

Chapter - The Price of Failure

The Throne Room of Meridian's Royal Palace

Purple flames danced in the ceremonial braziers, casting writhing shadows across stone walls that seemed to absorb light rather than reflect it. The air hung thick and oppressive, weighted with the kind of silence that precedes violence. Even the flames themselves seemed reluctant to crackle, burning with an unnatural quiet that made the throne room feel more like a tomb.

Prince Phobos sat motionless on his obsidian throne, fingers wrapped around the armrests with enough force to make the metal groan. His violet eyes burned with cold fire as he stared down at the pathetic figures kneeling below him. The only sound was the steady drip, drip, drip of blood hitting marble.

Cedric's usually pristine human form was a disaster of torn fabric and dark green blood. Deep gashes crisscrossed his back where the Jaguar Undead's claws had found their mark. Beside him, Vathek's massive frame trembled slightly as black ichor seeped from the chest wound that had nearly killed him. Neither dared to lift their heads.

The silence stretched until it became almost unbearable. Then Phobos spoke, his voice soft as silk and twice as deadly.

"Help me understand something." Each word dropped into the quiet like stones into still water. "My two most capable servants. Sent on what should have been a simple retrieval." His fingers drummed once against the armrest. "And you return looking like you've been mauled by your own prey. Empty-handed."

Cedric's forked tongue flicked across his lips. When he finally found his voice, it came out broken. "My lord... there's no excuse."

"No." Phobos's voice dropped even lower. "There isn't."

The admission seemed to echo in the vast chamber. Cedric's shoulders sagged as his pride finally crumbled. He'd been so certain Elyon would come willingly. So sure the Guardians were just children playing with powers they didn't understand.

Vathek's massive hands clenched against the cold marble. *How were we supposed to know that... thing existed in their world?* But he knew better than to voice such thoughts—explanations would only sound like excuses.

The temperature seemed to drop as Phobos rose from his throne, unfolding with predatory grace. His violet robes billowed as he descended the steps, each footfall echoing like a death knell.

"You let my sister slip through your fingers," he said, barely above a whisper yet somehow more menacing than any shout. "Fall directly into the Guardians' hands. The one scenario we've been working so carefully to avoid."

He stopped close enough that they could feel the chill radiating from his form. Then his composure cracked.

"The outcome that could destroy everything we've built!"

The words reverberated off stone walls with the force of absolute imperial rage. Both servants flinched.

Cedric's head bowed lower. "My lord, if you'd just let me—"

"Silence."

The word cracked like a whip. Cedric's mouth snapped shut as Phobos began pacing, movements sharp and agitated like a caged predator.

"Do you understand what this means?" Back to that deadly whisper. "Elyon has seen their true nature now. Witnessed their power firsthand. Any hope we had of her coming willingly—of embracing her heritage without question—may be lost."

He stopped abruptly, fixing his burning gaze on them.

"All because you were bested by what, exactly? Children and some unknown creature?"

Cedric remained silent for a long moment, struggling. The memory played through his mind—those terrible amber eyes, the speed that had made him feel helpless.

Finally, he lifted his head just enough to speak, voice hoarse. "My lord..." He swallowed hard. "It moved faster than anything I've encountered. Faster than anyone in Meridian." The words came reluctantly. "I've faced your elite guards, your most skilled warriors, creatures from our realm's deepest reaches. Nothing—nothing—prepared me for what we encountered."

Something in Cedric's tone—genuine bewilderment rather than excuse-making—seemed to pierce through Phobos's fury. The prince had returned to his throne, and now sat with one finger tapping rhythmically against the obsidian armrest. The sound echoed like a metronome counting down to judgment.

"Continue."

Cedric drew a shaking breath. "It said nothing, my lord. Not a single word. Yet it dismantled us like novices." His voice grew strained. "Every movement calculated and precise. The moment it detected us, it attacked with a ferocity I've never witnessed. As if..."

"As if what?"

"As if destroying us wasn't just its goal—it was its nature."

The tapping stopped. Phobos leaned forward slightly, studying his servant's face and reading the genuine terror there.

"Describe this creature."

Cedric's eyes closed briefly as he forced himself to recall the details. "Humanoid, but with feline features. Golden skin marked with spots like a hunting cat. The armor was crude but effective—dark metal plating over vitals." He gestured weakly at his wounded torso. "Gauntlets with retractable claws that extended into bladed weapons. The craftsmanship was... barbaric. Like something a mercenary company might commission."

At this description, something shifted in Phobos's expression. His violet eyes lit with barely perceptible recognition.

"A member of the resistance, perhaps?"

Both servants looked up. Cedric found his voice first. "Possible, my lord. Though if so, they have resources we weren't aware of."

Phobos fell silent, his hand moving to stroke his chin in contemplation. If the resistance now possessed warriors of such caliber...

After several long moments, he waved his hand dismissively, suddenly appearing tired of the conversation.

"Enough. Leave me. I have much to consider."

Both servants bowed as deeply as their injuries would allow; the movement triggered new waves of pain through their battered bodies. Neither of them dared to show weakness now. Slowly, they struggled to their feet: Vathek pushed himself up with his massive arms, while Cedric relied on what little remained of his serpentine grace.

Their journey to the enormous doors required them to strike a careful balance between maintaining their dignity and not collapsing. Each step echoed through the vast space until they finally reached the exit, leaving Prince Phobos alone with his darkening thoughts.

BOARD Headquarters - Chief Karasuma's Office

The fluorescent lights hummed softly overhead, casting harsh light over a scene that felt oddly domestic. The five Guardians sat scattered around Karasuma's office, each wrapped in thick blankets and clutching steaming mugs of hot chocolate. Their rain-soaked clothes had been traded for dry BOARD-issued sweats.

Karasuma moved quietly between them, checking on everyone. His usual professional demeanor had softened with genuine concern. "Take your time. There's no rush to debrief. You've all been through enough."

But it was Elyon who drew everyone's attention.

She sat slightly apart from the others, blanket draped over her shoulders, staring at nothing with vacant eyes. Her hands lay listlessly in her lap, fingers curled around a mug that had gone cold twenty minutes ago. She hadn't taken a sip.

Cornelia watched her best friend with growing concern, her own mug forgotten. Finally, she couldn't stand it anymore. Setting down her blanket, she moved to Elyon's side and gently draped her own covering over the girl's shoulders.

The gesture didn't even register.

