

Collateral Baggage

by /a/non

I

There I sat, atop one of the many mangled vehicle wrecks now littering the city block. My gaze focused on a small weed, growing between the cracks of the sidewalk. The hardy plant swayed gently in the smoke-filled air.

Its shadow dancing across the charred walls around me, illuminated by small, scattered fires yet to be extinguished. The petite yellow flower which protruded above the concrete, seemed to be the only thing spared from the destruction.

A mixture of dust and sweat stung my eyes. I pulled the collar of my coveralls up to wipe the offending substance off my face. Suddenly, the sound of commotion behind me snapped my mind from wondering thoughts. I swiveled my head toward the noise. Further down the street, my fellow crewmates crowding around yet another destroyed car.

Quickly putting on my helmet, I jumped down from the wreckage and made my way towards them. Their voices becoming clearer as I approached, hushed words weighed by solemn tones pervaded the group.

I couldn't quite see what they were looking at. As I pushed through the small gathering, I caught a glimpse of what initially attracted the men.

Beneath the twisted metal of the overturned passenger van was a tiny, ashen hand. Blood had pooled around it, drying into a splattered, black stain upon the ruined asphalt.

"Dammit, not another kid..." One man said, reaching up toward his mouth to stem a rising lurch.

"Shit, I don't want to stick around when we lift this thing. Fuck that." Said another, turning away from the grim sight.

"Keeves, call command and tell them we've found another body..." A gruff voice cut in, bringing all of us to attention.

Looking to my left, I found the owner of the voice. Jahn, our unit leader. He was a stout fellow, a full head shorter than me and built like the mighty walls that surrounded the city. I spotted a defeated, distant look in his eyes. An expression I rarely saw in the man. One who had been in this line of work for some twenty-odd years.

Keeves, our unit's wise cracker who normally kept spirits high with his lame jokes, shared the same forlorn gaze Jahn held. He nodded his head, pivoting away while keying up his radio, preparing to contact our district's division commander.

Jahn turned back to us, sighing as he jotted down yet another casualty report onto his data pad.

"We've got two more hours before our rotation ends. However, it looks like there may be more victims still undiscovered. You know the rules, protocol states we stay and search for anyone, dead or alive, still left in the disaster zone. I'll talk to command, hopefully I can get another unit to relieve us. Until then, prepare to strap in for a long-haul. I've got a feeling tonight's only gonna to get worse."

With that, the group simultaneously echoed a 'yes sir' before continuing off in the search for more lost souls. I broke from the rest and made my way further down the street.

Alongside me, I passed ever increasing levels of devastation. Smoking blast holes pitted the fractured ground. Storefronts were burned out and charred from the battle just hours before. Lamp posts previously standing tall and sturdy, now drooped low, melted like candle wax from the intense heat.

The damage only got worse as I traveled. Entire sections of apartment buildings had been leveled to smoldering piles of rubble. Great trenches nearly ten feet wide had been carved seemingly at random into almost every surface. Their cavities polished to an opaque glass that shimmered the reflections of passing embers.

Nearby walls bore the atomized shadows of people unfortunate enough to be walking by. The haunting silhouettes capturing the moment their owners met utter oblivion. I averted my

eyes, spotting the outline of what appeared to be another child still holding hands with their mother or father.

I pressed on, looking ahead when I saw a large, misshapen form lying motionless under the smog choked sky.

There it was, the beast that brought such death to our city.

Its hulking mass was covered in cauterized slashes and still weeping wounds. The monster's immense body had been severed clean. One half thrown across the intersection where it now lay. Its belly had been torn open, exposing a stinking heap of entrails that painted the road in a sickly, yellow hue.

I dared not to get any closer. Even as I watched my fellow cleanup crews cutting through one of its many, clawed limbs with various heavy equipment. Bulldozers pushed gore and viscera out of the way for nearby idling trucks, waiting to be loaded with the vile mess for disposal. Even when lodged deep within a massive impact crater, it's ridged spine still loomed some thirty feet above the pit's edge.

Ignoring the flips my stomach was performing, I pulled down the biosensor attached to my helmet and scanned the nearby debris for any signs of life. Nothing. No breathing or heartbeats. Even when setting the visor to a full spectrum bio-scan, I couldn't detect any significant signature of human tissue anywhere.

This area had been relatively populated. Normally on calls like these, we'd find at least a finger or toe strewn about. Though the district was pretty close the epicenter of the battle, appearing to bear the full brunt of the assault.

The subsequent collapse of multiple structures most likely pulverized any remaining bodies to smithereens. Mixing them finely with the spoilage, there might as well been no one here at all.

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I continued my search. Periodically moving remnants of infrastructure and melted motor vehicles in hopes of finding one of the hundreds that perished.

Jahn was right. This is going to be a long, grueling night.

We worked into the early hours of the morning, occasionally stopping for water, food, and headcounts. We found a few bodies, but no more than a handful. Survivors in the immediate area were out of the question by the time we finished. It was clear that the attack had been more fatal than we initially thought. This had been one of the worst I've ever seen during my time in the Corps.

At debrief, I could barely keep my eyes open. My muscles were sore, burning from lifting rubble and handling heavy plasma lances for hours on end. I barely remembered the ride home as we left the disaster zone. No one spoke a word, each of us too exhausted to attempt small talk. None could mentally muster the strength anyway.

Our armored transport slowed to a stop outside my apartment block. I bid a muted farewell to my crewmates before getting out and onto the steps of the building. Walking inside, I found my door and began fumbling with my keys.

The sound of the transport's engines faded in the distance, as I finally entered my abode and fell face first into my dingy couch.

Raising my head off the cushion, I looked over to the television I had left on yesterday in my scramble to arrive to the scene. On screen was a news report of the attack, the anchor detailing the past night's events while footage of the beast's assault played.

The creature, named '*Haborym*' by the Department of Malediction, had been defeated by one of their many Thaumaturgists. More footage of the previous battle rolled. The beast had been staggered while melting a high-rise into slag. A beam of glittering, white light slammed into it from off screen.

The camera then panned toward a glowing figure in midair. It was a young girl, no older than a teen, clad in a frilly cyan dress studded with gems of all colors and shapes. Upon her head was a spiked crown of pure shimmering silver that formed a bright halo around her body. She shouted something and waved

around a wand of sorts. As the footage continued to play, the beast roared in hate and began charging the girl. It's many limbs flailed wildly, turning any in its path to red smears and clouds of pink mist as it barreled toward the Thaumaturgist. She let loose another beam of energy, striking the monster, but not before it swung a mighty claw her way. She hastily evaded the attack while still casting her own. Her aim, thrown off by the swing, cut a wide glowing scar into ground beneath her.

Screams filled the audio feed when the beam struck. The footage promptly cut, the cameraman presumably perishing in the assault. The news caster then announced a list of missing people, urging those affected by the attack to contact relief services for information on their loved ones.

I narrowed my tired eyes and angrily grabbed the remote, turning off the TV.

Every attack, every battle, has continued to increase in its destructiveness. The Department keeps deploying their precipitously trained magicians to deal with these terrible demons. Each time they do, the death toll exceeds the previous disaster. Partly due to the zealous actions performed by their "magical girls" in a vainglorious attempt to raise their popularity amongst a terrorized, desperate populace.

Flashiness gets the funding, I suppose.

Ever since the First Onslaught decades ago, the city had lost a majority of their Thaumaturgists to the monstrous legions. The shortage of capable magicians prompted a wealthy private security company, Malediction Liquidations, to begin recruiting magically unstable Rift Born near the First Walls.

They marketed these young magicians as cutesy idols to the people, dressing them in ridiculous outfits and created a ranking system for the public to throw money at. The plan worked and popular support for the program skyrocketed, giving previously struggling security firm more cash than they knew what to do with.

Eventually the company merged with Lutum's government, becoming one of the most powerful and well-funded bureaus.

The Department of Malediction.

You'd think with amount of money they're receiving it'd be spent it on training the Thaumaturgists to properly mitigating damages. Instead, they gave powerful weapons to high schoolers, tools that even the most battle-hardened veterans of the First Onslaught could barely handle.

It seemed like a grossly negligent decision in my opinion. It was this very belief, one I voiced to my superiors in the Department, that got me demoted and eventually fired from the DoM altogether.

I'll admit, I'm still incredibly bitter about that. Getting punished for doing my job as a collateral analyst still baffles me to this day. Though I should've seen it coming. Considering the fact that they unsealed the Yggdrasil Armory against my division's warnings, then began handing out super weapons to teenage girls. I couldn't just stand by while the Department's higher ups made horrendous decisions time and time again.

I promptly joined the Auxiliary Relief Corps the very week I had been let go. Six years later, and here I am. Arguably doing better, more meaningful work than I'd ever did sitting in front of a desk all day.

Hopefully with some hard work, I could get our unit more funding via collateral reports. However, the outlook on that plan is pretty miserable. The Corps needs street-hands more than they need analysts, and the Department does not like handing out money often.

I rolled over and looked up toward the bare concrete ceiling above me, studying the everwidening cracks forming along the contours of its crumbling surface.

I closed my eyes, trying to silence the buzzing thoughts of tonight's sights, sounds, and smells. Tomorrow's a new day, and I don't intend to waste it at the pub, again.

As I rested, my fatigue quickly caught up with me. My aching muscles relaxing as I felt myself drift off into a dreamless sleep.

II

The sweltering heat of our unit's machine shop combined with the overwhelming smell of harsh chemicals, assaulted my senses the moment I stepped through the bay doors. The yard was bustling with an unusual amount of activity this morning, especially in the wake of that major operation two days ago.

I enjoyed my time off while I could, though I eventually caved to Keeve's insistence that we hit the pub after our deployment. It was nice to relax for a change, shooting the shit with the guys and laughing like idiots.

Speaking of Keeves, he said he had something to show me once I got to the yard. Knowing him and his history of tinkering with all sorts of strange devices, I can only hope that whatever it is, doesn't somehow blow up in my face like last time. He's probably somewhere near the power tools, so I noted my destination and set off.

Snaking my way through the bustling shop, I avoided the flying sparks of technicians working on armored transports, as well as the occasional swinging's of a hammer. Finally making it to the shop's back offices, I opened the door and continued my search for Keeves.

He wasn't hard to find, standing in his usual spot by the tool lockers while digging intently through the cabinets for something.

"Mornin' Keeves" I said, poking at his side to get his attention.

"Ah! Morning to you too, Cecil. You drink any of the roach-ale we brought home a few nights ago?"

He turned around, mechanical grease smeared across his hands, face, and coveralls while he beamed a toothy grin.

"Not yet. Saving it for a rainy day, ya know?" I replied.

He huffed, dismissively waving his grimy hand, "That shit

will go bad if you don't. If you're not gonna drink it, then I'll happily repossess what I bought with my cold, hard earned cash."

"Oh, I wasn't aware that a gift could be un-given like that. Maybe next time, don't order so much ale with your so called 'hard earned cash.'" I jested, watching as he flipped me off, then promptly returned to his cabinet rummaging.

"So, you said at the pub you've got something to show me huh? Whatever it is, please tell me it wont catastrophically fail while demonstrating it."

"Listen here fucker, that happened once. The previous improvements I made to our plasma lances only had minor hiccups." He said, head still buried in the tool locker as he leaned further in.

"If you call a gas leak and the ensuing explosion a 'hiccup', then I have every right to be worried about whatever the hell you've created now."

Keeves, now practically diving into the cabinet, gave a muffled reply.

"Don't worry about it. Though I should probably warn you, what I've got *will* create an explosion. Ah! I found it!"

Keeves emerged from the locker holding a small, crystalline pyramid in his hand. The little trinket seemed to contain some kind of dimly glowing, orange fluid. Attached to each of the three points of on device were a mess of wires connecting to circuit boards. Of which appeared to be haphazardly taped to the facets of the pyramid.

"Keeves, what the fuck is that? And what do you mean it will *explode*?" I said, taking a tentative step backwards.

Keeves gave me a sly smile, tossing the device into the air and catching it.

"This my friend is an Ingus lodestone. One that I've personally modified."

I blinked in confusion, "Wait, how did you get ahold of an artifact? And a weapons grade one at that."

I almost didn't recognize the item at first, considering the heavy modifications he seemed to have grafted onto the thing.

“Remember the minor Fulgros Imp we cleaned up after? At the power plant a few weeks back? Yeah well, someone on the Liquidations team must’ve dropped this little guy in the assault. I found it while we were doing our hazard sweep and swiped it.”

He flicked the lodestone, the liquid within glowing brighter as it was disturbed.

“Keeves, you do realize you’re in possession of a highly illegal artifact, right? If that liquidation team finds out they’re missing a *grenade* from their armory, they’ll start questioning everyone here in the unit.”

Keeves shrugged, crossing his arms as he leaned against the workstation behind him.

“Not necessarily. Liqs’ lose shit all the time on ’ops. A missing grenade might as well be marked down as ‘consumed’ by the Department bean-counters. And considering the shitshow that was the Fulgros Imp, I’m sure they don’t even *know* they’re down a single grenade.”

