

ELEGY OF STELLAR FLIGHT

AN ILLUSTRATED NOVEL
WRITTEN BY YUKO

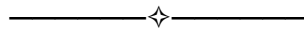
"the future I chose. was not you."

Chapter 1

—his world shifted. No longer was it indescribable ribbons of color, swirling around in the air, obscuring his vision. Now, everything was in grayscale—just how he liked it.

Because back then, we both decided that,

“the future I chose, was not you.”



He barely had time to remove his bloodied gloves before a rapid succession of knocks sounded from the double doors. The knocks on the door were swift and forceful, each one landing like a hammer on nail. He half-expected it to be another request to execute some defector. Even worse, sometimes the defector themselves would come crashing through the door praying on their knees, worshiping him like a god in hopes of something less than a death sentence. Unfortunately, Nox’s judgments were final, set like cold stone.

All attempts to defect from the intelligence division are to be punished via a death sentence.

“Your honor, are you there?” A voice called out from outside the door, accompanied by more knocking, “There is a very urgent matter.”

“Sorry,” he paused when he saw his bloodied gloves cast aside on the desk. *Two in one day, huh?* It hadn’t even been more than a few short months, yet his work had already begun to feel unpleasant.

He tried to stop himself from sighing before he said, “Please come in.”

The double doors swung open. In the hallway stood two lines of soldiers, with a person caught between them. It was difficult to see him through the looming soldiers, but judging by his height, he was probably young enough to pass as a “young man”. Someone like Eli himself.

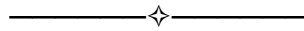
“Your Honor, we’ve captured an individual stealing our documents from vault three.”
The soldier in the forefront of the line began, “The document that was stolen was the—”

“You can tell me the details later,” Eli cut him off with a lie. In all honesty, he couldn’t care less about the documents at this moment. There were more pressing matters, such as—

—“What’s the punishment?”

After all, what’s a few pieces of paper to a human life?

“Since it directly impacts the intelligence department, it’s Your Honor’s choice.”



That was how he found himself facing this strange young man. If they were not in an execution room, it could have looked like two normal schoolboys talking to each other. They should look similar in age, probably. Eli could never be sure because the young man’s unkept black hair concealed across his face like a mourning veil, disguising his youthful features and making him appear older than he probably was. His hair practically merged in color with his all-black attire—a black cloak, a black button-up shirt, and black pants. The only thing that was not black was the silver cross he wore on a chain around his neck. It glittered with a polished, pure light, and was undeniably out of place with the frayed and ragged clothes that he wore.

Moonlight spilled through the windows, painting everything in a white hue: the two chairs they were sitting on, the chains that bound the young man to his chair, and the young man himself. Usually, the chains prevented the thrashing victims from escaping, but they seemed almost unnecessary this time. The young man just sat there, and the room was silent except for the distant drip of water and the boy’s slow, steady breathing. That was the only sign that he was in fact still alive. No begging or tears. A chill ran through Eli. Was it courage that still the boy’s tongue or simply hopelessness that left him mute? He wanted to shake the boy, force him to look up, to say something, anything. The numb acceptance was unnerving. It would only be normal for people their age to be shaking with fear, unable even to lift their heads, because they were only children, and sixteen years was far too short for a complete life.

Now that he looked closer though, this young man was not shaking with fear.

“Who instructed you to steal classified documents from Singularity?” Eli’s instincts told him this was a Valkyria spy. Although a bit too young, he wouldn’t be surprised if an organization with the likes of Valkyria had no problems with sending underaged agents to their deaths.

The young man did not reply. In fact, he gave no indication of even hearing him.

“How did you even manage to crack the vault protecting the documents?”

No reply. Again. It felt as if he was talking to the wall behind the young man instead of the young man himself.

“Do you have any idea what the consequences were before you did this?” An unidentifiable anger was rising inside Eli. Again. This feeling would always inevitably come when he was face to face with condemned defectors.

Was he angry that he had to work after hours for this? Was he angry because the young man refused to listen to him? Who was it even directed at, himself or this young man?

“Of course,” The young man replied simply, still looking at the floor.

“Then why? Don’t you know that—”

“According to judgments set out by Nox, the Archangel, ‘all unauthorized attempts to retrieve classified documents are punishable by death,’” He restated what Eli was about to say matter-of-factly, “So what will you do, Mr. Honorable Justice? It’s your judgment this time.”

Eli hated the fact that the young man was right. According to official policies, there was no way for this young man to be spared. The thought of letting him go free of consequences was boarding on the absurd.

Kill him. It’s your job.

That's what the voice at the back of his mind said.

That's what everyone would say, even the young man. He looked perfectly serene as if preparing for a long slumber instead of death. He had witnessed the terrified and defiant, but never this...emptiness. The young man's eyes were fixated on the floor. No flicker of emotion, no intent to do anything. It was like he was staring at a clock, watching the seconds go by in boredom. He half-expected the young man to melt away at any moment, his physical form no longer able to contain his departing spirit. It was almost incomprehensible, like there wasn't actually a human there, but something closer to a ghost or a person behind a wall.

Eli hoped that it wouldn't hurt too much.

He stood up and raised his hand into the air, and it hung there, suspended. He took a deep breath. Then, he let his hand close.

It all came crashing down in an instant. The chains bounding the young man fell to the floor with the clatter of metal against the smooth marble floor.

"I don't want to kill an underaged boy today," he sighed as he threw himself back on the chair facing the young man. This time, he moved a little closer.

Eli reached out his hand, ever so carefully, each movement deliberate. The closer he moved, the more he felt like the young man's muscles tensed, like a serpent about to strike. A frigid chill swept over Eli, though the room was warm. He was the Seraph, and that title alone made him one of the most powerful people to ever exist. Why did he feel this unknown fear? Yet the icy fingers of fear gripped his heart all the same. But this was not fear stemming from this young man's power. It was something else. Something he couldn't quite place.

The moment Eli swept the young man's hair aside, he knew where that fear came from.

Emptiness.

As Eli looked into the young man's eyes, he saw nothing but emptiness. An eerie void that sucked in everything around him, and doesn't let go. Eyes were windows to the soul, as people always said. But what if there was no soul behind those eyes? They were almost purely black, with a hint of olive green. In their depths, there was no reflection of the world around them, no spark of recognition. Eli couldn't even see his own reflection through the young man's eyes. It seemed to swallow the light of the moon outside, casting it into the abyss where it never returned. It was hard to believe that these eyes could truly belong to a human being who was alive.

"Who are you...?" Eli managed to force out. He had forgotten how to breathe.

There is no person here. Just a hollow shell in the shape of a person.

At that moment, the young man began to speak.

"My code name is 'Serpent'."



Until now, Eli had not realized how much of an understatement it was to describe Serpent as strange. Actually, he wasn't sure if there even existed a suitable word to describe this being that calls itself 'Serpent'.

A few days ago, Eli had spared Serpent of an execution. He had expected at least a "thank you" from Serpent, given Eli's status as a Justice. Apparently, that was too much to ask. It had been evident that Serpent had no intention of acknowledging anything and even shot Eli a sharp glare. Of course, Eli had shot one back. Eli couldn't have imagined that he, a Justice, would be disregarded in such a manner by a person who, as far as he knew, didn't even have an ability.

After that whole ordeal, Serpent had simply sat down in a sad, dim corner of the living room. He had remained there for an entire day, sometimes reading his book, sometimes gazing off into the distance, looking at something Eli couldn't quite see. That was the only two things he did, and sleep was not one of them. Eli wondered if he ever slept—as far as he knew, every time he had passed by, Serpent would be sitting there, wide awake.

So they had remained that way, not speaking a word to each other for many days. Of course, Eli had tried to talk to him, but Serpent would never reply. The closest thing Eli ever got for a reply was him turning his head and staring into Eli's eyes for a few seconds. After a while, he figured he should just leave him alone for now. Maybe he would open up when he got used to this new environment.

Now they were sitting at the table in the living room, each in their own thoughts. The only sound was the clatter of silverware against ceramic plates as they ate breakfast in silence.

"So," A young man's voice sighed, "How long are you going to keep me here? It's so boring I would rather die at this point."

"Excuse me?" Eli blinked, perplexed.

"What? Did you think I was mute or something?" Serpent mumbled over a plate of eggs.

"So you could talk!" Eli stood up violently, almost knocking over a glass of water in the process, "Why'd you ignore me like that then?!"

"Not used to being ignored as a Justice? Oops, sorry. I just didn't feel like talking to you." Serpent said. It was half-hearted at best, and incredibly rude at worst.

"You would rather stare into space?" Eli gave him an incredulous look.

"I'm not staring into space. It's a thing called thinking, if you didn't know." Serpent said distractedly, staring into space yet again.

"How dare you speak to a Justice like that?!"

"Of course of course. I'm so sorry. But Your Honor, how come you're so eager to speak with a commoner like me?" A smug smile spread across Serpent's face. "Could it be that... you're actually lonely?"

Eli lowered his head and sat down, staring into his empty plate as the room fell quiet again.

“Ohohoho? I see It must be really lonely for you not to have any friends, right?” Serpent smirked.

“Enough. I don’t have time for this. I’m new to this department, and I don’t have many acquaintances here, that's all. And I don’t usually meet many people my age here. They’re all serious adults constantly telling me to go work, or they’re too scared to even talk to me properly.” Eli said as he continued his downward stare.

“Hmm... okay.” Serpent murmured half-heartedly.

Eli caught a glimpse of black dance across the edge of his vision. He glanced in that general direction, thinking it was the shadow of some bird passing outside. It took exactly one second for him to realize that wasn’t a shadow of a bird.

“*Hey*,” Eli drawled, slowly, “What do you think you’re doing?”

Eli swiveled to face the thief who was standing on a chair, his arm in the process of closing the cabinet doors. Under Eli’s piercing gaze, Serpent frowned and reluctantly backed away from the glass jar on the top shelf of the cabinet.

“No, don’t think I don’t see that. Put it back.”

“What do you mean? I haven’t taken any—” Serpent held up a hand in protest.

“Put. It. Back. Do you have any idea how much I went through just to get that jar of candy? It’s worth more than gold...”

“Can’t you just buy more? I imagine Justices to, well, be at least rich enough to buy food.” Serpent said as he slowly opened the cabinet to put the candy back.

