

AUGUST FIRES

"Watch it all burn around you."

SEAN FRANCIS

Dull grey was the color of the day. Well, that was the color of every day. The base of the Inquisition was made of unpainted metal and after being here for a decade Matthew was still not used to it. Walking down the hall toward the Armory every day was a very emotionless trip. Even with the various staff and soldiers of the Inquisition walking or running the other side.

Matthew reached into the pocket of his uniform pants and pulled out a key ring. His uniform was modeled after the military uniform of officers and soldiers but instead of the tans and greens there were blacks, greys and little whites. However, since he was not a soldier he did not have weapons at his hips. Which was fine with him. Even though he worked at the Armory he did not like weapons at all. Ironic, sure, but it was better than any other part of the Inquisition.

He inserted the key into the door of the Armory and entered the first room. It was plain and only had enough space to hold about three people. At the other end of it was a door made of heavy duty and thick metal. There was a covered slit in the door about eye level and the only way to slide the cover was from the other side.

Using another key on the ring, he opened the metal door into the second room of the Armory where all of the weapons of the Inquisition were kept. This part of the Armory was much larger than the 'lobby' of the armory. Weapons of various kinds were hung in two rows along the walls, two tables were covered with more weapons and the corners had yet more weapons. All of the weapons were guns of various kinds. They were organized by categories such as Assault Rifles, Sub-Machine Guns and Artifices.

He reached out to the side and grabbed a clipboard full of columns. Papers rustled as Matthew looked over the sheets. Every column was filled in completely.

Matthew smiled at that. Five years after the Second World War they had recovered their stock of weapons. That was fast.

A bell rang. He looked through the slit in the door to see two soldiers standing patiently on the other side.

"What can I do for you?" Matthew asked.

The man on the left stepped forward and saluted with one hand while holding out an envelope with the other, "We have been tasked with retrieving weapons for Fire Training."

Matthew nodded, "Slide it through."

The man stepped forward and lifted the envelope to the door slit. Matthew grabbed it and opened it. His eyes glided over the words of the form. It was a request from the Range Instructor for ten of the M50 Submachine guns and five Assault Rife styled Artifices. The Jefferson models to be precise. Made sense as those were some of the newest acquisitions on his list. The form was filled correctly and the signature was the Instructor's.

Matthew nodded and signed his name on one of the two only blank lines of the form confirming that he had received the request. He then consulted his list to find the weapons in question. Ten minutes later, the second line of the form was signed saying that he was able to fulfill the request and the two soldiers were walking out of the Armory with two weapon bags.

After filling out two rows on another list he had, Matthew checked over all of the weapons. Each one of them looked as if they were in mint condition. As if they were just begging to be taken off of the wall and used in action.

Thankfully he would never need to use them. While he did have combat training there was no need for him to fight, even if the base was attacked. With all the Inquisition did to help defend the Allied Powers against the Axis Powers, not many people dared to defy them. The only group that would dare think about it would be the Black Cults but they had been relatively quiet lately.

Matthew shook his head. Why was he even thinking about this? Even the black magi should be smart enough to not attack right after a war. Especially since the Magic Law would come down on them fast. He

grabbed the book under his chair in the Armory room and sat down to read.

An hour later, the bell in his room rang again. Setting down his book, he walked up to the door and peered through the slit in the door. When he saw who was beyond the door he had to fight off a nervous reaction. The man on the other side was the Major Sergeant of the base.

He was someone who looked like he could take on anyone. Silver hair in a buzz cut, a wide face and serious blue eyes. His uniform was spotless and lacked a single wrinkle. As if to contradict his hard ass exterior, though, he had a massive smile on his face.

"Hey Graver" The Sergeant boomed, "How are things goin' in th're?"

Matthew opened the door, "Things are going well sir." He reached for the clipboard of requests with the only request of the day being the one from an hour ago, "All of the weapons have arrived and are in perfect condition. Instructor Tamlin made a request for some of the weapons for Fire Training."

The Sergeant turned his head to look down at Matthew. While his smile did not falter, there was something in his eyes that told Matthew he was thinking, "Really? Fire Training?"

"Yes sir." Matthew said, "He sent two men to grab them for him."

"With paperwork?"

Matthew nodded, "Yes sir." He blinked, "Why sir?"

The man kept his gaze on Matthew. After a minute of being uncomfortably stared down Matthew asked, "Sir?"

The Sergeant shook his head, "Nothing Graver." He started walking down the Armory looking at the weapons, "You said that we had all of our weapons?"

Matthew, happy that he was no longer under that thoughtful gaze, answered, "Yes sir. I looked through them all and they are ready for combat."

“Good.” He said, “You know, we are the first base to get all of our equipment.”

Matthew blinked, “Really? I guess being near D.C. gives us a boost up.”

The Sergeant nodded, “The Chicago base has about ninety percent and the Los Angeles base has about eighty.”