I pondered his reasoning for a moment. While it is true that the chaos of a liquidation operation sees the deployment of weapons, most of which get destroyed or otherwise lost, that still doesn’t evade the fact that he illegally pocketed one from the Department.

Sighing, I threw my hands up in resignation.

“Alright, as long as you don’t go showing everyone your explosives, then I guess it’s alright. So, what exactly did you do to that thing?”

He gave me a wide smile once again, an even *more* toothy at that. He placed the lodestone on the table and beckoned me closer. I bent low, leaning in to study the object while he began.

“Well lodestones come in multiple flavors if you will, depending on the essence contained within. You’ve got your standard shock-stones, blast-stones, and lumi-stones. But the one we have here today is an Ingus-stone. This baby can bathe fifty square feet in highly reactive, flammable essence that explodes on contact with organic material. You can easily blow a chunk

off a high daemon with one of these, and probably outright kill a lesser imp too.”

His eyes were glued to the stone, I could see the gears turning in his head as he imagined whatever else that device could kill or maim.

“From my time with the Liqs, I got to tinker with a lot of their shit. I discovered that the essence inside lodestones isn’t necessarily set in stone, so to speak. Heh.”

I rolled my eyes and continued to listen,

“Anyway, what really matters is the internal structure of the crystal lattice itself. That determines what the essence will do once it breaks free from containment. Usually, lodestone essences are locked into whatever configuration their lattice defines them as. However, I figured out how to artificially change the lattice itself, thereby tweaking how the essence will behave once freed.”

He pointed to the mess of wires wrapped around the stone.

“After *carefully* fucking around with it, I think I’ve been able to increase its explosive yield by at least eighty percent. If my shotty math is correct, the lodestone’s kill radius has been increased to almost a hundred feet, give or take.”

I raised an eyebrow, slightly mortified at his invention.

“Wow, great. Now not only do we have a grenade in the shop, but one that can practically level the entire office if dropped in the wrong way. Nice going buddy.”

He chuckled. His head held high with pride.

“Thanks. Not only that, but while the increased the yield, so too did the effects it has on organic material. Or rather, any material for that matter.”

“What do you mean by *any material*?” I asked, my trepidation rising.

“I guess in the processes of changing the lattice structure, it made the essence within somewhat uh...unstable. Turns out essence doesn’t like being altered when already trapped within a lodestone. If released, the essence will violently react with the crystal *itself*. This self-destruction produces a raw form of thau-

maturgical energy strong enough to almost completely annihilate anything it comes in contact with.”

I decided to take some steps away from the stone. Though I quickly realized a few feet of space wouldn't be enough to save me from this thing, should it decide to explode. Despite my hesitation, he continued.

“Furthermore, I think the reaction is exponential, or at least an entirely efficient one. Honestly, I'm not too sure. When this lodestone detonates, it'll either cause a cascading chain reaction that could level a city block, or just completely destroy everything within its new hundred-foot radius.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose, trying to process the incredibly unsettling information Keeves just gave me.

“Okay, so now this is not *just* a grenade, but an untested, highly volatile super weapon. And currently, that super weapon is sitting five feet away from us. Let me ask you, Keeves, why in the world would you create such a thing?”

Keeves just shrugged, picking up the lodestone and fiddling with it.

“I dunno, I just wanted to see if I could.”

“One more question, how do you know if any of the effects you described work? I mean, did you build and test one before?”

He averted his gaze, looking up at the ceiling in a poor attempt to hide his wicked smile.

“I mean, yeah, I have. Although never with an Ignus-stone. I've seen these effects occur on a smaller scale with other lodestones, mostly the Lumi-stones. Probably due to their relatively tame lattice structure. I've always wanted to get my hands on a Ignus-stone, but I never got the clearance to access them while I was a Liquidator.”

“Imagine my shock.”

“Shut it dipshit. Department's R&D would've kissed my whole ass if they knew I could make this. Imagine, some Department Girl dumping a crate of these bad boys on top of a behemoth. Boom! Instantly neutralized.”

“Sure, the last thing this city needs are gung-ho Department Girls with crates of those things. They’ll cause even more damage than the daemon itself! Have you been drinking roach-ale at work?”

He chuckled, “I wish. Here, catch.”

I found myself frantically reaching for the lodestone that had been tossed in my way, being careful to not drop or shake it too much.

“Fucking hell Keeves! You’re gonna give me a heart attack!” I said, gingerly cupping the explosive device in my hands.

Keeves just laughed again. I glared, waiting for him to stop slapping his knee.

“Don’t worry, I made sure it won’t explode unintentionally. The only way you can activate it is by punching in a combination on the keypad, which you’ll see is on the bottom of the thing. However, unlike an unmodified lodestone, once you activate this one, there’s no turning back.”

I flipped it over, indeed seeing the aforementioned keypad. At least he had the foresight to add in a safety feature.

“I assume you’re not going to tell me the combo?”

“Hell no. I mean, I trust you and all, but honestly even *I’m* too spooked by it’s destructive potential. I’d rather keep it to myself for security reasons. Plus, your dumbass would somehow put the combo in without thinking and blow us straight to the Rift.”

I frowned, “Thanks for looking out for me bud. By the way, what are you planning on doing with it? Make it a paper weight or something?”

“You should know by now I wouldn’t use something like this in such a mundane way. I’ll keep it on me, safely tucked away in my gear bag. Just in case.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Just in case...what?”

“Just in case I find myself in a particularly unfortunate position. Like oh I don’t know, say, staring into the maw of a daemon, seconds away from becoming human chewing gum. If that were to happen, I’m going out in a blaze of glory and slam-dunking this little fucker straight down it’s gullet.”

I couldn't help but laugh, shaking my head in the grim absurdity of it.

"Let's hope that doesn't happen."

"You and me both, pal."

The sound of my radio keying up stole my attention away from Keeves, I watched as he cocked his head, waiting to see who was transmitting. I pulled the radio from its holster on my belt and held it up to my ear. Soon after, a familiar graveled voice came through.

"Cecil, meet me at my office in twenty-five. I think I've got something that might be of interest to you."

"Ten-Four" I said, then put the radio back into its holster.

"Something of interest to me? I don't know if I liked the sound of that."

"Hey, maybe ol' stone bones finally sees something in ya. He could be trying to set you up with that smoking hot daughter of his." Keeves jabbed.

"If anything, that would be arguably worse than whatever he actually wants."

"Well, I'll leave you to it. I'm going back to burning the clock today. Not like there's much to do anyway, everyone's already here hoggin all my work, oddly."

With that, Keeves turned his back and continued to rummage through the tool locker. Deciding it was a good time to try and get some work done, I left the office and returned to my workstation in the shop. Keeve's comment still lingered in my mind.

It was pretty unusual for the yard to be packed with personnel right after an operation. Something tells me our unit might be preparing for training mission of the sort. Not unheard of, but certainly poorly planned if that were the case. Well, I guess I'll know once I get in the big man's office.

III

I fidgeted in the chair outside of Jahn's office, thinking about whatever particular thing of interest he had for me. Normally, I'm never skittish around Jahn. I've known the guy for years now. I mean, he was the only Corps commander sensible enough to hire me after my ugly separation with the Department. Something that doesn't look too good on an evaluation report when trying a government job in this city.

For that, I thank him greatly. Though, there have been times where his abrasive, no-nonsense attitude rubbed me the wrong way. Maybe that's just due to my distaste with that kind of leadership, heaven knows I've experienced enough of that at the Department.

At least with Jahn, I know he'll always be honest. Thanks in part to that aforementioned zero tolerance of bullshit. He'll give it you straight, good or bad. Plus, I don't need to be constantly looking over my shoulder while working under him.

Unlike in the Department where every minute mistake was meticulously catalogued, then leveraged against you if you happened to be unfortunate enough to look at a superior the wrong way.

Regardless, this coming meeting has put my nerves on edge. I've learned over the years to trust this gut feeling. One needed while trying to maneuver around the vapid politics within the Department. It served me well, keeping my mind sharp and alert for whatever may come next.

I looked up toward the television mounted on the wall adjacent to Jahn's office. Department news was on as usual, and they seemed to be running another story about the last attack.

On screen was the Department Girl who killed the demon known as Haborym. She appeared to be in an interview with

various journalists, each fighting over the other just to ask her a question.

“Lo-Leey! Lo-Leey! Can you tell us, what was going through your head when the beast first lunged at you?”

The magic girl, still flaunting her gaudy jewel studded outfit, flicked her hair and upturned her chin before responding.

“Whether or not I’d make it back in time for tea of course! Hehe!”

The high trill of her giggle cut through my skull like plasma lance. I already want to take Keeve’s unholy hand grenade and spike it into the wall closest to me.

“It was a simple matter really! no foul beast can match the glamorous prowess of yours truly! As is the truth for the fastest rising star in all of great Lutum!”

A flurry of further questions erupted from the journalists. Lo-Leey looked down her nose at each one. A haughty, smug expression crossed her face while she chose her next questioner.

She then pointed toward a journalist and plainly uttered “Speak”.

“Lo-Leey! The monthly rankings are in, it looks like you’re only five points behind Yuuko Amora for the number two spot! Do you think you’ll surpass her by next month’s rankings?”

Lo-Leey scoffed, oozing further an aura of superciliousness, if that was even possible.

“Certainly, undoubtedly! Everyone knows I’m the one and only master of the Luster Crown. Yuuko couldn’t handle its true power, as expected of a first generation divinator. I on the other hand, not only have the talent and genius to do so, but the stylish flair to pull it off!”

She smirked as another torrent of questions bombarded her. She inspected the laser-cut perfection of her manicure, then randomly pointed in the general direction of one of reporters.

The journalist she called on started right away, hammering her with unexpectedly tough questions.

“Lo-Leey! Are you aware of the mass casualties caused by the battle between you and Haborym? Can you explain why you

didn't lead the beast away from the housing district? Reports are saying the neighborhood won't recover for at least another five ye—“

The reporter was abruptly cut off by Lo-Leey's fist slamming against the podium.

“I believe I've answered all of your wonderful questions, though I must take my leave now. I've got a training schedule to follow. If I'm not in top shape, then how could you expect me to save the great people of Lutum once again? Toodaloo!”

With that, a team of Department suits cordoned off the excited reporters. They ushered the magical girl off stage and out of view from the camera as the press went wild. The feed then cut to another program.

Well, that was interesting. It's been a while since any real questions were directed towards one of the magic girls. The Department usually has the press vetted and tightly locked down to avoid any unsanctioned inquires. Maybe times are changing? People might be finally wising up to the idea that Department Girls aren't as effective as they've been portrayed.

I doubt it though. I'm willing to bet some unaffiliated reporter managed to sneak their way into the event. Regardless, the “victory” over Haborym was pure propaganda. Only serving to boast the Department's fresh new talent while shifting focus away from the collateral damage incurred during the fight.

Keeps the cash flowing to support to their program. Afterall, Lo-Leey dolls don't just sell themselves.

Suddenly Jahn's door opened and out peeked the short man, nearly startling me in the process.

“Come in, Cecil.”

I got up quickly and entered the room, taking my seat across from his desk. Jahn's office was thick with the smoke of his cheap cigars. I still can't believe he's lived this long as Auxiliary Relief while smoking like a chimney. A testament to his heritage I thought while looking at the pictures of family members that hung on the wall. All of which had commanded this unit at one point in time.

“Like I said earlier, I’ve come upon something that you’ll find an opportunity in, Cecil. Though I don’t know if you’re going to like what it entails.”

I’d never put it past Jahn to give me every dirty detail of an assignment or task. Though the fact that he preemptively gave a warning, leads me to believe this thing of interest might be more trouble than it’s worth.

“Alright boss, what’s the catch? I’m sure it isn’t something I can’t handle. I see the shop’s been busy today, so I assume you’ve got another double shift or training exercise in the works?”

Jahn shook his head, promptly handing over a clipboard filled to the brim with files. On the front page in big, bold letters read,

DEPARTMENT OF MALEDICTION TALENT REPORT NO. 676
(REVISED)

Uh oh.

“After the last operation, the Department made the unexpected decision to focus their efforts on Thaumaturgist disaster relief training. Something about public relations concerns spooked them, surprisingly. As such, they’ve been sequestering their non-ranked junior Thaumaturgists and embedding them within Auxiliary Relief Corps units across the city.”

“Apparently, there seems to be a push to give the next generation of Thaumaturgists disaster relief and rescue experience by working alongside the Corps.”

I looked back to the files and briefly flipped through them. Each page contained assessments, reports, and analyses on multiple non-ranked magical girls. Yet what unsettled me most was the majority of the files pertained to a single student.

One by the name of Ana Nakamura.

“I was contacted by a Department official and given this report directly. It seems that our unit was selected as one of the lucky few who will be hosting a non-ranked.” Jahn said as he produced a cigar and trimmer, cutting then lighting it.

