “I can’t believe you took up the job just because of the money.”

“Money makes the world go round, Al,” she nudged his shoulder, before noticing the people in the cubicle she had almost slammed herself into. Her brows curled up under her Newsboy cap, “Oh… It’s Elijah and Emily.”

“Took you guys long enough,” the vibrant Emily muttered, adjusting her posture on the desk.

Gwendolyn and Altair walked in through the open door.

Altair and Elijah gave each other a nod, while Gwendolyn answered Emily, “You know how Captain Claive is. We had to stand and watch him let off some steam.”

“Wait… That’s it? No punishment?” Emily asked with a raised brow, almost disappointed.

A small smile formed on Elijah’s lips.

“Yeah. I guess it’s because of the conference holding tonight,” Altair answered with a shrug.

A brief moment of serenity filled the cubicle as Elijah stretched his open palm toward Emily, who pouted.

Altair and Gwendolyn locked eyes, then they looked back and forth from Emily to Elijah, and vice versa.

Emily stood up begrudgingly, her golden-blonde hair falling behind her shoulders. She walked over to Elijah’s desk in five steps and handed him the 20 Solis bill.

“Nice doing business with you,” Elijah quipped, a smile, or an expression of victory, nonexistent.

But his cohort were already used to this. They could tell his mood through other means.

Gwendolyn realised what just transpired before them and frowned slightly, “You guys placed a bet on us?”

“And you wanted us to get punished?” Altair shook his head at Emily.

The blonde lady simply shrugged with a terse smile, “Just a short suspension. Besides, like you always say, Altair… Let’s not focus on the little details.”

She walked back to her desk, uncoupling one more button on her white shirt. She hopped on the desk and let out a pained sigh. 20 Solis was quite a lot.

Elijah quickly chipped in before Altair or Gwendolyn could talk back, “Concerning the conference, the captain briefed us about it earlier. It would seem Dr. Kreel only requested for our squad in this district.”

“Just the four of us?” Altair raised a brow.

The Episton district housed quite a number of squads, and most of them were 2-Halo Imperial Guards, and above. In order to protect someone of Dr. Kreel’s status more efficiently, hiring more squads would have made more sense. At least, to Altair’s sense of reasoning.

“The captain too, I guess,” Emily shrugged. She then raised her head and faced the ceiling, her usual vibrant demeanour eloping her for a brief moment, “He also mentioned that a squad from the Cogsworth district will be working with us too.”

Altair let out a sigh of discomfort, while Gwendolyn rubbed her forehead to quell her irritation.

“Yeah, we reacted the same way too,” Emily could tell how they were feeling without dropping her head. She lowered her head either way, “But it has been made official. The Rivet squad will be working with us.”

“Oh, for the love of God…” Altair muttered, taking a seat behind Elijah on the desk.

Even Elijah looked discomforted at the mention of the Rivet Squad. That was just how bad the situation was.

“Maybe this wasn’t worth the money after all…” Gwendolyn sighed, fiddling with her smoke pipe. She took a step back and half-turned toward the open door, “Oh well, I better go buy something fit for the occasion. It’s evening already.”

“Want a ride?” Altair proposed, reaching for his car keys.

“Nah, I’m good. I need the walk, to assess my thoughts so I don’t snap at the sight of the Rivets,” she answered curtly and exited the cubicle.

“She’s definitely going to snap alright,” Emily scoffed, watching Gwendolyn snake through the other cubicles. They were all aware of how short Gwendolyn’s temper was. She wasn’t nicknamed the *‘Feisty Damsel’* for no reason.

“Yeah…” Altair sighed with a smile. “Tonight’s going to be a disaster.”

# **CHAPTER FIVE**

~ Twilight in Clockshire ~

The streets of Episton buzzed lively that evening. Street vendors paraded the sidewalks on their unicycles, and other mechanical gadgets that whirred and clicked, showcasing their various goods.

Gwendolyn made sure to avoid any kind of physical contact with them as she walked down the street, her black trench coat swaying along. Only a simple brush could cost her quite a few valuables; her wallet for example.

Having been a victim of pickpockets and con vendors in her early years as a cadet, her body had grown instinctively aware of the shady environment.

Taking out a lighter from her pocket, she noticed the orange sun forming a tangent on the horizon, spewing its warm glow across the city. It would have been a more calming and beautiful scenery if the sky wasn’t clouded by smoke and steam, if the incessant honking of vehicles and grinding of machines would let one stay focused enough to take in the divine artistry.

But this was Clockshire; life was different.

*Flick!*

Gwendolyn put on her lighter and placed the flame close to the end of her smoke pipe. She inhaled while lighting and holding down the carb, allowing smoke to fill the stern. Then she released the carb while inhaling, to allow air to enter the stem. The lit smoke found its way into her mouth and she let out a puff.

“Sigh…” she slipped her hands into the pockets of her trench coat and continued her stroll down the street, her mind whirling in thoughts.

‘Should I go for a gown, or a skirt and shirt?’

She crossed the street at the sight of a female clothes store. She normally would have opted for a boutique—considering the importance of the event—but then her pockets would go light for a week or so.

Stepping over the curb, she moved closer to the store and peered through the transparent glass wall.

She remained in that position for minutes, staring with an indecisive look. Her black eyes kept moving from the dresses on the wooden mannequins, to their price tags.

The prices were pretty decent but Gwendolyn didn’t know what dress to go for. As someone who had never stepped into a clothes store to purchase a dress, or even a simple gown, she couldn’t tell what dress was good or not. A simple shirt and a pair of trousers or shorts was good enough for her.

Whenever she was required to attend a formal gathering, her mum would help her with her clothes, since they pretty much had the same stature. And when she became an Imperial Guard, Emily was the one that would help her get the required outfit.

‘Ugh… I should have asked Emily to come with me,’ she exhaled softly, wisps of smoke dancing from her lips.

She eventually gave up on selecting a dress and decided to visit her parents. Perhaps, her mum would have one of her old fancy dresses to spare.

‘I should get something for Silas too…’ she turned away from the store and halted, taking out her smoke pipe as she let out a thicker puff of smoke. Her eyes drifted to the corner of her sockets, as though trying to look behind her head.

Then she scoffed and sauntered down the sidewalk, the puff of smoke drifting behind her.

…

The figure in the alleyway froze as they locked eyes with Gwendolyn. To be honest, they couldn’t even see her eyes from that angle, but they could feel her pitch-black gaze on them, as though she had eyes at the back of her head.

