Trouble at the Port

By NST

215,502 Words

Chapter 1: The Founders day Incident

The massive city of Porta Nexus booms with excitement, a hub of the Multiverse where all walks of life exist, unlike any other world. Fireworks are going off as lights flash everywhere. People are dancing in the streets, while others watch a parade of floats marching by. The TVs light up with activity as a bulky man in a snazzy blue suit appears with a much shorter woman in a purple suit. “Good evening Multiverse! It's me Aion Anderson, and My lovely co-host Mia Meridian coming to you live straight from Porta Nexus. Today's a very special day!” He says to the viewers. “That's right it's Founder's Day, a day representing rejuvenation, and regrowth.” She said smiling with the same excitement everyone seemed to have.

“The Siege of Porta Nexus... was tragic, thought to be impossible even, all of us lost something in that devastating attack from the Remnant, but now a full year later everything is rebuilt stronger than ever. So everyone drink and be merry, for this city, for overcoming adversity, and everyone we lost.” Aion said somewhat solemnly. “But remember not to party too hard.” Mia joked. “With that, we wish you a happy Founder's Day. Aion Anderson.” He started to say. “And Mia Meridian.” She said.

“Sighing off.” They both said in unison as the broadcast ended. A boy with green hair smiled watching it happily before returning his focus to the crowd taking pictures of everything like a reporter.

A woman with short brown hair and golden eyes patrolled the streets. Her dog ears flopped subtlely with every step. Her eyes darted around her nose, keen on looking for unusual scents. Her brown and white uniform was pristine, the gold accents flickering against the lights of the celebration. For everyone else, this was a party, but for her, this was still work. Even still, her tail swayed from side to side, unable to contain her excitement about the event.

She passed a man in uniform casual sitting at a table lounging about. He seemed to be a cat person of sorts, body covered in fur he looked at her and laughed catching her attention. “Ha, so the Peacekeeping Division is doing their jobs after all. I would've thought all of them were slacking to enjoy the festivities. Even still what can a dumb mutt like you do by yourself?” The cat said mocking her. She just sighs. “Says the one doing the same. My men have worked hard I'm working so they don't have to, but it's not just me, and other divisions have stepped in as well Captain,” she said growling.

He remained calm but rubbed his face like he pitied her for not understanding. “I am working. My job is intelligence remember, Captain.” He said back to her. Both of them stop everything they are doing glaring at each other like they are about to fight. People around seem to notice, but don't say or do anything like it's a common occurrence. But something is off a sudden shift in the wind causes the dog to stop starting to sniff around. “What is it dog?” The cat asked. “Gunpowder? No something strange I can't place, but it doesn't belong.” She explains turning the direction it's coming from.

“Pft... you call that information, that's nothing. This is what technology is for, you savage.” The cat said as he pulled out a com device to check recent messages from his informants. Most of them seem to be nothing them wanting to get paid for useless information, but one catches his eye. A picture of the parade float staff all looking a little shady with matching skull tattoos. “Hmm, what direction is it

coming from mutt?" He asked. "The parade." She said not wasting any more time with him rushing off to go see. He sighs leaping onto a rooftop following her.

They both reach it pretty quickly seeming to be moving down the main street as people cheered and danced. Something seemed off about the floats they didn't seem to represent anything relevant. One was a floating skull, one was a metal bird, and another was an octopus no easily placed theme, but the people below didn't seem to notice or care. The skull stood out considering the siege. Their attackers all seemed to have skulls decorated on their uniforms somewhere.

The dog captain rushed towards that one Climbing up it without notice slipping into a patch as he followed close behind. Inside was everything they didn't want to see. A bomb, it's strange and unfamiliar but no doubt an explosive. The cat leans down inspecting it looking for some way to avoid it going off. He looks up at her with worry. "It's... we don't have time." He said. "And we don't know how many there are either." She said equally worried.

"Does the float have an operator?" She asked. "Hmm... looks like all of them are controlled by the lead float." He said already on his com looking that information up. They quickly climb back up setting aside their grudges jumping from float to float trying to avoid notice of the crowd below. Someone in a black jacket watches from a rooftop spotting them. "Skull 1, Looks like they somehow caught wind of our plan, might want to step on it." The man said on the radio. "Roger." That is all they said in response.

The floats shook into action speeding up, way faster than they ever meant to both of them barely keeping their footing as they increased speed. The crowd below roared thinking it was all part of the show. They looked up ahead where the largest crowd had gathered in the square both of them looked at each other with certainty it must be the target. They kept leaping forward almost there, but also to the target as well. The dog broke into the cockpit kicking the man out of the driver's seat and

making a hard left towards another road she knew led to a lake. The Cat pulled the man up on top bringing out his claws toward his face. “Who are you? What is your objective?” He asked trying to intimidate him.

“They've taken the float, the mission has been thwarted. May our bones last forever in this world.” He says to people listening on an earpiece as he bites into something. His mouth begins to foam as the light fades from his eyes. The cat sighs but knows there isn't anything they can question him on looking ahead seeing that the Dog intends to drive the floats straight off a cliff into the water below. “Hey idiot how are we supposed to get to safety?” He hisses at her. “That grapple gun thing you have.” She states bluntly. “It doesn't work well when there are no vantage points around.” He says waving toward all the rather low-level buildings not reaching above the floats. What's worse a child is up ahead looking at the floats in wonder, and awe no clue how much danger she is in.

“There's a kid!” He shouts as she slams on the brakes, but the mass and acceleration of the float are too great causing it to flip over still barreling forward. He only has moments to vault from it and grab the child frozen in place using his body to cushion the fall and keep her safe. The dog jumps from the vehicle too just as all the other floats slam into it crashing down below. She lands on a much safer balloon stand popping most of them. “Pft I thought cats always landed on their feet.” She mocks as the explosives detonate engulfing the sky, people nearby are confused unsure if it's part of the show or not.

The kid begins to cry as they both resume their stare-down. “You could've warned me there was a kid!” She barked. “Well, you could've warned me you were about to drive off a damn cliff. They forget about everything locking arms moments from a fight as the green-haired man snaps a picture with the explosion still lingering behind, as well as the child's wailing. “Wait no it's not what it looks like!” The cat pleads.

“It looks like you drove all the floats off a cliff for no reason, and almost hit a child.” He said

raising an eyebrow. “Well yes, but we had a reason you have to listen someone is...” She started to explain as some of the flames reached the nearby bridge causing it to catch fire. Thankfully it was closed so no one was on it but it was burning intensely. The Fire Division quickly rushed in to put it out making the sector erupt into chaos. “This is... not good,” Darla said worried.

The man from the rooftop looked down at the Chaos with a grin. “Not the plan, but well. Maybe this is even better, who can you trust if you can't even trust your heroes.” He said to himself as he stepped back into the shadows. The green-haired man had left the main area going down to the bank of the river to investigate looking a little confused at what he saw snapping pictures all the same leaving without a second thought.

“Captain Darla Dogenridge... Captain Alister Purrmont... I'm assuming I don't have to explain why you are both here.” Cassian Sterros, Administrator of Internal Investigations, sat with fingers steepled behind his meticulously polished desk. His suit was immaculate, his expressionless so. A flamboyant man with pink skin, and well-groomed hair, both of them sitting across from him. “Well of course Cassian you're the Administrator of the Internal Investigation Division. You have Investigated the situation, and concluded the mistake the media has labeled us with.” Alister said confidently licking the backside of his paw. The man sighs giving him a face that says are you serious.

“That's Administer Sterros to you, we aren't close enough for first names, especially given your recent actions.” He sighed taking a deep breath before displaying a new article on screen that says. Captains hijack a parade float and make a little girl cry, during a drunken argument. Followed by the image the reporter took doing just that. “We didn’t clear you because there’s nothing to clear.” He said with a sigh. “Administrator listen I know it looks like that, but there were bombs, someone was trying to attack us during the celebration,” Darla said more calmly, but with enough urgency to get her point across.

“So I saw in your report. We looked into it, and saw no such thing.” He said again dismissing them. “Are you blind? That explosion is evidence.” Alister said in anger. “Well that is a little harder to confirm one way or another we are still looking into that part... look you're missing the point. Have you read this article?” He asked amused. “Of course, I have read this... hit piece. I can't believe Aion Anderson of all people would post such lies... after everything I did for him.” The cat hisses.

“Facts are clear, and the contents of the article lend to a deeper problem. Ever since the founding of Porta Nexus the cats and dogs have fought, but you've finally made it untenable. We are at a breaking point.” He said trying to get them to understand. “House Dogenridge have been loyal protectors to this place longer than anyone. It was the cats who came in and started scheming.” Darla buts in. Cassian sighs seeing there is no point.

“Listen. If it weren't for your family legacy, for your past actions. You are both heroes, the city would have fallen in the siege without you... You would have been discharged after something like this.“You don't have to worry about that because of it, but... The Other Administrators and I have decided it's best to demote you.” He said trying his best to explain it to them. “What how could you do this? Are you a fool? This was clearly orchestrated! How can you not see that.” The cat said outraged.

Darla was similarly enraged but clenched her fist taking a deep breath. “So what does that mean for us?” She asked. “You are now both Lieutenant once more, but you will be reassigned to something new we are putting together.” He further explained. “Are you serious you think us working directly together will solve anything? I wouldn't put it past him to try and murder me in my sleep.” She growled. Alister is about to say something only for the man to slam his hand on the table in anger. “You will do so your future depends on it!” He said in frustration.

He takes a deep breath calming down. “I will give you both a moment to collect yourselves, but then we will leave so I can show you, your new assignment. Oh, and I will need you to leave your Coin

Pieces behind of course.” He said holding out his hand. Both of them pull out a shiny ornate coin that seems to have multiple parts to it one for each rank one ascends it's the very pride of a Port Authority. Giving something up like this was a great shame.

“I won't do it you hear me I... This isn't over... we will prove you wrong.” Alister said removing the captain piece of the Coin slamming it down and rushing off. Darla looked more like she was about to cry even the thought of letting something like that go made her distraught, She stared at the coin in her hand. It had weight, far more than its gold could explain. Her father’s hand once placed it in hers. Now she placed it on a stranger’s desk. She eventually built up the strength to do it leaving much more calmly.

After an hour or two The Administrator led them to a run-down old building that looked like it had not been used in a solid decade at least. “You have got to be kidding me... This is a pigsty I can't be seen coming in and out of a place like this.” Alister whines. “Welcome to your new division's headquarters.” He said ignoring him. “And what actually is this... Division.” Darla pressed. “We have decided to call it The Special Operations Division,” Cassian said waving his hands in the air dramatically with a slight hint of sarcasm. “And what does the Special... Operations Division do?” She asked.

He just chuckled opening the door. “You'll see.” Inside is a huge man also with Pink skin only wearing half his uniform just casually lifting weights in the lobby. He dropped them right away after seeing them. “Oh, you're here already. Sorry I thought I had some time to get some reps in while I waited.” The man said laughing placing his hand behind his back. “This is Bram Ashgarn Formerly of the Military Division. He will be your muscle of sorts.” Cassian explained.

“Well, I'll certainly try to be at least. Nice to meet you.” He said holding out his sweaty hand to anyone who would take it. Alister did so half heartily which didn't seem to bother him. Before they can

talk more a blonde girl rushes in with excitement her frame small, and unassuming next to the towering man even still she jumps for joy. “Yay, they are here, they are here! Wait who are you guys again?” She asked confused having no idea who they were or why they should be happy about it.

“This is... Fiora Fenleigh no former Division she was sent here straight from the academy, your Rookie member.” He explained once more only for her to tilt her head in confusion. “Oh right, that's my name sorry I forgot... I mean I knew but well I... haha...” She said nervously. “Wait why would you send a new recruit to an experimental Division like this?” Darla asks with genuine concern for the girl.

Cassian pulled them over to the side. “Well, she is a special case of sorts... She claims to have amnesia but knows at the very least she has always lived in Porta Nexus, her performance was rather... erratic during training.” He glanced over his shoulder. Fiora was waving at a light fixture, eyes blank and cheerful. “And... she’s an idiot,” he added, deadpan. They return to the two of them Cassian looking around clearly already done with being here “Where is Callum... Sorry I mean Jax.” He asked Bram. “Oh, he said he wasn't coming I think his exact words were something like. Tell that pompous pretty boy to shove his fiddle up his...” He started to explain only for him to stop him.

“Ok, ok I get it I'll go look for him,” Cassian said walking down a hallway. Darla, and Alister followed behind. Fiora tilts her head. “They never said who they were.” She said in confusion. “You really don't know? Man amnesia sucks glad I don't have it... or do I?” He started to question before shaking his head trying not to catch her stupid. “That's Darla and Alister Heroes of the Siege of Porta Nexus. Their families have been protecting this city since it was founded thousands of years ago.” He explained but she didn't seem to get it.

Down a dim hallway, they found a cluttered lab space glowing with sparks and machinery. At its center, a man hunched over a mess of wires and tools, completely absorbed in his work. “Jax... Jax...” Cassian said getting no reply. “Callum!” The man spun around like a shot. “I told you not to use that

name you twat!" He said pointing a finger at him. "What are you doing I sent a message to everyone here to be ready and waiting for introductions." He growled a little more angry at this insubordination. "What does it look like you bugger? I'm upgrading. This entire place is running on tech older than your haircut. It is less useful than your Entire division." He insulted having a lot more beef with him compared to the others.

"This charming personality is Jax... Just Jax... Formerly from the Science and Engineering Division. Moving on." And with that, he walked off, clearly done with this dynamic. "I didn't want to talk to your sorry ass anyway." Darla and Alister stood there awkwardly unsure how to talk to him. "Hold this will you," Jax said handing him something small as he went back to work like it never happened. "What is this?" Alister asked. "Thermal combustion device don't drop it." He said calmly as he started tinkering with a weapon.

"The mechanism in our swords... this thing can light people on fire!" He said freaking out and flailing around afraid it might do so to him. "Are you daft... don't go waving it around like that or it will. I only needed a minute." He takes it back placing it into the weapon. "Nice to meet you... Jax..." Darla said more nervously standing out of reach. "Yeah, yeah why are you still bothering me I'm busy, fuck off already." He said returning his focus completely to his work they just turned and left to go find where Cassian went.

They regrouped in what used to be an impressive office, arched windows, an old world map etched into the wall, and a massive desk that once commanded respect. Now, it was all faded and cracked, the grandeur long buried under dust and peeling paint. The seat of pride from a long-forgotten division... reduced to storage space for misfits. Cassian spread his arms theatrically. "So. Now you've seen it all. What do you think of your new team?" "Wait... that's it?" Darla asked, puzzled. Divisions usually had entire wings of personnel. "You're giving us a handful of people and this dump?"

“This isn't a Division this is a trash bin where you place all your problem children.” Alister hissed. Cassian turned with a smirk. “I’m surprised you’d admit that about yourself.” Alister growled under his breath, fur bristling. “You aren't far off this is just that. You made a mistake, but you're frankly too valuable to lose. This city doesn’t have the luxury of throwing away its best.” He explained. “But I still don't understand... this mismatch of divisions. This run-down building. What is our objective, and maybe more importantly what is the goal long term?” Darla asked.

“See, this is why people like dogs more than cats. You ask the right questions... you will be all-rounders of sorts. You will co-lead assisting every division out when needed like reserve members, your day-to-day is unclear just yet, but long term... the long term is to show us that you truly deserve to be Port Authority to make us proud. Not because you're a Member of a House Purrmont, or Dogenridge, but because you love this City, and this world and would do anything for it. I'll be taking my leave now good luck to you both.” Without waiting for a reply, he exited the room, his polished boots echoing down the worn hall.

The door clicked shut. Darla looked at the cracked floor, then over at Alister, who scoffed but didn’t say anything. The only sound left was the distant creaking of the old building and the low hum of machinery as Jax presumably got back to work. A piece of the ceiling suddenly collapses to the floor breaking them out of it as they glare at each other once again. “THIS IS ALL YOUR FAULT!” They both say to each other ready to draw their blades, and Finish this once and for all. “You have been a thorn in my side ever since we were children, and Private school, does it never end.” He said in a rage as they circled each other.

All I've done was my duty, you were the ones always influencing from the shadows with your shady tactics and slimy half-truths.” She barked back. They drew their weapons but didn't seem to have the ability to fully pull out the blade still stuck in its scabbard. Their eyes locked moments from

striking each other as the door swung open Bram walked in with Fiora. They quickly sheathed their weapons like they had never been drawn at all. “Oh hey guys just wanted to... oh wait did I interrupt something I'm sorry. I hate to get in the way of two flames in the middle of passion.” He laughed.

“The hell are you... you can't honestly think that.” Alister said in disbelief. “Aw don't be ashamed guys love is love even if you are different animal people... At least I think it is.” Fiora added seeming the less certain the more she thought about it. “Anyway, we just wanted to tell you we made Parstorni if you want some.” He said with a smile as she just put her thumbs up. “Parstorni?” Both of them asked. “Yeah it's a Nexian dish just like mom always made, come on I made plenty even for that old grouch.” He said motioning for them to follow.

Both of them look at each other exhaling letting all the stress out. “This is going to be hard, dog.” He sighed. “I know it is... but it's the only way... so let's... try to tolerate each other.” She groaned. “At least until we can get out of this shithole,” Alister said as they both followed the other two to the dining hall.

Chapter 2: Supplies Surprise

Alister and Darla sat in the decaying office. Instead of replacing the desk or using it properly, they had divided it in half, each working on their own side. “This place… it’s a pigsty,” the cat groaned, leaning back in his creaking chair, not even pretending to be busy. “We don’t have the budget for improvements,” Darla replied bluntly, scribbling on her report. “What are you even doing, mutt? We haven’t had an assignment in weeks. What could you possibly have to report?” he sighed. “It’s standard procedure. Our duty is to follow protocol, even if it hasn’t been… eventful.” Her tone was cold.

Alister slammed his paws against the desk and stood. “Are you that dense? Don’t you see what’s happening here? We’re finished. This is what they call quiet termination. They’re just waiting for us to go mad and quit on our own.” His claws dug into his forehead as he groaned. “This is an endurance test,” Darla said, stacking her papers aside and meeting his glare. “Can’t handle it? Not exciting enough for you?” “This is beneath me. I dare say it’s even beneath you.” His voice dropped to a hiss.

“Says the one who refuses to stay in the barracks. You haven’t seen how low things can get.”

Her gaze shifted, her tone cooling. “All this time, and you think you know suffering.” Alister scoffed, looking away. “Like House Dogenridge knows anything about suffering.” Darla shot to her feet, slamming a boot on the desk so hard it rattled. “Keep my family’s name out of your filthy mouth, cat!” she barked. They both climbed onto the desk, teeth bared, ready to strike, when an alarm shrieked through the office, freezing them mid-lunge. “A mission?” they both said at once, eyes snapping to the corner.

They rushed over as a wall-mounted device hissed with steam, lowering an ancient monitor. The screen flickered before finally stabilizing into the sharp image of Cassian Sterros at his immaculate desk. “Ah, so you’re still intact,” he said dryly. “Of course we are!” Alister snapped, just as the desk behind them gave a long crack and split in two. “…Right,” Cassian muttered, hiding a smirk. “You have a mission for us?” Darla asked quickly, pretending nothing had happened.

“Yes. Well, now that you’ve had ample time to… ruminate with your new team, I do indeed have a mission of great importance.” “You… you do?” Alister said, ears perking up. He wiped at fake tears and clasped his paws together. “I knew you weren’t such a bad guy after all.” “So what’s the issue? How can we help?” Darla pressed, ever the professional. Cassian steepled his fingers, voice dropping into solemn gravity. “This mission will shake the very foundation of Porta Nexus. There is no greater task. If you fail, the city itself may well be doomed.”

“Really?!” Alister leaned forward, tail flicking with anticipation. “Then spit it out already! A slum lord? No, too small. A hostile fleet approaching the gates? Some insidious infiltration? Don’t tell me...” “I’m afraid it’s far worse than any of that,” Cassian cut in, voice still dripping with drama. He paused long enough for both Captains to hold their breath. “The Logistics Division is lacking manpower. The Military Division has not received its shipment of coffee beans… among other things.” His smirk widened as the grand illusion shattered. Alister’s jaw dropped. “You bastard! That’s nothing!”

“On the contrary,” Cassian chuckled, leaning back in his pristine chair. “You’ve never seen

Administrator Stonehide without his coffee." Alister's ears twitched; he hissed low under his breath, trying not to lash out at his superior. "The Logistics Division is massive. They should have hundreds, thousands of runners," Darla said, brows furrowed. "Yes, you'd be correct," Cassian replied smoothly. "However, anything involving the Military Division... and certain others, requires a more… specialized and secure courier. Their usual man is, shall we say, indisposed." "And no one else meets those criteria?" Alister pressed, suspicion dripping from his tone.

Cassian sighed with exaggerated weariness, already smirking. "If you're so against it, I suppose I could find someone else to handle the job…" Alister's fur bristled; he backpedaled instantly. "I didn't say that! We'll do it!" Cassian sat back, smiling. "Excellent. Dock 33C, west side. I'll inform them of your arrival." The screen flickered to black, cutting the call before either of them could reply. Darla let out a long breath. "I'll gather everyone." "We're going somewhere?" chirped a voice.

They both jumped. Fiora stood right behind them, beaming. Neither of them had noticed her enter. "Just a… supply run. Nothing special," Alister muttered, still rattled. "Awesome! My first real mission! …At least, I think it is." She tapped her chin, already losing focus. "I'll go get Bram!" she squealed, dashing off before they could stop her. "That just leaves…" Darla began. "Him," they groaned in unison. They trudged down the hall toward the workshop. As expected, Jax was hunched over some project, sparks jumping off the table. The smell of solder and burnt metal filled the room. He didn't even glance up as they explained the assignment.

"Do I look like a field tech to you?" he asked coldly, tightening a bolt. "I mean…" Alister started. "You won't find me out there playing errand boy," Jax cut him off, shoving a spanner back into his toolkit. "Have fun on your little field trip." His defiance was absolute. Neither Darla nor Alister had the patience to argue over something this trivial. With a shared look, they turned and left him to his machines.

They reached the docks not long after, Darla leading the way with practiced familiarity. Ships from across the multiverse came and went here, dropping off anything and everything one could

imagine. The system ran like clockwork; there was too much money on the line for it not to. A man was waiting outside one of the warehouse doors. His eyes lit up when he spotted them.

"Well, I'll be. Thought they were pulling a prank on me, but it really is Captain Darla. How are you, miss? It's been a while." "It's… Lieutenant now," she corrected, hesitating. "Oh, right…" He rubbed the back of his neck. "Listen, I don't care what the reporters say. You always kept us safe." His tone was sheepish, almost apologetic. "It's fine. This is my duty now. Now, if you would please show us the shipment." She waved the topic away quickly, unwilling to linger.

"Are our bosses really that big of a deal?" Fiora whispered to Bram, not nearly as quietly as she thought. "Well, yeah. Told you, they were heroes," Bram replied in the same faux-whisper. All three of them turned their heads at once, glaring. The rookies fell silent. The man cleared his throat and opened the warehouse. Inside, a small cargo vessel sat already loaded, stacked with crates of food, equipment, and other supplies. Everything looked standard… except in the corner.

A strange black box sat apart from the others, unmarked and featureless. It didn't look like it belonged with the rest of the shipment, and its dark sheen seemed to swallow the dock lights around it. "Huh… looks like they forgot to load a few," the man muttered, frowning. "They know better. Give me a couple of minutes, and I'll have it stowed with the rest."

It didn't take long for the man to load the last crates and hand over the keys. With that, the Special Ops Division was on its way. The cargo vessel hummed as it lifted out of the warehouse, drifting smoothly into the air. It required no pilot, gliding forward on its programmed route. Alister and Darla took up posts on the forward corners, sharp eyes scanning the city below, while Bram and Fiora kept watch from the rear.

Far beneath them, in the shadows of an alley, a man with a jagged mohawk slipped through with a small crew at his heels. They ducked through a crack in the wall leading back into the very same warehouse, the opening cleverly hidden behind stacks of unused crates. One by one, they hauled themselves inside and looked around. Empty. "Well? Where is it?" one asked nervously. "We already

got buyers lined up."

"I swear I stashed it in here; this warehouse wasn't in use." Mohawk snapped, his eyes darting over the bare floor. A realization struck him, draining the color from his face. "You don't think…" "Damn it," their boss growled, slamming a fist against the wall. "We have to figure out where they're headed before they give our goods away." The gang scattered back into the alleys, mounting their battered flying bikes. With engines roaring, they tore into the sky after the departing cargo vessel. Bram and Fiora leaned against the railing at the back, keeping watch on the skies. "So… come here often?" Fiora blurted out, for no real reason. Bram chuckled, taking it as a joke. "Nope. First time."

They both laughed, grinning like rookies on a field trip, enjoying the mission far more than Alister. The cat's ears twitched in irritation. "How can they be so carefree, knowing we're the trash-bin division?" he muttered. "Maybe not everything is about status," Darla shot back, her tone dripping with mockery. Their glares locked, tension rising again, until the sound of laughter from behind turned into screams. They spun around just in time to see a man with a jagged mohawk leap from his hovering bike, barbed-wire bat raised high. He swung down at Bram... and Bram only laughed, catching the weapon mid strike. The barbs tore into his palm, blood dripping, but he wrenched the bat free as if it were nothing.

The rest of the Iron Vultures circled the cargo vessel on their bikes, sparks crackling from their engines as ten or more men dropped onto the platform. "What the… Iron Vultures?" Alister spat in disbelief. "Why would they attack a cargo ship full of groceries?" One of the thugs cracked his knuckles with a grin. "All units, Level 2!" Darla barked, drawing her sword. The scabbard remained locked in place, the hilt buzzing as arcs of electricity flared across the sheath. Without another word, she charged.

"Level what?" Fiora asked, blinking in confusion. "Seriously?" Alister groaned, smacking the nearest Vulture across the chest. The man convulsed as volts surged through him, collapsing to the deck. "It's day one stuff at the Academy." "It's a security level," Bram explained, hefting a rifle as its

coils glowed. He squeezed the trigger, dropping another Vulture in a cascade of sparks. “Means we’re cleared to use tasers.”

“Ohhh, I get it now!” Fiora chirped, sticking out her tongue and knocking on her head playfully. She barely noticed one of the Vultures swinging for her. The blow sent her sprawling to the deck, the man laughing triumphantly. Until Fiora’s expression changed. Her eyes narrowed. Her posture sharpened. She sprang to her feet with deadly precision, rifle snapping into place. In a blink, she cut down half the Vultures with clean, surgical shots. Each bolt found its mark with uncanny accuracy. The others froze in shock, staring at her.

Then, just as suddenly, Fiora tripped over her own boots. “Oh, um...” she yelped, face-planting as her rifle skidded out of her hands. It bounced once… and cracked straight into the skull of the last conscious Vulture, dropping him cold. Silence fell over the platform. “…What the hell was that?” Alister muttered, ears twitching. Working quickly, they dragged the gang to the center and tied them together. Darla and Alister crossed their arms, looming over them with interrogation in mind. “That was amazing, Fenleigh! Where did you learn those moves?” Bram asked from the side, practically glowing with excitement.

“Huh? Oh… just beginner’s luck, I guess,” Fiora stammered, cheeks turning pink. The mohawked leader groaned awake, head lolling. “Shit… we fucked up,” he muttered. “That’s an understatement,” Alister hissed, eyes narrowing. “Now talk, before I make you.” The man chuckled despite his split lip. “Please. This isn’t my first screw-up. I know better. You’ll hear from my lawyer.” One of his crew flinched, about to blurt something out, but Mohawk jabbed him hard in the ribs to shut him up.

Alister’s eyes flashed. He was ready to ignore the protest and press harder, but Darla raised a hand. “He’s right. This falls under Peacekeeping protocol. You can’t just do whatever you want to him.” Her tone carried a warning edge: if he overstepped here, both of them would sink deeper into trouble. “Tch. Fine. Let’s just get this over with. Call for a pickup.” Alister snapped, stalking off to the

far end of the platform, tail lashing.

“Who are the steel eagles anyway?” Fiora asked. “You mean the Iron Vultures? They are a gang that has plagued Porta Nexus for too long. Like their name would suggest, they became famous for picking up the pieces after other gangs fell to ruin.” Alister Explained. The Mohawk man laughed. “We never gave ourselves that name, you know, but we sure as hell embraced it.” Fiora didn't seem to get it, just nodding silently.

They finally arrived at their destination: the rear dock of the Military Division’s headquarters. The massive stone structure loomed above them, old but immaculately maintained, every wall and banner polished as though the building itself demanded respect. Waiting for them was a towering black bear of a man beside a much smaller dog soldier, his youthful face bearing a resemblance to Darla. The bear’s booming laugh echoed off the dock. “So it was true! A bunch of brutes, of all things, after my supplies. Anyone who gets between me and my coffee ought to go straight to hell.” Despite the threat, his tone was merry.

“Administrator! How are you? How’s the wife?” Bram called, striding forward with his arms open. The bear grabbed him into a crushing hug instead of a handshake. “Ashgarn! It’s been too long! The missus is just fine!” The two of them launched into easy conversation, clearly old comrades, their laughter rattling the air. Meanwhile, Darla approached the young dog quietly. “How are you handling it, brother?” she asked, her voice softer than usual as the guards moved to haul the captured Vultures away.

He shifted on his feet, eyes downcast. “I… I’ve got big shoes to fill. You know I could never really take your place.” “Nonsense.” Darla placed a hand on his shoulder. “You’re a Dogenridge. You’ll protect this city just fine.” “I’ll do my best. But we both know you’re the real Captain of the Peacekeeping Division.” He gave her a quick hug, voice dropping. “So hurry back.” He rushed off with his men before she could reply, leaving her standing there with a faint smile, one tinged with sadness. “Seventeen years old,” Alister remarked as he came up beside her, tail flicking. “The youngest Captain

in history. Hard optics to compete with." His smirk twisted into a sneer. Darla's eyes hardened. "Insult me all you want, but keep my family out of it."

The Military Division continued unloading crates as the group chatted. Administrator Brutus seemed far more relaxed than most officials, trading jabs and laughing over old stories with Bram. "Man… we miss you around here, lad. It's a shame about everything that happened…" The bear's voice softened, realizing too late it might have struck the wrong note.

"It's in the past, Brutus. No worries," Bram said with a warm smile, brushing it off.
Before Brutus could reply, one of the soldiers approached with a stiff salute. "Sir, everything's been unloaded and stored. But… we found a few extras." "Extras?" Brutus raised an eyebrow. "What, someone sneaked in moon cakes again?"

"Well…" The man hesitated as several soldiers hauled over a strange black crate. They pried it open, revealing its contents: multi-cubes and multi-tools, jet black with faint red outlines pulsing like embers. "Empire tech," Brutus muttered, his jovial tone dropping away. "How the hell did something like this get mixed into our supplies?" "Where did it even come from?" Bram asked, frowning. "Leftovers from the Siege, maybe? I bet this kind of tech would go for a fortune on the black market."

"This must've been what the Vultures were really after," Alister speculated, tail flicking.
Darla folded her arms, thoughtful. "Do you think this might connect to Founder's Day?"
Before anyone could answer, a cool voice cut in: "We're already looking into it. One thing is clear. Logistics needs better oversight." They turned to see a woman with pink skin and white hair stride up, her officers immediately taking custody of the black crate. "Who are you…? Wait, you're the Captain of Internal Investigations, aren't you?" Brutus asked. "Correct. Alongside Administrator Sterros." Her tone was clipped and professional. "He asked me to commend you all on a job well done." With that, she turned and departed without another word. "Grgh, I hate that guy," Alister hissed under his breath. "He must've been using us from the start, just to flush this out."

"I'm not so sure," Darla said quietly. "But he'll tell us… one way or another." "Whatever the

case," Brutus rumbled, his cheer returning, "on behalf of my Division, thank you. You've got a long road ahead, but we believe in you." He leaned down, his massive paw settling heavily on Darla's shoulder. "And one last thing… take care of Bram. He's the best of us." With that, the bear gave Bram one final squeeze of a hug before lumbering away.

Chapter 3: Hooray Boarder Patrol

Bram stood in the kitchen, humming to himself as he stirred a pot on the stove. Like the rest of the building, the kitchen was in rough shape, with patched walls, exposed piping, and a ceiling that looked like it might give up at any moment, but the essentials worked. Mostly because Jax had, at some point, bullied them into working. He lifted the ladle, took a sip, and nodded to himself. “Mhm. Mhm. Mhm… That’s some good straganoff.” He paused, rubbing his chin. “Still missing something, though…” “Oh, what about this? It’s a spice from the Union…” Fiora appeared beside him.

Bram physically flinched, nearly dropping the ladle. “…Fenleigh,” he said slowly, recovering. “One day, you’re going to give me a heart attack.” “I... um... I don’t know anything about the Union,” she added quickly, holding out a small bottle. “Someone just told me it was really good.” She suddenly looked unsure of herself, like she wasn’t even convinced by her own explanation. Bram blinked at her for a moment, still mildly unsettled by how easily she had snuck up on him. He’d been trained for that. All of them had, and yet... He shook it off, focusing back on the pot. “Well… not exactly traditional,” he said with a grin, taking the bottle. “But I’m all for trying new things.” He sprinkled some in, stirred, then took another sip.

His eyebrows lifted. “Well, I’ll be. That’s got some kick to it.” “Of course it does. Everyone should use it,” Fiora said immediately. Then she hesitated. “At least… that’s what the… guy I bought it from said… probably…” Bram laughed. “You’re a strange one, Fenleigh.” He gave her shoulder a firm friendly pat. “Why don’t you go grab the others for me? Dinner’s almost ready.” Fiora froze for just a second at the contact, her face flushing slightly as something unreadable flickered across her expression. “…Got it!” She turned and hurried out of the kitchen. A second later, CRASH. Bram winced.

Out in the hallway, Fiora had somehow managed to trip over a rusted canister that had been sitting there for what looked like a decade, entirely ignored until now. Her small frame slammed into the wall hard enough to crack it open, and with a sharp hiss, one of the old pipes ruptured. Steam burst into the hallway, filling the air in seconds. Jax was there almost immediately. “You absolute dolt!” he snapped, already moving toward the pipe. “Do you have any idea how hard it is to keep something this old functioning?!” “I’m okay…” Fiora said from the floor. She did not sound okay.

In the office, Darla sat at her desk, working through a report like nothing was wrong. The desk was cracked down the middle. One leg was shorter than the others. It wobbled every few seconds. She ignored all of it completely. Across the room, Alister was slouched in a chair, half-asleep. “Could you get back to work?” Darla barked without looking up. One of his eyes cracked open. “On what?” he muttered. “How can you even pretend we have things to do right now? I swear, you must be grasping at straws at this point.”

Before Darla could fire back, the monitor on the wall flickered. Then, somehow it turned on. Both of them froze. “That thing’s still broken after the last time he called...” Alister muttered. The screen stabilized just enough to show Cassian. He was smiling. Both of them stood immediately. “It’s about time,” Alister snapped. “Not a peep from you in two weeks.” “Not even a mission debriefing…” Darla added, her ears drooping slightly in genuine disappointment. “Ah, yes…” Cassian said lightly. “Well done on your great mission. Top marks.” He waved a hand dismissively. “Now I have something

else for you. Border patrol. Go first thing in the morning. That is all."

The room went quiet. Alister blinked. "Wait, what do you mean that is all?" he snapped. "You vanish for two weeks and then just throw us at the border? Where do we even go? No fanfare? No briefing? Nothing?!" "Oh, that reminds me," Cassian added, completely ignoring him. "Make sure you take Jax with you this time." Darla tilted her head slightly. "That seems like… a challenge." For just a moment, Cassian's smile sharpened. "Just tell him Station 14's interlock is malfunctioning." The screen cut to black. "…He hung up," Alister said flatly. Silence. "So… border patrol," he added, equally flat.

"…Border patrol," Darla echoed. Even she didn't sound thrilled. A beat passed. Then, Fiora appeared behind them. Neither of them had heard her enter. Blood was running down her face, completely covering her eyes. She was smiling wide, cheerful, and deeply unsettling in a way she clearly did not intend. "Dinner is ready," she said. Both of them jumped back in unison. "WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU..." Alister shouted. "I tripped," Fiora said helpfully.

The next morning, they were up bright and early. Bram and Fiora waited by the door, ready to go. Meanwhile, Darla and Alister stood a few feet away, mentally preparing themselves for something far worse than border patrol. Talking to Jax. He was already in the hallway, crouched over the ruptured pipe from the night before, muttering to himself as he reinforced it with a mess of tools and parts that didn't look like they should work together. "Hey…" Alister started carefully. "We're heading out on a mission." Jax didn't even look up. "What of it?" Darla stepped in, a little less confident than usual. "We need you to come this time… Station 14's interlock is… broken." Jax froze. Slowly, he looked up.

"…Impossible." A beat. "I..." Another beat. "…Ugh. Of course it is." He stood up immediately, already moving. "Let's go." And just like that, he stormed past them, heading for the exit without waiting. The rest of them stood there for a second. "…That worked," Alister said, genuinely surprised.

Jax had already gone ahead. So naturally, they had to catch up on their own. They arrived at the tower.

It stretched impossibly high, vanishing into the upper atmosphere and beyond. Multiple landing platforms jutted out at different levels, with ships of all shapes and sizes docking and departing. Higher up, massive airships floated like drifting cities. Fiora stared up at it, wide-eyed. “Woah… that’s a really big tower.” Alister sighed. “This is the Aviation Division Headquarters, The Roost,” he said, already annoyed she didn’t recognize it. “We were assigned to the sky, so we report here first.”

“Oh…” Fiora nodded. “I thought we were going to guard one of those ground portal thingys.” “Peacekeeping handles those,” Darla said, straightening slightly with pride. “Most of the time, we don’t have to worry about them. Only nearby worlds, ones that are deeply trusted, are allowed ground portal access.” Before Fiora could ask another question. A figure dropped from the sky. A harpy woman landed smoothly in front of them, blonde hair catching the light, goggles resting on her cap. Two men followed shortly after, touching down beside her with the hiss of steampunk jetpacks, red scarves fluttering behind them.

“Darla!” she called out immediately, breaking into a grin. Before Darla could react, the harpy wrapped her wings around her in a tight hug. “I haven’t seen you in forever, girl!” “You too, Lacy,” Darla said, returning it with a rare warmth. “It’s been too long.” “…Who’s the pretty bird lady?” Fiora asked. Everyone sighed. The harpy pulled back, blinking once. “Oh, right.” She straightened up. “I’m Lieutenant...” She paused. Something flickered across her expression. “…Ah. Right.” She recovered quickly, smiling again. “I’m Captain Lacy Headwind. Nice to meet you, little cadet!” She hopped over and ruffled Fiora’s hair with one of her wings.

“Nice to meet you, Lacy,” Bram added with an easy grin. “Never met you myself, but I’ve heard you’re a kickass gal. I’m sure ol’ Captain Mac would be proud.” Lacy turned toward him. Her expression shifted again, this time slower. “You knew him…?” she asked quietly. Bram nodded. “I hope so,” she said after a moment. “He was a great man.” For just a second, she seemed somewhere

else entirely. Then she snapped back. “But we don’t have time for reminiscing about heroes,” she declared, clapping her wings together. “I’m here to show you to your post. Follow me!” She turned and marched confidently toward the entrance. Then stopped. “…Wait.” She looked around. “…I usually just fly up there.” She glanced back at them, then at the building again. “…I guess you use the elevator?” She looked to one of the men beside her. He nodded. “Right. Elevator!” she said brightly, immediately committing to it.

It didn’t take long for the elevator to reach the top. When the doors opened, the wind hit them immediately. They stepped out onto an open platform high above the city, the sky stretching endlessly around them. Ships moved in every direction, organized chaos humming through the air. Aviation personnel didn’t walk. They launched. Each of them was handed a compact jetpack before stepping out any further. “For safety,” one of the attendants said, already halfway off the platform. Bram turned the pack over in his hands, grinning. “Oh… I always wanted to try one of these back in my military division days.” “Pretty simple to control, I’m told,” Lacy said. Then she paused. “…I think.” She glanced at it again. “…I might need to do some personal research later. As a captain.”

She nodded to herself like that was a perfectly reasonable conclusion. Before anyone could question that. Something zipped through the sky. Fast. It cut through the air like a missile before slowing at the last second, landing smoothly in front of them. What looked like a large drone unfolded mid-motion, shifting, reconfiguring, and standing up. A humanoid robot now faced them, wearing a crisp Aviation Division uniform. “Greetings, Special Operations Division,” it said in a clean, mechanical voice. “I am A1R, newly constructed Lieutenant of Aviation. I will be guiding you to your assigned station.”

Fiora’s eyes lit up instantly. Bram’s too. “Is that… a super robot?” Fiora whispered in awe. Alister blinked, trying to process several things at once. “Wait, newly constructed?” he said. “Someone

built a machine and gave it a rank? And was the captain not supposed to do that?" "Oh, yeah," Lacy said casually. "Well, I've got some duties to take care of, so I can only take you partway." She gestured vaguely at the robot. "But don't worry! Airy might only be, like, a year old, but he's great at his job!" She flapped her wings once, already lifting off the ground. "See you later, guys!" and just like that. She was gone. Alister stared after her. "…She definitely gave that thing a rank," he muttered. A1R turned its head slightly toward him. "That is correct." Alister sighed. "Of course it is."

After clearance, they launched into the air, following A1R out over the city. Ships moving in organized streams above and below them, like invisible roads in the sky. The jet packs were surprisingly easy to control. Thin wires wrapped around their arms, responding to movement. Tilt your shoulder, adjust your arm, and the pack reacted instantly. Small bursts of steam trailed behind them as they stabilized in the air. Most of them picked it up quickly. Bram… did not. He wobbled slightly, lagging behind the group. "Um… guys…" he called out, a bit strained. "I think I might be too heavy." A1R adjusted its position midair, hovering beside him with mechanical precision. "The propulsion system is rated for up to one thousand pounds," it said evenly. "However, heavier-set individuals may experience reduced maneuverability and slower speeds."

"…That's a polite way of saying I'm struggling," Bram muttered. Ahead of them, Fiora was flailing her arms wildly. "I'M A BIRD!" she shouted, spinning slightly as her pack sputtered and jerked in response. "Please cease," A1R said immediately. "Such actions will result in motor strain and potential failure." Fiora froze mid-air, going completely stiff. "…Okay," she said, suddenly earnest. Alister drifted closer to the robot, his expression tightening. "Hey… robot," he said, trying to sound casual. "Which warden is responsible for Station 14?" A1R responded instantly. "That would be Warden Gobriella." Alister's face dropped. "…Ugh. No. Not the damned goblin." He folded his arms mid-flight, somehow managing to pout while hovering.

Darla glanced over. "…You know her?" Alister sighed. "Unfortunately." "She must not be that bad if you hate her," Darla jabbed. Normally, he would've snapped back immediately. This time, he didn't. "…I don't want to talk about it." That was answer enough. They flew the rest of the way in silence. It didn't take long before Station 14 came into view. A massive floating platform anchored along the underside of the planetary shield, acting as one of many checkpoints in the air control system. Ships passed above and below it in steady, regulated streams, like lanes in an invisible highway. They descended onto the lower platform. Alister's posture shifted the moment his feet touched the ground. One eye narrowed. Alert. "Destination reached," A1R said. "Please report to the warden. If unavailable, Operative One." Then. It took off again. They all watched it go. "…It just left," Bram said. "…It just left," Alister echoed.

They entered the station. The lower level was minimal, just a spiral ramp winding upward toward the main control area. Most of the operation clearly happened above, but before they could even start up the ramp. They found Jax. He was crouched in front of the main door panel, which he had already ripped open. Wires spilled out like exposed veins as he prodded at them with a tool, testing connections that didn't look broken. He must've gotten there just before them. The longer they stood there, the more irritated he seemed. "Oh… hey, Jax," Darla said cautiously. "…That damn Sterros," Jax muttered under his breath. "He did this on purpose. This thing has broken twenty-six times. I've taken it apart, replaced it completely, and rewritten the OS just to make it work, and then I come up here…"

He leaned back, glaring at the panel. "…and there is nothing wrong with it." He stood abruptly, brushing his hands off. "They just wanted me here." "Well, since you're here," Bram said cheerfully, slinging an arm around him, "you might as well stick around." Jax visibly tensed. "…Remove your arm," he said flatly. Bram laughed but let go. Jax exhaled, clearly deciding not to fight it further. "…I suppose it would be useful to observe the new scanners," he muttered, already pulling out a small

device and activating it. “If they’ve changed anything, it’ll be subtle.” He started taking notes immediately. Precise. Focused. Like he’d done this a hundred times before. The others exchanged a look. …Just who was Jax?

Chapter 4: Thrilling Inspection

“The warden is just through here,” one of them said. “Great, I’ll wait outside...” Alister started. The door opened. A short goblin girl stepped out, eyes immediately locking onto him. A beat passed. Then she looked away. “Oh! The specy! Come in!” she chirped, turning and walking back to her desk like nothing had happened. Alister froze. “…That’s worse,” he muttered. They followed her inside. Gobriella climbed into her chair, swinging her legs slightly as she looked them over. “So um… fancy man, tell Gobriella you’re coming,” she said, tapping her fingers together. “But… Gobriella not know what he wants you to do.” Darla studied her carefully, waiting. Nothing. No shift. No tension. No recognition beyond that first glance.

Meanwhile, Alister stood in the corner, trying very hard to look like part of the wall. “I will be inspecting your systems,” Jax said with a sigh, already stepping forward. Gobriella's eyes lit up instantly. “Oh! Engineer, man. Gobriella didn't know you were here.” She hopped up slightly in her seat. “It’s ok, Gobriella knows a thing or two about tech. Fix it personally.” Jax blinked once. “…Well now I’m terrified.” He turned and walked out immediately. Gobriella puffed out her cheeks, clearly

offended. “Hmph…” She crossed her arms, then quickly composed herself. “Gobriella think extra eyes are always good,” she said, nodding firmly. “Join scan team.” It wasn’t a request.

Darla gave a small nod. “Understood.” The group began filing out. “Oh, um…” Gobriella raised a finger. “Gobriella would like Cat to stay.” Alister’s head snapped up. “What? No. No, I need to...” He turned to Darla, eyes wide. Save me. She didn’t even hesitate. “We might outrank her… technically,” Darla said calmly. “But this is Aviation. This is her station.” She met his eyes. “Don’t rock the ship.” “That’s not helpful,” he hissed. “What’s the harm, Alley?” Bram added with a grin. “You have no idea…” Alister whispered. “Have fun!” Fiora said, waving absentmindedly as she followed the others out. The door shut behind them. Gobriella didn’t move. Then, “…Finally.” Alister didn’t wait. He lunged for the door. Locked.

He froze. Behind him. A quiet thump. Gobriella had hopped up onto the desk to be eye level with him. When he turned, her expression was wholly different. The smile was still there, but it wasn’t soft anymore. “Good,” she said, her voice smooth and precise. “Now we can actually talk.” Alister pressed himself against the door. “…I hate this,” he muttered. Gobriella tilted her head, studying him. “You really have maintained your condition,” she said, eyes narrowing slightly. “Posture. Muscle density. Minimal degradation since last observation.”

“…Stop that.” He quivers. “I finally have you isolated,” she continued, stepping forward slightly on the desk. “Which means I can complete a proper assessment.” “Nope.” He protested. “I intend to conduct a thorough...” She started. “No.” He said again, “...inspection of you, Alister Purrmont.” She said with a smirk. He yanked at the handle again. Still locked. He turned slowly. “… We are not doing this.” He said. Gobriella’s smile widened just a little. “Oh.” A pause. “Don't play coy; everyone knows of your family's proclivities. We absolutely are.” She jumps off the desk straight at him.

Back with the others, they stepped onto the main deck. It was a wide, circular room lined with tall windows, giving a full view of the sky lanes outside. Screens hovered above each station, streams of data flashing past faster than most people could read. Beyond the glass, ships drifted in controlled patterns, slowing, aligning, and then descending toward designated entry points. Jax had already separated from the group, crouched near one of the exposed panels, tools in hand. “I’ll admit,” he said after a moment, “I see no issues just yet.”

He didn’t sound reassured. Fiora, meanwhile, rushed straight to the nearest window, pressing her face against the glass hard enough to make the nearby console operator flinch. “Woah, we’re so high up! And look at all those ships!” she said, practically vibrating with excitement. “That’s a 345 Vigilant-Class heavy cruiser!” She stopped herself. “I mean, uh… wow. Big ship.” She mumbled. Jax glanced up at her, then at the cruiser. His eyes lingered a second longer than they should have, but he said nothing. Bram stepped forward, hands on his hips as he looked around the room. “I always wondered how this whole system worked,” he said. “Feels like organized chaos.”

Jax stood, brushing his hands off as he turned toward them. “Well, it’s simple…” he started. Then paused. “…Or rather, it was.” That got their attention. “The Air Con system runs on a biometric scan,” he continued, slipping into explanation mode with surprising ease. “Not precise enough to identify individuals. There are far too many variables for that.” He gestured vaguely upward, toward the shield far above them. “But each world has a slightly different genetic composition. A baseline. Subtle, but consistent.” Darla nodded slightly, following. “So it flags origin,” she said. “Exactly,” Jax replied. “If a ship’s occupants register as originating from a hostile world, the system denies entry outright. Clean. Efficient... Until that damned Commander Cyrus complicated everything.” There it was. Fiora tilted her head. “The Coalition commander? Why would he mess it up?” Jax gave her a look.

“Did you forget the Empire was banned from this world?” he said flatly. “Cyrus is from the

Empire. Half his army is." "…Oh." She said. "Once he became an ally, the system couldn't just reject Empire signatures anymore," Jax continued. "Now we have to differentiate between Coalition-aligned forces and hostile remnants." His expression tightened slightly. "Like the Bones." The room felt just a little quieter after that. Darla crossed her arms, thinking it through. "…That's why we had to escort him," she said. "His ships weren't allowed into the atmosphere." "Correct," Jax said. Outside, another ship slowed, hovering just beneath the shield.

For a moment, everything looked normal. Routine. Controlled. But the way Jax's eyes tracked the incoming traffic. He still didn't look convinced. Then, alarms didn't blare. Nothing dramatic happened. Instead, a single operator pressed a button, and everything changed. Outside, a swarm of drones peeled away from the station like a flock of birds, surrounding one of the incoming ships in tight formation. "Halt," the operator said calmly into the comm. "Unregistered vessel. You are not listed in known world records. No override access key detected. Identify yourselves." A pause. Then, "What? We are, uh… from Steelhaven," the voice on the other end replied, a little too quickly. "So just let us in, right?"

The operator sighed. Without responding, he flipped another switch. A section of the station shifted. Panels rotated, machinery unfolding with a heavy mechanical hum. A different scanner activated, separate from the Air Con system. The display above him flickered. An X-ray projection of the ship appeared. Crew count. Cargo density. Internal layout. Everything. Personnel around the deck immediately mobilized. Aviation units launched into the air, forming a perimeter. A larger airship began drifting into position behind the drones.

On the comm, the voice grew sharper. "Hey, what are you doing? Are you trying to board us? We told you who we..." "Your biometric signatures do not match that world," the operator interrupted flatly. Silence. "Don't you dare," the voice snapped. "We will open fire!" That got a reaction. The

operator glanced sideways. At Darla. Not his superior, but close enough. Like he was asking permission. Darla didn't hesitate. She gave a small nod. That was enough. "Switching to Level 3," the operator said, voice steady. "Stand by." He pulled a dial. Outside, the station shifted again. Cannons rotated into place. "Wait, no!" the voice on the comm blurted. "We were joking! Don't attack us..." Too late.

Aviation units surged forward. The drones parted. Boarding teams breached the ship in a single, coordinated movement. Inside the comm channel, shouting. A struggle. Then silence. A different voice came through a moment later. Calm. Unbothered. "Pirates. Dumb as ever." The operator exhaled, already turning the dial back. "Returning to normal levels." Like it was routine. Like it happened every day. Within minutes, the crew was extracted, restrained, and transferred to a waiting Peacekeeping vessel. The captured ship was secured and slowly towed back out beyond the perimeter, and just like that. The sky lanes resumed. Order restored.

"Wow… you all handled that really well," Bram said, genuinely impressed. The operator barely reacted. He just shrugged and turned back to his console, already focused on the next incoming ship. Routine. Darla let out a quiet breath. "I still don't know what we were expected to do here," she admitted. "I understand the operation of most consoles if necessary, but…" Her gaze shifted. Fiora had wandered off. Of course she had. She was now leaning over one of the operators, a tall, squid-like man with multiple limbs working across different controls at once. "Wow," Fiora said, staring. "Talk about a fish out of water." Bram laughed nervously. The squid man did not.

Darla pinched the bridge of her nose. "…We lack training for this field," she finished. "Then perhaps Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dumb should join the boarding team," Jax said without looking up. Bram blinked. "…Which one am I?" "Yes," Jax replied. "I don't know if the warden would approve of that," Darla said, hesitant. "We shouldn't overstep..." The door slammed open. Alister bolted through

the room. Full sprint. He disappeared past them before anyone could react. A second later. Gobriella skipped in after him. Completely unfazed. “What is he...” Darla started. “Oh! Cat helping inspect something,” Gobriella said cheerfully. “He is silly.” She giggled. Then, like it was an afterthought... “Gobriella not mind if you change roles. Extra hands are always good!” And just like that, she turned and ran after him again. Bram slowly turned to Darla. “…Did we just get reassigned?” Darla blinked once. “…I believe we did.” Fiora suddenly popped up between them. “Alright!” she said, raising a fist. “We’ve got this! We are going to be so good at… um…” She paused.

“…Inspecting stuff.” Bram lowered himself slightly to meet her eye level. Then raised his fist too. “Damn right we are.” They both nodded with excessive confidence and immediately ran off. Darla watched them go. Bram and Fiora joined the boarding team, waving back toward the station as they were pulled aboard one of the Aviation airships. Darla stayed behind, leaning slightly over the consoles, watching everything closely, ready to step in if needed. Jax didn’t move. He had already shifted focus. Logs. Code. Data streams. He scrolled through them quickly, eyes darting between lines most people wouldn’t even register. Every now and then, something made him pause, just for a second. Then he moved on. Outside, a ship caught his attention. Something about it felt… off.

He watched it pass through the upper shield. Then the second. Clean. No flags. He frowned slightly. “…Hmph.” Then dismissed it. The rest of the day dragged. Ship after ship. Scan. Verify. Clear. Repeat. Even the “interesting” moments were stripped down to procedure. Most flagged vessels complied immediately, given options to obtain access clearance. For some, it was simple: pay the fee, receive a temporary key. For others, it meant extended verification, processing through upper-level operators, and waiting hours. And for many, they already had access. They passed through both shields in seconds. Efficient. Controlled. Boring. Jax glanced up again.

The same ship. His eyes narrowed. It descended. Then rose again. Later... It came back. Again.

By the fourth pass, he wasn't ignoring it anymore. "…Why so many trips?" he muttered. He pulled up the logs. Every entry was clean. Bioscan: valid. Access key: confirmed. Cargo: consistent, but something wasn't right. The data matched. Too well. Before he could dig deeper. A voice erupted from one of the operator consoles. "The scan must have malfunctioned! They're clear to go through... hey. What's the big idea, let go of me!" Darla's head snapped up. "What's happening?" she demanded, moving to the window. Outside, Chaos.

Bram had tackled one of the boarding operatives to the deck, pinning him down hard. His expression. Was wrong. Bram never looked like that. "Bram, what the hell are you doing?" Darla shouted. Bram didn't even look up. "He's lying," he said, his voice low and shaking with anger. "They paid him off." The operative struggled beneath him. "Are you insane?!" he snapped. "Let me go." "How could you accept a bribe?" Bram shot back, his grip tightening. "Hey, um… maybe we shouldn't…" Fiora started weakly from the side. No one listened.

"Do you not understand?" Bram roared, his voice carrying across the deck. "When people look the other way… people die." The operative scoffed, barely even bothered by the accusation. "What do you know, outsider?" he shot back. "It's just a merchant trying to skip a fee. He's harmless." He shifted under Bram's grip, glaring up at him. "So what if I take a little extra? You're not even part of this division. Back off." For a brief moment, everything went quiet. Up on the station, Darla turned toward the nearby operator, her expression tightening as she searched his face for an answer. Is this normal?

The man hesitated before responding, clearly uncomfortable. "Well… I don't like it," he admitted, rubbing the back of his neck. "But if he says the scan is clear, I don't really have a way to prove otherwise. I just… trust the call." Darla frowned slightly, but before she could say anything, Bram spoke again. "That kind of thinking," he said, his voice colder now, "is exactly how the Remnant got as far as they did." That struck a nerve. One of the other operatives stepped forward immediately,

anger flashing across his face. “How dare you,” he snapped. “We didn’t let those bastards in.” He didn’t wait for a response. He swung. The tension that had been building snapped all at once. “Bram, stop it,” Darla barked, stepping forward, but he didn’t respond. His focus had narrowed completely, locked onto the man in front of him.

Before things could escalate further, Alister moved. He stepped between them in a single smooth motion, catching the incoming strike with one arm while holding Bram back with the other. “That’s enough,” he said sharply, his tone cutting through the chaos. The movement drew everyone’s attention just in time for something else to arrive. Gobriella dropped into the center of the platform, her landing anything but graceful. The device attached to her unfolded as she touched down, metallic limbs extending outward to stabilize her as the wing-like frame behind her collapsed into place.

The shift in atmosphere was immediate. The playful, almost childish demeanor she had shown earlier was gone. When she spoke, her voice was steady and controlled. “What is wrong with you?” No one answered. Her gaze moved across the group, lingering just long enough on each person to make them uncomfortable. “The Aviation Division cannot be bought,” she continued. “At least not Station Fourteen. Not any station under my authority.” Some of the operatives stiffened at that. A few looked genuinely surprised. Others avoided her gaze entirely. “Detain him,” she said, nodding toward the operative beneath Bram.

She paused for just a moment before adding, “And anyone else involved.” There was hesitation, but it didn’t last. The nearby officers moved in, pulling the man away and restraining him despite his protests. As he was dragged off, he twisted back to look at Bram, his expression shifting into something sharper. “I recognize you,” he said. Bram didn’t react. “You think you’re better than me,” the man continued, a bitter edge creeping into his voice. Then he smirked. “Warden killer.” That landed harder than anything else in the room. Bram’s posture changed almost instantly. The tension drained out of

him, replaced by something quieter, heavier. He didn't resist as Alister pulled him back.

Gobriella watched the exchange carefully before turning her attention to Alister. "I knew you noticed as well," she said, her tone shifting slightly, though not back to what it had been before. "Even with all the distractions." There was a faint hint of interest in her expression now, something more deliberate. "That is why I find you… worth evaluating." She said with lustful eyes. Alister exhaled slowly, clearly relieved the situation had shifted away from him being trapped in that room earlier. "Yeah, I'm gonna pretend I didn't hear that last part," he said, keeping his tone light even as he grabbed Bram by the shoulder. "Come on," he added more quietly, guiding him away from the center of the platform. Bram didn't argue. He didn't say anything at all. Behind them, Gobriella remained where she was, watching them leave with a thoughtful expression, already turning the situation over in her mind. Jax looked over, and there was the ship again.

Chapter 5: A Real Mission?

The mood on Station 14 had shifted by the time the day came to a close. It wasn't loud. It wasn't dramatic. Just… heavier. Lacy returned as the final rotations wrapped up, landing beside Gobriella as the Special Operations team gathered to leave. "Gobriella thinks...No," Gobriella cut in simply, waving a hand. "We have no need for that anymore." She looked toward the group. "Thank you all for helping. Especially you, Alister." She gave him a small wink. Alister physically shuddered. Lacy sighed, rubbing the back of her neck. "It's a shame how things ended, but don't worry. Cassian didn't really tell us what to expect. Just called it… an internal matter." She gave a small shrug.

"He did say something like this might happen, though. So he's probably already handled it." She further added. "Of course he has," they all muttered. With that, they turned in their gear and made their way back. Fiora walked beside Bram, glancing up at him every now and then. "Hey, um…" she started. He looked down at her. "If you ever wanted to..." She stopped herself, frowning. "…Never mind. Why would you want to talk to an idiot like me about serious stuff?" She waved it off like it didn't matter. Bram just smiled.

They stepped into the lobby. “Ugh, we need to wrap up your dumb reports so I can go home,” Alister groaned. “I need a bath.” “Welcome back.” They all stopped. Cassian sat casually on the ruined front counter, a clean cloth neatly placed beneath him like that somehow fixed the rest of the building. Several brown takeout bags rested beside him. “I congratulate you all on a job well done,” he said, smiling faintly. “As a reward, I’ve ordered takeout from the place down the street.” “Oh! The place with the Barracuta mascot!” Fiora lit up instantly. “He’s so cute.” “Cheap ass,” Alister muttered under his breath.

Cassian placed a hand over one of the bags protectively. “I’m sorry, I happen to enjoy the establishment quite a bit. If there are complaints, I’ll gladly take this one home myself.” Before anyone could respond, Jax stormed forward. “Where do you get off...” he started, already irritated. Then stopped. “…Right. This is what you actually wanted.” He slammed a data drive into Cassian’s hand.

Cassian’s smile sharpened just slightly. “Wonderful. Thank you for your cooperation.” He handed Jax one of the bags like a transaction. Jax stared at it. Then took it anyway. “Ridiculous,” he muttered, walking off. Cassian looked back at the others. “Now… shall we eat together, or…” He stopped himself. “You want to eat with us... and here?” Darla asked. “Perhaps not then; that's fine. Let's cut to the brass tacks.” He said. The air shifted. “I need to speak with Ashgarn… Alone.” The mood changed instantly. Darla and Alister exchanged a glance. Fiora stepped forward quickly. “You’re not going to...” “Don’t worry,” Cassian said lightly, waving a hand. “All of you, go. Enjoy the fruits of your labor.” Reluctantly, they each grabbed a bag and left. Bram stayed.

Cassian led him into the office. The door shut behind them. Cassian looked around slowly, taking in the cracked walls, the uneven desk, and the general decay. “My word,” he muttered. “It’s even worse in here than the last time I visited.” Bram didn’t respond. Silence stretched. “I know what you are, Bram.” He said. Bram’s eyes shifted slightly, but he didn’t speak. “Brutus wasn’t exaggerating,”

Cassian continued. “You are… the best of us.” Still nothing. Cassian took a slow breath. “But what did you do up there?” he said, tone tightening just slightly. “That wasn’t discipline.” A pause. “That was impulse.” The word hung in the air. “I can’t protect impulse.” Another pause. Cassian stepped a little closer. “It was hard enough pulling you out of the brig as it is.” That one landed. Bram’s posture changed subtly, but really. Cassian watched him for a moment longer. “This city needs you… So act like it,” and just like that he turned, opened the door, and left.

As Cassian stepped out into the hallway, he slowed slightly. Alister was already there, leaning against the wall like he had been waiting the entire time. “Lieutenant Purrmont,” Cassian said with a quiet sigh. “I understand your background in intelligence might push you toward this sort of behavior, but this was an overstep.” He said, “An overstep?” Alister pushed off the wall, ears flicking in irritation. “From the sounds of it, that’s all you ever do.” Cassian smiled faintly. “Fair enough. The difference is, I push the system. I don’t break it.” Alister’s eyes narrowed. “I’ll figure you out, Sterros.” “I welcome the attempt,” Cassian replied, almost amused. Alister didn’t let it go. “Are you done playing with us yet? Or are we still running errands for your entertainment? Give us a real mission.”