“Good thing we don’t expect to need them all any time soon.” Matthew looked at the Sergeant, “Right?”

Instead of answering, the Sergeant walked out of the Armory and left with, “Keep up the good work Graver.”

Matthew stared after the departed leader with confusion plain on his face. What the hell?

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It came at lunchtime.

As Matthew was not supposed to leave the Armory for all but one reason he had his meals delivered to him every day. They were all brought by the same soldier too. Travis Young was a good friend of Matthew and when he delivered the food they usually talked for a few minutes before Young had to be back at his post.

So, when someone other than Travis stood in front of the Armory's door alarm bells started ringing in Matthew's head.

"Can I help you?" Matthew asked.

The young man on the other end twitched the tray of food, "I came to bring you your lunch, sir."

Matthew narrowed his eyes, "Where is Corporal Young?"

"He was given an urgent task. He asked me to bring your meal for you."

Matthew's brain seemed to click but he could not bring the idea to the forefront. He shook his head, "Fine. Just leave it and I will grab it."

"I'm sorry, sir." The man shook his head, "I was told to make sure you got it personally. I cannot leave until I see it in your hands."

That was weird. Matthew looked down at the soldier's insignia on his left shoulder. He was only a private. Privates usually were overly cautious about not breaking the rules. But that nagging feeling in his mind just kept growing. Something was not right about this.

He cracked open the door of the Armory enough to hold his hand out, "Hand it to me then."

Matthew immediately saw his mistake. The soldier let loose a huge grin and clinched his other fist. Sensation rushed through Matthew's mind and he knew what his brain was trying to tell him. Magic. The man was holding on to magic and was waiting to use it. The energy from the cells in his skin

was leaking out energy and that was what his mind sensed at the beginning of the conversation.

He rushed to close the door. If the door was fully shut then it should be able to hold against any blast the kid could throw. It was too late. Force lashed against the door hard enough to send the door flying wide open. Matthew felt air under him then his back crashed against the opposite wall of weapons.

Various guns were knocked off of their racks and hooks. They all clattered to the floor and then Matthew landed on top of them. He clinched his teeth against the pain and looked up to see the kid bending down to grab a few of the weapons right next to the door.

Matthew made sure to grab a gun with a bayonet attachment before rushing toward the kid. His opponent twisted around to see him charging forward and lifted his hand. From what Matthew read of magi, they had to take a second or two in order to fire off a spell. So, he hesitated for a second before bending forward and leaping to the side.

Another blast of force sailed through the air, slamming into a table and sending the table to slam in turn against the wall right next to Matthew. The kid growled and readied another shot but now Matthew was too close. He thrust the gun forward and watched the bayonet sink into the kid's belly. Grunting, the kid planted his palm against Matthew and tensed slightly.

Fire. Fire erupted and Matthew could feel it burning his uniform and skin underneath. He could even see wisps of smoke rising from various spots on his clothes. Yet, he pushed through the pain and twisted the blade. As he did, he grabbed the kid's hand and shoved it away from his body. The energy still leaking from the kid's hand burned Matthew, but without the constant stream of energy the fires on his body soon faded.

The kid was weakening but he still tried to fight. Matthew gritted his teeth and whispered, "Please. Don't make me."

The kid still struggled to conjure another spell. Matthew sighed sadly and angled the blade up. It was a killing move. The body jerked once before going limp. Matthew let out heavy chokes before letting go of his weapon.

Some of the kid's blood had flowed down the barrel of the gun and stained Matthew's hands. He stared at the red for a couple of seconds.

That was the first time he had to kill someone. As the caretaker of the Armory he was never in the field. Yet, today he had to use his training to kill another person. A kid in fact. He probably was not over twenty five.

Matthew shook his head. He had to send up the alarm. His bloodstained fist slammed against the glass encased button on the Armory wall. Whirring alarms started blaring in the Armory and out in the hall. Boots thumped all over as the soldiers and guards started moving. A minute later, a Corporal ran into the Armory with the Major Sergeant.

"Graver?" The Sergeant asked. His head turned to the kid and gritted his teeth, "We've been infiltrated." He then turned to the Corporal, "Get moving!"

The Corporal saluted and rushed out of the room. The Sergeant walked up to Matthew and the kid, "What happened?"

Matthew did his best to calm his racing nerves and explained the events of the past couple of minutes. The Sergeant listened closely and nodded at the end, "One of the cults are attacking us then. Can you move?"

"Yes sir." Matthew said weakly.

"Good. I know you are not a soldier, but I will need your help."

Something in Matthew's mind shifted gears and he suddenly managed to calm down, "What do you need me to do?"

The man smiled and nodded, "Get yourself a weapon and bag up as many others as you can. The base is now on full alert and I am sure some of the soldiers are currently fighting. They will need all the firepower they can get."

Matthew hesitated, "A weapon for myself?"

"Yes. You have to have a way to defend yourself, don't you?"

