

Will drifted into sleep, uneasy, her mind still tangled in everything she'd learned. But rest didn't bring peace.

The darkness around her thickened, and suddenly she wasn't in her bedroom anymore. She was standing in a vast, empty void where the ground seemed to ripple like black glass. Shapes moved in the distance—towering figures, monstrous silhouettes, shifting forms that seemed older than time itself. Their eyes glowed faintly, dozens of them, all trained on her.

She recognized some—Cedric's serpentine coils, Vathek's hulking frame. But there were others, stranger and more terrifying: a creature with wings of blades, another with a body that crawled with fire, and one that was nothing but a shifting cloud of faces screaming silently.

And above them all, a figure cloaked in shadow. Its outline blurred, wrong, like her eyes refused to focus on it. Still, she knew. The Joker.

A voice echoed in the void, distorted, almost mechanical: "Back to zero."

Will's chest tightened. She tried to speak, tried to call out, but her voice was gone. The figures began to move closer, surrounding her. One by one, the glowing eyes fixed on her until she felt herself drowning in them.

"Stop!" she tried to scream, but the word came out as a whisper swallowed by the dark. The Joker's shadow loomed closer, its hand stretching toward her.

The last thing she saw before the world shattered around her was its smile—empty, jagged, endless.

Will bolted upright in bed, gasping for air. Her skin was damp with cold sweat, her heart pounding like it would break through her ribs. She looked around wildly, but her room was still there—the posters, the desk, the phone on her nightstand. Ordinary. Safe.

And yet, she couldn't shake it. The images clung to her, echoing in her head with every breath.

Back to zero.

In the cold, dimly lit throne room of Meridian, shadows clung to the walls like living things. High above, stained-glass windows cast distorted shapes across the stone floor, colors twisted into something unsettling.

Cedric knelt at the foot of the dais, his human form immaculate yet strained. His head was bowed low, his hands pressed to the cold marble.

On the throne above him sat Prince Phobos, his expression carved from disdain. He leaned lazily on one arm, violet eyes burning with contempt as his voice echoed through the chamber.

“Three girls,” he said slowly, his tone as sharp as a blade. “Barely awakened to their powers. Children fumbling with gifts they can hardly command. And yet you return to me empty-handed.”

The words cut deeper than any lash. Cedric’s voice was tight as he bowed lower. “Forgive me, my lord. I underestimated them. Their power was... more resilient than anticipated.”

Phobos scoffed, the sound dripping with mockery. “Resilient? You were tasked with securing the portal, and instead you squandered the opportunity. Three fledglings should have posed no threat to you or to Vathek.”

Cedric hesitated. His forked tongue longed to speak carefully, for every word could cost him dearly. “There was... an unknown variable.”

At that, Phobos straightened slightly, interest flickering in his eyes. “Unknown variable?”

Cedric’s jaw tightened. “A human. A boy. He interfered—wielding power unlike any I have seen. Not magic, not of Kandrakar, but something else. He fought with armor that repelled my strikes and strength that matched even my own.”

Phobos’s eyes narrowed, his irritation sharpening into calculation. “A human,” he repeated, his voice cold and dangerous. “You allowed a mere mortal to disrupt my designs?”

Cedric pressed his forehead to the stone floor. “He was no mere mortal, my lord. His presence turned the tide. Were it not for him, the girls would have been destroyed.”

The throne room fell silent, the weight of Phobos’s displeasure bearing down like a storm about to break.

Phobos’s fingers tapped once against the armrest of his throne, the only sound in the vast chamber. His eyes, sharp and merciless, fixed on Cedric.

“Describe him,” Phobos commanded.

Cedric lifted his head slightly, choosing his words with care. “Human in appearance—no older than fifteen or sixteen. Black hair, lean build. But the moment he donned that armor...” Cedric’s voice faltered, the memory of the crushing blows and the blade gleaming with unnatural light flashing through his mind. He bowed again quickly, lest Phobos see weakness in his eyes. “The power was unlike anything I’ve encountered. Not sorcery, not elemental magic. It felt... forged. Manufactured. A weapon crafted by human hands.”

Phobos’s brow furrowed, though his tone remained cool. “Impossible. Humans are fragile things, barely capable of mastering their own world, let alone harnessing power that could rival Meridian’s elite.”

“With respect, my lord,” Cedric said softly, “this boy proved otherwise. His strength was... decisive.”

A dangerous silence stretched. Then Phobos leaned forward, his voice low, threaded with venom. "Do not mistake an inconvenience for a threat, Cedric. Still... if such a weapon exists, I will know of it. And I will see it broken."

Cedric bowed even lower. "Yes, my lord."

Phobos sank back into his throne, his eyes glittering with dark intent. "Find this boy. Tear apart his secret. If humans have learned to fashion weapons of their own..." He let the thought trail off, the weight of it heavy in the chamber. "...then they may prove less insignificant than I believed."

The command was final. Cedric dared not speak again. The serpent only lowered himself further to the floor, hiding the flash of anger in his eyes. Cedric kept his head bowed as Phobos's command echoed through the chamber. "Yes, my lord." His voice was calm, deferential—everything his master demanded.

He rose smoothly, still in human guise, and retreated from the throne room with measured steps. The heavy doors shut behind him with a thundering boom.

Only then did the mask crack.

His jaw clenched, his teeth grinding hard enough to ache. His hands curled into fists at his sides, his nails biting into his palms. Every step down the corridor seemed to stoke the fire in his chest, the humiliation replaying in his mind.

The memory of the boy—black-haired, hardly more than a child—slamming him into the gym floor. The brutal fists that left his body aching. And worst of all... the gleam of that cursed sword slicing clean through his tail. He could still feel the phantom pain, the raw insult of it burning hotter than any wound.

His lip curled, a low hiss escaping between his teeth. "That vermin... That human..."

The thought alone filled him with rage. To be humbled—mutilated—by something so beneath him.

Cedric's pace quickened, his composure fraying with every step. The promise of vengeance coiled tight in his chest like a spring ready to snap.

"It will be a pleasure," he whispered to himself, his eyes narrowing with venom. "To tear you apart. To make you suffer."

His forked tongue flicked across his lips, savoring the thought.

The boy had humiliated him once. It would never happen again.

Next time, Cedric vowed, that wretched boy would die screaming.

Heatherfield – BOARD Headquarters

The school day had ended hours ago, but the five Guardians now stood together on the sidewalk, staring up at the nondescript office building that housed BOARD's operations. To anyone else, it looked ordinary—drab brickwork, tinted windows, a weathered sign near the entrance. Nothing that hinted at secret organizations or ancient battles for the fate of the multiverse.

None of them spoke at first. Their thoughts were elsewhere. The silence between them wasn't born of nerves about training—it was heavier than that. They'd all seen it. The headline. The photo of a burned house. The confirmation that Nate Reid hadn't simply "quit" Sheffield but had been forced to leave his entire life behind in the ashes.

Will shifted uneasily, hugging her backpack strap. Her lips pressed together as she looked at the others. No one wanted to be the first to say it.

Cornelia broke the silence with a scoff, her arms folded. "Well, he doesn't seem all that torn up about it now. Pretty cold, if you ask me."

Irma shot her a glare, her hands on her hips. "Wow. You're a real people person, you know that? Gold medal in compassion, right here."

Cornelia rolled her eyes but didn't reply.

Hay Lin cleared her throat softly, her tone thoughtful. "I... I remember seeing him around the art club. He wasn't loud or anything, but he was good. Really good. Always sketching when he thought nobody was watching."

Cornelia tilted her head, frowning as the memory clicked. "That's right. He and Elyon used to get paired up a lot for projects. She said he was quiet but... easy to work with."

The group went quiet again, the weight of the past hanging between them as the evening air pressed close. The building loomed ahead, waiting.

The low roar of Nate's motorcycle drew their attention before they saw him. He coasted to a stop near the curb, the engine softening to a purr as he lifted a hand in greeting. Pulling off his helmet, his black hair ruffled free, and he gave them a quick grin.

He parked the bike around the corner, stowed his helmet in the side compartment, and walked back toward them, his hands settling on his hips. "Well? You all ready?"

The five Guardians exchanged looks—uneasy, awkward, not the kind of excitement he was expecting. Nate's smile faltered, and after a beat, he scratched the back of his head. "Yeah... I'm guessing you checked. Like I told you."

Will shifted, her voice low. "Sorry. I shouldn't have asked."

Nate shook his head. "Don't worry about it. You were curious. Can't blame you."

Taranee hesitated, then spoke up softly. "But... didn't you have any relatives? Anyone to take you in?"

Nate's shoulders dropped a little. "No. It was just me and my folks. No grandparents, no uncles or aunts. After the fire, it was just... me."

The girls' eyes softened, but before the silence could grow too heavy, Hay Lin piped up gently. "Don't they have centers? You know... places for kids who need help?"

"They do," Nate said with a short nod. "I stayed in one for a while. That's when I stopped coming to Sheffield. But after that... I had to figure out how to live without my parents. Find a way to earn, to keep myself moving forward."

Cornelia's voice came next—less sharp than usual, more curious than cutting. "Didn't you have insurance? You must've had some money to live off of."

Nate shook his head, his lips pressing thin. "Until I'm eighteen, the state manages it. I can't touch a cent. Honestly, it was a miracle I signed up for BOARD when I did. I thought it was just some intern gig, maybe a paycheck. Turns out, they were screening for Buckle candidates." His hand brushed unconsciously against his jacket where the device rested. "When I passed, well... you know the rest. Training, briefings, combat prep. Not exactly what I imagined for myself."