Cassian tilted his head slightly, like he was considering the request more seriously than he actually was. “A real mission? And here I thought you were still lamenting your unfortunate reassignment. Do you think you can handle it?” “I’m ready too.” Darla stepped into the hallway, catching the tail end of it. She didn’t hesitate; she didn’t soften it. Just said it plainly. Cassian looked between them, something in his expression shifting just enough to notice. “Very well,” he said. “I suppose you’ve endured enough of your trial run.” His posture straightened, his hands folding behind his back as he finally got to the point. “I have something already in motion. Something… close to home.” Alister’s expression tightened immediately. “Spit it out.”

“The Intelligence Division has been monitoring unusual activity among the gangs,” Cassian

said. “Movement patterns, quiet consolidations, disruptions that don’t quite add up.” He let that sit for a second before continuing. “They’ve concluded it’s nothing.” Alister frowned, the irritation giving way to something more focused. “That was my division,” he muttered. “Before this… whatever this is.” He gestured vaguely at the building behind them. “Why would they just stop? There was clearly something happening.” Cassian’s smile returned, subtle but deliberate. “That,” he said, “is exactly what I’d like you to find out.” Cassian turned and started walking away.

“No, no, no, we need more than that,” Alister snapped, stepping forward. “How are we supposed to follow orders if you refuse to explain yourself?” Darla said. “What exactly do you need explained?” Cassian replied without turning. “Pick up where you left off. Investigate. Draw your own conclusions.” “That’s not an answer,” Darla said firmly. “That’s a liability.” Cassian paused just long enough to acknowledge that. “This,” he said, glancing slightly over his shoulder, “is part of the trial you must endure. The proof of concept for your Division.” And with that, he kept walking. This time, he didn’t stop.

Silence hung in the hallway after he left. Darla exhaled slowly. “So… we’re just supposed to figure it out.” Alister frowned, already thinking. “If Intelligence dropped it, then whatever this is either scared them off… or they were told to back off.” “That’s not reassuring.” She sighed. “No,” he admitted. “It’s not.” She crossed her arms. “So what’s the play? Undercover?” Alister hesitated for a moment. “Normally, I’d have operatives handle that. A captain’s job is to be the face everyone sees, not the one digging in the dirt.” He sighed. Darla gave him a look. “We are no longer captains.” “…Right,” he muttered.

A head poked out from the office. “Hey, um… sorry to interrupt,” Bram said. “I might have a few connections in the underworld. It could be a place to start.” Both of them blinked. They had completely forgotten he was still in there. Alister rubbed his chin. “Maybe. But we keep this small. If

we spread too wide, word gets out." Darla nodded. "Agreed. Fewer variables. Let's leave the other two out of it," Alister added. "Out of what?" They both flinched. Fiora stood right behind them, mouth half full, sauce dripping slightly down her chin.

"Agh, Fenleigh, stop doing that!" Alister snapped. "Doing what?" she asked, tilting her head. "We're going on a big mission, right? I wanna go." "No," Alister said immediately. "This is sensitive," Darla added. "If we're found out, the entire operation collapses." Fiora puffed out her cheeks. "Oh, like spies? I can do that. I'm basically a master spy." "Absolutely not," Alister said flatly. "At least we don't have to worry about Jax volunteering," he muttered. Bram scratched the back of his head. "I mean… her charm might actually help." Alister turned slowly. "Her… charm." Bram nodded, committing. "Yeah. Disarming. Unpredictable. People underestimate her." Fiora perked up immediately.

Alister stared at both of them, then sighed deeply. "You're going to come anyway even if we say no, aren't you?" Fiora nodded without hesitation. "…Fantastic." Bram stepped in quickly. "It's fine, I'll keep an eye on her. I'll make sure she doesn't say dumb." He stopped himself. "…Anything at all," he corrected. Fiora crossed her arms, clearly offended. "I don't say dumb stuff." Alister and Darla both looked at her. "…We'll workshop that," Alister said.

The next morning, they got ready. Or at least… tried to. The idea was simple: blend in. Strip away anything that screamed Port Authority and pass as just another group moving through the sector. In practice. "I feel naked," Darla muttered, tugging slightly at the hem of her plain t-shirt. Jeans. No armor. No insignia. Her tail stuck out the back awkwardly. She looked deeply uncomfortable. Bram stepped out from the other room. Darla blinked. "…Bram, I don't think..." He had chosen something entirely different. An old Nexian robe, draped across one shoulder, leaving the other exposed. The fabric hung loose but deliberate, showing off a bit too much definition to be considered subtle.

“Nonsense,” Bram said proudly. “This is traditional Nexian attire. Plenty of people still wear this.” “Not in the crime sector,” Alister replied flatly. Fiora was already staring. Unblinking. “…I think it’s perfect,” she said, completely serious. “He should wear it all the time. Maybe even make it his uniform.” She said. Bram lit up instantly. “You like it? This one’s been passed down through my family for generations. Pretty cool, right?” He had not picked up on her expression at all. Fiora leaned forward slightly, drooling. “Very cool.” “Fenleigh,” Alister said slowly, gesturing vaguely at her. “When we said ‘Spy,’ what part of that translated into… this?” She was wearing a full black suit. Not subtle. Not casual. Just… a suit.

“Where did you even get that?” He asked. “…That’s not important,” she said, still not looking away from Bram. Darla pinched the bridge of her nose. “Bram. Fiora. No. Go change.” Fiora pouted. “Alright, sorry, boss,” Bram said easily, already turning back. The second attempt went better. Not perfect, but better. They didn’t have far to go. That was the first unsettling part. The closer they got to the sector, the more the city… shifted. Port Authority patrols thinned out. Then disappeared entirely. They weren’t gone, exactly. They’d just been replaced. In one stretch, men in sharp suits with dragon tattoos stood at every corner, watching silently.

Further down, a casino glowed with too much light, two massive pig-like men guarding the entrance, their eyes tracking anyone who passed. Past that, the ruins of a collapsed building had become territory. Vultures lingered there, perched among the rubble like they owned it. Which they probably did. What made it worse. Some parts of the district were crumbling. Others were… pristine. Better maintained than the rest of Porta Nexus. Like someone had decided exactly where value mattered and where it didn’t.

Alister led the way without hesitation. “A couple of my old wardens operate in this sector,” he said quietly. “We’ll link up with them first.” They turned into a narrow alley. A man sat on the steps

ahead, slouched, wearing torn clothes and a worn-out hat. A sign rested against his knee. Will work for stream. He glanced up. “You got any cash?” Alister slowed slightly. “…Hey,” he said under his breath. “It’s me.” The man frowned. “What are you talking about?” He flipped the sign over casually as he adjusted it. On the back, written quickly and small: They can see us, idiot. Alister didn’t react.

He just laughed lightly. “Ah, sorry. Thought you were someone else.” “Yeah, didn’t think so,” the man said. “Anyway. People don’t like cats around here much. Might want to move along before someone gets the wrong idea.” Alister nodded. “Right. Appreciate it.” He handed him a few credits. The man took them, slipping something into Alister’s hand at the same time. “…You serious?” the man complained out loud. “I can’t even buy a soda with this.” “Sorry,” Alister said. “That’s all I’ve got.” “I got some...” Bram started, already reaching for his wallet. Alister grabbed his wrist. “Don’t,” he said quietly. Then, louder, “This man will waste it on drugs instead of contributing like the rest of us.” He walked off without another word. Bram frowned, clearly not convinced, but followed anyway. “That’s… not a very nice thing to say.”

Once they turned the corner, Alister opened his hand. A small scrap of paper. He read it. His expression dropped. “They don’t share info with people outside their division… but Cynthia might if you ask nicely. Don’t compromise her.” He crumpled it instantly. “That prick,” Alister muttered. “He’s a cat too. Just better at hiding it.” He paused, then added under his breath, “Probably jealous I have fur and he doesn’t.” He started moving again, leading them deeper into the district. Fiora slowed. They reached an alley. Narrow. Dim. Quiet in the wrong way. “Um…” she said, hesitating. “This alley is… scary. Yeah. Maybe we should go a different way.” She didn’t sound scared.

Not really. Alister didn’t even stop. “Then why did you come? If you’re going to back out, go back to base.” He kept walking. The others followed. Bram lingered just a second, then gave her a reassuring smile. “It’ll be fine. I’ll protect us both. Not that you need protecting.” Fiora smirked, trying

very hard not to blush. “Right… yeah. Fine. I’m sure it’ll be fine.” She stepped into the alley with them. A man passed by. Short. Dirt-covered. Ragged clothes. Rat-like features. Fiora locked eyes with him. Everything changed. Before he could finish. “Well, well, well, if it isn’t...” She moved. Fast. Faster than she had any right to be. She grabbed him, lifted him clean off his feet despite their similar size, and slammed him against the wall around the corner, hand at his throat. He choked, surprised more than anything. “Oh… gods… this is rich…” he rasped. “You actually joined them? After I didn’t hear from you, I thought...” She snapped a finger to her lips. “Shush,” she hissed. “Don’t say anything. Or I’ll… I’ll murder you.” It was not convincing. Not even a little.

He blinked at her. “…Really? This is how you repay me?” he said, recovering just enough to talk. “After everything? I ought to...” Footsteps. The others rounded the corner. Fiora dropped him instantly, stepping back like nothing had happened. “Oh! Um...” she said quickly. “I thought he was a bad guy. I was about to bring him to justice.” She explained. Darla stared at her. “…Right.” The rat man straightened himself, brushing off his clothes, clearly more amused than threatened.

“You lot might want to work on your disguises,” he said, grinning wide enough to show gold teeth. “The Nexian and the blonde? Maybe passable.” He looked directly at Darla and Alister. “But a dog and a cat walking through here?” He chuckled. “We know exactly what’s up. Your reputations got here before you did.” Alister exhaled sharply. “That explains the stares…” He glanced down at himself. “No wonder I got made. I can’t hide it like some can.” The rat man tilted his head. “Some of us learn.” He leaned forward slightly, interest sharpening. “I can help you out.” A smile spread across his face. “For a price.”

They all hesitated, exchanging looks. Trust him? Alister didn’t look convinced, but he stepped forward anyway. “I assume keeping this information private is part of the price,” he said. The rat man grinned. “Now that’s how we play. Good thinking, Mr. Purrmont… or do you prefer Alister?” He tilted

his head. “Seems like your family’s got a lot of little rug rats running around.” Alister sighed. “What don’t you know…” “That’s a currency I trade in too,” the man replied smoothly. “If you’ve got anything worth exchanging.” He turned, already moving. “Come. Let’s talk properly.” He pulled a board loose from the wall, revealing a narrow crack leading into darkness. One by one, they slipped inside. Bram tried. Got stuck. “…Well,” he said after a moment, laughing awkwardly. “Guess I’ll wait out here.” “Try not to draw attention,” the rat man said as he slid the board back into place, sealing the entrance.

Inside, the space stretched into a narrow hallway, dimly lit and cramped. At the end sat a metal door. It groaned loudly as he pulled it open. Inside, a small room packed with clutter. Documents stacked everywhere. Screens flickering. Cables running across the floor like roots. “Name’s Scratch,” he said, spreading his arms slightly. “Information broker.” His eyes flicked to Alister. “Your alley cats work with me sometimes.” He smirked. “Sorry... former alley cats.” Alister’s jaw tightened. Darla stepped forward, clearly out of her usual depth but trying to hold her ground. “Why would they do that?”

Scratch chuckled. “That’s the best part. The Intelligence Division, big shots, think they know everything.” He leaned back against a desk. “But if they knew half of what I knew…” Alister cut in immediately. “They’d run circles around you. They know things you wouldn’t even comprehend.” “Up top?” Scratch shrugged. “Sure. Maybe.” Then his grin widened. “But down here?” He tapped the desk. “They’re blind.” Alister didn’t respond. Scratch studied him for a moment, then added casually, “Funny thing is… you don’t even realize how much your wardens resent you.” That made him react. “…Resent me?” Alister said, brow furrowing. “Giving all that away for free?” a voice cut in from behind. They turned. A woman stepped out of the shadows. Blonde hair. Beanie pulled low. She took it off. Cat ears. Her tail slipped free from her loose pants as she stepped forward. “He’s right,” she said coldly. “You sit

comfortably at the top, playing the perfect officer, while the rest of us, the ones who can actually blend in, end up down here."

Silence settled. Darla glanced between them, clearly thrown by the hostility. Fiora, meanwhile, hadn't stopped staring at Scratch. Alister crossed his arms, expression hardening. "You have no idea what it's like to be a Purrmont. I'm not taking this from someone who's been selling us out." "I'm still loyal," she shot back immediately. "You just never cared how the information got to you." That landed. "When you were captain, you never asked where intel came from," she continued. "You just took it." She stepped closer. "This?" she gestured around the room. "This is the same thing. Give and take." Her eyes narrowed. "So tell me, how are you any different now?" Alister opened his mouth, and stopped. Darla stepped in. "Cynthia," she said carefully. "I assume." "Yeah," she replied flatly. "That's me." Her gaze shifted across all of them. "So now you tell me what you're doing here. Because right now? You're messing everything up."

She pointed toward the entrance. "You almost exposed Lester just by talking to him." Her eyes snapped back to Alister. "I expected better from our former captain." A pause. "Guess that explains the demotion." Alister tensed, ready to fire back, but Darla stepped between them. She didn't fully understand the history. Didn't understand the resentment. Her bonds with her family and the Peacekeeping Division were strong even now, but she understood enough. This wasn't just disagreement. This was something deeper, and for once she found herself standing in front of Alister. Defending him. Even if it didn't feel entirely right.

Chapter 6: This Mission is going sideways

Scratch moved quickly, working his way through the group with practiced ease. Fabric shifted, seams adjusted, colors altered. He didn't just change clothes he changed people. He stopped in front of Darla. "Hey, what are you, hands off!" she growled, snapping at him. He ignored her completely.
A few quick movements. A small device. A flick of light. When he stepped back, Darla blinked. Her ears were gone. Not hidden, gone. Her brown hair had shifted to a muted green, cut and styled differently. Even her posture felt… altered. Her tail was tucked so cleanly it might as well not exist.

She looked like someone else. Scratch rubbed his chin, grinning. "Yeah… that's one of my better ones."Darla stared at her reflection in a cracked panel, unsettled. "…We are going to have to do body searches after this mission." "Ooo, can I do Bram?" Fiora said immediately, raising her hand. "He's not even in here…" Darla muttered, still trying to process what had just happened. "Speaking of that, we shouldn't keep him waiting long."

"Hey, what about me?" Alister snapped. Scratch didn't even look at him. "You still don't get it?" Cynthia said with a sigh, not looking up from the console. Alister turned. "Get what?" "It's not just

your name," she said. "Or your reputation. You look too cat-like." She finally glanced at him. "The fur. The build. The way you carry yourself. People down here don't need a badge to recognize what you are." She paused. "And everyone knows Intelligence is exclusively Amalgam Feline." Alister didn't respond right away. For once, he couldn't. "…Right," he muttered. Scratch, meanwhile, perked up slightly. "Well, I do have something," he said, digging into his cloak. "Fancy little piece of tech. Projects a full-body holo overlay. Changes how people perceive you entirely."

Alister's ears lifted. "How much?" "Five hundred thousand central credits." Scratch smirked. "Might be willing to drop it for..." He started "Would you also like a down payment on a mansion?" Alister cut in flatly. "That's not happening." Scratch shrugged, completely unbothered, and tucked it away again. "If you want to contribute," Cynthia said, holding something out, "you do it like this."

Alister took it. Small. Lightweight. "A comm device?" She nodded. "You listen. You observe. You think. Like you used to." A beat. "Just… more hands-on." He turned it over in his fingers. "…And the rat?" he asked.

"Already ahead of you," Cynthia said. She tapped a few keys. The monitor flickered, then stabilized. Darla's perspective. Live. Darla froze. "…Where is it?" she said immediately, patting herself down, eyes narrowing. Scratch grinned from across the room. "Relax. You won't find it." Darla did not relax. "We are absolutely doing body searches after this mission," she said, more firmly this time."Ooo..." Fiora started. "No, Fiora." She barked "…Okay." A brief silence settled. Then Darla glanced toward the door. "…We should go. Bram's still out there."

Alister turned to Cynthia, eyes narrowing. "So answer me this, why did they stop?" Cynthia looked away. "I can't tell you. It's been completely classified." She hesitated. "Not that I agree with that, but I can point you to where we left off. The pieces I picked up before…" she paused slightly, "… your demotion." Alister grumbled under his breath. He hated this. Hated not knowing, especially when this was his case. The one he started. The one he should still be working… with her. "If things had gone

differently," he muttered. He looked back up. "So what did you find?"

Cynthia's expression hardened. "It all leads to one place." She met his eyes. "You'll understand when you get there." A pause. "The Porcelli Family's casino." The room went quiet. Darla stiffened. Alister's ears twitched. Even Scratch… faltered. Only for a second, but it was there. Fiora tilted her head. "Who are those guys?" Everyone looked at her. "…Of course you don't know," Alister sighed.

"They're one of the three gangs that run Porta Nexus's underworld," Darla explained. "Most of them are… big pig people. Suits. Money." "Old money," Cynthia added. "Tied to the merchants... unofficially. If you ask them, they'll deny it."

"Oh!" Fiora perked up. "So like the eagle guys we beat up!" "…Those were the Iron Vultures," Alister said, exhausted. "Oh. Right." She nodded. "Then what about the other one?" "The Kinyru-Kai," Darla said, her tone shifting slightly. "They're… a whole different problem." A brief silence settled.

Cynthia exhaled sharply. "What are you all waiting for? Go already." "Uh, uh, uh." Scratch raised a finger. Everyone stopped. "You walked into my lair," he said casually, "used my information… and I haven't seen a single coin." He smiled. "I'll make sure this mission fails before it even begins if you don't start coughing some up."

They all sighed. Alister reached into his pocket. "I don't have much on me right now, but… how does 100 central credits sound?" Scratch grinned. "Sounds like a start." "Don't we only get paid like…" Fiora started, counting on her fingers. "…400 a week?" "…Please don't tell the rat that," Cynthia said, facepalming. "It depends on your rank Fenleigh, wait a second…" Darla froze, patting herself down. Her expression darkened. "You already took all my money, didn't you?" Scratch raised his hand slightly, smiling. "So you caught on." A pause. "Guess we'll call it even then." His grin widened. "…For now."

Now that they had everything they needed, they stepped back outside. Bram wasn't there. Just a small rock… with a note tucked beneath it. Fiora picked it up immediately, unfolding it with a grin.

“You won’t believe it, guys! That contact I mentioned, we bumped into each other randomly. I’ll go handle it while you handle this! Smiley face” She looked up, pleased. Darla sighed. “…Hope he knows what he’s doing. Come on, Fenleigh. Let’s get this over with.” Fiora nodded, falling in beside her as they disappeared into the street.

Back inside the lair, the monitors tracked them as they moved. Scratch was gone. Of course he was. That left just Alister and Cynthia. Silence stretched between them, heavy and uncomfortable.

Alister shifted slightly, eyes still on the screen. “…So,” he started, forcing the words out, “you really disliked me this whole time?” No response. “…Why didn’t you ever...” “Do you think Lester enjoys pretending to be homeless every day?” Cynthia cut him off without even looking at him. Alister stopped. “He has two kids,” she continued, voice flat. “Hasn’t seen them in months.” Her fingers tapped against the console, a little harder than necessary. “All for scraps of information Intelligence decided they didn’t care about anymore.” Another pause.

“…At least you did.” It almost sounded like a compliment. Almost. Alister looked down, jaw tightening. He didn’t have an answer. So he said nothing. “You upper ranks just don’t get it,” she went on, quieter now, but sharper. “Do you know what it’s like to be stuck in the middle?” She finally turned slightly. “The other cats don’t accept you because you don’t look cat enough… but they’ll still use you.” Her voice dipped. “And everyone else?” she scoffed. “You’re a cat. So they don’t trust you either... They’ll never accept you.” Alister exhaled slowly. “And you think everything’s perfect at the top?” he shot back, a little too quickly.

“Maybe not,” she said, rubbing her temple. “But the grass sure looks greener.” She switched the feed. Darla’s perspective filled the screen. Cynthia watched her for a moment. “…You know, I bet she understands.” Alister frowned slightly. “Have you ever asked her?” Cynthia continued. “Or were you too busy trying to one-up her?” That one landed. “Me and her have more in common than any cat,” she said, quieter now. “Even if she is a dumb dog.” The room went still again. No one spoke.

Darla, and Fiora made it. The Fancy Building they passed earlier. “Woah this place is huge!” She said in amazement. Two giant pig men stood at the door. One of them lowered himself to get a better look at the tiny guy. “Come to gamble? You don't look like you have much cash on you.” He asked skeptically. “We have enough, we are about to win big.” Darla said with a smirk Cythina coached her into on the other side. It felt so wrong to her. The man just laughed. “Very well, and if you run dry. All if takes is a few contracts, and you can get right back out their with... in building Credit.” he explained. “Wow really so we can just keep playing forever and forever and ever!” Fiora said excited. “That's right enjoy.” He said opening one door as the other man opened the other.

Inside was a massive open floor, stretching farther than either of them expected. Every kind of gambling game filled the space cards, dice, spinning wheels, flashing machines each one louder than the last. A polished dance floor dominated the center, packed with bodies moving under warm lights. Off to one side stood the largest, most extravagant bar either of them had ever seen, lined with bottles that looked more expensive than most people’s homes. Everyone was living it up. Even members of other gangs were scattered throughout the room, laughing, drinking, trying their luck.

But one corner told a different story. A handful of people sat there in nothing but their underwear. Silent. Defeated. One man clutched a phone, voice shaking as he tried to explain charges to his wife… and why he needed more money. Darla’s eyes lingered there for a moment. Then... “Let’s do that one!” Fiora was already gone. Darla turned just in time to see her sprint toward a roulette table.

“Fenleigh, wait even if you have money, the house always...” Too late. Fiora slammed every credit she had onto the table. “I don’t know how this works,” she said brightly, “but I want the red one!” A few heads turned. Next to her, a man in a black leather jacket with slicked-back blonde hair smirked, clearly entertained.

“Well now,” he said, leaning back slightly. “Watch out, everyone. The wildcard’s arrived.” Laughter rippled around the table. Darla finally reached her, stopping just behind her shoulder with a

long, tired sigh. The dealer spun the wheel. It clicked. Slowed, and landed on red. Fiora froze. Then exploded. “Ha! Yes! I did the thing! I won, right?!” “You did,” Darla said quickly, already reaching for her. “Now let’s get back to...” She started to say. “Oh, come on,” the man cut in smoothly. “We’re all having fun here. Why not stay a while?” “Absolutely not,” Darla snapped. “Um okay!” Fiora said, completely ignoring her. “All my money on the black one now!” Darla’s head dropped. Slowly… she sat down beside her. “…This mission is going to kill me.”

“So,” the man said, leaning forward slightly, fingers folding together, “what brings two lovely ladies like yourselves here today?” He hadn’t taken his eyes off them once. “Oh, we’re on a secret mission...” Darla stepped on Fiora’s foot, hard. Fiora yelped. “...to relax,” Darla cut in quickly, forcing a smile. “What are you thinking, Fenleigh, you idiot!” Cynthia and Alister both shouted through the comms. The man raised an eyebrow, amused. “Oh? A secret mission?” he pressed, grin widening. “We’re checking out the gangs for...” Another stomp. Fiora winced. “…fun,” Darla finished, voice tight. “We just had some time off and wanted to… live it up.” Then the man laughed.

“Ah. So, like everyone else here.” The wheel clicked. Slowed. Black. Fiora shot up from her seat. “Yes! I did it again! I’m amazing at this!” Her pile of credits doubled, again. The man chuckled, watching her more closely now. “Well, look at that. Luck must really be on your side today.” His tone softened slightly. Interested. “I like you. Tell you what, why don’t we...” The front doors exploded open. The entire room shifted. Heads turned. Music faltered. A pig man stepped inside, flanked by a group that didn’t belong. A cat man in a Port Authority uniform. Several cat women behind him, same uniform. Wrong place. Wrong presence. He had yellow, spotted fur, and a smug expression that didn’t belong in enemy territory. He didn’t hesitate. Didn’t look around. He just walked. Straight upstairs. Like he owned the place.

Alister shot to his feet, eyes locked on the screen. “…What the hell is that?” he muttered.

A beat. “…No. He wouldn’t.” Cynthia didn’t look surprised. “Who did you think took your place?” she

said quietly. “…Your half-brother.” The blonde man exhaled slowly. “…Well. Looks like my fun’s over.” He stood, adjusting his jacket. “I’ve got business to attend to.” He glanced back at them, smirking. “But it was lovely meeting you both.” As he turned, Darla caught it. A patch on the opposite shoulder. A skull. He walked past one of the pig guards. No words. No resistance. The guard stepped aside immediately and opened a back room door. Letting him through.

Darla’s eyes narrowed. That wasn’t normal. That wasn’t random. Was he connected to the Founder’s Day attack? She didn't recognize the scent but he looked like he was wearing something simular to the man on the float. She took a step, then stopped. Fiora. Still at the table. Still playing.

“…Fenleigh,” Darla warned. The wheel spun again. Clicked. Slowed onto Red. Fiora had chosen black.

Everything vanished. The mountain of credits gone. Replaced with a small slip. A bill. 100 credits owed. Fiora stared at it. “…Huh…Wait.” Her face dropped. “What are you waiting for, dog?” Alister snapped through the comm. “Find a way upstairs.”

“The upstairs floor is for real players,” Cynthia cut in immediately. “Her outfit doesn’t fit. They won’t let her through. You’ll have to find another way.” Darla’s jaw tightened. “Did you not see that man?” she growled under her breath. “Yes…” Alister hesitated. “But this is... ugh… you’re right…”

It was sinking in. Who that was. What it meant. Cynthia leaned forward over the console. “Are you serious right now?” she pressed. “You won’t get a chance like this again.” Alister didn’t answer.

“If you don’t find out what’s happening upstairs now,” she continued, voice sharpening, “even if you try to sneak in later, they’ll notice. Patterns matter here.” Darla’s eyes flicked toward the staircase. Security. Guards. Eyes everywhere.

“You don’t understand what this is,” Alister said, quieter now, but heavier. “If the man in the black jacket is involved… if I can prove that…” He stopped himself. “…we could prove our innocence... I do want to know what my brother is doing, but...” He started “And if you don’t go up

there,” Cynthia cut him off, “and learn what you need to... he keeps getting away with it.” Silence. That landed. Hard. A man in a suit approached the table almost immediately. “Miss,” he said politely, “it seems you’ve encountered a small… deficit.” Fiora blinked. “A what?” “We have ways of resolving that upstairs.” Darla blinked. Bram's words about her being useful started to click. Darla looked at the door then back at Fiora. “I'm going with her. The man paused. Then smiled. “Of course.”

Chapter 7: Deal us in

The man led Fiora and Darla up a hidden staircase, tucked away behind a false wall. It was narrow, quiet nothing like the spectacle below. Darla understood immediately. This wasn't about convenience. This was about status. Not everyone got to walk the main floor. The staircase opened onto the upper level anyway onto a wide, wrapping balcony overlooking the chaos below. From here, everything looked smaller. Controlled. The real players lingered in quieter corners, far from the noise. Darla barely had time to take it in. The man was already guiding them toward a door. Then. "…Oh hey, Fenleigh?" Darla froze. Bram. He was sitting in a booth, leaned back like he belonged there, laughing with a large pig man across from him. Fiora lit up instantly.

"Oh! Bram!" He grinned, then glanced at Darla. His expression shifted slightly. "…Who's your friend?" He didn't recognize her. That… was unsettling. "Uh… we…" Fiora started, suddenly unsure.

The pig man across from Bram leaned forward, rubbing his chin as he looked them over. "You know these two, Ashgarn?" he asked, voice casual, but sharp underneath. Bram didn't hesitate. "I sure do! We work together," he said with a wide grin. Then he paused. "…Oh. I probably wasn't supposed to say

that part.” The pig man barked out a laugh. Bram joined him. Darla did not.

“Hey, Cleveland,” The Pigg added, waving a hand. “Let these two off. I’ll cover whatever they owe.” The man escorting them hesitated for only a second, then nodded and turned back toward the stairs. The Pig waved to the seat next to bram. “Why don’t you sit with us for a bit?” Darla slid into the booth slowly, still trying to process everything. Fiora dropped in beside her without hesitation. Darla leaned forward slightly, lowering her voice. “…How do you know each other?” Bram opened his mouth, but the pig man beat him to it. “Oh, we’re not exactly friends,” he said with a chuckle. “But I owe this man a debt I can never repay.” He snorted, amused.

“He’s the one I was telling you about.” Bram rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah… figured he might know something.” Fiora tilted her head. “Wait… you’re rich, Bram?” she asked. “Did you help him buy something expensive or...” Bram laughed. “Eh. Not exactly.” The pig man leaned back, taking over the story. “When those Crossbone bastards came through,” he said, voice lowering slightly, “me and my boys were out doing rounds.” His grin faded just a little. “They wiped us out.” A pause. “Good men.” The table went quieter.

“And just when I thought my ham was cooked…” he continued, glancing at Bram, “this big lug came crashing in.” He smirked again. “Saved my bacon.” Bram groaned. “You really gotta say it like that every time?” “Every time,” the pig man said proudly. “And for that…” He lifted his glass slightly. “I’m grateful.” Bram waved it off. “I told you, it’s just what I had to do.” “Nonsense,” the pig man replied immediately. “You didn’t just save me. You paid for helping me, don’t think I don’t know that.” His tone sharpened just a little. “And not just me.” That hung there. Then he relaxed again, smiling. “So the least I can do… is talk.” Darla leaned forward slightly. “…So you know we’re undercover.”

The pig man didn’t even blink. “Sure do,” he said easily. “But don’t worry, tuts. I ain’t about to go blabbing.” He took a slow sip of his drink. “So. What do you need?” A beat passed. “Wait.” Bram

leaned forward, squinting at Darla. "…Darla?" He blinked. "Hold on, no way." He pointed at her. "You look like a completely different person." Fiora grinned. "I know, right?!" Darla exhaled slowly. "…"We'll discuss that later." The pig man leaned back, rubbing his chin as he studied Darla more closely now. "…Darla… Darla…" he muttered, testing the name. Then it clicked. "Dogenridge." A grin spread across his face. "Ha. You really had me fooled." He gestured lazily toward her. "Whoever did your look? That's professional work." Darla didn't relax. Not even a little.

Portly's expression shifted just slightly. "I'm grateful to you, too," he added, more evenly. "Maybe not me personally… but during the Siege?" He tapped the table once. "You saved a lot of our boys." A pause. "In my book? The Port's good people." His smile returned, but it wasn't quite as friendly now. "Shame not everyone sees it that way." He straightened slightly. "But where are my manners?" He placed a hand over his chest with mock formality. "Portly Presley. Underboss of the Porcelli Family." The air changed instantly. Darla felt it. Even Fiora paused. Bram didn't move, but he stopped smiling.

Portly raised a hand casually. "Now, now, none of that, Ms. Dogenridge," he said, waving off the tension. "I already said we're cool, didn't I?" He tilted his head. "…Whether that stays true tomorrow?" A beat. "Well." He shrugged. "We'll find out tomorrow." Then the grin came back. "But today? I'm here to help my buddy Ashgarn." "…Maybe we should've gone with his plan first," Alister muttered through the comm. No one responded. Fiora leaned forward, completely unfazed. "So wait, the underboss?" she asked. "That means you're like… the big number two guy?" Portly chuckled. "Course it does." Then he leaned in slightly, lowering his voice just enough to shift the mood. "And if I have anything to say about it…" His eyes sharpened. "I won't be number two for long."

That line lingered. Then, just as quickly, he leaned back again. "Now," he said, clapping his hands once. "Start talking. We're on a clock." They explained. Carefully. Darla chose her words like she was stepping through a minefield. Bram filled in gaps when needed. Fiora… tried. No one at the

table fully trusted Portly. Except Fiora. Who was now smiling at him like he was just some weird, funny guy. Portly listened without interrupting. That alone was unsettling. When they finished, he exhaled slowly. “So…” he said, tapping his glass lightly. “You want to know what’s going on with the gangs.” A pause. “I don’t know much.” Darla’s eyes narrowed. “And what I do know?” he continued. “Might be a line I can’t cross.” He leaned forward slightly. The humor was gone now.

“Let’s just say… things have shifted.” No one spoke. “There’s a new player in town.” Fiora tilted her head. “Like the Vultures?” Portly shook his head slowly. “No.” His voice lowered. “Not loud like them. Smart.” He leaned back again, expression settling into something neutral. “That’s about all I can tell you… that I’m allowed to.” He let out a small breath, like even that had been pushing it. Darla’s eyes drifted toward the center of the upper level, where the cats were gathered. From this distance, she couldn’t hear anything, but she didn’t need to. Something was happening. “And what about that?” she asked. Portly followed her gaze.

“Oh, you mean their little meeting,” he said casually. “They’ve been happening more often lately.” Bram leaned forward slightly. “Who’s ‘they’?” Portly shrugged. “I’ll be heading that way myself soon enough, but the real talks don’t start until everyone gets there.” “…Who else is coming?” Bram asked. Before he could answer, the doors downstairs opened. The shift was immediate. Conversations softened. Heads turned. Even the music seemed to dip under the weight of it. A group stepped inside. Dark suits. Clean lines. Gold dragon tattoos catching the light. Kinyru-Kai. At their center was a man with a calm, easy smile. He looked relaxed, almost casual, but his eyes moved constantly, scanning the room, measuring everything.

Then they stopped. His gaze landed on Darla. It lingered just a little too long. Not curiosity. Not confusion. Recognition. Darla held still, forcing herself not to react. After a moment, he looked away and continued up the stairs, his men following in silence. “The Kinyru-Kai…” she muttered. “It seems this meeting is more significant than we thought,” Alister said over the comm, his voice tighter now.

Portly stood, brushing off his coat. “Well,” he said, “looks like I’m out of time.” “Wait, we need to...” Darla started, but the words didn’t come together. She didn’t even know what to ask for first. Portly paused, glancing back at her. “If you’re smart,” he said with a faint grin, “you’ll think very carefully about your next move.” Then he turned and walked toward the meeting.

Darla scanned the room carefully. With her sharper hearing, she didn’t need to be directly at the table. She just needed to get close enough to catch fragments, then piece them together. There were a few empty booths circling the massive table where the meeting was forming. The bar was another option, but it felt too exposed. Sitting there without drawing attention would be difficult, especially dressed like this. “Darla, look up at the rafters,” Alister said through the comm, his voice urgent but controlled. She followed his direction. A narrow duct ran along the ceiling. “There’s a vent up there. If you can get inside, you’d have a perfect vantage point,” he continued.

“It’s too small,” she replied immediately. “Ooo, I can do that!” Fiora said, raising her hand like she was volunteering for something fun. Bram glanced between them, confused. “Are you two talking to someone?” Darla didn’t answer. She was already thinking ahead, eyes scanning again, searching for something else she could use. Then she saw him. A well-dressed man sitting comfortably, surrounded by women clearly paid to keep him entertained. He was loud, relaxed, distracted, and most importantly, not paying attention to anything that mattered. Darla exhaled slowly, bracing herself. “Here’s the plan,” she said under her breath. “Cynthia, how well do you know the layout of this place?”

“Well… I know parts of it,” Cynthia replied. “Not the hidden sections. They’re very careful about that. But if she goes down that hallway, I think there’s a maintenance shaft that leads toward the meeting room.” “That’s enough,” Darla said. “Bram, you watch Fenleigh’s back while she moves. I’ll handle this side.” “You sure?” Bram asked. Darla nodded once. “Just follow Cynthia’s directions. You’ll be fine.” “Alright, let’s go!” Fiora said, already moving, dragging Bram with her.

Darla walked toward the man, every step feeling heavier than it should. “I really don’t want to

do this," she muttered. "It'll be fine," Alister said quickly. "You're not some hussy. This is for Porta Nexus." She took one more breath, then forced a smile into place. "Hey!" she said brightly. "Mind if I join the fun?" The man barely glanced at her at first. Then he actually looked. One eyebrow raised.

"Did they let a commoner in up here or something?" he laughed. "What, you want money?" The women around him immediately turned, their expressions sharp and territorial. Darla held her smile. "Oh no," she said, softening her tone. "You just looked interesting. I wanted to talk." This time, the man really looked at her. Slowly. His gaze lingered on her chest in a way that made her skin crawl. "Well," he said, leaning back slightly, "maybe under that outfit you've got something worth looking at." Darla didn't react. "Go on," he added, waving a hand lazily. "Sit. You've clearly got an eye for greatness." The other women glared harder, but none of them stopped her. Darla sat. And listened.

Meanwhile, Fiora and Bram slipped into the hallway, moving quickly between patrol routes. "Stop," Cynthia said suddenly. Fiora froze and threw her arm out, stopping Bram just before they rounded the corner. "Door on the right," Cynthia directed. They slipped inside just as two pig men in velvet suits walked past. "Those are the Velvet Tusks," Cynthia warned. "If they see you, you're done." Fiora nodded, taking that seriously. "Got it." "Now keep moving. The shaft should be just ahead." They moved deeper into the corridor. Bram glanced around. "No cameras?" "Cynthia says they don't want evidence of what happens up here," Fiora replied, tapping her ear. "…That makes sense," Bram muttered.

They reached the panel. "Alright," Cynthia said, "just remove it. The duct should run straight over the meeting room." Bram pulled it off easily, then paused, looking at the opening. "You sure about this?" he asked. It was tight. Even for her. Fiora swallowed, then nodded. "Yeah. I've got this." Without hesitation, Bram lifted her up. She pulled herself inside and started crawling forward. Bram stayed below, keeping watch, eyes fixed on the hallway.

Fiora crawled through the duct until she reached a vent. She carefully peeked through. Below her, the room had filled out. A massive table dominated the center. At the head sat an older pig man in a dark suit, cigar smoke curling around him as he waited. To the right, the cats had taken their place.

To the left, the Kinyru-Kai stood in quiet formation. Portly had already seated himself near the front. They were all there. Waiting. Now they had two vantage points. If one failed, the other could still catch everything.

"They're late," the old man said, voice heavy with irritation. "You know how I hate that." "Relax, Don," Portly said. "I'm sure they'll be here soon." The doors opened. A familiar figure stepped in. Mohawk. A folded metal chair slung over his shoulder. Behind him, more Vultures, each carrying their own chairs. They didn't ask permission. They dragged the chairs into place, loud and careless, metal scraping across the floor as they set up around the table. Mohawk dropped into his seat and propped his feet up. "Sorry, Don," he said, grinning. "Port Authority was giving me the runaround. Wouldn't let me out." He shrugged. "So we twisted a few arms." A pause. "Boss ain't coming. Deal with it." He then looked over seeing the cats. "Oh right... no offense." He said. The Cat just shrugged it off.

"You continue to be disrespectful… even after the death of your first leader." The Don's voice was calm, but the irritation underneath it was unmistakable. Mohawk leaned back in his chair and laughed. "You say that like you had anything to do with it," he shot back. "You think I'm threatened, old man?" He tilted his head slightly, grin sharpening. "Vincent Cross went out with more class than anyone in this room." The temperature shifted. The old Yakuza leader's gaze hardened just slightly.

"Would it kill you," he said slowly, "to show a little respect, young one?" Mohawk paused. Just for a moment.

Then he straightened up, rolling his shoulders like he was shaking something off. "Alright, alright," he muttered. "Let's just get this over with." "Good," the Don said, not missing a beat.

He turned slightly, gesturing. “Now… Leonidas, if you would.” That name carried weight. Even Mohawk lowered his shades slightly, studying him now with actual interest. Leonidas Purrmont stepped forward. Calm. Composed. Smug in a way that didn’t need to prove itself. “Leonidas Purrmont,” he said smoothly. “A pleasure.” His eyes swept across the room, measuring everyone present. “Yes, I am now the Captain of Intelligence,” he continued. “Though I believe we can dispense with formalities.” A faint pause.

“The Purrmont family has… lost interest in the Port Authority.” That got attention. “I only accepted this position to correct the mistakes of my… predecessor.” A slight emphasis. Deliberate. “In short,” he said, folding his hands behind his back, “I am cleaning house.” His gaze sharpened. “I am here to serve the interests of the Mercantile Court... My father’s interests.” The room went still. “And to do that…” he continued, voice smooth as ever, “I require your cooperation.” Mohawk scoffed immediately, leaning forward again like the tension meant nothing to him. “Ha. That’s rich,” he said. “Why would we give a damn about some rich idiots playing dress-up?” A low chuckle echoed from the Yakuza side. The old man didn’t smile. “This proposal,” he said calmly, “does not particularly interest the Kinryu-Kai either.”

“What…? How could he… Father would...” Alister’s voice broke through the comm, sharp with disbelief, then faltered as the words caught in his throat. Even Cynthia went quiet. She had known pieces of this, but not all of it. Darla forced herself to stay composed. She nodded along to the man beside her, pretending interest, while straining to hear every word from the meeting. Leonidas lifted one hand, inspecting his claws as if the entire room bored him. “Now, when I say ‘work together,’” he said calmly, “I do not expect it for free.” His gaze drifted lazily across the table. “You already have a model. The Porcelli Family.” A slight gesture toward the Don. “Look away from certain operations. At certain times. Perhaps… encourage a conflict or two when prompted.” His tone remained smooth, almost casual.

“You will be compensated accordingly.” Then his voice sharpened, just slightly. “But do not think we haven’t noticed.” He pointed toward the Yakuza leader. “Your ranks have grown… thin.” A pause. “And the Vultures…” he added, glancing toward Mohawk with a faint smile, “I’m not convinced they warrant concern either way.” Mohawk’s teeth ground audibly. “One of my men is worth fifty of yours,” the old Yakuza leader said, his voice low and steady. “Even if these… rumors were true, you would have no chance.” The tension thickened. The Don raised a hand before it could snap. “We do not wish to start another war,” he said, measured and controlled. “Not after the last one.” His eyes shifted briefly to the Yakuza leader. “We care about this city. And you do as well… don’t you?”

The old man didn’t hesitate. “Of course I do,” he said. “But I am not convinced that you do. You care only for money. You have no honor.” A quiet beat. The Don exhaled slowly. “…Money is Porta Nexus.” Then he leaned back slightly. “But perhaps it’s time I showed my hand.” He motioned to one of his men. The man hurried to a nearby door and pulled it open. From the shadows stepped the blonde man. The same one from the roulette table. Mohawk stiffened slightly. The Yakuza leader’s eyes narrowed. Leonidas, however, frowned. “…And who is this?” he asked. Portly’s expression hardened.

“Viktor Scathe.” Viktor stepped forward with an easy confidence, hands in his pockets, a faint smirk playing at his lips. “I’ve had dealings with most of you,” he said. “Supplied things you couldn’t get your hands on. No cost.” He tilted his head slightly. “But now… I’m here to collect.” The room went still. “I understand,” he continued, “change is difficult. But this?” he gestured loosely, “this is minor. No one is asking you to destroy each other.” His smile sharpened. “Just a few… favors.” A pause. “Comply, and I’ll honor our agreements... For now.” Silence. No one knew exactly what he had done for the others, but it was enough. Enough that none of them dismissed him outright.

The Yakuza leader stood first. “The Kinyru-Kai will comply,” he said, voice firm. “So long as no line is crossed.” He didn’t wait for a response. He turned and left, his men following without hesitation. Mohawk muttered under his breath, shaking his head. “…You really have me by the balls.”

Viktor closed the distance in an instant, getting right in his face. “Tell your boss to get over it,” he snapped, anger flashing for just a moment. Then it was gone. Replaced with that same easy smirk. “What I mean is… let’s be honest.” He leaned in slightly. “What does he actually do? Sits in a bunker all day?” His eyes locked onto Mohawk. “You’re the one running things. So make your decision.”

Mohawk sighed, running a hand through his hair. “…Hate to say it,” he muttered, “but the Vultures are in.” He stood up, waving his crew along. “Let’s go.” They left. Just like that.

Leonidas frowned, irritation finally breaking through his composure. “I don’t appreciate being upstaged,” he said coldly. The Don inclined his head slightly. “It was necessary, young master. My apologies.” Before Leonidas could respond, Viktor stepped closer again. The pigs around the Don tensed immediately, but he raised a hand and they stopped. “I can’t say I appreciate this either,” Viktor said, voice lower now, more dangerous. “I told you we weren’t ready to move yet.” “I did what was required,” the Don replied calmly. “And I did what was required,” Viktor shot back, smiling thinly, “to get the information you’ve been withholding.” Then the Don nodded. “…Very well.” He reached into his coat and pulled out a data drive.

“You’ve done enough,” he said. “Though even with this… knowing where it is, knowing the code…” He handed it over. “I doubt anyone you send will survive.” Viktor took it without hesitation, slipping it into his jacket. “That,” he said lightly, “is my concern.” He turned to leave. Then stopped.

Slowly, his head tilted upward. His eyes locked directly onto the vent. Right at Fiora. A faint smile formed. “Don,” he said casually, “you really ought to get pest control in here. You’ve got an infestation.” Don's face hardened. “Do a sweep of the whole building.” He said right away as Viktor walks away. “Fiora get out of there!” Alister said worried.

Chapter 8: Too close to the problem.

Fiora froze in the duct, staring down through the vent as the situation unraveled below. The pigs had already locked the building down, and the search had begun in earnest. There was no hesitation in their movements, no confusion, just controlled, systematic sweeps. For a moment, she couldn't decide what to do. Going back the way she came felt risky. Finding another exit felt impossible. Staying still felt worse. Below her, Leonidas exhaled slowly, irritation slipping through his otherwise composed demeanor. "We can't let this get out," he said, glancing at the others. "Even if it's probably just nonsense." The four cats beside him nodded and immediately spread out, joining the search. Whatever this was, they were taking it seriously.

Portly rose from his seat, scanning the room with practiced precision. His eyes landed on Darla, seated alone with the rich man. For a brief moment, everything clicked into place. He understood enough. Darla noticed him too, but she deliberately looked away, acting as though she hadn't. If his "today" had already turned into "tomorrow," she couldn't afford to test it. Portly turned sharply and headed for the maintenance access.

Back in the hideout, Alister was already moving. He paced the room, eyes searching for anything useful, anything he could turn into a plan. “This place is useless,” he muttered. “That dumb rat doesn’t have anything we can use.” Cynthia frowned, watching him. “What are you doing? You can’t just go charging in. I can’t either. He’s my boss.” Alister didn’t stop. “An extraction,” he said flatly. “It’s what I’d do for any undercover agent.” Cynthia hesitated, then reached into her pocket and pulled out a compact device. It unfolded slightly in her hand, sleek and unmistakable. Alister blinked. “What… why do you have that?” She didn’t look at him. “Because the Port doesn’t like them, and that’s exactly why they’re useful. Compact. Powerful. Easy to hide. Easy to use.” She tossed it to him. He caught it without hesitation. “…Thank you,” he said quietly. Then he ran.

Portly reached the back corridors just as two red-suited pigs passed by. “You’re needed downstairs,” he said without slowing. “They found something on the debt floor.” The two guards didn’t question him. They rushed off immediately. Portly slipped into the maintenance section. He stopped. Bram stood there, lifting Fiora down from the duct. Portly exhaled slowly. “I thought it might be this.” Bram shifted, readying himself. “If we have to fight, I understand.” Fiora frowned. “I don’t want to fight Mr. Pig…” Portly shook his head. “Not this time.” He gestured behind him. “I know a way out. One only we use. Follow me.” Bram didn’t move. “…But Bram…” Portly added, his eyes narrowing slightly. Bram swallowed, then nodded. “I’ll always be grateful,” Portly continued as he turned. “But after this… your debt is paid.” Neither Bram nor Fiora argued as they followed him.

On the main floor, Darla watched as the front doors slammed shut. The rich man beside her grabbed onto her arm, his composure gone. She wanted to shove him away. She didn’t. Every movement mattered now. Below, the pigs began rounding people up, searching them whether they liked it or not. Panic spread quickly, but it never quite reached full chaos. The Don stepped forward, overlooking the floor. “Do not be alarmed,” he said calmly. “This is a routine search.” He paused just long enough. “As compensation, each of you will receive one thousand in-building credits.”

The tension shifted. Not gone, but controlled. Then the doors exploded open. Alister crashed through them, wearing a hastily thrown-together mask. “I am Anarchy… man!” he declared, with far more confidence than the name deserved. For a split second, everything froze. Then he moved. The multi-tool in his hand reshaped mid-swing, folding out into a blade as he lunged at the nearest pig. “… You’re really doing this,” Darla muttered under her breath, eyes darting across the room. She spotted a woman nearby wearing an expensive silk scarf. “Mind if I borrow this?” She didn’t wait for an answer. She yanked it free and wrapped it around her face, pulling it tight into a makeshift mask.

“Hey!” the woman snapped. “You can’t!” the man beside her added. Darla was already gone. She vaulted over the railing and dropped into the chaos below. Alister was surrounded, holding his ground as pigs closed in from every angle. She came down hard, slamming into one of them and knocking him flat. The impact rattled through her as she rolled, snatching the man’s club from his grip in one clean motion. “And I am…” she started, already regretting it, “…Anarchy… Woman.” She cringed even as she said it. Together, they moved. Pigs dropped one after another, knocked unconscious but left breathing. They fought like they had trained for this, covering each other without needing to think about it.

Above them, Leonidas watched with mild irritation, standing beside the Don as if the entire thing were a minor inconvenience. “What’s this?” he sighed. “Vigilantes? We can’t have that in our city.” He tilted his head slightly, thinking. “What was the command again… ah, yes. Initiate Level Four. Or whatever.” Dismissive. Bored. Darla looked up at him, anger cutting through everything else. “This isn’t the appropriate level for that,” she snapped. “I don’t think he cares,” Alister replied. The four cats dropped from above. They landed in perfect formation. Blades ignited with a sharp hiss, steam venting from their hilts as the pressure systems kicked in, propelling their movements with unnatural speed.

Alister barely caught the first strike, his blade skidding against hers as sparks snapped between

them. Darla moved at the same time, intercepting another, the impact jarring through her arms. They were faster. Sharper. Trained for this, and at at a higher danger level. One of the cats hesitated mid-exchange, her stance shifting as she studied Alister more closely. "…It couldn't be," she murmured. Alister smiled faintly under the mask. "Always perceptive, Kloe," he said under his breath. "That's why you were my best lieutenant." The fight pressed on. Darla and Alister were better individually, but four-on-two turned precision into pressure. Every opening closed too quickly. Every counter was met.

Portly pushed open a concealed door at the back of the maintenance corridor, motioning Bram and Fiora through. "That's it," he said, voice low but firm. "Nice knowing you. Now get lost." "…Yes, sir!" Fiora chirped, grabbing Bram's arm as they bolted into the street. Portly watched them go, jaw tightening slightly. Back inside, "They're clear," Cynthia's voice cut through the comm. "Get out of there. Now." Darla and Alister didn't hesitate. They broke formation in sync, each landing a decisive strike that knocked two of the cats off balance. It wasn't clean, but it was enough. They ran. Straight through the door. Leonidas didn't even move. "What was that?" he muttered, unimpressed. "Weird."

The Don, however, was not calm. His hand tightened into a fist, the air around him shifting with barely contained anger. "Anarchy Man…" he said slowly, the name tasting like an insult. He turned slightly toward one of his men. "I want a hit put out on those two immediately... One million Central Credits. Two million if they're brought in alive." The pig nodded once and moved without question.

Darla and Alister ran. Not looking back. Not slowing down. As they pushed through the outer edges of the sector, they started shedding pieces of their disguises, tossing them aside as they moved. Layers peeled away until they looked like themselves again. By the time they crossed out of gang-controlled territory, their pace finally began to ease. On the opposite side, Bram and Fiora did the same.

Fiora glanced to the side mid-run. An alley. A familiar figure stood just inside the shadows. Scratch.

He didn't step out. Didn't call to them. He just raised a hand slightly and mouthed the words: "I'll be coming to collect soon." Fiora frowned, her pace stuttering for half a second. Then she looked forward

again and kept running. "…I'm not thinking about that right now," she muttered under her breath. Bram didn't ask.

They regrouped at the Barracuta-themed restaurant. The bright, tacky mascot grinned down at them from above the entrance like nothing in the world had changed. Inside, everything felt… normal. Too normal. They slid into a booth, the tension finally starting to bleed out of their bodies. A few moments later, Cynthia walked in. Still in disguise. Still scanning the room like someone might already be watching her. She sat down with them, shoulders dropping as she let out a long breath.

"…I didn't think it went this deep," she admitted quietly. "I thought they were just getting paid off." She reached into her coat and slid a data drive across the table. It stopped in front of Alister. "Thank you, Cynthia," he said, his voice steady but sincere. "For everything. We'd be completely lost without you." She didn't look at him. "Yeah. Whatever," she muttered. "Don't talk to me again. You'll get me found out." She stood and started toward the door. Then stopped. Just before she left their line of sight. "…Hey, Alister." He looked up immediately. "…Yeah?" She didn't turn around. "…Maybe you weren't such a bad boss after all. Fix this," she added. "Then come back." And just like that, she was gone. For real this time.

Alister looked down at the table, a faint smile pulling at the corner of his mouth. It wasn't pride. It was something quieter. Something uncertain. Like he didn't know if he deserved to feel good about it. Darla watched him for a moment, then reached for the data drive. "Let's get this to Cassian," she said. "This changes everything." Alister nodded, the hesitation gone. "Yeah," he said. "And after that…" He stood up. "…we start fixing things. At base. For real this time." Darla gave a small, approving nod. Together, they turned and left.

At the table, Fiora waved enthusiastically after them. "Have fun!" She turned back immediately, leaning across the table toward Bram like nothing had happened. "…So," she said, completely serious

now, “you’re paying.” Bram blinked. “What?” “I lost everything at that dumb casino,” she pouted. “Which means you’re covering me.” Bram stared at her for a second. Then laughed. “…You know what? Yeah. That tracks.” Fiora beamed. “Great! I want everything on the menu.” Bram’s smile faltered slightly. “…We’re gonna have to set a limit.” “Two limits,” she countered instantly. “…That’s not how limits work.” He sighed. “It is now.”

Cassian finished watching the footage, then leaned back slightly, rubbing his temples. “…This is nothing.” Alister stiffened immediately. “What do you mean it’s nothing?” he snapped. Cassian exhaled slowly, like he expected that reaction. “What I mean,” he said, more carefully this time, “is that it doesn’t help you.” Darla’s expression hardened. “It doesn’t help us? We just uncovered...” She started “A problem,” Cassian cut in calmly. “A very real one. Bigger than I anticipated, in fact.” He paused, letting that sit. “But this?” He gestured lightly to the data. “This won’t do what you think it will.” Alister’s eyes narrowed. “…So what, all of that was for nothing?” Darla said.

“I didn’t say that,” Cassian replied. His tone stayed even, but there was weight behind it now. “You did good work. However,” he continued, “I’m taking this off your hands. Internal Investigations will handle it from here.” Silence. Then Darla stepped forward. “Just like that?” she said, anger slipping into her voice. “You’re acting like we wasted our time.” Cassian shook his head slightly. “Not wasted,” he said. “Just… misaligned.” He straightened, folding his hands behind his back. “I need you to look at this from a different perspective.”

They didn’t respond. So he continued. “The Mercantile Court,” he said, “holds more power than most people are willing to admit. They don’t just influence the Port Authority. They shape it.” His gaze shifted between them. “Lobbying, funding, quiet pressure. Some would argue they are the true rulers of Porta Nexus.” Alister’s jaw tightened. Cassian went on. “So let’s say you expose your brother. The gangs. This… Viktor Scathe.” He paused briefly at the name. “What happens next?” Neither of them answered. “I’ll tell you,” Cassian said quietly. “It gets buried.” His voice didn’t rise, but it sharpened.

“Buried in bureaucracy. Buried in influence. Buried in silence.” A beat. “And you?” His eyes settled on Alister. “You get labeled a liability. A threat.” Then Darla. “And threats don’t last long in a system like this.”

The room went still. “So what,” Darla said, her voice tight, “you expect us to just forget about it?” Cassian didn’t hesitate. “No.” That stopped her. “But I didn’t create your division so you could become martyrs either,” he added, quieter now. “Charging in with half the picture doesn’t fix corruption. It feeds it.” Alister looked away slightly, frustration written all over him. “So what are you asking?” he muttered. Cassian sighed. “I’m asking you to step back,” he said. “For now.” He moved closer to the desk, tapping the data drive once. “Let us gather more. Build something they can’t bury.” His gaze sharpened again. “Then we don’t expose them.... We bury them.” That hung in the air.

After a moment, Cassian picked up the drive… then stopped. “…Actually.” He turned, holding it out toward Darla. “Keep it.” She blinked, caught off guard. “I’ve already made a copy,” he said. “But if you don’t trust me…” He let the implication sit. “…Post it,” he added simply. “Give it to someone like Aion Anderson. I’m sure he’d have a field day.” Alister’s eyes flicked up at that. Cassian stepped back, expression unreadable now. “Make your own choices,” he said. And just like that, the control shifted. He left it at that.

The walk back to base was quiet. Not tense. Not awkward. Just… heavy. The sun was starting to set, painting the sky in warm colors that didn’t quite match how either of them felt. “…What a day,” Alister said finally, letting out a long sigh. Darla glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. “…Why are you still here?” she asked, tone edged with dry amusement. “I figured you’d be halfway back to your luxury apartment by now.” His ears drooped slightly. “…Yeah,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck. “Well… maybe it’s about time I start living in the real world.”

Darla blinked, just a little surprised. Then, slowly, she smiled. For the first time she could say she was proud to know him. “…Huh,” she said quietly. Her tail gave a small, unconscious wag behind

her. “…Alright,” she added, turning forward again. “I’ll show you to a room. But be warned…” She glanced back at him, already knowing how this would go. “…it’s worse than you’re thinking.” Alister scoffed, a faint grin returning. “It can’t be that bad.” They stood in front of the door. Darla didn’t open it right away. She just looked at him. “…Last chance,” she said. Alister rolled his eyes. “You’re really overselling this.”

She opened the door. The wall inside was cracked, long fractures running from floor to ceiling like something had tried to break out of it. A couple of spiders casually crawled across the surface, completely undisturbed. The “bed” was a thin mattress on the floor, stained and uneven, with a few exposed springs poking through like it had given up years ago. The window had multiple bullet holes in it. Not repaired. Just… there. A breeze slipped through one of them. Alister stared. “…It is that bad.”

He turned immediately, already stepping away. “Yeah, no, I think I’ve learned enough about the real world for one day...” Darla grabbed him by the collar and yanked him back without effort. “Nope.”

Her tone was calm. Final. “You said you were changing.” He froze. Then slowly deflated, his entire posture collapsing. “…Alright. Fine.” He looked back into the room. Then back at her. “…Do I at least get… a blanket?” Darla shrugged. “…If you can find one that isn’t alive.” He stared at her. “…You’re joking.” She didn’t answer.

Chapter 9: What is Stillfall?

The city was quiet. Not peaceful quiet. Not calm. Something heavier. Even the base felt different. The usual hum of activity had thinned out, replaced by a strange stillness that crept into every corner. Outside, the sky lanes were sparse, ships moving slower, fewer in number. Shops were already closing for the day. It felt like the world was… holding its breath. Bram stood alone in the training area. He wore his traditional Nexian garb, hands pressed together, eyes closed. His posture was steady, relaxed in a way none of them had ever really seen before. He looked… at peace. Darla and Fiora stepped in, mid-conversation. “You’re really gonna show me some moves?” Fiora asked eagerly.

Darla gave a small nod, then stopped. They both noticed him. “…Heya, Bram. Whatcha doing?” Fiora asked, tilting her head. No response. “Oh… wait,” Darla said, lowering her voice. “Is it that one Nexian holiday? The quiet one?” Bram didn’t move. He simply nodded. Fiora leaned in slightly, squinting. “He looks really good like this,” she whispered, far too openly. “Fenleigh,” Alister hissed from behind them, “his culture is not your eye candy.” He stepped into the room, ears flicking in irritation. Before anyone could respond. A bell rang. Distant. Impossibly far away, and yet it echoed

clearly through the room.

Bram inhaled slowly. Then opened his eyes. A soft smile spread across his face. “It’s alright,” he said gently. “You don’t have to understand it.” He straightened slightly. “Today is Stillfall.” Fiora perked up instantly. “Oh! So it’s like a holiday? Are we gonna have a big festival? Games? Food?”

Bram let out a quiet laugh, shaking his head. “No. You’re thinking of the Convergent New Year.”

Fiora deflated slightly. “…Oh.” Darla stepped forward, more hesitant. “I’ve heard of it,” she admitted. “But… I’ve never really known any Nexians well enough to understand it.” Bram nodded. “That’s fair.” Alister spoke up, more matter-of-fact. “Day of Still Memory. Founders’ Silence.”

Bram glanced at him, then back to the others. “Yes.” He looked toward the window, toward the quiet city beyond. “It’s the day King Nexus chose to stop.” A pause. “Not because he had to… but because the world had to move on.” The room stayed quiet. “We remember what came before,” Bram continued softly. “And we accept what comes after.” Darla lowered her gaze slightly. “…Sorry,” she said. “We didn’t mean to interrupt.” She turned, ready to leave. Fiora followed halfway, then stopped.

“…But I wanna celebrate too,” she said, stubborn as ever. Darla and Alister both turned, about to shut that down, but Bram spoke first. “I would be honored if you stayed.”

They paused. “King Nexus welcomed all kinds of life,” he said with a small bow. “So we do the same.” Darla looked back at him. Something softened. “…Then maybe we will,” she said quietly. Bram’s face lit up. “That’s wonderful!” He clasped his hands together again, more animated now. “Every five hours, the bell rings. When it does, we stop. Completely. No talking. No movement. Just… stillness.” He smiled. “Then the bell rings again… and we continue. Just like the city always has.”

Fiora blinked. “Wait… Port of Nexus?” she asked. “I thought it was Porta Nexus?” Bram chuckled. “Some say it used to be called Port of Nexus. Others say that’s just what people misheard.” He shrugged lightly.

“The city changes. It always has.” His tone softened again. “But we’re still here.” Darla smiled without realizing it. Her tail gave a small, unconscious wag behind her. “I didn’t take you for the traditional type,” Alister said, arms crossed. Bram glanced at him not really saying anything. Alister huffed. “…I think I’ll pass,” he said after a moment. “I’ve got too much on my mind.” He turned and walked out. Bram didn’t seem bothered. If anything, he was just happy someone stayed. Jax passed by the doorway, already mid-inspection, tools in hand.

“Care to join us?” Bram called after him. Jax didn’t even slow down. “I don’t have time for your nonsense, Ashgarn.” He adjusted something on the wall as he spoke. “Some of us don’t have the luxury of standing still.” He glanced back briefly. “If I stop working, this whole place falls apart.” Then he was gone. Silence settled again. Not empty. Not awkward. Just… still, and for once. They didn’t rush to fill it.

A few hours later, they walked through the streets. Bram led the way, steady and purposeful. The city hadn’t gotten louder as the day went on. If anything, it had grown quieter. Most of the people out now were Nexians. It was… a sea of pink. Darla glanced around, taking it in. “…I don’t think I’ve ever seen this many of them in one place,” she admitted. “Where exactly are we going?” “To the shrine,” Bram said, like that explained everything. It didn’t. Before she could ask more. The bell rang. Instantly, the entire street stopped. Every person. Every step. Every motion. Gone. Still. Fiora took two more steps before realizing.

“…Oh.” She froze mid-stride, quickly trying to correct herself, snapping into place beside Darla. Her posture stiffened, eyes squeezing shut like that would somehow make it more convincing. She wobbled slightly. “…Do it for the hot himbo…” she whispered under her breath. Darla kicked her in the shin. Fiora went perfectly still. Time stretched. No one spoke. No one moved. Even the wind seemed to quiet itself, like it didn’t want to interrupt. Then. The bell rang again. The city exhaled. Movement returned all at once, like nothing had happened. Conversations didn’t resume. People

simply… continued. Walking. Existing. Like the pause had always been part of it. They kept moving.