“Oh no, I’m definitely rich enough to buy as much candy as I want,” Eli briefly gestured toward the pile of gems sitting casually on a nearby desk, “Theoretically, that is.”

“Theoretically?”

“How do I put this...” Eli sighed, “I have a monthly limit on sugar consumption.”

“Wha— Ahahahaha!” Serpent’s sudden burst into laughter almost startled Eli out of his seat. “I can’t believe you of all people have a limit on something so stupid! Are you a child or something? Maybe you have a set bedtime as well?”

“Shut up.” Eli mumbled in retaliation, “It’s in the organization’s best interest to keep Justices in perfect health, so there’s a lot of rules.”

Eli’s gaze wasn’t on the candy anymore. It was on Serpent. He may have found the answer to it all, how Serpent managed to infiltrate Singularity, got so close to a guarded vault, and even managed to open and enter it all without anyone noticing. Though stealing a jar of candy from a cabinet seemed to dim in comparison to stealing documents from a vault, they were actually similar in difficulty. In fact, one could even argue that stealing that jar of candy was actually more difficult. Why? Simply because Eli was there. The senses of a Justice were usually more heightened than any normal person, because not only could they sense motion and sound, but also strong emotions. Fear. Anger. Those were the emotions that would most likely give away the intentions and location of an assassin.

Serpent was different.

Eli couldn’t even sense his presence, let alone any emotional fluctuation. He should’ve at least felt nervous when he attempted to steal from the cabinet, and that would’ve been enough for Eli to notice him. But he didn’t. It was as if no one was there from the beginning, as if Serpent’s body existed in a separate plane of existence, and the person standing there wasn’t really him. It was a ghost.

“Hello?” A girl’s voice interrupted Eli’s thoughts.

“Rae?” Eli turned towards the speaker on the table.

“Good morning—” Rae’s voice rang out from the speaker.

“No no no wait!” Eli scrambled to turn the audio off before Rae could continue, but he fell short at the last second.

“—Eli. What?”

“Whatever,” He sighed, “You already said my name. I was going to say there’s someone here, but it’s too late now. ”

“What? Since when did you live with someone?”

“Since... yesterday.”

“Wait, so the rumors were true? You did spare that kid? Serpent, was that his name?”

“Well...”

“Yes, he did,” Serpent interjected, “and I have quite a lot of complaints about him. I take it that you’re his superior?”

“No, we’re equals,” Eli stated firmly.

“Eli, don’t forget who brought you up to this position.” Rae reminded him at once.

“Ugh, you’ve been holding that over my head for months.” Eli grumbled, “Fine.”

“Your Honor, he’s been refusing to give me food.” Serpent complained as he chose a spot to sit, as close to the speaker as possible.

“That is so not true.” Eli tugged Serpent away from the speaker, “Don’t listen to a word he says, Rae.”

“For you see Your Honor,” Serpent explained, “I am a scholar, and I spend much of my time thinking. A little sugar can boost brain power by providing glucose to the brain cells that need it. However, my host has been refusing to share his stock of cand—.”

“Shhh!”

“Eli,” Rae said sternly, “have you been stealing sweets again?”

“No, haha,” Eli managed an awkward laugh, “I would never!”

“I’ll deal with you later.” She sighed, “Anyway, I’m sorry that he’s been treating you like this, Serpent.”

“I know right?”

“Eli, I honestly think you’re unfit to look after him. You’re a teenager, irresponsible, and childish. And you break rules way too often.”

“Why do you have to put it like that... it’s really hurtful, you know?” Eli winced.

“Well, I’m just stating facts.”

“Damn! That hurts even more!”

“See?” Serpent murmured, “I told you you’re a child.”

“I am not!” Eli raised his arms in protest.

“Maybe that’s why you don’t have friends.”

“I do! Please tell him I do, Rae.”

“Although I hate to admit it, he actually used to be one of the most popular commanders of the warfare division.” Rae spoke after a moment of hesitation, “Almost like a celebrity, really.”

“Oh really?” Serpent smiled mockingly and stared right at Eli. “I find that kind of hard to believe.”

“I know right? You’re not the only one here.” Rae agreed.

“I never thought you’d betray me like this,” Eli replied with faux hurt.

“Well, sorry, but it’s true. Anyway, I’m getting off-topic. Before I go, I just wanted to let you know that Nox isn’t exactly excited about this whole ordeal of sparing a criminal.”

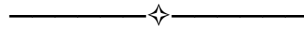
“Yeah, I know. I’ll sort it out.”

“Hurry up—”

“I know, I know. I have my own plans.”

He hung up. The last thing he wanted was for Nox to meddle in this because she had the potential to mess everything up without even knowing it. However, he had to hope that Rae could find a way to distract her somehow, because his plan had just started.

He hasn’t even figured out what Serpent was yet.



Eli knocked a single time. It was midnight, and he didn’t want to disturb Serpent, just in case he was asleep. He’d highly doubt it though. Serpent was likely awake, if the past week was any indication. Judging by the dark circles under Serpent’s eyes getting darker and darker with every passing day, it would be a miracle if he even slept a single hour during this whole week.

He knocked a few more times, louder now. Serpent had always refused to even show Eli a sliver of what was going on inside that room of his, but recently he’d been taking more and more of his meals in his room, refusing to even step outside most of the time. Eli had confronted him about it once, and he started going outside more often, dragging his legs across the floor like rags just to flop down again on the living room sofa. That was just one of the tricks he used to distract Eli, but Eli noticed that something was wrong. He always did.

“Open up!” He yelled at Serpent through the door, “If you don’t in five seconds, I’m going to kick down the door!”

“Five!”

No response.

“Four!”

Silence.

“Three!”

More silence.

“Two!”

The door remained firmly shut.

“One!”

The door fell inwards with a crash. Eli peered inside, his eyes still adjusting to the darkness of the room. All the lights were off, and even the stars were hidden behind the curtains.

“I thought I told you not to come in here.” A quiet voice seemed to materialize from the darkness, “I’m busy too, you know.”

Now that Eli’s eyes finally adjusted to the darkness, there was in fact a person sitting there. Serpent was on the bed in the darkest corner of the room, half lying down and half slouched against the wall behind him. He was almost one with the shadows themselves. If Eli didn’t know any better, he would’ve thought it was still the darkness talking back to him.

“What in the world have you been doing here?” Eli flicked on the lights. The moment the room brightened, he froze. “Ah, I see. Trashing my place?”

To describe the room as a mess would be the understatement of the century. The room was an explosion of chaos, a catastrophe captured in physical form. Books lay strewn across the floor like bodies on a battlefield, tossed haphazardly in every possible direction. They were splayed open, bent and crumpled, pages wrinkled and torn. The

floor practically disappeared beneath oceans of paper—both loose and in disheveled stacks, they sprawled across every available surface, fragments of thoughts and ideas drowned in their own excess.

But the most striking feature of the room was the alcohol bottles. Some empty, some half full, they glinted in the low light, scattered like glitter across every available surface. Some teetered precariously on the edge, waiting to shatter. The sharp, nostril-burning scent of alcohol permeated the stale air.

“High-proof tequila? Do you actually drink this stuff? Can’t believe you’re already an alcoholic at sixteen...” Eli picked one of the half-full bottles up, and smelled it. “Ugh, smells like alcohol. Disgusting.”

“No one drinks alcohol for the taste, you know.” Serpent said as he picked up another half-full bottle, “It’s for the *experience*.”

“And no one downs this many bottles in a single week.” Eli looked around the room, counting the bottles. Originally, he thought he was just exaggerating, that Serpent didn’t drink as much as he thought he had. But it was the exact opposite. At this point, the question in Eli’s mind was if it was even humanly possible to drink this much and still be sane.

Serpent set the now empty bottle down, “Well...”

Eli finished counting, and that’s when the reality finally set in. “Don’t tell me you drank all of this in a single day?!”

“What are you getting so worked up over? Could it be that you’re worried about me?” Serpent mocked.

“Well, I’d appreciate it if you stop trashing my place.” Eli answered mildly. Judging by Serpent’s tone, Eli doubted if Serpent would believe him even if he said cared.

“Sure, sure. I’ll clean it up later.” Said Serpent with a dismissive wave of his hand.

Eli crossed his arms and stood firmly in front of Serpent, “No, now.”

“Kinda rude. Now I don’t want to.” Serpent also crossed his arms in response.

“Get up!”

Without warning, Eli yanked the quilt off Serpent. For a moment, he just sat there. By the time he realized what was happening, the quilt was already half off the bed. He jumped at the last chance to grab onto the quilt before it slipped out of his grasp, and once he got it, he refused to let go.

“Hey, stop! It’s cold!” Serpent complained as he pulled the quilt out of Eli’s hands.

“Stop your excuses! Wait... you’re actually cold?” Eli looked at Serpent, and he was indeed shivering in the quilt, despite it being almost summer, “Are you sick? You have a fever!”

Eli held out his hand to touch Serpent’s forehead, to check if he did in fact have a fever. However, before he could get any closer, Serpent shoved his hand aside with such a quick reaction that Eli barely had time to process what hit his hand. But that momentary contact was enough for Eli to know. Serpent’s hands were freezing cold, even more so than a dead person.

“Eh, it’s minor. I’ll be fine. I mean hey, What’s the worst thing that could happen?” Serpent shrugged, “Maybe I’ll die, sure, but it’d be much more pleasant if my last hours weren’t wasted by you screaming at me.”

“You’ll die?!” Eli half yelled, half asked. He didn’t know why he was even surprised, because the fact Serpent is still alive was more unbelievable than if he was dead. Maybe the way he glossed over the fact he might die so casually was more surprising to Eli than anything else.

“I’m kidding.” Serpent scoffed, “It’s a normal sickness, I’ll be fine. Now get out.”

Eli refused to move. In fact, he took another step forwards. Serpent rolled his eyes, and opened his mouth to ward off Eli like he was some sort of spirit haunting him. Eli cut him off before he could make a single sound.

“What do you even take me for?”

“...Huh?” Serpent stared at him, confused.

Another moment of silence stretched before Eli sighed, “Do you actually think I’m that stupid? What’s that in your hand?”

Eli stared straight at Serpent’s hand. Although it was concealed under the quilt right now, when Eli lifted the quilt off him, there was definitely something, even if Eli only caught it for a second. His eyes wouldn’t lie.