“You can’t be serious Jahn. A damn magic girl in our unit? That’s absurd! Having one of those living weapons tagging along in our operations would be disastrous!”

Jahn took a long draw off his cigar, then replied through a mouthful of smoke.

“I had feeling you’d say that. Hence what I’m about to explain. So, listen closely, if you know what’s good for you.”

I bit my tongue and waited as he puffed the cigar.

“After doing some of my own digging, I think I’ve figured out the reason why our unit was selected for this new program. And it specifically relates to you.”

“W-what? Why?” I stammered, taken aback by the statement.

“Think about it Cecil. You’re the only employee in our unit who’s previously worked with the Department, bad relations notwithstanding.”

“Furthermore, your experience as a collateral damage analyst place both you, and our unit, in a prime position for this program. Whether you like it or not, the mere fact that a Department suit personally handed me the files you are now reading, speaks volumes to where they think money is best spent.”

I gritted my teeth. What the hell does the Department want from me now? Especially after all these years?

I’ve severed every tie, burned every bridge I could with that rotten organization. All just to make sure they never entered my life again. Now here I am, Jahn telling me I have to not only participate in a Department run program but work *alongside* a fucking magic girl too?

“Jahn this utterly ludicrous. You saw what kind of damage those Department Girls inflicted on that neighborhood the last operation. They’re practically daemon magnets. How are we

supposed to do our job if one of those weapons starts firing off laser beams every which way? If anything, its suicidal!”

Jahn closed his eyes and breathed deeply. A sign I've come to recognize that his patience was wearing thin.

“This a chance for you to advance in the Corps. While not an official promotion, your performance in the program has the potential of seeing you become squad-lead in the unit. Or even a deputy unit commander in the future, depending on how well you handle this.

“You're a motivated guy, Cecil. Do you really see yourself working as a street-hand for the rest of your career here? I don't think such would do you any justice.”

I mulled over his words, those of which carried an unexpected but welcome boost.

I've been meaning to try and advance in the Corps ever since I got hired. However, if it meant associating with the Department again to do so, even if on paper, I don't think I could. Working with magic girls is a gross violation of the principles I've built upon since my severance with the Department.

This seems like some kind of ploy by them to smear one of their old employees. Maybe I'm just being paranoid, but I sure as shit don't want to risk my career at the Corps by supervising one of those loose cannons. A barely trained one at that.

Jahn seemed to pick up on my apprehension and spoke again.

“See it like this, you now have an opportunity to potentially fix the problems that the Department couldn't. Training, mentoring, and guiding young Thaumaturgists in way that fosters a real sense of civic duty in them. Not just a shallow need to accrue popularity and wealth by any means necessary, which is precisely what you hate about the Department and their Magicians.”

I watched as he placed his cigar in its tray. Light wisps of smoke trailed between us in the silence as he awaited my response.

“I have a question.”

“Shoot.”

“Who is Ana Nakamura? And why does her file make up the majority of this report?”

Jahn sighed an acquiescent breath. He leaned back in his chair, lacing his fingers together as he stared up at the ceiling, thinking about how to answer my question.

“Nakamura is...a problem child, to say the least. Her performance in the Department’s Divination Academy has been poor ever since she was enrolled. Frequent fights with her classmates, coupled with regular insubordination against her instructors has left the Academy looking for alternative solutions to her situation. All of which is on the file of course. As you can see, it’s quite a lengthy report.”

I thumbed through the papers again and randomly flipped to a page.

Regular D’s in every subject except auroral pathfinding, which she scored a low B in. Thirty-six incidents of physical violence against fellow classmates in one semester.

Twenty-nine recorded trancies, along with fourteen detentions in the following year. Multiple larceny reports, including the theft of a Tiamat Class magical weapon from the school’s very own armory.

Holy shit.

This kid is an utter delinquent.

“Don’t tell me she’s the one they chose for us.”

“..Well, she’s not the only one. But yes, she is the first non-rated to be joining the unit.” I leaned back in defeat, my hands reaching up to cradle my face as the reality of the situation set in. The Department sought out my unit because of me, and they’ve appeared to pin us with perhaps the worst candidate they could’ve drudged up from their pompous academy. What the hell is going on?

“Jahn, I don’t even know where to begin. I have no experience in teaching anyone, let alone high schoolers that can shoot lightning bolts. How the hell do you expect me to do this?”

Jahn chuckled and picked up his cigar again.

“I don’t. No one said you had to personally mentor these kids.”

“However, I thought that perhaps what you saw as an unfortunate situation, could be turned around and made to work for you. Rank advancement, coupled with the potentiality of teaching non-rated Thaumaturgists what it truly means to save lives. All while steering them away from clutches of Department thinking. I see nothing but boons here.”

He leaned in.

“I know how much you hate the Department, Cecil. I get it, I understand. However, life is short. And life in the Corps is even shorter. As such, the time you have here is invaluable, and this program is practically gold if handled correctly.”

He took another puff of his cigar, this time blowing an impressive smoke ring.

“They’re going to be in-house regardless of your decision. Just know that should you decide to tackle this head on, the fruits of your labor will not only benefit you, but this unit, the Corps as a whole, and most importantly, *Lutum itself*.”

With that, Jahn leaned back again and continued to smoke his now shortening cigar. I sat for a moment, analyzing both my new situation and his words of encouragement.

“I’m cutting you loose for the day, giving you some time to think it over. Whatever your decision is, I expect you to tell me by this time on Friday. A full week should be sufficient enough for that ever-spinning brain of yours to figure it out.”

He then swiveled in his chair, turning his back, and looking out the window. I took this as my cue to leave and placed the files on his desk. But not before he stopped me with a raised hand,

“Oh, and by the way, you’re going to need that. Even if you don’t accept, having at least some basic information about her will help avoid any problems during her stay. I suggest you get familiar with it quickly, since she’ll be here in two weeks. That’s my second order to you.”

I nodded, picking the files back up again and tucking them under my arm. Turning to the door I said my farewell, Jahn re-

sponding with a simple wave as I exited his office.

Once in the hallway, I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding in.

If what Jahn said was true, which I have no reason to believe he'd lie, then the Department has definitely not forgotten about me. I shuddered at the thought, considering the lengths I took to stay as far away from them as possible.

Whatever motivation they have for doing this, I'll just have to live with it. Knowing how the Department works, this could be the first move in some contrived game of chess they're playing. With them waiting patiently for me to make the first move.

Jahn's words of opportunity still clung in my mind. It did seem like a pretty lucrative, if not incredibly risky way of achieving my goals of moving up in the Corps. Along with the potentially of cleaning away the rot the Department had infested this city with.

I'll have to think it over some more, but I can already see possible angles of attack beginning to show themselves. It could be done, though I won't know until I actually meet this 'Ana Nakamura'.

For now, I think it's time to get some lunch, and I know just the person to grab grub with.

I made my way down the stairs and toward the shop offices, files in hand.

IV

“Where are you going?” Keeves asked from underneath his workbench as I walked by. His hands focused on a rat’s nest of wires hanging from above him.

“The pub, and I’m taking you with me.” I said kicking his boots.

Keeves emerged from beneath the workbench and stood up, crossing his arms.

“The pub? I guess whatever Jahn told you calls for some alcohol. What’s with all that paperwork? Did he actually decide to marry off his daughter to you?” He quipped, eyeing the files under my arm.

“Might as well have, but this is far worse than that. I’ll tell you once we get some ale in us.” I said, motioning for Keeves to follow me out of the shop.

We traversed our way around the yard, avoiding the activity of technicians and heavy equipment as we went. Reaching the front gate of the yard we took a left turn, then walked down the sidewalk and out of the industrial sector toward downtown Lutum.

The overhead canopy of winding pipes and electrical infrastructure gave way to bustling streets filled with an odd assortment of venders selling their wares. Customers milled about making their daily purchases, the sounds of haggling merchants filled the air as we walked. Trees lining the road replaced the jungle of pipework as we got closer to the heart of the shopping district.

The crowd thickened as we pushed past, our destination in sight.

The Wild Hog Inn.

A shabby little pub straddling the edge dividing the indus-

trial and consumer districts of East Lutum. Sandwiched between two abandoned high-rises, the place was one of the lucky few businesses that survived an attack in this area about four years ago.

The tavern is a popular gathering place for our unit, with it being so close to the yard. Often times I'd find street-hands or even a sergeant or two sitting at the bar drinking the night away after a long operation.

Today however, the bar was quite empty. I guess that's to be expected since it was now past lunchtime. A little peace and quiet was definitely welcomed on my part, all things considered. We entered the establishment and waved to the bartender, Marcus, who gave a brief nod in response, preparing two tall mugs of roach-ale for us.

We took our seats at a booth near the back of the tavern. Keeves promptly helping himself to a small bowl of stale peanuts that sat between us. I placed the files on the table and slid them over to Keeves. Shells scattering all over as he grabbed it flicked through them.

"What am I looking at here Cecil?" He said through a mouthful of peanuts.

"Apparently after the last attack, the Department must've realized their magic girls were lacking in emergency rescue experience. So, they decided to attach junior non-ranks to select Corps units across Lutum. Unfortunately for us, we seem to be one of the units welcoming them into our ranks."

Keeves furrowed his brow as he listened. His crunching slowed while the gears in his head turned.

"Hold on, you're telling me we're going to be working with one of these brats? Damn, what hell is Jahn thinking?"

"It's not Jahn's call. He told me a Department suit personally handed him these files. Our unit's been selected into the program at the behest of the Department. What's worse is the fact that they're sending a serious troublemaker our way, as you can see."

His eyes widened while looking through Nakamura's files, wearing the same face of disbelief I gave Jahn.

"Good lord, you weren't kidding. Are they really embedding these rascals with every unit in the city? I don't see how this would help our operations in any way."

"Sadly yes. Though, I don't know if other units are getting similar undesirables. If that's the case, then the Corps has a serious problem to deal with in the coming months. I wanted to show you this as a heads up, since Jahn told me our first non-ranked will be here in two weeks' time."

Keeves sighed, sliding the files back to me as he laid his head on the table.

"Great, just what we need while the city is hit by one of the worst incursions in years. I really don't want to be wearing those heavy, hazard suits every fucking operation. Especially now that we've got untrained and dangerous Department Girls tagging along with us."

Marcus soon appeared with two mugs of roach-ale, placing them on the table in front of us.

"Thanks Marcus." I said as he gave me a silent nod.

"If anything, Jahn told me there's a potential for rank advancement if the program goes smoothly. I figured you wanted in on that, hence why I brought you here. If we can somehow find a way to wrangle these delinquents effectively, then we've got a good pay raise coming our way. Though honestly, I don't know how I'm going to handle this. I suppose two heads are better than one."

"Cecil, do I look like a teacher to you? Also, I hate kids. I can't stand my nephews, annoying little gremlins always managed to break something at family gatherings." Keeves said, head still buried in his arms.

I chuckled, "That's what I told Jahn, but he seems insistent on the mentor thing. His push for it makes me think we'd get more funding, should the program at our unit be successful."

Keeves raised his head off the table and took a long swig from his mug. I grabbed my own and drank deeply, the sickly-sweet

ale bringing a familiar burn to my palate as I did.

Since I've got the day off, might as well get a little buzz going. Bringing Keeves along to the pub would hopefully pay off in my quest to formulate a gameplan. He always seems to find the best, albeit unorthodox solutions to problems while drunk.

We continued to drink into the afternoon, the light of the day giving way to darkness as the tavern began filling up with street-hands from the yard. We spent a few more hours drinking, the boys getting rowdy once someone turned the jukebox on. Eventually, Marcus cut off Keeves after consuming nearly six mugs of ale. Which prompted Keeves to drunkenly hurl peanuts his way every so often.

"Heeeey Marcus, itz been like, three fuckin' hours. Get me anotha' mug will ya!" Keeves slurred, nailing Marcus on the forehead with a shelled projectile.

"You're shit faced Keeves, anymore and you'll either drink me dry or pass out again, like last time."

"Fug you." Keeves spat, preparing to toss another peanut his way.

I laughed, feeling the ale warm my head as I picked up a peanut and whipped it at Keeves. He responded in kind by launching his own, then grabbed my mug and quickly downed what was left.

I was about to protest when the alert chime of Department's news stopped me before I could. I turned toward the TV above the bar and watched the cast play. I couldn't hear it too well, so I stood up and shouted to Marcus.

"Hey Marc, turn up that up!"

Marcus pointed a remote toward the screen and turned up the volume. The news anchor's voice now revibrated through the pub.

"Reports of large tremors are coming in from the oil wells south of the city. Well workers are preparing to evacuate as multiple drill sites are experiencing power failures and structural damage. City officials are warning citizens to prepare for a possible attack, emergency services will be on standby should dae-

mon contact be made. We will be giving continual updates as this situation evolves.”

As if on cue, every street-hand’s radio sprang to life, emitting the familiar warning tone that played whenever Corps units were expecting to be activated. I do not look forward to answering a call while plastered like this.