It took longer than expected to reach the shrine. Transportation wasn't running. No shuttles. No lifts. No shortcuts. No one complained. The Nexians walked without hesitation, like the journey itself was part of the ritual. Eventually, the city gave way. Ahead of them, a massive mountain rose into the sky, its peak disappearing into the clouds. At its base, the shrine stretched outward, carved into the stone itself, and surrounding it. Stalls. Vendors lined the outer edges, selling trinkets, charms, food, little keepsakes labeled Stillfall Day Merchandise.

Darla frowned slightly. "…That feels wrong." Some Nexians passed by without a glance. Others lingered. A few looked openly disgusted. Bram didn't react. He just kept walking. After a moment, he slowed. "…I should probably say this now," he said, glancing back at them. "I have a few duties to take care of once we're inside." Fiora tilted her head. "Duties?" "I volunteer here," Bram said simply. "We help guide people, keep things running… small things like that." "Oh," Fiora said, nodding. Then perked up. "Wait, what kind of things?" Bram smiled. "Well… one of them is with the kids."

"The younger ones don't really understand Stillfall yet," Bram explained. "So we try to help them, in our own way." Darla raised an eyebrow. "…How?" Bram's smile widened just a little. "We put on a puppet show." A beat. Fiora blinked. "…A puppet show?" Bram nodded proudly. "The loudest event of the day," he added with a quiet chuckle. Then he gestured off to the side. "Oh, and you see that building over there?" he said. "You can rent outfits like mine. Traditional ones." He looked between them, a bit more earnest now. "I would be honored if you both wore them today."

"Absolutely," Fiora said immediately, a smirk already forming like she was planning something five steps ahead. Darla nodded, quieter. "…Alright." Bram beamed. "Wonderful! I'll meet you both at the shrine." With that, he turned and jogged up the steps, disappearing into the growing crowd. Darla watched him go. "…Bram is a man of many colors," she said thoughtfully. "Yeah," Fiora replied,

already heading toward the building. “But mostly pink.” Darla sighed, following her.

Inside, the space was lined with neatly arranged garments. Traditional Nexian attire, flowing, elegant, each one slightly different. The cuts varied, the patterns shifted, and the colors… were everywhere. Not just pink. Though there was a lot of pink. Fiora grabbed one immediately, holding it up with excitement. “Ooooh, this is perfect.” Moments later, she stepped out wearing the female variant, fitted differently, with softer lines and layered fabric that flowed when she moved. Each outfit was unique. Each one said something different.

Fiora struck a pose, throwing her arms above her head and puffing out her chest. “Finally,” she declared dramatically, “the world will witness my overwhelming feminine wiles and fall hopelessly in love with me.” She held the pose. Confident. Unshakable …There was nothing there. Darla opened her mouth. Then closed it. “…You look fine,” she said instead. “I know,” Fiora replied, completely serious.

Darla changed into her own outfit, more subdued, a yet red with subtle accents. It fit her better than she expected. She didn’t comment on that. They left without another word and began the climb.

The shrine stood above the clouds. Massive. Ancient. Multiple buildings spread across the mountain’s peak, each carved from stone and shaped with quiet intention. The main structure drew the largest crowd, while smaller halls sat off to the side, more isolated, more personal. The air felt different up here. Cleaner. Still. At the center of it all stood a familiar figure. Cassian. He stood beside another woman, his captain, both dressed in traditional Nexian attire. Their posture was perfect, breathing slow and measured, fully aligned with the ritual. For once… Cassian wasn’t talking.

Darla slowed slightly as they approached. “Cassian,” she said. “I didn’t expect you to be here. Even if you are...” She hesitated. “I am Nexian,” he finished for her. “As is she.” He opened his eyes, his usual composed expression already back in place. “But I don’t put much stock in the folklore,” he added. “This is simply a yearly formality. You two are the ones that stand out.” “Says the one obsessing over proper form in the main hall,” his captain muttered with a quiet sigh. Cassian’s eye twitched,

barely. “If I’m going to participate,” he said, more sharply than usual, “it will be done correctly. Regardless of personal belief.” That earned him a look. Not annoyed. Familiar. Darla shifted her attention. “…We’ve met,” she said to the woman. “Internal Investigations Captain. I’ll admit… I don’t know much about you.”

“That’s by design,” the captain replied calmly. Her voice was even. Measured. Like every word had already been chosen before she spoke it. “I’m...” She stopped. Just for a moment. Cassian glanced at her. Not a warning. Not quite. She adjusted. “Elaina... Elaina Kestrel.” She said coldly. Cassian smiled. “Well that about does it. We will be going now. Or at least I will be, Elaina?” He asked. “I'm coming I have nothing left here anyway.” She said with a sigh both of them leaving quickly.

“Well… I guess we should find Bram,” Darla said awkwardly as they moved forward. They didn’t have to look far. They stumbled into a small stage set up mid-performance. A group of young Nexians sat cross-legged, watching intently as colorful puppets moved across the stage. Bram stood beside it, acting as the narrator. “On that day… King Nexus was nearing the end,” he said gently. On the stage, a puppet of the king lay still in a small bed. A dog puppet paced beside him, trembling.

“Oh my… what are we going to do? Oh great king, you are the foundation!” it barked.

Darla couldn’t help it, she let out a quiet laugh at the dramatization of her people. A cat puppet stepped forward, calmer. “Relax, you silly dog. Everything will be fine… right, Mr. King?” Bram’s tone softened. “But the king did not move. He said nothing.” More puppets rushed onto the stage, voices overlapping in panic. “Oh no! Oh no!” Then. Stillness. “The king only smiled,” Bram continued, “looking upon his closest friends as they worried.” The chaos slowed. “In his final breath… he spoke.”

The puppets froze. “My friends… I have lived a wondrous life. And you have all been a part of it. I enjoyed every moment.” Bram’s voice carried the line with quiet warmth. “Though the beginning was different from the end… thank you for staying with me.” The king puppet slowly stilled… and was gently lifted from the stage. No music. No movement. Just silence.

The children shifted. Some frowned. One hugged their knees. Then the dog puppet spoke again, softer this time. “…I’m sad the king is gone.” A pause. “But… he wouldn’t want us to stay sad forever.” The cat nodded. “He told us himself. The world has changed.” It looked out toward the others. “So… we keep living. Together.” The other puppets slowly began to move again. Not loudly. Not wildly. Just… forward. Darla raised an eyebrow slightly at that part, but didn’t interrupt. The curtain closed. Bram stepped forward with a small smile. “Today, we stand still,” he said. “We remember what was… so we can decide what will be.” A breath. “And then… we live.”

The reactions were mixed. Some kids clapped. Some just sat there, thinking. One little girl raised her hand. “Hey… you kinda look like the king!” Bram blinked, caught off guard. “…I do?” he said with a small laugh. “I suppose I never thought about it. I’m honored,” he added, softer now. “Though I don’t know if I believe it myself.” Another child leaned forward. “Maybe he didn’t die.” Bram tilted his head. “Maybe he just… forgot.” The room went quiet again. “…And now you don’t remember either,” the kid finished. Bram opened his mouth. Then stopped. He didn’t have an answer.

After an awkward silence, the children eventually scattered, already laughing, already forgetting. The stage was empty again. Darla and Fiora made their way back over to Bram. “…That was an interesting show,” Darla said, still thinking about the way the dogs and cats had been portrayed. Bram rubbed the back of his neck with a small laugh. “You think so? Well… it was a good millennium ago. I’m sure there are a few inaccuracies.” He glanced toward the now-empty seats. “We try to keep it digestible for the kids,” he added. “The message matters more than the details.”

Fiora suddenly stepped in front of Darla, striking a pose that she clearly thought was impressive. “Right, yeah, totally,” she said, smirking. “So... how do I look?” Bram blinked, then smiled. “You both look great,” he said honestly. “I’m really glad you agreed to this. Truly.” There was a small pause. “…Most people don’t,” he admitted, the smile fading just slightly. Darla noticed. She

didn’t comment. Instead, she shifted the conversation. “So… what’s next?” Bram perked up a bit. “Well, there’s only really one thing left,” he said. “Unless you want to try the positions…” He paused. “…Actually, I think I’ll skip those this year too. They might be a bit much for outsiders.” He turned, motioning them to follow. “Come on. We go to the bell. We bow, we remain still… and then we move on.” A small grin returned. “And after that… we go home, eat way too much, and get drunk.” Fiora lit up instantly. “Ooo, now that part I understand!”

They followed him up the mountain. The higher they climbed, the quieter it became. Fewer people. Fewer voices. Just the wind and the soft shuffle of footsteps. At the very top, The bell. Massive. Ancient. Still. Darla slowed slightly as she looked at it. “…I’m surprised I’ve never heard of this place,” she admitted. Bram smiled. “It’s out of the way,” he said. “But this?” He gestured up at the bell. “You can hear it across the entire world.” Then. It rang. Not loud. Not violent. Just… absolute. It filled everything. Darla felt it more than she heard it. They bowed, and stood still. No movement. No words. Just… presence. For a moment. Nothing else mattered. Not the gangs. Not the corruption. Not the choices waiting for them. Just this. Maybe standing still… wasn’t the same as standing by. Then the bell rang again, and just like that. They moved. Darla exhaled quietly as they stepped forward. Not back. Forward. Toward whatever came next.

Chapter 10: Stigma

A human man laughed as he stepped into a massive bed room, the room around him lavish and warm. Blonde hair. Green eyes. Easy smile. A swarm of children followed him eight, maybe more climbing, circling, talking all at once. A woman entered behind them, brown fur and a soft snout, her presence immediately calming the chaos. She leaned in, licking his cheek affectionately. He chuckled. “Alright, alright, calm down,” he said, raising his hands slightly. “It’s time for bed.” A small voice cut through the noise. “But dad... you said you’d read us a story!” One of the children pushed forward, fur like her mother’s, eyes wide. He knelt down, ruffling her hair. “And I will,” he said warmly. “Everyone into bed.”

It took a bit of wrangling, but eventually they settled, piled together under blankets, pressed close. The man and woman lay back among them, surrounded. He opened a large picture book.

“This,” he began, “is the story of Porta Nexus.” The room quieted. “Once, there was a great king. Wise. Powerful. Beloved. But even as his kingdom prospered…” He paused slightly. “…he felt it was stagnating.” A small hand raised. “What’s… stagnating?” The man smiled gently. “It means things

weren't growing anymore," he explained. "Not changing. Just… staying the same." The child nodded, satisfied.

He continued. "King Nexus held the power to shape the world itself. And one day… he made a decision." The illustration showed a balcony, the king standing tall. "He raised his arms and said... 'Let us experience all cultures. All places. Let us grow together as one.'" The page turned. "And so… it was done." Portals filled the sky. "People came from everywhere." The children leaned in closer. "First came the dogs," he said, putting on a playful tone. "That's us!" one of them shouted proudly. "That's right," he said with a grin. "They arrived broken. Hurt. Lost." The picture showed wounded figures, being helped up. "And the king spared no effort helping them recover. The Dogenridge… and others like them… were so grateful, they swore to protect him. To protect everything he built."

He nodded slightly, like that part mattered. Then, He took a small breath. "Then came the cats." A few of the children immediately booed. "Hey, hey," he said gently. "That's not fair." He turned the page. "The cats came for the same reason as the dogs," he continued. "They admired the king. They wanted to help." A pause. "They just had… different ways of doing things." The children didn't look convinced. He smiled anyway. "And then came the rest." The pages turned faster now. "Dragons. Rats. Ox. Tigers. Rabbits. Snakes. Horses. Demons. Humans. Avians. Pigs…" He chuckled. "And even a few strange little aliens." The illustrations filled with color. Diversity. Movement. "And together…" He looked down at them. "…they built this city." A small hand tugged at his sleeve. "As friends?" He smiled. "…Yes."

One of them stayed awake. Barely. The only one of two without fur. "…Daddy?" she whispered, her voice soft, fighting sleep. "What is it, Darla?" he asked gently. She shifted slightly, eyes half-lidded. "…Why do the cats and dogs always argue… if we're friends?" The room went quiet. He hesitated. Just for a moment. His eyes flicked toward his wife. She didn't answer. So he did. "Well…" he said slowly, choosing his words carefully, "we just… disagree sometimes. About how to

make things better." Darla frowned slightly. "…But that's okay," he added quickly, smiling again. "Because when it really matters…" He brushed her hair back. "…everyone comes together." His voice softened. "We fight for what's right. We protect the city we all love." Darla smiled, comforted. "… Okay." Her eyes finally closed.

Years later... Fire. Heat pressed in from every direction. Smoke choked the air. Darla coughed, stumbling forward, her arms wrapped tightly around her younger brother as she dragged him through the burning halls. Something collapsed behind them. She didn't look back. Screams echoed in the distance. Too many. She burst through the doorway into the open air, collapsing to her knees as she dragged him outside. For a second. She thought they made it. Then she saw him. Her father stood in the courtyard. Still. Unmoving, and beside him. A towering lizard-like figure. Massive. Silent. Watching.

Darla froze. "…Dad?" He turned. His eyes found hers immediately.

There was something there. Not fear. Not anger. Something… heavier. He looked at her. At the child in her arms. Then, He smiled. "…Stay strong, Darla." The world seemed to stop. For just a second. Then. the blade came down. Clean. Effortless. He didn't even resist. The body fell. The figure didn't look at her again. It simply turned, and flew. Darla couldn't move. Couldn't breathe. Couldn't think. Darla woke up with a sharp gasp. Cold. Shaking. Her hands clutched her knees tightly, pulling herself in as if that could hold her together. Her breath came uneven. Slowly. Painfully. It had been a long time… Since she'd had that dream. "When it mattered...." She said to herself.

She got up anyway. The dream clung to her, heavy and cold, but she forced herself to move. Routine. Structure. Something solid. She dressed quickly, adjusting her uniform in the grainy, cracked mirror. She stared at her reflection for a moment. Then took a deep breath, and smiled. The uniform made her feel safe. That was enough. She left the room.

The others were already in the training room. Alister and Bram stood in the center, wooden blades clashing. Bram swung wide, Alister stepped in, clean and precise, knocking the weapon from his

hands. Bram laughed, raising his hands. “Well, you got me. Guess they don’t call you captain for nothing. Former or otherwise.” He stretched his arm, shaking it out. “Bet you couldn’t beat me with a rifle though.” Alister snorted. “For once, I agree.” He glanced up as Darla entered. “Oh, look who finally woke up,” he said, lifting his blade slightly. “Care for a match?” She sighed, already reaching for a training sword. “…Fine,” she said. “I could use it.” “To use what?” Fiora asked from the side. “… Nothing.” Darla stepped forward. “Let’s begin.”

She moved first. Fast. No hesitation. The first strike slammed into Alister’s guard hard enough to rattle him. Then another, and another. He barely had time to adjust as she pressed forward, her blows sharp, controlled, but heavier than usual. “…Okay,” he muttered, stepping back. “That’s new.” He found his rhythm quickly, parrying, redirecting, matching her pace, but it was clear. She was pushing harder. After a few minutes, he dropped back, breathing out as he lowered his sword. “Alright, I yield,” he said, slumping slightly. “What’s your deal today?” He glanced at her. “I haven’t seen you spar like that since private school.” Darla looked away. “…Don’t worry about it.”

Bram just laughed, stretching again. Fiora, meanwhile, had completely stopped paying attention. She stared off at the wall, eyes unfocused. Alister noticed immediately. He smirked. “Now, there’s a lesson here,” he said, lowering his stance slightly. “We train to stay sharp…” His voice dropped just enough. “…and sometimes to get a little payback.” He lunged. Fast. Straight for Fiora. She moved instantly. No hesitation. No confusion. Her expression snapped sharp, focused. She stepped aside, caught his arm mid-strike, and flipped him cleanly over her shoulder. Alister hit the ground hard.

The room went quiet. “…Ow,” he groaned. Bram blinked. “…Dang, Fenleigh,” he said slowly. “You’re full of surprises.” Fiora blinked. Her face reset immediately. “Oh uh yeah!” she said, scratching the back of her head. “That was… beginner’s luck?” Silence. They stared at her. She smiled wider. “… Right?” No one bought it.

Before they could say anything else, shouting echoed down the hallway. “What the hell are you

doing here?!" A second voice followed, sharp and cutting. "I'd like to ask you the same thing, Callum. He didn't tell me you were stationed in this… place." The room went quiet. One by one, they drifted toward the doorway, peeking out. Captain Elaina stood in the hall, arms crossed, posture rigid. Jax stood across from her, equally tense. "I don't go by that anymore," he snapped. "And I sure as hell didn't ask for your opinion either. So why don't you go back to your polished little headquarters and stay out of my work?"

Elaina didn't flinch. "Oh, please," she said coldly. "I was the best thing that ever happened to you. You know that." Jax barked a short laugh. "I'd rather go back to prison than spend another minute dealing with you." The tension snapped tight. "…Ms. Elaina?" Fiora said cautiously, stepping just enough into view to be noticed. Elaina's eyes flicked over instantly. Assessing. Alister stepped forward slightly. "…What is this?" he asked. "She was just leaving," Jax said quickly. "Why the hostility?" Bram asked, genuinely confused. Jax exhaled sharply, running a hand through his hair.

"You don't know her like I do," he muttered. "…We used to have… history." Elaina scoffed. "I don't want to be here either," she said, folding her arms tighter. "I'm here because my..." She stopped. Jax moved instantly, grabbing her arm. A warning. A look. She corrected smoothly. "… because the administrator sent me," she finished, her tone flattening. "I have a mission for you."

The room shifted. Jax yanked his arm back, already turning away. "…Great," he muttered. "Just what we needed." He walked off down the hall without looking back. "Well," he called over his shoulder, "don't let the door hit you on the way out." Then he was gone.

"Oh, a mission?" Bram perked up immediately. "That's perfect. Lunch is almost ready. Come join us, Ms. Elaina. Don't worry, I made plenty," Bram said, smiling like nothing had happened five minutes ago. "I am not sharing a table with that prune," Elaina said flatly. "Don't worry," Fiora waved it off. "He never eats with us. I just take it to him wherever he's brooding later." Elaina exhaled slowly, clearly ready to refuse. Then her stomach growled. Loud. "…Fine," she said.

They sat around the table together. If you could call it that. The surface was uneven, one leg shorter than the others, forcing Bram to subtly steady it with his foot. Elaina noticed immediately. Her eyes flicked across the room, taking in the cracked walls, exposed wiring. A piece of the ceiling fell somewhere in the distance. "…I think after this mission," she said slowly, "you should strongly consider convincing Cassian to address… all of this." She gestured vaguely. The entire base. Then she took a bite. She froze. Her eyes widened, just slightly. A faint flush crept into her cheeks before she forced her expression back into place. "…This is..." She stopped herself. Composed. "…acceptable."

Fiora grinned. "First time?" she teased. "Man's a god in the kitchen." Elaina cleared her throat. "…I must concur." Darla leaned forward slightly. "So. The mission?" Elaina set her utensils down. Now she looked like herself again. Focused. Sharp. "I came in person because this information is… sensitive," she said. A brief pause. "The former Chancellor's daughter has been kidnapped. She's being held outside the city." The room went still. "…What?" Alister leaned forward. "Chancellor Morvin?"

"Yes," Elaina confirmed. "Though he seems more concerned with keeping this quiet than retrieving her." Alister scoffed under his breath. "…Of course he does." He leaned back, thinking. "At first I thought it was leverage," he muttered. "Keep it quiet so they don't escalate…" He shook his head. "No. There's an election coming up." His expression darkened. "…He's running again, isn't he?"

Elaina gave a small nod. Fiora blinked. "Wait, what's a Chancellor?" she asked. "And where is he running to?" Darla sighed. "The Chancellor is the elected head of Porta Nexus," she explained. "He's not literally running. He's campaigning." "Ohhh," Fiora nodded. "Like trying to convince people he's cool again." "…Not the word I'd use," Darla muttered. Alister cut in, more sharply this time. "During the Siege, he abandoned the city and hid in a bunker," he said. "That's why Garrick's been holding things together since." Fiora blinked again. "…Sometimes I pay attention," she muttered defensively.

Bram leaned forward slightly. “So why us?” he asked. “Wouldn’t this fall to the Military Division? Or the Peacekeepers?” “It does,” Elaina replied evenly. “They already have the location surrounded. But the kidnappers made their terms very clear.” Her voice lowered just a fraction. “If they move any closer…” She let the silence hang for a beat, eyes passing over each of them. “…they kill her.” The room went cold. Elaina continued, more controlled now. “Cassian knows what each of you is capable of. He believes this is the kind of situation your division was made for.” She paused, choosing her words carefully. “You’re to meet with Mathias Captain of the Military Division. Coordinate with him, and find a way inside without triggering the hostage condition. Then you extract the Chancellor’s daughter.” No one spoke.

Darla was the first to break the silence. “…I’ve never met this captain. What’s he like?” Elaina hesitated for the briefest moment. “Calculating,” she said. Then, after a beat, “And not the kind that explains himself.” Alister let out a small breath, a faint smile forming. “Perfect. Then he already has a plan.” “Let’s go save her!” Fiora said, the words coming out a little too bright for the room. Everyone turned to look at her. “Fenleigh… this mission is...” Bram started, softer than usual. Fiora’s expression fell. She nodded once. “…I know.” That was enough. No one needed to say anything else. They moved. Gear was gathered without discussion. Weapons checked. Armor secured. Within minutes, they were filing into the transport Elaina had already prepared, the weight of the mission settling in as the doors sealed behind them.

They flew out of the city. Most of the planet was covered by Porta Nexus, sprawling and dense, but a full third of it still remained untouched. Wild. Quiet. Forgotten, and there, cutting into that untouched land. An impossibly old fortress. It stood like it had always been there. Weathered. Silent. Watching. Surrounding it was nearly half the Military Division. Darla spotted her brother off to the side, standing with the Peacekeepers, holding a firm line. Nearby, a green-haired reporter was trying, and failing, to push past him.

“No. This is a Port Authority matter. No press,” her brother said sternly. “Come on,” the reporter pushed, clearly frustrated. “My boss wants eyes on this, damn it, why didn’t he send Crow? They’d already be inside…” he muttered. Darla passed by without stopping, giving her brother a small, respectful nod. He returned it just as quietly. There wasn’t time for more. A large brown bear man rushed toward them, slightly out of breath but focused. “You’re the team? Good, good. They told us you were coming. The captain’s waiting. This way.” They followed immediately.

As they moved through the encampment, they passed multiple squads, each led by a Warden. Every group felt… different. Specialized. An elven woman, calm, precise, almost deceptively normal. A honey badger man, compact, tense, the kind of presence that radiated raw, dangerous resilience, and a towering alien woman with four arms, each one moving independently as she adjusted gear. “They’re not holding back,” Bram murmured, eyes scanning the field. “Each of them is strong… in their own way.” The bear led them to a command tent, pushing the flap open slightly. “Mathias. They’re here.”

“I see.” The voice was measured. Controlled. A moment later, the figure stepped out. Darla froze. Then her expression twisted subtle, but unmistakable. Her eyes sharpened into something cold. Something personal. He was tall. A lizard man. Immaculate posture. A monocle resting neatly over one eye. He looked at her, and in that look, there was recognition. Understanding, and absolutely no care.

“…What are one of you still doing in the Port?” Darla asked, her voice barely above a whisper. Everyone else looked at her, surprised.

Mathias didn’t react. “Some of us still believe in it,” he said calmly. Then, without pause, he shifted his attention to the rest of the group. “Now. I’ve found a way to use your team.” Just like that.

Business. “There’s a hidden tunnel in the original blueprints. Recently uncovered. Structural integrity is… questionable.” A slight pause. “But it leads directly inside. If you move carefully, you should be able to extract the target without detection.” Darla’s breathing had gone shallow. Tight. Controlled. She processed the information. Forced it down. “…Understood,” she said shortly. The others exchanged

glances. This wasn't like her. Not with Alister. Not with anyone. This was something else. Something deeper.

But, as always. Darla chose duty. "We move now," she said, already turning away. Mathias watched her go, then exhaled quietly. Fiora leaned forward, whispering, "What was th..." Alister clamped a hand over her mouth immediately. "…That," he said flatly, "is not a subject we bring up."

And just like that, They moved.

Chapter 11: Coming Together

Darla and the others moved through the tunnel. It was dark. Wet. The air clung to them. Alister pinched his nose. “Ugh what is that smell? I know they said this used to be a sewer, but that was hundreds of years ago.” Darla glanced back at him with a flat look. She could smell it far worse than he could. “You should’ve grabbed one of the cool masks,” Fiora said. Alister flinched slightly as she leaned into view, wearing a creepy-looking gas mask. “Where did you even get that?” Bram asked. “They were handing them out for free.” She said. “Who?” they all asked. Fiora pointed vaguely behind them. “…Them.” They all paused. Then, collectively, decided not to ask, and kept moving.

The kidnappers were unraveling. Every one of them wore black, but none of them looked unified anymore. The leader paced the room, boots tapping harder with every step. “What are they waiting for?” he snapped. “Call him. Now.” One of the men scrambled, activating a hologram. It flickered to life. A figure appeared. Black jacket. Skull patch, but his face. A robotic mask, shifting through distorted emotes before settling on a warped skull. He didn’t speak. The leader stepped forward, voice tight.

“We did what you said. Now what? Do we ask for money? Are you even watching this? They’ve got the whole damn army out there!” The figure tilted his head slightly. Then laughed. Low. Distorted. “No… nothing like that... Now you just die.” Silence. The leader stared at him, the words not landing at first. “…What?” His voice cracked. “That’s not what we agreed to.” The figure didn’t move. “The only thing we agreed on was for you to kidnap her. If you don’t want to die… then don’t... It hardly matters to me. The job is done.” The leader’s hand trembled. Then the feed cut. He didn’t even remember ending it. For a moment, he just stood there.

Then, Rage. He kicked the projector hard enough to send it skidding across the floor. “Damn it!” He turned sharply, storming toward the girl. She flinched as he ripped the gag free. “This is all your fault...” She shook her head, voice breaking. “My father will pay, please...” He laughed. Not amused. Not even angry. Just hollow. “No, he won’t.” That hit harder than anything else. He turned away, running a hand through his hair, breathing uneven. “Maybe they will,” he muttered. He pointed at one of his men. “Go. Tell them ten million central credits. One hour.... Or she dies.” The man hesitated. Then ran. The room fell quiet again. No one felt in control.

Slowly, Darla climbed out of the hole, pulling herself onto solid ground. She turned immediately, reaching back down. “Alister.” He grabbed her arm, and she hauled him up. Then Fiora. Easy. Then she looked at Bram. “…Right.” Alister caught on quickly. He stepped over, knocking against the stone beside the opening. “It’s brittle,” he said after a moment. “I think.” Bram nodded once. They all stepped back. He jumped. Not climbed, launched. He slammed into the wall like a cannonball. The stone cracked, then gave way completely, opening the hole wide enough for him to pull himself through. He stood, brushing dust off his shoulders. Then the ceiling groaned. Darla’s ears lifted sharply. “Wait...” Too late. The tunnel collapsed behind them, stone crashing down and sealing the entrance.

Silence followed. Alister stared at it for a second, then sighed. “…Drat. Guess we’re finding

another way out." Darla tilted her head slightly, listening. Nothing. No footsteps. No voices. They hadn't been heard. "We're clear," she said. "Let's move." Alister nodded, his tone shifting, sharper now. "Mathias said there are around forty hostiles. Stay alert. If they discover us, the mission's over."

Everyone nodded. The fortress was a labyrinth. Old. Twisting. Forgotten. They moved carefully through its halls, keeping low, sticking to shadows. The kidnappers were scattered, too scattered. It made things easier.

Too easy. They slipped past patrol after patrol with barely any resistance. Alister frowned as they moved. "How did amateurs like this pull off a kidnapping like this in the first place?" "Everyone has bad days," Bram said simply. Darla shook her head slightly. "…Or their real fighters are with her."

That sat heavier. They kept moving. Room after room. Hall after hall. Nothing. Just small patrols and empty space. Then the comm crackled to life. "Special Operations, do you read me?" Mathias. Alister tapped his earpiece. "Reading. What is it, Captain? The kidnappers have issued terms." Darla stiffened. "They're demanding payment in exchange for the hostage," Mathias continued. "But even if we were willing… there isn't enough time. You have twenty minutes." Silence. "After that," he finished, voice flat, "they execute the girl."

"We need to pick up the pace." Darla moved first, pushing forward without waiting for a response. The others followed immediately, falling in behind her without question as they began clearing rooms more quickly this time, their movements less precise as urgency took over. Then they found it. At the center of the base, a massive room opened up before them. The leader stood in the middle, pacing in tight, restless circles, while another man held a gun directly to the girl's face, his eyes flicking down to his watch. "Five minutes left," he said with a tired sigh. "No response."

Darla stilled, her focus sharpening instantly as she assessed the situation. There were five of them in the room. One was the immediate threat, the one with the gun. The others were dangerous, but not in direct control of the hostage. She glanced at her team. "Bram," she said quietly, pointing toward

the gunman, “do you think you can make that shot without hitting her? We are at level three. Live ammo.” Bram scratched his chin, studying the distance. “Well, gee… I’m not sure,” he admitted. “I’m pretty good, but I don’t know if I’d trust myself with that.” His gaze shifted downward. “…What about Fenleigh?”

At first, both Darla and Alister looked confused by the suggestion. Then they remembered. Every strange moment. Every time she had done something that shouldn’t have worked. “The Vultures…” Darla said, thinking it through. Fiora immediately shook her head. “No, I… I can’t do stuff like that,” she said quickly. “I just got lucky. I’m just dumb ol’ Fenleigh.” Alister stepped forward and placed a hand on her shoulder, forcing her to meet his eyes. “Fiora,” he said, his tone unusually steady, “I’ll admit you are an absolute idiot, but even I can’t deny it. You might be our best choice here.” He held her there for a second longer. “Please.” Fiora hesitated, her confidence slipping. “…What if I miss?” she asked, quieter now.

“You won’t,” Bram said with a warm, reassuring smile. “We believe in you.” That seemed to settle it, even if she didn’t fully believe it herself. “…Fine,” she muttered, forcing the words out. “I’ll do it, but don’t complain if I...” She stopped when she realized they were already moving. They had taken positions without waiting for her to finish. They trusted her completely. Her expression dropped, the usual act slipping for just a moment. “…Stupid… I can’t pretend…” she whispered under her breath. She pulled out the rifle and lined up the shot, her breathing steadying as everything else fell away.

Darla raised two fingers. Then motioned forward. Fiora fired. The shot was clean and immediate, the bullet tearing through the gunman’s head before he could react. His body dropped to the floor as the others surged forward. Darla moved first, closing the distance and slashing into the leader before he could recover. Alister followed, taking down the next two in quick succession, his movements precise and controlled. The last man panicked and lunged toward the hostage, but Bram

stepped in before he could reach her, driving a powerful punch into him and knocking him to the ground before securing the girl safely behind him. Within seconds, it was over.

Bram moved quickly, kneeling beside the girl and cutting through the bindings with a calm, reassuring smile. The moment she was free, she threw herself into him, breaking down as the tension finally snapped. “It’s okay,” Bram said gently, holding her steady. “We’ve got you. You’re safe.”

Alister stepped in, more focused, already scanning the room. “It’s not over yet, so stay sharp,” he said. “We still have to get out of here.” The girl nodded, trying to steady herself. Alister tapped his comm. “Mathias, we’ve secured the hostage.” “Excellent,” Mathias replied immediately. “We are moving in to support you. Maintain position and keep her safe.”

A low rumble echoed through the structure as the military began their advance. On the ground, the leader coughed, barely conscious. He pressed a shaking hand to his earpiece. “They… have the hostage,” he rasped. “Sto… p them…” His hand fell still. Darla’s ears lifted as she listened, her expression tightening. “They’re coming from that direction,” she said, pointing down the hallway they had entered through. Everyone understood immediately. They ran the opposite way.

Outside, the green-haired reporter was still trying to push past the perimeter. Darla’s brother held his ground, blocking him without budging. Then everything shifted. The Military Division surged forward in unison, splitting into coordinated squads and storming the fortress from multiple entry points, with Mathias himself leading the main charge. That moment of movement was all the reporter needed. He slipped through. “Hey, what are you doing? Get back here!” Darla’s brother barked, already moving after him.

Inside, gunfire erupted. The kidnappers regrouped faster than expected, chasing them down the corridors and firing as they ran. The entire structure shook under the combined pressure of the assault and the collapsing interior. Then another group appeared ahead, cutting off their path. “Split!” Darla shouted. Fiora grabbed the girl and pulled her into a nearby room just as bullets tore through the space

they had occupied. The wall behind them collapsed under the impact, sealing the path they had come from. Fiora blinked, staring at the debris. "…Oh. Um. Crap." The girl looked at her, terrified. "Don't worry," Fiora said quickly. "I'm… strong." It did not help. "Let's go this way," she added, already pulling her toward a broken section of wall.

Back in the corridor, Bram tried to force his way through the collapsed passage, but the rubble held firm. "We don't have a choice," Darla said, already moving. She drove her blade into one of the attackers, while Alister struck from the opposite side, taking another down cleanly. "There are at least thirty left," Alister said, his tone tight. Bram exhaled slowly, centering himself before stepping forward to join them.

The Military Division carved through the fortress with overwhelming force. Squads moved with precision, cutting down resistance and pushing deeper into the structure. It should have been a clean sweep. But they still hadn't found Special Operations. Despite everything they cleared, the target remained out of reach.

Fiora led the girl through a narrow hallway, her grip firm but steady. Then, ten men rushed toward them, weapons already raised. They opened fire immediately. Fiora yanked the girl back behind the corner just in time, the bullets tearing into the wall where they had been standing. She exhaled sharply, frustration bleeding through. "…Hey," she said, her voice dropping, more serious than usual. "Don't tell anyone about this, okay?" The girl blinked, confused. "What are you..." Fiora was already moving.

She pulled out her rifle, then quickly tied strips of fabric from her clothes around it and her sword, tightening them with practiced efficiency. Then she stepped out. The first shot dropped a man instantly. She closed the distance without slowing, driving the rifle forward like a blade and slamming into the next, using it like an oversized bayonet. Another three fell to clean, precise headshots before they could adjust. The remaining five froze, caught completely off guard. Fiora didn't. She moved

through them in a blur, spinning between their positions, cutting and striking in a single continuous motion. By the time they reacted, it was already over. They collapsed one after another. Fiora stood in the middle of them, breathing steady, her expression completely different now. “Pathetic,” she said flatly. No act. No smile. Just truth.

Darla and the others pushed through the halls at full speed, boots echoing against stone as they followed the path of destruction ahead of them. Bodies. Walls torn apart. Clean, efficient takedowns.

Darla slowed slightly, eyes narrowing. “…Who did this?” she said, clearly thrown. “Maybe the Military Division came this way?” “It must have been,” Alister replied without hesitation, even as something about it didn’t quite sit right. They kept moving. “Hey, look!” Bram called out. Ahead of them, Fiora came into view, leading the girl through the corridor. Just beyond her stood Mathias, already stepping forward to intercept.

“Targets located,” he said immediately, voice sharp and commanding. “All units, converge on my position. We are extracting now.” Fiora didn’t slow as she passed him, the girl still in tow. Within seconds, the surrounding forces closed in, forming a protective formation around them as they began pushing toward the exit. They were close now. So close.

Near the outer corridor, the green-haired reporter stumbled along behind them, camera still clutched in his hands despite everything. Behind him, one of the kidnappers gave chase. “Why did I think this was a good idea?” the reporter shouted, panic breaking through his voice. Darla’s brother caught up in a flash, cutting the attacker down before he could close the distance. “You tell me!” he snapped, grabbing the reporter and forcing him forward. The group surged past them, momentum carrying everyone toward the exit. “Captain,” Mathias called back without stopping, “get that reporter to safety.” Darla’s brother sighed, clearly annoyed, but followed anyway, dragging the reporter along.

“Alright, alright,” the reporter said quickly, hands raised. “I’m going, I’m going. I’ve seen enough.”

They burst out into the open. Sunlight hit them hard after the darkness inside, the brightness almost blinding for a moment. The forces stationed outside erupted into motion, cheering and calling out as the rescued girl was quickly escorted deeper into their protective lines. It should have been over.

Mathias slowed near the entrance, turning back toward Special Operations. “Well done,” he said, genuine approval in his voice. “I’ll admit, I wasn’t sure about you when Cassian said you were coming. But we wouldn’t have pulled this off without you.” Darla didn’t look at him. She didn’t respond.

Behind them, the reporter had already recovered, snapping pictures rapidly now that the danger seemed to have passed. But it hadn’t. Not quite. From the darkness of the fortress, a single figure staggered forward. One of the kidnappers. Half-dead. Bleeding. But still standing. His eyes burned with something desperate. Not fear. Not survival. Spite. He raised his weapon with shaking hands, barely able to hold it steady, and fired. The shots tore through the air. Straight toward Darla. No one had time to react. Except one. Mathias moved instantly.

He stepped in front of her without hesitation, placing himself directly in the line of fire. The bullets struck him hard, forcing a cry from his throat as the impact drove him back. His scales absorbed some of the force, but not enough. He dropped to one knee, his breath catching as the pain set in. Darla froze. Her eyes widened, confusion crashing through her as she looked down at him. “…Why…?”

Her voice barely came out, trembling as tears welled despite herself. Mathias let out a strained breath, his body shaking under the pain as he tried to stay conscious. “I was a child then too…” he said, his voice uneven but steady enough to carry. “My people… they were wrong.” He forced himself to look at her. “We have to come together.”

The strength left him. He collapsed fully, his body going limp as nearby soldiers rushed in immediately. “Move, move!” They dropped beside him, working quickly and efficiently, stabilizing him before lifting him onto a stretcher. Within moments, they were already carrying him away. Darla didn’t move. Her gaze stayed locked on him as he disappeared into the crowd, her expression caught

between too many emotions to name. One of the soldiers glanced back at her, offering a quick, reassuring nod. “He’ll be fine,” he said. “Our captain’s tough. He’s not going down that easy.” Darla didn’t answer. She just stood there, still watching where he had been.

Chapter 12: Finally Recognition!

Things had finally calmed. The Military Division had mostly pulled out, leaving only a handful of personnel behind to clean up what remained. The air still smelled faintly of smoke and dust, but the chaos was gone. A sleek, expensive-looking airship descended from the sky, lowering itself into the ruins with far more grace than anything that had just taken place there deserved. The doors opened. Former Chancellor Morvin stepped out immediately, posture straight, expression already arranged into something smug and self-satisfied. “Perfect,” he said, clapping his hands once. “You rescued her just like I expected.” Special Operations collectively sighed. Behind them, the green-haired reporter immediately started snapping pictures.

Before Morvin could say anything else. “Whatever, you didn’t do anything!” his daughter snapped, turning on him. “I hate you, Dad. I’m going to go live with Mom!” Morvin blinked. “What?” He looked genuinely confused for a second. Then he noticed the reporter. “Hey... no, you get out of here. No press!” he snapped, immediately shifting gears. His daughter stared at him for a moment. Then just… left. She walked off with one of the escort squads without waiting for him to catch up,

without waiting for him to notice. He didn't. Not really.

Morvin ground his teeth, watching her go for half a second before forcing himself to reset. His posture straightened again, expression smoothing out like nothing had happened. He turned toward Darla and the others. "Well," he said, taking a measured breath, already slipping back into performance, "Captain of Peacekeeping… I knew it was the correct decision to send you personally."

His eyes shifted. "And you as well, Captain of Intelligence." There was a brief pause. Alister stepped forward slightly, his smile thin. "Before you start rewriting the story," he said in mock formality, "you might want to get your facts straight, sir." "Or watch the news," Bram added casually. "It's been about half a year."

Morvin stared at them. "…Why would I do..." He stopped himself, waving it off. "Whatever."

He straightened again. "I would like to reward you all for saving my daughter," he said smoothly. Then, quieter, just under his breath. "…and make me look good." Fiora's hand shot up immediately. "Ooo! I want street tacos. From the guy on 32nd street!" There was a beat. Morvin blinked. "…That's… all?"

Fiora nodded enthusiastically. "Very well," he said slowly, clearly trying not to sound disgusted. "That makes things… easier. We will get your… street tacos." His eyes shifted to the reporter, who was still snapping pictures. "As for you," Morvin said, voice tightening, "what would it take to ensure you don't… misrepresent this moment?"

The reporter shrugged. "My boss always says the facts are the facts." Alister scoffed, clearly irritated. "The facts of Founders Day..." "Look, man, I don't know what you want from me," the reporter cut in quickly, suddenly nervous. "It looked pretty bad at the time. I mean, there was that other thing, I guess, but..." He looked around. Everyone was staring at him. "…Oh wow, look at the time, I gotta go," he said quickly, backing away. Then he turned and ran. "Reporters," Alister muttered. "Reporters," Morvin echoed at the exact same time. They both paused. Morvin glanced at him. "Oh?

Did they slander you too?"

"Yes, he di..." The started to say "Enough." Darla's voice cut through cleanly. She stepped forward, sharper now, fully present again. "That's not what happened," she said firmly. "And you know it." Alister started to respond, but she grabbed his arm and pulled him back before he could. "Goodbye, Mister Morvin," she added, giving a polite bow that didn't carry even a hint of respect. Then she turned and walked away, dragging Alister with her. The others followed without question. Morvin watched them go, his expression shifting slightly. Not angry. Not impressed. Just… curious. "…Get me everything you can on those people," he said quietly to one of his aides. The aide nodded.

They made their way back toward the transport they'd arrived in. Only to find empty space. "…Well," Alister said flatly, looking around. "Now what?" A loud honk answered him. All of them looked up just in time to see something ridiculous drop out of the sky. A flying convertible. It descended smoothly, far too smoothly for what it was, and landed right beside them with a soft, controlled hum. Cassian sat behind the wheel, wearing sunglasses. "Excellent work," he said casually. "Get in. We have much to take care of." Bram and Fiora both stared at the vehicle like it had just descended from heaven. "…A 1216 flying Montyrolla?" they said in perfect unison. Cassian lowered his shades slightly, smirking. "It sure is."

He tapped the side of the car. "Try not to ruin the seats with your… mission stench." They all hesitated. Then, reluctantly, climbed in. Fiora immediately claimed the front seat. The rest piled into the back. Without another word, the car lifted smoothly into the air. "Where are we going?" Alister asked after a moment. "You'll see," Cassian replied, as cryptic as ever. Darla didn't speak. She stared out over the city, her reflection faint in the glass, still somewhere else entirely. Bram, meanwhile, looked like he was having the time of his life.

It didn't take long before they arrived. The Port Authority's main office rose up ahead of them massive, polished, and impossibly clean compared to everything they had just come from. Cassian

guided the Montyrolla inside, landing it smoothly in a designated bay. They stepped out and followed him in. “Man,” Bram said, looking around at the polished floors and towering architecture, “I can’t remember the last time I was here.” Cassian didn’t respond. He simply led them down a quieter hallway and into a smaller room.

Inside. A table. Covered. In street tacos. An absurd amount of them. Even Alister stopped walking. Cassian gestured lightly. “The former Chancellor made a rather… unusual request before I came to retrieve you,” he said, clearly still processing it. “I assume you’re familiar with it?” Fiora didn’t answer. She was already moving. She dove onto the table like a predator, immediately devouring tacos at a speed that should not have been physically possible. Alister walked up more cautiously, picking one up and inspecting it like it might explode. He sniffed it. Took a bite. Paused. “…Okay,” he admitted. “That’s actually good.” Then he glanced at Cassian.

“But this can’t be the only reason you brought us here.” Darla stepped forward slightly, her tone more focused now. “Most units don’t get called to the main office unless...” “That’s correct,” Cassian cut in smoothly. He looked toward Fiora. “Fenleigh. You do have your coin piece, yes?” Fiora stopped mid-bite. She slowly turned, completely covered in taco debris. “…My what?” Cassian sighed, reaching into his pocket. He pulled out a small golden ring-like object and held it up. “It looks like this,” he explained. “Every cadet receives one upon graduating from the Academy.” Fiora blinked.

Then looked down at her hand. Slowly, she slid the ring off her finger. “Oh… that?” She frowned. “…I thought it was just a ring.” There was a pause. Then realization hit her. “…Wait.” Her expression shifted. “…I thought that guy was trying to marry me.” She pouted. Alister didn’t even look at her. “That has never stopped you from staring at random men like a creep,” he muttered. Fiora gasped. “I do not stare,” she said defensively, immediately grabbing another taco. “Well after you have your fill, and Perhaps... utilize the facilities to clean yourselves. We will recomun thin the ceremony room.” He said with a smile that seemed more proud then normal leaving them to the Tacos.

Aion stared at the green-haired reporter in disbelief. “You did what?” he said, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Are you insane, Tristan? Why didn’t you call Crow? Or, better idea, not go in at all?” Tristan threw his hands up. “You think I wanted to?” he shot back. “You said you wanted the scoop! You told me I should challenge myself more!” “That is not what I meant,” Aion snapped. “I would never tell you to run into an active battlefield!” He let out a long sigh. Mia spoke up from beside him. “What did he do?”

She sat calmly, head tilted slightly. Blind and deaf, she couldn’t see or hear any of this, and yet somehow she still understood Aion exactly. “He ran into an active battlefield,” Aion said, exasperated.

Mia sighed. She reached out, feeling for his face until she found it, then pinched it firmly. “Are you forgetting how we even met?” she said. “You are just as reckless.” “Ow... okay, okay, I get it!” Aion winced, pulling back slightly. “Sorry, kid,” he added, glancing at Tristan. “Don’t follow my example. Let Crow handle stuff like that from now on.”

Mia frowned. “Crow is just a kid too. Stop working them like a horse.” “I don’t push it on them,” Aion defended quickly. “They do it themselves. Half the time they’re the ones asking me for more.” Mia didn’t look convinced. She lightly smacked his shoulder again. Aion sighed, finally giving up on that argument. He turned his attention to the photos Tristan had taken, flipping through them one by one. “…Okay,” he muttered. “There’s actually some good stuff here.” He paused. “Not sure it makes the broadcast,” he continued. “Maybe front page print…” His eyes lingered on one image. “That group though…”

He leaned in slightly. “What was it… Special Operations Division?” His expression shifted.

Recognition. “Oh, right. Alister’s on that team now.” Aion straightened, energy returning instantly. He adjusted his tie, already slipping into presenter mode. “I’ve got it.” He spread his arms wide, a grin forming. “This is how we frame it.” He paced once, then turned back dramatically. “Two disgraced rival captains…” He pointed at the photo. “…joining forces for a redemption arc.” He snapped his

fingers. “The birth of the Special Operations Division.” He looked at Tristan, clearly pleased with himself. “How’s that sound?” he asked with a laugh. Mia sighed. “…It sounds like you’re about to exaggerate everything again.” Aion didn’t even hesitate. “Of course I am,” he said smoothly. “But it's no lie. Maybe it would push things in the right direction. Good ol Alister deserves a win.”

Mathias stepped out of the hospital, adjusting his posture as he moved. His recovery had been fast, faster than most would expect. His scales had taken the worst of the damage, and his body had already begun repairing what remained. Even so, he could still feel it. The ache hadn’t fully left him.

A robot woman stood nearby for a moment an AID-E , scanning him before emitting a soft confirmation tone and drifting away. Mathias didn’t acknowledge it. He continued down the street until he reached a bench and lowered himself onto it, taking a moment to breathe.

The city felt quieter here. Distant. Almost disconnected from everything that had just happened.

Then someone spoke. “Good work today, Captain Mathias.” Mathias’s eyes shifted slightly. Another man sat on a nearby bench, facing away from him, as if he had been there the entire time. “…Who are you?” Mathias asked, his tone cautious. The man let out a quiet chuckle. “Who I am isn’t important. What matters is you.” He leaned back slightly. “Your past. What you did before the Siege.” Mathias went still. The tension hit instantly. He started to rise. “Don’t.” The word was calm, almost gentle, but it carried weight. “Don’t stand. Don’t turn around,” the man continued. “Unless you’d like everyone nearby to hear this conversation.”

Mathias froze in place. Slowly, his posture settled again, but his body stayed tense. “…It was you,” he said, voice low. “You set up the kidnapping.” The man tilted his head slightly, though Mathias still couldn’t see his face. “No comment.” Mathias’s jaw tightened. His gaze dropped for a moment. “…What do you want?” he asked. “Nothing complicated,” the man replied. “Just a favor. Every now and then.” Mathias’s hand curled into a fist. “That time was different,” he said, his voice sharpening. “I won’t do that again...”

“Was it?” The interruption came immediately. There was a faint edge of amusement in the man’s voice now. “Maybe Miss Darla was right about you,” he continued. “Maybe you really are just like the rest of your kind.” That hit harder than anything else. A low growl slipped from Mathias’s throat before he could stop it. “I will not bow to your demands,” he said, forcing the words out steadily. “I did what I did for the Military Division. If you want to expose me, then do it.” There was a brief pause. “I see,” the man said. “Then we move to the alternative.” Mathias frowned. “What alternative...”

The man reached into his coat and pulled something out. Without turning, he held it behind him. A piece of paper. Mathias hesitated, then took it. He unfolded it. The moment he saw what was on it, everything in him dropped. A small lizard girl. Smiling. Alive. “…How did you.” His voice faltered. “…No…” For the first time since the battlefield, his composure cracked. “I’ll admit,” the man said, standing now, “you did a good job hiding them.” He took a step forward, still not turning to face him. “Then again, I suppose people really do resent your kind that much.”

Mathias couldn’t respond. His eyes stayed locked on the photo, his grip tightening around it. “If you want them to keep breathing,” the man continued, his tone almost conversational, “then perhaps it’s time you started living like your ancestors.” He didn’t wait for a reply. He simply walked off, disappearing into the alley as if he had never been there at all. Mathias stayed on the bench, unmoving. The photo trembled slightly in his hand, and for the first time in a long while, he didn’t know what to do next. Elaina poked her head out from around the corner. She had seen most of it, but not caught the entire conversation she would be watching.

Special Operations finished eating, cleaned themselves up, and changed into fresh uniforms. By the time they were ready, the mood had shifted again. Not tense. Not chaotic. Something more… formal. They made their way down the hall toward the ceremony room. Darla and Alister were already there. Both stood at either side of a set of large double doors, each holding one open just enough to

reveal what was inside. Bram and Fiora slowed as they approached, peeking in. Inside, the room was lined with Port Authority members standing at attention, uniforms pristine, posture perfect. At the far end stood Cassian and Brutus. Everyone looked… proud. Fiora blinked. Bram frowned slightly.

"…But I'm already a..." "Go," Darla and Alister said at the same time. Before either of them could protest further, they were pushed forward. The doors opened fully. Music began to play. Bram and Fiora stepped inside. They walked down the long aisle together, the sound of their footsteps echoing against polished floors as the room watched in silence. When they reached the end, the tension broke, applause rising from both sides. Fiora froze for half a second, clearly not expecting it. Bram smiled, though even he looked caught off guard. Cassian stepped forward. "Fiora Fenleigh," he said, a faint smile forming. Brutus followed, his voice booming with warmth. "Bram Ashgarn."

Cassian folded his hands behind his back. "You have both proven yourselves exceptional beyond your rank," he said. His gaze settled on Fiora. "Fenleigh especially. Today's rescue would not have succeeded without you." Fiora blinked rapidly, her face flushing. "…Oh," she said, suddenly unsure what to do with herself. "Um… you're not mad?" Cassian raised an eyebrow slightly. "Of course not." That didn't seem to fully register, but she nodded anyway. "Now," he continued, "if you would… it is time to make it official. To make you truly one of us." He extended a hand. "Please step forward and hand me your coin piece." Fiora hesitated for a second, then quickly pulled the ring from her pocket and handed it over.

Cassian examined it briefly before reaching into his coat and retrieving a second piece, a polished silver coin. He aligned the two. With a soft, precise click, they locked together. "The coin piece represents a cadet," Cassian said, holding it up for her to see. "Empty. Full of potential." He tapped the center. "This represents growth. You are no longer what you were… but you are not yet finished. There are still heights to reach." Then, more casually, he pressed five small stars into the center. "And these," he added, far less ceremoniously, "represent your current standing." He handed it

back. “You are now Operative One,” he said. “The highest-ranking operative…” A small pause. “…by default.” Fiora stared at it. “…Really?” she said quietly. “I’m… wow…” She looked like she might cry.

Brutus stepped forward, clapping a heavy hand on Bram’s shoulder. “Now you,” he said with a grin. “You’ve proven yourself again and again. Not just today.” Bram smiled, already holding out his coin piece. Brutus took it. “You were an operative before your demotion,” he said. “So we’ll skip the long speech.” He repeated the process, locking the coin, pressing in the stars. Then he paused. With a bit more intention, he pressed one larger star into the center, right over the others. The room seemed to take that more seriously. Brutus handed it back with a proud nod. “You are now a Warden,” he said. “Congratulations, my friend.” Bram looked down at it, then back up. His smile didn’t change, but something in his eyes did. “…Thank you,” he said, quieter this time.

Behind them, Darla and Alister watched. Neither of them said anything. They didn’t need to. The room filled with applause, loud and genuine. Fiora blinked like she still didn’t believe it was real, then suddenly threw her arms around Bram. He laughed as she barley nudged him, hugging her back just as tightly. They held onto that moment. For once, no chaos. No mission. No pressure. Just… proof that they had made it somewhere.

A while later, the ceremony wound down, and the team made their way back. Fiora walked ahead of the group, practically skipping, her confidence reaching dangerous levels. “Ha… wait…” she said, slowing slightly as something clicked. Then her grin spread wider. “That means…” She turned, eyes lighting up. “I outrank Jax now.” Silence. Then... “Oh, I’m gonna boss him around so much,” she added, already laughing to herself. Darla, Alister, and Bram all exchanged a look. Concern. Immediate. Mutual. Deeply justified. “…This is going to end badly,” Alister muttered. “No,” Darla said flatly. “… This is going to end violently.” Bram just smiled nervously. “Let’s… maybe supervise that.”

They rounded the final corner toward headquarters, and stopped. Smoke. Thick. Black. Rolling out from the upper floors. Flames licked through broken windows, casting flickering light across the

street. For a second, none of them moved. Then... “The hell…?” Alister breathed. Emergency crews were already there. The Fire Division worked in coordinated bursts, a robot man shot his hoses blasting through the structure as others moved in and out. The scene was controlled, but only barely. A stretcher burst through the front entrance. Jax. He was laid out on it, coughing, his clothes scorched, one arm hanging limp off the side as medics rushed him past. Fiora’s grin vanished instantly. “…Jax?” she said, quieter than anyone had ever heard her. Darla stepped forward, eyes locked on the building. “…What happened?” No one answered.

Chapter 13: Can we do something about this?

The Fire Division had already put out the fire. Smoke still lingered in the air, thin and bitter, curling out from the shattered upper floors. The building looked worse than before somehow. Like it had finally given up pretending it could hold itself together. Jax was carried out on a stretcher, unconscious but breathing, his chest rising unevenly as medics rushed him past. A Dalmatian man stood nearby, speaking with one of the robot firemen, reviewing the scene with practiced focus. His uniform stood out immediately, bright red with yellow trim, reflective and clean despite everything.

Darla and the others approached slowly, still trying to process what they were seeing. The man turned as soon as he noticed them. “You’re the Special Operations Division, correct?” he said, straightening slightly. “Captain Dalmore, Fire Division.” He gave a quick, respectful salute. “No need to worry. The fire’s been contained.” Alister barely acknowledged it, his attention fixed on the stretcher disappearing into the distance. “Enough about the building,” he said flatly. “What about our man?”

Dalmore’s posture stiffened just slightly. “He should be fine,” he replied. “Smoke inhalation mostly. He pushed himself too far.” A brief pause. “I’m not a doctor, so I won’t pretend to know more

than that.” Darla stepped forward, her gaze shifting to the damage. “What caused it?” Dalmore glanced toward the robot beside him. The machine’s optics flickered as it processed the data. “We believe a tool was left running,” it said in a calm, mechanical tone. “The individual inside appeared to be severely fatigued. It is likely he lost consciousness prior to ignition.” Silence settled over the group.

“…That’s Jax,” Bram said quietly. “He just… doesn’t stop.” Alister crossed his arms, staring up at the massive hole torn through the roof. “Maybe that’s a good thing,” he muttered. “For once, he’s being forced to rest. I'm more worried about...” Darla didn’t look at him. “Buildings can be replaced,” she said evenly. “People can’t.” That shut it down. She turned, already moving. “Come on,” she added. “Let’s go. I haven’t seen Lucy in a while anyway.” Bram followed without hesitation. Fiora lingered for half a second, glancing back at the wreckage, then hurried after them. Alister moved to follow, but a hand stopped him. Dalmore. “Hold on,” the captain said, his tone firm but not aggressive. “I’m going to need to ask you a few questions.”

Alister’s ears flicked slightly. “…About what?” “To ensure Mr. Jax wasn’t being pushed into unsafe conditions,” Dalmore replied. “Overwork like that doesn’t happen in a vacuum.” Alister stared at him for a second, then let out a sharp breath. “What, you think I caused this?” he snapped. “Are you serious? I can’t control that man. He does whatever he wants. I thought you fought fires, not… whatever this is.” Dalmore didn’t react to the jab. His grip tightened slightly, not aggressive, just steady. “Sir,” he said calmly, “nothing matters more to me than preventing fires. That includes the ones that start long before the flames.”

Alister held his gaze for a moment. Then his shoulders dropped, just slightly. “…He doesn’t listen,” he muttered. “None of us can make him stop.” Dalmore nodded once, like that confirmed something. “Then maybe that’s the problem,” he said. Not accusatory. Just… factual. Alister didn’t respond. For once, he didn’t have anything to push back with.

The rest of them, everyone except the cat, reached the hospital quickly. The atmosphere shifted

the moment they stepped inside. Clean. Quiet. Controlled. The chaos from before felt distant here… like it had never happened at all. Jax lay in one of the beds, motionless. Machines hummed softly around him, steady and indifferent. Elaina was already there. She sat beside him, one hand gripping his tightly. Her posture was rigid, but her expression, unguarded. For once. “You idiot… why do you always…” she muttered under her breath, voice cracking just slightly. Then she noticed them. She stood up instantly, letting go of his hand like she’d been caught doing something she shouldn’t.

“I...” she started, then stopped. Her expression snapped back into place, controlled, distant. “…I still care about him, alright?” she said, more defensive than she intended. “Cassian will be here soon.” She didn’t wait for a response. She turned and walked out quickly, brushing past them before anyone could say a word. Fiora blinked. “…Huh.” Before anyone could follow up, another woman entered the room, a small figure with sharp eyes and steady hands. A robotic assistant hovered at her side, optics glowing softly. Nurse Droids. AID-E units. The woman didn’t acknowledge them at first. Her focus went straight to Jax.

Her hands lifted, faint energy swirling around them as she pressed them gently against his chest. “Doctor Iris?” Darla asked. “How is he?” Iris didn’t answer immediately. Then she exhaled. “…My magic won’t help much here,” she admitted. “It repairs physical damage. Flesh. Organs. This…” She gestured slightly. “…this is internal. Smoke damage. Irritation. It doesn’t respond the same way.” A brief pause. “Lucy would be able to treat it properly,” she added. “But she’s not here.” Fiora tilted her head. “Who’s Lucy?” No one even reacted to the question this time. “She’s the head doctor,” Darla said. “Administrator of the Health Division. Probably the best doctor in the multiverse.” Fiora nodded like that made perfect sense.

“…So why isn’t she here?” she asked. Iris hesitated. It was subtle. Most people wouldn’t have noticed, but Darla did. “…She had an important meeting,” Iris said finally. “In another world. You wouldn’t know about it.” Her tone was steady. Too steady. She wasn’t telling the whole truth. Bram

stepped forward slightly, concern clear on his face. “He’s going to be alright, right?” Before Iris could answer, the AID-E unit spoke. “The patient is experiencing lung inflammation,” it said in a calm, mechanical tone. “Additionally, his body is severely fatigued. If the Administrator does not return soon, recovery will occur naturally over time, but extended rest is required.” “Rest,” Darla muttered. “Yeah, that’s not gonna...” Jax choked.

Everyone turned instantly. He stirred weakly, hand lifting as he fumbled for the oxygen mask, trying to pull it off. “…Not happening,” he rasped. “I need to get back to...” His strength gave out. His hand dropped. His body went slack again. Iris didn’t hesitate. “You are not going anywhere,” she said sharply. “Doctor’s orders.” A brief silence followed. Then. “Yeah,” Fiora added, stepping forward with absolute confidence. “Rest. I’m ordering you to. Because I’m the boss of you now.” The room paused. Jax’s eyes cracked open just enough to focus on her. “…What?” he muttered, confused and exhausted.

“I outrank you now,” Fiora said proudly, lifting her chin like she had just been crowned queen of something extremely important. Jax’s eyes barely opened, his focus slow and unfocused as he tried to process what she had just said. After a moment, he managed a weak glare in her direction. “…Fuck off, you dumb cunt,” he muttered, his voice hoarse and barely holding together. Fiora froze where she stood, the confidence draining out of her almost instantly. Her shoulders sank as the weight of that response hit her harder than she expected. Without another word, she shuffled off to the corner, crossing her arms tightly and turning away from everyone. “…I was trying to help…” she mumbled, clearly wounded.

Bram turned slightly, coughing into his hand in a very poor attempt to hide the fact that he was trying not to laugh. His shoulders still shook just enough to give him away. Darla didn’t react to any of it. Her attention stayed fixed on Jax, on the machines surrounding him, and on the steady rhythm of his breathing as it filled the quiet room. For a long moment, she said nothing at all, her expression unreadable. “…He needs to rest,” she said finally, her voice low and even. She wasn’t speaking to Jax.

She wasn't really speaking to anyone. She was just stating something that should have been obvious long before now.

The door opened not long after, and Cassian stepped inside. He didn't rush. He didn't speak immediately. His eyes moved across the room, taking in everything, the state of the equipment, the tension in the air, and finally Jax himself. Something in his expression shifted, subtle but real. He walked over and sat on the edge of the bed, resting his hands on his knees as he looked down at him.

Jax, still barely conscious, turned his head just enough to meet his gaze, irritation still present even through the exhaustion. Cassian let out a quiet breath. "…I pushed you too far, my friend," he said.

There was no deflection in his voice, no attempt to soften the truth. It was simple, direct, and completely genuine.

The room grew quieter around them. After a moment, Cassian straightened slightly, his tone shifting back toward something more composed. "I think it's time we address the condition of your headquarters," he continued. "I had been waiting for results, something I could justify to the Port as a reason to approve a full reconstruction." He paused briefly, choosing his words carefully. "You have shown results," he admitted. "However, not enough to secure official funding. That process will take time, and in truth, you still have a long road ahead before the Port is willing to make that investment."

That part lingered. Then he exhaled again. "But you have shown enough for me." Darla blinked, caught off guard as she looked up at him. "I will cover the cost myself," Cassian said simply. There was no emphasis, no dramatic delivery. If anything, that made it land harder. "…What?" Darla asked, the surprise slipping through before she could stop it. Cassian nodded once, as if the decision had already been made long before he walked into the room. "Yes. I will have Wainwright Beyond begin work this afternoon." Fiora peeked up slightly from the corner, her earlier mood momentarily forgotten. "Like… a whole new base?" she asked, still half-pouting. Cassian glanced at her briefly. "A functional one," he replied. That seemed to satisfy her more than it should have.

