

Chapter 1: Convergence

The streets of Heatherfield stretched empty under the pale moonlight, casting long shadows that seemed to dance with every flicker of the streetlamps. Nate Reid pulled his jacket tighter, the cool night air biting at his exposed skin as he continued his patrol. At fifteen, most kids his age worried about homework and weekend plans. Instead, here he was, walking the silent streets on a mission for BOARD, tracking what the organization suspected was an Undead sighting.

God, why did I have to sign up for that flyer? he thought bitterly, his breath forming small clouds in the cold air. *Oh, right. Of course, Nate. You had nowhere to go after the fire, your parents were gone, so you had to work for a living. Swell life.*

His right hand clenched into a fist, anger bubbling up from the depths of his chest where he tried to keep it buried. The memories of that night—the flames, the screaming, the smell of smoke that seemed to cling to everything—threatened to surface again. He forced himself to take a deep breath, unclenching his fist and pushing the rage back down where it belonged. Getting emotional wouldn't help him track down an Undead.

A strange noise echoed from somewhere ahead, barely audible but definitely out of place in the quiet neighborhood. Nate quickened his pace, following the sound as it led him toward a familiar silhouette against the night sky. Sheffield Institute loomed before him, its brick walls and tall windows bringing back a flood of memories he'd rather forget.

This was where he'd been a student, back when his life was normal. Back before the fire changed everything and forced him to leave his old life behind. He shook his head sharply, dispelling the thoughts. That life was over. He was a BOARD agent now, and he had a job to do.

The front gate stood slightly ajar—odd for this time of night, but definitely promising. If there was an Undead here, an unlocked entrance made his job easier. Nate slipped through the opening and onto the familiar campus grounds, his footsteps silent on the concrete pathways he'd walked hundreds of times as a student just a year ago.

The noise came again, louder this time, and was definitely coming from inside the main building. Nate followed it through empty hallways that felt eerily different in the darkness, past classrooms where he'd once sat through boring lectures about subjects that seemed meaningless now. The sound led him toward the gymnasium, where a strange orange glow flickered beneath the doors.

He pressed himself against the wall and peered through the small window, then nearly gasped at what he saw inside.

It looked like something straight out of a magical girl anime. Three girls—no, not just girls, but transformed beings with flowing costumes and elemental powers—were locked in combat with two monstrous creatures. One of the monsters was serpentine and pale, moving with liquid

grace as it struck at the defenders. The other was larger and more brutish, with stone-like skin that seemed to shrug off the magical attacks being thrown at it.

This was definitely not what BOARD had prepared him for.

Not one for subtlety, and with adrenaline overriding his better judgment, Nate pushed through the gym doors. "Hey!" he called, his voice echoing in the large space. "What's going on here?"

The pale, serpentine creature—Cedric, though Nate didn't know his name—immediately took advantage of the distraction. With inhuman speed, he abandoned his previous targets and rushed toward what appeared to be a defenseless human teenager. Nate's training kicked in and he threw himself to the side, barely avoiding claws that would have torn through his jacket and the flesh beneath.

"Who is that kid?" called one of the transformed girls—Will, the red-haired one with electricity crackling around her hands.

"No idea!" shouted a girl with long brown hair who seemed to control water. "But he just made things a lot more complicated!"

The third girl, who was Asian with shorter hair, was too busy dodging stone projectiles from the larger creature to respond, but her expression clearly said she agreed.

Nate rolled across a gym mat, coming up in a crouch as Cedric landed where he'd been standing a moment before. The creature's yellow eyes fixed on him with predatory interest.

"What are you doing here, little human?" Cedric hissed, his voice carrying an otherworldly resonance. "This is not your fight."

Nate scrambled backward, putting distance between himself and the creature while his mind raced. *What Category is this thing?* It definitely wasn't like any Undead he'd studied in BOARD's files. The appearance was wrong, the behavior was different, and there was something about its presence that felt more magical than the twisted nature he'd learned to associate with the Undead.

His hand moved instinctively to his jacket, fingers closing around the familiar weight of the device BOARD had entrusted to him. Cedric's serpentine head tilted with curiosity as Nate pulled out what looked like a metallic card case, its surface gleaming with an inner light.

"Interesting," Cedric murmured, momentarily pausing his advance. "What exactly are you, boy?"

The three girls continued their battle with the stone creature behind them, flashes of elemental magic illuminating the gymnasium in blues, whites, and earth tones. But Nate's focus was entirely on the serpentine being before him and the weight of the Awakener in his hand.

Whatever these creatures were, wherever they came from, his mission remained the same: protect innocent people from supernatural threats. And right now, these three girls—magical or not—needed his help.

Time to see if BOARD's training was worth anything, Nate thought grimly, reaching into his jacket to produce what appeared to be a card. The rectangular object gleamed with an ethereal blue light, and Cedric's eyes widened slightly at the sight of it.

Without hesitation, Nate slipped the card into a slot on the device. The buckle accepted it with a soft click. Before Cedric could react, Nate slapped the device against his stomach, and red segments began to fan out from its edges, forming a complete belt that secured itself around his waist with an audible snap.

Cedric watched with growing unease as the boy stepped back and extended his right arm forward, his stance taking on a practiced, almost ritualistic quality.

"Henshin!" Nate called out, his voice echoing through the gymnasium with newfound confidence.

The transformation began immediately. Nate swiveled his hand so his palm faced forward, then swiftly withdrew his arm to pull a switch on the buckle's side. The front panel flipped open with a sharp mechanical sound, and an electronic voice boomed from the device:

"TURN UP!"

A massive wall of pure energy erupted from the buckle, expanding outward like a shockwave. The force slammed into Cedric with devastating impact, sending the serpentine creature careening across the gymnasium floor. He crashed into a stack of exercise equipment with a thunderous clatter that echoed through the entire building.

The sudden explosion of power caused everyone else to freeze. The three girls stopped their battle with Vathek mid-attack, turning in shock toward the source of the incredible energy. Even Vathek himself paused, his stone-like features showing surprise at this unexpected development.

Nate took a deep breath, feeling the power coursing through him. Then, without warning, he began running headlong into the wall of energy that still lingered in the air before him. The girls watched in disbelief as he charged directly into the crackling barrier.

But as Nate ran through the energy wall, blue and silver armor began materializing around his body, piece by piece, forming over his limbs and torso with each step. By the time he emerged from the other side of the energy barrier, he was completely encased in gleaming battle armor. Without missing a beat, he launched himself directly at the downed Cedric.

The armored figure—no longer recognizable as the teenage boy from moments before—landed on Cedric with inhuman force. His fists, now encased in metallic gauntlets, pounded into the

creature with a strength far beyond what any normal human could possess. Each impact sent shockwaves through the gymnasium floor.

"My Lord!" Vathek bellowed, abandoning his standoff with the girls to rush toward his fallen companion.

But Hay Lin was ready. Seeing an opportunity in the chaos, she raised her hands and conjured a compressed gale of wind that caught Vathek mid-stride. The powerful air current swept him off his feet like a leaf in a hurricane, sending him slamming into the far wall with bone-jarring force.

Meanwhile, Cedric could only endure the relentless beating from the armored warrior. Every time he tried to find an opening to counterattack, another devastating blow would land, keeping him pinned and helpless. Just as Vathek was struggling to stand, the armored figure grabbed Cedric by his serpentine neck and, with a display of incredible strength, hurled him across the gymnasium.

Cedric's body collided with Vathek just as the larger creature was getting to his feet, and both enemies crashed to the ground in a tangle of limbs and confusion.

For a moment, the gymnasium fell silent except for the sound of settling debris and labored breathing. The three girls stared in shock at the armored figure standing over the fallen creatures.

"What... what just happened?" Irma gasped, her water-based attacks forgotten as she tried to process what she'd witnessed.

"Who is that?" Hay Lin whispered, her ponytail swaying as she turned her head between the mysterious warrior and her friends. "What is that?"

"I have no idea," Will replied, electricity still crackling faintly around her fingers. "But questions will have to wait." She reached into her costume and brought out a small, glowing jewel—the Heart of Kandarakar. Its pink light pulsed with otherworldly energy as she held it toward the shimmering portal that hung in the air near the gymnasium's far wall. "We need to close the gateway to Meridian before—"

"NO!" Cedric's voice cut through the air like a whip crack. Despite the beating he'd endured, the serpentine creature's eyes blazed with desperate fury as he spotted the Heart. "Vathek! Stand! We cannot let them seal the passage!"