They wanted to run. They wanted to get as far away from her as possible. But their limbs had gone limp and heavy at the same time. They couldn’t even grit their teeth to mitigate their fear.

They could tell that they were done for.

However, Gwendolyn straightened her neck and continued her gentle stroll.

At that moment, the heavy burden on the figure gradually dissipated and they staggered back in cold sweat, almost stumbling to a fall.

A small cloud of smoke drifted into the alley and stopped before the figure’s face, gradually solidifying into a peculiar shape—it was a middle finger. And just like that, it dissolved into thin air.

They shuddered repeatedly, unable to take their eyes off Gwendolyn’s disappearing figure.

Their teeth gnashed, “What in Rimbyne’s name? S-She’s a monster!”

It was the voice of a man.

…

**Avidan Street.**

Gwendolyn flicked at her Newsboy cap as she raised her head at the four-storey apartment building before her, brass pipes and wooden planks attached to its walls.

‘Maybe I should have confronted that stalker?’ she pondered, making her way to the stairs at the left side of the building. ‘But then I wouldn’t make it in time for the dress and whatnot. They were fodder anyway; a waste of time.’

A brief film of images of the last man that exploded earlier in the day, flashed across her head and she smiled wryly. She underestimated people, a lot. Then she remembered the captain's enraged face and his yelling.

‘Heh. I hope this doesn’t bite back at me.’

She blinked and found herself in the hallway on the third floor, the tiny voice of a little girl tugging her back to reality.

“Hm?” she lowered her head, her eyes following. The first thing her eyes fell upon were purple locks of dread scattered on the head of a little girl. The girl raised her head with a wide smile on her face, her unique purple eyes lustrous and vibrant.

She pushed her hands up and leaned on her toes, as though telling the Imperial Guard to carry her, “Sister Gwen! Welcome back!”

Gwendolyn turned her gaze upward, trying her best not to roll her eyes, “Ugh… Aubree. I told you to stop calling me that. Just Gwen is fine.”

The little girl dropped her hands and sadly pouted, “But you’re older than me, and we live together.”

“Lived,” Gwendolyn lowered her head once again and raised a finger to buttress her point. “And don’t say it like we lived in the same house. You’re just our neighbour.”

“But--”

“No buts,” Gwendolyn walked past her, seriously hoping that she didn’t come after her.

Of all things that the Imperial Guard liked and disliked, children fell on the latter spectrum.

# **CHAPTER SIX**

~ Dark Matter ~

Little Aubree pulled at her gown and gazed down at her white sneakers, “But I miss you, Sister Gwen. It’s been so long.”

Her British accent was more profound, now that she had calmed down.

‘Trying to play the guilty card, eh?’ Gwendolyn wanted to turn deaf ears and continue her stride. Just a few more steps and she’d get to her parents’ apartment. So close.

However, the little girl’s voice was quite compelling. It would make one imagine her at the brink of tears—not that Gwen cared that much anyway. But it indeed had been a long time since she came here, and Aubree seemed to have grown a bit. She was usually very annoying to deal with. At least, from Gwendolyn’s perspective.

She heaved a disgruntled sigh and made a 180° turn, immediately flashing a terse smile, “Come on. Don’t look so downcast. I… I missed you too.”

Aubree’s eyes lit up immediately and she raised her head, “Really?!”

Gwendolyn forced out a cough, “Yeah. Yes. Are my parents home?”

“Yes. Silas too,” Aubree answered curtly, walking closer to her ‘big sister’.

“Ah… That reminds me,” Gwendolyn reached for the inner pocket of her trench coat and brought out a small pack of gummy bears. She slouched forward a little and stretched the pack of candy at the girl, “Here. For you.”

Aubree gladly received it whilst showing her sparkling dentition, “Thank you, Sister Gwen.”

Gwendolyn went on a knee and ruffled her dreads, sighing inwardly, ‘I bought the candies for Silas. Thank God I bought two.’

The door behind her swung open and a boy slightly older than Aubree, poked his head out. His hair was brown like Gwendolyn’s, but his eyes had this azure shade.

His creased brows relaxed when he recognized the lady in the trench coat. He stepped outside with a smile and folded hands, “Oh, the prodigal daughter returns.”

Gwendolyn could almost roll her eyes. She patted Aubree softly and rose to her feet, “That’s Sister Gwen to you, Silas.”

“Mom, Gwen is here!” Silas hollered into the apartment. Then he faced his sister, his arms still folded, “What took you so long?”

“Seriously, what happened to, ‘welcome, Sister Gwen, or, how have you been, big sister?’” Gwendolyn threw her hands apart as she approached him, Aubree tagging along.

He rubbed the back of his neck, “Sorry. It’s just that I’ve been meaning to show you something important, but you keep ignoring my letters.”

“You sent me letters?” she raised a brow.

He lowered his eyelids, “Do you even check your mail?”

She simply shrugged, “Hmph.”

Silas shook his head, “Well, it doesn’t matter. I can just show you now.”

“Why? Can’t it wait? At least let me get inside,” Gwendolyn began taking off her trench coat.

“That’s the thing. It can’t be done inside. It needs quite some space,” Silas answered, backing up a bit.

“Fine. Wow me,” Gwendolyn just wanted to rest her legs.

“Okay, just stay where you are,” his lips twitched as he struggled to hold in his smirk.

He raised a hand over the other and began to create more distance between them, whilst widening his palms. The space between his palms twisted in an irregular pattern. Those present could not see the contraction and expansion, but the distortion was visible. It was as though something was there, but at the same time, it wasn’t.

Gravity also began to shift, within and without the space of the palms.

And just like that, a pitch-black sphere took form in Silas’s hand, light bending around it so much that the light in a one-metre radius started getting dim. Even the air wasn’t left out as it got pulled toward the dark sphere.

At that moment, Gwendolyn’s pitch-black irises reflected the darkness of the sphere as she attained a state of enlightenment. Her lips gradually parted, “Is that… a black hole?”

“Yes!” the excitement in Silas’s voice was unmatched. He continued with a wide smile, “You know how my Blessing allows me to control gravity, right? Well, I tried compressing a tin can to its limit when I accidentally did this. I didn’t even know what it was at first and it just kept expanding. I’m not sure what happened after that because I passed out.”

“Of course, you did. It drained all your energy,” Gwendolyn said, keeping a close eye on the small black hole. If Silas lost control, it wouldn’t just be Avidan Street that would be in danger, Clockshire could be wiped out.