He turned his attention to Iris next. “This may be an unusual request,” he said, his tone more measured now, “but when Doctor Lucy returns, I would like you to refrain from fully restoring him immediately.” Iris frowned, her arms crossing instinctively. “You’re asking us to withhold treatment?” she said, clearly uncertain. “Not entirely,” Cassian clarified. “He is stable, correct?” AID-E responded before Iris could. “The patient is not in critical condition. Recovery is expected with sufficient rest.”

Cassian gave a small nod. “Then allow him to recover naturally,” he said. Jax let out a weak, strained laugh that turned into a cough halfway through. “Cassian… you bastard…” he wheezed. “You want me to suffer?”

Cassian didn’t react to the accusation. “I want you to rest,” he replied evenly. “And I am confident that you will not do so unless you are physically incapable of continuing.” That answer didn’t leave much room to argue. Jax stared at him for a moment, but whatever response he might have had didn’t come. His strength gave out before his stubbornness could. Iris shifted her weight slightly, still unsure. “I will discuss it with Lucy,” she said after a moment. “However, I cannot promise she will agree. She is not the type to leave a patient untreated if she can resolve the issue immediately.” Cassian inclined his head. “I would not expect her to agree easily,” he said. He stood then, but before stepping away, his gaze lingered on Jax for just a moment longer. Not as a superior. Not as someone evaluating performance. Just… as someone who knew him. “…Take the time,” he said quietly. “You have earned at least that much.” Jax didn’t answer, but for once, he didn’t try to get back up either.

Just as he promised, Colt Wainwright, CEO of Wainwright Beyond, came down personally to oversee the renovations. He didn’t send a team. He showed up himself, already giving orders before most of them had even processed what was happening. The damage was assessed quickly, plans drawn up just as fast. According to him, the rebuild would take a few days. Which meant, for once, they had nothing pressing to do. So they scattered.

Darla thought about going home. She made it all the way to the gate before stopping. She stood

there longer than she meant to, staring at it like it might answer something for her. In the end, she turned away and walked off instead. Bram went back to his family without hesitation. That part of his life had always been steady, something he could return to without thinking twice. Fiora claimed she was going to visit hers. She did not. Instead, she ended up asleep on a park bench later that night, using her jacket as a blanket and one arm as a pillow. The city carried on around her, and she didn't seem to mind. At least that's what she told herself. Alister rented a high-end hotel suite, clearly eager to reclaim at least some of the comfort he had lost. He leaned into it hard, surrounding himself with luxury like it might quiet everything else going on in his head.

At the hospital, after more back-and-forth than anyone expected, Lucy eventually agreed to Cassian's request. She didn't like it, but she understood the reasoning behind it. Sometimes forcing recovery too quickly only made things worse in the long run. They all visited Jax. Just in their own ways. Fiora showed up first and immediately started talking. She didn't stop, didn't pace herself, didn't even seem to notice how little he was responding. She kept going until Jax finally snapped and yelled at her to get out. She left without arguing, but the next day she came back like nothing had happened.

Bram brought food every time he visited. Real food, homemade, portions bigger than necessary. He didn't talk much while he was there. He just made sure Jax ate, then stayed long enough to make sure he actually kept it down. Alister took a different approach. He brought blueprints. Detailed ones. The plans for the new base were already marked up, full of notes and adjustments. Jax went through them carefully from his bed, flipping each page with a focus that hadn't been there before. That, more than anything else, seemed to settle him.

Elaina came too, more than once. She never stepped into the room. She would stop just outside, check with the staff to make sure he was stable, then leave before he had the chance to see her. She didn't give herself the opportunity to say anything, and she clearly wasn't ready to hear anything back. Darla came last. She didn't bring anything with her. She just sat down and stayed. She didn't try to start

a conversation. She didn't push him. She simply existed in the same space, quiet and present.

Jax was sitting up now, still recovering but more aware than before. He watched her for a while, clearly trying to figure something out. Eventually, he spoke. "I don't get it." Darla shifted slightly, her attention snapping fully to him. "Get what?" He hesitated before answering, his voice lower than usual. "I haven't exactly been kind to you. Any of you." He let out a breath, glancing away. "Why do you care? I'm just some washed-up mechanic." Darla didn't respond immediately. She took a moment to think, then answered honestly.

"You're loud. Angry. Argumentative. You refuse to work with anyone." Jax's shoulders dropped slightly as she said it. Then she kept going. "But you also get up every morning. You check everyone's equipment. You sweep the base. You fix problems no one else even notices." She pulled her sword slightly from its sheath, studying it. "I don't know what you did to this, but it feels lighter. More responsive. It's never been easy to use, but now it feels right." She slid it back into place. "You are a grouch. You are an asshole." Jax let out a weak huff, somewhere between a laugh and a sigh. Then she looked at him fully. "But we see what you do for us." There was a brief pause. "And you're our friend." The room went quiet after that, but it wasn't uncomfortable. It felt steady, like something had settled into place. For once, Jax didn't argue.

Darla didn't stay long. On her way out, she nearly ran straight into Lucy in the hallway. "Oh hey, Darla," Lucy said, her expression brightening. "How have you been? I heard about your demotion… are you holding up okay?" There was no judgment in her voice, only genuine concern. Darla paused, caught slightly off guard. "…It's been that long since we talked?" she asked quietly. Then she shook her head. "I'm sorry. I've been busy. Maybe I can start coming back for lunch again. Once a week, like before." She let out a small breath. "And don't worry… I've accepted it."

Lucy nodded, but before the moment could settle, Darla's expression shifted. Her eyes

sharpened as she focused on her. “What about you?” she asked. “Where do you keep slipping off to? Don’t think I haven’t noticed. I’ve been here more lately.” Lucy froze. “Oh… um…” Her gaze drifted to the side. “Look at the time...” She started to turn away. “No,” Darla said firmly, stepping just enough to block her path. “I’m not accepting that.” Lucy’s shoulders sank, the deflection failing instantly. She exhaled slowly, like she had been holding that answer in for a while. “…Alright,” she said at last. “I’ll tell you.” She hesitated, searching for the words and not finding them. “Just… not right now,” she added, her voice quieter. “I’m still figuring out how to even say it.” Darla studied her for a moment, then gave a small nod. “…Fine. For now.”

The day of completion arrived sooner than expected. Renovations were finished, lining up almost perfectly with Jax’s discharge from the hospital. Outside the base, Colt Wainwright stood waiting in a clean black suit, a white hard hat tucked neatly under his arm. Behind him, the building looked completely transformed. The structure was solid, reinforced, and pristine. Above the entrance, a new insignia gleamed in the light, a rifle and a sword crossed together, with bold lettering beneath: Special Operations Division “Well?” Colt asked, a satisfied smile pulling at his expression. “What do you think?”

“Whoa… it looks so much better,” Fiora said, already moving toward the entrance with barely contained excitement. Colt’s smile wavered slightly. “Well… I’ll admit,” he said, adjusting his posture, “the exterior is the jewel.” He glanced toward the doors. “The interior… still needs work.” That immediately drew their attention. Darla tilted her head. “…What do you mean?” Colt gestured toward the entrance. “See for yourselves.” They stepped inside.

The lobby was immaculate. Polished floors reflected the overhead lights. Their division’s insignia was embedded cleanly into the center, and the walls looked untouched, as if they had never been damaged at all. But as they moved deeper inside, the illusion faded. Some rooms were fully restored. A meeting room stood ready, furnished and clean. Key spaces were functional, even

comfortable, but most of the base was simply… usable. The walls were repaired but unpainted, left bare and unfinished. Broken furniture had been removed entirely, leaving wide, empty areas that echoed slightly with every step.

It was safe. It was stable, but it wasn't complete. The mess hall stood out more than the rest. The structure was intact, and the equipment had been completely replaced. New stoves, new cookware, everything modern and functional. At the center sat a large table, wrapped with a ribbon. A note rested on top. Alister picked it up, already expecting what it would say. "My gift to you," he read. "Now earn the rest." He exhaled softly. "…Yeah. That sounds like him." The dorms followed the same pattern. Each room now had a proper bed frame, a mattress, a small desk, a shelf, and a mirror. Nothing more than what was necessary. Nothing extra.

"Well," Alister muttered, glancing around, "at least it won't collapse on us anymore." "Progress is still progress," Bram added with a small, approving smile. "One more thing," Colt said, motioning for them to follow. He led them down a hallway that had once been completely blocked off. Now it was cleared. Revealed. A garage. Inside sat an old vehicle, worn and dust-covered, clearly untouched by the renovation work. Jax didn't hesitate for even a second. He moved past them immediately, drawn toward it. "…My word…" He stepped closer, running his hand along the frame with careful attention.

"This is a Port Authority first edition," he said, almost reverently. "It doesn't even have flight capabilities…" Colt nodded. "We restored the garage itself, but left that as-is. Figured you might want it for parts… or whatever it is you do." Jax didn't respond. He didn't take his eyes off it. "There were a few more rooms we uncovered," Colt added, straightening his jacket. "Nothing of note. Mostly junk." He gave a polite bow. "I trust you're satisfied." And with that, he turned and left. Jax remained where he was. "…Well," Bram started carefully, "at least now you don't have to worry about anything exploding. You can take it easy for once."

“Oh, bollocks,” Jax cut in immediately. He straightened, energy snapping back into him like it had never left. “My work has only just begun.” He turned toward the rest of them, something alive in his expression again. “Now, instead of putting out fires, I can actually do things properly.” A grin tugged at the corner of his mouth. “Get ready, Special Operations.” There was no hesitation in his voice. “I’m overhauling everything.” They all sighed. At the same time, but they were smiling.

Chapter 14: You're wrong about us

Another quiet day settled over the base. Cassian hadn't contacted them since granting leave, and while that left Alister visibly uneasy, the others filled the time in their own ways. For once, there was nothing pressing to deal with. No mission. No crisis. Just time. Bram had taken full advantage of that. The smell of a massive breakfast filled the building, rich and warm, pulling everyone in whether they meant to or not. Plates were already laid out across the table by the time Jax sat down, book in hand, flipping through its pages with an unusual calm. Fiora was the first to arrive, drawn in immediately by the smell. "Mmmh, that smells amazing..." she started, bouncing halfway to the table before stopping abruptly. Her eyes locked onto Jax. "…Wait. Why are you in here?"

Jax didn't look up. "I completed my inspection early," he said, turning a page. "For once, nothing is on fire, broken, or held together by poor wiring and worse decisions. That leaves me with time, and I intend to use it. To catch up on the latest tech." Fiora narrowed her eyes slightly, then nodded as if that made perfect sense. "Well, of course. I knew you'd learn your place eventually." She crossed her arms smugly and sat down. Jax's eyes lifted from the page just enough to glance at her. For

a brief moment, it genuinely looked like he was considering several different ways to kill her. Then, with a quiet exhale, he decided it wasn't worth the effort and returned to reading.

Darla joined next, fresh from training, her posture relaxed but steady. Alister followed not long after, adjusting his coat as he walked in. Both of them paused when they saw Jax already seated at the table. Neither of them commented. Bram brought the rest of the food over, setting it down with quiet pride. The table quickly filled, and for a while, things were simple. They ate and talked while Fiora made random, chaotic comments that no one fully followed. Jax read between bites, Alister critiqued things no one asked him to critique, and Darla mostly listened. For a moment, it felt normal in a way none of them were used to. It didn't feel like a division. It didn't feel like a unit. It felt closer to a family.

A sharp buzzing noise broke the moment. Alister frowned slightly, looking around. "What is that?" Jax didn't look up. "I believe that would be what some would refer to as a doorbell." Alister let out a small laugh. "That has to be broken. Who would be ringing here?" Jax's eye twitched faintly, but he didn't respond. The buzzing came again, louder this time. Darla stood. "I'll check." The others followed her toward the lobby. Fiora remained behind, her eyes locked onto the unfinished food scattered across the table. A slow grin spread across her face. "…Waste not." She gathered every remaining plate toward herself without hesitation.

As the others approached the front, the noise became clearer. Voices. A lot of them. They overlapped in a low, constant murmur that made it difficult to pick out individual words. Darla reached the door and cracked it open just slightly, peeking outside. Then she immediately shut it again. She turned back, blinking. "…I think we are under attack." Alister didn't hesitate. "What is it the Vultures... the Porcelli." He stepped past her and pulled the door open fully. Then he stopped. Not enemies. Not soldiers. Just people. A crowd of them stood outside, all looking back at him with a mix of recognition, curiosity, and expectation. "Oh, it's them!" one said "You're Special Operations, right?" Another. "I

saw you in the paper!" another. "And your new building looks amazing!"

The voices began to overlap, rising quickly into a chaotic wave of requests. "Can you help? My cat is stuck in a tree!" One said. "There is someone suspicious outside my house!" Another. "My microwave won't turn on!" Another. "I would like a number one with extra pickles." All of them froze for a second, completely thrown by what they were hearing. Darla stepped forward slightly. "…We are not Peacekeeping," she said carefully. Alister leaned toward her, lowering his voice. "Do they even do half of this?" Darla crossed her arms. "It is not a requirement," she admitted. "But I always did. It felt like part of the job." That answer only encouraged the crowd. They surged forward with renewed energy, voices overlapping even faster now as hands reached out and people talked over each other without waiting for answers.

Bram rubbed his beard thoughtfully as he looked over them. "These are locals," he said quietly. "Right on the edge of the crime sector. They probably get overlooked a lot." Jax stepped forward without warning. He crouched slightly in front of an older woman. "Show me the microwave," he said plainly. "I will fix it." The woman blinked in surprise before lighting up. "Oh, thank you young man. Yes, right this way!" He stood and followed her without another word. The rest of them just stared after him. Alister raised an eyebrow. "…Did he just volunteer?" Bram smiled faintly. Darla looked back at the crowd. At the faces. At the expectation in their eyes. At the way they were looking at them like they could actually help. She took a breath. Then stepped forward. "…Alright," she said. The crowd quieted just enough to listen. "We will help." They were not Peacekeeping. "What do we look like some help desk. Your wrong about us." Alister muttered in protest, but went along seeing that everyone else already was.

They stepped out into the district for the first time. Not just passing through. Not grabbing food and heading back. This was the first time they actually looked. The place was older than most parts of the city, worn down in ways that didn't always stand out at first glance. Some buildings leaned just

slightly. Paint had faded. Repairs had been made over repairs, layers stacked over time. Despite that, there was life here. It showed in small ways, in conversations between neighbors, in open windows, in the quiet rhythm of people just getting by. It was easy to miss if you didn't slow down long enough to see it.

Most of the problems were simple. A broken latch. A loose panel. A door that wouldn't shut properly. A quick fix here, a small adjustment there, and things were better again. Alister found himself halfway up a tree, carefully working his way along a branch. He paused, staring at the small animal just out of reach. It stared back at him. It was just a cat. Not even the same kind as him, not anything that should feel personal, and yet something about the situation bothered him more than he wanted to admit.

"This is ridiculous," he muttered under his breath, inching closer anyway. Below him, Bram stood ready in case things went wrong, trying very hard not to laugh.

Elsewhere, Darla moved through a different kind of problem. Two neighbors stood across from each other, voices raised but not quite shouting. The argument wasn't new. It had history behind it, small frustrations that had built over time. She stepped between them, calm but firm, guiding the conversation, redirecting it, breaking it down into something manageable. It was familiar. She had done this countless times before, and for the first time in a while, it felt… right. Not perfect, not complete, but close enough that it settled something inside her. Since the demotion, there had been a gap. A sense that something important had been taken away. Standing there, helping in a way she understood. Almost.

Because something still felt off. There was no presence here. No consistent authority. No one actually watching over the area. That part didn't sit right with her. As the conversation settled and the two neighbors finally began to cool down, she found herself unable to hold the question back any longer. "Why doesn't Peacekeeping handle this?" she asked. The man she had been speaking to let out a small laugh, not unkind. "Oh, they come around sometimes," he said. "But they've got a lot on their

plate. Bigger problems, I guess. We try not to bother them unless we really have to." He gestured vaguely around the area.

"But now that you're here…" He trailed off, like the rest didn't need to be said. Before Darla could respond, Alister dropped down from the tree nearby, landing cleanly and brushing off his coat like he hadn't just been climbing branches. He stepped forward, expression already sharpening. "What exactly do you think our division does?" he asked. The man blinked, confused by the tone. "Well… the paper told us." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded page, handing it over. Alister took it, unfolding it as his eyes scanned the headline. His expression darkened with every line.

"The Special Division is born…" Alister read aloud, his voice flattening as he went. "After a heroic rescue, this group of all-rounders is exactly what the Port needed. A specialized unit capable of handling anything, from the mundane to world-ending threats… or so says their benefactor, Cassian Sterros, when asked to comment." He lowered the paper slowly. "…Of course he did," Alister muttered. Behind him, Darla looked out across the district again. She took in the people, the small problems, and the quiet expectation resting on all of it. For the first time, she understood what they were really seeing. Not a division. Not a title. Not a set of limitations. They saw someone who would help.

Darla's expression steadied as something settled into place. "I'll start making patrols every morning when we're off mission," she said, matter-of-fact. Alister turned his head slightly toward her, already knowing that tone meant she had made up her mind. The days passed, and things began to even out. After the initial wave of problems was handled, the constant stream slowed. People still came by from time to time, but it no longer felt overwhelming. The chaos had settled into something manageable, something routine. A balance. That morning, Alister sat on the roof, arms resting loosely as he watched Darla step out below, already heading off on her patrol just as she had promised. "Are you seriously doing that?" he called down with a sigh.

Darla stopped and looked up at him, her expression firm. “Why wouldn’t I?” she replied. “There is a need, and I am able to fulfill it.” Her tone left little room for argument. Alister dragged a hand down his face in frustration. “You’re going to make them keep bothering us,” he said. Darla’s gaze dropped for a moment, then lifted again, more focused than before. “Maybe that’s the point,” she said. “Maybe this is the first step toward becoming the people they already think we are.” She raised her hand toward him, offering it without hesitation. Alister stared at it for a second, weighing the choice like it was far more complicated than it actually was. Then he groaned. “I hate you, dog… but fine. Let’s go.” He pushed himself off the roof and dropped down beside her. Darla allowed herself the smallest smile. Together, they stepped forward and began the patrol.

Later that night, a meeting was being held at the Port Authority’s main office. A transport settled onto the landing platform, its engines humming softly as the doors opened. A tall man stepped out first, his presence immediately commanding attention. He was well-built, with spiked gray hair and stern eyes that carried something difficult to place. There was weight behind his gaze, something that spoke of experience, of decisions made and carried. Beside him stepped a younger man with green hair. His eyes were closed, yet he moved forward with complete confidence, his steps precise and unhesitating, as if he could see more clearly than anyone around him.

Waiting for them were Brutus and Mathias. Both seemed genuinely pleased by their arrival. “Ah, Guild Master Garrick… or should I say Acting Chancellor,” Mathias said, stepping forward and extending his hand. “I have been looking forward to meeting you in person. Brutus has told me quite a bit.” The larger man took his hand, returning the shake with a small, easy smile. “Call me whatever you like,” Garrick replied. “Well met,” Mathias said as they released. His attention shifted to the man beside him. “This gentleman, however, I do not believe I know.” “This is Caerith,” Garrick said, gesturing slightly. “My right hand at the guild.” Caerith gave a polite bow. “A pleasure to meet you,” Brutus added, finally stepping in. His tone was warm, but there was a sense of urgency beneath it. “We

should get moving. We are already pressed for time, and the meeting is about to begin. You both know how prickly some of the administrators can be." They nodded and followed him inside.

The halls of the Port Authority stretched out before them, vast and meticulously designed. Everything gleamed, polished to perfection, almost to the point of excess. Garrick never quite got used to it. To him, it always felt… gaudy. Too much attention placed on appearance, not enough on function. Still, ever since the Siege, he had found himself here more often than he would have preferred. They ascended to the highest floor, where the atmosphere shifted into something quieter, heavier. At the end of the corridor, a set of large doors opened into a massive circular chamber. At its center stood a wide, C-shaped table. In the open space between its ends sat an ornate desk, more ceremonial than practical, positioned as a focal point for authority. Garrick's nameplate rested neatly atop it.

Most of the seats were already filled. At each position sat an Administrator, with their respective Captain standing just behind them. The room carried a quiet tension, the kind that came from too many powerful people sharing the same space. Brutus moved to his seat, with Mathias taking position beside him. Garrick's gaze moved across the room, taking in each presence. Every division was represented. From the combat divisions to the civic ones. Captain Lacy stood beside an eagle-featured administrator. Captain Dalmore stood firm behind a stern brown bear. Darla's brother stood beside an older dog man whose posture suggested decades of service in Peacekeeping. Lucy was there as well. She sat alone. No captain at her side, or at least none present. That alone stood out.

Garrick glanced briefly at the ornate desk in the center. Then, with a quiet exhale, he walked past it. Instead, he took a position along the middle section of the table, choosing presence over ceremony. "Apologies for the delay," he said calmly. "Let us begin immediately." As he spoke, his eyes met Cassian, who sat directly across from him. Cassian leaned back slightly, arms folded, a familiar smug smile resting on his face. Elaina stood at his side, composed and unreadable as ever. "Hold on, Acting Chancellor," Cassian said, his tone smooth as he raised a hand slightly. The room stilled just

enough. “We are still missing someone.” He gestured toward an empty seat. A nameplate sat before it: Intelligence Division. Garrick’s gaze shifted toward it, his expression tightening just slightly. “…I see,” he said. “Then we will wait a moment longer.”

“Apologies for the delay. We’re here now.” Leonidas entered the room without urgency, as if showing up had been optional to begin with. His tone carried no weight, no concern for the room he had just interrupted. Behind him followed a larger, rounder black cat man, his expression already tight with irritation. Leonidas didn’t hesitate. He walked straight to the empty seat and dropped into it. The shift in the room was immediate. Subtle, but unmistakable. Whatever reputation he had, it had arrived before him. The black cat stepped forward, stopping just behind the chair. His arms crossed as he stared down at Leonidas, his patience clearly worn thin.

Leonidas glanced up at him, confused at first, then mildly amused. After a brief pause, he let out a quiet breath and stood, stepping aside without argument. The man took the seat instead. “Forgive my captain,” he said, his voice calm but edged with restraint. “It has been… difficult to convince him to take his position seriously.” Leonidas only smirked, unbothered. Garrick studied the man now seated. “Lucien Viremont,” he said. “I have heard quite a bit about you.” Lucien’s expression did not change. “Then there is no need to waste time on introductions,” he replied evenly. “Let us begin.” Garrick let out a small sigh. “Very well.”

The meeting began, and for a while, it was exactly what Garrick had expected. Policies. Reports. Disputes between divisions over jurisdiction and authority. Carefully worded complaints disguised as formal concerns. The kind of conversation that mattered… but never felt like it did in the moment. He mostly just listened staying out of it. Until. “Speaking of overreach…” Leonidas leaned forward, cutting cleanly into the flow of discussion. “What about this ‘Special Operations Division?’” he continued, his tone casual but pointed. “We all know what it actually is.” His eyes flicked toward

Cassian. “Internal Investigations sticking their noses where they don’t belong.” A few heads shifted slightly around the table. Not disagreement. Recognition.

Cassian didn’t even turn to look at him. He smiled. “Do you have trouble with what words mean?” Cassian replied smoothly. “It is quite literally in the name of my division. It is my job to stick my nose into things.” Only then did his eyes shift, just slightly. “As for Special Operations…” He leaned forward a fraction, resting his arms against the table. “I suppose this is as good a time as any to move forward a few proposals.” The room stilled. Not because of Leonidas. Because of him. The cat hated this.

“Your motion to have them attend was already denied.” The voice came from across the table, sharp and controlled. The Administrator of the Legislative Division sat rigidly in his seat, clearly unimpressed. Cassian didn’t react. “Yes,” he said calmly. “However, I have other motions. Some of which challenge that decision… as is my right.” The Administrator’s expression hardened. “Calling them a division is an insult to the word,” he replied. “They are nothing more than your personal project.” Cassian smiled faintly. “Yes,” he said. “But I see more.” He leaned forward slightly, his tone steady. “And so, my proposal is simple. I would like to make them official. A true division of the Port Authority.”

The room erupted. Not loudly, but intensely. Voices overlapped in hushed arguments, sharp whispers cutting across the table as each administrator reacted in their own way. Disapproval spread quickly, tension rising with it. “That is absurd,” the Legislative Administrator snapped, louder now. “We do not create new divisions on a whim.” Garrick glanced around the room, clearly taken aback by the strength of the reaction. This was not simple resistance. This was pushback from every direction.

Cassian remained unmoved. “I will admit they are still developing,” he said. “However, many of you have already seen what they are capable of.” His eyes moved across the table, briefly meeting several gazes. “So perhaps…” he continued, his tone almost conversational, “we put it to a vote.” The room

went silent. Not because they agreed. Because they understood what that meant.

“A vote?” Leonidas vaulted over the table to the center, his voice carrying just enough bite to cut through the quiet. “Do I need to remind you who is in this so-called division?” He gestured loosely, dismissively. “Two disgraced former captains. A murderer. An unstable wildcard. And...” The words were cut off. Lucien stood. The sound of his hands striking the table was sharp enough to stop the room cold. “Captain Purrmont.” His voice was calm, but it carried weight. “The public has already formed its opinion,” he continued, his gaze fixed on Leonidas. “But the facts are not yet settled.” There was no anger in his tone. That made it worse. “You should understand that,” Lucien added. “As Captain of Intelligence.” He turned slightly, shifting the focus across the table. “Is that not correct, Judge?”

The Administrator of the Justice Division adjusted slightly in his seat, clearly aware that all attention had shifted to him. “I have reviewed the allegations personally,” he said. “The cases involving the captains are… inconclusive. There are too many inconsistencies to reach a definitive judgment.” He paused briefly. “As for the others, I wasn't involved.” Leonidas exhaled sharply through his nose, the tension leaving him in a controlled release. Without another word, he stepped back from the table and moved toward the wall, choosing not to push further.

The room did not return to normal. It couldn’t. Because now the argument had shifted. This was no longer about whether Special Operations should exist. It had become whether anyone could actually prove they shouldn’t. “They don’t even have a captain or an administrator,” the Legislative Administrator snapped, pushing back hard against the silence. Cassian didn’t flinch. “Well…” he said calmly, folding his hands together, “perhaps we can rectify that as well.” The man stiffened. “You’re not seriously suggesting we promote...” “Of course not,” Cassian cut in smoothly. “At least, not today.” That pause mattered. “For now, I will act as their Administrator,” he continued. “In time, I am confident they will earn their autonomy.” The room went quiet again. Not the same silence as before. This one carried weight.

A soft hum filled the chamber. Holographic interfaces appeared in front of every Administrator and every Captain, hovering just above the table. Each display showed a simple prompt. Vote: Recognize Special Operations as an official Division. One by one, decisions were made. Lacy tapped yes without hesitation. Beside her, the eagle Administrator selected no. She glanced at him, surprised.

Across the table, Lucien selected yes. Behind him, Leonidas chose no without a second thought. Other divisions followed more predictably. Brutus and Mathias both voted yes. Peacekeeping aligned with them. Civics selected no. Legislation selected no. Lucy hesitated. Her interface displayed a small note, her vote counted for two, in place of a missing captain. She blinked at it, processing for a brief moment. Then she selected yes.

The results compiled almost instantly. An even split. The tension in the room tightened immediately. Every eye turned. Toward Garrick. He had remained still through all of it, hands resting lightly against the table. He exhaled slowly. “I do not believe it would be appropriate for an acting Chancellor to decide a matter like this,” he said. “I was not elected by the people. I am only holding the position until that process is complete.” The words were careful. Measured. Cassian leaned forward slightly. “But you are running, aren’t you?” he asked. Garrick’s expression didn’t change. “I believe it would be better if I did not,” he replied. “My ties to the Guild would give the appearance of bias.”

A brief pause followed. “As it stands,” he added, “the only declared candidate is Former Chancellor Morvin.” Cassian’s smile thinned slightly. “That man abandoned his post when the city needed him most,” he said. “Will you truly allow him to return to power?” To some in the room, the question felt out of place. Too pointed. Too personal. But Garrick understood. This wasn’t about Morvin. Not really. It was about responsibility. About stepping forward… or stepping aside. Garrick’s eyes narrowed slightly as he considered it. Then he straightened. “…On this matter,” he said slowly, “I will decide.” The room held its breath. “I vote yes.” The words landed cleanly. Decisive. “The Special Operations Division will be recognized as an official division of the Port Authority.” For a brief

moment, no one spoke. Because something had just changed. Not just on paper. But in the balance of the entire system.

Chapter 15: The Reaper Returns?

Special Operations stood in front of City Hall with dread. Fiora, meanwhile, admired the scale of the building as the others looked down even Bram. Jax, of course, didn't come with them. A heavyset man pulled out a clipboard while a shorter woman did the same. They both gave an enthusiastic thumbs-up. Fiora seemed to catch on immediately. "Wow, are we about to do something awesome?" she asked. "Yes!" they both said. "…What?" Fiora tilted her head like an excited puppy. "An audit!" Fiora's excitement shattered instantly, her expression dropping lower than anyone else's.

"And why exactly did Cassian want us to come?" Alister groaned. "Well, you know how he is. I can't say for certain," the man laughed. "Very helpful," Alister muttered.

"Well," the woman added, glancing at her notes, "he did say to give the operatives time off. They usually handle most of the information gathering. I suppose that will be your role…" She hesitated. "…but he also said he didn't want you to interfere with anything." The group went quiet.

"…Who are you guys, anyway?" Fiora asked. "Oh!" the man perked up. "We're Wardens of Internal Investigations." He flashed a pink ribbon. The woman did the same. "I thought you'd all be stoic

warriors like Elaina," Bram said with a small laugh. "Not every division is full of fighters," Darla replied with a sigh. "Well then, steel yourselves, everyone, we have a long day ahead of us!" the man said eagerly, already rushing inside with the woman close behind. The rest of them didn't move right away. "…I already hate this," Alister muttered. Then, reluctantly, they followed.

Inside was a massive lobby. You could fit entire city blocks inside it, and maybe more notably, a massive line. There were rows of reception desks twenty, maybe more, but only two of them were actually open. The line for those two stretched impossibly long, and even after that first hurdle, it continued up both staircases. Off to the side, a man lay sprawled across one of the lobby chairs, fast asleep in a Port Authority uniform. Darla's eyes narrowed as she marched over. "Cleatus… why are you always sleeping on the job?" she said, grabbing him and shaking him awake. The man jolted upright.

"Ah! Are we under attack? Is it the Remnant again? The Gaslight Ascendancy? No worse, my mother-in-law has come to visit?!" he shouted, throwing his arms up like he was about to karate chop something. Then he actually looked at her and slouched immediately. "Oh. It's just you, Captain Darla. How've you been?" he said casually. Darla's tail stiffened, then flicked sharply with irritation. "How have I been…?" she repeated. "It's been long enough for you to know I'm not a captain anymore."

She caught Fiora already about to ask and cut her off. "This is Civics Division Captain Cleatus," she said flatly. "Neglecting his position. As always." Cleatus yawned, stretching lazily. "Jeez, Darla, what do you want me to do?" he said. "You know how it is. Captains are fighters. Defenders. That makes sense in divisions like yours, but here?" He gestured vaguely toward the endless line. "What, you want me behind a desk?" He leaned back again, already settling in. "I'm here to protect, just like you. And until that happens…" He pulled his hand over his eyes. "…I'll be right here." Within seconds, he was asleep again.

Darla sighed. The Wardens were already heading up the stairs, splitting in opposite directions.

“What now?” Bram asked, confused. “Split up and watch them work, I guess…” Alister started. Then paused. “Eh. On second thought. Fiora, stay with Bram. You two can cover the reception desk.” He pointed at Bram, who nodded sheepishly. “Right! We’ll take lots of notes, and everyone will know how good our notes are because all the problems in the multiverse will be fixed!” Fiora said confidently.

Alister and Darla exchanged a look, completely unconvinced, but moved upstairs anyway. Bram and Fiora slipped behind the desk. The receptionists didn’t question it. They clearly knew an audit was coming… though they didn’t look thrilled about being observed instead of helped. Bram considered stepping in. Then he remembered Alister’s words, and the fact that he didn’t actually know how to do their job. If anything, he’d just slow them down and force them to redo everything. So he stayed back.

It was the definition of tedium. Each person stepped forward, gave their name, explained what they needed, and was handed a form, packed with excessive information. Some of it made sense. Some of it didn’t. Favorite colors. Old schools. Random personal details. Bram assumed they were security questions. Once completed, each person was directed upstairs, sent down specific hallways to find the appropriate Warden depending on their request. Vehicle registrations. New IDs. Health insurance. Passports. Everything funneled through these same two painfully slow lines. Bram did his best to take notes. He focused on the process. Looked for inconsistencies. Signs of corruption, but on this level? There wasn’t much. Just… understaffing. Maybe intentional. Maybe not. He remembered coming here plenty of times before, and it hadn’t changed. Not even now, seeing it from the other side.

Fiora took notes too. For about five minutes. After that, her page slowly turned into doodle, badly drawn versions of the team, each one more exaggerated than the last. Around them, the room felt heavy. Everyone looked exhausted. Like this process wasn’t just slow… It was wasting something they didn’t have enough of to begin with.

Upstairs, things were different, but only in flavor. The Cat and Dog slipped in and out of rooms, each handling different cases, yet somehow it all felt the same. At least up here, people could sit while

they were processed, but something was undeniably… angrier. They watched as people were denied for the smallest reasons. Forms filled out incorrectly. Applications rejected on technicalities. Requests dismissed outright. All that time spent in line, wasted. Some had been waiting all day, only to be told no. "…Why is this allowed?" Alister said, his voice tight, conflicted. One of the Wardens overheard him from behind a desk. "Ask the damn Administrator," he muttered. "You think we like this?" He froze slightly, realizing what he'd just said, especially in front of auditors, and quickly went quiet.

Even if, in theory, they were there to fix things.

They moved on. The file room was worse. The more rotund Internal Investigations Warden was already there, flipping through records. Rows upon rows of filing cabinets stretched endlessly, farther than seemed reasonable. He looked… delighted. He glanced up as they entered and laughed. "I know, right?" he said. "We live in a time with all this advanced tech, information stored in the smallest spaces, and City Hall is still using typewriters." He shook his head, amused. "They don't back any of it up digitally?" Darla asked. "Hard copies are important to have," Alister said. The Warden snorted. "Not unless you're the Port Authority, or some bigwig," he replied. "I'm not saying they should go fully digital, but if something happened to these files…" He tapped one of the cabinets lightly. "…half the city wouldn't exist anymore." He paused, scribbling something down. "A city of ghosts."

"Why… that seems…" Darla started, at a loss for words. "The Administrator's been running this division for decades," the Warden said with a laugh. "Says he doesn't want to waste money on frivolous things. Wait until you see his office." "Is that just stubbornness toward change?" Alister asked. The Warden shrugged. "Personally? I think it's embezzlement," he said. "But no matter how many audits I run here… I can't find the hole." His tone dropped slightly, the earlier enthusiasm gone.

"I hope not…" Alister muttered. "I suppose we'll leave you to it." He didn't sound convinced. That was a serious accusation.

They stepped out of the room, both of them quiet for a moment. "Do you know anything about

him?" Alister asked, a little surprised he didn't already. It had never seemed relevant before, not even for Intelligence. Darla shook her head. "Nothing beyond seeing him in passing during meetings," she said. Alister glanced back down the hall. "Maybe we should go see who he is," he said lightly. "We won't interfere… just watch." Darla nodded once. "Yes," she said. "We'll just observe."

They made their way to the highest floor, moving down a long hallway.

At the end stood a set of massive double doors, made from some unknown material that looked incredibly expensive. From inside… laughter. Women. Giggling. Darla glanced at Alister, then gave a small nod. The voices inside went silent instantly. A loud crash followed, glass shattering, then muttering. "Who the hell is knocking at a time like..." The door cracked open. A man peeked out, saw them, and immediately slammed it shut. "Go, get out of here, you hussies!" he barked back into the room, anger sharp in his voice as more things broke inside. Then hurried movement. Shuffling. Footsteps crossing the room. Darla's ears twitched slightly. A faint clicking sound, heels moving quickly away. The man inside took a deep breath. "…Come in," he said, trying, and failing to sound refined.

They stepped inside, both of them immediately thrown off. The room was… awful. Massive. Expensive. And completely tasteless. A huge desk dominated the center, cluttered with trinkets only an out-of-touch rich man would think impressive. The walls were lined with strange, gaudy paintings. One side table held nothing but a stack of gold bars, just sitting there, like decoration. A bookshelf stood off to the side. No second exit. Darla noticed that immediately. Behind the desk, a pile of broken glass, barely hidden. Something had been there. Something recently moved, and then the window. Huge. Stretching across the wall. The view of the city from this height was… stunning. A perspective neither of them had ever seen before. Beautiful. Completely wasted on this room.

"Oh… it's just you people." The man leaned back slightly, bottle still in hand. "The Special Operations Division," he continued. "Or should I call you Cassian's lapdogs?" He squinted at Darla.

"…Though I suppose that insult doesn't land with you. You are a dog." He took a slow drink. "Bootlickers, then. What the hell do you want?" He was an overweight human man, his face flushed, posture loose. Darla could smell the alcohol from across the room. He was drunk. "We were just… checking on you, Administrator…" Alister started, already losing confidence halfway through. He paused, trying to recall the name. Then his eyes flicked to the desk. The nameplate. "…Milton Sloat," he read, the words coming out slower than expected. There was a brief silence. Alister frowned slightly.

This was the man running the division? He looked… pathetic. "I'm starting to understand why this division has the issues it does," Darla said to Alister, almost like the man wasn't even there. "Oh, fuck off," the Administrator snapped, words slurring together. "I keep this ship running. They audit me every month, the bastards. They don't find nothin'… because there ain't nothing to find." He took another drink, barely even looking at them. "Now get lost already. Congratulations on becoming legit, I guess." Darla and Alister both raised an eyebrow, neither of them entirely sure what he was even referring to. They looked at him. Then at the door. There was nothing here. No conversation to be had. No ground to stand on. And Cassian had already told them not to interfere. So they left. The Administrator didn't react. Didn't even watch them go.

The door closed behind them with a quiet click. Both of them stood there for a moment, neither moving. "…We've both lived here our whole lives," Alister said finally, his voice quieter than usual. "I'm in Intelligence… how have we never noticed this?" Darla didn't answer right away. "What can we even do about it now that we have?" she said instead, her tone low… heavier than before. Alister glanced back at the door. "…Is this what he wanted us to see?" he asked. Darla exhaled slowly. "Knowing him… it has to be," she said. "But what do we even do with it?" A beat. "I… don't know." They walked away from that floor feeling… hollow. Not angry. Not even frustrated. Just… drained.

The rest of the day didn't help. It was more of the same. More inefficiency. More pointless barriers. More people stuck in a system that technically worked… just enough to justify itself. By the

time they regrouped with the Wardens, whatever energy they had left was gone. “Well,” the heavier Warden said, looking down at his clipboard, “they get a passing grade…” He didn’t sound satisfied.

The woman beside him simply nodded, defeated. Alister leaned over, glancing at the form. They had passed. Barely. The absolute minimum required to say nothing was technically wrong. They made their way downstairs and found Bram… and Fiora, half-asleep beside him, her notes long since abandoned to doodles. No one said anything. They just left.

In the lobby, just a few feet from where Cleatus lay asleep, Viktor stood with a newspaper held up in front of his face. As Special Operations walked out, he lowered it slightly, just enough to watch them pass. A faint smirk pulled at the corner of his mouth. Once they were gone, he stepped forward and casually placed the newspaper over Cleatus’s face, covering him completely. The man didn’t stir, didn’t react, didn’t even seem to notice. Viktor lingered for half a second, then turned and continued on his way. No one stopped him. No one even looked at him. The receptionists were overwhelmed, buried under the weight of an endless line of people. The Wardens were too focused on their own responsibilities to spare even a glance. The entire building moved around him, busy and blind, as if he simply wasn’t there at all. He walked straight through it.

When he reached the upper floor, he didn’t hesitate. He made his way down the hall and drove his foot into the Administrator’s door, forcing it open with a sharp crack. Inside, the man jolted in place, startled. “Huh? Who the hell are you...” He sounded more sober than before, but not nearly sober enough. Viktor didn’t give him time to process anything. He stepped forward, planted a boot on the desk, and grabbed the man by the hair, yanking his head up so their eyes met properly. The Administrator struggled, hands pushing weakly against Viktor’s arm, but there was no strength behind it. In one smooth motion, Viktor slammed a multicube against his chest. The device activated instantly, unfolding outward in a rapid, mechanical bloom. Panels snapped into place around him, locking his arms and torso to the chair before he could even react.

“Wait, wait, what do you want? Money? I can...” Viktor ignored him completely. He pulled a simple gag from his pocket and forced it into the man’s mouth, securing it tightly without a second thought. The rest of his words died there, reduced to muffled noise. For a moment, Viktor just looked at him, as if evaluating the result. Then he exhaled, almost bored. “I’m here to fix the problem the Port can’t,” he said, letting out a quiet laugh that didn’t quite sound sincere.

He climbed up onto the desk like he owned it, then reached into his bag and pulled out a robotic head. It was unmistakably a modified Proxy unit, altered far beyond its original design. He turned it once in his hands, almost thoughtfully, before placing it over his own head. The moment it locked into place, his entire body flickered. Something scanned him from the inside out. His clothes shifted instantly, replaced by a clean, formal set that looked completely real despite being entirely artificial. The transformation was seamless, like it had always been that way.

The mask itself began to change next. Pixels crawled across its surface, slowly forming the shape of a skull, but it never fully stabilized. It glitched constantly, flickering in and out of clarity, as if it couldn’t quite hold onto its own identity. Viktor tilted his head slightly, testing it. “How do I look?” he asked. The Administrator thrashed in his restraints, eyes wide with panic, shaking his head as much as the bindings allowed. Viktor pressed a finger to the side of the helmet, activating a comm channel. “Are you in position yet?” he asked, his tone calm and measured. A voice responded immediately. “Yes. We’ve taken the tower. No discovery.” Viktor’s posture relaxed just slightly, satisfaction settling in. “Perfect,” he said.

He stepped down from the desk and dragged the restrained Administrator forward, adjusting him carefully in the chair. He took his time with it, tilting his head, straightening his posture, making sure the light hit his face just right. Every movement was deliberate, like he was setting up a display rather than dealing with a person. Once he was satisfied, Viktor set up a camera in front of the desk, adjusting the angle with precise care. “Then let us begin,” he said, a trace of amusement slipping into

his voice as he looked through the frame. "…the revolution." He pressed the button. The recording started.

Suddenly, all across the city, every monitor flickered. Advertisements cut out mid-loop, bright visuals snapping away as if something had overridden them entirely. In their place, a single live broadcast took over, unified and inescapable. The image came into focus. A man sat tied to a chair, his entire body tense, eyes wide with fear as he struggled uselessly against restraints that held him firmly in place. Then laughter filled the feed. Viktor stepped into frame, the glitching skull mask shifting constantly, never quite settling into a stable shape. "I'm baaack," he said playfully, drawing the word out like he was enjoying himself far too much.

He moved closer, tilting his head slightly as if studying his own reflection through the lens. "Hello everyone. I've returned once more. Defeated, but never vanquished." He spread his arms just slightly, presenting himself like a performer stepping onto a stage. "A new form." He lowered his head into a mock bow, pausing just long enough to let anticipation build. "I am... The Reaper." He held the pose, letting the silence stretch, letting the weight of the name settle over the entire city, and it did. Everywhere, people stopped what they were doing. Conversations died mid-sentence. Movement slowed, then halted entirely as eyes turned toward whatever screen was nearest. Fear spread quickly, quiet at first, then undeniable. It didn't matter that he looked different. The last time the Reaper appeared, the city had nearly fallen apart. That memory hadn't gone anywhere.

At the Anderson News Network, every monitor lit up with the same feed. Even the ones that weren't supposed to be connected. Even the ones that had no reason to display it at all. Aion stared at the screens, his composure slipping immediately. "Oh no… no, no, no, what is this…" he muttered, hands hovering over controls that no longer responded to him. Mia couldn't see what was happening, and she couldn't hear it either, but she felt the shift in him instantly. She grabbed onto him, holding tight, grounding him the only way she could as his breathing started to spiral.

Out in the streets, people watched in silence. Some stepped back instinctively, as if distance might somehow protect them. Others stood frozen, unable to look away. The city remembered. Darla's brother didn't hesitate. "To City Hall," he ordered sharply, already moving. His unit followed immediately, snapping into motion as one. Elsewhere, Lucien reacted just as quickly. "Find the source of that broadcast and shut it down," he commanded, his voice calm but carrying absolute authority. Two operatives saluted and moved without delay. Leonidas was nowhere to be seen.

Deep inside a prison cell, an old monitor crackled to life. A man sat chained to a chair, his face half-burned, his posture relaxed in a way that didn't match the restraints holding him. He watched the screen carefully. Studied it. Every detail. Then he started laughing. Not forced. Not hollow. Genuine. A guard rushed over, slamming a hand against the bars. "Hey, Reaper freak, shut up already," he barked. "Or we'll gas you." The man didn't stop. If anything, the laughter only grew louder.

Then there was Special Operations. They were already halfway back when the broadcast took over every screen in sight. Darla stopped in place, her eyes locked on the image. "…We were just there," she said, the realization hitting all at once. Alister didn't hesitate. "We're going back," he said, already turning, already moving. There was no argument, no hesitation from the others. They followed immediately. Because whatever this was... it had only just begun.

Viktor didn't stop. "So what's my goal this time?" he said, pacing slowly in front of the camera like he was enjoying the attention. "Well, it's simple. Nothing has changed. I'm here to send the same message as before… only with a bit more edge." He turned and walked back toward the man, grabbing him by the hair and forcing him upright, dragging his face closer into the frame. "Some of you may recognize this man," Viktor continued. "Some of you may not. It doesn't really matter." He tilted the man's head slightly, as if presenting him. "His name… irrelevant." There was a pause, deliberate and cold. "He represents something simple."

Viktor leaned closer to the camera, the glitching skull mask flickering as it struggled to hold its

shape. “Rot.” He let the word hang, then straightened, gesturing lazily around the room. “For too long, the people at the top have lived comfortably. They offer nothing for you. For us. They take, and take, and take.” He grabbed the camera and turned it, giving the city a full view of the office. “Don’t just waste your money on frivolous things like tacky paintings,” he added, almost amused. “They waste your time. Your labor. Your life.” The camera lingered on the gold bars, the absurd decorations, the excess. “These people don’t care about you,” Viktor said as he set the camera back into place. “They are parasites.” He shoved the man aside again, letting him slump slightly in the restraints.

The feed cut briefly. Then it flashed to the lobby. The line. The exhaustion. The frustration. Voices overlapping as people were turned away. Denied. Told to come back later. “But change isn’t built in a day,” Viktor’s voice continued over the footage, calm and controlled. “This is just the first step.” The feed returned to him. He paced slowly now, measured, confident. “This system is broken,” he said. “It cannot be fixed.” He turned back toward the camera. “Just look at your former Chancellor. We kidnapped his daughter… and what did he do?” A small laugh slipped through. “He didn’t give a single damn.” He waved it off casually. “We never intended the poor girl any harm. That was never the point. The point was clarity.” He stopped moving. Faced the camera directly. “So starting here… join me.” His tone sharpened. “We will tear this one down… and build something better.”

He reached down and pulled out a multi-tool, the device shifting in his hand as it unfolded into a sleek pistol. “Starting with him.” He raised the weapon without hesitation. The man thrashed in the chair, eyes wide, tears streaming as he tried to plead through the gag, his entire body shaking. Viktor didn’t react. He pulled the trigger. The shot echoed through every screen in the city. The man went still. Viktor lowered the weapon slightly, completely unfazed. “We are the Marrow Collective,” he said calmly. “And we will reap all their souls.” A small pause. “Aion Anderson is next.” The broadcast cut instantly.

Back in the office, Viktor tapped the side of his helmet again, already moving. “Is everyone

out?" he asked. Downstairs, the response came quickly. A group in black jackets stood among the tied-up Wardens and Cleatus, weapons in hand, the entire lobby subdued. "Yes, sir." Viktor let out a quiet laugh. He walked over to the wall, pressing against it until he found what he was looking for. A hidden lever clicked into place, and the bookshelf beside him shifted, opening into a concealed passage. He paused for just a moment, his attention drifting to the corner. The gold bars. Just sitting there. Untouched.

He stepped over, scooped them up without hesitation, and tucked them away like it was second nature. Then he turned back toward the exit. "Well… die well, everyone," he said lightly, almost amused, as he disappeared into the hidden passage. Outside, Special Operations, Peacekeeping, and multiple divisions converged on City Hall at once. They barely had time to process what they were seeing. The massive line of civilians was still there, confusion spreading as the broadcast ended.

Then the building erupted. The explosion tore through the structure in a violent burst, fire and debris ripping outward as the shockwave slammed into everything around it. Inside, the Wardens, Cleatus, and the black-jacketed group were still within the blast.

Chapter 16: Aftermath

City Hall was completely gone, reduced to rubble. Darla dropped to her knees and slammed her fist into the ground. The others stood frozen, devastated, and it hit even harder knowing they had just been there not long ago. “If we had stayed just a little longer…” Alister muttered, his voice caught somewhere between anger and disbelief. “Don’t think like that,” Bram said seriously, gripping his shoulder. “That kind of thinking will eat you up, and you won’t come back from it.” Fiora didn’t say anything for once, and that alone said enough. Around them, the others who had rushed to respond shared the same hollow expression, all of them staring at the ruins like they were trying to process something that refused to make sense.

The Fire Division moved in quickly. Even though the flames had already burned out, they began search and rescue immediately, tearing through the debris with practiced urgency. The Health Division followed close behind, setting up triage as fast as they could. It didn’t take long before bodies started being pulled from the rubble. People nearby began helping without being asked. It wasn’t organized, and it wasn’t clean, but it was better than standing there doing nothing. An AID-E unit moved between them, scanning each body as it was recovered. “Wardens… all identified… deceased. Unidentified

bodies… deceased…" Its tone was mechanical, but there was something about the delivery that still carried weight.

"We found another one over here!" The droid rushed toward the voice. It was Cleatus. What was left of him barely resembled a person. His limbs were gone, his body broken, and his breathing was uneven and shallow. Somehow, despite everything, he was still alive. A robotic man in a lab coat dropped to his side immediately, scanning him with quick, efficient movements. "He's critical, but we can save him if we move now," he said, urgency cutting through the chaos. They worked fast, lifting him carefully onto a stretcher before rushing him away. His eyes flickered open for just a moment. They didn't focus on anything in front of him. Instead, they seemed distant, caught on something only he could see. "I… failure…" he whispered weakly.

More figures began to arrive as the situation stabilized. Administrators, and Garrick himself. None of them spoke. They didn't issue orders or ask questions. They simply looked out over the destruction, taking in the scale of what had happened. Even Cassian stood in silence. Alister spotted him immediately and moved without hesitation. His steps were sharp, his emotions barely contained as he closed the distance and grabbed Cassian by the front of his coat. "Is this what you wanted us to see?" he demanded, his voice low but shaking. He knew the answer, but it didn't stop him from asking.

Cassian didn't resist. He didn't even look at Alister at first. His gaze stayed fixed on the ruins. "Of course not," he said quietly. "Why would anyone want this?" There was a pause, brief but noticeable, before his tone shifted just slightly. "…And why would someone with motives like that allow the civilians to leave?" He was already thinking ahead. Already dissecting it. Alister let go of him abruptly, the frustration still written across his face as he turned away.

At Aion's tower, the atmosphere was just as tense. Aion paced back and forth, his thoughts spiraling faster than he could keep up with. "I thought all of this was over," he said under his breath. "The Wishing Door, everything… and now it's all on me again. I don't even have an Aspect anymore.

What did I do?" Mia stayed close to him, holding onto his arm as she tried to ground him. "Aion, you need to show them it didn't get to you," she said gently. "That's what you always do." He shook his head, running a hand through his hair. "I can't do that right now. I'm a mess, Mia. I need time to think, to come up with something that actually works before I go out there and..." His words trailed off as he lost himself in the thought.

Tristan and Crow stood off to the side, watching the exchange unfold. "We have powerful friends," Mia continued. "They've protected us before. They'll do it again." Aion didn't respond. Instead, he suddenly turned toward them. "Suit up," he said. "It's time to prove you've got stage presence." Tristan blinked, caught completely off guard. "What? No, no, I'm way more of a coward than you are, and Crow barely even speaks. This is a terrible idea." Aion waved him off. "You're dating a god. Don't tell me this is more intimidating than that." "We broke up," Tristan shot back quickly. "And yes, this is absolutely more terrifying." Aion ignored him and pushed both of them toward the studio.

A moment later, Tristan found himself sitting at Aion's desk. Crow sat beside him, already composed. They were both dressed in formal suits now. Tristan's was green, while Crow's was black with a purple tie still with a mask. Aion adjusted Tristan's hair with quick, efficient movements, then stepped back without giving him another chance to argue. The broadcast started immediately. "Good evening, Multiverse… I'm Tristan Torrent," he began, his voice tight but steady enough to hold. "And I'm Crow," the masked figure added smoothly. "We are here to bring you an unfortunate special report." Tristan pushed through it, even though it felt like every word was a struggle.

He stayed focused. He stayed clear. He made it through. "Please rest assured that despite being named as this supposed Reaper's next target…" Tristan read carefully from the teleprompter. "…he is not concerned and fully trusts the Port Authority to handle the situation," Crow continued seamlessly. "Specifically, the Special Operations Division, who have reportedly already disrupted the Reaper

during the kidnapping incident…" Off to the side, Aion gave a small nod. He stood in the corner, typing rapidly, adjusting the script in real time as Tristan spoke. He had already decided how this narrative would unfold before anyone else had even begun reacting. This wasn't panic anymore. This was control.

Out in the streets, things were far less controlled. Chaos spread unevenly. Most of it came from opportunists rather than true believers. The Iron Vultures were already taking advantage of the confusion, moving through stores and alleys with practiced ease, while a handful of regular citizens got swept up in the moment and made poor decisions they would regret later. Mohawk walked casually down the street, a grin stretched across his face as he watched one man struggling to carry an armful of stolen game consoles. "Hey, nice work," Mohawk called out, tilting his head. "Wanna join up with us?"

The man froze. Then panic took over. He dropped everything and ran without looking back.

Mohawk blinked once, then shrugged. "Well… his loss," he said, crouching slightly to inspect the pile. He picked one up, turning it over in his hands with interest. "Not bad, either." He glanced back at his crew. "What do you say, boys? Let's forget this whole riot thing and head home. Haven't played one of these in centuries." A few of them laughed as they gathered up what they could carry, their interest in the chaos already fading. For them, this was never about revolution. It was just an opportunity. The rest of the crowd didn't last much longer either. As soon as Peacekeeping units began pushing into the area, the civilians scattered quickly, disappearing back into side streets and buildings like the moment had never happened.

Then came the political response. Morvin wasted no time. His video spread almost as fast as the Reaper's broadcast, appearing across feeds and screens with polished efficiency. He stood centered in frame, posture perfect, expression carefully constructed. "Do you honestly think I don't care about my own daughter?" he said, his voice tight with rehearsed emotion. "I was devastated." He paused just long enough to let it sit, lifting a hand to his face as if steadying himself. The tears were there, placed

just right, controlled rather than genuine. “That Reaper… he is a menace. He must be stopped. I wanted to act, but that Guild Master has blocked me at every turn.”

His tone sharpened slightly. “If I were still in charge, we would not be facing this situation.” He stepped forward just a fraction, leaning into the camera. “In truth, the Siege was no different. He ripped control away from me, locked me in a bunker, and then spread the lie that I abandoned my post.” There was conviction in his voice now, practiced and deliberate. “Wake up, people. I have served this city for years… and I will again. Vote for me.” The broadcast ended cleanly.

The sky went into complete lockdown. No ships moved. No traffic. No distant lights crossing the horizon. The shielding shifted, sealing the planet entirely. Nothing in. Nothing out. The few who still had clearance were forced to reroute through physical gateways, heavily restricted and tightly controlled. For the first time in a long time… the sky was empty. Lacy stood there, staring up at it. She had never seen it like this before. Not during the Siege. Not even at its worst. Everything felt… paused. Frozen. The memory of the Reaper, the one who had nearly broken the city, still held a grip on everyone. It didn’t matter that this might not be the same man. The name alone was enough. Her eyes didn’t leave the sky. “…Mac… I miss you.” That was all she said.

The streets were quieter than usual, but not calm. Murmurs spread through the crowds in low, uneasy waves. “That guy… he killed so many people,” one man said, his voice tight. “My whole family died in that attack. Why would anyone believe that nonsense?” Another shook his head, more hesitant. “I don’t know… I think he had a point. And we don’t even know if it’s the same one. The report said no civilians were killed this time. Just those...” The first man snapped. “How could you even say that after everything he did?” he shouted. “This city burned. Millions died!” “I’m just saying… maybe this one is different,” the second man pushed back, though there was uncertainty in his voice. “And maybe he’s not wrong about everything.” That was enough. The tension broke. They lunged at each other, fists swinging as the crowd around them scattered, not wanting to get involved.

The city wasn't united. It was splitting.

Inside the casino, the mood wasn't any better. Viktor walked past the Don as if nothing had changed, though everything clearly had. The Don stood near one of the tables, staring at a screen that had long since gone dark. "Look at this mess," the Don muttered, frustration bleeding into his voice. "Has this city really devolved into one where masked lunatics decide how things run?" He scoffed, shaking his head. "Do you have any idea how much money we funneled through that place?" "Tragic," Viktor replied casually, a faint smile hidden from view.

The Don turned slightly, finally noticing the bags. "Going somewhere?" he asked. Viktor didn't hesitate. "Oh, just heading out for a bit," he said lightly. "Don't worry. I'll be back before this all blows over." He adjusted one of the straps over his shoulder. "I don't think you'll have to worry about this 'Reaper' for very long." There was something about the way he said it. Just enough confidence to sound reassuring. Just enough ambiguity to mean something else entirely. "I hope you're right," the Don replied, his tone heavy. "The Court is not going to be happy about this." Viktor just smiled. Then he turned and walked away. In the corner, Portly watched him go, his eyes narrowed, suspicion written all over his face.

Special Operations returned to base. No one spoke. There was nothing to say. They moved through the building quietly, each one peeling off toward their own space without a word. The usual noise, the arguments, even Fiora's chaos… none of it was there. It felt wrong. Empty in a way that had nothing to do with the building itself. This wasn't like before. This wasn't a close call. This wasn't something they could chase down or fix with effort or teamwork. This was something bigger. Something already in motion. Something they had completely missed. For the first time since forming… it felt like they had lost. Even if it wasn't their fault. Even if it had never really been in their control, and none of them knew yet… that Aion had already put their names at the center of what came next.

Chapter 17: Find out more at Ten

Fiora woke up to silence. The base had been like this for the past few days. Too quiet. Wrong in a way she couldn't quite explain. Darla hadn't left her room. Alister had gone out at some point… and never came back. Fiora stretched, then wandered toward the kitchen, already expecting one thing at least. Bram. The smell of food confirmed it before she even reached the door. "Ooo, now that everyone's elsewhere… we can roleplay," she said to herself with a smirk, clearly entertained by her own idea. She stepped into the mess hall, and froze. Cassian, Garrick, Brutus, Lucien, and another man she didn't recognize. All sitting together. All completely serious. "…Oh no, The found out." Fiora whispered.

Her hand moved instinctively, producing a knife from somewhere that no one should question at this point. "I'm going to have to..." "Fenleigh," Cassian cut in calmly, not even looking surprised. "We saw you. You can come out. You are not in trouble." She slowly leaned back into view, still suspicious. "…Why are you all here?" she asked. Then she immediately dropped to one knee in front of Garrick. "Your lordship." Garrick blinked, completely caught off guard by that. Bram stepped in smoothly,

placing plates in front of everyone like this was the most normal situation in the world. “They said they have something important to talk about,” he explained. Cassian gave a polite smile that didn’t feel polite at all. “Be a dear and go gather the others.” Fiora didn’t argue. She bolted.

She reached Darla’s door and started pounding on it immediately. “Darla! Dog! Darla!” she shouted, urgency completely disproportionate to the situation. Inside, Darla stirred, confusion still heavy as she got out of bed and opened the door. Fiora grabbed her arm instantly. “You have to come down. There’s a bunch of scary people here and I think they’re going to get me if I don’t...” Darla blinked once. “Intruders?” Fiora shook her head, dead serious. “Worse… bureaucrats.” There were actual tears in her eyes. Darla sighed and patted her head. “I’m surprised you even know a word like that,” she said flatly. “It’s Cassian, isn’t it?” Fiora nodded rapidly. “I’ll get ready and be down shortly,” Darla said, already turning back inside.

Fiora hesitated at the door. “What about Alister?” she asked. “He didn’t come back.” Darla paused for just a second. “If it’s important,” she said calmly, “he won’t miss it.” That was enough for Fiora. She wiped her eyes quickly, nodded, and ran off down the hall toward her room. Darla made it down not long after. She slowed slightly as she entered, taking in the room. Cassian, Garrick, Lucien, Brutus, and her focus locked immediately. “…Administrator Kessler?” she asked. The dog man sighed. “Darla, we’ve been over this. Call me Bernard.” “…Why are you all here?” she asked, tension creeping into her voice. “Unfortunately,” Cassian said with a thin smile, “a certain news anchor forced our hand.” There was a hint of annoyance in it… but also something else. Respect.

Before he could continue. Fiora burst into the room. She was wearing what looked like a prom dress. Hair styled. Makeup heavy. Trying very hard to look appealing. “Hey boys,” she said, leaning into it. Darla turned immediately. “Fenleigh, no.” She didn’t even hesitate. “I think you should… take a walk.” Fiora deflated instantly. No argument. No pushback. She just turned and left. “I think you look nice,” Bram whispered from the kitchen. Fiora didn’t respond.

Darla sat down at the table. Bram joined her. After a moment, Jax wandered in, taking his place like he had already been expecting this. Cassian didn't wait any longer. "As I was saying… Aion Anderson has been named the next target of this new 'Reaper.'" He let the word sit for a moment. "And Aion has taken it upon himself to place his safety… in your hands." A moment. "Isn't this what you wanted?" Darla asked, still irritated, still not fully grasping the scale of it. "It is," Cassian admitted.

"Just… not like this." He leaned back slightly. "I suppose even I can't plan for unexpected terrorist theatrics." Darla looked down for a moment, thinking. "I can't help but feel like this is connected to Founder's Day," she said quietly. "Now that I've had time to think about it." That caught attention. "Founder's Day…" Garrick said, leaning forward slightly. "I read the report. Heard fragments in meetings. But never the full picture." He looked at her directly. "What really happened?" Darla took a slow breath. Then she began.

Outside, Fiora wandered aimlessly. Even dressed up, she looked… small. "Hey, Fera." Her expression hardened instantly. She turned. Scratch stood in the alley, leaning casually against the wall like he owned the place. "What's with the getup?" he said with a grin. "Though… you do look pretty good." She crossed the distance fast. "You are the only person on this planet I do not want hitting on me," she said flatly. "Alright, alright," he said, raising his hands slightly. "I get it. But why the hostility? After everything I've done…" He tilted his head. "…after keeping my mouth shut. You want it to stay that way, right?" Her expression snapped. "You set me up!" she shot back. "I didn't even want to join the Port!"

"Well…" he shrugged. "Seems like it worked out. For both of us." His smile sharpened. "You got yourself a nice little family…" He leaned in slightly. "And I got access." That made her grip tighten. "Just wish I could've gotten to you before the Civics Division blew up," he added casually.

That did it. She grabbed him by the collar, slamming him back. "Don't," she said, voice low and dangerous. He didn't stop smiling. "Careful," he choked slightly. "You might ruin your little 'good girl'

routine." Her grip tightened. Then, she stopped.

