

## Chapter 1: The First Step

The wrought-iron gates of Sheffield Institute loomed before him like the entrance to a forgotten dream. Nate's fingers traced the cold metal bars, feeling the familiar ridges where rust had begun to claim the paint. Each breath came out as a small puff of vapor in the October air, and he could taste the metallic bite of approaching rain.

His backpack felt impossibly heavy—not from books, but from the weight of everything unsaid. Two years. Two years since he'd walked through these gates as just another teenager worried about pop quizzes and whether he'd work up the courage to ask someone to the winter formal. Now the boy who'd sketched dragons in the margins of his notebooks was gone, replaced by someone who knew exactly how real monsters moved in the dark.

The courtyard stretched before him, autumn leaves scattered across weathered stone like confetti from a party he'd missed. That familiar scent hit him—wet concrete, chalk dust from eraser-beaten blackboards, and something else. Something that smelled like childhood, like Saturday mornings and homework he'd forgotten until Sunday night.

Voices drifted from the front steps, carried on the wind. Laughter, bright and unguarded. His chest tightened as he spotted them—five figures clustered together like they always had, like the center of gravity that had once pulled his whole world into orbit.

Will's red jacket was unmistakable, a splash of warmth against the gray morning. For a heartbeat that stretched into eternity, Nate considered turning around. Walking away. Pretending this moment had never existed. But his feet had already betrayed him, carrying him forward across stones that remembered the weight of his younger self.

The laughter died gradually, like someone turning down a radio. One by one, their faces turned toward him—confusion flickering across familiar features, followed by recognition that hit like a physical force.

Will's mouth fell open slightly. "Nate?" Her name came out like a question she wasn't sure she wanted answered.

He stopped about arm's length away, close enough to see the surprise in their eyes, far enough to run if he needed to. "Hey." The word scraped against his throat, rougher than he'd intended.

"You're... here. Actually here." Will shook her head slightly, as if trying to wake up from a dream. "I mean, we heard rumors, but..."

"Rumors travel fast around here," Nate said, attempting a smile that felt foreign on his face. "Thought I'd beat them to the punch."

Irma crossed her arms, that familiar smirk already spreading across her features. "Well, well. Look what the cat dragged in. Let me guess—private military pays better than flipping burgers?"

"Irma," Taranee hissed, elbowing her friend in the ribs, but there was no real heat in it.

"What? I'm just saying, looks like someone's been taking care of himself." Irma's grin widened. "Better than the rest of us stuck eating cafeteria mystery meat."

Elyon stepped forward, offering a small smile that seemed both familiar and different. "I wasn't sure we'd see you again," she said simply. "I'm really glad you came back."

"Oh my god," Cornelia groaned, throwing her hands up dramatically. "Could you two be any more obvious? Just hug already and get it over with."

"Cornelia!" Elyon's cheeks flushed pink as she shot her friend a glare that could have melted steel.

The sound that escaped Nate's lips was somewhere between a laugh and a cough. "Nice to see some things never change."

Hay Lin bounced slightly on her toes, her energy practically visible. "It's like something out of a movie! The mysterious love interest returns just when the heroine needs him most!"

"I am not a heroine," Elyon muttered, but she was fighting a smile.

"And I'm definitely not mysterious," Nate added, though they both knew that wasn't entirely true anymore.

Will shifted her weight, her expression more serious now. "We've been keeping an eye on Elyon. You know, just in case. Making sure she's not wandering around alone."

"I don't wander," Elyon protested. "And I can take care of myself."

"Sure you can, princess," Cornelia said, but her tone was fond. "That's why I've become your personal bodyguard in every class we share."

"Lucky me," Elyon deadpanned.

Irma wagged her eyebrows. "And lucky Nate, getting to join the protection detail. Hope you're ready for Cornelia's commentary on everything."

"Hey!" Cornelia flicked her blonde hair over her shoulder with practiced indignation. "My commentary is insightful and helpful."

"Your commentary is loud and relentless," Taranee said with a grin.

"Same thing," Cornelia replied, unrepentant.

"Besides," Irma continued, "Nate's not really Cornelia's type anyway. She's more into guys who make YouTube videos about protein shakes and talk about their 'personal brand.'"

The group erupted in laughter, even as Cornelia's face turned approximately the same shade as Will's jacket. "I hate all of you," she announced with as much dignity as she could muster.

"No, you don't," Hay Lin said cheerfully, wrapping an arm around Cornelia's shoulders. "You love us and our terrible sense of humor."

For a moment, standing there in the courtyard with the autumn wind tugging at their clothes and laughter echoing off the old brick walls, Nate felt something loosen in his chest. This—this felt like home. Like the world he'd left behind wasn't completely gone, just waiting for him to find his way back to it.

The first warning bell rang across the campus, its shrill cry scattering groups of students like startled birds. Around them, the courtyard began to empty as people headed toward the main building.

"Come on," Will said, shouldering her bag. "Let's get you to the office. Pretty sure they'll need to do some paperwork magic to get you back on the roster."

As they walked toward the entrance, Nate found himself cataloging every detail—the way Hay Lin gestured with her whole body when she talked, how Taranee automatically slowed her pace to match Cornelia's more measured steps, the protective way Will positioned herself slightly ahead of the group. And Elyon, walking beside him just close enough that he could catch hints of her shampoo, something that smelled like vanilla and possibility.

"So," Elyon said quietly, her voice just for him as the others chattered ahead. "How long are you staying?"

The question he'd been dreading. The one he didn't have a clean answer for. "For a while," he said finally. "As long as I need to."

She nodded, seeming to understand that there were layers to that response he couldn't unpack here, in the space between the courtyard and the front doors. "Good," she said simply. "I missed having you around."

The admission hit him harder than it should have. Two years of distance, of carefully constructed walls and professional detachment, and five words from Elyon Brown threatened to bring it all crashing down.

As they passed through the entrance hall, Nate caught sight of his reflection in the glass display cases—older, sharper, carrying secrets that would have been unimaginable to the boy who used to walk these halls. The weight of his hidden buckle seemed heavier against his ribs, a constant reminder of the double life he was about to lead. This wasn't really coming home, he realized. This was going undercover in the ghost of his former life. The boy who had once worried about art projects and school dances was gone, replaced by someone who understood that monsters were real and that sometimes the most important battles were fought by pretending everything was normal.

It wasn't a home he was walking back into—it was his newest mission. And maybe that was exactly what both he and Elyon needed.

### Later That Day

The Gothic arches of Sheffield Institute's cafeteria stretched high overhead, their stone curves casting intricate shadows across the polished floor below. Afternoon light filtered through the tall, narrow windows, painting everything in warm amber tones that made the whole space feel like something from a medieval cathedral—if cathedrals served pizza and chocolate milk.

Nate stood in the lunch line, plastic tray in hand, watching the familiar choreography of teenage life unfold around him. The sound of overlapping conversations created a constant hum that bounced off the vaulted ceiling, punctuated by the occasional burst of laughter or the scrape of chair legs against stone. Students clustered around circular tables, bent over smartphones, sharing gossip, complaining about teachers—living their lives with the kind of casual certainty that came from never questioning whether tomorrow would exist.

It felt surreal. Unreal.

Two years of hunting creatures that could end the world, two years of every shadow potentially hiding something that wanted to kill him, and here he was again—worried about whether the meatloaf was safe to eat and if he had enough change for a bottle of water.

A group of freshmen at a nearby table erupted in giggles over something on one of their phones. Two seniors argued lazily about weekend plans. A quiet girl with thick glasses sat alone, reading while she ate her sandwich, completely absorbed in her book.

None of them had any idea. None of them knew that reality was held together by barriers that were weakening, that creatures from nightmare realms regularly tried to break through, that their entire existence depended on a handful of teenagers with powers they barely understood and a fifteen-year-old boy with a belt full of monsters.

They just... existed. Blissfully, carelessly, beautifully unaware.

Nate moved through the serving line mechanically, accepting whatever the lunch lady spooned onto his tray without really seeing it. His eyes kept drifting to the other students—the way they slouched in their chairs, the casual way they left their backs to doorways, how they sat with their attention completely focused on mundane things like homework and gossip rather than scanning for exits and potential threats.

When had he lost that? When had he stopped being able to sit down without cataloging every possible escape route?

He spotted the familiar cluster of red and blonde hair near the windows where natural light made the ancient stone walls look almost golden. Will, Irma, Cornelia, Taranee, and Hay Lin had

claimed their usual table—though now Elyon sat among them, looking more relaxed than he'd seen her since the tunnel incident.

As he approached, Taranee looked up and immediately scooted her chair over, making room for him on the long bench that ran along one side of the circular table. "Hey," she said quietly, offering one of her gentle smiles. "How's the first day back treating you?"

"Like riding a bike," he said, settling down beside her and setting his tray on the scarred wooden surface. "If the bike was on fire and you'd forgotten how bikes worked."

Hay Lin giggled. "That bad?"

"Not bad, just..." He paused, looking around the cathedral-like space again. A maintenance worker was refilling the napkin dispensers. Two teachers chatted near the Gothic doorway. Normal people doing normal things. "Strange. All of it."

Irma leaned back in her chair, balancing it on two legs with practiced ease. "So," she said, her trademark smirk already forming, "how does it feel to be back in hell?"

"Irma," Cornelia protested, though she was fighting a smile.

"What? I'm just saying what we're all thinking. This place is basically a medieval prison with better Wi-Fi."

Nate looked around the soaring space—the ribbed vaulting, the stone tracery of the windows, the way voices echoed off ancient walls. "I don't know," he said slowly. "Right now it feels more like... a sanctuary, maybe. Everyone here gets to worry about normal things. Pop quizzes and social drama and whether they'll get into college."

His voice carried a weight that made the girls exchange glances. There was something almost wistful in his tone, like someone looking through a window at a life they could never have.

"Must be weird," Will said softly, "coming back to all this after everything."

Nate picked at his food, not really eating. "You know what the strangest part is? I keep expecting something to happen. Like an alarm to go off, or for one of you to get that look that means we need to transform and go fight something." He gestured around the peaceful cafeteria. "But everyone's just... eating lunch. Complaining about Mr. Henderson's math test. Arguing about who's taking who to the winter formal."

"Welcome back to the land of the gloriously mundane," Irma said, though her sarcasm was gentler than usual. "Where the biggest crisis is running out of chocolate milk."

Nate finally took a bite of his sandwich, chewing thoughtfully. "I'm not complaining. It's just... I forgot what this felt like. Being around people who don't know that monsters are real."

The girls exchanged glances around the table, their expressions growing more serious. They were all thinking the same thing—wondering what Nate's life had really been like during those two years of fighting creatures that could probably withstand a nuclear blast. But their curiosity was quickly overwhelmed by memories of the Jaguar Undead, the way it had moved with such vicious precision during the battle in the tunnel.

Calling it a battle was generous, really. It had been less about trying to kill the thing and more about simply surviving it. The way it had blurred around Nate as he fought desperately to keep it from tearing him apart, even with his armor protecting him—the image still haunted them.

Will cleared her throat, deciding to shift to more practical matters. "How soon do you think BOARD can find a second Rider?"

Nate paused mid-chew, his expression growing uncomfortable. He swallowed slowly, then set down his sandwich. "Well, Chief Karasuma ran into a bit of a snag this morning. He got a call from the main branch back in Japan—they can't spare any agents right now."

"Why not?" Cornelia asked, frowning.

"They're monitoring their own situation there. All hands on deck, apparently."

Taranee adjusted her glasses, her analytical mind already working. "Are the Undead really that widespread around the world?"

"Of course they are," Nate replied matter-of-factly. "You can't really expect them to all be conveniently located in Japan. That'd be pretty stupid from a tactical standpoint."

The girls nodded—the logic was sound, even if the implications were unsettling.

Irma leaned forward with a sardonic grin. "So what you're saying is, there might come a time when they ship you off to fight monsters in Siberia? Because that sounds like a great time."

Nate went suspiciously quiet at this, his sandwich forgotten as he stared down at his tray.

The girls all exchanged worried looks before Irma's eyebrows shot up. "Wait," she said slowly, "did you seriously get sent to Siberia?"

"Not exactly," Nate replied, still not meeting their eyes. "More like the North Pole. Where Kick Locust was." He looked up with a tired expression. "That was fun."