Albeit, from what the boy had said, the black hole’s size was directly proportional to his energy.

A curious Aubree left Gwendolyn’s side, her purple eyes enthralled by the black hole. She pushed her right hand toward it, “Can I touch it?”

“What? No!” Silas panicked as her fingers got close and lost his hold on the black hole.

The light bulbs in the hallway flickered hazardously. The wind intensified and the apartment doors shook, as everything began to get pulled toward the expanding dark sphere.

Gwendolyn reacted quickly and clasped her hands around the black hole with a terse grunt. It shrunk rapidly in her grasp until it was nonexistent.

Silas’s eyes dilated at this. He knew the kind of *Divine* his sister was, but this… this wasn’t something a 3-Halo should be capable of.

She opened her hands and looked toward her brother’s side. Aubree was standing next to him.

Gwendolyn tossed her coat at Silas with a sigh, “Can we go inside now?”

…

**Episton District.**

Altair Blackwood loosened his tie and drew his chair closer to the desk. His crimson eyes moved incessantly around their sockets as he scanned through a bunch of files.

He had been seated in his cubicle and doing that for over an hour now. If Gwendolyn hadn’t just disappeared, all in the name of getting a formal dress to wear, the paperwork would have been equally divided, and maybe, just maybe, he would have been on his way home at the moment.

But it was just him. Taking down the Ivory Claw was a case specifically assigned to them, or else he would have asked Elijah and Emily for their help. They were probably busy preparing for the conference anyway.

As someone who came from a well-standard family, he had quite a number of new suits and shoes to spare. He could easily pick one at the last minute.

Going through the last paper, he grabbed his mug of coffee and sat back, holding the paper close.

‘Hmm… Even after a month of infiltrating a bunch of their hideouts and questioning those caught, we still barely know anything about them. We don’t know their leader or main objective. Though they seem to only target the rich. They’ve never robbed small businesses either. It’s usually a bank, factory, or a jewellery store.’

Other imperial Guards began to retire for the night, waving at him as they walked past his cubicle. He waved back.

He took a small sip and sighed, allowing the steam to waft out of his mouth, “Ahh… What am I supposed to write in the report? This is all basic knowledge. We’ve learned nothing new.”

‘If only Gwen would stop being aggressive with every group we catch,’ he rubbed his glabella with a sigh.

“Dane? What are you still doing up so late?” a light, feminine voice whispered softly.

Altair lowered his brows at the sound of the voice. His movements slowed down as he tried to process what he had just heard. He slowly sat up and dropped his mug on the table at the same pace.

That voice. That name.

Only one person sounded like that. Only one person called him Dane.

Abruptly, he muttered with squinted eyes, “Mum?”

There was no response, only a mild gust of wind that blew in through the cubicle’s open door. As though that wasn’t an oddity on its own, nothing moved from the wind. Not even the papers on the desk.

For some reason, his attention was drawn toward the door, maybe to see the source of the unnatural wind. It was at that moment that he noticed the silhouette of a woman standing by the open space, her back slightly hunched just so that her head wouldn’t hit the top frame. She stood at a towering height of seven feet.

Altair froze, his mind whirling in thoughts, ‘Who­—What is that?’

He wasn’t scared. No. As an Imperial Guard, it was a norm to encounter or find oneself in such an enigmatic situation.

He was only curious.

For something like this to have slipped into the station without anyone, or even the captain himself noticing, Altair could tell that this would not be easy to handle, or get out of. More so, his Blessing was mostly effective against the physical. The metaphysical was a different case entirely.

But it was worth trying anyway.

He slowly reached for his twin pistols, keeping his eyes fixated on the tall silhouette that just stood there lifelessly. Once he had a firm grip on the triggers, he pulled out Heaven and Neveah, and…

The silhouette suddenly dissolved into a dark mist that moved toward the desk.

Altair flinched back and was this close to standing up, if two dried hands hadn’t emerged behind him. They looked as though they had no blood in them, their nails stretching for almost an inch.

The hands closed tightly over Altair’s mouth before he could even notice that they were there. They pulled him back, whilst the dark mist filled the entire cubicle.

The dark mist faded almost immediately, as though it was never there. But it wasn’t the only thing that had left the cubicle.

Altair Blackwood was nowhere to be found, his chair swivelling back and forth to an unnatural wind.

# **CHAPTER SEVEN**

~ Blood and Silk ~

**Avidan Street.**

“This is perfect,” Gwendolyn said with a smile as she held up a long black gown designed with silver embroidery. Its sleeves were made of transparent silk, joined to the gown by fluffy armhole ridges.

“Huh? Just like that?” the middle-aged woman seated next to her on the bed, quizzed with creased brows. Almost half of her black hair strands had turned grey, complementing her deep grey eyes.

Rubbing down the big skirt of the gown, Gwendolyn took a glance at the woman, “But it looks good though. The captain’s wife seldom wears this to the station.”

The woman could only smile at the former’s incognizance, “That’s exactly why you shouldn’t wear this to the conference. I wore this as a spinster, it’s completely outdated. That’s why Margaret wears it so casually.”

“I thought the captain’s wife’s name was Maurice,” Gwendolyn muttered, folding the gown to the best of her ability.

“Only her friends call her Margaret,” the woman shrugged.

This piqued Gwendolyn’s interest, prompting her to abandon the gown on her lap and face the woman, “Wait… Mom, you guys are friends? She never mentioned it.”

“Well, you know, Margaret doesn’t--” her mum took a quick pause as she realised what Gwen was doing. Her eyelids dropped, “Don’t try to change the topic. Are you sure this is the dress you wish to wear? I mean, what would blood-eyes think when he sees you?”

Gwendolyn couldn’t help but chuckle softly, “Mum, his name is Altair, and I don’t care what he thinks. It’s my dress.”

Her mum placed a hand beneath her chin and shook her head, “Is this the type of behaviour you want to keep up with when you get married?”

“Eh?” Gwendolyn was lost in a daze.

At that moment, a man popped half his body into the room with an apron around his neck. Without any introduction, one could tell that he was Gwen’s father. The resemblance was uncanny.

“Hey, ladies,” he flashed a smile at them. “Dinner’s ready.”

Gwendolyn knitted her brows, “You’re the one cooking now, dad? What about Silas?”

He rubbed the back of his neck, “He’s the one that does the cooking most of the time, with a little guidance from your mum. But as our guest today, I couldn’t risk him ruining your best food.”