Forced herself to let go. "What do you want?" she asked, cold now. Controlled. Scratch straightened, satisfied. "Just a favor or two." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small data drive. "The news guy's pretty confident your team's going to save him." He smirked. "Which means you'll be heading up there soon." He held it out. "My blind spot." She took it, turning it over in her fingers. "What is it?" she asked. "Nothing shady," he said, far too quickly. "Just gives me a back door into their systems. Files, drafts… unpublished articles." His grin widened. "All the good stuff." She didn't like that. Not at all. "If I do this…" she said slowly, eyes still on the drive, "are we done? You leave me alone?" His smile stretched wider. "Of course," he said, and somehow… that made it worse.

Back with the others, Darla finished explaining everything. Garrick sat in silence for a moment, taking it all in, turning it over carefully as if weighing each piece against the others. "Keep in mind," Lucien said at last, "this information cannot be verified either way." He folded his hands in front of him, measured as always. "I would very much like to believe them… especially given the inner turmoil of..." He stopped himself before finishing the thought. "…but the facts do not lean in either direction."

"I see," Garrick replied, thoughtful rather than dismissive. "Even so, with what she has shared, I cannot ignore the connection. It is also important to remember the Siege. Everyone was skeptical then, and that hesitation left us unprepared." His eyes shifted to Darla. "Except Peacekeeping. You acted on the warning, didn't you? Captain Raleigh's." Darla gave a small nod. "I was warned just before it happened," she admitted. "I didn't fully believe it… but I still raised the alert level to three. Just in case." "Then perhaps we should do the same now," Brutus said, his voice low as he considered it. Bernard Kessler shook his head immediately. "The alert level is already at five. Full lock down. Keeping it there much longer is going to cause unrest." The room settled into a quiet tension. Cassian exhaled softly, stepping in. "You are all missing the point," he said. "This is much simpler than you are making it."

He looked directly at Darla. “You have been given a very specific burden. Protect Aion Anderson.” He let the name sit for a moment before continuing. “Yes, he is just a reporter. The people love him, and losing him would be a significant blow to public trust.” His expression sharpened slightly. “But that is not what truly matters.” He leaned forward just enough to make it clear. “If we fail… the Port might as well say its final prayer.” Darla frowned, not fully following. “I don’t want him to die,” she said, “but I don’t see how one man’s death destroys Porta Nexus.” Lucien answered her this time.

“He positioned you as the ideological opposite of the Reaper,” he explained calmly. “Whether that is true or not no longer matters. If you fail, the people will not see it as a tactical loss. They will see it as proof that we cannot protect them at all.” A voice came from the doorway. “That’s my old administrator. Cynical as ever.” Alister stepped into the room. Lucien smiled faintly and gave a small nod in acknowledgment. Alister’s gaze shifted to Darla. “He’s right,” he said. “We don’t have a choice. We have to do this.”

Darla didn’t argue, but she didn’t look convinced either. “I’m not denying that,” she said slowly. “I just… can’t shake the feeling that there’s something else going on.” Jax, who had been quiet until now, finally spoke. “I don’t think it’s unreasonable to consider a misdirect,” he said, leaning slightly against the wall. “If this is meant to draw everything toward Aion, then the real target could be somewhere else.” Brutus frowned. “If that’s true… who?” Jax gave a small, humorless shrug. “There are too many possibilities.” Cassian let out a quiet sigh, clearly irritated by the uncertainty. Before he could redirect the conversation, Garrick spoke again. “I am not particularly concerned for my own safety,” he said, his tone steady. “But this situation requires clarity.”

He looked around the table, making sure he had everyone’s attention. “Special Operations will guard Aion directly. Aviation will maintain a perimeter outside. Mathias can hold a smaller unit at the base.” He paused, considering the rest. “As for the remaining forces… we keep them distributed. On

standby. Ready to respond anywhere at a moment's notice." One by one, the others nodded. Not because it was perfect. But because it was the only plan they had.

Chapter 18: The Voice of the Multiverse

Special Operations arrived at the Anderson News Network tower. The elevator ride up was quiet, heavier than it should have been. When the doors opened at the top floor, Jax stepped out with them, but instead of joining the group, he immediately peeled off without a word, already moving toward the building's systems. He did not need to ask. Everyone else moved forward. Aion stood waiting with Mia. "Alister, buddy, and you too, Darla I'm so happy you." Alister stepped forward and slapped him. The sound cracked through the room. Aion blinked, stunned. "…What was that for?" he asked, genuinely confused. Alister crossed his arms, giving him a look that made it very clear he was not going to explain something that obvious.

Aion hesitated, then straightened slightly. "The Founder's Day situation?" he said, trying to recover. "You know I can't be biased. I'm a newsman through and through." He said it proudly at first. Then the confidence slipped, just a little. Darla didn't miss it. "I might have believed that," she said evenly, "if you hadn't pulled something like this." Aion laughed, a little too quickly. "Oh, but it's true," he said. "I simply reported it before it happened… right…" The last word came out quieter. Less

certain.

Bram stepped forward, completely unaffected by the tension. “Mr. Anderson, it’s an honor,” he said, holding out his hand. “I’ve always wanted to meet you.” Aion lit up instantly. “Of course!” he said, grabbing Bram’s hand enthusiastically. “Always good to meet a fan.” Fiora leaned slightly to the side, squinting. “…He’s almost as big as Bram,” she muttered to herself. Bram scratched the back of his head, suddenly a little embarrassed. “This might be a bad time,” he admitted, “but… I actually have something for you to sign.” Aion’s grin widened. “Say no more.” He grabbed a sheet of paper and signed it with dramatic flair, like the situation didn’t exist at all. Bram looked way too happy about it.

“Can I have your number?” Fiora asked immediately. Aion leaned down slightly, studying her. “My number?” he repeated. “Why would you want that, kid? Thinking about changing careers?” Before Fiora could answer, Mia stepped in. She moved between them smoothly, not aggressive, just firm enough to redirect the moment. “That won’t be necessary,” she said calmly. Her tone was polite. Not optional. Aion blinked, then straightened again, clearing his throat slightly.

“Right… let me show you around,” Aion said, clapping his hands lightly as if trying to reset the mood. He led them outside first. The view was… undeniable. From this height, all of Porta Nexus stretched out beneath them, layered and alive, glowing with movement and light. It was the kind of sight meant to inspire confidence. Unfortunately, the security did not. There were only a few automated turrets along the railing, and even those looked recently installed rushed, almost. At least someone had tried. Above them, Lacy and A1R patrolled the skies alongside their Wardens and operatives. This time, the units were mostly airborne, winged responders sweeping across the skyline. No goblins in sight. That alone was a relief.

“Inside,” Aion said, already moving. The bedrooms came next. They were comfortable, leaning toward luxurious without crossing into excess. Aion and Mia clearly shared one, while Tristan and

Crow had separate rooms nearby. Functional. Personal. Nothing alarming. Then Aion turned, grin returning. “And of course… the main event.” He led them back toward the center of the floor. The broadcast set. Lights, cameras, screens, everything arranged perfectly. It was the heart of the tower, where his voice reached the entire multiverse. “Where the magic happens,” Aion said proudly. He gestured toward two figures nearby.

“And these are my roadies… though at this rate, they might replace me.” He laughed lightly. “You’ve met Tristan, at least.” Tristan gave an awkward wave. Beside him, Crow did the same quiet, reserved. Alister barely looked at first. “Yeah, yeah, whatever let’s just...” Then he saw them. Crow.

Everything stopped. His breath hitched. The room tilted. For a split second, he wasn’t there anymore. A man in a white military uniform laughed sharp, cruel. A dragon girl stood beside him. A wolf. A bear. A black-haired woman. The memory was fractured. Blurred at the edges, like something his mind refused to hold onto properly. The man stepped forward. Straight toward him. “Your information is nothing compared to mine.” In the background, A bird figure. Watching.

The moment snapped. Alister collapsed. “Alister?!” Darla dropped beside him instantly. “What, someone get a medic, now!” Alister’s hands trembled as he tried to push himself up, his breathing uneven. “What is… the bird doing here…” he managed, voice strained. Aion froze. For a moment, he didn’t understand. Then it clicked. “…Right,” he said quietly. “Crow was there.” Darla looked at him sharply. “Was there?” she repeated. Crow stepped forward. “I will leave for now,” they said calmly. “No wait,” Aion said quickly. “Don’t go. We can work something out. Different areas of the building, something.” Darla didn’t take her eyes off them. She studied Crow carefully now. “Who… are you?” she asked.

Aion hesitated. “…Crow is… they were with the Chimera Legion.” The words landed heavy.

Darla’s eyes widened immediately. “The same group that stabbed you,” she said, looking between them, “and nearly killed him during the Siege?” “Wait,” Fiora cut in, confused. “I thought that was the

bone people." Alister forced himself upright, still shaken. "It was," he said. "But while everyone was focused on them… another group made their move." He looked at Aion. "They tried to take his power." His voice tightened. "I was sent to protect him... I can understand everything else," he added, still trying to process it. "But why this? Why them?" Aion looked down for a moment. Then back up.

"Crow was just a kid," he said. "They didn't know what they were doing." His voice steadied as he continued. "And from what I learned later… their leader was falling apart. Spiraling. None of them were thinking clearly." He glanced at Crow. "They were victims too. In their own way... but that's not the point," he said firmly. "I chose to forgive them." He held their gaze. "and they've proven invaluable ever since."

"How were they even allowed on this world?" Darla asked, confusion cutting through her voice. Crow didn't hesitate. "Marcus always told me to be his eyes," they said. "Stay out of sight. I was never on any records." "If the Port had known," Darla shot back, sharper now, "they never would have allowed it." Crow lowered their gaze slightly. "Then I should leave," they said. "My presence jeopardizes your safety, Aion." "No," Aion said immediately, stepping forward. "Don't you see what this is?" He looked between all of them, his voice gaining strength. "Cyrus Steelheart stood in this very room and told the multiverse he wanted to change. You were both there. You saw it." He pointed toward Crow. "And what did he do? He followed through. He created something incredible." His tone hardened. "Why can't Crow be the same?"

"Do none of you believe in second chances?" he pressed. "In redemption for your alleged wrongs?" "That's not the point," Darla replied, frustration rising. "Alister can't even..." "No," Alister cut in quietly. All eyes turned to him. "He's right." He steadied himself, though his voice still carried the edge of something unsettled. "We are the same," he said. "At least… more than I want to admit." He glanced toward Crow. "But that doesn't mean nothing changes." A small pause. "…We should stay

on opposite sides of the building." Then he turned and walked out. The room felt heavier after he left. Crow gave a small bow. "I will do my best to avoid any problems," they said. Before anyone could respond, they lifted into the air, phasing cleanly through the ceiling and disappearing from view. Fiora watched them go, her expression tight, her hand unconsciously gripping the data drive hidden in her pocket.

Far from Porta Nexus, in another world. Misty Point. Fog swallowed everything. Viktor walked through it like he belonged there. He had spent years in this place. In some ways, it reminded him of Porta Nexus, if it had ever stopped pretending to be something better. He passed an old woman mugging a man in an alley, her cane revealing a crude firearm taped to its end. Neither of them paid him any attention. No one ever did. He moved through the fog and into a large, worn building. Inside, the air felt stale, heavy with quiet deals and bad intentions. A single counter sat at the center, with a woman behind it who looked like she trusted no one. "I need the best assassin one billion credits can buy," Viktor said plainly. The woman looked him over, then down at the bag in his hand. For a moment, she seemed to consider taking it. "You can try," Viktor said with a small, knowing smile. She laughed, the thought passing just as quickly as it came. "I know the perfect guy."

A few minutes later, Viktor sat at a table, boots propped up casually as a masked figure approached and took the seat across from him. "So you're the one?" the mercenary said, leaning back slightly. "One billion? We both know you don't have that kind of money in that bag." "You're right," Viktor replied. "But I do have proof that I can access that kind of capital." He opened the bag just enough to show what was inside. That was all it took. The mercenary's posture shifted. "Must be quite the job," he said slowly, "if it pays that much." "It is," Viktor said. "I'll give you a million just to consider it. The rest comes when you succeed." He tilted his head slightly. "You'll also need to paint a couple of skulls on your armor." The mercenary frowned. "You wouldn't happen to be connected to that group causing problems over in Nexus, would you?" Viktor smiled faintly. "Oh, no," he said.

“Nothing like that.” He leaned forward just slightly. “Let’s just say… I was inspired. So.” He rested his chin on his hand. “Are you in?” Things had settled… at least on the surface. Everyone had taken their assigned positions throughout the building. Bram stayed with Aion and the others directly, while the rest spread out across the four corners of the tower. Jax remained in a security room, having already modified it as much as he could on short notice. Now he simply watched the monitors, scanning feeds, tracking movement, looking for anything out of place. Fiora stepped into the room quietly.

Her eyes stayed down. “Hey, Jax… I wanted to ask you something…” she started, hesitating. Then, suddenly...“I mean, I order you to tell me about techy stuff.” He gave her a long, flat stare.

For once, he didn’t insult her. “Shouldn’t you be at your post?” he asked. Then he sighed. “…What’s the question?” Fiora shifted slightly, trying to sound casual. “If I... well, not me, but if some evil bone guy plugged a… drive doohickey into a port up here… what would it do?” Jax’s expression changed immediately. He raised an eyebrow. “…Did you see something like that?” he asked. “Oh um… no,” she said quickly, already unsure. Jax didn’t press. Not yet.

“Well,” he said, turning back slightly, “that would depend entirely on what’s on the drive.”

“So it would just… read old files and stuff, right?” she asked. “I suppose,” he said. Then paused. “Or something more drastic.” His eyes narrowed slightly. “…Actually, now that you mention it...” He stopped mid-thought. Then moved. Fast. Jax rushed out of the room without another word, already heading to check the ports across the building. Fiora stood there alone. The room felt too quiet. Too open. She looked at the main console. Unattended. Her hand drifted toward her pocket. Then stopped.

Leaving it there might be too obvious. Moving it might be worse. She swallowed, then crouched slightly, feeling along the back of the console instead of looking directly. There was a port.

Already in use. That made her hesitate. Then she pulled the other drive free. Just enough. Just

long enough. She slipped the drive Scratch gave her into place. Her fingers lingered there for half a second, looking down at the other. A black data drive with a skull on it. Then... “What’s that?” Jax’s voice. Right behind her. Fiora flinched. He stepped past her before she could respond, already focused on the device. “You found it?” he asked, grabbing it and turning it over in his hand. Relief flickered across his face. He moved quickly, pulling out a laptop and setting up an isolated instance, something protected enough that whatever was on the drive wouldn’t fry the system. “This is perfect,” he muttered, already working. “This is how they broadcast across all systems.” His tone shifted, excited now. “Good job, Fiora. With this, I might be able to extract the data… build a countermeasure… maybe even trace the source.” He barely looked at her as he worked. Fiora stood there, frozen for a second. “…Ye... yeah,” she said weakly. “Yay. I did it.” Her hand slowly slipped back into her pocket. Now empty.

Chapter 19: Show Time

A tense calm had settled over the tower, the kind that made every second feel heavier than the last. No one relaxed, no one spoke more than they had to. Everyone was in position, waiting for something they all knew was coming. Above the tower, the Aviation Division maintained a constant presence, circling in layered formations while airships held their positions with cannons trained outward. At the base, Mathias and his team reinforced every entrance they could, sealing off access points and preparing for anything that tried to force its way in. Inside, Special Operations held their assigned posts, spread across the building exactly as planned. They were ready.

Then the sky lit up. Fireworks burst in the distance, bright and deliberate, cutting through the controlled airspace like it meant nothing. They didn't scatter randomly or fade into harmless patterns. They formed shapes. Clear, unmistakable shapes. Skulls. Dozens of them, burning across the skyline for the entire city to see. For a moment, everything hesitated. Then something tore through the display. A jet-black plane, crudely painted with white skulls, ripped through the air at a speed that didn't make

sense under full lockdown. “How did that get through?” Lacy asked, already moving before anyone could answer.

The rest of her unit reacted immediately, accelerating toward the target while nearby airships shifted their orientation, cannons locking on in perfect unison. The order didn’t need to be spoken. They fired. The plane didn’t evade. It didn’t slow. It didn’t even attempt to adjust its course. It drove straight into one of the airships. The collision erupted in fire and tearing metal, but the moment barely had time to register before the real threat revealed itself. The pilot launched out of the wreckage. He landed hard on the deck of the airship, already moving before his feet fully settled. The crew rushed him without hesitation, weapons drawn, trying to overwhelm him with numbers. It didn’t work.

He moved through them like he had done this a hundred times before, slipping past strikes, redirecting attacks, knocking them aside with efficient, controlled force. Nothing he did was flashy. Nothing was wasted. Within seconds, he had cleared a path straight to the command station. He shoved the operator aside and took control. The airship lurched violently as it changed direction, now aimed directly at the tower. Below, the remaining ships adjusted again, tracking the hijacked vessel as it closed distance. They opened fire immediately, tearing into the frame with everything they had. The airship didn’t survive long. Explosions ripped through it mid-air, shredding it apart before it could reach its target.

That didn’t matter. The mercenary had already moved. He launched himself from the falling wreckage, using the last of its momentum to carry himself forward. He hit the tower hard, smashing through a lower level in a violent burst of debris and disappearing inside. At the base, Mathias stared up at the impact point, his expression tightening as the reality set in. “He’s already inside,” he said, more to himself than anyone else. He hesitated for just a moment, weighing the situation. “Send a small squad in to assist,” he ordered finally, his voice strained with uncertainty. “Stay alert. This might not be the only threat.”

Inside the tower, the tension snapped instantly. “Crap, what do we do?” Fiora’s voice cut through the comms, sharper than usual. “Stay calm and hold your positions,” Darla responded without hesitation. “I’m heading down now.” She was already moving. Fast. But she wasn’t the first to act. Crow had already gone. They dropped from their perch without a word, phasing through multiple floors in rapid succession, their descent clean and controlled. They emerged directly in front of the intruder before he had even fully adjusted to the new environment. There was no warning. No introduction. Crow’s arm shifted as shadow gathered along it, forming into a blade in the same motion as their strike.

The attack came fast and precise. The mercenary barely managed to react in time, raising his rifle just enough to intercept the blow. The force of the impact sent Crow slamming into the wall behind them. They recovered immediately, pushing off the surface and resetting their stance in a single motion. The mercenary did not give them time to breathe. His multi-tool shifted in his grip, reshaping into a blade that mirrored Crow’s own. Then he moved. Steel met shadow in a rapid exchange, the two of them colliding in a flurry of strikes that filled the space between them. Each attack was met with another, neither side gaining ground, both moving faster than most people in the building could properly track.

Darla reached the floor just as the clash intensified. She slowed for half a second, taking it in, her eyes tracking every movement, measuring the distance, the speed, the rhythm of the fight. “They might be the strongest one here,” she said quietly, more to herself than anyone else, and if that was true, then whatever came next was only going to get worse. She didn’t step in. Not yet. Every instinct told her to join the fight, but experience held her back. If she misread even one movement, she would only get in the way. Instead, she steadied herself, watching closely, preparing for the moment Crow might need her. The mercenary shifted tactics. He stopped meeting Crow head-on.

Instead, he started looking for openings, slipping to the side, testing angles, trying to break past

them rather than defeat them. Crow noticed immediately. They adjusted, shifting their stance, positioning themselves between him and the stairs, blocking the path like a wall that refused to move.

That made things easier. For him. The mercenary flicked something to the ground. Smoke exploded outward, filling the space instantly. Darla didn't lose him. She couldn't see him, but she could hear him. The shift of weight. The movement of air. She stepped forward and struck. Her blade drove through the smoke, connecting with something solid. The mercenary let out a sharp grunt as the strike landed, the edge cutting into him.

For a moment, she thought she had him. Then his hand snapped onto the weapon. He yanked it free from her grip while it was still lodged in him, twisting with enough force to tear it loose. Before she could react, his foot slammed into her face, sending her back hard. "I don't have time to play today," he said with a tired sigh, like this was all an inconvenience. Upstairs, Aion was already unraveling. "Tristan, what are you waiting for? Deploy the cameras!" he shouted, pacing like he could outrun the situation. "Are you crazy?" Alister's voice snapped back over comms immediately.

"Are you sure that's a good idea, Mr. Anderson?" Bram added, his tone far more cautious.

"Of course it is," Aion shot back without hesitation. "We need to show everyone." Mia pressed her fingers to her temple, already regretting everything. Five orb-like drones powered on at once, lifting into the air before darting toward the lower floors. Outside, on a nearby rooftop, two figures in black leather jackets watched everything unfold. "Reaper, do you read me?" one of them said into a comm. "We can't play your message, and we don't have control of their systems anymore. The drive… it's been removed." There was a pause.

Then a voice answered, calm and almost amused. "Really now? What a shame," Viktor said. "Well, that was the B plot anyway. Forget the message. Just make sure I make an appearance." The line cut. The two operatives looked at each other. Then, without a word, they threw out their hands. Rock. Paper. Scissors. One of them froze. "…Best two out of three?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

The other shook his head. “Damn it,” the loser muttered, dragging a hand down his face. “I wanted to die on the other mission.” He reached into a bag and pulled out a costume.

A Reaper mask. Cheap. Crude. Nothing like the real thing. Still enough. Back inside. The mercenary reached the next floor just as the drones found him, hovering into position and locking onto the fight. Alister was already waiting. Sword drawn. Stance steady. “Come on,” he called out, confidence masking the strain underneath. “Fight me.” The mercenary swung his blade as if to accept.

Then slipped past him. “Hey, don’t ignore me!” Alister snapped, firing his wrist grapple. The line shot out, wrapping around the mercenary’s torso and yanking him back. Alister moved to strike, but the mercenary was already ready. Their blades clashed, again. and again. Alister pushed forward, but he was a step behind every time, his breathing tightening as the pace wore him down.

“Hey… dog…” Alister muttered between strikes, forcing the words out as he struggled to keep up. “Catch up already…” “We’re here!” Darla’s voice cut in. She and Crow re-engaged at the same time, closing the distance and striking in tandem. For a brief moment, it looked like they had him contained, their movements overlapping just enough to box him in. Then the mercenary dropped another smoke bomb. The blast of gray swallowed everything in an instant. When it cleared, he was gone.

He didn’t stop moving. By the time they tracked him again, he had already reached the upper levels. He burst into a room at the top floor, and the doors slammed shut behind him. The walls lit up immediately, energy pulsing outward in sharp, controlled waves. The mercenary dropped to one knee, his momentum broken for the first time since the attack began. Confusion flashed across his face, like he hadn’t expected anything inside the tower to actually stop him. On the other side of the wall, Jax stood at a control panel, eyes locked on the system as it ran.

“I’ve contained him,” he said, focused. “Gravity amplification combined with electro pulses should be enough to shut him down.” Fiora rushed up beside him, lighting up immediately. “Way to go!

I knew my subordinate could do it!" Jax didn't even look at her. "Fenleigh, I swear to the Caretaker, I'm going to..." A sharp beeping cut him off. Both of them froze. Inside the room, the mercenary moved. Every live grenade on his body activated at once. There was no time to process it. The explosion tore through the containment chamber, blasting the doors apart and sending a shockwave through the hallway. Jax was thrown back into the wall hard enough to knock the air out of him.

The mercenary came through the smoke. Still standing. Barely. His armor was gone, reduced to scraps, and half his skin had been burned away by the blast. The damage should have killed him. It didn't even slow him enough. He lunged straight at Fiora. She barely managed to dodge the first strike, stumbling back as his blade cut through the space where she had just been. "Why would you… do that to yourself…" she asked, her voice shaking with genuine shock. "It ain't about me, kid," he replied, swinging again. She couldn't keep up. Each strike came too fast, too heavy, even with him slowed. She dodged what she could, barely staying ahead of it, but it was clear she wouldn't last long. Then Bram hit him.

The punch landed clean across the mercenary's face, snapping his head to the side and dropping him to the floor. For a moment, it looked like that might have been enough. It wasn't. By the time the rest of Special Operations regrouped on the top floor, the mercenary was already pushing himself back up, bloodied, burned, but still moving. Aion stood in the corner, clutching Mia, his composure completely gone. The mercenary saw him. He raised his gun and fired. The shot never reached its target. Crow stepped in front of it, taking the hit before it could land. "No! You stupid kid!" Aion shouted, panic breaking through completely. The mercenary tried to fire again. Nothing. He was out of ammo.

Below, Mathias watched the situation unfold, already seconds away from sending reinforcements up. When another force appeared. A group in black jackets, led by a crude imitation of the Reaper, rushed forward. "Reap all their souls!" the fake called out, charging. They managed to cut

down a few of the lower-level operatives before Mathias stepped in, his restraint gone. He tore through them without hesitation, finishing the group in seconds before grabbing the fake Reaper and slamming him into the wall. “You’re going to rot in prison,” Mathias hissed. The man laughed weakly through the impact. “Our bones have already been crushed… all that remains is marrow.” Mathias frowned, the words landing wrong, but there wasn’t time to process them.

Back upstairs, Special Operations had the mercenary surrounded. He leaned against the window, barely upright now, but still holding his ground. “Give up,” Darla barked. “This is over.” The mercenary gave a tired, almost amused look. “A job’s not over till I die… or I get paid.” He raised a multicube. It unfolded in his hand, revealing one final device. A bomb. Large enough to take the entire floor with it. Alister didn’t think. He moved. He tackled the mercenary straight through the window.

Glass shattered outward as both of them disappeared into open air, falling toward the streets below. Alister fired his grapple instinctively. It didn’t reach. The building was too far.

Darla rushed forward, reaching out, shouting his name as he fell. Alister closed his eyes. Then something caught him. Crow. They surged forward at the last possible second, grabbing him mid-fall and pulling him away just as the explosion above consumed the mercenary completely. The blast tore through the air, fire rolling outward into the night. Crow carried Alister back to safety, landing with the rest of them as the smoke cleared. For a moment, no one spoke. Then Darla moved first. “Alister… you’re okay,” she said, pulling him into a hug before she could stop herself.

He blinked, confused. “Dog?” She froze, immediately letting go. “I mean...” Bram didn’t give her time to recover. He wrapped both of them into a massive hug, pulling the entire group in as Fiora jumped in right after, clinging on like she refused to let go. Around them, the drones continued to orbit.

Recording everything. Aion straightened immediately, stepping back into frame like nothing had happened. “Well, look at that,” he said smoothly, composure snapping back into place. “Good evening, Multiverse.” He gestured toward the group behind him. “Just like reported, the Reaper has been

stopped. The man himself has been neutralized, all thanks to the Special Operations Division." He gave a small wink toward the camera. "Find out more tomorrow morning." The feed cut, and just like that. The story was his again.

The next morning, they stayed. Just in case. The tower felt different now. Not safer, not really, but quieter in a way that didn't quite match what had happened. Aion, on the other hand, seemed completely at ease again, as if the danger had already passed and the story had already been decided.

Like he had already moved on. Right on schedule, he began his morning broadcast. Special Operations stood off to the side, watching. Crow was in the corner, working on themselves like nothing had happened. They had removed the bullet on their own, carefully and without hesitation, their movements steady in a way that made it clear this wasn't new to them.

Alister watched for a moment, something unsettled in his expression. "…Maybe they are…" he started, then stopped himself, turning away before finishing the thought. The elevator chimed softly. Lucien stepped out, composed as always, already holding a tablet in hand. "Falco Black," he said, getting straight to it. "A hired gun known for taking only extremely high-paying contracts. As far as we can tell, he barely uses any of that money." He paused briefly, glancing toward Alister. "It is likely he was hired by this 'Reaper.'" Alister frowned slightly. "That man downstairs… was that really him?" he asked, uncertainty clear in his voice.

Lucien didn't hesitate. "Inconclusive. Nevertheless… well done." His tone didn't change, but there was something almost approving beneath it. "I've submitted my recommendation for you to return as Captain. Preferably within Intelligence…" he added, before his expression shifted just slightly. "…though your half-brother may complicate that." And just like that, he turned and left without another word.

Outside, Fiora sat on the edge of the tower, her legs hanging over the drop, her usual energy completely gone. She had never been this quiet. Bram noticed. He walked over without saying anything

at first and sat beside her, giving her space but not leaving her alone. "…Why would he do that…" she asked softly, staring out at the city. "Just… die like that…" Bram thought about it for a moment. "Maybe he had a reason," he said. "A family. Someone he cared about. Money makes people do some crazy things." He paused, then added more gently, "…Or maybe he believed in something." Fiora didn't react at first. "I would take a bullet for you, Fenleigh," Bram said with a small, sincere smile.

She turned to him immediately. There was fear in her eyes. Real fear. "No," she said quickly. "Please don't say that. I don't want anyone to do that again… I mean…" Her voice faltered. She didn't finish. Bram blinked, surprised by how strongly she reacted, but he didn't push her. Instead, he shifted slightly and placed an arm around her shoulders. "Alright," he said softly. "Then I won't die for you." He gave a small, reassuring smile. "I'll live for you."

Down below, Darla and Jax watched as Peacekeeping escorted the man in the crude Reaper costume into custody. He would not be treated lightly. Most likely, he would end up in a cell very close to the one who had started all of this. "Ugh… what a mess," Jax muttered. "Are we going to end up with an entire block filled with these idiots?" Darla glanced at him, studying his expression carefully. "You seem more bothered by this than usual," she said. Jax didn't even look at her. "Are you daft?" he snapped. "The last one messed with all of us. Of course it's personal." He exhaled sharply, frustration slipping through. "If it weren't for that stupid power of his… none of this would have happened. The air control systems would have held." He turned and walked off, clearly done with the conversation.

Back upstairs, Aion wrapped up his broadcast with an easy laugh, like everything had gone exactly as planned. "I knew it would all work out," he said, already shifting to the next story in his mind. He turned toward Crow. "While we're at it, why don't we try to track down Captain Raleigh and Orion? You said you had a lead, didn't you?" Mia immediately stepped in. "At least let them take a break, Aion," she said, irritation clear in her voice. "Of course, of course," he replied smoothly. "No rush." He smiled, already thinking ahead. "But when they're ready… an interview like that could

change the multiverse. Just like today did.” The room collectively sighed, and just like that. He was already chasing the next story.

Chapter 20: Crushed Bones

Viktor walked through the tunnels in silence. They were old. Ancient, even. The kind of place that felt forgotten by the world above. At the far end, the passage opened into a massive cavern. Light spilled in from a jagged break high above, illuminating what lay at the center. A crashed Empire ship. It had been there for years, buried and broken, yet still imposing in its ruin. Viktor raised a hand to his comm. “Is the Port gone?” “Confirmed.” A small smile formed. “…Good. Then let’s get to work.” From the tunnels behind him, figures began to pour into the cavern. Dozens at first. Then hundreds. Black and red uniforms. Some marked with crude skulls. Then another group emerged, white uniforms, cleaner, more structured.

They all stopped when Viktor stepped forward. Every one of them snapped to attention. “Ah… the Neo Empire has graced us as well,” Viktor said, almost amused. “A wonderful family reunion.” He gave a salute, just slightly off from proper Empire form. They returned it anyway. One of the white-uniformed men stepped forward and dropped to one knee. “We were wrong to follow Marcus. Now that

his Empire is no more… we wish to rejoin the fold. Thank you, Reaper, for giving us this chance."

Viktor looked down at him for a moment. Then he reached out and pulled him back to his feet.

"There's no need for that," he said lightly. "We are all soldiers of the Empire here. We may have broken apart… but you're back now. That's what matters." The man nodded immediately.

From the crowd, a hooded figure in black stepped forward, arms crossed. "I'm still unconvinced." Viktor turned to him without hesitation. "Oh? You've followed my plans so far. Why the change of heart?" The man didn't answer. Not directly. "We are short on time," he said instead. "The distraction you made with the newsman won't last long. And we still have to deal with the automated defenses." Viktor watched him for a second longer… then smiled. "Right," he said simply. "Then let's begin." He climbed onto a jagged piece of stone, overlooking the cavern. His plain leather jacket stood out among the uniforms.

Then, suddenly, he snapped to attention, again giving that slightly imperfect Empire salute. "Brothers," he began. The cavern quieted instantly. "Within this ship lies a treasure trove. If we truly wish for the Empire to rise again… we must claim it." He gestured toward the shattered hull. "But it will not be easy." His tone sharpened. "So fight with the honor the Empire once had. Not as remnants. Not as Crossbones. Not as Chimera." He paused. "As the true Multiversal Empire… our great leader, Lucius Novastride, founded." The crowd erupted. Cheers echoed through the cavern. Viktor smiled. "Yes… now go forth." He pointed toward the breach in the ship. "For the Empire."

They charged. The moment they crossed into range, the ship came alive. Automated turrets unfolded from hidden compartments, locking onto targets instantly. Gunfire tore through the front lines. Men dropped almost immediately. They didn't stop. More pushed forward. Bodies fell. Ground gained. Inch by inch. Viktor remained seated atop the rock, watching it all unfold with quiet satisfaction. The hooded man stepped up beside him, arms still crossed. "This doesn't seem very efficient," he said.

Viktor didn't look at him. "They're learning the defenses," he replied calmly. "Mapping firing patterns. Trigger thresholds." Another wave surged forward. More died. "…And dying," the hooded man added flatly. Viktor leaned forward slightly, resting his chin against his hand as he watched the battlefield unfold below them. "Yes," he said, a small smile forming again. "But that's the cost of rebuilding something real."

He kept his eyes on the ship as another wave was cut down. "They were already broken," he continued. "Remnants. Leftovers. Men without a future." He tilted his head slightly, as if reconsidering the thought. "Now they have purpose." The hooded man didn't respond. Below them, the soldiers continued their advance, slow and brutal, each death pushing the line forward just a little more. Viktor's gaze never wavered, even as the front line finally reached the turrets and began tearing them free, ripping them from their mounts to stop the slaughter. "This is what our great Empire has been reduced to," the hooded man said. Viktor gave a quiet, dismissive laugh. "Yeah… what a shame." There was no emotion behind it. "I don't see you risking your life," the man pressed. Viktor straightened and stepped off the rock. "You're right," he said. "Maybe it's about time we entered the fray." He slid down the stone and joined the remaining soldiers as they pushed into the ship.

Inside, the damage was even clearer. They moved through the hallway, following the trail of bodies left behind by the advance. The path had been secured, but at a heavy cost, with more than half their number already gone. The survivors were no longer empty-handed, though, as multi-tools lit up across the group, giving them a fighting chance as they moved deeper. Viktor walked among them with a faint grin, his attention drifting toward the black crates lining the walls. "Look at this," he said with a quiet laugh. "There's so much money just sitting here."

The hooded man glanced at him. "This was the prize you saw?" "Well, yeah," Viktor replied casually. "It wouldn't be the first time." He slowed for a moment, his expression sharpening just slightly. "But this one… let's just say I have my eye on something else." "Something the other ships

didn’t have?” the hooded man asked. Viktor shrugged. “Maybe.” There was a brief pause before the man asked, “Is that why the Port was guarding it?” “I doubt it,” Viktor said. “They didn’t even know about the others.” He smiled again, a little wider this time. “I’m just feeling lucky today.” He turned sharply toward the corridor ahead. “Everyone, to the bridge!” The remaining soldiers surged forward again, their energy renewed despite their dwindling numbers. The hooded man kept pace beside him. “You’re looking for one of those, aren’t you?” he asked. Viktor didn’t hesitate. “Guilty.”

The deeper they went, the worse it became. Turrets deployed from the walls, drones dropped from above, and laser grids ignited without warning. Even with the multi-tools, the group continued to shrink at an alarming rate, their numbers falling from hundreds to barely ten. Still, they pressed forward. They reached the final chamber before the bridge, and as they stepped inside, a massive machine dropped from above, slamming into the ground with enough force to crack the floor and crush one man instantly. The hooded figure stepped forward without hesitation. He raised his sword, not a multi-tool, but something else entirely, something that felt wrong just looking at it, and caught the machine’s strike. The impact drove him back slightly, but he held his ground, blocking the attack and keeping it from reaching the others. He wasn’t overpowering it. He was holding it in place.

“Damn it…” Viktor muttered under his breath. “If I lose more people, it’ll take forever to haul all this out of here.” He exhaled, then raised his voice. “Stand back. This one’s mine… and the Major’s.” The hooded figure didn’t respond, too focused on maintaining the block as the machine pressed against him. Viktor moved quickly, sliding beneath the machine’s frame and placing charges along its underside in a single fluid motion. A second later, the explosives detonated, tearing through its lower structure and destabilizing it completely. That was all the opening the hooded man needed. He drove his blade forward, piercing deep into the machine. As the weapon sank in, something changed. The sword didn’t simply shut it down, it let out a distorted, unnatural sound that almost resembled a scream before going completely still.

The silence that followed felt heavier than the fight. Viktor let out a small chuckle. “Heh… nicely done.” He stepped forward, brushing past the hooded man as if the fight had already been decided. “But I’ll take it from here.” He extended a hand. “Take the others back. They’ve earned some rest.” The hooded figure hesitated before placing the weapon into Viktor’s hand. “If you ever want me to hand this over… to fully accept you,” he said evenly, “you’ll have to do better than this.” With that, he turned and led the remaining soldiers away. Viktor didn’t stop him. He didn’t argue. He didn’t even seem particularly interested. Instead, he stood there, turning the weapon slightly in his hand as he examined it with quiet amusement.

He stepped onto the bridge. The room was empty in a way that felt wrong. It wasn’t quiet or abandoned, it was hollow, stripped of anything living, leaving only the bodies of the pilots who had died trying to bring the ship down. They remained slumped over their controls, frozen in the moment of impact. Viktor didn’t give them more than a passing glance. He walked toward the center of the room, where a sealed capsule stood untouched by the destruction around it. A console sat beside it, dark and unresponsive. He tapped at it a few times, trying to wake it up. Nothing happened.

“Come on… you better not be dead,” he muttered, letting out a quiet breath. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a makeshift battery, pried open a panel, and forced it into place with practiced ease. The console flickered, then surged to life. A dim interface appeared. Simple. Old. Functional. One line immediately caught his attention. Status: Alive A small smile spread across his face. “Well, there you are.” He moved through the prompts quickly, overriding restrictions and forcing control over the system. The capsule responded with a low hiss as pressure released and the seal began to open. Inside, a girl floated in suspension.

Her orange hair drifted weightlessly around her face. Thick cables ran from the back of her skull down into the capsule, embedded directly into her neck and spine. Her eyes were open, glowing faintly, but there was nothing behind them. No focus, no reaction, just a hollow awareness. Viktor

pressed a few more commands, and the system powered down completely. The suspension field collapsed. She dropped forward, catching herself just enough to land on her knees in front of him. The cables still held her in place, tethering her to the machine behind her.

He knelt beside her and began removing them one by one, pulling each cord free with careful precision. “Time to wake up, sleeping beauty,” he said softly. The last cable came loose, and for a brief moment, nothing changed. Then she blinked. Her gaze shifted slowly as she looked around the ruined bridge, unfocused at first, before settling on him. Her eyes lingered, trying to process what she was seeing. “…Who are you…” she asked, her voice quiet and distant. “You’ve come to reclaim me?” There was no fear in her tone, and no anger either. It was just empty. “In a manner of speaking,” Viktor replied, the faintest hint of amusement in his voice.

She didn’t respond immediately. Her gaze drifted downward again, her expression hollow. “… How long was I like that…?” she asked after a moment. She paused, then spoke again without looking up. “…Actually… just kill me. I don’t want to do this anymore. I won’t obey you.” Viktor let out a soft laugh, not loud or cruel, but clearly entertained. Her head tilted slightly as confusion broke through the numbness. She looked back up at him, studying him more closely now. “You enjoy my suffering?” she asked. “I just think it’s funny,” he said, still smiling, “that you fell for it like the others.” He leaned back slightly, watching her reaction. “You think I’m with the Empire.”

That made her hesitate in a way she hadn’t before. She looked at him again, this time more carefully, her eyes narrowing just slightly as she tried to understand what she was actually seeing. Viktor leaned in closer. “I’ll tell you what I think about the Empire… and the world,” he said quietly.

He whispered something into her ear. Whatever he said, it broke through the emptiness. Her eyes widened as something shifted behind them, something real beginning to surface. When he pulled back, she was looking at him differently. “Then what do you want with me?” she asked. Viktor laughed again, a little sharper this time. “That’s rich,” he said. “Just like the Empire that exploited you… you

don’t even know your own worth.”

She didn’t argue. She didn’t push back. Her gaze dropped again, but this time it felt less empty and more uncertain. “…Viktor Scathe,” he said, straightening slightly. “What’s your name?” She hesitated before answering. “…G-1389.” The words sounded reluctant, like they didn’t really belong to her. That made him pause for a moment, a faint frown crossing his face before he dismissed it. “You know, we’re a lot alike,” he said, not explaining what he meant. “G-1389?” he repeated, almost dismissively. “That’s not who you are anymore.” He stood and extended his hand toward her. “You’re mine now.” A small smile returned. “You’re Calva. Beautiful, loyal, and built from ruin.”

For the first time, she reacted. A faint blush touched her face as she looked up at him, something fragile forming beneath the surface. There was hesitation, confusion, and something else trying to take shape. Then it shifted. A twisted smile spread across her lips as she reached up and took his hand. “Let’s go wreck the place,” she said, a spark finally breaking through her voice.

Chapter 21: A Convergent New Day

Fireworks shot across the sky in every direction. Whether the Port wanted to or not, it had to move on. A new day had come. Security restrictions had been lifted only a few days earlier, after Aion Anderson was officially deemed safe. No further attacks had followed, and the Port had someone in custody claiming to be the Reaper. That, combined with pressure from merchants losing millions during the lockdown and a public eager to believe the crisis was over, forced their hand. Now, with the most anticipated holiday of the year upon them, the city pushed forward. Nine long months had passed since Founder's Day, and everyone in Porta Nexus needed something to hold onto. For today, at least, they would forget their troubles and celebrate Convergent Day. The streets were alive in a way they hadn't been in months.

Colorful banners stretched between buildings, lanterns glowed softly above crowded walkways, and music echoed through every district. Food stalls lined nearly every corner, filling the air with overlapping scents of spice, sugar, and smoke. The city felt brighter. Louder. Warmer. It felt… normal.

Bram moved easily through the crowd, dressed once again in his traditional attire, the fabric standing out against the more modern styles around them. Beside him, Fiora walked with three skewers of food in hand, already halfway through all of them. She stuffed another bite into her mouth before looking up at him, cheeks full. “So… what’s this one about?” she asked, her words slightly muffled.

Bram slowed, giving her a look that was equal parts confusion and mild disbelief. “Fenleigh… you don’t even know this one?” he said. She shrugged, completely unbothered. “This is Convergent Day,” he explained, gesturing lightly toward the city around them. “It’s the day King Nexus opened the portals and let everyone in.” There was a small smile on his face as he spoke, but beneath it was something softer. Not judgment, exactly… more like quiet sympathy. He still believed her story. The others had started to question it, but Bram hadn’t. Not yet. Fiora chewed thoughtfully, swallowing before responding. “Oh,” she said, glancing around again, this time with a bit more focus. “I wonder what this King Nexus guy was like. Everyone seems to think he was awesome.”

Bram’s expression brightened slightly. “People say he was jolly,” he said. “Full of life. Always receptive to new ideas. He treated every new arrival like they belonged here from the start.” Fiora studied him for a moment as he spoke, her usual chaotic energy settling just enough to notice the way he said it. “Maybe those kids knew what they were talking about,” she said quietly. Bram didn’t seem to catch the shift. Or maybe he just didn’t question it. Instead, he clapped his hands together lightly and turned, already moving. “Come on, Fenleigh,” he said, his tone lifting again. “Let’s head down to Second and Third. They always have the best stuff set up around there.” Fiora perked up immediately, the moment passing as quickly as it had come. “Food?” she asked. Bram laughed. “Food.” She nodded enthusiastically, already picking up her pace to match his as they disappeared deeper into the crowd, swallowed by the celebration along with everyone else.

Alister groaned as he trailed behind Darla Dogenridge, their pace slightly out of sync in a way that reflected the subtle shift in their relationship. “Why are we even doing this?” he complained. “We

don’t even have the responsibilities we used to. I want to enjoy a night of actual fun…” He sighed. “No one is forcing you to come with me,” Darla replied, her tone steady but firm. “But even during events like this, the city still needs to be patrolled.” “Then leave it to Peacekeeping,” he shot back. “They already have enough on their plate,” she said sharply. “They can always use the extra hands.” Alister let out an exaggerated sigh, dragging a hand down his face. “I swear, we do everything expected of us, and then some, and we’re still out here doing grunt work. That damn Sterros… what’s it been, another three weeks of silence? Where’s our promotion?” he muttered.

“You know becoming a Captain or an Administrator is a much longer process,” Darla replied, not even looking at him. She already knew he understood that. “Yeah, yeah…” he waved it off. “I’m not even saying we’ve earned it yet. But would it kill them to at least say ‘good job’?” His tone sharpened slightly. “They vanished the moment we were in the clear. After all that grand talk about being the Port Authority’s last hope… what a joke.” Darla didn’t respond immediately. She exhaled slowly, her gaze drifting downward as she fell into thought. “…I suppose I would like to know if I’m doing my duty properly,” she admitted after a moment. “At least the public seems to think so.” She glanced up as they passed a small group of civilians. A few of them smiled. One waved. She gave a small nod in return. Alister followed her gaze, unimpressed. “Yeah, whatever,” he said. “Let’s just get this over with. I deserve to spoil myself tonight. I might even let you come too… if you ask nicely.”

Darla didn’t slow down. “I plan to patrol all night,” she replied flatly. Alister stopped for half a second, staring at her like she had just personally offended him. “…What? You dumb mutt, live a little...” he started, before catching himself and pushing forward again with a groan. “Fine. Your coming with me later you hear. Someone has to make sure you don’t die of boredom.” He jogged to catch up, falling back into step beside her as the sounds of the festival continued around them, bright and loud and completely at odds with the quiet frustration hanging between them.

Just as they disappeared into the crowd, another pair emerged from a nearby alley. Viktor Scathe

stepped out first, brushing a bit of dust from his jacket as he looked up at the sky. He took a slow breath, letting it out with quiet satisfaction. “Man… it’s good to be back,” he said, a faint grin forming. He spread his arms slightly, gesturing to the city around them. “Welcome to the canvas.” Behind him, Calva stepped into the light. She paused almost immediately. Her eyes moved slowly at first, taking in the colors, the movement, the noise. Then faster. Brighter. The decorations, the crowds, the music, the stalls, everything pulled at her attention all at once.

“…Can I?” she started, stopping herself mid-sentence. Viktor glanced at her, amused. “By all means,” he said casually. “Let me flex a little.” That was all the permission she needed. Calva took off. She moved through the crowd with barely contained excitement, stopping at the nearest stall and grabbing whatever caught her eye without hesitation. Food, snacks, things she didn’t even recognize, none of it mattered. She just took. Viktor followed at a much slower pace, completely unbothered. Each time she grabbed something, he stepped in just behind her, placing payment down before the vendor could even react. A coin here. A bill there. Enough to keep everything smooth. No conflict. No attention. Just control.

Calva slowed suddenly. Her movement stopped so abruptly it almost looked like something had caught her. Her gaze fixed ahead, locked onto a shop window. Clothing. She stepped closer, her reflection faintly visible in the glass as she studied the outfits on display with quiet fascination. Viktor came up beside her, following her line of sight. “About time we got you something real to wear,” he said, his tone light. His eyes flicked briefly over her current outfit. “Not that I mind the tights.” A smirk pulled at the corner of his mouth. Calva turned to him, and for the first time, there was something new in her expression. Not emptiness. Not confusion. Something closer to confidence.

“I’ll let you pick out everything you want me to wear,” she said, returning the smirk. For her, it meant more than the words themselves. This was the first time she felt seen as something other than a tool. The first time she felt like she was allowed to exist as a person, even if the one giving her that

feeling was… questionable. She didn't wait for a response. She pushed the door open and rushed inside. Viktor watched her go, that same faint smile lingering as he followed at his own pace. Inside, Calva tried on nearly everything in the store. Outfit after outfit, she stepped out with growing confidence, each change faster than the last. At first, she hesitated, watching for a reaction. Then she stopped waiting for one. Viktor sat calmly off to the side, saying nothing. He didn't criticize. He didn't praise. He simply observed, but every so often, he would reach over and quietly set a piece aside. His favorites.

He looked… relaxed. Almost indulgent. Like he was enjoying something he hadn't allowed himself before. Calva mirrored it in her own way. The uncertainty that had followed her earlier was gone, replaced by something sharper. Lighter. Alive. Finally, she stepped out again, hands on her hips, completely self-assured. "Fuck it," he said. "We'll buy all of it." he dropped a large bag of credits onto the counter with a heavy thud. The clerk froze. Viktor let out a quiet laugh under his breath. "Wow…" Calva said, glancing at him as she leaned slightly closer. "You really are loaded, huh, Viktor?"

"For the right person," he replied smoothly. That was all it took. She clung to him instantly, pressing close, already pulled in deeper than she probably realized. For a moment, she let herself sink into it. Then she paused. Her gaze dropped, a faint blush creeping across her face as something shifted again. "But those other ones you picked out…" she said, her tone lowering, changing. "Those are for your eyes only." Her grip tightened. Stronger than it should have been. For a brief moment, Viktor realized he couldn't pull away even if he wanted to. Not that he did. "Yes, ma'am," he said lightly. "Anything else?" Calva straightened, just as quickly as the moment had come, already moving past it.

"Nope," she said. "I'll tell you when I see it." She grabbed a few bags without waiting for help and headed back toward the door, her energy already shifting to whatever came next. Viktor followed behind her, hands in his pockets, that same faint smile returning as the noise of the festival swallowed them again.

Back at the base, Jax was exactly where you would expect him to be. Working. This time, it was quieter. Focused. He leaned over a partially assembled motor vehicle, tools scattered around him as he adjusted one of the internal valves with careful precision. His current passion project. Then he pulled just a little too hard. The valve snapped loose, and a stream of oil sprayed directly into his face. Jax just sighed “I told you he’d be here.” The voice came from the doorway. Jax turned, wiping oil from his face with the back of his hand. His expression immediately flattened. Standing there was Cassian, and Elaina, who Cassian was quite literally dragging into the room by the arm as she resisted just enough to make a point.

Jax didn’t look impressed. “What the hell do you want…” he said, dismissive, already turning halfway back to his work. Cassian didn’t answer right away. He simply sighed and lifted the bottle in his free hand. Jax stopped. Turned, and immediately walked closer. “You actually found a 1111 Rosegrave?” he asked, the irritation gone, replaced with genuine interest. “I thought you said that was the last one.” “Took some doing,” Cassian replied, a small, satisfied smile forming. “What I want… is to forget the last few years ever happened.” He tilted the bottle slightly. “And sit like we used to.”

Elaina stopped struggling. Her gaze dropped. Jax looked away, his expression tightening. For a moment, it looked like he was going to refuse. “…I suppose I have the time,” he said after a beat. “Just this once.” Both Cassian and Elaina perked up immediately, the shift in their expressions almost identical, genuine, unguarded relief. Then Elaina snapped back into herself just as quickly. “I’m still mad at you, though!” she said, pointing at him. Jax didn’t even look at her. “Like I care,” he replied flatly, already walking past her toward the mess hall. She turned sharply, about to fire back again. Then followed anyway.

The rest of the city felt much the same. Whether you were Port Authority or part of a gang, no one seemed interested in anything beyond enjoying the moment. Even the ones who were supposed to be working had relaxed, at least a little, letting the celebration bleed into their duties. Station 14 was no

exception. A small party had formed right on deck, decorations thrown together in a way that shouldn't have worked but somehow did. Gobriella stood at the center of it, grinning as she carefully lit the candles on an oversized cake. The flames flickered to life one by one, casting a warm glow over the gathered crew. When she turned and presented it, the reaction was immediate. Every pair of eyes locked onto it. More than a few of them started drooling without even trying to hide it.

Tristan walked down a dim alley, camera in hand. Aion had sent him out to get some good shots, something simple to help round out the broadcast. At some point along the way, though, he had taken a wrong turn. Then another. Now he had wandered straight into the crime sector without realizing it. Someone else noticed immediately. A Vulture stepped out from the shadows, already moving before Tristan even registered what was happening. He rushed forward, ready to take him out without hesitation. A blur cut through the air.

Crow dropped in from above, silent and precise, slamming into the attacker and dragging him back into the darkness before a single word could be said. The alley went quiet again like nothing had happened. They stayed just out of sight, watching. Aion had asked them to make sure Tristan got where he needed to go. That used to be unnecessary. He had an almost unnatural sense of direction before the Siege, always knowing exactly where to go without thinking about it. Now he was the opposite. He kept walking, completely unaware of how close he had just been to getting taken out.

Eventually he reached a fork in the alley and slowed, staring at it like it was some kind of puzzle. "Alright… do I go left or…" A Porcelli thug charged in from the side, already mid-sentence. "This is Porcelli..." Crow intercepted again, cutting him off and dragging him away before Tristan even turned his head. Tristan, still thinking, casually chose left. It was the wrong direction. Further in. The next group belonged to the Kinryū-kai, and this time they were more alert. Crow hit them the same way, fast and controlled, but now people were starting to notice. Celebrations died down. Heads turned. Something was clearly off.

Crow landed briefly, scanning, then moved again as more figures closed in. Behind Tristan, the fight escalated. What started as one or two attackers turned into a steady stream. Crow handled them as they came, cutting through them with efficient movements, but even they were starting to get pushed. Their pace slowed just enough to show it, their movements losing a bit of that effortless control. Tristan kept walking like none of it was happening. Eventually he stepped out of the sector entirely, crossing into a safer part of the city without even realizing it.

A second later, Crow dropped in front of him, crashing to the ground. Their outfit was torn up, mask barely holding together, clearly pushed way past what they should have been dealing with alone. Wings frayed. Tristan blinked. “Oh, hey, Crow. You good?” he asked, looking them over. “Did you fly into a pole or something?” Crow slowly raised a thumb, barely steady. Tristan laughed. “You should really watch where you’re going. You get lost way too often.” Crow stared at him for a second, then let out a quiet, tired sigh as they stood back up, and then they followed him again.

Returning to Viktor once more, he walked straight past the edge of the celebration and into the crime sector without hesitation. “This is where we mainly operate,” he said casually. “We’ll see the Ossuary Base later, but I’ll show you around first.” “Ooo, cool name,” she replied, though her attention was already drifting as she took everything in around her. “This place feels different,” she said, smiling wider as she looked around. “It’s more dangerous, and I kind of like that.” Viktor gave her a small smile in return, clearly entertained. Before they could go much further, Portly stepped into their path with a few men behind him, and this time even members of other gangs stood nearby, all of them tense and clearly irritated. “Viktor, you’re back,” the pig said with a scowl, making no effort to hide his dislike.

“Yep, sure am,” Viktor replied easily. Portly narrowed his eyes. “You see a couple of punks run through here, one with green hair and the other some creepy shadow thing?” Viktor didn’t hesitate. “Can’t say I have, Porky,” he said with a light laugh that only made things worse. Portly didn’t like the

name calling, but he let it go anyway. “Guess we ran them off.” Then his attention shifted, and he took a closer look at Calva, his expression changing as curiosity crept in. “…Who’s this,” he asked, studying her more carefully. “She looks like one of those girls from the news, you know, the one… Raleigh… Reagan… something like that.” Calva immediately struck a pose, clearly enjoying the attention.

Viktor answered without missing a beat. “Nah, nothing like that, this is my girl.” He said it like it was already an established fact. Portly raised a brow before letting out a low chuckle. “Well damn, I thought you didn’t partake, but maybe we are more alike than I thought.” With that, the tension broke, and the group dispersed. Calva tilted her head slightly as they kept walking. “What was that about?”

“Watch out for that one,” Viktor said casually. “He’s the only one around here who actually has eyes things.” He kept moving like nothing had happened, and she followed without question.

A few steps later, she stopped again, her attention caught by something new. A tattoo shop. She stared through the window with clear interest. Viktor turned, surprised but not complaining. “Didn’t take you for the type, but I’m not against it, since ink can look really good on a body.” He paused, then smirked slightly. “I’ve also been meaning to talk to the owner anyway.” He pushed the door open. Inside, Cynthia sat behind the counter, fully disguised, pretending she barely noticed them. “Hmm, fresh meat,” she said without looking up, even though she had absolutely noticed them. Then she saw Calva and slipped for just a moment. “…That’s… is she…”

Viktor caught it instantly. “That’s a strange question for someone unassuming tattoo artist,” he said smoothly. “What if she is, since I wanted one of my own.” He wrapped an arm around Calva like it was natural. Cynthia forced herself back into character. “So what will it be?” Calva looked around before speaking without thinking. “You don’t have many tattoos for someone who does this all day.”

Cynthia hesitated, then answered carefully. “I prefer mine to be seen by a more exclusive audience.”

She gestured subtly toward the areas hidden under her clothes.

Calva's eyes lit up. "Then I want some like that too." "You really should not start by covering your whole body," Cynthia said with a sigh. "Whatever, just do it," Calva shot back. "I want skulls everywhere." Viktor's expression hardened instantly. "No," he said flatly. She blinked, confused. "But isn't that your thing?" "You can't take off a tattoo," he replied, gesturing to the skull patch on his jacket. "Not like this." She paused, then adjusted. "Fine, then how about this…" She explained her idea, and Cynthia got to work not long after, focusing mostly on her shoulders. Calva barely reacted to the pain, which was telling on its own.

After a while, Cynthia spoke again, keeping her tone casual. "So what exactly are you planning to do with someone like her?" Viktor stepped closer, smirking. "I suppose I can tell you, but only if you open up a little first." His eyes flicked around the shop. "Most of your clients are Yakuza, right?" Cynthia frowned slightly, unsure why he cared. "Yeah, I don't do their initiation work, but I take their money like anyone else would." "I see," he said, clearly filing that away. "That's useful." He sat down nearby as Calva was repositioned. "You saw that girl on the broadcast, right, I had to get me of those." He leaned back slightly. "She tore through the Empire like it was nothing, so imagine what I could do with that kind of power."

Calva's expression shifted, but not in the way anyone expected, since it wasn't anger but jealousy mixed with something deeper she didn't understand yet. "Don't get the wrong idea," Viktor added smoothly. "You're my number one now, but I should still thank her, since I wouldn't have known to look for you without that." That was enough. Calva's smile returned, sharper this time. "Then don't mention her again." Cynthia felt the shift immediately, and it made her more uneasy than anything else so far. She finished the work after a couple of hours, and they left almost immediately. Mostly black lines, cracked around the shoulder, Cynthia cound't help but think it turned out well. At the door, Viktor paused and glanced back. "Hey, miss cat…"

Cynthia froze on instinct. "Relax, I'm not here to expose you," he said lightly. "But speaking of

rats, maybe it's time you stop playing with your food and actually swallow him." His tone stayed casual, but the meaning didn't. "You can report whatever you want, but you don't have anything solid on me, and we both know that." He opened the door. "So maybe keep your head down, unless you want to lose it." He walked out without another word. Cynthia stayed still for a moment, panic settling in under the surface, before something clicked in her mind. Scratch. Her expression darkened. "I'm going to swallow him, alright." she muttered under her breath, her voice low and sharp.

The night was drawing to a close. Somehow, against all odds, Alister had managed to drag Darla into a bar. The place was loud, warm, and alive with lingering celebration, but she sat stiffly at the table, ignoring the drinks in front of her and focusing entirely on the food. Every few seconds, her eyes flicked toward the door, like she was expecting something to go wrong at any moment. Alister leaned back with a long, annoyed sigh. "No wonder we never get along," he muttered. "Getting you in here was like pulling teeth, and now you won't even relax." Darla didn't look at him. "How can I relax when it's my duty to..."

"Enough with the duty," he snapped, cutting her off. "Justice can survive one night without you hovering over it." He leaned forward, irritation bleeding into his voice. "You've been pushing me around a lot lately with all that 'right thing to do' nonsense," he added, raising his paws in exaggerated quotation marks. "The least you can do is indulge me for once." His expression shifted into something smug. "You should feel honored I even let a dumb dog like you sit here with me. Plenty of feline ladies would..." Darla growled. That stopped him. "…Fine," she said flatly. "I'll drink. But only a little." She grabbed the nearest glass and downed the shot in one go.

A second later, she immediately spat it out. "What is wrong with people?" she asked, staring at the glass like it had personally offended her. "They actually like this?" Alister blinked at her, genuinely caught off guard. "You've never had a drink before?" She didn't answer. He leaned back, shaking his head. "Darla Dogenridge, I thought you were just uptight, but this is something else." He nudged

another glass toward her. “It’s an acquired taste. You do it enough, and eventually you’ll understand.”

“The only stuck-up furball here is you,” she shot back, clearly annoyed now. Still, she picked up the glass again. This time, she took a slower sip. She didn’t spit it out. Alister watched her closely, a faint smirk forming as she forced herself to process it. For once, neither of them said anything. It wasn’t perfect. It wasn’t even comfortable. But it wasn’t hostile either. For tonight, that was enough.

Maybe cats and dogs could get along, at least for a little while. Whatever came next, whatever new threat was waiting around the corner, the city would face it the same way it always did. Porta Nexus kept moving forward.

Chapter 22: Written out

A group of men marched down the street and halted just outside the district perimeter. At first glance, they looked like Port Authority. Brown capelets. Gold trim. The familiar shape of authority that most citizens had learned to recognize on sight. But something was wrong. Black armor showed beneath their uniforms. Their faces were hidden behind heavy masks and round glass lenses. Brown berets sat low over their heads, and not one of them wore a visible division marker. No Peacekeeping insignia. No Military crest. No Justice seal. Nothing that told the people who they were supposed to be afraid of.

One of the masked men stepped forward. “All of you have your assignments,” he ordered. “Fan out.” “Yes, sir!” The response came in perfect unison. The men split apart immediately, rushing into the district with practiced efficiency. One lingered behind for just a moment, his hand tightening around his weapon. “Sir…” he started, voice low behind the mask. “Are we sure this is...” The leader cut him off before he could finish. “This is for Porta Nexus,” he said. “It may seem wrong, but cast that notion

aside." Then he ran forward with the others. The remaining man stood alone in the street, staring after them. For a moment, he did not move. Then, quietly, almost like he was trying to convince himself, he said, "Yeah." And he followed.

A squad reached the first residence and broke down the door without warning. The woman inside screamed as they flooded in. She barely had time to stand before two of them grabbed her arms and forced her down. Her husband rushed in from the next room, eyes wide with disbelief. "What are you doing?" he shouted. "She's committed no crime!" Two more men turned on him immediately, seizing him before he could get any closer. "By order of the Port Authority," one of the masked officers said coldly, "you have been recognized as unlawful residents. You will be detained and deported immediately." The woman stared at him, shaking. "What…? But I was born here." No one answered. They dragged her outside.

Across the district, the same scene repeated. Doors were kicked open. Homes were searched. Families were pulled into the streets. The young, the old, the sick, the frightened. No one seemed exempt. Some complied quietly, still clinging to the belief that there had to be some mistake. Others shouted, pleaded, or fought back. Those ones were dropped with tasers. By the time the masked unit regrouped, the street was full of people forced into lines beside waiting transports. They were not criminals. They were not invaders.

Things at Special Operations Headquarters were slow. Alister and Darla sat at their desks again, trapped in the same familiar routine that satisfied neither of them. No mission. No orders. No crisis. Just reports, waiting, and the quiet sense that something should have been happening by now. Elsewhere, Jax was still attempting to bring the prehistoric vehicle in the garage back from the dead. Every now and then, a clang, hiss, or muffled curse echoed through the building, which told everyone he was either making progress or actively losing his mind. Bram was in the training hall, lifting weights. He seemed more focused than usual. Each motion was steady and controlled, but there was a

weight in his expression that had nothing to do with what he was carrying. Something was clearly on his mind.