Before Matthew could answer, someone ran up to the Armory and yelled, "Sergeant! They are in the West Wing!"

"Alright. I will go there immediately." And with that, the Sergeant left the room.

III

The large bag on Matthew's back threatened to send him to the ground. It was as full as he could possibly make it with guns, artifices and various ammo for said weapons. One gun was heavy enough to him, but now he was luging around dozens of them. And that was only a fraction of what he had in the Armory.

Echoing throughout the halls were the sounds of combat. So much so that Matthew could not tell which way was the best way to move. If he went by the sounds alone the fighting could have been right next to him. But that also meant that no matter which direction he went he would run into someone.

Following that line of thought, and the random soldier's statement, he turned to the right outside of his Armory and headed for the West Wing. That side of the base was where the Field, Fire and Instinct Training took place in various rooms from classrooms to large open spaces. But why did the fight start there?

The memory of the Major Sergeant's look when Matthew mentioned the only transfer of the day came back. Had he given the enemy the weapons they needed to start the fight? But they had only asked for fifteen weapons. Did that mean there were only fifteen magi here?

His thoughts were interrupted by a concussive like blast that sent him down on his back. The only thing he could hear for a couple of seconds was an unending ring. White filled his vision and he felt nothing. Slowly his senses returned.

Groaning he started to sit up only to see a lance of ice fly toward his head. A shriek escaped his lips and he shoved his head to the side. He felt the point of the lance slice his cheek open but without the lance directly in his vision he could see what happened.

Two figures, a man and a woman, were having a magical and physical firefight with a single Inquisition soldier.

Matthew's instincts told him to leap to his feet and run for the fight. But he held back. While he was lucky with the kid in the Armory, he knew that he was not good in a fight. Even the fact that he was trained did not help. So, instead of rushing into the fray and getting himself killed he waited and looked.

The soldier had managed to pull a table from the room nearby and flipped it to use as a makeshift barrier. It was not going to hold out for long as it was made of wood and already had dents and holes from previous attacks. The man himself had a couple of rips and Matthew could see blood staining his arm from his shoulder down. Yet he held a Smith and Wesson SW Magnum pistol in both hands.

The mages, on the other hand, were relatively worse off. The man had gunshot wounds on his arms and legs and it was a surprise that he was even on his knees. He looked as if he was about to collapse, yet he let loose with an ice shard that smacked into the table. The woman next to him was better off with only rips at her body but she looked like she was exhausting herself. They both wore the Inquisition's uniform, albeit worn and battered, so they must have been able to infiltrate with disguises. The Inquisition would have to be careful about who they attacked.

Matthew, deciding his first target, pulled the Colt Python from its holster on his hip, pulled back the hammer, and fired. The thought of attacking another person had sent shakes down his arm, so his shot flew wide from the male mage. Yet, he had grabbed the attention of the magi.

They both turned to him and he could feel the power leaking from them as they prepared spells. The energy caressed his skin and the fear of the fight prevented him from getting his weapon ready for the second shot.

The soldier saved his life.

While the magi were distracted with Matthew, the soldier rose from his hiding spot and sent two rounds into each mage's head. They both jerked back and slid against the wall. Matthew flinched as well and turned his gaze away from the two corpses.

The soldier, a Corporal by his insignia, rushed toward Matthew and knelt.

"Are you alright Graver?"

Matthew nodded quickly, "Yeah. Yeah." He twisted to set down the bag still at his back, "The Major Sergeant wanted me to deliver weapons to whoever I could."

The Corporal reached into the bag and grabbed an assault rifle as well as a couple of clips worth of ammo for both the rifle and his pistol. It was not much, but it would at least be enough to last a little while.

"Do you know what they are after?" He asked.

"No. I was in the Armory when they attacked. I do not know anything except that they may have a few of our guns."

The man muttered a curse, "Alright then. Keep moving toward the West Wing. The mages were moving this way before I ran into them so I'll see if I can follow their path."

Matthew nodded and rose to his feet. He pulled the bag back over his shoulder and continued on. With each step his heart and stomach sank with nerves and fear. And while he did, he thought about the fight.

He had almost died. If the Corporal was not there, he would currently have lances of ice and whatever the woman was throwing in his head. All because he was too scared to properly cock and fire his gun. Granted he was never a fan of weapons, but in this situation he could die if he did not get his act together. He had to make sure to not let the fear control him again. The instructors had told him to not let emotion get in the way. Coldly analyze the situation and act. Save the emotions for later. Yet that was one of the areas that he was never able to do well.

Better do well now, then.

IV

Fifteen minutes later, Matthew had delivered all of the guns he had in his bag. And he was not even close to the West Wing. At the pace he was maintaining, it would take him another ten minutes to make it through the maze of corridors to the wing. He pushed on though figuring that it would be kind of pointless to run right back to the Armory to grab even more weapons.

As he rounded yet another corner he saw fluttering cloth cross an intersection. It would not have been a worrying thing except that it was going in the exact opposite direction of the West Wing.

