

ROMAN SAVAROVSKY



# THE LAST PALADIN

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ROMAN SAVAROVSKY  
THE LAST PALADIN

BOOK THREE

AN ACTION & ADVENTURE PROGRESSION FANTASY  
SERIES

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The Last Paladin

Book # 3

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# PROLOGUE

A TALL MAN STOOD SHIRTLESS at the center of a circular arena bathed in blinding light. A golden mask covered his face, and in his muscular hands, he held a whip laced with veins of pulsing blue elemental energy.

The audience, seated in private four-person booths surrounding the massive stage, murmured with anticipation. The famed “Slaughter of Nine Faces” was about to begin—a monthly tradition in the capital’s most exclusive theater.

The *Gods of Masquerade*, closed to the public, was a sanctuary of unsanctioned thrill and decadent bloodsport. In certain elite circles, it was whispered about with equal parts awe and envy—a place where raw emotion met carefully curated carnage.

Entry came at a steep price. But for that sum, every guest received not only a mask and anonymity, but also carte blanche to indulge—full access to the post-performance banquet and a private party so notorious it was banned by name in official circles.

In this theater, many laws simply... didn’t apply. That was part of its charm. And for the noble elite—who feared nothing more than boredom—it was a rare haven of stimulation. For two hundred years, the *Gods of Masquerade* had kept ennui at bay.

The lights dimmed. A hush fell over the masked guests. All eyes turned toward the stage, where two platforms began rising opposite the whip-wielding man beneath the protective shimmer of a force dome.

One platform bore a flickering blue Portal, crackling with erratic bursts of energy. The other held a steel cage packed with nine prisoners, each shackled in glowing elemental cuffs of varying color.



As the spotlight flared, the captives instinctively recoiled from the Portal's pulsing charge—its rhythm signaling an imminent breach.

“Too scrawny to be a fire user...”

“My money's on the metal chick.”

“You serious? That Portal's electric. Water wins, no contest.”

“Agreed—one million on the water freak.”

“Pfft. Look at the nature guy—he's the only one who looks like a soldier. Victory's his.”

The aristocrats' voices layered over one another, smug and dismissive, their masked identities emboldening their arrogance.

The first creature emerged—hissing, coiled, and cruel. A Thunder Serpent, its yellow scales crackling with arcs of lightning, slid from the Portal and, spotting its prey, lunged toward the shirtless man.

Unfazed, the masked handler cracked his whip. With a sonic snap, the serpent was flung against the dome wall. It retaliated instantly, charging itself in a spiraling electrical storm before launching a surge straight at him.

Calm as ever, the handler caught the strike with his whip and redirected it. The lightning twisted midair, striking the serpent square in the side. It hissed—thunderous and enraged—but then slithered backward, bowing its head in submission.

The announcer's roar thundered across the amphitheater. “Ladies and gentlemen—a tamer.”

Applause erupted, drowning out even the crackle of residual energy. The handler gave a slow, theatrical bow and exited toward the opposite end of the arena.

A new platform rose immediately in his place, stacked with weapons and armor of every imaginable style—blades, polearms, bucklers, and reinforced gloves.

The announcer's voice oozed mockery and flair. “Tonight's rules are



simple, ladies and gentlemen. Nine participants—each representing one element—will now choose. Unite to prevent the breach... or kill the Tamer. Reach either goal, and the fight ends.”

A ripple of expectation surged through the audience.

Then, with gleeful relish, he continued, “But as you well know, there’s one exception: should only one participant survive, regardless of objective—they win. And the prize? A life of freedom. So watch your backs, little ones... and may the Light have mercy on your souls!”

Spotlights bathed the arena in dazzling color. The shackles fell. The cage vanished.

One of the nine bolted for the weapon pile—only to be incinerated by a fireball from behind. Another screamed as the serpent lunged and clamped down on him mid-run. Within seconds, the arena dissolved into chaos.

“Is this really the best you could round up?” the man said with a sneer, seated in the highest central booth, his pristine porcelain mask gleaming in the flickering light.

“We’ve had fewer slave shipments this month, my lord. We’re working to correct the situation,” the kneeling servant murmured at his side.

“If even one guest demands a refund,” the masked man growled, “you’ll be our next offering from the Light Clan.”

“Understood, my lord.” The servant remained bowed low.

The Overseer was seething.

Not even his beloved arena could temper the fury burning inside him. Five men lost—two of them from his elite guard. Gone. Disgraceful.

Just yesterday, he’d thought sending two was excessive. Now, he cursed himself for not sending the entire unit. How that damned Shadow rat had survived their ambush was beyond him.

And worst of all—they’d seen it. All of them. The so-called “family.” Vultures in noble garb, just waiting to circle the next fallen rival.

The Overseer had clawed his way to the fourth spot in the succession line. A lifetime of careful manipulation, bribery, and silence. And now, all of it was slipping from his grasp.

“My lord, a call,” the servant whispered.

Irritated, the Overseer snatched the communicator—only to freeze at the name on the screen. His expression shifted instantly. Without a word, he left his booth and entered a soundproof room.

“Hello, son. How’s the show?”

“All is well, Father. The crowd’s ecstatic. We’re sold out for three months,” the Overseer answered with forced enthusiasm.

“Good.” The Prince’s voice was cold. “I heard about your… setback. Another one.”

The chill in those words nearly made the Overseer drop the device. “It won’t happen again, Father.”

“It better not. I trust you, son. And to prove it—I give you my word: resolve this… delicately… and you will become my official heir. First in line. No more shadows.”

The Overseer’s breath caught. His knees nearly gave way. “I won’t fail you,” he said through gritted teeth, masking the tremor in his voice. The call ended.

On the surface, he remained composed. But behind the mask, he was grinning like a lunatic.

After all these years—this was the moment.

Let his idiot siblings waste their lives on the frontier. Let them fight and die for scraps of glory.

He would take the throne in one stroke.

All that remained… was to erase Marcus. And reclaim the Shadow District.

\* \* \*

Across the city, a man in an immaculate suit set down his glass of whiskey and placed a single finger on a white pawn—one of twenty-seven carefully arranged along a chessboard. Each pawn faced a gleaming white king, like runners frozen on a track just before the race began.

“Evan, are you really naming him your heir?” the bearded elder asked, slouched in the leather chair across from him. “After that disaster? The lunatic?”

“Watch your tone, Bryce,” the Prince of the Light Clan said, exhaling a puff of smoke. “You’re speaking about my son.”

“And my grandson.” Bryce wheezed and shook his head. “Did I raise you to be this soft? The others won’t take kindly to such an idiotic decision.”

“There will be no succession,” the Prince said with a smirk, casually knocking the fourth pawn from the board. “Argus won’t just let the Warrior be killed.”

“Then why promise him?” Bryce’s eyes narrowed.

“When you send a pawn to die,” the Prince replied, “make sure it believes it’s destined to be king.”

“Quoting me now?” Bryce gave a dry chuckle. “Good to know you still remember something. So what’s the plan for this Marcus? You won’t be able to take the district by force. Not without Argus noticing.”

“I won’t have to,” the Prince said, resting his hand on the last pawn in the line. “I just need to remind Gabriel... who he really belongs to.”

# CHAPTER 1

AN IRON BEAST ON LEVITATING WHEELS carried me through the night.

The city lights blurred into streaks at my sides. Autumn wind whipped my face, sharp and cold. My elemental armor wrapped snugly around me, cushioning every bump in the road.

Albert had shared the general location of Victoria's estate a few days ago. The exact route, however, was kindly marked out for me by a tower of smoke blotting out the stars over the southeastern edge of the capital.

The thought of calling for backup was discarded immediately.

I didn't know what I was walking into—and I wasn't about to gamble with the lives of my people. Not now, when the district couldn't afford to be left unguarded. And not when I could move faster alone.

I took the final turn, hit a straightaway, and gunned the throttle. Warning signs about restricted private property zipped past in a blur.

What hit me harder than the wind was the silence. Thick, unnatural silence.

No sirens. No alarms. No patrols.

And given how far the fire's smoke had spread, there were only two possible explanations: either the Empire's emergency services had been bribed into staying quiet—or they simply didn't care what happened on aristocratic turf.

Or maybe... this part of the capital had its own set of rules.

I hadn't had time to dive that deep into city politics—and frankly, I didn't care.

Time was ticking. If I had to break through their perimeter, so be it. The motorcycle wasn't a tank, but it could still give them something to chew on.

I sped past the outer checkpoint—where shattered gates and deserted guard towers greeted me like old friends.

Apparently, I wasn't the only one who'd decided the "no trespassing" signs didn't apply.

The mansion came into view: a three-story inferno engulfed in elemental flames. And then came the shot.

An elemental fire bullet hissed through the air. I absorbed it just before it hit the bike.

That was close.

Exploding at full speed might have been a flashy entrance—but not exactly the kind of impression I wanted to make as a rescuer.

The attackers weren't idiots. Instead of wasting time with questions, they opened fire on sight.

Good. Made my job easier.

I saw the next shot coming. Dodged. Then ducked.

And just as the shooter pulled the trigger again, I bailed from the bike, overloading the rear engine mid-air.

The machine reared up, spun wildly, and slammed straight into a truck that had been blocking the road.

The resulting explosion bathed the night in brilliant firelight, forcing the gunman and his three backup dancers to scatter.

While they scrambled, I slipped into the ditch beside the road, vanishing into the dark.

"Go," I whispered, summoning the Cat and giving him a nod.

He let out a cheerful "mrreaow," gulping down nearly eighty percent of

my current energy reserve, then darted off like a happy little nightmare.

Screams followed. The kind that ended abruptly and didn't echo back.

By the time I stepped out of the shadows, four mangled corpses littered the pavement. In the middle of them, my Cat stretched lazily, licking his claws with smug satisfaction.

He was barely the size of a housecat, but his speed was beyond human perception, and his claws—those glinting, pearlescent razors—could shred even elemental metal like wet parchment.

Against humans, that was more than enough.

“You know,” I muttered, watching him clean his paw with visible pride, “Argus may have been a bastard of a system, but sometimes it was right.”

I let the Cat devour the bodies. Might as well leave no evidence.

Then my attention shifted to the estate's main entrance. The elemental fire had warped the ambient energy field, making it nearly impossible to pinpoint Victoria's location.

The only thing I could tell for sure... was that she was still alive.

“Find her,” I commanded.

A moment later, I summoned Fluffy—my shadow tracker. He slithered out without hesitation, that twisted little embodiment of Darkness already eager for the trail. Victoria had only visited once, but that was all he needed. He caught her scent in seconds and vanished into the Shadows.

Summoning and feeding him drained nearly everything I had left. When the Cat gave me a questioning look, I pulled out two Light Clan Shards I'd taken off the attackers earlier.

Clenching them tightly, I forced every last trace of Light from their crystalline cores, letting the raw energy burn through my veins like molten iron. The Element resisted, clawing to escape.

I kept it down by sheer will.

Converting it into Darkness now would waste too much power—every drop counted. I could deal with the internal burning later.

Good thing no one was around to see me... at least no one who was going to survive this. Explaining why my left eye had gone stark white would've been a pain.

“We’re going in,” I said finally.

I glanced at the blazing doorway, then at the Cat, and reached into my pocket for one of the six water crystals Max and I had pulled from our last crab run in the Portal.

Unlike Source shards, these colored gems couldn’t store new energy. So I let the Cat have the whole thing.

The second he spotted it, he purred like a turbine and rubbed against my leg before devouring it in one gulp. Like it was his favorite treat.

Which, to be fair, it probably was.

With his knack for sucking up elemental energy, he loved those shiny little stones almost as much as the parrot loved killing heretics.

After all, water crystals were pure, concentrated elemental energy. For a being like him, it was better than blood.

The change was instant. His fur dampened, eyes gleamed, claws shimmered blue, and his wagging tail broadcast sheer ecstasy.

“Let’s go save a princess,” I muttered, tossing on my cloak and stepping through the burning threshold.

The first thing I saw was a bald slab of muscle with fists like sledgehammers.

The first thing he saw was a blur of dripping claws flying at his face.

It was also the last.

Ten seconds later, he collapsed in a heap.

I took care of his two buddies—each carrying short-barreled rifles—



before they could even register what had happened. One second distracted by the Cat, the next—dead.

I gave the place a quick scan.

The big guy had been a Fire Elementalist. His death had unanchored the elemental flame he'd left tethered to the roof, and now it began to spread downward.

Not great.

Still, the estate had powerful elemental constructs embedded in the walls. They couldn't extinguish the blaze entirely, but they could slow its progress.

That bought us time.

A hallway stretched out ahead. At the end—an open door and a staircase leading down.

Three men stood guard, flanked by burning debris.

Fluffy had locked onto his target. I didn't hesitate.

I bolted. The Cat fell in step beside me, trotting along like a happy plushie stuffed with knives. He'd just devoured the crystal and clearly had no intention of wasting the boost.

A well-fed Cat was a well-behaved Cat. Strange, considering his usual temperament.

Even back in the Order's golden age—seven hundred years ago—I rarely spoiled him with crystals. They were precious, after all—strictly reserved for field emergencies or support systems inside the Tower.

Every crystal we collected had gone toward powering Argus... or so the rumors said.

The stairs ended in a sealed door.

I kicked it.

A trickle of Light surged through me and into the strike.

Slight overkill.

The door rocketed off its hinges and smashed straight into the unlucky bastard bracing it from the other side, flattening him against a support column with a wet crunch.

The Cat and I stepped into the room.

A wide, rectangular chamber opened before us, packed with a small army—at least a hundred fighters. A third of them were focused on ramming down a massive set of double doors on the far end using makeshift elemental battering rams.

I didn't need a tracker to know what was behind those doors.

*Bang!*

A deafening impact shook the entire floor as concentrated elemental energy from thirty Gifted slammed into the reinforced door. The steel buckled inward, hinges shrieking in protest.

The elementalists operating the battering ram stormed through the breach, while the rest of their little army turned in unison—right toward us.

“Evening, gentlemen,” I said cheerfully, cracking my knuckles.

“Grrraa-myaaah,” the Cat yowled—not exactly diplomatic. He pounced on the nearest soldier, claws raking down the man's face with a wet, tearing sound.

For a moment, the goons froze in shock. Then, as if belatedly remembering their training, they reached for their weapons and opened fire.

The Cat wisely shielded himself with his still-screaming victim. I, meanwhile, dove behind the nearest support column.

The Light energy still coursing through my veins felt like molten iron, scorching and unruly. Figuring I wouldn't get a better opportunity, I issued the command.

“Shoot yourselves.”

A blinding pulse of energy erupted across the room. For a second, silence. Then, a chorus of dry, individual gunshots.

Every single non-Gifted soldier still in the room—left behind after the combat elementalists stormed ahead—obeyed without hesitation. They jammed the barrels into their mouths and pulled the triggers.

All but one.

Unarmed, the poor soul stood alone among a sea of corpses, desperately trying to shoot himself with... a shovel. A combat spade, specifically. He'd crammed the blade end into his mouth and was muttering something incoherent.

“Bang... bang... pew...”

The sounds reached me as I stepped closer.

Yeah... I'll admit, I didn't have the juice left to phrase the order more elegantly. Using another element's techniques always came at a steep cost. Still, to interpret my command that literally? That took a special kind of mind—or whatever passed for one in a guy chewing on a dirty shovel.

The Cat, ever the humanitarian, put him out of his misery with a low snarl and a clean bite to the throat.

I helped myself to a throwing axe from one of the fallen soldiers—pure portal metal, definitely not cheap—and lifted a sidearm off another. Good elemental recoil on this model. It'd do.

Then I picked up the pace and slipped through the shattered doorway.

What awaited me beyond looked like a cross between a warehouse and a war zone. A vast underground chamber, swirled with hurricane-force winds, scattered leaves, debris, and the occasional corpse.

Elemental currents slammed into the four surrounding walls, erratic and wild. And at the center of it all—in the far corner of the room—was Victoria.

She stood barely upright, surrounded by five well-trained elementalists in sand-colored gear. No emblems, no identifiers—but their Nature Element

was easy to read.

Individually, none of them matched her. But together? Working in a tight formation, keeping perfect tempo? They were steadily backing her into a corner.

Two pressed her up close, conjuring barriers and tanking the last of her gusts. The other two used them as cover, launching precise attacks from range. The fifth hung back, assessing and coordinating.

Victoria was bloodied, battered, and on the verge of collapse. Yet she held her ground. Her strength now only sustained a chaotic windstorm to block line-of-sight—enough to prevent gunfire, but barely.

But she was out of time. Out of energy.

One of the ranged attackers spotted a gap and raised his rifle.

I hurled the axe.

The elemental blade cleaved into his skull with a sickening crunch, sending him tumbling backward, limbs twitching.

His partner turned, stunned.

“Who the hell are y—”

Too slow. It’s hard to fire a weapon when you no longer have fingers.

“Aaaahhh!” he screamed as he noticed the Cat beneath him, who spat out a couple of digits like sunflower shells and shook off the blood from his claws.

One more leap, and the screamer hit the ground, twitching and out.

The frontline soldier noticed the commotion and turned, his wooden shield suddenly sprouting thorny branches that shot toward me like spears.

“Let’s see how you like this,” I muttered, yanking the axe from the corpse and whispering, “Shift.”

To his credit, the defender managed to reshape his branches back into a proper shield.

Too bad a black swirl materialized above it—and the axe dropped straight into his skull.

By now, the last attacker understood the wind had faded. Victoria, kneeling and barely conscious, was no longer a threat. He shifted targets immediately and reached for his weapon.

Too late.

Ten rounds.

Eight holes.

He dropped like a sack of bricks.

I never claimed to be a crack shot—especially since back in my day, guns were rare and frowned upon by the Order. But at this distance, and with this much adrenaline? It was enough.

The defender had tried to block it with a shield of residual Nature energy. A decent move—except the bullets were fire-elemental. Nature never stood a chance against Fire.

With the last one down, I gave the Cat a well-earned pat on the head.

Then I walked to where Victoria had collapsed and gently lifted her into my arms.

Each breath came like a struggle, her body slack with exhaustion.

“M-Mama?” she murmured, barely audible.

“Sorry, kid. Just me,” I whispered, meeting her jade-glazed eyes with a small smile.

A weak smile flickered across her lips in return.

“That’s... okay too...” she whispered, then curled into my chest.

“Where are your people? Did they abandon you?” I asked sharply, scanning the training grounds with narrowed eyes.

Aside from the breached gate—the same one I had entered through—

there were two more exits. Both were sealed from the inside. And judging by the scattered corpses across the grounds, none of them belonged to Victoria's team.

"No... They're following orders—evacuating the staff," she said quietly.

By now, I'd already used Fluffy to sweep half the surrounding area, and something didn't sit right.

A group of about forty was holed up in a structure at the edge of the perimeter. Only just now had a dozen Gifted broken off from them and started heading back toward the central compound. The crests on their uniforms marked them as Victoria's people.

"You intentionally drew the attack onto yourself?" I asked, incredulous. "Are you out of your mind?"

"I gave my word I'd protect them," she snapped, attempting to clench her injured hand into a fist—but her fingers refused to obey.

"Your bodyguards should be strung up for incompetence," I muttered.

"They didn't know I wasn't with the staff," she admitted with a weak smile. When I shot her a bewildered look, she added, "I've hated surveillance since I was a child. And lately... the training drills here have been far too easy."

"You're insane," I said, shaking my head.

"Guilty as charged," she murmured with a faint, strained smile—then passed out in my arms, the expression on her face peaceful, almost blissful.

Seriously?

She'd tricked her own security, sealed herself in a deathtrap with enemies she couldn't beat, and gambled her life just to save a few bystanders—who'd likely be targeted again the second she wasn't around to protect them.

And she had the audacity to call this a training exercise?

“Who even does that?” I muttered, shaking my head. In my mind, I could almost hear old Aks grumbling disapprovingly.

I turned to the Cat.

“Hey, flea-bag. Stop licking your junk. We’ve got work to do.”

“Mrraow?” the Cat shot me a wounded look.

“Kidding, kidding,” I said with a grin. “Fleas wouldn’t dare settle on you unless they were S-class monsters themselves.”

“Hrrf.” He snorted and turned away.

“If I were you, I wouldn’t scowl,” I added, sending him a mental ping of what Fluffy was picking up. “We’ve done our bit as rescuers. Time to try our paw at hunting.”



## CHAPTER 2

THE PRINCE OF THE NATURE CLAN tapped his fingers anxiously against the leather armrest of the SUV, his gaze fixed on the city beyond the tinted window. Less than thirty minutes ago, he'd been informed of his daughter's death.

But he didn't feel grief. Not exactly.

What gnawed at Vincent Lugovsky was doubt.

His position demanded caution and foresight. So when word reached him that an unidentified individual had been spotted near the operation site, his first move was to tighten security around his private estate.

They couldn't confirm the intruder's identity. But as Vincent mentally sifted through every possible candidate, one name emerged that sent a wave of cold dread crawling down his spine—a dread he immediately crushed with sheer will.

He had no reason to doubt his people would finish what they'd started. But just imagining that elusive monster coming for him... that was enough to make even Vincent uneasy.

So, without hesitation, he ordered his convoy prepared. His new destination: the Nature Clan's headquarters on Unity Square. The estate's usual defensive net had been weakened by the deployment of a hundred fighters. It was no longer safe.

Some might have called it an overreaction.

Vincent would call it survival.

Just yesterday, he had personally executed his First Assistant Sean for failing to produce a proper report on Marcus. There was no time to appoint

a replacement. So he dove headfirst into the compiled intel himself.

He nearly strangled his entire analytics department in frustration.

Not a single one of those useless degenerates had managed to explain anything about Marcus's actions. They couldn't even offer a power estimate for the man.

The more Vincent read, the more the data felt like fantasy. Not hard facts.

This Marcus casually slaughtered elite Gifted without leaving a trace. He closed Portals—alone. Aristocrats from rival Clans kept appearing around him. Lightning and Astral Clans openly shielded him. And to top it off, the guy had secured official Warrior status in the Registry without Council approval.

As for how he kept butting heads with the Light Clan and lived to tell about it?

Still a mystery.

Which is why Vincent, spooked but calculating, was now en route to the only place in the city where he could think clearly and regroup without fear of assassination.

The first step in his plan to seize control of the Fire coalition had already been completed.

His men hadn't yet returned from the operation, but the confirmation of his daughter's death had arrived. That was all he needed. By tomorrow morning, Vincent could launch the second phase: blaming the Fire Clan for a cowardly assault on his family.

The old fool had walked right into the trap—playing warlord in his pathetic Shadow slum while neglecting diplomacy. Vincent had waited years for this opening. Now, the Fire Clan was drowning in debt, disgraced, and abandoned by the Light Clan.

No one would back the Fire Prince at the Council meeting. And when the first whispers of his downfall surfaced—conveniently timed for

tomorrow's banquet—Vincent would be ready to soar.

How poetic that his beloved granddaughter's birthday would mark the collapse of the Fire Prince—and his own ascent as Boss of the entire Fire coalition.

Yes, Marcus's meddling tonight had soured the sweetness of that victory a bit. But in a way, it was even better.

After all, with the Shadow freak caught at the scene of the crime, it would only strengthen Vincent's case against the Fire Clan.

"Tried to kill Marcus, but ended up torching my daughter's home?" he muttered, stroking his chin as he rehearsed his speech. "No... better. Driven mad by repeated failures, the senile warmonger unleashed his fury on an innocent princess—burned her alive, along with her servants?"

"Not bad," he praised himself and allowed a smile to tug at his lips for the first time all evening.

Up ahead, the lights of Unity Square gleamed through the windshield. Tomorrow, the mourning procession for the fallen princess would start there—choreographed to perfection by Vincent himself.

But his triumph was cut short.

A shrill metallic screech pierced the night, and the lead car in the convoy erupted into the air.

"Shit—swerve, you idiot," Vincent shouted—only then realizing his driver was slumped over, unconscious.

A burst of wind from Vincent's palm saved the vehicle from flipping as he vaulted into the front seat, gripping the wheel himself.

He wasted no time. With a flick of his hand, he hurled the limp driver out of the car, ignoring the ghostly whispers slithering at the edge of his mind. In the rearview mirror, he watched the rest of the escort vehicles slam into each other like dominos.

The only entrance to the safe zone lay on the far side of the roundabout. But between him and salvation was a wide pedestrian

boulevard—lined with benches, kiosks, and fountains. Even at this late hour, it was packed.

Vincent didn't hesitate.

Summoning his full elemental might, he wrapped the car in a howling storm barrier, then floored the accelerator straight into the pedestrian zone.

Trees splintered. Poles snapped. Fountains detonated under the pressure. The storm ripped the benches apart and hurled kiosks aside like wreckage.

Panicked screams erupted as civilians scattered. Some didn't move fast enough.

Vincent didn't care.

He could smooth over a few civilian deaths later. His own was harder to explain.

He was almost there—ninety percent of the way—when the elemental engines sputtered and died. A foreign force kicked in the brakes.

He didn't panic. He yanked the wheel hard, popped the door, and launched himself forward in a wind-powered leap.

The moment his body passed through the transparent energy barrier of Unity Square, he exhaled in relief. He hit the ground, rolled, and sprinted.

Only at the center of the square did he finally stop.

Panting, he turned and looked back.

There, at the edge of the neutral zone, the darkness condensed—morphing into a humanoid silhouette. It stood perfectly still, as if daring him to look.

Even here, within the square's protective field, Vincent felt the weight of that gaze.

He turned away, shaken, and dashed toward the Nature Clan's building, where two wings of elite guards met him at the doors.

“An assassination attempt—in the capital itself!” he screamed. “They don’t even spare civilians anymore. Detain everyone. Now!”

He didn’t stop running until he reached his private bunker.

He didn’t dare look back.

\* \* \*

I stood motionless at the edge of the barrier, watching one of the capital’s most powerful Gifted flee like a frightened piglet.

His elemental connection had to be over seventy percent. His energy reserves easily numbered in the hundreds of thousands. And yet, not only had he never fought portal creatures, the man had casually murdered innocents on his way out.

I saved who I could.

But twelve people wouldn’t be returning home tonight.

And this coward—this thing that dared call itself a man—was going to pay.

Honestly, I hadn’t expected the Prince to drive over pedestrians in the middle of the capital just to escape. Clearly, I’d underestimated how deeply rooted this aristocratic sense of impunity had become.

Seven centuries of unchecked power had turned it into something monstrous.

Well. That, at least, I could fix.

“So this is what the major meant by a neutral zone,” I muttered, running a finger across the edge of the Quell Dome that wrapped around the square.

Impressive stuff.

The same kind of tech they used to isolate entire floors inside the Tower.

It dispersed offensive elemental energy, destabilized active techniques,

and couldn't be bypassed—unless you shut down its power source.

Unfortunately, this one was wired into every Clan embassy around the square.

Smart move.

With a sigh, I glanced at the Shadow Clan's embassy—the raven statue still looming over its facade.

The windows were sealed behind reinforced steel shutters, the entrance marked with Imperial seals, and a faint shimmer hinted at an additional barrier—difficult to identify from here, but definitely not a simple one, especially if it was functioning inside the Quell Dome.

“Interesting,” I murmured, scratching my chin. Right then, armed Nature Clan operatives started spilling out of the building.

Not wanting to be spotted, I scanned the area for witnesses and slipped into the Darkness.

I reemerged in my quarters inside the district, arms outstretched as I flopped back onto the bed.

The jump hadn't covered much distance, but the elemental cost—fifty-seven full units—was absurdly steep considering how weak my current connection to the Darkness still was.

Still, a small price to pay for staying off the radar. Getting caught at the scene of a massacre packed with civilian bodies was a headache I didn't need. The fallout would've been catastrophic.

My train of thought was interrupted by a call.

“She's in,” Albert said, his voice weary. “Delivered and secured.”

“Did anyone see you?”

“Come on, Marcus. I'm not new at this. Four of my guys had to expose themselves, but the op went clean. They're—uh—”

“Yes,” I said, cutting him off. “They can stay in the district. As

agreed.”

“Thanks.”

“No, thank you,” I said, meaning it. He’d pulled off the covert extraction of Victoria without complaint and hadn’t even brought up his sister. That level of trust didn’t go unnoticed. But I could still hear the strain in his voice. “How’s our princess?”

“Weak. Unconscious. Should we bring in Gabriel?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Why? No one would find out. We’ve isolated the building. My guys are monitoring—”

“No,” I said firmly. “In fact, lock the room. And... tie her up.”

“Seriously?” he asked, clearly bewildered.

“Dead serious. She doesn’t leave that room for the rest of the day, even if it takes force to keep her there. Understood?”

“...Got it,” he said reluctantly.

“Good,” I said with a smile. “Leave the rest to me.”

I hung up—and right on cue, someone knocked on the door.

Tch. Should’ve jumped back to my apartment instead. Not that it would’ve helped. That persistent little fox would’ve tracked me down anyway.

I didn’t raise my voice. “Come in.” That was all it took.

Lexa stepped inside, dressed in a scandalously low-cut white outfit that clashed beautifully with her utterly professional expression. Or maybe it was just my imagination, but something in her eyes had changed.

“I don’t know what game you’re playing, taking the princess hostage,” she said without a hint of small talk, “but as your assistant, Marcus, it’s my job to point out all the risks.”



“Consider them duly noted,” I said, pushing myself upright with a lazy stretch.

She frowned, clearly unimpressed. “You do realize the moment the Nature Prince learns his daughter is alive, he’ll want to finish the job himself? Or worse—he’ll go public and claim she was abducted by the Shadow Clan. Your trail—”

“There is no trail.” I waved her off.

“What about Unity Square?” she pressed, calm and unflinching.

“Covered.”

“Impossible,” she muttered, chewing her lip. “Any Element leaves a residual trace. Even with weak or unfamiliar techniques, some artifacts can pick it up.”

Technically, she wasn’t wrong. Every Element left a signature. Even Darkness. But while their fancy gadgets might recognize unfamiliar techniques, identifying an entirely unknown Element? Not likely.

“Let’s just call me the exception,” I said with a smirk. “Now, if we’re done nitpicking, how about something useful? I need the princess’s surviving personnel alive for the next twenty-four hours.”

“Guaranteed?” she asked, all business again.

“And without any direct interference from us?” I flicked her a glance. “Can you manage that?”

“If it’s just a day... yes, theoretically,” she murmured, tapping her tablet. “We could label them as victims, shield them with public sympathy... or flip the script and classify them as suspects.”

“Which works better?”

“Suspect status. Jail time,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Do it,” I said. “We’ll deal with the fallout later. Will they be safe?”

“For the next day? Absolutely. It’s too high-profile. The murder of a

highborn aristocrat is under the Governor's personal supervision—and the whole capital's watching. The princess's staff won't enjoy it, but no one will dare kill them."

"Then I'm leaving it in your hands," I said, getting up and peeling off my shirt.

"Need anything else?" she asked, one brow lifting slightly, gaze lingering a bit too long.

"Have breakfast and a car ready," I said, tossing the shirt aside. "I've got business in the city."

As I headed into the shower, I caught her looking after me with... was that disappointment?

Freshened up from the night's chaos, I tore through a plate of spicy meat waffles, chased with fruit and a liter of coffee.

Not that I needed the caffeine.

My overeager Cat had gorged himself on enough elemental energy from our kills to keep us both wired for hours. Just the residual charge from the fire-element munitions they'd brought was still working through my system, making me feel like I'd swallowed a furnace.

Best not to think about how many hundreds of thousands those weapons would've fetched on the market. Taking even a single piece would've been risky, so I'd let the greedy furball siphon off every last drop.

It'd been a decent boost to my internal reserves.

At the side exit of the mansion, I spotted my parrot perched on a nearby rooftop, eyeing me with visible judgment.

Yeah, yeah. The little feathered menace knew I'd gone hunting without him and was silently demanding to be included this time.

Not yet, buddy. I still need you here.

I made my way down the stairs and scanned the parked van.

No major changes to the exterior, but the engine purred more smoothly now and gave off about twenty percent more elemental feedback than it had yesterday.

Tech was rare around here, so seeing it maintained this well was a relief. Even if Olga and Lexa hadn't said anything about the Shadow District's finances, I already knew—they needed money.

Lots of it.

Seven hundred years had done wonders for technology, but all that progress came with a price tag. And as I was quickly learning, that price wasn't cheap.

But first, I had to deal with my own power situation. Letting a target slip away yesterday had been a mistake I didn't plan on repeating.

"Morning," Bob said, hesitating.

I climbed into the passenger seat. "Why are we still here? Let's go."

He hesitated for a second, probably expecting I'd bench him after yesterday's screw-up. But when he realized he was still my driver, his face lit up, and he floored the gas.

The locals, already used to his reckless driving, stepped aside calmly as he swerved past.

The district was alive and bustling.

Getting cold reports from Lexa was one thing—seeing it all firsthand was another.

The bars and shady joints had given way to workshops and fruit stands. Neighbors helped each other repair windows, hammers rang from abandoned homes being rebuilt, and a sturdy new checkpoint had sprung up at the gate—kids were even playing nearby without fear.

As we drove out, I looked back at the place I now had to protect.

These people had put their trust in me—their lives, their safety, their future.

I made a silent promise:

Before the day was out, there'd be one less enemy of humanity in this world.

## CHAPTER 3

“EXPECTING TROUBLE?” BOB ASKED CAREFULLY, eyeing my current getup.

Unlike my usual last-minute ventures, I’d taken this one seriously—and it showed.

Tactical backpack with supplies? Check. Two water crystals, hand-delivered by a courier to the district. Lightweight recruit-grade armor, still bearing the Ministry crests on the shoulders—the same set that held up surprisingly well against the Steel-Spiders. And for the final touch, Twilight’s Hand, tightly wrapped in my cloak and strapped across my back.

“There’ll be trouble, all right,” I said with a pleasant smile, glancing at the second bag Bob was packing. “But not for us.”

“All packed—food, water, sample pouch, and those two swords,” he said, ticking off the items on his fingers. “Double-checked everything.”

With a pleased nod, I pulled out the bound pair of sheathed blades and drew the first.

It had the lean, curved look of a yatagan—simple design, no guard, a hooked pommel, and a thin blade with a faint bluish tint running down its edge. The elemental response was weak—but steady. I was satisfied.

Just a few days ago, this had been one of three blades embedded in the corded scythe of the Reaper who tried to gut me. The handle had dissolved with him, but the blades remained. Patrick had wasted no time reforging this one into something usable.

Out of curiosity, I drew the second. Crimson streaks ran the length of its edge—still pulsing faintly with elemental fire.

Altogether, I’d taken three elemental blades off that Reaper—water,

fire, and poison.

I clipped both to my belt and adjusted the straps. The third one—poison-aligned—I’d given to Patrick as payment for his work. I hadn’t had any spare cash back then. Still didn’t. And I wasn’t about to throw my weight around as Clan Boss just to stiff a craftsman. I had plans for the old man—plans that called for loyalty, not fear.

“ETA’s about an hour if the map’s right,” Bob said as we merged onto the highway. “We’re headed for a Portal, yeah?”

“Yep,” I said, leaning back slightly. “Name’s Trident. Ring any bells?”

“Nope. Sorry. My field was... uh, more on the ‘business’ side.” He scratched the back of his neck. “Why? Is it famous or something?”

“In a way,” I said vaguely, flipping open my communicator.

This Portal had only popped up on my list once I hit Warrior status—even though officially, it was classified as a simple F-class. But what caught my attention was the ownership tag. It wasn’t claimed by any Clan—it belonged to the Empire. That alone made it rare.

Even stranger, the entry point was located in a Green Zone northwest of the capital. Yet it was marked “conditionally unclosable” and had remained active for eight years straight.

That alone made me dig deeper. And soon, the puzzle pieces fell into place.

It wasn’t just a Portal—it was a strategic logistics hub surrounded by an entire military town. And the name Trident wasn’t just for show.

It was a multilayered Portal with three separate biomes, each with its own exit.

The top layer was non-elemental and rated F-class, with an entrance and exit in the Green Zone. The middle biome? C-class, linked to a Yellow Zone. And the third, the bottom biome—rated B—was barely explored at all.

In eight years of observation, no creature had ever moved between the

layers, so Argus classified them as separate Portals. But in reality, the three were parts of one—and to fully close it, all three biomes had to be cleared. Not that anyone ever had. The third biome's only known entrance lay somewhere deep in the Red Zone. Off the map, basically.

But that was the hidden bonus.

You could enter Trident from the Green Zone, move into the second layer, and exit straight into the Yellow. It offered instant cross-country travel, which made it a perfect logistics route. No wonder the place was packed.

I noticed it as we got closer—the traffic quadrupled. Cargo vehicles dominated the road, and by the final mile, we were locked in a full-blown jam.

“Sorry,” Bob muttered, gripping the wheel as he tried for the third time to maneuver around the truck in front of us. “No dice. It’s gridlocked.”

“Don’t sweat it,” I said, casting a sideways glance as another SUV with some flashy family crest zipped past us in the nobles-only lane.

I’d made a point of dressing like a nobody—standard recruit armor, no Clan Amulet, and our van’s Shadow District emblem covered up. With all the rumors flying around, anonymity suited me just fine. At least until it didn’t.

Stretching lazily, I slung my backpack over one shoulder, gave Bob a few last-minute instructions, and started walking.

Leaving him alone in a crowded public area didn’t bother me.

In a fight, he could hold his own. And thanks to the “parkour morons” who’d tried using high-level mental control on us and failed, both he and the cook now had acquired mental resistance. Alongside my cloak’s immunity—and Mirk’s recent recovery—they were among the only ones in the capital who didn’t have to worry about mental tricks anymore.

That was half the reason I brought him along, despite his partial recovery.



The other half? The portal market—southern capital’s largest—sat at the heart of this military town, taking up more than half its total area.

The sun was warm against my back. I was smiling for no reason. The air near Portals always did that to me—got the blood pumping. My body missed the hunt, and it was itching for a fight. But first, I had to wrestle with the overly zealous Imperial guards.

Turned out, solo Guardians below the ninth rank weren’t allowed inside for “safety reasons.” And I’d been dumb enough to open my mouth and mention I was a tenth.

In the end, two guards got a five-hundred-credit “tip” each before I was finally waved through.

No wonder this place was backed up. These morons were actively creating their own bottleneck, waiting for suckers like me to pay for the privilege of moving forward.

I just hoped Bob wouldn’t snap and start killing them when he figured it out.

Skirting around the barracks, I crested a small hill—and froze.

I take it back. The market didn’t cover half the town.

It was the town.

Rows of stalls and tents stretched out in every direction, consuming the horizon. It looked like someone had dumped a small city straight into the middle of a logistics base.

A wall of noise hit me as I descended.

“Selling here!”

“Barter, best rates!”

“Only today!”

“Flash sale—don’t miss out!”

“Trading! Buying!”

The traders' voices collided into a relentless blur of shouted deals and claims. Some were so aggressive they physically latched onto passersby, trying to drag them into their booths.

Fortunately, their trained eyes read me like an open book—and passed me over without a second glance.

Worn-out recruit armor. Hand-scraped scabbards. Cheap, beaten-down hilts. A ratty, half-empty tactical bag.

Only the wrapped blade on my back drew a flicker of attention—but without the ability to sense elemental energy, it looked like just another scrap of metal in a torn rag.

Eventually, I fought my way through the crowd and reached the Guardian sector.

Tents. Shared barracks. A round two-story tavern. A few identical buildings designed to cover basic needs.

Two more prominent structures stood apart, behind wrought-iron fencing and trimmed hedges, complete with garden paths and decorative statues. Nobles being nobles—even here, they'd carved out their own personal bubble of luxury. I didn't even want to guess how much a night in that hotel cost. But judging by the foot traffic, business was booming.

My focus, however, was elsewhere—the Portal gate itself.

To my amusement, it was carved into a massive trident-shaped rock formation.

A small line had formed at the entrance. I joined it without complaint.

Sure, the noble lane looked tempting—but I'd committed to the broke-Guardian act, and I intended to play the part till the end.

They were letting in one squad at a time, spaced three minutes apart. Not a huge delay, but after ten extra minutes of standing around, I was starting to get bored. With a sigh, I checked the time.

“Outta the way, trash!” someone snapped behind me—and a second later, a hand clapped down on my shoulder.

Reflexes honed by years of taking no nonsense kicked in immediately. I spun, twisted the bastard's arm behind his back, and slammed his face into the mud. Hard. The guy, dressed in fancy maroon armor, started flailing with his free hand, but couldn't say a word. Difficult to form coherent thoughts when your mouth is buried to the gums in sludge.

"Who do you think you are, you worm?" another maroon-laced thug shouted, swinging a punch at me.

I ducked cleanly under the punch, swept his legs, and introduced his face to the dirt as well. Now there were two of them munching earth. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught movement from a third maroon-clad idiot—but he had enough sense to keep his hands to himself.

"Do you have any idea who you're dealing with, filth?" he hissed, his goatee twitching as he leaned in close. "We serve the House of the Pyresons—one of the top ten battle Clans of Fire!"

"Fire, huh?" I said dryly, eyeing the two freshly planted clowns behind him. Their fancy armor was caked in mud and, judging by the smell, worse. "I figured you were more... earth-aligned."

"I'll—" Goatee reached for his red-bladed weapon.

I was already halfway through planning his forced mudbath when two Imperials arrived on the scene.

"Break it up!" one of them ordered, stepping squarely between us.

"What the hell is going on here?" the other asked sharply.

"These fine gentlemen confused the front of the line with the back," I said with a pleasant smile.

"And who the hell are you?" the first Imperial asked, eyeing me suspiciously. "Haven't seen you around here before."

"Mark Lightborn," I replied crisply, straightening up and snapping off a proper salute. "Guardian, ninth rank."

There was a stifled snort behind me, but I let it slide.

Secrecy above all.

As I'd noticed earlier, this Portal lacked an Argus Fang, meaning entry was registered verbally—no verification, no fee for Guardians.

“Well, best of luck to you, Mark Lightborn,” the Imperial said, casting me a sympathetic look before turning toward the maroon trio. “And you lot—back in line.”

“We were already in line,” one of them grumbled, spitting mud. Then he grinned, flashing a mouthful of yellow-brown teeth. “Right behind this young Guardian.”

No one from the tail end of the queue—composed entirely of green recruits—bothered to protest. The Imperial just sighed and walked back to the Portal entrance.

Behind me, the trio of clowns muttered something under their breath, but I wasn't interested. All I wanted was to get inside already.

“Next squad,” the Imperial announced, motioning me forward.

“You should've bailed when you had the chance, Mark Lightborn,” Goatee muttered darkly, just loud enough for me to hear.

And then the Portal's warm, elemental pull wrapped around me, drawing me through.

The Trident Portal dropped me onto a vast, open field of wildflowers that stretched on forever.

Not a cloud in sight. Dozens of well-trodden, clearly marked paths led in all directions from the entrance, though the main road—bearing the deep grooves of transport wheels—was impossible to miss.

A metal signpost pointed straight ahead: “Second Layer – six miles.”

Even without it, the massive tree towering in the distance made the destination obvious.

I considered waiting for the degenerates behind me to teach them some manners, but I was already off-schedule—and murdering someone at the

entrance of a Portal wasn't exactly subtle.

Besides, I could already hear plenty of movement nearby. Rookie squads were grinding the upper biomes of this free-access Portal for training and loot.

And judging by their gear, that maroon trio wasn't here to stay. Same as me—they were just passing through.

With that in mind, I shrugged off my jacket, stuffed it into my pack, shifted my gear around for easier access, and broke into a jog.

The path turned out to be so safe it was practically boring. I only had to slow down once, and even that was more out of curiosity than necessity.

After all, I rarely encountered predatory plant-type creatures in the wild.

Sure, I knew they existed—there were tons of varieties—but most of them were weak enough that no one bothered sending a Paladin to handle them.

So when I caught a whiff of something sweet and noticed movement just off the path, I veered aside to investigate—and immediately got swallowed whole by a giant yellow plant.

I could've dodged. But that scent had been suspiciously pleasant, and I wanted to know where exactly it was coming from.