Serpent’s expression was shuttered, and he refused to meet Eli’s eyes. In the end, Eli’s eyes still found his, and Eli’s gaze pierced through the strands of black hair obscuring Serpent’s vision. He flinched, and after a while, he pulled his hand out from the quilt.

In his palm, he held few vials and a syringe.

It all suddenly connected in Eli’s brain, and it was worse, much worse, than what he had been expecting.

For a moment, he was lost for words. “Are you insane?” Eli stared, wide eyed, at this young man in front of him. “Is this what you’ve been doing, injecting lethal poisons? And what for?!”

“I dunno, for fun I guess.” Serpent muttered, “Look, I’ve only been injecting small doses. It’s to build up my resistance to these poisons I make. I don’t want to poison myself by accident, you know.”

“Oh yeah, small doses. That wouldn’t kill you, right?” Eli asked sarcastically. He almost wanted to laugh at the fact any sane person could do anything like this. It was practically self inflicted torture. “Well, you’re about to pass out right about now, aren’t you?! Because I am, and most poisons don’t even have an effect on me! It’s a miracle you haven’t died!”

“So?”

That single word fell like a dead weight between them. For a while, the two just stood there. In silence. Staring.

“*What?*” Eli’s voice was barely above a whisper.

“So? What if I died? I couldn’t care less, to be honest.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Do you really there’s a reason for me to care? Does the act of living really carry any meaning?” Serpent met Eli’s gaze with those cold black holes that were called eyes. Those eyes that were different from any other living being. “‘God is dead.’ That’s what Nietzsche said, 192 years ago. Without God, there was no basis for objective knowledge or universal values, and everything became relative and subjective. From then on, humans no longer had any reason to live or act. There used to be a God. But now, ‘God’ has abandoned me.”

“Are you delirious?” Eli tried not to flinch from Serpent’s unforgiving stare straight into his soul, spreading coldness like a blizzard through his very being.

“Of course you wouldn’t understand. ‘God’ has never enlightened your life with meaning. Once you have experienced that, you can never go back, because that’s the moment you realize... life has no meaning.”

“In other words, you want to die. Is that it?”

“No, I don’t. Dying has no meaning either. Both of them are equally bad choices logically, and I don’t know which one to choose. So, I will just go along with whatever happens, whether it’s life or death. It’s pointless to struggle.” Serpent said it in a perfect monotone voice, not even wavering in the slightest. It was almost like this was a speech, memorized and practiced, down to every tone, every word, over and over inside his mind.

Serpent’s eyes seemed to be made for the very purpose of staring people down. That stare ripped through reality itself, mercilessly shattering everything in its wake. He was

willing to rip open every human limitation, every mental barrier, in search for the truth of the universe. but there is no truth, only insanity. But he would only find madness beyond the point of no return. He wanted to erase the event horizon of his own mind, the boundary that protected him from the incomprehensible singularity of truth. He would eventually realize his mistake, and would try to put the event horizon back around it. But by that time, it would be too late. Eli was sure of it. Everything around Serpent would become infected with the same insanity.

All those protective barricades Eli had spent so long building within his mind would crumble away in an instant.

Right now, Eli's anger moved faster than reason.

"Meaning this, meaning that! Is this what you think about every day?" Eli would've grabbed Serpent by the collar if he didn't stop himself just in time.

"Why does this even matter to you? It's my life." Serpent's voice sounded distant.

"Because, I went through that much effort, to wrench your life out of Nox's grasp, and you just throw it away?!"

Blue eyes met green, and suddenly, Eli's frustration came to a screeching halt. That was the exact moment Eli realized it was all futile. Not a thing has changed about Serpent. In fact, his gaze seemed deepen, collapsing into a pit of counterarguments against any word that could come out of Eli's mouth. This was a debate Serpent had already exhausted, perhaps thousands of times, inside his own mind. No matter how much Eli wanted to reason with him, it was impossible. Because he was right. Everything was meaningless, including this debate that would have no definite answer. Neither of them wanted to listen to the other, let alone yield. They had already set their first foot onto the infinite staircase down to hell. Eli had to stop before one of them shoved the other over the rails.

Eli pinched the bridge of his nose and let out a long sigh. "I'm supposed to be better at this. Okay." He took in a deep breath. "I'm sorry about how that sounded, I didn't mean it like that. I understand how you feel, and that's exactly why I'm so frustrated."

Serpent cast him an unimpressed look, "I highly doubt you understand."

“That doesn’t matter right now. Just... Please at least listen to me before you end your life. You don’t care about living because it has no meaning, is that right? What is the so-called meaning you’re searching for?”

“Truth.” Serpent answered simply.

“What is truth to you?”

“A universal truth that is known with absolute logical certainty. In other words, the choice of ‘God’.”

“I don’t know who this so-called ‘God’ is, but I do know that what they’re telling you to search for doesn’t exist.”

Serpent laughed dryly. “If you think you, a mere human, are wiser than “God”, tell me.” He looked at Eli, and suddenly it felt like the world had gone dark. “What is the meaning of any of this?”

For a long moment, the only response to his question was silence. And truly, Eli believed that silence should be the only correct answer to this question. After all, words were far from sufficient when it comes to things like this.

At last, Eli spoke, choosing every word with care. “Well, sorry to break it to you, but life has no meaning. From your perspective, nothing we do has any meaning.”

“Exactly, that’s what I said.” Serpent said it as if he saw this coming from miles away, that he had always been right. “See, we agree.”

“So stop searching for a meaning that doesn’t exist,” Eli said quietly, but it was louder than anything else he could’ve said. “We can never be objective. We’re affected by emotions, by values, and by simply experiencing the world, we’re being biased. And none of us can change that.”

Serpent shot him an unimpressed glare. This was probably an answer he had heard over and over, one that he most definitely didn't like. But Eli continued, meeting his disappointed stare head-on.

"Because we're all human."

In that instant, something clicked. Or snapped. Serpent was quiet for a moment, wide-eyed, simply processing the weight of Eli's revelation.

"Is that so?" Serpent whispered faintly.

He began to laugh. Softly at first, but it grew louder.

"So that's what I've been missing all this time, huh? Interesting. Interesting!" His eyes gleamed with a certain light that Eli couldn't quite pin down. It was either happiness or madness, two very different things. "You are an interesting person, Eli."

"So, do you want to live?" Eli asked at last, after Serpent's laughter had died down.

"Yes." Serpent simply smiled. "Yes, I do."

Serpent opened his mouth as if he wanted to say something else, but before any sounds came out, he promptly passed out.

Chapter 2

It was the crack of dawn, and Eli was already awake. He glanced down from the glass walls of his living room. In the gardens below, soldiers were already gathering, some pouring out from the very building they were standing in, others arriving from the buildings in the outer rings. He had been hit swiftly by notice from Nox in the middle of the night, telling him to prepare the Air Force to engage in battle as soon as humanly possible. At that time, Eli had thought it was some joke. In fact, he still thought it was. What problem was big enough to involve the Air Force at all, let alone the entire Air Force? Was Nox intentionally creating more problems for him as revenge for his choice to spare Serpent a little over a week ago? If it was, Eli could only expect these

annoyances to grow into real problems. However, orders were orders, no matter how absurd.

“Is the Air Force getting ready?” Serpent peeked out from the crack of his door.

“Yeah.” Eli said noncommittedly as he continued putting on his cape. Suddenly, he stopped dead in his tracks as if he realized something, and turned towards Serpent.

“Wait, why would you know?”

“Oh,” Serpent smirked at Eli, “I sent a message to Nox using your communicator last night.”

“So it was you?” Eli wore an unimpressed look that said he was not surprised in the slightest. “How’d you even manage to do it?”

“Easy. I gave you an anesthetic that kicked in after you opened your menu. You fell asleep afterward, and I just used your hand to control it. I mean, I just wanted to make an honest suggestion.” Serpent shrugged with feigned innocence, “The location Valkyria is attempting to cross is a crucial area in our borders, and aerial forces are the only forces that can get there without taking a major detour around the river.”

“How do you explain using the entire Air Force? Isn’t that a bit overkill?”

“Sure, it is. But it eliminates any chances of defeat. If the entire Air Force is able to be used, why not take full advantage of that?”

“Your strategies are full of holes.” Eli sighed, not taking his eyes off the soldiers below the building, who were now gathered in orderly lines. “For starters, what about defense? Don’t forget this is the main center of operations for the intelligence division. Almost half of our classified documents are stored here, and Valkyrian spies constantly have their eyes fixed on them. What if they take this chance to attack this building?”

“Don’t worry, they won’t be able to take a single thing from here. I am certain.”

“How are you so sure?” Eli turned around to face Serpent.

Serpent spoke with a tone that was as cold and certain as the look in his eyes.

“Because I will personally see to that.”



They passed by the Air Force on their way to their protection target, the entire building occupied by the intelligence division. It was almost an insurmountable goal for the fifty of them, for the number of floors alone outnumbered them. Yet they had no other choice than to replace the 200-strong force that once defended this place. Eli had sent a message to their communications, personally entrusting them with this role.

Why only fifty? This was impossible from the start. Seth thought as he led his small defense force closer and closer to the building.

Well, whatever the case was, the Seraph had made a miscalculation. Because this force had already failed. They were not the defense force Eli had requested.

They were Valkyrian spies.

The original defense force had already been exterminated by their own hands. The clothes they were wearing were uniforms stolen from them, complete with the Singularity soldiers' IDs.

“Sir? Sir Seth?” A soldier's voice sounded behind Seth.

“I think I've spotted our target. Look up there.”

Seth took out his binoculars and looked up as the soldier said. He was right. There was a young man, on the topmost floor, sitting in a seat facing out the window. There was no doubt it was who they were looking for, because that hooded black cape could indicate no other person. It was their target. *The* target, who was responsible for an incident that led to the biggest losses to their intelligence division in the past three years.

“Sir, can’t we just snipe him from here to save the effort of infiltrating the building? He’s sitting right next to the window, and this would be a brilliant opportunity.” The soldier said as his hands itched towards the sniper rifle.

“I wish it was that easy.” Seth sighed. He had a feeling that some mysterious force was forcing them to enter the building instead of using any of their other strategies. “The spot he is sitting in right now is a blind spot. We can’t hit it, especially on a windy day like this.”

“I see.” The soldier pulled his hands away from the rifle, “Then we’ll continue with our original strategy?”