Matthew hesitated for a split second. He could follow it and see where it was going but it could have just been an officer carrying out a task. In which case it would have been pointless to do so. Yet, if it was one of the enemy that managed to get past the Inquisition guards then ignoring him could be catastrophic for the Inquisition.

Gritting his teeth against the rising fear, Matthew ran after the figure as quietly as he could. The figure was faster than Matthew and seemed to be using some sort of spell to make himself quiet. The spell, however, was what allowed Matthew to keep track of him. Any guard that ran by ignored both the figure and Matthew which really confused the Armory supervisor.

Sure, there was a fight going on that required the Inquisitors' attention. But this was a possible mage that they were just shooting past. The mage could have been holding another spell that hid himself from the guards, but then why would Matthew be able to still keep track? It did not make any sense.

Matthew rubbed a couple of fingers against the artifice hanging from his belt. He would need it if the figure in front of him decided to open fire. Which was another concern. Why was he not doing so against the Inquisitors around him?

After about five minutes of the chase, the figure suddenly threw himself through a door. Matthew hung back a bit and looked into the room.

It was a maintenance room full of different systems that controlled air flow, heat and electricity. The figure knelt in the center of the room and was setting something on the ground. A small light pulsed from the object and the figure rubbed its fingers in a specific pattern along the thing's surface. The light showed the figure's face in the otherwise dark room.

She was beautiful. Silver hair flowed down to her neck and into her eyes slightly. A slender neck held up a thin face. Green eyes flashed in concern as she looked at something on the device. She was wearing some sort of leather coat and he forced his eyes from going any further. It would have been impolite.

Matthew shook his head and lightly slapped his cheek. Focus. She obviously had an artifice of power. It probably was supposed to destroy the systems of the base or else why would she set it up here. He had to find a way to stop it.

He stayed at his position and watched her carefully. What he was betting on was that the woman would finish setting it up and then leave. However, when she leaned away from the device she stayed kneeling next to it. He was going to have to be direct then.

Taking a deep breath, Matthew flung himself through the door, pointed his pistol at the woman and yelled, "Don't move!" Or, at least he tried to yell. It came out more like a urging statement.

She did react similarly though. She flinched to her feet and let out a gasp. Seeing that he was holding a gun to her, she held her hands up.

"Step away from the device."

She shook her head and Matthew tried to ignore the features the pulsing light showed, "I cannot."

Matthew took a step closer, "Why not?"

He expected her to instinctively take a step back to mirror him, but instead she kept herself planted, "Orders, of course." Her thin and appealing

mouth curled up in a smile, “You think I would really do what you say because you are holding a gun to my head?”

Matthew blinked, “Um... yes? Guns are usually threatening right?”

A sweet laugh echoed across the room, “So naive.” With that, she clinched her fist.

Invisible force lashed out and crashed against Matthew’s chest. He grunted and slid to hit the wall behind him. The wall bounced him back and he stumbled to an upright position again. When he looked up again, he saw that the woman had not moved from her place but she had lowered her arms to cross her chest.

Matthew did not want to do it, but he pulled his weapon and opened fire. The bullet slammed against a dome that flashed with blue light and then ricocheted off of the metal walls until it slammed into one of the system controls. He gritted his teeth in annoyance. She was prepared which he probably should have seen.

And she still had that damn smile.

“You have not participated in a fight before, have you?” She asked. That smile twitched up even more, “Or are you distracted?”

Something drew Matthew’s eye down toward the artifice. The light was pulsing faster. He had the uncomfortable image of a bomb ticking down. If he did not do something soon, the artifice would activate.

Matthew raised his gun again. The woman laughed, “You really want to do that again?”

He shifted the gun’s barrel to the side and pulled the trigger. The shot careened off of the metal wall, ricocheted off of another wall, and slammed into the woman’s back. She jerked forward and fell to a knee. Seeing the woman’s pain sent pain through his own body but he controlled it and stepped forward.

She flung her hand up and Matthew felt the spell uppercut him in the chin. His feet left the floor and he landed hard on his back. The gun in his hand barked and the bullet bounced off of the wall to sink into the heating system.

Another spell hit his side and he was slid into the wall again. Groaning he struggled to stand up. Instead he only got to his knee and looked up. The woman was grinning and pointedly glanced at the artifice. Matthew looked too and saw that the artifice was blinking at a machine gun's rate of fire.

He only had time to place his hand on the artifice at his belt before everything exploded.

V

When Matthew returned to consciousness, the first thing he felt was pain. Massive, horrible pain all over his body. It was as if he was dipped in a cauldron of molten lava. To go with that was the heat that flowed and sunk into his skin. He wondered briefly if he really was in a cauldron of lava. Confirming it would have required opening his eyes and that was something he did not think he would have been able to do.