The answer? Disappointment.

Inside the plant's mouth, the stench of rotting flesh and decay was overpowering. So I tore the damn thing open from the inside, shook off its digestive gunk, and strolled back to the path.

"Still nothing beats meat," I muttered, spitting out a fragrant but utterly flavorless green leaf.

I reached the colossal tree in under an hour without encountering a single soul.

Well, at least the run got my blood pumping. Good cardio, decent

warm-up, and a chance to test the fire-aligned yatagan I'd brought along—it had sliced through the plant like a hot knife through, well, everything. I still didn't know the creature's official classification, but old Aks would've just called it a "weed."

Even if some weeds hit A-class.

The passage to the Portal's middle layer was nestled beneath the tree's enormous roots and shielded by a familiar protective barrier.

No guards this time, but an Argus Fang had been installed nearby, listing the Portal as C-class with a metal elemental resonance of forty-two-point-seven percent. Entry fee: twenty-five thousand imperial coins.

"Yikes." I let out a low whistle. So much for a free grind. Still, I wasn't turning back. I placed my palm on the console.

The Fang took longer than usual to process, but eventually blinked green, withdrew the fee, and lowered the barrier.

I adjusted my pack and stepped through—instantly noticing the change.

From the inside, the roots resembled mineral-rich bedrock, their surfaces crisscrossed with glowing veins of ore. The tunnel was clearly manmade, the air thick with moisture and faint elemental particles.

Seemed like, at some point, an off-world Portal had opened inside the peaceful meadow and slowly fused with it, creating a strange kind of harmony.

Despite the worn tire tracks and footprints etched into the stone floor, the cave ahead was empty. At the far end, a vast pit came into view.

I approached, spotting a broad spiral road outfitted with rails, snaking downward along the walls of the abyss. A barrier fence surrounded the edge—tall enough to keep idiots from falling in.

A schedule board nearby showed the caravan times. Two runs a day. The last one had departed an hour ago.

Tough luck.

Sighing, I slid off my pack, pulled out a ham sandwich, and leaned against the railing to eat while staring into the inky void below. I couldn't see a damn thing—not even with my enhanced vision. That meant the descent was seriously deep.

Too bad. I'd been hoping to grind some C-class monsters today. Who knew it'd take an endless hike and a straight drop just to reach them?

My brooding was cut short by the hum of a barrier disengaging. I glanced lazily back at the entrance—just in time to see three all-too-familiar maroon-clad idiots marching toward me with smug grins.

“Well, finally,” I said, finishing the last bite of my sandwich and smiling brightly. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

## CHAPTER 4

THE THREE MAROON-CLAD THUGS looked more like a bad comedy act than any serious fighting unit. All the fancy gear, cocky stares, and even the faint whiff of elemental response didn't do much to fix the image. I mean, really—how was anyone supposed to take them seriously? One had his beard trimmed into a dramatic goatee and carried himself like a discount noble. The tall, skinny one wore armor at least two sizes too big, constantly yanking it back into place. And the third? He still had clumps of dried mud hanging from his ears and hair like they were some sort of accessory.

These clowns proudly called themselves “Guardians of Humanity.” Doing... something important, probably. Who knows—maybe they scrub latrines in the Yellow Zone and I'm being unfair?

“You run pretty fast for a bastard,” the skinny one sneered, wiping his nose before raising a short pike.

Weird choice of weapon for a cave, but hey—easy enough to mop the floors with if you slap a rag on the end. Long arms, decent reach.

“And you're clearly not a ninth-rank, not if you made it this far,” Goatee said, giving my backpack a greedy once-over and resting his hand on the hilt of his red-bladed sword. “But that just makes it easier. Death in a Yellow Zone Portal is nothing unusual.”

“Why go straight to death?” I asked, fixing him with a mock-concerned look.

“See, Wade?” the mud-lover drawled. “The boy was waiting for us. Worried about us. Let's give him a chance to speak, yeah?”

The trio exchanged sleazy grins, stopping about ten feet away. Mudman stepped forward, leaning on a spiked mace with jagged, star-



shaped blades.

“On your knees, maggot. I’ll let you beg for forgiveness,” he growled.

“Does that ever actually work on anyone?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

“More often than you’d think,” he said, shifting the mace to his left hand. “Faced with certain death, the weak always grasp at the tiniest sliver of hope. Watching that hope pop like a soap bubble along with their skull? Favorite part of my job. But first, you’ll lick the dirt off my boots, you little —”

“You guys are in the wrong line of work,” I said flatly, brushing breadcrumbs from my hands. “No worries—I’ll handle things from here.”

“Only in a body bag,” Mudman roared, swinging his mace.

The weapon screamed past me, flying a good thirty feet and crashing into the wall—hand still attached. He let out a strangled howl, flailing the stump of his arm in wide-eyed panic.

“You’re dead, you freak!” the skinny one shouted, lunging at me with his pike.

Guess he thought keeping his distance would save him. Cute.

I smacked the shaft sideways with my palm, slipped past him as he overbalanced, and jabbed with my left. He blocked—good reflexes. Even managed to activate his elemental armor.

If he’d backed off right then, he might’ve walked away. But instead, he ditched the pike and tried to grab my throat with a palm wreathed in elemental fire.

He didn’t reach me.

His knee snapped first. Then he collapsed, the water-aligned yatagan lodged in his throat.

Without missing a beat, I nudged the pike with my foot, caught it midair, and hurled it through the still-writhing Mudman’s neck. Nailed it.

Goatee, to his credit, was a bit quicker on the uptake than his buddies. He was already halfway to the barrier, using Mudman's twitching body as cover. Clearly a professional coward. Knew how to run properly. If I weren't the one chasing him, he might've made it. Too bad.

"Shift," I said calmly.

The barrier shimmered—then swallowed him into a roiling black swirl.

"Son of a—!" His scream echoed as he reappeared midair above the pit, scrambling to grab the ledge. His fingers clung to the edge just in time.

While he screamed and flailed, I calmly gathered the loot from his buddies and dissolved the evidence through absorption. I kept the mace. Looked crude, but might come in handy. The pike? Fed it to the Darkness. All show, no substance. My training spear was leagues better.

With the cleanup done, I strolled over to the dangling goat-bearded coward.

Terror danced in his eyes. His fingers scrabbled for a grip under the weight of his gear—sweaty, slipping, desperate. All that swagger and self-importance? Gone.

"P-please. Help me. I'll pay. Whatever you want."

"That's not what I want."

"I-I've got thirty thousand credits in my account. And more at home. I'll give you—"

I cut him off with a shake of my head. "Tell me, Wade. How many people have you killed like this?"

"N-none. I swear. We're Guardians. We don't kill people."

"Of course," I said with a sweet smile—and pressed my boot down on his fingers.

"Aah!" he yelped, nearly slipping. "I didn't kill anyone. I swear. I was just backup. I didn't want to fight you. It was all Mason—"

“Got it,” I said, feigning sympathy. I leaned over the railing.

“You gullible idiot,” he hissed, and his eyes flared crimson.

All that elemental energy he’d been hiding surged into his arms, heating them red-hot as he latched onto my neck with both hands. He jammed his thumbs into my throat, flooding the area with concentrated fire. Tried to pull me down with him.

Nothing happened.

“W-what the hell?” he gasped, hanging off me like dead weight. “What are you made of?”

He pulled again. The heat rolled off him in waves, but my skin didn’t even flinch.

Instead, I leaned in, calmly unbuckled the red-bladed sword from his belt, and with a single motion, lopped off both of his hands.

Wade tumbled into the abyss, screaming all the way.

I wiped the sword clean, slid it into my backpack, and nodded in satisfaction. Its elemental signature was far more stable than the yatagans I’d been using. At least this souvenir partially made up for the twenty-seven units of energy I’d burned on the “shift” command.

Sure, I could have just devoured him alive. But that would’ve been excessive. And I was in a decent mood today. Besides, I’d been waiting for these guys. Recon didn’t run itself.

Closing my eyes, I tuned into a tiny insect-like tracker I’d slapped on Wade’s belt. The screech of his fall hit me like a migraine, and I quickly muted the audio, leaving only the visual feed.

Pitch-black darkness wasn’t a problem for someone who commanded the Element of Darkness. Which meant Wade’s sacrifice hadn’t been in vain. I’d already gathered everything I needed before he kicked the bucket —and even a bit afterward.

My tiny tracker had managed to hang on for four more seconds after impact, just long enough to help me make my final decision.

I hadn't geared up for this mission just to skip through a flower field pulling weeds. Not when there were far more... interesting targets so close at hand.

Besides, I'd already dropped twenty-five thousand of my hard-earned imps on this.

Smirking to myself, I stepped up onto the railing.

The cold air rising from below felt like a slap of fresh adrenaline. I pulled Twilight's Hand from my back, peeled it free of the cloak binding it, and hurled the relic down into the pit.

"Pretty sure the princess will forgive a minor delay," I muttered, licking my lips. Then I threw the cloak over my shoulders—and jumped in after it.

Arms and legs spread wide, I let myself fall, savoring the drop.

The speed and close-shaving metal outcroppings made my pulse race. Adrenaline flooded through me in warm waves, merging with the primed current of my element.

The roar of wind drowned out everything else, though I caught snatches of voices echoing up from the many terraces of the Portal's middle layer as I flew past in seconds.

The Twilight's Hand landed first, triggering a burst of elemental backlash. I caught a portion of it and instantly funneled it into a Shadow Step.

The deeper layer of the Shadow realm greeted me with the usual hostility, clinging to my body like a dense web. But it couldn't hold me. It did, however, slow my descent just enough to let me emerge safely—grinning—on the floor of the shaft.

Absolute darkness might have unsettled someone else, but for me, it was as comforting as home.

Because the world of my native Element was a place of paradoxes: a world where everything existed and nothing did; where fire could freeze

and cold could burn; where neither life nor death held sway. A place even time itself couldn't touch.

To master the Element of Darkness, I'd had to visit that realm not dozens, not hundreds—but thousands of times.

Sometimes I wondered if I'd spent more time there than in the real world. But neither I nor old Aks could say for sure.

All we knew for certain was that nothing alive had ever returned from the realm of Darkness.

Nothing—except me. And whatever I chose to bring back.

Compared to that place, this damp little cave and its chilling gloom were child's play. And the dozens of glowing eyes lighting up with elemental energy around me? They were like toys in a sandbox. My sandbox.

“Well then,” I murmured, nudging Twilight's Hand with my foot. “Let's have a little fun.”

The elemental beasts circling me were easy enough to track, but I only had eyes for one—the big one standing upright on two legs. It looked like a bipedal rhino and had just unsheathed a pair of long, saber-like claws when the relic slammed into its face. The beast—whose diet clearly included elemental metals—chomped down eagerly.

Bad idea.

A metallic screech split the air, followed by a bellow of agony. The monster's shattered teeth scattered across the stone, and by the time it realized what had happened, I was already beside it, driving the water-aligned yatagan straight into its throat. The blade was long enough to pierce the creature's brain through the palate, and the hulking body collapsed instantly.

Shame the yatagan didn't survive the process. One-use weapon, apparently.

Not that I had time to mourn it—the alpha's pack had decided it was

their turn.

They were smaller, sure, but just as nasty. And with jaws wide enough to swallow a man's torso whole, they made up for size with bite radius. Their gaping maws fanned open like steel traps, backed by a body of jagged plating, a drill-shaped horn, four short but powerful legs, and giant golden eyes built for perfect night vision.

Grox. Borderline D-class creatures, though certain subspecies—like the alpha I'd just dropped—could tip into D+ or even low C-class.

The first one lunged at me, and I cracked its jaw with a mace. The second took the fire-forged through the eye. Wade's sword claimed three more before giving out.

I scooped up Twilight's Hand. It still wasn't cooperating—sucking down my energy like a cursed vacuum—but it tore through Grox armor like it was parchment.

I danced across the shaft floor like a man possessed. The rhino-rats came in relentless waves. For every one I downed, two more took its place. Sweat poured into my eyes, my muscles screamed from the strain, and my energy reserves surged and plummeted like a broken gauge.

But in that moment, I'd never felt more alive.

After half an hour of nonstop fighting, I finally tossed the unruly relic aside and grabbed the mace again. Infused mid-fight with energy from the water crystal, it was still punching through the Grox just fine—and, more importantly, it didn't try to kill me in the process.

Subduing the relic would take more time, but I'd bend it to my will eventually.

From the outside, it probably looked like I was one misstep away from death. But I wasn't. This was routine. I hadn't used a single technique, hadn't activated the cloak, hadn't called on my familiars, hadn't issued any orders.

Today was about one thing—testing myself. Seeing how sharp my reflexes still were. How well my body had recovered. How it handled the

elemental surges and stress.

All in all, I was satisfied.

Muscle memory was still intact.

And the high from siphoning battle-won energy into my core? Absolutely addictive.

I'd just hit my fourth hundred of the day when the Grox nest finally ran dry.

I exhaled, dropped the mace—and only then realized its head had snapped off at some point.

A roar erupted behind me. I ducked instinctively, let the beast leap over me, then sprang up and rammed the broken mace shaft straight into its eye socket. My arm sank in to the shoulder.

And just like that, another Grox down.

I must've killed the last ten this way without even noticing. Guess I got a little carried away.

After a few deep, controlled breaths, I calmed my burning aura and went to loot the place.

The final tally: seven metal crystals. That's all I could realistically carry out on foot. The Grox bodies? Each one weighed as much as a full-size truck. Feeding them to the Darkness was easier—and worth another hundred and fifty energy units to my core.

Then my gaze fell on Twilight's Hand, embedded in the stone and still pulsing with hostile, smoky aura.

My hand still stung from trying to tame the damn thing. The first impulse? Leave it here. The second? Track down Artemis's corpse, resurrect him, and shove the blade straight up his backside.

They say master smiths forge a piece of their soul into every artifact. If that was true, Artemis would owe me for reuniting him with this cursed part of himself.

Seriously, why did I have to bond with the Shadow Element?

One last scan of the shaft floor confirmed I'd cleaned everything up. I wrapped the relic in my cloak, tied it to my back, and grinned grimly.

Leaving it here would be too easy on the treacherous relic. It clearly wanted to be abandoned—so obviously, I couldn't let that happen.

Tough luck, relic.

Packed and ready, I looked up toward the lip of the shaft and scratched my head.

“Yeah, that's not happening,” I muttered, glancing at a dozen narrow side tunnels.

I walked over to the largest opening. Barely three feet in diameter. No good.

Eventually, I circled back to my original plan. Or rather, a working assumption: that the shaft's base was roughly aligned with the lower layer of the Portal's middle level.

With that in mind, I placed my palm on the wall and closed my eyes.

Scrolled through all viable manifestations that might help—and summoned my shadow tracker.

With a mental nudge, I gave Fluffy the command to find the nearest living human. He slipped into the Shadows and vanished for twenty minutes.

By the time he returned, I'd already finished my backup sandwich stash and was seconds away from dumping four hundred energy units just to Shadow-step out of there.

Then I heard it—the huffing of a happy, scruffy hound. Fluffy emerged and projected a vague human silhouette.

The cave's strong elemental background made it hard to see more detail, but the distance—seventy-five feet—wasn't a problem. If someone was alive at the endpoint, I could anchor to them and emerge safely.



Popping out inside solid rock would've been a pretty embarrassing way to go. Ha-ha.

Such were the risks of jumping into uncharted territory. Aks would've yelled at me just for thinking about it. But he was dead, I was broke on energy, and what could possibly go wrong?

"Lead the way," I told him with a wink, stretching my arms—and stepped into the Darkness.

The first thing I saw was steam.

Wet blue tiles beneath my feet. More tile on the walls. The sound of running water and unmistakable female voices.

Apparently, Fluffy had found the nearest safe zone with a living human present—and delivered.

What I hadn't expected... was for that place to be a women's shower room.

And judging by my position on the opposite side of the entrance... this was going to be tricky.

Still, as old Aks always said: *If you take a wrong turn—just pretend it was your plan all along.*

So I shrugged, rolled my shoulders—and started undressing.

## CHAPTER 5

I NUDGED MY BACKPACK to the side, laid my clothes and weapon across the top, and calmly turned the faucet. Warm streams cascaded over my face.

The water—saturated with elemental potency—rinsed off the Grox’s black blood without resistance, soothed my muscles, and kicked my natural regeneration into high gear. I’d forgotten how damn good this kind of healing water could feel. With a deep breath, I closed my eyes and let it do its thing.

A sharp voice rang out behind me. “Hey! What the hell are you doing here?”

I opened my eyes and turned, meeting the furious glare of a young woman wrapped in nothing but a towel, dark blue hair cascading past her waist—and very much not amused.

“Forgive me, Miss,” I said politely. “Would you happen to have a spare towel?”

“Miss? A towel?” Her brow scrunched in disbelief. “Are you serious?”

“So... no towel?” I asked with mock disappointment, returning to scrubbing a stubborn bloodstain off my shoulder.

Her expression vanished from view, but her elemental mood shift was hard to miss. Cold rolled off her in waves, frosting the tile and dropping the water temperature by at least thirty-six degrees on the spot.

Unfortunately for her, boosting the water with her Element only made it more effective. And I didn’t mind a cold shower. So I continued as if nothing had happened.

A minute passed. Then another. The frost queen’s efforts to drive me

out eventually ceased. I finished washing, turned off the water, and stretched contentedly.

When I turned around, she was still there. Still blocking the exit. Her eyes flared with elemental blue, arms crossed beneath her towel, one foot tapping on the frozen tile.

“Towel,” she said flatly, tossing a soft white bundle at my face.

“Much obliged,” I replied, drying myself off without hurry.

“For real—cover up already,” she huffed, pointedly looking away.

With a shrug, I finished drying off and wrapped the towel around my waist. I reached for my backpack, which had fused to the tile in a crust of elemental ice.

The noble girl watched smugly, clearly expecting me to start groveling or apologizing for my supposed intrusion. Behind her, a gaggle of half-dressed women had gathered at the far end of the room, watching our little standoff with interest.

Ten of them. All Gifted. None weak. But the one in front of me? She stood out. Not just for her elemental presence, but for the confidence in her gaze. Aristocratic, commanding. The others clearly deferred to her.

It was a shame to disappoint such an eager audience.

I placed a hand on the backpack, and the elemental ice shattered with a soft crackle. My belongings came free without a trace of frostbite.

The responses were instant. A couple of sighs—some impressed, some not. And one particularly irritated exhale.

Predictably, that last one came from the girl still standing in my way.

“Pardon me, Miss. May I pass?” I asked, tone calm but pointed.

She jabbed a finger toward me. “Don’t call me that like it means something. And no, you may not.”

I raised a brow in mock sincerity. “Want me to hit the hard-to-reach

spots while I'm here?"

She blinked, caught off guard, then frowned like she couldn't decide if I was serious—or just messing with her. Which, to be fair, I was.

Not only had she failed to chase me out, she'd ended up prolonging my stay.

Her entourage didn't interfere—this was her mess to fix. She was their alpha, and they'd let her deal with the consequences.

I leaned in, dropped my voice. "Tell you what. I'll say you kicked me out, and as for the ones who looked at me like I'm made of gold—I'll make sure it doesn't happen again."

Her lips parted in shock. Then—smack. A slap cracked across my face.

"Fair enough," I muttered, rubbing my jaw. "Walked into that one."

Still, she could've eased up a bit. A hit like that could've broken a rookie's jaw.

The sighs and laughter from the peanut gallery confirmed that she'd regained her edge. Encouraged, she grabbed me by the shoulders and shoved me—still towel-clad—into the hallway.

"Pervert!" she shouted after me, her voice echoing down the corridor before the door slammed shut.

Footsteps paused. A few heads turned.

I raised both hands with a sigh. "Okay, yeah. That one's on me."

Then, without a hint of shame, I started dressing right there in the hallway.

Once decent, I glanced around to figure out where "here" actually was.

Long, dim stone corridors stretched in either direction.

Spotting a sign marked *exit*, I followed it.

A couple turns later, I reached a railing and let out a low whistle.

I stood three stories up, overlooking a small city carved directly into the heart of the cavern. Dozens of buildings lined its walls and floor, connected by metal walkways and suspension bridges.

Forge, armory, mess hall, marketplace, infirmary, storage depot, and a station—just some of the signs I could make out at a glance.

All of it hewn into solid rock. By my rough guess, this base housed at least five hundred people.

I looked up at the building I'd just left and spotted the sign: *Barracks*.

Above us, thick metal pipes snaked from the barracks outward across the cavern ceiling, encircling the entire settlement in a closed ring.

Clever.

Grox hate water—will avoid it at all costs unless threatened with death. This setup? Perfect deterrent.

“And practical,” I muttered, admiring the soft, healed skin on my hands.

The water I'd just bathed in had clearly been infused with elemental properties. Its circulation seemed to be managed by a building labeled *Engineering*, radiating a strong Metal response.

The exit from the Portal's middle layer was located in the central building—shaped like a trident—where carts were actively hauling in materials to be sorted into cargo containers.

The Yellow Zone had to be just beyond.

If people had built a base inside the Portal, it meant the outside was even worse.

Curiosity surged. I wanted to head straight for the Zone, see it with my own eyes. I really wanted to stay a few extra days and farm the Yellow Zone properly, but duty called.

Reason won out. First things first—I had to get back to the capital.

I hurried down the stairs, checking the time. If I missed this train, the next wouldn't come for twelve hours.

The more I saw of this place, the more I liked it.

The cave's vaulted dome reminded me of the Great Tower. The people here? Guardians, not preening aristocrats. No suits or silk dresses—just elemental armor and steel. Instead of car horns, the air was filled with the rumble of heavy carts. And the elemental density in the air made my head buzz in the best way.

It felt like a different world.

Which, technically, it was.

Grinning, I broke into a jog and burst out onto a small platform. The drop-shaped train—only ten cars long—was crafted entirely of elemental metal, smooth and sleek, with no windows. A side panel was slowly sliding shut.

I sprinted toward the last open door and jammed Twilight's Hand into the gap just as it started to close. The blade rang out with a dull clang, but held firm. The door reopened.

A voice snapped from inside. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

The conductor stuck his head out, a golden crest gleaming on his collar. "Train's full."

"I really need this ride," I said, flashing a sheepish smile, blade still wedged in place.

"Oh, so now you're going to threaten your way in?" he said, narrowing his eyes. "Back off, before I call the warden."

"Come on," I said, smile not budging. "How much is the fare in imps? I'll pay double."

"Imps?" He scoffed. "Where'd you crawl out of? Fort Trident only takes one currency—crystals. My advice? Find a scavenger crew, sign on for a month or two, try not to die, and maybe earn enough for the trip. Or

walk.” He nodded toward the narrow path hugging the rails. “Seventy-three floors. Week or two on foot. Just don’t be on the trail when the train’s running.”

A shrill whistle sounded from somewhere behind him.

With a curse, he reached to close the door again.

I quietly slipped two metal crystals into his hand.

He froze.

Didn’t say a word—just pocketed the crystals with a greedy gleam and let me step inside.

“You said double,” he reminded me as the door closed behind me. He extended his hand, expectant.

“How much is the fare, exactly?” I asked, frowning.

“One crystal per ticket,” he said smoothly, “plus one more for the fuel surcharge.”

I arched a brow. “Fuel surcharge? What are we doing, flying to the moon?”

“Vertical lift on an elemental magnetic cushion burns a lot of power,” he replied, dead serious.

Technically, he wasn’t wrong. Hauling this oversized metal box to the top—even with elemental tracks already laid—wasn’t cheap. Still, tacking on an extra fee? Petty.

Then again, not like passengers had much of a choice.

“Fine.” I handed over another crystal. Before the sniveling Imperial could start whining again, I cut him off. “Double fare. That’s what you’re getting. Take it and drive—or try throwing me off and see how that goes.”

The conductor gave a tight cough, clearly unused to being spoken to like that. He cast a quick glance toward the door, then gave a reluctant nod. “Estimated arrival—thirty minutes. I suggest you hold on. The ride’s not

exactly gentle.”

“Hold on to what, exactly?” I asked dryly, spreading my arms.

There wasn’t a single rail or strap to grab in the cramped vestibule. Just smooth, seamless walls.

“Unfortunately, as I said, there are no available seats inside,” he added with a shrug before disappearing into the cabin. I caught a glimpse of tightly packed rows of steel-framed seats—every one of them occupied.

To be fair, he wasn’t lying. Not a single spot was free.

The train jolted and began its slow ascent up a tightly spiraled track. Pressed against the wall, I muttered a quiet curse and pulled out Twilight’s Hand.

Yeah, that was one hell of a ride.

There’s nothing quite like being sealed inside an elemental metal coffin while it accelerates and spins its way up a vertical helix. Not exactly a luxury cruise.

Still, I wasn’t too uncomfortable. Sure, I bounced around a bit, but the hilt of the shadow relic—wrapped in my cloak—made for a surprisingly effective handhold. The relic barely resisted, which gave me a few ideas.

Turns out, it had more uses than carving enemies in half. Made for a decent railing substitute too. And it survived the ride, so hey—win-win. I should probably start taking it out for walks more often.

As soon as the train lurched to a stop, the conductor came charging back into the vestibule, clearly eager to shoo me out before his coworkers came sniffing for a cut of the “tip.” How thoughtful.

He did freeze for a second, though, when he noticed the neat hole burned through the carriage floor. He started shouting something about damage and compensation, but I’d already tuned him out.

I popped the hatch myself and stepped outside.

Just twelve hours ago, the upper level of the cavern had been a ghost



town. Now it was bustling. A mix of workers and new arrivals milled around—some future passengers, others hauling cargo crates from the train to the nearby carts.

I slipped through the crowd and glanced back.

The conductor had climbed onto the running board and was scanning the crowd with a glare, trying to find me.

Good luck with that, pal. Try plugging that hole with a crystal—there's enough elemental charge in one to patch it. Otherwise? Happy to talk reimbursement. Some other time.

I'd love to stay and chat, but time was ticking.

By the time I stepped through the Portal, it was already dark outside. A light drizzle tapped against the rooftops. I adjusted my backpack and headed for the parking lot.

Final tally for this Portal run?

Five hundred units of energy. Four metal crystals. A surprisingly productive training session. An intriguing peek at the inner workings of Fort Trident. Oh—and the residual effects of a Water Element stimulant still humming through my system.

On the downside? One spent water crystal, a disappointing test run of those new yatagans, and a twenty-five-thousand-coin bill.

Could've been worse. With a bit more time inside, the numbers would've looked even better. Definitely worth coming back.

That thought vanished the moment I spotted a van parked right by the exit.

Leaning against it, scanning the area like a nervous meerkat—Bob.

Yeah... I was two hours late. And I hadn't left a backup plan.

"Should've asked him to grab something to eat for the ride," I muttered. Even from here, I could hear his stomach rumbling.

Great. Another trip home on an empty stomach.

“You’re alive,” he greeted me with obvious relief, a grin spreading as he flung open the passenger door.

“Had doubts?” I said, climbing in.

First thing I did was reach for the second backpack.

Empty. No food.

“Yeah, about that...” He scratched the back of his head, sheepish. “I kinda ate everything. I can make a quick stop. There’s a diner not far from here—”

“No need,” I said, waving him off. “We’re behind schedule.”

“Got it.” He straightened instantly, switching into full-focus mode as the engine roared to life.

At this hour, the roads were clear, and we quickly picked up speed.

“So,” I said, glancing his way, “what’d you think of the place?”

“Absolute goldmine,” he replied, practically buzzing. “Insane variety, tons of foot traffic, and prices are thirty percent higher than even in the capital. And they still buy—and ask for seconds. I sold every sample we brought. Had to throw a few freebies to the locals to keep ‘em friendly.”

I couldn’t help but smile. I’d bet on the kid, and it paid off. Raised by Patrick, he’d absorbed most of the old merchant’s tricks. Life in the back alleys of the Shadow District had taught him the rest—how to adapt, find workarounds, and survive where most would give up.

He had the instincts. The skills. All I needed to do was give him direction.

“What if we scaled up?” I asked casually.

“Easy,” he said without hesitation. “If we loop Patrick in, we’ll bankrupt the whole block in a week.” He laughed, but the amusement faded fast. “Thing is, they won’t let us in big. I poked around—every turf’s carved

up by heavy hitters. No one's giving that up easy."

"That part's on me," I said, flashing a quick wink.

The rest of the ride was quiet.

Bob hummed tunelessly under his breath while I buried myself in my communicator, sifting through Lexa's compiled reports. I was particularly interested in anything related to the nighttime assault on Victoria's estate.

Lexa didn't disappoint.

She knew exactly what I'd be looking for. Every summary was sharp, focused, and mercifully free of fluff.

When I got to the part where the Prince of Nature officially declared his daughter deceased—and had already held a memorial ceremony in the capital's main plaza—I couldn't help but chuckle.

And when I read that he'd openly blamed the Prince of Fire, even promising to present evidence at the evening gathering... I closed the file, satisfied.

"How fast do you think we can get to the district?" I asked, rubbing my chin.

"Half an hour? Easy," Bob replied with a relaxed shrug. The van, already pushing its limits, surged forward.

"And if I told you we need to make a quick detour?" I tossed him a set of coordinates.

He tapped the wheel thoughtfully. "What about the fines?"

"Screw the fines."

"In that case—we'll make it happen," he said with a sharp grin, licking his lips. Then, catching my reflection in the mirror, he added, "Might want to buckle up."

A second later, the elemental pressure inside the van spiked, and I was slammed into the seat harder than I'd been in that damned train.

Now I understood why, out of all the vehicles in the Clan's possession, Patrick had chosen to keep this unassuming van on the books.

Smart man.

## CHAPTER 6

WE MADE IT BACK TO THE DISTRICT in just under thirty minutes—a record Bob was clearly proud of, judging by the sweat on his brow and the wide grin plastered across his face.

The trip had cost me a bent handrail, a cracked side window, and a couple thousand imps in fines. Oh, and yes, I'd had to buckle up.

“Nice work, kid.” I gave him a quick pat on the shoulder. “Now go and get some rest.”

“What? But I—” His smile vanished.

“No buts.” I cut him off before the protest could finish. “Being good at resting is just as important as being good at working. Got it?”

“...Got it.” He dropped his gaze and headed off.

He had started the day half-spent, burned through all his reserves, and still somehow managed to juice the van's core engines with his own energy to push it faster. Admirable? Sure. Sustainable? Absolutely not. At this rate, he'd fry his energy channels before he hit adulthood.

“Welcome back, Marcus,” Albert greeted me as I climbed out of the van, backpack slung over one shoulder.

“You look... refreshed,” he added with a weary half-smile. “Enjoy your break?”

“Something like that,” I said, eyeing one of the abandoned houses nearby. Albert, looking utterly exhausted, was propped against the doorframe like a human wedge.

“You, on the other hand, look like death warmed over. Did you even

sleep?”

“I’ll sleep when I’m dead,” he said with a grunt.

“Let’s not test that theory anytime soon,” I muttered. “I’ve only got one infirmary. Did the Imperial police come snooping around?”

“Yeah. They dropped by this morning,” he replied, pushing off the frame and cracking his neck. “Lexa tore into them so hard one of the officers nearly cried.” He huffed a dry laugh and pulled the door open for me.

“Think they’ll be back?” I asked, stepping inside.

“They promised to return tomorrow.” He gave a one-shouldered shrug. “Masochists, probably.”

The entrance was sealed with a simple but sturdy barrier. I gave it a quick nod of approval. Albert had clearly taken my orders about isolating the princess seriously. Considering the Nature Prince had already declared his daughter dead, I’d say the guy had done a stellar job. Not a single leak.

The house was a basic two-story. About twenty-two hundred square feet, plus a garage, a basement, and a backyard roughly the size of a tennis court.

Apparently, ten people had lived here before. They cleared out the moment I took control of the Shadow District. According to Albert, they’d run a nice little torture business out of the place. Explained the “special” basement design.

I spotted the door to the basement immediately, but a large, not-so-friendly man in full combat gear stood in my way.

“Marcus, allow me to introduce the leader of the covert ops unit, Pride,” Albert said, gesturing toward him. “They handled the princess’s extraction.”

The man’s amber eyes scanned me, sharp and appraising.

“Leon,” he said, gripping my offered hand with a hint of surprise. “The Commander spoke highly of you. An honor to meet you, sir.”

“You did excellent work,” I said sincerely. “And just Marcus is fine.”

“I told him,” Albert muttered under his breath. “He refused.”

“Apologies, sir. Protocol demands we maintain decorum,” Leon said with a respectful nod. “Pride’s principles are non-negotiable.”

Tall, broad, with wild amber eyes and a lion’s mane of hair—Leon looked every bit the apex predator his name suggested. His thick shoulders, sharp jaw, and fanglike teeth gave him an edge I hadn’t expected from Albert’s unit. I’d pictured something more... metallic. More armored. Not a beast wearing human skin.

“Principles are good,” I said, rubbing my chin. “But if you’re standing here, I assume there’s something on your mind?”

For a moment, the confidence in Leon’s expression wavered. His gaze flicked briefly toward Albert.

“Forget what Albert told you to say,” I said flatly. “Speak your mind. Otherwise, we’re not going to work together.”

Albert cleared his throat in warning, but Leon’s attention was locked on me. His entire body tensed, like he was preparing to charge.

“This morning, the princess’s entire household was officially charged with aiding assassins,” he said stiffly. “At dawn, they’ll face public trial and execution.”

“Correct.” I gave a short nod.

“That... was your doing?”

“Also correct.”

Leon drew a sharp breath. “Two members of Pride were taken. Including the Commander’s sister. Were you aware of that, sir?”

“Of course.” I caught the flicker of pain in Albert’s expression. “So what’s the question?”

“I—” Leon hesitated, then bowed his head. “Forgive me, sir. I spoke

out of turn.”

“On the contrary.” I met his gaze steadily. “You’re human. I get it. Some young idiot from the northern hills shows up barely a week ago, orders you to restrain a wounded princess you’ve protected for five years, forbids any contact with her, then vanishes while your people get chained up and prepped for execution. And you’re just supposed to trust him? That about sum it up?”

“In broad strokes,” Leon said darkly.

“And you?” I asked Albert without missing a beat.

“No hesitation,” he said firmly. “You promised to protect my sister. I believe you.”

There was conviction in his voice. But I caught the flicker of doubt too.

Maybe I had pushed too hard this time. But compared to Old Aks? I was practically a saint.

Satisfied, I turned back to Leon.

“That’s the difference, soldier. Trust.”

“With respect, sir... I’ve only just met you.”

“And I’ve just met you,” I replied evenly. “But here you are, ready to serve under me.”

“Because I trust the Commander like a brother,” Leon said, squaring his shoulders.

“Good enough.” I clapped him once on the shoulder. “Trust is a two-way street. And speaking your mind? That’s how you earn mine. Pass that on to the rest of Pride. If you don’t, we won’t work together. Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” Leon said crisply.

I dropped my backpack and made my way to the basement door. I’d promised Albert his people would get temporary contracts as servants. That promise would be honored. But if they wanted anything more, they’d have



to earn it.

And they'd just received their first hint.

I descended the stairs into a well-insulated basement. A thick gray door stood embedded in a wall of elemental stone, its signature faint but deliberate—designed to block sound, light, and any trace of life within.

Curious, I pressed a hand to the stone. I couldn't tell if anyone was inside.

"Interesting," I muttered, and stepped through.

The stale tang of damp air greeted me. Before me stretched a corridor lined with six cells. Five doors hung open. I headed for the last one.

I knocked—politely, for once—then opened the door and stepped in.

This room was different. A proper bed with a fresh mattress. Two bags of women's clothing and cosmetics in the corner. A dresser with a mirror, clearly brought from upstairs. Scented candles flickered throughout the cell, filling it with a surprisingly pleasant aroma.

And sitting right in the middle of the bed, wrapped in a blanket and surrounded by a fortress of pillows, was the princess herself.

"Cozy," I remarked lightly.

"For a prison cell? I've seen worse," she replied, offering a faint smile. Then she pulled her bound hands from beneath the blanket. "So, what's the plan? Did you save me to make me a slave, or are you just into this sort of thing?"

"Still got your sense of humor. That's good," I said, setting the bag down and stepping closer. "Means you're strong enough for what comes next."

"For what?" she asked warily, recoiling slightly.

I reached toward her, and she flinched hard, squeezing her eyes shut.

But when she felt the binds around her wrists release, she opened them

again—and looked straight at me. No fear. No feigned fragility. The faint stir of elemental strength—there it was.

I caught her right hand mid-swing, stopping her slap less than an inch from my face. Enough charity for today. I'd hit my daily quota of slaps already.

“You're welcome, by the way,” I added dryly.

“That was for tying me up,” she snapped, yanking her arm back. “A real gentleman might've let a wounded, delicate lady vent her frustration. You wouldn't have broken.”

“Delicate's not the word I'd use,” I said, letting the corner of my mouth twitch as I watched her aura steadily replenish—already a quarter full, without any outside help.

Impressive regen for a Nature Elementalist.

“If that's a compliment, it's a clumsy one,” she muttered, tying her hair back into a neat bun. “How are my people?”

“Alive and well,” I said, flopping down onto the bed and admiring the precision with which she cleaned herself up.

Even her baggy clothes couldn't hide the sharp definition of her form. A blend of power and grace that she was now trying to soften with a touch of makeup and a tidied hairstyle.

Of course the noble princess of an entire Clan wouldn't dare face the world without looking flawless—even if she was crawling out of a basement. Personally, I thought the tousled hair and blanket-wrapped look suited her just fine.

“The mansion?” she asked next.

“Burned down.”

“And my Amulet?”

“Handed it over to your father.”

“You let someone walk away alive?” She shot me a disapproving look.

“I had to,” I said with a shrug. “Otherwise, there wouldn’t have been a funeral to attend.”

“Come again?” she said, dropping her hairpin.

“Oh, right—almost forgot,” I said cheerfully. “Congratulations, Vic! You’re officially dead. The entire Empire’s in mourning, heartbroken over the loss of the Prince’s beloved daughter and heir.”

“You’re joking,” she said, her voice dangerously low.

“For a dead woman, you look incredible.” I let a smirk tug at my mouth. She didn’t find it funny.

Cutting her preparations short, she launched herself at me and grabbed me by the collar.

“What the hell did you do, Marcus? My people—he’s going to have them all executed!”

“No, he won’t,” I said lazily, waving her off. “The trial’s not until tomorrow.”

“What trial?” she demanded, her grip tightening.

“You’re asking too many questions.” I pried her hands off, keeping my tone light. “Better tell me how long you need to get ready.”

“I’ve been ready to leave this dump for ten hours,” she snapped. “Let’s go. Now.”

“You’d look stunning in a potato sack,” I said, nodding toward the bag I’d set down, “but there’s a dress code at events like this.”

“What are you talking about—” She broke off, pulling an emerald ball gown from the garment bag. “This is…”

“Maria really outdid herself,” I said, standing up and tucking a rebellious strand of her dark jade-colored hair behind her ear. “We can swing by and thank her after the reception. I’ll even make sure your people

are returned safe and sound. Promise.”

“You’re insane,” she whispered, still staring at the dress.

“Then we’ll make a perfectly matched couple for the evening,” I said breezily, pulling out my own suit. “We’ll miss the start of the reception, but I’m sure they’ll forgive a royal resurrection being a bit late.”

I left the cell and headed upstairs. On the way, I left the basement door open—Albert caught that little gesture with a visible sigh of relief.

Couldn’t have been easy for him, playing jailer to the princess after all those years as her loyal bodyguard. Still, he hadn’t slacked off in his new role as head of Shadow Clan security.

At least the district hadn’t burned down, and from what I could tell, all the Nameless Ones were keeping busy.

The parrot was bored, though. Without any fresh attacks to screech about, he was napping in his perch. Word of the district’s shiny new deathtrap had spread far and wide through the city’s underworld.

“Be a champ and get us a van,” I said, catching Albert’s eye from where he sat at the entrance.

He gave me a confused look. “A van?”

“The princess is about to debut her new dress at a public event,” I said with a dry smile. “I’ll be escorting her.”

His chair scraped back sharply as he shot to his feet. “She is not arriving in a van.”

“And me riding around in one doesn’t bother you?” I asked, arching a brow. “It’s perfectly reliable.”

“It’s also cramped. And extremely conspicuous,” he said, frowning.

“We toss in a few cushions, repaint the crests—problem solved.”

“That won’t cut it a second time,” he said, shaking his head. “The van’s been flagged. And Marcus—you’re the one who told me to handle our

covert ops. Or have you stopped caring about information leaks?”

“Well...” I let the word stretch out as I considered.

Technically, the important part—Nature Prince’s public statement—had already gone down. If the secret about the living princess leaked a bit early, it wouldn’t be the end of the world.

Still, Albert had a point. Victoria’s coward of a father was enough of a rat to bolt or pull something drastic if he smelled a shift in the wind.

“Fine. Transportation’s on you,” I said at last. “You’ve got until the princess finishes getting ready.”

“On it.” Albert perked up and snapped off a mock salute before vanishing into the house.

I headed to the guest bathroom on the ground floor to wash up and change into my suit—non-portal fabric, but high-end enough.

Price-wise, it rivaled my combat gear, though it offered zero protection. Nice fit, soft fabric, ridiculously easy to ruin. But hey, I wasn’t about to complain—clean underwear and a free shirt were always a win.

I tied an emerald-green tie over my crisp white shirt, smoothed my slightly tousled hair with a splash of water, and glanced at my reflection.

Perfect.

Reception ready.

Four minutes, start to finish. I poured two glasses of whiskey from the half-finished bottle on the side table and stepped outside.

Lexa was already waiting by the porch.

“Here,” I said, handing her one of the glasses.

“Thanks,” she said with a playful smile, leaning wearily against the railing.

“Regretting signing on to work with me yet?” I asked, catching her distant look.

“Not even close.” She snorted, then downed the whiskey in one go. “Honestly, I don’t remember the last time I enjoyed my job this much.”

“Exhausted too,” I said lightly.

“That too.” She didn’t bother denying it. “How’s Victoria holding up? Barely a day ago, her father tried to have her killed. Now she has to go smile at him like nothing happened.”

“She’s holding.”

“Careful, Marcus,” she said, shaking her head. “Sometimes the strongest-looking women are the ones closest to breaking.”

“Duly noted,” I replied, sipping my drink.

“And what about you?” she asked, shifting her gaze to me. Her nose crinkled slightly when she noticed the faint shimmer of my skin. Without hesitation, she reached out and ran the back of her hand across my cheek.

“So it really was you...” she murmured.

“What?”

“Nothing,” she said with a smile, pulling back. “Anyway, I didn’t just come out to chat. I’ve got business.”

“Urgent?” I asked, glancing at my watch.

“You decide.” She lifted one shoulder in a tired shrug. “A job just came in.”

“What kind of job?”

“Assassination.” Her voice was flat. “Target: the Prince of the Nature Clan.”

I straightened instantly. “And the client? Hidden?”

“That’s the interesting part.” She pulled up a tablet. “The request came through the underground channels. But it’s been openly stamped with the seal of the Light Prince. And yes—it’s authentic. I checked.”

I studied the document in silence for a good twenty seconds. No name. No sender. Just a short, clinical request for the elimination of one Vincent Lugovsky—better known as the Nature Prince.

The posted reward was laughably low: one hundred thousand imperial coins. A joke for a target of that caliber. But the price didn't matter.

What mattered was the message.

It was bold. Brazen. Practically flaunting itself.

The Light Prince knew my next move before I'd made it. He was watching. Testing me. Tossing a bone, eager to see how I'd react.

Could be bait. A trap set up with the Overseer. Or something else entirely.

Didn't matter.

You want to play, Prince? Let's play.

I smiled and gave the order. "Take the job."

## CHAPTER 7

“ARE YOU SURE?” Lexa asked cautiously. “There’s a risk he could turn this against us later.”

“Refusing would be even worse.” I tipped back the last of my whiskey. “Show weakness now, and the pressure will only increase. How’s it going with the Imperial police?”