Cornelia sighed softly, crouching beside her friend's chair. With infinite gentleness, she reached out and lifted Elyon's chin until their eyes met.

"Elyon, what happened back there? Why were you in those tunnels?"

For a moment, Elyon's vacant stare focused on Cornelia's face. But instead of relief or gratitude, her expression shifted into something unexpected—a scowl that made Cornelia's heart sink.

Elyon turned her face away, pulling back with obvious reluctance to engage.

The gesture left Cornelia bewildered, and she wasn't alone. The other girls exchanged confused glances.

Irma leaned forward, sarcasm edging her voice. "Okay, what's with the ice queen routine?"

Something broke in Elyon's carefully maintained composure. Her expression crumpled as tears began welling in her eyes. When she spoke, her voice was small and hurt.

"You know exactly why I was there."

More puzzled glances. The confusion was only deepening.

"Come again?" Irma asked, her sarcasm evaporating.

That seemed to be the breaking point. Elyon's frustration, held in check until now, suddenly exploded.

"You followed me!" Her voice cracked with emotion. "You were making sure I couldn't get away!"

Five jaws slowly fell open in perfect synchronization. They stared at their friend as if she'd just spoken in an alien language.

Taking their shocked silence as confirmation, Elyon's voice rose with vindication and pain. "I'm right, aren't I? That's exactly what you were doing—following me!"

Complete silence. The girls could only stare at Elyon in utter bewilderment.

Will was the first to find her voice, speaking slowly as if trying to solve an impossible puzzle. "Elyon... what are you talking about?"

The question seemed to ignite something explosive in Elyon. She snapped to her feet so quickly that both blankets fell to the floor, her untouched mug tumbling after them and shattering against the linoleum.

"Stop lying! Just stop it!"

Silence again. Irma, Cornelia, and Hay Lin could only stare at the girl who had been their best friend since elementary school—someone they'd shared secrets with, laughed with, cried with—now talking to them as if they were enemies.

They genuinely couldn't understand. Her accusations couldn't possibly be reconciled with what they'd just experienced—being called to help with an Undead sighting, nearly dying in that tunnel, watching Nate risk everything to protect them all. How could she think they'd followed her? Why would they?

Cornelia slowly rose to her full height, hurt and growing frustration mixing in her expression.

"What else are you going to tell me?" Elyon demanded, hysteria creeping in. "That you just happened to be—"

CRACK.

The sharp sound echoed throughout the office like a gunshot. Everyone recoiled as Elyon stood frozen, her head turned from the force of Cornelia's slap, a red handprint already blooming across her pale cheek.

For a moment, time suspended. Elyon's eyes were wide with stunned disbelief as she slowly registered the sting, her hand rising automatically to touch the welt. In all their years of friendship, she had never—not once—seen Cornelia raise a hand to anyone, let alone her.

Cornelia's expression had transformed completely. Gone was the confusion and hurt bewilderment. In its place was an uncharacteristically solemn intensity as she locked eyes with her best friend.

"Cut the crap so we can tell you our side." Each word was deliberate and clear. "Why we were really there. Why we were risking our lives. Why we were fighting that thing."

She stepped closer, never breaking eye contact.

"But if there's one thing—one thing—you need to know, this is the truth: The very last thing we wanted to find in that tunnel was our best friend pressed against a wall, scared out of her mind and helpless against some monster."

Complete silence except for Elyon's ragged breathing and the distant hum of fluorescent lights.

Will took a shaky breath. "Elyon, please... just listen. Let us explain what really happened."

She glanced at the others, drawing strength from their presence. "It's only been a few days since we awakened as Guardians. A few days since we learned we're basically magical warriors tasked with defending other realms separated by something called the Veil." Her voice grew stronger. "And only a few days that we knew anything about Meridian, or magic, or any of this insanity."

Will's hands clenched in her lap. "All we really cared about was getting the hang of these powers. Trying to figure out what we were supposed to do with them."

Elyon remained silent, but she was listening now, her hand still pressed to her stinging cheek.

"That night at the gym," Will continued, her voice taking on a harder edge, "Cedric and Vathek attacked us. They were trying to seriously hurt me, Hay Lin, and Irma. If Nate hadn't shown up..." She swallowed hard. "We probably would have been killed. We had no idea how to use our powers—it was the first time we'd ever transformed."

As Will spoke, Elyon's mind raced. She remembered that night, remembered leading the girls there under Cedric's suggestion. *They're lying*, she thought desperately. *They're deceiving me, just like Cedric said they would.* But as she really listened, heard the sincerity in Will's voice, remembered the expression on Cornelia's face when she'd slapped her—not anger, but desperate concern—doubt began creeping in.

"What does Nate have to do with anything?" Her voice shook despite her efforts to control it.

The girls hesitated, exchanging uncertain glances. Finally, Will released a long breath.

"I'll tell you that part too. About the monster in the tunnel—it's called an Undead. About something called the Battle Fight. Why Nate was with us and why he's involved in all this."

As Will began explaining about the primordial creatures, about the deadly competition they were trapped in, about how Nate had been forced into this role, Elyon found herself thinking back. Nate had suddenly stopped coming to school one day. She hadn't really checked on why—she'd just assumed he and his family had moved away, as students sometimes did.

But then Will mentioned a house fire, and that assumption crumbled.

A house fire. That's why he disappeared. That's why he never came back.

Will's voice grew heavy. "If any of the Undead win, not only Earth, but all worlds will have humanity—and others sharing human traits—replaced by that Undead's species. Every man, woman, child... they either won't be human anymore, or they'll be wiped out completely."

She paused, swallowing hard before delivering the most terrifying part.

"And if the Joker wins?" Will's eyes locked with Elyon's, her voice dropping to barely above a whisper. "If the Category Joker Undead wins, nothing will be left at all. The game—no, the entire multiverse—will undergo a hard reset until someone who isn't the Joker is crowned winner. We can only hope the Human Undead pulls through to maybe bring everything back, but that's just us being optimistic."

When Will finished, the office fell into absolute silence. Elyon could only stare at her—at all of them—utterly stunned. The magnitude of what they were facing, the scope of the threat, the reality that everything and everyone she'd ever known could simply cease to exist... it was beyond comprehension.

Her hand slowly dropped from her cheek, forgotten in the face of this apocalyptic truth.

Karasuma's footsteps were quiet on the linoleum as he entered. "Girls, Nate's ready to see you. He's resting in the infirmary."