Keeping himself on the ground and near sleep felt really good. It would have felt better to actually fall asleep. His mind even started to fall deeper into the void. Despite that, he slowly forced his eyelids to part.

A part of him wished he had not.

Light pierced his eyes and his brain immediately hated him for it. The act of trying to adjust to the light was something right out of hell. But that was only one part of it.

When he finally got his eyes fully open, he saw that his surroundings were blazing in fires mixed with red and blue flames. Whatever was not in flames was pretty much demolished. Matthew slowly rose to his feet and had to fight against his body's will to just fall over. Standing up he had a clearer view of where he was.

Mainly, he was outside. Virginian winter air sank its fangs into his skin, but instead of being freezing it helped him get to a reasonable temperature. Not even being near the mountains could bring him below slightly chilled. In front of him was the Inquisition's base on the east coast.

Completely engulfed in flames.

From his vantage of the giant building, he could tell that his area was not the only one that exploded. Various, seemingly random, areas were entirely gone from the building and the supports were exposed and burning. Thankfully, there were no bodies around him. At least ones that he could see. All of the guards were headed for the West Wing though. Maybe he was just not seeing the true damage.

Making sure that he still had his weapon, he pushed himself toward the nearest breach. His body was stiff and refused to move properly. So instead of walking he maintained a strong limp. After a couple of steps, though, he felt his foot kick something on the ground.

He looked down to find that it was the woman who planted the artifice. The idea of just stepping over her, or even on her, and keep moving was strong. But he ignored it and knelt next to her.

Her chest fell up and down rhythmically and her pulse was strong. There were only minor injuries plus the bullet hole in her back. The bullet did not look like it hit anything fatal however the injuries were leaking blood. If it kept up and she did not wake up she would die.

And why is that an issue? A dark part of Matthew's brain asked, She is the enemy!

He gritted his teeth and started cutting strips from both of their clothes to cover up her injuries. Every cut was covered no matter how small and most of the work was placed on her back. When that was done, he patted her down and took anything that might be dangerous. She had a couple of artifices that looked similar to what she used and one that was probably a shield artifice but it was burnt out.

Matthew pocketed it all and pulled the unconscious woman up. With one of her arms around his neck and his arm around her back, careful to avoid the shot, he started getting them both to the nearest hole of the base.

Halfway, he felt the woman stir a bit. She then let out a groan. Matthew did not stop moving though, and he felt some resistance as she struggled to keep pace with him.

"What?" She muttered.

"Are you alright?" Matthew asked.

In the corner of his eye, he saw her turn to look at him, "What are you doing?" She was obviously still recovering from the explosion herself. The voice that came from her was tired and blurred, "Why are you helping me?"

"I'm placing you in my custody." He said, "Do no try to escape or you will be put down. Follow all of my orders and everything will be just fine."

She snorted, "Yeah. Sure."

He was not sure which part of the statement she was scoffing at. Or if she was scoffing at it all. But she did not try to fight him. She even kept using him as a support until they finally got back into the building. Once in the relative safety, she shoved herself away from Matthew. He was slightly upset at that, but did not say anything.

"Alright then, mister Inquisitor." The woman said in a sarcastic tone, "What do I do?"

He pulled out his pistol, made sure it was loaded, and held it out pointedly, "You stay in front. Any sign of using magic and you get shot." He hoped she did not notice the slight shaking in his voice and hands.

Either she did not, or she ignored it, "Fine."

She stepped in front of him and waited. It took him a couple of seconds to realize that she was waiting for his direction. If his mental image of the building was correct, they were a few intersections from the maintenance room.

"Take a right." He said.

She nodded and headed that way. Now that she was moving on her own, he could see that she was not exactly limping but she was taking the shot in her back into account. The cloth wrapping her injuries were already soaked and the motions were not helping anything at all.

A pang of guilt hit his chest. He knew that she was the enemy and he knew that she was one of the ones to ruin the base. But he had shot a woman. The fact that he shot anyone was hard enough, but shooting a woman made it even worse. What was wrong with him?

He shook his head and kept his gun aimed close to the woman.

VI

They had made it to what remained of the West Wing. Before the explosions, the wing was composed of multiple rooms, each with various tools specific to their function. The Field Training rooms, for example, held various props, ‘clues’ and training weapons to simulate having to go out into the field and investigate, hunt down, or escape any situation imaginable.

It was an area that Matthew was very familiar with as he spent multiple years of his life in each of these rooms in training. And he was just the Armory manager. He could not even imagine what the full training regimen would be like.

Now, however, it was barely recognizable.

Where classrooms once stood were just large holes exposing the hallway to the outside air. Scorch marks marred the walls of the hallway. Supports either burned quietly or managed to snuff out their fires and struggled to stand upright. Debris was scattered everywhere both inside and outside the building and they crunched, squeaked or dinged as the woman and Matthew walked over it.