Seth nodded. “Also, make sure all of you drop your weapons.” He glared towards the soldier behind him, “Especially that sniper rifle. We can’t bring heavy firearms inside, or else the Singularity guards will get suspicious.”

The soldier silently nodded. By the time they approached the front double doors of the building, all they had remaining on them was a few daggers.

“Are you the commissioned defense force from the defense division?” The guard at the door held out an arm to prevent Seth from passing.

“Yes. Here is my ID and proof of request.” Seth held out the card and his pin as if this was any ordinary day. There was no need to be nervous, after all. Their plan was flawless, and these Singularity guards were far outnumbered by them.

“All cleared. You can pass.” The guard said as the double doors slowly opened.

They stepped inside. Inside was a grand hall, with polished white walls, and a lush sky-blue carpet. However, before they had time to admire the gold engravings and chandeliers, Seth decided that was enough time wasted.

“Soldiers, take your assigned stations!”

All the soldiers pulled their gaze away from the surroundings, snapping back to the mission at hand with a unanimous “Yes Sir!”



At the end of the hallway stood a cold iron door—The entrance to the weapons storage vault. It looked so sturdy and unmoving, and he was sure that it could withstand a nuclear blast with no problems. But this security was by no means overkill on Singularity's end. Over half of the firearms in this building were stored in this single room, and if they could open the doors, it was all theirs. The Singularity guards would not stand a chance against them.

A lone soldier, himself, walked out from the line of soldiers.

E98713.92J.

That was the password their informants had given them. He had to be quick, but he couldn't afford to make a mistake. He reached for the keypad on the door, his fingers trembling slightly. He typed in the first letter of the password, then paused. Was it a capital or a lowercase? He checked in his mind, where he had memorized the password the the point where he'd be able to recite it in his sleep. It was a capital. He pressed the key again, hoping it registered. He moved on to the next letter, then the next. He typed in the numbers, double-checking each one. He was almost done. He pressed the last key, then held his breath.

One chance. That was it. If the alarms were triggered right now, they would be in a bad place.

He heard a beep, then a click. The door opened.

"Yes!" He exclaimed under his breath as the door hissed and slowly began to open.

All forty of them wasted no time in rushing into the vault. The interior was dimly lit, with a red light on the ceiling. The walls were lined with racks, holding various types of guns, from pistols to rifles to shotguns. There were also shelves, containing seemingly endless boxes of ammunition, magazines, scopes, and silencers.

“Take whatever you need. The IDs you have should give you access to any weapons.” He said as he took a pistol from the racks.

The very moment he said that, the entire room flared up with red. Alarms started blaring from every corner of the room as the entire squad fell into disarray, frantically looking around for an escape.

By the time they rushed towards the door, it was already closed.

What? No no no no, this wasn't supposed to happen!

“Unrecognized ID. Alerting combat personnel.” A robotic voice said, above the blaring alarms.

That only worsened the panic inside the vault. All he could hear was alarms, yelling, and footsteps. Whether those footsteps were from their own soldiers or the enemy's, he didn't know. All he knew was that no matter whose footsteps those were, the enemy soldiers would be arriving to kill them soon. It was only a matter of a few extra seconds.

Wait. It was then he finally realized something, and with that, his panic began to clear.

“Everyone! Don't panic!” He yelled, his voice above the chaos.

Suddenly, all the soldiers stopped as if they had seen salvation.

He continued, “I know this is unexpected, but we can use this to our advantage. Someone, probably the Seraph, has somehow foreseen this and removed the permissions for these IDs to leave the vault with weapons. However, the lockdown sequence our informants had warned us about was not triggered.”

He could see the gaze in the soldiers' eyes visibly change, from one of utter despair to one of hope.

“Instead, whoever tampered with the permissions has instead chosen to inform all the guards in this building to come to us.” He grinned in satisfaction, silently laughing at who could've made a mistake as stupid and fatal as this one, “Which was exactly what we

were hoping to achieve in the first place.” He raised his pistol into the air. “Take your weapons! As soon as the door is opened, shoot. We far outnumber them. And after we killed all of them, we can move freely with no more obstructions.”

Forty guns were pointed at the vault door as they waited for the footsteps to get louder. They could hear the Singularity guards approaching, closer and closer with every moment. But none of them were scared. Because this victory belonged to them.

The vault door flung open. Before the guards even had time to see any of their faces, he aimed and—

“Fire!”

Forty triggers were pressed at the same time.

Not a single bullet came out.



“Have any of you gotten any leads to where our target might be?” She questioned impatiently at the returning soldiers. They had practically searched every room, every cabinet, every closet, and every bed at this point. Yet their target seemed like some invisible ghost that just refused to show himself no matter how much they searched. They were trained for this. They had done this thousands of times before and succeeded every time. It was just as embarrassing as it was frustrating to admit that the only time they happened to fail was against this random teenage boy.

“Not at all.” The soldiers all shook their heads, much to their leader’s disappointment.

Before she could voice her frustration, a sound stopped her.

She heard it. They all did. The faint sound of alarms blaring, many few floors below them.

“That was from... the weapons storage room?” Asked the soldier next to her.

“Yeah.” She stared at the floor as if that would somehow allow her to see what was happening down there. “They’ll be fine. In fact...” Her frustration slowly gave way to a smile, “I dare say this is a positive development.”

“How so?” The soldier tilted his head in confusion.

“Think about it.” She said, deep in thought herself, “All the armed forces have left this building, so who else is here?”

“The... operatives of their intelligence division?”

“That’s right. And as far as I know, most of their operatives aren’t able to engage in combat. That means, Singularity must do everything to prevent its intelligence personnel from going into fights in order to prevent losses. The easiest way to do this is of course to instruct them to hide in a safe room. And who else is a priority protection target for Singularity? The Seraph.”

“So what you’re saying is...”

“All the operatives must be gathering on the top floor right now, in the office of the Seraph.” She pointed upwards. They were only one roof away from the floor in question. “What we need to do is to break into that room and take everyone there as hostages. Then we can use that as leverage to turn Singularity against our target. He will have nowhere left to run.”

“But how do we get past the security to the Seraph’s floor? Just as our informants told us, it’s the floor with the most defense mechanisms.”

“Don’t worry,” She smiled with absolute confidence this time, “We sorted that out a long time ago.”



The wooden front doors gave away and flung open, revealing the line of Valkyrian soldiers with daggers in hand.

“Put your hands behind your head! Move and we’ll kill you!”

Their soon-to-be hostages all tried to run, of course. But they soon realized this was called the last resort room for a reason. All the rooms led to dead ends. There was only one entrance for the hostages, and now it was blocked.

“How were these people able to get in here?!” an operative’s eyes widened in fear as he slowly backed away from the doorway, closer and closer to the glass, as if he could escape that way.

“Our leader disabled all the defense mechanisms from the control room.” She grinned. It was an expression of absolute confidence, one that said this was all foretold. “You lot are now our hostages.”

The Valkyrian soldiers behind her rushed into the room all at once, like water in a flood. Before the operatives even had time to react, there was a dagger on each of their necks. The first rays of dawn shone through the glass walls and made the blades sparkle like a silent warning.

“Don’t let them talk to each other, just in case they coordinate any plans to escape.” She said as she stepped into the center of the room, counting the kneeling hostages that her soldiers had gathered in a line.

“Hello, soldiers of Singularity.” She began, speaking every word slowly into the microphone. “All of your operatives are now in our hands, on the top floor. I would be glad to release them if you accept our only condition—Cease fire at once and find the young man in the black hooded cloak. Bring him to the top floor in ten minutes. I swear on my life that I will let all the hostages go without a single scratch. Do you accept my offer?”

She knowingly smiled as she waited for the opposition’s voices, a collective gasp of shock, or something similar. There could only be one answer in the end. operatives were the core of every organization, the brain that kept the body of the organization working. Losing a few of these people was damage enough, not to mention tens.

However, the answer she anticipated never came.

“Hello?” She tried again.

“Uh...” A soldier peeked outside the wooden doors, “I think the signal’s jammed.”

“What?”

“The broadcast doesn’t seem to be working anywhere else outside of this room, which means there are probably jammers around here to prevent communication from getting out.”

“... Alright, fine then.” She drawled slowly, through gritted teeth. “*You*. You know who I’m talking to. Reveal yourself right now, or else I kill all these people. If that happens, you alone will be responsible for all of this, and I can only assume Singularity will give you a very painful death. So choose wisely. You have ten seconds.”

She wasted no time before counting down, her voice cold and menacing. "Ten... nine... eight... seven... six... five... four..."

She paused, hoping for a response.

"Three..."

Soldiers moved their daggers closer and closer to the hostages’ necks.

"Two..."

The blades drew blood. Only a thin line right now, but in one more second—

Darkness came to answer her. Without warning, everything changed. The lights flickered and died. The glass walls that once let the sunlight in turned opaque all at once, plunging the room into absolute darkness.

All at once, everyone in the room briefly forgot about the countdown of death. *It’s probably just a power outage. It’s fine.* She tried to reassure herself in the darkness, but

even the voice in her mind was slightly wavering. There was something deeply unsettling that she couldn't ignore. Was it the darkness itself or something in it?

For the first time since she came here, she felt *hunted*, by something she couldn't even see. All her experiences, garnered over the years, have come to the same conclusion. She was on the verge of something bad. Very bad.

The iron doors outside suddenly fall shut.

That was their only way out.

"To be honest, I don't really care." A young man's voice sounded behind her, a voice that lacked any human characteristics.

"Who..." She began, but soon realized her mistake. *Was a human being even here?* She couldn't feel the presence of a person behind her. *This is a recording, right?*

The voice laughed. "Oh no, this is not a recording." it replied out loud to her thoughts.

She turned around just in time for the windows to clear up again. With the light rays of dawn shining through again, she could see—
—nothing. Nothing at all. There was not a single soul there, just shadows from where the sunlight could not reach. The darkness there was as deep and dense as mud.

She takes another step towards the shadows, to check if there was anyone there. In return, the darkness also stepped out into the light.

"Hey," it said with a smile as thin as paper.

Only then did she realize their target had been here all along, in the very room they were standing in. He had melded into the shadows, becoming one with the darkness itself. She was sure that she couldn't have been more than an arm's reach away from this young man, yet she had failed to see him completely.

In that moment, she almost instinctively took a step back. But instead, she forced herself to steady and stand her ground.

“Drop your weapon!” She demanded.