Through sheer force of will, Cedric began to rise, his scaled form trembling with pain and rage. Vathek, though dazed from his collision with the wall and his lord, started to push himself upright as well, stone fragments falling from his rocky hide.

But before either creature could take more than a step toward the girls, the armored figure moved between them. With a fluid motion that bespoke both grace and deadly intent, he

reached to his side and drew a gleaming sword from its sheath. The blade caught the light from the portal, its edge promising swift and final justice.

Cedric's serpentine eyes widened with genuine fear as he stared at the weapon pointed directly at him. This was no mere human teenager anymore—this was something far more dangerous, something that could end them both without hesitation.

"Vathek," Cedric hissed urgently, his earlier bravado completely gone. "We retreat. Now."

Grabbing his larger companion with desperate strength, Cedric began slithering rapidly toward the gymnasium's exit, dragging the still-stunned Vathek behind him. But the armored warrior was faster. With a single, precise strike, he brought his sword down in a silver arc.

Cedric screamed as the blade sliced cleanly through a portion of his tail, severing several feet of scaled flesh. Pain shot through his entire body like liquid fire, but adrenaline and pure determination drove him onward. He didn't stop, couldn't stop—not with that terrifying figure behind them.

"This isn't over!" Cedric snarled as he hauled both himself and Vathek through the gymnasium doors. "Do you hear me? This isn't over!"

His voice echoed through the empty hallways as the two creatures disappeared into the night, leaving behind only a trail of scale fragments and the lingering scent of otherworldly magic.

The gymnasium fell into an eerie silence. The portal to Meridian flickered and began to close as Will maintained her hold on the Heart of Kandarakar, its pink light gradually dimming as the gateway sealed itself shut. But now the three girls found themselves alone with this mysterious armored figure, and none of them knew what to expect.

They watched him carefully, tension filling the air as they tried to determine whether he was friend or foe. His sword remained drawn, gleaming in the dim light that filtered through the gymnasium windows. The armor that encased him was impressive and intimidating, giving no hint of the person beneath.

Hay Lin leaned closer to Will, her voice barely a whisper. "Should we... should we ask who he is?"

Will shook her head almost imperceptibly, her grip tightening on the Heart. Every instinct told her they needed to get away from here, and fast. This figure might have helped them drive off Cedric and Vathek, but that didn't necessarily make him an ally.

But before any of them could move, the armored figure spoke, his voice carrying clearly through his helmet but sounding surprisingly young—and completely bewildered.

"What the hell is happening around here?"

Chapter 2: Unlikely Allies

The warm, inviting atmosphere of the Silver Dragon restaurant was a stark contrast to the chaos they had just escaped. Red lanterns cast a soft glow over the wooden tables, and the scent of jasmine tea and traditional Chinese cuisine filled the air. After an awkward "you first" argument about dropping their respective transformations back at the school, the four teenagers now sat around a corner table in uncomfortable silence.

Will fidgeted with her napkin, still processing everything that had happened. Irma kept stealing glances at their mysterious companion, while Hay Lin seemed lost in thought. Nate, meanwhile, kept to himself, staring down at the untouched cup of tea in front of him as if it held answers to questions he didn't know how to ask.

The soft shuffle of footsteps announced the approach of an elderly woman, her silver hair pulled back in a neat bun and her knowing eyes taking in the group with quiet wisdom. Yan Lin, Hay Lin's grandmother, moved with the grace of someone who had seen far more than her years suggested.

"So," she said gently, settling into the empty chair beside her granddaughter, "how did your first mission go, girls?"

Will let out a heavy sigh, her shoulders sagging. "Disastrously," she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. "We weren't a match for Scaleface or that big galoot. We would have been in serious trouble if we hadn't been rescued by..." She gestured vaguely toward Nate, who continued to avoid eye contact.

Yan Lin's ancient eyes turned to study the young man sitting quietly at their table. There was something about him—a weight of responsibility that seemed too heavy for someone so young, a sadness that spoke of loss and hardship. But there was also something else, something that made the old Guardian's instincts prickly with curiosity.

It was then that Irma's eyes suddenly widened with recognition. "Wait a minute," she said, pointing at their silent companion. "You're Nate Reid! You were an upperclassman at Sheffield before you..." She trailed off, uncertainty creeping into her voice.

Nate arched an eyebrow at being recognized, then deliberately turned his head away, his jaw tightening. The gesture left the three girls exchanging confused glances, wondering what they had said wrong and what secrets this mysterious young man was carrying.

Yan Lin observed the tension for a moment, then gently cleared her throat. "Perhaps," she suggested in her calm, measured voice, "we should start over. Young man, would you properly introduce yourself to us?"

Nate's eyes met the old woman's gaze, and for a moment he seemed to weigh his options. There was something about Yan Lin—a quiet authority, a sense of wisdom that reminded him

uncomfortably of the BOARD instructors who had seen right through his defenses. Finally, he released the breath he had been holding and straightened slightly in his chair.

"Like the girl said," he began, his voice steady but guarded, "my name is Nate Reid. And, well... I used to attend Sheffield before I quit."

Will, still adjusting to being new at Sheffield Institute, leaned forward with curiosity. "What do you mean by 'quit'? Did you transfer somewhere else or—"

Nate's expression immediately closed off, and he turned his gaze back to his untouched tea without answering. The pointed looks that Irma and Hay Lin shot in Will's direction made it clear she had touched on something sensitive.

"Sorry," Will muttered, her cheeks flushing with embarrassment.

Yan Lin offered a gentle smile to ease the tension. "Well then, is anyone hungry? I could prepare something for—"

"Yes, actually," came a voice from the restaurant's entrance. "I am quite hungry."

Everyone turned to see a man in a light gray suit stepping through the door, despite the clearly posted 'CLOSED' sign hanging in the window. He moved with the quiet confidence of someone accustomed to authority, his brown hair neatly styled and his sharp eyes taking in the scene before him.

Nate's reaction was immediate and telling. He shot to his feet, his chair scraping against the floor as he snapped to attention. "Chief Karasuma!" he said, his voice carrying the crisp formality of a subordinate addressing a superior officer.

The man—apparently Chief Karasuma—glanced around the warm interior of the Silver Dragon, his expression thoughtful. "I can hardly believe I'd be back here again," he murmured, almost to himself.

Yan Lin hadn't turned around to face the newcomer, but her voice carried a note of weary recognition. "What are you doing here, Karasuma?"

He shrugged casually, though there was something calculated about the gesture. "Just in the neighborhood." A pause, then his voice softened slightly. "It's been a long time, Yan Lin."

The elderly woman let out a derisive scoff. "Not long enough."

The silence that followed stretched uncomfortably, filled with the weight of old history and unspoken memories. But gradually, something seemed to shift in the atmosphere. Both figures appeared to mellow, the edges of old hurt softening into something more familiar.

Slowly, Yan Lin stood and turned to face him. They approached each other with the careful steps of people who had once meant something to each other, and after a moment's hesitation, they embraced warmly.

"You're not that hot babe I used to know anymore," Karasuma said with a wry smile, his formal demeanor giving way to something more genuine.

Yan Lin chuckled, pulling back to look at him. "And you're not that punk kid who got us all into trouble back in the day."

The three girls watched this exchange with growing bewilderment. It was clear that these two had a history, but none of them had expected their evening to take such an unexpected turn.

"Um, Grandma," Hay Lin ventured hesitantly, "who is this man?"

Yan Lin stepped back from the embrace and gestured toward her visitor. "Girls, this is Kei Karasuma. He's an archaeology professor at Tokyo University." She paused, studying his face. "Or at least, he was the last time we spoke."

Karasuma waved away any fanfare with a modest gesture. "I've since left my tenure," he explained simply. "I went into a different line of work."

"Last I heard, you were living quite well in academia," Yan Lin observed, her tone carrying a note of curiosity mixed with concern.

Karasuma's expression grew more serious. "A lot has happened since then. Things that..." He glanced meaningfully at the girls, then back to Yan Lin. "Things that you might need to hear about."

The warmth immediately drained from Yan Lin's face, replaced by a look of apprehension. Whatever Karasuma was referring to, it was clearly significant. She motioned toward the table. "Sit," she said quietly. "Please."

Karasuma nodded and took the empty chair beside Nate, giving the young agent a coy smile that suggested he was quite pleased to have found his subordinate in such interesting company.

His attention then turned to the three girls seated around the table. "These must be the new ones," he observed with knowing interest.

"Drop it for now," Yan Lin said firmly, raising a hand to stop him. "One thing at a time. First, you need to tell me what's drawn you back to Heatherfield after all these years."