What Matthew noticed the most, though, was the countless amounts of bodies. Corpses littered the floor, leaned against the walls or lay outside the building. Some of them were unrecognizable under all of the burns, blood and scraps of cloth. Others were missing limbs or whole sections. Very few remained intact completely or even mostly. The smell that permeated the hall was something out of a nightmare and Matthew had to fight not to throw up.

The woman, though, just stood motionless. She made no sounds and the only sign that she was still alive was the slight back and forth of her breathing. Nothing on her face showed what she was thinking and nothing in her stance betrayed her reaction.

That lack of anything and the scene before him triggered an emotion in Matthew and within a second he gripped the woman's shirt. He spun her to fully face him and raised a fist ready to punch. The pistol previously in his hand clattered to the floor.

He felt his teeth grind together so hard it was a surprise that no flecks of bone slid out of his mouth, "Was this your plan? To kill as many people as possible?"

The woman shook her head slightly, "I have no idea." Her face was still a mask of nothing, "I am a soldier."

"You really expect me to believe that you are ignorant of this?" He asked.

"Believe what you will." She said, "But I do not know the true motivations of this attack. I follow orders." At that last, a flash entered her eyes.

Matthew barely recognized it, "What the hell did you think would happen when you were told to use a BOMB? That no-one would die?"

Sudden anger showed on her face and she forcefully pushed Matthew away, "You joined a military organization! What did YOU think would happen when you joined? That no-one would die?"

Matthew hesitated at that. She had pretty much just thrown what he said back at him, but it was effective. The Inquisition was the strongest force when it came to fighting magi. They had defended against and won against various magi both independents and Black Cults. It gave them a reputation for pretty much being indestructible. Matthew himself had joined the Inquisition to help the effort of controlling the misguided magi and took the position not many others wanted so he did not have to fight.

Yet, like she said, he had joined a military force. Of course they would be attacked. And the fact that the Inquisition was good at its job would only motivate the magi even more. Had he really been arrogant enough to believe that nothing would happen?

He shook his head and focused back on the woman, "My thoughts on this are not important right now. The fact is that you assisted the destruction of an Inquisition base and the deaths of many lives."

Her face turned down, “Do you really think that THIS was the time to discover that? You could have given me that speech half an hour ago.”

He was about to answer, but a shot rang out. Blood splashed across the woman’s body as she crumbled to her knees. A hole the size of a fingertip appeared in her chest. Her shocked face was the last thing Matthew saw of her before she collapsed face first.

“Well, that takes care of that.”

Matthew looked up and watched a thin and lean woman walking toward him. Her walk was more of a saunter. As if she expected to grab anyone’s attention. She was wearing a black duster and held a Colt pistol in her right hand. Her left hand was curled palm up into a cup and a ball of fire was suspended between the tips of her fingers.

However, the smile that spread across her face was the thing that sent chills down Matthew’s spine. She was not even trying to hide the fact that she was enjoying this. Blood stained her cheek which made the smile even worse.

Matthew looked around trying to find the pistol he had dropped moments ago. It was nowhere to be seen. He could have sworn that it fell around him. The woman in front of him laughed and his stomach dropped.

“Looking for this?” She held up the Colt in her hand.

He gritted his teeth, “How dare you.”

“You really do not know what you want do you?” She asked, “I just helped you kill one of the mages who had attacked this base. You should be happy!”

Matthew ignored the spark of emotion that flared in his belly, “But she was one of your own.”

“And?” The woman shrugged easily, “If she could not take out a simple Inquisitor then she was useless to me.” Her voice had a hint of frost to it, “I had tolerated her for too long anyway.” As if she had just realized something, she raised the pistol and thumbed back the hammer, “Speaking of. I need to take care of you too. Especially since you are the last one alive.”

VII

There was only a split second for Matthew to get himself out of this situation. If he did not think of something, he would get a bullet straight to the head.

Good thing he planned ahead.

As the woman had been taunting him, he slowly shifted his hand toward the pocket that held the burned out artifice. Barely after the woman finished her ‘final words’ he had flung the rounded disk of metal and wood at the woman’s head. It crashed into her shoulder which, considering what has happened, was a great shot.

But the fact that it succeeded in its task was even better. The object flying at her then hitting her was enough of a distraction to make her miss. Matthew felt the bullet slice his earlobe and he hooted in pure adrenaline before turning on a heel and running away.

This woman definitely had skill. That was confirmed when a lance of fire flew past him. The only reason he dodged was because he felt the sudden shift in her energy as the spell was released. Something that not many people knew to look for. Even though he knew what to look for, though, he almost did not sense it fast enough.

Knowing that the woman was skillful, though, gave him the idea he had been toying with halfway through their conversation. In order for him to survive he needed two items. He just had to hope that the rooms they were in were still intact. Or else he would have to go fisticuffs with her which was a near suicidal idea.

So, he just had to survive until he could get to the rooms. Doing the math in his head, he figured that he would need fifteen minutes to get to each room. Half an hour of running and fighting against a mage of high caliber. Something that could be considered suicidal in itself, but it was less so than the ‘fight hand to hand with a master mage who had a gun’ plan.