I bet Keeves felt the same way, considering how hammered he was. In response to the radio call, some of the street-hands hurried out the door to their posts. Taking this as an indicator that we should probably leave for the night, Keeves and I left our tab on the table and followed suit.

Keeve’s inebriation was pretty clear by the time we got moving, stumbling every so often as he walked besides me. While I was far from his level of intoxication, I still felt numb and sluggish from the ale.

I could only hope that we weren’t activated anytime soon. Showing up to an emergency muster drunk as a skunk probably won’t look too good in Jahn’s eyes. For now, we’d just have to sober up and prepare for the possibility of another operation.

After stopping by a convenience store for some sports drinks, Keeves and I walked back to my apartment and changed into new coveralls. Keeves passed out on my couch once he was geared up, hoping to get some shut eye in before the now likely deployment. The television showing more updates on the situation as I sat at my kitchen table, looking over the files once again.

My head spun from the combination of caffeine and roach-ale in my system, making the effort of reading the files a difficult one. Following Keeves, I slumped forward and rested my head between my arms, allowing my tiredness to drag me into sleep.

V

I awoke to the sound of our radios blaring an alarm, along with Keeves down the hall vomiting into my toilet. I shook the grogginess from my head and gathered my things. Keeves emerging from the bathroom looking queasy as he did the same.

We've been activated, the situation down by the oilwells must've turned into a legitimate emergency. I took a quick glance at the TV, the screen showing lines of vehicles evacuating the drill sites while Relief Corps transports headed in.

I looked at my watch, five-thirty-eight AM. We'd gotten some sleep in, but not nearly enough. I drank the rest of my energy drink and headed out the door with Keeves in tow.

We raced our way back to the shop. The entire city was bathed in an unnatural, hazy-red hue in the morning twilight. Off in the distance, great plumes of black smoke emanated from the oilwells just south of the city. This didn't look good at all, whatever was going down at the wells must've been bad.

We ran through the shop's gates at breakneck speed, Keeves nearly stumbling over himself in the process. Our unit was already lining up for muster as we sprinted between them and the armor transports idling outside, ready to embark.

After looking around, I spotted Jahn talking with his sergeants, all of them wearing bulky hazard suits. He then noticed our presence and aggressively waved us over. We hurried to him, I could see he wasn't too happy that we were late.

"Where the fuck have you two been? We're rolling out in ten and you chuckle fucks don't even have your hazards on." He hissed.

"Don worry, we're here now bosh," said Keeves, slightly wobbling.

"Keeves are you fucking *drunk*?" Jahn spat, his expression

growing dangerously dark. I quickly cut in.

“He’s just tired, we’re going to suit up right now.”

Jahn’s face hardened in response. After giving both of us a once over, he angrily pointed in the direction of the shop. We hastily nodded and ran towards our quarters to begin putting the hazard suits on.

I had to help Keeves into his while simultaneously strapping myself in. The task being quite difficult, with Keeves getting tangled in the many straps and hoses that hung from the suit. After plugging power-cells into the suits and checking our oxygen supply, we ran back to yard and toward the transports. Our heavy metal boots thudding against the gravel.

The vehicles were loading up with personnel when we climbed into the back of one. I slid my way into the cramped interior and belted myself in, my comrades doing the same as the transport roared to life.

Our convoy’s sirens deafened by the thick steel of the compartment as we rode our way out of Lutum. I rubbed my eyes and took a sip of water from my canteen, my hangover announcing itself through a painful throb in my skull.

The ride to the wells was uneventful, if not a little bumpy once we passed the first few protective walls of the city. Looking through the small portholes of the transport, the morning sun was rising over the great dunes that surrounded Lutum. It’s light casting an orange hue as it climbed further into the smokey sky. The desert landscape passed by, stretching as far as the eye could see while the transport sped closer to our destination.

I noticed Keeves rustling about next to me. I watched as he produced a small bag of some dried substance. Of which, he opened up and offered to me.

“Want some jolt-wort?” He said, his words now clearer of the slurring from earlier.

“Stimulants? We’re going on call dude. I don’t want to be wired out of my mind while operating a plasma lance.”

“Suit yourself.” He pulled out two jolt-wort caps and downed them with a swig from his canteen. Keeves began handing them

out to the others next to us, a few of which happily accepted. I paused for a moment, feeling the tiredness of my own hangover weighing me down as I watched them take the drug.

“Fuck it.”

I reached over and grabbed the bag from him, tossing one into my mouth. The dry cap sputtering and popping once it hit the moisture of my tongue. Keeves chuckled as he watched me, stealing the bag back and putting it into one of the many pouches lining his suit.

“ETA two minutes, gentlemen” The driver announced through the static of the compartment’s interior speaker.

We all double checked our gear, helping each other whenever we found a hastily attached hose or open zipper. I awkwardly turned to look out of the porthole, my movements encumbered by the suit’s bulk. Small droplets of black liquid were splattering on the glass, leaving smeared trails in their wake.

“Holy fuck, the wells are spewing!” One of my crewmates said, looking out the window next to him.

The ground racing past us had darkened with the fluid. I felt the transport’s wheels struggling in the oily mud as we got close. Soon the vehicle stopped, making us lurch forward as red disembarking lights illuminated the compartment.

At once, we all heaved the armored helmets onto our heads, snapping them into place upon the suit’s shoulder and neck joints. The loud hiss of multiple suits sealing themselves from the exterior environment rang out while we unbuckled, preparing to exit the transport.

The doors flew open, our boots hitting the sand as we dismounted. I could see through the bi-reflective visor of my helmet what awaited us.

Vast, burning columns of fire erupted across the desert. Each being the source of the black smoke I had seen earlier. The world around us was painted in an orange haze. Smog consumed the surrounding air, heavily obscuring the sun’s light like a foreboding storm.

The ground around us softened considerably from the spewing oil. My boots getting sucked into the muck as we made our way to the first line of firefighters attempting to contain the disaster.

Emergency personnel milled about while tracked vehicles carrying water cannons, blasted the burning wells into submission. Excavators worked close by, digging out contaminated sand near some of the extinguished pipework.

In the distance between tall mounds of blackened earth, stood the charred husks of multiple pump-houses. Most of which had been consumed by the fires. The group set off towards them, our main priority to find any survivors or bodies taken by the flames.

We trudged up the slickened dunes, equipment in hand as great blazes illuminated our backs, casting long shadows upon the ruined sand. After cresting the hill, I saw the true extent of the damage.

Refineries that dotted the landscape were utterly destroyed by a massive explosion. Buildings and pipework laid mangled, thrown about and embedding themselves in the surrounding area. Some buildings were flat-out leveled, the foundations the only remaining sign that a structure existed. Large chasms had opened up here and there, swallowing up whatever sat above them.

We got to work, picking through the rubble while scanning for any survivors. Keeves and I worked as a team, him carrying the plasma lance as I waved around an elongated bio-scanner. Every so often, we'd come across the remains of a well-worker.

Keeves cut the bodies out of the debris with the lance, then helped me tag and load them into black bags. We worked our way around the destroyed facility, periodically reporting our findings over the radio. I could feel the jolt-wort's effects setting in, the twitchy alertness keeping me focused on the task before us.

"Hey Cecil, come take a look at this." I heard Keeves. His voice distorted in the helmet's communications.

I lumbered my way to his position, finding him crouched besides a deep hole in the ground.

Lying in front of the hole was a partially charred, severed leg. Blood still leaked from the amputated limb, trickling down into the hole below it.

“What the hell happened here?” I bent down to his level to study the limb.

“I don’t know man, but I don’t think that leg was blown off in the explosion. Look here, the flesh is torn clean, something had sliced right through it.”

Keeves pointed to the limb. It had indeed been sliced clean through, something that an explosion couldn’t have produced.

“Maybe some shrapnel took the poor bastard’s foot, I don’t know. Let’s bag it.”

Keeves reached for the leg, grabbing it as I prepared another disposal bag. After disturbing the limb, sand around the hole began to shift and give way. Keeves quickly got up and took a step back.

“What the hell...”

Suddenly, a leathery tentacle shot out from the hole. It wrapped itself around Keeve’s arm and began tugging him towards the hole.

“FUCKING SHIT! WELL-WYRMS!” He screamed, scrambling for the utility knife on his thigh.

Thinking fast, I pulled out my own and slashed at the creature, cutting a wide gash that sprayed inky blood across our helmets. The tentacle recoiled and released its grip on him. I grabbed Keeves, pulling him away as we tumbled backwards onto our asses.

We scuttled back from the hole, watching as multiple tentacles arose from within and whipped about. The tendrils shuddered while searched for whatever had injured it.

I keyed up my radio.

“Boss! We’ve got well-wyrms near the pump-houses, alert the crews!”

“*What?! Get the hell out of there now!*” Jahn shouted.

He didn't have to tell us twice. Keeves and I scrambled to our feet and took off running toward the rest of the team. The suit's bulkiness making the task harder as I dumped all my energy into sprinting away.

I took a quick glance behind me, seeing multiple wyrms now pouring out the ditch. Their eyeless forms twitched erratically, sniffing the air for us. They gave chase, feeling our heavy boots pounding the sand as we ran.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck!" Keeves yelled as we clambered up the slope.

After reaching the top, I turned back again and saw countless wyrms emerging from the ground, each aroused by the commotion we had caused. Keeves activated his plasma lance, heating up the device in preparation to defend ourselves.

"Keeves, we gotta get the fuck outta here! Don't even think about fighting one of those things!" I said, tightening the grip on my knife.

"Shit! You're right, there's too many!" He heaved the glowing lance over his shoulder and turned with me.

We ran down the hill towards the crews still fighting the fires. Upon seeing us waving frantically, they paused and watched in confusion. Then, they too began running as the wyrms, now hot on our trail came flooding over the dunes. Panic set in as every worker abandoned their tasks, making a break for the armored transports.

The wyrms were getting dangerously close. Some broke their chase and started attacking the remaining stragglers, those of which had yet to see the coming threat. Their bodies were torn apart by writhing masses of tentacles, others being dragged screaming under the sand as we raced by.

We came barreling towards the open doors of a transport, but not before those inside slammed it shut. We pounded on the metal, screaming for them to open back up.

Keeves fell with a yelp, his leg clutched by a lone wyrm that had emerged beneath us. I turned to help, watching as he cut through the offending creature with the plasma lance.

Behind us the wyrms kept coming, a pack of them now slithering in our direction. Keeves and I kicked away the growing mass of tentacles in a frantic effort to climb on top of the transport and away from the creatures.

After reaching the roof I looked down, seeing the vehicle becoming surrounded by them. The wyrms squealing as they tried to slither up. Keeves activated his lance once more and began firing at any that got too close.

“Jahn! Are you still there?!” I yelled into my radio again, hoping to hear a response.

“Yes! You guys alright? I’m in a van heading out of the facility, I’ve called command and they’re sending a Liquidation team to evacuate us. Get to a transport immediately!”

I was about to reply when the vehicle started moving, almost throwing both of us off balance in the process. We dropped to our stomachs and clutched the sides of the transport. Holding on for dear life as the armored van began charging away. The uneven ground beneath bounced the vehicle around, threatening our grip. Suddenly, the transport hit a mire of oily muck and teetered sideways then spun out.

The abrupt stop tossed Keeves and I off the roof, hurling us into the slick oil below. We landed in a splash as I watched in a daze through my smeared visor the transport flipping over multiple times, then stopping in a heap some distance away. Its doors had opened and those inside were launched out.

The wyrms, drawn to the crash, began swarming the van. The sounds of panicked screams and multiple plasma lances firing echoed off the dunes while they poured in.

Keeves helped me to my feet and we started running once again. Our crude-drenched suits made the effort a slippery one. I tried wiping away the liquid from my visor but was unsuccessful. My gloves too were covered in the substance.

The frenzied screeches of the wyrms hissed behind us, getting closer.

This was it. The day I finally died during a call. I searched for my knife but couldn’t find it, the blade must’ve dropped during

the wreck. Keeves, noticing my panic, tossed me his own as he readied the lance.

They were almost upon us when the wyrms stopped dead in their tracks. The creature's excited movements slowed, with some burrowing back into the sand. We stood still, holding our breath in terror.

Moments later the ground began to shake. From a large sand dune to our front, arose the massive form of a wyrm.

Easily twenty feet in height, the creature's gaping serrated maw gushed a sickly yellow saliva that melted the sand below.

Its leathery head was covered in spiked, chitinous armor that shifted with its movements, peeling back to reveal row after row of jagged teeth. Noticing us, it let out a terrible roar and moved with a speed unthinkable for such a large creature.

"Oh fuck." Keeves squeaked, watching as the huge wyrm slithered toward us and crushing its brethren underneath.

Suddenly from our left, a thin streak of purple light slammed into the wyrm's side, causing it to tremble and turn towards the source.

I snapped my head in the direction of the beam as well, seeing a girl clad in a tangled skirt of foliage standing atop a dune. She aimed her glowing bow toward the creature, letting off another shot which hit the wyrm square in the face. The beast belowed and changed course, charging the magical girl as more bolts chipped its armor.