Five jaws dropped in perfect synchronization.

"Did you skydive in, like in the movies?" Irma asked, her voice pitched higher with disbelief.

Nate gave her the flattest look imaginable. "Do I look like James Bond to you?"

Will leaned forward, concern evident in her voice. "Was it dangerous? Being there, I mean?"

Nate didn't even try to deny it. "The armor protected me from most of the cold, thankfully. But I still had to camp out, find food, just stay alive while searching for the damn thing." He paused, running a hand through his hair. "When I finally found Kick Locust, it... well..."

"Kicked you?" Irma followed up with characteristic snark, though her usual humor was tempered by genuine worry.

Elyon, who had been quietly listening, leaned forward with concern evident in her voice. "Are there any Undead that are... well, friendly? Some that can be reasoned with?"

The question hung in the air, and suddenly the entire table went quiet. All eyes turned to Nate, who considered this for a moment before shrugging.

"Most of the Undead I've run into so far haven't exactly been smooth conversationalists," he said dryly. "But there might be some, like the Human Undead. Unlike the others, what we could translate from the ancient ruins was that the Category Two of Hearts had no remarkable physical qualities—no super strength, no speed, nothing like that."

Irma frowned, clearly skeptical. "Then what did he have? Because I find it a bit hard to believe that some guy, even if he was immortal, could take on something like Speedy over there." She gestured vaguely in the direction of the tunnels where they'd encountered the Jaguar Undead.

"He used his wits," Nate explained. "Somehow managed to gain the Category Ace of Hearts as an ally. Brain and muscle, you could call it." He paused, then added with a slight smile, "Though I haven't met either of them personally, so I can't say for sure how chatty they are."

The girls exchanged glances, the weight of the conversation settling over them as more students filtered into the cafeteria, claiming tables nearby. The ambient noise of teenage chatter and clattering trays seemed almost surreal after discussing immortal creatures and battles at the North Pole. The silence that fell between them was heavy with unspoken questions about the dangers that still lay ahead, the scope of threats they were only beginning to understand.

#### Later That Afternoon

The final bell's echo had barely faded from Sheffield Institute's Gothic halls when Nate felt a familiar sense of relief wash over him. The day had been a strange mix of normalcy and unreality—taking notes in algebra, discussing Shakespeare in English lit, all while carrying the weight of secrets that could shatter every assumption his classmates held about the world.

He made his way through the stream of departing students to the parking lot where he'd left his motorcycle. The blue and silver bike stood out among the handful of cars students were old enough to drive—a sleek reminder that his life had taken paths most teenagers couldn't imagine. As he approached, fishing for his keys to unlock the compartment containing his helmet, a familiar sound cut through the afternoon air.

A high-pitched whine of distress, followed by a chorus of jeers and rough laughter.

It was a sound that transported him instantly back to his earlier years at Sheffield, back when his biggest concerns had been homework deadlines and whether he had the courage to talk to certain classmates. The sound of bullies at work—a universal constant that apparently transcended even interdimensional warfare.

He turned toward the commotion, his trained eyes quickly assessing the scene. Four older students had cornered what looked like a freshman near the bike racks. At the center of the group stood a figure that made Nate's jaw tighten with recognition—Uriah Dunn, still wearing his signature blue and yellow shirt over a white long-sleeved top, still sporting that same predatory sneer that had made countless underclassmen miserable.

But it was the fourth member of the group that gave Nate pause. Nigel Ashcroft stood slightly apart from the others, his expression caught somewhere between resigned complicity and obvious discomfort. Nate remembered him from the art club—he'd often dropped by to decompress after dealing with his more aggressive friends, sketching quietly in a corner while Nate and Elyon worked on their projects. Unlike the others, Nigel had always seemed less invested in the cruelty, more interested in avoiding drama than creating it.

With a sigh that carried the weight of someone far older than his fifteen years, Nate stepped away from his bike and walked toward the confrontation. "Hey, Uriah!"

The effect was immediate. All four boys froze mid-harassment, turning toward the voice with expressions of surprise. The moment of distraction was all the cornered freshman needed—he yanked his backpack from Uriah's loosened grip and bolted, disappearing around the corner of the building.

Uriah's sneer faltered as his eyes tried to process the familiar face beneath the unfamiliar black and white letterman jacket. "Reid?" he stammered, genuine bewilderment replacing his earlier aggression. "Nate Reid?"

Nate stopped a comfortable distance away, his stance relaxed but ready—a habit born of too many encounters with things far more dangerous than schoolyard bullies. His gaze swept over the group, cataloging the faces that were both exactly as he remembered and somehow smaller than they'd once seemed. "How's it hanging?"

Uriah shook his head as if clearing cobwebs, his trademark arrogance reasserting itself. "How am I hanging? What about you, Reid? You just disappeared one day. What's the deal?"

Nate ran a hand through his dark hair, a gesture that had become unconscious over the years of stress and responsibility. "Problems," he said simply. "I see you guys haven't changed."

Rather than showing any shame at being caught in the act of bullying, Uriah's chest swelled with pride. His grin was audacious, unrepentant. "Oh, you know us. Just livening up this dump." He fixed Nate with a calculating stare. "So what—you back for good, or just visiting?"



"Back here, I guess," Nate replied with a shrug that seemed casual but carried undertones of weariness. "Couldn't exactly find decent work without a diploma."

Uriah scoffed, contempt flickering across his features. "Please. I don't need any of that fancy education junk. I'm talented on my own."

The irony wasn't lost on Nate—here he was, someone who'd literally saved the world multiple times, listening to a small-time bully lecture him about not needing education. His lips curved into a dry, sarcastic smile. "You sure are."

His gaze shifted to Nigel, who had remained silent throughout the exchange. Their eyes met, and something passed between them—a subtle nod of recognition, a quiet acknowledgment of shared history. It was Nigel's way of saying "good to see you again" without the complications that words might bring. Nate returned the nod with the same understated dignity.

"I'll be seeing you around," Nate said, offering a brief wave to the group before turning away.

"Yeah, yeah," Uriah dismissed, already losing interest now that his audience had fled.

As Nate walked back toward his motorcycle with unhurried strides, a different kind of silence fell over the group he'd left behind. It wasn't the comfortable quiet of friendship, but the awkward stillness of unspoken questions and half-remembered guilt.

"So where's he really been?" Kurt finally asked, voicing what they were all wondering.

Uriah shrugged, shoving his hands deep into his pockets. "Don't know. Just heard a bunch of rumors."

But Nigel said nothing. He simply watched Nate's figure recede across the parking lot, afternoon sunlight catching on the dark fabric of his letterman jacket. Unlike his friends, Nigel didn't need rumors to fill in the blanks. Two years ago, he'd been scrolling through his phone during a bout of late-night insomnia when he'd stumbled across a local news headline that had stopped him cold: *House Fire Claims Reid Couple. Survived by Their Son.*

The article had been brief—just a few clinical lines about a tragic accident and emergency response times. But Nigel had read it over and over, each word sinking in like stones into still water. And then Nate had simply vanished from Sheffield, from their social circles, from existence itself.

Nigel had even drafted a message once, late at night when guilt and genuine concern had overcome his usual social anxiety. Just something simple—condolences, an offer to talk if needed. But he'd hesitated, thumb hovering over the send button for what felt like hours. They weren't close enough for such a gesture, were they? It would feel wrong somehow, like an invasion of private grief from someone who barely qualified as an acquaintance.

Now, watching Nate disappear into the distance, that familiar sting of guilt pricked at his conscience. But he pushed it away, as he always did. It wasn't like he could have made anything better, he reasoned, shaking the thought from his head and following his friends toward their own transportation.

Meanwhile, Across Dimensions

The air shimmered like heat waves rising from summer pavement, reality bending and warping until it tore with an almost audible rip. A jagged violet seam appeared in the fabric of space itself, harsh alien light spilling through from the realm beyond. Cedric stepped through the dimensional tear with practiced grace, the oppressive atmosphere of Meridian's throne room giving way to something infinitely more pleasant.

The scent hit him immediately—old paper and leather, dust motes dancing in afternoon sunlight, the comfortable mustiness of aged books and quiet corners. He was in the back room of Ye Olde Bookshop, his carefully maintained sanctuary in this primitive but useful world.

As the tear sealed itself behind him with barely a whisper, becoming nothing more than a faint distortion in the air before vanishing entirely, Cedric's form began its familiar transformation. His fine Meridianite robes—still torn and stained with the dark ichor from his recent humiliation—dissolved like smoke, replaced by a simple brown cardigan and tweed slacks. Wire-rimmed spectacles materialized on his nose, and his predatory features softened into the mild, scholarly appearance of Richard Hoffman, antiquarian bookseller and perfectly unremarkable human being.

The transformation was more than cosmetic. As Richard Hoffman, he could move freely through this world, observe its inhabitants, learn their weaknesses. And after his catastrophic failure in the tunnels, he needed time to plan, to recover, to plot his redemption in Prince Phobos's eyes.

Moving with the fluid grace that no amount of human disguise could entirely suppress, Cedric made his way to the front of the shop. He flipped the wooden sign hanging in the door from "Closed" to "Open," the small click echoing like a victory bell in the quiet space. Here, surrounded by ancient tomes and forgotten knowledge, he was safe from his master's wrath—at least temporarily.

His fingers trailed across a shelf of worn leather bindings, and a cruel smile played at the corners of his mouth. This miserable little world, populated by self-important, petty creatures who had no idea of the forces that moved beyond their perception, was indeed the perfect place to hide. The Guardians would never think to look for him here, among the dusty corners of human academia.

The memory of his recent defeat still burned like acid in his thoughts. That insolent boy, Nate, and his pathetic friends had fought back with a fire he hadn't expected from such primitives. The humiliation was a wound that wouldn't heal, made worse by the knowledge that his failure had cost Phobos a chance at finally claiming his sister.

But they would pay for their insolence. Every last one of them.

And when the time came, when he had found the perfect moment to strike, he would be the one to deliver Elyon to her rightful place—whether she wanted it or not.

### The Next Morning

The courtyard of Sheffield Institute buzzed with its usual pre-class energy as students crossed the weathered stone paths between Gothic buildings. Morning light filtered through the ancient arches, casting long shadows that danced with the movement of teenagers hurrying to beat the warning bell.

Nate walked at a measured pace, his backpack slung over one shoulder, mentally preparing for another day of balancing normalcy with vigilance. The transition back to student life was still surreal—sitting through lectures about algebra and history while knowing that interdimensional threats could tear through reality at any moment.

He was lost in these thoughts when someone walking toward him, completely absorbed in their phone screen, nearly collided with him. Both of them stopped short, the other person looking up with a startled expression.

"Oh! Sorry about that," the boy said, pushing his thick glasses up his nose with a nervous gesture. He was about Irma's age, with short blonde hair that stuck up in several directions and a scrawny frame that suggested he spent more time indoors than most of his peers.

"No problem," Nate replied easily. "What's got you so glued to your phone?"

The boy blinked owlishly behind his glasses, then seemed to remember what he'd been doing. "Oh!" He turned his phone screen toward Nate, revealing a photograph of the very courtyard they were standing in. "I was just checking this shot I took. My camera's set to max resolution, so I wanted to see how the detail came out."

Nate studied the image on the small screen. Having worked on photography projects back in art club, he could appreciate the composition—the way the morning light played across the stone architecture, the balance of shadows and highlights, the subtle depth of field that drew the eye naturally across the frame.

"That's really good," he said, and meant it. "You've got a nice eye for composition."

The blonde boy's face lit up with genuine pleasure at the compliment. "Martin Tubbs," he said, extending his hand with newfound confidence. "Nice to meet you."

"Nate Reid," Nate replied, shaking the offered hand.

Martin snorted softly, though not unkindly. "It's not every day someone actually comments on my photos. I mean, a phone camera can only do so much compared to what a pro camera can do with a single snap."

"Still impressive work," Nate said, handing the phone back. "The lighting in that shot is perfect. You caught it at just the right moment."

"Thanks," Martin said, his smile widening as he tucked the phone back into his pocket. "That actually means a lot. Most people just scroll past without really looking, you know?"

Nate nodded. "You did a really good job. The accuracy especially—that could have only been snapped at exactly the right angle."