Gwendolyn’s mouth watered almost immediately as an image of her ‘best food’ flashed across her mind. She managed to maintain a calm demeanour, a small smile escaping her lips, “Well, I guess that is a good alibi. But aside from this exception, Silas remains your cook. You need to relax with your wife more often.”

With her mum’s fragile condition of asthma, inhaling a small puff of smoke or dust could instantly cause her breath to cease. That’s why she had to retire from the kitchen.

It’s also why Gwendolyn remained conscious not to light her smoke pipe in the house.

“Yes, ma’am,” her dad threw a salute before leaving.

As soon as he left, the ladies continued arguing on which dress was best. An argument that Gwendolyn eventually won.

She ate her dinner in a hurry, whilst savouring every component of the dish. She had wasted enough time looking for the ‘perfect dress’ and was almost running late. If she got to the conference before it started, and the Rivet squad were already there… Let’s just say a fight could break out.

Her mum gave her another bag of grounded leaves for her smoke pipe before she left. Gwendolyn didn’t know what kind of leaves she smoked, but they weren’t in the least toxic.

She handed a few Solis to Silas and Aubree, and also warned the former never to create a black hole with no supervision.

She stepped out into the street of Avidan at exactly quarter past seven.

…

**Episton District.**

Akin to a zipper being undone, space split open vertically at the ceiling of the cubicle.

The light bulbs flickered in discordance to the thin apparition, the furniture groaning deeply as they slowly got dragged upward.

The spatial apparition expanded like rubber and spat out a figure, who was able to land on their feet.

It was a man. A man whose silver-coloured hair had almost turned red with the amount of blood it had absorbed. Blood trickled down his face like paint, matching his crimson irises that had gone dull.

His white shirt also had its own share of blood, but somehow, his trousers still seemed to be very kept.

He stood there listlessly for over a minute, as though he had no life in him.

But then, a knock came at the door, jolting him out of whatever reverie he was in. Like a rusted clock, he turned his neck and fixed his eyes on the door, meeting the petrified gaze of the janitor.

The middle-aged man trembled no matter how hard he tried to control himself, almost losing his grip on the mop stick.

He scanned the man from head-to-toe, just to make sure it was the same man he once knew. The appearance was the same, but his demeanour, and this… creepy chill spewing from him, would make one think otherwise.

He finally found his voice and asked in a stutter, “Uh, s-sir? Are you—what happened to you?”

Altair Blackwood dropped his gaze to his hands, closing and unfurling them, “Oh, you know, the usual Imperial Guard stuff. This one was really tough to handle alone though.”

‘Phew…’ the janitor couldn’t be more relieved. He simply nodded and pushed his mopping bucket toward another cubicle. Standing that close to the Imperial Guard made it really hard to breathe.

As soon as the janitor left, Altair shifted his gaze to the apparition that gradually closed up. The crimson in his irises filled his sclera in a rush and he heaved a small sigh, ‘That was close.’

# **CHAPTER EIGHT**

~ ~

The pebbles on the cobblestone road shook to the subtle tremor coming from an approaching vehicle. And there it was—the pinnacle of engineering elegance—Kreel Industries’ latest and finest edition—*The Gilded Cruiser*.

Its polished brass body gleamed under the gas lamps, catching the flicker of flames. The engines purred, steam escaping the vents like a dragon exhaling. The crystal-clear windows framed by velvet curtains revealed plush leather seats, embroidered with golden thread.

A miniature chandelier hung from the ceiling, dispelling the darkness of the night and highlighting the face of the man that sat at the back. Black-grey beards formed a layer over his sharp jawline. His nose was also pointed and sharp, threatening to tear one’s skin if touched carelessly. His eyes were veiled by the shadow of his top hat.

He was seated with his weight shifted more to the right, as he stared intently at his pocket watch. He was running late.

He let out a sigh after a few minutes passed and raised his gaze, looking forward, “How much further, Smithson?”

The driver, clad in a tailored waistcoat and a top hat adorned with a peacock feather, lifted his gaze to steal a glance at the rear-view mirror. They made eye contact, “Not too long now, sir. The cheers are getting louder.”

True to Smithson’s words, a chorus of cheers and jeering music echoed from the bend up ahead. One could even see the dancing beams of light crisscrossing the night sky.

With a slight groan, the Gilded Cruiser made a turn around the bend, almost bumping into another vehicle of the same brand.

It wasn’t until that moment that the man at the backseat noticed the other Gilded Cruisers driving in the same direction. He had been so fixated on his pocket watch.

Seeing the exact replicas of his most expensive car prompted a slight click of his tongue. Its worth had been watered down to every normal vehicle one would see on the streets.

But it was to be expected. Fifty percent—if not more of the conference’s attendees—were men and women of class and prestige. Senators, aristocrats, professors… Name it. They were all there. Rumour even had it that the governor might show up. And it wasn’t even farfetched; Dr. Kreel was a man the people called *The Messiah*.

He wasn’t like other men and women of science. His innovations and inventions had pivoted Clockshire and nearby towns into a new age of convenient and efficient technology.

Soon enough, the car came to a halt by the red carpet that led to the grand hall. News reporters, journalists, cameramen, and fans lined the sides of the red carpet, cheering, raising their wired mics, or taking as many photos as they could.

“Ah… People…” the man at the backseat groused as he inserted his earplugs. Having attended events like this so very often, the loud noises gradually damaged his fragile hearing.

He picked up the golden-laced cane by his side and shifted his weight toward the opening door by his right. Pinching the front of his top hat, he lowered his head and alighted the car, immediately welcomed by the reverberating cheers and flickering camera flashes.

He quickly turned toward Smithson, who had the door opened with one hand, a glass case in the other hand.

The man reached for the case with his free hand and opened it. A gold-rimmed pair of glasses lay within. With much care, he took the pair of glasses and gently lifted his top hat to wear it.

Once he was done, he addressed his driver, a tinge of fatigue in his voice, “Please, don’t park too far. I might not tarry too long here. My head is buzzing already.”

Smithson nodded, “Understood, sir. I’ll come join you soon.”

The man turned to face the crowd again, lowered his head and set his cane forward.

The next thing he remembered was climbing the short flight of stairs that led to the hall. Though a bit rough, he had learned to concentrate hard enough and shut the world off for a couple of seconds.

“Welcome, professor,” the concierge kowtowed with a warm smile, whilst handing out a steel name tag.

The man couldn’t help but smile back at the fine lady as she placed the name tag on his palm. It wasn’t as heavy as he had expected.