Will immediately stood, relief flooding her features. "Is he okay?"

"See for yourself," Karasuma replied with a small smile.

The Infirmary

They found Nate sitting on the edge of a medical bed, shirtless but very much alive. White bandages crisscrossed his torso and arms, covering the bruises he'd sustained during the battle. Despite the Rider armor's protection, it was clear he hadn't emerged unscathed.

"Hey." He looked up as they entered, voice tired but steady. "Sorry for the scare back there."

Karasuma stepped forward, his tone taking on the familiar cadence of a briefing. "The armor protected him from serious injury, but there's something important you need to understand about the Undead: They have the ability to hurt each other. It's the only thing they aren't immune to."

Will frowned. "You mean they can shrug off everything else?"

"Bullets, knives, elemental attacks, magic—all can be deflected or absorbed. But against another Undead, they become susceptible to damage. They have to be, for the sealing process to work."

Taranee stepped closer, scientific curiosity overriding her usual nervousness. "Why is that?"

Nate shifted on the bed, wincing as he adjusted his position. "All Undead have buckles." His hand moved unconsciously to where his Blay Buckle would normally rest. "When they take enough damage from another Undead, those buckles crack and split open. That's when they're vulnerable enough to be sealed—when their essence can be captured."

He looked up at the group seriously. "It's the only way the Battle Fight can actually end. Without that vulnerability, they'd just keep fighting forever."

"That's why you could hurt the Jaguar Undead when the most we could do was distract it." Irma paused, frowning. "But its buckle didn't open, did it?"

Nate shook his head ruefully. "Afraid not. Undead are still tough bastards. It'll take more than one hit to really take them down."

"One hit?" Cornelia snorted. "You made that thing bleed, which was completely gross, by the way."

Hay Lin shuddered. "Green blood. So nasty."

Irma offered her characteristic sarcasm. "Could've been worse. Could've bled burning acid that'd be murder on our clothes."

"Don't jinx it," Nate replied, drawing chuckles from the group.

It was then he noticed Elyon standing behind the others, seeming to shrink away as she held her arm protectively, her posture uncertain, almost fragile—so different from the confident girl he remembered from art class.

"Elyon, you okay?"

She didn't answer immediately. Her mind was a muddled mess of conflicting thoughts—the things Cedric had shown her, the "truth" about how her friends and family had supposedly been controlling her life. But then there was Nate, the boy she'd partnered with on projects, who she'd talked with like a real friend when Cornelia wasn't around. The quiet conversations about art and life, the easy companionship.

Cedric hadn't included him in his web of lies. He hadn't been part of the conspiracy Cedric had painted.

She looked at the girls, who all gazed at her with genuine concern rather than the deception she'd been told to expect. The weight of everything—the revelations about the Battle Fight,

seeing them risk their lives to save her, the sincerity in their voices when they'd explained what really happened—pressed down on her.

Finally, she found her voice, small but genuine. "I'm fine. Thanks... thanks to all of you."

BOARD Headquarters - Twenty Minutes Later

The atmosphere in Karasuma's office had grown heavy with anticipation as Thomas and Eleanor Brown arrived to collect their daughter. The fluorescent lights seemed harsher somehow, casting stark shadows across everyone's faces. Elyon sat rigidly in her chair, hands clasped tightly in her lap as she watched her parents enter.

Thomas Brown looked exactly as he always had—tall, gentle-faced, with kind eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses. Eleanor was equally familiar, auburn hair pulled back in its usual practical style, worry lines etched around her eyes. They were the same people who had raised her, who had tucked her in at night, who had celebrated her birthdays and comforted her through nightmares.

So why did the sight of them make her heart race with fear?

Cedric's words echoed like poison: They've been controlling your life, manipulating you from the beginning. They're not your real parents—they're jailers, keeping you from your true heritage.

But as Thomas's eyes found hers across the room, as his face crumpled with relief and love at seeing her safe, something in Elyon broke. These weren't the faces of conspirators or manipulators. These were the faces of two people who had been terrified they might lose their child.

"Elyon," Eleanor whispered, her voice thick with tears.

For a moment, Elyon hesitated. The fear Cedric had planted warred with fourteen years of love and memory. Then instinct took over—the instinct of a child who had scraped her knee and needed comfort, who had faced her first heartbreak and sought solace, who had experienced real terror and needed the safety that only home could provide.

She launched herself from the chair into their arms.

Thomas and Eleanor caught her in a fierce embrace, their own tears flowing freely as they held their daughter close. Eleanor's hand smoothed Elyon's hair while Thomas's arms formed a protective circle around them both.

"We were so scared," Eleanor whispered against Elyon's hair. "When we got the call... when they said you'd been in danger..."

"I'm sorry," Elyon sobbed into her mother's shoulder. "I'm so sorry. I thought... he told me that you were..."

"Shh," Thomas murmured, his own voice breaking. "You don't have to explain anything right now. You're safe. That's all that matters."

Through her tears, Eleanor looked up at Karasuma. "You're the one who called. Chief Karasuma? What exactly happened to our daughter?"

Karasuma's expression was grave as he explained the day's events—the Undead sighting, discovering Elyon in the tunnels, the battle that had ensued. He kept the details clinical and factual, but the weight of what could have happened hung heavy in the air.

As he spoke, Thomas and Eleanor's faces grew increasingly pale. Their daughter had been alone, terrified, and completely defenseless against creatures that could have killed her without a second thought.

"But she's alive," Eleanor whispered when Karasuma finished, holding Elyon even tighter. "She's alive because..."

"Because help arrived in time. And because one of our agents was there to protect them all."

The five girls filed quietly into the office, their presence immediately drawing Thomas and Eleanor's attention. They looked tired but determined, still wearing the sweats they'd been given after their ordeal.

"Cornelia?" Thomas's voice betrayed confusion and recognition from numerous sleepovers. "Girls? Why are you here? Were you witnesses to what happened?"

Will stepped forward, her hand moving to the chain around her neck. Slowly, she withdrew the Heart of Kandarakar, its crystal surface beginning to glow with soft pink light the moment it was exposed. The pendant pulsed gently, responding to the presence of so much emotion and tension.

Thomas and Eleanor stared at the artifact in stunned recognition. Their faces went completely white as the full implications hit them like a physical blow.

"You're..." Eleanor breathed, unable to finish.