Martin's chest puffed up slightly with pride. "I'm something of a crack shot with the camera. I never miss, no matter how tricky the shot." He glanced at his watch and grimaced. "Anyway, I'm gonna be late for my next period. It was nice meeting you, Nate."

"Same here, Martin."

The two parted ways, Martin hurrying toward the main building while Nate continued his more leisurely pace across the courtyard. Neither of them realized that their lives were about to become far more entangled than a chance encounter over photography might suggest—that in a world where monsters lurked beyond dimensional barriers and ancient battles played out in modern settings, even the most innocent meetings could carry the weight of destiny.

Saturday Morning - BOARD Headquarters

The weekend air at BOARD headquarters carried a different quality than the weekday bustle. Quieter, more subdued, with only essential personnel moving through the sterile corridors. Nate's footsteps echoed off the polished floors as he made his way toward Chief Karasuma's office, a manila folder tucked under his arm containing his weekly report on Elyon's security status.

So far, the undercover assignment had been surprisingly uneventful. No dimensional tears, no mysterious creatures stalking the halls of Sheffield Institute, no signs that Prince Phobos's servants had located their target. Just the strange normalcy of attending classes, taking notes, and pretending that his biggest concern was an upcoming chemistry test rather than interdimensional warfare.

He was halfway down the main corridor when a woman's scream pierced the air—high, sharp, and filled with genuine distress. The sound hit him like a physical blow, instantly triggering every combat instinct he'd developed over two years of hunting monsters.

Without conscious thought, Nate dropped the folder and broke into a sprint, his sneakers squeaking against the linoleum as he raced toward the source of the sound. His hand

automatically went to his jacket where the Blay Buckle rested against his ribs, ready to transform if needed.

The scream had come from the research lab.

Nate burst through the door without bothering to knock, his eyes immediately scanning for threats—hostile Undead, dimensional rifts, anything that could justify the terror he'd heard in that cry. His muscles were coiled, ready to dodge, fight, or shield whoever was in danger.

Instead, he found Shiori Hirose slumped dramatically over the main work counter, her face buried in her arms, her shoulders shaking with what he now realized wasn't fear but sheer frustration. Her phone lay beside her, still displaying an active call that had clearly just ended.

"Shiori?" Nate's voice came out more breathless than he'd intended as he tried to shift mental gears from combat mode to concern. "What happened? Are you hurt?"

She looked up, her usually composed features twisted with a mixture of anger and despair. Her short hair was disheveled from running her hands through it, and her eyes held the particular exhaustion that came from fighting bureaucracy rather than monsters.

"They said no," she said flatly, gesturing toward her phone with something approaching hatred. "Again."

"Who said no to what?"

Shiori straightened slowly, like someone carrying an enormous weight. "The main branch. In Japan. I just got off the phone with my father and the project supervisors." She picked up her phone and ended the call with more force than necessary. "I requested—again—that they send us a promising candidate to test for the Garren Buckle compatibility."

Nate blinked, the name unfamiliar. "The Garren Buckle?"

"The second Rider system," Shiori explained, her voice heavy with defeat. "It's been completed for weeks now. Fully functional, calibrated, ready for field deployment. But we can't use it because we don't have anyone who can wear it safely."

She slumped back over the counter, her forehead coming to rest against the cold metal surface. "My father keeps saying they don't have anyone to spare, that all their candidates are needed in Japan, that we'll have to make do with local recruitment." A bitter laugh escaped her. "Local recruitment. As if we can just post flyers around town asking for volunteers to risk their lives fighting immortal monsters."

Nate cocked a brow, as that was technically how he was recruited in the first place. He then moved closer, genuine concern replacing his earlier adrenaline rush. He'd never seen Shiori this defeated, this openly frustrated with the constraints of her work. Usually she maintained the

same professional composure as Chief Karasuma, treating each setback as just another problem to solve.

"How long have you been working on this?" he asked gently.

"Months," she replied without lifting her head. "Ever since we realized you'd be operating alone here while the main branch deals with their own Undead incidents. The second belt was supposed to provide backup, support, someone to watch your back when you're facing the stronger categories."

The weight of that statement settled over both of them. Nate thought about his recent encounters—the Jaguar Undead in the tunnels, the Kick Locust at the North Pole, all the times he'd gone into battle knowing that if something went wrong, if his armor failed or he made a critical mistake, there would be no one to help him.

"Where is it?" Nate asked quietly. "The Garren Buckle?"

Without looking up from the counter, Shiori raised one arm and pointed toward the far end of the lab. "Work bench. Next to the card analysis equipment."

Nate followed her gesture and felt his breath catch. There, resting on a clean white cloth, was a buckle nearly identical to his own Blay Buckle. The same sleek design, the same sophisticated craftsmanship, but where his bore the symbol of spades, this one displayed a diamond—sharp, precise, gleaming with its own inner light.

The Garren Buckle. A second chance at evening the odds.

He walked over to the work bench, studying the device with the appreciation of someone who understood exactly what it represented. The engineering was flawless, every line and curve designed for both functionality and durability. Beside it lay a small collection of cards, their surfaces decorated with the diamond symbol that marked them as compatible with this particular system.

"It's beautiful," he said, and meant it.

"It's useless," Shiori countered, her voice muffled against the counter. "A masterpiece of technology that might as well be a paperweight because we can't find anyone crazy enough to use it."

Nate picked up one of the cards—the Category Ace of Diamonds, he realized, studying the intricate artwork that depicted what looked like a rhinoceros beetle with armor-plated wings. "What about the compatibility testing you did with the Guardians? The card didn't react to any of them?"

"Not even a flicker," Shiori confirmed. "And we can't exactly go door-to-door testing random people. The psychological profile alone narrows the field significantly."

"What kind of psychological profile?"

Shiori finally lifted her head, pushing her hair back from her face. "Someone with the mental fortitude to handle direct contact with sealed Undead consciousness, the physical resilience to withstand the transformation process, and the emotional stability to use that kind of power without losing themselves to it." She gestured helplessly. "Oh, and they have to be willing to risk their life on a regular basis fighting creatures that could kill them in dozens of creative ways. It's not exactly a large demographic."

Nate set the card back down carefully, his mind working through the implications. Two Riders would be exponentially more effective than one. They could coordinate attacks, cover each other's weaknesses, take on stronger opponents. But only if they could find someone compatible with the system.

"What happens if the wrong person tries to use it?"

Shiori's expression darkened. "Best case scenario? Nothing happens. The buckle simply won't activate." She paused, then continued with clinical detachment. "Worst case? Psychological breakdown, coma, possible death. The early prototype testing wasn't... gentle."

The weight of that revelation settled over the room like a heavy blanket. Somewhere in Japan, people had suffered—possibly died—to perfect the technology that now sat unused on a research bench.

"So we wait," Nate said finally. "Until your father finds someone, or until we get lucky with local testing."

"We wait," Shiori agreed, her voice hollow with resignation. "While you continue risking your life alone, facing opponents that were designed to fight in groups, hoping that your luck and skill are enough to keep you alive until backup arrives."

Nate looked back at the Garren Buckle, its diamond symbol catching the lab's fluorescent lights. So close to a solution, yet impossibly far away. Like having a loaded gun with no one qualified to pull the trigger.

"Maybe," he said slowly, "we're thinking about this wrong."

Shiori looked up, curiosity replacing despair in her expression. "What do you mean?"

"You said local recruitment is impossible because we can't test random people safely. But what if we don't have to test random people?" Nate turned back to face her, an idea beginning to form. "What if we focused on people who are already involved? People who already know the truth about what we're fighting?"

"The Guardians already tested negative," Shiori pointed out.

"I wasn't thinking about the Guardians."

Understanding flickered across Shiori's features as she followed his logic. "You mean other BOARD personnel? But Chief Karasuma already tested negative, and there aren't many other agents stationed here..."

"No," Nate said quietly, his gaze returning to the gleaming buckle. "I mean people who are already in danger. People who are already targets. People who have every reason to want the power to fight back."

The implications of his words hung in the air between them, heavy with possibility and risk.

Shiori sat up straighter, her scientific mind already working through the concept. "It's not impossible," she said slowly. "The compatibility factors might be different for someone who's already been exposed to interdimensional threats. Their psychological baseline would be different."

"And their motivation would be personal rather than abstract," Nate added. "Someone fighting to protect their own life, their own world, rather than following orders or fulfilling duty."

They both looked at the Garren Buckle, seeing it now not just as unused technology, but as potential salvation for someone who desperately needed the power to survive in a world that had suddenly become far more dangerous than they'd ever imagined.

The question was: who?

Meanwhile - Heatherfield City Park

Three miles away from BOARD headquarters, Martin Tubbs crouched on one knee in the dappled shade of an old oak tree, his phone held steady in both hands as he lined up what he hoped would be his best shot of the day. The morning's encounter with Nate Reid had left him buzzing with newfound confidence, the genuine compliment about his photography echoing in his mind like a mantra.

"You've got a nice eye for composition."

No one had ever said that to him before. Not about his photography, not about anything, really. Teachers tolerated his questions, classmates ignored his existence, and his parents seemed perpetually puzzled by their quiet, camera-obsessed son. But Nate—Nate had looked at his work and seen something worth praising.

So here he was, spending his Saturday morning in the park with his phone, trying to capture the kind of professional-quality shots that might justify that unexpected compliment. He'd been at it for nearly two hours, moving from location to location, studying the way light played across different surfaces, the way shadows created depth and texture.



The fountain near the park's entrance had provided some decent shots—water droplets catching sunlight like scattered diamonds. The playground equipment had offered interesting geometric compositions, all angles and curves against the soft backdrop of autumn trees. But now he'd wandered into a more secluded area, where the maintained paths gave way to natural trails and the sounds of the city faded to a distant hum.

This spot was perfect. A small clearing where ancient trees formed a natural cathedral, their branches creating a canopy that filtered the morning sun into golden shafts of light. Fallen leaves carpeted the ground in shades of amber and crimson, and the emptiness of the space seemed to invite contemplation rather than demand activity.

Martin adjusted his position, trying to find the perfect angle to capture the interplay of light and shadow. The sun was positioned just right, enhancing the deserted backdrop like a natural work of art—exactly the kind of shot that photography websites called "environmental portraiture without the portrait."

He held the phone steady, waiting for that perfect moment when all the elements would align. Through the viewfinder, he could see dust motes dancing in the sunbeams, the gentle sway of branches creating subtle movement in the frame. His finger hovered over the shutter button, ready to capture the scene at precisely the right instant.

That's when something blurred across his field of vision.

Martin blinked hard, his concentration shattered. He lowered the phone and looked around the clearing, scanning the trees and undergrowth for whatever had moved. A bird, probably. The park was full of them—squirrels too. Nothing unusual about wildlife moving through their natural habitat.

He raised the phone again, reframing the shot. The light was still perfect, the composition exactly what he'd envisioned. He steadied his breathing, waiting for that moment of absolute stillness that would make the image sing.

The blur passed again, faster this time, close enough to the camera that it completely ruined the shot.

"Seriously?" Martin muttered, lowering his phone with a frustrated sigh. This time he'd definitely seen something—not a bird, too big and too fast, moving with purpose rather than the erratic flight pattern of most wildlife.

He stood up slowly, brushing dead leaves from his jeans as he scanned the clearing more carefully. The morning was still and quiet, with only the distant sounds of traffic and the occasional rustle of wind through the canopy above. Nothing seemed out of place, nothing that would explain what he'd seen.

Maybe his eyes were playing tricks on him. He'd been staring through the phone screen for hours, focusing intently on small details and subtle movements. Eye strain could cause all sorts of visual distortions.

But as he raised his phone for a third attempt, Martin couldn't shake the feeling that something was watching him. Not the casual observation of woodland creatures going about their business, but something more focused. More intentional.

The blur had moved like it was hunting.

BOARD Headquarters - Ten Minutes Later

"You sure about this?" Shiori asked, watching as Nate carefully placed the Garren Buckle into a specially designed carrying case. The diamond symbol caught the lab's fluorescent lights one last time before disappearing beneath protective foam padding.

"No," Nate replied honestly, clicking the case shut. "But like you said—beggars can't be choosers in times like these. And sitting around waiting for Japan to change their minds isn't exactly a productive strategy."

Shiori nodded, though her expression remained troubled. "One week. If you don't find anyone promising by then, bring it back and we'll... figure something else out."