*Professor Sardius Grey* was neatly carved into it.

“Do I really have to wear this though?” he asked, just to make conversation with her.

He didn’t have the chance to though; he had other people waiting in line behind him.

Finally, the professor walked into the grand hall, almost brushing shoulders with other attendees.

Attendees—scholars, inventors, and dreamers—arrived in attire that bridged epochs. Men sported waistcoats adorned with pocket watches, while women donned corsets and lace gloves. Goggles perched atop furrowed brows, ready to decipher secrets.

A waitress approached him with a tray of wine glasses, each of them filled halfway. She smiled, stretching the tray toward.

“Ah, thank you,” he picked up a glass, shook it and emptied its contents in one gentle swig. He dropped the empty clear glass, alongside his badge subconsciously.

The waitress didn’t even notice; she was busy serving other guests. As soon as the tray was empty, safe for the professor’s empty glass, she walked away to restock.

Watching her leave, his eyes swept across the many top hats fixed upon heads, one in particular shuffling through the crowd and approaching him. It was adorned with a set of crow feathers.

‘A fellow professor, maybe? A student with questions?’ his brows creased under his hat. Whichever the case was, he wasn’t here to talk with anyone unless it was very important.

His right hand tightened around his cane and he turned the other way.

However, he ended up standing face-to-face with the man that donned the feathered top hat.

Professor Grey would have been stunned at that moment if he didn’t recognize the face beneath the hat. His gruff-looking—yet clean—face was one of a kind.

“Captain Thaddeus Claive,” the professor raised his chin. “That hat looks ridiculous on your head.”

Captain Claive smiled tersely, “Same thing my wife said, but my hands are tied. Though, I’m quite surprised you actually came, professor.”

Professor Grey sighed, slightly resting on his cane, “What choice do I have? Maelstrom wouldn’t stop sending me letters. But I don’t plan to stay too long.”

Then he quickly added, “He told you to come get me, didn’t he?”

Captain Claive simply nodded, nudging his chin toward the stage, where the VIP guests were seated, “Yes. You’re to—wait, where’s your name tag?”

“Oh, that,” Professor Grey did a quick search around his suit and trousers. He had forgotten where he placed it. He dropped his hands and shrugged, “I have no idea.”

Knowing how reluctant the professor was at climbing the stage, Captain Claive lowered his eyelids, “Did you toss it away?”

A small smile formed on the professor’s lips, “I wish I did, but no. I’ll find a secluded place to sit. You don’t have to worry about me.”

Captain Claive sighed, “I’m sorry, but I can’t allow that, sir. You were targeted and injured during Dr. Kreel’s last abduction attempt. It’s very possible you’re also marked as a target tonight.”

Professor Grey would have rubbed his forehead if not for his hat, “I’ll follow you, so far I don’t have to climb that stage.”

“I can arrange… that,” Captain Claive nodded, his eyes gradually creasing as he spotted a small red dot sitting on the professor’s chest.

However, as soon as he blinked, the red dot was gone. This prompted him to look around. The hall had no windows, safe for the glass roof, which was very transparent. There was no one there.

It was odd.

He moved closer to the professor, and placed a hand on his back, “Please, come with me. You’ll be safe with my squad.”

# **CHAPTER NINE**

~ Elegance? What’s That? ~

Gwendolyn alighted the taxi, almost tripping to a fall. She stood upright immediately and looked around just to be sure that no one saw her almost embarrass herself.

She dipped her right hand into the pocket of her gown and handed the taxi driver a Solis note.

Afterward, she turned toward the red carpet, watching several attendees traverse the midst of cameras and journalists in style. From what she had seen, literally anyone could walk the red carpet that night, so far they were invited.

But she knew better not to take that path. She would only ruin the little reputation she had as an Imperial Guard, and as a lady.

Could she even be called a lady anymore? She only looked the part, but her personality was in complete contrast.

She looked really good that night. The long black gown fit her frame as though it was tailored specially for her. The silvery embroidery was beautiful, snaking around the upper part of the gown, all the way to the back. Though the skirt of the gown was quite fluffy and flayed, it was almost weightless, allowing easy movement.

Well… for any other lady, movement would have been easy. The black heels she wore to match were her biggest ops that night.

As soon as she began walking around the crowd, her ankles started weeping. She kept staggering like some drunk lady, the thin heels destroying her sense of balance. Her legs swerved in opposite directions, her ankle bones almost sticking out of her skin.

‘Almost there, almost there…’ she repeated like a mantra, her gaze unmoved from the concierge at the entrance.

However, her night only got worse. She suddenly swayed to the left as her heel broke. It already had enough of her mannerless walk.

“Ugh, enough!” she clicked her teeth and stopped, taking off her right shoe. She broke the heel off in one motion and put the shoe back on. Before anyone could notice her, she tossed both heels into her purse.

“Ahh… Much better…” she sighed in relief, placing both shoes on the ground. It felt like heaven.

“That looked expensive.”

“Hm?” Her eyes darted toward the concierge.

Altair was standing before the concierge, flashing his Imperial Guard I.D. He half-turned and extended his left hand toward Gwendolyn, “Your mum’s, right?”

She grudgingly took his hand and he pulled her close.

“Who cares? I could feel my ankles begging to be spared,” she flashed her I.D too.

The concierge smiled and moved away from the entrance, “Enjoy your evening.”

Altair raised a brow, “What about the badges?”

“Oh. Those are for certain guests only,” she answered curtly.

“Oh…” Altair nodded and pulled Gwendolyn into the hall.

Gwendolyn couldn’t take her eyes off the feet of the other women in the hall. They walked so freely and gracefully in their needle-point heels. She shuddered, realizing the amount of torture they must have endured to get used to it.

“How do they do it?” she muttered under her breath.

Altair smiled at this, “You know, it’s a norm for every woman to be able to wear heels.”

“Why? What kind of devil even thought of inventing them?” she frowned slightly.

Altair couldn’t help but chuckle a little. She was one of a kind. If only she could appreciate her beauty in the dress and act more ladylike.

Her hair had been braided in parts, then weaved together and complemented with a black ribbon. She also had black lip gloss on her lips, piquing his interest.

He cleared his throat and decided to tease her, “You look good though. I like the full-black theme.”

She took a glance at herself, “Do I? It’s like a cage, yet I feel so vulnerable.”

She slipped both hands into the pockets of her gown’s skirt, smiling tersely, “This is the only good thing about it. They should produce more gowns with pockets… Maybe I’d then buy a few.”