“All handled,” she replied crisply, offering a brisk nod. “They’re under pressure from above, being rushed, which makes their arguments way too flimsy to resist my... charm.”

“You mean blackmail, threats, and playing the noble card?” I drawled, arching a brow.

“Pfft.” She waved her hand with exaggerated nonchalance. “I’m just restoring balance after the methods their patrons used first. Honestly, it’s amusing. Two days of scribbled paperwork, and they think they can beat someone who grew up playing this game. Such adorable disrespect.”

“Have fun.” I flashed a dry smile. “Just remember, you’re saving their lives. My feathered informant won’t bother checking for warrants. And drawing the Governor’s attention right now is the last thing we need.”

“I know, I know,” she muttered, puffing her cheeks out in mock annoyance. Then, a little too casually, she added, “Should I be waiting up tonight?”

“Does the district really need me around?” I asked, sweeping a deliberate glance across the peaceful street.

Fresh-baked goods drifted in from the left; from the right came laughter and a guitar’s cheerful strum. A few victories, a few shared hopes



for a better future—and people were finally starting to believe again.

Now I just had to make sure they could leave the district without fear. Make sure they could call themselves Shadows with pride.

“Maybe I wasn’t asking about the district,” Lexa said with a coy smile.

And from the look she gave me—impossible to tell whether she was joking or not—I decided discretion was the better part of valor.

“Alas,” I said, raising my hands in mock resignation, “tonight, I have to play the part of a shining prince.”

“Pity,” she murmured with exaggerated drama, then turned on her heel and sauntered toward the mansion, hips swaying with just enough flourish to make sure I noticed.

Old Aks was right: manipulation was in women’s blood.

And knowing that didn’t make it any easier to tear my gaze away from the lingering trail of citrus perfume she left in her wake.

Exhaling slowly, I loosened my tie—just in time. The garage door creaked open, and Albert appeared on the porch, practically radiating newfound energy.

“All set,” he said, nodding toward the garage.

A nondescript brown sedan rolled out slowly on worn wheels—absolutely invisible among the thousands of commoners’ cars clogging the streets.

Zero elemental signature. Plain old metal. A cheap engine that would crumple like paper in a real collision. Perfect.

Before I could say anything, Albert stepped up and—surprisingly politely—opened the back door for me.

Inside, I found myself facing an elegant young woman dressed in an emerald gown. Simple, tasteful jewelry—three pieces total—including a pair of earrings I distinctly remembered giving her.

“You look stunning, Your Grace,” I said, settling into the seat beside her.

“Don’t mock me, Marcus,” she muttered, though the tiny smile tugging at the corner of her mouth gave her away.

“As you command, Your Grace,” I replied with a grin, signaling the driver—who, naturally, turned out to be Leon.

A second later, Albert climbed into the front passenger seat, and the car smoothly pulled out onto the road.

“Welcome aboard Pride’s taxi service, esteemed guests,” Leon said lightly from the front. “If any emergency arises, simply channel a bit of energy into your door handle. Leave the rest to us.”

Two minutes after exiting the district, I heard distant gunfire. The Nameless Ones had done their job—clearing any outside surveillance. In the rearview mirror, I caught sight of two identical sedans pulling into formation behind us.

Looked like Albert had taken his assignment seriously.

Good. No complaints from me.

The Nameless soon peeled off and returned to the district, leaving just our convoy on the move—Pride members I’d be meeting properly later.

Out of idle curiosity, I brushed my fingers against the “ordinary” door handle—and smiled faintly. Hidden inside was a complex protective construct, something like a compressed steel cocoon pressurized to feel weightless.

Examining the car more closely, I spotted three more sealed constructs woven throughout the frame.

I take it back. The car only looked like a junker from the outside. In truth, it was packed to the brim with elemental tech.

Granted, the suspension creaked under the weight, and the vehicle’s maneuverability left a lot to be desired, but that wasn’t the point. This setup wasn’t about speed. It was about invisibility and surviving a first strike long

enough for backup to arrive.

And with a Metal Clan Warrior riding shotgun, anyone trying to punch through this armor would have their work cut out for them—especially if I just sat back and let them.

“My apologies for the cramped conditions, Princess,” Albert said, glancing back awkwardly. “And... for everything else.”

“Relax, Bertie. I’m not mad,” Victoria said sweetly, flashing him a mischievous grin. “You were just following orders.”

“Bertie,” I repeated, fighting a snort.

“Don’t start,” Albert grumbled, hunching down in his seat and saying nothing more.

Leon stayed laser-focused on the road while Victoria leaned against the tinted window, lost in her own thoughts.

“You mad at me too?” I asked eventually, breaking the silence.

“No...” Victoria gave me a small, weary smile. “You saved me—even if you did it like a true northern barbarian. But there’s something I’m curious about. That girl who slapped you... you didn’t kill her, did you?”

Albert flicked a curious glance over his shoulder, and I immediately regretted the car didn’t have a soundproof divider.

“No. I didn’t.”

“Good.” Victoria’s lips curved into a knowing smile.

And for the rest of the drive toward the Fire Clan’s southern residence, we rode in comfortable silence.

\* \* \*

“Ladies and gentlemen!” A stately man clad in expensive finery stepped to the center of the grand ballroom, his voice booming across the room. “By Argus, it pains me to darken Lady Florence-Valerie’s celebration...”

He cast a mournful look toward a highborn woman dressed, for the first

time in his memory, not in her trademark crimson—but in solemn black.

“Then don’t—”

“Who even invited him—”

“Why did His Highness allow this...”

“Age spares no one, it seems...”

The venomous whispers rippled through the hall, but the Nature Prince, wearing his mask of sorrow, inwardly smiled.

Let them chatter. Let them.

The master of this house’s days were numbered. Everyone who paid attention to court politics could see it. Even the old Fire Prince himself had sat silent all evening, speaking only briefly to his beloved granddaughter before retreating to his own circle.

Whatever pride remained, the old man would be forced to drink the cup of humiliation to the bitter dregs—and in front of witnesses, more numerous than the Nature Prince had dared to hope.

His public accusations earlier today and the funeral in the heart of the capital had done their work.

Now, at this ordinary birthday party for the Fire Prince’s granddaughter, there were representatives from nearly every Clan of the Top Ten. Not openly, of course—but hidden among vassals and trusted proxies. Eyes and ears, poised and ready.

Ready to hear what the Nature Prince was about to say.

Power was already his to take. Only one final step remained.

“And yet, my friends,” the Nature Prince continued once he had everyone’s full attention, “it is with the heaviest of hearts that I must reveal the findings of our internal investigation.”

As he spoke, he felt the smoldering gaze of the Fire Prince—so intense it was almost tangible.

That hateful stare. The pressure he'd lived under since birth. Since the moment little Vincent had opened his eyes, the Fire Clan had loomed over the Nature Clan like a sword of Damocles.

The decisions of their ancestors—and the cruel hand of fate—had bound two Elements into a coalition where one ruled absolutely, while the other was forced to serve.

No matter how strong Vincent grew, no matter how many victories he won, an Elementalist of Fire would always eclipse him. That was the brutal, unchanging reality of the Elements.

The Fire Clan only needed the Nature Clan to balance the Water coalition. Beyond that? They were expendable.

He had spent a lifetime bowing to the Fire Prince's will.

But now? Now the tables were about to turn.

Vincent's lips curled into the faintest smile as he watched the old predator across the hall—this time powerless to stop what was coming.

"The one responsible for this tragedy walks among us," Vincent declared, voice ringing across the hall. "Drinking champagne, breathing the air of freedom—while my daughter, the strongest warrior our Clan has ever produced, lies cold in the ground."

He turned—deliberately, pointedly—toward the old man in the burgundy robes. "You, Prince of the Fire Clan."

The Fire Prince stepped forward through the parting crowd, his gaze steady, unflinching.

"So, the pup finally found his nerve," he said, voice roughened by contempt. "I thought you'd never have the balls to challenge me."

"This isn't a challenge, Your Highness," Vincent answered, standing firm beneath the searing weight of the Fire Prince's elemental aura. "This is an accusation. And I demand that you repent before Argus, confess your crimes, and step aside—so your more worthy descendants can atone through loyal service to humanity."

The gathered aristocrats lining the hall stood frozen. No one dared to breathe, let alone speak, as they watched the confrontation unfold—an event destined to reshape the political order of the capital.

Whoever won tonight, there would soon be one less Prince in the Empire. Something that hadn't happened in forty years.

“Big words, Prince,” the Fire Prince said, his jaw tightening, fire flickering faintly at the corners of his mouth. “Got any proof to back 'em up?”

Vincent shifted slightly to the side, revealing two imposing figures in Imperial uniforms who materialized at his flanks.

“The investigation was conducted with the full cooperation of the Imperial Governor,” he said, his voice cutting clean through the heavy silence. “And the chief piece of evidence—”

From inside his jacket, he drew a tarnished, acid-eaten amulet, its once-proud glow reduced to a sickly shimmer.

“—is my daughter's Amulet.”

A chill of dead energy radiated from the shard, cutting straight to the bone.

Vincent stepped forward, his voice clear and commanding. “As you can all see, honored lords and ladies, the bond between my daughter and her Clan Amulet has been severed. Its authenticity has been personally confirmed by the Death Prince himself, and the energy imprint analysis leaves no doubt—before her death, my daughter was subjected to prolonged exposure to a High-Order manifestation of the Element of Fire, which also obliterated her estate!”

The Fire Prince's lips curled in disdain. “That you managed to bribe one of my distant nephews into using his Clan Element proves only that you have violated the Pact, Prince,” he said, voice dry as ash. “But I am merciful. I won't bring this slander before the Council. Instead, I offer you a chance to redeem your transgressions—with blood and an honest duel.”

Vincent narrowed his eyes. “An honest duel? Would you have offered

the same to the Water Prince, Your Highness? There's no honesty in trying to burn truth and justice out of existence. You'll answer not to me, but to the Council—and to Argus, which, for your information, has already confirmed the Imperial investigation's findings and struck my daughter's name from the Registry!"

A ripple of shocked gasps spread through the hall. Most of the guests instinctively edged away from the Fire Prince, as if he carried a contagious curse.

Vincent, radiant with barely concealed triumph, soaked it all in.

Forcing the Death Clan into conducting an expedited verification hadn't been easy. But it had been the final, perfect piece of the puzzle.

Now all that remained was to let the whispers die down before invoking his princely right—to summon the Court of the Ten Princes, where he already held a guaranteed majority.

After all, he wasn't the only one eager to drag one of the oldest, most dangerous Princes off his throne. Only Argus's system of checks had kept the balance until now.

He caught the furious, searing glares of the Fire Prince's relatives—but ignored them. This was his moment. He only needed to finish his speech and—

Why wasn't the noise dying down?

If anything, the murmuring had grown louder, the crowd buzzing like an agitated hive. The disturbance was behind him, but Vincent didn't dare turn his back on the Fire Prince. He locked eyes with his opponent, determined to ignore the commotion—

Until he saw something that made his heart plummet into his boots.

The Fire Prince's somber eyes suddenly gleamed with smug satisfaction. His gaunt, withered face twisted into a grotesque smile.

Dread coiled in Vincent's gut.

Against every instinct screaming at him not to, he turned.

And there she was.

Alive. Glowing with health. Smiling sweetly.

Victoria stood at the entrance, her arm linked with that of a tall, dark-haired man whose relaxed, mocking gaze made Vincent want to turn and run for his life.

\* \* \*

Victoria's father... well, he looked like a complete wreck.

Hunched, twitchy-eyed, and visibly unraveling, he stood frozen in the middle of the hall, unable to find words. His desperate gaze darted left, then right, searching for support—and finding none.

Not once did Vincent look at me. Or at his daughter.

I, however, had a few seconds to spot some familiar faces—and among them, Max stood out in particular.

There he was, arm-in-arm with a pretty young woman wearing a red bracelet, grinning like he belonged here. Decked out in a crisp white three-piece suit, he actually blended in with the aristocrats remarkably well.

In one hand, he was holding a canapé topped with caviar.

Not even crab.

The second I noticed, I caught his eye and gave him a slow, deliberate shake of my head.

Max, instantly realizing what I meant, went red, choked on the caviar, and whipped his head away.

Traitor.

Once this was over, I was going to teach that scoundrel a lesson about the importance of honoring a gentleman's bet. I didn't care that he wasn't hosting the event.

If the menu didn't have crab, you brought your own.



A man's honor was at stake.

All of this flashed through my mind in the five seconds after Victoria had spoken—and by then, the Nature Prince had managed to pull himself together.

With arms spread wide, he stepped toward us.

Just for the hell of it, I gave a subtle push of energy against his armor.

He froze in place half a step away, barely hiding the fear on his face.

“My daughter! You're alive,” he said, voice cracking with theatrical emotion. “They said it was impossible—but here you are! I'm so relieved those vile assassins failed.”

He snatched a glass of champagne from a passing tray and drained it in one gulp.

“I'm quite happy about that myself,” Victoria replied, her smile polite, her voice calm.

Too calm.

Inside her, her elemental energy roared like a hurricane.

Not exactly hard to spot.

Sparing her a glance, I said loudly, every word dipped in formal restraint, “Let's not spoil the celebration with any... misplaced displays of family affection. We're here to honor the birthday girl, after all.”

Victoria inclined her head gracefully, then turned her gaze away from her father and toward a girl in black standing nearby, tears welling in her eyes.

Neither of us gave a damn about how the crowd would interpret it.

Holding herself together with sheer force of will, Victoria walked toward the girl—Valerie—and offered her a small, warm smile.

“Happy birthday,” she said softly.

“Valerie, you look absolutely stunning today,” I said, lowering my voice with solemn warmth as I pulled a gold-foil box from my jacket and held it out to her. “Please accept this humble gift from us.”

For Victoria, everything else seemed to vanish in that moment—the trembling, the hurricane of emotions.

The weight in her chest eased. Her steps steadied. Her focus narrowed to the friend beside her, the one person who still made her feel safe.

And frankly, I was grateful.

Without a scene, without a breakdown, Victoria had pulled it off—right here, in front of half the aristocracy.

Every guest here could see it clearly: the girl standing before them might very well become the future Princess of the Nature Clan.

As for forgiveness from the Fire Prince... not a chance.

Public humiliation inside his own house? Yeah, no way he was letting that go.

And speak of the devil—

I caught the approach of a heavysset old man whose elemental aura practically cracked the air around him.

“Wonderful to see you alive and well, Victoria,” said the Fire Prince, smiling with courtly charm. “Know that within these walls, you are always welcome.”

“Thank you, Your Highness,” Victoria replied smoothly, matching his formality without missing a beat.

The old man gave a dignified nod—then shifted his sharp gaze to me.

“May I steal your companion for a moment?” he asked, offering a diplomatic smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“Of course, Your Highness. I have plenty to discuss with Valerie,” Victoria said at once, taking her friend’s arm and leading her away.

The old man turned back to me, his grin tightening.

“So you’re Marcus.” He gave me an appraising once-over, then sipped his champagne. “I’ll admit, I never thought I’d owe you a thank-you.”

I arched a brow. “Then maybe skip it. Spare yourself the regret later.”

He let out a short, sharp laugh. “Regret’s not really my style, boy. Flexibility—that’s what matters at my age. You live in the now, not the past. Because any day might be your last.” His smile was sly, sharp as a blade.

“Pity more aristocrats don’t share that outlook,” I said lazily.

“Oh, we both know how short the lives of stubborn fools tend to be.” Then—to my surprise—he extended his hand.

The hall went deathly still.

It wasn’t just a handshake.

It was a public acknowledgment.

By extending his hand, the Fire Prince was publicly recognizing me as an equal. And through me, legitimizing the entire Shadow Clan’s claim to power.

I could practically feel the dozens of curious, stunned eyes zeroing in on me from all sides.

I hesitated only a heartbeat before clasping his hand firmly.

And when the Prince finally moved off, his entourage trailing behind him like loyal dogs, he immediately became the center of attention again—dragging the crowd’s focus along with him.

Perfect.

I seized the opportunity and slipped over to the buffet.

I was starving.

\* \* \*

“I’m so glad you’re alive!” Valerie squeezed Victoria’s hand fiercely once

they were alone.

“Did you really think I was that easy to kill?” Victoria tipped her nose in the air, voice teasing—though her smile was genuine, filled with warmth.

Valerie was her closest friend—the only person at this ball, aside from Marcus, who made her feel truly safe.

Victoria was certain: if it hadn’t been for that infuriating northern whirlwind barreling into her life, she wouldn’t have made it through today.

It was his warm hand, his steady presence, that had kept her grounded. Without him, she would’ve shattered. And with her, the entire future of the Nature Clan.

She wouldn’t let that happen.

Every plan she made, every step she took—was for the sake of saving her Clan.

For giving it the bright, free future it deserved.

“Thank you,” Victoria whispered, her eyes tracing the contours of her friend’s somber black gown. “You know...” she said thoughtfully, “black actually suits you.”

“Oh, shut up,” Valerie huffed, waving a hand in mock annoyance—then eagerly tore into the little gold box.

Inside was a bracelet, black as midnight, inlaid with a scattering of pearl-like gemstones.

“Looks like you’ll have to wear black more often.” Victoria’s smile softened as she admired the gift.

“He knew?” Valerie gasped, fastening the bracelet onto her wrist. “He knew I’d wear black today? He picked this himself, didn’t he?”

“Sorry.” Victoria’s expression flickered with guilt. “I was a little busy fighting for my life.”

Valerie gave her a flat look. “As if that’s anything new for you.” Then,

grudgingly, she admitted, “Fine. Your guy’s got good taste. But I still don’t approve of this obsession of yours. What happened to the reckless girl who only cared about battles, the Red Zone, and boosting her gift?”

“He saved me,” Victoria said simply, lifting one shoulder in a soft shrug.

Valerie frowned but didn’t argue. “Still don’t like the guy,” she muttered, casting a dismissive glance toward the banquet tables. “Speaking of which—where is he?”

Victoria turned too, scanning the hall.

Marcus was nowhere in sight.

Neither was her father.

Biting her lip, Victoria’s fingers instinctively found the jade pendant at her chest—the one hiding a capsule of deadly poison—and clenched it tightly.

“Too late again...” she whispered under her breath.

Maybe it was for the best that it wouldn’t be her.

The thought surfaced unexpectedly, and with it, the tight knot of anxiety that had plagued her since childhood finally loosened. Her hand fell away from the pendant, and for the first time in a long while, she allowed herself to simply enjoy chatting with her friend.

## CHAPTER 8

I MOVED THROUGH THE DARK HALLWAY without a single stray thought in my head. Just another name on the list. Another creature to erase so the world could breathe a little easier.

One strike—death. Elemental energy, stolen from someone unworthy of it, surged warm through my veins.

That feeling had become second nature to me, something I'd lived in for most of my life.

Some Paladins called it duty. Others, necessity. A few even claimed it was a sacred calling.

I saw it for what it was—elimination. And whether it was a portal creature or a human scum in disguise, it didn't matter. The only real difference was how they looked. Beneath the skin, some of them were far worse than anything that crawled out of a rift.

What's the difference between a beast that slaughters a hundred innocents and a man who does the same?

On the surface, none.

But then you remember—creatures kill out of hunger, out of instinct, out of corrupted elemental need. A human does it with full awareness. Cold calculation. They'll set the world on fire for a coin or a strip of land. And once a person starts treating that kind of behavior as normal, they forfeit their right to command elemental power. They become a threat to the world on par with an S-class portal abomination.

Sure, not every Gifted who gains strength loses their soul. But those who cross the line? They need to be erased—so something better might take

root in their place.

Usually, the Order pointed us toward those who'd crossed that line.

Now, that decision was mine alone.

One strike—death.

“Think that was the last one,” I mused, coming to a stop in front of the double doors leading to the Prince's private office.

The central mansion of the Nature Clan, once bustling with people, now stood silent. I hadn't touched the ones who chose to run. Didn't even show myself. Only those who got in my way—who stood ready to protect the monster I'd come to destroy—met their end.

Silently, I stepped inside.

The first thing I saw was a man frantically trying to zip up a bulging duffel bag. He cursed under his breath, wrestling with the zipper, which had snagged on a crumpled five-thousand credit bill.

An open, half-empty safe stood nearby. A crushed folder peeked from his jacket, and his pockets bulged with hastily stuffed jewelry.

Once I confirmed we were alone, I stepped out of the Darkness and closed the door with a quiet click.

“What took you so long? Where are the porters?” the Nature Prince barked, spinning around—until his eyes locked on mine.

“Heading somewhere, Your Highness?” I asked politely.

“You... not you again...” he stammered, letting the bag slide to the floor. “You dare trespass into the private domain of a Great Clan's Prince? Do you have any idea what the consequences will be?”

“No one saw me.” I stepped further inside, slow and unhurried. “Aside from a couple of fools who thought your life was worth dying for. The rest ran before I even showed up. Word of your speech has already spread through half the capital.”

“Sniveling rats...” he spat, face contorted in fury. Slowly, deliberately, he began drawing energy into his chest. “But that changes nothing. I’m still the Prince! You’ll hang for this, you filthy mongrel.”

“Then it’s a good thing we won’t be telling anyone,” I said with a smile.

That was all the warning he got.

His eyes flared with green light, and with a lazy swipe of his arm, he hurled a dense wave of elemental energy at me.

“Devour,” I murmured calmly.

A veil of Darkness surged into being, catching the blast mid-flight. I couldn’t absorb it fully—my connection to the Element wasn’t strong enough yet—but it scattered, broke apart, and dissolved into the self-contained space I’d created.

By my estimate, the cornered Prince had dumped around ten thousand units into that strike. All of it—just gone.

“Shame.” I didn’t bother hiding the sigh. “Guess I’ll have to use it myself.”

No more threats. No more posturing. He straightened his shoulders and began crafting something massive. The entire mansion trembled with the buildup.

Figures. For all his power, he was still a desk-bound noble who hadn’t fought a real fight in decades. If Victoria had the same energy reserves, she would’ve given me a run for my money.

“Lock.”

A pulse of Darkness erupted from my hands, coating the walls and ceiling in black. Only the floor and the central area of the room remained untouched—where I stood, and where the dumbfounded Prince now stared at his empty hands.

“What did you do?” His eyes went wide as the massive spell he’d prepared vanished.



Well, not vanished—absorbed into the enclosed space I'd formed around us. But he hadn't figured that part out yet.

"Stopped you from blowing up your ancestral mansion," I said casually. "The future Princess might still need it. But by all means, don't let me stop you. Continue."

I gestured invitingly.

"Don't get cocky, pup!" the Prince roared, hurling a tangle of elemental roots at me like whips. I managed to deflect them—but barely. Their speed and force caught me off guard, and judging by his startled expression, he hadn't expected that either.

He was stunned—not by the attack itself, but by the fact that he'd pulled it off without burning a single drop of his internal energy.

I brushed the remnants of his last spell from my sleeve. "This is a Duel Square. A space outside time and reality. I created it, but it feeds off both our sources. It'll exist until one flow consumes the other."

The Prince hesitated, eyes narrowing as he processed my words. Coward he might be, but stupid he was not.

Then, finally, realization dawned.

The walls around us shifted—gradually fading from inky black to a murky shade of green.

Good. He figured it out.

He'd realized that the sheer imbalance between our elemental cores meant his native energy—Nature—was vastly more abundant here.

"Fool!" he snarled triumphantly, his green eyes gleaming with renewed vigor. He raised his arms, and a deluge of elemental strikes came crashing down—a storm of vines, thorns, stone shards, and razor-like leaves, all hurtling toward me from every direction.

Showtime.

He didn't bother probing for weakness. Just tried to flatten me under a

storm of raw power.

Had even half that energy leaked into the real world, the entire building would've been shredded to splinters.

Luckily for him, nothing went to waste inside the Duel Square. The energy stayed contained, cycling through the space I'd created. Otherwise, old Aks would've had a stroke watching someone this powerful burn through resources like the Element owed him a debt.

Then he'd resurrect himself just to strangle the idiot who didn't deserve a tenth of the power he had.

Back in my day, the Order believed in reincarnation. That each powerful Gifted's death opened the way for another to rise. That the amount of elemental energy available to humanity was finite—and every drop needed to be cherished.

No one ever proved it—but it always made sense to me.

“What the hell?” the Prince gasped as his attacks halted midair, frozen an inch from my body.

Thinking he hadn't pushed hard enough, he tried to brute-force the final inch with sheer pressure. It didn't work. He collapsed to one knee, drained.

Emptying a source that size in under a minute? That was impressive.

With that kind of channeling efficiency, he could've closed B-class Portals solo. Too bad he wasted it on politics.

I tapped one of the frozen vine-blades with a finger. Instantly, all his techniques unraveled, the energy flowing back into the walls.

Fuel for the space I controlled.

“Oh, one more thing I forgot to mention.” I let my voice rise a notch. “In this place, all energy obeys the one it recognizes as its master.”

“My energy answered to you? Don't talk nonsense.” The Prince stumbled back a step, his voice cracking with disbelief. “You're Shadow

Clan scum. That's... that's impossible. Shadow Gifted can't do that. I would know. Everyone would know!"

"Who told you my Element was Shadow, Your Highness?" I tilted my head, voice light as silk. "Now, why don't you answer me instead? Where do I find the person who created this?" I raised my hand, revealing Victoria's Clan Amulet.

"You touched it... That's impossible... Only our bloodline can..." His eyes widened in horror, realization crashing over him like a wave. "Ah! That's it. I knew it. It was you! The Amulet was tainted with Death energy, even though my daughter's alive... You tricked me. But no one can control Death but them. I knew those traitorous bastards didn't help me out of charity—you're working for the Death Clan, aren't you? You're one of them. I won't tell you a damn thing!"

His wild-eyed stare turned fully unhinged. Tens of thousands of particles of Nature energy swirled in the air around him—but none obeyed. None answered his call. He reached out, desperate to seize control, but the Element ignored him like a pet that had finally grown tired of its master.

"I work for no one," I said coolly. "And what you're seeing around us —"

I lifted my hand.

A single flower bloomed in my palm—quiet, soft, radiant with life.

"—is Shadow. And Death. And Nature."

A heartbeat later, the walls, ceiling, and parts of the floor were swallowed by a pitch-black veil.

"Primal Darkness..." the Prince whispered, trembling as he tried to retreat, only to stumble backward over his safe and crash to the floor. "I knew it. It's you. The demon. The monster who will bring about the end of the world!"

"Oh, that little prophecy." I exhaled slowly. "People still believe that nonsense? Shame." My fingers curled in the air. "Last words?"

“Burn in hell, you filthy freak!” he screamed, eyes wide with terror.

“As you wish.” I gave a nod—and the command. “Devour.”

Darkness surged forward and swallowed the Nature Prince whole. His screams didn’t last long. Resistance crumbled into agony, and agony dissolved into silence. Just as he’d wanted, he went straight to hell.

The Duel Square collapsed.

Over two thousand units of Nature energy poured into my reservoir—the maximum my core could hold at that moment. It strained under the weight. Still, the excess would need to be subdued and reworked into something usable. But that was only a matter of time.

“End the world, huh,” I muttered, catching my reflection in a nearby mirror. “Maybe you’re right.” A smirk tugged at my lips as I stepped back into the Darkness.

\* \* \*

I emerged inside the men’s restroom on the second floor of the ballroom.

Crossing to the mirror, I adjusted my suit jacket and caught a flicker of green sparks dancing in my irises.

Too much of the Prince’s energy—still unrefined.

Until I tamed it, I’d need to mask the effect with illusion.

With a steady breath, I touched my Amulet and closed my eyes. When I opened them, my gaze had returned to its normal state—normal by Imperial standards, at least. No need to terrify the locals just yet.

Still, I’d need to stay alert around anyone with a talent for sensing energy. Gabriel was already watching me too closely.

Once I confirmed everything looked in order, I headed back into the ballroom. The place was nearly empty now—only the most persistent guests lingered, scattered across gaming tables and the inner garden.

I found my companion nestled beneath the apple trees in a secluded

alcove.

“You finally showed up,” Valerie snapped, arms folded. “Do they not teach northern savages that abandoning your lady mid-reception is the height of rudeness? I even had to cover for you. Do you have any idea how that looked?”

“Like there’s no longer any bad blood between the Fire and Nature Clans?” I said, all innocence.

“Well, look at that,” she said dryly. “The brute knows politics.”

“Thank you, Valerie,” Victoria said warmly, as she stepped in for a hug.

For a heartbeat, the fire-born frost in Valerie’s demeanor cracked. With a polite nod, she excused herself and melted into the shadows of the garden.

As soon as I sat beside Victoria, she looped her arm through mine and asked in a soft voice, “Is it done?”

“It’s over.” I stroked her hair.

She let out a breath of relief and leaned against my shoulder. “Thank you,” she whispered.

We left the reception twenty minutes later. But we didn’t head home until the edge of dawn.

I kept my word. That night, we went straight to the maximum-security holding facility.

No official dared stop her—not when the princess’s face had led every Imperial broadcast for the last twenty-four hours. And it would’ve looked very strange to keep people imprisoned for plotting her murder while she stood there, very much alive, demanding their release.

Still, we spent two exhausting hours tangling with red tape.

Victoria was clearly running on fumes. But she refused to rest while a single one of her people remained locked up.

Even Maria had officially signed on as her vassal—during that disastrous tea party, no less.

I didn't complain. Especially since Maria promised to keep my discount.

Once everyone was released, we loaded them into a convoy and moved out.

No ambushes. We were shadowed by a Fire Clan strike team and trailed by six vans full of reporters, but that was it.

Instead of returning to the Nature Clan estate, we turned toward the Shadow District.

It made sense. Victoria didn't want to return to the place where her father had died. But I still didn't know why she refused to stay in her secure Unity Square residence.

When her guards realized where she was going, they followed immediately. "To protect her," they said.

Amusing, considering they'd utterly botched it the day before.

Victoria passed out en route. At the last second, I rerouted us to my apartment.

Albert raised a brow but didn't argue.

He knew my place was just as secure as the district itself.

That wasn't the only reason.

Bringing the princess—and her entire guard—straight into the embattled Shadow District would've been tantamount to a public alliance. I didn't want to dump all our problems onto her shoulders.

She already had enough ahead of her—internal politics, Clan reform, coalition pressure.

My place wasn't perfect. But it was technically neutral ground. And that alone might keep some of the wolves at bay.

“We’re here,” I murmured, nudging her gently.

She didn’t stir. Just tightened her grip on my arm like it was a pillow.

“Albert, the district’s yours for the night,” I said, rubbing my temples. “I’ll handle the princess.”

He gave a quiet nod, his gaze softening as it rested on Victoria.

I didn’t know how he’d felt toward her before. But now, it was clear—he looked at her like the sister he’d once sworn to protect. The one we’d finally convinced to settle in the district.

Well... “convinced.” He’d dropped her on Bob’s doorstep and called it a day.

“And them?” Albert asked, gesturing toward the twelve members of Victoria’s personal guard, who’d spilled out of the van and were currently scanning every approach to the building, throwing me wary, feral stares.

Funny. Just a short while ago, that had been him.

“Let the watchdogs patrol the perimeter. But they’re not stepping inside.”

“They won’t like that,” he said with a heavy sigh.

“I’m not asking,” I said with a shrug, scooping Victoria into my arms. “They can take it or leave.”

The second I approached the entrance, the guards stepped to block me—then stopped cold as they slammed into a human barricade named Albert.

Ignoring the shuffle behind me, I crossed the threshold, reinforcing the wards as I entered, and carried Victoria to the only bed in the apartment that had been made. I laid her gently on the pillow.

I had every intention of sleeping in the guest room.

But the moment I pulled away, the girl who’d looked so small and fragile in sleep latched onto my wrist with surprising strength.

“Marcus... stay,” she whispered, tugging me down beside her.

## CHAPTER 9

SLEEP NEVER came.

Morning had long since arrived, and I lay sprawled across the crooked bed, watching the peacefully sleeping girl beside me, her jade-green hair cascading across the pillow like a silken waterfall.

A bright shaft of autumn sunlight cut through the curtains, falling directly across her bare chest—partially covered by a ragged scrap of what used to be a blanket.

Turns out, Victoria had a lot more energy than I'd anticipated. If I hadn't recently refreshed the protective wards, the flimsy walls of this residential high-rise wouldn't have survived the night.

She'd passed out fairly quickly afterward. I wasn't so lucky. Sex had only stirred up the tangled elemental energy inside me, amplifying it—fueling a false sense of clarity and alertness I knew wouldn't last.

Still... no regrets.

"Well, except for forgetting to restock the fridge," I muttered, eyeing the bare interior.

At least I still had coffee.

I brewed two strong cups, filled one to the brim, and stepped out onto the balcony, sipping as the crisp air hit my face.

Not even the muffled shouting and clattering from below could spoil my mood.

The Imperials were making their third attempt now. I leaned on the railing, watching as they waved their arms and argued in vain. Their support



squad, more cautious, kept throwing uneasy glances at Albert—who lounged behind Lexa, polishing his golden elemental blade with theatrical indifference.

From this height, I had a clear view of the courtyard. For the finer details, I relied on my parrot. He tracked every twitch, every breath, his bright eyes locked on the Imperials like a predator waiting for someone to make a fatal mistake.

Just when it looked like the standoff might fizzle for the third time, a goddamn tank rolled up.

An eight-wheeled beast with twin turrets and a sleek, silent barrel. It looked capable of leveling half the block.

Smooth lines, multi-element shielding circuits, elemental readings on par with two high-tier Gifted—and that subtle aura of concentrated threat hanging thick in the air.

The only thing ruining the aesthetic was the obnoxiously large Light Clan crest stamped across its turret.

I downed the rest of my scalding coffee, threw on some clothes, and headed downstairs.

“Morning, Your Highness,” a mustached soldier said, snapping to attention as I approached the perimeter. Callsign: Spine.

Whether he’d earned the name for his height or for snapping enemy spines, I had no idea. But he was clearly the one in charge of Victoria’s personal guard. And aside from yesterday’s tactical failure, the guy looked solid—definitely not a rookie. A proper third-rank Guardian, too.

“Morning,” I replied easily. “Her Highness is still asleep. Nothing’s going to happen to her inside the building. But once she steps out, her safety’s on you.”

“Of course, Your Highness,” he said quickly—far more eager than I expected. “Do you... need assistance?”

“Nope.” I gave him a casual grin. “But thanks. Keep an eye on the

perimeter. There's a guy a klick southwest who's been watching your formation for the last twenty minutes."

That wiped the smile off his face. He gave a sharp nod, adjusted his rifle, and sprinted off.

Still too reliant on firearms, these guys.

I turned the corner, where the gleaming white-and-gold monster stood idling. Its very presence had rattled Albert enough to pull him from his usual post and draw the attention of every Nameless guard in the district.

The standoff at the entrance had officially escalated.

"Nice ride," I said to one of the junior Imperials guarding the outer ring.

The kid blinked like a stunned deer—then, panic surging, raised his rifle. "Stop right there! Hands where I can see them!"

I rolled my eyes but complied.

He took a cautious step back, clearly gaining confidence now that the others were watching. That confidence doubled when a pudgy man began bulldozing his way through the crowd.

Now this guy, I remembered.

He was the only Imperial in the area wearing a business suit. Judging by how the buttons strained across his stomach, the Light Clan had been feeding him well.

"There you are, Your Highness," he sneered, practically spitting the title.

"Wasn't exactly hiding," I said with a crooked grin, recognizing the man who'd been chatting with the Nature Prince just before the old bastard ran off to pack his bags. "Rubens... what was it again?"

"Lane," he replied, pleased with himself. "Deputy Chief of Central District Police."

“Huh.” I let my fingers glide across the tank’s smooth plating. “Fancy connections for a deputy chief.”

He flinched at that. None of the tank’s active barriers had triggered at my touch—and that did not sit well with Lane.

Lexa didn’t look too happy either. She tried to push her way toward me, but I gave her a subtle shake of the head. She paused at the district boundary, catching on to what I intended.

Enough was enough.

The daily appearances of armed Imperial squads were choking operations, stirring panic, and turning the Shadow Clan into a sideshow.

So when I was informed that I was now a suspect in the “disappearance” of the Nature Prince and called in for questioning, I didn’t resist.

They clamped on the energy-dampening cuffs. Hauled me into the police transport like a trophy.

Lexa was fuming. Her scowls could’ve burned holes in armor. She kept sending angry messages insisting the whole thing was a farce and the Nature Prince’s case had only been logged under “missing,” not “murder.”

I didn’t care.

Lane clearly wanted to take me somewhere. I decided to let him.

As old Aks used to say: *Sometimes, when the car starts to skid, you steer into it.* Strange advice from a man who’d never driven a day in his life.

I’d always wondered where Aks picked up those gems of “wisdom.” He never talked about his past—just shrugged or told you to piss off.

The first red flag came five minutes into the ride.

We didn’t head to the central precinct. Instead, we veered south, well beyond the district’s boundaries.

The soldiers seated across from me were tense. Hands hovered near triggers. Even with the cuffs on, they weren't taking any chances.

Oops.

I'd forgotten to adjust my eye color illusion. They could see the cuffs were active... but also that they weren't doing a damn thing.

Well, no point keeping up appearances now.

With a casual stretch, I undid the cuffs and placed them beside me.

The guards tensed. Two rifles leveled at my chest—but when I simply folded my arms behind my head and leaned back, they hesitated.

We drove for just over an hour, eventually arriving at what looked like an abandoned police building in a dead industrial zone.

The lot was surrounded by empty fields and rusting warehouses. The precinct itself was crumbling, stained with time, and definitely not in use.

But hey, they brought me here for a reason. Might as well see it through.

The escort marched me down a long hallway to the farthest room, then left without a word—just a few silent, vaguely sympathetic glances.

The moment they disappeared, I summoned the Cat.

He stretched languidly, took one look around the damp, dust-choked room, and narrowed his eyes in disgust. “Mrrow?”

“Yeah, I don't need muscle for this one,” I said, nodding toward the tiny barred window. “I need your ears.”

“Pffft.” He flattened his ears, clearly unimpressed, then gave the air a halfhearted sniff.

He hated jobs that didn't involve claws and spilled guts. And since I'd left his treats—the elemental crystals—at home, the grumpy little bastard wasn't exactly eager to cooperate.

Still, it only took him two seconds to catch the scent. His ears perked

up, his tail snapped straight, and drool began to gather at the corners of his mouth. “Mrr-eow?” His eyes went wide—pure hope in feline form.

“No,” I said flatly. “You can’t eat the tank.”

Instant disappointment. He sneezed in disdain and began to slink back into the Darkness.

“If you pull it off...” My voice followed him as he vanished, low and deliberate. “I’ll give you two crystals.”

Black fur bristled mid-step. He froze, then backed out the way he came—tail first—fixing me with a narrowed, squint-eyed glare.

“Mrr?”

“You think your smug little face deserves four crystals?” I said with a snort. “Three. And you can go hunt rats in the district.”

“Mrrr-yow!” He gave a thoughtful nod, then launched himself straight out the window—a fluffy manipulator on a mission.

A second later, the iron door to my cozy little “cell” swung open, and in stepped Lane. “Porter. Why the hell isn’t the suspect restrained?” he barked, his brows crashing down like thunderclouds.

Someone mumbled something unintelligible, and Lane scowled harder, casting a wary glance my way.

I stood by with the picture of innocence, whistling softly.

“Apologies for the delay, Mister Marcus,” he said with a caricature of civility, eyes flicking to my unshackled hands. “May I ask who you were just speaking to?”

“No one,” I said easily, nodding toward the barred window. “Just thinking out loud.” I motioned to the black folder in his hand. “So, what’ve you got for me?”

He hesitated, then set it on the dusty table and brushed off two stools—sinking onto one and nudging the other toward me. “All right then, Mr. Marcus.” He waited for me to sit. “Let’s start with something simple.

Where were you last night?”

What followed barely qualified as an interrogation—more like a limp checklist of boilerplate questions. I was pretty sure Lexa had already filled most of this out before I even arrived. Lane pretended to jot notes and flipped on the recorder for show—though I’d bet my cloak it wasn’t even running.

I played dumb. That was the whole point—stall, stall, stall.

About thirty minutes in, a message popped up on Lane’s phone. He exhaled a little too noticeably, snapped the folder shut, and stood abruptly. “We’ll call you back in,” he said, his tone suddenly all forced politeness, already halfway for the door.

I met the line with a patient, condescending smile.

I waited exactly one minute.

Then the world exploded.

A deafening blast ripped through the building. In the space of a heartbeat, the entire structure ceased to exist.

Molten elemental fire surged through every room. Off-world metal tore down the ceiling. Purging beams of Light reduced debris to black dust—and then a hailstorm of deadly stone grit rained down to finish the job.

All of it hit in under a second.

Turns out, multi-element warheads are no joke. I didn’t even want to think about how much those cost.

There are maybe a dozen portal creatures in the known world capable of naturally producing that kind of effect—and all of them are classified S-class or higher.

If the locals had figured out how to replicate that technologically, well... I was honestly impressed.

Too bad for them, I’m immune to all elemental side effects. As for the direct hit? I’d thrown up a Darkness cocoon just in time.

Still, the blast shoved fifteen thousand units of raw elemental energy into me. Even the cocoon hadn't fully absorbed it. I stood—again—naked but for my scorched cloak, tied loosely around one arm, in the middle of a smoldering crater.

Seriously. Again.

My custom-tailored suit—the one that took five damn days to make—had been vaporized. Along with two hundred units of energy I'd spent shielding myself from being turned into barbecue.

Spitting soot and brushing ash from my hair, I stepped out of the wreckage and stared down the barrel of a tank—its muzzle still glowing from a four-element discharge.

Nobody else survived.

I'd hoped Lane would call it off last second. He didn't. At least he and his men died quickly.

The Cat didn't like playing with weaklings. He'd ended it fast.

Speaking of which—there was no sign of the fuzzy little menace.

That was bad.

I sprinted to the hatch and threw it open. “Hands off the Imperial hardware!”

There he was—caught mid-lick, tongue stretched toward a color-marked shell labeled with a glowing *S*.

He ignored me, of course. Classic Cat. His front paws were already raised, ready to absorb the “treat”—until I grabbed him by the scruff.

“Mrrr-ryaa!” he hissed, flailing indignantly, eyes still locked hungrily on the twin multi-elemental shells.

“All right, fine. You can guard them,” I said, letting the flea-bitten gremlin go. “But if even one goes missing, I’m loading you into the cannon and firing.”

“Frrr!” he huffed, dramatically offended—but flopped across the shells with blissful abandon, purring like an engine.

Just being near a power source like that was practically heaven. He stretched luxuriously and rolled over with a dopey, contented grin.

Once I was sure my prize—the one that had cost me time, effort, fashion, and two hundred units—was safe, I activated my communicator.

The line clicked.

“Let me guess,” Albert said, his voice perfectly calm. “They tied you up and threw you in a river. You swam out and need a van for the loot?”

“You seriously think I’d let them dump me in a river? In the middle of autumn?” I muttered, shivering in the breeze. “They shot me. With a tank.”

“What?” His voice cracked.

“You heard me,” I said, still picking cinders out of my hair. “I’m fine. Just not sure where to stash it now.”

“Stash what?”

“...The tank.”

“You still have it?”

“What did you think this whole trip was about?” I said. “Anyway, reason I’m calling—any of your people tank operators? Also, a garage would be great. I doubt I’m driving it back to the capital.”

“How long’s the crew been dead?” Leon asked, his voice high-pitched and excited as he cut in before Albert could respond.

Huh. No “sir” this time. No faked politeness either.

“About three minutes,” I said. “Why?”

“That model’s the *Leviathan*—top spec! It’s got a self-destruct system onboard—we’ve got maybe... five and a half minutes to disarm it. You have to listen to me very carefully. One mistake and that thing’ll—”



I stopped listening.

Instead, I placed a hand on the plating and closed my eyes.

Seven multi-element constructs were embedded into the machine's core. Only one was time-triggered.

"Consume," I whispered.