Karasuma leaned back in his chair, his expression becoming more businesslike. "Since leaving my position at the university, I founded an organization. Its purpose was originally to protect and preserve rare and ancient artifacts. Its name is a bit of a mouthful: the Bureau of Archaeological Research and Defense. BOARD, for short."

Yan Lin's eyes narrowed slightly. "But there's more to it than that, isn't there?"

A brief smile crossed Karasuma's features. "It started when we booked an expedition to Tibet. There, we came across ancient ruins." His voice grew more serious. "Very ancient. Carbon dating revealed them to be from the Miocene Epoch, predating the earliest recorded hominins."

The revelation drew surprised looks from around the table. Even Yan Lin's eyebrows rose at this information.

"Well," the elderly woman said with good-humored levity, "that's way older than even me."

The light moment drew chuckles from the girls and Karasuma, while even Nate let out a snort of amusement despite the underlying tension.

Karasuma's expression grew more serious as he continued. "It took us five years to decipher even a fraction of what was written on those ruins. Imagine—even back then, there were people..." He paused, choosing his words carefully. "And I use that term loosely—who left markings that could be interpreted as writing."

Yan Lin leaned forward, her earlier humor fading. "What were you able to decipher? Nothing good, I'm betting."

"You would be right," Karasuma replied grimly. "It concerns things that might be connected to powers we once dealt with."

"I can name a few ancient evils," Yan Lin said, her voice taking on a knowing edge. "Believe me, they're a dime a dozen. So what are we talking about here?"

Karasuma's voice dropped to a more somber tone. "We managed to find a large stone tablet that we labeled the Monolith. What's written on it speaks of a battle—an ancient conflict that was to determine the dominant species—"

The words had barely left his mouth when Yan Lin snapped upright from her seat, the chair skidding back across the floor with a harsh scraping sound. Her face had gone paler than a sheet, and her eyes held a look of recognition that bordered on horror.

Karasuma's expression hardened as he recognized the look on her face. "You know," he said, his voice carrying the weight of certainty rather than a question. "Or at least you have an idea of what I'm talking about."

"The latter," Yan Lin replied, her voice hollow and distant.

Hay Lin immediately rose from her own seat, moving to her grandmother's side with obvious concern. "Grandma, what's wrong? You look like you've seen a ghost."

Yan Lin shook her head, though her hands trembled slightly. "I'm alright, dear. I just... I need to go."

Karasuma leaned forward, his tone becoming more urgent. "Yan Lin, you need to hear what BOARD has been doing about this. About the Undead."

The mention of that word caused Yan Lin to laugh—but it wasn't a sound of joy. It was hollow, brittle, carrying the weight of deep trepidation and dawning horror.

"The Undead," she repeated, the words seeming to taste bitter in her mouth. "I had only ever heard of this once before, from the Oracle himself, but I never could have imagined..." She trailed off, unable or unwilling to finish the thought.

She turned away from the table, her composure finally cracking. "I must leave. I have to inform the others immediately."

Before anyone could react, before Karasuma could say another word, Yan Lin vanished in a brilliant flash of light, leaving behind only the lingering scent of jasmine and the echo of displaced air.

The silence that followed was deafening. Will, Irma, and Hay Lin sat frozen in their chairs, staring at the empty space where the elderly woman had been standing just moments before.

"Where did she go?" Will finally managed to ask, her voice barely above a whisper.

Hay Lin could only shake her head in confusion, clearly as stunned as the others by her grandmother's sudden disappearance.

Karasuma, however, leaned back in his chair with the weary expression of someone who had seen such things before. "I might know where she went," he said quietly. "Kandrakar."

Chapter 3: Council of Fear

In the ethereal realm of Kandrakar, the usually serene Council chambers echoed with unprecedented chaos. The ancient halls, normally filled with calm deliberation and measured wisdom, now rang with voices raised in alarm and distress.

"The Undead have returned!" one council member cried, his voice cracking with fear.

"How is this possible?" shouted another. "They were sealed away eons ago!"

At the center of the tumult sat the Oracle, his sage-like form cross-legged in a meditation pose, but his usually serene demeanor had given way to deep and genuine unease. With a simple raise of his hand, he commanded attention, and gradually the other council members fell silent, though their agitation remained palpable.

"This has been an unforeseen variable," the Oracle began, his voice carrying the weight of ancient knowledge. "With the awakening of the new Guardians, so too have the Undead awakened from their slumber."

Luba, her feline features bristling with panic, could barely contain herself. "Everything is doomed!" she cried, her usual composure completely shattered. "We're all doomed!"

"Luba, quiet yourself!" Tibor snapped, his stern voice cutting through her hysteria. "Let the Oracle speak!"

The Oracle nodded gratefully to Tibor. "Thank you. As I was saying, with the report from Yan Lin, I fear this might not be a problem that the Guardians alone can handle."

Halinor, the former Guardian of Fire, her expression grave, spoke up. "What can be done? The Undead are supposed to be true immortals. Nothing—not even the strongest magic—can harm them."

The Oracle's expression grew even more troubled. "That is correct. They existed at a time before the Nymphs established Kandrakar itself. They are primordial beings who fought an ancient war to determine which among them would reign as the dominant species—not only for Earth but for all universes. The fact that humanoids became the most prevalent life form suggests that this war was won, but clearly not decisively enough to destroy them entirely."

"Destroy them?" Luba exclaimed, her voice rising to near hysteria. "Nothing can kill these damn things! How are those girls supposed to take care of this when they've hardly settled into their roles? Phobos was bad enough, but at least he's mortal!"

The congregation erupted again, consumed by worry and fear. The Oracle could only watch, knowing that no amount of reassurance would calm them. The next battle wasn't supposed to occur for millennia—what could have changed? What might have triggered this premature awakening?

"Yan Lin," the Oracle called out above the chaos, his voice cutting through the noise. "Tell us more about Karasuma and his organization. What exactly did they discover?"

Yan Lin stood, her expression grave. "They were the ones who originally found the ruins where the Monolith lay. According to their translation, the battle would begin when all fifty-two of the Undead were fully awakened."

This revelation sent the congregation into another frenzy of worried voices.

"Fifty-two!" someone shouted. "They may have broken the seal themselves by disturbing the ruins!"

The Oracle raised his hand again for silence. "No," he said firmly. "The seal was designed to remain intact until the time of the next battle. It cannot be broken by external means—it chooses when to unseal itself."

"Nevertheless," he continued, his voice heavy with concern, "the prospect of the Undead awakening—or perhaps having already awakened—is grave indeed. The Guardians might not

be enough on their own." He turned back to Yan Lin. "What can BOARD offer to help in this fight?"

Yan Lin shifted uncomfortably. "I... I had yet to ask Karasuma that question. I left before he could explain any further."

The silence that followed was pointed, with most of the congregation staring at her with expressions that clearly conveyed: *Seriously?*

Luba let out a long, weary sigh. "We're all doomed," she muttered in a resigned tone that seemed to capture everyone's collective despair.

The Oracle, however, maintained a thread of hope in his voice. "A correspondence must be established with BOARD immediately. We need to know what measures they've taken to address this crisis."

Several members of the congregation began voicing their doubts, their words overlapping in a chorus of skepticism.

"What can a human organization without magic possibly do against such creatures?"

"They're only mortals—how could they stand a chance?"

"We're talking about beings that predate magic itself!"

The Oracle raised his hand once more, his expression growing stern. "I concede that the task seems impossible," he said, his voice carrying the weight of ancient authority. "But you shouldn't dare underestimate the potential of humanity." His next words fell like stones into the still water, creating ripples of stunned silence throughout the chamber.

"For it was the Human Undead that originally won the first Battle Fight."

The naysayers fell completely silent, the magnitude of that revelation settling over the congregation like a heavy blanket.

Chapter 4: Past Connections

The BOARD headquarters was modest compared to what one might expect from an organization dealing with supernatural threats. Located in a rented office building on the outskirts of Heatherfield, it consisted of a few cramped rooms filled with research materials, artifacts, and monitoring equipment that hummed quietly in the background. The walls were lined with photographs of archaeological sites, ancient texts, and what appeared to be incident reports from around the world.

Nate sat across from Karasuma's desk, still processing everything he'd witnessed the night before. His bike—a sleek machine that BOARD had provided him, equipped with various

detection devices and communication equipment—was parked outside, drawing curious looks from passersby who couldn't quite place its unusual modifications.

Karasuma ended his phone call with Yan Lin and set the receiver down with a thoughtful expression. "Well," he said, leaning back in his chair, "that was enlightening."

"So," Nate began without preamble, "do you have any missions for me today?"