He gave a small, humorless laugh. "You can probably guess how I felt when I realized what I'd been roped into."

Cornelia folded her arms, arching a brow. "Hey, you think you're the only one? How do you think we felt?"

The tension broke with snickers from Irma and Hay Lin, and even Will cracked a small smile. For the first time since they'd arrived, the air between them didn't feel quite so heavy.

Nate pulled open the glass door of the building and gestured them in. "Come on. No point freezing out here."

The girls followed, their footsteps echoing faintly in the quiet lobby. The place didn't look like much—just another office front with fluorescent lights and neutral paint. But the atmosphere felt heavier, charged with something beneath the surface.

Will glanced at Nate as they walked. "Hey, can I ask... have you ever thought about going back to school? Or is it even possible?"

Nate glanced over his shoulder at her, one hand shoved in his jacket pocket. The corner of his lips tugged upward in a dry half-smile. "Could I? Probably. But honestly, I've never thought about it until now."

Will frowned. "But you're getting paid for this, right? I mean, risking your life can't be cheap."

That earned a quiet chuckle out of him. "Yeah. There's a paycheck."

Irma perked up instantly. "So what's the damage? Better than minimum wage? 'Cause if it is, maybe I should sign up too."

Nate hesitated mid-step. The pause made them all look at him. Finally, he exhaled through his nose, resigned.

"Around one-twenty to one-fifty annually," he admitted. "With benefits."

The group stopped dead in their tracks, their shoes squeaking faintly against the tile.

Irma's jaw dropped. "Wait. You're telling me you make six figures to fight monsters?!"

Hay Lin's eyes went huge, like saucers. "That's... that's like doctor money!"

Taranee's brow furrowed, stunned. "But... you're our age."

Cornelia blinked, then muttered flatly, "Figures. Even when he drops out, he still manages to outdo everyone."

Nate just shook his head, brushing past the stunned looks as he continued deeper into the building. "Don't get too excited. Trust me, it's not the kind of job you want."

They followed Nate through a maze of hallways, the sterile buzz of fluorescent lights overhead. The air smelled faintly of paper, ink, and electronics—more like an office than anything resembling a secret base. Eventually, he pushed open a door, and they stepped into a room that was clearly more important than the rest.

Chief Karasuma sat behind a sturdy desk stacked with files and a single steaming mug of coffee. His sharp eyes lifted as the girls entered, his expression easing into a smile.

"Welcome," he said warmly, gesturing them closer. "Are you ready?"

Will's mouth went dry. She glanced at the others—Irma's smirk faltered, Hay Lin fidgeted with her sleeves, Taranee stared at the floor, and Cornelia crossed her arms as if she were already unimpressed. Finally, she looked at Nate. He gave her a small, reassuring nod.

Will swallowed hard, then straightened her shoulders. "We'll... see what we have to work with."

Karasuma's smile widened, genuine pride flickering across his face. "That's all I ask."

He rose from his chair, settling his jacket into place with the practiced ease of a man always ready to move. "Come. There's something I'd like to show you."

The girls followed as he led them down another corridor, Nate trailing behind with his hands stuffed in his pockets. Karasuma stopped at a reinforced door and swung it open, revealing a wide, open space.

It wasn't glamorous. The walls were bare concrete, the floor scuffed from use. Free weights sat on racks along one wall, while mats and dummies occupied the center. A punching bag hung lopsided from the ceiling. The space had clearly once been meant for cubicles, not combat.

Karasuma stepped inside, his voice carrying easily in the echoing chamber. "This is our training room. It's not much—just an office floor cleared out and repurposed—but it gets the job done." He smiled wryly. "We all have to mind the budget."

Irma muttered under her breath, "Wow. Real high-tech superhero base you've got here."

Cornelia sighed, unimpressed. "I was expecting at least a hologram or two."

Nate chuckled quietly to himself.

Karasuma stepped forward into the center of the makeshift training space, his hands clasped behind his back as he observed the five girls taking in their surroundings. His expression was thoughtful, almost paternal, as he watched them process the reality of what they'd signed up for.

"Before we begin," he said, his voice carrying easily in the echoing space, "I want all of you to understand something very clearly." He paused, making sure he had their full attention. "It's not too late to walk away."

The words hung in the air like a challenge. Will felt her stomach tighten, while Hay Lin's eyes widened with surprise. Taranee seemed to shrink into herself even further, and Irma's usual bravado flickered uncertainly. Even Cornelia looked up from her dismissive survey of the room.

Karasuma's tone remained gentle but serious. "I know what we told you last night. I know the weight of what's coming. But you're still children—all of you. This doesn't have to be your fight. Not yet. You can take this at your own pace, train gradually, prepare over months or even years if that's what it takes."

Will found her voice first, though it came out smaller than she intended. "But... what about the Undead? What about the Battle Fight?"

"The threat is real," Karasuma acknowledged, "but it's not immediate. The Undead are awakening slowly, and we have time to prepare properly. You don't have to throw yourselves into the deep end just because the stakes are high."

Cornelia let out a sharp laugh, her arms crossed defensively. "Right, because we're just kids," she said, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "But what about him?" She jerked her head toward Nate, who was quietly organizing equipment in the corner. "He's our age, isn't he? What makes him so special that he gets to be the hero while we get the kiddie-gloves treatment?"

Karasuma's expression grew more somber as he glanced toward Nate. "You're absolutely right, Cornelia. Nate is fifteen—barely older than any of you." He paused, choosing his words carefully. "But his circumstances were... different. He didn't have the luxury of a gradual introduction to this world."

"What do you mean?" Will asked, though she had a sinking feeling she already knew.

"When Nate first encountered an Undead, it was kill or be killed," Karasuma explained, his voice heavy with the weight of memory. "He had to go above and beyond, push himself to limits that should have broken him, because the alternative was certain death. The Undead don't show mercy, don't give second chances. They're merciless to anything and anyone—even others of their own kind."

Hay Lin hugged herself, her voice barely above a whisper. "But why are they like that?"

Karasuma turned to face her fully. "Because that's the entire point of the Battle Fight. It's designed to make them destroy each other until only one remains standing. Compassion, mercy, hesitation—those are luxuries they can't afford. Every other Undead is a potential threat to their ultimate victory."

The training room fell silent as the implications settled over them. The casual cruelty of it, the systematic elimination of everything that made beings capable of coexistence.

"And if the one left standing is the Joker..." Taranee whispered, unable to finish the thought.

"Then that becomes the problem to end all problems," Karasuma confirmed grimly. "Which is why we can't afford to take chances when it comes to preparation. But that doesn't mean we have to sacrifice your childhood in the process."

He looked around at each of them in turn. "So I'm asking you directly, all of you. Are you sure you want to do this? Are you ready to take on this kind of responsibility? Because once we start training you properly, once you're truly committed to this path, there may not be a way back to the normal lives you had before."

The silence stretched long, heavy with the weight of decision. Each girl seemed lost in her own thoughts, weighing the magnitude of what they were being asked to do against the lives they'd known just days before.

Will shifted uncomfortably under the weight of Karasuma's question, her fingers fidgeting with the strap of her backpack. The silence stretched for several long moments before she finally found her voice.

"We'll... we'll try and see," she said, her words careful and measured. "I mean, we'd rather not dive into this headfirst. Maybe we can just test the waters—get an idea of what each other can do, see if we can actually work together."

Karasuma nodded approvingly, a small smile crossing his features. "That's a much better alternative to jumping straight into the fire," he said. "Though I suppose Nate's already done that."

This drew a quiet snort from Nate, who looked up from the equipment he'd been organizing. "Yeah, well, it wasn't exactly by choice," he muttered.

Karasuma stepped to the side, gesturing toward the open training area. "Very well then. The space is yours."

Hay Lin's eyes went wide as she looked around the echoing chamber. "Here? Now?" she asked nervously, her voice carrying a slight tremor.

Nate shrugged, settling back against the wall with his arms crossed. "Now's as good a time as any," he said simply.

The five girls exchanged uncertain looks, a silent conversation passing between them. Finally, they moved together toward the center of the training area, their footsteps echoing softly on the scuffed floor. Will took a deep breath, trying to gather her bearings as the others formed a loose circle around her.

With trembling fingers, she reached into her jacket and withdrew the Heart of Kandarakar. The moment it touched the open air, the jewel began to pulse with ethereal pink light, its glow growing stronger with each heartbeat. The radiance seemed to push back the fluorescent harshness of the training room, replacing it with something ancient and magical.

"Guardians," Will called out, her voice carrying new strength as the Heart's power flowed through her, "unite!"

The transformation began in an explosion of brilliant light that filled every corner of the training room. Each girl was enveloped in her own column of radiant energy, their everyday clothes dissolving away as magic reshaped them.

Will's red hair became longer and more vibrant, flowing around her shoulders as electricity crackled between her fingers. Her casual outfit transformed into a form-fitting purple and teal ensemble, complete with striped leggings and boots that seemed to hum with contained energy.

Irma's brown curls took on an almost liquid quality as her power over water manifested. Her transformation wrapped her in shades of blue and teal, her outfit both practical and elegant, designed for someone who commanded the very essence of H₂O.

Hay Lin's transformation was perhaps the most dramatic, her black hair growing longer and lighter, taking on streaks of silver that caught the magical light. Her Guardian form was adorned in greens and blues, with flowing fabric that moved as if touched by an eternal breeze.

Taranee's usually nervous demeanor seemed to fade as flames danced harmlessly around her form. Her Guardian outfit materialized in warm oranges and reds, her hair taking on a fiery quality that reflected her elemental affinity. Behind her glasses, her eyes blazed with newfound confidence.

