

## Chapter 05

"What is it now?" Ethan Ramsey lifted his hand to his ear.

"Another lead," the voice in his earpiece said. "This time, it's ours. We did a bit of research, and found a certain pattern. There is a man who turns up in every encounter we have with Petron Yussen."

Ethan sighed. "Another lead? The last one didn't go very well, did it?" He rubbed his bandaged left arm.

"You found him, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"And you gained experience in the ways that he fights. That was, all in all, a good outcome."

"I suppose I can't really argue with that. Who is this lead?"

"He's a man living in the outskirts of the city. He's been referred to as a hermit, or an outcast."

"Don't tell me he's another ex-Op3. If he's associated with Petron Yussen then I wouldn't be surprised."

"No. And I'm definitely not lying this time." Ethan could hear his boss breathing out smoke through the headpiece. "He's just a criminal with a lot of money. A veteran. When he turns up in our research, he's usually the brains hiring the brawn. With the right... leverage, we could convince him to give us important information about Petron Yussen, the Disappearing Man."

"I see. What leverage were you thinking of?"

"There are certain people in high places who want him dead. Unfortunately for them, they have not been able to reach him, as they don't know where to find him. He lives in a small house, and under a different name, so they would be very much happy to find out where he lives. We also have a large amount of useful information."

"And we will threaten to give this information to them?"

"Blackmail can be a beautiful thing, Ethan. I'm sure he will see that he will be giving us only one of his possible employees in exchange for his safety. Of course there would also be other... alliances at hand."

Ethan was silent in thought for a few moments. "Sounds sturdy enough. What's his name?"

"Christopher Langley."

Ethan knocked on the door of a small demountable building. He had driven out into an area which was spread out, and there would have been plenty of room for a palace on the land before touching the next property.

The door opened, revealing a young man. Ethan's first impression of him was that he did not look as rich as he was said to be. He definitely looked eccentric. His hair stood up from his head, looking like it hadn't been brushed in a couple of years. He wore a small pair of sunglasses, and had sideburns that almost touched at his chin. He had a few days worth of five o'clock shadow.

"You're Christopher Langley?"

The man stared at Ethan for a few seconds. His eyes scanned up and down Ethan's body, seeming to inspect him before allowing him to confirm his identity.

He stared at Ethan's eyes again, over the top of his sunglasses.

"Yes. I am Christopher Langley. Who are you?"

"My name is Ethan Ramsey, and I believe you have some information for me?"

"What is it regarding, Ethan?"

Ethan paused for effect. "Petron Yussen. The Disappearing Man."

Langley seemed shocked. "Mr. Yussen?" Once again Christopher looked Ethan up and down. "I'd rather not talk about these topics out here in the open air with you. Please, come inside. Take a seat."

Ethan got a sudden sense of *de ja vu*. "I'd rather not sit down. I'll stand."

They walked inside, and Christopher Langley sat down in a big chair. "Tell me, Ethan, what do you hold against our Petron?"

"He's come up on our records as a person of better use dead."

"As simple as that? And what leverage have you brought for me?"

Ethan reached down to his pistol. He didn't intend to use it, but Langley's smugness was unsettling.

"I trust," Langley said, "that you have leverage? You didn't expect me to give you information at random, did you?"

"No. My leverage is information."

"You think I need more information?"

"No. We have information. Already, I have shown you that I know your real name and address. That information is locked up in our database, ready for anonymous dispatch to certain corporations and organisations who would value it greatly."

"I see. Is that all?"

"No. Also, we have a pair of your... workers under our control. I believe that they usually go by the names of Mr. Moon and Brutus? They were captured during a raid. Because of them, we were able to deduce that you were the one behind the attempted assassination of one of our operatives, Aphid."

"Attempted?"

"Yes. She is still alive and well."

Langley's shoulders drooped, but his eyes were still fixed angrily on Ethan. "I see."

"So you should. Let me state our proposition loud and clear for you, Langley. What we want from you is information regarding your manner of communication with Petron Yussen, the Disappearing Man. Also, we demand that you stop the attempted attacks on Aphid."

Langley breathed in. "What do I get?"

"What we will give to you is our word that we will not give your delicate personal information to certain groups who may want it. Also, we will 'overlook' this incident with Aphid, and we will not attempt to strike back at you for it. Another possibility, provided that you approve, is an alliance with The Company, in which we will not attack you as long as you do not attack us."

Christopher Langley rubbed his forehead with two of his fingers. "And you wish to capture and kill The Disappearing Man?"

"That is our aim, yes."

"Well good luck to you. I assure you that it is impossible."

"What do you mean by that?" Ethan stepped forwards.

"Have you not heard about the countless people Petron has killed? Those who were after him were no big challenge. And nobody to this day has figured out how. He seems to be the only person with a bounty on his head who nobody has figured out."

"So will you give me the information? Whether or not I can kill him is not up to you."

"I will give you a name, and maybe an address. Fortunately, I have never met the Disappearing Man myself, as I communicate through a, er... 'middle man.'"

"That will do fine."

"But let me warn you, Ethan Ramsey." Christopher Langley stood up. His eyes were red. "Even I fear the Disappearing Man, and I am the one who pays him. I have not met him one on one, but I have seen him do his work, and there is nobody as quick as he is."

"So he's an Op3."

"No. He surpasses Op3. There are rumours, Ethan, and it would not surprise me if half of them were true." Langley began walking towards Ethan. "Some stories say that he controls animals. Some of the more fantastical ones even say he summons them. His powers surpass the greatest Op3s, and it seems that every theory about him has been proven wrong. Nobody knows the limits of what he can do, and the only ones who figured it out are now dead."

Ethan stared at Langley. He remembered the wolf in the office. It had seemed out of place.

"Just give me the information."

"Fine." Langley pulled out a piece of paper on his table, and scribbled down an address. "Here. You have a deal, Ethan Ramsey. Now your company had better not back out of your half."

"We won't." Ethan looked down at the piece of paper Langley was handing to him.

The tired-looking Langley walked Ethan to the door.

"Her name is... Amelia," said the tired-looking Langley, before slamming the door in Ethan's face.

"Amelia..."