In an instant, the construct's power was gone. Neutralized. From inside the tank, a furry face popped up, scowling.

Of course the greedy little beast had felt it—I'd just eaten a slice of his precious dessert.

"Fine. You'll get your fourth crystal," I muttered, reopening the call.

"...Now gently disconnect the yellow wire from connector seven—no, five—no, three—" Leon was still rattling instructions, with Patrick and at least three others arguing in the background.

"I've already disarmed it," I said, cutting him off. "Anything else?"

"...You what?" he sputtered.

"Yeah, we're good. Sent the coordinates. Send some drivers—and bring Roe. The security system might eat anyone else."

I ended the call and leaned back into the hatch.

"Reminder," I said to the Cat. "Bad people—snackable. Good people—no touchy."

He blinked once in acknowledgment, then curled deeper into the ammo rack, purring louder.

I draped my cloak over my shoulders, still shivering, and trudged off into the wind.

Time to find a cab. Again.

## CHAPTER 10

HOT WATER FROM THE TUB soaked into my bones, chasing off the chill left by the autumn wind. The jets eased the tension in my shoulders, cold whiskey cleared the last of the morning fog from my mind, and the hearty meat platter finally calmed my stomach after a hectic day.

“Now this is divine,” I murmured with a contented smile, eyes on the ceiling.

Getting a cab while half-naked had proven harder than expected—especially with a Clan Amulet around my neck. Apparently, people got jumpy when they saw a shivering man in battle-torn clothes waving them down like a lunatic. Luckily, one good-hearted family man took pity and gave me a lift to the *Southern Pantheon*.

Yeah, I’d chosen to head here. Back at my place, Victoria was still asleep, and the Shadow District wasn’t exactly known for peace and quiet. I needed a break somewhere the Overseer’s fingers wouldn’t reach.

SoPa fit the bill on both counts. Even if I’d spent half my pitiful savings on a semi-deluxe hotel suite, it was worth every credit.

The backlash from absorbing the Nature Prince’s energy had hit harder than I thought. My body needed real rest.

The last couple of days had been... a lot. But the momentum had shifted. The district was stable, my link to the Element was growing steadily, and my source now had enough power to keep two familiars active at once. With a bit more growth, I could probably summon a third.

Oh—and I had a tank.

“Right. The tank...” I muttered, swirling my glass. “That thing’s gonna

bleed me dry.”

And not just the tank.

Lexa had stabilized the district’s finances, sure—but that just meant we weren’t bleeding money anymore. We still weren’t making it.

I had plans to change that, of course. The only problem? Plans needed funding too.

Still, I had arms, legs, and a head that mostly worked. I’d survive. And I wouldn’t let my people fall either.

According to Lexa’s reports, our current balance would hold for another two weeks. That gave me just enough time to figure something out.

Plus, the hundred-thousand-credit transfer from the Light Prince should be arriving soon. I hadn’t told him about the Nature Prince’s untimely demise—but I was sure that sly old fox had already pieced it together.

Now the question was: what’s his next move?

Unlike the Overseer, whose every step I could practically smell in advance, the Light Prince was a mystery. And I liked that. It made things... interesting.

I caught myself smiling. Even here, even now, I couldn’t stop thinking about the mission. Some habits just didn’t die. So much for a vacation.

Back in the day, I’d been sure that without old Aks breathing down my neck, I’d have walked away from it all.

Clearly, I’d been wrong.

Eventually, I popped the last bit of meat into my mouth, stifled a yawn, and headed to bed to catch up on the sleep I’d missed the night before.

The bed—soft as a cloud—knocked me out cold within minutes. I woke up hours later to the buzzing of a communicator.

Cracking my eyes open, I ran a quick internal check and nodded. The energy had settled perfectly. My body was ready for more action.

“I’m listening,” I said lazily, answering the buzzing call.

“Oh, now he’s listening, huh?” The voice on the line was sharp with outrage. “This is the fifth time I’ve—”

I hung up.

Some people needed to learn how to lead with a greeting.

I headed to the bathroom to wash up. It was already dark outside, and the clock read just past eight in the evening. Morning, by my new schedule.

Routine? Never heard of it. I was on vacation, after all.

Second call. Same number.

“At your service,” I said cheerfully, picking up.

“Do you have any idea how rude it is to—” The same voice started again.

I hung up again.

No “hello,” no “how are you,” no “sorry for waking you.” Honestly.

Just as I stepped out of the bathroom, a polite knock sounded at the door. I glanced between it and the still-buzzing communicator, scowling.

“Max, seriously,” I muttered, swinging the door open—only to stop short. Lexa stood there, all smiles, holding a plastic garment bag. “I’m not dressed,” I said reflexively, though technically I still had my cloak wrapped around my waist. I wasn’t a total savage.

“Clearly,” she said with a smirk, handing me the suit. “Also, your little roadside catwalk got picked up by *Capital Mirror*. Broadcast on *Storm Channel*. Want to see the headline?”

“No thanks,” I said with a shrug. “Was it at least a flattering angle?”

“Surprisingly, yes.” She smiled again—far too cheerfully.

That was the first red flag.

Something was off. Still only half-dressed, I walked up to her, sniffed

the air, and narrowed my eyes. “Have you been drinking?”

“Is this a dry district?” she replied, feigning innocence.

It was then I noticed her outfit—white cocktail dress, designer jewelry, stiletto heels. Not exactly business attire.

“One sec.” I raised a finger and answered the still-buzzing communicator. “Are you trying to invite me out drinking?” I cut to the point.

“Well... yeah,” Max replied, caught off guard. “I mean, we already started—but that’s on you. You’re ten minutes late. Just show up, even if you’re naked. Some of the ladies here wouldn’t mind, to be honest,” he said in a conspiratorial whisper.

“Next time, lead with that,” I said, exhaling. “And save the complaints for after you share critical strategic intelligence.”

“Like you’d listen anyway.”

“Exactly.” I flashed a grin and hung up, then turned back to Lexa. “You do know where we’re going, right?”

“Obviously,” she replied with a faint, knowing glance.

“Great.” I got dressed in a hurry.

The suit, thankfully, was low-effort. Not really a full suit, actually—just slacks, a blazer, and a plain T-shirt. Add some socks and underwear, and you’re good to go.

No brand tags. Smelled like sanitizer. Cheap, in other words.

Either the district’s finances were worse than I thought, or Lexa just didn’t trust this outfit to survive the evening.

We rode the elevator down together, and in the mirrored walls, we looked like we came from different worlds.

Lexa noticed and smirked again.

If she thought that would embarrass me—bad call. Any outfit that

couldn't survive a tank blast was disposable. I wasn't about to start blowing money on fancy threads just to look pretty.

Was that a prank attempt?

I squinted suspiciously and pinched her bare shoulder.

“Hey!”

“Just making sure you're not an impostor,” I said, hands raised in mock surrender as the elevator doors opened.

A courteous staff member greeted us and led us without question toward the central hall of the Southern Pantheon. Entry to that area usually cost more than my entire hotel suite, but no one asked for payment.

It wasn't hard to guess Max was behind this.

Why Lexa was in on it, though—that part was still unclear. When I asked, she simply said, “You'll see.” She slipped her arm through mine.

“There he is. The man of the hour!” Max greeted us with a wide grin, offering a gallant smile to Lexa and shaking my hand enthusiastically.

“What'd I do this time?” I asked, eyeing the thirty-something people raising drinks and watching me like I'd just won a war.

Some of them I'd never seen before. Others I recognized right away—Tarin with his ever-scowling face and whiskey in hand, Major Winthrop sporting a smug grin, and the analyst girl Helen from the *Nexus of Argus*, who'd swapped her lab coat for an elegant ruby dress that fit the setting far too well.

We were in the fourth tier of the VIP zone. No one else was present aside from five very attractive waitresses.

“What do you mean?” Max looked genuinely hurt. “You're the guest of honor. There's a new Warrior in the capital—you think we can just ignore that? People need to know your face, offer their respect, and drink in your honor.” With exaggerated flourish, he bowed. The others followed suit. Then, raising his glass, he said loudly, “May your path be righteous and mighty!”

The crowd echoed the toast in unison and downed their drinks.

I just stood there, stunned. I hadn't imagined it—had he really just quoted a line from the laws of the Fallen Order?

“Drink,” Lexa said, nudging me with her elbow.

I downed the flute of champagne she'd handed over.

That's when the procession began. One by one, in an unspoken hierarchical order, the guests made their way toward me. Most offered a curt “congratulations” before slipping off to resume their mingling. But a few lingered.

“Still breathing? Good for you,” Tarin said with a booming laugh, clapping me on the shoulder hard enough to bruise.

“As you can see, Captain,” I replied with a smirk. “Luck seems to be on my side today.”

“Sure, ‘luck,’” he grunted, squinting at me. “Tell me you're not about to lock yourself in some office now that you've got all these shiny new titles?”

A deep voice cut in from behind him. “You taking a shot at me, Paul?”

We both turned as a towering man stepped forward—his presence enough to make even Tarin shrink back a little.

“Perish the thought, Major,” Tarin said quickly, faking indignation. “Wasn't aimed at you.”

“I know, Paul, I know.” The major gave a gravelly chuckle. “Come on, let's grab another drink. First time I've come out in public in twenty years, and I'll be damned if I spend it sober.”

“Right behind you.” Tarin gave a sloppy salute, and the two of them—already several drinks deep—charged off toward the bar like men on a mission.

“Not used to seeing you in clothes,” Helen said with a strange little smile as she stepped in next.

“You’re not the only one,” I said. “If your lab’s got a decent tailor, send them my way.”

“I’ll make a note,” she said, giving a reluctant nod before stepping aside for the next well-wisher.

The whole thing took at least thirty minutes—maybe more. I didn’t rush. I gave everyone their moment.

Eventually, Max sauntered over, grinning like a kid at a carnival. “So? What do you think?” he asked, eyes gleaming as he gestured at the lavish venue. “Not bad, right? And to think, you weren’t even going to answer the call. Tonight, anything goes. Best food in the city, top-shelf liquor, and plenty of... long-legged bonuses.” He gave a wink. “All of it’s free until midnight—for the Warrior and his honored guests.”

“So all these puffed-up faces are just freeloaders?” I asked, nodding toward the many strangers I didn’t recognize.

Max winced dramatically. “Poor Alexandra. She really has her hands full with you...”

Right on cue, Lexa appeared behind him. “Not nearly as full as Diana has with you, sweetheart,” she said dryly.

“I’ll have you know,” Max said, lifting a finger with mock gravitas, “one day I’ll be a Warrior too, and when I am, I’ll invite the whole capital to my celebration.”

“If Diana lets you,” Lexa said with a sideways glance toward the stairs. “Speaking of which—there she is.”

Max’s confidence evaporated instantly. “Aw, hell.” He turned and made a swift tactical retreat.

I snagged another glass of champagne from a passing tray and offered Lexa my arm. Together, we strolled away from the crowd.

From the small fourth-tier balcony, we had a perfect view of the waterfall and the hundreds of guests below, laughing and celebrating like they didn’t have a care in the world.



“You do understand what all this means, right?” Lexa asked quietly, once we were out of earshot.

“More or less,” I said. “What’s the forecast?”

“Favorable.” She nodded, satisfied. “Not everyone showed, but that doesn’t matter. What matters is who did. Until yesterday, no one would’ve risked being seen with you. Now? The wind’s shifting.”

“Details,” I said. “Aside from the Ministry people, I don’t know anyone here.”

“Not just ‘Ministry people’—senior Ministry people,” she said, correcting me. “The head and deputy of the Recruitment Corps both showed up. That’s the entire branch vouching for you. They’re prepared to intervene if someone tries to take you out.”

“Really. So they’re not just here to booze and mumble ‘congrats’?”

“Of course not.” She sounded indignant at first, then lowered her voice. “The Fire Coalition wasn’t invited, but that handshake with their Prince yesterday made your standing with them clear enough. And your close ties with the princess didn’t hurt either. As for the Water and Death Coalition, the nephew of the head of the House of Lakesons is here with his fiancée.” She nodded toward a blue-haired man sipping a mojito in the corner beside a young woman. “They may not be a ruling or military family,” she continued, “but they handle diplomacy for the entire Water Coalition. They’re not backing you—yet—but sending him signals interest.”

I nodded, remembering the guy had commented that the waterfall view couldn’t hold a candle to their hot springs back home. At the time, I hadn’t thought much of it, but now it was obvious—it had been an invitation.

I mentally rewound the conversations I’d had all evening.

“What about those two?” I asked, pointing to a pair of burly men locked in a heated argument in front of a taxidermied Dire-Weasel mounted on the wall.

“Max didn’t introduce them?” Lexa arched a brow. “His cousins. Actually, more Lightning Clan members showed up tonight than anyone

else—six in total. One of them’s from the second-oldest bloodline. And don’t forget, this whole event was Max’s idea,” she added with a note of reluctant approval. “I don’t know how you pulled it off, but they’re openly offering you... a partnership.”

“Partnership?” I said, raising an eyebrow. “Of what kind?”

“No idea.” She gave a shrug. “Nothing official’s been submitted. But I have a feeling Max will bring it up again—”

“Assuming Diana doesn’t dump him in the drunk tank first,” I said with a dry smile.

“Speaking of her,” she said. “Events like this carry political weight. And the Astral Clan showing up tonight is no accident.”

“You’re saying Diana supports me too?”

“She’s not the only one,” she said, lifting her chin slightly. “I’m here not as your assistant—but as a member of the Astral Clan. No one shows up to gatherings like this by chance. You’d be wise to take a closer look at everyone here.”

“Why bother?” I said, smiling. “I’ve got you.”

“Ugh, lazy.” She gave a light snort—but I could tell she was enjoying herself.

After that, business talk faded into the background. With the formalities behind them, the guests gradually filtered out.

Some, like the Lakesons, left early.

Others, like Helen and Max’s younger cousins, hit the dance floor.

Tarin and the major set out on a new expedition—for more booze.

As for Max himself? Vanished.

Some host.

No matter. I got his hotel info through his assistant and sent a little surprise to his room—seventeen different crab dishes. He’d better eat every

last one. I'd check in the morning.

Lexa and I ended up staying the longest. I didn't even notice how the hours slipped by until we were politely kicked out of the VIP section—our complimentary “congratulations, Warrior” package had officially turned into a pumpkin.

One thing led to another, and we ended up in my hotel suite. The semi-luxury room was covered till noon, the security was tight, and the bed was... frankly, incredible. I wasn't planning to sleep, and Lexa looked exhausted. Letting her crash there was the least I could do.

I made for the hot tub, planning to soak in peace and mull over everything I'd learned.

Someone else had other plans.

“Can't sleep?” I asked, glancing up.

Lexa stood before me in delicate white lace, not a trace of hesitation in her eyes.

She said nothing—just slipped out of the lingerie and eased into the water beside me, her gaze daring me to say something clever.

“You really do love making things complicated,” I murmured, unable to look away from the flawless, dangerously perfect creature beside me.

Old Aks was right—*Astral women were trouble*.

They didn't just know your vices. They studied them. And they had no qualms using skills more dangerous than any illusion to get what they wanted.

“I like complicated,” she purred—and beside her, another version of herself appeared in the water.

Identical. Physical.

An astral clone.

# CHAPTER 11

WEARING LEXA OUT had taken some doing—and once we made it to the bed, it became three times harder.

Honestly, if I hadn't gotten a solid night's rest beforehand and recharged properly, I don't think I'd have had the stamina to keep up with that relentless wildcat.

Back in the day—long before Aks forbade it—I'd crossed paths with two Astral women. And now, after a more... intimate introduction to a third, I could say with confidence—they all had that same dangerous streak.

Though Lexa definitely stood out, even among their kind. That girl had a creative flair that really deserved an award.

By the time the clock neared five, and Lexa was dead asleep, I was already in the elevator heading down to the bar. Sleep wasn't coming, so I figured I might as well grab a cold imperial beer and see what passed for breakfast around here.

The central hall of the Southern Pantheon was mostly cleared out by now. Only the truly resilient were still hanging on. Even nobles had to work on Monday mornings.

Well—most of them, anyway. A loud group of twenty were still partying near the dance floor.

The bartender didn't have anything solid to serve and sent me toward a café in one of the side wings. No food, but at least he didn't hold back on the beer. Small blessings.

Sipping my drink on the go, I made my way down a wide corridor and stepped into a panoramic dining hall—completely empty—and was

promptly served a full breakfast.

Efficient.

Especially for an hour like this. No complaints, no scowls—just food on the table. The service in this place really was top-notch. No wonder the nobles loved it here.

And I was pretty sure I'd seen less than half the place. If the rest of the Southern Pantheon was anything like this, there were probably far more interesting things going on behind closed doors—especially with the Princes' Council owning the establishment and staffing it with old-blood retainers.

"I'm telling you, sir—the breakfast menu becomes available at six sharp." The firm, measured tone carried clearly from the corridor.

Seconds later, a young noble in a pristine Guardian dress uniform appeared, looking both drunk and ravenous. His bleary eyes locked onto me—and without the slightest hint of shame, he jabbed a finger in my direction and grabbed the tie of a nearby server. "Don't give me that crap. He's eating. I want breakfast too!"

"I'll be forced to call security if you persist," the server replied evenly.

"Oh, threatening me now? Do you even know who I am, you worthless —"

"A guest." The server cut in smoothly, still wearing that pleasant smile. "One who's about to earn himself a permanent spot on our blacklist. Along with his entire House."

That line did the trick. The noble's swagger evaporated instantly. Watching a server—even a hereditary one—shut down a bratty aristocrat with just a few well-placed words was an unexpectedly satisfying start to my day.

"Hey, you," the noble snapped, redirecting his frustration toward me now. "You in the hand-me-downs. I challenge you to a duel for the right to sit at that table."

I couldn't help the laugh that escaped me as I set my utensils aside.

Over the years, I'd been challenged to duels for all sorts of reasons—over loot, over women, over money. Once, even over a damn saddle. But this? This was the first time anyone had challenged me over eggs and bacon.

We live in fascinating times.

“Guardian, you're under no obligation to—” The server turned toward me, but I stopped him with a small gesture and rose to my feet.

The fact that he'd called me Guardian didn't even faze the noble. Either he hadn't heard it—or worse, didn't care. “It's fine,” I said. “I accept.”

“I handled it, guys. We're good!” the noble shouted triumphantly, waving toward his crew in the corridor.

Naturally, it was the same rowdy bunch I'd seen at the bar earlier. They must've overheard my talk with the bartender about breakfast and decided to tail me.

The same server led us to an inner courtyard. Judging by the combat ring in the center, the place was well-prepped for events like this.

Our multitasking host served as judge, referee, and eventually, emergency dispatcher for the would-be duelist, who managed to break his arm on me before passing out cold.

Three more drunken idiots jumped in to avenge their friend. All three hit the ground just as hard—though the fractures were in different places.

By the time the fourth one dropped unconscious, the server didn't even blink—just summoned another med-cart and declared my victory.

After four duels, no one else was in the mood to play hero. The rest of the group sobered up instantly and scattered with record speed.

Turns out, friendship has its limits—especially when it involves public humiliation and a hospital bill.

“Make sure they all get patched up and sent home,” I said politely.

“Of course, Guardian. Their families will also receive a personal account of the incident from me—along with a few... remarks from the establishment,” the server replied with a tight-lipped smile.

“Appreciated.” I gave a small nod and headed back inside.

Too bad they were all so green. Their attempts didn’t even qualify as a proper warm-up. Still, at least I’d secured my table in peace—so I thought.

Until I returned to find Max already sitting there, happily staring out the window.

Well, there goes that fleeting sense of victory.

“Morning,” he chirped the moment he spotted me, grinning from ear to ear.

“How’d you even get in here?” I asked, dropping into my seat and finally diving into the breakfast I’d earned the hard way.

The food was still hot. Maybe they reheated it when they saw me coming. Either way, the eggs—made from fully portal-sourced ingredients—were excellent.

“Same as you,” he said with a casual shrug.

“You a Guardian now?” I raised a brow, spearing another bite.

“No, but for your information, I’m actually—” he began, then trailed off with a grimace.

So much for keeping secrets. Like any ordinary Clan grunt gets to joyride through Unity Square or keep someone like Diana as a personal assistant.

Lexa mentioned he was a promising warrior from the Lightning Clan’s second branch.

Frankly? Didn’t matter to me. He could’ve been from the tenth, or a commoner for all I cared.

Everything I needed to know about him, I saw on that beach when we stopped the crab wave together. Max was probably the first person in this world I could call a friend.

“So what’d you order?” I asked casually.

His grin faltered. Shoulders stiffening, he suddenly looked anywhere but at my food. “Uh... I’m not hungry,” he muttered.

“You know, that gift I gave you? It’s only good for three days,” I said, grinning.

“I know... Diana told me.” He groaned and slumped forward onto the table. “Listen, Marcus... what would it take for you to cancel the bet?”

“You’re already giving up?” I gave him a slow, exaggerated stare. “And here I was thinking of hitting another Portal full of crabs. Rumor is they’re starting to run low in the capital.”

“Sure, running low.” He let out a dry snort. “Diana found out about the bet and immediately ordered a month’s supply from a culinary guild out east.”

“Now that’s someone who respects the rules of a wager. Hold on to her,” I said with mock solemnity.

“So what about it—five hundred thousand, and we forget the whole thing?” he asked, his eyes pleading.

“Nope.”

“Six hundred?”

“No.”

“Seven?”

I gave him a stern look. “Don’t make me explain the basics to your noble backside. A wager can’t be undone with money.”

“Then what can undo it?” he asked, latching onto a glimmer of hope.

“Only another wager,” I said, finishing the last bite of my eggs.



I'd have to get that recipe. It didn't look like much, but it filled me up like a pound of steak.

"Done!" he burst out.

"First of all, you haven't even heard the terms —"

"Don't care. I'm in!"

"Second," I added with a smirk, "you still have to win it."

"Shit," he groaned, head dropping to the table. "Forget it. Hey, you didn't kill those guys, right?"

"Would that ruin your partnership proposal?" I asked, playing it cool.

"How'd you—" He blinked. Then it clicked. "Lexa told you. Of course. That's why I wanted to talk yesterday."

"And you ran."

"Strategic withdrawal," he said brightly. "Anyway, killing them wouldn't have derailed our plans, but it wouldn't have helped either. One of them belonged to a vassal House under our jurisdiction. His death would've... complicated things. Another was the bastard son of a prominent Water Clan figure. Officially, no problem. Unofficially..."

"They'd have told me to go screw myself," I said flatly. "Got it."

As for the faint Light-element trace I'd noticed on two of the more obnoxious ones—clearly the mark of a mental technique—I kept that to myself. First, I couldn't prove it. And second, dealing with that Light bastard on my own had already become a matter of principle.

"All right," Max said, eyeing me suspiciously. "I can tell you're up to something again. Before you vanish off on your next stunt, I'm proposing the Shadow Clan sign a declaration of intent for cooperation with the Lightning Clan. Officially."

"I thought I already told you—I don't need protection," I said with a frown.

“This isn’t about protection, Marcus. A declaration of intent doesn’t involve military backing. It opens channels—for trade, for information exchange, for joint business ventures.” He spoke like he’d rehearsed this in front of a mirror.

“Got it,” I said. “You’re worried we’ll start cozying back up with the Fire Coalition.”

“You’re practically part of it already,” he said sharply. “Shaking hands with the Fire Prince, saving the Nature heiress, appointing a Metal Clan Warrior as head of security—”

“So that’s why they weren’t invited to the party?” I asked dryly.

His expression soured. “That’s not fair. No, the Fire Coalition didn’t receive formal invitations—but they weren’t barred from attending either.”

“Sure. And if they had shown up, it would’ve made it look like the Shadow Clan was still under their thumb.”

“You’re getting the hang of this,” he said, nodding in approval. “Exactly. But since none of them came, the other Clans are now free to engage with you without causing a stir. I’m sorry, Marcus. But our Prince? He doesn’t play to come second.”

“So our whole feud with the Light Clan doesn’t faze him?”

“Oh, please. The Light-Shadow conflict has been going on for millennia. Nobody bats an eye at it anymore. What does raise eyebrows is the fact you actually managed to stand your ground, break off from the Fire coalition, and now you’ve made the Shadow Clan into prime real estate. Like it or not, Marcus, everything in the Empire revolves around the balance of the Ten Elements. Even a supposedly ‘extinct’ Clan like yours still matters.”

“How exactly?” I asked, leaning forward.

“Sorry, that part’s classified.”

“What can you tell me?”

“That my offer to help is genuine.”

“And what’s in it for you?”

“Same thing as the first day we met, strange northerner.” He gave a crooked grin. “Call it intuition.”

“Send the paperwork to Lexa. I’ll think about it.” I pushed to my feet.

“That’s all I ask,” he said with a grateful nod.

We said our goodbyes, and I headed back to the hotel.

Last night had made one thing very clear: I had one real threat still in play.

The Overseer.

Sure, the Light Prince was more dangerous in the long run, but in terms of actively sabotaging my plans and endangering my people? The Overseer was the one playing dirty right now. And it was time he got a proper answer.

With that cheery thought, I stepped into the room.

Lexa was still asleep. I settled into the armchair beside her, picked up her tablet, and started reading through her files on the Overseer.

The moment I saw the page count, I knew this was going to take more than an hour.

\* \* \*

I heard a sleepy murmur behind me. “Morning.”

I glanced up—and forgot the reports for a moment. Lexa was stretching luxuriously in the golden wash of sunrise, her movements slow and deliberate. She’d clearly noticed me watching and wasn’t making the slightest effort to hide the view.

She really did enjoy making things complicated.

I pushed down the impulse to toss the tablet and jump her then and there. Barely.

“Morning,” I said, smiling as I turned back to the screen.

When the charm attack didn't land, she sighed in exaggerated defeat, pulled on a white robe, and padded over. Her tone turned brisk as she leaned in and glanced at the tablet. "Gone through everything?"

"Almost," I said. "Still missing Roe's interrogation report."

"I attached it," she said, frowning as she tapped into the file directory and opened the document.

"It's incomplete. Looks like she doesn't fully trust you yet."

"Huh..." she murmured, thoughtfully. "She's sharper than I gave her credit for. You think she left out something important?"

"No idea. But I need her," I said, setting the tablet aside.

"Oh?" Her eyes lit up. "Got a plan?"

"Something like that." I smirked. "Call the tank crew."

\* \* \*

The capital that morning was grey, wet, and windblown. A storm warning had blindsided the city, despite earlier promises of sunshine. Most people would've found that depressing. I, on the other hand, was thoroughly enjoying myself.

You don't notice rain or wind—or the panicked drivers swerving out of your path—when you're riding inside a tank.

Comfortable? Not even close. But did it kill the mood? Absolutely not.

"Holy crap, sir! They really didn't stop us." Leon practically vibrated in the driver's seat, his grin stretched from ear to ear as he navigated the hulking machine through the streets.

I sat in the commander's perch, watching the city blur past. Roe lounged in the gunner's seat, not because of the tank, but because the Cat was curled up and purring in her lap like a smug little king.

He'd refused to leave until I handed over the reward he'd been promised. I wasn't about to burn precious crystals on him yet—not until the

mission officially started.

“We’re here, sir.” Leon’s voice snapped to attention as the tank rolled to a stop in front of a lavish white-and-gold building.

Golden filigree wrapped the pillars, a classical pediment topped with sculpted figures loomed above the entrance, and an enormous standard bearing the Light Clan’s crest hung from the facade.

The Overseer hadn’t held back when decorating his favorite toy.

No denying it—it was beautiful.

Shame he’d forgotten to install proper defenses.

“Do it,” I said.

With a thunderous blast, a multi-element shell tore from the tank’s cannon, slamming into the ornate facade and sending debris flying.

“This is still a diplomatic visit, right?” Roe asked dryly, finally lifting her gaze from the Cat.

Together, we watched as the most prestigious theater in the capital—the *Gods of Masquerade*—collapsed like a house of cards.

## CHAPTER 12

“GET AWAY FROM me! Leave! I said leave!” With a strangled shout, the man bolted upright, gasping for air like a drowning victim.

His hand, trembling, fumbled for the towel lying on the nightstand. He dabbed the sweat from his neck, then glanced in the mirror, grimaced, adjusted the mask that had slipped down his face, and shuffled toward the shower.

The Overseer had been plagued by nightmares for days now.

It had started with the screaming, eyeless freak known as the Banshee. A joke of an opponent for a Light Gifted with a strong mental aspect—he’d dispatched it without breaking a sweat. But then another came. Louder. Uglier.

He killed that one too.

Then came another.

And another.

And another...

He couldn’t even close his eyes anymore without seeing some new howling chthonic monstrosity clawing its way toward him. His mind, fraying at the edges, had begun to resist sleep entirely.

No sedatives helped. The best healers and mindsoothers money could buy had failed him, offering only vague excuses about “external interference.”

He knew full well this was an outside attack. But knowing didn’t help. With every sleepless night, he grew more irritable, more unstable.

To preserve what clarity he had left, he clung to every scrap of sleep he could get—however brief. He'd practically moved into his bedroom. Even now, well past noon, he'd only managed a pitiful three hours of rest. All he wanted was a freezing shower to calm his shredded nerves, a change of clothes, and a return to bed before the haze of sleep slipped through his fingers again.

He had just begun to feel human again—his heartbeat slowing, his thoughts steadying—when the bathroom door burst open.

“My lord! Emergency, my l—” The assistant didn't get to finish.

His skull felt like it was splitting in half from the noise, and his immediate, instinctive response was to eliminate the source. He did so by smashing the man's head in with a golden showerhead.

Blood pooled over the pristine white tiles in thick crimson rivulets.

He exhaled, soothed by the sudden silence. His lips curled in relief.

Yawning, he quickly dried off and made for the bed, eager to sink back into the dark.

But in his chambers stood a short, smirking figure with snow-white braids and a maddening glint in her eye.

“What do you want, Angie?” he muttered, pausing in the doorway, drenched and naked except for the towel.

In the Light Clan, every heir was raised apart. That was tradition. Each child of the Clan Prince had their own estate. Their own guards. Their own servants, funding, tutors, and military teams. From birth, they were competitors—not siblings. Rivals for the throne, honed in a cutthroat environment where affection was a liability.

Visits between “family” were rare. Usually only when someone wanted to gloat over a rival's failure—or plant the seeds for the next betrayal.

“Father called,” Angie chirped, her grin smug enough to make him twitch. “Asked me to check on you, dear brother.”

He froze. “Wait... Father called—you?” He hadn't spoken to the Light

Prince since the day the old man promised to name him heir. And in their world, a call from the Prince meant everything. It meant you still mattered. That you hadn't been discarded. It was a sign—no, a lifeline. A personal summons from the Prince was a chance to climb the internal rankings of the Clan, a board that measured real power, not just public standing.

The top three received daily contact. The Prince ran the Clan through them, entrusted them with missions, secrets, contracts—even visited them on occasion. The top ten could expect a call once or twice a year. But those below the ten? They might as well not exist. Some—like that poor bastard Gabriel—had reportedly never even spoken to the Prince in their entire lives.

And now the Prince had called Angie. *Angie*. Ranked twentieth in the line of succession. And not him—*him*, who'd been holding steady at fourth.

In a panic, he lunged for his comms terminal, scanning for missed calls. Nothing. No calls. No messages. Which meant... Father had deliberately sent his message through Angie. That could only mean one thing: he'd fallen off the rankings altogether.

"No... no, that's not possible," he whispered, voice cracking as he turned to her with haunted eyes. "What... what could've happened?"

"Oh, you really don't know?" Angie said sweetly, practically bouncing over to the window. "Well then—let me show you!" With a playful twirl, she yanked the curtain rod clean off the wall, tearing down the heavy blackout drapes.

His first instinct was to throw her out the window for defiling his private sanctum. But then he saw it.

A thick plume of black dust was rising into the sky, not far in the distance. The ruins of his beloved theater lay in smoking ruin, and in the center of the destruction, flickering with unstable blue sparks, was a Portal. One that wasn't supposed to exist. A secret Portal no one—no one—was supposed to know about.

"You son of a bitch!" he screamed, tearing at his hair and hurling a gilded stool at Angie. She dodged it with infuriating ease, giggling as she



darted from the room.

“Bastard! Bastard! I’ll kill you! I’ll slaughter you, you miserable bitch!” he bellowed like a mad beast, all thoughts of sleep and headaches forgotten.

His hands trembled as he dialed his security chief. “Where is he?” His voice dropped to a cold, lethal edge.

“Inside the Portal, sir,” the security chief said.

“How many did he take with him?”

“We were told only the unnamed girl and the Cat, sir.”

He couldn’t believe his luck. Yes, the Portal’s exposure was a disaster. The theater’s destruction was catastrophic. But if Marcus died in there—if he died... then everything would be forgiven. Father had given his word. And a Prince’s word was iron. Kill Marcus... and the title of heir would be his. “Summon the strike teams. Prep for deployment. I’m coming down myself.”

“Should we call in the Guard?” the security chief asked.

“Call in everyone, you idiot!” the Overseer snapped. “I want that rotten bastard dead inside that Portal.” He slammed the receiver into the wall, shattering it into a dozen pieces.

He was one step away from his dream—one step from ascending above the vultures that circled the throne. And if the world had to burn around him to get there, so be it. He would tear it down with his own teeth.

\* \* \*

“You do realize he’s a war beast, right? A predator in disguise—fur, claws, and a lizard-shaped death machine when he’s in the mood to stretch his wings,” I said, lounging on the thick limb of a towering tree.

“Oooh... Kitty can fly?” Roe perked up from where she was sprawled beneath me, still scratching the Cat’s fluffy belly as if that were the only thing she’d heard.

I opened my mouth to reply but thought better of it and stretched deeper into the branch.

The inside of the Portal was a nightmare jungle—dark, dense, and absolutely infested with Thunder Serpents.

Not my favorite D-class creature, especially with their charming habit of hurling lightning bolts from the shadows.

And they didn't do it openly, hell no. These little bastards liked to zap you, slither off to recharge, then vanish behind a camouflage field so sophisticated that spotting them in this terrain was damn near impossible. By the time we pinned one down, it was already juiced up and ready to fry us again.

To make matters worse, a Thunder Serpent's elemental strike could reach over three hundred feet. After an hour of sprinting through jungle static, both the Cat and I were dragging. Even Roe, nimble as she was, struggled to move cleanly through air so charged it hummed.

Lightning-elemental particles weren't as physically damaging as fire or metal—usually. A mild overload just left your limbs numb and twitchy. Not fatal, but not fun either.

To fight in a place like this, you needed stamina that bordered on monstrous.

Which is how we ended up here, squatting on the wide, welcoming branches of a thunderroot tree. Rare even in this region, the thunderroot naturally absorbed ambient electricity, giving us a brief moment of peace. Our little makeshift safe zone.

But the second we dropped down again, the yellow-scaled swarm would be on us like static on wool.

And there were a lot of them. Different sizes, different stages of growth. At this rate, it would take the three of us at least two weeks to fully purge the Portal.

According to the Registry, this place had been marked as sealed seven years ago. In reality? The Portal had remained active all this time, steadily

breeding Thunder Serpents without any oversight.

And that idiot Overseer? He'd clearly been feeding them civilians. No other explanation for why so many had survived in such a confined patch of jungle. Not unless someone had been regularly delivering meat sacks for dinner.

But the real problem wasn't the strength of a single Thunder Serpent. It was their absurd fertility rate and ability to store excess elemental energy—enough to grow five times their size if left unchecked.

So far, we'd only run into the hungriest younglings. But I could feel something watching us from deep within the jungle. Something bigger. Something patient.

"Can I please go hunt now?" Roe cast a pleading look my way.

"No. Still too early."

"Ugh, boring." She groaned and collapsed into the cradle of a thick thunderroot limb, limbs flopping with theatrical misery.

"Mrow?" The Cat poked his head out from under my branch, eyes wide with hope.

"No, not you either."

"Mreeow?"

"No, you're not getting treats ahead of time."

"Grrrowl." The Cat turned sulky, curling into a huff-ball of indignation.

"Nope. Not even one," I said, flicking him a look. "You know what? I'm starting to regret bringing either of you. Should've sent you off with the tank to the district. At least then, you'd be pestering Leon instead of me."

"Sorry," Roe muttered and, bored out of her mind, climbed onto a narrower branch to tightrope-walk across it.

She did it with all the grace of a circus acrobat. Honestly, if she hadn't

chosen a career in assassination, she'd have made a fantastic high-wire performer.

As for the Cat—who'd been soaking up affection seconds ago—he gave me a withering glare, then leapt in a huff onto a neighboring tree.

He didn't last a second.

A stray bolt of lightning caught him mid-air, zapping him hard enough to send his twitching body flying back onto our thunderroot.

I laughed. Roe winced sympathetically. The serpents below hissed in eerie harmony, as if celebrating the clean strike.

Balance, as they say, was restored.

At some point, I must've dozed off. One of the young snakes, tired of waiting, tried its luck by climbing up for a surprise ambush—a good old-fashioned venom bite to the throat.

Didn't go well for it.

The thing now dangled limp from a branch by its jaw, skull caved in like a cracked coconut. A festive little jungle ornament.

Only the hungriest of the juveniles tried that trick. The older, more cunning ones were still down below, biding their time. They knew we'd have to come down eventually.

Three hours passed in restless waiting.

“Finally,” I murmured, catching the signal from one of my trackers.

I stretched luxuriously and rose to my feet, every muscle coiled with anticipation.

The Overseer's men had just entered the Portal.

Which meant it was finally time for the hunt to begin.

# CHAPTER 13

THE MAN IN THE SMOOTH PORCELAIN MASK stood at the jungle's edge, sunlight catching faint reflections across its surface. His armor blazed gold beneath the scattered shafts of light filtering through the canopy. The Overseer's hand twitched as he scanned his assembled forces.

His ever-present personal Guardian—face concealed behind a golden mask—stood silently beside him, gripping an artifact whip with both massive hands. Seven loyal Light Elementarists were issuing final orders to their respective squads, which together totaled roughly a hundred and fifty fighters of varying strength and equipment.

The Overseer had gone all in. He'd conscripted every able-bodied subordinate he could muster. If it hadn't been for the Ministry Guard sealing off the Portal so quickly and barring civilians from entry, he would've armed the kitchen staff with combat knives.

Because the Portal had manifested on his private estate, he'd managed to convince the Ministry to give him twenty-four hours to resolve the issue independently.

That should be plenty of time to find and eliminate Marcus—and actually closing the Portal afterward? That part could be offloaded onto the Ministry. They'd no doubt seize control of the land anyway after this fiasco, but the Overseer didn't let his thoughts drift that far.

With his claim as first heir still intact, he was banking on being reassigned to the central residence in the capital.

"Are we ready?" he asked, glancing nervously at his watch.

"Yes," the Tamer said calmly. "The path is clear. The creatures won't touch us."

“Perfect.” The Overseer gave a curt nod as the army began to move. He took the lead, relying on the Sight of Light to guide him unerringly through the dense brush, tracking the Shadow-wielding pest he’d come to eradicate.

The Tamer walked beside him, maintaining a clear path. The jungle beasts recognized his authority—years of taming them had earned it—and they gave the army a wide berth. It cost him almost no energy to keep the corridor safe.

The elite guards led their squads at staggered intervals, ready to execute a pincer strike or surround the target at a moment’s notice.

The veteran Light warriors moved confidently. Their subordinates, however, weren’t nearly as composed—clearly unaccustomed to operations like this. They flinched at every hiss and rustle from the thick, shadowy undergrowth.

“Hold.” The Tamer raised a hand, halting the procession.

The troops froze, eyes snapping toward a trembling bush up ahead.

“Don’t shoot,” he ordered sharply, hearing a few particularly jumpy soldiers already raising their weapons.

“You said the path was clear,” the Overseer hissed.

“I’ll handle it.” The Tamer stepped forward and pushed aside a giant frond.

Crouched awkwardly in the clearing was a small, scruffy black creature with fur standing on end and faint crackles of static energy flickering along its coat. It turned its squashed, annoyed little face toward the intruders, hiccupped, and sent a ripple of bright blue sparks across its twitching whiskers.

The Tamer slowly reached for his whip, but the creature sensed the shift and bolted—zipping between his legs and disappearing into the branches in a blur.

“What was that?” the Overseer demanded.

“Cat,” the Tamer muttered, squinting after it. “Want me to catch it?”

“Is it dangerous?”

“Looks harmless... but it might be a scout. Or a distraction,” he said with a shrug.

“Then move!” the Overseer snapped. “We’re almost within range.”

The Tamer nodded and stepped forward—but stopped cold. His breath caught. His grip on the whip tightened.

“What are you doing?” the Overseer growled, stumbling into him.

But the Tamer wasn’t listening. His eyes were locked on a shape emerging from the brush—a massive yellow serpent, far larger than any native species. The ground trembled as it raised itself high, glittering scales alive with blue lightning. Thunder cracked across the jungle, dropping a dozen men to their knees.

The beast stared him down with glowing blue eyes. The Tamer didn’t blink. He slowly lowered his whip. “It’s the Queen,” he said in a steady voice that still managed to carry. “Don’t move. She’s not here for us.” Then the brush behind her erupted with motion as hundreds of smaller snakes poured out in formation.

“What the hell—”

The Tamer clamped a hand over the Overseer’s mouth before he could say another word, pouring all his willpower into suppressing the mental link to the brood.

The Queen had never left her nest before—not once in the last seven years. This wasn’t a coincidence.

Then, just past the milling soldiers, the Tamer spotted that damned cat again—belching up a half-digested chunk of something... was that a snake egg? “No—” he bellowed, but it was too late.

The Queen saw it.

With a hiss that shattered the air, the colossal serpent lunged—not at

the army, but straight at the cat. Two stunned warriors happened to be in her path. She tore through them like tissue paper.

“Mrrr-hah-hah-hah!” the Cat cackled gleefully as it bolted, the Queen on its heels.

That was all it took. The panicked troops opened fire, dousing the clearing in elemental flames.

“Form a perimeter!” the Tamer shouted, realizing they’d lost control. But it was already too late.

The jungle exploded in motion as hundreds of serpents surged forward in a coordinated assault.

\* \* \*

I perched on a thick branch, legs swinging lazily as I watched the chaos unfolding below—through the Cat’s eyes.

After devouring two metal crystals, he was practically radiating elemental metal, enough to enrage every serpent in the area. Apparently, snakes loathed metal with every fiber of their being. And yet, that alone wasn’t enough. So I’d sent the flea-ridden gremlin deeper into the jungle to raid the queen’s egg clutch.

I’d said one elemental egg would suffice for the disruption effect I wanted, but he got a little... carried away. He gobbled down two dozen juicy little power bombs, emptying the queen’s nest of all her unborn spawn.

The result?

His fur was on end, elemental energies crackled and surged through him in wild, conflicting waves—and the little junkie was now tripping hard.

Eyes wild, claws sparking with unstable metal energy, he tore through the enemy’s rear line, mauling humans, snakes, trees, and anything else unfortunate enough to cross his path. All while dodging a very pissed-off serpent queen, who was frantically trying to swallow him whole.

“Your turn,” I said, nodding to Roe, who was practically bouncing in



place with anticipation. “You remember the plan?”

“Yes-yes-yes!” she chirped, eyes gleaming. “Come on—hand over my precious already!”

I sighed, once again questioning my life choices.

Breaking the psyche of familiars was one thing—they were flexible, resilient, and more or less mine. But trying to reprogram a Darkness embodiment? That was an entirely different beast.

Most of them retained only two, maybe three, core instincts or behavioral traits from whatever twisted form they’d emerged as—and that was all I could reliably work with.

The tiny insect-like tracker? Pure sloth and passive surveillance. It wouldn’t budge an inch unless bribed—and even then, only slowly.

The shadow lizards? Curiosity and stealth. They never stopped moving, constantly sniffing out secrets but incapable of staying still for more than a second.

And Fluffy—my creepy little hound? Loved scaring things. Lived to dig up whatever was hidden. But sink his teeth into something? Forget it. He refused to bite anything. Ever.