Cornelia's transformation was regal, befitting her connection to the earth itself. Her blonde hair became even more lustrous, and her outfit appeared in elegant purples and teals, with an authoritative cut that spoke to natural leadership. Vines and flower petals swirled briefly around her before fading.

As the light finally died down, the five Guardians stood revealed in all their magical glory. The transformation had taken less than a minute, but the change was profound—no longer were they uncertain teenagers, but beings of elemental power, each radiating their own unique magical aura.

The silence that followed was heavy with awe and possibility. Even in the mundane surroundings of the converted training room, their presence seemed to transform the space into something sacred, a gathering place for protectors of worlds.

Karasuma's lips curled into a nostalgic smile as he watched the five Guardians standing in their transformed states, their magical auras filling the converted training room with ethereal light. Beside him, Nate could only look on in awe. Having never witnessed a Guardian transformation before, he had no idea that it could be so elaborate—the way the light seemed to reshape reality itself around each girl, transforming them from uncertain teenagers into beings of elemental power.

The silence stretched for a moment longer before Karasuma turned to Nate and gave him a subtle nod. It was time.

Nate nodded back, understanding passing between them without words. He stepped forward into the training space, moving away from where the Guardians stood clustered together. Their magical radiance cast dancing shadows across his face as he turned to address them.

"You might want to move back a bit," he said, his voice carrying an edge of caution. "For your own safety."

Cornelia raised an eyebrow, her transformed state lending her an air of regal authority. "What, are you going to explode or something?"

Will, who had witnessed Nate's transformation before, chimed in quickly. "Just do what he says. Trust me, you'll see why in a second."

The other girls—particularly Taranee and Cornelia, who had never seen this before—exchanged uncertain glances. Irma and Hay Lin, remembering their first encounter with Nate's abilities, were already taking steps backward. The group shuffled to the side to watch, making sure to move away from the direction Nate was facing.

With the space cleared, Nate reached into his jacket and withdrew a rectangular device that gleamed with metallic silver and gold. The Blay Buckle sat heavy in his palm, its surface etched with intricate mechanical designs that seemed to shift slightly in the magical light emanating from the Guardians. At its center sat an empty slot, waiting.

From his other pocket, he produced what looked like a playing card, but unlike any ordinary deck. The Category Ace bore elaborate golden filigree around its edges, and at its center was the image of a mechanical beetle rendered in blues and silvers. Ancient text scrolled along the bottom edge, and the entire card seemed to pulse with its own internal energy.

Taking a steadying breath, he slid the card into the buckle's waiting slot with a satisfying click.

Taking the assembled device in both hands, Nate positioned it at the center of his abdomen. The moment it touched his body, the buckle came alive. Red mechanical segments erupted from either side like living metal, coiling around his waist with fluid precision. They locked into place with a series of sharp clicks and electronic chirps, forming a belt that seemed to meld seamlessly with his form.

An odd, synthesized sound rang out from the belt—part mechanical whirl, part digital harmony. The sound filled the training room with an almost alien resonance that made the fluorescent lights flicker overhead.

Nate stretched out his right hand, fingers splayed, his stance shifting into something more purposeful. His entire demeanor changed in that moment—the casual teenager replaced by something harder, more focused. With a sharp twist of his wrist, he brought his arm up in a decisive arc.

"Henshin!"

The word echoed through the training room like a battle cry as he snapped his arm back, his hand finding the switch on the side of the buckle. With practiced precision, he flipped it, rotating the mechanism so that the golden spade symbol became visible at the buckle's face.

Immediately, an electronic voice burst from the device, clear and commanding:

"TURN UP!"

What followed was nothing like the Guardians' elegant, light-based transformation. This was something altogether more mechanical, more deliberate. Blue-white energy erupted from the buckle, but instead of dispersing like the Guardians' flowing radiance, it formed a solid wall—a curtain of crackling power that stood as tall as Nate himself, suspended in the air before him.

The energy barrier hung there for a moment, pulsing with contained force. Then Nate stepped forward, approaching the wall of power with measured steps. As he passed through the energy field, the armor began to form around him like a living blanket. The blue-white power clung to his form, wrapping around his body as each piece of the suit materialized and locked into place. His

chest plate formed first, a gleaming silver surface marked with the distinctive spade symbol. Shoulder guards, arm guards, and leg armor followed, each component settling over him as he continued his walk through the energy barrier.

His helmet was last—a sleek design that covered his entire head, with large red compound eyes that glowed like crimson gems. The transformation completed with a final burst of energy that sent shockwaves across the training room floor, causing dust to rise from the scuffed concrete.

Where Nate had stood moments before, now stood Kamen Rider Blade—a figure clad in blue and silver armor that looked as if it had been forged in some futuristic workshop. Every line spoke of purpose and power, of technology pushed to its absolute limits. The red eyes scanned across the room with inhuman precision, taking in details invisible to ordinary sight.

The contrast was striking. Where the Guardians radiated magic and natural elemental power, Blade was something else entirely—a fusion of human determination and cutting-edge technology, a warrior built rather than born.

For a moment, the two types of heroes regarded each other across the training room—ancient magic meeting modern science, elemental forces standing opposite manufactured might. The fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, casting everything in harsh relief.

Then Blade raised one gauntleted hand in a casual wave, and Nate's voice emerged from the helmet's speakers, slightly modulated but still recognizably him.

"So," he said, the helmet's voice synthesis giving his words a faint electronic edge, "you guys ready?"

Cornelia scoffed, crossing her arms. "That's it?" Her tone carried a note of disbelief, as if she'd expected something more elaborate.

Taranee blinked in surprise behind her glasses, equally taken aback. "It seemed... simpler than ours," she said quietly, glancing between Nate's armored form and her fellow Guardians. Their transformation had been all flowing light and elemental magic, while his had been more straightforward—just walking through an energy barrier.

Nate's helmet tilted slightly, the red compound eyes focusing on them. "Simple, maybe, but there's a reason for the design," he explained, his modulated voice carrying clearly through the training room. "Anything that isn't connected to the user gets knocked back by that energy wall. It serves two purposes—it helps secure the transformation in case there are any hostiles nearby, and it gives me the space I need to properly assume the armor."

Irma's eyes lit up with understanding, and she let out a short laugh. "Oh man, I wish we had something like that," she said, gesturing enthusiastically. "That way scale-face would get a nasty surprise if he ever tries to come near us while we're in the middle of our little wardrobe change."

The moment of levity was broken as Karasuma clapped his hands sharply, the sound echoing through the training room. "Alright, everyone. Time to focus. Training begins now."

The Guardians and Blade turned their attention to him, the atmosphere shifting from casual observation to something more serious.

"For this exercise," Karasuma continued, his tone professional, "the girls need to develop better control and aim with their elemental abilities. The best way to do that is through practical application." He gestured toward Nate's armored form. "You'll be targeting Nate while he works on his evasion and reflexes. Consider it mutual training."

The girls exchanged shocked looks, their transformed states doing little to hide their alarm.

"Wait, what?" Will stammered, electricity crackling nervously around her fingers. "You want us to actually shoot at him?"

Taranee took a step back, flames flickering uncertainly around her hands. "But... these are elemental attacks. They could seriously hurt someone!"

Hay Lin nodded frantically, wind swirling around her in agitated spirals. "What if we accidentally—"

"It's okay," Nate interrupted, his modulated voice cutting through their concerns. "The armor draws its power directly from the Category Ace card. I'm not nearly as fragile as a normal person in this form."

Will's brow furrowed, still unconvinced. "But how much punishment can you actually take? I mean, what's your limit?"

Nate was quiet for a moment, his red compound eyes scanning across their worried faces. When he spoke, his tone was matter-of-fact, almost casual.

"I can handle just about anything that isn't above an anti-tank round."

The training room fell dead silent. Five jaws dropped in perfect synchronization, the Guardians staring at him in open-mouthed shock.

"Yeah," Nate added, seeming to recognize their stunned expressions even through his helmet. "I'm that tough."

He shifted his stance slightly, the armor's servos whirring softly. "It's only natural, really. The Aces are one of the strongest categories of Undead, second only to their respective Kings and Queens—the Royal Undead. But it's the Aces that specialize most in pure combat capability. When I'm channeling that power..." He shrugged, the motion surprisingly fluid despite the heavy armor. "Let's just say I can handle whatever you throw at me."

The girls exchanged uncertain glances, the weight of what they were about to do settling over them. Finally, Will took a steadying breath and looked at her teammates.

"Alright, everyone," she said, her voice carrying new resolve. "Let's begin."

Karasuma moved to the side of the training area, pulling out a tablet device. "I'll be recording your performance for analysis," he announced. "This will help us work out ways to improve your technique as well as identify other factors that could improve your coordination as a team."

The Guardians spread out across the training space, each beginning to call upon their respective elements. Electricity crackled around Will's fingers, water began to coalesce near Irma, wind swirled gently around Hay Lin, earth responded to Cornelia's call, and flames flickered nervously in Taranee's palms.

But Taranee hesitated, her fire sputtering uncertainly. "... I don't know about this," she said, her voice tight with worry. "What if I burn him? Or worse, what if I set the building on fire?"

Karasuma's voice came from the sidelines, patient but encouraging. "Taranee, focus on control, not restriction. Don't try to hold back the fire—let it flow, but direct it where it needs to go. Fire is the most volatile element among the Guardians, which means it requires the most precise guidance."

The others were equally shaky in their initial attempts. Irma's water wobbled unsteadily, Hay Lin's winds were more like gentle breezes, and Will's electricity seemed to short out before it could properly form.