She performed an impressive somersault and rolled out of the way. Sand kicked into the air as the dune she previously stood upon exploded from the sheer mass of the creature.

The wyrm swiped at her with its clubbed tail as she evaded, dodging the attacks and firing more bolts of energy. The beast spewed boiling saliva in a rage, the girl dashing away with each splash.

Not wanting to stick around, Keeves and I started running again.

In our hasty escape, we passed a team of heavily armed Liquidators charging the serpent. They opened fire with various

weaponry, their barks reverberating off the slopes in the assault. One of them stopped and quickly ushered us into a dune buggy.

We jumped inside and immediately took off. The gunner on the buggy firing a large, mounted machine gun at the creature as we fled. The concussion of the weapon rattling my teeth, my helmet's protection doing little to mitigate the blasts.

The chaos shrank in the distance, bolts of magic and gunfire lighting up the desert around us, backdropped by the still burning oilwells beyond them.

I grabbed the latches of the helmet and unlocked it. Moisture from my sweat soaked body hissed out as I heaved the thing off my head. Fresh, though still smoggy air stung my throat as I took a deep breath. Keeves did the same, coughing up a glob of spit in the process.

"You boys alright?" Ask the liquidator seated next to us.

Keeves gave a thumbs up before slumping back into his seat. The soldier nodded, returning to scanning the horizon ahead of us.

I leaned my head back, resting it on the buggy's roll cage while the sun's morning heat baked us in the open-topped vehicle. The jolt-wort's effects were beginning to fade, I felt the crash hitting me hard. I shut my eyes hoping to calm my nerves while the buggy sped towards Lutum.

VI

“Six.”

“Six of us killed.”

Jahn sat on a toolbox in front of us, our unit gathered around in the cramped shop facing him as he spoke. His features were stained by oil, sweat, and dust.

“Johan, Hegel, Martin, James, Kaylee and Frank. All Dead.”

He paused. None of us dared make a sound. I hung my head in grief, the unit hadn't lost this many people in a single operation. Ever. Even during some of our hairier deployments, we've been pretty safe. This, however, was unprecedented.

“Never in all my years in the Corps, have I seen casualties like this in our ranks. As you all know, this line of work is inherently dangerous. Each one of you knew this when signing your recruitment papers. Hence why we drill, and train, and drill again. Over and over.”

“However, even with all of the preparation in the world, surprises can still blindside us. Fortunately, the majority of you were wearing hazard suits, which I know saved a lot of lives today. That is exactly why we wear them.”

He sighed, running a grimy hand through his thinning hair.

“I want to make this very clear to you, what happened today was no one's fault. For those of you that think such, get it out of your head. We were sent in to assist fellow relief crews during an industrial accident. Not a single one of us could've foreseen what was coming.

“If you feel so inclined to blame someone or something, blame the drilling company. Which I had been told was careless enough to skimp out on a well-worm survey.”

That huge oversight, which Jahn explained to us at the start of this meeting, was indeed the cause of the attack. The drilling

company made the genius decision of not surveying the land they built upon on years ago.

Turned out there was a massive hive of well-wyrms deep beneath the facility. Of which, over the years, had been attracted to drilling activity and eventually ate through the pipelines in order to feed on extracted crude. The wyrms caused a leak, which then exploded and forced them towards the surface.

Well-wyrms are normally easy to deal with, that is if you find the hive beforehand. However, the drilling company had been greedy and didn't perform this critical survey, hoping to cut the cost of extermination. This led to the death of nearly half of their Wellers, along with six of our own and numerous firefighters.

Jahn was right, no one is to blame for this other than the company. This wasn't even a daemon incursion, which the company tried, and failed, to claim.

If it hadn't been for the Liquidation team and their Department Girl, we would've easily been wyrm food. For once, I am grateful for their appearance. Even I couldn't blame them for the deaths of our comrades since they had arrived sometime after the attack took place.

Coupled with the distance from the city and the speed at which we were assaulted, the very idea of blaming them put a bad taste in my mouth.

Jahn spoke again.

"The next few weeks will be difficult. Services for our fallen members will take place soon. Subsequently, our unit's operations will be halted for the time being. I don't expect any of you to come in tomorrow, or the following days for that matter. Take some time to be with your friends and loved ones."

"Consider yourself lucky, and let this be a reminder to always, *always* be on alert. Even during a standard, non-daemonic emergency. Doing so will keep you alive. You are dismissed."

The group began to break up, returning to their lockers to change and gather their personals. I got up and spotted Keeves already out of his hazard suit. Sweat-drenched undergarments stuck to his body as he moved. I approached him.

“Hey Keeves, how’re ya holding up?” I gently asked, resting a hand on his shoulder.

He sighed then chuckled, “Thankful to be alive, of course. What kind of question is that?”

I chuckled with him at the stupidity of my inquiry.

“I guess that was kind of stupid, wasn’t it? You thinkin’ about going to the pub tonight?”

He quickly shook his head ‘no’.

“Normally I’d say yes, but I thought of spending some time with my brother. Heaven knows I haven’t seen him in a while, and probably wouldn’t have if things were worse.”

I nodded in understanding as we exchanged our farewells. I took a trip to the showers for a brief deep-clean, then headed out of the yard and back home.

Upon my arrival at the apartment, I sat on my couch, a bottle of roach-ale in hand, and watched the nightly news report.

“The fires at Sarha Crude’s southern drilling site were determined to be caused by a previously unknown hive of well-wyrms. Officials stated the wyrms were drawn to the company’s drilling, inflicting structural damage to underground pipelines which eventually burst.”

“The wyrms had attacked first responders, inflicting mass casualties in the process. Of which included multiple Lutum Fire Brigade personnel along with Auxiliary Relief Corps crews. The Department of Malediction responded to the attack shortly after.”

The screen then displayed a still picture of Yuuko Amora. I recognized that strange, tangled skirt of leaves and vines. In the picture, she wore a flower crown I hadn’t seen previously. Across her chest was the string of what I assumed to be her bow, hidden behind her back.

Her soft yellow eyes contrasted with an icy blue bob-cut. She was looking at the camera, which caught her in mid-wave. Her wrists adorned with more flowers of all sorts and colors. The anchor continued, “Thaumaturgist Yuuko Amora arrived on scene and reportedly engaged the wyrms, allowing the remain-

ing emergency services to safely evacuate the area. An interview with Yuuko will be held tomorrow at nine AM. At the top of the hour, we will be speaking with multiple emergency service officials who were present during the attack. Stay tuned for more.”

I took a deep swig from my bottle and turned off the television. The reality of what happened setting in.

The fact that Keeves and I survived is nothing short of a miracle. I was certain we were toast. Those wyrms were ridiculously fast and unforgiving.

The visages of my fellow relief crews being torn apart by the creatures still burned in my mind’s eye. If some of them were among our unit’s dead, then I couldn’t have known. Considering the hazard suits that obscured their faces, not that it mattered anyway.

Even though I didn’t know some of them personally, it was still pretty jarring. Reflecting on this, I suppose it wouldn’t kill me to socialize with my coworkers more often. The only one I really hung out with is Keeves.

Out of each, I believe I conversed with Kaylee on more than one occasion. She was a kind soul, quite young to be in the Corps. I remember the few times I spoke with her. She had yet to adopt the foul-mouthiness that pervades the unit’s crew.

I drank the rest of the ale-bottle and tossed it behind me, hearing it bounce then shattering on the floor. Without thinking twice, I got up to get another from the fridge. I’ll be drinking the rest of my supply tonight. Heaven knows I need it. I guess I’ll watch a movie or two while I’m at it, anything to get my mind away from today’s disaster.

* * *

I awoke on the floor. A small puddle of drool had dried next to me. I painfully pushed myself up, knocking aside multiple bottles of roach-ale with a clang in the process. The sun shining through the shades told me it was mid-morning, it’s light stinging my eyes as I winced in response.

I wobbled to my feet, making my way to the bathroom to expel the copious amounts of alcohol that I drank last night.

As I was relieving myself, I realized I had left my radio back at the shop. I must've forgotten it in my shellshocked state while stripping from the hazard suit. I really didn't want to go back to the yard, but I can't just walk around without my only form of communication with the unit.

I left the bathroom and traveled to the kitchen, intending to brew a cup of coffee. I didn't even bother turning on the TV, I don't want my pounding head to be assaulted further by the device's noise.

The coffee machine gurgled as I opened my cupboard, taking out a pain reliever, along with an energy bar to hold me over. I tore into the packaging and greedily consumed the treat, then popped one of the pills, using some left over ale to wash it down.

I check my watch, ten o'clock exactly.

If the shop was open, then now was my time to go. I poured my coffee into a thermos once it was finished brewing and headed out the door in search of my forgotten radio.

VII

Luckily, the door was unlocked, and I let myself in. I had absent-mindedly left my shop key on the counter before I left. I really ought to keep better track of my belongings.

Unsurprisingly, the shop was completely empty. It was pretty strange to experience such glaring silence in the normally busy yard. I made my way through the shop and into the back-offices, seeing my locker still tightly shut from the night before.

I shuffled in front of it, placing a hand on the cabinet to steady my woozy self while I searched for the correct key. Finally finding it, I opened the locker and spotted my radio nestled between a bunched-up mess of work clothes and tools.

I was about to grab it and head out of the office when a loud clang rang out from behind me in the direction of the shop.

Quickly I pivoted on my feet and toward the noise. My hang-over fading as I stood still, listening intently. No one was in the shop when I entered, and I didn't hear the door open before that. I doubt anyone was still in here from last night, making me highly suspicious of whatever produced the sound.

Another loud bang came from the beyond the door.

I grabbed a shale-bar lying against my locker ran towards the sound, peaking my head out from the doorway in search of a possible intruder.

There, in the middle of the room holding a plasma lance, was a tiny girl. Her slim form, standing no more than four and half feet tall, effortlessly waved around the heavy lance. She wore skinny jeans and a studded leather jacket, along with some old worn-out sneakers. Her fiery red hair was done up in a ponytail, the locks of which draped alongside her face, swaying about as she played with the lance.

What the hell is this kid doing here? I guess I should've

locked the door after I entered, but that still doesn't explain who she is, or why she's in here. I let go of the shale bar and strode into the shop, loudly clearing my throat to get her attention.

"Excuse me, but you're not supposed to be in here kid. Who are you?" I said, putting on the best authoritative tone I could.

She snapped her head at me in surprise, an expression which quickly turned into a sneer. She crossed her arms in defiance, plasma lance still in hand.

"Wouldn't you like to know, old man."

Old man? I'm not a day over twenty-seven! Who the hell does this kid think she is?

I walked over to her and snatched the lance out of her grasp. Her mean expression only growing nastier once I did.

"That's a dangerous piece of equipment, you could've seriously hurt yourself." I scolded her, watching as she turned her back on me, huffing in protest.

"I've handled wands that could've melted your eyeballs right outta your skull!"

She glanced back, looking me up and down.

"If anything, *your* gangly ass is the one needing a lesson on dangerous equipment."

She said, making air quotations, still facing away from me.

I paused, baffled at the rude response. Good lord, her parents must be living a nightmare. I bent down to her level and pointed a finger in her direction.

"Listen here missy, if you don't get out of here in the next five seconds, I'm calling the cops." I warned, hoping to scare her back home.

Instead, she simply turned around and blew a raspberry, then promptly kicked me in the shins with a surprising amount of force.

"Ah!"

I yelped, holding my injured leg up in pain as she scuttled past, letting out an evil giggle along the way.

Stumbling, I gave chase. There's no way in hell I'm going to let some troublemaker run amuck in the yard. If anything hap-

pens to her or the equipment, I'd certainly be the one to blame. Considering the fact that I'm the only one here, besides this little devil.

I ran into the office just in time to catch a glimpse of her ponytail rounding the corner towards the stairwell.

Not so fast kid.

Sprinting, I tried to catch up with her, only to see a single leg phasing through the wall above the staircase like a ghost.

What in the ever-living fuck?

Ignoring the strange sight, I charged up the stairs hoping to catch her in the hallway near the officer's quarters.

I did locate her, but I also nearly ran face-first into none other than Jahn, who was staring at me with an amused expression. The kid peeked out from behind him, sticking her tongue out at me.

"Ah Cecil. Didn't expect to see you this morning. In some kind of a rush?"

I stared at the both of them, my mouth agape as I tried to find the words to reply. Jahn, ever being the one to explain, continued.

"I see you've met Ana. I was wondering what all that commotion was downstairs." He placed a hand on her head, gesturing to me with his other.

"Ana, this is Cecil. Cecil, Ana."

I narrowed my eyes, her doing the same.

Jahn, noticing the tension between us, chuckled again.

"Seems like you two didn't get off on the right foot. I've got breakfast cooking in the rec-room, I'll explain more over some eggs. Care to join us?"