So sure, I had access to thousands of these Darkness-born entities—but most were so narrowly specialized they might as well have come with built-in user manuals labeled “good for one thing only.”

And yet... Roe had somehow proved me wrong.

In under a week, she’d trained Fluffy—who isn’t even bonded to her—to locate objects and hide them. In a Shadow Pocket. Let me say that again: she taught a Darkness Entity to stash things inside a Shadow Pocket.

And this wasn’t just some fetch trick. That kind of manipulation required instinctive Shadow-channeling ability most adult Gifted couldn’t manage.

She didn’t even realize how rare her talent was—or what that could mean if properly developed.

And that wasn't all. She'd picked up several tricks from Fluffy himself—figuring out how to cast nightmares and slip between Shadows with more finesse than some seasoned Shadow Clan initiates.

Turns out, showing her how the embodiments operated did a lot more good than lectures ever could. Animal logic just... worked for her.

And now that Fluffy had taught her all he could, it was time to move on to phase two.

"Come forth," I commanded.

In her arms appeared Obby, a small, obsidian-furred hamster with gleaming violet eyes—the first Darkness embodiment I'd ever assigned to Roe.

This time, the little ball of murder didn't vanish the moment he saw her. Instead, he melted into her arms, stretching contentedly in her grip.

Right. Worth noting—this was the same hamster who once treated touch like a mortal offense. He'd only ever tolerated mine under direct command. And now? He was nuzzling her of his own volition.

I cleared my throat, pushing aside the flicker of jealousy. "Alright. Recap the plan."

"Any mentalist—we send in Fluffy first to break their focus. Then Obby jumps in to draw attention. Once both hit, that's when I move," Roe said crisply, her cheeks puffed with determination.

"From behind. And only if they're alone."

She gave a sharp nod and vanished into the Shadows with her oversized hamster.

Until recently, Obby's life had revolved around eating, hopping, and rubbing his cheeks like a spoiled mascot. I was curious to see what Roe could actually teach him in a week. If nothing else, it'd be good practice for her—real combat experience using Shadow leaps. And Obby? He'd make for a very bouncy visual aid.

I still had about thirty constructs in reserve with Shadow capabilities. If

Roe kept this up, she might even outpace Mirk someday—and I didn't say that lightly.

Sure, sending her after seasoned, battle-hardened mentalists was risky. But she'd been adamant—demanding full rein over the guards since I'd forbidden her from going near the Overseer.

Figuring the Cat would be watching her back, I agreed.

After scanning the terrain a little longer, I dropped from my perch.

The three idiots who'd set up camp beneath my tree didn't last long. I wasn't interested in their guns, but I did pocket a sturdy blade, two needle grenades, and a gutting knife—handy if any Portal beasts dropped crystals. I already had the Ministry-issued one, but it never hurt to have a spare.

Too bad they hadn't brought backpacks. I'd left mine behind, expecting a quick smash-and-grab to bait the Overseer. The unexpected Portal among the ruins had flipped that plan on its head.

Honestly, I'd brought Roe along because she doubled as a walking tactical pouch. Still, before collecting our spoils, it only felt polite to properly thank the donors.

Ten minutes later, my kill count hit fifteen.

That was enough to flush the Overseer out. He broke from his defensive ring and came striding in with three Gifted at his heels.

Smiling, I slipped back into the jungle.

The serpents I passed didn't spare me a glance. Most were already slithering off to reinforce their queen. A few lunged, fangs bared. I snared those with dense whips of woven Darkness and hurled them back at my pursuers like venomous gifts from above. Not that I expected to kill anyone with that—I just liked watching them scream and curse through the tiny insect-like tracker I'd left embedded in one of the snares.

The novelty wore off by the third toss.

So for fun, I crammed two grenades into one snake.

When one of the Gifted casually speared it midair, the surprise inside went off. Two detonations later, the Overseer's backup was halved.

It took a leisurely thirty minutes to reach my destination. I could've gone faster, but after the explosion, the rest of them were crawling—flinching at every bush and twitching at each leaf.

The queen's nest was impressive—an open, scorched plateau ringed with dozens of delicate yellow eggs, each nestled in an elemental web of lightning.

Silent bolts cracked across the clearing at steady intervals. They made no sound, but they were real. Each strike sent raw energy arcing across the ground and into the eggs, their surfaces lighting up with faint blue sparks like veins of life.

“So this is where you end up, freak.”

The grating voice pulled me out of my reverie. I turned.

Staring at me was a man in a porcelain mask, lips twisted in what I assumed was a sneer—judging by how his eyes scrunched. Or maybe it was indigestion. Hard to tell.

His expensive armor was scorched, gouged, and punctured in at least twenty places. Whatever it was made of, it held—barely. Shame it looked like it had been dragged through a shredder.

The other guy—the one who'd also survived the gauntlet—was bare-chested in a gold mask, tattered shorts, and no shoes. He held a whip and looked completely untouched. Just a little out of breath.

Judging by the elemental energy rolling off both of them, they were roughly on par.

“So, which one of you is the Overseer?” I asked lazily.

“You'll know soon enough, scum,” the man in the porcelain mask said. His eyes lit with searing light.

“Yeah, that tracks,” I muttered, squinting. “Recognized the goat-like voice.”

A command boomed from everywhere at once. “Kneel!”

I slowly bent my knees, barely suppressing a smirk as both men lit up with triumph. Then, without missing a beat, I scratched my ankle and stood right back up.

“Nope. Still doesn’t work,” I said brightly.

The Overseer kept a straight face—not hard, with the mask. “Your mind... it’s dead. The rumors are true. You wield the power of Death.”

“Or maybe,” I said, “you’re just a crap mentalist.”

That struck a nerve. The Overseer clenched his fists and summoned a blazing orb. A miniature sun ignited above us, bathing the entire clearing in blinding elemental light.

The beam wrapped around all three of us. For me, it tried to incinerate my bones. For the two Light Gifted, it granted divine shielding and rapid healing.

Nasty bit of work—high-tier.

If Roe had wandered under this little sunburst, it would've fried her in seconds—just as agonizingly as she did to Light Gifted when she drowned them in Shadow.

Good thing I’d dragged this party into the jungle. You didn’t need to touch this light to get hit by it—just seeing it was enough.

“That it?” I asked, shielding my eyes.

“You’re no true Shadow,” the Overseer said coldly. “But the blade still accepted you. I’ll enjoy peeling your mind apart—”

“Don’t worry,” the man with the whip said softly, finishing his sentence. “Once you’re dead, it doesn’t hurt.” Then he lashed the whip toward me like a bolt of lightning.

Bastards. I cursed silently and dodged. The crackling whip sliced past.

A deafening crash behind me—tree split clean in two. Great. So the

second one had a reflection strike. Light-based. Interesting combo.

“Not just a controller, huh...” I mused, stroking my chin as dozens of snakes slithered out of the undergrowth.

I stopped counting after thirty.

They coiled in precise formation—then, in perfect unison, began to glow with faint blue spirals.

Yeah. That was going to hurt.

I stepped onto the plateau.

A bolt of silent lightning slammed down two inches from my face.

Slipped the timing by a second—got a little too into the act. Still kept my expression flat. That hit them harder than any counterattack.

The Overseer seethed. His gold-masked companion just looked baffled—especially when his obedient snakes refused to attack me near the nest.

They froze, awaiting new instructions.

He caught on fast.

For these snakes, nest defense came first—hardwired instinct, stronger than any mental override. After a few tense seconds, the whip-wielder released his grip.

The serpents vanished into the jungle to handle their next priority: rescuing their queen from a nervous breakdown and helping her catch the Cat.

Too late. She’d given up the chase and was happily munching her way through the Overseer’s army, recharging.

As for me, I clasped my hands behind my back and continued strolling calmly across the storm plateau, not even flinching as bolts of lightning struck the ground around me.

“How the hell are you doing this?” the Overseer finally exploded.

He'd already dispelled his ravenous sun construct—utterly useless against me—and was now wholly intent on prying into my head.

No dice.

A few tendrils slipped through, but none stuck. Keeping them out wasn't passive—it drained energy each time.

Thankfully, the plateau was generous. Every time a bolt of lightning arced across the eggs, a portion of that energy bled into me. More than enough to offset the cost of mental resistance.

And honestly? It felt amazing.

I really needed to pitch this to Max. Ozone spas. Not as elegant as the Water Clan's springs, but a hell of a pick-me-up.

"I think I've figured it out," the man with the whip muttered after three minutes of observation. Then he stepped boldly onto the plateau.

Shame. If he'd really figured it out, he would've stepped about a foot and a half to the left.

The next bolt hit him squarely.

To his credit, he didn't die. He raised the whip just in time to absorb part of the blast—but the raw force still knocked him to one knee.

"Mistake number two," I murmured, just as the next strike came crashing down—this one punching straight through to bone.

# CHAPTER 14

PEOPLE LOVE TO SAY lightning never strikes the same place twice.

Well, they're wrong.

It does.

Twice, three times—and if you're really unlucky, like the man with the gold mask sprawled at my feet—it'll hit you a third time just to be sure.

The Overseer flinched at the sight of his companion's crispy demise and instinctively took two steps back, glancing over his shoulder like he thought he might still escape.

No such luck, buddy. You're not going anywhere.

To my surprise, though, he didn't run. Instead, he pressed a glowing hand to his porcelain mask. Instantly, it lit with elemental brilliance.

I was braced for any number of tricks from the Light Clan's bottomless bag of illusions and energy stunts—but I hadn't expected the corpse of the whip-master to light up too.

Now that was new.

Before I could react, the dead man's skeletal hand clamped around my ankle in a death grip. A heartbeat later, a bolt of elemental lightning came down like divine judgment—straight at both of us.

My instincts kicked in. Right arm up, cloak absorbing the brunt of the blast. Left hand? Fingers curled into the shape of a pistol, aimed directly at the Overseer.

Some of the energy dispersed across the cloak. Some slammed into my core, draining a quarter of my reserves. But the last fraction? That obeyed.



It surged through me, refined mid-flow, then blasted from my left hand—punching a hole straight through the Overseer’s chest.

My heart stuttered. For a few agonizing seconds, it felt like I’d dunked my torso in lava. But the Overseer was worse off—he was a smoking heap on the ground, with a hole through him wide enough to see daylight.

The puppet’s grip on my ankle slackened and fell away. I scooped up the charred whip and got the hell off the lightning-scorched plateau.

Note to self: *still not quite ready to channel that much raw energy in one go.*

The second reason for my swift exit? That rising hiss from the jungle—layered with thunder.

Its source was barreling straight toward me.

I glanced at the half-melted whip in my hand, then tucked it away. Drew my blade, tested its edge, slid it back.

Should’ve brought Twilight’s Hand. Would’ve carved through Thunder Serpent hide like butter. But diving into the queen’s throat wasn’t exactly on my to-do list.

That thought ended as the Cat stumbled in.

Disheveled, bloodied, and sparking with residual charge, he padded up and rubbed against my leg—leaving a burn through my pants.

“Mrrowr,” he purred smugly, like this had been his genius plan all along.

He even looked up at me with that faux-innocent face, clearly fishing for praise—as if he hadn’t just blown the timing and drawn the queen straight to me well ahead of schedule.

Sure, she probably sensed the intrusion into her precious nest and came charging regardless. But that didn’t excuse him.

Was there a task? Yes.

Was it completed? Not even close.

Still wanted a prize. That's the Cat in a nutshell.

"Fine," I said, pulling out two metal crystals. "You get a pass for showing up in person." I'd promised four, and I keep my word.

His eyes gleamed. His purring hit jet-engine levels. He practically drooled.

"Bon appétit." I fed him both and gave him a pat.

He burped—loudly—and immediately tried to vanish into the Shadows like his shift was over.

I grabbed him by the scruff before he blinked out.

"Rrraow?" he yowled, scandalized. He knew damn well ten crystals wouldn't let him crack the queen's lightning barrier without frying himself.

"Nope," I said. "You're working this one off."

Perfect timing. The queen of Thunder Serpents burst from the treeline—thirty feet of electrified murder—and lunged.

The Cat freaked, fur spiking into steel quills as he tried to slip my grip.

Too late.

By the time he finished morphing, he was airborne—launched straight at her gaping jaws.

I rolled aside.

Thoroughly distracted from her precious eggs, she began to coil—glowing with blue spirals of elemental buildup.

Didn't matter.

A moment later, her body bloated and ruptured—hundreds of steel quills tearing her apart from the inside out.

She blinked once, blue eyes wide with confusion—then collapsed like a felled tree.

Moments later, something hedgehog-shaped staggered out of her remains—wheezing, coughing up blood, and soaked in serpent guts.

It took one victorious breath—gagged at the smell—then tried to groom itself... and froze halfway through.

“You broke the kitty.” Roe’s outraged voice cut through the silence. She rushed over, horrified but too squeamish to touch him.

She hovered near the quill-covered wreck, then shot me a glare sharp enough to leave a scar.

I’d seen her angry before. This was worse.

The little manipulator let out a faint, pathetic mewp to seal the deal.

Another second, and Roe would’ve snapped.

I needed to fix this before my apprentice declared war.

“Quit playing dead,” I said dryly.

The Cat didn’t budge.

Yep. Completely spoiled.

Roe’s pampering had gone to his head. The furry manipulator was addicted to her affection.

“Do I need to say it again?” I said, flatly this time.

He got the hint.

Instantly, the slime vanished, the quills retracted, and the Cat sat before us in pristine condition—fur sleek, claws gleaming, tail flicking with smug precision.

Roe blinked like reality had glitched.

“He’s working you,” I said. “Look at that smug face. He enjoyed killing that overgrown lizard. She’d been chasing him for an hour, and now he’s the one laughing.”

Roe squinted suspiciously at the Cat.

He averted his gaze, feigning guilt.

“Bad kitty.” She crossed her arms. “No ear scratches for a week.”

He deflated—just for a second. Then he spotted the eggs scattered across the plateau.

His eyes lit up, tongue flicking out in anticipation. He took a single step toward the nest... and dropped straight into the Darkness snare I’d rigged for him. Didn’t even get to yelp.

All that lovely elemental energy he’d been hoarding surged into me—raw power flooding my core, sharpening every nerve and sense.

No wonder he’d been short-circuiting. Lightning and Metal didn’t exactly play well together. Feedback like that could tear a lesser caster apart.

Took me ten seconds to stabilize.

Meanwhile, Roe—already acting like a seasoned looter—had begun sweeping the area.

Good girl.

“Don’t forget the eggs,” I said, nodding toward the nest.

The lightning had faded with the queen’s death. And with it came the unmistakable chill of a closed Portal—followed a second later by a notification from the Registry.

Guardian, eighth rank.

What that actually meant—aside from the right to stitch some personalized emblem onto my jacket—I still had no clue. But it bumped me one step closer to seventh.

That’s when the real perks kicked in.

Ministry Portals in the Yellow Zone would finally unlock. The Shadow Clan didn’t own any of those. Whatever scraps we got came from the leftovers—whatever the Princes and their Clans didn’t feel like using.

How the whole system worked was still a mystery. And nobody I knew had the clearance to explain it.

The only ones who did were the ones with terminal access—and they guarded that intel like their lives depended on it.

Not even Lexa had been able to dig anything up. After weeks of digging, she'd finally thrown up her hands in frustration and moved on.

Guess I'd have to crack that one myself eventually.

But for now? Sweet, glorious loot.

While I'd been chasing down the Overseer, Roe had apparently been playing tag with the guards—and judging by the carnage around us, she'd played to win.

At first, she had trouble separating them, so she settled for solo stragglers. But the moment the serpent queen slammed into the Light Clan's ranks, their formation collapsed.

That's when Roe had her fun.

One by one, she yanked the seven elite guards into the Shadows. The possessed girl didn't surrender a single soul to the queen—not even the unlucky one already halfway down its gullet. She dragged him out like some grim magician pulling a rabbit from a hat.

What happened to them afterward wasn't my concern. What mattered was that Roe hadn't forgotten to loot anything that wasn't nailed down.

Even now, she was rifling through the pockets of two masked corpses. With a disgusted glance at the Overseer's body, she spat and reached for his mask.

A soft gasp pulled my attention from the queen's skull, which I was halfway through dismantling.

Roe gestured at the corpse, yanking on the mask. It wouldn't budge. I tossed her a second butchering knife without a word.

She caught it without looking, gave the body a skeptical once-over,

then, remembering who it was, calmly sawed the mask free and stuffed it into her Shadow Pocket.

From the twitch of her nose, I could tell she wanted to ask something—but in the end, she stayed silent and repeated the process with the second corpse.

By then, I'd reached the brainstem and was grinning as I pried loose a hefty object pulsing with flickers of electric-blue energy.

Even as a kid, I'd been taught that the fewer imperfections a crystal had, the stronger and more saturated it would be. In all my years as a Paladin, I had never seen a C-class specimen this pristine.

Not a single scratch or uneven edge—just a flawless oval, about the size of a large egg, glowing like a miniature moon with soft, cool light.

This Portal hadn't just stayed open for seven years—it had been active. The queen hadn't been trying to escape. She'd been hoarding energy, reinforcing her brood, and quietly biding her time.

And the idea that she might've emerged in the middle of the capital at any moment?

If the Overseer were still alive, I'd kill him again. Slower.

By the time the Guardians could've responded, the body count would've hit tens of thousands.

"What a beauty." Roe crouched beside me, feline eyes wide in wonder.

"Totally worth getting electrocuted," I muttered. But my mind was already spinning. If a seven-year Portal could produce a crystal like this... what would I find in one that had been growing for ten? Twenty? A hundred?

Shaking off the temptation, I slid the crystal into an inner pocket and rubbed my hands together, turning back to inspect the lair.

The egg collection was Roe's job.

None of them were viable for incubation, but they might fetch

something on the market. If they retained their charge outside the Portal, they could be used as fuel. If not, I'd let Patrick figure it out—or toss them to my chef for experimentation.

Still, I wasn't leaving empty-handed.

After methodically scanning the hardened coils of the lair, I spotted what I was after and smiled. Embedded beneath a loop of dead flesh was a jagged fragment of scale, glimmering like stained glass dipped in oil.

"Find," I said, flicking it to my tracking hound as it materialized at my side.

Let's see how many times she'd shed over seven years of uninterrupted growth.

\* \* \*

A young aristocrat in a crisp white suit sat on the edge of a glossy desk, bouncing a rubber ball in lazy rhythm. Wall. Ceiling. Floor. Back to hand.

A knock. Then a voice through the door. "Can I come in?"

"Yeah."

The woman who stepped in caught the ball mid-arc and, without missing a beat, tossed it out the open window.

"I thought you had a meeting," she said, frowning. "But here you are goofing off again."

"Diana, sunshine, how could you say that?" Max pressed a hand to his chest, mock-offended.

"Because it's true." She folded her arms, expression sharp. "I barely recognize you these days, Max. You used to loathe the capital—always found excuses to escape. Now you've been holed up here for two weeks. Don't say it's Clan business—you've been delegating everything. So what's keeping you?"

"Nothing's changed," he said with a shrug. "I'm exactly where the Clan needs me."

“Oh, sure. Bouncing a ball. Vital work.” She paced a step. “And getting cozy with the Shadow lot? Ignoring my reports, too?”

“I read them,” he said smoothly. “They were inaccurate. Like I told you.”

Diana’s jaw tensed, her fists clenching. It was the first time in fifteen years one of her assessments had been off—and it stung. “They’ve been updated,” she said through gritted teeth.

“Don’t take it personally, sunshine.” He smiled. “We all trip up now and then. The trick is learning from it. That’s why you backed Marcus, isn’t it?”

“What makes you think that?” she asked warily. “I haven’t even gone up to his floor.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Max said, shaking his head. “If you helped set up that meeting, then you’ve already made your move. So... what’s your forecast on Marcus now?”

“Uncertain.” Her tone was clipped. She hated admitting it—even more than she hated being wrong. “Ever since Alexandra joined his team, my access has been locked. You know how it is.”

“Don’t interfere with your own side.” Max gave a small nod.

“Exactly.”

“Honestly,” he said, “that’s probably a good thing.”

“How so?”

“Because I don’t want to dig up dirt on a...” He hesitated.

“A friend?” Diana’s eyebrows lifted.

“And if he is?” Max countered with a shrug.

“So Marcus is the reason you’re still here,” she said, eyes narrowing.

“I’m where I’m most useful to the Clan.”



“Oh, come on.” She rolled her eyes. “I’ve known you for fifteen years. This morning, we lost a strike team in the Red Zone. Yesterday there was a fire at Refinery Three. And three days ago, people started vanishing from the wall construction site. The old you would’ve been neck-deep in all of it by now.”

“I assigned capable teams,” Max said calmly. “They’ll handle it.”

“That’s not the same and you know it.”

“I’ve got ten minutes left,” he said, glancing at the clock. “Let’s skip to the point.”

“There’s news. About the Portal.”

That got his attention.

The whole city had been buzzing over the discovery of an active C+ class Portal right in the capital. The Ministry of Guardians had sounded the alarm and requested backup from the Lightning Clan—it matched the Portal’s dominant Element.

“In the end, our help wasn’t needed,” Diana said. “The Portal’s already been closed.”

Max’s eyes gleamed. “Is that so.”

“You’re not even surprised,” she muttered. “Even after the analyst reports.”

“I’ve learned to stop betting against Marcus,” he said with a laugh. “Find me an analyst who can predict his next move, and I’ll give them the best car in my garage.”

“Challenge accepted,” she said instantly, eyes glinting. She’d had her eye on that limited-edition, two-seater red Hawk for weeks. Then her expression darkened. “That sneaky witch...”

“Who?”

“Alexandra.” She jabbed her tablet. “The Ministry offered the Shadow Clan a reward for closing the Portal and saving the capital.”

“And what did they choose?” Max asked, leaning forward, genuinely curious.

Her answer hit, and Max barked a laugh loud enough to echo off the windows.

## CHAPTER 15

MAJOR WINTHROP WAS PACING FURIOUSLY around his office while I sat quietly on the couch, sipping the tea Olivia had brought in.

Still damn good, by the way. Helped take the edge off the military-grade scowl flashing across the man's face.

“Land?” he snapped, turning his glare on me. “Have you completely lost your mind, Marcus? It’s one thing to bring it up in private, but you really had to say it on camera?”

“What’s the issue?” I asked, casually setting the cup aside.

“What’s the—” His crimson eyes flared wide. “You have the audacity to request a piece of land you bombarded with a tank, that’s what.”

“I’d prefer to use a different term for what happened,” I said politely.

“Oh really?” he said with a snort. “And what, pray tell, would you call it?”

“Aggressive diplomacy,” I said, taking another sip.

“They’d have hanged you for that kind of ‘diplomacy’ in the middle of the capital.”

“The tank was traveling along a transit route authorized by the Ministry of Defense,” I said evenly. “And it had permission to fire within the privately designated zone—which included the theater.”

“The route was authorized for the Light Clan! And the permission was for training shots. Are you suggesting Herman fired on his own property?”

“Herman?” I raised a brow.

“The Overseer,” he muttered.

“Ah, so that’s his name,” I said, feigning interest. “Anyway, as for your question—legally, the route and permission to fire weren’t granted to the Clan, but to the vehicle itself. Whoever was driving it at the time doesn’t matter. And there were no civilian casualties, unless I missed something?”

“Thank Argus, there weren’t.” The major dropped into his chair with a groan. “But you stole the damn tank. Don’t even try to deny it. We have footage. Witnesses. You’re on record climbing out after the shot!”

“I got a ride,” I said with a shrug. “And the tank didn’t deviate from its assigned route. Not even an inch.”

The idiot Overseer had personally approved the tank’s path straight through the capital, past my district. Probably thought it would intimidate me. Instead, he handed me the perfect hiding spot for the thing.

Oops.

Lexa had uncovered the “coincidence” and spun it in our favor with her usual finesse.

“Fine. It stayed on course,” the major conceded. “But are you planning to return it?”

“If the owner files a claim, we’ll gladly return it,” I said with a bright smile.

He groaned again, dragging a hand down his face. Of course he knew the Overseer was dead, and legally speaking, Light Clan property was now caught in a byzantine inheritance shuffle.

“Whatever. Keep the damn tank,” he muttered, spitting the words like acid. “Let the Light Clan sort it out with you themselves.”

“Glad we’ve cleared that up,” I said with a nod.

Honestly, I doubted the Light Prince would bother. If he did, I’d be disappointed—not because I’d have to give the tank back. No. Like hell I’d return a legitimate war trophy.

No, I'd be disappointed in him for being so... small-minded. And he was supposed to be my vacation entertainment.

"But the land, Marcus..." The major rubbed his temples. "That's a different matter."

"What about it?" I asked. "That patch was transferred to the Ministry of Guardians due to the Portal. But two hundred years ago, it belonged to the Shadow Clan. It was seized illegally. Our petition to reclaim it is sound, even without awarding it as a 'reward.' So technically, we're requesting facilitation, not a gift."

By the time we'd arrived at the Ministry building, I was fully prepped—thanks to Lexa. The legal groundwork she'd laid was airtight. They could still deny the request, sure, but after the public statement? It would look... less than admirable.

Lexa had set all this in motion the moment the Overseer dragged me into that Portal. She'd trusted I'd survive—and planned for every outcome.

Scary woman.

"There's still a Portal on that land!" the major said, exasperated.

"Which I closed," I replied.

"But—"

"Major," I said, leaning forward. "You're the one who insisted I choose a reward. I consulted my assistant. This is our formal request. You're free to decline. But in that case, drop the blockade and let my team enter the Portal area." I checked the time. Just past midnight. "According to Guardian provisions, which you made me memorize, I have the right to extract resources from the zone for one week after closure. Or are you trying to strip that from me too?"

His brow creased. He reached into a drawer, pulled out an unlabeled bottle of amber liquid, and poured some into his tea. After a beat, he looked at me in silent offer. I shook my head.

"You're killing me, Marcus," he muttered, cracking a peanut between

his teeth. Then he took a sip. “Fine. I’ll greenlight the request for the land committee.”

“And the blockade?” I asked.

“I’ll lift it,” he said, “but on one condition.”

“Which is?”

“You’re not turning it into a theater,” he said, voice hardening. Something dark flickered in his expression.

Apparently, I wasn’t the only one who knew what had happened behind those walls.

“Deal,” I said, rising and shaking the hand he offered.

With that, I left the office and made my way to the exit, head spinning slightly from how quickly things had escalated.

Turns out, Lexa had gotten the ball rolling the moment I vanished into the Portal. She’d known—somehow—that the Overseer wouldn’t be coming back. And she’d prepared for it.

The moment Roe and I emerged, we were greeted by a delegation of soldiers, a swarm of reporters, and an army of cameras. When the major personally thanked me and offered a reward, I got a call from Lexa. One minute later, I walked back to the crowd and publicly stated that if the land had still belonged to the Shadow Clan, like it had two centuries ago, none of this would’ve happened.

I hadn’t even been addressing the major—those words were meant for the Light Prince. But he took it personally and dragged me here for this little chat. But hey, he’d offered the reward. I just accepted.

I stepped out of the building in high spirits despite being dead on my feet. I hadn’t slept in over twenty-four hours, and I was about ready to pass out.

But the van waiting for me outside lifted my mood.

Unlike the reporters, Clan transport had been allowed through to the

inner courtyard, and five minutes later, we were cruising through the night, headed back to the district.

After exchanging a few words with Bob—who was practically buzzing—I dialed Albert and gave the order to move in.

The collection team was already on standby. We'd pulled the most valuable finds ourselves through Roe's Shadow Pocket, but the Portal's lush off-world ecosystem still held plenty of rare resources. Under Albert's supervision, my team would sweep the place clean over the next seven days. Including the hundreds of serpent corpses we'd left behind.

Portals were usually far from the capital, which made logistics a pain. But this one? We could sell the loot from the doorstep. I'd even brought in Patrick to appraise the haul and help line up buyers.

All in all, that S+ class Portal had netted me over three hundred energy units, two artifact masks, one whip, a high-grade Lightning crystal, more than two hundred pieces of gear, fourteen elemental eggs, and two bags of shimmering blue-scaled serpent queen hide.

Add to that another two hundred units I got in “cashback” when the Cat snacked on those metal crystals, and whatever else my team extracted from the place—and this was easily my best haul since arriving in the capital.

Rich enemies really are a blessing. Even their Portals are stacked.

I chuckled to myself and dialed the next person on my list.

“How'd it go?” Lexa's voice drifted over the sound of splashing water—casual, smooth.

Judging by the acoustics, she was lounging in my bathtub again. Guess she'd made herself at home while I was off in the jungle.

“The major signed off.”

“Brilliant,” she said, her voice light. “Leave the rest to me. I'll try to get the land hearing scheduled for this week.”

“Fast turnaround.”

“I don’t do slow,” she said proudly. “Besides, this is a huge opportunity. If we establish precedent by reclaiming one plot, we’ll have a legal basis to file claims on other lost lands. Getting access to the Unity Square residence becomes a lot easier after that.”

“You’re working that angle too?” I asked, genuinely impressed. “Do you ever take a break?”

“I don’t get tired,” she said. “Although, speaking of the Unity Square campaign, there’s a small condition you’ll need to fulfill. But we can discuss that in the morning. For now, there’s something you need to hear.”

“Mm?”

“Payment just came through—for the Nature Prince job.”

“Always a welcome update,” I said with a grin. “But that’s not the whole story, is it?”

“Correct.” Her tone shifted. “A new contract came in. This time, it’s for the Overseer.”

“Come again?” My eyebrows shot up. It was one thing for the Light Prince to joke around and put out a hit on another Prince. But his own son?

“The bounty is symbolic—just one thousand imperial coins.”

“And the timing?”

“Let me check...” A pause, followed by the faint sound of her scrolling. “Oh. It was filed the exact moment the Overseer entered the Portal with you.”

“In other words,” I said darkly, “the Light Prince knew in advance that his son wouldn’t return.”

And the thousand-coin reward?

That wasn’t a payment. That was a statement.

That was the value he placed on his own son's life.

And he wanted the world to know it.



Sick bastard.

\* \* \*

A tall, broad-shouldered man stood by the window, slowly exhaling cigar smoke as his gaze lingered on the shadow-gray facade across the street—the one crowned with a statue of a raven.

The Shadow Clan's embassy. The eternal rivals of the Light Clan. And every time he looked at that building, the Prince swore that damned bird was staring right back into his soul.

In his eyes, the raven embodied everything the Shadow Clan stood for.

Drab. Frail. Opportunistic. Feeding off scraps and weakness. Lacking the vision of an eagle, the claws of a hawk, or the elegance of a falcon. A sorry excuse for a predator by every metric.

And yet, somehow, it endured.

Worse still, some of them had learned to disguise those weaknesses—to play clever, to provoke and challenge predators far stronger and better suited to survival. Insolent little vermin, really.

If it were up to him, the Light Prince would've wiped out every last one of them and razed that filthy statue to the ground. But he couldn't.

The Pact of Ten—the unbreakable Unity Accord forged between the Clans—was the Empire's greatest strength... and its greatest weakness.

Centuries ago, one of his ancestors had devised a brilliant workaround: if extermination was off the table, exile them instead. Banish the Shadows to the dumps, relegate them to irrelevance, and slowly breed out their defiance.

And for two hundred years, the plan had worked.

He'd long hoped to complete his ancestor's legacy—fusing the power of two Elements into a Supreme Element—one that would rise above and dominate the rest. He still believed he'd live to see it done.

Until now.

Now, a new raven had landed on the trash heap—and driven out the docile flock. Worse yet, he wanted his nest back. And what disturbed the Prince most was that this one... might actually pull it off.

He could feel it in his bones.

But instead of fear, he felt... anticipation?

The dull gray world of long-term predictions and century-spanning strategies had suddenly bloomed with color. The script had flipped. The future, once boringly inevitable, now brimmed with delightful uncertainty.

His forebears had always warned that chaos was dangerous. And yet here he was, heart pounding like a child awaiting a game's outcome.

Because chaos, it turned out, could be exhilarating.

This little raven, this Marcus, had reminded him of something he'd long forgotten: chaos could be *fun*.

And for that, the boy had his gratitude.

Which only made the desire to destroy him burn hotter.

But he wouldn't rush it. What would be the point? If he ended the game now, the world would fall back into grayscale monotony. No, better to let things unfold. Let his "children" step out of their gilded playpens and prove what they were truly worth.

He had waited too long for an opportunity like this to pass it up—no matter how it had arrived.

Besides, what real harm could come of indulging himself—just this once? Letting go of duty, just a little. Allowing himself to play?

A smile tugged at the Prince's lips as he watched the status of the payment order shift to confirmed. "Good little raven," he murmured, then clicked *Pay*.

A thousand imperial coins transferred from one account to another.

A servant stepped up behind him. "Your Highness, Prince Warren—

everyone's assembled."

"Thank you, Jim." He shrugged on a white blazer and strode toward the conference room.

Twenty-five individuals sat around a long, oval table of tempered glass. Different ages, different backgrounds, united only by the shimmer of their Light Clan Shards—and the intense white gleam in their eyes.

At his entrance, they all rose in silence, heads bowed in reverent respect. Some met his gaze with wary admiration, some looked away in nervous deference, and a few—too young to have seen him before—couldn't even raise their eyes.

This was the first time all the heirs of the Light Clan had been summoned to the same room. And with the Light Prince himself presiding, it was the kind of gathering that happened once in a generation—if ever.

"Welcome to the sanctum of our Great Clan." He took his place at the head of the table. "My children. Today, I've called you here for one reason: the time has come to name the one who will one day take my place. The one who must bear the weight of our legacy and lead both our Clan—and the world—into a brighter future." His voice rang with solemn gravity, and with it came a surge of elemental force that rippled through the room like a rising tide.

The top-ranked heirs remained composed, already hardened by prior exposure to the Prince's mental grip. The others, less prepared, crumpled beneath the weight of his presence—crushed by the invisible force pressing down on their minds.

Only twenty-two were still standing when he nodded for them to sit. He withdrew his aura and waited patiently while the rest slowly recovered and reclaimed their seats.

"The name of my successor," he said, pausing—just long enough to note how his eldest son, Gareth, tensed like a coiled spring, "is Ga—"

"Thank you—" The narrow-shouldered man in white-and-gold glasses stood, smug expression already in place.

“—briel.” The Prince finished the sentence smoothly, his gaze locking on his son’s frozen stare.

Gareth, first in the rankings, blinked. Then rose, carefully composing his features. “This is a joke, Father?”

“Not in the slightest.” The Prince’s eyes drifted across the table to observe the fallout.

It was an old habit, born from his own days clawing for power as one heir among many. He’d triumphed then—some by cunning, some by strength, some by elimination.

Back then, Warren hadn’t cared what was right or just. He’d known only one truth: in the Light Clan, only the Prince had the right to his own will. Everyone else was born to obey. And Warren had never obeyed anyone.

Looking around the table now, he felt a flicker of nostalgia. He remembered the day his own father had done the same—declared his heir and stripped every other child of their freedom. From that moment on, their lives had belonged to the Clan.

So it had been. So it would always be.

Now it was his children’s turn. No more games. No more indulgences. He’d delayed long enough, uncertain of who could carry the burden alone.

“You’re kidding me!” the second-ranked heir roared, slamming a white-gold glove onto the table.

“I don’t agree either,” a woman said icily, her hair adorned with golden pins fanned like a sunburst. “Gabriel didn’t even bother showing up.”

The Prince let the room simmer for a moment longer. “Only the top three are upset?” he asked, clearly unimpressed. “Let me remind you: when I stood where you sit, I was ranked eleventh. Look where I am now. And where are the others?” His voice remained calm, almost emotionless, but the power behind it crept into their bones.

One by one, the heirs stood again. Five... six... ten... until all twenty-

five were on their feet.

Only then did the Prince rise. “Better,” he said. “Now, I’m giving you one chance. One year. All of you. Prove me wrong. It doesn’t matter what you’ve achieved so far—what happens over the next year will decide everything. One shot. One outcome. Clear?”

“Yes, Father!” they shouted in unison.

“What exactly are we supposed to do?” Gareth adjusted his glasses.

“Take back what is rightfully ours—the Shadow District.” His voice dropped, hardening. “And your target is its current Boss—Marcus. I don’t care how you handle him. Break him, bribe him, control him—he’s the key to your future.”

“So that’s why you picked Gabriel.” Gareth made a quick note, realization dawning.

“Exactly.” The Prince’s expression didn’t change. “Right now, he’s ahead of all of you.”

“Is this really that important?” the second-ranked heir muttered, clenching his gloved hand.

“It’s not just important, Cyril.” The Prince’s voice turned cold. “It’s a matter of survival.”

No one dared question him after that.

Dismissed, the heirs filed out.

The Prince returned slowly to his private chambers, turned the chessboard halfway around, and placed the black king beside the nearest white pawn.

# CHAPTER 16

I'D SLEPT LIKE a rock.

Apparently, my fondness for leaving windows open hadn't gone unnoticed, because even here at the mansion, every door and shutter had been left wide open. The cool air drifting in made the bed feel extra inviting, and I was out cold in under a minute.

Yeah—I'd stayed in the district overnight. Lexa had hinted yesterday that a few matters needed my personal attention, so I figured I might as well get a jump on the day.

The stack of paperwork waiting on the desk was impressive, but I cleared it in under an hour.

Most of it was already sorted and just needed my signature or review. Like the updated report on internal and external spies eliminated in the last six days.

I had to hand it to Olga and Joel—they did a damn good job.

Olga, with help from Albert and Tina, had flushed out the rats hiding in the district. Joel, on the other hand, had silenced nearly everyone I'd marked for elimination during our first meeting—cleanly, efficiently, and without a trace.

Which meant the district was now stable from a security standpoint. The transitional phase was over.

The most dangerous period—when enemies could've struck openly—was behind us.

After that handshake with the Fire Prince and the shift in how the highborn viewed the Shadow Clan, no one dared stage an attack on the

district or my people out in the open. And anyone stupid enough to try something covert? I'd already demonstrated the consequences—starting with the Overseer.

Not that killing a Shadow Clan operative in secret was easy. Good luck pulling that off.

I took a slow sip of the coffee Olga had brought in and glanced at the door, behind which someone had been patiently waiting for ten minutes now.

“Get in already—any slower and you’ll start growing roots,” I said, setting aside the signed documents.

“My apologies. I didn’t mean to interrupt.” The man stepped into the room in a loose black robe. He looked composed... and oddly enough, almost happy?

Apparently, word of the Overseer’s demise—and the slow acceptance of the Shadow Clan by the upper crust—hadn’t gone unnoticed. Plus, anyone still living here had seen firsthand how much the district had improved in just a few days.

In less than a week, Joel—like the rest of the Nameless—had gone from being a despised nobody to an official member of one of the Empire’s Top Ten Clans. In his case, he’d even been appointed as my head of external intelligence. And frankly, he was killing it. There hadn’t been a single unauthorized observer near the district for three days straight.

“You’re not interrupting,” I said with a smile, sliding a tray toward him. “Croissant?”

“No, thank you, sir—”

“Just Marcus.”

“Marcus,” he said quietly, the word catching slightly in his throat. “The spy purge is complete—internally and externally. The nearby zones are being patrolled, and all known leak sources have been neutralized. But we’re having trouble with extended surveillance and dossier building. I wanted to report it in person.”

“What’s the issue?”

“The daytime travel ban on the Nameless.”

“Then consider that ban lifted,” I said, still smiling.

“Lifted... how? You mean you officially overturned a decree from the Governor himself?”

“Not yet,” I said, reaching for a strawberry croissant. “But I’ll get around to it. In the meantime, I’m giving you permission to operate whenever you need—but with one condition.”

Joel’s eyes narrowed slightly. “And that is?”

“Don’t get caught.” I grinned. “Surely no one can track you through Deep Shadow.”

“If we’re careful, no... but...” He hesitated, brow furrowing. “Previous Clan Bosses were strict about enforcing that ban. They knew the Governor wouldn’t hesitate to make an example of the Boss first if anything went wrong. So if something does happen—”

“You saying you don’t trust your own skills?” I raised a brow.

“What? No. Of course I do!” Joel straightened quickly.

“Good. Then go do what you do best. Yeah, it’s riskier—but I believe in you. Time you started believing in yourself too.”

A rare smile broke across his face. He finally reached for a croissant, then vanished into the Shadows.

“Well, that’s one down,” I muttered, stretching and rising from my chair. “Let’s move on.”

\* \* \*

Right hook.

The hanging bag shuddered under the impact.

Left hook.



The room dimmed for a second, a tremor running across the walls.

BAM.

A devastating high kick tore the bag clean off its chain and slammed it into the wall.

Dust and dark smoke swirled through the infirmary's recovery hall. At the center of the chaos stood a pale silhouette, limbs wrapped in jet-black bandages.

His yellow-black eyes—void-like, burning with restrained power—glinted through the haze. Despite the two thick scars crossing his throat, the man looked—if not fully healed—then at least intact.

“Glad to see you’re up,” I said, catching his hard stare and tossing him the last croissant.

Mirk gave it a once-over, then devoured the cherry-filled pastry without a word.

Didn’t look any more cheerful afterward.

“Not fast enough,” he muttered, stepping toward me with slow, deliberate movements.

“So they told you,” I said. “You pissed?”

“At myself,” he replied tightly. “Recovery’s been harder than I thought. My body and my mind... they’re speaking different languages.”

“Could’ve fooled me,” I said, eyeing the ruined training bag.

That thing wasn’t standard gear. Half of it was made from portal beast hide, the other half from elemental shadow. Even grazing it required flawless coordination between elemental control and physical movement.

To knock it off its mount entirely? That took precision most elementalists couldn’t dream of.

“Today, sure,” Mirk said. “But it’s too late now. The Overseer’s dead.”

“Dead,” I confirmed quietly.

His fists clenched, rage and power trembling just beneath the surface. But after a few seconds, he met my gaze. “How did he die?”

“Elemental lightning. Burned a hole straight through his chest.”

“Damn.” He scowled. “Too quick.”

“You’re not wrong,” I said. “The lightning hit every nerve ending in his body. He felt the moment of death with every cell. Brain stayed intact—so he got two full minutes of pure agony before the end.”

“Still... not enough.”

Didn’t matter if I said a minute, a day, or a year—nothing would’ve been enough for him. He’d endured too much.

Even now, he was barely sleeping. Still tormented by nightmares, by the lingering aftershocks of high-level mental domination.

The only thing that could’ve quenched his need for vengeance—if only a little—was killing the Overseer with his own hands.

And now he thought he’d missed that chance.

Only he hadn’t.

“You still want to kill the one who did that to you?” I asked, locking eyes with his.

“What difference does it make now?” he muttered.

“It makes a difference,” I said. “Because one of them is still alive.”

He blinked. “But the voice...”

“When the relic severed that mental control, I started putting the pieces together,” I said. “I believe the voice belonged to the Overseer. Maybe he thought he was the one pulling the strings. But when I examined his energy signature, I found traces of someone else’s control layered beneath it. Subtle. Deliberate. But definitely there.”

“You mean...”

“I mean he made all his decisions willingly—but someone nudged him toward them. Helped him carry them out.”

Mirk’s eyes narrowed. “The Prince?”

“Maybe.” I shrugged. “Or one of his delightful heirs. Either way, that’s where we start. No offense, but in your current condition, you won’t get far.”

Anyone else would’ve taken offense. Mirk just smiled—the first time I’d seen that on his face.

“What exactly do you need from me?” he asked, all business now.

“Find a way into the Shadow Clan residence near Unity Square,” I said casually, watching his reaction closely.

He didn’t bother hiding the surprise. “That’s impossible.”

“You’re wrong,” I said, tapping his forehead lightly with one finger. “The answer’s up here. I’d bet anything that you’ve either been inside or met someone who has.”

“And you’re basing that on...?”

“Because whoever guided the Overseer, controlled you, and accessed the Shadow Terminal—they’re all the same person. And I’m pretty sure it wasn’t the Light Prince.”

