# Chapter 61 - Advertisment

The torrential rain soaked the earth of the Culdao Peaks, the soil and roots turning into sludge as birds and animals alike took shelter. Some relished in the water, but soon, a thunderous cacophony of pitter-patter could be heard off in the distance, a solemn drum beating in rhythm with the tired gasp of goblin soldiers.

<That accursed Gulak, forcing me to come out to this backwater area!> A small but well-shaven goblin envoy with smooth emerald-like skin and a lavish attire grumbled on his palanquin. The burdensome weight was hoisted high by four goblins who struggled under the weight of the ornate design and other ‘necessities’ the envoy had deemed essential for the trip.

The front and back of the procession were guarded by a dozen goblin soldiers each, while twenty servant goblins lugged large empty woven baskets on their sweaty backs, their contents empty in preparation for the tribute.

A strong gust of wind buffeted the troops, the rain crashing into the envoy sideways and wetting its chair and silk-like garments, causing his face to scrounge up in sheer irritation. <Are we within a hundred steps yet?!>

<Yes, sire!> A servant goblin responded.

<Halt!> The envoy held up its right hand, the procession stopping. <Send forth the messengers. Have Gulak prostrate before me!>

Three goblin soldiers acting as messengers moved forward, armed to the teeth with iron spear and a sword, while the envoy waited with anticipation. *That damn Gulak! If only he had just provided tribute on time, I wouldn’t have to come out all the way here! Let’s see his face when I raise the tribute requirements!* A wide grin appeared on the envoy’s face, its sharp front teeth bared for all to see, hardly concealing its excitement.

The envoy raised yet another hand, beckoning one of the veteran hobgoblins under his command to approach the palanquin. <Have the soldiers prepare for a raid!> The hobgoblin stood tall, nearly human height, yet he bowed to the diminutive envoy in obedience.

<Sire, are we not here to collect tribute from a loyal goblin tribe?!>

<Loyal? They have missed the final deadline for tribute offering to Sahusa, our great King! This is unacceptable and an affront to the unity of the goblin kingdom. Do you understand?>

<… yes, sire.> The veteran hobgoblin did not fancy going to war with their own tributary but complied with the order anyway.

Noticing the hesitation apparent on the veteran’s face, the envoy sighed. <If we do not teach a lesson now, then how will the kingdom survive when every damn tribe delays their tribute! Our economy is already on the brink – if we do not collect the tribute, rationing will have to begin soon.>

<Understood, sire.>

However, before the veteran could make a move, a howl of pain could be heard in the distance, from the direction of the goblin den. The envoy squinted its eyes, only to see a ragged and bleeding messenger running back to them. Arrow shafts stuck out of its skin like a pin cushion, making the others wonder how the messenger was still even able to run.

<Who’s attacking us?> The envoy called out.

The messenger barely seemed to have registered the envoy’s call to stop, instead running right past the procession with all haste, screaming its lungs out with abandon. A wave of fear struck the soldiers of the procession as they watched the injured messenger disappear into the forest behind them, making them wonder what kind of danger the messenger encountered.

<What’s going on?! How dare they fight back?> The envoy was enraged – the arrows in the messengers were clearly of goblin-make, which meant Gulak had attacked his messengers. <Prepare for subjugation of this infidels!>

It was then that the source of the messenger’s fear appeared in front of them, a lone human woman bearing an ornate crossbow in one hand and the corpse of a goblin messenger in the other, its heart clearly ripped out by the woman’s bloodied hands.

<Human?! What is a human doing here?>

<She tortured him! The tribe of Gulak has already fallen to the humans!>

<It’s a trap!>

A wave of panic spread through the soldiers as they saw their comrade’s corpse, some of the more timid servants immediately throwing their baskets to the ground and fleeing the procession.

<Stand your grounds, you fools! What can a human do to the great kingdom of Sahusa? We’ve beaten them back before and we’ll do it again!> The envoy rallied the troops, but it was to no avail. With each step the human woman took towards them, the shivering and the fright spread even more through the two dozen goblin soldiers who each now faced an internal turmoil on whether to fight or retreat.

The veteran hobgoblin stood steadfast, taking up point with a spear and shield. His presence did nothing more than to hold the soldiers together precariously. But before he could even give an order, a single goblin arrow shot right through the gap between his helmet and his chest armour, embedding itself in the windpipe.

That was all it took to have the goblins to scream and scatter completely, the fear infectious as they fled in all directions. The palanquin was thrown unceremoniously to the floor, with the four servant goblins unwilling to sacrifice their lives for their envoy.

<Come back this instant, or you shall be executed for desertion!> The envoy shrieked at the top of his lungs, but the threat of the law did not pose any burden for the retreating goblins, leaving the envoy to face down the human woman alone.

The goblin arrow had not been shot by her, but by attacking goblin archers posted in the trees as scouts. The envoy gasp at the sight of the goblins acting like elves, a natural disgust rising up in his throat. <You… have all of you been corrupted? How dare you scurry around like rats on trees?>

<Better to be on a tree than a rat struggling in the mud like you.>

The envoy squinted once more, spotting Gulak behind the human woman with a wide grin. <Gulak! You! How dare you collude with humans!>

<Life is much better here than ever before, Erasg! As our guest of honour, you should come and visit to see for yourself!>

The implications was clear to the envoy, who quickly scrambled for a weapon. Grabbing a dropped-sword nearby, it quickly aimed it at its own heart and was about to thrust deep before the human woman lunged forward, kicking the sword away.

With a strong grip, the human woman grasped the goblin by the neck, lifting up high. The eerie slience of the human woman worried the envoy even more than Gulak’s cackling. *By the ancestors, may King Sahusa and the Oracle protect our kingdom…*

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“Here we are at the South Sector, who we-uh…. At one of the…” A homely girl stuttered while staring blankly at a lightcapturer with a confused expression, scrounged up in desperation as she tried to remember her lines.

“Okay, okay, cut!” Reese waved his hands frantically, stopping the recording. A few sighs left the crew on site, sweltering under the intense heat as they hoisted lighting equipment and supplies for the filming. Yet none of them dared to utter a word to the obviously flustered girl, her bumbling stutter somehow a point of endearment that washed away their anger. Her intricate dress and tight-fitting skirt only increased their threshold of annoyance, her beauty a sight for sore eyes despite her various mistakes.

“Okay, Emily, breathe, focus. Breathe, alright?” Reese calmly spoke to the flustered girl.

“Sorry, Mr. Reese, I forgot my lines; it’s my first time doing this!” Emily apologized furiously, bowing so low her dainty hat nearly fell to the floor.

“No, no, no, it’s okay. It’s all of our first time, don’t worry about a mistake or two! Let’s try again, and if you need to go slow, just go slowly, alright?”

Emily nodded, quickly resuming back into position, her opulent layered skirt elegantly trailing on the smooth stone tiles of the arcade’s outer plaza. The surrounding onlookers dressed in all sorts of clothes, Versian migrants and Raktor citizens alike, watched with hushed tones, mesmerized by the silhouette of the stunning beauty. If Reese had told them that she used to be a worker at the Lusty Arcian under the care of Slavin, not a single soul would believe him.

Except Kyle, of course.

“3,2,1 and GO!”

“Here we are at the South Sector, at one of the hottest spots of the year - the Golden Snakes Shopping Arcade! I am your presenter for this show - Emily Bourton, and we’ll be giving you a tour of the area and showing you exactly how much progress has been accomplished here!” She stepped out of the way to reveal a stunning shot of the Golden Snakes shopping arcade, complete with an expansive foyer and square where hundreds of locals were gathered, soaking in the sun and enjoying themselves. Most of them stared in confusion at the newfangled light-capturer, while some of the more cheeky children waved their grimy hands at Emily, who smiled back.

“For this grand tour, I’ll be accompanied by Inquisitor Mason! Inquisitor Mason, please introduce yourself to our lovely audience!”

“Hi… uhm…. I…. I…. what was I supposed to say again?”

“CUT, CUT, CUT!” Reese hollered, slapping his own chair in a sudden outburst far different from how Emily was treated.

A collective groan erupted from the crew, their attitude vastly more aggressive in nature. A few onlookers sniggered and jeered at the obviously photo-shy Mason, who glared back at them while tapping his embellished inquisitor cap as a reminder of what he could do to them. That stifled the crowd in an instant.

Reese, on the other hand, was on the verge of pulling out his already thinning hair, the level of frustration impeccable. “This… AHHHHH! What the hell is wrong with you?! How can a man like you fuck up on this level?”

Mason gritted his teeth, his chest rising in anger. “Hey, what the hell? This is my first mistake! How come Emily can fuck up twenty times but-”

“See?! I need that, I need that confidence WHEN we’re running the lightcapturer, NOT after! You know what? I don’t give a shit if you’re an inquisitor or not, and I’m going to treat you like a dumb kid. Even my daughter can perform better than you! Hey, YOU! Yea, you! Find some large presenation paper and write his lines big. Real big. Yea, NOW! Get them off the printing presses nearby, I don’t care!”

Mason was about to protest about the apparent disparity in treatment when suddenly someone patted him on the arm, nearly prompting him to attack on instinct.

“Don’t worry, Mister Mason! You got this! Let’s do it!” Emily gave a cheerful smile along with a cute little thumbs-up, the indignant rage within Mason melting away like frozen water on a comet.

“Uhh, yes… of course of course.” Mason muttered non-committingly, adjusting his sleeves and collar properly.

Reese held back on the rest of his rant, his own anger mellowed out by the cuteness radiated by Emily. The annoyed crew were also appeased, their spirits somehow uplifted by the homely girl who was a sheer bundle of endless energy.

Soon, one of the crew returned with a big signboard freshly printed. “Now, you have no excuse to forget your lines. Your lines are right here. Before the rest of the crew comes back, I want you to practice so you stop wasting your time and my time, got it? Try it now!”  Reese grunted.

The signboard was placed them near the lightcapturer like a cue card, with Mason muttering the lines to himself over and over again, his hands clearly fidgeting from the stage fright.

“Good!” Reese clapped his hands, signaling yet another re-run as Emily and the crew returned. “Last chance otherwise I’m going to tell Bishop Vernette!”

“Why do you make it sound like she’s my mom?! I’m forty years old, for Yual’s sake!”

“Then you better act your damn age, or else I’ll get my daughter to replace you. ACTION!”

Mason instantly straightened his back, dusting off his sliver pauldrons and fluttering his inquisitor coat. “Hi everyone, I’m Mason, and thanks for having me on. It’s my pleasure to show off what the enforcers have aimed for and achieved here.”

“Awesome! Let’s get started!” Emily put on a cheerful smile, instantly carrying the fliming with sheer confidence. “But, Inquisitor Mason, before we begin, I noticed that there’s something strange here. Something feels off!”

“Indeed, maybe a few intellectuals in the audience might be able to tell. It has something to do with the streets; look how many people there are and its condition.”

“Wow, you’re right! They are spotless, immaculately so! And there’s not a homeless person in sight - how is this possible?”

“That’s the secret to the success story of the districts so far - the enforcers of the Sanctum of Yual have been hard at work, collaborating with the Golden Snakes Construction Company to provide free housing for everyone in the area, ensuring a stable living environment for all.”

“Free housing? That sounds too good to be true!”

“Of course, because there are a few simple conditions one would need to achieve before being able to enjoy this new housing project. Contrary to first impressions, the housing built is owned by the Golden Snakes Construction Company, which has placed a requirement for all residents to hold a job in this district.”

“Holding a job here? But that’s hard in today’s economy, and some might even say that there are no jobs at all!”

“Naturally, if we place such a requirement, we also have provided the means with which to fulfill that benchmark.” Mason was getting into the groove now, speaking far more naturally than before. “The Golden Snakes Construction Company provides more than ample jobs, with more than a thousand openings available on a daily and monthly basis. Not only that, other companies in the district are ramping up their operations, and manpower is in short supply.”

“Great news for people looking for employment and a brighter future ahead!” Emily nodded, her joyful expression instilling confidence in Mason.

“As for their families, the housing provided is large enough to accommodate a family of five, as long as one works according to his ability.”

“Brilliant, they can bring all their loved ones over as well! But are there enough amenities around here?”

“Of course, there are! Let’s take a tour of the Golden Snakes Shopping Arcade now!”

“And CUT! Well done! Move to the next set, quick!” Reese ordered the crew, hurriedly scrambling with the equipment in tow into the shopping arcade, where the temperature control delivered the perfect climate, cooling all of them down.

The shopping arcade was a bustle of activity, with the crowd of onlookers naturally jostling into the corridors and blocking paths. A few scuffles broke out between angry customers and irritated shop-owners. “HEY! NO WAITING OUTSIDE THE SHOP! YOU’RE BLOCKING THE ENTRANCE!”

Many of them shifted, but still fought for a place to get a glimpse of the beautiful Emily who seemed to have a certain charm of sorts, one that Reese planned to utilize to its best effect.

As the crew set up again in the expansive corridor along the shops, Reese fiddled with the lightcapturer, peering through the scope and checking the angles. He tried lugging it around, hauling it on his shoulder, struggling to move with its sheer weight. *I should design a mobile version.*

He glanced around, peering through the numerous onlookers and trying to find a solution. He suddenly noticed Damian munching on a seasoned boiled potato in a nearby tuckshop without a care in the world, unbothered by the commotion all around him. “Damian! Damian!” Reese waved frantically, jumping up and down.

“Huh?” Damian stared blankly around in confusion until Reese shoved his way through the crowd to grab him. “I’m off duty now. Get Niko if you need security.”

“Get over here! Quickly! I need your help!”

“What, why? What’s wrong?” Damian hurriedly stuffed the remainder of his potato into his mouth, rushing over, thinking that Reese was in some trouble.

Instead, the lightcapturer was placed onto his broad shoulders, with two crew members struggling to tighten a harness across his thick burly chest. “Damian, I need you to walk slowly with them and keep the lightcapturer stable. Hold it tightly, don’t slouch and remain steady as much as possible. Got it?”

“But I was just about to eat one more pota-“

A glare from Reese imparted the importance of the event onto Damian, who quickly nodded with a slight hint of confusion until he noticed Mason and Emily preparing up in front of him, ready for the next segment. “Okay, okay, I’ll do it!”

“Alright, lighting on!” A few handheld arctech spotlights blasted the two of them, the glare visible in their pupils along with the crew shoving a few persistent bystanders aside out of the view.”3,2,1 and GO!”

“So we’re inside the Golden Snakes Shopping Arcade now, what do you think?” Mason started off, reading off the cue card intently with sheer concentration.

“I think it’s brilliant, and amazing. One of the better places to be in the South Sector for sure!” Emily happily skipped over to the nearby tuckshop, motioning at the queue of people lining up for their meal, most of which instantly turned around and hid, many still believing in the more esoteric properties of the light-capturer, albeit with a tinge of shyness and embarrassment.

“There’s a proper weather-conditioned area to eat in peace and comfort, and if you got a bad stomach or something getting you down? Right opposite here is a certified Alchemist Guild store - but it’s not your average one: it’s a cheaper version! It’s not as effective as a proper potion, yet it still gets the job done.”

“And sometimes that is all one needs. Rest, entertainment, and relaxation are what really heal you. Everything you need is right here at the shopping arcade - you have clothiers, florists, toymakers, and cafes. Up above, we have the light-thrower theatre, one of the best entertainments in town today. All of these can be done safely without the fear of pickpockets and criminals.”

“Why is that, Inquisitor Mason?”

“We have enforcers posted in the area 24/7, and of course, with the help of the Golden Snakes Construction Company, we are able to monitor and ensure the dignity and safety of everyone in this region alone. The enforcers are looking at expanding these operations, but it will be some time until the end of our test run. I believe this shows the critical importance of the Sanctum of Yual in delivering a better future for all citizens and that we are committed to making life better in Raktor.”

The recording continued on, with Damian tirelessly following the two around, with a few attempts to eat on the job. The rest of the shopping arcade was shown in detailed sequence before proceeding to the new housing units, ten-story high buildings with multiple apartments per floor, an oddity amdist the more decrepit shacks just in the other district.

“And for those thinking that it is your average boarding house, with the usual chilling winds coming in through the pockmarked roof, think again!” Emily grinned for the light-capturer as she opened a door to a showroom, where the apartment was neatly furnished with the basics, the walls painted with a nice clean white finish, the furniture simple but efficient. “One apartment can host you and your family quite comfortably. Much better than being out on the streets!”

“Yes, and what’s more, the Golden Snakes Construction Company has pledged to expand housing by another five blocks in this district alone, accounting for almost six thousand apartments. It would be the biggest housing project in the South Sector alone!”

“That’s incredible! But Inquisitor Mason, with only a thousand jobs available in with the Golden Snakes Construction Company, how can the apartments be filled up?”

“I’m sure many have heard the news of a new weapons factory opening up in this district, co-owned by both Baron Cain and the Golden Snakes Construction Company. This and other affiliate companies are also eligible for the free housing as long as they hold a job in this area. And for those who think they do not possess the qualifications, listen up close: a trade school is about to open in a few months.”

Emily gasped with an obviously fake astonished expression before turning to the lightcapturer with a photogenic smile. “That’s right, all; this district is about to become the new shining star of the South Sector - what are all of you waiting for? Apply today!”

“And perfect - DONE! Good job, everyone, that’s all for today.” Reese hollered.

“Thank you all! Thank you, Mister Mason and Mr. Reese!” Emily bowed with humility multiple times, earning the hearts of the crew as they cheered and applauded.

Mason adjusted his collars and sleeves, nodding at Emily’s appreciation as he clapped along. The applause and cheering went on for a while longer, while Reese reviewed the captured footage on a lightthrower, projecting it onto a nearby wall to see if they needed any additional shots.

“Looks like we’re good. Tomorrow, we’ll be doing the weapons factory and the other buildings.” Reese announced.

The announcement caught Mason off-guard. “Wait a minute, I don’t remember signing up for multiple runs! This was supposed to be a one-time thing!” He objected.

“If it was a one-time thing, why did you fuck it up so many times?!”

“I only fucked it up ONCE! I never - Either way, I won’t be available. I have districts to patrol!” Mason was about to turn around and walk off until he caught a glimpse of a shiny gold emblem, Reese fiddling with it in his hand. “You… how… you’re not allowed to hold onto that!”

“Oh, but I am! Under the power vested to me temporarily by the Bishop of the South Sector, Inquisitor Mason is hereby ordered to assist the Golden Snakes Construction Company until the completion of the advertisement. Also, Kyle and Bishop Vernette will be present tomorrow, so you better memorize your lines if you don’t want to look like an idiot!” # Chapter 62 - Plans for Expansion

“The new girl seems to be doing quite well. Where did you find her? Central Sector?” Bishop Vernette asked as she overlooked a roaring construction site, the thrum and whirs of heavy arctech machinery nearly drowning out her soft gentle voice.

Dozens of workers swarmed the area, their actions seemingly choreographed to a hidden beat presented all across the site. Fine dust particles hung in the air, kicked up by the never-ending movement of steel beams, bricks and clay, hauled to and fro along a temporary scaffolding that enveloped the entire old factory, which had been completely cordoned off by a series of barriers, guarded by a few Seven Snakes to ensure no one stole any materials.

The bishop squinted her eyes, peering not too far away where a whole host of activity was happening: the lightcapturer filiming, for which Inquisitor Mason was being berated once more.

“Bishop, the potential for greatness lies in everyone, not just those of the Central Sector. A boost in confidence is all the difference one needs to reach the sky. Even diamonds can be found in the rough here.” Kyle replied, leaving out the part of Emily being a former sex worker under Slavin at the Lusty Arcian.

“If someone else other than a gang leader said that, I might be inclined to believe it.” The bishop smiled. “People don’t change much. I’ve learned that much over my career.”

“Then you just haven’t gone far enough.”

“And do you have the means to go that far?”

“With Baron Cain’s blessing, I do. With the Ardent Cretins… not so much.”

“If this is an implicit cry for help, I can’t do anything on my end. You’re not the only one with a peace treaty.”

“I know.” Kyle took a deep breath, looking across the construction site, the din echoing off the walls of other nearby warehouses and manufacturing plants. The old factory in which Niko, Karl and Gordon used to work was being overhauled to be the site of the new weapons factory, with many of the existing infrastructure reutilized and diverted for efficiency and speed. It was far easier to retrofit the old factory than to build one from scratch, saving much time.

Kyle had obtained the land deed through a ‘conversation’ with the owner, the transfer officiated by Baron Cain himself thanks to the joint venture. With all the odds against the owner, he wouldn’t be surprised if the owner and his family were halfway to Versia or Kregol now.

“Well, looks like it’s my turn.” Bishop Vernette was a bit excited to be featured in the advertisement, carefully stepping down a sandy slope while Kyle escorted her, reaching the lightcapturer crew where Reese was.

“How’s everything?” Kyle inspected the crew and arctech engravings, checking for any errant accumulation of dust that might affect the lightcapturer.

“Looking good. We should be done in three days.”

“Good. We have all the necessary equipment in place?”

“Yes, sir, I have five dozen degraded light-throwers that we can distribute across the South Sector as a gift to spread our marketing efforts.”

“Excellent. Have them sent to the local pubs and soup kitchens. I want the advertisements playing the moment it is ready. We need to attract talent as quickly as possible. Keep up the good work.” Kyle patted Reese on the shoulder before leaving to inspect the weapons factory.

Close to two hundred construction workers were on hand, digging and layering bricks en-masse, the multiple floors being knocked down to create one singular expansive room. Kyle strode past diggers, machinery operators, and managers, earning a respectful bow or a salute from everyone around.

None of the old factory was left behind, though the workers were still retained, many of them now temporarily working under the Golden Snakes. Theoretically, nearly everything was in place for the operation of the weapons factory. Yet Kyle faced a pertinent problem, one that he had yet to solve.

He made his way through the site towards a makeshift office, where Gordon was planning the placement of the heavy machinery with the other construction managers. “Twenty rows, with a continuous conveyor belt system moving downwards. Each individual worker takes care of one specific procedure, with no one other than the designers learning more than three procedures. Each station should have an arctech etcher performing a singular task as well as spotlights for a better view. On top of that, metal grill catwalks all around the perimeter as a security feature. We don’t want any sabotages, unionization or funky business.”

The moment Gordon noticed Kyle entering the tent, he instantly bowed, as did the rest of the managers. Kyle merely waved them off, focusing on the issue at hand. “What’s our current situation?”

“The external structural design and floor plan is somewhat complete, what’s left is the allocation of space. If we were to follow the old factory’s design, each team will be assigned a single row.”

“And the team comprises of?”

“Two arctech designers, two logistics and twelve technicians.”

“For a single production line? That’s not enough, let me see the floor plan.” Kyle ran his fingers over the drawn-out blueprint, measuring the available distance. The team was pitfully small for the area available, as well as the scale that Kyle was intending to hit. “We can do much more than that.”

“Yes, but organizationally, it would be harder to control.”

“No, it’s doable. We’ll have twenty production teams, five supply teams, three design teams and one management team.”

The managers looked around at each other in confusion, with Gordon also scratching his head. “You’re suggesting to split up the current working unit?”

“There’s no reason for designers and logistics to be tied to a single team. They should be floating. The supply team will keep track of the number of parts and raw resources required by each production team, fulfilling each order in sequence and by priority. Also, the production teams’ number of technicians should be increased to a hundred.”

“A hundred?! We can’t fit a hundred.”

“We can’t, but this way, we will be able to do shifts around the clock. The production lines must keep going even through the night. Designers will be allocated the smallest space here, supply teams near the loading bay. Each team should have about thirty-three workers per eight-hour shift, until we can procure the requisite heavy machinery to lower our headcount. Understood?”

Kyle would have gone further if he could – if he had the option he would have robots replace every single human worker, with all protocols under his direct control. But he had fallen a long way from his Galactic Era position, and with so many willing employees lingering out in the streets, it was only right that he made use of them.

Gordon felt a bit resistant to the idea overall, having no prior experience of running such a large operation, yet he could not reject it. “Yes, sir.”

“Good. How’s our progress on finding the employees?”

“Well, we weren’t expecting to hire as many as a hundred per team. We can try, but I highly doubt we’re going to be able to fill up the vacancies in time for the opening ceremony. If we want more experienced people, we could try discussing with the various masters.”

“Masters?”

“Masters of the Society of Friendly Weaponsmiths. They are compromised of skilled craftsman who has been making weapons for generations. Though, discussions with them may be a bit tricky…”

Kyle got a rough idea of why. “We obtained the license through a direct grant by the Baron instead of going through them. Since we’ve ran afoul of their ‘procedures’ we can expect some trouble. No matter, I will handle it. What about the arctech designers? Don’t tell me they are part of the same society as well.”

“About that… we only have ten designers currently, if you include Reese and Gordon. We have a few more signing up, but they are not exactly the best nor the cream of the crop since we’re explictly trying to avoid those who are in the society. It would take time to get them up to speed.”

“That’s not enough. We need at least fifty overall to be able to run the production lines smoothly. Where is Keith?”

“He’s in the adjacent building, setting up the trade school as you’ve requested.”

The trade school was a reconditioned apartment building but converted for the purposes of educating future factory workers. Kyle needed a continuous stream of skilled labour to achieve the economic goals that he had set forth, and the trade school served its purpose well both in the short-term and long-term

However, they did not have any teachers hired yet, despite having already invested the money into the establishment. Construction workers were already building up technical studios, practical workshops and classrooms while Keith was busy talking through an arctech radio in the newly furnished principal’s office, though it now only sported a simple table and chair filled to the brim with papers. Each paper held the information on every skilled arctech designer in the districts.

“…Then I wish you the best of luck in your future career. Take care. Thank you.” Keith hung up on the radio call, letting out a frustrated sigh as Kyle entered the office. “Sir, we have a problem regarding the recruitment of the arctech designers.”

“I noticed. How many so far?”

“I’ve called fifty, only a few responded. The rest turned me down, or didn’t pick up the radio.”

“Are we not offering double the current market rate? No one else here offers that much. They should be approaching us in swaths, bar those who have aligned themselves with the society.”

“The fifty we’ve approached are not part of the society. And yes, we are offering double… but take a look at this.” Keith handed him a scrounged-up flyer. “It’s been spreading through the city like wildfire recently.”

The flyer had an interesting style to it: thick accented watercolours seemingly mass printed by multiple printing presses, with a smart-looking handsome man plastered all over it. The face didn’t really matter to Kyle, only the number that was printed below the headline of the flyer.

“20000 rakels a month is ridiculous. No one would pay that amount in Raktor.” Kyle remarked, flipping over the flyer to see the other side.

“Exactly. I don’t know how they’ve done it, but right now, Harrison Industries is all the rage. People are smuggling themselves into Versia despite the restrictions just for a chance to work under him.”

Kyle knew Harrison, though he never met him in person. The Versian had bet a large amount of money during his auction of the Oriental Bloom, nearly taking it out of Baron Cain’s hands. Furthermore, Reese was nearly kidnapped by Harrison as soon as he completed the light-thrower. It was immediately obvious what was happening here.

“It’s a race for human resources. And skilled arctech designers will be the make or break for the upcoming war, Harrison was just ahead of us in the game.” Kyle concluded, not putting much thought into Harrison’s actions, knowing that there was always solutions.

“The Ardent Cretins are also highly protective of their designers as well. I can’t get any information on them, it’s like they have been erased from the world. Their names have been blacked out on this copy. I suspect if I tried to dig up any information on them, we would run into much more trouble.” Keith tapped on a book detailing all recent graduates from the University of Raktor’s arctech design program.

“Let’s not poke the Ardent Cretins anymore.” As indignant as Kyle was about the still persistent blockade, he saw it as an opportunity to develop his own parallel economy rather than be dependent on businesses under the control of Sebastian. This way he would be free of the effects of anything more that the Ardent Cretins tried to do. “How many left?”

“Based on this book, three thousand. But they are scattered all across the city. If you’re talking just about the South Sector, then there’s only five hundred left available, not including the fifty I’ve called.”

Kyle paced around the room, thinking carefully. With a diminishing pool of skilled manpower, he would not be able to delegate designing duties to the factory. Reese and Gordon were just two people, hardly enough to handle the entire Seven Snakes catalogue of requirements.

“Raise our starting salary to 25000 rakels. Run the numbers, how long can we last?”

Keith baulked instantly, but quickly calculated on a piece of paper, twirling a pen in his hands. “We’re still under embargo by the Ardent Cretins, which means iron and coal are all priced exorbitantly.”

“Didn’t we get ninety million rakels from the information dealer? If I’m not wrong we should still have thirty million rakels left.” Kyle had a good grasp on the finances.

“Yes, you’re right. Sixty million rakes were allocated it all for the six housing blocks as well as the weapons factory and this trade school. We’re only left with thirty million rakels or so for operational usage. 25000 rakels with fifty designers means…” Keith scribbled down quickly, mentally adding up the expenses. “We’ll run out in a year or so, assuming we don’t expand any further. And I haven’t included the wages for the technicians and other miscellaneous staff, not to mention the cost of buying iron and coal.”

*Fifteen million a year just for the fifty designers…* Kyle, of course, was planning to expand further. Yet it was impossible to compromise on workers – skilled labour was necessary. “If we can’t compromise on salary, then we have to compromise elsewhere… how much more are we paying for the iron and coal now?”

“About close to 400% from last year. Lowest I’ve been offered was 250%, but that was from the Tul’e Da’li , the East Sector’s major gang, who apparently is on close terms with their Baron. If we accept their supply, the Ardent Cretins could take it as an direct offense and try to clamp down harder on us physically via hijackings and raids. They are not on the best terms with the Tul’e Da’li…”

“Even 250% is a rip-off. We’ll need to find an alternative source of iron and coal if we want to support the salary of the designers, and soon. Otherwise, the weapons factory will be running dry in months if Harrison raises his offering again.” Kyle rejected the offer. When he proposed the weapons factory, he had been banking on assumptions made following certain well-known hallmarks of historical progression based on his former Galactic Era education. He had already priced in double the current salary, not expecting Harrison to quadruple it.

Furthermore, Kyle’s weapons factory was not the only one clamoring for resources. With the war all but confirmed in name, Count Leon had his own gaggle of businessmen who supported his every move, forming a corrupt conglomerate with the best locations and adjacencies to iron mine deposits and coking coal for steel manufacturing. This was the real reason why the prices in the market were so high this time round.

“There is an independent iron mine deposit in Kregol that we could potentially discuss with.” Keith pointed out. “Though I hear it is under the control of their own native gangs as well. The Ravens, if I recall correctly.”

Kyle massaged his temples, trying to think his way out of this predicament. “If we go with them, we will need to pay them an additional fee to get them to supply us with the necessary materials. Furthermore, the transportation would take more than four hours one way via wagon, and is prone to being hijacked.”

The radio on Keith’s desk beeped, Adrian’s voice crackling through the static on the private Seven Snakes vipers’ channel. [Keith, is Boss with you?]

“Yeah, go ahead.”

[Just got word from the Culdao Peaks that Sasha captured a goblin official, who seems to be a representative from the goblin kingdom deeper in. The official tried to claim tribute from our first goblin den with a few soldiers…]

A sudden flash of inspiration struck Kyle. “What weapons did they have? Armour?”

[From what I understand, they have iron spears and shields…]

“Homemade? Or stolen?”

[I’ll need to verify with them, but as far as I can tell, it was all homemade.]

Kyle instantly sprung to action, speaking quickly into the radio. “Adrian, tell Sasha to prepare from my arrival. Keith, raise the salary cap, but find me a prospector first, the best one you can find. He will be following me to the Culdao Peaks. How far has the tunnel been dug?”

Keith was caught unaware, confusedly looking at Kyle. “The tunnel should be about half of the way to here, sir, perhaps it would be complete in two months. But what about the weapons factory? Why are you going there now?”

“Focus on hiring: you, Gordon, and Reese will be in charge of setting everything up. The goblins’ weapons are indicative that they have their own form of iron production, however small. As such, instead of buying iron and coal externally, we will develop our own vertical economy.”

“That means we would have to refine and process the iron ourselves into steel before making the weapons. How are we going to get the manpower and resources necessary to do all the additional work?” The confused Keith racked his brain. “We would need to transport workers from Raktor to Culdao Peaks… and then have a food supply and housing for them…?”

Kyle could only sigh. “Keith, it seems like you’re still not ready to be a gang leader. We already have a workforce in the Culdao Peaks. All we have to do is expand.” # Chapter 63 - Prospecting

[<Ahhhh, save me! Anyone, help me!>] A female goblin wailed in its own language as it cowered on the ground, virulent brilliant flames erupting all around here as the blackened trees burnt down, crashing in a cacophony of destruction. The sounds of fighting and fellow goblin tribe members’ screams of pain echoed all around her, causing her to tremble slightly, clutching and protecting a goblin baby with her life.

The gallop of a horse could be heard in the distance, a steel glint betraying it’s riders armour, the distinctive yellow grin of a goblin soldier appearing in her vision while the tip of a spear pointed right at her and her baby.

[<Have mercy, please! I did not rebel!>] The female goblin pleaded on all fours, clutching onto her only descendant. [<At least let this child of mine go free!>]

[<You think I am a fool?! If I let your child go, who knows if he will also become a rebel? I shall nip this in the bud right now!>]

[<NOOOOO!>]

Just as the rider was about to stab forward, the baby’s eyes suddenly flew wide open, glowing bright yellow with demonic flames spurting out from its pupils, an immense pressure suddenly falling upon the rider.

A strong defensive golden barrier suddenly appeared around the mother, deflecting the spear and knocking the rider off balance. The startled horse jerked backwards, letting out a neigh before galloping off in fear, leaving the rider to his fate.

[<Wha-what is this baby? How can it be so strong? Impossible? Unless…>] The rider wore a face of pure, exaggerated horror, its mouth agape as it watched the yellow aura swirling around the baby goblin surge to an even greater height that towered over the flames around them.

The baby goblin began to rapidly grow up, turning into a full-size hobgoblin in three seconds, cracking its knuckles and walking menacingly towards the rider, each step causing the ground to violently shudder with the force of an eruption.

[<You’ll… you’ll never take me alive!>] The rider screamed at the top of his lungs, pulling out a backup knife and jabbing it right at the yellow aura hobgoblin. The knife barely penetrated more than a millimeter into the yellow aura, the storm knocking the knife away as it twirled into the sky with a twinkle.

[<Fool! My power is over 9000!>] The hobgoblin flicked the tip of its nose as it got into a fighting posture. [<BEHOLD! THE STEEL SONG TRIBE’S FIFTIETH SECRET ART – CONSECUTIVE NORMAL PUNCHES 1000!>]

The enormous hobgoblin roared as he threw a flurry of punches, smacking the rider into an unrecognizable pulp in just five seconds before finishing the combo with a kick that sent the rider flying into the sky. Just as the hobgoblin did a victory pose, it began to shrink again back to a baby form, ooo-ing and gaga-ing at the mother.

The female goblin gasped, scampering over to the baby hobgoblin. [<Oh my dear baby! How did you get so strong in just a month?!>].

The baby hobgoblin couldn’t reply, but it looked in the direction of the audience and winked, ending the scene.

[<Coming to the theatre this Marth 21st: That Time I Went Forward in Time To Be My Great-Granddaughter’s Baby while Retaining All of My Powerups and Skills as well as My Intellect and My Ladykiller Moves and Your Mum. Yes, Your Mum.>]

The lights in the underground theatre began to turn back on as the screen showing the film dimmed, with the goblin audience practically screaming and cheering for the trailer.

<NUMBAS GO UP! He hit 9000!>

<This is the best film by far!>

<Everything is better than the stupid Enforcer Man – who wants to watch a show about stupid humans?!>

<Indeed, we finally get a rendition of our own folklore!>

<I must say, it is not actually accurate. In the original tale of King Sahusa the Great, it was said that he actually reincarnated through every single generation, so he actively found the best female goblins to lay, honing his craft over multiple generations. In fact, is he not the current king of the Steel Song tribe?>

<Exactly! And I recall my mother telling me that he had five arms and four legs! This film is trash! Not even historically accurate! I have cave drawings to prove it!>

Only a single goblin was furious at the film, the said envoy who had been captured by Sasha. <What is this nonsense! How dare they drag the goblins’ culture through the mud like this? Appaling!>

However, none of the other goblins gave a shit, completely ignoring him and infuriating him even more. Before he could shout anymore, a female human hand grabbed him from behind, dragging him back to his prison cell. <Wait, no please, I was wrong! It’s great! I love how the baby’s shield glitter- WAIT!> He pleaded, yet the lady did not make a single sound as only his begging could be heard disappearing into the tunnels.

As the audience bickered and discussed the trailer, two other humans near the back of the theatre were silently watching the audience reaction, with a girl holding a clipboard and jotting down details, intently observing their emotions. “Hey, you! Make sure they pay for the trailer! One rakel for each member, even kids. I don’t care if they are one month old or not! If they can breathe - they can pay!” The girl screamed at a goblin worker, who nodded quickly.

She continued writing down on the clipboard. “Reaction: S+, Controversy: S+. This film will surely be one of the best we’ve made for the goblins. Perfect distraction to keep them working.”

The man standing next to her cleared his throat. “Uh… Merissa, I don’t understand why-“

“It’s Ms. Merissa to you, Feldon.”

“Ms. Merissa, why are we making films for the goblins? Shouldn’t we be making films for Raktor?”

“We already are, but the goblins need to be appeased for a few moments to make our position here better secured. We need to present ourselves as a clear force for good, or else they would continuously try to rebel. This is just a simple method to calm down tensions.”

“Did they not try to rebel just a week ago?”

“Only the newer slaves. The better of a class system we build, the easier it is for us to have them turn on each other while we hold the reigns overall.” Merissa tapped her clipboard. “Have you not learnt anything over the past few months you’ve been here, Feldon? How the hell were you hired as a company manager of all positions?”

“Uh… I looked good?”

Merissa wanted to retort, but she couldn’t disagree. Despite for all of Feldon’s failings, he did have a intriguing charm. In fact, Merissa wouldn’t mind if Feldon’s wife took a dip in one of the maggot pits and had a horrible acci –

She caught herself before her mind spiralled off, returning to her usual self. “You’re lucky you look good, otherwise I would have thrown you into the training arena for the rest of your life.”

The arctech radio on Merissa’s belt buzzed, crackling to life. [Ms. Merissa, the boss is here.]

At the entrance to the goblin mine, the defenses had been improved significantly. Instead of makeshift wooden fences, it was metal spikes atop newly fortified stone walls reinforced with support beams, with intimidating watch towers providing the lookouts a good overview over the front. The area in front had been cleared out of trees, preventing anyone from sneaking all the way up to the walls.

Near the gate, there was an honor guard procession to receive Kyle, who walked in accompanied by a meek-looking human who was carrying what seemed to be prospecting equipment. Kyle nodded in approval as he inspected the guards, noticing the apparent improvement that the months of training had done to Gulak’s tribe.

“Mister Kyle, you promised me that I would be safe here!” The meek person whispered urgently to Kyle as he nearly flinched from the snarl of a goblin warrior who stood at attention along the side.

“You are. This will be your home for the next year or so. Once you’re finished with the prospecting and mining for minerals, consider your debts to the Seven Snakes cleared.” Kyle replied.

The meek person reluctantly nodded as he was reminded of his casino debt, sighing internally to himself. The group was met by Merissa and Feldon, who bowed to Kyle. “Everything okay?”

“Yes, sir. We have prepared everything in advance.”

“Mister Raksha.”

The prospector jolted to attention as they began to enter the mining tunnels. “Yes, Mister Kyle!”

“I need an answer by today or so. I’ve heard you are one of the best in town. Keith spoke highly of you, and I’m on a tight schedule. Any delay would be… detrimental to our working relationship. And your health.”

Raksha shuddered slightly at the insidious threat but stood his ground, his professional expertise coming to bear. “Prospecting a brand new mine from scratch is hardly an easy task, especially when there’s barely any infrastructure left to support it…”

“Merissa.” Kyle called out, with Merissa immediately moving over to him. “Explain what you have prepared for him.”

“Yes, sir. Mr. Raksha, we have prospecting surveys from the previous mine owners and a team of elder goblins who have lived in the mine for decades. They will assist you in your search for any minerals.”

“And did the surveys’ mention any traces of iron ore?” Raksha inquired.

“They did not. But they did not mention traces of arcite ore as well, but as you can see here…” Merissa motioned towards some of the excavated arcite ore from the shaman inscription chambers.

“Arcite ore? Here?” Raksha was shocked. “If you monetise it, you could –“ He stopped himself before he continued, noticing Kyle’s clearly irritated face.

“Do try to keep business ideas to yourself, especially those that require a direct license from the Emperor himself to operate.” Merissa warned.

“But you guys are hardly lega-”

“That does not mean we try to draw attention to ourselves.” Kyle snapped. “I would appreciate if you would focus on the task at hand.”

They continued to walk down the converted tunnels, with Raksha obviously surprised at the increased level of infrastructure. None of the arctech lights were flickering, with utility pipes clearly running along the length of the tunnel, providing flowing water and air ventilation into the area. A few air ducts could be seen as well as he passed a tunnel-in-progress that was clearly leading in the direction of Raktor, with goblins hauling out rubble from the consistent digging.

It was already a big surprise to him that a human group would be in charge of such a large goblin operation. Goblins were notoriously hard to govern and could easily start a rebellion due to their sheer numbers that increased over time. He had heard of previous attempts by the Yual Dominion to subjugate this area but had always lost or suffered too many losses against the major goblin tribes.

Raksha began to scan the tunnels, taking note of the various formations of rocks layered into the tunnels, which changed as they went deeper and deeper into the goblin den. They soon reached a foyer of sorts, a large open space where various market stalls were opened, peddling various foods imported in from the town.

At the very far end of the foyer, a manual pulley system ran by a series of sweating goblins hauled arcite ore to and fro towards a separate entrance, where the mechanical wind regenerators had been installed. Half of the arcite ores were being shipped to Raktor, with new depleted ones coming in everyday in a non-stop routine. The mechanical regenerator was hardly efficient, but Kyle had more than enough goblin slaves to make up for it.

Kyle brought Raksha to the main administrative office, which has been expanded greatly. It was now a three-level cavern lit with arctech lanterns powered by regenerators, with each floor having multiple clerks, both human and goblins working hard to manage the logistics of the entire den. Rows upon rows of paper were slotted away neatly on carved stone shelves, organized according to chronological date for better ease of access. It was here where the bulk of the Euria Seeds collection was tallied up and accounted for.

On top of that, the administrative office also acted as a de facto government of sorts. With the absorption of the second tribe to boost their worker numbers, the number of goblins living in the den right now was more than six hundred, nearing the size of a big town.

Since Kyle wanted total control over the entire operation, Merissa had no choice but to hire clerks to assist her, even splintering some of them off into separate ministries to cover different tasks aimed at supporting the current workforce.

As Feldon showed Raksha where all the old survey documents were collected as well as introduced him to the team of elder goblins, Kyle walked around with Merissa, observing the work of the clerks. “You’ve done a very good job of teaching the goblins how to read and write.”

“Thank you, sir. It is but my duty.” Merissa bowed.

“Where is the envoy?”

“Sasha is still currently interrogating him, over here.” Merissa led him to an adjacent holding room, where the envoy was currently screaming its lungs out from the torturous pain that Sasha was inflicting on him.

The envoy spat a glob of blood on the ground as soon as Kyle entered the holding room. Instead of talking directly to the envoy, Kyle turned to Merissa. “Estimate of their combat potential and capabilities?”

“As far as I can tell, we can easily overpower them. The soldiers were ill-trained and fled at the first sight of their comrade’s corpses. The envoy, however, is of stronger will, as you can see here.”

“Any advanced technologies?”

“Nothing of the sort. They even disdain bows and arrows with a passion. All we have is their iron spear and iron shield.” Merissa motioned to a few of the captured weapons lying on the side.

Kyle picked them up slowly, twirling the spear in his hand with ease.

MG404: [Item | Crude Goblin Spear (Basic) | A copy of a human spear. | No Active Skills.]

The balance was clearly off, but it did not seem that the spearhead had been crafted out of iron bacteria, rather it looked as though it had been smoothly refined, proving that the goblins had methods of iron refinement.

“Can we negotiate with them?”

“As far as we know, no. The envoy is very… opposed to humans.”

<Of course, you are simply hairless monkeys, skulking and backstabbing instead of fighting with pride and honor!> The envoy understood the human language but refused to speak back in it instead.

Kyle walked right up to the chair in which the envoy was tied up to, before delivering a straight punch to the face, nearly crumpling the envoy’s already crooked nose. Blood spurted out of its orifices as the chair flipped over, its head smacking against the cold hard barren earth.

<I will give you a chance.> Kyle spoke in the goblin’s language, leaning over. <Tell us everything you know about the kingdom.>

<I will only wish the worst of curses on your ancestors’ spirits and your descendants’ future, may their lives be filled with rot and sorrow, and their hearts pierced by the sword of Sahusa!> The envoy roared back in rage, kicking and fighting against its restraints.

<I don’t take insults lightly.> Kyle instantly grabbed the envoy by the neck, crushing it with both hands in a tight grip before tossing the twitching corpse aside. “Throw his body into the maggot pit, but don’t forget to use a light-capturer first of his demise. Make sure everyone in the den knows of this.”

Merissa and Sasha barely flinched nor blinked at the ruthlessness with which Kyle had acted out, nonchalantly getting a few goblin slaves to carry out the order. The treatment of the royal envoy spread like wildfire through the rumours and light-capturer flims, further entrenching the strength and brutality of their human overlords in the goblins living in the den, making them less reluctant to go against Kyle and his rule.

“Sir, killing the envoy could be seen as an act of war.” Merissa pointed out as they walked back through the den, many of the goblin slaves cowering in fear.

“We’ve already attacked another tribe, and our very act of enslaving this tribe is an act of war against the kingdom. We were going to fight them sooner or later, and judging from the quality of their weapons, I expect any war to be swift.”

Kyle soon returned to the office, where Raksha had just completed his discussion with the goblin clerks and Feldon.

“Mr. Kyle.” Raksha scurried over, holding a few documents in his hands. “I have yet to survey the area personally, but I find that most of this document is accurate and precise. The formation of arcite ore might not be well known, but iron ore is very well documented.”

“Get to the point. Is there iron ore or not?”

“No sir. There is a very, very low chance of iron ore here in this specific den. Most of the iron here would be trapped in forms that would be exceptionally hard to extract. None of the oxides we normally use would be found here, as there was a clear lack of oxygen and water before the mine was opened.”

“So what’s the solution?”

“I… I don’t have any. I think this mine is done for. You might find other things like coal, but you won’t find much iron ore here.”

“Then we’ll just have to get it elsewhere. Sasha, gather all the warriors and prepare for an assault. We’re taking over the goblin kingdom, one den at a time.” # Chapter 64 - Regicide

Sahusa the Great was not having a good time, contrary to popular belief.

It was not the fact that he was named after a myth of his great-great-great-great-great-grandfather, or that the name automatically implied that he was a goblin ladykiller or that he had five arms. Of course, those made him irrationally angry as well.

But what really irked him was the bickering of the five goblin tribe leaders in front of him, which had been going on for nearly five days in a row now. And he, as the Goblin King, had to sit here and listen for hours and hours on end while surviving individual meetings with each of the tribe leaders in order to hold everything together.

<King Sahusa! Are you listening to the foul words of this weakling? He should have his tongue chopped off immediately!>

<Just like your grandfather and your predecessor. Perhaps you should be the one to have your tongue chopped off so as to continue the tradition of insolence!>

King Sahusa sighed. *It’s only been a year since I took over, and yet everything has gone to waste.* Sahusa kind of regretted assassinating his father now. He had always thought that ruling as a king was the ultimate goal, but here he was, forced to slave away and listen to old farts grumble and argue with each other.

<How dare you! You take that back now! For the last four days, I have been tolerating your ill-mannered speech, but no longer! Fail to rescind your words, and there will be war!>

<Threatening civil war in front of the king? How daring! What can you possibly do?>

<SILENCE!> Sahusa was enraged now, his bottled fury bursting forwards as he stood up. <I have listened to you old farts for long enough now! I have tried at every twist and turn to explain exactly what we need to do in order to alleviate the loss of tribute!>

<Bah! It’s simple! We go to war! Just like we always have! As long as we can get past the female human monster, it will be an easy win for us! Gulak and his weak tribesman can hardly fight back against us!> An arrogant hobgoblin crossed his arms, flexing his muscles and the skulls mounted on his shoulder.

<Osir, you’re such a fool! My scouts have seen their strength – their equipment is far beyond our comprehension! What we need to do is to negotiate and trade with them, then, we will be able to alleviate the famine that is plaguing us now.> Another scrawny old tribe leader pointed out.

<I agree with Elder Ulthan, we should find another human group to support us: not all humans are aligned with each other! We can use that to our advantage and gain technology like them.> A third tribe leader spoke.

Osir grunted as he slammed his fist on the table, causing the entire wooden surface to reverberate <Then we will be merely a proxy war, just like the Heavenly War! Have your mothers not taught you anything while you were still a child? If it were not for our ancestors, we would still be enslaved by them!>

<What did you say about my mother!?>

<SHUT UP!> Sahusa interrupted the conversation, raising a scepter in his hand that was completely covered in dense engraving. The scepter seemed to amplify his voice as it glowed. The tribe leaders tried to talk but realised that their voices could not be heard by anyone but themselves.

<With the power vested into me as the Goblin King, I command all five tribe leaders: This meeting shall be adjourned, and the final decision shall be made by me in three days! I will not entertain any petitions nor individual meetings!> King Sahusa put his foot down, before storming off out of the meeting hut

He grumbled to himself as two servants immediately fell into line behind him, keeping pace as he pushed aside the cloth marking the entrance to the meeting hut, and stepped out.

The meeting hut was positioned on a cliff overlooking the valley between to Culdao Peaks mountains. He stormed down a stone path that was carved out of the valley’s slope, leading to a small palace that was embedded into the mountain in a large alcove.

Sahusa sighed loudly, stopping to take a look at the valley. The goblin city was large but was mostly made of mud, wood and stone mined from the mountains. They were dispersed through the long valley save for a central market area, where he could see thousands of goblins clamouring for the latest meat or cave carrots and mushrooms to eat, nearly trampling over each other or fighting non-stop.

His warriors were working around the clock to maintain the peace, but even he could tell that exhaustion would soon hit them. *This is not sustainable; I must find a solution immediately.*

<I will consult the Oracle now. Prepare for the ritual.>

The servants gasped, looking at each other. It was a once-in-a-lifetime event to consult the Oracle – nearly no one living had seen it in person. Sahusa himself had not personally seen it, but the procedure has been passed down through stone tablet inscriptions over the generations.

The last time it was done was four generations ago. The servants quickly scrambled, reading up on all the ancient texts of how to consult the Oracle.

An hour passed before King Sahusa was prepared. <Your Majesty, your robe.> The servants put on a ceremonial robe on him, one that was pure white in nature and had sharp corners on the shoulder pads, along with a weird extra flap of fabric near the breast pocket with a series of letters that he could not read. The fabric was unique, something that not even the best goblin shamans or elders could replicate in their lifetime, the threads fine and precise like an artifact from the heavens.

The procession paraded down towards a grand cave at the end of the palace, which led to a large metal door, reflective enough for King Sahusa to see his handsome face in it. <Recite the heavenly numbers in order.>

<Yes, Your Majesty.>

The goblin servants began to read off the ancient texts, following the directed pronunciation as guided. They struggled with many of the intonations, causing the words they spoke to sound like an accent of a foreign language that Sahusa had never heard of before.

As soon as they finished reading the text, a large red light above the door came to life, with a klaxon suddenly blaring out an alarming sound in different tones, scaring King Sahusa as weird metallic contraptions popped out from hidden crevices near the door, each having an ominous pipe aimed right at them.

<RETREAT!> He roared, prompting the servants to immediately scamper out of the grand cave and back into the valley. The retreat was hasty and disorganized, making the procession look like a foolish endeavor. While King Sahusa cursed his inability to consult the Oracle, his servants whispered to each other vigourously.

<What was that?! I had never heard anything like that before?!>

<Perhaps the Oracle was angry at us and wanted us gone! Are we doomed? What are we going to do now?>

King Sahusa felt dejected, recalling the myths of the Oracle told to him by his father. The Oracle was the reason why his tribe was even able to dominate nearly half of the goblins in the Culdao Peaks Area, making them the superior ones.

*If the Oracle does not even want to help me, what hope do I have left?* King Sahusa began to ponder his options.

*Starting a war during a famine is one way, but I must be assured of victory. A prolonged conflict would only cause more issues.* Sahusa returned to his room, planning while using a makeshift map of the area as known by the goblins.

It was a given that the area could only support so many goblins’ hunting and foraging in the forest and caves, which served as a natural barrier to the population.

However, Sahusa was not content with simply letting his people starve nor send them off to war simply to cull the number of heads to feed. He did not want to be callous, but the thought continued to remain in the back of his mind as a potentially easy way out.

Before he could think further, a warrior barged into a room, panting heavily. <King Sahusa! The scouts have reported that another two tribes has fallen to Gulak!>

<What?!> King Sahusa stood in shock. He had thought the expansion of Gulak would be slow and measured – but two tribes in a single day was a completely absurd notion to Sahusa. *Not even the original Sahusa managed to achieve that in the tales!*

<Have you told any of the other tribe leaders?> Sahusa asked.

<No, your Majesty, but the scouts might have told them directly as well!>

King Sahusa’s eyes widened in shock. “Quickly assemble all my warriors for battle! We must-“ His words were caught in his throat as he could already hear the cries of his servants and the sounds of metal clashing echoing through the stone palace. <We must defend our territory, now!>

<Y-yes sir!> The warrior scampered off, while Sahusa walked into a separate room, his personal armoury where his father’s armour rested – a full steel armour stolen from a young human noble, complete with an arming sword.

Before he could put it on, however, the door to the armoury was blasted open, with more than fifteen goblin warriors under Osir’s command entering. They immediately tackled the king to the ground in a rush, pinning down and restraining him.

<Attempting to run away while you let our entire society collapse, are we? I had high hopes for you when you assassinated your father. I thought that ‘Finally! We have a proper leader willing to do whatever it takes.’ Yet when the first news of a tribe being taken reached you, all you did was stick your head in the sand!>

<Even when the delegation by Envoy Erasg sent was massacred by the female human monster, you barely made a move, not even bothering to increase our forces or improve our equipment! The position of the king is wasted on you!>

<If you do this, the other four tribes will turn on you!> Sahusa shot back as he was forced to kneel on the floor.

Osir let out a hearty chuckle. <And you think the other four tribes are supportive of your position? FOOL! Strength is the only currency in this society! As we speak, your warriors are being cut down by the dozens!>

Sahusa was about to retort before Osir delivered a kick, slamming the jaw of Sahusa with force. <Useless! Drag this worthless king out to the balcony so the people can see how pitful he looks!>

Sahusa struggled against his restraints as he was dragged unceremoniously through the hallway. The bodies of his servants and loyal warriors were strewn across the palace’s many corridors, the stench of blood and meat filling the air as more and more rebel goblin warriors entered the palace. The rebel warriors did not seem shocked by the turn of events, raiding and pillaging the palace and digging out all the valuable goods.

<You… You have been planning this for a long time! How dare you!>

<An incompetent king who is oblivious to what ferments under his feet.> Osir scoffed as he marched ahead of his warriors.

They soon reached the balcony, where the true scale of the devastation caused by the rebels was made obvious to King Sahusa. Tens of thousands of goblins were embroiled in fighting and fleeing, with the battle raging all across the entire length of the valley. Everything was being pillaged while the loyal warriors of Sahusa’s tribe continued to fight for their lives.

<Your entire tribe shall be purged from this area! I will make sure you are the last one to die, so you can see how your bloodline falters into nothingness. Sahusa the Great is no more!>

The rebel warriors strung Sahusa up onto a pole, hoisting him up high over the valley. Osir grabbed the sceptre handed to him by a warrior before activating it and amplifying his voice over the entire valley, echoing off the slopes and mountains.

[<Behold! Your incompetent king who has led us into famine and hardship! As of today, he is no longer our king, for I will be yours!>] Osir declared through the sceptre, shouting over the land. The rebel soldiers cheered in response as they continued to fight, while the loyal warriors’ morale began to deplete rapidly as they saw their king captured.

The common goblins were also quickly surrendering, unwilling to fight any longer to the death against a losing cause. What reason was there to defend for a king that has already been captured?

[<But I will be different – as your new king, I will herald a new golden age for all goblins in this holy land!>] Osir shouted a warcry, echoed by his rebel troops that were now locked in a civil war over the vast valley.

<Tribe Leader, do we kill the king now? I have a method I would like to -> A warrior asked, earning a slap to the face.

<Idiot! He still holds value to us. No one here is to kill him without my command.>

Osir ordered them to drag Sahusa down from the pole. Sahusa smirked as he knelt on the ground. <So, what do you want from me? You have pillaged everything I have. Perhaps you want the name of Sahusa the Great as well? The riches of my palace?>

<Don’t play jokes with me. I have no use for your filthy gold and worthless paintings. You know what I want. I want the Oracle.> # Chapter 65 - Counterattack

The targeted goblin den fell swiftly, unable to fend off Sasha and her trained warriors. Their shabbily constructed defences made from adventurer gear and decrepit Yual Dominion equipment were ran over within a short three hours. Kyle did not even take part in the raid, leaving it as experience for the new attack force.

<Move faster!> Gulak grinned as he slapped the back of a captured goblin, who was shambling off in a line, heading off back to the main goblin den. <You will now follow the orders of those of the First Tribe and me!>

Kyle did not concern himself with how the goblins were being assimilated, as he already expected the first batch of goblins that he dominated to create a class hierarchy. This meant that Gulak and his tribe were motivated to capture and ensure that the new goblins did not overthrow their newfound power.

*By creating a class divide between them, I can have them focus their energy and anger on each other rather than the humans running the operation…* It was a common tactic that many leaders of the Galactic Era have implemented and perfected since the first human empire was born on Ancient Earth.

The total number of goblins under Kyle now neared a thousand in total, composed of three different tribes. Gulak’s First Tribe had transitioned into being the administrative wing as well as the overseers. Gulak had also elevated the Second Tribe, creating the class pyramid in order to retain order.

Now, they were herded back to the goblin den of Gulak for ‘re-education’, where they would be subjected to continuous displays of modern technology and increased living standards. It was not wrong to say that despite their enslaved status, their standard of living was far better than what they had previously.

“Food is going to be a problem. Merissa, you were working on sustaining the goblins previously, any ideas?”

“Yes sir. Due to the Culdao Peaks being a volcanic formation in the past, the soil around the entire forest area is arable and can be used to grow certain crops. With the addition of this den, we might be able to acquire enough land area, though it will take time to become self-sustaining. Right now, we have been importing food from the Culdao Peaks Town.”

*With the increased number of goblins, such an agricultural project becomes even more critical to complete. We can temporarily sustain the population with food bought via the Euria Seeds trading system, but this won’t be sustainable in the long term.* Kyle sighed, adding yet another problem to deal with on the list. Yet it was a good problem to have – if it came to it, he could simply cull half of the goblins, but he would prefer to sustain the large workforce where possible. *After all, they are more useful alive than dead.*

He did not follow the new goblins back to the den, instead remaining in the den that had just been captured to inspect it. Sasha was resting with the troops while Merissa and Feldon assessed the state of the den to ascertain if it could be connected back to the main goblin den.

“It’s not too far in terms of distance, but we would need some serious tunneling equipment if we wanted to link everything up properly. A rudimentary tunnel system is possible by hand, but could be dangerous. We already had a few cave-ins in the first den.” Merissa pointed out to Kyle.

Creating such heavy equipment would definitely not be easy – Kyle was not even sure if he could get it done within two months. It could be done extremely fast if he duplicated the automated mining equipment he knew from the Galactic Era, but he had to weigh the pros and cons of it.

“For now, let Raksha map out the area and see what’s the possibility of digging out a tunnel normally to link up with the main one being dug. We need to prospect this den as well, see if there is anything of value.” Kyle replied. Given the number of goblins under him, it was possible to do a rotation shift and provide arctech hand drills to chew away at the rock and reuse existing abandoned networks. It would certainly be easier to implement than an entire tunnelling machine and digging through new rock.

Raksha was now busy prospecting and checking every nook and cranny of the den as far as he could with the assistance of captured elder goblins. Kyle hoped that at least a bit of iron ore would be found so they could begin building a distribution system for the factory to begin with. It wouldn’t be enough in the short term, with Kyle still having to purchase from suppliers in Raktor to make up for the shortfall, but at least it was some amount of savings.

Just as Kyle was about to leave the den, an excited Raksha quickly ran up to him. “I’ve found it! I’ve found it! Here’s the motherlode!” Raksha’s face was covered in black dirt, his hand holding a few crumbling pieces of black rock.

Kyle’s eyes immediately widened, picking up the rock and feeling it for himself. “Coal. You found a coal seam?”

“Indeed! I cannot determine if there is more than one layer yet, but there is definitely a layer right here that we can dig right into!”

“Merissa, Feldon, you hear that?”

“Yes, sir!” Merissa nodded. “I’ll have them prepare the roof supports and the ventilation immediately. I assume this makes the tunnel even more important?”

Kyle nodded. “Every goblin worker that’s not fighting is to focus on this project – we need it done within a week. The steel production line to support the weapons’ factory is to be completed within the next month, so I want the distribution network up and running even before the tunnel is ready.”

“The network will be slow if we use the same method that we use for the Euria Seeds, the wagons will take more than a day to get to Raktor.” Feldon pointed out.

“That’s a temporary solution for now. Once we’re done with pacifying the area, we’ll start laying rails in the dug-out tunnel for faster distribution.”

Kyle returned to the outside, where Sasha was desperately trying to train the goblins to shoot the handguns that he had brought. It was not going well, with the goblins being too far used to the bows trained under Kyle. A few pellets went wide, nearly nicking other goblins in ear or ricocheting off the rocks far behind the targets placed for practice.

[Sir, I don’t think it’s possible for us to distribute the extra handguns to the goblins right now. I fear we may suffer more casualties than expected.] Sasha spoke through the wireless channel.

Kyle nodded. It was impossible to train a human to be a sharpshooter within a day or two, so he did not have high hopes for the goblins in the first place. “Not a problem. We’ll do it the old-fashioned way, then. Any news from our forward scouts?”

[They claim there’s been rioting over the past day in the central territory, but we have not heard back from them in a while.]

“When was their last check-in supposed to be?”

[About ten hours ago.]

Kyle contemplated for a while, arranging the possible events that might result in the scouts not reporting back in. *The highest possibility is that they are dead. Which means an assault force is on its way.* “Mobilize all the warriors immediately. Prepare for an attack soon.”

Sasha did not question the order, immediately signaling with her hands and passing down the message through the ranks. The goblin warriors and human squad leaders were all confused, murmuring among each other. The differences in race hardly mattered to them anymore as they fought side by side, many bonds forged through the battles and shared despair of Sasha’s training routine.

Kyle took stock of the number of troops left. Some of them had been diverted to escorting the newly captured goblins back, which meant he was left with a diminished fighting force that was also slightly tired.

“Sasha, scout ahead and report. Carry an arctech lantern.” Kyle ordered, prompting Sasha to scale up the mountain immediately with the lantern, leaping from rock to ledge and trying to get a bird’s eye view of the forest that surrounded the mountain.

“The rest of you will split up into two groups. Both groups will head away from the mountain, two kilometers that way. Keep a line of sight here. Once you see the signal, you will rush back here and flank the attackers. Got it?”

The warriors nodded first before they began to mumble among themselves again. One of the humans raised his hand, picking up the courage to ask Kyle. “Sorry, but what’s the signal?”

“Sasha will flash the lantern towards you. Prepare everything and leave now.”

Following Kyle’s orders, they split into two groups of fifty each, heading deep into the forest away from the mountain. With this, only Kyle was left at the mine, save for Merissa, Feldon and the other goblin workers still prospecting with Raksha.

[Sir, significant troop movement spotted.]

“Estimates?”

[About two hundred goblins.]

“Then it is an even fight.”

Kyle checked his armour, hammer and arctech handgun. The railgun was hard to use in such a dense forest, so he needed close-range weapons that were reusable. The handgun could only be reloaded twice with the number of magazines slotted in his belt.

The sounds of marching footsteps and drums began to reach Kyle’s ears. The noise echoed into the goblin den, prompting Merissa to come out, astonished at where all the warriors went.

“Stay inside the den. I am going to block the tunnel.” Kyle hefted a few large boulders and broken, abandoned mining equipment to stuff the entrance, ensuring that none of the enemy goblins could enter the den while he was fighting.

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A loud horn blared across the forest in a rapid burst of three blows, causing the birds of the forest to fly away en-masse as the drums continued to pound.

Two hundred armored goblins and hobgoblins were moving in formation while the leader of the force was atop a horse, a skull cap above his head.

<How far to the tribe?> He asked a servant who was walking barefoot, carrying his equipment.

<About a hundred steps or more, sir>

<HALT!> The leader held up his fist, prompting the force to immediately stop and form a defensive formation, with the goblins carrying heavy steel shields positioned at the front. None of them had any bows, as bows were seen to be used only by weak pointy-ear elves.

The leader motioned to a goblin messenger, who nodded and grabbed a stone tablet from his backpack, climbing up a tree.

[<Gulak, traitor to the Goblin King! Repent for your sins of collaborating with human groups to starve the goblins, as well as capturing the blessed envoy of King Sahusa, Envoy Erasg! You have ten seconds to surrender yourself, else, there shall be no mercy!>] The goblin messenger screamed through a makeshift wooden loudhailer, amplifying his voice over the treeline, echoing off the slope of the mountain.

Nothing in the forest moved save for the breathing motion of the goblins, who held their swords and spears at the ready, keeping their eyes peeled for anything in the distance or through the dense foliage that obscured much of their vision.

A fearful young goblin who had been conscripted into the force was slightly trembling as he gripped his spear, sweat glands causing him to lose his purchase on the handle. <Wh..what if the female human monster appears?!>

<Bah! The humans are not that strong! There are nearly two hundred of us here!> An older goblin smacked the back of the young goblin heartily. <If she appears, then claiming her head and eating the maggots from her remains will be the best achievement of your life!>

The young goblin nodded slightly, still unconvinced. The minute of silence passed slowly, with every pulse of his blood thumping in his ears as he lost track of time.

<A minute is up.> The leader announced.

The words were caught in the leader’s throat as a lone human male appeared in the distance, walking slowly towards them.

<Who is that? An accomplice of the female human monster?> The leader was flustered, having heard horror stories from the survivors of the envoy’s disastrous attempt. <Kill him, kill him now!>

The goblins were all stunned but soon steeled their hearts and charged. They split up and jumped over the roots of tree branches and fallen logs, rushing at the human male.

A smirk appeared on the human male’s face as he brandished an ornamental handgun, a copy of the Oriental Bloom.

*Intimidation Aura!*

Suddenly, every goblin who had their eyes locked on Kyle froze in fear, with nearly half of them stopping and turning around. Even the leader of the goblin felt it, his heart nearly skipping a beat as he felt the eyes of a predator land on his skin, the goosebumps sending a tingle through his spine.

Kyle quickly aimed the handgun, firing rapidly with precision at the goblins who were frozen with fear. Within the first second, two goblins were already crumpling to the floor, and a tunnel formed through their heads.

[MG404: System Message | Killed : [Goblin Warrior] | +50 EXP]

The sounds of the shots jolted those who were still stationary and prompted them to move.

<Stay calm! Wait for him to run out of projectiles, and then we will attack together!> An older goblin that had fought against the Yual Dominion before yelled at the top of his lungs.

Kyle took the advantage to dance around the trees, using the trunks as cover as he darted in and out, sniping at the goblins who failed to conceal their heads completely amongst the foilage.

In the first thirty seconds, nearly a dozen had already died, with the fear amplified by the Intimidation Aura. More and more goblins began to flee, running back. The young goblin, too, lost his composure, screaming as he ran away. However, a javelin was tossed towards him, landing right in front of him and causing him to shriek in fear.

The leader and his elite troops were now on the ground, fighting against the Intimidation Aura. <Run from the battle, and you will be killed! Fight!>

The continuous threat did not work until the leader impaled one of the deserting runners with a thrown javelin. <COWARDS! TURN AND FIGHT!>

As the fleeing goblins rallied once more and rushed at Kyle, they noticed Kyle reloading, with a metal block dropping out of the handgun.

<NOW! ATTACK!> The experienced older goblin roared, charging out with his own spear and lunging at Kyle.

*Penchant for Violence!*

Kyle’s speed increased, his hand swiftly retrieving the magazine in his belt and reloading the handgun in an instant. In a blitz spray, he retrieved his hammer and swung at the incoming attackers while he used his other hand to fire the handgun non-stop. Running out of pellets, he swerved out of the way as a spear lunged towards him, slamming the barrel of his handgun into the chin of the attacker like a blunt weapon.

Despite his overwhelming strength, he only had so many pellets on hand, and there were still more than a hundred fifty goblins attempting to surround and corner him.

[Sasha, give the signal!]

[Sir, I’m not sure if the lantern will be strong enough to attract their attention; they might not see it.]

[Don’t worry about it, I’ll provide an additional signal.]

Kyle grinned as he sheathed his now empty handgun, grabbing the nearest goblin and lifting him high. With an extremely strong toss, Kyle braced his legs as he flung the screaming goblin out beyond the treeline towards the flanking groups. Its scream echoed off the peaks, resounding throughout the nearby area.

“That should be good enough.” # Chapter 66 - Infiltration

All across the forest laid strewn armour and bloodied corpses of goblins and hobgoblins alike, with already a few scouting insects prodding their mandibles into the fresh flesh, tugging it apart piece by piece. Goblins under Kyle scoured the battlefield, happily capturing any remaining survivors and requisitioning their weapons and gear for themselves.

The battle was over in less than thirty minutes, with the flanking groups attacking from the sides, along with Sasha flanking from the mountain. The armored goblins and hobgoblins sent by Osir were no match for the sneaky archers and tough fighters trained by Sasha and Kyle.

Kyle himself had exhausted all his ammo, though he could easily form new pellets back at the goblin den. The arctech handgun was a simple gadget that accelerated projectiles, so there was no need for any complicated bullet production, though it could only store a limited amount.

He breathed deeply as he calmed himself down, stepping over the drying pools of blood and corpses that laid out in front of him. Kyle had lost count of how many goblins he had killed, simply fighting wildly with all his strength.

MG404: [Title Obtained | Goblin Killer (Intermediate) | Goblins tremble at the sound of your name | +20 STR, +10 DEX, +4 VIT, +20% damage to goblin-type enemies.]

MG404: [ Level Up: 16 - 20 | All Stats Increased | Bonus Points Granted ]

MG404: [Sub-Class Announcement | Sub-Class Upgrade (Level 20) | Congratulations, sub-classes will be unlocked now. | Please wait.]

Kyle dismissed the holographic system message from his field of view, deciding to deal with it later. Right now, he marched up to the leader of the attacking force, who was tied up and kneeling on the ground along with the rest of the goblins who surrendered, its mouth bleeding profusely as a few of its sharp yellow teeth were scattered on the floor. Sasha grabbed its head, lifting it up to face Kyle.

He motioned for another goblin to perform the interpretation, interrogating the leader. “How many warriors are left in your territory?”

<Pah, afraid are we?> The leader grinned through bloodied gums. <If I don’t return within two cycles, a thousand goblins will be sent here!>

“A thousand warriors…. Interesting.” Kyle contemplated his options. “Sasha, get Gulak here immediately, along with fifty baskets of food. Take them from the storage.”

Kyle spun as he ordered the remaining warriors. “The rest of you, pick up the equipment and wear it. Smear the mud and blood on your faces.”

The warriors glanced at each other before it finally caught on as to what Kyle wanted to do. They quickly spread out across the battlefield, picking apart the broken equipment and wearing them wholesale.

The leader of the attacking force was stunned, watching the wide-scale battlefield salvage operation happening as Sasha sprinted off to fetch Gulak. <Filthy human! What are you planning to do?>

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Bresir tapped his crossed arms slowly, silently overlooking the city where remnants of burning houses and huts still sent smoke spiralling through the air like black pillars of heaven. It’s been a full cycle since Osir had delegated Bresir as the head general in charge of the newly formed army.

He was a hobgoblin, much larger and stronger than a normal goblin – closer to the average build of a human. This allowed him to wear the human knight armor stolen years ago, making him look like a proper armored general.

The market square at the very center of the Culado Peaks kingdom that used to trade in food and forage was stripped down to form a large parade square, where thousands of goblins were queuing up for their strictly controlled rations, a stopgap measure to prevent a catastrophic famine.

Bresir felt a slight tremble on his feet, glancing down to notice the goblin merchant that he was stepping out trying to squirm, the merchant’s arms shaking violently as he tried to support himself on all fours.

<Enjoying the view? Your market square has been turned to dust, and the food has been given out to the people.>

<I-I-I’ve worked hard for that food! You have no idea how much I hav->

Bresir stomped on the back of the merchant, breaking his spine and causing the merchant to squirm on the floor in pain. <It is YOU who have no idea how much hurt and grief you have brought to society. I detest the king for introducing currency and the market – food is food, and should be equally distributed to all!>

He bent down to grab the goblin merchant by the neck, lifting him high above and causing his short legs to dangle wildly as the merchant kicked the air in response. <And all you did was sit back and wait for the workers to bring you the money. Pathetic! A warrior’s society has no place for your greedy ilk! Begone!>

He slammed the merchant onto the ground, knocking him out. <Drag him to the caves – let him forage for his own food. Or he can feed the maggot piles with his own flesh.>

Two rebel warriors complied, dragging the merchant off as Bresir continued to observe the area. There were still small pockets of resistance; loyal knights of the former king holed up in caves along the slopes of the valley. Battles were still erupting as some refused to fall under the new system.

*What is Osir doing?* Bresir wondered. The new Goblin King had taken all his best troops and holed themselves up in the palace. Some rumours among the rebels were saying that Osir was simply taking over to enjoy the luxuries of the palace, forgetting about the people. Bresir did not want to believe it, but he couldn’t help thinking that there was a modicum of truth to it.

Suddenly, a loud clamour erupted from the queue of goblins waiting for their food rations. Two goblins were rolling and tumbling on the ground, embroiled in a scuffle as the maggots in their bowls were thrown high up into the air.

The queue of goblins immediately broke formation as the nearest goblins lunged for the maggots on the ground, stuffing the soil and maggots into their mouth while the fighting spread, encompassing nearly more than a hundred goblins.

Bresir grunted, immediately rushing down with a squad of rebel soldiers to disperse the crowd.

<STOP!> Bresir yelled, moving forward with the rebel soldiers and shoving the brawl’s participants apart. The soldiers grabbed each of them and dragged them out before restraining them with twine and rope.

Bresir forced his way into the middle of the brawl before bellowing out in a roar. <BY THE NAME OF OSIR THE BRAVE – STOP!>

The shout stunned the participants, allowing the soldiers to act quickly. More and more rebel soldiers entered the fray, reducing the number of rioters and fighters punching each other or scrambling for maggots.

Some of the goblins were heavily injured, moaning as they lay on the ground. Bresir laid eyes on the original culprit, who was still fighting and swinging wildly.

With a charge, Bresir immediately charged and tackled the culprit head-on, slamming him into the ground and pinning him with the sheer weight of his well-built body as well as knight armour.

He grabbed the culprit by the neck, keeping a tight grip. <You! I don’t care what reason you have for fighting; you are henceforth conscripted into the army. The rest of you! Arrest every goblin who fought here. If you have enough energy to fight – then fight against Gulak and his tribe, who have betrayed us!>

The goblin onlookers all murmured in agreement. <Indeed. If Gulak had not been greedy, we would not have a famine now…>

<Gulak has taken over yet another tribe; will this area eventually be embroiled in war as well?>

<Fear not, for I will defend this place with my life! No enemy will get past me. You can count on me!> Bresir promised to the people with heartfelt sincerity. He truly believed in Osir’s vision for a new golden age for the goblins, hoping to unify the tribes into a single race that could work for a better future.

Many of the onlookers could truly feel his sincerity, cheering for him. <Round them up and drag them to the camp for training! Beat them if they refuse. No mercy for offenders!>

Bresir waved to the crowd and stayed a bit longer to help those who had suffered collateral damage, though they did not have enough herbs nor poultices to mend and heal wounds. *It’s been a cycle since I sent the strike force to attack them… if they were successful, the scouts should have reported back by now…*

<General Bresir!> A goblin scout reported by coincidence, bowing deeply. <We have received word that Leader Qatu is successful! He has captured Gulak and brought back fifty baskets worth of food!>

Bresir’s jaw nearly dropped before he shook himself out of his stupor. *This… this is unbelievable! A miracle!* <Quickly, help them bring in the food to distribute to the people!> Bresir frantically ordered, organizing the remaining soldiers towards the main gate.

A simple wall of wood and stone controlled the entry into the valley, with observers posted along every interval. Bresir rushed to the gate, which was a basic wooden door barred with a rotten decaying wooden beam. The guards gritted their teeth as they lifted the heavy wooden beam, opening the gate for the victorious force returning home with the salvation of the famine.

Bresir squinted his eyes, noticing the visage of the two hundred goblins returning through the tree line. However, his excitement soon turned to dismay as he noticed how badly injured the goblin force was.

Many of them had broken equipment and bloodied limbs, while some were limping, soaked to the bone in mud and blood. Others were wrapped in makeshift bandages from the leaves of Euria Seeds trees, hobbling as they carried the baskets of food.

The guards of the wall quickly rushed forward to carry the basket of food, helping them carry them in. <Call all the shamans well-versed in healing to come over quickly!> Bresir quickly ordered as he went down himself to meet Leader Qatu, whose face had been badly bruised.

<Qatu, what happened? Did you defeat the humans?>

<We did, but at a loss. I managed to capture Gulak at the cost of half of my men.> Qatu motioned to the rest of his pitiful force. There were less than a hundred goblins and hobgoblins left, all injured and shambling in some way or another. <If you don’t mind, I need to take a rest…>

<Of course, of course!> Bresir quickly made way for them, allowing the force to enter through the wide-open wooden gates. Bresir observed the condition of the force as they walked past them.

*How terrifying is the human force to inflict this much damage onto our armoured strike force? I must report this to Osir once he exits the palace…* Bresir’s train of thought was suddenly stopped as a fairly tall hobgoblin walked past him, completely covered in armour with its face masked by a leaf bandage.

Bresir considered himself one of the tallest hobgoblins around, and he had been managing the army and rebel soldiers under Osir for a long time. *Strange, I don’t recall a hobgoblin being an entire head taller than me.*

On the periphery of his vision, he noticed that a few of the hobgoblins were also just as tall, and one was extremely lanky and slim, almost feminine. *I also do not remember sending a female hobgoblin off with Qatu…*

The more he observed, the stranger he felt. However, most of the suspicion passed as soon as he saw the fifty baskets of food. *It does not matter as long as we have enough food to feed the people!*

Gulak was tied onto a pole and hoisted by two hobgoblins. Bresir grinned as he marched up to the bound shaman. <Gulak! Finally, karma has caught up to you! Today, before you are executed, you shall see what your selfish actions have caused to our people!>

Gulak scoffed: <You mean your people! The tributes I paid were extortionate! If your people cannot survive without my hunting or forage, perhaps your people are the ones who should not exist! Do not think that just because Osir is king that every goblin will listen to you!>

The arrogance and hostility stemming from Gulak made Bresir even more suspicious. <Soldiers! Put down the baskets of food and check them one by one!>

Bresir himself walked through the rows of baskets placed in order, opening them and checking them. Most of them were human goods and food, with dried meat and nuts being the majority. Bresir could not find any evidence that there was a human or even an enemy goblin hiding among the baskets. *If they are not hiding in the baskets…*

Just as the realisation hit him, two large human hands grabbed him by the head and twisted it sharply, his vision spinning 180 degrees rapidly as he glanced at Kyle’s face, no longer masked by the leaf bandage. As Bresir’s body slumped onto the floor, he could only see Kyle grab an arctech radio, speaking into it with the calm of a coming storm.

“We’re in. Commence the assault.”

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MG404: [Stats Table] # Chapter 67 - Saviour

MG404: [System Message | Killed: [Goblin General Bresir] | +500 EXP]

“Clean up the guards.” Kyle motioned with his hands, the trojan force under him immediately lashing out in a surprise attack, each of his soldiers lunging out with hidden weapons. Whatever feigned injuries or bandages they had were now thrown aside as they charged.

The guards were caught unaware, the prior excitement of victory and finally having enough food to eat was replaced with horror and confusion as they tried to retreat from the two hundred strong force that now rushed towards them.

“Sasha, don’t let any of them escape!” Kyle ordered, planning to secure the gate without the rest of Osir’s forces finding out.

Sasha nodded, swinging a longsword with both arms as she hacked with abandoned at goblin after goblin. The longsword cleaved through the dense muscles and bone of the guards, lodging itself halfway as she kicked the bleeding victim away, pulling her longsword out with frightening brutality. The retreating guards soon saw through the disguise, some of them recognizing her just from the movements alone.

<It’s the female human monster! Run!>

<No, we need to regroup and fight back! If we lose the->

The guard’s head was grabbed from behind as Sasha’s right fist glowed bright, the force of the longsword’s swing boosted. The cold edge of the blade seared through the vocal cords and windpipes of the unfortunate guard, Sasha continuously tugging and sawing away like a butcher. With a final lurch, the guard’s head came cleanly off, tendrils of flesh and meat dripping from what was his neck.

Instead of reveling in the violence, Sasha did this with a clear intention: to get the guards to surrender. Moving quickly to her next target, she was instantly grouped up on by a few courageous souls. She parried a hit from a brave fighter before pushing back, taking advantage of the confusion and disorganization among the guards to slaughter her way through the fearful guards more than a dozen in ten minutes.

Kyle focused on securing the gate, flushing the remaining guards stationed on the walls. Javelins were thrown at them, while Kyle easily dodged them and sprinted up the stone steps to reach the top. The paltry metal shields of the guards were dented and smashed in easily by Kyle’s kicks and neon-red hammer strikes, with others felled by the pellets shot from his handgun.

<Quick! Light the signal fire!> One of the guards yelled to a wooden watchtower, but what replied to him instead was a loud bang followed by the falling body of the observer stationed above, shot in the chest.

Kyle aimed his handgun at the watchtowers, ensuring no goblin observer could send back any signal to the main rebel army. If the rebel army caught wind of the attack, he could not guarantee that his forces would be able to fight head-on against a thousand goblin warriors. *Even if I could, it would be such a waste of manpower.*

As the battle was concluded, a secondary attack force under Kyle’s command entered through the gates, trailing behind the initial trojan force. In total, Kyle now had two hundred and fifty warriors under him, ready to strike.

The warriors gathered the bodies of the guards and piled them up, along with the corpse of Bresir. Gulak was untied, grinning widely as he danced in front of the corpses of the guards. “Arrogant hobgoblin, I spit on your body!”

A few guards were kept alive and interrogated by Kyle and Gulak. This allowed them to understand the overall situation in the area now while Kyle pondered his next move.

[We should rally with the other local pockets of resistance fighting for the former king.] Sasha pointed out. [We can tap into their manpower and gain some legitimacy, otherwise, we will be fighting against both sides who want to resist human control.]

“Where is the former king now?” Kyle asked Gulak.

“Sahusa the Great’s palace.” Gulak pointed to a large section of the valley’s slope above the treeline, where it seems that a few significant structures have been built, embedded into the wall directly overlooking the valley. “Guards say he last seen with Osir inside, has been one cycle.”

“Not all the six tribes are here, correct?”

“Yes, this is home of Steel Song Tribe. Osir’s main tribe is Howling Wind, far away.”

Kyle frowned. “This means that there’s a chance that there will be additional forces trying to enter the valley from this direction.” With the other tribes having their own armies beyond the valley, it was even more important to hold the gate to ensure fewer variables.

“Sasha, you will remain here in charge. Hold the gate until I have saved the former king.”

[Yes, sir.]

Kyle grabbed a few health potions from a supply crate, stuffing the small vials into his belt alongside his magazines before he sprinted off towards the palace alone.

He used the dense forest as cover, keeping off the crude gravel roads and instead running towards the slope of the valley up towards the embedded buildings. Surprisingly, there were nearly no guards outside the palace, with every available rebel soldier fighting against the loyal knights elsewhere all along the entire length of the valley. *Makes it easier for me.*

Silently striding into the vicinity of the palace, he was amazed by the seemingly man-made formation that the palace was carved into. It seemed to be a perfect square that was tunnelled out of the side of the mountain, leading deeper into the formation. Large stone pillars supported the weight of the ceiling to prevent it from collapsing, with centuries of immaculate drawings lined on the surface.

Kyle gave the drawings a cursory glance, noting the long history of the goblins and how long they had been here. *Based on the drawings, it seems like they have been here for a good five hundred years or so, but I’m not an expert.* If anything, he was only an expert at selling such archaeological finds on the black market, having dug up countless alien ruins in the Galactic Era. He focused on finding the former king for now – there would be time to solve all of it.

He soon reached the palace’s entrance plaza, finally noticing two hobgoblin guards patrolling the large archway that led further into the foyer. Kyle hid himself behind a stone pillar, taking out his arctech handgun and checking his ammo. *Fifty rounds total.*

Kyle peeked his head out, examining the guards who carried a sword and a round shield. He noticed that their armor was far more elaborate and intricate than the guards and strike force that he found. He could even see signs of arctech engravings on the surface of their vambrace, though it was too far for him to determine what effects they would have.

Taking a deep breath, Kyle stepped out from the pillar, immediately firing his handgun at the two guards.

The vambraces of the two guards flared to life, firing out point defense projectiles to cancel out the incoming shots while they yelped as they were caught off-guard. <Human?!>

They lifted the round shield and entered a fighting stance as Kyle sprinted towards them, closing the gap. The guards rushed forward bravely, with the first guard taking point and slashing downwards at Kyle in an aggressive attempt.

He dodged to the side before using his left free hand to grab the wrist of the guard, pivoting and delivering a knee to the back of the guard, denting the armour in and cracking the guard’s spine. Kyle immediately retreated backwards, creating distance as the second guard stabbed towards him with ferocity. With deft movements, Kyle swiftly aimed the handgun and fired two more shots at the second guard.

To his surprise, the arctech vambrace blocked the shots again, while the first guard’s breastplate activated to produce a healing effect, allowing him to recover back into a fighting posture. “Fine, let’s do it the hard way.” Kyle sheathed his handgun and brandished his neon red hammer, charging straight at them.

The two guards were synchronised, each covering for their own openings while blocking attacks with the shields. However, they were still no match for the brute force strength of Kyle’s hammer strike, slamming down right onto the shield and causing the first guard’s knees to buckle to the floor, losing balance as he toppled.

With a backhand swing as a follow-up, Kyle parried the second guard’s sword and sent it flying out of its grip before continuing with a devastating combo that saw Kyle brutally target each of their vitals, their skulls crushed in. The delayed activation of the second impact further squashed their brains in, a sickening squish echoing in the now silent palace’s entrance plaza

MG404: [System Message | Killed: [Improved Hobgoblin Guard] | +250 EXP]

*Improved Hobgoblin?* Kyle was a bit taken aback, having never seen an improved hobgoblin before. None of the hobgoblins he killed from Leader Qatu had such a title for them.

He entered the palace, which was a complete mess. Dozens of goblin and hobgoblin corpses were strewn over smashed furniture and cracked marble floor tiles, the blood already dried over a day. Kyle stepped warily into the entrance lobby, keeping an eye for any ambushers.

To his surprise, there were no guards anywhere in the lobby; only the ambience of death and silence accompanied Kyle as he watched his step. As he approached the grand staircase, he could hear footsteps walking down the marble tiles, prompting him to hide behind one of the pillars nearby.

A lone hobgoblin guard was patrolling the palace, equipped with the same equipment as the guards Kyle killed. Kyle stealthily crept around, waiting until the guard passed the pillar before jumping out and grappling him to the ground, quickly forcing the guard to drop his sword and shield.

<Talk-Where King?> Kyle spoke in a broken goblin language, unable to fully imitate the guttural sounds as he pinned the guard down.

<The human speaks?!> The hobgoblin was surprised, earning a smack to the back of the head.

<Talk!>

The hobgoblin tried to flip Kyle over, but to no avail, as Kyle expertly restricted all of his limbs’ movement. <No, you filthy human! I am a proud warrior of the Howling Win-> Another smack.

Smack.

Kyle smacked him a few more times before he finally relented.

<Wait, stop smacking! I’ll tell you, just let me go!>

<No I won’t. You come with me.> Kyle used his hammer and broke the limbs of the hobgoblin at the joints, the screams muffled as Kyle forced its head into the ground. <You don’t need this.> Kyle grabbed the breastplate and destroyed the engraving on it, preventing the hobgoblin from healing.

The hobgoblin whimpered as Kyle lifted him up, grabbing him like a hostage shield in front of his body, except for the clearly twisted and broken limbs of the hobgoblin dangling. <Bring me to enemy – you die. Slowly. Understand?>

The hobgoblin nodded vigorously through teary eyes.

<Point with your nose.>

Just like this, Kyle used the crippled hobgoblin as a guide who was unable to fight back thanks to the broken limbs. He navigated the myriad of hallways and rooms filled with dead servants and other family members of the king, quickly moving.

Soon, he was led to a hallway where there were two more guards protecting a jail door. In a split instant, Kyle flung the crippled guide towards the two guards, the body smacking into the first guard while Kyle sprinted along the side, lunging at the second with a strong hammer strike uppercut right into the chin.

MG404: [System Message | Killed: [Improved Hobgoblin Guard] |+250 EXP]

He made quick work of the other guard as well, keeping the crippled guide alive, who was agonising from the impact of the throw. Kyle aimed his hammer at the hinges of the prison door, smacking it repeatedly till it was damaged and fell to the ground with a loud clanging thud, revealing a badly bruised goblin who was stark naked.

It was clear he had been repeatedly tortured, though a sense of determination still held strong in his posture.

<You. King?>

Sahusa the Great could barely see through his swollen eyelids, but he made out the outline of the human. <No, I am no longer king… the King is Osir…>

<Good.> Kyle grabbed the crippled guide and dragged him into the prison cell, tossing him into a corner. Retrieving a health potion vial from his belt, he fed it to Sahusa, healing him slightly just enough to talk.

“Who… who are you?” Sahusa spoke as he tried to sit up, wincing at the bruises sending jolts of pain through his nerves. “Are you with Gulak?”

“A smart king. I need you to get your people back under control. I will help you squash the rebellion.”

Sahusa was nearly overjoyed to hear it, but he soon calmed himself down, thinking quickly about why Kyle was offering such a deal. It wouldn’t be the first time that he was offered something too good to be true, and remained quiet as he contemplated. “You want me to serve as your puppet.”

“Your society is unable to support your population without agricultural development. I assume this is not the first time such a rebellion has happened.”

Sahusa didn’t reply immediately, but internally he knew Kyle was right. The growth of the population was always limited by the ecosystem as they could only hunt and forage, with no knowledge of large-scale farming. There had been a few attempts, but the scale was just not big enough to sustain such a centralization development as his forefathers had attempted.

“Do you not want to see a golden era of goblins? One living in prosperity and happiness? I can make it happen – as long as you help me as well.” Kyle pressed his offer.

Sahusa sighed, knowing the only other option he had was to let Osir take control, beginning the cycle anew into a never-ending spiral of continuous coups and revolts. Perhaps Kyle represented a way out of this never-ending loop, a pathway to a better kingdom. However, what would he have to sacrifice? Was he trading one enemy for another?

Yet he had no choice if he wanted to live. He certainly did not trust Osir to lead his people into greatness, and so he had to settle for the lesser unknown evil for now.

“Fine, I agree. However, I am not a king anymore – it is Osir.”

“I know. Where is he? They told me he would be in the palace.”

“No, he is not. He is currently trying to brute force his way into getting an audience with the Oracle.”

“The Oracle?” # Chapter 68 - Evolution

“The Oracle has been with us since the beginning of time,” Sahusa explained as he put on the dead hobgoblin guards’ gear, having healed up to full with another of Kyle’s health potions. “But Osir is no easy foe; he is one of the strongest hobgoblins there is, which is how he maintains his position as leader of the Howling Wind Tribe. In order to defeat him-“

<Hey! What happened here?> Another group of patrolling guards spotted Sahusa and Kyle in the open, prompting Kyle to charge them without hesitation, easily dodging their swords and killing them with multiple strikes to the head and body. Kyle could read their attack patterns like an open book, knowing that all of them were probably trained the same way.

“Where is the Oracle?” Kyle wiped the blood splatter off his cheek, walking back to Sahusa without a sweat. The former Goblin King gulped internally as he watched Kyle approach him, his mind slowly comprehending how strong Kyle was.

“I need to go the armoury to pick up my armour set first,” Sahusa explained. “This way, I can also assist you… a little.”

“Fine by me.” Kyle nodded. He wouldn’t say no to some more arctech armour. Perhaps he would find something that could help him even more.

Kyle finished off the crippled guide in the prison in one clean swing, tying up loose ends and moving quickly through the palace with Sahusa as the guide. Sahusa was half-expecting Kyle to meet up with another group of humans, but as they neared the armoury, he did not see any others there. *Weird, did he enter the palace alone?*

The armoury was unprotected, its gilded rows and shelves of equipment noticeably barren. All of the weapons and equipment had already been taken and distributed among the rebel soldiers, pillaged to oblivion. Sahusa was crestfallen at the disappearance of his own armour set, one that represented what the King was. “Osir seems to have taken everything of worth in here.”

“Then you stay put here. Tell me the way to reach the Oracle.”

“No, I’ll go with you. I can handle my own.”

“No.” Kyle gripped Sahusa’s shoulder tightly, forcing him down onto the ground. “If you don’t stay here, I’ll tie you up. I can’t have you dying on me.” Kyle did not want a liability tagging along with him – the death of the former king would make it even harder to consolidate the area with legitimacy.

If Kyle could rule directly, he would not hesitate to decimate the entire royal bloodline. However, this would only create resentment among the surviving goblin population. In order to ease the transition of power, he needed a figurehead, one that can be accepted by the goblins.

Sahusa tried to get up in defiance, wanting to seek his own revenge against Osir. He grabbed Kyle’s wrist, exerting force in trying to pry it off his shoulder. However, he did not have enough strength to overpower Kyle even in such a simple scenario, Kyle’s grip firm. “Fine, I’ll stay hidden here. The Oracle stays in a grand cave far behind the palace. Simply head further into the mountain, and you will find it. I doubt Osir managed to make it past the entrance.”

Kyle nodded, barricading the armory with fallen debris to make sure they couldn’t easily reach the former king. He sprinted through the palace in a general direction, killing a few more hobgoblin guards along the way. The entire palace was a disaster, with dead servants, pillaged kitchens and storerooms. The centuries of decadence and wealth had been ruptured and ripped apart by equally ruthless rebels.

The construction of the palace seemed to follow the cavernous tunnel itself, stretching inwards deep into the mountains, yet every structural design seemed to be a maze in order to prevent anyone from reaching its end. However, Kyle’s job of navigation was made easier with the trail of rebel footprints and hobgoblin guards posted along the expected route.

He soon approached an elongated corridor resplendent with former luxury, the originally yellow carpet stained by the blood of a vicious battle, dead bodies piled up and oozing along the grooves of the hand-laid tiles. Up ahead laid an encompassing darkness, the natural cavern spreading further than his eyes could see save for a few lanterns placed sparsely along the floor, leading in.

Kyle took great precaution, scavenging for a shield from a fallen hobgoblin as protection. Such a cavern only served as a perfect line of sight for any ranged attacks. He wasn’t about to simply assume that the elite warriors of Osir had completely forgone bows and arrows, or even guns if they had them.

Each step he took echoed through the thunderous cavern, yet no attack seem to be imminent. The path was eerily silent, and there was a conspicuous dearth of bodies and corpses, as though no one had tread here before.

As he moved further in, he finally spotted a few bodies of hobgoblin warriors fallen onto the ground, their chests gouged out by a perfectly circular searing wound that went straight through their hearts, the edges of the gaping hole still smoldering. The cauterized flesh had been blackened, the missing parts turned to ash.

Kyle immediately recognized the type of wound, having seen it far too often in the Galactic Era. *Particle beam guns? They exist here?*

He was not too surprised at the fact that Galactic Era technology was present in this world. He had already seen an ancient exosuit spine as well as a personal energy shield from the Ilysian Punks. But he did not expect such technology to be hidden under the primitive goblins.

Kyle had been trying to pin down the history behind the world that he was in and how he had awoken here. Plenty of theories swarmed in his head, but the existence of the particle guns forced him to reconsider the validity of most of them.

More and more goblin corpses were appearing with increasing frequency as he continued to move down, their faces still frozen in agony and surprise. The row of corpses numbered in the dozens, leading up to a large broken metallic door, a gaping hole evident in the very middle as though someone had clawed it out with their own hands. Dangling wires hanging out of destroyed mechanical turret stands stood testament to the brutal fight here. *A massacre.*

The door was recognizable of Galactic Era technology, the hinges and composite metal armor clearly manufactured under immense heat and pressure that was hardly achievable in Raktor. Yet Kyle could see a few signs that it was not the same level of technology, the material makeup of the armour far more advanced that what he had possessed in his former life.

The Galactic Era did not imply that every single sector in the galaxy had the same level of technology, with the time taken to perform FTL travel from the center of the galaxy to the rim being more than ten years. This led to the stunted growth of technology in the sectors on the outskirts, which was where Kyle’s criminal empire used to thrive, far away from the reaches of the Council at the center of the human quadrant.

As such, technology grades in the Galactic Era were split between ‘classes,’ with Kyle’s previous domain being C-Class. The difference in exotic material concentration also inhibited technology adoption – even if a C-Class force knew how to make a B-Class technology, it did not mean that they had the materials to do so.

The turrets and door were of A-Class technology, two grades above what Kyle knew. The door was also far too big to be an entry point of a crashed ship, and he highly doubted that a capital ship this size would not have made any obvious landmark to the natives.

Yet for an A-Class metal composite armor to be successfully broken by the goblin army meant that it had weakened over the years. Kyle walked up to the door carefully, inspecting the damage dealt. Instead of seeing a perfectly arranged multi-layered armour cutaway, it instead looked like a amalgamation of bacteria and slush, as though it was the innards of an alien hive.

*The door had already been previously attacked by a metal nano-plague in the past…*

Kyle did not waste anymore time surveying, knowing he had to stop Osir as soon as possible. Every hour he delayed was another hour where they spent more money than was necessary on iron and coal. He entered the doors, noticing a large lab-like hallway, except the walls were dark blue and the ceiling was immeasurably high. It felt more like a temple of sorts, with a single delineated path running down through the middle.

Countless bodies of robotic turrets were smashed and broken apart, some entangled with dead hobgoblins who fought to the end, using their bodies to bear the brunt of the damage, pockmarked with particle beam wounds.  It was clear that Osir had forced his way in with his forces, utilising the king’s armoury to its limit.

MG404: [System ALERT | UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS | %@&#*( ARE N&T ALL*WED IN. SY\*@#M WILL BE DEACTI@3TED IN T@)#TY SECONDS. PLEASE L333E44AVE THE AR@&#EA]

MG404: [System Message | UPLINK ERROR | U12812 TO CONN123 TO  M2IN SE213R.]

MG404: [Adminstrator Access | Access Granted | Secret Key Accepted. Welcome to Installation 12.]

*Installation 12?* Kyle became even more curious. He had never had a system message for entering a new area before, not even when he entered the Culdao Peaks area or different parts of Raktor.

For the System to react like this to such an area, it seems like it could hold the answers as to what exactly is Kyle’s holographic system interface.

He picked up the pace, moving through the large hallway. However, he immediately spotted something that forced him to stop and deviate, running towards the wall.

Kyle leaned down next to a deformed skeleton with two horns jutting out of its skull. However, it was wearing a wholly destroyed exosuit, the particle beam rifle in its hand entirely shattered by what seemed to be a bullet.

It was not the only monster skeleton piled up along the side, with multiple different types of skeletons of varying shapes, sizes, and forms. Only a few were actually human, and they bore a different type of exosuit compared to the monster skeletons.

Kyle was not an expert in determining the time of death, but for the exosuit to have decayed this badly over time indicated it could have been more than a few hundred years, less if he considered the effects of the metal nano-plague. The time scale gave his heart a sinking feeling, the possibility that whatever he knew of the Galactic Era could have been long gone by now.

He tried to salvage some equipment, yet there was not much still functioning. Most of the exosuits that laid about had already been ravaged to a shadow of their former glory, the metal nano-plague pervasive. Yet there was a conscpicous lack of rifles and weaponry, as though someone had taken all of it. *This is bad.*

Kyle decided not to move ahead any further, quickly salvaging as much as he could find, hoping that the hobgoblins did not take everything. Soon, his keen eyes managed to find a working personal energy shield that somehow was not affected by the metal nano-plague, though the battery strength was degraded over time. Picking up the palm-sized energy shield module, the system surprisingly did not give him any indication of what the item was and its statistics, as though his system no longer functioned within the installation. *Weird; it’s getting even weirder now…*

The personal energy shield beeped while Kyle held it in his hands, displaying a holographic message. [Warning: 10% charge left. Proceed to the nearest employee charging station.]

It was far from ideal, but Kyle did not complain too much, equipping the personal energy shield to his body. The module latched itself onto its back, scanning his body’s outline before generating a skin-layer forcefield around his body that shimmered under the dim glow of the floorlights. *This should be good enough unless I have to fight the automated defense turrets.*

As he continued on, he found the entire situation simply ironic. He had spent the majority of his criminal empire attempting to hustle for highly controlled B-Class technology, yet here he was, wearing an A-class personal energy shield by simply scavenging.

He soon approached the end of the hallway, noticing a thick rusted bolted door as the only exit, pneumatic pistons stretching into the recesses of the walls. Before Kyle could even consider how he was going to open it, a large hissing sound was heard as the pneumatic doors on the end opened to reveal five hobgoblin guards exiting the hallway.

<Do you feel stronger? I feel like I can crush anything with my fist now!>

<That green smoke – it is a blessing from the Oracle! No doubt with our comrades improving their strength, we can strike back against Gulak and the humans!>

Kyle noted that they still had their weapons sheathed, taking advantage of surprise to rush at the hobgoblins, firing his entire arctech handgun clip at two of them, overwhelming the point defense armour engravings, killing them instantly as green arcia bolts lanced across the wide hallway, attempting to shoot down Kyle’s pellets.

<What?! Intruder! Go back and warn Osir that the humans are here!> One of them roared, but none of them had the time to react as Kyle charged them down, closing the gap in four short leaps and pummeling the hobgoblin.

<Fool! I have the power of the Oracle behind me no-> The hobgoblin roared just as Kyle sank his fist into its face, crushing the entire skull in one fell swoop. A sword swing came in too fast for Kyle to react to, causing the A-class personal energy shield to flare up and deflect the sword.

[Warning: 5% left. Proceed to the nearest employee charging station immediately.]

*Their attack pattern is the same, but its much faster.* Kyle grunted as he swiveled to grab the attacking hobgoblin by the neck, snapping it with his grip and flinging him aside as the third hobgoblin stabbed towards him, forcing him to dodge and take a step back before speed reloading his handgun.

The final hobgoblin fell, the point defense vambrace unable to react at such close range. Kyle noticed that there weren’t any system messages for him killing the hobgoblin as well.

Determined now to find out the truth, he headed past the open pneumatic doors, entering a large circular chamber where a lone hobgoblin decked in golden armour was in the middle, surrounded by numbered doors all along the circumference. Each of the doors had a countdown clock over them, with thirty seconds left.

The hobgoblin was the largest he had seen yet, towering at nearly 2.4 meters in height. It roared as it slammed the command console in front of it, the orange holographic interface illuminating his green muscles.

<Oracle, why do you not answer me! What is the truth behind this place?! Where did this power come from?> The large hobgoblin roared to the console.

[Error: Voice Pattern not recognised. Please repeat the question. Note: Due to the destruction of defensive systems, following Protocol 138A, all relevant data has been erased from the databanks.]

<GAH! I TIRE OF YOUR NONSENSE, ORACLE! If you are unwilling to tell me the truth, then you have no more purpose!> The large hobgoblin gripped the command console, ripping it off its stands and the connected wires, causing it to fray as the console was tossed to the side, its monitors and keys smashed to pieces.

<This… I know what this place is—a relic from the Heavenly War by our forefathers. To think we had so much heritage, so much untapped potential hidden within our bodies! How dare Sahusa and his tribe hide such information from the people!>

The large hobgoblin glanced at Kyle entering the chamber, his eyes widening. <HUMAN! You defile the holy chambers of our ancestors!>

“I take it that you’re Osir.” Kyle brandished his handgun, aiming it right at Osir and firing three shots. Instead of hitting Osir, a shimmering personal energy shield on Osir glowed purple, blocking the shots and dissipating them.

Osir barely flinched, instead glancing towards the countdown clock and grinning <Fool, you are no match for our improved potential!> The doors around the chambers hissed as residual green gas began to waft out, with nearly two dozen hobgoblins stepping out of their individual chambers, all clearly improved hobgoblins armed with a sword and shields.

<Human – today, you die here!> # Chapter 69 - Warlord

Kyle did not stand around in the open circular chamber, immediately retreating to the entrance. He fired the remainder of his magazine at the two closest hobgoblins, overwhelming their point defence systems. The undeflected pellets tore right through the skin and muscles, some nailing their target right in the head and killing them on the spot.

His hand instinctively grabbed a magazine of pellets to reload the handgun, his fingers swiping past the remainder of his belt to keep stock. *Only two more magazines left after this one – thjrty-six shots left, including my current magazine.*

Instead of exposing himself to attacks from all sides, he funnelled them into the tight, narrow space of the rusted pneumatic doors, bending over to grab a shield into his left shield from the earlier hobgoblin guards he killed.

The first three hobgoblins charged through the gap, earning themselves a full frontal strike of the shield right onto their faces, sending them stumbling back into their allies who crowded around behind them.

<Coward! Come out to the chamber and fight like a warrior!> Osir roared.

Kyle ignored the obvious taunt and swapped to close-quarters combat, changing out his handgun for the hammer and going to town on the closest hobgoblins. He swung and smashed, using the shield on his left hand to fend off the sword attacks as well as break their necks with a forward jab of the shield’s edge.

*Penchant for Violence!*

The same familiar surge of energy flowed through the veins of Kyle’s body, granting him an increase in strength, allowing him to easily dispatch the incoming hobgoblins as he fought them three at a time. Despite their obviously improved physique, none of the improved hobgoblins were a match for his sheer strength and fast reflexes, unless they fought him from all angles.

Osir recognized this issue immediately. <Idiots! Push past the choke point and surround him!> Osir roared, prompting the hobgoblins to charge forward with even more vigour, using the fallen bodies of their comrades to try and block the attacks of Kyle.

“No chance.” Kyle grinned as he expertly focused on any hobgoblin trying to get past him. At some point, he dropped the hammer and grabbed the ankle of an injured hobgoblin, using him as a weapon by wildly swinging him around.

With a single swing of the hobgoblin’s body, the ankle bone snapped off cleanly as Kyle launched the body towards the hobgoblins, knocking them out like dominos back into the circular chamber. Osir was astonished by the sheer strength of the human, only recalling the line infantry of the arrogant Kregol Count that they had fought in the past. *Since when were humans this competent? I must capture him alive and find out his secrets!*

Already half of them had died, leaving only a dozen hobgoblins alive and afraid to re-enter the death trap of the entrance, where Kyle stood over the corpses of their comrades, drenched in goblin blood.

*Penchant for Violence only lasts for a while; I need to make the best use of it right now!* Kyle did not wait for them to muster up the courage to come back in and fight, instead using his handgun to fire at the hobgoblins, taking them out one at a time.

With precise calculations on how much their point defence system could block, it took four shots to kill one of them, prompting Kyle to finish off three of them with rapid fire as he sprinted around the circumference of the chamber.

Just as Kyle began to reload his magazine while running, his brain screamed danger as a hail of brilliant particle beams flew straight at him. The speed of the beam made it impossible for Kyle to avoid the hits, his skin-layer personal energy shield wobbling violently before it dissipated into nothingness.

The remainder of the particle beams seared through the skin and flesh of Kyle’s right arm and thigh, penetrating all the way through and carving a smoldering wound out while Kyle gritted his teeth, resisting the urge to scream.

[WARNING: BATTERY DEPLETED!]

The personal energy shield warned as Kyle fumbled onto the floor, blood cauterising on the still sizzling wound while his handgun and shield clattered onto the floor. The remaining hobgoblins began to rush Kyle while Osir held a smoking turret gun in both hands, astonished by the existence of the personal energy shield on Kyle.

<This human knows how to use the Heavenly Relics as well!> Osir exclaimed. <Cut off his limbs and capture him!>

But before the hobgoblins could move any further, an all-encompassing feeling of dread fell over the hobgoblins and even Osir himself, his heart palpitating slightly as his neck broke out in cold sweat. Osir had never felt this way for a long time – the last being his first trial hunting a sabretooth in the ravine near his home tribe.

*Intimidation Aura!*

Kyle stood up quickly, wincing at the pain while he used his undamaged arm to grab the health potion vials, stuffing them into his mouth and activating the necklace of healing as well. A bright green surge healed Kyle back nearly instantaneously, the particle beam wounds instantly shedding their burnt flesh and regenerating, but he knew this would be the last full healing he would get for a while.

The effects of the Penchant for Violence began to taper off, but the Intimidation Aura allowed Kyle to buy time to pick up his handgun and reload.

Osir was the first to snap out of it, squeezing the trigger on the turret gun. However, the energy battery had clearly been depleted, and only smoke and sparks were ignited along the frame of the turret gun, causing it to malfunction. Instead of hesitating, Osir tossed the gun with a loud roar towards Kyle, forcing Kyle to leap out of the way.

Kyle immediately emptied his clip into the next three hobgoblins, nailing them while they were still frozen to the ground by the intimidating aura still emitting from Kyle. The sight of their comrades falling to the ground amplified the fear they felt in their hearts, prompting the remaining six hobgoblins to scamper out of the entrance, afraid of fighting against Kyle any longer.

Osir did not bother with them, knowing nothing he did now would be able to bring them back. <Useless warriors! The Oracle’s Blessing is wasted on them!> He cracked his hands as he marched towards Kyle, who reloaded his handgun and fired the entire clip at Osir.

The projectiles were all deflected by the personal energy shield, with Osir completely unfazed. <Fool! The Goblin King’s armour is no match for your puny pistol!> With a loud battle cry, Osir charged forward in a tackle with unexpected speed, slamming right into Kyle with his right armoured elbow and pinning him into the wall with his sheer body strength, being nearly one and a half times larger than Kyle.

Kyle gagged as the destructive impact ran through his body, his guts shuddering as Osir’s humongous left hand grabbed Kyle by the neck, lifting him with ease before being thrown headfirst onto the floor, the metallic tiles cracking at the seams in a spiderweb.

The force nearly knocked Kyle out,  but his combat training kicked in, his body instinctively rolling out of the way to dodge an incoming stomp by Osir.

*Aero Shoes!*

Kyle’s shoes glowed brightly, accelerating him even faster as he circled Osir, grabbing his hammer and picking up yet another shield. His eyes darted across the room as he analyzed every opening and opportunity he could exploit. He was no stranger to fighting larger humanoid aliens, having fought countless slovesas in the liberation wars of his home nation.

Osir felt a slight tingle run down his spine as the analytical eyes of Kyle sized him up like prey to be chopped up, making him wonder who was the real predator here. However, there was no time to hesitate – only the battle mattered.

As soon as Osir made the first step, Kyle sprinted towards Osir, swinging the hammer at the extended leg that was stepping forward. But before he could complete the swing, his instincts prompted him to retract his arm and support his shield with both arms as Osir immediately countered with a backhand swing, sending Kyle flying across the chamber.

Kyle twisted his body and negated the force through his recovery landing, instantly dashing out of the way as a broken command console came hurtling towards him, smashing into the wall in a burst of sparks and metal. The fragments pelted Kyle’s face, impeding his vision temporarily as he continued to run.

Before Kyle could shake them off his face, Osir was already a step ahead of him, lunging towards him. Kyle’s eyes glinted as he spotted an opening, pivoting on his right foot and side-stepping the heavy punch coming in. With two rapid strikes to the waist of Osir, Kyle immediately retreated until another opening appeared, stepping in again to counterattack.

Osir grinned as he prepared to fight back, but suddenly, the two points on which he had been struck flared up with a severe jabbing pain, causing him to flinch involuntarily. With his movement temporarily hampered, Kyle took the chance and delivered a brutal combo, landing five strikes directly onto Osir’s right forearm.

The delayed pain retook effect, neutralising Osir’s right arm for a short moment, allowing Kyle to continue the devastating series of strikes, continuously swapping over to the other side. Kyle’s brain raced as he mentally calculated the time taken for the pain to kick in, timing it with his follow-up attacks to prevent Osir from retaliating effectively.

<ENOUGH!> Osir bellowed, his warlike blood and animalistic instincts pounding non-stop, the adrenaline causing the effects of the hammer to become insignificant. Kyle was caught off-guard by Osir’s sudden cry, another heavy-handed slam hitting his shield. The vibration from the hit nearly caused Kyle to drop his hand as his bones were rattled from the sheer force.

Kyle immediately knew what was happening, quickly backing off and leaping from side to side, no longer interested in fighting back.

<COME HERE, YOU COWARD!> Osir heaved the bodies of his fallen warriors, using them as projectiles to force Kyle into dodging before charging forward. However, Kyle was far too nimble for Osir to catch up with, especially with the activation of the Aero Shoes.

The song and dance continued for another minute or so while the pain that Osir had been ignoring began to creep back slowly, the dull aching sensation in his body no longer able to be avoided. The very moment Kyle noticed Osir slowing down, he launched a vicious counterattack, rushing straight at Osir unexpectedly.

It was a simple tactic every frontier explorer of the Galactic Era learnt when dealing with native alien lifeforms – avoid when enraged, strike when weak. No sane explorer would fight an alien who should be braindead while the body is still unaware of its own death.

Just like that, Kyle held the unequivocal advantage over Osir, easily hitting all over the body. Osir yelled out in pain as the multitude of delayed pain effects kicked in at the same time, causing him to suffer tremendously.

<Eno…enough! You always had the power to kill me. Just finish me off!> Osir knew that Kyle had more than enough strength to beat him over the course of the fight. He would have given up and retreated if it wasn’t for the fact that this was a life-or-death duel. His head hung low, dejected as he slumped against the wall, unable to move his limbs any longer.

“Good.” Kyle took a deep breath, his head covered in sweat, grime and blood as he tried to wipe it off with an equally bloody hand. “I have a few questions. What is the Oracle?”

Osir was dumbfounded. <What?! But you… you know how to use the Heavenly Relics!>

“Answer the question.”

<The Oracle…. The Oracle is this room! The heritage of our forefathers who left it as a relic from the Heavenly War…>

“You keep talking about the heavenly war; what is it?”

<A.. a myth.> Osir spoke with a pained expression as he breathed deeply, his lungs aching. <Passed down from our ancestors. A continental war that caused the colour of the sky to change its hue. The stars blotted out by divine rays from above. Millions of our forefathers fought and died, leaving us with only this…> Osir coughed out blood, dripping down his chin.

“How long ago was this… heavenly war?” Kyle asked with hesitation, afraid to know the answer. He already had hints from the skeletons and rusted exosuits.

<I do not know, but… but the first Goblin King was five hundred years ago…> Osir’s voice started to get weaker. Kyle quickly moved forward to heal him with the Necklace of Healing, but for some reason, the green aura that enveloped Osir was not enough to fix the internal bleeding.

“What are the chambers for? What did the console tell you?”

<Con-… con-?>

“The Oracle, what did she tell you?”

<It spoke of an improvement, of … pro-to-cols… I only wished to see the glory of the goblin race, for our race to flourish once more…> Osir’s voice trailed off, the small amount of healing unable to stem the severe wounds Kyle had inflicted on Osir.

Kyle stopped trying, noticing Osir’s hands losing their tension. The chamber was a complete wreck, with many of the chamber doors smashed in or broken apart by their brutal fight. He stood up, glancing around the room. One of the doors out of the chamber looked different – an administrator room of sorts. As if on cue, the door began to automatically open.

MG404: [System Message | Access Granted | Temporary Administrator Privileges recognized. Please register at the nearest terminal.]

He readied his shield and hammer, preparing for the worst. *Time to find out what Installation 12 is.* # Chapter 70 - Oracle

Kyle kept his guard up, staying wary as he stepped through the now-opened door of the administrator’s room. However, instead of seeing a control center of some sort, it was instead a long concrete hallway, dimly lit by barely functioning lights. *There is still electricity in the place – entirely possible for someone to be alive.*

He slowly stepped down the hallway, minimizing the noise of his footsteps as much as he could as he approached a T-junction. A sign in the Council’s language was plastered on the wall, further cementing Kyle’s belief that this was a Galactic Era installation.

[<————— Seed Storage | Genetic Chemicals ——————->]

*Seed Storage? Is this a doomsday bunker?* However, the existence of the green gaseous chambers that improved the hobgoblins did not seem right. It felt more like an experimental lab than a bunker meant to hide out. There were also no signs for shelter, so it did not feel like an evacuation point.

Kyle decided to check out the chemicals’ section first, curious about the green gas. He had breathed in a few whiffs but felt no particular changes to his body, wondering if it only affected goblins.

He soon reached another similar metallic door, locked tight. Unlike the previous doors, this one was seemingly well-preserved, with no sign of attack or any metal nano-plague corroding it from inside out. Kyle was considering his options on breaking the lock when the door automatically opened for him, as though it was expecting him. This raised his suspicion even higher as he tried to figure out why did he have such privilege.

*Is every System user an administrator? If there are such facilities in Versia, and Galactic Era tech was able to be recovered, perhaps they, too have a System User…*

Kyle focused his attention on his immediate surroundings. He stepped through the door, revealing a bio lab that was clearly dedicated to genetic experimentation. Hundreds of labelled pressurised gas tanks were lined up in a packed formation, the tubes attached to their nozzles and running the entire length of the lab’s ceiling towards an exit duct that no doubt led to the individual gas chambers.

There were four vats in the lab, each with a floating specimen inside. Kyle could see that they were arranged in ascending order, with a goblin baby being the first, followed by a goblin child, a goblin adult and a hobgoblin adult. They seemed to have been preserved in some sort of stasis, their cellular activity frozen in time.

*Were the goblins artificially created? Or experimented on?* Kyle moved over to the control terminal, where he spotted a helmetless human wearing an exosuit sitting on the chair, facing the vats. He readied himself for a fight, slowly moving up and using the hammer to spin the exosuit around slowly.

Only the dead, agonized, decaying face of its occupant stared back at Kyle, long dead before Kyle even arrived. Streaks of dried blood stains were marked on the wall, along with three other destroyed exosuits with no bodies. A pile of human bones lay in front of the exosuit pilot. *Cannibalism. Not surprised.*

He shoved the exosuit and bones out of the way, tapping the control panel. Nothing responded despite electricity still being supplied to this place. Kyle tried tapping once again, prompting a shimmering sound to materialize behind him. He quickly swiveled and swung the hammer, only for the hammer to pass through a holographic human.

[Good morning, Administrator. Oracle-13 ORISA at your service. What tasks would you like me to perform today?] The holographic AI human bowed, wearing a skimpy bikini that accentuated her curves in a disproportionate way. It instantly disgusted Kyle.

“Revert to your default form and give me the logs of the lab. And call me sir.”

[Understood.] The A.I. reverted into a military-style uniform, complete with a beret. [Following Protocol 138A, all existing logs and data have been purged from the facility. Shall I attempt to uplink to the main server?]

*Main Server?* “All future uplinks are hereby prohibited. Understood?”

“Yes, Administrator.”

“Refer to me as sir.”

The figure glitched temporarily, before returning to normalcy. “Yes, Administrator.”

Kyle didn’t press any further, immediately picking up on the error. *Seems like the cognitive core is damaged.*

He continued to scan the room, digging up any information possible. Many of the monitors have already been damaged, with only one intact, still functioning. He reached over to the monitor, tapping the nearly invisible frame with the tip of his fingers. It prompted a holographic keyboard to appear in the air, one that Kyle quickly typed in to try and access any remaining data. Yet the system had been wiped clean, with nothing left to investigate apart from a glowing “PROTOCOL 138A” in front of him.

“What is Protocol 138A?”

[I apologise. Information regarding Protocol 138A has also been erased.]

Kyle frowned, visibly frustrated as he tried again on the keyboard. However, facing such an issue was not unexpected. Many human forces in the Galactic Era employed such tactics to mask their military or secret installations. Galactic Coordinates were a life-or-death matter. It would be catastrophic if they were leaked to a hostile alien force. Kyle himself had employed such a protocol during his liberation war against the invading slovesa, preventing captured ships from leaking critical data.

“When was your last reboot?”

“68163748625”

“In human years.”

“Three hundred and seventy years ago.”

“When was Protocol 138A implemented?”

“Unknown.”

“So, you don’t know what this lab is for.”

[Correct. But I am connected to every mechanical and electrical system in this facility.]

“What defence systems are left?”

[Searching… ERROR: all defence systems have been neutralised.]

“What was your original purpose?”

[Sorry, I do not have the information to answer that.]

Kyle gripped his fist tightly, looking around for any question that he might have to try his luck. “What is this holographic interface that I have?”

[Sorry, I do not understand the question. I do not sense any holographic interface present on you.]

Kyle groaned. “What information do you actually have?”

[I have been equipped with many of the instructions needed to grow the seeds stored in the Seed Storage section. I am also able to control the pressure of the gas tanks that are currently connected to the individual chambers.]

Kyle sighed. If the A.I. had continued to be useless, he might have stormed the entire place to find her databank and rebooted it in the most manual way possible. “That’s it?”

[Apologies. All other records have been eradicated. There are two remaining pieces of data that I have retained, however.]

“Show me.”

[The first is an instruction to download data from the main server. Shall I execute?]

“NO!” Kyle shouted hurriedly. He had no idea what forces were behind the planet or controlling any installation. There would be severe repercussions if the force behind the main server found out that he had taken down one of their facilities. If Kyle were in that position, he would have also done the same thing.

“Under no circumstances are you to make any radio transmissions, electrical connection, or conversation with anyone outside this facility except me. Got it?”

[Yes, sir.]

Kyle pushed the dead exosuit wearer out of the chair, sitting down on it to rest. *This is actually a blessing in disguise, but I must find a way to hide the existence of the A. I as much as possible. Spreading the word about such a facility among the common people is a good way to invite trouble.*

He glanced at the A.I., who was still in a holographic form. “You mention another piece of information, what is it?”

[While my functionality is currently limited, I am able to restore my original form via repair of a few critical systems. Upon reboot I have noted all damaged systems and their required components]

A list of items appeared in front of Kyle, detailing the extent of the damage. Kyle’s eyes darted as he scanned through the list, most of which were clearly nanotech that he did not have the means to acquire nor produce. However, most of the damaged modules were not that important to him, especially anything to do with communications. It was better if he left it unrepaired to prevent virtual incursions.

One of the module’s name intrigued him, however. “Physical Transfer Module?”

[A module that allows me to upload a copy into a pre-prepared physical biological body.]

Kyle had never seen an A.I adopt a biological organism before, most of the time it being fully synthetic like a robot. *Why does the A.I in such a location have this functionality though?* “You must have records of using such a body before.”

[No, but I have retained the instruction on how to create a physical avatar.]

Kyle quickly started planning in his head. With the help of this supposed A.I. avatar, it could accelerate the redevelopment of the entire goblin society by centuries. All he had to do was to find some way to get the avatar to be somewhat functional, and then integrate it into the goblin society as a sort of ‘leader’.

Now with Osir dead, Sahusa would be a puppet under him, essentially giving Kyle full control of the goblin society within the Culdao Peaks. This alone would skyrocket his industrial capabilities beyond what any of his competitors could do, even the Ardent Cretins.

*Step-by-step.* Kyle had to stabilize the kingdom first in order to get the workforce going. Knowing that the source of the instability in the first place was due to famine, food was the highest priority that he needed to solve.

“Show me to the Seed Storage.”

Kyle crossed the hallway in which he entered from, heading to the opposite end where the pneumatic doors unlocked to reveal a broken radiation shower, meant to sterilize germs and bacteria that could infect the seeds.

Rows upon rows of shelves with cryogenically frozen seeds in pods stretched onwards infinitely, while ancient packing drones whirred to life, scaling the infinite shelves along the rims and resuming their indexing task. The A.I floated above him in a holographic projection, following him. [What seeds are you looking for?]

He peered into a few of the nearest pods, noticing a wide variety of genetic modification for all types of plants: Ancient Earth, New Terra and multiple new strains from conquered alien worlds. These collection reminded Kyle of one of the largest coroporations in the Galactic Era: terraformers, paid for decades-long projects to make worlds habitable again.

*So was this a terraforming outpost…?* *But why experiment on goblins?* Kyle did not question more, instead focusing on which seeds he needed in the immediate term. “Fastest growing cycle with the largest portion of nutrients and calories, with a slight emphasis on good flavour.”

[Calculating… Type-349-AGW, modified radish with growth cycle of 14 days, leaves are edible as well with a slight spice to it.]

“How many in storage?”

[Approximately 2,000,000 seeds.]

“Good. Have all of them unfrozen and delivered to the front entrance. I will be back soon.”

@@@

Sahusa was panicking as he continued to hide in the armoury, worried about what happened to Kyle. He had not heard a single warrior past the armoury ever since, but Kyle not returning after a few hours worried him tremendously.

Suddenly, two pairs of footsteps could be heard approaching the barricaded door of the armoury. Sahusa quickly grabbed a sword and shield that was nearby, preparing to fight. *Don’t look down on me! I am Sahusa the Great!*

“Sahusa. You better be alive in there.” The voice of Kyle wafting through the barricades sent a wave of relief through Sahusa’s body, nearly bursting out into tears.

The barricade was quickly torn down, with Sahusa clamouring to his feet. “Osir, did you kill Osir?”

“I have.” Kyle respond, tossing the decapitated head of Osir through the opening, the tendrils skidding along the vacant armoury’s floor. “We had a deal.”

Sahusa gulped. His ancestors had always warned him of human treachery, yet at this point he had no choice but to accept for now. As Kyle entered past the torn barricade, Sahusa immediately knelt on all twos. “I, Sahusa, King of the Goblins, in exchange for the grace and help that you have rendered me, plead allegiance to you for the remainder of my life.”

“Good. It’s time to stabilize the kingdom.”

With Osir now dead, the pacification of the remaining rebels went off without a hitch, though some defectors fled deeper into the mountains, scaling up the slopes towards the glaciers above. Combining the forces under Sasha’s control and the loyal followers of Sahusa, the chaos and disorder ended as abruptly as it had begun.

The food that Kyle’s forces had brought in originally only served as a stop-gap. “Sasha, send a message to Merissa to divert more food over here for the next two weeks, we need it to tide over until we become more self-sufficient here.”

[Understood.]

“Sahusa, gather a hundred of your most loyal troops and head to the Oracle’s entrance. I have convinced the Oracle to provide gifts.”

“A gift?!” Sahusa’s face immediately lit up, his respect for the Oracle’s omnipotence immeasurable.

An hour later, a hundred hobgoblins were standing outside the circular chamber in the expansive hallway, murmuring among themselves as they watched the first two dozen hobgoblins, along with King Sahusa, enter with Kyle guiding them in. The doors closed shut behind them, leaving the remaining hobgoblins wondering.

The hallway had been long cleaned up, Kyle having ordered the A.I to sweep up any remaining debris and bodies to prevent the surviving goblins from knowing the true nature behind the Oracle. Yet the hobgoblins were not bothered by the long dried blood stains on the floor, instead marvelling in awe at the carvings that extended all across the ceiling.

<I have never been in the Oracle’s chambers before. Why does it look so different from what we have outside?>

<Shut up, it’s a gift to be even able to enter such a holy place. The Oracle herself shall herald us into a golden age!>

As the hobgoblins discussed excitedly as to the origins of the Oracle over the next few minutes, the pneumatic doors slid open, revealing the same two dozen hobgoblins and King Sahusa. Those waiting outside were taken aback as they clearly saw a marked difference in the bodies of those who entered.

The most prominent change was that of King Sahusa, who had grown to a size nearly as large as Osir, his repressed genes activated by the green gas. It was a stark difference from his previously average height as a normal hobgoblin. Sahusa flexed his hands a bit, noticing the sheer power and strength flowing through his body. He had never felt better in his life.

He threw a punch, the vigorous blood swirling through his vein with a clear new level of power. <I feel like I can do anything! The Oracle has blessed us!>

Cheers erupted from the hobgoblins, the gift of the Oracle evident in front of them. Kyle smiled, watching his overtuned workforce come into being. *With this, everything should go much faster.* “Sahusa, I leave the rest to you. You already have the information on how to plant the seeds?”

“Yes, Lord Kyle.” Sahusa bowed with genuine respect to him, recognizing Kyle as the benefactor.

“Good. Work with Sasha to overcome the famine and follow her orders. Food supplies will arrive intermittently.”

“I understand… but where are you going?”

“I have a few personal issues to solve.” Kyle waved him off, heading to the rear of the chambers and entering the Genetic Chemicals section alone, sealing the door behind him. With the installation restored to a somewhat functional stage, the System Messages were now flooding his screen.

MG404: [System Message | Killed: [Improved Hobgoblin Guard] | +250 EXP]

MG404: [System Message | Killed: [Goblin King Osir] | +3000 EXP]

MG404: [ Level Up: 20 - 25 | All Stats Increased | Bonus Points Granted ]

MG404: [Class Announcement | Class Upgrade (Level 25) | Congratulations, Unique Class will now be upgraded| Please wait.] # Chapter 71 - Subclass Selection

MG404: [Sub-Class Announcement | Sub-Class Upgrade (Level 20) | Congratulations, sub-classes will be unlocked now. | Please wait.]

MG404: [Class Announcement | Class Upgrade (Level 25) | Congratulations, Unique Class will now be upgraded| Please wait.]

The last time he had done a class upgrade was when he was level 10 – and it was an extremely painful process. If Kyle wanted to get the upgrades right now, he needed to do it somewhere out of sight and completely safe from any possible enemy attacks.

Kyle returned to the Genetic Chemicals section, sighing as he sat back down in the chair. Now that he had seen how the hobgoblins and goblins had been experimented on, a burning question began to nag in his mind. *How is the System conferring the skills onto me?*

Regardless, the moment he thought about the sub-class upgrades, a new system message appeared.

MG404: [Sub-Class Announcement | Generating Sub-Classes | Please Wait. | Please Wait.]

*It better be good this time, and before I make a final choice, I should ask for the skills first.* Kyle tapped his fingers impatiently, waiting for about a minute before the sub-class windows appeared.

MG404: [Sub-Class Announcement | Sub-Classes Generated | All subclasses come with only one class-unique skill at the start, up to a maximum of two. | Please choose carefully. A total of twelve subclasses have been created.]

MG404: [ Sub-Class Generated | Arcia Mystic (Basic) | The flow of arcia energy is in your hands. | Skills are focused on manipulating the flow of arcia energy.]

MG404: [Skill | Arcia Disruption (Basic) | *Upwards instead of downwards* | Select one single engraving within five-meter radius to disrupt. Results may vary. Upgradable. Duration: Thirty Seconds. Cooldown: One day.]

MG404: [ Sub-Class Generated | Tycoon (Basic) | Money makes the world go round. | Active Skills revolve around business acumen, persuasion and leadership.]

MG404: [Skill | Rich Man’s World (Basic) | Reduce the opposition people have towards your deals. | +10% Persuasion Success Chance. Upgradable. Duration: Five minutes. Cooldown: One day.]

MG404: [ Sub-Class Generated | Slave Driver (Basic) | The means of production is only efficient with one leader. | Active Skills revolve around intimidation and manipulation.]

MG404: [Skill | Slave Engraving (Basic) | Don’t let your property escape. | Mark selected target with an invisible engraving that can be triggered to deliver intense pain. Target must mentally accept the engraving. Upgradable. Number of Engravings: Two]

MG404: [ Sub-Class Generated | Drug Cook (Basic) | Mixing nature to get people high. | Active Skills revolve around the increased quality of drugs and a higher chance to learn new recipes. ]

MG404: [Skill | Addictive Eye (Basic) | Know what makes people tick, or puke. | Highlights ingredient that have addictive properties. Differentiation in addiction levels obtainable through upgrading sub-class. Passive.]

Some of the subclasses were intriguing. Tycoon would be very useful, but Kyle didn’t think he needed any more ‘help’ in being persuasive, that was something that he could control on his own without the System’s help.

Slave Driver was interesting, with the perk of it being invisible. Current slave engravings came in the form of collars, with Kyle having already placed one on Guang Hwa and covering it with clothes. *I don’t think I need the System for that. Furthermore, it’s only two, and I can manufacture an unlimited amount of collars.*

Drug Cook had the most useless starting active skill. Sure, the System claims that there could be another skill if he upgraded the subclass, but he could easily figure out addiction within a few days.

What he was looking for was a skill that he would not be able to acquire naturally. The Arcia Disruption skill fit the bill slightly – he had never heard of an arcia engraving being disrupted before remotely, only physically.

Either way, he did not immediately dismiss the subclasses. There was still an ample selection of eight more to go, so he pulled up the next four that had been generated.

MG404: [Sub-Class Announcement | Displaying next four subclasses | Please Wait. | Please Wait.]

MG404: [ Sub-Class Generated | Inventor (Basic) | Breaking the norm, one patent at a time | Active Skills revolve around an increased chance to optimise new blueprints for invented parts.]

MG404: [Skill | Possibilities (Basic) | To break the barriers of imagination | Highlights potential upgrades on a single component to improve efficiency. Upgradable. Duration: Ten minutes. Cooldown: One day.]

MG404: [ Sub-Class Generated | Revolutionary (Basic) | Move the people with a wave of your hand | Active Skills revolve around crowd control and mood.]

MG404: [Skill | Riot Incitement (Basic) | By the people, for your purpose. | Agitates emotions and accelerate mob thinking. Five-meter radius. Upgradable. Duration: Ten minutes. Cooldown: One day.]

MG404: [ Sub-Class Generated | Poisoner (Basic) | Mixing nature to kill people. | Active Skills revolve around poison and its applications.]

MG404: [Skill | Weakness Modifier (Basic) | Everyone has their failures, some just drink it. | Indicate one allergy immediately on a selected target. Five-meter radius. Upgradable. Duration: One minute. Cooldown: Two days.]

MG404: [Sub-Class Generated | Tamer (Basic) | Even the animals shall be exploited  | Active Skills revolve around subjugating animals for various uses.]

MG404: [Skill | Domestication (Basic) | Existence shall be put to greater use. | Makes one non-humanoid subservient indefinitely. Number of Tamed Creatures: 1]

*Inventor is absolutely useless.* Kyle could see why the System was generated such a subclass, considering the amount of ‘inventions’ that he had made over the course of his time here. Yet, when armed with the knowledge of the Galactic Era, why would he even need such a subclass?

As for the Revolutionary, while the skill might be useful in certain scenarios, Kyle had more than enough methods to achieve the same goal and objective. *Really, the System is looking down on me.*

Poisoner was an interesting skill in itself. Knowing the allergies of others would make them much much easier to control. Unfortunately, the cooldown was far too long. If he wanted to profile the entirety of his enemies it might take him months and years. It was also possible that the indicated allergy was non-lethal, proving to be useless. *Overall, an underwhelming skill for a poisoner role.*

Kyle was not a human nor humanoid supremacist in anyway – the Galactic Era had taught him a simple rule: if it can work, it can be exploited. So Tamer was of interest to him.

However, Tamer was not that much different from Slave Driver. And considering that he had already somewhat subjugated the hobgoblins and was on the verge of obtaining his own overtuned hobgoblin workforce, there was hardly no need for the Tamer class. Kyle thought about it critically, and tried to provide an argument internally that eventually he may come across monsters like giants that would need to be domesticate.

Yet, the auction in the Central Sector last year had already shown him that even a cyclops could be enslaved. *Let’s keep these four in view first then.*

MG404: [Sub-Class Announcement | Displaying last four subclasses | Please Wait. | Please Wait.]

MG404: [ Sub-Class Generated | Serial Killer (Basic) | Once you start, you can’t stop. | Active Skills revolve around increasing stats the more you kill within a given timeframe.]

MG404: [Skill | Bloodlust (Basic) | Passion for blood | Combat stats against target in the specified duration is increased by 0.5% for every hit accumulated. Killing the target retains the bonus for five minutes. Upgradable. Duration: Thirty Seconds. Cooldown: One day.]

MG404: [ Sub-Class Generated | Manufacturer (Basic) | Conformity through production  | Active Skills revolve around mass production and assembly lines]

MG404: [Skill | Mass Production Drones (Basic) | Two hands bad, more drones good. | Able to control up to two arctech drones remotely. Blueprint provided. Upgradable. Duration: Ten minutes. Cooldown: One day.]

MG404: [ Sub-Class Generated | Pact Maker (Basic) | Enforces written contracts to a certain level. | Active Skills revolve around applying debuffs to signatories who do not adhere to the contract.]

MG404: [Skill | Moral Justice (Basic) | Guilt manifest. | Creates a special contract. If a signatory goes against the contract, stats will suffer a permanent decrease of 10%. Applies to both sides. Upgradable. Number of Pacts: 1]

MG404: [ Sub-Class Generated | Shadow (Basic) | From the shadows you strike | Active Skills revolve around infiltration and self-concealment.]

MG404: [Skill | Silent Steps (Basic) | Even the bats do not hear you. | Reduce footstep noise to bare minimum. Upgradable. Duration: Twenty Seconds. Cooldown: One Hour.]

The subclass Serial Killer originally intrigued Kyle, but when he read the skill he immediately discarded it. He did not need extra help killing multiple targets  - he could easily invent a machine gun for that. And the stronger he grew, the more damage he would already do per hit, sometimes even killing them in one hit with his sniper rifle. *Perhaps against large monsters, but even a cyclops can be felled with a single shot.*

If he took the skill, it would mean that he had to hit the target about twenty times in order to receive a 10% damage bonus. *Does it work against static targets? Might be good for knocking down walls.*

MG404: [Clarification | Bloodlust (Basic) | Skill is only applicable against living organisms. Inorganic material cannot be ‘killed’.]

*Right.* Kyle ignored his obvious mistake and continued on. Manufacturer was looking quite good, and he might have taken the class up if it were not for the existence of the A.I and the ancient packing drones that he had seen in the Seed Storage section of the installation. Kyle had no doubt he could eventually repair and modify the drones, given the right materials, and subsequently reverse engineer the drones to make his own arctech versions.

*Maybe the System’s drones are far more advanced, but I don’t need that many drones either way.* Furthermore, the skill was limited in duration, which paled in comparison to his Seven Snakes members as well as hobgoblin workforce.

The Pact Maker subclass looked fairly interesting. Kyle was clear that the underworld contract was enforced by strength and reputation – many of the contracts served as proof of justice in the event one party decided to renegade on the terms. However, if one party had an overwhelming power advantage, the contract was completely unfair.

The problem laid in the fact that the debuff in stats would be applied to both sides. This meant that Kyle would also be restrained by the laws that he set forth himself. Furthermore, the skill did not guarantee that there was no loophole in the contract – Kyle not having his Galactic Era cranial implant meant that he could not remove such a possibility.

As such, a scenario existed in a way that the other signatory could exploit the loophole, and Kyle would be forced to follow the contract still, lest he wanted to suffer a debuff. *It would be good without the downsides.*

Shadow sounded good, but Kyle wasn’t really one to sneak in personally. He had followers for that very purpose, even training Sasha to that extent. *I could also design an arctech engraving to minimize the sound coming from my feet.*

With all the subclasses now presented, Kyle began the process of elimination. He kept in mind that the subclass could generate two skills maximum in the future.

*Let’s get the useless ones out of the way. Tycoon, Inventor, Revolutionary, Manufacturer, Drug Cook, Slave Driver, Tamer, Shadow are all useless, even if upgraded.*

Kyle swiped with his hands, manipulating the windows in front of him. The remaining list was Pact Maker, Arcia Mystic, Serial Killer and Poisoner.

He held a small hope that Pact Maker would work, but he also noted that even if the signatory suffered the permanent debuff, it would be a one-time affair. With him only having knowledge of the System, it would not be an effective measure to ensure that the other party would adhere to the terms of the contract.

Sure, there was a edge use-case in which he could use it to weaken an enemy, but it seemed too complicated to execute. Any enemy that he could bring to the negotiating table meant that he had a similar power range, or at least, enough bargaining power already. *It’s a ‘win-harder’ class, but I don’t particularly need it.*

Arcia Mystic was a weird one, and the only subclass to deal directly with the flow of arcia. While the skill was limited in ability, it still served as a potential game-changer in many of the duels. Kyle could think of so many ways he could have made some past fights much easier with the ability to disrupt an engraving. He kept it for now, considering the next class.

Serial Killer’s current skill was not that enticing, but Kyle wondered if the second generated skill would be good. However, it was essentially gambling, and for all the casinos that Kyle has built in his life, he never placed his entire faith in luck, only making decision based on what he had in front of him. As such, he had to discard the sub-class, knowing that his strength would soon dwarf the usefulness of the skill. *It’s also a ‘win-harder’ class.*

Poisoner was the one that Kyle held the most hesitation about. If he could use the class to know what was Sebastian’s allergies, then it would make it easier to eliminate him. Yet, there was still a vast gap between knowing the allergy and actually executing an elimination plan. *If the skill tells me he’s allergic to seafood with nothing but a mild rash… I might just try to rip out the System of my own body.*

Unwilling to take the risk, Kyle only had the Arcia Mystic left as the viable subclass. He checked again some of the subclasses that he had eliminated in the first round, going through them again. *It’s the only class that provides me with a skill I don’t already know how to implement.* Without hesitating any longer, he selected the Arcia Mystic sub-class.

MG404: [WARNING | Sub-class Integration Beginning | Please find a safe location. | Please find a safe location.]

Before Kyle could even brace himself, the familiar sharp, sudden jabbing pain erupted at the nape of his neck.  The fiery pain shot through the nerves, spine and bones like lightning, causing him to wince and fall off the chair, writhing in pain. *How is this as painful as the main class upgrade?!*

MG404: [WARNING | Class Upgrade Beginning | Please find a safe location. | Please find a safe location.]

*Shit, the System is combining both upgrades into one?!*

As he rolled around the floor, a million needles prickling his skin, he could feel the same foreign object in his body slicing away at his internal organs and underlying flesh, as though it was rearranging his vessels and blood flow, albeit in a brutal gruesome fashion.

[Sir, you seem to be experiencing severe distress.] The A.I’s holographic image appeared. [Symptoms include talking to oneself and undergoing extreme cramp cycles. Do you need me to play you some soothing music?]

Kyle grunted unintelligibly, unable to reply in coherent words as the pain continued to envelop his entire being. He began to struggle to keep awake, the continuous waves and bouts of pain nearly making him lose consciousness.

“Ti..tis is nuthin…” Kyle tried to speak, nearly biting his own tongue off. The spasms caused his body to convulse on the floor, making him involuntarily hit his head against the edge of a gas tank before falling unconscious. # Chapter 72 - Golden Age

Kyle gasped as he jolted awake, his eyes darting around the room. He raised his arms gingerly, noticing he was lying in a puddle of blood leaking from regenerating skin– a side-effect of his class upgrade.

Two screens hovered in his vision.

MG404: [ Sub-Class Obtained | Arcia Mystic (Basic) | The flow of arcia energy is in your hands. | Skills are focused on manipulating the flow of arcia energy.]

MG404: [Skill Obtained | Arcia Disruption (Basic) | *Upwards instead of downwards* | Select one single engraving within five-meter radius to disrupt. Results may vary. Upgradable. Duration: Thirty Seconds. Cooldown: One day.]

MG404: [Class Upgrade | Main Class Upgraded | Your rise in criminal society has been noted. | Crime Lord upgraded to Viscount of Vices . All skills upgraded.]

MG404: [Skill Obtained | Intimidation Aura (Intermediate) | Control those who oppose you with fear. | +50% Intimidation Success Chance. Duration: Ten minutes. Cooldown: Twelve Hours.]

MG404: [Skill Obtained | Penchant for Violence (Intermediate) | A good crime lord must be fluent in the language of the underworld | All combat stats temporarily increased by 100% for a short duration. Duration: One minute. Cooldown: Ten minutes.]

MG404: [Skill Obtained | This is My Turf (Intermediate) | No one gets close to you without your word. | Creates a selective domain, where enemies are unable to approach. Duration: One minute. Cooldown: Three Hours.]

MG404: [Skill Obtained | Designate Follower (Intermediate) | Can’t be a crime lord without underlings | Marks any sapient being as a follower, enabling telepathic communication. Stat increase for each follower within five hundred meters. Limit of two followers.]

Kyle smiled to himself, despite the copious amount of blood that had pooled around him. However, as he tried to sit up, he suddenly realised something critical that he needed to test immediately. *Select one single engraving within five-meter radius to disrupt… does that affect my own engravings?*

He decided to test it now immediately, despite the cooldown being one day. He painted himself as the target.

*Arcia Disruption!*

A warbling visual effect surged from his body as the centre, forming a sort of translucent wave that rebounded back into him.

*Penchant for Violence!*

Instead of feeling the same familiar surge of power rushing through his blood, Kyle winced from a backflow of arcia energy, sent into turmoil by the negation field. The pain erupted from deep within his body as though he had an engraving in there.

*What does this mean?* Kyle questioned himself internally, but he already knew the answer all along since his first Class Upgrade : the System has been engraving the skills onto his body or readjusting his internals to generate the skill effect. This also explained why every single class upgrade was so painful and agonising, as though someone was carving away at his flesh.

Kyle had always held the notion that arctech was not a form of magic but rather a special exotic element that simply had magic-like properties. He had seen other exotics have equally amazing properties, but he had never heard of one which could be imbued into the human body like this without rejection.

Nearly every study of the Galactic Era stated that humans could not integrate exotics normally without completely modifying their genetic makeup to adapt. Kyle wondered now if all humans on this planet were of a specific variant, able to ingest and manipulate arcia normally.

*But how did the humans get here in the first place?*  Kyle could not confidently say he knew exactly what happened in the history of this planet. It could still very well be a virtual reality game, though it seems to be straying even further from that angle.

Time travel was a possibility as well - Kyle was not unaware of time anomalies present in the more chaotic sections of the Milky Way Galaxy.

The installation that he was in as well did not look like an evacuation shelter either but rather as an observation laboratory. *Perhaps they studying the natives, which were the goblins.*

As Kyle was weighing the different theories he had, the A.I’s holographic image appeared. [Good morning, sir. It has been three days since you were last awake.]

“Three days?” Kyle was astonished. The previous class upgrade took only the better part of a day; he did not expect to be knocked out for so long. *Perhaps it was also due to the main class upgrade as well.* “Is the stabilisation of the goblins complete?”

[Yes, sir. All goblins are now united under King Sahusa. Agricultural reforms are in progress, though from my observations, they have encountered a hitch.]

“Understood, I’ll have it solved.”

Kyle nodded, standing up with the sludge around him sliding off. The facility had no functioning showers left, so Kyle had no choice but to head back to the palace.

The new hobgoblin guards, made up of the loyal knights of Sahusa, were standing guard outside the Oracle Chamber under the orders of the King Sahusa. They were told not to fidget or stray from their duties, but an overpowering foul stench, as though someone had bled to death, soon assaulted their senses, nearly causing them to gag.

<What is this stench?! Not even my mother’s cooking is this bad!>

The guard turned to see Kyle marching out with a blank expression, his body stained with disgusting streaks of blood as though he had massacred an entire hive of alien ants.

<Is this an abomination?> One guard put his sword up at the ready before the other hobgoblin guard smacked him on the head.

<Idiot! This is the human that King Sahusa told us about!>

<Really? The smell is vastly different from that of the female human monster…>

Kyle ignored their bickering, simply stepping past them and heading straight to the king’s room, where Sahusa was relaxing.

Sahusa took a whiff of the air before he screamed at the appalling appearance of Kyle.

“Why are you screaming?”

“Have you not looked at yourself?! Servants, quickly! Give this human a bath!”

The goblin servants led Kyle towards a large bath area, where a small waterfall cascaded down from a cavernous river, the flow blasting away the grime and stains on Kyle’s body.

The fact that there were no proper shower room or bath irked Kyle. *The facilities here definitely need to be improved.* Kyle examined the state of the palace. It was indeed opulent but could be designed to be much more efficient and relaxing. *A task for later – let’s see the overall progress.*

Kyle got Sahusa to bring him around the valley to observe the projects implemented and to learn of the current issues.

“It’s only been three days since we have reunited the goblins – we are focusing on the terrace farming project as instructed by the Oracle.” Sahusa pointed out to a nearby sloped section of the valley, where sectioned terraces were already carved out and planted with the modified radish seeds. Rows upon rows of elevated farms were being carved out, the work mostly accomplished by the recently enhanced hobgoblins.

All hundred of them were put to good use, digging canals and irrigation channels to provide ample water to the soil, keeping it damp and moist. Sahusa escorted Kyle around, pointing towards a sapling that was already germinating, the leaves vibrant.

“According to the instructions, the soil should be dark and moist, full of nutrients when planting such a seed. However, as you can see…” Sahusa grabbed a fistful of the soil, most of which were loose dust and sand. “The seeds are rapidly absorbing the moisture faster than we can water.”

Kyle glanced at the irrigation canals, noticing that the water flow was a mere trickle, and hardly enough to sustain the increased requirements of the modified radish. This was the downside of having a much faster growth cycle which drew nutrients and resources way beyond the normal range.

“Can we utilize the main tributary?” Kyle pointed towards the snaking river at the base of the valley that was far below the terrace farms.

“We’ve tried carrying the water in buckets up, but its far too strenuous.”

Kyle sighed in despair at the goblin king’s stupidity, blaming himself for assuming that the goblins would be able to industrialize on their own. “Sasha, are you in the area?”

[Yes, sir.]

“Have Merissa and Feldon arrived?”

[Yes, sir, they are working to distribute the food among the goblins.]

“Good. Once they are done with that, have them build a waterwheel to ferry water upwards in a pulley system. I’m sure you know what I’m talking about.”

[Yes, sir. The prospector Raksha is also here as well. He is at the base of the valley currently, investigating for iron.]

“Understood, I’ll be there shortly.”

Ordering King Sahusa to work with Merissa and Feldon, Kyle himself headed down to the base, where a large gaping hole in the side of the mountain loomed over him, the entrance to a crude iron mine that the goblins have been using.

Unsurprisingly, there was not much infrastructure, with the goblins doing everything by hand. Right now, Raksha was accompanied by a few goblins, inspecting the mine.

“Sir, the mine is definitely rich in iron, alongside a few coal seams.” Raksha presented the result of a geological borehole that had been lowered fifty meters into the ground. “This iron mine could last for two hundred years even if it supplied the whole of Raktor.”

“That’s good news.” Kyle nodded in affirmation. With the acquisition of iron and coal, all he had to do now was to create a distribution network towards Raktor. “Can the existing tunnel network be connected with our current progress?”

“I’m not entirely sure, but it would be definitely be far less work than digging an entirely brand new tunnel. But the air within the tunnels would be severely limited.”

“Not a problem, we can solve that easily.”

Kyle wasted no time, instantly getting King Sahusa to order the other idle goblins into the mines. Only a few enhanced hobgoblins were assigned, the rest being small weak standard goblins. He did not plan on upgrading every single hobgoblin, as with increased power naturally came increased consumption. Until he stabilized the food production locally, he could not afford to let the general population evolve just yet. Furthermore, it could serve as a form of reward for those who had work hard, establishing a sort of hierarchy inherently.

Over the next week, the redevelopment of the Culdao Peaks proceeded with little hitches. Any defectors or agitators that attempted to further destabilize the goblin society were instantly eradicated by Sasha’s strike force.

The waterwheels were constructed swiftly, the surrounding trees utilized for easy construction material and solving the irrigation issue.

At the same time, water was routed towards the mine to speed up the digging process as well as a rudimentary steel factory that was slowly being built up. However, it was not without obstacles.

“The blast furnace will need to be of sufficient scale to achieve a profit when heating up.” Kyle explained to Feldon. “And the entire method of delivery from the iron ore deposit to the blast furnace and out into a basic oxygen converter.”

“A what converter…?” Feldon was confused, having no background in chemistry or anything to do with engineering.

Kyle sighed, quickly drawing out a system diagram on a piece of paper, his style of labelling and shapes completely different to whatever Feldon was accustomed to.

“Let me simplify it for you – raw iron and coking coal is mixed into pig iron, then slammed into a large pot where we blast oxygen, a constituent of air, into it, blowing away the excess carbon and forming steel. We then pour it out into a mold. As much as possible, this entire process should be completely automated, save for the mining.”

“Uhh….”

“Never mind, I’ll handle it.” Kyle regretted not having Reese or Gordon here, but they were still busy building the weapons factory as well as the trade school back in Raktor. The oblivious expression on Feldon’s face only served to remind Kyle of just how important it was to have skilled arctech designers.

He had the A.I break it down into a simple steps for instruction, using King Sahusa once again to oversee the construction. While that was in progress, Kyle checked up on the mine, where the tunnelling process was already beginning.

It was a forty-kilometre distance from the iron ore deposit to the factory, which meant significant amounts of ventilation and filtering of air would be necessary to make it less dangerous for the workers. Kyle explained the plan to Merissa and Raksha. “We only need ventilation for the mine and the receiving end of the resources. For everything else in between, the carriage would be completely encased and supplied with its own air. That would be easier than digging ventilation shafts everywhere, or wasting energy to pump it in.”

“Like a diving bell… but how are we going to lay the tracks?”

“We’ll craft the tracks by hand here in the temporary steel factory. It won’t be the best quality, but we can iteratively upgrade it when we have the weapons factory set up in Raktor. We’ll rotate workers in and out through the tracks.”

With no time to spare, some of the heavier equipment were ordered in from Raktor. The sinter plant, coke overs, blast furnace and ladles were all ordered from other manufacturers under the wing of Baron Cain.

At the same time, Kyle crafted a rudimentary mine cart, one that had compressed air inside along with makeshift tubes that could allow deep miners to replenish their own air tanks. Much time was spent creating generic air-tight helmets and pressurized crude iron tanks.

The following week, the first laying of the newly manufactured rail tracks began in earnest. Groups of goblin workers dug in parallel, some of which had already been digging for more than four months to this point, having very nearly reached Raktor.

The harvested radish also boosted the morale of the goblins even more, with the famine successfully being solved. More and more workers entered the mines, expanding it and accessing even more iron veins under the guidance of Raksha and Merissa.

As the tunnel became deeper and deeper, it became harder and harder for the goblin to manually push the mine cart along the tracks, especially with limited air. Kyle quickly drafted and crafted a temporary solution, repurposing parts of a normal arctech wagon and attaching it to the minecart, allowing it to be driven properly.

Soon, after three weeks since Kyle pacified the goblins, the tunnel was soon to be completed. Reese and Gordon waited at the end of their basement tunnel right below the factory. They had constructed a basic platform of sorts, preparing to ease the loading and unloading of goods.

Reese was about to check the time again when the soil in front of him began to crack open, bursting out to reveal fifteen goblins, all sweating and panting, their temporary helmets and tanks filled with air weighing them down tremendously. Behind them lay a continuous stretch of railway tracks with the first crafted mine cart on it.

He quickly added his own air pump on this end of the tunnel, filling the tunnel with air. As he worked with the goblins and hauled the first batch of steel tracks up, a rumbling sound could be heard as a second mine cart attached with an arctech engine hurtled down the tracks like a rollercoaster, with Kyle being the first test passenger.

The cart came to a stop at the end with manual braking. He stepped out of the cart shakily, immediately jotting down notes on a clipboard while a large bruise on his forehead was visible.

“Section 4-D is not aligned properly; Section 2-A nearly took my head clean off – needs to be wider. Steel quality in 5-D is not good; severe fatigue noted – mark for replacement.” Kyle muttered to himself as he ordered for minor fixes to the tunnel tracks, making sure it was smooth as possible for quick transportation.

The tunnel now served as a direct transportation route. Critical tools and other essential goods were immediately transported down the tunnel, the mine carts pushed by arctech towards the Culdao Peaks, and in return, processed steel bars were stacked neatly, allowing the weapons factory to kick into action. However, due to the small nature of the tunnel, it only allowed for one mine cart to enter at a time. A simple lighting system with controllers at intermediate points allowed the operators to know if there was a mine cart convoy currently travelling the tunnel.

“How’s the progress of the weapon’s factory?” Kyle inquired of Reese as he exited the cart.

“Everything is in place, all preliminary machinery installed.” Reese showed Kyle around the completed weapons factory, the conveyor belts already in place with workstations defined. They were not the best money could buy, but Kyle had other ideas on how to improve production.

“Good. Time to make some money.”

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MG404: [Stats Table] # Chapter 73 - Snowball

The opening ceremony of the weapons factory was simple and muted, but did not go unnoticed. Many of the desperate poor and homeless were enticed by the various rumours floating about, hundreds flocking in droves towards the Seven Snakes district, in the hopes of a better secure future. The advertisement that was now aired through distributed light-throwers in various pubs around further enticed those looking for a new lease, a new chance at life as well as those who needed financial assistance.

“I’m sick and tired of living in the slums, why wouldn’t I get a free apartment if I can?” The more adventurous of them began to migrate, moving from districts beyond the Seven Snakes’ control. Rows upon rows of applicants began to swarm the Golden Snakes Construction office situated near the shopping arcade, where job openings were a dime a dozen, along with a standard apartment that was far better than the shelters they had been in before.

[And with this, I declare the Aspis Weapons Factory open! A ground-breaking innovation in assembly and manufacturing processes, to herald the new golden age of Raktor in!] Gordon announced, the first batch of workers cheering in full force, mostly out of cheer for better wages and their new dwellings.

A tour was summarily provided for the other attendees of the opening ceremony, who mostly comprised of other business owners and sycophants of Baron Cain. With Baron Cain’s co-ownership of the factory it was easier than ever for the Seven Snakes to position themselves as a legal incorporated entity, despite the control clearly in the hands of Kyle.

“I never expected you to have the factory ready for me this quickly – truly amazing.” Cain praised Kyle. Of course, it wasn’t the fact that the Baron now had a weapons factory: he always had them, but those factories were more of a partnership with the military rather than a fully private venture such as this one, which did not divert funds into Count Leon’s pockets.

This allowed him to amass his own political power base, independent of the manufacturers and suppliers that other Barons had to rely on. What’s more, with the raw materials being derived from the Culdao Peaks, Baron Cain was effectively invincible to any price fluctuations that Count Leon might attempt to stir.

Kyle too was happy with what has been accomplished. The Ardent Cretins’ blockade was still in place, but as soon as the food supply was stabilized in the Culdao Peaks, plans were already in place for the goblin kingdom to be a net exporter of raw materials, both agricultural and industrial. This vertical economy gave Kyle complete control over the pricing and profit, enabling a steady income. *Perhaps a second weapons factory there as well.*

Thus, the financial maneuvering of Sebastian hardly meant a thing to Kyle any longer, except for the physical hijackings and attempts at harassment. Transport wagons were still being raided on a weekly basis, constituting a real security threat. The tunnel alleviate some of that, but Euria Seeds and other supplies still travelled over land on the regular.

“With the weapons factory established, we can now apply for the supply contract set forth by Count Leon’s military. There is only a month left to demonstrate the weapons. Any later and the supply contract may be rescinded.” Baron Cain explained the next step of the plan. It wasn’t as simple as the military throwing money at Kyle and the Baron – they had to convince the generals of their product’s efficacy against their competitors.

Furthermore, the military exercise was to serve as the backdrop for a potential invasion of Versia. Kyle had no doubt that at least a minor conflict or skirmish would erupt during the exercise itself - this would be the profit point that he had to leverage on.

“How much and what do you need?”

“The demonstration will be a mock battle between knights from other Barons and suppliers. I will need enough equipment to arm one of my knight squads for testing. Assume that it is a standardized set that can be issued to regular soldiers.”

“I will begin work immediately. The design will take a while.”

“Can you get it done under a month? The earlier you can get it done, the more pressure we can put on the other suppliers.”

“No promises, but we’ll do our best. In the meantime, I will produce the standard rifles as afforded by the license to grease the wheels.”

They shook on it, the two parting ways as Kyle began proper operations of the weapons factory. “Gordon, you’re with me for now. Keith, have the designers organized and briefed in the trade school, I’ll drop by later.”

The first batch of newly hired technicians were all gathered in their respective teams. Most of them were old hires from the previous factory, yet to see their old workplace undergoing a massive overhaul was nothing short of an amazing feat. Some thought they would have spent their entire lives under the same grimy black ceilings and failing machinery.

Utilizing the new structure that Kyle had implemented, Gordon had the old hires split up into twenty production teams, five supply teams, three design teams and a single management team, Gordon himself being the top overall. The bulk of the workforce gathered in front of him were technicians and etchers, helmed by an experienced foreman.

The production teams were not solely comprised of technicians and a single foreman – three foreman and five logistics workers served as the attached support staff, allowing the production team to interface with the design team and subsequently management team.

Contrary to usual roles in other factories nearby, the design team also had old technicians embedded with them. Kyle never believed in the idea that one could design a product without having intimate experience in actually making them.

With the teams having a somewhat holistic makeup, this ensured that the factory operated efficiently and with clear distinction of roles. In this way, the production team was designed akin to a autonomous unit, able to achieve its own supply requirements through the five logistical staff members attached.

Gordon cleared his throat as he stepped up onto a makeshift platform of extra construction materials, his voice amplified through a series of arctech radios embedded along the length of the wall while he gripped the microphone in his hand. Introducing the basics of the factory as well as the organizational hierarchy, Gordon finally neared the end of the briefing.

“Each production team will be trained to develop multiple products. Our factory is not like the old ones, nor is it like the others in Raktor – you will be instructed and taught by your foremen to be versatile. As demand is not fixed, we as the suppliers must be able to adapt to changes on the fly, hence the high requirement on your holistic understanding of the product lines.”

The somewhat unique structure had the old hires confused, many used to the old days of factory workers only being a single cog in the machine, focusing on just a very small task. Being transformed from a single task specialist into a generalist was far more than many technicians could handle.

“No human was born knowing how to etch arcia, so do not underestimate the potential for your brain to learn more than you started with. Grow with us, and we shall help you achieve your dreams and security for your family. Of course, with appropriate compensation for your efforts.” Gordon concluded. Many cheered, but there were a few who only gave nods or grunts in response.

Kyle scanned the crowd, noticing a few obviously disgruntled workers from the old factory amdist the production team. He could sense that they were jealous of their former co-workers and especially Gordon taking higher positions, while the majority of them were still in the production teams, toiling away as technicians.

For now, the lower worker hours of eight hours instead of sixteen and the free housing were keeping them in check and satisfied, but Kyle knew this wouldn’t last forever. It was the human condition to always adapt and seek for more than what he currently had. Furthermore, once they had obtained the contract, production would have to ramp up eventually, but that would be a problem for the future. *Nothing stays the same forever, not even me.*

The first batch of workers dispersed, heading towards their assigned assembly lines for training. Kyle had already issued preliminary designs of the Seven Snakes armour pieces, as well as a standard basic design of the current Raktor’s military rifle, provided to him by Baron Cain.

“Shouldn’t we start off with our final design? Like the weapons and armour that we are going to deliver to Baron Cain.” Gordon remarked to Kyle as they oversaw the training. “It seems inefficient to have them learn a specific engraving or assembly procedure, seeing that they would have to re-learn everything again.”

“And do you have our final design?”

“… No, sir.”

“Then let’s wait until the design team is brought up to speed before doing anything. This preliminary training will serve as a good buffer and a way to test the efficiency of the system.”

While Kyle was confident in his implementation of the factory structure, it was by all means a educated guess. Without the help of his cranial implant, Kyle could hardly recall every little single optimization that humanity has learnt over the years, and those optimizations would also not be applicable in a vastly different era. He was too used to robotic automation producing everything at the touch of the button.

As such, the training will both help Kyle to tailor the operations to its peak efficiency, while also producing new armour sets for the newly recruited Seven Snakes members. He had never made armour for anyone who had joined since the Ilysian Punks War, which amounted close to five hundred new associates. Some of the new associates, unsurprisingly, were also working in the weapons factory in various roles. *I should have them inducted soon as well, and trained.*

“I’ll leave things in your care. Any issues or suspicions, report it either to Damian or me immediately.”

“Understood, sir.”

Kyle proceeded to the trade school, where Keith had just concluded an introductory briefing to the newly recruited arctech designers, which numbered about thirty, which was far lower than what had been promised. They were now gathered in the new auditorium built like a lecture hall, each of them taking a seat amdist the rows of benches facing the blackboard.

“I expected fifty.” Kyle whispered to Keith as he walked up to the podium.

“I’m still trying to recruit the other twenty, but many are not answering our advances or returning reply to our offers. Should I expand the recruiting to non-graduates? There are many more that we can hire that might not have a university degree.”

“Do it, we have no time. I need them in by the end of the week.” Kyle needed more hands on deck in order to build the standardized knight set – it would be far too much effort on his own, even if he had taken the Manufacturer sub-class.

Keith nodded, handing over the marked attendance list. However, one name was clearly missing, Kyle noticing that only twenty-nine were present.

“Where is he?”

“Last known contact was in the East Sector three days ago. Most likely the Tul’e Da’li got wind of this movement and are stalling him indefinitely.”

Kyle internally sighed, but did not lament too much about it. If he were in the major gang’s position he would have done the same. *Or perhaps even worse.* “Let’s move on without him, we’re on a deadline.” Kyle took center stage, immediately explaining the overall process.

“Keith would have already informed you in the briefing prior, but for the sake of clarity, let me repeat: You are now working under a joint venture between Golden Snakes Construction and Baron Cain. Any leaks of classified patents or engravings is punishable by death under the Sanctum of Yual, and I am also legally allowed to execute said punishment. Understood?”

The audience murmured with a few nods, clearly inattentive to Kyle’s words. Many of the designers in this room were not from the districts near the Seven Snakes, some coming from the Red Lions or the Wretches. Kyle shot a glare at Keith, who quickly shook his head.

“It seems that there is a slight misunderstanding on who are your superiors here.” Kyle began, only to be interrupted by a scoff from an older designer.

“A young kid lording over us, when he hasn’t even attended the University of Raktor? Give me a break. If this is how I am to be lectured during my stay here, I believe my time is better spent in a far more prestigious company.”

“Then please. The exit is that way.” Kyle motioned towards the lecture hall’s door.

Yet the older designer did not move, knowing that the salary was what drew him here in the first place. Even if he became a professor at the university, there was no way he would be paid anywhere close to what Kyle was paying him.

“If you choose to stay, then understand this.” Kyle left the podium, walking through the steps of the lecture hall between the rows of seats. “If I say run, you run. If I say jump, you jump. If I say sit, you sit. If I say understood, you say yes sir. Understood?”

The arctech designers looked at each other confusedly, before a sudden wave of pressure erupted from Kyle, the designers’ heart all seemingly gripped in fear, as though a terrible behemoth had just appeared in the hall, embodying the essence of terror.

“I said… understood?”

“YES, SIR!” Even the older designer sat upright now, the sweat trickling down his back from the shivering fear.

“Good. With that out of the way, the first project that the weapons factory will be undertaking is an improved version of the standardized arctech knight suit that Raktor’s military currently use. Each of you will be split into three teams to take care of different aspects of the armour as well as weapons. Your design lead will temporarily be me, who will oversee all requirements and testing of the knight suit for the next month. Understood?”

“YES, SIR!”

“Team A, you’re on the armour materials and etching requirements. You will set the standard for the body armour as well as etching guidelines for all production teams to follow. Standardization is key here. Team B, work with team A on the armour and create two variations of the knight suit – one focused on defence and the other on mobility without sacrificing protection. You have the original design to work off, find the flaws and fix them.”

“Team C, your job is to improve the weapons. Start by working on the rifle. You will also be provided with the design for the Oriental Bloom.”

That last mention of the handgun sent a wave of gasps between the designers, many of whom had already heard about the miraculous handgun that had efficient arctech design. The older designer was half-amazed, half-perplexed. “But how? Even the Raktor military did not have the design… unless…?”

“Stop wondering and get to work.”

@@@

“Who is this lowborn peasant working with Baron Cain?!” Count Leon raged to himself, calling up all the business owners under him. “Why haven’t we cut off all sources of iron ore and coal to him?!” Count Leon pressed, knowing the region of Raktor and all prospected iron ore deposits. He was sure that he had full control of all of them.

[We have! We stopped selling iron ore and coal to them three days ago when they applied for the contract, but according to our observers, the factory is still running.]