Fiora walked by the open doorway, stopped, then immediately darted back behind the frame to peek inside.Bram did not notice. Her eyes drifted over him, taking in the sweat, the muscle, the quiet intensity. Slowly, a grin spread across her face. She rushed off toward the locker room, already imagining it. “I could be his spotter,” she muttered to herself, barely containing a laugh. “And then he’ll fall in love.” Before she could make it through the locker room door, someone burst out of the lobby and into the hallway. Fiora jumped, one hand already reaching for the knife she kept hidden on her body.

The man was Nexian. Pink skin. Lanky frame. Wide, panicked eyes. He looked like he had run all the way here without stopping, his breathing sharp and uneven. “Who are you?” Fiora asked, narrowing her eyes. “I’m…” The man took another labored breath, glancing around like the walls themselves were wasting his time. “Bram works here, right? Where is he? I need to see my bro...”

Fiora blinked. Then her posture softened slightly. “Oooh, you’re his brother?” she said, raising a finger to her lips like she had stumbled onto a delicious secret. “He told me he had a big ol’ family.” The man did not seem amused.

“If you won’t tell me, I’ll find him myself,” he growled, already moving down the hall. “Wait, um…” Fiora glanced around, suddenly unsure how official she was supposed to sound. “That’s a crime or something… citizen.” He didn’t stop. She sighed, then pointed the opposite way. “Wait, no. He’s… the other way.” The man froze, turned sharply, and ran past her in the direction she indicated. Fiora watched him go, frowning slightly. “…You’re welcome,” she muttered. The man rushed into the training hall just as Bram lowered another set of weights. “Bram… Bram, you have to…” His voice cracked as he stumbled forward, breathing hard. “It’s awful. You have to do something.”

Bram turned toward him, confusion cutting through his focus. He set the weights down with a

heavy thud and walked closer. “Gram?” he asked. “What are you doing here? What’s the matter?” Gram tried to answer, but the words seemed to catch in his throat. His hands shook at his sides. “They took them,” he finally said. “All of them.” Bram’s expression changed. “Took who?” he asked, his voice lower now. “Where? Gram, you’re not normally like this. Slow down.” Fiora caught up behind them, stopping near the doorway. Gram swallowed hard, forcing himself to breathe. “Everyone,” he said, the panic still clinging to every word. “Ma… our brothers and sisters… Grandma…” For a moment, Bram did not move. Then his face hardened.

The warmth drained from him so completely that Fiora actually took a small step back. He did not shout. He did not panic. He simply stared at his brother with a calm so cold it felt worse than anger. “Who?” Bram asked. Gram faltered. “I… I don’t know.” Bram’s eyes narrowed. “What do you mean you don’t know?” “They were dressed like the Port,” Gram said quickly, choosing every word like one wrong answer might set Bram off completely. “But it wasn’t Peacekeeping. It wasn’t Military. It wasn’t...” “Then what?” Bram’s voice cut through the room. Gram flinched. “Where?” Before he could answer, Darla and Alister entered, drawn in by the noise. “What is going on?” Darla barked. Bram’s face softened slightly at the sight of them, but only slightly.

A few minutes later, they were all gathered in the reception room. Gram sat forward, elbows on his knees, forcing himself to explain everything again. This time, his words were calmer. More precise. That almost made it worse. “They took everyone living in Founders’ Ward,” he said. “Said something about them being unlawful residents.” Bram stood completely still. “How can that be?” he asked, his voice quiet but boiling beneath the surface. “Our family has lived here since before the founding. We are Nexian. Our skin itself is proof of who we are. Proof that we belong here.” Darla’s expression tightened. “Do you know where they were taken?”

Gram hesitated. “Well… I know it wasn’t the island.” Fiora tilted her head. “The island?” “Blackstone Isle,” Bram answered without looking at her. “Where they send offenders. Thieves,

murderers, terrorists… anyone the Justice Division decides belongs behind walls." "But why wouldn't they go there if they were arrested?" Darla asked. Alister had gone quiet. He stood near the wall, eyes locked on his comm unit, scrolling through something faster and faster. His ears twitched once. Then his expression dropped. "We have to go," he said. "Now." Darla turned to him. "You found something?" "Yes." He looked up, and for once there was no smugness in his face. "My access is limited now, but not useless. I found enough. This unidentified unit has been seen coming in and out of the Port Authority head office." Bram's fists clenched.

Alister continued, his voice sharpening. "And if they weren't taken to Blackstone…" Darla's eyes widened slightly as she caught up with him. "You're not implying…" "I'm guessing based on limited data," Alister said, already moving toward the door. "But yes. Legislation is involved somehow." The room went cold. Even Bram faltered. "Well, let's go get them back," Fiora said without hesitation, like there was no other possible answer. "Of course we will," Darla replied. Then her eyes shifted to Fiora, firmer now. "But Fiora… you need to be careful. The people we are about to speak with are not like the ones we usually deal with. Watch your words. I mean it." Fiora tilted her head, confused about what the problem was, but she nodded anyway.

Gram remained near the center of the room, lost and uncertain. "What about me?" he asked. "I doubt they'll let me in." The others were already halfway to the door, but Bram stopped. He turned back and placed a hand on his brother's shoulder. "Whatever is going on, Graham," he said, his voice steady despite the anger beneath it, "I'll figure it out. I'll fix it. I'll bring our family back." Gram looked at him for a long moment. Then, slowly, he nodded. That was enough.

The four of them left. They marched through the city with purpose. Bram's face had hardened again, his jaw set, his hands clenched at his sides. He looked less like the warm man who cooked for them every morning and more like someone prepared to tear down the monstrous building ahead stone by stone if that was what it took. Darla glanced at him, her expression softening in a way it rarely did.

“The Dogenridge have protected this city since its founding,” she said quietly. “Your family is part of that history too. We will make this right.” Bram did not look at her. “I hope so,” he said. His voice was sharp, but beneath it was fear. Not fear of what had happened. Fear of what he might become if they failed. “Because I don’t know what I’ll do if we can’t.” No one had an answer for that.

When they reached the city center, they found the streets already packed. A crowd had gathered outside the massive Port Authority head office, spilling across the plaza in every direction. Citizens shouted over one another, waving signs and demanding answers. Some signs were carefully written. Others looked like they had been made in a panic. GIVE THEM BACK. NO ONE IS ILLEGAL IN THEIR OWN HOME. WHERE ARE OUR FAMILIES? Peacekeeping had set up a barricade to keep the crowd from pushing any closer.

Officers stood shoulder to shoulder, tense but restrained. Near the rear of the line, Rufus Dogenridge watched the crowd with an expression that looked far too heavy for someone his age. A husky girl stood beside him, one hand hovering near his arm as if she had been trying to reassure him.

The officers at the barricade spotted Special Operations approaching and glanced back. “Captain?” one of them asked. Rufus blinked, then straightened as soon as he saw them. Whatever uncertainty had been on his face vanished behind duty. “Let them through.” The officers opened the barricade just enough for the four of them to pass.

“Lieutenant Coldren,” Darla said, giving the husky a respectful nod. The husky returned it immediately. “Lieutenant Dogenridge.” Darla turned to her brother. “What is going on, Rufus?” Rufus exhaled, glancing toward the crowd before answering. “I honestly don’t know the full details,” he admitted. “Legislation ordered us to set up the barrier and maintain public order. That’s all we were told.” “That’s all?” Alister asked, ears twitching. Rufus nodded, frustration slipping through despite his best efforts to hide it. “The people are angry. They’re talking about deportations. Not just one district either. It’s happening all over the city.” Bram’s eyes sharpened.

Rufus continued, quieter now. “A group of men carried it out. I don’t recognize them. They wore Port colors, but no division marks. Masks. Berets. Armor.” He frowned, searching for the comparison. “They looked almost like the Gaslight Devils from the old records.” That made Bram’s anger flare. “Where are they?” He stepped forward and grabbed Rufus by the shoulders. Too hard. The Husky's hand went to her weapon on instinct.“Bram,” Alister said sharply, pulling him back. “You need to calm down.” For a moment, it looked like Bram might not hear him. Then he took a breath and released Rufus, stepping back. “…Sorry,” Bram said, though his voice still shook with restrained fury.

Rufus adjusted his uniform and gave a small shrug, trying to play it off like it had not rattled him. “They come and go,” he said. “But even if you question one, I doubt you’ll get far.” “The masks are part of the design,” Kira added, her voice more controlled. “No faces. No names. No division. No accountability.” Her eyes drifted toward the head office. “They answer to someone inside. No doubt about that.”

Chapter 23: Power in Plain Sight

Special Operations walked through the giant halls of the Port Authority head office. The building felt different this time. Guards stood at attention behind every corner, posted so evenly it seemed less like security and more like decoration. Every polished wall, every gold-trimmed banner, every echoing step reminded them that this was one of the most protected places in the entire city. Last time, Fiora had walked these halls for a ceremony. Promotions. Applause. Triumph. Now the same halls felt colder. Fear lingered in the space between footsteps. Unease clung to the silence. Even Fiora could feel it, and that bothered her more than she wanted to admit. “Why is everyone acting like this?” she asked, glancing between them. “We just talk to the guys and tell them to stop being dumb.”

To her, that was how things had gone so far. Someone did something bad. Special Operations found them. They fought, shouted, stumbled through the problem, and somehow fixed it. Why would this be any different? Alister glanced at her, his expression sharper than usual. “Because Legislation writes the rules,” he said. “They decide what right and wrong means inside this building. If you aren’t

careful, they might decide you're what's wrong." Fiora didn't answer at first. Then, quieter, she muttered, "So they're like the Council…" Her eyes lowered. "That didn't stop Natasha." Alister's ears twitched. "What was that?" he asked. He had not heard enough to understand, but given where they were going, he was unwilling to let anything slip past him. Darla's ears had caught more. Not everything, but enough. She did not comment. She simply filed it away for later.

Fiora shrugged, suddenly less willing to speak. "What do I know anyway?" Bram looked toward her. Normally, he would have smiled. Normally, he would have said something warm, something gentle enough to bring everyone back together. Something that made the room feel less divided. Not now. Her bluntness had calmed him slightly, if only because it reminded him that not everyone saw the world through paperwork and power. But the anger was still there, simmering beneath his skin. He knew Alister was right. He knew they had to be careful. Even so, all he could see was red.

They finally reached a staircase. Two guards stood at the entrance, both shifting slightly when they saw who was approaching. They recognized Special Operations. That much was clear. What was less clear was whether they were supposed to stop them. Alister didn't give them time to decide. "We're here for Internal Investigations," he said smoothly. Darla's head snapped toward him, her glare immediate. Alister leaned closer, lowering his voice near her ear. "What? It's not really a lie, is it? From a certain point of view." The guard did not look convinced. If anything, he looked like he hated that answer more than if Alister had simply said they were Special Operations.

Still, after a moment, he stepped aside. "I'm surprised they haven't shown up before now," the guard muttered. "Fine. Go ahead." They passed without further resistance, climbing the stairs toward the Legislative floor. Somehow, it was even more extravagant than the main level. The public halls below were grand, but they at least pretended to belong to the Port Authority as a whole. This place did not bother pretending. Gold displays lined the walls. Priceless paintings hung beneath crystal fixtures.

The floors gleamed so cleanly they reflected the ceiling above them, turning every step into an intrusion.

Alister's eyes moved across the room with a faint grimace. "Well," he muttered, "at least it looks less tacky than the Civics office." The words left his mouth before he could stop them. Regret followed immediately. His expression tightened, and for once, he said nothing else. They continued down the hall, passing several enormous ornate doors labeled as warden offices. Each one looked grander than most administrators' quarters, with polished handles, engraved nameplates, and enough decorative trim to fund an entire district for a month. Finally, the hallway opened into a wide chamber that looked less like an office and more like a ballroom.

The wardens were gathered there. Not working. Not meeting. Lounging. They sat together at long polished tables, laughing softly as maids set plates before them. The food looked expensive. Not celebration-expensive. Daily-expensive. The kind of meal served by people who had never wondered where the money came from because they had never needed to. Each warden still wore a Port Authority capelet, but theirs were different. White dominated the fabric, bright and immaculate, with brown reduced to a tasteful accent. Gold thread curled across their shoulders in elaborate patterns, turning the uniform into something closer to noble attire than public service.

The room went quiet as Special Operations entered. The wardens turned toward them. Not with alarm. Not even anger. With pity. As if stray animals had wandered into a banquet hall and everyone was waiting for someone else to shoo them away. A demon man sat beside an angelic woman whose wings were covered in countless blinking eyes. A stone-bodied man leaned back in his chair, arms folded like a statue that had grown bored of existing. Nearby, an alien woman with glassy skin and long jeweled fingers lifted her cup, paused, and looked them over without hiding her distaste. None of them spoke. None of them stopped them either. They simply turned up their noses and waited for Special Operations to remember they did not belong here.

“With this lack of reception,” Alister said, glancing across the room of silent wardens, “I think we shouldn’t waste our time with them.” None of the wardens reacted. That made it worse.
“If this is going to lead anywhere,” he continued reluctantly, “then I think we have no choice but to talk to…” He stopped himself. Darla’s expression tightened. She seemed to be the only one who understood exactly who he meant. “…him,” Alister finished. Bram was already moving.

They crossed the chamber without another word and climbed the next staircase. Another hallway waited above. Quieter. Narrower. Less decorated, but somehow more oppressive. The kind of place where luxury stopped being shown off because everyone already knew who owned it. At the end stood another door. They opened it and stepped into a reception room. There was no secretary. No aide. No one waiting to greet visitors. Just a few chairs arranged for private meetings, a polished table near the window, and a woman sitting there calmly with a cup of tea. She glanced at them from the corner of her eye. Only once. Then she looked away and returned to her drink.

Bram stopped. So did Darla. So did Alister. All three recognized her immediately, and all three froze like their bodies had remembered the danger before their minds could fully process it. Fiora did not. She kept walking. Darla’s eyes widened. Alister’s mouth opened silently, his hand lifting in warning. Bram reached out, but she was already too far ahead. Fiora glanced back at them, confused.

“What are you...” She started to say. Alister mouthed one word. Stop. The woman stood, and the room changed. It was not sound. Not wind. Not magic in any obvious shape. It was pressure. A wave of presence filled the space all at once, heavy and absolute, and Fiora froze mid-step. Her eyes widened.

For the first time since any of them had known her, Fiora looked genuinely afraid. Every instinct in her body screamed at once. Run. Hide. Move. Survive. She felt like she had walked into a predator’s den and only noticed the teeth after the door had closed behind her.

The woman approached calmly, tea still in hand. She was tall. Composed. Effortlessly confident. She looked down at them as if they were not officers, not people, not even nuisances worth

anger. Just insects that had crawled across a clean floor. “Who let you fleas in here?” she asked. Her voice was quiet. That made it worse. Fiora trembled where she stood, unable to move. Bram’s fists tightened at his sides. Darla held perfectly still. Alister swallowed hard, every sarcastic instinct in him wisely choosing deathly silence. The woman took another step. Then a voice came from behind the door ahead. “That won’t be necessary.” The woman stopped. The voice continued, calm and old and carrying more authority than the entire room. “Let them through.”

The woman did not react. She simply obeyed. Without a word, she stepped past them and left the room. The pressure faded with her, the air returning to normal as her presence disappeared down the hall. Normal did not mean safe. No one moved for a moment. Fiora stared at the door ahead. The overwhelming aura was gone, but that almost made what came next worse. Whoever was on the other side had stopped that woman with a few words. No force. No threat. No hesitation. Just authority.

Each of them took a slow breath, the kind people took after realizing how close they had come to something terrible. “I didn’t think she would be here,” Alister admitted, his voice smaller than usual. No one teased him for it. They pressed forward. The next room was quieter. A man sat behind a desk, surrounded by documents laid out in precise, orderly stacks. He did not look up as they entered. He simply continued working, pen moving smoothly across the page. He was older, with light green hair and a permanent frown carved into his face. Not angry. Not impatient. Just composed in a way that made emotion feel inefficient. Everything about him was controlled. Focused. Exact.

Fiora studied him. In a fight, she could beat him. She knew that immediately. He did not carry himself like a warrior. He did not have the impossible pressure of the woman outside. There was no instinctive terror screaming from her body now. And yet, somehow, he felt worse. He was powerful in a different way. The kind that did not need to raise a hand. They walked closer and stopped before his desk, none of them entirely sure how to begin. The silence stretched just long enough to become uncomfortable. “Well?” the man said coldly, still not looking up. “Speak.” Bram was the first to break

through it.

His emotions were already too high, his patience worn down to nothing. Even so, he forced his voice into something that almost resembled respect. “Supreme Administrator Heskal,” Bram said, each word strained, “are you responsible for these deportations?” Only then did Heskal’s pen stop. He did not look up right away. For a moment, he simply sat there, letting the question hang in the air like something mildly inconvenient. Then he set the pen down with care. “So that is why you have come,” he said. “Does my motion offend your sensibilities?” His voice was calm. Almost disappointed. Bram’s hands curled into fists at his sides, but before he could answer, Heskal finally lifted his gaze. “Tell me, Special Operations,” he said. “What is Porta Nexus?” His eyes moved first to Alister. Then to Darla.

The answer seemed obvious. Darla stepped forward, outrage held tightly behind her teeth. “The greatest city in the multiverse, a melting pot of Cultures.” she said. “A people we have sworn to protect.” Her voice lowered, sharpening. “How could you so callously push them away?” Alister’s ears flicked, his eyes narrowing as he studied Heskal’s face. “What are you planning to do with them?” he asked. “And how is this even allowed?” Heskal sighed. “Wrong.” The word landed coldly. “Porta Nexus is the largest trade and commerce hub in the multiverse,” he said. “A well-oiled machine. A miracle of structure, movement, and exchange.” He folded his hands neatly atop the desk. “You already know the answer, don’t you?”

Alister’s expression shifted. He went quiet, thinking back. Records. Civics. The warning. The thing they had been told long before anyone understood what it meant. “Half the city…” he murmured. “The records.” “Precisely, Mister Purrmont.” Bram stepped forward, anger finally breaking through.

“These people have lived here their entire lives!” he shouted. “Their forefathers lived here. Their families helped build this city. They are not illegals!” His voice cracked under the force of it. “How many families are you going to destroy?” For the first time, Heskal looked directly at him. Not at Special Operations. Not at the uniform. At Bram. “They contribute nothing,” he said. “So they will be

removed.” The room went still. Heskal’s expression did not change. “There will never be a better opportunity than this to clean house.”

Bram’s jaw tightened. His teeth ground together audibly, and everyone in the room seemed to notice at once. Darla shifted slightly closer. Alister’s hand hovered near Bram’s arm, ready to stop him if he moved. Fiora stared at Heskal like she was only just beginning to understand that some monsters did not need claws, fangs, or weapons. Some only needed a desk. “Oh yeah?” Fiora snapped, stepping forward like she was desperate to contribute something, anything. “Well, we’ll tell your boss about this, and he’ll stop you!” Heskal looked at her. Not with anger. Not even amusement. He studied her for several seconds, his expression tightening in a way that suggested genuine confusion. As though her presence itself irritated him, not because he recognized her, but because he could not immediately determine why someone like her had been allowed in the room.

“You are referring to Guild Master Garrick,” he said at last. “Acting Chancellor in title, though still bound by procedure.” Fiora’s confidence flickered. Heskal returned his attention to the documents before him. “By the time he is able to act, the motion will already have served its purpose. Assuming he acts at all.” His pen tapped once against the page. “Civics left a hole in this city. I am merely ensuring something useful fills it before something worse does.” He sighed. Bram stepped forward again, his voice low and shaking. “My family contributed to this city long before anyone in this room was alive. How dare you do this to them. How dare you...” “Ah.” Heskal cut him off, and somehow the interruption felt sharper than shouting. “So that is the point of contention.” He said. Bram froze. Heskal looked up again, as if the conversation had finally become legible to him.

“You should have led with that,” he said. “You are requesting an exception.” The room seemed to shift. Darla’s eyes narrowed. Alister’s ears twitched. Fiora looked between them, confused. Heskal opened a drawer and removed a clean form from inside. “Apologies,” he continued, with no apology in his voice. “Families of Port Authority personnel are meant to be exempt from this motion. They must

have fallen through the cracks with the lost records." He slid the form across the desk. "Write their names down. I will have them released at once." For a moment, no one spoke. Bram stared at the paper. All the anger in him faltered, not because it was gone, but because Heskal had moved the ground beneath it.

Alister was the first to find his voice. "What?" he asked, genuinely thrown. "You mean… that's it?" Heskal said nothing. Alister looked from the form to Bram, then back to Heskal. "That doesn't…" His expression twisted as the implication landed. "What about everyone else?" Heskal's eyes lifted slightly. "What about them?" Before anyone could answer, the door opened behind them. Cassian stepped into the room with a weary sigh, as if he had arrived exactly when he expected to and was already disappointed by what he found. Beside him stood another Nexian man dressed in the white-and-gold uniform of Legislation. Unlike the wardens outside, he did not look amused. If anything, he looked uncomfortable being here.

"Alright," Cassian said, walking in with deliberate calm. "You have all said your piece. Let me handle the rest." Bram turned on him immediately. "You think I'm going to let this go?" he snapped, the form still untouched on the desk. "Even with this exception?" Cassian stopped in front of him. His expression did not harden. His voice did not rise. "I am asking you to remember our conversation about impulse." Bram's anger did not disappear, but something in him faltered. His fists loosened by a fraction. Cassian stepped closer, lowering his voice just enough that it felt more personal than official. "Mark my words, Ashgarn. I will not let this stand." Then his tone sharpened. "Take the form. Fill it out. And hope it won't be necessary." There was no room for argument in the way he said it.

Darla looked conflicted. Alister looked furious. Fiora looked like she wanted someone to explain why getting Bram's family back felt so much like losing. Bram stared at the form for several long seconds. Then, slowly, he took it. The paper crinkled slightly under his grip. He turned without another word and walked out. The others followed after him, none of them satisfied. Not even close.

Behind them, Heskal simply picked up his pen again.

Chapter 24: Intervention of the Highest Order

Cassian and another man sat across from Heskal in silence. The air between them was tense, not because anyone had raised their voice, but because all three men understood exactly what kind of conversation this was going to be. None of them wanted to have it. None of them were willing to avoid it. Heskal's eyes shifted toward the Nexian in the white-and-gold uniform. "Marcell," he said. "I take it you are unhappy with the motion. Much like Special Operations." Marcell did not answer immediately. His posture remained formal, but there was no hiding the weight in his expression. "Hm," Heskal continued. "Unhappy enough to side with Internal Investigations, of all divisions." He said. Marcell exhaled slowly. "That's right," he said. "I'll be blunt. I believe this is an overstep, even for you."

Heskal's expression did not change. Marcell leaned forward slightly, his voice controlled but firm. "Do you truly believe that people who do not contribute directly to trade simply do not matter?"

"They matter as much as their records allow them to matter," Heskal replied coldly. "Civics lost public records. That is unfortunate. However, public records are not the only records that exist. The Port, the merchants, and even the Guild maintain their own." He folded his hands neatly. "If a person's identity exists in none of them, then that person has no place in this city."

Cassian sighed and leaned back in his chair. "Even if we accepted that premise," he said, "do you not believe that can change?" His eyes narrowed slightly. "You have two examples of that sitting

right here." Heskal paused, studying them both for a moment. "The only thing you have grown into is a thorn in my side." He frowned. Cassian smiled faintly. "You mean the only person other than the Chancellor who can realistically check you when you overstep. This is certainly a contender."

Marcell rubbed his temple with a quiet groan. "Must you antagonize him?" he asked. "We are trying to convince him to change his mind, remember?" He pleaded. Cassian's smile did not fade. Marcell sighed harder. "This is why everyone hates Internal Investigations." He groaned. Heskal stood without another word and walked toward the window. Below, the crowd remained gathered in the plaza, their signs lifted high, their voices muffled by the glass. From this height, they looked smaller. Easier to dismiss. He stared down at them for a long moment, his expression unreadable. "I see no flaw in removing undesirables," he said at last. Marcell's jaw tightened.

Heskal continued, "However… perhaps this has garnered too much negative attention for Legislation." The words landed heavily. Cassian's eyes sharpened slightly, but he said nothing yet.

Marcell looked at Heskal like he was searching for a man beneath the title and finding only polished stone. "So that is your concern?" Marcell asked quietly. "Not the families? Not the people dragged from their homes? Not the possibility that our own city is eating itself?" Heskal turned from the window. "My concern is Porta Nexus," he said. "As it always has been."

"Alright then, I assume we can begin negotiations." Cassian said, settling back into his chair as if victory had already become procedure. Heskal said nothing. Cassian's smile thinned. "Firstly, where are you keeping them?" "They are being processed on the lunar colony, We have yet to find a suitable world willing to accept them. If that fails, I have no qualms about depositing them on a random one." Heskal replied. Marcell's composure cracked. "Hold on now, sir," he said quickly. "Let's not get hasty." Heskal did not look at him. Marcell fumbled for something, anything, that might reach the man in the language he understood. "Think about optics," he said. Cassian kept his eyes on Heskal. "Then I'll be using my authority to gain oversight of this matter, and placing an immediate pause on that." he said,

his tone just as firm.

Only then did Heskal's gaze shift. "Is that an official command? Or a request?" he asked.

"We can ask Garrick together, if you'd like. Test your theory on his willingness to get involved." Cassian smiled faintly. For the first time, Heskal turned fully to face them. The silence that followed was cold. "Very well," he said at last. "We will hold them until further notice. But I will not wait long, and you may come to regret wielding your theoretical power over me." "Not good enough, I want them returned to their homes." Cassian replied without hesitation. Marcell looked toward him, surprised by the push. Heskal's mouth tightened. "They may return," he said slowly, "under house arrest. If they leave their dwellings, they will be deported immediately." Marcell leaned forward before Cassian could answer.

"Some of them are not well off, sir," he said carefully. "If they are not permitted to work, they won't be able to afford rent. Or food." Macell pleaded. Heskal exhaled through his nose, irritated now. Cassian tilted his head. "You wouldn't let these leeches sit there and contribute nothing, now would you?" The smugness was in full effect. Marcell closed his eyes for half a second, silently begging him to stop enjoying this so much. Heskal stared at Cassian for a long moment. "They will be permitted to work under supervision, Ankle monitors will suffice." he said finally. Cassian watched him, weighing the answer. Heskal's tone hardened. "That is as far as I will move. You have bought them a month, Two at most." Heskal added.

"Wonderful, I'm glad we could come to an agreement before you made such a.... disastrous mistake." Cassian said, standing. Heskal's eyes narrowed. Cassian did not leave. "Now, there is one other matter." he continued, Heskal said nothing, but his expression shifted slightly. "These new forces of yours," Cassian said. "I believe, during our last meeting, someone made a point of saying we do not form divisions on whims. So what would you call them?" His smile returned. For the first time, Heskal smiled back. Only slightly. "There is no whim, You will see soon enough." he said. Cassian's smile

faded by a fraction. Heskal folded his hands behind his back. “You could say I followed your example,” he continued. “Without overreaching beyond the bounds of law.” For once, Cassian did not have an immediate response. His face fell just enough for Marcell to notice. Whatever Heskal had done, it was not something Cassian could prod at yet.

Both men left Heskal’s office without another word. The door closed behind them, and for a few steps, the silence followed like a shadow. Cassian finally let out a soft laugh. “Not bad for a couple of Nexians, yes?” Marcell stopped walking. His expression tightened, not with fear, but with the kind of frustration that had been building for longer than one conversation. “Do you really think that attitude is going to help us?” Marcell growled. Cassian turned back toward him, one brow lifting. “Internal Investigations is already hated by nearly every division,” Marcell said. “Perhaps that is unavoidable. Your work requires you to step where others do not want you. But you…” He paused, visibly choosing whether or not to continue. “Forgive me for speaking this way to a superior, but Heskal only listened because you had leverage. You know that. You’re too intelligent not to.”

Cassian’s smile faded by a fraction. Marcell stepped closer, lowering his voice so it would not carry down the hall. “Provoking him does not make you clever. It puts Special Operations in danger. You and Heskal may both be administrators. You may both have one vote like the rest of us, but that does not mean you stand on equal ground in practice. You do not toy with a man like him unless you are prepared for what comes after.” For once, Cassian did not answer immediately. “You won a pause,” Marcell continued. “A month, perhaps two. That matters. I will not pretend it doesn’t.” His eyes shifted briefly back toward Heskal’s office. “But he learned something as well.” He said. Cassian watched him carefully. Marcell left the words hanging there, then turned and walked away. Cassian remained in the hall, his expression unreadable, and this time he did not follow with a joke.

A few days passed, and the city settled into something that almost resembled normal. Not peace, exactly. More like exhaustion wearing a mask. Gram stayed around Special Operations Headquarters

during most of it, drifting between rooms and lingering near the lobby like he did not fully believe anything had been fixed. Maybe he needed to see it happen with his own eyes. Maybe he did not trust anyone in uniform enough to leave before he knew for certain.

Darla found him there one morning and approached with quiet pride, though it softened as soon as she saw the look on his face. “I just received word,” she said. “Your family is going to be released soon. I told you we would protect them.” Her ears drooped slightly as the rest of the thought caught up with her. “I only wish it had never happened at all.” Gram did not look relieved. If anything, her words seemed to harden something in him. “Bram already told me,” he said. “And don’t act like you fixed this. You didn’t. You delayed it.”

Darla blinked, caught off guard by the sharpness in his voice. Gram stood from his seat, frustration spilling out now that there was finally somewhere for it to go. “You know, I always hated you dogs. You act like you’re protecting Porta Nexus, but you stopped doing that a long time ago.” Her ears perked in shock. “How can you say that? All I’ve ever tried to do is protect this city. I’m doing that right now.” “And look where we are,” Gram shot back. His voice trembled, but not from fear anymore. “I grew up hearing stories about the dogs protecting the king. Protecting his people. Us. The Nexians.” He shook his head, disgusted and hurt all at once. “But you don’t protect anyone anymore. You and the important people upstairs stopped caring about us a long time ago.” He walked away before she could answer.

Darla remained where she was, the words landing harder than she wanted to admit. She knew he was angry. She knew he was scared. She knew his anger was pointed at her because she was the nearest symbol of something much larger and uglier than herself. Still, that did not make it hurt less.

Worse than that, she could not entirely dismiss it. Had the Dogenridge family really protected the people of Porta Nexus, or had they protected the idea of the city while people like Gram slipped through the cracks beneath them? She looked down, suddenly unsure.

When Bram's family was finally released, he rushed to them the moment he saw them. He pulled as many of them as he could into a massive group hug, holding on like he was afraid they might vanish if he loosened his grip. Fiora had come along too, but she stayed off to the side, half-hidden and smiling quietly. For once, she seemed to understand that this was not a moment she needed to barge into. "I was so worried," Bram said, tears shining in his eyes. "I'm glad you're all okay." An older Nexian woman patted his arm with affectionate firmness. "You're such a worrywart, Brammy. Come on. Let's go home. I'll cook us up some jambalena, and we'll celebrate properly." Bram immediately frowned. "Grandma, you must be exhausted. You need to rest. Think about your health." "Oh, pish posh," she said, waving him off. "There will always be hardships. I'm not old enough to be treated like glass, young man." He opened his mouth to argue, then gave up with a small, helpless smile. "Yes, ma'am."

His grandmother's eyes shifted past him toward Fiora's hiding spot. "And bring that human girl over there with you. She looks like she needs a good meal and some love." Fiora nearly fell over. "You can see me?" she asked, pointing at herself in disbelief. "You want me to come?" "Of course I do," the old woman said warmly. "The more the merrier, dear. We would be happy to have you." Fiora's face lit up so brightly it was almost dangerous. "You got it, mother-in-law," she said, firing finger guns without the grandmother having the slightest understanding of what she had just implied. Bram's grandmother only laughed, either amused by the boldness or choosing not to correct it. So they went home. They cooked far too much food, filled the house with noise, and celebrated long into the night. For a while, it almost worked. The warmth, the laughter, the smell of spices, the overlapping voices of a family grateful to be together again. It all felt real.

Then Bram noticed the ankle monitor around his grandmother's leg. The sight brought the rage back so quickly he nearly lost his breath. "You know you don't have to wear that, right?" he said quietly. "I didn't want to sign the paper, but I did. You're exempt now. You and everyone else I listed."

His grandmother's expression softened, but her answer came without hesitation. "No." Bram stared at her. She touched the monitor lightly with her fingers. "Everyone else in the neighborhood is wearing them, so we will too." "That isn't fair," he said, voice tightening. "No, it isn't," she agreed. "But fairness doesn't mean much if you only ask for it when it reaches your own doorstep." Bram had no answer. She sighed, the strength in her face dimming for just a moment. "Your brother refused, I suppose. Stubborn boy." Bram looked away, jaw tight, but her word was final in their house and he respected that.

Later that night, Fiora sat off by herself with her fifth plate of food balanced in her lap, eating quietly as the celebration carried on around her. The noise had settled into something warmer now, less frantic than before, but still alive. People talked in clusters. Someone laughed too loudly in the kitchen. A few of Bram's relatives had started telling stories that seemed to grow less believable with every passing minute. Fiora smiled softly at all of it, but her mind was clearly somewhere else. Bram noticed.

He walked over and lowered himself beside her, careful not to crowd her. "Heya, Fenleigh," he said, his voice gentle. "Sorry about my family. They usually don't invite outsiders in this fast. They can be a bit much." He laughed a little, but Fiora shook her head. "Your family is wonderful, Bram." She said it more calmly than usual. Not teasing. Not loud. Just honest. That caught his attention. "Glad to hear it," he said, studying her with concern. "But something's eating at you, isn't it?" Fiora looked down at her plate, pushing a bit of food around with her fork. "I met so many powerful people, and I… couldn't do anything." Her voice softened further. "That woman…" She trailed off, but Bram understood.

He leaned back slightly, thinking about it. "Aw, don't feel too bad. The fact that you tried at all means the world to me." He gave her a warm smile, then leaned in a little closer, lowering his voice. "And just between you and me, I think you really got to the Administrator." He laughed. Fiora glanced at him, not fully convinced. "You really think so?" "I do," Bram said, lightly poking her side. "He

looked like he had no idea what to do with you." That got the smallest laugh out of her, but it faded quickly. Her thoughts drifted back to the reception room, to the suffocating pressure that had filled the air when the woman stood. Fiora had faced danger before. She had fought people. Hurt people. Maybe killed people. But that had been different. That had been something older than fear and sharper than logic, her body understanding before her mind did that she was completely outmatched.

"Hey, Bram…" she said after a moment. "Who was she?" Bram's expression shifted. Even saying the name seemed to make him uneasy. "That was Supreme Captain... Valeria Highborne," he said. "At least, I'm pretty sure that's her full name. People say she's the strongest person in Porta Nexus. Everyone knows better than to mess with her." Fiora stared ahead, quiet. Then she asked, "That can not be her real name..." Then softer more thoughtful. "Do you think one day I could be that strong?" Bram looked at her. "I can't do anything when it comes to all this talking stuff," she continued, her voice unusually sincere. "Politics, laws, people like Heskal… I don't understand it. But if I were stronger, if I could become someone people couldn't just ignore…" Her fingers tightened slightly around the edge of her plate. "Maybe I could make a difference somehow."

Bram did not answer right away. He took the question seriously, the way he always seemed to when it mattered. He thought about the strange things she had done, the instincts she tried to hide, the courage she often buried under nonsense and jokes. Then he smiled. "I think you can do anything, Fiora." She looked at him, startled by the sound of her first name. Bram's smile softened. "And I don't just mean becoming strong."

In the crime sector, Gram moved through the alleys with his hood pulled low, slipping between shadows and avoiding gang patrols whenever he heard them coming. The rest of the city was still celebrating, but he had no interest in fireworks, food, or music. Not tonight. After several turns, he stopped beneath a broken streetlamp and pulled a scrap of paper from his pocket. A crude map had been drawn across it, full of sharp lines and rough directions that barely made sense unless someone

already knew what they were looking for. He checked it once, then looked ahead.

A massive hole split the street open, leading down into one of the forgotten lower layers of the city. Gram swallowed, then climbed down. The passage beneath was damp and old, older than the polished streets above would ever admit. He walked for what felt like an hour, following the map through cracked tunnels, rusted supports, and half-collapsed service corridors until he finally reached a wide underground chamber. An old warehouse sat buried there, hidden beneath the city like something Porta Nexus had chosen to forget.

Viktor Scathe leaned against the wall outside it, hands in his pockets, looking like he had been expecting him. Calva sat nearby on a stack of crates, smiling with idle curiosity as Gram approached.

“So,” Viktor said, his voice casual, “you’re interested in joining after all. You and your friends?” Gram stopped a few steps away. Conflict crossed his face, but only for a moment. Then he took a breath, forcing himself past whatever hesitation remained. “Yeah,” he said. “I’m tired of sitting around and waiting for someone to care. If the city won’t change on its own, then I’ll make it change.” His hands curled into fists. “Even if I have to work with you. Even if I have to hurt people.”

Viktor laughed softly, like that was exactly the answer he had been hoping for. “A wise choice,” he said, pushing himself off the wall. “Buckle up, Gram. We’ve got a bumpy road ahead.” He opened the warehouse door. Inside, a group was already waiting. Most of them were Nexian. Some looked angry. Others looked scared. A few looked like they had already crossed a line and were just waiting for someone to tell them what came next. Viktor stepped aside, his smile widening. “The revolution has only just started.” Gram stared into the room. Then, slowly, his uncertainty faded.

He grinned and stepped inside without looking back.

Chapter 25: The Polls Are Posted

Guild Master Garrick sat at his desk in the Guild headquarters, staring out the window with a heaviness he could no longer ignore. The room around him was practical. Almost plain, compared to the offices of the Port Authority's higher administrators. No gold displays. No crystal fixtures. No priceless paintings hanging where work should have been done. Just shelves, records, old maps, and a desk worn smooth by generations of use. That somehow made the papers in front of him feel heavier. Letters from citizens pleading for action. Reports on Civics. Documents detailing the recent deportations. Complaints from merchants. Notes from administrators. Polling projections he had not asked for but had received anyway. All of it stacked before him like the city itself had been reduced to paper and placed on his desk. He looked down at it, then back toward the window.

A moment later, the door opened. Caerith entered quietly and took the seat across from him. His eyes remained closed, as always, but his attention settled on Garrick with complete clarity. "Is this truly what you want?" he asked. Garrick let out a slow breath. "No," he admitted. "Not at all." There was no shame in the answer. Only exhaustion. "This position has passed from my father, and from his father before him. The Guild is what I know. It is what I do." He paused, fingers resting against the edge of the desk. "But I am part of something larger now."

Caerith inclined his head slightly. "And you cannot continue dividing yourself between both."

He questioned. Garrick gave a tired smile. “You always did have a talent for making my thoughts sound cleaner than they are. I try.” Garrick looked down at the insignia resting beside the papers. It was old. Older than most offices in the Port Authority. Older than most families who claimed authority over the city. A symbol passed through his line for thousands of years, carrying more memory than metal should have been able to hold. “If anyone can replace me, it is you, Caerith.” His voice softened slightly. “No. Not just replace me.” He looked up. “Carry it forward, old friend.”

Caerith’s expression warmed. “I am honored by your faith in me. I will not let you down.” Then, after a small pause, he added, “And should things not work out as you hope, I will step aside when you return.” Garrick smiled at that, though there was sadness in it. “Still leaving me a way back?” “Someone has to be practical.” The elven man man laughed. Garrick stood. Caerith rose with him, and the two men clasped hands across the desk. For a moment, neither spoke. The gesture carried more than ceremony. It carried trust. Then Garrick picked up the ancient insignia and placed it in Caerith’s hand. “When I first took this,” Garrick said quietly, “I thought it was the heaviest thing I had ever held.” He explained. Caerith closed his fingers around it with care. Garrick glanced toward the window, toward the city beyond the Guild walls. “But compared to what King Nexus carried…” He let out a small, humorless chuckle. “It feels light as a feather.” He went on. Caerith did not answer. He did not need to. Garrick stepped away from the desk, leaving the insignia, the room, and the life he had known in hands he trusted. Then he walked out, not as a man escaping one duty, but as one finally choosing another.

The sun rose over the skyline of Porta Nexus, light spilling between the portals that hung above the city like windows to everywhere else. Another Aion Anderson broadcast had begun. Aion popped onto the screen with his usual bravado, already smiling like the entire multiverse had personally tuned in just to see him. Mia stood in the background near a large display, smiling patiently as information scrolled beside her. “Good morning, Multiverse!” Aion declared, throwing one arm wide. “Today is a

very special day here in Porta Nexus. The election season has officially begun."

The display behind him shifted, showing the Chancellor's seal. "For those of you not in the know," he continued, pacing slightly across the set, "Porta Nexus elects its Chancellor to five-year terms. Former Chancellor Morvin had just begun his fourth term before the Siege, only for Guild Master Garrick to carry the office forward in the aftermath." Aion's grin sharpened with the kind of energy that meant he was enjoying this more than he probably should. "In the past, the Chancellor race was barely a race at all. Morvin ran uncontested so often that most people stopped asking who else might try. But this year?" He gestured toward the display as several names appeared one after another. "This year is different. Besides the obvious front-runners, the people of Porta Nexus have found themselves with a wide and colorful field of choices."

The broadcast cut to a crowd gathered outside a massive cathedral. A dark-skinned man with a warm, beaming smile stepped onto a podium. His robes caught the morning light, giving him an almost glowing presence as he raised both hands to quiet the crowd. "Good morning to all the Caretaker's children," he said, his voice rich and practiced. "It is I, Father Orison Everlight." Some in the crowd cheered immediately. "Many of you know me for my work within the Church here in our city," he continued. "And many of you know my heart. That is why I cannot remain silent any longer. My heart is broken. Shattered, I say, by what I see happening around us." He placed one hand over his chest, his expression full of solemn conviction.

"Porta Nexus is falling into fear, division, and despair. I do not claim to have every answer, but I know this: a city without light will stumble in darkness. So it is my wish to bring light back to this great city." His voice rose. "In the Phoenix's name, amen!" A portion of the crowd echoed the word back to him, some with genuine devotion, others swept up in the moment. Off to the side, however, a few onlookers remained less convinced. "Didn't the Empire wipe out most of the Church leadership?" one man muttered. "Who even is this guy?" A woman beside him folded her arms, watching Orison

carefully. “I think he’s been here for a while. Heard people like him. Maybe someone like that wouldn’t be the worst fit.” The man scoffed. “Religion and politics don’t mix well.” The woman did not answer, but she did not look away from the stage either.

The broadcast cut again, this time to a recording studio lit with neon signs and expensive mood lighting. An interviewer sat across from a woman covered in tattoos from neck to fingers. A backward hat sat low over her head, a bright grill flashed when she smiled, and every inch of her outfit seemed designed to announce itself before she did. “Hello, everyone,” the interviewer said. “I’m here with 60¢REDIT, famous Soundground rapper and now, apparently, candidate for Chancellor of Porta Nexus.” 60¢REDIT leaned back in her chair and threw up a casual sign toward the camera.

The interviewer continued, trying very hard to sound professional. “Tell me, why the sudden shift? Do you truly have some grand plan for the city? Something that will improve the lives of ordinary citizens?” “Uh… yeah,” 60¢REDIT said, nodding with great confidence and very little substance. “Totally. I’ve got a ton of wicked ideas.” The interviewer leaned in slightly, encouraged. “But,” she added, already pulling something from beside her chair, “why don’t we talk about my new album instead?” She held up the cover with a grin. “It’s called Panic at the Polls.” The interviewer paused. “Oh,” they said slowly. “Is the album intended to explain your policies through rap?” 60¢REDIT stared at them like that was the strangest question she had ever heard. “Why would you think that?”

The broadcast cut again, this time to an older robot standing on a modest stage before a half-filled conference room. Its body looked worn but carefully maintained, with a single camera-like eye set into its face and a stiff metal suit fitted over its frame. Behind it, a projection displayed a dense chart packed with arrows, numbers, and bullet points that only a handful of people in the audience seemed brave enough to read. “And that,” the robot said in a flat, measured tone, “is why, if we follow this twelve-part plan, Porta Nexus will become more efficient, safer, and more prosperous for every

resident. Vote for me. Unit-12."

The presentation ended to a scattering of polite claps. Several people in the room had fallen asleep. One man stretched in his chair and leaned toward the person beside him. "Well, that was boring, but he had some good points. Who says a robot can't run things?" The other man snorted. "Nah, we need someone more exciting." The first man frowned. "Dude, this is about making people's lives better, not being entertained." The broadcast moved on.

Back at Special Operations Headquarters, Darla sat at her desk working through a report that somehow required her to account for everything she had not done that day. Aside from her morning patrol, the list was depressingly long and bureaucratically meaningless. She was halfway through another sentence when Alister rushed into the room, one hand pressed over his mouth as if he was physically holding back laughter. "Hey, dog," he said, his voice already shaking. "Did you hear?" Darla's ears lifted slightly, though she did not look up from the page right away. "Hear what?" Alister leaned against the edge of her desk, clearly savoring the moment. "There's a dog running for Chancellor."

That got her attention. She straightened with sudden interest, her annoyance giving way to curiosity. "Really? I would have heard about it if it were someone from my family. Is it a Kessler? A Coldren?" "No," Alister said, the word nearly breaking into a laugh. Darla narrowed her eyes. "Then who?" "One of your distant cousins, obviously." He turned his tablet around before she could question that any further. On the screen was an ordinary golden retriever sitting proudly in front of a campaign banner. The dog wore a fancy tie and a tiny pair of glasses, looking far more dignified than any animal had a right to look. Beneath the photo, bold letters declared: BISCUIT FOR CHANCELLOR. A GOOD BOY FOR A BETTER CITY.

Darla stared at the image for several long seconds, her expression slowly shifting from confusion to offense. "What…?" she said at last, leaning closer. "That is not a dog candidate. That is

just a dog." "Yes," Alister said, finally losing the battle against his own laughter. "How is this allowed?" Darla demanded, snatching the tablet from his hands. "Who would vote for an animal that cannot even speak, let alone understand policy?" "Ooo, me! Me!" Fiora appeared beside them so suddenly that a few months ago both Darla and Alister might have jumped. By now, neither of them so much as flinched. Darla turned toward her slowly. "Fenleigh, you are not wasting your vote on this."

"But he looks so adorable with that tie," Fiora said, clasping her hands together. "And his name is Biscuit." "That is not a political platform." She barked. "It's kind of one," Fiora said, pouting. "It is not." Alister wiped at his eye, still laughing. "To be fair, Biscuit has fewer scandals than Morvin." Darla's glare snapped back to him. "That is also not a platform." She looked down at the tablet again, personally offended by every part of the golden retriever's campaign image. The longer she stared, the more her irritation began to sharpen into suspicion. "Someone filed this paperwork," she muttered. Alister's laughter began to fade as he recognized the tone in her voice. Darla's eyes narrowed. "And I want to know who."

Finally, the broadcast cut back to Aion in the studio. He stood beside the candidate display, looking far too pleased with the chaos he had just summarized. "And that's the gist of it," he said, clasping his hands together. "Some of these candidates might end up becoming true dark horses in this race. Others…" He glanced back toward the display, where Biscuit's campaign photo still lingered in one corner. "Well, I wouldn't count on it." The screen shifted, leaving only two portraits side by side: Morvin and Garrick. "But let's be frank, folks. We all know who this really comes down to. Former Chancellor Morvin, and Acting Chancellor Garrick." Aion stepped closer to the camera, his smile easing into something more professional. "I'll be moderating the upcoming statements and debates, and I assure you, I will do so with the utmost neutrality and complete lack of bias." He said. Mia, still in the background, tilted her head slightly.

Aion cleared his throat. "That said, as I have already stated before, you all know my pick."

He moved on before anyone could comment. “Keep in mind, we are already two years into what would have been this term. Whoever wins will only have three years to enact their agenda. But don’t let that fool you. If history is any indication, the winner of this election could very well go on to serve many uncontested terms afterward. Chancellor Vallron served five terms, a full twenty-five years. So while this may look like a shortened race, the future it decides could last far longer.” The display behind him shifted again, now showing a debate stage marked with the Chancellor’s seal. “So tune in soon for the first round of candidate statements and debates. I’m Aion Anderson, signing out.” The broadcast ended almost as quickly as it had begun.

Far from Porta Nexus, on the distant edge of the multiverse, a world with a pink sky glowed beneath the morning light. In a quiet room, a lion-man watched the broadcast with growing excitement, his tail flicking behind him. “Ha,” The Lion said, leaning closer to the screen. “An election. How exciting. Perhaps I shall throw my hat into the ring. They love me over in Port of Nexus.” He started laughing before he had even finished the thought. The door opened behind him. A black-haired man with gray eyes stepped in first, already looking tired. Beside him came an orange-haired woman with long flowing hair and absolutely no patience in her expression. “The hell you are,” the woman said.

The Lions laughter stopped. Before he could retreat, she grabbed the back of his collar and started dragging him away from the screen. “If you even think about ruining another election, I will make your life a living hell.” The man followed after them with a long sigh. “Did you really think we’d let you do this again?” “I was not going to ruin it,” He protested, digging his heels in with no success. “I was going to enrich the democratic process.” “You were going to sell buttons,” He said. “And posters,” She added. “And possibly name yourself Chancellor-King-Mayor-Prime Minister of the Port.” The Lion gasped, deeply offended. “That title was still in draft form.” He said offended as she dragged him fully out of the room as he continued protesting, his voice fading down the hall. The broadcast screen remained behind them, still glowing faintly with the image of Porta Nexus and the

election that was already becoming far stranger than anyone had planned.

Chapter 27: Civic Duty

The excitement of election season had settled into something more predictable after the first few days. A few candidates had already dropped out once the novelty faded, while others remained in the race mostly out of pride, publicity, or stubborn refusal to read the room. The polls told the real story better than any speech could. Morvin and Garrick were nearly tied at the top, close enough that every interview, rumor, and mistake suddenly mattered. Father Orison Everlight lingered just behind them, respected enough to be taken seriously but still too far back for most people to believe he could actually win. Everyone else had fallen into the single digits. The first true debate between Morvin and Garrick was only a few days away, and the city had already started arranging itself around the coming spectacle. Screens advertised it in public squares. Commentators argued over policy. Merchants sold candidate pins beside festival leftovers. For a moment, it almost seemed like Porta Nexus had moved on again.

A woman entered the lobby of Special Operations Headquarters looking lost, exhausted, and completely unsure whether she was in the right place. The room did not help. There was no secretary, no front desk staff, and no one waiting to greet her. Just a clean but unfinished lobby and the distant sound of someone swearing at machinery deeper inside the building. Jax emerged a moment later, wiping his hands on a rag as he crossed the room with a list of parts in one hand. He barely noticed her at first, already halfway to the door. “Um… excuse me, sir?” He stopped, then slowly turned toward

her. His eyes narrowed, not unkindly, but with the tired suspicion of a man who had not planned to deal with other people today.

The woman drew in a shaky breath. “Is this Special Operations? I was told you people can handle any problem.” Her voice was thin with exhaustion. She did not sound like she believed that. She sounded like someone who had run out of better options. Jax’s expression shifted slightly. Not much, but enough. “The others aren’t here right now,” he said. “I’m just...” She caught his hand before he could finish. “Please,” she said, gripping him with both hands now. “I need to talk to someone. It’s just… please hear me out.” Jax looked down at her hands, then back at her face. He let out a long, deeply inconvenienced groan, but he did not pull away.

“Fine,” he muttered. “Come on, then.” He led her into the reception room. By the time the others returned, they looked like they had lost a fight with an engine. Oil stained their uniforms, streaked their faces, and clung to Alister’s coat in ways he clearly considered unforgivable. “I am never doing that again,” Alister complained, holding one sleeve away from his body like it was contaminated.

“It was the first mission Cassian offered us in a month,” Darla said, though even she sounded like she was trying very hard to justify it to herself. “And it was not worth it,” Alister hissed.

Bram looked down at his own oil-smeared arms with a rare frown. Fiora sniffed her sleeve, made a face, then shrugged. Before Alister could respond, Jax poked his head out from the reception room. “Can you ninnies stop your nonsense and come in here already?” Fiora perked up immediately. “Huh? What are you doing in there?” “We have someone here to see you,” Jax said. His tone flattened. “It’s urgent.” “Oh, right.” Fiora lifted her chin with complete confidence. “Good job. I trained you well.” Jax stared at her with enough hatred to peel paint. Alister sighed, glancing down at the oil still dripping. “How urgent?” he asked, clearly hoping the answer left room for a shower.

Jax’s expression hardened just enough to kill the thought.

“Urgent enough that I stayed.” That got their attention. The complaints died one by one. Darla straightened first, her fatigue slipping behind duty. Bram’s frown faded into concern. Fiora looked toward the reception room, curiosity giving way to something more serious. Alister exhaled through his nose, then flicked a bit of oil from his sleeve. “Of course,” he muttered. “Why would today be simple?”

They followed Jax inside.

They entered the reception room together. Darla sat down without hesitation, already shifting into the posture she used whenever someone came to them with a problem. Alister was slower about it, glancing at the oil on his sleeves and then at the upholstery with visible pain before lowering himself into the chair anyway. Darla looked back toward Bram and Fiora. “You two go change. We’ll handle this for now.” Bram nodded, clearly reluctant to leave but willing to trust her judgment. Fiora didn't argue. Once they were gone, Darla turned back to the woman. “Sorry for the delay.” Alister folded his hands together, trying very hard to ignore the state of his coat. “What appears to be the issue?”

The woman looked between them, still trembling slightly. Her eyes settled on Darla with a flicker of recognition that Darla did not immediately understand. “So it was true,” the woman said quietly. “Ms. Darla… my husband told me about you. He said you went to school together.”

Darla paused, studying her more closely now. She searched her memory, running through faces from private school, old classmates, old families, old names, but nothing came clearly. Alister’s eyes narrowed in thought, and he made the connection first. “You’re Captain Cleatus’s wife, aren’t you?” The moment he said it, Darla understood. The woman nodded, and the effort nearly broke her composure. “I think… I think he was taken.”

Darla’s expression tightened. “Taken?” she repeated. “No. I was there after the attack. I won’t lie to you. He was badly injured, but there is no doubt he survived.” “I know he survived,” the woman said quickly. “That’s not what I mean.” Alister leaned forward slightly. His annoyance was gone now. “Then why do you believe someone took him?” She took a breath, trying to steady herself enough to

explain. “I haven’t been able to contact him. When I went to the hospital, they told me he had already been discharged. I thought that had to be wrong. With the injuries he had, how could he be discharged so soon?” Darla and Alister exchanged a look. They had both assumed Cleatus would be in recovery for a long time. Months, maybe longer.

“I called him over and over,” the woman continued. “He only answered once.” Alister’s voice lowered. “What did he say?” The woman pressed her hands together in her lap, fingers twisting until her knuckles paled. “Not much. And it almost didn’t sound like him. He was cold. Direct. Like he was reading something, or trying not to feel anything.” Her voice shook harder now. “He said he loved me. Then he said he had made a mistake.” Darla’s ears lowered slightly. The woman tried to continue, but the words caught. Tears welled in her eyes as she forced them out anyway. “He said he would never let it happen again.”

They sat in silence for a moment, letting her words settle. “That does not sound like Cleatus,” Darla said, frowning. The last clear image she had of him was not flattering. Cleatus asleep on the job. Cleatus fumbling through responsibility. Then Cleatus beneath the rubble, his body burned and broken, barely alive after everyone around him had died. Maybe that kind of survival changed a person. Maybe it broke something in him. She did not know. Alister leaned back, his expression turning thoughtful despite himself. “You know, for all his faults, Cleatus was not stupid.”

Jax shot him a look from the side, clearly asking why that was the direction he had chosen. Alister ignored him. “Yes, he was a slacker. Painfully so. But I knew him too. He had high marks when he actually bothered to turn in his work, and if I remember correctly, he broke a few records in swordplay.” Darla looked at him, surprised by the softness buried under the observation. “What I mean,” Alister continued, his tone becoming less flippant, “is that the man is stronger than people give him credit for. He survived when no one else did. If he is in trouble, then I believe there is still a chance he can hold on until we find him.”

The woman lowered her gaze, her hands trembling in her lap. “I hope you’re right.” Her voice cracked. “Please. I don’t have much, but I’ll pay you. I’ll give you anything I can. Just please find my Cleatus.” Darla reached across the table and took her hands firmly. “We will start looking right away,” she said. “And I already have a good idea where to begin. We will find him. I promise.” The woman held onto that promise like it was the only solid thing left in the room.

After they saw her off, Darla stood near the entrance for a while, watching until she disappeared down the street. Alister finally broke the silence with a sigh. “I assume you’re thinking of the hospital first. Sensible. But I am not taking one step farther while covered in whatever transport fluid this is.” Darla glanced down at herself, then sniffed one sleeve. Her expression tightened immediately. “…Yes. For once, I agree with you.” They took enough time to clean up and change into fresh uniforms before heading out again. Bram stayed behind, claiming he had dinner to prepare and clearly trusting the others to handle the first round of questions. Fiora, naturally, came along. No one was entirely sure whether she was motivated by curiosity, concern, or the possibility that hospitals had vending machines.

Compared to some of their previous missions, getting inside was almost too easy. The Health Division received them without question. An AID-E nurse droid met them near the entrance and guided them through the clean corridors with calm efficiency. “The Administrator is not currently present,” the unit explained as they walked. “However, Doctor Crucible was responsible for Captain Cleatus’s care and is available.” Darla nodded. “Agian? Fine, then take us to him.” The droid led them away from the main wards and into a section of the hospital that felt less like a place of recovery and more like a workshop someone had built inside a medical facility. The walls were lined with carefully mounted prosthetics: arms, hands, legs, wings, tails, and stranger shapes designed for bodies that did not fit any standard template. Tools rested in organized trays beside diagnostic screens. The air smelled faintly of metal, oil, sterilizer, and heated circuitry.

At the center of the room, a robotic man in a lab coat hunched over a workbench, focused intently on a mechanical leg. The structure looked avian in design, delicate in some places and reinforced in others, with a joint configuration that clearly refused to behave like a human limb. He adjusted one component, watched the mechanism twitch incorrectly, and let out a tired sigh. “Stubborn little thing,” he muttered. The AID-E unit stopped near the doorway. “Doctor Crucible,” it said. “I have brought Special Operations.” The robotic doctor paused with one hand still resting on the half-finished prosthetic. Then he turned toward them, his optics shifting as he took in the group.

Alister blinked. “Another robot with a rank?” Fiora leaned forward, already far more interested than she had been a moment ago. “Ooo, can you transform into a tank or something?” She asked. Doctor Crucible’s optics dimmed in what somehow felt like disappointment. “To both of our disappointments, I am not fully mechanical. My human brain remains intact, at least until I can properly transfer the data.” He set one of his tools down with a small metallic click. “As for the other question, of course not. I am a medical professional. I can only transform into useful things.” Fiora deflated immediately. Alister, somehow, only looked more confused.

Crucible turned his attention back to Darla before either of them could make that worse. “As for Cleatus, AID-E informed me you were coming shortly before you entered the hospital. I had time to review the relevant records.” His tone shifted, losing some of its dry rhythm. “It was strange indeed.”

Darla stepped closer. “Strange how?” Crucible hesitated. His hand remained near the prosthetic leg, though he was no longer working on it. “You are asking because you wish to locate him, yes? As his doctor, there are details I would prefer to keep between myself and the patient unless they are necessary.”

“Tell us what you can,” Darla said. Her voice stayed firm, but not harsh. “Who took him?”

Crucible was quiet for a moment longer, weighing duty against duty. When he finally spoke, there was less machine in his voice than before. “The man was in a dire state when he arrived. AID-E and I

managed to stabilize him, and for a time, he was recovering. Slowly, but recovering. Doctor Iris attempted to assist afterward. Her magic can repair damaged organic tissue if she acts quickly enough, and several of his internal injuries responded well." He paused, optics lowering slightly. "But he was adamant that the scars remain."

Darla's expression tightened. "He was returned to me later," Crucible continued. "Still weak. Still nowhere near ready to leave care. But conscious, active, and insistent. He begged me to give him new limbs." He went on. Fiora's smile had faded completely now. "I told him I would be willing to help when he was strong enough," Crucible said. "But he had not recovered enough to survive the process safely. Not then, and then the men arrived," Crucible said. "The masked men," Fiora said. "The ones from the deportations?" "I believe so," Crucible replied. "They came with official authority and removed him from my care. I told them it was too soon. I told them the risk was unacceptable. They did not care." His voice tightened faintly. "They said he was stable enough." Jax, who had been silent until then, folded his arms. "Stable enough for what?"

Crucible looked at him, then back to Darla. "They handed me an order from the top." He said. Alister went still. "Hold on. You mean from Legislation?" Crucible did not answer directly, which was answer enough. Alister's ears lowered slightly. "Is it really a good idea to be telling us this?" "No," Crucible said plainly. "It is not safe. The order was clear. Tell no one." His gaze shifted toward the doorway, then returned to them. "But Administrator Lucy trusts you. So I will trust you as well." For the first time, the guilt in him became unmistakable. "I failed that man," he said. "I should have stopped them." Darla's posture softened, just slightly. "You said they had an order from the top. What could you have done?" Crucible looked back at the unfinished prosthetic on his bench, his metal fingers curling slowly against the edge of the table.

"I am a doctor," Crucible said. "The answer should have been more than nothing." Even so, he moved toward a nearby desk and opened one of the drawers. Inside was an array of medical tools

arranged with careful precision, though several looked specialized enough that Darla could not even guess their purpose. Crucible shifted through them until his fingers closed around a small device. It was compact, smooth, and already blinking with a faint pulse of light.

Jax recognized it immediately. “A heart monitor?” Crucible nodded. “Yes. Every member of Health carries one, except AID-E, for obvious reasons.” He glanced briefly toward the nurse droid. “She has no heart to monitor.” AID-E’s optics flickered once, as if acknowledging the statement without offense. Crucible turned the device in his hand. A small readout glowed across the surface, the steady beeping filling the room with a rhythm that suddenly made everything feel more urgent. “I managed to insert it without their notice before they removed him from my care,” Crucible said. “It appears to still be active.” He handed it to Jax. Jax took it carefully, his earlier irritation gone as he studied the signal. “If this is still connected, we might be able to pinpoint where he is.” His eyes narrowed with focus. “Not immediately, but with the right equipment…”

Darla looked back at Crucible, her expression softening. “That is not nothing,” she said. “You may have saved him.” Crucible did not look convinced. His metal fingers closed slowly around the edge of the desk, the motion quiet but heavy. “At the time, I only thought I could ensure he was still breathing,” he said. “Perhaps, eventually, the right person would be able to do something with that knowledge.” Jax was already turning toward the door, the device held securely in one hand. “Let’s get this back to base. Give me a few hours, and I can probably trace the signal. Half an hour at the earliest if the universe decides to stop being difficult for once.” Alister blinked at him. “That sounded almost optimistic.” “It wasn’t,” Jax snapped, though he was moving faster than usual. Darla gave Crucible one last nod. “Thank you, Doctor.” Crucible returned the gesture, though the guilt still lingered in his posture. “Find him,” he said quietly.

They returned to base just in time for dinner, though the meal did little to settle anyone. Bram had already prepared enough food for all of them, but the usual warmth around the table was missing.

Darla sat with her hands folded near her plate, barely touching anything. Alister picked at his food in irritated silence. Bram looked troubled, his usual attempts to lighten the mood never quite making it past his face. Fiora ate, but even she seemed quieter than normal.