"Deal." Nate slung the case over his shoulder, feeling the weight of both the technology and the responsibility it represented. "It's worth a shot, right? Maybe I'll get lucky."

"Maybe." Shiori turned back to her computer, already pulling up files for her next project. "Just... be careful who you approach with this. The wrong person getting hold of that buckle could be catastrophic."

Nate paused at the door. "Any worse than leaving the world's fate in the hands of one overworked teenager?"

"Point taken."

The parking garage beneath BOARD headquarters was quiet except for the distant hum of ventilation systems. Nate's motorcycle sat where he'd left it, the blue and silver paint job gleaming under the harsh fluorescent lights. He secured the case in the bike's storage compartment, making sure it was properly cushioned against road vibrations.

The engine roared to life with a satisfying growl, echoing off concrete walls as he guided the bike up the ramp and into the afternoon sunlight. The city stretched before him, full of people going about their daily lives, completely unaware that their continued existence depended on finding someone brave enough—or crazy enough—to strap on a piece of alien technology and fight monsters.

Where did you even begin looking for someone like that?

The park seemed like as good a place as any. Quiet, peaceful, a good spot to think while keeping his eyes open for potential candidates. Maybe he'd get lucky and spot someone who fit the psychological profile—someone with the right combination of courage, stability, and desperation that made for a compatible Rider.

If only he knew that luck was already at work, in ways he couldn't have imagined.

The Park - Same Time

Martin's footsteps quickened as he moved through the secluded clearing, the sensation of being watched growing stronger with each passing moment. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end, and he found himself snapping his head around at the slightest movement, only to find empty space where his peripheral vision had caught motion just seconds before.

"Get it together, Tubbs," he muttered to himself, adjusting his glasses with a nervous gesture. "You're just tired. Been at this too long."

He needed a break, maybe grab a soda from the vending machines near the playground and find a nice, populated area where paranoid thoughts couldn't take root. The isolated beauty of this spot had lost its appeal now that his imagination was running wild.

Martin rounded a corner where the path curved between two massive oak trees, their branches forming a natural archway overhead. He was looking down at his phone, reviewing the shots he'd taken, when he walked directly into something solid.

The impact sent him stumbling backward, his phone flying from his hands to land with a crack on the asphalt path. "Oh no, oh no—" he started to say, already mourning his broken screen, when he looked up to apologize to whoever he'd bumped into.

Hollow, amber eyes met his own through his thick glasses.

The thing standing before him was at least humanoid. But whatever humanity it might have possessed was buried beneath layers of armor and fur. Its skin had a golden, spotted pattern like a hunting cat, stretched over a frame that was simultaneously too thin and too muscular. Dark metal armor covered its vital areas, crude but effective plating that looked like it had been forged in some nightmare foundry.

The creature's face was the worst part. Blackened features warped beyond recognition, the jawline extended to accommodate rows of sharp teeth, the eyes nothing but hollow sockets filled with burning amber light. What might have been hair had become a wild mane of coarse fur, and when it smiled, Martin could see that its canine teeth had grown into proper fangs.

For a heartbeat that stretched into eternity, neither of them moved. Martin's mind struggled to process what he was seeing, every rational thought crashing against the impossible reality

standing before him. This couldn't be real. Things like this didn't exist. They were the stuff of movies and nightmares, not Saturday afternoons in suburban parks.

Then the creature's smile widened, revealing more of those predatory teeth.

With that, the spell broke. Martin's scream caught in his throat as pure terror flooded his system, but his body knew what to do even when his mind couldn't process it. He turned and ran.

Behind him, something that sounded like laughter echoed through the trees—low, harsh, and utterly without warmth. Then came the sound of claws scraping against bark and the heavy thud of something large and fast giving chase.

Martin ran harder than he'd ever run in his life, his sneakers slapping against the asphalt path as he fled through the park's winding trails. His glasses bounced on his nose, threatening to fall off with each jarring step, and his lungs burned as he gasped for air. Behind him, he could hear the creature gaining ground—not because it was faster, but because it wasn't limited to staying on the path.

Branches cracked as it moved through the underbrush, taking shortcuts that Martin couldn't risk. The sound was getting closer, accompanied by that terrible grinding laughter.

He burst out of the secluded area and into the main park, where families were enjoying picnics and children played on swing sets. Normal people living normal lives, completely unaware that something out of a horror movie was hunting through their peaceful afternoon.

Martin wanted to scream a warning, to tell everyone to run, but he didn't have the breath. All he could do was keep running and pray that whatever that thing was, it would lose interest if he could just reach somewhere public enough, safe enough, crowded enough.

The sound of pursuit grew closer.

And somewhere in the distance, the rumble of a motorcycle engine grew steadily louder.

Park Entrance - Parking Lot

Nate guided his motorcycle into an empty space near the park entrance, the engine's rumble fading to silence as he switched off the ignition. The afternoon sun felt warm on his shoulders as he dismounted and removed his helmet, running a hand through his hair to flatten where the padding had pressed it down.

He opened the bike's storage compartment and carefully lifted out the carrying case, its weight both familiar and foreign in his hands. With practiced efficiency, he placed his helmet in the compartment where the case had been, the space fitting perfectly—clearly this wasn't the first time he'd made such a swap.

The case's latches opened with quiet clicks, revealing the Garren Buckle nestled in its protective foam. The diamond symbol caught the afternoon light, seeming to pulse with its own inner radiance. Beside it lay the Category Ace of Diamonds card, its surface decorated with the intricate artwork of an armored rhinoceros beetle.

Nate nodded to himself, closing the case but keeping it readily accessible. Time to get to work—though he wasn't exactly looking forward to the process. Walking up to random strangers and asking them to touch a trading card was going to make him look like either a turbo nerd showing off his collection or some kind of weirdo with questionable social skills.

He'd faced death too many times to care much about his reputation at this point, but still. The questionable sanity of his current mission wasn't lost on him.

"Right," he muttered to himself, shouldering the case. "Time to find someone desperate enough to save the world."

### Several Blocks Away

Martin's legs burned as he sprinted across the street, his sneakers slapping against asphalt as he put distance between himself and the park. His lungs felt like they were on fire, each breath coming in sharp, shallow gasps that did nothing to satisfy his body's desperate need for oxygen.

He kept looking back over his shoulder, expecting to see those terrible amber eyes pursuing him, but the street behind him appeared empty. Normal Saturday afternoon traffic, a few pedestrians, nothing that remotely resembled the nightmare he'd encountered in the clearing.

But his gut told him otherwise. Something was still there—not visible, but present. Watching. Waiting. Taking its sweet time because it knew something Martin was only beginning to realize.

His body simply wasn't built for this kind of exertion. The photography club wasn't exactly known for its cardiovascular requirements, and Martin's idea of exercise usually involved climbing stairs to the second floor of the library. His legs were already shaking with fatigue, and despite his terror-fueled determination to keep running, his muscles had reached their limit.

He stumbled to a halt beside a brick wall, pressing one hand against the rough surface for support while the other clutched at his ribs where a sharp stitch had developed. His glasses had slipped down his nose, fogged with perspiration and panic, making the world around him appear blurry and distorted.

That's when he noticed where he was.

In his blind panic, he'd fled not toward the crowded areas of downtown or the safety of populated streets, but into what appeared to be an industrial district. The building beside him was some kind of warehouse, its windows dark and empty. Across the narrow street stood another similar structure, and ahead of him, the road dead-ended at what looked like the mouth of an alley.

A secluded street. No witnesses. No help.

The realization hit him like ice water in his veins—he hadn't been running away from that thing. He'd been led here. Herded like prey into exactly the kind of isolated location where screams wouldn't carry and bodies wouldn't be found until it was far too late.

Martin's breathing quickened, but not from exertion this time. Pure terror flooded his system as he understood just how thoroughly he'd been outmaneuvered by something that had probably been hunting far longer than he'd been alive.

The shadows between the buildings suddenly seemed deeper, more threatening. Every flicker of movement could be those amber eyes watching from the darkness. Every sound might be claws scraping against brick or concrete.

He was trapped, exhausted, and completely alone.

And somewhere in the gathering shadows, something began to laugh.

Heatherfield City Park - Main Area

Nate's twentieth attempt at recruiting went about as well as the previous nineteen.

"Trading cards? Seriously, dude?" The college-age guy in the basketball jersey looked at him like he'd just asked for spare change. "What am I, twelve?"

"It's not exactly—" Nate started, but the guy was already walking away, shaking his head and muttering something about "weird nerds" under his breath.

Nate sighed and closed the carrying case, the Garren Buckle disappearing once again beneath its protective foam. So far, his brilliant recruitment strategy had yielded exactly zero promising candidates. The few people curious enough to actually touch the Category Ace card had shown no reaction whatsoever—not even the faintest flicker of recognition or compatibility.

Most people, though, hadn't even gotten that far. Apparently approaching strangers with trading cards was the social equivalent of wearing a sign that said "Please avoid me, I'm clearly unstable."

He'd tried the joggers (too focused on their fitness routines to care), the dog walkers (more interested in cleaning up after their pets), the families having picnics (protective parents who clearly thought he was some kind of predator), and even a group of teenagers hanging out by the fountain (who'd laughed him off before he could even explain what he wanted).

Each rejection stung a little less than the last, but the accumulating weight of failure was starting to settle on his shoulders like a lead blanket. Maybe Shiori was right. Maybe this was hopeless. Maybe they really would have to wait for the main branch in Japan to send someone, no matter how long that might take.

Nate was so lost in his discouraged thoughts that he almost missed the phone entirely.

His foot caught something hard, sending it skittering across the asphalt path with a sharp scraping sound. He looked down, expecting to see a rock or maybe a discarded bottle cap, and instead found himself staring at a smartphone with a spider web of cracks radiating across its screen.

Someone had dropped their phone. Probably during a jog, or maybe it had fallen out of a pocket while they were playing with their kids. In a few hours, they'd realize it was missing and retrace their steps, hoping to find it before someone else did.

Nate picked up the device, turning it over in his hands. The case was black with some kind of geometric pattern, the kind of thing a teenager might choose. The damage looked recent—the cracks were clean and sharp, with no dust or debris worked into the fractures.

He pressed the power button, expecting the screen to remain dark. Phones with this kind of damage usually don't survive the impact that caused it. But to his surprise, the display flickered to life, revealing a wallpaper image that made his breath catch in his throat.

It was Irma Lair.

Not a picture of someone who looked like Irma, or some celebrity who shared her features. This was definitely, unmistakably Irma—caught in a candid moment, laughing at something off-camera, her brown hair catching sunlight in a way that made her look almost ethereal. The photo had the intimate quality of something taken by someone who cared about the subject, someone who'd waited for just the right moment to capture her genuine happiness.

Nate's mind raced through the implications. He knew this phone, had seen it before. The same kid he'd met in the courtyard the other day, taking pictures with quiet dedication until Nate had complimented his work. Martin had been so surprised by the genuine praise, so grateful for someone treating him like he mattered. And now, seeing Irma's face smiling up from the cracked screen, the pieces fell into place with disturbing clarity.

This wasn't just a dropped phone. This was evidence of something gone wrong.

Nate looked around the park with new eyes, scanning the area where he'd found the device. They were in the main recreational area, surrounded by families and joggers and all the normal weekend activities. But Martin wouldn't have been taking pictures here—too crowded, too public for the kind of candid shots he specialized in.

He would have gone somewhere quieter. Somewhere with better light and fewer distractions. Somewhere like...

The nature trails on the far side of the park. The secluded areas where the maintained paths gave way to natural woodland, where someone could spend hours perfecting their photography without interruption.

Exactly the kind of isolated location where bad things could happen to solitary teenagers.

Nate's grip tightened on the phone as a cold certainty settled in his chest. Something had happened to Martin Tubbs. Something that had caused him to drop his phone and flee—or worse, something that had prevented him from picking it up again.

The Garren Buckle suddenly felt heavier in its carrying case. Not just unused technology anymore, but potentially the only thing standing between life and death for someone who might need it desperately.

Without another thought, Nate broke into a run.

Industrial District - Several Blocks Away

Martin pressed his back against the brick wall of the warehouse, trying to make himself as small as possible in the narrow space between two dumpsters. His breathing was still ragged from his panicked flight, but he forced himself to keep it quiet, shallow breaths through his nose that wouldn't carry in the still air.