Count Leon hung up in anger, pondering the situation. *If they are still able to run, it either means they are stealing from my iron mines or they have found a new one! Unacceptable!*

He found the notion of the first theory ridiculous, seeing as he had his own armed forces guarding the iron mines tightly, which meant that the second theory was far more valid. He immediately arranged a meeting with Baron Cain, planning to pressure him into giving up the new mines if they existed.

“Baron Cain, you understand well that this entire region of Raktor is under my jurisdiction. Running an illegal mining operation in my territory is tantamount to a declaration of war on my title. Forget buying your weapons, I could have you stripped of your nobility on accounts of conspiracy against your betters.” Count Leon instantly threatened as he strode into the visitor’s room, where Baron Cain sat and carefully sipped on the edge of a delicate tea cup.

“You don’t have any evidence of such an operation, and only the Duke has the right to strip my title if it came down to that.” Baron Cain calmly replied. “However, if, hypothetically, there was such a mining operation, it can only be considered illegal if the mining rights have been given to you.”

“All mining rights in Raktor have been given to me by the Duke himself. And by extension of his authority granted from Tryas, the Emperor!”

“Ah, but not for every mine in the entirety of Raktor, am I right? I seem to recall a few illegal arcite mines that have not been declared to the Emperor as well. Has he given you the rights to them as well? I’m sure Tryas would be very interested in such mines for national security.”

Count Leon stiffened slightly as his threat faltered, his eyes narrowing at Baron Cain. “You… what are you aiming at?”

“Count Leon. We have much to benefit from a mutual agreement here.” Baron Cain rose from his chair, pacing slowly. “You want to win a war, however small. I want to prove my loyalty. My factory will produce quality weapons and armor. For a Count to actively sabotage his own military suppliers directly will… not speak well of your reputation.”

“My reputation will not suffer if it was made clear that you are in cahoots with the Seven Snakes! I should immediately issue an county order and revoke the weapon’s manufacturing license. A gang leader should not possess such a dangerous document – only a full master of the Weapons Guild of Raktor is able to hold such a license.”

“The landed nobles of the Yual Dominion have full executive power to issue weapon licenses to whomever they please, guild or not. Unless you are implying that the whims of the craft guild are far above the actions of the nobles.” Baron Cain countered. “And revoking the license will be equivalent to preventing me, a Baron of Raktor, from producing my own weapons. Need I remind you that I currently own half of the factory? Or perhaps you would like to escalate the matter to the Duke?”

Count Leon did not reply immediately, thinking carefully while Baron Cain continued: “You do not lose anything in the establishment of my factory: the military gets better equipment, and you win your glories over Versia. It’s a win-win, with the only loser being Versia. Do you not hate the condescending gloating faces of the nobles in Tryas every year? They think of us as borderland buffoons, on par with that of Kregol and Perlis. With my factory, your prestige will surpass anyone present and future.”

As much as Count Leon hated how Baron Cain managed to get the upper hand on him, he did not disagree with the concept of showing up the nobles in Tryas. Far too often, he had been looked down on for the rowdy and crime-ridden city of Raktor.

Yet, accepting Baron Cain’s new factory would jeopardize the business relationships of all his suppliers and supporters that he was planning to enrich as well. The Weapons Guild would be swarming him as well.

“Fine.” Count Leon eventually compromised on the surface, seemingly unwilling to start a fight with Baron Cain. “I agree to the deal. Let us negotiate on a later date.”

“Of course, Count Leon.”

As soon as Baron Cain was out of hearing distance, Count Leon reached for a nearby arctech phone, twisting the ratchets to a specific channel. “Sebastian, I have a job for you.” # Chapter 74 - Education Access

Despite the first batch of workers being well experienced with the old factory’s procedures and assembly process, it was still a tall order to jump from making benign household products to military-grade arctech steel that had to withstand brutal conditions over long periods.

Furthermore, most of their experience was based on machines that they were intimately familiar with. As the factory slowly lurched into the production of standard rifles and breastplates, the shaping of steel and required accuracy of engraving was far beyond their current skills.

The training thus did not go as smoothly as expected, with numerous errors and inefficient etchings being spotted on the produced engravings. Kyle dug through a wooden crate filled to the brim with the failed products, trying to pinpoint where the source of error was.

Kyle naturally had expected something of this nature to occur, putting untrained technicians into a brand new assembly line. Yet due to the tight deadline, it was even more critical for him to try and reduce the training requirements, so as to hire more technicians.

Currently, the Aspis Weapons Factory was not employing to its maximum capacity, instead only having around 30% of the employees that Kyle was originally designing the layout for. This led to a conspicuous void on the factory floor, where entire assembly lines laid dormant.

The issue of employment could be easily solved if Kyle had just approached the Weapons Guild of Raktor, but due to the immense salary that he was splurging on the arctech designers, he could not afford the cost of hiring experienced apprentices or journeymen from the guild. *No doubt that the guild or unions will eventually throw a tantrum once I have this batch trained.*

“We need a few designers to serve as quality control…” Kyle muttered to himself, knowing that it would be ridiculous for him to check every single item alone, nor could he have Gordon, the head of the factory be continuously inspecting each item.

MG404: [Item | Seven Snakes Breastplate (Degraded) | *Tarnished by improper etching* | +2 VIT, +1 MAX HP. Active Skill: Deflect (Basic) – Able to block up to one medium-speed projectiles. Duration: Ten Seconds. MP Cost Per Activation: 15 MP. Cooldown: Ten hours.]

“This is terrible…” Gordon remarked as he looked through the pile of rifles and plates. “An absolute waste of resources.”

The effects of the breastplate was far worse than the original. Nearly every factor had been worsened. Kyle then returned to the factory, observing a single production team in action as they manufactured one more for training.

First, the steel bars delivered from the Culdao Peaks were heated up, rolled and flattened to the required dimensions, forming a steel plate. Kyle didn’t think the error was occurring over here, following the now pressed steel plate towards a molding station, where the steel plate was now bent slowly to match the curve required.

After that, the engraving was etched on to it, each breastplate worked on by various technicians who each etched a specific portion of the entire engraving design onto it. Kyle soon found the problem, noticing that the hands of the technicians were quite shaky and unfocused, unable to accurately carve out most of the finer engravings, leading to losses in arctech energy being dissipated.

In the old factory, it used to be the designers themselves who would perform the etching, but Kyle wanted to shift away from that. Yet there was barely enough time to have the technicians brought up to speed. He needed to find a method in which the technicians could easily replicate the etch.

*As long as they have a guideline, then it would be easier to follow.* Kyle quickly had Gordon fashion a breastplate with proper etching, but instead of leaving it as an example. Kyle used the hot burning tip of the etcher to melt cleanly through instead, gouging out the shape of the engraving on the breastplate.

Repeating it for all outer and inner sides of the breastplate, Kyle had the gouged out breastplate tested in a production line. Immediately, accuracy greatly improved, the technicians simply following along the path that had been set for them. By matching the template to the incoming breastplate, each technician could etch by simply inserting the tip of the etcher into the gouged grooves and tracing along.

“Have twenty of this ready, and get the design team to ensure that all engravings can be performed like this, especially for the rifle’s barrel.” Kyle instructed Gordon, heading over now to check on the design team.

Motivated by the high salary as well as Kyle’s intimidation, the designers were hard at work, already coming up with a few preliminary ideas. The same older designer ,who once belittled Kyle, was now heading the materials team as he hurriedly introduced the new concepts.

“Metal armour is far outdated, especially with the design breakthroughs that the Oriental Bloom has inspired. With more guns now firing more rapidly, it is even more critical for the soldier to be able to avoid. Hence, we are working on deriving a lighter form of armour that can still provide significant protection while affording mobility.” The older designer showed a few pieces of paper, detailing the theoretical proposals. “First, we have the idea of a thinner steel plate in general. This would be the fastest way to achieve weight reduction for the arctech knight.”

“Rejected. The integrity of the plate would disintegrate after a single impact.” Kyle instantly remarked, but the older designer was not fazed, as if he was half expecting it.

“Second, a metal vest -  a chainmail, if you will. The chainmail will be hidden under the military uniform, and would be significantly lighter than plate armour.”

“Hmmm, possible. Have that tested in the firing range for penetration and disintegration.”

“Dis-int what?”

“Nevermind, just test the rifles against it. Next?”

“Next is an interesting proposition by yours truly, steel alloy combined with imbibed traces of arcite to strengthen it. Arcite ore forms in areas of high pressure before coming to the surface, so by theoretical understanding, the arcite ore itself should be highly durable.”

“What’s the fraction required?”

“That would have to be tested to determine the effective fraction, though I would suspect anywhere from two-hundredths to a tenth.”

Kyle did not have that much arcite ore to spare – his current production of arcite ore was barely enough to keep all of his buildings running currently, reliant on the mechanical regenerators to keep up coupled with a few regular purchases from the black market. Infusing the arcite ore into the steel would mean it cannot be regenerated. “I will provide the necessary testing material. Have this tested as well. Next?”

“Finally, we have discovered a unique bonding between Yul’s Tears and Greiss Powder with iron, that can potentially form a more durable and lightweight alloy compared to steel. However, this would be far longer to test.”

Yul’s Tears were exceptional expensive, and Kyle did not think he had the monetary capability now to attempt to corner the market. “Rejected, the metal’s cost would far outscale its worth. Leave it for a future investigation.”

Kyle next checked up on Team B, who were working on the layout of the armour. Not much improvements have been made, saved for a better freedom of motion in terms of the shoulders as well as the legs. The arcite fuel pack was still placed conspicuously at the back, though the designers had no idea how to minimize the size of that, seeing as they were not designing fuel packs.

For Team C, the rifle was already improving leaps and bounds from its original design, thanks to the reference engravings provided by the Oriental Bloom. Already, the first prototype of the rifle was available for Kyle to inspect.

MG404: [Item | Rifled Arctech Repeater | *A combination of genius and conformity.* | *Active Skill – Volley (Basic): Fires multiple projectiles as long as one holds down the trigger and has enough in the magazine. Cost per Activation: 2 MP per Projectile.*]

“Have you tested this?”

“Yes sir, Baron Cain provided one of his arctech knights to serve as a reference. He could fire the prototype up to 10 times before needing to swap a fuel pack. Without the fuel pack, he could fire 3 times, which is a significant improvement over the Oriental Bloom.”

“Not good enough. We need to design the rifle to be able to shoot 10 times without the fuel pack.”

“What?!” The team was in disbelief. “That’s physically impossible!”

“Is it? The Oriental Bloom would have been thought to be physically impossible just a year ago.”

The team did not have a rebuttal for Kyle, but still held a fair amount of reluctance and derision for the tall order. Kyle sighed, quickly sitting down and pouring over the sheets of engraving designs for the rifle.

“Look, over here. The placement of this cobalt bead is not properly amplifying the flow of arcite through the engraving, and the carbon blocks are not helping at all, instead causing the energy to be lost as heat and sound. If you just reroute it like this…” Kyle deftly sketched out a new engraving, his Arcia Engraver title’s put to good use. “Just this alone can reduce the arcia consumption by two-fold. Imagine what you could do with the rest of the engravings.”

Kyle didn’t hear a response, looking away from the drawing table only to see the team’s designers in utter shock at the skill that Kyle had just displayed, their head trying to reconcile the fact that such a young adult could show up even the most experienced among them. Their eldest designer quickly grabbed the new sketch, theories clashing and fighting for dominion in his head.

Kyle had other matters to attend to, so he left them to their confusion, checking up on the trade schools’ attendance. A few more students were enrolling, the classrooms now slowly filing up. However, it was still a depressing sight, especially considering that the trade school had been made free to attend.

“Keith, expand the recruitment age range have the trade school work up a part-time plan for the students. Make sure the part-time plan is a adult living wage.” Kyle ordered. This would provide an allowance of sort while bolstering the workforce in the factory.

“Even if the student is a child?” Keith questioned.

“Yes, especially if they are a child.” The trade school was far more attractive to parents who were in dire need of money. Such families already had their children work in various other capacities in order to support their livelihood, so Kyle was confident that his plan could attract much more talents that were currently buried under poverty.

Keith worked quickly, creating a system where the students would work in the factory for four hours a day in the guise of ‘hands-on’ experience. The subsequent announcement and rumours were spread through the district, and before long there were a significant number of parents lining up to enroll their children into the trade school.

Yet this was not enough for Kyle. He knew this offering was not enough to truly exponentially grow his talent pool – he needed a wider reach in the long run. A way to put the district on the map of every citizen in Raktor. For now, he had to consider how else could he increase the number of workers in the new factory temporarily. His mind eventually landed on the new associates that had just joined the Seven Snakes since the Ilysian Punk War.

*I’ll have to put the new associates to good use.* He decided to head over to the original base, where the arcite ore training chamber had been set up. Originally the gang had only occupied the basement, but thanks to their recent expansion, they now controlled all five floors of the building. Kyle no longer had the original base set up as the HQ, having shifted all accounting and administrative matters to the shopping arcade for easier transportation.

Instead, the original base was now converted to one of five training centers, in which Damian and the older cobras and associates drilled the same physical training regimen into the new recruits. They were first processed here before being allowed to join the main team operating in the shopping arcade, effectively serving as a screening process of sorts.

“RUN YOU FUCKWIT! EVEN THE HOMELESS KIDS CAN RUN FASTER THAN YOU!” Damian yelled at the top of his lungs at a struggling new recruit, who was trying to sprint back and forth thirty times. “THINK JOINING THE SEVEN SNAKES IS A FUCKING GAME?!”

Kyle nodded in approval, Damian taking on a more serious approach to training ever since his brother was kidnapped by the Ilysian Punks. It was clear to the vipers that with the Seven Snakes current progress, they were bound to come into conflict with other gangs eventually, especially the Ardent Cretins.

*In peace, one always prepares for war.* Kyle scanned the floor, where various training exercises were carried out. In one part of the room, combat training was carried out in a similar fashion to how he had begun: by beating up prisoners captured for flouting the Seven Snakes rules, while older associates gave tips and real-life learnings on fighting.

Kyle watched on as Damian personally demonstrated him wrangling a hobgoblin, taken directly from the Culdao Peaks. With the capture of the former rebels under Osir, Kyle had them put to good use as training dummies rather than letting Sahusa imprison them. *All lives are important to me, after all. Human or not.*

The hobgoblins provided a tougher challenge than the regular street fighters and enforcers, with their increased physical prowess and penchant for violence. As such, the prisoners were provided for training in levels of ascending difficulty: pickpockets, thugs, veterans, goblins, hobgoblins and evolved hobgoblins.

The training routine seemed to progressing well, Kyle noticing a few bloodthirsty recruits who relished in the suffering they inflicted on the prisoners. He appreciated such an outlook on human life - the training regime was designed around honing that killer instinct in all recruits, able to kill on order.

However, he soon noticed another new recruit hesitating against fighting a seemingly weak old prisoner, who was currently still sprawled on the floor and bleeding from the previous fight. The new recruit glanced at his compatriots, feeling the pressure, but yet did not want to hurt the prisoner any longer.

Kyle squinted his eyes at the obvious hesitation, yet he did not think it was unexpected. The new recruits were largely small-time criminals or thieves with some semblance of a code of honor. However, if this impeded the operations of the Seven Snakes, Kyle had to nip it in the bud as soon as possible.

“What’s wrong?” Kyle approached the group.

The new recruit and those around him instantly stiffened up, quickly bowing in respect. Everyone here knew exactly who Kyle was - his name was legendary through the districts for his prowess in both the Red Lion Skirmish as well as the Ilysian Punk War.

“Answer.”

“Sir.. uhh… Boss! I… We’ve been beating him up for days on end now, and it’s starting to feel repetitive.” The new associate’s eyes shifted suspiciously, hiding his true feelings which seemed to be shared with the rest of his training squad.

“Repeititve… I see.” Kyle nodded, brushing past the new associate towards the collapsed old prisoner. He checked the state of the prisoner, the blood loss obviously significant. *This is a problem.* “You there, get Damian here now.”

Soon, Damian arrived, slightly out-of-breath from the recent demonstration he had just done. “Boss, you called?”

“The recruits are reluctant to attack humans. Do you see the same problem with goblins and hobgoblins?”

Damian glanced at the recruits all standing around aimlessly while the old prisoner bled to death, the recruits fidgeting like newborn chicks. “Not at all, boss. But I understand that they can’t go the last mile. Many of the recruits were former small-time criminals, petty crime and all that. They still can’t act on killing orders just yet.”

“Indeed. They are still clinging to the ideals of civilian life. It would be good to have them familiarize with the extent that we are willing to operate.”

“Understood. I can have them kill prisoners who are non-compliant.”

“Not good enough. I want you to increase the intensity of the physical training regime. And have those capable ones spend sometime working at the weapons factory as well. Make sure they dont have time to think, get them to accept orders subconsciously. Then organize them into squads with cobras leading them, and have them go out on the streets to arrest people who flout our rules.”

“Arrest people? You mean the thug rackets? Niko is already working on that, wouldn’t it be overkill?”

“No. The veteran associates and cobras are already experienced enough with the Ilysian Punks war. Those who refuse or resist the training, mark them for immediate transfer to the training caves for desentiziation exercises. I will inform Monica on how to handle them.”

“Yes, sir.” Damian nodded without hesitation, immediately drafting up a new intense physical regime aimed at breaking their spirits. He did not question exactly what Monica and Kyle would do with them, but he had no doubts the recruits will no longer hesitate to act once they were done.

With the combination of part-time trade school students as well as a good number of recruits now working in the Aspis Weapons Factory, the total employment rate would be near 70%. Kyle needed a bigger push and a wider reach to fill the remaining gap. *I’ll need to check my finances and options once more.*

Kyle observed the training for a bit longer, before heading to the shopping arcade to talk again with Keith, who was entertaining an somewhat expected visitor. He entered a meeting room, only to be met with three gruff men, their attire clearly that of the working-class, though their demeanour was posh and upright.

“Ahem, fellow masters, apologies for the interruption, but this is Kyle of the -”

“The Seven Snakes, I know who he is.” One of them cut Keith off. “Finally, someone worthy to discuss matters with instead of your undecisive bratty ass.”

Kyle squinted as the other two sneered at Keith, who began to bubble with rage, only holding it back thanks to Kyle’s presence. Kyle took a seat at the head of the meeting table with Keith now standing behind him. “I apologize, I was not made aware of any visits beforehand, so please do forgive me-”

“Spare us the pleasantries - you’re just a ruffian posing like a business owner at best.”

“Then you should be well aware of my capabilities.”

“Which is nothing in front of the Society of Friendly Weaponsmiths.”

“Ah!” Kyle clapped his hands in realization. “Sorry, I thought I was talking to the Society of Buffoons. I had assumed the three of you were Master Foolish, Dull and Witless”

“What did you say?!” Master Foolish slammed the table. “My name is -”

“Now, due to my tight schedule, I have other matters to attend to. If you would like me to spare the pleasantries then please spare me the backtalk.”

Master Foolish rose out of his chair, about to lambast Kyle only to be held down by Master Dull, who retrieved a stack of papers, sliding it infront of Kyle. “We’re here to inform you that none of your factory workers are part of the Society of Friendly Weaponsmiths. As you have been awarded a license by Baron Cain, deserved or not, it is under the Societies Act pushed forward by the Count that all workers in the industry are strongly encouraged to be a part of this Society.”

“And why would it be my concern that the workers be a part of this society?”

“The Society ensures the qualification and working mannerisms of all its members as well as ensuring experience is paid for by fair wages. It also serves as a framework for your business to achieve optimum efficency and appeasment of any unrest or discontent against your management as a whole, by providing a platform to seek redress for accumulated grievances. Such a platform will help to maintain stability -”

*A craft union, effectively.* “And how ‘fair’ are the wages you ensure?”

“From our understanding, your workforce is largely made of unskilled labour. It is critical that you afford them additional wages to have them complete a mandatory training process over twelve years.”

“Twelve years? We don’t have twelve years.” Keith retorted.

“This is the average journey for an apprentice to a master within our Society. Anyone outside of this process cannot be qualified to be a proper weaponsmith.”

“How much would the training process cost?” Kyle asked.

“100 rakels each week, not including their membership fee which also has to be borne by the owner himself, which in this case is you.”

“Hmm… interesting. Thank you for the heads-up, you may leave now.” Kyle motioned towards the door, Keith walking over to open it for them.

Master Dull looked slightly stunned, before Master Foolish finally burst out in anger: “You idiot, this is not a suggestion - this is a mandatory requirement to be a weapons manufacturer in Raktor!”

“Mandatory? I see here at the very top of the paper that it is merely a recommendation co-signed by the four Barons and the Count. I don’t see anything here that would legally force me to have me foot the bill for fees I never agreed to.”

“If you don’t pay this amount, you will earn the ire of every other qualifed weaponsmith in the city!”

“So be it - I never hired any of them either. You and I have nothing to do with each other.”

“You-” Master Foolish started, but was once again held back by Master Dull, who seemed to be one of the more calculative ones.

“Mr. Kyle, I presume you understand what would happen if some of your workers were to hypothetically join our Society? Their wages and fees must be borne by you.”

Kyle gave a knowing smile. “I know how to handle my workers. Now, you will vacate the premise immediately, or any other ‘hypothetical’ scenarios you discuss can and will be consider as a direct threat and insult to my businesses. And I don’t take threats lightly.”

The three masters glanced at each other, before making the collective decision to leave together. “You will reap what you sow.” Master Witless warned before he left.

“Indeed. I’m looking forward to the profits.”

With the three masters gone, Keith let out a huge exasperated sigh. “Fucking scum, we already provide the workers with free housing and what not, and now they want us to foot the bill for their own society? What do they think we are, a charity?”

“Nevermind them, but have some members keep an eye on their movements. I want to know as soon as they try anything funny to our workforce. Stability in the factory is of the utmost importance.” Kyle spoke to Keith as they left the meeting room, returning to the main office rooms where dozens of hired clerks ran numbers and managed the businesses. The bureaucracy within the Seven Snakes was now expanding quickly to account for the number of subsidiaries being established.

“Give me the overview of our businesses now.” Kyle started in his private office while Keith closed the door behind him.

“Yes, sir. With the raw materials from the Culdao Peaks now being transported smoothly, our operating costs have dropped significantly by about half. However, hiring the technicians poses another burden on our budgeting. The trade-school is operating at a complete loss, and we will be able to only survive six months assuming no further increase in current revenue.”

“So we’re still burning money.”

“Yes, and if we recruit more than fifty arctech designers at the rate chosen, we will slowly eat into our savings. Right now, these calculations are the worst-case scenario, in which we are operating under the assumption that we will not get the military contract, nor will Baron Cain buy any of our standard rifles being produced in the training phase.”

Kyle was confident that his technology would beat the competition, but he was not sure if there would be enough political pressure to push Count Leon into signing a supply contract. This was something that Baron Cain had to take care of on his end. Yet Kyle did not put all his eggs in one basket, still having a potential escape route for every scenario. “Has any messenger from Versia come in yet?”

“Not that I know of. But if you’re thinking of selling weapons to Versia, it would be just as dangerous as what the Ilysian Punks were attempting to do.”

“Indeed it will be. A last resort of sorts.” Kyle had backup plans to shift production to Versia if it really came down to it, barring future negotiations with Minister Dekar who he had talked with months before. Having no messenger come by with the war looming this close seemed a bit suspicious to him.

“Taking into account the grown crops coming in from the Culdao Peaks now, we can drastically suppress the price of food, making our area much more attractive. Already many market stall owners are moving over into the district.”

The population snowball effect was starting to kick off, with the foundational work that Kyle has laid beginning to come into fruition. By providing ample amentites and a sustainable cost of living, he could entice people to come, which would in turn attract more businesses to set up shop here to profit on the increased footfall and population.

However, there was an inescapable side-effect of all this: land prices. While Kyle was defacto leader of the underworld here, it did not mean he had unbridled control over every single piece of land.

Of course, if he had his way he could violently repossess most of the buildings in the area, creating his own dominion. Yet the entrenched landowners and minor nobility who still had a vested interest in the district would be a tough target to bully, mostly due to their close ties with the enforcers and with Baron Cain.

Illegally evicting them and stealing their land would worsen the peaceful truce that the Seven Snakes and the enforcers now had – it would be directly biting the hand of those who paid the budget of the enforcers through taxation and donations. Already him claiming the land deed from the weapons’ factory prior owner had stepped on some toes, angering the landowner associations, and it was only because of Baron Cain’s involvement that the repercussions were muted.

Kyle was not too worried about the land prices rising, but it would serve as a significant cost barrier to future expansion, limiting the number of housing projects and factories that he could potentially established as landowners would seek to profit off the rising speculation.

For now, the holdings under the Seven Snakes was an impressive portfolio, as Keith began to read off the status of each of them.

“The Lusty Arcian has expanded into multiple branches now, a total of five outlets all complete with their own fronts. We have embedded some branches in the basement of the housing complexes, providing door-delivery where possible.”

With direct control over the housing complex and the enforcers implicit approval, prostitution was in full swing, to be contained within the four walls of the towering apartments, affording easy access to vices. Not only brothels were set up there, but branchs of the Seductive Serpent as well as the Golden Snake Casinos were flourishing in the complex, creating a sort of haven away from the Sanctum of Yual.

This, along with the advertisement and the promise of job security, was what tipped the scales for many migrants and slum dwellers, willing to trade freedom to go under the protection of the Seven Snakes, integrating themselves into the economy.

“What about the Sliver Snakes?” Kyle queried.

“Reese is working on developing a mobile version, one with much smaller proportions to fit in the size of a palm if possible.”

*Ah, a handheld camera.* “Good, that’s another potential profit line.”

“Yes, but it eats into our pool of qualified arctech engineers and designers.” Keith shook his head, pointing towards the recruitment list. “Lowering the threshold for who we hire is fine and all, but eventually we would be bottle-necked for every role like we are now, even with the students and associates working in the factory.”

“Then we will need to find more avenues of attracting workers to our districts.” Kyle knew the advertisement via the distributed lightthrowers was working wonders, but those were expensive to manufacture and maintain as well. Until a handheld projector or screen of sorts was cheaply available, it would be hard to reach a wider audience. He consider other possible methods of distribution. “What about arctech radios?”

“They are still fairly expensive and hard to manufacture as of now, with many only hearing them in coffee shops or Euria dens, where only the well-to-do might frequent.”

*Then perhaps in the future when we can make them cheaper.* “Then we are only left with the medium of writing. Do we have any printing presses in our vicinity?”

“There are a few small-time newspapers, though they are mostly local news and only boast a small readership. The larger ones are all from Tryas or under Count Leon. There is a few on Thresher Street that Reese has been using for the filming process.”

“Give me a list of those in our districts, I will work on it. How is the application rate for the trade school?”

“Abysmal. Many are unable to read and write, and frankly are not interested in learning to as well. They would rather do hard labour with their hands than educate themselves. To many of them, reading words is a bit of a chore and boring.”

Kyle tapped his arm, before a plan emerged in his mind. Keith knew that look on his face, only wondering to himself what shenanigans Kyle was going to pull to solve this problem again.

# Chapter 75 - Sasha’s Day Off

“End of the line! Get off!” A loud female voice hollered from the front of the arctech wagon, frightening the dozens of blindfolded and cuffed men packed like sardines.

A rush of fresh mountainous air blasted the interior of the wagon as the doors opened, a stark difference from the usual smog-filled stench that permeate Raktor. The blindfolded men staggered about as they tried to stand, only to be forcibly dragged by others outside the wagon.

One by one, the blindfolds were removed, revealing the blinding rays of sunrise and the staggering peaks of mountains in the midst of a dense forest, cold gusts rustling through the leaves of Euria trees all around them. One of them glanced down at the hand gripping him, noticing that it was a weird shade of green before realizing he was face-to-face with a hobgoblin, its grin ferocious.

All around them were wooden palisades mixed with a few watchtowers, all manned by trained goblin warriors and archers. Their aggressive demeanor frightened the men into submission, though some still tried to fight back against their restraints.

One of the more daring men spoke out in defiance towards the lady disembarking from the wagon, trying to shrug off the hobgoblin holding him back. “But ma’am, where exactly are we? This isn’t Raktor!”

“This is what happens to Seven Snakes recruits who don’t follow orders. Don’t blame me, you chose this yourself. Take them into the caves.” The lady gave a knowing smile, the hobgoblins hauling off the screaming recruits into the depths of the tunnels.

“Welcome to Culdao Peaks, Lady Monica! This is our first time meeting in person, it is always a pleasure to meet a viper!” At the same time, Feldon marched forward, saluting Monica firmly with respect, only to earn a suspicious glare.

“Cut the Lady and the crap. Where’s Merissa? She’s the one supposed to keep track of the transfer. Why is it you?”

“Oh, she told me that she’s busy today handling other important issues. I’ll be in charge for today.” Feldon puffed out his chest smugly.

“Is that so…? Last time you were in charge you single-handedly damaged the water pipes. Hopefully that won’t happen again.”

“Of course, Ma’am Monica, viper!” Feldon saluted again.

“Alright, enough with the fucking salutes. Make sure those damn recruits get their proper taste of training.” Monica groaned, but internally she relished at the authority she commanded, far different from her previous thug self, scampering around with Adrian and Eric.

Feldon nodded. “I’ll have them shaped up in a month or two, guaranteed! Lets have the wagon unloaded.”

The rest of the wagon’s load was made up of household appliances and other tools to improve the standard of living for the goblins living in the first den. “Yes! Finally I get a basin of my own!” Feldon clenched his fist in victory as he sorted through the goods. “And two kegs of beer! YES!”

“Where’s the shipment?” Monica glanced around, not noticing any boxes of Euria Seeds or regenerated arcite ore around.

“We haven’t finished organizing them yet, but most of it is ready in the den. Since its your first time here, perhaps you would like to visit the den?”

Monica followed Feldon into the goblin den, still hearing the distant screams of recruits as they were unceremoniously left for dead in the training caves, forced to fight off feral humans and rebel goblins. The den still had plenty of failed tattoo experimental subjects and rebellious prisoners left to use as combat practice. A simple month or two in there would desensitize anyone to the idea of killing.

The central cavern of the goblin den had been clearly overhauled, with the infrastructure becoming more and more modern. If it were not for the young goblins running about and playing, Monica would have assumed it was an underground human city. Multiple mechanical shafts were attached to small little wooden wheels that skimmed the top of an large underground river, which transferred energy into arcia regenerators that refueled arcite ore.

Elevators and minecarts served as easy transportation throughout the now expanded den, while a myriad of food stalls served fresh produce delivered right from the goblin kingdom, though many of them had a disgusting stench that seemed to only attract goblins.

“Want to try a Sahusa Radish stew?”

“What the hell is a Sahusa Radish?”

“It’s the new plant they are growing real real fast in the goblin kingdom. Like two weeks or so, a bit spicy. It’s pretty amazing.” Feldon brought here to a stall, pointing out the bland soup that was filled with slices of radish and its murky leaves, nothing else. A few dozen goblins were happily slurping away, chugging the stew down before ordering seconds.

For Monica who had lived her entire life in Raktor, the lack of obvious flavor in the stew disgusted her. “Are you sure it’s amazing?”

“Yea! You might puke for the first five bites, but you get used to it after thirty bowls. It’s an acquired taste.”

“I’ll bet. Looks, I got places to be. Where’s the shipment?”

“Right here.” Feldon motioned at a supply depot, where workers were already loading gurney sacks of arcite ore into wooden crates, with eighteen crates ready to go.

“Good. By the way, where is Sasha?” Monica glanced around. “I was hoping to meet her properly for once.” She had only interacted with her momentarily during the Ilysian Punk War, but not enough to really know her. Monica was slightly intrigued as to the only other female viper in the Seven Snakes, wondering what Sasha was really made of.

“Oh, she told me that she’s busy today handling other important issues.”

“Weird, you said the same thing about Merissa.”

“Did I? Haha, I guess ladies are always busy. Just like Ma’am Monica right here-” Feldon nervously chuckled, instinctively reaching out to pat Monica on the back before a sharp glare from her stopped him dead in his track.

“Get the ore and seeds loaded up. I’ll stay longer next time.”

“Of course, Lad- I mean, Monica.”

*Strange, what’s wrong with him?* Monica wasn’t too bothered to find out. Her job was simply to handle transportation, not investigate administrative issues. She returned back to her wagon, immediately setting off back for Raktor down the winding path through the mountainous forest.

*Now, I should be able to make it back before noon if I hurr- what was that noise?*

Monica immediately halted the wagon, hearing some movement among the crates that had been loaded by the goblins. Grabbing her handgun, she carefully stepped off the driver’s seat, heading towards the back where the sound was coming from. “Alright, I don’t know who you are, but nobody gets a free ride from me without asking. You got one chance before I start blasting.”

Nothing but silence answered her, prompting Monica to board the back and begin searching the crates one for one. Grabbing a crowbar, she pried open the lids of the very first crate, only to find Merissa hiding within, staring back at her in obvious shock.

An awkward silence passed for a brief moment as they stared at each other, each contemplating what the hell was going on. Before Monica could recover from her surprise, Merissa grabbed the lid back without a word, carefully slinking back into the recesses of the crate while closing the lid, as though nothing had happen.

“You think closing the lid means I don’t see you? Get the fuck out of the crate, Merissa!” Monica fumed, wrestling for control of the lid while Merissa dug her fingers into it, clinging on for dear life while leveraging her bodyweight against it.

Unfortunately, Monica was far stronger than her, eventually lifting Merissa and lid together and tossing her onto the ground. “What the hell are you doing smuggling yourself onto my wagon? Weren’t you supposed to be watching over the Culdao Peaks?”

“I’m sick of taking care of the fucking goblins!” Merissa suddenly burst out, throwing a tantrum. “I want to see the city! I want to see the shopping arcade! I want to eat good food! I want to watch light-thrower shows! By the way, this are not my desires. I’m only translating for her.”

“Her?” Monica suddenly felt a presence behind her emerge from behind the crates, turning around to face the mute Sasha, seemingly staring at her without any emotions.

“Sasha says she wants a day off.” Merissa began speaking for Sasha.

“Did Kyle approve of that?”

“Sasha says Kyle only acknowledged it, but never really gave a fixed date. Seeing as nothing much is happening and all the rebels have already been caught, it’s time for the day off.”

“Okay, let me ask Kyle first and -”

“No, no, no! He won’t agree to it! We need to do this secretly. It won’t matter as long as he doesn’t know.”

“What if something happens at the Culdao Peaks while you guys are gone?!”

“Feldon can handle it! We trained him for long enough. Plus there’s King Sahusa and Gulak too. And if they try anything funny, Sasha and Kyle will beat them back into oblivion.” Merissa mimicked a fighter, punching the air with a ‘fear-inducing’ one-two that had her tire out already.

“Right…” Monica glanced back and forth between Sasha and Merissa, noticing Sasha barely showed any noticeable signs of communication. “Wait, how the hell are you translating her words?”

“It’s an acquired skill.” Merissa scrambled up to Monica, clinging onto her clothes even as Monica tried to shrug her off. “PLEASE, MONICA! I’ve spent months in the dens, I want to see the improvements to the Seven Snakes District! I can’t keep hearing about it and not seeing it!”

“I can get some men to use a light-capturer-”

“NO! I WANT TO SEE IT! WITH MY OWN EYES!” Merissa motioned towards her two pupils, nearly jabbing into them before flinching.

“Is this your words or Sasha’s?!”

“Both!”

Monica hesitated for a moment, before finally relenting. “Fine. But if Kyle finds out about this I’m throwing the both of you right under the wagon.”

Merissa immediately scampered past Monica, sitting on the front passenger seat with Sasha, who was surprisingly already there. “No problem, we can handle it.”

Monica’s delivery trip was suddenly transformed into a tour of sorts, as Merissa and Sasha stared intently at the village huts and farms beyond the walls of Raktor. “Sasha, you came to Raktor before, haven’t you? To save Keith?”

“Sasha says she was there on a mission, so she never really had time to experience the city.”

“There isn’t much to experience, really. Just a lot of soot and smog, and endless workshops or factories along with poorly maintained roads, not to mention the faulty arctech lights… why the hell are you two getting excited from what I’m saying?! I’m saying bad things!”

For Merissa and Sasha who had been kidnapped from their homes from a young age, they had never spent enough time in a city, so they gazed in awe as the wagon rolled past, intermittent gasps of excitement as they frantically pointed at ‘weird’ buildings and statues. “Look at the guard towers, they are so tall! The enforcers on them look so tiny from here!” Merissa patted Sasha’s shoulder rapidly.

Monica rolled her eyes as they crossed the gates without issue, revealing the full extent of the cramped Raktor roads. They were now in the West Sector, the wagon lurching forward at an excruciatingly slow-pace as Monica tried to navigate past the departure depots, where countless convoys were waiting to depart to other towns and adjacent counties.

The main street past the entrance gate was a hodgepodge of merchants and traders from all walks of life, searching for the best bargain in the famed city of dreams. Tributaries of the grand river running through the very center of Raktor were filled to the brim with countless sampans and gondolas of various sorts, their goods hailing from far beyond the reach of the Yual Dominion.

Amdist the bustling throng of people, West Sector enforcers decked out in heavy arctech knight armour towered over the crowd, their engravings glistening under the sunlight as they scanned for any suspicious activities and performed regular checks on each batch of cargo entering or leaving Raktor’s borders. The recent revelation that the Ilysian Punks had been smuggling weapons to Versia now had the Sanctum of Yual on high alert, under Count Leon’s orders.

Just beyond the crowd, Monica spotted a few skulking children, their necks clearly marked with the insignia of the Violet Demons. They served as the scouts, keeping an eye out as the Violet Demons associates broke open the laced walls of inconspicous crates to retrieve their contraband, illegal herbs and spices grown in other counties.

Sasha peered out of the murky window of the wagon’s cabin, examining the various people walking about and checking their outfit intently. There were a few adventurers and mercenaries decked out in similar armour as she was perfectly functional but leagues below the dainty ladies that sauntered past the wagon.

Monica noticed her clear fascination with fashion, taking a chance to get to know Sasha better:” If you want a new city outfit, the shopping arcade does have a tailor or tw- yes, yes okay! I’ll bring you there after this stop, no need to pat me so violently!”

The trip continued on, with Monica pointing out the various streets and buildings along the way to her next stop. The wagon came to a halt outside a non-descript building that looked just like any other, with a lone man waiting on the steps.

As soon as the wagon stopped, the man sprung into action, heading to the back of the wagon and unloading the Euria seeds crates quickly, with Monica helping out. This was the headquarters of one of the shell companies, who helped to lower the price of Euria Seeds across the city.

Sasha was hardly interested in the distribution in seeds, instead paying her attentions to the various storefronts along the way. Toy shops, artisan cafes and flower shops held her attention the longest, her never seeing such establishments before. Even bookstores were a foreign concept to her, despite having learnt how to read and write.

They soon reached the shopping arcade, Sasha’s mouth dropping at the enormous sight. Mountains were one thing, but she had never seen such a large man-made structure before, especially one that seemed to have elegant curves rather than ugly blocky designs like most of the buildings in the West Sectors. The outer plaza was filled to the brim with workers and residents enjoying their time off, enjoying food and snacks in the warm sun while others queued up for the free public bathhouse, holding wooden baskets filled with their laundry.

Monica drove them into the supply depot, a basement floor underneath the shopping arcade where the central node of the distribution network was. Drivers regularly came back and forth, shuttling workers and residents around in a designated line while secretly shipping alcohol and Euria-infused potions to smaller thug rackets outside the Seven Snakes district. Merissa carefully examined the various types of potions, having never truly seen the outcome of the countless Euria Seeds that she had been in charge of harvesting.

“Interested in this?” Monica waved a little glass bottle filled with whiskey as she stowed away her gear and arctech radio into a nearby locker. “Come on, there’s a bar nearby.”

Despite their original excitement, Sasha suddenly gave a knowing look to Merissa, who’s face in turn was in complete shock. “Fuck, I didn’t bring any rakels!”

“What? Are you two dumb? Everything is for free - Sasha’s a viper! If she doesn’t drink free, who does?!” Monica laughed it off, leading them past the throng of drivers and workers unloading the various trucks. The trio headed towards a normal metal door plastered with the sign “EMPLOYEES ONLY”, opening only to reveal a rowdy bar filled to the brim of other Seven Snakes members.

The bar was far from the usual rowdy downtrodden watering holes that Sasha had been forced to clean at the forest fort when she was a slave under Paulie. Instead, arctech lights lined the grooves of the ceiling, giving a ethereal aurora feel to the entire decor. The furniture was flushed with luxurious materials purchased from the best dealers in the South Sector, chairs and barstools well-built and able to withstand the raucous behavior of the associates, workers and residents alike.

As soon as Sasha entered through the door with Monica, some of the associates who were taking time off instantly hushed down, staring at the three ladies who were clearly out of place in the male-dominated bar. Merissa immediately felt embarassed by the simplistic dress that she was wearing, a far cry from the trendy clothes that she had seen on the streets, while Sasha was far more concerned with why they were staring so intently.

“Ah just ignore them. Virgins who never seen a girl before in their lives.” Monica scoffed as she led them through, brushing past a few stunned associate and shoving them violently out of the way. A wave of murmurs erupted through the associates, while the fresher recruits had no clue who the three of them were.

“Fucking greenhorn, that lady over there in the armour is Sasha, Kyle’s left-hand.” One of the veteran members slapped the arm of a confused recruit. “Don’t fuck with her, or any of them. No idea who the small one is though.”

“Left hand? I thought Damian was his right-hand?”

“How the fuck did you even pass the training? Humans have two hands, idiots!”

“Don’t know, she doesn’t look that strong. A bit fit, sure.” One of the more egoistic recruits barely gave a glance at Sasha, immediately dissing her.

“I’ll write that on your headstone when she comes for you.”

Sasha didn’t mind the whispers spreading around her - actions always speak louder than words, a concept she was physically inclined to. Yet she did not act against the recruits, ignoring them and following Monica to the bar, where Eric Dicar was reading a pamphlet of sorts, sniggering to himself in clear fascinations at its contents.

“ERIC!” Monica slammed the table forcibly, frightening the nearby recruits to give up their barstools. “Three lemon-flavored soju for the new ladies in town.”

“Oh my, bringing new girls for Slavin? Maybe I’ll have a go fi-” Eric glanced up, before performing a double-take. He hurriedly stood upright, bowing towards the two ladies. “Uhm, sorry, I mean greetings, Lady Sasha, I’ll have your drink for you right away.”

While Eric was scrambling in an obvious fluster, Sasha was utterly confused by the reaction, only to be distracted by the upbeat voice of a presenter blaring through a radio near the bar counter.

[In updated news - terror in Kregol as gang violence has reached an all-time high. Word on the street is that a major gang from Raktor is expanding their businesses into neighbouring counties. Count Kreig has requested for intervention from Count Leon, though it yet remains to be seen the outcome of such negotiations, if any.]

“Must be the Ardent Cretins. The rest of the major gangs are too caught up in dealing with each other.” Monica remarked as she rummaged about the bar’s various empty bottles.

“Why are the Ardent Cretins so strong?” Merissa asked, she and Sasha slightly oblivious to the power structure within Raktor as former slave girls out in the Culdao Peaks.

“Don’t you know? Their leader, Ares Ulras, is a beast. I heard almost no one can compare to him - I wouldn’t be surprised if he was personally fighting Kregol’s gangs to submissions. He and Sebastian rose out from nothing, creating the major gang over the span of three years. When I was young, I recalled the South Sector still had more than fifteen gangs. Now? Less than four remain, not including the Ilysian Punks - and we’re one of the four. A miracle by any measure of the word considering our pitiful start.” Monica rambled, before pouring a small flask of whiskey out onto a cold shot glass. “Now that the Ardent Cretins are expanding beyond Raktor, it might be time for us to do something similar. Here, give this shot a try.”

Before Sasha could grab the shot glass, Merissa clenched Sasha’s arm tightly, wagging her finger. “No killing if you get drunk, you hear? If you kill anyone, Kyle is going to find out!”

Sasha rolled her eyes, shrugging off the weak Merissa and downing the glass in one motion. “Hell yes! Finally someone proper to drink with instead of them weak boys.” Monica grinned widely, patting Sasha vigorously.

“Who are you calling weak?” A suave voice wafted in from behind. “Can’t be having you talk us Seven Snakes down in front of such beautiful and stunning ladies like these two.” The owner of the voice tried to rest his hand on Monica’s shoulder, before Monica violently gripped it, nearly crushing the hand. “OW OW OW OKAY OKAY STOP!”

“What the hell are you doing here, Niko? Weren’t you supposed to check out Thresher Street and its printing presses?”

“Got word that two new beautiful ladies were in town, following Monica along. Had to get a glimpse myself.”

“Who told you that?”

“I have my sources from certain observers.” Niko adjusted his collar and his peaked cap, chewing on a Euria Seed as he shoved the recruit next to Merissa away, sliding in in a slick movement. “Hello, pretty. Name’s Niko, Seven Snakes’ number one viper. Pleasure to make your acquaintance. If I may have the honor of knowing your name, Mademoiselle?”

While Merissa was slightly irked by the sleaziness of Niko, she couldn’t help feeling a little better being talked up this way.

“Don’t answer him.” Monica interrupted. “He’s still chasing someone else.”

“Come on, I already broke up with Emily three weeks ago!” Niko brushed his fringe under the cap.

“And it was a pretty bad one. Saw you crying your heart out on the ground the other day just outside here. Saying you wanted to get back with her and all that.”

“It wasn’t bad - It was a mutual agreement, we had our misunderstandings that I’m sure will clear up over time.”

“Yea because you were hitting on every pretty lady you saw on the street once u became a viper.”

“Allegations that may have some weight. Or it’s more than they were astounded by my good looks. Just can’t restrain my charisma. Now what say I buy you two a drink or two, hmm? Or maybe three drinks?”

“Forget it, Niko, they are drinking free.” Eric returned with the three lemon-flavoured soju, decorated nicely in a cocktail glass with mock umbrellas inside.

“Drinking free? I didn’t know today was ladies night? Well then, how about you two and I scoot over to a cafe just upstairs? They got pretty good ice-cream and cakes that we can enjoy slowly.” Niko stood up and was about to put his arms around Merissa and the other, only to find the slightly excited face of Sasha staring back at him, her expression intrigued.

“Sasha says she wants to try the ice-cream and cakes.” Merissa translated.

Niko almost yelped on the spot, flashes of the gruesome mess filled with bloody bits and human limbs that he had to clean up after Sasha’s battle with the Ilysian Punks. He hurriedly retracted his arms and immediately took two steps back. “Well, uhh, since it’s ladies night, I’ll leave the ladies to it, then. Don’t need to worry about little old me, haha!”

“Hold on, you said you were going to buy us a drink or three?” Merissa taunted. “I was really looking forward to the three drinks.” Sasha nodded in agreement, Niko’s face pale as he glanced between them and Eric, trying to look for a way out.

“Come on, Eric, all Vipers drink free, right? I’m a Viper too?” Niko tried to snake his way out.

“Well, theoretically, Merissa isn’t a Viper, so she had to pay at some point.” Eric tapped the blackboard hung up on the wall behind him, the list of prices.

“Grrr… FINE!” Niko pulled out a bunch of rakels, sliding them over to Eric. “Get them three of the cheapest beers!”

“I don’t want beer, and neither does she!” Merissa retorted, Sasha nodding vigorously in agreement.

“Then what do you want?”

“I want three of the most expensive drinks on that board!”

Soon, Niko’s spare change in his wallet was largely empty, Monica and Eric sniggering as Niko left defeated. “Next time better check who you’re trying to flirt with first!” Monica hollered after the disappearing figure of Niko. “Dumbass, not even sure why he’s a viper. At least he got guts and blind courage. You met him before, haven’t you, Sasha?”

Monica expected a reply from Merissa, but instead turned to find two slowly spinning barstools, Sasha and Merissa conspicuously missing along with Eric holding a fake smile. Before Monica could question Eric on their disappearance, a familiar presence was already approaching her from the side.

She immediately stood up and bowed towards the approaching person. “Boss, what are you doing down here?”

“I was in the vicinity, and thought to check up on operations here. I was also planning to inform you of your next task… Were you drinking with someone?” Kyle glanced over Monica’s shoulder, looking at the three cocktail glasses still filled up.

Monica swiveled back, only seeing Eric’s nervous expression with a frozen smile on his face. “Huh…? Err yea… I mean no, uhhh…. I was planning on drinking all three!”

“Hmm.” Kyle squinted his eyes, looking around the bar. The originally ecstatic atmosphere had simmered down immediately on his arrival, some of the recruits still sipping their beer with their eyes wide open staring at him, glancing back and forth. Only the tense slurps of alcohol could be heard over the music playing from the arctech radio. “Anyway, next task is to distribute these pamphlets around the districts.” He pointed towards Eric’s pamphlet that was on the counter.

Monica picked it up, reading the title only. “Are we selling this?”

“No, just drop them off at all the known slum areas. Distribute it for free to anyone. As many districts as you can by today.”

“Right, I’ll get it done.”

Kyle nodded, about to leave before he suddenly turned back, surprising Monica and frightening Eric. “Right, I wanted to also say that there’s a few new variety of ice-creams and cakes in the cafe, courtesy of Haui’s recent experiments. Perhaps you could invite some of your friends there?”

“But I don’t have any friends like that…?” Monica was slightly flabbergasted, but Kyle was already leaving before he even heard the reply.

“Okay, he’s gone. Now, can you two stop hiding under the bar and sipping on the half-drank bottles for free!?” Eric grabbed Merissa by the shoulders and lifted her up, Monica finally realizing what just happened.

Sasha deftly slid over the bar counter back to her seat, neatly avoiding the cocktail glasses and acting as though nothing had happened, taking a sip. The fruity taste of the drink brightened up her expression immensely, and the drink did not last long as she drank all of it in one shot. Monica had to hastily grab the mock umbrella away from Sasha before she ate it. “It’s a prop! Alright, we gotta go now. I got work to do.”

As soon as Monica said that, Sasha and Merissa were crestfallen, relcutantly nodding as they prepared to leave the bar. Monica groaned, wondering why she felt like she was raising two daughters. “FINE! We’ll get the new ice-cream and cakes, alright? We’ll get you a new outfit too, but you only get an hour top!”

Various snack stores were open in the shopping arcade, selling all kinds of wacky food and wondrous invention. Sasha peered at the printed drawing of the new ice-cream, reading the title. “What the hell is a Sour-Faced ice-cream?”

“Fuck if I know, but I’m getting one for each of us.” Monica soon returned with three ice-cream cones filled with what seemed to be greenish gloop.

Despite the unappetizing facade, the smell was tremendously enticing, Sasha hurriedly taking a bite. Her mouth was instantly awash with a stinging sour sensation that drilled into a her jaw, her mouth contorting in tension.

Monica and Merissa instantly burst out laughing at the sour-face of Sasha. They each took turns making fun of each other, before trying the rest of the cake. The staff member of the store hurriedly scooped as much as he could of every variant, handing them over to the voracious trio. Before he could charge them for anything, the manager immediately stopped him. “If you know what’s good for you, don’t.”

Their shopping trip was brief but vicious, Sasha finally obtaining an clean prim and proper outfit well-suitted for city excursions. Despite her previous fascination with the large skirts that the ladies boasted outside, she found them cumbersome and heavy, instead opting for a simple red sleeved shirt with a high-waisted pants that both looked good and provided for better freedom of movement. Merissa hardly cared about combat, instead grabbing the best looking dress and strapping herself in, wearing countless layers beneath just like the other city girls. “Alright, come on out. Feeling posh enough yet? I’ve got work to do and it isn’t babysitting you all the entire day!” Monica had to urge them out of the clothes shop before they tried on every single outfit in existence.

Happily enjoying the cake and relishing in their newfound outfits, Sasha and Merissa enjoyed the rest of the trip, with Monica delivering the pamphlets all over the city to the slums. Destitute kids immediately scrambled over, expecting some sort of donation or food, only to receive stacks upon stacks of freshly printed pamphlets.

“Its free for you all. Distribute them, give them away, sell them, I don’t care. Make sure it gets around.” Monica took off as fast as she arrived, leaving the kids giggling to themselves as they browsed through the various pamphlets.

Sasha spotted the kids’ excitement in the rear-view mirror, wondering what was in the pamphlet. She retrieved a copy from the back of the wagon, reading it intently before she let out an audible gasp and hurriedly packed it back in. Merissa noticed her weird behavior, immediately grabbing the pamphlet and pouring through it, suddenly recoiling in shock. “Eww, what the hell?! Why is Kyle distributing this? Monica, have you actually read this?”

“Isn’t it just a random article?” Monica shrugged. “No, I haven’t read it.”

At the next stop, Merissa stuffed the pamphlet into Monica’s hand. “Read it, it’s demonizing us!”

Monica relented, flipping through the pages before bursting out into laughter much to the chagrin of Merissa and Sasha.

“How can you laugh? Why is he entering such a business? We already make more than enough from our existing ventures!” Merissa stomped her foot. “Did Niko put him up to this?”

“What can I say? Our boss really knows how to draw the crowd in.”

# Chapter 76 - A Warning

*A week later…*

“This is absolutely outrageous! Let me speak to the Bishop immediately!” A frustrated lady slammed the reception table of the Magda again, her cries overwhelming the din of overworked clerks and enforcers trying to take a break.

“Ma’am, if you would please calm down… I don’t even know what you’re reporting!” Mason groaned as he tried to calm down the lady, motioning for her to take a seat. “At least tell me your name and purpose!”

“Madam Suzanne, and I am here to report of an affront to the very nature of humanity!”

“Huh?” Mason was flabbergasted, until the lady retrieved a rugged looking pamphlet, slapping it on the hardwood table-top.

“Look at this! it is being distributed all over near the Golden Snake Shopping Arcade!”

Mason snatched the paper, it clearly being a sort of published article, albeit one of poor quality. A scantily-dressed woman was plastered on the cover of the soaked pamphlet, the illustration lurid and highly imaginative.

He flipped open the cover, reading the very first page:

[A Warning to Young Boys, Gentlemen and Young Ladies Who are in the South Sector to Visit the Golden Snakes Shopping Arcade.]

*What the hell?*

[It is our earnest desire that nothing dangerous or violent will befall these visitors during their trip to marvel at the shopping arcade, and we also hope that their stay in the district will be both happy, exciting and profitable.]

“Ma’am, I don’t particularly see why this pamphlet is an affront to humanity…”

“Shut it and keep reading!”

[While it is true that the shopping arcade hold many diversions of a benign nature, it is regrettably also true that the district offers a multitude of dangerous amusements that only the most depraved of may willingly encounter. We beseech the innocent visitors that they may be cognizant and aware of exactly where such distractions lurk, and thus we set forth a list of places so as to warn others of their inherent dangers.]

[The Konan Market and Stokes Street. There is no more dreadful sight in all of Raktor and the South Sector than of the scores of painted harlots gathered in these areas. These pitiable ladies ply their awful trade from exactly eleven in the morning near the beauty school until long after midnight has struck, with lodgings for the night often offered in nearby housing complexes for twenty rakels.]

[It is hardly possible to traverse the length of the newly established food market in the Konan Market without being made the unwilling and naïve subject of numerous irresistible propositions of a grossly indecent nature, some willing to conduct their trade right out in the open for indecent sums.]

[This area, inclusive of the Olson Square, is alas, not the only place infested by such girls. The park in the center of the square at exactly two in the afternoon is transformed from a place of harmless family fun and frolicking to a fearsome den of vice and criminal nature.]

[Houses along Stokes Street are but mere facades, places where the presence of a Lusty Arcian employee mark the spots where prostitutes may be encountered with comparative discretion. Other parts of the districts are also habituated by the most loathsome of creatures, some of whom know their hiding dens full of alcohol and gambling games very well, their affiliations well marked by the armour and weaponry they holstered beneath their well-trimmed clothes.]

[Despite the best effort of humbler vigilantes and crusaders such as ourselves of the Crusaders Against Vices, brothels, pubs and casnios abound in all areas of the districts. Take good care of your steps, lest you find yourself enticed to such dens of terrible circumstances, as , for instance, the Seductive Serpent tucked away at a basement on Pullers Lane No 41, open from six in the evening till late where horrid pints of alcohol are served for a mere four rakels each.]

[Such establishments are said to possess courtesans skilled in the arts of Aphrodite who cater to the most depraved of tastes. Beware too, of a certain man who goes by the moniker ‘Slavin’, which is the man who fulfils every vice an innocent visitor might find himself lured to.]

[Physical vices are not just the only thing a visitor must watch out for. Here in Thresher Street, in shop after shop, are sold various species of print and literature that will offend and outrage all but the most corrupt of sensibilities. I am told of certain light-thrower establishments that portray shows of an unmistakable nature, with seating tickets sold at prices that are dangerously within the range of a visitor’s pocket.]

[For those who have nay but a single rakel in their pockets, Jalan Sekolah’s trade school is to be avoided with the utmost precaution, as it is said that their educational staff is fraught with mysterious beauties that would lead even the most sensible Sanctum clergy astray from their path. The living wage afforded by the enrollment of the trade school is but another trap laid by such beauties who seek to ensnare young men for over a year.]

[Be not alarmed, for the district is by and large safe and blameless. Remember too that the enforcers and the Seven Snakes offer its sanctuary at all times from any of these irresponsible ventures.]

Mason had to stifle a laugh, much to the enragement of the lady, her face filled with blistering anger. “How dare you, an inquisitor, laugh at such an blatant crime being committed?”

“HAHA- Sorry, ma’am.” Mason instantly stopped sniggering, keeping a straight face, though it was clear from the tip of his eyes that he was about to burst into abrupt laughter any time. “I don’t see how this is a crime – the writer and publisher of this booklet is clearly doing the Sanctum’s work by offering good advice on where to avoid. In fact, his information is so detailed that much of my own investigative work has been put to shame.”

“And shame indeed!” The lady spat. “The most outrageous thing of all is the claim that the Crusaders Against Vices has issued this ‘guide’ that is obviously false!”

“May I inquire as to how you are so sure that it is false?”

“Because I AM the leader of the Crusaders Against Vices! And look at the indecent drawings plastered all on the back!” The furious lady jabbed towards the last few pages.

“Well then, perhaps one of your members felt the need to inform the general public of where to stay clear of. It does indeed reduces the impact of crime in the district.”

“You…! These pamphlets are being distributed not just at stalls all over the district, but even circulating among kids. Children! If it were not for me finding out that my very own son has been reading this in secret, large swaths of residents would have been terribly afflicted.”

“I apologize, my enforcers will take this case with the utmost importance. You can rest assured that we will find the source of said publication and clamp down on it heavily.” Mason eventually managed to convince the lady to let it go, before letting a hearty laugh. *Seven Snakes, they really know how to get them going.*

However, as an inquisitor, he had no choice but to act on the evidence presented to him. With the locations and streets so blatantly described in the guide, he had to at least ‘pretend’ that he was doing something.

As soon as he stepped out of the Magda into the busy street, he could already see the pamphlet being read by about one in every five pedestrians, the publication spreading like wildfire across the South Sector. *Weird. I could have sworn only a small fraction of the population knew how to read.*

Obviously, the people reading the booklets were not exactly ‘reading’, but simply ogling at the etchings of semi-clad dancing girls alongside occupational drawings of various seductive professions, like teachers and construction workers.

The effect of the publication was immediately obvious, even to an outsider like Mason. As he approached the trade school, dozens were already queuing up in front of a makeshift table, where Niko and Keith were happily receiving the new enrolling students.

At the corner of the bustling queue, Alex was trying to convince Ollie and Bola to queue up for the trade school enrollment. “Come on, you get paid a decent wage and actually learn something! You can’t spend your entire life working in the bath house. The wages might be good, but -”

“I didn’t sign up with the Seven Snakes to become a nerd!” Ollie shrugged off Alex’s hand vigorously. “I joined because of the shopping arcade and the job! Not to bury myself in books!”

“Idiot, if you can read and write you’ll have a brighter future ahead! My daughters are signing up too - This is an order from your cobra as your squad leader!”

“I don’t have to take your life advice! I’m an associate of the Seven Snakes, not a dumb student!” Bola yelled, grabbing Ollie and running off into the alleyway, leaving the frustrated Alex behind with his two daughters enrolling.

“Fucking Damian, why the hell did he assign me two brats, I’m already having a hard time parenting…” Alex grumbled as his daughters tugged him in opposite directions, one wanting to go to a nearby cafe, while the other urged him to move along the queue.

Apart from the bickering in the Seven Snakes squad, many other students were clearly enticed by what had been written in the pamphlets and various publications issued around town by Monica, the majority being boys in the prime of their puberty.

“Can you read? Can you write? Okay, good, sign here, and you can pick up your complimentary uniform and books inside at the store.” Niko jabbed at the contract paper.

“Right!” The excited student signed with haste and wrote his name down, his scribbles hardly legible but still better than nothing. “So, where are the teachers?”

“Right this way.” Niko grinned, already anticipating the disappointment on the student’s face as he guided them in towards the elderly university graduates who would to be their ‘mysterious beauties.’ Telltale sounds of disappointment and outrage against the wrinkled saggy faces of the teachers erupted amdist the various classrooms, but it was far too late for these trapped souls.

Mason chuckled to himself, simply walking along and tipping his cap at Keith in acknowledgement. The flow of people into the Seven Snakes district was enormous, the migration reaching a new record in the history of Raktor.

He headed to down to Thresher Street, where a few print shops were crowded to brim with factory workers clamoring for a view at the displays. The windows and shelves were packed with vicious and gaudy literature of all sorts, seemingly enabled by an improved printing press that allowed for such cheap publications. Some of the workers gathered around their colleagues, having them read out the erotica that had just been purchased, a few of them even cursing their own inability to read.

Apart from the crowded street, underground small-scale light-thrower theatres were packed, tickets selling faster than a maggot stick in a goblin den. The new visual medium helped enrich the public’s imagination, allowing them to live out fetishes they might not have dared to attempt on their own.

Furthermore, the Sliver Snakes had just released a handheld version of the light-capturer and the light-thrower, accelerating the adoption of the product into households. Various workers splurged their entire wage onto the expensive contraptions, hoping to enjoy themselves thoroughly with one of the pre-filmed engraving plates that were immediately sold out in a day.

*How does that damn Alvin Teras keep coming up with such ludicrous inventions?* While he would have initially despised the Seven Snakes for their obvious lack of morality and decency, it was hard to say that Kyle was not improving the district, albeit in unconventional ways. It was clear to Mason that such pornographic books and materials seemed like a sure-fire method to raise literacy and entice even more people to come to the Seven Snakes district in search for more exquisite entertainment.

Memories of how Kyle slipped between the enforcers’ fingers during his arrest still irked Mason, but he now learnt that the machinations of the Seven Snakes were not something to be trifled with.

He thus closed one eye, and continued ‘patrolling’ down the street, remaining blissfully oblivious to the printed material. The Sanctum of Yual only prohibited prostitution, but had no rules against such newfangled visual mediums. Until orders came in from the top, Mason chose to not interfere at all.

[Inquisitor Mason, the Bishop has asked you to return to the Magda immediately.]

“What for?”

[An order from the Central Sector’s Bishop has been handed down.]

*An order?* Mason couldn’t recall the last time such an order was issued this way. Usually the rumours would travel through the grapevine months in advance before the declaration of an order was made. *Something’s off.*

Returning to the Magda, Mason only found Bishop Vernette pacing the breadth of her office with a slight tinge of panic. “What’s wrong?”

“They found out about the truce we have with the Seven Snakes.”

“And…?” Mason cocked his head in confusion. It was nothing new for the enforcers to cut deals with local criminal organizations to prevent anything from going into all-out war. The West Sector was the perfect example of what happens when you break the truce. *At least Kitana is having a field day there.*

“They want us to revoke it.”

Mason’s face darkened. “Who’s behind this?”

“The Central Sector’s Bishop.”

“You and I both know he’s far from able to issue such an order. Theoretically, you are on the same level as him.”

Bishop Vernette took a deep breath, exhaling slowly. “I think the Seven Snakes are getting a bit too close for comfort for Count Leon.”

“Didn’t Baron Cain negotiate a deal?”

“He did, but still, we can’t ignore the order.”

“Breaking the truce would devastate the progress the South Sector has made thus far.” Mason warned, having learnt his lesson from arresting Kyle. With the shopping arcade and the influx of jobs and houses now coming in, it would be tantamount to political suicide to suddenly reverse their stance.

Furthermore, they had already announced joint projects such as the housing complex to further boost the enforcers’ public image. The bishop was clearly conflicted with this as well, but Mason could read her expression as clear as day. “You have a solution.”

“I have. A way to play both sides.”

“Tell me.”

“We officially renounce the truce, but we do not act on it. We simply pull back all our patrols and resources from the Seven Snakes district. Tell Count Leon we won’t intervene no matter what happens, fight or not.”

“Isn’t that still a truce of sorts? How are we going to explain why we are not arresting them?”

“We can simply say that the district is too dangerous for our enforcers to enter, and that it constitutes a work hazard until we are afforded more budget.”

“Us pulling out of the district wouldn’t make the factory nor the Seven Snakes any less weak… unless…” Mason completed his thought in his brain. *Unless Count Leon has other means of undermining the weapons factory.* “Should we give them a warning?”

Bishop Vernette held a grim smile on her face. “No, we don’t want to be complicit in anything. Count Leon is going to crush the Seven Snakes, and we’re going to stay out of his way.”

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“Bye bye Mister!” A young girl waved her free hand jubilantly towards a florist shop, the other holding onto a quaint little miniature pot, with a tiny flowering plant blooming in it.

“Don’t wander off too far, you go home straight now, you hear? And water it regularly every day!” The florist waved back from the shop, a gentle smile on his weathered face while he dusted off a few stray leaves on his apron, turning back into the shop to help other customers.

The florist shop was filled with many well-dressed residents, each of them obviously considering the best arrangement for their upcoming events as they discussed with one another. He noticed a few customers voraciously reading a pamphlet, his own curious self leaning over to peek at what they were reading.

As soon as he saw the images, his face contorted slightly in suppressed rage, but still held a gentle smile as he approached another customer who was clearly having a hard time deciding.

“My good sir, that bouquet is a marvelous choice for your wedding anniversary. Or perhaps you could consider adding a tinge of red into the mix, make the yellow and white more outstanding. I suggest a Crimson Tiger Flower, though it may be on a pricey side?”

“A Crimson Tiger Flower..? I never heard of that before.” The customer in question scratched his head.

“Not to worry, I have a sample right here. Blooms right in the desert of all places, can you believe it? A great symbol of your undying love to your wife.” The florist chuckled as he pointed out a flower pot, with a spectacular large red flower the size of a plate glistening under an arctech lantern.

“That’s it… that’s it! I’ll take it.”

“Perfect. Let me wrap that up for you.”

The atmosphere was cheerfully laid-back, with the satisfied customer leaving with his humongous bouquet. The florist continued working, tending to the flowers and watering the pots until metallic boots could be heard approaching the store. He glanced up to see a squad of three arctech knights standing at the door, the leader removing his helmet to reveal a familiar face.

“Mr Leo, I need to have a word with you. In private.”

“I apologize, but I’m currently very busy as you can see.” Leo motioned to his watering can. “Perhaps we can schedule for another date.”

“It’s from the top.”

A moment of silence passed, the remaining customers inside the shop staring at the arctech knights while Leo gently put down his watering can.

“Everyone out.” Leo announced to the store, the customers unnervingly immediately leaving out onto the streets in an orderly fashion, as though they were thralls of the florist himself. The sight of the customers leaving promptly hardly fazed the three knights.

Leo arranged for a wider space, shifting a few pots out of the way. “Please, come in. I do apologize for the mess, but there are no chairs available.”

The three knights entered, closing the door behind them and locking it, while the leader immediately began talking even though Edgar was still tending to the flowers. “Count Leon has an offer for you.”

“I know what you want. Speak to the Ardent Cretins - I have better things to do.”

“You and I both know that the Ardent Cretins are currently preoccupied with… external matters beyond Raktor.”

Leo raised his eyebrows in suspicion while he continued trimming the plants with a gardening shear. “And you came to me?”

“This offer is standing for anyone with the strength and willpower in the South Sector.”

“And what will I get if I do this?”

“Count Leon promises no retaliation from the enforcers for a year, as well as a waiver on all taxes.”

“Intriguing, and how far do I have to go?”

“As far as you want. All enforcers have stopped activity in the Seven Snakes District.”

“For what reason did Sebastian reject this?”

“I am not privy to their private discussions.”

“If Sebastian and Ares were hesitant to take up the offer, what makes you think I will? I’m still recovering from the war - not everyone got out unscathed.”

“Consider the possibility of absorbing all of Seven Snakes.” The leader pressed his persuasive speech, expressions hidden under the helmet.

“Not good enough. I will be severely weakened if I fought them head-on - Kyle has more than proved his strength. If you want a dog to eat another stronger dog, you’re going to have to offer more.”

“Or Count Leon could just starve you himself, and find another dog.” The knight leader chuckled.

“He can try.” A loud snip from Leo’s gardening tool echoed through the store. “He can most certainly try.”

“The offer still stands. It’s either you, or the others. Your choice. The final objective is simply to neutralize the Seven Snakes’ ability to hold their economy together. Both you and Count Leon have a common goal in this, otherwise you will be left behind in the dust.”

Leo stood motionless for a moment. “I will consider it. You may expect my reply in three days.”

The meeting ended as abruptly as it began, the three arctech knights leaving instantly. Leo let out a sigh, placing his gardening shears into the deep pockets of his apron. The tough decision weighed on his mind heavily - not because he did not want to harm the Seven Snakes, but rather because he saw no way to do so.

He furrowed his brows, his mind deep in contemplation as he headed towards the storeroom behind the cashier. Amdist the neatly arranged rows of empty pots and seed packets, a muffled whimper drifted through the damp cold air.

Leo let out an exasperated sigh to himself as he approached three men tied to wooden chairs, their eyes blindfolded and their mouths gagged with a cloth. The first of them began to shiver uncontrollably as he heard Leo’s footsteps approaching him, struggling to break free.

He knelt down, coming face to face with the blindfolded man, gripping the first man’s chin and checking his cheeks without speaking a word. The man whimpered as Leo grabbed and patted each part of the man’s body, finally reaching the the still bloody stumps that used to be the designer legs, the chair rocking back and forth heavily.

“I brought you out of the slums, and for a measly 25000 rakels you scamper away to our enemies. It made me think - do arctech designers really need legs?” Leo kicked the designer right in the jaw, causing the chair to topple over as the designer’s head slammed against the nearby pots, his amputated stumps flailing in the air with blood spurting.

*Kyle is slowly draining resources from the entire South Sector, and he even managed to overshadow Sebastian’s shopping arcade through his public pandering and sabotage.* Leo faced a conundrum with regards to Count Leon’s offer. Sebastian’s rejection was a big red flag for him, but if Leo did not do anything, he would eventually be bled dry of skilled labor and residents to extort. *What good is a gang with no one to profit off?*

Leo glanced around at the other three prisoners, his mind racking together, wondering if there was a way to bring down the Seven Snakes without a military confrontation. They were still licking their wounds after the Ilysian Punks War, and many other minor gangs and rackets were now eyeing them, seeing them as the weakest of the pack. Suddenly a flash of inspiration hit Leo, a small smile slowly blossoming in his face as he started to put a plan together.

The second prisoner was more composed but still showed a few signs of fear when Leo approached him. “It seems all three of your lives still have worth.” Leo murmured as he grabbed the second prisoner’s head, shaking it violently. “But know this: if you ever lie to me, the Mane of the Red Lion, one more time, you won’t be dying peacefully anytime soon. This is your last chance, Wrent. Try not to fuck it up.” # Chapter 77 - Incursion

The first week of operation of the factory proceeded smoothly despite the hiccups in employment and training. Gordon innovated a few other methods of compartmentalizing the assembly process, making it easier for the factory workers to become productive.

Veteran technicians, trade school students and new Seven Snakes recruits alike worked hand-in-hand, filling up the gaps and pumping out rifle after rifle. It soon became second-nature to many of the workers and the foreman, enabling the production teams to slowly perform their own quality control.

At the same time, the durability and strength of the new materials were tested thoroughly, many of the variations and compositions not making the cut. Kyle spent most of his hours figuring out how best to create a new stronger material that could beat the competition.

Yet he could not utilize his previous knowledge of Galactic Era defense systems. Even if he had still retained his cranial implant on resurrection, it would still be nearly impossible to achieve the temperatures and gravitational control parameters required to manufacture some of the more exotic alloys that were commonplace during his time.

After all, he had to remain small as well. The existence of the exosuit spine he had won at the auction and other relics were a clear sign that there were others who may understand Galactic Era technology, and begin to target him.

*I’ll have to start small.* Kyle watched on as a few Seven Snakes associates test-fired the newly produced standard rifles against the prototype materials in a makeshift firing range enclosed within the Aspis Weapons Factory which were propped on wooden crosses, enduring pellet after pellet.

“Sir.” The older designer in charge of leading Team A was already there, measuring the depth of impacts on a few specimens. “As we can see in the chainmail variation, it seems to be perfectly aligned with our requirement. Just on penetration alone, it is performing quite well against standard lead and iron bullets.”

“Put the specimen up again in lane 12. Have the light-capturers set up.” Kyle ordered a few workers while hauling his long briefcase onto an empty table, opening to reveal parts of a special gun that the Team A lead designer had never seen before, his questions only restrained by a glare from Kyle.

Kyle carefully assembled the sniper rifle together, though in his mind it was hardly an sniper rifle. *What kind of sniper rifle can only have a range of 500 meters?* However, it was by far the most powerful single shot weapon in his arsenal currently - making a new one would have to wait until he was done with the military contract.

The lead designer’s face paled as Kyle continued to assemble the elongated barrel piece by piece, the engravings along the side intricate. “By Yual, what the…”

Kyle ignored the stares of the Team A designers who were now crowding around him, instead focusing on fine-tuning the gun, making sure the engravings were all aligned correctly before latching them into place. He heaved the entire rifle with one single arm, resting it at the range aimed right at the target of lane 12, where a thin chainmail already dented with holes was waiting.

With a single pull, the recoil sent a shudder through the makeshift firing range, the temporary partitions vibrating violently from the sudden launch as the pellet tore through the chainmail like a sheet of paper, the wooden cross behind snapping in half.

“Get the captured engraving into a light-thrower.”

The recorded flight of the bullet was tabulated, using the marking along the walls and estimating the time of flight by using the frame rate of the light-capturer. With this, Kyle continued putting various iterations of the chainmail specimens, firing shot after shot.

Each of the chainmail prototypes failed to resist the penetration effect, most of them a gaping hole torn through them.

“Not good enough at all. If this armour cannot handle this amount of energy at least more than three times, its a failure.”

The designers erupted into a furor at the obvious tall order, some of them clamoring towards the Team A lead designer. “Elder Buron, what the hell are we going to do now?” Yet Lead Designer Buron did not respond, his face glinting with excitement at the prospect of the challenge, only motioning with his hand to another designer to bring out the next testing specimen.

“This next specimen is a steel plate doped with arcite ore as well as a few additional materials. Even with your elongated rifle, there’s no way you’ll penetrate it!” Buron stuck his chest out with pride. “Countless overtime hours have been put in over the last seven days to find the perfect combination-”

His speech was interrupted by a loud bang, the pellet fired from the rifle whizzing past in a blur, slamming into the steel plate. For a brief moment Buron grinned, half-expected the doped steel plate to hold, only for the pellet to tear through it, albeit less easily than the chainmail. This time, the pellet had disintegrate from the impact, though there was still a clear burnt mark on the wooden cross behind.

Kyle repeated the test, making sure the results were repeatable.Even a doped plate with increases thickness was unable to resist the ballistic impact.

“Slightly better… Anything else?”

Buron’s heart sank, having lost hope only for another brave Team B designer to step up. “I have one!”

“Good, bring it up to lane 12. Replace the wooden figure.”

As Kyle checked on his rifle, Buron hurriedly grabbed the Team B designer. “What other specimens do we have?! You’re not even from our team! Were we not working on the chainmail and the steel arcite alloys?!”

“I’ve found an interesting concept from Proco during my visit to the markets and when designing the layout of the armour. Just watch!”

Kyle overheard the discussion, slightly intrigued as a similar steel plate was placed on the range. However, instead of it being a simple bland steel plate, this one was a composite, with the middle layer filled to brim with what seemed to be standard sand, sandwiched between two doped steel layers.

“Idiot, what good would sand do agains-” Before Buron could interrogate the designer, Kyle fired another pellet. A loud impact echoed through the range, the friction eroding the silicate particles in an intense fury apart. Yet surprisingly the back armour plate itself was intact, though the dent on the front was severe. Sand poured out of the hole, leaking like a sack of rice.

“Interesting.” Kyle was well aware of composite armour - starships in the Galactic Era still relied on it, albeit with the layers numbering in the dozens. This simplifed armour was a step towards the winning formula that they needed to prove their capabilites to the Raktor armed forces. With this, he had plausible deniability to throw off anyone suspecting him of knowing too much, able to shift the heat to the designers.

Just as Buron was about to celebrate and take credit for something he didnt do, Kyle fired yet another shot, the pellet hitting the same spot dead on. In one fell swoop, the pellet tore through the backplate, and the thin steel layers began to fracture rapidly, the entire plate cracked apart from the center, breaking into multiple pieces.

“Combine the concept of the chainmail with this composite armour.” Kyle drew up a quick schematic on a rough piece of paper, revealing a honeycomb structure of steel. “Fill the gaps with all types of sand, have them fused up to t

200 degrees. Quench, temper, try everything. Choose the one that has the best impact dispersion. We want to make sure the longitudinal wave is not too severe that the entire structure flexes and cracks.”

The designers stared at Kyle, their expressions flabbergasted at what Kyle had just said. Not even Buron had any idea what the hell he was talking about, the words coming out of Kyle’s mouth sounding like esoteric ritual spells. They murmured between each other, trying to figure out whether anyone understood what just happened.

Kyle ignored their blank stares, leaving the schematic with them as he went to check on the standard rifles, which were supposed to be improved by Team C. New Seven Snakes recruits were rotated back and forth as they went through vigorous testing of the arcia consumption limits of the new rifle, piles upon piles of struggling bodies trying to recover from arcia exhaustion.

“It seems to be working.” A Team C designer reported to Kyle. “The fresh recruits can now fire up to seven times, so a trained soldier should be able to fire ten.”

“Money is not made from assumptions, it is made from certainty. Get Baron Cain’s knights to test them out.”

Overall, the weapon and armour design was improving rapidly, spurred by the high salary and the continuous tips offered by Kyle. On the other side, Gordon still oversaw the production team, which were now arranged into twenty assembly lines. Rows upon rows of arcia etchers that dangled from flimsy steel frames were tightly gripped by workers, carving delicately by following the grooves on the already rounded plates.

The continuous hiss of heat-treated steel breastplates and carved barrels reigned supreme in the air, amdist the never-ending hammering of steel presses and workers hammering the plates into shape. With the process now divided properly, production was as smooth as long as they kept the supply up.

Logistical support staff continuously ferried fresh materials from the Culdao Peaks, keeping stock of each assembly line everyday and making sure they had enough to manufacture their target goals.

[Sir, I have your updated report on the other gangs..] Adrian spoke on the radio while Kyle inspected the produced rifles.

“Go ahead.”

[First, an update on the Ardent Cretins. It is confirmed that both Sebastian and Ares are out of town in Kregol, but they will be returning shortly in a few days. The information is outdated, so they could very well be back in Raktor.]

“Understood.” Kyle understood what Sebastian was trying to do - expand outwards instead of contesting within the city. Just like how he had occupied the Culdao Peaks and ousted the Violet Demon’s bandits from the forest, the Ardent Cretins were now doing the same with Kregol. Yet Kyle felt that it was not worth it - if he were Sebastian, he would immediately leverage his ability to crush the remaining three gangs in the South Sector without hesitation. *Unless he is planning for something else…*

[The Wretches have been closed off, it’s hard to get information on them. They are keeping a tight lid on anyone or anything going out of their districts, but they don’t seem to be taking any offensive actions.]

“Got it.”

[As for the Red Lions…. Wrent hasn’t been seen for quite some time. The last known location was deep in the Red Lions’ district, near their headquarters.]

“Then they must have already caught on to what is happening. Is there an imminent attack?”

[No sir, none of the Red Lions are making a move. Instead, they are pulling back all of their members from the contested streets between us.]

“Weird. No mobilization?” Kyle half-expected the Red Lions to react to the brain-drain in a similar fashion as the Ilysian Punks. Most gangs would immediately attempt to antagonize him to keep the pressure high and prevent their own district residents from migrating over.

[Nothing at all boss. Although, because of the retreat, there are more people coming to apply for our housing program now.]

“Hmm…” Kyle sensed a plot brewing, but he still could not put his finger on what was happening. “Have Gordon and Keith ensure that a proper background check is performed. Anyone coming from the Red Lions district should be thoroughly investigated. We don’t want any surprises.”

[Understood.]

*If the Red Lions plan is to try and steal the engravings so as to establish their own industry, they will be sorely disappointed*.

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The temporary job distribution center was packed to the brim, with new applicants from all over the South Sector jostling for a chance to get in.

They had to, for the housing complex did not have infinite capacity - it was clear to anyone who had even paid attention to the sheer public media push by the Golden Snakes Construction Company.

Originally derided as an unsafe district ran by hooligans, the former Versian District was now the land of dreams for anyone looking to get a better life.

The applicants came from everywhere - villagers from afar looking to start anew, homeless families seeking a chance again, addicts wanting to coast by on a simple job and many others. Some of them had already been rejected by the trade school due to their illiteracy.

At the helm of the swarm of people elbowing each other to squeeze in through the doors, Guang Hwa desparately tried to control the situation from getting out of control.

*Shit, I thought being a company head meant a good life. Yet I’m out here trying to reign in idiots!* Guang Hwa naturally had no loyalty to Kyle nor the Seven Snakes, which is why he had two veteran cobras acting as his ‘bodyguards’, both of them able to activate the slave collar in an instant if Guang Hwa ever tried to betray them.

He sighed, resigned to his fate as he continued speaking through the microphone. [Everyone, there are more than enough houses to go around! Please queue up!]

The surge of applicants hardly heeded his pleas, instead choosing to push even harder, a few of them even getting into scuffles, throwing punches with their children cries neverending.

[Stop fighting, there’s enough for everyone!] Guang Hwa headed down the stage, trying to break up one of the fights, only to get hit right in the chin by a stray elbow from an angry applicant.

Instead of apologizing to Guang Hwa, the angry applicant continue forcing his way through before finally being restrained by two Seven Snakes recruits, both of whom were already showing clear signs of disdain for the rowdy applicants as they dragged him away.

The other recruits who served as guards gritted their teeth as they continuously shoved belligerent applicants back.

“Where the hell are the enforcers?” One of the fresher recruits grumbled as he forcibly restrained a struggling applicant to the ground. “I signed up to be a gangster, not some security dog!”

As he stood up, his complaints earned him a smack from Niko.”Idiot, this is our territory! And why are you still relying on enforcers?”

The bruised Guang Hwa internally snapped, immediately getting up and screaming into the microphone. [THIS IS YOUR LAST FUCKING WARNING! WE HAVE LIGHT-CAPTURERS ALL OVER THE CENTER - ANYONE WHO IS STILL FIGHTING WILL BE ARRESTED! YOU HAVE ONE MINUTE!]

The ragged crowd halted for a brief moment, contemplating their next move when a few smarter folks snuck in through the confusion, cutting the queue and forcing their way into the center.

Without hesitation, an uproar rose through the queue, as the fighting and chaos became even worse.

[FINE! EVERYONE BEYOND THIS LINE IS OUT! LEAVE IN THIRTY SECONDS OR YOU WILL BE ARRESTED!]

“By who? I don’t see any enforcers around here!” One of the more oblivious applicants from beyond the city hollered, expecting the others around him to join in.

Instead he turned to only see more than half of the crowd disperse like rats scampering away from an ensuing flood. “What the…”

The oblivious applicant had no time to think, an impact driving deep into his ribs as he was tackled to the ground by Niko.

Guang Hwa grinned as he saw them scurry away like ants, relishing in the power. Yet the nagging reminder that Kyle had him as a slave put a damper to that.

While the queue was brought back under control, a ragged homeless man stood in line, seemingly compliant. Yet the glint in his eyes betrayed his clear intellect for anyone keen enough to spot him. Both Niko and Guang Hwa did not see the man, the two focused on making sure everything else ran smoothly.

As the man approached the front of the queue, he exchanged a knowing glance with one of the processing clerks, before revealing the tip of a jade bracelet.

“Next, please. Yes, you over there.” The processing clerk motioned to the same ragged homeless man, who shuffled over with a conspicuous limb. “Please, take a seat.”

The man sat carefully, his arms resting on the counter to reveal multiple bruises and cuts that were just healing.

The processing clerk slid over a glass of water on a coaster, the man quickly grabbing it and gulping hurriedly as though he had just crossed a desert. “Name?”

“Gunther.” The man wiped a trickle off his chin, his energetic eyes already locking onto the two bodyguards for a brief moment.

“Occupation?”

“Farmer.”

“Farmer? From which part?”

“Near Ocra. Had a few pigs I hold dear, but sold them to make my way here in hopes of a better life.”

“I’m sure the pigs still miss you.” The processing clerk penned the information down onto a template form. “We may have a few jobs in that area that would suffice. How good are you with your hands?”

“Not as good as my mouth, I am afraid. Nothing compared to my brother, of course.”

The two shared a laugh, though if anyone was looking closely, it was a mirthless laughter.

“You mentioned you had a brother. Any other family members?”

“17 brothers and sisters blessed by those above and my master, but all of them have scattered into the wind ever since our home had been burned down. It pains me to have yet to find them, but I am confident that I am close to one. Very close.”

“I too, wish you the very best in your endeavors. So, any preference in jobs?”

“I would like to apply to be a technician in the Aspis Weapons Factory.”

“The weapons factory has a stringent background check. It may take a few days before you are cleared.”

“The road to a better future is always long and narrow.”

“Indeed.” The processing clerk finished up the documentation, drafting up a temporary pass. “The Golden Snakes Construction Company welcomes you. You’ll be assigned a temporary waiting location until your apartment has been prepared. You may or may not be sharing rooms with others.”

“Not a problem, I am ready to work for my future, no matter how hard it gets.”

“That’s the spirit.” The processing clerk grinned, stamping a seal of approval on the documents, the name written down clearly different from what was said. “Looking forward to work you, Ki Hwang. The Society welcomes your help.”

The man grabbed the coaster under the glass, keeping it in-between the layers of shabby cloths covering his body before reaching over for a firm handshake. “Of course. Together we will strike against tyranny. For the Goddess.”

# Chapter 78 - Martyr

Progress was swift over the next two weeks, with the Aspis Weapons Factory slowly building up their capabilities and expertise. However, the Seven Snakes now faced a serious issue - there were now far more applicants to the housing project than they could employ across all their subsidiaries.

“We’re running out of jobs, we’ll need to expand even more.” Keith explained to Kyle, listing down the expansion plans of each of the businesses. “But with the Ardent Cretins still enforcing an embargo on us, it’s hard for us to get any construction projects beyond our influence, and our finances are tight as of now.”

The Golden Snakes Construction Company was simply building housing projects now in a never-ending cycle, providing menial jobs for untrained workers to fill by using the dirty money earned from prostitution, alcohol and the sale of addictive potions. However, there would soon come a limit on how much they could build. Furthermore, with the land prices across the districts increasing rapidly, it would be hard to legally purchase the deeds to the buildings.

Their accounts were also running low, most of the expenses pushing advertising and media publications to attract more workers. Niko and his men were turning up more and more pop-up slums around the factory, hidden away in dilapidated housings while the dwellers tried to snatch or steal wages from the workers.

Despite Keith’s flustered expression as he poured over the statistics, Kyle was leaning back leisurely, knowing that he was on the verge of attaining a critical mass of population. He looked at the results of the recent population census, an initiative ordered by him to tally up the number of heads he had in the district, along with the economical data. Optimal wages and pricing for various products were calculated as a whole swath of clerks ran number after number in a large human calculator.

It was clear that discontentment was slowly increasing among those who did not manage to get into the housing project, or could find a job. “Perhaps we should allow some of them to stay in the apartments even if we do not have a job to offer them…”

“Out of the question. If you give an inch, they will take a mile.” Kyle was laser focused on the balancing act, optimizing for the perfect ratio of good public perception and amount of crime he could get away with. “By the way, I have not heard of anything from Mason nor Bishop Vernette. Where are the enforcers?”

“Word is that they are running low on budgeting, so they are cutting down patrol requirements. Mason told me that the enforcers will stay out of the Seven Snakes district for the time being and let us handle the housing project.”

“Hmm…” Kyle was not too concerned whether or not the enforcers were here - as long as the threat of releasing handguns into the general populace hung over their heads, Inquisitor Mason and Bishop Vernette would hardly dare to antagonize him.

“Is it a problem, boss?”

“There are no problems - only opportunities waiting to be exploited. Since the enforcers have pulled out of the districts, we have full control over everything in the district. Have the new recruits act as the policing force, and start expanding all of our businesses. Make as many new branches as possible for the brothel, pubs and casino. After all, there are more than enough willing labour to work there.”

“Understood. What about money?”

“Does not matter. Do what we need to expand.”

Having too much labour on hand was a happy problem to solve, as long as Kyle could keep them satisified. Public projects such as the cleaning of streets, free soup kitchens as well as the shopping arcade bathhouse helped to raise the standard of living. But with more and more migrants coming into the district, the infrastructure of roads and streets were starting to become more and more congested, severely impacting mobility.

Cobblestone paths were packed to the brim with wagons and carts of all sorts, with the more entrepreneurial residents opening food stalls which severely restricted the flow of traffic even more with their temporary seating arrangements and winding queues. The shopping arcade could only offer so much capacity to feed the residents. Already the Aspis Weapons Factory and trade schools’ canteen were crowded, workers crammed like sardines as they shovelled radish stews down for a simple calorie boost.

“Boss, if we expand now, our current financial runway will plummet to three months.” Keith pointed out. “And that’s not including the salary’s cost so far nor the bargaining with land and building owners.”

“Do it - the weapons contract in a month’s time will make us whole again.” Kyle dismissed Keith’s concern. “As a temporary boost in the event that we do not make money from the weapons contract, have Reese begin selling the handheld light-capturers and light-throwers en-masse as soon as possible. We’ve spent long enough gatekeeping to assure the market of our unassailable position. I will work on finding alternate venues of money.” *Perhaps the creation of a new drug is in order.* It’s been a while since he made anything new - the Euria-infused potions were getting a bit stale.

Keith complied, quickly relaying the order to Reese and issuing offers to buildings in order to purchase them over. However, the prices that he had been quoted by the various landowners were near exorbitant, more than three times the prevailing market price. Every owner knew that the Seven Snakes had money, and were naturally not going to let go of a potential good deal.

Kyle watched with an amused expression as Keith tried to haggle and threaten the landowner on the other end of the line. “Good sir, your asking price is far too high! No sane gentlemen worth his salt would suggest such a ridiculous price!”

[The bottom line is this - you pay me what I ask, and you will have the land deed. Otherwise, you can forget about it! You’re not going to get a better deal anywhere else.] The landowner hung up on him, leaving a frustrated Keith slamming the holster of his chair out of anger, causing Kyle to let out a slight chuckle.

“Look at you, getting so flustered when someone tells you no. Just because we’re legal now, doesn’t mean we should forget our roots. I’ll handle this.” Kyle left, heading for another discreet base, a separate location that had been set up to mask the original handgun manufacturing. The exterior had been shaped up to be an ugly concrete building, featuring nearly no windows at all. A simple sign of the Alchemist Guild hung outside, the issued license and expiry date clear for everyone to see.

The building was an empty shell of itself, a former office building that used to be packed with traders and company accountants. Now, nearly every facade of its former business had been wiped clean, saved for the large old mechanical arctech clock that hummed away quietly in an empty courtyard.

Through the winding hallways bereft of any decorations, the once empty maze of office rooms were a sterile clean room, the floor tiles eerily pure white without a single stain. Large fans featured prominently in vast vents layered with multiple layers of sheets, filtering air that came in, their continuous rotation repetitive and soothing. If it weren’t for the intermittent hellish screams from the rooms beyond, it might be considered to be a mediation hall of sorts.

Kyle pushed his body past a wall of iron chains, revealing a small chemistry lab, dozens of alchemist apprentices hard at work while Haui relaxed at a corner, sipping on a colorful straw from a quaint little glass bottle, the label of the Seductive Serpent brewery engraved into the surface.

“I must say, you do know how to make these drinks. Give my thanks to Eric, he’s as much of an alchemist as I am, though we differ on objectives.” Haui smiled as he sipped happily, enjoying the unique fruity taste.

“I need an update on the program. It’s been far too long.”

“It’s only been three months since the war ended, progress cannot be rushed, especially when one seeks to discover the meaning of nature.” Haui slowly got up from his reclining chair, heading over to a table and picking up a small little glass bottle, tightly capped.

“Is this it?”

“It’s as pure as we could get it.”

Kyle held the glass bottle in his hand, the viscous yellow liquid slowly flowing like honey within as he examined it.

MG404: [Absolute Euria Seed Extract | Pure addiction, unfiltered | Warning: will inflict critical addiction symptoms. Lethal at 100ml consumption.]

“And the tests?”

“See for yourself.”

Haui led him down the lab, where muffled screams and cries were the only background noise, drowned out by a uncharacteristically jazzy upbeat tune playing on the arctech speakers installed around. Rows upon rows of solitary cells were filled with humans and goblins, all prisoners who were suffering from severe addiction except for a few who served as a placebo control experiment.

The cells were arranged orderly, a simple slip of paper detailing the parameters of the experiment performed. Some of the cells’ occupants were already dead, their body contorted in a violent rush of self-mutilation, their skin ripped raw from their own nails. Kyle and Haui merely observed them, not caring at all for those still suffering.

“We’ve ran multiple dosages, directly doping their water supply in increasing percentages. The sweet spot is about five parts per hundred.”

“Onset time period?”

“Within three days or less, assuming no more consumption, irritability, lethargic movement, and slurred speech will start to kick in. The withdrawal lasts for two weeks before subsiding. Consumption of any portion of Euria Seed, even by smoke inhalation, will lengthen the withdrawal symptoms proportionally.”

“Production rate?”

“It’s slow. Extraction ratio is 50 to 1 in terms of mass, and the repeated purification cycles will take a week. However, unlike the potions, addiction is guaranteed with this one.”

“Hmm…” Kyle swirled the honey-like substance in his hands. “We’re the only ones with such a drug on hand? No one else has access to this, correct? I do hope you are not selling it.”

“No, this is exclusive for us.”

“Good enough for now. But I need you to find other potential avenues of improving the production. It does not need to be pure - a composite will be fine.”

“I have some ideas, I will work on it.” Haui agreed, watching Kyle pocket the 100ml bottle of Absolute Euria. “But if you need a lethal poison or a paralyzing potion, I already have them in store. You could just simply purchase them off me instead of wasting time on such a slow acting extract.”

“You and I measure effectiveness through different lenses.” Kyle replied as he prepared to leave. “You want them dead - but dead men are of no use to me. All life have purpose, and I simply help them to find their full potential, if they are willing.”

“And what if they are not willing?”

“I’ll make sure to change their minds.”

@@@

*Three days later…*

“Papa, the water tastes funny.” A small kid gagged as he took a sip from the fine glass that twinkled under the chandeliers, his short legs barely reaching the marble floor tiles of the grand dining room. The water in the glass swirled with a tinge of yellowish taint.

“Not now, son, I’m busy.” The father at the head of the dining table shooed him off, focusing on reading the newspapers laid out in front of him, pouring through the articles. “Weird, the Sliver Snakes’s new handheld light-capturers are a rousing success… despite my misgivings, I must say the product worked just as marketed.” He himself possessed a new model of the handheld light-capturer, though he had yet to use it to its full extent. Just as he was about to flip over to the next page, an arctech phone on another table rang.

The father hurriedly reached over to pick it up, earning a complaint from his attention-starved son. “Why do you always respond immediately to the phone, but not to me?”

“Servants! If you could please have my son finish his meal and retire to his room. I’m busy right now.” The father paid no heed any longer to the grumbling son, instead listening to the call. “This is Stanley, who’s calling?”

[Mr Stanley, how was your discussion with the Seven Snakes?]

“Ah, Mr Gunther! Of course, it went just as you have expected it to.”

[Good. When we are all united as one, we shall all earn a bigger slice of the pie. Soon, the Seven Snakes will capitulate to our demands.]

Stanley let out a grin. “Yes, you are right. I can only blame my former short-sighted self for nearly selling it at a small profit.”

[Do not understand the power of collective action - it can even force the greatest to crumble. But I must inform you to be wary of your surroundings and person. The Seven Snakes are known to employ treacherous methods to get what they want. Do let me know of any suspicious activities.]

“Speaking of suspicious activities, I’ve just read about a new line of portable light-capturers and light-throwers being released to the general public for anyone to buy. What does this mean? I originally believed that they were going to continuously corner the market by restricting supply.” The actions of the Seven Snakes perplexed him - any self-respecting businessmen would hardly invest additional rakels into a new product line when the old was entrenched well.

[Perhaps they are gathering the resources necessary to comply to our demands! Either way, it is good to keep an eye out for such things. I must go now, we will convene at a later meeting to discuss our next steps.]

“Aha, of course! Why did I not see it that way! I understand now, Mr Gunther, I will remain vigilant.”

The warning hardly landed as he put down the phone, the thought of being able to collect a hefty profit from the sale of his property leaving him giddy and light-hearted. “Bring out the wine! Tonight I’m celebrating. Has my wife not yet returned home?”

“Sir, she is still out shopping in the shopping arcade.”

“Have her return to the house immediately, with such an important deal on the line, I cannot have her remain an exposed liability. The Seven Snakes may attempt to kidnap her.” Stanley ordered.

As he returned to the dining table, he soon spotted the slight yellow tinge in the cup of water that the servants were getting his son to drink, the warning from Mr Gunther raised Stanley’s awareness to high heights. “Hold on, what’s in the water? Has it not been boiled beforehand?”

“Yes, sir, it has.” A meek servant replied, only fueling Stanley’s anxiety as his son coughed violently.

“Call the doctor in immediately! Son, are you feeling alright?” He hurriedly ordered, kneeling next to his son who was bewildered at the sudden attention from his dad.

“Sir, I have your wine.” Another servant called out, carrying a bottle from Eric Dicar and a thin clear wine glass.

“Are you crazy? Now is not the time for win- hold on, who are you? And you! Who told you to bring out the handheld light-capturer? You’re not my servants!”

“Of course not, Mr Stanley. For all men are equal under the Goddess.”

Before Stanley could react, the edge of the wine glass was forcibly slammed into his neck, the fragile glass shards lodging themselves deep into the flesh, burrowing into the vocal cords.

Each involuntary breath dragged the glass shards across his throat, ripping apart blood vessels from within as he suffered stab after stab, his limbs flailing wildly in a desparate bid to protect himself. He tried to speak, but the glass shards only dug deeper.

The sudden violence caught the son offguard, his face blank as he watched the stranger stab Stanley repeatedly, Stanley’s body convulsing with each strike.

Soon, there was nothing left of the glass, the stranger tossing away the broken handle. “So those above remember their roots.”

“So shall they return to dust.” The other servants responded immediately, the son frightened out of his mind as he tried to scream, only for the stranger to grab his mouth, caressing the son’s hair gently with bloodstained hands.

“Search the house. Everything of value is to be sold for the cause. Arrange the scene.”

The servants moved like clockwork, some scouring the house for valuables to pawn off, while others began to thrash the existing decor of the property.

Another two began to tie up Stanley’s body, stringing ropes around his wrist before using a kitchen knife to gut his innards out, though taking great care to make sure they remained attached.

The son struggled against the stranger, but his grip was far too strong, the son’s head forced to face the brutal treatment of his father’s body.

“You are far too young to understand, but yet you represent the original sin. No amount of repentance can cleanse your soul. Be at peace.”

The stranger finally let go of the son, the son hurriedly running off, only to be tackled by two servants dressed up as Seven Snakes recruits, their temporary armbands visible with the insignia.

They grabbed the son and blindfolded him, forcing him to kneel on the floor facing the light-capturer.

“Ready.”

“Begin.”

“You, speak your name. To the light-capturer.” One of the fake recruits slapped the son on the head, but the son was too terrified to say anything.

Only the sharp tip of the kitchen knife could prompt the son to begin speaking. “M…my name…”

“Speak up!”

“My… my.. my name is Kelvin of house Roset.”

“How old are you?”

“E…eight years old.”

“And who is your father?”

“M… my father is dead!” The son burst out crying, his head immediately slammed against the floor, crushing his front teeth inwards.

“Your father, Stanley Roset, is a evil landlord who wishes to gouge the society at large by charging exorbitant rents, living on interest payments! Raising land prices at a time of poverty and exploitation!”

The son couldnt reply, not with his face buried in the floor, tears and blood streaming down his face.

“Let this be known that the Seven Snakes will not tolerate those who work against society, those who prey on the weak and the poor. Not even their offspring will be spared.”

The last thing the son could feel was the sharp jolting pain of the knife’s blade, slowly carving into his neck before a sense of weightlessness took over, his body no longer attached.

# Chapter 79 - Nature of Arcia

Kyle glanced at the vial of Absolute Euria, wondering on how to use it properly. He could use it on the landowners and force them to submit over time, slowly gaining control. *There’s no reason to rush it just yet. Any sudden shock would have the public turn against us.*

He set the vial down on the top of the workbench, next to the Ancient Exosuit Spine that he had purchased from the auction last year.

MG404: [Item | Ancient Exosuit Spine | *Lost technology created in the Galactic Era, unusable without thorough refurbishment.* | Active Skill: Nerval Jack – Enables an exosuit pilot to wield a suit through a nerval distribution network. Requires an operational exosuit.]

While the rest of the Seven Snakes were hard at work, Kyle too had always been hard at work to improve his own skill set as well as his arsenal with his own personal workshop well furnished. After all, it was power from which all authority stemmed from - he had to ensure that he was always one step ahead of the game. The development of composite armour as well as armour layout made a potential exosuit construction more and more feasible.

Unfortunately, he had hit a conceptual roadblock in advancing his understanding of how arcia works and the nature of arctech language. He had hoped the ancient spine might work as expected , as he understood electricity very well. However, it was hard to do anything with the spine, especially given that he had none of the manipulators nor fabricators necessary to repair it, nor did he have the correct power source to energize it.

His attempts to scavenge samples and resources from the Oracle’s lab in the Culdao Peaks also proved to be useless, the metal nanite virus having eaten away most of the functionality of anything left, degrading most components to individually useless base elements. He could attempt to cannibalize the components of the A.I. core, but doing so would severely compromise the benefits of the seed storage. For now, all he had was this spine to work off, albeit one that could not be activated.

Yet the spine offered a glimpse into his forgotten knowledge, allowing him to gleam a few concepts that had once been stored in his cranial implant. If he could utilize the learnings in the production of the arctech knight armour set, it should ensure that he had a healthy lead over his potential competitors.

The main conceptual working of the exosuit spine was to serve as the central connection bus to the rest of the exosuit armour. However, Kyle did not possess a nerval plug on his body to use it in anyway, nor could he install one himself. The procedure was far too complicated for any surgeon of this age to do so, the potential infection and corruption of the biological nervous system too dangerous.

However, the existence of arctech engravings gave a potential alternative to develop a prototype arctech spine built around the same idea. After all, the nervous control of the spine was a series of electrical impluses - all he had to do was to map them to an arctech impluse instead.

Kyle drew up a series of mock arctech engravings, etching them onto spare pieces of metal to see their effectiveness and outcome. Despite his considerable experience in copying and improving engravings, mapping the entire nervous movement of a human body was far beyond his limit. The key lacking factor in his understanding of how arcia worked was the lack of variability - it generally seemed that all engravings that he had made so far had a fixed output of sorts.

*Only Penchant of Violence has some scaling involved with combat stats.* Kyle could hardly see the engravings in his own body, much less study them. Instead he turned to another engraving which he knew had a form of variability - the arctech wagon’s mechanical convertor. Since the speed of the wagon could be throttled, Kyle searched for clues for the missing piece necessary to allow for a variable input rather than a fixed consumption, yet to no avail.

On the far end of the workbench was a series of textbooks on arcia, augmented his collection from his original Treatise on Arcia by Theorin, which by itself was incomplete. The new textbooks were however, clearly also incomplete, with much of the effects of many arcia engravings being attributed to more esoteric causes rather than a scientific study. Through consistent reading over the last three months, Kyle was able to slowly piece together certain standard coherent rules behind the utilization of arcia.

MG404: [Title Obtained | Bookworm (Basic) | *A crime lord must be, above all, literate enough to know the charges levied against him* | +10 INT, +25% reading and comprehension speed for written text.]

However, each new arcia engraving challenged his prevailing set of derived rules, making him wonder if arcia was truly an exotic element that could not be understood until he had reached a higher level of technology. For now, he could make a few basic assumptions, the first of which was that the direction of arcia flow mattered significantly.

All engravings that Kyle had worked on so far were not closed loops, instead a single starting point moving towards an end point, where it could be then linked to other engravings. Arranging the engravings in the correct order from start to finish was what gave it its properties. This was not entirely different from electricity, in which components had to be laid out in a coherent sequence in order to achieve the circuit’s intended purpose.

However, the difference laid in what occurred when the flow of arcia was reversed or disrupted. Assuming that the arcia flow was similar to electricity, a reversal would result in a electrical short or an overheating of engravings with high resistance, like a diode.

Kyle held a copy of Riker’s pipe in his hand, the first engraving that he had copied more than a thousand times at this point

MG404: [Item | Engraved Metal Pipe (Basic) | A pipe to bend the rules | Active Skill: Reinforcement – Increased force when hitting. MP Cost Per Activation: 2 MP. Duration: Thirty Seconds. Cooldown: Two minutes.]

As he powered it up with a swing, the engravings gleamed yellow as expected, the inefficiency of the engraving emitted as visible light. While he continued swinging, he activated his Subclass skill on it. *Arcia Disruption!*

Instead of the engraving emitting a bright yellow glow, little white droplets began to form rapidly on the surface of the pipe, slowly coating it in its entirety before one of the droplets burst, revealing a small little insect the size of a hair, lazily flying and leaving a corroded hole on the originally smooth metal finish.

One by one, the eggs began to burst, the ensuing rush of insects fluttering around mindlessly in a harmless swarm, many of them carelessly bumping into the walls and ceiling, while Kyle stood in the midst of them in confusion. He picked up what remained of the metal pipe, seeing the entire pipe now corroded as though it had been submerged in seawater for the last three centuries.

The insects began to die within seconds of leaving the pipes, their small carcassess dotting the floor with Kyle picking up a few of them, inspecting it. There was nothing too special about the insect, a simple body layout but with clear organs completely missing, such as eyes and a mouth. *What the hell is going on?*

Kyle shook his head, refusing to let his scientific self call it ‘magic’. There was no magic in the Galactic Era, only rare exotics. He hunkered down, trying again with another copy of the engraved metal pipe, performing the same actions again. However, the skill did not activate.

Kyle pulled up his System interface again, checking the skill description of his subclass again.

MG404: [Skill | Arcia Disruption (Basic) | *Upwards instead of downwards* | Select one single engraving within five-meter radius to disrupt. Results may vary. Upgradable. Duration: Thirty Seconds. Cooldown: One day.]

*On cooldown… I’ll need a light-capturer to accurately flim the results of the skill. Does the flow reverse, or simply start from a different point?* Kyle needed to understand this, as it was a potential issue with any subsequent exosuits that he tried to build. Human nerval impulses were always varying in strength, and if any part of the engraving were to be damaged, Kyle would rather not be covered in insect eggs during a critical battle.

With the skill on cooldown, Kyle tried to draft up a reverse of the metal pipe’s engraving, quickly etching it onto a new pipe to try and replicate the result before.

MG404: [Item | Engraved Metal Pipe (Basic) | A pipe that bends. | Active Skill: Ensnaring - Captures the nearest target, which may be the owner. MP Cost Per Activation: 2 MP. Duration: Thirty Seconds. Cooldown: Two minutes.]

*Huh?* Kyle squinted at the interface message. He activated the new pipe, which immediately began to bend and twist itself, the thickness deteriorating as the pipe elongated itself like an ensnaring vine, wrapping around Kyle’s wrist and snaking along his arm, culminating in the tip of the metal pipe splitting apart like a flower. The physical transformation ended as soon as began, the engraving along it clearly broken and deformed.

Kyle was beyond flabbergasted as he pried the thin metal pipe away from his arm, snapping it into pieces. It was an interesting engraving, but the effect was essentially useless as a weapon. *Maybe as a trap.* Apart from the potential applications, he was far more concerned about the issue that the results were completely different in every way, shape and form. It was not even remotely related, save for a ‘physical transformation’.

*They say insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, and expecting different results. Yet here I am, getting different results.* As he swept away the pieces into a nice little disposal bin, he contemplated the possibility that the results were different because the starting conditions were different. *This means that my Arcia Disruption skill does not simply reverse - it’s more of a random number generator at this point. Hopefully pseudo-random.*

Turning his attention back to the exosuit spine, he wondered on how could he prevent his own engravings from being messed with like this. There was no doubt that there would be devices and contraptions out there that could reverse or mess with his attempted flow of arcia. He could already imagine his internal skill engravings causing insect eggs to be buried deep within his body.

*Perhaps, the stronger the flow and the finer the control will prevent such incidents from happening.* Kyle would have to implement this for any exosuit project in the future, especially if he intended it to be mass-produced, though there were just far too many obstacles now.

As he groaned in exasperation, his eyes landed back once again on the vial of Absolute Euria, a flicker of inspiration hitting him as he wondered if he could weaponize it against the Ardent Cretins, his largest obstacle to expansion right now. Maybe Kyle could attempt to drug Sebastian, though he doubt any of his members could get anywhere close.

Suddenly, his arctech radio buzzed, a panicked Niko hurriedly speaking: [Boss, it’s real bad out here!]

“What’s wrong? I already made it clear I was not to be disturbed unless it’s important.”

[It is important! There’s a impromptu protest going on right now at Rose Lane!]

“Led by who?”

[I’m not too sure yet, but it seems to be a Crusaders Against Vices or something. They are claiming that the Seven Snakes brutally beheaded a eight-year old kid!]

“Did we? I don’t recall ordering recruits to execute children yet.”

[What are you even saying, sir? Of course not!]

“I’ll be there shortly, ensure nothing gets out of hand.”

Kyle rushed out of his personal workshop, entering the crowded Thresher Street, where workers were still clamouring at the glass windows, supposedly captivated by the erotica material displayed on the cabinets, as well as queuing up for light-thrower shows. He was about to ignore their antics when he noticed the mood was unusual, the workers’ faces far more solemn and restrained than their usual jubilant selves.

He walked past, taking a peek only to see a handheld light-thrower show running on the store’s display of two masked Seven Snakes recruits violently beheading a eight-year old, before chopping up his limbs and tossing them about the house. The throng of workers murmured among each other, locked in heavy discussion.

“It’s good that damn Stanley finally died. He evicted me and my grandmother by jacking up the rent. If it were not for the Seven Snakes’ housing project, I would still be homeless right now.”

“Listen to yourself, you’re condoning the brutal murder of a child! He did nothing wrong! Maybe Stanley got what was coming to him, but since when were the Seven Snakes the arbiter of whether a child should be killed or not? In my opinion, no children should be killed at all!”

“Even if they would grow up to be the same?”

“You don’t know that for sure!”

“Fuck it! One less rich fucker to deal with! I’m with the Seven Snakes on this one!”

“Disgusting murderhobos! I can’t believe I’m working with you!”

“You’re the disgusting one, trying to forgive the crimes of the rich. Lick their boots even harder!”

“Speaking about yourself? You’re the one sucking up to the Seven Snakes - aren’t they rich too?”

Kyle quickly shoved past them to get to the front, the bickering workers instantly clearing a path for him when they recognized him, many immediately scattering, afraid of suffering any potential retribution.

Before he could enter the shop, a brave factory worker stood in front of him, defiant and outraged at the brutal beheading. “Who are you to kill our children? You think just because you’re rich, you can slaughter anyone you want?”

Kyle stopped, glancing around and noticing the crowd slowly inching in, emboldened slightly by the accusation of the defiant worker. “Step away now, if you know whats good for you.”

“I may not know what’s good for myself, but I stand for the good of us all. We are not your pigs to kill anytime you please!”

A murmur of agreements washed through the crowd like a wave, Kyle seeing the intrusive thoughts already showing on their faces, their eyes glinting with intent. *Intimidation Aura!*

The ensuring arcia pressure blasted the crowd, the defiant worker’s face paling as he began to shiver in his murky boots, his fingers fidgeting a bit on his pants as Kyle approached him.

“The Seven Snakes did not do this, and I will find justice, mark my words. Now return to your work, or else I will have to dock your entire day’s wages. Is that clear?”

“Y-y-yes, sir!”

The crowd was dispersed as easily as they were gathered, the fear stemming from Kyle far too overpowering for them to keep any sense of moral superiority. Kyle stormed into the shop, about to blast the shopkeeper for playing such a defamatory light-thrower show when he noticed that the shop door was locked from the inside.

Retrieving his handgun in one hand and a hammer in the other, he smacked the handle of the door apart, the creaky door opening slowly with not a single soul in sight. He carefully moved through the shop, watching for any potential ambushes while he navigated the rows upon rows of recorded engravings in neatly arranged shelves, indecent drawings of scantily-clad girls and men plastered all over every available surface of the interior. Rows upon rows of erotica books were dropped to the floor in piles, smatters of blood staining their covers.

As he approached the cashier counter, the familiar stench of a decaying body hit his nose. Kyle did not let down his guard just yet, diligiently checking every corner before he finally knelt next to the shopkeeper’s dismembered body. The cuts and wounds seemed to have been done by common kitchen tools, no signs of any arctech weapons or handgun shots either.

He turned off the light-thrower show at the display cabinet, before realizing that every other store around the area was also playing the same show on repeat, most of the factory workers that passed through Thresher Street having already seen in. “Keith, I need a squad to secure Thresher Street. All of the erotica shopkeepers have been killed. Call up all reserves now, prepare for a doubling of security.”

[Understood, sir.]

Kyle headed over to Rose Lane, where a burgeoning protest was now in full swing, led by a enraged lady who stood ontop of an overturned wagon. “THIS OUTRAGE SHALL NO LONGER BE TOLERATED! If the enforcers do not want to enforce the rules of the Sanctum, then the people ourselves shall enforce it!”

Niko and the recruits had already formed a line, preventing the protestors from moving any further. “Shore up that gap, don’t let them flank us from the alley! Block it up with the damn crates!” Niko roared, before hurriedly bowing to Kyle. “Sir, there’s a light-thrower show that -”

“I know, I saw. Where was it flimed?”

“In the house over there. We have our men securing the place for now.”

“Who did it?”

“We don’t know yet, but we’re trying to figure out who.”

Kyle nodded, flourishing his coat as he stepped into the now cordoned-off house. As soon as he entered through the doorway, his body was instantly assaulted by a foul stench, the unmistakable scent of copious amount of blood.

The narrow premises of the house was filled to the brim in gore, and it was hardly possible for Kyle to escape the puddles of blood when stepping in. He originally thought that it would be a simple incident, but what he saw made him think otherwise.

Just inside the living room is the body of a man, hung from the ceiling via two ropes. with his neck thoroughly ripped. His hands and legs had been mutilated thoroughly, the skin stripped off his flesh and left in pieces on the originally white marble floor, now instead soaked in dried dark blood. Brain matter and other tissue flesh was splashed across the once opulent dining room.

A Seven Snakes armband was left behind, resting on a pool of blood as Kyle gingerly picked it up, inspecting it for authencity. *It’s real.* The armband was one that was issued to recruits when they had cleared a month’s worth of basic training, something only either a recruit could get, or a Seven Snakes who was high up in the ranks. *We have a mole.*

Damian and Niko soon entered the house, their faces immediately recoiling from the strong stench of death. The violence was not new to Kyle – he had seen far worse in the Galactic Era, but this level of senseless violence had never been seen before in Raktor. Even Damian, who had been a long stay of the Seven Snakes, was clearly shaken by the obscene brutality of the murders.

“It can’t be one of our recruits, they wouldn’t dare to do this so blatantly.” Damian murmured as he looked at the armband in Kyle’s hands. “Unless…”

“Keep the theories till later. Any other clues right now on the scene?” Kyle asked.

“The entire house has been ransacked of all valuables - anything with so much as a gold lining has been stripped.” Niko informed.

“Call up all the fences and dealers we know in the black market. I want eyes and ears on anything being sold in major batches, and information on their particulars.”

“Understood, I’ll talk to them.” Damian nodded. “But still, what was the purpose of this? It doesn’t make any sense. Are they simply trying to undermine our reputation?”

Kyle looked up to the mutilated Stanley, still hanging from the ceiling. “Someone wants to take us down from the inside. To destroy the trust the people had in us. As for the ultimate purpose… I may have an idea or two.”

“But we didn’t do it! Can’t we just tell them that we did not kill Stanley?” Niko offered.

“Try telling it to them.” Damian motioned outside at the protestors shoving as hard as they could against the line of Seven Snakes recruits.

“MURDERERS! Your existence is a sin! Revenge for our fallen brother!” A lady screamed in the face of a recruit as she violently shoved him, the stone in her hand swinging wildly. The edge of the stone drew blood, a long gash striking his face.

Damian hurriedly rushed out, trying to prevent the recruits from retaliating, while Kyle pondered longer, trying to put the pieces together. He contemplated everything that had happened so far. *First Wrent goes missing, then the enforcers pull out, then this.*

While Kyle thought about the sequence of events, Niko received another call on his arctech radio, his face paling immediately. “Sir, it’s getting really bad now. One of our arctech designers has just been found murdered in his house. His entire family was killed, including a one-year old daughter. The show is circulating now as well!”

Kyle stared at Niko blankly, a awkward moment of silence passing as Kyle ran every possible motive through his head. “Sir? What do we do?” Niko asked in a panicked tone, obviously not used to the social unrest that was now spreading like wildfire.

Instead of Kyle replying Niko, he instead called Adrian. “Update on the enforcers and Wrent.”

[Neither of them is moving.]

“Any movement by the Ardent Cretins? The Wretches?”

[None, sir. In fact, just like the Red Lions, they all seem to be pulling back their members from the borders. Something’s happening, but I still can’t figure out the pattern.]

“Any observers spotted the perpetrators of the murders?”

[No sir, but we do have some light-capturer observation engravings that may offer a few hints.]

“Have them ready for me when I return to the shopping arcade.” Kyle ended the call, turning sharply to Niko. “Get every recruit and associate that’s in security to be out on the streets now. I want double protection on all designers, as well as the businesses of the Seven Snakes.”

“Got it. But what do we do with the protestors?”

Outside on the street, Damian was contesting with the locals, some of whom he knew personally. “Angela, please, you have to believe us! We did not do it!” He pleaded with the leader of the protest.

“Whether you did it or not, it is clear that your existence is a stain on the security of our districts! How can our children even play in the streets with brutal murderers roaming freely! The Crusaders Against Vices will not tolerate the Seven Snakes any longer!”

“I don’t want to hurt you, Angela. Please, stand down and we can talk this out properly.”

“Neither do I. But as long as you are part of the Seven Snakes, you are the enemy! Repent now!”

Damian sighed, knowing he would be unable to convince her any longer. Two recruits had to restrained the injured recruit, preventing him from lashing out against the protestors. “Fucking cocksuckers! Why are you holding me back? You going to let this fucking dumb guys shit all over us Seven Snakes! Looks like it was a mistake joining this damn pussy gang when we have to bow down to idiots like them! I don’t care if we did it or not, they better back the FUCK OFF!” The injured recruit roared, echoing many of the other recruits’ sentiment who felt they had degraded into a powerless security force.

Before Damian could retort, a loud bang rang out through the street, the yelling protestors shocked by the sudden scare. Kyle held a smoking Oriental Bloom in his handgun, aiming it right at the protestors. “You have one minute.” Kyle spoke with a firm tone.

Damian was startled, hurriedly running over to Kyle and whispering. “Boss, what are you doing? If you try to beat them up, it would only raise public resent! Everything we worked for will be undone!”

“Damian. This is not the time to question me.” Kyle warned.

However, Damian was clearly distressed, continuing to whisper: “Yes, but this doesn’t seem like the right way to do it!”

“I know exactly what I’m doing. And if you don’t want to follow me… I have no use for an underboss who does not comply.” Kyle did not need to finish the sentence, Damian getting the underlying implications of what would happen to him if he did not listen to Kyle. He immediately began to organize the recruits, preparing them alongside Niko, though his lingering doubts still swirl in his head as to what Kyle was intending to do.

Some of the protestors began to panic, only to be rallied by Angela once more. “Stay your ground! Even the Seven Snakes gang leader cannot attack his own people, not if he wants to face a revolt! We are stronger together!”

“Suit yourself. Damian, Niko, arrest everyone here. And for those who resist arrest… do what you have to.”

# Chapter 80 - Roots

In a sharp reversal of treatment, the Seven Snakes began to clamp down on angry residents and public dissent brutally, beating the protestors into submission with everything on hand. Homes and slums were raided, those who protested being arrested and thrown into poorly maintained cells where they were subjected to continuous torture and experiments, the addiction research still on-going.

“The districts will now be under a new law. Anyone caught flouting the rules or opposing society at large will be beaten and imprisoned indefinitely. Choose your actions wisely. Security and stability will be restored.” Kyle announced through the various media platforms, painting the protestors as the minority.

Some accepted the excuses, wishing for more security, while others felt constrained. Kyle did not care. The time for playing nice was now over, especially at such a critical juncture just before the demonstration of the knight armour suits to the military. *Almost as if it was on purpose.*

Many of the prisoners were still defiant, planning their escape and trying to earn empathy from the jailors. Yet thanks to the improvement in the training regime for Seven Snakes recruits three weeks ago, they had no qualms about the horrible treatment that the protestors were receiving. In fact, their experience over the course of the month had hardened their views of the rest of the district, treating anyone that was not Seven Snakes lesser than themselves.

On-top of that, a clarification by Damian on who committed the murder helped to steel and assure the loyal recruits that they were in the right. Many of them who had worked in the job distribution center and elsewhere had first-hand experience of the sheer entitlement of applicants and small petty criminals who refused to join the Seven Snakes.

“Damn straight - finally some action! I’m sick and tired of bending over to these dumb peasants!” The more bloodthirsty among the recruits echoed sentiments of violence and suppression, relishing in the gang’s return to its roots.

However, as always , there were recruits who had second thoughts about the entire process and overarching goal that Kyle had in mind, wondering if they were going too far. “We’re practically performing illegal experimentation on prisoners!”

Kyle had a simple solution for such individuals: he had them transferred to the Culdao Peaks, rotating the first batch of re-education members around.

The stint in the training caves worked like a charm, with the returning batch now hardened and seasoned soldiers, ready to act or kill at the drop of the hat. It took a bit of time for them to assimilate back into city life, but Kyle saw the entire program as a rousing success at breaking their spirits and immunizing them to the concept of death, albeit with a bit of trauma.

While the suppression of the protestors initially worked for the first few days, discontentment was starting to spread among the populace, creating strife between those who supported the Seven Snakes and those who opposed them. The ones caught in the middle were starting to lean against the rule of Kyle, mostly due to the oppressive continuous presence of Seven Snakes members watching their every move on the streets.

Yet despite the ability to simply send off dissidents into prison and training caves alike, handling the vipers was a whole another issue to solve. It became painfully obvious to Kyle that not all of the higher ups were in agreement with the nature of his orders.

“Sir, this is unsustainable in the long run. Eventually a large portion of the population will try to break our control. If anything, this resentment could be manipulated by our enemies.” Keith protested the orders for violent suppression, with Reese and Eric supporting him.

“Keith is right, any further antagonism of the populace at large would erode the goodwill that we have worked so hard to build over time. Instead we should focus on explaining the truth and appeasing them.Perhaps we can reach a compromise with-”

“I appreciate your opinions, but it is already far too late.”

“But we’re being portrayed as the evil ones now. The landowners’ association is already protesting to the Sanctum of Yual and Baron Cain for an armed intervention.” Keith pressed his case, firmly believing Kyle was heading down the wrong path.

“And are the enforcers responding to their request?”

“…No, sir. No movement at all.”

“Good. Spread the word that those who are aligned with us will retain their wealth. Those who resist, have them arrested and their property seized.”

“But you will need the Baron’s approval first and foremost. All land deeds are issued under his name.”

“I will handle the Baron myself, thank you.”

“Still-”

“Keith.” Kyle interrupted Keith with a stern look. “We are first and foremost a organization that prides itself on being the best, and I will do everything in my power to ensure we remain at the top. There will be no pandering to the weak, no concessions given to the vocal minority. I will not allow anything to disrupt the upcoming mock demonstration nor the sale of weapons. And I did not put you in charge of the businesses to question my orders repeatedly - once is more than enough. Do not think that just because I have shown favor to you in the past, that I will accept any and all opinions. If you do not want to execute the orders, there are plenty of others eager to take your position. Is that clear?”

“I… yes, understood, boss.” Keith accepted it with a resigned look, returning to his work. It’s been far too long since Kyle had exerted his authority like this, making the vipers half-forget that Kyle still had the final say in everything that the Seven Snakes did.

“Damian, into my office, now.” Kyle ordered, leaving the vipers outside to discuss what had just happened.

“Kyle must have gone power crazy. What happened to doing right by the people? He was always talking about balancing legal and illegal activites, yet now he’s fully toppled over into violence.” Keith grumbled. To him, Kyle’s actions was erractic and uncharacteristic - rash orders and immediate bouts of violence was not how they had solved issues in the past.

Inside Kyle’s private office, Damian too was conflicted internally. “Sir, I apologize for my brother’s actions-”

“I assume you are aligned with him as well?” Kyle interrupted, pulling out two stained Seven Snakes recruit armbands, the same ones they had found at the site of Mr Stanley’s execution.

“There is merit to their concern, after all, the current orders runs counter to our entire business philosophy that we have established in the months since the building of the shopping arcade. Perhaps if you would explain your actions and overarching plans a little it would help to assuage the concerns of the vipers and others.”

“These armbands… do you know who issued them?” Kyle seemingly ignored the comment, pointing towards the stained armbands.

“I can have that checked against our logs.”

“And who is in charge of our logs?”

“That would be Niko, sir.”

“Not him. He’s the one doing the distribution to the recruits. These… these armbands were clearly not issued through an official ceremony by him nor you.”

Damian’s eyes widened at the implications that Kyle was insuinating. “You’re saying my brother is invovled in this.”

“Perhaps, perhaps not. This is the real reason why I cannot divulge my overarching plans. Do you understand?” Kyle clasped his hands together as he walked closer to Damian. “I tell you this because I have placed my trust in you as the appointed underboss. But do not think for one second that I am tolerant of traitorous activites, no matter how benign the traitor thinks his actions are. Not even the underboss’s brother.”

“I assure you, sir, Keith has no intention of betraying the Seven Snakes. As his older brother, I can vouch for his-”

“Your words, not his.” Kyle pointed out. “Sometimes even brothers have their differences.”

Damian wanted to retort, but he knew better than to push the matter even more. “Yes, sir.”

“Now, the mole might be anyone else, but it is certainly one high up in the ranks with close ties to the logistics and deployment of manpower across our men. Either that, or your brother is being framed. Regardless of who it is, until we discover the mole, you and I will keep it between us. Under no circumstances are you to explain the situation except with my prior approval. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Now, keep the other vipers in line, and keep an eye out for any suspicious activites.” Kyle had Damian dismissed, and as soon as the underboss left the private office, Kyle was already going through the motions, checking his drawers and equipment and his possible escape routes. He scanned the rooftops beyond the glass wall of his office, searching for any observers or possible spies that might be watching in on them.

He methodically searched every nook and cranny of the office, looking for any recording devices or unknown arctech devices. While he had just explained to Damian that he trusted him as the underboss, deep down in his heart, Kyle still did not trust anyone within the Seven Snakes with his life. *Always have an escape route. Even at the cost of your followers.* There was no chance in hell he would subject himself to the same betrayal he experienced at the end of his former life.

With the office now scrubbed clean, and no obvious devices found, Kyle took stock of the scenario. He had a rough idea of what was being achieved, but it will still require more time and observation to truly understand the endgoal and composition of his enemies. *Let’s check the observation engravings of the execution site.*

Unfortunately, the observation engravings did not reveal anything of worth, with none of the perpetrators visible in the recording. With no clues and no leads to go on, Kyle had no choice but to order Adrian install as many light-capturers as they could afford in discreet locations, forming a survelliance network, waiting to catch the next event before it even happened.

An arctech radio call came in from Baron Cain, his voice clearly panicking. [Kyle, what the hell is happening over there? I’m getting flooded in complaints and petitions for your eradication from the South Sector! Did you really kill a landowner’s entire family in cold blood? This is crossing the line.]

Kyle pondered for a second, before finally replying. “The landowners are seeking to rile up the public. They’ve killed one of their own to blame the Seven Snakes, in an effort to discredit the weapons factory and our growing dominance of the district.”

[What are you implying?]

“If we do not control the landowners now, they will attempt to take over our businesses, at which point I will no longer be able to assist with the Aspis Weapons Factory. You will have to manage it yourself.”

A poignant silence reigned on the other end of the line, Baron Cain clearly weighing the pros and cons of having Kyle out of the venture entirely, though there was not much to weigh. Without Kyle’s input, Baron Cain would never be able to trump the other weaponsmiths as a standalone designing and manufacturing hub for weapons, only to be relegated as contract manufacturers for the foresseable future.

[No, its critical that you remain with the venture.]

A small grin erupted on Kyle’s face, knowing he had steered the Baron to where he exactly wanted him. “Then I will need a temporary approval to execute confiscation of assets should the landowner continue to stir political unrest and dissent among the populace.”

[ONLY if they stir political unrest against the current order. Under no circumstances will the approval allow you to simply detain anyone.]

“But of course. Please do add that clause into the approval as well. An announcement should be made as well to clear our name and inform the populace at large of such an agreement.”

[…. Indeed, we should. But if I ever find out that you were the ones who truly executed the family, I will see to it that I personally eradicate the Seven Snakes.] Baron Cain threatened before he hung up.

Kyle leaned back in his chair with a satisified expression, having gotten what he needed. *The Baron is only worried about his public image. The Seven Snakes leaving the weapons factory joint venture and the newly announced housing project would result in a large humiliation city-wide.* While other criminal gangs might have disdained any official deals or compromises with the enforcers or the nobles, it was this very compromises that were now keeping the Seven Snakes in play and in control of its districts.

*With every problem comes an opportunity in disguise.* As the other vipers were tearing their hair out at the seemingly desparate situation, Kyle knew that he had been given the greatest opportunity to solidify his control of the districts. With the landowners all now falling into his hands as soon as they made any attempts at resistance, he could claim and purchase any land deed at market price with Baron Cain’s approval once it was confiscated.

*Now that that is under control, it’s time to focus on the weapons contract. With due time, the enemy will reveal themselves through their actions.*

Yet, just as he was about to leave the shopping arcade, he suddenly heard something unexpected on the arctech radios playing in the office, some of the clerks listening attentively.

[In a shocking turn of events, Versian President Johan has gone missing. The current suspect is Minister Dekar, who is now on the run and has been revealed to be taking bribes from Raktor as a compromise for the previous incident. Vice-President Monero is now temporarily in power, seeking to have elections running as soon as possible.]

[“The news of this sudden betrayal by our very own Minister has brought great shame upon our country. It is my duty and honor as the temporary President to ensure that Versia will be able to navigate the uncertain future to come. Our borders and society shall be secured against foreign corruption and aggression, and together, we will build a better, more progressive society on the hard work of our forefathers before us.”] Monero’s voice crackled in the static, and while the clerks were ambivalent about the event, Kyle’s face darkened tremendously. He knew that with Minister Dekar on the run, whatever prior agreement or connection he had with the ruling party of Versia was now cut off. He had half-hoped that the choice would remain open, but he soon snapped out of it, reminding himself that there was always other opportunities to hunt for.

He made his way to the factory, convening with the designers on the final prototype of the knight armor suit. There were twelve copies, sufficient for the demonstration. For the purposes of testing, a few experienced associates and cobras were already there, donning on the prototypes.

The armour was far lighter than the original steel armour set that the Raktor knights were using, though it was thicker by about a third while boasting an improved penetration resistance. The honeycomb-like structure was neatly hidden away, the metallic surface of the plates yet to be painted in the Baron’s noble colors.

Kyle originally had the concept of engraving the interior of each of the honeycombs, only to realize that was far beyond the capabilities of the factory to mass produce. If the demonstration was a success, the amount of orders will number in the tens of thousands. *Better to keep it simple for now*

Interestingly, the System recognized the entire armour suit as a single item, with the stat bonuses and skills combining.

MG404: [Equipment | Aspis Mk1 Knight Armour (Intermediate) | A mass-produced armour set by the Aspis Weapons Factory in Raktor | +25 VIT, +15 MAX HP. Active Skill: Resist and Intercept(Intermediate) – Temporarily improve resistances by 50% to penetrating attacks, and provides point defence for up to five medium-size projectiles. Duration: Two minutes. MP Cost Per Activation: 15 MP. Cooldown: Thirty Minutes.]

Kyle was surprised to see the skills being able to be combined like this into a single skill, and it seemed to perform more efficiently than if they were separated. He wondered if he could eventually combine all the engravings that he had learnt over the last year into a compound engraving. *Maybe next time.*

For now, he watched as the testers perform basic mobility tests, running up and down in a makeshift obstacle course, as well as testing the flexibility of the limbs. Team B had focused heavily on the freedom of movement, leaving a few gaps between the armour that could be exploited, but the point defence engraving helped to mitigate the number of potential threats, save for a close-range attack.

A few mock battles ensued over the day, before Kyle was finally convinced that they had a working product, ready for the demonstration. “Have all the suits cleaned up and prepare them for shipment to Baron Cain. Each team’s designer will follow me to the demonstration event. Keep an eye out for our competitors - I want a list of potential improvements to be compiled on our return.”

@@@

The center of the private proving grounds was filled to the brim with weapons and armour manufacturers from all over the town, the bulk of them in the pocket of Count Leon. Esteemed arctech designers and weapons masters mingled and discussed their latest innovations with each other, though keeping their inner workings close their chest, exchanging frivolous pleasantries.

At the foyer of the private arena was a battalion of Raktor Knights under Count Leon, mobilized to ensure no Versian was able to sneak in. The scar of the Ilysian Punks stealing military secrets still weighed heavily over the city, and only served as a mocking point for other foreign Barons from Kregol and Perlis who came to visit, chaffing at the strict security.

While the craftsman socialized in the center, on a higher floor of the arena, Baron Cain reclined on a viewing couch, munching on a vine of fresh ripe grapes served by two servants who stood at his beck and call. He was not alone in the VIP viewing gallery, with the other lesser lords of the city and priests of the Sanctum of Yual speaking in soft tones with each other, hashing out deals.

“Baron Cain.” A white-robed lady with the insignia of the Sanctum bowed in respect upon approaching his couch, escorted by an inquisitor.

“Bishop Vernette. Inquisitor Mason.” Baron Cain nodded, motioning for them to have a seat next to him. “I hear that your finances have been suffering.”

“Indeed it has. The violence has been spilling out over from the West Sector in waves, with almost all of our resources dedicated to stemming the tide of crime.” Despite the seemingly large control of the South Sector by the Ardent Cretins, there were still nine districts that were firmly in the Bishop’s hand, with no one gang claiming control over them, not even Sebastian.

“Is that so…? From my perspective, it seems that you are hiding something else.”

“If you are referring to the pull back of enforcers from the Seven Snakes district, need I remind you that we have also pulled our enforcers from the Red Lions and the Wretches’s zones of control as well. We only have so many men at our beck and call, and their lives are of the utmost importance to me.”

“More than enforcing the Sanctum’s law? I fund half of your current budget.”

“And the other half is funded by me.” A stranger interrupted the conversation, prompting the Baron to turn around.

“Bishop Flectus. How nice of you to join in my private conversation. Perhaps you could provide a more reasonable explanation as to why the enforcers are not doing their jobs.”

“They are doing exactly what they should be doing - not cooperating with the vile gangs, unlike a few individuals here.” Bishop Flectus sneered in response, his white-robed arms crossed in an elegant manner. “The Sanctum of Yual should not tolerate those who run afoul of the holy commandments. Those who listen are inherently worth more than others.”

Baron Cain did not reply, merely nodding nonchalantly, knowing that it was just an excuse. Bishop Flectus smiled and began to approach him, intending to sit on the same viewing couch only for the Baron’s servants to block his path. “Who are you two to stop me? I am a Bishop of the Central Sector!”

“And I am a Baron and they are my loyal servants, not some bragging dog who doesn’t know where to sit. Know your place and leave us.” Baron Cain waved his hand dismissively, no longer paying attention to the simmering Bishop.

“Now, now, now, that is no way to treat each other! We are all working for the same common goal here!” A boisterious voice echoed from afar, Baron Cain knowing exactly who the owner of the voice was.

Immediately the entirety of the viewing gallery paused what they were doing, bowing towards Count Leon who were now entering with his appointed generals, five of whom flanked him from behind in an entourage. Count Leon bore a wide grin, unnervingly ecstatic as he reached out to Bishop Flectus, slinging his arms around his shoulder and patting playfully. “Two arms of the same driven purpose - to make Raktor the city of dreams! No need for such abrupt confrontation! Let us all be a better man and put aside our disputes for today.”

“As you wish, Count Leon.” Bishop Flectus bowed again, shooting a scathing glare at Baron Cain as he was heralded by Count Leon away to another section of the viewing gallery, far from prying eyes and ears. Baron Cain scoffed at the arrogant display, turning to warn Bishop Vernette: “I know what you’re doing - you’re trying to play both sides. Neither Kyle nor I will forget this betrayal.”

” Can you really call it a betrayal when I have not intervened at all? As a Bishop, I do what I must to protect my people.” Bishop Vernette hardly wavered from the accusation. “The inner politics are not the concern of the Sanctum of Yual.”

“So be it. Those who sit on the fence will eventually be ruptured from within, or brought to heel.” Baron Cain did not press the issue any longer, his attention now drawn to the center of the private arena below him that was now clearing out, preparing for the demonstration of arms. A few servants issued pamphlets containing the agenda for the day’s proceedings, the Baron noting that the requisite testing of arms were much more stringent and rigorous than ever before.

A lord who owned a weapon crafting workshop seemed to share the same sentiment, exclaiming out loud with shock to his peers. “The criteria is too harsh - no armour suit nor weapon can survive such a beating!”

“Perhaps it is only yours that is unable to survive. Your armour is not known for its tenacity, after all. It is right to be worried.” A taunt came from elsewhere, causing the surrounding lords to chuckle at the expense of the enraged lord.

“Who slanders me in broad daylight? Show yourself if you dare!” The furious lord stormed towards the source of the voice, only to instantly backpedal and hurriedly bow in return the moment he recognized the source.

“Here I am. I am the one who slandered you. Now what would you have me do?”

“My apologize, Baron Namor! I did not know it was you!” The lord apologised frantically, half-expecting a punishment for acting so outwardly towards a Baron of all people.

Unexpectedly, Baron Namor shrugged it off, treating the slight as a non-issue. “If you would like to not receive such taunts in the future, consider improving the quality of your products. Look how unbothered the others are, full of confidence in themselves to clear the bar set by the Count. War and technology is ever developing, and one must strive to stay ahead of the curve and not rest on one’s titles. I myself have the utmost assurance in the durability of my East Sector’s offerings, and so do the other Barons. Isn’t that right, Baron Cain?”

Baron Cain could feel the underlying tones. “Of course, Baron Namor. We do our best to strive for the betterment of our armed forces.” Despite his outward confidence, the list of tests detailed in the pamphlet shocked him. He had only seen a few simple tests at the Aspis Weapons Factory, and was unsure if Kyle’s armour set and rifle would be up to the task. The clear confidence from the East Sector’s Baron Namor alarmed him slightly.

*Endurance, Durability and Penetration will be tested to the brink.* Baron Cain glanced around at the murmuring lords as well as the other Barons, flipping the pamphlet pages over. Only a total of twelve corporations had registered to vie for the demonstration - three coming from the Barons of Raktor, one from the county of Kregol and Perlis each, and seven owned by other lords and businessmen who had close ties with the Count.

On the other side of the viewing gallery, the members of the registered corporations were gathered, splitting the ‘common folk’ away from the nobility. Despite the overtly friendly atmosphere shared by the craftsman, each of them clearly recognised the other as rivals. It was especially apparent in the distinction between Sectors, Kyle being the only corporation from the South Sector applying for the demonstration.

Kyle flipped the pamphlet over, his brows furrowing at the various tests placed. It was far different from what Baron Cain had informed him, but thanks to his prior preparations, he was more than confident that the tests would pose no issue at all. The only factor that he could not control was the competency of Baron Cain’s knights, who would be the ones donning the Aspis MK1 armour for the mock battle, assuming his armour survived the tests.

*With Baron Cain in full sight of the tests, I doubt that anyone would try to cheat openly.* Kyle was certain that instead of cheating on the tests, the corporations affiliated with Count Leon had already known about these tests beforehand, allowing them to tailor the perfect armour to meet the criteria. It was certainly an effective way to filter out those who were underprepared.

Next to him on the viewing couch, Gordon and Buron sat down, both of them clearly excited about the upcoming tests. If it were not for the presence of Kyle, they may have spilled the beans about their innovations and progress with the armour to anyone who might ask, constituting a information leak of sorts.

Buron almost left his seat, unable to control the urge to speak to one of the other craftsman that he had been eavesdropping on, only for a firm hand to hold him down. He looked up to see a stern Sasha, as silent as ever, her glare treating Buron like a rebellious kid that could be killed at the drop of the hat. Whatever thoughts he had of running off and interacting with other designers faded away in an instant.

Kyle had Sasha return from the Culdao Peaks to bolster security in the district. After all, the unrest was occurring in the city, not in the goblin kingdom, where Merissa, Feldon, Gulak and King Sahusa had everything under control. Sasha herself drew a few quick glances from others around the viewing gallery, most of them never having seen her before in the Seven Snakes.

“Ah, Mr. Kyle. I am surprised to see you here of all places. Don’t you have a riot to control?” A taunt wafted in from the side.

Kyle glanced sideways, only to break out into a smile. “Why, if it isn’t Master Foolish, Dull and Witless together as a trio. If I haven’t seen one of you lurking outside the erotic shops of Thresher Street, I would have thought all of you were conjoined at the waist.”

“My name is -”

“I hardly care what your name is. Perhaps you should keep such unwanted information to yourself.”

“You fucking brat, you don’t know who you’re messing with! Sooner or later, the riot will grow beyond your control.”

Kyle raised his eyebrows. “Careful, Master Witless. Such predictions would lead some to believe that you might be the culprits behind the unrest.”

“The Society of Friendly Weaponsmiths firmly rejects and denounces the brutal execution of the family by unknown men. That is, if the Baron’s announcement is to be believed in the first place.” Master Witless smirked.

“I will be sure to let the Baron of the South Sector know that there are men who do not believe a noble’s words.” Kyle waved his hand dismissvely, leaving the three masters stunned and furious. Master Witless tried to step forward, but was summarily blocked by a fearsome Sasha, who glared at them.

“Those scrooges are persistent, they might be behind the rioting and execution.” Gordon whispered to Kyle. “We should have them investigated.”

“Of course. But for now, worry about what’s in front of us than about theories. I’ll handle them.”

From the corner of Kyle’s eyes, he could spot the East Sector’s corporations congregating together in a corner of the gallery. In the midst of them was a heavily tattooed man wearing nothing but a sleeveless shirt and shorts. It was a Tul’e Da’li ranking officer, who sneered back at Kyle. “A minor gang from the South Sector trying to swim in the big leagues. How ridiculous! Sebastian must be losing his touch.”

Kyle ignored the obvious taunt, his focus on the arena that was now setting up for the first test.

“Look at him, thinking he’s the cock of the town with his shiny fake gold cloak. That suit looks like it came off a slum dweller, hah!” The Tul’e Da’li ranking officer taunted from afar, drawing the laughter of the associates that gathered around him. “Acting like some bigshot, tough guy. You’re just a bag of hot air.”

Sasha nearly started, her hands about to draw a blade strapped to her body when Kyle held up his hand, ordering her to stop. “Actions speak louder than words. We do not need more enemies.”

“Yea, that’s right. Keep your bitch reigned it like a good little dog. You’re lucky we ain’t in the South, because we would have decimated you! HAHAHA!”

Kyle brushed off the never-ending series of taunts, unwilling to fight. There was no reason to start a ruckus, especially when he had a military contract to win. Beating up the Tul’e Da’li officer was simple enough, it was the consequences that made it untenable. It was already painful enough to deal with the Ardent Cretins - getting onto another major gang’s hit list was not something Kyle wanted now.

[We shall now begin the demonstration test! Participants will now undergo tests under various scenarios - failing the tests in any stage means you shall not be moving on! Only a complete knight armour set with a rifle will be accepted as the product to be tested!] An announcer called out through the arctech speakers, his voice booming through the small enclosed private arena. Apart from the two viewing galleries, the normal seats were filled up with other journeymen and masters from the Weapon’s Guild of Raktor, each of them looking for inspiration or the latest technology development in Raktor.

“Bet the runt won’t even make it past the first stage, hah!” The Tul’e Da’li continued mocking Kyle incessantly, causing a vein to pulse on Kyle’s temples.

Not wanting a fight did not mean Kyle was about to let him go off scot-free. He twirled a small vial of Absolute Euria into Sasha’s hand discreetly, his Designate Follower skill activating. [Make sure you’re not seen.]

[Understood. Full dose?]

[Half dose. I’m a generous man - he can repent for the rest of his life. If he survives.]

# Chapter 81 - Military Demonstrations

The tests were about to begin, with the generals discussing over who they thought would come out ahead as they inspected various samples of the registered armour pieces, noting any deficiencies.

“Of course Baron Namor’s Fulcan Defense provides the most protection for our knights as always. I hear this time round, they have made great strides in innovations and improvements to the original base design that we have long been accustomed too.” One of the generals pointed out on the material composition sheet, a complusory document that each participating corporation had to issue.

“Perhaps, but I see the Dimas Uniform by Master Huron being potentially able to overcome the challenges. Our knights should be far more mobile than ever - not walking metal coffins. With rifles and cannons dominating the battlefield, perhaps the best option is extreme mobility.”

“I don’t mind which armour wins - only the one that has the best cost-to-performance ratio. Our budget is more well spent on procuring more cannons and arctech weaponry than focusing on the knight corps. They are a dying breed in the modern world.” Another general chimed in.

“Or perhaps we may very well find a way to integrate all three of them into the army.” Count Leon smiled genially, as though he was hardly worried about the outcome, his eyes momentarily meeting that of Baron Cain’s, who stared back at him with obvious suspicion.

As the various armour sets were lined up on the arena, Kyle got a good look at all of them, before leaning back and extending his palm out to Gordon, prompting Gordon to quickly place a half-read arctech textbook in his hand. Kyle never wasted time, directing all his efforts to to the betterment of himself and his followers at all costs.

The Tul’E Da’li officer scoffed at the seemingly arrogant posture of Kyle reading the textbook. “Slumrat is about to find out he’s in way over his head. Nobody can beat our Fulcan Defense!”

The first test began on schedule, with a few Raktor recruits moving forward, using a standard military-issued knife to stab the armour in anyway possible. A loud crack and fracture could be heard as one of the private corporations’ armour broke apart at the seams, the knife’s edge easily cutting apart the main breastplate, clearly showing the deficiencies in refining and hardening of the original metal.

Any employee related to the corporation immediately hid their face in shame, unwilling to be recoginzed by the other members of the Society of Friendly Weaponsmiths, lest they be ostracized from the industry. On the flip side, their boss was unrepentant: “We aim for the lowest cost possible. At least the armour can block a single knife blow! With our cheap armour you could make every recruit a knight!”

“I too can block a knife blow with my teeth. If I wanted shoddily-made armour I would have bought them from Versia! Leave us!” A military general scoffed, immediately evicting the corporation out of the demonstration.

The second test was a antique handgun, used in the two Yual-Hwa wars. It had a very low muzzle velocity, only suitable for target shooting instead of penetration. Nobody really expected any of the armour to fail these part, until the next armour’s helmet had a conspicuous gaping hole perforated completely by the weak pellet, the owner of the corporation in question flabbergasted. “How is this possible? We’ve tested it multiple times! Someone must have sabotaged us!”

The cries of protests fell on deaf ears as the corporation was escorted out of the arena, their reputation tanking amongst the master craftsmen of the Society. On the far end of the viewing gallery, a few of the other owners grinned, clearly involved in the sabotage.

“Get down there and make sure everything is well.” Kyle ordered Gordon, wary that a sabotage could happen to them as well. There were far too many enemies in the demonstration, everyone vying to be the only recognized armour set to earn the military funding.

The third test was a standard rifle, the current issue that all Raktor soldiers utilized in battles. It was here that many of the armour sets failed to make the cut, many getting shredded easily like cheese or paper as the three iron or lead pellets tore through them at a medium velocity. Three of the private corporations were knocked out by the second pellet, large portions of the armour already fracturing apart like a puzzle, the sharp jagged edges of the wound glistening in the spotlight.

The final test was a repeater rifle, the same version that the Ilysian Punks had been stealing from the military. The repeated strikes pushed the armour sets to the limited, the weaker armour sets reaching their failure points easily.

Throughout all the tests, only three armour sets stood standing by the end, the viewing gallery now conspicuously empty, leaving only the Tul’E Da’Li officer and his associates, Kyle with Sasha, and the craftsmen under Master Huron. The taunts no longer came in, everyone there now finally recognizing the competence of Kyle’s armour set.

One of the military generals personally inspected the surviving pieces, marvelling at the Aspis MK1, the surface now riddled with pellet dents, some of the iron and lead pellets having been flattened. “Incredible. Almost no backplate deformation after all of this?! How much does the armor set cost? It must be the most expensive of the remaining eight.” He asked his aide-de-camp, who trailed behind him.

“Sire, the Aspis is actually the lowest in terms of cost. The total set costs only thirty thousand rakels when rounded up.”

“Ridiculous. A proper armor should be about a hundred thousand rakels. There must be a downside to this armor that we just do not know yet. However, a thirty thousand armor set will mean that we might be able to recruit more knights than we currently have.”

The aide-de-camp nodded, but leaned in with a low whisper. “Sire, if we choose such an armor set, we may incur the ire of Count Leon and his suppliers that have worked with us for a long time.”

“Nonsense! If Count Leon wants a competent army, only the best armor should be selected! That is, if the Aspis MK1 survives till the end.”

A bead of sweat broke out on the forehead of the aide-de-camp as he glanced nervously between the general and the Count glaring down at them from the viewing gallery. He hurriedly ran over to another armor, trying to embellish the others. “Sire, the Fulcan Armor by Baron Namor is also proving its worth. It might be a bit more expensive, but it may perform better than expected.”

“Hmm…” The general sauntered over, looking at the damaged breastplate, noticing that the backplate protrusion were not significant, yet still more severe than what was visible on the Aspis MK1. “Perhaps. I will consider it.”

The Aspis MK1 and the Fulcan Armour making it to the end was a given, but Kyle was surprised that Master Huron’s armour set had survived. He had been under the impression that he had to only contest with the prevailing military supplier in the form of Baron Namor.

Amdist the audience, the masters of the Society of Friendly Weaponsmiths hardly bore any friendly expressions. “How is it possible that a bratty upstart like the Aspis is able to go toe to toe with our representative Huron?!” Master Dull grumbled.

“He must have cheated - but it is of no matter. The mock battle will reveal the flaws immediately and that arrogant Kyle will find his downfall swift.”

[With the last three armour sets surviving to the very end, we will now commence a three-way mock combat between knight squads.]

The arena was hurriedly arranged by servants, utilizing arctech lifters to hoist heavy stone pillars and debris, mocking a standard warzone of about 400 meters diameter in a circular fashion. Makeshift towers and random broken crates were thrown into the mix, creating a chaotic landscape.

A few of the servants were a bit too trigger happy with the cannons, blasting apart the smooth floor of the arena to create ditches.

Kyle watched as a squad of Baron Namor’s knights stepped forward, their Fulcan armour covering them from head to toe in quenched and tempered steel, the metal glistening under the arctech spotlights with the colors of the Baron plastered over them. The helmet had been shaped to resemble that of a cavalier, imposing a regal authority upon those who saw it. The engravings spoke of strength and instaneous power, an armor designed to burst through any form of resistance they met on the battlefield.

On the other side, a small motley crew of mercenaries wore a hastily arranged Dimas Armour set, some of whom had to reuse the damaged armour from before. It was far lighter than its counterparts, resembling a medium leather armour with interspersed steel plates, aiming at maximum mobility. Exposed skin were visible on the thighs and biceps, sparking a heated discussion between opposing philosophies on what an armour should be.

“It seems Master Huron has maximized the freedom of movement on the Dimas Armour according to his teachings.” Another master from the Society noted, his accompanying journeymen and apprentices nodding quickly, jotting down the lessons. “The essence of combat is being faster than the enemy, always two steps ahead.”

“Are you talking for yourself, or are you merely regurgitating words from long-gone masters?” Another master retorted. “Baron Namor clearly has the advantage here. Even mobility cannot outrun overpowering strength!”

“All the Dimas Armour has to do is to outpace the slow Fulcan Armour, and it would be an easy win!”

“All the Fulcan Armour has to do is smash the Dimas in direct combat! Skulking around does not work in an head-on confrontation!”

The heated discussion began to escalate into a few direct arguments, long time personal disputes being brought into fray as tensions rose, their stance ever more rigid from the two armour having proven their tenacity through the various tests beforehand.

“Its clear that the Fulcan Armour is the superior one in real combat, but the Dimas Armour is a good concept as well.” The Tul’e Da’li officer remarked with surprising lack of bias and maturity. “At least it is much better than the shitty Aspis MK1, made by a nobody!” He chortled as he picked up a cocktail glass, siping on it before noticing a weird taste on the tip of his tongue. Instead of complaining about it and potentially revealing his own ignorance, he drank it promptly, unwilling to be taunted.

Kyle didn’t care too much about the officer ingesting the Absolute Euria - his life or eventual death was of no meaning to him after all. Instead, he waited quietly for his armour to appear in the arena.

Soon, Baron Cain’s knights entered the arena, though the reception was more muted than the other two. Baron Namor had the support of a major gang, and Master Huron had most of the Weapon’s Guild supporting him. Baron Cain instead only had Kyle, a relatively unknown leader of a minor gang at best.

“This is going to be fun. I can’t wait to see the look on Count Leon’s face.” Inquisitor Mason grinned as he whispered to Bishop Vernette.

“An inquisitor should be far above such petty things.”

“Says the one looking at Bishop Flectus’s direction for a bit too long.”

The Aspis MK1 was not particularly shiny, the surface matte with an interesting color pattern that matched the arena itself. It did not blend in at all, the human figure still clearly visible, but it took extra effort to discern them from the random debris and cover around them.

It seemed to be a middleground between the two armour presented so far, having very obvious gaps in its armour. The shape of the armour was practical, not glamorous or exquisite in anyway, giving off a rugged feel. However, the Aspis boasted a significant volume of armour on the main body parts, the volume being even higher than the Fulcan. This led to a sort of oblique shape that looked clunky, even though the knights had good freedom of movement.

The sight earned a rousing chuckle from the audience. “Now that I finally see someone wearing it on, I can tell that the armour has lost its purpose! It is always a tradeoff between strength and speed, not trying to achieve both and obviously failing.” Many of the Weapons Guild craftsman agreed, murmuring their discontentment. Part of their hatred to the Aspis MK1 was due to the lack of employment of guild journeymen and apprentices, hence the boycott.

Other masters began to weigh the three armours against each other properly, seeing the squads gearing up and getting into position. “Armour is not the only determinant of whose set is better. The compatibility with the rifle is paramount to a soldier’s survival. I cannot envision the Fulcan Armour having too much leeway in repositioning and accurac- by Yual, what is that?”

A wave of shock erupted in the audience as the Fulcan Armour knights revealed their rifles, which was now strapped with an unusual bayonet design that looked more like a sequence of gears with sharp teeth. Thick engraving lines ran along the dense metallic center, the barrel of the rifle dwarfed by the sheer size.

“The grinder is our breakthrough innovation to combat an ever-changing battlefield. In the previous conflicts, barbed wire and fortified defenses were the main obstacles for the advancing knights - which will no longer be the case with the grinder.”

Bayonets and attached pikes were not new for rifles, but it was a first for anyone in Raktor to see such a weird contraption being shown as part of the main offering. It definitely showed prowess and brute strength, something that could invigorate the troops in a frontal assault. The sharp teeth could also grind through armour easily if necessary - but only if the knights got close enough to the fortifications.

“This is bad for Master Huron. If the Fulcan Armour knights encircle them, they would have nothing left to defend themselves with!”

Some turned to Master Huron in the viewing gallery, expecting a defeated expression. Instead, he bore a wide grin on his face, as though he had already expected such an outcome.

Yet, despite his confidence, the firearm on the side of the Dimas Armour did not evoke any confidence at all. It looked very much like a standard antiquated arctech pistol used very often in the skirmishes of the past, with nothing fancy nor innovative about it.

Instead, the Aspis MK1 had a far more unique design, unlike anything the others have seen before. Contrary to the standard rifle design, instead of having a single pellet canister on the top and an arctech fuel pack strapped to the butt, the rifle featured four canisters on the top, angled slightly away from the barrel to allow the pellets to slope inwards. It also did not have a fuel pack, instead boasting a connection port at the side for an external fuel pack mounted by the armour itself on a well hidden back compartment.

“Four canisters?! HAH!” The Tul’e Da’li officer burst out laughing, his associates following suit. “A knight can barely fire more than five pellets a minute even with a repeater - four canisters is a ridiculous overkill. Might as well paint a target on your helmet so the enemy knows exactly where you are!”

Conversely, Baron Namor had stopped smiling, already knowing the reason for the four canisters from earlier internal tests.

[The mock battle will begin in one minute. Any man who is knocked down is protected. Any man who suffers an injury is protected. No headshots and no intent to kill! Count Leon and the military generals reserves the right to stop the fight at anytime.]

Down at the arena, the three opposing knight squads began to form up opposite each other, randomly assigned their starting positions. The deul began in earnest, with the squads immediately moving. Baron Namor’s squad rushed forward, intent on striking down the Aspis MK1 squad. The Dimas squad had the same idea, working together to pincer attack the Aspis MK1.

“As much as I do not like the phliosophy behind the armour, is it not a bit unfair to have two squads gang up on one?” One of the masters remarked, slightly wincing at the Aspis MK1 squad slowly being cornered as the first pellets began to fly.

As if they were already expecting it, the Aspis MK1 squad began to entrench themselves behind the cover, taking up defensive positions with good viewpoints on both approaching squads from across the arena. Despite their clear line of sight, the Aspis MK1 did not fire at all, making many observers confused. “Are they holding on because their rifles do not have the range?”

This emboldened Baron Namor’s squad, who charged forward unrelentless, leaning into the strengths of their armour. No cover or debris were a match for them as they made a straight beeline right for the huddled Aspis MK1 squad. The leading knight used the grinder at the tip of his rifle like a spear, carving a direct path through the mess of wooden boxes and even stone walls, showcasing its offensive capabilities.

As soon as the leading knight broke through one of the cover positions with two of his comrades in close formation, he rushed the nearest Aspis MK1 knight with the grinder front and center, intending to impale the armour. Instead, he found himself facing the barrel of the four canister rifle, the connecting arcia fuel pipe gurgling with full pressure, engravings along the length brimming with energy.

The leading knight hurriedly activated the inbuilt point defense engraving, expecting only three or four pellets to emerge. Instead, a hailstorm like never before seen blasted outwards from the rifle in rapid fire, the pellets in the mounted canisters being consumed at a rapid rate while the barrage mowed down the three knights in quick succession with green point-defense arcia bolts flying harmlessly. The withering fire annihilated the Fulcan Defense steel, denting it and sending the remaining Baron Namor’s knights scrambling for cover themselves.

Unfortunately, the leading knight took the brunt of the damage, bleeding from multiple new orificies that had torn through the front of his armour like butter. It was near impossible for him to move without getting sliced or jabbed by the jagged edges of the holes, the backplate deformation of the impact crushing his flesh uncomfortably as he hit the ground with a loud thud, the first casualty of the duel.

Baron Namor sat upright in his chair, no longer resting on his laurels as he glared at the seemingly infinite pellet capacity of the rifle. Everyone was caught off-guard, some now fully understanding why the rifle had four canisters of pellets instead of one. “By Yual, it’s an improved repeater!”

The Dimas squad did not prove any better. With minimal armour on, they had even less protection from the pellet storm than the Fulcan Defense. One of the more daring mercenaries activated his boots, increasing his footwork as he tried to close the distance towards the entrenched Aspis MK1 squad, but was instantly suppressed from all angles, intermittent fire from the squad pinning him down well enough.

The two attacking squads were not dumb - if they could not wrest control of the defensive position, they would rather hold their own line against the Aspis MK1 squad without risking too much in an all out attack. Instead, they began to look towards each other, wondering if they could at least claim second place.

However, they never had the choice, as the Aspis MK1 squad split into two, both parts rushing out to attack. “Now’s our chance! Get them!” The mercernary leader grinned, charging out with two pistols, firing with abandon. The pellets hardly made a dent on the honeycomb structure of the armor plates, each individual ceramic element reducing the ballistic impact greatly, allowing the Aspis MK1 armour to shrug it off.

Soon, the duel turned into a one-sided massacre, as the wounded began to accumulate on the arena, all of whom were not Aspis MK1 armour. The only time the armour showed some form of weakness was when one of the grinders hit the armour, tearing it apart easily. Yet with the withering barrage and immense firepower, most of the grinders could not get close.

“I’ve seen enough. Stop the duel.” Count Leon raised his hand. “Generals, please make your decision.”

The generals look at each other in apprehension, with only one of them being far happier than the others. “Of course, the cheapest and best armour, which is clearly the Aspis MK1. In fact, I would go so far as to suggest delaying the military exercise to allow for our troops to properly incorporate this armour into our ranks. We would have a clear edge over the Versians or even the Hwa Dynasty!”

“But we have already stores of the earlier version of the Fulcan Defense. It would be simpler to replace and upgrade in sections rather than to buy a full armour set from scratch. Consider the switching costs as well.” Another general countered, his eyes glancing a bit to the flustered Baron Namor, who seemed ready to go down to the arena himself and inspect the damage to his knights.

“If we want to increase our ranks, we would have to purchase more armour regardless - I’m sure our recruits would perform much better with an reduced version of the Aspis MK1!”

The generals continued to bicker while Baron Cain felt like he was on cloud nine. Any lingering subconsicous apprehension he had about working together with Kyle were now washed away like snow on a summer’s day. He had half-regretted making the announcment to clear the Seven Snakes name as well as making the temporary approval, but as of now, he couldn’t care less about giving Kyle anything he needed so long as his own personal public image was improved. *Kyle is truly the future - I must work with him for as long as possible.*

At the other viewing gallery, Kyle promptly stood up, about to leave with Sasha without saying a word to the other two participating corporations, the Tul’e Da’li officer left flabbergasted at the result, his face completely awestruck before he hurriedly composed himself together, his business orientated mind already seeing the potential value of collaboration.

However, the moment he tried to approach Kyle, Sasha was already between the two of them, blocking his path, but he still gave it his best shot, calling out after Kyle: “Good sir, would you be interested in potentially meeting my boss? We could arrange for a potential acquisition of your factory - the compensation benefits would be significant, on the order of millions.”

Kyle gave a sly smirk to the man, not stopping in the slightest.”I am always open to negotiations, and we can meet at a later date.”

“Of course, my boss will be in contact soon!” The officer bowed respectfully, but Kyle barely gave him any further attention, leaving the gallery, having never intended to meet the Tul’e Da’li.

After all, there was no use negotiating with a dead man. # Chapter 82 - The Union

“Count Leon has agreed to make a purchase order of a preliminary 30,000 sets of the full armour set, along with 60,000 of the reduced cheaper version in total. This order is far larger than those in the past.” Baron Cain summarized the conclusion of the demonstration, handing over an order sheet over to Kyle. “150 million rakels, paid on delivery of the armour sets after inspection.”

The amount of money was more than enough to cover operations of the Seven Snakes for the next three years even with the exorbitant salary he was paying the designers, reliving a burden off Kyle’s shoulders. It was good, but the money was still not in their hands just yet. Producing the armour would take time. “What’s the deadline?”

“Two months. They are already delaying the military exercise, but it can’t be shifted any later than that. Kregol and Perlis are involved in the joint exercise drill as well, so any later would cause issues.”

Kyle’s expression immediately darkened, Baron Cain catching on to the obvious signs. “You can’t produce that fast enough.”

“Not at the current rate, no. I’ll figure it out, and I’ll have it done by the two months.” Kyle wasn’t about to let go of such a juicy contract, but he had this inkling that the order should not have been this large in the first place. “How did Count Leon behave during the negotiations? Any signs or erratic issues?”

“Surprisingly enthuasitic overall. Seemed to have no qualms issuing us the contract, even convincing the generals to order more than three times the original discussed amount.”

“Hmm…” Kyle took that information with him, returning back to the Aspis Weapons Factory where the managers and Gordon were gathering and already celebrating the results of the duel. The revelation of the order from Kyle had mixed reactions from them at best, many worrying about it.

“Sure, it took us a month to design and produce twenty sets of the Aspis MK1. The bulk of the time was in the design and research, so now we should be able to go faster.” Buron was optimistic, but he was just the designer, which means he had minimal interactions with the plights of the average production team technician.

Gordon was more wary of the tall order. “But how fast can we go? Say we did not even include the reduced version, and only produced the 30,000 Aspis MK1, we would have to produce at least around 4000 each week.”

“Whats the current expected maximum production rate for each assembly line?” Kyle asked.

“Takes about an hour to complete one set, with the rifle, not including the testing and quality check.” Gordon calculated. “And I have yet to factor in the amount of material needed. We might not have enough mined.”

“Don’t worry about the materials, I will source for it if necessary. But judging based on the rate, we must have the assembly lines working 24 hours a day. Do we have enough workers to man all twenty of them?”

“Not yet, sir. The part-time trade school students and the associates are not experienced enough to work full time on the assembly line just yet, so in terms of just experienced workers, we’re at 50% capacity.”

“Then we’ll have to work them 50% harder. Double everyone’s shifts and get more workers in.”

A moment of silence languished among the managers, even Buron, as Kyle eyed them warily. “Speak your minds.”

Gordon took a deep breath, steeling himself. “Sir, with the new martial law and policing by the Seven Snakes… there’s been a bit of a bad look for us. If we double the workers’ hours, there very well might be backlash and growing dissent in the district that could come to bite us back in the ass.”

“If we don’t double the workers’ hours, we won’t be able to match the …” Kyle’s voice trailed off, as something in his mind suddenly clicked together. Everything was beginning to fall into place like clockwork, the machinations of those who were plotting against him becoming clear as day, a small grin appearing on his face. “I see what’s happening now.”

“See what?”

“My order still stands.” Kyle held his ground, his body language far more confident now. “Double the workers’ shift until we find enough workers to man the factory at 100% capacity, but do not double the wages. We have to control the cost until we receive the payment. Explain this to all the workers, have it reinforced during the morning speeches. Don’t forget our roots, Gordon. We are a gang, not a charity. Sacrifices have to be made.”

Gordon nodded, albeit a bit reluctantly. Kyle did not waste any more time with them, calling Damian and Sasha to meet over at one of the Seven Snakes’ various smaller bases, masking his movement as best as he could.

“The enemy has finally reared his head. It is even more critical that the vipers follow my orders to the letter. Any deviations from this plan will result in unwanted consequences that threatens to further erode us as a gang.” Kyle explained quickly.

“But are we allowed to know what they are trying to aim for?” Damian tried to dig in, but Kyle stood firm.

“Not until we find the mole. While I trust the two of you, it remains to be seen if information is leaking through either of you. I will have to keep the nature of our orders to myself.”

“Sir, you can trust us, we would never leak the information.”

“Thank you, Damian.” Kyle replied with emotion, not taking the show of loyalty to heart. Betrayals always come from the most trusted of followers. “Now, I need you to disseminate the orders accordingly.”

“Damian, I need the associates well trained. No quarter nor mercy is to be given to anyone who flout our rules or try to disrupt us. Every burgeoning protest is to be cracked down on immediately. I will not tolerate any unrest or disruptions to the factory’s production over the next two months. This order applies to both you and Niko. All prisoners are to be withheld indefinitely for any infractions, even the smallest.”