“Alright, fine.” The young man raised his hands in defeat as he dropped the butterfly knife in his hand with a sharp clang. “You’re all soldiers who could easily overwhelm me. Shouldn’t I be the one who’s scared? Are the ten of you seriously scared of me?”

She looked around. He was right. He was outnumbered, ten to one. So why wasn’t he surrendering?

“But you’d be right to be scared.” The young man’s smile was slow and cold, “If any of you try anything I don’t like, I will not hesitate to blow up this entire building.”

“With what?” She lifted her eyebrows, skeptical that anything could turn the tide at this point.

“The bombs.” The young man spoke without any emotions, as if reading from a textbook, “There are four in every single hallway, two in every single room. Including this one.”

“How could anyone have time to plant hundreds of bombs unless they anticipated this attack at least a week beforehand? I know for a fact no information was leaked about this operation. In other words...” She moved in a flash, bringing her dagger up to the young man’s neck before he could move. “You’re bluffing.”

“I never bluff without basis.”

The young man lowered his arms. In that instant, she could briefly see the shape of a black rectangle slip out of his sleeves into his palm. *‘I will not hesitate to blow up this building.’* It was just as he said.

He pressed the button on the remote control without any hesitation.

They all heard the beep. The unanimous beep of electronics, from the corners of the room. They all ducked down and held their heads, as if that would do anything to soften

the impact of the impending explosion. But of course it was all useless. They were way too close to the explosion, and had nowhere to escape. Fate was already sealed.

Silence.

Slowly, soldiers began to lift their heads, glancing nervously around. *Am I dead?* After a while, she realized she was in fact, still alive and well, in the same room she was in before. Nothing had changed.

However, when she had the courage to fully open her eyes, it was quickly proven to her that something had changed. A tiny red light was flashing in each corner of the room.

“The bombs are counting down!” a soldier yelled.

“Now you have five minutes before the building gets blown into smithereens.” The young man’s mouth twisted into a smile. “Try something like that again, and I will make sure that we all die right here, right now.”

“Are you insane?!” She got up from the floor in a flash, wanting to grab the young man’s collar. But she stopped herself when she saw the remote control still in his hand.

“Ahahaha!” the young man burst into a laugh that strangely lacked depth.

Everyone in the room glared at him in disbelief. Who could laugh in such a situation? When all of them ducked down to the floor in a panic to save themselves, this young man did not even attempt to escape. He simply stood there. And now he stood here, laughing at his, no, everyone’s impending death.

He ignored the glares and slowly continued, “As I said before, I don’t care. I don’t care if anyone here dies. You, me, them. It doesn’t matter.”

She stared at the young man, not even knowing what to say for a moment. “What about your own operatives?”

“Mine?” he laughed, “What made you think I was with Singularity? Because I sold Valkyria’s information to them? If you think holding them hostage will save you, you’ve

made a miscalculation.” His eyes were dark and cold, more so than the shadows behind him. “I won’t feel, nor care at all if any of them dies. You forget that I’m an information broker. One that sells information to whoever wants it. Loyalty means nothing to me.” He looked at the remote controller in his hand. “Now, time is running short. Three minutes. I wonder what you will do?”

“What we always do.” She turned away from the young man. If hostages won’t do, they would simply have to use force. Their plan wasn’t ruined yet. As she said that, she saw her soldiers already getting to work without wasting a single precious second. “We are a special operations force after all. Disarming bombs is our specialty.”

“You can’t possibly disarm every single bomb in this entire building in time.”

“Oh yes, we can. Because you made a miscalculation too.” She turned her head, meeting the young man’s eyes. “You cut off your own path.”

“Oh really?” He scoffed, “That’s funny. Enlighten me, then. ”

“Signals from here can’t reach any other floor; You jammed it yourself, didn’t you? That means only the bombs here are activated. After we disarm them...”

“We got it!” soldiers called out unanimously.

She didn’t need to be told twice.

“...We can do whatever we want.” Before she even finished her sentence, her dagger was already on the neck of the young man.

“Kill me, then.” He said, almost mockingly. “We’re all going to die anyway.”

“What?”

“Look at what’s behind me.”

He spread out his arms, and before she lifted her head to see the monstrosity in its entirety, she already knew what it was. The glint of metal extending out of the walls gave

it away. The one thing their informants said would result in complete extermination. The one thing they must not trigger at all costs.

Twin machine gun turrets the size of a canon.

The world seemed to slow down. Then, the barrels began to turn.

In that moment, there was only one thought on her mind.

Run. run runrunrunrun—

It was too late.

“Fire.”

He took half a step to the side.

The world lit up with flashes of flame. Bullets rained down indiscriminately on every wall and every corner of the room like an unrelenting thunderstorm, punctuated only by screams. Screams that barely started before they fell silent forever. The metallic symphony of bullets tearing through the air was accompanied by the sharp shattering of glass as windows exploded into a shower of shards.

A bullet passed through where the young man stood, only a fraction of a second ago. However, it did not fail its purpose entirely. Instead, it found a new target—

—When she saw the bullet, it had already hit her in the forehead.



After what could have been mere minutes or thousands of years, the deafening sound of bullets fell silent. The operative finally lifted his head from the floor, and the first thing that came into view was nothing short of nightmarish.

The air was still heavy with the acrid smell of gunpowder and smoke, but he could see it. Bodies. Dead bodies torn apart and mangled by more holes than he could count. Corpses

laid against the wall, forever frozen in their last attempt to escape. Blood scattered across the once-white floor like the artwork of some deranged artist. Not even the walls escaped—they too were ridden with holes, blackened and burned in the aftermath.

And in the center of it all, stood Serpent. He wiped a streak of blood off his face. It was not his own blood. It would've been his if he had been half a step to the side, but now the Valkyrian soldier lay dead in place of him. Half a step. That was the difference between life and death.

“You all can get up now.” Serpent speaks with a perfectly calm and flat tone, as if everything that happened was nothing more than an inconvenience.

“Are you out of your Goddamn mind?” The operative whispered, or maybe he screamed it. “You could've gotten us all killed. All of us! Do you have any idea how important we operatives are? We're the brains of the organiza—”

“Yeah yeah,” Serpent cut him off with an offhanded reply and a wave of his hand, “but all of you are still alive, no? Besides...” He leaned down, forcing the operative to meet his eyes. “I think it's time you realize you aren't as smart as you think. If I were you, I would've seen all this coming. And yet I had to painstakingly use bombs to distract the Valkyrians, just so I could learn your ‘secret intelligence division sign language’ and tell you what to do. If I didn't tell you to duck down when the turrets fire, you lot would've all died.”

“Y- you...” The officer stammered in disbelief, “learned our sign language? In five minutes?”

“Yep, I noticed you were communicating right under the nose of the Valkyrian soldiers from the start.” Serpent smiled and stood up again, “Did you think I needed some secret documentation on how to decipher your hand signals? It's so mind-numbingly easy to learn that I'm surprised anyone thought it was a good idea, much less making it an official means of conveying information.”

“That doesn't make your plans any less reckless. How could you have known that the turrets had blind spots? What if it just shot at every square inch of the room?” The officer half demanded, half asked.

“Of course it must have a blind spot, or else it would kill the very person who activated it for the purpose of protecting themselves. This blind spot would, under normal circumstances, be something only the Seraph would know, since this is his office.”

“So how could you know? Did he tell you?”

“He doesn’t need to tell me.” Serpent gestured towards the wall behind them, “If you take a look with your eyes, you can see that because of the positioning of the turrets, they can’t hit the floor except on the walls directly opposite of them. And logically, they wouldn’t hit the line of space where the Seraph’s chair is located, to avoid hitting him. However, where would a person threatening the Serpah most likely be standing? In line with the Seraph’s chair, where he is probably sitting. Therefore, in order to shoot the intruder but not the protection target, the most reasonable solution is to establish a safe zone that only slightly deviates from the area the protection target is supposed to be in. Then the protection target, knowing the safe zone, would step aside just slightly. The intruder would not notice, leaving them to get shot.”

“What...?”

Every word that Serpent said made sense. It almost made too much sense. But it just seemed so... *impossible*.

“Don’t worry about it. Humans have their limitations, after all.” Serpent smiled as he turned away. It wasn’t a smile of forgiveness. It was one of pity.

Serpent walked, slowly, toward the shattered glass walls. He glanced down at the city below. The people, the buildings, the trees—they were nothing more than insignificant dots, so far down below that they were nothing but tiny specks.

With his black hair whipping erratically in the wind, he turned around and faced his audience. Or rather, audiences. Because he was also looking at something else, something that wasn’t the people in this room. His eyes locked with the glinting lens of a security camera, hidden in the roof’s corner.

Serpent leaned back, his heels stepping into the void.

A self-satisfied smile appeared on his face as he spread his arms wide.

In that instant, the sun rose above the horizon.

He took out a knife, and threw—

“I’ll see you on the other side.”

—And then his body crossed the edge.





The last screen flickered into static. The knife found its mark. Again.

“Damn it!” Seth cursed as he threw himself out of his chair, away from the surveillance monitors that once had been his eyes throughout the entire building. They were all useless now. He couldn’t control anything, now that he couldn’t see. It was like grappling in the dark.

His hands tightened around the table, his knuckles turning white as he gripped the edge.

How long before he would find me?

There was an answer to that question almost immediately.

A loud crash. It was the sound of glass shattering, just one wall away. Seth didn’t need to see who it was to know—the sound of the intruder’s footsteps said it all. Slow, almost mocking. As if he had all the time in the world. Seth stepped back into a corner as he waited for the footsteps to become louder and louder and louder and louder—

—there were a few beeps of the keypad, like a warning bell, before the door creaked open.

The young man stepped inside. He was like a tourist, looking at every corner of the room with careful scrutinization. His gaze first landed on the screens of static, then at the chair, then at every wall. Seth briefly met eyes with the young man as his gaze swept past the corner he stood in. Even though Seth stood there, in the corner, illuminated by the sunlight and completely in the young man’s field of view, he moved on as if there was nothing there. Because to him, there was, in fact, nothing there.

To see is to believe, to believe is to see.

Silently, like a predator stalking its prey, Seth took out a pistol. The young man had his back turned to him. This was the most opportune moment. He only needed one bullet to

kill the young man before he could even react. He aimed at the young man's head and squeezed the trigger.

Click.

No bullet.

Before Seth had time to be shocked about this turn of events, the young man immediately spun around to face the direction of the sound, as if he was waiting for that signal all along.