"Actually, yes. I need you to return to the Silver Dragon this evening. Yan Lin has agreed to a more formal meeting to discuss our... mutual interests." Karasuma's expression grew more serious. "There are details that need to be ironed out properly if we're going to work together on this."

Nate shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "I'd rather not go back there. More of them might recognize me, and I don't really feel like dealing with that right now."

"I understand your reluctance," Karasuma replied gently, "but this is important, Nate. We need all the allies we can get."

Brushing aside his doubts with a frustrated gesture, Nate leaned forward. "Alright, but first, I need you to explain what the hell this is all about. When we left that restaurant last night, you barely told me anything other than 'magic exists'—which, honestly, I wouldn't have believed two years ago if it weren't for the Undead."

Karasuma nodded, understanding the young man's confusion. "Yan Lin is affiliated with something called Kandrakar," he began, his voice taking on the tone of someone recounting something almost too incredible to believe. "It's an ethereal realm that exists at the center of the universe—the heart of infinity itself. It exists beyond both time and space, a vast nothingness where the most powerful spirits and creatures reside, all led by a being known as the Oracle."

Nate stared at his superior for a long moment, then blinked slowly. "And you know this because...?"

A small smile crossed Karasuma's features, tinged with nostalgia and something that might have been regret. "Because I used to live in Heatherfield. Years ago, I got caught up in the adventures of five girls called the Guardians of the Veil. They're tasked with safeguarding all worlds from various supernatural threats."

"Wait, hold on," Nate interrupted, raising his hands. "How the hell do you even know that? I mean, it sounds pretty crazy. Different worlds? Like... parallel dimensions?"

Karasuma chuckled, though there was a weariness to it. "You could say that, though the reality is more complex. And yes, it was crazy for me too back then. I came into contact with them purely by accident." He paused, his gaze growing distant. "I didn't join in their battles—I wasn't capable of that kind of fighting—but I helped in other ways."

"What kind of ways?" Nate pressed, his curiosity overriding his skepticism.

"Research, mostly. Translation work. I was pursuing my doctorate in archaeology at the time, specializing in ancient languages and forgotten civilizations." Karasuma gestured to some of the artifacts displayed around his office. "When strange things started happening in Heatherfield—portals opening, creatures from other dimensions appearing—the local authorities were completely out of their depth. But I had the academic background to help make sense of some of what was happening."

Nate leaned back, trying to process this information. "So you're telling me that you just... stumbled into all this supernatural stuff?"

"More like it stumbled into me," Karasuma corrected with a dry smile. "One day I was a normal graduate student working on my thesis about pre-Columbian civilizations, and the next I was helping teenage girls fight an evil prince from another dimension."

"Teenage girls," Nate repeated flatly.

"The Guardians are chosen young," Karasuma explained. "The power of the elements—Fire, Water, Earth, Air, and Energy—selects its wielders based on their hearts, not their age or experience. Some of the most powerful magical beings I've ever encountered have been barely out of middle school."

Nate thought about the three girls he'd fought alongside the previous night—Will, Irma, and Hay Lin. They couldn't have been more than fourteen or fifteen years old, yet they wielded incredible magical powers with a skill that suggested significant training.

"So what happened to the original five?" he asked. "Why are there new ones now?"

Karasuma's expression grew more somber. "The mantle of Guardian passes from generation to generation. When one group completes their mission or... when circumstances require it, the power moves on to new wielders. The three you met last night—Will, Irma, and Hay Lin—are part of the new generation, though I believe they're still missing their final two members."

"And you think these Undead that BOARD has been tracking are connected to all this?"

"I don't think it—I know it," Karasuma replied firmly. "The timeline matches too perfectly to be a coincidence. The new Guardians are awakening to their powers just as the Undead are beginning to stir. According to the translations we've made from the Monolith, this kind of synchronicity isn't accidental."

Nate was quiet for a moment, absorbing all of this. Finally, he looked up at his superior with a mixture of respect and bewilderment. "Chief, with all due respect... how did you go from helping magical teenage girls to founding a secret organization that fights ancient monsters?"

Karasuma's smile held no humor this time. "Because after seeing what I saw, after learning what I learned about the threats that exist beyond our normal understanding of reality, I realized that humanity needed to be prepared. The Guardians are powerful, but they can't be everywhere at once. And some threats..." He paused, his expression growing grave. "Some threats require a different kind of response."

He stood up and walked over to one of the display cases, where an ornate device sat under protective glass—clearly an early prototype of the Awakener system that Nate now carried.

"The technology we've developed, the training programs, the research into ancient civilizations and forgotten magic—all of it stems from what I learned during my time helping the original Guardians. I saw how unprepared the world was for supernatural threats, and I decided to do something about it."

Nate followed his gaze to the prototype device. "So BOARD isn't just about preserving artifacts."

"No," Karasuma confirmed. "It's about ensuring that when the next great supernatural crisis arrives—and there's always a next one—humanity won't be caught completely off guard. We may not have magic, but we have technology, knowledge, and most importantly, the will to fight."

He turned back to face Nate, his expression serious but not without hope. "Which brings us to tonight's meeting. If the Undead are truly awakening, then we're going to need every advantage we can get. The Guardians have power, but they lack experience and numbers. We have resources and knowledge, but we lack their magical abilities. Together..."

"Together we might actually have a chance," Nate finished, understanding dawning in his eyes.

"Exactly." Karasuma returned to his desk and picked up a thick folder. "Now, I want you to review these files before tonight. Everything we know about the previous Guardian conflicts, the dimensional structure of reality as we understand it, and most importantly, what our projections suggest about the Undead threat."

Nate accepted the folder, surprised by its weight. "This is going to be a long afternoon."

"Yes, it is. But Nate?" Karasuma's voice held a note of pride. "Last night, you proved that BOARD's training and technology can stand alongside magical power when it matters. That's going to be crucial in the battles ahead."

As Nate left the office with the folder under his arm, he couldn't help but reflect on how much his life had changed. Two years ago, he'd been a normal high school student with normal problems. Now he was a member of a secret organization, wielding advanced technology to fight supernatural threats alongside magical girls from another dimension.

It would have been completely insane if he hadn't seen it all with his own eyes.

His bike started with a quiet purr, and as he rode through the streets of Heatherfield toward his small apartment, Nate found himself wondering what other revelations tonight's meeting would bring. One thing was certain—his life was never going to be normal again.

But looking back at everything he'd lost, everything that had brought him to this point, maybe that wasn't such a bad thing after all.

Afternoon at the Silver Dragon

Later that afternoon, Nate found himself back at the Silver Dragon, though this time the atmosphere was completely different. Instead of the quiet, closed restaurant they'd occupied the night before, the place was bustling with the normal lunch crowd. The gentle clatter of chopsticks against bowls mixed with conversation in multiple languages, creating a warm, lived-in ambiance that made the previous night's tense revelations feel almost surreal.

He parked his bike outside, noting how it drew a few curious glances from passersby. The modified machine looked distinctly out of place among the family sedans and compact cars that typically frequented the restaurant district, but Nate had grown used to the attention his BOARD-issued equipment attracted.

Walking through the entrance, he was immediately hit by the rich aroma of authentic Chinese cuisine—star anise, soy sauce, ginger, and the complex layering of spices that made his stomach growl audibly. It had been a long time since he'd had a proper meal, and the stipend from last night's successful mission was burning a hole in his pocket.

The lunch crowd meant he had to wait a moment for a table, but eventually a hostess seated him at a small table near the window. He could see his bike from here, which was always a good thing—BOARD equipment wasn't exactly replaceable on a teenager's budget.

A woman approached his table with a warm smile, notepad in hand. She was perhaps in her thirties, with kind eyes and the efficient manner of someone who'd been working in restaurants for years. "Good afternoon," she said pleasantly. "What can I get for you today?"

Nate glanced at the menu, though the rich scents filling the air had already helped him decide. "I'll take the Mapo Tofu," he said, looking up at her. "Extra spicy if you can manage it."

The woman's eyebrows rose slightly with approval. "Someone who appreciates real flavor," she said with a chuckle, making a note on her pad. "Most customers ask us to tone down the spice. I'll make sure the kitchen knows you can handle the heat."

"Thanks," Nate replied, offering a rare genuine smile. "I've always enjoyed spicy food."

"It'll be out in about fifteen minutes," she said, collecting his menu. "Can I get you something to drink while you wait?"

"Just water, please."