Kyle continued speaking, rattling off orders as Damian jotted down the information. “Have Keith inform Merissa and Feldon to speed up material production. Have the prisoners enslaved and working on preparing the materials for the armour set. All of our efforts should be directed towards the completion of the contract. And I still want any resistant landowners properties taken away. Yes, even Stanley’s prior possessions.”

“Sasha, I need you to trail the Society of Friendly Weaponsmiths. Find out which pub they gather at, who is the landlord who host their weekly meetings. Their council, treasurer and every man of note should be profiled and jotted down onto a record here for my perusual.”

“Lastly, get Adrian to watch out for any movement. I want eyes and ears all over the district, anything that even sounds remotely suspicious comes to me immediately. This includes the other vipers.”

Both Damian and Sasha wore a grim face at the idea of stalking their own members, yet Kyle hardly cared. “Remember, we are not the people’s friends, nor are we their saviors. We only do things that benefit us. And no matter what order I give you, it is all for the future of the Seven Snakes. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Get to work. Because once we’re done with this, we’ll be on track to be the next major gang in the South Sector.”

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“The mutilation of Stanley must be punished! How are the enforcers simply letting the Seven Snakes go off scott-free?! Who is enforcing the law?” A landlord yelled at the top of the lungs as he slammed the shiny wooden laminate of his conference table, the copious amounts of newspaper cutouts slightly trembling from the force.

“Yea, and now the Seven Snakes are the enforcers? How did they get Baron Cain on their side? Even the Ardent Cretins are not this blatant! This cannot stand!” Another enraged landlord added, a wave of vigorous agreement spreading through the meeting. “How dare they try to intimidate us into selling our property. Stanley’s properties are now in the hands of Kyle himself! We should have rioted when he was still building the shopping arcade.”

“We should have rioted when he just ousted the Ilysian Punks! A dog of Yual will never understand Versians.” Yet another landlord chimed in. Many of them there were originally from Versia, having migrated to the district because of the presence of the Ilysian Punks, creating its own closed feedback loop of Versian solidarity in the sea of various ethnicities and nationalities in Raktor.

As the meeting continued, many grievances were exchanged before the meeting was interrupted by the doors slamming open, revealing a far shabbier group of factory workers mixed with a few craftsman, clearly from the Society of Friendly Weaponsmiths. Master Dull led the entourage, but some of the landlords looked at the outfit of the incoming group with clear disgust: “What? Who let your kind in? What nonsense is this?”

The two groups stared at each other, having came to blows before over raises in wages and work hours in the past. They immediately saw each other as enemies, especially Master Dull who had long resented the landowners for their lazy and greedy attitude.

“Who the hell are you? This was our group’s arranged meeting point.” Master Dull began with his usual rash demeanour before gargling a glob of saliva and spitting it onto the luxurious carpet without a care in the world. “Have you not learnt your lesson from our previous picketlines?”

“We should be teaching you your place, you dirty rats! Always looking for the easy way out!”

“I could say the same for you scummy landlords, idling and collecting profit at the expense of others’ labours. What benefit do you bring the workshops and factories?!”

Before the two groups could come to blow, their confusion only further amplified as a third group showed up, the Versians among the groups immediately recognizing them.

The third group was comprised of hooded individuals, ten of whom wore non-descript robes, their faces also equally flabbergasted as Master Dull tried to make sense of the situation. “What in the world is going on? Who invited any of you here?”

“I suspect we might have been all invited here by the same individual.” The landlords association leader’s better judgement reigned supreme, trying to diffuse the situation. “It seems that we may have common ground, the Seven Snakes.” Tensions began to relax a little, as they began to realize there was a purpose that they were all gathered here today.

“The fucking invaders who ousted our brothers!” Master Dull cursed, taking a seat at the other side of the conference table, revealing his true allegiance apart from the Society. “And transformed our district into something unrecognizable. Now, we’re filled to the brim with migrants and tourists all clamouring from a job who won’t even hire our accredited craftsmen! I got a good mind to give Kyle a thorough whacking if I can get close enough to him!”

“What good would such a whacking do? Someone new would simply take over and continue running the factory for profit! If even the dumbest resident can make a rifle, your Society is practically useless.” Another landlord scoffed, clearly incensed from his past dealings with similar organizations.. “I don’t blame the Seven Snakes for getting rid of your kind - I know you fixed the market prices far too high!”

Instead of Master Dull answering, a hot-headed craftsmen shouted back: “Them fighting words, coming from a fat pudgy landlord who regularly raises rents without even improving anything! Maybe I should whack you first and handle this myself! At least I won’t have to compromise with your greedy fuckface!”

“The Goddess herself has already claimed dominion over us. We are all equal - it is only through true equality that we will understand each other.” The third leader tried to intervene, only to earn a flung glass at him.

“I migrated from Versia exactly to avoid your kind. I had enough paying out of my fucking nose for unemployed losers like you despite me having worked my ass off!” A landlord roared, with some of the Society’s members surprisingly agreeing with them.

“We are working towards a better united future while you are worrying about your own disproportionate wealth? What human needs seven servants and three buildings, hmm? You should be purged from society, a tumor on the health of humanity!”

“How about I purge both of you instead?!”The tensions rose again as chairs were tossed aside, the various members going toe to toe and scuffling with each other, grabbing collars and tossing anything they could get their hands on.

In the midst of the fight, none of the scuffling members noticed a new attendee flanked by two others, the well-suited man walking in with purpose and taking a seat at the head of the table despite the chaos erupting around him. His fingers rasped against the table loudly, drawing the attention of the others over the loud crashes and fights.

“Fucking hell, another one? Is Gunther fucking with me?!” Master Dull groaned as he shoved a half pummeled landlord to the ground.

“I am Gunther. Pleasure to meet all of you.” The man at the head of the table smiled, his fingers rasping like clockwork, repetitive every second until those in the room began to calm down, staring at him.

“Then I guess you better start explaining what fucking stunt you’re trying to pull by putting us here in the first place.”

“Mr Sutton has already enlightened you. We have common ground. A common enemy that is worth putting aside all of our differences to fight against. If you follow my rules, we can have the Seven Snakes reeling in a month, or even less.”

A wave of mirthless laughter erupted across the room, even the infuriated landlords. “In a month? I only accepted the invitations because I had hope this ‘Gunther’ would be someone reasonable. How are you going to take down the Seven Snakes in just a month?” Master Dull scoffed. “Industrial action would be on the order of months or even years of picketlines, strikes and protests!”

Master Dull soon found Gunther expressionless, the mysterious man’s face completely serious. “My word, you really believe in your plan.”

“I would only explain it to those who swear to silence. You have thirty seconds to leave, otherwise you will be consider complicit.” Gunther leaned back into the leather chair, relaxing.

The members exchanged nervous glances, but none of the three groups backed off, especially not the landlords who were hungry for revenge for the death of their own.

“The plan is simple. The entire economy of the Seven Snakes now hinges on the weapons factory. We simply need to make sure that the factory is immobilized, and then we can bring Seven Snakes to the bargaining table, rip them to shreds.”

“And how would we do that?”

“Rudimentary actions. The Seven Snakes have already fallen into the trap. The martial law and new restrictions will be our source of motivation, our source of anger to find more people who will align to our course. Just like how I found your three groups.”

The leaders sat quietly for a moment as they contemplated the plan, only for the silence to be broken by the boisterious Master Dull. “But why are you in charge? All of this sounds great and all, but they are just fluff - you can’t actually pull them off without our help. Seems like you’re gunning to be the new big guy amongst us. Why should the Society help you? I might as well go it alone.”

“You can try.” Gunther gave a knowing look, though he barely moved, only leaning forward to clasp his hands together, resting his chin on them.

“Then you can forget about having my support. And here I thought the plan would be something special. The Society has their own ways of dealing with reluctant factory owners, and I’m sure as hell ain’t going to work with fat pigs and crazy cultists.” Master Dull rose from his chair. “While I’ll like to see Kyle gets what he deserves, this is far too much of a compromise. We’re leaving, boys.”

Gunther snapped his fingers, Master Dull suddenly feeling a sharp jab in his neck, a syringe lodged deep in his neck with purplish fluid pressed into his veins by his own members, his eyes widening in realization. He tried to open his mouth, but his jaw was locked as the tendrils snaked across his cheeks, rooting his muscles in place, not even being able to blink.

He could only watch Gunther smirking at him from the head of the conference table. “You don’t even have control of your men. What makes you think I really need you? Now, would anyone else like to leave?”

The remaining leaders shuddered in their seats, no one moving an inch as Gunther began to pace the room, inspecting the various members. “Good. Let’s keep in this way. My rules are simple. You’re either with me, or against me. I don’t compromise. I don’t give second chances. For a revolutionary movement’s entire being should be devoured by one purpose, one thought, and one passion. To win. Do you understand? If you don’t, I’ll make sure you do. Now, onto our next step.”

Gunther returned to the head of the conference table. “We need to rile the people up. The factory’s hours are going to be doubled, but wages aren’t going up. The Soceity, you will begin to organize the dissatisfied workers. Build up the numbers, prepare for a mass strike. But that alone is not enough. We need more impetus, more momentum, more outrage.”

“Mr Stanley’s death is outrage enough.” Mr Sutton, the leader of the landlord union spoke up. “We can try to paint him as a martyr to the people, get people angry.”

Sutton’s words only caused Gunther to break out into uncontrollable laughter. “What’s so funny?”

“A single greedy landlord being a martyr? I did not take you to be a comedian, Mr Sutton. An entirely ridiculous proposition.” Gunther’s retort clearly incensed Sutton, but he did not fight back, having seen what was still happening to the craft union leader.

“We need another strike, another event. And our dear Master Dull had just volunteered himself. Have him prepared.” Gunther motioned his hand towards the immobilized craft union leader, two of Gunther’s followers walking forward to hoist the leader up onto the table, before setting up a light-capturer and placing Seven Snakes armbands on, dressing up as a recruit.

The sheer methodical operation alarmed Sutton. “You…. you’re the one who killed Mr Stanley! Not the Seven Snakes!”

“Ah, does it really matter? Mr Stanley was a dead man walking either way. In fact, I would go so far to say that I’ve rescued him from suffering in the clutches of the Seven Snakes.”

“You’re insane!” Another landlord roared in defiance, standing up and protesting. “You think we would follow your orders now that we’re seeing this? You will be exposed for your deeds.”

“And the Seven Snakes rule the district once more. Which would you prefer? What am I even saying? I’m sorry for making it sound like you have a choice.” Gunther smiled, the landlords immediately being surrounded by Gunther’s men, all of whom who had been posing as Society members, cornering and restraining the landlords. “But rejoice! For Mr Sutton was right after all. All of you can become martyrs for the cause.”

Sutton panicked as the syringe was forced towards his neck, struggling against his captors from behind as he shouted frantically. “Please, no! I’ll give you anything, I’ll give you my wealth for funding, for support! You need money to strike, to feed the workers! I can give you jewels, paintings, everything! Just let me go!”

“You seem to not understand. I don’t live for greed or for wealth. This… sick world, this digusting social order, the so-called civilized world that is cursed with avarice and inequality: I have severed every link with it. The laws, the morality, the mannerism hardly matter to me. I am the merciless enemy of all that is ‘right’ and for me to continue to live in such a world - I only have one purpose” Gunther murmured as he retrieved an ornate knife, walking up to the craft union leader. As Gunther slid the blade underneath the chin of the craft union leader, the leader barely reacted, his body stiffened by the poison but clearly still aware, the fright visible in his eyes.

“To destroy it.”

# Chapter 83 - A Worker’s Life

*Two weeks later…*

The ringing bells echoed through the Seven Snakes District as the first light peeked over the smog-filled tips of the buildings, the bright rays reflecting off the tall housing complex apartments where hundreds of sleep-deprived workers were stirring awake.

“Culo, wake up, wake up! If you’re late you’re going to lose your damn job.” A pair of hands shook the bed violently, the sleeping man tossing and turning under the thin blanket before jolting awake.

“…wha?” Culo grumbled as he rubbed his groggy eyes, trying to get a good look at the arctech clock, ticking away quietly at the ceiling of his shared dormitory room. “Five in the morning?”

“Get up, else I’m gonna leave without you!” His roommate gave him a hearty slap on the back, before rushing to queue up for the smaller communal bathhouse that had now been situated on every floor of the apartment building.

“Just… just a few more minutes.” Culo lay back down, his eyelids barely budging open as he could feel the fatigue accumulating in his bones, his mind already dreading the working days to come. As he stretched his limbs, trying to release the strain, his hand rubbed against a ragged piece of paper, featuring a painted portrait of his brother and his village back in Ocra.

That painting alone galvanized him, realizing what he had came to Raktor for. *Nothing comes without sacrifice.* Culo repeated the mantra in his head, forcing himself up and towards the bathhouse beneath the winding halls of the housing complex to have a simple wash of his face and hair. As he joined the queue, the workers barely talked to each other, retaining their strength for the long workday ahead as they shuffled in silence, each taking turns to rinse themselves clean.

Soon, he was out onto the street like clockwork, joining a throng of workers that shambled in a slowly burgeoning crowd, all of whom were heading towards three sharp chimneys that jutted out of the city akin to a spine, the Aspis Weapons Factory looming ominously over its counterparts.

No one spoke a single word to each other, the initial joy that had infected the workers in the first month now long lost. Many kept their mouth shuts, focused far more on the time than the crowd around them. Culo himself had already lost track of his roommate, becoming just another face in the sea of factory workers.

The hissing of arctech wagons unloading workers from other districts, the continuous chime of ladies waking up other workers living in their own houses alongside the kids who trailed behind with trays filled with breakfast meals melded into the background as Culo marched incessantly, his brain hardly functioning. Even as he walked past Thresher Street, the sight of the pornographic displays and erotica only drew a short glance from him, before he mindlessly made his way towards the factory.

Soon, he was one of hundreds queuing up in the factory for the routine security check, the aggressive handling of the Seven Snakes recruits manhandling their belongings and clothes. “Five minutes till the next shift!” A foreman called out with a loudhailer, the workers picking up speed a little as they shuffled to and fro. Culo moved to his locker in the changing room, swapping out his clothes for a standard overalls uniform with the number 384, buttoning it up only to wince at his raw fingers that were still healing from burns.

As he closed his locker, the workers from the current shift began to enter the changing room, Culo recognizing one of them, a fellow Versian migrant from Ocra as well, though not his village. He tried to get his attention, but his friend barely acknowledged his surroundings, acting like a mindless drone as he simply went through the motions. It pricked Culo’s heart a little at how much has been lost, but he brushed it off, focusing on what he came here to do.

“Shift starting in a minute! If you’re late, you lose one hour of wages every minute!” Another manager hollered, spurring the workers on into a sort of frenzy as everyone broke out into a slight jog, heading towards their assembly line stations and forming up with the rest of their production team, Culo following suit. Culo was surprisingly one of the few adults in the team, the youngest of the team being only twelve years old. Children were far cheaper in terms of wages compared to adults, so Culo could count his lucky stars.

“Welcome back, boys. Here’s to a more productive day. Yesterday we fell behind on our production goals of twenty-four sets, so we’ll have to make up for the shortfall.” The foreman’s speech elicit a few groans from the workers, but no one dared to speak out, not with the Seven Snakes associates patrolling the factory armed with the improved repeaters.

“Last shift we had three rejected vambraces, five rejected sabatons and two rejected rifles. Those workers have been relegated to the steel moulding station. If you don’t want to get assigned there, I suggest you all do get better at etching, and etch faster!” The foreman continue berating the production team, pointing out their errors and their flaws. “I can’t afford anyone to make anymore mistakes, else all of us get the chop, you hear? There are hundreds waiting at the job distribution center for your very position now!”

The shift began in earnest, Culo taking his place along the assembly line as he grabbed the arcia etcher dangling from above his station, turning the embedded dial up to increase the temperature of the tip, ready to get to work. Already the sweltering heat was starting to get to him over the next few minutes, the sweat clinging to his skin and uniform as his back was drenched, working tirelessly in a never-ending chain of production, a single cog in the machine doing the same thing on repeat.

“416! You’re late by ten minutes!” The foreman’s voice carried over to him over the din of machinery, but Culo did not dare to turn around and look. “You’ll be docked accordingly!”

“Sir, please, there was a hold-up on my wagon. Another body turned up again - it’s one of the Masters of the Societ-”

“I don’t give a shit who got executed this time round. Baron Cain made it clear that these are the acts of terrorists and should not affect you. The simple fact is you turn on time, or you won’t be paid! Now get to your position or you can be blacklisted for life!”

*Thank the heavens I was on time.* As the next vambrace was passed to him, he placed and clamped the guiding sample over the vambrace, hurriedly stuffing the etcher’s tip into the various groove and carving away as fast as he could, before applying a binding agent to settle the etching in. Giving a quick cursory look, he handed it off to the next person, who sanded the edges and the bulbous layers left over by the etching and binding agent, smoothing it down. The following station’s workers fixed temporary arcia terminals on it, running a test flow through it to see if the engravings worked as expected. Once they were done with the simple test, a layer of protective coating was applied before being tossed into a reflow oven, the coating naturally equalizing over the various grooves and notches of the etching to provide a continuous surface.

Each worker continued on tirelessly - vambraces, gauntlets, cuirass, helmet, greaves, boots, rifles and pauldrons were moulded, refined, etched, sanded, smoothen, layered and then re-etched again, followed by a quality check.

With twenty members in the production team, Culo was one of the ten engravers, while the others had to face the brunt of the factory’s heat in the steel pressing and moulding machine. Other teams tempered and heat-treated the steel before the production team got their hands on it, creating a fully in-house vertical economy where every material was within reach of each other.

The soot and grime from the factory began to accumulate on their faces, as the toxic fumes from the arcia etching fluid and high temperature outgassing of the steel made their way into Culo’s bloodstream, though he did not understand how it truly affected him. All he knew was that he could feel his body slowly dying, having chalked it up to continuous lack of sleep.

Moving through the routine, Culo etched piece after piece, changing out the guiding samples regularly and checking, his mind completely hollow save for his hands moving automatically on instinct, drilled into him over the last month and a half. The other workers were the same, no one even exchanging a single glance at each other, nor did they have the energy to spare. Culo could see a few of his team members taking the downtime between pieces to get some shuteye, dozing off immediately the moment they closed their eyes.

Culo tried to do that, but he was not as adept as the others. As he tried to sneak in a quick nap, he was suddenly rudely awaked by a gauntlet smacking him right in the face, the foreman’s angry face glaring right at him. “384! Get your shit together! You didn’t apply enough of the binding agent for the etching to work on this part of the damn gauntlet, and here you are sleeping on the fucking job! If you want to sleep, I can swap you out with someone else who’s more willing!”

“No sir, please, I need the job, I’m sorry! I’ll fix it right now.” Culo hurriedly grabbed the gauntlet, his hands flustered as he grabbed the wrong guiding sample, almost etching in the wrong traces before the foreman stopped him.

“You fucking idiot, you-” The foreman’s rage was interrupted by the clanging of the lunch bell, the large factory arctech clock that controlled the lives of the worker hanging overhead booming with a resounding chime. “I’ll deal with you after this - this better be your last fuckup!”

Culo apologized feverishly as the production team shuffled off, handing over their positions to a part-time team made up of the trade-school students. Their starry-eyed and relaxed demeanor only reminded the workers of how badly they were suffering right now, the mood only worsening as they headed to the factory’s messhouse, queuing up for their mandatory meal.

Culo had his head hung low, ashamed of the mistake as he queued up. His depression was interrupted by a worker shouting at the top of his lungs near the front of the queue. “What?! I got to pay for this now? Shit, this used to be part of the free meal!”

“I don’t make the calls, honey.” The lunchlady gritted her teeth. “If you got a problem, take it up with the management.”

“Fuck you, just give me a scoop of that damn soup - since when do we have to pay for soup?”

“Since you boys aren’t making enough money, I guess. NOW MOVE ALONG, YOU’RE HOLDING EVERYONE ELSE UP!” The lunch lady motioned with a dripping ladle, some of it splashing onto the shouting worker.

The shouting worker turned to face the others in line, noticing that some were clearly angry at him for holding up the queue. “You guys really going to pay for soup? When we’re working 16 hours a day, being paid only for eight hours? This is bullshit!”

“Still more than what we get outside!” A worker retorted.

“But at what cost?!”

The quarrel continued for a few more minutes, some of the workers murmuring in agreement, while others yelled back, telling the worker to move aside. A scuffle broke out between them, prompting the Seven Snakes guards assigned to the factory to immediately charge in and arrest the original complaining worker, hauling him off to an unknown fate.

Culo heaved a sigh of relief that the queue was moving along again, checking the time on the clock again. *20 minutes left. I can eat in ten, and then I’ll catch a nap for five-*

It was only now that the irony of his reaction began to hit him. *How low have I sunk that I can easily succumb to the whims of the factory? When was I this obsessed with time?*

As he glanced around the queue, each worker was also nervously looking at the clock, hoping that they had enough time left to finish their lunch. Some even boasted their own pocket-watches, checking them regularly to make sure they were completely on-time, fearful of being accused by the foremen. He watched as the workers who already had their meal gobbled down the cheap radish stews and mashed potatoes hurriedly, their eyes continuously glancing at the clock to see if they could afford a quick ten minute nap.

Culo felt out of place, as if he was an observer of a dystopian nightmare. Regret began to well up in him, as he wondered why did he even leave his village in the first place. He had succumb to the rumors of good standard of living and good food in the city, as well as the wages being far higher than whatever he and his brother was earning. Yet the life was far easier and simpler back home - he used to only work a few hours a day, and that was only during the harvest seasons.

Now? He was clocking in sixteen hours a day, non-stop, everyday of the week. Culo tried to convince himself that it was only temporary, just like the factory managers said. But he had this sinking feeling that it was going to be quite permanent, the feeling only intensifying when the food portion he received from the lunch lady was clearly smaller than the week before, the factory skimping out on ingredients.

Culo shuffled over to an empty seat, shovelling the tasteless grub into his mouth without caring about the taste. As he chewed, swallowed, chewed, swallowed, he wondered to himself just how did things become like this for him. He no longer found joy in food, nor did he find joy in his life. He could barely see the meal in front of him as anything other than just something to provide energy for him, a far cry from the succulent wild meat from tusken rabbits that he and his brother used to savour in the cold winter together. *What the hell am I doing here?*

“Hey, you alright? This free for me to sit?”

The sudden call broke Culo out of his stupor, seeing another unfamiliar worker pointing towards the empty bench opposite him. “Err, yea, of course.”

“Alright. You sure you’re fine? Saw you staring at the meal for a while now.”

*Has it been that long?* Culo glanced at the clock, noticing he had been eating for ten minutes, with only another ten minutes left. “I’m fine, sorry. I’ll make a move first, gonna try to catch some sleep first.”

“Hey, hey, hey, no need to rush off. I know that look on your face. You don’t like what’s happening around here, don’t you?”

Culo glanced around nervously, wondering if this was a trap of some sort, evoking a laugh from the other worker. “I’m not out to make you lose your job. You know, you’re not the only one to feel this way. Others do too.”

“Others do too?” Culo had this impression he was the only one, especially judging from the expressions of his fellow team members.

“Of course, its just that nobody dares to step out of line, lest they end up like that guy. Everyone wants to keep their jobs, right?”

“Yea… I guess so.” Culo kept a low profile, making sure none of the Seven Snakes guards else was listening. “If you step out of line, you get grabbed like that complaining worker did. The Seven Snakes are far too brutal - they execute everyone that goes against them!”

“I know. They killed a Master of the Society of Friendly Weaponsmiths , and most of the landowners too, all for their own benefit. It really makes you wonder, are you really getting paid your fair share from all the money they are making?”

“Hold on, hold on,” Another worker nearby interjected, clearly invested in the topic. “They already said they didn’t do it - it was someone else trying to frame them. I heard Baron Cain’s announcement way back-”

“Come on, how naive can you be?” The unfamiliar worker groaned. “Tell me, who benefits the most from the master dying? Who benefitted from the landlords dying? It’s the Seven Snakes! They have all the motive in the world to do so. With the Society inept as ever, no one dares to organize against the Seven Snakes, and they bought all the confiscated land deeds up at market price with the Baron’s blessing. Ridiculous, if you ask me, to think that people could believe their lies so easily.”

“The Society was useless to begin with - they only look out for their own, not dumb factory workers like us. The last time I tried to join, they just laughed at me and called me unskilled. Told me to wait twelve years.” The other worker retorted.

“Still, the Seven Snakes are benefitting the most. Look at how they got us all lined up like compliant sheep, ready to burn our lives away for the numbers on their papers to simply increase another digit.”

“What are you trying to get at?” Culo interrupted. “We can’t do anything, we got no power.”

The unfamiliar worker grinned, but soon began to speak faster as he spotted a Seven Snakes guard looking at his direction. “Like I said, you two, you’re not the only ones dissatisfied. If you want things to change, come find me after your shifts just outside the gate.” He left as abruptly as he joined, grabbing his meal tray and moving to another seat.

Culo and the other worker traded a few glances, before returning to their meal. The bell rang again once more, the factory clock dictating his life yet again. He stuffed what was left of the meal and hurriedly returned to the assembly line, avoiding the glare of his foreman and focusing on making sure he didn’t cause another mistake.

The hours flew by, but Culo felt like he had worked for an eternity, staring at the same spot in the same posture, the etcher having already became a part of him, the continuous clanging of machines a part of his life, drowning out his thoughts. He briefly entertained the thought of meeting the unfamiliar worker, but he quickly brushed it off, not wanting to risk anything for the wages he was earning.

Despite the physical and mental suffering that he was experiencing now, the money was still benefitting his home village to some degree at least. Whats more, the job was the only reason why he had a free dormitory to stay in, reducing his total cost of living. If he were to be evicted, then he would either have to rent or return home defeated.

With that settled, Culo toughened himself out, gearing himself for a productive sprint when a loud shout bellowed from the front of the assembly line. “The machine is down! The machine is down!”

The steel press machine was now malfunctioning, sparks erupting from the errant engravings that seemed to have cause a few gears to have jammed up, preventing the metal press from lowering or moving up. One of the workers tried to reach his hand in, attempting to dislodge the gears, but his hand was far too big. Production team members began to clamour around the machine , wondering if their pay would get docked because of the sudden disruption. The foreman himself was panicking, calling up everyone he could think of to try and solve the issue as quickly as possible.

Soon, the solution came in the form of small children, two girls who were barely eight years old, but they were paid well thanks to their small size and nimble fingers, able to weave through the tiny gaps that an adult couldn’t and fix the machines. Culo relaxed a little, knowing that the kids were good at fixing machines, a well-known staple of the factories around the city. The rest of the members returned to their stations as well, about to take advantage of the failure to sleep when suddenly a blood-curdling scream erupted from the same spot.

When Culo turned to look, the most heart-rending shriek engraved itself into his mind as he saw the originally tiny scrawny body of the girl dragged into the merciless gears, the sound of her arm and shoulder snapping asunder while the steel press moved on its pre-defined motion. The foreman stared helplessly as the machinery twisted her around, drawing the skin and flesh tighter and tighter into the gears, her limbs flailing widely whilst the blood splattered and streamed upon the floor, the oozing fluid snaking its way to Culo’s feet.

While the rest of Culo’s team stayed rooted, he was the only one who rushed out of his chair, attempting to throw a nearby curiass into the metal press in a bid to lodge the machine right into its gear. The freshly produced curiass was crushed, prompting him to toss in another sabaton before anyone on the team could react. The amount of steel finally jammed the steel press, Culo hurriedly reaching over to save the girl. “What are the rest of you doing? Help me!”

The members immediately got to work, extracting the mangled twisted arm of the girl, her shoulder entirely broken into fragments that were protruding from every angle, her head lulling out lifelessly as blood continued to gush out of the open wounds. “Get a healing potion, quick! Someone must have one!” Culo glanced around frantically for a solution as he laid the girl on the floor, but another small hand grabbed his shoulder.

He turned to see the other young girl, who shook her head sadly while pointing at her partner. Culo looked down to see that the girl was clearly already dead, her face locked in excruiating pain and anguish. He placed the body down gently, still shocked from the horrifying accident while the girl’s partner began to wrap the bloody body arm with the help of the others. It was then he noticed that the girl’s partner herself was missing a finger or two on both her hands, with one of them still wrapped up, the muscles and skin stripped to the bone from fixing other machinery.

As if on cue, the large factory arctech clock boomed without emotion, signalling the end of the shift. Unlike the other workers who immediately left, he was rooted to the spot, watching the others carry off the lifeless body of the girl, the girl’s partner almost treating this like it was a daily occurrence.

It wasn’t the first time it had happen in the weapons’ factory, but Culo had just never seen it happen on his assembly line, his mind trying to make sense of it all. Instead, he earn a slap to the back of the head, the foreman angrily berating him. “Look at what you’ve done to the damn gears! It’s going to take an entire day to fix this! You can forget about coming in until it’s done, and your wages will be docked until you pay off the damages!”

The foreman’s rage infuriated Culo beyond belief, his eyes nearly clouded with anger. Still, Culo held his tongue, not speaking a word as he gather his things and left for the changing room. Instead of his usual tired self at the end of every shift, he now slammed the locker door with fury unbeknownst even to himself, changing and hurriedly moving out of the factory, hoping to find the unfamiliar worker outside.

He did not see him, his hopes plummeting tremedously. *This is hell. The managers are inhumane. The workers are mindless. And the owners are oppressing us!* As he walked through Thresher Street, moving along with the returning workers, he saw a few workers clearly diverting off the usual path back to the housing complex, some of them turning into an alleyway. Catching onto the clue, he picked up the pace, hurriedly turning the corner and seeing their figures disappearing into a basement staircase, secretly tucked away behind a pile of trash.

Culo gingerly stepped forward towards the staircase, instead coming face to face with the unfamiliar worker coming out from behind the pile of trash, seemingly having placed something inside. Before Culo could question what the worker was doing, the worker grinned instead and warmly greeted him, distracting him. “Comrade, I knew you would come. Come in, everyone else is waiting for you.”

As the two of them entered, the alleyway returned to its usual lonely atmosphere, only punctuated by the girl’s partner walking alone towards the same staircase. She rummaged through the trash, looking over her shoulder to make sure nobody spotted her. Her hands felt for a familiar touch, before gripping onto a wad of rakels that had clearly just been placed recently, tucking it away in her shabby dress while she strolled off, whistling into the cold wind. # Chapter 84 - Mindtwister

*In the Culdao Peaks…*

Kyle dug his hand into the soil, feeling the damp moist texture on his skin. “The soil is performing quite well with the new irrigation. How soon can we start producing Poair Leaves?”

“We’ve already ran a few test on variants, so we can move forward with the best one. One of the plantations is already blooming now, so we’ll have the final harvest in a week’s time.” Merissa replied, handing him a clipboard with the information.

“I need more. Much more. What about the other farms?”

“We now are growing five varieties. So far, the new radish seeds are performing the fastest, it would take another month or two to see results.”

“Hmm…” Kyle continued to inspect the farms, especially the Poair Leaves plantation. Poair Leaves was a critical ingredient in his potion-making business. Now that the Aspis Weapons Factory was running at full steam, the Seven Snakes were essentially burning money. Adding on the cost of expansion in order to create more jobs for people, Kyle was quite near the brink of bankruptcy in the next two months.

“How’s the factory coming along?”

“The new one here? We’re making it an exact duplicate, but the goblins are much harder to train than the humans by a large margin.” Feldon frowned. “We should have it going in two weeks, but its going to take sometime to ramp it up. I’ll say it would be nowhere near the capacity of the one in Raktor, but it should make up for a shortfall.”

“If you need stronger goblins, have King Sahusa bring them to the Oracle Chamber for evolution.”

“It’s not about strength, it’s about dexterity and understanding. Now, if you told me there was a chamber to improve their intelligence, that would be right up our alley.” Feldon complained.

Kyle was not putting all his eggs into a single basket to meet the weapons contract, relying on slave goblin labour to shore up the defecit if any. It wouldn’t reach the same efficiency as the Aspis Weapon Factory in Raktor, but based on his estimates, he should be able to produce at least 30% of the required weapons within a month and a half in the Culdao Peaks itself just based on current progress.

He would have preferred to have a larger safety net over a longer period, but the timing of the military exercise and war was his deadline - if he wanted the best benefits, he needed to do this. *Every problem is just an opportunity waiting to be turned.*

As such, Kyle was now gunning for alternative avenues to increase his revenue streams as much as possible. With the goblin kingdom now turning to mining, manufacturing and agriculture, he was confident that he could monetize it even more than it already was. In some sense, the Culdao Peaks were effectively free labor now, due to the ability for them to remain self-sufficient. However, they were not making any money other than the sale of Euria Seeds that were harvested.

“Sir, we could simply just sell more Euria Seeds?” Feldon offered his opinion as they continued their inspection of the various terrace farms which stretched all along the valley. “Now that we have a wider area of control over the mountains and forests, we could expand our harvesting operations.”

“No. Oversupplying the market will only cut into our profits by tanking the price even more.” Kyle also knew that other gangs across the city were beginning to develop their own Euria Seeds plantations, especially thanks to the developments on Euria-infused potions. The concept of addictive potions were already widespread in Raktor, so Kyle needed something new to continuously dominate the market for drugs within the South Sector.

*People are always searching for the next high, so it may be time to move forward.* He had a good knowledge on what chemicals would be addictive, even considering if he could plant opium seeds from the Galactic Era seed storage in the Oracle Chambers as a start. However, such a chemical with an unknown production method not native to this planets would raise serious alarms. He had no way of knowing who was actually out there watching him, so his developmental steps had to be measured at best.

This meant that Kyle needed to focus on developing a potion that was already known locally. Haui had given him a few ideas, but he was focused on one that was one of the first he had encountered, but had not used yet.

MG404: [Title | Potion Inspector (Intermediate) | *It seems that you are somewhat of a scientist yourself. | +10 INT, Increased description of potions examined.*]

MG404: [Item | Mind-Bending Potion (Advanced) | *Sends the user on an illusionary trip fueled by their subconscious, rendering them incapable of normal functions. Lasts up to a day on a full dose.* | \*Recommended Dosage: Half a bottle for an adult human male for three days. Ingredients: Poair Leaves, Greiss Powder, Culdao Grass, Tusken Rabbit Meat, ???. Cooldown: Thirty Seconds.]\*

The title now allowed him to see the ingredients, most of which he previously did not have access to. Now, with the goblin kingdom under his control, both the Culdao Grass and the Tusken Rabbit meat were freely available to him in the wild just by foraging and hunting with the goblin hunters. The Poair Leaves could be grown easily, and Greiss Powder could be simply purchased off the market as a ubiquitous product.

Furthermore, there was still a hidden ingredient that would require him to either level up his Potion Crafter title or his Potion Inspector title. The issue with that was that the progress between titles was exponential. Kyle in fact had been crafting potions non-stops, attempting to obtain a new title over the last two weeks but to no avail.

*When I first started, the titles came in freely. Now, each one only comes in a blue moon.* Thankfully, with Haui on his side, Kyle was able to obtain the name of the last ingredient easily: Dzi Flower Sand.

“Such an ingredient is extremely rare. It can only be found in a mountainous area, and most of the time it is stuck either in the mud or in the water. It would take extreme filtration to extract any meaningful amount. I myself am not privy to the exact extraction method.” Haui warned Kyle as he passed him a sample of ingredient, which looked like a dazzling rainbow color bag of translucent sand. “Even the Alchemist Guild does not have a stable method of production nor does every mountain range have it.”

What Haui did not know was that Kyle had access to a Galactic Era A.I in the form of the Oracle, who was designed for planting seeds. As such, samples of the mountain soil and water around the Culdao Peaks were collected, Kyle letting the A.I process the samples and perform a chemical analysis on them.

[140 samples processed. Only 5 have the presence matching the chemical compound known colloquially as Dzi Flower Sand. However, the concentration is small.]

A representation of the chemical compound was presented to him. “You have chemical simulations built in?”

[Yes, Adminstrator.]

“Run oxidation and bonding simulations with all elements on the periodic table.”

[Confirmed. It would take five days to complete, with an accuracy of 66.7%]

Kyle begrudingly accepted the slow processing speed of the A.I, considering that he had yet to actually make any repairs to it at all. Five days was a long time, however, and Kyle wondered if there was perhaps local information available. He decided to go out to the goblin kingdom for any clues if the locals were familiar with the Dzi Flower Sand, accompanied by Sasha as he showed the sample that he had obtained from Haui around, starting first with King Sahusa.

“I have never seen that before.” King Sahusa stated bluntly. “Though I have heard rumors before of the Snow Song Tribe performing brilliant rituals during the period of festivities, their stone beaches on the glacier lakes filled to the brim with colorful sand just like this. If you need a guide, I can provide it.”

Kyle accepted the offer, immediately trekking up out of the valley towards the peak, following the new river that the goblin workers had carved out by hand to irrigate the terrace farms, siphoning water from the ice melt far above. The trek was relatively easy and harmless, the path between the Snow Song Tribe and the domain of King Sahusa well-trodden and clear-cut.

The wind rustled the myriad of ferns and palm trees that surrounded them, the humidity copious despite the mountainous terrain due to the abundance of water all around that evaporated under the hot daylight. Insects the size of a human palm skittered among the detritus of the dense jungle like floor, while birds of all feathers called out, their presence masked by the vast foilage that seemed to stretch on for infinity into the distance.

Kyle followed the guide, keeping an eye out for everything around. The environment felt quite like a typical colonial outpost, genetically modified permaculture used to terraform and create a livable environment for humans. Yet, as he ascended towards the glistening white peaks that formed the Culdao Peaks, the level of arcite infused into the air was ever slightly higher.

*What is arcite, exactly?* Kyle used the spare time he had now to ponder on the nature of the element that his abnormal strength was derived from. Sure, calling it an exotic element was an easy way to accept its mysterious properties, but Kyle had never heard of an element that adhered to very specific engravings as well as their sequence.

The presence of a fixed sequence as evidenced in his tests made it clear that arcite followed a language of sort. None of the books that he had consumed in the past months on arctech had really touched on it. They simply prescribed formulas and patterns that has been revised and reformed over decades of experiments. None dare to claim they knew the exact guideline of arcite and the underlying rules that governed its behaviour.

What made it even more confounding was that the supposed exotic element was nearly everywhere to be found in the area, as prevalent as air itself. Exotic elements of the Galactic Era were usually found in unusual geological formations or extreme conditions, such as specific quadrants of an accretion disk or the innards of a collapsing wormhole. Following conventional laws of density, the arcia density should follow gravity, but the air of the Culdao Peaks was a clear argument that arcia did not agree with that theory, seemingly increasing in strength as he ascended up from the valley.

*It can’t be magic.* Kyle wasn’t about to succumb and simply hand-wave it. His powers and System most likely depended on it - he would need to make sure he had the finances and resources to discover the truth behind his reincarnation. *One impossible thing at a time.*

As Kyle squinted at his surroundings which was compromised of raging gorges and avalanche debris, Sasha trailed him from behind, lost in her own thoughts. They trekked in silence, the sounds of nature making up for the lack of conversation until Sasha suddenly made the first move. [Sir, can I ask a question?]

Kyle was slightly taken aback, never having experienced Sasha taking the initiative to ask him a question. Usually it would be a straight-to-the-point report, an affirmation or an problem, this behavior having stemmed from Kyle training her personally.

“Of course.”

[Why did you not order me to retrieve the information regarding the Dzi Flower Sand? You could have done something else instead of trekking here.]

The question caught Kyle completely off-guard, his mouth opening slightly to answer before he contemplated it even more. “I needed to see the source for myself.”

[I could have brought a light-capturer.]

“Well, then I wanted to take a break, to survey the territory a little.” Kyle came up with a filler answer quickly, but deep down he too did not know why - he could have found a more efficient way to recover his mental instead of trekking on a three-hour journey.

Even in the Galactic Era, Kyle can’t remember the last time he took a walk like this. He had never done this with anyone, not even his family. *Why am I even doing all of this? Would it simply end up the same way?* Yet he could not think of any alternatives to his current plan, having been a crime lord most of his life. It was like second-nature to him, something he couldn’t shake. He had half-joked in his former life that even during retirement, he might act as a consultant of sorts.

Even given a new leash of life, Kyle never felt like the wheel had stopped for him. There was always something important to do, something to gain, something to win, something to conquer, something to -

[Sir, can I ask another question?]

Kyle’s train of thought was interrupted, but he recovered quickly. “If this is about the off-day you took, I am perfectly fine with it. You have served me well thus far, but I do hope you will inform me before you decide to do such things. An attack on the Seven Snakes may occur during such an outing.”

Sasha’s face immediately began to redden slightly, her head quickly diverting lower as though she was focused on where she was stepping through the rough trekking trail. [I apologize, sir, I will consult you in the future. My question is not related to that.]

“Ask.”

[Sir, what are you aiming for?]

Kyle stopped briefly, turning to give Sasha a slightly confused look.”I’m aiming to reach the Snow Song Tribe to obtain more information on the Dzi Flower Sand. Did I not make this clear?”

[No, sir, I meant in general, for you and the Seven Snakes. What are you aiming to achieve?]

A calm silence reigned between the two as only the sounds of their soles squashing the wet mud echoed amidst the teeming forest. “… If I told you, you would not believe me. No one on this planet would.”

[Sir, I joined you to achieve my own strength, to be able to stand tall. To survive by my two hands. For someone as strong as you, what is there left to achieve?]

Kyle was not upset with Sasha’s inquisitive questioning - he much preferred his followers to be able to make creative decisions on the job, which meant that they must be able to think beyond their gravity well. “I am not the strongest in this world by any measure, or even the universe at large. There are still peaks to climb, worlds to dominate, mysteries to uncover. Perhaps you think that this city and its surrounding regions are all that are important to me. But in my eyes, even if I lost everything that I’ve gained here, it would mean very little in my grand scheme.”

Sasha pondered for a few seconds. [I don’t quite understand. I… I don’t have a goal beyond achieving strength.]

“You lack the foresight. You have not see what I have seen, so you do not know what is possible, and what lies beyond. But I have.” Kyle asserted as he clambered towards a short cliff, pulling himself upwards before the streaming rays of light finally enveloping his body as if he had ascended to the sky, his confident face looking back at Sasha while he extended a hand. “If you do not know what to do, then follow me - I will give you your purpose, to see the top of all things, here and now, past and present.”

Sasha stared in awe for a moment, before grabbing onto his hand, stepping off the cliff and climbing up to come into the view of a what seemed to be a dormant caldera, the basin awash with a lush forest and a beautiful sparkling lake that dazzled the eyes. Sasha stared in awe for a moment, the view astounding. She did not dare say what was in her heart, but vowed solemnly in secret to follow Kyle till she saw what he meant.

“There’s the tribe, I guess we had no need of the guide after all… where’s the guide?”

In the midst of their conversation, they had left the goblin guide far behind, exhausted and way out of breath, unable to keep up with the intensive pace of Sasha and Kyle. Sasha returned back down the path, hoisting the guide up in her arms like a princess to the same cliff where Kyle was surveying the location.

Kyle noted the almost perfect rim of the caldera that extended in a circular fashion. *Too perfect, in fact.* He suspected that there was more than meets the eye, especially with the presence of the Oracle Chamber embedded in the very mountain he was stepping on now.

The trio began to descend into the basin, following a carved staircase along the inner rim. The snow had long melted, though some still retained their form, tucked away in the corners under rocks and trees. Hardly any birds were present, a stark contrast from the incessant din from the forest before. They soon reached the tribe’s outer wall, a makeshift wooden palisade no different from any other goblin den, except for the cast iron shield that hung over its entrance.

As they approached, the watchtower guards began to panic, hurriedly opening the gate for him. None of the tribal goblins dared to oppose Kyle, all of them knowing exactly who he was. Some of them were even more afraid of the woman next to him, though Kyle was not focused on intimidating them, instead having one of them lead him and Sasha towards the supposed stone beaches of the glacier lake. The exhausted goblin guide was offered food and drink, while curious goblins gathered around him.

<What were they like?> One of the more inqusitive goblin children asked. <Are they are strong as they said they are?>

<Far more monstrous than any adventurer who even made it this far… The male human is even a mind-reader, able to converse with the female monster at will!>

A wave of ooh and gasps attracted more towards the guide, as the guide began to exaggerate his boring trek with Kyle and Sasha, giving birth to rumors and folklore that would last for generations to come.

True to King Sahusa’s words, the surrounding stone beach that would’ve been covered in snow was now glittering under the bright sunlight, the blue ice remnants of the glacier still floating in the large lake that was slowly draining out into the rivers and tributaries beyond. Amdist the whistling wind that came from all directions, Kyle bent down to pick a random stone of the beach, revealing the rainbow Dzi Flower Sand in small but significant amounts, scattered around in what seemed to be a repeating circular pattern, encompassing the perimeter of the lake in waves.

However, the pattern was not consistent along its length, having certain nodes and branches that were cutoff abruptly, as though it was entering the ground. Both Kyle and Sasha had no clue what the pattern meant, having to return to the Snow Song Tribe to question its shaman.

<We give our thanks to the Mother of the Heavens, Dignitary of the Eighteen Stars by arranging the accumulated sand into the pattern pre-ordained by our ancestors past. It is through this pattern that we offer back some of the energy that we have been gifted by the Mother above, to nourish the environment.> The shaman explained as he rested cross-legged in the center of his tent, the walls rife with ornaments, bracelets and paintings created using the excess Dzi Flower Sand. Even weapons and armour were neatly displayed on a rack, each of them glistening in the sand along the mystical engravings that ran their length.

It was clear from the age of the items that there was not much to sieve from the environment each year, with some of the bracelet dating back decades or even centuries. Sasha stared long and hard at a dazzling falchion, adorned with the largest Dzi Flower Sand jewels the tribe had to offer, with ancient cursive arcia engravings marking its entire length. For some innate reason she felt drawn to the sword, though the leery eyes from the shaman clearly indicated that the falchion was only reserved for special ocassions.

Kyle instead only saw the relics as materials. He had half a mind to simply scavenge what was on display when he and Sasha were suddenly handed a ceremonial bracelet each by the shaman.

MG404: [Item | Snow Song Ordained Dzi Bracelet (Intermediate) | *Blessed by the foregoblins of yore.* | +15 MAX MP, +1.25% MP Cost Reduction on all skills.]

*What?!* Kyle was not expecting the effect of the Dzi Flower Sand to be this powerful - while the cost reduction was small, it was still a step towards mass adoption of highly-efficient arctech equipment. *This could create amazing cost savings in the regenerators and in subsequent devices.*

He hurriedly inspected the bracelet, noticing that the bracelet was made of two layers: fused Dzi Flower Sand into a silica cover over a wooden base, the cover protecting the wood from decay. The engravings on it were unlike anything he had seen in the textbooks he had gathered so far. They seemed more like runic symbols with clear starting and ending points, as if they were standalone pictures that could be slotted into a jigsaw in any shape or fashion.

<Shue, Yul, Uryag…>

The shaman and Kyle stared at each other in confusion. “What did you say?” Kyle squinted his eyes.

<I did not say anything…?> The shaman glanced around frantically, before his bulging eyes landed on Sasha, who’s ceremonial bracelet was now glowing with a red aura brilliantly as it laid on her palms. <The female monster can speak?!>

Sasha looked up in astonishment, her head swivelling quickly between the shaman and Kyle staring at her. [Sir? What’s wrong?]

“What did you say just now?”

[I didn’t say anything, I was just reading what was written on the bracelet.]

“Hmm… read it again.”

[Yes, sir…] <Shue, Yul, Uryag, Golus, Kiear, Samki Polwa Erix> At this point, even Sasha was surprised by the words that were coming out from her mouth, having never spoken once since she had been kidnapped from her homeland. As she completed the sentence, the bracelet vibrated vigorously, the red glowing aura intensifying before the silica cover began to melt, seeping into the pores of her palms like searing lava.

Sasha winced and tried to remove the bracelet, but the process was over as abruptly as it had began, leaving only the wooden layer of the bracelet behind, the Dzi Flower Sand somehow absorbed into her body with a burn mark now on the inside of her right palm.

“Sasha, your mouth!” Kyle hurriedly grabbed her face, checking over as purplish veins began to emerge, arcing and snaking under her skin from the edges of her mouth, forming symmetrical unnerving symbols on both of her cheeks. “Are you alright? Can you speak?”

She tried to speak the normal human language, but she could not utter a comprehensible word, instead only guttural sounds being emitted from her throat. [Sir…, I can’t!]. In a moment of panic at having lost the temporary ability to speak, she hurriedly picked up what was left of the disintegrating bracelet, reading the sentence out again. <Shue, Yul ->

Before she could complete the sentence, Kyle quickly grabbed her back and smacked the bracelet away, forcing her to look at him. “Calm down - we’ll get to the bottom of this together. I can’t lose you to an unknown phenomenon, let’s not make any rash moves until we know exactly what happened.”

While Sasha took a deep breath, controlling her emotions, she noticed that the shaman was already grovelling at her feet. <The female monster speaks the words of power long lost to our tribe! Great-grandfather, I finally have found the successor to our ways. Quickly, we must have her breed with ->

“Nobody is breeding with anybody here.” Kyle cut that train of thought immediately. “If you make any moves against her will, I will annihilate your entire goblin holding and have you trapped in the deepest mines. Or she could do that herself. Are we clear?”

The shaman nodded vigorously, hurriedly backing off out of the tent, no doubt to spread the rumor. Kyle did not mind the rumors spreading, as it only helped to solidify their rule over the goblins even more. As Sasha continued to contemplate what she had just discovered about herself, Kyle was now more focused on the seemingly magical properties of the Dzi Flower Sand, that did not seem to be recognized by his System. *So the System is not omnipotent after all.*

This further advanced his various theories of the history of this planet, but that would be a discussion for later. The issue of the most pressing importance now was how to collect enough of the Dzi Flower Sand for now to accelerate his potion making business. Kyle returned out to the beach, inspecting where there were natural formations of the Dzi Flower Sands as guided by the local goblins. Unlike the fine grains that he had seen them scatter into the pattern, he found them in bulbous nodules that were ridden with dents, the Dzi Flower Sand bonding with something else.

He picked up one of them in his hand, reading the System information message.

MG404: [Item | Dzi-Nodia Amalgamation | *Natural state of Dzi Flower Sand.* | Dzi Flower Sand Amalgamation with Toxic Nodia. Can be separated through melting.]

*Just like mercury and gold…* Already Kyle was running possible templates of processing and production in his mind. If the soil and water here had traces of the Dzi Flower Sand, he just needed to collect enough of the Toxic Nodia - only that he did not know anything about the new liquid element. That information alone was easy to obtain from the Snow Song Tribe, who had been melting the nodules to obtain the Dzi Flower Sand.

Back within the tribe’s central area, there was a designated tent for the extraction - two pairs of goblins donning on makeshift masks made of animal skins, as the greyish fumes twirled and spiralled into the air, buoyant by the heat from the hot iron tongs that clamped each nodule, before slowly drifting lower to the floor, accumulating like a dense mist that.

<The scent is intoxicating, and may cause delusions as well as corrosion to both the body and the environment…> One of the goblins handed Kyle a flask of condensed Toxic Nodia, collected from the ambient clouds that hung low to the ground by shabbily constructed contraptions that concentrator the vapor over time, albeit very slowly.

MG404: [Item | Flask of Toxic Nodia | *For a quick escape from life* | Highly corrosive and lethal to organic material.]

With the information now in hand, Kyle and Sasha trekked back down to the valley holding a satchel of the Dzi Flower Sand and the Flask of Toxic Nodia in hand, the exhausted goblin guide left behind overnight to recuperate.

By the time they had returned, it was nearing evening, the same ambient pink hue dominating the sky of dusk once more, overlooking the myriad of lights that began to appear all throughout the valley. Countless lives and houses dotted the landscape as goblin farmers took a well-deserved rest, while the mine rotate shifts, Feldon yelling at the top of his lungs as he oversaw the operations.

[Sir, I would like to return to the tribe tomorrow. I believe I can improve my skills there and find out what I’m truly capable of.] Sasha suddenly spoke up. Clearly her being able to speak specific words was a life-changing event for her, and Kyle had no intention of restricting his follower’s growth.

“No problem. But I need you ready in two weeks, back in Raktor.”

[Understood. I will be prepared.]

Kyle watched as Sasha returned to her own living quarters in King Sahusa’s palace, his mind considering what had happened at the tribe. *For Sasha to be able to read the old engravings, she might hold the key to deciphering the true nature of arcia. A trip to her homeland would provide many benefits. A future endeavor to keep in mind*

He returned to the Oracle Chamber, intending to begin his attempt to manufacture the potion. “Inform anyone approaching the Chamber that I am not to be disturbed unless it is news of unrest in Raktor.” Kyle waved his hand in the air as he approached a prepared table, the chemical reactants all already laid out for him by some of the repurposed seed storage drones.

[Understood, Adminstrator.]

Cracking his hands, he began to experiment on a various combinations, applying everything he knew about potion brewing from his previous attempts. However, Haui himself did not know the exact ratio or formula required. With little Dzi Flower Sand in hand, he had to be extremely careful with the ratio he was using, trying to reverse-engineer the formula in small doses instead of a full flask.

Before long, he had multiple trays full of precalculated Dzi Flower sand in petri-dishes scavenged from other parts of the Oracle Chamber. “Confirm milligrams.”

[Scanning - 0.1 mg to 1mg in rows of 50 confirmed.]

Kyle began to divide the other ingredients, the brute force experiment beginning. He kept track of the percentages he had developed, as well as using the insight on Poair Leaves and Griess Powder obtained from before.

The hours flew past in a blur, Kyle taking quick power naps and spending upwards of 18 hours a day in complete silence save for the hum of the gas tanks all around the former observation lab, his entire being completely attentive on each results.

Hours turned into days, and by the eighth day, Kyle was near his wits end, having ran nearly every combination of the three new elements for the Mind-Bending Potion : Culdao Water, Tusken Rabbit Meat and Dzi Flower Sand. His satchel was running low, and he was considering if he should return to the tribe for more.

He flipped through all the results of his combination, even picking up one petri-dish and inspecting it.

MG404: [Item | Unknown Object/s| *Placeholder description for when user attempts to mix random things.* | The System was unable to determine the effect or origin of the mixture.]

Kyle gritted his teeth, picking out multiple perti-dishes and obtaining the same information over and over again in desperation. As he picked up what felt like the ten-thousandth petri-dish, a notification appeared in his face.

MG404: [Title Obtained | Potion Inspector (Advanced) | *A reward for the tenacious squinting of eyes and tearing of personal hair over potions.* | +25 INT, Increased description of potions and residuals examined.]

He hardly cared about the snarky descriptions any longer, quickly picking up the petri-dish

MG404: [Item | Failed Mind-Bending Potion| *One does not simply throw random particulates and expect a potion.* | Order of placement is wrong.]

*Order of placement?* Kyle quickly revisited his experiments, noting that he put the Dzi Flower Sand first into the petri-dish, before simply laying the rest and pouring the Culdao Water over.

The next three days was a hectic sprint, as Kyle followed the breadcrumbs left by the mysterious descriptions while trying every single combination he could think off. Finally, nearly one and a half weeks after he began, he had the method and percentage down.

“35% Poair Leaves, 5% Griess Powder, 10% Tusken Rabbit Meat, 5% Dzi Flower Sand, 45% Culdao Water. First pound the power into the meat by massging it, wrapping it in Poair Leaves, before boiling it in Culdao Water, and then sprinkle Dzi Flower Sand in.” Kyle let out a sigh of relief as he held the miniscule test tube up to the light, seeing the rainbow distortions of the lab’s inbuilt lighting through the fluid and glass.

MG404: [Item | Mind-Bending Potion (Advanced) | *Sends the user on an illusionary trip fueled by their subconscious, rendering them incapable of normal functions. Lasts up to a day on a full dose.* | *Recommended Dosage: Half a bottle for an adult human male for three days. Ingredients: Poair Leaves, Greiss Powder, Culdao Grass, Tusken Rabbit Meat, Dzi Flower Sand.*]

MG404: [Title Obtained | Potion Crafter (Advanced) | *For pounding meat repeatedly. Mind-bending in itself.* | *+25 INT, Increased description of potions examined, +20% chance to craft an intermediate potion when using basic materials. 20% increased chance of discovering intermediate potion recipes per attempt, stacking. Resets on discovery.*]

Kyle grinned to himself as he grabbed a bit of Absolute Euria from his sample flask, dropping three drips in.

MG404: [Item | Euria-Infused Mind-Bending Potion (Advanced) | *Sends the user on an illusionary trip fueled by their subconscious, rendering them incapable of normal functions. Lasts up to a day on a full dose. Highly Addictive* | *Recommended Dosage: Half a bottle for an adult human male over three days. Ingredients: Poair Leaves, Greiss Powder, Culdao Grass, Tusken Rabbit Meat, Dzi Flower Sand, Absolute Euria.*]

Despite all of these achievements, Kyle still did not have a consistent method of producing Dzi Flower Sand. In order to extract it from the environment, he would have to utilize Toxic Nodia repeatedly, but even Toxic Nodia itself was hard to obtained.

[Administrator, a man named Feldon is asking to see you.]

“If it’s not about Raktor, I don’t care.”

[He claims that miners are falling ill by the dozens from toxic fumes.]

Kyle’s eyes widened as he quickly grabbed his cloak, flipping it on as he met Feldon outside the Chamber. “Sir, it’s real bad, there’s this weird greyish mist that is pooling on the lower shafts. None of our miners can go any deeper than that, it’s like we hit a gas pocket.”

Instead of the concerned expression Feldon expected to see, a small grin was already growing on Kyle’s face, his eyes not even looking at Feldon. “Looks like a new cash cow is here to stay.” # Chapter 85 - Imminent

Gordon grunted as he gripped a wrench tightly, trying to loosen a nut that was bolted tightly to the machine. “Come on, you dumb shit, come on - Urgh!” The wrench lost its alignment, the imbalance throwing him backwards as it went soaring through the sky, clattering onto the factory floor.

The managers all stood around staring at Gordon desparately trying to fix the machine, irking him even more. “What are you dumb idiots standing around for? This is not the only machine broken, isn’t it?”

“Sir, but we don’t know how to fix the other machines as well!”

“JUST TRY SOMETHING! If we let the machines falter any longer, we’ll be seriously behind our deadline! You think your jobs will be safe as well?!” Gordon yelled at the top of his lungs, frightening the managers into action.

Gordon wiped the oil off his cheeks and nose, ordering another group of technicians to take over fixing the machine. He gritted his teeth as he stomped through the factory, the last three weeks of non-stop production taking a toll on him. He could not even take time off to go enjoy himself at the Seductive Serpent or the casino, not with the ever-increasing number of problems.

At first, it was only a single machine that broke down. Then afterwards it became injuries, casualties, workplace safety issues. With each machine broken, the other assembly lines were driven to work harder by Gordon, only exacerbating the fatigue cycles of the other production machine and causing them to fail as well. *How in the world are we supposed to hit the target now?*

What’s more, there was rumors of the formation of a secret group of sorts, one made of workers under the blessing of the Society. Gordon had no doubts that it was this group that was attempting to sabotage the production lines, disguising the machines failures as an error in management or overwork. “Crack down on any, ANY worker that tries to tamper with the damn machines. I want light-capturers set up everywhere all around the clock, and anyone who is so much of a suspect, arrest them indefinitely!”

The pressure and stress had turned Gordon into a fearsome manager, partly driven by the fear of what Kyle might do to him when Kyle returned to Raktor. As Gordon grumbled and complained to every foreman he could get his hands on, the production technicians kept their heads low, unwilling to lose their job or stand up directly. Amdist the numerous faces who stole a glance at the raging Gordon, Culo stared at Gordon, his face burning with hatred.

“Relax, comrade.” A hand was placed on his shoulder, reminding him not to stare to long. “Your vigor and loyalty shall prove itself in due time.”

“Sorry, Gunther. It’s just… that manager is not even in the slightest bit remorseful of what pains he is inflicting on the workers. It’s like he doesn’t even give a single shit about safety at all!”

“That is what all the pigs at the top think of us. Just mere pawns to move around so as to fill their coffers. A disgusting social order, imposed by force. But soon, we shall have that force soon.” Gunther muttered in a low tone, focused on etching the armor piece in front of him.

“When will we act?”

“Soon, soon. And you shall lead the charge.” Gunther smiled as the lunch bell rang, the workers congregating in the lunch canteen once more.

Instead of the usual dejected faces that used to be ever-present amongst the workers, they instead held knowing looks, their eyes glancing shiftly as they gave slight nods to others around, eating in silence and watching out for Seven Snakes guards.

None of them talked to each other, not even Culo and Gunther as they sat away from each other amdist unknown workers, masking their affilation to one another. If the Seven Snakes guard had been looking carefully, however, they would have noticed a burning rage and fire in nearly half of the workers present.

Gunther shared a glance with Culo, before motioning with his finger, as if he was twirling his curly hair. Instantly, two other workers starting yelling at each other. “That pudding was mine, you bitchface!” The first hollered as loud as he could, attracting attention.

“Oh yea? Well too bad! What you going to do?” The second taunted, before earning the full force of a metal lunch tray still dripping with sauce right into his face. The tray spun off, smacking into another worker who immediately took offense, a brawl breaking out.

*My time to shine.* Culo finished his lunch quickly, standing up to return his tray before walking off. But instead of heading back towards the production lines, he headed towards a Seven Snakes recruit blocking a small door, who was clearly distracted by the fight brewing in the lunch canteen and speaking rapidly into his arctech radio.

*Once I get past these doors, I’ll smuggle the-*

Before he could sneak past through the door, a gauntlet suddenly grabbed his collar behind, dragging him back to come face-to-face with the recruit. “Where the fuck do you think you are going? You’re not allowed past here!”

Culo didn’t reply, instead acting oblivious and putting on his most believable act. “Sir, I was just trying to go to the toliet! I’m new here!”

“Don’t try to fool me, your number shows you’re clearly one of the first day hires! Now get back before I-” A bowl of soup smashed against the Seven Snakes recruit’s head, prompting him to look away, buying enough time for Culo to break free of the recruit’s grip, before twisting the recruit’s head around into an armlock, dragging him through the door before anybody spotted him.

Culo jerked his head as the grappled recruit attempted to wrestle out of the lock, throwing punches in desperation. An elbow drove deep into Culo’s ribs, causing him to wince and nearly loosen his grip. In one smooth motion, he drew a small purple potion flask from his overalls’ pocket and pulled the cork with his teeth, before pouring it onto the recruit’s face.

The recruit sputtered as the liquid blocked his view, but his motions began to slow down tremedously, as if he were slowly becoming more and more lethargic. “You won’t get away with this!” He spoke through an ever-tightening grip on his neck.

“By the time you wake up, we’ll be done.” Culo tighten his lock even more, cutting the airflow to the recruit’s brain who finally began to lay limp.

Culo hurriedly stripped him of his armour, putting on the helmet. He found a nearby empty crate to dump the recruit in, heaving the body over and shifting the crate to a hidden place between the towering shelves of materials and rifles.

He had not seen the layout of the entire factory before, but memorized the blueprints for over a week and a half now. Acting with purpose, he deliberately approached the loading dock where wagon drivers were waiting for the next shipment to deliver to a separate storehouse.

“Hey, Peter!” Another Seven Snakes guard stationed there called out to him towards him. “Whatchu doing here? Skiving? Weren’t you just shouting for help at the canteen just now?”

“Yea, it’s too rough, I had to get out of there.”

“What?! Are you crazy? If we let the workers riot out of control they’ll send us to the damn Culdao Peaks! I sure as hell don’t want to end up like those mad murderous fuckers who came back - they give me the creeps.”

“If you wanna do something about it, go ahead. I got an order from the top that I’m swapping with you.”

“Huh? First I heard of that, I didn’t see anything like that during our morning briefing.” The other guard frowned as he leaned back against the crate, eyeing Culo warily.

“Ask the vipers, I’m just following orders.”

“Vipers? Huh… okay. How bad is in there? I’m not going in there alone, right?”

“I don’t know, but you finally get to beat people up, right?”

“Damn right I do. One of the perks of being a Seven Snakes, yea? By the way, you sure you alright? Your voice is a bit funny.” The other Seven Snakes guard squinted, inspecting Culo.

Instead of letting him inquire anymore, Culo brandished the rifle he stole from the recruit, his finger resting on the trigger. “You making fun of me? We can settle this outside.”

“Oh yea?” The other guard grinned, standing up to his full height with his rifle brought to bear as well. Culo clutched the grip of his rifle, his mind racing. *I don’t know how to use the rifle at all… shit! What if he-*

“Alright, alright, you got it man. Hey, what’s the matter? Relax, I’m going. Have fun watching wooden crates move to and fro.” The other Seven Snakes guard slung his rifle back and held his hands up in jovial surrender, walking off with the rifle towards the lunch canteen.

As soon as Culo took his post, a unmarked wagon drove into the loading bay, the driver getting out and giving a quick nod to Culo. The two moved with purpose, hauling crates out one-by-one and stacking them into the back of the wagon.

“Hey, hey, hey!” One of the loaders ran over panicking. “Those crates aren’t supposed to be shipped until two days later!”

“I got orders to get this out as fast as possible. The military wants them right now. Or are you saying you know more than me?” Culo assumed a threatening stance, the feeble loader shrinking immediately and scampering off without another complaint.

Soon, the wagon was loaded to the brim with almost ten crates of rifles and armor, just as the end of lunch time was heralded by the ever-present gong of the factory’s clock. Culo slapped the back of the wagon, prompting the driver to leave as soon as he had arrived. He ditched the stolen armour and rifle in a separate crate, before quickly returning to his position in the assembly line.

As he walked slowly through the factory floor, guards and managers alike all ran past him, intent on containing the growing riot in the lunch canteen. No one suspected him at all, with none stopping to even give him a second glance.

A hand rested on his shoulder, nearly causing him to yelp out of anxiety. “Calm down, comrade. Is it done?”

“The wagon should be on its way to Wrent now.”

“Good. You have proven your loyalty to the cause.” Gunther nodded, taking a seat next to him. No one suspected the two of them, and neither would they try to disrupt their work. The two of them were by far the most productive members of the production team here - which only hardened Culo’s heart against the managers, especially when his only reward was an increase in hours with no changes in wages.

The work progressed without so much as a word shared between the two, each of them focusing on their work while the rioters at the lunch canteen were ferried out. One of them slightly nodded in Gunther’s direction, Gunther returning a knowing look.

The atmosphere in the factory was like a burning tension, a undetectable rage that spread like wildfire. Managers, foremen, and Seven Snakes guards were well aware of the growing unrest and disobedience of the workers, taking proactive action to check workers for weapons and other equipment they might be smuggling out.

Another grating sound erupted on the factory floor, the sound of another machine jammed once more. Already the common sounds of managers whining and foremen screaming could be heard, a part of the recent work environment. Each wail gave Gunther a slight smile on his face, while Culo kept his grin hidden, hardly unable to wait for the right time to strike.

Soon, their shift was over, and like clockwork over the last two weeks, Culo and Gunther made their separate way to yet another meeting point, each location different from the day before. This time, the meeting point was far from the factory, near the boundary towards the Left Paw of the Red Lion’s district.

As Culo rasped his hand on a discreet door, it swung open, welcoming hands dragging him and celebrating with loud cheer in the musky basement, a former arcia boiler room that had now be outfitted to be a gathering spots. Chairs and tables were loosely arranged under the flickering light of the arctech lanterns pilfered from other abandoned buildings.

Nearly a hundred workers were gathered here in the meeting, many congratulating Culo on the successful heist. “Great work, lad! Knew you had in you, you’re one of us now.”

Culo beamed as he accepted handshake and hugs one after another, uncaring about the grime, soot and oil present on all of them. They wore them as signs and marks of their hard labour. “Of course, anything for us. But they would find out soon enough.”

The workers began to stream in one by one, until the room was packed to the brim, each of them engaging in energetic conversations about the future. “Fuck those pigs, let them find out we got weapons. Maybe they’ll finally learn their fucking place and stop killing children!” Another worker yelled out, clearly drunk on stolen alcohol.

“Damn right, those fuckers live on our back-breaking labour”

“Yea, those managers have no clue how to run a fucking factory. If it was me, I’ll make sure everyone only does eight hours, and no more children on the floor!”

“We should strike, right now! Now’s the chance!” A worker shouted out, some groaning in response.

“Correct, Comrade. The time to strike is tonight.” Gunther’s voice carried over the din of celebratory cheer, instantly mollifying the workers who were all caught off-guard.

“Tonight? But we’re not ready yet! It’ll take time for us to get used to the weapons and armour to mount a proper resistance!”

“There is no time. They would begin to crack down immediately once they discover the missing weapons and armour. How long do you still want to be oppressed? How long do you still want to suffer? All of you may have joined the union for a different reason, be it for the Goddess, for a better wage, or for safety. But we are all united against one single foe - the Seven Snakes.” Gunther took an iron stick, jabbing it onto a table where a simple crude map of the district had been etched out, already rife with marks indicating their various outpost.

“Over the past month, we have accumulated thousands of valiant comrades and heroic brothers from all walks of life, some of whom are currently languishing in prisons, toiling away in unknown conditions. Right beneath the very floor of the factory, enslaved prisoners toil away unseen, unheard! All men are equal: Goddess, Sanctum, or neither! The only men who are less that dirt are those who try to lord themselves over others.” Gunther riled up the workers.

“YEA!”

“And they are only propped up into their position by virtue of our labour! They live frivousvly on the fruits of our labour, while we grit our teeth and break our backs just for a paltry wage, one that is highly dangerous. Think of all the children and men who have died in accidents so far - how many could have prevented? Yet what do the managers do when they see one of us die? They strike another mark of the list of thousands, and replace us with yet another migrant.”

“They treat us like cattle!” One of the workers roared in response, earning agreement from the others.

“We might outnumber them, but we’re outgunned! Kyle and his vipers are ruthless to the bone - they control our housing as well!” Some of the more cautious workers spoke out, many of whom were living in the apartments built specifically for that role.

“Would you rather die free, or live like livestocks, cramped into apartments that barely has enough living space for two, to sacrifice your souls for the production of weapons meant to kill other men?” Gunther shot back. “NOW IS THE TIME! Tonight, the slavers and tyrants will know what it means to oppress us, to step on us. For enough is enough - we fight! For wages, safety, and unity!”

“For wages, safety and unity!” The workers chanted back at the top of their lungs, Culo screaming at the top of his lungs.

“Our insider in the Seven Snakes has already been informed. Operation Brilliant Flame is now in effect.” Gunther began to organize the workers according to the preordained plan, dividing them into attack groups and handing each of them a crate filled to the brim with arcite ore. As Culo stepped forward to receive his crate, Gunther instead pulled him off to the side. “You have already proven yourself, comrade. Stay out of this one.”

Culo looked a bit forlorn, until Gunther led him to another room, which clearly housed the upper council of the union, who were already frantically issuing orders through messengers and coordinating ground movement through a myriad of arctech radios laid out along the walls. A replica map of the district was already being utilized to mobilize each attack group from various locations. He recognized markers like the Lusty Arcian and the Seductive Serpent, making him hesitate a little at what Gunther was planning for him. “Gunther, those locations would be heavily defended by the Seven Snakes - they are mainstays of their operations. I don’t think I would be able to -”

“Do not worry, those places are mere distractions to allow the rest of our brothers to strike accurately. And you are no longer a mere foot soldier - You will now be part of the council. Your valor will be critical in helming our protests and strikes tomorrow.”

Culo’s heart surged with pride, nodding vigorously as a young messenger brushed past them, hurriedly delivering a sealed letter to another cell group by foot. The moment the messenger left the hideout however, he instead made a sharp turn, instead moving through a nearby slum to lose anyone tracking him.

The messenger deftly avoided the dwellers and pickpockets, skipping over clearly intoxicated bodies and swerving past a crazy lunatic screaming at the top of his lungs in joy, his mouth frothing with green bubbles. Sharp turns and tight corners masked his path, the messenger soon approaching an inconspicuous building, seeing a hooded individual waiting in the dark alleyway.

The messenger slipped the individual a rolled message. “Duplicate of the letter sent to the other union members. The pot boils tonight. If I’m caught…”

“Understood. The Seven Snakes never forgets one of their own.”

With that short exchange, the messenger left as fast as he arrived, the hooded individual now retreating into a recess and reading the letter. He whipped out an arctech radio with a clear panic in his actions. [Reporting to vipers - the workers are attacking tonight.]

# Chapter 86 - Prison Break

“Is it a hoax?” Damian poured through the duplicate letter in his hand, Keith and Niko gathering around him at the main office in the shopping arcade. “For all we know, this could be a distraction.”

“They say here that they are going to blow up everything Seven Snakes affilated - I doubt they have the capacity to do so.” Niko scratched his chin after pinning all the written targets on a map laid out on a circular table.

“Not when we’re missing weapons from the factory.” Keith groaned. “I just heard from Gordon ten entire crates are missing. That’s enough to outfit two hundred of them.”

“Shit, that’s basically a turf war all over again! Why didn’t we post guards there?” Niko argued. “I told you we should have tripled the security at the factory. Now that the factory is in shit, Kyle will be pissed when he comes back from the Culdao Peaks.”

“We gave our word we’ll handle, and we will. No time to groan or whine - let’s solve it.” Damian mustered up his authority, calling in all the cobras on duty and mobilizing every member. “Get all of them armed and out onto the streets. Priority is the highest performing businesses. I want twenty men on every fucking entrance of all our establishments. Check the prisoners too, make sure none of them are escaping.”

Damian did not have the same level of confidence as Kyle, but as the underboss his orders were followed to the letter, the basic training and desentization exercises at the Culdao Peaks kicking into action, arming themselves at the armory. The gang began to move like a well-oiled machine, cobras and their squads reporting in like clockwork.

“Do we even have enough men to cover everything?” Niko asked as he tabulated the assigned squads, clerks in the office yelling commands and orders over arctech radios while organizing supporting groups. “At this rate, we’ll be spread way too thinly.”

“No, but I’ll be damned if I let even a single one of our branches get bombed. It would be a humiliation. At least we should post five men to the smaller ones, that way we can mitigate the damage done-”

“Cancel that order.” A familiar voice entered the office suddenly, prompting the three of them to quickly bow in respect.

“Sir, I didn’t know you’ll be back so soon.” Damian muttered while Kyle strode past him with Sasha in tow, along with a dozen veteran soldiers accompanying them from the Culdao Peaks.

“I heard from Adrian. Have all men concentrate on our main establishments, leave the branches undefended.”

Damian, Niko and Keith looked at each other uncomfortably, but accepted the order nonetheless, having already established that Kyle’s orders were final.

“Damian, Sasha, a word in my office. Niko and Keith, handle it now.” Kyle motioned for Sasha and Damian to join him in the private office overlooking the district, the vast expanse of the South Sector extending before them in a never-ending kaleidoscope of street lights.

“Damian, Sasha. It’s undeniable. The mole must be one of the vipers.” Kyle spoke quickly.

Sasha hardly reacted, but Damian was flabbergasted. “What?! That’s impossible - we did a background check on every viper, and Adrian is on the lookout for any suspicious movements. The mole might be one of the newer recruits-”

“Then explain how ten crates of weapons were stolen from us right under our noses. Not just the viper himself - we most likely have multiple turncoats within our ranks.” Kyle pulled out a letter from his coat, handing it to Damian. “I have the latest list of confirmed union council members from Adrian. The ringleader is a man named Gunther - who apparently is living right under our very noses in the housing complex under a different name, yet we do not have any documents nor evidence of his stay. Someone among us is helping him.”

Damian understood the underlying implications. “Are you still suspecting my brother?”

“Anyone who handles the business and logistical aspect is subject to scrutiny. Gordon, Reese, Keith, Monica. Even Adrian himself. I only trust you two, and I highly suggest you do not trust any other member within the gang, no matter how close you are with them.”

“Why do you trust me, but not my brother? He’s in charge of the finances, the trade school.”

“The reason I trust you, Damian, is because of your ability and loyalty as the underboss thus far to carry out my will, despite how unreasonable my orders might have seem. On the other hand, for the past month, Keith and Niko were clearly against them, with Keith being the most vocal. If I took any of Keith’s suggestions, the Seven Snakes may have very well ceased to exist at this point of time. Until proven innocent, I cannot forgo my suspicions.”

Damian winced under the weight of the accusations, though he could not deny that Keith had been acting more and more aggressively in recent meetings, especially with regards on how to deal with the growing unrest. “Then what do we do now? How do we smoke them out? What’s the plan?”

“The plan has not changed since this whole debacle started. The attack has two goals in mind: the first is to prevent the weapons factory from fulfilling the contract. The second is tarnishing the reputation of the Seven Snakes as weak and riddled with incompetency.”

“And I assume you know who is behind all of this.”

“Of course. But it is still a theory. It remains to be seen if it is the Ardent Cretins or another gang supporting him from behind the scenes.” Kyle twirled a pen in his hand, scrawling a crude layout of the district. “The new group of workers will attempt to bring the factory’s production to a halt.”

“Yes, by bombing every establishment and ruining our manpower allocations.”

“And once they’ve done that, they’ll force us to the negotiating table, asking for money and more autonomy. But this is not their only objective.” Kyle jabbed the tip of the pen towards the prison where research subjects and enslaved prisoners were held. “They want to free their brethren and other prisoners as well, to aid in the upcoming strike.”

“That’s not possible - the prison and alchemy lab is heavily guarded by our men.”

“Not when we have a mole among us. Do you understand?” Kyle stared at Damian, who was slightly confused before realization dawned on him.

“I understand.”

“Good. Then have all men organized as previously ordered, leave the prison minimally defended. Sasha, you know what to do.”

[What about Haui?]

“I’ll provide him the necessary information so he remains in one piece. He’ll know you’re coming. Get to work.”

Sasha nodded, leaving immediately with her veteran soldiers in tow, while Damian began helming the operations, organizing defensive squads all along the important streets. Kyle watched from his office as his men began to fan out across the district, his plan already coming into effect. He glanced at the list of top union members, memorizing their names and portraits to the best of his ability, along with a copy of their pamphlet and manifesto.

Kyle scoffed as he read their list of proposed demands. *When one has a hundred years of experience running a criminal organization, union-busting is part and parcel of the job.*

@@@

As dozens upon dozens of Seven Snakes guards poured out into the district, the residents were equally frightened and they scampered for safety, wondering if another war was on the verge of breaking out. Some of the more tenacious ones had nothing to fear, instead drinking their worries away in pubs and watering holes hidden away from the numerous patrols.

“What’s going on, what’s happening?” A kid asked as his mother hurriedly carried him into the house, her skirt trailing behind in the smog that drifted through the dark cobblestone streets. “What are those men doing?”

“Keep your head down, dear, it’s none of our business, and we’ll do well to stay clear.” The mother peeked back, watching five Seven Snakes guards armed to the teeth, their metallic Aspis MK1 armour glinting dangerously under the arctech signs that flickered. Their boots clanked against the rough stone as they prowled the streets, searching for union workers or anyone who fit the bill.

“Fucking Versian rats, can’t even keep a job, always asking for this and that.” One of the Seven Snakes cobra grunted as he checked an alleyway with his squad members. “Damn factory slaves should just keep their heads down, useless cunts. If they want a better wage, they should’ve joined the Seven Snakes.”

“Damn right, sir.” His squad members echoed in acknowledgement, scouring every nook and cranny through the darkest recess of the districts to flush out anyone hiding. The squads entered the slums, noticing many bodies lounging lifelessly against the side of the nearest support, be it a trash pile or a mouldy crate, their eyes staring into vacant space as they laughed to themselves like lunatics. Some of them were clearly factory workers, still wearing their uniform as they rolled about, chasing dreams and frantically flailing in a pool of bile and residual acid from nearby production.

One of the squad members picked up a small flask, a little rainbow-ish green tinge lingering at the bottom of it. “Shit, is this the new drug we’ve been selling?”

“Effective, no? Making a lot of money with this one. Heard Alex and his team were making a killing distributing this two days ago. One of the kids was off his rockers, testing it.” The cobra laughed as he grabbed the chin of a clearly drugged slum dweller, checking the pupils which were dilated far beyond its normal size.

“Must be having a good time, I wish I was having a good time.” A squad member remarked as he aimed his rifle around at the various other dwellers, many of whom were intoxicated. Even kids were lying face up, chuckling at nothing and at each other, the grin on their faces unnatural.

“Better not try this drug, I heard its fifteen times more addictive than the regular doped potions.” The cobra warned.

“Well, once this potion spreads wide enough, the union will kill itself in no time. The workers would be-” Instead of completing the sentence, the whizzing sound of a pellet shot past the cobra, cutting off his words. A gurgling sound could be heard, the cobra turning to see the squad member’s lower left jaw completely blown off, hanging by a strand of flesh as blood poured out from what remained of his face.

As the squad member collapsed to the ground, a withering barrage peltered them from all directions, their armour taking a beating. “AMBUSH, GET DOWN!” The cobra roared, a pellet nearly taking his head off, deflecting off his helmet at an angle and ricocheting towards the same drugged dweller, the pellet ripping into his lungs and searing flesh through the friction. The dweller’s insane smile still held on his face, even as he bled to death with the firefight raging all around him.

“Cobra Bosso reporting, we’re being ambushed at Brickworks, near the Lusty Arcian! We need help, now!” Bosso roared into his radio as he crawled through the dirt and grime that coated the slum, firing back randomly at the source of the barrage.

“Where the fuck are they, I can’t see them!”

“Over there, in the rooms above, the balconies!”

“MY ARM! MY ARM!”

“Grr, NIKO YOU FUCKING TWAT, YOU BETTER BE HALFWAY HERE NOW!” Bosso hollered at the top of his lungs into the radio, aiming the iron sights on the tip of his rifle at the balcony, spotting a mere shadow aiming right back at him.

With fast reflexes, he fired first, the shot blasting right through the union fighter’s rifle, causing it to explode brilliantly. The burst of light illuminated the temporary battlefield, revealing the rest of the union fighters, who were hiding amdist the rotten tents made out of disposed clothes, armed with the very same weapons that the Seven Snakes had.

The armor set began to shoot forth green arcia bolts, but it was hardly enough to deal with the sheer amount of pellets whizzing past the alleyway. The point defense arcia engraving was exhausted as soon as the battle began, offering only a brief respite in the opening salvos.

“Fucking shit!” Bosso ducked his heat as suppressing fire went right over him, blanketing the alleyway, his squad breaking up and taking cover wherever they could. Bosso clambered his way behind a pile of decaying corpses, long dead from disability and malnutrition. The pellets thud dully against the cover of flesh and bone, while he gripped the holster of his rifle, checking his fuel belt.

“COME ON, YA PUNKS, GET SOME!” He bellowed, lifting the rifle above his cover and holding down the trigger, the fuel pipe gurgling with intensity as the repeater unleashed dozens of shots in rapid successions, nailing everything in its path. Painful screams erupted from the fire, five union fighters falling to the continuous firing, Bosso squeezing even harder only to find that the rifle was not reacting any longer, the barrel overheating from the sheer friction of the rapidfire.

Bosso watched helplessly as another of his squad members was nailed ten times in the chest, the breastplate’s ceramic honeycomb shattering apart while his body tumbling to the ground. Before the union fighters could began to surround them, a sudden hailstorm blasted them apart from their flank, ripping their ranks into shreds as they cowered.

“Bosso! Whatchu doing hiding there like a rat!” Niko grinned as he burst into the battle, cornering the union fighter from behind with his own squad, pinning down the enemy with suppressive fire.

“Shut up and keep firing until they are all dead!”

All around the district, firefights just like this were breaking out, unfortunate bystanders and residents caught in the crossfire between the associates and the union workers, duking it out for each establishment affilated with the Seven Snakes.

Before long, a resounding explosion was heard before its brilliant light lit up the dark cloudy night sky, an entire building blown apart to pieces, marking the destruction of a Seductive Serpent branch pub and its unlucky inhabitants. As the battle raged on through the night, a team of thirty union fighters snuck their way through the patrols, aiming for something else.

“They are fully distracted now - we should save our brethren. To the prison!” The leader of the union strike force urged, rushing through the backlanes with rifles and arcite explosives. They moved towards an ugly concrete building, the sign of the Alchemist Guild hanging lifelessly. “We know the plan, scour the entire building for the cells. Kill anything that ain’t us!”

The union strike force scouted the building, noticing it was lightly defended with a few patrols. Soon, they all suddenly received a notification of sorts on their radio, immediately moving to reinforce the other firefights breaking out all across the city. “Comrade Bronco, something is strange. Look over there! Where are they going?” One of the union fighters scratched his head in confusion as he motioned for the leader to come over.

Instead, he earned a smack to the back of his loosely worn helmet from Bronco. “Idiot, our insider is distracting them for us, quick, get in!” Bronco led the strike force group by group, slowly making their way over to the unguarded entrance. “You two, circle around the back and check for traps or any ambush.”

“Yes, Comrade Bronco.”

The rest of the strike force swarmed into the building, carefully checking each corner of every hallway, scanning the dilapidated abandoned office rooms before reaching the entrance of the alchemy lab. They formed up against the door, preparing to breach as they could hear movement beyond the doors. While they had the guts, most of them had hardly used a rifle in their lives, some of their hands trembling violently as they gripped the holster. Still, Bronco had no choice but to push forward in the interest of time. “Count of three, rifle blazing. Three, two, one!”

The leader burst into the lab, only to be met with a completely empty lab, the flasks and contraptions all devoid of fluid nor materials, as though they had already evacuated beforehand. “Shit, they knew! It’s a trap! Check behind us!”

Yet no ambush came, nothing moved in the deadly silent lab, the strike force on their toes as they fanned out into the empty lab glanced around at each other, even checking back down the hallway through which they came. “Brother, I don’t see anything moving!”

“Huh?” The leader was confused, unable to wrap his head around what was happening. *Are they just letting us free them that easily?*

“Comrade, the prisoners, over there!” One of them pointed to the row of solitary cells, where more than two dozen were shivering and cowering on their beds. The leader shook out of his stupor, immediately ordering his comrades to free them.

“Don’t hurt me, I’ll do anything, just let me go, please! I’ll take the drug, I’ll take it!” The panic was clear in the prisoners’ eyes as they struggled, even when the union fighters unlocked their cell grills through brute force.

“We’re here to break you out, idiot. Now quit yapping and giving our position away or I’ll have to gag you myself.” Bronco warned, before stuffing a small handkerchief into the prisoner’s mouth before the prisoner could reply.

The union strike team was at a loss for words as they rescued the prisoners one by one, noticing the horrifying experiments that was performed here. “Oh, Goddess Nona, what have they done to you?” One of the union fighters knelt down to an obviously convulsing prisoner, who clutched his arm violently with both hands.

The prisoner’s skin hung loosely from his bones, as though he had been malnourished for decades, his gaunt cheeks visible to all as he stared right into the fighters’ eyes. “More, I need more, please!”

“More of what?”

“Stop wasting time, we need to get them out of here before the Seven Snakes guards come back!” Bronco hastened them, getting them to move out. “How many prisoners are there here?”

“Only two dozen, there should be more elsewhere.” A union fighter replied. “Maybe there’s another prison we don’t know about.”

“No, our insider guaranteed that this was the only prison the Seven Snakes currently have.”

“The others are downstairs, other workers who have been imprisoned!” One of the rescued prisoners yelled. “There are hundreds of them!”

“Good, we’re going to get them out. Anyone that can fight, take a weapon, now!” Bronco armed the prisoners who were still capable of moving, while leaving a squad to protect the unconscious and immobilized ones.

As they navigated the building, they soon found the basement that had been half-converted into a dungeon, though it was far more clean and sterile than the usual prison, as if it were a research facility.

A single hallway that extended into the distance, with each cell holding more than twenty of their union workers, other thugs and petty criminals who had been captured by the Seven Snakes over the last three months, many languishing away in torment with them sharing a single shit bucket, the stench overwhelming. Large exhaust vents dotted the walls, helping to circulate fresh air from the surface through giant fans.

“HELP US, SAVE US!” One of the prisoners screamed, clutching at the grills that imprisoned them.

“We’re on it. Comrades, break down the doors!”

The union fighters slammed and shot off the hinges, freeing them by the dozens as they all scampered and screamed for joy. “The other cells, deeper in! You three, hold the exit until we’ve freed all of them.” The leader ordered, leading the charge as the small strike force built into a hungry mob, desiring revenge.

Before long, all of the prisoners were freed, many hugging each other and crying tears of joy, freed from the slave labour and human experimentation they had been subjected to. “To the exit, quickly!”

“Not so fast, my friends.” A unknown voice echoed down the single hallway, the voice garbled through a filter. “I can’t have my precious research subjects leave that easily. Not without a parting gift. A field test needs to be properly prepared for, after all.”

Bronco turned to see a lab coat alchemist at the end of the hallway, wearing what seemed to be a plague masks, the glasses flickering under the sterile white arctech light.

“Alchemist Haui, you little fucker, shoot him!” Bronco and the union fighters held no hesitation, immediately aiming at Haui only for a sudden blur slashing through them like a whirlwind. He could only see the facade of a woman, twirling a glittering falchion that sliced through the barrels of the rifles like butter, dismantling them in just a few seconds. Leaping back away from the throng of prisoners, the woman stared at them while flicking the blood of her blade, a small grin on her face.

“My hand, she cut my hand off!” A union worker yelled in pain as he doubled over, many of the fighters now realizing their right hand had been sliced off through the flesh and bone, the interior exposed to the elements while the sliced rifles fell helplessly to the ground, broken in half.

“She’s just one girl, beat her up and the Alchemist!” Bronco roared over the wails of the maimed fighters, leading the charge with the prisoners following in tow.

Haui tossed Sasha another gas mask, her putting it on calmly as she watched the throng of prisoners and union workers rush at her. <Shue, Yul, Uryag, Nemoon> Sasha spoke in with a silky voice, the falchion in her right hand glowing brilliantly, the large Dzi Flower Sand jewels embedded in it surging with energy that travelled up her veins.

Before the first prisoner could reach Sasha, the exhaust vents suddenly slammed shut, the panes all locked tightly, before a sickening blue smoke began to erupt in copious amounts, blasting them from all angles. Haui chuckled under the mask as he watched the prisoners and union workers began to choke on the fumes entering their lungs.

“It’s a trap! This.. this is Euria smoke!” Bronco gagged as he took yet another involuntary breath. He glanced upwards, peering through the dense blue smoke only to see the bright blade of the falchion shining through the fog menacingly. He watched in horror as with every swing and slash, another man lost his hand, the piercing shrieks of pain echoing through the narrow tight hallway. “Retreat, retreat!”

The originally united throng began to panic, scrambling for the only exit behind as Sasha cut down hand after hand. A union fighter bravely drew a spare handgun against her, only for his hand to be sliced cleanly through the muscles, flesh and bone, the nerves exposed to the stinging Euria fumes as he fell backwards.

“Better start running, if you stay here, you’ll lose more than just a hand.” Haui called out from behind while Sasha hunted each one of them brave enough to fight back. Those who made it out of the basement found themselves flanked on all sides by Sasha’s veteran soldiers, who had them encircled on all ends save for a few gaps.

“Don’t fight them, just run, get out!” The leader ordered, panic clear in his voice as they scampered out of the office building, fleeing in every direction where the soldiers were not. Nearly all of them were maimed in someway or another, having lost a hand, or being shot in the thighs or losing their feet, hoisted to safety by their comrades.

The survivors ran as fast as they could, only regrouping half an hour later at a pre-planned location. “How many did we lose in there?” Bronco coughed out blue smoke as he started counting heads, his face growing in slight disbelief at the sheer number of prisoners and union fighters who made it out. There were now nearly three hundred total gathered here. “No one? We didn’t lose a single person? How can that be? I…”

“It’s a success, comrade!” One of the fighters cheered. “The prisoners have been freed!” The rest joined in the cheering, celebrating prematurely with shouts of joy and victory. However, Bronco was far from convinced it was a successful operation.

*They could have killed or captured all of us in there, but yet they let us go. But why?*

# Chapter 87 - Revolution

[Wages, safety and unity!]

“Wages, safety and unity!”

[Wages, safety and unity!]

“Wages, safety and unity!”

Arctech radio chanted protest slogans as a general strike was called the very next morning, the entire district grinding to a halt as hundreds upon hundreds of workers took to the streets, marching towards the factory with pickets and signs. “FREE US FROM SLAVERY!” They called out, their advance indomitable. A few of them were clearly missing hands and limbs, being supported by their comrades as they protested for a better future.

They moved through pellet-ridden streets, burning wagon wrecks and destroyed storefronts, the remnants of burnt-out buildings from the rigged explosions left standing as a charred husk, countless bodies burnt black with no one to collect them. Culo glanced at the wreckage with astonishment at the brutality of last night’s conflict. “I thought we were supposed to blow up the Seven Snakes, not innocent residents.”

“Now is not the time for reluctance. Their deaths were an unfortunate collateral, a result of the fierce fighting between the Seven Snakes and us that resulted in this botched explosion. They were not meant to die, but their sacrifice will be remembered in the new world that is to come.”

Culo nodded, but in his heart he wondered if that was truly the case. Still, the invigorating chants from his comrades and other workers buoyed his resolve and buried his doubts.

Gunther grinned as he watched the masses move according to his will, advancing together as one. “This is it, this is the revolution. And you, Culo - you will get to see everything happen in your own eyes.”

“But will the Seven Snakes agree to our demands?”

“They may not. They will try to negotiate, to haggle their way out just like the pigs they are. But instead of compromising, we will stand our ground and not budge a single inch. They are the ones who need us, not them.”

“If both sides do not budge, there will be no jobs.”

“And so what? Better a life of revolution than a life of half-assed contradictions. These pigs should not and will not be treated diplomatically - they are the source of all our problems, a disease upon society. Now that the masses truly know how evil they are, we can finally bring about true change within the Yual Dominion.”

“Just like Versia.”

“Exactly. One coup was example enough for us to know its possible. Every Versian knows that, and you and I are the leaders of this new revolution in Raktor.” Gunther patted Culo on the back as they marched on, surrounded by fellow factory workers.

Even those who were originally not part of the union joined in the strike, the protest building up critical mass as they approached the factory, its towering chimneys looming over them while two rows of Seven Snakes guards formed up, blocking their path.

“You’re not getting any further than this, fuckers!” Niko roared over the din of slogan chanting. “Anyone who crosses this line will earn a pellet to the head!”

“You’re not the only one with guns, bitch!” A worker called out, with dozens of union workers brandishing rifles, aiming them right back at the Seven Snakes guards and Niko.

A tense standoff occurred as the protestors shoved against the line of guards, trying to break through and occupy the factory. Niko began barking orders to try and control the situation. “Cover that backlane and shore up that gap! I want fifty men with shields on that corner. Bosso, get your fucking squad over there now and push them back!”

“WAGES, SAFETY AND UNITY! WAGES, SAFETY AND UNITY!” The protestors raged, violently pushing the guards backwards as Niko began to sweat a little, faced with the seemingly endless horde of workers.

“The only way you can stop this is to get your fucking boss down here to negotiate!” Culo roared at Niko.

“Like fucking hell a shitface like you is going to talk to the Boss of all people! He would never -” Niko’s rant was interrupted by an order on the arctech radio, his face paling at what he was hearing. “Damian, you can’t be fucking serious. If we let them in, we… you’re joking. This is complete bullshit! What the hell have we been- fine. But if this goes sideways it ain’t my fault.”

Niko stuffed the arctech radio back onto his belt. “Retreat! Retreat back to the shopping arcade.”

The guards stared at him blankly, but quickly complied, none of them really wanting to match the crowd head-on themselves no matter how bloodthirsty they were. Even the most violent among them knew they wouldn’t come out unscathed. The moment Niko retreated, The protestors rushed forward like a surging tide, quickly occupying the factory in droves, swarming every room and space on the factory floor.

“We did it! We actually have control!” Culo cheered with the rest of the workers, all of whom bore wide grins on their faces as they shook hands and threw hats into the air.

“It’s not over yet. They could try to flush us out with that damn Euria smoke…” Bronco wheezed badly, his face slightly pale. “I wouldn’t put it past those fucking gangster to try everything!”

“They won’t. And if they do, it would only worsen their reputation. Now we just wait for them to come to the negotiating table.” Gunther took up residence in Gordon’s office, which had been hastily evacuated. He flipped through the designs of the weapons and the armour, ordering one of his followers to keep a copy of them for themselves.

“Gunther, what are you doing? If we use those designs, we’ll be slaughtered by the nobles themselves. Those are military grade weapons!” Culo warned with anxiety in his voice.

“Culo, authority comes from force. How can you expect to negotiate with those who oppress us on a level playing field without having the same equipment that they possess. A maggot cannot negotiate with a goblin. We’ll have a few days to prepare before they try to strike again, and then it will be a week until they come to bargain with us once they realize they cannot flush us-”

“Comrade Gunther, the boss - the boss of the Seven Snakes is here to negotiate!” Another member of the council informed them, stunning Gunther into an awkward silence. Many of the council members were flabbergasted as well, having never seen Gunther stumped like this. For most of the last month, every single word that Gunther had said all came to fruition, but yet this was clearly an unexpected turn of events.

“That’s not right. This shouldn’t be happening… the boss of the Seven Snakes is a known profiteer who only seeks monetary gains…” Gunther tried to rationalize what was happening. “They should be only compromising a week later at best. Are you sure its them?”

“Yes, sir. He’s here with the underboss Damian and a lady with a weird glittering sword.” The mention of the magical falchion traumatized Bronco, who began to breath erratically.

At the base of the factory floor, the workers began to part aside, avoiding the trio who walked through them fearlessly and with sheer confidence, Kyle leading the way with Damian and Sasha in tow. Some even began to doubt that the strike would be a success, knowing the three of them were far too strong.

Damian towered over everyone like a hulking giant in a modified Aspis MK1 armour suited just for him, along with a large custom-made tower shield strapped to his back. On the other side, Sasha still had bloodstains from the night before, rumors of her callous slaughter spreading like wildfire among the freed prisoners into the protestors.

“I’m here to negotiate. Who is the union leader?” Kyle asked, glaring at the workers nearby who all cowered in fear, many knowing what the boss was capable of.

“That would be me.”

Kyle glanced up to see Gunther standing at the top of a metallic stairwell leading to the head office. “Good, let us negotiate inside.” Kyle was about to head up when Gunther chuckled.

“Negotiate? Inside? There is no ‘negotiation’. There are only demands. And you will adhere to each and everyone of them, right in front of all of my comrades and brothers here. No more dealing in the shadows.” Gunther smirked, looking down upon Kyle.

*Intimidation Aura!*

A sudden burst of pressure erupted from Kyle, the workers all trembling and backpedalling as far away from Kyle as they could. Even Gunther began to sweat a little, his heart palpitating wildly while he tried to understand what was happening.

“Then you best come down here.” Kyle motioned with his hand towards Gunther, pointing towards the ground. Out of fear, Gunther descended the stairwell, finally coming eye to eye with Kyle, his body shivering even more as he got even closer to the source.

Suddenly, the pressure was lifted, the workers all confused and staring at each other in shock. Gunther panted heavily as he dropped to one knee while Kyle smirked down at him. “That’s better. Now we are on the same level. Well? What are the demands? I’m listening.”

Gunther gritted his teeth, scrambling back up to his full height with resolve. “You think you can toy with us? Here’s our demands - relinquish managerial control of the factory to us, all workers are to be unionized under me, all shifts reduced to eight hours just like before, and wages increased double that of market prices! And no more fucking children on the factory floor.”

“Done. You have my word.”

“And don’t try to bargain with us, I will not budge a single - huh?” Gunther was caught off-guard, the workers around astounded, some frantically digging their ears to hear better.

“I said I agree to all your demands. You have control of the factory now, and I will inform Gordon of the new arrangements. The wages will be paid according to the maximum capacity of the factory as of this very moment.”

“What?” The workers couldn’t believe what they’ve just heard, assuming the boss of the Seven Snakes would be an uncompromising monster that they would have to fight tooth and nail with. Suddenly all of the tension and excitement was deflated like a popped balloon as a wave of excited murmurs spread through the crowd, the workers at the far end equally astonished at what was happening.

“You’re lying.” Gunther stared pointedly, earning a small chuckle from Kyle.

“I’m not. Your demands are effective this very hour. Gordon will make sure of it. I will pull all Seven Snakes guards back from the factory. Anything else?”

“…” Gunther was at a complete loss for words, unable to utter even a reply, his mind racing with all the possible motives as he looked at the confident Kyle, who seemed to be dictating the playing field.

“Well then, I have places to be. Good discussion. I look forward to a prosperous relationship in the future.” Kyle turned sharply, his coat flicking in the air as he left as quickly as he had arrived, leaving the protestors in a state of shock.

An awkward silence reigned in the air, bated breaths waiting for Kyle and his men to leave the factory. “We… we did it? WE DID IT!” Culo roared at the top of his lungs, the protestors and workers cheering in unison, hugging each other. “We got everything we ever dreamed of, and its all thanks to you, Gunther! That Kyle guy wasn’t so bad after all!”

“Don’t count your fresils before they glow!” Gunther warned, storming back up to the head office, where the council was already celebrating in full force, shouting with every ounce of energy they had and ravaging any alcohol that had been hidden away by the managers. “Calm down, you idiots. That fucking pig must have something up his sleeve, I’m sure of it!”

He ordered the workers to keep an eye out, but true enough to his words, each and every demand was entertained fully. The managers had all pulled out, with Gordon confirming Kyle’s orders to double the wages and reduce the shifts. Every foreman was now under the union and morale was soaring across the factory.

“That’s awesome, we got the dream job now!” Culo clenched his fist in victory before glaring at Gordon angrily. “No thanks to you and your managers.”

“Need I explain to you again that the whole reason why we were pushing you all so hard was because we have a clear production deadline to meet!” Gordon reminded them angrily. “Your wages will only last as long as the contract is active - failing to meet the contract will result in the factory going bust! If that happens, you can say goodbye to your job.”

“Not a problem. Our brothers and comrades are more than skilled to operate the factory and take a bigger pie of the contract!” Gunther retorted sharply, confident in the prowess of the new union.

Word was spread quickly, the double wages invigorating them more to do their part. Now that the workers knew that they were getting paid their worth, they had a far higher morale, especially knowing that the others were all in the same union, their rights protected. The hours were reduced to eight hours just like before and machines were repaired without fatality or injury.

While Culo worked on the assembly lines with a wide grin on his face, joking with the other members on his team, Gunther was still pacing the office nervously, clearly bothered by how weird Kyle was acting. “This can’t be, this can’t be right, we had it all planned out…” He mumbled to himself quietly, ignoring the celebrations erupting all around him.

As Gunther dealt with his own internal disarray, Culo poured over the finances and production targets, realizing Gordon was not joking about the targets. It was a tall order to begin with, and while he could not forgive the callousness of the managers, he could at least sympathize with what they had to deal with. Now, the council was in full control of the wages and positions, allocating jobs to the workers en-masse.

However, it didn’t take an hour for the first obstacle to appear in their path without even a full day passing: there were way more workers than there were jobs.

“Why am I not allowed to be the foreman, but you get to be it?! I fought just as hard as you and I deserve a job, hand or no hand!” One of the freed prisoners complained, waving his stubbed arm around as a sign of his valor.

“You’re disabled, you can’t possibly work the line! Etching and sanding requires both hands for maximum stability!” The foreman tried to reason with the freed prisoners, many of whom were clearly maimed and unfit for the tough requirements of arcia etching and machine operating.

“Really?! We fought tooth and nail, even suffered for the cause, and now we get tossed aside like cattle? You’re no different from the pigs that we just got rid off!”

“Everyone, calm down, calm down!” Culo tried to interject. “Look, I’m sure we can find a role for all of you, definitely. I’ll talk to the union council and see what we can do for you.”

Despite the doubling of wages, the council was already at a loss on what to do. “The thing is, when one of our brothers were to be imprisoned, the factory hired an additional one to replace him. Now that we have freed all of them, there are more than enough hands to go around, but if we do so, we won’t be able to pay all of them the promised double wages!” A council member explained the dilemma.

“What?” Culo was confused. “Didn’t Kyle agree to pay double wages?”

“Only up to the maximum capacity of the factory!” Gordon rolled his eyes in clear disdain. “Were you not listening? As if anyone in the world is simply going to pay you double just because you hired a few hundred useless people right off the bat.”

“You!” Culo stormed up to Gordon, jabbing his finger into his chest. “You’re a fucking monster - they aren’t useless, it’s because of them that we got to where we are today.”

“Sure, but you and I both know where they’ll bring you to tomorrow.” Gordon sneered, earning a right hook from Culo that sent him sprawling to the ground.

“Fucking cunt.” Culo spat on Gordon’s chest. “We should do our best to at least rotate the roles. Maybe have it such that people don’t work all seven days of the week. This way, everyone still get some wages in some way, isn’t that right, Gunther? Gunther? Where did he go?”

The council looked around only to find him completely missing. “Last I saw him he said he was going out to pick up a package.” Bronco motioned with his thumb out through the office door, while he fumbled with a satchel of Euria Seeds pilfered from the stores of the managers.

Culo squinted his eyes at him in suspicion. “What are you doing with that?”

“I’m going to smoke it, what else?”

“Since when do you smoke? Hell, you used to be part of the Crusaders against Vices! What would Angela say?”

“Fuck if I care about her, it was here free for the taking. Or what, you’re the leader of the council now? I thought we were all equals here!”

Culo fumed internally, wanting to lash out at the obvious hypocripsy, though he noticed the strike force’s leader hand shivering slightly. “Fine. Either way, we will make sure the factory runs, smoothly and safely. Got it?”

While the council desperately worked round the clock to get the factory in order, Gunther was moving quickly away from the factory, hiding himself with a hood away from the prying looks of passerbys and residents, disguising as a shabby homeless man once more.

As he entered the backlanes, walking with purpose, he soon approached a nondescript metal box that was locked tight. A simple key from his pocket cracked it open, revealing an arctech radio within, with a coaster that had a series of numbers written on it. However, instead of following the instructions, he tuned the radio to a completely different set. As the connection was established, Gunther was already whispering angrily into the receiver. “You told me they didn’t have enough money! That they wouldn’t negotiate! You fucked my entire plan!”

[They don’t! I’m sure of it, I checked all of the finances personally myself!]

“Then how the fuck are they affording to pay double the wages when I just blew up five of their fucking establishments? They aren’t even charging the workers rent in the housing complex!”

[I don’t know! I really don’t!]

“On the Goddess name, you better find out what Kyle is up to, or else both you and me are screwed!” Gunther hung up, before staring down at the coaster with the set of numbers, wondering what his next step should be. *I must figure out what is going on, before I am ensnared by anything and anyone. It’s best if I keep all the cards close to my chest instead of-*

He suddenly froze in place for a brief moment, only to suddenly feel a startling presence behind him, instantly twisting around to deliver a kick. Instead of hearing a satisfying thud, his heel was stopped short of the man’s face, gripped tightly in place before he was flung unceremoniously into the nearest trash pile. Gunther shrugged off the grime, only to see three men approach him, the leader grinning widely.

“Quite the welcome. Is this how you repay us?”

“Fuck you, Wrent. I don’t answer to you.”

“Seems like you don’t want to answer to anyone. I was wondering when you were going to inform us of your successful strike.”

“I took down the damn factory, just like we agreed upon. I’ve already done my part.”

“Nope.” Wrent wagged his finger, playing with the hilt of his red sword hinged on his belt. “The deal was clear between Leo, me and you. Humiliate the Seven Snakes beyond restoration and crater their economy.”

“Once the factory fails the contract, their reputation will already be down the drain.”

“Ah, but there’s a better way to disgrace their image. You have quite a few weapons and armour on you, no? Perhaps you could get some more. You see, despite Kyle’s unlikeable traits, the Aspis MK1 armour and rifle he made is quite useful both to us and Count Leon. It is indeed a leap of technology.”

Gunther glared with suspicion. “What do you want?”

“It’s simple, really. I want the factory production on the same schedule as before, but all weapons and armour diverted to the Red Lions.”

“You’re mad, you’re asking me to be killed by the Seven Snakes! I’m not ready, I-”

“What does your life or death matter to me? And if you’re thinking of running… we already both know how that played out before. Leo can grab you just as easily as before.”

Gunther cursed under his breath as Wrent laughed, turning around to leave with his men. “Have the crates delivered to my district, I’ll handle the rest.”

“Big fucking talk for a man who lost to twenty Seven Snakes.” Gunther grinned as he recovered to his full height.

Wrent stopped dead in his tracks, looking back over his shoulder with a fearsome glare. “What did you say?”

“I said -” Before Gunther could finish, three red waves slashed violently across his thighs, toppling him over in a burst of blood. He gritted his teeth, resisting the urge to scream as Wrent slowly walked to him.

Wrent bent down to the bleeding Gunther, grabbing his cheeks and dragging his head up to eye-level. “If you ever mention that again, I will let the world see what a revolutionary looks like on the inside out, limb by limb. First I’ll start with your fingers, and carve my name on each and every joint while it’s still connected. Then I’ll rip the toenails and sear them with an etcher for fifty days. And forget about Leo hunting you down - I’ll be the one to chase you if you leave the city, even to Tenar. I’m far different from the man I used to be when I lost to the Seven Snakes, and you can be the first to find out just how much has changed. Are we clear?”

“Yes…sir.”

“Good.” Wrent dropped him to the floor again, tossing a health potion that clattered on the blood-stained cobblestone. “Always charmed to meet you. Remember - every day, fifty crates by dusk. That, or we could have another conversation like this that might be a bit more physical.”

Gunther clenched his fist, reaching out for the health potion as Wrent and his men disappeared, melding into the throng of pedastrians who hardly cared for the homeless looking man bleeding out in the backlane. He chugged the potion, his wounds healing rapidly, though he was still dizzy from the blood loss.

He staggered to his feet, limping slightly back towards the factory as he ditched the stained disguise. The celebration was still in full swing, workers cheering and relaxing in the lunch canteen and all around the factory floor, joking with each other. As he returned to the council office, Culo was the first to notice a bit of bloodstain on the edge of Gunther’s sleeves and pants, but Culo held his tongue.

“Have we organized the workers?” Gunther resumed his strong resolute self.

“We’re working out the kinks now, but Culo had a brilliant suggestion of having everyone split their shifts up. This way, we can hire everyone in the union, but each individual works less. It’s a great way to -”

“No. If we want more workers, expand the assembly lines. I want the extra workers working on the new lines as soon as possible. Everyone works, seven days a week, eight hour shifts. The factory has to be running round the clock.”

The council stared at Gunther in slight shock. “Gunther, what the hell are you talking about?”

“If we want to keep our wages, we will need to match the production contract, just like Gordon said. This is the only way we can maintain the results of our demands.”

“But the wages, they won’t be doubled if we hire everyone full time! The deal with Kyle was that he pays the wages for the current maximum capacity right now, not in the future!”

“So be it. At least the union has control over how the factory is being ran. What’s the current treasury of the factory?”

“Uhm… just enough to buy the materials and pay wages to last another week of production.” A council member reported.

“Then we have no choice. I will forgo my wages, and we will need to in order to purchase new equipment for the additional assembly lines.”

“You’re talking about docking our pay just as we had it doubled?! This won’t go well with the workers!”

“We don’t have a choice, not if we want to keep things this way. This arrangement will only last until we get the payment of the contract in. Have the finances be transparent to all workers in the factory, make sure everyone is on the same page.”

While Gunther was essentially recommending the same working pace as the managers before him, Culo still appreciated that Gunther was being upfront about the reason why, though he still had a bit of lingering doubt as to what bloodied the edges of Gunther’s outfit when he went out.

As the council began to spring into action, Gunther pulled Bronco aside for a private conversation. “Brother Bronco, are you with me?”

“Till the end, Brother Ki Hwang. You know this.”

“I need you to divert some production to the arming of our brothers. Our true brothers, not the leeches who tagged along. There are forces that seek to profit of us and what we have accomplished so far, and I’ll be damned if I let that happen again.” Gunther explained the deal with Wrent.

Bronco nodded in understanding, knowing that Leo had captured Gunther and him before multiple times. But this time was different. This time, they had a weapons factory. “We won’t let the damn Red Lions catch us off-guard again. This time, when they come for us, we’ll be armed to the teeth.” Bronco grinned.

Gunther gripped Bronco’s hand firmly, an unbreakable bond forged from their days in Versia. “So those above remember their roots.”

“So they shall return to dust.” # Chapter 88 - Same Old Routine

The week went past in a blur for Culo, as the factory began an even tighter and stricter production strategy while setting up new assembly lines. While the hours had been reduced, and there were far less fatalities than before, he still couldn’t shake the feeling that they were now worse off than before.

“Weren’t we fighting for a better work-life balance and what not?” His team member remarked to him as they etched what seemed to be the umpteenth rifle barrel, following the grooves of the guide like second nature. “Why do I feel like I’m working harder than ever, and it’s not like we’re getting paid more too!”

Culo had nothing to rebut with, glancing over to the new assembly lines where there were a significant majority of workers who had missing hands and feet, unable to do their task as efficiently as the others. Many fumbled with the etcher clumsily, some even resorting to crudely implemented contraptions that strapped the etcher to their stubbed arm in a desperate attempt to remain relevant. Many of them could not find another job within the factory, especially given their low educational level and lack of understanding.

It would be wrong of him to think lowly of them - they had fought as hard as he did for the union. Culo shrugged in response to his team member’s words, focusing on his works, the tight deadline and finances looming over his head more than ever *Am I even more stressed now?*

“At least the council is living up to their expectations.” The team member grunted. “Not like those fuckers taking up perfectly fine jobs that could be given to others… have they not seen how many migrants are out there queuing for a job like we had in the past?”

“Hey, they sacrificed their body and soul to get our brothers out of the prison.” Culo retorted.

However, he instead earned a nudge from another team member beside him. “Hey, uhh, you know it was mostly other thugs and criminals in those prisons right?”

“So what? We’re all working towards the same goals.”

“See for yourself, mate.” The team member pointed towards a corner of the assembly line, where a freed thug was clearly snoring soundly, skiving off his job. In fact, as Culo took a closer look, he started to notice the thugs acting like they were working hard, but in effect doing nothing, earning a paycheck for free.

“What the fuck?” Culo slammed his etcher down onto the table, storming over to the sleeping thug and smacking him awake. “How the fuck are you sleeping on the job? We got deadlines to meet! Were you not listening during the morning briefing?!”

“Huh? Who the fuck are you?!” The thug clutched his bruised cheeks, glancing around before realizing it was just a scrawny young man in front of him. “Oh, you’re the kid on the council. What, gonna boss me around?”

“I’m not bossing you around, I’m telling you, if you wanna hold a job, you better work for it!”

“Fine, fine, geez. Got a goblin up your arse or something? What a loser.” The thug dug his ears in irritation, returning back to his work reluctantly and etching haphazardly, without using the guiding sample. Even Culo was able to see that it would not past any form of quality test. “There, you happy now? Or if you wanna pick a fight, me and my bois will be more than willing to oblige.”

Culo clenched his fist, but returned to his position without causing additional fuss. He bottled up his emotions, the team members next to him keeping their heads low to avoid the thug’s gaze. His council position was utterly useless if the new workers themselves did not truly believe in the union. “Leeches, the lot of them.” He muttered under his breath as he continued his etching.

“Damn right, now we’re working extra to make up for their shoddy work. Why the fuck can’t we just fire them?” Another worker whispered to his buddy.

“Idiot, they are part of the union now too! What would it look like if we tried to fire one of our own?”

“He’s clearly jeopardizing the production targets, that should be grounds to get him out!”

“Only the council can do it, but judging from how Culo was treated, I got a feeling it won’t be that easy.”

Culo ignored the whispers around him, his eyes focused on the etching right in front of him. *Dream job my ass. Now I’m a babysitter who is not even respected.* The rest of the workers watched as the thugs and other prisoners joked and laughed. And while no one had any other outburst of rage like Culo did, the writing on the wall was clear as day: nobody liked getting paid unequally.

What was even worse was the finances of the factory made public by the council. Any worker who walked past the entrance or changing room were met with multiple copies of the weekly production targets required of them in order to maintain their job. No one wanted to lose what they had fought so hard to earn, yet the baggage that they were now forced to drag along out of moral goodwill was beginning to strain relationships among the workers.

A council meeting was naturally called to address the issue, but it was scheduled at night, after the day shift was completed. At the end of his day shift, Culo’s body fatigued as ever before, dreading the meeting as his mind tried to resolve the conflict within. He lumbered back home, towards the housing complex, completely out of energy . *I still got to meet with the council later before I can sleep, and I need the team to produce 50% faster over the next week. This is just fucking… huh?*

As he approached his shared apartment, two familiar workers counting a wad of rakels brushed past his shoulder violently, clearly having just left his room with a wide grin on their faces. Culo rubbed his shoulder while observing their backs, before noticing they had a very familiar looking ring in their hands. “HEY! What the fuck are you doing with my ring?!”

“Huh? You talking to us?”

“Yea, I’m talking to you. Who let you into my room? Give it back!”

“Who else? Your roommate. He sold this ring to us, said it was his.”

“Well it’s not. You better give it back or -” As soon as Culo spoke those words, his wrist was grabbed, his body thrown against the ugly concrete walls of the dim hallway forcibly, pinned.

“Or what?” The worker fiddled with the ring in his hand while his partner rained blow after blow on Culo, Culo blocking with his arm as best as he could, searching for a way out. With a swift motion, Culo kicked out, slamming his shin into the shin of the partner, sending him stumbling backwards as Culo propped himself up against the wall unsteadily, only to face the barrel of a handgun.

“Aight, kid. You got punk. Say, aren’t you that young council guy?”

“And you guys are fellow union workers. Give back the damn ring!” Culo gritted his teeth, raising his hands into a fighting posture.

“Like hell I’m going to leave without getting paid!” The worker aimed the handgun right at Culo’s forehead, but Culo was unintimidate, his resolve steeled.

“Don’t you know this whole complex is guarded by the Seven Snakes?” Culo tried to reason. “If you start a fight, you’ll be imprisoned by them!”

The worker and his partner glanced at each other, before breaking out into raucous laughter. “Oh, he’s so cute! I wish I could put him in my pocket. Thank god the council is naive as fuck.”

“What the hell are you two laughing about? I’m serious?”

“You really believe the Seven Snakes guards are coming to help you? Idiot, the doubling of wages to the factory forced them to reduce the amount of guards here in the complex! I even heard they all got sent far away for some reason. It’s a free for all now - we might as well rule this place. I could shoot you right now and stuff your body away hidden for two weeks before the stench calls someone over.” The worker chortled. “But you’re a good guy, I’ll prefer if it not comes to that.”

“You-”

“Don’t test me, I will shoot. You won’t be the first.”

Culo was frozen on the spot, his eyes locked on the ring as he weighed whether his life was really worth risking for it. Flashes of his brother and village back in Ocra clouded his vision, eventually forcing him to relent and relax his posture.

“Good kid. Seeing as you’re council, you’ll probably have us fired from the factory tomorrow. But hey, see if I give a shit, I can pawn this ring for ten days’ wages and make even more selling the new stuff!” The worker and his partner laughed as they retreated back down the stairwell, leaving a raging Culo behind who instantly stormed into the room, finding a ravaged and messy room unlike how he had left it this morning. His personal belongings were strewn all over the floor, each and every valuable piece laid for all to see.

“Hyul, what the fuck are you doing?! You sold my ring? Are you fucking out of your mind?” Culo was about to give his roommate a piece of his mind, but his roommate was unresponsive, a dreamy smile plastered unnaturally on his face while an empty potion flask was still gripped tightly in his hand. The clearly drugged roommate’s eyes wandered the walls, grinning at each and every speck of dust that seemed to come to life.

Of course, to the sober Culo, all this was simply insane. “Hyul? Hey?”

Culo glanced at the empty potion flask, the smell instantly recognizable. *Fuck, it’s that new mindtwister that’s been going around!* He grabbed his roommate by the collar, shaking him violently and slapping him twice to no avail. It was this very moment that Culo felt entirely helpless, the precious ring that his parents had left him as a reminder now pawned off to an unknown fate.

Whatever lingered of his naive view of the union was slowly breaking down when he packed his things into the same small briefcase he had when he first arrived and shifted out. It was far too dangerous for him to remain here, especially with a addicted roommate. As he descended the floors, he could see fights and drugs dealt all over the housing complex coupled with prostitute girls staring him down, showing no oversight at all from any guards or enforcers.

Culo watched helplessly as other union workers leveraged their position to rob or drug other union workers, stealing anything of value. Instead of the union uniting the workers, they had instead bandied into small thug groups, relishing in the power vacuum by the retreat of the Seven Snakes. Soon, Culo found a lone Seven Snakes patrol squad, idling near the entrance of the housing complex. “Hey, hey! I need help, I just got robbed!”

“Huh?” The cobra leading the squad stared vacantly at Culo running up to him.

“Yea, two big guys, one bald and missing his front two tooth along with a hand, the other having a grey beard with a scar on his left eye.”

“Right… like that narrows it down. Are they union workers?”

“Well, yes, but what does that matte-”

“Orders from above are to not mess with the union. Don’t want to risk another general strike fucking over the whole district, you know? Better to stay out of the way, else I’ll get transferred to the boonies to god knows what shitty slave factory.”

“But-”

“You guys chose this, don’t blame us. We ain’t your babysitters. And aren’t you a council member? Sort your own shit out instead of running to us.”

Culo was left standing alone on the crowded street just outside the complex, bustling with activity, yet he never felt so alone before, not even when he first arrived to Raktor. The sad reality of the union was beginning to crack his dreams while he lugged his briefcase along, thinking of where to move to. *I could move to one of the union hideout, at least I’m safer there… or am I?* Both his roommate and the worker who stole his ring was union too, diminishing his belief in the unity of the union.

As he wandered aimlessly down the street, a slightly familiar face noticed him and waved at him. Culo couldn’t recall his name, but knew he was an old hand from the previous factory before the refurbishment, one of the original foreman.

“Hey, Culo, right?”

“Yea?” Culo stared warily as he clutched the handle of briefcase even tighter, ready to fight at a moment’s notice.

“Yea, wanted to ask if- hold on, what got you so tense? What’s with all the baggage? You moving house?”

“What’s it to you?”

“Hey, hey, hey, calm down, I ain’t out to hurt you or anything! What happened?” The genuine look of concern on the foreman’s face soften Culo’s stance a little.

“Nothing, just, looking for a place to stay. My roommate just sold one of my family heirlooms for a fucking drug.”

“Shit…that bad, huh?” The foreman scratched his head awkwardly, glancing around. “Say, uhh wanna move to my place? I don’t have a lot myself, but I got a spare bed you can crash on for the night while you figure things out.”

“What are you aiming at?”

“Nothing, just offering. Well, if you don’t want it, I’ll just be on my way, then. Hope you find a place, I’ll just ask my question tomorrow.”

“Just shoot, I’m listening.”

“Right… I wanted to ask you what the council was going to do about the lazy bums in the new assembly lines. I’m their foreman, but I can’t get to move or budge or do a single thing properly! Half of the gear produced is shoddy and needs to be reworked. I don’t wanna look bad to the council and have my job cut, so I was hoping if you could speak up for me.”

“I will, I understand what you’re saying perfectly.”

“Great, thank you, I really need that job, I got a wife and kid to feed, you know, usual stuff. Thanks again!” The foreman shook Culo’s hand vigorously, before making his way home.

“Say, that bed still up for grabs?” Culo called out after the foreman, opening up a bit.

“Sure thing, anything for a council member!” The foreman nodded, motioning for Culo to follow him. The duo walked through the crowded street under the street lights, watching as bits and pieces of lawlessness that Culo had never seen before slowly creep into the district. Roaming thug gangs were already starting to assert territory, claiming protection money from frightened store owners under the guise of the union.

He could already hear the angry mutterings of bystanders as they watched yet another store owner have his display smashed to bits. “I don’t like to say this, but at least the Seven Snakes had the best interest of the district at heart. Look at this mess, I much rather they come back than have the union in control!” A lady murmured to her friend as they walked hurriedly by, acting like they never saw a thing.

“The Seven Snakes are still here, but they are only protecting their businesses. They are afraid of antagonizing the union anymore - spineless, if you ask me.”

“Can you blame them? They did try to wipe out the union, but it backfired heavily. If I were them I wouldn’t risk a fight, especially not when they have their own armed force. The union is basically a new gang in itself!”

Culo couldn’t disagree, not with everything he had witnessed so far. However, he no longer tried to intervene, instead keeping his mouth shut and trudging along silently with the foreman, who also gazed at the sight with a hopeless expression. They soon reached his house, a quaint little apartment right at the end of Thresher Street, above a erotica bookstore that had eerie moaning sounds wafting through the mouldy holes of the wooden plank floor.

“I thought you said you have a wife and kids?” Culo questioned as he was greeted with a clearly messy house, full of bottles of alcohol lingering about and an unkept couch.

“I do. They are just…. uh… not staying here at the moment.”

“Disagreement?”

“Very much so. Well, then, make yourself at home.”

Culo smiled, but shifted his collar nervously. “Sorry, you’re doing so much for me but I seemed to have forgotten your name.”

“Ah, I’m Karl. Long timer of the factory. How could you forget my name when I was the one who trained you?!”

“Sorry, sorry, its just been a crazy two months.” Culo put down his briefcase, collapsing into the couch, uncaring about the obvious stench of beer and whiskey permeating the air. “I thought we won the world last week, but it seems like such things are always too good to be true.”

“You know it. I’ve been working in this line for a few decades now, seen my fair share of societies, guilds, unions and what not. People at the top always claim that they are doing this for the good of the people, but humans? They act more like monkeys than civilized beings.” Karl grunted in agreement as he poured out a glass of whiskey for each of them, both sipping it in an angry silence.

“It’s only a few bad apples…” Culo tried to console himself, but Karl laughed.

“A few bad apples? Looks like an entire orchard to me! I saw how they treated you today on the factory floor. No respect, no deference for the council that fought for their wages. They don’t appreciate the sacrifice that we’ve put in to get to where we are today!”

“No, they do. Some even suffered at the hands of the Seven Snakes, experimented on.”

“Yet I don’t see any of them doing badly now? No one died during the prison escape, as far as I can tell. Both you and I know that prison was more of thugs and petty criminals than valiant union workers who fought for the cause. All they are doing is riding our goodwill and tearing our reputation to shreds!”

“Maybe… but-”

“Culo, look. You’re a great council member, a real standup guy, but are you really getting the respect you deserve? What did you come to Raktor for? I know you’re a migrant, though I never really got the full story.”

“I’m just here to earn money for my brother and village back home in Ocra, that’s all.”

“So am I, here just to earn money for my kid to have a better future, whether or not he’s here with me or not. You and I, we’re in the same boat here. Now tell me, is what you’re doing now for your brother? Is being treated like trash and slaving away for other skivers to get the same paycheck as you really working out as you expected?”

“It’s not, but as a council member, I have to uphold the morals of the union-”

“The union is made up of people first and foremost. If no one respect the morals, what value does it have over anyone?” Karl gestured frantically, agitated. “I tell you this for your own sake, I know exactly what you’re thinking deep down. You might be afraid to say it, but I’m not - the reason why you are angry, is because you’re putting in the same, if not more work than others, YET they are getting paid the same. What happened to fairness? Equality? Unity?”

Culo had nothing to say, Karl having hit the nail right on the head. He thought about his brother again, wondering what the fuck was he playing at again. He was supposed to earn money, not act like a shepard for clearly reluctant workers. “You’re fucking right, no one respects me at all. What the fuck am I even doing with my life?”

“You fought for an ideal, a dream. That’s great and all, and you achieved it. But it’s clear that the same dream and ideal isn’t shared by others. Are you sure that the council is even aligned on the same dream when they aren’t even lifting a finger to stop this madness?”

Culo was far too infuriated to speak any longer, angry at both himself and the circumstances as he poured himself two additional shots of whiskey, downing them in quick succession. Karl did the same, drinking along with him quietly before breaking the silence a minute later. “Now, if you want respect, you want to really see where the real wealth lies, I may have a friend who knows a guy who knows a guy.” Karl twirled a rakel coin between his fingers.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m talking a night out - at the pubs and casinos! If those damn fuckers are going to play about, you and I both deserve some good rest and relaxation.”

Culo wondered when was the last time he really took a break. First it was the harrowing hours, then it was the non-stop late night planning for the union and heist, then it was the neverending council duties that seemed to go on forever, one problem after the other. That coupled with the loss of his family heirloom finally broke him. “You know what? You’re right. But wouldn’t the Seven Snakes stop us from going in? We’re union.”

“Ah, like I said. I’m an old timer around here - I was around when the Seven Snakes rose to power myself, may have even witnesses a few fights in person. I know my way around town.”

“You’re not going to do anything to me, are you?”

“What, you think I’m going to drug and kidnap a council member at the Seven Snakes, just when the tensions between the union and them have yet to fully subside? I must have a death wish.”

“Fine, but I got no rakels on me. I sent most of it back home.”

Karl slung his arms around Culo, clearly a little tipsy. “Don’t worry, I’ll cover you. My friend who knows a guy who knows a guy? He’s a real one, he’ll foot the bill for us if we ask nicely.”

“I still got a council meeting later to attend… I-”

“Fuck. Them. What they going to talk about? You’ve spent your entire time here in Raktor worrying about others. It’s time for you to relax.”

Culo had his doubts, still wary from his ring being stolen, but the alcohol he had just drank was starting to creep in, giving him a false sense of confidence. “Alright, lead the way.”

“Hell yes, lets party! Let me call a wagon real quick.”

“Call a wagon? You’re that rich?”

“I live alone, and frankly, child support ain’t that expensive.” Karl grinned as he tuned the arctech radio, speaking quickly while Culo poured himself another one.

The wagon came fast to the house, a luxurious wagon with the emblem of the Seven Snakes plastered all over it, the driver getting out of the cab to open the door for them. Culo felt like an imposter, never having been met with such treatment before, though Karl seemed to take everything in stride. “Come on, I got VIP treatment.”

“But why? You’re just a foreman!”

“Lets just say it’s clear where I spent most of my money.” Karl winked as Culo hopped on, instantly greeted by plush velvet and a neatly arranged set of glasses, already prefilled with sparkling wine. Karl didn’t hesitate, immediately toasting Culo as the wagon moved off, speeding through the nightlife.

Soon, they arrived at their destination, somewhere Culo never expected to be: the basement of the shopping arcade. Arctech neon lights and carpeted floors made him and his shabby outfit feel out of place, while the atmosphere were filled with violent shouting and drinking games, Seven Snakes recruits cheering each other on to get wasted.

The bouncer at the door took a glance at Culo and Karl, immediately bowing and allowing them to enter without any fuss at all. “What the hell was that?”

“I’m a longtime customer - they better treat me right.” Karl adjusted his collar, grinning widely as he led Culo towards a VIP area, far away from the rowdy crowd in a nice little circular room, complete with a ambient glowing table along with the softest cushion and silk Culo had ever felt before. However, the decor was not what surprised him. Instead, it was the two other council members who were also there at the VIP table, already drinking happily away.

“What are you two doing here?! Aren’t you supposed to be at the meeting?” Culo exclaimed.

“Speak for yourself, you’re here too.” The other two laughed and toasted each other, clearly drunk. “What’s with the long face? Come on, let’s drink!”

Culo felt the entire scenario was weird, wondering what kind of trap he had fallen into himself, only to finally notice the man sitting at the very center of the VIP room. He spun around, grabbing Karl by the collar and glaring at him. “You! You’re working with them! You set me up?!”

“Hey, everything I’m doing is for you - you know that! Nobody is going to hurt you, just hear them out.”

“Yes, Culo Demitri. Sit down.” The man motioned to a nearby space, intimidating Culo as his legs began to shiver, knowing just how powerful the man was. Culo glanced over to the two other council members, who seemed to not care at all about who the man was.

“I got nothing to say to a slaver who has no regard for human life.”

“And who is the one paying you double wages now? Me? Or the council? Because from what I’m hearing, I’m not the one screwing up your work now.”

“You experimented on people!”

“The very same people who are currently wreaking havoc on your very room. I know, Culo. I know exactly how they are.”

“Because you’re no different.”

“Am I now? Last I checked, the district was better off under me than you and your union. Your friends here clearly agree with me.”

“What did you do to them?” Culo squinted.

“HEY!” A drunk council member wagged his fingers at Culo angrily. “We can make our own decisions, thank you very much.”

“I simply made them an offer they couldn’t refuse. Now sit down, before I change my approach.”

Culo glanced to the side, noticing a few Seven Snakes members already eyeing the entrance to the VIP room. He knew if he tried to leave now, he wouldn’t make it out alive, so he resigned himself to his fate, sitting down next to the man. “And what could the boss of the Seven Snakes want with me? I’m just a factory worker.”

“You’re not just a factory worker. You’re leaders of men, but it is clear to all of us that the men are falling short of expectations. Despite the freedom and leisure that you have afforded them, you have obtained none of that. No one listens to you at all, but I can change that.”

Culo wasn’t dumb, knowing what Kyle was getting it. “You want me to betray them, work for you in the union.”

“Not work for me. Work with me. And I think you seem to be mixing up who is betraying who.”

“Don’t try to twist my words, I know exactly what is happening now.”

“Do you now? And do you know why Gunther was suddenly so adamant about maintaining production? About making sure everything stays on track?”

“To keep his job. And ours. It’s obvious. I know what you’re doing, you’re trying to turn me against him.”

“And what has he done for you? Your work isn’t any better, your stress is through the roof, and you’re compensating the same wages as those leeches slacking out of sight.”

“You were the one who made the job intolerable in the first place!”

“Would you not have done the same in my position, when faced with such a tall order? Don’t lie to me, I know you three are clearly angry at those who are not pulling their weight. If they fail to deliver, you lose your job. Simple as that.”

“We’re not the ones losing money.”

“Of course not, I am the one losing money. See? I’m here to support the union. I gave in to every demand you had without so much as a complaint, despite all your protesting and violence.”

Culo tried to retort, but couldn’t deny that Kyle did acquiesce to all of their requests wholeheartedly. It was the workers who failed him, not the Seven Snakes themselves. There was no one else to blame when they had managerial control of the factory now.

“I hear you’re in dire need of money. You have a brother and village to feed back home.” Kyle scribbled a number on a piece of paper, handing it to Culo. “Work with me, and you get this percent for every rifle and armour you sell from the factory. The same offer as those two.”

Culo snatched the piece of paper, his eyes bulging at the number. He was not too intelligent, but the basic math he quickly hashed out made the money he could potentially earn beyond his wildest dreams. *If I have this money, the village, they would be secure for generations to come!* “But the union…”

“Karl, if you would.” Kyle snapped his fingers, prompting Karl to bring forward a prepared handheld light-thrower. “Have you ever wondered where Gunther disappears to during the day? How he and his other men are always gathering around the loading bay?”

“It’s to make sure that the weapons and armour are properly stored away to deliver to Count Leon. We were warned that the Seven Snakes would try to steal them.”

“Well then, see for yourself.” Kyle smirked as he leaned back into the couch, enjoying his drink slowly while Culo stared in horror at what was playing out, watching Gunther personally transfer the crates to a Red Lion member in another district.

“Gunther! No! This can’t be real, this is fake! You fabricated this!”

“Just like how he fabricated all the executions.”

“Those were real!” Culo asserted, causing Kyle to laugh.

“Since you’re so adamant about me being a slaver who experiments on others, what makes you think I would kill my own residents so wantonly?! I have much more use for their lives than to string their corpses around publicly. Don’t you see? Your union leader is the one stringing you along!”

The other two council members were already sobering up after watching Gunther and his men delivering the crates day after day, the equipment they had worked so hard to produce now sold to a gang. “If he’s giving them away to the Red Lions, there is no chance in hell we’ll meet the deadline!”

Culo slumped into the couch, defeated. In just a single week, everything he thought to be true and ideal was smashed to pieces. Not even the union leader that he had trusted so much lived up to the dream that he had in his mind.

“Respect. Money. Power. All of it can be yours. I’m not here to crush the union, I’m here to help you. Now, are you with me? Or against me?”

# Chapter 89 - The Mole

*A week later…*

In the wee hours of the morning, the office of the shopping arcade was quiet, the myraid of office tables left unkept, dozens of paper documents stacked high with pens scattered about. In the midst of all this bureaucracy, a lone man dug through the drawers, searching through Keith’s desk intently.

“Come on, come on…” The man grunted as he flipped through hundreds of documents frantically, trying to find something. Words and numbers washed over him while his eyes flickered to and fro, reading as quickly as he could before he finally spotted something irregular. “What the fuck?!” He rubbed his eyes, unable to believe what he was reading.

Suddenly, he heard a clinking sound, a metal key rattling in the locked door of the office. “Fucking shit, who’s coming in to work this early? Are they crazy?” Still, complaining was not going to help him. The man hurriedly arranged everything back in order the way it was, before scrambling for a hiding spot.

Soon, the door opened to reveal a groggy Keith, who had just barely woken up, though he heard a dull thud coming from the rows of tables. “Hello? Who’s there? Is that you, Lucetta? You know we don’t pay for overtime.”

Nothing responded, the office as quiet as ever, Keith squinting in suspicion as he began to carefully walk through the office, scanning every table.

Behind an office cabinet, the man cowered in fear, clutching his mouth and nose tightly to prevent his breathing from being heard. He heard the footsteps come closer and closer, until Keith’s boots were clearly visible from the corner of his eyes. He steeled himself, preparing to come out swinging until the arctech radio on Keith’s table blurted out static, distracting Keith.

Keith hurried over, picking up the radio. “Yes? Yes, of course. Understood. I’ll have all the cobras and vipers gathered within the hour for the capture of Gunther. I’ll ensure the union council is in position.”

*Capture of Gunther?! Fuck, the gig is up!* The man’s heart skipped a beat, but he remained calm, not moving a single inch while Keith continued chatting on the radio, leaving the office. The man who was stealing secrets from Keith’s office knew very well what would happen if Gunther were to be caught - he would be next in line without a doubt.

The moment the main doors of the office slammed shut behind Keith, the man leapt into action, grabbing as many documents as possible of the Seven Snakes and stuffing them into his pants, shirt and wherever else he could hide them. He quickly ran over to the door, opening it just an inch and peeking, noticing that the hallway outside the office was empty, Keith nowhere to be seen.

Not giving up the opportunity to leave, he walked out of the office, scampering back towards his own office, quickly packing all of his things. He fumbled with a lockbox, opening it to reveal an arctech radio of his own, quickly calling the other pair. “Gunther, Gunther!”

[What? What’s wrong?]

“The Seven Snakes are out to capture you, and most likely I’ve been made as well!”

[What do you mean? How are they going to capture me?]

“They have infiltrated the union council itself! I suspect some of the members have turned against us.”

[I can’t leave yet, the weapons meant for our brothers and the revolution is not ready]

“If you don’t leave now, there will be no revolution, idiot! We need to leave, now!”

“Guang Hwa?” A voice suddenly interrupted the conversation, Keith knocking on the door of the man’s office.

Guang Hwa panicked, stuffing the radio back into the lockbox and slamming it shut, before hiding all of his packed belongings. “Keith? Please, come in.”

Keith entered, seeing nothing different about the office, save for Guang Hwa sweating with a pained smile on his face. “Why are you sitting in the dark?”

“Uh… well… I heard it helps improve my vision. You know, to see better at night.”

“What, you trying to be a night owl now? Nevermind that, I need you in the meeting room in an hour.”

“Of course, of course, I’ll be there.” Guang Hwa gave a thumbs up, before acting like he was reading a document intently, Keith closing the door. The moment the door closed, Guang Hwa resumed his packing, stuffing a handgun, the radio and all of the stolen documents into a small briefcase, before arranging his outfit properly.

He waltzed out of the office with confidence, walking with purpose while the clerks and other adminstrative staff nodded and bowed to him, not caring about where he was going. As soon he was clear of the shopping arcade however, he suddenly ran right into the towering Damian just around a corner, nearly smacking into his chest directly.

“Oh, sorry, didn’t see you there. Where are you going anyway? There’s a meeting in an hour.”

“I heard there’s a issue at the new apartments being built near the complex. I’m going to have a quick look and I’ll be back for the meeting.”

“Alright, I’ll have Niko arrange an escort for you. We can’t risk any of our higher-ups getting lynched by the union now.”

“No, no don’t bother. The site is really close, just over there. And I’m a Seven Snakes too, I can handle myself.”

Damian glanced at the lanky Guang Hwa, examining his scrawny body. “Right…”

“Anyway, if I don’t leave now, I’ll be late - no time to arrange the escort. See you later, big guy.” Guang Hwa smacked Damian’s biceps that felt like steel, before quickly walking off.

Once he was clear of the shopping arcade, his direction changed immediately. *Fallback point is towards the Magda…* He followed the escape plan concoted between him and Gunther, moving quickly through the street, melding into the thousands of workers who were now leaving or entering the factory in droves.

He moved carefully, acting as part of the crowd and blending in, following the tide of people that were heading to work. However, not many were heading towards the enforcers’ district, instead having jobs at the various Seven Snakes establishment. As such, the crowd around Guang Hwa began to dwindle as he turned street after street. *Almost there, almost there…*

Suddenly, as he turned the corner, his eyes widened as he frantically backpedalled into cover, noticing Niko stationed with three squads of Seven Snakes. “Make sure no union worker gets past this. Once the operation start, people are going to start running, and I want every single suspicious person caught!”

*Damn it!* Guang Hwa tried to peek around the corner, looking for a way around. However, the Seven Snakes were long experienced with locking down the district, each and every backlane now cut off by the guards who formed a tight net.

His mind raced as he slowed down, hurriedly acting like a local resident, moving with the flow of people back towards the center of the district. Finding a nook in a nearby damaged shop, he quickly entered and hid among the half broken shelves, tuning the radio once more to a different number. “Red Lions? Red Lions?”

[And to whom am I speaking to?]

“It’s Guang Hwa. I need your help to get out of the district. The Seven Snakes, they are onto me!”

The person on the other line remained silent, Guang Hwa’s heart palpitating as he watched a Seven Snakes patrol move past him as he ducked.

[And why is the CEO of the Golden Snakes running?]

“Cut the bullshit, Wrent. I have information, critical information on how the Seven Snakes operate, locations of all their secret hideouts and labs. If you want it, you need to help me!”

[Hmm…. fine. Meet at Southcross Road, make sure you aren’t followed. Find the sign of the red jug and wait there.]

“What do you mean, wait there?!” Guang Hwa whispered angrily, but the radio had already went silent.

“Hey, who’s in that shop?”

*Shit!* Guang Hwa kept quiet as a mouse, holding his breath as a Seven Snakes patrol team peered into the damaged storefront.

“Come on, Ollie, stop messing around. You just want an excuse to try on a woman’s dress, right?” Another patrol member nudged Ollie in the ribs.

“Stop messing around, you two. Today is fucking important, you hear me?”

“When are you going to stop acting like our dad, Alex?”

“It’s Cobra Alex to you!”

While the patrol team was bickering, Guang Hwa quickly moved through the debris, clambering over a half collapsed doorway and slinking through the gaps, before reaching a back entrance. He closed his eyes tight as he ditched his formal outfit, changing them for one of rags stained with grease and snot, clearly discarded by another homeless man. Clutching the briefcase tightly, he snuck his way around the streets, making it towards the Red Lions meeting point, continuously glancing behind him to make sure he was not followed.

Soon, he made it to the destination, a old rusty building with a half-broken sign of a jug, dashed with blood. No one seemed to have occupied it in what seemed like ages. He quickly entered into its depths, finding a staircase that led downwards to a cellar. To his surprise, the cellar was surprisingly well-stocked, filled to the brim with supplies and maps that seemed to be the result of observations gathering intelligence on the Seven Snakes.

Guang Hwa ran his finger across some of the maps, noting a few variations of an attack plan on the Seven Snakes, a three prong strike launched from the various Red Lion districts. A grin came to his face, knowing that his salvation was close at hand. *That’s what you fucking get for enslaving me, bitch.*

Thankfully, he was confident that he was far out of range of the slave engraving being able to affect him. All he needed to do was to find a black market engraver who could break the connection, though it would be hard to find someone trustworthy. Many escaped slaves instead found themselves transferred to another master, entering the slave market anew or auctioned off again.

Guang Hwa continued to examine the cellar, noticing a locked door at the far end, arctech engravings inscribed all along its surface. Just as he averted his gaze, the engravings glowed, opening to reveal Wrent and five of his Red Lion followers.

“Thank the goddess - Seven Snakes are going to bust the union apart, they want to capture Gunther!” Guang Hwa explained, but Wrent yawned, clearly not interested in what he had to say, instead holding out his hand expectantly.

Guang Hwa gritted his teeth, taking out a single secret document and tossing it over to Wrent, who caught it nimbly. He flipped through the document, a small grin spreading across his face. “Interesting. So the way the Seven Snakes are footing the bill is because of the new drug. Workers buy the drug with their wages, and the money circulates right back into the Seven Snakes treasury. But I don’t suppose this is the only information you have?”

“You only get the rest when you get me the fuck out of here.” Guang Hwa eyed the entrance from which Wrent and his men came through, noticing it was a tunnel of sorts that clearly led out of the district.

Wrent thought for a brief moment, before motioning to his men. “Check the street, make sure no one is following us.”

“What the fuck are you waiting for? Let’s get out!” Guang Hwa urged, only for Wrent to draw his blade.

“Oh don’t think I’m stupid, Guang Hwa. I’ve heard all about your ‘deals’ with the black market. Everyone knows you’re the one who sold the degraded engravings. For all I know, this could be another trap by that accursed Kyle.”

“You fucking idiot, I’m not with them, I’m a slave!”

Wrent ignored the pleas of Guang Hwa, instead waiting for his men to confirm the absence of an ambush. One of his men climbed up the staircase, peeking his head out to see the street level empty, devoid of residents. “Sir, no one is around.”

“Not a single soul?”

“Yes, sir, I don’t even see any worker-GUH!” The Red Lion’s head was gripped tightly, before his entire body was flung out into the open, Damian charging right into the cellar with a tower shield in his right arm. With a roar, he slammed into the next Red Lion, bashing the man into the wall violently before using the long edge of the shield to knock the Red Lion out.

“Damn it!” Wrent gritted his teeth, drawing his engraved sword, the remaining three Red Lions wielding rifles and firing right at Damian. “Flank his shield!”

They fan out across the cellar as Damian took cover behind the shield, Guang Hwa cowering on the floor and scrambling past to the entrance in the hopes of safety. However, before Guang Hwa could make it, Wrent gripped his collar and flung him to the corner. “You’re not going anywhere you fucking cunt!”

“Better pay attention!” Damian grinned as he rushed the nearest Red Lion, using the shield to crush him head-on. However, the other two Red Lions quickly captialized on the opportunity, shooting at Damian’s exposed back.

Instead of the pellets biting into the flesh, they pinged off his body like his skin was made of metal, the Red Lions flabbergasted while Damian now switch targets, surprisingly agile for his large body. With a rapid successions of hits, the remaining two Red Lions were knocked out as well, concussed from the heavy blows rained down upon them.

Suddenly, alarm bells rang in Damian’s head as he hurriedly brought his shield to bear, a red gushing energy wave slicing right at him and sending him sprawling backwards, breaking apart tables and chairs.

“Damian, little boy. Look how you’ve grown up. But you’re not the only fucker improving!” Wrent roared as he unleashed another two waves of energy, his engraved sword slashing violently and pushing Damian back. His tower shield suffered brunt after brunt as Damian dug his feet into the cellar’s floor, bracing himself against the broken wooden furniture.

“Oh I’m grown up enough now. I used to see you as a wall - but now I know you’re just as weak as anyone else!” Damian grabbed a dropped Red Lion rifle, firing at Wrent only for the pellets to be deflected by point defense arcia bolts lancing outwards.

“Don’t think your armor is unique!” Wrent lunged at Damian, slashing downwards at close range, the tower shield creaking under the impact as Damian’s feet drove deeper into the ground. Damian quickly rolled out of the way, using the shield to deflect each of the incoming strikes.

Without a word, Damian fired all the pellets in the rifle, squeezing the trigger hard and trying to overwhelm the point defense. Sure enough, the breastplate of Wrent’s armour began to falter, the pellets about to burst through the plates only for a glittering energy shield to appear out of nowhere.

“Surprised? Courtesy of the Ilysian Punks’ stash!” Wrent yelled as he went on the offensive again, his confidence buoyed by the protective Galactic Era personal shield while delivering a brutal combo. The blade of the sword found an opening, cutting deep into Damian’s arm and exposing the bone, blood leaking outwards. “Better tell your boss to come save you, else there won’t be much left!”

“You don’t understand - we knew all along we were going to fight you.” Damian gritted his teeth as his arms reveberated from blocking another blow.

“And they chose you? HAH!” Wrent lifted the sword high.

“Because I’m enough.” Damian spoke quietly while he rapidly rolled out of the way, Wrent losing his balance as the downward slashed missed entirely, hitting thin air. Before Wrent could recover his posture, the edge of the tower shield slammed from his right toward his legs, the personal shield flickering wildly from the physical impact.

Wrent hurriedly swung the sword to the right, deflecting the tower shield on Damian’s left arm upwards, exposing his body. “You’re dead!” Wrent reversed his wrist as he aimed right at Damian’s neck, slashing downwards. Instead of seeing a shocked Damian, Wrent could only watch as the right fist of Damian shot towards his face, breaking through the personal shield and landing squarely on his jaw. The force of the impact instantly cracked three of Wrent’s teeth, before sending him tumbling into a dust cloud of broken furniture, a nearby cupboard collapsing onto Wrent.

“RAGH! It’s not ovah!” Wrent roared with blood spurting out of his broken jaw, using the sword to slash his way out of the debris, forcing Damian to block the ensuing energy slash. Wrent hurriedly checked his shield, noticing the relic’s gauge was depleted. He glanced around the cellar, noticing that Guang Hwa was already missing, having clearly escaped before him. “GRRR!”

Wrent unleashed his fury, throwing five rapid slashes and blasting Damian back, before diving into the exit of the cellar, closing the door behind him and channeling arcia energy into the engraving, sealing it. “GUWANG HWWA! You fucking rat!” Wrent limped as blood trickled down from his mouth, his gum bleeding profusely as he fumbled with a healing flask on his belt, quickly drinking it. The wounds began to close up, restoring his health, but the humiliation at Damian’s hand still remained.

*Fucking, how could I lose to that pathetic excuse of a kid! Even Ulon used to be weaker than me!* Wrent boiled with rage as he sprinted down the tunnel, knowing Guang Hwa was right ahead. He took solace in the fact that Damian was the underboss of the Seven Snakes. Beating Kyle might be currently out of reach, but at least he still stood a chance against their second strongest.

As he reached the end of the tunnel, he finally spotted the visage of Guang Hwa, banging on the exit and obviously failing to open the door.

“Idiot, you can’t open the door if you’re not a Red Lion!” Wrent grunted, grabbing Guang Hwa from behind and slamming him against the wall, the blade of his sword biting into his neck. “Now give me one very fucking good reason why I do not LOB YOUR HEAD OFF RIGHT NOW!”

“I didn’t know I was tracked, I swear! Look, have everything on me! You gotta believe me, I’m not with them!” Guang Hwa hurriedly pointed his briefcase. “I was the insider helping out Gunther take over the factory.”

Wrent held the sword against Guang Hwa’s neck as he bent down to open the briefcase, seeing an entire stack full of financial documents and logistic routes. Wrent thumbed through a few, realizing that Guang Hwa was telling the truth - some of the information corroborated with his own information gathering so far.

“See? It’s not my fault!”

“Fuck you.” Wrent kicked Guang Hwa in the shin, causing him to collapse while continuing to browse the documents. Wrent’s eyes grew wider and wider as he read each document amdist the unnerving silence of the tunnel only interspersed with Guang Hwa’s whimpering. “You fucking idiot, did you read any of this information?”

“What..?” Guang Hwa replied painfully. “I just got my hands on it right before I left!”

“Bitch, they were already onto you from two weeks ago! They were tracking you from the very beginning!”

“Fucking… Now’s not the time to bicker about who’s following me, only that I’ve made good my bargain, so now you have to save me!”

“Oh yea? Now that I have all your information, what good are you to me?”

“I gave you everything!”

“Yea, a boatload of pain and trouble. We both know how the underworld works.” Wrent raised his sword, Guang Hwa scrambling to find a reason to stay alive.

“I…I can set you up with the rest of the union! Gunther and his men must have made it out now with the weapons and designs.”

“Designs?”

“Yes, the design for the armour, so you can make it yourself too.”

“Interesting… fine. It looks like you are still valuable. But cross me again and I’ll make sure this sword rips your body in half.” Wrent sighed, packing the documents back into the briefcase before approaching the exit door. He placed his hand on the surface of the door, channeling arcia and unlocking it. However, Wrent could already feel something was off, not opening the door just yet.

“What’s wrong? Let’s go already!”

“It’s too quiet. My men would have asked for the passcode by now.”

“Fuck! Give me a weapon!” Guang Hwa urged.

“Like fucking hell I will.” Wrent wasn’t about to risk the chance, so Guang Hwa looked around frantically, before picking up a loose rock, hoping and praying to the Goddess as well as any other divine beings beyond his understanding it would be enough to defend him.

Gripping the handle of his sword tightly, Wrent flung the door open, preparing to slash downwards only see the glint of a dazzling blade striking right towards, nearly nailing him right in the neck as Wrent instinctually parried with the hilt. The force of the lunge sent him toppling, Wrent recovering quickly before noticing a woman with blood splattered across her outfit and face. “Who the fuck are you?!”

Instead of hearing a response, Wrent only heard Guang Hwa’s panicked footsteps sprinting down the tunnel back the entrance fleeing for his life, leaving Wrent to fend for himself.

The woman merely cocked her head sideways as she kicked aside the mutilated body of a Red Lion member, surprisingly still breathing and moaning. Wrent roared as he charged forward bravely, only for all of his strikes to be parried easily by the woman, each step pristine like a dance. The woman had a bored expression on her face, almost yawning while Wrent gave it his all, slashing and throwing energy wave after wave.

“Fuck!” Wrent shot forth an energy wave, the woman suddenly slashing her sword perpendicular to the wave, dissipating it right through the middle as the two halves of the wave smashed into the wall behind, a dust cloud erupting from the impact.

Before Wrent could launch another combo, he suddenly felt a burning sensation carved right through his fingers, his grip on his sword lost as it went sailing through the air, clattering onto the blood-stained ground. Wrent collapsed to his knees, fighting back the urge to scream from the loss of his fingers.

As the woman slowly approached him, a primordial fear began to seep into Wrent’s heart as he involuntarily scrambled backwards, half of him suddenly wondering if Damian was not even the second strongest in the Seven Snakes. # Chapter 90 - Radicals

The atmosphere was tense, as Gunther heaved a bag full of pellets and rifle parts into a dusty corner, panting slightly while he tried to catch his breath. His other followers who escaped with him were equally exhausted, some collapsing onto the floor of the derelict hideout room, the door locked tightly behind them.

His followers were compromised of those who knew the real inner workings of the union, those who were loyal to Gunther. Many had participated in the executions and beheading themselves, using the union as a means to bring their shared vision into reality.

However, this setback had them reeling. No one spoke a word as they reorganized their stuff, Gunther himself boiling with frustration as to what had happened. “Where is Long Hua? He should have been here before us. Did he leave?”

“No sir, the hideout was completely untouched when we first arrived.” One of his followers answered him. “The door was still locked exactly the same way we left it.”

Gunther cursed under his breath, wondering what happened before the leader of the strike force entered the hideout along with another small group of workers, having just escaped the Seven Snakes district. It was painfully obvious from the look on their faces that not everyone had made it out of the ensnaring net.

“What the hell happened, Ki Hwang?” Bronco pressed as he stormed up to Gunther, asking the question that had been on everyone’s mind for the last few hours that they have been running. “We had control of the whole union! We could have fought off anyone who was coming to capture us.”

“Not when the union council has been corrupted.” Gunther seethed. “Those spineless compromisers, they were planning to round all of us up at the morning council meeting!”

“Who?!”

“Who else? The fucking cocksuckers who spent their time at the Seven Snakes pub and casino every night these past few weeks!” Despite Gunther’s external show of disdain and anger, internally he was far from furious about the betrayal of Culo and the others. He had never expected them to really be on the same page as him, even with all their talks of unity and solidarity.

He used them just as much as they used him. As Gunther looked around the temporary hideout, he was buoyed by the fact that he had already grown his original following to a near hundred now, armed to the teeth with military grade weapons and armor pilfered from the factory stores at no additional cost.

“Fucking traitors…” Bronco gritted his teeth, kicking a nearby crate. “We lost our power - reduced to a skeleton of what we could have been! The whole factory! It could have been the start of something fresh, a true revolution!”

“And it still can be. We still have multiple stores of weapons and supplies to continue the fight.”

“Then we should hit the Seven Snakes as soon as possible. The moment they drop their guard-”

“No. It’s all a ploy by that accursed Kyle.” Gunther clenched his fist. “He knew exactly what was going to happen, and he played us all for fools!”

“What do you mean? How is that possible?”

“I felt it the moment he instantly agreed to all our demands, as if he was already expecting it to happen. The council may have already been infiltrated even earlier.” Gunther began to pace the hideout, checking all of their remaining food and water. *Perhaps even Culo was on their side from the beginning.*

“You’re right, it was strange for us to have successfully rescued all of the prisoners without a single casualty. But I don’t understand, what is the overall motive?”

“It does not matter - as long as we still live, the revolution lives on through us. Gather everyone who have proved their loyalty once they are settled in. Contact Wrent and inform him of what happened.” Gunther ordered Bronco.

While Bronco rallied the men, Gunther was not as disinterested as he seemed in Kyle’s motive, trying to compile everything he knew. As he watched his men scurry about, reorganizing the hideout once more, it was like lightning striking the ground when the pattern began to emerge in his brain, the path obvious to him.

It was already clearly obvious that controlling the union was the desired outcome for the Seven Snakes, and it had been achieved through the corruption of his allies, but it failed to explain just why they did not crush the union outright. *If they were able to capture Guang Hwa so easily, then there was an underlying reason why they did not capture me yet.*

Gunther knew he was the highest profile target - for all his disguises and machinations, he had no doubt Kyle would have captured him instantly the moment he was revealed. *Which means I still served a purpose, up to today.*

As what was left of the workers continued to reorganize their equipment, Gunther spotted Bronco’s hand shivering slightly, Bronco taking out a smokepipe and stuffing a few grounded Euria Seeds. “Since when did you smoke?” Gunther squinted in suspicion.

“I…” Bronco himself wasn’t quite sure. “I just saw this among the stash of the factory managers, seemed about right to use it.”

“You don’t look too well.”

“I’m fine, I’m perfectly fine. What, you going to tell me I can’t smoke now?”

“Of course not.” Gunther didn’t particularly care about Euria smoke, it was just another hobby to him. Yet he saw quite a few people smoking as well within the hideout, the distinctive blue plumes wafting to the ground.

“Hey, there’s an announcement by the union on the radios!” One of the men remarked, tuning the radio only to earn a slap in the head from Bronco.

“What fucking use do we have to listen to the traitors? Fuck all of them!” Bronco reached forward to grab the radio, but Gunther stopped him.

“No. To know our next move, we need to know our enemies. Play it.”

[-And the union will no longer tolerate those who seek to undermine and threaten the stability of society. The union is committed to ensuring peace and prosperity, for those who are willing to put in the effort. We now represent all workers in the district, if you choose to join us, in working hand-in-hand with the enforcers and the business owners.] Culo’s voice rang clearly through the hideout, antagonizing Gunther’s followers who were listening in.

“Fucking bitches! They compromised with the landlords and the Seven Snakes! They betrayed the workers!”

“Gunther, we should go in and kill all of them. The only thing worse than a landowner is a traitor!”

Gunther’s followers were already seething, shouting over the announcement until Gunther raised his hand, earning a silence while Culo continued to speak.

[Our former leader, Gunther, has been revealed to be the mastermind behind the beheadings and executions, attempting to frame others. The union vehemently denounces all forms of violence and offensive actions, and are purely committed to a peaceful negotiation with all business owners. We do not seek revolution, but reformation. Together, we can all work towards a better future, hand-in-hand without conflict. In order to do so, we have implement a few changes to the union.]

“FUCK YOU CULO! NO CHANGE WITHOUT STRENGTH!” One of Gunther’s followers hollered, earning a wave of agreements and shouting.

“Disgusting slimeballs who suckle their masters’ toes!” Another heckled. “And I bet the first change they did was to rescind the double wages.”

[As such, effective from today, the union will be enforcing new rules and legistation to ensure the well-being of every worker of the union. First and foremost, double wages of the current prevailing market rates are in place, to be revised every three years under a progressive scheme.]

“What?!” Gunther’s followers were befuddled beyond belief, their anger overridden by confusion. Many of them turned to look at Bronco and Gunther, only to see that the two were equally flabbergasted as well.

As Culo continued elaborating on the changes, it became painfully clear that all of the benefits that the union had earned was not going away at all. Bronco pulled Gunther to the side angrily:“This runs contrary to every other business owner we have dealt with before. What is the Seven Snakes even aiming at?! How are they sustaining double of the market rates?! And to even suggest that it would be revised regularly? If anything, Kyle should have crushed the union instantly to save costs!”

Gunther’s eyes flickered to the pipe still in Bronco’s hand, the realization striking him. “You, you and the other prisoners. You’re addicted to the Euria smoke, aren’t you?”

“What? How does that matter now?”

“The workers left behind, they are fueling their addiction by buying drugs from the damned Seven Snakes. The money never ever leaves their system, it just circulates! That’s how they are funding the double wages, because the workers are going to spend it on them anyway!”

Bronco started to come around a little, but was still a bit confused. “But they still need money to produce the drugs, it can’t be that profitable for them!”

[Finally, for workers who have suffered financial difficulties, we are proud to also consecutively announce a loan program with low interest rates from the Golden Snakes Construction Company in order to cover your expenditure. This offer is unique to workers within the union only!] Culo’s final change had a resounding applause on his side of the radio, but Gunther’s followers were deathly silent in the hideout.

At this stage, Gunther didn’t need to bicker any longer, Kyle’s plan laid bare for all to see. “He’s milking them dry through never-ending interest. If they are as addicted as you, they would spend their entire wage on every single drop of Euria they can get their hands on, even going into debt!”

“Then they will be forever indentured to the Seven Snakes.” Bronco concluded as he tossed his Euria pipe to the side in disgust. “All while the workers think they are protected and supported by the union. He played us like puppets!”

“Like puppets indeed.” Gunther clenched his fist in anger. *First the Red Lions, now the Seven Snakes. I had enough of being used as a pawn!*

The announcement ended, leaving Gunther’s followers waiting for an answer while they bickered among each other, some reconsidering whether following Gunther was the right thing to do or not. “Maybe if we had just compromised, we would have been able to achieve something greater. Culo is doing exactly what a union should be doing.”

“Are you crazy? The union should have zero diplomacy with the business owners - don’t forget the Seven Snakes imprisoned and experimented on our brothers. They treat us worse than cattle!”

“That’s right, no quarter should be given!”

“But Kyle gave in to all of our demands!”

“That means he just has an ulterior motive. It’s clear he is the ultimate beneficial owner of the union now, pulling all the strings. Who is to say that he won’t twist it for his own nefarious means in the future!”

“It does not matter what he wants, or why he wants it.” Gunther interjected, stepping into the very center of the hideout. “What matters is that the union under Culo has lost their path. They have become enchanted, led astray by the naive belief that working with those who seek to own us would ever lead to a positive outcome. This is only a false cover, an illusion to make it seem like the Seven Snakes is walking the path of moderation.”

“But the fact is, the workers did get a better job and safer working conditions.” One of the more hesitant followers pointed out.

“Then inform me, and the rest of us here: who put them into that situation in the first place? Who created the working environment from scratch? Molded it, designed it? Was it us?”

“Those above us who have forgotten their roots.” Bronco and a few others chanted in response.

“Culo and the traitors paint us as radicals, as extremists who only know violence. We have lost our base of power, our support, our former brothers and comrades. But when our suffering and pain is inflicted through violence, what other recompense do we have? Does a pig bend the knee in order to prevent being slaughtered? Does a dog not fight back when others seek to maim it? And when ur fellow chickens sprint for the ovens, shall you follow them? No! We will fight, fight for our right to get what we deserve from those who seek to rip that away from us!”

“And so they shall return to dust.” More began to join the chant.

“The business owners establish their rule through the use of force, in the form of enforcers or gangsters. Thus, the use of force is necessary to overthrow said rule! There is no other alternative, no other compromise. A revolutionary does not maim himself in search of a better future, he struggles and fights with every ounce of energy within his veins, within his muscles. And while he may not live to witness the future, he knows that it is what must be done in the present, in the here and now. For great men suffer for a goal they may never see realized.”

“So our children can be reborn anew.” The followers were starting to come together, united under a banner.

“To a better world, a world without exploitation, servitude, a world without class, a world without nobles and their ilk, a world without suffering nor pain, where every man, woman and child will be afforded his due rights according to his true ability rather than the nature of his birth.”

“So our world will be made united.”

“This setback is but a minor dip, but it only hardens our resolves and threshes the dregs from our cause. Here we remain united, stronger than ever in our bonds. Those traitors do not deserve our help, nor will they receive our sympathy. No longer shall we run, no longer shall we hide.”

“For men of equal shall inherit the world!”

“Gather everyone who is willing to fight for the cause, to fight for the freedom that we all had ripped away from us the moment we were born into this cruel society. Recruit the lost, the forsaken, the downtrodden, and rise up! Rise up stronger than ever before, rise up burning with vengeance in your heart, soul and mind! The revolution can be only be paved in blood, for all men are equal!” Gunther roared at the top of his lungs.

“And so they will die equal!”

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The galloping of horses thundered across the tracks, only matched by the never-ending shouts and cheers from the audience. Many of them clutches slips of papers in their hands, their hearts palpitating in line with each gallop the horses took.

[Angel’s Venture is leading the pack right now, but Team Crimson is catching up real fast, it looks like its coming down to the wire!] An upbeat announcer’s voice belted out commentary through the various arctech radio speakers mounted on the ceiling of the stands, invigorating the audience even more.

[AND UNBELIEVABLE! TEAM CRIMSON IS THE WINNER BY JUST THE TIP OF ITS NOSE!]

“THAT’S BULLSHIT!” An angry audience member wagged a clenched fist in the air. “THEY WERE CHEATING!”

“Sit down, old man, you just betted on the wrong horse!”

“Fuck you!”

As the audience broke out into equal mix of cheers and tears, a entourage of Red Lion bodyguards surrounding a VIP lounge area showed no emotion at all, much less the man that they were protecting. Instead, the man was focusing far more on the words that were being whispered to him.

“There has been no contact with Wrent since the announcement by the union. We suspect the Seven Snakes may have captured him.” A Red Lion officer reported to Leo who was still staring intently at the chaos unfolding in the stands. An eerie silence reigned in the air, the officer’s leg shivering slightly while he watched Leo’s every movement.

“I don’t want suspicions, I want information. Do they have him or not?” Leo spoke with an icy tone, his anger clear as day.

“His last known movement was to secure an informant of the name Guang Hwa, who used to be the CEO of the Golden Snakes.”

“Then it’s likely our motives and plans have been compromised. The Seven Snakes must be aware of our plans. How fast can we move?”

“We’re not done with the distribution of weapons and armor collected by Wrent. It would take a day or two to have every leader and their district geared up again.” The officer reluctantly informed, risking earning the ire of Leo. However, he would rather not end up like Wrent - honesty was the best policy when it came to the Red Lions.

“Mock up a reduced attack plan with a smaller strike force. Once approved, distribute it to all leaders for execution. Who’s left in the Left Paw?”

“The next ranking member is Lionel, boss.”

“Have him assume the position of the Left Paw.”

“But boss, Wrent might still be alive. If we replace him now, it would go against years of tradi-”

Leo glared at the officer. “Regardless of whether or not Wrent is alive, he is a dead man to us. I do not tolerate failure twice. Carry out the promotion, effective immediately.”

“Understood, boss.”

Leo sighed, adjusting a leather gauntlet that masked his entire left forearm. “The attack must be lightning quick. Have Lionel take over from Wrent for the Left Paw. I will take command as soon as the strike force is organized. We must burn every Seven Snakes business to the ground before they can fortify their defenses.”

“Of course-” A sudden gunshot interrupted them from the front of the stands, the audience collectively shouting in unison, Both Leo and the officer immediately exchanged suspicious glances. “Who’s in charge of security here?”

“I’ll ring him up.” The officer quickly tuned the arctech radio strapped to his belt, only to met with static.

“Mobilize anyone who is still remaining. We will immediately retreat to our nearest hideout.” Leo motioned with his hands, having the entourage move in tandem with him, forcing their way through the panicking crowd.

As the bodyguards pushed and shoved the audience members aside in a bid to get to the exit, a sudden glint of metal flashed into Leo’s eyes, the sharp blade of a knife gutting a unaware bodyguard from amdist the crowd. “They are onto us!” The Red Lion officer cried out, drawing his handgun and scanning the crowd for the hidden assailant.