Jax did not join them. He took the heart monitor straight to his workspace and got to work without so much as pretending he might sit down first.

Darla finally broke the silence. “Why would they take him?” she asked, more to herself than the others. “For what?” Alister leaned back in his chair, his expression tight. “I don’t know. But something about those masked men is wrong. They’re operating without division marks, answering to someone above normal procedure, and now they’re removing patients from hospitals.” He tapped one claw against the table. “What are they? Where are they operating from? What is their actual purpose?”

Bram let out a slow breath. “Not to be a downer, but what can we even do about it?” His voice was unusually solemn. “They’re Port Authority, same as us. We can’t just barge into wherever they are and drag Cleatus back.”

Alister’s mouth twitched into a faint smirk. “We can if we use Internal Investigations as a shield.” Darla’s ears lifted sharply. “You already did that once. We cannot keep hiding behind Cassian’s division every time the rules become inconvenient.” “Why not? It worked.” Alister asked. “That is not the point.” She sighed. “It is absolutely the point,” he replied. “I hate Internal Investigations as much as anyone, but if their authority is useful, then we might as well use it. Besides, who says it would even be a lie? This is an internal matter, and it certainly deserves investigating.” Darla’s frown deepened. “Cassian said himself that he wants us to learn to operate on our own.” Alister looked away, annoyed because he did not have an immediate answer to that. “Yes, well, Cassian says a lot of things.”

Before Darla could respond, Jax entered the room. Everyone stopped talking. He stood in the doorway with a tablet in one hand, his expression caught somewhere between satisfaction and dread.

“About that…” he said. Alister sat up straighter. “Were you able to locate him? “Yes,” Jax replied, though the word clearly came with complications. Darla stood. “Where?” Jax hesitated just long enough for the room to tense. “He is not in Porta Nexus.” Fiora blinked. “What? Where is Mister Sleepyhead, then?” “They took him to another world?” Bram asked, disbelief already sharpening into anger. “Why would they do that?” “Not quite,” Jax said. He crossed the room and set the tablet on the table, then tapped the screen. A three-dimensional map of the planet appeared above it in pale light, rotating slowly. Porta Nexus glowed along the surface. Then Jax adjusted the display. The view pulled back. A smaller celestial body appeared beside the world, marked by a single blinking signal. The room went silent. Jax looked at them grimly. “He’s on the moon.”

Chapter 28: The Debate

The time had come. Spotlights shone across the stage as Aion Anderson walked out to the center podium, smiling with the practiced confidence of a man who understood exactly how many people were watching. The debate hall was packed from wall to wall. Citizens filled every seat, reporters clustered along the sides, and Port Authority guards stood posted at every entrance and corner. Outside, Mathias waited with a small detachment of Military forces, keeping the perimeter locked down. Whether the Reaper was still a threat or not, no one was willing to take chances tonight.

Mia sat off to the side beside Crow, her attention divided between the stage and the live data display feeding in audience reactions, polling shifts, and viewer counts. Tristan worked from the control room, adjusting audio levels and camera angles with a focus that would have surprised anyone who only knew him before the Siege. Everything was ready. Nothing was supposed to interrupt this debate. Aion reached the podium and spread his arms. “Good evening, Porta Nexus,” he said, his voice carrying smoothly through the hall. “Tonight marks the first debate of this election, and if the last few weeks are any indication, it is bound to be a hectic one. We have two men who need no introduction, but deserve one anyway.” A few members of the crowd laughed. Aion turned slightly toward stage left.

“First, former Chancellor Morvin. I would be remiss not to mention that he served three consecutive terms before beginning his fourth just prior to the Siege. Please welcome him to the stage.”

Morvin entered to a sizable wave of applause and cheers. His campaign had done its work well. Whatever people had thought of him after the Siege, enough of them had been persuaded to remember the years before it instead. He wore his finest white robes, the fabric immaculate under the lights, his pale skin almost glowing as he raised one hand in a gracious wave. He moved as if the stage already belonged to him, reaching his podium just as the applause began to fade. Aion turned toward stage right. “And his opponent, Acting Chancellor Garrick. Former Guild Master, a man with a storied past, and one many have called the Hero of the Siege.”

The crowd roared again, just as loudly, though the sound carried a different weight. Morvin’s applause had been polished and nostalgic. Garrick’s was rougher, more passionate, filled with people who remembered exactly who had stood up when the city was falling apart. Garrick took a slow breath before stepping onto the stage. His clothes were more formal than usual, but modest compared to Morvin’s gleaming robes. He approached his podium with the bearing of a man walking toward a battlefield rather than a celebration.

Aion waited for the noise to settle before looking between them. “Now, both of you have made statements on these issues during your personal campaigns, but for clarity’s sake, I would like to begin with a simple question. Are you both ready?” Morvin smiled and gave a small nod. Garrick did the same, though his expression remained serious. “Excellent.” Aion shifted the papers in front of him and read from the first card. “What are your policies for this city, and this world? How do you intend to make Porta Nexus better for everyone?” The attention moved first to Morvin. He allowed a brief pause before answering, as if giving the city time to remember him. Then he smiled, soft and confident.

“I believe the question itself is somewhat misguided,” Morvin began. “Has this great city suffered? Yes. Has it stumbled? Certainly. But we must not pretend Porta Nexus has always been like this.” He looked out over the crowd, his voice warming as he continued. “When I was Chancellor, this city knew peace. It knew stability. People did not wake each morning wondering what disaster would

strike next. There were no Crossbone devils tearing through our streets. No false Reapers throwing the city into panic. No fear that half our neighbors might be dragged away by the very systems meant to protect them." His expression turned solemn, but only just enough. "Even the Multiversal Empire, at the height of its power, could do little against us." That line drew murmurs of approval.

"My goal is simple," Morvin said, lifting his chin. "I intend to return us to that stability. To the Porta Nexus people remember. The Porta Nexus people deserve." The crowd clapped, receptive to his words regardless of how cleanly they matched the truth. Many of them did remember those years as stable. Not perfect, perhaps, but easier. Safer. Before the Siege. Before terrorist broadcasts. Before lockdowns, deportations, and the constant sense that the ground beneath the city had started to crack. Morvin was selling them a memory, and for a city exhausted by the present, memory had power.

Then attention shifted to Garrick. He did not answer right away. He looked down at the podium, then out toward the crowd, searching for words that would not simply sound like a response to Morvin's. "Porta Nexus has always been a great city," Garrick said at last. "But I believe it would be naive to pretend its current troubles began with one attack, one crisis, or one person's failure."

The room quieted slightly. "The Siege exposed weaknesses that were already there," he continued. "The collapse of Civics exposed failures that had been ignored for years. The recent deportations showed what can happen when broken records, unchecked authority, and fear are allowed to decide who belongs." His gaze moved across the audience, steady and unflinching. "I saw some of this as an outsider to the Port Authority. I have seen far more from within it."

Morvin's expression remained pleasant, but his eyes narrowed slightly. Garrick pressed on. "This city does not need another coat of paint over rotting wood. It does not need a bandage placed over a wound that has already gone septic. Porta Nexus needs reform. Real reform. Accountability where there has been none. Protection for those who have been overlooked. Systems that serve the people, rather than forcing the people to prove they are worth serving." He straightened behind the

podium. “If we want this city to be great, truly great, then we cannot simply return to what came before. We have to build something better, together.”

Across Porta Nexus, people watched with bated breath. The debate played on public screens in plazas, taverns, transit hubs, homes, offices, and even on the stations above the clouds. Some viewers were supposed to be working. Some were posted at guard stations, airship decks, and communication towers, unable to leave their duties but unwilling to ignore the broadcast. Even the more apathetic citizens found themselves watching. The city had been through too much for this to feel like ordinary politics. Whatever happened tonight could shape the next three years, maybe far more.

Special Operations was no different. They sat together in the mess hall, the debate projected from a holographic monitor above the table. None of them were fully relaxed. Cleatus still hung over the room like a second broadcast only they could see. They knew where he was now, or at least where his heartbeat had been traced. The moon. A place they could not simply walk into, fly toward, or storm on righteous instinct. Too many security checks. Too many authorizations. Too many ways for Legislation to know they were coming before they even got close. So they watched and waited. Jax had set the tracking tablet off to the side, angled toward him so he could keep an eye on the signal without pretending to care about the debate. Every now and then, his gaze flicked toward it. The blinking marker remained where it had been. For now.

On the broadcast, Morvin gave a small laugh, soft enough to sound polished but sharp enough to cut. “Oh, please,” he said. “You can stop the facade now.” The crowd stirred. Aion’s eyes narrowed slightly. For a moment, he looked ready to interrupt, but he held back. It was early. Letting candidates show their teeth was part of the job. Morvin turned more fully toward Garrick, his smile still perfectly in place. “We all know who you really are. You speak of accountability, responsibility, reform, and all the right little phrases people like to hear in times of panic. But this is not about reform, is it? This is about inserting Guild influence into the Port Authority.”

Garrick's expression remained controlled, though his hand tightened faintly against the podium. "I stepped down from my position for that very reason," he said. "If I am to serve as Chancellor properly, my focus must be on the Port." "A convenient performance," Morvin replied smoothly. "But I would not know how easily ties to such a shady organization can be severed. I have no such affiliations." A few murmurs moved through the audience. Some skeptical. Some approving. Morvin pressed the opening. "The Guild has operated beside this city for far too long with far too much freedom. Private contracts. Private loyalties. Private power. We should have removed their influence from the Port ages ago." His voice sharpened, though his expression stayed pleasant. "Tell me, Garrick. What good has the Guild truly done for this city?"

Garrick's fist clenched. For a moment, the answer rose in him immediately. The Guild had protected routes before the Port could. It had trained people, moved supplies, guarded travelers, held communities together beyond official reach. His father had carried that duty. His grandfather before him. Caerith carried it now because Garrick trusted him more than most men alive. He wanted to say all of that, but he knew the trap.

If he defended the Guild too strongly, Morvin would have what he wanted. The debate would stop being about Porta Nexus and become about Garrick's loyalties. The city would see a former Guild Master protecting his own. So Garrick breathed through the anger and let his hand relax. "The Guild has done good," he said at last, his voice steady. "And it has made mistakes. Like every institution that lasts long enough to become comfortable with itself." Morvin's smile faltered slightly. Garrick looked out toward the crowd instead of at him. "That is exactly why I stepped away. Not because I am ashamed of where I came from, but because this city deserves a Chancellor whose first obligation is to the people. Not the Guild. Not the Port Authority. Not the merchants. Not any one division or family."

His gaze returned to Morvin. "And if your argument is that old ties make a man unfit to lead, then perhaps we should ask what ties allowed the city to rot quietly for three terms while everyone was

told things were fine." The room shifted. Aion leaned forward slightly, sensing the debate sharpen into something real. At the table in Special Operations, Alister gave a faint, unwilling smirk. "Not bad." Darla did not smile, but her ears lifted a little. "If he had listened to me in the first place the siege never would have happened." Jax Mumbled to himself.

The debate continued, but it was beginning to circle itself. Morvin seemed less interested in offering solutions than in chipping away at Garrick's character, while Garrick spent most of his time defending himself without sinking into the same kind of rhetoric. The crowd could feel it too. The energy had shifted from debate to argument, and even Aion's patience had begun to wear thin.

When the exchange finally drifted too far from the question at hand, Aion stepped in.

"I must remind both candidates why we are here," he said, his voice still polished but firmer than before. "It is time we move on to the next topic, and I suspect it is the one many viewers have been waiting for." The display behind him shifted. Images of the ruined City Hall appeared first, followed by archived shots of Civics offices, missing-record notices, and public protests.

"Whether you clamor for the past or strive toward a brighter future, there is no denying this much: Civics left a wound in this city, and that wound cannot be ignored." Aion turned back toward the candidates. "So, Former Chancellor Morvin, Acting Chancellor Garrick, what would you do to fix it?"

Morvin laughed lightly, as if he had been waiting for the question. "I'm glad you asked." Garrick's eyes narrowed slightly. "I have already been speaking with some of my old colleagues on this matter," Morvin continued, "and I believe we have arrived at a perfect solution." He paused. For the first time that night, his confidence seemed to catch on something. Not enough for the crowd to notice immediately, but enough for Garrick to see it.

"It is, well…" Morvin gave a small, practiced chuckle. "The technical jargon is hardly everyman-friendly, now is it? Rather than bury the audience in details, I would like to welcome

someone who can explain it properly." Aion raised an eyebrow but did not interrupt. Morvin gestured toward the side of the stage. "Please welcome Aurelius Helix, CEO of Helix Corporation. He and I have discussed the matter at length, and together, we have developed what I believe to be the future of civic administration." Applause rose from part of the audience as a man in a fine white suit walked onto the stage. He moved with the relaxed confidence of someone used to entering rooms that immediately adjusted around him. Instead of stopping near Morvin's podium, he walked straight to the center, positioning himself almost directly in front of Aion as if the stage had always been meant for him. Aion's smile stayed in place, but his eyes did not.

"Thank you, thank you," Aurelius said, lifting both hands with a bright, expensive smile. "I'll keep this simple. Many of you know Helix Corporation. In fact, some of you are probably using our technology right now without even realizing it." That drew a few uneasy laughs. "When my good friend Morvin told me what happened to Civics, I was heartbroken. Truly. A city like Porta Nexus cannot function when its people are trapped in lines, lost in paperwork, or left waiting for records that may never come." His blue eyes caught the stage lights, seeming almost to glow. "So naturally, the boys down in the lab and I got to work." He turned and motioned toward the side of the stage.

A man in an orange jumpsuit wheeled out a sleek machine and positioned it beside him. It was tall, polished, and far too clean, with a glowing interface set into its front and a narrow slot beneath it.

Aurelous placed a hand on its side like he was introducing a beloved child. "And we came up with this." The display behind him shifted to show the Helix Corporation logo beside a mockup of the machine. "I present to you the future of registration. A new civic registry system, quick, simple, and accessible. No more endless lines. No more waiting months for confirmation. No more forms disappearing into dusty offices." He tapped the interface, and it lit up at his touch. "You input your information, the system processes it in seconds, and if you are approved, your identification prints on the spot. If you are rejected, the system will tell you exactly why."

The crowd murmured. Some sounded impressed, others uncertain, but the longer Aurelius spoke, the more the room began to shift in his favor. His smile widened as he felt it happen. “Civics failed because it was slow, outdated, and too dependent on fragile hands,” he said. “Helix Corporation can give Porta Nexus something better. Something efficient. Something modern. Something that will never lose half a city in a filing cabinet again.” Garrick’s expression hardened. Morvin, meanwhile, smiled like salvation itself had just been wheeled onto the stage. Aurelius gave the machine one final pat, then turned back to the audience with a polished bow. “And that is all I have for you today. Thank you for choosing Helix Corporation.” He left the stage without another word. The applause followed him, growing more enthusiastic than before. To many in the crowd, the answer seemed obvious. Civics had failed because it was old and slow. Helix Corporation had arrived with something new and fast. After months of fear, missing records, and bureaucratic collapse, “simple” had a power all its own.

Now every eye turned to Garrick. He stood quietly for a moment, not because he had no answer, but because the shape of the trap was almost absurd. Morvin had spent half the debate warning people about Garrick’s ties to the Guild, only to invite the head of a megacorporation onto the stage and let him sell the city a private registry system. Garrick rubbed a hand over his beard, gathering his thoughts. “The issue with Civics is not simple,” he said at last. “And I would be wary of anyone who tries to make it sound simple.” Morvin’s smile thinned. Garrick continued, “I have worked with registration systems before. The Guild maintains one of its own, refined over hundreds of years. It is not perfect, but it was built to function across worlds, species, languages, identities, and legal structures that do not always fit neatly into one box.”

He glanced briefly toward the machine before looking back at the crowd. “Technology like Mister Helix’s may be useful in the short term. I will not deny that. A faster process could help. A more accessible system could help. But a machine cannot become the heart of Civics, and it certainly cannot replace trust.” The crowd quieted. “Systems like that are dangerous when treated as answers instead of

tools," Garrick said. "They store enormous amounts of personal information. Names, addresses, family records, identification histories, financial data, legal status. All of it gathered in one place, all of it dependent on whoever controls the servers, the console, and the rules written into the machine." He explained. Jax, gave a faint nod despite himself.

Garrick's voice sharpened. "If someone gains access, that information can be stolen, altered, sold, or erased. Then you do not simply have a faster Civics. You have forged identities, false rejections, manufactured approvals, stolen records, and citizens who cannot prove who they are because a machine decided otherwise." A few members of the crowd began murmuring again, but this time less comfortably. "And there is another matter," Garrick said, his gaze shifting toward Morvin. "We have spent part of this debate discussing outside influence. Whether the Guild has too much history with the Port. Whether old ties can compromise public duty. Yet Former Chancellor Morvin's solution to the collapse of a public division is to invite a megacorporation to manage the identities of our citizens." Morvin's expression tightened. Garrick did not raise his voice. He did not need to. "If Civics failed because it stopped serving the people, then handing its future to private interests is not reform. It is surrender."

Morvin visibly frowned. For the first time that night, he looked like he might actually flounder. His mouth opened slightly, then closed again as he searched for a clean response and found nothing waiting for him. At Special Operations Headquarters, the reaction was immediate. Bram let out a warm laugh as he moved around the table, pouring tea for anyone who wanted it. "He sure turned that back around on him." Even Alister looked pleased, though he tried very hard to make it seem like detached political appreciation rather than genuine satisfaction. Darla's expression softened with cautious approval. Fiora grinned like she understood all of it, though there was a strong chance she had only followed the part where Morvin looked stupid.

Jax smiled too. That was the rarest reaction in the room, and it did not last long. His eyes drifted

back to the tracking tablet beside him. The faint smile vanished. He set his cup down without drinking from it and picked up the device, leaning closer as the signal shifted across the display. “Everyone…” he said. The room quieted at once. Jax’s expression tightened. “Cleatus.” The debate faded from their attention like someone had lowered the volume on the world. Darla stood first, her ears lifting. “What’s happening?” “He’s moving,” Jax said, fingers flying across the tablet as he adjusted the display. “Or someone is moving him. The signal just left the moon.”

Bram’s smile disappeared completely. Fiora leaned over the table, all traces of playfulness gone. Alister was already pushing himself to his feet. “Then we move too,” he said. “Wherever they’re landing, we need to be there. Even if we cannot stop them yet, we can identify who is transporting him, where they take him, and how they operate.” Darla did not hesitate. “Agreed.” Bram set the teapot down. “Dinner can wait.” Fiora was already halfway to the door. “Finally.” Jax grabbed his tools and the tracker, moving faster than any of them had seen in days. Behind them, the debate continued on the holographic screen, Morvin still trying to recover from Garrick’s answer. For Special Operations, it no longer mattered. Cleatus was coming back to Porta Nexus.

Chapter 29: New Civics

Special Operations moved out while the debate continued behind them. On the broadcast, Aion gathered his papers and stepped back toward the center podium, his practiced smile returning just in time to guide the evening toward its conclusion. “Alright,” he said, glancing between the candidates. “We are close to time, so we will move on to closing statements.” He turned first toward Morvin. Morvin gave another light laugh, though it lacked some of the confidence it had carried earlier. Garrick’s counterargument had clearly rattled him, and the Helix presentation had not landed as cleanly as he had expected. Still, he lifted his chin and faced the crowd with the confidence of a man who believed volume could cover uncertainty.

“My plan is the only plan that will save this city,” Morvin said. “And it will do so quickly, cleanly, and without burying the people beneath endless reform committees and vague promises.” His gaze shifted toward Garrick. “Voting for a man like him is the same as inviting the Reaper in yourselves. Remember that.” Aion’s expression tightened, but Morvin had already stepped back from the podium. He left the stage without another word, his robes trailing behind him as the crowd reacted in a divided wave of applause, murmurs, and uneasy silence. Garrick took his turn more quickly than before. He did not look pleased. If anything, he looked tired of having to answer spectacle with sincerity. “I had hoped to avoid making this debate personal,” he said. “Clearly, my opponent does not feel the same.” The room settled.

“I will be honest with you. This position was never something I wanted. The Guild was my life. My responsibility. My home.” He paused briefly, then looked out at the audience with a steadiness that made the hall quiet around him. “But after the Siege, after seeing firsthand how many problems this city had ignored for too long, I could not look away. I still cannot.” Morvin was no longer on stage, but the weight of his presence lingered. “Former Chancellor Morvin is not the cause of every problem in Porta Nexus,” Garrick continued. “No one person is. But he is part of the system that allowed those problems to grow while everyone was told things were fine. I will not insult him. I will not dress up fear as leadership. But I will say this plainly: if this city is going to heal, it cannot simply return to the habits that brought us here.” He rested both hands against the podium.

“Porta Nexus needs real change. Not easy change. Not perfect change. But honest change. And if you entrust me with this office, that is what I will work toward.” The applause came slowly at first, then grew stronger. Garrick remained on stage, accepting it with a small nod rather than a victorious smile. Far from the debate hall, Special Operations rushed through the streets. “Jax, where is it going?” Alister asked, already moving faster than he liked to admit he was capable of. Jax kept one hand on the tracker, his eyes fixed on the shifting signal. The more he watched it, the less sense it made. “You are not going to believe this,” he said. Darla glanced toward him sharply.

Back inside the debate hall, Aion waited for the applause to settle before returning to the center of the stage. “And that concludes tonight’s debate,” he began. “Thank you all for coming, and tune in next time for...” Crow flew onto the stage before he could finish. They landed beside him with practiced silence and leaned close, whispering something into his ear. Aion’s smile froze in place.

His eyebrow rose. “They want to what?” he murmured. Crow said something else. Aion glanced toward Garrick, then toward the side entrance, his expression caught between professional curiosity and genuine concern. Finally, he let out a quiet sigh and turned back to the crowd.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, adjusting his posture as if the night had not just been pulled

out from under him, “it appears we have one more item for you before we end this broadcast. I will admit, even I am not entirely sure what we are about to see.” That did not comfort anyone. Aion stepped slightly aside. “Please welcome Lieutenant Marcell Veyran of the Legislative Division.” A new murmur moved through the crowd as Marcell entered from the side of the stage. His white-and-gold uniform marked him immediately, though he did not carry himself with the same polished arrogance as the wardens. If anything, he looked tense. Uncomfortable. Like a man walking into a room while already regretting the words he had been ordered to say.

Aion and Crow moved off to the side, joining Garrick, who remained on stage with visible confusion. Garrick’s eyes narrowed as Marcell reached the center. Whatever this was, he had not been informed, and that alone told him it was not good. Marcell cleared his throat, then glanced down at the microphone. “Is this thing on?” he muttered. The speakers carried the words across the hall, and a faint ripple of awkward laughter moved through the crowd. Marcell closed his eyes for half a second. “Right. Of course.” He straightened, forcing himself into the posture expected of a Legislative officer.

“Legislation has heard the concerns of the people,” he began. “Tonight’s debate has only solidified what many already understand. Civics remains one of the greatest unresolved wounds in this city. While its ultimate direction remains a matter of public and administrative debate, we believe the citizens of Porta Nexus deserve clarity. More importantly, they deserve to know that efforts have already begun.”

Outside the debate hall, Mathias and his men raised their weapons as an aircraft descended into the secured perimeter. Its engines hummed low as it settled onto the landing pad, and every soldier present tensed. The hatch opened. A figure stepped out, flanked by masked officers in brown capelets, black armor, and berets pulled low over glass-eyed masks. “Identify yourselves!” Mathias barked, his weapon trained forward. The figure at the front did not flinch. He stepped into the light, raising a sealed document stamped with the mark of Legislation. Mathias saw the stamp first. Then he saw the man

holding it. His expression shifted. “It can’t be…” he said quietly. “Are you…?” “Yes,” the man answered. His voice was muffled behind the mask, but still steady. “And here is my authority.” Mathias stared at the document for a moment longer, jaw tight. Then, with visible reluctance, he lowered his weapon and stepped aside. His soldiers followed his lead, though none looked pleased about it. A few moments later,

Special Operations arrived at the perimeter. Mathias turned as they approached, confusion sharpening into suspicion. “What is going on in there?” Darla looked past him toward the recently landed aircraft, then back to the lizard. “Will you let us through?” Mathias exhaled through his nose. “Do you also have parchment?” No one answered. For a moment, he held their gaze, weighing the rules against the unease already crawling up his spine. Then he stepped aside. “Go,” he said. “Something does not feel right about this.”

Inside the hall, Marcell paused. His hand lifted to the earpiece hidden beneath his hair, and he listened to a voice no one else could hear. The silence stretched just long enough for the audience to grow restless. Then he nodded. “Without further delay,” Marcell said, though his voice had tightened, “allow me to introduce New Civics. A division prepared to stand in place of the old, regardless of the final administrative structure chosen for it.” The side doors opened. Masked figures marched onto the stage in perfect formation. Their boots struck the floor in unison as they lined up behind Marcell, faceless and rigid beneath the lights. The crowd reacted immediately. Gasps moved through the room, followed by whispers that grew sharper by the second.

“Are those the ones from the deportations?” “They dragged people out of Founders’ Ward.” “What are they doing here?” Marcell heard enough. His jaw tightened, and for a moment he looked like he might falter. Then he forced himself to continue. “And returning from the old Civics Division,” he said, stepping aside, “Captain Cleatus Bellwether.” Nothing happened. The hall went silent. Aion’s smile was gone now. Garrick stared toward the entrance. Crow’s wings shifted slightly, their attention

locked on the stage. At the back of the hall, Special Operations burst through the doors. Darla stopped first, eyes sweeping over the masked men on stage. Alister came in behind her, ears pinned back in alarm. Bram and Fiora followed, both visibly confused by the formation.

Then the sound came. Slow, heavy footsteps echoed from the side of the stage. A man emerged into the light. At first, he barely looked like a man at all. His arms and legs were mechanical, each step deliberate and weighted, the motion too controlled to feel natural. His breathing came harsh and labored through the mask covering the lower half of his face. The rest of his head and neck remained exposed, revealing burned, ruined flesh that the lights made impossible to ignore. He moved slowly, but no one interrupted him. Not the crowd. Not Aion. Not Garrick. Not Special Operations.

Darla stared, unable to reconcile the figure before her with the man she remembered from City Hall. Lazy, friendly, careless Cleatus. The man who had slept at his desk and smiled through work he never seemed to take seriously. The man who had survived when everyone else in Civics had died.

Now he stood on stage beside the masked officers who had taken him. Some in the crowd recognized him too, not personally, perhaps, but enough. A familiar face from City Hall. A man they had seen behind counters, slumped over paperwork, waving lazily from an office chair. The whispers changed. They became uncertain. Uneasy. Cleatus reached the center of the stage. For a moment, only his breathing filled the room. Then he spoke.

“Civics was a failure,” he said, his voice rough and strained beneath the mask. “In every sense of the word. It failed its function. It failed to protect. It failed to process.” His head lowered. “I failed.”

Darla’s ears pulled back. Cleatus lifted his head again. “But I am still alive. And because I am alive, I still have a duty.” His mechanical fingers flexed once at his sides. “I will not let this happen again. I will never falter again. I swear to you, New Civics will serve this city as it was always meant to serve. No more. No less.” When he finished, he turned with the same slow heaviness and began walking back toward the side exit. The masked officers moved after him in formation, surrounding him not quite like

guards and not quite like escorts. Marcell remained still until the last of them had passed, his face controlled but pale beneath the stage lights.

A few people in the crowd began to clap. Then a few more. Some seemed reassured by Cleatus's promise. Others looked horrified but joined in because they did not know what else to do. Most simply sat frozen, caught between sympathy, discomfort, and the terrible sense that they had just watched something important happen without understanding whether it was salvation or warning. At the back of the hall, Special Operations said nothing. Darla could not take her eyes off the stage. Alister's expression had gone cold. Bram looked sick. Fiora, for once, had nothing to say, and on the stage, Garrick stood in silence, staring after Cleatus Bellwether as the applause continued unevenly around him. Cassian watched from his home with a frown. "So this is your counter."

No one seemed to know what to do. For several long seconds after Cleatus disappeared from the stage, the hall remained suspended in uncertainty. A few people clapped, then stopped when others did not join in. Others whispered to one another, searching for an explanation that would make what they had just seen feel normal. Even Aion stood at the edge of the stage without his usual confidence, eyes fixed on the exit Cleatus had taken. For once, the Voice of the Multiverse had nothing ready to say.

Eventually, people began to file out. Slowly at first, then in uneven groups, each person carrying the same confused discomfort with them. Whatever New Civics was, it would be discussed later. Argued over later. Defended or condemned later. For now, no one knew how. Special Operations remained where they were, frozen near the back of the hall. "He didn't seem like he was being held against his will," Darla said quietly. Alister's expression stayed tense. "You don't think…" He hesitated, as if even he disliked where the thought was going. "He asked for this, did he? Crucible refused to operate because it was too early."

"But he was still willing to help him if he waited," Jax said sharply. "That matters." Fiora stared at the empty stage, unusually still. "I think I get it," she said. Everyone turned toward her. She did not

notice at first. Her eyes remained fixed ahead. “He was probably stuck there. In bed. Just sitting with what happened.” Her voice softened in a way that did not sound like her usual self at all. “With his failure. Maybe he would have done anything if someone told him it could make things right.” The others were quiet for a moment, caught off guard by the clarity of it. Bram finally spoke. “So what do we do? Go after him?”

Alister crossed his arms, though the motion looked more defensive than smug. “Obviously. At the very least, we need to know where he is going.” “And we need to ask him ourselves,” Darla added.

No one argued. They followed the tracker through the city without another word. This time, the signal led them somewhere familiar. The remains of City Hall, or what had once been the remains. The site was already halfway rebuilt, surrounded by scaffolding, work lights, cranes, and construction crews moving with practiced urgency. The new structure rising from the rubble looked larger than the old one. More modern. More practical. Sleeker, stronger, and colder in a way that made the ruin beneath it feel less like a tragedy and more like something being overwritten. Cleatus stood where the front entrance would eventually be.

He did not move as they approached. Around him, workers continued rebuilding, though many kept glancing toward him as if they were unsure whether they were looking at a captain, a monument, or a warning. Several masked officers patrolled the perimeter. The moment Special Operations drew close, the masked men turned and raised their rifles. Darla and Alister froze, hands lifting instinctively before the situation could become a fight. Bram’s jaw tightened. Fiora’s hand twitched toward her weapon, but she stopped when Darla shot her a look. They had done nothing, and weapons were already trained on them. “Let them through,” Cleatus said.

He did not turn. He did not raise his voice. The masked officers lowered their rifles at once and returned to their patrols as if nothing had happened. Special Operations walked forward reluctantly. “Cleatus,” Darla said, her voice quieter than she intended. “Is that really you?” “Yes.” He said. Jax’s

attention went immediately to the prosthetics, to the seams where machinery met ruined flesh, to the way the metal moved with small delays and rough corrections. His expression darkened. “That is not clean work,” he said. “It serves its function,” Cleatus answered. Bram stepped closer, his usual warmth strained by concern. “So you asked for this? You were fully willing?”

“Of course.” The answer was too short. Too empty. No one seemed to know how to respond to it. Darla’s expression shifted from sorrow toward anger. “Your wife was terrified. She thought you had been kidnapped.” Cleatus did not answer right away. His gaze drifted past them. “That is how it had to be,” he said at last. “Do not tell her.” Alister’s ears pinned back. “Oh, she will find out. If she has not already.” For the first time, Cleatus sighed. It was heavy, mechanical, and painfully human beneath the mask. “Then so be it.” He faced forward again, still as a statue before the unfinished entrance. He said nothing more. The message was clear enough. The conversation was over. After a while that just had no choice but to admit defeat and go back home but they would tell his wife. They accomplished their mission but it didn't really feel like it.

When night fell, the construction crews finally went home. One by one, the machines powered down, the voices faded, and the workers disappeared into the streets. The guards left after them, their patrols thinning until even the masked officers were gone. Cleatus remained. He stood in front of the unfinished entrance of New Civics, motionless beneath the work lights. He had not moved for hours. Not when the crews packed up. Not when the last transport pulled away. Not when the city around him settled into a quieter rhythm. He simply stood there, breathing through the mask, staring ahead like the rubble and scaffolding had become the only world he was allowed to see.

Then footsteps echoed down the street. He did not turn, but his breathing changed. It grew heavier. Less controlled. A woman stepped into the light. His wife stopped several paces away, staring at him as if some part of her had still hoped the reports were wrong. Her eyes moved over the mechanical limbs, the ruined skin, the mask, the body that was and was not her husband. The

devastation crossed her face slowly, almost gently at first, before it broke through completely. “It…” Her voice cracked. “It really is you.”

She rushed forward and wrapped her arms around him. Cleatus did not resist. He did not return the embrace either. He did not so much as move. Eleanor held him anyway, crying into his chest as her fingers trembled against the edges of his ruined body. She touched the metal arms, the scorched skin near his neck, the places where flesh and machinery met too harshly. It was like she was trying to prove he was real and failing with every new detail. Finally, she looked up at him. “Why?” she asked. “Why would you do this?” His head lowered slightly. For a moment, no answer came. “Eleanor, I…” He stopped himself.

The silence that followed was worse than any explanation. Her grip tightened. “Why won’t you speak to me?” His voice came low and rough through the mask. “How could I?” Eleanor shook her head, tears still falling. “I was so worried when I found out what happened. Then I was so relieved when I heard you survived. And then you vanished. You called me once, sounded like a stranger, and now…” Her voice broke as she looked at him again. “Now this.” Cleatus remained still. “What happened to my Cleatus?” she asked. He did not answer. She hit him lightly in the chest, not hard enough to hurt him, not that she could have. It was grief more than anger, her hand closing against metal and cloth as if she hated both for being there.

“You said we were going to have children,” she said, stumbling over the words now. “You said we were going to grow old together. You said we would retire to Eventide and complain about the weather and pretend we didn’t miss the city.” Her voice trembled, but she forced herself to keep going.

“You said all of that. And we can still do it. We can. I don’t care what happened to you. I don’t care what you look like. We can still have a life.” For the first time, Cleatus moved. Slowly, carefully, as if afraid even tenderness might break something, he raised his mechanical hands and placed them against her back.

Then one hand moved higher, awkwardly but gently, brushing through her hair with a motion that belonged to the man he had been. “I’m sorry,” he said. Every word sounded painful. “I can’t.” Eleanor stared up at him. For a moment, she looked like she had not understood. Then the words reached her. “Why not?” she screamed. Cleatus’s hand stopped in her hair. “I have to protect Civics.” She shook her head, almost laughing in disbelief through her tears. “You always have. That doesn’t mean we can’t...” “No.” His voice cut through hers, rough and final. “If I had done my job properly, they would still be alive.” Eleanor’s expression broke. “That is not true.”

“It is.” He said. “No, it isn’t,” she snapped, grabbing at him again as if she could force the thought out of him by holding on tightly enough. “That evil man did this. The attack did this. You were hurt too. You almost died.” Cleatus looked down at her, and for the first time, something like anger moved behind his eyes. Not at her. Never at her. At himself. “You’re wrong.” The words landed coldly. Eleanor froze. Cleatus lowered his arms and gently, deliberately, released her. The absence of his touch seemed to hurt more than the metal ever had. “I will stay here,” he said. “You should move on.” Her eyes widened. “Don’t say that.” “I was never good enough for you anyway.” That one did it.

The grief on her face twisted into fury. She let go of him, stepping back as if he had struck her. “I hate you,” she said, though the words shook too badly to sound true. Cleatus did not answer. Eleanor wiped at her face with the heel of her hand, still crying, still furious, still refusing to surrender even as he tried to make her. “I’ll come back tomorrow,” she said. “And the next day. And the day after that. I don’t care how long you stand here pretending you’re already dead.” His breathing hitched behind the mask. “I will never give up on you,” she said. Then she turned and ran, her footsteps fading into the dark street. Cleatus remained where he was. For a long while, he did not move. He simply stood beneath the cold work lights, facing the unfinished doors of New Civics while the city slept around him. Then, slowly, his head lowered. Tears slipped down what remained of his face, disappearing beneath the edge of the mask. “Please,” he whispered, too softly for anyone but the empty street to

hear. “My dear Eleanor…” His mechanical fingers curled at his sides. “Forget about me.”

Chapter 30: A Shell of a Man

Mathias walked through the dark streets of the crime sector out of uniform, his posture stiff beneath a plain coat that did little to hide the soldier underneath. A group of lizard men followed behind him, their footsteps echoing through alleys most citizens avoided even in daylight. At first, they seemed confident. They trusted him, or at least they trusted his name. Mathias had earned that much. Among their kind, his word still carried weight. But the farther he led them from the main streets, the more that confidence began to thin. The buildings grew older. The lamps became fewer. The air turned damp and stale as they descended into one of the forgotten levels beneath the city. One of the men glanced around uneasily. “How much farther?” Mathias did not look back. “Not far.”

That was all he could make himself say. Eventually, he led them to the same buried warehouse Gram had entered days before. Viktor Scathe was waiting outside, as if he had known exactly when they would arrive. Calva stood near him, arms folded, watching the approaching group with sharper suspicion than before. One of her hands rested close to her weapon, not drawn, but ready if this turned into something less useful than promised. Viktor’s smile spread warmly across his face. “Good,” he said. “You brought them.” Mathias said nothing. Viktor turned his attention to the lizard men, his expression softening into something carefully manufactured. “The lizards of this city deserve to be part of this more than anyone. You have bled for Porta Nexus, guarded its walls, carried its wars, and received scraps of respect in return.”

One of the men looked from Viktor to Mathias, disbelief tightening his face. “Mathias… this is the man you spoke of?” His voice lowered. “There has been talk among our kin. About him. About the Marrow Collective.” He looked at Viktor again, uncertain. “Is he truly right?” Mathias frowned. For a moment, he could not speak. Viktor’s eyes shifted toward him. The smile remained on his face, but something behind it hardened. Mathias felt the warning without needing to hear it.

He took a breath and forced himself to face the others. “Of course he is,” Mathias said. The words tasted wrong. He pushed through them anyway. “Think about everything you have gone through. Everything our people have endured while the Port calls on us when it needs strength and forgets us when the fighting is done.” His jaw tightened. “Mister Scathe is… sympathetic to that. He has gathered many who feel the same pain we do. Not only lizards. Others too. People abandoned by the city they served.” The other lizards looked at one another, conflicted. One of them stepped closer. “What about the Port?” he asked. “You still serve them, don’t you? You told us yourself you believed in them. You said they were flawed, but worth protecting.” His eyes searched Mathias’s face. “Did that change?”

Mathias looked at him as if the question had cut straight through his ribs. For one awful second, the truth nearly reached his mouth. Then he saw Viktor’s smile at the edge of his vision. “I’m afraid so,” Mathias said quietly. “The Port is not what I thought it was.” His voice steadied into something colder, more rehearsed. “Soon, I will join you all.” The lizards studied him. Some still looked uncertain. Others looked wounded by the answer, as if Mathias’s disillusionment gave shape to fears they had not wanted to name. Finally, one of them nodded. “If you are vouching for him,” he said, glancing toward Viktor, “then we can at least hear him out.”Viktor’s smile brightened with delight. He stepped aside and opened the warehouse door. “Excellent,” he said. “That is all I ask.” Mathias watched the men file inside one by one. He did not move until the last of them had crossed the threshold. Then he followed, feeling the door close behind him.

Viktor did not lead them deeper into the warehouse for a grand speech beneath banners or maps.

He did not stand at the center of the room and declare the Marrow Collective's purpose like some revolutionary preacher. Instead, he stopped just inside and gestured casually toward the far corner. "Now," he said, "I could explain our plans myself. I could tell you what we intend to change and why people like you belong with us." His smile softened, carefully. "But perhaps testimony would serve better."

He pointed toward a table where Gram sat with several other Nexians. The table had been laid out with surprisingly good food, the kind of meal that should have drawn attention in a place like this. None of them seemed to care about it. They sat with tense shoulders, low voices, and the hardened expressions of people who were still deciding whether anger was enough to hold them together. "I think that group over there would very much like to speak with you," Viktor continued. "Mingle. Break bread. See who we really are." The lizards hesitated. Some looked at Mathias. Others looked toward the Nexians with old suspicion already forming. Still, after a moment, they began to move.

At the table, Gram noticed them approaching. His first reaction was immediate. His brow lifted, and a glare began to take shape before he could stop it. Then his eyes shifted to Viktor, to Mathias, and finally back to the lizards themselves. Whatever old resentment had risen in him, he seemed to think better of it. Slowly, Gram stood. The others at the table watched him, waiting to see what he would do. After a long moment, he reached out his hand. One of the lizards stared at the offered hand, uncertain. Then he took it. Viktor watched the exchange with satisfaction. "Well," he said lightly, turning away, "that takes care of that." He laughed. Mathias had not moved. His eyes lingered on the table, on the men he had brought here, on Gram speaking to them like this was the beginning of something instead of another trap closing around them.

"Come on, Captain, It is time for a little debriefing." Mathias turned toward him slowly. "And your next assignment." Viktor said it lightly, almost mockingly, before leading him deeper into the warehouse. Mathias followed without a word. Calva came with them, her eyes lingering briefly on the

recruits before the door closed behind her. The room beyond was smaller and more private. A simple booth had been set up near the center, surrounded by monitors showing different feeds from inside the warehouse. Every group was separated into its own corner, each faction kept apart just enough to preserve its identity, but close enough that Viktor could pretend they were already becoming one movement.

The moment the door shut, Mathias's demeanor changed. "You have overstepped," he hissed. Viktor sat down with casual ease. Calva settled beside him, and he threw an arm over her shoulder like this was nothing more than a private meeting after a successful party. Mathias stepped closer, a low rumble building in the back of his throat. "How could you make me do that to them?" "I did not make you do anything," Viktor replied. "Besides, do not tell me their grievances are unjustified. You know they are not."

Mathias's fists tightened. "Perhaps," he said. "But this is not the way. It will never be the way. It has already been tried. It has already failed." His voice hardened, old anger mixing with fresh disgust. "You are using my people for your..." "In the end, you brought them here," Viktor cut in. "They agreed to listen. Whether you approve of what happens next is not especially important to me." Mathias looked like he wanted to lunge across the room. Viktor only smiled wider. "Now, for your next mission." he continued, "More?" Mathias stared at him in disbelief. "You think I will do more for you? This was already more than I ever should have done. Leaking a few documents is one thing. Recruitment is another." He growled. Viktor waved a hand as if brushing aside a minor concern. "Relax. I believe I have gotten everything I can from you on that front. Your next task is something closer to home."

Mathias went still. "I want the Military Division's database," Viktor said. "Shift changes, schedules, patrol routes, response patterns, security habits, every little quirk. Even the details that seem useless." He said. Mathias's eyes widened. "You're mad." "Frequently accused." He said. "Even if I

could get that information, there is no way I would hand it over to the likes of you. That is not a favor. That is a security nightmare." Mathias stepped right up to him, towering over Viktor with barely restrained fury. "We are done. No more." "Really now?" Viktor stood and paced toward the corner of the room, utterly unbothered. He looked at one of the monitors for a moment, then spoke with sudden casual brightness.

"Oh, by the way. Did you hear little Priscilla made a new friend?" Mathias stepped back as if struck. Viktor turned, wearing a fake smile so gentle it was almost obscene. "A cat, of all people. What was her name again? Katy, I believe." He chuckled softly. "You do not see that too often these days."

The fight drained from Mathias's face. His head lowered, his fists clenching so tightly his claws nearly cut into his palms. "If you dare hurt her…" he whispered. There was no force behind it. No teeth. Only fear. Calva's expression changed. The amusement she had carried earlier faded, replaced by confusion and something dangerously close to concern as she looked toward Viktor. Viktor crossed back to Mathias and patted the much larger man on the shoulder. "There we are," he said. "I know betraying everyone you have ever known and loved is a big step for you, so I will let you sleep on it for a while." His hand lingered just long enough to feel like ownership. "But do not misunderstand me. I expect compliance."

He reached into his coat and pulled out a small bag of credits, pressing it into Mathias's hand. "Here. Take your little girl out somewhere nice. I hear Carnival Continent is coming back to town soon." Mathias stared down at the bag like it was something rotten. Viktor gave him a casual nudge toward the door. "Go on, Captain. Family time is important." He mocked. Mathias did not answer. He closed his fingers around the credits because refusing them would not change anything, and because dropping them might make Viktor smile wider. Then he left the room. Calva watched him go. Her gaze stayed on the closed door for a moment before shifting back to Viktor, quieter than before.

"Would you really kill a little girl?" she asked. Viktor frowned, almost disappointed by the

question. “He doesn’t need to know that,” he said. His voice was smaller than before. Quieter. Honest in a way he rarely allowed around anyone else. Calva’s expression shifted immediately, relief softening the tension in her face. “Then this is…” Viktor recovered quickly, laughing before she could finish the thought. “Right.” He turned toward the monitors and motioned for her to come closer. A sudden spark of excitement entered the room, sharp enough to cut through the unease he had left behind.

“You have to know who you’re speaking to before you open your mouth,” Viktor said. He gestured toward one of the feeds, where the old Empire remnants gathered near the far wall of another room. A few of them sat around a table playing cards, looking bored, bitter, and ready for something to prove they still mattered. “Tell them to die, and they will, Gladly, if you say it the right way. Appeal to their pride. Their fallen glory. The grand old tragedy of men who think history owes them a second chance.” Viktor said. Calva smiled at that. There was no discomfort in her expression now. If anything, she liked the idea. The Empire had used her for so long that watching Viktor pull the strings of its remnants seemed almost satisfying. A reversal. A little justice dressed in manipulation.

Viktor’s eyes shifted to another monitor. This one showed the newer recruits. Gram sat with the lizards Mathias had brought, and despite the tension that had filled the room earlier, they seemed to be getting along for the moment. Not comfortably, not completely, but enough. They talked over untouched plates of food, and one of the lizards even laughed at something Gram said. “But them?” Viktor continued. “Not a chance. They do not care about the Empire. Most of them probably hate it. They do not care about flags, titles, or dead emperors.” His smile sharpened. “So you speak of revolution. Change. Justice. You tell them they can make the world a better place by burning the old one down.” He laughs. Calva watched the feeds with growing understanding.

“Now I feel silly for doubting you, I understand now.” She said. A smile returned to her face. Viktor looked at her, and for a moment, the performance slipped again. Not into kindness exactly, but into something close to fondness. “You’re the only one who does.” He patted her gently, then turned

away from the monitors. “Now let’s get out of this dump and back to base.” He directed. Calva wasted no time. She walked to the corner of the room and lifted a helmet from a charging frame. The device locked around her head with a series of small mechanical clicks, fitting against her skull like it had been built for no one else. She plugged a cord into the machine beside her, and the room filled with a low hum. Her feet lifted slightly from the ground. Light gathered in her eyes. Then, despite everything, she blushed and reached one hand toward Viktor. He took it without hesitation. The light surged. In a flash, both of them vanished.

Mathias walked through the dark alleys of the crime sector with his head low and his coat pulled tight around him. He felt dirty. The weight in his chest had settled so deeply that every step seemed to press it farther down. Still, he kept walking. No matter how badly he wanted to stop, no matter how much some part of him screamed to turn around, he knew he could not. Not yet. His thoughts drifted back to the academy. To the looks. To the whispers. No one had wanted a lizard in the Port Authority then, not after everything that had happened. Not after the old wounds their people still carried into every room. Most had seen a risk, a brute, a symbol of trouble they did not want near their ranks. Brutus had seen something else. A strong man. A capable man. A man who could believe in the Port and keep it safe.

Mathias’s jaw tightened. Brutus had been a fool to believe in him. This was not his first moral failing, and if Viktor had his way, it would not be his last. A sudden movement snapped him out of the thought. His hand went to the sword at his hip as he turned toward the sound. Nothing waited there. Only a few barrels, knocked over and rolling slightly across the uneven stone. Whoever had made the sound was already gone. Mathias continued walking, but now he was listening. He pretended not to notice. Pretended the alley had settled back into ordinary silence. But his senses sharpened with every step. He listened to the street around him. Smelled the damp stone, the old smoke, the faint traces of movement above. Then he heard it. Footsteps. Light ones.

He angled his head slightly, just enough to catch a better view without giving himself away. Brown boots on the rooftop. Mathias sighed. He knew what that meant. He was being followed. Worse, whoever it was knew how to follow someone properly. This was not some common thug hoping to rob him. Without warning, he kicked a loose stone up from the ground and hurled it toward the rooftop with brutal force. It struck the edge hard enough to break the masonry apart. The figure above barely had time to react, springing away as the roofline cracked beneath them. They kicked off the wall, twisted in the air, and landed safely in the alley just out of reach.

Elaina straightened, sword already half-drawn. Mathias raised an eyebrow, though the confusion on his face did not quite hide the dread beneath it. “The Captain of Internal Investigations,” he said. “Why would you be tailing me?” Elaina drew her blade fully and pointed it at him. “I have been onto you from the start.” She said. Mathias said nothing. “I saw you meeting with that man,” she continued, her voice cold but strained. “I know better than most who Viktor Scathe is.” She said. Cassian had shared the recording with her and the rest of Internal Investigations: Viktor speaking with the gangs, turning rivals into pieces on his board, smiling his way through the city’s wounds. He had not ordered them to move on Viktor directly. Not yet. Only to watch. To report anything they saw.

Elaina had done that. At first. Then she had seen Mathias with him. Seen the way Viktor spoke to him. Seen the tension in Mathias’s shoulders and the way he moved like a man walking with a blade pressed to his back. She had not understood the whole shape of it, but she had understood enough to follow. Now she stood in front of him, outrage threatening to break through her composure. “You tell me,” she said. “How could you, of all people, work with them? How could you send more of your own kind into that man’s hands?” Her grip tightened around her sword. “Have you not suffered enough? Or was all that pride, all that talk of duty, just theater?”

Mathias looked at her for a long moment. Then he sighed. It was not frustration. Not exactly. It sounded more like a man hearing the last door close. “No,” he said quietly. “But I suspect we are far

past the time for talking." He drew his sword. Elaina's eyes narrowed. Mathias struck first, closing the distance with terrifying speed. His blade came down hard enough that Elaina had to brace both hands against her own weapon to catch it. "I cannot let you report this," he growled. Elaina shoved back, boots scraping against the stone as she forced space between them. "Then make me understand."

Mathias's expression twisted. "I can't." Then he attacked again.

Chapter 31: Dual Loyalties

Another day settled over Special Operations Headquarters, and things had mostly returned to something resembling normal. Jax had finally taken a break from the prehistoric van to focus on the Marrow drive instead, though judging by the sounds coming from his workshop, that was not going much better. He sat hunched over his desk, typing commands into a connected terminal while the strange device pulsed beside him. Lines of code flickered across the screen, only to vanish beneath a cascade of red skulls, shrieking alarms, and something that sounded disturbingly like recorded laughter. Jax stared at the screen for a long moment, slowly removed his glasses, rubbed the bridge of his nose, and put them back on. “Whoever designed you,” he muttered, “was not joking.”

The noise drew Fiora almost immediately. She poked her head through the workshop doorway, eyes bright with interest. “Are you playing video games? What is it? Slam Sisters? I wanna play too!” Jax did not even turn around at first. “No. It is not a game.” “Looks like a game,” she said, leaning farther inside. “It has skulls and laughing.” “It is the drive you found,” he said, his patience already thinning. “I have been trying to access its contents for a while, but every program I feed into it gets rejected, mocked, or threatened.” Fiora tilted her head, genuinely puzzled. “Oh. So it’s a racing game? I don’t remember finding one of those.” Jax finally turned to stare at her, looking her up and down with the exhausted expression of a man trying to determine whether the universe had personally insulted him. Then he pressed a hand over his face. “Of course. Of course you don’t. Out. I’m busy.”

He stood and started pushing her back toward the door, but Fiora planted her feet and grabbed the edge of his desk with both hands. “Wait, wait! I’m sorry, okay? I came because I wanted to ask about that other thing.” Jax stopped pushing, though his expression somehow became even less welcoming. “What other thing?” Fiora smiled too brightly. Jax’s eyes narrowed. “Fenleigh. You mean the weapon.” Her smile became brighter still. He sighed so deeply it sounded like something leaving his soul. “I know you claim to have memory issues, but you ought to know there are proper channels for new weapon designs. They need to be approved, reviewed, tested, and preferably not created from whatever fever dream you put on that paper.” Fiora pouted immediately. “You already said you would.” “That was before you gave me the sheet you called a blueprint.”

Fiora straightened, trying to summon every ounce of authority she possessed. “Well, as your superior officer, I order you to...” Jax’s glare cut through the sentence before it could become dangerous. She deflated a little, though not enough to actually retreat. “…consider it?” “No.” he asked. “Please?” “No.” Jax stared at her for several seconds, then looked back toward his desk as if hoping the Marrow drive might explode and save him from the conversation. Unfortunately, it only blinked at him. Finally, he sighed. “I suppose it is technically within my duties to evaluate equipment proposals, and I may have tested a few prototype concepts after you asked.” Fiora’s eyes widened with immediate victory. “That does not mean I ever intended to give you anything,” he added quickly, but it was too late. “Thank you!” she blurted out. “I said that does not mean...” “You’re the best.” She said. “I am not.” He grumbled.

Jax pointed at the door. “Leave.” Fiora released the desk, practically bouncing backward. “Why don't you go bother Bram or something.” He sugested. She stopped in the doorway, suddenly smug. “Oh you’re right. We are basically lovers now, you know.” Jax went very still. “I did not know that, and I regret learning it.” Fiora closed her eyes with absolute confidence. “He called me by my first name the other day, so things are progressing rapidly.” She said with excitement. “I could not give less of a

damn who you fornicate with," Jax said, shoving her the rest of the way out of the workshop. "That means you support us?" she asked, just before he shut and locked the door.

Fiora shrugged it off and skipped down the hall, her mood already recovering as she went to find Bram. She found him at the far end of the building, already preparing lunch with the comfortable focus of someone who understood knives better when they were used for vegetables. He glanced up as she approached and smiled. "Oh, heya, Fenleigh. What's up? Feels like it's been a while since just the two of us were together." Fiora froze. Whatever confidence she had managed to rebuild shattered instantly. Her head lowered, her shoulders drooped, and without another word she slowly turned away. "I'm gonna go cry in my room," she said, walking back the way she came like a condemned prisoner. Bram tilted his head, completely lost. "Okay, but lunch will be ready in thirty minutes, so don't wait too long!" he called after her.

She went upstairs, passing Darla and Alister in the hall while they were in the middle of arguing about something neither of them looked ready to forgive. Both of them stopped when they saw Fiora moving past them with the energy of a deflated parade balloon. Darla's ears lifted with concern. "Should we…" she started, but Alister folded his arms and looked away. "She's just being Fenleigh. Leave her be." Darla did not look fully convinced, but Fiora had already reached her room and closed the door behind her.

The room was small but serviceable, not exactly luxurious, but still a step up from what she had before the remodel. A bed, a desk, a little storage, a few personal things scattered around in a way that suggested she had tried to decorate and then gotten distracted halfway through. Fiora sat on the edge of the bed and stared down at the floor, her earlier bravado nowhere to be found. "I'm such an idiot," she muttered to herself. "Oh, don't sell yourself short, Fera. I think you're doing real swell." The voice came from under the desk. Fiora moved instantly. The knife was in her hand before she had fully stood, her body reacting faster than thought. Scratch popped out from beneath the desk with both hands

raised, grinning like a man who had not just chosen the worst possible hiding place in the entire building. “Relax, it’s just me.” He glanced around the room with mild interest. “Nice digs. Well, nicer than some of the places I’ve shacked up.”

Fiora’s face hardened at once. The embarrassment vanished, replaced by something cold and far more dangerous. “What are you doing here? Of all the places, this is the worst.” She asked. “What, afraid someone will hear us?” Scratch asked, stepping out from under the desk and brushing dust from his sleeve. Her eyes darted toward the door before snapping back to him. “You need to leave.” She ordered. “ I’m only here for a favor.” That was enough to break whatever restraint she had left. Fiora’s eyes went wide with frustration, her grip tightening around the knife. “A favor? How many more favors do I have to do?” Scratch lifted his hands again, still smiling. “Oh, just one more.” Fiora let out a sharp, disbelieving laugh. “That’s what you said last time with those documents. And the time before that. And the time before that.” Her voice rose, anger and fear tangling together. “When is the real last one?”

Scratch’s smile softened, but not kindly. “I’m not asking you to move mountains, promise.” He glanced toward the door, then back to her. “Just let me stay here for a bit.” Fiora stared at him like he had lost his mind. “Here? In Special Operations Headquarters? In my room?” She hissed. “Only for a little while.” Her expression did not change. “Get out.” Scratch’s grin faded by a fraction. Not gone, but thinner now, the easy act slipping enough to show the hook beneath it. “Fera…”

Downstairs, the front doors of Special Operations Headquarters burst open hard enough to rattle the frame. Cassian strode inside with a look on his face none of them were used to seeing from him. Not smug. Not amused. Not even faintly theatrical. His expression was sharp, cold, and furious in a way that made the air in the lobby change around him. He crossed the room without slowing, heading straight for the inner halls just as Darla and Alister were coming down the stairs for lunch. Darla stopped immediately. “Cassian? What are you...” “Gather everyone,” he said, not breaking stride.

Alister’s ears twitched at the tone. “What happened?” Cassian stopped just long enough to look

back at them, and whatever Alister had been about to say after that died in his throat. “No questions. Get everyone and prepare.” Then he turned and stormed down the hall toward Jax’s workshop. Darla and Alister watched him go, both momentarily caught off guard by the lack of explanation. Alister recovered first with a sigh, though there was no real laziness in it this time. “I’ll tell Bram. You get the other one.” Darla nodded reluctantly and started back up the stairs toward Fiora’s room, her ears still angled toward the sound of Cassian’s footsteps below.

Inside her room, Fiora was still glaring at Scratch. “Don’t ‘Fera’ me,” she hissed. “We aren’t friends. We have never been friends, and you have no reason to stay here.” Scratch sat on the edge of her bed as if the argument had already become less urgent than his comfort. “Actually, I do.” He glanced toward the door, his confidence thinning for the first time since he had crawled out from under her desk. “The cats are looking for me.” Fiora narrowed her eyes. “Cynthia? Aren’t you two best buddies or whatever?” Scratch shrugged, trying for casual and not quite reaching it. “That’s just how it goes in the dirt. Friends one day, enemies the next. It’ll blow over. Just let me stay here a couple days and...” A knock sounded at the door. Both of them froze. “Fiora?” Darla asked from the hall. “Are you talking to someone?”

Fiora moved on pure panic. She lunged across the room and clamped one hand over Scratch’s mouth before he could make the situation impossibly worse. His eyes went wide. Hers did too. For one awful second, neither of them breathed. “No,” Fiora called back, her voice pitching higher than usual. “Um. I was just… talking to myself. Because I’m very thoughtful.” There was a pause on the other side of the door. Fiora could practically feel Darla’s suspicion through the wood. “Cassian is here,” Darla said at last. “He wants all of us ready for something. Finish whatever you are doing and come downstairs.” Fiora swallowed. “Yep. Got it. Coming right down.”

Darla did not answer immediately. She had definitely heard something, even if she had not heard enough to know what. Under normal circumstances, she might have pressed the issue. Under

normal circumstances, Fiora's door, her strange voice, and the possibility that someone else was in the room would have been more than enough to make Darla start asking questions. But Cassian had arrived looking genuinely alarmed, and that mattered more for the moment. So Darla stepped away, filing the sound away with all the other things about Fiora that did not quite fit. Only when her footsteps faded did Fiora release Scratch. Both of them took a breath at the same time.

Scratch leaned back on the bed, already recovering his grin. "See? It all worked out." Fiora stared at him like she wanted to test several knife angles at once. "That was not working out. That was nearly getting caught by my superior officer in the middle of hiding a wanted criminal in my room." She pointed the knife at him. "You are staying in this room. You do not leave. You do not open the door. You do not touch my things. You do not look at my things. You do not breathe in a suspicious way." He slowly lay back across the bed like he had already decided to ignore the threat in spirit, if not in practice. "Fine. Now go on your noble mission or whatever it is your little division does." Fiora slammed the door in anger joining the others.

Cassian reached Jax's workshop and opened the door without knocking. Jax looked up from the Marrow drive immediately, anger and confusion flashing across his face as he prepared to tell Cassian exactly what he thought of people entering his workspace uninvited. He never got the chance. Cassian spoke first, and the words cut through everything else. "Elaina is missing." He said. Jax went still. Whatever insult had been forming died before it reached his mouth. "Damn it," he said, already standing. "Where?"

"She told me she was going to the crime sector," Cassian said, his gaze lowering despite himself. That changed Jax's demeanor all over again. He crossed the room in two strides, grabbed Cassian by the collar, and shoved him back against the nearest workbench hard enough to rattle the tools. "And you let her go alone?" he demanded, getting right in his face. For a second, the anger in Cassian's expression flared as if he might shove him off. Then it faltered, giving way to something

worse. Guilt.

“Of course not,” I told her to wait. She went anyway.” Cassian said, quieter now. “So that’s what this is about,” Alister said from the doorway. Jax did not let go right away. Cassian looked toward the hall and found Alister standing there with Darla, Bram, and Fiora beginning to gather behind him. Alister’s eyes narrowed, taking in Cassian’s expression, Jax’s grip, and the fact that this had clearly not gone through official channels. “A captain disappearing is a serious matter,” he said. “Serious enough to bring everyone in. But judging by your tone, you have not reported it.” He said. Cassian’s eyes snapped to him. “Don’t you dare.” Alister’s ears shifted slightly at the force in his voice.

Cassian pulled himself free from Jax’s grip and pointed a finger at Alister, the mask of control cracking more than any of them had ever seen. “I have my reasons for avoiding that for now. If it comes down to it, I will report it. If you fail the mission I am about to give you, I absolutely will. I will tear down the entire crime sector brick by brick if I have to, even if it costs me everything.” The hallway went quiet. Alister stared at him, thrown off by the sudden bluster. Cassian had threatened people before. He had maneuvered, mocked, pressured, and smiled through entire disasters. This was different. This was not strategy talking. This was fear wearing authority’s coat.

“Just who is Elaina to you?” Alister asked. Jax looked down. He clearly knew the answer and just as clearly had no intention of saying it first. Cassian stood there for a moment, breathing hard through his nose. Then the anger drained from him in one long exhale. When he spoke again, his voice had lost its edge. “She’s my sister.” He admited. Darla, Bram, and Fiora all reacted at once. “What?”

Alister did not say it, but his ears rose sharply enough to count. Darla stepped closer, genuinely baffled. “Why the different last names? Why would you hide the family you come from?” Cassian gave a humorless laugh, though there was no strength in it. “Of course you would ask that.” Darla frowned. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means you are a Dogenridge,” Cassian said. “Your name is armor. Mine is a target.” He

looked away, jaw tight. “You do not know what it is like being Administrator of Internal Investigations. If people knew I had anyone I cared about, if they knew I was not just some smug bastard who existed to make their lives miserable, if they knew there was someone they could use to reach me…” He stopped, then shook his head. “Do I really need to finish?” Darla’s expression softened, though not completely. She understood duty. She understood family. Hiding family was harder for her to comprehend, but the fear beneath it was not.

Alister crossed his arms. “Then why would she join you as captain?” “Because she is stubborn. Always had been.” Jax spoke up. Everyone looked toward him. Jax kept his eyes on the floor for a moment before continuing. “The name change was the compromise. It protected her from some of his enemies, and in a way, it helped her step out of his shadow too.” “So that's why you don't want to report it yet. Your afraid it will do more harm to her then good, and make Internal Investigations look weak.” Alister’s gaze shifted back to Cassian as the pieces settled into place. “So that is why you have not reported it yet. You are afraid making this official will do more harm to her than good. It puts a target on her, makes Internal Investigations look vulnerable, and gives anyone who took her time to realize exactly what they have.”