“And if it was?” he asked grimly.

“Then we’ll handle him together. After you rule everyone else out.”

Truth be told, I also suspected that same someone had hidden the Amulet’s creator from me. He’d vanished the same day I arrived in the capital—far too convenient to be coincidence.

Mirk nodded uncertainly, then furrowed his brow and closed his eyes, clearly trying to recall something. Suddenly, he winced and clutched his head, staggering back. “Ugh... it’s no good. I can’t remember anything. Even if you’re right, how am I supposed to find them? I only remember the voice...”

“You don’t remember—but your body does,” I said quietly. “Get close enough, and it’ll react. That’s something only you can track. Set up surveillance. Try to provoke a response. I know it’s risky, and I’ll understand if you want to back out—”

“No!” He snapped, shaking his head. “I’m in.”

“All right,” I said with a nod. “But you’ll need to be careful. If the target senses he’s being hunted, he’ll vanish, and we’ll never find out who was behind it.”

“I will find out,” Mirk said coldly. A dangerous gleam flickered in those eerie, sclera-less eyes. “No matter what it takes.”

“You want backup?”

“Yes.” He hesitated, then gave a short nod.

“Who?” I asked, wondering if Roe or Joel could handle it if he named them.

“Boar.”

That cut through my thoughts, and now it was my turn to blink.

I would’ve understood if he’d picked one of the Nameless Ones. Even for them, tailing a Light-aligned target was suicide.

Gifted of the Light with strong elemental resonance could sense the presence of Shadows nearby. Some could banish you from the Shadow world entirely with nothing more than a glance.

One slip-up meant death. One mid-level Light technique? Also death.

Roe probably had enough skill to stay hidden even under passive Light exposure... but not enough self-control to just sit and observe. Joel was the opposite—disciplined, a solid tactician—but lacked the practical instincts to operate in the field.

Just being able to melt into the deep Shadows wouldn’t cut it.

And then there was the risk of mental interference. The Shadow Clan

had lost that war two hundred years ago for a reason. Without counters, they never stood a chance one-on-one.

“You’re sure?” I asked, studying him.

“For anything beyond the district, Boar is a much better fit than you’d think.”

“You’re the same guy who told Lexa yesterday he refused to stay in the district,” I said, squinting.

“Correct. He refused to stay—not to help.” A faint smirk tugged at Mirk’s lips. “Prideful bastard. He’s afraid of what people here will say about him. But he recognizes your authority.” He paused, then pulled out an Argus coin and handed it to me.

“Did he say where he got this?” I slipped it into my pocket.

“No. But he promised to track down someone who knows—if you give him the chance.”

“And you believe him?”

“It’s not about belief, Marcus.” Something dark stirred in Mirk’s voice—barely there, but unmistakable. “He can’t lie to me.”

And just like that, I almost felt sorry for Boar.

I’d momentarily forgotten who I was talking to. Mirk wasn’t some street-level agent—he was descended from the old, fallen House of true Shadow-bloods. Same line Aks came from. The kind bred with persuasion and cruelty stitched into their bones.

Now that I thought about it, he and Aks had a lot in common. Grim as hell, both of them.

“All right. He’s yours,” I said. “Take the Relic too, if you need it.”

“I don’t.” Mirk shook his head. “It belongs here. And... thank you. For trusting me. And,” he added, nodding toward the window where a few locals wandered past, “for the district. I mean it.”

“Okay, now you sound like you’re about to drop dead,” I said dryly. “What’s with the farewell speech?”

“Drop dead?” He gave me a crooked smile. “Not until I find the bastard and gut him myself.”

“Glad to hear it.” I clapped him on the shoulder.

We stepped out of the infirmary. The moment Mirk crossed the threshold, my parrot landed on his shoulder with the poise of a predator.

“Her-r-retic?” Beeky demanded, eyes narrowed.

“No,” Mirk said, squinting right back.

Beeky narrowed his eyes further, and the two of them froze—locked in a ten-second staring contest.

“R-r-rude!” Beeky finally snapped, flapping off to sulk on the rooftop, beak pressed to the attic window.

“Boar’s going to get the same treatment, isn’t he?” Mirk asked, glancing sideways at me.

“Of course.” I grinned. “If you need a new assistant, you know where to find me.” I waved him off and made my way to the mansion’s open terrace, where my final meeting of the morning was already waiting.

Despite the October chill, Lexa sat barefoot in a loose white dress, sipping a daiquiri like it was the middle of summer. At first, I thought it was just an astral projection. But no—real body, real intent. And judging by the cut of her dress, she’d made deliberate choices this morning. No bra, minimal fabric, and the breeze made sure everything was clearly visible—and then some.

“Good morning,” Lexa greeted with an innocent smile, sliding a tray of food across the table. “Your breakfast. Eric went all out once he heard you finally spent the night here. He’s starting to think you’ve lost faith in his culinary talents.”

“I’m sure you can explain to our chef why he’s wrong,” I said, diving into the food. “I’ve got big plans for him. Tell him not to worry.”

“Well, at least someone made it onto your to-do list,” she muttered, a trace of irritation cutting through the sweetness. “Didn’t peg you for the type to adopt strays.”

Following her gaze, I spotted Mirk leading Boar down the steps of the infirmary. My parrot gave Boar a long, dramatic once-over, sighed, and flew up to sulk near the attic window again.

“More like sending him out for a walk,” I said, watching them disappear. “Think he’ll be useful?”

“Absolutely.” Her tone sharpened. “The streets are a mess. Most of the unaffiliated gangs—trash we kicked out—are swarming again. The big players won’t step in, and no one’s stepping up to lead.”

“You think they’ll follow Boar?”

“They already are,” she said. “Over a hundred of them are waiting on his word. The rest? He’ll bring them in. Say what you want about him—he knows how to rally people.”

“You’ve got a point,” I said, thinking back to that mob of fearless idiots who’d tried to avenge him.

“No point about it. I know I’m right.” Her smile turned sharp. “By the end of the week, Boar will own the street scene. And if your feathered psycho’s instincts are right, that’ll work out very well for us.”

“Let’s just hope it helps Mirk,” I muttered, biting into a roll. “He’s got a tough job ahead.”

“Speaking of that ‘job’...” Lexa wrinkled her nose. “You still don’t believe I can get you that residence legally, do you?”

“I do,” I said honestly. “But for him, it’s personal. Unless... you worried about the competition?”

“Me? Worried? About competition?” Her eyes went wide with mock offense. “Oh, that’s it, Marcus. You just made it personal. And if your little ghost-faced shadowling starts whining that I beat him to it—too bad.”

“Fair enough,” I said, setting my fork down. Then I met her gaze.

“Now, let’s talk business. What exactly did you mean yesterday about their conditions for me? Still have a promise to keep to my parrot.”

At that, Beeky peeled his beak off the window and stared at me with a hopeful glint in his eye—as if thinking: *Her-r-retics?*



# CHAPTER 17

AS IT TURNED OUT, regaining access to the Shadow Clan's residence on Unity Square wasn't going to be easy.

First, I'd need formal approval—signed not just by the council but personally by the Governor.

And just to submit the request, I'd have to gather a mountain of documents and win a string of court battles. Lexa casually estimated five.

She refused to give me a timeline, gently hinting that resistance and bureaucratic sabotage would meet us at every turn. No one in the Ten Clans had any interest in letting the Shadow Clan reclaim access to the terminal.

Still, the gleam in her eyes told me she didn't consider the task impossible. Quite the opposite—she looked like she was already drafting the winning strategy. The only real question was how soon it could be done.

And apparently, I needed to be ready for that soon.

Even if the permit came through, the Shadow Clan still wouldn't be allowed to use the residence—unless it had a legitimate Prince at the helm.

Which, it turned out, was a whole separate quest. Just being the acting head of the Clan wasn't enough.

That was why people had called the Shadow Clan a “dead Clan” for the past two hundred years—because, legally, it hadn't had a Prince in all that time.

To claim the title, I had to meet three conditions: status, wealth, and strength.

Out of those, I currently fulfilled just one—and barely at that. The

“barely” was thanks to my laughable status as an eighth-rank Guardian.

According to Lexa, that rank devalued me as a Warrior. If I wanted to avoid trouble later, I’d need to bump that up to match the active ones.

At least fourth-rank. Ideally higher.

Then came the wealth requirement—proving I could personally fund the upkeep of the residence and its equipment for the entire duration of my leadership.

Lexa didn’t give an exact figure, but she hinted it was in the nine-digit range. Minimum.

And finally, the cherry on top: status.

On paper, I’d need to become a registered noble and officially establish a House.

Right now, people only called me an aristocrat because of loopholes in the Shadow Clan’s charter. In reality, the so-called House of Dark that had popped up two weeks ago wasn’t officially recognized. And until that was fixed, I couldn’t become Prince.

Honestly, I didn’t see a problem with the first two conditions.

But the third made me pause. Did I even want this?

Sure, no one could take the title of Boss from me—the founding documents guaranteed that.

But without a legitimate Prince at the top, every Shadow Clan member would remain stuck in this pseudo-noble, second-class limbo.

And any hope of peacefully accessing the residence or the terminal? Gone.

I didn’t give Lexa an answer right away. She didn’t push, but I could tell she didn’t love the hesitation. “So,” she said smoothly, “what did you decide about the Lightning Clan?”

“They already sent over the paperwork?”

“This morning,” she said. “The draft agreements are ready for review.”

“Go ahead.”

“With pleasure,” she said, flashing a playful smile. “Any special requests?”

“I want access to their Portals and shard suppliers.” I rolled my Clan Amulet between my fingers, thinking. I only had three minor shards left—pulled from the corpses of would-be assassins. But the Clans had to be sourcing theirs from somewhere.

“Anything else?” she asked, catching my expression.

“Yes. The Trident.”

“The Portal? The Fort? The city?”

“The city,” I said. “Specifically, the market. I want a foothold there.”

“Understood.” Her smirk turned sharp. “I’ll wring every concession I need from that bitch.”

“Whoa, hang on—” I cut her off. I knew that look. One minute she’s negotiating, the next there’s a declaration of war.

“Relax. I know what I’m doing. Diana will fold,” she said, tossing her hair as she turned toward the mansion.

“I hope so,” I muttered, watching her elegant figure vanish around the corner.

Sorry, Max. You knew what you were getting into.

I drained the rest of my coffee, stopped by my room to gear up, and slipped out through the mansion’s side entrance.

I headed down the drive and spotted the van already waiting. Bob stood beside it, grinning like a kid and throwing me a cheerful wave. “Morning!” he said.

“Morning.” I nodded. “Ready for adventure?”

“Always ready,” he barked, diving behind the wheel and firing up the engine.

I didn’t even blink at the new improvements to his armor or the beefed-up elemental response. Whoever kept upgrading our modest fleet—and doing it for free—deserved a medal. I needed to track them down eventually.

“You ready too?” I looked up at my parrot, who’d been trailing me all morning and was now bouncing excitedly on a branch.

“C-c-can I really come?” he chirped, his beady eyes sparkling with joy.

“Yes, really,” I said, smiling as I opened the van’s side door.

I hadn’t severed his tether to the district, so if anything went wrong, he could fly back home through the realm of Darkness. Costly, but necessary. He needed fresh air—or I’d have a meltdown on my hands, tether or not.

Overjoyed, my feathery menace darted into the van like a missile, plopped down in the comfiest seat, and began preening with exaggerated dignity.

Why he needed a chair, I had no idea. But whatever made him happy.

I took the side bench along the aisle, and off we went.

Bob drove us south through the capital, blasting upbeat music and enthusiastically recounting the chaos that followed the Overseer’s assassination.

People remembered his reign all too vividly—and many feared that if he’d won, things would’ve gone back to the way they were. Or worse, since they’d supported me.

According to Bob, the same people who’d once stayed silent and kept their heads down were now openly voicing support and even seeking out Patrick to ask for work.

They could sense change. And they wanted to be part of it.

But what really lit Bob up was the reception to our captured Light Clan

tank.

He claimed everyone in the district had taken photos with it, and he'd organized a full-on photoshoot. His only complaint? The interior was too cramped for someone his size—and he'd like to “liberate” a roomier one next time.

Not buy. Liberate.

Great. I might actually be a bad influence.

And today's trip? Yeah... not exactly a shopping run.

Our first stop was a wooded hill, discreetly tucked into a quiet stretch of forest. From the top, we had a clear view of a massive circular glass structure, boldly named *Eternity Medical Center*.

I hadn't planned to actually enter the premises, which is why I'd asked Bob to park as far from the building as possible. The moment we stopped, he turned toward Beeky with a big grin and announced, “We're at the hospital...”

“Beak to the freak with a her-r-retic squeak!” He cawed cheerfully.

Bob burst out laughing.

Beeky, who'd been restlessly eyeing the window the whole ride, perked up and began rocking excitedly in his seat.

“We're here to visit the heretics...” Bob continued with a wide grin.

“...bury them deep—and then we feast!” Beeky finished the rhyme with gusto—and Bob turned to me, grinning like a schoolkid who'd taught his dog to cuss on command.

I just stared, baffled, trying to process how a creature that, seven centuries ago, had struck fear into millions as a living weapon of death had been turned into a bloody rhyming machine in under a week.

And judging by Bob's beaming face, he had no idea the parrot wasn't joking. Every line that bird spat out, he remembered—and meant. And he'd act on it. That wasn't funny. That was terrifying.

The thought of how many dark impulses the poor parrot had internalized thanks to these comedians made my head spin.

“What’s with the look?” Bob blinked. “Isn’t it awesome? Roe taught him! Seriously, he can finish almost any line. Watch this—” He stifled a laugh, turned back to Beeky, and started counting, “One, two, three, four, five...”

“...no her-r-retic leaves alive!”

“Five, four, three, two, one...”

“Burn them all—just for fun!” Beeky’s eyes flared with literal fire, and I barely managed to clamp down on his energy feed before the little psycho launched himself out the window to incinerate the entire damn hospital.

“Hold it!” I barked. The flickering elemental flame on Beeky’s feathers vanished at once, and he averted his gaze guiltily.

“Oh, come on,” Bob grumbled, sounding genuinely disappointed. “That was funny...”

Ugh. Only now did I fully appreciate how right I’d been to ban the parrot from leaving the Shadow District without my supervision.

“Bunch of comedians,” I muttered, sharply cutting the parrot’s access to energy.

Still... now I was curious, damn it. Could he really finish anything? “Awake or asleep...” I said cautiously.

“...I’ll shred their throats nice and deep!” Beeky chirped, bobbing happily.

“Okay, that one was solid,” I admitted, chuckling despite myself. I pointed out a small white building standing alone at the far corner of the medical complex—the one where, at that very moment, six young aristocrats in various states of bandaged idiocy were drinking vodka and sharing not-so-kind thoughts about a certain “shadow bastard.”

Sure, I’d blamed their behavior at the Southern Pantheon on the mental manipulation of their little gang’s ringleaders. But what they were doing

now? That was all on them. And every choice had consequences.

Aks's ghost can bear me witness—I gave those punks a chance. Not my fault they didn't want to live.

“Right now, they're inside planning how to break my legs and make me watch what they'd do to Lexa,” I said flatly. “What do you think? Heretics?”

“Her-r-retics!” Beeky shrieked instantly, his eyes glowing with purpose.

“Whoa, easy there, buddy,” I said, wagging a finger. “We're not burning down the entire hospital.”

“...We're not?” he asked, sounding genuinely heartbroken.

“We're not,” I said firmly. Then, giving him just enough juice to operate, I rolled down the van window.

He vanished like a feathered ninja.

A moment later, the windows of the white annex lit up red from the inside.

A little rough, maybe. But fine. At least he didn't trigger the hospital's alarm system—was my last thought before I spotted a bloodied man crawling across the pavement toward the main building, screaming, one leg in a cast.

And skipping happily behind him was a tiny black parrot, yelling at the top of his lungs: “Get up, scum, get on your feet! Her-r-retics deserve the heat!”

“What the hell...” I groaned into a full-face palm.

Bob was no longer laughing.

\* \* \*

Retired Imperial Special Forces Captain Frank Starsky loved his job.

Like most of his academy buddies, he'd joined the Empire's military

dreaming of glory and a spot in one of the Clans. Years passed, and he slowly realized his talents were better suited to hunting humans than creatures. And so that's what he did, year after year, until the Clan invitation never came, and his prime quietly slipped away.

When his health started acting up, he began considering civilian life. That's when a cushy vacancy landed in his lap—chief of security at an elite Imperial institution that catered exclusively to aristocrats.

He didn't love dealing with nobles, but he knew how. And the pay was excellent. All he had to do was babysit the Medical Center's grounds, keep randoms off the roof, and make sure the fancy patients didn't go looking for duels or trouble.

Simple enough. Over time, the grizzled veteran settled into the role without complaint, smoothing over noble whims without fuss.

Like reserving a private comms room for six spoiled brats under the pretense of a “study project.” Cut in the head doctor, bring the kids some snacks and vodka, keep them from wandering—easy money.

Their injuries were minor, discharge was scheduled any day now, and a little side cash never hurt.

At least, that's what he thought—until he saw that.

Starsky had seen a lot in his time. But a portal creature singing limericks?

That one broke him.

Still, duty called. He grabbed his rifle and fired at the black blur.

It didn't work.

The multi-element bullet vanished into the parrot's tiny body like it had been sucked in.

The last thing Starsky saw was a blood-slicked beak flying straight at his eye.

\* \* \*



The van tore down the highway in absolute silence.

No music.

No jokes from Bob.

Just the steady hum of the engine... and the sound of Beeky picking gore from his feathers.

“Well,” Bob finally said, voice low, glancing at the rearview mirror with a guilty wince. “At least he didn’t torch the hospital.”

Judging by his face, he’d recognized some of his own “poetry” in Beeky’s material.

I wasn’t mad at either of them. Not really. In the end, thirty-seven heretics died.

Heretics, mind you. To avoid collateral damage, I’d had to pump Beeky with just enough charge for a proper mental scan—let him vent, then come back.

Took two minutes.

Five minutes later, we were past the city’s southern border.

“Better not bring it up again,” I muttered, glancing at Beeky’s sulky expression. “That whole ‘not burning the hospital’ thing really upset him.”

And no matter what anyone thinks, that building will burn. Maybe not today. Maybe not tomorrow. But someday. My familiars don’t leave things unfinished.

“Got it.” Bob reached for the radio, turned on some music, and started humming along.

I stretched out on the van’s bench, pulled up the incident footage, and sent it off to Lexa—just in case anyone came knocking. The local cameras and scanners couldn’t detect the Darkness Element, but plenty of people had seen the parrot. And heard his rhymes.

It probably wouldn’t trace back to us. But still—better safe than sorry.

By the time I was done, the van was pulling up to a shabby gate in a concrete fence, topped with rusty barbed wire. One lonely, empty guard tower stood to the side.

“We’re here,” Bob said, eyeing the decrepit hangar behind the fence.

Broken windows, rusted walls, bent floodlights—no markings anywhere.

The place looked abandoned.

It wasn’t.

It was one of the Overseer’s seven warehouses—the only one that, after his death, was legally reclassified as neutral.

And neutral meant one thing.

Mine.

No way I was letting the rest of his little gang loot my rightful inheritance. Not while they were in there right now, frantically loading the last of it into a truck.

The thought barely formed before the van rocked sideways as an explosion thundered outside.

“There’s our welcome,” I muttered, noting the barrier had held—but only just.

“Who dares touch my baby?” Bob howled, leaning out the window.

A bearded guy with an RPG froze mid-reload.

“Our parrot’s a real gem,” I said with a grin.

“Her-r-retics beware—he’s got a stick to spare!” Beeky screeched and vanished.

A second later, the bearded man toppled from the tower, a crooked stick jammed through his skull.

“You know what? That was kinda fun.” I stepped out and surveyed the

quiet wasteland around us.

Nothing but fields and abandoned lots for miles.

Well—except for the people in the hangar. But not for long. I wasn't restricting Beeky's movement here. Just throttling his energy intake so he didn't burn through my reserves. Even so, it'd be more than enough to mulch the scavengers inside.

The Overseer had already sacrificed his real muscle in the Portal. All that remained here were lucky—or maybe unlucky—bottom-feeders who knew where one of his stash points had been.

“Nice piece,” Bob muttered, picking up the RPG and side-eyeing the tower... then the van. “Another shot like that and the barrier's toast.”

“Relax. Pull the van up to the entrance.” I clapped him on the shoulder and kicked the gate open.

Inside, five corpses lay sprawled on the floor. No one else in sight.

“They're a little busy right now,” I said, stepping over the bodies.

“Busy with what?” Bob asked, gaze already drifting to the corpses' gear.

“Trying to survive.” I gave a whistle and strode deeper into the hangar.

# CHAPTER 18

INSIDE THE MAIN HANGAR BUILDING... was a bit of a mess.

Without access to elemental attacks, the parrot had gone with a simpler approach: accelerate at full speed and punch through enemies like a feathery drill. If any of them were Gifted, they weren't strong—the best resistance they managed was a couple of desperate shots before going down.

And Beeky didn't have patience for that kind of insolence.

He'd neatly perforated the first two thugs at the entrance, but the rest had met far less humane ends. Judging by the ruckus in the back rooms, the feathered sadist was still chasing down whatever sorry scavengers had survived.

I finished off the three too wounded to die properly, then gave the signal. Moments later, our van rumbled in through the side entrance. "Holy crap!" Bob's eyes lit up as he scanned the dozens of wooden crates stamped with Imperial military markings. "This is all ours?"

"All ours." I grinned. "Start packing."

Buzzing with the kind of anticipation I hadn't felt in ages, I moved between the crates, cracking them open one by one.

Rifles. Machine guns. RPGs. A mountain of firearms—not much use to me, but the district would know what to do with them.

"And what do we have here..." I cracked open a steel case that stood out from the rest and immediately broke into a grin.

Two carefully packed rounds, color-coded and shaped exactly like the ones I'd seen in the tank. Not quite as powerful, but Leon—who was now

in charge of the beast—was going to be very pleased.

There were eight more crates just like it. No doubt this was the tank's service depot. A quick sweep turned up more boxes with spare parts and lighter ammo.

“Check this out.” Bob came over quickly, eyeing the haul like a seasoned appraiser. “Gear's a bit outdated, but in perfect condition. I'm guessing it was quietly siphoned from Imperial stock and prepped for resale through this hub.”

“Why resale?”

“Not enough consumables,” he said right away. “Just enough for a demo to attract buyers. Mostly empty shells—aside from these.” He nodded at the heavy-duty crates, rubbing the back of his head. “But the van's gonna be tight. We can't just leave it here...”

“No way.” I cut him off, already calculating profit margins and where I'd allocate the funds. “Reinforcements are en route. Sit tight.”

“Got it!” Bob perked up, already debating what to load first.

I headed into the next room, fully confident he could manage without me. If anything, he'd probably assess the total value better than I could—and judging by how easily he'd hefted that steel case full of multi-element ammo, he didn't need my help with the heavy lifting either.

The second room had the same layout, but the shelves were bare. Either it had never been stocked—or someone had already cleaned it out. Judging by the lack of dust, I'd bet on the latter.

Annoying, but not unexpected. The scavengers had a full night's head start. Even Lexa had needed time to comb through everything the Overseer left behind and uncover this stash.

I was just about to head back when the parrot suddenly yanked at my core. Hard.

The jolt knocked me off rhythm—abrupt, crude, and totally uncharacteristic.

I glanced toward the back exit and smiled.

Now that was interesting.

I stepped outside into a wide, fenced-in lot—an outdoor range littered with makeshift targets made of scrap wood and sheet metal.

It had recently been redecorated with corpses.

A man with light hair crossed the bloodied field toward me, a fresh scratch glinting on his cheek.

“Her-r-retic?” Beeky narrowed his eyes at him from my shoulder.

Amusing.

With the limited energy I’d allocated before his hangar rampage, the parrot had clearly chosen to keep his distance. Now he was asking for a top-up—meaning this one had put up a fight.

“Interesting bird,” the man said, wiping the blood from his cheek and licking it. “Yours?”

“Who’s asking?” I leaned back slightly. First time seeing this guy’s mug, and I already didn’t like it.

“Answering a question with a question? Bold.” He flashed a Clan of Light signet ring and a row of golden teeth. “You’re standing on my property, pal. Mine.”

I gave an exaggerated glance at the ground beneath me, looked around with exaggerated confusion, and spread my arms. “Huh. Don’t see your name anywhere. Looks pretty neutral to me.”

“Then why are you looting it?” His eyes gleamed with Light energy as he looked past me toward the hangar.

Sharp and gutsy. He came alone.

“‘Looting’ is such an ugly word,” I said evenly. “I was just passing by, saw some crates lying around. Thought it’d be irresponsible to leave this stuff unguarded. What if it fell into the wrong hands?”

“You’re a funny guy,” he said, flashing another grin.

His golden teeth gleamed in sync with his eyes, and a wave of hostile energy rolled over me and the parrot.

Whoa. Hypnotic paralysis. Never seen that one from a Light Elementalist before. And it worked—I couldn’t feel my fingertips.

“Her-r-retic!” Beeky screeched in delight before I could even react. He yanked half my core’s energy in one gulp and launched himself like a steel missile straight into the guy’s teeth, punching clean through him.

Satisfied with his work, he fluttered back to my shoulder, yawned, and passed out on the spot.

The borrowed energy slowly flowed back into me, with just enough left to keep Beeky’s base form intact.

About ninety percent discharged—but with the way he was blissfully snoring, I couldn’t bring myself to be mad. I stroked his crest gently. “Good work.”

Still, a bit annoying. I would’ve liked to study that technique more. In seven centuries, the Light Clan had made serious progress in developing the mental side of their Element.

And that guy... he wasn’t a nobody.

His shattered teeth turned out to be shard fragments—Clan-grade.

I didn’t miss a single one, scooping them up and pocketing his signet ring before letting out a breath.

Looks like I just gave the Light Clan another reason to hate me.

Back in the hangar, Leon had just pulled in with the second van.

When I asked if he needed anything, he shook his head and said Pride had already secured the perimeter. Within a couple of hours, they’d have everything cleared out—no trace left behind.

Satisfied, I grabbed my backpack from the van, relocated the snoozing

parrot to the passenger seat where he'd nested before, gave Bob his marching orders, and went off to find a taxi.

He tried to argue, of course. Begged me to wait for him.

But he gave in when I promised to send my location later.

\* \* \*

The rocky trail crunched beneath my boots. The arched ceiling of a long cavern loomed above, damp and speckled with moss. The air stank of mildew and stone rot. Every few seconds, a droplet hit the floor with a hollow plink, slicing the silence like a metronome.

And there I was—cheerfully striding deeper into the underworld, half-empty pack on my back, humming under my breath.

Just a week ago, an E-class Portal had opened fourteen miles south of the capital. Since then, not a single Clan had expressed the slightest interest in claiming it. Which meant, by default, it had fallen under the Shadow Clan's jurisdiction.

According to Empire protocol, I was supposed to collect an Argus Fang from the Ministry and ensure its installation within twenty-four hours of assignment. But why bother, when I could just show up and shut it down myself?

The Portal's elemental reading had been present—and unusual.

Nineteen percent Shadow Element.

That alone explained why the other Clans had passed on it. Well, that and the fact that Portals in the southern range were rare, logistics in the region were nonexistent, and the entrance was nestled into a ridge nearly two miles from the nearest road. Too much hassle for noble hands to get dirty.

But me? I was a Paladin—not above doing it myself. I packed a bag and went.

Besides, I'd been hunting a Shadow-based Portal for a while now. Sure, I'd have preferred something with a higher threat classification, but



you take what you can get.

Thirty-four minutes into the hike, I ran into my first creature.

A Shadow Vamper.

A four-winged monster with venomous fangs and no eyes. These things didn't hunt by sight—they zeroed in on elemental energy. That, and blood. Preferably both at once.

Vampers were cunning, elusive bastards. They thrived in the dark, never revealing themselves until the moment of attack. The only reason they hadn't wiped out every non-Shadow-aligned Guardian in history was the telltale pop they made when surfacing from the Shadows. Without that—and without a proper Shadow Elementalist in your party—fighting them was practically suicide.

Then again, most Shadow creatures were like that. Which is why you didn't see many of them in circulation.

*Pop.*

That all-too-recognizable sound snapped me around just in time to greet a gaping maw with the blade I'd salvaged during the Thunder Serpent mission.

The Overseer's grunts had been well-equipped—plenty of exotic armor and weapons, including this little beauty. A lightweight sword forged from off-world alloy. I'd even scavenged myself a full set of light armor from the same haul.

We'd see how long it held up. I'd brought my usual cloak, of course, but also something a bit more experimental—Twilight's Hand.

The Vamper impaled itself on the blade like a kebab. I kicked the corpse free and adjusted my grip.

Then the *pops* started coming faster—too fast to track.

The echoes turned the entire cavern into a warped percussion hall.

\* \* \*

By the time the last wing stopped twitching, over a hundred dull violet bodies lay scattered across the floor. Shadow Element coursed through my veins like ice water, flowing into every channel, tingling in my core. My heart pounded from the rush, my breath sharp and rhythmic.

The swarm had attacked for two straight hours. Vampers favored the mob approach, but this? This had been excessive. Normally, they hunted in tight clusters.

With that thought, I reached for Twilight's Hand.

The Shadow energy I'd accumulated surged toward it—drawn as if magnetized. The link sparked to life. The blade responded. For a moment, I dared to hope this would go smoothly.

Of course not. Nothing involving Artemis ever went smoothly.

Pain exploded through my arm. My fingers locked. My hand went completely numb.

I cursed, dropped the smoke-veiled blade, and scowled. "Still playing hard to get, huh?"

No answer. Not that I expected one.

But there was something in that sword—some twisted shard of awareness. Not quite sentience, but close enough. Stubborn, proud, and absolutely uninterested in acknowledging anyone's authority but its own. Classic Artemis craftsmanship.

My plan had been simple. The blade, forged by Paladin Artemis himself, only recognized him—or theoretically, someone with a comparable command over the Shadow Element.

Technically, my native Element was Darkness, not Shadow. And the sword knew it. Rejected me on principle. But I figured if I could prove I had the same—or better—control than Artemis himself, the damn thing might reconsider.

Clearly, I'd overestimated its intelligence.

Twilight's Hand had devoured every drop of energy I'd reaped from

the Vampers. Didn't even choke.

"Fine," I muttered, wrapping my cloak around my right hand and picking up the blade again.

It thrashed, writhing in my grip. But this time, the combined pressure of the cloak and my internal reserves held it down. The numbness receded—barely.

I narrowed my eyes and gave it a few testing swings. The balance was... acceptable. But I had to keep a tight leash on the blade's volatile energy with every movement. Which made things—well, tense.

Even so, it remained one of the deadliest weapons on the planet. Able to slice through just about anything. Physical or not.

In theory, I'd achieved my goal—partially tamed it. But something still felt off. Hollow.

Was that it? Was I just out here waving a smoky tantrum stick around like a kid with a lightsaber?

A sudden *pop* behind me.

A Vamper, three times the size of the others, emerged from the Shadows.

I smirked, stepped in, and bisected it with a clean stroke.

Then came the next *pop*—and pain tore through my shin.

"Unbelievable. Freakin' blade's got an attitude," I growled, realizing it had refused to slice the target.

Twilight's Hand was enchanted with a failsafe—one of Artemis's genius ideas. It couldn't harm Shadow-aligned Gifted.

Problem was, it had just refused to cut a portal creature. Not a person. A monster. The exact thing it was supposed to kill.

Now I understood why old Aks had always called Artemis the biggest disgrace he'd ever trained—even though he was a Paladin. A *walking*

*embarrassment. A stain on my legacy.*

Lacking any better option, I smashed the bat's skull in with the pommel.

Then I hurled the cursed blade aside and proceeded to fight the next twenty-seven Vampers barehanded.

By the end of it, I was out of breath, dripping blood, and mad as hell.

I stalked back to the blade, scooped it up barehanded—ignoring the fresh surge of pain—and said, coldly: “If you won’t behave, we do this my way. Devour.”

A void of Darkness opened at my feet.

I plunged the blade into it.

The pain in my arm spiked. Smoke curled up past my elbow. But I smiled—and pushed it deeper, one-third into the void.

With my free hand, I pulled out a crystal egg and crushed it. Energy surged into me.

Twilight’s Hand bucked, thrashed, fought to escape—but the constant influx from the crystal gave me the leverage I needed. I kept pressing it down, inch by inch.

More *pops* echoed around me. The swarm had sensed the energy spike.

I ignored them and focused on the stubborn blade.

“One...” I murmured, releasing my thumb.

“Two...” I lifted my index finger off the hilt.

By that point, the blade was halfway submerged.

“Three...”

“Fo—” I said—barely clinging to the hilt with my pinky.

The smoke vanished. The pain stopped.

I yanked the blade free and cleaved an incoming Vamper in half.

This time, it died properly. As did the next thirty that followed.

Only after the chaos settled did I notice the crystal egg in my hand was cracked, its once-bright blue glow barely a flicker.

“You’re going to pay that back,” I muttered, pointing the blade at the ground.

Even if it wanted to disobey now, it couldn’t. It had acknowledged me. Yielded.

With a sharp motion, I stabbed Twilight’s Hand into the dirt up to the hilt.

The resulting burst of Shadow energy flushed out another thirty hidden creatures. It took ten minutes to wipe them out—and left me riding a cold wave of elemental euphoria.

The Portal was closed.

Now came the real question: what to do with all these corpses?

The smaller ones could be fed to the void without a second thought. But the larger specimens? Their hides retained active Shadow resonance, and their uniquely structured fangs were perfect for making poisons.

Good thing I’d brought my butchering knife.

A hundred hides. Two hundred fangs. Even managed to extract three compact shadow crystals.

By the time I packed my haul, the bag was full to bursting. I slung it over my shoulder—and immediately staggered.

The backlash from force-subduing the blade had hit. My channels were burned out, my core overloaded.

Now was not the time to be lugging weight.

But I wasn’t the only stubborn one here.

I touched Twilight's Hand. The blade held a personal Shadow Pocket, not much larger than the weapon itself. It was meant for concealment. Artemis, being Artemis, had used it to sneak in booze by the barrel.

With a hiss, the blade vanished into the Shadow.

Nice.

The bag, however, didn't.

Confused, I repeated the process—summoning and dismissing the blade, mentally commanding it to store the backpack too.

This time, it left the scabbard on my back.

The little bastard was mocking me. Knew I was drained. Couldn't disobey me directly—so it decided to get cute.

“Oh, you want to play games?” I said, slinging the pack more securely across my shoulders as I headed for the exit. “Buddy, you have no idea who you're dealing with.”

And Artemis thought he was the only one with a sense of humor.

## CHAPTER 19

I WAS SITTING ON THE OPEN TERRACE of the mansion, tearing into a lemon-and-herb baked fish like a man who hadn't eaten in days.

Yesterday's little outing had wrung every drop of strength from my body, so the moment I got home, I passed out cold and didn't wake until dawn.

Nothing major had happened while I was out, thankfully.

Well—aside from the media still chewing on my public statement about the land and hovering like vultures around the ruins of the theater, where they now had round-the-clock coverage.

Not that I minded. In fact, the press was doing us a favor.

The Light Clan had officially disavowed the Overseer and claimed they had no knowledge of his crimes. They even condemned his use of a dangerous Portal within the city limits.

That bit of PR had played right into our hands. The Ministry had formally acknowledged that we were the ones who closed the Portal, and public opinion had started to shift.

People were actually curious now—wondering what would happen to the land and how the Ministry would respond to our claim. In the meantime, reporters kept broadcasting juicy footage of Albert's freshly assembled collection team hauling sacks of loot from the Portal and piling them under temporary shelters while Patrick wasted no time setting up shop and selling the goods.

The weapons cache had been cleared out yesterday too—smoothly, I might add. That gave us a temporary buffer on the financial front. And with

Twilight's Hand now firmly in mine, power wasn't an issue either.

All that remained was the matter of lineage.

The big question.

After thinking it through, I was leaning toward registering a formal House. Not because I suddenly cared about pedigree—but because of Argus.

It was the key to everything. Access to Argus required a terminal. The terminal came with a residence. And a residence? That meant official status. A Prince.

One neat little domino trail.

And besides, I couldn't afford to let down the people who'd already started placing their trust in me—some of whom were right now posing for pictures beside the monument we'd erected last night.

The unseasonably bright sun beamed down on the artifact encased beneath a transparent dome, making the blade shimmer like a diamond from every angle.

Gotta say—it looked beautiful.

"A bit much, don't you think?" someone said from behind me.

"Well, look who's here." I smiled and gestured to the seat across from me. "Sit. Eat. Don't mind the fish being green—Eric swears it's supposed to be that way."

"Thanks, but I already ate." Gabe sat down with a polite nod and cast another glance at the monument glinting in the sun.

"Suit yourself." I followed his gaze. "And what exactly is 'a bit much'? The pedestal isn't gold, just painted yellow. And the marble base was already here."

"That's not what I meant." He kept his tone even. "Shadow Relics don't like light. And that blade—if I'm not mistaken—is very much one of them."



I paused mid-bite and turned to look at the monument again.

Elegant and deadly, Twilight's Hand hovered within the dome. Smoky wisps of shadow rose from the blade, its aura steady and charged with elemental force.

"It's fine," I said, waving it off.

"You sure? How long's it going to stay there—until sunset?"

"Haven't decided yet." I shrugged. "Let the people enjoy it for now. They should know what a true Clan Relic looks like. I'm even thinking of rigging some floodlights around it later, maybe use those stage lights we borrowed. Thoughts?"

"Floodlights aren't sunlight. It won't care." Gabe's voice was dead serious.

"What if I power them with this?" I rolled a golden tooth across the table—one humming faintly with the Element of Light.

His reaction was what I'd been watching for.

To his credit, Gabe didn't so much as twitch. Cool as ice. Either he genuinely didn't know who that belonged to—or he was a better liar than I gave him credit for.

"You testing me?" he asked, eyebrows tightening in something close to hurt.

"Shouldn't I be asking you that?" I kept my voice flat. "You've been avoiding me for, what—about a week now?" He didn't answer right away. Just stared past me—quiet, guarded. I hadn't even come at him with accusations. I just wanted to understand. "Changed your mind about staying in the district?" I asked.

"No, it's more the opposite..." His words came slowly. "Although, yeah. I won't lie—there were doubts. Then... my father reached out to me."

"And?"

"You don't get it." His voice went cold. "He never does that."

“Never calls people?”

“Never calls me.”

“I see. So what—he told you to come home?”

“Worse.” Gabe exhaled like it hurt. “He said I was doing the right thing. He... approved.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“Wow.” I shook my head. “And that was enough to spook you into dodging me all week?” This kid really had a habit of overcomplicating things. And he was, what, twenty? Still young enough to be dramatic, I guess. But at this rate, he’d stress himself into an early grave. When was he planning to start enjoying life?

“You don’t know my father.” Gabe’s tone turned sharp, clearly offended by my casual take. “He never does anything without a reason.”

“That much, I’ve already figured out.” I smirked. “You’ll have to introduce us sometime.”

He let out a broken laugh—sad, slightly hysterical. “Anyway,” he said, trying to steady himself, “I just wanted you to know—I’ve decided to stay. My choice. Not his.”

“Now that’s what I like to hear.” I clapped him on the shoulder. “So, how’s the surveillance op going?”

“The stakeout?” He gave a dry snort. “Boring as hell. Your people are loyal to a fault. Didn’t need my help catching the traitors. Only one slipped past them, and even he cracked after a light nudge. All in all... not perfect, sure. But you’re not interested in petty vices or small-time screw-ups, are you?”

“Nope.”

“But if you ever want to know who’s sleeping with who—”

“Let’s not.” I cut him off with a grimace.

“Fair enough.” He raised both hands in surrender, but finally offered a genuine smile. “Honestly, now that you’ve got him,” he added, nodding toward the neighboring rooftop, “you probably don’t need surveillance at all.”

My parrot, perched like a smug little warlord, was surveying his domain with all the dignity of a conquering general. The only thing missing was a cigar and some tiny white gloves folded behind his back.

“Funny you say that.” Gabe narrowed his eyes at Beeky. “He’s way too chipper today. Did you... get him high?”

“Close.” I grinned. “Introduced him to one of your relatives.” I pointed to the golden tooth.

“Ah.” Gabe gave a casual shrug. “Don’t worry about it, Marcus. Herbert was a bastard. Not like the Overseer—but not far off. He spent his whole life trying to copy that creep. The world’s better off without him.”

“That so?” I scratched my chin. “Then allow me one question.”

Gabe straightened. “Shoot.”

“Did you know the Overseer wasn’t working alone?”

“No.” His answer came without hesitation. “I wasn’t looped in, Marcus. And even if I had been... our ‘family’ wasn’t much of one. More like enemies under the same roof. Worse than Fire and Water Clans, or—”

“Light and Shadow.” I smiled. “Got it.”

We fell quiet. Gabe sank into thought while I enjoyed my coffee, occasionally glancing at the monument.

The blade didn’t speak, but its irritated pulses were loud and clear. It wasn’t a fan of sun exposure. Too bad. It was going to lie there and “soak up rays” until my back stopped aching—an injury I blamed entirely on that cursed weapon.

Maybe even a bit longer.

“Marcus,” Gabe said cautiously, “you asked about the Overseer because...?”

“Because someone was pulling his strings too.”

He flinched. Just a fraction—but I caught it. “Thank you,” he murmured after a pause.

“For what?”

“For trusting me.” His expression was sincere. “I can’t imagine how hard it must’ve been for you to share something like that... with someone from the Light Clan. I appreciate it. I mean it.”

Honestly? It hadn’t been that hard.

I’d been keeping tabs on him the entire time, and if he ever betrayed me, his death wouldn’t just be slow—it’d be inventive. And that wasn’t because I was cruel.

It was because Roe knew his secret. And in exchange for her silence, she’d made me promise that if Gabe ever turned, I’d hand the “filthy little Light brat” over to her.

So no—I wasn’t worried.

Still, I did trust him. Call it instinct, or leftover training from the old world, but I had a knack for sensing rot in people. And Gabe?

He wasn’t rotting.

“Sorry, Marcus. But I have no idea who it could’ve been,” Gabe said, looking visibly unsettled. “In our ‘family,’ real strength and hidden cards are guarded more fiercely from each other than from enemies.”

“Could it have been the Prince himself?”

“Unlikely.” He echoed my suspicion. “My father prefers to observe. Push, nudge, manipulate from the sidelines—but never act directly. And no offense, Marcus, but if my father had gotten involved personally... there wouldn’t have been a mistake.”

“Mistake?”

“Mirk wouldn’t have survived.” His tone was blunt. “When the Prince takes control, it ends only in death.”

“Got it. Thanks for the honesty.” I downed the last of my coffee and rose to my feet.

“Wait—” Gabe jumped up. “I wanted to ask—”

I’d been wondering when he’d get around to it. The entire conversation, he’d been dancing around something. “Go ahead.”

“Let me use the infirmary.” He pressed his palms together. “And before you say anything, I swear I won’t use my gift directly. I promise—I can still be useful. Enchantments, scans, even just medicine. I’ll go insane with nothing to do. I want to help. No one in the Clan’s going to sniff me out, I swear!”

I was tempted to point out someone already had—but whatever. “Doubt there’s much medicine in there,” I muttered, eyeing the infirmary building.

It looked fine on the outside—intact, clean, decently equipped. But I knew better. Supplies were practically nonexistent, and what remained had been reserved for the previous Boss and his inner circle.

Civilians? They weren’t worth the bandages. If they survived, great. If not, just another body in the grinder.

“That’s not a problem.” Excitement lit up Gabe’s face. “I can get what I need. And with the Portal under review—those jungle plants sound fascinating.”

“You think there’s something useful in there?”

“I’m sure of it.” He leaned in. “That Portal stood on Light territory for seven years. Albert may be a great fighter, but knowing my brother? There are definitely surprises waiting. I’ll have his back. Promise.”