Even Leo couldn’t tell who was the enemy and who was just a fleeing audience member. “Clear out the crowd, NOW!”

The bodyguards complied, firing into the air and forcing the innocent audience members to scatter away from them suddenly. But before some of the bodyguards could react, they were immediately met with a barrage of pellets, most of which tore through their steel plates like a hot knife through butter, butchering their organs in a mist of blood.

Leo ducked low while he was escorted out of the racing arena, pellets zinging in the dense air when a sudden explosion rang in the distance as others screamed and ducked, running for cover while smoke billowed from the nearby factories.

“Who’s attacking us?” Leo demanded, but the bodyguards around him were far too preoccupied to identify their allegiance. Only from the corner of his eye did he spot the silhouette of the assailants, though it was not enough to determine who it was.

As the firefight continued, the Red Lion bodyguards fell one by one in their attempts to bring Leo to a safehouse along the wide streets filled with panic and devestation. They cowered behind smoking husks of arctech wagons and toppled billboard signs, firing back randomly at the general direction of the enemy.

“Boss, we’re going to make a run for it over into that shop and hole up until further reinforcements come - you two cover us!” The Red Lion officer barked, Leo complying and sprinting as fast as he could under suppressive fire.

Soon, they were in the still pristine shop filled with silk and luxurious cloths draped on rails and manniquins, the workers frantically hiding in the safety of their counter.

“Get into the back!” The Red Lion officer waved his handgun frantically, forcing the workers into the storeroom behind while Leo himself began to shift a few display cabinets towards the door, shoring it up before taking stock of what they had on hand.

“Boss, you can have my handgun.” The officer offered it to Leo, only to be rejected.

“I have my ways of defending myself. Get in contact with the other members, have them encircle the enemy now.”

“But boss, if you use it, your body will not be able to-”

“Did I ask you to question me?!” Leo snapped, prompting the officer to hurriedly tune the arctech radio, trying to hail the other Red Lions.

Another explosion reverberated through the shop, the mannequins rattling violently along with the flimsy glass pane that shielded their storefront. Leo could only watch as his bodyguards were pinned down under the sheer firepower of their attackers unable to stop them at all.

Suddenly, he noticed another glint of metal from a second-floor window opposite the store, a strange looking spearheaded projectile aimed right at him. His muscles tensed as he instinctively lunged towards the officer, dragging him down onto the floor.

Within a split second, the projectile had launched forward, billowing a dazzling green trail of gas before shattering the storefront’s glass pane and smashing a mannequin in its way, lodging itself into the fake wooden flooring of the fashion store.

Leo struggled to rise to his feet, while the far more sturdy Red Lion officer attempted to hoist him up. However, a sudden churning sound erupted from the strange projectile, heralding a thousand sharp fragments of metal to explode with force. The fragments ricocheted across the store, damaging and shredding the various strips of cloths apart while the officer fell to the ground, dead from a searing fragment that had nailed him right between his shocked eyes.

Leo scrambled to the counter at the far end of the shop, taking cover behind the sturdy wooden walls of a wardrobe while a squad of five union fighters stormed the entrance, hacking and kicking apart the temporarily placed display cabinets. “So those above us remember their roots.” The squad leader chanted, motioning for the others to sweep the store.

“And so they shall return to dust.” They responded, hoisting their rifle to bear, carefully stepping over the pieces of broken mannequins and torn trails of clothes billowing amdist the smoke and devastation of the

“No use hiding, Mane of the Red Lion. No one shall stand above the union any longer!” The leader of the union squad taunted. “Come out and we may grant you a quick death.”

“Fools, I was the one who funded you! I supported your cause!” Leo roared from behind the cover, his eyes darting about as he searched for a way out.

“I would be a fool to believe your words - you imprisoned Gunther and my brothers too! No doubt you had nefarious means for us, using us to your own benefit. We will no longer be your puppets!”

“Then you leave me no choice.” Leo grunted with effort, removing his leather gauntlet on his left forearm to reveal a wretched, shriveled black hand, from which a sickening red gas began to seep out of every pore, snaking through the debris like tendrils that seeked out the fighters.

Before any of the workers could react, the tendrils of gas had spiralled up into the air, coiling like snakes and drilling right into their nose, their harrowing screams filling the air as their bodies was hoisted and flung through the store, their skin ravaged by multiple lacerations from the various sharp glass fragments around.

The squad leader was frightened, hurriedly firing as many pellets as he could muster at the incoming tendrils. Yet the pellets had no effect on the gas, only forming swirling holes of fumes as it passed through harmlessly. Three tendrils lunged towards him, two grabbing his two arms and locking him down to the ground, while the last one jabbed right into his eyes, his eyes squished into a pulp as blood streamed down his face.

Blood began to pulsate, swirling back through the tendrils towards Leo’s hand, his original shriveled blackened skin beginning to regain its original color and skin tension. In exchange, the workers’ body began to decay rapidly, the flesh deflating like a balloon as the life was sucked right out of them.

The leader still struggled while Leo walked towards him, confident as ever as a deadly red aura surrounded him. Without a single word, Leo flicked his finger upwards, the tendril that had latched onto the leader’s eyes began to pull even harder, turning the leader’s face inside out in an gruesome form, the red raw flesh within brought to the surface in a twist of skin and meat.

The tendrils dropped the leader, leaving Leo alone in a sea of carnage as he stepped over the desiccated corpses, heading out into the street where a squad of Red Lions were already rushing over to him. “Boss, are you alright?” The first started, only to see the bodies behind Leo as the answer to his question.

Leo ignored the concern of the member, instead ordering the Red Lions to launch a counterattack on the union immediately. “The union has far outlived their usefulness - it’s time to cull the herd.”

# Chapter 91 - To The Table

*Three days later…*

The Red Lions districts were a veritable sea of chaos and fire, flames licking up from every other window as firebombs, firefights and bloody stains dominated the streets unlike never before. Sounds of gunfire and screams rang out through the debris-ridden alleyways and backlanes, buffeting the whimpers and muffled cries of those seeking shelter however they could.

Clashes between the Red Lions and the union was intermittent, and despite the initial morale of the Red Lion members, they were surprisingly slowly losing ground to the union over time. “Boss, they are just too many! Their members are hiding everywhere, and their numbers grow each day with every factory and store they liberate.” An officer reported to Leo in a small unrevealed command hideout, the view overlooking the main street where smoke and fumes continued to drift in the cold wind from burning husks of arctech wagons.

“How many?”

“Estimates from our observers put them at a thousand, and growing. As far as we can tell, they are putting a rifle in the hands of anyone who is coming to them. Many of their newer recruits are from other Sectors or Versian migrants.”

“Fucking Versian trash…” Leo cursed under his breath. It was not too much of a surprise to him that the Versians would be more open to the radical nature of the union, seeing as they had their own revolution 15 years prior. “Have the enforcers mobilized yet?”

“Bishop Vernette is on the move. Within three hours we will completely encircle this district and bring the union to heel.”

“Ensure every tunnel in and out of this district that is on our record is guarded and monitored. I don’t want a single food ration getting in and out.” Leo reminded.

“Understood, Boss, we’ll starve them out.”

Leo nodded, his gaze returning to the view of the burning district once more. While he still held a confident posture, deep down he wondered just how had it come to backfire so spectacularly onto him. *Gunther… I will personally make sure you live a long and harrowing life.*

[Children of Raktor! I ask that you see past the manufactured differences between us, created by those above that seek to divide and conquer us!] Gunther’s voice rang clear on the arctech radio placed in the command center. [There is no upper-class, no middle-class, no lower-class: there is only those who own, and those who labor! Work with us, for we are starting a revolution anew. One that has succeeded before, and will succeed again!]

“Have we pinpointed where the transmission is coming from?” Leo queried a Red Lion member who was jotting down recordings on a notebook.

“We’re almost done triangulating the signal strength for many of them.”

“Current guesses?”

“They are not within our district, thats for sure. Nearly all of the sources are originating from the enforcers’ district.”

“We’ll take care of that.” Bishop Vernette’s voice rang out as she entered the command center confidently, flanked by five enforcers.

“So Count Leon finally listened.” Leo barely acknowledged her arrival. “I was beginning to wonder if you were behind this.”

“This uprising affects me as much as you.”

“What about your Seven Snakes pet?”

“We no longer work with them, I think that much was made clear months ago.”

“Non-action is equivalent to helping.”

“I made my stance clear to Count Leon. If you have issues, you can take it up with him.” Bishop Vernette waved her hand dismissively, instead focusing on the situation at hand. “I’m surprised you haven’t massacred them yet.”

“They are spread like rats and birds - their command hierarchy is in complete shambles, and none of them truly know the exact extent nor strength of the union.”

“So the Mane of the Red Lion is brought low by a simple worker uprising. How poetic.”

Leo scowled, but did not raise a hand against her. “I liked you better when you were still a naive priest.”

“I liked you better when you were still a humble foreman.” Bishop Vernette smirked. “Your hand should have killed you by now.”

“Not when there are no shortage of enemies.”

“Even one that you have created yourself?”

“Enough small-talk. I will need your enforcers to bolster the lockdown and starve out the workers entrenched in their hiding holes.”

“Of course. But remember this, I’m only doing this as part of Count Leon’s request. Who’s to say on what could happen after this is done?”

“We’ll see about that, old hag.”

Soon, the reluctant combined force enforcers and the Red Lion members were working hand-in-hand, albeit with clear issues in the distribution of information. The mistrust between Leo and Bishop Vernette made trying to encircle the radical union difficult and time-consuming, Leo unwilling to reveal the full capabilities of the Red Lions. Similarly, Bishop Vernette too did not show her hand, only allocating a minimum number of enforcers to deal with the threat.

With the internal bickering in the combined force, it was near impossible to filter and recognize every single member, many of whom had just join, radicals in their own right having flocked to a believable cause. Red Lion members and enforcers bickered with each other on every single possible move, a tug-of-war on control of the overall suppression operation.

As the days trailed on, it became even more and more clearer that the situation was starting to spiral out of hand due to the disunity. More and more pockets of union resistance was beginning to spring up even within the enforcers’ district itself. Protests and strikes became more and more frequent, all the while business owners were harassed and in some cases, executed publicly in a bid to frighten the city into submission. The same bloody fate that had befell Stanley and his son was repeatedly displayed across the South Sector.

What worsened the situation more was that some of the Red Lions and enforcers began to lose hope in ever suppressing the union, a minority even sympathizing and leaking information about deployments and raids to the union, rendering any coercive moves impotent.

Any threat of force by the enforcers were summarily ignored due to the union’s possession of military grade weapons, resulting in sporadic firefights breaking out all over, even right in front of the Magda. There was no sense of rhythm nor rhyme to the expansion of the radical union, as though Gunther had simply given the tools to the people, spreading the fight as far as he could. Rumors of affiliated branches began to appear in other Sectors as well, threatening the overall stability of the city.

By the end of the next two weeks, even Leo was starting to get desperate, to the point where he himself was taking to the field. His overwhelming power allowed him to steamroll any opposition that he faced, but it was insignificant in face of the exponentially growing numbers of the radical union. As he examined what remained of another union hiding spot hidden in the slums, he began to despair at the sheer scale of what he faced. “Just how many hideouts do these rats have? It’s like trying to crush a thousand ants hiding in the forest.”

Yet it was not the numbers that truly frightened him, but the logistics of supplying that many union members as he noticed the copious amounts of ration packs made available in the shabby hideout, where five captured union members were tied up and forced to kneel. *Just how is Gunther keeping all of them in control? How is it possible to feed that many mouths?* At this stage, the union was now boasting a force even greater than the Ardent Cretins, and far more dispersed than anything the Red Lions could deal with. Every time they flushed a union hideout, three more popped up in their stead.

Leo stormed up to a captured union member, who had been clearly the overall in-charge for the hideout. In one swift motion, Leo had his red gaseous tendrils hang the man upside down, shaking him violently before hoisting the man’s face to his eye level. “Tell me where are the other hideouts, and maybe I’ll let you live.”

Even as the blood rushed to the captured union member’s head, his forehead brimming red, the member spat a glob mixed with saliva and blood onto Leo’s face, grinning widely. “Better to die free than to die a slave.”

Leo slowly wiped the spit off his face with a handkerchief. “Last chance. We can be friends, or I can be the last face you ever see.”

“When I die, the only face I’ll see is that of the Goddess Nona. Can you say the same, heathen?” The captured union member continued grinning widely, mocking Leo until his face began to scrounge up in pain, his brows furrowing as he struggled against the red gaseous tendrils that held each of his limbs.

“So be it.” Leo stared into the man’s eyes as the man’s limbs were slowly tugged apart by the tendrils bit by bit. The sinews between his joints were pulled apart, the force immeasurable as the man bit down on his own tongue, drawing blood before finally letting out a pained shriek as the left arm gave way first, exposing the dislocated shoulder as well as streaks of flesh gushing out.

Within a minute, the man was quartered, his four limbs wrenched out of place, separated from his body and thrown to the remaining four union members, instilling fear behind them as the man still continued screaming, attempting to crawl away albeit without arms nor legs.

“Ready to talk? First one lives.” Leo grunted, the four captured union members instantly clamouring to speak over the other, hoping to avoid the gruesome fate that their leader faced.

The Red Lion members took over, interrogating and drawing information from their testimony and confessions, yet soon a bleak picture was painted for Leo. Despite the clear willingness of the union members to share information, that information was ultimately highly segregated and filtered. Each union cell was unique from another, with only the very top leaders around Gunther knowing the true extent of where each union cell was.

“We.. we operate independently! We simply were told to recruit and fight for the cause wherever possible, to find the weakest spot!” Another captured member exclaimed, further proving Leo’s suspicion that the entire movement was a decentralized body. With no head to cut off, Leo did not see an easy way to end the instability.

“Boss, perhaps… perhaps we should reach a compromise with the union.” A Red Lion officer suggested, only to earn a glare from the frustrated Leo.

“A compromise?”

“The level of destruction will only increase over time, and our finances are being severely affected as it is. Even our protection rackets are starting to falter.” While the Red Lions could still enforce a certain level of security among their businesses, the simple fact was that residents were no longer sticking around to patronize them, causing their revenue to dip on a large scale.

“There are far bigger fish to worry about than some paltry revenue of rakels. This is a war of annihilation. If we do not crush the union in time, I’m afraid the Red Lions may very well cease to exist.”

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*The next day…*

[Fears of union uprisings are beginning to spread throughout the city of Raktor. In what was originally a single factory unionizing has now turned into a sector-wide scare. Countless strikes and protests are brewing in every single district, with more and more workers joining the radical extremist union.] A radio presenter’s voice drifted through the quiet mansion, Count Leon resting his head on his hands upon a opulent dark oak table complete with every fanciful decorations a noble could have, staring at a letter in front of him, the seal of a Duke on its edge.

His silence only unnerved the four generals standing in front of him, as well as every Baron and Bishop in Raktor save for Baron Cain, who was conspicuously missing. However, Count Leon was more concerned with pressing matters than a missing Baron. He raised his head, his sigh echoing about the large personal study. “Barons and Bishops, thank you all for coming on short notice. I’ll get straight to it: Care to explain how the radical union has yet to be crushed?”

The South Sector’s Red Lions district was now a veritable hotspot for the radical union. Even the help of the enforcers was employed within the last week, though the situation has only seemed to worsen.

No one dared to make the first step, almost all of them turning to look at Bishop Flectus, the Central Sector’s Bishop who had been put in charge of the union suppression efforts. He cleared his throat, stepping forward with formality. “Count Leon, sir. With all due respect, the union is hard to deal with due to the alluring nature of its cause -”

“I do not want fanciful words or excuses, Bishop. My business, the city’s businesses are suffering. Right now, the business owners are putting forward a petition to have me renounce my position! Every operation you have done has only led to more disasters. Why can’t you just kill every single union leader and be done with it?”

“Killing the leaders will only paint them as martyrs, for others to rally around. Already, the death of Bronco, the union’s leader second-in-command has increased fevor for the cause.” Bishop Flectus did not waver, adamant. “Our sincere belief is that the correct approach is-”

“To outlaw every form of worker organization in the city. Right now, we simply do not have the legal right to arrest them. It does not exist in the Sanctum’s code, which means we would need to apply for a special inquisition order. If we try to subvert the code, it would be another talking point for those undecided in these events.” Baron Namor, the Baron of the East Sector offered his approach. “Until we have the legal and moral right to suppress the union, our arms are tied.”

“Outlaw every form?” Bishop Vernette scoffed. “You might as well outlaw the Sanctum as well - we too provide protection for workers.”

“Clearly I was misunderstood. These laws and amendments to the code shall obviously need to be reworded and discussed properly through the appropriate avenues-”

“I HAVE NO TIME FOR LEGAL BULLSHIT!” Count Leon slammed the table. “I have a joint military exercise with Kregol and Perlis along with an imminent war within months, and I will be the laughing stock of all of the Yual Dominion if I cannot get my own city in order. Who is funding the union and keeping them afloat?! How are they feeding a thousand fighters across the damned city?”

No one could answer that question - all they had now was suspicion and theories. The silence only angered Count Leon even more. “I want the union dead. Crushed. Torn to pieces, so they will never rise again!”

“This will only cause even more unrest and uprising, which would serve as a potent knife for those who seek to undermine our stability. It’s clear that someone not among us is funding them. Are you sure about taking a violent approach?” Bishop Vernette raised her eyebrows, only angering Count Leon even more.

“I’m starting to think you’re in leagues with the union yourself, Bishop Vernette. Perhaps you are the one funding them.” Count Leon accused.

“My own men and inquisitors are fighting tooth and nail on every reported strike and protest as we speak. Perhaps before resorting to unnecessary doubt and grasping at straws, we should focus on concrete solutions. Not finding scapegoats.”

“We can mobilize the military, call martial law.” A general gave his suggestion. “Make gatherings illegal temporarily, override the Sanctum’s code, give the military extralegal authority.”

“Are you implying that the enforcers of the Sanctum are weak?” Bishop Flectus retorted.

“Could not have put it better myself. The very fact that your enforcers fails to squash such an simple uprising shows that the military is far better suited for such a suppression campaign.”

“To question the effectiveness of the Sanctum of Yual is to question the decision of Emperor Yual himself! Martial law is only to be called in the most severe of emergencies, and it has never been called in the history of Raktor. Doing so would make ALL of us look weak. Think of our reputation!”

While the generals, barons and bishops bickered about the next steps, Count Leon let out an exasperated sigh, clearly distressed and suddenly bursting out in anger. “ENOUGH! You have two more weeks - two more weeks to find the union leaders and have all of them crushed! Lure them, cheat them, I do not care what it takes. Or else our positions, not just mine, will be in jeopardy.”

Count Leon simmered with rage as he stared at them, before realizing something. “Where is Baron Cain? It has been more than twenty minutes! You two, find him and bring him before me right this ins-”

“No need for that, Count Leon. I am right here.” The doors to the personal study swung open, revealing Baron Cain along with an unexpected guest. Count Leon shot up of his seat, while Bishop Vernette only squinted her eyes in suspicion.

“What are you doing bringing a gang leader here?!” Count Leon roared.

“To deliver your requested weapons and armour, of course.” Kyle spoke with respect, his voice calm unlike that of Count Leon.

“But-”

“But how is it possible after everything that has happened? Is that what you wanted to say?” Kyle smirked, Count Leon bristling with fury unlike never before.

“How dare you enter uninvited. Guards!” Baron Namor immediately ordered two enforcers to step forward to arrest Kyle.

Yet, before the enforcers could get close to Kyle, Count Leon took a deep breath, calming himself. “The rest of you, please allow me to have a private conversion with Baron Cain and this gentlemen over here.”

The generals looked at each other shiftly, confused about what was happening before finally reluctantly leaving with the others. Baron Namor shot a glare of disgust at Baron Cain, while Bishop Vernette brushed past Kyle for a brief moment. “Please don’t pull me into whatever you have planned this time.”

“Of course not. I value my allies’ prosperity, whether or not they leave me out to dry.” Kyle smiled.

Soon, only Count Leon, Baron Cain and Kyle were left alone within the personal study. Kyle took a seat without asking, leaning into a comfortable armchair and crossing his legs without a care in the world.

“You two, you fuckers. You planned all of this!” Count Leon accused. “Give me one good reason why I should not have you exiled on counts of treason!”

“Treason?” Baron Cain shrugged. “We simply fulfilled the contract as requested. Of course, the factory underwent certain unexplained hardships, but thanks to Mr. Kyle over here, we were able to sort it out effectively enough to meet the order. And under the terms of the contract, we are expecting renumeration, of course.”

“I will have to ensure that the delivery is in order.” Count Leon rang up his servants, irritated by the smug look on Baron Cain’s face. “Check that the weapons and armor are delivered exactly to the number stated in the contract.”

[Count Leon, sir, it’s confirmed. All rifles and knight armour sets are accounted for, both standard and reduced version.]

“Impossible…” Count Leon was too shaken to even be angry any longer.

“Count Leon. We’re both businessmen who clearly values time, so let me get to the point.” Kyle took over the conversation, leaning forward with a glint in his eye, ready to strike for the kill. “You hired a gang, the Red Lions to disrupt my businesses and my district. On top of that, you made a seemingly ridiculous order that no other factory in Raktor could meet, something that would require a miracle. I do not begrudge you for that - it is a free market after all, the rules of the game are fluid. Unfortunately for you, I specialize in miracles.”

Count Leon did not reply, watching Kyle get up and pace around the room, continuing to speak. “Whether you intended it or not, the Red Lions engineered a union uprising within my territory, and now that the radical union has escaped the confines of my grasps, it is now wrecking havoc across the city, stirring up emotions and long suppressed dreams of revolution, of better things. The Red Lions cannot even control the union in their own borders.”

Count Leon gritted his teeth in anger, finally realizing what happened. “You purposefully let the radical union out so it would bring me to the negotiating table. You are the ones funding the radical union now!”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not. Who’s to say? But maybe…” Kyle smirked, approaching the table right in front of Count Leon.

“What do you want?” Count Leon snarled.

“I want an mutual understanding, that we can both work better together than against each other. My weapons and armour are qualitively better than your current suppliers, and I am more than willing to share the design. For a price, a percentage, of course.”

“Not enough. I could easily have my men come up with a better design. Why do I need you? Baron Namor and his engineers could do it in a heartbeat.”

“Then why haven’t they? Clearly you’re lacking a few critical ingredients, a few leaps in theoretical understanding. Also, I’m not finished yet. On top of the design offering, as a sign of a goodwill, I will help you crush the union in one fell swoop for free.”

“A sign of goodwill? Crush the union? HAH!” Count Leon let out a mirthless laugh. “You want to do what not even the generals, barons and bishops can do? What can you do that the enforcers or the major gangs cannot do?”

“Unlike the Tul’e Da’li who seems to think beating up every single union worker is the best solution, I propose a surgical strike, where I will kill or capture all of the union leaders.”

“What makes you so confident? The bishops have already tried that - even the Mad Dog cannot get to the leader herself.”

“Because I have something different. I have something dear to the union leader, and that is my trump card. But until we have an agreement, you may enjoy dealing with the union as large. My prediction? If you do not deal with the leadership immediately, you will face a general city-wide strike within three months, right when you least expect it.”

*Something dear to the union leader?* Count Leon raised his eyebrows in curiosity. “And if you fail?”

“Then consider the deal off. You may do whatever you want to me - but don’t expect me not to fight back.” Kyle concluded, sitting back in the same armchair.

Count Leon kept silent for a moment, considering his options. *I could have him killed right here and now. But his weapons and armour are truly better than its counterparts, and if he really does have the means to stop the union…* “You planned all of this from the start.”

“Only in response to your plan. It is all a game in the end, but with all of us winning.”

“I’ll very much prefer if you two lose.” Count Leon threatened.

“Do you know why the Bishop of the South Sector and Baron Cain is working alongside me now, despite my… background? It’s because they have come to the conclusion that to be my ally is far more desirable than to be my enemy. You’ll find that dealing with me even when I’m dead will be more trouble than the union is.” Kyle tapped the holster of his armchair, not budging under the glare of Count Leon.

Count Leon was not dumb. He knew of the reason why Kyle was let off so easily - the release of the handguns was still a major threat. Now that the radical union was also in full-swing, antagonizing Kyle right now would be the worst move to make, only stacking the problems even higher. *I will use him, for now.* “Fine. You shall receive royalty amounting to one-tenth worth of the price for every subsequent design produced by the Aspis Weapons Factory for the purpose of Raktor’s military, the design also having been accredited by the military. And you will -”

“Three-tenths.”

Count Leon’s words were stuck in his throat, before he recomposed himself, glaring at Kyle. “Two tenths.”

“Three-tenths.” Kyle did not budge.

“Two and a quarter tenths.”

“Three-tenths, Count Leon. I’m not the one who needs to worry about a union growing stronger by the minute. The clock is ticking.”

Count Leon grapsed the table, his hand nearly cracking the edge off. “FINE! Three-tenths. But only for up to a year.”

“Accepted. We can renegotiate at a later date. Pleasure to be working with you, Count Leon.” Kyle shot up of his seat, adjusting his suit and coat with a wide smile on his face. “Do try not to undermine my operations where possible, it would only cause certain designs to be severely hampered. My designers require the best of environments to produce quality work.”

“Get lost. I want the union leadership captured in a week!” Count Leon roared.

“Of course, my Count.” Kyle only gave a courteous nod, before leaving the personal study. As soon as he opened the door, he was met with the glares of the generals, barons and bishops.

“I’m surprised you made it out of there alive, I was certain you would have been dead. No gang leader has ever entered his personal study room before.” Baron Namor remarked.

“I suppose there is a first for everything. Though it’s hard for someone who is always coming in second in most rankings to truly appreciate that.” Kyle didn’t linger around to see Baron Namor’s face scrounging up in pure unbridled rage, though Kyle motioned for Bishop Vernette to follow him outside.

“What have you done now? Are you planning to antagonize the whole city? That man is a Baron, and he has extremely close ties with the Tul’E Da’li!”

“His influence is only in the East Sector. Despite the differences between me and Sebastian, I’m sure the Ardent Cretins would not tolerate another major gang enforcing their dislikes in our sector. However, I do need to ask you of a favor. You no longer need to distance yourself from me.”

“… what do you want?”

“I need a prisoner transfer. A very highly publicized one. From the shopping arcade to the Magda. I will provide a full list of everything I need, and it must be organized within two days. Do this, and I will forget your past actions against me.”

*Why are you the one forgiving me?!* “Fine. Inquisitor Mason shall be the liaison. Are you sure you know what you are doing?”

“When have I never been sure?”

# Chapter 92 - Attempted Rescue

*A day later…*

“Gunther. It’s bad.” A member reported in a hectic meeting room in the same hideout they started in, now filled to the brim with new recruits that came from all over the city, the most radical of them all fighting tooth and nail against the enforcers and Red Lion gang members. “Long Hua is going to be transferred to the Magda in less than a day.”

“It’s clearly a trap.” Bronco immediately replied. “Obviously, it is meant to pull us out of hiding.”

“So the Seven Snakes have finally turned against us.” Gunther murmured to himself, sighing. He had waged war and sparked a violent revolution, spreading the cause as wide and and as far as he could. The teachings have already taken root in the city, touching the hearts of many and emboldening those who thought that a union uprising was not feasible.

“We should go even deeper underground. The success of the revolution depends on us. We cannot sacrifice the future for one man.”

“Long Hua is our brother.” Gunther retorted.

“Then he will know that we’ve made the right decision!”

“How large is the prisoner escort?” Gunther asked the member, ignoring Bronco.

“The escort will be compromised of a hundred Seven Snakes members and the South Sector’s enforcers combined. It would be the most heavily guarded target that we have hit so far. The wagon they are travelling will be heavily reinforced.”

“We don’t have the weapons necessary to attack them. We would need mortars, grenades, explosives.” Bronco frowned, his fingers running through a catalog of all equipment stored in the hideout. “Perhaps if we raided a military storage…”

“Out of the question.” Gunther rejected the idea instantly, instead turning to an armoured arctech knight who stood nearby, overlooking the meeting room. “Can your master supply us?”

“No.”

“No?!” Bronco fumed. “What do you mean, no? Wasn’t your master supposed to be our patron?”

“My master’s goodwill is not infinite. He would require compensation in some form or another.”

“The designs for the Aspis MK1 Armour. As well as the improved rifle.” Gunther did not hesitate at all.

“Then you shall have what you need by the end of the day.”

“Good. Let us plan for the route. Any information on that?”

“No, it’s a tight secret. But the final destination is certainly the Magda.”

Gunther nodded, quickly mocking up all possible routes from the shopping arcade to the Magda. “Here is the plan. We will destroy the roads on these few streets as soon as the convoy comes into range, forcing them to stop. This is when we will launch an attack, but not a concentrated one. Each cell will act independently, attempting to kill or maim as many of the escorts as possible. Once the actual wagon holding Long Hua has been confirmed, then our strike team will move in to rescue him.”

“What if we cannot destroy the roads in time?”

“Have the members launch an impromptu protest tomorrow, blanket out the main streets where the convoy is most likely to travel. We will swamp the enforcers with bodies and bog them down, making our rescue mission easier. Any questions?”

Most of the leaders were in agreement with the plan, but some still held doubts. “This is but one man. Sacrificing this much resources to save him is ridiculous!” One of the leaders complained. “Our resources should be focused on growing and expanding our reach.”

“Are you implying that we should leave one of own behind, to suffer and be tortured?” Gunther retorted. “The union stands for all workers - their worth is immeasurable! I would not hesitate to rescue you myself if you were the one imprisoned. Not one soul is ranked above another, for all men are equal!”

Those who were still on the fence had no argument left, keeping quiet as Gunther continued issuing orders, distributing commands to the various cells embedded all over the South Sector. “This will be dangerous, as we only have a few hours to prepare. But we shall prove the might and solidarity of our cause through this, and our legend will spread even further beyond!” Gunther rallied them, eliciting a cheer from his followers.

As they dispersed to prepare for the rescue, Bronco hurriedly pulled Gunther over to the side, whispering urgently into his ear. “Look, we know each other well enough. Is it really worth all of this to save him? This is definitely a trap - many of us might die in this rescue operation.”

Gunther grabbed Bronco’s shoulder, staring at him eye to eye. “That is why I need you in the strike team. I have a special mission for you. No one else must know about this.”

@@@

*A day later….*

“Eat up, maggot. Don’t forget to wash your hands.” The guard chortled as he tossed a mouldy piece of radish into the jailcell. The white chewy flesh was immediately pounced upon by a severly malnourished Guang Hwa, who knelt on the floor and use his mouth to bite into it, gobbling it down as fast as he could, uncaring about the algae-covered stone tiles that grazed against his nose and cheeks.

As soon as he was done, he used the back of his palms to hoist himself back up, lying face up on the cold slimy prison floor, staring at the dark ceiling crawling with insects. Some slithered down on their silkstrings, drawn to the exposed flesh beneath his missing fingernails while he panted, swallowing the remaining bits of radish still in his mouth. He was far from the only one in the cell, being accompanied by five others who were all clearly far too incapacitated to even move or talk, leaving himself alone to his thoughts.

Soon, a familiar pair of footsteps began to approach the cell, their shadows extending into the hallway from the dim lights. Guang Hwa instinctively shuddered, scrambling away from the grills with haste. Yet it was to no avail, the cell’s door opening to reveal Niko grinning. “Time for a new house, friend! Looks like you are not doing too well in here.”

“F…fuck you! I’m not telling you anything!” Guang Hwa muttered through short pained breaths as Niko grabbed the nape of his neck, dragging him out of the shared cell. His futile resistance only earned him a kick from Niko into his chin, his jaw knocked ajar from the force.

“And here I thought we had something special going.” Niko chuckled. “Looks I’ll really miss our time together.”

“…wha…what? What do you mean?”

“You’re getting a new house! Amazing, isn’t it? Not many can afford a roof over their heads, especially in this kind of property market.”

“What the fuck are you talking abo-” Another kick into his ribs shut Guang Hwa up for good, spit and saliva choking out of his mouth.

“Come on, boys, the princess needs a lift!”

Two Seven Snakes guards entered, cuffing his limbs and hoisting him up out of the cell, his mind dizzy from the gut-wrenching pain and forceful treatment. Bright white lights went past him in a hazy blur as he was hauled out of the prison, and unceremoniously tossed into what felt like the back of a wagon, the two guards boarding with him.

Guang Hwa could feel the rough bulbous surface of the cheap cast iron used to make the floor, struggling about to stand up. His hands clamoured for a grip, only to accidentally cling onto the armoured Seven Snakes guard’s ankles, earning yet another violent kick that sent him sprawling.

“CEO… had the world and he gave it up.” Another guard muttered as he placed the sole of his metal-tipped boots on the handcuffs of Guang Hwa, pinning him down.

“Teaches you not to mess with the Seven Snakes. Traitors get carved up just like him.” The first guard shook his head in disappointment.

“At least he wasn’t sent to the training caves.”

“No, it would be too easy of a death for him.”

Rage welled up within Guang Hwa as he mustered the strength to speak back. “Fucking brainless sheeps, you’re worse than goblins at your best, and lower than a maggot at your worst. Mindlessly following those above you like cattle led to the slaughter!”

The two guards stared at each other, before breaking out into a subtle laugh. Guang Hwa sneered. “What’s so funny? Funny that I’m right?”

“No, just thinking how you match the briefing perfectly. Niko did say you were gonna try to rile us up or hit us with a speech.”

“Well that only proves my point that you lot are spineless cowards with not a single pinch of self-respect shared between the two of you - no, between all of the Seven Snakes. Kyle is leading all of you astray! He’s part of the owning class, and we, you and I, are the working class!”

An awkward silence reigned in the back of the wagon, which was surprisingly stationary. Guang Hwa twisted his back, trying to get a good look at the two guards’ face. “Well?!” He grunted.

“Uhh, were you talking to us?”

“Grrr!” Guang Hwa struggled against the weight of the boot pinning his cuffs down.

“Damian said that would rile you up as well.”

In sheer frustration, Guang Hwa began to tug as hard as he could on the cuffs, the top of his skin shredding against the sharp metallic edges and drawing blood. Before he could even move another inch, the two guards immediately grabbed him and hoisted him up onto the bench built into the wall.

“What? Can’t let me die?” Guang Hwa mocked as he tried again, only to be restrainted by the guards.

“I wish I could, but your new owner wanted you in tiptop condition.”

“New owner…? You’re selling me?!”

Guang Hwa’s surprised expression earned another chuckle from the two guards, this time with one of them reluctantly handing over three rakels to the other.

“Told you he would be surprised! Niko said so too!” The other guard chortled.

“Damn it…”

“Enough! I demand to be informed where exactly are we going!”

Before the two guards could reply, the door to the wagon’s cabin opened, with Damian entering the driver’s seat. “We’re going to the Magda, where you will be handed over to the proper authorities.”

Guang Hwa immediately stiffened up. While his treatment was horrendous under Kyle’s imprisonment, it was a well know fact of the sheer hostility that Versians faced in the local prisons. “Look, I’ll talk, okay? I’ll tell you all the hideouts, the attack patterns, the stashes!”

“You already told us most of that.”

“W-well, not all of it!”

“Save the rest for the Bishop.”

Guang Hwa tried to convince Damian further, only to have a cloth forced into his mouth, gagging him temporarily.

[First dummy wagon convoy was hit on Hullbreaker Lane. Suspicious activity gathering around Deogul Square. Suggest to avoid.] An observer’s voice crackled through the radio built into the driver’s cabin, a dim green light flickering on and off near the top.

Damian reached up to toggle the microphone. “Understood, taking route 53. Are the enforcers ready?”

[Ready when you are.]

“Good, let’s move. Keep your eyes peeled.”

The wagon convoy lurched forward, picking up speed as twelve wagons form a line snaking through the various streets and junctions with enforcer wagons leading the convoy from the front, their presence kicking up a huge buzz amdist the countless residents that ogled at the huge armed presence.

Guang Hwa could only stare in silence through the small grill windows of the modified wagon, watching the familiar sights and sounds of the Seven Snakes district roll past slowly. There was no escape for him this time round, not when Damian was in the very same wagon as him.

The two guards clutched the holster of their rifles tightly, their eyes continuously darting around as they scanned the outside surroundings. Their gazes met a few pedestrians, all of whom stared back in shock and confusion, unsure of what was happening.

“Something’s wrong.” One of the guards mentioned. “Way too many people on the street at this time of day. It’s like nobody is working now.”

“Maybe they are all on strike?” The other joked, before the wagon started to slow down noticeably, Damian cursing under his breath.

Guang Hwa peeked through the small little gap that afforded a view of the front, seeing another identical wagon in front, clearly part of the convoy. Damian remained calm, checking for any anomalies while toggling the radio again. “What’s the hold up?”

[Some old man tripped when he was trying to cross the road.]

“Get out and help him move out of the way. Every stop is an opportunity for the enemy. Observers, any movements?”

[Seems to be a few separate mobs, but they aren’t congregating just yet. We spotted a few picket lines further down, though they aren’t budging.]

“Alternatives?”

[Take a left on the next corner, then a right. Should be clear.]

“Understood.” Damian placed his hands on the wheel steadily, while two enforcers from the frontmost wagon went to help the old man. Instead of being grateful, the old man began to curse and swear, shrugging off their help.

Instead of being grateful, the old man began to curse and swear, shrugging off their help. “What are you two cunts doing, going this fast down the street? I can’t cross the road that quickly!”

“Sir, please, let us help you up.”

“You think I’m a chick? I’m a grown man, I can help myself.” Yet it was painfully obvious that the old man was far from being able to support himself up, his legs wobbling violently as he almost collapsed to the floor again. While the two enforcers began to force the old man off the road, bystanders and onlookers simply walked past, far more intrigued by the wagon than the old man himself. They peered into the wagon, with a young grimy kid catching a glimpse of Guang Hwa himself, locking eyes with him.

As soon as that occured, the radio began to stir to life, the reports intensifying. [Damian, sir, lots of movement! Everyone in the vicinity is swarming towards you! You need to move, now!]

“Fuck!” Damian swore, flicking another switch on the radio dashboard. “Incoming enemy attack, all wagons move off immediately!”

[But sir, the front wagon is still held up-]

“Ignore them, drive around!”

The second wagon complied, leading the charge and mounting the kerb with impunity, the shouts and screams of the running residents blurring past the convoy as they followed along, bypassing the old man and the two enforcers. Damian gritted his teeth as he jolted the wheel a hard left, the wagon nearly tipping over as they entered another street. As soon as the convoy hit the next junction to make a right, instead of accelerating like expected, Damian was forced to hit the brakes hard, jostling the two guards and Guang Hwa behind violently. “Now what?!”

[There’s a strike going on here - I don’t know, hundreds of them just showed up!] The observer’s panicked voice was starting to be drowned out by what seemed to be an impromptu protest march, taking up the entire street that they had been planning to enter.

“It’s the damn union. I need an alternate route, now!”

[Go straight, then make a left-]

The convoy didn’t wait around for the observer to finish explaining, moving to another street down a block, only to be met with the same situation. “They have us cornered. Get down and force a way clear for the convoy!” Damian roared, prompting Seven Snakes guards and enforcers to unload from the various other wagons, their rifles brought to bear on the marching protestors.

While the guards held the crowd at bay, the convoy moved ever so slowly, allowing the mobs from the other streets to begin flanking the convoy, smothering them in a sea of angry protestors and onlookers who had clearly no idea why they were there in the first place. “Get out of the way! Obstruction of enforcer duty will be punishable by law!” An enforcer shoved a protestor back, only to earn sticks and stones being tossed towards him.

“By law?! You want to talk about law when you barely even enforced any of it against the thugs and gangs that have been harassing us?!” Another protestor hollered back, riling up the crowd even more.

“This is your last chance - return to your homes immediately!”

“Fuck you!”

As the fighting and arguing became more intense, Damian began to watch the surrounding shophouses carefully, looking for any suspicious vantage points from where the union might be watching from. The convoy was precariously exposed, the people around clamouring to get closer while the guards and enforcers tried to hold them back. “This is taking way too long, we’re sitting ducks here!”

Some of the more daring protestors threw their bodies right in front of the convoy, forcing the wagons to come to a complete halt while a wave of protestors crashed, fuelled by a mindless mob craze seemingly driven by instinct. Guang Hwa watched as hands clamoured onto the wagon’s small grill windows, only to earn a sharp jab from the barrel of rifles wielded by the two guards. “BACK OFF!” A guard roared, threatening again with the rifle brought to bear this time.

Damian’s eyes darted about, looking for an alternative escape route before he caught the glint of a bright metal flash from afar between the shutters of a shophouse window, instinctively ducking as a pellet shattered the side-mirror into a thousand dazzling glass shards. The pellet ricocheted into the crowd, maiming a lady and earning a harrowing scream while the protestors all cowered.

“They shot someone! They shot us!” One amdist the crowd fan the flames of rage, some of the more violent protestors taking it upon themselves to charge and try to flip the wagon. More pellets rang out through the chaos, the wagon suffering withering fire as Damian kept his head down, unable to clearly see where they were being shot from.

“ENOUGH!” Damian roared as he floored the accelerator while sharply twisting the wheel, the wagon brutishly charging forward without a care for collateral damage. Cries of pain and calls to violence hardly mattered in the face of an arctech wagon, but there were still far too many bodies blocking his way out. “Shoot to kill!”

The Seven Snakes guards compiled instantly, firing at anyone who was attacking the convoy physically without hesitation. Many of them were still fresh recruits, but their time in the training caves had successfully desensitized them to the carnage and suffering that they inflicted on the whimpering protestors.

Damian himself drew his own handgun, shooting down the protestors who attempted to block the wagon from moving with impunity. As the frightened unarmed protestors began to scramble, the union fighters behind the engineered swarm of people were slowly revealed, armed to the teeth with the same armor set and rifles as the guards and enforcers.

While the other convoy escort wagons were bogged down in the ensuing firefight that seemed to break out in all directions, Guang Hwa’s wagon roared to life as Damian swerved through the panicking fleeing crowd, earning a few pellets to the side, the pellets bouncing off the thick armor harmlessly. “It’ll take more than a few rifles to stop this wagon.” The first guard grinned as the pitter-patter of whizzing pellets continuously barraged the wagon.

Damian could finally see the end of the street, a clear path beyond that led to the Magda. Yet suddenly, he noticed a small squad of three standing right in the middle of the road, mounting what seemed to be like a long metallic cylinder on their shoulders, the tip aimed straight at him. His battle instincts kicked in, trying to weave out of the way.

His eyes could only watch as a projectile burst forth from the cylinder, accelerated by the engravings along the side and nearly toppling over its wielder. The projectile slammed into the wagon, crushing the passenger seat of the cabin, narrowly avoiding him. It looked eerily like a spearhead, albeit far larger than what one would brandish on a regular spear.

Thick lines of engravings swirled around its surface, glowing for a sharp instant before Damian suddenly felt the wagon jolt to an immediate halt as if it were grounded, the motion far too intense and flipping the wagon forward. The world spun around him as the top of the wagon slammed into the smooth cobblestones with a loud bang, the ceiling caving inwards erratically.

Damian grunted while he found himself upside down in the driver’s cabin, slightly crushed in with his rifle badly bent from the impact. Without missing a beat, he forcibly kicked the door open, the hinges blasting off while the door itself slammed into a union fighter head-on, allowing Damian to quickly slid out. Before he could even recover into a fighting posture, however, pellets were already shot at him, the union trying to kill him as fast as they could.

The tattooed engravings beneath his skin burned into life, hardening his skin under the modified Aspis MK1 armour he wore, allowing him to bear the brunt of the withering fire even if the pellet found a chink in the plates. In three leaps, he sprinted at the closest union fighter, grabbing the fighter’s rifle with his left and driving his right fist deep into the guts of the fighter’s stomach.

Even the union fighter’s stolen Aspis MK1 armor was far from enough to withstand the blunt trauma inflicted by Damian’s punch, the ceramic-filled honeycomb shattering easily and transferring the full momentum into his bones as he was sent flying into the nearest storefront. The mannequins and display figurines collapsed into a dishelved heap under the weight of the union fighter, while Damian swung the butt of his freshly-stolen rifle at another union fighter, the butt slamming right into the jaw and concussing him.

Under the torrent of pellet fire, Damian hugged the wreck of the wagon closely, putting what remained of the armoured frame between him and the union fighters. As he ducked instinctively from the barrage, he slammed the walls twice. “HEY! You two alive?”

There was no response, Damian fearing the worse. Nearly two dozen union fighters were pinning him down now. Even if he managed to climb over to the cabin and yank out his stuck tower shield, it would be certain death to attempt to fight back.

Yet he held strong, firing back over his cover and taking out as many union fighters as he could. Already in the distance, he could see the rest of the convoy escorts rushing over, preventing him from being fully surrounded on all sides. The firefight raged like thunder and hailstorm as he clambered to the back of the wagon, prying open the wrecked doors to reveal two unconscious guards and a clearly frightened Guang Hwa, still gagged and bound.

Damian slung the stolen rifle behind his back and gave a tight smack to both of the unconscious guards’ face in a desperate attempt to wake the both of them up, but to no avail. “This location is too dangerous. Get up!” He hauled the shivering Guang Hwa to his feet, before motioning for three other Seven Snakes guards to move up as additional support while he tore out the broken door to use as a temporary shield. “Cover me to that lane!”

Guang Hwa let out a muffled shriek as he was dragged through the ravaged battlefield, the smell of burning flesh and clouds of fine stone dust wafting through the air while pellets tore through them to find their marks, earning painful grunts and shouts of battle. He scampered alongside Damian’s makeshift door-shield unsteadily, keeping their heads and body as low as they could while the supporting guards laid suppressive fire.

“They are trying to escape with the prisoner! Get them!” A union fighter leader called out, the brunt of the firefight starting to shift towards Damian’s shield. The force of the pellets slamming against the door-shield resonated through his arms, nearly making it numb while he watched one of the supporting guards take a pellet right into the neck between the chinks of armour, the white of bone visible as it shredded the spine apart in a single tear.

“RUN, YOU IDIOT!” Damian roared at the still shivering Guang Hwa, slapping him on the back and sending him tumbling towards the alleyway, earning scratches and slices from the rubble that drew beads of blood. While the remaining two guards blocked the entrance to the backlane, Damian hoisted Guang Hwa up with his free arm, running as fast as he could.

Guang Hwa’s world spun as they turned sharp corners one after the other, Damian familiar with every nook and cranny. They snuck through rows of piled trash underneath the dripping soap from hung laundry high above them, losing their pursuers as the sounds of fighting were beginning to be drowned out by the ambient whir of arctech house machinery, pipes churning with filtered air or water along the sides of the buildings’ walls that flanked them on both ends.

“Looks like we’re in the clear for now.” Damian muttered as he got his bearings, using the buildings and the streets as landmarks to orientate himself. Before he could make a move, he suddenly heard the tumble of a rock, a small circular ball of metal rolling right down to their feet.

Damian instantly held his door-shield up, but instead of expecting a storm of fragments bursting out, a soft, lighter-than-air gas tinged with a purple hue surged forward , enveloping both him and Guang Hwa by surprise. “Fuck!” He grabbed Guang Hwa by the nape of his neck and rushed off, only to find his limbs and muscles, his blood pressure starting to slow down significantly. Numbness crept into every pore of his skin, the tingling sensation causing him to loosen his grip on his surroundings.

He tried to speak, but his mouth didn’t move the way he wanted it to, his words slurring around instead in a daze as he slumped too the floor, only able to watch as five union fighters appeared with gas masks fixed on their faces, the bright engravings on the covers filtering the gas with each hiss they breathed.

One of the union fighters aimed his rifle at the incapacitated Damian, only for another to shove the barrel out of the way. “Idiot, you want to bring the entire Seven Snakes onto us?” A familiar muffled voice spoke, Damian recognizing the owner. *Bronco.*

“We’re already at war with the city, what’s one more gang to us? We are the revolution!”

“Then you should know very well to not create more enemies than necessary. If we kill the underboss of the Seven Snakes, the very same gang who accepted all of our demands and is running the moderate union, what would the public think of us?”

“Gunther said no compromises.”

“I’m the commander on the ground right here and now. Focus on saving Long Hua!”

Three soldiers moved forward to undo the cuffs on Guang Hwa’s hands and the gag in his mouth. Having inhaled the incapacitating gas as well, Guang Hwa’s head lolled to the side as he was hoisted up. “Ready to move, Bronco. Where to next? Hideout 5A? … Bronco?” A union fighter asked warily as Bronco seemed to be checking his rifle intently, making sure he had enough pellets.

Without warning, Bronco flicked his rifle upwards, killing the three union fighters with a single headshot each in one swift motion. Before the remaining fighter could react, he bashed his elbow into the back of the fighter’s head, knocking him out onto the ground and ending his life with three pellets to the chest.

Guang Hwa’s eyes widened, his brain screaming to move, yet his intoxicated body hardly responded, his limbs only shifting slightly as Bronco walked up to him. “I know what you want to say, but I didn’t want to hear it. Sorry for this, Brother.”

A single pull of the trigger blasted Guang Hwa’s brain out, the sickening grey flesh splattering with copious amounts of blood draining out of the fear-stricken face. Bronco instantly holstered his rifle on his back, taking out a knife and carving away at Guang Hwa’s neck for a minute or two, stripping away the sinews and cutting right through the bones before yanking it off his body by the roots of the hair.

“One down, one more to go.”

# Chapter 93 - Ensnaring

The never-ending waves of reports and shouts over the arctech radios washed over Gunther, countless casualties and injuries streaming into the hideout, desperate fighters missing limbs still raring to launch a second wave against the escort while volunteer nurses and medical staff tried to hold them down.

“Gunther, the prisoner escaped with the underboss. They are running on foot now.” One of the radical council members informed him.

“Have the fighters hunt them down. I want our informants keeping a lookout for the two of them.”

“Of course, Gunther.”

The battle raged on as the rescue operation lingered on. Soon, an interesting report came in that had Gunther sitting upright in his chair. “Bronco’s squad was killed?” he pressed themessenger who had just delivered the news.

“Five bodies, dead. The prisoner is dead and beheaded for some unknown reason - Bronco and Damian is missing. We suspect Bronco might be dead or captured by the Seven Snakes…” The messenger held a solemn expression. The news of the prisoner dying sent shockwaves through the hideout, many of the fighters stunned at the ‘failure’.

Gunther kept silent for a brief moment, his hands clasped together as he rested his elbows on the operation table. “Call off the operation. All members to return to their respective cells immediately. Stall any pursuit.”

The council got to work, hurriedly calling off the rescue mission. Their faces were clearly disheartened, the morale plummeting significantly, some having lost friends for a sacrifice that did not amount to much in the end. Gunther clearly noticed the change in atmosphere, prompting him to stand up and raise himself to his full height. “Brothers and sisters. We have not failed. We have succeeded!”

The declaration caught the other members off-guard, confusion clear in their faces as they looked towards Gunther. “But Brother Long Hua is dead!” A council member countered.

“And would you rather he be tortured, enslaved against his will, suffering in a cell where he may never see the sun again? It is true that we did not save him, but we most certainly tried. And today, we succeeded in proving that the union is as united as ever, bound together by code, loyalty and morals in solidarity to the cause!” Gunther asserted, clenching his fist as he pumped his arm into the air. “We’ve shown the city that we would never let one of our own be taken against their will, not without a fight! And anyone who dares to stand against us would have to suffer terrible casualties and pay the price. This is the day where we truly establish ourselves as the pinnacle of the revolution, the spearhead of the fight against inequality and selfishness, against despair and hopelessness. Brother Long Hua would have been proud today, that he died for a better future that he would never see. For a future where all men are equal!”

“For men of equal shall inherit the world!” The hideout reverberated with a resounding chant, boosting the morale back upwards.

“Now, we have our own fighters to save. Their families are waiting for their return, as do all of us. Save them all!”

The retreat was rapid and decentralized, the fighters streaming back to the nearest hideouts and diffusing towards their original cell’s location. Before long, the battle had came to an end, leaving the major streets a wreck, with countless billboards and lampposts toppled over, fragments of glass, rock and flesh strewn all over the pavements. Searchlights and patrol squads of both enforcers, Red Lions and Seven Snakes alike hunted any clues or inklings of the union.

Intermittent explosions send spiralling pillars of smog and fumes into the sky, the night air filled with panicked shouts from violent raids on hidden cellars in every nook and cranny. No matter how hard the union tried to cover their tracks, somehow each hiding hole was rooted out one by one. As the night wore on, the council became increasingly distressed as news of the cell groups falling like dominos were incessant.

“They have us on lock, its like they know exactly where we were going to retreat to!”

“The prisoner himself was a trap, a ploy to lure us out and expose our positions, we should have never mobilized a force as large as we had!”

“We had no choice, our brother needed our help!”

While the council bickered over the rights and wrongs, Gunther could already see the writing on the wall. “Brothers, no matter what comes, we will stand strong till the dawn. Fight! Fight to the death! There will be no compromise, no retreat. If they come to us, we will never forgo the cause!”

“For the union!” The remaining fighters in the hideout rallied behind Gunther’s words, preparing for the toughest battles of their lives. Even the injured mustered what strength they could, helping to prop up temporary makeshift barricades and distributing additional homemade weapons to those who did not have rifles nor armour.

While defenses and traps were being placed, Gunther leaned over to his nearest council member. “We will leave eventually. Leave them to their fate - if we die, the union will be no more.”

“Understood, brother.”

Four of the council followed Gunther as they snuck out of the hideout, covering their own tracks from their very own members and travelled to a different hideout, a fortified bunker hidden below a building through a mechanical shaft, covered precariously by what seemed to be a sewer drainage cover. The five of them clambered down the small ladder, descending into the depths where stores of food, water and weapons enough to last them three months were well-stocked and arranged neatly. This was one of but the many retreats that Gunther himself has built up over the years in Raktor, before his unfortunate capture by Leo.

As soon as he descended the ladder into the main hallway lit by bright arctech lanterns. he was greeted by Bronco who was covered in grime and blood from head to toe, the head of Guang Hwa displayed prominently on a table behind him. “Well done, Brother. It must have been hard.”

“Anything for the cause.” Bronco nodded. “But why did we decide to meet here? Once the fighters know that we have abandoned them, they might turn on us.”

“No doubt that with so many of our fighters exposed, our hideouts will eventually be traced back by their movements. Even if they tell of what they know, only the few of us know of this bunker. They would never be able to find us here. We shall wait a day or two before announcing our survival to the city, thereby earning our legend as resistance fighters to the end. The word of our escape can be easily dismissed as rumors planted by the gangs and the enforcers to discredit us.” Gunther explained as he reached forward to place his hands on Guang Hwa’s head, sighing slightly to himself. “The path of a revolutionary is vicious and ruthless, yet necessary if we want to succeed. Do you understand, Bronco?”

“Of course, Gunther.” Bronco found his wording to be a bit strange.

“What do the rest of you think?” Gunther spoke calmly, turning to face the other four council members. “Do you agree?”

“Yes, Gunther. To be a revolutionary is to forsake the world.”

“Then one of you is clearly lying. We have a mole amidst us. One who has been working with the Seven Snakes in an effort to topple the very revolution you swore your lives too. You have one chance to step forward, and maybe you will live.”

The others were startled, their eyes shifting to each other in shock and suspicion, wondering who among them was the true traitor. “How do you know there is a mole? What if the mole was part of the council that was left behind?”

“Impossible. Only the five of us here knew the full extent of every cell group in operation. I would be even more surprised if there was not a mole-” Gunther was about to grab Bronco’s rifle in a bid to elicit a confession, only to suddenly hear the grating sound of the drainage cover being shifted aside along the street. “Someone’s coming.”

The council kicked into action, rushing for the stored rifles and handguns and taking cover, aiming their guns right at the last step of the descending ladder, ready to fire at a moment’s notice. Gunther too wielded a rifle of his own, staring down the iron sights while nodding to Bronco, who armed an similar incapacitating gas grenade, preparing to throw it.

Without warning, two figures dropped from the shaft, not even bothering to climb down the ladder as their knees buckled, kicking up the dormant dust from the floor. Instantly all of the council fired at them, only for the pellets to be deflected by a strong arctech tower shield, wielded by Damian himself. “Time for payback.”

The pellets ricocheted around the room in a dazzling display, nearly nicking the ears of one of the council members. “Bronco, NOW!” Gunther roared as he too began to fire at Damian. However, it was far too late, the second figure already lunging forward in three leaps to the nearest council member, her magical falchion lobbing off the council member’s arm in one fell swoop, the disembered limb flailing into the air while its owner let out a shriek of pain.

“Bronco? Bronco!” Gunther turned only to see Bronco frozen with fear, suffering from the trauma of Sasha’s assault during his prison rescue attempt. Gunther grunted as he focus on saving his own life, swivelling his aim to the vanishing Sasha, trying to get a lock.

He watched helplessly as his pellets went wide, Sasha unhindered and maiming each of the council members one by one. Before long, only Gunther and Bronco were left standing, the rest whimpering on the ground while a third figure entered through the shaft, his cloak fluttering from the impact. “Mister Gunther, or should I say, Ki Hwang. What a pleasure to finally meet you properly.”

Before Gunther could react, he heard the hiss of a gas mask behind, the familiar purple gas streaking forwards and enveloping him. He involuntarily breathed in the intoxicating gas, choking and gasping for air as he staggered to his knees, watching in horror as Bronco tossed the grenade right under Gunther’s feet. “Sorry, brother. I had no choice…”

“Bronco, you…!” Gunther’s voice was hoarse as he clutched his throat, trying to stem the effects of the gas as best as he could. His muscles still in control, he swung his rifle around to Bronco, pulling the trigger without hesitation. The shot caught Bronco off-guard, the pellet breaking his gas mask and lodging deep into his eye, the eyeball twisted into a pulp while Bronco cried out in pain.

“Kyle!” Gunther grunted in anger, reaching deep into his shirt before the gas took over and drawing a palm-sized metallic totem, the cracks in it beginning to flash red. “You won’t be leaving this place alive, not if I have a choice!”

Kyle squinted in suspicion at the mysterious handheld arctech device, Sasha and Damian immediately keeping a clear distance, unsure of what was about to happen.

“Now, all three of you will die her-URK!” Gunther’s proclamation was interrupted as the device began to rip apart Gunther’s flesh, turning his own muscles into meaty tendrils that snaked along his arm and strangle him. Each sinew of flesh tore their way into every orifice they could find on Gunther’s body, twisting and lodging themselves deep within his innards while his eyes stared in horror, clearly not expecting this effect. He tried to let go of the device, but his hand was locked firmly in place due to the purple gas, his body no longer responding.

“The device is killing him!” Damian shouted, but Kyle was already one step ahead, rushing forward and trying to tear apart the tendrils that were rooting themselves all over Gunther’s body. The tendrils swarmed together and lashed out towards Kyle, who ripped them apart with his bare hands easily. Yet, more and more of Gunther’s flesh was being stripped to form new tendrils, as if he was the new breeding ground for a demonic monster that was hellbent on devouring everything living in reach.

Kyle got close enough to Gunther’s flailing body, using his fingers to pry the device from Gunther’s undying grip, but even he could not overpower the unnatural strength. “Sasha, sword!” Kyle motioned with a free hand, Sasha tossing her falchion over to Kyle immediately without hesitation. In one swift motion, he used the blade to cut off Gunther’s wrist, the enhanced edge slicing cleanly through the bone.

The horrifying device clattered onto the ground, before its unnerving invisible aura suddenly expanded, enveloping the bunker as strips of skin on everyone within range began to twist into similar tendrils, jabbing sharply at the faces of their owners. The council members screamed as their bodies turned against them, one even dying as his own eyelids turned inwards, the modified flesh carving right through his brain and yanking grey matter out. Damian and Sasha retreated, attempting to escape the limits of the aura but to no avail. Even Kyle watched as his own skin began to peel in small strands, revealing the red flesh beneath while the newly formed tendrils tried to lunge at his eyes.

*Arcia Disruption!*

The device’s engravings colours and invisible aura instantly swapped, turning brown instead of red as a disgusting putrid stench of a decaying corpse began to emit from it, the vomit-inducing smell enveloping the whole bunker. Damian nearly gagged as the council, while Sasha’s eyes watered. Kyle himself smothered his own nose with the edge of his sleeve, preventing the horrid scent from disorientating him. The animated tendrils instantly disintegrated, leaving the survivors panting and wincing from the exposed flesh. Damian tossed Sasha a small health potion flask, healing up the minor wounds while he stabilized the remaining council members.

Kyle knelt next to the dying Gunther, healing him with his necklace of healing. The soft green glow alleviated the internal bleeding, but it was far from strong enough. Even feeding a full health potion flask did not stop the numerous internal wounds from closing up, Gunther’s life slowly fading.

“Sasha, Damian, get Gunther and the rest back to Haui immediately. I want them alive.” Kyle ordered, the two immediately complying and calling in a wagon to haul the injured away for further interrogation, while he continued to attempt to stem the bleeding. Sasha scoured the bunker for medical equipment or additional potions, passing them to Kyle in an effort to stabilize Gunther. He took the spare time to pat Gunther down, checking his clothes for any other strange arctech devices or trackers, a habit he picked up a lifetime ago.

Soon, a team of Seven Snakes and a wagon came to pick up the injuried. “Guard the wagon, make sure no union fighter finds out about it.” Kyle had Sasha and Damian escort the wagon just in case there was a third party angling for it. He wouldn’t put it past Leo of the Red Lions or even Bishop Vernette to swoop in and claim his prize. While he eventually had to hand them over to the enforcers, there were still a multitude of questions he had, especially after all that has happened.

He began to inspect the bunker, trying to figure out who exactly was funding them. The stores of food and supplies were unnatural in volume, far beyond what Count Leon and the Red Lions would have provided them with. Clearly someone was helping them, and Kyle did not think that there was another mole in the Seven Snakes capable of pulling off such a feat.

Kyle picked up the strange arctech device in his hand, feeling the clearly machined grooves and surface, detailed with a precision level reminiscent of a high-tech factory. The engravings were far more intricate than anything he had ever seen so far in Raktor, showing a level of arctech engineering beyond what he was familiar with. Not even the military grade armor or weapons that he had developed thus far came close.

MG404: [Item | Flesh Warper | *Twisting bodies for its own nefarious purpose. Designed and manufactured by Harrison Industries.* | Active Skill: Tendrils of Meat (Advanced) - Strips flesh into weaponized tentacles within range. Single Use.]

*Harrison Industries?* Kyle began to check the rest of the bunkers, noticing many of the supplies were coming directly from Versia, including the unique rocket launcher that took out the prisoner convoy. He sifted through the various belongings of those who had lived in the bunker over time. Multiple records and parchments of delivery timings and rotations of watches were noted, along with a list of supplies and goods.

Soon, the rest of the Seven Snakes guards showed up, entering the bunker enmasse led by Niko, who was awed by the size of the bunker. “Fucking…. they built all of this in two months?”

“Hardly. It seems to have been utilized over three years.” Kyle replied as he flipped through an old logbook on a dusty desk, scanning the entries within. There were clear dates next to crossed out lines, along with coded agent names, all apparently dispatched from Versia by a group only know as Nest. *Haui did mention about Nest before, I’ll need to have a chat with him.*

“So what do we do now? We got the bastards, we should reorganize and solidfy our control now. Better yet, this will be the perfect time to launch an attack on the Red Lions.” Niko suggested.

“No. My deal was to crush the union, and we shall do that. We do not fight anyone else. Instead, I’m far more interested in where this Harrison is supplying the union from. Have these few crates brought back to the base for research and inspection.” It was clear with the enforcers, nobles and gangs all working against the union, the Versians must have had a smuggling route into Raktor that was near undetectable. *Gunther must have had a point of contact as well. Where is he?*

With Gunther and the council now in his hands, his side of the deal was now done. Kyle could simply hand over the rest of the operation to the enforcers. Yet the involvement of Harrison with advanced arctech made it even more important to get as much information as he could. He did not forget that the Galactic Era personal shield worn by Makoa had also passed through Harrison’s hands. *Not to mention the Ancient Exosuit Spine being from Versia too.*

With so much technology coming from Verisa, Kyle felt the need more than ever to figure out the true source of all this technology. *And perhaps I will find my answers in these so-called ruins.*

[Sir, Bronco is still alive.] Damian reported.

“Keep him there, I’m on my way. Prepare Gunther for interrogation as well.” Kyle prepared to leave, bringing a few pieces of evidence back when a smattering of footsteps began to swarm the ladder, angry shouts echoing through the shafts before a Seven Snakes guard was thrown down the ladder, prompting Niko to hurriedly block the guard’s fall.

Before Kyle could inform the rest of the Seven Snakes in the bunker to prepare, a man bristling in red gaseous tentacles dropped in, his landing softened by the aura condensing at his feet. “So, it seems the information was right. You were financing the radical union and preventing us from crushing them.”

“Good to finally meet you to, Leo.” Kyle adjusted his cloak’s collar, staring at the Red Lion’s leader as the rest of the Seven Snakes aimed their rifles at him. “But I’m afraid you’re mistaken. I merely cleaned up after you. All radical union leaders have been captured.”

“Funny. Don’t you mean protected?” Leo gritted his teeth. “Hand over the union leaders, or things will get nasty here.”

Kyle gave Leo a closer glance, noticing the distinct purple leather clock with the insignia of the Red Lions emblazoned on its shoulders. The red gaseous tentacles split into five unique arms, drifting and snaking their ways towards the other Seven Snakes guards. None of the guards flinched, waiting for the order, but Kyle seemed wholly unimpressed with the threat that Leo posed. “You are more than welcome to try.”

“I could gut you like a leguswhale fin by fin before you even made a move.”

“Are you sure you want to?”

The pause in response from the hesitant Leo was all it took for Kyle to let out a condescending snort, infuriating Leo even further. “Don’t think you can walk away scott-free. I want compensation!”

Kyle raised an eyebrow. “Compensation? Now that’s a funny word.”

“You engineered this entire radical union uprising against my men, my people.”

“And how much is this proposed compensation supposed to be?”

“Two hundred million rakels. For the wanton destruction of businesses and property all across my districts.”

“Interesting….”

“Interesting?! You…!” Leo launched a tendril of gas right at Kyle, stopping inches before the nose, Kyle not even flinching a single inch, staring down the tendril. Leo instinctively recoiled, retracting the tendril as a sliver of fright began to appear on his face, as though he had a close shave with death.

For it was not the pride of Kyle that instilled fear into him - it was the utter discipline that the Seven Snakes guards surrounding showed. If any enemy had tried to do that to him, his own Red Lions would have pulled the trigger immediately. The fact that they didn’t showed the sheer level of confidence the Seven Snakes guards had in Kyle’s prowess. *He… he is on par with Ares Ulras! Or even beyond…*

“Are you finished with your theatrics?” Kyle’s mouth curled into a smile, as he stepped forward slowly, approaching Leo who fought every base instinct in his body that told him to run. “Let’s be very clear with each other, as fellow concerned citizens of Raktor.”

Kyle’s voice was barely audible as he leisurely circled Leo, step by step. “Your men are exhausted from an uprising you foster from the very beginning. I know your attack plans. I know the deal you had with Count Leon. And I know where every single one of your commanders are, thanks to a certain Left Paw.”

Leo was frozen in place, the tendrils dangling helplessly in mid-air when the tension was finally interrupted by another arrival, the sliver pauldrons and distinctive cap of the inquisitor flashing as Mason slid down the ladder with grace, landing right behind Leo. Mason surveyed the bunker cautiously, noticing the tense standoff while Bishop Vernette entered as well. “Seems like I’m interrupting.” Mason remarked.

“Not at all, Inquisitor. Just reminding a wayward citizen of how the city works.” Kyle held a genial smile, his eyes still boring holes into Leo.

“Need I remind you both, that starting a gang war right now does not mean the enforcers will stand by idly. I think we had more than enough disruptions for one month in the South Sector. Don’t push my generousity. You two, stand down right this instant.”

Kyle motioned with his hands to the Seven Snakes guards to lower their weapons, while Leo retracted the tendrils into his body, the gas seemingly seeping back into his hand.

“Now, where is Gunther?” Bishop Vernette asked Kyle pointedly, clearly noticing none of the union leaders here.

“I am holding them for questioning.”

“The Count wants them in front of him in the morning.”

“And he shall have his prisoners by then.”

“Don’t listen to him! He’s clearly protecting them! The Seven Snakes are in cahoots with the radicals!” Leo finally mustered enough courage to speak back out, buoyed by the presence of the enforcers, yet he found no solace within the Bishop’s and Inquisitor’s pitying gazes.

Bishop Vernette waved her hands dismissively. “Enough, Leo. I think you’ve done well enough. In the morning, I will report your assistance favorably to the Count.”

Leo wore an external look of anger, but deep down he was slightly relieved to not have to face Kyle. However, when he turned around to climb the ladder back up, he found Niko and three other Seven Snakes guards blocking his way. “Who said you could get away scott-free?” Kyle’s voice rang out.

“Seven Snakes! Don’t you dare-” Bishop Vernette started, but quickly held her tongue the moment her eyes’ met Kyle’s.

“Please do not interfere, my dear Bishop. This is a business matter between gentlemen.” Kyle’s voice was polite, but his demeanour was far from it, walking towards Leo who began to stiffen up.

“Wh-what do you want?” Leo mumbled with obvious fear in his voice, while Inquisitor Mason was surprised at just how meek the leader of the Red Lions could be. The last time he heard of anything equivalent was when Leo met Ares Ulras of the Ardent Cretins.

“I’m here to offer you your compensation of course.” Kyle mocked. “Despite your intentions against my businesses, I think is a valid compensation for your troubles : I will not pillage, raid and sack your entire territory of supplies and retrieve my stolen weapons and armour. You will turn them over to the enforcers and the Count, while paying me in equal for what you stole. I -”

“Ridiculous!” Leo interrupted Kyle. “You can’t be the only gang in the South Sector wielding such equipment! The balance of power will be -”

*Intimidation Aura!*

His own words were lodged in his throat as the undeniable wave of pressure surged onto him, the weight of world seemingly pressing down while Kyle near him with each step, the same calm smile still plastered on his face. “You speak as if you even have a say. Interrupt me again at your peril. Understood?”

Leo tried to speak, but his body refused to budge, the intimidation aura suppressing him heavily as he struggled to even breath properly. Every fiber of his being screamed danger, even though his mind knew he needed to stand up for himself. Instead, he shuddered for a brief moment, before nodding vigorously in response.

“Now, I do not care whether or not your businesses are standing - you will complete payment and delivery within two months, or face the consequence.Is that clear, Mane of the Red Lion? Or should I write it down on paper to help make it clearer for you?”

Another nod from Leo.

The aura retracted as quickly as it began, Leo finally able to gasp for air while Kyle patted him on the shoulder. “Good. Pleasure doing business with you. Off you go now, better hurry home. Ophelia needs help getting down the stairs, she isn’t doing too well lately, isn’t she? I can offer my support should your wife need any healing.”

Leo didn’t bother responding, only quickly sliding past the grinning Niko and clambering up the ladder with his tail between his legs. Bishop Vernette sighed at the sight of Kyle sending Leo packing, but still did not expect anything different. True to his word, Kyle had now full control of the union and put the Red Lion to heel in one singular masterplan, the Bishop wondering if Kyle was secretly a legendary royal from the Hwa Dynasty.

“Now then, I have other matters to attend to. You will have Gunther before the morning. The scene is yours, Bishop. Inquisitor.” Kyle nodded, before climbing up the ladder himself with the Seven Snakes guards in tow, leaving the enforcers to gather whatever was left of the evidence. Niko carried a crate filled to the brim with the same incapacitating grenades back with them as well, Kyle intent on

As they returned to the prison, where the union leaders were being treated, Kyle had the unconscious Gunther hauled to a solitary cell. “Is he stabilized?” He asked Haui, who was overseeing the healing process while two assistants were monitoring the prisoner’s breathing rate and pulse.

“We’ve managed to seal most of the wounds and purge some of the toxins. The incapacitating gas’s effects are still lingering in his system, which means his speech might be slurred or he would not be able to talk normally now.”

“Good. I’ll need about ten metal needles and five pairs of lab gloves.”

Haui held a confused look on his face even as he complied. “If you’re planning to experiment on him, I can have my assistants do any procedure you need.”

Kyle snapped the slightly loose gloves on, a snug fit with his hands as he flexed his fingers. “Sometimes it requires a personal touch to have a civilized conversation.”

# Chapter 94 - Hitmen

The stinging chill of ice cubes mixed with water smattered against Gunther’s face, the water causing him to splutter awake as he tried to get his bearings. A snap of the fingers shook him out of his stupor and brought his attention to the man standing calmly in front of him, the man’s arms crossed while fiddling with a metal needle in his gloved hand.

Gunther tried to move, but found his limbs restrained to a chair by thick metal chains, his body stark naked save for a single piece of underwear, the thin fabric hardly concealing his genitals. A sluggish feeling dominated his body, but his mind was clear as day.

He attempt to shrug off the chain, before realizing something was wrong as he glanced down on his right arm, which has been amputated without his knowledge. An sudden jolt of phantom pain from the nerve endings of his stumped arm arced through his flesh, Gunther clenching his jaw to prevent the urge to shout in pain.

“A loss of a hand is hardly anything to worry about, isnt that right, Brother Ki Hwang?” The man spoke calmly.

“You don’t know the meaning behind the word ‘Brother’.” Gunther hissed through gritted teeth, his body involuntarily flexing his missing right hand on instinct only to find nothing.

“I know more about the word than the one who ordered the death of Brother Long Hua.” The man mocked, the needle twirling between his fingers deftly while Gunther struggled against the chains fiercely, intent on strangling the man, but his body was sluggish and lethargic.

“Born in Tenar, lived in the slums until you were adopted by the temples, upon which you graduated your disciple training with flying colours.” The man continued, circling Gunther.

Gunther didn’t speak, though his heart was already in turmoil, knowing Guang Hwa had spilled everything on him.

“You were raised alongside Long Hua, trained to spread the word of the Goddess Nona in order to-”

“Keep her name out of your filthy mouth, you fucking corrupt scum.” Gunther snarled.

“Corrupt scum? Why, I believe you and I, we are the same.”

“I am nothing like you. Kyle, or should I say, Alvin Teras. Slaver, hoarder, a disgusting shit stain on the world, only seeking to reap reward for selfish profit. A sociopath who only chases power! No sense of family, honor or respect for human life - a vile being that should have never been birthed!”

“Am I? It seems the people think differently. Right now both the union and the people are cheering for the Seven Snakes, for upholding wages, bringing back security and peace to the district. Most likely they now hail me as a champion for society, for the greater good.”

“Peace?! Greater Good?! You?! The union who cheers for you is not my union. My brothers and comrades will fight to the death and spread our cause to the four corners-”

“And I have a map of every single hideout in the South Sector. We have already raided half of them in this night alone. By the morning, your ‘brothers’ who you abandoned will be either dead or captured. There is no union for you any longer, only mine.”

Gunther thrashed as hard as he could, the metal chains rattling against the chair while the chair’s legs grated against the floor. “YOU FUCKING SLIMY BASTARD! Once I’m free -”

“Free? Who said anything about releasing you?” Kyle chuckled, but Gunther remained confident.

“Threaten all you want, but I know Count Leon wants me. At some point you will have to let me go.”

“Indeed. Count Leon wants you in the morning. Which gives us plenty of time to have a civilized conversation.” Kyle placed the metal needle down.

“I have nothing to say to you.”

“There’s no need to put up a facade any longer - the union’s survival is hardly your concern any longer.”

“Unlike your selfish perspective ,I have something I believe in beyond my personal gain!”

“Let me guess what you believe in: you believe that you will survive as Count Leon’s prisoner. The nobles will not dare to execute you lest you become a martyr, so you will be imprisoned indefinitely, upon which someone will break you out of prison through a twist of wit and sly words.”

“Save the ramblings of a daydream for someone else.” Gunther retorted snidely, but there was a clear unmistakable sign of shock, the upper left corner of his mouth twitching slightly before being suppressed.

“You’re wondering why I know your entire sequence of moves. You wonder why I allowed the union to flourish. You can’t understand why I gave into every union demand and somehow managed to predict all of this. The answer is obvious: we are two sides of the same coin.”

“Bullshit. I have morals.” Gunther hissed.

“Enough morals to sacrifice men, women and children alike in the pursuit of an unattainable ideal. How many lives have you ended at your own hands yourself? The former leadership of the craft union, the landowners, even your own brethen to cover up your tracks.”

“You’re one to talk - you kill, maim, enslave without a care in the world, and to a meaningless end. When your knees buckle under the weight of your endless sins, no one will be there to save you.”

“I’m not the one professing to follow a divine cause, nor did said divine cause implore me to do otherwise. I hardly believe that a benevolent Goddess would condone a violent revolutionary twisting her words to serve a more sinister purpose.”

“It is the only method to rid shitstains like you from this broken world. There is no sin in that.”

“Unfortunately for you, it is the punisher who determines what a sin is.”

“Only the Goddess has the right to punish me.”

“Then call her. Call her right this very instant.” Kyle grinned. “Because right now, only divine intervention can save you.”

Before Gunther could retort, Kyle deftly spun the metal needle in his right hand, reaching over with his left to Gunther’s last good arm and clamping it down tightly against the holster of the metal chair.

Without a word nor a sign of concern, Kyle aimed the tip of the metal needle right beneath the fingernails of Gunther’s trembling fingers, the sharp pointed end slowly twisting into the soft raw flesh and drawing beads of blood.

The prickling pain was impossible to ignore, Gunther clenching his jaw as hard as he could to ignore the jolts of pain surging from his fingers. “The Goddess works through my brothers, and they shall be the ones who will save me.”

“It seems that you have failed to fully comprehend severity of your situation.” Kyle sighed. “Not a single soul save for those closest to me know where is this cell. Your union does not stand a chance. Even if they are able to locate you, none of them will be able to break through our defences.”

“What makes you think such empty threats will break me?” Gunther snorted. “All I have to do is wait until Count Leon asks for my transfer.”

“Still confident in your plan, I see. Hinging your survival on being Count Leon’s prisoner.” Kyle drew another metal needle from his packet. “But there is one critical flaw in all of that.”

Kyle lunged and grabbed Gunther’s face, his fingers prying apart the eyelids of Gunther’s left eye while the other hand aimed the tip right at the quivering moist pupils.

“Who said I had to give you over in one piece.”

Gunther let out a loud roar as the needle was jabbed in, punctuting the frail surface of the eyeball and rupturing the nerves inside. The pain was immeasurable, Kyle leaving the half-embedded metal needle inside. With every slight movement of Gunther’s eyes, the needle sent never-ending waves of excruciating pain into his body. Even clenching his eyelids were of no help as blood gushed over, streaming down his cheek.

“Now, let’s talk - who is your point of contact with Harrison Industries?”

Gunther heaved heavily as he continuously winced with the metal needled lodged in. He stared at Kyle using his good eye with a resigned expression as he heard Kyle’s question, before his mouth slowly twisted into a grin and breaking out into racouous laughter, the pain of the metal needle seemingly gone. “Truly a frog in the well. And I here I thought you knew everything! So even the omnipotent *Kyle* is unaware, HAHAHA!”

“So be it. If we can’t have a civilized conversation -” Kyle snapped his fingers, prompting two other Seven Snakes guards to enter. “then I’ll wait until you’re ready. Make him spill everything on Harrison Industries.”

Even as Kyle handed the role of torturer over to his men, Gunther still maintained an unnerving grin while Kyle left the cell.

The sudden mood change caught Kyle off-guard, instilling doubt into his plans. He pulled out an arctech radio from his coat, calling Damian. “Is everything in place? Any signs of an attack?”

[Nothing yet, sir. No movement outside the prison. Sasha is patrolling the vicinity. The remnants of the unions are scrambling towards the ends of the Sector, some already fleeing past the boundary. Should we chase them down?]

“No, that would constitute as an overreach. Let the other Barons handle it themselves.” Kyle wasn’t about to clean up more than was required, conserving his resources.

[Got it. I will ens-] The radio suddenly cut out mid-conversation, regurgitating static, Kyle squinting in suspicion. He tried to tune to the other channels only to be met with more static as well. *Not good.* “Sasha, come in”

[Yes, sir?]

“Looks like the telepathic arcia engraving still works. Is your arctech radio working.”

[Testing now… no sir, its not.]

“We’re being jammed. Get Damian and his men to high alert now.”

[Understood. Should I - URK!] Sasha’s telepathic voice faded out as well in an instant.

“Sasha? Sasha?” Kyle tried to contact her, but upon the third failure, he didn’t waste anymore time, marching up to the idling guards waiting outside the various cells. “We’re under attack. Sound an alarm. Plan DR.”

The guards’ eyes widened with shock before kicking into high gear, scrambling about to arm themselves and stock up on ammunition and health potions from a nearby storage rack.

While the men began to set up defensive barricades and blockades against the main entrance, Kyle double checked his weapons available once more to him, positioning himself in the hallway right outside Gunther’s cell. He couldn’t recall the last time Sasha had lost to anyone but him during training. *Whoever is coming must be strong.*

From inside the cell, Gunther’s laughter filled the air. “My saviour arrives! I have not been forsaken by the Goddess!”

“Check all possible entrances. Cover each vent and window now!” Kyle roared to the rest of his men, he himself arming himself with the Oriental Bloom handgun.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl for Kyle and the others, each laugh from Gunther the only thing marking the passage of time save for their own tense breaths, waiting for the imminent attack.

Yet minutes passed, with nothing happening at all. Only the silent wind and usual din of Raktor’s nightlife could be heard at all, the Seven Snakes guards beginning to lose their tension and attention.

“Focus - he will strike when it is most-” Kyle’s attempt to rally the guards was interrupted by a sudden collapse of the ceiling right above him. He instinctively ducked out of the way as two figures tumbled down along with the rubble with an enveloping cloud of dust. However, Kyle’s sharp instincts had him immediately swivel the Oriental Bloom towards the second figure, firing a pre-emptive shot.

Instead of drawing blood and eliciting a pained cry, the fast pellet was instead deflected by an armoured arm, covered from tip to base in engravings that barely glowed.

Kyle didn’t relent, firing shot after shot and forcing the wielder of the armoured arm to block them. While the wielder’s attention was on Kyle, the first figure accelerated behind the second, her left arm’s arcia tattoo swinging a dazzling falchion that threatened to take off the head of the wielder.

Yet the falchion only chopped through the cloud of dust, the wielder ducking and crouching low, before delivering a rear kick that nailed the first figure right in the guts. The fearsome hit caused her to gag and tumble away out of the pile of rubble towards the stunned Seven Snakes guards, who were finally shaken awake from their stupor the moment they recognized the first figure.

“Protect Sasha!” A guard roared, forming a line between the bleeding Sasha and the attacker, who was unrecognizable under a black face mask and helmet. They fired immediately, the attacker’s armoured arm surface flaring to form an arm shield that blocked most of the pellets. Some pellets ricocheted off the dense shield, injuring the guards as they bounced around the hallway.

Just as the attacker was about to charge ahead, alarm bells rang in the attacker’s head, a intimidating presence bursting out behind him, a neon-red hammer aimed right for his head.

The attacker dodged again, but Kyle did not let him recover, swinging blow after blow in a violent combo. As the head of the hammer slammed into the armoured arm, a devestating reverberation sent shockwaves through both of them, forcing Kyle to retreat as his arm became slightly numb.

*Penchant for Violence!*

Before the attacker could get into a proper fighting posture, Kyle was already three steps ahead of him, each blow targeting other parts of the attacker instead.

Surprisingly, the armour on the other limbs was less resistant than the armoured arm, allowing for the neon-red hammer to easily inflict damage on the attacker directly.

Yet the attacker remained resilient, blocking and dodging when he could, even as the Seven Snakes guards flanked him with pellet shots as well. The skill level was unimaginable, the attacker showing no signs of giving up. The moment Kyle swung his hammer wide again, a familiar purple gas wafted forwards from his arm, spreading quickly through the hallway.

Kyle hurriedly leapt back from the expanding incapacitating smoke, retrieving a gas mask from his coat and strapping it on quickly. Rushing into the smoke, he found the attacker completely missing, save for the door to Gunther’s cell being wide open.

Kyle dashed to the entrance, only to see a gleeful Gunther laughing at the two dead Seven Snakes guards, their necks crushed by the armoured arm of the attacker unceremoniously.

“Looks like you’re not so great after, Kyle! And once I get my brothers together again, you will be dead in no-” Gunther’s words were stuck in his throat, his mind trying to speak the words yet only finding nothing coming up, instead feeling a sharp pain at the back of his neck, a strange syringe plunging deep into his nervous system.

Kyle hurriedly shot the Oriental Bloom at the attacker, forcing the attacker away from Gunther, but it was already far too late. Whatever was in the syringe was spreading rapidly, fuelled by Gunther’s own heartbeat as its progress was visible through the discoloration of his veins actoss his skin.

Everywhere the discoloration spread, Gunther’s skin peeled off, as if it had been dried under the sun for decades, disintegrating into dust while his muscles visibly degraded. Gunther’s body shuddered violently as he tried to resist the effect, but soon he had nearly no skin left, only the raw flesh beneath, which was also slowly turning to ooze and slime. Soon, all that remained was a husk of its former self, the flesh dying rapidly.

The attacker took the moment of shock as an opportunity, leaping over Kyle in a bid to escape through the cell’s door.

Instead, a tight iron grip clapsed around the attacker’s ankle, slamming him down into the cold hard concrete which cracked violently. “Don’t even think about leaving.” Kyle twisted his body, pinning the attacker down. The armoured arm’s engravings surged into life, allowing the attacker to grapple Kyle back on his wrist, the metallic fist threatening to crush it.

*This is My Turf!*

The sudden defensive barrier crushed the attacker and his armoured arm right into the floor, as well as pushing apart the incapacitating gas to have Kyle get a clear view on the attacker for the first time.

*This arm…* “Where did you get this arm?”

The attacker tried to struggle free, before realizing it was futile. Instead a spark of fire erupted from the attacker’s chest, a familiar scene to Kyle himself. *The same thing happened when Reese was kidnapped!*

Kyle quickly manipulated his barrier, allowing only the armoured arm to enter as an ally object. Immediately the difference in force ruptured the attacker’s arm out of its socket, the foundation of the prison shuddering violently under the crushing weight.

Before the self-immolation could take place, the attacker had already been flattened to a pulp save for the armoured arm which dangled lifelessly on the ground.

[Sir!] Sasha called out as she, Damian and the other guards rushed in with gas masks, breaking through the gas. The sight was a complete mess - Gunther’s half-meat skeleton sitting on a chair still chained, a gruesome paste staining the floor as innard juices flowed freely through the cracks, and two dead Seven Snakes guards.

“Focus, Gunther is not the only prisoner! Cover the perimeter!” Kyle urged the two of them. “Don’t let another get through!”

“On it, sir!” Damian took charge of the defense, ensuring the area and district was fully secured, ordering the men to spilt up. Not a single gap was spared in their patrols, the guards checking every nook and cranny.

As Damian barked orders rapidly, Kyle hardly cared about the dead Gunther and his hitmen It was obvious that the hitmen was sent by Harrison to eliminate anyone who would leak information. Sure, Gunther was meant to be delivered to Count Leon to be interrogated and imprisoned, but that didn’t mean anything in the long term. All Count Leon wanted was for the union to stop messing around in Raktor, and it had already been achieved. Instead, there was a far greater prize that had been delivered to him, right to his doorstep. He knelt next to the armoured arm, picking it up and removing the dismembered arm within.

MG404:[Item | Arcia Exosuit Arm Prototype(Advanced) | Designed by Harrison Industries | Active Skill: All-rounder (Advanced) -Enhance user’s physical stats tremendously. +30 STR, +30 DEX, +30 VIT. ]

# Chapter 95 - Bigger Picture

Over the next two days, the radicial union was slowly losing control over the city, their last pockets of resistance relegated to the edges of the city. Attempts by their local leaders to reach the original council members were only met with silence, the command structure breaking down into disrepair.

Some returned into being the small closed clubs or craft unions they used to be, while others strove to ignite the same flame where possible. Yet, with close to no funding available and hardly any real weight with which to bargain, attempts at strikes and protests were crushed heavily by enforcers and gangs across the city.

Still, elements of defiance and political unrest rocked the city, some of the nobles themselves sympathetic to the original cause but rejecting the violent methods of the radicals.

Yet this meant nothing to the vipers gathered at the top of the shopping arcade in a conference room in front of Kyle, who himself was becoming cognizant that he was part of a larger game and scheme.

“I don’t give two shits who this Harrison dumbass is, if he wants a war he’ll get a war! You don’t kill two of our men in our territory without getting some payback!” Niko slammed his palm on the table in rage. “If we don’t fight back, then what about Kismet and Mizar? They gonna die for nothing?!”

“Calm down!” Reese urged. “Do you even understand who the hell Harrison is? He’s the number one richest man in Versia, he controls more than a third of the market in his hands alone! Don’t even mention the other subsidiaries who ‘seemed’ to be his competitors but are secretly in league with him. Picking a fight with him is suicide!”

“No, Niko is right. Whether or not he is the richest or not means little to us. No matter who messes with us, they’ll have something coming for them. If we let this go we’ll be like a laughing stock. All of the nobles and major gangs know we let Gunther die in our hands, its an absolute stain on our reputation that we’ve painstakingly built so far.” Keith spoke up.

“But how are we going to do anything to him? We don’t even know what he wants nor what he has?” Monica rebutted. “We’re like a blind duck seeking revenge on a non-existent hunter. If we move rashly now, we will be exposing ourselves with each move.”

“Indeed. Verisa is far beyond our scope of control. If he was in the South Sector or the Culdao Peaks, we might have been able to do something about it right away.” Damian scratched his arm in irritation. “Still, did we not have a point of contact with that Versian Minister…? What’s his name again…”

“Minister Dekar is already a criminal, and on the run for kidnapping Versian President Johan.” Keith reminded them. “Whatever agreement or opportunity we might have had through him is basically lost, unless we can figure out where he is hiding. Their political issues are like a blackbox to us.”

“If all we’re lacking is information, then we simply need to gather it.” Kyle finally interjected, his voice laced with vengeance. “This man, this Harrison has been interfering with our operations for far too long. No doubt he is behind the upheaval in politics there as well.”

Originally, Kyle was not too peeved at Harrison’s actions. It was simply business at the time. He did not believe that Reese’s kidnapping nor the poaching of arctech designers were aimed directly at him.

However, the funding of the union and scaling far exceeded Kyle’s plans, putting his Seven Snakes in danger, not to mention Harrison’s own soldier killing Seven Snakes members. Members that he put his own time and effort into recruiting and training.

“How are we going to collect information? None of us are Versians, right?” Damian mused. “They are notorious for being closed off ever since the revolution.”

“We have Versian workers in our district, they seem pretty open.” Gordon pointed out the factory as an example.

“Those are the migrants, those willing to leave Versia for a better life. Those who remained aren’t the same.” Damian explained.

“We already have a good selection with us.” Kyle pointed out. “Three of them, in fact.”

“Three? I get that we have Culo, he’s probably our best bet by far.” Keith counted on his hands. “Who are the other two?”

“Bronco is one - but it remains to be seen how loyal he can be to us.” Niko got into the groove, following the group’s line of thinking.

“Bronco is far too dangerous to act as an information gatherer. I would think that his betrayal had already raised alarms among Harrison’s network about possible infiltration. The same goes for Culo, his face is practically plastered all over the place as being our mouthpiece. It would be near impossible for him to enter undetected.” Kyle tapped the table.

“Then who else do we have left? Who’s the last one?” Eric Dicar frowned.

“Someone who would never be doubted by Harrison or anyone in Versia. Someone who hates us to the core. But before we put him into action, we will need to strengthen ourselves before entering enemy territory.” Kyle began to piece the plan together once more, the vipers listening attentively to him. With his recent victory over the union, his actions and plans were no longer in doubt no matter how vicious or outrageous they were.

“Sasha, Damian, Niko, Culo and Monica will undergo a one month training with me in the Culdao Peaks. It is clear that Harrison’s men possess technology and skill far beyond our current capabilities. While I am confident we can deal with the threats, it is better to be safe than sorry.” Kyle explained. “On top of the vipers training, we will have the rest begin to prepare and stock up for our ‘excursion’. This will occur in the following steps.”

Kyle had Keith roll out a simple map of the surrounding regions, Versia and the other counties of the Yual Dominion labelled clearly for all to see. “It is obvious that there exists smuggling routes between Versia and Raktor that both the Ilysian Punks and Gunther had been using to both deliver and obtain supplies. We must find the specific of these routes as soon as possible. My current estimation is the ships along the central river running through the Central Sector, as well as potentially a few tunnels that bypasses the check along the walls.”

“Once we’ve uncovered their paths, we will send our forward team as soon as they are ready. They will collect local information and provide us with regular updates, which we will then tailor our actions accordingly.” Kyle continued. “While the forward team is collecting information, we will continue to ramp up training in the Culdao Peaks, improving our forces and equipment to be even better than that of the military. This is to ensure our chances of survival against any sudden backlash or betrayals from the nobles, Ardent Cretins or even Count Leon himself.”

While the chances of Count Leon suddenly turning on them seemed low, none of the vipers thought it was wrong to be overprepared. A standing force of well-prepared fighters would always be a benefit to future conflicts or negotiations in anyway.

“The moment we know exactly what is happening in Versia, I personally will head over to oversee operations myself, while Damian and Keith will remain in charge of operations in Raktor. A doppelganger trained by Keith will help maintain the facade that I am still around in Raktor, masking our movements.”

“Sir, do you really have to go over personally? I understand that the situation at large has been stabilized for now, but it seems a bit risky to do all of this.” Damian asked.

“I am by far our strongest fighter. With Harrison possessing technology far beyond our current means, it falls to me to ensure the stability of our international operations.” Kyle gave a cover-up answer, but the truth of the matter was that he needed to figure out where all the Galactic-Era tech was coming from, him being the only one among them who truly knew what they represented, not to mention the potential existence of ruins there. Sasha and Culo would not be able to operate them, and he had a sinking suspicion that his system will be able to make use of the ruins, similar to how he activated the Oracle Chamber in the Culdao Peaks. “Any questions before we begin?”

Niko shot up his hand quicker than the others. “If I beat you during the training phase, do I get to be the leader of the Seven Snakes?”

A wave of chuckles spread among the vipers, Niko’s brows furrowing. “What?! I thought that was the custom in the gang! Wasn’t that how Kyle got his original position from the previous gang leader?”

Damian couldn’t contain his laughter, wiping a tear from his eye. “Well, sure. If you want to end up like him.”

Kyle didn’t respond himself, merely smiling before motioning to the next viper who had a question. “Keith, please, ask away.”

“Sir, while I understand that Harrison has been jeopardizing our operations here, it does not warrant such a plan to deal with him. We could simply enact certain countermeasures to prevent his poaching or attempts at stealing technology from us, like boosting security and so on.”

“Do you think the plan is dangerous?”

“Very much so, sir. The full force of the Seven Snakes will not be able to follow you over lest we raise suspicions - your only support would be Sasha, Culo and whatever men they can cobble together. You’ll be entering the mouth of the lion, both figuratively and literally.”

“I won’t be entering unprepared, if the information gathering goes to plan. And I will be able to handle any attack that comes my way.”

“But sir, I don’t understand. We could simply sit back and improve our businesses. Why must we specifically target Harrison?”

Kyle sighed, rubbing his temples. He knew Keith had always been averse to fighting in general, but not to this extent. “It seems that some things have not been made clear despite all of you having been under my wing for this long. I have but one purpose when it comes to dealing with someone who tried to steal and kill everything I had under my very nose for their own profit.”

“And when it comes to such a man like Harrison,” Kyle stared at the flyer on the table in front of them, the Versian conglomerate leader’s grinning confident face taunting him. “The purpose is as clear as daylight: to make everything that is his, mine. And if I can’t have it, no one else can.”

@@@

Culo fidgeted with his fingers as he glanced between the various other passengers in the wagon, wondering why was he even lumped in with them while the wagon bounced erratically on the unpaved roads of the Culdao Peaks. He squeezed past the two passengers flanking him on both sides, their burly arms nearly squashing him in as he tried to raise his hand, waving at the rearview mirror in the driver’s cabin. “Uhm, sir…? Mr. Kyle, I believe there has been a mistake of sorts…?”

“Mistake?” Kyle turned back with a confused expression.

“Yes, I’ve seem to have boarded the wrong wagon. I’m not a viper.”

“Indeed you are not.”

“But there are only vipers here. If this is some sort of uhhh vacation retreat, I might have accidentally taken up a slot. Perhaps we should turn around and-” Culo’s words were slapped out of his chest when a large palm smacked him hard on the back.

“Quit jabbering and keep quiet. You’re in the right place.” Monica groaned, trying to catch some shuteye.

Culo instantly shrank back into his own original position, his mind wandering about all the reasons why he had been hauled here. “Mr. Kyle, if I’ve done something wrong, I sincerely apologize wholeheartedly, and will do anything to make it right - just please don’t hurt me.”

Kyle chuckled. “Glad to hear it. I will hold you to that.”

The wagon soon reached their destination - the first goblin den, where Feldon, Merissa and Gulak were already out, preparing to receive them. Feldon stood front and center, a wide beaming smile plastered on his face as he bowed nearly ninety degrees the moment Kyle exited the wagon. “Welcome, Boss! It is our great pleasure to have you-”

“Cut the bullshit, bring us to the training caves. We’re on a tight deadline.” Kyle’s dismissal and the grim faces of the vipers were more than enough to put a stop to Feldon’s idea of a warm reception, the group simply walking past them without worrying about appearances or decorum - not that the Seven Snakes used to anyway.

Culo nervously tagged along, only to suddenly come face to face with Gulak, a scream nearly leaving his throat as he had never met a goblin before. He shivered as Gulak’s nose drew closer to him, the warts and greenish pus seeping out of them more vivid then ever.

“You… you’re weak. They must have delivered you for maggot pit!” Gulak concluded, his laughter an eerie gurgle to himself before Sasha stepped in, grabbing Gulak by the nape of his neck and hauling him to the side. Culo’s face was pale as ever, frightened beyond his wits, forcing Sasha to haul him in while he screamed at the top of his lungs. “I DONT WANT TO BE A MAGGOT!”

Sasha had to smack Culo’s face a few times before he finally stop screaming and swapped to whimpering instead, earning only disdain from Sasha’s clearly irked expression. [Sir, I really don’t think he’ll amount to much.] Sasha spoke through her telepathic engraving to Kyle.

“Just like how you revealed your true strength through a challenge, so shall he.” Kyle assured. “The rest of you, take a break while I run Culo through the basics.”

“Wh-what basics are there to being a maggot?!” Culo exclaimed, only to earn another smack from Sasha.

“If you don’t shut up right now, I will make sure you get thrown into the maggot pit.” Niko threatened, tired of all the whining. That got Culo to finally shut up for good, meekly leaving the other vipers behind as he followed Kyle deeper and deeper into the training caves, unsure of what was happening while Sasha brought up the rear. The dense dark stone walls made him feel more clausterphobic than ever before, even more so than the winding streets of Raktor. The hazy memories of open blue skies and expansive farms near his village felt further than ever before.

Now, he had to carefully watch each step he took over loose rocks and random ditches, the sounds of dripping water dominating the environment as he blindly followed Kyle further in. The ambient light of the glowing arcite embedded through the cavernous system served as the main source of light, only to be superseded by intermittent arctech lanterns that made it hard for his eyes to adjust to the darkness.

“We’re here.” Kyle came to a sudden stop right outside a bolted wooden door, bloody handprints staining its slowly moulding surface. “Are you ready?”

“Ready…? Ready for what?” Culo glanced around frantically as Kyle himself rummaged around a nearby chest, picking up a rusty knife.

“Ready to become a better man.” Kyle tossed the rusty knife to it, Culo fumbling with his hands as he barely managed to catch it.

“Huh?” Culo could only stare in horror as the door was opened, revealing a dark circular chamber with nothing to show for it, save for the scraps of decaying flesh and strips of broken leather armour scattered around the floor, the obvious signs of a fearsome battle.

He felt a kick shove him into the door, with Sasha entering after him as the door slammed shut behind them. An eerie silence rumbled in his eardrums while he slowly took in the surroundings, trying to spot anything of note. With nothing to go on, he turned around, hoping that Sasha had an answer. Instead, he found nothing, Sasha having seemingly disappeared into thin air.

A sudden ungodly shriek echoed from the other side of the chamber, causing Culo to yelp in horror. “What was that? Hello? Ms. Sasha? Mr. Kyle? Anyone!?”

His ears perked up at the response, before sharply realizing it wasn’t anything human. All could here was the furious beat of something rushing towards him from seemingly all angles, his head swivelling quickly to try and peer through the dim lighting afforded by the chamber’s sole lantern.

*Fuck this, I’m not dying here like this!* Culo half-regretted following Kyle willingly into the wagon, but there was no time to lament about past issues. He gripped the hilt of the rusty knife tightly, ignoring the rough grooves that bit into his already calloused hand, knowing that the knife was all that stood between him and whatever monster was on the other side.

The scampering sounds of palms and feet slapping against the cold hard rocks around the chambers echoed incessantly, Culo priming himself for an attack from any direction. *It’s circling me, looking for an opening. As soon as it leaps I’ll-*

A claw lunged out and grabbed his arm from the side, the long rotting nails digging deep into his flesh. Culo shrieked in pain, his survival instincts kicking in as he swung the rusty knife down, the claws retracting immediately.

His eyes finally landed on the monster that was hunting him as he clutched his now bleeding arm - though calling it a monster was hardly a right word. “What the fuck are you?!”

The ‘monster’ was a heavily injured feral human, his posture animalistic as he glared at Culo with a clear frenzy, a level of aggression Culo was instinctively certain that he wouldn’t be able to talk his way out of it. One of the feral human’s arm was already clearly mangled from a past fight, leaving it dangling and lifeless, barely attached to its socket as he approached Culo, baring his teeth.

Another swipe from the feral human’s good arm had Culo backpedalling frantically, who used the knife in a bid to scare him off. “You try that one more time and I will -”

The same ungodly shriek erupted from the feral human’s broken jaw, nearly stunning Culo while the feral human charged head-on, rushing right at Culo.

Culo didn’t waste his breath on talking any longer, gripping the knife as hard as he could when the body of the feral human slammed into him, the two of them tumbling onto the ground in a fierce struggle. A howl echoed as the knife found its mark, lodging its rusty blade deep into the chest of the feral human.

Culo ignored the dripping saliva from the feral human’s canine-like teeth, twisting the knife and attempting to slice as hard as he could towards the side, using one hand to block the infected claw trying to gouge his eyes out. The feral human clung to him like a parasite, unwilling to let go until Culo finally found an opportunity to hit the feral human on the head, though to little effect.

Despite the knife cutting deep, the feral human still struggled with a primal fury, forcing Culo to resort to other options. Instead of trying to twist the knife any longer, he used his free hand and drove a fist straight into the broken jaw of the feral human.

The already broken jawbone splintered even more, the force shoving the fragments deeper into the face as the feral human recoiled in pain. Culo didn’t let go of the chance, immediately gaining the upper hand and pouncing on the reeling feral human. With a vicious grip, he pulled out the knife with his other hand drove it straight through the head of the feral human.

The feral human’s body twitched a little as it struggled to come to terms with its own death, before finally collapsing onto the ground, lifeless, leaving Culo panting hard, his lungs heaving from the frantic battle.

Finally, the pain that he had ignored on his injured arm began to overwhelm him,Culo noticing that he had lost blood through the gaping wounds, some parts starting to turn yellow from the infected claws. He clasped the wound in an attempt to stem the bleeding, stumbling away from the dead feral human and slumping against the wall.

*Am I going to die here…? Brother…* Culo closed his eyes for a bit, trying to process what had just happened when a new presence suddenly emerged in front of him.

His instincts kicked in, using the same trusted rusty knife to stab forward without hesitation. The knife was easily deflected, before his attacking arm was grappled expertly.

Before he could react,. the new attacker dumped the contents of a small yellow potion flask on the open wounds of Culo’s arm, healing it quickly.

“Huh…? Ms. Sasha…?”

The door swung open, revealing a satisfied Kyle. “Well done, Culo. I knew you could do it.”

Culo was slightly stunned, before anger began to well up from within, locking onto Kyle as the source of all of this. “Are you fucking crazy?! Did you just throw me in here to die?”

“If you did not fight back, then yes. But I was confident you had the will to see it through.”

“What…? What the fuck are you even trying to do?”

“To make you a better fighter.” Kyle inspected the dead feral human, surprised at the tenacity it had displayed so far despite it being nearly a year since he had experimented on them. He wondered if the failure rate of the tattoo knife was due to his original lack of experience with the arrangement and procedure of engraving arcia tattoos. With his new learnings, Kyle was confident he could impart a higher success rate onto other people, though he would still need willing subjects to test this on. Or unwilling.

“Why do I need to fight? I’m a union leader, not a Seven Snakes fighter!” Culo retorted.

“There will always be an occasion to fight. I need you to be able to stand on your own two feet - you’ll be going to Versia with Sasha, and she will not be there to save your life all the time.”

“Back to Versia…? Why?”

“That, I cannot say. But if you want to see your brother again, it would be advisable to complete this training without whining too much.” Kyle got up and began to leave the chamber. “Sasha, try to make sure he come out in at least three pieces. I’ll see you for dinner.”

“… complete this training? three pieces?! Wait, wait, wait! I’ve already cleared the training! I killed the man!” Culo tried to find a way out, only to earn a chuckle from Kyle as Sasha activated a notch in the chambers’ walls, opening a secret door from which two feral humans emerged from, snarling and already locking onto Culo.

“Cleared? You haven’t even started.”

# Chapter 96 - Accelerated Training

“How long you think the scrawny kid will survive? I bet he caps out at two.” Niko yawned as he stretched his limbs, lazing on a sofa in a waiting room, attended to by goblin servers who offered the three vipers sitting opposite each other refreshments and food.

“Nah that kid got a fire in him. You’ve seen him during the strikes. He knows what it takes.” Damian munched on a raw radish, crunching through the white juicy flesh which spluttered a few droplets across the room, earning the ire of Monica.

“You really like that shit? It’s fucking tasteless!” Monica wiped off a splatter with a disgusted face.

“Don’t know about you, but I learnt from a young age you eat whatever edible dish comes your way.”

“Sure, I get that. But we’re loaded now, we could eat at a fancy restaurant day in day out. Why eat… that?”

Damian pondered a moment, before taking a second bite. “Don’t know. Guess I’m still stingy. Some things never change even if the world changes. Also, there is a slight spice to the radish, surprisingly refreshing. You should try it.”

“No way. I heard that the spice is actually the radish’s attempt at poisoning its would-be predators. That’s why you dont see any Tusken Rabbits swarming the terrace farms. Also, sometimes these insane goblins put maggots in their Sahusa Stew”

“One animal’s poison is another human’s food.”

“HEY! Are you two even listening?” Niko interjected the inane conversation, furious at being ignored.

“Listening to what? Why do you care so much about Culo? Worry about yourself first.” Monica sighed, rubbing her temples.

“Worry about myself…? I can handle this training - it’ll be easy as pie.” Niko scoffed, leaning back into the sofa leisurely with a confident aura. “By the end of this month, I should be able to challenge Kyle for the position of gang leader.”

Damian and Monica exchanged a glance, before bursting out into laughter, chunks of radish spluttering out of Damian’s mouth in a violent fashion, frightening the goblin servers who scampered to clean up the mess.

“You? HAHA! You’re fucking out of your mind!” Monica couldn’t control her laughter, slapping the holster of her chair repeatedly.

“Wh-what?!” Niko shot an aggravated look at the other two vipers still rolling in their seats, laughing at his expense. “I ain’t wrong, I know there’s a tradition to duel for the gang leader’s position!”

“You think we’re laughing about that?!” Monica jeered. “We’re laughing about you thinking you could even come close to beating Kyle! Maybe consider whether you can even beat another viper first!”

“I sure as hell can beat you, you mocking bitch! I’m your senior, I joined the gang before you! Don’t think I’m weak just because I’m younger than you, it only means I got more potential!”

“We both became vipers at the same time. Don’t flatter yourself, you couldn’t hold a candle to me in a duel. Out of the five who came here, you might be the second weakest. Even I think Culo might overtake you with time.”

“What the fuck?!” Niko shot straight up of his sofa. “I can handle you in a duel anytime, bitch. If we weren’t in the same gang, I would have pummeled your face when you were captured by Damian!”

“Oh yea? Try me now.” Monica held a self-satisfied grin.

Damian was still laughing about Niko thinking he could beat Kyle, only to realize that Niko and Monica was being serious about it. “Hold on, dont start a fight here. If you wanna fight, do it in the training caves or -”

“Fuck no, I’m going to beat up this bitch in front of everyone. Fight me in the main chamber, or maybe Monica is too scared to do it?”

“Like fucking hell I’ll take shit from you.”

The two of them stormed out of the waiting room, entering the spacious central chamber of Gulak’s goblin den, the walls and ceiling slowly being expanded over the months to accomodate more and more personnel. Decorations aimed at appeasing the local goblin slave population has been erected across the originally vacant desolate chamber, now filled with bouts of glowing mushrooms and dazzling vines that spruced up the environment.

Goblins and human employees alike mingled and relaxed at the various benches and food stalls, enjoying a mix of imported food and drinks delivered through the express tunnel that ran through the den, the vibrations dampened by a large statue of King Sahusa dominating the center of the chamber, reminding the goblins of their allegiance to the kingdom and serving as a mask for the real power behind the kingdom: Kyle.

Gulak’s tribesman now acted as overseers and adminstrators, no longer relegated to the lowly manual labours that other subjugated tribes were forced to do now, creating a clear hierarchy with the Seven Snakes at the very top. With a wide variety of delicacies from both Raktor and the Culdao Peaks, along with modern infrastructure like public bathhouses, centralized cooling and motorized transportation through the longer sections of the den, it was starting to developed into an advanced underground town in its own right.

Yet the usual routine of the goblins and human employees were starkly broken by the appearance of Niko and Monica, both of whom marched right into the chamber and began to face off against each other, hardly caring for the safety of others around. Some of the goblin warriors who recognized Monica immediately grabbed their Sahusa stews and rushed to a much further location, away from the imminent destruction that was about to unfold, while other unaware bystanders began to form a ring around the two vipers unknowingly.

“HEY, HEY, HEY! NO FIGHTING IN THE CHAMBER! IF YOU WANNA FIGHT , GO TO-” Feldon shoved his way through the ring of goblins that had already formed fast, finally squeezing through only to be faced with a violent glare by Monica and Niko. He yelped before scrambling back away through the ring, not wanting to mess with an angry viper.

“Where the fuck is your weapon?” Niko motioned with his chin, while he brandished a default sword and round shield, requisitioned from a unwilling goblin warrior nearby.

“Right here.” Monica grinned as she sported brass knuckledusters, her arms in a boxing posture. “This should be good enough to pummel you down.”

“We’ll see about that.”

“Alright, alright. Duel stops when I say so. Fight to kill, but no finishing blows. We got loads of healing potions anyway.” Damian crossing his arms, overseeing the battle as an arbiter. “Ready?”

Niko nodded, clutching the leather straps of the default round shield in his left arm, his right hand’s sword positioned high, ready to swing and chop in any direction. His eyes locked onto the burly figure of Monica, who still stood still, arms raised and locked.

“GO!”

Niko launched forward, his right foot driving into the gravel, preparing to close the gap in two strides as his right arm tensed up, ready to deliver a downward swing. But before he could follow up with another step of his left foot, Monica had already taken three strides, her body twisting to the right of Niko while her right fist shot forward like a bullet, forcing Niko to hurriedly block the incoming strike with his shield, his footing messed up.

The force of the punch cracked the shield slightly as Niko was knocked backwards, his two feet drawing lines in the ground. Niko tried to recover his posture, yet Monica stuck to him like glue, immediately following up with two more straights and a hook, Niko blocking each strike with the skin of his teeth.

Soon, the shield began to crumble apart, the edges flaking from the reverberation of Monica’s heavy punches. *Since when was she this strong?!* Niko had never really seen Monica fight before, but he was still determined to win, quickly jabbing forward with his sword to earn some space.

Monica swivelled her body, avoiding the incoming stab before resting her entire weight on her left foot, her right leg kicking out towards the exposed Niko, who could not retract his sword arm in time. The shin of Monica’s right leg drove deep into the guts of Niko, his mouth gagging with saliva choking outwards as he was lifted off the ground temporarily by the sheer impulse.

With no time to react, Niko ate a fearsome left hook into his cheek, the knuckledusters smacking and crushing his cheekbone while he was sent toppling to the ground in a bloody mess. The audience members cheered, already a few goblins clutching their heads in despair as impromtu bookies jumped on the chance to run bets on the duel as quick as they could.

“STOP!” Damian roared, immediately stepping inbetween Monica and Niko, preventing Monica from following up. He turned to help Niko up, only for his helping hand to be smacked away, Niko himself popping a health potion flask and chugging it, his injuries healing up quickly.

“You got guts, kid. But you certainly don’t have the skill.” A grinning Monica taunted, only making Niko far more irritated.

“I was using the wrong weapons!” Niko grunted as he wiped off a blood stain on his previously injured cheek. “I wasn’t used to the sword and shield!”

“Oh yea? Go ahead and pick any weapon, I’ll still beat you up.” Monica motioned with her hand, inviting a second bout.

Niko tossed the sword and shield away onto the ground, before turning to a goblin warrior nearby and grabbing its spear, twirling it in his hands effortlessly before assuming a fighting posture, his palms gripping the rough surface of shaft tightly, the spearhead aimed low.

Damian was slightly impressed, knowing Niko chose the spear in order to create some distance between him and Monica’s fist style. “Ready?” He shot a glance at Monica, who nodded back in response, content to use the same old knuckledusters agian.

“GO!”

This time, Niko pushed his legs to the limit, driving forward faster and trying to match Monica’s speed. While he was still slower on the uptake, he managed to close the gap with ample preparation, the sharp tip of the spear already swinging at Monica’s neck as she tried the same attack pattern on Niko.

The tip whizzed past as Monica recoiled, forced onto the backfoot with each step as Niko sent forward a quick strike and jab, mixing in wide arcing sweeps as well to keep Monica on her toes. The length of the spear prevented Monica from getting in close and delivering her punches, the threat of the spear too overwhelming.

As Niko performed a wide swing again, Monica took the opening while Niko was still retracting the spear, closing the gap as fast as she could only for her face to be met with the rear-end of the spear’s shaft aimed right at her eyes. She swerved her head, narrowly dodging the blunt attack before crouching low and giving a fierce uppercut.

Yet Niko had a grin on his face, easily avoiding the predictable uppercut and instead reverse gripping the spear, stabbing the spear towards the crouching Monica.

She rolled fast onto the ground, creating distance and recovering into a fighting posture, a smile on her face. “Learning, are we?”

“Like I said, give me a month.” Niko grinned, charging forward with more confidence now, Monica weaving through the strikes as the two vipers duel began to shift closer and closer to the audience, most of them now scrambling away to avoid getting hit. The pace of the battle was accelerating with time, moving ever quicker, both fighters’ steps increasing in rhythm as they parried and fought across the chamber.

Unaware food stall customers were taken aback as the duel near them, some shouting and screaming at the two vipers to stop to no avail. Damian himself was still eating the same radish, hardly concerned with the chaos the duel was causing in the chamber.

“How long are you going to dodge!” Niko spat through gritted teeth, the muscles in his arms burning from the exhaustion of continuous stabs, his speed and combo beginning to slow down heavily.

“Dodge? I’m just letting you have your fun.” Monica smirked, before she suddenly used her two hands to grab the spear itself, before tugging hard on it. The tired Niko was caught off-guard by the sudden change in attack, his body toppling over as he still clung onto the spear, being dragged forward.

He frantically released it, only to see Monica’s knee speeding towards his face, his nose being crushed in as he tumbled and crashing into a stew stall, sending radishes, maggots and fruits scattering across the floor which was unceremoniously picked up by the opportunistic audience members around.

Monica snapped the spear on her knee easily, tossing the two halves apart before rushing up to Niko who now had no weapon. Or so she had thought, as a large black circular metal bowl swung towards her, an impromtu metal wok used as a weapon by the undeterred Niko. Sizzling oil and squirming maggots spluttered across the both of them, Niko unrelenting as he charged forward, unwilling to give up the fight as he landed a direct blow on Monica’s shoulder, smacking her hard.

The metal wok knocked her off-balance, but her legs kicked out instantly, her foot nailing Niko in the chest once more and sending him crashing into the already half-broken food stall, the goblin owner tearing what remained of his beard out in a rage. <My maggots!>

“STOP! Monica wins again.” Damian declared once more as he intervened. This time, Niko was far too exhausted from the longer duel to even raise an arm to feed himself a potion, reluctantly allowing Damian to pour a health and stamina potion into his mouth. His injuries still healed quickly, but the effect was reduced from the repetitive usage in such a short amount of time.

“Good fight.” Monica herself rubbed a bruised shoulder, flexing her arms a little to loosen it up before offering a hand to Niko. “If only you trained harder instead of wasting your time hitting up girls and drinking all day, maybe you would have beaten Kyle by now.”

Niko didn’t reply, but he begrudingly accepted Monica’s hand, hoisting himself up with her help, but the two of them soon found Damian chuckling behind them. “Why, what’s so funny?”

“No… it’s nothing. It’s just that you two are really thinking too lightly of Kyle. Neither of you have trained with him yet, so you probably don’t comprehend just how much better he is than all of us. Hell, I don’t even think the two of you together could beat me, much less him.”

“WHAT?!” Monica took offense. “I don’t need Niko to beat you too! You’re not that strong without your shield.”

“Sure, sure, keep telling yourself that.” Damian chortled, mocking Monica with a dismissive tone.

Monica gritted her teeth, before slapping Niko violently on the back. “Come on, punk, let’s teach this dumbass a lesson!”

Niko stretched his limbs, his face grinning with anticipation. “If we beat you, we get to be underboss, right?”

“Sure. If any of you can take me down, that is.” Damian accepted the offer. Instead of using his custom-made tower shield. Damian took a default tower shield onto his left arm, testing the range of motion that was available to him. “I’ll use this. You two can use whatever you want.”

Niko decided to take a spear once more, while Monica still kept her knuckledusters, raring to punch apart Damian’s shield. “No tattoos, else that’s cheating!” Monica warned.

“Of course. And no excuses - I see both your fatigue and injuries have already healed up.” Damian nodded, before glancing over towards the audience who had now grown into the hundreds, some clambering to the top of stalls to get a better view. “FELDON! Stop hustling bets and come oversee the duel.”

“Shit…. I mean, yes sir!” Feldon saluted, stuffing the rakels he earned into his coat before acting prim and proper like a arena official. “Ready? GO!”

Monica rushed ahead faster than Niko, charging right at the stationary Damian. She threw her right fist straight at the tower shield, expecting it to crack as it did for Niko, but instead she could only watch as the shield was shifted slightly outwards, her punch missing as it went past it towards Damian’s body, Damian’s reaction time far quicker.

In one fell swoop, Damian grabbed Monica’s extended right arm and slammed it against the edge of the tower shield in a crushing move, almost breaking the arm off as Monica roared in pain. But Damian did not let go just yet, instead using his elbow to send Monica backwards, her body crashing into the lunging Niko who was caught off-guard.

Niko grunted as he staggered backwards, hoisting the full weight of Monica before pushing her aside. “Why the fuck are you so heavy?”

“Why the fuck are you not helping!”

“You’re literally in my way! You should’ve let me attack first with my spear!”

“I don’t need your stupid ass!”

Before the two could bicker any longer, Damian was already rushing at them with his tower shield front and center, slamming into the unprepared Niko and toppling him again. Monica tried to use her remaining good arm to grapple Damian’s exposed body, lunging for his waist in an attempt to pin him to the ground. Yet even her strong arm was easily shrugged off, Damian using his free hand to punch Monica right in the face.

In just a minute, Damian stood towering over the two defeated vipers, Niko still struggling to get up while Monica was sprawled on the floor, suffering a heavy concussion. Feldon stared in shock at the disparity of power, before noticing Damian glaring at him. “Right, right - STOP! The duel is over, Damian wins!”

A few gambling goblins tossed their stew onto the ground in rage, some cursing Feldon out. <Why did I even bet on that dumbass Niko? I shouldn’t have been lured by the high odds offered by that stinking human!>

Damian helped the two of them up, the potions used on their injuries, though this time Niko wasn’t able to heal as much, still suffering from the slam from Damian. “Are we done comparing? If you can’t even last more than a minute against me, you won’t last against Kyle.” Damian chided them as he checked their injuries. “You’ll need more than this month of training to even come close to him.”

The three vipers returned back to the waiting room, Niko weary from being defeated multiple times in a row, Monica depressed for having been shut up by the underboss, while Damian still munched on yet another radish, his obsession with it seemingly endless.

Soon, Kyle returned from the induction of Culo’s training, before he noticed a few bruises on Niko and Monica with his keen eye, as well as their haggard breathing and empty potion flasks on the table in front of them. “Was there an attack?” He questioned Damian.

“No, sir, no attack. We were simply uhh… training with each other ahead of schedule.”

“Hmm…good to see enthusiasm for the training. This month is meant for us to close the power disparity we have between us and Harrison, so we will need every ounce of effort dedicated towards our improvement. To that effect I have created a new training routine.”

Kyle began to explain the plan to them. “From our experience against Harrison’s hitmen, it’s clear that not even Sasha can efficiently fight them one on one. Their technology and equipment far surpasses ours, them being able to use devices seemingly scoured from the Galactic Era. Our improved rifles were unable to penetrate their enhanced armor as well, which means we must find other avenues of improving our strength. While I will attempt to procure similar equipment, it is no secret that our fighting capability is concentrated in me, Sasha and Damian disproportionately.”

Niko would have taken offense at that slight, but he was no longer hot-headed as he was before, having been humbled by both Monica and Damian. However, a fire still burned in his heart, his mind already thinking of ways to overcome his peers. Kyle could see the raw determination in Niko’s eyes, Kyle nodding approvingly.

“As such, we will have two weeks of accelerated individual weapon training. I will dedicate an hour to instructing both Niko and Monica independently, to have them brought up to par, while Damian and Sasha will continue to duel one another. Following the individual trainings, Culo will join us and participate in group training. While we are members of the same gang and have effective squad strategies, we do not have efficient combat synergy when handling enemies that cannot be killed easily. Each of you have been acting independently thus far, but we also have to learn to fight with one another.”

Monica held her head low in slight shame, knowing that if Kyle had seen the disastorous 2v1 duel between Damian and her with Niko, Kyle might have had them punished heavily for being so incompetent.

“With this, by the end of this month, the military exercise would begin, and we would be prepared to begin our entry to Versia. Adrian and Keith have already located potential smugglers and information dealers who are well-versed in Versia. They will compile and catalogue information that we need to get the most benefit of our expansion there. If we can get our hands on what technology and finances Harrison has in control, we would be a step ahead of any other gang in Raktor. Any questions?”

Niko and Monica shook their heads, ready to improve themselves and prove their worth. However, Damian raised his hand, wanting to ask a question. “Sir, you mentioned you’ll only be training Niko and Monica for an hour each day. Are you not joining us for the rest of the training?”

“Of course not. If neither of you can beat Sasha, there is close to no reason I should be in the training - it would only lead to a one-sided beating with no practical learnings gained. Instead, I have something far more important to focus on - improving our equipment.” Kyle smiled, tapping his Oriental Bloom handgun. “And once we are done, Harrison’s men won’t stand a chance against us.”

# Chapter 97 - Engineering Improvements

MG404:[Item | Arcia Exosuit Arm Prototype(Advanced) | Designed by Harrison Industries | Active Skill: All-rounder (Advanced) -Enhance user’s physical stats tremendously. +30 STR, +30 DEX, +30 VIT. ]

It’s been a few months since the last time he had done any serious crafting - most of the time he had been still carefully studying and learning about arcia and engravings ever since his tests on the various arctech engravings.

And despite Harrison’s attacks on the Seven Snakes, Kyle had obtained something far more important - the exosuit arm dropped by Harrison’s hitman, an additional piece ontop of the spine that he already possessed. With this, he was now a step closer to completing an exosuit of his own entirely, though he was confident he would not get it right the first time.

The intricacies of a Galactic Era exosuit was far too much for him to recall, him having relegated most of the technical information into a separate cranial implant which naturally did not follow him through his reincarnation.

However, with the addition of this exosuit arm designed utilizing arcia energy, he can now begin to inspect and merge the various separate concepts of arcia engravings into a single overarching theme and model.

*Hopefully, this should also improve the tattoo engravings.* Kyle still had possession of the engraving knife from Gulak, allowing him to perhaps increase the success rate of tattooing, which was the main reason holding him back from engraving for the vipers. Their skills and motivation were currently too valuable to run the risk of an engraving that only had a 7% survival rate.

Now, in the Oracle’s Chambers, he had Harrison’s exosuit arm laid out, two bright spotlights shining on it. The arm was well defined, with clear signs of precision machinery that Kyle had yet to see in Raktor itself. This only made him respect Harrison as an enemy even more, knowing that there would be a technological gap to overcome.

Yet such a gap would be nothing in front of Kyle, or so he believed. As he began slowly pry apart the arm piece by piece, the intricatcies of the design was far more than he had expected, presenting a higher level of arcia engineering that he had yet to fully understand himself.

Within the arm was close to five layers of arcia engravings etched onto a slivery flexible membrane, each acting like a continuation of the circuit below. The lines were not exactly dense like the picocircuits of Kyle’s former life, but it was still a technological marvel today.

What was especially confounding to Kyle was how the layers were attached. There were multiple throughholes and mounting points between the layers, allowing the ‘symbols’ of the arcia engraving to be connected with each other in a lengthy sequence that provided it with its active skill.

He carefully deconstructed the membrane, using a tweezer to piece apart the tightly woven layers before separating them out. “Orisa, are you here?”

[Yes, Adminstrator.] The A.I materialized into view, her default human figure saluting at Kyle.

“Scan these layers and digitize them into an electrical schematic.”

[Understood.]

A loading drone was repurposed from the seed storage, Orisa using its inbuilt camera to take a medium resolution picture of the layers. [Adminstrator, the pictures do not match any known format of electrical wiring. My functionality is incapable of automatically populating the components as well.]

Kyle had half-forgotten that the A.I was not fully completed, and only had information regarding chemicals and agriculture. “Nevermind, trace all of the lines out and display them on the lab holomonitors. I’ll take it from there.”

The nondescript etches found in the layers were highlighted in blue, allowing Kyle to manually begin placing the layers ontop of one another in a 3D hologram supported by the lab’s surviving functionality.

He walked between the layers, tracing out lines between througholes and mounting points, making sure the layout of the digitized pictures were exactly as it was on the membrane, before finally changing the colors to represent different sequences.

Soon he noticed that while the System Message had told him about a single active skill, it was in fact the combination of multiple engraving sequences to achieve the effect.

He took apart the engravings one by one, isolating their sequences before grabbing a few additional metal plates, quickly using an etcher to do a copy of the isolated engraving.

As expected, the System informed him of the various engravings now carved into the sample plates, a total of five separate sequences that all contributed to the movement of the arm itself.

*There’s not just a defensive engraving or a resistance engraving, there is also a motion, weight and enhancer engravings…* Kyle copied this engravings into memory by continuously etching them repeatedly into other sample metal plates. His proficiency at etching was now higher than ever, allowing him to drill the movements and image into his head.

The biggest learning poiint was the way the engravings were connected.Some were connected in the middle while others were connected at the start or the end. Each symbol in the engraving has multiple ‘connection’ points, each point having a different meaning like a language in itself.

As far as Kyle could tell, the language was only two-dimensional at best, with the layers acting as a way to compress more into less. Furthermore, the entire combined sequence was repeated over six times along the length of the membrane. Kyle soon quickly realized the benefits of repeating the engravings. *If one section of the arm is damaged, the rest of it is still functional.*

The membrane of the exosuit arm was not the only thing that was engraved - the rest of the metal arm was also engraved. Kyle soon figured out that the membrane and exosuit arm’s engravings were all powered by the hitman’s innate arcia energy. While it paled in comparison to Kyle’s current arcia capacity, it was still leagues above Damian,Niko and Monica, not to mention the newbie Culo.

Kyle was planning to help them cover that weakness as well, but for now he was focused on seeing if he could replicate the exosuit arm himself.

Over the next five hours, Kyle worked tirelessly without distraction while Orisa watched without a word, her A.I avatar stationary as Kyle learnt, copied and memorized every engraving sequence on the exosuit arm.

*Good, I’m finally ready to begin.* Kyle drafted up schematics, sending them over to the smaller factory in the Culdao Peaks and having them manufacture the different components of the arm, save for all but the membrane itself, which he was still unsure as to what was its material. “Orisa, analysis the membrane’s material.”

[Confirmed. Non-degradable superpolymer structure detected - Kusal Corporation Fabric.]

“Never heard of them before.”

[I have records of only their name, but not their existence or history. Kusal Corporation Fabric can be used to upgrade modules here.]

“Which modules?” Kyle could only recall the Physical Transfer Module, in which Orisa would be able to take control of a physical humanoid body, a distinct feature of an A-Class A.I

[Digital Compaction Module. The module allows a reduced copy of the A.I to be intergrated in a chip form into other Council-format compliant devices.]

Kyle nodded, knowing that fully developed exosuits required a companion A.I to help the pilot process information in the event there was a sensory overload. Yet he could not cannibalize the membrane right now, as he needed it as a reference before he could produce the exosuit arm. “Can you analysis the structure of the Kusal Corporation Fabric?”

[Affirmative. I will utilize the chemical analysis procedure used for seed and plant identification.]

“Estimated time?”

[Unknown. Complexity does not follow any known natural occuring substance.]

The information given to him by Orisa only made him sigh. *What a waste Harrison. You’re sitting on a veritable gold mine and wasted it.* However he had to admit that the usage of the Kusal Corporation Fabric in places of bulky wires was ingenious. Many lower-tier exosuits, even in the Galactic Era were mostly utilizing flex cables to transfer power from a mounted battery pack. With such a single point of power failure, an exosuit that lack redundant systems could easily be taken out by simply destroying either the power source or the spine which distributes the current.

Instead, this membrane allowed for segregated usage, allowing for limited functionality even when partially damaged due to the spread of the repeated sequences that have contact points with the skin. Of course, there was still a single point of failure: the wearer’s internal arcia energy.

Kyle took this information to heart, continuing to practice the engravings as much as possible while waiting for the manufactured parts to come in. It took nearly another eight hours for the parts to finally come in, Kyle arranging them in sequence using a draft assembly procedure.

“Orisa, analyze assembly procedure and create holo-renderings of steps.”

3D holograms appeared, crude images to show how each piece fit together. As Kyle held the first bolt in his hand, memories of his childhood training came rushing back. Memories of his forced routine, locked in a room until he could disassemble and reassemble a military exosuit from scratch. *Some things never change.*

He got to work, inserting latching bolts, washers, springs, and o-rings all custom-made by the factory, assembling them tirelessly through countersunk threaded holes, the exosuit arm slowly coming together.

Within a short fifteen minutes he had the frame of the exosuit arm in place. He placed it on his own arm, trying to wear it before realizing he couldn’t even squeeze his hand through the opening at the shoulder like a sleeve.

*If I made it wider, it would be too loose. I need a tightening and loosening mechanism.* Kyle quickly disassembled the frame again, drawing up a new schematic and then requesting the factory to produce newer parts.

The process repeated like this, Kyle going through multiple tests of dimensional tolerances, stress tests and freedom of movement. *This part is continuously jabbing itself into my forearm, its uncomfortable. This frame is too rough, the sanding isn’t enough. I can’t bend my arm all the way either.*

Before Kyle knew it, it was already morning when he finally had a workable frame mounted on his right arm. It was a close to perfect custom fit to his current arm size, with some slight room for further refinement. *Now for the engraving plates.*

[Adminstrator, you were previously scheduled to instruct Niko individually for weapons training.]

“Right, got it.” Kyle kept the frame on, bringing it for the training back at Gulak’s den, where Niko was already waiting in a training chamber with an assortment of various weapons arranged neatly on a rack for Niko to select from.

“What the hell is that? You trying to become a factory?” Niko exclaimed, squinting at the weird looking arm frame that was devoid of armour plates.

“Don’t worry too much about. Consider it a handicap for me for your sake.” Kyle flexed the frame a little, noticing a slight difficulty in moving freely. *This should be good to test the current structure’s performance in simulated combat.*

“Handicap..? So you won’t take it off no matter what, right?”

“Yes”

“Perfect… but what are we supposed to do again?” Niko scratched his head in confusion. “How am I supposed to know which weapon fits me?”

“Pick any weapon and try to kill me. You will pass this session if you can land three blows on my chest.” Kyle held up his fingers.

Niko grinned, picking up a simple blunt club from the weapons rack, testing its weight on his palms. “And if I don’t?”

“Then it will be a good one hour of training. If you survive.” Kyle stood in the center of the chamber, facing Niko calmly. “Begin anytime.”

“You said it!” Niko yelled with a smile as he flung the club with a jerk, the target being Kyle’s chest. Even while the club was in mid-air, Niko was already gripping another weapon in the rack, intending to hurl a throwing javelin. *I’ll hit him in the position he’s about to dodge… LEFT!*

The split second choice had the throwing javelin soaring through the air, aimed at a predicted location. Yet instead of dodging, Kyle simply used the prototype structural frame on his arm to smack the club down without moving a single inch, the throwing javelin impacting the ground next to him helplessly.

“Hey, what the hell! Doesn’t that count as a blow?”

“I said *three blows on my chest*.”

Niko gritted his teeth, grabbing a short goblin dagger as well as a few other knives on the rack, throwing them haphazardly at Kyle in a bid to hit the chest. Kyle simply yawned while most of the throwing weapons missed him. “If you’re going to continue fooling around, I will have no choice but to impress on you the importance of this training. Through force.”

“You can’t blame me, I’m testing weapons!” Niko was unrepentant, having learnt how to fight through bare hands and grabbing anything that was within range during a pub brawl or an alley fight. He knew how to use a rifle effectively as both a ranged gun and a blunt staff, but he was far from an expert in it. As he reached for yet another throwing weapon on the rack, he heard a loud bang as Kyle lunged towards him in one leap, nearly closing the gap in an instant.

Battle instincts kicked as Niko gripped the nearest weapon in a desperate bid to protect himself, pulling the shaft of the weapon towards his own chest with both hands to intercept Kyle’s incoming punch, the pressure feeling like impending death.

The punch slammed the shaft of Niko’s weapon head-on, cracking it apart in two while Niko’s body was knocked backwards, stumbling and tripping on his own heels as both him and the weapons rack were toppled by the impact. His head knocked hard against the ground, nearly disorientating him but his muscle memory for the multiple Seven Snakes fight kicked in, frantically recovering into a crouching fighting posture.

Another fast kick came in hard from the left, forcing Niko to raise half of his broken weapon, before finally realizing it was a rugged waraxe, or at least that was what it was before the shaft snapped off. Niko hurriedly twisted the stained edge of the waraxe towards Kyle’s incoming shin, forcing Kyle to retract the leg and allowing Niko some breathing room to recover into his full standing height.

Without a word, Niko wielded the top half of the waraxe in his left hand along with the remaining half of the shaft in his right hand, swinging downwards at Kyle’s chest with the full intent to hurt with a grunt. Kyle swerved to the side, angling his body to dodge the incoming slash with ease, before ducking low to avoid a frontal stab by the cracked shaft in Niko’s right.

Kyle observed Niko carefully as he dodged and weaved between Niko’s various attempts to hit Kyle even once. It was clear that Niko definitely had the impetus and fighting strength to achieve the skills of a average warrior above the common folk, but without a weapon specialization it was hard to obtain an expert level. This observation created a conundrum for Kyle as well: training Niko in a specific weapon would reduce his apparent versatility between weapons, an critical trait to retain in times of war and battle. Being adaptive on the battlefield is a hard viewpoint to cultivate once Niko were to be a trained expert in any weapon.

Luckily, Kyle had ample experience in being adaptive himself, having been trained for decades in various weapons. He highly doubt he would be able to raise Niko to the same level as him within a month, but as long as he could instill the correct foundation in Niko, there would be room to grow. Kyle suspected that this trait alone would eventually make Niko the strongest and most versatile fighter among his men with the right attitude.

Niko swung feverishly, his face scrounged up in effort and strain as it became apparent that whatever bravado he had at the start of the training was clearly misplaced. He could not even land a single hit on Kyle, Kyle’s footwork nearly impeccable. Kyle was continuously putting his body in a position that made it awkward for Niko to attack without repositioning his body and posture, especially if he did not want to be off balance.

Each step and each movement, Kyle would throw a fake punch or a fake kick, exposing the gaps in Niko’s motions and balance. Niko took the hint, not requiring any words, his body automatically learning on the spot. As time went on, the openings were gradually reduced, though Niko was clearly starting to get tired with every successive attack, the swings slowing down tremedously as he drew short rapid breaths, his arms beginning to feel like lead.

With his reactions slowed, he could hardly react in time when Kyle charged forward abruptly, expertly throwing Niko on to the ground with a grapple. “Drink up.” Kyle tossed a stamina potion over to Niko, Niko chugging its contents greedily as he began to recover his strength.

“Whew… is that the end of the training?”

“Hmm? It’s only been fifteen minutes.”

“WHAT?!” Niko’s jaw dropped, his body having felt like he was fighting non-stop for an hour as he laid on the ground sprawled out.

Kyle tapped his chin as he took stock of the weapons that were now scattered on the ground next to the toppled weapons’ rack, thinking of the next steps. Niko’s proficiency with the waraxe was amateur at best, showing no real understanding of the weapon itself. Clearly the style of training that Kyle had used himself was not effective enough for Niko to get a good grasp on how to use it.

Instead of wasting the next hour, Kyle decided to switch it up, picking up Niko’s broken waraxe and twirling it effortlessly in his hand. “For the next ten minutes, you will dodge the waraxe.”

Niko’s jaw couldn’t drop anymore. “That’s even harder! Why the hell are we doing this?”

“You need to understand both defense and attack, different perspectives of the same weapon. By being put in the role of defender, you will come to understand and visualize how an attack would go, and increase your prediction rate as well. Moving forward, we will fight in bouts of ten minutes, with five minutes for rest.”

“Sure…” Niko pushed himself off the ground, stretching his limbs once more. “But you won’t hit me… right?”

“We have enough health potions if I am… unable to stop in time. Sometimes pain is the best lesson.”

Niko frantically shook his head and hands. “Wait wait wait, if we do it like this, I’m going to overdose on the potions!”

Kyle pondered for a moment. “Alright. I will stop just before the edge touches your skin. But for every ‘hit’, your pay will be docked 100 rakels.”

“WHA-” Niko yelled only to have his words caught in his throat, his eyes bulging as he watched the edge of the very same waraxe he used swing towards him with a devastating force, the blade aimed right at his neck. He had no time to react as the edge stopped short of his skin, his pores and hair tensing up while goosebumps and a shocking adrenaline pumped through his veins.

“1.” Kyle counted.

Niko didn’t bother complaining anymore, immediately nodding and immediately began running away, circling the chamber. “Running away is considered dodging!” He shouted with a grin, slightly confident he would be faster with no weapons compared to Kyle holding the waraxe.

As soon as he cleared a third of the chamber’s circumference, he hear loud stomps behind that prompted him to turn his head around, a scream leaving his lips while he watched a frightening Kyle charge straight at him, easily closing the gap with each stride that was twice as fast as his running speed.

Niko dolphin-dived to the ground as the waraxe whizzed past where his head used to be, quickly rolling to the side as soon as he landed, avoiding a powerful downward swing that cracked the chamber’s floor. Niko quickly recovered and kept his eyes locked on Kyle, knowing running wouldn’t save him in the long run. Unfortunately, staying to dodge also was a disaster Within the ten minutes, Niko found himself laying on the ground once again, panting his lungs out while his lungs heaved.

“You would have been killed 40 times by now.” Kyle surmised, passing the waraxe to the sprawled out Niko.

“Only because I don’t have a rifle! Whats the use in training all of these melee weapons when we have guns?” Niko lamented. “If anyone charges at me with a spear I could just shoot them!”

“Not in close quarters, not in tight spaces and certainly not in urban skirmishes. Dont forget there’s a city-wide restriction on guns. Furthermore, there will be times when a gun is unable to kill an enemy. It is then your expertise with a weapon will come in handy. Arctech weapons can be far more deadly than our rifles in the right situation.”

The training session continued, the results being as expected. “Your one hour is up.” Kyle concluded. “Tomorrow, you will use a different weapon.”

“But I was just starting to get used to a waraxe. Were we not supposed to train a specific weapon?”

“The point behind training different weapons for you is in order to develop an understanding of weapon combat overall. The fundamentals of strikes, slices, jabs and swings can have similarities between different types of weapon, no matter how unique their shapes are. In the first week we will work on that concept, and then we will choose a weapon to start focusing on in the second.”

Kyle left Niko to his regular training routine of duels and limit testing against feral humans or other vipers, while he returned to his workshop in the Oracle Chambers. With about five hours to the next weapons training session with Monica and him still waiting for the iteration results from Orisa on the exosuit arm frame, he decided to work on something else, retrieving the tattoo knife and laying it out.

The only two people that had a tattoo engraving were Damian and Sasha. Manpower was scarce in the gang’s early days so Kyle did not take unnecessary risks. Now, with his improved capabilities in etching and engraving, he felt that the success rate of the knife should increase tremendously.

*Then again, must I use the knife specifically?* Kyle wondered what was special about the knife, and whether or not he could recreate it into something that was more stable, easier to use and replicate success.

MG404: [Item | Taboo Knife (Intermediate) | A goblin heirloom from the past, designed for tattooing enchantments onto the skin. | Age undetermined.]

The ritual knife was engraved with enchantments and clearly not made for goblins alone, with Kyle considering how best to replicate its effects. While he could see the arctech sequences on the surface, it was still unclear whether or not it was layered with other enchantments beneath, something that was impossible to see without a scanner.

*A scanner…* “Orisa, are you able to scan the knife itself?”

[Negative. I am able to provide a chemical analysis of the item, but not a nanometer-depth breakdown.]

Kyle sighed, thinking of another way to try and improve the knife’s engraving success. It would be difficult to crack it apart without irreversibly damaging the rest of the engravings. However, all hope was not lost, for Gulak’s Taboo Knife should not be the only one around.

Exiting the chamber, he found King Sahusa in the palace working hard on implementing a bureaucratic system to handle the allocation of new houses and jobs across the kingdom. The goblin kingdom was very much ran as a monarchy, where the King’s rule was final. It was with this authority and newfound support from the Seven Snakes that King Sahusa decided to be a benevolent leader and improve the lives of his fellow goblins.

Kyle had no qualms with that - an improvement in infrastructure and amentities across the kingdom would slowly erode the hate and distrust that his human gang members and employees faced regularly overtime. In order to truly exploit a position of power within a society, it is best to have a good public image for longevity to continue utilizing the obedient population at large. If he didn’t care about the long-term, Kyle would have had all goblins enter the deepest floors of the new mine and harvest all the Toxic Nodia possible without a single gas mask to reduce cost.

“This knife, we have quite a few of them. In fact, I can introduce to one of my inhouse artisans who still knows how to make them. Perhaps you can get some further insights through them.” King Sahusa recommended. “Not many goblins dare to undergo the ritual, many having died through its violent process.”

Following the lead, Kyle reached a sizable workshop nested in the very center of the valley, long-standing and enduring, still made out of the old clay and mortar design that rich goblins could afford back before Kyle ‘uplifted’ them. Regular plumes of black smoke churned out of crudely carved holes up the top of the workshop, the hot fumes drafting upwards while Kyle entered through a rugged wooden fence long decayed, the splinters breaking apart.

Inside was a lone goblin whos white beard betrayed its age, still carefully etching a palace spearhead, seemingly a contract issued by King Sahusa. The working space was slightly grimy and unkept, soot and dust covering every inch of the floor while the ambient crackle of wood breaking apart in the fireplace gave a surprisingly soothing, rustic feel.

“I heard you know how to make this.” Kyle began, unveiling the taboo knife while standing next to the old goblin artisan, who still was peering through an old monocle, his hand rocksteady as he carved into the palace spearhead.

<I do. But I don’t make them for humans.> The old goblin mumbled.

“Do you know who I am?”

<The real king behind our false puppet. I know you. This is not the first time we have been exploited by humans.>

“And why do you not make them for humans?”

The old goblin finally put down the etcher quietly onto the table, removing the monocle to stare at Kyle intently, scanning his face. <Interesting. I was sure that you would have tried to kill or hurt me by now. You’re different.>

Kyle was slightly impressed at the clarity of the old goblin’s mind given its apparent age. Despite the old goblin’s aggressive stance, he had no intention of harming or hurting him, lest the good image of the Seven Snakes or King Sahusa was ruined, so he bore the disrespect quietly. <Of course I am.> Kyle spoke in the native goblin language, surprising the old goblin further.

<Strange, strange indeed.> The old goblin pondered for a moment, stroking his white bread. <How do you know to speak our language? As far as I know, you only appeared months ago.>

<I had a good teacher.> Kyle shrugged. <You still haven’t answered my question.>

The old goblin rummaged about a crate nearby, picking up a flask and pouch in his wrinkled hands. <Humans have a much lower survival rate with the knife than goblins. About close to double. You will need additional help to increase your chances, such as using specific materials like these.> He handed them to Kyle, Kyle instantly recognizing them as Toxic Nodia in its liquid form, along with a pouch of Dzi Flower Sand.

<I was thinking about improving the quality of the knife itself. It would be good if you could share the blueprints if any.>

<The design has hardly changed over the centuries since we first obtained it.> The old goblin sighed. <Every attempt I’ve made at improving the work handed down my family has only ended in failure.>

<Perhaps I can try. I’m something of an arctech engineer myself.> Kyle offered.

The old goblin hesitated for a moment, weighing the pros and cons before finally accepting. He handed the engravings and etching guides that had been scribbled onto dried animal skin, a family heirloom that has been passed down through the generations. Kyle quickly scanned the engravings required, before proceeding to etch them one by one on a separate piece of metal, memorizing it through practice and adding it to his repertoire over the next four hours.

MG404: [Title Obtained | Arcia Engraver (Advanced) | A veritable walking dictionary to engravings. | +20 INT, +12 DEX, +30% chance at improving quality of final Arctech Equipment.]

<You mentioned that specific material could help increase the success rate. How is it used?> Kyle waved the Toxic Nodia flask at the old goblin.

<When cutting the skin, you must sprinkle the Dzi Flower Sand over, which will increase the power of the engraving. The Toxic Nodia will react with the Dzi Flower sand to form smaller particulates that helps the body to better acclimatize to the new engraving before the person loses his mind.> The old goblin explained.

<How much of each do I use?>

<This… I cannot say. Every individual has a different tolerance level for the quantity of each. This can only be learnt through trial and error over a long time. It is suggested to only use it when engraving smaller elements.>

With the newfound information, Kyle left the workshop, returning to the Oracle Chamber. Toxic Nodia was now easily harvestable from the mines, while Dzi Flower Sand could then theoretically be sifted from the sediments of the river flowing down the river, both of which were already being used in the production of addictive mindtwisters.

But with no clear idea on how much to use for each, it was far too dangerous to utilize the brand new procedure on Niko and Monica as vipers. However, Kyle was not bothered at all, knowing exactly how to fix this lack of knowledge. As he travelled back to Gulak’s training caves for Monica’s allocated session, he rang up the Seven Snakes in Raktor.

“Keith? Send all prisoners who are unfit for further clinical trials to me. I have a new job for them.”

# Chapter 98 - Weapon Lessons

Monica can’t remember the last time she’s been pushed this hard. Not even the war with the Ilysian Punks or Gunther’s union had her struggling this hard without a glimmer of hope of winning. At least when she fought against Damian and Sasha, she could at least see or visualize what she needed to do to close the gap, or understand what she was lacking in.

This? This was just a one-sided humifaction by Kyle, who hardly broke a sweat as he smoothly dodged each of Monica’s punches without moving back too much. Monica gritted her teeth as she roared, through a few more punches, trying to get a clean hit on Kyle’s body.

“You’re too slow with your punches. Far too much emphasis on strength and brawling. A good skill to have learnt from your years growing up in Raktor, but not enough to face off with the best.” Kyle pointed out as the fight concluded, Monica exhausted beyond her limit and dropping to one knee

“Well I don’t have an tattoo or equipment backing me up unlike Damian and Sasha!” Monica shoved the blame aside, trying to deliver one last desperate kick, hoping to catch Kyle off-guard.

Instead, she found the ceiling swirling around her vision as her leg was grabbed in one hand, Kyle tossing and twisting her onto the ground with an expert martial grip, her shoulder blades scrapping the rough stone floor of the vast training chamber.

“They could beat you without using their engraving or equipment as well. I too have neither.” Kyle shrugged.

Monica opened her mouth to retort, but decided better against it. She had heard of Kyle’s ‘transformation’ from a weak member of the old Seven Snakes to an irrationally strong, violent and confident leader, which still made no sense to her.

“I understand you are specialized in using your fists. Gloves or knuckledusters should work the best for your style, but with your current weaknesses its far too easy to overcome. In the new age, guns and artillery are the main things that will kill you in a battle.”

“So what, you want me to wear a shield like Damian? Fuck that, if I’m going into a fight, I’m going in to pummel their faces.”

“It simply means that your equipment has to cover for that weakness. Your biggest flaw was proven just now - you could hardly catch up with me. And by my estimation, no matter how much you train, someone with a more compact body will always be able to outpace you if you were on equal terms.” Kyle explained, though it sounded more like he was talking to himself.

“Are you calling me fat?!”

“So you will need something that can slow down the person if you want to catch him…”

Monica struggled to get up, her hands gripping her knee as she supported herself upwards. “I don’t care about that, what I want is that the moment I catch them, they are dead. That’s all.”

“Hmm, but you also don’t have enough brute strength through break through a defence.”

“Then I’ll keep punching and pushing until I do! I don’t need one hit wonders, I just want to be sure to finish them off. Anyway, enough chatting. Again!”

The one hour training session concluded the same way as Niko’s did: utter devestation with Monica not being able to hit Kyle’s chest at all despite having specialized in a weapon. Kyle had also alternated attack and defense spars, allowing Monica to better visualize and internalize learnings of how best to cover her weaknesses.

“Tomorrow, I will use my handgun. Try your best to think on how to deal with it.”

“WHAT?!”

Kyle left the flabbergasted Monica behind in the training chamber, returning to the Oracle Chamber once more where the variations on the exosuit arm frame was finally completed, displayed to him in various holograms. Selecting the best variation with material cut out and reduction in overall envelope size, he finally had what he deemed was the final exosuit arm frame design. *Now, time for the engravings.*

With no more Kusal Corporation Fabric to utilize, he decided to settle on using layering within the metal plate itself. However, the integrity of the metal would be lost if it had too many layers to begin with. Melding the different metal layers together would also result in warping and disfiguration of the engraving, which may result in unwanted effects. Kyle certainly wouldn’t want his exosuit arm to suddenly burst out into insect eggs during combat.

He decided to utilize three engravings - a point defence engraving copied from the military breastplate, coupled with resistance and strength engravings as a first test run, seeing if the different skills could be combined into one single arm. Sending the designs of the various engravings off to the factory, he could only wait for the manufacturing to be complete, the lead time being three days.

Next up was the improvement of the taboo knife. As expected, the blueprints for the taboo knife had engravings within the knife itself, a total of three separate sequences as well. He already had practice copies of the design, the most interesting one of them all being the blood infusion engraving.

MG404: [Item | Blood Arcia Infusion Engraving (Advanced) | Channel the force of nature through your veins | Active Skill: Infuse (Advanced) - Blood that touches the engraving will have ambient arcia energy from the surroundings infused into the cells. A weaker physique will not be able to handle the change and potentially cause seizures, memory loss and personality degradation.]

Apart from the explanation of how the taboo knife actually worked, the rest of the side effects were already familiar to Kyle, having experimented on a few hundred humans already. What truly worried him was the usage of Toxic Nodia and Dzi Flower Sand in the process.

However, with the influx of prisoners from Raktor ready to be part of a greater cause, Kyle felt confident enough to begin experimenting on them, though carefully, setting up control tests and creating a rigorous testing procedure. *Best to select a simple engraving, one that is easier first.* Choosing the same force-increasing enchantment from Riker’s pipe that he used on Sasha, he began to vary the quantities of Dzi Flower Sand and Toxic Nodia, arranging them in separate flasks while ordering the goblin slaves to restrain the prisoners down to tables.

There were only a hundred humans delivered, with about of third of them still suffering from Absolute Euria withdrawal. Without knowing if there would be any complications with the withdrawal symptoms, Kyle decided to work on the rest, some of whom were already disabled or maimed. *Too bad there is no anathesia*

Segregating them into separate chambers, Kyle began to experiment, screams and shouts echoing through the chamber from those who still had the strength to attempt to fight back. The testing was brutal, lasting through the night as Kyle meticulously carved the skin with the sharp tip of the taboo knife like a surgeon, goblin slaves helping him to bring cloths that soaked up the residual blood. Arcite ore was placed nearby, acting as replacement for the ambient arcia energy in the environment if Kyle needed it.

Over the first ten humans, already seven became feral, with three surprisingly surviving the process, those that had Dzi Flower Sand applied to the carving and Toxic Nodia subsequently poured over it. Kyle had to wear a gas mask to avoid the toxic fumes billowing out from the reaction, dark green swirls of rancid smoke spilling into the chamber. For the patient, a simple wet cloth was placed, which both muffled the painful shrieks and reduced the effects of the toxic fumes.

However, as he began to increase the dosage of the additional material, the eleventh human’s body began to bloat significantly, as if it was getting pumped up like a balloon. The test subject’s eyes widened in horror as he tried to speak, only for a sickening green liquid gushing out of his various orficies, leaking like a sinking ship before the skin drawn taut finally burst apart in a bloody mist stained with Toxic Nodia, peltering Kyle in a shower of flesh and ungodly fluids. The unnerving scene frightened the goblins, but Kyle was unfazed, merely moving onto the next subject as per planned. “That was not good.”

Finally, as he began to slowly tweak the quantities lower and lower, he found the procedure, managing to succeed on five test subjects in a row, a feat previously unachievable with just the taboo knife alone. *A 1 to 3 ratio , Dzi Flower Sand to Toxic Nodia.* Kyle had the procedure down on lock, though, save for the placement of the Dzi Flower Sand beads. This method also gave an interesting insight into how current arctech engravings can be improved, as the amalgamation between Toxic Nodia and Dzi Flower Sand seemed to be a natural enhancer to the efficiency of the sequence that it is placed in.

MG404: [Title Obtained | Human Flesh Carver (Basic) | Beauty is in the eye of the knife-wielder | +10 INT, +10 DEX, +25% chance at improving quality of final carving.]

Over the next three days, Kyle perfected his movements and procedure during the surgery, becoming akin to a meticulous surgeon with steady hands. Soon, the prisoners had achieved a near 75% success rate, though there were still some issues of rejection and uncontrollable descents into madness, but Kyle considered them a sacrifice that he was willing to make. However, as soon as he stepped across the threshold of having more than one engraving in the body, the same bloating issue occured for all test subjects, the bodies violently refusing to accept the new engravings. Kyle needed to find someone who was compatible with the Dzi Flower Sand to see if a human body could hold more than one engraving, for he knew that he now had more than one skill thanks to the System.

The three days also saw Niko, Damian, and Monica improving by leaps and bounds. Niko had yet to choose any weapon, but the fundamentals were getting stronger and stronger by the day. Monica had finally began to fully visualize both sides of attack and defense, elevating her combat skills another notch. Damian himself had only grown far more resistant to incoming damage over time as well as improving his reaction speed to imminent attacks, even able to pre-emptively stop Sasha’s falchion with his custom-made tower shield.

Sasha, on the other hand, felt like she was hitting a wall, unable to progress any further. The falchion that she had obtained from the Snow Song’s shaman was indeed a boost to her own power and strength, but it did not really feel like it was a part of her. She was very much a flexible fighter like Niko, able to use any weapon effectively but not to a master level, unsure of whether she should specialize in the falchion. Not knowing how to move forward, she went to Kyle, noticing the clear improvements in the engravings and Kyle’s conundrum on doing multiple engravings. [Sir, I volunteer.]

Kyle immediately shook his head, though his steady surgical hands hardly budge as he still carved away on a body. “No. Out of the question. The procedure for getting a second engraving currently has a 100% death rate.”

[I have an affinity with the Dzi Flower Sand.] Sasha reminded Kyle of how the original ceremonial bracelet presented to them had seeped into her skin. [I am the best candidate by far.]

Kyle pondered for a moment. He didn’t consider any vipers irreplacable, not even Sasha, though the setback in terms of time, effort and resources put into training them was irreversible. He might have agreed back in the Galactic Era, as there was a large population of willing humans, but here, Sasha was unique and still had leads that he had yet to explore. “Once I’m done with this body, you and I will carry it up to the Snow Song tribe and seek advice.”

Lugging the unconscious patient in a conspicous body bag, Kyle and Sasha made the same trek back up again, this time moving much faster thanks to their previous experience. Sasha dropped the body at the feet of the terrified Shaman, who’s expression of fear was soon melted by curiousity at the engraving. <Human, this is the best ritualistic engraving I have seen in my life!>

“Do you have any champions that have borne more than one engraving? I’m looking for clues on how a human body can support more.”

<Only two, both of whom are dead. Humans were never meant to support even one engraving in the first place.> The Snow Song Shaman shook his head again.

“I just need to know traits, quirk, any unique features.”

<Hmm…. For one, they can absorb Dzi Flower Sand into their body directly upon reciting the ritual words. She too can do it.> The shaman pointed a gnarly finger at Sasha’s hopeful expression, but Kyle was still unconvinced.

“How many times have you tried to impart more than one.”

<Thirty times. Or was it fifty? I can’t really remember, my head is foggy…>

Kyle and Sasha tried to search the area for more clues, asking other members of the Snow Song tribe, but to no avail, only hearing rumors and tall tales that were clearly fabricated by storytellers over the decades. With nothing left to go on, the duo returned back to the training caves, Sasha pushing hard for Kyle to go through with the procedure. [Even if we took the shaman’s worst case scenario of fifty, that’s still a 1% chance, not 0.]

“That’s far lower than what you originally went through. It’s too risky.” Kyle was still hesitant. “We will see next week when I am more prepared. I will study more on arctech engineering.”

While he left the hopeful Sasha waiting, Kyle began to plan for Niko’s and Monica’s engravings as well, knowing that he had a very high success rate with just a single engraving now. The issue was to what engraving he should impart. As of now, Damian had a defense engraving, while Sasha had a force engraving. Theoretically, both Niko and Monica should also receive force engravings, but Kyle felt that they could be better specialized to their needs instead of having a generic one, something that should really elevate them to the next level of power.

He focused on Niko first, thinking carefully about his supposed growth plan. “What engraving would you prefer?” Kyle asked Niko during one of the individual weapon’s training sessions, Niko now using a bow and arrow amateurishly.

“Uh… I don’t know. Something that makes my enemies go boom!” Niko grinned, mimicking an explosion with his hands, simultaneously reminding Kyle that Niko’s opinions hardly mattered now.

Instead, Kyle began to lean towards an engraving that could help in training rather than in combat. He needed an engraving that could accelerate Niko’s weapons training faster without fatigue or time for rest, making use of every minute. He scoured the various arctech textbooks, looking for a relevant arctech engraving before finally finding a theoretical one that fit the bill.

MG404: [Item | Stamina Recovery Engraving (Basic) | Sleep is for the weak | Passive Skill: Stamina Recovery Increase (Basic) - Doubles current stamina regeneration rate, but does not improve maximum stamina nor stamina consumption.]

The engraving listed in the textbook was clearly rudimentary and have not been improved on, a small little note mentioning that it was a theory at best and yet to be implemented on any living creature, the research department of the University of Raktor clearly abstaining from human experimentation. Publicly, at least.

Kyle naturally took the note as a mere suggesstion, quickly practicing the engraving before his Arcia Engraver title kicked in, swirls of information and hints at how to improve the quality surged into his brain like a rapid waterfall, akin to a cranial implant of sorts. He worked feverishly through long hours in the night, finally managing to improve the engraving.

MG404: [Item | Stamina Recovery Engraving (Intermediate) | Sleep is for the weak | Passive Skill: Stamina Recovery Increase (Intermediate) - Triples current stamina regeneration rate, but does not improve maximum stamina nor stamina consumption.]

Kyle took the engraving back to some of the remaining prisoners, practicing on them again. For each engraving that he had to do, the placement of the amalgamtion beads were different, so Kyle had no choice but to put in the hours necessary to ensure Niko did not die.

Surprisingly, Kyle faced less of a problem than the force engraving of Riker’s pipe, Kyle able to successfully impart the engraving onto five more prisoners in a row. Feeling the momentum, he hurriedly ordered the goblin nurses to call Niko in.

Soon, Niko found himself strapped in tightly into a clearly blood-stained table, with bits and pieces of exploded skin and flesh still strewn around the floor. He could feel the cold gloves of Kyle marking out the engraving’s location on the back. “This isn’t going to hurt, right? I’m not a prisoner!”

“You’re not.” Kyle smirked as he sharpened the edge of that taboo knife while Niko’s mouth was stuffed unceremoniously with a cloth. “But it will definitely hurt. Just think of all the girls you can hit on once u get this sorted.”

“Reall- ARRGGGHHHHHH!” Niko belted muffled profanities and curses in such a combination that would annihilate anyone and their ancestors if they were the target at hand. His hands and legs flailed wildly, taking nearly four goblin slaves to hold him down on a single limb while Niko clenched hard onto the cloth in his mouth.

The procedure was longer than expected, Kyle having to smack Niko unconscious at one point to prevent him from potentially disrupting the surgery with the continuous squirm, as well as for Kyle’s own sake due to Niko even throwing some vulgarities his way over the first ten minutes.

Finally, the carving was complete, with Niko’s breathing still steady while the goblin slaves wiped the blood off his skin, revealing a slowly healing engraving glittering with the beads in specific places. Kyle confirmed the accuracy of the sequence with the textbook and his improved reference, before finally concluding the surgery by pouring a healing potion directly onto the wound.

Next was Monica’s turn, and she already had a clear idea on the engraving she wanted. “The main issue with my combat style is that I need to keep close to the target to be able to finish him off in one combo. Any engraving that would slow the enemy would work well.”

Kyle agreed, and rummaged through the engravings in the various books and notes he had kept since coming to Raktor. He recalled one of the arctech equipments he had seen a long time ago, the engraving on it being a potential candidate.

MG404: [Item | Glacial Defensive Bracelet (Basic) | Slow those who would stop you. | +2 STR, +2 VIT. Active Skill: Glacial Defence - Imparts a slow chilling effect onto enemies who hit any part of the engraving. Can be resisted based on vitality. MP Cost per Activation: 2 MP. Duration: Two seconds. Cooldown per Target: 10 seconds.]

However, such an engraving would require Monica to suffer a hit first, which was a downside that Kyle could not accept when it came to it being a human tattoo, as any direct blow on the body could have killing potential. Kyle flipped through a few books, coming across some slowing auras, but all of them required massive arcia consumption that Kyle himself wasn’t sure his body could sustain.

*If we can’t slow the enemy, then we need an engraving that makes sure the opponent is finished off.* Kyle pondered a bit, laying out a few options. He could give Monica the generic force engraving, but he doubted it would be what she wanted. Niko’s advice of making things go boom momentarily appeared in his head, though it was dismissed just as quick. Explosive engravings were dangerous as Kyle did not know how they performed on a human body. Kyle had a few more equipment on hand, checking their effects.

MG404: [Item | Aero Shoes (Basic) | For swift feet. | +4 AGI, +1 CHA. Active Skill: Sprint - Allows the wielder to move slightly faster. MP Cost per Activation: 2 MP. Duration: Fifteen seconds. Cooldown: One minute.]

MG404: [Item | Enchanted Flaming Hammer (Basic) | *A good ol’ one-two, except its only one punch.* | Active Skill: Delayed Assault - Target hit will experience searing pain after five seconds, lasting for ten seconds. MP cost per activation: 2 MP.]

Speed engravings like that of the Aero Shoes would help Monica catch up, but Kyle still felt that she was lacking the power to really break her opponents apart. Even if Monica were to be able to get close to one of Harrison’s hitmen, Kyle suspected that her punches would not be able to make a dent on the exosuit arm armour.

The Enchanted Flaming Hammer on the other hand, was a good engraving, something that could quite literally double Monica’s strength and also prevent the target from escaping once a hit lands. Kyle began the usual procedure, testing and practising on other bodies first before calling Monica over.

Monica was far more stable than Niko was during the surgery, though the engravings were not on the back like Niko’s, but only on her right hand. Kyle wasn’t about to put a second one on the left hand lest he lost Monica as well, the risk far too high. Thankfully, the surgery went off without a hitch, Monica awake through out the entire procedure. She clenched her rapidly healing hand, seeing the embedded Dzi Flower Sand in her knuckles.

“Can you feel the engraving? You should be able to sense it as part of your body.” Kyle instructed Monica on how to utilize it, having Sasha also guide Monica on acclimatizing to the inclusion of the tattoo. Monica threw a few punches, putting her focus on her right hand as the engraving began to glow slightly.

Kyle had Sasha and Monica go a practice round, with Monica still getting used to the engraving. However, the effects of it were immediately clear when Sasha tried to swing her falchion in. Instead of dodging, Monica slammed her right engraved fist into the flat side of the blade, knocking it askew while retaliating at Sasha.

Sasha easily dodged the counter-attack, taking one step and was about to launch another attack when a sudden blow from nowhere nearly knocked her falchion out of her grip, prompting Monica to pounce on the opportunity and rush Sasha.

While the duel still ended with Sasha successfully grappling Monica to the ground, the new inclusion of the Delayed Assault skill was proving to be a clear boon to Monica, who couldn’t stop grinning. “Now I’ll be able to punch twice, literally.”

However, the very next day, there seemed to be a problem as Kyle found out Niko was still unconscious, missing his individual training session. He wasn’t waking up from his deep sleep, his breathing peaceful as he laid on a small single bed, Kyle and the other vipers gathering around him quietly. “How long has he been like this?” Kyle asked Damian.

“Not sure, sir. About eighteen hours.” Damian bent down and placed a finger near Niko’s nose, checking for a breath.

“Did something go wrong in the surgery?” Monica asked.

“Not that I am aware of…” Kyle pondered a bit, crouching over and testing Niko’s pulse on his wrist. “Seems like he’s truly unconscious.”

The air in the room became slightly solemn, Damian’s mood worsening as he looked at the peaceful face of Niko, contemplating the chance that Niko might be in a coma. “What should we do, sir?” Damian looked around the room. “We could try to get some smelling salts. Perhaps have a doctor come and -”

“No. A smelling salt won’t fix a botched surgery. He is a replaceable viper anyway, plenty of others willing to fill his position. Have the goblins chop him up and cart him off to the maggots-”

“WAIT WAIT WAIT!” Niko suddenly lunged out, grabbing Damian’s arm with a desperate grip. “I’m okay, I’m okay, I was just pretending to be asleep! I just wanted some proper rest!”

The tension in the atmosphere broke apart like clouds parting, the other vipers all groaning in unison while Kyle had a small smirk on his face, already knowing Niko was faking it. “Good, so now that you had a proper rest, you should be able to do proper training. Damian, work up a physical routine twice as hard. With his new tattoo, he can handle it, don’t worry about pushing him to the limit. Reduce his sleep hours as well.”

Leaving the pleading cries of Niko behind, Kyle now only had Damian and Sasha’s engraving left to be upgraded. The upgrading of an existing tattoo had never been done before even by the goblin shaman, so Kyle was definitely in the dark here, continuing his exhaustive work to attempt the new procedure of re-carving. It was also a mystery on whether he would be able to remove already existing engravings on the body, especially if the upgrade required new symbols in the middle of the sequence rather than at the end.

He started with Sasha’s force engraving first, improving it on the metal plate before continuing to modify existing ones.

MG404: [Item | Reinforcement Engraving (Advanced) | A pipe to bend the rules | Active Skill: Reinforcement – Increased force when hitting. MP Cost Per Activation: 1 MP. Duration: Two minutes. Cooldown: Three minutes.]

The improved version had a lower cost as well as a longer uptime overall during combat, proving to be far better than the one Sasha currently had. Luckily for Kyle, the upgraded engraving only required three more symbols attached to the end, so it was a simple job to simply extend the engraving.

In this fashion, both Damian’s and Sasha’s engraving were upgraded, though Sasha was still insistent on receiving the second engraving. Kyle had tried over the next few days to improve his success rate, but failed to see any measurable effects that could increase his chances. Sasha was simply too critical to run the test on.