As she walked away, Nate settled back in his chair and let himself relax for the first time in what felt like weeks. The normalcy of sitting in a restaurant, ordering food like any other customer, was oddly comforting after the surreal experiences of the past day. Around him, families shared meals, couples chatted over steaming bowls, and the rhythm of ordinary life continued, unaware of the supernatural forces that had been stirring just beneath the surface.

He found his gaze drifting to the back of the restaurant, where he knew the private dining area was located—the same space where tonight's meeting would take place. Would Yan Lin be there? Would she have answers from this Kandrakar place that Karasuma had described? And what exactly were they expecting him to contribute to whatever alliance they were trying to forge?

The weight of the folder in his jacket seemed heavier as these thoughts circled through his mind. He'd spent most of the morning reading through the files Karasuma had given him, and the scope of what they were potentially facing was staggering. Fifty-two Undead entities, each one a primordial being with power beyond conventional understanding, awakening to fight a battle that could determine the fate of not just Earth, but all realities.

Two years ago, his biggest worry had been whether he'd pass his history exam. Now he was apparently part of humanity's first line of defense against an ancient apocalypse.

The irony wasn't lost on him.

The Complete Team

Hours later, as the restaurant began to empty and the last of the lunch crowd filtered out, Yan Lin appeared at his table with her characteristic quiet grace. Her expression was more composed than it had been the night before, though Nate could detect an underlying tension in the way she held herself.

"Young man," she said softly, "please come with me. The others will be arriving soon."

Nate nodded, leaving money for his meal and a generous tip—the Mapo Tofu had been exceptional, living up to every bit of the promised heat. He followed Yan Lin through the restaurant toward the same private dining area where the previous night's revelations had unfolded.

The room looked different in the late afternoon light filtering through the windows. Less mysterious, more mundane—just a comfortable space with traditional decorations and a large round table. Yan Lin gestured for him to take a seat, then busied herself with preparing tea, her movements carrying the practiced efficiency of someone who had done this countless times before.

"They should be here shortly," she said without looking up. "All five of them this time."

Nate settled into his chair, trying to ignore the nervous energy building in his stomach. Meeting the three girls from the previous night had been awkward enough—adding two more to the mix wasn't likely to improve matters.

He didn't have long to wait. The sound of voices approaching from the main restaurant announced their arrival, though the tone was notably different from what he might have expected from a group of confident heroes. There was an undercurrent of nervousness, uncertainty, and even reluctance in their whispered conversation.

Moments later the door slid open to admit not just Will, Irma, and Hay Lin, but two additional girls he hadn't met the night before.

The first was a tall girl with dark skin and serious eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses, her curly hair pulled back in a practical style. Instead of the confident academic bearing he might have expected, she seemed to shrink into herself slightly, staying close to the wall as if hoping to remain unnoticed. She kept glancing around nervously, clearly uncomfortable with the situation.

The second girl made Nate's blood run cold.

Blonde hair perfectly styled, expensive clothes that probably cost more than his monthly BOARD stipend, and that particular expression of casual superiority that he remembered all too well from his time at Sheffield Institute. Cornelia Hale—student council member, social elite, and one of the people who had made his final months at school significantly more unpleasant with her dismissive attitude toward anyone she deemed beneath her notice.

Nate felt his shoulders tense involuntarily, and he drew his lips into a thin line while bringing a hand up to partially cover his face. Maybe if he kept his head down and stayed quiet, she wouldn't recognize him. It had been over a year since he'd left Sheffield, and he looked different now—leaner, more angular, with the kind of weathered appearance that came from living rough and facing real dangers.

Fortunately, he thanked whatever powers existed for the saving grace of teenage self-absorption. Cornelia had barely glanced around the room before her attention was completely absorbed by her phone, her fingers dancing across the screen with practiced efficiency. Her entire body language suggested she'd rather be anywhere else but here, dealing with what she clearly considered an inconvenience.

"Um," Will started hesitantly, looking around the table, "I guess we should... do introductions? Since we're all supposed to be working together now?" Her voice carried none of the confident authority he'd seen during their battle—instead, she seemed almost as nervous as the rest of them.

She gestured somewhat awkwardly to the two newcomers. "This is Taranee Cook. She's... she's the Guardian of Fire." Taranee offered a barely audible "hi," looking like she wanted to disappear entirely. Her hands fidgeted with the strap of her bag as she avoided eye contact with everyone.

"And this is Cornelia Hale, Guardian of Earth," Will said, a note of exasperation in her voice.

Cornelia looked up from her phone just long enough to roll her eyes and mutter, "Can we please get this over with? I have actual plans tonight." Her tone made it clear she considered this entire magical Guardian business to be a massive waste of her valuable time.

Nate kept his face partially hidden, hoping his voice wouldn't trigger any recognition. "Nate Reid," he said simply. "I work with BOARD."

"BOARD?" Taranee asked quietly, her voice barely above a whisper. "That's the organization that fights... those things?" She seemed to shudder slightly at the memory of whatever Yan Lin had told them about the Undead threat.

"Yeah," Nate confirmed, still marveling at the surreal nature of his situation. Two years ago, if someone had told him he'd be sitting in a restaurant having a strategy meeting with actual magical girls, he'd have recommended they seek professional help. Now here he was, and somehow it felt like the most normal part of his increasingly bizarre life.

"So you actually know how to fight monsters?" Irma asked, her usual bravado seeming forced. "Because honestly, last night was terrifying, and I have no idea what I'm doing with these powers."

"None of us do," Will admitted quietly, her shoulders sagging. "I mean, we barely figured out how to transform, and now they're telling us we have to save the world from ancient evil beings?"

"Fifty-two of them," Taranee added in a voice so quiet it was almost a whisper, then immediately looked like she regretted speaking up.

"Ugh, whatever," Cornelia said without looking up from her phone. "Can't someone else handle it? I didn't ask for any of this magic stuff, and I have a social life to maintain."

Yan Lin set down the teapot and took her own seat at the table, her expression patient but concerned as she observed the girls' obvious reluctance and fear. "I know this is overwhelming," she said gently. "But the powers chose you for a reason."

"Well, they chose wrong," Cornelia muttered, finally putting her phone down but crossing her arms defensively. "I don't want to be a Guardian. I want to be a normal teenager."

Nate found himself relating to that sentiment more than he cared to admit. He looked around the table at these five girls—some barely fourteen years old—who had been thrust into a responsibility they never asked for, facing threats beyond imagination. The parallel to his own situation wasn't lost on him.

"For what it's worth," he said quietly, surprising himself by speaking up, "I didn't ask for this either. Two years ago, I was just a normal high school student. Sometimes life doesn't give us a choice about the responsibilities we inherit."

It was, he realized, the beginning of an alliance none of them had wanted but all of them desperately needed. Now, he just had to make it through the rest of the meeting without Cornelia looking up long enough to place his face.

Yan Lin cleared her throat gently, drawing everyone's attention. "Now that we're all here, let me recapitulate what I've shared with the girls and what Nate should already know from his organization." She folded her hands in her lap, her expression growing more serious. "Apart from your primary mission to protect the Dimensional Veil, you must now also help us seal away the Undead because of something called the Battle Fight."

Hay Lin leaned forward, her earlier nervousness giving way to curiosity. "Grandma, you only told us the bare bones before. Can you give us more details about what this Battle Fight actually is?"

Yan Lin raised a hand with a patient smile. "All will be made clear, my dear granddaughter. But since Nate has been charged by Karasuma to properly explain the matter to all of you, I believe it would be better to let him take the lead on this discussion."

Nate's eyes widened, the blood draining from his face. The full implications of Yan Lin's words hit him like a physical blow. Internally, he was cursing Karasuma in every language he knew—and a few he'd picked up from BOARD's international operatives. He had been expecting the Chief to show up and lead this meeting alongside Yan Lin, not dump the entire responsibility on a seventeen-year-old agent who was still figuring out the supernatural world himself.

He suppressed a groan, not wanting to make a bad impression or draw unnecessary attention to himself. The last thing he needed was—

"Wait a minute," Cornelia said suddenly, her phone forgotten as she looked up and really focused on him for the first time. Her eyes narrowed as she studied his face with the sharp attention of someone trying to place a half-remembered detail. "You look familiar."

Nate felt his stomach drop to his ankles, but there was no escape now. Recognition dawned in Cornelia's expression.

"You're that upperclassman who used to be in the art club," she said, her voice carrying a note of surprise mixed with something that might have been disdain. "Nate... Reid, right? You just disappeared from Sheffield one day."

Despite every instinct screaming at him to deny it or deflect, Nate found his lips curling into a crooked, resigned smile. There was no point in pretending anymore.

"That's me," he confirmed quietly, his voice carrying a mixture of embarrassment and bitter acceptance.