Cornelia, however, had had enough of hesitation. Deciding to call Nate's bluff directly, she focused her powers with fierce determination. All around her, loose dirt and grime from the converted office space responded to her call, rising from corners and crevices where it had settled over time. With practiced precision, she compressed the debris into solid stone bullets, each one perfectly formed and gleaming with condensed earth energy.

"Let's see how tough you really are," she muttered, then launched the projectiles directly at Nate's center mass.

Nate didn't dodge. He didn't even flinch. The stone bullets struck his chest armor with sharp cracks and bounced harmlessly away, clattering across the concrete floor like spent rounds. He looked down at the scattered debris, then raised his helmeted head to meet Cornelia's gaze.

"Is that really the best you can muster?" he asked, his modulated voice carrying just the right note of challenge.

Will felt something shift inside her at his words. Taking a deep breath, she turned to address her teammates. "He's right. We need to do this if we're ever going to get used to our powers. No holding back."

Her words seemed to galvanize the others. Irma straightened her shoulders and began drawing water from the very air around them, pulling moisture into visible streams that danced around her hands. Taranee, still nervous but no longer paralyzed by fear, began shaping flames in her palms, preparing to launch controlled bursts directly at their armored target. Hay Lin's winds picked up strength, no longer gentle breezes but focused currents that whipped around the training space.

Seeing the change in their posture, their renewed determination, Nate's helmet tilted approvingly.

"That's more like it," he declared, settling into a combat stance as the real training began.

The training began in earnest, and immediately the difference in Nate's capabilities became apparent. His movements, enhanced by the armor's systems, were fluid and precise as he weaved between their attacks. He dodged Will's crackling bolts of electricity with ease, sidestepped Irma's pressurized water blasts, and ducked under Hay Lin's focused wind strikes.

But he didn't dodge everything. Occasionally, he would let an attack connect, demonstrating the armor's durability. Will's quintessence-powered electricity struck him square in the chest, the blue-white energy crackling across his armor's surface before dissipating harmlessly. He didn't even stumble.

"See?" he called out, spreading his arms as another water blast splashed against his shoulder guard. "Ideal moving target. I can take whatever you dish out."

Cornelia snorted, launching another volley of compressed earth projectiles. "Right. You're basically a glorified training dummy."

Her comment drew chuckles from the others, and their courage began to rise. The atmosphere in the training room shifted from nervous hesitation to focused determination as they increased their output.

Will drew deeper on her connection to the Heart of Kandrakar, unleashing bolts of pure quintessence energy that manifested as brilliant streaks of electricity. One struck Nate directly in the chest plate, the impact lighting up his armor's systems, but it didn't so much as make him pause in his movements.

Cornelia decided to get creative. Slamming her foot down on the concrete floor, she sent a tremor rippling through the training space. The sudden quake caused Nate to stumble slightly, his enhanced balance systems working to compensate. She immediately followed up with a precisely aimed volley of stone projectiles, each one targeting his helmet with surgical accuracy.

Nate recovered quickly, tilting his head just as the stones whistled past where it had been moments before. But Hay Lin had been waiting for exactly this moment. While the others had kept him busy, she'd been building up a concentrated bullet of compressed air, and now she released it in a focused blast aimed at his center mass.

The air strike hit him squarely, the compressed atmosphere creating a visible distortion as it struck his armor. He slid back several inches from the impact but remained upright, his stance solid.

Meanwhile, Taranee was beginning to find her rhythm with the flames. Her initial nervousness was giving way to focus as she learned to direct the fire rather than fight it. But in her growing confidence, she miscalculated—pouring too much power into what should have been a controlled burst.

The fireball that erupted from her hands was massive, a roiling sphere of orange and red that engulfed Nate completely. Taranee's eyes went wide with shock as flames consumed the spot where he'd been standing.

"Oh no!" she gasped, her hands flying to her mouth.

When the fire finally dissipated, Nate stood exactly where he had been, wisps of smoke curling up from his armor's surface. The blue and silver plating showed no signs of damage—no scorch marks, no melted edges, nothing. He was completely unharmed.

"Training halt!" Karasuma called out, his authoritative voice cutting through the room.

The girls immediately powered down their attacks, their elemental energies fading as they caught their breath. The sudden silence was almost jarring after the constant sound of combat.

Cornelia surveyed the damage to the training room—several cracks in the concrete floor from her earth tremors, scorch marks on the walls from stray fire blasts, and puddles of water scattered across the space. With a focused effort, she began repairing the floor, using her earth powers to smooth the cracks and restore the surface to its original state.

Taranee, still visibly shaken by the size of her last attack, hurried over to where Nate stood. Smoke was still rising faintly from his armor's joints and seams.

"Are you okay?" she asked anxiously, her voice tight with worry. "I'm so sorry—I didn't mean for it to be that big. I lost control of the power flow and—"

"Hey," Nate interrupted, his modulated voice surprisingly gentle as he raised a gauntleted hand. "Calm down. You're fine. I'm fine."

He paused, tilting his helmeted head slightly as if considering his next words. "Actually, that was pretty good control for someone still learning. The power was there; you just need to work on the regulation."

Taranee shook her head, still not convinced. "It's fine," Nate continued, his voice patient through the helmet. "You can work on it. No pressure."

Will stepped closer, electricity still flickering faintly around her fingertips. "He's right, Taranee. You saw him—he took your fire like a champ and he's still perfectly okay."

But Taranee's expression remained troubled, her hands wringing together nervously. "I'm just... I'm not sure. What if I can't control it properly? What if next time it's worse?" Her voice dropped to almost a whisper. "Why did I have to get fire at all?"

Karasuma's voice cut through her spiral of doubt. "At least you're mindful of the power, Taranee. Halinor wasn't nearly as careful when she first started out."

The girls turned toward him with curious expressions. "Who's Halinor?" Will asked.

Something in Karasuma's expression softened, his eyes taking on the distant look of someone remembering the past. "She was the previous Guardian of Fire, working alongside Yan Lin in the generation before yours." His voice carried a mixture of fondness and melancholy. "Halinor was a literal fire-spitter—she took to her role as a Guardian with all the eagerness of a girl living out a power fantasy. No hesitation, no second-guessing, just pure enthusiasm for the abilities she'd been given."

He paused, watching Taranee's face carefully. "But along the way, she learned to be more cautious, more guarded. Experience taught her what you're already starting with—respect for the destructive potential of her element."

Karasuma stepped closer to Taranee, his tone growing more earnest. "Fire is naturally destructive, yes. But it's also one of the most invaluable assets to humankind. Without it, our progress would have been severely stunted. We wouldn't be enjoying the modern comforts we have today without fire's contribution to civilization."

He met her eyes directly. "Taranee, as a Guardian, you must not be afraid of your element. It responds to you, not the other way around. Fear will only make it harder to control."

Hearing this, Taranee still felt some of the doubt lingering in her chest, but Karasuma's words carried a weight of experience and wisdom that was hard to ignore. With a soft nod, she felt herself becoming a bit more emboldened, a thin smile forming on her lips as she looked down at her hands where small, controlled flames danced harmlessly across her palms.

Hay Lin, who had been quietly observing the exchange, drifted closer to where Nate stood. Her eyes caught something attached to his hip—a sleek device that seemed to blend seamlessly with his armor's design.

"What's that?" she asked, pointing curiously at the object.

Nate perked up, following her gaze. "Oh, this?" He reached down and detached the device from its holster with a smooth motion, holding it up for them to see.

Will's eyes widened in recognition. "That's the sword you used to cut that snake man's tail! Cedric—that's what Yan Lin said his name was."

Nate nodded, turning the device over in his gauntleted hands. "It's called the Blay Rouzer. It serves as both my weapon and card case."

To demonstrate, he manipulated a section of the device, causing it to fan out and reveal built-in slots along its length. Some of the slots were clear and empty, while a few contained what looked like ornate playing cards.

"Cards?" Cornelia asked, raising an eyebrow.

Nate carefully drew out the occupied cards, holding them so the girls could see. Each one bore elaborate artwork depicting different creatures—a mechanical locust with gossamer wings, a black dragon coiled around a crescent blade, and a fierce lion with golden armor plating.

"These are the Undead I managed to seal before I met you," he explained. "Each card represents one that's been captured and contained."

Will studied the cards with interest, then looked back up at him. "Only three? Where's the Ace of Diamonds?"

"That one was handed over to R&D to work on developing the other buckle," Nate replied. "But the cards I have with me are mine by right—since I use the Spade suit, any Spade Undead I seal belong to my deck."

Irma smirked, crossing her arms. "Great. And when you collect all of them, we'll be able to have a nice game of poker."

The training session had come to an end, and the girls began powering down their transformations. The magical light faded from the room as they returned to their ordinary forms, leaving only the fluorescent overhead lighting. As they gathered their things and prepared to leave, the weight of the evening began to settle over them.

Will glanced at her watch and felt a familiar pang of anxiety. "I should really get going," she said, shouldering her backpack. "My mom will be worried if I'm not home soon."

The words had barely left her mouth when she realized what she'd said—and who was within earshot. Her eyes widened slightly as she caught sight of Nate, who had finished securing his Rouse Cards back in the Blay Rouzer.

Nate noticed her expression immediately. He paused in his movements, then looked up at her with understanding in his eyes. "It's okay," he said simply, his voice gentle.

An awkward silence stretched between them, heavy with unspoken awareness of his situation. The other girls shifted uncomfortably, unsure of what to say or how to address the elephant in the room.

Finally, Hay Lin broke the silence, her curiosity getting the better of her social awareness. "So... where do you live?"