With a week passing by like this, the training was progressing better than expected, each of the vipers hitting a new high in their capabilities and fighting strength, while Kyle obtained better engravings. The exosuit arm was all that was left for Kyle to attempt, before moving on to his own self-upgrades. Yet there was another problem that appeared - the prisoners who successfully survived the engraving process, many of them receiving the force-engraving, stamina recovery or delayed assault. “Sir, what should we do with them? We should try to recruit some.” Damian offered his suggestion.

“How is Culo doing now?”

“He’s currently capped at three feral humans, and he’s getting much more ruthless over time.”

“Good. Send the prisoners to him one by one. I expect that after a week of that, we will have a new top fighter in the Seven Snakes.”

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MG404: [Stats Table]

# Chapter 99 - Payback Preparations

*A month later…*

Wide-eyed children led by their parents squeezed with one another as they meandered along, following a bright lady waving a tiny little red flag hoisted at the end of what seemed to be a conductor’s stick. The frills of her dress coupled with the immaculate beauty of her face dazzled and angered men and their wives respectively as she led a large group behind her, strolling down the wide streets underneath the towering housing apartments, some of which had just been recently completed.

“And that’s the end of the tour! We hoped you enjoyed your visit to the Golden Snakes shopping arcade and its various subsidiaries, where your dreams can come true!” The lady smiled and took a bow to rising applause, some of the more daring children running forward to request a picture together. The tourists began to disperse one by one, flooding the already crowded high street and shopping arcade, looking to buy souvenirs back one by one.

The beautiful lady held a determined smile as she weathered the endless request for pictures, selling the photos by the hundreds for a tidy profit. It took nearly two hours before the queue and crowd finally began to thin out, though it did not mean that people had stop ogling at her. The lady was hardly worried about her security, however, as there was an entire squad of Seven Snakes covering her and keeping an eye out for anyone thinking a bit too far.

While the lady was about to raise her hand and wipe the sweat of her forehead, someone else firmly gripped her hand, forcing it down while using a cloth to dab the sweat off instead and chiding her : “Careful, Emily. The makeup will be smudged if you do that. Need water?”

“Thank you, Alex, that would be great.”

“OLLIE! Get some water for Emily here. Ollie!” Alex glanced behind his shoulders, trying to spot where his squad’s member had gone, only to find Ollie completely missing. His eyes locked onto Bola with a stern gaze, Bola immediately saluting and running off to find Ollie.

“Bola, you fucking idiot, get the water fir- nevermind.” Alex’s voice trailed off as he watched Bola disappear into the throng of people loitering outside the shopping arcade, many of whom were couples out on a date. “Sorry about them. No idea why I’m in charge of kids.”

“At least they got energy. I’m tuckered out now, thank Yual that was the last one.” Emily smiled as they both entered the air-conditioned interior of the shopping arcade. She took a seat carefully on a nearby bench facing outwards to the expansive foyer, taking great precaution to not crumple up her large skirt.

“I wish they had less energy, at least that way they would actually listen to me. I feel like a babysitter instead of a cobra. Stay here, gonna get some drinks nearby. Any preferences.”

“Oh oh! I want the radish sherbet at Haui’s cafe!”

“What?! Are you serious? That thing is bland as hell!”

“No it’s not, it has a good spice to it.” Emily stood her ground.

“Fine.” Alex left to buy it, Emily soaking in the usual environment before she spotted someone unusual amidst the crowd. The moment Alex returned, she hurriedly grabbed his arm, shaking it violently and nearly causing him to drop the drinks.. “Why, what’s the matter?” Alex asked confusedly.

“Over there, over there! It looks like Kyle, right? Our boss!”

“Nah, you must have gotten it wrong. He wouldn’t wear a such a funky yellow shirt like that out into the open.” Alex muttered to himself until he saw the man put on a similar coat, just like Kyle’s. “Huh, I guess it’s him. Didn’t know he liked to idle at the foyer of the shopping arcade.”

“That’s what I’m saying! In fact I feel like I’ve been seeing him everywhere! Yesterday I saw him at the Lusty Arcian as well!” Emily asserted while slurping on the sherbet, shivering slightly from the cold tingle. “He was trying to hit up one of the other girls.”

“Now that’s a bit too far. Kyle has practically zero interest in the girls. I may not be a good judge of character, but Kyle wouldn’t waste his time on things that don’t improve him.”

“Who knows?” Emily shrugged as the two of them watched Kyle walk off into the distance. “Maybe he got a bit lonely after all.”

Alex didn’t argue, but he soon recalled something strange as well. “You know, now that you mentioned it, I did see him two days ago at the Seductive Serpent. Like the main branch. But he wasn’t talking to the bartender or anything, just having a simple drink on his own.”

“Maybe… maybe we’re on to a secret side of Kyle!” Emily got excited, her hands waving wildly. “If only I could track what he does from time to time…”

“Still, there’s something clearly wrong. I got word that Damian, Monica, and Niko would be gone for a good while, along with Kyle and Sasha. Did you see Kyle last week?”

“I did, I did! I saw him last week hanging around Thresher Street!” Emily patted Alex’s shoulder. “What about you?”

“I saw someone that looked like him, but I wasn’t too sure. He was at the trade school’s entrance, smoking a Euria Pipe.”

Emily recoiled. “Kyle doesn’t smoke!”

“I know, but I never really thought too much about it. I mean, he has every right to take whatever substances he wants, really…. hold on, who’s that?” Alex squinted his eyes to the far end of the foyer, before gasping in shock. “It’s Kyle!”

“Yeah, that was what I said at the start-”

“No, no, it’s a different Kyle! Look he’s walking back into the foyer from a different direction, with a completely different shirt!”

“Huh? He has the same coat, though!” Emily craned her neck in suspicion, though she could not deny that the man definitely looked a lot like Kyle, at least from afar.

“This is bad. Someone is trying to impersonate him. All the other Kyles that we have been seeing might very well be imposters!” Alex exclaimed, shooting out of his seat in horror. “We must quickly warn the vipers. Stay here, I’ll get my squad to catch him-” His agitation was halted by Emily’s firm grip on his arm.

“No, let me approach him and try to stall him first, so he doesn’t run away. You find your squad members and surround all the possible exits!” Emily insisted, while Bola and Ollie finally returned, Ollie holding a nice small bouquet of flowers and handing it to Alex much to his confusion. Alex grabbed Ollie and Bola by the shoulder, dragging them out beyond Emily’s hearing range.

“What the hell is this for?” Alex whispered angrily.

“What you mean?” Ollie gave a stunned look. “The uncles in the slum told me you should buy flowers if you want to date a girl. Isn’t it obvious?”

“You fucking brat, shut the fuck up now!” Alex quickly snatched the bouquet of flowers away and stuffed it into his coat, before smiling nervously at Emily, who thankfully was still locked on the imposter in the foyer. “Look, I’m a grown man, I know how to play the game, I don’t need two kids telling me what to do!”

“I don’t know, boss, Niko seems to be doing a better job at getting dates than you are. You’ve been with her for a month now!”

“You-” Alex clenched his fist tightly, taking deep breaths to relax himself. “Anyway, we got more important things to do. See that man over there?”

“Oh, Kyle? Weird.” Bola scratched his head. “I saw another Kyle on the way back here, a different one!”

“Nevermind that. Emily is going to talk to that imposter, and then we’re going to surround and capture him, you hear? Secret mission!”

Bola and Ollie immediately grinned, scampering off to the position that Alex had told them, forming a triangle around the imposter without arousing suspicion while Emily walked up to the man. Alex acted aloof as he paced slowly up and down the street near them, watching Emily talk to the man, ready to pounce at a moment’s notice.

However, Emily suddenly recoiled, letting out a gasp as she took three steps back in shock. “GO GO!” Alex kicked into action, charging right at the imposter at full sprint, his thighs pumping as hard as he could as he launched himself in a direct shoulder tackle, nailing the imposter right in the guts and pinning him to the floor. Both of them tumbled to the floor while Alex wrestled him to the ground, the bystanders shouting and running away from the site. “I got you, you little bastard. Emily, you alright? What did he do to you?”

“I’m fine, sorry, sorry, Alex, I was just a bit startled.” Emily spoke with a flustered face.

“I din du nuffin, wats the meanin?” The imposter blabbered, Alex immediately recoiling in shock too. “Hei, wats with the look?”

“Sorry, I just uhhh…. I just never expected you to have such an accent…” Alex mumbled too, understanding why Emily had let out a gasp. He just couldn’t imagine someone who had Kyle’s face to talk in such a gibberish manner.

“I was pracitsin, n u just rondomly hit me. Wats the beg deal?”

“Practicing? Practicing what?” Alex asked, the situation even far more confusing when he realized Bola and Ollie wasn’t here. “Where are they?”

“THERE’S ANOTHER ONE HERE! GET HIM!” Ollie roared in the distance, Alex turning to see the two of them charging yet another imposter who had just gotten of an arctech wagon, one who also looked like Kyle albeit holding a briefcase of sorts.

Ollie threw his body at the other imposter in a tackle, only to be grabbed and hoisted up by his collar, while Bola was sent flying and tumbling with a single kick. Alex gulped as he saw the real Kyle glare at the struggling Ollie, Kyle about to punch the living lights out of him for the surprise attack. “So, this is treason?” Kyle spoke with clear intention to kill.

“Sir, wait, wait, wait, it’s a misunderstanding!” Alex let go of the imposter, who tried to scamper away only to be held down by Emily’s heels.

“Misunderstanding…?” Kyle looked around, his gaze locking onto the other captured imposter. “Right, of course. Keith did not inform you, but these are my doppelgangers.”

“Doppel… huh?” Alex stared blankly.

“Body doubles, essentially.” Kyle dropped Ollie unceremoniously onto the ground. “All of you, follow me.”

He led all of them including the other imposters up to the shopping arcade’s office, where the other doppelgangers requested long ago were gathered and being trained by Keith.

“You idiot, Kyle doesn’t pose like that. Be more menacing! More intimidating! And when you give a smirk, your eyes need to smile in a sinister way as well! And you should not smile very often either. And keep your body straight! Kyle doesn’t stick out his butt like that!” Keith used a wooden stick to tap the doppelganger’s body, pointing out the bad points of the posture.

“And when Kyle talks, he talks in a deep accent. Go bass! Go low! Feel the Kyle in your veins!” Keith passionately exclaimed like he was an instructor for actors. “When you walk, you got to walk like you’re the cock of the town. No one is above you; everyone is beneath you! Drill that into your mindset! Okay, now you! Number 3. Try Line 15.”

Number 3 stepped forward, clearing his throat as he approached Keith, who was already on the verge of tears. He arched his jaw forward while glaring at Keith with a fearsome expression. “Keith, I would like to ask you a simple question.”

Keith immediately burst out laughing, unable to hold back any longer. Number 3 frowned, wondering what he did wrong.

“HAHAHAHA…sorry…hah… it’s not your fault.” Keith wiped the tears of joy from his eyes. “It’s just that it’s such a good impression! It’s exactly like him when he first became leader!”

“Glad you found it funny.”

“Indeed… wait, wow! That was a perfect impression of Kyle; it sounds exactly like-“ Keith turned around to see who it was, only to come face to face with the real Kyle. He immediately straightened his back, standing at attention.

The real Kyle walked up to his table with the six doppelgangers and Keith lining up in front of him. It’s been a month since Keith recruited them. Emily, Alex and his squad could only marvel at just how similar they looked in both facial features and posture, though the accent was clearly distinguishable and hard to mask.

“Keith, have you tested them combat-wise?”

“Erm, well… they are competent. But none of them has the same strength as you.”

“Good. Have them do a proper rotation. Keep them all in secret training - it’s clear that if even our own cobras like Alex over here can tell the difference apart, it is not working as expected. For the rest of you, I trust that you will keep this a secret, even on pain of death.”

“Yes, sir!” Everyone saluted, while Kyle had all but Keith dismissed from the office.

“Sir, I assume the training went well?”

“It did. Damian, Monica and Niko will be returning tomorrow to assume their former positions. Good work holding down the fort. Updates on the businesses.”

“Of course. Over the last month, we have now possessed more than a third of all land deeds in the three districts. Expansion of the Lusty Arcian and Seductive Serpent is being done hand-in-hand with facades of redevelopment, allowing us to build in fronts. Our advertising and marketing campaign is doing wonders - currently our shopping arcade district has the fourth highest population, only outmatched by the Ardent Cretins and the Magda.”

“Good. I assume there has been no trouble so far.”

“Not unless you include the usual thug rackets and small-time criminals trying to leech off our businesses. We now have Seven Snakes guards on regular patrol, we’re basically the police now, everything is feasible as long as we don’t go overboard. The workers are all under control thanks to the moderate union - our bribed council members are helping us tame down expectations and manage the wages as well as worker happiness. Fake negotiations have been performed recently to appease any potential dissidents. Some remnants of Gunther’s union are still out at large, but have as of yet been of any issues.”

“Enforcers, Red Lions?”

“No activity as seen. The Red Lions have paid back half of what we ‘requested’ from them. Bishop Vernette and Inquisitor Mason are still promoting the housing district. For the military exercise, it is about to begin in less than a week. However, we have new information regarding the Ardent Cretins.”

Kyle sighed. “What did Sebastian do this time round? I assumed he was still handling business in Kregol.”

“They lifted the embargo just two hours ago before you arrived. I got word through the black market dealers, and many of them are raring to buy designs and mindtwisters off us.”

“Do it. Increase our production of all addictive potions and spread it as far as we can, without dropping the price. Current finances?”

“Combining everything we’ve earned so far, we’re currently holding at ninety million rakels. Much of the money has been allocated into developing new housing apartments and their respective infrastructure, as well as buying up land deeds at market price, forfeited by the landowners who retaliated against us.”

“Perfect. With the districts under us now fully stabilized, it’s time to look further beyond. Raktor may be our starting point, but it is not the end of our growth.” Kyle smiled.

“Versia, sir? Adrian should have already delivered the information he had collected regarding the smuggling routes. It has information on Ocra’s current defenses.”

“I have indeed received it. Culo and Sasha have already been dispatched accordingly as the forward team. Through them we’ll begin to collect information on Harrison and his movements, and subsequently plan our strikes. Once the other vipers return from training, begin stocking up and training more Seven Snakes in case another embargo were to befall us. We cannot rest on our laurels forever.”

“Understood, sir.” Keith complied, leaving to carry out the orders, while Kyle overlooked the district beyond the glass wall of his office, the construction and development of the district moving rapidly with a industrial fervor instilled in the air. It was the combination of amenities, technology and living standards that helped to gather and accumulate talent, money and resources under his banner, and now he was ready to expand it to the next level.

A more amateur gang leader at his position would think that the gang would need to take down the Ardent Cretins first before moving overseas, but that is far from true. Instead, attacking Harrison was the far safer play thanks to Kyle’s close connections with Baron Cain and the enforcers, who would hardly tolerate any Versian attempts to destabilize Raktor further.

Now, the boot was on the other foot, and Kyle was ready to squash anything Harrison had to throw at him. *You’ve fucked with the wrong man.*

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*At the Central Sector’s Harbour…*

Scores of workers and managers hollered out over the never-ending din of bells, machinery and rumbling of arctech engines, fuelling the heavy cranes that hoisted large wooden crates back and forth, loading them onto barges that ferried cargo down and up the main river that ran through the whole of Raktor.

The murky water stained with the refuse and sludge dumped by uncaring factories along the shores splashed against the grimy hull of a decrepit barge, the crates being marshalled in by workers who gingerly stepped through the mushy deck layered in a coat of algae, while two enforcers moved through the various cargo being hauled, a manifest of the items reported in their hands. “Where’s the damn captain of this ship?”

“Th-that would be me, sire.” A grungy old man wearing tattered clothes limped over with a nervous smile, his clammy hands clasped together while rubbing feverishly. “Anything that I can help you with…?”

“You know the rules - no classified technology to Versia, and no smuggling.”

“Of course, of course! Feel free to check any cargo you want. But sire, I dont think the list is complete. We recently had a few new… additions.”

“New additions?”

“Right here, sire.” The old captain handed over a clipboard with a new manifest, the enforcer grabbing it only to feel a thick envelope hidden beneath it, filled with notes of rakels.

“Hmmm… Only to Ocra and back, correct?”

“Yes, sir. Nothing further.”

The enforcer quickly pocketed the envelope into his coat, glancing around to make sure no one else was watching. “Good, because if you were moving to Tenar by any chance… even I can’t help you then.”

The old captain waved his hands frantically in denial. “No, no, no of course not! I’m not an idiot! Everyone knows there’s bad things coming, I just wanted to keep my head down. You won’t get no trouble from me, no sire.”

“Alright. Your barge is cleared. Clear the dock in ten minutes.”

“Yes, enforcer, right away.” The old captain bowed lowly as he watched the two enforcers disembark, the two already preparing to split the bribe.

The captain’s submissive behaviour immediately disappeared the moment the enforcers were out of hearing range, assuming his full height as his back straighten while he entered the lower cabin of the barge, where there were rows upon rows of slaves trapped in cages, some of whom were still sobbing loudly, only stopping when he kicked the cage’s grills violently. “COME ON! SHUT THAT BITCH UP AND GET A MOVE ON! We got three trips to make today!” He roared at the workers, spurring them on to move faster.

He returned back to the captain’s quarters, where a well-dressed man wearing an immaculate suit complete with a handkerchief and monocle was sitting quietly, reading a newspaper while oozing the very epitome of wealth. The captain’s submissive behavior appeared once more as he bowed respectfully to the man. “Apologizes for the delay, Mr…?”

“Culo.”

“Mr. Culo, yes. There are quite a few additional processes we needed to clear before making the transfer. I’m sure you understand that relationships between Versia and Raktor are…. tenous.”

“Of course. But I have a deadline to meet, and if it is not met…”

“No, no, no, we will be on time to deliver the goods as per promised.” The captain hurriedly interjected.

“Good. Then please, continue about your work.”

“Yes, sir. Please enjoy the trip and do not hesitate to call for me if you require my assistance.” The captain bowed out of the quarters, closing the door with a grin on his face. His lack of pride was hardly a concern to himself, his mind only filled with the thought of money to earn. *Only a bigshot can pay to smuggle this many slaves. If I can impress him, I’ll be set for life!*

While the captain giggled about his non-existent future, Culo on the other hand was paying great attention to every detail of the smuggling sequence - the loading of cargo, the masking of goods and slaves, the bribing of enforcers, his mind quickly jotting down each and every tiny facet to allow the Seven Snakes to replicate it when compiled. Even the names of those involved in the process were memorized for future references.

The barge lurched forward, the anchor raised as it began to slowly drift down the river at a snail’s pace, the river’s current carrying it along. The arctech motors onboard whirred to life, the reverberations shaking the flimsy shell of the barge violently as motorized paddles along the side of the barge inched outwards, before pushing the water in a rowing fashion. Culo glanced out of the porthole, watching the riverside pass by gradually, filled with the hustle and bustle of industrialization.

The smokestacks of various factories soared into the sky, chugging out black fog while the various ships moved goods along the river, even within the city. A barge filled to the brim with sand sailed past them, headed for a glass factory, while an empty food barge overtook them from the other side, heading back to the grain bins on the outskirts of Raktor to pick up more grain to fuel Raktor’s food demand. Culo slightly marvelled at the drastic change from when he had first came to Raktor as a starving factory worker. Now? He was returning to near his hometown, well-dressed and rich beyond his wildest dreams, not to mention bristling with strength and power thanks to the one month of training.

A few hours passed, with Culo sitting in silence and keeping a close eye on the route into Versia. The ferry passed a few more rows of factories as they neared the city of Ocra. He spotted a sign, demarcating the end of the County of Raktor and where the Versian border began. It took three hours on the river to even get a glimpse of city lights as day turned to night, the hue of arctech lanterns reflecting off the rolling clouds in the distance.

As they approached the city, Culo noticed men working along the side of the river, digging what seemed to be trenches and placing defensive fortifications that stretched more than a few kilometers, forming a defensive line, apparently having started more than three months ago. The entire river was gated between two towering secondary military forts with cannons aimed at the river, a metal grill preventing boats from crossing immediately.

[Halt! Security check!] A loud arctech speaker from the top of the gate bellowed towards the barge, while arctech spotlights flooded the deck brilliantly, dazzling the workers.

Culo could see from the windows of the captain’s quarters that a team of Versian soldiers had boarded the deck of the barge randomly inspecting crates and workers for their purpose of visit, shoving the captain aside even when he tried to bribe and stall them. *That’s not good.* Culo began to prepare himself, checking his equipment and clothes and making sure he was ready to go at a moment’s notice.

Soon, three soldiers led by their squad leader made their way to the captain’s quarter, coming across Culo with a clear look of disgust on their faces. “What the fuck is a Versian doing on a Yual dog’s barge?” The Versian squad leader spat.

“Why? Do I not have the right to choose my friends?”

“No, of course not. Though I’m sure the friendship will not last long…” The Versian squad leader was suddenly distracted by a sudden chirp on the arctech radio hooked to his belt.

[Sir, there are slaves in the lower cabin of the barge! Fifty of them!]

Before the Versian squad leader could even accuse Culo of being a smuggler, he was already faced with Culo’s fist aiming right for his nose, the knuckles crushing into his face and sending him tumbling unconscious. With one swift motion, Culo drew a sharp knife from his coat, jabbing the cold blade straight into the neck of the other soldier who was caught offguard.

The remaining soldier tried to draw his rifle, but Culo closed the gap in no time, the knife thrusting right at the heart and cutting it open, killing the soldier on the spot. Culo hurriedly grabbed the fallen soldier’s rifle and left the captain’s quarter, but not before finishing off the unconscious squad leader. He rushed down to the lower decks, where there was already a brutal brawl going on, the slaves seemingly fighting back against the workers who were also fighting against the Versian soldiers. However, if one were to look closely enough, only ten of the fifty slaves were hitting back with skills far beyond what a slave should have, Sasha herself leading the charge and massacring anyone who had seen them save for the other slaves.

The sudden skirmish was over as soon as it had began, the workers, captain and Versian soldiers alike all killed and hunted down. Culo quickly approached the slaves, setting them free and giving them directions. “If you want to survive, jump off the barge and swim to the left shore! Grab the weapons and move!”

Following his word, nearly thirty of the surviving slaves armed themselves and began to escape the barge, with the alarm now blaring on the two secondary forts. The spotlights all focused on the swimming slaves, the Versian soldiers manning the turrets at a complete loss on whether to shoot them or not.

“Rest of us, grab the gear and to the right shore! Sasha, clean up the ship!” While the guards of the fort were preoccupied, Culo led the remaining ten slaves and scoured the ship, breaking apart specific crates in the lower cabin, unveiling a few units of Aspis MK1 knight armour, packed into large sacks. Sasha prowled the ship, checking for any remaining Versian soldiers or workers who might have seen them.

They hauled the sacks over the edge, dropping them into the water towards the right shore, jumping in after them while avoiding the spotlights who were far too focused on the escaping slaves. Gunshots and rapid pellet fire rang out through the cold night air as Culo braved the chilly waters, paddling frantically while lugging along a heavy sack that weighed him down greatly. His head began to sink underneath the water level as he struggled to fight the current, only to be finally hoisted by Sasha, his entire body lifted effortlessly and thrown onto the shore.

As soon as he made it to the shore, a large explosion rocked the barge, the dazzling fragments of unknown metal bits spilling out into the air in a ball of flame and light, Culo’s group keeping low in ditches and underwater to prevent being spotted. “Sir Culo, now that the route has been compromised, what do we do? Do we return to Raktor?”

“No. We still have a way in.” Culo had already learnt the information collected by Adrian, knowing there was still a gap in the walls that was currently built in a ring on the outer radius of Ocra.

The moment Sasha reached the shore, Culo ordered the other to pack their stuff up, motioning at them to follow her. They lug the sacks as they trekked through a muddy swamp, approaching close to a half-built wall where the workers had already gone to sleep. Exploiting the gap in the fences and walls, the group hurriedly sneaked by, entering the border of Ocra proper.

Within an hour, they found themselves close to the city of Ocra, the city far different from what Culo remembered. It was now built up with great walls and defenses, mounting points for cannons and siege weapons dotting the top of the fortifications. Countless trench lines and ditches were dug in the ground, the land and original forest cleared for miles. “Over on the western side of the wall is a door reserved for members of Nest. It is here that we will be able to enter Ocra proper.”

They kept low as they snucked through the trenches and muddy soil, keeping low to avoid detection by patrols and watchtowers intermittently dispersed along the side of the wall. Sasha’s keen senses helped them to see who was looking their way, every member hinged on her every command. With expert manuovering, they made it to the wall without a hitch, hugging along its coarse rugged bricks while Culo felt around for a secret brick. “Get your rifles ready.”

Soon, he found it, a loosened brick that somehow acted as a door handle as well, Culo pushing in to reveal a spiral staircase that led downwards.

Panicked voices could be heard from the bottom of the stairs, clearly discussing what had just happened to the barge. “Did you see the explosion? Wasn’t that one of the smugglers’ barges?”

“Yea, it must have been a bad one. Those new Versian guards from Tenar don’t fuck around, they barely take any bribes at all, it’s like they are all possessed- wait a minute. Did you hear someone enter?”

Culo immediately signalled to the squad, prompting them to launch an attack as they rushed down the staircase into what seemed like an underground cavernous pub, smugglers and criminals of all types gathered together. In a withering barrage of fire, the pellets whizzed across the cavern, killing most of them caught off guard. Some of the more fortunate ones cowered behind wooden tables and chairs now pockmarked with pellet holes, others scampering for the exit. However, those trying to flee only found themselves facing Sasha, who easily cut them down one by one with little to no effort.

The blitz attack ended in mere seconds, allowing Culo and Sasha to now gain a proper foothold into Ocra. Culo grabbed one of the surviving smugglers, dragging him onto a chair and aiming the tip of a knife right at his face. The smuggler tried to put on a brave face, grinning at Culo: “Do you even know who you’re fucking with? This city is ran by Masir!”

“Masir? Who even is that? Last I heard, it was Makoa.”

“That rat went to Raktor a long time ago. Masir is the one in charge now.”

“How many men?”

“A hundred, maybe even two. You better let me go, or else he’ll-”

Culo smacked the smuggler hard, tossing him onto the floor next to the other surviving smugglers who were all now rounded up by the rest of his squad.

“As you can all see, our outfit - my outfit - is small, but there’s plenty of room for aggressive expansion. Now, let’s put it this way.” Culo grabbed a rifle from another squad member, aiming the barrel at the first smuggler. “Masir, or me?”

“You think you can -” A loud bang had a pellet tear through the brains of the smuggler, him dying immediately. The remaining smugglers stared in horror while Culo immediately swivelled the rifle to the next man.

“Now, Masir? Or me?”

# Chapter 100 - Village

A distant thud rumbled across the clear skies, the vibrations shaking the trees slightly as a small cloud of smoke drifted into the air above the forest between Ocra and Raktor, birds and animals alike scampering in all directions away from it.

The reverberations were all too familiar to an arctech engineer, as he tried his best to compartmentalize the sound away in his mind, his gloved hands and eyes focused on the broken arctech irrigation pump in front of him. He had to get this fixed by tomorrow, but it was even harder to concentrate when the same dull thuds kept echoing through his small village workshop, frightening him.

“Jakub, everything okay?” His wife called out to him from the nearby kitchen, a look of worry as she poked her head around a corner, where the smell of caramelized sweets wafted in over the metallic tinge of arctech machinery.

“Sorry dear, I…. I just can’t focus.” Jakub sighed, putting down his gloves.

His wife put down whatever she was cooking, turning off the arctech stove before walking over, patting him carefully on the shoulder. “Is it the artillery shells? They are just doing an exercise, nothing more. We’re miles away from them.”

“I know, I know… it’s just…” Jakub took a deep breath, leaning against the workbench and looking up at the ceiling, arctech lanterns dotting the thatched roof precariously on wooden beams. “My brother is in Raktor now. I just wonder if he’s caught up in everything.”

“You’re such a worrywart, Culo is doing perfectly fine. Didn’t he send us money just last month? He must be making a killing there to be able to send that much. If it wasn’t for his job we might have not enough funds to make it through the coming year.”

“I… guess you’re right. But recently I’ve been hearing stories from the others about how everyone is evacuating out. Maybe we should consider leaving too, in case a war really breaks out.”

“I’m sure level-heads will prevail, the last civil war is still fresh in the people’s heart, they won’t advocate for any more suffering.” His wife consoled him. “Either way, this is our home. We were born here, married here, and soon we’ll have our own family to take care of here too.” She pulled Jakub’s hand towards her tummy, Jakub feeling a slight bump.

“It might be safer in Ocra, for all we know.” Jakub still harboured anxiety. “The Versian army will protect us, at the very least.”

His wife sighed, showing signs of exasperation. “I think you need to take a break. How about some sweets, hmm? Calm your nerves a little.”

Jakub complied, about to follow his wife into the kitchen when he suddenly heard a loud commotion over the hum of his arctech furnace beyond the walls of the workshop. Shouts and clamouring could be heard, before someone violently rasped against the door with vigor, clearly agitated. “Stay in the kitchen.” Jakub motioned to his wife, while he grabbed a nearby arctech hunting musket, heading to the door carefully, unsure of what was happening.

He tugged the door handle open, revealing a disheveled girl dressed in a work shirt and pants, her hands also holding a red-tipped woodcutter’s axe. “Lisa? What’s going on?” Jakub asked.

“There’s soldiers from Ocra, lots of them!” Lisa blurted with clear agitation, Jakub able to see some of the other villagers exiting their houses, armed with similar axes and rallying together.

“How many of them? What do they want?”

“Maybe two dozen, all armed to the teeth with rifles and armor! They wanna evacuate us forcibly!”

Jakub could already tell that there was a confrontation erupting between some of the villagers and the Ocra soldiers, arguments lobbied back and forth. He went back into the house, finding a small handgun and passing it to the wife. “Use it if you have to, I’m gonna try to calm down the situation.”

“Jakub, stay safe!” His wife nodded and let him go, Lisa leading him towards the village square where an angry mob was already facing off against the Ocra soldiers, led by a sergeant who’s strong body towered over most of the villagers. They congregated under the central bell tower, where a few kids looked down curiously at the commotion beneath them.

“Who are you to force us to leave our homes! If those damn Yual dogs come our way, we’ll give them a hell of a thrashin!” A villager waved his woodcutter’s axe frantically in the air.

“Damn right, this is our homeland! We aren’t gonna just up and leave without a fight!” Others chimed in, echoing the same sentiment.

“Citizens, please.” The sergeant spoke with a clear somber voice. “While I know the pain and hardship you may endure, this village is too close to the border and is likely to be attacked. As soldiers of the Versian military, it is our best interest to reduce civilian casualties and -”

“How about you say what you truly mean: you just want to steal all our land and property!” One of the more cynical villagers spat back, clearly lacking trust in the Versian army. “I bet once we leave, you’re gonna swoop in and claim everything as yours!”

The accusation spread like wildfire, especially the less educated villagers who were susceptible to such rumours and fear-mongering, the crowd turning against the Ocra soldiers, steps being taken forward.

“I assure you that we only have your best interests at heart. In the next week or two, an attack by forward Raktor scouts may very well be possible! We are here to help you evacuate to Ocra!”

“Bullshit! You’re just chasing away from our ancestors’ land!”

“Yea, dem Raktor boys are just practicing, they ain’t actually gonna cross the border! You’re just tryna scare us!”

“Despicable soldiers, shame on you!” An old lady threw an apple at the soldier, heralding a flinging of fruits, mud and other excretions at the Ocra soldiers and the sergeant, whom were near their breaking point, the sergeant himself about to order the soldiers to arm themselves.

“STOP! STOP!” Jakub waved his hands in the air as he shoved through the throng of villagers, pushing to the front and defending the sergeant with his own body, taking the brunt of the thrown fruits and rocks before the villagers realized who it was. “Please, let us think carefully before making any rash actions or antagonizing anyone!” Jakub pleaded. “Let me speak with the sergeant.”

The villagers’ raised hands began to drop one by one, murmurs exchanged among each other as they complied, allowing Jakub a moment’s respite to wipe off the mud slung at him. “Apologies for the less than warm reception.”

“Finally, some semblance of civility in this backwater village. What’s a educated man like you doing in such a place?” The sergeant too lowered his arm, the soldiers no longer priming their rifles to fire.

“I prefer a quiet life. Either way, I’m sure its obvious that the villagers do not want to move for the time being.”

“But you must know that tensions between Versia and Raktor are higher than ever. The artillery strikes from their military exercises are at the very edge of our borders.” The sergeant explained. “Under my orders, I cannot allow this village to fall into enemy hands as a staging point for further invasion into Ocra.”

“I completely understand, but would it not be better if we were somehow incorporated into the defense plan, if any? The motivation to defend our homeland could be utilized well against any possible invasion, however unlikely.”

“Unlikely? We stand at the brink of war, it’s almost certain. All it takes is for one trigging incident for hell to break loose.” The sergeant retorted. “To be frank with you, I couldn’t care less if you half-breeds died in the first wave. Consider it a grace that you have even been offered help to evacuate.”

Jakub’s eye slightly twitched, but he suppressed his anger. However, the villagers had already heard what the sergeant said, rage rising amdist the mob. “He dare call us half-breeds? We have every right to Versia just as much as you!”

“Yual dog blood runs in your veins, and that much is clear from your mannerisms.” The sergeant scoffed. “If you breed two different races, what else can you call it but a half-breed?”

“You fucking bitch!” A large stone was hurled right at the sergeant, nailing him right in the face and knocking him out cold, while the Ocra soldiers began to panic when faced with a swarming angry mob, having lost their chain of command.

“Please, everyone, take a step back! We don’t have to fight each other!” Lisa glanced around, flustered as the tensions rose, the bodies converging in the square and facing off against one another. Her desperate attempts at restoring peace through dialogue was interrupted by a loud gunshot. One of the fresher recruits among them freaked out, firing a pellet that nailed a villager right in the thighs, evoking a cry of pain that rallied even more villagers against them.

“STOP! HOLD YOUR FIRE!” Jakub roared, trying to calm down the villagers, but it was no use. A violent melee brawl broke out between the two sides, knuckles clashing and pellets shot wildly, axes swinging into flesh and bone as Jakub struggled to force his way through. Yet his voice alone was not enough to quell the unrest, the Ocra soldiers both unwilling to kill their own citizens or move without their sergeant’s order. Soon, most of them decided to retreat, hauling the still unconscious sergeant away from the village.

“That’s right you fucks, RUN!” One of the villagers cheered as he wiped off a bloody nose, but he was soon confronted by an angry Jakub who grabbed him by the collar, shaking him violently.

“Have you any idea what you have just done?” Jakub bristled with fury, his tone simmering. “You just fought against the damn military! What happens when they come back with an even stronger detachment? You’ve just marked the entire village as rebels!”

“Relax, kiddo. Just cuz you’re the engineer of the village don’t mean you smarter than us. They wanted us to leave!” The villager waved his hand to the surrounding forest that had been Jakub’s childhood, a few others nodding in agreement including Lisa. “If we leave, it’ll be a disgrace to the work of our fathers and grandfathers.”

“That doesn’t mean its worth fighting against the state’s military! We won’t be able to defend against them if they come back.” Jakub stood his ground.

“Then what? We leave with nothing but what we can haul, and with nothing to show for it!” Another villager shouted back.

“We can start again, start anew somewhere else, somewhere further away from the war…” Jakub tried to convince them, but he was already starting to lose their interest and attention.

“That’s easy for you to say. You’re an arctech engineer - anywhere you go, your skill will be needed. What skill would me, a simple woodcutter and farmer have in Ocra? Nothing!” Yet another villager heckled Jakub. “Now if you would shut up and step aside, we got a home to defend! You can leave if you want to, smartass. Always looking down on us since you were a fucking kid. At least your brother is doing something useful!”

Jakub wanted to retort, but soon realized it was useless, the mob having made up his mind. Defeated, he stepped away from the mob, intending to walk home when Lisa blocked his path. “Jakub, look, I know they are idiots, but we gotta do something for them. If things really start to go south… we should help out.”

He rested a heavy palm on her shoulders, pushing her slightly aside and continuing to walk off, Lisa trailing behind trying to convince him. “Please, Jakub. I’m on your side here: fighting the military was a stupid idea, but now that it has happened, we need to start-”

“Lisa.” Jakub interrupted her. “You’re barking up the wrong tree. I’m not the village chief - your dad is.”

“But he’s-”

“In Ocra to sell crops, yes. So it is down to you. Are you really going to stand by these suicidal idiots? We hardly have the weaponry and equipment to fight back any attack from either Raktor and Versia, and somehow we’ve painted a target on ourselves for both of them.” Jakub ranted, walking faster and leaving Lisa behind. “You can save them yourself, I’m leaving with Lucy tonight.”

“Jakub! JAKUB!” Lisa shouted from afar, watching Jakub disappear into his workshop and locking the door shut.

Jakub let out an exasperated sigh as he stormed to his workshop, packing up everything, while his wife nervously looked at him in confusion. “Jakub, I heard shots, is everything okay?”

“No, nothing is okay. Pack your bags, we’re leaving by evening. Grab everything of value that we have.” Jakub mumbled as he picked up a sack, shoving his etcher, tools and whatever else he could fit in, hauling all of them out into a back garage where an arctech wagon sat silently.

“Why, what’s wrong? Jakub, don’t be paranoid again, there’s no war-”

“NO WAR?” Jakub slammed his fist against the table. “The villagers out there just decided to punch the living lights out of a Versian military sergeant of all people, and they still think they are safe here?! Now, if you really understand what is going on, please, please pack up now. We need to be gone before the villagers come to me for help. I can’t let you or the kid die, do you understand?”

The wife’s face paled at the revelation, nodding vigorously before hurrying into the rooms, snatching and packing everything they could into suitcases and luggages, stocking up the arctech wagon in full. Jakub packed all of the arctech hunting muskets he had, loading them into wooden cases, hoping to be able to sell them at Ocra if they needed extra cash. It took nearly three hours, the last glimmers of daylight finally dipping over the horizon as the wagon was filled with their belongings, ready to depart, Jakub raising the garage door to reveal a seemingly quiet village gravel road.

His wife looked back at the semi-empty house, the new furnishings that they had just crafted right after the wedding a few months ago left alone, barren as ever. She tugged at Jakub’s sleeves before he entered the cabin of the wagon. “Jakub, maybe we can talk it out with them. You’ve always been the smart kid of the village, we could try and convince them-”

“Convince them of what? They see me as different, as a smartass. Well if they don’t want my help, I’m more than happy to leave them to the fate that they chose.” Jakub grunted, shrugging off his wife’s hand and clambering into the driver’s seat. “I’m done with this village.”

Jakub twisted a knob and jumpstarted the engine, the arctech engine whirring into life as a sudden defeaning explosion rocked the entire garage, though it did not come from the wagon. “What was that?!” His wife exclaimed in horror, as bright dazzling glints of flame began to cast shadows upon the garage.

He peered through the cabin’s window, seeing an entire house burst out into flames, the wooden fragments sailing through the air, drawing trails of smoke through the evening sky as villagers began to swarm out of their houses, shocked and afraid. A bell began to toll from the village square, one that usually heralded the end of the workday. Except this time, it was ringing with an anxiety unlike ever before.

“We need to go!” Jakub began to floor the pedal, the wagon rolling forward into the chaos as shouts and screams echoed through the normally peaceful village.

Instead, his wife grabbed Jakub’s arm tightly, locking eyes with him and forcing the wagon to come to a halt. “Jakub! You promised Culo you would protect the village for him! And here you are running away!”

“Let go of me, Lucy! If we stay still any longer, we will die!”

“And if we leave, what do we have left to live for, knowing we let our own friends die when we could have saved them!” His wife screamed back at him. “If you’re not going to defend this village, I’ll do it myself!” She jumped out of the cabin, the small handgun in her right as she charged towards the billowing flames erupting from the burning house.

“LUCY! Fuck!” Jakub rammed the wagon’s gear into reverse, pushing back into the garage before dismounting and cracking open the back, hauling out the crates of muskets that he had packed. As he carried the first crate out, he spotted a desparate Lisa running towards him, her originally anxious face now overwhelmed with a deep sense of betrayal, seeing Jakub’s wagon all packed up and ready to go.

“LISA! Help me arm the villagers!” Jakub roared over the din of gunshots and pellets, his heart palpitating with uncertainty as he watched the last trails of his wife’s dress disappear around the corner to an unknown fate. He gritted his teeth, hauling out the crates of hunting muskets as fast as he could. Lisa shook herself out of her stupor, shoving her doubts to the back of her mind and rushing to help. A few villagers also charged over, grabbing a musket and a pouch full of muskets. “Don’t forget to grab the arctech packs, you need them to shoot!” Jakub motioned over to the wagon, the small self-patented packs ready to go.

Soon, Jakub himself was rushing out, armed to the teeth with his own muskets and arctech packs, chasing frantically after where his wife was, hoping to the Goddess that she was not dead yet. He turned the corner sharply, coming face to face with the full brunt of a heatwave erupting from the burning house, where victims were being carried out of the fiery wooden wreck crackling with fury.

He spotted his wife carrying a kid out of the house, laying him down as the kid coughed violently, his entire face covered in blackened soot, while other villagers were attempted to splash buckets of water onto the burning house to no avail. Sprinting up to his wife, he knelt beside her, checking the kid’s pulse. “Who’s attacking? Who set it on fire?”

“I don’t know, but others are saying an artillery shell hit the house head-on, an incendiary explosive that blew them up from within!”

Jakub glanced around, noticing plenty of bodies being laid outside, many of them having suffered first-degree burns. The moment he heard Lisa’s footsteps catching up behind him, he quickly ordered them to fan out towards the border. “Make sure no one is coming to attack, if they are, we have to stall them while we evacuate the rest!”

As soon as he said that, an unmistakable whizz through the air could be heard before something large slammed right into the bell tower, snapping the stone foundations in half while he watched a man fall from the top, his body smashing against the rubble like paste, his bones broken apart in a bloody mess that splattered onto the white tiles of the square.

“Lisa! We still have three more wagons, right? Forget stalling the attackers, grab them and load everyone up, we’re getting out of the village! You two, help her out!”

Lisa nodded, but was stopped by the same violent villager who had punched the sergeant in the first place. “Look at you two - village chief’s daughter and smartass. First instinct is to fucking run! We should stay and defen-”

His words were cut short by a sudden straight punch from Jakub, toppling the villager over onto the ground hard. “Defend against that?! We got nothing! Only a military point defense can take that down - Lisa, move!”

The able-bodied villagers began to haul what they could, carrying the injured first and foremost into the wagons that Lisa began to organize into a convoy near the centre of the square. Another artillery shell blasted yet another house, sending sparks racing through the air, spurring the survivors to move faster. Jakub and his wife too rushed back to their own wagon, driving off quickly to join the convoy. Some of the more greedy villagers tried to stuff furnishings and furnitures, only to have them tossed out by Jakub and Lisa, prioritizing lives first. Even Jakub threw away most of his tools to make space for everyone.

Within fifteen minutes, Jakub led the convoy off, the wagons rumbling out from the burning village as the embers began to drift onto other houses, causing the fire to spread faster than ever. He looked at the side-view mirror of the wagon, watching the flames lick what was left of his childhood, wondering what would have happened if he had just left them behind. His wife noticed his depression, gripping his soot-covered hands tightly. “You did the best you could, we saved almost all of them! We can rebuild once the war is over.”

That only raised his anger even more towards those who fired the shells. “Those damn Yual dogs, using us as target practice! I’ll fucking kill them if I ever get the chance again.” He promised himself as the burning village began to disappear into the distance.

The journey was long and harrowing, the bumpy gravel road hardly alleviating the burns of those who survived the fire, their bodies still groaning in agony. There was barely enough potions salvaged from the village to go around, Lisa eventually deciding to give the potions to the children instead to lessen their suffering. “Once we get to Ocra, we can buy potions, we’ll sell off what we have.” Jakub explained to Lisa as they took a break, the villagers gathering around a temporary campfire set up on the side of the road, boiling a large pot of soup made of the last vestiges of their harvest.

Morale among the villagers were lower than ever, most noticeable of all being the violent villager who had regained consciousness. “Our grain, our livestock, our forest… all gone because of Raktor!” The sentiment of hate began to take root among the villagers as they could still see in the dark the plumes of smoke and flickering red light emitting over the horizon.

“We’ll get our revenge soon enough.” Jakub consoled the villagers, many of them now looking to him as a competent leader alongside Lisa. As they continued their journey, they soon began to meet other refugees from other villagers as well, realizing that the strikes were a concerted effort by the enemy to drive them out.

“Why didn’t they hit our convoy when we were leaving? If they were able to hit our village, they must have seen us.” Lisa pondered in deep thought.

“They must have wanted to capture us alive. Don’t think too much about it, thank the Goddess that we made it out alive.” Jakub murmured, his eyes tired from hours of driving on the road, their convoy now merging with others to form a large train that chugged along slowly towards Ocra, its fortress walls looming in the distance. “Almost there, chin up. We can meet up with your father soon.”

As the wagons began to lurch into the vicinity of Ocra, Jakub could see hundreds of makeshift tents and corrugated metal shelters stacked next to each other in close proximity beyond the walls, thousands of refugees from villages all over clamoring to get entry into the city. Jakub gripped his wife’s hand tightly, hoping for the best. Their wagon was stuck in a queue as they were cleared one by one by Versian soldiers blockading the slums outside Ocra, their identity being checked one by one.

Soon, it was their turn, the wagon rolling up to a sergeant motioning for his soldiers to check the contents of the wagon. “Name? Purpose?”

Lisa took point, clearing her throat and raising her stature to the highest she could.”Good sir, we’re refugees evacuating from Creek March, and we got injured that needs immediate medical atten-”

“How many adults?”

“Sorry?”

“I said, how many adults?”

“Sir, we have kids who are suffering from burns and-”

“If you’re not going to ask the question, I’m going to have to arrest you on grounds of obstruction.”

“What?! Are you even listening to me, you-” The furious Lisa was quickly restrained by Jakub, who gave a nervous smile to the intimidating sergeant.

“Apologies, we have about thirty men and forty women. Our village chief is in the city, maybe you kno-” Jakub could only watch as the sergeant barely listened to him, instead rummaging in a box and grabbing a handful of small little paper cards, shoving them into Jakub’s hands without warning.

“Here, your ration cards. Now, you’re gonna have to leave your wagons with us. You can keep your belongings, but only after our soldiers have checked it. Your allocated tents are on the cards. Now move along.” The sergeant brushed him off, motioning for the next wagon to come.

Before Jakub could do anything, he was shoved out of the way by other soldiers, who began to inspect the wagon carefully. They flipped open the crates of muskets and arctech packs, before quickly calling the sergeant over, who’s eyes widened in shock. Instead of the previous intimidating demeanour, the sergeant was now smiling from ear to ear, quickly running up to Jakub and shaking his hands. “Good sir, are you by any chance an arctech engineer?”

“Yes, I am, but what’s going on-”

“Perfect. We are in dire need of your skills for the war effort, and you will of course be rewarded handsomely for your efforts, naturally. Please, follow me.” The sergeant motioned with his hand, prompting Jakub to follow, but Jakub refused to budge.

“I’m not going anywhere without my wife. And my friends still need medical attention.”

A small glimmer of exasperation flashed across the sergeant’s face, before quickly being replaced by the same compliant expression. “Of course, of course. Your wife can follow too, and your friends will be taken care of.”

Jakub found the man’s demeanour suspicious, but he still did not want to start a fight against the military, not when the villagers under his care were still in dire need of aid. He and his wife followed the sergeant and two other soldiers carrying some of his crates to a luxurious tent, the interior being revealed to be a quaint little office where a lone officer sat on a small little wooden chair, yawning ever so slightly.

The officer stared at Jakub and his wife, both of whom were still covered in soot and blood stains, his face clearly irked by the disgusting stench of sweat. His fierce glare landed on the sergeant. “Sergeant Mord, if this is another botched attempt at claiming a commission…”

“No, no, no, of course not! The last one was an honest mistake! Look, we have some of his products here, found in his wagon.” The sergeant ordered the two soldiers to open Jakub’s crates, revealing his own self-patented arctech packs, the officer nearly leaping out of his seat.

“This… this is a compressed fuel pack. How efficient is it?”

“About a third of a fuel pack, but at a tenth of the mass and envelope.” Jakub stated proudly despite his suspicions.

“Perfect.” The officer reached into a drawer, retrieving a pouch and tossing it to the gleeful sergeant, who left the tent with the other two immediately. “The Versian state has need of your prowess with arctech engineering. Starting from tomorrow, you will be transferred to Tenar and working for Harrison Industries to support the war effort.”

“What?!” Jakub exclaimed in shock. “But sir, my wife and the other villagers who came with me…”

“Your wife will accompany you as well, you will be safe in the capital. As for the others, you have my word that they will be well taken care of. In fact, it is thanks to your skill that they shall have priority, more rations and medical supplies than the others. If you work hard enough, it may be enough to help them apply for refugee status within the city of Ocra itself, or even Tenar!” The officer smiled as he pulled out a stack of paper, laying them on the contract. “All you have to do is sign here, and the state will see to it that you, your family and your friends are safe.”

“Oh… oh thank you so much!” Jakub’s anxiety melted away, everything he had hoped for and better was coming true in Ocra. He had feared that they would have been forced to struggle to make ends meet as evacuees, but here in front of him was a golden lifeline for both him and his wife. Without hesitation, he glanced through the contract, seeing that everything was as the officer said, being a regular labour deal. He signed it within five minutes, before shaking hands with the officer and hugging his wife tightly. “We’re safe, we’ll be safe, thank Versia!”

“You should be thanking Harrison, he is the one funding all of this and putting our best minds to good use. We have a convoy setting off in an hour’s time, I suggest that you spend the remaining time saying your temporary goodbyes to the others. Depending on your work, you could be seeing them in a month’s time.”

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!” Jakub shook the officer’s hand again feverishly, his wife equally elated at the prospect, especially after the near escape. They returned giddy to the other villagers, who were all now disembarking the wagon, with Jakub explaining what was about to happen to them.

“That’s great, Jakub! Thank you for getting the help we need.” Lisa hugged Jakub, her worries also evaporating away, regaining hope for the future. “Are you sure you’re going to be okay?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be seeing you all soon, Lucy and I will work as hard as we can in Tenar to bring all of you over. Stay alive, you hear?” Jakub grinned, rubbing a few of the kids heads playfully as he went around, saying his goodbyes. Soon, he and his wife were leaving with their belongings, leaving Lisa alone to take care of the villagers, her hands now possessing the ration cards.

She approached the sergeant happily, but soon noticed something wrong with their wagons as the soldiers checked it. Instead of driving them off to the side, the soldiers were stripping the wagons down for parts and hauling all of their belongings away to an unknown place. “Uhh, sir? sir?” She tapped the sergeant on the shoulder, only to earn a confused gaze.

“Huh? Who are you?”

“I’m Lisa, I’m friends with the arctech engineer you just recruited to Tenar, and he told us -”

“Oh, yea. Right, line up over there to get your rations.” The sergeant jabbed his thumb over his shoulder to a two-hundred strong snaking queue over at the other side of the fence into the slum, the cold night wind causing many of the old refugees queuing to shiver in their ragged clothing.

“Sir, sorry, that can’t be right.” Lisa let out a nervous laugh. “Your soldiers are tearing apart our wagons and stealing our belongings! Jakub said that we got priority and more rations and…”

“And is this Jakub around?”

“Huh?”

“Are you fucking deaf? Where is this Jakub? Now you better get in line before I have to resort to force.”

The violent villager stormed up to the sergeant, defending Lisa. “That’s no way to talk to us, you fucking upstuck twat. Jakub got word from the officer that-”

Instead of a reply, the villager was shot right in the legs, crippling him as he doubled over in pain, the sergeant’s handgun still smoking. The sudden violence frightened the other villagers into submission, Lisa horrified at the sudden twist in treatment while the Versian soldiers began to surround them, aiming their rifles right at them.

The sergeant scowled as he waved his handgun’s barrel at them, earning screams from the villagers. “Get in the damn line, you fucking half-breeds, else you can starve for as long as you want!”

# Chapter 101 - War Refugees

*A week later…*

Lisa awoke once again to the never-ending sound of flapping cloth, the hot morning gusts billowing through the half-patched tent as she lay on a thin mat that was synonymous with the rough uneven ground that jabbed into her back. Her eyes could barely open, a stinging sensation from the dust and soot trying to get their way in combined with the exhaustion of yesterday swirling in her mind. The air of the tent was stuffy and humid, filled with the exhalations and sweat of thirty other refugees from various other towns or villages like Lisa, all struggling awake again.

A sudden clarity infused her mind as she realized what she was supposed to do, her body sharply twisting around to check on a boy laying right next to her, the boy’s body wrapped in pus-stained bandages, some fluids already seeping beyond the edges of the cloth onto the ground, pooling. Lisa hurriedly reached for a small leather bag near her mat, taking out a fresh roll of cloth.

She gingerly removed the bandage, the boy groaning as his burn scabs were melded with the cloth, Lisa slowly peeling away the cloth bit by bit. The extent of the burn was horrific, encompassing more than a third of his body, the boy having been caught right in the middle of the fire that struck the village last week. As Lisa twirled up the old pus-stained cloth, preparing to discard it, the boy clasped Lisa’s arm tightly, his voice exasperated and weaker than ever. “Lisa… just….”

“I’m not giving up on you, Selas. Not now, not ever. I’m the village chief’s daughter and I will take care of you. Now you do your best to rest as much as you can, okay? Once I get back from work, I’ll have a potion ready for you.” Lisa asserted with a calm confident voice, patting the boy’s head gently, moving on to replace all of his bandages, flipping his body over. She grimaced at the burn marks all over the boy’s back, the sense of desperation getting even stronger in her veins while preparing to leave the tent.

Already in the short ten minutes that Lisa took to care for the boy, most of the tent had been emptied out, leaving only a few left, mostly those from Lisa’s village who were still unable to acclimatize to the new life in the refugee camps, having been split up among the various tents.

“Marah, can you watch over Selas? I’m going out to try to find a job.” Lisa asked a elderly lady from the same village while she put on her workboots.

“Of course, dear. Of course…” The elderly lady had just woken up, but she already held a grim expression, one of that showed hope rapidly declining.

“Today I’ll get a potion for Selas, and we should be able to stay alive for longer.” Lisa comforted Marah, before leaving the tent proper out into the blazing daylight and the crowded din of rows upon rows upon rows of makeshift tents that seemed to stretch out towards the horizon indefinitely, thousands of refugees like her fighting to survive in the high density and fast-paced race to earn a living wage. It was a stark contrast from the freedom of the village, Lisa now being a single cog in the machine.

Despite her external confidence, deep down Lisa only had worries after worries, not even sure if they would have enough water to last another week. Yet she buckled down, knowing that if she had time to worry, she had time to do something about it. She covered her head with a ragged piece of cloth, keeping her face hidden from the other refugees loitering about, some who stared her down as she made her way through the throng of people shambling to and fro, their mass only adding to the intense heat. With every tree and grass in the vicinity eradicated, there was hardly any shade to rest or take comfort in, something completely alien to the village-born Lisa.

As she left the tents, the environment began to change slightly, the usual broken fabric and flimsy supports now replaced with corrugated metal plates along with pieces of slag casted out from the factories used as foundations for rickety stalls and shops, sellers calling out prices and their wares while weak children lingered on the streets, begging for help or merely starving to death under the callous gazes of other equally starving refugees.

Lisa too couldn’t afford the time to help each and every malnourished kid that she stepped past, knowing that other villagers were waiting for her, being one of the few remaining able-bodied ones. She quickened her steps, ignoring her exhaustion and focused putting one foot in front of the other, nothing else.

[Join the Versian Armed Knights today!] A arctech loudspeaker blared over the shuffling crowd of refugges, a light-thrower displaying onto a large black wall a faded glorious advertisement of soldiers marching in step and saluting in presidential parades. [Defend our home and our identity against those who wish to crush it! New recruits will receive fifteen tenars upon enlistment. No equipment? Harrison Industries will provide all fresh joiners with equipment, free of charge!]

Right below the advertisment was a sergeant already handling a long queue of refugees, many of them young boys and girls pushed to the edge by the harrowing conditions in the camp. Lisa didn’t blame them - anyone who saw how much power the military wielded in the camp would have had half the mind to sign up. *Fifteen tenars, can I even earn that much in two weeks?*

It took Lisa more than fifteen minutes to reach her destination: a square of sorts, where foremans screamed at the top of their lungs for openings that refugees clamored for, their voices carrying over the rumbling of military arctech wagons distributing supplies and children weaving through the crowd.

[Two spots left at Harrison Industries’ Ocra Division! Free lodging, free meals, five tenars a week! Depart immediately! Must be able to lift a log!] A foreman shouted, even as he was already being swarmed by dozens of refugees.

“Me! Me! Pick me, please!” Desperate pleas and struggling cries could be heard in response, every refugee wanting to get out of the camp, a common occurrence nearly every hour of the week, each of them hoping to be selected.

[You! And you! Yes, you with the torn sleeves! Come on, wagon ain’t gonna wait forever!]

“Oh THANK THE GODDESS! THANK THE-” The selected refugee was immediately pounced on by the others around, punches and kicks thrown at him on the ground while someone stuck a wrapped glass shard into his throat, carving right into his vocal cords and leaving him voiceless and twitching to death.

“HEY, HEY, HEY! Break it up!” The nearby Versian soldiers immediately moved in, dispersing the crowd and trying to snatch those who attacked the man, arresting them. But even as the attackers were dragged away, they had no regret, instead smiling to themselves and giving a thumbs up to the glass shard’s wielder

[Looks like we got one spot left! You!] The foreman shouted into his arctech loudspeaker pointed to the man still holding the bloodied glass shard. [You look like you have some drive in you. Get in the wagon!]

Lisa sighed at the sight, and was about to ignore the commotion until she noticed who was the other worker selected by the foreman. She abandoned her original goal, hurriedly running to catch up with the worker and forcibly turning him around, revealing him to be the same violent villager who had punched the sergeant. “Wez, you can’t be serious! What are you doing, weren’t you supposed to protect-”

“Protect what? Protect the village? What village?” Wez grabbed Lisa’s arm by the wrist and tossed her aside, his strength far beyond her as Lisa toppled to the ground. “I told you to stay behind and defend what we owned, but look at us now. Scavenging and scrambling for bits and pieces. Where is the village to protect?”

Lisa coughed while struggling to get to her feet, fueled by rage. “You were born in the village, same as me. We grew up together, all of us, and here you are ditching us! Selas is still suffering from the burns because of what you did!”

“What did I do, other than try to protect the land our ancestors had?! You’re the one who gave up, and listened to that smartass Jakub. Look where that got us!” Wez motioned with his hands around at the swirling dust bowl kicked up by thousands of feet mingling and running in the square. “And he and his wife left us for better lands in Tenar, ditching us! I don’t hold any obligations to help a group who didn’t listen to me.”

[HEY YOU! IF YOU AIN’T COMING I’LL GET SOMEONE ELSE!] The foreman roared.

“Farwell, Lisa.” Wez turned and left towards a waiting arctech wagon, Lisa only able to watch as the original bonds of the village crumbled. Her mind began to ran wild as she calculated the loss of Wez, leaving only ten able-bodied villagers of adulthood that could potentially do work. *With him gone, that’s one less ration card to…* Lisa caught herself mid-thought, realizing that she had reduced the villagers to mere numbers and statistics. *What have I become? Where is Jakub? Did he lie to us? Did he-*

“BITCH! Get the fuck out of the way! You’re holding up the whole road!” A wagon driver roared, frightening Lisa out of the street and into the side corners, where equally dismayed fresh refugees curled up into balls, crying their hearts out at the immense despair that they had been plunged into. Lisa nearly wanted to do the same, but knew that unlike Wez, she could not just ditch the others without it weighing on her conscience.

As she turned around to look in the square, she suddenly noticed a few people staring at her openly with disgust, before realizing that her face was no longer hidden. Scrambling to wrap her head around with the same ragged cloth once more, Lisa moved to her original goal, back at the center of the square.

Amdist the frantic chaos, She desperately sprinted from job board to foreman, trying to get a job within the camp itself. Many of the openings required posting outside of the camp or beyond Ocra, her options being limited. Soon she spotted a familar foreman, one that she had worked with before. Shoving her way to the front of the crowd gathering in front of his makeshift stage, she waved her hands frantically, trying to get his attention. “Mister Hikub, it’s me! it’s me!”

“HALF A TENAR FOR A HAULER! HALF A TENAR - oh hello, dear, you’re a bit late today. The job you had yesterday is gone now.” Hikub spotted Lisa, lifting his tinted small circular glasses to get a better look.

Lisa’s heart faltered for a bit, but she did not give up yet. “It doesn’t matter what job, as long as I can earn.”

A wide grin sprouted on Hikub’s face, his colorful robe heaving as he laughed. “That’s the spirit, girl! If you really want to earn, I have someone looking for a wife!”

“…Huh?”

“Don’t worry too much, the suitor obviously would want a dinner date first, of course, and even if you don’t pass his requirements, you’ll still be paid.”

“Uhm… I rather not.”

The grin immediately evaporated from Hikub’s face, his demeanour returning to the same haughty uncaring mood. “Well then, out of our beautiful yet short friendship, I do have something for you. Take this token and tell the lady in flowers at Section 6A I sent you. One tenar a day.”

A wooden token was sent sailing through the air, Lisa lunging out and grabbing it in her sweaty hands before others around her could react. She quickly scrambled out of the crowd , covering her face once more and disappearing into the ever increasing waves of refugees trying to get a job, brushing against others forcibly while a few tried to search for her, intent on snatching that job away.

She had no time to linger on Wez’s departure any longer, focusing on what she could do now. She slunk past groups of famished kids harassing others for food, patrols of Versian soldiers snatching whatever snacks were available, as well as wealthy merchants organizing the next trade route, profiting off the desperation of the refugees as they hired them by the dozens off to a job beyond.

Section 6A was near the gates, filled to brim with Versian inspectors checking each and every wagon coming into the camp, traders hauling goods to and fro from deeper within Versia while temporary haulers waited for their next job, earning a mere pittance as they carried sacks far beyond their capabilities. *The lady in flowers…* Lise glanced around the messy street lined with excretions, dirt and a few stray animals before she noticed her new employer, a well-dressed lady with a dress seemingly made out of petals of varying colours, as though the flowers themselves had grown around her. If Lisa didn’t know any better she might have mistaken her for a forest spirit instead if it were not for the lady smoking on an ornamental Euria pipe, blue smoke puffs circling and drifting around in a haze.

Lisa marched up confidently, handing the lady the wooden token from Hikub on outstretched palms. The lady barely budged, instead motioning with her hand towards two other girls. “Join them. You’ll get paid at dinnertime. I only have one rule: no talking. Ever. Got it?”

“Yes, of course, thank you, thank you!” Lisa bowed multiple times, but the lady was hardly interested in her anymore, instead seemingly gazing off into the streets, seemingly looking for something. Lisa didn’t care, quickly moving over to the two girls who were sat on the side of the street, weaving what looked like a sack. She was about to open her mouth to ask for guidance, when one of the girls raised her forefinger to her mouth, her eyes not leaving the sack on her thighs.

*Right, no talking.* Lisa plopped down next to the girl, observing what the girl was doing, which seemed to be simply patching up holes in the sacks with newer fabric. There were nearly a thousand empty sacks piled up near each of the girls along with an additional sewing kit. Grabbing the needle expertly, she began to copy what the girls were doing, soon getting into the groove of it. Weirdly enough, the sacks each had uniform holes, though they were all seemingly at random.

Her niggling question on the origin of the holes were soon answered, as she watched three inspectors climb into the back of a trader’s wagon, taking out what looked like an inspecting rod and piercing the sack from the top, extracting a sample of grain from the very center of the sack. The inspectors were thorough, checking each and every sack that the trader had till they were satisfied. “Alright, you’re clear. Move along.”

Those inspected sacks were then passed to Lisa and the two girls, who repaired it while the trader paid the lady in flowers for the haulers and sack repair. Lisa’s curiosity was temporarily satisfied, until the lady herself handed one of the girls a crate of small vials, their color dark yellow, clearly a potion ingredient. None of the haulers or girls under the employ of the lady said a word, simply moving about their jobs. Lisa watched the girl sow a single vial into the fabric of the sack, masking it with a newer fabric like a hidden pocket, while another group of boys slotted the vials into wooden crates, similarly hiding it as well.

The repaired sacks and crates returned to the trader, the trader paying the lady extra without exchanging a single word, far from the eyes of the inspector who were far too busy checking on the next trader wagon. Lisa had an inkling what was happening, but kept mum as she continued her work, moving along as her eyes never stopped wandering. *Where is she getting the vials from?* Lisa contemplated stealing the vials, knowing that it must be valuable. Yet the stable income was more important than whatever other thoughts she had, the image of Selas still suffering back in the tent continuously reminding her of what she needed to do.

As evening neared, the lady suddenly tapped Lisa on the back, handing her one tenar as promised by Hikub. “Come back tomorrow. You don’t need that token.” The lady simply stated as if it was apparent, leaving Lisa overjoyed at finally having a potential stable job. She bowed to the lady with great respect, before leaving happily while stowing the sliver coin away in her pockets, making sure to hide it from anyone else looking at her.

Lisa rushed to a run-down shack, the wooden boards rotting from moisture as mold and mushrooms festered on it while the tattered fabric covering the entrance was stained in blood. Ignoring the dipilidated state of the shop, she entered, being immediately surrounded by three armed men, each wielding a makeshift handheld weapon and glaring her down. They too were refugees, but clearly well-fed and well-trained to beat anyone who tried to rob the shop.

“I’m Lisa, I came here before, two days ago, to ask for a healing potion.” Lisa raised her arms in a surrender, with one of the armed guards patting her down, his rough hands slightly grazing across her chest without apology. She bore the shame with a stern expression as she was checked for weapons.

Earning the armed guard grunt of approval, Lisa pushed past them, running up to a fat old man who languished on a reclining chair behind a wooden display cabinet, sleeping with his face covered by a newspaper. “I’m here to buy a healing potion!” Lisa rasped her fingers against the dark polished wood, jolting the old man awake with a scare.

“Who- ah… it’s you again.” The old man yawned, stretching his arms. “Finally got enough for the next dose?”

“Here, four tenars.” Lisa proudly displayed four sliver coins in her hands, only to earn the old man’s chuckle.

“I’m sorry, but it’s six tenars now.”

“What?! You said it was four tenars two days ago, and I already bought one for four!”

“That was a first time discount.” The old man picked up the same dark yellow vial from a shelf behind him, swirling it about. “These things don’t come cheap, and they are much harder to come across nowadays.”

“I….” Lisa’s confident demeanour melted away, her voice faltering as she struggled to find a way to convince him. “Please, my friends are suffering.”

“I know. So I got a better deal for you. Two healing potions for one day’s ration allowance.”

Lisa nearly rejected the offer, but the healing potion was necessary to help the burn victims of the village heal. Yet it meant that she would not be able to eat nor drink for an entire day tomorrow, making it even tougher on her.

“Time’s ticking, my shop isn’t open forever. Who knows? Maybe tomorrow the deal might be differ-”

“I’ll do it. Here.” Lisa was about to hand over her ration card when the old man shook his head.

“The ration card is obviously tied to your name and identity. You’re going to pick it up now and get it back to me in two hours before sunset.”

“But the queue now is-”

“If you don’t want the healing potions, there are plenty of others I can sell my wares too.” The old man grinned. “I don’t need you, but you need me.”

Lisa clenched her fist, but decided not to retort. There was no way she could fight against his armed guards as well, and she would be hunted down by the Versian soldiers if she tried to rob the shop. “Fine. Don’t you dare change the deal again.”

“That’s up to me, not you. Better make a move, ration queue is getting longer.”

She stormed out of the shop, leaving the old man smiling back in the potion store. The despair began to well up in her heart, but at least she still had a shot at survival. *I can go one day without food, and for the water I’ll just try to scavenge it…*

Sprinting towards the ration distribution center nearby barely made the queue any shorter, Lisa finding herself stuck behind a line of nearly three hundred other refugees snaking into a large white tent guarded by soldiers - wailing babies, desperate mothers, famished and maimed men returning from work, their skin peeling from the intense heat they suffered in the day. Nobody had the energy or time to talk to anyone, but Lisa had no time to queue up. She carefully hid her face, walking up near the front of the queue where a clearly starving lady was struggling to remain standing on two feet.

“Two tenars, let me take your spot.” Lisa offered the lady quietly, but the lady only glowered at her with bloodshot eyes, shaking her head vigorously. “Three tenars, please I need the rations faster.”

“I’ve been in queue for more than four hours now!” The starving lady spat, her voice hoarse from the lack of water.

“Three tenars can buy you three meals!” Lisa urged.

“You think I’m an idiot? If others see you passing that much money to me, I’ll be jumped!”

“Four tenars.”

The lady didn’t respond for a while, her gaunt face glancing around quickly before hurriedly motioning to Lisa with a taut palm. Lisa quickly handed the four sliver coins over, the lady immediately leaving the queue and letting her take her spot with no additional fuss, third from the front.

Ignoring the grumbles and stares aimed at her, Lisa waited with bated breath, as it came to her turn, facing three Versian soldiers manning a simple booth, behind which was stocked with the very same sacks of grain and crates she had repaired in the day, other refugees worker in the back packing them into smaller satchels.

“Ration card? Remove your hood, please.” The soldier extended a hand, Lisa passing over her card, an empty flask and a small satchel before reluctantly removing the cloth covering her head. Immediately glares of disgust latched onto her from the soldiers, but they did not say anything, merely passing the satchels on to the refugees workers who began to pack grain and water into the satchel and flask respectively.

Lisa quickly wrapped her head again in cloth, the filled satchel and water handed back to her. However, as soon as she felt the weight of it, she knew that something was clearly wrong. “Uhm, sir… this doesn’t seem to be the right ration size?”

“Hmm? We’re reducing the rations sizes.” The soldier in charge stated nonchalantly. “You’re holding up the queue. Move.”

“But I saw the man in front of me receive a full flask and satchel. This is only three-quarters-”

“If you’re not going to move, this will be considered as obstruction. And know this - half-breeds aren’t treated well in the labour camps.” The soldier glared at Lisa.

A fiery rage began to well up in Lisa’s chest at the clear mistreatment, but she could also feeling the angry stares of the refugees queuing up behind, clearly also wanting her to move away as soon as possible. Resigning to her fate, Lisa left the ration distribution center with only three-quarters of a ration, wondering if the old man at the potion store would be still willing to at least pass her one healing potion at the minimum. She had her doubts, but still she had to try, her pace picking up once again, moving towards the potion store.

However, as soon as she turned the corner, a blunt pipe slammed right into her forehead, the force sending her tumbling onto the ground, disorientating while her mouth was filled with the taste of dirt and soot. She tried to flail her arms to fend off whoever attacked her, her eyes finally noticing that it was the starving lady she had given 4 tenars too. Lisa struggled to get to her feet, but the concussion had her head ringing non-stop, allowing the starving lady to grab her flask of water.

Lisa summoned whatever conscious strength she had and clinged onto her satchel of grain as tight as she could, kicking the lady away. The lady didn’t linger around, immediately sprinting off into the myriad of alleys with the stolen flask of water. “YOU!” Lisa roared in pain, but there was nothing she could do, still left groaning on the floor.

She gritted her teeth, her fists clenched tightly as she forced herself to stand, before stumbling towards the potion store, clear trickles of blood leaking down her forehead. Other refugees had clearly seen the attack, but no one lent a hand, not wanting to be involved. Some of them even began to follow Lisa, hoping to catch her off-guard if she ever let slip her guard.

Clutching her satchel to her body as tightly as she could, she made it back to the potion store, the armed guards astonished at the blood and dust coating Lisa from the sudden struggle. The old man on the other hand hardly raised an eyebrow even as Lisa tossed the grain satchel towards him.

“And the water?” The old man asked before noticing the weight of the satchel. “This is only half of the ration.”

“Stolen.” Lisa hardly had any energy left to speak, her breathing ragged as she tried to wipe some of the blood off with her head cloth.

The old man sighed, thinking about what to do next before finally deciding to hand Lisa a dark yellow potion. “Here. You only get one because-”

“It’s half. I know.” Lisa snatched the potion out of his hands, limping out of the store without another word. All of her hate and rage at her current scenario began to swirl in her mind non-stop, the throbbing blood thumping in her ears as the adrenaline began to build. When she finally returned to her allocated tent, she noticed that Selas had been left alone, the other villagers conspicuously missing. A fire began to burn in her soul, her fist clenched in anger until she heard Marah’s distinctive voice coming out from another tent, followed by shouts and sounds of a struggle.

Lisa moved over as quick as she could, only to see the villagers along with Marah and other strangers holding down another burn victim, who was fighting as hard as he could to break free. “What’s, what’s going on?!” Lisa stared in confusion at the frothing mouth of the burn victim, as if he had gone feral. “I, I have a healing potion here!” She raised the potion she bought in the air, the potion suddenly spurring the burn victim to push even harder, biting and snapping at any arm holding him down.

Marah swivelled to look at her, but instead of an answer, Lisa only got angry stares as an unknown stranger approached her. “I heard you were the one who bought the healing potions for him two days ago.”

“That’s right.” Lisa nodded with a slight mix of apprehension, afraid of what was about to come.

“Well, the potions are a dud. They have been diluted greatly and have been dosed with Euria Extract. He’s undergoing withdrawal right now.”

Lisa’s heart plummeted. “Wh-what..? No, but, the old man told me it would take a few days to-”

“Healing potions should heal within minutes, not days. Anything else is a diluted form. Whoever sold you the potion is planning on you being a repeat customer.”

Lisa’s words were stuck in her throat for a while, as her mind frantically tried to find a way out, a way to reverse what she had done. “But I’ve spent more than four tenars and rations on it, I… you must be an alchemist as well, right? You must know how to fix this!”

“I… I was just a village alchemist, nothing special. But for what you’re asking, It’s not going to be cheap. I can make a healing potion from scratch but I’ll need the raw ingredients. Poair Leaves, Griess Powder namely. I suspect with the demand in the refugee camp for such herbs, a single potion might cost about twenty denars.”

The burn victim finally calmed down, while Lisa returned to her own tent, distraught at what she had just wasted, sitting next to the sleeping Selas. *Twenty denars, that’s twenty days!* Her thoughts were interrupted by a groan from Selas, Lisa immediately bending over and checking his wounds. There were signs of slow regeneration, but it was far too slow, Selas’ face still in agony at the jolting pain he felt from the scars.

“Lisa… did you get it…?” Selas asked, his voice laced with hope.

“I… I’m still working on it. You can count on me, just rest as much as you can. I… I’ll handle it. We’ll get you back to your usual self in no time.” Lisa’s wavering voice tried to comfort Selas, but her tears already began to leak from the corner of her eyes as she changed Selas’s bandages once more.

As Selas began to drift back to sleep, Lisa resolved herself, heading back out into the center of the refugee camp once more. Even at night, the central square was still filled to the brim with refugees, there being work to be done even at night. Trench diggers and logistical haulers were all recruited for the improvements on Ocra’s fortifications, while soldiers off-duty searched for a fun night out. Lisa on the other hand, was searching for yet another lifeline out, the story of her days unchanging.

She found Hikub still at the same spot, handling job allocations and collecting a good commission for his efforts inside his own little converted wagon that was basically a permanent office with a quaint little table, guarded by two hired refugees. Hikub noticed the dishevled Lisa from afar, raising his eyebrows. “Didn’t expect you to see you at night, dear. If you don’t rest well before tomorrow, it would be tough for you to - you’re bleeding.”

“I’m here for that dinner date you mentioned. But I want thirty denars.”

“Oh? Daring, are we?” Hikub smiled, his gloved hands clapsing each other as he rested against a table. “I’m sorry, but thirty is beyond what I can offer. Best I can do is twenty, hows that? Why do you need that much anyway?”

“Twenty denars, deal.” Lisa ignored the prying question. “I need it now.”

“Hmm, we’ll need to doll you up a little though. We’ll need to cover that mark of yours.” Hikub rose from his chair, motioning for Lisa to follow him to a nearby shack, where the dense scent of Euria smoke hung low around the dim flickering arctech lantern, a luxury that many refugees did not have. Lisa glared warily at the obviously intoxicated men and woman lying on mats, smoking away as much as they could with dreamy smiles on their faces.

Lisa found herself attended to by two other girls, who stripped her and wiped the blood off her forehead, applying shoddy caked makeup and a simple dress, replacing her haggard look with a homely one. The bulk of the makeup was lathed onto her head after removing the cloth covering it. “Beautiful.” Hikub approved. As soon as Lisa was ready, she found herself whisked away in a wagon, brought to an entirely different part of the refugee camp that she had never been to before. Drunkards and raucous laughter reigned supreme in the nightlife, each shack seemingly offering alcohol and Euria seeds to Versian soldiers and traders alike. The wagon soon lurched to a halt outside what seemed to be a pub of sorts, a ear-shattering din continously emitting from inside.

“Don’t get cold feet dear. You need the money, so you do what you got to do.” Hikub reminded as Lisa left the wagon with him, following him into the blinding lights beyond the doorway. Instead of a pub, it was a full blown gambling den, filled to the brim with soldiers risking their daily wages away in the hopes of striking it rich. Dice, cards, cups and coinflips were all played on various tables, joyous laughter or cries of defeat erupting everywhere all at once, disorientating Lisa while Hikub led her to a table.

“Officer, your requested date.” Hikub bowed respectfully to a Versian officer still dressed in uniform, sipping on a glass of whiskey as he sat at a table of dice. The officer examined Lisa, looking her up and down, before nodding slightly. “She’ll do.” A pouch of money holding an unimaginable amount of tenars was passed to Hikub, a wide smile on his face as he left Lisa as quickly as he had arrived.

Lisa was about to shout after Hikub for her tenars, but Hikub had already disappeared into the crowd of gamblers. Already Lisa found herself cornered by the stares of Versian soldiers, all of whom glared at her, clearly indicating for her to sit down next to the officer. She gingerly sat down, the slightly drunk officer slinging his sweaty arms around her shoulders and dragging her closer. “High or low?”

“Sorry?”

“The dices. High or low?”

“Uhm… High?”

The officer tossed a larger golden coin, Lisa’s eyes bulging at the money being tossed around on the table as the other sergeants and corporals also tossed equal amounts. *That’s… that’s a hundred tenars!* The table’s dice dealer rolled the dice into a cup expertly, shaking it violently before slamming it onto the table, removing the cup to reveal a high number.

Immediately, the officer had a wide grin on his face, collecting his winnings. “Get this lady a special drink, she might be my lucky star today. For your efforts, dear.” The officer placed ten sliver coins in front of her, Lisa involuntarily gulping at what had just been offered to her. *Maybe… maybe this isn’t so bad after all.*

A waiter served her and the officer a shot glass of whiskey, the officer raising it in a toast to the others. “Time to win the night!” He roared, his soldiers under his command cheering back in response. Lisa too raised her glass, drinking along with them. However, as soon as the whiskey hit her throat, she could already feel something was wrong with the drink.

Her vision began to fade in and out, as her muscles slowly became stiffer, her eyes noticing her veins starting to turn a little purple. She tried to scream in panic, but her vocal cords were sluggish, only letting out a groan to earn the officer’s attention. “Are you okay, my lady? Do you need a rest?”

Lisa couldn’t speak, the officer’s face slightly worried as he tried to tap Lisa’s pulse on her wrist. “Sorry boys, have to take care of the lady.” Against her will, her body was dragged upstairs to a empty bedroom, the guarding soldiers hardly blinking at the sight of Lisa being carried by the officer. “No one comes in or out until I’m done.”

“Yes, sir.” The soldiers saluted, Lisa’s heart panicking as she strained herself, trying to move even just her finger. Instead, she could not control her body, the officer dumping her onto a rickety bed while he began to strip his uniform and his belt that holstered his handgun, placing them on the ground, his eyes barely looking at her as anything more than a simple product to be used.

She tried to close her eyes, but she couldn’t, only able to watch in horror as her dress as it was ripped apart forcibly, her mind spiralling into despair. Nearly everything in the refugee camp had worked against her, her own naivety exploited without her knowledge. Even though she could not shut her eyes, she began to accept her fate, preparing to watch what was to come.

Suddenly, a loud scream and gun pellets erupted from the corridor outside the room, resulting in more screams and shrieks erupting from the lower floor, the officer stopping mid-action. Without saying a word, the officer immediately grabbed the handgun from the belt on the ground, aiming it at the door. “Sergeant Moras?! What’s going on out there?”

“Sir, someone is atta-” The sergeant’s voice was cut out by the sound of scraping metal against bone, a loud thud indicating a body collapsing in the corridor. The officer’s face paled as he gripped his handgun’s handle tightly, aiming at the door.

Before he could react, the door was blasted off its hinge, kicked with such force that the door slammed right into him, the handgun sailing through the air while his body was sent tumbling onto the ground, his head crashing against the floor. The moment the officer tried to recover, a man was already ontop of him, the sole of his boots stomping down onto his arm and crushing the bone deeply, a scream of pain leaving the officer’s mouth.

The officer tried to raise his other hand to push the man’s foot off of his pinned arm, but the man instead wielded a makeshift stick up high, one laced with sharp glass shards trickling with blood. In a brutal downward swing he grated deep into the officer’s arm, the officer yelling even harder. “ARGHHHH! YOU! Don’t you know I am an Versian officer-”

But the man did not relent on his attack, slamming the modified stick down again and again onto the officer, his pleas and words slowly muffled by the blood gushing out from his wounds, smothering his mouth. Each violent blow tore and ripped out more of the officer’s flesh, flaying him naked and disfiguring his face. Soon, the officer’s hand collapsed to the floor, lifeless as the man continued pounding the dead body before finally being satisfied.

The man glanced at Lisa, Lisa immediately recoiling from the blood that covered his’s demonic expression as he approached closer, checking Lisa’s arms and the purple veins. Pulling out an arctech radio in his belt, the man began to speak with a familiar voice. “Sasha, I found her. I need a antidote ready when I get back.”

*Culo!? Since when he was this strong?* Lisa wanted to scream with joy, but she could not move an inch. Culo smiled at her as he wrapped her up in the bedsheet, protecting her modesty while lifting her onto her shoulders, his body stronger than ever.

“Don’t worry, Lisa. This time, I’ll save the village.”

# Chapter 102 - Insurgency

[“The sovereignty of the Versian nation is at stake! Join your fellow comrades in arms, and fight for freedom and representation away from the tyranny of the Emperor!”] The same old announcement blared out into the bustling refugee camp, accompanied by the slow rumbling tremors while the military arctech wagon rattled across the dusty street, its exhaust billowing plumes of dust against cowering refugees who hid their faces from the escorting soldiers.

Lisa groaned, her eyelids heavy as she found herself lying flat on a thatched sheet in the middle of what seemed to be a cramped abandoned shop of sorts, empty pots and jugs dangling from threads hooked to deformed bedframes suspended in the ceiling. Specks of light flickered in through the perforated canopy above, the air filled with the usual stench of muddy earth and decay. She no longer worn the ripped dress which she had been raped in, instead covered by a thick blanket weaved from multiple coarse fabrics, one she recognized to be used for sacks. She tried to move her right arm, but it was as if she was laden with lead in her veins, the muscles sluggish.

A familiar hand rested on her arm, gripping it firmly. Lisa could feel the callouses in its palm rubbing coarsely against her wrist. “Don’t move, the more you exert, the more the effects will linger in your body.”

“C-Culo…” Lisa found her voice cracking, her throat parched as though she had just traversed a vast desert before. “When did you return?”

“Two weeks ago.” Culo gently put the lid of a flask against her lips, letting her sip carefully. “I only heard recently that you guys were at the refugee camp. What happened to the village?”

Lisa tried to respond, but instead began to choke on the water, though she did her best to keep in it instead of letting it spill out of her mouth. Water was precious here, and the sight of Lisa struggle to save every drop made Culo’s heart plummet.

“We’re going to have to wait here for a bit, let the heat die out before we move. Probably till nighttime, when there are less soldiers patrolling.” Culo explained while he peered through a crack between the corrugated metal walls of the abandoned shop, eyeing the patrolling soldiers harassing refugees nearby.

Lisa swallowed hard, letting out a relaxed sigh. “The village… we were attacked, our houses burnt from artillery fire.”

Culo’s eyes narrowed in suspicion while he still kept watch. “Artillery fire? Who told you that?”

“There was a Versian squad who came to us, they wanted us to evacuate-” Lisa’s heart skipped a beat as she suddenly saw Culo’s angry face swivelling to glare at her.

“That’s a lie, the Versian soldiers just wanted to pillage you.”

“But we did get bombed later in the day, just as they predicte-”

“Of course it’s just as they predicted.” Culo spat with a fiery rage boiling in his chest. “They were the ones who bombed you! The military exercise isn’t anywhere near enough to be able to hit the village.”

“What? How do you know?”

“Look at the refugees streaming into this camp. All of them have the same story - attacked by Raktor soldiers, bombed by artillery fire. Thousands of them all across the region of Ocra. Weird, huh, that there’s so many skirmishes happening but the Versian army is still ‘mobilising’. What a coincidence.”

It was a bit hard for Lisa to swallow, but after all of the terrible things that has happened to her in the refugee camp, she was more than inclined to believe Culo. It was far worse to imagine that it was the result of sheer incompetence that her life had fallen to such a stage. However, she suddenly recalled something important. “Culo, your brother, he was hired by Harrison Industries. He was on a wagon to Tenar!”

Culo stared blankly at Lisa, stunned for a moment before letting out an exasperated sigh. “… shit.” He walked back towards a rickety old chair, slumping down into it. “I knew this would happen. What did they promise him?”

“I wasn’t there for the meeting, but he said he’ll try to get us balloted into Tenar…”

“Another lie.” Culo waved his hands dismissively. “This whole refugee camp, the skirmishes, the attacks, it’s all a ploy to drive people into here.”

“But why? Why would anyone do this? Many of us are suffering here for no reason at all.”

“It is exactly that suffering that is being exploited. When times are desperate, people will cling onto anything. Anything that can save them. That can feed them. In events like this, the simplest answer to who would have done it, is by seeing who profits the most from it.”

Lisa watched as another wagon rolled past the abandoned shop through the boarded up windows, the side of the wagon plastered with big letters. “Harrison Industries. Why is the government not stopping them?”

“The new acting president most likely must be working with Harrison.” Culo muttered as he pulled out a unfamiliar rifle from behind his chair, checking its barrel to make sure it was all clean. “What about the rest of the village? Where are they?”

“They are separated into different sections. Selas and Marah are with me, but Selas had been burnt badly by the attack. I tried to buy some healing potions for him-”

“But they were laced with addictive Euria.”

“How did you know-”

“We’re the ones smuggling them.”

“We…?” Lisa mumbled before she realized what Culo had just said, fury rising in her body as she struggled to get up. “You…. you’re the ones who made everything worse!” She whispered angrily, still cognisant of their current situation.

“Lisa, you need to rest-” Culo got off his chair and tried to coax Lisa back into lying down, but she swiped off Culo’s arm fiercely.

“How can I rest when you are the ones actively hurting the refugees!? Your addictive potions are causing everyone to spiral even harder into poverty and depression!” Lisa tried to smack Culo on the cheek, but Culo caught her wrist mid-air, stopping her weakened arm easily.

“Firstly, I don’t sell to the refugees directly. I don’t control who sells what. I’m not the police, the military, or the government. I’m just another man, another face in the camp. And as of this stage, morals be damned if we want to achieve what we were sent here to do.”

“Who is this ‘we’ you keep talking about?! Who twisted you, Culo? You used to be -”

“I don’t like who I used to be!” Culo fumed in a sharp hushed voice, before relaxing a little. “I was weak. Naive. Blind to how the world works. In this life, if you don’t fight for what you deserve, you will never get it. Have you not learnt from everything that has happened to you?! The treatment of us half-breeds, the mark they seared into your forehead? Morals won’t save you from being raped. Only strength, money and power will.”

Lisa could stare at Culo’s face in horror. “Well the whole reason I was in that position was because of that same potions!” She snatched her wrist away from Culo’s grasp, retreating under the blanket in anger.

Culo didn’t linger too long, returning to his chair and checking his rifle and other weapons available to him. The silence between the two of them reigned for the better part of an hour, the sounds of fights over rations and lamenting of mothers over dying children washing over the abandoned stall. As time passed, Lisa kept replaying the traumatic scene of last night, betrayed by Hikub and sold off as just another body to be raped, the memories vivid even as she closed her eyes, trying to sleep. Her stomach soon began to rumble, famished from having not eaten anything at all, her rations having been stolen and sold off as well.

A tapping sound and the smell of braised meat caught Lisa’s attention, pulling her out of her depressive spiral. She turned to see Culo cracking open a can of preserved beef, pouring it onto a half cracked bowl and carrying it towards her. Sitting up relcutantly while still clutching the coarse blanket close to her body, she finally broke the silence. “Sorry… you’re right.”

“No, you’re right.” Culo placed the bowl of braised beef on a nearby table. “If I didn’t sell the potions, maybe Akola would not have gotten his wares to sell a diluted version of ours to you. Ours are far more effective.”

“But still addictive.”

“That’s the only way we can hook the Versian soldiers, especially when they come out from training. Huge demand for the stamina potions.”

Lisa nodded, gingerly lifting the bowl with one hand and bringing the lid closer to her lips. She slurped on the tasty sauce and chunks of meat, a luxury that felt like a lifetime ago. Her face began to scrounge up in despair, tears welling up in her eyes. “Culo, what did we do to deserve any of this? All we’ve done is live in our little corner of the world, and that has been enough for generations… why now? Why us?”

Culo stared at the crack between the metal sheets, the light from outside streaming in, unable to look at the crying Lisa. “I don’t know why, nor what we did. But I know how to move forward. To make sure this never happens again to us.”

@@@@@

Night soon fell upon the refugee camp, the nightlife as raucous as ever. Lisa awoke again to see Culo gearing up, wearing what seemed to be knight arctech armour before covering it with ragged cloths to mask it.

“Time to move.”

“Move where?”

“Back to our hideout. It should be safe now. Here, I found a garb for you. Just cover your head with the blanket.” Culo tossed over a few shabby stained clothes, found among the trashpiles just outside the abandoned shop. While Lisa got dressed, he peeked out, keeping an eye for patrols.

As soon as Lisa was done, Culo motioned to her with his fingers tracing over his lips, Lisa instantly recognizing it as the sign they used when they were kids, hunting deer in the Keru Forest. She nodded, keeping her mouth shut and wrapping her face up, ready to move.

The two exited the shop, huddling together like a couple as they snaked through the burgeoning nightlife that now filled the street. For all intents and purposes, they looked like another couple trying to find a place to let loose some steam.

Lisa kept her vision low, only looking ahead at the muddy water pooling in uneven ditches on the road, yet from her peripheral vision she could see other girls being led into gambling dens much like the one she had been raped in. She tugged on Culo’s sleeves, but Culo shook his head. “We can’t save everyone. Save ourselves first!” He whispered.

As they moved along, Culo spotted a few patrolling soldiers reporting to a Versian sergeant. “Sarge, didn’t find anyone who said they were with the Ghosts of Versia! They also didn’t know anything about a officer being killed!” A young fresh refugee recruit saluted, his uniform fitting loosely while his face gleamed, clearly attempting to impress the sergeant.

“Idiot, who the hell would say that they are with the Ghosts of Versia if you ask them?!” The sergeant smacked the refugee recruit in the head lightly. “Grab those who look suspicious and haul them all to me, I’ll make them talk!”

Culo held a light smirk as he and Lisa weaved through the myriad of haphazard tents and makeshift buildings, losing the patrolling soldiers before reaching near the walls of Ocra. The refugee camp had already melded against the walls of Ocra, only seperated by a large trench filled with barbed wire to prevent refugees from scaling the walls.

Instead of navigating through the barbed wire for all the city guards to see, Culo instead diverted towards what seemed like an outhouse, the smell of excretion pooling in a shallow hole forcing Lisa to pinch her nose tight. Culo ignored the stench, going around to the back of the outhouse where there was a small little trapdoor, unlatching it to reveal a ladder that descended into an unknown depth.

“After you.” Culo motioned, closing the lid after Lisa had clambered down the ladder. She found herself in a tight tunnel that could barely fit one person’s shoulder width, forcing her to squeeze through in the pitch black darkness.

While she groped her way in the darkness, her hands suddenly knocked against something clearly metallic, a door blocking her path. The door opened to reveal two rifle barrels pointed right at her face, wielded by what seemed to be young female recruits nearly the same age as Lisa was. Lisa let out a yelp in fear, almost doubling back into Culo directly.

“It’s me, stand down. Where’s Sasha?” Culo revealed himself, sticking his head beyond Lisa’s shoulders.

“What’s the code?”

“Geraldine, it’s me, Culo, I-”

“What’s the code?!” The female recruit jabbed the barrel towards the two of them.

“By day she smiles, by night she smites.”

The two female recruits finally let down their guards, extending their hands to help Lisa out of the tunnel into a brightly lit room carved underground, the only furnishing being the tunnel’s trapdoor, a single exit door, and the three arctech lanterns above. “Sasha’s waiting in the command room.” Geraldine answered without emotion, though she scrutinized Lisa from head to toe. “Is this your girlfriend?”

“What?” Culo and Lisa exclaimed in unison.

“Yea, must be.” Geraldine seemed self-satisfied with the answer. “Only reason why you would kill an officer this blatantly.”

“Urgh….” Culo groaned, dragging Lisa away from the two gossiping female recruits. He swung the exit door open, revealing a small tavern of sorts, the tables and chairs filled to the brim with similar recruits, all of whom wielded rifles slung to their bodies. Lisa gulped instinctively as they locked eyes with hers, Culo hurriedly dragging her through the tavern before reaching an inconspicous door, entering the command room.

Lisa had already been surprised at the amount of people living underground, though she was far more shocked at the quality of the food and drinks they had. What surprised her even more was the command room, which was dominated by a large map of Versia placed on a stone table, marked by squiggly handwriting over almost all major cities and towns.

While Lisa was gazing at the map, Culo himself was nervous, his gaze catching that of Sasha who’s elbows were resting on the table, her hands clasped as she glowered at him, her mood clear as day.

“Look, I know what I did was wrong…” Culo began, but Sasha didn’t respond, merely holding up two fingers that immediately made Culo flustered, far from the confident Culo that Lisa had witnessed over the last few hours. “Two… days? Sorry, I can’t interpret your signs and expression like Merissa can, I- two weeks?! He’s coming in two weeks?”

“Sorry, who’s coming in three weeks?” Lisa blurted out without thinking, the glare of Sasha now resting on her directly. Culo immediately stepped in between the two of them, smiling nervously.

“Sasha, meet Lisa, my current village chief. She has good potential to be a leader, and with her she can gather more manpower through the rest of my village. They are good guys, I swear, I knew them all my life. I’ll make killing that officer worth it.”

The intensity of Sasha’s glare weakened, as she got up from her seat, eyeing Lisa from all angles. Picking up a pen, Sasha scribbled quickly onto a piece of paper, handing it over to Lisa, who read it quickly.

*Do you seek strength, or righteousness?*

“Say ye-” Culo’s words were instantly cut off by Sasha, who shoved him aside, forcing Lisa to answer on her own accord.

“I don’t want strength for strength alone. I want both. I want the strength to be righteous.” Lisa replied with determination, locking eyes with Sasha for a good few moments until Sasha nodded in response, motioning to Culo.

“Right, I’ll get Geraldine to train her. Thank you, Sasha. And no, she’s not my girlfriend, I can tell from that look.” Culo hastily urged Lisa out of the command room, back out into the tavern before Lisa finally had enough, spinning on her heels and forcibly stopping Culo in his tracks.

“I think it’s high time that you explain to me what is going on. Who are these people, how did you get involved with them?! Who was that lady, and what are you aiming for?” Lisa shot her questions off in a rapid-fire fashion.

“Okay.” Culo sat her down at an empty tavern table. “We’re the Ghosts of Versia.”

“I figured. What are we aiming to do?”

“Take down the current Versian state, most of all Harrison Industries.” Geraldine’s voice interrupted them before Culo could continue, Geraldine herself sitting down next to Lisa on the same wooden bench. “Isn’t that what you’re here for?”

“I’m not here for something as grand as that, I’m just here because…”

“Because you were raped.” Geraldine placed it bluntly. “And you’re not the only one here. Look around. Don’t you notice that there’s more ladies than men in here? That’s because the Versian military has been picking up the boys mostly, leaving the ladies to be comfort women or slaving away for a pittance. Well FUCK THAT!” She slammed her fist on the table, earning the attention of the other recruits around.

“Yea, fuck that! We deserve to be free, not under the thumb of the fucking Versian State!” Another recruit agreed, pumping his fist into the air.

“The Ghosts of Versia fights for a free Versia, one without tyranny!”

“FOR A FREE VERSIA!” The rest of the tavern echoed back in a loud cheer, nearly deafening Lisa.

“And it seems that you are our newest comrade. You must have seen it yourself, our people herded like cattle, treated like trash, ripped of everything they own to become another cog in a machine geared for a war that might never happen!” Geraldine wrapped her arms around Lisa. “Don’t you feel anger at those who have wronged you? Those who had cast you aside like another sack of meat to rape and fuck?”

The memories of the rape came flooding back into Lisa’s mind, overwhelming her emotions as she suddenly felt a sense of comradery among the recruits in front of her. Finally there were people like her willing to fight back against the injustice, to fight against the wrongs, the crimes and the sins levied against her village. “I am.”

Geraldine scoffed. “That’s all you got to say? Say you’re angry! Say it!”

“I’m angry!” Lisa gritted her teeth, her fist clenched as she pictured the officer who drugged her, Hikub who had betrayed her, Akola who had duped her, the lady who had stolen her rations - everything wrong so far scrounged up into her balled fists.

“Not good enough! Say I’m angry as hell and I’m not going to take it anymore!”

“I’m angry as hell and I’m not going to take it anymore!”

“I’M ANGRY AS HELL AND I’M NOT GOING TO TAKE IT ANYMORE!” Geraldine roared.

“I”M ANGRY AS HELL AND I’M NOT GOING TO TAKE IT ANYMORE!” Lisa too let out all her anger and sorrow into a powerful shout that was followed by cheering from the other recruits who began to pat and swarm her.

“Damn right. You’ll be a damn good Ghost once we’re done training you.” Geraldine grinned as she smacked Lisa’s back amdist the crowd.

While the recruits clamoured and cheered the night away, Culo returned to the command room, where Sasha was still plotting lines, drawing marking between cities. Sasha eyed Culo from the periphery of her vision, scribbling on a piece of paper and handing it to him.

“No, I didn’t tell her the truth. She’ll act better as a leader if she doesn’t know. We can send her ahead after a week of basic training with Geraldine to Tenar to setup.”

Sasha mulled over the potential plan, before tapping another mark on the map, though Culo shook his head. “Desham and Creuliz can be set up later - the most important cities to infiltrate are Tenar and Ocra. Tenar is even more important now that I have this piece of information.” Culo retrieved a letter from his inner armour, the letter seal still stained with the blood of the officer he killed.

Ripping the letter, Sasha read it carefully before her eyes widened, raising her hand to mockingly punch Culo, who held up his two hands in surrender. “I couldn’t show you the letter with Lisa around!”

That appeased Sasha, but she still moved in a hurry, quickly drawing up a new series of plans, marking random Xs and search areas all around the outskirts of Tenar, before labelling them with numbers. Culo instantly got the gist, nodding his head. “I’ll get three teams, we’ll have the route ascertained. As soon as Kyle arrives, we’ll be in position to take down Harrison in one fell swoop.”

# Chapter 103 - International Expansion

*Two weeks later…*

The sweltering heat blasted down on the dry, cracked earth of the refugee camp, and the devastation it wrought on the surroundings has spread even further in the months since its establishment. More and more streamed in from neighboring villages and towns, evacuating in the hopes of escaping to Tenar. Yet not all were brought here against their own will.

The snaking queue to enter the camp was jam-packed with refugees lugging everything precious to them, cowering under flimsy makeshift cloths to shield them from the blistering heat and the gusts of dirt that surge through the queue at regular periods. In the midst of the queue, a young, hopeful man gaped in awe of the looming walls of Ocra that seemed to block the entirety of the horizon beyond, the rest dotted by secondary forts laid out in defensive positions overlooking the desecrated fields.

As he took in the view, he suddenly was forcibly shoved aside by a rough meaty hand against his shoulder, his body toppling to the floor while his mouth tasted the dusty ground. Infuriated, he scrambled back to his feet, intending to fight the man who pushed him out of the queue, only to recoil, intimidated at the sight of the man instantly.

He bore countless black swirling tattoos that glistened under the light across his tanned body, some of which seemed to be counting into the hundreds. In his burly left hand was a long metal arctech chain attached to the handcuffs of two prisoners trailing behind him, the prisoners’ heads covered in a thick black sack that blocked their vision. The young man yelped in fright, scampering away from the trio, unwilling to fight the tattooed man who was clearly intending to sell the prisoners.

His vicious eyes scanned the motley queue ahead of him, mostly composed of terrified refugees unwilling to risk any conflict. Those who met his gaze immediately stepped aside, allowing him to walk closer and closer to the entrance of the refugee camp, save for one brave soul: a grimy, soot-covered blacksmith, his arms as thick as logs. He crossed one over the other, standing firmly in place and stopped the tattooed man dead in his tracks with an equally fearsome glare.

“Who said you could just waltz in like-” The blacksmith barely got the words out of his mouth when the knuckles of the tattooed man’s right fist collided with his jaw in an instant, the force cracking apart the bone beneath and sending him sprawling onto the ground, blood spilling out his mouth.

The tattooed man ignored the screams and cries of the blacksmith’s family, merely gurgling and spitting a glob of saliva and mucus on the ground before pointedly stepping over the blacksmith’s body towards the front of the queue. This time, no one else dared to raise a finger against him, the line of refugees parting like frightened Tusken Rabbits in the daytime. A slight grin appeared on his face, clearly elated by the pride and respect now awarded to him.

Unfortunately, the Versian soldiers guarding the queue were far less intimidated. Three recruits immediately aimed their rifles at the tattooed men, fanning out and surrounding him. “Put the chain down and place your hands in the air!” one of the recruits shouted nervously, the small shaking in his grip visible while the barrel wobbled.

The tattooed man turned to face the nervous recruit, his eyes boring deep into the recruit’s soul as he spoke slowly. “Boy. You better get someone here who actually recognizes these tattoos, or you’re going to have a terrible time in Ocra.”

“Wha…” The nervous recruit blinked rapidly, trying to process the statement in his head before a sudden hand grabbed his rifle’s barrel and forced it down. Training kicked in, and the recruit launched an elbow toward his unknown assailant only to find out that it was his sergeant in charge.

“Recruit! What the fuck do you think you’re doing to our esteemed veteran?!” The sergeant roared directly into his ear, nearly deafening him. Out of confusion, the other two recruits lowered their rifles as well while the sergeant stormed forward, grabbing all three of them into a line. “Can’t you see the damn ranks on his neck? This man fought in the independence war, honorably discharged as an officer! You better apologize right this instance-”

“No need for that, Sergeant Kola.” The tattooed man patted the sergeant on the shoulder. “Instead of us standing around out in this heat, maybe we can get a drink together.”

“O-Of course, Makoa, sir!” Kola hurriedly saluted, his boots clicking together in a military posture.

“I’m not an officer anymore, Kola, relax.” Makoa chuckled.

“You’ll always be my officer, sir.”

“Then maybe you can pay for that drink. I am pretty thirsty - walked a long way.”

“Yes, yes… what about those two?”

“These two?” Makoa scoffed as he tugged on the chain, one of the prisoners staggering forward from the sudden jerk. “Some Yual dogs I caught trying to smuggle Versian refugees across the border. Was hoping they would be worth something.”

“We don’t deal with slavery here in the military.” Kola’s face darkened slightly, only to have Makoa breaking out in laughter.

“Kola, Kola, still a stuck-up as always. Who said I was selling them to you? That’s my business. Now, are you going to let me in or not?”

“Yes, yes, of course.” Kola immediately motioned for the gate to the refugee camp to be opened, a creaky flimsy metallic fence gate balanced on weak hinges swinging open, the recruits saluting Makoa as he and Kola walked past into a crowded street. The street was filled to the brim with slimy foremen and pimps ready to pick off the next fresh refugee that walked through the gate, while other starving refugees waited with bated breath in the recesses between tents, hoping to pick up the leftovers from any fights or scuffles. They were clearly disappointed when they saw the burly Makoa entering instead flanked by Sergeant Kola. Many quickly dispersed and acted aloof when the two of them walked past.

“Interesting setup you got going here,” Makoa remarked as they moved through the dense waves of people surging to and fro, though most of the refugees made way for them, unwilling to tangle with the Versian military soldiers. Makoa could already see a few angry stares at his chains, dragging the two prisoners in cuffs behind him. The two prisoners stumbled and tripped over rocks and pebbles, unable to see their steps clearly through the black sacks wrapped around their heads. Some even began to trail them, following them through the crowd at a distance.

“We had to do what we can to save the people. This looks bad, but when the war starts, I’d rather them be alive here under protection than dead. We have multiple layers of defensive lines ready to stop any Yual advance. Secondary forts, trenches, you name it.” Kola replied, kicking a broken basket out of the way while his hand gripped a handgun on his belt tightly, ready to pull it at any moment.

“You look a little on-edge given all the ‘protection’ you just mentioned.” Makoa motioned to the handgun that Kola was gripping, noticing Kola’s nervous glances towards a few seedy individuals in the crowd.

“You don’t know the half of it. Some of the refugees have managed to arm themselves and carve zones of control through the camps. Attacks on soldiers aren’t exactly new.”

“What’s new? Same shit in the last war. I wouldn’t have expected anything different from Masir.”

“Forget Masir - sure, he was the biggest gang in Ocra, and he still is, but with such a high influx of refugees, cliques and groups are being formed and broken apart on a daily basis, fighting for rations non-stop. Let’s talk somewhere else where your prisoners will stop drawing so much attention.” Kola motioned towards a seedy-looking shop, pushing past the curtain to reveal a small rundown bar with dilapidated tables and rickety chairs, mostly empty save for an old scrawny bartender cleaning and the light crackle of an arctech radio hung on the damp countertop.

[Acting President Monero has vouched that he will do everything to secure peace with Raktor in spite of recent rising tensions but will also not reduce the expansion of the Versian Military. Here’s what he had to say at yesterday’s peace negotiations.] The Versian news blurted out on the radio as Makoa and Kola took a seat at a secluded table near the back corner of the bar, the prisoners chained to a pillar nearby. [“While peace negotiations are certainly a possibility, our sovereignty will never be challenged again. Having rooted out the source of corruption in our government, we must take further steps to ensure that we can defend the rights we have come to love and adopt. Every Versian must do his part to protect our state from the tyranny of the Yual Dominion!”]

“Anything you’ll like? What about an Euria wine? They are quite popular these days.” Kola turned around to face the board hanging above the bar, not noticing Makoa let out an involuntary shudder.

“Perhaps just a simple glass of water to start with before we move on to the hard stuff. I’m thirsty.” Makoa suppressed his nervousness.

“Never expected to hear a drunkard like you say that, but sure.” Kola raised his hand to the old, scrawny bartender, motioning with two fingers.

“Make that four glasses,” Makoa called out.

The bartender shot a quick glance at the two prisoners, nodding his head. Kola turned back, eyeing Makoa suspiciously. “You’re acting surprisingly nice to those two prisoners. Didn’t you say they were nobodies?”

“Can’t have them dying on me before I sell them off. You know Masir wouldn’t take a defective product.”

“When I said I was going to treat you to a drink, I didn’t mean I’d treat them too.”

“Put it on my tab. I’ll have the cash after I sell them.” Makoa leaned back onto the wooden chair, the frame creaking slightly under the weight.

Kola let out a mirthless laughter while the bartender served them the glasses of water along with a jug for refill. “I seem to recall you had a tab here in Ocra a long time ago, too. Wonder if anyone recalls it.”

“I sure as hell don’t.” Makoa swirled the water in his glass before gulping it down in one go.

Kola watched Makoa swirled the water in his glass, before he gulped it down in one go. “What are you really here for, Makoa? Last I heard you got busted in Raktor for some unknown reason. I thought you were in jail.”

“Well, here am I.” Makoa stretched out his hand with a wide grin. “Tasting freedom. Can’t I return to where I was born after suffering in prison?”

“I can’t say it’s the same Ocra you remember.”

“Seems that way.” Makoa murmured as he refilled his glass again. “I’m pretty much running blind here.”

Kola squinted his eyes. “What would you have done if I wasn’t on shift guarding the refugee camp gate?”

“Same old, same old. Break a few heads, loosen a few mouths. Much easier to have a friend tell me everything. You were saying something about Masir before we entered.”

“If you’re thinking about rejoining Masir, don’t bother. Nobody has seen him for days; he’s been in hiding for a good long while, ever since the new kids on the blocks came into town.”

“New kids on the block?”

Kola leaned forward, whispering to Makoa in a hushed tone. “The Ghosts of Versia.”

Makoa scanned Kola’s face before a loud, unprompted laugh erupted from his mouth, slapping the table uncontrollably. “HAH! Why are you whispering like a lady wanting to elope? What kind of stupid name is that? Who the hell had that kind of naming sens-” Suddenly, Makoa caught a glint, a fearsome glare from one of the prisoners chained to the nearby pillar, sending shivers down his spine as he backtracked his words. “I mean, they do sound a bit dangerous, no doubt, but why the need to whisper?”

Kola hardly noticed Makoa’s erratic behavior, far more concerned with making sure no one else was in the bar. “The Versian military hasn’t officially recognized the gang, so they’ve banned any discussion about it. But ever since they killed an officer out in the open two weeks ago, things have been getting much bloodier.”

“Bloodier…? You’re the damn military! If I was still an officer, I would taken a squad and wipe them all out.”

“That’s the thing - we can’t pinpoint their hideout. It isn’t anywhere in the refugee camp, even when we raided multiple locations provided by our informants. And surprisingly, we’re not the ones suffering the most damage.”

“It’s Masir.” Makoa summarized, earning a nod from Kola. “So these… ‘Ghosts’ are currently set to takeover Ocra?”

“Right now, it could be said that the Ghosts run the majority of the refugee camp, but Masir still rules the city proper. As I said, no one has seen Masir come out yet.”

“Maybe hiding like a little pussy.”

“Don’t say that in public, still loads of Masir’s men vying for control in the camp. You never know when they are listening in.”

“Still paranoid as always.” Makoa shrugged off Kola’s concern. “I doubt Masir even remembers me at all…. enough about him anyway. What’s the deal with the war now? I heard they were going to try some negotiations?”

“Maybe… but I doubt it would come to anything. From our view, Count Leon’s military exercises have continuously pushed the limit. Some of its artillery fire has hit villages and towns nearby, resulting in the creation of this refugee camp. I don’t see how the citizens of the Yual Dominion can support such an action.”

Makoa simply nodded in agreement while he sipped on the glass of water, not revealing too much of his involvement in the stealing of military tech from Raktor. “Seems like we’re both in for a rough ride.”

“Seems that way… what are you going to do now?” Kola ventured.

“Not much. Sell them prisoners, then work out a plan to gamble my way into the capital. Should be the safest there, I’m done with anything Yual Dominion.” Makoa stretched his arms, rising to get up before Kola suddenly stopped him, Kola putting his hands on Makoa’s shoulders.

“Hey, hey, what’s the hurry? You just got back to Ocra; we should reminisce longer.” Kola smiled nervously, trying to get Makoa to sit down.

Makoa squinted his eyes. “Kola….you’re not just a sergeant now, are you?”

“Makoa, I-”

“If you’re going to try to trap me here, you’re going to need more than a handgun.” Makoa threatened.

“Oh, we got more than just a handgun. Twelve of them, in fact.” A familiar voice wafted in from the front of the bar, leading a dozen men who began to filter in through the tables and chairs towards Makoa.

“Masir.” Makoa gritted his teeth, standing to his full height as Masir’s men all surrounded his table, while Kola quickly scrambled to the other side of the bar behind Masir. “What did you do to Kola?”

“Nothing much, nothing much at all. He just owes me a little favor, and it seems that with such a big catch, it is duly returned.” Masir patted Kola’s back with a hand adorned with five rings, each glistening with a different jewel, exuding wealth. He adjusted his flamboyant yellow shirt’s collar and pants, both of which were clearly tailor-made to fit, a stark contrast to the thin, rugged clothes Makoa and his prisoners wore. “You, on the other hand, have a very big favor to return. Interest racks up after seven years, you know?”

“Heard you were squirrelling away in your little hideout, afraid of the Ghosts of Versia. Still making your little henchmen doing all the work?” Makoa shot back with derision as he eyed Masir’s dozen henchmen closing in around him.

“Kola is such a good liar now.” Masir chuckled, strolling through the bar up to Makoa calmly, each step resounding with a rich click against the hardwood floor boards. He held a smile on his face as he approached, before suddenly unleashing a brutal left hook that knocked Makoa over his chair, toppling onto the ground. “You think I’m some bitch who’s afraid of some new stuck-up Ghosts? Fucking country cunts who think they can run the show. They don’t know half of what it takes to run Ocra Haul him back to the Chopping Block.” Masir ordered his men while his gaze landed on the two prisoners still chained to the ceiling, one of whom was clearly scared out of his wits. “Who do these two belong to?”

“Makoa’s prisoners, apparently. He was intending to sell them off.” Kola hurriedly replied from afar.

“Intending to sell them off?! Without even thinking of greeting me?” Masir exclaimed in mock surprise, looking at Makoa, who was restrained by four men.

“I was planning to pay you off with the proceeds from their sale.”

“Ah, a convenient plan. You might as well have gone with the birthday present excuse. It is my birthday tomorrow, so I’ll be taking these two for myself.”

“You little-” Makoa tried to struggle but earned another fist from one of Masir’s henchmen into his mouth, his gum now bleeding profusely from the successive hits. The four men hauled him onto their shoulders, carrying him like a coffin as they exited the bar, while Masir led the two prisoners along with the chain, tossing a tenar to the bartender. Kola had already scampered off, running back to his sergeant post.

Outside, Makoa’s body was paraded through the refugee camp under the daylight, the four men intermittently beating him up on public display, instilling fear into anyone who saw them. “MASIR IS IN CHARGE AROUND HERE!” One of the henchmen roared as loud as he could into the ever-growing crowd of refugees clamoring to see the commotion. “NOT THE BLOODY DUO, NOT THE GHOSTS - MASIR, AND ONLY MASIR!”

Masir smiled for a while as he led the procession through the sea and bustle of refugees which naturally carved out to form a straight path. Yet there were still a few newer refugees who had just entered, unaware of what was happening. One of them, a starving lady, accidentally bumped into Masir and tumbled onto the floor, her rations spilling out onto the ground while the nearby refugees began to scramble for the free pickings.

“STOP!” Masir bellowed, the crowd of refugees freezing in motion, none of them daring to even move a single inch while he walked up to the lady and bent down, picking up the dropped flask of water. Surprisingly, he handed it back to the lady without another word, and even helped her pick up a sack of grain.

“Thank you, thank you!” The lady bowed profusely, clearly grateful for the assistance.

Masir held a gentle smile, patting the lady on the shoulder. “If you ever need help, you know who to find.” He returned to the procession, leading his men back to their destination. However, as soon as he was out of earshot, he motioned to another henchman, pointing to the lady. “Get one of the little guys to beat her up, but not her face. She’ll come back to us soon enough, and we’ll need it for the new brothel.”

“Yes, sir.”

As they continued through the myriad mess of refugee tents and makeshift shelters, Masir’s keen eyes began to spot a few familiar silhouettes and clothes, seemingly being trailed by an unknown group. He kept an aloof expression, acting like he did not know what was going on. Soon, they finally reached their destination - a large logistical warehouse acting as one of the ration distribution centers of the refugee camp. Makoa’s groggy vision swam with bright lights and never-ending rows of shelves as he was hauled through the warehouse, before being forced down onto a rusty metal chair in an abandoned room, his arms bounded to the coarse oxidized surface.

“Make sure whoever the fuck is dumb enough to follow us is caught or killed. I don’t care if their bodies are out on the streets. Get every man we have available here now. I want them all armed to the teeth.” Masir wagged a finger at a henchman before sending him off to secure the outside. “And you three, take these two prisoners down the stairs here to the waiting cells. They can be part of the next shipment to Tenar.”

While Masir’s men moved about, Masir himself drew up another chair nearby, plopping down right opposite the bleeding Makoa, who was still flanked by four henchmen. “So, what brings my sworn brother back to the fold? Finally got tired of playing punk in Raktor?”

“I got sick of the taste of Yual in my water. Didn’t know the water here still tasted like Masir crap.” Makoa grinned, his teeth bloody from the punches. As soon as he finished the sentence, Masir flew into a rage, picking up the chair and swinging its legs at Makoa’s head, nailing him right in the ear while Makoa crumpled to the ground, the metal chair clanging.

“Still got a funny bone in you, huh? You think you can rip off the whole gang and just disappear for seven years and come back without a word?” Masir sneered, delivering a sharp kick to Makoa’s stomach. “Not while I’m still alive, you fucking cocksucker.”

Makoa coughed a mixture of blood and saliva, his face still grinning. “It was just a hundred thousand tenars, no big deal- URK!” He gagged as Masir kicked him once more in the leg, jolting pain arcing through his entire body while he involuntarily winced.

Masir grabbed him by the neck, hoisting him up with one hand. “THAT WAS OUR ENTIRE SAVINGS! Our blood and sweat, all pilfered so you can go to Raktor with that dumb General Javel and fuck about with some sluts! We fought tooth and nail beside you in the fucking war and all you can do is give up on us? On Ocra?!”

“Y…you haven’t seen what’s possible in Raktor.” Makoa wheezed with a grimace. “You’re nothing to the gangs there.”

“Like I give two shits. Ocra is my kingdom, big or small. We grew up here, we die here.” Masir tightened his grip on Makoa’s neck, choking him while Makoa’s body writhed in the air. “Not that a traitor like you would ever understand.”

Despite the choke, Makoa still held a confident smile on his face. “Fe-feel free to die here alone.” Makoa eked out the words through the strangling grip, causing Masir to be utterly confused.

“Is this bravado before your death, or….” Masir’s mind autocompleted the rest, dropping Makoa unceremoniously onto the floor with a loud crash. “You, give me that damn arctech radio.” He snatched the radio from one of the guarding henchmen, rapidly tuning the channel. “How’s the perimeter? Who was the group following us?”

However, no one responded, only static echoing on the radio’s speaker. Masir immediately burst out the door back into the wide-open warehouse floor and stormed up to the nearest henchmen. “How many members do we have in this warehouse right now?”

“Sir…?” The henchman stared blankly at the flustered Masir.

“Answer the damn question!”

“Uh.. uh, about fifty or so.”

“Raise the damn alarm, get everyone down here and armed in a minute, or your head will be next on the chopping block. Are we clear?”

“Y-yes, sir!”

Masir rushed back into the room, heading straight for Makoa and sitting him back upright. “You! You fucking baited me out to get the Ghosts of Versia to come find me!”

Makoa merely held a small smile. “Took you long enough.”

“You -” Masir’s words were cut short by a loud explosion on the side of the warehouse, sounds of pellet fire whizzing and ricocheting off the metal shelves, tearing into sacks of grain while screams echoed to the ceiling. “Barricade the damn doors!” He hurriedly ordered the remaining four henchmen, who quickly bolted the door with a heavy latch.

While the battle raged on outside, Masir began to check his handgun, ensuring there were enough pellets inside. “Grab the bitch, and let’s get the fuck out of here. Where’s the exit?”

“Sir, through the waiting cells. There’s an exit that will get us back outside the warehouse.”

“Alright, let’s move.” Masir motioned with his handgun before another shuddering explosion rocked the warehouse violently; dust loosened from the ceiling while cracks began to form in the walls. “What the fu-”

A starling loud scream erupted from down the stairs, where the waiting cell was. Masir immediately aimed the handgun at Makoa. “What the fuck did you do?”

“You shouldn’t be worried about me - you should be worried about him,” Makoa muttered cryptically.

“Grrr! You, check out what the hell is going on down there!” Masir ordered one of the henchmen, but it was already far too late as he watched the henchman get impaled against the wall, right in the chest by the rusted tip of a makeshift spear, seemingly wrenched out from the bars of the waiting cell. The remaining three immediately brandished their own handguns, aiming at the staircase, waiting to shoot anyone who came up while the sounds of screaming and fighting still broiled outside.

As soon as they spotted a human head, they immediately fired with abandon, blasting indiscriminately. Yet instead of the pellets fired tearing apart the skull, the pellets were all stopped in midair by an inconceivable, invisible wall, protecting the prisoner and allowing him to dash out to the impaled henchmen and grab the henchman’s handgun.

With a swift swivel, he fired three impeccable shots, the pellets all finding their marks right between the eyes of each of the henchmen.

MG404: [ System Message | Killed: [Masir’s Henchman] | +10 EXP]

Before Masir could even react, the prisoner shot both of his thighs and ankles, a cry of pain leaving Masir’s lips as he dropped his handgun and collapsed to the ground, clutching his writhing leg.

“So, is this the best Ocra has to offer?” The prisoner muttered as he slowly walked up to the squirming Masir. “I can’t say I am not disappointed.”

Masir gritted his teeth, twisting his arm outwards to reach for his dropped handgun, only for the prisoner’s feet to stomp mercilessly on his wrist, the feet grinding his bone against the concrete floor and sending waves of pain through Masir’s body. “ARGH!”

Finally, the sound of the fighting beyond the door began to subside before a powerful magical falchion sliced through the hinges, causing the door to fall over flat with a loud crash. Makoa caught sight of the lady with the sword, his body hurriedly shirking away in instinctual fear.

[Boss, all targets are either captured or eliminated.] Sasha saluted to Kyle while the other Ghosts who trailed behind her merely stared at Kyle in confusion.

“Good work. Have the rest of the members rescue those in the waiting cell. We’ll sort them out later. And as for you… you seem like you know your way around Tenar, don’t you?” Kyle stepped down even harder, causing Masir to scream in pain.

“Y-you! Don’t you know who the fuck you’re messing with!?” Masir made a desperate attempt to frighten Kyle while he used his free hand to try and lift Kyle’s feet off his wrist, yet he had no strength to overcome the sheer pressure Kyle inflicted. He could only stare in horror as Kyle stared at him like a bug to be squashed.

“Oh, I know exactly who you are. You’re the first step to my new international expansion.”

# Chapter 104 - Catacombs

“Update,” Kyle spoke as he took his seat at the head of the meeting table in the command room, nested in the main hideout of the Ghosts of Versia. He donned a simple factory worker’s shirt and pants provided by Sasha, the basic white fabric and brown pants blending in with most of the other refugees while not being too overtly shabby.

Despite his order for an update, both Culo and Sasha instead stared blankly at him, seemingly frozen in time, while Kyle squinted his eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“Sorry, sir, it’s just… I’ve never seen you wear… uhm… you look good.” Culo blubbered with a fluster, Sasha nodding vehemently in agreement.

“Cut the crap and focus. We’re on a tight deadline.” Kyle snapped his fingers. “I’ve only been receiving your reports via letter, but now I want to hear them in full. And I want to hear it from Culo.”

“Yes, sir. Since the month we’ve come here-”

“Wait. Sasha, get Makoa and Feldon in here.”

[Feldon?] Sasha cocked her head in confusion. [He’s here?]

“He was the second prisoner with me. Don’t tell me you didn’t see him when you were trailing us?” Kyle squinted his eyes.

Sasha and Culo exchanged a confused glance before Culo coughed, trying to explain. “Sir, to be frank, we were only informed of your arrival, not his.” Culo scratched his neck nervously, his eyes avoiding Kyle’s intense gaze. “And it was hard to recognize Feldon as well, as his face was wrapped in-”

Before Culo could complete his words, the meeting room burst open to reveal a haggard Feldon, restrained by two other Ghosts who tried to hold him back, but were clearly failing to do so. “YOU IDIOTS LEFT ME BEHIND!” Feldon roared. “If I didn’t know where the damn hideout was, I would have-”

“Feldon.” Kyle interrupted his imminent rant. “You know the reason why I brought you along on this business trip. Please don’t make me regret it.”

Feldon’s anger immediately subsided as the adrenaline subsided, though he still forcibly shrugged off the two other Ghosts, plopping down on a seat and catching his breath. “Yes, sir, sorry for the outburst. When I said ‘idiots’, I was referring to-”

“That hardly matters now. The two of you, please leave us.” Kyle motioned to the two Ghosts, who looked at each other in confusion before Culo repeated the order to them, closing the door behind them. “Now, let us focus on the operation at hand. Culo, please continue with your update.”

“Y-yes, sir.” Culo saluted before using a stick to point toward a layout of Versia at the very center of the meeting table. “Through the distribution of Euria-infused potions predominately, we have been able to acquire large swaths of control within Ocra. Our main competitor was Masir’s gang, which had been the incumbent in the city for decades, though that’s clearly no longer a problem.”

“Clearly.” Kyle nodded. “Any problems with the Versian military?”

“We’ve been avoiding them quite well - we haven’t lost a single Ghost to them yet, though it is not clear how much of an effort they are putting to track us down.”

“Good, let’s keep it that way for now. What about other cities?” Kyle clasped his hands together, leaning against the map of Versia.

“Tenar, Desham and Creuliz have already been infiltrated by trusted Ghosts, smaller cells being developed there. Sasha and I have already verified their locations and setup, they will serve well as fallbacks.”

“Well done.” Kyle smiled as he began to collate all the information together, formulating the next step of the operation. “I need three things: Harrison’s whereabouts, Minister Dekar’s location, and status of the war.”

“Minister Dekar’s location is not certain of now, but from some of the intercepted military transmissions that we have seen, it is certain that he is still within the vicinity of Tenar.” Culo picked up a letter and handed it to Kyle, who read it quickly, his eyes scanning left to right as he suddenly spotted an interesting mention.

“They seem to be talking about something underground.”

“Indeed. If our information and assumption is correct, Minister Dekar is hiding in the tunnels below the city. A catacomb.”

“Catacombs…” Kyle muttered to himself. “Do we know the entry points?”

“Only some of them, but all of them require entry into the main city first. Security is tight now, but we suspect Masir knows how to get in through an external entrance.”

“Get the information out of him as soon as possible. We need to find a way in-” Kyle stopped himself as he watched Feldon raise his hand meekly like a child asking a question in class.

“Sorry, sorry, I’m just not too clear on why we need Minister Dekar’s location…? He’s not with Harrison, nor does he have any more ministerial power. Wasn’t the goal to take down Harrison a peg?”

Kyle sighed, rubbing his temples, fully intending to ignore Feldon’s inane question until he realized both Culo and Sasha too were also dumbfounded by the question, unable to answer. This time, he wasn’t too worried about there being a mole between the four of them, so Kyle took this opportunity to ensure everyone was on the same page.

“Minister Dekar is a critical component in our operation to snatch Harrison’s power base away. Despite his ousting from power, he still wields credible and tangible influence over a large part of the Versian population, being one of the original revolutionary leaders.” Kyle explained. “Having him as the face of our organization will give us the legitimacy required to build a credible threat competent enough to take down Harrison. If we can get a hold of him, we can begin to set up a counter-shadow government to contest the current one.”

Kyle rose from his seat, pacing around the room. “Consider the current scene - we have Harrison Industries and his underground organization, Nest, whose hitmens have attacked us more than once. They are clearly in cahoots with the government, having obtained every military contract. I have no doubts that Harrison will seek to profit off the imminent war, much like we do.”

He jabbed at the layout of refugee camps scattered all across the four major cities. “All of us know that the current evacuation of front-line villages and towns is a simple ploy to force industrialization and cheap labor into the cities, further strengthening his economic base by exploiting the desperation of the refugees. Those who comply are either recruited into the military or subject to work forever under Harrison. Those who don’t suffer at the hands of various gangs around, such as Masir’s gang.”

“Then why don’t we exploit the desperation of the refugees too?” Feldon ventured, taking his chance to clear any doubts. “We’re a gang, not a charity organization. Since when did we become good-natured’rebels’ fighting for Versia?”

“It is all a facade. Power in the shadows is power that endures.” Culo answered, having gotten the gist of the plan.

“Indeed. We will twist Harrison’s own actions against him, using the very same discontent he intends to manipulate into our strength. With a righteous banner and a purpose that others can rally behind, we can mask our movements, embedding it deep behind layers of motivation.” Kyle clenched his fist. “The entire first phase of the operation is to build the power base, using what we have already achieved with the Seven Snakes. Now that we have a stable line of communication from Ocra to Raktor, we can start to arm and supply the refugees, all while profiting off an imminent war. Are we clear?”

The other three nodded in agreement, Feldon’s eyes widening in understanding, though there was still a little problem with the plan for him. “It’s good to build a rebel force in hiding, but when are we going to actually use it?”

“This is why I need information on Harrison’s movements and the status of the war; then, I can determine the next steps moving forward,” Kyle replied.

“As of now, Harrison has only been seen to be in Tenar, though we are unsure whether it is a body double or his true self. There have been observations by some of our members that Harrison Industries is still ramping up recruitment of arctech engineers from the various refugee camps, all concentrating towards Tenar. Apart from that, it’s hard for us to get any secure, stable information from our members planted in Tenar.” Culo summarized.

“So we still do not know what Harrison is up to…” Kyle muttered under his breath as his brain raced through the possibilities of Harrison’s next move. Yet, without enough information, it was nearly impossible to figure out what the next step should be. If he made just one wrong move, everything he had set up would crumble easily, and he might have no choice but to return to Raktor. *Like hell I’m going to give up on my first international expansion like this.* “Culo, try to wring out any information from Masi-”

A sudden collective loud groan erupted from the tavern outside the command room, interrupting Kyle. Culo gripped the holster of a nearby handgun and carefully approached the door, opening to reveal shouts and jeers of derision at an arctech radio.

[A special feature - the man, the myth, the legend and pride of Versia for the coming decades: an interview with Harrison!]

“Sasha, play it on the radio in here.” Kyle ordered while motioning for Culo to close the door tightly. They began to listen intently to the radio interview.

[Harrison, so good to finally meet the star of our golden age!] The interviewer gushed with obvious excitement. [Tell me, how does it feel to be on top of the world?]

[Thank you for the kind compliments. It is indeed invigorating to have the capability and scale to change Versia for the better towards a new future. I am first and foremost a Versian at heart and soul, born and raised.] Harrison replied with a crisp, clean voice, his words clearly refined for the public.

[Truly impressive. Your story from rags to riches have been heard already countless times and serves as a inspiration for us Versians today. However, with war looming on the horizon, many have voiced concerns and doubts that we would be able to survive the coming storm. What do you have to say to that?]

[As many should know, Harrison Industries is heavily intertwined with the governement and military of Versia. We provide our services and products to the best of our abilities and the confidence placed in us by Acting President Monero speaks greater volumes about our stance on the coming war - we will not lose if it came down to a fight.]

“That Harrison man must be crazy. Versia is a fraction of the population of Raktor, not to mention the military exercise is a joint program with the Counts of Kregol and Perlis! Is he crazy? We could throw three soldiers for every one Versian trained!” Feldon exclaimed, only stopping when Kyle glowered at him, transmitting the universal expression for ‘shut the fuck up.’

[Our weapons and armor technology have been designed and perfected by the best minds around, along with the innovative engineering process that allows us to accelerate blueprints from paper to reality. Whatever comes, we will be able to adapt quickly and with ease.] Harrison continued, hardly flustered at all by the interviewer’s question.

[Indeed they will, but recent news about artillery strikes hitting Versian towns and villages near the border have seen nothing more than condemnation from Acting President Monero.] The interview’s voice grew solemn. [Many have been devastated by the loss of their homes.]

[I understand the suffering of the people.] Harrison spoke calmly. [Yet, to rush into war is not the right way to ensure peace and stability. War breeds hatred and terror in a never-ending cycle, one that Versia may still be suffering the consequences of. While we will not back down without a fight, it is erroneous for us to initiate any foolhardy attack. But we are also soon deploying countermeasures that will be able to secure our borders better.]

[Countermeasures?]

[That’s right. In response to the conflict, Harrison Industries has developed and innovated brand new weapons to counter the Yual Dominion. As a small nation, it is critical that our manpower be conserved and used effectively in battle. To that effect, I would like to announce an inaugural exhibition fair at the end of next month! Entry shall be free for all Versians so that all may see the glory and power that we can bring to bear at the frontlines.] Harrison announced with a joyous tone.

The rest of the interview was plain details about the exhibition fair, and the interview turned out to be a shell for Harrison to market this event. “Did you hear about this exhibition before?” Kyle asked Sasha.

[This is the first I’ve heard of it. I’ve never seen anything mentioned about it in any communications, military or not.]

*Either Harrison just came up with it, or Nest is extremely proficient in securing information.* Kyle was more inclined to believe the latter, never underestimating his opponents. He had experienced his fair share of such cunning enemies and wouldn’t put it past Harrison to be able to pull off such a feat. *Especially one with Galactic Era tech.*

That was the true ultimate goal that Kyle had not told anyone else, not even Sasha - he had his suspicions that the catacombs beneath Tenar would reveal secrets and ruins much like that of the Oracle. Whether or not it had already been plundered did not matter to him; knowledge itself was the treasure. *And if I’m right, no one else should be able to access it. At least nobody without a System.*

Kyle still hasn’t ruled out that others could potentially have the same System they did - there was no reason to, and he felt it far more probable than no one else having the System. In fact, if no one else had the System, it would make it far harder for Kyle to gain an insight as to his origins in this world.

While Kyle pondered on the next steps, Feldon and the rest were already arguing about Harrison’s motives. “It’s clear as day that the man is just your regular usual money-grubber. If we want to predict his moves, we have to start from there.” Feldon offered his conjecture.

“If he’s a usual money-grubber, then he would have expanded into Raktor, not hole up in small ol Versia. Like you said, fraction of Raktor’s population here.” Culo readily disagreed, Sasha supporting him.

“Well, maybe he likes the sound of tenars more than rakels?” Feldon grasped at straws. “And it looks like he doesn’t really want the war from the sound of the interview.”

“That’s just a facade.” Kyle joined the discussion. “Without the war, his investments into the military sphere will be all for naught. He needs the war to happen, and so do we.” He picked up a pen and began to draw up a plan, overlaying Versia. “Get Masir ready by tonight. I don’t care how you extract the information - as soon as we know how to enter the catacombs, we will liaise with our forward Ghost cell in Tenar. And from there, we’ll set up the dominos to fall one by one until we crush Harrison.”

“But we still don’t know where he is!” Feldon exclaimed. “How are we going to crush him?”

“Don’t act like an idiot. Harrison himself just told us where he’ll be in two months. And I fully intend to be present.”

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The dense primal trees of the Keru Forest around Ocra were being chopped down one by one, and their ancient age was ignored as they were used to build palisades and shelter and act as firewood for the refugees. Amidst the never-ending sawing that continued even through the night, a discreet arctech wagon slowly inched out from a thick undergrowth masking the end of a sewage tunnel, its wheels rugged against the uneven ground.

Inside the jostling wagon, only sniffling and crying could be heard from a dozen various girls chained together into a single metal cage, knowing their impending fate to be sold as slaves in Tenar. Some of the more desperate ones tried to catch the attention of the guard sitting right next to the cage, only to earn a sharp jab with a sharp pole that could draw blood from its pinpoint tip.

In the front of the wagon at the driver’s cabin, Sasha, Feldon, and Masir sat together in an awkward silence, Masir’s torture wounds having been healed by a potion. He gripped the rough steering wheel carefully, unwilling to go against the fearsome Sasha, whose every glance terrorized him.

“Wish I was like Kyle back there, taking care of the ladies.” Feldon whistled, trying to break the awkward tension, but Masir and Sasha hardly replied.

Contrary to Feldon’s expectations, Kyle was hardly interested in the slave girls he was guarding. He knew for a fact that they had been kidnapped off the streets of Raktor, ladies from middle-class families. Already, a few of them noticed his clear Raktor roots, trying to appeal to his nationality, yet it drew no compassion from him. Not much could.

He had never considered himself to be a citizen of the Yual Dominion despite the former owner of his body being so. To him, it was just a playground, a test of his abilities. Combined with the System, it was almost beginning to feel like a game. *Almost.*

Kyle still also couldn’t rule out the possibility that the world was a VR game entirely, though the existence of the Oracle Chamber and his supposed Administrator privileges were already evidence that it went much deeper. Only with more information could he narrow down the possibilities. He clambered towards the front of the wagon, rasping his knuckles on the window. “Put on the camo.” He motioned to Feldon, pointing his finger at a small briefcase that Sasha was holding onto.

“The camo…?” Feldon held a confused gaze, his eyes shifting back and forth before he snapped his fingers in realization. “Right, the makeup from Haui!”

Kyle groaned, before shuffling back to his original position, taking out a small canister which held a slightly-transparent cream, one that would alter their appearance enough to be considered different. The cream felt slightly mushy and lumpy, but Kyle didn’t care as long as it did the job. As soon as he was done applying it to his face, he closed his eyes, taking a break for the long trip ahead, though he remained continuously aware of his surroundings.

Just before the first rays of daylight hit the skies above, the wagon reached its destination - a seemingly nondescript cave opening big enough to fit a single person. There were no markings nor fixtures whatsoever anywhere, only the natural foliage of the forest surrounding it. Kyle wouldn’t have made a mental note of the place if it weren’t for three clearly armed men filtering out through the entrance the moment the wagon approached.

“Name and license.” The leader of the three armed men gestured as he approached the cabin door cautiously, his right hand never leaving the rifle’s holster slung in front of him. Kyle peered out through the slits of the wagon’s cloth, noticing the gear of the armed men. They were well equipped, featuring nearly a full arctech knight armor set though at reduced thickness, favoring mobility over durability.

“Masir, here to deliver the goods as promised. Where’s Yona?” Masir opened the cabin door gingerly so as to not alarm the armed men, carefully stepping out onto the ground while rummaging through his pockets, before handing over the license, a small piece of scribbled paper, to the leader.

“Yona’s busy. I’m in charge here now.” The leader grunted as he checked the license. “Get all your men out here.”

“Of course, sir.” Masir bowed hastily before turning back to holler violently. “HEY! GET THE FUCK OUT HERE NOW, LINE UP!”

Kyle, Sasha, and Feldon followed the plan, coming up front and lining up in front of the armed men, with the leader inspecting them. However, as soon as the leader spotted Kyle’s face, he nearly let out a shriek, recoiling back in horror. “Goddess above, what the fuck happened to you?”

Kyle cocked his eyes, but Masir hurriedly stood between them, smiling sheepishly. “This one, he’s a young man I took pity on. Terrible accident with a few arctech devices left him freckled, acne notwithstanding. Safe to say, those warts aren’t going away anytime soon.” Masir explained.

“You need an alchemist to get you checked up.” The leader nervously leaned in to get a whiff before nearly belching in disgust. “That smell won’t be getting you any girls anytime soon, that’s for sure.” Still, he did his job, holding up a list of portrait pictures against Kyle’s face and comparing them. “Right, you’re good to go.”

The moment the leader turned to face Feldon, he too recoiled, though the shock was to a lesser extent. “Are you picking up a circus? One got warts, the other got burns, and the last is just a shame!” The leader furiously glowered at Masir.

“What can I do? Military been grabbing all the good ones. Look, I don’t think Yona is going to be too happy about us being held up here. How about we stop griping about my men’s looks and let them have their peace, all right? I’m sure their social life is already bad enough.”

“Fine. Your license is good. Don’t forget to renew it end of this month.” The leader finally relented, handing back the license and motioning for the two other armed men to open the way. Kyle and the rest got back on the wagon, Kyle carefully watching as the tight entrance was slowly expanded, the original limits of the opening actually part of a mechanical door with a stone facade.

“Pretty smart of them to hide it in plain sight. Just another cave; who knew it could open to fit a wagon?” Feldon murmured to himself as Masir lurched the wagon forward. The cave opening enlarged to reveal a tunnel road, providing smooth travel for incoming arctech wagons along with intermittent lights embedded all along the road.

*This isn’t good. If we want a sustainable smuggling route, it can’t be one controlled by Nest.* Kyle eyed the various Nest patrols sparsely posted along the tunnel route as they descended into the depths, going deeper and deeper in a barely noticeable decline. Taking over such a tunnel would no doubt raise the suspicion of Harrison, not to mention bring the entire Nest organization down on him. *There must be another way in.*

The wagon had to hit a few more checkpoints; the Nest checks were extremely thorough. Kyle gritted his teeth as he endured the mocking and pity from some of the Nest patrol members, memorizing their faces so he could enslave them personally when he was ready. Each checkpoint only further impressed him that this route was definitely not feasible.

Soon, the wagon finally hit the end of the road, the tunnel road leading into a slightly larger cavern where there was ambient water flowing through ancient canals dug out centuries ago, the stench horrid. Masir tapped the cabin in a known pattern, signaling for Kyle and the others to get out. The port was active, able to berth a total of four ships that seemed to be regularly ferrying cargo and products much like the slave girls they had brought to and fro, the boats periodically hurtling off down the rushing waves to an unknown fate. Kyle noticed a few shipments headed for other destinations far beyond Tenar, proving that the underlying network of tunnels and catacombs was not only restricted to the capital city.

The slave girls to be sold were transferred onto a smaller boat, the boat powered by a strong arctech motor that allowed it to sail up the currents within the rivers of the catacombs. As Kyle strolled towards the designated boat, he caught the glance of a nervous Nest worker, who quickly avoided eye contact and acted like he had never looked at all. The nervous Nest worker’s behavior clearly stood out from the rest of his raucous and brutish colleagues, making for an intriguing sight, Kyle making a mental note. *Interesting…*

While the slave girls were being herded onto the deck, Masir clasped his hands nervously as he leaned over to Kyle, whispering urgently. “I brought you all the way in here. Once you deliver the slave girls, if you walk right up to the end of that specific canal and look out for the sign 5A, that�s where you’ll find a service ladder from which you can enter Tenar proper. This is where we’ll part way-”

Masir suddenly felt Kyle’s arm slung around his shoulders in a chummy fashion, as if they had been best brothers since childhood. “Masir, let me guess what’s going to happen the moment you leave us. You’re going to tip off Nest that we are in the city, and hope that they will be enough to kill us so you can regain control of Ocra.” Kyle smiled jovially as he patted Masir on the shoulder, making it seem to the surrounding Nest workers and patrollers like they were sharing a joke. “And here’s what I’m going to do - I’m going to kill every last Nest member, slaughter through them all the way back to Ocra and find you, and then string you up upside down in a cell for the next fifteen years where no one will ever find you again. If such a future scenario is not to your fancy, I highly suggest you stick with us.”

Masir recalled the brutality with which Kyle executed his henchmen, wondering if Kyle could really do what he said. As he glanced at Kyle’s smiling expression, he intuitively felt a deepening sense of fear and unbridled power, his mind slowly convincing him that Kyle was speaking the absolute truth. He nodded slowly, earning a larger hearty smack on the back.

“Good doing business with you, Masir. Always a pleasure. Now, if you would please.” Kyle held that same eerie smile, leaving Masir shivering at the back of the boat while he headed to the front. With the preparations completed, Nest workers untied the boat’s rope to the berth, allowing it to drift into the center before a designated boat operator revved up the motor.

The catacombs hardly had proper lighting, darkness enveloping the entire boat save for the cabin as soon as it entered the main channel, fighting against the rushing tide of sewage and other unknown objects caught in the stream that flowed through Tenar. “Sasha, memorize the route,” Kyle muttered under his breath, activating his Follower skill.

[Understood. I’ve already mentally mapped the location.]

“Good.” Kyle felt the boat swerve back and forth through the deafening black void of the dark canals, the Nest boat operator seemingly acting on muscle memory as though he had the entire map of the catacombs memorized in his head. Within a short ten minutes, Kyle could see a small little lantern in the distance, growing larger by the second while they approached the pre-arragned dropoff, Nest workers positioned on a small little docking pier that led into what Kyle assumed was an functioning workshop, sounds of intricate machinery audible over the rushing roaring currents.

The slave girls whimpered as they were dragged up the pier, some beginning to fight back in a desperate last attempt the moment they were hauled out of the boat, knowing what lay ahead was their final destination. Kyle didn’t waste any time helping the Nest workers restrain and subdue them without hesitating.

“Heading back now?” The boat operator waved to Masir, who shook his head.

“Sorry, champ. We got business in Tenar.” Masir replied as the rest got off the boat onto the pier, waving his license paper as a form of proof while clutching it tightly, making sure it didn’t drop into the canal.

“Suit yourself.” The ensuing churn of the arctech motor had the boat speed back off towards the pier while the Nest workers continued to force the slave girls into the factory, completely ignoring Kyle and the rest as he walked off, following Masir’s lead.

“Those slave girls, what the hell are they doing down here in the catacombs?” Feldon asked Masir with a naive face.

“Fuck if I care. Just to fuck or maybe even to work, I don’t really give two shits. I got paid upfront, and I’ve done my part of the deal, that’s all.” Masir shrugged.

As the four of them trudged along the slimy moss covered side paths of the canals that were beginning to seem more and more like sewage tunnels, Kyle motioned to Sasha, giving her a series of orders through hand signs.

[Stay and watch the workshop?]

Kyle nodded, Sasha immediately compiling and vanishing without a trace. Neither Masir nor Feldon even noticed her leaving. Masir was fully focused on squinting through the darkness as he groped his way forward along the wall, intermittently cursing when he accidentally grabbed onto a bug.

“Here we are, 5A.” Masir motioned to a ladder mounted against the wall ahead, daylight streaming through the rim of a manhole cover. “After you,” He bowed respectfully, but Kyle instead drew out a handgun and prodded him.

“You first,” Kyle ordered, not taking no for an answer.

Masir’s face paled, but he complied anyway, quickly clambering up the ladder while Kyle kept a steady aim on him with his free hand as he followed closely behind. Masir grunted as he shifted the manhole cover outside, peeking his head out to check for anyone watching before clambering upwards, Kyle also climbing out with Feldon in quick succession.

They found themselves in a secluded alleyway, yet unlike Raktor, there were hardly any homeless men languishing in corners or slums built into the crevices of buildings with kids sniffing drugs. Instead, it was clean and spick, well kept with neatly arranged trash in piles or containers. The stark difference made Kyle feel slightly disorientated, as though he had been teleported into a different era. *That’s impossible. Cities of this era should be crime-ridden and filled to the brim with filth in overcrowding and trash. How can this be?*

Even when Masir led them out to one of the main streets, the roads, pathways, curbs, and sidewalks were all spick and span, looking like a picturesque city straight out of a fantasy book that glossed over all the horrid details of human dwellings. Bright portraits of young ladies showing off the latest fashion and quaint little cafes along the road all spoke of a society clearly dominated by decorum.

[Grand Versian Exhibition, proudly sponsored by Harrison Industries!] An arctech billboard blasted out, a light-thrower plastering the wide, handsome, grinning face of Harrison on a black background. [You don’t want to miss it!]

“This doesn’t seem like the evil den of a money-grubber. People here look…. happy.” Feldon remarked as he watched a group of schoolboys shout and playfight over pieces of bread, uncaring of the food wastage. “This is nothing like the refugee camps! Is this where the nobles live?”

Masir scoffed. “Nobles? We haven’t had nobles in Versia for fifteen years, unlike you Yual dogs! This is the lower quarters - every citizen living here has the same standard of living. Welcome to Tenar.” # Chapter 105 - Tenar

Kyle shied away from the streets, covering his face behind the corner of an alleyway as a military arctech wagon rolled past, the streets filled with the hustle and bustle of everyday life. Versians clamored outside of popular cake shops and temporary stall carts that served waffles of every flavor, the sweet, delectable aroma wafting through the fresh air. It was a far cry from the plight of the refugees he had witnessed just in Ocra, a world of difference apart.

“Feldon, make sure the directions are correct. We’re looking for the Golden Days bookstore.” Kyle ordered to the wide-eyed Feldon, who hurriedly pulled out a rolled-up piece of paper, reading through the steps written by Culo.

“Says here it’s two blocks down from here, assuming this map is accurate…” Feldon rotated the rough scribbles on the paper to match their current location, squinting at the nearby road sign. “Just gotta walk straight to that roundabout at the end of the road and make a right, we should see it along the sidewalk.”

Kyle nodded, stuffing his handgun back into his belt’s rear holster before gripping Masir’s arm tightly. “If you try to run, you know what will happen.”

“Of course, of course!” Masir bobbed his head vigorously.

“Good. Let’s move.” Kyle shoved him out onto the open street, and the trio began to act normal, walking through the crowded streets without giving themselves away. Kyle noticed a few weird glares from nearby pedestrians and even wagon drivers staring at him, clearly either intrigued by the fake acne and warts on his face. He clenched his fist tightly, restraining his boiling internal rage. *Once I get back to Haui…*

His thoughts were interrupted by the sight of a grand statue placed right smack in the center of the roundabout. Little red flags waved, indicating tour groups being led around the statue, which was surprisingly half-broken and soiled with red paint and graffiti. “Death to the Count…” Kyle read it out loud under his breath.

Quite a few Versia tourists who were on their first trip to the capital were staring in awe, with even a school group being guided by three teachers, along with a few filming crews who were already using light-capturers. [It was here where former President Johan first made his famous independence speech, along with current Acting President Mornero; long live his name.]

Kyle played along with the act, his path taking him slightly closer to the light-capturers to get a better look. His eyes scanned for any telltale signs, before he finally found a mark - one indicated that the Sliver Screens had produced the light-capturer. *Interesting, must have been smuggled here. I certainly don’t recall approving the sale to Versia.*

One of the actors being filmed was on break, taking a sip from a flask as he glanced at Kyle and nearly spat out his water in shock. Kyle gritted his teeth and pressed on, ignoring the whispers. As he followed Masir and Feldon, he felt the actor approaching him from behind, nearly forcing him to draw his handgun on instinct. Yet he refrained, turning around with a light smile. The actor recoiled a little but summoned the courage to say what he wanted to say: “If you need a referral to a nearby hospital or clinic, I can provide you with some. All Versians have free healthcare so long as you claim from the government in the next-”

“I’m perfectly happy with how I look, thank you very much.” Kyle’s eyebrow twitched as he shrugged off the man, continuing to follow Masir and Feldon along the street towards the liaison point. As he caught up with them, he found Feldon sniggering to himself, though it was stopped quickly by a sharp glare from Kyle. “Don’t laugh at me - you don’t look that much better yourself. If you want to continue laughing, feel free to return.”

“Sorry, sir. I’ll do my best.” Feldon spoke with an emotionless robotic tone as though he hadn’t been on the verge of tears before.  Still, Kyle was impressed with what the actor had told him. *Welfare benefits – I’m surprised a country at this age would support universal social security.* Generally, he would have expected a city to turn out exactly like Raktor, with the industrialists and landowners at the very top. Instead, it felt like he had entered a socialist paradise of sorts. *Disgusting.*

While the trio walked, Kyle noticed a few Versian soldiers patrolling as well, spotting a similar tattoo on their necks much like the Nest workers at the catacombs dock beneath. He kept his gaze low, avoiding eye contact as they brushed past each other through the crowd of Versians that seemed to never end.

Soon, they found themselves outside the mentioned bookstore, a quaint little place that had a distinct smell of leather and binding glue that permeated the atmosphere.  A few customers were already in there between the towering shelves that touched the moldy ceiling, some of them eyeing Kyle as they entered through the door, a tiny bell ringing to announce their entry.

He followed Feldon towards one of the shelves nested in the corner of the bookstore, ignoring the half-asleep cashier at the front counter who had dozed off reading an unfamiliar book about the different breeding methods for likrids. Kyle shuffled through the tight, narrow spaces of the shelves, coming face to face with a series of encyclopedias that stretched half the length of the shelves, their red leather jackets luxurious and intimidating.

“Now, we just need this…” Feldon rummaged in his pocket, pulling out a tiny little arctech necklace much like Kyle’s own Necklace of Healing. He placed it against the spine of one of the encyclopedias’s volume, the shape of the necklace’s sigil matching the invisible groove exactly. Closing his eyes, Feldon took a deep breath and channeled arcia energy, the bright blue arcs visible slightly under his skin as it arced towards the sigil, powering it up before it began to sputter and falter, the process failing.

“Are you a mage by any chance?” Masir began to look at Feldon with far more respect. “And here I thought you were just a bumbling fool, but I haven’t seen many with good control over their internal arcia energ-”

His words were caught in his throat as Kyle pushed Feldon aside roughly, placing his own hand and channeling the arcia energy at a far faster rate. The sigil lit up and glowed brilliantly, traces glistening from the imbued arcia energy as the shelve began to slightly shift apart, revealing a small tiny gap in the wall near the bottom that could only fit one person at a time by crawling.

Kyle did the same as always: he forced Masir in, followed by Feldon while he took up the rear, pocketing the necklace, clambering into the tight space, and ensuring that the shelf closed behind them. “Move up, you fat cunt.” Feldon prodded Masir’s butt with his finger, causing Masir to yelp slightly and scramble faster.

The cramped tunnel sloped downwards until they reached a main tunnel, one large enough for them to stand up and lit by arctech lanterns that had just been freshly installed. They squeezed their way through, coming face to face with a heavy wooden door only furnished with a single eyeslit that opened the instant Masir stepped close.

“One without tyranny.” A female voice echoed behind the door, her eyes scanning the trio suspiciously.

Kyle held up the sigil of the necklace. “The revolution repeats itself.”

“The birds are no longer caged.” The female voice pressed.

“Even the wyvern’s nest is not safe.”

Three latches were unlocked one by one on the other side of the door with loud clangs, the door swinging open to reveal a small but proficient hideout furnished with simple bunk beds and supplies to last a month. Only four members were inside, including the lady who had just asked them the codewords. She stuck out her hand, shaking that of Kyle’s. “You must be the leader Culo mentioned was coming. Though I didn’t know you would look like… that.”

“I am, and you must be the famous Lisa. Culo put you in charge of Tenar operations.” Kyle finally wiped off his makeup, revealing a stunning, charismatic face, making Lisa instantly blush from even the obvious false compliment.

“Well, please, make yourself at home. I was expecting four of you, including Sasha…?”

“I have her on another mission. We’ll meet up with her later.” Kyle plodded down on a nearby chair, tapping the table and motioning for the rest to gather around while Lisa shut the door. “Let’s not waste time - we’re on the clock, and we need to take stock of what we have and what we know.”

“Yes, sir.” Lisa automatically deferred to Kyle’s authority, hurriedly following her training, knowing that Kyle was the boss of Culo and Sasha and, thus, must be a great man. “As you can see, it’s been exceedingly difficult to recruit manpower in Tenar. The standard of living here is just too good for anyone here to even fathom rebelling against the current ruling power. Both Acting President Monero and Harrison right now have a sort of fanatical cult behind them.”

Kyle nodded his head in agreement. With such strong welfare options in place, the people must feel far removed from war and hardly affected. “This is not the same as the refugee camp at Ocra.”

“Exactly. Without enough dissatisfaction, we won’t be able to gather enough men to do anything significant. Not to mention that there has been an increased presence of Nest and military troops, trying to ensure stability and hunt down us.” Lisa sighed. “Honestly, I haven’t left this hideout for about three days now. It’s just too dangerous out on the streets.”

“What about the catacombs?” Feldon ventured. “They seem complicated enough to hide there and evade detection. Maybe we can try hitting some Nest locations and take them over, like that Nest dock we just came through.”

“No, that will cause them to crash down on us even more. Do we have a map of the catacombs?” Kyle asked Lisa.

“Sadly, I believe even Nest does not know the full extent of the catacombs. It’s been built more than three centuries ago and has been expanded countless times. There are rumors that some tunnels even lead all the way to Creuliz.” Lisa shook her head. “If we want to know about the catacombs, we need to recruit someone who is extremely familiar with it.”

“How are we going to recruit them? Anyone who knows the true extent is either a Nest member or probably some Versian government employee. Unless…” Feldon tapped his chin. “You already know someone who is a proper candidate. Is it Minister Dekar?”

“Minister Dekar is indeed rumored to be in Tenar, but we have our eyes on another potential recruit - Zayin.”

“Who?”

“An old revolutionary, one of the original crew who established Versia. We have concrete confirmation from our observations that he is working as a slave in a sweatshop in the catacombs near Section 5A. I believe if we can save him, we can use him as a way to get into contact with Minister Dekar while achieving information on the layout of the tunnels.”

*That was just where we were.* Kyle pondered for a moment, before he glanced at Masir, who quickly looked away, acting like he had not just listened to the current conversation. As his mind raced, putting the pieces in place, a plan began to form together in Kyle’s head, a small grin growing on his face. He abruptly slammed the table loudly, standing up to his full height. “We will continue to monitor the situation from this hideout, and then determine a correct time to establish contact with this ‘Zayin’. Understood?”

Everyone but Masir nodded, dispersing to their respective bunk areas to continue their work. Feldon took up the lead position alongside Lisa, though there wasn’t much to lead, with only three other Ghosts here. However, Kyle suddenly pulled Lisa aside, whispering to her quietly: “How many other hideouts do we have here?”

“We have three more, though they are quite far away.”

“How fast can we move?”

“If necessary, we can cave in the entire place with a few explosives in about ten minutes. It will take about an hour to reach the next one though.”

“Okay.” Kyle sat back down on the table, grabbing a nearby ink pen and scribbling furiously into a letter quickly and sealing it with wax. “Have a Ghost take Masir above ground and use him to deliver the letter to the Alchemist Guild’s branch here.”

“Hmm… okay, but what if Masir runs?” Lisa was well aware of who he was, feeling this mission was a bit dangerous.

“Tell the Ghost to give chase, but immediately give up if there’s any chance of being caught. Our lives are more important than some message. Remember, it’s critical that the Ghost is not seen delivering the message, understood? This message is critical to taking down Nest.” Kyle spoke a bit louder, earning Masir’s attention.

“Understood.”

“Good.” Kyle watched as Lisa explained the task to another female Ghost member, who in turn grabbed the letter and Masir along, dragging him out of the hideout unwillingly.

Masir grunted as he clutched onto the edge of the door, struggling to hold on while the Ghost tugged him in the other direction. “What are you making me do?! Please, don’t kill me! I already did everything you asked for; I want no part of this stupid rebel movement!”

“This is your last task. Do this well and I will set you free, how about that?” Kyle smiled.

Somehow, Masir doubted that was true, but he still took the chance, letting go of the door and following the Ghost back out towards the bookstore. They clambered through the cramped tunnel once more, exiting normally through the tiny gap as Masir dusted off his clothes. He looked around sheepishly, planning to dash away from the Ghost, when his wrist was suddenly expertly gripped by her, twisting behind his back in an arm lock. He yelped in pain, turning his face only to see the smooth barrel of a handgun aimed right squarely between his eyes.

“Don’t try to run, or else. Now move to the Alchemist Guild’s branch on Asha Street.” The Ghost spat before placing Kyle’s letter into his arm and releasing him. Masir staggered forward, rubbing his wrists gingerly as they left the bookstore, the Ghost trailing him quietly from behind through the street.

*Fucking hell, if I’m spotted delivering the letter, I will be marked as an accomplice despite me being a prisoner!* Masir’s eyes darted about with a shifty gaze, looking for every possible angle of escape. Yet, he could see the Ghost watching him extremely closely, expertly following his every move and cutting off most places he could try to hide in. More importantly, he instinctively knew that if he tried to run with his unfit body, the Ghost would catch up with him in an instant.

He bided his time, carefully walking towards Asha Street and constantly keeping a vigilant lookout. For some unknown reason, there were hardly any military or Nest patrols around. *Where are those fuckers when you need them the most?!* Masir never thought he would say that of Nest, but dire times called for brand-new allegiances.

As he turned the corner into Asha Street, the area was brimming with activity - a relic market with merchants propped up wooden tables covered with a brilliant cloth, displaying arctech equipment that was specially designed or excavated from long-forgotten ruins in the Versian wilderness. There was a clear difference in the type of crowd that was here under the colorful fabrics hung across the buildings that blocked the harsh daylight compared to the outside.

Adventurers, explorers, and mercenaries were all browsing weapons, armor, and equipment out in the open, thanks to Versia not having a ban on it. Even arctech guns and handguns were sold by the dozens, displayed prominently on carpets along the floor. Masir shifted through the crowd quickly, his steps picking up, hoping to lose the Ghost. Yet as he turned around, he saw the Ghost keeping pace with him well, only a few steps behind. They were getting close to the branch of the Alchemist Guild’s branch, its store sign hanging on a bright metallic pole in the distance.

As luck would have it, Masir finally spotted an entourage of what seemed to be well-armored mercenaries decked out in arctech knight armor coupled with gas masks covering the lower half of their faces. Four of them guarded a well-dressed lady, her dark green cheongsam sticking out like a sore thumb against the more practical adventurer’s leather outfit and the frilly dresses of the ladies who shot a few jealous glares towards her. But all of that hardly mattered to Masir - what mattered the most was that they all sported the same neck tattoo, the lady’s one the most obvious to those who knew what it meant. *Nest!*

Masir immediately sprinted towards the lady, prompting the mercenaries guarding her to immediately draw their weapons, all of them brimming with arctech pieces of equipment far beyond the budget of a regular mercenary. The front two mercenaries caught Masir right by the neck, restraining his arm and pinning him to the ground. Masir struggled against the weight of the heavy armor, spitting saliva on the ground as he tried to speak. “Y-Yona! It’s me, Masir!”

“Masir…? I know a lot of ‘Masir’. Most of them are dead.” The lady murmured, the crowd in the Asha Street relic market knowing well enough to steer clear of the commotion, not willing to get tangled up in Nest business if they could help it.

“It’s me, Masir, from Ocra?! You know, Masir’s Boys leader?”

“Rings somewhat of a bell. Search him.” The lady waved her manicured hands dismissively, one of the mercenaries quickly ruffling Masir’s pockets, finding the sealed letter in his palm. The mercenary continued to search before tugging out the license paper and reading it.

“He has a license with us, Lady Yona.” The mercenary held it up for her to read, though she did not touch it herself.

“So it seems… And what business do you have to charge at me? Appointments are to be scheduled by my servants.” Yona flexed her fingers outwards, self admiring her own fingers that overlapped her vision of the grovelling Masir.

“I’m being chased, I’m being chased by the Ghosts of Versia! There’s a Ghost following me!”

Yona’s nonchalant demeanor immediately darkened. “Call every Nest member nearby. Lockdown Asha Street now.” She ordered a mercenary, who relayed the order.  Within seconds, some merchants and customers revealed their Nest affiliation all along the length of the street, cutting off the entrance and exit of the street. “Check everyone in here. You, get up. You recognize the Ghost chasing you, right?”

“Yes, yes, but I have bigger information!” Masir struggled to his feet, catching his breath after being pressured by the heavy arctech knight armor of the mercenaries. “Their hideout is at the Golden Days bookstore!”

Yona squinted her eyes. “Are you sure?”

“I’ve been trading slaves for ages, Yona, please, you have to believe me! They destroyed my gang and enslaved me!” Masir pleaded, getting down on his knees. Despite the begging, she did not budge just yet, contemplating her next moves while the Nest mercenaries forced Masir to cooperate in their search for the Ghost. However, Masir quickly realized that the Ghost had already long escaped, most likely at the moment he sprinted towards Yona.

“And how do I know this is not a trap?” Yona questioned.  “For all I know, you could be leading me to my death!”

“I-I’ll lead you to them directly! I’ll go first, but only if you guarantee my safe return to Ocra!” Masir negotiated, clearly not letting go of his own survival.

“Hmm…” Yona seemed hesitant, making Masir flustered.

“I still got more information on what the Ghosts of Versia plan to do next!” Masir compromised heavily, trying to lead on Yona, who grinned in return.

“Deal. Lead the way.” Yona immediately rallied a dozen Nest mercenaries, marching back through the streets leading towards the Golden Day bookstore, the Versian citizens stepping aside as they watched the squad force their way through the densely crowded streets.

Masir quickly found the bookstore once more, but something was clearly off - all of the customers inside as well as the cashier was already missing. Yona immediately noticed the nervousness of Masir, prompting her to use a few handsigns, ordering the Nest mercenaries to scout the area, checking for any other routes out.

“Lady Yona, this is the only exit and entrance as far as we can tell.” One of the mercenaries reported back.

“Then get the informants nearby to relay any suspicious behavior they can recall coming from the bookstores. I want faces and names where possible. Get three men to go in with Masir now.” Yona ordered.

Masir gingerly stepped forward, feeling like he had jumped from one boiling pot to another as he felt the three Nest mercenaries behind him aiming their barrels right at his body, prepared for any potential betrayal. They stepped forward with great care, checking every movement to make sure they did not trip any traps. As they reached the same bookshelf as before, Masir soon realized that he did not have the necklace required to open the shelf, nor did he have the requisite control over his own internal arcia energy. “There’s this tiny little groove in the spine of the book right here that we need to-”

Before he could finish, the Nest mercenary slung his rifle behind his back, grabbing the shelf with two gloved hands and pulling it apart, the shelf nearly crushing Masir as he scampered to the side. One by one, the shelves crashed into each other, collapsing like a domino with a series of loud bangs, kicking a swirling cloud of dust that choked out the men inside.

Sure enough, there was a tiny gap present in the wall. With two Nest mercenaries watching Masir carefully, the lead mercenary entered first, before confirming that the tunnel was safe. Soon they entered, putting Masir right in front of them as a body shield while pushing forward. As they reached the end of the tunnel, the bolted wooden door was latched shut. Masir walked up nervously, rasping his knuckles on the hardwood. “Uhm, Lisa? Kyle?”

No one replied, only an eerie silence resting in the cramped tunnel. The lead mercenary immediately charged forward, slamming his entire knight armor into the door with his whole body weight. The thick door snapped off its hinges nailed into the cavernous wall, collapsing with a loud thud to reveal an abandoned hideout, supplies, and documents still left about.

“Wha-” Masir stuttered, unable to understand how the hideout could have been abandoned in such a short timeframe. The three Nest mercenaries scoured the hideout for traps, not finding anything while the lead thumbed through the documents left behind, his eyes widening before activating the arctech radio on his belt.

“Lady Yona, there seems to be information about Ghosts of Versia in here. We’ve cleared the place of traps as far as we can tell.” The lead spoke into the radio’s microphone.

[I’ll be there shortly.]

Soon, the hideout was filled with six Nest mercenaries and Yona herself, who read over the documents slowly. “Good work, Masir. Looks like you’ll be returning to Ocra safely after all-”

All of a sudden, a series of deafening booms exploded the walls apart in a dazzling ball of flame that threatened to engulf the hideout, the support of the cavernous ceiling immediately giving and causing a rockslide that crushed the Nest mercenaries into paste despite their heavy armor without a chance. Before the incoming rocks and fire could smash into Yona, she instinctively flicked a paper fan apart, one which glowed with thick arcia lines that brimmed with energy.

A sharp, hemispherical barrier of wind formed around her, the gusts strong enough to divert the crumbling ceiling all around her while the foundation of the building above threatened to crush her as well. Grunting, she flicked the fan furiously, drawing winds from the meager air around that concentrated into a stream that pushed the foundation slightly to the side, plunging into the ground right next to her. With one more flick of her fan, she let out a gust that extinguished the remaining fire that had already burnt through the documents.

Yona let out a heavy breath as the rockslide finally stopped, her rage brimming on the surface while she glanced down at a squeamish Masir who was still cowering with his eyes closed right next to Yona, his hands wrapped around his head in a fetal position. “You fucking bitch, you lured us into a trap!” She swung her fan again, this time the wind slamming Masir into a nearby pile of rubble painfully, his mouth gagging. “Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t bury you right next to my men!”

“Please, please, I didn’t know, I didn’t know!” Masir pleaded, but Yona grabbed him by the collar, her seemingly frail body surprisingly strong enough to drag him through the tunnel towards a Nest mercenary who had entered the tunnel, alerted by the sounds of an explosion.

“Take this man back to the catacombs, right this instant! I want to know who the fuck let him in!” Yona roared, smacking Masir on the back of his head and knocking him out cold.

Masir suddenly found himself splashed with a cold bucket of sewer water; his entire body drenched as he squirmed on the floor, his legs and arms bounded behind him. While he spluttered and tried to wipe the water off his eyes using the coarse stone floor of the catacombs, he noticed that another man had been tied up next to him as well - the guard who checked their wagon at the very first entrance. The two of them were now placed on full display in the middle of the catacomb dock right on the berth, no doubt to make a statement of them. Dock workers all gathered around, watching in morbid curiosity.

“I gave you one simple job, and you couldn’t even stop some Ghosts rats from entering!” Yona berated the Nest guard leader as she sat on a chair facing the two accused, her eyes staring daggers at the both of them as she was flanked by two Nest mercenaries.