Altair was about to pull her hands out to avoid embarrassment, when he noticed a giant approaching them.

A giant.

Literally, no. Figuratively, maybe. The lady was huge alright.

She towered above most men and women, standing nearly seven feet tall, her presence both imposing and captivating. Her long black hair flowed like a dark river down her back, contrasting strikingly with her peculiar, ashen-grey eyes.

Despite her considerable height and build, her figure was attractively proportioned, exuding a sense of strength and grace. She wore a fancy black dress that hugged her form elegantly, the fabric shimmering subtly with each step she took. As she walked towards them, her movements were fluid and confident, each stride purposeful and commanding attention.

If Altair was meeting her for the first time, he would have been drooling under her feet. But this was a woman he didn’t really like that much. None of them in the Episton district did.

He quickly nudged Gwendolyn’s shoulder, “Hey, look up.”

“Hm?” with her hands still lost in her pockets, she raised her head, the little smile on her face vanishing instantly. She lowered her eyelids, “Why is she--”

“If it isn’t my favourite couple,” the tall lady smirked, patting them on the shoulder like little children.

“Good evening, Captain Rivet,” Altair placed a fist on the left side of his chest and bowed tersely. She was their superior from a different district; he couldn't neglect formality even if it opposed his emotions.

Captain Rose Rivet, overseer of the Cogsworth district. Yes, the Rivet squad was named after her.

“We’ve told you to stop calling us that,” Gwendolyn complained with a slight frown as Altair pushed her head down to bow.

Rose’s smile didn’t waver, “But you two look so good together. The others also agree.”

“The others?” Altair and Gwendolyn chorused, tilting their heads and looking past the tall woman.

They could see Emily and Elijah discussing with four other Imperial Guards. Though they were in mufti, they could easily recognize them as the members of the Rivet squad.

They weren’t surprised to see them together, since they were on the same mission that night. But holding a drinking contest and cracking jokes? Did they bewitch Emily and Elijah? The two squads never met eye-to-eye.

“Oh…” Altair suddenly muttered when he spotted Captain Claive at the other side of the table, alongside Professor Grey. That must be the reason why they forced themselves to get along for the time being.

“Come on. Thaddeus isn't particularly happy about you two coming late. We had no choice but to do a quick debrief while waiting for you,” Rose said with a more serious expression.

The three of them had barely taken a step forward to meet with the others, when a short screech echoed across the hall.

This stole everyone’s attention. They faced the stage.

A man was standing before a standing microphone, dressed like most aristocrats in the gathering. He had a rather plain face and moustache. The only distinctive feature about him was his pair of thick-rimmed glasses that rested on his eyes with no support. They had no temples.

He stood there like an inanimate object, staring everyone down with his dark-green eyes behind his lenses.

Rose folded her hands and sighed, “Finally, it’s about to begin.”

# **CHAPTER TEN**

~ The Future is Now ~

Serenity and stillness gradually descended upon the hall. Everyone had their eyes transfixed on the black-haired man on the stage.

He stood there like a statue, his gaze imposing, as though peering into everyone’s soul and countenance.

Once he was satisfied with what he saw, he smiled warmly and spoke into the carbon microphone, “Esteemed guests, distinguished aristocrats, respected professors, and the illustrious minds gathered here tonight. It is with immense pleasure and profound gratitude that I welcome each of you to this conference, a celebration of the boundless pursuit of knowledge and the marvels of human ingenuity.

“We find ourselves at a remarkable juncture in history, where the very fabric of our understanding of the natural world is being woven anew, thread by meticulous thread, by those who dare to challenge the limits of our intellect.”

He removed the mic from the stand and stretched his free hand to the side, “Tonight, we convene not merely to share our findings but to ignite the flames of curiosity and collaboration. Each of you brings a wealth of experience and a unique perspective that can illuminate our collective path forward. As we traverse the labyrinth of discovery, let us be guided by our insatiable thirst for truth and our commitment to the betterment of society.”

“I am Dr. Maelstrom Kreel, your guide through this vast labyrinth. Welcome, once again,” with his hand still extended sideways, he bowed tersely.

This simple act was immediately showered with a profound round of applause.

“Ahh… He’s such a good man,” Altair muttered, clapping his hands softly. “I wonder why anyone would want to hurt him.”

“I know, right? If it wasn’t for him, our country would still be years behind in technology and lifestyle,” Gwendolyn shook her head, returning her hands into her pockets after a short clap.

“Well, there’s the matter of money and competition,” Rose decided to chip into the conversation, her eyes a bit dull as she struggled not to take them off the man on the stage. One could tell that just like Gwen, Captain Rivet didn’t fancy gatherings like this.

Gwendolyn and Altair shifted their gaze towards her, the former speaking up first, “I get that the abductors want money, but competition? No one in Clockshire can compete with Dr. Kreel. He’s in a league of his own.”

“So?” Rose asked rhetorically with a shrug. “What if he suddenly died or mysteriously disappeared? Other entrepreneurs or scientists that haven’t been heard of will begin to rise and try to fill his shoes. They need him out of the picture.”

“Oh…” Gwendolyn hummed softly, drifting her eyes back to the stage, feeling a little dense for not thinking that deep.

Rose sighed and turned the other way, “Let’s meet up with the others. It’s about time we got to our posts.”

The three of them made their way past the crowd till they got to the table where their squad members were seated.

Captain Thaddeus lifted his crow-feathered hat and sized Gwendolyn and Altair up, resisting the urge to scold them right there and then. He simply sighed and pressed his hands around the edge of the table, propping himself up.

Elijah and Emily dropped their poker cards, likewise the members of the Rivet squad—three males and one female.

Professor Sardius Grey simply placed his hands on his cane and rested his weight on it.

Captain Thaddeus cleared his throat, “Elijah and Arthur, you two take the roof. Henry, Emily, head backstage. James, leftwing, Edith, to the right…” he paused, slowly moving his head toward his remaining squad members. “You two will be our inspectors. Go from post to post at intervals, but make sure not to let Dr. Kreel out of your sight.”

‘So, we can’t go to the roof, then,’ Altair rubbed his chin.

“Are you sure it’s really a good idea to let them stay together, Captain?” Emily just had to ask, her eyes narrowed. “We all know they get very unserious when together, and things tend to… well… blow up around them.”

Gwendolyn scoffed, “That only happened once.”

“I understand your scepticism, White, but as nonchalant as they might seem, their teamwork is impeccable,” Captain Thaddeus forced the words out through his teeth.