“All right,” I said. “It’s yours.”

“For real?” His expression froze in stunned joy. “Seriously?”

“Of course.” I arched a brow. “What, did you think you were a prisoner here?”

“No, but... thank you.” He let out a breath, then stepped closer, suddenly serious.

The sudden change in tone put me on guard. I shifted back slightly—but not fast enough. Gabe reached out and gripped my wrist, fingers closing around the left one. The same hand I’d used to wield Twilight’s Hand less than ten hours ago.

“How are you feeling?” he asked, his brow furrowed as faint pulses of scanning energy trickled into my channels.

“Fine,” I said, yanking my hand back. To prove the point, I flexed my fingers a few times. Sure, there was some numbness, but I’d had worse.

Three, maybe four days, and I’d be back to normal. My body might’ve dulled during the years I spent sealed away, but it still remembered how to recover. And considering my job—and my sadistic old mentor—pushing past exhaustion had basically been my way of life.

Especially in my youth, which could best be summed up as *die trying or don’t bother*.

Compared to that? This was nothing. Honestly, I was embarrassed I’d let the blade get to me at all. Old Aks would’ve rolled in his grave if he knew I’d let a temperamental weapon make me break a sweat.

“You’re lying.” Gabe gave me a pointed look. “You’re drained and overloaded at the same time. And the element... may I?”

“Fine.” I held both hands out, palms up. They were still trembling a little, and I couldn’t quite feel the tips of my fingers—but I didn’t count that as a real problem.

He glanced around, then gently pressed his glowing fingers to my wrists and closed his eyes.

Warm, steady energy flowed through me like a tide, stitching micro-

tears in my channels and jump-starting regenerative processes I hadn't had time to initiate myself.

"Strange..." he murmured. "Your source is resisting. I thought the damage would be less—"

"That's enough." I forced a smile and pulled away.

"O-okay. But you need rest..." Gabe backed off, unsteady. Sweat beaded on his forehead, and his legs were shaking. He looked like he needed healing now.

"Don't worry, Gabe. I'm not planning to kill anyone today."

"That's not what I meant—" he said, but I was already waving goodbye and heading into the mansion.

He might've seen more than he was supposed to—but he wouldn't talk. Probably didn't even realize what he'd picked up on. Still, I had to admit—I felt better. Not perfect. But better.

With that thought, I went to my room and opened the wardrobe.

Inside: one formal suit, two hoodies, four t-shirts, a pair of sweatpants, and three clean combat sets of roughly the same quality as yesterday's.

The last one hadn't survived the Portal trip. It hadn't left me naked, but it was in such bad shape I'd had to toss it.

That one was my fault. I'd triggered a wave of energy so intense it overloaded even my Paladin-tempered body. The fact that the clothes didn't disintegrate on the spot was a miracle in itself.

Still, I let out another sigh. If I wrecked the last suit, Lexa was going to murder me.

I threw it on anyway and dialed the number.

"Good morning! Water Clan front desk, how may I help you?"

\* \* \*

Victoria sat quietly, staring out the window.

Sunlight slanted across the Pillar of Unity—a towering monument meant to symbolize the unbreakable Pact and the unity of the Ten Clans. Given everything that had happened lately, she found that symbolism almost laughable.

Technically, she was no longer a princess. But she wasn't the ruling Lady yet, either. That left her stuck in a strange sort of limbo—a political no-man's land that had thoroughly upended her life.

Before, she'd had a clear goal: destroy her father. But now that she'd finally achieved it, all she felt was emptiness. And confusion.

Victoria had never feared portal creatures, enemies, or even her father. Even on the day she'd nearly died, cornered by dozens of assassins, she'd been focused, sharp, and confident.

Of all the things she might've doubted, her own strength had never been one of them.

But now? She'd left the home she grew up in and moved into a Clan estate in the central district. Traded her beloved Mire Wyvern leather armor for an elegant dress.

A beautiful one—but by her standards, embarrassingly outdated.

Still, she'd been told it was necessary. So she complied.

Unlike the battlefield, the halls and offices where she now spent her days made her feel off-balance. Predators circled her constantly—and the worst part? They wore human faces.

A quiet creak interrupted her thoughts. She turned, hope flickering—only to see a servant.

*Not Marcus*, she thought with a flash of disappointment.

“My lady, the Boss of House Vexley and his eldest son await you in the Yellow Audience Hall,” the servant said.

“Thank you, Martha. I'll be down shortly,” Victoria said with a tight smile as the door clicked shut.



“If only you could rescue me from this mess too...” she whispered, casting one last wistful glance at the window.

Outside, a flock of birds wheeled past—free and untethered.

## CHAPTER 20

I HADN'T BEEN TO THE EASTERN SIDE of the capital before, and I had to admit—it was a sight.

Lush greenery, expansive parks with neatly integrated low-rise buildings—none taller than five stories—and temples. An absurd number of temples.

By the time we were halfway to our destination, I'd counted at least nine of them.

The eastern sector was separated from the rest of the city by a wide river, effectively making the entire area a peninsula. Control here belonged exclusively to the coalition of the Water and Death Clans.

Don't ask me how those two ended up as best friends. Their Elements were polar opposites by nature. Water represented life—it even carried a healing aspect, albeit weaker and more indirect than Light. Death—that one spoke for itself.

Still, somehow these two Clans had formed not just an alliance, but what appeared to be a full-on bromance.

Lexa had outlined all of that in her report, which I'd just finished reading as we passed yet another cemetery.

I think it was the seventh.

The road veered sharply upward, the treetops of the park giving way to the jagged ridgeline of the eastern mountains. Another ten minutes of winding turns, and we pulled up to a checkpoint with wide steel gates already open. The car rolled through without stopping and came to a halt in front of a stately two-story wooden structure.

At first glance, it looked modest—but the materials used weren't common. There was an old-world weight to the place, a quiet presence that exuded age and elemental strength. And not just from the building itself.

There was a fountain by the entrance, a full irrigation system for the trees, and a lake nestled just off to the right. Everything around here was saturated with elemental energy—especially the air, thick with unnatural humidity.

Charming spot.

I paid the driver and stepped out. Clean mountain air filled my lungs, the scent of pine teased my nose, and I caught the gentle ripple of water, birdsong, and the soft rustle of wind through the trees.

I stood there, enjoying it all, until a polite cough snapped me out of it.

Turning, I saw a man in a deep blue robe—almost a dressing gown—and a graceful young woman standing beside him.

“Welcome to Dragon’s Foothills, sir,” the man said with a polite bow. “My name is Han. Unfortunately, Mr. Lakeson is currently in a meeting and isn’t expected for another three hours.”

“Greetings,” I said politely. “Yes, I was told the audience would be later. But your colleague sang such high praises about this place that I couldn’t resist arriving early. I hope that’s not a problem?”

“Of course not,” Han said, smiling. “Mr. Lakeson has already arranged for a guest suite and full access to the facility’s services. Here you’ll find the complete amenities list.” He handed me a tablet displaying an animated dragon head baring its fangs. “It also includes a detailed map of the guest zone, which covers the entire northwest section of the complex. I recommend reviewing it carefully to avoid any... misunderstandings.”

He gestured toward the young woman, who offered a graceful bow. “Should you need anything, you may direct your questions to me or Celina. She’ll be your assigned guide.”

And a handler, I thought, noting her elemental response. With a core signature like that, she could probably survive a C-class Portal. Maybe even

B-tier if she was lucky.

“Do you have any questions at this stage?” Han asked, still courteous. Judging by his aura, he wasn’t just a receptionist, either.

No wonder I’d made it past the gate without inspection. If all the staff here were on their level, they probably didn’t need guards. They were the guards.

“None,” I said, returning his smile.

With another bow, Han vanished into the main building.

“This way, Mr. Marcus.” Celina’s voice was calm and composed as she led me down a stone path toward the northern perimeter.

Ten minutes later—past a cherry grove and a koi pond—we arrived at a row of five identical guest cottages. She stopped in front of the first and opened the door for me.

The single-story unit was clean and simple. One spacious room with a double bed, a couple of nightstands, a large wardrobe, a mini fridge, and a private shower.

“For the duration of your stay in Dragon’s Foothills, please leave all personal belongings inside.” Her tone was cool but professional. “Replacement clothes, towels, and slippers are on the bed.” With that, she turned and left, leaving me to settle in.

I took a slow walk around the room, watching as the heavy moisture in the air tried to latch a tracking beacon onto me. To keep things smooth, I played dumb and let it attach itself to my shoulder.

Then I changed into the provided outfit and checked the mirror.

A silvery-blue robe—what the locals called a kimono—fit me surprisingly well. Not quite as sharp as the suit Maria tailored, but a close second. Looked like the suit was getting the night off.

I hadn’t brought anything valuable on purpose, so I wasn’t too worried about inspections.

The only thing giving me pause was the cloak. I turned it over in my hands thoughtfully. On the one hand, no one here could detect its elemental signature. On the other... hiding it visually was another story.

I wasn't concerned about theft. I was more worried about what might happen to the people who tried to steal it.

Out of pure curiosity, I left one of my tiny trackers behind.

Let's see what happens. Will a couple of staff deaths derail their diplomatic talks with the Water Clan? Or will they sweep it under the rug and pretend nothing happened?

I didn't doubt for a second someone would try.

Choosing to host delicate negotiations in a place like this came with two obvious advantages.

First, the premium service lulls guests into a false sense of gratitude and leaves them feeling indebted—even after the meeting's over.

Second, the comfort makes guests drop their guard. You become vulnerable, not just during the talks, but the entire time you're on the grounds.

Water Clan members had always been sly and cautious, but ever since they joined forces with the Death Clan, that caution had sharpened into something else entirely. I hadn't spotted any traces of the Death Element yet, but I could feel it. Lurking somewhere just out of reach.

Not that it would stop me from enjoying myself.

Seven hundred years ago, soaking in a Water Clan hot spring was my favorite pastime between Portal runs. The only reason I hadn't done it lately was simple: I couldn't afford it.

This sort of luxury came with a price tag that made even the Argus Order squirm. Internal restrictions were set to limit visits, and as far back as I could remember, the Magisters were always bickering with the Water Clan about their extortionate rates.

Didn't help. Prices kept rising. Monopolies do that.

But now? Now I was here for free—and I planned to milk this day for everything it was worth. Staying overnight would be reckless, sure. But if I played my cards right, I could still tick off all my wish-list items before sunset.

With that goal in mind, I stepped outside, spun the map on the tablet, and plotted my route.

Darian Lakeson—nephew of the head of the House of Lakesons—could arrive at any moment and drag me into another round of “productive discussions,” so I had to move fast.

“Celina,” I said, turning to my handler-guide, “quick question. Are they going to touch my stuff?”

“You have nothing to worry about regarding the safety of your belongings,” she replied smoothly.

“So yes,” I muttered, locking eyes with her.

“I’m afraid it’s necessary for laundering, Mr. Marcus. We always return your items clean, to ensure maximum comfort after your treatments.”

“And if I say my things don’t need laundering?”

“Then once the staff verifies that, they’ll be left untouched.”

Wow. Such elegant phrasing for what basically amounted to: *like it or not, your things will be checked for dirt—or anything else we can find.*

And knowing the Water Clan? If they did find something, they’d hold off until the worst possible moment to mention it—like, say, the middle of negotiations.

Just to spice things up.

There was once a Magister of the Order—an ancient, respectable fossil—who got a bit too enthusiastic about his visits to the rejuvenating waterfall in his twilight years. One time, the old man made the mistake of showing up wearing a lava-forged signet ring. Yes, he took it off before stepping into the water to avoid an elemental conflict, but the Water Prince still took it as a personal insult that a Fire Element artifact had even been

brought to the sacred springs. The Prince threatened to ban the Magister for life.

And when did he deliver that little speech? Right after the procedure—just in time to demand payment.

The result? A hefty fine and double the cost for all future visits for the “offender.”

Safe to say, I doubted the Water Clan had become any more reasonable over the last seven centuries. Best to clarify the fine print now—before someone tried to launder my cloak and turned half the resort into mist.

“In that case,” I said casually, “please let your... ‘servants’ know not to touch the cloak I left hanging in the bathroom. A visual inspection will suffice.”

“Are you hiding something in it?” Her tone sharpened.

“Not at all,” I said with a shrug. “It’s got holes, no pockets, and I left it wide open. Just trust me—it doesn’t need washing.”

Anyone who tries won’t need a funeral, either.

“They’ll decide for themselves.” Her gaze flicked toward the cottage, wariness creeping in.

Yeah. My shadow lizards had already confirmed what I suspected—those heavily armed “servants” were sprinting toward the place the moment I stepped out.

“As you wish.” I smiled, disarming. “Just remember—I did warn you.”

Celina’s lips twitched. She glanced back at the cottage, something calculating flickering in her eyes.

I didn’t bother waiting to see which won—curiosity or common sense. I simply turned and headed down the path.

First stop: the massage complex.

\* \* \*

The last rays of sunlight spilled lazily over the foothills. The turquoise waters of the hot spring shimmered in the fading light, steam drifting upward only to be carried off toward the mountains by the breeze.

The view from the water was nothing short of breathtaking.

Directly ahead, the green-carpeted ridgelines curled along the eastern edge of the capital—no more than a thousand feet tall, but they formed a natural border.

This particular spring, Dragon's Tear, marked the final destination on my authorized sightseeing tour. And I fully intended to soak in its healing waters until I'd turned into a prune.

By this point, I'd made it through three types of massage, one off-world seaweed wrap, and two other procedures I couldn't pronounce if my life depended on it.

Every stop used healing water imbued with elemental energy, so the fatigue I'd been dragging around vanished halfway through the first treatment. Everything after that was pure indulgence. Now I had more energy than my physical body could reasonably contain.

Even my mind had cleared. For a brief moment, I forgot why I was here.

Officially, anyway.

In reality, this had been the plan all along—an all-day express recovery with a side of relaxation. Frankly, I wouldn't have minded if Darian had never shown up.

But according to my little lizards, he'd arrived half an hour ago—and immediately ordered not to be disturbed.

Fair enough. He had a cloak to deal with first.

No one on his staff had dared touch it. He almost did, though—reached for it, then pulled back just in time.

I'd wanted to track him longer, but once he left the guest house, he disappeared into the estate's secured sector—too deep for my lizards to



follow.

So I pushed the thought aside, stretched out in the steaming spring, and let myself relax fully.

Absolute bliss.

I must've spent another full hour there without even realizing it. Eventually, I figured I was sufficiently pickled and decided it was time to move on.

My lizards were gone. I had no idea where Darian was now. So I rinsed off, slipped into a robe, and made for the exit.

My lovely handler was probably somewhere nearby, I thought, pushing open the door into the hallway—and was immediately hit in the chest by something soft, warm, and pleasantly scented.

“Sorry, I got distracted...” A petite girl with long blue hair backed away—then froze like she'd seen a ghost. Recognition flashed in her shimmering blue eyes. Her expression twitched, nostrils flaring.

“You!” she blurted, her voice pitching upward as she opened her mouth to deliver what was clearly going to be a furious tirade.

Except it never came. The words jammed in her throat. She sputtered, muttered something incoherent, then shoved me with hands that felt colder than expected.

“Yep. Me,” I said cheerfully. “Hi.”

“B-bye!” she stammered, eyes wide as she glanced frantically around, then darted past me and slammed the changing room door shut behind her.

From the far end of the corridor, Celina was watching the entire exchange with a look that could only be described as... intrigued.

I headed in her direction, already reconsidering my decision to decline the overnight stay. Things around here were starting to look a lot more interesting.

\* \* \*

Amelia had grown up in a big, loving family—her entire Clan.

As a member of the ruling bloodline of the Water Clan, she'd never known hardship.

The best tutors. The best trainers. The best teachers.

A late-born child, she had absorbed all the love her parents had left to give, soaking it up like the sea absorbs the rain.

Children raised in such conditions often turned into spoiled brats or fragile porcelain dolls.

But not Amelia.

She had a rare gift: she'd taken all that love and turned it outward.

For someone of noble birth, there was only one proper use for a heart overflowing with love—to give it back to your people.

Her brother—the current Water Prince—was twenty years her senior. Yet Amelia, not he, was the darling of the Clan. The favorite of the people. Its beating heart.

Her talent, her devotion, her sincere desire to make life better for others had elevated her to near-divine status among the lesser Houses of the Water Clan. They adored her.

While her brother ruled from the capital and handled Clan affairs, Amelia had been traveling the Empire since the age of eight, using her gift wherever she went.

A rare blend of restoration and healing, paired with an immense inner reservoir of power, made her an irreplaceable asset on the front lines.

By fifteen, she could regenerate a hundred soldiers simultaneously and transmute over thirty thousand cubic feet of water into elemental form.

By twenty, she could conjure a self-replenishing spring from nothing, solving water shortages in even the most remote territories.

By twenty-five, her mastery over the Water Element had become so

refined that she could casually manipulate the properties of any nearby water at will.

They called her a prodigy. Rightfully so.

But Amelia had one weakness. And it went all the way back to childhood.

Men terrified her.

She never fully understood when it started or why—but the more she thought about it, the more she realized there'd never been men in her life.

Her father had died young. Her brother became the Clan's ruler and was rarely around. She'd been raised by her mother and a succession of nannies, mentors, and female instructors. Eventually, she was sent to an all-girls academy within the Clan, where her social world solidified.

To the Clan, she was a treasure—untouchable, too precious to risk. Every noble House tried to bring their daughters into her circle. Their sons? They kept them far away.

Without even realizing it, Amelia had been “protected” from men her entire life.

At first, she thought it was a problem. But every man she encountered turned out to be weak. Dull. Disappointing.

She'd eventually made peace with the idea that there simply wasn't anyone out there who could be a match for her.

And then she met him.

A filthy, blood-splattered, unrefined barbarian.

For three days after their encounter, she couldn't stop trembling. Her body betrayed her. Her thoughts scattered. Her gift refused to cooperate.

She visited every healer she could find, tried every treatment imaginable. She even left the front lines to recover in the capital.

And then—she ran into him again.

And in that moment, she knew...

This “illness” was going to be far harder to cure than she’d ever imagined.

## CHAPTER 21

“GOOD EVENING, Marcus,” the man in the elegant kimono said smoothly, the wide sleeves bearing the stylized crest of an open dragon’s maw.

Dark blue hair, a smooth baritone voice, and the kind of calm, measured gaze that belonged to someone who’d seen far too much of the world to be impressed by anything. We hadn’t had a chance to talk at the Southern Pantheon party, though to be fair, he hadn’t exactly gone out of his way to make that happen—beyond the formal invitation.

Despite looking like he was somewhere in his late twenties, Darian Lakeson gave off the distinct impression of someone much older and wiser. With unrestricted access to healing springs, though, that could mean he was thirty. Maybe even forty. Who knew?

“Evening. Thanks for the warm welcome,” I said with a polite smile, settling at the strange low table already set with a dozen types of exotic seafood.

The sheer variety made my head spin. I wanted to try everything.

As I’d already noted, the Water Clan had a thing for our Empire’s eastern neighbors. It showed in everything—from the name of the establishment and the decor to the staff training, the guards’ weapons, and even the etiquette.

“Apologies for the delay.” Darian gave a courteous nod. “Your call caught us by surprise. It wasn’t easy to fit the meeting into the schedule.”

Ah. That was quite the diplomatic jab.

A perfectly civil way to frame a complaint—harmless on the surface, but subtly reminding me of the social distance between us. Smooth move.

Nephew of a noble House of career diplomats, after all.

It might have worked on someone less experienced. But I knew the dance. So out of courtesy, I offered the expression he was expecting—mild guilt and polite gratitude. “No worries, Darian. I had a great time. You were right, the springs are magical. I’ll definitely be back.”

“We’ll be happy to host you again.” He allowed a mild smile. “Just let Celina know in advance, and she’ll arrange everything. This year’s demand is fairly low—reservations for March are still open.”

March. Of course. When it was only October second.

A graceful way to say I was welcome—just like everyone else. An open invitation... to stand in line.

Classic diplomacy.

Ugh.

I’d forgotten how much I loathed it. The half-truths, the layered meanings, the way even the simplest request took months—sometimes years—to resolve.

“I’ll let her know,” I said, stifling a yawn, then tossed back a shot of rice vodka. “Not bad.” I poured another without waiting for permission and downed it in one go.

Darian watched me silently, his expression unreadable as he tried to process my behavior.

I, meanwhile, entertained myself by thinking how hilariously ill-suited the dragon crest was to a man like him. I mean, really—what did a dragon have to do with diplomacy?

“Something amusing you?” he asked mildly.

“Don’t mind me, just reminiscing.” I grinned, reaching for the carafe.

“Pardon me, Marcus... what exactly are you doing?” His brows drew together in rare, visible confusion.

Interesting. So he wasn't entirely devoid of emotion.

Still, he didn't have the guts to stop me. I tossed back the third shot.

Turns out, the easterners knew their booze. Who would've thought?

I didn't even notice when I reached for another. That's when Darian finally moved.

No, not to stop me—but to join in.

I watched with interest as his calm, composed demeanor began to crack under the onslaught of three consecutive shots. Then he picked up speed.

By the time the first carafe ran dry, the mood of the negotiations had shifted. Dramatically.

When they brought in a second bottle, things got downright cheerful.

\* \* \*

I woke up with my tongue glued to the roof of my mouth.

Well, “woke up” might be a stretch. I peeled one eye open, got blinded by the sunlight, winced, and shut it again.

It wasn't a hangover, exactly. My body could handle that on its own. No, the problem was what Darian's staff had served us after the rice vodka ran out.

The liquid had no discernible color. It came in a black bottle, decorated with a skull and about ten different warnings in various languages.

But the taste? Smooth as silk. Went down like water.

That probably should've been the first red flag.

The presence of both Death and Water Elements in the same drink didn't bother me—if anything, it piqued my interest. And rightly so.

That concoction alone justified the existence of their entire coalition. I say this as someone who's experimented with hundreds of elemental brews.

Nothing—nothing—compared to the effect of that black elixir.

The Death particles would break down damaged or toxic cells. The Water ones would rebuild them. On the fly. Every corrupt cell, every impurity, every lingering trace of poison got obliterated and replaced.

The result? A full cleanse—not just of the body, but of your core and energy channels. Something even direct healing couldn't do.

And the kicker? It got you wasted. Gloriously.

The downside? Magical dehydration. The kind only Elemental Water could fix.

I was just about ready to stomp out and demand compensation for the incomplete service when I opened my eye again and noticed three bottles of water neatly arranged on the nightstand.

Complaint withdrawn.

I reached for the first one. The bottle was ice-cold, the chill biting into my fingers as I twisted the cap and downed it in one long pull.

The spring water flooded my body, dragging me back from the brink with such intensity that it felt like being reborn.

It was like some inner switch flipped. First your system dried out, squeezed of everything unnecessary, bringing you to the edge of death. Then, in the final moment, healing water surged in and pulled you back—stronger than before.

Magnificent.

I was definitely taking one of these bottles home. Hopefully I wouldn't have to wait until March.

With that comforting thought, I drained all three, tossed off the blanket, and muttered, "Oops. Overdid it," glancing at the woman shivering beside me.

Right. I'd forgotten—Celina, being the diligent handler she was, had insisted on staying the night. Said it was her duty. I hadn't objected.



Hard work deserved reward, after all. Not her fault she fell asleep on duty.

Though to be fair, that was partly my fault. Even after drinking the black brew, I'd had energy to spare. Three hours later, Celina had begged for mercy and passed out cold.

Not wanting to wake the poor girl, I gently covered her with the blanket, got dressed, and stepped outside.

I was immediately met by Han, whose "perfect timing" suggested he'd been lurking there for a while—his freshly shaved head gleaming in the morning sun.

He escorted me to the exit, offered formal apologies on behalf of Darian—who'd allegedly left an hour ago—and handed me a bright little box with a neatly packed breakfast inside.

When I asked about taking a bottle of that mysterious black elixir, Han raised his hands and solemnly promised to consult with his master and get back to me by lunchtime. Then he personally held open the door of the taxi waiting at the curb.

Only one thing dimmed my mood: I never did catch a glimpse of the blue-haired girl. Darian hadn't mentioned her at all. No name, no reference.

She remained a mystery.

Still, my spirits were high enough to ignore the not-so-subtle message behind Han's forced smile and lingering stare—the clear wish that I never come back.

What was he so mad about anyway?

So what if I shaved his head clean with a katana yesterday? He should be thanking me. That thing was a damn artifact—handcrafted by some respected eastern House and guarded like a family heirloom. The Lakesons had kept it in pristine condition for four generations. Besides, he's the one who claimed there wasn't a single swordsman left in the Empire who could properly wield it.

Naturally, I had to prove him wrong.

To honor my victory, Darian took me to a dead spring located in a guest-restricted zone on the southern edge of Dragon's Foothills.

Fascinating place, really. A bottomless well, about ten feet across, where the water inside dissolved anything it touched.

At first, I tossed in a couple rocks and a pair of guest slippers just to see what would happen. Then Darian joined in. He ordered up an entire cart of junk, and soon we were placing bets on which item would last the longest before disappearing completely.

A broken sword or a cannonball?

A hoe or a bronze ladle?

The cart itself, or an ornate set of silver scabbards?

It got more interesting when we started chucking in gold coins and a full set of deluxe armor we stripped off one of the guards.

That's when Han stepped in and diplomatically reminded Darian that he had an important meeting the next day.

We wrapped up the fun at that point—though we'd managed to cover all the key talking points in between the impromptu destruction derby.

Technically, the Water Clan hadn't made me a formal offer.

Lexa had summed it up perfectly back at the party. Just intentions.

Darian spent most of the evening highlighting his eastern trade partners—exclusive suppliers of exotic foods, rare medicines, and cutting-edge weapons, all distributed solely through the Water Clan. He also made sure to mention their extensive network inside the Empire, casually pointing out that they had the largest corps of medics and a wide range of unique wartime services no army could afford to ignore.

And all of it, he claimed, could be offered to us at a discount. Potential long-term cooperation was absolutely on the table—if, and only if, the Shadow Clan distanced itself from the Fire Coalition.

He phrased it all so politely, so subtly. But the core message was obvious.

The Water Clan was laying down a line. I'd have to choose—build ties with the Fire Coalition, or the Water Coalition. Not both.

Darian might not have expected my sudden request for a meeting, but he'd come prepared. He even offered his condolences for the Shadow Clan's two centuries of "slavery" under the Fire Coalition, and expressed hope that we'd finally break free from our dark past and start making decisions independently.

I didn't bother correcting him.

Either the Water Clan genuinely didn't know that the Light Clan had been secretly running the show in the Shadow District all these years... or they were just pretending not to know.

In any case, he didn't press me for an answer. The whole evening was basically a carefully crafted sales pitch. He didn't even bring up the land beneath the ruined theater, and not a word was said about my cloak.

In the end, I told him I'd think it over, and in the spirit of mutual understanding, we celebrated with a fireworks show.

Well... sort of.

Darian insisted that no proper eastern-style meeting ended without fireworks. The lack of actual fireworks wasn't a problem either. Instead, they demonstrated the "Stork-17," a locally manufactured artillery piece.

Buzzkill Han tried to object again, but it was still early, and he didn't have any real counterarguments. After all, what's a little firepower among friends?

Of course, the shot landed squarely on one of the guest houses.

Apparently, firing artillery inside city limits—even on private property—wasn't technically allowed. Not that it stopped anyone.

Personally, I thought blasting a few rocks was a waste. Darian agreed, casually remarking that four guest houses were plenty, and he'd been

meaning to remodel the fifth one anyway.

“So yeah,” I muttered, watching the Shadow District gate appear through the taxi window. “I guess Han had a couple valid complaints.”

I paid the fare and told the driver to pull over, then made the rest of the walk on foot toward my rented apartment.

Still in a good mood, I climbed the steps and opened the door—only to be hit by the warm, rich scent of freshly brewed coffee.

Suppressing a sigh, I stepped into the kitchen.

Lexa stood by the stove, wrapped in a pristine white apron, flipping pancakes like she’d done this a thousand times. Somehow, she managed to look effortlessly elegant even in domestic mode.

I glanced at the coffee machine. Its timer showed the brew had finished exactly one second before I walked through the door.

Perfect timing. Honestly, I was starting to forget just how much she knew.

“Morning. Hungry?” Lexa asked brightly, flashing me her usual sweet smile—right before spotting the takeout box in my hand. “Oof. My cooking’s no match for breakfast from Sakamoto’s.”

“That the place everyone keeps talking about?” I asked, flipping the lid open.

“Mhm,” she said with a grin. “He’s—oh, never mind. Will you share?”

“Sure.”

Lexa quickly plated three elegant eastern dishes, added a stack of pancakes slathered with butter and honey, and slid a mug of coffee toward me. “Enjoy.”

“Thanks.”

She gave me a quick wink, her eyes lighting up as she tried to decide which dish to sample first.

Honestly, the food yesterday had been good. A little short on meat for my taste, but as far as appetizers went, not bad.

“How’d you know I’d end up here?”

She gave me a knowing look. “Have you forgotten who you’re talking to?”

“Seriously.”

“I figured you wouldn’t want to deal with Bob after ghosting him and disappearing in a cab.”

“I didn’t ghost anyone,” I said through a mouthful of pancake. “I just needed some fresh air.”

“Oh yes,” she said dryly. “A whole day of it. In a region where seven high-ranking aristocrats have been poisoned in the past year alone.”

“Should’ve known how to drink,” I muttered.

“Excuse me?” Her brow arched.

“I said—lightweights.”

She snorted. “Uh-huh. That mountain range happens to house the Empire’s largest poison lab.”

“Now that is interesting.” I perked up.

“Forget it. Irrelevant to the matter at hand,” she said briskly, shaking her head. “The point is, going there alone—especially staying overnight—was reckless.”

That look in her eyes made me nearly choke on my pancake. I hurriedly washed it down with a gulp of coffee.

“For the record,” I said, clearing my throat, “all the district’s transport was tied up with Portal operations. Patrick commandeered everything for our city-wide delivery rollout.”

“The tank was free.”

“I like your thinking.” I grinned. “But my meeting with Darian was... diplomatic in nature.”

“Are you accepting the Water Clan’s offer?” she asked, narrowing her eyes and giving me a once-over. “Was their service really that good?”

“Oh, the service was excellent,” I said dreamily, already plotting how to steal just one of their springs. “We could really use something like that.”

“So we’re renaming the Shadow District to the red-light district now?”

“I think we’re talking about different kinds of ‘service,’” I said, frowning. “Anyway, I am accepting an offer. Just not theirs—yours.”

“Mine?” Her eyes blinked in surprise.

“Yours.” I nodded, shifting into my business tone. “Go ahead and register it. I’m founding a noble House of the Dark.”

## CHAPTER 22

THE ARMORED LIMO TORE SOUTH along the Imperial highway. Most vehicles veered out of the way at first sight, recognizing the unmistakable monstrosity that belonged to one of the Empire's most wanted criminals.

Its crest—an iron-horned demon's snarl—was infamous. Four pairs of massive wheels, three turret-mounted cannons, two belt-fed machine guns hidden beneath reinforced plates, and a personal energy shield more powerful than anything the Empire's engineers had ever produced. The vehicle looked less like a limousine and more like a mobile fortress on wheels—an urban tank that, according to rumors, could burrow through soil faster than a mining rig.

And yet, through some bureaucratic miracle, it was still registered as a civilian vehicle.

“Ten minutes to the capital, sir. Orders?”

“Stay the course,” the man in the red shirt and formal jacket said, his voice deep and gravelly.

“Copy that.” The response crackled through the intercom. A thick finger adorned with a chunky ring clicked off the selector switch.

Beran Astor—better known by his underworld moniker, Beast—grinned as he peered through the armored viewing slit.

Just days ago, he would've laughed at the idea of returning to the capital. The former Earth Clan Warrior turned top-tier fugitive had burned every bridge that mattered.

And yet here he was, rumbling down the main thoroughfare in broad daylight, practically announcing his arrival... in his weaponized limo, no

less.

When the call had come offering full amnesty, he'd thought it was a joke. When they added that he could keep all his assets, continue his criminal network, and wouldn't be monitored, he nearly hung up and told the idiot to shove it.

But something had made him stay on the line. And now, less than two days later, he was back—officially. In his hands, he held guarantees signed by the Governor and the heads of three major Clans. Real guarantees. The kind he used to dream of landing even for just one week. Seven days would've been enough to squeeze the capital's spineless criminal elite dry and recoup every loss from the past few weeks.

Instead, they'd handed him three months. On a silver platter.

No surveillance. No restrictions. No oversight.

And if he completed one simple task within that time, the full pardon would be his—no strings attached.

The mere thought of what he could accomplish without someone breathing down his neck made his head spin.

Even now, while constantly on the move, burning through millions to maintain tunnel networks and keep associates quiet, Beast had managed to build the largest syndicate on the planet. His financial and military clout trailed only the Top Ten Clans—and not all of them.

The Shadow Clan? Insect-sized amateurs by comparison. And how fortunate that no one was backing them now. Even better—leading them was the very man Beast had been ordered to take out.

And this Marcus... Well, that target wasn't just professional. It was personal.

Because of Marcus's little escapade in Fort-Hell, Beast had lost two million credits, a nice chunk of his reputation, and—eventually—two of his prized Reapers.

“Well then, bastard,” he muttered, rubbing his hands together as the



limo crossed into the capital. “Time to settle the score.”

\* \* \*

Turns out, registering a noble House was a lot trickier than it looked.

Like everything else, it required a court hearing and a formal petition to the Ministry.

Lexa had her work cut out for her now, but to her credit, she was thrilled. She kissed me on the cheek, practically bounced out the door, and threw herself into the bureaucracy with disturbing glee.

I stayed behind, polishing off the rest of my coffee and wandering out onto the balcony.

The street buzzed below. It was calming.

I stood there for nearly an hour, watching the everyday rhythm of life unfold—people rushing to work, arguing, making up, laughing. It was comforting to see how much more alive the entrance to our district had become.

Tourists no longer flinched at the sight of it. Some even paused to sneak curious glances.

After recent events, the Shadow District’s image was on the rise—no small thanks to the media, especially *Storm Channel*, the Lightning Clan’s network. They’d been the first to push a positive spin on our people, and they hadn’t stopped since.

If the Water Clan didn’t get stingy and finally sold me a bottle of black brew, I’d make sure Max got a taste as a thank-you. The guy could probably handle it without dropping dead.

I returned to the district before noon and headed straight for the monument. My back no longer ached thanks to the hot springs, and a full day in the sun was more than enough for that stubborn relic to reflect on its behavior.

The dome still gleamed under the sunlight, but the blade inside had dulled slightly—its shadowy aura faint, its edges no longer pulsing with

menace. I carefully opened the casing and lifted Twilight's Hand out of its display slot.

Tough love only went so far. I sent the relic to rest in the shade. A good guardian takes care of his wards—even the difficult ones.

Beeky, for one, was still chirpy and alert. A healthy dose of heretics had turned my feathered companion into a model citizen. For now, at least, the district was in safe talons.

As for the Cat, I'd spent a while deliberating what to do with him.

On the one hand, with my current energy reserves, I could summon him permanently in his base form. On the other, he had a mind of his own, and keeping him confined strictly to the district was... unlikely.

That could be a problem. We were being watched, after all.

I doubted any of the locals would guess he was an embodiment of Darkness—but better safe than sorry. No need to advertise more than necessary.

My strength was growing, yes—but I was still far from my former self.

"All right. Come on out," I muttered.

A small feline stepped gracefully out of the swirling cloud of Darkness.

I gave him just enough energy to maintain his base form. At a glance, he could pass for a perfectly normal house cat.

"Mrow?" He tilted his head at me, eyes full of feline curiosity.

"Yes, yes. Every basement in the district is yours, just like I promised. And there's a network of sewers under the mansion—consider it a bonus."

"Brrr-mrrrow?" he rumbled, nose twitching as he sniffed the air.

"Yes. If you find any spies, eat them. But if you so much as nibble an innocent—or Darkness help us, sink your teeth into the mansion's trophies—you can kiss your freedom goodbye."

"Prrrt." The Cat flicked his nose proudly, then suddenly froze—tail

high, pupils blown wide. With a thrilled chirrup, he rubbed against my leg and looked up at me with wide, pleading eyes. “Mrr-aa?”

“Yes, you can nap in the tank.” I sighed.

“Rrrr yow!” he yowled in triumph, bolting for the hangar.

I made a mental note to warn Leon about our newest crew member, and that’s when I felt it—a brief ripple of elemental energy.

I turned instantly, pinpointing the source near the mansion. Metal Element. Interesting.

Albert should be busy at the Thunder Serpent Portal, and Pride is covering the flank. Unless someone from his crew stayed behind?

I wasn’t in a rush, so I headed in that direction. The closer I got, the more distinct the rhythmic banging became—coming from the side garage. That’s where the van had met me last time, but both it and Bob were currently out.

Whistling a lazy tune, I opened the metal door and took in the scene.

A man in a bandana and sleeveless vest struck a thin metal plate with a small hammer. Sparks flew—gray-gold and dazzling—and a wave of hot energy rolled through the space.

A potent dual-element pulse. It didn’t hit me—I was immune. But the fact that this guy didn’t flinch either and just kept tapping away like nothing happened? That surprised me.

He nailed a glowing contour into the plate using tiny enchanted nails, then picked up a file shaped like a deformed fang and began smoothing the edges with slow, confident strokes.

His silver eyes gleamed with obsession, and he licked his lips every time the energy flared. Despite the clear discomfort, he kept going, refining the roughly twenty-inch plate with methodical, precise strikes.

He hadn’t noticed me at all.

Toby—the district’s gearhead-artificer. Utterly absorbed in his work.

The gleam in his eyes was so genuine that even my fingers started itching for action. After a morning of peace and idleness, the energy buzzing inside me was practically begging for a fight.

Too bad there wasn't a single worthy enemy in sight. Or a decent Portal, for that matter.

"Hey, Marcus!" Toby spotted me and lit up, his unshaven face splitting into a grin.

He was one of the two who'd backed me during the vote for District Boss. One of the few who'd stood up to Mirk, and not only stuck around after, but got actively involved in the Clan's internal affairs. At first, he'd helped Patrick with inventory; later, he teamed up with Bob, doing something or other. Lexa had filed a report about it, but I hadn't paid much attention. Still, I'd heard stories about Toby's past.

Born and raised in the district. No special talent, no combat skills to speak of. The only thing that set him apart from the rank and file was his work ethic—and his obsession with tinkering. He built his first artifact at nineteen, and Patrick immediately took him on as an assistant in the shop.

That's where he came alive. Within two years, he'd outpaced Patrick in the art of artifact crafting. Five years later, he was the top crafter in the district, and by year seven, he was running the entire Shadow Clan's tech-artifact division.

That same year, he received a Clan Shard and was officially recognized as a member of the Shadow Clan.

Patrick vouched for him. Olga too. But it was Bob who backed him most fiercely—not surprising, given how often they were seen together. Their mannerisms were starting to blend.

"Morning," I said, stepping over and picking up a plate of metal he'd been working on.

The engraved raven insignia wasn't just beautifully crafted—it was concealing a layered construct with a surprisingly clever configuration.

"Yours?" I asked, inspecting the edges.

“Huh?” He rubbed his bandana, then blinked. “Oh! Yeah.”

“You thinned the plate to cut down weight but compensated for the lost durability using a sealed water layer beneath the crest... finished with an iridite coating?” I ran my fingers over the surface.

“Whoa, you are in the know.” His eyes lit up. “Exactly right. Bob asked me to reduce the weight—said the van was dragging like a mule. Also mentioned the last barrier almost got punched through by a single RPG hit.”

He tapped the center of the plate with his finger, practically glowing with excitement. “If the top seal takes a hit, the water barrier inside activates, neutralizing the incoming strike.”

“And it spreads the force across the surface, reducing impact density and boosting total resistance by... what, fifty percent?”

I’d never been much for artifact theory, but you had to pick up some tricks along the way. Those without money or muscle had to rely on ingenuity to survive fights against the Order’s warriors. I’d been one of them once.

Funny how now I was the one without money.

“One point seventy-two,” he said proudly. “And the final weight drops by about four and a half percent. All it needs is a recharge every so often—elemental water and cheap iridite. We’ve got enough stockpiled to outfit five vans.”

“You factored in our budget during development?”

“More like the lack of one.” He gave a short laugh—no bitterness in it. Just joy at the challenge.

It was a clever solution, but not without its risks. Water and Metal were fundamentally incompatible Elements. One wrong move and the result would be the opposite of what you wanted. But he’d sidestepped the issue by wiring the plate with a micro-generator.

Just a trace of electricity—not even noticeable to the touch—but it

bound the two elemental conductors and stabilized the whole system. No conflicting reactions, no blowups.

And all of that, figured out by a district-born artifact crafter.

No wonder the van was getting better with each passing day. This guy was a genius. Letting that kind of potential go to waste felt criminal.

“Tell me something,” I said, rubbing my chin. “What if your budget was... let’s say... unlimited?”

“Sorry, but we both know that’s not the case.” He gave me a lopsided smile. “Even hypothetically, the Shadow Clan’s motto has always been ‘cheap and efficient.’ The warehouse inventory matches that philosophy.”

“Does it?” I pretended to be surprised. “Because I dropped off two sacks of Thunder Serpent queen scales just the other day. Didn’t check the market price, but I doubt they’re cheap.”

“Oh, those?” His gaze softened. “Yeah, they’re in the restricted vault. Olga said she’d tear me a new one if I so much as looked at them.”

“Interesting security method,” I muttered. “From now on, you have clearance to use whatever you find in there for your work.”

“Anything?” His hands trembled slightly as he grabbed my shirt, eyes wide with barely restrained glee.

“Anything that can be turned into something worth more than the raw materials.”

That settled it. He was all in.

“When can I start?”

“Right now, if you want. If Olga threatens to rip anything off, tell her to take it up with me.”

“Got it!” He snapped to attention, tossed the plate aside like scrap, and bolted for the garage exit.

I glanced around at the shelves stacked with components and tools.

The place looked like a mad scientist's lab, like someone had lived and worked here for years.

But here's the thing—just a week ago, this garage was empty.

All of this had appeared in the past seven days.

How much time had he spent in here? Did he even sleep?

“Oh! Almost forgot.” Toby came skidding back into the room, breathless. “Lexa wanted me to help you find a ride.”

“A ride?”

“She said the vans are booked for the week, and you can't exactly cruise around the capital in a tank. The rest of the fleet is, uh... junk.” He started counting on his fingers. “She doesn't trust cabs, and honestly, I agree with her.”

“I see. So how's the search going?”

“Well, it was supposed to be a surprise...” He rubbed the back of his neck. “Lexa wanted to present you with something ready to go. I found a seller with a decent machine but...”

“But?”

“I found something better.” He lowered his voice. “Only catch is... it's not exactly legal. And extremely dangerous. But it's free!”

“I already told you—we're done cutting corners,” I said. “I need the best we can get our hands on. I don't care how long it takes—better to wait than—”

“No, that's what I'm saying!” He cut in. “This is the best option.”

“The free one?” I arched a brow.

“Well... almost free,” he said with a wince. “There's this place in the western suburbs. Every three months, smugglers and artifact dealers hold a... let's call it a trade event. They exchange things that, for one reason or another, can't be sold openly. I've still got some contacts there, and one of

them tipped me off.”

“Go on.”

“There’s a ‘Velmiro SRX’ custom build on the list. Built exclusively in the western provinces—rugged enough for Red Zones. Never sold on the open market.”

“And the catch?”

“You can only get in if you bring something to trade. And the entry criteria are brutal. I’ve made it in twice in the past decade. I figured you might be interested, so I floated something anonymously—and the Velmiro’s owner agreed to a private meeting.”

“That so?” I narrowed my eyes. “What exactly did we offer that got his attention?”

“A Steel Spider egg,” he said quietly. “But I have to warn you—over the past twelve years, that ride has been offered at auction three times. Never sold. And no one who met its owner ever came back.”