The laughter had stopped.

That should have been reassuring, but somehow it made everything worse. At least when he could hear that terrible grinding sound, he knew where the creature was. Now, in the oppressive silence of the industrial district, every shadow could be hiding those amber eyes, every sound could be claws scraping against concrete.

His phone. He'd lost his phone somewhere during his flight—probably back in the park when he'd collided with that... thing. Without it, he had no way to call for help, no way to contact anyone who might be wondering where he was on a Saturday afternoon.

Not that anyone would be wondering. His parents thought he was at the library, researching colleges he'd probably never be able to afford. His classmates didn't know he existed outside of school hours. The only person who might notice his absence was the librarian, and only if she happened to look for him at his usual table in the back corner.

Martin squeezed his eyes shut behind his cracked glasses, fighting off a wave of despair that threatened to overwhelm him. This couldn't be how it ended. Not here, not like this, hunted by something that shouldn't exist in a world where his biggest worry should be whether Irma Lair would ever notice he was alive.

Irma.

The thought of her brought a different kind of pain—not the sharp terror of imminent death, but the aching regret of things left unsaid, chances never taken, dreams that would die with him in this forgotten corner of the city. He'd spent so many hours watching her from across the



cafeteria, imagining what it would be like to actually talk to her, to make her laugh the way she did with her friends.

Now he'd never know.

A soft scuffling sound from the mouth of the alley froze his blood. Footsteps—or something trying to sound like footsteps. Too regular to be human, too deliberate to be accidental.

Then came the low, grinding purr, which echoed off the brick walls in such a way that it was impossible to identify its source.

Martin bit down on his knuckle to keep from whimpering. Through the crack between the dumpsters, he could see a shadow moving across the alley entrance—tall, wrong-shaped, definitely not human.

The shadow paused directly in front of Martin's hiding spot. For a terrifying moment, he was certain he'd been discovered—that any second, claws would tear through the metal dumpsters like tissue paper and drag him out into the open.

Instead, the footsteps continued past, moving deeper into the maze of alleys and loading docks that made up the industrial complex. But Martin knew it was just playing with him, the way cats played with mice before the kill. The creature knew exactly where he was. It was just drawing out the hunt, savoring his terror.

His hands shook as he tried to think of a way out. The alley had only one entrance, and the creature was somewhere between him and freedom. The walls on either side were too high to climb, topped with razor wire that would shred anyone foolish enough to try. Behind him, the alley dead-ended at a loading dock that offered no escape routes.

He was trapped.

That's when he heard something that made his heart leap with desperate hope—the distant rumble of a motorcycle engine, growing steadily louder.

Heatherfield City Park - Several Blocks Away

Nate's motorcycle roared to life as he raced along the park's perimeter road, following the network of paths that led to the more secluded areas where someone might go to take photographs in peace. The Garren Buckle case bounced against his back with each bump and turn, a constant reminder of what might be at stake.

Martin's phone was secured in his jacket pocket, its cracked screen a tangible piece of evidence that something had gone very wrong in what should have been a safe, familiar place. The wallpaper image of Irma kept flashing through his mind—not just because of what it revealed about Martin's feelings, but because of what it represented.

He slowed the bike as he reached the trailhead leading into the wooded area, scanning the ground for any signs of disturbance. There—scuff marks in the dirt, as if someone had been running. A few broken branches hanging at odd angles, like something large had pushed through them recently.

And underneath the normal sounds of wind and distant traffic, something else. Faint but unmistakable to someone trained to listen for it.

The sound of an Undead on the hunt.

Nate killed the engine and dismounted in one fluid motion, his hand automatically going to the Blay Buckle beneath his jacket. But he didn't transform immediately—the sound was moving away from the park, deeper into the city. Whatever was happening, it wasn't happening here anymore.

He knelt down, studying the disturbed earth more carefully. Two sets of tracks—one human, wearing sneakers, running hard enough to leave deep impressions in the soft soil. The other was harder to define, but definitely not human. Claws instead of feet, leaving gouges in the dirt that spoke of supernatural strength and speed.

The human tracks led away from the park in a pattern that suggested panic rather than purpose—someone running for their life rather than toward any specific destination. The creature's tracks followed at a more measured pace, taking shortcuts through areas the human couldn't navigate, always staying close enough to maintain the hunt.

Nate stood up, brushing dirt from his hands as he processed what he was seeing. This wasn't a random attack. This was a deliberate hunt, with the Undead driving its prey toward some predetermined location where it could finish the job without witnesses.

The industrial district. It had to be—the only area within running distance that would be deserted enough on a weekend to provide the privacy an Undead would want for feeding.

Nate remounted his motorcycle, the engine roaring back to life with a sense of urgency that matched his own rising alarm. As he raced through the city streets, weaving between traffic with practiced precision, one thought kept echoing in his mind.

*Please let me not be too late.*

Industrial District - The Hunt Intensifies

The motorcycle sound was getting closer, but Martin couldn't tell if that was good news or just another layer of nightmare to add to his situation. For all he knew, it was another one of those creatures, riding some mechanical beast that would make his current predicament look like a mild inconvenience.

But it was the only hope he had left.

Martin closed his eyes, trying to think past the terror that threatened to paralyze him completely. The creature was confident, relaxed even—it knew it had him trapped, knew that whoever was approaching couldn't possibly be a threat to something like it.

That confidence might be its weakness.

If Martin could time it right, if he could wait until the exact moment when the creature was distracted by the new arrival, he might have one chance to run. Not to escape—he was too exhausted for that, and the thing was too fast—but maybe to reach whoever was on that motorcycle before the creature could stop him.

It was a terrible plan with almost no chance of success. But it was the only plan he had.

The motorcycle sound grew louder, closer, until it seemed to be coming from just outside the alley entrance. Then, abruptly, it cut off—engine noise replaced by the sound of footsteps on concrete.

Human footsteps.

"Hello?" called a voice Martin recognized but couldn't immediately place. "Is someone there? I found your phone in the park."

His phone. Whoever this was had found his phone and somehow tracked him here. That should have been impossible, but Martin was far past questioning impossibilities at this point.

Martin heard the sound of claws scraping against brick, and suddenly he couldn't wait any longer. This person—whoever they were—was about to walk into a death trap because they'd tried to return a stranger's lost phone. He couldn't let that happen, not when it was his fault for being stupid enough to wander off alone in the first place.

He squeezed out from between the dumpsters and ran toward the mouth of the alley, his sneakers slapping against concrete as he sprinted toward the sound of that familiar voice.

"Run!" he screamed as loud as his hoarse throat would allow. "Get out of here! It's not human!"

The warning came out as more of a croak than a shout, but it was enough. At the alley entrance, he could see a figure in a dark jacket spinning toward the sound of his voice—and just in time to avoid the claws that raked through the air where his head had been a moment before.

Martin stumbled to a halt as he got his first clear look at his would-be rescuer, and his heart nearly stopped for an entirely different reason.

It was Nate Reid.

The same Nate Reid who'd complimented his photography the other day, who'd treated him like an actual person instead of invisible furniture, who was now facing down a nightmare creature with nothing but his bare hands and whatever reflexes had saved him from that first attack.

"Martin!" Nate called out, relief evident in his voice even as he backed away from the advancing Undead. "Stay behind me!"

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The Undead tilted its head at the two boys, those hollow amber eyes studying them with predatory intelligence. Of all the creatures Nate had to encounter again, it had to be the Jaguar Undead—the same beast that had nearly killed him in the tunnels, the same nightmare that had left scars both visible and hidden.

Nate's hand moved instinctively to his jacket, fingers finding the familiar weight of his Buckle. But the Jaguar Undead had been watching, waiting for exactly this moment. The creature moved with that same impossible speed Nate remembered, a blur of spotted fur and dark metal that closed the distance between them before he could even begin to draw the transformation device.

Claws knocked the Blay Buckle from his grasp, sending it clattering across the concrete to land somewhere in the shadows between the dumpsters. Before Nate could react, before he could even think to dodge, steel-strong fingers wrapped around his arm with crushing force.

Recognition flickered in those burning amber eyes. This wasn't just any prey—this was the boy who had managed to wound it, the one who had denied it victory in their last encounter. The creature's grip tightened deliberately, slowly, savoring the moment as understanding and spite guided its actions.

Nate's scream echoed off the brick walls of the alley, raw and desperate as bones ground together under pressure that could easily snap his arm like a twig. He kicked at the creature's armored legs, threw wild punches with his free hand, tried everything he could think of to break free, but it was like fighting a statue made of steel and malice.

The Jaguar Undead's smile widened, revealing those terrible fangs as it began to squeeze harder.

That's when something incredible happened.

Martin Tubbs—quiet, invisible Martin who'd spent his entire life avoiding confrontation—spotted a length of steel pipe lying near one of the loading dock doors. Without thinking, without considering the impossibility of what he was attempting, he grabbed the makeshift weapon and charged.

"Let him go!" Martin shouted, his voice cracking with terror and determination as he swung the pipe at the creature's head with every ounce of strength he possessed.

The Jaguar Undead's response was almost casual. It rolled its eyes with the dismissive irritation of someone being bothered by a mosquito, then backhanded Martin with its free arm—not even bothering to release its grip on Nate.

The bladed gauntlet whistled through the air, catching Martin across the face with surgical precision. His glasses split in two, the broken pieces falling to the concrete as a thin line of blood appeared across the bridge of his nose. The impact sent him spinning, his feet tangling together as he crashed into the brick wall behind him.

But Martin Tubbs had just done something that would echo through both their lives: he had tried to save someone, despite being terrified, despite having no chance of success, despite everything logical telling him to run.

And in that moment of courage—brief, desperate, probably doomed—the Garren Buckle in Nate's fallen case began to pulse with a soft, diamond-bright light.

Nate saw it through his tears of pain, that subtle glow emanating from the carrying case that had spilled open when he'd been grabbed. The Category Ace of Diamonds card lay beside the buckle, both items somehow closer to Martin than they had been moments before.

"Martin!" Nate gasped between waves of agony. "The case! The buckle!"

Martin blinked hard, trying to focus through his pain and the disorientation of losing his glasses. Blood dripped from his nose onto his shirt, and the world had become a blur of shapes and shadows. He shook his head violently, trying to clear the ringing in his ears and the disorientation that came with losing his glasses. The world had become a watercolor painting left in the rain—all blurred edges and indistinct shapes that refused to resolve into anything meaningful. Blood continued to drip from his nose, warm drops pattering onto the concrete beneath him as he struggled to focus.

Through the haze of pain and confusion, he could make out two figures locked in what looked like a grotesque dance. The larger shape—that terrible creature with its golden spots and burning eyes—held the smaller one in what Martin's brain initially tried to interpret as an embrace. But then Nate's voice cut through the fog, high and desperate in a way that made Martin's stomach clench with horror.

"Martin!" The scream was raw, primal, the sound of someone trying not to break under agony that was rapidly becoming unbearable. "The case! Get the buckle!"

Martin blinked hard, trying to bring the scene into sharper focus. Even without his glasses, he could see the unnatural angle of Nate's arm where the creature held him, could see the way his body was rigid with the effort of not collapsing completely. And there—a wet, grinding sound that made Martin's own bones ache in sympathy.

The creature was breaking Nate's wrist. Slowly. Deliberately. Savoring every moment of it.

"Please!" Nate's voice cracked as another wave of agony wracked his body. His free hand clawed desperately at the creature's grip, leaving bloody scratches on armored hide that might as well have been made of steel. "I can't—I can't reach it! Martin, please!"

The panic in Nate's voice was infectious, cutting through Martin's shock like a blade. This wasn't just pain—this was terror. Real, bone-deep terror from someone who understood exactly how much worse things were about to get. If Nate died here, if whatever plan he'd been working on failed, then Martin would be next. And unlike Nate, he had no plan, no backup, no mysterious technology that might level the playing field.

Martin's vision cleared just enough to make out a dark shape on the ground several feet away—the carrying case that had spilled open when the creature grabbed Nate. Even through his damaged eyesight, he could see something glowing inside it with a soft, pulsing light that seemed to respond to the rhythm of his own thundering heartbeat.

The buckle. The thing Nate had been so desperate for him to reach.

Martin's rational mind tried to process what was being asked of him. Nate wanted him to grab some kind of device—probably a weapon, maybe a communication device to call for help. That made sense. That was logical. That was something he could understand and act upon.