“Yup, one of a kind,” with a smile, Altair threw a hand over Gwendolyn’s shoulders and pulled her in.

She smiled tersely.

Emily simply shook her head, “Understood.”

“Alright, Claive will remain with the professor, and I…” Rose pulled a chair back and sat by the table. She grabbed a bottle of red wine and shook it mildly, “I need a drink.”

“You heard her. Off you go,” Captain Thaddeus sat down on his chair and pushed his empty glass toward his fellow captain.

Their squad members made a short salute before dispersing their different ways. Emily and Elijah made a quick bet before separating. Gwendolyn saw the swift transaction and warned Altair that they remained focused that night.

The Captains and Professor Grey clinked their wine glasses and paid attention to the stage once more. A presentation was about to ensue.

…

The grand hall buzzed with anticipation, the air thick with curiosity. Everyone had their eyes on the polished wooden stage where a curious contraption sat under a white cloth. Murmurs filled the hall as the audience speculated on what marvel lay beneath.

Dr. Kreel stood confidently at the centre of the stage with the soot-stained hands that now held his tools. He cleared his throat, commanding immediate attention.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he began, his voice resonating through the hall. “Thank you, once again, for gathering here today. I stand before you to unveil an invention that I believe will change the way we harness power forever—the gasoline engine!”

With a flourish, Dr. Kreel pulled the cloth away, revealing the gleaming metal framework of the engine. The audience gasped in awe, eyes wide as they took in the intricate components: the cylinders, the crankshaft, and the fuel lines glistening under the big bright bulbs that hung from the ceiling.

“This…” he continued, gesturing to the engine. “... Is a marvel of engineering. Unlike the steam engines that have dominated our industry, which rely on boiling water to create steam and generate power, this engine operates using a far more efficient and compact fuel: gasoline.”

He paced the stage, enthusiasm pouring from him. “Let me explain how it works. Inside this engine, gasoline is mixed with air and ignited by a spark from the ignition system. The explosion drives the pistons, which turn the crankshaft and ultimately power our vehicles. In contrast to steam engines, which can take considerable time to build pressure and are limited by the need for water and fuel, the gasoline engine can start and run much more quickly. It requires less space and can produce more power relative to its size.”

Dr. Kreel paused, letting his words sink in. He could see the audience's intrigue growing, their scepticism beginning to wane.

At least, most of them. The likes of Gwendolyn and Captain Rivet could barely keep up with his words. Even Altair had a hard time understanding the concept behind this ‘gasoline engine’.

Professor Grey sat back and hummed softly, his mind opening to the possibilities that would be brought about via this new—and never thought of—innovation.

“But that’s not all!" Dr. Kreel continued. "The gasoline engine is far more efficient than steam engines. Where steam engines can consume significant amounts of fuel and produce considerable waste, this engine is designed to maximise every drop of gasoline. This means less fuel consumed for more power produced, resulting in lower operating costs and greater range.”

He reached for a lever at the side of the engine. “Now, let me demonstrate.”

With a swift motion, he engaged the engine. A series of clicks and whirs filled the hall as the engine came to life, its pistons moving rhythmically. The sound was smooth and consistent, a stark contrast to the clunky chugging of steam engines.

The audience erupted into applause, their excitement palpable as they witnessed the engine in action.

Dr. Kreel smiled, his heart swelling with pride, “Imagine the possibilities,” he said, raising his hands. “With this engine, we can power not just vehicles but machines that will revolutionise our industries! We can travel farther, faster, and with greater ease than ever before!”

As the applause grew louder, Dr. Kreel felt a wave of exhilaration wash over him. He had presented not just an invention but a vision of the future, one where gasoline engines would pave the way for a new age of mobility and innovation.

One would think that he should have gotten used to this. The cheers and applause were a constant phenomena at all his presentations. But no, just like a child having accomplished the same task successfully, over and over again, Dr. Kreel was always excited to see the smiles and hope on everyone's faces as he showed them wonderful innovations to advance the world. It was his passion as a man of science.

“Thank you!” he exclaimed, bowing slightly. “Together, let us embrace this new technology and push the boundaries of what is possible!”

The crowd roared with approval, and in that moment, Dr. Maelstrom Kreel knew he had taken, not the first step, and definitely not the last, toward changing the world.

# **CHAPTER ELEVEN**

~ Through Fire and Mist ~

Elijah yawned as he stepped out of the door that led to the concrete roof. In quick succession, the hand on his mouth went straight for his hat, pressing it down against his head before it swam with the wind up there.

Another man exited the stairwell, lowering his head as he walked through the door frame. He straightened himself beside Elijah, dwarfing the latter by a few inches.

Elijah couldn’t help but feel a little discomfort as they stood side-by-side. Not only was Arthur Lancaster ridiculously tall—same height as Captain Rivet—he was quite buff, and his silk blonde hair that flowed below his shoulders made him look like a prince from those fairytale books.

“So… is our job just to stand here while gazing into the distance all night long?” Arthur casually asked, tearing the veil of silence.

With a hand still propped on his hat, Elijah shrugged, “More or less. We have the high ground, we should be able to see everything and notice anything odd coming this way...”

“And as the first ones to notice any danger, we would be able to alert everyone before it escalates,’” Arthur completed, getting the gist.

“Exactly,” Elijah wanted to nod but ended up creasing his brows as he watched Arthur leave his side, sauntering towards the roof’s edge.

“Then I guess it wouldn’t hurt to relax while doing so…” Arthur’s eyes flitted a mild red glow as he said this. He pushed both hands forward and gripped at thin air.

Instantaneously, red pixels spawned at his call in multitudes. They moved in an organized flux before him, constructing what seemed to be two camp chairs. They pulsed once before the glowing died down.

The constructs had taken real form. It was as though the camp chairs had always been there.

A small smile crept up Arthur’s lips as he settled down on one of the chairs, crossing his legs.

‘Manifestation Blessing…’ Elijah reminisced as he moved toward the other chair. ‘Or in his case, The Artisan’s Grasp.’

He sat down without resting his back, fixating his eyes on the other buildings ahead, ‘Seriously, being able to create anything out of thin air is cheating at life. He wouldn’t even need to buy a car if he knew how to build one.’

He stole a quick glance at Arthur. The blonde man was fully rested on his chair, star-gazing and sighing at intervals.

Elijah retracted his gaze, ‘Would he even need to know how to build one? He could just think of a car and his Blessing does the rest… I think…’

He felt his brows crease as a dull red glint flashed across his eyes. It flickered so quickly, it almost made him question whether he had seen the red light or not.