"The Guardians of Kandarakar," Will confirmed, her voice steady despite the magnitude of what she was revealing. "This generation's Guardians."

Thomas's legs nearly gave out. He had to grip the back of a nearby chair to remain standing as reality crashed over him. "The Veil... if you've been awakened, then the Veil is..."

"Weakening," Will confirmed. "And tonight, Elyon was targeted by Prince Phobos's servants. They tried to take her."

Eleanor's face crumpled as she pulled Elyon closer, as if she could somehow shield her daughter from a truth that had finally caught up with them. "No. We've kept her safe all these years. We've hidden so well..."

"You did everything you could," Cornelia said gently. "But they found her anyway. If we hadn't been there..."

She didn't need to finish. The unspoken words hung in the air like a death sentence.

Thomas looked at each of the girls in turn, his eyes filled with gratitude and something like awe. "You saved her."

Will shook her head. "We only helped. The person you should really thank is resting in the infirmary right now. Nate—he was the one who did most of the work."

She paused, then looked directly at Thomas and Eleanor with an expression both compassionate and determined.

"Mr. and Mrs. Brown, would you like to explain what's really going on with Elyon?"

The question hung like a challenge. Thomas and Eleanor looked at each other, a lifetime of shared secrets and fears passing between them in that single glance. They had known this day would come—had dreaded it, prepared for it, hoped against hope it never would.

But here it was, and Elyon's life hung in the balance.

Slowly, Thomas nodded. Eleanor's hand moved to touch a small pendant at her throat—one none of them had ever noticed before, so carefully had it been concealed. As her fingers made contact with the silver charm, soft blue light began emanating from both her and Thomas.

The transformation was gradual, their human appearances melting away like illusions being dispelled, revealing their true forms underneath. Thomas's skin took on a distinctly green hue, his features becoming more angular, his hair transforming into flowing teal locks. Eleanor's appearance shifted as well—her skin gaining a pale blue-green tint, her hair becoming soft aqua that seemed to flow like water.

Their clothing remained the same—simple, practical suburban parent attire—but somehow the contrast made their transformation even more striking. They were still unmistakably the people who had raised Elyon, just revealed in their true Meridianite forms.

Elyon felt the world tilt. These were still her parents—she could see it in their eyes, in the way Eleanor's hand still rested protectively on her shoulder, in the way Thomas leaned forward as if to shield her from the world. But they were also strangers, beings of power and mystery who had built an entire life around protecting her from something she was only beginning to understand.

"My name is Miriadel," Eleanor—Miriadel—said softly. "And this is Alborn. We were commanders in Meridian's military forces, before the usurper took the throne."

"The usurper?" Will asked, though something in her stomach was already clenching with dread.

Alborn's jaw tightened. "Prince Phobos. The man who murdered the rightful queen and claimed her crown." He paused, his eyes fixed on Elyon with infinite tenderness and sorrow. "The man whose infant sister we smuggled to Earth and raised as our own daughter."

The revelation hit like a physical blow. Elyon gripped her chair arms so tightly her knuckles went white. "I'm... I'm his sister?"

"You are Princess Elyon of Meridian," Miriadel said, her voice breaking with emotion. "The rightful heir to a throne that's been stolen from you since before you could walk."

Absolute silence except for rain against windows and Elyon's sharp, shallow breathing.

Finally, Will found her voice. "How did you escape? How did you get her to Earth?"

Alborn and Miriadel exchanged a look heavy with shared memory and pain.

"It's a long and terrible story."

Later - The Infirmary

The sterile air of the BOARD infirmary contrasted sharply with the rain-soaked world outside. Nate lay propped up on his bed, familiar white bandages peeking out from beneath his dark gray t-shirt. His body still ached, but the throbbing had receded to a dull, manageable pain.

The door clicked open and Elyon entered. Her face was pale, arms hugged tightly across her chest as if holding herself together. Her movements were slow, deliberate—so different from her usual confident stride.

She walked to his bedside and stood there, silent.

"Hey," Nate said softly, his voice a little rough. "You hanging in there?"

Elyon shook her head, her gaze fixed on the blankets at the foot of his bed. "I don't know if I'm okay after... after finding out my whole life was a lie." Her voice was barely a whisper. She looked at him, her expression a mix of shock and utter vulnerability. "My parents aren't my parents. My home isn't my home. I'm not even human."

Nate raised an eyebrow. "Well, I knew that last part. You were always a little too good at the Still Life club for a regular person."

A faint, almost imperceptible smile touched Elyon's lips. She let out a small, tired sigh. "They told me everything. That they're from Meridian—a world of pure magic. That my birth parents were royalty, and they were the ones who rescued me from my brother, who murdered our mother just to steal the throne."

Nate listened, his expression unreadable. When she finished, he blinked slowly. "Huh. And here I thought you'd be an alien from outer space."

Elyon's head snapped up, and a genuine, if fleeting, smile broke through her solemnity. "You haven't changed one bit. Nothing's different from when we were in the art club."

Nate shrugged, a small grin playing on his lips. "Yeah, well, comes with the territory of fighting monsters. If you don't have a sense of humor, you probably won't last long." He patted the side of his bed. "Want to sit for a minute?"

Elyon nodded quietly and settled onto the mattress edge. Silence stretched between them, comfortable and familiar despite everything.

"They told me about your parents," she whispered, not looking at him. "How they died in a fire."

Nate didn't say anything. The silence grew heavy, but Elyon continued, her voice soft.

"I was curious why you just... stopped showing up at school. I thought..."

"That we moved?" Nate finished for her, his voice flat.

Elyon nodded, finally looking at him, searching his face. She saw the quiet boy who was just as good at sketching as her, remembering how competitive they could get, but always in good fun.

"Do you think... you could ever go back to school?"

Nate looked at his own bandaged hands, then back at her. "Could you?"

Elyon considered the question, its weight settling in her gut. She thought of her old life—homework, art club, gossip, her crush on Matt. It all felt so distant, like living someone else's reality from what she really was. She shook her head. "How could I go back to that? Being just a girl struggling with adolescence, school, boys." She looked back at him, her eyes pleading. "What's it like?"