“Classic trap.” I couldn’t help smiling. “When do we leave?”



## CHAPTER 23

A MASSIVE HALL beneath a domed glass ceiling. Loud music. Multicolored spotlights slicing through the darkness. Sharp-dressed waiters in red ties darting between tables. Half-naked dancers in matching ties twirling around chrome poles.

At first glance, the place—modestly named *The Garden of Eden*—looked like your typical lower-class capital nightlife spot.

Second glance? Still the same.

No dress code whatsoever. One guy might stroll in wearing a custom-tailored three-piece suit. Another, a worn T-shirt and scuffed jeans—the only “business attire” on him being mirrored sunglasses worth more than his shoes.

The only unifying theme was anonymity. Almost everyone wore masks. And nearly every guest had a personal bodyguard in tow, each one kitted out like a paramilitary unit.

Even the club’s own guards wore the signature red ties—draped somewhat comically over reinforced armor and tactical gear.

Things only started to look different once I made my way deeper inside.

There, past the noise and dancers, stood two dozen elevated platforms—each sealed under a glass dome, each displaying a different rarity.

An obsidian-and-gold coin pulsing with the faint aura of Death.

A massive spiked greatsword forged from green steel, its worn insignia barely visible at the hilt.

Dozens more artifacts were scattered throughout the showroom, but the centerpiece sat on a rotating dais: a matte-black SUV with elegant curves, gleaming under the spotlights.

And what a sight it was.

The rugged frame, sleek lines, and understated menace radiating from the vehicle combined military elegance with raw functionality. Toby had practically chewed my ear off about this model on the way here.

This wasn't just any SUV—it was a Velmiro. Manufactured exclusively in the western provinces using proprietary off-world alloys. Each one forged from a different, undisclosed magical metal blend. Not even the buyers were told the exact composition. Plenty of nobles had tried to replicate the recipe. None had succeeded.

Thirty years ago, according to Toby, two western Dukes forcibly took over the company, hoping to unlock the secret to its armor-grade chassis. They failed—spectacularly—and the knowledge was lost. Which, naturally, sent the Velmiro's value through the roof.

Fewer than a thousand were left worldwide.

“So how does the buying process work? There aren't even price tags,” I said, eyeing the beast of a vehicle gleaming beneath the lights.

“Items on the main platforms are unique,” Toby said. “They're mostly here to draw attention to the event. Technically, they're for sale—but not for money. Most of the owners don't care about credits. If you want one of these, you'll need to offer something else.” He nodded toward my backpack. Inside it was a miniature incubator—and a Steel Spider egg.

That unborn creature was our ticket in. Not valuable enough for a main-stage display, but certainly worthy of one of the side showcases. I could've placed it there and wandered off until someone made an offer.

But in my case, that wouldn't be necessary.

We already had a buyer lined up.

The catch? Full anonymity. Neither of us had the faintest clue who we

were meeting. All we could do was wait. And while waiting was boring, we passed the time like everyone else—drinking free booze, admiring beautiful women, and pretending to study the inventory like seasoned collectors.

“Still,” I muttered, eyeing the spiked greatsword again, “how do they sell anything with no prices?”

“Simple,” Toby said. “It’s all about the trade. Rare items for rare items. Services. Intel. Sometimes... lives.”

He didn’t even flinch.

“With this much security around?” I asked, glancing at a nearby giant in full combat armor, whose elemental response was comparable to that of a Nameless One.

“They only protect the items guaranteed by the event organizers,” he said. “As for the owners themselves? That’s a different story. In fact, it’s in the organizers’ best interest if a few of those owners meet an untimely end. Full acquisition beats a seller’s commission.”

“Charming system you’ve got here.”

“Risk is part of the deal.” Toby gave a crooked grin.

“That’s for damn sure.” I accepted a champagne flute from a passing server and took a sip. “Not bad,” I said, swirling the glass. “Smooth... despite being poisoned.”

“Poisoned?” Toby lunged for my hand, trying to knock the glass away.

I sidestepped him and took another sip, just to prove a point. “Oh yeah,” I said, nodding thoughtfully. “Definitely poisoned. But the bitterness actually balances the sweetness. Classy touch.”

Toby stared at me like I’d lost my mind. “You saw who gave it to you?” he asked, hand drifting toward the pistol at his belt.

Apparently, he’d forgotten I brought him as an artifact expert—not a bodyguard.

“Relax, Toby.” I set a firm hand on his shoulder and drained the glass.

“Your job’s the car and the deal. Let me handle everything else.”

“...Understood.” He pulled his hand away, though his eyes still radiated deep regret—for bringing me here in the first place.

Me? I was having the time of my life. This wasn’t just my element—I was a shark in a tank full of toothy guppies who hadn’t yet noticed the apex predator in their midst.

Toby wandered off to admire the Velmiro, leaving me to grab another pair of champagne flutes and lean casually against a nearby column.

“Too sweet.” I grimaced after the first sip.

A soft rustle to my right. A woman appeared—sleek black dress, silent steps. “He’s here,” she whispered, accepting the glass I offered her.

“He see you?”

“He did. But made no move.”

I nodded. “Then I’ll handle it from here. You keep an eye on Toby. And be careful. We’re not exactly welcome here.”

“Understood, mentor.” Her feline gaze sparkled with mischief. She drained the rest of her drink in three smooth sips, set the empty glass on the floor, and slipped back into the Shadows.

I straightened my tie and headed back toward the center of the room. At the bar, a woman in an elegant cocktail dress met my gaze through a half-mask of emerald lace, her vivid green eyes gleaming behind it.

“May I join you?” I asked, settling beside her.

“I’d be delighted,” she said, signaling the bartender, who immediately set down two more drinks.

Definitely aristocratic. But unlike the rest, she wasn’t here for the artifacts. Her detachment spoke volumes. And boredom, more than anything else.

We made idle small talk for fifteen minutes—names were never

exchanged, and neither of us seemed to care. But she was good company. And honestly, the champagne tasted better with someone like her.

Then, as we were receiving our third round, someone bumped into me from behind.

“M-my apologies, sir.” A boy in a red tie scurried off, balancing a tray.

“What a nervous little thing.” I smirked, turning to my companion. “Do I look that scary tonight?”

“Not at all,” she said sweetly, adjusting my jacket. “You look... dangerous. The boy’s not a fool. He knows how many predators are circling this room. Speaking of which, it’s getting a little too loud. Would you mind moving somewhere quieter?”

“I’d love to.” I offered her my arm and grabbed my drink with the other.

“Thank you,” she said, smiling as she led the way.

Five minutes later, we were in a dimly lit storage room—the only redeeming feature being the complete lack of witnesses.

She didn’t waste a second.

Her glass clinked to the floor. Her lips found mine. One hand brushed my jawline before loosening my tie and letting it fall.

Moaning softly under my touch, she reached for my belt, unfastened it—and that’s when my heart stopped.

Literally.

The elemental toxin—delivered through that last drink and a few well-placed touches—finally reached my heart. The woman pulled away, lips glossed green, eyes gleaming with smug satisfaction... and then smiled.

A sly, venom-laced smile.

It didn’t last long.

A second later, my heartbeat continued steady as ever, completely

unfazed. The woman's confidence evaporated, her smirk crumbling into wide-eyed panic.

“That’s it?” I asked sweetly, flashing her an innocent smile.

Her eyes darted frantically, scanning for an exit. Whatever predatory edge she’d been using was gone now—along with any trace of seduction. She tried to wriggle free from my grip, failed, and opened her mouth to scream.

I clamped a hand gently over her lips and shook my head.

I never did get a full read on how many people she was working with. She’d been cautious. The kid who bumped into me earlier had been scared stiff—definitely coerced. Probably the bartender was in on it too, but I didn’t feel like checking.

Honestly, I’d been hoping they’d out themselves if I played along long enough. And yeah, I’ll admit—playing along had been kind of fun.

If all assassins tried to kill me like that, I wouldn’t mind.

“She’s yours,” I said after a brief pause, weighing the options.

Behind her, the air shimmered—and then Mirk emerged, slow and silent, swirling outward like ink in water.

The aura that followed him hit her like a cold slap. She flinched hard and tried to bolt—but this time, Mirk caught her. Without a word, he pulled her into the Shadow with him. Only he remained, standing just outside the fading distortion, and gave me a nod.

“How’d it go?” I asked, tightening my tie.

“Checked three heirs. Including the one waiting for you upstairs.”

“And?”

“None of them are connected to the Overseer.” A trace of disappointment slipping through his voice.

“So you don’t mind if I have a little chat with him?”

“Not at all.” He tilted his head slightly. “Need me?”

I gave a casual shake of my head and glanced past him, toward the spot where the distortion still lingered. “You?”

“No.” His voice was flat—and then he vanished.

I let out a breath. Assassins these days—no commitment.

Grabbing a nearby glass, I drained it in one go. The lingering bitterness was... perfect. I should really get the recipe.

After brushing off my jacket, I strolled back into the central lounge. One of the venue’s hired muscle spotted me and headed over.

“They’re expecting you,” the big guy rumbled.

I glanced toward Toby, who was loitering near the Velmiro’s display, animatedly arguing with a squat man whose gut strained against his vest.

“They’re expecting you, specifically,” the big guy clarified.

“Got it.” I shrugged and let him lead me through the crowd toward the far elevator.

Two more guards in red ties exchanged glances as we approached, then silently stepped aside.

On the third floor, the big guy walked me to the last door at the end of the hall, knocked once, and promptly made himself scarce—nearly wiping out on the turn in his eagerness to get back to whatever he was doing.

I nudged the door open and stepped into a spacious, mostly empty office. A battered couch sat against one wall, a desk with a lonely cactus perched on the corner, and a man perched on the desk itself.

He was blond, not young, with a gold earring and a thoughtful expression as he idly toyed with a golden chain in his hand. At his feet lay a creature the size of a large dog, reptilian and armored in mossy-green scales, with jagged stone protrusions and a dull horn crowning its snout.

A baby Tyranax. Young.

So the guy was a Light Clan Tamer. Noted.

To his right stood a tall, broad-shouldered woman in a sharply cut black suit—clearly built for battle, not boardrooms. Slumped on the couch nearby sat a stocky man in full-body elemental armor, a metal case resting on his knees. And when I say short—I mean barely five feet tall in the armor.

“Welcome, ‘M,’” the Tamer said, voice dripping with condescension.

“‘M’?” I raised an eyebrow.

“That’s what our contact called you,” he said with a shrug. “Not that names matter in this line of work. You can call me Jack.”

“And your associates?”

“You won’t need their names.” Jack smirked.

“Fair enough.” I returned the smirk. “Let’s go with Shortstack and Muscles.”

That got a reaction. Both twitched—faint but telling.

Good. That meant they weren’t under direct mental control. Normally, Tamers couldn’t dominate humans, but the Light Clan had surprised me before. Worth testing—purely for curiosity’s sake.

“You’ve got more guts than I expected,” Jack said, lips curling as he sent a ripple of energy down the golden chain.

The baby Tyranix’s eyes opened, glowing red. It looked up at me with a gaze full of pain, despair, and a quiet plea for death.

Classic Tamer method—misery as obedience training.

“Does it take guts to attend a business meeting?” I asked, feigning confusion. “Especially with all that security downstairs. I’d say our safety is more than guaranteed.”

Jack grinned wider. The musclemethod snorted.

Yeah... subtlety clearly wasn’t part of their training package.



“Oh, absolutely! For those who bring worthy merchandise.” Jack inclined his head with forced civility. “You did bring it, right?”

“Of course.” I slid my backpack off and opened the mini-incubator.

Nestled inside was the egg—perfectly intact.

After we’d moved it to the district, Albert helped stabilize it in a proper incubator. At first, we kept it at my rental apartment, then shifted it to the mansion. Not mine—his.

It was loaded with metallic particles, and Albert had taken it upon himself to recharge it regularly. He’d gotten weirdly attached. Called himself its guardian. Fussed over it like a mother hen.

I was surprised Roe, animal lover that she is, completely ignored it. Apparently, she didn’t count unhatched creatures as real. No affection until they popped out, I guess.

Days passed. The egg stabilized... and then just sat there.

I didn’t know how to raise something like that—and wasn’t eager to sell it either.

So there it stayed—until he caught wind of it.

The second the Light Tamer saw the egg, his eyes lit up like my parrot spotting a heretic. He slid off the desk slowly, approaching with a reverence that bordered on creepy.

“Looks genuine,” he muttered, clearly surprised. His eyes glowed faintly as he looked up at me. “May I?”

“Be my guest.”

He brushed his fingers over the shell, then recoiled and snapped his fingers.

Shortstack shoved his case aside and waddled over. Metal-clad fingers tapped the egg. Then he sniffed it. Licked it. Pressed his forehead to it.

Muscles watched with the same blank stare I had—equal parts

confusion and secondhand embarrassment.

“Could be viable,” Shortstack announced with mock authority. He reached to lift it—

And I snapped the incubator shut an inch from his fingers, sliding it right back into my bag.

“Well, that’s enough window shopping for now,” I said brightly, locking eyes with their now humorless faces.

That’s when the constructs activated behind me.

I felt the pulse of a power field—five layers, at least. Strong, too.

“You sure this is how you want to handle things?” I asked, lowering the bag to the floor and meeting four very unfriendly gazes.

## CHAPTER 24

THE FIRST TO STRIKE was the woman.

In a single step, Muscles was on me—her unnervingly powerful hand locking around my throat with a grip like iron.

Heat flushed beneath her skin as a searing wave of Fire Element wrapped around me. Her sleeves split at the seams as her frame swelled, too much strength for the suit to contain. Her grip tightened as she slowly lifted me off the floor, veins bulging across her forehead, black hair beginning to smolder. A guttural growl rumbled through clenched teeth.

Thank the gods she didn't go in for a kiss. For a second there, I actually thought she might.

Meanwhile, Shortstack casually made his way toward my backpack, clearly assuming I was done for.

Impatient little thing.

Yeah... I'd say it's time.

I clenched my fist and raised it to chest level.

A moment later, the shadow relic materialized—and drove clean through her neck.

Her grip slackened instantly. I dropped to the ground as her overinflated body slumped with a wet gurgle and hit the floor like a sack of overcooked meat.

Shortstack didn't even process what had happened before my next swing lopped a couple fingers off his greedy hand—the one reaching for my pack.

“Aaaargh, you bastard!” He stumbled back, spraying blood in all directions.

“Seize him!” Jack shouted, scrambling back against the far wall.

The golden chain in his hands burst with radiant energy, wrapping four times around the baby Tyranix’s neck. The poor creature howled in pain, ready to do anything to make it stop.

“Break,” I whispered.

The chain dimmed and fell with a heavy clatter.

Wide-eyed, the Tyranix stared down at his feet. Then he shuffled his thick-set legs, turned in a slow circle, clearly confused.

“What the hell was that? I said seize him, you stupid mutt!” Jack roared, jabbing a finger in my direction.

So the Tyranix followed the command—to the letter.

The blunt, rock-hard horn of the reptilian beast was at just the right height to smash straight into the Tamer’s groin.

The crack of pulverized bone and the squelch of shattered pride echoed through the room. Jack couldn’t even scream—he blacked out on impact.

The Tyranix stumbled backward, building momentum—only to slam into a table. A cactus pot toppled from above and smacked him square in the head.

He blinked.

Scowled.

And promptly ate the cactus. Pot and all.

Then, as if nothing had happened, he charged—ramming straight into the unconscious Tamer’s chest.

The blunt stone horn shattered ribs and spine alike. The beast stomped a few times on the mangled corpse, then snorted in satisfaction.

The only other spectator besides me was Shortstack, who had somehow stopped the bleeding and now stood frozen in the corner, clutching his briefcase like a lifeline, waiting for the dust to settle.

Once the Tyranax finished his triumphant little dance on the body of his most hated enemy, his red eyes swept the room—and landed on Shortstack.

Licking his lips, the young beast knocked over a table with his horn and barreled forward.

*Thunk!*

The room echoed with the sound of a collision, and the beast went flying, slamming into the wall with a whistle.

For a guy his size, the armored runt could hit.

With the full backing of the Metal Element and a suit of enchanted steel, he didn't even flinch. A full-grown Tyranax would've struggled to crack that armor—even one with the full strength of the Stone Element. This baby never stood a chance.

Not that the young Tyranax cared. He shook it off, narrowed his eyes, and charged again.

*Thunk!*

Same result. This time, the horn cracked.

He wobbled upright, blood leaking from his nostrils, and glared defiantly at his armored opponent. He had no intention of surrendering.

Admirable. And suicidal.

One more hit like that and he'd break something vital. So I stepped in, caught him by the horn, spun him around, and set him down facing the other way.

Predictably, he charged again.

Straight into the wall.

He slid down with a dull thud and lay twitching.

I turned to Shortstack, who was glaring at me like I'd just ruined his entire business plan. Relic at my waist, I approached slowly.

"No need to thank me," he said dryly. "I could've handled it."

"Oh? You think I was saving you?" I glanced at the dazed creature. "Didn't want trash like you putting down a rare beast like that."

"You arrogant bastard. Do you even know who you're talking to?" He squared his shoulders. "I'm Thaddeus. An official intermediary for the Organization. I'm untouchable."

"Untouchable, huh..." I nodded toward his mangled hand. "Guess your fingers didn't get the memo."

"That was my mistake," he said, slipping back into business mode. "I assumed the deal was complete." He moved to step past me.

I blocked him.

"Maybe let me do my job?" he said, trying to sound in control.

"Hand over what's mine, and I'll consider it." I flicked a glance at his briefcase. "The Velmiro key's in there, isn't it?"

"That's none of your business," Thaddeus snapped. "The deal fell through. Per contract terms, the deceased's lot now belongs to the Organization."

"Yeah... that doesn't work for me."

"In that case, as the aggrieved party, you may purchase the lot from the Organization for twenty-five percent of market value." He popped open the case, revealing the transparent capsule holding the key—and the contract. He held both out to me. "All perfectly legal."

While I examined the paperwork—which matched the one I'd signed earlier—Thaddeus whipped out a calculator and punched in a number without blinking.

The Organization's terms were simple: provide anonymity, guarantee fair trades, and compensate losses at one-fifty percent of value. In return,

they charged one percent commission and claimed ownership of unclaimed items if a seller died.

Interested parties had twenty-four hours to buy the item for a quarter of its appraised value. Most walked away happy—just not the ones being buried. Neat. Efficient. And always in the Organization’s favor.

“So you want me to pay four million for this thing?” I stared at the calculator. Then double-checked the zeroes.

“Not me. The Organization.” He beamed. “Contract’s clear.”

“Yeah, I’ve got a better idea.” I pocketed the capsule. “I take what’s mine—and your Organization keeps its living rep. Sound fair?”

“That’s not how any of this works. There are guards at the exit. You’ll never get out with it. The deal fell through!” His voice cracked as panic crept in.

It was almost funny. Bleeding, disheveled, still clinging to protocol like it’d save him.

Reminded me of someone.

“From where I’m standing, the deal’s done,” I said. “That Light Elementalist—Jack, was it? He left the car to me.”

“There was no official transfer of ownership!” he snapped. “When?”

“Right before he died.” I watched his reaction. “Didn’t you hear?”

“No—no way!” His breath hitched. “I’ll testify I saw the deal collapse. If you try to leave with the item, you’re dead. Even the Light one was willing to pay!”

“Four million for the egg?” I raised a brow.

“No, two hundred thousand.” He shrugged. “Quarter of the appraised value.”

“Still not bad.” I glanced toward my backpack. “Guess there was a point to bringing cash.”

I gave the room a quick sweep, then strolled to the desk, opened a hidden panel, and pulled out a hefty briefcase.

“I, intermediary Thaddeus, confirm that the Organization accepts this as the first installment,” he said, slipping back into form. “You’ve received the key. We’ll sign a credit agreement for the rest. You may take the item.”

“You’re a real go-getter, huh?” I bent down and picked up the chain from the floor.

“Put that down,” he barked. “Now.”

“You’re joking, right?”

“The contract applies to the item only. Everything else on the deceased becomes Organization property. That’s the rule.”

“Oh, the deceased, huh? What if...” I muttered, “Devour.”

And just like that, the blood, the corpses—gone. Swallowed by Darkness. Like they were never there.

Thaddeus froze. His visor lifted slightly as he took in the spotless room. No blood. No corpses. No proof.

“I... I still know you killed them. My testimony’s enough!” he blurted—then realized he was standing on quicksand.

A minute ago, he’d had power. Evidence. A front-row seat to the whole scene. Now he had nothing.

And he knew it.

Seeing how easily I’d erased the mess, even an idiot like him could piece together that I could just as easily erase him—and walk out of this charming den of backroom deals with both lots and a suitcase full of cash.

Panic took over. He reached for the elemental blade at his hip—and lunged.

To his credit, he moved fast. Clean form. Precise strike. The guy definitely knew how to kill.



But I caught the tip of the blade between two fingers. Inches from my chest.

“You should’ve taken my first offer.” I watched as he poured every last drop of energy into the weapon, trying to force it through.

The blade began to dim, then corrode—flaking apart in chunks as the rot spread to his armor.

He staggered back and collapsed in the same corner where this little chat had started, staring up at me in horror.

“What... who... what are you?” he choked out, his brain short-circuiting.

I stepped closer and gripped his visor with a gloved hand. The wrapped folds of my cloak hissed as corrosion spread across the metal. Thaddeus tried to reinforce the crumbling armor, but it was too late.

“Last question, Shorty. Why did the Light want the egg?”

\* \* \*

I stepped out of the elevator whistling cheerfully and made my way toward Toby, who was standing beside the Velmiro display, tapping notes into his tablet.

He spotted me, exhaled in visible relief, and waved. “How’d it go?” he asked quietly.

“Overall? Smooth,” I said, handing him the case with the key. “And you?”

“Verified everything. The machine’s legit.” He looked proud, practically beaming. Then his eyes darted past me—three grim-faced guards had just exited the elevator behind me, whispering among themselves and shooting the occasional glance our way.

“They think I killed the seller and the broker,” I said flatly, unfazed.

Toby’s grin vanished. He quickly tucked the key case under his jacket. “Killing the seller—sure, happens all the time. But the broker? That’s... bad

news.” He swallowed hard. “Did they find the body?”

“Nope,” I said, sipping my champagne.

“Any blood? Witnesses? Evidence?” he asked, rapidly ticking off each question.

“None of the above.” I waved it off. “Only thing they’ve got is the fact that both men were alive when I walked in and gone when I walked out.”

“Ha!” Toby barked a laugh. “Then they’ve got nothing. All deals in this place are verbal. Without proof, the Organization can’t do jack. Even suspecting a client without cause? That’s dangerous. People would stop doing business here.”

“What about the guards?”

“Their word means squat.” He shook his head. “Meetings like this are strictly anonymous. No ID, no tracking. That’s the whole point—”

“Easy to bury the fallout,” I said, setting the empty glass aside. “Yeah. Got it. But I don’t think they care about proving anything.”

Because I’d just noticed the exhibits disappearing one by one—platforms retracting smoothly into the floor—everything except the Velmiro. The music had stopped. Around us, the only “guests” remaining were a couple dozen guards in red ties.

“Oh, shit,” Toby hissed as realization hit. He drew his pistol, eyes darting to each of the four exits—already sealed. More red ties poured in by the second.

“Start it!” I snapped, slamming my elbow through the protective dome on the central podium.

“O-on it!” Toby scrambled onto the display.

“Stop!” one of the guards shouted.

At that moment, the lights went out.

Gunfire erupted, and I grinned.

In the pitch black, I slipped up behind two enforcers and took their heads off in silence. Their bodies hit the floor with dull thuds.

The Velmiro's engine roared to life, echoing like a thunderclap.

The transparent dome shattered under the elemental pressure as the platform rose—lifting the armored machine above the wreckage.

A moment later, it dropped to the floor with a crash, headlights blazing.

Bullets flew toward it, but they bounced harmlessly off the vehicle's elemental plating like rubber pellets off a tank. I ducked behind a pillar, surveying the room.

This would've been easy—if I were alone. But I needed to get Toby out. And I still had to find Roe.

Fortunately, that problem solved itself.

Screams and gunfire from the rear confirmed my apprentice had joined the party. But even for her, this was overkill—especially since a third of these bastards were way beyond what her skills could handle. The gear these guards wore? Top-tier. The kind you'd take into a B-class Portal without a second thought.

“Get in! We're pulling out!” Toby's shout rang across the chaos.

“Go!” I barked, watching as the building's only garage door began grinding shut.

“I'm not leaving you here—”

“That's an order.” I snapped. “And take Roe with you—she's by the gate!”

“R-right!” He hesitated, then floored the gas.

The Velmiro surged forward, crushing a guard who thought sneaking up from the side was a clever idea.

I turned toward the gate and exhaled through my nose. Roe had done well—killed the lights on her own, realized the doors couldn't be allowed to

close—but misjudged her strength. She hadn't been able to hold the mechanism, and the goons had shoved her away from the panel.

“Bind,” I commanded.

Thick whips of woven Darkness burst from the floor, coiling around the garage gate and halting it mid-close. Holding it there took effort—even the Velmiro wouldn't crash through that thing without taking a beating. And I wasn't about to replace a fender on a sixteen-million-Imperial antique they hadn't made in thirty years.

From behind the pillar, I cleaved down another pair of enforcers who got too close, buying time. The moment the Velmiro cleared the building, I dispelled the bindings.

The gate slammed shut behind it, sealing the space in total black.

Did it scare the red ties?

Not a chance. They slipped glowing lenses over their eyes and kept tightening the noose. Clearly, the car wasn't their priority.

I was.

Was I scared?

Please. I'd been hoping for a chance to cut loose and test this rebellious relic in a real fight.

Sure, the sudden evacuation of the exhibits was a bit of a buzzkill. And yeah, I should've thrown the egg into the car earlier. I was just thinking that when something shifted inside my backpack.

“Oh, hell no,” I muttered, realizing what was happening.

And I charged—straight into the chaos.

## CHAPTER 25

THE RAIN HAMMERED the armored roof. Sirens howled through the courtyard, bouncing off the concrete.

Beyond the outer fence, the low roar of an angry crowd rolled in—those forcibly ejected from the premises. Behind us came the muffled rhythm of gunfire.

The Velmiro's engine rumbled softly in the middle of the inner yard—just ten minutes ago, red-tied guards and enforcers had filled the space. Now it was a ghost town.

Everyone who could wield a weapon had been pulled into the main building. The rest—clerks, admin, idle workers—had scattered the moment the breach sirens started screaming.

No one asked why monsters had appeared here of all places—a sector scrubbed clean of Portals for miles. The visitors weren't given a chance to ask anything.

They were shoved out. Hard.

Everyone—except the two who'd driven themselves out in a matte-black SUV.

And once they were gone, the guards seemed to lose all interest in chasing them.

They didn't even need to flee far. Toby, still in the driver's seat, kept the engine running but made no move to leave. He was chewing his nails raw, eyes locked on the building where he'd left the boss.

"I'm screwed," he groaned, grabbing his head. "So, so screwed."

“Did you scratch the car or something?” the girl in the sleek black dress asked from the back seat.

Sprawled across it like a makeshift bed, Roe idly stroked the oversized hamster on her chest—currently gnawing his way through a thick copper wire with steady determination.

“You an idiot?” Toby snapped, shooting her a glare through the rearview mirror. “I brought him here! Me! And he’s still in there—”

“Yeah,” she said dreamily, her feline gaze drifting toward the building. “Having all the fun without us.”

“Fun?” His voice cracked. “Do you even know who the Organization is? They’ve got three hundred of the world’s deadliest mercs on their payroll! Ninety percent of them operate exclusively in Yellow and Red Zones. They only show up here to dump rare loot and schmooze with the capital’s nobles.”

“They network in interesting ways.” Roe smiled as she gently scratched the rough stone plating on the creature’s head. It was dozing between the front and back seats. She hadn’t dared risk the pristine upholstery with those jagged spines—but tossing a wounded creature into the trunk felt too heartless.

“This never happens,” Toby muttered, trying his best to ignore the mobile zoo unfolding behind him. “The Organization never interferes with clients. It’s bad for business. Sure, sometimes they quietly help dispose of a few unlucky artifact hunters, but this? This is pure insanity! Customers will demand answers. Nobody’s going to buy that ‘random monster breach’ story. If the Beast were here, this never would’ve happened...”

“The Beast?” Roe echoed, momentarily distracted from her scratching duties.

“Right... you’ve never been beyond the capital.” Toby rubbed his face. “Beast’s a major underworld figure. Owns the Organization and a third of the illegal market outside the Green Zones. Not just here—international. What his people just pulled tonight? That’s gonna cost him big, both in cash and credibility.”

“Mmhmm.” She slowly pushed herself up on her elbows, ears twitching. The gunfire had stopped. She smiled. “Sounds like it’s over.”

Toby blinked. “What is?”

Then he heard it too—a low rumble from the building, followed by a thunderous crash.

His gaze snapped to the breached wall near the sealed elemental gates.

Something burst through.

No—someone.

Drenched in blood, swearing like a sailor, hair a complete mess, blazer shredded at the seams—there was their boss, sprinting full speed across the yard with a stuffed-to-the-brim weapons bag slung over one shoulder and a Steel Spider egg cradled in his arms.

“Where’s the incubator?” Toby asked blankly.

Then he noticed it—the crack running through the shell, and the faint, glowing eye staring out from within.

\* \* \*

Albert was going to be upset.

No—very upset.

I hadn’t told the big guy that I’d taken the egg he’d been fussing over like a broody hen for the past week. And now, not only had I shattered the precious incubator he’d bought with his own hard-earned credits, but I was standing here watching the Steel Spider inside that cracked shell slowly die.

The ambient atmosphere of our world was poisoning the hatchling. It curled tighter into itself, as if trying to crawl back into the shell, but it was no use. Its glow dimmed by the second, and its metallic hide had already begun to flake and crumble.

Toby was flooring it, but one glance at the spiderling told me we wouldn’t make it in time.

I looked at the backpack I'd hastily stuffed with trophies. Most of them were rare, even valuable—but somehow, I doubted Albert would see that as a consolation prize.

I wonder... if I fed it that horned little pest, would it last long enough to reach him? I glanced at the trembling creature curled at Roe's feet. As if sensing my intent, it rolled its eyes and collapsed in a clumsy faint.

Hah. The baby Tyranix was just as bad at acting as its former handlers. Still, credit where it's due—decent survival instincts. That alone made it a rarity among portal creatures.

Most of them, once dragged into our world, could think of nothing but tearing into people. The environment here broke them down from the inside out. But this one? No signs of aggression. Alert. Aware. Calm.

Weird. Maybe it was bred in a lab?

And come to think of it—how the hell did this thing, the same one I'd left behind in that observation room, end up in our SUV?

Old Aks had a clear rule when it came to monsters: *A creature's still a creature*. No excuses.

Yet here I was, worrying over a dying spider. Maybe it was just because I didn't want to upset Albert... but still.

I looked down at the tiny form curled inside the shattered shell. Its limbs had drawn inward, trembling as it tried to survive. But the fight was nearly over.

"Damn it," I muttered, then glanced at Toby. "Pull over."

He obeyed instantly, swerving toward the shoulder and bringing the SUV to a sharp stop.

"Pop the hood. No one gets out." I clutched the egg under my arm and stepped out into the cold night.

Toby and Roe pressed their curious faces to the windows, but I ignored them and circled around to the front of the vehicle.



I lifted the hood.

Scratching my chin, I tried to recall Shortstack's final words.

"Feed it to the Velmiro," I murmured, echoing his dying advice. I glanced at the egg, then at the energy intake chamber.

"Well... sorry, little guy. Bad timing on your part," I said softly, and held the egg over the intake.

Congratulations, Marcus. You're apologizing to a live portal creature now.

And yeah, maybe this one had never hurt anyone. Maybe it had only ever shown fear. But it was still a monster—still a threat to humanity.

I was a Paladin. I'd slaughtered creatures by the millions. Letting them go had never been a problem.

So why the hell was this one so damn hard?

The engine roared with anticipation, sensing the proximity of free energy. The hatchling had less than a minute left, so I shook off the hesitation and dropped the egg into the chamber.

The Velmiro devoured it whole.

\* \* \*

Moonlight filtered weakly through the thick clouds overhead. A cyclone rolled in from the west, bringing biting wind and a misty drizzle that clung to the skin.

But despite the weather—and the late hour—the crowds hadn't thinned.

Albert stood tall and inhaled deeply, letting the damp night air fill his lungs. With a faint smile, he surveyed the three long lines of people forming outside the perimeter.

The first led to a tent so large it could pass for a circus pavilion, its entrance adorned with a cartoonish raven wielding an assault rifle and a

hand-painted sign that read: *Patrick's Goods*.

From the back, dusty bags of scavenged armor and weapons were being hauled in; from the front, satisfied customers emerged cradling refurbished gear polished to a mirror sheen.

Patrick even attached tags and tied on little decorative bows. Judging by the nonstop supply runs over the past three hours—wooden crates, battered boxes—it looked like the old merchant had started selling off his personal stash to meet demand.

Can't blame him.

Few people wanted to shop inside the Shadow District, and thanks to the news frenzy, this patch of dirt had become the most talked-about spot in the entire city. Crowds were flocking here from every direction—some out of curiosity, some for fame or profit, and some by accident.

Patrick had something for everyone. He turned gawking foot traffic into cash without breaking a sweat.

That explained the frenzy around the gear tent. But the second line—leading to a humble red-cross medical tent—left Albert scratching his head.

Gabriel, the reclusive Light Elementalist Albert had only seen once that week, had shown up that morning in a white coat and immediately set to work gathering ingredients.

Well... “set to work” might be generous. The guy wandered the Portal alone, collecting herbs. At first, Albert had been ready to kick him out. He didn't trust Light types. But after Gabriel disarmed two traps and saved two dozen collectors from what would've been dismemberment—or worse—Albert had changed his tune.

He'd assigned Gabriel a few helpers and even loaned him a proper tent. Now that tent was pumping out customers like a factory. People stepped out beaming, clutching pouches of dried herbs and roots like they'd just discovered the Fountain of Youth.

Albert had been tempted to see what the fuss was about. But time was short.

Even now, as the Shadow Clan's head of security, he only had ten minutes for a breather before he was due to lead another group of resource collectors into the jungle.

The Portal's timer was ticking down. Every second mattered. And without Marcus—or the all-seeing winged demon watching his back—Albert knew the safety of his people rested entirely on his shoulders.

But he was a Warrior. Responsibility came with the role.

And truth be told? He liked it.

"You done resting?" he asked with a grin, glancing down at the broad-shouldered young man slumped in front of him—built like half a delivery van.

"Come on, Bertie," Bob groaned. "I've got a delivery run in ten minutes... what if I get attacked, and I'm wiped out?"

"That's why you train," Albert said dryly. "Didn't you ask me to help prep for your Guardian exams? Or are you backing out now?"

"I didn't change anything," Bob muttered. "I just don't see the point. You've seen my gift."

"Sure. And I've seen what you're missing after ten sparring rounds."

"They were in a row! Let me rest and I'll smoke you!"

"Exactly," Albert said. "Work on that stamina, and then we'll talk. Down position—now."

"Yeah, yeah." Bob groaned as he dropped into push-up form, ignoring the cold rain pelting his back.

Albert's gaze drifted toward the third line—the easiest one to explain.

It curled toward the open-air field kitchen under a fireproof tarp, from which the smell of roasted herbs, meat, and spice carried for blocks.

Whatever else you could say about Eric, the man could cook.

Using little more than a spice kit, his fire-based gift, and a few crates of

ingredients ordered from the nearest supermarket, he was turning snakes, roots, and bark into gourmet masterpieces.

Albert glanced at his watch, did one final scan of the perimeter, and was just about to call an end to the break when a sudden roar of an engine ripped through the night.

He knew that sound.

A Velmiro engine. But that made no sense. According to Pride's recon, there were none in the capital. Which meant...

Attack?

Albert's brain kicked into overdrive. He'd spent too long in the Red Zones not to recognize the signs.

He grabbed the trainee by the collar, yanked him backward, and stepped forward, weapon already drawn—ready, if necessary, to stop a moving Velmiro with nothing but his body.

But the vehicle didn't strike.

Instead, the SUV dropped from the upper ring road—slamming into the compound with a deafening crash. It hit the ground, skidded sideways in a drift across a pile of shattered theater rubble, and came to a halt just one yard from Albert's feet.

Then the driver's door swung open... and out stumbled a dazed but grinning man—unshaven, bleary-eyed, and looking utterly, stupidly pleased with himself.

He gave the SUV a fond pat, then looked up at Albert.

"Did you see that drift, Bertie?" Toby shouted triumphantly. "She's ours now, buddy!"

He nearly keeled over from sheer energy exhaustion.

"You're barely standing, you idiot," Albert snapped, stomping toward Toby. "Why the hell didn't you signal you were one of ours? I nearly put you in the ground!"

“With all due respect, you couldn’t put the Velmiro down that easily.” Toby shot back, glancing over his shoulder for backup.

“And what if that had been a live combat squad instead? Or worse—civilians in the crossfire?” Albert struck the back of Toby’s head with a heavy hand.

“Ow.” Toby rubbed the spot with a wince—just as the SUV door creaked open and a dark silhouette stepped out.

Marcus climbed down, drawn and grim as death itself, his eyes hollow with sorrow as he looked up at the towering Warrior.

The sight knocked the breath out of Albert.

He had never—not once—seen Marcus like this. Not after missions. Not after political standoffs. Not even after the massacre at the Shadow Clan mansion. But now? Now Marcus looked shattered. And that terrified Albert more than any threat ever could.

“What happened?” Albert asked, rushing forward. “Did someone die?”

“You could say that.” Marcus’s voice was raw, quiet. His trembling hands extended something—an eggshell, blood-smeared and broken.

Albert’s arms dropped to his sides. “But... I’d been—I’d been trying for so long...”

“I know,” Marcus said gently, pulling the hulking man into a one-armed hug. He gave him a quiet pat on the back. “There, there.”

Albert hadn’t expected it to hit so hard. When he saw Marcus like that, all kinds of terrible thoughts had rushed through his mind—about his sister, about the district, about Victoria... but it was just an egg.

Still, it hurt. Badly.

He’d poured almost half his energy into that damn thing over the past week. Secretly trained at night, bought elemental crystals out of his own savings, didn’t even tell Marcus how costly it had been to maintain the incubator—afraid the guy might sell it off if he knew.

And all for what? For a Steel Spider to hatch—alive and whole. Not because Albert liked portal creatures. Not as a Warrior. But because his withdrawn, quiet little sister had clung to that egg like it was her lifeline.

Ever since the slaughter of their family... the attack that followed... the prison... the move to this cursed district—she hadn't spoken to anyone. Wouldn't even leave Albert's quarters.

Except to be with the egg.

In the rare hours he had free, he'd spend them with her, tending to it together. She even gave it a name—but wouldn't say what, too scared she'd jinx it before it hatched.

Albert had promised to protect it. And now —

“How did it happen?” he asked quietly.

Marcus scratched the back of his neck, sheepish. Then he popped the SUV's hood and pointed to the crystal compartment.

“The little guy hatched while I was driving,” Marcus said with a sigh. “Didn't look good. Barely hanging on... so he climbed in there. Right into the energy core. I can still hear the godawful grinding as the Velmiro tried to chew him up...”

Albert's head dropped. “How am I supposed to tell my sister...” He paused. “Wait. I hear something...” He stepped forward slowly, pressing an ear to the still-running engine.

A loud clang rang out as something smacked into his helmet from inside.

“You little bastard!” Albert leapt a foot in the air, spinning around—only to find a cheerful, beady-eyed little face staring out at him from the crystal compartment.

“Toby, you idiot! Kill the engine! He'll overheat in there!” Albert shouted.

Marcus and Toby both burst out laughing.

All the grief, all the weight that had been dragging Marcus down—vanished in a flash. The mournful boss was gone. In his place stood the same cocky, carefree lunatic Albert had always known.

“He’s not going anywhere,” Marcus said with a grin, nodding toward the spiderlet, who looked quite pleased with himself. “Besides, where else would a hatchling feel safest if not in its nest?”

“Nest?” Albert blinked.

“Well...” Marcus stretched the word. “He didn’t exactly crawl in there. I may have... placed him inside. And he sort of hatched fully while in there. So now he sees the Velmiro as his mother.”

Albert stared at him, then gave Marcus a once-over—bloody, bruised, half-burned. “You didn’t hit your head or anything, right?”

“Technical stuff’s Toby’s department,” Marcus said breezily, waving a hand. “But it does smell amazing out here... Yup. That settles it. I’m officially on lunch break.”

“It’s nearly midnight,” Albert muttered.

“Then dinner break.” Marcus whistled and strolled off toward the food tent.

Trailing behind him, waddling on short legs, came a plump creature with the head of a lizard and a stubby horn stuck smack in the center of its forehead.

“Watch out—portal creature on your six!” Albert shouted, drawing his sword.

“Hey! He’s not a creature—he’s Craggy!” Roe sprang out from the Shadows and threw herself between Albert and the creature. “He’s with us!”

“Craggy? The hell kind of name is that?” Albert stared, utterly lost. Maybe he should’ve just taken that two-hour nap.

“Hold it.” Marcus turned, suddenly serious. “I said he stays only if he listens to you.”

“But he wants to help you,” Roe insisted. “You’re the one who saved him!”

Marcus sighed, glancing at his rumbling stomach. Then he turned to the little beast—just in time to watch it lift its head proudly, walk straight into a tent pole, hook its horn on a rope, and spin in frantic circles until it crashed down, dragging half the kitchen with it.

A furious cook erupted from the wreckage, swearing.

“So much for helpful,” Marcus muttered. His eyes flicked to the still-open engine bay. “Hey, Roe... if we shove him in horn-first, you think he’ll fit?”

\* \* \*

A cool rain tapped steadily on the tent’s tarp as moonlight danced across the frothy rim of a beer mug. My stomach—warm and full—was still singing praises to the chef, and my gaze—slightly glazed—rested on a mountain of black-and-gold armor crouched like a child, getting a lecture from a scruffy, unshaven drunk in a stained white T-shirt.

Toby waved his tablet like a conductor’s baton, pointing at formulas and diagrams, explaining how the alloy structure in the Velmiro’s core resembled that of a Steel Spider—and how we might use that to our advantage.

Meanwhile, the spiderlet swung from the SUV’s open door like it was a jungle gym.

Circling the chaos at top speed was Craggy, ramming a broken pillar with his horn and snorting triumphantly every time it budged.

Peaceful chaos.

Roe had gone into the Portal with the collectors, giving Albert a much-needed break. Gabriel and Patrick were still manning the stall, serving what remained of the night crowd.

“Guess the talk with Patrick will have to wait—again,” I muttered, checking the clock. It was already past one in the morning.



Then my phone rang.

“Hey, Max,” I said with a grin. “Let me guess—escaped Diana’s clutches and want to hang out?”

“Something like that,” Max replied—but his tone was all wrong. Too serious. Way too serious.

The grin dropped from my face. “What happened?”

“There’s... something. And I hate to ask, but...” Max trailed off, uncharacteristically unsure.

“Don’t say another word. Just give me the address.” I was already climbing into the Velmiro.

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Roman Savarovsky was born in 1992 in a small Siberian town. His childhood love for reading short detective stories eventually shifted to a fascination with fantasy, sci-fi, and adventure during his teenage years. While in university, reading took a backseat to other hobbies and studies, until the LitRPG genre captured his attention in 2014. Realizing, “I could write something like this,” he completed his first full draft and submitted it to a writing contest. Although the draft didn’t progress further, Roman turned his focus to a career in sales.

His search for purpose continued over six years, moving from one job to another, yet the desire to write never faded.

The turning point came in 2021 when Roman stumbled upon another major LitRPG contest. Revisiting and fully rewriting his draft, he transformed it into a successful trilogy, gathering his first fans and finding his true calling. Since then, Roman has never set down his “pen,” crafting and publishing new captivating stories.