The admission seemed to shift the entire atmosphere in the room. Will, Irma, and Hay Lin exchanged glances, clearly picking up on the sudden tension. Taranee looked even more uncomfortable, if that were possible, while Cornelia's expression suggested she was reevaluating everything about this situation.

"So," Cornelia continued, her tone taking on that familiar edge of superiority he remembered all too well, "the mysterious monster hunter is actually just some dropout from our school?"

The words hit harder than they should have, carrying all the weight of his failures and the life he'd been forced to abandon. But before Nate could formulate a response, Yan Lin's voice cut through the tension with quiet authority.

"Cornelia," she said firmly, though not unkindly, "everyone at this table has made sacrifices to be here. Perhaps we should focus on the crisis at hand rather than past circumstances."

Nate shot the elderly woman a grateful look, then straightened in his chair and tried to summon whatever confidence he could muster. If Karasuma had thrown him to the wolves, he'd just have to make the best of it.

"Right," he said, his voice steadying as he fell back on his BOARD training. "The Battle Fight. From what our organization has been able to decipher from ancient sources, it's... well, it's exactly what it sounds like. A battle to determine which species gets to be the dominant form of life across all realities."

The shocked silence that followed was broken by Cornelia's sharp laugh—though there was no humor in it.

"Seriously?" she scoffed, crossing her arms. "It's just some kind of contest to see who gets to be top dog? That's what all this fuss is about?"

Will and Hay Lin exchanged uncertain glances, while Taranee seemed to shrink even further into her chair. Irma's usual bravado had completely evaporated, replaced by growing unease.

Yan Lin's expression grew grave as she shook her head. "I'm afraid it's much more serious than that, Cornelia. When we say 'dominant species,' we mean the winner will get to replace all of humanity with their own kind."

The clarification hit the room like a physical blow. The casual chatter and nervous energy that had filled the space moments before died completely, leaving only stunned silence. Even Cornelia's phone slipped from her suddenly nerveless fingers to clatter onto the table.

Nate cleared his throat, his voice coming out rougher than he intended. "It's true. According to our research, if even one of the Undead wins the Battle Fight, they get to reshape reality itself.

Every human on Earth—every human across all dimensions—gets replaced with whatever kind of creature they are."

The five girls just stared at him, their faces reflecting varying degrees of horror and disbelief. Will's hands had gone white where they gripped the edge of the table. Hay Lin's mouth hung slightly open in shock. Taranee looked like she might faint. Even Cornelia had gone pale beneath her perfectly applied makeup.

"You're kidding, right?" Irma finally managed to ask, her voice barely above a whisper. "Please tell me you're kidding."

Nate bit into his lower lip, the small pain grounding him as he forced himself to meet her desperate gaze. Slowly, deliberately, he shook his head.

"No," he said quietly. "I'm not kidding. I wish I were."

The weight of that admission settled over the room like a shroud. These weren't just teenage girls who had been given magical powers to fight some distant evil—they were humanity's last line of defense against complete extinction. The responsibility was so vast, so overwhelming, that for a moment no one seemed able to speak.

Finally, Will found her voice, though it trembled. "How... how many people know about this?"

"Not many," Nate admitted. "BOARD, Kandarakar, and now you five. The general population has no idea what's coming."

"And if we fail?" Taranee whispered, her words barely audible.

Nate's silence was answer enough.

"This is crazy!" Irma suddenly exclaimed, her voice cracking with fear and anger. "If we don't win this Battle Fight thing, all of humanity is gonna be kaput—gonzo! Why the heck does something like this even need to happen?"

Yan Lin's expression remained calm, though there was deep sadness in her ancient eyes. "No one can truly control the sequence of life, dear. All we can truly do is weather through it."

"Weather through it?" Hay Lin countered, her voice rising with incredulity. "Grandma, how are we supposed to weather through something like some apocalyptic tournament where winner literally takes all? That's not weathering—that's impossible!"

For the first time since the conversation had begun, Yan Lin smiled—not with joy, but with something that might have been hope mixed with grim determination. Without saying a word, she simply raised her hand and pointed directly at Nate.

All eyes in the room turned to him, and Nate felt his stomach lurch. The weight of their collective gaze was almost unbearable, especially when he could see the desperate need for reassurance in their faces.

"What?" he asked weakly, though he had a sinking feeling he already knew what she meant.

"You've already proven that humanity doesn't have to face this threat defenseless," Yan Lin said, her smile widening slightly. "Last night, when those creatures had the upper hand against three Guardians, you evened the odds. BOARD's technology, combined with the Guardians' power... perhaps that's how we weather this particular storm."

The implications of her words settled over the group slowly. Will was the first to speak, her voice still shaky but gaining a thread of strength.

"So you're saying that maybe we're not as helpless as we thought?"

Cornelia let out a derisive snort, her earlier shock giving way to familiar skepticism. "Oh please," she said, gesturing dismissively toward Nate. "You're talking like this changes everything, but he's just one guy. One teenage dropout with some fancy gadgets. How is that supposed to make us feel better about fighting fifty-two ancient monsters?"

The casual cruelty in her words made Nate wince slightly, but he forced himself to sit straighter. Whatever his personal feelings about Cornelia Hale, she wasn't wrong about the numbers.

"I'm not the only one," he said quietly, his voice gaining strength as he spoke. "BOARD has other agents. Resources. Technology. I'm just... well, I'm the one assigned to this particular region."

Irma's face immediately brightened with relief. "Oh thank goodness!" she exclaimed, her voice carrying the first genuine hope any of them had expressed since the meeting began. "So there are others like you? Where are they? How many? Are they coming to help?"

The sudden enthusiasm in her voice made Nate's stomach twist with guilt. He found himself fidgeting with the edge of his jacket, unable to meet her eager eyes.

"Well," he began hesitantly, his voice growing smaller with each word, "we... we still have to find them."

The silence that followed was deafening. All five girls stared at him with expressions that shifted rapidly from hope to confusion to growing horror.

"WHAT?!" The word erupted from multiple throats simultaneously, so loud that Yan Lin actually flinched. Will's voice cracked on the exclamation, while Hay Lin's eyes went impossibly wide. Even Taranee's quiet demeanor shattered as she stared at him in shock.

Cornelia shot to her feet, her chair scraping harshly against the floor. "Are you kidding me right now?" she demanded, her voice shrill with outrage. "You just told us that humanity's survival depends on some secret organization, and now you're saying you don't even know where your own people are?!"

Nate's hand moved instinctively to his jacket, his fingers finding the familiar weight of the device that had saved his life just the night before. The outraged voices of the five girls continued to echo around him, their fear and anger completely justified given what he'd just revealed. He couldn't blame them for their reaction—if he were in their position, he'd probably be screaming too.

Taking a deep breath to steady himself, Nate slowly withdrew the Blay Buckle from his jacket and placed it on the table between them. The metallic device caught the overhead light, its silver surface gleaming with that subtle inner radiance that marked it as something beyond ordinary technology.

The sight of it immediately silenced the room. All eyes focused on the compact device, its sleek design both elegant and somehow ominous. Even Cornelia stopped her tirade mid-sentence, her attention drawn to the object despite her anger.

"This," Nate said quietly, his voice carrying a weight that commanded attention, "is what we use to fight the Undead."

Will leaned forward slightly, her earlier shock giving way to cautious curiosity. "What is it?"

"It's called a Blay Buckle," Nate explained, his tone taking on the measured cadence he'd learned from BOARD briefings. "BOARD developed it based on ancient principles we discovered in the ruins. It's designed to channel the power of what we call the Category Ace of each suit."

Hay Lin tilted her head, confusion evident in her expression. "Category Ace? Like... playing cards?"

Nate nodded slowly. "In a way, yes. The ancient civilization that left the Monolith organized their power structure around four suits—similar to a deck of cards, but representing fundamental forces of existence. Each suit has its hierarchy, from the lowest ranked to the Ace—the ultimate expression of that suit's power."

Taranee found her voice, though it remained barely above a whisper. "And this device... it lets you use that power?"

"It channels it," Nate corrected gently. "The armor you saw me wear last night—that's the manifestation of the Category Ace's strength. Whoever wears the Blay Buckle temporarily gains abilities far beyond normal human limits."

Irma's eyes widened with something that might have been hope. "So it could make us stronger too? Strong enough to actually fight those things?"

Nate's expression grew more serious as he shook his head. "It's not that simple. The Blay Buckle is attuned to specific individuals. It took months of preparation and conditioning before I could safely use it. Even then, the transformation puts enormous strain on the user's body and mind."