The Colt behind him coughed out and Matthew flinched in reaction. He heard something careen off of the wall next to him and keep bouncing back and forth down the hall in front of him. Almost immediately afterward he felt that snap of sensation again and ducked down. Ice whizzed close enough to slash a few hairs from his head.

It had only been a minute yet his opponent already got close to killing him three different times. How the hell was he supposed to survive to get the items?

Duh, he thought to himself, by using your head!

The standard Inquisitor always had two items with him at all times no matter if he was on or off duty: a pistol, with the popular choices being the Colt and the .44 Magnum, and a shield artifice yet replacements were in the Armory. That was why he was able to defend against the explosion, but afterward his had burned out just like the one the mage who set it off did. So, the first thing he needed was to grab one of the pistols from a fallen soldier. Something that made him feel sick to his stomach, but he had to survive. And if he was lucky, he could also grab a shield artifice.

He abruptly turned a random corner and kept a mental map of the base up. Behind him as he did, he felt the sudden heat of another fire ball fly by him. It was so close that he checked to make sure his clothes were not on fire again.

But just the weapon and artifice would not be enough. He had to find a way to slow down or stall the mage chasing him. Randomly turning corners would help, but he needed a better way. If he was able to move the debris scattered around him, he could have put those in her way but any second he was standing in place was a second that made it easy for her to headshot him. And he had no magical abilities himself, so he could not just chuck the debris at her.

No matter what he came up with, though, he could not figure out how he would be able to do it. He knew of a few artifices in the Armory that he could use, but that would require him actually making it to the Armory before he died. With each step he took it seemed less and less likely that would happen.

A sudden thought hit him and he shook his head in frustration. He had been thinking the wrong angle. All of the plan that he thought of were focused on fighting her as a mage. But despite all of her power, she was still a human. And all humans have ways to get distracted.

First, he had to start confusing her.

Through panting breaths, he said as if to himself, “Where is it?” Along with his question he started looking back and forth as if looking for something. “I thought it was around here!”

The snap of a spell releasing reached him and he threw himself to the left. That gave him the chance to look behind him. The woman was still chasing after him and still getting closer but Matthew could see her expression change slightly.

Assuming that she started taking the bait, he muttered, “Maybe it was to the left.”

It took a couple of minutes to get to the next intersection. When he approached the four-way cross, he started to act as if he was about to turn left. It was hard for him to tell, but he thought he could hear the woman start shifting to the left. Grinning like a fool, he suddenly leapt to the right.

A grunt of surprise sounded from behind him, confirming that the woman did indeed take the bait. He had to restrain from laughing as he continued running through the halls.

As if to retaliate, the woman launched a massive blast of fire down the hall toward Matthew. He turned the corner, but the blast traveled too fast. His arm erupted into burning agony and he fought off the need to scream. He could not let the woman know that she actually hit him. This was at least in part a psychological fight after all.

Looking behind him, Matthew could see that he had gained a significant lead. He felt that he was far enough away to start looking for the weapon he needed. After five minutes, he still had not seen anything and he thought that he would have to just deal with avoidance. Yet, turning the last corner, he saw his first destination: the Armory.

He let out a sigh of relief and ducked into the partially damaged room he was familiar with. As he passed the doors, he slammed them shut. They did not give him complete coverage as they had holes in them, but they would slow the woman down a bit.

The idea of having to use a weapon larger than a pistol unnerved him. But he ignored the feeling and grabbed an assault rifle and multiple clips that miraculously remained fully loaded. He slammed a clip into the gun and aimed it right at the door as he grabbed a couple of artifices. Seconds later, the woman crashed through the door.

And Matthew, with only a millisecond of hesitation, opened fire.

The booming sounds of the gun firing off each shot threatened to deafen him in the tight space of the Armory. And the physical bucking of the gun was like a bull trying to throw off its rider and his burned arm did not help. Yet, the bullets all collided with deadly force into the shield the woman called at the last second.

He smiled slightly. She was doing exactly what he wanted.

The woman took step after step backward and Matthew matched her. When she was out of the Armory, she flung herself away from the doorway. Matthew rushed out of the room and headed in the opposite direction. He felt her about to fling another spell at him, but he started peppering her with bullets again and watched as she had to call up a shield to protect herself again.

Magi were powerful people. It was why they were so feared all over Earth and why the Magic Law was created. Yet, they had inherent rules to how they use spells. And it was well known that very few magi actually have the concentration needed to hold two spells at once.

And the woman behind him was no different.

Her shield interrupted her buildup for another offensive spell. Not only that, but the sudden shift of gears in her “Magic Lobe” probably damaged her.