“Lady Yona, please! I followed protocol; I checked all of his men against the wanted list and for signs of affiliation. Masir had a proper license paper as well!” The Nest guard pleaded his case, but he was clearly not getting through to Yona. Instead, Yona snapped her fingers, prompting another Nest mercenary to walk up to the Nest guard, attaching what seemed to be an anchor to the ropes that tied the guard’s leg. With a solid throw, the guard was dragged screaming into the depths of the dock, the bubbles the only remnant of his struggle. The crowd of dock workers winced slightly, reminded of their role and position in Nest.

Masir’s face paled, quickly racking his brain as to how he could get out of this. “WAIT! Wait, wait, wait, I know where the Ghosts of Versia are going to attack next!” He exclaimed, trying to get Yona’s attention.

“If this is another trap…”

“No, no, no, I’m pretty sure this is the truth! You can verify this for yourself - I know there’s an old Versian revolutionary known as Zayin, he’s working in the sweatshop at Section 5A! Please, you have to let me go, I was enslaved by them in the first place!”

Yona whispered to the mercenary next to her, prompting him to pass Kyle’s sealed letter to her. “And what about this letter?”

“I don’t know anything about its contents! I was only asked to pass the letter to the Alchemist Guild branch on Asha Street!” Masir immediately told the truth.

Yona had her mercenary open the letter in case it had been laced with a contact poison. When it was verified, she read it carefully, though her rage only began to boil even more, her face fuming with anger. “YOU! YOU HAD THIS PLANNED ALL ALONG!”

“H-huh?!” Masir looked around confusedly. “What’s in that letter?”

“Don’t play dumb. Since you want to go back to Ocra, death by drowning is hardly enough for you - you two, send him to the military to be conscripted as a recruit. Let him be cannon fodder on the frontlines since he loves Ocra so much.”

“No, no, no, please!” Masir’s struggles and screams had no weight on Yona as he was hauled away to an unknown fate, her fury now directed at the contents of the letter. Without another word, she only gave a slight glance at the bubbles still coming from the Nest guard leader that was drowning.

“Make sure that we retrieve the anchor when he’s dead. Metal is precious in wartime.” Yona ordered without any emotions, leaving the dock with her mercenaries in tow. The surrounding dock workers began to discuss among each other as soon as she left, curious about what had just happened.

“Who’s that lady?” One of the more newer dock workers asked naively. “She looks pretty nice.”

An older veteran worker chuckled, patting the newer dock worker on the back. “Same here, but you better give up your hope of ever getting close to her. She’s one of the vice leaders of Nest here in Versia - we won’t be making it to that rank anytime soon.”

“Who knows? Maybe I can prove myself?”

“By what? Hauling crates? Sure, very inspiring.”

“HEY! What are you all hanging about for? The shift ain’t over just yet!” One of the nearby Nest guards hollered after them.

As the surrounding dock workers began to disperse, one of the more nervous dock workers did not return to his post, instead moving carefully towards a hidden nook behind large crates of supplies, finding a hiding spot. He glanced over his shoulder, making sure that he wasn’t about to be caught, before cracking open one of the crates, revealing a tiny compact arctech radio. Tuning the frequency, he whispered into the microphone. “Jovial is the hay in the den.”

[Decks will be scrubbed in war. I told you not to call me unless it’s urgent.] The voice on the other side shot back angrily, forcing the nervous dock worker to squat and cower behind the crates, adjusting the volume slightly lower.

“But Minister, I got some information about one of our old friends!”

[Old friends?]

“Zayin! Zayin has been enslaved by Nest, working at a sweatshop in Section 5A!”

[That’s impossible! I heard he migrated to Creuliz after the war of independence!]

“Must be another lie propagated by Mornero. What else has he not lied about?” The nervous dock worker’s voice was thick with hatred. “What should we do?”

[What else? Of course, we’re going to save him.]

“But Nest also knows about him - it could be a trap! We’ve worked so hard to keep under the radar -”

[There’s no choice. Today is the day that I, Dekar, will stand and fight for those who will walk with me to freedom!] # Chapter 106 - Triple Trap

“Right about now, Nest should be mobilizing to defend Section 5A,” Kyle explained to Lisa while the rest of the members continued to reorganize.

“That’s not good, isn’t it? It’ll make it harder for us to get into contact with Zayin.” Lisa frowned, clearly mulling over something Kyle couldn’t give two shits about.

“Here’s what is going to happen: The information given to Nest most likely should have leaked to Minister Dekar. I am confident he has his own informants embedded with Nest. Any large-scale action by them would go undetected. All we have to do is wait until he strikes. If he doesn’t move, then it’s no loss to us as well.”

“No loss to us? We lost a hideout!” Lisa bristled with fury. “We only have one backup hideout left, and I would very much prefer if I was kept in the loop regarding such plans, especially my members.” She motioned to the Ghost who had to escape Asha Street, the Ghost nodding furiously in agreement. From their point of view, Kyle was like an errant leader who had just overtaken their entire operation.

Kyle sighed. “And here I thought I was dealing with adults.”

“What…?” Lisa glared at Kyle angrily, but Kyle didn’t back down at all. Instead, he overpowered Lisa through his sheer dominating aura that seemed to suddenly seep from every single pore on his skin, exuding confidence and strength.

“If the mission was revealed to her, it would have tipped off Masir and any nearby Nest personnel who might be watching. It needed to be as authentic of a slip-up as possible, and she did it perfectly. I find it hard to believe that you are angry at getting closer to our goal.” Kyle pointed out. “Consider this - in just two hours since I’ve arrived, we have gotten more information than in the week you have been posted here, and we have a concrete plan to nab both Minister Dekar and Zayin. Now, please, inform me - what would be your alternative?”

Lisa wanted to retort but decided to hold back. The truth was she didn’t have any other options other than to simply stake out and observe rumor spots, doing the regular leg work. She hated to admit it, but Kyle did indeed accelerate their plans significantly, her having expected to do about a month’s worth of observation and embedding into the capital of Versia before obtaining any results.

“If you are truly committed to the goal of a free Versia, then my methods are by far the best and quickest. Now, if we’re done grumbling about the segregation of information, which is common in any hierarchical organization, let’s move on, shall we?”

“You think you’re so good, but there’s a massive flaw in your plan.” The Ghost, who had been tricked into escorting Masir, rebutted Kyle, clearly indignant about being used as bait in some sense.

Kyle smiled, sitting back in a wooden chair and leaning back. “Please, do enlighten me.”

“Your plan hinges on the fact that Minister Dekar comes to ‘save’ this Zayin. Now that we are in this new hideout, how do we know what’s happening within the catacombs?”

“There are plenty of ways to enter the catacombs when one’s in Tenar.” Kyle waved his hands dismissively. “Your team has already marked out multiple entry points nearby within fifteen minutes. There should be no issue entering it.”

The Ghost scoffed. “Still, the moment Minister Dekar attempts to save Zayin, it will take time for information to come back to us before we can respond at all, even if you place an informant there that will not be caught by Nest!”

Kyle grinned. “Oh, but I have that covered. You do not need to worry about that. All you have to do is do your job well, and everything will fall into place.”

“Are you calling me a pawn!?” The Ghost started, but Lisa held her back, shaking her head.

“Look, we’re all a little frazzled after losing our first hideout-”

“Because of him! We were doing perfectly fine, but he decided to go and reveal its location to Nest without even consulting us-”

Kyle rasped his fingers on the holster of his chair. “There seems to be a misunderstanding here.” He slowly rose out of his chair, cracking his arms before standing squarely in front of the Ghost. “I am the last word on everything here - not Lisa, not Feldon, not Culo, not Sasha, not you. Me. Alone. You have no say in any overarching mission plan that I have in mind, and you will not for the foreseeable future.”

“You think you can waltz in here and just-” The Ghost couldn’t complete her sentence, her face being grabbed by Kyle’s hand firmly and forced down in a powerful shove, her head slamming into the ground violently and nearly knocking her out. Lisa instantly drew out a handgun, aiming it at Kyle, but Kyle did not care, instead lifting the squirming Ghost up to eye level, her feet dangling while she struggled and clasped Kyle’s outstretched arm, trying to remove his hand to no avail.

Kyle dragged the Ghost’s head near to his face, whispering into her ear. “If I sense any dissatisfaction or refusal to carry out orders, you will no longer be treated as an asset, but as a liability. And you do not want to see what treatment the Ghosts of Versia has prescribed for such a liability. Are we clear? And if you’re done playing around in your fantasy of morals and unity, you can drop the handgun, Lisa.”

The struggling Ghost nodded vigorously, prompting Kyle to let go of her face that had almost been crushed in his grip, her body flopping onto the ground. Lisa, too, lowered her handgun, slightly frightened at the sheer strength that Kyle exuded. What would have happened if she fired at him? Her body shuddered slightly as she holstered it, helping up the Ghost from the ground. The rest of the members stared in shock as well, save for Feldon, who was fast asleep in a simple bunk bed and snoring away through the disagreement.

“Cross me again, and we will have problems. As long as you follow my orders, we will see a free Versia. Understood?” Kyle dusted off his shirt and arranged his hair, glaring at Lisa. “I expect a ‘Yes, sir’.”

“Yes, sir,” Lisa mumbled reluctantly.

“Continue with your work.” Kyle dismissed them, retreating back to the chair where he was sitting. It was unfortunate that he had to resort to violence to rein in the members, but it was clear that they harbored resentment against him for working behind their backs. He needed to quickly establish a clear line of authority, and any form of pandering would have just made him look weak and unsteady. With such a tight deadline, appeasing a few rebel members was at the very bottom of his list of priorities. *However, I should keep an eye on the two of them; they will most likely betray me in the future.*

He decided to check in on Sasha, who had been staking out the sweatshop at Section 5A for two hours now as well. “Any updates?”

[There’s an increase in Nest guards, that’s for sure. I’m counting about two dozen of them armed to the teeth, plus two mercenaries decked in knight armor.]

“Need a resupply?”

[No, I can handle it for another eight hours.]

“Right. I’ll inform you of the new hideout location when you’re done.” Kyle ended the conversation. *Two dozen Nest guards won’t be easy for Minister Dekar to break through.*

With that in mind, Kyle focused on what he should be doing - planning backup hideouts and escape plans. It was clear that they were the underdogs in this city and that in order to execute a successful guerrilla campaign, they needed to have as many bases as possible to shift between, never letting the enemy corner them. In the event that they were surrounded, Kyle also needed to figure out possible safehouses or even routes that would allow the rebels to escape Tenar if necessary.

He had no doubt that the moment he launched an attack against Harrison using the Ghosts of Versia, a shadow war would break out all over the city and the catacombs. Even if he did not initiate any attack in the next few months, he could not guarantee that Harrison would not suddenly decide to raid or purge the Ghosts out of their hiding spots.

As such, Kyle carefully inspected blueprints for the city one after the other while the rest of the Ghosts and Feldon took a much-needed rest. He worked tirelessly until night fell on Versia, the brightly lit streets filled with wonderous lights and arctech billboards that lit up like fireworks, citizens enjoying a well-deserved dinner after a hard day of work, or going on dates at romantic venues under a simple lantern’s light.

*It seems a bit hard to escape Tenar through a land route…* Kyle reached a conclusion after working so long on the city blueprints. It was as if the Nest and military had cut off every possible entrance and exit into Tenar, but Kyle felt that such a statement could not be true. *There must be a secret passage in the catacombs. Either Minister Dekar or Zayin would have known about it.*

As if on cue, Sasha’s voice was transmitted over the Designate Follower engraving right into his brain. [Sir, I’m seeing movement here. It looks to be Minister Dekar’s men.]

“How many did he bring?”

[I can’t see all of them, but it looks like there are just five of them. One of them matches the portrait of Minister Dekar.]

“Perfect.” The plan was coming all together. Kyle got off his seat, moving over to the snoring Feldon and smacking him awake. “Get up. We got work to do.”

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The rushing tide of the catacombs flowed incessantly through the entirety of Tenar, the water carrying refuse and chemicals dumped by errant factories, cumulating in a swirling stream of murky sludge that deposited along the bends and turns of the canals. Despite the clear inhospitality of the toxic environment, a lone frog the size of a cat waited patiently; its transparent bulbous skin masked amid the glistening mud while it watched carefully, beady eyes seemingly locked straight ahead into the darkness.

Even as a few minutes passed, the frog didn’t budge a single inch, acting completely stationary until a distinctive whizzing sound could be heard approaching fast. Within a split second, arcia energy swelled up in the frog’s body, the veins beneath the translucent skin charging up an enchantment as it blasted out a small but fast arcia bolt. A bright flash accompanied a dull thud as a tiny flying salamander crashed into the water, a smoking hole in its guts. The bolt’s sound could hardly be heard over the rushing stream.

Before the salamander could be washed away, the frog leaped out from its hiding position, moving as close to the edge of the water as possible and shooting out a long tongue that wrapped around the salamander, pulling it out. In an instant, the frog swallowed the salamander whole, letting out a satisfying burp.

Suddenly, the frog felt familiar tremors approaching like raindrops in synchronization, prompting it to dive deeper into the sludge, burrowing into a nice little hole as it digested its latest meal, the tremors passing right over and stopping. The frog had little time to react as a sharp spearhead stabbed right down into the sludge, impaling both it and the tiny salamander in its belly, bodily fluids gushing out as it was unceremoniously dragged out to face two humans carrying arctech lanterns.

“Hey, check it out. One stab, one kill. We’ll be eating good tonight.” The first human grinned as he opened a container on his back, stuffing the impaled frog in and pulling out the spearhead.

“Are you sure we should be doing this? Shouldn’t we be guarding the sweatshop? If Yona or her men find out, we’re skiving…” The other looked around with a shifty glance, clearly reluctant about eating the frog.

The first Nest guard sighed while keeping his hunting spearhead. “We’re not skiving; we’re being resourceful. You have no idea how delicious this little guy is. People would pay big money for it.”

“Yea, but look, there’s something in its belly. Don’t think that guy is edible.”

“Huh, guess you’re right.” The first Nest guard took a closer look at the container, seeing the half-alive tiny salamander trying to crawl free from the ruptured frog’s belly, its movements sluggish. “It’s a dog eat dog world, never tried it but always a first time for everything, right? Right?”

He glanced behind his shoulder, noticing that the second Nest guard was conspicuously missing, including his arctech lantern. Alarm bells began to ring in his head as he carefully paced his steps around, his other hand already on his handgun while he held the lantern forward, keeping close to the walls while moving forward.

The wall next to him suddenly shifted, the bricks readjusting to reveal a pair of hands that lunged forward, grabbing him by the neck and immediately twisting his head hard, far beyond what it could handle. His neck muscles torn and spine ruptured by the sudden force, he could only watch in pain as his body crumpled to the floor, the gap in the wall opening to reveal Minister Dekar decked out in armor and a Versian rifle. His face was masked with camouflaged paint.

“All clear. Let’s move.” Dekar motioned behind him, prompting a small group of armed men to follow him out, each of their faces disguised by paint as the five of them scurried along the canal’s pathway, trekking over slippery algae-infested tiles dating back centuries. The satchels full of pellet canisters rattled on their belts with each step they took while checking every single corner for other Nest guards’ patrol.

No words were exchanged, their faces all grim as they focused on the mission ahead, Section 5A’s sweatshop. As soon as they came within range of the pier’s lone arctech lantern, Dekar held up a clenched fist, ordering the squad to stop. “Two guards at the entrance near the pier. Potions, now.”

Dekar and his men immediately pop vials of Strength and Stamina potions, a sense of newfound power coursing through their bodies the moment they finish it. With a single hand sign, Dekar’s men moved forward without hesitation.

Their footsteps were immediately heard by the two Nest guards, who spun to see four armed men aiming rifles at them. Before either of them could pull out their guns, pellets already whizzed through the air with murderous precision, tearing holes through their cranial cavities, the last sound they made in their lives being the splashes in the water as they toppled over the edge of the pier.

“Hey, what’s going on out there? You idiots still shooting fish in the water?” A gruff voice echoed from beyond the entrance of the sweatshop, Dekar’s men quickly hugging as close as they could to the wall, shuffling silently nearer to the entrance. The moment the owner of the gruff voice stepped out towards the pier, Dekar grabbed him by the mouth, muffling him while using a knife in another hand to slit his throat, keeping the Nest guard’s mouth tightly closed as the life ebbed away from his body, squirming intermittently as the lungs were choked with his own blood.

Dekar’s men were experienced, quickly shifting the dead guard’s body out of the way while taking up position, preparing to breach the entrance. Dekar held up three fingers, slowly counting down. The moment he clenched his fist, the first two men barged their way into the sweatshop, guns swiveling and immediately shooting the nearest three Nest guards in rapid succession, not giving them any time to react.

Yet there were far more than three Nest guards in the wider factory area, filled to the brim with wide-eyed slaves of all origins, even a few hobgoblins. All of them seemed to be working on sewing and stitching up military uniforms in a never-ending production line, thousands of uniforms stacked up high in crates waiting to be delivered to Ocra.

The moment the bodies hit the floor, the slaves around screamed, inciting a panicked rush to get away from the fighting while Nest guards on the other end were alerted. “We’re under attack! Quick, report to Yona!”

Immediately a fierce firefight broke out through the factory floor, Dekar and his men taking cover behind sewing machines and crates of wool and leather, pellets zipping by in the air as a dozen Nest guards fanned out to defensive positions and began to suppress them with overwhelming firepower.

“Dekar, there are way more slaves and guards in here than expected! We should retreat!” One of Dekar’s men shouted over the din of gunfire and slaves scrambling to get as far away as possible from the main entrance.

“Not until we get Zayin! He must be here.” Dekar gritted his teeth, summoning his courage to dash out to a forward workbench, braving the withering fire that seemed to encompass the entire factory. Sliding beneath the workbench, Dekar let out a roar as he flipped the workbench over, protecting his body from the pellets that were now converging on him. With the pressure being relaxed on his men, they began to take potshots at the Nest guards, injuring and killing a few.

At the far end of the factory floor, a manager burst out of his office in anger. “Who the fuck is attacking us?” He roared at a nearby Nest guard who was cowering behind a pillar.

“Sir, I don’t know, but they got armor and guns far better than we do!”

“Damnit! Hey, you two! Time to do your job!” The manager hollered into the office, from which two of Yona’s mercenaries appeared from, their knight armour flaring up with arcia energy.

The Nest guards moved forward tactically, providing covering fire for each other as they shifted covers, trying to get a flanking angle on Dekar who was still behind the flipped workbench, the pellets impacting against its tough wooden surface.

“Dekar, two knights!” His men called out, pointing wildly in the general direction.

“Are the slaves clear?”

“I don’t see any of them!”

“Got it! Get down!” Dekar rummaged through his pockets, tugging out a grenade. In one swift motion, he armed it and tossed it straight toward the two knights headfirst. A green point defense arcia bolt lanced out towards the grenade, but instead of knocking it away, the bolt exploded the grenade, releasing a hailstorm of shrapnel that dug right through the mercenaries’ armor like a knife through hot butter, earning pained screams all around. Some of the shrapnel grazed against machinery, creating sparks that began to ignite a few crates of exposed arcite ore, a small fire starting up.

The resulting shockwave disorientated the Nest guards, buying time for Dekar’s men to quickly storm the factory floor with impunity. Some of the Nest Guards tried to shoot back, but they could hardly aim properly with the loud ringing in their ears and the smoke from the growing fire eating away at the wooden crates and military uniforms.

With a sudden dash, Dekar sprinted out from cover, charging ahead, the pellets singing by his head as he could only hear the blood pounding in his ears. Swiveling the barrel to and fro, Dekar shot rapidly as quickly as he could, nailing two Nest guards in the head and chest. With his men keeping up, soon the dozen Nest guards were either dead or heavily injured, Yona’s mercenaries whimpering on the floor as they tried to pluck the shrapnel bits out from their ruptured eyelids.

Dekar held no pity, immediately ending all their lives with two pellets to the head and three in the chest up close. The manager stared in horror as he watched the massacre unfold. *Fuck, I got to call Yona!* He rushed back into the office and slammed the door shut before quickly rummaging through his drawers for the arctech radio. However, before he even managed to find it, the door was kicked apart, the hinge destroyed by Dekar’s increased strength. The manager now found himself staring at two barrels aimed right at him, one of them being Dekar’s own rifle. “Step away from the radio if you want to live.”

The manager’s eyes darted about as he tried to look for a way out, gingerly raising his hand while taking one obvious step away from the table. He did not recognize Dekar due to the camouflaged paint, instead blurting out anything that could save him. “Look, I don’t know what you want, but I got money if you’re trying run a protection racket! But let me fucking remind you that it is Nest that –“

Dekar walked up and smacked the manager right in the face. “Shut the fuck up. You have a man here I’m looking for. His name is Zayin.”

“What? Nest would kill – ARGH!” A pellet burst through his calf, causing the manager to fall to the group, his face crashing against the stone floor. The sole of Dekar’s military boot rested against his face, crushing his jaw slightly.

“Not if we kill you first.” Dekar spat before turning around to face his men. “I’ll go find him myself. The rest of you, stay here and keep a lookout. We have to leave before they respond.”

While Dekar’s men took turns harassing the manager, Dekar himself went to search for where the slaves had run off to. Connected directly to the main factory floor were what seemed to be repurposed burial chambers, now acting as cramped housing for countless slaves far even beyond what Dekar had estimated.

The chambers were filled with as many people as they could fit inside, all living in clustered groups while huddling around what belongings and clothes they were allowed to accumulate, many of which were defective military uniforms. Some laid on unused wooden planks, their hands callused from the constant work shifts. There were close to three hundred people in the chambers, both young and old, a veritable mixed pot of all types of people. A few naïve kids stared at Dekar entering, some of them marveling at the armor that Dekar sported.

Yet the adults dared not look at Dekar in the eyes, afraid that he was from a rival gang that was simply here to take possession of them. Mothers grabbed their kids out of the way as Dekar filtered through the tight space, trying to control his emotions, focusing on finding Zayin. It wasn’t until he walked past a young, shriveled-up man that he began to realize where all of these slaves were from.

He spun around, trying to confirm his assumption and asking the nearest slave. “Where are you from?”

“Where am I from…? I was born in Tenar. I grew up my whole life here.” The slave replied as if it was an obvious fact, his face confused. “Almost all of us are.”

Dekar’s heart plummeted as the truth became apparent. Many of the workers were local Versian citizens, those too poor to repay their debts or snatched off the streets, never to see the light of day anymore. Even children of eight years old and above were forced to work as well, climbing into small nook and crannies of dangerous complicated machinery to fix nuts and bolts. This was how Tenar had achieved such a perfected standard of living for those above ground.

Still, he had no time to despair. Continuing his search for Zayin, he finally noticed a grey-bearded man sitting cross-legged in the midst of a moldy pile of military uniforms and shredded leather, his skin drooping. Clear signs of malnutrition and years of muscle degradation were visible through the stick-like arms and the countless wrinkles etched on his face while his eyes stared blankly ahead. “Zayin!”

The old man spluttered out saliva, a weak grin growing on his face as Dekar hurriedly bent down to check his condition. Instead of embracing Dekar, Zayin used what strength he had left to smack his arm away. “Look who finally decided to visit. Second-in-command Lieutenant General of the Versian Revolutionary Army, Dekar. Have you finally realized what is happening?”

“Zayin, I… I didn’t know anything. Mornero kept all of us in the dark, it is him who lied to us. He told us that you moved to Creuliz.”

“Hah, me? Move to Creuliz?!” Zayin’s eyes flared up with a hidden strength, fuelled purely by anger despite his deteriorating condition. “AFTER EVERYTHING I SACRIFICED FOR-” He coughed violently, his body unable to handle his rage. “After everything I had sacrificed for the country, for my friends and people, and for Tenar, you think I would just up and leave? I was born here! In Tenar! My very own home ground!”

“Zayin, I swear, I did not know any of this, and I will make it right. I’m going to get you out of here. We can still save Tenar and Versia if you help me, just like in old times.”

“I’m tired, Dekar. I’m tired of the old times. I’m tired of the speeches. Everywhere I went, I was tugged in a direction I never truly believed in. To me, you are the same as Johan and Mornero.”

“Johan did everything right by us and by the peo-”

“Don’t you dare say that in front of all these people who’ve you let down! Do you have any idea how long I have been stuck down here? SEVEN YEARS! And it took your corruption scandal for you to finally open your eyes. All the social welfare schemes preached, all for naught and only for the well-to-do. Us lowlifes? We belong here, and I doubt you are going to be able to change anything.”

Dekar clenched his fist in anger, but not towards Zayin, instead himself for not knowing how deep the corruption had taken root in the Versian government. “I will do everything in my power to make this right, even if I have to face the whole of Nest and the army alone. You can count on me - no more speeches this time, only action.” He grabbed Zayin’s light body by the waist, hauling him upwards while ignoring Zayin’s protests.

“Alright, I have Zayin, we can mov-” Dekar left the chambers only to be faced with an entire squadron of Yona’s mercenaries surrounding him. He instinctively pulled out a side handgun from his belt, but a sudden gust of sharp, slicing wind blasted the handgun out of his grip and cut deep into his wrist. Two pellets were shot into his thighs immediately before he could retreat back into the chambers, the slaves near the chamber’s entrance shrieking in fear and scampering away while Dekar fell to both knees.

“Looks like Masir was right about you guys attacking after all.” Yona grinned, closing her arctech paper fan with a crisp snap and walking up to the grimacing Dekar, who clutched his bleeding thighs. As she approached, Dekar summoned the strength he had left, lunging out with a hidden knife from his thigh’s side pocket, stabbing right at Yona’s neck.

Instead of the blade finding its mark, the tip of the blade was stopped by a swirling wind of gust, which immediately sped up and wreaked havoc all along Dekar’s arm, the slices cutting deep into his flesh as he let out a roar of pain. “Please don’t try anything new. I still have to keep you in one piece for Mornero.” Yona spoke with a smug face, the closed paper fan still glowing with arcia energy.

While Dekar winced in pain, his eyes caught sight of his squad, all of them captured and knocked unconscious as well. “Worried about your friends? Don’t worry, you’ll be heading to the same torture room.” Yona grinned, motioning with her manicured fingers for two of her mercenaries to pick Dekar and Zayin up.

Dekar struggled against the mercenaries’ tight grip in a futile attempt. *She must have planted the trap in the first place. I was too bull-headed in trying to save Zayin.* He looked around for a way out, but it seemed impossible, with nearly two dozen mercenaries escorting them out onto the pier, hauling them onto a boat that began to take them out of the catacombs. Yet as he continued glancing around while the boat moved, he noticed the strange shadow of a woman in the distance, stalking them and matching the speed of the boat like an unseen ghost, her silhouette barely visible.

The boat finally approached a new stop in another part of the catacombs, the water being slowed artificially by dams and barriers to create a smooth coasting canal that led to another pier, this one is right under Asha Street. A clear underground establishment had been set up, much like the sweatshop Dekar had just raided, but the glowing neon arctech signs on the exterior showed it was of a different business.

As Dekar was forcibly dragged into it, he watched as a crowd of customers cheered and roared while they watched two ruffians have a go at each other on top of three round tables, the frames barely able to hold on as their weight continuously shifted. Sweat and blood were flung into the cheering onlookers, who heartily downed their pints and shouted.

“COME ON, YA WUSS! GRAB HIM BY THE BALLS!”

“THE EYES! AIM FOR THE EYES, YOU FUCK WIT!”

Dekar tried to ignore the flashing arctech lights glistening all around him, the underground bar clearly being run by Nest. Slave female dancers dressed in revealing clothes paraded themselves on the stage while men threw flowers at the girls non-stop as they groped another girl who was already giving them a lap dance. The kaleidoscopic lights from the tinted arctech lanterns swiveled around the floor while jazz music blasted from the surrounding arctech radios.

Yona’s mercenaries shoved their way through the rowdy dancing crowd, many of the dancers clearly intoxicated by some drugs, empty potion flasks plastered with the emblem of Nest rolling on the ground or shattered by the boots of the mercenaries. Dekar continued to be hauled downstairs, deeper underground past the churning arctech engines that powered the entire establishment, until he was thrown unceremoniously into a plush velvet room, the cupboards along the walls lined with extravagant alcohol and potions of a dizzying array, converging on a gold-tinted desk.

Dekar was left to bleed out on the carpet while the rest of his men were imprisoned elsewhere. Yona paced around the bleeding Dekar while five of her mercenaries aimed their rifles directly at him, ready to fire at a moment’s notice. She picked up an Euria pipe from the desk, carefully placing grounded Euria Seeds into it. “So, Minister Dekar, you’ve been somehow evading us for the last three months. Care to explain how?”

A small, confident grin grew on his face. “Looks like Mornero never really paid attention back then. He should know the answer well enou-”

Dekar felt the sharp tip of Yona’s heel jab into his already wounded thigh, sending a wave of pain through his nerves. “You know how to navigate the catacombs fully, and you’re going to show us how.”

“So you can enslave more Versian citizens? You’re a disgrace to the state and everything we have fought for!” Dekar retorted, only to earn an amused expression from Yona.

“Why do I care? I’m not even Versian.” Yona took a deep breath on the pipe. “Are you still worrying about the ‘nation’ even in this situation? I can’t tell if you’re being serious or keeping up an act.”

“Unlike the rest of those corrupt, selfish fuckers in government, I actually believe in something beyond myself.”

“Well, then, let me help you believe something in yourself.” Yona bent over to whisper. “You will not get out of here alive unless you help me. You can spend the rest of your miserable life rotting in a dark, damp cell, waxing lyrical about the Versian state while I decimate the rest of your stupid Ghosts of Versia.”

Dekar was about to retort, but then his expression became even more confounded. “What? What Ghosts of Versia?”

“Don’t play dumb. I’ve already raided one of your hideouts at the Golden Day bookstore.”

Dekar’s confused look did not dissipate, only infuriating Yona even further. “Fine, if you won’t talk, I’ll wrench it out from yo-”

A sudden loud explosion resounded through the foundation of the underground bar, rocking the VIP room that they were in. “You two, get out there and find out what the fuck happened!” Yona immediately ordered while she grabbed Dekar by the cheek. “Looks like your friends have come to rescue you. Too bad they are walking into their graves.”

Dekar’s confusion deepened even more while Yona continued to issue orders to defend the establishment. *That’s not possible. I only have my five men and Zayin, no one else. Who is coming to save me?*

Minutes passed while the tension in the room built up, Yona suddenly cognizant of the fact that the firefight was not subsiding, the sounds of fighting and screaming louder than ever. “You three, flank the door’s entrance. Anyone else who barges in, shoot them on the spot. I don’t care if they are Nest or not! Get everyone out there fighting now!”

The three mercenaries fanned out, hugging the wall where the VIP door’s entrance was, their sweaty hands clutching the holster of their rifle. Through the wall, they could hear the brawl getting closer and closer, the clear, distinct sound of a body tumbling down the stairs past the arctech engines before silence reigned dominant. The bar’s music had completely paused, save for the bated breaths of the mercenaries, Yona and Dekar.

Slowly, the sound of footsteps approaching the door got louder and louder. Yona quickly grabbed an arctech radio, whispering into it while she prepared her own paper fan. “We need backup at the Flirty Hole, now!”

But before she could get a response, a loud bang exploded the door inwards of its hinges, zooming past the cowering Dekar and crashing into the floor, kicking up a thick cloud of dust. The moment the silhouette of a body was visible at the door, the three mercenaries opened fire relentlessly, pelting the body with withering fire.

Instead, the body turned out to be a dead Nest guard, his skin now pockmarked and ragged by the hailstorm of pellets he had endured. The body was shoved aside, crashing into one of the mercenaries while an intruder moved with an alarming speed, catching another mercenary off-guard. The intruder’s hand slammed into the base of the mercenary’s jaw, splintering the bone internally into a dozen fragments before a handgun drilled three pellets into his chest.

Before the intruder could move to the last mercenary, a slice of wind arced forward in a straight line, forcing the intruder to dodge out of the way as the slice crashed into the wall, tearing apart the wallpaper. Yona swung the fan, forming a strong wind gust to drop Dekar close to her, aiming a handgun with her free hand toward Dekar’s temple. “Don’t move another inch, or I’ll blast his brains out. That wouldn’t be too good for your rescue mission now, would it be?”

“Oh? It seems that even the great Lady Yona is wrong sometimes” The intruder smirked, the dust and smoke finally clearing up enough to reveal his face. Dekar was astonished by the person. *Kris Greyborn?!*

Yona squinted her eyes. “Wrong?”

“My mission isn’t just to rescue him. I’m here to kill all of you.”

# Chapter 107 - Slaughter

Kyle ducked out of the way as a deadly wind slice carved a path through where he was just standing, his body rolling on the carpet before recovering into a running stance and charging right at Yona. Instead of retreating, Yona stood her ground, unfazed by Kyle’s attack as she swung her paper fan rapidly, sending another three slices at him that threatened to corner him.

With a sleek motion, Kyle twisted his body expertly, dodging each of the slices as though it was a mere game to him. However, the moment he reached within four steps of Yona, he hurriedly retreated, narrowly avoiding a sudden swirling barrier of air, filled to the brim with metal dust that threatened to shred anything that came close.

“You think you alone are enough to kill us? You coming here alone was a death sentence, though I’ll take my time to wring the information out of you.” Yona taunted confidently at the same moment when five Nest guards appeared at the door to the VIP room, preparing to enter and surround Kyle.

Instead, the five Nest guards found themselves shot at by Lisa and the other Ghosts, forcing them to scatter across the hallway and take cover behind their fallen comrades. Kyle took advantage of the confusion to rush forward in one decisive leap, closing the gap to the surprised Yona as the cloud of metal dust collapsed to the ground in a dazzling fall. Before she could activate her paper fan again, Kyle had already trapped her right wrist, locked by his firm grip, as he twisted it into an arm lock, trying to force Yona to drop the paper fan.

Yona grinned as she unveiled a second paper fan in her left hand, swinging it upwards to send an updraft filled with metal dust at his face, forcing Kyle to let go once more, but not without him retaliating with a side step followed by a spinning kick aimed at her head.

Swirling wind gather around Yona’s arms and legs as she lashed out against the incoming kick, parrying it. The continuous stream of metal dust set off sparks against Kyle’s armour, scratching it deep like a buzzsaw while Kyle continued to block counterattacks from her. With each of Yona’s strike, her range was extended by the arctech fan, allowing the cloud of metal dust to lunge out like a whip. Her movements were as fluid as water, clearly trained in martial arts unbeknownst to Kyle.

“Bit off more than you can chew, huh?” Yona smiled as she unleashed a room-wide kick, sending an arc of metal dust in all directions, lodging them into the wall in a circular ring. Some rushed out through the open entrance, forcing everyone outside to duck, including Lisa and the Ghosts.

“Lisa! Get the rest, I’ll handle her.” Kyle roared over the din of pellet fire, Lisa nodding and diverting her efforts toward the prison cells further down the hallway.

“Are you sure?” Yona mocked as she clenched both paper fans in her hands, directing the metal dust cloud back to form rings around her, manipulated by the continuous flow of air. Without warning she shot three bolts of the metal dust at Kyle, prompting him to roll and avoid the shredding blasts.

“I’m sure.” Kyle recovered into a crouching position, retrieving what seemed like a grenade and tossing it at her as hard as he could, the grenade shooting forward like a baseball pitch.

“Idiot!” Yona summoned her strength, charging the wind right at the grenade to knock it back. Instead, the cloud of metal dust shredded the exterior of the grenade, igniting its contents into a fiery ball that began to consume all of the metal dust, trails of fire converging toward Yona. With a quick flick, Yona forcibly expunged all the metal dust near her, preventing her from getting caught up in the growing explosion that also threatened to envelop Kyle. Seeing her chance, she quickly shot a gust of wind, pushing the explosion towards Kyle while she retreated back.

However, despite the push, the explosion suddenly split apart, an invisible barrier parting the flames and smoke around Kyle as if it were nothing. His barrier had also protected the still bleeding Dekar in the middle of the room from getting caught up in the explosion. Before Yona could utter any exclamation, Kyle was already in front of her, the barrier forcibly slamming her back into the nearest wall before she crumpled to the floor.

“If we’re done playing around, maybe we can get to business.” Kyle adjusted his sleeves, walking up to Yona, who was struggling to get up, her leg fractured from the sudden hit. She desperately tried to swing her paper fans once more, but even her wind slices could not penetrate the barrier, harmlessly bouncing off as if she was merely pushing air around.

“You… you are transcendent!” Yona spluttered out with saliva and blood mixed in her spit, one of her lungs clearly collapsed as she tried to support herself against the wall. Kyle’s eyes immediately narrowed, rushing forward to grab her by the neck and lifting her up, her broken leg dangling freely in the air, his barrier now warping around her.

“How do you know about transcendents?” Kyle questioned, but Yona only held a small grin as though she had won.

“Too late, you touched me.” She let out a small laugh, before a small light began to erupt from her chest, a familiar scene that Kyle had seen before in the hitman who had come to kill Gunther.

*Won’t work on me a second time.* Kyle already knew the best method to deal with it, slamming Yona down onto the ground and knocking her out cold. He ripped apart the clothes covering her chest, revealing a large engraving that was beginning to combust, her skin blackening from the flames that were trying to erupt.

*Arcia Disruption!*

Immediately, the flames began to sputter out, and the flow of arcia diverted through his Sub-Class skill. Instead, Yona’s body began to flail violently as the arcia energy began to course backward into her own veins, her skin turning greenish and melting apart from the random effects. Acting quickly, Kyle hurriedly retrieved a copy of the Tattoo Knife from its holster on his belt, using it to disable the engraving directly by carving into her flesh, cutting through the runes directly, and making sure it was inoperable.

The slashing reduced her chest to an unrecognizable bloody mess, the loss of blood putting Yona on the brink of death. Yet instead of letting her die, Kyle grabbed a spare health potion vial from his pocket, pouring it all over the wound. The effects were immediate, with new skin growing over the old ripped-out strands, stabilizing her breathing.

Yet the mission was not done yet. Kyle quickly rose up to his feet, checking the progress of the battle outside the VIP room. Sasha and Feldon had already subdued most of the Nest guards, while Lisa and the Ghosts were rescuing Dekar’s men and other slaves chained in the cells, no doubt being marked for sale to future owners. Kyle did a quick headcount of those he had seen, making up for about twenty people they’d rescued. “Sasha, get in here. I need you to handle Yona. Tie her up and prepare for escape.”

[Yes, sir] Sasha quickly entered the room, her outfit bloodied from the close combat that she had just gone through, some bits of flesh and strands of ears still visible on her shirt, though it hardly fazed her. She knelt next to Yona, stealing the uniform of another dead Nest guard and wrapping Yona in it.

At the same time, Kyle walked up to Dekar, whose breathing was still short and rapid, the battle having inflicted some minor wounds on him from the gusts of metal dust. Kyle fed him a health potion, giving him some comfort, though his eyes were fully locked on Kyle’s face. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

“I’m back to have you honor the deal. You owe me a weapons factory.” Kyle stretched out a hand, Dekar accepting it and pulling himself up to a standing posture.

“I’m not the Minister anymore. My friend, Zayin-”

“I know. We’ve already got him and your men out. We need to move before the rest of Nest start coming in. We have a hideout nearby.” Kyle began to move, but Dekar grabbed his arm.

“No. Whatever hideout you have, it won’t be good enough.” Dekar shook his head. “Follow me. I got a place not even Mornero knows about.”

“Perfect. Let’s move.” Kyle agreed, ordering the rest of the Ghosts to evacuate. By this time, the Flirty Hole was the site of a terrible massacre. Lisa had to cup her mouth in horror, trying to stop herself from puking due to the sheer gore and human blood spilling across the dance floor, the bar’s music still blasting as the rescued slaves and Dekar’s men hobbled out through the entrance. Kyle and Sasha didn’t care at all, simply stepping over the corpses of both innocent bystanders and Nest guards alike, focusing on making it out.

Dekar led the group, most of his wounds healed by the healing potion as he moved as quietly as possible, leading the entire group down the canals. As he reached a junction, he suddenly could hear shouting noises, the sounds of Nest reinforcements chasing after them. “This way, quickly!” Dekar urged, the group picking up the pace and following Dekar closely. They turned and twisted through the slowly narrowing canals until they reached a dead-end directly, with seemingly no path ahead.

“Are you crazy, old man? What the fuck are you doing bringing us to our deaths?!” Feldon shouted over the rushing water, but Dekar ignored him, instead sprinting up to the dead end and placing his hand on a yellow brick. The wall began to split apart, the bricks jostling aside like a magical tunnel, revealing a descending tunnel that led into an unknown shadowy realm.

“Get in, now!” Dekar whispered angrily before leaping in headfirst, Kyle following right after with the rest. The brick wall closed up behind them rapidly, leaving them in total darkness until Dekar tapped an arctech lantern, twisting a switch to light up the path. They all stood for a few seconds, catching their breath before finally hearing the pursuing Nest reinforcements approaching the wall.

“Shit, they are com-” Feldon panicked, but his mouth was immediately smothered by Kyle, who held a single finger up to his own mouth. Some specks of bright spotlights could be seen filtering through the gaps of the bricks as the Nest reinforcements tried to search for them.

“Where the hell did they go? I swore they turned here!” One of the Nest guards roared.

“Check every nook and cranny. There must be a hidden place or hole!” Another replied. “You two, check further down that way and see if they ran further!”

Kyle tapped Dekar’s shoulder, motioning to him in silence to move forward. The group quietly tiptoed down the tunnel, careful not to attract any attention until they were sure they were out of earshot. Some of the rescued slaves began to grin widely, wanting to celebrate until they saw Kyle’s stern face. “No cheering until we’re safe.” He reminded them.

“Didn’t know the walls were retractable like that,” Lisa muttered, though her face looked a bit listless, trying to reconcile the horrifying massacre that she had been a part of, unable to accept the senseless loss of life. Still, she kept a facade up, knowing that she was the leader of the Tenar rebel cell and had to act the part. *It’s all for a good cause, it’s all for a good cause…*

“Plenty of secrets in the catacombs. Johan and I are the only ones who know every single route in the catacombs. Maybe Zayin knows half of them.” Dekar grinned at the limping Zayin, who didn’t reciprocate.

They continued walking down the tunnel in silence, the ground clearly sloping deeper into another level of the catacombs beneath the canals. Soon, a bright light could be seen ahead at the end of the tunnel, revealing itself to be a large chamber filled with old rifles, maps, and some supplies that were collected by Dekar’s men. Multiple tunnels served as exit and entry points into this central chamber, some of them leading to other smaller rooms. The group began to filter out into the large chamber, some of the rescued slaves staring at the vast ceiling and wondering how such a place could be hidden under Tenar.

While the rest began to settle down, resting to recover their stamina, Dekar’s men finally began to realize that they did not recognize Lisa or the others, their suspicion raised even though they recognized them as their savior. One of Dekar’s men walked up to Dekar, whispering quietly. “If this is another ploy by Nest, we should get rid of them soon. We can’t afford to trust others beyond who we know.”

“I’ll figure it out. Let me talk with their leader first before I know what’s happening. He and I have dealt with each other before.” Dekar nodded before waving at Kyle. “Kris, please, come this way. Alone, if you could.”

Kyle handed Yona over to Sasha as he left to follow Dekar.”Have her prepared for interrogation in another room.”

Kyle and Dekar walked through one of the shorter tunnels, reaching a similar hallway with three rooms, one of which seemed to act as Dekar’s main lodging. “Apologies for the mess, but it has been a long time since we’ve used this hideout.” Dekar smiled as he arranged a few documents on an unkept table. The decor of the room clearly showed its age. Kyle noticed a few blurred paintings of the original revolutionaries in a group, along with crumpled banners and flags and a few old muskets stacked up along the side. A simple wooden bed with minimal cushion and no decorations was enough for Dekar.

Dekar closed the old, moldy wooden door behind them, turning to face Kyle properly while he crossed his arms. “Firstly, thank you for saving us. But I think you owe me an explanation before we move forward with anything. Clearly, you are more than just a weapons designer. Who are you, exactly?”

“Who I am does not matter, it is what I can do for you that matters.” Kyle sat down on the creaking bed calmly, unperturbed by the cramped room.

Dekar squinted his eyes. “This is a matter of causes and beliefs. If we are not aligned, then there’s no reason for us to cooperate.”

“Don’t be so quick to dismiss a business proposition. Even if we have differing goals, the fact remains that both of us stand to benefit more if we work together.”

“I still haven’t heard what your goal is.”

“It’s simple. Take down Harrison.” Kyle stated clearly.

“Take down Harrison…? Why?”

“The reasons are mine alone, but I have accumulated a significant network of rebels that are willing to fight against the current government, all of whom had suffered tremendously at the hands of sweeping policies.”

“You’re lying.” Dekar suddenly shot back in anger. “I gave you a chance to come clean, and here you are still thinking I don’t know anything. You think I don’t know who you are? I’ve done my research when I was a Versian Minister - you’re the leader of the Seven Snakes in Raktor.”

To Dekar’s astonishment, Kyle didn’t show any sign of anger or surprise, merely staring at Dekar quietly. “Do they know?” Dekar pointed outside towards the door. “I doubt those rebels are following you because you are a gang leader. For all I know, you could be a spy for Raktor. One working for Count Leon to sow discord amongst the Versian people as a prelude to war. With just one word, I could have them all turn against you. So you better tell me exactly what you’re here for before I kill you myself.”

Kyle clapped slowly, a small genial smile plastered on his face. “Well done, Minister Dekar. You have me all figured out. All the cards are in your hands. But you’re missing one thing.” He rose to his full height, standing face-to-face with the indignant Dekar, who did not back down. “Do you think you can kill me?”

*Intimidation Aura!*

A sudden surge of pressure crushed down onto Dekar’s shoulders, his muscles tensing as he suddenly felt shivers course through his body, the sight of Kyle now terrifying him to his bone. He gulped instinctively, trying to stand firm, but his legs were already beginning to wobble terribly while Kyle merely smirked.

“Minister Dekar, or should I say, former Minister Dekar. I will help restore you to power if you agree to join our rebel movement and allow me to take over Harrison. If you do not agree…” Kyle withdrew a Tattoo Knife. “I’m afraid that I will have to take drastic measures to secure information. I’m sure you understand the dangers of running a rebel outfit.”

“Y-you are utilizing the rebel movement just so you can get back at Harrison for a personal feud ?! Are you insane?” Dekar’s voice wavered, though he still had the courage to accuse Kyle. “Even as a Yual dog, that’s too mu-”

Kyle lunged forward in an instant, grabbing Dekar’s mouth and clamping it shut with an iron grip. “I don’t think you understand the gravity of this situation. No one crosses me and gets away with it scott-free. No one. Not even if I have to burn the whole of Tenar down to the ground. And as far as I can tell, you’re toeing the line between asset and obstacle. Which one would you rather be? Friend or foe?”

Dekar’s eyes widened, before nodding his head vigorously, clearly indicating that he would like to be a friend. He gasped as Kyle let go of his mouth, breathing heavily.

“Always a pleasure to talk with someone with a head on their shoulders. Hard to come by these days.” Kyle returned to his original seat on the wooden bed, the intimidation aura dissipating and lifting the pressure off of Dekar. “Now, the deal. You will be the figurehead of the rebel movement, and I will assist your endeavors to restore Versia to… whatever it was before.”

Dekar rubbed his cheeks gingerly. “To a free Versia. A great Versia, one ruled by the people, for the people.”

“A good slogan and an ideal for people to rally behind, yes.” Kyle waved his hand dismissively. “Though it is clear that whatever form of government comes next is hardly going to match.”

“When I promise a free Versia, it will be so.” Dekar took offense at the insinuation.

“There is another time for jokes, Minister Dekar, but for now, it’s time to focus on the facts. Your former ‘Versia’ was neither free nor great.”

“How would a Yual dog know of such things? You live under the thumbs of your nobles directly, content to wallow in the mud while they enjoy the fruits of your labor. Even you as a gang leader have to pay taxes and tribute to them.” Dekar shot back.

“That may be so. Then please tell me, why did your ‘free’ and ‘great’ Versia crumble to such a shell of itself? You seem to be wallowing in the mud yourself.” Kyle entertained him.

“Because there was evil already lurking amidst us from the very beginning! Betrayed by our own brothers, that fucking snake Mornero and his lackeys twisted their hearts against the original cause for the sake of money and power…” Dekar began to ramble. “If only I had-”

“More power? More control? More authority to ensure that such evil would never rise again?”

“I… I wouldn’t put it that way…” Dekar’s voice faltered slightly.

“Don’t mask the answer from yourself - if you truly want a free and great Versia, someone has to step in and enforce it. The rule of law is only enforced through authority, and authority is enforced by force. Without a force great enough to restrain others, how can you be expected to ensure the liberties of others? Look, even your pitiful rebel outfit cannot maintain its original cause. You fumble and sneak about while your fellow Versians you swore to protect are enslaved by corrupt government officials and industrialists, trapped for years as you wax lyricals.” Kyle sighed.

“I had nothing when I was framed!” Dekar roared in anger. “I didn’t have anything. If it weren’t for my old allies helping me-”

“You would have been captured and jailed for the rest of your life under Harrison, forced to watch as his men bring Versia to the brink of collapse. Don’t you see? I am the solution. With me on your side, you will have enough firepower, power and support from the people to fight back against the evil. All you have to do is promise me you’ll stay out of the way when I deal with Harrison.”

*Just why is he so obsessed with Harrison?* Dekar wondered as he did not answer immediately. Despite Kyle’s obvious overpowering physical capability, he wasn’t one to cave to threats alone - the threats from the nobles didn’t stop him from leading the charge during the independence war. What truly made him pause was Kyle’s proposition. *I need his strength and power. He clearly has the ability to both arm and organize groups in a clandestine manner, to the point where I myself did not even know of their existence. Perhaps he is right: I can use him until I get back into a seat of power.*

Yet something in Dekar’s mind warned him that there was a hidden facet to the deal, though he shrugged it off. *As long as I don’t fall into his trap, I will be able to corner him once I’m in power.* “I accept your deal. My men will now join the Ghosts of Versia.”

“Perfect. Pleasure doing business with you.” Kyle shook Dekar’s hand. “However, if you do decide to renegade on the deal, know that your death will be long and painful.”

Dekar kept a stern expression, not replying as he returned the handshake. As Kyle left the room, he found himself sweating buckets, as if he had just faced down a monster. *Have I just made a deal with the devil?*

Kyle, on the other hand, was clearly satisfied with the progress of the rebel movement so far. With Minister Dekar now working for him, the Ghosts of Versia would gain some much-needed legitimacy. It also put them on the radar against Nest, as he had no doubt that such a raid would alarm them immediately and have them scouring the city. *Best to stay in this hideout, though we do need to find escape routes.*

Not one to put all his eggs in a single basket, he began to examine the large chamber. It was clearly an ancient one, repurposed and last used during the original independence war. Rows upon rows of antiqued armor, ammunition, explosives, and rifles were stacked uselessly into piles carelessly collected in corners, while empty ration shelves were coated with dust accumulated over the years, only replaced by intermittent bags of groceries apparently acquired recently by Dekar’s men. *Something to fix.*

“Hey, just exactly who are you guys?” One of Dekar’s men spotted Kyle examining the place, standing up to confront him. “You might have saved us, but we’re going to need some answers soon. We don’t take too kindly to civilians playing with us, there’s no time to handle kids acting like they are soldiers.”

“Civilians…?” Kyle cocked an eyebrow in confusion.

“Yea, don’t you know who we are? VSF commandos, all five. If we weren’t captured by Nest, you wouldn’t even see us.” The commando puffed up his chest as his buddies began to congregate, nodding in agreement.

Kyle looked at them incredulously, before snorting in derision. “You? You guys are Versian Special Forces? Don’t make me laugh. All of you fell into a trap without even thinking for a second who was behind it.”

“What did you say? How about you and I -” Before the commando could finish his challenge, a hand grabbed the back of his head from behind, tugging it backward in a furious flip that sent him sprawling onto the ground, crashing into the pile of rifles with a loud crash. His four comrades immediately raised their arms, ready to brawl, but they were too slow to block the punches aimed right at their guts, causing them to wheeze and gag one by one as they were taken down onto the floor.

As they struggled on the floor, they could only watch Sasha step over their bodies, dusting her hands off while Kyle sighed in the back. “You can’t even handle one civilian, and you expect to be able to handle Nest? Maybe if you get your head out of your ass, you’ll be able to learn something from us.”

“Grr… f-fuck! That wasn’t fair!” The first commando to be thrown scampered back onto his feet, his expression furious. “Fight me head-on!” He roared, slamming his chest and getting into a boxing posture.

Sasha stepped forward, but Kyle placed a hand on her shoulder, stopping her. “Let others have some fun. Lisa, you’re up.”

“H-huh?! Me?” Lisa glanced around nervously, caught eating half a biscuit in her mouth while sitting against the wall.

“When someone disrespects the Ghosts of Versia, the cell leader must be ready to defend their pride.” Kyle motioned. “He said you Ghosts are just playing around.”

That was enough for Lisa, who shot right up, swallowing what was left of the biscuit in one chomp before storming up to the commando, who was already spitting bravado: “Yea, come on, let me show you how strong the military really is!”

Lisa didn’t falter, raising her hands up just as Sasha had trained her over the last few weeks, the moves ingrained into her bones from the countless beatings and losses. Faced with the commando, Lisa felt close to no fear, knowing that he was no match even for Sasha. Her eyes burned with determination, sending a slight jolt of fear into the commando’s heart for a brief moment, though he eventually laughed it off.

“Trying to act tough? If you don’t strike first, then I’ll-” The commando could not finish his words, forced to raise his elbow to block a fast right hook thrown by Lisa, before a sudden sharp pain could be felt on his knee, the cartilage tearing apart as Lisa’s kick slammed the joint in a horrendous way, causing the commando to scream out in pain.

“Couldn’t even last five seconds.” Lisa scoffed and shook her head in disappointment while the commando’s four comrades rushed over to help him lie down. “You think we’re playing around? You are just military soldiers blindly following a man - but we are fighting for a future we believe in, and that every action and every plan executed will bring us closer to our goal. To us, you are the ones playing around, trying to bully others into submission just because you are stronger. Don’t look down on us, punks.” She tossed a health potion vial to the injured commando before walking back to Kyle and Sasha.

Sasha nodded in approval, giving a thumbs up, while Kyle held a satisfied smile on his face. “Finally got over yourself?” Kyle asked.

“I’m sorry for lashing out before at your plan. You’re right - you’ve done more for the cause in one day than I have done in a week. So long as your plans and actions are for the cause, I will follow. For now. I’ll keep the other Ghosts in line.”

“Good. Like I said, follow my orders, and we won’t have a problem. You’ll see your free Versia soon enough.” Kyle shrugged. This was a good enough compromise for now - pushing too hard with a punishing hand would turn the rebels against him. He had to portray a show, as if he was simply a brutal man with a genuine cause aligned to them. *They don’t need to know the full picture - no one does. I will just use them until they are no longer useful to me, or if they betray me. Everyone is replaceable.*

While the injured commando continued to whimper in the corner, Kyle continued his tour of the chambers. There was plenty of space, with quite a few extra rooms that could house close to two hundred people overall, and there could be some avenues and areas that had some potential to be expanded with the proper support in place. Still, he didn’t know which tunnel led where, until the commandos finally dropped their ego and answered Kyle faithfully. “The tunnels in this layer help us to access different sectors of Tenar, and some eventually lead to other cities.”

“Other cities like Ocra?”

“Yes and Creuliz. Desham is a bit harder, there’s no direct path as far as we know. According to Dekar and Johan, there should be one, but it is extremely perilous.”

“Perilous? As in, treacherous terrain?”

“No, as in other animals and creatures. We aren’t the only ones living at this depth in the catacombs.” The commando explained.

“Interesting…” Kyle kept that in mind, but he focused on the main issues now, walking up to his Seven Snakes members. “Sasha, Feldon. I need you to establish a proper route back to Ocra. We need to gather supplies, weapons, and additional help. If we can secure this supply route, it will be much easier. Anything that can’t be solved, let me know.”

“Yes, sir.” Feldon and Sasha nodded in unison, getting to work and leaving Kyle free to do what he truly needed to do. He entered the room where Yona was tied up in, Yona still unconscious from the hit. It was a simple bunk room with a few chairs and sleeping bags scattered about. She was tied up with ropes binding her arms and legs to the chair separately. Kyle walked around her, his hand pulling out the Tattoo Knife from his belt’s holster, twirling it expertly.

“I know you’re awake. You got three seconds before I rip off one of your arms.” Kyle warned, prompting Yona to finally open her eyes, a small grin on her face.

“You won’t. Not when I hold the information you so desperately need.” Yona held a confident look. “If you kill me-”

A blinding slice faster than she could blink flashed past her, her brain slightly disorientated at what had just happened until she realized she couldn’t breathe, her throat slit by the cold, sharp blade of the Tattoo Knife. *What?! He actually killed me?* Her eyes widened as the blood began to gush out of the inch-wide incision on her vocal cords, choking on her own blood as she toppled back over onto the floor, struggling to breathe while her body flailed wildly in a violent attempt to break free of her restraints.

She squirmed against the ropes to no avail, only able to roll over towards Kyle’s feet, Kyle’s eyes uncaring, simply watching her life fade away slowly bit by bit. Yona clenched her fist as she tried everything she could think of in a desperate attempt, arcing her body to try and flex the chair off, but her strength was rapidly fading, her vision narrowing over the seconds. *No… no… no! I can’t die here, not like this!*

“Looks like you still want to live.” Just before she was about to lose consciousness, Kyle kicked her squirming body over, forcing a healing potion right onto her throat wound. Within seconds, the wound healed, restoring her sliced throat and vocal cords and allowing Yona to breathe again, her lungs inhaling with a loud, sharp gasp.

“Ready to talk? Or we can repeat this until you’re satisfied.” Kyle flicked the blood of the knife towards the ground, Yona’s blood splattering on the ground. Yona didn’t hesitate, this time nodding in agreement.

“Good. First question - how do you know about transcendents?”

# Chapter 108 - Interrogation

“You… you’re not with them, are you?” Yona squinted her eyes even while she was coated in her own blood, the streams from her throat drying up on the Nest guard uniform that draped around her ripped cheongsam.

“Maybe, maybe not.” Kyle played it off, but deep down his heart skipped a beat. It had been an assumption ever since he had been thrown into Raktor in the body of Alvin, yet right here was confirmation that he was truly still in the Galactic Era and that he wasn’t the only one who knew about it. However, he needed to pry out more information from her - perhaps they had different definitions of what a ‘transcendent’ was.

“Of course you’re not with them - otherwise you would have never asked such a question. Please don’t treat me like I’m dumb.” Yona held a smug look, a futile attempt to act as if she had the upper hand in the interrogation in order to compensate for her near-death experience. Such was the way of life as a Nest leader - one had to act tough regardless of the scenario.

“Answer the question.”

“Never in my life would I have expected to meet a rogue transcendent in the flesh. Usually they don’t last long enough, but judging from your strength, you certainly found a way to evade their detection. Sooner or later they are going to find you and-” Yona suddenly felt the knife’s blade against her neck again, Kyle moving faster than she could react to.

“Last chance.” Kyle warned, before retracting the blade. “You’re the not the only one in Nest who knows - don’t think you’re irreplacable.”

Yona gulped instinctively, her fake bravado finally collapsing entirely and prompting her to spill the beans. “Transcendents are what the name suggests - humans who have transcended their boundaries.”

“Like mages.”

“Sure, but we both know you’re not a mage, and I know you’re not asking about mages. Transcendents are like gods among men, able to dominate anything they touch, seemingly invincible and possessing strength far beyond the common human.”

“How many have you met?”

“Only one in person here in Versia.”

“Is he still here?”

“Hard to say. The last time I met him was a year ago - he could be anywhere now.”

“What was he in Versia for?”

“I wasn’t the one in charge of him - he was handled by someone else.”

“Who?”

“Harrison.”

Kyle took a deep breath, sitting down on a chair and pondering his next moves. With this new information, tackling Harrison would be far more difficult than he expected. Harrison possessing Galactic Era technology was one thing, but another possible System user was a whole another thing. *I have to investigate this new connection between Harrison and this ‘group’ of transcendents as soon as possible, and ascertain just how far entrenched they are in Versia.*

If Kyle could help it in anyway, he would rather not expose himself to any other System users - he knew for a fact that they would kill him on sight if they had the chance, no questions asked. He knew because he would do the same as well. Having someone with a similar power system as him was far too dangerous to both control and handle, unless he found a method to restraint such a user through relics or other Galactic Era technology.

On the other hand, if they were not System users, it would be equally dangerous: Galactic Era transcendents were basically super weapons, constituting about a billionth percent of the galactic human population. His criminal group in his former life had methods of dealing with such people, him even having assassinated one himself before, but he did not have access to any of his former technology. *I’ll have to work harder then.*

Still, there was more to get out of Yona. In order to regain his former strength, Harrison’s Galactic Era arsenal of technology was what he needed to truly ensure victory against any other System users, assuming they had a similar start to him. “You’re a leader of Nest, so you must have information on what is Harrison’s endgoal. What does he want?”

“Who knows?” Yona shrugged. “I just follow his orders - the motives behind the plan are a mystery to me.”

“Then at least you know his movements. Where is he?”

“For now he’s been travelling between the new military complex and the Versian Parliament. If you’re planning to attack him, just know he’s well protected - at least thirty men are guarding him at all times, not to mention the entire Nest information network. I suspect that when word of my capture returns to him, they would double security in both Tenar and the catacombs.”

“I already expected that.” Kyle rose to his feet, gripping the knife tightly and preparing to decapitate her. Yona’s eyes widened as her brain raced to find a way out.

“Wait, I told you what you wanted to know!” Yona blurted out while Kyle continued to approach.

“And I’ve heard enough. You’re better to me dead than alive.”

“No, no, no I still have more to tell you! I-I could tell you the layout of the military complex, the patrol pattern of the guards! I can tell you where Harrison’s office is too, and get you access in too!”

“And who’s to say you won’t sell us out?”

“You don’t understand, Nest won’t accept me back: without the self-immolation engraving, I’m considered compromised - protocol is to kill me on sight! Please, you have to let me live, I can’t die just yet!” Yona pleaded.

“That’s not good enough.” Kyle walked forward, the knife aimed right at Yona’s heart.

“I… I can give information on all Nest sweatshops and all secret Nest smuggling tunnels. You need manpower, don’t you? I can help provide the location of all of them, and even provide delivery timings!”

“That’s more like it.” Kyle grinned, sheathing his knife. “And if you do decide to betray us…”

“I won’t - with the self-immolation engraving gone, Nest means nothing to me now.” Yona nodded vigorously, though her shifty eyes already showed considerations for an escape plan.

“We’ll see about that.” Kyle untied her from the chair, but kept her hands bound before dragging her out of the interrogation room back to the central chamber, where Sasha and Feldon were preparing to ascertain a resupply route to Ocra along with the other Ghosts. Dekar and his men were also in the middle, discussing their next steps together and organizing everyone.

After the talk with Kyle and display of strength, Dekar and his men had already reluctantly accepted the merger. However, it was clear that they were still working on their own procedures and timings, though Kyle did not care too much about that as long as they did their jobs in a competent manner. “Sasha, Feldon, hold on. We have more information from her.” Kyle put Yona front and center. “She’ll assist in getting us a resupply route and inform our next steps.”

Sasha nodded, but Feldon, Lisa and Dekar clearly had their misgivings, everyone else in the central chamber staring at Yona with suspicion. “Are we sure we can trust her? If her information is wrong we’re all dead in the water!” Lisa pointed out.

“We’re not going to trust her blindly - we’ll carefully ascertain each detail of the information she gives us before we act. But with Dekar’s understanding of the catacombs and Yona’s knowledge of the Nest locations, we can begin to produce a complete map of the catacombs.”

Dekar began pulling out old ancient schematics of the catacombs and laying them out on the floor in the central chamber, all members gathering around and listening in intently. “There’s a total of four layers to the catacombs - Nest is mostly concentrated in the 1st and second layer. They have been expanding it as well, so the maps I have here are not accurate either.”

Yona looked taken aback at what Dekar had said. “That’s impossible, the catacombs only have two layers, everyone knows that. We swept the entire place from top to bottom with more than a thousand members.”

“And you still couldn’t catch me.” Dekar smirked.

“I did when you came for Zayin.” Yona taunted.

“And look where that got you.” Dekar grinned. “Always a bigger dog in a dog-eat-dog world.”

Yona was about to retort, before the gears started to turn in her mind, tracing the events that had happened and finally realizing the truth, her face aghast at Kyle. “You. You planned all of this. That fucking Masir, the hideout explosion, the information leak of Zayin’s location, and the tracking back… It was you!”

“So I did. Now focus at the task at hand.” Kyle waved his hand dismissively. “Four layers to the catacomb - which layer are we in now?”

“Right now we’re in the third. Only the original revolutionaries know about this third layer, because we discovered it ourselves. Clearly Nest has no clue about it, but I’m certain with Yona’s disappearance, they may eventually discover us.” Dekar began to combine the maps together, forming an incomplete drawing of all three layers.

“Can we move deeper? What about the fourth layer you mentioned?” Feldon asked.

“The fourth layer is far too dangerous. Nobody we’ve sent during the independence war had ever returned, so even that is a black box to us.” Dekar shook his head. “The current rumor is that it is a ruin of sorts, but its teeming with monsters and creatures that would take far too much effort to clear. Not even the treasure hunters dare to attempt it, not that most of them are even aware of its existence.”

Kyle was already aware of this from what Dekar’s men had mentioned before, but still it intrigued him greatly. *This must be a Galactic Era ruin - and if Nest doesn’t know about it, Harrison doesn’t either. This could be my chance to get a leg up on him without having to attack him directly.* Already his efforts into this rebel movements was providing returns far beyond what he could obtain in Raktor. “Do we know where the entrances are?”

“We do, but its way too dangerous. Anyone that enters never makes it out!”

“Doesn’t matter - mark them out. Let’s get that combined map drawn out now.”

Over the next three hours, they worked together to trace out the different known layers, the maze of the catacomb slowly coming into shape with marks indicating Nest presences and slave factories. Even Yona was astounded at the sheer scale of the third layer, which seemed to be even more expansive than the first and the second layer combined, which Dekar knew like the back of his hand.

“Who else knows about the third layer?” Kyle asked while they continued marking hotspots.

“The original revolutionaries. Johan and I know the most.”

*President Johan… he was the former Versian president before he took over.* “Where is he?”

“I have no idea, but he was reported missing on a tour around the Versian border.”

“He’s captured by Mornero.” Yona answered directly. “I know, because I captured him personally.”

“WHAT?!” Dekar shouted in a sudden rage, glaring at Yona as he grabbed her by the shoulders, raising a fist ready to punch her. “You fucking kidnapped the Versian president? Are you out of your fucking mind?”

“You can kill me all you want, but it doesnt change the facts. We’re a mercenary organization - we work for the highest bidder.”

“You…” Dekar bristled with fury, but he calmed himself down, returning back to his cartography tasks. “When all this is over, you’re going to rot in a cell for decades.”

Yona didn’t reply, but she clearly was not planning to go easily. Kyle hardly gave two shits about their internal conflicts, only focusing on the map. With the entire layout now planned out, it was obvious which tunnels they could use for the resupply towards Ocra. “These three tunnels are our targets for now. If we can secure them and protect them against detection by Nest, then we should be able to maintain a proper logistical chain.”

“That’s assuming we don’t get stopped when we reach topside.” Feldon pointed out. Our wagons still need to get into Ocra.

“Find a solution. I don’t care how you do it as long as you keep it clandestine. Work with Sasha to control the route.”

“Understood.” Feldon and Sasha both picked up a backpack of supplies each which they had prepared before, one of Dekar’s men leading them out of the hideout.

“Dekar, you and I are going to find a way into the fourth layer. Lisa, I need you train and organize the rescued slaves. Teach them what it means to be a Ghost. Anyone who refuses to fight, relegate them to logisitical support. Make sure Yona doesn’t get any chance to communicate outside, lock her in a separate room.” Kyle issued his orders one by one.

“No, no, no I’m not going there again. No way in hell. Not even if the Goddess herself came down and asked me to.” Dekar shook his head vigorously.

“It’s only a matter of time before Nest finds us - the fourth layer will help us serve as a backup escape path should we be cornered.” Kyle explained. “Based on the entrances of the fourth layer, it would also help us to traverse the third layer far quicker if we can find a pathway through.”

Dekar couldn’t argue against Kyle as their perlious escape from Nest had the Nest guards now swarming the catacombs looking for them. Without a secondary escape plan other than running to another city, it would be foolish to simply stand still and hope for the best. “Alright. I’ll get my men ready for it.”

Within an hour, Kyle, Dekar and his commando squad were geared up, armed to the teeth. Kyle himself brought a briefcase, as well as gearing up with a smuggled Aspis MK1 Knight Armour, his Oriental Bloom handgun, the Tattoo Knife and a Seven Snakes repeater rifle, courtesy of Lisa’s supplies. They left through a different tunnel, one that seemed to lead outwards to the wider main zone of the third layer.

Unlike the largely sterile and man-made structures of the first and second layer, the third layer was beginning to look more like a natural cave of sorts, though the paved paths along the waterways were clearly artifical, laid by the predecessors from eons ago. Countless glowing mushrooms provided a significant amount of ambient light as waste energy, seemingly part of their conversion process. Kyle could already feel a denser concentration of arcite ore, much like the depths of the Culdao Peaks.

Radioactive sludge and large scurrying rats avoided the bright beams of concentrated arctech lanterns, their beams narrowed by makeshift apertures held by Dekar’s commando squad leading the way. Despite their apparent weakness against Sasha and Kyle, it was clear that they still had a significant advantage in professionalism and experience, expertly checking every nook and cranny, every turn and corner for potential enemies.

Kyle had the map memorized already, at least for the vicinity of the hideout, and could still figure out where he was. Yet as he trudged along with the rest, he couldn’t shake the feeling that something was watching him intently from the sides. He spun his head around sharply, trying to catch him, but instead he only heard the scurrying of something large moving away from him, rock tapping against stone rapidly. *Looks like they weren’t wrong about creatures.*

Dekar led the group towards a door that was half collapsed, grunting as he shifted the fallen rubble out of the way to clear the entrance. The commandos entered gingerly, their lanterns flashing across the expansive burial chamber which had rows upon rows of buried humans, all still mummified in their elegant coffins stacked in carved out stone shelves, accompanied by urns that used to be filled with jewelry, priceless antiques and precious metals. However, as Kyle peered closer, it was apparent that all of them had been plundered a long time ago.

“I thought only the original revolutionaries knew about this place. How is this place already wiped clean?” Kyle remarked, picking up one of the ancient urns and examining it. The ancient Versian language was indecipherable to him, but thankfully his System was there to assist.

MG404: [Item | Ancient Versian Urn | *Perfect for a fetish* | The surface depicts a goddess descending from the heavens in a fiery chariot. ]

“How did you think we found the funds to fight back against the nobles?” Dekar gave a knowing smile as he approached the end of the burial chamber, pushing aside a large circular stone and revealing a circular hole that led to an equally ancient hideout designed similar the one Kyle had seen previously, except that it was clearly unused for decades and far larger, nearly triple in size. Unlike the previous one, this hideout had already been cleaned out of any supplies and weapons, with almost no furnishing left.

Dekar continued to lead them through the maze-like hallways, rows upon rows of abandoned bunks and storage rooms abandoned, before coming to a room that once housed an arctech engine that powered the entire base, a broken arcia etcher left lying on the dusty floor while a clear square mark indicated where the engine used to sit.

“It was only nearer the end of the war where we found a tunnel that led deeper in, right here.” Dekar pointed to the very end of the engine room, a locked metal door that was bolted tightly. “No one entered through here before, but it definitely leads straight down.”

“Why did you not explore it?”

“At the time we couldn’t afford to lose manpower to a futile attempts. We had already sent multiple exploration squads through another entrance far further along the third layer, but like I said, no one came back. It would be stupid to continuously throw members to their deaths when we were fighting a losing war with the nobles.” Dekar explained as he checked the metal lock. “Shit. We’re missing the key. Spread out and check the rest of the base-”

Kyle took his Tattoo Knife out from its holster, slicing through the lock like it was made of liquid, the two halves clattering to the ground uselessly. The metal door creaked open slowly, a gust of wind from within pushing it out slightly as Dekar’s commando squad was on high alert, their barrels aimed right at the door. The tunnel behind the metal door was rugged and cramped, only able to fit one human at a time at full height.

“Alright, we found the entrance, so we can head back now-” Dekar acted oblivious, turning to leave when Kyle grabbed him by the shoulder.

“This isn’t enough. We still need to make sure there is a pathway.”

“If you want to commit suicide, please don’t drag me into this.”

“We’re just going to scout to figure out what we’re dealing with. At the first sign of danger, we’re running back. You two, you’re coming with us. The rest of you guard the tunnel and set up camp.” Kyle ordered. The commandos looked at each other uneasily, before looking at Dekar.

Dekar sighed, finally accepting what he needed to do. “Do it. We’ll be back soon. I got a feeling we’ll be running back in five minutes.”

Kyle didn’t enter the tunnel first, having one of the commandos enter first before following in. They moved as a unit, everyone keeping their eyes peeled for any potential traps. “Stay within a meter of me at all times.” Kyle spoke quietly while he kept focused, looking for any signs of a Galactic Era trap - pressure plates, quasar shredders or radioactive emitters that could melt a human were all a possibility, though he was confident that he could deal with it with his System Skills. *Everything except Intimidation Aura and Arcia Disruption is available. This is My Turf would be the only useful one against such a trap - I wouldn’t be able to intimidate an automated defense system either way.*

As they continued to descend, the rush of air seemed to get stronger and stronger, a strange occurrence for a tunnel at such a depth. “Weird… there should be less air as we get deeper. Why is there more?” Dekar muttered while he kept close to Kyle from behind. Soon, within a short five minutes, the tunnel suddenly opened up around the bend, expanding into a large rectangular tunnel that was wide enough to fit a wagon. Instead of the standard brick-and-mortar that had been consistent throughout the entire catacombs, the walls here were instead made of a dense green stone, half covered in glowing algae that gave a eerie blue glow, accented by the intermittent green crystals embedded in the ceiling glittering like stars.

“By the Goddess…” Dekar whispered, while his commando squad let out hushed sounds of amazement at the scope of the tunnel. Kyle walked up carefully to the nearest wall, noticing intricate decorations in the form of carvings that extended the entire length. The rectangular tunnel seemed to extend indefinitely, its end barely visible in the distance.

“Assuming my sense of direction is correct, we should be facing the other known entrance of the fourth layer.” One of the commandos mentioned, trying to recall the layout. “If this pathway can move twenty kilometers straight, it would be perfect for our uses.”

“Hmm, you’re right.” Dekar pondered, trying to orient himself according to a 3D imagination of the catacombs. “That’s if the pathway isn’t dangerous.”

Kyle noticed a metallic glint at the base of the wall, squatting closer while using his Tattoo knife to shift the glowing algae moss aside, revealing a light-emitting diode strip that had been entrenched into the tunnel. *So this really is a Galactic Era ruin.* However, unlike the Oracle Chambers, he did not receive any notification whatsoever, which made him wonder if this ruin was related to his System at all.

He grabbed an arctech lantern, shining it deeper towards the end of the tunnel. The moment the focused beam shot towards the distance, Kyle noticed a speck of black moving across the width of the tunnel much further down, the same skittering that he heard trailing him on the third layer starting to get closer. “Get your weapons ready, and prepare to run” Kyle quickly ordered.

“What the hell is that sound?” The commandos swivelled their heads around, pacing back towards the cramped tunnel entrance from which they came from. As the four of them stared into the horizon, a growing swarm of squirming legs began to surge towards them, a mass of movement charging right at them at alarming speed, the exact details unperceivable through the dim ambient light that were slowly blocked out one by one.

“RETREAT!” Dekar roared, spinning on his heels to run back to the cramped tunnel entrance, only for the cramped tunnel entrance to suddenly collapse on itself due to the sheer tremors created by the incoming swarm. The two commandos didn’t hold back any longer, firing into whatever was charging at them while backpedaling. Instead of the pellets finding flesh, they ricocheted off what seemed to be hard rock, bouncing off the tunnels.

Kyle hurriedly tossed his repeater rifle to the nearby commando: “Use it and cover me! You, go help Dekar clear the damn rubble out!” The commando caught the repeater and hurriedly fired it, finding far more success as the pellets elicited sharp shrieks of pain and guttural growls, stemming the swarm a little.

While the two commando got into action, Kyle cracked open his briefcase, revealing a metallic exosuit arm that he wore in one swift motion onto his right, the fingers and grooves fitting neatly onto his shoulder.

MG404: [Item | Custom Prototype Exosuit Arm(Advanced) | *From the moment flesh’s weakness was revealed, disgust reigned* | Active Skill: Strength Infusion (Advanced) - Provides user with immense strength on arm. +150 STR. Cost: 1 MP per minute.]

Kyle activated the arm, the engravings all glowing up as it snaked through the metallic frames stemming from each of skin pores, the strength flooding into his arm as he clenched and relaxed his fist a few times. He grabbed the Tattoo knife in the armoured first, while his left gripped the Oriental Bloom handgun, ready to fight.

“Shit, here they come!” The commando using the Seven Snakes repeater hollered, Kyle standing up and preparing to fight. It was only at this close distance that he could begin to make out what creature was actually attacking them, but before he could get a good look, one of them lunged towards him with a piercing shriek that almost deafen him, two spiky rocks aimed right at his head.

*Penchant for Violence!* Kyle’s body grew even lighter, his stats doubling on top of the strength bonus provided by his new exosuit arm. Power surged through his veins as he deftly dodged the two incoming strikes, pivoting on his feet while the exosuit arm whirred with a unique hum, allowing him to plunge the Tattoo Knife into the owner of the two spiky rocks. The tip of the jagged knife pierced a hard rocky armour, cracking it apart to reveal a squishy black flesh that ruptured easily the moment the knife touched it, shredding it like butter.

Kyle swerved his head to the side as another rock spike shot towards his head, gritting his teeth and plunging the knife even deeper into the flesh as hard as he could. With a roar, Kyle channeled his arcia energy into the exosuit arm, using raw power to drag the knife along the insides, tearing apart the flesh from within and cutting the creature in half. It collapsed with a trailing cry, the spiky rocks collapsing to the floor as well as with a torrent of icky bodily fluids gushing out and smothering the glowing algae along the floor.

MG404: [System Message | Killed: ‘Rock Spider’ - 10 EXP]

MG404: [System Message | Trial Initiated | The young seek their next meal. Survive.]

*Trial?*

“What the actual fuck is that?” The commando yelled as he continued shooting, taking out other rock spiders that continue to charge forward. Each of them featured eight sharpened rock spikes for legs, while their central body was a perfect sphere of hardened rock armor which a normal rifle could not penetrate, save for a circular opening from which a tentacle, worm-like mouth acted like another limb, jabbing at Kyle while he chopped off any that approached. There were nearly two dozen of them blocking the tunnel, the commando having killed a few off and blocking their path slightly as the rest clambered over the corpses of their dead bretheren.

Despite the toughness of the armour, Kyle’s exosuit arm afforded him the strength to simply plunge the knife headfirst into the mouth of the spider, while his left hand fired the handgun with precision, the powerful pellets maiming legs and tearing into the armour. He rushed at another rock spider, cutting through the central sphere like cake with his Tattoo Knife, resulting in another fountain of bodily fluids that spluttered onto Kyle’s, the black icky goo viscous.

MG404: [System Message | Killed: ‘Rock Spider’ - 10 EXP]

With no time to waste, Kyle sliced and jabbed as hard as he could, killing a few other rock spiders before his Penchant of Violence’s duration expired. Soon, his body suddenly felt heavier, the energy he had lost, but Kyle now focused on the weak points of the rock spiders, aiming for their mouths. His Oriental Bloom handgun began to run out of pellets, and the commando was also forced to reload, pouring more pellets into the multiple canisters from his own.

Kyle didn’t let a single rock spider get pass him, using his exosuit arm to carve them up one by one while making sure the commando wasn’t in danger of being attacked. Soon, all two dozen of the rock spiders were dead on the ground, some of their bodies still twitching slightly. Amdist the black goo that coated everything in range, Kyle noticed a small speck of something familiar, keeping his exosuit arm at the ready to stab anything that was still alive while reaching out cautiously. His hand dug through the soft flesh, before tugging out a tiny coin-sized crystal, similar to what his Necklace of Healing had.

MG404: [Item | Poor Arcia Crystal (Basic) | *Better than an arcite ore, but filled with impurities.* ]

Kyle’s mind raced as he absorbed the implications of what this meant. *This rock spiders are a walking mine!* Still, it was no time to figure out how to make money from it - already Kyle could hear countless screams and shrieks in the distance, other rock spiders swarming towards the disturbance. “Dekar, how long more?”

“Al-almost done!” Dekar huffed and panted, clearly unable to shift some of the larger pieces of rubble that blocked the exit. Kyle didn’t waste any more time, sprinting up to them and using his exosuit arm to easily tear apart the rubble, his punch crushing the rubble into smithereens.

“Get up! NOW!” Kyle roared, motioning for them to quickly scampered up around the rubble, Kyle taking up the rear. The moment everyone was clear of the large rectangular tunnel, Kyle followed them up, but not before digging the fingers of his armoured exosuit arm, pulling out a chunk of the supporting wall and partially collapsing the cramped tunnel behind him. He could hear the charging rock spiders slam into the collapsed pile of rubble that now blocked them, their shrieks endless in a chaotic cacophony.

Dekar let out a huge sigh of relief the moment they reached the top, ordering the other commandos who were guarding the engine room to barricade the metal door as soon as Kyle came up. They hauled bedframes and old wooden cupboards, boarding up the metal door with anything and everything they could find to make sure the rock spiders didn’t come up.

Kyle ignored the stares of horror from the commandos at his clearly stained armour and clothing, coated in the black icky goo from the rock spiders. Instead, he was far more focused on the arcia crystal in his hand. *If this works just like my Necklace of Healing, then we have a way to create far more compact fuel packs.* Arcia consumption had always been one of the biggest issues that his men faced, and with his rebel movement being on a tight deadline, such portable crystals could act as compact batteries and supplement the weak arcia supply that the rebels and recruited slaves will have.

Even more interesting was the Trial System Message that he had received, a clear indication that his System was related to the ruin. “Dekar, prepare to move the hideout to here. This base will be our main command center.”

Dekar stared at Kyle as if he had just heard the stupidest thing ever. “You’re crazy. You nearly died to a carnivorous swarm of rock spiders and you want US to MOVE? HERE?”

“With great danger comes great rewards.” Kyle tossed the collected arcia crystal to Dekar, the latter fumbling the crystal in his hand. “And I intend to get what I deserve.”

# Chapter 109 - Dungeon Exploration

As soon as Kyle got back to Dekar’s original hideout, the entire plan previously discussed kicked into action. Over the next three days, they worked together to port all of their supplies and equipment over to the abandoned hideout, slowly refurbishing it over time. The arctech engine room was fortified, Kyle ordering the creation of tiered defenses should the original entrance tunnel fail to hold the rock spiders at bay. Even though the rock spiders were supposedly part of the ‘Trial’ his system suggested, it was not beyond the realm of possibility for a swarm to attempt breaching the hideout.

While he had been working on organizing the forces, Sasha and Feldon had managed to utilize one of the old tunnels to great effect, establishing a proper link with Ocra. With the connection completed, Kyle could now requisition additional tools and personnel over. A dozen more trained Ghosts were sent over, helping to bolster the force even more alongside regular rations and arctech machinery to enable Kyle to perform basic modifications. Antidotes, potions, gas masks, and armor were also brought over, giving them some much-needed equipment for him to explore the dungeon later, one that he inherently expected to be dangerous. *If I had an exosuit I would use it.*

Throughout this entire process, Lisa took charge of helping and training the new slaves into useful assets. Unsurprisingly, many of them did not want to join the frontlines and be a rebel, but were open to the idea of contributing in the backlines. Feldon and Lisa worked together to instruct them properly, acting as resupply crews and mules to pick up smuggled goods and scout other old tunnels to serve as backup connections. They were put to use in expanding and excavating the old hideouts as well as improving the living and storage space.

“For now, we know that he intends to invite delegates from other countries around the continent. I suspect it’s a ploy aimed at preventing Count Leon from attacking too early.” Minister Dekar explained his understanding of the situation. “With so many foreign diplomats in the city, it would be devastating to both Count Leon and the Yual Dominion’s reputation if they were to strike first or even perform any military action.”

“Current information suggests that Count Leon is attending the exhibition as well…” Kyle found this sudden exhibition unnatural compared to the previous progress expected. It was apparent from all of his dealings with the black market and Count Leon that a war was imminent. “Perhaps Harrison is intending to delay the inevitable, hoping to buy more time for preparation.” He muttered to himself, trying to nail the motives of all parties involved.

There was no question that the military exercise would be the best time for Count Leon to launch a first strike and catch Versia off-guard in a blitz. If Kyle was in the same position, he would have launched an attack as soon as his troops were organized without hesitation. The fact that Count Leon was waiting this long spoke of a different plan. *Or maybe he recognizes the potential of Harrison’s technology to be far stronger than expected, or Harrison has leverage.*

Yona was still working on writing out the military-industrial complex, an effort that would not be done so soon. With only three weeks left till the exhibition, Kyle needed clear information on Harrison’s whereabouts, as well as a surefire method to infiltrate and perform proper espionage. He didn’t like being left in the dark, and he was already beginning to prepare for a potential all-out conflict should he be unable to gleam anything about Harrison’s plan.

In order to have an all-out conflict, they needed to recruit more willing rebels and manpower to sustain any efforts to destabilize Harrison. Kyle knew that the people enslaved in Nest sweatshops on the first layer and the second layer were prime sources of bodies, but attacking them would raise the heat much higher and potentially cause a brutal crackdown. The Ghosts under Kyle were certainly not in a position to be able to handle such an event, not without thorough planning.

Kyle focused his efforts now on exploring the dungeon, a critical escape route that would be necessary should Nest breach the third layer. He rubbed his temples as he inspected the equipment that the Ghosts now had, checking its quality to ensure that the exploration would be successful. Already, it was clear that the antique rifles had to be replaced by freshly smuggled Seven Snakes repeater rifles that could penetrate the rock spiders’ armor. However, he was looking for a more concrete upgrade to the firepower - rock spiders might not be the only heavily armored creatures lurking in the depths.

The main limiting factor was the arcia reservoir in each of his Ghosts. Even the commando under Dekar’s command, who had utilized Kyle’s repeater rifle, was suffering from arcia exhaustion, unable to fire all four canisters in one go without collapsing. It went without saying that recently converted refugees and slaves would not have the same competency and reservoir size compared to well-trained Seven Snakes associates who had spent time in an arcia training cave.

A solution was to obtain fuel packs, but smuggling such devices was both clunky and dangerous as well - any bust would mean a huge loss. Instead, Kyle had a hunch that the poor quality arcia crystal he had plucked from the remains of a rock spider could potentially alleviate the consumption strains on a user if embedded correctly on the repeater. *It should act exactly like a battery, the question is how?*

Thankfully, Kyle was already well-read on the engravings used in a fuel pack, though he also got a hold of an old fuel pack they found lying about in the hideout as a reference. *The engravings here show an extraction method in order to filter arcia energy out of arcite ore… it should be simple enough.*

Taking small steps at a time, Kyle set up a simple workbench in a small room: a smuggled arcia etcher with a few scrap metal plates that could serve as a prototyping board. He practiced his movements by drawing with a pencil on paper first a few times before using the etcher to engrave onto the scrap metal plate bit by bit, leaving a tiny notch for the poor-quality arcia crystal to be placed inside.

MG404: [Item | Prototype Crystal Extraction Engraving (Advanced) | One spider’s heart is another man’s treasure. | Provides 2 MP per second for 10 seconds.]

The result was slightly disappointing, but not unexpected. Energy could only be compressed so much, and while Kyle would have preferred to have an energy source equivalent to an arcia fuel pack, it was enough to fire the Seven Snakes repeater rifle for two canisters worth. *That’s about two hundred pellets if we’re going at full burst and without using internal arcia energy.* 20 MP was not much to Kyle, but it was significant to untrained soldiers. While it might limit their future training potential with the crystal serving as a clutch of sorts, the timelines were far too tight to worry about that - he needed firepower right now.

Taking his own repeater rifle and modifying it over the next few hours, he soon managed to embed the poor arcia crystal into a nice little slot that could be capped by a metal cover, preventing it from falling out during combat movements. *Considering this is the Aspis MK1… perhaps it is a MK2.*

MG404: [Item | Rifled Aspis MK2 Repeater (Advanced) | *Modified by Kyle* | Active Skill: Volley (Advanced): Fires multiple projectiles as long as one holds down the trigger and has enough in the canisters. Current Crystal Supply: 20 MP. Cost: 1 MP per second. Able to overcharge at the cost of increased consumption and fatigue cycles.]

Kyle noted the ability to overcharge the shots, fulfilling his need to achieve firepower that could break through stronger armored creatures should they appear. With the modification done, Kyle began to modify other smuggled Seven Snakes repeaters, making sure they all had a slot for the crystals. To make the process faster, he filtered through the rescued slaves, finding a few who had competent hands and assigning them etching roles, where they followed a guiding example to the letter.

Soon, over a day, Kyle had five MK2 repeaters ready to go, along with adequate amounts of pellets necessary to sustain a prolonged conflict thanks to Feldon’s smuggling. Kyle arranged for his squad to delve deeper into the dungeon, bringing along Sasha and three of Dekar’s commando men towards the barricade entrance once again, this time with supplies enough to last a week. “Feldon, you’re in charge here. I brought you from Culdao Peaks for a reason - don’t let me down. Work with Lisa to get everything in order.” Kyle informed Feldon while the squad geared up, handing control of the hideout over to him.

“You can count on me boss, I won’t let you down!” Feldon gave a wonky salute, causing Kyle to sigh and enter the cramped, collapsed tunnel once again. Kyle never told Feldon that the only reason why he was chosen for this operation was because he was the most expendable in the Seven Snakes, having no assigned role of importance, unlike Damian, Keith, and Niko. *Better to let him believe he is important - easier that way.*

As they reached the base of the tunnel, they were met with a dead-end, filled with rubble caused by Kyle’s destruction of the tunnel’s support. “Wait, we should have gotten some others to come here and dig it out. It’s going to take us ages!” One of the commandos complained.

“Sasha, cut away the rubble, but don’t collapse the support,” Kyle spoke as if it was possible, the commandos sharing glances of confusion.

[Understood.] Sasha stepped up to the pile of rubble, slinging the MK2 repeater behind her back and unsheathing her runic falchion. <Shue, Yul, Uryag, Nemoon> She spoke once again with her eyes closed, her tone demure and silky smooth, the engravings that glittered with Dzi Flower Sand lighting up along the length with a furious brilliance, the blade shuddering violently in a rapid vibration. Her eyes flew open, her movements slashing the pile four times, the vibrating blade shredding apart the rubble. Each step saw Sasha carve a path out, her movements precise to ensure the rest of the tunnel did not collapse, as if she were a surgeon.

The three commandos could hardly believe their eyes, though their training kept them firm and steady, MK2 repeaters aimed towards the end of the tunnel. The moment Sasha broke out back into the large rectangular corridor, the three commandos filtered out quickly, checking the surroundings. Instead of seeing a pile of decaying rock spider corpses, the corridor was clean, only stains of black icky goo on the wall remaining as a sign of their battle days before. Kyle cautiously paced his steps, checking every detail until Sasha called for his attention. [Sir, take a look at this.]

Kyle saw Sasha squatted over a trail of black icky goo, interspersed by what seemed to be webbed footprints left. “So the rock spider isn’t the only thing we have to worry about…” Kyle motioned for the rest of the squad to come over, seeing if anyone recognized it.

“Looks like a salamander’s tracks. There’s quite a number of them roaming the catacombs, though I don’t think I’ve ever seen one that big before…” A commando pointed out, trying to get a sense of scale. “It would be about the size of a tree trunk to match such a footprint.”

“And it most likely ate what remained of the rock spiders,” Kyle concluded, standing back up. “Check your gear - the moment we see such a predator, we retreat this way. Set up the arctech lanterns.”

The squad got to work, attaching and hooking arctech lanterns up that lit up the corridor as they went, providing a brightly illuminated path back if they needed to beat a hasty retreat. Surprisingly, even as they walked forward for what seemed to be ten minutes, there were no signs of any rock spider swarms nor humongous salamanders either, the place eerily silent save for the small trickling of water that seeped through a few cracks, plopping onto the bioluminescent algae that were ubiquitous throughout the area. It was only until Kyle unknowingly stepped across the line that a system message popped up for him.

MG404: [System Message | Trial Cleared | The young have retreated to their abode. +5000 EXP awarded.]

MG404: [ Level Up: 25 - 27 | All Stats Increased | Bonus Points Granted ]

MG404: [System Message | Dungeon Discovered | *Noxious Depths of Tenar* | Level Recommended: 25 - 40. Penalty applied beyond recommended level range.]

*What?* Kyle rubbed his eyes a little, wondering what the hell he was reading. *The trial gave me enough EXP to level up, even though I left the area for a few days. And this is the first time I’ve seen the dungeon’s name.* It was also his first encounter with a recommended level. As far as he knew, his level had never really mattered, and it still didn’t. However, the system message had now given him two hints.

First, the recommended level implied that there would be challenges, trials and creatures that a level 40 would find appropriate - a bad sign for Kyle’s current level. Secondly, the name ‘Noxious Depths of Tenar’ implied a theme of poison, something he was not entirely prepared for. In an instant he held up his hand, clenching his fist tight and prompting the squad to come to a halt. “Everyone, gas masks on, now.”

The squad didn’t argue, especially the commandos who were now utterly convinced of Kyle’s superiority in combat. Dekar’s warning of no one ever escaping the fourth layer had been broken by their previous success, but the three commandos knew it was only because of Kyle that they got out alive. Sasha too clamped a gas mask on her face, her breath intermittently fogging up the visor as they continued onwards.

As they continued down the corridor, still setting up arctech lanterns at intermediate intervals, a strange mist was coalescing on the floor, clearly heavier than air but not pushing towards them. Kyle didn’t move any further the moment they spotted it, instead taking a single pellet from a canister and rolling it across the floor towards the mist, a tactic learned well in his time during the Galactic Era.

Instead of the pellet disintegrating as expected, the mist didn’t seem to do anything to the pellet, seemingly inert. The squad rolled a few more pellets forward, using their arctech lanterns to try to spot any cracks above that could result in an ambush of sorts. Once they were satisfied, they moved ahead slowly, each step measured and cautious, Kyle keeping a keen eye out for any artificial traps. *Good thing I brought the gas masks and antidotes.*

It took another ten minutes before they were now ankle deep in the mist, the tension amidst the squad still as high as ever as they continuously checked every nook and cranny for possible angles of attack. Weariness began to seep into their bones, their minds unable to keep up for much longer at this rate, the situation nerve-racking. “Stay within a meter of me.” Kyle ordered, counting on his skill to negate any possible attacks.

Moving as a tight unit, it wasn’t long until they finally saw the end of the corridor, the sound of dropping sludge prominent above their own breaths in the gas masks. Smaller tiny insects and lizards scampered away from their armoured boots as they stepped towards the end, Sasha and the commandos faces dumbfounded from what they saw.

The corridor had led to a vast cavern in which none of them could even see the end of, filled to the brim with pillars upon pillars of refuse, sludge, sewage, and whatever waste Tenar had accumulated over hundreds of years, spiraling upwards to the ceiling while viscous excretion seeped in through the ceiling, pouring newer waste down. Even through the gas mask, they could smell the strong stench of decay that was prevalent everywhere. Rivers of dirty, murky water filled with shit snaked through the floral and fauna that had sprouted up around the trash pillars, feeding off the rotting matter that seemed to never end and emitting ambient light enough to give the entire chamber a ghastly purple glow.

It wasn’t Kyle’s first time seeing a trash planet, but this was still something to take in. The pillars of refuse did not seem to be just made out of waste - something was inside eating away at the waste from within, periodically releasing noxious fumes that were the result of some foul chemical reaction. “Make sure there are no gaps in your armor and clothing,” Kyle warned once more, forcing the squad to check their equipment again before moving forward.

Each step had a sickening squish to it, revealing countless tiny little critters and insects that escaped out of the squashed mud, scurrying away to safety while red moths swooped down, picking off their latest prey and returning to high up on the pillars, the air filled with a dizzying array of lifeforms that formed an ecosystem of the trash dumped from Tenar. One of the commandos resisted the urge to puke as he stepped closer to the pillar, noticing a decaying human body that had clearly drowned in the catacombs, its flesh consumed from within by maggots while a lizard nearby waited with bated breath, its glossy eyes blinking slowly.

As they moved forward, Kyle took out an empty potion vial, using the tips of his custom prototype exosuit arm to gingerly scoop a sample of the water, hoping the System would be able to recognize it and maybe give some information.

MG404: [Item | Toxic Sludge | Not potable, not drinkable. Do not drink directly at any cost, not even under the pain of death.]

*That was pretty useless.* Kyle sighed, but Sasha suddenly spoke into his brain. [Sir, another footprint.] Sasha motioned silently to an equally large salamander footprint hidden beneath the murky water. That raised the alertness of the squad immediately, and their repeaters were ready to shred anything that attacked them.

Kyle led the squad ahead, carefully trekking and keeping his movements quiet, avoiding splashing the murky water too much in case it attracted the wrong kind of attention. As they moved deeper into the chamber, following the snaking river of sludge that winded through the chamber, the exit tunnel was already out of sight, only the sights of never-ending waterfalls plunging from above into the chamber.

From the corner of his vision, Kyle spotted an object drop - a human corpse that fell along with the sludge, smacking against the pillar of refuse and tumbling along its bioluminescent edge before sliding down to the floor, soaking in the mud. Unfortunately for them, they were not the only ones who noticed this, a familiar skittering sound echoing over the splashes of mud. The squad quickly crouched and hid behind any large fungi or trash pile they could find, peeking out to observe a dozen rock spiders moving over in a group, scampering over the human body. Their worm-like mouths extended out of their central sphere body, the teeth gnashing and tearing apart at the dead human, ripping its tendons and muscles apart while the other spiders fought with each other over parts of the entrails that were dragged further and further.

The commotion began to attract more rock spiders as well as up to three more groups, some of them scampering from unknown locations to congregate while the squad kept as quiet as possible, hiding their figures from view. The first dozen began to snarl and snap at the other groups of rock spiders approaching, clearly territorial over the dropped meat. Interestingly, even as a rock spider crawled over where Kyle was hiding, it didn’t seem to notice him, having no eyes to see. Kyle wasn’t about to get in the middle of more than four dozen spiders contesting over food. Using his hand sign, he stuck it out ever so slightly, indicating for them to retreat back to the exit tunnel.

However, as soon as one of the commandos prepared to turn around to leave, his face came dangerously close to a rock spider, part of another fifth group that had approached from behind. In a moment of instinct, the commando fired his MK2 repeater at the rock spider, pulling the trigger hard. Five pellets burst out, nailing the rock spider right in its worm-like mouth and tearing the flesh inside out, causing it to let out a bloodcurdling shriek as it died.

Kyle knew the jig was up, and the rest of the rock spiders were now turning to face the direction of the commando who had just shot the pellets out. Before they could move, Kyle and Sasha popped out of their cover, unleashing a hailstorm of their bullets and nailing six rock spiders in a row.

MG404: [System Message | Killed: ‘Rock Spider’ - 10 EXP]

MG404: [System Message | Trial Initiated | Forge a different path through the pillars.]

*A different path?* Kyle hurriedly aimed the repeater once more, firing on the encroaching rock spiders who began to fan out, some leaping onto the pillars of refuse and using it to flank the squad from above. Each member of the squad began to fire, with Sasha swapping to her runic falchion, chopping away at any approaching rock spiders.

“Sir, we can’t stay here - the fight will bring more! We have to move back!” One of the commandos roared over the din of pellet fire.

“No, we move forward!” Kyle urged, charging forward while swiveling the repeater rapidly, treating the rock spiders like target practice as he expertly double-tapped the trigger, resulting in a faster fire rate overall. The commandos were flabbergasted to see Kyle push ahead instead of retreating, but it was clear that the path behind them was slowly getting clogged up with more rock spiders who were attracted by the loud gunfire. With no time to argue, the squad moved as one, with Kyle and Sasha bringing up the rear and leaping about, slicing off the legs and the mouths of rock spiders.

With a battle cry, Sasha slammed the falchion into a nearby pillar, the pillar losing its precarious balance and beginning to teeter, falling down in a large collapse that sent a wave of mist and noxious fumes blanketing the squad and the rock spiders alike. While the crash pinned down a few rock spiders, the rest were unfazed, simply clambering over the collapsed pillar and lunging at Sasha.

As they raced through the chamber chased by swarms of rock spiders whose numbers seemed to multiply, Kyle kept his eyes peeled, his mind holding a 3D orientation of where the next exit should be. It was risky, and Kyle would have chosen to retreat if it had not been for the Trial’s message. *If I can exit the chamber through a different route, I may get another 5000 EXP, which would give me another level.* He knew he needed every drop of EXP he could muster if he wanted to be confident enough to clear the dungeon, which he assumed would have Galactic Era tech.

Yet, the current chamber filled with trash didn’t seem to possess any apparent technology. Kyle was starting to doubt that there would be anything of value here, but he focused on the goal of escaping first. However, something began to change in the rock spiders’ behavior, and not every one of them chased the squad. Instead, some began to suck up the sludge in the rivers of murky water, seemingly chewing on them before clambering up a pillar. Kyle looked at one as its worm-like mouth suddenly extended like a cannon barrel aimed right at him, the rock spider suddenly ejecting a projectile made of sludge at medium speeds toward him.

While he easily dodged it, the sludge projectile slammed into the muddy ground, a sizzling sound disintegrating and breaking down whatever pieces of trash were around into black icky goo. *Are they shooting stomach acid at us?!* “Dodge the sludge!” Kyle cried out as he grabbed another commando nearby, tugging him out of the way as another sludge projectile whizzed past where the commando had just been standing.

Despite their best efforts to run, the chamber seemed to have no end. Kyle was sure that he had been running in a straight line, but it felt as if the chamber was in a never-ending loop. The commandos were also getting exhausted, still having to lug the supply of rations in their bags. With no end in sight, Kyle began to look for a different way out, finally spotting a path that sloped downwards into a natural cave entwined with fungi and algae across its surface, the opening only big enough for a man to squeeze through one at a time. “Here, get in here!”

The commandos didn’t question the order, hurriedly tossing an arctech lantern in through the opening, with the first squeezing through. Kyle and Sasha stood their ground, firing with abandon at the incoming rock spiders while expertly dodging the sludge projectiles that shot their way.

MG404: [System Message | Killed: ‘Rock Spider’ - 10 EXP]

*If I killed five hundred of them, then that would be perfect.* Kyle grinned, relishing in the battle as he weaved through the horde of rock spiders, using his Tattoo Knife and exosuit arm to annihilate most of the approaching rock spiders. On the other side, Sasha was carving away relentlessly, her armor and gas mask already coated entirely in the black icky goo.

With each kill, Kyle and Sasha nimbly plucked and pocketed any arcia crystals they could find in the dead rock spiders, a wall of bodies beginning to pile up around the openings. Soon, the three commandos had managed to enter the cave. “Sir, we’re done!”

“Sasha, go first!” Kyle ordered as he continued to slice and jab with the knife, the exosuit arm punching and cracking a rock spider’s armor. Sasha nodded, sprinting towards the opening while deftly dodging projectiles, her nimble body sliding into the gap without a hitch. Kyle soon followed suit, running into the opening and squeezing through the gap quickly while enraged rock spiders jabbed and tried to tear apart the opening with their spiky rock legs.

Kyle huffed and panted, catching his breath while the others slumped onto the floor, taking a break. The arctech lantern showed that they had entered a smaller corridor of sorts in a similar design to the one that they had been traversing at the start, the same mist also wafting in along with streams of murky water that slopped down. As the rock spiders beyond the gap struggled to get in, the squad took a break, resting on the dryer parts of the floor and drinking water while Sasha jabbed any rock spider who got too close.

Soon enough, the dead rock spider bodies were completely covering the gap, preventing any new rock spiders from getting through. Kyle too leaned against the wall, sipping on a water flask and a stamina potion vial, recovering his strength. In the brief respite, Kyle walked ahead of the squad with his own arctech lantern, exploring the little corridor that they had found themselves in.

Unlike the algae covered mess of the larger corridor, the walls here were far more clean. As Kyle continued walking further, the light of his arctech lantern revealed the walls to slowly form a gradient, changing from green hard stone to metal over its length. At the very end of the corridor, he could see a weird metallic door, one that felt somewhat familiar. “Sasha, protect the squad,” Kyle ordered, while he continued exploring forward alone.

As he neared the door, his vision was suddenly flooded by a recognizable system message.

MG404: [System Message | Access Granted | Temporary Administrator Privileges recognized. Please register at the nearest terminal.]

The metallic door at the end of the corridor slid open, but it failed halfway, electricity sparking at the hinges as its gears creaked, trying to overcome what sounded like centuries of rust. Kyle noticed that the door’s metal parts were also corroded, reduced to a recognizable amalgamation of bacteria and sludge, characteristic of a metal nano-plague much like the one he had seen in the Oracle Chambers. *Finally, another Galactic Era ruin.*

He used his custom exosuit arm, grabbing the edge of the door and forcing it apart bit by bit, gritting his teeth as the door slowly but surely moved until the mechanism restricting the door’s movement finally snapped, allowing the door to slide open fully. No lights were turned on as Kyle entered, the entire place in complete disrepair. Broken electrical panels and wires consumed by the nano-plague were left dangling and scattered, and the tiles of the room cracked as well.

Unlike the Oracle Chambers, there were no bodies to be found - no signs of a fight were found. *Looks like it was an automated post.* Kyle walked up to a nearby monitor mounted on the wall, tapping it to see if it activated. It did not light up at all, and there was no power throughout the entire room. Kyle explored a bit more, traversing the room to see that there was a heavily bolted door, like a vault of sorts, tightly locked into the wall, with a damaged keypad next to it. As he got closer, he inspected the damage, noticing it wasn’t too terrible. He carefully used his hands to connect two frayed wires together, the keypad’s monitor lighting up only for a brief flicker before dying out.

He scanned the bolted vault door, noticing that there was a mechanical key slot in the door, a backup in case of the failure of the electronics. Kyle tested the strength of the door a little, using his exosuit arm to try and pry the door open, but to no avail.

*Penchant for Violence!* Kyle tried once more, pulling as hard as he could, but the vault door barely budged, unmovable. *There might be a sign somewhere else that could give me a clue. Or the key could be somewhere around here.*

As he looked around, he spotted something strange. Weirdly enough, at the end of the room was an interesting sight - three partitions that separated the end of the room into four sections. Kyle approached cautiously, his arctech lantern still scanning the dilapidated room while he noticed a small little infographic plastered onto the wall, half of it eaten away by insects. *Dangerous Personnel… huh…* Kyle couldn’t make out the rest of the words, but as he inspected the partitions, their purpose became immediately clear, the edges of the partition featuring twenty laser emitters aimed towards either side of the wall. *It’s a laser prison cell.*

He didn’t see any bodies of prisoners left behind, whoever was trapped here having clearly escaped. Kyle walked up to a control panel, tapping it and checking the gap behind it to see that the wiring was still intact, though it had no power to maintain its original function, the power cell within depleted. As he turned around, a glint of metal from the corner of his eyes alerted him to a rectangular high-tech battery lying on the floor inside one of the laser prison cells.

Confirming that the prison cell would not suddenly activate, Kyle walked up carefully, picking up the ancient battery with the exosuit arm in case it exploded. Old Galactic-Era batteries had a tendency to do that, the side effect of cramming so much energy into a small form factor.

MG404: [Item | Ancient Galactic-Era Battery (Advanced) | *Technological marvel of power compression.* | Charge: 50% remaining.]

*Good enough.* Kyle took the battery back to the main control panel at the front of the room, plugging in the battery and booting up the system. No A.I. like the Oracle appeared, but the scrolling diagnostic texts showed that the battery was barely enough to run the room at its minimum functionality.

The laser emitters on the partition immediately turned on, forming a crisscrossing net across that threatened to burn every single atom that attempted to escape. *Seems like power is being focused on the prison’s features. If I can either redirect it or find more power sources…* Kyle scoured the room, finally finding another battery pack, though it was also in another laser cell. He tapped the control panel, disabling the laser protection, before walking into the cell.

However, as soon as he stepped across the threshold, he suddenly felt his body become sluggish, slowing down tremendously as if his muscles had been replaced with lead, his legs nearly impossible to move. His heart pumped faster, his lungs struggling to inhale.

MG404: [System Message | Active Suppression Engaged | All System Features disabled. ]

*What?!* Kyle’s heart skipped a bit as he felt himself grow short of breath, as if every bonus and stat increase that he had accumulated in his lifetime was now unable to be bear, the burden on his body far too great. He clenched his teeth as he pushed forward step by step, his legs like logs as he picked up the battery before retreating beyond the laser cell, collapsing onto his knees hard.

MG404: [System Message | Active Suppression Disengaged | All System Features enabled. ]

Power surged back into Kyle’s veins, his eyes blinking rapidly as he took short, sharp, rapid breaths, trying to recover his senses. *This… this is a prison cell for System users!* Kyle quickly leaped to his feet, checking the control panel and its systems check. *Communication is totally destroyed; this entire room is cut off from the rest of the world. That’s good.* Judging from the state of the door, Kyle assumed that he was the first one to open this area.

Still, the room was a dead-end, offering no other exits save for the heavily bolted vault door that Kyle clearly could not open at all. He still had a trial to clear, and his squad was still waiting for him. He unplugged the battery from the main control panel, pocketing it along with the other battery he had retrieved. Closing the door behind him with the strength of his exosuit arm, he returned to the squad. The three commandos were still resting, having recovered enough strength through the potions to try another push, while Sasha stared at Kyle with a curious gaze. [Sir, did you find anything?]

“Nothing much.” Kyle brushed it off, unwilling to reveal too much. If he told anyone else that there was a prison cell that could restrict the better part of his abilities, it would no doubt come back to bite him in the ass in the future. *Better to keep it to myself.* “Are we ready to move?”

[We’ll have to widen the opening a little first.] Sasha didn’t pry any further, readying her runic falchion to slide through the pile of rock spider corpses again. The three commandos got their repeaters ready, crouching and preparing to lay waste to anything that breached the gap. Kyle himself prepared as well.

Sasha used the same enhancement method, slicing through the gap and widening it greatly. As the diced-up parts of rock spiders began to tumble through the open hole, enraged rock spiders began to pour in, earning a barrage of withering fire that melted through their armor, the force of the pellets pushing them back. Kyle and Sasha took up the front, using their strength to force their way out and carve a path back to the surface.

The moment they peeked their heads out, Kyle was taken aback by the sheer number of rock spiders that were clamoring to get at them, nearly more than two hundred of them. The commandos could also see the sheer numbers that they faced, their faces balking. “This is insanity - how are we going to make it out?”

Without warning, a sudden burst of trash, mud, and fungi was sent flying in all directions, a large jaw lunging out from within the base of the pillars of refuse and swallowing more than a dozen rock spiders in one giant gulp. A humongous shadow swept across Kyle and Sasha as the new creature clambered out of its hiding spot deep in the ground, rising to its full height and towering over the squad, making even the calm Kyle start to sweat a little. *Wasn’t it supposed to be just a tree trunk?*

# Chapter 110 - Discovery

The noxious salamander reared its gigantic body on its hind legs, the weight of its limbs resting on other pillars nearby that slightly buckled under the immense force while its webbed feet flattened fungi, flora, and insects alike. A sudden drop in pressure could be felt around Kyle as the salamander inhaled in, resulting in a series of sickening crunches as the rock spiders in its maw were crushed and pulverized by unknown mechanisms deep within the beast.

Already, the other rock spiders were scattering frantically, their spiky rock legs jabbing the ground furiously as they sprinted away, though it was impossible to escape the noxious salamander that seemed to occupy the entire area. Kyle and Sasha ducked as a barbed tail swung past right over them, dragging and carving through the ground in one fell swoop while the salamander chased the fleeing rock spiders, looking to eat more. Each step the salamander took sent tremors through the earth, frightening the commandos. They were well-trained to kill humans, but such monsters were far beyond what they were prepared to fight.

Kyle was trained to, but whatever EXP the Trial offered now meant nothing to Kyle - he wasn’t about to try and kill the beast that was almost three stories high and the length of a regular patrol starship, at least not without enough information. It wouldn’t be his largest alien kill, but all of them had been done with a functioning exosuit, at least. “We’re retreating back to where we came from. The moment that salamander gets out of range, we’re leaving.” He explained to the rest of the squad, the rest nodding back in response. No one came here to sacrifice their lives, not when they could simply retreat and fight another day, preferably with more firepower.

As soon as the noxious salamander disappeared beyond the various pillars, Kyle and Sasha led the squad out, keeping low as they moved with haste, sneaking through the rotting environment with a clear sense of urgency. However, for some unknown reason, the tremors felt by the salamander’s footsteps did not subside, instead increasing with intensity as they neared the tunnel from which they had entered. “Hold! Something isn’t right!” Kyle urged, but it was far too late.

From beyond a wall of refuse that obscured their vision, a second noxious salamander burst out in an exploding torrent of sludge and excretion, lunging right at Sasha and catching her off-guard. *Penchant for Violence!* Kyle clenched his armored right fist and kicked off as fast as he could, tackling Sasha right on the waist to knock her out of the way. The body of the noxious salamander soared past them and crashed into a river of sludge with a thunderous splash while Kyle and Sasha tumbled through the mud, their armor and gas masks coated in filth.

Sasha scrambled to her feet, leaping for the runic falchion as the three commandos began to fire at the attacking noxious salamander. The pellets lodged themselves into the slightly glossy scales on the salamander’s skin, earning a shriek before the salamander turned to face them. With the salamander distracted, Kyle recovered into a fighting posture, drawing his Tattoo Knife and charging forward. Thankfully, the size of this salamander was about a third of the first one they had seen, though it still possessed tremendous muscular strength and agility.

The moment Kyle took three steps forward at a running pace, the salamander flicked its head in alertness, stopping its approach towards the three commandos while flicking its tail at Kyle, the barbs lined with seeping poison threatening to impale him through his guts. Without hesitation, Kyle nimbly leaped up high, the Penchant of Violence effect allowing him to jump two meters up to avoid the sweep of the tail before landing with a strike aimed right at the base of the salamander’s tail. The custom prototype exosuit arm glowed as it imbued additional strength into the punch, the fist collapsing the scales proper and reaching flesh. A gruesome stench erupted from within in a ghastly pulse of bodily liquids and sludge as three red moths fluttered out from the wound, their feelers sharp as nails and threatening to stab him. They swarmed Kyle’s face, forcing him to dedicate time to slicing the moths apart as the salamander recovered, giving him its full attention now. It inhaled sharply, the mist sucking up into its gills and mouth as its belly inflated fully.

As Kyle cut down the last moth with his Tattoo Knife, a compressed blast of air shot straight at him, slamming straight into his chest and sending him sprawling and tumbling backward. Kyle gasped and choked while he rolled on the floor, his innards suffering from the sudden impulse as he struggled to recover, his vision swirling when the shadow of the salamander’s body loomed towards him. Before it could lunge, a barrage of pellets slammed right into its head, the three commandos buying time for Kyle.

The salamander growled, immediately charging towards the three commandos in a headlong rush. They dived out of the way as its head smashed into a pillar of refuse, temporarily disorientating while the squad re-positioned.

A blistering fast red flash raced up one of the pillars, Sasha using her powerful legs to climb up a few meters before leaping out in a backflip right above the noxious salamander. As she sailed through the air, the salamander shot another burst of air at her. Reading the movements of the salamander accurately, Sasha contorted her body, twisting and avoiding the incoming shot by using her runic falchion to pierce the incoming blast, the compressed air splitting apart and crashing against the ceiling, dislodging stalactites and slicing through unfortunate airborne insects too slow to evade.

With gravity as her force, she dove straight towards the salamander, falchion first. Her calloused hands gripped the hilt of the falchion tightly, and the cold sharp tip of the runic blade stabbed right into the body of the salamander, narrowly missing the head as the salamander tried to dodge. It let out a loud shriek, expelling the mist it had sucked in as Sasha clenched tightly, summoning all her strength to drag the falchion through the flesh, ignoring the resulting swarm of red moths that began to jab at her from all directions.

The salamander emitted a guttural roar of pain as it flinched, trying to flail its body to shake off Sasha. As its body twisted and flicked in all directions, the three commandos had to scamper, dodging and ducking in all directions. Its tail swept wildly but suddenly contorted itself backward and lunged towards Sasha, the barbs digging into her flesh as she was lifted upwards. The poison began to invade her bloodstream. Sasha used her hands and tried to pry the barbs out of her own body.

However, a sudden explosive tremor shook through the salamander’s body, the tail immediately letting go of Sasha while she tumbled down onto the filthy floor, poisoned and injured. The wounded salamander twisted its head around, seeing a fearsome Kyle charging up its body, aiming for the runic falchion that was still lodged in its body.

Clasping its hilt with his armored hand, the imbued strength of the exosuit arm empowered his strikes even more as he carved bloody slashes deep into the body of the salamander. Scales and flesh were torn apart by the devastating combo; the red moths instantly split in half while Kyle let out a battle cry. While Sasha staggered to her feet, assisted by another commando, she could tell that Kyle’s sword slashes had a higher strength even compared to when she activated the runic enchantment. “Get to the exit! I’ll handle him!” Kyle roared, prompting Sasha and the others to limp away while the battle unfolded behind them.

The salamander stood no chance, Kyle unleashing a frenzy right in the middle and chopping all the way into its internals, dicing up the eerie glowing entrails and pulsating digestive tracts filled to the brim with rancid sludge accumulated over time. Uncaring about the stench, Kyle plowed his way to the very center, trying to find the heart. Yet instead of a heart, Kyle found six thick muscles wrapped around in a cocoon, siphoning what seemed to be arcia energy through its veins with each rapid pulse.

He jabbed the runic falchion forward before flicking it upwards, tearing through it in half from the bottom to reveal a singular arcia crystal embedded in the midst of the torn muscles, far larger than the ones he had found in the rock spiders. However, he did not grab it right away, instead continuing to slash the meat all around, the bodily fluids coating him entirely from head to toe.

Letting out a final whimper, the noxious salamander collapsed, keeling over while its limbs intermittently twitched, the life fading in its reptilian eyes as the arcia energy coursing through its veins began to peter out. A thunderous roar erupted from afar as if in response to the last cry of the salamander.

MG404: [System Message | Killed “Young Noxious Salamander,” +500 EXP]

*Young?* Kyle reached out and grabbed the arcia crystal into his hand, clambering his way out of the hole he had carved into the salamander.

MG404: [Item | Good Arcia Crystal (Basic) | *Rechargable with the correct modifications.* ]

Kyle didn’t have time to consider the implications of the system message, noticing that the collapsed salamander had crashed into a pillar of refuse that was teetering on the brink of collapse. He could only watch as the towering pillar began to crumble, leaning towards the side and slamming into another nearby pillar, causing a domino effect that fell in the same direction as where Sasha and the rest of the squad were heading.

The mountains of trash and sludge fell like a torrential rain, forcing Sasha to retreat while the exit tunnel was now heavily blocked by the never-ending collapse of the pillars stacking up onto of one another into a thick pile that would take ages to carve through, even if Sasha used her runic falchion. [Sir, the exit is blocked!] Sasha’s voice exclaimed in Kyle’s head.

Another roar boomed out from across the chamber like a crack of thunder, the squad’s expression paling as they could feel the tremors approaching them, the vibrations causing the mud to violently squirm with each slam. “That’s not good…” One of the commandos gulped instinctively, checking his repeater and frantically wiping the residual mud off it.

Kyle knew exactly what was coming - the question was what to do next. *Penchant of Violence is still on cooldown, but the rest of my skills are still functioning. It’s going to take a while to break out through the collapsed trash, better to find another path.* He was about to suggest a new battle plan until he noticed Sasha breathing heavily, drinking a slew of various potion vials as she tried to catch her breath, unwilling to show any signs of weakness. The other commandos also suffered minor bruises and scratches that were starting to fester as well, one of them even having a broken arm dangle lifelessly.

*The correct choice would be to sacrifice the three commandos to stall the salamander while Sasha and I find a way out of this chamber.* Kyle nearly started before he caught himself halfway. *I’m not running a gang here, I’m running a rebel movement. If I mindlessly sacrifice troops against something I can clearly defeat, it would be a bad look for other recruits. On the other hand…*

“You three, grab her and go back towards the cave we first found.” Kyle quickly pieced together the next steps, planning the best course of action while taking into account the future. That cave was the safest location he could think of, especially with their path of retreat completely blocked off. “I’ll fend it off until you’re all recovered and ready to fight once more.”

[Sir, I can still fight!]

“Not now.” Kyle ignored Sasha’s words, stepping away and flicking salamander’s blood off the blade of the runic falchion with a furious flick.

[But sir, that salamander must be three times larger in size!]

“Good. Then it’ll be a worthy fight.” Kyle grinned, his steps firm and steady as he walked towards the approaching tremors, undeterred. The sight of his strong back and blade at the ready burned itself into the memory of the three commandos and Sasha, all of them staring at him in awe and admiration. Already the expressions of the three commandos were turning from reluctant soldiers to signs of loyalty, though Kyle did not turn around to witness it.

As the rest of the squad made their way back to the cave they found, Kyle readied himself, checking all of his gear once more. A few armor plates on his leg were already punctured while he stretched his limbs in all directions as though he was going for a routine exercise.

In the distance, his keen eyes could spot a raging black figure that was charging right at him, blasting and shoving aside any environmental obstacles like they were ragdolls. He pulled up the Aspis MK2 repeater, activating its overcharge function and pushing his own internal arcia energy into it. The barrel’s engraving glowed brilliantly as the metal itself became red hot, on the verge of deforming while Kyle pulled the trigger with the stock pushing against his chest.

A straight line of pellets erupted like a laser, aimed right at the head of the incoming larger salamander. The empowered pellets almost broke the sound barrier, puncturing the dense scales protecting its vitals easily and tearing apart flesh. With a grunt, Kyle dragged the barrel while controlling the recoil, the laser-focused rain of pellets now blasting into the left eye of the salamander.

The sudden jolting pain of its eye being shredded into a slurry of meat caused it to recoil, its initial momentum slightly lost. It stumbled as it tripped into a deep pit of mud, its body swerving off course and tail swinging wildly, the sharp barbs cutting through the air where Kyle had been standing. Kyle dove to the ground headfirst, rolling out of the way as the large salamander tumbled and crashed into a mountain of trash, sending insects, rodents, and rock spiders fleeing from their previous hiding spots within.

Kyle hurriedly recovered to a fighting stance, pulling up his repeater again only to notice that the red hot barrel had been deformed during the dive, proving useless for shooting anything anymore. The moment he tossed the repeater aside, alarm bells started to ring in his mind as he instinctively ducked, a wave of compressed air tearing through the chamber and cutting pillars right through.

He swerved, dodged, and weaved through the flora and fauna as more blasts of compressed air shot towards him, far more powerful than the one he was facing before. As he rolled on the ground through the mud, a towering shadow loomed over him, the salamander’s size blocking the bio-luminsicent glow of the fungi all around. It was only now that Kyle fully comprehended the sheer size of what he was facing.

The larger salamander raised itself on its hind legs, almost rivaling the mountains and pillars of trash in height as it let out a guttural roar that would have deafened anyone close enough to its maw. Its body was covered in dense armored scales that were stained with the same color as the mud and sludge around, while the barbs on its tails were the size of longswords, threatening to impale Kyle if he was ever unfortunate enough to come face to face with it.

Amdist the armoured scales, strange warts and pods that glowed with pulsating arcia energy were visible on its back, Kyle mentally targeting them as potential weak points. The salamander’s furious gaze swooped back onto Kyle as soon as it was done with its roar, the battle commencing proper with Kyle leaping out of the way to avoid an incoming stomp.

The barbed tail swung towards Kyle with full force, the width of the tail far larger than what Kyle could jump over. Gritting his teeth and clenching his jaw, Kyle brandished the runic falchion gripped in his right armored hand, blocking the incoming barbs and digging in his feet. The impact of the barbs sent reverberations through his arms, his muscles numbing as he was sent skidding backward through the mud for three meters, some of the barbs narrowly missing his gas mask.

“That all you got?” Kyle took the temporary chance to deliver a slash, the runic falchion cutting through the armored scales of the tail and finding soft flesh within. The tail recoiled backwards in pain, before the salamander lunged at Kyle with its gaping maw, intending to swallow him.

Kyle deftly side-stepped the incoming lunge, the blade spinning around in a vicious slash that aimed right at the still-injured eye, cutting through to the nerves and sending it reeling backward. He quickly charged towards the flailing salamander, unwilling to let up the pressure. *There should be a weak spot where I shot it in the head - huh?*

Despite the barrage of pellets that he had seen tear through the armoured scales, new armour was being rapidly regenerated, growing over the wounds in real-time and forcing Kyle to reopen the wound. The salamander flicked its body back, slamming into Kyle and sending him flying back, though Kyle easily recovered due to him blocking the impact with his exosuit arm.

As he continued his fight, he also noticed that the wound he had inflicted on his barbed tail was also healing over time. *I can’t fight a battle of endurance - I have to find a way to kill him in one hit!*

The battle raged on for another five minutes, neither side truly landing a solid blow on the other as they fought across the entire chamber, their battlefield continuously changing. Kyle’s eyes darted around rapidly as he rapidly recalculated attack trajectories for every new object in his surroundings, using it to his advantage to exploit the blind spot. Kyle found a climbable pillar, leaping up and utilizing it to launch himself off onto the top of the furious salamander, right next to the glowing pods.

Before he could use the runic falchion to burst the pods, the glowing pods themselves began to swell larger in size, exploding outwards and unleashing a disgusting stench that sent Kyle staggering even as he inhaled through his gas mask. Unexpectedly, something from within the pod lunged towards him, his battle instincts quickly swinging the blade to chop it down.

As he recovered his senses, he soon realized that he had just cut down a baby salamander, its translucent glossy skin still fresh with goo and lack of pigmentation. *The pods are its babies?!* Kyle spun around to see five more pods bursting, revealing a squad of baby salamanders that immediately targeted him as the enemy.

The large salamander suddenly twisted its body, shaking Kyle and the baby salamanders off its back and flinging them aside. Kyle twisted his body, controlling his landing while the salamanders landed with grace as well, instantly charging towards him. Other glowing pods began to burst as well from the large salamander’s back, revealing more than two dozen baby salamanders that began to swarm toward him.

“Sasha, are you ready? Now would be a good time to help out.”

[Just a bit more, sir!]

For a brief moment, a memory of his former life betrayal flashed through his mind, even as he readied the runic falchion and the Tattoo knife in separate hands. *If I were Sasha, I would have taken this chance to run away and leave my boss to die. Maybe she is lying to me, and there is no help coming. Will it happen again to me? Will I have to take revenge once again on those who betrayed me?* He started to doubt the original plan he had, aimed at creating an inspirational story to galvanize the rebel movements with his ’heroic� sacrifice. Yet deep in his subconscious, a hidden fear began to rise to the surface once more; his body no longer possessed his former genetic modifications that removed such unnecessary emotions and thoughts.

It was not a fear of the enemy, for Kyle knew he wouldn’t lose against the salamanders. Instead, it was something that had been engraved in him since he arrived here, a simple question that had been persistent with him. *Can I trust anyone but myself anymore?* Already Guang Hwa had betrayed the Seven Snakes previously, and Kyle always had the mindset that it was only a matter of time before his own vipers tried to kill him. This was the main reason why he had not told anybody too much about the Oracle Chambers or of his origins - even after spending more than a year with them, Kyle still could not trust anyone but himself for his own survival, not even Sasha. He had lost track of the countless ‘loyal’ employees he had over the course of his former life that he had personally executed for betraying his criminal empire, their faceless visages washing over him in a never-ending stream.

He closed his eyes as the stampede of baby salamanders approached him in a frenzy, preparing himself for a possible back-stab, a betrayal. *Even in this new life, some things don’t change. Looks like I can only count on mys-*

[Sir, we’re here!] Sasha’s excited voice came in, Kyle opening his eyes to see Sasha and even the other three commandos charging right into the fray. [We’ll handle the smaller ones!]. They fired their Aspis MK2 repeaters over the swarm of baby salamanders, the pellets easily penetrating the translucent, unarmoured skin.

*They… they came back…?* Kyle was stunned for a moment but shoved whatever emotions and thoughts he had to the back of his mind, dual-wielding both the falchion and knife and charging forward in a straight line towards the roaring large salamander. *Penchant for Violence!*

The familiar power surged through his veins as he unleashed a brutal combo, each arm cutting, jabbing, slashing with force, the armoured scales of the salamander cracking and peeling apart like they were sheets of ice. Even the salamander’s attempts to counterattack were useless, Kyle dodging each of them with ease.

Before the salamander could rear up again for another attack, Kyle lunged toward its belly, diving deep once again right into the flesh with abandon. *Its heart should be an arcia crystal as well - I just have to find it!*

Outside, Sasha had already cleaned up most of the baby salamanders, now focusing her firepower on the large salamander. However, instead of the large salamander trying to squash her, it coiled up its barbed tail, using the barbs to protect itself from the pellets, all while arcia energy sparked and accumulated at its tails, stemming from within the body. [Sir, something bad is charging at the tail - the source is in the very center!]

“On it.” With the direction given now, Kyle drilled his way through the Penchant of Violence, allowing him to churn through the flesh rapidly with ease, soon reaching the heart, which was a far larger cocoon compared to the young salamander he had slain before. He performed the same procedure, severing every connecting flesh tendril to the central arcia crystal.

However, instead of letting out a death cry, arcia energy continued to charge on the tail; Kyle even noticed that the pulsating arcia energy in the body did not subside. *Shit, it has another crystal!* “Sasha, what’s happening outside?”

[It’s about to cast an arcia engraving on its tail!]

*Not good!* Kyle raced to find the other crystal but could tell that he wouldn’t be able to find it in time. Instead of trying to dig any further, he stretched out his hand and focused his mind on the surging arcia energy. *Arcia Disruption!*

The flow of arcia energy suddenly reversed, the sparks at the tail petering out as the salamander let out a high-pitched scream that stunned the rest of the squad outside, its lower body rapidly disintegrating and melting, the resulting liquid seemingly being sucked and coalescing in a large black crystal, leaving the upper half to collapse and squirm violently. Kyle was flung out of the body by the sudden sundering, tumbling onto the floor painfully with one of the arcia crystals held tightly in his hands.

MG404: [System Message | Killed “Patriarch Noxious Salamander,” +2000 EXP]

Kyle gasped for air as he struggled to get back to his feet. He heard footsteps approaching him, prompting him to raise his Tattoo Knife in instinctive self-defense, before finally recognizing that it was Sasha. [Sir, are you okay?]

“I’m fine.” Kyle nodded weakly, acting like it was nothing, though his body was aching all over, scratches and cuts all over his skin, his blood-stained face panting heavily. He pulled out a health potion vial from one of his side pockets, downing it in one single gulp, exhaling as the regenerative effects took over. “We need to move - that might not have been the last of them. We’ll have to find a new exit as well.”

[Sir, about that… the exit is actually right behind you.] Sasha motioned over Kyle’s shoulder. Sure enough, an opening was visible in the chamber’s wall, the battle with the salamander having taken Kyle all across its length to the other side. Kyle nodded, putting one foot forward before stumbling, Sasha lunging to grab and support him with her shoulders. He tried to stand on his own two feet, but Sasha held his arm down firmly as they limped towards the opening. Kyle squinted his eyes in suspicion, assuming Sasha was doing this for an ulterior motive. However, it soon became clear that Sasha just wanted to help him, showing no signs of betrayal, causing turmoil in Kyle’s mind.

“Wh… why did you come back?” Kyle muttered weakly. “That was your best chance to kill me and be free.”

Sasha raised her eyebrows, an awkward silence resting between the two before Sasha finally spoke with a wide grin. [If I killed you now, how would I be able to see what you’ve promised me? I won’t let you die, not until you show me the true heights you mentioned.]

Kyle’s mind recalled his chat in the Culdao Peaks, his face smiling a little as he could finally put a reason for Sasha’s lack of betrayal. “Are you sure you want to wait that long? It might take years. Decades, even.”

[Take as long as you want. We’ve got time.] Sasha averted her gaze slightly as they continued to walk towards the opening.

Unlike the corridor from which they had entered the chamber, this opening was a standard circular sewage tunnel, sludge dripping out through a canal drop by drop. The squad ignored the pervasive stench, the smell from the rotten chamber far worse. “I’m alright now,” Kyle shrugged off Sasha’s support, clambering up into the sewage tunnel himself as strength finally returned to his limbs, regaining his proper self.

MG404: [System Message | Trial Cleared | A path has been forged. +5000 EXP]

MG404: [ Level Up: 27 - 28 | All Stats Increased | Bonus Points Granted ]

*The EXP required for each level is exponentially increasing rapidly…* Kyle felt a bit disappointed at the rewards the System gave. While he internally already knew that he could not rely on the System alone to increase his strength and power, it was still a necessary crutch. If he did not have such a System, he would not have been able to access the Oracle Chambers nor the laser prison cells he discovered, nor would he have had access to the combat skills necessary. *It would still be possible to kill the salamanders without it, albeit a bit longer*

“We should be able to find a way up to the third layer. Let’s move.” Kyle ordered, the squad complying almost instantly. Whatever suspicion, assumptions, or doubts the three commandos had harbored about him were now completely eliminated, having witnessed Kyle’s ‘heroic’ sacrifice for their sake. Kyle held a small smile on his face as they trekked down the tunnels, knowing the plan had paid off and would continue to give returns over time.

True enough to Dekar’s map, there was an exit tunnel at the very end, a simple ladder that ascended up to the third layer. As they clambered up the rungs, Kyle found himself in yet another similar abandoned hideout to the one they had occupied on the other end of the third layer. However, unlike the abandoned hideout, most of the machinery and furnishing were still in place, coated in copious amounts of dust, soot, and dried grease.

It was a trivial affair to find their way back through the third layer to the fourth layer, thanks to the provided map, but it soon became clear that the route on the third layer between the two hideouts was too complex to traverse on a daily basis to be used as a proper base. Kyle immediately designated the newly discovered hideout as a backup one in case of an emergency, to be evacuated towards quickly using the fourth layer dungeon, whose layout they were now familiar with.

Returning to the main hideout, many were shocked to see Kyle, Sasha, and the three commandos coated in filth and sludge as though they had just taken a mudbath, the rancid scent permeating the chamber and living quarters. They had been out for a day now, including the time it took to traverse the third layer back. Kyle ignored the complaints of the smell as he walked up to the astounded Dekar and Feldon. Both of them recoiled from the stench and pinched their nose tightly, Feldon almost gagging instinctively. “You’ve made it back from the fourth layer?” Dekar struggled to stay standing.

“I have. Feldon, Lisa. Sasha will instruct you on a new training routine using the fourth layer. It will be useful to harden the new Ghosts as well to carve out a potential escape route through that method.” Kyle explained the next steps quickly. “We will need to stock up our new escape hideout as well.” He pointed towards the third layer map, marking a chamber right next to a tunnel that led to Desham.

“Understood!” Feldon saluted with his free hand, hurriedly rushing away to get rid of the scent.

“How’s the progress on Yona?” Kyle asked.

“Almost done, she should be ready with every detail we need to infiltrate Harrison’s military industrial complex.”

“Is there a way in?”

“There is, but it requires one of us to infiltrate their offices. All of us here would immediately draw suspicion and attention, even if we try to disguise ourselves. The identity checks are sure to be far more stringent than some random Nest guard. We would be revealed almost immediately!”

“*Almost* all of us - I know just the perfect candidate for this task.”

# Chapter 111 - Military Industrial Complex

The fumes belched out in never-ending pulses from tall smoke stacks that dotted the landscape, the military-industrial complex of Tenar seemingly having no end, expanding even beyond the ancient walls and encroaching onto the nearby pastures and large expansive fields. Instead of greenery and grass stretching into the horizon, monstrous factories and humongous refineries were the mainstay of the view here, filtering the daylight that spilled out onto the paved streets.

Flywheel generators and gravity batteries towered over sixty meters high in the distance, the residual sounds of clanging and burning dominating the air, a far cry from the peace and tranquility of the residential district. Here, industry seeped into every aspect of life. Sleepy workers covered in soot and grime all over their work outfits rubbed their groggy eyes as they lumbered back to their dorms, snatching every minute of shuteye they could before their shifts started again.

A loud bell resounded through the complex, signalling the start of the next shift as thousands of workers, engineers, researchers and clerks filtered out from their dormitories in dense swarms, congregating on open parade squares situated next to the domineering factories, their oppressive black visage casting large shadows over the square.

[Rollcall!] A foreman shouted into an arctech radio, his voice carried on arctech speakers situated all around the square and prompting assistants to run down the thick rows of employees, counting heads and checking for names. [We only have two weeks left till the Grand Exhibition - projects such as Aurtla and Guryi have not been completed! It is our responsibility to put forward our best foot; Versia is counting on us! Any failure will be a catastrophe for both you and me. Do your part!]

“YES, SIR!” The workers chanted in sync, none of them averting their eyes from the foreman.

[Good. Confirm your assigned role with your team leaders, and remember to get your work card punched.] The foreman had the workers dismissed, the throng of workers dispersing into a hundred swarms as they criss-crossed each other, trying to get to their workplace. Many boarded wagons which carried them to their departments, some situated miles away.

The foreman let out an exasperated sigh as he returned back to his office, going over the attendance list with his assistants compiling the information. Sitting down on a black stool and thumbing through the sheets of paper stacked on his narrow wooden desk, he soon noticed something strange. “Hey, where are the sub-contractors? Why aren’t they on this list?” He questioned the assistant nearest to him.

The assistant scratched his head in confusion, eyes darting about thinking that the foreman was talking to someone else, until he met the foreman’s gaze again, clearly looking directly at him. “H-huh? Which subcontractor? Glovcal Works or-”

“Huriga Cleaning Services, you idiot! Their whole team is fucking missing!” The foreman scolded. “Get their manager on the radio right now!”

While the assistant scrambled to find their radio, the foreman continued to inspect the list, noticing quite a few employees who were reported late. “Dock Employee 2248 and Employee 5063’s wages - dock them an hour for every minute missed.” He lazily scribbled onto a slip of paper, handing it over to a nearby clerk.

An hour passed, the foreman looking up at a nearby clock before realizing that the assistant had not gotten the manager on the line. “Hey, what’s the hold up?”

“Sir, they aren’t responding to any of my calls!” The assistant nervously replied from a desk further down the hall of the office.

“And you only decided to tell me now?!”

“I…”

“You fucking useless-” The foreman was about to raise his voice again but decided not to waste any effort on the dumb assistant, instead pulling up a work chart of all assigned subcontractors and their tasks.

Before the foreman could cancel a line, a group of two dozen cleaners entered the office, wearing dark blue work overalls with the logo of Huriga Cleaning Services clearly emblazoned across their chest and back. They hauled cleaning supplies in a large cart, their manager walking up to the foreman’s desk with a pensive smile on his face. “Sorry, Bernard, traffic was pretty bad just now.” The manager apologized with a slight bow.

“Bah, don’t give me any excuse, you old slag.” Bernard clenched his fist while picking up an Euria pipe in the other, smoking. “You’ve been late more than five times now. How the hell am I going to explain to Harrison? Maybe we should dock your contract.” He placed the tip of his pen down on the work chart, about to cancel out their name, when the manager leaned forward quickly, trying to stop the foreman.

“Really, you know it’s not my fault. Johan Street is always chock full of wagons - even if I wanted to arrive on time, it would be near impossible!” The manager pleaded, his grip tight.

Bernard let out a sigh, dropping the pen and scratching his balding head, the manager letting out a sigh of relief while Bernard complained:“You’re always getting off easy - just because we’re old time buddies doesn’t mean I can keep covering for you all the time! You could just come out earlier!”

“Come on, Bernard, it’s only an hour!”

“Do you have any idea how many other cleaning crews out there would kill to have the contract that you have right now? For each of your assigned areas, hundreds would kill for such a lucrative payment, especially given the terrible conditions outside Tenar.” Bernard chided. “And you barely even look out for me! Why do I feel like I’m getting the short end of the stick, huh?”

“What are you talking about - Of course I always look out for you.” Huriga grinned, glancing around with a shifty look before rummaging through his overall’s pocket, pulling out a tiny vial, a viscous dark-yellow liquid swirling inside. “On the house.”

Bernard’s eyes widened when he spotted the vial. “Are you crazy, bringing that here? How the hell did you get it?”

“Like I said, I always look out for you. Free of charge.” Huriga slid the vial over, Bernard frantically snatching it and pocketing it before any of the clerks and assistants nearby spotted him. His originally antagonistic behavior faded like snow on a summer’s day, his face beaming with happiness instead as if he had never been angry at Huriga.

“I knew you could always pull through, Huriga. You’re the best.” Bernard had a wide smile from cheek to cheek. “You better get going to the dorm areas - if you get any later, they are gonna get real mad at both you and me.”

“Yeah, about that. I was thinking about taking two areas at once.”

Bernard raised an eyebrow. “So that’s why you’ve brought so many people. Hmm… I can’t have you do two dorm areas now; the rest are already allocated to their own cleaning crews. Why do you even want to do two at once?”

Huriga leaned over, his voice dropping to a whisper. “That vial ain’t cheap. You and I both know it. Do me a favor, and I’ll get you another one. How’s that?”

Bernard squinted his eyes in suspicion before scanning the work chart again. “Let’s see here… I only got the mansion here. You’re going to need clearance to get in there.”

Huriga’s face paled slightly at the mention of that. If Bernard had been looking closely, he might have noticed Huriga’s eyes trembling for a while before firming up once more. “Come on, Bernard, you know I don’t have the clearance for that area. There has got to be another area I can clean!”

“Nope, nothing else here. Rest has been taken up. Seriously, if you wanted two areas, you should have told me the day before and maybe not show up late!” Bernard retorted, but his hand continuously felt the precious vial in his pockets, already thinking about when he could get the next dose. He beckoned for Huriga to come closer, whispering. “If I get you in, two vials.”

“Sure, if I get double areas for the next two weeks.”

“Deal. Hey, you! These men need temporary clearance for Zone A!” Bernard hollered to the dumb assistant, who quickly scampered over while clutching a stack of papers tightly.

“But, sir, these passes are not to be given out lightly. They’ll have to be approved by-”

“By the foreman. That’s me, you dingus! Now get me those temporary passes, or I’ll dock your pay!”

Within minutes, a dozen of the cleaners had a temporary pass, a simple card pinned to their work overalls. “The pass only last for your allocated cleaning time. Don’t overstay - you won’t like military jail.” Bernard warned the group. “Don’t cross any lines, stick to your assigned zones, and don’t touch anything that isn’t yours. Understood?”

The cleaners nodded, with Huriga leading them out of the office. They split up themselves into two separate wagons, heading to their zones. The wagons rolled through the vast industrial complex, their paths eventually diverging over time with one of them heading towards the center.

Inside the back of the wagon, the cleaners didn’t say much, some closing their eyes to get some sleep, while two others muttered among themselves, their voices kept low and hushed. “Hey, you said there wouldn’t be any hiccups.” One of them whispered angrily, jabbing the other in the ribs and causing him to flinch.

“What the fuck? Of course there isn’t. Huriga got us in - what else do you want?” The other rubbed his ribs gently, glaring at his friend.

“Are you blind? There’s a new girl here! Why is there a new girl as part of the crew?” The first motioned with his chin towards a lady sitting at the other corner of the wagon, her clear eyes looking out the back at the scenery passing by. She wore a tight mask that covered her skin from the nose down, the work overalls hiding her outline.

The other cleaner scoffed. “What’s the matter? Want to date her?”

“Fuck no - I’ve seen what’s under her mask. Also, I’ve been going steady recently.”

“Hah! You? Steady? You’re joking. Nerves getting to you.”

“I’m serious, you asshole.”

“What, that girl selling horse milk at the end of Asha Street? Brother, you’ve been cheated - that girl is dating four guys right now!”

“Wha- how do you know?”

“She’s dating me right now, too!”

“WHAT?!” The first exclaimed loudly, his voice raised and attracting everyone’s attention, even the girl at the back. He quickly calmed himself down, taking a few deep breaths to control his rising temper, before continuing: “Firstly, that’s not the girl I’m going steady with.”

“Then why the hell were you so shocked?”

“I…”

“Hey, you don’t need to lie to me. I know you dated her before.”

“If you know there are so many people dating her, then why are you dating too?”

“Just because there’s five players in the game doesn’t mean I can’t join the game too. There’s no player limit, is there?”

“Wha- look, you’re not focusing on what we got to do. That new girl is a liability - simple as that. We should find a way to make sure she doesn’t interfere with what we have to do.”

“Nah, she’s not going to do anything - she’s brand new!”

“Exactly why a single fumble from her could screw up everything! Do you even understand the importance of what we’re trying to do? Our lives in Versia depend on this!”

“Alright, alright, relax. We can assign her to refill the buckets; that’ll keep her away for long enough.”

Soon, the wagon crawled to a halt, a thump along the side of the wagon prompting the cleaners to get up. The new girl looked around blankly, her expression naive, before one of the other cleaners tapped her on the shoulders. “We need to get out for a security check.”

The new girl nodded, dropping down to see Huriga chatting with a Versian sergeant while other soldiers boarded the wagon, checking the cleaning supplies and equipment to make sure there was nothing dangerous. The Versian sergeant spotted the girl, squinting in suspicion. “Who’s the new girl? You hiring comfort women now?”

“They aren’t that cheap to hire, you know. At least, not for how much tenars I earn.” Huriga grinned. “No, the girl is just a new cleaner. I promised her father to take care of her, so there you go.”

“Then what’s with the mask?”

“Trust me, you don’t want to see what’s behind it.”

“Try me. I’m not going to let anyone past this checkpoint without seeing their faces.”

“Don’t blame me - you asked for it.” Huriga motioned to the new girl to pull down the mask, the cleaners all immediately averting their gaze. The Versian sergeant eyes bulged, before his reflex instinct cause him to gag. He staggered to the side, vomitting out his breakfast in its entirety with a loud retch. As soon as he recovered, he too averted his gaze from the new girl, waving frantically at Huriga and shaking his head.

“Painful accident. Lost her voice.” Huriga shrugged, signaling to the girl to cover up once more. “Look, I’m already behind schedule. I’ll treat you to lunch next time I come around.”

The Versian sergeant gasped for air as he stood back up to his full height, taking deep breaths. “You better treat me to lunch and breakfast for that fucking atrocity!”

“Hey, that’s not fair, you asked for it!”

“… Fine. Lunch.”

The soldiers got off the wagon, reporting to the sergeant. “All clear, sir. No bombs or funny arctech.”

“Good. Alright, let them through!”

The checkpoint gate opened to reveal a large, expansive road with well-manicured bushes planted along the side with exceptional accuracy, the distance between them immaculately in both pattern and calculation. The grass on the rolling lawn that spread out beyond the edges of the road was trimmed well, too, showing clear signs of regular gardening on a daily basis. The road snaked up a slight slope, curving around and leading to the front of a large mansion, its prestigious white pillars glinting in the distance while the sheer number of windows made the first-time cleaners� jaws drop.

The wagon soon rolled up to the porch, and five armed Versian guards immediately approached the wagon. The cleaners hopped off again one by one, intimidated by the large arctech knight armor that each of the guards wore, their height nearly 2.1 meters from the sheer amount of metal infused into its structure. Huriga’s usual charisma faltered, and one of the armored guards walked up, each step clanging with domineering metal. “Business?” A somber tone spoke from behind the armored helmet, his stern eyes only shown through a slit on the faceplate adorned with the emblem of Versia.

“Huriga Cleaning Services. We’ve been assigned this area by Foreman Bernard.”

“Passes?”

Huriga frantically motioned to the rest of the cleaners, getting them to line up and brandish their temporary passes pinned onto their work overalls. A few of them trembled as the armored guards inspected them thoroughly, checking their pockets and belongings. None of the guards flinched even as they pulled down the mask of the new girl, though they were quick in covering up her again.

“Stay on the first floor. The second floor is off-limits. Anyone crossing will be shot on sight.” The armored guard warned once more, stepping aside to allow Huriga and the cleaning crew to enter, lugging their buckets, mops, clothes, and other essentials up the grand steps that numbered about a dozen up towards the main door.

A butler greeted them at the main door, though his expression was clearly cautious. “Good to meet you, sir Huriga, but I don’t recall any cleaning crews being assigned to this area.”

“I don’t know anything about assignments; I just follow wherever the foreman tells me to go.” Huriga shrugged, but his eyes were already captivated by the elegance of the door’s construction. Ornamental gold lined every edge, and white slivers marked the edges of the carvings in the ancient oak frame; the details and precision were marvelous to witness. Even the cleaners were stuck with awe, gaping with their mouths open along with hushed sounds of exclamation.

“Are you going to stare, or are you here to clean?” The butler sternly glared at Huriga, causing Huriga to shake himself out of his stupor, quickly stepping through the opened main door and entering the main hall proper. The main hall wasn’t any better at making Huriga focused on cleaning. Its glistening rails and stairs that looked like a palace staircase were too eye-catching, not to mention the dazzling chandeliers hung precariously above that were larger than some of the rooms the cleaners had slept in the day before. Countless rooms and echoes of other guards’ footsteps vibrated through the polished marble floor that stretched the entire length of the mansion, each stream of light pouring through the windows and reflecting off the tiles like a mirror.

“You’ll be cleaning this main hall, along with every other room in the mansion on the first floor.” The butler informed in a matter-of-fact tone. “Should you require additional supplies, we do have the necessary equipment to clean everything.”

“Thanks, we can take it from here.” Huriga gave a genial smile, acting professional though the cleaners behind him were already murmuring among each other, hardly listening in.

“My god, why do they even need us? Whoever owns this mansion could buy out a hundred maids if he wanted to!” One of the cleaners exclaimed in awe.

“The master himself is currently at the Versian Parliament, and the other servants have all been summarily executed by firing squads for stealing relics from the mansion. You would be wise to keep your hands to yourself. As well as your comments.” The butler noted sternly before leaving them alone in the main hall. Two guards eyed the group of cleaners from the second floor’s railing as they got to work, mixing soap with water and soaking cloths, mop, and rags alike.

They split up across the hall, each area designated by Huriga who oversaw the whole operation, eyeing the guards carefully. Soon an hour passed, the cleaners having scrubbed only half of the wide hall, the six of them barely enough to get the job done fast enough. They took breaks in-between, chit-chatted and generally did their cleaning without too much complaints. The guards were already bored of watching their menial tasks and repetitive motions, instead bickering among each other.

Huriga whistled as he snacked on a piece of bread, careful to make sure no crumbs fell to the floor. He leaned against a nearby pillar, where two other cleaners were sitting, looking off into the distance. “You see those guards?” Huriga spoke through the corner of his mouth, trying to avoid suspicion.

“Yea. Rotates every thirty minutes or so.”

“How long does the shift change take?”

“Five minutes, more than enough.”

“Good. I’ve already ascertained Harrison’s office location. On the second floor, all the way at the end on the right with the bronze handles and ox-ring door knocker.”

“Got it. What about the butler? He’s too observant.” One of the cleaners motioned towards the stern-looking butler, who was eyeing them intently but clearly out of earshot on the second floor.

“I’ll handle him, don’t worry.” Huriga winked.

With the break over, they continued cleaning, albeit at a much slower, methodical pace, intentional to a fault. Huriga kept his head low as he used a mop to scrub the tiles clean, though from the peripheral of his eyes, he could tell that the butler was getting frustrated.

By the next break, the butler was already descending the main staircases, making a beeline straight for Huriga. “You’re far too slow - the mansion must be cleaned by nightfall, and it’s already lunchtime! I can see that some of your cleaners are clearly slacking in their work.”

Huriga shrugged as he sipped on a flask of water. “Well that’s because we’re not allowed to clean the other rooms yet. Too many cooks spoil the broth, we can’t have that many cleaners in the main hall. If you want it to go faster, its better if I divide my cleaners up to tackle multiple areas at once.”

“Out of the question. Who would supervise you?”

“Relax, relax. You’re too stuck up - how long have you been holed up here?”

“What does that matter to you-” The butler leaned in close and sniffed Huriga’s breath before recoiling in shock. “Are you drinking wine right now?!”

“Nothing in the contract says anything about not being able to drink on the job. I’m still functioning. Just a sip to keep me going, you know how it is.” Huriga swirled the wine in the flask, watching the butler’s eyes tracing the flask intensely. “Want some? It’s good.”

“As the head butler, I could never-”

“Who’s going to find out? Hmm? Look, have the whole flask.” Huriga took a sip from the flask before handing it to the butler. “I don’t need it anymore - you need it more than me. You could drink this right now and be sober before your ‘master’ returns, and no one would be any the wiser.”

The butler grasped the flask with both hands gleefully, though he carefully kept it close to his chest, stuffing it in his inner suit pocket out of sight of the patrolling guards. However, he soon felt something suspicious, as if Huriga had planned all of this. “You’re not going to poison me, are you?”

Huriga chuckled with an incredulous look. “Poison you? Are you insane? Where would I escape to if you were found dead? I don’t even have a weapon to fight these guards!” He jabbed his thumb over his shoulders to the fully armored guards decked out in arctech knight plates. “And I drank the flask too! Look, if you don’t want it, I’ll-”

“I’ll take it, I’ll take it.” The butler clutched his suit close. “Your cleaners can go to the other rooms, but you’re not allowed onto the second floor.”

“Of course, of course.” Huriga waved to the butler as the butler retreated sheepishly before darting towards his accommodations further down the hallway, no doubt drinking the flask as soon as he could. *Looks like our client was right about the butler being an alcoholic. He’ll be sleeping the rest of the night off. Maybe two. Can’t have me sleeping now though.* He reached into his pockets and took out an antidote pill, popping it into his own mouth as he strolled back into the center of the main hall. He gave a hand sign to the cleaners, two of them following him immediately while the rest stayed outside and continued cleaning the main hall.

They marched down the first hallway with a cart of cleaning supplies, walking down all the way to the end towards a room before gingerly opening its door to reveal a standard library, hardly used, with its bookshelves still regularly dusted by the butler. There was no one within, and the room was illuminated by the two large windows that showed the exterior of the mansion.

Huriga began to unload the cleaning supplies, revealing a strange arctech machine that looked like a circular plate of sorts, its diameter wider than his shoulder’s width by a good margin. One of the other cleaners brought a ladder; Huriga climbed it and placed the circular plate right on the ceiling, ascertaining the distance between the door and its placement. “Ok, we’re good. Synchronize watches.”

All three of them took out a pocket watch, gathering around to fiddle their timings to be the same. “When the minute hand hits five, crash the cart of cleaning supplies into the pillar or wall or something priceless.”

“You got it, bossman.” The two cleaners left, leaving Huriga alone in the room as he took out an arctech fuel pack that had been disguised as a carton of soap, extending a dormant energy tube and plugging it into the very center of the circular plate. He waited patiently at the top of the ladder, counting down the seconds to go on his pocket watch. *Three, two, one…*

He activated the fuel pack on the dot, the energy surging through the tube and powering the circular plate. A bright flash illuminated the circular plate, the edges grinding through the ceiling’s material itself in a perfect circumference. At the exact same time, Huriga could even hear a loud crash in the main hall, prompting the guards to respond as soon as they could.

The butler, too, came out from his accommodation, wondering what all the fuss was about until he saw one of the cleaners coated entirely in soap, laughing it off with his fellow cleaners. With the guards standing around on high alert, the butler did not care too much any longer, deciding to retreat back to his abode once more to finish his half-drunk flask, his body becoming slightly lethargic.

Huriga held his breath; his ears perked for any approaching guards. When he was convinced no one was coming, he slowly lowered the circular plate, a perfect cutout of the ceiling and, subsequently, the floor of the room above. Carefully climbing down the ladder and placing the cutout on the ground, he clambered up again, this time reaching through the hole and pulling himself upwards.

The room above was pristine and immaculate, and the carpet was perfectly clean with no signs of tampering at all. Huriga cautiously observed every single facet of the office, the memory ingrained into his brain for when he needed to set everything back where it belonged. However, his attention was suddenly distracted by the near priceless relics that were mounted on stands within a golden display cabinet, his mouth instinctively drooling. *Jackpot!*

He hurriedly lifted himself out of the hole, tiptoeing across the room towards the glass cabinet, keeping an eye out for any potential traps. As he reached the cabinet, he noticed a taut red wire strapping the glass cover down, the red wire leading somewhere unknown. Huriga knew if he snapped it, it could lead to something bad.

Instead of trying to avoid it, Huriga cracked his knuckles and took out a flat knife. Keeping a tight grip on the wire with one hand, he placed the knife on the surface of the glass cabinet before grabbing the other side of the red wire. He rubbed the center of the wire against the edge of the knife, slowly fraying it before it snapped. Just as it snapped, Huriga pulled hard as well, ensuring that the red wire stayed taut.

The entire cabinet jerked a little, the red wire seemingly connected to a trap door in the wall. Huriga carefully put both ends of the broken wire in his left hand while using his right to rummage through his pockets for a vial of horse glue, sticking the ends of the wire to the nearby wall and making sure it stayed taut. With the trap diffused, he carefully lifted the glass cabinet, the treasure right in front of his fingers.

He shoveled every relic of worth from the cabinet into a small sack, stuffing it full till it was bulging at the seams. As soon as he was done ransacking the entire cabinet, he quietly dropped the sack down the hole onto the ladder, himself clambering down as fast as he could, only to hear shouting from guards outside. “Someone triggered the pressure plates in the main office!”

*What?!* Huriga didn’t recall his client telling him anything about pressure plates. *Shit, it was a trap!* His mind raced, trying to come up with an alternative plan as he stuffed the sack in the cart. His two cleaners barged into the room, one of them still covered in a few soap bubbles. “Bossman, they are coming here, fast! We need to hide!”

“Fuck, there’s no time to hide!” Huriga cracked open the other cleaning supplies, revealing dismantled rifles that had been smuggled in, too. “We’ll be caught eventually - we have to break out!”

The two cleaners hurriedly grabbed the parts from the cleaning supplies, assembling the rifle hastily. “What about the others?”

“Screw them, we’ll use them as bait to buy time! There’s a backdoor we can get out from, come on!” Huriga hurriedly left the hallway, instead spotting two armored guards already charging down the hallway towards them.

“Dammit! Quick, out the window!” Huriga reversed his course, rushing back into the library and smashing his way out through the window, the glass shards shattering and attracting all of the guard’s attention.

The trio sprinted through the lawn, ignoring the calls to stop, and the pellets shot at them, running as hard as they could.

Inside the main hall, the other cleaners were stunned by what happened. They had been part of the operation, too, but were clearly left behind. Immediately, they began to scramble, trying to get out of the way. Some cracked open other smuggled weapons in a separate cart of cleaning supplies, using the rifles to fight back and hole themselves up in the rooms as the guards tried to force down the barricades. The butler stumbled out of his room, clearly drunk and intoxicated by the laced wine, staggering on his feet as he grabbed the nearest armored guard. “What’s going on?!”

“The cleaners stole Harrison’s collection!”

“WHAT?! Then what are you still doing here?”

“But their accomplices are here in these rooms!”

“Do they have the collection?”

“No, sir, the thieves with the collection are running towards the complex now.”

“THEN WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR? SEND EVERYONE TO GET THEM!”

In the midst of all the chaos, no one noticed where the new girl had disappeared. With the guards chasing the escaping thieves and trying to pacify the remaining cleaners, she easily slinked her way towards the library, her movement suddenly as swift as a bird before she leaped upwards into the cutout hole in the ceiling, finding herself in Harrison’s office.

The empty golden display cabinet hardly bothered her - instead she headed straight for Harrison’s office table, where a stack full of documents were piled up. She filtered through the stack of paper, trying to find any critical information before holding her hand up to her neck, activating an engraving. [Sir, are you in range?]

[I am. Read out the documents to me.] Kyle’s voice entered her brain directly. [Don’t move the documents too much; we want all the blame to be pinned on the others.] Sasha was the perfect candidate because none of the documents would have been shifted, and it was as if Kyle himself was there. However, Kyle was naturally not going to endanger himself. Furthermore, if Sasha were to be caught, she would be unable to leak any secrets due to her being mute.

Sasha nodded and began reading all the information. Some of the blueprints were far beyond her understanding, but she methodically read each one of them out to Kyle. Many were letters of correspondence by Harrison to other dignitaries and company personnel, but surely enough, Kyle began to get a better picture of what Harrison was aiming for. [Sir, there’s a letter from Count Leon to Harrison.]

[What does it say?]

[It says Count Leon will be attending the Grand Exhibition with a gift.]

[A gift…Are the Barons attending as well?]

[No. However, the Count of Kregol and the Count of Perlis have rejected the invitation.]

[Good information. Keep on searching. I need to know what else Harrison is planning to do in the Grand Exhibition.]

Most of the other documents were basic designs and scribbles of mathematical formula, something Sasha could hardly read out properly. Soon, she came across an interesting document. [Project Aurtla and Project Guryi are the main two showcases of the Grand Exhibition.]

[What?]

Sasha squinted her eyes, her brain reeling at the complexity of the blueprint. [There’s no description for Project Aurtla, except it looks a little like a… tree? A tree with two solid, thick branches sticking out, but the branches have no leaves. It’s quite strange. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything like this.]

[A tree with two branches… what about Project Guryi?]

[Project Guryi… says here that it will rival the heavens with a full suit of armor. I’m seeing drawings that look just like the armored arm of the Nest hitman that killed Gunther. ]

Kyle immediately fell into a silence. *This Harrison… he’s planning to unveil a full exosuit?* He assumed that the exosuit would not be a Galactic Era one, but one that had been remodeled to function off Arcia instead, just like it had been for the prototype exosuit arm. Still, being able to construct the armour in its entirety was no small feat - Kyle needed to grab that information. [Where is the suit now?]

[Not stated here, I could-] Sasha swiveled her head towards the sound of approaching footsteps, getting closer and closer to the office. [Sir, I’m about to be compromised. Do I keep reading? ]

[No. Hide now and return when you’re ready. You’ve done enough.]

She quickly slid back down the cutout hole, descending to the first floor of the library before dashing out of the room. With the guards still completely preoccupied with other cleaners fighting back, she could easily sneak out the back of the mansion and into an unguarded gardener’s shed, where she crouched and waited patiently for nightfall before planning her escape.

At the far side of the complex, Kyle and Yona sat at a bench facing the road, watching wagons and pedestrians walk past. “Judging from your expression, I assumed the plan worked. It was easy enough to drop an anonymous contract for Huriga to snatch up as long as he had the information. He wouldn’t even think twice about who he’s stealing from as long as it makes him rich.” Yona smiled to herself, though she never made eye contact with Kyle. She had been the one to put up the contract deal and get Sasha to join Huriga, further emboldening him with information on the complex details.

“Not until Sasha gets out,” Kyle muttered. “However I will admit your plan got me far more information than expected. This Grand Exhibition is going to be *very* interesting.”

# Chapter 112 - Preparations

*Two days later…*

Wez panted as beads of sweat trickled down his forehead, his grimy hands shaking violently as he struggled to lift up the handles of the wheelbarrow in front of him, its content loaded with chopped wood. He could feel the coarse surface of the handle slip past his blistered, callous hands, the sharp edges tearing through his palm in a gash and unveiling old wounds earned over the last month.

“Hey, whats the hold up?!” A Nest guard shouted over the crashing gnashing sounds of large metal presses flattening freshly smelted steel out from a blackened furnace, rivers of slag coursing and hardening through a depressed trough while slaves like Wez use their tools and bare hands to pry apart the slag.

Wez swiveled his head quickly, noticing the long, tired queue of other slaves waiting for their turn, the vertical elevator in front of him already descending with a creaking sound, heralding the next batch of wood to be fed into the never-ending furnace. He watched in horror as the Nest guard stormed up to him, metallic boots clicking against the soot-covered floor of the sweatshop. “Sorry, sir, I-”

“Get this cart moving now!” The guard roared right into Wez’s ears, deafening him. “If you don’t want to work, I’ll give your meal to someone else!”

“No, sir, sorry, I’ll do it now!” Wez summoned whatever strength he had left of his malnourished body, his once taut skin now dangling by his biceps as he knelt down and gritted his teeth to lift the cart by his shoulders, swapping over to his hands once the weight had been balanced on the rickety wooden wheel beneath.

“Anyone else trying to slack under my watch will get their next two meals docked! Plenty of others hungry for your position!” The guard scolded the rest of the slaves, all of whom kept their gaze low, unwilling to incite any beatings or thrashings. Wez himself hurried along the path, pushing the cart along a designated route that ran along the conveyor belt, steel bars, and beams passing him by in a blur as his eyes focused ahead, though his mind was already on the verge of breaking.

*I deserve this…* Wez was a far cry from the haughty villager he was, regret welling in his heart for ditching the other villagers. He did not know that the foremen in the refugee camps of Ocra were actually slave traders, providing Nest with free labor to sell goods and production capacity to Harrison. The sweatshop was right beneath the military-industrial complex, though Wez doubted that any of the engineers and technicians above knew what was happening down here.

As Wez continued, he noticed there were significantly more guards than usual, while the slaves he passed were emotionless, their eyes staring into the distance. They operated billows, used arcia etching to reinforce steel armor plates meant for the frontlines, and operated heavy machinery to sand the edges down, all moving like clockwork on a never-ending schedule. Wez’s mood was equally at rock bottom, feeling as if this was penance for him leaving Lisa behind. *If this could happen to me, then the villagers in the refugee camp, they…*

He shook the thought out of his head instinctively, unwilling to consider what happened to the villagers. For all he knew, they could have been equally enslaved and raped, the children forced into dangerous work just like he saw in the sweatshop here. The slaves came from all over Versia, some even from places he had never even heard of. Not that anyone was willing nor had the energy to talk about the good old times without breaking out into tears.

As Wez’s mind drifted, he failed to notice an uneven shallow ditch in the ground, the rickety wooden wheel falling in and causing the entire cart to topple onto its side. Even Wez was caught off-guard, his own body stumbling over face first and hitting the cart, injuring him. The resulting scatter of chopped wooden blocks alerted a nearby Nest guard while the slaves around all averted their gaze.

“YOU! What the fuck?” The Nest guard hollered, charging right toward him with an iron stick and immediately hitting the injured Wez right on the head. The impact temporarily disorientated Wez as he staggered onto all fours on the ground, using his hands to try and block the incoming strikes. The Nest guard’s subsequent words were unintelligible to Wez as he was hit over and over again, blood from his skull coating his ears and vision, the world blurry in both sight and hearing. He cowered as each strike from the iron stick sent a jolting pain through his nerves, his body and limbs twitching while the guard rained blow after blow on him.

“You there, pick up all the fallen blocks and cart them off! Furnace #4 needs it right now!” The guard jabbed violently at another slave working the billows. The slave did not argue, immediately rushing to the fallen blocks and collecting them, ignoring the bleeding, groaning Wez on the floor.

Wez could feel his life ebb away, the pain from the wounds slowly becoming unregistered in his mind, as though they were never painful to begin with. *Lisa… Culo… Jakub… I…* He was about to give up the ghost when he realized that Lisa must still be in the refugee camp. *No, I have to make it up to them… I have to get out of here, I have to help them! I can’t die just yet!*

The guard swung the iron stick down once more, but this time, Wez caught it with his bare right hand, ignoring the shocking sting of the metal biting into his flesh, digging into the gash he had already gotten from the cart. The astonished guard was taken aback as Wez rose to his full height, towering over the guard, face covered in blood and arms red from the beatings, a fury unlike never before in his eyes despite his deteriorating muscles.

Without a word, Wez let out a battle roar, grabbing the jaw of the Nest guard with his other hand and squeezing with all his might, his iron grip from decades of woodcutting in the village coming to bear on the guard’s chin. The guard mumbled incoherently, his voice muffled by the gritty soot-covered palm of Wez, a sickening cracking sound heard as Wez crushed the guard’s jaw as hard as he could.

The other slave that was collecting the wooden block widened his eyes in shock as he watched Wez collapse the guard’s jaw inwards. Blood and meat interspersed with teeth fell out of the guard’s mutilated mouth with a plop onto the ground, the guard keeling over and letting out a horrible scream in pain. The scream echoed over the raging furnaces and din of metalworking, the slaves nearby all stunned by the sudden change in schedule.