He gestured toward the device, noting how the others instinctively leaned away from it slightly. "This particular buckle is synchronized to the Category Ace of Spades—what BOARD classifies as the combat suit. It grants enhanced strength, speed, durability, and tactical awareness. But each suit represents different aspects of power."

Will's eyes sharpened with understanding. "So the other suits must be Diamond, Club, and Heart, right? Where are they?"

Nate's expression grew more uncomfortable. "We still need to find candidates for the Diamond and Club buckles. Anyone else using one without the compatibility will experience stress that could even be life-threatening."

Cornelia let out a derisive snort. "Oh, this just keeps getting better," she said, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "So how exactly is BOARD going to find these mystery candidates? Put out an ad in the newspaper?"

Nate shrugged, looking almost embarrassed. "Actually... that's pretty much how I was recruited."

The silence that followed was profound. All five girls stared at him with expressions of pure shock, their mouths hanging open in disbelief.

Hay Lin was the first to recover, moving the conversation along with visible effort. "What about the Heart suit?" she asked, her voice slightly strained.

Nate's expression grew even more troubled. "The Heart should be the Category Ace of Hearts—the Mantis Undead. Unfortunately, the actual buckle hasn't been completed yet, since that particular Undead hasn't been sealed. Without a template, we can't finish the device."

He reached into his jacket again and withdrew what appeared to be a playing card, though it was clearly something far more significant. The card gleamed with the same ethereal quality as the Blay Buckle, its surface showing an intricate design of a beetle-like creature surrounded by ornate borders.

"This is what I mean," he said, holding up the card for them to see. "This contains the Category Ace of Spades—the Beetle Undead. It was one of the few Undead that BOARD managed to reach before it could awaken."

Will leaned closer to examine the card, fascination overriding her earlier fear. "So you have to capture these things to make the buckles work?"

Nate nodded grimly. "After sealing the Beetle, I hunted down the Category Ace of each suit, barring Hearts." His voice grew quieter, more serious. "I'll tell you this bluntly—the first time I faced off against the Category Ace of Diamonds, I nearly got killed."

The room fell silent again, but this time it was a different kind of quiet—heavy with the weight of genuine danger rather than shock.

"It took being in a controlled environment where we lured the Undead out," Nate continued, his hand unconsciously moving to his ribs as if remembering old pain. "We had a contingent of trained soldiers with military-grade weapons, and even then, it took everything I had. By the time I was finished, I spent two months in the hospital."

He met their eyes one by one, his expression deadly serious. "Had I not been wearing the suit, I would have ended up worse than that. Or just dead."

The silence stretched long, heavy enough to press on their lungs. No one wanted to break it, because to do so would mean admitting the truth of what Nate had said—that this wasn't some secret adventure or magical rite of passage. This was survival. This was extinction hanging over their heads.

Irma was the first to crack, her voice sharp in the quiet. "So... no pressure, right? Just the entire fate of humanity on five high school girls and a guy with a fancy belt." She tried to laugh, but it came out strangled, and she immediately looked away.

Hay Lin hugged her arms around herself, her eyes wide. "I thought we were supposed to, like... stop Phobos, close portals, protect the Veil. That's huge, but... this—" She swallowed hard, unable to finish.

Taranee barely moved. She just stared at the table, knuckles white where her hands clutched her bag strap, breathing fast like she was trying not to hyperventilate.

Will's face had gone pale, but her eyes burned. The weight of leadership pressed on her more than any of them. She didn't speak—she couldn't, not yet—but her whole body trembled with the effort of keeping herself from falling apart.

Cornelia's phone still lay forgotten on the table. She looked at Nate, her usual smugness stripped raw, and for the first time her voice didn't drip with sarcasm or superiority. It was soft, shaky, almost human. "This... this can't be real. It's just—it can't be real."

And Nate sat there, silent, letting them break under the truth because he knew forcing false hope on them would only make things worse later. He remembered his first briefing, the way the instructors hadn't sugarcoated a damn thing. The cold certainty that you might die tomorrow, and if you weren't ready for that, you shouldn't be there at all.

Finally, Will lifted her head. Her voice was quiet, hoarse, but steady enough to cut through the air. “So what you’re saying, Nate... is that this isn’t about winning battles.” She met his eyes, and for a heartbeat she looked older than she was. “It’s about surviving a war.”

Nate finally leaned forward, resting his forearms on the table. His tone was flat, clipped—the way you spoke when you couldn’t afford illusions.

“You can help. Your powers, your instincts—they’re useful. But when it comes to a direct confrontation with the Undead...” He paused, making sure they were all looking at him. “Run. Get clear, regroup, survive. Because if you stand toe-to-toe with them, you’ll die. No hesitation. No second chances.”

Irma blinked at him, then slumped back in her chair with a long exhale. “Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence,” she deadpanned, though the joke landed hollow.

Yan Lin’s expression grew grave. Her hands folded together in her lap, her voice soft but cutting as she took over. “Nate isn’t wrong. You girls must understand—these creatures are not like Phobos or Cedric. They are older than Kandrakar itself. The Undead are true immortals.”

The word hung in the air like a death sentence.

She continued, her eyes sweeping over each of the Guardians. “Magic cannot touch them, for magic came after them. Steel, fire, water, lightning—none of it will harm them. They are immune to all things that were born from the eras that followed. They are as ancient as existence itself, and so they are untouched by anything younger than they are.”

Taranee whispered, almost to herself, “Then... how do you even fight something like that?”

Yan Lin didn’t answer right away, and that silence was louder than any words.

Nate’s jaw tightened as Yan Lin’s words sank in. He let the silence hang for a moment before cutting through it.

“There *is* a way to stop them,” he said, his voice low but firm. “You can’t kill an Undead. You can’t burn it, freeze it, blast it with magic, or crush it with stone. The only way—the *only* way—is to seal them.”

All five girls looked at him, confusion and dread mixing in their expressions.

“That’s how the original Battle Fight ended,” Nate continued. His fingers brushed the Blay Buckle at his side, the weight of its history heavy in his hand. “When all fifty-two were unleashed, it wasn’t brute strength or magic that decided things. It was the Human Undead—the Category Two of Hearts—that managed to seal every other one inside the Monolith.”

The words hit like a thunderclap.

“Wait, wait, wait.” Irma held up both hands, her eyes wide. “You’re telling me... humans won? Against all those nightmare creatures? How is that even possible?”

Taranee blinked, shaking her head. “But... if they were sealed, how are they back now?”

Hay Lin’s mouth opened, closed, then opened again. “You mean... we’re only here *because* humans already won once?”

Cornelia’s expression hardened, the shock cutting through her cynicism for once. “And now it’s on *us* to finish what they started.”

Will didn’t say anything. She sat frozen, staring at Nate like he had just rewritten the laws of reality. The Human Undead... humanity itself... had faced extinction before and somehow survived. And now the same impossible fight rested in their hands.

Will finally found her voice, though it trembled as she leaned forward. “Okay... then what are the rules? There has to be some kind of... structure to this Battle Fight, right?”

Nate nodded slowly. “Pretty straightforward. Every Undead fights until there’s only one left. Whoever’s still standing at the end... becomes the dominant species. No exceptions.”

The Guardians exchanged uneasy looks. Will swallowed hard, her fingers tightening on the edge of the table. “Right. So basically... we have to find the Human Undead and get him to win again, right?”

Nate didn’t answer right away. His teeth worried at his lip, hesitation flickering across his face beneath the armor of professionalism he always tried to keep up.

Cornelia caught it instantly. Her eyes narrowed. “What?” she pressed. “Don’t tell me—he can’t be reached?” She leaned back in her chair with a sharp laugh that had no humor in it. “What’s the plan, then? Put out an ad in the classifieds? *‘Lost and found: one ancient immortal, last seen saving humanity, please call if located.’*”

Irma groaned, dropping her face into her hands. “Great. We’re supposed to save the world with a guy who’s MIA. Totally reassuring.”

Nate exhaled slowly, steadying himself. “It isn’t hopeless,” he said at last. His eyes swept across the table, meeting each of theirs. “If finding the Human Undead isn’t possible, there’s another way. Seal them. *All* of them. Every last one—including the Category Two of Hearts.”

The girls froze, startled by the weight of his words.

“Think about it,” Nate went on. “If every Undead is sealed, there’s no one left standing. By default, that means humanity remains the dominant species. We win, without needing the Human Undead to claim the final victory.”

Will looked to Irma, Irma to Hay Lin, and Taranee's posture eased just slightly. For the first time since the meeting began, there was something in their eyes besides fear—something that looked like cautious optimism.