Nate didn't hold back. "It's grueling work. I hated it when I first started. Still do, but... after fighting for a while, realizing the stakes, I can't exactly back away." He sighed, tired in a way that was older than his years. "And honestly, I'm not just doing this to save the world. Truth is, after my parents were gone, I didn't really know what to do. I spent time in a shelter, but I couldn't stay there forever. So I thought I could strike out on my own, look for a job—anything to stop drowning in my own misery. That's when I saw a flyer for BOARD, looking for promising

employees. I signed up thinking I could get some minor gig as an intern and eventually low-level work with a steady paycheck."

Elyon blinked, her mouth slightly agape. "Seriously? That's how you ended up in this job?"

Nate chuckled lightly, the sound rusty from disuse. "Yep, that's exactly how."

"But instead of fetching coffee, you're putting your life on the line to stop the apocalypse," Elyon followed, a dry smile touching her lips. "Not many fifteen-year-olds can claim to be superheroes."

Nate countered with a small smirk. "And not many fourteen-year-olds can claim to secretly be a princess from another world. Sounds like something out of an anime."

They went quiet, the absurdity of their situation hanging in the air before both dissolved into soft chuckles. Their laughter was cut short by a sharp throat clearing that made them both jump.

They turned to the door, where Will, Irma, Cornelia, Taranee and Hay Lin were standing, having crept quietly to avoid notice.

Elyon and Nate's cheeks flushed, and Elyon quickly hopped off the bed. "We were just talking."

Irma, ever sarcastic, raised an eyebrow. "Oh, right. When's the royal wedding?"

Cornelia rolled her eyes. "Irma." She stepped forward, her expression mixing concern and exasperation. "Is she good to go home with her folks? She could always stay here at BOARD for protection."

Elyon was quiet for a moment. "Our home might not be safe anymore."

Will stepped forward, her voice firm with purpose. "She's right. But I think I have an idea how we can secure her. Kandrakar."

Two Days Later - BOARD Headquarters Common Room

The next few hours had passed in a blur of otherworldly travel. The group, along with Elyon's adoptive parents, had been transported directly to Kandrakar. There, Elyon and her family were brought before the congregation, where the Oracle, Himerish, formally welcomed her. With a solemn gesture, he'd agreed to Will's proposal, ordering that a powerful ward be placed over the Browns' home so that no tears or folds could appear within or around it. He'd also announced that agents would be stationed nearby, ready to repel any of Phobos's minions. The Guardians would serve as her personal security, especially at school.

Now, two days later, the five girls gathered in a common room at BOARD Headquarters, lounging on plush couches. The silence hung heavy until Irma broke it with a sigh.

"So, to recap—we've just been officially appointed as bodyguards for her royal flunkiness."

"Shut up!" Elyon shot back, but there was a quick smile on her face.

Just like that, a fragile sense of normalcy returned. They were just girls talking and joking again.

Just then, Nate walked by, carrying a stack of papers that teetered precariously in his arms. He looked pale, but his movements were steady enough.

"What are you doing?" the girls asked almost in unison.

"What else?" He shifted the stack to keep it from toppling. "Paperwork."

Will blinked. "Wait, you're actually doing paperwork? Shouldn't you be resting?"

Nate paused, adjusting the precarious pile. "Yeah, well, I have to file a report on what happened so they can have it on record. Pretty standard stuff, apparently."

"Who knew being a superhero could be so bureaucratic?" Irma's voice dripped with her trademark sarcasm.

Nate rolled his eyes, a small smile playing on his lips. "Tell me about it. I've had to submit a report for every mission, even while hospitalized."

The girls exchanged looks, and Elyon's face showed the most concern. "Are you really okay, though?"

Her voice was softer than the others, carrying a weight that made Nate pause in his paper-shuffling.

"I'll be right as rain in a few weeks, so long as I take it easy."

"And then it's off to be made into somebody's punching bag again," Irma added, her sarcasm turning more serious. "Really living the dream, Nate."

Nate sighed, tired and rueful. "It isn't the glamorous life that comics and graphic novels promise, that's for sure. But I like to think it's more in line with stories done by Tolkien."

Cornelia cocked an eyebrow. "You read Tolkien?"

Nate grinned, genuine and easy. "Nah, just the movies. But I've read the general plot points online, and there, the hero's journey is more about weathering hardship than glory or victory. Plus, it gave me and Elyon a lot of inspiration for sketches back in the day."

"Yeah," Elyon confirmed, her face lighting up at the memory. "Especially the artbooks. The illustrations were so immersive."

Nate gave them a final, tired smile. "Well, I better get this filed before Chief Karasuma decides my mission report was due a century ago." He shuffled off down the hallway, the stack of papers still threatening to topple.

The girls watched him go, concern and lingering amusement on their faces. They were quiet for a moment, the humor slowly fading as Nate disappeared from view.

"Okay," Will said, clapping her hands together to break the silence. "So, we all told our parents we were hanging out today. We have a few hours to kill, and... we obviously can't go to the mall."

"Seriously?" Cornelia sighed, slumping back into the cushions. "What's the point of having free time if we can't do anything fun?"

Hay Lin bounced on her toes, her voice bursting with energy. "We could go to the park! Or get bubble tea!"

Taranee, ever practical, chimed in. "Maybe we should just go home and get some rest. We've had a big week."

Elyon, who had been quiet, looked at the group. "What about a movie? We could just get a movie and... stay here?"

Will nodded. "That's not a bad idea. We all have Netflix on our phones, so all we're missing is a flat screen, and we'd be in business." Her eyes scanned the room, searching. She sighed. "Which they don't have around here."

"How about checking the building out?" Hay Lin suggested, earning surprised looks. "I mean, we haven't exactly been given a tour of the entire place. Besides, there's nothing wrong with familiarizing ourselves with it."

Cornelia scoffed. "And get in trouble?"

"Not if we don't touch anything," Irma countered, a mischievous glint in her eye. She was already intrigued.

Will, sensing where this was going, conceded with a sigh. "Fine. But on one condition: we don't touch anything. We're not little kids anymore. Got it?"

"Yes, ma'am!" Hay Lin offered with a mock salute, her eyes twinkling with excitement.

With their new plan in motion, the girls began wandering the halls of BOARD headquarters, carefully navigating the unfamiliar maze of corridors.

"Are there even other staff here?" Hay Lin wondered aloud. "I mean, the only ones we've met are Chief Karasuma and Nate."

"Well, they did say the main branch is back in Japan, so there might be more there," Cornelia responded.