I raised an eyebrow at him, then tentatively nodded in agreement. With that, he smiled and strolled down the stairs, Ana in tow.

"*Stinky*" she whispered while waking past, lacing her hands behind her head as she began to whistle.

I sneered at her as she did.

So, this is the infamous Ana Nakamura. She's just as nasty as her files made her out to be. Why she's here so early, I have no clue. I guess Jahn will tell me shortly. Following the duo, I angrily shoved my hands into my pockets, but not before taking a quick sniff of my pits.

She was right, I did stink.

I made a note to hit the showers before joining them for breakfast.

* * *

After my quick shower, I took a seat at the rec-room table across from Ana. She hummed while eating a PB&J sandwich, one that I assumed Jahn made for her. She occasionally shot quick glances my way when she thought I wasn't looking. Trying to ignore her, I turned to Jahn, who was standing in front of the stove scrambling some eggs.

He wore a ridiculous "kiss the cook" apron that I didn't know he even had. I'd give him shit for it, if it weren't for my attempt at saving face in front of them.

After a minute or two, he turned around and placed a big plate of eggs and bacon on the table, sitting down to join us while he did.

"So, Cecil, I guess you're wondering why Ana is here two weeks early. Truth is, the Department dropped her off late last night while I was closing up. The suits told me it was necessary to do so, especially in light of the oilwell attack. Said something about an 'emergency deployment' of the sorts. The attack must've prompted their decision, a wise one on their part I figure."

"Nothing is wise about those assholes, Jahnnny." Ana perked up, referring to him with a pretty cutesy nickname.

"Language, young lady." He said, not taking a single eye off his meal.

Ana quickly went silent and returned to her sandwich, not even throwing him the glare she gave me when I reprimanded

her.

I raised an eyebrow to this. Jahn appeared to have some level of control over her. I guess that's not surprising, he raised did three kids of his own after all.

"Well now that you've cleared things up, would you care to tell me where she's staying? Preferably somewhere far away from the shop."

As I said this, she looked straight at me while continuing to chew, hate positively oozing from her brilliant green eyes as she did.

"Where else would she stay, if not at the unit? After all, she *is* here to learn from us. I've got a free room near my office she's been settled into. Don't worry about it, she's taken care of."

I thought about that for a moment. This kid is undoubtedly hard to control, something I figured out quite quickly in the short time meeting her.

I have no clue how Jahn's going to keep her in check, especially after seeing her playing around with a plasma lance. Though, it looks like he's got a pretty good handle on the brat, seeing as she as yet to disobey his words.

I picked up a fork and knife and began eating. We sat in relative silence as we downed our meals. Eventually, Ana got up, saying she was going to the toilet, and exited the rec-room.

Seeing as we were alone, I looked back at Jahn.

"Boss, she's just as bad as the file said. I don't know how this is going to work out, especially with some of the grumpier guys here. I can already see problems brewing on the horizon, are you sure about this?"

Jahn swallowed his food before replying,

"Cecil, it hasn't even been an hour since you two met, and you're already throwing in the towel. I expect a little more motivation on your part. I've been putting in the work, so should you.

"Besides, it's not like we're housing a dangerous criminal or anything. She's just a kid, give her a chance. In fact, she's quite pleasant to talk to once you get to know her."

I pointed an egg skewered fork in his direction,

“A dangerous kid I should remind you. How do you expect to keep an eye on her when she can phase through fucking walls, Jahn?”

He paused, “She can phase through walls? That’s interesting. Thanks for letting me know.”

Without skipping a beat, he moved onto his bacon and continued eating.

I threw up my hands in agitation. I don’t understand how he can be so casual about this.

“I saw her playing around with a plasma lance earlier, doesn’t that seem even the least bit disconcerting to you?”

Jahn paused once again. This time briefly stopping mid-chew and narrowed his eyes,

“I see what you mean. I’ll talk to her later about it. In the meantime, I’m going to let her shadow you for the rest of the day now that you’re here and all. I’ve got a meeting to attend in the coming hour, so I’m placing the responsibility on you.”

Ana then re-entered the room. Though instead of coming through the doorway, she walked straight through the wall and took her seat.

“Well, I’ll be dammed, you were right.” Jahn said, eyeing the girl in disbelief.

He wiped his mouth with a napkin and got up, throwing the scraps of his meal into a nearby trash bin then turned to us, “Try not to burn the shop down while I’m gone you two. Ana, play nice with Cecil. He’ll tell me everything, good or bad, that you do today.”

With that, he took off his apron and walked out of the room. Leaving both of us in an awkward silence.

VIII

Ana rested her face in a hand, deliberately appearing to avoid my gaze.

Ignoring this, I got up and left Ana alone in the rec-room. Or so I thought, as she quickly appeared from the wall next to me.

“Where are you going?”

“Jeez kid, cut that out, it’s freaky as all hell.”

She rolled her eyes, following me.

“I asked a question and I expect an answer.”

“Work. And don’t touch anything while I do.” I responded through clenched teeth.

Thankfully she stayed quiet, sticking by my side as I started to work on the various tasks left unfinished from the day prior. Every so often, I’d tell her to stop touching shit, something that she continued to do regardless of what I said.

“How am I supposed to learn anything if you won’t let me help you?”

She sighed, watching me using a soldering iron to fix the damaged components of my hazard suit’s helmet.

She did have a point, but I didn’t trust her enough to start fiddling with tools just yet.

“All I ask of you is to watch and listen. You wanna learn? Then start taking notes.” I said, moving my face away from the leaded fumes wafting off the helmet.

This seemed to elicit further questions from her as she leaned in to get a better look at what I was working on.

“What is this thing? Why are you melting it with a stick? Why does it smell funny? Why do *you* smell funny?”

I put the iron down and rubbed my temples. If this was going to be the rest of my day, then I might as well go home. Though with Jahn pretty much expecting me to watch her today, that op-

tion was completely out the window. I'll just have to deal with it while keeping her out of trouble.

"For one, I don't smell funny, I just took a shower. And two, I'm fixing a broken circuit on this *thing*, my hazard suit, with this *stick*, a soldering iron. It's used to mend connections between electrical components on circuit boards."

I took a glance at Ana, her eyes glazing over as I spoke.

Sighing, I continued my work, with Ana periodically asking more questions about such. Finishing up, I unplugged the iron and put my suit back into its locker. Making sure to lock up the cabinet afterwards.

Now that I think about it, nothing's stopping her from just reaching through the door and fiddling with it anyway. Whatever. I just hope she doesn't think to do so later on when I'm not looking.

Following me out of the office and into the shop, she watched as I picked up the plasma lance she held earlier and put it back into the tool cupboard. But not before she spoke up again, "So, what is that thingy? It kinda looks like one of those shitty wands we get at the Academy"

Suppressing an urge to scold her language, I saw an opportunity to teach her something. I reached back into the tool cupboard and pulled out the lance, showing it off.

"This is a plasma lance. We use it to cut through metal or concrete in our way while on operations. It's pretty powerful, which is why I told you not to touch it."

She smirked, placing a hand on her hip.

"Pretty powerful huh? Why don't you show me what it can do? I doubt it's as strong as the wands I've used."

Taking this a challenge, I heaved the lance's fuel tank onto my back and motioned for her to follow me outside.

In the yard, I searched around for some scrap metal, which wasn't too hard to find. I located a pretty hefty piece of wrought iron and pointed at it.

"Observe." I said, turning on the lance's fuel supply while it whined to life. Ana raised an eyebrow, but was nonetheless in-

terested in what I was about to do.

A bright, blue flame erupted from the lance's tip. I turned a valve to control its flow, watching the jet glow white hot as it let off a screaming hiss. After ensuring the magnetic containment field was equalized, I placed the jet on top the scrap metal and began cutting through it.

I could see Ana's surprised expression through the sparks of the melting iron, seeing her eyes widen at the lance's ability to easily slice the metal. A few seconds later, and I had cut clean across it. The two halves falling apart, their edges glowing with intense heat.

"Pretty cool huh?" I said, turning back to her while I killed the lance's gas flow with a chirp.

"Eh, I've seen better." She shrugged, quickly dissolving her previous look of amazement.

Man, this kid is difficult. Time to up the ante.

I walked around looking for more things to slice, eventually finding a reasonably thick support girder. I repeated the same process as before, though this time it took a little longer to cut. Her reaction stayed the same to my disappointment.

She followed me about as I searched further for cutting fodder. Towards the back of the yard, I spotted a pile of concrete we had yet to crush, then got an idea.

"Wanna make some lava?"

She cocked her head in thought.

"Sure, why not?" I heard a hint of rising excitement in her voice.

Bingo.

We made our way to the rubble heap. I turned the lance on and began melting the concrete, making sure to not actually cut it, but hovering the lance just above the rock.

This had the effect of creating molten slag, which flowed from the widening, glowing crater I was making. I noticed she had taken some steps toward me, intently watching as the 'lava' dripped and pooled beneath the lance's jet. She was obviously interested, so I continued.

After making quite a fiery mess, I cut the gas, watching a smile slowly grow on her face. Taking this as my cue, I made a pretty risky proposition.

“Want to try it out?”

As expected, she immediately agreed. I brought her close and placed the lance in her hand.

“Before we start, I want to show you how this thing works. See this valve here?” I said, pointing to the limiter on the lance.

“Yeah?”

“That’s your control switch. Turning it towards you increases the gas’s flowing into the lance from its tanks. Turning it away from you, will slowly shut it off. The smaller lever below it controls the electromagnetic field that contains the jet.

“In order to keep a constant flame going, you need to balance the levels between gas flow and the field’s strength. It’s not too difficult once you get the hang of it. Though if you see the jet ‘running away’ from you, meaning the flame keeps getting bigger and brighter, all you gotta do is press this button here, which will shut the lance off completely. “Got that?”

She nodded, seeming to actually understand what I told her this time. I hope. If this thing starts running off, then it could be a serious problem. Runaway lances, while not common, have been an occasional mishap every now and then. Eh, I’m right here next to her. If anything goes wrong, I’ll just shut it off.

I’m sure it’ll be fine.

* * *

It wasn’t fine.

She was doing good at first, managing to control the jet as she melted away the concrete. However, in her excitement, she pushed the lance a little too close to the rock, which sprayed molten concrete in our direction. Taken by surprise, she quickly pulled away and accidentally pushed the gas valve too far, causing the lance to flare up which in turn, rattled in her hand and scared her even more.

She dropped the lance in fright, not realizing the thing was still attached to me. The pressurized jet forcing the lance to flail wildly out of control. I was lucky enough to catch the thing before it cut straight through me. Though I did get singed pretty bad in the process.

My eyebrows were still smoking as I put the lance back into its home in the shop. Grumbling at the fact that she was *laughing* while I fought to control the thing.

“Looks like you really *do* need more lessons on dangerous equipment, Cecil.”

With my back turned to her, I raised an eyebrow. That was the first time she addressed me by name. Previously, all she did was call me ‘stinky’, ‘smelly’ and ‘old man’. This looked to be an improvement, though I still needed to drill some seriousness into her regarding things like this.

“Yeah well, you were the one handling the lance. The responsibility of use lies upon the operator, remember that well. Otherwise, I won’t let you use it again.”

She smiled mischievously, “Oh really? Now that you’ve taught me how to use it, how ya gonna stop me from doing so?”

I scowled, trying to think of a proper retort.

Again, she was right. I couldn’t prevent her from grabbing the lance if she really wanted to. Just as the thought entered my mind, another made its way in. I returned a devilish smile her way.

“If you do, I’ll make sure to let Jahn know.”

The mention of his name caused her to quickly drop the smirk. Realizing the foolishness of her comment.

“Whatever, I’m going to get some juice.” She frowned, turning around and presumably walking back to the rec-room.

Well, at least I found something she’d appeared to take interest in. Although, blasting through concrete with plasma lances isn’t the only thing we do around here. Plus, she’s yet to join us on an operation. Something I think she isn’t quite ready for just yet. Hypothetically, if we got activated tonight, there’s ab-

solutely no way she'd be able to handle the chaos of a disaster scene.

Her reaction to the lance's flareup was evidence of such. I doubt the girl could keep it together while we collected dead bodies, in addition to providing first aid to screaming, wounded survivors. Thinking back to yesterday, I began to fully realize just how much work I needed to do in order to prepare her. I guess that's all a part of this training program.

Feeling parched as well, I made my way to the rec-room for some refreshing orange juice.

IX

The rest of the day was relatively uneventful. Jahn briefly stopped by after his meeting to check up on us. I gave him the rundown of what happened with the plasma lance. He commended me on handling the mishap, but warned to be careful next time I decide to do something like that again.

The massive clock which hung on the rec-room's wall chimed, indicating another hour had passed by.

The sound woke me up from a power nap I had taken on the rec-room's recliner. I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes, and found myself face to face with none other than Ana, who was sitting atop the recliner's headrest above me. She was upside-down, her emerald eyes staring deeply into my own. I jumped up with a shout.

"What the hell Ana! What are you doing? You nearly scared the daylights out of me!"