But Seth was no longer there. He had moved in a flash, knowing his location had been compromised. Now he was behind the young man. Things had not gone quite as anticipated, but a dagger to the neck was as good as a bullet to the head.

The young man took something out of his cloak, something Seth couldn't quite catch. Was it a gun? A knife? It didn't matter. He couldn't defend against someone he couldn't see.

The sound of glass against the floor reached Seth's ears just as he put his dagger against the young man's neck.

Then there was pain.

Seth's body fell to the floor with a thud. If it wasn't for the pain, the unbearable pain that filled every inch of his being, he wouldn't even know if he was alive.

"You can hide from my eyes, but not from the truth. Sight can be manipulated, distorted, or obscured. But reality remains the same, regardless of how you see it." The young man turned around, and met Seth's pained gaze with eyes colder than ice.

"H..." Seth attempted to speak, but the pain proved to be too much for both his mind and body. He had to use all his energy just to keep himself from screaming. Maintaining his invisibility was out of the question.

“Shhh.” The young man holds up a finger to silence Seth. He then continued in a gentle soothing voice as he looked down at Seth. “You don’t need to talk. You want to know how, right?”

Seth could only watch, frozen in pain. And in fear. An unknown fear gripped him like the hands of death. The young man spoke with tenderness, but there was raw danger in that voice. His eyes were also strange. They were too calm. Much too calm, too calm to belong to a human. Human eyes flinch when they see other humans suffering. But this young man just stared back as if he was not staring at a living, breathing fellow human being.

“You were set up from the start. It wasn’t because of your brilliant plan that you managed to infiltrate this building.” The young man’s expression was full of mocking pity. “I was the one who convinced Singularity to use their entire Air Force for this operation, even though it was a distraction sent by Valkyria all along. I was the one who commissioned those fifty Singularity guards, just so you could kill them and use their identities to infiltrate this building. Did you not stop to think for a second how much of a coincidence all of these events were? What were the chances that Singularity, an organization which has remained successful over all these years, could make a decision to leave one of the most important central buildings unattended?”

Stop. Seth wanted to scream. The more this young man spoke, the more blood drained from Seth’s face. *All of this. All of this was never in my control.* He didn’t want to believe it, but the results were there. The bloody results, there for everyone to see.

“I left some guards at the entrance to make sure you couldn’t come in with firearms, and instead had to go to the vault to steal them. The night before you arrived, I used the Seraph’s account to remove all fifty of these guards’ IDs from the system so that if they took weapons, the lockdown protocols would be triggered. Normally, the protocol would be to blow up the entire vault, along with the people in it. But I thought about it, and honestly, blowing up all those weapons would be such a waste!” The young man gave a slight shrug.

Seth gritted his teeth. He knew that wasn’t the real reason. The real reason was much worse. Judging by the young man’s expression, he didn’t care about the weapons either. He simply wanted to mess with them.

The young man continued, “So I took all the bullets out of the guns in the vault instead, and changed the protocol to security alert. After the vault doors opened, you were the first to rush out with your invisibility ability, right? Well, I regret to inform you that your soldiers who stayed behind realized a little too late that their guns were all empty. So unfortunately they all died before they had time to react.” The young man smiled thinly, “And you saw what happened to your second group from the surveillance cameras.”

“You...” Seth barely forces out a coherent sentence amidst the pain, “you foresaw all this?”

“Yes, I did. I foresaw all this and more.” The young man’s expression was full of mocking pity. “I planned everything. I executed everything. Do you see it now? You had no chance from the start.”

“Impossible! How is it humanly possible to—”

“Your human limitations don’t apply to me.” The young man cut Seth off with a voice that completely lacks emotions. “Just because you can’t do something doesn’t mean I can’t.”

“... If it’s as you say, then you could’ve gotten us all killed before we even got into this building. Do you want to torture me for information?”

“Of course not. If you think that spilling all your secrets might make me think twice before killing you, you’re wrong. You are no different from all the others. I won’t feel, nor care at all if any of you die.”

The voice that came out of his mouth was nothing like a young man’s. It was a sound that was brutal and unfeeling, as if it came straight out of hell.

“Then what was the point of any of this?” Seth hated the despair that was creeping into his voice, but it was there all the same. Somehow, torture might’ve been better. Because it meant that the young man needed him for something, something he couldn’t get himself. But the young man had it all. And in his eyes, Seth was nothing more than an inconvenience, an insect on a road.

“A warning.”

Just as the young man said that the poison kicked in. Seth could pinpoint the exact moment it did. He suddenly clutched his throat, hoping to scream, but only a faint whimper escaped his lips. The world was spinning and fading as if it was falling into a dark abyss. His muscles contracted and spasmed, as if they were being torn apart and then ripped from his bones. Breathing became impossible as every breath felt like fire burning through his body, but his fading consciousness screamed at him to keep breathing, no matter the cost.

The young man said with an indifferent expression, “The more you struggle, the more poison you breathe in.”

And he was right. Seth’s voice was nothing more than a fractured mess at this point. “Are you insane...? The poison will kill you too...”

“It wouldn’t kill me.” He took a deep breath as if savoring the air itself, “I made it.”

The young man met Seth’s eyes as he let out a silent scream. Although no sound came out, he could taste his own blood.

It hurts. It hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts—

“It hurts, doesn’t it? I’ve felt it too. Well, don’t worry. It will only get worse.” even though the young man was smiling, his expression felt flat, like he was not actually smiling. In fact, it was barely an expression at all. No cruelty, no mockery, no twisted joy at Seth’s suffering. “So I suggest you end this as early as possible.”

—End. Right. It would be nice.

With the last of his strength before his entire body becomes paralyzed, Seth curled his hands around his dagger. The hilt felt cold to the touch. It felt nice. It felt calming. Then, slowly, he moved his hand, as much as it would. He stopped next to his heart. That’s as far as his hand would go, but it was alright. If it was not for the effects of the

poison, his hands would not be shaking right now. He wasn't afraid anymore. He couldn't bear a single second more of this pain.

Death would be kinder to him.

He pierced the dagger towards his heart.

It didn't go through. All he felt was another sharp, unbearable pain, dissolved among the countless others like a drop of water in a lake.

His hands were too weak to pierce his ribcage. In fact, he could only look helplessly as the dagger fell out of his grasp, falling to the floor with a sharp clatter.

"Oh, sorry," The young man kicked the dagger out of his view with his foot. "I forgot you're too weak because of the poison. Here, have this."

The young man pulled out a pistol and dropped it on the floor.

Seth's fingers inched towards it, as quick as he could will his hand to move. He gripped the pistol as if it were some precious treasure.

"You have one bullet. That's right." There was nothing left in the young man's voice. "Shoot yourself through the heart."

That's what Seth did.

Gunshot.

Scream.

The bullet found itself half an inch away from where it should be. Blood started gushing out uncontrollably, but he wasn't dead.

"Oops, you missed!" the young man's expression briefly twisted into a grin before it returned to its original coldness. Seth had missed his only chance to enter the sweet

embrace of death, and it was all because of how much his hands were shaking from the poison gas. “Now the question is whether you will die of pain or blood loss first.”

Pain, probably. Seth grimaced inside his mind, although his actual expression was probably more similar to a distorted face of pain.

But the young man’s own response to his question was even more horrifying. “Just kidding. I didn’t intend for you to die that easily anyway.”

“What... are you...?” Seth looked as if the world was ending before his very eyes.

Because he saw *that*. In a truly bleak moment, he finally came to a revelation. The person standing before him wasn’t a human being. There was nothing there. There was not even a sign that a living thing was talking to him, much less a human being. *Those eyes are not supposed to belong to living people. They belong to the dead.* Just like how the *thing* standing before him didn’t belong to this human world.

This young man is the devil itself. An incomprehensible, higher being.

When the young man opened his mouth to answer Seth’s question, his voice sounded completely hollow.

“I am Serpent.”



Eli burst through the door without a single knock. His eyes blazed like wildfire.

“What have you done.”

It wasn’t a question, it was a statement. A statement that allowed no room for excuses, because no matter how many excuses Serpent could come up with, it was ultimately meaningless. His actions were unjustifiably reckless either way.

Serpent seemed to realize this too, because he simply turned around and looked at Eli blankly. It wasn’t a beg for forgiveness or understanding. But nor was it an apology.

“Answer me!” Eli demanded, unable to stand the silence any longer, “Why did you use the bombs without sparing a single thought about the people that could’ve died?”

“Huh.” Serpent mumbled as he glanced at the operatives hiding behind Eli like anxious children. “So they told you.” They all seemed to collectively shrink into the shadows as soon as Serpent acknowledged their existence. “Why am I being blamed? All the people I killed were Valkyrian soldiers.”

Serpent let out a long sigh, “Look, I wouldn’t actually blow up the building.”

Eli’s eyes bore through him.

Then Eli said slowly, quietly, “You’re a liar.”

Serpent blinked. “What?”

“You look at me with those eyes and expect me to believe you?” Eli stepped towards him until they were eye-to-eye. “I know for a fact that if those Valkyrians tried to actually kill you, you would’ve killed everyone here without a second thought.”

For a moment, Serpent’s eyes showed some indescribable emotion, too brief and subtle to catch. Was it surprise or anger? Whatever it was, it disappeared as quickly as it came when he took a step back.

“But it worked out in the end, didn’t it?” He crossed his arms.

“Why did you have to take that path?” There could’ve been so many other things you could’ve done.”

“It was the easiest.” Serpent replied dully. “It’s that simple. It’s the only way I could’ve killed all the intruders all at once with a zero percent chance of failure.”

“You would gamble the lives of twenty people for a better probability?”

“Sure,” Serpent shrugged and turned away. “If you want to put it that way.”

Just like that, he was already walking away, past Eli, past the operatives, past it all, without a single word of explanation. It was almost like they didn't deserve to know, so much so that Serpent would rather let them misunderstand for the rest of eternity.

Serpent managed to get one foot out the door before Eli whirled around and grabbed his shoulder with a force that could crack Serpent's already thin limbs like a twig.

"We're not done here. This whole thing was on purpose, wasn't it?"

For the briefest second, Serpent's muscles stiffened—a habit Eli recognized as something Serpent did when Eli said something that drove the conversation in an unanticipated direction. It was only a slight movement, so small it was impossible to tell from just looking at him. But Eli could feel it, because he had been waiting for this signal all this time.