But his gut told him it was something else entirely. Something that would change everything, something that would make him responsible for whatever came next. The way Nate had said "the buckle" with such specific urgency, the way that glow seemed to pulse in time with Martin's own fear—this wasn't just about grabbing a weapon.

This was about choosing to become something he'd never imagined he could be.

Another grinding sound, another choked scream from Nate, and Martin's internal debate shattered like his broken glasses. Whatever that device was, whatever it would do to him or ask of him, it couldn't possibly be worse than watching someone die because he was too scared to act.

Martin pushed himself up from the brick wall, ignoring the way his knees shook and his vision swam. Blood from his nose had started to congeal, making it harder to breathe, but he forced himself to focus on that pulsing glow in the distance.

"I'm coming," he whispered, more to himself than to Nate. Then, louder, his voice gaining strength from desperation: "Hold on, Nate! I'm coming!"

He stumbled forward across the uneven concrete, his hands outstretched to catch himself if he fell. The world remained stubbornly blurred, but that diamond-bright pulse was like a beacon drawing him forward step by uncertain step.

Behind him, the Jaguar Undead's grinding laughter echoed off the brick walls, the sound of something that found their struggle amusing rather than threatening.

Martin reached the spilled case and dropped to his knees beside it, his hands hovering over the scattered contents with sudden uncertainty. Up close, even through his damaged vision, he could make out the buckle with its diamond symbol, but it was the card lying beside it that seemed to pulse with an inner light—as if the artwork on its surface was somehow alive.

"Martin!" Nate's voice was weaker now, exhaustion and pain taking their toll. "The card! Touch the card!"

Another grinding sound, another choked gasp of agony, and Nate's voice became more desperate, words tumbling out between waves of pain. "Does—does the picture move? Tell me if it moves!"

Martin squinted at the card through his broken vision, trying to make sense of what Nate was asking. The artwork showed what looked like some kind of armored beetle, its surface decorated with intricate details that seemed to shift and writhe in the pulsing light. But that had to be an optical illusion, a trick of his damaged eyesight and the adrenaline flooding his system.

Didn't it?

Martin's hand shook as he reached toward the Category Ace of Diamonds. The moment his fingertips made contact with the card's surface, the world exploded into light and sensation that threatened to tear his consciousness apart at the seams.

The beetle on the card didn't just move—it roared to life with a sound like thunder trapped in crystal. The artwork became three-dimensional, the armored creature lifting itself from the flat surface as if emerging from a pool of liquid starlight. Its compound eyes fixed on Martin with an intelligence that was utterly alien yet somehow familiar, as if recognizing something in him that he didn't even know existed.

Images flooded his mind—not his own memories, but something else. Flashes of violence and carnage that made his stomach lurch. Creatures like the one currently torturing Nate, but hundreds of them, thousands, all fighting each other with savage desperation. Blood and ichor staining alien landscapes. The screams of the dying echoing across dimensions as immortal beings tore each other apart in an endless war with no winners, only survivors.

And then, cutting through the chaos of alien memories, came a voice—simple, direct, without pretense or philosophy.

*Power.*

That was all it offered. Not salvation, not heroism, not answers to his loneliness or dreams of mattering. Just raw, undiluted power. The strength to act when action was needed. The ability to fight back against things that wanted to hurt him and the people he cared about.

*Do you want it?*

Martin looked back at Nate, saw the way his friend's face had gone pale with shock and pain, saw the creature's claws beginning to dig deeper into his arm. In that moment, there was no choice at all.

"Yes," he whispered to the creature in the card.

Then, louder, with a voice that was somehow deeper and more certain than it had ever been: "YES!"

The card pulsed once with brilliant light, then went dormant in his hands. Martin blinked in confusion—was that it? Had something gone wrong?—when his eyes fell on the buckle lying beside the open case. As if guided by pure instinct, his hands moved without conscious thought, picking up the device and examining its sleek surface.

There—a small switch on the side, barely visible unless you knew to look for it. Martin's thumb found the mechanism and pulled, causing the buckle's diamond-shaped face to flip open with a quiet click, revealing an empty slot within that seemed perfectly sized for the card in his other hand.

"That's it," Nate gasped through gritted teeth, hope flickering in his voice despite the agony. "The card—put it in the slot!"

Martin slid the Category Ace of Diamonds into the receptacle, and immediately the buckle began to hum with an electronic tune that seemed to resonate in his bones. The melody was alien but somehow familiar, like half-remembered music from a dream.

The Jaguar Undead's head snapped around at the sound, its burning amber eyes widening with something that might have been recognition—or fear. It could sense the power awakening in the device, could feel the presence of another of its kind stirring to life within the sealed card.

"Put it on," Nate managed to say, his voice barely above a whisper. "On your stomach—the belt!"

Martin pressed the buckle against his midsection, and green segments immediately shot out from either side, wrapping around his waist with mechanical precision. The belt sealed itself with an audible click, the weight of it both foreign and strangely natural against his body.

The humming grew louder.

Martin took a shuddering breath, and somehow—impossibly—he knew exactly what to do next. His left arm rose slowly, extending outward as his hand clenched into a tight fist. The motion felt ritual, ceremonial, like the opening steps of a dance he'd always known but never performed.

Then his right hand moved in arc to the buckle's switch once more.



The Jaguar Undead released Nate with a snarl of fury, its predatory instincts screaming warnings as it recognized the threat building before it. The creature launched itself across the alley in a blur of spotted fur and dark metal, claws extended, desperate to stop the transformation before it could complete.

Martin's fingers made contact and pulled at the switch.

The buckle's face flipped back into its closed position, the diamond configuration gleaming gold in the industrial district's harsh light. An electronic voice boomed from the device, clear and commanding:

"TURN UP!"

Martin recoiled in panic as the Jaguar Undead barreled toward him, those terrible claws reaching for his throat. He was going to die—the transformation hadn't worked, he was still just Martin Tubbs, still helpless—

Energy erupted from the buckle like a thunderclap.

The blast caught the Jaguar Undead mid-leap, hurling it backward with enough force to crack the brick wall where it struck. The creature crumpled to the ground, stunned but not defeated, amber eyes blazing with rage and disbelief.

Martin stared in amazement as the energy didn't dissipate but instead coalesced into a shimmering wall that hung suspended in the air before him. The barrier rippled with blue and white light, and within its translucent surface, he could make out the figure from the card—the armored beetle, now life-sized and beckoning him forward with intricate, articulated limbs.

*Come*, whispered the voice in his mind. *Accept what you have chosen*.

Martin took a tentative step toward the energy wall, then another. The light grew brighter as he approached, the beetle-figure becoming more defined, more real. He could see every detail of its armored carapace now, every joint and plate rendered in perfect clarity.

With a deep breath that tasted of ozone and possibility, Martin stepped through the barrier.

The sensation was indescribable—like being embraced by lightning, like having molten metal poured over his skin, like dying and being reborn in the same instant. He felt his body changing, expanding, becoming something greater than the sum of its parts. Armor flowed over his limbs like liquid mercury, solidifying into plates of burnished red and silver. His vision sharpened behind the emerald lenses of his helmet, the world suddenly crystal clear despite the loss of his broken glasses.

When the light faded, Martin Tubbs was gone.

In his place stood Kamen Rider Garren, armored warrior of the diamond suit, his beetle-inspired helmet gleaming in the afternoon sun. The transformation was complete, and for the first time in his life, Martin felt truly powerful.

He flexed his gauntleted hands, marveling at the strength that flowed through his enhanced muscles, then turned to face the Jaguar Undead as it struggled to its feet.

"My turn," he said, his voice electronically modulated but unmistakably his own.

The Jaguar Undead released an enraged roar that echoed off the brick walls, its pride wounded and its fury absolute. It would not be humiliated again—not by another human with their stolen power, not in front of prey it had marked for death.

The creature began to run.

Not toward Martin this time, but in a wide circle around the confined space of the alley. Its speed was incredible, turning it into nothing more than a blur of golden spots and dark metal that ricocheted off walls and dumpsters with supernatural agility. The pattern was hypnotic, disorienting—a predator's tactic designed to confuse prey before the killing strike.

Martin spun frantically, trying to track the creature's movement, but his enhanced vision could barely follow the streak of motion that seemed to be everywhere at once. The Jaguar Undead was testing him, probing for weaknesses, waiting for the perfect moment to strike from his blind spot.

That moment came sooner than Martin expected.

Claws raked across his armored back, sending a shower of sparks flying as the creature's supernatural strength found gaps in his protection. Martin screamed—not from physical pain, but from the sheer overwhelming force that his armor could only partially absorb. The impact sent him stumbling forward, and before he could recover, another strike caught him across the ribs.

More sparks. More crushing force that made his bones ache despite the armor's protection.

"Martin!" Nate's voice cut through the chaos as adrenaline helped him struggle to his feet despite his injured wrist. "Try to track it! Look for patterns!"

Martin gritted his teeth, forcing himself to focus through the pain and disorientation. The creature was fast—impossibly fast—but it wasn't random. There was method to its circular assault, predictable points where it had to touch down, brief moments where it committed to a trajectory before banking into the next turn.

His hand moved instinctively to his hip, his fingers closing around something he somehow knew would be there—the Garren Rouzer, a weapon that felt both alien and perfectly natural in his

grip. The device was sleek and angular, its design reminiscent of both a futuristic firearm and an ancient crossbow.

Martin raised the weapon, tracking the blur's movement as his enhanced reflexes began to adjust to the Jaguar Undead's speed. There—a corner where the creature had to slow slightly to change direction, a split second where its path became predictable.

All those hours of photography had taught him to wait for the perfect shot, to anticipate the exact moment when all elements aligned. His finger found the trigger just as the Jaguar Undead reached the predicted point.

The Rouzer discharged with a sound like thunder, its energy blast catching the creature square in the chest and sending it tumbling across the concrete in a tangle of limbs and armor. The Jaguar Undead crashed into a dumpster with enough force to dent the metal, finally brought to a halt after what felt like an eternity of relentless assault.

Martin kept the weapon trained on the creature as it slowly picked itself up, its amber eyes now filled with something that looked almost like respect alongside the rage.

"Lucky shot," Martin muttered, though he couldn't hide the satisfaction in his electronically modulated voice. For the first time since this nightmare began, he felt like he might actually have a chance.

But Nate wasn't about to leave him fighting alone.

Despite the throbbing agony in his injured wrist, Nate scrambled across the concrete toward where his Blay Buckle had fallen. His fingers found the familiar weight of the device, and with his good hand, he quickly drew out his own Category Ace—the card that had become as much a part of him as his own heartbeat over the past two years.

The Ace of Spades slid into the buckle's slot with a satisfying click, and Nate pressed the device against his stomach. Red segments immediately shot out from either side, wrapping around his waist with mechanical precision before locking into place. The familiar weight of the transformation belt settled against his ribs like an old friend.

His wrist screamed in protest, but Nate gritted his teeth and pushed the pain aside. This ended now.

"Henshin!" he shouted, his voice echoing off the alley walls as his thumb found the buckle's switch.

The face flipped from the card configuration to display the golden spade symbol, and immediately the device responded with its electronic cry: **"TURN UP!"**

Blue and white energy erupted from the belt like a controlled explosion, forming the familiar barrier that shimmered in the air before him. Without hesitation, Nate sprinted toward the energy

wall at full speed, his injured arm tucked against his chest as he threw himself into the transformative light.

The sensation hit him like coming home—that indescribable feeling of power and purpose flowing through his enhanced body as armor materialized around his limbs. His vision sharpened behind the red lenses of his helmet, and when he emerged from the energy wall, Kamen Rider Blade stood ready for battle.

The pain in his wrist was still there, muted but persistent beneath the armor's protection, but it no longer mattered. He was whole again, complete, the warrior he'd been trained to be.

Two Riders now stood in the industrial alley, their armor gleaming in the afternoon light as they faced down the creature that had terrorized them both. For the first time since the Jaguar Undead had appeared, the odds felt even.

The Jaguar Undead hauled itself upright from the twisted wreckage of the dumpster, dark ichor seeping from the wounds Martin's energy blast had torn through its armored hide. But instead of retreating, instead of showing any hint of self-preservation, the creature's amber eyes blazed with an intensity that spoke of pure, undiluted fury.