He leaned forward, his eyes narrowing, “What was--?”

Before he could finish contemplating, he saw the red light again. However, it wasn’t a simple flash like before. It was a long red line that emanated from many rooftops away. The beam of light cut between Elijah and Arthur’s chair.

At that point, in that split second that he saw the pointing red light, no one needed to tell him where it was coming from or what was about to happen next.

But could he react fast enough?

That’s if he even knew what to react to. In a world where people could manifest supernatural phenomena, expecting a mere sniper shot at that moment—especially with the surrounding circumstances that night—would be akin to taking a wooden shield to fight a fire-breathing dragon. One would be reduced to chars in an instant.

In light of this, Elijah made an attempt to get away from his chair whilst trying to alert Arthur of the impending danger, “Arthur, get down!”

“Huh?” Arthur sat upright.

But it was too late.

Before either of them could move an inch more, a gold plated bullet spun into their midst, the red markings on it crackling like electricity. It struck the roof in an instant, birthing a sudden explosion that rocked the entire hall. Its flames shrouded the roof like a big cloud of orange dust.

Part of the flames died down in a couple of seconds, ushering in thick clouds of smoke.

Some part of the smoke darkened and squirmed, assuming the shape of a man that walked through the rubble with a hand over his face. Every step he took cleared the smoke before him; they immediately coagulated behind him though.

It was Elijah, coughing and squinting his eyes as he searched for Arthur. He soon heard a grunt and watched Arthur’s silhouette rise up a few feet adjacent to him.

The latter staggered on his feet and coughed dryly, “What the hell? Elijah, is that you?!”

“Oh… yeah,” the smoke clouds dissipated in an instant and they could see much more clearly now.

‘Why didn’t he do that to begin with?’ Arthur simply shook his head, scanning every corner of the roof with narrowed eyes.

A large hole now existed where their chairs once sat and dust riled up from within it. Aside from that and the few rubble on the roof itself, he and Elijah were pretty much unscathed.

He raised a brow.

“We weren’t their targets,” Elijah voiced out, fixing his eyes in the direction that the shot had come from. “Well, I’m guessing they wanted to take us out with that attack too, but we were able to protect ourselves at the very last second.”

“Yeah,” Arthur cracked his neck, walking around the hole with caution. “I have a strong reflexive defense. A metallic dome was crafted around me, but the heat almost made me bring it down. What about you?”

Elijah wasn’t one to brag but he waved his right hand, which dissolved into a dark mist. With another wave, his hand was back.

Arthur simply shrugged, “So, what now? We don’t know who or how many enemies there are.”

“But we know where,” Elijah loosened his tie as he beelined towards the edge of the roof. “I’ll do a quick reconnaissance. Alert the others.”

He jumped with little effort, instantly dissolving into a dark mist cloud that surged forward into the distance.

Arthur let out an exasperated sigh as he dragged his feet toward the hole. He gazed down with squinted eyes, trying to see through the dust.

‘Can he really handle them himself? Should I go after him? I mean, the explosion shook the entire building. Everyone should already know what has happened. It’s not like we have any information on the enemy anyway.’

He was still contemplating this, when his neck hair went taut. His eyes flitted a deep red glow and his right arm went over his head reflexively, whilst a shield of steel fabricated on his forearm.

The construction had barely gone halfway when something dense and heavy collided with it, sending out a loud clang that reverberated across the night. The sudden impact pushed Arthur to a light stagger, but he still took the initiative to jump a few feet back.

At that same moment, multiple figures dropped from the night sky in projectiles, landing on the roof one after the other. They made sure to land quite a distance from the hole, in order not to degrade the weakened structural integrity around it.

But Arthur couldn’t care less. His eyes were unmoved from the man that now stood where he once was. He was almost twice as bulky as him and probably an inch taller, his brown coat reinforced with metal accents along the shoulders and chest, giving it an almost armor-like appearance.

Held firmly in his right hand was a large spikeless mace, its head exuding faint wisps of this purplish aura.

“Aye, a tough one, I see,” the man said, almost smiling as he sized Arthur up. One could tell that he was impressed. He took a glance at his weapon, “Hardly have I encountered anyone that survived the first blow from Tonitrui.”

‘Toni--?’ Arthur raised a brow. Then his eyelids lowered, ‘He named his weapon, just like that Altair guy. Weapon-loving guys like this are usually a hassle. Sigh…’

Though most of his attention was on the hulk-of-a-man, he could still see the other intruders moving about and chatting idly as though he was nonexistent. They were taking out gadgets from their bags and fixing wires and all other objects he couldn’t recognize.

‘They seem to have really planned this out. They wouldn’t have started this with something so loud as an explosion if they didn’t know what they were doing. And they don’t even see me as a threat. Not only that… this guy…’ he looked at the man with the mace. ‘He might be too much to handle alone. Should I fall back? No, I should try to stop whatever these guys are trying to do, but then he’ll interfere. Ahh… what a conundrum.’

“As you can see, my… uh, comrades are busy. We wouldn’t what to disturb them, now, would we?” the hefty man proposed like a gentleman.

“We…?” Arthur stood on guard, his brows twitching . He was divided on what action to take next.

Well, the hefty man trimmed down his options for him in the very next second.

His figure phased from where he stood, coming into existence right before the thinking Arthur. His free hand went for the latter’s neck, easily breaking through the ‘reflexive construct’ that tried to block his lunge.

He grabbed Arthur’s neck and leaped high into the air. He locked his eyes on the closest building and shot at it while Arthur struggled to break free of the choke.

The next thing his comrades could see was the building instantly crumbling to ruins as though a bomb had struck it. They quickly turned their faces away as the shockwave and rush of dust hit them.

“I knew we shouldn’t have brought Thalric. He doesn’t care what happens to us whenever he’s excited,” one of them protested with a grunt.

The only one amongst them that wasn’t doing any work, simply smiled, “When was the last time Thalric got this excited? He’s found a worthy opponent… hopefully. Let him have his fun. Maybe now, we can finally understand the full extent of his gift.”

The man was about 6 ft tall and quite lean, garbed like an appraised aristocrat, his fancy outfit a pallet of purple and black. His black hair was neatly gelled to the right side, his left eye adorned with a gold-rimmed monocle.

He kicked at his blackthorn cane and let it swing, “That aside, hurry up. We don’t want to keep our beloved guests waiting.”