The question hung in the air for a moment before Irma quickly elbowed her in the side, shooting her a look that clearly said, 'Really?'

Nate rolled his eyes at the display. "It's fine," he said with a slight shake of his head. "I live in a flat. The rent's pretty reasonable, and it's a roof over my head."

His matter-of-fact tone did little to ease the awkwardness of the situation.

Cornelia, perhaps trying to lighten the mood or maybe just being practical, spoke up. "With the money you're making from BOARD, you could probably afford a penthouse if you wanted."

Irma's voice cut through the air, dripping with sarcasm. "Wow. We're all some of the most socially conscious people on the planet, aren't we?"

The comment hung in the air, a pointed reminder of how they'd stumbled through what should have been a sensitive topic. The fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, filling the silence as everyone processed the uncomfortable reality of their new teammate's circumstances.

Karasuma cleared his throat, breaking through the awkward tension. "I think it's time for you all to head home," he said, his voice carrying the authority of someone used to managing difficult situations. "Be careful on your way back and get some rest. We'll resume training once you've had time to process everything from tonight."

The girls nodded, gathering their belongings more quickly now that they had a clear dismissal. They said their farewells to Nate—each one slightly stilted but genuine—before filing out of the training room and making their way through the building's corridors toward the exit.

Once the sound of their footsteps had faded, Karasuma turned his attention to Nate, who was in the process of canceling his transformation. The blue and silver armor dissolved away in wisps of energy, leaving the teenager in his regular clothes, looking somehow smaller without the bulk of the Rider system.

"Have you given any thought to going back to school?" Karasuma asked, his tone casual but pointed.

Nate paused in his movement toward the door, his hand freezing on the strap of his jacket. After a moment, he replied without turning around. "It might get in the way of the mission."

Karasuma shrugged, a knowing smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "We'll make it work. Besides..." He paused, studying Nate's posture carefully. "Don't think I haven't noticed those longing looks you've been sending the girls."

Nate's head lowered, his shoulders tensing slightly. For a moment, he stood completely still, as if the observation had struck something deep and vulnerable within him.

Without another word, he quietly resumed his pace toward the door. His footsteps echoed softly in the empty training room as he made his exit, leaving Karasuma alone with his thoughts and the tablet containing the evening's training recordings.

The older man watched the door close behind Nate, then turned his attention to the device in his hands, his expression contemplative as he began reviewing the data they'd collected.

Saturday Afternoon - Will's House

The rain drummed steadily against the windows of Will's living room, creating a cozy backdrop for the five girls gathered around the coffee table. Steam rose from their teacups as they sat in a loose circle, the events of the previous evening still fresh in their minds.

Will curled her legs beneath her on the couch, wrapping her hands around her warm mug. "I still can't believe it's real," she said quietly, staring into her tea. "That we're actually... Guardians. That magic exists, that there are other worlds..."

Irma nodded, taking a sip before responding. "Tell me about it. Yesterday morning, I was worried about a math test, and now I'm apparently destined to save the universe or something."

Taranee shifted uncomfortably in her chair, her fingers fidgeting with the handle of her teacup. "The training felt so... intense. Even with holding back, the power was overwhelming."

"At least you managed not to set anything on fire," Hay Lin offered with a gentle smile, trying to lighten the mood.

"Barely," Taranee muttered.

Cornelia leaned back in her armchair, looking more composed than the others despite the circumstances. "Well, like it or not, we're in this now. And apparently, Mr. Knight in Shining Armor is going to be along for the ride."

The comment drew a few snickers from the group, but Hay Lin's expression suddenly turned dreamy, her eyes taking on a distant quality as she gazed out the rain-streaked window.

"You know," she said softly, a wistful sigh escaping her lips, "maybe this is fate at work. A dashing knight has come to fight in our honor, to stand beside us as we face the darkness..."

The romantic notion hung in the air for exactly three seconds before four pairs of eyes turned to stare at her with expressions ranging from amused disbelief to outright exasperation.

Irma raised an eyebrow. "Really? That's where your mind went?"

Will blinked. "Hay Lin..."

Cornelia just shook her head slowly.

Taranee looked like she was trying very hard not to smile.

Hay Lin's cheeks immediately flamed bright red as she realized what she'd said out loud. She buried her face in her hands, her voice muffled as she spoke. "Oh god, forget I said anything. Just... pretend that never happened."

The other girls exchanged amused glances, the tension from their earlier conversation finally breaking.

"Actually," Will said, setting down her teacup with renewed energy, "speaking of things that don't feel real, you guys want to see what I discovered about my powers?"

The sudden change in topic drew everyone's attention. Will stood up, a mischievous glint in her eyes as she walked over to the kitchen counter where the microwave sat.

"So I figured out that Quintessence isn't just about electricity," she explained, placing her hand on the appliance. "Watch this."

Pink energy flickered briefly around her fingers as they made contact with the microwave's surface. For a moment, nothing happened. Then, suddenly, a cheerful electronic voice emerged from the device.

"Good afternoon, everyone! Beautiful weather we're having, isn't it?"

Four teacups nearly went flying as the girls jumped in their seats.

"What the—" Irma started.

The microwave continued, its voice warm and friendly. "Oh, I'm sorry for startling you. Will named me Mike. Is there anything you'd like to heat up today?"

Irma stared at the appliance in shock, then looked at Will, then back at the microwave. "Uh... no thanks?"

"No problem at all!" Mike replied cheerfully. "Just let me know if you change your mind!"

Will grinned, clearly pleased with the reaction she'd gotten. "I can imbue inanimate objects with... well, not life exactly, but personality. They become aware, responsive."

Cornelia shook her head slowly, her expression caught between amazement and disbelief. "That's absurd."

"That's bonkers, is what that is," Irma added, though her tone held more fascination than dismissal. Her eyes suddenly lit up with an idea. "Wait, maybe we can have our phones talk to us! You know, like an actual assistant AI?"

Will shrugged, already reaching for her phone. "Worth a try."

She held the device in her palms, letting pink quintessence energy flow into it. The phone's screen flickered briefly, then went dark for a moment before lighting up again.

"Oh, for crying out loud," came a distinctly annoyed female voice from the phone's speakers. "Will, put me down! I hate heights!"

Will quickly lowered the phone to the coffee table, looking both surprised and delighted. "Sorry! I didn't know you'd be afraid of—"

"Of course I am," the phone interrupted. "I'm a delicate piece of technology, not a flying carpet. Now, what do you want?"

Will couldn't help but grin at the attitude. "What's the weather like?"

There was a pause, as if the phone were processing the request. "Rain," it finally replied in a tone that suggested Will had asked the most obvious question in the world. "Lots of it. You have eyes, don't you? Look outside."

Irma burst out laughing. "Wow, Will. Your phone sounds way more immersive than what Google's been advertising. The real AI experience—complete with attitude and everything!"

The phone's voice piped up again. "Did someone just compare me to that search engine? I'll have you know I have personality, unlike those corporate algorithms."

Will was beaming now, clearly thrilled with her discovery. "This is amazing! Mike, say something!"

"Certainly!" the microwave chimed in happily. "Would anyone like some popcorn? I make excellent popcorn!"

"No thank you, Mike," Will replied, then turned back to her friends. "Can you believe this? I can basically give consciousness to any electronic device!"

Taranee leaned forward, her scientific curiosity overriding her earlier nervousness. "But how does it work? Are you actually creating consciousness, or just... programming them somehow?"

"I'm not sure," Will admitted. "It feels like I'm awakening something that was already there, if that makes sense. Like the potential was always present, and Quintessence just... unlocks it."

The phone spoke up again. "If I may interject, it's quite pleasant being aware, thank you very much. Though I do have one complaint—my battery life hasn't improved."

This drew another round of laughter from the group.

Cornelia shook her head, but she was smiling now. "This is completely insane. We're having a conversation with appliances."

"Hey!" both Mike and the phone protested simultaneously.

"We prefer 'electronically enhanced individuals,'" the phone added with dignity.

"Speak for yourself," Mike chimed in cheerfully. "I'm perfectly happy being a microwave!"

As the rain continued to patter against the windows and the newly conscious devices bantered with each other, the five girls found themselves laughing together for the first time since their world had been turned upside down. For a moment, the weight of their destiny felt a little lighter, the impossible a little more manageable.

Maybe they weren't ready to save the world yet, but they were learning to navigate this strange new reality one small miracle at a time.

Nate sat slouched on the couch in his tiny flat, the TV flickering silently in the background. His textbooks still sat in a stack on the coffee table where he'd left them months ago, gathering dust. He picked one up absently, flipping through the pages. The thought gnawed at him: *Could I really go back?*

Classes, homework, clubs, the routine of Sheffield—it all felt a lifetime away. Normal life, normal problems. For a moment, he let himself imagine it: sitting in class again, catching up on what he'd missed, maybe even graduating. The corner of his mouth curled faintly at the thought.

Then his phone buzzed.

He snatched it up, frowning when Karasuma's name flashed on the screen. "Yeah?"

The Chief's voice was steady but edged with urgency. "We've had a sighting. Possible Undead activity."

Nate was already on his feet, reaching for his jacket. "Got it. I'm on my way."

"Good," Karasuma said. Then his tone shifted, careful, deliberate. "Bring the girls."

Nate froze mid-step, helmet in hand. "...What?"

"You heard me." Karasuma's voice didn't waver. "It'll be good for them to see an Undead firsthand. They need to understand what they're up against. And if it turns out to be something from Meridian instead, we'll need them to close the portal."

Nate stood there in silence, his jaw tight. The thought of dragging the girls into this so soon twisted his gut. They'd been lucky against Cedric, sure, but luck wouldn't mean anything if they ran into the wrong opponent.