"Huh?" Serpent looked back.

"Stop playing dumb." Eli said quietly, but his tone was firm like an order. "I knew as soon as I got to the battlefield that there was something wrong. There was no way Headquarters would make such a stupid mistake as to send two hundred people to fight twenty."

There was a moment of silence before Serpent answered, "Fine. Yeah, I did that." He replied quietly, slowly, "I set up this entire thing as a warning to Valkyria."

"How?" Eli's brows furrowed in confusion before he realized what was happening and quickly readjusted his muscles to show an indifferent expression. It was always like this. Every conversation with Serpent was like a debate, in which whichever side was caught off guard would be quickly overpowered. "They're not going to be scared by losing fifty soldiers. That happens so often it's barely a problem—"

"But losing forty-nine to one person without an ability is another whole ordeal." Serpent said, "And I kept one of them alive to tell the tale. I just took him out of Singularity headquarters a few hours ago. He should be waking up and scrambling back to Valkyria right about now."

“That’s not my question.” Eli’s voice was unyielding like ice.

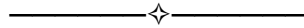
Serpent met him with an equally stone cold stare, “Then what do you want——”

Eli cut him off before he could finish his sentence, “You have another purpose behind this, don’t you? Something you’re trying to prove.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” He drawled slowly, deliberately, all while staring Eli in the face. “And don’t try to control me. I’m not afraid of you.”

“And either am I of you.”

That was the last thing either of them said before the door closed between them with a slam.



Chapter 3

All their conversations ended in bitterness. Every word was a spark, enough to start the flame of a full-blown argument. They had both long grown tired of it, and so they resorted to the ultimate solution. Silence. Silence for hours, days, and soon it would grow to weeks.

It would undoubtedly grow into an infinite silence if time was infinite. But right now, time was running shorter than ever.

One day. No, not even that. 13 hours.

That’s how long Eli had before deciding Serpent’s fate. He would’ve preferred not to make this decision, because no matter how much he hated Serpent, was it really his place to decide his death? But he knew he brought this upon himself. He spared Serpent the first time without knowing full well who he was, despite the obvious warning signs and all the advice given to him. Unfortunately, it was a little late to know that he had taken in

a person on the top of Valkyria's wanted list, who committed one of the most impressive crimes in perhaps all of history—to expose the coordinates of Valkyria's control center. It quickly became known everywhere, that Valkyria's transportation center which remained hidden for years had been invaded by Singularity, and over twenty Valkyrian bases had been destroyed overnight. Serpent had, whether intentionally or unintentionally, contributed to over twenty percent of their yearly profits. Nox should've thanked him, but Eli was sure that Serpent was just selling the coordinates to Singularity like any information broker selling to any client. It was strictly business, and nothing more. In fact, judging by Nox's orders, the higher-ups have long decided that Serpent was probably more trouble than he was worth. It would be no pleasant affair to shelter a wanted criminal that guaranteed endless conflicts between them and Valkyria, after all.

So now there were two choices: execute Serpent or convince him to join Singularity.

The scales were tipping more and more towards execution recently. It would be hard enough to even get Serpent to join Singularity, not to mention the endless conflicts they would have if Serpent became Eli's subordinate. Of course, those problems were all insignificant when faced with the real reason why both Eli and the higher-ups were hesitant to let Serpent into their ranks—he was simply too *incomprehensible*. Eli was sure there was some rhyme or reason to Serpent's actions, especially because Serpent's entire existence was comprised of his endless search for reason. But Eli could never understand Serpent, let alone anything he did. In Eli's eyes, he was a terribly unstable and unpredictable wild card, that changed every once in a while to yet another completely incomprehensible form. It was as if the laws of his world simply weren't the same as what normal people operated by.

Eli crept slowly, carefully, into the living room where Serpent spent most of his day slumped on the couch. And as always, he was there with an open book over his face.

Eli opened his mouth to speak.

“Stop.” Serpent held up a hand before Eli could say a single word.

“I haven't even said anything yet.” Eli protested.

Serpent's voice sounded muffled underneath the book. "I know what you want to ask. And I've given you an answer more times than I could count, so spare us both the hassle. Evil, good, morals. These words are just social concepts made up by humans. They mean nothing to me, so stop trying to bind me with your so-called righteousness."

"I'd expect nothing less from you, always choosing indifference at every turn." Eli said bitterly. "What do you even gain from this except boredom?"

"I am not bored." Murmured the figure that lay limp on the sofa, receding more and more into the black fabric with every passing second.

"Yes, you are. What do you have to live for? What do you even want?" In Eli's eyes, Serpent looked no different than a dead body. "You don't know, do you? I'm not even surprised, since you are so hell-bent on detaching yourself from your emotions. If you even can't answer those questions, you could hardly be called a living person."

"Do you think we're the same, that if you experience something, I will too?" the book slid off his face, and there was silent anger behind his eyes, waiting for a spark to combust. "Don't try to understand me. I have long moved past the human need for understanding. After all, it's impossible to understand human emotions. They're unpredictable, subjective, and impulsive."

"Why do you speak of humans as if you're not one of them? Everyone in here is human, are they not?"

"Sure. But some people are less human than others."

There should've been a pause, a moment when Eli turned over Serpent's words in an effort to decipher whatever he was saying. But not this time. As easily as breathing, he fell back into that pattern that always signaled the start of another argument. "Are you saying that we are less than human?" He scoffed before he realized what he was saying. "That explains why you wouldn't spare a single thought before killing all of us, then."

Serpent simply stood there with lips pursed, as if he was suppressing words coming right up his throat. He only stood there and waited in silence, for Eli to say something before he turned away.

But, as always, there was nothing left to say.

“No.” Serpent said quietly, seconds before Eli made up his mind to leave. “The opposite, really,”

“*What?*”

For a moment, it was as if the world fell away into darkness until the only things left in it were Eli, Serpent, and the wall. *That* wall, which always separated Serpent from the world around him. But this time, it was no longer a wall. It was a pane of glass, and Serpent’s dark olive eyes cut through the glare of the glass like black holes that absorbed light. Now that Eli could see more closely through the barrier between this world and Serpent, his eyes looked different somehow. There was something else inside of that pitch darkness, some indescribable emotion swirling in the depths, hidden from plain sight. It was everything at once, like all the colors mixing together to form black. Anguish, resentment, fear, helplessness, loneliness, sadness, joy. It could’ve been any of them, or none of them. Maybe this was all a figment of Eli’s imagination, because the more Eli tried to find a reason for these fleeting emotions in Serpent’s eyes, the more it blurred and escaped like wisps of smoke.

“Serpent,” Eli began after a long silence, “if I ask, will you join Singularity?”

“Why?” Serpent asked with a mixture of annoyance and bewilderment.

“Because you’d die otherwise.”

“I wouldn’t.”

Eli sighed. “I know.”

“So why should I join?” Serpent said quietly. “I don’t owe this organization anything. I don’t... owe you anything.”

“I know.”

“Why am I even listening to you right now? I should just leave, since all that awaits me here is endless arguments over nothing.”

“I know. ”

“So... why?”

“To be honest, I don’t know.” Eli confessed. He had no idea what he was saying or doing. Still, he chose to meet Serpent’s eyes. “So, what’s your answer?”

“Well, I’m not the kind of nice guy who listens to others’ requests that easily.” Serpent turned his gaze away from Eli, almost as if he was intentionally avoiding it. “Everyone has a hard time getting me to do anything. So, what can you offer me?”

Eli was slightly bemused by the sudden question. “You think that I can give you what you want, even though you don’t even know?”

“Maybe. I really don't know either.” He looked blankly towards the floor. For the first moment since they met, Serpent sounded unsure. “I haven’t met anyone like you before. That’s why I’m asking you.”

It was only in that moment that he truly seemed his age. Like any other teenager, swept into the sea of uncertainty trying to find themselves. For some reason, Eli always expected, whether consciously or unconsciously, for Serpent to be some all-knowing divine prophet that was long beyond that. But the ease with which those words slid out of his mouth made it seem like those were the real words he wanted to say. There was no malice, no joy, no sadness behind those words. But they weren’t empty.

“Well, it doesn’t matter what you choose.” He said quietly, “I’ve already sent the notice to Nox.”

Serpent’s lips drew into a thin line, “When’s the execution?”

“Never.”

“Huh?” Serpent blinked slowly, and rose up from his slouched position. Suddenly, his eyes widened as if he just snapped back to reality from a dream. “Does that mean... you’ve always intended to keep me alive?”

Eli shrugged in response. “Well, not always.”

“Then... since when? Why?”

“As you said, humans are unpredictable, aren’t they?” Eli smiled softly.

“I don’t— Huh? Why would you—” Serpent’s face quickly shifted into sheer confusion as he waved his hands around, hoping to grasp some explanation out of thin air, all while Eli was desperately pursing his lips in a valiant fight to keep his laughter down.

“I’m sorry, but this is just too funny to see you like this. You look more confused than a child seeing the outside world for the first time!”

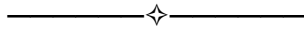
“Shut *up*.” Serpent retorted.

Eli took a deep breath and wiped that smile from his face. “Anyway, about that offer.” He paused for a second, choosing his next words. “I admit that I can’t guarantee that I can offer you anything, so I won’t make an empty promise. I will at least guarantee your survival, but what you choose next is entirely dependent on you.”

Serpent’s only answer was silence as his eyes once again wandered towards the floor, and he remained that way for many minutes that seemed to stretch into infinity.

“Well, you don’t need to answer now.” Eli thought it would be unfit to give him a mere minutes to make such a decision. It may be an easy decision to make for most people, but seeing Serpent’s previous confusion and struggles, it would be clear he would need much, much longer. So Eli turned towards the door to his room. “If you’re still here next morning, I’ll take that as you’ve decided to stay.”

Before Eli closed the door behind him, Serpent’s voice sounded behind him, “A few hours is long enough.”



When Eli opened the door, Serpent and the moon shining outside weren't the only things waiting for him. The next thing that caught his eye almost instantly was the light yellow sheets of paper splayed all over the desk, floor and couch in a semi-organized fashion. In the middle of it all, like a person performing a summoning ritual, was Serpent, pressing buttons on his holographic screen. Eli approached warily, half because he didn't want to disturb whatever Serpent was doing, and the other half because he didn't know what Serpent was doing.