As they explored, they discovered an unmarked door. Will twisted the knob, and it opened to reveal a dim office with computers and other machines humming softly in low light. The girls tiptoed quietly inside and started examining the place, realizing it could only be a research center or laboratory.

Suddenly, a quiet snort broke the silence, and a voice called from behind a desk. "Who's there?"

The girls froze as someone swiveled their head, their eyes glazed with sleep. She spotted them and blinked slowly. "Who are you?"

All five girls huddled behind Will, who felt a bead of sweat form on her brow at being made their spokesperson. She brought her hands up placatingly. "We were just... looking around." Her voice came out a little too high.

The girl blinked several more times to brush the sleep away, her expression still drowsy. "You have to leave. This place is restricted."

"Sure thing!" Will agreed, her voice chirpy. The girls were about to turn and leave when the girl's voice stopped them.

"Wait." She squinted, her eyes focusing now. "Chief Karasuma mentioned there were... girls at BOARD. Are you the ones he was referring to?"

Will's breath caught, and she hesitated. The girl certainly didn't look like a researcher, wearing a white sweater with the number 44, but she might just be an intern like Nate had been. Will took a step forward, her hands still raised placatingly. "Yes, he was talking about us. I'm Will." She introduced the others in order: "This is Irma, Cornelia, Taranee, Hay Lin, and Elyon. We just wanted to tour the place, not mess with anything. Honest."

The girl took a moment to collect herself before standing up, and they realized she must have been sleeping on the floor, curled up beside the desk. She drowsily introduced herself. "Shiori Hirose." She walked over to where there was a coffee maker and turned it on.

The girls could only stand awkwardly, some regret creeping in. Will once again told Shiori they were going to leave, when she turned and squinted, her eyes scrutinizing them as if trying to figure out a puzzle. "Wait." She walked over to a wide counter where they could see stacks of paper and, surprisingly, the same type of cards that Nate used. Shiori motioned for them to come closer.

The girls hesitated, shuffling closer. Shiori took one of the cards and presented it to them. "Do you mind passing this around to each other?"

Will stepped back. "Whoa, wait a minute. Sorry again that we bothered you, but what's this all about?"

Shiori just held the card out, her expression unreadable. "Just pass it around amongst yourselves."

Will and the others hesitated, tension thick in the air. Shiori's request was simple enough, but they knew these cards were anything but. Will's eyes darted between Shiori's impassive face and the card, searching for a hint of something—a threat, a trick, anything. With a trembling hand, she reached out and took it.

The moment her fingers brushed the surface, cold dread prickled up her arm. The card radiated a silent, ominous aura—a weight that felt wrong and ancient.

Reluctantly, she passed it to Taranee, who took it just as hesitantly. Taranee brought it closer to her face, adjusting her glasses to examine the intricate design. The art depicted a stag beetle, its armored body gleaming with polished, metallic sheen. And on its back, a single, glowing emerald green diamond.

Elyon, with her newfound understanding of magic, held the card with quiet intensity, but nothing happened, and she passed it to Irma, who, with a raised eyebrow, passed it to Hay Lin. Hay Lin, always fascinated by the unusual, held it with pure wonder. She turned it over in her hands, as if searching for something, before finally giving it back to Shiori, who immediately took it and placed it on the counter.

Shiori's gaze fixed on them, her eyes wide and alert now, a stark contrast to her earlier sleepiness. "Did the image look like it moved when you made contact?"

Bewildered by the question, the girls shook their heads in unison. "No," Will answered, a confused frown on her face. "It didn't move."

Shiori's tense shoulders visibly relaxed, and she let out a long sigh of relief. "Good. You're not compatible."

The girls exchanged glances, and Will's voice was sharp with a new edge. "You were seriously just checking to see if one of us could be like Nate?"

Shiori nodded, her gaze serious now as she began arranging the scattered cards on the counter. "BOARD has intensified the search for someone to use the other Buckle. To become the next Rider."

"Rider?" Cornelia asked, her brow furrowing in confusion.

"That's what we call those who are meant to hunt the Undead," Shiori explained, picking up a folder and handing it to Will. The surface was dotted with Japanese characters, but stamped in bold, unmistakable English letters were three words: KAMEN RIDER PROJECT.

Will stared at the folder in her hands, its cover a stark contrast of Japanese characters and the bold English title. She read the words aloud, her voice quiet with a mix of curiosity and concern. "Kamen Rider Project?"

Like the card, she passed the folder along. Irma took it with a raised eyebrow, a playful smirk on her lips as if expecting a secret candy stash. The smile quickly vanished as she opened it. The documents inside were a bewildering mess of Japanese characters, schematics, and diagrams that made no sense to her. Irma quickly passed it to Hay Lin, who peered at the intricate drawings with a mixture of awe and confusion.

"The 'Kamen' in the name means 'Mask'," Shiori explained, her voice cutting through their bewilderment. "So you could also call it the Masked Rider Project. It was a project my father, Yoshito Hirose, devised."

Shiori's expression was serious, her gaze darting between the five of them. She gestured to a small notebook on the counter, filled with handwritten notes and equations.

"I was stationed here to act as the local researcher while maintaining correspondence with him."

Will's mind raced. "Your father... he's a scientist?"

Shiori gave a slight nod. "Yes, but he's back in Japan, so like I said, we exchange notes and anything else that might forward the project." She motioned with a hand for the folder to be given back, and Hay Lin, with a thoughtful hum, complied.

Taking the folder, Shiori flipped through a few pages of notes before stopping at a particular set of schematics. She turned the folder so the girls could see. The drawings were still full of Japanese characters, but the design was clear enough. It was a much bulkier, more primitive version of a Rider Belt. This early prototype, labeled 'Project Zero,' was a crude, boxy device with a large, central slot and visible wires. It lacked the smooth, refined look of the belt Nate wore; this one looked like it had been built in a garage with whatever parts were available.

"This is the earliest prototype," Shiori said, her voice filled with a hint of pride. "The concepts were sound, but the design was a mess. My father worked on this for years, making small adjustments to make it more efficient."

She then turned the page to a new schematic. This one was a more streamlined design that resembled Nate's more, but still retained a distinct box-like shape, only slightly smaller to not hinder the wearer's movements. This one was more advanced, but still had the visible wires and crudeness of a work-in-progress.

Shiori closed the folder and tucked it under her arm. "With the second belt completed, we only need to find a suitable candidate. And thankfully enough, you girls failed, but it was worth a shot."