She threw her head back in laughter, a toothy smile plastered across her face as she did.

"You should've seen your face! You looked like a scared pigeon!"

I rubbed my sore neck, the muscles strained from sleeping at an odd angle.

"Again, why were you watching me sleep?"

Ana regained control of her laughter, "You talk in your sleep, you know that?"

I froze, tilting my head inquisitively.

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, when I walked in to grab some cereal from the cupboard, I noticed you murmuring something while dozing away. I couldn't make out what you said, but I kept hearing you say

the name 'Lily' over and over again. Were you having naughty dreams about your giiiiirlfrieend?"

She teased, making kissy noises as she did.

I felt the blood drain from my face, for a split second my movements ceased again. This sudden change in demeanor was instantly picked up by Ana, who stopped her taunting and raised a confused eyebrow. I snapped out of my freeze and waved a dismissive hand.

"No, nothing of the sort." I tried to deflect.

I took a look at my watch. Holy hell, it was nine at night! How long did I sleep for? Even more worrying, I let this kid presumably wander about the shop while I slept like a log. I looked back to her, Ana still eyeing me up with curiosity.

"It's pretty late now, and mostly likely past your bedtime. I've got to home anyway. Jahn should be back soon to close up."

She narrowed her eyes, my attempt to change the subject not flying past her. A few tense moments went by before she lightened up,

"I'm thirteen, old enough to not have a bedtime. I'll sleep whenever I so please."

I looked at her curiously, "Thirteen? I thought you were supposed to be a junior in high school."

She smirked and raised her chin skywards,

"I was put ahead in advanced classes when I enrolled in the Academy. My gigantic brain being too powerful for the lower classes to properly satiate. Though, that looks to be the same this past semester."

Thirteen huh? I don't know how I missed that basic piece of information when reading her files. Although, there was quite a lot to review. Still, I should've seen her age somewhere when I looked. Honestly, I don't know how I didn't see the discrepancy between her relatively young appearance, and what the files had said.

"You'll break your wrist if you keep jerking yourself off that hard. Now get to bed, before Jahn chews me out after seeing you eat sugary cereal this late into the night."

I turned and walked out of the rec-room before she could respond. Surprisingly, she didn't follow me as I made my way down the stairs and out of the shop. The night's cool air felt good on my face, I thought about what she heard me say in my sleep.

I never talked about Lily. Ever. Maybe I mentioned her once before to Jahn years ago, but I don't really remember. As much as it pains me not to, its better that way. Should any of the Department's prying ears overhear such, that could mean the end of me. Regardless, I apparently slept-talked.

I should probably be more careful about where I decided to doze off from now on. Especially around a magic girl who can pass through walls at a whim. I'd rather not to let any more of my personal life slip from my drooling mouth again.

A chilly breeze blew by, causing me to shiver. The night was getting colder as the moon marched high into the sky. I better get home soon, before I'm awake until sunrise. That nap probably wasn't the greatest of ideas.

* * *

The next morning, I decided to come into work again. Even if operations were halted for the time being, I now have Jahn's expectations hanging over my head, so I might as well clock in. Entering the office, I found him sitting cross legged on the floor atop a pillow, an Auxiliary Relief Corps manual splayed out on his lap. Across from him was Ana, a booklet of her own in hand.

"Tell me again, what's the first thing a response squad must do when arriving at the scene of a disaster?"

Ana, now wearing track pants and an oversized Auxiliary Corps hoodie, let out an exasperated sigh,

"Uhhh, cordon off the area? I guess?"

"You guess, or you know?"

"Yeah, the last one."

Jahn nodded, accepting the answer before asking again,

"Now, why do we do this?"

Ana scratched her chin, the hamster wheel that powered her so-called “gigantic brain” was practically smoking trying to answer the question. Jahn waited patiently, allowing her to process her thoughts.

“So that...other people don't try and enter the dangerous area?”

“Good!” Jahn said, giving her a thumbs up. He then noticed my presence and acknowledged me.

“Cecil, good morning. I've left some assignments on your workbench, get to it.”

“Thanks.” I muttered while taking a sip of my coffee, walking towards the bench.

The two continued their lesson in the background as I flipped through the assignments Jahn laid out. Looking them over, I noticed a small note placed between the papers. I plucked it out and read,

My office, ten minutes.

I shoot a look over my shoulder to Jahn, who was still embroiled in the teaching session with Ana.

I'm not too sure what kind of message that was, other than a direct order, but its succinctness gave me an uneasy feeling. Pocketing the note, I grabbed the assignments and headed toward the rec-room to leave the pair in peace.

I filled out various paperwork, nervously checking my watch every so often as I did. The note, although short, never left my mind. Eventually, the anticipation became too great. I put down my pencil, standing up and walking towards Jahn's office ahead of the meeting time. I couldn't shake this foreboding feeling in my gut.

Jahn never leaves me notes. If anything, he'll tell me straight up what he wants whenever, wherever. The very fact that he decided to write one didn't sit well with me.

I opened the door to his office and took a seat in one of the chairs. I didn't have to wait long for him, the short man soon wordlessly entering the room.

I watched him sit down, expecting him to pull out another cigar. But he never did. I gulped, the feeling in my gut getting stronger as he loosened the pinstriped tie around his neck.

He paused for a moment, seeming to scrutinize every inch of his office as he did. He then started,

“Cecil, I don’t want to alarm you, but I have reasons to believe we’re being monitored.”

I held back a flurry of questions brewing in my head.

“Well, that’s to be expected. I suppose you’re referring to Department evaluation reports and the check-ups on Ana.”

Jahn shook his head.

“Not like that. Yesterday, after Ana went to bed and I closing up the shop, I noticed a black sedan tailing me on the drive home. It was painfully obvious, as whoever driving it made no attempt to hide from my view.”

I said nothing, waiting for him to explain.

“The car parked outside of my house for a good hour or two. Eventually, two men, who were clearly Department suits, got out and stood by the car, watching my window for another hour and a half before getting back in and driving away.”

“We’re doing everything by the program’s book, following each directive to the letter. I can’t see why the Department would do such a thing, maybe this is some kind of standard procedure for them. Especially since we’re housing one of their, ahem, *assets*.”

I instantly understood what was happening. While Jahn might’ve not figured it all out, I could see it clearly.

“It’s a show of force.”

He raised an eyebrow, motioning for me to continue.

“A gang stalking tactic. A favorite one by the Department when they’ve got their eyes on you. The reason for its occurrence doesn’t really matter. What does matter is your reaction to it. Anything short of a lingering glance in their direction, basically gives them the greenlight to escalate their activities.

“I should know, they watched me for a few months after I left. I guess they’re scoping us out to protect their assets, ensuring it’s

safe to let one be quite independent here. Though once they start, the suits probably won't stop for a while."

Jahn contemplated my answer, prompting him to pull out a cigar and light it.

"That's pretty nefarious. Though if what you said is correct, then ignoring them should get rid of the problem, no?"

I let out an exhaustive sigh.

"Doing that worked in my case. But considering our situation, and I place heavy emphasis on *our*, then I only assume this is going to get worse over the next few weeks. Though, I doubt they'll do anything seriously violent to you.

"As a you've said, you're a unit commander overseeing the training and safety of one of their Thaumaturgists. It'd be nothing short of pure stupidity should they try to attack you or something. However, I wouldn't put it passed the Department to make stupid decisions."

Jahn sat in thought, silently puffing his cigar again while leaning back. I could tell this bothered him greatly. He wasn't used to the idea of being under the Department's microscope. Not that most people were anyway.

His revelation to me brought further concerns to my mind, as my own involvement in the program could easily see me getting targeted again as well.

"In any case, I thought I'd bring it up to you. Knowing that you've got deeper knowledge on the Department and their inner workings than me. I'm sure I don't have to tell you to stay alert in light of this."

"That being said, keep your head on a swivel and watch what you say, especially to Keeves. I know you vent to him about the Department consistently, especially in public places like the Wild Hog."

Jahn was right. I often did regularly unload my misgivings about the Department to Keeves. Additionally, the mention of the pub brought uncovered a blind spot I had been carelessly neglecting over the years.

If it took me this long to escape the Department's clutches, only for them to suddenly ramp up their malicious actions, and toward my boss no less, then I ought to tread with caution from now on.

No more drunken Department rants at the Hog, I guess.

Jahn's voice brought me back from my thoughts yet again as he stood up, snuffing the cigar into its ashtray.

"I don't know if this means anything, but I'll be on appearing on televised press conference along with other Corps commanders this afternoon. This could be the reason for the sudden appearance of shady suits following me around recently."

"I'm heading back home to prepare for it, hold down the fort while I'm gone. I probably don't have to tell you to keep a close eye on Ana, but I will. Watch her like a hawk."

I nodded, following while he exited the office and locking the door behind him.

After reaching the bottom offices, we parted ways. I watched carefully through one of the office's large, shaded windows as he got into his car and drove away. I lingered for a moment, searching for any signs of the aforementioned black sedan.

X

No matter where I looked, I couldn't find Ana. Panic set in as I paced about, searching everywhere for a sign of the fiery haired girl. I checked every possible hiding spot a kid her size could fit. Tool lockers, cupboards, inside transports, even the fridge as I got desperate.

I saw her not even twenty minutes ago, when she was engaged in her book lesson with Jahn. Now she was nowhere to be found. I started placing my ear against the walls like a lunatic, listening for any indication that she was hiding there.

Finding nothing, I reached for my radio preparing to call Jahn back to join the search. It felt pretty embarrassing to do so, considering he had just left the shop.

Luckily, my investigation ended as Ana's ponytail popped out from the wall, slapping me in the face.

I shook my head, watching her slide out from the surface, cackling like ghoul.

"It's pretty funny watching you all flustered like that, I should start hiding more."

I crossed my arms in annoyance, "I thought I told you to stop doing that."

She shrugged, ignoring me as she plopped down on the rec-room's recliner. She took a sip from a juice box before pointing at me.

"Am I not allowed to have fun here? I thought you'd guys would be less stuck-up than the academy instructors."

"Your definition of 'fun' is skewed, young lady. I'm certainly *not* enjoying the small panic attacks every time you disappear and reappear at random."

"That's your problem."

"You're right, you *are* my problem."

My comment seemed to peeve her. She sucked the rest of the juice box dry and tossed its empty husk toward me. Ducking under the drained projectile, I quickly changed topic to avoid any more objects flung my way.

“How do you do that anyway?”

“Do what?”

“You know, the whole phasing through walls thing. I thought magic girls could only do stuff like that with an artifact.”

She chuckled while passing a hand through the recliner’s arm, the chair’s mechanism turned as it leaned back.

“It’s called auroral pathfinding, and I’m the best pathfinder in the city.”

Ah, I remember reading that in her file. Though her claim of being ‘the best pathfinder in the city’ seemed pretty boisterous, considering she only scored low Bs in the subject. Finding myself wanting to learn more, I continued.

“Yeah but, how does it *work* exactly? Performing a feat like incorporeal shifting without the aid of an artifact is pretty high-level stuff. You’re not carrying one around, are you?”

“Psst. I don’t need an artifact. I’m a late generation divinator, my natural magical abilities are far beyond any current Department Girl’s.” She said getting up, making her way toward the fridge for another juice box.

“That still doesn’t answer my question. What is auroral pathfinding and how do you do it?”

Getting annoyed by my pestering, she huffed and spun around to face me.

“You wanna know? Then check this out.”

I watch her hand shoot toward my chest, the limb passing through my body. A chilly shiver jolted its way up my spine as it did. I closed my eyes in surprise. When I opened them, my vision had been totally obscured by a dark haze.

Eventually, I could see the faint outlines of the objects around me. Small glowing cracks like those on a shattered window, webbed the inside of their forms. The wispy lines constantly

shifted and changed orientation. It was disorientating, my senses were further assaulted as I looked at Ana.

In my new sight, she appeared as a vague outline of dancing lights. Bright bands of azure glowing ribbons mingled with sharp violet stripes.

It was mesmerizingly painful.

She was like a living blaze, flickering and waving in the darkness. What was most striking were her eyes, they burned into mine like the sun itself. The incredibly rich green orbs cut through my mind with a fierce intensity. It threatened to reduce my very self into a tiny, condensed point of pure awareness.

It was too much for me to handle and I jumped back from the sensory overload. My vision returning to normal once her hand exited my chest.

“What the hell was that?!” I yelled, feeling short of breath.

“That was how I ‘phase’ through walls, as you put it.”

“That didn’t teach me anything. Other than gaining an intimate knowledge of what my insides look like.” I shuddered.

“Eh, I don’t know how to explain it otherwise. I should’ve known a mundane couldn’t comprehend the power of thaumaturgy.” She retorted, finding her place back in the recliner, fresh juice box in hand.

Unsatisfied with her ‘explanation’, I gave up my further questioning. Taking a seat at the table, I took another once-over of my paperwork to pass the time.

Soon, another flying juice box sailed through the air. This time hitting the back of my head and bouncing to the floor.