It had been humiliated once by the blue-armored Rider. Now it faced two of them—two humans wearing the stolen power of its fallen kin, standing together in defiance of its ancient authority. The sight ignited something primal in the creature's consciousness, a rage that transcended mere hunger or territorial instinct.

The Jaguar Undead's roar split the air like a physical force, echoing off the brick walls with such violence that dust rained down from the fire escapes overhead. Then it launched itself forward with that same impossible speed, claws extended and gleaming with malevolent intent, determined to tear both Riders apart before they could coordinate their attack.

But this time, they were ready.

"Martin!" Nate's electronically modulated voice cut through the chaos with practiced authority. "Suppressive fire! Keep it off balance!"

Without hesitation, Martin raised the Garren Rouzer and began tracking the creature's erratic movement patterns. His enhanced reflexes were already adapting to the Jaguar Undead's speed, his photographer's instincts translating seamlessly into combat awareness. Shot after shot rang out, each energy blast forcing the creature to alter its trajectory, disrupting its rhythm and preventing it from building the momentum it needed for a killing strike.

While Martin kept the Undead harassed and disoriented, Nate drew the Blay Rouzer from his hip with fluid precision. The weapon's blade caught what little light filtered into the alley, its edge gleaming with lethal promise as he fanned out the card compartment built into the crossguard.

His fingers found the Kick Locust card without conscious thought—muscle memory born of countless battles guiding his movements. The green and black artwork seemed to pulse with contained energy as he drew it from its slot, the image of the powerful insectoid creature almost seeming to move within the confines of the card's surface.

With practiced efficiency, Nate scanned the card across the Blay Rouzer's crossguard. The moment the artwork passed through the reader, the card began to dissolve into pure energy—streams of green and gold light that flowed into Nate's armored chest like liquid fire.

The power hit his system like a controlled explosion, the sealed consciousness of the Kick Locust Undead merging temporarily with his own. He could feel its strength, its supernatural agility, its devastating kicking power flowing through his enhanced muscles and converging in his right leg until the limb fairly crackled with contained force.

Nate planted the Blay Rouzer point-first into the concrete with enough force that the blade sank several inches deep, the weapon standing rigid and ready to serve as his launching platform. His red compound eyes tracked the Jaguar Undead's increasingly frantic movements as Martin's continued suppressive fire kept it from establishing any coherent attack pattern.

"Keep firing!" Nate ordered, his voice tight with concentration as he calculated angles and trajectories with mechanical precision. "I need three more seconds!"

Martin's next shot caught the Jaguar Undead square in the shoulder, spinning it around and forcing it to stumble. For just a moment, its wild movement became predictable—a brief window of opportunity that was exactly what Nate had been waiting for.

He leaped upward with enhanced strength, his right foot finding the Blay Rouzer's pommel and using it as a springboard to launch himself even higher. The Kick Locust's power surged through his leg like contained lightning as he reached the apex of his jump, green energy crackling visibly around his armored boot.

Time seemed to slow as Nate descended toward his target, gravity and supernatural force combining to create a strike that could shatter steel. The Jaguar Undead looked up just in time to see death falling toward it—a blur of blue and silver armor with one foot blazing like a fallen star.

The impact was devastating.

Nate's powered kick connected squarely with the creature's skull, driving it into the concrete with such tremendous force that the ground cracked in a spider-web pattern radiating outward from the point of impact. The Jaguar Undead's roar cut off mid-scream as it was buried in a crater of its own making, dust and debris exploding upward in a choking cloud.

For a moment, the alley fell silent except for the sound of settling rubble and the electronic hum of the Riders' armor systems. Steam rose from the crater where Nate stood, the residual energy of the Kick Locust's power still crackling around his right leg as he surveyed the destruction.

The Jaguar Undead lay motionless at the bottom of the crater, its amber eyes dim and unfocused. Dark ichor pooled around its shattered form, a testament to the overwhelming power that had finally brought it low.

Then, it happened.

The Jaguar Undead's buckle—a twisted piece of ancient metal shaped like two serpents consuming each other in an endless cycle of destruction—split open with a crack that rang throughout the alley. The sound was music to Nate's ears, a familiar symphony he'd heard the few times he had sealed his own Undead and the Ace of Diamonds. It meant victory. It meant survival. It meant one less monster stalking through the world, hunting innocent people.

Without hesitation, Nate once again fanned out the card compartment and drew out a Common Blank card, its surface pristine white except for the ornate golden frame with interlocking chains that symbolized it for sealing. He'd performed this ritual enough times that the motions were automatic—muscle memory born of battles and hard-won victories.

He dropped the card onto the downed creature's chest.

The moment the blank card made contact with the Jaguar Undead's armored hide, its body began to glow with a sickly green light that pulsed in rhythm with some alien heartbeat. The luminescence spread outward from the point of contact, racing across the creature's spotted fur and dark metal armor like living fire.

Martin watched in stunned fascination as the monster that had terrorized them—this impossible thing with its burning amber eyes and predatory grace—began to dissolve. Not into ash or dust like something from a movie, but into streams of emerald energy that flowed inexorably toward the small card lying on its chest.

The Jaguar Undead's form grew translucent, then transparent, as piece by piece it was drawn into what looked like nothing more than an ordinary playing card. Its gauntleted blades were the last to disappear, those terrible weapons fading into wisps of green light that swirled once around the card before being absorbed completely.

Martin had seen impossible things today—his own transformation into an armored warrior, creatures that shouldn't exist stalking through familiar streets. But this was something else entirely. This was magic disguised as technology, or perhaps technology so advanced it might as well be magic. The fundamental laws of physics were being rewritten by a piece of cardboard and alien engineering.

The card lifted from the cracked concrete where the Jaguar Undead had fallen, spinning slowly in the air as the last traces of green energy swirled around it like a miniature aurora. Then it shot across the alley in a perfect arc, sailing directly toward Blade's outstretched gauntlet.

Nate caught it with practiced ease despite the throbbing ache in his injured wrist, his enhanced reflexes making the motion look effortless. He held the card up to examine it, and even through the red compound lenses of his helmet, Martin could see his satisfaction.

The blank surface was blank no longer. Where moments before there had been nothing but empty space within the golden frame, now a shimmering card materialized, its metallic surface gleaming. The intricate artwork depicted the very creature they'd just defeated, yet altered to no longer resemble its once humanoid form. Instead, it was rendered into a mechanical jaguar, its golden, sleek frame adorned with circular turbines on its back, a hint of menacing power in its stance. It was as if the creature's essence had been distilled into this compact, elegant, and dangerous form.

But it wasn't just artwork. Martin could swear he saw the image move slightly, as if the creature within was pacing back and forth in its cardboard prison, forever trapped but somehow still alive within the confines of the card.

At the bottom of the card, an elegant script proclaimed its identity: *Mach Jaguar - Category Nine of Spades*.

A Category Nine. A powerful Undead, one of the stronger specimens he'd encountered since starting his mission. The fact that he—that *they*—had defeated it was no small victory. With Martin's help, they'd accomplished something that might have been impossible alone.

Nate lowered the card and turned to face his unlikely partner. Martin stood frozen in his red and silver armor, his beetle-inspired helmet tilted slightly as if he was still trying to process what he'd just witnessed. The Garren Rouzer hung loose in his grip, temporarily forgotten as his mind struggled to integrate the reality he had just lived through with everything he'd thought he knew about the world.

The silence stretched between them, heavy with unspoken questions and the weight of revelations that would change everything. Finally, with a tired sigh that his helmet's speakers couldn't quite mask, Nate spoke:

"You're gonna want to come with me."

The words hung in the air, both a challenge and an invitation. Because there was no going back now. Martin had seen too much, done too much, *become* too much to simply return to his old life of photography and unrequited crushes. The Garren Buckle had chosen him, and that choice came with responsibilities that would reshape his entire existence.

Whether he was ready or not, Martin Tubbs had just become a soldier in a war most people didn't even know existed.

And judging by the way he was still staring at the card in Nate's hand—at the imprisoned monster that had nearly killed them both—the reality of that transformation was only beginning to sink in.

## Two Days Later - After School

The afternoon sun cast long shadows across Sheffield Institute's Gothic courtyard as six girls made their way toward the parking lot. The usual post-school chatter felt subdued today, weighed down by an absence that had become increasingly noticeable.

"Has anyone heard from Nate?" Will asked, adjusting her red jacket as they walked past the weathered stone benches. "He's been out for two days now."

Irma shrugged, though her expression showed more concern than her casual gesture suggested. "Maybe he caught something? Going from tropical missions to sitting in algebra class can't be great for your immune system."

"Or maybe he's on another assignment," Hay Lin offered, her voice carrying the kind of forced optimism that meant she was trying to convince herself as much as anyone else. "You know how BOARD works. Something could have come up."

Cornelia's heels clicked against the stone path with sharp precision, each step betraying her irritation. "They could at least tell us when they're pulling him out of school. We're supposed to be protecting Elyon, remember? Kind of hard to coordinate when half our backup disappears without notice."

Taranee pushed her glasses up her nose, a nervous gesture that had become more frequent since the tunnel incident. "I'm sure Chief Karasuma has his reasons. He wouldn't pull Nate unless it was important."

Elyon walked quietly beside them, her expression troubled in a way that went beyond simple worry for a friend. The past two days had felt strangely hollow, like something essential was missing from the normal rhythm of her life. She'd caught herself looking for his familiar figure in the hallways, listening for his voice in the cafeteria, and the constant disappointment was wearing on her more than she cared to admit.

As they reached the street corner where they usually parted ways, Will's phone buzzed with an incoming text. She glanced at the screen, then stopped walking entirely.

"What is it?" Taranee asked, noticing the sudden change in her posture.

Will held up her phone so the others could see the message displayed on the screen: "Report to HQ immediately after school. All five of you. - Chief Karasuma"

The girls exchanged glances, a mixture of anticipation and apprehension flickering across their faces. An emergency summons to BOARD headquarters could mean anything—new intelligence about Prince Phobos, another dimensional threat, or worst of all, news about Nate that required their immediate attention.

"Well," Irma said with forced lightness, "looks like we're about to get our answers."



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## BOARD Headquarters - Chief Karasuma's Office

The walk to Chief Karasuma's office felt longer than usual, filled with the kind of tense silence that came from too many unanswered questions. When they arrived by his familiar door, the girls entered to find the Chief seated behind his desk, his expression as carefully neutral as always, but something in his posture suggested the weight of recent events.

"Please, sit down," he said, gesturing toward the chairs arranged in a semicircle before his desk. His tone was professional but not unkind, the voice of someone about to deliver news that was neither entirely good nor entirely bad.

The girls settled into their seats, Will and Cornelia flanking the group while Elyon took the center chair, unconsciously placing herself in the position where she could see everyone's reactions. The arrangement felt formal, official—more like a briefing than a casual update.

"I assume you're wondering about Nate's absence from school," Chief Karasuma began without preamble, his hands clasped on the desk before him.

"Is he okay?" Will asked immediately. "He's been gone for two days without any explanation."

Chief Karasuma was quiet for a moment, seeming to choose his words carefully. "Two days ago, Nate encountered the Jaguar Undead in the city."

The effect on the girls was immediate and dramatic. Hay Lin's hand flew to her mouth, stifling a gasp. Taranee went rigid in her chair, her knuckles white as she gripped the armrests. Cornelia's face drained of color, while Irma let out a string of creative profanity that would have made her mother reach for the soap.

But it was Elyon's reaction that was the most telling. She didn't gasp or curse or freeze. Instead, she simply closed her eyes and took a deep, shuddering breath, as if she'd been expecting this news and dreading it in equal measure.

"He fought that thing alone?" Will's voice cracked slightly, the memory of their own desperate battle against the creature making her stomach clench with horror. They had barely survived their encounter with five people and their Guardian powers. The thought of Nate facing it by himself was almost unbearable.

"Not alone," Chief Karasuma said, and something in his tone suggested there was more to the story than a simple combat report. "He had help. Unexpected help."

Before any of the girls could ask what he meant by that, the office door opened with a quiet click. They all turned toward the sound, and the collective sigh of relief that escaped them was audible.

Nate stood in the doorway, very much alive and apparently in one piece. He was wearing his usual black and white letterman jacket over dark jeans, his hair slightly mussed as if he'd been running his fingers through it—a nervous habit they'd all learned to recognize. But it was his right hand that immediately drew their attention.