Cornelia even let out a soft, relieved scoff. "So we don't have to chase down some immortal hermit after all. Just... lock the monsters back in their box."

Nate didn't share in their relief. His tone dropped, his words heavier than before. "There's one thing you all need to understand, though. One rule that cannot—*cannot*—be ignored. The Category Joker must be sealed, no matter what."

The fragile hope in the room faltered. Will leaned forward, her voice tight. "Why? What's so different about the Joker?"

Nate's lips pressed into a thin line. He hesitated, then answered with grim finality. "Because if the Joker ever wins... everything ends. Not just humanity. Not just Earth. *All* life. Human, animal, even the other worlds out there—you name it. Everything gets dragged back to zero. Reset. And then the Battle Fight starts over, again and again, until a true winner is crowned that *isn't* the Joker."

Silence fell like a guillotine. The thought was too big, too terrifying to put into words.

Hay Lin's voice came out small, a whisper. "Back... to zero?"

Nate nodded once. "Back to nothing."

The silence dragged on, thick and oppressive. No one moved, no one spoke. The only sound was the faint clink of Yan Lin pouring herself more tea, though even that seemed muted under the weight of Nate's words.

Finally, Irma broke first. She leaned back hard in her chair, arms crossed, her voice cracking as she tried to joke it off. "Well. That's just peachy. Fight monsters, seal monsters, save the world... but if *that guy* wins, boom, bye-bye existence. Love the stakes."

Taranee's hands trembled in her lap. She shook her head, whispering, "That's not even fair. That's not... that's not a game you can win."

Hay Lin forced out a nervous laugh, though it sounded hollow. "Reset... like, reset-reset? Like when you unplug the TV and it goes dark? Except it's not the TV—it's *everything*?"

Cornelia slammed her palms against the table, the sharp sound making everyone flinch. "This is insane. You expect us to fight things we *can't kill*, and the one thing that absolutely can't win is the one that *always* breaks the rules?!" Her anger cracked at the edges, bleeding into fear.

Will hadn't moved since she asked the question. Her eyes were locked on Nate, her face pale but set. When she finally spoke, her voice was quiet, but steady in a way that made the others turn toward her.

"Then we don't give the Joker the chance." She clenched her fists, electricity crackling faintly at her fingertips. "If sealing is the only way, then we seal them all. Every single one. And we make damn sure the Joker doesn't slip through."

The table went silent again, but this time it wasn't hopeless. It was the silence of a group realizing what had to be done—even if the path was terrifying.

Will drew a slow breath, trying to steady the room before it could collapse back into panic. "Alright... so sealing is the key. But if BOARD's got more of those Buckles, then we're not in this alone. How do we find candidates for the others?"

Nate shifted in his seat, his tone turning clinical. "That's the tricky part. It takes time, specialized screening. The Buckles aren't something just anyone can strap on. If the compatibility isn't high enough, the transformation will tear the user apart. Physically and mentally."

The girls flinched, exchanging uneasy glances.

Nate continued. "Honestly, it was luck I managed it the first time. Even then, I had a splitting headache afterward. According to BOARD, your compatibility rate has to be above ninety percent just to *attempt* it safely."

Irma leaned forward, squinting at him. "And yours was what? Valedictorian material?"

A faint, humorless smirk tugged at the corner of Nate's mouth. "Ninety-eight point eight."

"Whoa," Hay Lin breathed, eyes wide.

Cornelia raised a brow. "So you're basically built for the thing."

"Not exactly," Nate corrected. "Even with that number, I still had to train in the armor before I could use it properly. Compatibility just gets you in the door. Learning to fight in it—that's the real work."

Taranee spoke up for the first time in a while, her voice barely above a whisper. "So... if you're the best case scenario, what happens to someone who doesn't hit the mark?"

Nate's expression hardened. "You don't want to know."

Irma grimaced, folding her arms. "Well, that's comforting. Either you're a perfect fit or the Buckle eats you alive. Great odds. Really selling this, Nate."

Hay Lin tried to lighten it with a half-smile. "At least you didn't, you know... explode or anything. Just a headache."

“Yet,” Irma muttered.

Cornelia rolled her eyes, her voice sharp. “This all sounds like gambling. Compatibility tests, training, some ancient monster tech. What if BOARD never finds anyone else? What if it’s just you?”

Will cut her off before the tension could spiral again. “Then we work with what we’ve got. Complaining doesn’t change the stakes. If finding candidates takes time, then that’s what we give it.” She looked at Nate, her tone serious. “But in the meantime, you’ll have to keep us alive long enough to matter.”

For a moment, Nate looked like he wanted to argue, but he stayed silent.

It was Yan Lin who finally broke the heavy air. She set down her teacup with a soft clink, her eyes calm but intent. “Patience will be your greatest ally here. The Buckles are powerful, yes—but raw power without understanding is dangerous. Better to have one trained wielder than several who falter under the strain.”

She glanced around at the five girls, her gaze lingering on each in turn. “Your path will be different. The Heart chose you, not by numbers or percentages, but by who you are. That, too, must not be underestimated. BOARD’s tools and your magic are not meant to compete—they are meant to complete each other.”

Will straightened, drawing strength from the words. Irma sighed, but nodded reluctantly. Hay Lin bit her lip, but her eyes sparked with determination. Taranee still looked nervous, but less paralyzed. Cornelia leaned back, unconvinced, though even she didn’t snap back this time.

The room felt steadier, though the storm outside their little world had only just begun.

The meeting finally broke, the weight of everything said still clinging to them like smoke. Outside the Silver Dragon, the late afternoon light painted the street gold as Nate swung a leg over his motorcycle.

The Guardians lingered on the sidewalk, watching with curiosity as he adjusted the straps on his helmet. Will tilted her head, hesitant but unable to hold the question back.

“So... why’d you drop out of Sheffield, anyway?”

Nate’s hands froze briefly on the helmet strap before he resumed buckling it. He didn’t answer right away.

“I mean,” Will added quickly, lifting her hands defensively, “I just moved here. I don’t really know what happened.” She glanced at the others for support.

Irma shrugged. “Beats me. He just stopped showing up one day.”

Hay Lin shook her head, frowning. “Yeah, no warning. Just... gone.”

Cornelia's arms crossed, her expression unreadable.

Nate lowered the visor of his helmet and looked at them through it. The stare was long, unflinching, and it made them shift uncomfortably under its weight.

"If you really want to know," he said at last, his voice muffled but clear, "check the local news."

That left them all blinking in confusion as he twisted the key in the ignition. The engine rumbled to life.

He gave them a final glance. "If we're going to be in this together, you'll need to start reporting to BOARD headquarters. Yan Lin has the address. We'll be able to train there."

"Train?" Cornelia repeated, eyebrows shooting up. "Sorry, but I've got a prior engagement."

Irma rolled her eyes, smirking. "What? You gotta fix a broken nail?"

Cornelia snapped her head toward her with an irritated snarl. "Excuse me?"

Nate chuckled, shaking his head as he revved the bike. "Still the same as I remembered back at school, Cornelia."

With that, he veered off into the street, the roar of the engine fading as the Guardians stood in silence, each of them wondering what exactly they'd just gotten themselves pulled into.

Later that night, Will lay on her bed, the glow of her desk lamp casting soft shadows on the walls. Her pajamas felt too warm, her blankets too heavy—sleep wouldn't come, not with her head churning like this.

They'd only just transformed the night before, thrown into a fight with that snake freak and his rock-headed buddy, and now... *this*. A battle to decide the fate of not just Earth, but the entire multiverse.

When she turned fourteen, she thought the hardest part of growing up would be puberty, homework, maybe dealing with her mom's expectations. Not this. Not the looming possibility that one day she, her friends, *everything* she knew could just... disappear.

She turned on her side, staring at her phone on the nightstand. Nate's words wouldn't leave her alone.

Check the local news.

Before she could talk herself out of it, she picked up the phone, swiped it open, and tapped into Heatherfield's news site. Her thumbs hesitated over the keyboard, then she typed in his name:

Nate Reid.

The result popped up immediately. Headline, bold and merciless:

House Fire Claims Reid Couple. Survived by Their Son.

Will's breath caught. She opened the article. A picture of the charred remains of a home. Details of the blaze. Names of the victims. And at the bottom, the note that their son had lived. Alone.

She just stared at the screen, throat tight, guilt gnawing at her. Slowly, she shut her eyes and set the phone down, face-down on the covers.

"Stupid thing to ask," she whispered into the empty room.

The silence pressed in, heavy, but she didn't reach for the phone again.