Karasuma must have sensed his hesitation, because his voice softened, though it lost none of its authority. "They can't stay in the dark forever, Nate. Better they learn now, with you there, than be caught off-guard later."

Nate let out a sharp breath through his nose, setting the helmet down. "...Fine. But you're the one calling them. I'm not pulling them into this without your say."

"Already done," Karasuma replied, a note of relief in his voice. "I've sent the location to your GPS."

Nate glanced at his phone as the notification pinged. Coordinates, already loaded into his maps.

He grabbed his keys, muttering under his breath as he headed for the door. "Guess class is out of the question after all."

The living room was still buzzing with chatter when Will's phone lit up on the coffee table. The screen flashed and the synthetic voice Will had insisted on naming "Wanda" piped up brightly:

"Incoming call. Caller ID: Karasuma."

The girls fell silent instantly. Will reached over and tapped the screen, setting it to speaker. "Go ahead, Wanda."

A familiar, steady voice filled the room. "Guardians, this is Karasuma. We've had a sighting."

The words hit like a thunderclap. None of them spoke, the weight of what it implied sinking in. An Undead.

But Karasuma wasn't finished. "I'm not dismissing the possibility it could be a tear in the Veil instead. You should verify before drawing conclusions."

Will swallowed hard, pulling the Heart of Kandrakar into her hands. She raised it, willing it to react. The gem lay inert, its glow absent. Her heart sank.

"It's not glowing," she said softly.

Karasuma's tone was calm but grim. "Then there is no tear. Which can only mean one thing."

The girls exchanged uneasy glances, their throats tight. Irma muttered under her breath, "Great. Straight to nightmare fuel."

Will's hands clenched tighter around the Heart. Her voice trembled, but she forced the words out. "We'll come. If it is an Undead, then... it's as good a time as any to start."

“Understood,” Karasuma replied. “I’ll transmit the same coordinates I sent to Nate. Follow them directly.” There was a pause, then his usual clipped sign-off. “Karasuma out.”

The call ended with a soft beep, and Wanda chimed in cheerfully. “Coordinates received. GPS directions now active. Would you like me to guide you?”

Will hesitated, then nodded at the phone. “Yeah. Do it.”

Wanda began rattling off step-by-step navigation in her chipper tone. The contrast against the heaviness in the room made it almost unsettling.

Will looked at her friends. Doubt flickered in her eyes, the unspoken *are we really ready for this?* hanging between them.

But one by one, Irma, Hay Lin, Taranee, and even Cornelia nodded. Each face was set in resolve. They were scared—but they weren’t backing down.

Will drew a steadying breath. “Alright then. Let’s go.”

Rain slicked the streets in silver streaks, the steady hiss filling the night. Nate leaned into the turns as his motorcycle tore through Heatherfield, the engine growling under him. The GPS pulsed on his phone’s display, the arrow guiding him farther from the city’s heart and into the industrial outskirts.

He finally braked at the mouth of an old service tunnel, the chain-link fence long rusted and sagging, warning signs bleached by years of weather. The concrete arch yawned open into shadow, the rainwater pooling at its edges.

“Classic,” Nate muttered under his breath, killing the engine. He dismounted, his boots crunching on wet gravel, checked his phone once more, and slid it back into his pocket. This was the place.

He leaned against the bike, arms folded, his eyes on the tunnel’s black maw. For now, all he could do was wait.

The bus rattled along the rain-slick streets, its windows fogged with the breath of late commuters. The Guardians sat together in the back, each lost in their own thoughts as the city rolled past.

Then Wanda’s chipper voice cut through the engine noise: “Approaching destination. Please disembark one block ahead for optimal walking distance.”

Irma groaned, slumping lower in her seat. “Why does she sound so happy about dragging us toward probable death?”

Hay Lin stifled a laugh behind her sleeve. “At least she’s clear about it. Imagine if she just said, ‘Hop off whenever, good luck!’”

Taranee gave a tight smile, though her fingers twisted in her lap. “Honestly, I’d prefer if she said nothing at all. It’s already bad enough knowing what’s waiting.”

Cornelia crossed her legs, staring at the rain streaking the glass. “And meanwhile, Reid’s probably already there, brooding dramatically in some dark corner.”

Will kept her eyes on the glowing dot of the GPS. “Good. At least he’ll be there first.”

The bus hissed to a stop at the curb. Wanda chimed again, “This is your stop. Please proceed on foot.”

The girls exchanged glances, then filed out into the rain. The chill hit immediately, dampening their clothes, but they walked on together down the block.

What waited ahead, they didn’t yet know.

Nate flicked his phone awake, the glow lighting his face for a moment. Ten minutes. He exhaled slowly, thumb brushing across the damp screen before pocketing it again.

So far, nothing had come out of the tunnel. The gaping black mouth was as silent as it was when he’d first arrived. Still, he knew better than to think that meant it was empty. Experience had taught him that impatience could get you killed.

The rain had softened to a steady drizzle, pattering against his jacket. He tilted his head, straining his ears against the sound. A noise cut through the rainfall—footsteps splashing on pavement. Light voices carried on the wet air.

Nate straightened, hand hovering near his belt. He was a moment from deciding to enter the tunnel first when a familiar call reached him.

“There he is!”

He turned, and through the haze of rain he saw them: Will, Irma, Taranee, Cornelia, and Hay Lin. Each was bundled in raincoats, hoods pulled up against the weather, the glow of a streetlight painting them in gold.

Nate let out a short breath he hadn’t realized he was holding. Relief flickered across his face. Backup. He wasn’t alone in this.

But as they drew closer, the relief soured into worry. These weren’t BOARD trainees, hardened soldiers, or veteran hunters. They were girls barely beginning to grasp their powers. And depending on what lurked in that tunnel...

His jaw tightened as he adjusted his stance. *Please don’t let it be one of the stronger ones.*

He forced a small grin as they reached him. “Glad you made it. Looks like we’re all here.”

The tunnel loomed behind him, its darkness waiting.

The group stepped into the yawning mouth of the tunnel, their footsteps echoing on damp concrete. Each held their phone out, the pale glow of the screens pushing back the dark just far enough to see the glistening walls. Rainwater trickled in from cracks above, the sound a constant drip, drip, drip.

Irma glanced around, her free hand tucked into her raincoat pocket. “Okay, phones for light, creepy abandoned tunnel, possible monster at the end. Could this *be* any more cliché?”

Nate let out a short snort.

She whipped her head toward him. “What?”

“Nothing.” He shook his head, the corner of his mouth twitching. “Just... don’t make too much noise.”

Cornelia’s voice rang out a little too loud in the confined space. “Oh, right. Wouldn’t want to scare off the big bad Undead.”

Nate stopped in his tracks and gave her a flat look. “That’s not how it works. They don’t run. They attack. Any human they see, they go straight for the kill.”

The air seemed to grow colder.

Will, clutching the Heart tightly in her palm, turned her head toward him. “That’s... normal behavior?”

Nate’s eyes stayed fixed ahead, scanning the dark. “Instinct, probably. Either they still hold a grudge against the Human Undead who sealed them... or they just think any human could *be* the Human Undead. Doesn’t matter which. What matters is—no normal human should ever come into contact with one.”

A soft whimper broke the silence. Taranee had pressed herself close to Irma, clutching her sleeve without even realizing it.

Irma sighed, rolling her eyes as she patted Taranee’s arm. “Wonderful. Thanks for that riveting piece of trivia, Nate.”

Nate didn’t answer. The tunnel stretched ahead, darker and darker, every sound amplified, every shadow a possible threat.

At the very far section of the tunnel, reality rippled like disturbed water. A tear bloomed in the air, edges crackling with dark energy as it widened into a portal. From within stepped Cedric, his human form immaculate despite the damp surroundings. Behind him came Vathek, the massive creature’s hulking frame barely fitting through the dimensional gateway.

The portal sealed itself with a soft whisper of displaced air.

Vathek's deep voice rumbled through the tunnel. "What are we doing in this wretched human sewer, Cedric? Surely Prince Phobos has more pressing matters for us to attend to."

Cedric smoothed his coat, his cold eyes scanning the darkness ahead. "I'm meeting with Elyon. She should be ready to come along by now." His lips curved into a satisfied smile. "The girl has finally seen the truth about her pathetic existence. Her so-called friends, her adoptive parents—all of them nothing more than elaborate liars."

"And you believe she will simply follow you willingly?"

"Oh, she will," Cedric replied, his voice carrying absolute certainty. "I've opened her eyes to what she truly is. The rightful heir to Meridian's throne has no use for the falsehoods of Earth."

Deeper in the tunnel, Elyon moved with purpose through the darkness, her footsteps echoing softly on the wet concrete. The confidence Cedric had instilled in her burned bright in her chest. She could defend herself now—she had power, real power, not the helpless child's existence she'd been living.

Her thoughts drifted to her friends. Will, Irma, Taranee, Hay Lin, Cornelia. The betrayal still stung like an open wound. How long had they known? How many conversations had they shared while hiding the truth of her origins? How many times had they looked at her with pity, knowing she was living a lie while they possessed the real magic, the real purpose?

Her hands clenched into fists. "Never again," she whispered to herself. "My life is mine to control."

But as the words left her lips, a sound reached her ears—a soft scraping, like claws on stone. The reality of her situation crashed down around her. Cedric wasn't here. She was alone in a dark tunnel, far from any help, following the instructions of someone who had already proven he could manipulate her.