He walked silently until he was no more than a few meters away. That was when it hit him. Those weren't sheets of paper, they were files. He leaned forward, catching sight of the text written on the files. And the sight of those words was enough to stop him dead in his tracks.

Top-secret, classified files.

Personal information of higher-ups and executives, and military plans, coordinates. They were all here on this small desk and the floor around it. All in all, there were probably no less than ten of these files. If the higher-ups found out, they would both no doubt be obliterated in an instant. Eli swallowed hard, and there lingered a bitter taste in his mouth that wouldn't go away.

"Stop." Eli drawled in a low tone, "Don't move."

Serpent put a brief pause on his organizing work as he finally seemed to acknowledge Eli's existence. Eli was sure Serpent had sensed him approaching. After all, the creaking sound his door made was by no means quiet. However, Serpent hadn't even made an effort to hide the files from him, and it didn't make sense for a person of his intelligence level to be conducting a matter like this with such audacity. At this point, it almost seemed intentional.

A few more moments passed before Serpent promptly decided to ignore Eli's presence, and went back to organizing the files.

Without stopping his hands, Serpent briefly glanced up at Eli's bewildered expression. "Don't look at me like that. I am an information broker, after all. My only loyalty is money. I have clients who requested this information for thousands of dollars, and I'd be an idiot to pass up that opportunity when I'm already here, right in the heart of Singularity." He said in an almost mocking tone, "Did you really think asking me to join with vague offers would win me over? All it did was buy me more time."

"In other words, your objective was to steal documents all along." Those words drifted weakly into the air. Eli knew he was just repeating what was true all along. He wanted to scoff at himself. What was he even hoping for? For Serpent to disprove the truth?

"Sure." Serpent answered absentmindedly. He stared at a document in his hand, deep in thought for some time before continuing, "Here, I don't need this. Take it."

Eli caught the folder that was tossed at him halfheartedly, without even a look from Serpent to check where he threw it. When he turned the file around, he instantly recognized the text on the front.

My name.

He himself hasn't even seen this document. It was filled from top to bottom with text. Abilities, age, history, future plans the organization has for him. Way too much text to read in one sitting. It was a little unsettling to see all this information about himself, as if the organization had eyes in every corner, watching his every move.

Eli would soon be forced by his curiosity to read through the entire document if Serpent didn't interrupt him before he turned the page. "Honest suggestion, don't read it." he said in a seemingly indifferent manner, "Some things are better left unseen."

Despite the warning, Eli still turned that page.

Serpent sighed with slight exasperation and motioned towards the shadows in the corner of the room. "Seal that and take it back to its original place."

A girl with long white hair and a singularity uniform emerged from the space behind the curtains, and bowed toward Eli and Axel before silently approaching Eli. She held out

her hand, as if asking for something. After a few seconds, seeing she didn't receive what she requested, she somewhat wrenched the document from Eli's hands despite his protests.

"Excuse me." She bowed at the threshold of the door before she turned to leave with the folder in hand.

"As your superior," Eli began, "I do not allow—"

Serpent interrupted curtly, "Don't bother. You are no longer her superior."

The door slammed shut behind the girl.

"Some of these operatives are no longer loyal to Singularity." Serpent stated simply.

"What... do you mean?"

"Humans are quick to give in to fear or desires. As long as I can evoke an emotion stronger than what their own organization offers them, they turn to me in an instant." He spun a pen idly in his hands as if this was nothing out of the ordinary. "In other words, I threatened them or sabotaged them until I could make an offer they couldn't refuse."

Eli flinched visibly. He couldn't imagine this all being done by anyone, alone, in a matter of hours. Was it a bluff? *No, it couldn't be*, He thought. It was unlike Serpent to bluff, because all his bluffs eventually come true anyway. But no matter how he thought about it, it just didn't seem possible at all, even if Serpent set this up long beforehand. Although at this point, Eli should've long ceased being surprised at all. The fact this was done by Serpent would suffice as proof.

"Of course, I have no intention of following up on those threats." Serpent continued, "It's just too much effort for me to get involved. Having them believe it is enough for now, since belief is enough to change a person's entire reality."

Eli could've said anything at that moment. He could've started another bitter argument, he could've accused Serpent of being an emotionless monster. In fact, he could just kill

him, right here, right now. But none of those options would change anything, and in the end, it would always end up in the direction Serpent predicted, always full of anger, regret, and misery. Sometimes it really did seem like his predictions were the cause of such unfortunate situations, and he would unconsciously make efforts to reach the worst ending possible just to prove a point—whatever that point may be. So at long last, Eli simply said nothing, and let silence wash over them both.

Serpent paused what he was doing and looked at Eli for a moment as if silently signaling to him that it was his turn to speak. However, whatever sentence he wanted from Eli never came. After a long and excruciating pause, he gave up. “Another suggestion before I leave. Even though you are the executioner for betrayers of the organization, I think you should turn a blind eye to all this. As long as you don’t tell the higher-ups, they would never know, and you won’t have to kill these people.”

Slowly, deliberately, Serpent packed all the files into a neat pile and put them in a suitcase, as if waiting for something. All the organization’s crucial figures’ identities, military plans, weapons systems, and operations, were all in there. Eli only watched as the suitcase finally closed with a click.

“Well, it wouldn’t matter anyway.” Serpent said with a sigh, “If this information gets leaked, the organization would probably sustain a lot of damage, assuming it doesn’t collapse. You should be safe, since I’ve kept your crucial information.” He said quietly, “But if you stay here any longer, there’s no telling what will happen.”

Serpent stood up, and the moment their gazes met, Eli felt like he was silently watching the last spark of life die from those black eyes. With slow steps, Serpent walked past Eli, giving no indication of ever seeing him. He headed towards the door like a person still in a daze.

Just as he was about to leave, a semi-transparent blue wall materialized between his hand and the door.

“Are you telling me to betray my organization?” A light buzzing sound sounded behind Serpent as a glowing sword materialized in Eli’s hands.

“Well, I figured you’ve never been one for the higher-ups’ rules.” Serpent didn’t bother looking back. “If you truly followed them, none of this would’ve happened.” He didn’t even flinch when the blue light of the sword reflected off the white walls into his eyes. “So, do you regret it now? Leaving me alive.”

Eli didn’t answer immediately, and instead let the silence sit between them for a while before answering quietly, “...Not at all.”

Serpent froze. The sword in Eli’s hand had long vanished into the air when Serpent swiveled around to look at Eli with a look of utter perplexity.

“Since you said you wouldn’t pass up an opportunity for money as an information broker, let’s speak in a language you understand.” Eli smiled in self-satisfaction now that he had captured Serpent’s attention. With a swipe of his hand, a holographic display appeared. “This is the monthly wage for executives, plus a bonus if you reach the contribution requirement. Much more than what your client will ever pay you.”

Serpent just stared at the numbers blankly. When he finally looked at Eli, his expression was one of open disbelief. “You’re not worried I’m going to run off or sabotage Singularity from the inside? I really could, you know?”

It was true. Eli suddenly realized how many people were around them, just barely out of earshot. Executives, soldiers, operatives. How many of them were traitors now? Half? All? How long would they last against him? There was no way to tell.

“You won’t.” Eli simply replied.

“How do you know?”

“Well, I don’t. It’s just a feeling.”

“Feelings are extremely unreliable, you know.”

“I know,” Eli admitted, though it wasn’t a tone of defeat. “But sometimes they can be incredibly accurate.”

A moment of silence stretched on between them as Serpent quietly found his way back to the sofa.

“Honestly, you’re such an idiot,” Eli said mildly as he sat down on the sofa not too far from Serpent, and cast his gaze towards the ceiling. “You read other people like they’re an open book. Their desires, their fears, their potential, you can even enough to get them to turn against their own organization...” he closed his eyes, reconsidering his words even as he was saying them. “but what about yourself? If you can’t even know what you are... it doesn’t matter how smart you are. You’re an absolute idiot.” he finished quietly.

Serpent stared at Eli in shock before quickly looking away. But even though his expression was strategically hidden from Eli’s sight, there was nothing to conceal his soft chuckle. “Says you! I can't read you at all.”

“I’m just being perfectly honest.” Eli shrugged lightly.

And he truly was. He didn’t regret letting Serpent live at all. Perhaps there were some rare moments where that idea wavered, but in the end, it always came back to the same conclusion. Serpent was a double-edged sword. He has the potential to strike down an entire organization, but he also has the potential to save an entire organization. And because he had no motivation to lean towards either of those, the first person who could give him a reason, be it material or emotional, could effectively get him to do anything, no matter how good or bad. In a way, it was almost saddening to see how a person like him would willingly throw away the fundamentals of who they were, and continue living life as nothing more than an empty shell.

If only I could fill the void in his eyes, reach out, and bring him back to this world. It would be much better for him to realize that in the end, everyone is only human.

“So, about that offer.” Serpent began.

“You’re still onto that?” Eli murmured, “Damn it, I was hoping you’d forget... Is my answer really that important?”

“Of course. Everything depends on your answer. So, what will you offer me?”

Eli didn't answer immediately. For nearly a minute or so, it seemed Eli was inspecting Serpent and his thoughts, with the scrutiny of a surgeon trying to make the right cut. And Serpent simply stood there, with unlimited patience.

"I'll give you a reason to live," Eli finally answered quietly with a smile.

"Sure."

"You actually accept?" Eli was skeptical. He had expected this to be more difficult, but the way Serpent answered almost immediately made it seem like anything he said would have yielded the same result.

Eli's skepticism was answered with silence, the language Serpent seemed the most fluent in.

"Well," Eli began, taking the silence in stride, "I'm taking that as a yes. So, now that you're officially my subordinate, I have one question for you," He announced. "And don't try to lie."

"Hey!" Serpent had a look of utmost betrayal. "That's not fair, you don't just get to interrogate me like that!"

"Alright, alright, stop yelling. Just count this as repayment for me saving your life."

"Fine." Serpent finally relented, "Only one question."

"What's your name?" Eli asked at once.

"That's it?" Serpent asked with genuine disbelief.

Eli nodded, with all the earnestness he could possibly muster.

"Axel Hendrix." He answered with a smile, no matter how faint.

"I'm Eli Aphelion." Eli held out his hand, "Nice to meet you, Axel."

Axel took it. And Eli realized the moment their hands touched that despite Axel's lifeless stare, his hand was warm.