His wrist was encased in a pristine white cast that extended from his knuckles to halfway up his forearm, the stark medical device a jarring contrast to his otherwise normal appearance. The cast was secured with a sling that kept his arm positioned across his chest, and even from across the room, they could see the careful way he moved to avoid jarring the injury.

The girls converged on him like a small hurricane.

"Nate!" Hay Lin practically bounced out of her chair, her relief so palpable it was infectious.

"What happened to your hand?" Cornelia demanded, her voice sharp with worry disguised as irritation.

"Are you okay?" Will asked, her eyes scanning him for any other injuries they might have missed.

"How bad is it?" Taranee added, her analytical mind already trying to assess the extent of the damage.

Elyon remained in her chair, but her eyes never left his face, searching for signs of pain or trauma that he might be trying to hide from them.

Nate raised his left hand in a gesture that was both greeting and request for calm, a tired smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Easy, easy," he said, his voice carrying the kind of exhaustion that came from explaining the same story multiple times. "I'm fine. Really."

"That cast says otherwise," Irma pointed out, though her usual sarcasm was tempered by genuine concern.

"Just a sprained wrist," Nate replied, flexing the fingers that protruded from the cast to demonstrate their mobility. "Should be good as new in a few weeks. The doctor was being overly cautious."

"A few weeks?" Elyon spoke for the first time since his arrival, her voice quiet but carrying an undercurrent of something that might have been fear. "How bad was the fight?"

Nate's smile faltered slightly as he met her eyes, and for a moment, the careful mask of reassurance slipped just enough to reveal the memory of genuine terror. "Bad enough," he admitted. "But it's over now. The Jaguar Undead is sealed."

To prove his point, he used his uninjured left hand to reach into his jacket pocket and withdraw a playing card. He held the card up so they could all see it clearly, and the collective intake of breath was audible.

The Category Nine of Spades—Mach Jaguar. The artwork was breathtaking in its detail and somehow terrible in its beauty. Where the creature they remembered had been a twisted, humanoid nightmare of spotted fur and burning eyes, the card depicted something altogether different. The Mach Jaguar was sleek and mechanical, its golden frame suggesting both elegance and lethal power. Circular turbines adorned its back, hints of incredible speed and devastating force contained within the stylized form.

Hay Lin reached out tentatively, and Nate placed the card in her outstretched palm with careful reverence. She held it up to the light, studying the intricate artwork with the appreciation of someone who understood the skill required to create such detailed work.

"I can't believe it," she whispered, turning the card slowly to catch different angles of the light. "This used to be that... thing? That monster from the tunnels?"

"The sealing process contains them," Nate explained, settling into the empty chair beside Elyon with the careful movements of someone favoring an injury. "Traps their consciousness and power within the card structure. What we fought—that's what it actually was."

Hay Lin continued to examine the card, her artistic eye-catching details the others might miss. "Whoa, this is so cool," she said, and there was wonder in her voice. "Look at those jet things on its back! I can't believe this used to be that scary monster thing."

"The cards show an artistic representation," Chief Karasuma interjected from behind his desk. "The imagery reflects their abilities and nature, but it's stylized. The actual Undead—what you fought—that was its true form. In card form, their power can be harnessed and used by the Rider who sealed them."

Cornelia frowned, her analytical mind working through the implications. "So now you can use its power?"

Nate nodded, though his expression remained serious. "The cards retain the abilities of the original Undead, but in a controlled form. The Mach Jaguar gives me access to incredible speed—much faster than anything I could achieve normally."

"That's... actually pretty amazing," Irma admitted, though she still looked skeptical. "But it doesn't explain how you managed to beat that thing in the first place. Last time, it took all of us just to put a dent on that thing."

Nate's expression grew more complex, and he exchanged a meaningful look with Chief Karasuma before responding. "Like the Chief said—I had help. Someone else was there, someone who..."

He paused, seeming to search for the right words to explain something that was still difficult to believe.

"Someone who what?" Will prompted gently, sensing there was more to this story than a simple combat report.

Nate took a deep breath, his left hand unconsciously moving to his jacket where they all knew his Blay Buckle rested. "Someone who became the second Rider."

The silence that followed this announcement was profound, broken only by the soft hum of the office's ventilation system and the distant sounds of BOARD personnel going about their duties in the corridors beyond.

Finally, Elyon found her voice. "There's another person like you now? Another... Kamen Rider?"

As if on cue, Chief Karasuma's office door once again clicked open. All eyes turned toward the entrance, expecting perhaps one of the Chief's subordinates with an urgent report or maybe Shiori with technical updates.

Instead, a familiar figure stepped through the doorway—head bowed low, one hand scratching nervously at the back of his neck in a gesture of pure, unadulterated timidity. The boy wore his usual outfit of slightly rumpled clothes that suggested he'd dressed in a hurry, and his blonde hair stuck up at odd angles only lending to that possibility.

"H-Hey, girls," Martin Tubbs greeted awkwardly, his voice cracking slightly on the second word.

The effect was immediate and total. Every conversation, every thought, every concern about Nate's injury and the sealed Undead card evaporated as six pairs of eyes fixed on the last person any of them had expected to see in BOARD headquarters.

The silence stretched for what felt like an eternity, broken only by the soft hum of the ventilation system and Martin's nervous shuffling by the door. Then, in a voice so flat it could have been used to calibrate measuring instruments, Irma spoke:

"Martin?"

The single word carried a world of confusion, disbelief, and dawning horror as the implications began to sink in. This was Martin Tubbs—quiet, invisible Martin who took pictures of her from across the cafeteria when he thought no one was looking. Martin who snorted when he laughed and called her by ridiculous nicknames that made her want to hide under her desk.

Martin's expression shifted subtly at the sound of her voice. Not surprise exactly—he'd clearly been expecting to see her here—but something closer to disbelief that this was actually happening. When Nate had told him about the girls, about their involvement with BOARD and their supernatural abilities, part of him had assumed it was some kind of elaborate practical joke.

But here they were, all five of them, sitting in chairs like they belonged here. Like this was normal for them.

"H-Hey, Irma," he replied, his nervousness making his voice higher than usual. "N-Nice to see you here."

The familiar snorting laugh that had haunted Irma's cafeteria experiences escaped him, echoing off the office walls with uncomfortable clarity. The sound seemed to snap the other girls out of their stunned paralysis, and slowly, like flowers turning toward the sun, all heads swiveled toward Nate.

Irma's expression was particularly eloquent—a mixture of dawning comprehension, mounting dread, and the kind of desperate hope that said *please tell me this isn't what I think it is*.

Reading her thoughts as clearly as if she'd spoken them aloud, Nate made a small gesture with his uninjured left hand, the movement somehow managing to be both apologetic and matter-of-fact.

"Guys," he said, his voice carrying the tone of someone delivering news that was simultaneously wonderful and terrible, "I'd like to introduce you to Martin Tubbs, primed and tested as BOARD's second Kamen Rider."

The words hung in the air like a physical presence, each syllable settling into the collective consciousness of the assembled girls with the weight of a small earthquake. Hearing himself introduced in such official terms, Martin straightened up noticeably, his shoulders squaring with something that might have been pride mixed with utter disbelief. Another snorting laugh escaped him—this one carrying notes of hysteria alongside his usual nervous energy.

He couldn't believe it. Two days ago, he'd been worried about whether he had enough courage to say hello to Irma in the hallway. Now he was apparently some kind of armored superhero who fought monsters with weapons that looked like they belonged in a science fiction movie.

The absurdity of it all was almost enough to make him laugh—or cry. He wasn't entirely sure which.

His gaze fixed on Irma, and something in his expression shifted. The usual timidity was still there, but underneath it was something new—a confidence born of having survived the impossible, of having discovered he was capable of far more than anyone (including himself) had ever imagined.

Martin wiggled his eyebrows at her with exaggerated charm, his voice taking on what he probably thought was a suave, flirtatious tone. "I guess this means we're going to be working together from now on, Monamoeba."

Another snorting laugh punctuated the statement, and in that moment, every worst-case scenario Irma had ever imagined about her high school experience crystallized into terrifying reality.

The reaction was immediate and devastating.

Irma's jaw dropped open so far it was a wonder her chin didn't hit the floor. Her eyes went wide behind her hair, and for a moment, she looked like someone who had just received news that the universe had decided to play the cruelest possible practical joke on her.

Then, with the kind of dramatic flair that would have made Shakespeare proud, she slid out of her chair and dropped to her knees on Chief Karasuma's office floor. Her face turned upward toward the ceiling tiles, her arms spread wide in a gesture of complete and utter despair.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

The scream echoed off the walls with such volume and anguish that it probably registered on seismic equipment three states away. It was the cry of someone whose worst nightmare had not only come true but had somehow been upgraded with additional features she hadn't even known were possible.

Hay Lin clapped her hands over her mouth, trying unsuccessfully to stifle the giggles that threatened to escape. Cornelia had gone very still, her expression caught somewhere between sympathy for Irma and barely contained amusement at the situation. Taranee was studying Martin with new interest, clearly reassessing everything she thought she knew about quiet classmates and hidden depths.

Will just looked tired—the expression of someone who had reached the point where new revelations were simply added to the ever-growing pile of impossible things she had to accept and move on from.

And Elyon... Elyon was watching Nate's face, noting the way his eyes crinkled slightly at the corners despite his attempt to maintain professional composure. There was affection there, real warmth for his unlikely partner. Whatever had happened during that battle, whatever had led to Martin becoming a Rider, it had forged a connection between them that went beyond simple mission parameters.

Chief Karasuma cleared his throat with the patient resignation of someone who had dealt with far stranger situations than dramatic teenagers having existential crises on his office floor.

"Miss Lair," he said mildly, "perhaps you could rejoin us at table level? We have a great deal to discuss, and I believe you'll find the briefing materials easier to read from a chair."

Irma's wailing gradually subsided into defeated whimpering as the reality of her situation began to sink in. She was going to be working with Martin Tubbs. Martin Tubbs was going to be

watching her back in combat situations. Martin Tubbs had somehow become a superhero while she wasn't paying attention.

The universe clearly had a very twisted sense of humor.

From his position near the door, Martin watched Irma's breakdown with a mixture of hurt and understanding. He'd known his feelings weren't reciprocated—had known it for years, really—but seeing her react to the prospect of working with him as if it were a fate worse than death still stung.

But he was a Kamen Rider now. He'd faced down a creature of nightmare and lived to tell about it. He'd discovered reserves of courage he hadn't known existed and power he'd never dreamed possible.

Maybe it was time to stop letting other people's opinions define his worth.

"Don't worry, Irma," he said, and his voice was gentler than she'd ever heard it. "I know this isn't what you wanted. But I promise I'll do my best not to let you down."

There was something in his tone—a quiet dignity, a strength that hadn't been there before—that made her pause in her dramatic despair. She looked up at him from her position on the floor, really looked at him, and for just a moment saw something she'd never noticed before.

Martin Tubbs wasn't just the awkward photography nerd with a hopeless crush anymore. There was something different about him now, something that spoke of battles fought and won, of impossible choices made and survived.

Maybe, just maybe, having him as a partner wouldn't be the end of the world after all.

But she wasn't ready to admit that yet. Not when the shock was still so fresh, not when her pride was still smarting from the cosmic joke that had been played on her expectations.

Instead, she allowed Will and Cornelia to help her back into her chair, shooting baleful looks at both Martin and Nate as if this were somehow all their fault.

"This is not how I imagined my day going," she muttered, slumping in her seat like someone who had just learned that all her life choices had led inexorably to this moment of cosmic irony.

Chief Karasuma waited patiently for the drama to subside, then gestured toward an empty chair near the wall. "Mr. Tubbs, please have a seat. I believe we have quite a bit of ground to cover, and everyone deserves to understand exactly what has transpired over the past forty-eight hours."

Martin made his way to the indicated chair, his movements less awkward than usual despite the magnitude of the situation. As he settled into his seat, he caught Nate's eye and received an

encouraging nod—the kind of gesture that spoke of shared experiences and mutual respect earned through trial by fire.

Whatever happened next, whatever challenges lay ahead, at least he wouldn't be facing them alone anymore. And maybe, just maybe, that would be enough.