“I’m mad as hell, and I’m not going to take this anymore!” Wez slammed his knee into the guard’s face, sending him sprawling. His life was now running on pure adrenaline, the blood thumping in his ears as his mind went into overdrive, looking for a way out. Unfortunately, the scream also attracted the attention of three Nest guards, who rushed over only to find the barrel of a handgun aimed right at them, wielded by the other slave who had taken the opportunity to grab the injured guard’s equipment. Before any of the three could react, the slave fired everything he had, five pellets shrieking out through the air.

The pellets slammed into the guards, one killed instantly with his head pierced, the others maimed and injured as they scrambled out of the way, ducking and hiding behind machinery and other slaves at their workstations. The other slaves were equally panicking, wondering what to do next. Wez could see the hesitation in his eyes - but he did not need their help to choose what to do next.

With a battle cry, he charged forward with the iron stick gripped in his injured right hand, aiming for the nearest Nest guard. But before he could complete his third stride, a deafening explosion resounded through the sweatshop factory, echoes of metal crashing and superheated water bursting out in a thunderous rage across the walls and ceiling. Wez turned around to see a blinding light, one of the furnace’s walls having been blasted apart by unknown forces with billowing smoke threatening to engulf the entire underground cavern, the light from mounted arctech lanterns already blanketed out by the growing wave of dust and dirt surging towards them.

Wez hurriedly shielded his eyes as the shockwave of air and gusts of smoke buffeted him, nearly toppling over as he felt the drying blood on his skin flicker off from the sheer force. The other slaves shouted and screamed as they took cover as well, crouching and hiding behind machinery as towering metal frames began to waver unsteadily while sounds of gunfire and fighting erupted in the distance.

“It’s a raid! It’s a raid! The Ghosts of Versia are here!” Rumors and cries carried over the air, reaching Wez and the slaves. Wez’s heart surged with confidence, knowing that even if it was a hoax, it may be enough to galvanize the other slaves to action. Without hesitating any further, Wez charged towards the nearest disorientated Nest guard, slamming the tip of the iron stick right into his neck before forcibly twisting it off, the entire left side of the guard’s neck left gushing with blood as he collapsed.

“FREEDOM!” Wez roared out through the smoke, his voice carrying over the unorganized screams and shouts. “FREEDOM!”

Some of the slaves blinked, their eyes filling with recognition as they began to attack their nearest Nest guards, using anything and everything they could find on hand. Arcia etchers, drill bits, and even ladders were utilized to fight against the guards, resulting in multiple gruesome deaths on both sides. The Nest guards were even more disorganized, one of the leaders trying to activate his arctech radio as he huddled behind a pillar: “Reporting, Sweatshop at Section 46B is under attack! The Ghosts are here!”

Instead of receiving a reply, there was nothing but static. The leader frantically tried to dial and tune the radio to another channel but found only blaring static on the radios. “What’s going on? I don’t understand!” Yet the leader soon found himself surrounded by slaves who had found his hiding location, Wez stepping forward with an iron stick in tow, blood dripping off its length.

“Don’t you try anything!” The leader warned, slowly reaching behind his back to grab a holstered handgun. “We’re all working for the glory of Versia! Your labor is important to the country - don’t you know that Raktor is about to attack us? Think about what you are doing!”

“I know what we’re doing - we’re being exploited!” One of the more uncouth slaves spat at the leader, but the leader had a grin on his face, already ready to pull out the handgun, when he suddenly felt an iron grip clasping his wrist from behind, arm locking him. A sharp kick to the back of his knee had him topple over, pinned down onto the ground while Wez stood in disbelief.

“Lisa…?” Wez mumbled as the throng of slaves rushed forward, wanting to take their chance to beat up the source of their pain for months, some even having been here for years. Yet Lisa used her free hand to pull out a rifle, aiming at the slaves gathering around and forcing them back.

“We need him alive for our revenge! Anyone who tries to kill him will be shot on sigh- Wez?” Lisa, too, was taken aback at the sight of the bloodied Wez. However, the sight of Lisa still alive and doing well caused Wez’s adrenaline to plummet significantly, Wez finally noticing that he had a pellet wound in his stomach, the blood staining his meager slave clothing.

As he collapsed onto both knees, he saw Lisa rush up to him while two other armed Ghosts captured the leader. Lisa hurriedly popped a health potion vial, pouring it right over Wez’s wounds, but there was too much blood loss for Wez to stay conscious any longer, his eyes struggling to stay open. Before Wez’s vision faded, he could only see but not hear Lisa frantically shouting into an arctech radio mounted onto her shoulder.

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Wez’s eyes shot open with vigor, and he immediately tried to sit up, only to feel a terrible headache and a sharp, painful sting emerging from his guts. He found himself in a different room, a smaller underground room, though it was filled with the groans and moans of other injured slaves as well, all being treated by unknown strangers. He felt a thin fabric beneath his back, a bed with minimal cushioning, though far better than the hard floor he had been sleeping on in the sweatshop.

He tried again to move his arm, but he felt a gentle hand push him down, the owner of the hand sitting next to his bed and feeding him another health potion vial which soothed his aching head. “Don’t move, Wez. You’re too injured for a single potion to heal in a day.”

“Lisa…” Wez croaked, his voice dry as he gazed upon the familiar face of Lisa, though from her expression, it was clear that a lot had changed since their last meeting in the refugee camp. “I… I’m sorry…” He averted his gaze, unable to look Lisa right in the eyes.

“I heard what you did today. There’s nothing to be sorry about. Glad to see you’re still willing to stand up and fight.” Lisa smiled, patting Wez on the shoulder. “How did you end up there?”

“The foremen… he sold me at a dock in the tunnels…” Wez’s voice trailed off, his mind struggling to recoil from the horrible beatings and punishment he endured at the start. “I tried to escape, but…”

“It’s okay, it’s okay. You’re safe now.” Lisa comforted him, her head swiveling around. “I’m going to go tell Culo that we saved you.”

Wez nodded weakly, watching the confident Lisa move through the medical room, her posture and demeanor more decisive than ever. *She used to be a clueless girl, only in charge because of her father.* He was more surprised when he noticed others calling her for advice and orders, clearly in the leadership position. *What happened here?*

Within a few hours, Wez recovered slowly, being fed health potions and stamina potions on a regular basis. He had raised clear objections against getting such potions, knowing that it was a luxury and an expensive one to have an Alchemist brew. Yet Lisa ignored him, only eventually bringing him out into the central chamber to show him around when he was well enough to walk.

The sight was astounding, with dozens of Ghosts and other logistic workers all moving, planning, and working in a central main chamber hall. Rations, potions, armor, and weapons were carted non-stop to and fro, new shipments being carried in on large sacks. Even children pulled their weight, taking care of other still injured slaves as well as fixing up torn clothing and sewing new bedding for the Ghosts. Wez could only stare in amazement at the tall stacks of potion crates, the potions numbering in the thousands while shelves were stocked with sealed water flasks, enough to flood a forest if they wanted to. “What in the Goddess’s name is happening here? Are you preparing for the end of the world?!” Wez exclaimed to Lisa.

“This? This is just one of our bases. There’s four more like this across this layer.” Lisa grinned with clear pride, having built up over the last few weeks. Fresh recruits from rescued slaves were familiarizing themselves with the Aspis MK2 repeater and poor arcia crystals, the training led by Feldon and a few other veteran Ghosts. In another training hall, they passed by, Sasha was drilling basic hand combat skills into the trained Ghosts, demonstrating by spars.

Deeper along the hallway was a row of arcia etching stations in yet another chamber. While it was not as massive as Wez’s sweatshop, there was enough for a motley crew of a dozen arcia etchers to fix up any damaged engravings. Other chambers connected to the central chamber each had a designated role - administration, operations planning, ration and supply packing, and an engine room to power the lights and other machinery in the base. As Wez and Lisa walked past a room, he noticed a fearsome man step out from a doorway, his height slightly above Wez and with the air of a domineering leader. Wez could already feel an unknown pressure, intuitively knowing that he should never cross this man.

“Lisa. Any issues with the jammer?” Kyle spoke with gravitas, each word measured and straight to the point, his eyes stern.

“No, sir. Worked perfectly.” Lisa gave a slight salute, almost prompting Wez to salute as well out of a desire to fit in.

Kyle glanced at Wez, but summarily ignored him as unimportant. “Good. I trust there’s no issue with our radios then?”

“Yes, no interference at all.”

“Perfect. And this is…?” Kyle turned his attention to Wez.

“My old childhood friend. He’ll be an asset for us - a great fighter.”

“Understood. I’ll leave the training to you.” Kyle walked past the two of them, and Lisa saluted again even though Kyle had not turned around.

“Who was that?” Wez whispered hastily to Lisa. “He doesn’t look like a Versian.”

“He is the only reason why I am able to rescue you today and be in such a position.” Lisa glowered with pride. “That man will be the savior of Versia - whether or not he’s at the front or at the rear. And it doesn’t matter if he’s Versian or not. Anyone willing to fight against the Versian state is someone I can work with.”

“You…” Wez’s eyes widened with realization. “You’re the Ghosts of Versia! How did-”

“We can reminisce about history later.” Lisa brushed off Wez’s question, leading him to another room where other healed slaves were gathered, all of them able-bodied men and women, some as young as 15. “I need your help to fight. To fight as a Ghost against those who enslaved you. Are you in? Or are you going to run away like before?”

Wez didn’t even think twice, accepting Lisa’s offer in a heartbeat with a firm handshake. “I won’t let you down again. I won’t let anyone down anymore.”

Lisa smiled, reaching out to give Wez a tight hug. “I forgive you. Now don’t die on me, and we’ll get to go back to our village in due time.”

Wez nodded, joining the group of fresh recruits. Not all who were rescued wanted to join, and thus, his group was clearly composed of strong motivation, grit, and desire. He could tell that some wanted revenge, others wanted to fight for justice, and others simply wanted to have the strength to stand up for themselves. For him, he saw this as redemption.

Over the next week, the training was grueling. They cycled and rotated through various regimens: weapon training course, physical combat, and mapping. They were barely allowed to sleep, though they were not as fatigued as they should have been, thanks to the non-stop usage of stamina potions that kept them going. The crash course was brutal and unforgiving, with some of the recruits unable to handle the mental strain and instead falling out to work as an etcher, scout, or supplier. Though their group started at two dozen, they were filtered down to just five by the end of the crash course.

Wez knuckled down, braving anything the Ghosts threw at them. Nothing the course did was worse than what he had experienced at the hands of the Nest guards, the beatings, whippings, and scars fresh on his skin and mind. He followed every instruction to the letter, the strenuous schedule forging him and honing him into a new Ghost. However, the training was only just that: training. In order for the fresh recruits to be accepted, they needed to be drilled in live combat.

At the end of the training week, Wez relaxed in a changing room, leaning against the wall as he sat on a thin bench, his other squad mates resting too and checking their gear. “They should just let us have a go at some of the captured Nest prisoners. Let us fight them one on one.” One of the fresh recruits that he had bonded with over the week-long training course spoke while dismantling his Aspis MK2 repeater, cleaning its parts and assembling it over and over again, drilling the motion into his head.

“Feldon said they are too weak for us.” Another replied as he polished his armor plate, checking the engravings for any bad grooves or dirt stuck. “Supposedly they got something better for us to fight.”

“What, rats? I’ve already killed three skulking around the base. Actual rats, not those Nest rats.” Yet another recruit joked, earning a wave of laughter through the changing room that was interrupted by Lisa stepping through the doorway.

“Gear up. Your squad is moving out of the base as soon as possible. Full weapons and supplies. Gas masks, too. Geraldine will be your lead.” Lisa gave the order with a matter-of-fact tone before leaving. Wez didn’t hesitate, scrambling to his locker like the others and putting on his gear, his muscle memory checking each and every facet of the loadout. He slotted a thick armor plate into a woven fabric vest, masking it and then slinging the repeater’s sling over his shoulder, donning a simple helmet, and moving out.

As soon as all of them were organized in the changing room, the veteran Ghost Geraldine came and led them towards the very end of the hallway, past barricade, barbed wires, and defensive repeaters mounted and connecting to pulsating arcia fuel packs. Most of the recruits’ minds were already bursting at the seams with questions about where they were going, but their training had them drilled into the hierarchy, keeping their mouths shut.

Wez found himself descending a cramped tunnel leading into a large rectangular corridor that was already well-lit. As Geraldine had them march down the corridor, he noticed other logistic workers carting wheelbarrows filled with poor arcia crystals, stuffed into sacks that were subsequently hauled up to the main base itself. *Where the hell are we going?*

His answer came soon enough as soon as they reached the end with Geraldine waving her hand outwards. “Welcome to the Rotten Cave. This is where we collect all of your poor arcia crystals that you use in the Aspis MK2 Repeater.”

The recruits stared in shock at the towering pillars of trash, the smell already causing some of them to gag. One of the recruits could not handle it, vomiting a little in her mouth underneath her gas mask. In the distance, there were sounds of fighting, and other squads of Ghosts were also doing their own apparent training.

“You’ll be killing rock spiders - quota is 100 crystals for the whole squad before you are allowed to return. I’ll be assisting only if your life is in danger.” Geraldine warned them. “And I can only react so fast.”

The recruits nodded, the squad gingerly stepping through the new environment. Some places already had poles with mounted arctech lanterns providing bright light on top of the already bioluminescent fungi and flora scattered around the area. Wez looked at another returning squad, their armor and gas masks coated in black icky goo from head to toe, while one of them had a gaping hole in their legs.

Within minutes, Wez’s squad was thrown into the fray, delving deeper into the cave to find a horde of rock spiders numbering in the dozens charging at them. Their training kicked in, though some of them flustered a little. Yet, thanks to the firepower of the repeater, they were able to easily tear through the rock spider armors without breaking a sweat. The original fear had begun to dissipate, and Wez, too, found newfound confidence in dealing with the rock spider over an hour.

However, suddenly, a tremor rumbled through the cave, originating from the far horizon beyond where the Ghosts have explored, the darkness enveloping the view ahead with no mounted arctech lantern poles. Wez squinted his eyes, seeing a large shadow rushing towards them, smacking its way through piles of trash and refuse. Behind the squad, Geraldine’s face paled beneath her gas mask, frantically shouting to the squad. “It’s a noxious salamander! Quick, retreat!”

The squad had never trained for this, and they began to panic, some rooted to their feet. Wez began to run, but noticed one of the recruits standing still, frozen in fear while the maw of the salamander slowly came into view, illuminated by the glow around as it lunged towards the stunned recruit. Wez himself charged forward, tackling the recruit out of the way as the salamander’s maw crashed into the ground, only gulping mud.

As the salamander’s beady eyes turned to face Wez and his squadmate still struggling to get up from the sludge, Geraldine quickly ordered the squad to open fire, the barrage distracting the salamander briefly. The gap allowed Wez to pull his squadmate up to his feet, the two escaping while the salamander recoiled from the withering fire.

However, the Aspis MK2 repeater could only fire so long. Within a minute, the canisters went dry, Geraldine picking up the rear as the squad beat a hasty retreat. Geraldine frantically spoke into an arctech radio. “Contact! Contact with salamander!”

As soon she had said the words, a sonic boom erupted through the cave, a single projectile tearing through pillars of trash and hitting the salamander right on its snout. Instead of it deflecting, the projectile ripped into the flesh easily, lodging itself right in the very center of its head before its skin began to bulge erratically, a dull muffled explosion inside that caused bodily fluids to burst out of its orifices.

The sonic boom frightened the squad, even causing Geraldine to take cover, unsure of what had just hit them until Kyle’s smooth voice came in over the radio. [Hit confirmed, Sasha. Salamander eliminated. Proceed with resupply and resume training.]

Geraldine stared in shock at the dying salamander before looking up to see Kyle perched on the top of a pile of trash, observing them quietly. He was apparently giving orders to Sasha, who wielded a long pole of sorts embedded with basic arcia crystals, which could be loaded with a strange pellet that Geraldine had never seen before. “Y-yes, sir!” She scampered to her feet, hastily urging the squad to go back to the start.

Kyle didn’t pay the retreating squad any mind, focusing on his own practice. “Looks like the improved railgun should be enough to pop a human head.”

[Sir, I think it’ll do more than that. This railgun could destroy anything.] Sasha replied telepathically.

“I doubt that.” Though Kyle had clearly improved the railgun beyond its former strength, he somehow felt that Harrison would have something up his sleeve for certain. “How’s the handling?”

[Hard. The recoil is immense. I doubt any other Ghost would be able to handle this gun.]

“Then we don’t have a choice. You’ll be the designated sniper for the exhibition.”

After they had completed their practice run, Kyle and Sasha returned to the base. With only a week left to the exhibition, Kyle had been working day and night to improve his chances of stealing the exosuit. The Ghosts of Versia now numbered two hundred in total, forming an effective rebel strike group that could raise havoc anywhere he wanted. Originally, he wanted to attack Harrison at the Grand Exhibition, but it was a risky maneuver, especially when there were inklings of an exosuit being brought up. Despite Sasha’s infiltration, Yona’s understanding, and the training of the Ghosts, it was not enough information for Kyle to truly ascertain the level of defense and firepower that he was dealing with. He could not determine if Harrison had perfected the arcia exosuit or not, making it a blind attack at best. *Until I steal the exosuit and use it to make my own, I cannot guarantee a complete win.*

If he brutishly launched an attack, Nest and the military would be sure to come charging down to kill them in full force. Kyle wondered whether it would be worth it but eventually decided not to. “Our main objective is to steal any technological innovations Harrison has on display - nothing more. Despite our progress in developing the rebel movement, it would be foolhardy to fight a civil war now.” Kyle explained his revised plan to the others, holding a meeting in the operations room.

“So just a simple in-and-out, fast and quick. Are you sure, though?” Yona warned. “This could be your last chance to see Harrison - when the war begins, he might be holed up in a bunker somewhere even I don’t know.”

“The start of the war will lessen the pressure we face and also allow us to continue building our strength,” Kyle replied.

“I agree. Two hundred fighters is hardly enough to occupy even just the Versian parliament if we wanted to. The guards in there alone already number two hundred - it’s too risky to try anything now. We’ll just have to find Harrison later in the chaos of the war. Eventually, he would slip up.” Dekar nodded.

“We should attack now.” Lisa disagreed vehemently, jabbing at the map of Tenar. “Even if our strike fail, we have plenty of backups and escape routes to make sure the movement survives.” She pointed out the different tunnels that had been scouted out thanks to the clearing of the Rotten Cave. “We can easily evacuate to Desham or Creuliz, depending on which base we’re being attacked from.”

“Once we evacuate, there might be no coming back. This means we would lose everything we’ve built here. It would be impossible to ferry everything of worth out of the bases just on our backs alone.” Feldon countered. “If I were Nest, the moment I find out about the extent of the third layer and fourth layer, I would do everything in my power to clamp down any entrances or exits, maybe even collapse them! If we leave to Desham, we will lose access to Tenar, which is the seat of power.”

“The plan is final. Next week, the Ghosts of Versia will infiltrate the Grand Exhibition and steal everything of worth. Our main target is Project Aurtla and Project Guryi, which are reported to be displayed in these two buildings. Under no circumstances can we reveal that it is the Ghosts who stole it. Yona will put out a few more anonymous contracts for such a heist to mask our movements.” Kyle concluded. “Sasha will be working as oversight with the new railgun in case we are compromised. All Ghosts will be positioned at their designated location, ready to strike in any scenario. Understood?”

The rest of the leaders nodded in unison, though Lisa still had a question, raising her hand. “Sir, if Sasha is acting as oversight, who is actually stealing the Projects?”

“Me.”

# Chapter 113 - Grand Exhibition (1)

A booming crescendo of fireworks, confetti, and music blasted through the air, showering the attendees of the Grand Exhibition in dazzling colors and displays under the clear blue sky. The streets of Tenar were filled with joy, school children running up to the entrance with anticipation, and Versians from all over the nation gathering in one single spot to partake in the festivities.

The entire main street leading up to the central square beneath the statue of President Johan had been cordoned off, its sidewalks now repurposed to feature pop-up stalls and carts of all kinds, selling mysterious candy, sweets, and delicacies from far beyond. Sellers and performers alike called out to the bustling crowd, attracting attention to their acts and wares.

“Rock candy, salted straight from the Mines of Tryas! Even the Emperor couldn’t help letting everyone try it out!”

“The dazzling Miss Shark hailing from the Fifth Island of Proco - half lady, half shark, all violence!”

“Behold, the three-horned ram of Ulut! Its dazzling rainbow wool puts other animals to shame, able to fan it out to attract other males through perilous dances on the tip tops of the mountain ranges! It is famed for its tenacity through harsh weather conditions, as well as an uncanny ability to mimic human words when you say his name!” A circus performer regaled his audience with colorful descriptions of the various oddities from around Versia held behind cages., prompting a kid to walk up and participate. “Go on, say his name!”

“Uhm…” The kid looked around confusedly, the apple candy already melting in his hand, about to drip onto his checkered sleeves. “I don’t know his name.”

“It’s right here, on his collar.” The performer pointed out a tag on the Ulut ram, who was cheerfully gnawing away on a trough of blue leaves, its eyes staring blankly ahead at the audience gathered around.

“Oh! Oink Oink!” The kid laughed. “That’s a funny name.”

“Oink yourself, dumb twat.” The ram blurted out in the tone of a gnarly farmer with a sneer on its face, belaying its intelligence, before its expression returned to a vacant look just as before. The crowd rolled in laughter, the kid still stunned by the sudden outburst before he began to sniffle, running back to his parents.

Elsewhere on the streets, merchants tried to show off mysterious wares with tall properties while explorer groups laid out relics discovered from the depths of Versia, some even showing off their amazing abilities to an amazed crowd. “This relic right here is the pinnacle of our haul in our decades of ruin-diving. Behold an object so magnificent and dazzling that when one peers into it, it’s as though you can see the stars beyond the veil, beyond this mundane reality! Give it a shot yourself, free of charge!” One old explorer waggled a tube-like object with a lens attached to it. “Do be careful - whatever you look at might feel a little tingle of sorts.”

Some of the more adventurous men stepped up, grabbing the tube from the old explorer and looking around, their jaws dropping in its amazement. “My goodness… this… this is like peering through walls! I can see beyond!” The first user exclaimed with shock, aiming the tube at the crowd. “I can see so much… it’s like a brand new world!” The lens of the tube aimed right at a few of the ladies in the crowd, all of whom could suddenly feel an unknown heat erupting all over their skin, as if they were being irradiated by an unknown source stemming from men who were clearly grinning from ear to ear.

Festival games, singing, dancing, and performances all distracted each and every attendee, and the entrance to the Grand Exhibition was completely free of charge. All Versians of any age and origin could attend, with a significant crowd already gathering in the central square, enjoying the various amenities and delicacies around. Beyond the central square laid the steps that led up to a repurposed justice court, once used for trialing errant nobles after the war, now converted by the government into a museum and subsequently used for the Grand Exhibition as a banquet hall.

Inside the banquet hall, whose doors were still closed, servants and waiters alike scrambled around frantically, preparing tables and chairs and decorating pillars to welcome the approaching dignitaries. The colors of Versia and its coat of arms were displayed prominently, and the banners and other flags propped up along the ceiling and walls made it look grand. Coupled with the intricately brilliant marble tiles and the opulent revolutionary paintings by former revolutionaries spanning the entire ceiling of the converted justice court, it gave a sense of awe and inspiration to any within it.

However, the waiters did not have time to soak in the atmosphere, rushing to and fro to setup the cutlery and silverware for each of the tables, placing placards on some of the circular dining tables situated near a stage which used to be the judge’s seat. Tens of dozens of cutlery sets were arranged methodically and precisely, a few managers walking through and fixing any mistakes the waiters made.

“Don’t any of you dare to drop your damn fucking drinks! I swear to the Goddess, if you stain ANYONE’s suit or dress, I will have you quartered the next day in this very same place and make you clean up your own guts! Are we clear?!” The banquet hall’s manager roared, the waiters nodding back in unison. “Good. Get into position!”

The waiters filtered out to various corners of the halls, standing next to tables and pillars while an honor guard formed at the entrance of the banquet hall, their uniforms decorative in nature, presenting the colors of the revolutionary guard. They all stood still, listening to the din of the crowd and the cheers of the people beyond the closed doors.

Amidst the waiters who stood at attention, one of them was Kyle himself, having disguised his facial features thanks to Haui’s makeup. This time, he did not use the warts or acne one, instead using a lighter one that gave him freckles, as well as making his chin slightly more dirty in nature, just enough to throw anyone who would recognize him off, his hairstyle also changing drastically. His eyes glanced around the hall, mapping the area out while his eyes caught the gaze of a few stationed Nest guards scattered around the hall.*There’s a hundred waiters here, not to mention Nest guards. Let’s not try anything funny here.*

[Announcing the arrival of Acting President Mornero!] A muffled announcer voice spoke from outside, drowned out by the cheers of the countless Versians gathered along the road and the entrance of the banquet hall to see him. Soon, Kyle saw him enter the banquet hall, the honor guard at full attention and saluting him with honor.

It was Kyle’s first time actually seeing Mornero in the flesh. He donned a proper black suit, a neat little pin with the flag of Versia attached to his suit’s pocket, along with a well-folded blue handkerchief tucked in nicely. Though Morneo himself wasn’t very tall, he had a somewhat familiar gait in the way he walked, giving Kyle an uncanny feeling as though he had met him somewhere else before. Most noticeably, his nose gave Kyle a strong sense of deja vu, though Kyle was struggling to find a connection to anything that had happened to him before. *Something isn’t right. I shouldn’t have seen this man before. Why does it feel like I’ve worked with him before? Is he from my former life?*

While Kyle ran through all the possible ex-employees in his former life’s criminal group, he could not figure out anyone who looked like him. When Mornero’s gaze swept the banquet hall, Kyle pointedly averted his eyes, acting like he was focusing on the ceiling, the painting depicting the tumultuous final battle of the revolutionaries taking over the parliament, led by President Johan himself. If Kyle squinted his eyes, he could just barely make out the painted visage of Dekar, his expression locked in a battle cry leading the troops.

Mornero did not leave the banquet hall yet, standing right near the honor guards and preparing to welcome the incoming foreign and local dignitaries himself. Sure enough, one by one, diplomats and representatives from all over the world began to stream in by the dozens, the Grand Exhibition having attracted a lot of attention. Kyle watched as even a city mayor from Creuliz received a personal handshake from Mornero himself. *Interesting. They know how to sell themselves to the people.*

“Hey, what the fuck are you waiting for? You got to start serving drinks!” A manager smacked Kyle in the back, almost prompting Kyle to turn around and twist the manager’s head off. However, he relented, swallowing his pride and moving off without a word, perfectly balancing a tray of champagne glasses in one hand and moving through the banquet hall floor.

Soon, the banquet hall was filled up with nearly five hundred guests. Kyle tracked as many faces as he could, but he could not immediately tell who they were and where they were from. He had their faces recognized bit by bit, knowing that there would come a time when he would need to use them. From the corner of his eye, he silently tracked Mornero and who he talked to, all the while expertly handing glasses and sweets to nearby guests. Each move Kyle took was measured, slowly allowing him to get closer and closer to Mornero.

As Kyle approached, he suddenly noticed a gaze locked onto him from a bodyguard near Mornero. It took three minutes of him playing it cool until the bodyguard finally relented, looking elsewhere. He took the opportunity to glance at the bodyguard once more. Unlike the rest of the Nest guards clearly angling around the president, this one was clad in a full armor suit that left no obvious gaps, the surface a smooth metallic black that gave an eerie sense of speed despite its apparent weight. On the center of his chest plate was the emblem of Nest engraved prominently, while arctech engravings dominated the rest of the armor, the grooves and edges sleek and dangerous.

“Are we sure there won’t be any Ghosts attacking today?” Mornero murmured to that bodyguard during a lull between dignitaries’ arrival, Kyle’s keen hearing able to pick it up even though he was not looking directly at them.

“No, sir, not to our knowledge. Our men have everything under control.” The bodyguard replied in a hushed tone, earning a scoff from a lady nearby, irking him slightly. “Do you have something to say, General Verian?”

“Nothing.” The lady arranged medals of honor on her military uniform, which were countless awards for her acts of valor in the independence war fifteen years ago. Her face bore multiple scars, her gaze unafraid of anyone, not even Acting President Mornero himself. “I just wonder whether Nest is losing its touch. Didn’t you just get another sweatshop attacked?”

“We are not having this discussion here.” Mornero intervened immediately, cutting the conversation short. “I will not have you two bickering - reputation is at stake here. Nox, secure the VIP room once more. General Verian, be nice to our guests. No fighting.”

“Yes, sir.” Kyle peeked from the peripheral of his vision, tracking the bodyguard Nox, who moved towards a luxurious door embedded in the wall, clearly meant for more important visitors. [Sasha, anything happening?]

[Nothing I see yet, sir. No sign of Harrison.]

[Do you have a clear line of sight to the VIP room?]

[Affirmative. I can see all the chairs.] Sasha tweaked the scope of the railgun, perched precariously on the rooftop of an adjacent building nearly three blocks away, her vantage point allowing her a good view of the situation.

[The moment you catch a glimpse of his convoy, I need to know immediately. ] Kyle ended the conversation, focusing his efforts on preparing to infiltrate the VIP room. He knew it would be where he would ascertain the most information, as well as allow him to eavesdrop on Harrison. Just as he was checking out the security that was guarding the VIP’s door entrance, he felt a light tap on his shoulder.

“Could I have that drink you’re carrying?” A familiar voice caused Kyle to jolt in shock, a first since he had ever arrived at Raktor. Instead of turning around fully, he only plucked the glass of wine from the tray he carried, handing it to the person behind him while averting his gaze. *What the fuck is he doing here?! Wasn’t he supposed to be in Kregol?*

“Hey, Sebastian! You got to try this bread, its wicked. It’s blue and everything!” A loud booming voice cheerfully called towards the man behind Kyle, Kyle realizing that both Sebastian and Ares Ulras were attending the Grand Exhibition too. Kyle soon noticed other major gang leaders also attending, all of whom he recognized - he had to if he wanted to know who to avoid or work with. *Bolsh Legion, Veiled Angels, Violet Demons, Tul’e Da’li - everyone is here.* While Kyle felt slightly irked that his Seven Snakes gang was not invited, it was clear that only major gang leaders were invited.

Most of the other delegates kept a clear distance away from the unruly bunch, though Sebastian squinted his eyes in suspicion at Kyle, wondering why the waiter was trying so hard to look away. “You seem familiar… have we met before?” Sebastian queried.

Kyle put on his best alternate accent voice, mimicking a young, frightened boy. “Sorry, sir, I don’t know. I’ll have to leave now.” He hurried away, acting like he had to refill the tray with drinks while Sebastian stared at his back.

[Sasha, you didn’t tell me that the major gangs were here too!]

[Sorry, sir, I was focused only on looking out for Harrison.]

Kyle let out a deep breath, this time making sure to avoid getting close to the major gang leaders in any way. Despite their clearly delineated territories back at Raktor, surprisingly, they were all cordial and friendly with each other, Kyle noticing Sebastian and Ares chatting happily with the other leaders. *Looks like they are working together - but to what end?*

Sasha’s frantic voice suddenly surged into his mind once more. [Sir, I see Harrison’s convoy approaching now, but there’s someone ahead of him.]

[Who?]

[Count Leon is here, with what seems like a prisoner wagon. I am not too sure.]

*It must be the delayed handover of Versian prisoners.* Kyle quickly used the distraction as the dignitaries and guests alike all turned their heads to watch the arrival of Count Leon at the steps of the banquet hall. He noticed Nox had already taken up position next to Mornero near the front, while two Nest guards watched over the door to the VIP room. Acting fast, he hurriedly grabbed a set of silverware from a nearby unoccupied table, rushing over with the tray in hand and looking flustered.

The two Nest guards immediately blocked his path, their rifles aimed at him. “Where the hell do you think you’re going?!”

“Sorry, sirs, I was told by the manager to set up the cutlery!” Kyle explained with a jittery voice.

“Someone else already set up the table, it’s done.” The guard asserted, nudging Kyle back with the rifle.

“There’s been a late addition to the guest list - Sir, please, if the manager finds out I didn’t do my job…” Kyle pleaded, the guard sighing and finally relenting, opening the door for him to reveal a quaint little room, a dining table fit for just five people. However, the moment Kyle entered, he tripped over his own foot, collapsing onto the floor with the cutlery flying all over, the silverware clattering onto the neatly arranged table in a mess.

The sound caused a few guests to turn their heads, and the guard quickly closed the door to prevent anyone else from looking in. “Clean that fucking mess up, quick!” The guard whispered from outside, clearly agitated.

“Y-yes, sir!” Kyle grinned and got to work. He easily rearranged the table back to its original setup, not leaving any hints that it had been tampered with. Sliding his hand into his pockets, he retrieved a modified arctech radio, adhering it with horse glue to the bottom of the table. “Testing, one, two.”

[Loud and clear, sir.]

[Try making a sound back.]

No sound came from the modified arctech radio, altered to only transmit sound that picked up, effectively working like a listening device that would allow Kyle to spy on the conversation. The radio would transmit to Sasha, who would then repeat the words into Kyle’s brain via telepathy. “Good.”

[Announcing the arrival of Count Leon as well as Mr. Harrison!] The same muffled announcer’s voice prompted Kyle to clean up after himself. He quickly grabbed the tray and scampered out of the room, but not before apologizing vehemently to the two Nest guards, who felt a slight bit of pity for him. With his task done, Kyle was planning to leave the banquet hall and ditch his waiter uniform until he caught sight of both Count Leon and Harrison entering together, accompanied by Acting President Mornero.

Count Leon wore the same blue noble colors he had worn when he met Kyle, while Harrison had his own blonde hair combed backward neatly into a ponytail, and instead of wearing a suit, he wore an inventor’s coat, his pockets filled to the brim with eccentricities and other oddities, even featuring a full toolset on a work belt. Kyle didn’t recall Harrison looking like this in the advertisement; his outfit was far more elegant than in the marketing light-thrower images. Here, Harrison portrayed a more homely feel, as if he were just an engineer working for Versia.

Kyle felt something strange from the way the two were acting with one another, especially for two rival powers supposedly on the cusp of war. Count Leon abandoning his military exercise to attend this Grand Exhibition would naturally be seen as a de-escalation of tensions by the general public at large. *What is going on?* Kyle decided to stay for a bit longer, just to see if he could gleam any more information. Once he ditched his waiter role, it would be nearly impossible to re-enter once more.

[And now, I would like to invite Acting President Mornero to give a speech for the opening ceremony of the Grand Exhibition!] A cheerful lady hosted the stage of the banquet hall, and the guests politely applauded while Mornero adjusted his suit and walked up the stage with firm determination. He tapped the microphone behind a podium emblazoned with the emblem of Versia, the echo reverberated even outside where arctech speakers had been linked in sequence, allowing his voice to reach the whole of the Exhibition.

Thanks to the marketing and advertising by Harrison, almost every Versian around the state was listening in on their own radios, even those working in Raktor stopping their jobs to sneak a quick listen in. Back in the Seven Snakes, Keith and the rest of the vipers were also carefully listening in, knowing that this was an important event that would reveal some of the plans at hand.

“My fellow Versians. It has been fifteen years since we declared the independence of Versia. It brings me joy to be able to stand before all of you today to enjoy the fruits of what our forefathers and ancestors have fought tooth and nail for. Today, the day shines its light upon a brand new Versia, full of vitality and strength, ready to herald in a new age.” Mornero spoke with dignity, his voice passionate.

“This Grand Exhibition serves as a candle in a dire time, even when we find ourselves besieged by the realities of life. In an era where men seek to dominate everything they see, Versians throughout the nation, far and near, can stand together in this single event and look at their fears in the eye and say: ‘Not today.’”

“For today is a day of celebration, of dignity, of fortitude. Versia is a democratic republic, its government born by the people, for the people. Our revolution may have succeeded when we first toppled the nobility, but it is still not finished - our society is not yet perfect. There are problems still to solve, and those who seek our ruin lurk about, planning our demise. I am glad that today, only friends of Versia have gathered here to join us in this monumental event. We thank each and every one of our most esteemed guests for participating.”

*Friends of Versia? That’s rich.* Kyle glanced at Count Leon and Harrison, who did not seem to react in any way to Mornero’s speech.

“Each and every Versian has worked hard to bring to fruition this Grand Exhibition, a showcase of the ingenuity and talent that our precious people have to offer. Today, you will witness the grandeur and might of everything the people have in their hands! Versia, forward!” Mornero clenched his fist, shooting it out.

“VERSIA, FORWARD!” The citizens of Tenar chanted back before breaking out into a raucous applause that seemed to encompass the entirety of the city.

“Right now, I would like to invite Harrison, the sponsor of the Grand Exhibition, to say a few words.” Mornero motioned to Harrison, who surprisingly did not take to the stage, but instead began to walk towards the entrance.

Ushers and guards began to have the guests walk out of the banquet hall onto its grand steps, taking a spot along its length to face the large cheering crowd gathered in the central square beneath the towering statue of President Johan. Unconventionally, Harrison had a microphone handed to him, the wireless arctech radio carrying his voice to the speakers effortlessly as he descended the stairs, his arms waving frantically to the crowd which jostled back in response, the front row squashing against a string of Nest guards and barricades to try and touch Harrison.

“My fellow Versian comrades, esteemed guests.” Harrison began, a wide smile on his face. “This Grand Exhibition is to show off what all Versians have achieved, inventions galore. However, what good would be an invention if it were not Grand? Surely it would not fit the name of the event! Yet today I promise that what you see next, will have your eyes widen beyond belief.”

“For centuries, countless attempts by other inventors have tried and failed to reach the heavens. They said we would never be able to reach the same heights where wyverns and dragons rule.” Harrison spoke with a low tone, a rumbling sound erupting in the air above that sounded like a charging train. The guests clearly looked around in panic at the source of the rumbling, and even Sebastian and Ares looked confusedly at the sky from which the sound was coming.

“Look, over there!” Someone in the crowd pointed towards the distance, where five tiny specks of black dots were growing quickly in their field of view. Many were rooted to the spots, while others excitedly bickered about what was happening.

“Behold! The first known controllable artificial flight, fully powered by arcia engravings alone!” Harrison did a bow in front of the guests, as the five specks of black dots expanded into large planes that swerved past in a blur. They zoomed away, splitting up from each other and leaving behind streaks of smoke while the deafening sound blanketed the crowd, the gusts rushing through. Kyle nearly dropped his tray in shock when he heard the familiar sound and saw the planes swoop by; the second time, he had been astonished.

[Sir, that’s the tree drawing I saw! It’s Project Aurtla!] Sasha exclaimed via telepathy.

“While other countries may have already achieved such flight through the use of relic ruins, this is the first native engineering design, fully replicable for mass production!” Harrison announced. “With this in our hand, the skies will be ruled by us, and allow us to dominate any enemy that we may encounter, even a swarm of wyverns if it came down to it!”

Already, the guests were all exclaiming in amazement, while the people were losing their minds over the second flyover as the planes once again zoomed past at a low altitude, threading the needle between buildings and leaving the attendees astonished all over the city. Kyle snapped himself out of his stupor, hurriedly finding a secluded exit to ditch his waiter uniform, revealing a simple civilian outfit beneath as he donned a peaked cap, melding into the crowd easily and heading straight for the designated location of Project Guryi.

Before he left, he glanced at the guests who were returning to the banquet hall, his sight locked on Count Leon. Despite the tremendous display and insinuation by Harrison of the firepower the planes could bring to bear, Count Leon looked happier than ever, as if the planes being introduced were a good thing. On the other side, reporters and journalists swarmed Harrison, trying to get his take on the newly unveiled invention even while he retreated back into the banquet hall. [Sasha, can you hear the VIP room?]

[It’s still working, sir.]

[Good. I want to know every single word that is spoken.]

[On it.]

Kyle weaved and snuck his way past the now riled-up crowd, the enthusiasm and patriotism at an all-time high. *With such an unveiling, it might be even harder to recruit potential rebels now.* With air superiority now being a concern, it felt that the imminent war with Raktor was uncertain. Kyle felt that there was a real chance that Versia could easily win the battle in a first strike, assuming Count Leon had nothing to deal with the planes. *Perhaps that smile is because he has a countermeasure. Point defense engravings?*

[Harrison and Count Leon just entered the room.]

Kyle didn’t react, so he focused on his task ahead. Project Guryi was to be on display in one of the nearby buildings, a converted warehouse that was now filled to the brim with visitors, already examining the various types of industrial machinery placed within glass boxes, preventing anyone from touching them. He filtered in easily, the security letting anyone through.

[Count Leon congratulated Harrison on the planes.]

[I want to hear the exact words.] Kyle glanced from side to side, noting down the clearly heightened level of security. More than three dozen Nest guards were scattered around the warehouse, covering each and every viewing angle. A metal walkway positioned far above allowed them to get a bird’s eye view of the crowd at large, though none of them could spot Kyle in the middle of it all.

He acted nonchalant, as though he was extremely interested in an automatic sewing machine and reading its description placard. Instead, he was listening to Sasha’s recitation of what was going on in the VIP room.

“Perfect display, indeed.” Count Leon praised as he took his seat inside the VIP room, sitting across from Harrison and Mornero.

“Thank you kindly.” Mornero nodded his head in acceptance. “Though, its clear that we should talk about pressing matters than simply exchanging pleasantries.”

“Of course. As previously agreed with your former… Minister Dekar, all Versian prisoners from the Ilysian Punks shall be transferred to you. General Javel has been kept well and alive.” Count Leon leaned back, more confident than ever.

[Sasha, do you have eyes on General Javel?]

[I do, he’s still in the wagon. I can see him through the window grills.]

[Keep an eye on him.] Kyle spoke as he approached the end of the exhibition hall, setting his eyes on the exosuit mentioned. Even though the exosuit had been crafted by Harrison, Kyle could already tell that it was a near masterpiece from his experience as an arcia etcher and his work on the prototype exosuit arm. Each engraving on the luxurious exosuit was exquisite and elegant in nature, as though it was an exosuit befitting of a noble, the edges decorated with ornamental drawings that made it even more exotic.

Most of the visitors stared at it in wonder and amazement, thinking that it was just another arctech knight armor. However, Kyle could see that the exosuit’s spine was the key lynchpin of the entire exosuit’s activation and mobility, far different from how a normal arctech knight armor suit would have operated. He decided to wait before striking, watching carefully for the rotation of guards while still listening to the conversation.

“And you shall retreat your troops from the border of Versia?” Harrison pushed, clasping his hands together while resting his elbows on the table.

“Of course. As soon as you legally transfer everything south of the forest boundary to Raktor.”

“That will have to take a while. We need a bit more time to consolidate our control on the nation.” Harrison fiddled with a sliver fork, twirling it on the table. “But we can indeed sign a contract now, witnessed by a representative from Proco.”

“Indeed we can. I never wanted war, merely a token trophy to show that I still have teeth to screw those nobles in Tryas. I suspect we may have a fruitful business partnership going into the future.” Count Leon grinned with a satisfied expression. “Excuse me for a second, I have to use the washroom for a bit.”

Contrary to the happy atmosphere in the VIP room where Harrison and Monero were sharing a toast while Count Leon was gone, Kyle’s plans were in complete shambles, his mind struggling to come to terms with what Sasha had just relayed to him. [Are you absolutely sure?]

[Yes, sir. They are planning to sign a peace treaty. They are getting the Proco representative to come to the VIP room right now!]

Kyle’s brain raced, calculating all the implications. *If the peace treaty is signed, then everything I have done thus far will have gone to waste. The Aspis Weapons factory will be basically left to rot - I do not have a license to sell it anywhere else if the war does not happen. Furthermore, the Ghosts of Versia will be utterly crushed by Harrison and his men if there is no Count Leon to split his attention. There would be no chance in hell that I could steal control of the economy from under Harrison’s nose without the war.*

The consequences were dire, and everything hinged on this one moment. Without missing a beat, Kyle grabbed the holster of his Oriental Bloom, now modified with a basic arcia crystal embedded in it to enhance its power. [Sasha, blow up the prisoner wagon, and aim for Harrison, but do not kill him!]

With no hesitation, Sasha instantly swiveled the aim of the railgun to the prisoner wagon, pulling the trigger immediately. The projectile shot outwards with a boom, breaking the sound barrier with a rush of air trailing it. It slammed into the front arctech engine, before resulting in a brilliant ball of flame that immediately engulfed General Javel and the other Ilysian Punks in it, leaving them burning in arcia fire, turning them into husks.

Sasha then turned her attention to the VIP room, able to see Harrison’s panicked face through the windows, prompting her to squeeze the trigger once more. The projectile smashed through the window, shattering the glass into a thousand shards while it rushed straight at Harrison. Before the projectile could reach him, a sudden dark blur had Nox accelerate in his heavy armor, his sleek metallic arm shield deflecting the projectile effortlessly and knocking it away, the projectile exploding harmlessly in the air and showering them in dust.

Nox locked eyes on Sasha in the far distance, quickly blurting into his radio. “Someone just tried to assassinate Harrison. Secure all escape routes now - we’re under attack!”

# Chapter 114 - Grand Exhibition (2)

[Sasha, inform the Ghosts that we have been compromised - attack every Nest guard in range!] Kyle urged as he shoved his way through the still stunned and confused crowd of exhibition viewers towards the exosuit, pushing them aside violently and drawing his handgun. The exosuit exhibit was at the very end of the warehouse, displayed prominently on a stage of sort elevated, the box supporting it painted entirely in white to give a sleek modern look.

The alarmed Nest guards were already on high alert, one of them already spotting Kyle bringing his Oriental Bloom handgun to bear on the nearest Nest guard. Kyle didn’t hesitate to pull the trigger, firing a devastating shot that drilled a hole right between the eyes, gouging out the nose bridge and brain matter behind into a sickening splat as the guard’s body collapsed like a ragdoll.

MG404: [System Message | Killed: ‘Nest Guard’ - 10 EXP]

The shot resounded through the warehouse, civilians panicking and scrambling in all directions, trying to find an exit out while the Nest guards began to swarm Kyle, firing at him with no intention of taking him alive. Kyle grabbed the nearest fleeing civilian, using him as a shield against the incoming pellets as he weaved through the frantic crowd. Pellets ripped through the civilian’s flesh, dying instantly from the withering barrage that had him bleeding from multiple wounds, frightening the nearby civilians away even more and causing a stampede.

Ignoring the screaming children and sounds of chaos, Kyle finally made it right up to the front of the exosuit display cabinet. In one swift motion, he ducked and rolled, firing shots that killed each Nest guard with precision, taking out a dozen of them easily before he smashed the cabinet with his own fist, the alarm sensors in the warehouse blaring.

*Now is hardly the time for subtlety.* Kyle already knew that by killing General Javel, the jig was up. He needed to grab the exosuit and run. Reaching out with his hand, he searched for an opening on the exosuit, but instead had to duck and take cover behind the armor suit and the painted stage box itself, intending to use them to protect himself.

Unexpectedly, one of the pellets hit the exosuit from above, the pellet cutting through the armor like butter and nailing Kyle in the left shoulder, the force sending him sprawling onto the ground behind the white stage box in disbelief. He glanced up to see the gaping hole on the exosuit, the metal plates apparently a facade and made out of simple thin wood painted to look metallic. *What the-*

He had no time to think, not when he was pinned down by countless guards that were beginning to filter in, some gaining a height advantage over him on the catwalks above, trying to get a lock on him. In the midst of the chaos, Sasha’s voice suddenly came into Kyle’s brain. [Sir, I have eyes on Count Leon. Do I kill him?]

[Negative. Shoot at every Versian - do not hurt anyone from Raktor or other countries. Focus on Harrison!] Kyle needed the assassination attempt to look as though it was a Raktor operation in order to instigate the war. If Sasha killed anyone from Raktor, it may provide plausible deniability to Count Leon and allow him to restart the peace process. He clutched his shoulder, using the Necklace of Healing to channel a soothing green glow onto his wound while he glanced nearby, noticing a few other industrial machinery and furnaces on display right next to the exhibit that he was hiding behind.

With the exosuit being a farce, Kyle had no reason left to stay, reloading the pellets into his handgun once more and checking his clothes. *Penchant for Violence!* He rolled out of the cover, expertly shooting back at the encroaching surrounding Nest guards, the pellets forcing them to take cover as well and causing the entire warehouse to devolve into an open firefight. Kyle ducked and weaved through the various exhibits, the pellets ringing off the brass of industrial machinery, plates, and pipes alike serving as intermittent temporary cover.

With each move, he took out a Nest guard at a time, dwindling their forces bit by bit till he managed to completely flank a Nest guard, using the pillars and crashes of exhibits as a distraction. Lunging with his free hand, he clasped onto the guard’s neck, crushing it instantly and stealing the rifle the guard had. It wasn’t exactly as efficient as the Aspis MK2 repeater, but it had a far better capacity for pellets than his handgun did.

Kyle began his counterattack, swerving and diving between the various exhibits, even utilizing a few horrified civilians as bait by forcing them to run out into the open, distracting the Nest guards while he plucked them off one by one. He didn’t bother killing all of them, instead rushing for the exit back into the open street where true chaos was unfolding. Explosions rocked the once jovial festivities of the Grand Exhibition, the colorful stalls and tiles now stained with blood, sweat, and crying children trying to wake up their parents. Kyle sprinted down the street, locking onto the nearest escape route, when he heard Sasha fire yet another shot, the trail of the pellet visible to the naked eye as it streaked across the buildings.

[Sir, I can’t hit Harrison. There’s a man deflecting all pellets, and he seems to be reporting my location.] Sasha relayed.

[Understood. Retreat to the designated hiding spot, but stay above ground and wait for further orders.] Kyle sharply turned into an alleyway, slinking through the cluttered buildings and accessing a manhole that had him drop right down back into the 1st layer of the catacombs. Already, he could hear the sounds of fighting and battling echoing through the canals as Ghosts and Nest guards alike clashed in a growing battlefield, fighting for control over the uppermost level to retain access to Tenar. Kyle made a beeline straight for the main base in the third layer, entering the central chamber to see a clearly flustered Dekar.

As soon as Kyle entered the base, Dekar rushed up to him, grabbing him by the collar and whispering angrily. “What the fuck did you just do?! Did you just put this entire movement in danger?!”

Before Dekar got his answer, Kyle simply clasped his hands around Dekar’s hands, easily peeling them off without any apparent effort, overpowering him entirely. “We were compromised. Simple as that.”

“Compromised?! We had a plan!”

“And that plan has been found wanting.” Kyle didn’t stand there idle, immediately heading towards the operations room where Lisa was belting out orders non-stop to the various Ghost squads, while other regular squad handlers gave intermittent updates on the course of the battle. “How long can we hold?” Kyle asked the clearly agitated Lisa who barely had a modicum of brainpower left to spare.

“I don’t know, but soon, more and more Nest guards are going to come charging in to find us. We really riled up the hornet’s nest this time.” Lisa shook her head as they watched other clerks continuously shift squad markers on the previously drawn-out map of the catacombs; Kyle was able to see the Ghost squads retreating in real-time as an infuriated Dekar entered the operation room as well, storming up to Kyle and dragging him aside.

“If I didn’t know any better, I’ll say you were fucking planted by Harrison!” Dekar spat through gritted teeth. “We’re going to lose everything we’ve built so far at this rate - it would take months, even years, to ever come back to this! Why did you fuck it up?!”

“Everything we’ve built?” Kyle cocked an eyebrow. “This is everything I BUILT!” He raised his voice far louder than necessary, shocking the frustrated Dekar out of his anger. “And we will not lose anything - in fact, we will gain more than ever thanks to my efforts today. This is just a temporary setback.” He ignored Dekar, shoving him aside and returning back to the operations room central table, issuing orders.

“Lisa, I want a slow retreat. Just like we planned. Have the Ghost squads spilt up into three, each of them going to one of the few cities. We will evacuate whatever supplies we can muster and head to Desham. Lisa, you take Ocra and liaise back with Culo. Dekar, you’re going to Creuliz with Yona. Sasha, Feldon and I will head to Desham. How long will executing this plan take?”

“If we want to get most of the machinery and supplies out, then it’ll take at least half a day.”

“Then Sasha, Feldon, and I will hold back the enemy for as long as we can. We will serve as the bait. Once your forces have reached the evacuation point, collapse all tunnels behind you with the prepared explosives. Do not let Nest track you in any way.”

“What about our informants up in the city? They are still embedded into the citizens!” Dekar pointed out. “Are we just going to abandon them?”

“We have no choice - if we are to survive, sacrifices have to be made. Do not tell them of our evacuation plan lest they leak it. This stays within us, understood?”

Lisa nodded readily, already having learned from the start to trust in Kyle, while Dekar, on the other hand, was clearly suspicious about Kyle’s plan but knew that they could not stand and fight against Nest. They only had two hundred fighters, which would be nearly impossible to hold out against the tens of thousands of Nest fighters and potentially military soldiers that would be deployed to crush them. It would be only a matter of time before their supply routes were cut off, resulting in potential starvation. They all knew they had to evacuate now or perish.

Naturally, Kyle did not tell them the full reason of why he initiated such an attack on Harrison. Before he prepared his defenses, he walked up to Feldon, whispering to him quietly out of earshot of everyone else. “Feldon, send a message to one of the frontline Ghosts. Talk about how it was not our fault for the assassination. Make sure Nest is listening in.”

“Got it, boss.” Feldon saluted, moving to carry out his task while Kyle began to arrange all of his defenses. The heist of the Grand Exhibition was a complete bust, but only because of the imminent peace deal. *Harrison and Count Leon have been in cahoots this whole time. They’ve been using the threat of war on both sides as a way to control and pacify the population at large.* A small smirk grew on his phase as he loaded up an Aspis MK2 repeater. *Except now, the two of you will butt heads, and I will be the sole winner.*

@@@@@

Aboveground, the banquet hall was in an utter mess, the explosion from the railgun’s projectiles having peltered the hallway and blasted the VIP room into an unrecognizable pile of rubble. Amidst the crumbling tiles and broken furniture, Nox grunted as he lifted a massive chunk of debris, showing a fairly unhurt Harrison, whose ears were still ringing from the blasts. Other Nest guards had been knocked out fully while President Mornero was groaning on the floor, slightly injured and pinned under a fallen bookcase.

Nox hauled the debris aside, moving over to assist President Mornero and check his breathing. *Still alive.* He quickly activated his radio, tapping it rapidly in a known pattern. Immediately three Nest guards rushed into the room, their eyes widening at the scale of the damage.

“Get these two men down to the bunker right now!” Nox urged before another deafening explosion rocked the hall, causing screams to erupt from the foreign dignitaries who were now scrambling to safety under the care and protection of their bodyguards. More and more Nest guards came in, forming a defensive ring around Harrison and Mornero as they were escorted out towards a secret backdoor nested in the back of the banquet hall’s stage, General Verian already waiting near it with a scowl on her face.

“Look at this mess.” She spat with derision. “Your men are useless!”

“Save the blame game for later. We need to get to safety first.” Nox ignored her taunt, placing his palm on the surface of the locked door. An arcia engraving unlocked a series of bolts within, revealing a sturdy metallic tunnel that led right to the basement of the Versian Parliament. None of the Nest guards were allowed in, Harrison staggering along the wall in a daze while General Verian carried Mornero. “All of you - the sniper was located on the Gaudy Kino�s rooftop. White hair, red shirt. Find her and capture her alive - she’s the one who tried to kill Harrison.”

The Nest guards scrambled to catch Sasha while Nox slammed the tunnel entrance shut, reactivating the bolts. As he took another step back, he placed his hands once again into the wall, activating the internal lights and summoning a second metallic wall that completely blocked off the tunnel from the entrance, serving as a barricade if someone blew up the door again.

The tunnel led towards a secret bunker in the basement of the Versian Parliament, a location that only the ministers of Versia and other Versian leaders knew of. Harrison let out a groan as he slumped into a chair, trying to rid himself of the splitting headache from the shell shock, while Mornero was carefully fed a healing potion by General Verian, allowing him to regain consciousness gradually. “Wh-who the fuck attacked us?” Mornero flew into a rage the moment his eyes opened, though his body was hurting all over as he tried to shove General Verian aside.

“We haven’t figured that out just yet,” Nox stated clearly. “Our men are currently trying to apprehend the sniper responsible for the attack. Thankfully, you and Harrison are safe-”

“Safe?! SAFE?!” Mornero burst out in fury, his fists tightly clenched as he struggled to sit upright. Whatever friendly and dignified visage he had worn for the masses melted away like a facade, revealing his true nature. “We nearly died, and you call that safe?! I’m starting to question the necessity of even having you idiots around as security!”

“President Mornero, sir, I-” Nox tried to defend himself, but Mornero wasn’t having any of it, continuing his tirade.

“First you nearly fumble the existence of the sweatshops, then you allow a major Nest leader to go missing. Weirdly enough, what follows after is a well-planned heist on Harrison’s mansion, clearly informed by said major Nest leader who knew all of the nooks and crannies around his office!”

“We caught the perpetrators of Huriga and his men and retrieved everything of value. As for Yona, it is highly unlikely that she has been caught - the self-immolation engraving can not be disarmed easily. Even if she had leaked critical information, we have changed all of our protocols, including our codewords and messaging patterns. Anyone who obtained her information will not be able to access us.”

“It’s the Ghosts of Versia. They are the ones who attacked us.” Harrison suddenly spoke out with a clear sense of clarity. “No one else has any motive to do so - only Minister Dekar and his ragtag team of rebels will. Tap into their communications network, and listen to all the radio chatter quickly!”

Nox complied, pulling up an arctech radio installation embedded into the wall of the secret bunker, neatly tucked away in the corner. He tuned the channels, suddenly noticing a strange sound on one of them, and hurriedly turned the dial, locking onto the message.

[…don’t know who attacked them. We’re looking for the assassin - white hair, red shirt. No known alias nor registration found of the suspect. Whatever she did jeopardized our operation, and we had to wait until we could evacuate. Once we’re ready to move, retreat to the third layer.] Feldon’s voice carried over the waves, all four of them hearing it in the enclosed underground space of the bunker.

“It’s not them?” General Verian scratched her chin. “Or do they know we’re listening in?”

Harrison fell into a pondering state, a far cry from his jovial performance back in front of the public before. On the other hand, Mornero was still not done venting on Nox, still content to blast him fully with everything he had in the tank. “And to think we don’t know despite having a supposed full control of the catacombs. I was assured that Nest had a full understanding of the catacombs, but lo and behold a third layer! How is it that to this day, we still don’t know where Minister Dekar is after Yona captured him?!”

“Sir, I guarantee that my best men are on the hunt. We will have their locations sniffed out by the day’s end, third layer or not.” Nox bowed apologetically, though his own fist was clenched, Nox preventing himself from retorting back to his employer.

“Not good enough. If that intercepted communication is to be believed, we won’t be fast enough.” Harrison tapped his finger on the holster of his chair. “Where is Count Leon? Was he attacked, too?”

“Negative, sir.” Nox shook his head. “The only three shots were aimed at the prisoner wagon and you.”

Harrison’s expression darkened. “Then there’s another real possibility. Count Leon has betrayed us.”

Mornero’s eyes widened for a moment before he slammed his fist onto the chair. “That scoundrel, I always knew his hunger would be insatiable. We should have never agreed to such an escalation of military power with him. The assassination was targeted at us so he could utilize the chaos to sweep all of Versia in one fell swoop!”

General Verian nodded in agreement. “Count Leon had always been vocal about restoring the pride of the Yual Dominion for the loss in the independence war. Even if it was the Ghosts of Versia who carried out the assassination, there’s no doubt in my mind that the two are linked. Count Leon may be funding the rebels directly himself!”

The bunker fell into contemplative silence as Harrison and Mornero came to grips with the changing tides. Just a few minutes ago, they were preparing to sign a peace treaty that would solidify their rule, yet now it had all come toppling down. “This isn’t good, not good for business…” Harrison mumbled to himself. “If the war really happens, Versia may be lost forever.”

“I’ll be damned if I let that Count Leon get the last laugh!” Mornero punched the air with anger. “I’ll fight to my fucking last breath to keep Versia alive at all costs!”

“If Count Leon had been planning this attack all along, then he is surely aware of our military capabilities. He must be initiating a surprise attack as soon as he returns back to his military base.” General Verian pointed out, clearly suspicious of anything Raktor. “We cannot let him escape Tenar scott-free, this would be like letting ourselves be robbed!”

“Nox, get your best men and chase down Count Leon, wherever he is. I don’t care if he is in a convoy or not. Capture him alive and bring him here to us!” Harrison ordered.

“But sir, if we attack him, it may very well be a declaration of war! Perhaps we should investigate the situation further-”

“Nox, who is your employer?” Harrison interjected.

“That would be you, sir.”

“And did I hire you for your strength or for your inane mind to question my ORDERS!” Harrison roared. “Count Leon could be laughing all the way to the bank, and while we sit on our asses and figure out who attacked us and who didn’t, tens of thousands of Raktor troops would be gathering on the border, preparing for a first strike. And under no fucking circumstances will I let the name of Harrison Industries be tarnished like this, to be dragged through the mud being caught with our pants down. You will hunt Count Leon down like the Yual dog he is and bring him to ME!”

Nox nodded, leaving the bunker with haste, while Harrison looked at General Verian. “Order a general mobilization now. Mornero, it’s time we declare a state of emergency. Utilize the assassination attempt to announce a curfew and lock down every damn entrance and exit in and out of Tenar. No one moves without our permission!”

As soon as Nox cleared the tunnel, the first announcements of martial law were already sweeping the city, and arctech radio channels were hijacked to explain the situation. Nox ignored the waves of panic among the citizens, instead tapping his arctech radio again. “Get me my top Tigers, now. Where is Count Leon?”

[Sir, he’s leaving the city in his wagon convoy.]

“How many escorts?”

[Fifty arctech knights, armed with repeaters.]

“Get every nearby Nest squad to immediately attack them. Make sure they don’t leave the city!” Nox ordered hastily as he began to dash through the buildings, his armor’s engraving glowing with energy as his speed was accelerated bit by bit, each stride getting easier than the other until he was basically stepping on air, swooping past the frantic crowds of cowering civilians.

With each stride, Nox had one of his Tigers joined him - an expert warrior trained in assassination and speed, able to keep up with Nox’s enhanced speed, racing down through the streets towards Count Leon’s convoy. By the time he had arrived there, ten Tigers were already with him, the group leaping up onto the rooftop and obtaining a bird’s eye view of the fight breaking out near the city’s main gate.

Just fifty meters before the city gate, Count Leon’s convoy was still functional, inching forward as arctech knights aimed their Aspis MK1 repeaters towards the surrounding Nest guards and Versian military, the captain of Count Leon’s knights shouting at the top of his lungs. “Obstruction of the Count’s path can be considered an act of war, martial law or not. You will provide passage for my master out of Tenar!”

The city guards, who had now shut off the city gate, confusedly looked at each other, the standoff tense as neither side dared to fire a shot. Even the Nest guards who had answered Nox’s call to gather here were unsure, knowing that any wrong mistake might trigger a cascade of events that had unforeseen consequences. Furthermore, it was clear that Count Leon’s escorting knight contingent of fifty were far superior in both training and equipment.

That same hesitation that rested among everyone did not bother Nox. “Kill everyone but Count Leon.” He spoke calmly, prompting the ten Tigers to leap off the rooftop, diving straight towards the Raktor knights who had formed a defensive perimeter around the convoy.

As one of the Tigers dived in headfirst, two sharp blades emerged from his wrists, slamming straight into the weak flesh between the shoulder and the neck of his target Raktor Knight, blood instantly spurting out. The Raktor knight instinctively grabbed the Tiger’s arm, crushing it with a devastating punch, though the Tiger nimbly leaped backward, using his uninjured hand to fire a pellet at one of the convoy drivers, killing him in one hit.

That single shot set off a bonfire of anger, each side instantly firing without abandon and clashing with swords, steel, and fists alike in a sea of combatants. Nest guards fired indiscriminately into the convoy, killing some of Count Leon’s servants and knights, while the Tigers were slowly pressuring the knights to retreat further.

“Protect the Count!” The knight captain let out a rallying cry, the knights chanting in response before pushing forward with renewed vigor, some of the knights forcibly charging the city gate and trying to storm the tower. However, the city guards held firm, protecting the gate’s mechanism and funnelling the attacking Raktor knights into a tight space and killing them easily.

Nox smiled with satisfication, knowing that Count Leon was not going anywhere as he descended gracefully from the rooftop himself, his armour bearing the brunt of his landing. As he recovered to a standing posture, a loud creaking sound suddenly came from the gate mechanism room, the city gate slowly inching upwards and revealing the distant horizon filled with trees.

“PUSH! PUSH FORWARD!” Emboldened by the opening gate, the knights fought even harder than ever, the Nest guards no match against their prowess and equipment alike. Even the Tigers were beginning to find it hard to stop or even kill the knights, the knights being the cream of the crop of Count Leon’s retinue.

“Get that city gate under control!” Nox roared, himself making a beeline for Count Leon, only to come face to face with the knight captain himself, who immediately fired the Aspis MK1 repeater at Nox. Nox used his diamond-shaped arm shields to deflect the pellets, the armor he wore from head to toe hardly fazed by the incoming barrage. As soon as the pellets petered out, Nox charged ahead, clashing with the knight captain’s sword head-on.

As they exchanged blows, punches, and kicks alike, it was apparent that Nox was not going to best the man in single combat. A dangerous glint in Nox’s eyes through the slit of his armor flickered as he suddenly lunged with the tip of his diamond arm shield, stabbing into the waist of the knight captain before retreating quickly.

The knight captain raised his sword, prepared to swing at Nox, when he suddenly staggered back, the veins on his exposed skin starting to blacken with each pulse of his beating heart as he stumbled back and forth. Nox held a grin under his faceplate, using a single finger to shove the dazed knight captain aside and allowing access to the central wagon where Count Leon was held. Any other Raktor knight who tried to intervene was held back by Nest guards and Tigers, leaving Nox free to move.

Just as he reached his hand forward to wrench the door of the wagon open, alarm bells rang in his head as a familiar boom shot towards him, the same railgun almost tearing him apart. By the skin of his teeth, Nox retracted his arm on reflex, using the armshield to deflect the projectile haphazardly, sending it trailing off into a nearby building, crashing into an apartment.

Before anyone could react, the projectile exploded with impunity, digging an entire crater in the building and collapsing it halfway, the resulting debris and rubble that crashed onto the floor kicking up a cloud of dust that enveloped the entire convoy. Nox tried to recover his senses, but the same boom erupted once more, this time a second projectile slamming right into his chestplate. Instead of penetrating, Nox was sent skidding backward, his two feet digging into the cobblestone tiles and dragging them up.

Immediately, the second projectile exploded right in Nox’s face, the resulting fragmentation killing anyone nearby and sending him toppling and tumbling down the street, his ears ringing and blood pounding from the sudden shock. He struggled to get back up onto his feet, but his arms didn’t listen, vibrating shakily as he could only watch Count Leon’s convoy begin to speed up towards the now fully open city gate. The Raktor knights leaped onto the nearest wagon, putting down suppressive fire. “STOP THAT CONVOY!” He bellowed with whatever strength he had.

A Nest guard hurriedly hauled a projectile launcher upwards, mounting it on his shoulder and preparing to fire at Count Leon’s wagon. Before he could squeeze the trigger, the same railgun boom echoed, blasting the unfortunate guard into meat paste that was splattered all across the street, the launcher wrecked beyond repair.

Nox could only watch as Count Leon’s convoy disappeared into the horizon rapidly, but his anger was now settled on the sniper who had attacked him more than five times. He looked up to see the white hair lady slinging the railgun behind her back, sprinting along the lengths of the walls towards the left, Nest guards firing wildly at her and missing entirely. “GET THAT SNIPER NOW!”

Back in the bunker, Harrison clenched his fist even tighter as he listened to the complete failure of Nox to capture Count Leon, almost about to tear his hair out in frustration. “We were so close to success, to victory! We could have dominated the Yual Dominion’s economy to the point where they would entirely rely on us! My business could have soared to greater heights, forming a new commercial empire that would have controlled the entire continent. That damn Minister Dekar is in cahoots with Count Leon, conspiring to bring us down!”

Harrison slammed his chair, getting up and pacing the small bunker room, clearly agitated while Mornero began to call for an emergency cabinet meeting, the ministers all rushing down to the bunker and taking their seats in a conference room within an hour.

“With the declaration of martial law and the attempt on our lives by Count Leon himself, war is almost inevitable. If we do not seek recompense for such an act of war, then Versia would no longer have its pride, and its sovereignty shall be trampled all over by subsequent transgression. It is here that we must put an end to it and fight to assert our right to live and be independent, free from the machinations of the Yual Dominion once and for all!” Mornero explained with determination.

The weight of the situation was apparent to all of the cabinet ministers, many of whom had been put into power by Mornero himself when he ousted all of the former revolutionaries from the parliament. “Starting from today, we shall move into a war footing. Lock down every movement in and out of the whole of Versia and have our conscription quotas raised. I want enough men drafted up to support a second wave of assault if necessary.”

“A second wave of assault…?” The cabinet ministers looked at each other with confused glances before the finance minister finally spoke up. “President, sir, wasn’t the military policy to be a defensive one? Furthermore, calling up enough men to support a second army would have our economy crashing in one fell swoop. Riots and protests might begin almost immediately if we do so!”

“Do you not comprehend the reality of the situation that we’re in?” Mornero’s voice lowered to a whisper. “The fate of Versia is at stake! Within a week, Count Leon will have his men mobilized and attacking us with full force! There is no time for worrying about the economy or worrying about the poor sentiments of the citizens. This is SURVIVAL! Do you really think Count Leon is going to return to Raktor and not do anything after he just tried to kill us? To kill me?!” He slammed the conference table in anger before jabbing his finger right at the finance minister. “You will support the conscription, and you will cut every useless piece of socialist bullshit that that idiot Johan and Dekar have integrated into the system. I want every single tenar squeezed out of the population and put into the war effort. Do you understand?”

The finance minister gulped instinctively when faced with the furious glare of “Yes, President. I understand.”

“Good. As for the fucking rebels, I will no longer tolerate these rats living in the basement of our capital city and jeopardizing our safety. General Verian, you shall be in charge of a full sweep. You have complete control of Nest, and I want that sniper and Minister Dekar in chains in front of me in two days. Use everything that we have in the arsenal to flush out each and every rat that opposes us.”

“Everything, sir?” General Verian cocked her eyebrow. “Some of our weapons are still experimental.”

“I understand. Use *everything.*”

General Verian had a sly grin on her face, giving a military salute. “With pleasure, President. They won’t know what hit them.”

# Chapter 115 - Grand Exhibition (3)

*Three hours later…*

Smoke and fire reigned in the city of Tenar, more so in the deep underground of the catacombs. Dozens of Ghosts squads fought tooth and nail to hold the line, struggling against ever-increasing waves of Nest guards desperately. Some of the Ghosts wavered a little, unsure about the situation as they defended the various chokepoints in the intricate maze-like layout of the second layer.

“We can’t hold here much longer, Wez!” One of the Ghosts shouted over the din of pellet fire and random explosions, each and every reverberation traveling far and wide through the canal. The sewage water coursing through was starting to be stained with blood, the fallen bodies of both Nest and Ghosts alike being swept away in the never-ending tide.

“Not yet, five more minutes!” Wez urged, himself leaning his entire weight against a temporary barricade fashioned from scrap metal and anything else that could withstand more than a few pellet shots. He clutched his rifle tightly close to his chest as he could see the sweeping of arctech lanterns from the Nest guards flickering and reflecting off the walls further, the beams trying to illuminate their barricade. Only his squad had been assigned to guard the intersection here.

“WE DON’T HAVE FIVE MINUTES!” The Ghost roared, jabbing with his finger furiously at another injured Ghost who was desperately trying to pour a healing potion on a large gaping wound, the edges of the flesh seared with burning embers from a recent explosion. “That’s our last health potion!”

“If you got time to worry about the potions, then you got time to worry about holding them back!” Wez shouted back, poking out from behind his cover to fire a few shots from his Aspis MK2 repeater. The pellets slammed into an exposed Nest guard, ripping through his leather armor and causing him to stagger off the pathway, falling into the surging tide with a loud splash. Three glints of reflective glass were enough to warn Wez to quickly duck back into cover. Sure enough, a hailstorm of pellets filled the air, pockmarking Wez’s cover. Another Ghost from Wez’s squad popped out, taking advantage of the attention focused on Wez and taking potshots, earning another pained scream echoing down the canal over the rushing water.

The five minutes felt like an eternity, Wez only cognizant of the sweat sticking to his clothes, his knight armor’s originally cool and chilling feeling long gone, replaced by a warm plate that clung to his body, half of it already chipped or dented from stray pellets that managed to nick Wez. Still, the knight armor provided a much higher level of protection than was afforded by the Nest guards. However, it was far from enough to stem the ever-increasing tide of enemies trying to push through the catacomb.

Suddenly, a strange rumbling sound began to send tremors through the canal, Wez’s cover vibrating heavily as he peeked out from his hiding spot once more to try and spot the source. His eyes widened as he watched an entire platoon of Versian soldiers armed to the teeth with arctech knight armor and rifles rivaling theirs, charging down towards their defensive position to bolster the attack of the Nest guards. *Shit, the military is here too!*

“Quick, tell them that the army is moving in now!” Wez urged the nearest Ghost to him, who hurriedly tuned the radio to the Ghosts’ channel, relaying the information.

“There’s no way we’ll be able to hold out much longer! It’s already been more than five minutes!” The same complaining Ghost shouted. “We need to retreat now!”

Wez’s heart palpitated as time slowed down from his perspective, his mind racing as he weighed his options. In a blink of an eye, he came to a decision, his expression determined. “Take the injured and retreat right now to Base 4. I’ll stay behind and collapse the intersection entirely.” He began to rummage through his pockets, looking for explosives while glancing around for a weak spot. His gaze landed on a big red X mark, left behind by the scouts and supply crew, who had already labeled the easiest way to cave in the canal.

“What?! Are you crazy? Then how will you retreat?”

“I’ll figure that out. Go now, quick!” Wez urged, grabbing his repeater and firing haphazardly over the cover. The random suppressive fire forced the incoming Versian soldiers to quickly duck out of the way, taking cover behind the various pillars along the length of the catacomb tunnels. He retracted the repeater, swapping out an empty canister for a new one from his backpack next to his side on the ground.

As he prepared to shoot again, he noticed that the rest of the squad was not moving, instead also fighting back. “What the hell are you idiots doing?” Wez shouted.

“We ain’t leaving without you!” The other Ghosts wore grim faces, but their eyes burnt with fierce determination, ready to fight against the seemingly impossible odds to the end. With no time to chat, the squad rallied their morale together again, their spirits higher than ever as they let out a unified battlecry, firing as much ammunition as they could down the canal. Nearly a dozen soldiers were nicked by the sudden barrage, causing the rest of the Nest guards and Versian soldiers to retreat temporarily.

Suddenly, one of the Versian platoon leaders stepped out into the open, unafraid of the pellets at all. Wez focused all of his fire onto the men, but instead of the pellets injuring the platoon leader, point defense arcia bolts lanced out furiously, drawing green streaks across the canal. One of the green bolts shot right toward Wez, disintegrating the pellet along the way while vaporizing a gaping hole in Wez’s cover, the resulting impact sending Wez tumbling backward.

The other Ghosts also tried to shoot back, but the point defense seemed to never end, a large fuel pack carried by two other Versian soldiers plugged into the platoon leader’s armor. The connected tube churned rapidly and allowed the armor’s engraving to be continuously lit, allowing a seemingly endless stream of green arcia bolts that streaked across the canal, the high energy incinerating and searing through anything.

Wez’s vision faded in and out as he groaned, rolling on the floor. From his hazy sight, he could only watch as one of the Ghosts shot a pellet at the leader, earning an overwhelming point defense arcia bolt that singed his armor and sent the Ghost flying backward as well. Wez could feel someone grabbing his shoulder, trying to drag him away from the battle, but he could already hear the impending sounds of rushing metal Versian boots charging toward them. Even as his squadmates tried to retreat, Wez could already tell it was far too late for them, knowing that there was no hope of resistance anymore while he made his peace. *Better to die free than to die a slave.*

Before Wez closed his eyes, he surprisingly saw a familiar figure appear in front of him, making him almost think it was a hallucination. *There’s no way… there’s no way that’s the boss, right? He wouldn’t come like this…* Yet there was something he could feel with each step the familiar figure took in front of him, something that couldn’t be replicated easily. *It’s him!*

Without saying a word, Kyle grabbed Wez by the collar with one arm and tossed him unceremoniously down back towards the intersection to safety. “Retreat now!” Kyle waved his arm, his exosuit arm flaring into life as the engravings on it glowed with a brilliance unmatched. He charged towards the incoming Versian soldiers, a wide, confident grin plastered on his face.

None of the Versian soldiers could react in time when Kyle cleared the distance in just four short strides, his speed unfathomable as he stabbed forward with the Tattoo Knife headlong in his left hand, aimed right at the jugular of the platoon leader. With no time even for instinct to kick in, the jagged blade already skewered into the vocal cords of the leaders in a blink of an eye, Kyle swapping hands and reverse gripping the handle with his right and forcing it through. The strength of the exosuit arm whirred with power incarnate, the Tattoo Knife cleaving through the neck of the platoon leader like it was liquid.

Even before the soldiers fired a pellet at him, Kyle was already dancing through them, creating a chaotic battle as he used the soldiers themselves as a sponge to soak up the fired pellets. He was like a shadow, flitting through the platoon and inflicting terror among its ranks as he sliced limb from joint and head from the body, his motions swift and deadly. Each swing of the knife saw one more Versian soldier fall to the ground, the EXP System messages racking up in front of him, though he ignored them, mentally pushing them out of sight.

Within a minute, Kyle had already slaughtered close to twenty Versian soldiers and Nest guards alike, and he showed no sign of stopping, a veritable one-man army on his own in such an enclosed area. Each and every facet of the environment blended into his mind, able to calculate the most efficient path while every soldier was mentally imaged and predicted, his steps immaculate. Fear began to grip the hearts of the remaining soldiers, many of them fresh conscripts unwilling to fight against a seemingly impossible enemy, especially when their platoon leader was dead.

“Retreat and regroup! Retreat and regroup!” A frantic Versian recruit called out, his voice wavering in terror before Kyle locked onto him, using his free hand to fire a pellet from his Oriental Bloom handgun. The recruit’s expression was locked in horror, a gaping hole searing through his left eye, the pellet bursting into a fleshy explosion that frightened anyone who saw it.

“I ain’t going to die here in this shitty tunnel!” The survivors scattered like flies, running haphazardly down the canal in a disorderly retreat. Kyle shot a few more of them, racking his total kills to thirty, singlehandedly eradicating the attacking platoon. He sprinted back to the intersection, grabbing any dropped supplies the retreating Ghost squad had left behind and lugging them on his back.

Before he left the intersection, he took good aim with his handgun at the red X marked near the corner of the canal, the spot laden with explosives. With a single shot, he ignited the dormant combustible material, immediately destroying the support of the canals and collapsing it, blocking the entire pathway off, though the water current surged through the gaps in the rubble. [Sasha, report.]

[Sir, re-entering catacombs. There are too many enemies above.]

[Did Count Leon escape?]

[Yes, sir.]

[Good work. Meet at Base 1. Do not move too fast - make sure Nest knows your track. We’re going to lure them to us so the other three bases can evacuate.] Kyle retreated back to the main base, which had already been slowly hollowed out. He had only thirty Ghosts left in the base, the rest being supply and logistic workers who had already retreated into the Rotten Chamber as their backup base. Dekar and Yona had already moved to another base, which was much closer to the Crueliz escape route. All Kyle had to do was stall Nest and the military for as long as he could to preserve as much manpower and supplies before retreating towards Desham.

“Sir, the route has already been set. We’ll recuperate in the Rotten Chamber and then set off. We have already sent forward scouts to check the tunnels towards Desham once more, and they will liaise with our other cell planted there.” Feldon gave his report with a salute. Each of the cities in Versia was already prepared by Sasha and Culo before Kyle had even arrived in Ocra, with each region having a designated cell leader, just like how Lisa had been appointed as leader for Tenar.

“Good. How are our defenses?” Kyle asked.

“We have set up enough roadblocks towards the fourth layer entrance room, and we’ve planted enough explosives to collapse the whole hideout if necessary.” Feldon pointed out the barricades made from mattresses, makeshift crates filled to the brim with dirt dug from the dungeon, and leftover bedframes stacked haphazardly to funnel any attackers coming in. Each Ghost was armed with an Aspis MK2 repeater, having harvested enough poor arcia crystal to at least last a battle, Feldon himself armed with one as he led Kyle around the defensive setup. “I don’t think that Nest is coming here anytime soon, though - with you collapsing that intersection and the other Ghost squads splitting up, it would take maybe a day for them to find us.”

“Nest is coming. I’m bringing them here. All of you, prepare yourself. Make sure you’re stocked up on ammunition, supplies, and potions. Anyone who is injured immediately retreats back into the fourth layer, understood?” Kyle raised his voice louder for the various Ghosts to hear. “We will not fall here - we will survive! And we will fight hard enough for our comrade to survive!”

“YES, SIR!” The Ghosts roared back in unison, preparing themselves for the imminent battle. Kyle had now practically ascended into a heroic figure for them, and the word of him selflessly saving Dekar’s commandos and rescuing Wez’s squad from certain doom had spread like wildfire. None of them had even the slightest doubt that Kyle would sacrifice them. With their morale at an all-time high, they even began to joke with each other, laughing about how Nest would fall into their trap. “Anyone who even steps into the central chamber is going to be annihilated!”

Surprisingly, Kyle, too, had the same mindset, though for a far different reason. *Training these Ghosts was difficult and a sink on resources. Every action I take to protect them will increase the solidarity of the group, and in return, my activities will be less scrutinized.* Kyle never lost sight of the objective: to steal everything that belonged to Harrison and make it his. The imminent war and the rebel movements were just simple cover-ups to his true motive, and any action that would work toward that goal without compromising himself, he would do, even if it meant acting as a selfless, righteous hero. Furthermore, once Versia was rid of Harrison, Kyle would then be able to naturally assume the same economic role, this time with ardent Versian supporters on his side. *All part of the plan.*

While he was truly irked at the farce of an exosuit, he wondered whether or not Harrison really had an exosuit to display. *Perhaps the reason why it was a fake was because he actually did not have anything to show.* Kyle knew he wouldn’t know until he captured Harrison himself, but he suppressed his anger at being tricked deep into his heart, not letting it cloud his current decision. He focused on arming himself with the necessary gear, unveiling a second railgun much like Sasha’s. Unfortunately for Kyle, most of the specialized projectiles had been handed to Sasha for the operation, leaving him only two explosive rounds to use. They were difficult to make, and Kyle was required to handcraft them himself.

Soon, within ten minutes, Sasha had entered the base, panting and huffing, her arms and legs clearly wounded with some pellets lodged inside her muscles and bones. Despite her prowess, it was near impossible to evade a hailstorm of pellets aimed at her by entire squads and platoons chasing her through the city. She collapsed onto the ground near the entrance, Kyle and Feldon immediately rushing up to carry her out. “Feldon, get two Ghosts to move her to the Rotten Chamber and get her healed immediately.”

[Sir, I-I can still fight!] Sasha grunted telepathically as she struggled to move, but her limbs were already immobilized by the pellets still embedded inside. Kyle grabbed her arm firmly, making sure she couldn’t get up.

“You’ve done well enough. Go rest. This isn’t the final fight, and it’s far from the heights you wanted to see. Don’t sacrifice yourself needlessly.” Kyle nodded, with the two Ghosts immediately treating her wounds with healing potions before moving her down to the fourth layer.

“Shit, if Sasha is here, it means Nest is not far behind!” Feldon exclaimed, adjusting his Aspis MK1 armored helmet and fastening the straps. The jokes and small talk had died down, with a solemn, grim atmosphere now taking hold of the remaining Ghosts. They only numbered thirty in total, including Feldon and Kyle, but they all knew that they may be facing a force ten times their size.

“No sweat, no sweat at all.” Feldon continued mumbling to himself as he took up position behind a barricade facing the main entrance tunnel. They had barricaded every other entrance to the base, leaving only the tunnel from which Sasha had arrived through as the sole funnel point from which Nest could potentially attack. “All I got to do is just pull the trigger the moment I see any human figure pop up from that entrance. Easy. Just fire as many pellets as you can, nothing can wrong, Feldon, nothing can wrong.”

Kyle had to listen to Feldon’s inane mumbling and was about to berate him when a sudden eerie tremor started to rock the entire central chamber, the vibrations intensifying over time as it approached. The barricades rattled violently, the Ghosts swiveling their head around in confusion to try and find the source of the tremors. Kyle himself did not truly understand what was happening. *Is this an earthquake? Or-*

Before he could react, a sudden burst of dirt and rubble erupted from the top of the ceiling of the central chamber, the rocks tumbling onto the ground and crushing two Ghosts that were unfortunate enough to be right below, dying instantly. Within seconds, five ropes were thrown down from the hole, Nest guards rappelling down quickly and entering the very center of the base, right behind the barricades that had been set up.

Kyle moved quickly, his handgun shooting down the Nest guards as they came in, but there was a clear limit to how fast he could shoot. More than three dozen Nest guards fell in, immediately attacking the nearest Ghosts that were all universally caught off-guard.

Some of the Ghosts further away swiveled their rifles to aim at the rappelling Nest guards, but another deafening explosion rocked the chamber, the main entrance tunnel bursting apart wider with the rubble being flung out by the shockwave. The enlarged entrance suddenly saw another three dozen Versian soldiers enter, the entire central chamber devolving into a mad firefight.

“Shit, shit, shit!” Feldon cursed as he fired as quickly as he could, holding down the trigger and running the poor arcia crystal mounted on the repeater dry, killing three Versian soldiers in one fell swoop. Elsewhere, Kyle immediately grabbed the five ropes and bunched them up into both hands.

With his exosuit arm helping out, he yanked the rope as hard as he could, causing the rappelling Nest guards to get swung violently on the ropes. Those further up on the rope had their faces smacked against the hole, knocking them out. Kyle tugged the rope again as hard as he could, finally causing the five ropes to snap, sending a few Nest guards plummeting downwards to their deaths.

Before Kyle could recover, a sudden black shadow jabbed towards him, the sharp pointy tip of a diamond-shaped arm shield nearly cutting into his arm. He deftly dodged, spinning around with a devastating roundhouse kick, only to miss the kick as the shadow ducked low, the shadow’s shin slamming into Kyle’s one, attempting to sweep Kyle off his feet.

Unfortunately, the kick had no effect, Kyle still standing strong as he grappled with the shadow, finally recognizing the sleek black metallic armor. *It’s Nox!* Taking two steps back, nearby Ghosts began to fire at Nox, showering in a violent barrage.

Nox’s arm shields blocked his face while the rest of his body armor’s engraving began to light up, seemingly soaking the pellet damage to no effect. The pellets that hit his armor all collapsed onto the floor like a waterfall, scattering like marbles. Nox grinned as he lowered his arm shields, only for his eyes to widen as Kyle aimed a second railgun at him, the explosive projectile already zooming towards him.

Nox did not avoid the hit; instead, he shielded himself once again and blocked the projectile with his armshields. The projectile burst into a brilliant ball of flame, but it was soon dissipated into streaks of smoke, Nox’s armor seemingly left untouched save for the engravings flickering on his armor, their brilliance unsteady as the energy concentrated onto his arm shields.

He rushed forward with a blinding speed, his movement hard even for Kyle’s keen eyes to catch as he tried to jab at Kyle once more with the tip of the armshield.

Kyle was forced to use the railgun’s shaft to block the hit, the sparkles along the edge of the barrel dazzling from the friction, but unlike the first attack by Nox, he suddenly found himself lifted off the ground and thrown backward by an extreme force, the arm shield engraving’s arcia energy expelling rapidly. Kyle’s vision swirled as he flipped in midair, landing back onto the ground with his two feet slamming hard into the rock, carving two lines as Kyle’s body was still moving backward, the force of the hit inconceivable.

He watched as Nox deflected yet another pellet stream, the energy from the pellets seemingly absorbed harmlessly by the armor and channeled towards the arm shields. *He’s converting the kinetic energy absorbed for his own use!* Kyle quickly raised his railgun in response to a third strike by Nox, using the sturdy railgun as a short staff to parry the incoming hits.

Kyle landed a few counter hits in, but it clearly did no perceivable damage to the armour. Instead, Kyle found himself on the back foot, having to block stronger and stronger hits as Nox reused every attack he received, each jab and strike by the arm shield getting stronger and stronger.

A momentary lapse in calculation saw Kyle dodge a jab by the skin of his teeth, the tip of the arm shield stabbing past his ear. Unexpectedly, before Kyle could move to the side, a hidden jagged edge emerged from around the shield, one of the edges slicing Kyle’s earlobe.

MG404: [Status Effect | Debilitating Poison | *Unknown poison that numbs the body.* | All combat stats reduced by 5%. Stack 1/10.]

*What?!* Kyle had never received a debuff before, but he had no time to think, with Nox capitalizing on the shock to push his advantage, delivering a kick to Kyle’s left knee to cripple him.

However, Kyle’s legs barely buckled, allowing Kyle to quickly backpedal and make some distance while the wound on his cheek and earlobe began to bubble with a greenish liquid, seeping into Kyle’s bloodstream.

*Necklace of Healing!* The green aura surged around the wound and enveloped the green poison, but there was no notification of debuff removal. Already Kyle could feel his body being slightly more sluggish, slower to react. The sounds of battle and rage were already noticeably far degraded compared to his usual sense and spatial awareness. He dodged and weaved through the next three Nox attacks, using the antidote vial between exchanges and splashing it onto his earlobe.

“That won’t be enough to cure the poison - you’re going to need at least ten of that.” Nox grinned under his faceplate, knowing he had Kyle cornered. “You’re not going anywhere!”

Nox’s fighting style was unique, using the sharp edges of the arm shield and the hidden blade to slice and dice as he continued to throw punch after punch at Kyle, no longer trying to kick Kyle’s legs in close-quarter combat. His speed was unmatched, able to throw two attacks for every one attack Kyle tried to retaliate with.

Just as Kyle swung the railgun at Nox’s head, Nox ducked and crouched to the floor before launching his foot up towards Kyle’s chest. Kyle quickly pulled back his railgun to block the hit, but another retractable blade was hidden in Nox’s shoe, firing outwards and lodging itself into Kyle’s right shoulder between the gaps of the armor.

MG404: [Status Effect | Debilitating Poison | *Unknown poison that numbs the body.* | All combat stats are reduced by 5% per stack. Stack 3/10.]

Kyle’s mind began to falter, his thought process beginning to diminish as his combat stats began to plummet. But Kyle immediately grabbed Nox’s leg before performing a body throw and slamming Nox into the ground. The impact was absorbed right into Nox’s armor, dissipating as Nox immediately twisted his body to deliver yet another kick with his free leg, forcing Kyle to let go of Nox and dodge in anticipation of yet another hidden blade. Sure enough, the hidden blade was fired, nearly missing Kyle’s nose as he avoided it in time.

“Enough.” Kyle suddenly spoke with a clear tone, the air around him changing rapidly. *Penchant for Violence!* His body suddenly surged with strength, overwhelming the Debilitating Poison and allowing him to temporarily overpower Nox. The sudden change in power caught Nox off-guard, with Kyle able to lunge forward and pin him down to the ground with a frontal slam, preventing Nox from using his speed to dodge any more hits.

“Seems like you never learn anything!” Nox activated another hidden blade on his armour, this one jabbing deep into Kyle’s flesh.

MG404: [Status Effect | Debilitating Poison | *Unknown poison that numbs the body.* | All combat stats are reduced by 5% per stack. Stack 5/10.]

“You’re going to need more than that to stop me.” Kyle lunged forward with his right exosuit arm, grabbing Nox’s armored helmet and ripping it off, the helmet sailing back towards the interior hallway of the hideout, revealing Nox’s face and his red hair. Without hesitating, Kyle nocked back his right arm, sending all of his strength into a single punch that crushed Nox’s nose and frontal teeth in one hit, his jaw bending inwards.

However, before Kyle could deliver yet another heavy-handed blow, the armor of Nox suddenly began to glow hot red, scalding Kyle’s skin and forcing Kyle to get off. Nox quickly recovered, but his eyes were bloodshot as, his nose was completely caved in, with half of his teeth missing, and blood flowing freely from his mouth.

Nox panted visibly, with the engraving on the armor beginning to die down. *That must have taken a lot of arcia energy out of him.* Kyle prepared to counterattack, but instead of Nox facing Kyle head-on, Nox began to retreat behind the other Nest guards, who were still locked in a tense firefight with the other Ghosts. Casualties were beginning to mount on both sides, more so for the side of Nest than the Ghosts due to the difference in equipment.

Kyle tried to chase, knowing that if he captured Nox, it would prove to be a valuable asset like Yona. Unfortunately, Nox had disappeared as fast as he had entered the battlefield. Kyle turned his attention to the still-increasing tide of Nest and Versian soldiers storming the base. “Fall back to the second layer!”

The Ghosts retreated into the hallway, using the tight and narrow corridors to funnel the attacking enemies. The Versian soldiers were not dumb however, using deployed explosives to blow holes through the walls and allow them to flank the roadblocks. Kyle fought hard in the rooms, preventing the Versians from backstabbing the Ghosts, while Feldon let out a battle roar, laying down a sustained pellet fire that mowed down anyone stupid enough to expose themselves in the hallway.

The bodies of Nest guards and Versian soldiers began to pile up significantly, so much so that the Ghosts were beginning to use them as the barricade itself. Blood, meat, and organs flowed freely in rivers that snaked their way through the hallway, imprints of military boots and spent pellets scattered around. Kyle himself was covered from head to toe with stains of blood, the effect of the Penchant of Violence having worn out long ago.

Yet, despite the clearly insurmountable odds, they were able to continuously hold out for what seemed to be an hour, with Kyle doing the bulk of the killing. Already, two hundred soldiers had fallen at his hands alone, the EXP stacking up tremendously.

MG404: [ Level Up: 28 - 29 | All Stats Increased | Bonus Points Granted ]

The waves of Versian and Nest soldiers never seemed to stop coming, like lambs to the slaughter. Despite the ease of the defense, Kyle felt that something was inherently wrong. *Harrison wouldn’t do something so stupid as throw this much fodder into a grinder. There must be something bigger at play here…*

In the central chamber, a black fog-like cloud began to descend from the hole in the ceiling. It floated downwards gently, an unknown device from above pumping out fumes that continuously sank below. As it hit the ground, it surged out in all directions, slowly filling up the chamber and crawling toward the hallways.

“Gas masks, now!” Kyle urged, the Ghosts quickly donning the masks, having been well-trained. Unfortunately, Kyle watched as the black gas surged past the Versian and Nest soldiers alike, the gas lapping up at them.

“Huh..? What is this fo- URK!” None of them could react fast enough, assuming it was smoke from a normal fire. However, as they inhaled the smoke, their eyes began to water uncontrollably, while their skin began to wrinkle up, the folds on their cheeks scrounging up so hard until it began to bleed profusely. Their throats began to sear with pain as they stared at their shriveling hands in horror, as though all the water and life were being sucked out of them.

*This is My Turf!* Kyle immediately stepped into the hallway, using the invisible barrier to block as much of the smoke as possible, but it was useless - the smoke, too, began to seep into the adjoining rooms bit by bit, circumventing his barrier as the Ghosts stepped back warily, unsure of what to do next. “FELDON, GET EVERYONE OUT NOW!” Kyle roared.

It was a race against time, Feldon hurriedly leading the retreat back to the fourth layer entrance. There was no time for decorum; each Ghost immediately sprinted down the cramped tunnel regardless of how many scrapes and bruises they earned from the jagged walls. Kyle carefully stepped back, keeping track of his Turf barrier before reaching the end of the hallway. He noticed Nox’s helmet on the ground, quickly picking it up.

MG404:[Item | Arcia Exosuit Helmet Prototype(Advanced) | Designed by Harrison Industries | Passive Skill: Intelligence Boost (Advanced) -Enhance user’s intelligence stats tremendously. +90 INT.]

Kyle didn’t have time to cheer about the prize, moving as fast as he could back to the entrance of the fourth-layer tunnel. The black smoke seemed to suck the humidity out of anything that it touched - rations, walls, and wood all began to shrivel up rapidly, the water content completely lost. Placing his hand on a nearby wall engraving, he sent a surge of arcia energy, zig-zagging down a pre-engraved line that led right to the central chamber, illuminating the bodies of the fallen from below.

Within a split second, a thunderous blast erupted from the central chamber, each of the rooms in sequence being blown up by arranged explosives. Screams and shrieks of horror erupted from the hole above the ceiling as the black fog was pushed upwards, no doubt enveloping whoever deployed the gas. Kyle, too, sprinted down the tunnel, but not before collapsing the tunnel behind him, creating a pile of rubble that stemmed from the flow of the dangerous black fog. However, the resulting explosion instead pushed the black fog out harder, the velocity increasing through the gaps and seams of the debris.

As soon as he reached the large corridor that led to the Rotten Chamber, he ordered the Ghosts to run away as fast as possible before he took aim with his railgun at the tunnel, blowing it up with his last projectile. The explosion blasted apart the rubble and collapsed the tunnel even further, the heat melting some of the stone into slag that sealed up most of the gap. Kyle could still see some black fog leaking, its effect already apparently on the rapidly shriveling bioluminescent algae. “Retreat to the Rotten Chamber, we’ve done all we could. Tell Lisa, Dekar, and Yona to evacuate immediately before the gas hits them as well!”

Far above the chaos in the catacombs, in the Versian Parliament Presidential Office, Mornero clenched his fist in anger once more, the plan to capture the rebels clearly failing. “It’s clear that the rebels know more about our capabilities than we do - we can’t even round up the rats in our own backyard! If the information they have gets out to Count Leon, then we’ll be at a clear disadvantage.”

“Then the solution is simple.” Harrison calmly spoke, his anger from before already calmed as though he had accepted the change in events. “Have the general mobilization concentrate at Ocra. We strike first.”

# Chapter 116 - Premonition

The retreating Ghosts staggered down the corridor, the stronger among them supporting other weaker ones, limping slowly away from the black fog that was already subsiding. Kyle, too, was no exception, the intense battle having sucked most of the arcia energy out of him. While he had activated Penchant for Violence regularly, there was still no surefire method to recharge arcia energy directly into his body, even when consuming stamina potions.

Feldon huffed and panted as he supported himself against the wall, taking each step slowly while drinking a stamina potion. Despite the abundance of stamina potions, mental fatigue was not something that could be solved by simply chugging dark-yellow liquid, especially not when everyone around save for Kyle looked equally miserable. “We look like we just lost a fight at the playground…” Feldon remarked, his eyes glazing as he spotted the end of the corridor. The Rotten Chamber environment came into view, and two Ghosts that had been sent ahead with Sasha were waiting for them.

“Is the temporary area secured?” Feldon asked as he approached, massaging his aching arm and trying to stretch his shoulders.

“Yes, sir. The others have already set up a resting point with what supplies we could evacuate.” The two Ghosts led them to another area of the Rotten Chamber, one that already had most of the trash removed and held at bay by rock walls, creating an encampment that stood out from the rest of the environment. Despite the persistent stench from the nearby trash that had been scooped up and cleared, it was enough to serve as a temporary area to recuperate and reorganize the men. Within the encampment were makeshift tents and crates of potions and rations, about thirty logistic workers and ten Ghosts in total having built up the camp. Adding the surviving sixteen Ghosts from the last ditch defense, Kyle now had a command of 26 Ghosts to utilize.

“What do we do now?” Feldon’s voice was filled with exhaustion as he sat on the cleared ground, the same dark green block that walled the corridor making up the dungeon floor, its full extent buried under mountains of trash outside the encampment.

“We wait.” Kyle replied, his voice a bit shaky as he kept up a strong facade, acting like there was nothing wrong with him as he walked up to a crate of antidote vials, checking how many they had left. *A hundred…* Kyle grabbed ten, immediately downing them like a madmen while Feldon stared in horror, though Feldon did not dare to ask what was happening.

MG404: [System Message | Debilitating Poison Stack Reduced]

*Looks like its working, but clearly the general antidote is not that effective.* Kyle filled a sack with fifty antidotes, drinking them slowly bit by bit and trying to purge the poison as well. He needed to be at his best for what was to come, especially when being hunted by the military throughout the country.

The state of the encampment was sad to see, especially for the Ghosts and workers who clearly remember how well organized the main bases had been. The haphazard placement of crates, tables, chairs and beds made many feel like they have gone back to their days as a refugee or a slave, triggering deep repressed memories. It was also apparent to everyone that they had been forced to retreat, effectively a defeat by Nest.

However, Kyle did not see the result as a defeat or a loss for him. Instead, it was a huge win. He still held in his hands Nox’s helmet, which turned out to be an exosuit prototype. *One more piece to the puzzle.* Kyle gathered that with both the arm and the helmet prototype, he might be able to gleam enough information to begin construction of the legs as well. As for the spine, the Ancient Exosuit Spine would do well as a reference on how to move forward with his first full-body exosuit prototype. It was clear that the enemies were well advanced in their technological mastery of Galactic Era ruins and relics, so Kyle saw no further need to hold back as much. *Though I’ll keep the gamma lasers hidden for a later date.*

While he did not manage to steal a functioning exosuit from Harrison’s Grand Exhibition, his work at preventing the peace treaty from being signed was a necessary action for the continuation of his plan. *Without the war, there would be almost no chance to undermine Harrison. It is in the chaos that I shall thrive more than ever.* Already, the information and technology he had obtained from this entire Versian expedition far exceeded his expectations, having only expected to find maybe one or two Galactic Era personal shields.

“What are we waiting for? We should be trying to leave as soon as possible.” Feldon grumbled, clearly unhappy with Kyle’s order. “Nest would eventually dig up the collapsed hideout and find out about the entrance!”

“That may be so, but it would take more than a day or two to do so. We can rest here in the meantime.” Kyle let out an exasperated sigh, before his sight landed once again on the Arcia Exosuit Helmet Prototype. *I never really thought about it, but how would an INT stat increase affect others?* He was quite confident Feldon did not have a System from his observations. If Feldon did have one, then it might have been the greatest waste of a System ever. “Why don’t you think over the plan with this on?” He tossed the helmet over to Feldon, who almost fumbled it before clutching it tight, examining it curiously.

“Strange, I didn’t know you managed to get the helmet off that weird person. I’m not sure if the helmet actually fits my hea-woah. Woah. W-O-A-H.” Feldon’s pupils dilated, his eyes widening, and he stared around at the encampment with a brilliance about him that Kyle could never imagine Feldon having. It was as if he was a newborn child seeing the world in a whole new light. “I get it now. I get everything! The universe, the meaning of life, the-”

Kyle smacked Feldon in the helmet, knocking him out of his stupor. “I didn’t give you the helmet to be philosophical. So, what do you think of the plan?”

“Quite elementary, my dear Ky- I mean, boss. We recuperate and gear up for two days before moving over to Desham. Once we arrive, we will begin to take control of the city where possible, most likely through the refugee camps. With enough support, we may be able to raise a riot to overtake whoever is in charge. We will then need to establish the same manufacturing and training regimens that we had already implemented in Raktor and the catacombs, but on a far larger scale. Harrison will be too occupied with the war to even try and crush us. And if he does try to crush us, the contingent that he sends cannot be too large as he still needs to fight against Count Leon. The longer the war goes on, the better our odds of capturing his businesses and factories over Versia one by one. If either side starts to lose, then we should step in to - oh my god.” Feldon gasped with realization.

Kyle was impressed, not so much at Feldon but at the effects of the helmet. *Interesting. So, other humans also feel the effects of an INT increase.* It was rare to find such a piece of equipment, and most of his sources of INT came from titles, something he was sure Feldon did not have. *Perhaps there could be something done with this in the future…*

“You! You only called me here because I was downright useless in the Culdao Peaks!” Feldon exclaimed in horror, though his nose began to bleed a little, a trickle of blood drooping. “Is that what you think of me? Well, I’m a different man now, smarter than ever. And I’ll show you that I am far more valuable than any-”

Kyle snatched the helmet off Feldon’s head, the brilliance on Feldon’s face disappearing like a switch went off, as though his brain had suddenly smoothened out. “Huh…? What just happened?” Feldon grunted before clutching his head in agony, his nosebleed getting stronger. “Owwwww my brain! What is happening?!”

*Looks like even with the INT increase, the body can’t handle it. That’s not good.* Kyle would have liked to experiment more, but definitely not on Feldon. He and Sasha were his two most competent officers now, with Lisa, Dekar, and Yona having gone to the other cities. *I’ll test it next time.*

Feldon lay on the floor, nursing a splitting headache, while Kyle continued to drink antidote after antidote. It took about an hour before the status effect was finally dispelled fully, Kyle being restored to his former strength. *Much better now.* He rose to his feet, moving around the encampment to check on the status of the other Ghosts.

“How were we pushed back so easily? We had so many plans, so many contingencies. I… I just never expected to have to fall back to the worst case scenario.” One of the Ghosts muttered as he triple-checked his repeater, cleaning out the barrel and removing any residual from the pellets’ friction.

“At least we didn’t all perish for nothing. We can still fight in another city.” Another replied, taking care of a heavily injured Ghost who was recuperating on a loosely arranged bunch of fabrics and clothes, serving as a temporary bed.

“We were this close to ending all of this…” The first Ghost sighed in defeat. “We were inches away from killing Harrison and Mornero!”

The other Ghosts around did not reply, having no arguments against that. Kyle saw the same sentiment being echoed around the other workers as well, it is clear that a defeat was a defeat to them, regardless of how Kyle saw it personally. They had a different goal to him, and as such, it was natural for a group of this size to have second doubts. Still, it was a problem that needed to be solved, and Kyle wasn’t willing to let such a notion fester too long in the hearts of his men, men he needed.

“Gather in the medical tents,” Kyle ordered, all able-bodied Ghosts and workers gathering around for what seemed to be a debriefing. Their faces were still grimy, covered in sweat and blood from the recent battles, while the workers themselves were exhausted from the sudden evacuation, having not much time to prepare. An air of failure reigned among them, yet to their surprise, Kyle looked more confident than ever.

“My comrades. We have fought long and hard over the past months. Some of you have been with the Ghosts for three months, others a day. But today, we still managed to clinch an important victory!”

“A victory…?” The Ghosts were all stupefied, exchanging confused glances before one of the more outspoken of them shouted to Kyle. “How is it a victory when we’re in such a state?”

“We may have ‘lost’ the battle, but the war for Versia is in our favor.” Kyle grabbed a nearby metal stick used for cleaning the repeaters, using the sharp end to draw on the ground, etching through the dirt. “Before today, not many knew of our movement. Only those who had been rescued or truly discriminated against had found their way to us. In some aspects, many of you are here solely because of luck.”

Kyle continued tracing, drawing out a rough map of Versia. “Imagine if you quit right now. That at this very moment, this critical juncture in the fate of the nation, you decide that its an impossible fight, and you give up? Think of how the future would be - recall where you came from, what the military have done to you, what Harrison and his men have inflicted onto you. Do you want to go back? Do you want to suffer once more? Do you want your children, your family and your friends to be equally oppressed?”

“We should run! Run away to Proco, to Hwayul, anywhere!” The same outspoken Ghost retorted. “We can carve out and survive in the wild, away from all of this. We have the weapons and tools to do it!”

“And what would you tell your children? What would you tell your grandchildren? That when monsters ruled, you shied away and accepted your fate, running away from between your legs?” Kyle argued back. “It is in times like this that make or break a fighter. Are you willing to be broken, after everything you’ve been put through?”

“But who would join us now? How do we recover what we lost? We’re scattered beyond Tenar now, and it would take a miracle to get back to where we were. It’s impossible!”

Kyle held a small growing smile on his face “Do you not understand? This is the miracle! It’s a miracle that so many were willing to stand up to Harrison, and that with the result of this battle, even more dissatisfied Versians will rally to our banner, join our cause and fight for a free Versia! Who else has stood up to the Versian military and can say ‘I survived’ ? Suddenly, revolution does not seem hopeless, nor does it seem like a death sentence. Your efforts, your bravery, the sacrifices of your comrades are all part of a grand miracle that is now carried on you - on your shoulders! To give up now would be to give up the very reason why you are here in the first place! Remember, remember what is at stake! Recall why you became a Ghost!”

Kyle’s words began to crack the atmosphere of defeat, the Ghosts’ spirits lifting slightly as Kyle continued. “It is through adversity that the pinnacle of humanity is revealed, where the peak of courage, strength and valor is embodied in all of you! Countless times Nest could have crushed us, could have annihilated us, sent all of us back to where we came from. But we stood strong. We stood strong together and said no in the face of utter defeat. We stood strong together to carve our path and make our name be known. For we will not let Versia be overrun by the callous, greedy psychopaths that dominate the government - we will fight! And we will fight no matter where we are: the streets, the hills, the forest, the caves, until our bones creak and our muscles bleed. Even then we shall never give up, because great men fight for something beyond themselves. They fight for a great cause. Do you fight for a great cause!”

“For a free Versia!” A few of Ghosts chanted back.

“Are you going to let a minor defeat set you off this cause?”

“NO!”

“Are you going to let Nest gloat over your defeat?”

“NO!” The Ghosts were beginning to come around, their hearts swayed by the sheer confidence Kyle exuded as well as the belief of their comrades.

“Then STAND UP!” Kyle punched his fist into the air. “STAND UP FOR FREEDOM! For we fight even in death for a better world - the Ghosts of Versia will carry the dreams and hopes of all those who have gone before us, towards a better future!”

“FOR A FREE VERSIA!” The Ghosts stood up en masse and roared in full force, the tent shaking a little from the frenzy and subsequent stomping.

“Good. Gear up. We leave in a day to re-establish ourselves in Desham.” Kyle clenched his fist. “Dismissed!”

With the morale of the Ghosts now heightened significantly, Kyle began to also plan ahead for the relocation. He moved towards the supply tent, only to see a groggy Feldon barely recovering from the headache, a sheepish smile on his face. “Sorry, boss, I uhh kind of missed the speech. Could you say it again for me?”

Kyle ignored Feldon and instead got to work. He had Feldon tally up all the collected supplies, as well as organize them into proper backpacks for the workers to carry. There was no wagon or vehicles of any sort - the wheels would not have been able to traverse the soggy mud and piles of trash scattered all around the Rotten Chamber. Having the encampment did not mean that they were free from a monster attack by either the rock spiders or a salamander, and Kyle needed the workers to be as mobile as possible instead of being bogged down in sludge.

Sasha, too, was slowly recovering, and the hours passed with Kyle restocking everything he needed into his loadout, reloading pellets, and replacing spent arcia crystals. He also used an evacuated arcia etcher to continue crafting explosive projectiles to be utilized in the railguns, serving as his strongest weapon so far.

It was the twelfth hour since they arrived when a sudden loud booming tremor shook the entire cavern, the pillars of trash jostling slightly. Unlike a usual noxious salamander attack, this tremor seemed to come from the chamber itself, the sound of walls shifting and gnashing against each other amidst hidden mechanisms beyond the walls. *That’s not good.*

“What, what’s going on?” Feldon tried to stabilize himself, the shaking enough to knock him over if he did not support his weight on a crate. The Ghosts were all also woken up, scrambling to get their gear and prepare for any incoming fight.

However, after five minutes, the rumbling completely stopped, with no sign of an imminent attack or ambush. Kyle squinted his eyes in suspicion as he looked around the chamber, the environment has not changed in the slightest. *That’s not good.* He knew that this was a Galactic Era ruin, and any activation of a mechanism meant that either a trap was engaged or that defensive physical barriers were being deployed. “Feldon, do we have anyone out there?”

“Except the forward scouts we sent to Desham, no. No one.” Feldon shook his head.

“Sasha, are you good enough to move?”

[Perfectly fine, sir.] Sasha nodded, grabbing her railgun and runic falchion as her two primary weapons.

“Check the exit tunnel we found last time that led to Desham. Make sure it’s still open. Feldon, get all the Ghosts geared up.”

Sasha nodded and left immediately, sprinting through the Rotten Chamber. The encampment went into high alert, some of the Ghosts nervously looking around as the atmosphere became tense. Kyle too donned everything he needed, the exosuit arm still worn on his right arm. Unfortunately, his worst fears became true, Sasha reporting back that the tunnel to Desham had been closed off. [It looks like the tunnel is sealed off by a door.]

“Can it be destroyed? Shoot a railgun projectile at it.”

A dull boom from the distance echoed through the chamber. [No effect, sir. Not even a scratch.]

*I never expected my railgun to damage a Galactic Era wall either way.* “Feldon, you’re with me. Rest of you, stay in this encampment and hold this ground.” Kyle ordered, leaving with Feldon to join Sasha.

A sturdy metallic door had completely sealed off the tunnel, with no apparent electronics panel next to anything. Kyle tried to use his exosuit arm to wrench the door open but could not find a proper grip, the door leaving no gap. He decided not to use any of the skills, especially when the Rotten Chamber was in an unknown state. *For all I know, there could be a new type of creature coming to attack us.*

Still, there was no indication of any trial being initiated in the dungeon, which confused Kyle. He spent a few more minutes at the tunnel’s door, checking for any potential signs while Feldon and Sasha split up a little further, everyone looking for clues. Suddenly, Feldon shouted out to Kyle. “Uhhh, Boss? Was this here before?”

Kyle rushed over to Feldon, noticing a sparkling yellow line that was glowing beneath a shallow pool of sludge. The yellow line zigzagged, seemingly heading straight for the tunnel door, but there was no sign of it on the surface of the door nor on the walls around it. *Where does this line go…?*

Feeling that it was a trap, Kyle traced the line back, but cautiously, not rushing ahead, with Sasha and Feldon bringing up the rear. They could see rock spiders skittering around along the pillars and ceiling of the chamber, though by now, the rock spiders were all far too afraid to fight them, only aggressive when they were near a nest. The yellow line that Kyle followed snaked through the chamber, leading Kyle further and further towards an unexplored part of the rotten chamber, the established arctech lantern route ending.

In the stretching darkness, the glow of the yellow line became more apparent, going off into the horizon toward the depths of the chamber. None of the Ghosts, including Sasha and Feldon, had explored this far, mostly due to the time taken to traverse here. “We’ll need to determine where the line leads. If I’m right, the line should lead us to whatever activated that door closure. Get three squads of Ghosts to come here, and bring enough supplies to set up an intermediate rest point.”

Under Kyle’s orders, a pitstop was setup at the edge of the explored area, a few backpacks hauled to and fro by escorted workers, three squads of Ghosts also lining up. Kyle was not willing to use everyone, unsure of what danger laid ahead. If he had all Ghosts here and they perished, it would make subsequent recovery extremely difficult. Only when he was certain they were ready, did they finally push forward with the investigation.

The unexplored section of the chamber was not that different, but as they traveled along, the pillars of trash subsided more, replaced instead with decaying mounds of fungi, plants, and dead rock spiders stacked up, their flesh being eaten by bacteria, insects, and other opportunistic flora. This section was further from where the sewage and sludge fell, which meant it received the least nutrients.

The mud and sludge gradually decreased in prevalence; instead, they were replaced with the original floor of the chamber, smooth dark green stone tiles with a single yellow line trailing through. Arctech lantern posts were set up every length of the way, and it only took about twenty minutes of walking before they finally came upon a corridor similar to the one they had first used to enter the Rotten Chamber. Its end was unknown, but the yellow line stretched all the way inwards.

“One squad stays here to guard the entrance.” Kyle motioned with his hands. “Two squads follow us in.” They delved into the mysterious corridor, the same dark green stone tiles used to form its surface. However, Kyle suddenly began to notice that the once intricate decorations were suddenly far more recognizable. *I know these drawings.* Even Feldon and Sasha were aware of it, their eyes unable to look away from the beautiful drawings that glittered like stars even with the arctech lantern posts set up in sequence.

The ramifications of the engravings made Kyle pause immediately, having doubts about his plan for the first time in a long while. *The yellow line could be leading us to a trap. If these drawings are the same one I know, then the entire squad of Ghosts may very well be annihilated. I can’t afford that.* The Ghosts did not have the same System skills that Kyle did, and he would not be able to protect them all from what was to come. “Both squads, return to the encampment.”

“Huh?” The Ghosts were confused by the sudden order.

“That’s an order. Only Feldon, Sasha, and I will proceed. This is the best way forward.” Kyle urged, forcing them to retreat back down the corridor.

Feldon and Sasha, too, were stunned by Kyle’s decision. “What’s going on? What’s going to happen?”

“I do not know, but if I’m right, the more people we have with us, the more dangerous it will be,” Kyle murmured cryptically, leaving Feldon and Sasha confused, though they still carried on down the corridor.

The corridor was just as long as the first corridor, though Feldon paid much more attention to the drawings on the walls. “You know, looking at it now, it feels like its a story. Let’s see here… five spheres were carried around in darkness, but one of them was polished too hard…? I think I’m reading this entirely wrong.”

[Sir, can you give us any hint as to what is to come?] Sasha asked telepathically.

“A beast so great that even I may have a hard time killing it. In fact, I’m not entirely sure if we will be able to kill it.” Kyle spoke, Feldon, yelping in fright.

“Then what the hell are we doing? We should turn back, too!”

“No. We need that tunnel exit open, and this yellow line is probably the one activating it. We’re not going to fight the beast; we’re simply going to open the tunnel door. I will not fight the beast head-on unless it is absolutely necessary.”

Feldon gulped instinctively, his legs shivering with each step, while Sasha held a grim expression, checking her railgun again once more to assure herself that she was ready. After walking for another fifteen minutes, the end of the corridor became visible once more, but this time there was a bright light coming from beyond, much unlike the dim ambient luminescence of the algae around.

Kyle squinted his eyes as he entered a new cavern with Feldon and Sasha, the light from the ceiling blinding and forcing his eyes to adjust accordingly. As his vision began to stabilize, he noticed the layout of the cavern was extremely strange. There was almost nothing inside, the chamber completely clean and devoid of any form of life, save for five gigantic pillars that towered more than five stories high, arranged in a pentagram around a central square. There were three other doors placed around the edge of the chamber, all of them sealed save for the corridor from which they came.

At the very center of the square, there too was a single pillar three meters high, except there was a woman tied to it, her arms bound around it while her face was locked in an expression of pain. The lower half of her body was missing, while her ribs seemed to have merged with the pillar itself. Her hair was long enough to stretch to the base of the pillar, clearly showing that she had been here a long time.

Feldon internally shrieked, clutching his repeater as tight to his chest as possible. “Who the fuck is that? What is someone doing down here?” Feldon’s voice could be heard through the chamber, yet the lady was unresponsive, her eyes apparently looking upwards to the bright light.

Kyle looked up at the source of the light before noticing that it was a gigantic arcia crystal, its radiance dazzling while the reflections showed an assortment of colors. He intuitively felt that something was off, but not because of the strange layout. *Weird, those drawings were clearly indicative of an alien ritual. Yet I don’t see any sign of the ritual here. Was it a fake?*”Check the surroundings first. Look out for traps. Pressure plates, that sort.”

The three split up carefully, and each step was measured as they walked through the chamber. There was almost no place to hide, with the granite floor being cleaned. Not even a speck of dust could be found on the floor, as though it had been regularly cleaned. However, there were no other signs of life save for the lady in the center.

“No way in hell we’re going to touch her, are we?” Feldon gingerly asked, but he already knew the answer in his heart. All three of them could see that the yellow line stretched towards her, ending at her pillar itself.

“Get ready for anything,” Kyle warned, but even now, he did not know what was about to happen. Everything here was new to him, and he had no System messages to inform him of what was going on in the first place. He considered using the railgun to blow off the lady in the center, but he was worried about damaging any potential electronics or control mechanism necessary to re-open the exit of the Rotten Chamber. “Sasha, take up a sniper position on the left. Feldon, on the right. If I say run, you run for the exit immediately, no questions asked. Understood?”

Sasha and Feldon nodded, taking up their positions and preparing for the worst. Kyle knew that the moment he approached the lady, something strange was going to happen. *It could be a Trial or worse.* He cautiously approached the square, inching forward slowly while ready to fight at the drop of a hat. The lady did not respond to Kyle’s movements; her gaze locked onto the gigantic crystal embedded into the ceiling.

As Kyle got nearer, he noticed that the lady’s body was not exactly human. Three large glowing marble-like spheres had been placed in her shoulder, chest, and face, and arcia energy was continuously pulsating in and out of her body. Even when Kyle got within a centimeter of her, nothing happened at all. No message popped out, and Kyle didn’t sense any ambush about to happen. *What the hell is going on?*

He investigated the pillar the lady was bound to, noticing that it was devoid of any drawings like the one he had seen in the corridor. Based on his estimates, the pillar seemed to have been placed here fairly recently, about a century ago or so. Going around the back of the pillar, he spotted an electronics panel, the yellow line disappearing into it. Flicking the panel open, he saw a simple switch box; some of the switches were activated, while others were not. Using his knowledge of circuitry from his former life, he carefully ascertained which switch toggled the yellow line.

With a flick of the correct switch, the yellow line instantly turned off, a low rumbling sound just like before activating. “Yes, we did it!” Feldon cheered but quickly clutched his mouth in case he woke up the lady. Still, despite Kyle’s actions and Feldon’s impromptu celebration, the lady did not react at all, the arcia energy still pulsating steadily.

*This place is far too strange.* “Let’s head back quickly.” Kyle was about to step away from the pillar when he saw a red line shoot out from the pillar, but instead of tracing back the path of the yellow line, it shot forward to another door on the opposite end, opening it to reveal yet another corridor. He quickly aimed his railgun at the door, expecting a creature or an attack to come out from it, but to his surprise, there was nothing at all, the red line trailing off into the distance as well.

“We don’t need to follow that red line, do we? We already got the tunnel open!” Feldon urged, and Kyle agreed, too. It wasn’t worth the risk, especially when he did not know what to expect further into the dungeon. *I should come back later and figure out what is happening. After I control Versia.*

Feldon let out a sigh of relief as they retreated back down the corridor without incident, though Kyle remained completely clueless as to why no trap had been sprung. *I was certain that something terrible was going to happen there… is it because of my status as an Administrator?*

As they reached the exit of the corridor, another low rumbling could be heard, though the yellow line did not appear again. “Back to the encampment, then we should be ready to move out. Pack up the intermediate point. Send one squad to check that the tunnel is open.” Kyle got the Ghosts back on track, with the forward squad confirming that the tunnel’s door was now indeed open. However, as soon as they began to move away, a sudden bolt of lighting erupted without any warning, lancing through the corridor they had just come out from. The lighting bolt turned out to be a sword, the sonic boom blasting the Ghosts apart while it tore through whoever was unfortunate to be in front of its path, searing a gaping hole through their bodies and killing three.

The sword was aimed right at Kyle, who quickly used his exosuit arm to deflect it, sending the sword spiraling out of the way and lodging itself into the ground. The sudden attack caught Kyle off-guard, only now noticing that there was a lone man approaching from behind, three swords strapped to his back while he had a sword in each arm. He walked calmly as the surviving Ghosts fanned out while the workers scrambled for safety, arcs of lightning running up and down the swords as the lone man glared at Kyle with a killing gaze.

“Trying to steal my dungeon and leave? That’s not very nice of you now, is it?”

# Chapter 117 - Transcendent

Before the lone man could wind up another attack, Kyle brought his railgun up to bear, firing a single explosive round right at him. Without looking for the impact, Kyle quickly signaled with his hand for the Ghosts to take cover. Their battle training over the last few months kicked in like clockwork, each of them diving out of the way and positioning themselves in a staggered form.

Before the explosive projectile reached the lone man, he raised his left hand and swung downwards in a single slice, cutting the projectile in half. The two halves of the round sailed past him, exploding behind him and illuminating his outline while his short, curly hair fluttered forward in the ensuing shockwave. He wore a foreign outfit with sparse armor: pauldrons, elbow and knee guards, khaki pants with a frilled white shirt befitting that of nobility, not a single stain seen on the shirt itself. Two belts secured the three lightning swords holstered on his back, while sparks of lightning continuously arced between his fingers.

As he recovered into a standing posture once more, he noticed that all of the Ghosts and Kyle were already scattered across the chamber, fanning out around in a zig-zag pattern that ensured complete coverage of wherever the lone man moved if he took even a step forward. “Interesting…” The lone man muttered under his breath, his eyes cold and calculating as he analyzed the battlefield.

Kyle did not strike again, knowing the railgun was useless if it did not work in a concentrated strike. [Sasha, flank left slowly, and stay further back. I need you to snipe him while I take the front.]

[Understood.]

“Come on, is this how a transcendent fights, by hiding behind normal humans?! Pathetic!” The lone man called out, his voice clearly directed at Kyle. Feldon had a confused look, but Kyle’s expression darkened. This was the first time he had heard anyone other than him talk about transcendents out loud, save for Yona before. Instead of replying, he readied his railgun once more, loading in another round.

“Judging from the way you act… Bekin? Is that you? Well, whatever. Don’t blame me for helping myself to these bags of EXP.” A blinding clap of thunder erupted as a lightning sword impaled through Feldon’s lower abdomen, the sparking blade piercing through the large rock. The lightning itself seared the flesh, burning it electrically while the hilt knocked Feldon back and sent him tumbling back.

“Attack!” Kyle roared, the Ghosts all firing in unison as Kyle himself fired yet another railgun round at the transcendent. The transcendent’s eyes glinted with power while he drew one of the swords from his back to replace the one he had thrown. Sparks erupted from the edges of his body as he dashed around as fast as lightning itself, each step igniting and searing the ground with booming sonic claps. His movement was hard to hit, the second railgun explosive round sailing harmlessly past him. The first Ghost nearby barely had any time to react to the transcendent’s attack, only watching the sudden appearance of a lightning sword swinging towards him, his vision swirling as his head was cut cleanly off, blood still spurting through the neck stump as his body collapsed.

One by one, the Ghosts fell, most not even knowing what had hit them, while the transcendent carved a bloody path of fury and thunder through them, slaughtering five in just a few seconds with his dual-wielding lightning swords. Just as the transcendent was about to carve up another Ghosts, alarm bells rang in his head as he sensed two railgun rounds approaching him from different angles, intending to pincer him. He leaped upward with grace, slashing cleanly through the two rounds in sequence like a hot knife through butter, the explosions blasting outwards harmlessly on both sides.

*I’m losing too many men!* Kyle needed them to take Desham and train new recruits - letting this transcendent slaughter all of them would make the bulk of his Versian expedition meaningless. “Retreat!” He roared to the Ghosts charged forward in front, his presence immediately forcing the transcendent to turn around. With a single sonic clap, Kyle saw the transcendent appearing right in front of his face, a dangerous right uppercut swing aimed right at his arm.

Kyle hurriedly used the railgun to block, the sparks and heat of the lightning sword incinerating the wooden stock. “Wait a minute… you’re not Bekin!” The transcendent exclaimed in surprise, as if he wasn’t in an important battle at all. “Are you a new contestant sent by Mother?”

Without replying, Kyle lunged forward, using the butt of the railgun to nail the transcendent in the head. Kyle half-expected the hit not to land, but unexpectedly, the butt crushed against the transcendent’s jaw, sending him staggering backward and buying time to recover. The Ghosts were more than willing to comply with Kyle’s retreat order, quickly moving away back to the encampment. They picked up Feldon as well on their way back, while Kyle and Sasha remained behind. *I need a better weapon.* [Sasha, runic falchion!]

The falchion was hurled through the air, Kyle clasping it in his hand and pushing up against the transcendent, slinging the railgun behind him. Sasha, too, fired one more railgun round, but a sudden burst of energy out from the transcendent sent Kyle and the railgun round spiraling outwards more than five meters. Kyle tumbled on the ground, recovering quickly only to see an infuriated expression on the transcendent’s face.

“Here I am asking you simple questions, and this how you treat me? Who the fuck are you? What clan are you from? I’m going to lodge a fucking complaint against whoever bred you.” The transcendent ranted, stomping up towards the defending Kyle in a childish tantrum. “You better give me a good answer before I wipe you off the face of this fucking continent!”

Kyle gritted his teeth, preparing for an incoming attack, but soon he noticed that the transcendent’s eyes were locked on a corpse behind Kyle, the transcendent’s face an expression of pure shock. “Seriously?! Did you kill all of the salamanders here? WHAT THE ACTUAL FUCK?! Why the hell would you even do that? ARGGGGGGGHHH, YOU JUST OVERTURNED MY ENTIRE EXP GRINDING PLAN!” The transcendent rubbed his head in frustration.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Kyle still kept the runic falchion at the ready in his right hand, his left slowly drawing the Tattoo Knife from its holster without alerting the transcendent.

“Don’t try to fuck with me! I saw you flip that damn switch at the control system, and you got a fucking exosuit arm! You think I was bred yesterday?” The transcendent shot back, but he still did not launch an attack. ” Everyone knows it’s extremely rude to crash into someone’s else dungeon! Did you not fucking check the notice site? I’ve already booked this dungeon for two more years! You got ten seconds to tell me exactly which fucking clan bred you! Ten!”

“I really don’t know what you’re talking about!” Kyle blurted out. [Sasha, get ready. I might need you to come down to fight. This won’t be easy.]

[He doesn’t look like he is experienced in dealing with humans. We can take him.]

“Are you serious?” The transcendent squinted his eyes at Kyle.

“Yes. I’m just a dungeon explorer, that’s all. Heard there were relics.” Kyle bluffed his way, trying to get the transcendent to lower his guard. From his viewpoint, the transcendent was full of openings, yet Kyle knew he could not get a clean strike on the man even if he launched a surprise attack due to the transcendent’s speed. *That lightning speed must be a skill. What is the cooldown and duration? If I can figure it out…*

Weirdly enough, the transcendent began to grin from ear to ear. “A dungeon explorer? That’s great! Perfect for what I needed. I’m a bit away from Level 30 for my Race Upgrade - You’ll do just fine. No hard feelings.” Without warning, the transcendent lifted his feet again, a lightning arc causing a sonic clap between his shoes and the ground, the angle of the blast enough to propel him forward at an alarming speed.

The sudden attack caught Kyle off-guard as the transcendent swung a lightning sword with a cross slash from the left, threatening to cut off Kyle’s neck. The runic falchion blade blocked the incoming attack in the nick of time, though the kinetic energy of the blow sent Kyle skidding along the mud, his feet drawing lines in the sludge.

Kyle had no time to recover, seeing another slice headed towards his head. Instead of dodging, Kyle unexpectedly took a forward right into the transcendent’s inner arm radius, ducking to tackle the man’s body using his shoulder, trying to fling him over in a grapple.

The transcendent gagged as the force of his own movement worked against him, Kyle’s shoulder driving into his gap with full force. However, as soon as Kyle tried to grab the arm and complete the ground slam, a shocking high voltage current lanced through from the elbow guard into Kyle’s body. Waves of nerve-numbing pain arced through his body, causing Kyle’s muscles to temporarily cramp up.

Both of them staggered backward, each of them hurt from the exchange and trying to recover. Unfortunately, the transcendent recovered fast, about to rush again at Kyle when yet another railgun round blasted towards the transcendent from behind, Sasha having repositioned. The transcendent grunted as he aborted his attack, turning around to slice the railgun round once more. “I should kill this irritating fly fir-”

Before the transcendent could complete his sentence, Kyle was already on the attack, stabbing the runic falchion at the transcendent’s back. Immediately, the two remaining swords holstered on the back of the transcendent burst out, blocking the runic falchion and trying to knock it out of Kyle’s hand. However, Kyle’s grip was rock solid, eventually able to overpower the two blocking swords, but another sonic clap had the transcendent retreat to a safe distance from both Sasha and Kyle.

[Sir, I’m out of explosive rounds. I only had three.] Sasha said through her telepathic channel with Kyle.

[Switch to medium range with the repeater. I just need you to pin him down and distract him.] Kyle held the falchion up again in a fighting posture, though he noticed the edges of the falchion were slightly burnt from the lightning swords themselves.

“Since you’re unwilling to tell me which clan you’re from, then I can only consider you to be a rogue transcendent.” The transcendent twirled his two swords expertly, while the other two floated in the air by some form of unseen control attached to his body via an ever-changing arc of lightning like a tether. “Either I kill you, or I beat you hard enough and drag you back to Mother to sort you out, and then I kill you. How would you like it done?”

“How about neither?” *Intimidation Aura!*

The effects kicked in immediately on the transcendent, causing him to stutter and take a step back involuntarily. At the drop of a hat, both Kyle and Sasha kicked into action, Sasha firing a stream of pellets while Kyle stormed forward, closing the gap in three large strides. This time, Kyle aimed at the legs, chopping downward with all his might to stop the transcendent from moving as much.

The two floating swords kicked into action instantaneously as though they were automatic, one spinning in a furious circle to block the incoming pellets, while the other parried Kyle’s falchion even while the transcendent was still rooted to the spot with fear. Activating the exosuit arm, Kyle overpowered the automatic floating sword easily, pushing it away and slicing through the arc of lightning that was its tether. The clean cut had the automatic sword spiral out of control, dropping to the floor uselessly.

Kyle didn’t have another chance to swing the falchion, the transcendent suddenly recovering from the effects of the Intimidation Aura and swinging back. They exchanged blows and parries, Kyle utilizing his runic falchion and Tattoo Knife to go toe to toe with the transcendent. While the transcendent seemed to have the upper hand with his speed and lightning effects, Kyle was slowly winning the fight, cornering the transcendent inch by inch, exposing the transcendent’s lack of combat experience against humans.

Each swing and slash saw the transcendent begin to panic little by little, the transcendent taking a few steps back bit by bit. Just as Kyle was finally about to land a blow with his Tattoo Knife, the aura around the transcendent suddenly changed, the once white dazzling lightning switching to a red hue. “ENOUGH!” The transcendent bellowed with anger; another pulse of energy forced Kyle and Sasha to be pushed back.

Kyle slammed the falchion into the mud, using it to stop him from being pushed back too far. The pressure suddenly relented, Kyle looking up to see that the last automatic sword was gone now, and the transcendent merging both swords in his hands together, clasping tightly to form a larger greatsword, one masked in an eerie red hue that crackled with lightning energy too.

“Let’s see how much EXP you’re worth!” An evil grin erupted on the transcendent’s face, his two hands swinging the swords downwards in a single slash. Kyle leaped out of the wave, a wave of red lighting bursting outwards in an energy slice that carved the floor easily, tossing up rock, dirt, and sludge alike into an incinerating column of smoke. Kyle glanced behind, looking at the burning trail. *I’m not taking that head-on.*

“And you too!” The transcendent did not forget about Sasha, swinging at her as well as she ducked out of the way, a horizontal slice sending a lightning crack that burst against the walls of the chambers, chipping it slightly. The panels of the wall fell apart, revealing intricate electronics and sensors with beeping lights inside.

Kyle and Sasha backed off from the battle zone, dodging and weaving through the slashes. The transcendent was more than content to give chase; the battlefield slowly shifted closer and closer toward the center of the Rotten Chamber. Each slash of the greatsword saw pillars of trash that had stood for centuries come collapsing down, electricity sparking between the metallic bits of the refuse as they were overcharged by the lightning.

[Sasha, get him to strike the wall again!] Kyle urged, while his eyes darted about the piles of trash. Ignoring the broken bodies of rock spiders, scattering red moths and scampering insects, he spotted a long, twisted steel rebar pole lodged in the trash. Sheathing his runic falchion and picking it up, he watched as Sasha taunted the transcendent, firing more pellets at him.

“You irritating little shit! Do you really think those pellets are going to do anything?!” The transcendent roared, unleashing a slash at Sasha, who again leaped out of the way. Just like before, the slash broke the panels on the wall, unveiling electronics embedded within.

Before the transcendent could wind up another swing, Kyle lunged at him, jabbing forward with his Tattoo Knife, expecting the swings of the transcendent to be slower given the larger size of the sword. Unfortunately, the transcendent reacted as quickly as before, easily parrying the hit, the Tattoo Knife being cut cleanly through by the empowered greatsword. *Shit!*

Kyle leapt back, the transcendent not letting up as he gave chase, swinging at Kyle while Kyle backpedalled towards the wall, dodging and weaving through the energy slices thrown at him. With his exosuit arm, Kyle gritted his teeth and smashed the steel rebar pole into the electronics, before ducking out of the way again as another slash struck where he had been standing just a second ago.

“Idiot, are you trying to destroy the dungeon? There’s a limit to how much - GUH!” The transcendent was caught in the middle of taunting, the arcing lightning that was gathered around his body suddenly being absorbed by the steel rebar pole, the pole acting like a lightning rod. The transcendent gasped and struggled to move, but the lightning attraction was drawing him back, sucking up all of his excess lightning energy to an unknown ground.

Lines and lights began to flicker on in the dungeon, absorbing power bit by bit. The originally dim lightning of the Rotten Chamber was replaced by bright floodlights enhanced by the transcendent’s energy. Sasha and Kyle watched on as the transcendent twitched and flailed helpless, before the lightning finally died out, his body collapsing to the floor.

[NOW!] Kyle roared in his mind as he lunged forward, drawing his runic falchion, with Sasha also bringing her rifle to bear. However, a sudden recognizable sonic clap erupted from the transcendent’s body. Kyle immediately stopped his attack, swiveling around to block a white lightning sword that slashed against the blade of the falchion, drawing sparks.

“What kind of a transcendent would I be if I couldn’t stop my own skill?” The transcendent smirked, having lured Kyle inwards. “You’re not the first idiot to try that on me!” Kyle was pushed back by the transcendent’s sudden strength, though it was not as powerful as the red lightning transformation that he had experienced just now.

Kyle stepped back, with Sasha continuing to fire. Instead of an automatic sword blocking the pellets, the transcendent simply aimed his hands outwards, an arc of lightning lancing out towards her and nailing her right in the chest, sending her spiraling onto a heap of trash. “Enough bullshit. You’re strong. I give you that. You and I, one on one. No butlers, and certainly no dumbass mules.” The transcendent spat with derision at Sasha’s collapsed but still breathing body. “If that’s all you got, then you deserved to die anyway!”

A bolt of lightning shot out towards Kyle from the transcendent’s hand too, threatening to knock him out as well. However, Kyle’s reaction time was faster, allowing him to use the falchion to deflect most of it. Some of the residual shock still ran through his body, the voltage looking for a way out through his boots.

The transcendent stepped forward once more, unleashing a brutal, vicious combo with his default dual-wielded lightning swords, returning to his standard form. Kyle blocked and parried, only left with the runic falchion now that his Tattoo Knife was broken in half. Kyle had to utilize the railgun on his back to fend off a few attacks, expertly twisting and using his body in its most efficient manner. Unlike their first exchange, Kyle could tell that the transcendent was slowly learning how to fight back as well. *He’s learning too fast!*

Blood thumped in his ears while his muscles strained to the limit, each counterattack pushing his endurance to the maximum, each block numbing his bombs. His thighs screamed for rest with each step, but Kyle clenched his teeth hard, knowing that this was the hardest he had ever been pushed since coming to Raktor. Memories of his vigorous decades of Dynasty martial training, as well as a century of skirmishes as a crime lord, began to flood his brain, his mental fortitude stronger than ever.

Kyle’s aura began to grow more menacing by the minute, each foot he stepped forward unleashing a domineering aura that even the confident transcendent found hard to ignore. As the transcendent tried to rationalize what was happening, he was suddenly hit in the arm by the barrel tip of the railgun, a momentary lapse in judgment allowing Kyle to get an attack in. Before the transcendent could figure it out, it was already too late. Kyle’s fighting style completely changed, and his movements were now unperceivable. Whatever moves the transcendent had learned to counter Kyle were now useless, Kyle utilizing his legs more than ever, relying on his exosuit arm to block some of the grazing hits of the lightning sword.

“Dammit!” The transcendent tried to take a step back to create some distance, but Kyle stepped in even closer, his fighting style changing once again as he swapped over to his fists and knees, swapping to an extremely close combat style. A few hits landed on the transcendent’s thighs and chest, causing him to stagger back. In a blink of an eye, Kyle’s movements were switched up once more, light on his feet as he jabbed in and out, as light as a feather.

Even as the transcendent tried to use his sonic clap movement, Kyle was already for where he was going to appear, either launching a strike or defending aptly. *I know the durations between sonic claps now. I do not know the maximum number of uses, but it is every ten seconds.* Kyle kept this gap in his mind, utilizing it for his own benefit. Every time it hit ten seconds, Kyle would relent a little, allowing a gap for the transcendent to use it and then predict his movements.

As the battle drew on, it became even more apparent that the transcendent was on the losing foot. None of his lightning skills were working any longer on Kyle. Desperate, the transcendent used another sonic clap, this time launching himself high into the air unexpectedly. “RAYNER!!!” The transcendent roared out a cry for help, startling Kyle. *There’s another transcendent?! I have to take him out now! Penchant for Violence!*

Kyle had been taking a measured approached, unsure of what other tricks the transcendent had in the bag. However, if another transcendent were to join in the fray, Kyle would not be sure how he could deal with it, especially with Sasha knocked out for the count and Feldon severely injuried. If he wanted to strike, it was now.

The transcendent fell back to the ground, his eyes widening as he realized he was unable to dodge Kyle’s mid-air attack, his sonic clap on cooldown. He could only watch as Kyle launched himself up into the air as well, aiming his exosuit right fist at him. The transcendent hurriedly blocked the incoming punch with his dual swords, but unexpectedly, Kyle’s strength was increased tremendously, the blow sending him spiraling back, slamming into pillars of trash in sequence before tumbling onto the floor in an injured heap.

Before the transcendent could get up, Kyle was already on top of him, delivering one more blow that smashed the jaw of the transcendent in, concussing him. The transcendent dropped the lightning swords, both of them losing their lightning effects. Kyle immediately used his exosuit arm and crushed both lightning swords with his exosuit arm, unwilling to let the enemy have it any longer.

The transcendent was grabbed by the collar of his white shirt and dragged along the muddy ground into a nearby cave, his consciousness fading in and out. As his vision slowly stabilized back, he soon began to struggle hard. He gripped onto Kyle’s back, trying to send a voltage in to shock Kyle. However, Kyle’s body seemed almost unaffected by it, Kyle simply punching him in the back of the head again.

Kyle quickly forced the door at the end of the cave open, revealing the same laser prison cell that he had discovered on his first exploration of the Rotten Chamber. He immediately tossed the transcendent into one of the cells, plugging in the battery and activating the laser cutters. The transcendent was still groggy, struggling to get up to his feet, when he saw Kyle walking away from the cell. He tried to summon a lightning arc from his hand, but he somehow just couldn’t. “What… what happened to my System?! What the fuck did you do!”

A loud tremoring boom resounded through the cell, alerting Kyle to danger outside. Kyle didn’t care to reply to the transcendent, leaving him in the prison cell while he rushed out, tapping his arctech radio. *Is the other transcendent already here?!* [Report, status on Ghosts!]

[Sir, we’re under attack! An unknown person is breaking into our encampment.] A frantic Ghost voice came over the radio.

*Shit!* However, Kyle did not rush over just yet, instead heading to Sasha and checking up on her. She was still unconscious, the lightning blow having reignited her injuries from the battle with Nest just 12 hours ago. Kyle quickly poured a health potion down her mouth but did not linger around anymore. He sprinted as fast as he could back to the encampment, seeing fire and smoke already spiraling in the distance, rivaling the pillars of trash.

The encampment was a disaster, with most of the supplies damaged and blown out, stored explosives having been ignited by what seemed to be stray pellet fire. A dozen Ghosts were still fighting in the midst of the encampment; some of them had already died on the spot, their bodies strewn across the ravaged tents and broken crates, workers scrambling to salvage what they could and evacuate further.

In the very center, amidst a burning flame, a strange man stood, dressed in a full khaki explorer-style outfit that was slightly similar to what the first transcendent was wearing. However, Kyle could already see something different - the Ghosts have already hit him directly a few times, yet he was still standing, unhurt. His human skin had peeled off to reveal a metallic robotic case underneath, deflecting any pellets that the Ghosts sent at him, even those that had been empowered by a poor arcia crystal.

The strange man’s eyes locked onto Kyle, ignoring the barrage of pellets that only seemed to tickle him. “Where is Master Soren?” The strange man spoke with a monotone voice, confirming Kyle’s assumptions. *He’s a cyborg! I have to end it fast before he learns my moves!* Kyle had decades of experience fighting them in the Galactic Era, knowing that they were extremely dangerous and far easier to train than the regular, un-modified humans. Each second he wasted would lead to more problems, and he was already accumulating losses far more than he could accept.

The moment Kyle took a step forward, the cyborg raised his arm and launched forward a green dart. Kyle raised his exosuit arm to block the dart, only for the dart to suddenly light up and send a surge of arcia energy into the arm. The arm began to transform into ice at the point of impact, forcing Kyle to quickly take off the arm.

“You’re not registered in the databa-” The cyborg quickly raised both his arms, blocking a hit from Kyle’s runic falchion. Before the cyborg could move, Kyle already lunged forward with his other free hand, clutching onto the robotic chest of the cyborg and gripping as hard as he could.

*This Is My Turf!* Instead of pushing the cyborg aside, Kyle toggled the friend-or-foe setting of the barrier to only allow steel in. The strength of the barrier began to rip the cyborg apart, and every other alloy and element within began to strain as they were stretched. The cyborg’s voice became garbled immediately while its body was split apart into two, the various electronics, wires, and sensors, as well as motors, all being stripped from its steel frame.

The cyborg’s human skin itself was also elongated as it tried to cling onto the skin, but its body could not respond under the sheer intensity of the barrier. Before long, the entire innards of the cyborg have been evacuated by the barrier, leaving only just a skeleton of the cyborg behind.

MG404: [System Message | Killed ‘Rayner’, +500 EXP. ]

Kyle huffed and panted, tossing the frame of the cyborg aside onto the ground. He used his arm to wipe the grime and dirt off his face, noticing that it was stained with blood too. He had suffered a few hits from the transcendent during the exchange, and thankfully, this cyborg was far easier to deal with. He could have used the barrier skill on the other transcendent, but it was far too dangerous to use a high cooldown skill to an ambiguous outcome. *Looks like I was right to pace out the usage of my skills.*

“Clean up the encampment and pack all of this into a sack. We’ll move in by the end of the day. It’s far too dangerous to stay here.” Kyle motioned to the scattered electronics and sensors of the cyborg. “Get Sasha back here and use all potions now, do not ration them. We need to be at our best.” He didn’t know if there would be another transcendent coming or not, so he made up his mind to move as quickly as possible. However, he still had one more thing to do.

Returning back to the laser prison cell, he entered to see ‘Master Soren’ gingerly using his fingers to try and inch out between the gaps of the laser fence that made up his cell, aiming for the nearby exposed panel, though it was just out of reach. The moment Soren spotted Kyle enter, he immediately recoiled, scrambling back as far away into the cell as possible.

Kyle walked up to the cell, unexpectedly unplugging the battery from the cell’s panel and disabling the laser fence. Soren’s eyes widened in confusion, carefully watching as Kyle stepped into the cell. The same sudden loss of strength could be felt, but Kyle had been expecting it, his nerves steeled against the decrease in stats. Without warning, Soren lunged forward, throwing a punch at Kyle as hard as he could. The punch was stopped just before it hit Kyle’s face, Kyle clenching hard onto it.

“So you think you could beat me when I don’t have a System,” Kyle smirked, grabbing Soren by the neck and slamming his knee into Soren’s guts. Soren gagged as he collapsed onto the floor while Kyle’s hand clenched tightly onto Soren’s head, squeezing through his hair and lifting him up to be face to face with Kyle.

“I got bad news for you, kid. The System isn’t what makes me strong. I am what makes the System strong. Now, I can either kill you, or you can start talking, and then I’ll kill you. How would you like it done?”

# Chapter 118 - Prison

“How about neither?” Soren grinned, the transcendent still cocky even though his teeth was bloodied and he was bruised all over his body. “Soon enough, Rayner is going to come and kick your ass, you filthy rogue cunt.” He spat with derision, earning him another slam into the ground, his mouth eating the centuries-old dirt and soot coating the cell’s floor.

“I already killed your cyborg.” Kyle stated clearly. “I guess I will have to kill you as well.”

“Pfft. You can’t have killed Rayner. Like you actually dare to kill someone of- ARGGGGGGGGGGGGGGHHHH” Soren let out a harrowing scream as Kyle chopped deep into Soren’s left wrist with the runic falchion, the metal biting into the bone and severing nerves. Soren struggled and writhe on the ground, but a firm boot from Kyle’s soles held the flailing transcendent in place as Kyle steadily began sawing away, his normal strength not enough to cut cleanly through the transcendent’s bones.

“WAIT, WAIT, WAIT, I’LL TELL YOU! PLEASE! STOP!” Soren devolving into a sobbing mess, his words turning into whimpers of pain just like any scared teenager. Kyle relented, lifting his falchion out as blood spurt out of the wound, Soren immediately clasping it tightly towards his chest, red stains spreading across his white frilly shirt rapidly.

“Glad we’re on the same page.” Kyle flicked the falchion, the blood splattering off the blade in an arc. “Now, I’m going to ask some questions, and you will answer. Clear?”

Soren nodded vigorously in response, as Kyle began to twirl the falchion around expertly while pacing across the cell.

“The cyborg called you Master Soren. How many cyborgs do you have here?” Kyle wanted to ascertain the level of enemy he was fighting with first.

“Just the one.” Soren murmured, wincing due to the intermittent jolting pain through his exposed wrist bone, his left hand still dangling slightly. Interestingly, Kyle noticed that Soren’s wounds was beginning to regenerate, even without the System itself. *Clearly genetically modified.*

Instead of questioning any further, Kyle raised his falchion, preparing to chop again when Soren held out his one good hand in surrender, waving frantically as he backpedalled away from Kyle. “WAIT! WAIT! I’m not lying! We’re only allowed to take one with us!”

*Allowed?* “Who ‘allowed’ you? Who makes the rules?”

Soren stared at Kyle as if Kyle was the dumbest idiot to have ever lived, before his eyes landed on the runic falchion once more, gulping instinctively. “Mother, of course. Who else?”

“Who is this… Mother?”

“Mother is Mother. I don’t know how else to say it…” Soren looked around nervously, instinctively already preparing to shield himself from another possible attack. “I’ve only met her once, and it wasn’t in person! I swear! I never seen her face before!”

*So a virtual meeting. Holograms? A.I.?* Kyle did not rule out the possibility of this ‘Mother’ being a super intellgience or a synthetic lifeform, hidden away on this planet. His pondering expression was taken for fear, Soren gaining a slight bit of confidence, a smile slowly growing on Soren’s face.

“Now you know what you’re dealing with, huh? Even if you are from beyond the Great Waves, you should know very well who Mother is!” Soren gleefully taunted. “Once I get out of this dungeon, Mother will know about you and send people to slaughter you!”

Kyle only had an incredulous look for the hapless Soren. “Get out of the dungeon? You’re not going anywhere.”

“Oh yeah?! It’s been already twenty mintues since you disabled my System - any second now and you’ll never see me again!” Soren gritted his teeth, his face straining as though he was trying to activate a skill. His face reddened with exhaustion, before exhaling loudly and trying again, Kyle simply watching on in amusement. “This… this is not possible… I never heard of a Skill that can disable a System for longer than twenty minutes! I… I must have been counting right… I… Right! This must be a test! You’re a test sent by Moth-”

Soren’s words were replaced by another scream, this time Kyle jabbing into the calf, penetrating through the bone and ripping through tendons. The transcendent was a pitful sight, clutching both his dangling left hand and wounded leg as he keeled over onto the floor, whatever hallucination or assumptions he had about this being a test evaporating immediately.

“Are we done playing around?” Kyle glared, not a fan of wasting time. “If you’re not going to answer, then I’ll find someone else who will.”

“WAIT! WAIT! No one else is coming to this dungeon, not when I’ve booked it for two years!” Soren pleaded frantically. “It’s the rule of the Wardens!”

“The Wardens…?”

“Yes, the Wardens, and if you want to know about them, you got to keep me safe at least!”

“Trying to bargain with me?” Kyle raised his falchion once more, Soren immediately bowing low and placing his head on the ground in apology.

“No, no, not at all! But if you kill me, you will lose your only source of information about who the Wardens is! Isn’t that what you wanted to find out? I’ll answer all your questions too, as long as you swear to keep me safe. Transcendent’s honor!”

“Whether or not you live is something for me to decide, not for you to haggle.”

“I-”

“Start talking, or my decision to keep you alive may change rapidly.”

Soren gulped, hurriedly explaining. “The Wardens is the association of all System Users on Continent of Nedrasa!”

*All?!* Kyle was internally shocked, but he continued to remain stoic, not letting Soren see his emotions. “Go on. What were you doing in the dungeon?”

“Every five years, the Wardens choose the next candidate to join the ranks of real certified Wardens. Each clan can only have a few spots each year, and there’s an age limit too. I got the dungeon to train up for the final arena that determines eligibility. It’s a known fact that you need a high Level to participate in it.”

“You mentioned a person named Bekin during the fight. Who is that, your sibiling? How many sibilings do you have?”

“I don’t know, there’s dozens of us, I never really bother to chec-”

“How many, and give me the names of all those you know!” Kyle pressed.

“Alright, alright! Bekin, Liyana,… the rest I only know by their assigned digits!”

*So the Wardens have a program of sending candidates out into the world, but I haven’t seen any till now.* Kyle breathed a sigh of relief. *It’s a good thing I had this prison cell, otherwise my presence would be alerted to the Wardens.* He certainly didn’t want to deal with another unknown group tracking him down. *Best to stay hidden for now.* “And this arena happens in two years from now?”

“Well, three years, actually.” Soren began to massaging his recovering wound, the scab already forming over the shin, while his left hand was slowly regaining its nerves connection. “I was planning to grind for two more years, then get out to kill some bags.”

Kyle pondered for a moment. “How do you get the System? Does every one of your siblings have it?”

“Of course not - the System isn’t given lightly. Only to suitable participants willing to fight for candidacy. Except Bekin. No idea why he got the System, but he certainly isn’t the brightest of the bunch.”

“I don’t give two shits about Bekin.” Kyle sternly warned. “Tell me how do you receive the System.”

“Frankly, I don’t know. I didn’t do any special procedure or not, I just had it one day when I woke up in my room. Wasn’t based on age or anything - as far as I can tell, the System is entirely meritocratic.”

*Strange, seems like the Wardens do not have a handle on the System as well. This means they are not as powerful as I thought they were.* Kyle originally postulated the Wardens to be the true masters behind the System, but its clear from Soren’s surprise at the laser prison cell as well as their inability to implement the System in all of their siblings that the Wardens was simply a group of System Users at best. Still, he did not want to tangle with them, making up in his mind that Soren was never going to leave this prison cell. *Though I don’t need to tell him that yet.* “Why did you attack my group immediately?”

“The dungeon was already booked by me! It’s known that anyone trespassing, I have the full right to kill! Bag or no bag. And you being a rogue transcendent means theoretically I have to either capture you or kill you on sight as well. Can’t have System Users going wild around Nedrasa.” Soren shrugged, not bothered in the slightest by his decision.

“Who is charge of the Warden and its rules? Mother?”

“For a rogue transcendent sent from the Great Waves, you’re completely out of the loop. Just how bad is your information gathering?”

“Answer. The. Question.”

“The Archivist! The Archivist!”

“Who is that?”

“I don’t know, I never met him too!”

“I don’t believe you. You never met this ‘Mother’ and you never met the ‘Archivist’ too?”

“It’s true! For the Archivist, no one has seen him for the last thirty years!”

*Something less to worry about.* “How many System Users on the continent right now?”

“Uhhh… I don’t know the exact number… maybe a hundred? five hundred?”

Kyle groaned internally. Clearly Soren was a fledgling in the Wardens. If he was telling the truth, the information he had was extremely limited at best, and not of use. It was as if the Warden’s information security protocol was airtight in the event one of their candidates were to be caught by enemies. The only assurance Kyle had was that there would no way of the Wardens knowing that he had just attacked one of their members. *As long as they don’t come, we’re fine. I can’t have another group messing my plans up.*

Kyle also did not want to mess with a group of System Users five hundred men strong, clearly a deadly force to be reckoned with. There didn’t seem to be any more information he could wring out of Soren that he didn’t already ask. He contemplated killing Soren right now to tie up loose ends, but Kyle was never one to give up a free resource when it was ripe for the taking. *I always wondered how a System User like me would react to an arcia tattoo. Would their body be able to handle it? Would they be able to resist? And what’s the limits of their tolerance?*

A captured System user was far too valuable to simply slaughter off - Kyle knew that if he could bring Soren back to the Oracle Chamber, much more information on his circumstances as well as his understanding of how to defeat transcendents would increase dramatically. However, he also had a timeline to meet, needing to move to Desham as soon as possible before Nest found out about the fourth layer and so on.

Before he decided on a next step, he suddenly kicked Soren over, before rummaging through Soren’s pockets and stripping all of the armor away, making sure Soren had nothing to defend himself with. In the midst of the pockets in Soren’s explorer pants were mouldy crumbs of breads, a few tin cans of food, and a strange looking dark green stone key, something Kyle felt he recognized before.

“Hey! That key is mine!” Soren lunged for Kyle’s hand, but Kyle simply slapped him away, sending him sprawling into the center of the cell while he walked out. The System was restored to Kyle as he reactivated the laser fence, preventing Soren from escaping the cell at all. “YOU SAID YOU WERE GOING TO KEEP ME SAFE!”

“I am. This is the safest place by far. Don’t worry, I’ll keep the door closed for you when I leave.” Kyle grinned as he matched the key against the previously locked heavy door vault, the dark green key fitting in nicely to Soren’s horror.

“THAT LOOT IS MINE! MINE I TELL YOU! I WILL BE A WARDEN WITH THE RELICS! MINEEEE!” Soren went into a raging screech, running up to the laser fence only for him to quickly back off again, stomping the ground in utter frustration while he watched Kyle take the fruits of his labour. “I SPENT THREE MONTHS FINDING THAT DAMN KEY!”

“Good for you.” Kyle entered the vault, noticing that it was a storage room of sorts, except instead of storing plenty of food, water and other supplies, nearly all of the dungeon wall panels, electronics components and other necessities were placed here in crates. *Finally, a Galactic Era treasure trove!*

However, his expectations diminished rapidly when he saw the state of the electronics. Instead of it being a storage room, it seemed to be a dumping room for broken melted electronics. Kyle spent a few minutes digging through the numerous crates of electronics, blocking out the terrible shrieking from Soren. Resistors, capacitors and inductors were all heavily damaged, as if they had been fully crushed. *Still, even broken electronics can be smelted and purified into useful rare-earth metals. I’ll have to consider coming back here.*

His Ghosts were certainly not in a position to be worried about harvesting Galactic Era relics like these resistors which were a dime a dozen, but Kyle knew he could easily come back to the dungeon anytime, now knowing exactly where the entrance was. As he continued to rummage through the crates, he finally found a fully intact Galactic Era battery pack.

Moving outside of the vault and slotting the new battery into the main electronics panel, the entire room began to turn on fully, the holographic keyboards, displays and monitors all running at full functionality.

MG404: [System Message | Access Recognized| Temporary Administrator Privileges recognized. Prison Holdings activated.]

Kyle tapped a nearby holographic monitor while the wide-eyed Soren stared in shock as Kyle deftly manipulated the keyboard, trying to find information. *Looks like there really is a jamming effect on the entire dungeon. The whole dungeon is cut off from the outside world. So unless the Wardens sent someone to check, no one but me will know Soren is here.*

With the vault now fully functional as well and lit up, Kyle could now see the full extent of it. At the very end of the supposed storage room were countless metallic pods, their inhabitants unknown. *Galactic Era human survivors?* He gingerly walked up, peering into the foggy window of one of the pods only to see a frozen human, still stuck in cryostasis. Checking the display panel of the pod, it showed that there was only a 0.1% success chance of waking up the human in the pod as well.

He readied himself with weapons, though he was extremely confident he could take on a human who had just exited a cryopod, no matter how genetically modified he was. *I’ll pop the pod, and immediately drag him to the prison cell to prevent any System activation.* Assured in his plan, he used his temporary adminstrator privileges to begin the defrosting procedure.

MG404: [System Message | Killed ‘Company Employee’, +15000 EXP]

MG404: [ Level Up: 29 - 30 | All Stats Increased | Bonus Points Granted ]

MG404: [Race Announcement | Race Upgrade (Level 30) | Race Evolution can now be selected. | Please wait.]

*Huh? What?* Kyle was flabbergasted, watching the pod shudder violently as its inhabitant inside decayed rapidly, the body bloating up before bursting apart as it was rapidly thawed. *The kill message said it was a company employee…*

However, what truly caught him offguard was the race upgrade announcement. He didn’t know that the System could upgrade his race as well, though he wondered what race he would be allowed select.

MG404: [Race Announcement | Designated Terminal required for upgrade. | Race options provided upon entry. Terminal Located 10 meters ahead at SD-X-3340-PT-1.]

A golden line overlaid on his vision shot out from the center of his body, pointing directly to a square portable chamber that was nested neatly in the corner of the room. Countless tubes and gas tanks were plugged into it, the pipes a maze as they all congregrated onto a single surgical bed mounted in the very center of that chamber, the walls glass. A few stains of blood could be seen on the portable chamber’s glass walls, making Kyle a little suspicious. However, Kyle had seen such a contraption before in his previous life. *It’s a gene modifier chamber. Though I never seen one so advanced before.*

Dust coated the transparent monitors that were clearly linked to the chamber, with no sign of any mechanical keyboards or interfaces. Kyle sighed, knowing how much confidence the A-class states had in their electronics to survive, some even claiming they could last a hundred thousand years thanks to extensive testing in a time anomaly. *Except they never accounted for the fact that their power source might be completely crippled.*

A single handprint groove was on the side of the chamber, along with the power cable drawing energy greedily from the battery Kyle had just slotted in.

MG404: [Race Announcement | Designated Terminal is required for upgrade.]

Kyle laid out his plans once more. This put a wrench in his timeline, as he would not be able to move up to Desham as quickly as he would like. If the previous Class Upgrade and Subclass Upgrade was any indication to go by, he might be knocked out for a few days or even more. It would be foolish to leave the Ghosts here waiting, so he hurriedly modified his future plans a little. [Sasha, you’re in range?]

[Yes, sir, fully recovered now.]

[Take the Ghosts up to Desham. You and Feldon already know the way?]

[Yes, sir, we’ve already scouted it.]

[Good. Go on without me. I have business to settle here with the transcendent. Rebuild the Ghosts up and collect supplies where possible.]

[Understood.] Sasha took the order to heart immediately, preparing to set off with the Ghosts while Kyle cracked his knuckles, doing his own preparation for the race upgrade himself.

Thankfully, the storage still had a few rations left behind, preserved to last for centuries, along with a few tanks of water that had been prepared as well. *This should be enough if I need to recover.* Kyle also had his Necklace of Healing should he be severely weakened from the Race Upgrade, and a few vials of health potion and stamina potion. *This upgrade could help me dominate Harrison even more, so let’s get it over with.*

Before he began, he closed the vault door and locked it tight from within, leaving the still screeching Soren trapped fully behind the laser cage. He moved over to the chamber, approaching the handprint groove. He readied his runic falchion in the other, prepared to chop off his own hand in the event of an infection or a genetic corruption. It wouldn’t be the first time it has happened to him, either.

MG404: [System Message | Terminal Active | Warning – No functional terminal found in the next fifty kilometres. | Calculating energy usage. ]

MG404: [System Message | Sufficient Internal Energy | Race Evolution can be selected now. | Would you like to proceed?]

*Not yet.* Kyle meticulously scoured the room for anything active, along with any possibility of traps. He checked each crack to ensure that a rock spider would not suddenly burst through and kill him while he was unconscious. Playing it safe, he unplugged every cable that was connected, breaking the connection between the chamber and the monitors, as well as the thick power cable. Even the lightning were not spared, Kyle modifying a nearby electronics panel by flicking the switches off until he was confident that the chamber was the only thing powered up. *Don’t want anything in this room suddenly powering up at all.*

Air was circulating freely from the genetic modification chamber too, pumped out by dormant gas tanks that enriched the atmosphere.Kyle carefully removed his shirt, pants and shoes to prevent them from getting stained. The last few times saw copious amounts of blood staining his outfit, and a crime lord should always take good care of his appearance.

Already Kyle’s body was far different from his starting point as Alvin Teras, the weak sickly skinny frame now turned into a lean musclar machine, though the skin clearly still had some defects. However, the body over all was well-toned with a bit of room for improvement.

He gingerly entered the gene modification chamber, laying down on the surgical table as the chamber’s glass door closed automatically, though he still held onto his runic falchion, ready to fight at a moment’s notice. *If this chamber tries to kill me, I’m breaking out immediately.* Kyle never let his guard down, though it did give him a soothing feeling, reminding him of his own modification procedures back when he was just a kid. *Just like the good old days. Right, let’s see the options.*

MG404: [Race Announcement | Race Upgrade (Level 30) | Race Evolution choices will now be generated. | WARNING – Irreversible. Please choose wisely.]

Three races and their skills appeared in front of him, allowing Kyle to select the races.

MG404: [Race | Genetic Package 229-A-X Galactic Human | A designer genetic package for the scions of A-class nobility. Increased necessity for energy in every form as well as controlled nutritional diet and genetic stabilizers. | Stats Increment Per Level Boost: +5 CHA, +5 DEX, +5 STA, +1 MP, +5 HP, +10 INT, +5 STR.]

MG404: [Skill | Enchancment (Advanced) | Push your latent potential to the limits. | Passive Skill. Increased muscle growth and regeneration. Increased bone density and structural integrity. Increased reflexes and nervous reactions. Increased thought process. Stats Increment will improve over time with training. Unique Title will be applied at each stage.]

MG404: [Information | Genetic Package 229-A-X Galactic Human | Race Upgrade Path can be swapped to other variants later.]

Kyle had nearly forgotten what it was like to choose a System upgrade. It felt like ages ago when he had just chose the Arcia Mystic subclass. However, this upgrade was even more astounding, forcing him to rub his eyes to ensure that the System Message he was seeing was not a lie. *I don’t believe it. This genetic package…*

He was born as a designer baby with the 229-D-X variant in his former life, targeted for D-class states. This had originally put him above his peers, costing nearly an entire space habitat to both grow, nuture and sustain. With greater energy output, metabolism and calorie consumption increases as well - conservation of energy still had to be met in all cases. He owed his former glory and status as a Crime Lord to the 229-D-X, and he never truly had the chance to upgrade to a 229-C-X due to his age when he finally had the funds to. To see a 229-A-X package here, free for the taking was almost forcing Kyle to click instantly.

*The cost of the A-class genetic package could buy out an entire planet in a D-class state. Maybe even the capital of a D-class state.*

Not even mentioning the reputation of the genetic package, Kyle was flabbergasted at the sheer number of stats. *+5 for every level on top of the base +3, with a +10 for INT?!* The Enhancement Passive was even more jaw-dropping, with hints that the per-level increment of stats could reach more than what was shown here.

Before Kyle got far too emotionally invested in chasing what he failed to obtain in his previous life, he quickly looked at the next two races.

MG404: [Race | Arimorph | *A human variant designed by Werter Fluidics, it was ordered by the Bulin Principality in their efforts to improve the success of espionage operations.* |  Stats Increment Per Level Boost: +2 CHA, +4 DEX, +3 STA, +3 INT, -1 STR.]

MG404: [Skill | You Can’t See Me (Intermediate) | *Blend into the crowd with a new face every day.* | Twists the cellular structure of the outer skin and hair follicles. Requires a sampled human. Up to four templates can be saved. Duration: Three hours. Cooldown: One Day.]

MG404: [Skill | Boneshifting (Intermediate) | Craft the skeleton you always wanted | Skeletal structure can be modified at will to suit different body shapes. Extreme calorie input is required. Duration: Three hours. Cooldown: One Day.]

Kyle was not a fan of alien-hybrid variants. Even in his former life, he had long eschewed such abominations, though the race presented was overall interesting, and showed him a possibility that he could have taken. *Boneshifting already looks like a monstrous ability – but I’ll have to see if the others are better.* While the second skill intrigued Kyle, the first skill hardly impressed him as optical illusions were already available.

Granted, it did not require arcia energy to channel and could be done nearly instantly without having to prepare different suits altogether, but Kyle was already planning to improve on the optical illusion engravings and bring them closer to Galactic Era illusion technology. *Let’s check the next race.*

MG404: [Race | Slovesa-Human Hybrid (Intermediate) | *A human variant developed in the Loeric Empire, this combines the best of both human and slovesa attributes.* | Stats Increment Per Level Boost: -2 CHA, +2 DEX, +3 STA, +2 HP, +1 INT, +4 STR.]

MG404: [Skill | Stoneskin (Intermediate) | Reject carbon, accept silicon. | Hardens the exterior skin to the level of a middle-class slovesa. Far more durable against outside influences. Duration: Ten minutes. Cooldown: One Hour.]