“Quit it. I’m working.”

“You didn’t seem so focused on work just a second ago. Besides, all you’ve done is order me around and ask me questions. I think it’s time I do some questioning of my own.”

She was right, I did hit her with multiple questions from the moment we first met. Though I did think she was some kind of delinquent that broke into the shop. Which wasn’t too far from the truth.

“First off, what’s your favorite color?”

“Purple, next.”

“What’s your favorite food?”

“Chicken noodle soup with carrot slices, and hot chocolate.
Next.”

“What’s your favorite animal?”

“I don’t know, whichever tastes the best. Next.”

“Ok, how old are you? I’m guessing you’re like, I don’t know, forty something?”

What the hell? Do I really look that old? No, it can’t be. Kids are terrible at gauging age. Everyone is pretty much ancient to them.

“Rude, what makes you think that? I’m at the ripe young age of twenty-seven, thank you very much.”

Her face morphed into a surprised expression,

“Really? I would’ve thought otherwise. Your stubble looks like someone threw a cup of salt and pepper on your face.”

I reached up and rubbed my face, was I getting grey hairs? I haven’t really noticed nor cared to look for them since I normally shave. Oh lord, did I have grey on my head as well? That’s a sign of early onset hair loss or so I’ve heard.

With the amount of stress I’ve been under these past few years, I guess it wouldn’t be too strange to see some silver peeking through. With the introduction of Ana into my daily life, my hair might as well be bleached white by the time this program is over.

“Enough about this. Ask a better question next time.”

Ana pondered the request for a moment, before bringing a presumably tamer question to the table.

“How long have you been working here? And what did you do before this?”

Not so tame.

While I could answer the first part of her question, I was hesitant to fulfil the second part’s request. Last thing I need is to sour what little progress I’ve made with her by blabbing about my time in the Department. I decided to play it as safe as I could, bending the truth a little to satisfy her.

“Six years, give or take. Before this job I worked as a consultant for another emergency service.”

My answer didn't seem to have the desired effect as she pressed further.

“Which service? What made you leave, were you a firefighter or cop or something?”

I bit my lip, trying to figure out how to maneuver around the inquiry. Eventually, I just settled on flat-out lying.

“It doesn't exist anymore. It was small consultant job that had me sitting at a desk all day, wasting away. If you want my honest opinion, I found working at the Corps to be far more enjoyable than what I used to do.”

I held my breath as she analyzed the answer. Thankfully, she nodded her head in satisfaction and continued on.

“Next one, *who's Lily?*”

I tightly gripped my pencil.

I wasn't expecting *that*. I had hoped she'd forget the name after I waved her off last night. Though it appears she's still dangerously curious about it. Most likely karma for my lies uttered just a breath ago. Deciding to balance out my soul-debt, I spoke honestly.

“I don't feel comfortable answering that.”

“Why not?”

The speed of her response was astonishing, though it aggravated me further.

“I said I don't feel comfortable talking about it.”

“Was she a girlfriend? Did you guys have a bad break up or something? Seeing your reaction, perhaps I hit a soft spo—”

I got up and out of my seat, promptly turning towards the rec-room's exit and leaving her mid-sentence. Hearing her yells of protest from down the hall as I walked away. I'm having none of this.

Just as I thought I was out of earshot, she appeared before me, rising out of the floor.

“What's wrong with you? All I asked was who Lily is!”

I closed my eyes and breathed deeply, trying to compose myself. When I opened them, my eyes quickly shot down towards her. In a sudden, jarring movement, I bent down and leveled my face with hers. The action, coupled with the barely contained look of rage on my face startled Ana, causing her to take a small step backwards.

"Listen close because I won't repeat myself again. Do not speak of Lily. Do not ask me about her, or anything related to her. If you disobey this, I won't tell Jahn to discipline you, but will do so myself."

I leaned in further.

"Something that you do *not* want to happen."

She was practically shaking now, eyes wide in a confused terror.

"Do I make myself clear?"

"Y-yes!" She whimpered.

"Good."

I straightened back out again, watching as she quickly sunk back into floor and out of my sight.

I held my face in my hands, groaning loudly. Realizing the potential mistake I made, along the possible smoking that Jahn will give me after inevitably hearing about what transpired.

This kid doesn't know when to stop. I suppose I shouldn't blame her. Like Jahn said, she *is* just a kid after all. I feel pretty stupid chewing her out now that I think about it.

I checked my watch, seeing it was only one in the afternoon. I've still got a long day ahead of me. One that will now be pretty quiet, considering I just scared off Ana. She'll be fine, I hope. I'll let her think about what she said, maybe some alone time will bring her to her senses.

Though the more I thought about it, the more I realized I was the one that needed to regain my senses. Seeing as I probably won't be able to find her again anytime soon, I grabbed my jacket and decided on taking a stroll to clear my head.

XI

My walk through the city started with no destination in mind, as I strolled down the sidewalk and away from the shop. I just needed some time to clear my head. I decided to avoid the shopping district, downtown's daily commotion seemed too invasive in its current state.

I thought about going to a local botanical park located not too far from the yard, but I settled on just wandering further into the industrial sector instead. It was quieter here anyway. The noise of people being replaced by humming infrastructure and distant construction work as I walked.

Lutum is a large city, the sprawling metropolis consisting of endless concrete, asphalt and metal that seemed to stretch on into the horizon.

Being one of the larger mega-cities on the continent, it could take you days to walk from one end of the city to the other. That is, if you didn't take any sort of transportation.

I've lived here my whole life, though I grew up on the opposite end of Lutum. Near downtown Lutum I could blend in. Getting lost among the hundreds of people is a lot easier there, useful when trying to avoid the Department's eye.

Though sometimes, the desolate feeling of this area calms me. Attracts me even.

The many refineries, substations and warehouses created a network of urban jungle. Before this place had been fully developed, our unit had been called out here many times. Often the poorly maintained refineries had fires, or even explosions. Now that the energy sector had gotten a large amount of funding, courtesy of the Department, this area had become a hotspot for electrical infrastructure.

My stroll took me further into the industrial sector. Pedes-

trians were becoming few and far between, store fronts being replaced by manufacturing facilities and the odd substation. Above loomed the forms of mass-transit lines snaking above the streets. Every so often, the thundering sound of metro-trains zoomed overhead on their daily routes

I thought back to Ana, she probably was born somewhere near my old stomping grounds. Which would make sense if she was attending the Academy.

How she managed to stay in for so long is beyond me, her attitude is more than a handful for me and presumably her teachers. Although, she did say she was advanced into the higher classes of the Academy.

So, I assume the school's education board must've saw some kind of promise in her. Whatever they could've have seen, I certainly didn't.

She's a rude little brat, more so than for someone her age. I guess that's why they decided to drop her into our lap, both as a quasi-punishment and a way to potentially straighten her out.

Her persistence to draw out an answer really pissed me off. I suppose I may've overreacted a tad bit. Especially considering she was just being curious, if a little pushy.

It's been a while since I've actually talked about Lily to anyone. Coincidentally, I noticed I was pretty close to her.

Seeing as I had some time to kill, I might as well pay an overdue visit. Taking a few more turns down empty streets and narrow alleyways, I came upon my destination.

Cemetery eight-four-one.

The fence surrounding the small graveyard bore the wear of time. Its spiked metal rusted and bent from years of neglect. The graveyard was just as quaintly shabby as I remembered. At least the groundskeeper had the sense to continue maintaining the greenery.

I stepped through the gates and made my way down the rows of headstones. A few new graves had been added, presumably those who lost their lives from the last daemon attack. Ignoring the recent additions to the cemetery, I walked further along the

narrow cobblestone path between the rows of graves, nearing my destination.

Towards the very back of the cemetery, behind the large mausoleum that stood watch over her.

Or at least, the place where she would have rested. The small headstone was nestled between a patch of wildflowers and a tall, swaying willow tree.

Her stone was engraved with the simple sketch of a six-petal flower, with a half-moon straddled besides it.

I knelt down, thinking about the last time I had come here.

“Hey Lily, I know it’s been a while. I hope you’re not angry I haven’t visited often, but you know how it is with the Department and all. Things have been...quite different as of late. I met a girl.”

I waved my hand.

“Not like that, I assure you. Remember when I joined the Corps? Yeah well, since then, we got a new addition to the team. She’s a kid from the Department’s academy, sent to us for some kind of extra-curricular training. Heavens, where should I begin? She’s a handful alright. Insolent, rowdy, and foul-mouthed to a tee. Not that I have any right to say.”

I sat in silence for a few moments, feeling the wind as it passed through the willow’s draping leaves.

“Honestly, I don’t know what to do about it. Jahn, you remember him, right? Yeah well, he wants me to tutor this kid. You were always good with kids, I probably should’ve asked you for some pointers, huh?”

The wind picked up again. I zipped up my jacket further, then shoved my hands into the pockets

“Well, I thought I’d give you an update. I’m hanging in there. Don’t worry, I’m still eating healthy and all, trying to cut back on booze as well.”

“Alright, maybe not so much. I’m working on it. The stress hasn’t done me any good. I almost punched my lucky ticket last operation.”

I sighed, reaching my hand out to clear away the small amounts of moss that accumulated on the sides of the headstone.

“You’d wouldn’t be too happy seeing my ugly, oiled covered mug covered again, huh? I can imagine the earful you’d give me.

“I gotta go now, I promise I’ll stop by more often to chat. I love you.”

With that, I stood up again and paused for a short while. My mind wandered through fading memories of her as I rose to my feet.

From the corner of my eye, movement caught my attention. I snapped my head towards it.

A black car had pulled up an adjacent crosswalk near the cemetery’s entrance. Its windows were tinted, obscuring the occupants inside, those of which proceeded to shut off the engine.

Dread washed over me as I stared at the sedan. Quickly, I strode behind the large mausoleum to my left, attempting to conceal myself from the suspicious vehicle. I peered out, furthering observing what I assumed to be the same sedan that had before, stalked Jahn to his home. It stayed put for a few minutes, before starting up again and crawled down the street.

I maneuvered myself further out of view as it did. I was probably being watched from the moment I set foot in the cemetery. I guess sneaking around was a fruitless effort. Nonetheless, I continued to play this game of cat-and-mouse with the car while it slowly lapped around the graveyard.

Eventually the sedan took a left at the crosswalk, speeding down the street and out of sight. I stayed in my hiding spot for a few moments, ensuring that I was truly alone.

Scanning my surroundings, I looked into the dark windows of surrounding warehouses and the cramped spaces of nearby alleyways. The suits could still be watching me even after that conspicuous stunt.

Calmly but with haste, I made my way out of the cemetery and into the same alley I had come from. My next destination, Keeve’s place.

I sped up the steps of Keeve's apartment complex. I had hurried here as unsuspectingly as a possible, taking my less traveled routes to Keeve's places. The trip had been somewhat costly, as I had hopped on multiple transit lines in an effort to evade possible tails.

Finding his floor, I spotted and knocked on his door. I decided on not telling him I was coming over the radio. As far as I know, those could be monitored too. As rude as it may seem, I'm sure he'll understand after I tell him what happened.

I knocked again getting somewhat impatient. Finally, footsteps from the door approached. I looked into the peephole and waved for Keeves to be quiet. There was a pause before the door opened, revealing Keeves waving me in.

I swiftly stepped inside as he locked the door.

"Hey man what's up? You didn't call me, I would've bought more ale if ya did. I might have some left, lemme check."

"Sorry Keeves, but I think we've got a problem." I said, watching him the turn from fridge.

"Uh, what do you mean?"

"I think the unit is being watched by the Department."

Keeves raised an eyebrow, handing me an ale.

"What? Why?" He asked, cracking his ale and leaning against the counter.

"Remember the Department Girl file I showed you? That girl is supposed to be here in two weeks. But she showed up not even two days ago, Jahn said they sent her early after the well attack."

"I guess that makes sense, did you see her at work? How is Jahn dealing with this?"

"Thankfully, Jahn is doing better with her than I am. When I first met her, she was waving around a plasma lance."

Keeves sipped his ale and smiled.

"Hell yeah, I don't blame her. Cutting through shit is the best part of my job."

“She kicked me in the shins after I told her not to touch it.”

“That’s pretty funny.” Keeves snorted.

“Yeah well, getting followed everywhere because of her isn’t funny. I had to take a few detours to make sure I wasn’t. Which reminds me, Jahn was followed to his home the other day.”

Keeves narrowed his eyes. He finished his ale then grabbed another.

“I see what you mean, didn’t think they’d be this aggressive. Going to have to hide that Ignus-stone better.” The sound of my radio screaming to life jolted the both of us. Down the hall, I could hear

Keeve’s own blaring in his bedroom.

“We’ve been activated, grab our shit and lets—“

Keeves was interrupted by a panicked voice from the radio.

“Unit 1313 personnel, headquarters has experienced a large explosion! Calling for medical and rescue assistance immediately!”

We looked at each other and without a word, ran out the door.

End Part I