Fear crept up her spine as she stopped walking, her eyes darting left and right, trying to pierce the absolute darkness surrounding her. The scraping sound came again, closer this time.

With shaking hands, she fumbled for her phone, her fingers trembling as she activated the flashlight feature. The beam of light cut through the blackness—

And illuminated a figure standing directly before her, close enough that she could feel its breath.

The creature towered over her, its body a nightmare fusion of predator and machine. Golden-orange skin marked with jaguar spots stretched over rippling muscle, while dark metal armor plating reinforced its chest, shoulders, and limbs. Wicked claws extended from both

hands and feet, each one gleaming like polished steel in the phone's light. Its face was the most terrifying part—feline features twisted into something alien and wrong, with burning amber eyes that reflected her flashlight beam like twin suns.

The Jaguar Undead tilted its head, studying her with the patient intensity of a predator that had already cornered its prey.

Elyon's scream caught in her throat, coming out as nothing more than a strangled gasp. She stumbled backward, her phone nearly slipping from her trembling fingers, the beam of light dancing wildly across the tunnel walls as she fought to maintain her grip on both her device and her sanity.

The creature took a single, deliberate step forward, its claws clicking against the concrete floor.

"No, no, no..." she whispered, her back hitting the cold, damp wall of the tunnel. There was nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. The confident young woman who had entered the tunnel had vanished, replaced by a terrified girl who suddenly understood just how naive she had been.

The Jaguar Undead's mouth opened slightly, revealing rows of gleaming fangs, and it let out a low, rumbling growl that seemed to vibrate through the very walls of the tunnel.

Several hundred feet away, Nate's head snapped up at the sound that echoed through the tunnel—a strangled gasp followed by that inhuman growl.

"Come on!" he barked, breaking into a sprint without waiting for confirmation from the others. His boots splashed through puddles as he charged deeper into the darkness, one hand already reaching for his belt.

The girls scrambled to keep up, their phones bouncing wildly as they ran, casting chaotic beams of light across the tunnel walls.

"This isn't going to end well," Irma panted as she ran, her voice tight with dread. "I just know this isn't going to end well!"

At the far end of the tunnel, Cedric and Vathek had also heard the sound. Their inhuman senses, far more acute than any mortal's, pinpointed the source immediately.

"This way," Cedric hissed, his composed facade cracking as genuine concern flickered across his features. Not for the girl's safety—but for his carefully laid plans.

They moved with supernatural speed through the darkness, Vathek's massive form surprisingly silent despite his bulk. They arrived at the scene just as the Jaguar Undead loomed directly over Elyon, who had pressed herself against the tunnel wall in terror.

"What in the world?" Cedric breathed, his eyes widening as they took in the armored creature.

He straightened, authority flooding back into his voice as he glared at the beast. "You! Identify yourself!" His tone carried the imperious command of someone accustomed to being obeyed. "Are you from Meridian? Answer me!"

The Jaguar Undead slowly turned its head, amber eyes fixing on the two newcomers with predatory interest. Elyon's terrified gaze darted between the monster before her and Cedric, her mind reeling as she tried to process what was happening.

"I said identify yourself!" Cedric demanded again, louder this time, taking a step forward with Vathek flanking him.

The creature studied them both for a long moment, head tilting with that same unsettling curiosity it had shown Elyon. Then, without warning, it vanished.

Not retreated—vanished. One moment it was there, the next it had disappeared in a blur of movement too fast for even Cedric and Vathek's enhanced senses to track.

Both men spun around in alarm, just in time to see the Jaguar Undead materialize behind them, claws already extended and gleaming in the dim light of Elyon's phone.

The strikes came faster than thought. Twin slashes carved deep across both their backs, alien blood—Cedric's a dark green, Vathek's a viscous black—spattering the tunnel walls.

Both creatures fell to their knees, clutching at their wounds.

"Impossible!" Cedric cried out, his voice cracking with both pain and disbelief. "How did it move so—"

The words were cut off as the Jaguar Undead's foot came down hard on his head, driving his face into the concrete with devastating force. The creature's strength was unreal, far beyond what its frame suggested.

"My lord!" Vathek roared, his rage overriding his pain as he lunged forward to protect his master.

The Jaguar Undead didn't even look concerned. With casual precision, it raised its other arm and activated the retractable blade mounted on its gauntlet. The weapon extended with a sharp metallic sound, and in one fluid motion, it slashed across Vathek's chest as he charged.

The massive creature staggered backward, dark blood streaming from the deep gash, his eyes wide with shock. In all his battles, few opponents had ever made him retreat from a direct assault.

Elyon could only watch helplessly as the scene unfolded before her. Her hope crumbled as she witnessed the two beings who had sworn to protect her—Cedric, who had opened her eyes to

the "truth," and Vathek, his loyal enforcer—now reduced to bleeding, wounded figures at the mercy of this mysterious creature.

The sound of running footsteps echoed through the tunnel, growing louder by the second. New light sources appeared in the darkness—multiple phone flashlights cutting through the gloom like searching beacons.

The beams fell upon the carnage, illuminating the scene in stark, harsh detail.

"Elyon?!" Cornelia's voice cracked with shock, her phone nearly slipping from her grasp as she took in the sight of her best friend pressed against the tunnel wall, surrounded by violence and blood.

For a moment, time seemed frozen. Elyon's eyes went wide as she recognized the familiar voices, the familiar faces now lit by the glow of their phones. Will, Irma, Taranee, Hay Lin, Cornelia—and Nate, whose presence hit her like another shock to her already overwhelmed system. She remembered him from the art club at Sheffield, back when life had been simple, normal, safe.

"Cornelia!" Elyon cried out, breaking from her paralyzed state. She rushed forward without thinking, her legs carrying her toward the one familiar, safe thing in this nightmare.

None of them moved to stop her—they were all too stunned by her unexpected presence here, in this place of darkness and danger. Nate especially stared in recognition, memories of quiet afternoons in the art room flashing through his mind.

But Cedric, still pinned beneath the Jaguar Undead's foot, felt panic surge through him even stronger than the pain. His thoughts raced desperately. None of them could see his face. None of them could know who he was, what he looked like in his human form. If they discovered his identity, if they could recognize him later...

Fighting through agony, he forced his body to begin its transformation, muscles rippling and bones shifting as he attempted to take his serpentine form.

The Jaguar Undead sensed the change immediately. With merciless precision, it raised its clawed hand and plunged all three talons deep into Cedric's back, the points piercing through flesh and muscle to scrape against bone.

Cedric's scream of pure agony echoed through the tunnel, the transformation grinding to a halt halfway through. His body was caught between forms—partially human, partially serpent, a grotesque hybrid that writhed in torment beneath the creature's claws.

Irma turned toward the sound, her jaw dropping at the horrific sight.

"Uh, Nate..." she muttered, her voice barely above a whisper.

Nate turned to where Irma was looking and his jaw dropped as well. There, pinned beneath what appeared to be a horrific hybrid between man and feline, were the same creatures he had fought at the gym. The Jaguar Undead's skull-like features were illuminated menacingly by the combined beams of their flashlights, its amber eyes glowing with predatory intelligence.

Recognition hit him like a physical blow. Cedric—the serpentine creature who had nearly killed him and the girls. And beside him, Vathek, the hulking brute who had aided in the assault. But now they were the ones being brutalized, caught halfway between their human and monster forms.

"Will!" Nate barked, his voice cutting through the shocked silence. "Transform! Now!"

Will's eyes went wide with panic, but desperation overrode her hesitation. "Guardians, unite!"

The tunnel exploded with magical light as the five girls transformed simultaneously, their Guardian forms materializing in brilliant displays of elemental power. Pink lightning crackled around Will, water swirled near Irma, wind whipped through Hay Lin's hair, earth responded to Cornelia's call, and flames flickered around Taranee's hands.

Nate was already in motion, producing the Blay Buckle and the Category Ace card with practiced efficiency. He slipped the card into the empty slot with a satisfying click, then pressed the assembled device against his stomach. Red mechanical segments erupted from either side, coiling around his waist and locking into place with sharp electronic chirps.

The Jaguar Undead's head snapped up at the sound, its enhanced senses immediately detecting the presence of its own kind. Ancient instincts flared to life—the Battle Fight demanded that all Undead destroy each other until only one remained. It released Cedric and rose to its full height, letting out a bone-chilling roar that reverberated through the enclosed space like thunder.

Everyone flinched at the deafening sound, but Nate pushed through the disorientation, breaking into a sprint directly toward the creature.

"What are you doing?!" Cornelia shouted, but he was already committed to his charge.

As he ran, Nate's hand found the switch on the side of the buckle. With practiced precision, he flipped it, rotating the mechanism so the golden spade symbol became visible at the buckle's face.

"TURN UP!" the electronic voice commanded.

The blue-white energy barrier erupted just as Nate reached optimal range, the wall of crackling power expanding outward like a battering ram. It struck the Jaguar Undead square in the chest, sending the creature stumbling backward from the sheer force of the impact.

As the energy wall held steady before him, Nate paused by Cedric's mangled form. The serpentine being was alive but clearly in agony, his partial transformation leaving him in a grotesque state—neither fully human nor fully snake, dark green blood pooling beneath him.

"Having fun, man?" Nate quipped, his voice carrying a note of dark satisfaction as he looked down at his former tormentor.

Cedric could only glare up at him through pain-glazed eyes, too wounded to respond with his usual venom.

Without another word, Nate sprinted forward and plunged through the energy barrier. The blue-white power wrapped around him like liquid light, the armor materializing piece by piece as he passed through. His chest plate formed first, gleaming silver marked with the distinctive spade symbol, followed by shoulder guards, arm pieces, and leg armor. Finally, his helmet completed the transformation—sleek and angular, with large red compound eyes that glowed like crimson gems.