"Well, what if one of us had passed?" Will asked, a defiant glint in her eye.

Shiori shrugged. "It'd mean we'd have options. But after my briefing, I'm well aware you girls have your own problems to deal with." She paused, her eyes narrowing. "Are you magic users?"

Will exchanged looks with her friends, a silent conversation passing between them. The realization on Shiori's face and the casual way she said it was a lot to take in. Will bit her lip, but decided honesty was the best policy. "Do you believe in magic?" she asked, her voice barely a whisper.

Shiori gave a casual shrug. "If the Undead exist, then magic exists. Only a moron wouldn't believe after finding the impossible."

The girls took this logic in stride. After all, they were a group of teenagers with magic powers themselves. Will, however, still had questions.

"What's being done to find a candidate?" she asked, her voice firm.

Shiori ran a hand through her short hair. "Chief Karasuma is still brainstorming. We need to be careful in case the wrong person is chosen and we end up having law enforcement breathing down our necks."

"Is it really that dangerous to use the belt?" Elyon asked, her voice laced with curiosity.

Shiori's expression hardened. "During the very early stages of testing, the guy that used the prototype with the Category Ace of Spades ended up in a coma for two years."

The girls all recoiled, their faces paling as the full weight of Shiori's words hit them. A coma for two years. The sheer extent of the risk Nate had taken in even trying on his buckle was suddenly, terrifyingly clear.

Shiori seemed to sense the mood shift, and she moved to the back of the small room, where the coffee maker sat on a counter. "Do any of you want a cup?" she asked, her voice calm and even. "The storm has been raging for days. You could really use something to warm up."

They all shook their heads, still lost in thought.

"Are you sure?" she pressed gently. "It might help."

After a moment, one by one, they gave in. Shiori returned with five mugs, which she filled with the dark, steaming liquid. She poured a sixth for herself before gesturing to a small supply caddy on the counter. "The cream and sugar are over here."

The girls moved quietly to personalize their respective cups, each one perhaps needing the mundane, comforting ritual after the conversation they had just had.

After taking a sip, Will then asked Shiori, "Miss Hirose, about the cards. How is Nate able to use them?"

Shiori took a small sip of her own coffee before answering. "It's part of the Rouzer technology. The Rouzer is meant to take the power of the cards and supplement the Rider with whatever abilities it might hold. Each card has an ability that can only be used once for each transformation. After that, the Rider only needs to transform again to reuse any cards. But considering how risky it would be to come out of the armor during a fight, well... he doesn't have many options."

Each of the girls winced, knowing just how ill-advised that would be when tangling with an Undead after seeing firsthand what the Jaguar Undead could do.

A thought occurred to Hay Lin. "Hey," she began, "remember how fast that Undead was back at the tunnel?"

The girls nodded.

"I bet if Nate seals it, he'll be able to use that thing's ability. Imagine Nate moving and running at superspeed."

The image drew amazement from the girls, that for each Undead Nate sealed, his arsenal would increase, further expanding his options. Shiori nodded at this, and gave them another bombshell.

"The cards can stack, too. If Nate uses more than one card to make a proper combo, he'd be able to do more damage in a single attack than if he just used one. With the right combination, a Rider could reach a level of danger that even the most powerful Undead would think twice before engaging."

Irma let out an impressed whistle. "Aw, and we're just left with all the boring stuff like elemental powers."

Cornelia rolled her eyes, a small smirk on her face. "Speak for yourself. Other than Earth, I can move stuff with my mind."

The girls turned to Will, who had been quiet for a moment. She looked at her hands, taking another sip of her coffee before admitting softly, "I can... give inanimate objects consciousness."

Shiori choked on her coffee, coughing into her mug, her eyes wide with disbelief. Even Elyon leaned in, her eyes full of curiosity at this new revelation.

"Repeat that," Shiori managed, placing a hand on her chest as she tried to regain control of her breathing.

Will bit her lip, instantly regretting that she had said too much. Instead of repeating it, she simply pointed to the coffee maker and used Quintessence. Electricity briefly crackled around the machine before a familiar robotic voice said, "Hey, Shiori, you should replace the coffee filter since it's been used since yesterday."

Shiori yelped and nearly dropped her mug, staring at the coffee maker with a look of utter shock. After a moment, she placed the mug down on the counter and took a shaky breath, the shock on her face slowly morphing into pure intrigue.

"Have you... practiced with this power?" Shiori asked, her voice a low, excited whisper.

Will shrugged, taking another sip of her coffee. "I've basically made several appliances in my house an extended family of sorts, so... yeah."

Shiori could only stare for a moment, then a wide smile spread across her face. "Sugoi! What if—?" The woman then paused in thought, her eyes glinting with a new idea. She quickly pulled out her phone and accessed Messenger, calling for Nate to come to R&D.

Nate arrived a few minutes later, looking puzzled when he found the girls in the lab with Shiori. "What's wrong?" he asked, his gaze going from the girls to Shiori.

She waved him over frantically. "Nate, thank goodness you're here. I need you to take out your Buckle."

He cocked a brow, a hint of suspicion in his eyes. "Why? This isn't about maintenance, is it?"

"Just... insert your Category Ace into the slot," Shiori said, her voice filled with a strange, nervous energy.

Puzzled, he looked to the girls, who just stared at him expectantly. Slowly, he fished out the Buckle and the card from his jacket and inserted the card, when Shiori stopped him from placing it on his stomach.

"Don't put it on," she said, her voice a little too high. "Place it on the work counter."

Nate did so after a pause, the Buckle making a small clunking sound as he set it down. Will, watching the whole exchange, finally realized what Shiori wanted. She glanced from the eager scientist to her friends, then back at the objects on the table. A sudden wave of apprehension washed over her.

Shiori's face was a study in pure excitement. She motioned for Will to come closer. "Will, do your thing."

Will's mouth felt dry. Her gaze was fixed on the Category Ace of Spades card. A single card, yes, but it wasn't just an object. It was a sealed Undead, a creature of raw, destructive power. She had given consciousness to a coffee maker, to her phone, but to an ancient monster sealed inside a card? She shuddered to think what could happen. Any number of things...

After a long moment of hesitation, curiosity won out. Will pointed her finger at the Buckle, with the Category Ace of Spades visible in the slot. Like the coffee maker, it crackled with electricity for a moment, before everyone went silent to wait for the result.