Again, a sudden and irrational pang of guilt hit Matthew. He shook it off and headed for his next destination. Flinging the rifle onto his back, Matthew pulled one of the artifices he grabbed onto his hand. Immediately

he could feel a prickly sensation crawl up his arm. It was the leaking energy from the woman amplified more than possible with his “Magic Lobe.” While he had no idea what her levels of ability was before he put it on, he could imagine that she was running up to her first level of tolerance. Good. That would make it easier to do what he planned.

The glove sent signals up and down his arm that were strong enough to nearly numb the limb. She was preparing yet another spell. Had she not learned yet?

Matthew grabbed the rifle again and, without looking, opened fire again. Sensations from the glove shifted slightly as she had to call up her shield again. After a few rounds, though, the gun clicked empty.

He growled and started reloading the rifle. Laughter from behind him caused him to look and see that she was about to fire the Colt. Quickly, Matthew pressed a couple of fingers against the second artifice he grabbed. He could feel the power form a shield behind him and watched as blue ripples emanated from multiple point of the shield where the Colt’s rounds hit.

Protected, he finished reloading the assault rifle and continued to open fire. Signals from the glove started to gradually grow weaker as the woman’s energy was dying. He just needed to push a little bit further.

After ten minutes of back and forth, Matthew finally arrived at his second destination: the Artifice Development Lab.

Every Inquisition base had a lab where scientists and artificers researched and developed artifices for the Inquisitors to use in the field. Normally, though, they were much more organized than it was now. Tables, tools and cabinets were scattered everywhere, opened and broken. Only a couple of objects remained upright or relatively undamaged.

Matthew slammed the door shut and locked it with its deadbolt. While it would not hold the woman back for long, he hoped he would be able to find what he was looking for before then.

It was under the fourth cabinet he searched. Wooden handcuffs with a metal chain clinked as he pulled it out. Many people would have laughed at its appearance, but it was a mage’s worst nightmare. At least, if it

worked. The problem with developing an artifice to fight against magi in the Inquisition base is that there were no mages to test them on. So, Matthew prayed that they would actually work and ran to hide behind an upright shelf.

The door of the room exploded inward and Matthew could hear mage's quiet footsteps. He only needed her to get to the center of the room and he would have her. Just five more steps.

Four. Three.

Two.

His glove flared to life and Matthew did not have any time to react before invisible force slammed him up against the wall. The handcuffs fell from his suddenly limp fingers and clattered to the floor. He had expected the force to disappear after hitting him, but instead it increased its pressure.

The woman stepped toward him with a smile on her lips, "I have to admit that you were rather clever boy. But did you think you could trick me that easily?"

Matthew grunted, "I got you here, didn't I?"

"True. But the game is over. With you dead no one will know of this attack for months. Maybe even a year. This was just the prologue, boy. And you will get to watch the story unfold from Above!"

As she talked, Matthew could hear the strain in her voice. At this point, she had to have surpassed her first tolerance level. Which meant that she was only seconds from hitting her second tolerance level.

"That is an optimistic estimate." Matthew said, "What makes you think it would take that long?"

Her smile grew, "Stalling me? That won't work."

The glove on Matthew's hand quietly died down to near nothing. And the pressure on his body faded.

The woman growled and fired the Colt. As soon as he was able to, he dropped down into a crouch. His hand gripped one of the cuffs and he lunged forward with a yell. Her lack of magical energy severely reduced

her reaction time and she both missed the shot and was not able to avoid the cuff wrapping around her wrist. It snapped shut but she yanked her arm back.

She then swung her arm forward and used the other cuff as a weapon. The wood cracked into Matthew's cheek and he was stunned for a second. He felt two more blows on his body before his vision returned and he raised his hand up. The metal chain slammed into his hand and his skin immediately started to burn. The artifice was already working its magic then. It was the energy from its activation that was burning him. He did his best to ignore it as he pulled it toward him.

The woman cried out as she was thrown off her feet. Matthew grunted when her elbow sunk into his belly and a large puff of breath escaped. Yet, he pushed through it and reached around to grab her other wrist. She struggled against him which made it that much harder to get that second cuff on. However, he finally heard the snap and pulled away from her.

As soon as the cuff slapped shut the woman started convulsing. From what Matthew heard, the cuffs used slight contact with the metal chains to send relatively harmless electric currents throughout the wearer's body. However, the inventors had enhanced it to also cut out what little magical energy the wearer has.

A minute later, the woman fell face first onto the floor. Matthew just sat there breathing heavily. When he saw that she was not getting up anytime soon, he slowly pulled himself up. Gripping the back of her shirt, he started dragging her with him as he headed for the Major Sergeant's office. As long as the room was still standing, he should be able to access the phone inside of it.

Surprisingly, the woman did not wake up throughout the ten minutes of Matthew dragging her. He got to the room and found it standing. The phone was still plugged in and Matthew quickly got a line through. Speaking to the person on the other end, he finally got someone to come up to the base.

Done with that, he sat at the Major's seat and despite logic telling him he should not he immediately fell asleep.