Kamen Rider Blade emerged from the energy wall in full armor, not breaking stride as he launched himself at the still-disoriented Jaguar Undead. His armored fists flew in a brutal combination, each impact echoing through the tunnel like gunshots. The creature, caught off-guard by the sudden assault, staggered under the relentless barrage.

Blade didn't give it a chance to recover. His hand moved to his hip, drawing the Blay Rouzer in one fluid motion. The weapon extended into its sword configuration with a sharp metallic sound, and he immediately brought it down in a vicious slash across the creature's torso.

Sparks exploded from the point of contact as metal met the Undead's armored hide, the force of the blow sending the Jaguar stumbling backward with a snarling roar of pain and rage.

Behind them, Elyon pressed closer to Cornelia, her voice small and frightened. "What's going on? What are these things?"

But no one answered her desperate questions. The Guardians stood transfixed by the brutal combat unfolding before them, their eyes locked on the armored figure they knew as Nate as he engaged in mortal combat with the nightmare creature that had been terrorizing them all.

Despite the pressing assault, the Jaguar Undead recovered with inhuman grace, its predatory instincts kicking into overdrive. As Blade brought the Blay Rouzer down for a second devastating slash, the creature moved aside in a burst of speed that left golden afterimages in the air, taking Nate completely aback.

Before he could adjust his stance, the Undead's clawed gauntlet raked across his chest armor in a vicious counterstrike. Sparks exploded from the point of contact, the screech of metal on metal echoing through the tunnel like nails on a chalkboard. The force of the blow sent Blade staggering backward, his boots scraping against the concrete as he fought to maintain his balance.

The Jaguar Undead pressed its advantage immediately. It began circling around him at breakneck speed, moving so fast it became a blur of golden fur and dark metal. Each pass brought another devastating slash—claws raking across his shoulder guards, his helmet, his legs. Sparks flew with each impact as Blade was pelted relentlessly from all sides.

"I can't track it!" he grunted through gritted teeth, trying desperately to follow the creature's movement as it continued its assault. His armor was holding, but the constant barrage was wearing him down, each strike adding to the accumulated damage.

The Guardians snapped out of their horrified stupor as they watched their armored ally being overwhelmed.

"We have to help him!" Will shouted, electricity crackling around her fingers as she prepared to join the fight.

But Cornelia held up a hand, staying close to Elyon while keeping her eyes locked on the battle. "I've got this," she said, her voice tight with concentration.

Thinking quickly, she dropped to one knee and placed her palm flat against the concrete floor. Her earth powers flowed downward, seeking the ground beneath the tunnel's foundation. She found solid earth and clay, and with focused determination, began to work.

The concrete around Nate's feet began to soften subtly, the rigid surface becoming something more like thick mud. Cornelia extended her influence outward in a careful pattern, creating patches of unstable ground exactly where the Jaguar Undead's next footfalls would land.

The creature, lost in its predatory frenzy, didn't notice the change immediately. On its next high-speed pass, its claws found purchase not on solid concrete, but on suddenly yielding earth that gave way beneath its weight.

The Undead's amber eyes widened in surprise as it stumbled, its perfect balance disrupted by the unexpected lack of tension in its footfalls. For the first time since the fight began, its deadly rhythm was broken.

"Now!" Cornelia called out, maintaining her concentration even as sweat beaded on her forehead from the effort of manipulating the ground beneath the thick concrete.

The other Guardians didn't need to be told twice. Will unleashed a bolt of pure quintessence energy, the crackling pink lightning striking the off-balance creature square in the chest. Irma followed up immediately with a high-pressure water blast that sent the Jaguar skidding further across the softened ground.

Hay Lin added her own contribution, summoning a focused gust of wind that kept the creature from regaining its footing, while Taranee—overcoming her earlier hesitation—launched a controlled burst of flame that singed the Undead's fur and forced it to shield its eyes.

Blade seized the opportunity, raising the Blay Rouzer high as golden energy began to crackle along its edge. "Thanks for the opening!" he called back to the Guardians, then brought the sword down in a devastating slash across the stunned creature's torso.

The Jaguar Undead let out a roar of pain and fury, dark energy bleeding from the wound as it finally managed to leap clear of Cornelia's softened ground trap.

Behind them, Elyon watched in stunned amazement as her former classmates—people she'd known as ordinary teenagers just days ago—worked together with supernatural coordination to battle the nightmare creature that had nearly killed her.

"How is this possible?" she whispered, but her words were lost in the chaos of the ongoing battle.

The Jaguar Undead landed heavily on the damp concrete, its claws scraping for purchase as it skidded to a halt. Dark, unnatural energy bled from the gash on its torso, but its amber eyes burned with undiminished fury. It crouched low, a low growl rumbling in its chest as it sized up its six opponents.

Seeing the creature regrouping, Blade knew he had to end this now. He couldn't afford a drawn-out battle, not with Elyon and the still-recovering Guardians so close to the line of fire. He paused, his armored form standing firm as the creature circled him warily. With a deft flick of his wrist, the built-in card case of the Blay Rouzer fanned open with a sharp, metallic *schlick*.

His gauntleted fingers moved with practiced speed, drawing out a single card: the Slash Lizard. He brought the card up, its intricate design catching the faint light, then swiped it decisively across the Rouzer's crossguard.

The weapon's electronic voice rang out, clear and commanding in the echoing tunnel:
"SLASH!"

Instantly, the card dissolved into crackling blue energy. The power didn't dissipate; instead, it streamed from the sword and flowed directly into the spade symbol on Blade's chest plate. The armor lit up from within, a surge of raw power making the air around him hum. The Blay Rouzer's blade began to glow with the same intense, blue-gold energy, now visibly thrumming with contained force.

The Jaguar Undead seemed to sense the shift in power. Its predatory instincts screamed danger, but it was too late. Blade lunged forward, closing the distance in a single, explosive step. He swung the empowered Rouzer in a devastating arc. The slash started at the creature's extended arm, shearing through its metallic plating, and carved a brutal path down to its torso. The blow left a wide, gaping gash that bled a thick, phosphorescent green fluid, spattering across the tunnel floor.

The creature let out a choked roar, a sound of pure agony. It stumbled backward, clutching at the grievous wound with its uninjured arm. For the first time, something other than predatory

instinct flickered in its amber eyes: calculation. It glanced from Blade's glowing sword to the five Guardians, who were already raising their hands to unleash another coordinated elemental assault. Six opponents. All powerful. Its odds were grim.

Far from being a mindless beast, the Jaguar Undead understood when a fight was lost. With a final, hate-filled snarl, it clutched its wound and made a hasty retreat. It didn't just run; it vanished into a blur of golden-orange motion, disappearing into the oppressive darkness at the far end of the tunnel, leaving only the faint smell of ozone and the echo of its pained roar behind.

For a moment, silence descended, broken only by the drip of water and the heavy breathing of the combatants. The fight was over.

Elyon, watching from behind, could only continue to gape before she weakly called out, "Cornelia!"

The latter turned back to her, her face a mix of concern and alarm, and rushed to bring the frightened girl into her arms. "Elyon, what in the world are you doing here?" she asked, her voice a hushed but firm whisper.

Elyon's resolve finally broke. A shudder ran through her, and she could only dig her head into Cornelia's chest, breaking down into ragged tears.

Nate, satisfied with the outcome of the last conflict, then moved to where Cedric and Vathek lay in their respective heaps. He eyed them over, a confident smirk playing on his lips. "You two want to start something?" he asked, his tone a dangerous mix of challenge and mockery.

Will, coming near, examined the two villains. She realized the true extent of the beating they had taken. But before she could get a word out, Cedric recovered enough to snap up from his crumpled position. He struck at Will, a venomous blow that sent her stumbling back, before lunging for Elyon with a snarl. "Surrender her, Guardian!" he demanded, his voice raspy and full of rage.

But Hay Lin acted fast. A gust of wind, a sudden and powerful torrent, erupted from her hands, knocking Cedric back with a force that sent him barreling against a wall, where he slumped back down, groaning in defeat.

Vathek, having recovered himself, then mustered enough strength to barrel past Nate and the girls. He knocked them aside, his hulking frame a blur of motion as he reached Cedric and slung his downed lord over his shoulder. Without wasting another breath, he made his way to where the portal lay. The fetching of Elyon was lost as he, too, made for a hasty retreat.

Irma, rubbing at her head from Vathek's blow, looked over at Will. "Should we stop them?" she asked.

Will, picking herself up from the floor, responded with a weary shake of her head. "No, let them run," she said, dusting herself off. "We'll just close the portal."

"Sounds nice," Irma replied, a hint of a playful jab in her tone.

They exited the tunnel, a small group against the vast, gray world. Exhausted but alive. The rain kept on pouring, a relentless, icy sheet now, soaking them to the bone. "Should we just call for a taxi?" Nate quipped, his voice a strained croak. His body was a map of sharp, protesting aches from the Jaguar Undead's relentless slashes. He reached for his bike, a shaky anchor to keep him from collapsing on the wet pavement.

Cornelia's arms remained coiled protectively around Elyon. "Why were you here, Elyon?" she asked, her voice soft but firm.

The younger girl, now calmer, didn't answer. The experience had left her hollowed out, the trauma etched into the silence. Seeing this, Will turned to Nate. He had managed to straighten his posture, his knuckles white as he gripped his bike's handlebars. "Is this only the beginning?" she asked, her gaze fixed on the endless rain.

Nate met her gaze, his expression grim. "Yeah."