All eyes stared at the Buckle, as if expecting it to suddenly sprout legs and lunge at them. When nothing happened for another long moment, Nate finally broke the silence.

"Okay, what's going on? What am I really here for?"

Will sighed, her shoulders slumping. "I can give inanimate objects consciousness."

Nate blinked. A long stretch of silence hung in the air before he finally managed to ask, "Come again?"

"Look," Will said, "my Guardian power is basically something called 'Quintessence,' which Hay Lin's grandma called life energy. I can effectively play fairy godmother and have a puppet walk and talk."

Nate just looked at her as if she'd just grown several heads. "Do you have any idea how insanely broken that is?"

The girls all looked to each other, a flat, tired look falling on their faces before they replied in unison, "Yes."

Nate, with a sigh, then moved to pick up his Buckle when they heard it.

"Kill."

The group froze. The word, a low, gravelly sound that seemed to scrape against their ears, came from the Buckle.

"Kill... fight... must... fight..."

Their eyes widened as they stared at the Buckle, which was unmistakably making such sounds. The voice, alien and raw, was a physical presence in the room. They listened, captivated, as the Buckle—no, the Category Ace of Spades, the Beetle Undead—kept repeating the words. *Kill, fight*, it went on and on, the sound almost hypnotic, before it muttered something that sent a collective chill through their bones.

"Kill... you... kill... all... of... you..."

Will's breath came out in a rapid gust, her mind reeling. The trance broke, and a frantic energy coursed through her. She pointed a shaking finger at the Buckle again, a familiar surge of power flowing through her fingers. She dispelled the Quintessence, and the low, gravelly threats from the Undead immediately ceased, leaving a chilling silence in its wake.

Slowly, the others returned to their senses, the shock on their faces giving way to a shared fear. They exchanged wary glances, each comprehending the full, terrifying meaning of the Undead's words. Even Shiori, her earlier excitement gone, was left with the same fear. She simply nodded to Nate, her eyes silently urging him to get the belt away from the counter. After a moment of

hesitation, Nate reached for the Buckle, pulling out the card with much more haste than was necessary.

Irma, swallowing a large lump in her throat, then muttered without a hint of her usual sarcasm, "Let's not do that again. Ever."

The others all sounded their agreement, perhaps wishing to place this particular episode behind them much sooner than later.

After a moment of silence, a tense calm settling over the group, Will finally managed to speak. "Should I... turn the coffee maker back to normal?" Her voice was softer now, tinged with a shaky uncertainty.

Shiori, though still shaken, looked to the machine and shrugged. "No. This way, I can have a conversation whenever I go for a cup."

A familiar, slightly robotic voice piped up. "I agree. You can call me Kōhīmēkā."

Irma snickered, earning a curious look from the others. "Kōhīmēkā," she repeated, a grin spreading across her face. "That's actually pretty good. It's the rōmaji for Coffee Maker, but can also be a pun—'Coffee Mecha.'"

Hay Lin then asked Irma in wonder, "You know Japanese?"

Irma, still with a mischievous grin, simply shrugged. "I watch anime."

They stared at her for a moment, before Nate finally broke the silence, carefully tucking his Buckle away. "Cool. What titles?"

The Next Day - Chief Karasuma's Office

Nate knocked twice on the door frame before stepping into Karasuma's office. His movements were still careful, favoring his left side where the bandages pulled tight under his shirt. The morning light streaming through the windows made the sterile office feel almost welcoming.

"You wanted to see me?" Nate asked, settling into the chair across from Karasuma's desk. "If this is about a mission, I should probably mention I'm not exactly at a hundred percent yet."

Karasuma looked up from the stack of papers he'd been reviewing, a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "There is a mission, but not of the Undead kind. Not yet."

Nate's eyebrows rose slightly. "Okay..."

"This involves more... covert skills."

That got Nate's attention. He leaned forward slightly, wincing as the movement pulled at his injuries. "What exactly are you asking me to do?"

Karasuma set down his pen and folded his hands on the desk. "I need you to take on an undercover role at Sheffield Institute. Extra security for Elyon."

The words hung in the air between them. Nate sat perfectly still, his expression unreadable as the implications sank in. Sheffield Institute. School. His old life, the one that had been torn away from him in smoke and flames.

The silence stretched until it became almost uncomfortable. Karasuma watched Nate's face carefully, noting the way the boy's jaw tightened almost imperceptibly.

Finally, Nate spoke, his voice carefully neutral. "Is that genuinely what you want me to do?"

Something shifted in Karasuma's expression—the professional mask slipping just enough to reveal something warmer, more paternal. "This is a mission to help secure a figure of royalty, Nate. Nothing more."

But they both knew that wasn't entirely true. They both understood what this really was—a chance for a fifteen-year-old boy to have some semblance of a normal teenage life, even if it was wrapped up in the guise of duty.

Another long stretch of silence. Nate stared out the window, watching clouds drift across the gray sky. His fingers drummed once against the armrest of his chair.

Finally, he let out a long sigh, the sound carrying the weight of someone much older. "Fine." His voice held a note of resignation, as if he'd known this conversation was inevitable. "I'll take the mission."

Karasuma nodded approvingly, but there was something gentle in his eyes. "Your cover story is already being prepared. As far as Sheffield is concerned, you simply wish to enroll back after getting your head in order."

"And the real reason I'm there?"

"Keep an eye on Elyon. The wards around her home are strong, but school is a different matter. Too many variables, too many potential access points." Karasuma pulled out a manila folder and slid it across the desk. "Your schedule has been arranged to match several of hers. Art class, specifically—I understand you two have history there."

Nate picked up the folder but didn't open it immediately. "When do I start?"

"Monday."

That gave him three days. Three days to mentally prepare for walking back into a world he'd thought he'd lost forever. Three days to figure out how to be a normal student again while carrying the weight of everything he now knew.

"Any other instructions?"

"Try to blend in," Karasuma said with what might have been amusement. "And Nate? This doesn't mean you're any less valuable to BOARD. Sometimes the most important missions are the ones that look the most ordinary."

Nate stood slowly, the folder tucked under his arm. "Right. Anything else?"

"Get some rest. You'll need it."

As Nate reached the door, Karasuma called after him. "And Nate? For what it's worth... I think this will be good for you."

Nate paused in the doorway but didn't turn around. "We'll see."

The door clicked shut behind him, leaving Karasuma alone with his papers and the lingering sense that he'd just set something important in motion.