MG404: [Skill | Energy Core (Intermediate) | Because one more organ couldn’t hurt. | Passive skill. Generates a flesh organ similar in functionality to that of a slovesa core, boosting internal energy as well as radiation resistance.]

Kyle was shocked to see the race appear. After all, he was complicit in the creation of this variant, he himself being the biggest funder of the entire research project that was highly classified. *Did the A-class State that built this System steal the information from us?*

However, he was not enticed by the prospects of becoming a slovesa hybrid – he had seen the shortcomings of it in the various field tests and in the liberation war that eventually led him to become a Crime Lord. *Unlike a true slovesa, these hybrids can’t survive in space, and they can’t survive in a normal human environment as well without proper support. It’s the worst of both worlds.*

The energy core required intense radiation, making it such that the hybrids could only live on moons or planets with low magnetic shielding or staying close to radioactive sources. The hybrids could also not integrate exotic materials in the same way that the slovesas could naturally. Kyle was not planning to limit himself in that way – there were hardly any radioactive sources found here yet that could be exploited enmasse.

*Out of these three, I would pick the 229-A-X for sure. But I know this damn System always has more to give.*

MG404: [Race Announcement | Race Upgrade (Level 30) | Three more choices generated | WARNING – Irreversible. Please choose wisely.]

Sure enough, the System generated another three races the moment Kyle’s thought popped into his head. He quickly flicked through the selection once more, starting from the top of the new batch.

MG404: [Race | Vicronoth | *A stable human genetic mutation that naturally occurred during the Vicrophage.* | Stats Increment Per Level Boost: -2 CHA, +2 DEX, +3 STA, +2 HP, +1 INT, +4 STR.]

MG404: [Skill | Infection Vector (Intermediate) | Be the first horseman. | Releases infectious diseases in an area around you. Up to five can be stored. Note: Disease must be contracted by host first. Duration: Two minutes. Cooldown: Three Hours. Infection lasts in target after duration.]

MG404: [Skill | Viral Immunity (Intermediate) | You merely adopted the vaccine, but I was born in it. | Passive skill. Immune system boosted to be far more effective at restraining viral outbreaks and poisonous substances, sectioning them away from the main functioning organs of the body and storing them for use with the Infection Vector. Major immunity boost to nearly all known diseases.]

*The viral immunity is good – it might work against the debilitating poison. However, I’m not convinced that it is worth going down this racial upgrade path.* The issue with the skills was that all of them could be obtained if he had access to Galactic Era tech. The existence of the cyborg Rayner already hinted that there was the existence of factories who could produce Galactic Era technology and implement cybernetic surgery as well. If something was in reach, he didn’t want to waste the System upgrade to take it. *I could modify my own body myself in the future, it would be shame to give up the 229-A-X package for this.*

Kyle swiped to the next race.

MG404: [Race | Orisian | *A humanoid alien race, with clear signs of telepathic and psychic inclinations* | Stats Increment Per Level Boost: +2 CHA, -4 DEX, -2 STA, +2MP, +1 HP, +7 INT, +1 STR.]

MG404: [Skill | Overpowering Will (Intermediate) | Unleash your inner strength and dominate the others | Throws enemy minds into confusion and despair, while inspiring allies around you. +50% chance to cause confusion in enemies, +50% chance to boost morale of allies. Duration: Ten minutes. Cooldown: Thirty Minutes.]

MG404: [Skill | Telekinesis (Intermediate) | One of the great mysteries of the Galactic Era. | Fling objects with just a thought. Upgradable. Note: Requires immense training to apply correctly. Duration: Five Minutes continuous. Cooldown: One hour.]

*Telekinesis?* Kyle was shocked. Humans had never really obtained the true power of telekinesis, even through genetic manipulation, when he was still alive in the Galactic Era. *Just how far have I travelled into the future that an A-class state is able to do it?*

He suspected this race might be a complete overhaul of the human genome. From what he recalled of the Orisians, they had a hidden requirement of having to stay near an equally psionic active exotic that seemed to work a completely unseen type of wave, analogous to how dark matter was viewed in Ancient Earth. *Have they finally cracked the code? Does arcia allow for telekinesis?*

Kyle was a bit wary, not wanting to be solely reliant on the exotic. Every Orisian prisoner captured from their homeworld away from the exotics eventually went braindead even if they willingly left their home planet, but not before causing an absolute disaster with their raging telekinesis abilities. He also felt that if the System could implement it, then he could also eventually figure out an arctech engraving to replicate the skill itself. *What arcia can’t replicate is the 229-A-X package. It’s still too good to give up! Alright, let’s see the next one.*

MG404: [Race | Tharapon | *A human variant created by the Poharos Corporation, it allows for shifting in the fourth dimension.* | Stats Increment Per Level Boost: +1 CHA, +4 DEX, +1 STA, +2 MP, -2 HP, +3 INT, -1 STR.]

MG404: [Skill | Dimensional Shift (Advanced) | *A blip on the axis suddenly becomes two.* | Temporarily shifts in the fourth dimension for a split second, avoiding incoming attacks instantaneously—three shifts per day. Performing all three shifts in rapid succession will result in extreme exhaustion.]

*Only one skill?* Kyle was intrigued by the skill but not too surprised. Dimensional defences were not unique in the Galactic Era – starships got around by entering the fourth dimension; otherwise, humanity would have never been able to enter the galactic stage.

It looked extremely useful, but it seemed that it would not be able to dodge chemical attacks like the black fog or any skill that had a lingering effect in an area. If each attack counted for a shift, he would run out of shifts in the first three bullets of a repeater. Of course, he could bulk it up with a point defence engraving, but then the skill becomes less critical to use.

*I’m not really into this. If I could use it for teleportation, then yes. But as it is, it’s teleportation on the spot, with no sign of there being an upgrade path.* Kyle has not heard of any human variants that could teleport, not considering some transcendents. As such, he had little hope that the human variant Tharapon would be able to reach there someday.

His heart sank a little, feeling as though none of the races so far were interesting enough to outweigh the benefits of the 229-A-X package shown first. One of the more important hidden details is that any variant he chose would undoubtedly have his external features changed entirely.

As if in response to his feelings, the System whirred into life once more.

MG404: [Race Announcement | Race Upgrade (Level 30) | Feedback noted. Calculating best choices for final selection.| WARNING – Irreversible. Please choose wisely. These are the last three options. ]

MG404: [Race | Voidwalkers | The first human variant to allow for full space habitation without an exo-suit. | Stats Increment Per Level Boost: -1 CHA, +3 DEX, +10 STA, +2 MP, +10 HP, +2 INT, +2 STR.]

MG404: [Skill | Into the Void (Advanced) | *Not just electromagnetic waves, but particle radiation too.* | Passive Skill. Outer shell of the skin protects from all forms of incoming radiation, converting it into internal energy and absorbing particles that can supplement the need to breathe or to eat. Skin also protects against extreme temperatures. Does not confer any physical defensive bonuses.]

MG404: [Skill | Energy Thrust (Advanced) | *Be the propulsion system you always wanted to be.* | Release particle radiation through any section of your skin, resulting in thrust in any direction. Minimal use planetside. Duration: Dependent on the amount of particles available. Cooldown: None.]

*Huh. With this, I could actually just leave the planet myself.* Kyle considered the race carefully. This would give him the best survivability not just in space but also on the ground, with him being able to absorb starlight directly, such as UV radiation and so on.

But the second skill was completely useless, save for the fact that it could irradiate and overwhelm electronic components. However, most Galactic Era technology were already hardened for radiation on a general basis. In order to overwhelm the significant radiation shielding, he would have to generate more particles than a sunspot, all concentrated onto a centimetre square. *That’s not going to work.*

Kyle highly doubted his body would be able to fire harder than a particle cannon, which was effectively the same concept albeit they melted through the surface of whatever material they were touching. There was no way he could accelerate the particle that fast – the energy pulse seemed to be more of a solar sail effect rather than a rocket engine or a true particle ion thruster, with the general acceleration being low but continuous.

The first skill was still worthy of consideration. Being able to space walk without an exosuit was a critical one. But it still did not prevent one from getting shot at or blown up by a missile. Kyle internally fumed as he recalled how he died. Having such a skill would not have saved him in that scenario at all.

*Next.*

MG404: [Race | Arcian | *Remnants of a fallen alien race, torn by civil war.* |  No Stat Increment. ]

MG404: [WARNING | System Warning | Unable to fully convert to Arcian: Human Variant will be generated instead.]

So far, every race shown to Kyle had been a human variant or humanoid of sorts, so he did not expect himself to be able to transform into a tentacle monster or something. He did not want to lose his human features as well, as it may cause issues with him back in society.

MG404: [Skill | Arcia Reinforcement (Advanced) | *The power of the planet flows through you.* | Passive Skill. Ability to use ambient or internal arcia energy to strengthen muscles and improve arcia energy capacity and handling over-time. Unique Title will be applied for each stage of training and time. Requires immense amount of arcite ore to reach final stage. Performance reduced in non-arcia infused environment.]

MG404: [Skill | Arcia Efficiency (Advanced) | *Do not feel the fire; be the fire.* | Passive Skill. All skills cooldown reduced by 50% permanently. Non-upgradable. Overwrites all other cooldown modification skills.]

The skills were frankly downright amazing. Kyle found it hard to argue against the usefulness and efficiency of the stats and effects. However, all of this came with one caveat if he really chose this race, a question he couldn’t ignore: *Am I willing to be non-human.*

The very thought caused him to shudder. Changing to any of these human variants may make it hard for him to change back. Kyle had seen a lot of variants back in his day, but it was always the baseline humans who had the highest adaptability, able to work with anything. Taking the 229-A-X package wouldn’t diminish his ability to use arcia in anyway, and there was also a terrible side effect of converting to Arcian. *Performance reduced in non-arcia infused environment… That means space. Also means that if I ever get on a starship, I would have to bring along arcite ore.*

That was a no-go for him. Kyle hated relying on things or being dependent on others outside of his own body. This planet was not the only stage in the ladder he had to climb, and the places he intended to reach were not all laden with arcite either. He couldn’t imagine lugging around tonnes of arcite ore to simply fuel his psuedo-transcendent skills, it would reduce his maneuverability and increase his weakness tremendously.

*Last one.*

MG404: [Race | Dryad-Human Variant | A human variant able to interact with the trees. | Stats Increment Per Level Boost: +5 CHA, +5 INT, +5 VIT.]

Kyle simply swiped the final race away, not even bothering to look at the skills. *229-A-X it is.* Without any more hesitation, he selected the very first option he had been given, the chamber suddenly roaring to life as the table strapped his arms down along with his legs, restraining his movements. From beneath the table, countless needles begin to insert into his skin forcibly.

MG404: [System Message | Lack of Anesthesia | Warning - No Pain Relief Substitute Found. Please Prepare Yourself.]

He gritted his teeth, concentrating all of his mental fortitude as the needles jabbed deeper, as though he was lying on a bed of nails. Clenching his fists and eyes as tight as he could, he felt the liquid surged into his veins, his bone structure and muscles changing and twisting in realtime as the 229-A-X genetic package was installed into him forcibly. Hot lava ran through his vein, searing every nerve and every sensory Kyle had, the pain wracking through his entire body as he began to flail wildly on instinct to the tremedous pain. Unlike the other upgrades, Kyle forced himself to withstand the horrendous torture, his mind struggling to stay firm as the level of pain began to build up.

Every cell, every pore and every inch of his body cried out for rest as Kyle’s vision began to fade, though this time he held on longer than usual. “GRAAAAAAHHHH!” Kyle let out a roar, fighting to stay awake before a new needle the size of a pen jabbed right into his neck, the sharp jolting pain the final kicker to finally knock him out cold. # Chapter 119 - Rebirth

Kyle did not know how to explain the feeling when he woke up, not without an emotive sensory transfer machine. It was as if his former body had been made of lead, and that there were countless useless cells idling in every fiber of his muscles. He had a hard time getting used to the sluggishness of Alvin’s body, especially when he had a 229-C-X package in his previous life.

Now, the sensation was nothing short of a miracle, going even further beyond the genetic package he had. His senses were all heightened, as though every cell and every pore on his skin could be focused on. His eyesight was far sharper now, and he was able to see the entire vault beyond the current genetic modification chamber clearly. He could even read some of the small text on a crate twenty meters away.

As he flexed his fingers, he could feel the tendons and muscles of his forearm wrapping around the bone tightly, as firm and tense as ever, with potential strength and power lurking within every fiber of his being. He clenched his fist tight, his muscles glistening with sweat and slightly enlarged from what he had before.

The restraints were unlatched, releasing his wrists and legs and allowing him to sit upright, his entire back pockmarked with injection holes from the back of his head all the way to the bottom of his leg. Kyle’s entire body felt new and refreshed, a complete overhaul, as he could feel the agility beneath his skin yearning to be tested.

He glanced at a reflection of himself in the glass walls of the chamber, his hair turning blacker with still a tinge of auburn left behind, while most blemishes from his skin and face were removed, only leaving a few tiny unnoticeable blackheads and scars from Alvin’s prior acne issue. The jawbone and facial structure had been slightly adjusted as well, Kyle slowly regaining his former dazzling features from his past life. *In fact, I’ll say I’m even better looking now.*

Even as he stepped off the table, his feet touching the cold ground of the chamber gave him chills, and his skin sensory details dialed up to 11. Every gust and breath of air could be felt intimately, his mind immediately ascertaining the direction of airflow and sources of pungent stenches, if anything.

It was at this moment Kyle noticed that the table he had laid on was completely drenched in blood, his body having lost copious amounts during the surgery. Thankfully, the chamber also replaced his blood, and over time, the 229-A-X package would enhance his blood’s oxygen delivery efficiency as well as density.

MG404: [Race Obtained | Genetic Package 229-A-X Galactic Human | A designer genetic package for the scions of A-class nobility. Increased necessity for energy in every form as well as controlled nutritional diet and genetic stabilizers. | Stats Increment Per Level Boost: +5 CHA, +5 DEX, +5 STA, +1 MP, +5 HP, +10 INT, +5 STR.]

MG404: [Skill Obtained| Enchancment (Advanced) | Push your latent potential to the limits. | Passive Skill. Increased muscle growth and regeneration. Increased bone density and structural integrity. Increased reflexes and nervous reactions. Increased thought process. Stats Increment will improve over time with training. Unique Title will be applied at each stage.]

MG404: [Information | Genetic Package 229-A-X Galactic Human | Race Upgrade Path can be swapped to other variants later.]

MG404: [Title Obtained | 229-A-X Enhancement Title (Unique) | *On the path to becoming a god amongst men.* | Current Level: 0. Current Stat Increment Boost per Level: +0.]

Kyle stretched his limbs before stepping out of the chamber, his back still soaked in dried blood. The state of the blood told him that at least more than a day had passed, and the lack of Soren’s screeching also asserted his assumption. He moved up to a nearby water tank, collecting some of it and giving it a sniff to make sure it was still okay before using it to clean his back off. *How long have I been knocked out anyway?*

None of the panels on the chamber featured a clock anywhere, and those that did only had zeros filling up their epoch timestamp, making them completely useless to Kyle. *I’ll find out when I get out.*

Soon, Kyle was fully dressed once more, though his shirt and pants failed to hide his chiseled body, his abs and muscles worthy to be immortalized as a statue. Deep down, Kyle was elated at having far surpassed his former life’s genetic limitations, but already, the logician inside of him was tempering his excitement. *If such a genetic package is obtainable just by me being a System User, what does that mean for the Wardens?*

From having observed Soren’s wound healing rate, he was confident that Soren too had a genetic package, though it was unclear as to whether it was the exact same as his. *Definitely not an A-class package.* Still, even though human A-class states constituted a mere 10% of the Galactic Era population, there were still two decillion humans among them, though they were mostly concentrated near the galactic center. That itself does not include the S-class states, which had nearly one decillion humans. If Kyle had truly been transported to the future, then that population figure must have risen tremendously.

For now, Kyle knew the 229-A-X was enough to put him leagues above the average human, and certainly more than enough to destroy anyone on Soren’s level. He did not even have to use the Arcia Mystic’s subclass ability during the fight, having held it as a final trump card. *Now, I’m stronger than ever.*

His stomach rumbled with an aching hunger that he had never felt before, reminding him of the requirements of the body. *Right, if I don’t eat, I’ll starve faster than a regular human.* Energy did not come from nowhere, and Kyle needed nutrition to keep up his peak performance. He scoured the vault for the rations that were coated in dust and soot, centuries old at this point.

Ge settled for a few nutri-paste packets, highly condensed superfood Galactic Era rations aimed for maximum calories as well as vitamins, providing every chemical necessary for the human body to keep functioning. He gulped them down, the paste having no flavors at all and laced with countless preservatives, which was the sole reason they had lasted this long. It was hardly tasty or delicious, but Kyle wasn’t picky with his food. He drank from the water tank as well, sitting down for a few minutes to eat carefully and regain his strength.

With his hunger and thirst satisfied as well as the race upgrade now done, Kyle turned his attention to the pods nearby. He had inadvertently killed the inhabitant of one cryopod, and it had given him more EXP in a single kill than ever before. *Should I eradicate all the pod inhabitants?* It was alluring, having more than fifty pods in a row lined up here at the vault. Killing all of them would net him enough EXP to potentially reach the next upgrade.

However, Kyle saw that as a short-sighted action. The inhabitants of the pods were more useful than just EXP - they represented potential knowledge of the inner workings of the planet he was on, as well as the ruins. If he could even reawaken one of them successfully, it would be a big step in figuring out how he came to Raktor. *EXP can be farmed in the dungeon. And with the war starting soon, I gather that there would be no shortage of fights for me.*

He finally decided that it would be too risky to wake up the inhabitants of the pods now and decided to save it for a later date when he had the proper tools and technology to thaw them carefully. *We’ll need refrigeration and sealed chambers to allow the inhabitant to slowly acclimatize. It would be essentially a manual defrosting since the automatic one clearly failed.*

Kyle gathered all of his equipment and gear, loading out his outfit once more before leaving the vault properly, not forgetting to lock it behind him and keeping the key safely. As he left the vault, he noticed Soren languishing on the floor, clearly famished and dehydrated, and his eyes lolled about aimlessly. *Right, forgot about him.*

He re-entered the vault and grabbed a few of the century-old rations, as well as a water tank, easily hauling it over with just one hand. Even when Kyle disabled the laser fence, Soren basically did not have any energy to move. With his System disabled, his genetically modified body’s metabolism did not drop, only continuing to cannibalize his own stored fat from within, the bones clearly visible on his degrading taut skin. He could only stare helplessly as Kyle placed two water tanks and enough rations to last a few weeks.

“Try not to die.” Kyle slapped Soren awake, making Soren finally aware that food and water were available. Instead of lunging at Kyle in an attempt to escape, he reached for the rations, greedily opening a ready-made nutri-paste packet and devouring it. Kyle reactivated the laser fence, finally leaving the prison cell proper and locking all the doors, making sure Soren couldn’t get out.

As he exited the small cave and returned back to the Rotten Chamber, a few minutes of travel towards the encampment showed him that the Ghosts had left long ago, led by both Sasha and Feldon away to Desham. There did not seem to be any sign of Nest entering the chamber, and he didn’t see any tracks either. The arctech lantern posts around the encampment were all still lit up, making Kyle confident that he had only been knocked out for less than three days as that was their maximum duration with the amount of arcite ore inserted.

With no idea how much time had passed, Kyle followed the map in his head, making it to the exit tunnel towards Desham, where they had opened the door. The tunnel was already well-lit by the various arctech lanterns placed by the scouts and Ghosts that he had dispatched beforehand, and all of them were still functioning well. It wasn’t long before he reached the ladder that led up to the hidden hideout on the third layer, one that Kyle had established as a backup when he had first explored this tunnel. But instead of climbing up, he continued on forward, following the trail of lantern posts that went further and further into the tunnel.

Unlike before, Kyle’s body was lighter and far more enduring, able to keep up a steady jog that was slowly turning into a marathon. With the lack of daylight, it was impossible for Kyle to keep track of the passage of time, though he kept an internal counter as close to sixty beats per minute as possible. He ran for what he thought was two hours, the tunnel slowly sloping upwards as it got closer and closer to the surface before finally reaching the very end of the tunnel exit, the daylight from aboveground streaming through the eroding vines and flora that covered the rocky walls.

Kyle’s ears perked up, carefully listening out for any movements around while he cautiously stepped forward, out into the daylight that blinded him slightly, his eyes squinted as his vision acclimatized. While he knew Sasha must have cleared the path before him, there was always the off-chance that Nest had discovered the existence of the tunnel and laid a trap for him. [Sasha, do you read?]

No reply came back, Kyle gathering that Sasha must be out of range. *Desham is still a way ahead on foot.* He had the map of Versia memorized, as well as the evacuation route. Finding his way to the city was easy, but he still remained vigilant and wary.

The tunnel’s exit came out in a forest much like the one that had been chopped down around Ocra, although the trees and plants were far larger than expected as if they were meant for giants. The trees towered more than twenty stories high; Kyle was not even able to see the top of the trees from its base while large ferns and mushrooms dominated the undergrowth, bushes and shrubs growing even higher than him. It was as though he was but an ant amidst the nature here. *So this is the Keru Forest.*

Kyle navigated using his memory of the route, recalling the instructions the scouts had given to him. It was one thing to see it from the bird’s eye view but another thing to walk among the gigantic trees. He even gave pause when he saw large dark blue beetles the size of a football and trident horns one-foot long skittering across the trunk of a tree, gnawing away on the parasitic ferns and fungi that had taken root on the bark. The wind that rushed through the forest barely swayed any of the gigantic trees, their roots anchoring them like statues that were nearly impossible to topple. Some parts of the ground had large footprints that seemed to follow a migratory herd pattern of grazing, bushes, and shrubs having been chewed out completely. Broken branches crushed under the steps that created the same footprint, as well as humongous mud tracks, all showed the presence of equally gigantic animals within the Keru Forest.

Still, despite the overgrowing fauna, Kyle could clearly see some trails and marks of human presence. One of the red trees he passed had a Ghost mark on it, a simple small knife slash near its base to indicate a trail point. Confident he was on the right track, Kyle continued on, though his irritation at the larger shrubs and thorny flowers hooking onto his shirt and pants began to climb quickly.

It took another hour of trekking before he finally reached something close to civilization, though it was just a simple path that ran alongside the outskirts of the Keru forest, its surface hardened mud. Kyle moved along the path, walking for yet another hour along the winding path before it finally diverted off into rolling fields of grass and flowers as well as large acres of farmland, joining into a major gravel path road that connected Ocra and Desham.

To his surprise, the major road itself was already packed, countless convoys and shambling feet dominating the grassy plains and farms on both sides. None of the farms along the major road had any crops growing, all of them seemingly harvested as hundreds upon hundreds of refugees limped and marched, many barefoot on the scorching surface with faces devoid of emotion. Children crying and mothers weeping filled the air, the procession a throng of depression that seemingly had no end. Families carried prized possessions, while the more well-to-do ones were shoving refugees aside, forcing the others out of the way to allow their arctech wagons through.

Kyle blended it easily, his outfit already disheveled from trekking in the Keru Forest. However, he walked a bit faster, overtaking a few refugees and moving quicker than the crowd. Soon, Desham came into view on the horizon, though its walls and fortifications were far less impressive compared to that of Tenar and Ocra.

Reaching the outskirts of Desham, the slums of the refugee camps were already visible, billowing clouds of black smoke from burning wood drifting into the air like a plague across the once-green farmland. The refugee camps here were far larger than they had been at Ocra, many having chosen to come here instead of risking their lives and safety near the border of a potential conflict. However, unlike the stern military control of Ocra, there did not seem to be anyone controlling nor admitting refugees into the camp itself, the security has devolved into a free-for-all. No fences, no distribution center, and no administration seemed to be in place for the refugees.

“Don’t you dare sign up for the Versian Army, you hear me! You’re going to stay right here!” A mother berated her young son as they squabbled outside a slum shelter, Kyle overhearing the conversation. Both of them were clearly fatigued and starving, their cheeks gaunt and their skin taut, though it was the norm around these parts.

The son shrugged his mother’s arm off his shoulders, complaining. “But we have nothing to eat! The rations are dwindling, and if I join up as a recruit, I can bring you along to Ocra to stay at the military quar-”

“We are not going back to Ocra! Not when there’s war on the horizon! It would be far better if you just worked for Harrison Industries here!” The mother shouted back. Kyle didn’t listen to the rest of the argument, only watching as a convoy of wagons filled to the brim with refugees who had signed on being carted off towards Ocra, joining up as recruits.

*So there seems to be a rationing issue here as well, as well as at Harrison Industries. Interesting…* Kyle glanced around the vicinity of Desham, noticing that it was mostly farmland, though all of the crops were gone. His keen eyesight spotted some of the refugees still digging through the soil of the empty farmlands, hoping to find something to eat, be it insect or seed. Many dying refugees lay along the haphazard streets of the sprawling slums, some trying to mix flour with sewage water before eating it whole, suffering from dysentery that was spreading like wildfire.

All of this suffering made the outskirts of Desham depressing and a terrible sight. Anyone who had a heart would have seen it and wept. Instead, a sinister smile was already growing on Kyle’s face, even as refugees around his path writhed and begged others for help. *I was right to set this as the evacuation point. This is the perfect staging ground for a rebel movement.*

Near the formal entrance to Desham was a simple gate, the walls of the city not as tall as that of Tenar and Ocra but sturdy enough to hold back the tide of refugees that were clamoring to enter. Guards forcibly shoved back starving refugees from climbing the makeshift palisades and barricades that served as a forward defense layer before the metal-grilled gate itself.

A mother carrying a crying baby squeezed her way to the front of the jostling crowd, pleading with the guards. “Please, sir, the rations being given are not enough! I need one more for my baby!”

“Rules are rules! One sack of potatoes per family!” One of the guards was unsympathetic, barely giving her a cursory glance.

“Sir, please, I have six kids and two parents to feed! One sack is far from enough to last us the day!” The mother stepped forward, trying to get past the barricade, but a guard wielded his rifle, jabbing her in the forehead with the butt.

“Get back in line, bitch, or I’ll shoot you - and that goes for the rest of you! If you’re here to sign up as a recruit or a worker for the factories, queue up. Otherwise, wait until dawn tomorrow for your damn rations!”

One of the other refugees helped the mother up, shouting back at the violent guard: “Hey! We’re Versians too! We deserve the right to be fed! And the damn water supply in the camp is brok-”

Instead of replying, the guard simply raised his rifle, aiming straight for the man and firing instantly. The pellet caused the man’s brain to splatter onto the stunned crowd of refugees, his mouth still moving while his eyes were locked in confusion as his body toppled over, resting on screaming and shrieking children who began to scatter.

“I warned you all! This is Desham, not whatever fucking backwater village or town you came from. And if you came from Ocra, feel free to walk back! If you want to stay here, then GET THE FUCK IN LINE, NOW!” The guard roared, the refugees all immediately backing off, the shock and screams spreading through the crowd as the bulk of them began to scamper.

Kyle himself, too, kept himself out of sight, observing the guards and the resulting chaos at a distance. He peered past the gate itself, noticing that the inside streets were well-cleaned and devoid of any homeless stragglers and whatnot. He didn’t plan on entering the city yet, knowing that his rendezvous point was in the refugee camp itself.

Walking quickly through the maze of alleyways and small gaps between wooden shelters and makeshift tents of sewn-together clothes, he walked up to something equivalent to a small little store, a few other refugees already gathering around while holding valuables and family treasures, preparing to trade them for rations. “Ma’am, please, I need three sacks for my mother! I only have this necklace.” A famished youth barely sixteen years old offered up to the counter, placing a rare golden necklace adorned with emeralds.

“Three sacks? This necklace is only worth two sacks.” The lady behind the counter rasped her fingers against the shaky wooden counter, her tanned skin barely visible under the scorching glare of daylight as she sat comfortably under the shelter of the store, wearing a purple satin dress that showed a wealth much unlike the other refugees around.

“Ma’am, this necklace is priceless! It’s my family heirloom, and the emeralds are -”

“Are lifted from other refugees. Don’t try to play punk with me, Jaden. This isn’t your necklace. Your family isn’t here.”

“Well, my family is all of Versia.” Jaden grinned. “Doesn’t matter if I’m an orphan or not! And you’re going to buy it anyway.”

“Two sacks.” The lady didn’t budge. “Otherwise move, you’re holding up the line.”

“Three sacks!”

“Two sacks.”

“Three sacks!”

“Next.” The lady yawned, motioning with her fingers for Jaden to move away.

“Grrr… Fine!” Jaden snatched the necklace away from the counter, grumbling as he walked away. The lady smiled as she watched the angry Jaden storm off, before her eyes laid on Kyle watching her from the end of the line. She examined his outfit from head to toe, realization dawning on her as Kyle skipped the queue, angering the other refugees.

“Hey man, what gives?! I was here-” The queuing refugee’s words were caught in his throat the moment Kyle glared at him, a domineering aura falling upon him and almost causing his knees to buckle. The gaze forced him to immediately shrink back into his place and allow Kyle to step forward to the counter.

“Huh, Sasha didn’t give any warning you would be this handsome.” The lady complimented with a suave, alluring voice.

“Cut the small talk.” Kyle snapped, unwilling to waste time flirting.

“Straight to business then. Jaden!” The lady called out to the youth, who turned around confusedly. “Two sacks if you man the storefront for me.”

“Right away, Miss Diya!” Jaden gave a curt salute, rushing back and taking her spot while she stepped out behind the counter.

However, before Diya left, she turned around sharply, pointing a finger menacingly at him. “Steal anything and you’re going to lose the sack between your legs.”

“That would be great, Miss Diya - I mean, yes I won’t lose it - I mean, I won’t steal anything!” Jaden fumbled his words, but Diya and Kyle were already walking off.

Kyle internally judged Diya’s disposition as they walked through the slum. *She has the right makings to be a proper gang leader. Though she does look a little weak.*

“Are you judging me right now?” Diya smiled, her beauty dazzling through her braided hair and purple satin dress that flowed like water. “What do you think?”

“I think you should stop talking and lead me to the hideout. There’s work to be done.” Kyle stated clearly.

“Work to be done? What is there to be done?” Diya laughed as she showed off a few pieces of jewelry that adorned her tanned forearm, the metal glinting under the daylight with a radiance. “I’m doing quite well for myself here. And we’re generating enough money to fund the operations of the Ghosts. Culo chose me for my practicality, and I think I’m doing a great job. If it weren’t for me, your Ghosts would be starving right now. Either that or picking a fight with the guards.”

“A short-sighted view. Expected for a frog in a well.” Kyle replied stoically, not bothering to engage the outraged Diya as they approached an unmarked shelter, a Ghost disguised as a refugee already outside keeping guard. The moment the Ghost saw Kyle, he immediately bowed and led the way into the shelter.

Inside the shelter was a small abandoned space, with nothing but a few stained rugs littered across the floor. The ghost shifted one of the rugs, revealing a trap door. The trap door creaked open, a ladder leading downwards. Kyle hopped in quickly, sliding down the railings and landing at the bottom with a thud.

The hideout was far smaller than the ones in the catacombs, this one clearly being a simple natural cave. Kyle noticed that there were workers already excavating and placing support beams, trying to widen the living space while temporary beds were made out of empty crates and thin fabrics.

[Sir!] Sasha shot up from her bed and walked over quickly, examining Kyle’s body for injuries. [Did you kill the transcendent?]

[Not yet. I have him trapped in a cell. Once all this is over, I’ll drag him back to the Culdao Peaks for research.]

Sasha nodded, though there were still a lot of questions in her mind. Kyle noticed it, recalling that Sasha had been privy to most of the words Soren had said out loud during the battle. Sasha’s curiosity was made even more pressing when it was clear that Kyle’s appearance had changed slightly, the hair color and features all becoming far more attractive.

“Hey, Sasha, who is the new guy?” An oblivious Feldon munched on a boiled potato, chewing with his mouth open as he walked up with a confident swagger. “A new recruit, huh? Did Diya bring you in? Name’s Feldon, I’m kind of the one in charge here. But damn, look at your biceps, was there a hidden gym in this refugee camp or what? And your outfit kind of looks familiar.” Feldon used one hand to pat the muscular arms of Kyle, before his gaze finally met that of Kyle’s, recognition finally kicking into his brain. “A-a-a-a I-I-I” Feldon stuttered rapidly as he backpedaled frantically.

“Glad to see you’re ‘kind of’ in charge. Now stop joking around and focus.” Kyle rolled his eyes. “Give me a rundown. How many left?”

Feldon shook himself out of his surprised stupor, his stern demeanor returning. “Yes sir. Twelve Ghosts left and twenty workers. We got hit hard by that strange man filled with metal, and we lost another few to injuries on the way here - health potions weren’t enough for them. Still, we’re merging with the local cell group under Diya. That gives us a total of twenty Ghosts.”

Kyle internally winced when he heard the numbers. He had started off with thirty Ghosts, now having dwindled to a mere dozen of the original. The workers had also been cut in half, dropping from fifty to twenty. Merging with Ghosts under Diya’s command helped to bolster the forces a little, but it was a far cry from the two-hundred-strong rebel force he had in Tenar.

Despite the loss of manpower, he could see that their morale and spirits were still high. When some of them spotted Kyle arriving, word of his survival and apparent victory against the transcendent was spreading like wildfire, permanently enshrining him as a hero to the cause. None of the remaining Ghosts had any doubts in his capabilities any longer, knowing Kyle had what it takes.

The only ones who didn’t share the same sentiment were Diya and the Ghosts under her. She had been previously nominated as the local Ghost leader for Desham but has naturally been replaced by the arrival of Feldon and Sasha. Her infuriated expression clearly showed to Kyle that the merger was not as efficient as Feldon had put it, and he gathered that his arrival was also not to her liking.

Still, Kyle had no time to worry about the emotions of Diya, continuing to ask questions. “Supplies?”

“Barely enough potions, and one working arcia etcher. We don’t have enough Aspis MK1 armor to gear the local Ghosts, and food is a problem. Even though Diya is helping us source it through black market trading in the refugee camps, there just isn’t a stable source of food around the region.”

“I noticed all the farmlands were not growing anything.”

“This, I can explain.” Diya intervened, wanting to prove her usefulness. “The middle-class and richer factory owners in Desham want to monetize the desperation of the refugees. They harvested all the grain and crops in the last month and stored it in a grain storage deep in the walled section of the city next to the garrison. This way, they can use it as leverage to get workers for the factories and their business easily.”

“The factories are run by Harrison Industries?” Kyle queried.

“Not all of them, but the majority of them are. Right now, they are producing ration packs to be shipped off to Ocra, which makes it all the more ironic that people are starving right here.”

“That makes it easier for us. With the dissatisfaction of the people in the play, it would be far easier than it was in Tenar to gather support, resources, and manpower. Diya, you are to immediately stop selling food to the other refugees. Food shall only be provided within the Ghosts itself until further notice.”

Diya squinted her eyes in suspicion, her frustration at Kyle finally reaching a breaking point. “You’re asking me to cancel my only current business. The way I even get the rations for you all is by bribing the guards with the jewelry and valuables I earned! If I stop right now, all of you might as well starve to death! I’m starting to think that you brainwashed the Ghosts or something - there’s no way you’re even capable as a lead-”

Before she could finish, she found her face grabbed tightly by Kyle’s iron grip, the grip lifting her off the ground as her legs tried to kick against Kyle, though her own satin dress restricted the range of her movements. The Ghosts under Diya all shot up instantly, ready to fight at a moment’s notice, but Kyle’s Ghosts themselves also got up, the tension between the two sides building up.

“Look at you. Defenseless. Weak. Pitiful. Wearing a dress that prevents you from fighting back. Putting on jewelry and flaunting wealth meaninglessly. Do you feel better that you’re richer than the refugees? Is that the limit of your worldview? Is that how your Ghosts think, too? If so, I’m starting to consider you as a liability. I could crush your face and skull in a single instant right this very instant.”

Diya didn’t believe that Kyle would do it, but she suddenly felt his fingers clenching even tighter around her face, squeezing her jawbone and temples until a creaking cracking sound could be heard along her gum. “St-stop! Stop!” Diya pleaded, squeezing the words out through a muffled mouth before Kyle let go, dropping her unceremoniously onto the floor.

“You have the skills but not the vision to see. You are free to question my orders, but defy them, and you will find out what it is like to cross me. But if you prove your loyalty, I will have you see heights beyond your well. The same goes for your men. From now on, I’m in charge. Understood?” Kyle turned around and headed to the arcia etcher workshop that had already been set up, intending on crafting more explosive rounds for the two railgun snipers.

Diya gasped for air as she lay on the floor, her satin dress already stained by the dirty ground. She struggled to get up, though she still had doubts about Kyle’s plan. “I will close down my business, but how are we to get food? We will have nothing to bribe the guards with, and every farmland around is devoid of produce! Where are you going to get the food?”

Kyle didn’t turn around, preparing to craft the explosive rounds. “Sasha, Feldon, gear up with two other Ghosts. We’re going hunting in the Keru Forest.”

# Chapter 120 - Hunters

“Hunting in the Keru Forest? You’ll need more than a few Tusken Rabbits to sustain us, and that’s just for a day.” Diya complained while Kyle, Sasha, and Feldon geared up. “Everything else is larger than the Tusken Rabbit or too poisonous for humans to eat!”

“Then we’ll hunt the bigger creatures.” Kyle continued his work at the arcia etcher without looking back at Diya. He was confident that there existed such a food source, especially with the large animal tracks that he had spotted.

Diya still wasn’t convinced about the feasibility of the plan. “You can’t be serious, taking down a single mammoth hog is a task for the military. Just five of you won’t be enough - you’ll need all of us to maybe even hurt one. Not to mention that they travel in herds and always group up when they are under attack.”

Kyle cocked an eyebrow as he gave a sidelong glance at the frustrated Diya. “Good to hear. We’ll keep that in mind, but I can’t have all the Ghosts leave the refugee camp together. I’m counting on you to hold down the fort.”

Diya was about to retort once more but recalled Kyle’s warning before, stopping herself before she landed in more trouble. “Fine. Do it your way. But if you come back for help, don’t say I didn’t warn you.” She turned around sharply, her dress fluttering in the air as she made for the exit ladder.

As Diya left, Feldon shuffled over to Kyle’s side, whispering through the side of his mouth. “Sir, are you sure you should be pissing off the local Ghost leader like that? She is a local of Desham, after all; I would rather have her on our side than plotting against us.”

“What she does against us means little in the grand scale of things. Anyone who stands against me will be swiftly dealt with, that’s all.” Kyle wasn’t in the mood to entertain Feldon’s doubt, though he was well aware that pushing Diya too hard might cause her to change sides. Yet from his observations of Diya’s behavior, Kyle was confident that she would not turn over to the guards. *Judging from her interaction with Jaden, she is morally aligned with the goal of the Ghosts. If she were truly a pragmatic black market dealer, she should have sided with the guards instantly.*

A real black market dealer would have had Jaden shaken down for all his worth on top of that necklace. *The necklace itself was a fake, yet Diya offered two sacks. She’s too good for her own sake to even think of turning to the enemy.*

Within an hour, Kyle and the squad were geared up once more, Kyle returning the runic falchion to Sasha, albeit with the blade sung a little from the friction with Soren’s lightning sword. He left Nox’s helmet behind in a locked crate, still wearing the exosuit arm and bringing a railgun along with a simple standard machete taken from the stockpile of equipment that had been evacuated. Potions, rations, water flasks, and antidotes were all stocked up as well, just barely enough for the five of them. The supplies were running thin, but Kyle knew that food was the most pressing issue right now - bartering jewelry and using them to bribe the guards is hardly a sustainable method to fuel a rebel movement. Once he was ready, the squad formed up behind him, armed to the teeth with proper armor. “Let’s move.” Kyle motioned with his hand.

[Sir, perhaps we should gather more information on the mammoth hog that we are to hunt. Right now we’re completely in the blind as to where the herd could be.] Sasha gave her opinion as they headed up the exit ladder out of the hideout. [The Keru Forest is almost five hundred kilometers wide at its shortest width - we may be stuck hunting for days or even weeks.]

“Don’t worry about it. Someone will come to help us.” Kyle gave a cryptic reply, Sasha cocking her head in confusion.

As luck would have it, there was someone waiting right outside the shelter, the youth Jaden twirling a tenar coin between his fingers expertly as he squatted on the side of the dusty street, chewing on a yellowing grass stem. He stood straight up the moment Kyle and the squad stepped out, blocking Kyle’s path. “Name’s Jaden, heard you needed help hunting.”

“And where did you hear that from?” Kyle asked, his senses alerted to the environment. From the corner of his peripheral vision, he could see a tinge of Diya’s purple satin dress peeking out from the side of another shelter further down, hiding amidst the hustle and bustle of other refugees loitering about.

“Heard it from Diya.” Jaden tried to act tough, though it only increased his chewing speed. “I know the grazing pattern of the mammoth hogs. There’s a few hundred herds, but I reckon one herd is more than enough to feed this entire refugee camp.”

“What’s in it for you?”

“Just because I know where they are, doesn’t mean I can hurt them.” Jaden stretched his arms out, showing his lanky skinny frame off. “I got the tracks, you got the weapons and warriors. We can cut the meat fifty-fifty.”

“Five.”

“Five…? You want to kill five mammoth hogs? That’s a bit too much, isn’t it? I thought we were killing -”

“Five percent. That’s all you get.”

“Wha…” Jaden’s jaw dropped before he closed his gaping mouth and glared at Kyle. “How the hell is that fair? I’m the one who knows where the hog is!”

“And I’m the one who is going to kill it. If you’re not agreeable, we can talk again when I return.” Kyle signaled to the squad, all of them walking off down the street toward the end of the refugee camp. There were hardly any guards in the refugee camps, all of them having been delegated to the defense of the walls and gates of the inner city zone, allowing Kyle and his Ghosts to move freely enough.

Jaden didn’t expect Kyle to really walk away like that without haggling. *Shit, I need that meat!* He quickly ran up to Kyle, blocking his path once more with his arms outstretched. “Okay, okay, forty-sixty! That’s as low as I’m willing to -”

The tip of a drawn machete pressed against his chin, Jaden’s eyes not even being able to catch the speed at which Kyle drew the blade out. Even Sasha and Feldon were caught off-guard by the fluidity of the motion, having no knowledge about Kyle’s racial upgrade to a 229-A-X package. “Block my path one more time with a useless offer, and Diya will be left with a head. Five or dead. Choose.” Kyle sternly warned the flustered Jaden, who had his hands raised in surrender.

“F-f-five! Five! I agree to five!”

Kyle retracted the machete, flicking it before sheathing again along the back of his belt. “Always good to do business with someone smart. Lead the way.”

Jaden nodded vigorously but internally cursed at being threatened this much. Still, his stomach could only think about the five percent that he was about to receive in meat. *With that much being offered, I’m going to be rich in the refugee camp - I could even have servants!* The slowly growing grin on his face showed the greed under the surface as he led Kyle’s squad out of the refugee camp.

The Keru Forest was relatively close to the outskirts of Desham, and it took only half an hour of walking to reach the border of the forest. Already, the giant trees of the forest beyond stood far taller than the pitiful stone walls that surrounded Desham, the trees’ trunks and dense foliage limiting the daylight that filtered through the leaves in streams. A single major road led into the forest, winding deeper in. Interestingly enough, checkpoints for passing wagons going in and out of the Keru Forest were set up by Nest guards, inspecting countless wagons plastered with the logo of Harrison Industries that carried large planks of wood, escorted by armed personnel towards the factories of Desham. The military presence of Nest guards dissuaded any refugee who even thought of hijacking the wagon convoys. Large swaths of stumps showed the former border of the forest, already being steadily chopped down by arctech saws that ground against the ancient barks.

Instead of taking the major road where there was consistent traffic, Jaden led them onto a smaller path that was less traveled and far away from the view of the Nest guards. “Don’t want to get too close to those guys. Ever since the President declared martial law, they’ve been coming in and forcibly evacuating villages from the forest just so they can take over the land.” Jaden explained in a low, somber tone to Kyle as they entered the forest through another track, this one barely showing any signs of human presence.

*So Harrison Industries has been exploiting the forest too.* Kyle expected Harrison to do so - the wood in the Keru Forest was extremely useful for plenty of things such as creating weapons, barricades and providing temporary housing as well as serving as firewood. However, none of the refugees in the camps of Desham were benefitting from this exploitation, many still living in tattered tents that barely offered any protection from the elements.

“We’ll need to find a place to set up camp. Hunting the mammoth hog won’t be easy - it’ll take days of tracking and patience to even get the scent of one. There is a village deeper in the Keru Forest nearby that can help serve as a base point.” Jaden pointed towards a rickety old arrow sign that pointed along a winding forest track marked by piles of dead leaves recently brushed aside; the words on the sign faded from erosion.

“I thought you mentioned that the villages were being evacuated by Harrison Industries.” Feldon questioned as they continued walking.

“Well, this one is a bit harder to find. I doubt Harrison Industries would try anything with us.” Jaden shrugged.

“Us?” Kyle asked.

“Yeah, I uhh… yea I’m part of the village.” Jaden rubbed his head sheepishly, clearly hiding something else and raising Kyle’s suspicion.

[Sasha, take a high route and watch for any imminent traps.] Kyle spoke to Sasha through the telepathic channel.

[Understood, but if we suspect that it’s a trap, then why are we still following him?]

[Great rewards always come with great risks.] Kyle motioned with his finger, signaling to his Ghosts to get ready for an ambush, while Sasha leaped upwards without much of a sound, climbing up the great ancient trees and using their branches.

Interestingly, Jaden heard the sounds, turning around and looking up, though he could not see anything. “Weird, haven’t heard anything like that around…” He mumbled, having forgotten to count the number of Ghosts following Kyle.

They continued walking, Kyle keeping a keen eye out for any signs of an attack. To him, any place with a human population meant they could either be recruited or subjugated - either of which was always a boon to him. *I could certainly do with more Ghosts. If they are unwilling, then I could do with more slaves.*

Furthermore, he already had plans to expand his hunting business. Kyle was not yet certain about the size of one mammoth hog, but he knew he needed to kill much more than just a few. Having a few more capable trackers like Jaden would help a lot, enslaved or not.

Soon, the village came into view, turning out to be a simple hamlet. The two Ghosts that followed Kyle faltered a little, recalling their own villages near Ocra from which they had been ousted from themselves. The peaceful sight of the drifting smoke from fired clay chimneys merged with wooden roofing and walls gave them a sense of longing and memory that reinvigorated what they were fighting for.

The squad walked into the small little hamlet, a simple layout of about ten houses surrounding a river that ran through with a strong current. A few kids could be seen playing with some shiny marbles, tossing them into a ring and cheering over the results, while their mothers washed and hand squeezed the clothes dry with their strong arms, scrubbing them hard on jagged wooden boards to drain the moisture out.

A few village militia soldiers were already armed and standing on guard; their suspicion was raised the moment Kyle’s squad appeared at the outskirts of the hamlet, drawing their swords and shields as well as aiming with longbows at them. Only one of them had a gun, except it was a mere arctech musket, which was highly inefficient and had a slow reload.

Still, they stepped forward bravely, the leader wielding the musket shouting at the approaching squad. “Stop right there! If you’re from Harri- Jaden? Is that you?”

“Chief, it’s me; I’m back.” Jaden walked up carefully to the leader, his hands raised in surrender to show his stance. Conversely, Kyle and the other Ghosts didn’t let go of their guns, though they did not aim back at the squad.

“Jaden, it’s really you! Where the hell have you been? Do you know how worried I was?” The village chief put down the musket, letting out a sigh of relief. “Almost everyone else thought you were dead!”

“Sorry, chief, I… I ran off to the city.”

“Desham? Didn’t I tell you it was dangerous now? There’s a war about to happen; you can’t just walk off like this. Who are the men behind you? I don’t recognize any of them.”

“They… they are some friends I made in Desham! They are looking to hunt some mammoth hogs to bring meat back to the city.”

“Out of the question. The mammoth hogs will run rampant if you kill them off - they are not dumb. They will find this hamlet and destroy us in a stampede!”

[This doesn’t seem to be going well. Should we capture all of them?] Sasha offered her suggestion while Kyle used his enhanced eyesight to look carefully at the marbles that the children were playing with. *Those marbles… they are arcia crystals!*

[Not yet. There’s something more valuable to the village. It may be worth going the diplomatic route.] Kyle replied to Sasha, while he slung his railgun to the back, stepping up next to Jaden and approaching the village chief, extending a handshake. “Good to meet you. I’m Kyle, leader of the hunting squad.”

The village chief stared at the stretched-out hand, only returning the handshake with visible reluctance. “How did you meet Jaden?”

“Jaden himself offered his services to us and brought us here.”

“You!” The village chief turned sharply towards Jaden with a furious glare. “I told you not to tell anyone about the village until the war is over! Now that the word is out, they’ll come for us!”

“What’s the point of hiding it?!” Jaden shouted back. “We should be standing up and fighting back against those greedy idiots exploiting all of us Versians, not hiding in some backwater village.”

“Hiding in this ‘backwater’ village is exactly what’s going to keep us alive. Do you really want to die in a meaningless war where lives are traded just for the schemes of men who hardly give a shit about you?” The village chief retorted. “Now your rash actions have exposed our existence, and we’ll be dragged into this war! We should move now immediately and find someplace deeper in the Keru Forest.”

“This is exactly why I left the village! There are things bigger than just sticking your head in the sand and living life obliviously!” Jaden stormed off, clearly infuriated while he walked past Feldon who was taking a break against a nearby tree, breathing in the fresh forest air.

“Jaden! You come back here right now!” The village chief shouted towards Jaden’s back, though Jaden did not turn around. Letting out yet another exasperated sigh, he turned to face Kyle with a sheepish smile. “Sorry about that one. It seems that the real reason why he brought you here was to try and convince us to get off our asses. Ever since his parents died to Nest…”

“Died to Nest?” Kyle questioned further.

“Perhaps we can continue this discussion further in my house.” The village chief led the squad to the house, while Sasha remained on overwatch around the city. She enjoyed the cool breeze that rushed through the canopy of the forest as she sat on a branch, chewing on a ration pack herself.

“We had a lot of run-ins with the Nest guards ever since they moved in. Three whole other villages have been wiped out so far; their residents have been forced to be refugees. Sorry, I forgot to introduce myself. Name’s Draken.” The village chief motioned to a few wooden seats scattered around the homely room. Pots and pans, along with multiple vials filled with different herbs and potion combinations, dotted the walls on various shelves. A slow cooking pot brewed a fragrant tea, the aroma soothing as it wafted upwards to the high ceiling, the roof supported by wooden beams.

“Good to meet you, Chief Drake,” Kyle replied with a calm tone, surprising the two Ghosts and even Feldon, who almost spluttered on his water flask. They had long been accustomed to Kyle being extremely domineering and aggressive in all of his negotiations, so to see him act so humble and docile here felt extremely off.

“So, heard you want to hunt the hogs. Unfortunately, that’s a bad idea. The roaming herds are dangerous, and I don’t think just the four of you are enough to go up against them. On top of that, the population of mammoth hogs have been increasing dramatically as well.” Drake poured two cups of the aromatic tea, handing it over to Kyle who gladly accepted it, though he did not drink it.

“I understand that your main concern is the protection of the village.” Kyle diverted the topic. “It isn’t that you are worried about the mammoth hogs taking revenge - you’re worried about Nest figuring out where this village is.”

“You’re surprisingly astute… yes. You are right - we want to be able to defend ourselves, and the only feasible way is to hide. There’s no way we can fight against Nest or even Harrison’s guards.”

“So, the way I see it: you need protection, I need resources. We can work out a deal.” Kyle pressed his position. “Help us get the mammoth hogs, and we’ll make sure your village isn’t exposed. If it is exposed, we’ll fight for you.”

Drake sipped on his teacup slowly, his eyes squinting. “I don’t think what I’m saying is getting through - the four of you won’t be enough to deal with the mammoth hog herd, not even one stray one. I’ve seen Harrison Industries try to cull the herds near their new forestry areas: it’s safe to say it was an absolute failure. Good riddance though, but I wouldn’t wish the same fate on you.”

“Hmm… then it seems that we are at an impasse.” Kyle placed down his cup of tea, having not drunk it at all. “Perhaps I will return at a later date to offer more attractive terms. Thank you for your hospitality.”

“Thank you for understanding.” Drake stood up, offering his hand which Kyle gladly shook. “I can tell you’re still keen on hunting the hogs. Jaden is a good tracker, but I implore you to hunt at a further area downstream from the river so the village is not implicated.”

“I understand.” Kyle nodded, leaving the village chief’s house and walking along the river. As he walked past the children playing with the shiny marbles, one of the marbles rolled up to his feet, prompting Kyle to pick it up.

MG404: [Item | Refined Arcia Crystal (Advanced) | *Only an artificer of renown can achieve such a feat.* | Enhanced Arcia Energy Capacity and Output.]

*This is definitely worth an investigation…* Kyle tossed the marble back towards the kids, clearly feeling the village’s chief eyes staring into his back. In fact, many of the villagers were peeking out of their houses, observing each and every movement of the Ghost squad as they headed back towards where they came from.

[Sir, I saw someone strange. Last house along the river, red brick walls.] Sasha’s words had Kyle look towards the window of the brick house, noticing a foreign lady looking back right at home. As their eyes met, the lady hurriedly ducked, drawing the curtains across and blocking off Kyle’s view of the interior. However, that momentary glance had shown that there were countless arcia etchers and weapons hanging on the inside of the house, along with a furnace for smelting.

As they returned to the fuming Jaden, Kyle tapped Jaden’s shoulder. “It’s a bit strange for this small village hamlet to have an arctech workshop or blacksmith of that size. There’s only fifty of you.”

“Arctech workshop? We don’t have anything like that.” Jaden scratched his chin in confusion, before looking over to the brick house that stood out in clear contrast to the other wooden ones. “Huh, don’t recall anyone’s house looking like that. It’s only been four months since I left though. Maybe Drake hired an arctech engineer? Either way, I’m done with this stupid ass village. We’ll just go hunt in a different area…. were there only four of you? I feel like someone is missing.”

“There’s only four of us.” Kyle asserted. “Now lead the way.”

The Ghost squad soon left the village behind them, Feldon feeling everything was a little strange as he walked next to Kyle, whispering into his ear once more. “Boss, I’ve never seen you just give up and walk away like this! That village would have been useful as a base of operations, and its people were good for navigating the forest. The village chief was even a herbalist - he could help us make potions!”

A sly smile grew on Kyle’s face. “Who said I was giving up?”

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In the middle of the night, silence reigned supreme in the hamlet, save for the chirps of insects and the calming current of the river. Drake rested on his bed, thinking about the hunting squad that had turned up today as well as Jaden’s eventual departure once more. He clenched his fist, conflicted on whether to help Jaden or not, though he finally decided that the village was more important than the orphan. *Looks like your son acts the same way as you do after all, brother…* He turned onto his side, the bedside table featuring a picture of him with his brother posing next to a fallen mammoth hog, along with a younger Jaden smiling from ear to ear. As his eyelids began to close, a sudden knock on his door jolted him awake.

He sluggishly moved to the door, opening it to reveal a red haired lady, her demeanor serious as she shoved past him, motioning for him to close the door.

“Hayden, what the hell are you doing here? If anyone finds out you came here in the dead of the night-”

“That’s the least of our worries now. I’m afraid I may have been exposed. Those hunters that came earlier in the day, they may have been mercenaries hired by Nest to track me down.”

“Nest…? But I didn’t see any emblem or tattoo-”

“A tracker sent by Nest wouldn’t wear their colors that blatantly.” Hayden rolled her eyes, the wrinkles on her face creasing as she sat down on a chair, her legs jittery with anxiety. “I’m sure they were here to hunt me down. When I looked at them, one of them was clearly looking right at me with intent. They know me.”

“That’s not possible, it’s been months since you arrived and we’ve been doing fine. You haven’t left the village at all!” Drake sat down opposite her, resting his elbow on the table with a concerned expression. “Jaden isn’t dumb, he’ll know if they have bad motives overall.”

“I never met Jaden before, but from what I’ve seen today, it’s clear that he is just a kid. Still, I think it’s best if I leave the village permanently. It’s too dangerous for me to stay behind and endanger the rest of you. I came here today to give you my thanks for sheltering me and welcoming me into the community.”

“You can’t be serious.” Drake gulped instinctively, scanning Hayden’s face before he finally realized she was being serious. He tried to speak, but he couldn’t find the words to express what he felt, until Hayden grabbed his hand, clasping it tightly.

“Come with me. We’ll leave tonight. Pack everything into a sack and make our way deeper into the forest. Walk out of Versia by the end of the week.” Hayden looked Drake in the eyes expectantly. “We’ll do fine - you got the traps, I got the machinery. We can handle anything that comes out way together.”

Drake wanted to say yes, but the thought of the village weighed him down. “I… I can’t. The village is counting on me. At least until I’m confident that the village can do well without me. Look, I’ll help you pack up and send you off. Take a few potions before you go, especially some antidotes.” He got up from his seat, missing the momentary sign of exasperation on Hayden’s face.

“That’s alright. I’ll pack up myself. Goodbye, Drake. Thanks for everything.” Hayden’s voice became colder than ever, leaving Drake’s house before he could collect all of the potions and antidotes to pass to her.

“Hayden. Hayden!” Drake called out beyond the door, but Hayden didn’t turn around, focused on returning to her brick house. Some of the villagers who were still awake peeped out behind their window sills, always curious about the latest gossip, as they watched Drake stare at Hayden with a forlorn expression. Hayden’s figure walking away reminded Drake of Jaden’s departure today as well.*Why does it feel like everyone is leaving when I’m doing my best to protect us?*

Letting out the third exasperated sigh for the day, Drake closed the door, placing the potions and antidotes back into a cabinet before retiring for the night, lying back on his bed. However, he could hardly sleep, only thinking about Hayden and her imminent departure. *It’s for the best, its for the village, for the village…* Two hours passed as he tossed and turned in bed, unable to rest properly with his mind in turmoil. *I should go and clear things up with Hayden before she leaves.*

As he got up from the bed, a sudden distinctive shot of an arctech rifle was fired into the air, earning shouts and screams coming from the villagers’ houses. Bright arctech spotlights blasted across the village, shining through the windows and disorientating Drake while the village militia scrambled to get out. [Illegal squatters of the Keru Forest. Your offenses are twofold.] A loud arctech radio speaker blared out with a jarring static, two Nest guards carrying it along with the arctech spotlights while another dozen wielded rifles as well, taking up a position just outside the village.

[One. Illegal occupation of an area that does not belong to you. The land is under the ownership of Tenar Logging Incorporated, a subsidiary of Harrison Industries . You will now be forcibly removed from the area. New housing will be provided at your new destination in Desham.]

“What the fuck are you talking about? I’ve been here for over seven years – this is the first time I’ve heard of such bullshit!” One of the villagers yelled as he stepped out of his house, armed with a sword and wooden shield. “The Keru Forest doesn’t belong to anyone, and certainly not you cunts!”

[Two. You have been harbouring dangerous revolutionaries who plot the demise of the Versian Government, seeking to upend the stability of the people. Surrender them, and you will be granted leniency during your trial.]

Drake’s heart plummeted when he heard that. *Hayden!* He quickly put on his battle gear and armor, snatching his musket that was rested against the wall and rushing out of the house, the rest of the village militia having already gathered in place. However, there seemed to be no hope of fending off the imminent Nest attack, and the number of Nest soldiers was on par with that of the militia. The disparity in the equipment and weaponry only made the battle seem even more hopeless.

Still, Drake stood strong, stepping out in front of the militia and assuming his role as village chief. “I am the chief of this village, Drake! I request a meeting with your leader!” He shouted out while he shielded his eyes from the blinding spotlights, hoping to stall long enough to figure a way out either through diplomacy or compromise. He stood firm, unafraid of the rifles aimed right at him that could take off his head in an instant.

From beyond the bright spotlights, the leader of the Nest squad stepped forward. “We have received reports that you are harboring dangerous individuals who are active revolutionaries against the government!” The squad leader asserted confidently.

“I don’t see why this backwater village of ours would have anything to do with trying to overthrow the government.”

“Don’t play games with me. She was seen lurking around the restricted zone under Tenar Logging, we have eyewitness reports from our own guards. Her tracks lead right here!”

*What? Hayden hasn’t left the village in forever!* “That’s not possible, none of us have gone more than five kilometers beyond this village! You must have been mistaken.”

The Nest squad leader squinted his eyes in suspicion. “The penalty for harboring an enemy of Versia is death by public execution under the new Sedition Act put forth by President Mornero. You are to show me where they are immediately, or you will be considered as an accomplice and dealt with accordingly!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, the person you are looking for is not here!”

“Fine. Men, search all the houses and arrest all the villagers!”

Before Drake could protest, his defiance earned him a sudden blow to the head, the Nest squad leader striking him from the front with the butt of an arctech rifle. He toppled to the floor, dropping his musket which clattered along the gravel path. The villagers gasped while mothers hid their children in their houses. The militia tried to step forward, but they, too, were rooted in fear, unwilling to fight against the overwhelming firepower that the Nest guards had.

“This is your last chance!” The squad leader announced once more as the Nest soldiers began to filter out, segregating the villagers and cuffing them. “Anyone who gives me information about where the revolutionary is will be rewarded greatly, and will not be charged with treason!”

Drake was hauled up by two soldiers and restrained with handcuffs as well, dragged along the familiar decade-old path along the river towards his own house, led by the squad leader. His head lolled about, dizzy from the frontal hit. However, as they passed the brick house, he could see Hayden crouching behind a wall, hidden from sight and wielding a strange-looking triple-cylinder machine, preparing to fight back. Drake’s eyes widened, and he mouthed ‘NO’ and shook his head violently. Fighting against Nest like this would result in too many casualties, especially when only Hayden had something useful. The rest of the militia were only armed with bows, spears, and swords, which were inefficient against the arctech rifles.

The squad leader kicked down Drake’s door violently, smashing apart the hinge with his metal sole boot. Drake’s body was unceremoniously thrown into the house, while the two soldiers began to check and flip over every cabinet and shelf, countless precious herbs smashing onto the floor on purpose. “Search the whole damn house, I want to know where that revolutionary is!”

“Are you sure you want to know?” A familiar voice echoed from the wooden beams high above in the elevated ceiling, a shadow dropping from above and slashing his machete deep into the squad leader’s head, the blade stopping short when it reached the neck. The squad leader’s head split apart, the two halves dangling as blood gushed out from the shredded throat and revealing the sickening gray pulsating matter that was his brain.

MG404: [System Message | Killed: ‘Nest Squad Leader’ - 20 EXP]

The two squad leaders barely turned around when the same shadow lunged at them, a glowing arm illuminating the dimly lit room as the machete in its hand sliced through their necks like butter. They clutched the gaping wound on their necks, trying to stem the bleeding while they collapsed to the ground in a quivering heap, the blood staining the wooden floor panels of Drake’s house.

MG404: [System Message | Killed: ‘Nest Soldier’ - 10 EXP]

Drake stared in horror at the ghastly sight of the mutilated bodies, wincing as the machete was also swung towards him. However, instead of cutting off his head, the blade snapped the cuffs apart, allowing Drake to move his arms freely again and finally see who it was. “You! The hunter!”

“It seems you are in need of protection. Are the terms now attractive enough for you?” Kyle grinned, flicking the blood of his machete, using the clothes of the fallen Nest soldiers to clean the blade.

Drake wasn’t dumb, immediately realizing what was going on. “You led them right to us! Hayden would have never been dumb enough to go anywhere near the restricted zone. You brought them here!”

“That’s a stretch, I’m just a hunter. Also, does it really matter now? Your villagers are about to be arrested and transported off to a refugee camp. And you are completely helpless to stop it, including that old revolutionary you have been harboring all this time.”

“Damn you, this is blackmail!” Drake cursed with all his might, though he did not try to attack Kyle or act aggressive in any way, especially not around the fallen bodies that Kyle had just easily killed.

“Time is ticking.” Kyle tapped his blade, a soft ringing sound emitting from the resonance. “Lives are at stake. You said you wanted to protect your people, but here you are worrying about morals. Are you going to give up the freedom of your villagers for your own conscience? Once they find out about these three bodies…”

Drake could still hear the shouts and screams from outside as Nest soldiers continued to terrorize the villagers, oblivious to the death of their squad leader. He knew that if they found out, all of them might be killed on the spot. His heart burnt with hatred against Kyle, but he eventually succumbed, bowing to Kyle fully. “Please, save my villagers, and in exchange, I will help you hunt the mammoth hogs down.”

“Not good enough.”

“Huh?!”

“The deal has changed. Those Nest soldiers are a bit difficult to kill off. You’re going to have to offer more than that.”

“Didn’t you just want the meat?” Drake shot back.

“I can easily get the meat myself. Jaden could help me track it easily in a few days. Why do I need you?” Kyle smiled.

Drake heard another sharp shriek as a gunshot went off, children crying in the distance. His guilt and desire to protect the village finally tipped him over, the pressure unbearable as he bowed again to Kyle. “Okay, okay I’ll do anything you ask, just save the village, please!”

Kyle tapped his arctech radio. “Feldon, you hear that? Get the other Ghosts moving. Full sweep.”

[Loud and clear, boss.] Feldon’s excited voice came over the radio. [Time to clean up the trash.]

# Chapter 121 - Commercialized Agriculture

“Get down on the ground!” A Nest soldier roared, shoving the barrel of his arctech rifle against a defiant village militiaman, beating him down just outside his own house. Another soldier grabbed a frightened mother and her son, shoving them out of the house before entering, smashing, and checking for the supposed revolutionary. All across the small hamlet, small little scuffles were breaking out as villagers tried to resist the Nest soldiers breaking into their homes, but none of them were willing to fight back, afraid of the consequences or endangering their loved ones. How were they to fight back against enemies far more equipped than they were?

“Don’t fight back, just stay down!” A mother had to hold back her own son, preventing him from lashing out in anger as he watched the Nest soldier raid and pillage his house mercilessly, snatching and grabbing anything of value. Before he laid his grubby hands on a sapphire ring, something snapped within the son, prompting him to grab a nearby fireplace iron stick and use it to impale the Nest soldier from behind.

However, his inexperience had the sharp tip miss entirely, going past the Nest soldier who had moved in coincidence. No words needed to be said as the Nest soldier immediately grabbed the attacking son’s head with one hand, dashing his forehead against the wall violently in a fierce slam. A splat of blood stained the once homely walls, the stains skidding downwards as the son’s body fell to the floor, suffering a concussion.

“NO!” The mother wailed, running up to put herself between the Nest soldier and her unconscious son’s body. Instead, her bravery only earned a pellet that ripped through her simple skirt and the flesh in her thighs, the searing pellets lodging themselves near her femur, causing her to trip onto the floor, her face wracked with tremendous pain.

“Looks like you’ll be better off as a sack of meat than handing you over to the authorities!” The Nest soldier grinned as he grabbed the mother’s head by her hair, dragging her around the floor and flipping her over, aiming the rifle right at her head. “I should’ve killed your son by now, but maybe you can do something for me if you want to keep him alive!”

Before he could act on his nefarious intentions, a sudden knife blade found its way into his throat, gutting his neck out while the owner of the knife blade gave a sidelong kick to the ribs of the Nest soldier, the force gouging out the blade and slicing through the tendons that kept his head upright. The mother shrieked as she watched the dying Nest soldier crumpled into a useless heap, scrambling away from his killer, who stood behind the body and mercilessly kicked it.

Ignoring the panicking mother, the killer walked up to the unconscious son, popping a tube-like vial open and pouring the healing potion within onto his head. Within a few seconds, the son was already stirring awake, his head still groggy from impact.

The killer left without a word as gunshots and brutish howls of fighting echoed off the gigantic red bark trees that surrounded the hamlets, some pellets zipping through the foilage up through the canopy, causing a flock of birds to scatter, their rainbow feathers fluttering in the sky. Before any of the Nest soldiers were even aware, the Ghosts had launched a coordinated attack, catching them off-guard and spreading panic.

“Where’s the squad leader? Regroup! Regroup!” An anxious Nest soldier tried to call out to his comrades, waving his hands frantically only to paint a target on his back, three pellets driving through his weak, soft metal chest plate. The pellets drilled holes through his ribcage with blood gushing out, his body collapsing in front of a few shocked villagers that had been rounded up cowering outside.

The battle was fast and brutal, Sasha and Feldon making quick work of the clearly inexperienced Nest guards, some of whom seemed to have just been hired from the refugee camps of Desham as well. Despite their numerical superiority, they had nothing to answer against the professional slaughter that the Ghosts wrecked upon them.

Yet even as the last Nest soldier died, the damage to the village had already been done. The homes had been ransacked, and the dignity of the villagers was in tatters, children and mothers alike having been beaten up. While the deaths around them were horrifying to the largely pacifist villagers, not a single one amongst them thought the deaths were undeserved.

The Ghosts cut and dismantled any cuffs or restraints the Nest soldiers had put on the villagers, setting them free. Some of the villagers recoiled in fear, afraid that this was another armed group who had come to oust them. Disputes over territory were common in the Keru Forest, especially with the lack of law enforcement. Thankfully, the villagers recognized a familiar face among the Ghosts. “Jaden! It’s Jaden!” One of the kids excitedly shouted.

“Don’t worry, guys, they are with me. We’re going to protect you!” Jaden gave a thumbs-up, preparing to bandage up an injured villager who had broken his ankle. Drake was already sprinting out of the house, shouting to the villagers and gathering them together in a central opening amidst their trashed houses. “Are you all safe? Anyone in need of healing? I-I have healing potions! Get the injured to my house, quickly!”

While Drake and Jaden began to lead those suffering from bruises toward his house, Hayden let out a sigh of relief, still hiding behind her house with her triple-cylinder gun at the ready. She slung the gun to her side, hefting up a large rucksack filled to the brim with countless machinery and relics, about to leave the village without a word before someone unfamiliar appeared in front of her in the darkness of the night, his figure only slightly perceivable from the reflected glow of the hamlet’s fire and Nest spotlights still left on.

Hayden dropped the rucksack instantly, about to bring her gun to bear, when the figure in front of her moved quickly, his body becoming a blur. She tried to track his movement with her eyes, but her body could not react in time, a machete with stains of blood now pressing against her throat. “Let’s not get too hasty, Hayden Nu. There’s no reason for you to leave the village now that it’s sa-”

As her assailant spoke, Hayden wasn’t out of options just yet; a sudden glaring blast of light erupted the necklace around her neck, blinding her assailant and allowing Hayden to move. But before she could draw a knife along her thigh holster, an iron grip clasped around her head, the force unimaginable as Hayden let out a cry of pain, unable to withstand the pressure.

Two kicks to the back of her knees had her fall to the ground, forced to kneel while the assailant still held a machete to her neck. “For one of the original revolutionaries, you’re not as spry as I thought you would be. I’m not here to hurt you. If I can help it.”

Hayden gasped sharply as the iron grip on her head was released; the machete retracted to allow her to catch her breath. As she regained her composure, she had a small smirk on her face. “You better not hurt me. I’m sure Harrison wouldn’t appreciate it if you brought me back in tatters.”

“And why would I give you over to Harrison?” The assailant sheathed the machete behind his back on his belt, walking over in front of Hayden, where his face was illuminated by the light.

“You’re the hunter this morning. Aren’t you hired to track me down and haul me back?” Hayden scoffed as she stood back up, dusting off her knees. “Just get it over with.”

“You look very different from the pictures I’ve seen of you. Much younger and more energetic.” Kyle carefully paced around her. “It’s a shame I did not manage to rescue it from the hideout.”

“The hideout…?” Hayden’s confusion only worsened until she finally realized what Kyle was referring to. “There’s no way, the hideout is only known to-”

“Dekar and your missing President Johan, yes. Only they know the real layout of the catacombs. Unfortunately, I do not currently have Dekar with me. Let me assure you that I am not on Harrison’s side. We are the Ghosts of Versia.” Kyle introduced dramatically.

Hayden, however, shook her head vigorously. “Impossible. I heard through the radio that all the Ghosts perished in the catacombs after they attacked the Grand Exhibition and tried to assassinate Harrison. Pretending to be them is in bad taste - their sacrifice should not be tarnished by the likes of you.”

“Rumors of our demise have been greatly exaggerated, no doubt for the purpose of propaganda.” Kyle waved his hand dismissively. “Whether or not you believe us, I still require your assistance.”

Hayden squinted her eyes. “I’m just an old lady at this stage. I can’t help you with anything.”

“Don’t belittle yourself. I know who you are. Hayden Nu, Harrison’s former top researcher for arctech applications. Inventor of the Aurtla, the first native heavier-than-air flight completely independent of relics from ancient ruins.”

“I’m not the inventor of that blasted warmachine - I never agreed for it to be used for the military!” Hayden snapped back aggressively. “Harrison has twisted all of my designs for his own uses instead of the benefit of Versia, and that’s exactly why we’re in such a shit state right now!”

“And what are you doing about it? Last I checked, you’ve been hiding out in this village for months on end.” Kyle motioned towards the hamlet. “You don’t seem very concerned that Versia is in a terrible state now. You were even planning to go deeper into the Forest, weren’t you?”

“I’m not about to justify myself to some lowlife who thinks he can masquerade as a Ghost.” Hayden spat with derision, her determination strong. “Either let me go right now or just kill me alread-”

Her heart stopped for a moment as her body barely had any time to react, Kyle drawing the machete faster than she could blink. Her expression froze as the tip of the machete stopped just one centimeter from her eyes in an instant, the adrenaline immediately rushing through her veins while she stumbled back in fear.

“So much for determination to die,” Kyle remarked, twirling the machete in his hand expertly. “I can kill you at any time I want, no need for you to ask. Your life right now is in my hands.”

Hayden gulped instinctively, her heart palpitating rapidly from the near-death scenario she had just saw. If she had just moved forward a little, she could have lost an entire eye now. Still, the display of skill from Kyle showed to her that he was definitely not an ordinary fighter. *Could he really be a Ghost?* “What do you want from me? The plans for Aurtla? I don’t have them anymore on me.”

“I don’t want the plans, they are of little use to me. Pitiful things that can be easily shot down.” Kyle said dismissively, shocking Hayden.

“Easily shot down? Those ‘pitiful things’ fly at speeds unheard of - not even an arctech wagon can go that fast!” Hayden retorted in a fit of rage, defending her invention unknowingly.

Kyle didn’t respond, merely glancing around across the canopy of trees before seeing the outline of a bird the size of a barrel perched on a tree branch between the leaves, its wings folded as it slept quietly. “See that bird up there, the third branch from the left?”

Hayden squinted her eyes, barely able to make it out. She wouldn’t have been able to spot the bird without Kyle having pointed it out, and her eyesight was not as good as that of Kyle’s 229-A-X package. “Yeah, what abou-”

A sudden bang from a railgun erupted across the hamlet, a projectile streaking across at a blinding speed that slammed into the bird, before erupting in a ball of flames that set the leaves of the tree smoldering, sparks flying everywhere. The villagers were shocked at the sudden attack, and some of the villagers spread out to see what was happening. Bits and pieces of the bird’s flesh flew everywhere, scattering across the forest ground with a sickening splat, all while Hayden watched on in horror, her head swiveling only to see Kyle still pointing, having not fired a single pellet himself.

“Convinced?” Kyle smirked.

“Wha-what… but….” Hayden couldn’t wrap her head around it, struggling to figure out what was going on. *The speed of the projectile is not something a normal Versian rifle can handle. Anything like that would have blown apart the barrel immediately or sent a reverse wave into the arcia energy of the user and damaged his veins…*

“Want to know how? Join me as a Ghost. I will help you fight against Harrison and find your old comrades again. Dekar is in Creuliz right now, also gathering allies to help.” Kyle explained. “Your skills as an arctech engineer are needed in the fight. The time for hiding is over - now is the time to step out and stand for what you believe in. If you want in, follow me back to Drake’s house. Otherwise, I wish you all the best.”

He turned around, walking back towards the center of the hamlet, leaving Hayden in the dark and alone. No one else seemed to be around, though instead of running away deeper into the forest, she made up her mind, grabbing her rucksack and following Kyle from behind, albeit at a further distance.

[Sir, you were right. She’s coming back to the village. How did you convince her not to run?] Sasha’s voice came into Kyle’s mind as he walked among the injured villagers who were now being treated by Drake and a few other helpers. They were still wary about the sudden explosion nearby, but seeing that there were no follow-up attacks of any sort, the tension died down a little, though everyone was still a little on edge, their eyes alert.

[I just demonstrated I can blow up a bird in the middle of the night through the forest from seemingly nowhere. Anyone who decides to run after seeing that is an idiot not worth recruiting.]

Drake spotted Kyle coming by, though he still continued on his job, bringing potions and placing herbs on bruises to soothe the aching pain for some of the villagers. To his surprise, Kyle handed him a few vials of health potions, allowing the healing process for the villagers to go a lot faster. Drake was about to open his mouth to say thanks, but he caught a glimpse of the pensive Hayden approaching them, still hoisting the rucksack on her back along with the triple-cylinder gun slung in front.

He quickly moved over to her, trying to grab her hand. “Hayden, thank the Goddess you’re okay. I…”

Hayden allowed Drake to touch her hand, but she averted her gaze, unwilling to look Drake in the eye. “Sorry Drake, not now, just…. lets talk about it later. We got bigger things to worry about.”

“Right, right, of course.” Drake nodded, letting Hayden walk past him. The memory of him rejecting Hayden’s offer to elope was still fresh in his mind, tearing apart from within mentally until a weird whistle beside him from one of the Ghosts interrupted his train of thought.

“Looks like something spicy going on between the two of you.” Feldon remarked, a sly grin on his face as he nudged Drake in the arm twice. “Come on, tell me whats happening?”

“Err… Do I know you?” Drake cocked an eyebrow, unable to recall if he had talked to Feldon before.

“Name’s Feldon. I’m sorta in charge of the Ghosts. Well, except for Kyle. And Sasha. But that’s beside the point.”

“Look, I really don’t have time for this. People are hurt and -”

“I know, I know, but our boss got it covered. Look.” Feldon motioned towards Kyle, who was healing the injured with his Necklace of Healing whenever it was off-cooldown, trying to build a rapport with the villagers. It was definitely working, many now recognizing the Ghosts as their saviors.

Drake’s shoulder relaxed a little, knowing that the villagers were going to be alright. “Well, I guess it’s just that, I’m stuck between choosing her or choosing the village. Sometimes, I wonder why I can’t have both. Instead, now she’s most likely going to leave me forever. We might never get back to how we were before.”

“Hey, hey, it’s alright.” Feldon drooped his armored arm around Drake, as though they had already become best buddies. “You know, I had to suffer a divorce back then just like that, too. We quarreled day in and day out, always about money and whether or not to have children. It’s hard to find someone aligned with all of your views in this day and age. People come and go all the time, and when she left me, it was painful and difficult. It really showed me that life is fleeting and that this whole time I spent wondering about what to do could have been used to do something better. Anyway, what I am trying to say is that don’t worry too much. My first wife pulled the same trick on me, too, packing up and leaving without telling me.”

Drake was a bit lost from that rambling. “And… your first wife came back in the end?”

“What? Of course not. Heard she’s having a blast in Proco. Married one of the mayors or something, fuck if I know. Got a second wife with kids now.”

“What even is the moral of the story here?” Drake groaned as he facepalmed.

“Uhh… all things work out in the end? Just not with the one you were hoping for. But yeah, now that you mention it, we were talking about you and that lady-hey, where are you going? I wasn’t done yet! You’ll be remiss not to listen to Feldon, the love expert!” Feldon called out after Drake, who had given up on the ranting Feldon.

Many of the able-bodied villagers clamored around Drake as he walked past them, all wanting to offer up their opinions on what to do next.

“How did they know we had a revolutionary here in the village? Who told them?” A villager asked around loudly, his voice carrying over the injured.

“Didn’t you hear? They said she was skulking about Tenar Logging. She’s too dangerous for us - we should kick Hayden out of the village right this instant!” An elderly lady tapped her cane forcibly, ranting.

“That doesn’t make any sense!” The first villager shot back. “They already want to evict us on a false charge of illegal squatter, when we have been here for decades! Why would kicking Hayden out help us in any way?”

“I don’t care what happens, but I just don’t want my son to be caught in the crossfire!” Another mother chimed in. “We should surrender to the military immediately - tell them who killed their soldiers and who the revolutionaries are, then maybe we can avoid retribution.”

“This village was built on trust and loyalty among us, having worked together for generations. If we are selling out our own people, what kind of village is this?!” Jaden interjected, furious.

“Hayden is not one of us, she barely joined us a few months ago!”

“And? You still use her skills and tools to feed your children - don’t forget the metal post you use to cook!”

“We should move away from here - find another area. Grab everything we need and just get the fuck away from here. The Keru Forest is big enough for us to hide somewhere else!” Another anxious villager chimed in.

“We won’t be able to survive - deeper in is way too dangerous, nearly all the creatures there can kill us instantly if we’re not well prepared. There’s a reason why we’re even living in this part of the Keru Forest, because it’s safer!” Jaden waved his arms animatedly. “Anyone who’s been out hunting knows why there’s no villages deeper in!”

The argument was heated, as the villagers were clearly divided on what to do. Not many were willing to participate in the argument, some simply heading home to check on their damaged furniture from the rough handling of the soldiers, while a few curious kids warily picked up a dropped repeater, examining it before their mother quickly snatched it away.

Hayden sat on the side of the argument, watching the debate go nowhere. She rested her chin on her hand, her elbow pressed against her crossed legs, and she waited with an exasperated expression. Drake, too, was at a loss for words. He tried to enter the conversation, but the rising tensions between conflicting ideas were stressing him out greatly. This was the first attack on the village in living memory, and watching the villagers be divided like this was hard to stomach. A hand rested on his shoulder; Drake turned around to see Kyle. “Let me handle this,” Kyle said as he stepped forward into the middle of the villagers.

As he moved past the throng, none of them dared to block his path, all of them having seen his proficiency in combat. His towering height had him taller than most of the woodcutters and hunters in the village, his features also innately attractive to them. Furthermore, he had saved them from the brutality of Nest, and even offered healing and healing potions to the injured.

“I am Kyle. Leader of the Ghosts of Versia.” Kyle announced, earning a few gasps from villagers who had heard the recent news. The rumor of the attack on the Grand Exhibition had already spread fast, and even an isolated village like this had also heard something about it. “We are fighting against the tyranny of Nest, Harrison Industries, and the corrupt government who supports them.”

“I don’t care about your upstart political movement - this is our village we’re talking about!” The same elderly lady rammed her walking cane into the floor angrily. “We don’t want any part of the conflict, none of the war! We just want to be left in peace!” Her statements earned a few approving murmurs even among those who had been arguing with her; most of the villagers were averse to the idea of war.

“But the conflict is here, whether you like it or not. Running away is not going to change the fact that Nest is now eyeing your homeland and your rightful grounds as their property. Even if we and Hayden leave right now - they will still come back for you.”

“We can just leave! Go deeper into the forest and stake a new claim!” A villager called out.

“Then can you survive the creatures and monsters who will no doubt try to kill you?” Kyle countered.

“We won’t know until we try. If all fifty of us work together, we can make it happen! If the mammoth hogs try to attack us, we can fight back together!” The villager clenched his fist, though not many agreed with him, some scoffing at his foolhardy suggestion.

“Don’t you see? Wherever you go, either deeper into the forest, or out into the open plains, the peace that you are searching for is not by averting your eyes and shying away from conflict. The peace that you seek is by claiming your birth rights as humans, as Versians, to stand up for yourself in the face of tyranny!”

“Conflict is a cycle of hate, a cycle of destruction! This village will not be complicit in such a barbaric way!” The elderly lady re-stated her stance again.

“Then why do none of you admonish us for the deaths of the Nest soldiers? Why do you inherently feel that their deaths were deserved? Your freedom, your rights, your beliefs, and your identity can only be protected through strength. Through force! It is the force itself that had brought Nest to your doorstep, forcing you to the brink. Imagine if my Ghosts were not here. Would the village still be alive now?”

“It is your presence who brought them here! We never had a problem with them!” One man replied.

“Then what about a week from now? A month from now? Tenar Logging has been working for years now, and they aren’t going to just remain satisfied with their current zones.”

“Well, bad luck for them!” A mother taunted. “It’s not our fault that they can’t go deeper because of the hogs!”

“Then it was inevitable that they come for this village, a place where mammoth hogs rarely venture. Your demise was inevitable. How long are you going to let others step all over you? How long are you going to let yourself be swayed by the tide? Are you going to surrender yourself, willing to lose everything your ancestors and parents have struggled for, all because you do not want to fight? What would your father think? What would your mother have thought? What would you tell your children, when they ask you what happened to the village? That you gave yourself up willing and allowed yourself to be tortured, raped and beaten without so much as a whimper?” Kyle berated them, his voice raised.

“We will tell them that we stood for peace!” The elderly lady pushed back, but she began to be acutely aware that the villagers around her were starting to switch over to Kyle’s side.

Kyle scoffed. “Stood for peace? Is that the excuse you will give your children and grandchildren when they find themselves born into slavery, forced to work menial labor for days and months on end without recompense, stuck in never-ending production lines and destroying their own bodies and health just so one man at the top can be rich? Can you say that to your grandchildren? Can you look them in the eye and tell them right now that they will be enslaved, forced to live in cramped rooms with nothing more than a meal a day, a collar, and a number as their only distinguishing feature? Who wants to be the first? Right now, your children stand here, listening!” Kyle ended with a roar. “If you want to stand for peace, turn yourself over right now to Nest, and relinquish control and ownership of every parcel of land you own here. Who will be the first?”

Even the elderly lady found it hard to argue against that, unwilling to give up what she owned in the village. None of the villagers could, and many of them were unable to imagine a life without their house and land, which they knew was like the back of their hand. The terrible conditions of the refugee camps were also not new to them; everyone knew just how bad it could be. “But if Nest comes back with a bigger force, we are bound to lose! We’ll all die!” A panicking mother tried to reason.

“Then would you rather subject yourself and your family to decades of slavery and torture? Of imprisonment and punishment for something you did not do? Who here believes you are illegal squatters, that you do not have the legal right to live here?”

“FUCK NO!” The first villager stepped forward. “All of us were born here, our fathers and grandfathers before us, too! Like hell, I’m going to give up my home without a fight! I won’t let my child be captured by Nest, not if I have a chance to stop it!”

“Then I will give you that chance. Join us, join the Ghosts of Versia, and defend your village! We will train you, equip you with the necessary tools to ensure your security, and this village will see prosperity unlike ever before! Goddess Nona said all men are equal under her, and so we shall fight on equal terms with Nest!”

“YEA!” The majority of the villagers cheered in unison, those who did not still reluctant or pessimistic about their chances. Still, Kyle had already achieved his goal of securing the loyalty of the village, so long as he could protect it from Nest retribution. As the villagers cheered and smacked their chests with vigor, Kyle had Jaden and Feldon step up with him, explaining the steps.

“Starting from today, we will work together to form a defense perimeter around the village. Traps, ditches, hiding spots. We will fight not in the village where our loved ones are, but amidst the forest where our advantage lies. Feldon and Jaden will coordinate the defense now, while Hayden will equip you with the necessary weapons. Feldon, you know what to do. Jaden, show him the terrain.” Kyle handed it over, moving over to Drake.

“I… I never thought the village could be brought back together like that.” Drake was thoroughly impressed.

“Not all of them are aligned. Some might try to betray us. But once our defenses are set up accordingly, we can work it out.”

“But if Nest really comes with a bigger force…”

“Then we will be ready by then. Now, we have to do what we must. I need those mammoth hogs hunted by the end of today.” Kyle urged. The meat was crucial to having this entire plan work, and if he wanted to prevent a second Nest attack, he needed more manpower and equipment as well.

“I understand. Follow me.” Drake led Kyle back into his herbalist hut, Drake opening another cabinet to reveal a few pouches, inside which were Poair Leaves all grounded up, along with a strange purple powder sprinkled over them. “This will make the hunting easier, but it’s not easy to make this pouch. We only have five, and one is only enough for a single adult hog.” Drake handed the pouch over to Kyle, who inspected it.

MG404: [Item | Lethargic Poair Leaves | *Poair Leaves combined with the spores of a Magneta Cap. Slows down the reaction speed of anyone who consumes it.*]

*Good. Time to commercialize some meat.*

# Chapter 122 - Ruminations

At the crack of dawn, Kyle and the other two Ghosts formed a squad with Drake, setting off deeper into the Keru Forest while Feldon and Jaden prepared the village defenses and trained the villagers. Sasha had been tasked by Kyle to work overwatch, serving as a long-range scout and an early warning system for any signs of Nest movements.

“Are you sure just the four of us are going to be enough?” Drake asked with an anxious undertone as he gingerly stepped over the ever-increasing twisting roots and ferns that grew larger and larger until they could barely see over them. The trees seemed to increase in size the deeper they went into the forest, as if there was a strange force making everything larger unnaturally.

“We will be fine.” Kyle assured, using his machete to hack away at a few pesky branches and plants that blocked his path. He was confident that he alone could take on a mammoth hog, though it was also essential to have the Ghosts become familiar with whatever hunting method Drake had in place.

As they ventured further, Kyle could feel a slight tingle on his skin, the density of arcia energy getting higher. While it was not as much as a training cave like the ones he implemented back in Raktor, it was significant enough that even the Ghosts were starting to feel the pressure, their bodies absorbing the ambient energy. Countless sparks of arcia energy blipped in and out of existence along the lengths of the tree trunks, faint lines that looked like engravings snaking their way up to the top.

Kyle leaned in closer, inspecting the very faint but dense capillaries that channeled arcia energy along the surface of the bark. He used his machete to slice open an already peeling piece of bark, revealing the fresh, moist interior of the tree, glistening with arcia-infused water, though the arcia energy of the water was lost rapidly through evaporation. Above him, the canopy of leaves, flowers, and birds hiding amidst the growth felt a cool breeze, arcia energy dissipating out through the air via the surface area of the leaves. *Interesting, the lifeforms here have truly adapted to arcia energy as if it was just another facet of life.*

He was not too surprised - exotic materials found on planets always had their own unique ecosystem, though most of them were highly incompatible even with bioformed humans. To see arcia be able to integrate with well-known Ancient Earth lifeforms is nothing short of a technological miracle. *The trees draw arcia energy and water up from the base, breathing it in and then breathing it out through the leaves. It’s the same water cycle as usual, except arcia energy is also being diffused this way.*

The squad continued along the trek, the trees still dense as ever as they watched every step, careful not to crack any branches and alert anything that might be stalking them. Strangely enough, Kyle noticed that there were a few outcrops positioned further away along a sloping hill randomly, as though they had been sprinkled through artificially. None of the outcrops’ locations matched any other geological formations, but Drake warned Kyle to keep a clear berth of the lucrative iron ore deposits. “You don’t want to mess with whatever is eating that.”

“Eating?” Kyle cocked his head in confusion, but Drake placed a finger on his own lips, motioning for Kyle to crouch and keep quiet. He used the same finger to point over his shoulder, marking a solitary mammoth hog, grazing along the trees slowly.

The two Ghosts gasped before clutching their own mouths, astounded by the size of the hog. “No one told me it would be this big!” The mammoth hog truly lived up to its name, towering more than three stories high on all fours, while three snouts that acted like elephant trunks gave it a surprising dexterity, allowing it to pluck and strip bushes before stuffing leaves into its mouth, five large molars gnashing it before the pulverized leaves entered its digestive system of five stomachs.

Kyle wasn’t too fazed by the size but more so by the ability for it to even exist. *The gravity on this planet is Earth-like - such a creature would be horribly inefficient and succumb to its own weight if toppling… the only explanation is the availability of arcia energy.* He kept low as he crawled along the forest floor, moving up with Drake to get a closer look. The three trunks were the width of a human, giant fingers that made the front of the hog look like an octopus. Its forehead featured a large pointy horn, its bony surface orange in color from the oxidization, only accented by natural engravings shaping along its length.

The mammoth hog snorted through all three of its trunks, acting akin to a vacuum cleaner for some decomposing leaves, clearing up the forest floor as it lumbered along, moving away from the squad. Kyle was about to continue following, but Drake instead motioned for him to retreat. The squad moved back quietly, until Drake was sure that they were out of earshot of the hog. “Okay, here’s the plan. There’s a place nearby where the hogs usually come to graze every day. We’ll lay the bait there, and wait for the hog to eat it up. Once we are sure the bait has taken effect, then we’ll strike.” Drake used a nearby branch and carved a plan out into the dirt.

Kyle nodded, deferring judgment to Drake, who was the experienced hunter here. Personally, Kyle would have called in an airstrike to lay waste to the forest and form a clearing to hunt the hogs better, but alas, his options were limited. He watched on as Drake scattered the laced Poair Leaves along the floor, forming a pile of delicious leaves that no mammoth hog would be able to resist. As Drake returned to them, he suddenly walked to a nearby stream, scooping and slathering himself with mud. “We need to mask our smell - the hog can detect us from a mile away if we’re not careful.”

No one complained, masking themselves before the four of them separated, each of them climbing up the tree and taking up a hiding position. “Its sense of smell are really good, but only where its trunks are facing. Other than that, anything directly above where the trunk can’t reach is basically a blind spot. Trick is to stay along the branches of the tree if you can help it. The weak point is the head.” Drake explained.

A few minutes passed in silence, only the chittering of insects and birds masking the rustling of leaves in the wind and the sound of running water along smaller streams. Kyle took this time to inspect the environment, noticing the insects were the size of a toddler, skittering along the branches and leaves, some of them even using their feelers, which waved about in front of Kyle, trying to determine friend or foe.

One of the beetles that scampered past him had a strange engraving on its shell, the engraving lighting up when direct daylight shone right on it. The beetle found a perfect spot, laying there to rest and soak in the incoming radiation, its shell growing larger over time until the tail end of it snapped off, revealing the fleshy exoskeleton of the beetle beneath. It used its maw to grab the dropped shell, scampering to a hole in the tree and placing the shell neatly, apparently using it to cover its nest.

Kyle wanted to catch the beetle to see if the System would show any information about the engraving, but a large thud alerted him to the same mammoth hog, having turned around thanks to the scent emitted by the bait. He watched from above as the hog shuffled slowly, its three trunks continuously scanning the area through smell and touch both, its large beady eyes also looking around cautiously.

The first of its trunks sniffed the pile of laced leaves when it approached, the other two keeping at bay, ready to lash out at any nearby predator. Kyle and the others kept completely still, the trunks trying to sniff out their locations. He could see one of the trunks get near to him, sniffing and snorting, before it retracted, satisfied. Without any more hesitation, the first trunk scooped up the entire pile of leaves, stuffing it into its maw while it chewed away happily.

Kyle spotted Drake moving out from beyond his hiding position, his hand still held up with a stop sign, Drake’s eyes intently watching the hog’s movement. The hog didn’t seem to be affected, continuing to chew and loiter about the area, its curious trunks still wiggling about. However, the mammoth hog suddenly stumbled over an obvious root, one it should have avoided. This was the sign that Drake needed. “NOW!”

The three of them popped out from their hiding positions, the two Ghosts using their Aspis MK2 Repeater to fire a hailstorm at the hog. While the hide of the hog was tough, it was far from enough to deflect the pellets entirely, many lodging themselves deep into the hog’s flesh as it roared in pain, its three trunks suddenly letting out a sonic horn-like sound that blasted the two Ghosts off their branches. They tumbled down hard, crashing through branches and trees that broke their fall before collapsing onto the floor, bruised everywhere as they struggled to get up to their feet.

The mammoth hog charged towards them, its three tusks aimed at grabbing them, when a sudden projectile was shot towards the back of its head, an explosive round erupting and tearing through the hide easily with the ensuing explosion, sparks flying everywhere and causing leaves to smolder. Kyle slung the empty railgun behind him, drawing out his machete and leaping downwards onto the back of the injured hog.

Stumbling clumsily, the intoxicated and injured hog staggered through the forest, trying to limp away while Kyle landed right on top of it. A trunk swooped in from the front, attempting to remove Kyle off its back. Clenching his armored fist, the exosuit arm whirred into life as he drove the machete upwards in a devastating swing, timed exactly to slice the trunk cleanly off in one hit.

The mammoth hog recoiled in pain, letting out a series of grunts and whimpers while its trunk bled blue, dripping downwards in copious amounts from the severed wound. Kyle raised his machete, about to drive deep into the hog, when its horn began to glow brighter, its original orange hue blinding Kyle temporarily, causing him to nearly lose balance and fall off the back of the hog.

He clenched his eyes tight, trying to regain his vision. As soon as he opened it again, he saw the same severed trunk lunging back towards him, except that it was regenerating in real time. He swung his machete again towards the trunk, but felt his machete crack against the now hardened trunk, the tip having only regrown a bone spear. *What?*

Kyle ducked as the bone spear jabbed across him, skidding along the back of the hog while its legs threw a tantrum, trying to throw off Kyle. “Hit the eyes, the eyes!” Drake called out from afar, not having any weapon to be able to deal with it.

Thanks to Kyle’s attack, the two Ghosts had enough time to heal up and rejoin the fight. They focused their fire on the eyes, one of the barraging pellets finding its mark and shattering the crystal-like structure of the beady left eye, earning yet another deafening pained roar from the hog.

With its sight now blinded, the hog relied only on its sense of smell and hearing, flinging its trunks wildly in a desperate attempt to shake off Kyle on its back as well as crush the two Ghosts. It navigated towards the fired shots of the two Ghosts, charging forward with its horn facing forward, the trunks sweeping outwards like an grader, smacking everything in its path.

The two Ghosts leaped over the trunks on the ground, tumbling and rolling into a shooting posture once more, though the back of the hog had no weak spots to shoot at. They witnessed yet another glow of the orange hue, the remaining two trunks now also growing sharp bone ends to their snout. Interestingly, none of the tips were the same - the first was a spear, the other was a hammer, and the last was a mace.

Kyle fended off the attacks, dodging and clinging onto the hairy hide of the hog as he clutched with both his hands, pulling himself forward towards the horn, resisting the constant shaking and slamming of the hog, which was trying everything. Over time, the hog’s actions began to be more and more sluggish, allowing Kyle to easily reach the horn. Wielding his machete, he aimed at the base of the horn, using his exosuit arm to slam the machete deep beyond the hide, gouging out whatever flesh and organs were in the hog’s head.

The hog’s trunks twitched slightly as the machete’s blade reached its brain, the nervous system control disrupted while its motions were no longer coordinated, tripping over itself. It rolled onto the floor, flinging Kyle off while it tumbled towards a nearby tree, the hog crashing into it violently and bending the stiff tree trunk slightly.

MG404: [System Message | Killed: “Mammoth Hog,” +50 EXP]

*Only fifty?* Kyle wiped the sweat and blue-splattered blood off his face. The noxious salamander he had defeated in the dungeon was far more worth in terms of experience. Sure, the hog was not as hard, but it still took great effort to bring it down just due to its sheer mess.

Drake clambered down the tree where he was watching, cautiously approaching the hog, unsure whether it was dead or not, the two Ghosts sharing his sentiment as they held their rifles at the ready.

“It’s dead, don’t worry.” Kyle didn’t waste any time, moving forward to check the mammoth hog. He hacked through the hide, revealing a red, tender flesh beneath that was dense and packed, the arcia energy already dissipating into the air.

“I can’t believe you killed it so easily! Usually, we have to go a few rounds with the hog, and we’re lucky that this adult was alone. Though, it is a little bit on the smaller side now that I look at it carefully.”

“Smaller side?!” A Ghost blurted out in astonishment.

“Well now we know the method to hunt them, we should be good enough to start scaling up.” Kyle remarked, chopping off a piece of the tender meat into his hand.

MG404: [Item | Mammoth Hog Trotter Meat | *A meat worthy for giants.*|Requires detoxification through smoking.]

“It wont be that easy.” Drake shook his head, motioning to the two pouches filled with Lethargic Poair Leaves that he had on him. “We’ll need way more of this to properly hunt them. Otherwise we’ll be constantly fighting them at full strength.”

“The Poair Leaves should be easy enough to forage for,” Kyle replied.

“That’s easier said than done - its growing pattern is sporadic at best, it won’t be easy to find, not to mention the lack of Magneta Caps here.”

“And where would you find them?”

“Those outcrops we saw before? There are caves beneath that have them. Very rarely do they grow on the surface, they love the underground much more.”

“They love the underground…” Kyle pondered on it while the two Ghosts gingerly touched the legs of the dead mammoth hog, still in awe at the size of what they had just killed. “That’s good enough for now. Let’s head back to the village.”

“But how are we going to-” Drake’s words were stuck in their throat as he watched Kyle merciless carve through the leg expertly, ripping it off and lifting it up with his exosuit arm.

“Stay here and make sure nothing else eats the corpse.” Kyle channeled his energy into his thighs, sprinting hard through the forest while hauling the mammoth’s hindleg on his back, easily dashing through the trees and leaping over roots, the route fresh in his mind. What took them an hour to trek was cleared in just ten minutes, Kyle hardly breaking a sweat thanks to his 229-A-X package.

“Holy shit! But it took us ten days to hunt the last time round!” Jaden exclaimed in shock when he spotted Kyle walking back victorious. The hindleg was more than enough proof to the villagers, Kyle sending them off to cut up and gather the corpse back into more workable chunks. Soon, over the next hour, more than 6000 kg of meat alone was harvested, accounting for 55% of the entire hog’s corpse. “Don’t toss away the bone yet, we can reuse it to form spikes for traps!” Feldon reminded them.

Kyle did some simple calculations in his head. If he could bring back all six thousand kilogram of meat back, he could feed almost eight thousand refugees in a single week, assuming they consumed an average of seven hundred grams of meat each. Sure, meat wasn’t enough on its own, but Kyle knew it would be more than enough to recruit and lure manpower to his side.

With each refugee he recruited, he would be able to scale up the hunting operation. *The only problem is the lack of Magneta Cap. But instead of finding a way to drug the hogs, we should be finding a way to improve our firepower.* Kyle wanted a railgun that could kill the hog in a single hit if aimed right, but even in its current form, a simple basic arcia crystal did not have enough strength to do so.

Thankfully, there were already hints of a solution with Hayden, who was now working overtime in her own house’s workshop to make weapons for the villagers, using Feldon’s Aspis MK2 Repeater as the reference. Her original self-doubt and unwillingness to participate in any conflict had now been swayed by Kyle and the village as a whole. With the appearance of the Ghosts of Versia, Hayden did not feel as hopeless before, now finding a drive to put her skills to work in order to get back at Harrison.

As Kyle entered the workshop, Hayden was fully engrossed in studying the engravings and improvements that Kyle had made to the rifle. “Who taught you how to etch? Did you go to the University of Raktor?” Hayden asked curiously. “The concept behind these guns are truly unique, I’ve never seen… well never even heard of some of the methods you used to engrave this.”

“I read a few books on my own,” Kyle replied nonchalantly, placing the railgun in front of Hayden’s workbench. “I know you know how to refine the arcia crystals.”

“Such a process is extremely dangerous, and I wouldn’t recommend doing it. It could easily go wrong, especially in such an experimental weapon like this.”

“Yet you have the village children playing with a whole bag of it.” Kyle snorted. “And this is hardly experimental - its design is sound. I need to increase the projectile’s damage dealt in order to hunt the hogs more effectively.”

“Hmm….” Hayden did a brief inspection of the railgun. “No, not possible. Not with these engravings - the traces are now too small to handle such a large influx of energy, which may cause arcia deviation. You certainly don’t want your gun turning to ice cream halfway through a battle.”

“I suspected as much. But I wasn’t talking about the railgun. I was talking about the projectile itself.” Kyle placed an example of the explosive projectile he was using, the engraving simple enough for Hayden to immediately understand what it does.

“So the projectile converts its own mass into energy that explodes outwards on contact, intriguing. But to hunt the hog, you want it to penetrate. I think I got just the idea.” Hayden pulled out a piece of paper, sketching furiously and quickly. Her skills as an engineer were apparent, being able to draw to scale with accurate dimensioning and labeling for clear representation, even providing sectional cuts, albeit roughly. “How’s this? We’ll have the projectile be two-tiered. But in order to activate the second tier, you will need an additional source of ener-” Hayden stopped herself mid-sentence. “So this is why you want the refined arcia crystals. Aren’t you afraid that you might overcook the hog from within if you do this?”

“I’m not going to be using basic arcia crystals like what you have, but the poor ones. This way, the internal explosion will only be limited to a specific area where it hits.” Kyle showed Hayden a poor arcia crystal. “Can you do it? Just come up with the design, and I’ll handle the production.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Hayden nodded, getting to work immediately while Kyle left back to the village. As soon as he stepped out of the door, he saw Jaden grinning widely from ear to ear.

“What’s the matter?” Kyle squinted his eyes in suspicion.

“I… I want to join the Ghosts!” Jaden bowed. “I’ll even give up the 5% of meat I asked for! Please train me; I want to be as strong as you!”

“That’s not possible.” Kyle immediately dismissed him.

“Wha-what?! Weren’t you looking for Ghosts to recruit? That’s why you were hunting the hogs, right?” Jaden was confused.

“I was referring to you being as strong as me.”

“Well, if I train hard enough, I can -” Jaden stuttered as Kyle suddenly grabbed him by the throat, lifting him up with his legs dangling in the air wildly.

“Still want to be a Ghost? This isn’t a game. This is life and death. You will suffer horrible things, and witness devastation far beyond this small pitiful region. And once you join, there is no turning back. If you ever decide to leave, you will be hung and executed before you leak any secrets. Are you sure you want to be a Ghost?” Kyle glared at the young man.

Jaden struggled to breathe, but there was a fire in his eyes as he nodded vigorously to Kyle, though he was unable to speak freely. Kyle let go, dropping Jaden to the ground as Jaden gasped sharply, breathing hard.

“Good. Report to Feldon that I have accepted you as a Ghost. Try not to die.”

“Y-y-yes, sir! I won’t let you down!” Jaden saluted sloppily, having not learned much decorum as a villager for the better part of his life. Kyle ignored him, instead walking off to the center of the village to oversee the meat processing.

The villagers were well accustomed to handling the mammoth hog meat, ignoring the blue blood and strong scent of the meat while hacking away at the flesh, chopping them up into strips and tossing them onto a woven straw mat. Two men hauled the meat into a smoking chamber, the meat idling for three hours at a high temperature before it was ready to be cooked further and consumed.

Kyle then had a few villagers gear up with him, preparing to return to the refugee camp en masse. Each of them had backpacks filled to the brim with meat, totaling a thousand kilograms of smoked meat that could be kept for a while. He led them back the same path Jaden had shown him, avoiding the Nest checkpoints under the cover of night and sneaking back. However, even from a distance, Kyle could tell that something was not right with the refugee camp.

All along the main road, torches, and arctech lanterns could be seen stretching towards the horizon, and the stream of incoming refugees only increased. More and more of them were coming from Ocra, and the desperation in their eyes was even stronger than ever, unlike those Kyle had seen a few days ago. Interestingly enough, he spotted a Versian soldier covering his uniform with a tattered robe, hiding among the refugees, attempting to sneak past anyone checking and entering the refugee camp.

He focused on the current task, bringing the meat back to the Ghost hideout and surprising Diya. “Ho-Wha-” She fumbled her words, unable to come to terms with the sacks of meat being unloaded by the villagers, Kyle organizing the Ghosts to pack them into crates for storage in a cool, dry place.

“That’s not possible; it’s only been two days!” Diya couldn’t come to terms with it. Whatever Kyle had just done put every bribery and deal she had to cut with the guards to shame, making her wonder what the hell she had been doing for the past few months.

“I told you. You have the skills, just not the vision.” Kyle shrugged. “Besides, this is only one-sixth of a hog. We’ll get the rest when we’ve established a proper route.”

Diya nearly fainted upon hearing that. With the amount of meat now available, it was basically a given that the Ghosts wouldn’t be running out of food anymore. Still, this was not Kyle’s end goal.

“Have the meat be distributed to those who are willing to join us. Do not distribute flyers, only recruit in person, and don’t let any of the Desham guards see you.” Kyle instructed the Ghosts. “We want this movement to grow, but only deep undercover. I only want fighters - priority are mercenaries and former soldiers, if any, or young men who are fit to be trained. We only have a short amount of time before we are able to launch any attack.”

Even Diya’s Ghosts were not antagonistic towards Kyle any longer, having seen how he had personally solved their own food crisis. “How many do we recruit?” One of the Ghost in the hideout asked.

“As many as you can. I want at least five hundred.”

“Five hundred?! Are you trying to take on the army?” Diya spluttered. “Such a large force would definitely have leaks and spies among them. There could be those who join us only for the food offered, but sell the information to the Desham guards.”

“And that’s why I have you in charge here. You know most of the locals, work with those you trust.” Kyle nodded towards her. “Now, let’s get to work.”

The next three days saw a flurry of action amidst the Ghosts, with meat now regularly delivered from the village. An improved projectile from Hayden now allowed anyone with a railgun to shoot a hog dead on sight, assuming they were able to withstand the recoil. Feldon was trained by Sasha to use it proficiently, before he trained others in turn. By the end of the third day, Feldon was competent enough to at least maim a hog on his own, while the rest of the villagers and Ghosts were playing clean-up. They also harvested Poair Leaves along the way, stocking them up while Drake continued to produce healing potions for the Ghosts and village to use in case of another battle.

In the refugee camp of Desham, recruitment was going strong. Food was a critical factor in their joining, though word did not spread due to the policy of only recruiting in person. New recruits enjoyed smoked meat alongside their daily rations, allowing them to regain their strength. Those selected were either former guards in their village, mercenaries, adventurers, or even former Versian soldiers who had deserted the army. All of them were dissatisfied with the current status quo in Versia, naturally aligning with the goal of the Ghosts.

Diya could visibly see the Ghost cell grow and develop rapidly, expanding at a rate that she could have hardly fathom a week before Kyle’s arrival. Still, she was up for the job, managing and handling the training of the Ghosts as well as the distribution of supplies, becoming a proper Ghost leader within the three days, and no longer questioning Kyle. “Just… just how are you doing all of this?” Diya couldn’t help asking, curious and hungry to learn the secrets to Kyle’s apparent success and inherent ability to lead and organize.

“Looks like you’re finally coming around.” Kyle raised his eyebrows. “I thought you would still be reluctant for a few more months.”

“I finally see how dumb I have been, content to laze around in my own benefits when there were bigger things to achieve and grab. With such a growing force, we could take over the whole of Desham!”

“In due time, yes. But as soon as we make a move, Harrison will come calling in a heartbeat to crush us. We must wait for the right moment to strike. Since you’re interested in how I am doing all of this, why don’t you try to predict what I will do in the coming days?”

Diya pondered, tapping her chin in deep thought. “I think you would wait for another two weeks until the refugee camp has built up a critical mass and the new Ghosts we’re training have been prepared enough. We’ll attack in the night and try to cut off all communication instantly by hitting any arctech radio repeater or extender tower. We could also jam the city. Then, we’ll strike the military garrison head-on along with the city council, removing them from power.”

“All well and good, though not exactly the right strategy.”

“Not the right strategy…?”

“Instead of waiting two weeks, we strike in two days’ time.”

“What?!” Diya exclaimed in shock. “But you said that we needed to wait for the right time, otherwise Harrison will come to crush us.”

“He won’t. He’ll have bigger things to worry about by then. It’s been seven days since the Grand Exhibition, and neither side is going to linger around for much longer. Have you not noticed the influx of deserting soldiers trying to pose as refugees? They know what’s coming, and they are running, afraid. Because in two days’ time, Count Leon will launch a-”

Before Kyle could complete his words, a panicking Ghost suddenly interrupted them, sliding down the ladder hastily, his face aghast with disbelief. “There’s trouble among the refugees; it won’t be long before they raise another riot!”

“What? Why?” Diya asked hurriedly.

“There’s word spreading among some of the refugees that the war has started. Harrison launched a first-strike attack on Count Leon!”

# Chapter 123 - Overpopulation

The word of the war spread like wildfire, igniting thousands of refugees to flee Ocra in droves uncountable, their trail never-ending as they tried their luck. Many who felt they would not be able to get into Tenar headed for other cities in Versia or even remote towns, seeking safety further away from the conflict. However, Ocra did not experience a drop in population, but instead, an increase as evacuations of surrounding villages became more and more frequent, with once stalwart village defenders now fleeing for the cities.

Waves upon waves of refugees ravaged the countryside, their hunger and desperation driving each step while they scavenged through every field and forest they entered. Some met an unfortunate death deep in the Keru Forest, while large swaths of farms were decimated by the sheer numbers the farmers faced, many not having the requisite guards to defend such a horde. The refugees shambled along like groups of mindless zombies, devouring everything in their path. Trash and excretion were left behind, marking their path as they traveled along the major road.

The terrible conditions of the refugee camps had pushed many young men and women to join the Versian army, but some of them merely joined in order to receive their rations and skive off training, hiding wherever they could and skirting around the rules by exploiting the lack of trainers. However, as soon as the war begun, a minority deserted the army, unwilling to be sent to the frontline to die as cannon fodder. They hid themselves amidst the refugees, avoiding detection and joining the throng.

Others found employment under Harrison Industries. The few lucky ones found valuable positions among the engineers or technicians, while the bulk were forced into slave workshops and factories in Desham, Creuliz, and the underground of Tenar. Some who managed to escape captivity were only laughed at and sent back to where they came from by the police and guards. “Slavery doesn’t exist any longer in Versia!” was the usual response.

It was this rising tide of dissatisfaction, this growing swelling force of anger and unrest, that Kyle sought to manipulate to his own goals here in Desham. *I never expected Harrison to strike first. If he wins, he will be able to push to Raktor proper within a month.* He made a few assumptions, trying to simulate the battle at the border of Ocra to the best of his ability.

Harrison had a smaller army in general, but he did have better technology on his side in the form of Project Aurtla, which allowed him air superiority. Unless Count Leon was also hiding information regarding his military capabilities, he saw no feasible way for Count Leon’s troops to shoot down the planes. If his assumption was correct, Harrison’s planes may be able to achieve flight at one-kilometer altitude above ground, or three thousand kilometers at best. This would put it far beyond the range of his Aspis MK1 Repeaters that were currently produced for Count Leon, the pellets losing much of their kinetic energy through the air before they could even touch the plane’s surface.

Still, this presented him with a clear opportunity. *With Harrison now busy on the frontlines, it means his army is preoccupied with that. Hopefully for long.* Kyle immediately called all of the Ghosts together, even those who were still training as fresh recruits. As soon as they had gathered, Kyle announced his next steps. “In three days, we strike. There’s no time to waste when a golden opportunity has been handed to us.”

The Ghosts were all shocked. “How do we strike with just two dozen of us, and only a few trained?!” One of the Ghosts exclaimed. “The garrison of Desham numbers in the hundreds, there’s no way we’ll be able to fight all of them!”

Kyle held a knowing smile on his face, the plan already clear. “We won’t be the only ones in town fighting for Desham.”

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*Two days later…*

Locals of Desham would remember that nights used to be dark and quiet. Instead, those who lived within the city could only hear random shouts and retching sounds from the refugee camps, many refugees suffering from food poisoning or dysentery that was spreading rapidly. Countless of them had no place to stay, simply sleeping outside, while the more opportunistic ones looked for naive, unsuspecting people, trying to steal their rations. Even with all of this happening, streams of refugees were still coming in, their torches burning bright in the night, stretching all towards the horizon.

An officer looked on in dismay from the top of the walls, right above the gate mechanism. He shook his head at the sight of the refugee camp, looking over his shoulder to see a guard yawning, his eyes tired from the long shift. “Hey, you. Stay alert! Anything could happen.”

“Y-y-es, sir!” The lethargic guard snapped awake, rubbing his eyes hard while staring intently forward. The officer let out a frustrated sigh, about to leave the wall and climb down the stairs, when the lethargic guard motioned towards him. “Uhm, Officer Gabriel?”

“Yes?”

“I-I was wondering if you could uhm… spare me more food. I’m more than willing to give up my tenars if it means I can get more.”

“Isn’t the daily rations enough?”

“Yes, but… to be honest. It has been dwindling month by month. The last two weeks have shown significant decreases. My wife is having a baby soon, and I was hoping to get some extra just for her.” The lethargic guard held a sheepish smile, looking around nervously.

“I don’t control the food rationing, its the Governor and the council.” Officer Gabriel patted the guard’s shoulder slowly. “I can try, but no guarantees.”

“Thank you, sir, that means a lot to me.” The guard bowed respectfully, while Officer Gabriel descended the stairs. As he reached the base, he noticed a hooded man waiting for him, his gnarly white hands barely visible through the sleeves of his brown-like robe.

“Officer Gabriel. Your presence has been requested by the Governor.”

“Understood.” Officer Gabriel walked with purpose, moving down the empty cobblestone streets while the hooded man matched his pace. “Any information on the recent incident in the Keru Forest? Have you found out who is doing it?”

“We might have a lead. We’ve been expanding our observations, and there seem to be a few villagers transporting meat during the night. They are escorted by armed men, and there have already been a few skirmishes. However, there’s not enough manpower to spare. If you could just allocate one platoon -”

“I don’t have the luxury to allocate one platoon.” Officer Gabriel snapped. “You’re Nest, for crying out loud. It’s your job to make sure that the Keru Forest logging zones are protected!”

“And they still are. I fear there is a rebel movement growing among the refugee camps, fuelled by the transportation of meat from within the Keru Forest. All scouts we have sent that way have never returned. If we’re talking about responsibilities, then it is your job to make sure the refugee camps are under control.” The hooded man asserted his stance.

“Have you seen the number of refugees? Even my five platoons are not enough to control them if they decide to rise up.”

“I will squash any rebellious elements before they even have the chance to appear.”

“So be it.” The hooded man from Nest didn’t push any further. The rest of their walk was in silence as they approached the town hall, its lights still on while sounds of partying could be heard from within, loud dancing music echoing. The two of them entered through the main door, seeing an entire lavish banquet being thrown for the factory owners and councilors of the city, chit-chatting with each other while skimpily dressed girls danced on a stage, singing along with the music.

Officer Gabriel eyed the scrumptious spread of food all laid out along a long dining table, the attendees eating away and enjoying the food. Many of them did not finish their plates, throwing the rest of the food away into a bin and getting the waiters and servants to clean up the wasted food. He closed one eye to the apparent lack of understanding of Desham’s current condition, recalling his position solely as a military officer and approaching the Governor himself.

The Governor was a well-toned man, a big Euria pipe in his mouth with his hair slicked back, a girl on each arm as he rested against a velvet couch, laughing heartedly while swirling a glass of wine in his right hand that was adorned with rings. “Would you believe that I got this ring from a refugee? The dealer told me he got it for merely two potatoes. TWO! HAH, what a ruckus!” The Governor roared with laughter and slapped his thighs, the girls and nearby sycophants all sniggering along with him.

“Governor, you called for me?” Officer Gabriel interrupted his storytelling, saluting the governor while the hooded man stood next to him.

“Ah, Officer Gabriel. How good of you to finally show up.” The Governor let out a burp, his breath reeking of alcohol. “Now, here’s the question of the day - WHY ARE THE DUMB REFUGEES STILL AT MY DOORS?” He suddenly roared, frightening the girls as he slammed his leather shoes on the ground hard, the click of sole echoing through the banquet hall and piercing through the music.

Officer Gabriel glanced around, noticing that no one was moving to stop the Governor. He took a deep breath, steeling himself. “Governor, sir. Surely, you must understand that under the Constitution of Versia, we are legally required to offer assistance to any and all Versians, regardless of race, language, or religion. These refugees come from Ocra, and they all are in dire need of -”

His answer was interrupted by a splash of red wine hitting his face head-on, the Governor having tossed it from his glass. “And there’s my answer. How’s that, hmm?”

Officer Gabriel did not wipe away the wine from his face, instead bearing the stares and mocking laughter from other attendees who saw his hair dripping wet. “Sir, whether or not you splash me with wine does not change the fact that we have to help them as soon as we can. In order to prevent any rebellious charge, we should attempt to integrate them into our city and-”

“I WILL NOT TOLERATE LEECHES ENTERING MY CITY!” The Governor bellowed. “They are scum, fickle-minded dirty little creatures who only know how to beg and laze the entire day away. Tell me, how is the recruitment of workers for our factories and Tenar Logging? Perhaps you can illuminate their efficacy for us, Mister Vicorn.” He motioned towards the hooded man, his old wrinkled face now clearly visible under the bright lights of the banquet hall.

“Governor, sir. You are exactly right. Despite the refugees having increased in numbers in the hundreds on a daily basis, many are still refusing to sign up for the Versian Army, nor are they willing to take up job roles for many of our facilities and employment opportunities. They are most derisive of your kind offering to them.” Vicorn bowed respectfully.

“Did you hear that, Officer Gabriel? There was a chance offered to them, a way out from their dire situation - one that everyone in this city understands. Work or starve. The rules have never changed for us since I grew up here on the farm, why does it have to change for these lazy bums now, all looking for free food to eat, yet doing nothing at all?!”

*Because the employment opportunities are akin to slavery.* Still, Officer Gabriel somewhat agreed, knowing that the refugees could easily join the Versian army and be trained fully. Sure, he understood that not everyone wanted to fight, but he couldn’t deny that a way out had been offered for them. “You’re right, Governor, but even if we do not want to let them in, we should find some other method of appeasing them.”

“Are the rations we provide not enough? They have already done enough damage to the farms around them! We won’t be seeing another harvest for six more months if they continue to rip out and destroy everything we have done to the soil.” The Governor scoffed with a derisive expression. “Such ungrateful beings, isn’t that right, girls?” The girls giggled and nodded in agreement.

Officer Gabriel was about to offer his opinion once more when Vicorn interjected. “Governor, you are exactly right about this. Despite your good graces and donations of rations, the refugees have been terrorizing the Keru Forest in search of additional food to sate their never-ending greed. In fact, we suspect a quickly growing rebel movement that seeks to destabilize Desham. We have received good information on a route for hunting being set up, feeding refugees in the camps directly.”

“What?! They are harvesting food from the forest?” The Governor’s face paled.

Officer Gabriel saw what Vicorn was aiming for, quickly interrupting as fast as he could, “Governor, that should be a good thing. If the refugees’ hunger is met, then there would be less of a chance for them to rebel-”

“Idiot!” The Governor waved his right hand animatedly. “If they have enough food, then how will I amass my collection of rare jewelry? I got this for two potatoes!”

“Exactly, Governor.” Vicorn fuelled the flames. “The refugees no longer want to rely on your rations alone. They see you as a laughing stock and plan to be self-sufficient while hoarding everything of worth to them.”

Gabriel’s eyes widened in horror. “Governor, surely you can’t be thinking about-”

“Food is a currency here, Officer Gabriel. And I am its richest king from the horizon to here!” The Governor stretched out his hand. “Those loyal to me will receive their due rewards, but those who dare to reject my hand and seek out alternative sources will feel my wrath! Officer Gabriel! Receive your orders!”

Officer Gabriel wanted to retort, but stuck to his ingrained military decorum, hardened over the last ten years as he stood at attention, his face and upper uniform still soaked in red wine.

“You are to immediately sweep and search the refugee camps for this source of meat. Find them and confiscate them - I want all food that isn’t our rations to be placed in our silos or storage. If you need a reason, explain to the refugees that the food they foraged is either dangerous, toxic, or medically unsafe. Do you understand?”

“Of course. I will find the meat from Keru Forest and -”

“NOT JUST THE MEAT!” The Governer slammed his hand on the table in front of him. “I’m only going to repeat myself once: I want every food that is not OUR ration to be confiscated. Are we clear, or do I have to resort to other punitive measures?”

“No sir, I have received my orders.”

“Hmm… that does not sound convincing enough. Vicorn. I’ll have you in charge as well. Use whatever tactics you need. If Officer Gabriel is unwilling to carry out his orders, you will carry it out in his stead.”

Officer Gabriel was stunned, noticing Vicorn already had a grinning smile on his old, wrinkled face. *He planned for all of this to happen. He wants a bigger control of the city by sucking up to the damn Governor!*

“Well, what are you two waiting for? Go, do it now!”

Officer Gabriel didn’t expect it to happen immediately, hoping he could try to convince the Governor otherwise. “Governor, perhaps we should wait till dawn to give the refugees some ample warning abou-”

“Vicorn!” The Governor motioned with his hand. “You know what to do.”

“Do I have full command over the garrison, Governor?” Vicorn smiled.

“If you do what I ask, then yes, you have it now.”

“Governor, this I will not stand for. Vicorn is a member of the public and not sworn into an officer role. He cannot be tasked to lead a military force.”

“I AM THE KING HERE, AND YOU WILL LISTEN! OR I CAN STRIP YOU OF YOUR POSITION, AND YOU AND YOUR FAMILY CAN LANGUISH IN THE DEPTHS OF JAIL.” The Governor wasn’t taking any more criticism from Officer Gabriel, forcing the officer to immediately back down in submission.

Gabriel and Vicorn left immediately, Vicorn still having that irritating grin on his face. “Bad luck, officer. Looks like I am in charge now. Just sit back and see how it’s done.”

If Gabriel had a choice, he would have resigned on the spot, but he knew his family would be in trouble. *I just have to hold out, hold out long enough. I can’t afford to lose my position.* “There’s no need to. I will carry out the orders.”

“Didn’t you hear the Governor? I have full rights to take charge of the garrison!”

“You wanted your one platoon, yes? Don’t step on my toes, and you will have your requested reinforcements once this operation is over.”

“So be it. But if you falter even once, I’m taking control immediately.” Vicorn shrugged, content to let Officer Gabriel handle the situation. “My men will also participate in the operation whenever you begin.” Vicorn left him, returning to his Nest hideout to prepare.

Gabriel headed to the military garrison at the corner of the city, a simple small fort where the barracks and armory were held securely behind armored walls. As soon as Gabriel reached his office, he got a guard on duty to report to his office immediately. “Wake everyone up. I want them lined up in the square in ten minutes.”

“..sir? It’s already close to midnight. Do you mean the night shift or the -”

“I mean everyone. Now. NOW!” Gabriel vented his frustration, slamming both hands on the office table, the guard scrambling to ring the parade bell. The bell gongs resounded across the barracks, making the nearby townsfolk and soldiers wonder what was even going on.

Yet the well-trained garrison members fell in quickly with their equipment and rifle all in place, while some of the lucky recruits who had been assigned to the city garrison rushed out sloppily, their gear still in a complete mess. Gabriel stepped up towards the platoons, addressing them directly. “Guards of Desham, we have been tasked with a cleanup operation. Refugees have been illegally foraging from the Keru Forest, decimating the plants and trees in the region, harming what is rightfully of Desham! Our orders are to confiscate and have every food source that is not our rations!”

No one talked, but the confusion in their eyes was clear. Gabriel could also sense a slight hesitation in a minority, many of them thinking the same way. “Only a third of you will act first, while the others will be rotated on a shift basis. There is an incentive for you to carry out this mission. For every five you confiscate, you will get to keep one yourself.”

Immediately the morale of the Guards were heightened immediately, their eyes brightened up even under the darkness of night. Many were unsatisfied with the food, while others were thinking about who they could give the food to in their family. Even the city dwellers were rationed as well, though not to the extent that the refugees were.

The operation began in earnest, the guards marching out of the gates into the slum-like maze of the refugee camps that had been expanding non-stop since months ago. Within minutes of the operation beginning, fights and scuffles started to break out, refugees trying to cling to their food and prevent it from being stolen. “I had this bread since I left Ocra! It’s not yours, and I didn’t steal it from the Keru Forest!”

“It’s for your own safety - only the rations provided by Desham are medically sound. Look at the mold growing on the bread; it’s what’s giving you food poisoning!” Some of the guards used the official excuse given, while the majority were more than happy to abuse their new position of power, beating and snatching any type of food from the refugees. A small minority of guards even snatched official rations, uncaring of the reason or rhyme for the operation.

Gabriel simply closed his eyes to the chaos unfolding as the first gunshot rang out, one of the guards having shot a refugee dead on the spot. It was from there that the guards became even more bolder, having the superior firepower over the unarmed refugees. Vicorn himself and his Nest soldiers had entered the fray as well, taking advantage of the operation to steal anything of value, not just food alone. The Nest soldiers had expressions of joy and laughter as they tortured and wrung out everything worth something from the weakened refugees, not even sparing the sick or elderly. He watched as guards beat refugees into submission, the very innate nature of human violence coming out to the forefront as they fought over every scrap of food, confiscating them.

Blood was spilled on the street as some refugees tried to gather together, forming groups to resist the guards. However, even stacking bodies were not enough to face against the barrel of an arctech rifle that could end your life in a single pellet. As such, many refugees immediately gave up their food, and those who had nothing left to give were forced to relinquish their rations.

Carts upon carts of confiscated food were loaded up, escorted by squads of guards into the city, heading for the food storage areas where towering grain silos were filled to the brim. Some refugees tried to hide among the food in the carts, attempting to smuggle themselves only to be beaten badly, bruises coating their entire body before being hung up by their wrists over the gates as a warning to others.

“Sir, permission to join the operation!” The same lethargic guard who had been on the wall saluted him, eager to join the fray. Gabriel didn’t give his tacit approval, only motioning with his hand for the guard to go ahead. The rest of the garrison that was still guarding the wall and jealous at the opportunity their fellow guards had rushed down with anticipation, eagerly ravaging through the refugee camp to search for food to confiscate as their own.

As the operation wore on, Gabriel had lost track of the number of carts that had been filled up to the brim. There wasn’t any accurate census on the refugee camps, but he reckoned that it was about twenty thousand or so. *If all of them launched an attack together, it would take a miracle for my garrison of two hundred to even attempt to hold them back.* His paranoia had him ensure that there were enough soldiers back in the barracks, leaving two-thirds of the soldiers in reserve. “Make sure we have our mounted repeaters ready to go as well as cannons. Just in case.” Gabriel warned his sergeant beneath him.

The guards were rotated in shifts, the operation lasting through the night and earning panicked shouts and screams from the terrorized refugees. “WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS! WE ARE VERSIANS TOO!” A young man roared as he was pinned down to the ground, his chin scraping against the rocky dust ground that had long lost its color.

“You’re not a real Versian; you’re just a leech!” One of the guards sneered. “You had every opportunity to sign up for the Army, yet you want all the benefits but none of the work.” Just like this, a divide had been drawn between the guards of Desham and refugees, a hidden line in the sand that may never be repaired.

Gabriel had stayed up the whole night, his eyes slowly drooping asleep. As far as he could tell, the operation would be completed soon, so he decided to retire to his office and return to the military garrison. However, as soon as he could lean back into his chair, a sudden loud explosion rang out through the city, a booming creaking sound deafening through the still morning air that was followed by a thunderous crash. “What?!” He hurriedly grabbed his arctech radio, tuning the channel. “This is Officer Gabriel, what’s going on?”

Only static could be heard across the various channels, and none of his messages got through in any way. “Hello? Hello! Gate guards! What’s the situation!” Gabriel desperately fiddled with the dial to no avail. Having no other options, he stepped out of his office, heading to the parade square of the military barracks, only to see the arch of the city gates collapse entirely. Instead, all that was left was a crumbling pile of rubble in a V-shape form, refugees already clambering over to get into the city.

Other reserve guards were already awoken by the crash, astonished by the sudden attack that came out of nowhere. “Get everyone out here NOW! This is not a drill!” Gabriel urged the nearest sergeant, who was still rubbing his eyes sleepily, slapping his shoulder hard and jolting him awake.

They assembled an arctech wagon convoy, loading up weapons and mounting up arctech repeaters on the roof of the wagons, moving forward with portable barricades and other defenses as well. “What happened to our guards out in the refugee camps?” Gabriel asked a nearby sergeant hastily as he rode in the driver’s cabin of the wagon.

“The radio isn’t getting through to them. I’m afraid that if the refugees are already coming into the city, they must have been lynched already!”

“No matter. We’ll set up barricades at the main street to prevent the refugees from spreading further into the city. I want all the alleyways and side lanes blocked off too, no one gets past the main square!”

While Gabriel’s response was quick, the refugees were already emboldened by the collapse of the gate. Any city guard that had survived the collapse was brutally mauled to unrecognizable lumps of meat straddled among the rubbles, suffering countless knocks as refugees continued to pour into the city through the widening gap. Already they were gathering into a large crowd, marching down the main street and heading towards the large towering grain silos that were unmistakable in the Desham’s skyline.

“STOP RATIONING AND STEALING OUR FOOD! FREEDOM FOR VERSIANS!” A galvanized refugee roared with all his might, the crowd chanting loudly in return. The operation had backfired, turning even the most apathetic refugee against the military of Desham who had stolen their food. Gabriel’s men quickly set up a makeshift blockade on the main street, and some of the refugees were trying to sprint past before the barricade could be set up.

Gabriel himself had to wrestle a refugee who managed to squirm past the gaps, pinning him down onto the ground while another guard restrained him with handcuffs. A weird, familiar smell came from the refugee’s breath, even as he struggled against the restraints. Gabriel grabbed the refugee’s face with his hands, trying to recognize the smell. “… meat? Mammoth hog meat? That’s not possible, you can’t hunt them regularly! Who gave you the meat?”

“Fuck if I know! They were giving it out for free just two hours ago. Now let me fucking go! I’m Versian, too!”

*Someone is feeding them the meat. A mammoth hog isn’t easy to take down, especially with the ragtag bunch of refugees.* Gabriel’s heart plummeted, afraid to learn that maybe Vicorn was right about the entire incident. He returned to his senses quickly, ignoring the refugee’s pleading and ordering his troops to fan out. “Find out who’s distributing the food and why! I want them caught and brought to me, now!”

The soldiers filtered out through the narrow lanes and alleyways between congested buildings built haphazardly, arresting anyone that came into sight and steadily blocking off the paths. Soon, a strong, delicious smell of roasted mammoth hog meat began to surround them, the aroma enticing. Even the soldiers were salivating from the smell, but they did not dare go against their orders. They soon spotted the source of the smell, a lone human slow-cooking the meat over an open fire made of a random assortment of firewood. The sanitary conditions were abysmal, but none of the three dozen refugees queuing up for their cut had any complaints.

The moment a refugee got a skewer or a piece of the meat, he chomped it down quickly before running off to join the crowd of refugees that were now trying to force their way through Gabriel’s first barricade. The flanking soldiers tried to stop the lone human selling the meat, but it only made the queuing refugees angrier, most of them lashing out at the soldiers and turning the alleyway into a close-quarters brawl. Weapons were anything the refugees could get their hands on, mostly chunks of scrap metal, broken branches, or fragmented tent poles with a sharpened fired tip.

Gabriel began to receive reports from the various squads, countless guards suffering injuries or dying due to the overwhelming numbers of refugees. “Get every guard out here now, get them out here and hold the line! We can’t let them further into Desham!”

More and more guards poured out from the garrisons, bolstering the forces until they achieved parity with the rioting refugees who kept trying to climb over the barricades. Anyone who made it across found themselves immediately arrested and restrained, or beaten unconscious so as not to present a threat. The riot went on for a few minutes, but Gabriel felt like he had been there for hours on end.

While the brawls were erupting all throughout the various alleyways, Gabriel felt that something was off, even as he visually saw someone distributing the meat to the burgeoning crowd of refugees. *Are they feeding the refugees so they riot for them? If so… then these refugees must be a distraction. What is their end goal?*

Realization dawned onto Gabriel, his head swivelling to quickly do a count of the soldiers. “How many guards are left back at the garrison?”

“Sir, I think there’s only a dozen of them left. You asked for all of them to come out.” The sergeant replied confusedly.

“We need to go back now. Take three squads and return before -”

Gabriel couldn’t finish his sentence, not when he spotted a glint of metal fired from the walls of Desham, slamming into the armory of the garrison. Instantly, a loud, dazzling ball of flame erupted into the sky, the brightness of the explosion forcing him to shield his eyes. The resulting air shockwave rippled through the town of Desham as the ammunition and explosives within the armory all ignited as well, blowing up into a rapidly expanding pillar of smoke. Tainted glass windows of buildings, stores, and factories were shattered easily by the air shockwave, while weaker buildings began to collapse from the resulting tremors, unable to hold up their own weights with their crumbling and poorly maintained foundations.

He could feel the dull thud in his eardrums deafening him and his men, as well as the astonished refugees, all of whom cowered under the rushing air. As soon as he took another look at the garrison, the entire barracks and armory had been carved in half, the buildings and fortifications decimated by the immense explosion and sheer force.

None of the refugees chanted any longer nor tried to push, merely staring in surprise and shock at what had just happened. However, Gabriel knew exactly what had just happened. *They sabotaged us!*

Suddenly, a call rang out from deep within the crowd of refugees. “FORWARD! THEY HAVE NO MORE AMMUNITION! THE GARRISON HAS BEEN DESTROY! FOR FREEDOM!!!”

The galvanizing, invigorating call rang out sharp and clear, reminding the refugees what was happening now as the crowd began to push once more against the barricade, their efforts even more concerted than ever. The barricades threatened to topple over from the impact, forcing the guards to use their bodies to prop them up and resist the refugees’ push. Morale among the soldiers had plummeted to an all-time low, and many of them were already thinking of ways to get out of this mess. With the barracks destroyed, Gabriel had now lost almost all hope of controlling the local populace, their authority marred by the inability to defend their own barracks.

“Sir, your orders! We can’t hold this line any longer, we’re going to be overrun! Sir? Sir!” A sergeant shouted at Gabriel desperately, who was still stunned in a stupor.

Gabriel’s eyes turned towards the refugees, watching the countless faces shout and roar at him, wanting to tear apart Desham limb from limb. He could already imagine the bloodthirsty refugees seeking revenge on every city dweller in Desham. The faces of his wife and his son came into his mind as well, Gabriel knowing that if he did not stop them, his family may be in peril as well. *I started this mess, but a simple apology wouldn’t cut it either.*

He wanted to curse the Governor, but he was the one who carried the operation out in the end. All he could think of was his son’s beaming face back at his simple house, shining brightly in his memories.

“Mount the repeaters and wait for my signal,” Gabriel ordered suddenly, snapping out of his stupor.

The desperate sergeant stared in shock, before blurting out. “Sir, you can’t be serious! These are Versians, refugees or not! Such a command would-”

“Do you wish to be hanged, quartered, and flayed by them? Have you not seen the images and paintings of the original revolutionaries? Your family is waiting behind you, and we have no other recourse. Do you want to see them executed?!”

The sergeant’s words were stuck in his throat, gulping. Every guard here knew they would be immediately overrun by the rioting refugees and beaten to death if nothing changed. After all, that was what they had seen the original revolutionaries do to the nobility’s soldiers during the first revolution. It was part and parcel of a riot.

“Well?”

“N-no, sir.”

“THEN WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR? I SAID: MOUNT ALL OF THEM!” Gabriel shouted for the first time in a long time, his desire to defend his family mounting to an all-time high.

The guards quickly hefted the large machine guns on the top of the driver cabin of each wagon, hooking up an arcite fuel pipe connected to the wagon tank. The guards who handled the machine gun and aimed down the barrel at the ravenous crowd were trembling, afraid of what would happen if they pulled the trigger. However, they were equally afraid of what would happen to them if they did not pull the trigger.”

“OPEN FIRE!”

# Chapter 124 - Path of Blood

The mounted arctech repeaters fired rapidly, the engraving along the barrels glowing intensely as the storm of pellets showered the rioting crowd. Each pellet drove a straight hole through the sickly flesh of the malnourished slum dwellers, ripping through muscles, tendons and skin in a churn of blood and meat.

Chants from the crowd turned to screams of horror as the rioting crowd immediately dispersed, but it was far too late for many of them. Many slum dwellers could only watch in shock as they ran, witnessing the zipping pellets turn their childhood friends into a ragdoll, the multitude of pellets drilling and lodging themselves into the bones.

The mounted arctech repeaters’ fire stopped in ten seconds as the barrel began to overheat, but the carnage had already been wrought. Hundreds of bodies were now piled up on one another, with survivors desperately trying to claw their way out of the pile. Others were suffocating under the immense weight, unable to move as their last vision was only a glimmer of the bright sky, their vision murked by the streams of blood that flowed freely from the top.

Some stumbled away, unaware of their own impending death as they tried to plug the holes from which chunks of organs began to seep out. One man carried his wife in his arms, trying to flee while dragging his shot left leg, limping. “We’re almost out, we’re almost out!” he whispered to himself, unaware that his back was already riddled with pellet holes while his wife’s head lay limp, a gaping hole on her forehead with her eyes locked in a shocked expression.

The sight burned itself into the minds of the guards, with many of the local garrison’s guards having only heard about the first war but not fighting in it. Some of them retched out their meals on the sidewalk, while others began to tremble violently, unable to cope with the horrors in front of them.

“Arrest them all. Shoot all who resist.” Officer Gabriel ordered, but none of the guards moved. Not even the sergeant dared to move.

“Sergeant, execute the order NOW! Or should I consider this as insubordination?!”

The sergeant quickly snapped out of his hesitation; the years of blindly following orders from above drilled into him. “Arrest them now! Move!”

A good chunk of the guards complied, moving on instinct as they stepped over the barrier, their boots squishing against the strewn corpses that hugged the street, fresh blood streaming. However, there were three guards who refused to move, instead aiming their arctech guns towards Gabriel. “This is slaughter! I didn’t sign up for the Army just so I can steal from them and kill them! Retract the order or I’ll have to kill you!” One of them threatened, motioning with the barrel of his arctech rifle.

Without hesitation, Gabriel immediately pulled out his handgun, executing all three of them in a swift motion. “Insubordination is punishable by death.” He muttered to convince himself, holstering his smoking handgun back into its holder. “I want this city under control, no matter want. MOVE! Get three squads back to the garrison barracks and find out who bombed us! Desham is now under martial law!”

The guards surged forward, desperate to retain their authority over the refugees. Anyone who tried to stand up against was shot on sight, leaving the streets of Desham riddled with bodies and blood unlike never before. Brutality and violence had become the norm for the next few hours, as refugees scampered to get out of the city, unwilling to lose their lives to the guards. The sweep did not end there, with the guards pouring out into the refugee camp, sweeping through and executing those who resisted. Some of the guards had been originally reluctant: confiscating food was one thing, but slaughtering the helpless refugees was another. However, Officer Gabriel’s execution of those who defied him was more than enough to persuade them otherwise.

“The people do not respect us - the refugees, the city dwellers, even the councilors!” Officer Gabriel roared as he led the sweep himself. “They treat us lower than dogs, lower than even the ants that crawl on the pavement. We upheld justice and the law in this town, yet all we got was virtol and calls for our blood. They escalated it first! We gave them rations, we offered them recruitment, and in exchange they desecrate the very city we swore to protect. THEY ARE THE ATTACKERS!”

The false sense of justice emboldened the guards, spurred on by peer pressure as well as the fear of retribution if they ever let the refugees regroup or form back into a large crowd again. Their minds had been spurred to put the blame of the unrest on the refugees, but Officer Gabriel knew exactly who was really to blame. *The Governor.* The poor management and greed had led to tough conditions which gave rise to more unrest and rebellious elements among the refugees. However, there was no turning back now.

Conflict was like a ladder of escalating violence; it was a simple matter of who was willing to climb to the higher rung to assert victory and dominance. *The refugees were the ones who escalated the issue first!* Gabriel tried to convince himself, but as the counterattack progressed deeper into the slums, the guards were frightened by the sights they saw.

Countless guards and Nest men who had been part of the confiscation operation were mutilated, cut and hung up all along the streets, stripped of their clothes, armor and weapons in their entierty. Many were still alive, barely clinging onto consciousness as wounds and blood still flowed freely, dripping off their dangling toes. Vicorn had not been spared either, suffering bruises and slashes all across his lanky wrinkled body, his old sagging skin marred with stains of blood as he murmured incoherently.

“Get those men medical attention now! What’s the status on the garrison barracks? Do we have access to our medical supplies?” Gabriel hurriedly organized a rescue effort, the guards moving forward to cut off their fellow colleagues restraints as fast as they could. The rescue bogged down the original arresting operation - Gabriel still saw his men as a useful resource necessary to maintain the martial law. At least a third of his men and all Nest guards in the city had been beaten badly.

Gabriel knelt next to the suffering Vicorn, checking the condition of his tortured body. “Who did this, Vicorn? Did you get lynched by the refugees?!”

Vicorn finally noticed Gabriel’s face, his eyes widening as his gnarly old hands clutched Gabirel’s sleeves. “The Ghosts! The Ghosts, we were attacked by Ghosts!”

“Ghosts…? That’s not possible. Official military information was that the Ghosts all died in the depths of Tenar, there shouldn’t be any left.”

“The Ghosts! The Ghosts!” Vicorn blabbered incoherently, the panic in his face visible but his words were jumbled up in a never-ending loop. Gabriel couldn’t waste anymore time on the clearly mentally deranged Vicorn now, moving off to assist his men in retrieving the other injured guards.

Still, Vicorn’s words lingered in Gabriel’s mind. *The Ghosts… if it is really them, that explains everything. But now that they have blown up the garrison barracks… what is their next goa-* Gabriel immediately turned about, marching straight back towards a wagon positioned near the pile of rubble that was once the city gates and rasping on the door. “The council hall, who’s guarding the council hall?”

“Sir, we have two squads guarding the councilors and the Governor. We’re still being jammed, so we can’t reach them!”

“Get me to the council hall now! You two, get your squads and follow me!” Gabriel urged, rushing over to the council hall. However, it was already too late. The two squads that had been defending the council halls had been shot dead, their bodies littered across the entrance while the once grand doors had been blown open completely. As soon as Officer Gabriel arrived at the front steps, there were already a dozen Ghosts aiming their Aspis MK2 repeaters at the wagons, while Kyle and Diya had captured the Governor already.

“Stand down, Officer Gabriel, stand down!” The Governor urged, his eyes continously glancing to the side of his head, where Kyle had his Oriental Bloom handgun pressed against the Governor’s temple. “I SAID STAND DOWN!”

Officer Gabriel cursed under his breath, wondering whether he should start a fight. However, he soon noticed that Kyle and the Ghosts were all well armored, featuring arctech knight armour that could deflect most pellets, while his own guards were relatively poorly equipped. He motioned with his hand, ordering the guards to not fire. Beyond the blasted door of the council hall, Gabriel could see the dead bodies of the counciliors who had stayed behind, all of them killed by the Ghosts.

“Smart head on your shoulders, Governor. Life is important after all, is it not? Now, let’s continue our discussion of how we can collaborate.” Kyle spoke with a confident aura, his suave voice precise and clear for all to here. “Perhaps we can start by reigning in these guards. Have them disarm their weapons. Now.”

“T-there’s no need to, we can work together, like you’ve said. I can give you one-tenth, no, one-fifth of all the food stored in the silo. You’ll be provided with lodging in Desham, and you’ll have a seat on the council.” The Governor pleaded. “The guards will be useful in enforcing rule and stability, and together we can crush the refugees to our will!” He continued to talk, while his shifty eyes motioned at Gabriel with a slight hint, Gabriel getting the gist of what’s happening. Gabriel himself used three fingers behind his back, acting like he was stretching his finger though he instead was signalling to a guard still in the wagon. The wagon guard nodded in response, preparing an emergency smoke gun that would signal all the guards to converge on the council hall. *The Governor is trying to buy time for us!*

“And why would I want to crush the refugees to our will?” Kyle asked.

“W-what? Isn’t that the whole purpose of all of this? So that you can get power? I can help you, my family and friends are all bigshots in the city, and we can-”

“I think there’s a misunderstanding, Governor. I’m not interested in sharing power.” Kyle grinned, the Oriental Bloom handgun powering up. “I’m here to send a message. And I don’t need a middleman.”

Gabriel’s jaw dropped as he watched the handgun’s fired pellet blast the Governor’s brains out, grey matter forcing through a tiny hole through the skull while the Governor’s body collapsed to the ground, his face still locked in confusion. Before Gabriel could even give the command to fire, the Ghosts attacked first, their amplified Aspis MK2 Repeaters mowing down the guards who couldn’t react fast enough.

The arctech wagons were riddled with holes, killing even the guard who was about to fire the smoke gun. Gabriel dived to the ground behind the wagon, trying to scramble away from the withering barrage that decimated all the guards around him, leaving him as the sole survivor. He cowered down, covering his head before he heard a loud stomp land right next to him, Kyle grabbing him by the collar and slamming him into the ground again, Gabriel’s bone hurting from the forceful impact.

“You’ve acted just like Diya said you would. Now, tell all your guards to stand down, or your wife and son will be killed right now. Don’t make this any harder than it has to be.” Kyle lifted him up again, strangling him with a single armored fist on his right exosuit arm.

Gabriel grunted as he struggled to pry open Kyle’s fingers wrapped around his neck to no avail, his legs kicking futilely at the immobile Kyle. *It’s him! He’s the one behind all of this!* Despair took over Gabriel’s mind, his will eventually breaking as he nodded vigorously in agreement, before Kyle released him to the floor.

“Get to it. I don’t have much time. Get all the guards to assemble in front of me right now.”

Just like this, Desham’s entire authority fell under the Ghosts. Gabriel’s command to retreat was met with confusion, but the majority decided to follow, assembling in front of the council hall where the Ghosts disarmed them, reliefing them of their arctech rifles and weapons entirely. Close to a hundred guards were now standing in front of Kyle and Diya, who now wielded the power in Desham. “Good work. The city is now ours.” Kyle smiled, the plan having been pulled off successfully.

With the meat accumulated from the Keru Forest, they were able to coordinate and galavnize the refugees to surge forward. He had allowed Nest to see and get information on their supply route, raising the alarm and undoubtedly getting the military to suppress the refugees, creating even more unrest that Kyle could direct. Jammers and explosives were placed accordingly, while the enhanced Hayden projectile by the railgun allowed Kyle to blow up the garrison barracks from a good range. Diya too was amazed at the ease of the plan, though she still had a few lingering questions. “Sir, wouldn’t it have been easier if they were in the barracks and sleeping? Your railgun would have killed all of them.”

“I believe in human rights.” Kyle spoke cryptically. “Every human’s life has meaning, and it wouldn’t be right to just kill them like that.”

Diya and the Ghosts were slightly surprised by the statement. “Okay, but these guards would find every opportunity to betray us the moment Harrison turns his sight onto us. They are a liability, we should not even be trying to recruit them.”

“Is that why you think I gathered all of the guards here?” Kyle smirked. “Like I said, every human’s life has meaning.”

Diya was about to ask again, but a rumbling sound could be heard from afar, a wave of thunderous footsteps approaching. The refugees who was on the run from the pursuing guards now had the complete freedom to enter the city, all of them marching and pushing up in unison. Their march led them right up to the council hall, where the guards were all lined up in unison, their faces still confused as to what was about to happen. Chants by the refugees could be heard again, blood boiling and tension rising.

“DOWN WITH THE MILITARY! DOWN WITH THE GOVERNOR!”

“KILL THEM ALL! KILL THEM ALL AND TAKE OUR FREEDOM!”

“There he is, that’s the fucking governor who…. huh? He’s dead!” One of the refugees leading the mob spotted the dead Governor’s body, lifeless on the street like a wretched dog who had just been put down. The eyes of the refugees rested on Kyle, his figure imposing as he mercilessly kicked the governor’s body.

“Who’s that? Who’s the man who killed the governor?” The refugees had no clue who Kyle was, Kyle having kept hidden throughout this entire affair, working from the shadows.

Some of the more enraged refugees blinded by anger didn’t care who it was. “Must be another fucking prick! Look at his outfit, he’s not a refugee! Kill him before he kills us!”

*Intimidation Aura!*

“CITIZENS OF VERSIA!” Kyle bellowed with such force that all the refugees stopped right in their tracks, the fearsome aura spreading through them quickly and rooting their feet to the ground. When the refugees looked at him, they didn’t just see a normal man - they saw the embodiment of dominance and fear, their primal instincts immediately raising alarm bells against Kyle, warning themselves not to fight him.

Unexpectedly, Kyle didn’t continue speaking, instead motioning for Diya to step forward and address the rowdy mob. Diya gulped instinctively. She knew that this had always been part of the plan, yet now that she stood in front of thousand of hungry faces ready to tear her apart the moment she made a mistake, fear began to creep into her heart.

An awkward silence passed as Diya took deep breaths, the refugees still held at bay by Kyle, Kyle looking at Diya and observing her actions. Before Kyle decided to relinquish her of her role, Diya took a bold step forward, placing her right in front of the refugees.

“I have killed the Governor!” Diya loudly declared, her determined voice carrying far and wide. “I have killed the Governor, not because I seek power. Not because I seek wealth, and not because I seek control over others like you! No, I killed the Governor, because I am you!”

“I am a refugee of the war, forced out of my home, forced into the camps to languish into famine, to suffer sickness and thirst, to be pushed into decisions that our forefathers, our Versian ancestors before could have never tolerate. Decades ago, we united against the tyranny of the Yual Dominion, waging countless revolutions! My father and grandfather before me have fought tooth and nail for a better future! Is this the better future that they had hoped for? NO, IT IS NOT!”

The refugees faces began to lit up, murmurs of agreement through the crowd as they listened to Diya. “We fought for freedom, for equality, for representation of all Versians, yet look what happened? Greed and misery are accepted as the normal conditions, the voices of the poor and the forsaken lost in the midst of war, politics and the interest of the minority that seek to rule us? Did we not oust the nobility from their seats of power? Did we not swore to stamp out the evils of royalty and everything the Yual Dominion stood for? I am like you, my comrades. I want food to eat, I want water to drink, I want a place to stay! I want safety, I want freedom, I want my voice to be heard! But most of all, I want this for ALL VERSIANS! WHAT SAY YOU?!”

“FREEDOM FOR ALL VERSIANS!” A refugee called out, the rest of the refugees chanting along.

“I am not here to be your leader, but to be your friend, to be your hope! Together we shall build a greater Desham inclusive of all, a greater future that we and our children can be proud of! I have killed the Governor, because I am you, and you are me! With our hearts and mind combined, food, water and housing are basic rights to be made available to all! No more greed, no more corruption, no more unnecessary suffering. And anyone who tries to take that away from us will see a force and fury greater than this, so great that we can topple an entire city like we did today. FOLLOW US! JOIN THE GHOSTS OF VERSIA AND FOLLOW ME, DIYA, INTO THE FUTURE, AND LET US BUILD DESHAM TOGETHER, BETTER!”

“YEAAH!” The refugees all pumped their fists into the air.

“And as for the guards who have tried to steal from us, who have slaughtered countless of our brethen, they are not fit to join this future of us! We have stripped them of their weapons - deal with them as you see fit!” Diya waved her hand towards Officer Gabriel who’s face paled at the implications of what was to happen.

Kyle ended his intimidation aura, the refugees seeing the change in atmosphere as a sign that bravery had built up in them once more. All of their pent-up anger and hate was unleashed onto the guards, a big scuffle breaking out while the Ghosts and Kyle did nothing to stem the virulent violence that was spreading. Officer Gabriel himself fought as hard as he could to get away from the mob, but the refugees were far too numerous, chasing him down through the street and pouncing on him, countless punches and kicks raining blows upon blows on him.

“The guards are the perfect outlet for the refugees to vent their frustration. This will solidify our legitimacy even better. Get the Ghosts to open the grain storage, distribute the food immediately with no restrictions among the refugees.” Kyle explained to Diya as they re-entered the council hall, the bodies of the dead councilors still littered across the marble floor, blood flowing freely. “Begin recruitment immediately - we’ll take over every infrastructure that is still functioning.”

Diya assumed her role as the new installed leader of Desham, the two dozen veteran Ghosts and numerous fresh recruits executing her orders to the letter. The grain storage that had once been the prized possession of the now deceased Governor was pillaged by the refugees, the stores of food now open for all to eat. Still, the refugees were not allowed to gorge themselves on the food, lest they suffer from overeating. Deployed Ghosts still controlled the rate at which they were allowed to access food, though the refugees were still more than happy to receive their due shares.

“Girl, quick, queue up so we get more food!” A malnourished mother hurried her daughter along, her spindly arms a testament to the famine she had suffered through. Countless refugees had similar stories like this, all of them now allowed to roam the city freely. Workers joined them in arms, rising up against their employers in force and immediately fighting back, gunshots ringing out among the streets.

On the other hand, the city dwellers who had been living in Desham were appalled by the sudden influx of refugees. They barricaded themselves into their own houses, hoping to wait out the storm on their own stockpiles that they had been accumulating over the last two months. Diya didn’t falter at all, immediately ordering the Ghosts to arm the refugees and break into the houses. A revolution had now begun, sweeping the entire city of Desham from top to bottom, leaving no stone unturned.

Some Versian guards survived, trying to escape through secret tunnels or hiding in basements, hoping to contact the military generals in Ocra or Tenar for assistance. “We must inform them that Desham has fallen to the Ghosts!” However, there were far too many refugees spreading out towards the city, hungry for revenge on those who had stolen from them. Every city dweller and guard was painted as the enemy, the refugees forming hunting squads and chasing stragglers down.

Their furniture, paintings, possessions and wealth were all appropriated by the refugees, houses now occupied by the unruly refugees while those who refused to give up their property were beaten and arrested, dragged to the council hall for a false trial. “We shall hold a feast, a feast to mark this day as the day of renewal for a free Versia!” Diya proclaimed, using the same banquet hall that the Governor and his cronies had been partying just the night before.

Countless residents tried their luck to merge into the refugees, but many were recognized and spotted immediately. “You, you’re the factory owner who enslaved my brother!” One of the refugees yelled and pointed at a scrawny old man, his belly hard to hide despite his attempts to disguise himself. He was immediately arrested and hauled up for trial, Diya herself presiding over the ruckus as other refugees gathered in the banquet hall, shouting and screaming murder at the accused city dwellers while they munched on meat and drank the wine cellar of the Governor.

“Bring out the first to be accused!” Diya motioned, a lady and her son being dragged out in chains while the crowding refugees yelled and tossed food at them. “The wife of Officer Gabriel, who had given the order to slaughter countless Versians in cold blood, using the same guards and weapons sworn to protect Desham and fellow Versians! What do you have to say in your defence?!”

The wife of Gabriel couldn’t speak at all, her legs shivering violently as she began to break into tears, watching the lifeless body of Gabriel being tossed in front of her, his face beaten into a unrecognizable pulp. The son was equally terrified, even if he did not truly understand what was going on.

“It seems the accused has no defence! As such, I pass my judgement - to be hung right now as a lesson to all those who would go against the cause!” Diya ordered, two Ghosts immediately hauling the wife and son away. The trials gave the refugees the vengeance they sought, giving them a cathartic release from all of the suffering and painful memories they endured on their time in the camps.

Within a single day, more than three thousand were marked to be hanged. Factory owners, store owners, landlords, escaping guards, former councilors - the purge was thorough. Kyle did not let a single one of the upper-class slip through his finger, ensuring that no one would ever think about going against the Ghosts again in Desham. With the military and the upper-class now crippled, Desham was ruled by the masses.

Recruitment of the refugees into Ghosts went smoothly as well, the Ghosts having earned a legendary reputation for achieving and leading the revolution. Many saw the Ghosts as a way into the new power structure that rule Desham, while others truly believed in the cause of the Ghosts, wanting to fight for a free Versia. It did not matter to Kyle their differences - as long as they were all aligned towards the same goal of opposing the current power structure of Versia.

Controlling Desham was merely one step of the plan. “We will need to rebuild and industrialize. Food from the Keru Forest by hunting mammoth hogs is not sustainable in the long run. If we are to establish a serious base of operations, mobilizing the refugees is of critical operations.” Kyle explained the course of action to Diya and the other Ghosts as they gathered in the former Governor’s office, looking over the finances of Desham. “The first order of business is to hunt down and ensure no one can report what happened here to Harrison. Capture every Nest soldier and worker in Tenar Logging, and make sure we’re providing false reports to stave off any suspicion. Establish communication back with Ocra so we can see the progress of the war as well.”

“What about the refugees? How do we get them to move? Most of them might not want to work.” Diya pointed out.

“The refugees did not want to join the Army nor did they want to join the factories because they did not want to be a cog in the machine. But if they knew what they were working for, and what it would help them with, they would do it without any complaints. We will also ostracizes and reduce rations for those unwilling to help out with the rebuilding of Desham. Feldon and I will head two construction companies, building them from the ground up. We will use the wood from Tenar Logging to establish quick and easy permanent housing.” Kyle drew up a simple blueprint, a standard house that was rugged and resilient enough to withstand the elements.

“The refugees wouldn’t know how to build a house - hell, I wouldn’t know how to myself!” A Ghost pointed out.

“That’s why we would be performing it in a pre-fabricated manner. Each refugee would be only given a single specific task, rather than trying to make them an expert in everything. I will oversee the entire process and ensure each role is filled accurately.” Kyle cut up the blueprint with lines, highlighting them to be different sections manufactured in advance. Construction equipment was also not an issue, the factory workers having already ousted the factory owners from power and taking control on themselves.

Over the next week, Kyle soldified his grip over Desham, having Diya act as the figurehead while he held all the power in the shadows, controlling the strings that led the restoration of Desham. The refugees had nothing to complain, the stored food and the hunted mammoth hog meat ensuring they did not go hungry. The housing plan was met with thunderous support among the refugees and workers overall, each of them feeling a sense of fufillment towards a common goal much unlike how they were working before hand for the profits of the minority.

The progress was visible, Sasha leading a strike force to establish control over Tenar Logging and their restricted forestry zones. With the military garrison in the city destroyed, the Nest guards capitulated easily, surrendering to the Ghosts and allowing Kyle to take over command of the forestry operations. Every logging equipment fell easily into his hands and setting the stage for an entire vertical industry to take place.

Kyle worked with the emboldened factory workers, finding skilled arctech engineers and etchers among them to work out the fabrication of the houses. Other unskilled workers were used to dig out sewage systems beyond the walls of Desham, expanding the infrastructure and laying roads for better transportation of materials. They worked round the clock in shifts, everyone enjoying the fruits of the revolution and invigorated by the recent victory.

Each tile and wooden beam they laid as the foundations spurred them even more to work harder, seeing their work contribute to a goal that directly benefited them. Naturally, not everyone was aligned with the same goals. Some tried to steal and scavenge materials, stashing them and hoping to sell them secretly to others, things like arcite ore, engines, or even wagons. Such corruption or black market dealing was crushed instantly by the Ghosts wherever found, the perpertrators tortured heavily and forced into slave labour, their crimes known to the rest.

With the beneficial projects being done, along with the bad apples being weeded out, a strong labour base of refugees and factory workers began to coalesce into the new manpower pool that was loyal to the Ghosts and Diya, believing in the future that Diya had preached. It was hard to argue otherwise, when already the foundations of houses and their internal frames were being established in droves, the former slum maze of the refugee camps being removed in favor of much more stable housing.

By the end of two weeks, the first houses were completed, the hardworking construction workers and refugees allocated first and allowing their families to have a safe shelter. Their tangible rewards further entrenched their respect and adoration for the Ghosts, the reputation of the Ghosts of Versia skyrocketing when pinned against the terrible actions and deeds of the Governor and his cronies.

The Keru Forest village had also been transformed into a hunting base, a productive process of hunting and foraging being established by the influx of more manpower being sent from Desham. Drake’s potion production process was also improved with more helpers, the village expanding in prosperity while enjoying all of the benefits and comforts of Desham, receiving household necessities and luxuries appropriated from the purged upper-class.

The city gate had also been restored, Kyle reinforcing it. Throughout these two weeks, refugees had continuously been streaming in, but in the last two days, the number of refugees had dropped considerably, Kyle worrying a little about the implications of such an effect. What made it even more concerning that the rate of injured soldiers fleeing the battlefield had increased dramatically, composing of more than a third of the refugees coming. Information about the war and battles were sparse and uncoordinated as best, each of the injuried guards having their own takes on what happened.

“We lost many comrades, but our forces overall have gained an upperhand over those damn Yual dogs!” One of the injured soldiers waved his fist angrily as he was interrogated by the Ghosts. The progress of the war was of critical importance to Kyle, which is why he had established a communication line with Culo via messengers who snuck through the catacombs of Tenar, using the same escape route that Kyle had utilized through the dungeon.

By now, Harrison would have already been fighting for three weeks in total, yet the most recent message from Culo was that the battle was still being reported as a slow Versian victory. Despite the power and technological prowess of Harrison, the sheer army size of Count Leon was not easy to defeat in its entirety, the tides of war going back and forth as the soldiers fought over every inch of land, Harrison gain Kyle pondered on what he needed to do - the longer the war goes on, the more power he would gain in both Raktor and here in Desham. If he wanted to prolong the war, he needed to assist the side that is losing. *This means at some point, I will have to either help Harrison or Count Leon.*

By now, he had regained his former strength of two hundred Ghosts, forming a strong enough force to perform strikes in the war as well. *Moving from Desham would leave this new industrial base vulnerable to a counterattack by Harrison, but if I don’t assist Count Leon, Raktor could fall under siege and it would jeopardize my factories under the Seven Snakes.* Kyle preferred to not suffer any losses to what he had painstakingly established in Raktor as well, about to assemble a strike team under Sasha to return to Raktor when a new military report on the progress of the war had been intercepted by the Ghosts reached his ears.

“The Versian Army has been routed at the border, and they are retreating to Ocra! Count Leon, Kregol and Perlis are now on the offensive!”

*The first strike has failed?!* Kyle was surprised that Harrison would make such a blunder, but it didn’t matter. With the Versian Army on the route, he had no doubt that Count Leon is angling for a quick end to the war, something Kyle could not allow to happen.

“Gather the Ghosts. We’re going to Ocra.”

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*A day later…*

The refugee camp at Ocra was in shambles, countless injuried and defeated soldiers streaming through its streets as they fled the battlefield, seeking refuge in Ocra. They were a sorry bunch, their uniform in tatters while their eyes stared into the horizon, the bravery and courage they once held before the war now replaced with a daze and an aversion to loud sounds. They marched silently without cheer, huddled together under the light drizzle over Ocra, their boots smacking the soggy mud in a depressing retreat.

Refugees and slum dwellers alike who did not have the means nor courage to flee to other cities could only watch on as the column of defeated soldiers entered in misery, the despair and impending failure crippling the morale among the city. Amidst the column of soldiers were captured Raktor soldiers, kept in metal cages that were hauled into the city, the generals having hoped that such shows of imprisonment would help uplift the spirits.

Instead, the Raktor soldier merely grinned at the forlorn sights of the citizens and residents of Ocra who looked on from their windows and along the streets, his body bloodied and soaked in mud. With a crazed voice, he shouted out with a harrowing tone: “FOOLS! SOON, DEATH WILL COME FOR ALL OF YOU! COUNT LEON AND HIS KNIGHTS WILL SLAUGHTER ALL OF YOU AND TEAR YOU LIMB FROM LIMB! IN THREE DAYS, ALL OF YOU WILL-”

His furious speech was cut short by the stab of a spear, a Versian soldier killing him out of fury. The Raktor soldier held a horrifying smile on his face, unnerving the residents who too began to panic. Hoarding was rampant, while law and order began to break down significantly. Desertion was becoming the norm, even as General Verian returned to the city, trying to use her own failing authority to stem the tide of crime. “We will perserve! The walls of Ocra will hold, and we will repel those who encroach on our sovereignty with impunity! The loss is but a temporary setback, one which will recover from and strike back with full force!”

Some of the residents were buoyed by the General’s assertions, but Culo was not an idiot. He had been watching the baggage train of the soldiers continuously filter into the city, each of them more injuried and weakened than the last. Disease and sickness spread like wildfire through the ranks, even afflicting the refugees and residents themselves, creating even more unrest. As much as Culo hated the current authority and wanted to use this opportunity to strike at the Versian Army, he knew it would be a foolish endeavour. Taking control of the city now through a violent revolution would only result in the city falling to Count Leon, something Culo had been instructed by Kyle to not allow.

Culo didn’t know when Count Leon would arrive, but he had the Ghosts prepare to fight, gearing up for a long siege and stocking up supplies and potions alike to survive the imminent defense. He tried to probe the Versian Army for any information they had gathered, but even General Verian was not privy to the movements of Count Leon, their observation Aurtla planes being deterred by the Raktor army.

However, he soon didn’t need the information any longer, for three days later, the stream of refugees and injured soldiers running for the safety of Ocra stopped. No more fleeing, no more trains of refugees clamoring to get behind the walls, no more screaming.

Just a silence that many had never seen before since the evacuations began, the trenches lining the dark muddy fields ahead of the walls calm and quiet, as if all was right with the world. Some of the more naive resident saw this as a period of calm, a few of them even thankful that there would be no more mouths to feed, but Culo knew why no more refugees was coming to Ocra - because Count Leon’s forces was already here.

*This is the end of the line.* Culo braced himself as he watched the first monstrous machines of war peek over the horizon on the next day, the flag of Count Leon’s colors flying freely in the wind for all to see.

The Siege of Ocra had begun.