Cassian’s mouth tightened. He clearly hated hearing it said aloud, but after a moment he nodded. “Yes.” The word came out smaller than any of them were used to hearing from him. He looked between them, and for once there was no smugness, no performance, no careful little smile hiding what he wanted. Only fear, barely held behind authority. “My lieutenant is already searching,” he said. “But I need more eyes. More routes. More contacts than I can move without making noise. Use whatever you have to. Whatever favors you can call in.” His voice shook despite his best effort to stop it. “Please. Save my sister.” Darla’s expression softened, then steadied into something firm. “Of course we will, Cassian.” Alister let the silence hold for only a second before adding, “Even though you are a smug asshole.” Cassian blinked at him.

Bram looked horrified for half a breath, but Darla's ears twitched with the faintest sign of relief. Alister shrugged. "What? I thought we were acknowledging difficult truths." For the first time since he arrived, Cassian almost smiled. It did not last, but it was enough to put some shape back into him.

"Find her," he said. "We will," Darla replied.

Chapter 32: Back to the Crime Sector

Alister stood alone atop a rooftop overlooking the Porcelli casino, staring down at the street below with the hollow resignation. He was dressed head to toe in black, with scraps of cloth, straps, and poorly painted anarchy symbols thrown together into something that was somehow both effective and deeply insulting. The mask hung in one hand. He looked at it for a long moment and sighed. “I can’t believe I’m doing this again.” He should have been with the others. Investigation was his specialty. Reading people, catching contradictions, walking into a room and knowing where everyone had hidden their knives, those were his talents. Instead, he was standing on a roof in a half-mad costume because his last-minute disguise had somehow managed to offend exactly the right people.

The Porcelli hated Anarchy Man with a passion that bordered on personal mythology now, which made him the undeniably perfect distraction while the others slipped into the sector more quietly. Alister hated that logic. He hated even more that it was correct. With another sigh, he pulled the mask over his face, stepped onto the edge of the roof, and dropped. He landed neatly on the banister outside the Porcelli casino, coat flaring around him in a way that would have looked impressive if he had not immediately had to steady himself with one hand. Several pig guards below looked up at once. Alister threw his arms wide. “Ha! Ha! Ha!” he declared, forcing his voice into the most theatrical nonsense he could manage. “I have returned! It is I, Anarchy Man!”

For half a second, there was silence. Then one of the guards pointed at him in horror. “It’s that

crazy lunatic! Hurry, tell the boss!" The other guard turned and bolted inside. Alister struck a dramatic pose on the banister, then flicked several of Jax's little distraction grenades out from beneath his coat. They scattered across the street, bounced under carts, rolled beside support beams, and detonated in quick succession. The blasts were not meant to kill. Jax had made that very clear. They were loud, obnoxious, smoky, and precise enough to bring down a few already half-dead structures that probably should have been condemned years ago.

Alister watched a rotten balcony collapse into a cloud of dust and splintered wood. "Good thats step one." he muttered. Then he dropped from the banister, pulled out the multi-tool from before, and snapped it into the shape of a sword. The remaining guard lunged for him, but Alister moved first, striking the weapon from the man's hand and dropping him with the flat of the blade. More witnesses had already gathered. Enough to spread the story. Enough to make sure the right ears heard it. Alister turned, pointed dramatically down the street, and ran. Inside the casino, the guard who had fled burst into the private room where the Don sat in the middle of a card game. He was red-faced, breathless, and clearly terrified of being the one to deliver the news. "Boss," he gasped. "It's… he's back." The Don's eyes hardened at once. The cards in his hand slowly bent beneath his fingers. "You mean…?" The guard swallowed. "Yes. Anarchy Man."

For a moment, no one in the room moved. Then the Don stood so abruptly that his chair scraped across the floor. His fist slammed into the wall hard enough to crack the plaster. In reality, Alister had not done much the first time, maybe destroyed a door or two, humiliated several guards, and escaped in a costume no self-respecting criminal should have remembered. But to the Don, that was exactly the problem. Anarchy Man was an insult. Not merely to his property, but to the idea that his family could be mocked and survive it without response. "Send everyone," the Don growled. "And I mean everyone. Velvet Tusks included. Bring him back alive if possible." His eyes narrowed. "But if things happen, things happen. Better dead than nothing."

Portly stepped into the room, drawn by the shouting and the crack in the wall. He looked from the Don to the breathless guard, then sighed as if he already knew the answer to the question he was about to ask. “You sure that’s wise, boss?” The Don turned on him with a glare. “I will not let some low-life vigilante make a fool of this family. Now get out there.” Portly held his gaze for half a second, then gave up and started down the stairs. “Right,” he muttered.

On the other side of the crime sector, the rest of Special Operations moved through the streets with far less spectacle. They were out of uniform, though not truly disguised. There had not been time for anything elaborate, and subtlety had its limits when the group included Bram. Instead, they wore practical coats without emblems, heavy enough to conceal weapons and official gear but plain enough to keep them from immediately announcing themselves as Port Authority. Darla hated every second of it. The absence of her badge felt wrong, like stepping into danger while pretending not to carry the duty that had brought her there. Jax seemed indifferent, or at least too focused to complain. Fiora thought the coats looked cool and had already flipped her collar up twice. Bram somehow made his look too small despite it being the largest one they had found.

This side of the sector felt different from the Porcelli streets. Older. Quieter. Its architecture leaned eastern, with curved rooftops, narrow bridges, carved posts, and faded lanterns strung between upper balconies. It was worn down like everywhere else in the crime sector, but not abandoned to rot in the same way. Someone had tried to preserve its former grandeur. The paint had been touched up where it mattered. Broken tiles had been replaced with mismatched but careful repairs. Even the trash seemed to know better than to collect in the center of the street. Kinryū-kai territory. It may have been diminished, but the neighborhood still remembered discipline.

Jax moved near the front, all sorts of gear strapped across his coat and hanging from belts that looked one bad step away from becoming a mechanical avalanche. He lowered a scouter-like lens over one eye and swept his gaze across the street, scanning walls, rooftops, gutters, and old security fixtures

with growing frustration. “Where do we even begin?” he muttered. There was more panic in his voice than he probably intended. Fiora leaned closer, instantly noticing. “Aw, Jax. You do care.” Jax did not look away from the scanner. “You think me some unfeeling monster? Of course I care.” The bluntness of it caught her off guard just enough to quiet her for half a second. Bram glanced toward him gently. “You two have quite the history, then? You said as much before.” “Of course,” Jax said. His tone closed almost as soon as the words escaped. “But that is over. You have heard everything you need to know already.” Bram accepted the boundary with a small nod, though his expression made it clear he heard more in the refusal than Jax wanted him to.

Fiora rubbed her chin with exaggerated seriousness. “Huh. I kind of thought you and Cassian were the scorned lovers.”

Jax stopped walking and turned toward her very slowly. “Are you mad?” “Fenleigh,” Darla snapped, her patience already thin, “we are on a mission. Elaina could be in serious danger. Now is not the time for jokes.” Bram glanced between them, trying to steer the conversation back before Darla’s glare got any sharper. “We need to find Internal Investigations’ lieutenant first, right?” Darla nodded, though she did not look thrilled by the plan. “Cassian said they would find us.” Her ears angled slightly as she looked down the street, catching sight of a few distant thugs who had already started paying too much attention. “I do not like that part.” She directed the group down a side alley before the watchers could decide whether to follow. They had not gone far when a light clacking sounded from above. Footsteps moved along the rooftop with too much confidence to be accidental. “And found you, we have,” a voice said.

Two figures dropped from the roof and landed neatly in the alley ahead of them. They looked like twins at first glance, one male and one female, both blue-skinned and dressed in brown leather coats suited for quiet fieldwork. One had black hair, the other white. Both wore coverings over their eyes, giving them an eerie, unreadable calm. Fiora pointed at them with immediate excitement. “That

was easy!" Darla stepped forward carefully. "Are one of you Cassian's lieutenant?" "Yes," they said together. Everyone stared. Darla's brow furrowed. "What do you mean, both of you? Each division only gets one lieutenant." The black-haired twin inclined his head. "We are NoxLux. Our minds are linked. Two bodies, one officer." "We finish each other's…" Nox began. "Sandwiches," Lux said. Nox turned toward her. Even with his eyes covered, the confusion was obvious. "Sentences," he corrected with a sigh.

Darla closed her eyes for a moment and rubbed the bridge of her nose. "Of course Cassian has an officer like this." "It is par for the course with him," Jax said. Bram, mercifully, cut through the awkwardness before it could settle in too deeply. "Did you find anything on Ms. Elaina?" Both of them looked down, and that alone answered part of the question. "Afraid not," Nox said. "We searched for obvious signs, but this sector is vast, layered, and deliberately unhelpful." "And they like to cook ramen," Lux added. Nox turned his head slightly toward her again. "That is not relevant." "It smelled good." Darla's expression tightened. "That is not good. The longer we wait, the more danger she could be in. We need to..." A voice interrupted from the mouth of the alley. "We are not welcoming for a reason, Port dogs."

Special Operations turned as a small group stepped into view. The Kinryū-kai had found them. Some wore suits, others simpler street clothes, but every one of them carried the same golden dragon tattoo somewhere visible. Their posture was relaxed in a way that made it clear they were ready for violence if it became necessary. Darla's hand went to her blade. The others shifted with her, weapons not fully drawn but close enough. "We do not have time for this," Darla said, glaring. The man at the front lifted both hands. "Now hold on, sis. We ain't here to fight. At least not yet." Darla did not relax, but her eyes narrowed with confusion. "Then what do you want?"

"The boss wants to talk, And I would not refuse if I were you." " he said. "Mikako Kinryū? Why would she want to speak with us?" Darla asked, unconvinced. Bram looked uncertain, but

thoughtful. “I heard she sometimes worked with the Port. Fostering a better relationship, or something like that.” The man clicked his tongue. The sound carried a hint of irritation, maybe even resentment. “Lady Mikako ain’t around anymore.” That changed the air slightly. Darla studied him more closely. “Then who? And why would we waste time with them?” “Name’s Masa,” the man answered. “Says you’ve met before. At the casino.” Darla’s expression shifted as the memory landed. The casino. The chaos. The man who had not fit neatly into the mess around him. The Kinryū-kai man continued, sounding like he did not fully understand the importance of the message he had been sent to deliver. “He said, ‘I know why you’re here. Come to the manor, and we can talk. I know what you need to know.’”

Darla looked back toward the others. Jax’s scanner still hummed uselessly. Bram’s expression had tightened with concern. Fiora watched the Kinryū-kai with unusual attention, while NoxLux stood side by side in perfect stillness. Darla hated every part of this. But if Masa knew something about Elaina, refusing would waste time they did not have. She lowered her hand from her blade, though not far. “Fine,” she said. “Take us to him, but we will not be pushed around.”

Alister tore through the streets with a veritable army of Porcelli enforcers behind him, their shouts echoing between the old buildings as alarms spread from block to block. Ahead of him, the streets shifted into Vulture territory, where the buildings looked even more ruined and the people seemed to have accepted that rubble was just another kind of furniture. A handful of Iron Vultures lounged among broken walls and collapsed storefronts, watching the chase with immediate amusement. The sight of the Porcelli stampeding after one masked lunatic was apparently the funniest thing any of them had seen all week. Alister glanced ahead, then back at the pigs gaining on him. “This might be a mistake,” he muttered. Then he reached beneath his coat. “But on to stage two.”

He threw several more of Jax’s bombs, aiming carefully enough to damage property and make noise, but not carefully enough to avoid offending the Vultures. The charges bounced through the

rubble and detonated in bursts of smoke, sparks, and plaster dust. A rusted sign collapsed. A stack of scavenged metal crates tipped over. One of the Vultures' improvised tables split neatly in half, sending drinks, cards, and someone's lunch spilling into the street. The laughter died instantly.

For half a second, the Porcelli and the Iron Vultures stood on opposite sides of the street, united only by disbelief. Then the Vultures erupted into furious shouting and joined the chase as if they and the pigs had been lifelong brothers in the sacred cause of murdering Anarchy Man. Bottles, knives, loose bricks, and gunfire flew after him. Alister barely had time to duck, twist, and leap away as a bullet cracked against the wall beside his head. "Wonderful," he said, vaulting over a broken cart. "Cross-faction cooperation. I should get a medal." He spotted a narrow bridge ahead connecting two upper walkways between buildings. It looked load-bearing enough to matter and old enough to collapse without too much encouragement. Alister dashed beneath it, slapped two charges under the supports, and kept running. The bridge came down just after he passed, crashing into the alley with enough force to cut off the main wave of pursuers. Dust filled the street. Several Porcelli and Vultures skidded to a stop on the far side.

"This won't stop us, Anarchy Man!" one of them shouted, already clambering over the wreckage. Half the mob began climbing after him. The rest scattered into side alleys, searching for another way around. Above them, hidden along the rooftops, the cats watched in confusion. They were not Cynthia's undercover street-level people, but higher-ranking observers moving quietly through the district under the protection of Leonidas's strange arrangement with the Porcelli. That connection had granted them a narrow kind of safe passage, though none of them trusted it to last. Still, the hunt for Scratch had become serious enough that the risk no longer mattered.

Kloe crouched near the edge of a roof, eyes narrowed behind the shadows. She had suspected from the first brief encounter that Anarchy Man might be Alister. The posture, the movement, the infuriating theatricality buried under visible regret, all of it had felt familiar. But now, watching the

masked lunatic bomb Vulture territory, insult two gangs at once, and lead half the sector into a riot, doubt crept in. “What is…” she murmured. “Alister would never…” One of the cats beside her glanced over. “What was that, Lieutenant?” Kloe straightened, forcing the thought aside. “Nothing. Fan out. If that weirdo keeps making noise, he may draw out the rat.” The others nodded and scattered across the rooftops.

Below, Alister kept running, leaving destruction and confusion in his wake. He jumped a low wall, rolled across a broken awning, and landed in another street just as a pack of Vultures rounded the corner behind him. For one terrible moment, he laughed to himself beneath the mask. “You know,” he said, ducking under a thrown chain, “being on the other side for once might not be so bad.” For once, he did not have to worry about warrants, jurisdiction, evidence, procedure, or whether Darla would object to his methods. The crime sector had been left to function as its own little kingdom for so long that half the damage he caused probably would not even generate paperwork. He could punish people the Port could never quite touch and call it a distraction.

His smile faded beneath the mask. “What am I thinking? This costume is driving me insane.” he muttered. He turned the next corner and ran straight into an ambush. Portly stood in the middle of the street with a tired expression and practically an army at his back. More enforcers closed in behind Alister, cutting off the route he had just taken. The Porcelli had spread faster than he expected. The Vultures were still shouting somewhere nearby, and a few had already found vantage points along the upper walkways. Alister slowed, then stopped, eyes moving across the closing circle. Portly sighed like he was disappointed in everyone involved. “The buck stops here, kid.”

Alister straightened and forced Anarchy Man’s ridiculous posture back into place. “You cannot stop an idea.” “I’m not trying to stop an idea,” Portly said. “I’m trying to stop an idiot in a mask.” Portly drew his weapon, though he did not look especially proud of the situation. “I’d tell you to surrender, but I think you’re smart enough to know what the Don plans to do if he gets his hands on

you.” Two of the red suits stepped forward beside him, their expressions much less tired and much more eager. Portly gave another sigh. “Get him, boys.”

Chapter 33: Shed Scales

Darla was led down the Kinryū-kai's street toward a large manor that rose above the surrounding buildings like it had been there before the rest of the district knew what it wanted to become. It was huge and grand, but old in a way newer wealth could not imitate. The wood had darkened with age. The stone steps were worn down at the center. Dragon carvings curled around pillars, faded in places but still sharp enough to suggest they had once meant something more than decoration. It may have been one of the oldest buildings in Porta Nexus, or at least one of the few that still remembered being treated like it mattered.

As they were led inside, several of the Kinryū-kai men straightened and bowed with quiet respect. The gesture caught Darla off guard more than any drawn weapon would have. She had expected suspicion, hostility, maybe cold tolerance. Respect was harder to answer. Fiora, of course, answered it anyway. "See? They know how cool we are." she said, grinning. "Shut up before you piss one of them off," Jax hissed. The others said nothing. They knew better.

Inside, the manor felt even larger than it had from the street, but the size only made the

emptiness harder to ignore. Vast rooms opened around them, their polished floors and carved screens preserved with care, yet barely occupied. A few men stood guard where there should have been many. Closed doors lined halls that should have carried voices. Every step echoed a little too clearly. The place did not feel abandoned, but it did feel incomplete, as if half its body had gone missing and the rest refused to admit it. “What happened to…” Darla began. She caught herself before the question finished. The man leading them glanced back just enough to remind her where she was. She was in the middle of a dragon’s den, whether she liked it or not, and careless words could cost them time they did not have. Elaina’s life might depend on Darla holding her tongue.

Instead of leading them deeper into the manor’s grandeur, their guide took them through a side passage into a smaller room that showed far more signs of use. There was a bar along one wall, a low table, several worn chairs, and the faint smell of smoke, liquor, and old wood. Most of the men in the building seemed to have clustered here rather than spread through the manor’s empty halls, which only made the rest of the place feel lonelier by comparison. At the bar sat a balding man, calmly sipping from a glass of scotch as if this were an ordinary afternoon. The moment they entered, his gaze shifted toward them. Darla recognized those hawk-like eyes immediately. The same man from the casino. The one who had seemed to know exactly who she was even through her disguise, even when others had failed to notice.

“Special Operations,” he said, setting his glass down with measured care. “You have come. Please, sit. The bartender will take any request you make.” Fiora brightened and immediately started toward the bar, but Darla kept walking until she stood behind the man, hands at her sides and posture stiff. “Respectfully, this is not a social call, sir. We will stand.” Masa sighed, not offended so much as unsurprising. “That much I know.” He turned slightly on the stool, enough to face her without fully giving up his seat. “But have you forgotten? This is a reunion as well. Our families were two of the original thirteen. It is not often we meet like this anymore.” There was nostalgia in his voice, though it

sounded like nostalgia for an age he had never personally lived.

Darla knew the stories. Her father had told them to her when she was young. The old families. The first powers of Porta Nexus. The promises that had become institutions, and the institutions that had become burdens. But in her eyes, the dragons had long since fallen from grace. Whatever they had been, the Kinryū-kai were criminals now. She knew better than to say that. “That is ancient history,” Darla said, keeping her voice controlled. Masa studied her for a moment, then gave another small sigh. “Right to it, then. Respectable. I expected as much from a Dogenridge.” He lifted his glass again but did not drink. “Very well. We both know why I summoned you.” Darla did not answer. She was not about to reveal how much they knew until she understood what he knew.

Masa seemed to approve of the silence. “A Port captain disappearing in the crime sector helps no one.” Jax’s expression sharpened. “Then you do know why we are here.” “I know enough.”

“Do you know where she is?” Jax asked. His voice cut through the room more sharply than intended, worry pressed beneath every word. Masa looked toward him, then back to Darla. “Unfortunately, no.”

Darla’s patience tightened. “Then why are you wasting our time? You said it yourself.” “Because I know where it began,” Masa replied, unshaken. “And my men are searching as we speak. They will assist you. I have ordered as much.” He motioned toward the corner. One of the Kinryū-kai men standing nearby noticed the gesture and approached at once. He was younger than Masa, though not inexperienced, with the same golden dragon tattoo visible along his neck and one hand resting near the hilt of a short blade.

“This is Ryugi,” Masa said. “He saw part of what happened. He will tell you.” Ryugi bowed once, not deeply, but with enough discipline to make the motion feel formal. Jax stepped forward before anyone else could speak. “Well? On with it, then.” Ryugi’s eyes flicked toward him, then back to Masa. Masa gave the smallest nod. Ryugi took a breath. “It was late. Near the edge of our turf. I heard what sounded like metal crashing down, so I looked into it.” He scratched at the side of his neck,

suddenly looking younger than he had a moment ago. “Even though Big Sis Sakura told me to leave it be. It was not in our territory.” Jax’s patience thinned visibly. “Then where?”

“There is a section of the sector no one likes to touch,” Ryugi said. “It leads down into the city below. The old city. The one built thousands of years ago.” His voice lowered slightly, not out of fear exactly, but out of the instinctive caution people used when speaking of places that had swallowed too many fools. “Some of us call it the Forgotten Depths. None of the gangs claim it. Not the Porcelli, not the Vultures, not us. It is not worth the risk.” Bram’s expression shifted with recognition. “They say King Nexus was laid to rest somewhere deep beneath our feet,” he said quietly.

Jax turned on him. “We did not come here for a damn history lesson, Bram.” His voice cracked slightly around the anger, revealing the fear beneath it. “Where is my...” He stopped himself, jaw tightening. “Where is the captain?” Ryugi swallowed. “When I got closer, I saw two figures fighting. One was a lizard man. Green scales. Large. Powerful. The other was a pink-skinned woman in a Port Authority uniform.” “A lizard?” Darla’s voice went cold at once. The room felt the change in her before she moved. Her ears lowered, her hand tightened near her blade, and something old and ugly flashed behind her eyes before she could bury it. “Who?” she demanded, stepping closer to Ryugi. “Did you recognize him?”

Ryugi backed up a half-step, hands lifting slightly. “No, ma’am. He wore all black. I could not see his face clearly.” Darla did not move away. “But you saw him fighting her.” “Yes.” Ryugi’s gaze dropped. “And the captain was barely holding her own.” Jax went still. Ryugi hurried on, as if speaking faster might keep the anger in the room from turning on him. “I tried to get a better look, but the lizard man swung his sword into the wall I was hiding behind. The whole thing came apart. I remember the impact, then dust, then...” He shook his head. “Next thing I knew, I was waking up under rubble.” Masa watched him carefully from the bar, his expression unreadable. Ryugi lowered his hands. “I ran straight to Big Boss Masa after that. That is all I saw.”

Nox tilted his head slightly. “Green scales. All black. Sword user. Strong enough to collapse cover with a single swing.” Lux’s voice softened. “That narrows it.” “Narrows what?” Fiora asked. Darla looked back with a raised eyebrow, just as confused, though the dread in Jax’s expression suggested he understood more than he wanted to. “Not in mixed company,” Nox said. “Cassian already suspected this,” Lux added. Masa set his glass down with a quiet click. “Now that you have learned what happened, you have no reason to remain here.” His voice grew sterner, losing the old courtesy. “Go. Before it is too late. Before the Port makes this place into a bloodbath.” Darla hesitated. She wanted to press them. Wanted names, explanations, and every piece of truth they were clearly withholding. But Elaina was still missing, and the lead was already moving away from them.

“I will show you where, Big Sis,” Ryugi said, stepping forward before anyone else could argue. He looked toward Masa only briefly, then rushed for the door. They followed him out of the manor without resistance. Every Kinryū-kai member they passed offered a silent bow, not warm, not welcoming, but formal enough that Darla could not simply dismiss it as mockery. Once they were outside again, the emptiness of the place became even harder to ignore. The manor was too large, the street too quiet, the guards too few for a faction that had once carried itself like a power. Darla glanced toward the younger man leading them. “Hey,” she said carefully. “What happened to the others?” Ryugi’s shoulders stiffened. For a moment, he looked like he might answer. Then his eyes darted away. “I can’t tell you. Big Boss Masa wouldn’t like that.” His words were guarded, but the conflict in them was obvious.

“They probably went on vacation or something,” Fiora said, apparently deciding that sounded plausible. Bram let out a soft, uneasy laugh. “Even yakuza need days off.” Ryugi’s expression softened despite himself. “Yeah,” he said quietly. “Vacation.” His gaze drifted back toward the manor. “Maybe that’s how the stubborn old man sees it too. He thinks they’ll be back.” Darla did not fully understand, but she understood enough to stop pushing. Whatever had happened to the Kinryū-kai, it was not

something Ryugi was free to explain, and it was not something Masa had accepted as cleanly as he pretended.

At last, they reached the edge of Kinryū-kai territory. Beyond it, the city changed again. The careful repairs ended. The lanterns vanished. The streets ahead sagged into darkness and neglect, old stone disappearing beneath dust, moss, and cracks too wide to ignore. It was not merely abandoned. It felt discarded. Ryugi slowed and held up one hand. “Watch your step.” “What? Why...” Fiora started to ask. The ground beneath her gave way. She yelped as the stone collapsed under one foot, dropping into blackness so deep the sound of falling debris seemed to go on far too long. Bram caught her by the back of her coat at the last second and hauled her onto solid ground. Fiora clung to his arm, eyes wide as she stared down into the hole. For once, she did not make a joke.

Everyone moved more carefully after that. The reason no one lived here became obvious with each step. The street was a shell. Beneath the surface, the old city waited in broken layers, hungry for anything foolish enough to trust the ground above it. They crossed slowly, following Ryugi through a route marked less by signs than by instinct and memory, until they reached an old square from a forgotten age. Ryugi did not need to explain. This was where the fight had happened. The square was in worse condition than the streets around it. Walls had caved inward. Deep gouges cut through stone and brick where a blade had struck with monstrous force. Several buildings bore claw-like scars across their faces, as if the fight had spilled from one corner to another without either combatant giving ground easily. Dust still hung in the air. There were dark puddles on the broken stone, some dried, some not.

Blood.

Jax moved first. His scanner lowered over one eye, sweeping the square in quick, sharp motions. Darla’s gaze caught on something near the center of the damage. A coin lay on the ground, half-hidden beneath dust and shattered stone. Jax reached it before anyone else, crouching to pick it up with unusual care. He turned it over in his hand, and his face went pale. Internal Investigations. Then

he flipped it again and saw the complete pattern worked into the metal. Not a broken officer's token. Not a lower rank. A captain's coin. "There is no mistaking it," Jax said, his voice tight. "This is hers."

The words seemed to settle over the square like another layer of dust. Darla's hand tightened near her sword. Bram looked away for a moment, jaw clenched. Fiora stared at the coin with the uneasy focus of someone finally understanding exactly how bad things were.

Jax lifted the scanner again, forcing himself back into motion. The lens hummed, flickering over the blood, the cuts in the walls, and the ruined ground. He paused, adjusted the settings, then scanned again. "This is hers as well," he said, pointing toward one of the blood trails. His expression darkened. "But there's another trace. Different blood. Different scale residue." Darla's ears lowered.

"The lizard man?" Bram asked. Jax did not answer immediately. He followed the second trail with the scanner, eyes narrowing as the readings sharpened. "Most likely," he said at last. "And he was injured too."

Ryugi left them too it leaving quickly. They spread out across the ruined square, each of them searching in their own way, but nothing became clear. The place was in shambles, though that alone did not tell them much. This part of the crime sector had been crumbling for years, and even here, where the damage was worse than the surrounding streets, the general decay made it difficult to separate old ruin from fresh destruction. Broken walls, cracked stone, collapsed balconies, exposed supports, all of it blended together until the fight seemed less like an event and more like one more wound added to a corpse.

Jax's first instinct was to follow the blood. He moved from one dark patch to another, scanning every smear and droplet, trying to determine direction, depth, age, anything. But the trail refused to become a trail. One path vanished beneath fallen stone. Another disappeared into dust. A third seemed to stop in the middle of the square as if the person bleeding had simply ceased to exist. Neither the victor nor the loser had left anything easy behind.

The longer he searched, the more the panic in him sharpened into anger. Finally, Jax dropped to one knee, then slammed both hands against the ground hard enough to send dust jumping around his fingers. He did not seem to care if the stone gave way beneath him. With a frustrated growl, he ripped the scanner from his eye and threw it against the wall. “What good is any of this?” he muttered, voice low and shaking. “It’s useless.”

In another corner of the square, Darla crouched near the captain’s coin and tried to lock onto anything useful. Blood. Metal. Elaina’s scent. Anything that could give her a direction. She held the coin close, then lowered it, nose twitching as she swept the area with more focus than she wanted the others to see. Nothing. Or close enough to nothing that it might as well have been. Whoever had been involved had known better than to leave a clean scent trail for someone like her. The blood was muddied. The air was wrong. Even Elaina’s trace had been buried beneath dust, smoke, and something bitter that clung to the back of Darla’s throat.

On the rooftop above, Nox moved along the edge with careful steps, Lux beside him. They examined broken tiles, crushed gutters, and the remains of the wall Ryugi had hidden behind, but there was nothing obvious there either. Nox straightened, his covered eyes turning toward the square below. “There is nothing. The fight must have continued elsewhere. The only things here are destruction and the smell of brimstone.” “And peppermint,” Lux said. Nox paused. “That is not relevant.” Lux crouched and picked something up from between two cracked roof tiles. It was a small piece of candy, wrapped in clear paper twisted at both ends. The wrapper was dusty, but not old. Not like the stone around it. Not like the rest of the ruins. “

Jax went still below them. Slowly, he looked up. “Did you say peppermint?” The others turned toward him. Darla’s ears lifted. Bram took a step closer, and Fiora, who had been halfway through pretending not to worry, stopped moving entirely. Lux held the candy up between two fingers. “Peppermint.” Jax crossed the square faster than any of them expected, climbing over broken stone and

nearly slipping once before catching himself. He reached the rooftop access and scrambled up with enough urgency that Nox stepped aside without comment. Jax took the candy from Lux with unusual care. For a moment, he only stared at it. Darla watched his face. “Jax?”

“She acts like such a serious woman,” Jax said quietly, his thumb brushing the edge of the wrapper. “But she has a sweet tooth. A gluttonous one. Always has. She keeps a bag of these on her. Sometimes more than one.” The others fell silent. The little piece of candy suddenly felt heavier than the captain’s coin. Jax turned toward Darla, and for the first time since they entered the sector, he looked openly desperate. “Can your nose track it?” Darla did not hesitate. She jumped up to join them on the rooftop, took the candy carefully, and brought it close enough to catch the scent. Peppermint cut through the dust, blood, smoke, and rot with surprising sharpness. She closed her eyes, breathed in again, then turned her face toward the square below. “Yes,” she said. Then her brow furrowed. “But…”

She stepped to the edge of the roof and sniffed again, more carefully this time. Her gaze moved from the square to the broken walls, then upward. “I think I understand what happened.” She pointed toward the gouged stone where the lizard’s blade had struck. “He jumped. Straight up. That’s why we couldn’t find a clean trail on the ground. He landed somewhere else.” Jax’s grip tightened. “And Elaina?” “The scent of peppermint stands out more than the blood now.” Darla turned slowly, following something only she could sense. Then she pointed toward a large caved-in hole in the distance. “It leads that way.”

“Well, let’s get over there,” Bram said, already moving. Fiora immediately jumped onto his back without permission, wrapping her arms around his shoulders. Bram staggered only slightly. “Fenleigh,” Darla snapped. “I am respecting the dangerous ground,” Fiora said, gripping Bram tighter. Bram sighed, but he did not put her down. Darla led the way, following the peppermint trail through the ruined square and toward the collapsed opening. The others followed carefully, picking their way across the unstable stone until the broken street gave way to a cave-like passage beneath the old

district. Once, it might have been a corridor. Maybe a service path, maybe an ancient road. Now it was a jagged tunnel of cracked stone, rusted supports, and darkness stretching in too many directions.

Jax looked down one branching path, then another. “This could take days.” “No,” Darla said, already moving. “Not if the scent holds.” It did. Barely, but enough. Peppermint lingered where blood and sweat had been buried under damp stone, standing out like a thin thread through the ruin. Darla followed it through one passage, then another, until a faint glow appeared ahead. She slowed just before reaching it and looked down. The passage opened onto a major drop. Far below, dark water moved sluggishly through a broad underground channel. “A sewer?” Darla asked, her nose wrinkling. “Is this connected to the Port?”

“It very well might be,” Jax said, crouching near the edge of the pipe. His scanner flickered as he examined the stone. Then his expression changed. He reached out and touched a streak of blood along the rim. “She kept fighting even here.” His voice softened enough that no one answered. They dropped down carefully into the lower channel. The smell was worse there, thick with sewage, old water, and rot, but Darla stepped into it without hesitation. Her boots sank slightly, and she kept moving. The peppermint scent was weaker now, nearly drowned beneath everything else, but it was still there. She followed it down the tunnel, faster and faster as the trail sharpened again. Finally, they reached the end.

A wall had caved in, blocking most of the passage with broken stone and twisted metal. Against the rubble sat Elaina. For a moment, no one moved. She was badly injured, her face clawed, her uniform torn, her body streaked with blood that had dried in some places and still seeped in others. A few strips of cloth had been wrapped around the worst wounds, crude but deliberate. She had tried to treat herself. She had stopped the bleeding for a while, maybe long enough to keep herself alive. Then she had passed out halfway through the work.

Her head hung forward. Her breathing was so shallow it was almost invisible, but it was there.

Elaina was alive. Jax reached her first. He dropped to his knees beside her, hands hovering for half a second as if he was afraid touching her wrong would break whatever thread still held her to the world. Then he forced himself into motion, pulling bandages and tools from his coat. “Damn it,” he said, voice shaking now. “We should have brought someone from Health. They could have spared an AID-E. They could have...” “Jax,” Darla said firmly. “I know.” He swallowed hard and started dressing the wounds as best he could. “I know.” He was not a doctor. Everyone could see that. But he worked quickly, carefully, doing what little he could while the others watched the tunnel behind them and tried not to think about how much blood there was.

Elaina stirred faintly beneath his hands. Her eyes barely opened, unfocused and glassy. “Callum…” she whispered. Jax froze. Then his face crumpled for half a breath before he forced it back together. “Yes,” he said, leaning closer. “I’m here. I’ve come for you.” Her lips moved again. The words came weaker this time, almost lost beneath her breath. “Why did you… stop…” Then her body went limp. Jax caught her before she slumped sideways. “Elaina?” He checked her pulse, then let out a sharp breath when he found it still there. Without another word, he carefully lifted her into his arms. She looked too small there, bloodied and pale against the mess of tools strapped to him. “She needs a doctor,” he said, turning toward the others. His voice was no longer frantic. It was absolute. “Now.”

Chapter 34: Pressed for Time

Alister barely had time to raise the multi-tool before the first red suit was on him. The man moved faster than the others, his fist driving forward with enough force to crack the stone behind Alister's head when he ducked. Alister twisted under the blow and brought the flat of his blade across the man's ribs, but the second red suit was already there, catching him across the jaw with a strike that sent him stumbling sideways. The mask took most of it. Not enough. Alister tasted blood. Then the rest of them surged in.

For a few seconds, he made it look possible. He slipped between two Porcelli enforcers, kicked one into a Vulture with a knife, he dropped three men before they managed to surround him properly. A smoke bomb burst at his feet, filling the street with thick gray cover. He vanished into it, vaulted off a wall, and nearly made it to the upper walkway before Portly's hand closed around the back of his coat and dragged him down like a misbehaving alley cat. Alister hit the ground hard. Portly sighed above him. "You're slippery. I'll give you that." Alister rolled away just before a boot came down where his ribs had been. "And you're disappointingly competent."

The second red suit caught him from behind. Alister drove an elbow back, but the man absorbed it and slammed him face-first into the wall. Pain flashed white through his skull. His knees nearly buckled. He forced himself upright anyway, sweeping low with the baton and taking the man's legs out, but a Vulture's chain wrapped around his arm before he could follow through. Alister yanked, pulled the Vulture off balance, and kicked him in the chest. The chain slipped free. Then something struck him from the side, heavy and blunt, and the world lurched. He hit the street again.

This time, getting up took longer. The mob closed in around him, shouting over one another. Porcelli. Vultures. Red suits. Too many bodies, too many weapons, too many angles. Alister spat blood onto the stone and pushed himself onto one knee. Beneath the mask, he smiled despite himself. "You know," he said, breathing hard, "for a group of criminals, you are all remarkably sensitive about property damage." A bottle shattered against his shoulder. He fell forward, catching himself with one hand. Portly raised one arm, stopping the next wave before they could pile on completely. "Enough. Don wants him breathing." "Mostly breathing?" one of the Vultures asked. Portly looked at him. The Vulture shrugged and stepped back.

Alister tried to stand again, but one of the red suits kicked the multi-tool from his hand. It skidded across the street and disappeared beneath a broken cart. Another grabbed him by the collar and hauled him upright. His legs did not fully cooperate. The mask hung crooked on his face now, one lens cracked, the painted anarchy symbol smeared with dust and blood. Portly stepped closer, studying him.

"You're not what I expected," he said. Alister coughed, then forced the Anarchy Man voice back into place. "No one expects revolution." "No," Portly said. "I mean you're shorter up close." Alister stared at him through the cracked mask. Then one of the red suits drove a fist into Alister's stomach, and whatever clever response he had prepared died in his throat. He doubled over, gasping, only kept upright because the other enforcers were holding him.

Portly turned away with another tired sigh. "Tie him up. And someone find out where the

Vultures went before this turns into a three-way riot." Behind the ring of bodies, high above on the rooftops, Kloe watched in silence. The others had scattered to search for Scratch, but she had stayed. She told herself it was because Anarchy Man might still draw the rat out. She told herself it was tactical. Sensible. Professional. Then the masked vigilante's head lifted just enough for the broken light to catch the angle of his jaw beneath the mask.

Kloe's stomach sank. "No," she whispered. Below, Alister was dragged upright, half-conscious and still somehow trying to keep the ridiculous posture of Anarchy Man intact. Kloe's hand tightened against the roof ledge. "Captain…" she breathed, too quietly for anyone else to hear. Before the Porcelli could drag him much farther, Mohawk arrived with several Iron Vultures at his back, grinning like he had stumbled into the best entertainment in the sector. "So this is the jackass causing havoc and pissing everyone off." Portly stepped in front of Alister before Mohawk could get too close. "Back off. Your boys got plenty of hits in. That's revenge enough, ain't it?" "Revenge?" Mohawk laughed. "I don't want revenge. This guy's crazy." Portly stared at him. "You want to recruit him?" Mohawk shrugged like it was obvious. "And I thought the Don was nuts. No way. Buzz off."

"Oh, come on," Mohawk said, leaning to get a better look at the battered masked man behind him. "What does the Don want with him anyway? Did the crotchety old bastard get his little feelings hurt?" Portly grumbled, and the Velvet Tusks holding Alister loosened their grip slightly, not enough for him to escape, but enough to show their attention had shifted. The argument grew sharper from there. Mohawk offered to pay whatever bounty the Don had placed. Portly asked if he had a spare million credits lying around. Mohawk took off his glasses, blinked several times, and stared at Alister again.

"One million? For this dude?" "Right," Portly said. "Didn't think so." The two of them kept arguing, voices rising as Porcelli and Vulture tempers started to flare around them. The red suits holding Alister sighed, apparently realizing they might be standing there for a while. That was all Kloe

needed. She dropped from the rooftop without a sound, landed behind them, and reached into Alister's coat. Her fingers closed around one of the smoke bombs. She slammed it into the ground. Smoke exploded through the street, thick and sudden, swallowing the argument whole. Before the nearest red suit could react, Kloe brought her scabbard down hard against the back of his neck. He dropped. She struck the second across the jaw, caught Alister before he hit the ground, and dragged him into the smoke. "I better be right about this," she muttered. Then she vanished with him into the alley. Viktor watched from around the corner. "Hmm anarchy man. So that's what this noise was. I like it." He laughed.

Darla and the others climbed out of the cavern and back toward the surface as fast as the broken passages allowed. The moment they reached open air, Darla's comm went off. She growled, already having a good idea who it was before she even put it in her ear. "Dogenridge. I have been calling you nonstop for the past hour," Cassian said from the other end. His voice was tight enough that even his irritation sounded fragile. "I need a report." Darla looked back with worry as Jax carried Elaina carefully in his arms. The sight of her made every second feel too short. "We found her," Darla said, keeping her voice steady because there was no room for anything else. "But it's bad, Cassian. She needs medical attention right now." For one awful moment, Cassian said nothing. Then he let out a low, furious breath. "I was afraid of that."

"We need Health." Darla said. "Health is not allowed near the crime sector," Cassian said, frustration breaking through his control. "They have gone in too many times and been raided for supplies. If I send them past the boundary, I lose time fighting regulations and escorts we do not have." His voice sharpened again, forcing itself back into command. "You will have to rush her out yourselves. I will do what I can on my end." The call ended before Darla could answer. She lowered the comm and looked back at the others. "We have to hurry."

No one needed her to explain. They started moving at once, crossing the broken streets as

quickly as they dared. Jax held Elaina close for the first stretch, every step careful and tense, but the path ahead was unstable and his arms were already shaking from effort, fear, or both. After a moment, he reluctantly looked toward Bram. Bram understood without being asked. He stepped forward and took Elaina from him with a gentleness that seemed almost impossible for someone his size. Jax hesitated for one breath too long before letting go, then forced himself to move beside them instead.

NoxLux vanished onto the rooftops, splitting across both sides of the street while still moving with the eerie coordination of a single thought. Nox watched the routes ahead. Lux watched the places no one else thought to watch. Together, they cleared the path before the others reached it, signaling when alleys were empty and when patrols were too close. By the time they reentered Kinryū-kai territory, Darla could only hope the arrangement had not changed. The first patrol noticed them almost immediately. For a second, hands moved toward weapons. Then one of the men saw Elaina in Bram's arms.

"They found her," he said. Another glanced down the street and snapped his fingers at the others. "Make sure no one interferes." The Kinryū-kai scattered without another word, moving ahead and to the sides, not escorting them exactly, but clearing the space around them with quiet efficiency. Doors closed. Loiterers disappeared. A few men positioned themselves at corners, staring down anyone who looked too curious. Fiora watched them move, her expression quieter than usual. "Say what you want about them," she said, "but they have a sense of honor." Darla did not answer, but she did not argue either.

At last, they reached the edge of the crime sector. Cassian was already waiting there with an ambulance, Administrator Lucy, and several AID-E units. He stepped forward the moment he saw them, but whatever command he had prepared died when his eyes found Elaina. For once, Cassian Sterros looked utterly helpless. He reached out and brushed a hand against her cheek, his fingers trembling despite his effort to still them. His mouth opened as if he meant to say something, but no

words came. Lucy moved in before grief could steal any more time. She examined Elaina quickly, her expression tightening as the AID-E units prepared the gurney. “Careful,” she said. “Support her left side. Do not jostle the ribs.”

The AID-E units lifted Elaina from Bram’s arms and placed her onto the gurney with practiced precision. Jax hovered nearby, looking like he wanted to help and knew enough not to get in the way.

Lucy gave Elaina one more quick assessment, then released a breath that was almost relief. “You made it just in time.” Cassian looked at her sharply. “Can you save her?” “We can,” Lucy said. “But we need to go now.” Cassian nodded at once. The medical team loaded Elaina into the ambulance. Cassian climbed in after her without asking permission, and no one tried to stop him. The AID-E units followed, equipment already unfolding around the gurney as the doors sealed shut. A moment later, the vehicle lifted into the air and shot toward the hospital, leaving Special Operations standing at the boundary between the crime sector and the city proper. For a few seconds, no one spoke. Then Darla looked back toward the streets they had just escaped. They had found Elaina alive. But someone had left her there to die.

Cassian looked toward NoxLux, and the fury in his face was terrible in its restraint. It did not flare wildly. It tightened, sharpened, and settled behind his eyes like a blade being drawn slowly from its sheath. “Is it as I feared?” he asked. Nox and Lux answered with a single nod. Cassian closed his eyes. For a moment, his control almost held. Then he let out a quiet, bitter breath. “Damn it.” His voice dropped lower, nearly to a whisper. “I wanted to be wrong.” No one spoke. Cassian opened his eyes again, and whatever softness had slipped through vanished beneath command. “I’ll bury him,” he said.

Jax looked at him sharply. Cassian turned to NoxLux. “Put all of it together. Every trace, every witness, every movement. Find out more if you can.” Nox and Lux gave no verbal answer. They simply vanished from the street, separating in opposite directions with the same thought moving through two bodies.

Jax's hands curled into fists. "You know who did this?" "Almost definitely," Cassian said. "Then say it." he demanded. "We will have plenty of time to discuss it later." Cassian turned toward the hospital route, his caplet shifting behind him. "Right now, my sister is bleeding." That ended the argument. The others followed him in silence. No one had the strength to fill the walk with words. The looming fear that Elaina might not survive still clung to all of them, heavier now that the immediate chase was over. During the search, urgency had kept them moving. Now every second stretched too long. Every distant siren, every passing shadow, every delay felt like something that could steal her from them before they reached the doors.

When they arrived at the hospital, an AID-E unit was already waiting. It did not bother with questions or a check-in. Because of its shared network, it already knew enough. The unit turned and guided them straight through the halls toward the emergency ward. They stopped outside a glass partition just as Lucy finished working. The room beyond was full of quiet motion: AID-E units adjusting instruments, healing arrays dimming, bandages being sealed into place. Elaina lay on the bed, pale and still, but no longer surrounded by the frantic urgency that had followed her from the crime sector. Lucy looked up, noticed them through the glass, and released a relieved breath. Then she gave them a thumbs-up.

Cassian's shoulders dropped as if someone had cut strings holding him upright. Lucy made her way out of the room a moment later, her expression tired but warm. "She is stable, She will be all right." She said.Cassian started to weep. It happened so suddenly that no one had time to look away. One moment he was standing there, rigid and furious and composed by force. The next, his face crumpled, and the tears came before he could stop them. "Oh, dear Caretaker," he whispered, one hand covering his mouth. "I thought I had lost her." Darla's ears lowered. Bram looked down, giving him what privacy he could. Jax stared through the glass at Elaina, his own face unreadable except for the tremor in his hands.

Cassian drew in a shaking breath and turned toward Lucy first. “Thank you, Administrator Mendora.” His voice cracked, but he did not seem to care who heard it. “And not just you. All of you.” He looked at Special Operations, at Jax, at Darla, at Bram and Fiora. “You saved her.” Lucy smiled gently. “Call me Lucy.” For a moment, the words almost settled something. Not fully, but enough. Then Lucy’s expression shifted back into the careful seriousness of a doctor. “There are a few options for her treatment from here. There are faster methods, but I tend to avoid them unless absolutely necessary. They are effective, but unpredictable. Personally, I would recommend a longer, more natural recovery supported by controlled healing intervals and...”

Darla’s mind drifted before Lucy could finish. Alister. She opened her comm and checked for a message. Nothing. Her frown deepened. Jax, still staring through the glass, spoke without looking away. “We need her testimony. We need to know who did this.” “No,” Cassian said. Jax turned on him. “No?” “Her testimony may prove valuable later,” Cassian said, wiping at his face with one hand as he forced his voice back into order. “But I will not risk her life for information we can gather another way. Not now.” Jax looked ready to argue. Then he looked back through the glass at Elaina and stopped himself. Cassian’s eyes hardened again. “Besides, I already have enough to deduce the culprit.” “Then just come out and say it,” Jax snapped. “We would all like to know who did this.” He gestured around the hall, only to stop when he noticed the space beside him. Darla was gone. Bram turned, startled. “Where did she...” Fiora was already looking down the corridor. Darla had bolted.

Darla ran all the way back toward the crime sector, her boots striking the street hard enough that people turned to look and wisely moved out of her path. She had nearly reached the boundary when a voice came from an alley just outside the district. “Hey, dog.” Darla stopped at once, hand already near her weapon. She turned and found Kloe standing in the shadows, half-hidden beside a stack of crates. The cat woman looked around nervously, clearly hoping no one else had noticed her. She did not seem pleased to be speaking to Darla at all. “What do you want?” Darla barked. “I do not have time to...”

“I secured the captain,” Kloe said quickly. Darla froze. Kloe’s expression tightened, as if she hated that the title had slipped out so naturally. “I mean… Alister is safe. I brought him back to your headquarters.” For a moment, Darla could only stare at her. “How did you…” Her eyes narrowed. “He mentioned you were quick on the uptake. Why should I trust you? Last time I saw you, you were being ordered around by his half...” “Leonidas is not even a quarter of the captain Alister was,” Kloe snapped. “A shame to the Purrmont name.” The words came out too fast and too honest. Kloe caught herself a beat later, clearing her throat and looking away. “Or at least,” she added stiffly, “I believe Alister would say something like that.”

Darla studied her for another moment. Then, despite herself, she smiled faintly. “I’ll take your word for it.” Kloe did not look comforted by that. “How is he? Did he...” Darla asked. “He is awful,” Kloe cut in, anger flaring again. “How could you send him out alone like that? He barely had enough strength to explain where to take him.” Darla’s smile vanished. She took a slow breath, accepting the accusation because some part of her had already been making it against herself. “Because I trusted him, and because, like you probably guessed, he was the only one who could draw that much attention and survive it.” she said. Kloe’s eyes narrowed, but she did not argue. Not because she agreed easily, but because she knew Darla was right, and hated it. For a moment, the two of them stood in silence at the edge of the alley, both of them caring about the same man in ways neither wanted to explain.

Kloe looked away first. “I see.” Her voice had gone quieter. “I can’t be there for him like before, I can’t have his back.” she said. Darla’s ears lowered slightly. Kloe stepped back into the alley’s shadow. “So take care of him, you dumb dog.” Then she turned and walked away before Darla could answer. Darla watched her disappear into the crime sector’s darkness, then turned back toward headquarters. Alister was safe. That was one disaster avoided. For now.

Chapter 35: The Ugly Truth

Mathias walked through the bright, colorful streets of Carnival Continent, one hand wrapped around the much smaller hand of his daughter. Priscilla could barely keep still. Her eyes darted from one impossible attraction to the next, wide with wonder as music, lights, laughter, and the smell of fried sweets filled the air around them. Carnival Continent was not merely a fair. It was a landmass, a drifting festival that flew into Porta Nexus once a year and turned the sky above the city into a celebration. Most people looked forward to it all year. For many children, it was the highlight of their lives until the next time it returned. For Mathias, it was blood money. He looked down at his daughter's smiling face, then out across the crowd. Everywhere he turned, families passed beneath banners and glowing signs. Children tugged their parents toward rides. Vendors shouted over one another. Performers danced on floating platforms while fireworks burst harmlessly overhead in shapes of dragons, birds, and laughing masks.

Priscilla loved all of it. That should have been enough. Instead, rage sat heavy in Mathias's chest, coiled so tightly he could barely breathe around it. He had not wanted to come. Not with Viktor's credits in his pocket. Not after what he had done. But refusing had felt dangerous in its own way. If he

ignored the gift, Viktor might decide Mathias was being difficult. He might twist even this, turning Priscilla's joy into another measure of obedience. So Mathias had brought her. He had smiled. He had held her hand, and every step felt like walking deeper into a trap. "Daddy, Daddy!" Priscilla tugged his arm. At first, Mathias did not react. His gaze had drifted toward the crowd again, searching faces, exits, rooftops, shadows. Then her voice reached him properly, and he forced himself back into the moment. He lowered himself to one knee and looked at her with the gentlest smile he could manage. "What is it, little sugar plum?"

Priscilla pointed toward a roller coaster that twisted above the carnival streets, its rails looping through a ring of floating lanterns before plunging into a tunnel painted like the open mouth of some ridiculous beast. "I want to go on that!" Mathias looked up at the ride, then back at her. He rubbed his chin, pretending to consider it like this was an ordinary problem on an ordinary day. "That one may be a little too scary." Priscilla tilted her head. Her excitement dimmed just enough for worry to slip through. "Are you okay, Daddy?" The question cut more deeply than he was prepared for. Mathias corrected his expression at once, smoothing the fear from his face before she could understand it. "Of course I am," he said, softening his smile. "I only want to make sure you are ready." Priscilla puffed out her chest and showed him a toothy grin. "I'm tough just like you." For a moment, Mathias could not answer. Then he stood and squeezed her hand gently. "Very well," he said. "Let's go."

They got on the ride together. Priscilla cheered the moment the restraints lowered, kicking her little feet beneath the seat as the roller coaster lurched into motion. Mathias sat beside her, one arm braced protectively across her without thinking. The cars climbed higher and higher above the carnival streets. Priscilla pointed at everything. The lights. The games. The tiny people below. The other rides circling through the air like colorful machines pretending the world had never been cruel. Mathias smiled when she looked at him, but he was still somewhere else.

The coaster crested its first rise, and for one terrible moment, as the track dropped away beneath

them, his mind returned to the sewer. To Elaina's broken body. To the sound she had made when he let her fall into the darkness below. He had told himself she might live. He had told himself he had done what he could. He had told himself a dozen things, each one weaker than the last. The ride plunged. Priscilla screamed with delight. Mathias closed his eyes. How had he arrived here? The question circled him, ugly and relentless. There had been a time when he thought his life was proof that the past did not have to win. The lizards had done something unforgivable to Porta Nexus when he was a child, and no one had forgotten. Not really. History had become a chain around every throat that carried scales. All his life, Mathias had felt it. Normal people, decent people, frightened people who would have insisted they were not cruel, still crossed streets to avoid him. Children stared. Adults whispered. Glass bottles had been thrown at his head from windows while he dug through refuse for something to eat.

Even then, he had refused to surrender to what they expected him to become. He would not let the past define his future. So he signed up for the Port Academy. He broke records there. Not only in combat, though he excelled at that too, but in tactics, formation theory, threat assessment, and the quieter battlefield of the mind. He learned faster than recruits who had been raised for service. He studied harder than cadets with family names and polished boots. He won matches he was supposed to lose and solved simulations instructors had designed to humble entire teams. No one cared.

They saw the scales before they saw the scores. They saw the old crimes before they saw the young man standing in front of them. Mathias had no family name to protect him, no old house to vouch for him, no patron waiting in the wings. He was simply Mathias. Just Mathias. A lizard in a uniform that most people thought he had no right to wear. Then came final assessments. Other divisions often visited the academy that day, scouting recruits before assignments could be finalized. Most passed Mathias by with the same careful disinterest he had learned to expect. He had just finished a combat assessment, breath steady, practice blade still in hand, when a booming laugh cut across the training yard.

“Wow! Incredible!” Mathias turned, wary by instinct. A massive bear with a grin that looked too open to be a trick. “Your skills are remarkable indeed!” The young Mathias stared at him. “You’re talking to me?” “Of course I am!” the bear said, as if the question itself was absurd. “Who else just tore through that assessment like a storm through old canvas?” Mathias did not know what to do with that. Compliments were usually traps. Kindness was usually followed by a condition. The bear planted his paws on his hips and looked him over with obvious approval. “Say, I know the choice is ultimately yours, but how would you feel about joining us? The Military Division could use someone like you.” Mathias raised an eyebrow. “You want me to join?” “Of course! Why wouldn’t I?” The bear said.

There it was. The strange part. The impossible part. He did not seem to care what Mathias was. Not in the way others cared. He looked at him and saw strength. Skill. Potential. A future. Not a crime committed by someone else long before Mathias had ever opened his eyes. “Someone like you,” the bear continued, “could help keep Porta Nexus safe for decades to come.” Then he blinked, as if realizing something. “But where are my manners? I did not catch your name.” He reached out a paw. Mathias looked down at it. For a moment, he did not move. Then, slowly, reluctantly, he took it. “Mathias, Just Mathias.” He said. The bear shook his hand proudly, as if Mathias had already become someone worth standing beside. “Brutus, and I would be honored to serve with you.” he said. That was the beginning.

The Military Division was different from the others. At least, Mathias believed it was. They trained for threats most citizens never saw until the moment they arrived. They stood between Porta Nexus and the powers that thought a city of portals was something to conquer, raid, or claim. When danger came, the Military Division did not write letters, debate jurisdiction, or wait for a perfect political answer. They moved. They jumped in. They protected everyone. Mathias thrived there. He led soldiers through hostile gates and brought them back alive. He coordinated with Aviation during skyborne assaults, directing movements through smoke and fire while engines screamed overhead.

He faced encroaching powers that dared to test the Port's defenses and broke them before they reached the inner districts. He cut down pirate crews who believed Porta Nexus was a treasure chest waiting to be opened by force, and people cheered. Not all of them. Never all. But enough. For the first time, Mathias heard his name shouted without disgust. He saw citizens point at him without fear. Children with scales stopped hiding behind their parents when he passed. Public opinion did not change overnight, but it shifted. Slowly. Painfully. Like a rusted gate forced open inch by inch. He had never meant to become a symbol, but he had become one anyway.

Then the shields went up. The Visionary Draycott, Engineering's unseen genius, created the air-con system and the interplanetary shields that wrapped the sky of Porta Nexus in safety. The city celebrated, and perhaps it should have. The shields saved lives. They turned invasions into distant alarms. They made raids harder, battles rarer, and the skies less terrifying for ordinary people. No one knew who Mr. Draycott truly was. He did not appear in public. He did not stand beneath banners or accept flowers from grateful citizens. He simply changed the world from somewhere unseen, and the Military Division began to change with it.

There were fewer battles. Fewer raids. Fewer moments when soldiers arrived as heroes because fewer moments required heroes at all. The warriors of the Military Division trained, waited, and sharpened themselves against threats that came less and less often. To the city, that was progress. To Mathias, it should have been progress too, but somewhere inside the silence that followed, something began to rot. At first, it was small. Supplies arrived late. Training requests were denied. Equipment that should have been replaced was repaired instead, then repaired again, then quietly declared "adequate." Squads were reassigned to other divisions. Rooms that had once held strategy meetings were converted into storage. Budgets shrank behind language no soldier could fight: temporary reductions, efficiency reviews, resource reallocation. Mathias pressed on.

He trained harder. He trained the others harder too. If the city no longer needed heroes every

day, then they would be ready for the day it did. His free time became something he had not expected to have, and in that strange quiet, life found him in ways battle never had. Love. A home. A daughter whose tiny hands made even his claws seem gentle. For a while, Mathias tried to believe that was enough. Maybe the shielded sky had not taken his purpose. Maybe it had given him something else.

Then Morvin came to the base. He arrived without warning, flanked by wardens of Legislation carrying clipboards, ledgers, and the cold confidence of people who had already made their decision before entering the room. They walked through the halls writing things down on forms, glancing at training yards, armories, barracks, and mess halls with the detached interest of merchants appraising old furniture. Soldiers tried to ask questions. The wardens ignored them. Officers attempted to explain procedures. The wardens wrote more notes. To them, the Military Division was not a shield. It was a number.

They pulled Brutus into a meeting behind closed doors. Mathias stood outside for as long as he could bear it, arms folded, jaw tight, trying not to listen and failing with every word that slipped through the wood. “Let us face reality, Mr. Stonehide,” Morvin said. His voice carried that familiar smug ease, the tone of a man who believed cruelty sounded better when dressed as pragmatism. “We have no further need for the Military Division in its current form. Open raids are a thing of the past. The shields prevent most large-scale incursions before they begin, and any remaining aerial threats are handled more efficiently by Aviation.” There was the faint sound of paper shifting. “This division,” Morvin continued, “has become a drain on resources.”

“You cannot truly be suggesting that,” Brutus said. For once, the great bear’s voice did not boom. It sounded low, controlled, and deeply alarmed. “Even if raids have slowed, shields can fail. They can be sabotaged. Invading forces can adapt. We should always be prepared to...” “Maintain an unnecessary expense?” Morvin cut in. Silence followed. Mathias’s claws dug into his own arms. Morvin went on as if he had not just dismissed decades of service with a phrase. “The process will be

gradual, of course. We are not barbarians. Downsizing will begin immediately. Select personnel may be reassigned where appropriate. But by the end of the year, the Military Division will be formally disbanded."

Mathias's eyes widened. For a moment, he could not breathe. Behind the door, Brutus said something, but Mathias did not hear the words clearly. The hall seemed to tilt around him. Disbanded. The division that had taken him in when no one else would. The division that had given him purpose. The division that had shown the city a lizard could protect it. Gone. Reduced to forms. Erased by men who had never stood between the Port and anything with teeth. Footsteps approached from inside the room. Mathias forced himself to move, stepping away from the door just before it opened.

He buried the feeling. That was what Mathias had always done. Anger, humiliation, doubt, the old whisper that the city had never truly accepted him, all of it went somewhere deep beneath the discipline. He trained. He drilled the remaining soldiers harder. He reviewed invasion scenarios no one wanted to fund. He sharpened himself against silence and told himself preparedness did not require applause. Then, finally, something happened. A ground portal on the edge of the city had been breached. The report should have shaken every office in the Port Authority. Ground portals were not supposed to be vulnerable that way. Their routes were fixed, monitored, protected by layers of security and old code most people no longer understood. An enemy force breaking through one was supposed to be impossible.

No one seemed interested in how the impossible had happened. Mathias was sent with a small squad. Not the kind of force he would have requested if anyone had bothered to ask him. Just a small squad, because the shields were up, raids were obsolete. When they arrived, the portal chamber was already scarred by battle that had not yet become a battle. Burn marks stretched across the stone. Strange equipment had been anchored around the portal frame, feeding unstable energy into the air. On the other side, through the shimmering gate, Mathias saw them. An army.

Black and red uniforms. Skull markings. Bone-white insignias painted across armor and banners. Soldiers stood in formation beyond the portal, not rushing through, not looting, not conquering. Waiting. Measuring. Testing. “The Multiversal Empire?” Mathias questioned, hand tightening around the hilt of his sword. One of his men shifted beside him. “I believe they go by something else now, sir. The Crossbone Remnant. The Empire was defeated by the Union, remember?” Mathias did not know enough about the foreigners to care what name they used. Empire. Remnant. Skull-wearing fanatics from beyond the portals. It made little difference. He knew only one thing with absolute certainty. They should not have been here.

On the other side of the portal stood a man in a skull mask. Unlike the soldiers around him, he did not hold a rifle or blade. He raised one hand, and one finger glowed with a strange, powerful aura that bent the air around it. The portal reacted to him in pulses, as if he were testing its edges, learning its weaknesses, preparing it for something worse. Not an invasion. Not yet. A rehearsal. The masked man turned his head. Even across the distance between worlds, Mathias felt the attention land on him.

“The Port has arrived scatter,” the man said. The Remnant moved at once. Not forward. Back. They began retreating through the portal with practiced speed, dragging equipment, collapsing frames, and erasing traces as they went. Mathias lunged forward. “Stop them!”

His squad charged with him, but they had arrived too late and too few. By the time Mathias reached the portal’s edge, most of the Remnant had already withdrawn to the other side. He swung his sword through one of the remaining anchor devices, splitting it apart in a burst of sparks, but the skull-masked man only laughed. “Let this be a lesson, Port,” he called from beyond the gate. The glow around his finger sharpened. “No shield can stop us.” Mathias tried to push through. The portal exploded. Force hurled him backward, throwing him across the chamber with enough power to crack stone beneath his back. The gate collapsed in on itself, leaving only smoke, broken equipment, and the fading echo of the masked man’s laughter.

The shields had not stopped them. The Port had not been ready. And somewhere deep beneath the discipline Mathias had spent his life building, the thing that had begun to rot found air. He had made a decision that day. One like the decision waiting for him now. Mathias came back to the present just as the ride took its final drop. The coaster plunged through a tunnel of spinning lights, and Priscilla screamed beside him in pure delight, both hands raised, her laughter swallowed by the wind. Mathias turned toward her and tried to smile. Instead, his throat tightened until he could barely breathe.

The rest of the night passed in fragments. Priscilla dragged him from ride to ride, from glowing game booths to sweet stalls and floating puppet shows. She won a tiny plush dragon from a ring toss and insisted it looked like him. He laughed when she wanted him to. He clapped when she looked back to make sure he was watching. He bought her fried sweets, held her prizes, and stood beneath the carnival lights like any father enjoying a night with his daughter, but he was not there. Not fully. When the night finally began to wind down and the crowds thinned toward the exits, Mathias prepared to take her home. Then he stopped. Priscilla looked up at him, her little hand still tucked inside his. “Daddy?” Mathias forced his face into a smile. “Did you have fun today?” She nodded so hard her plush dragon nearly fell from her arms. “It was the best.” For one second, that almost broke him.

Then he turned away from the main exit. Priscilla followed, confused. “Daddy? Where are we going?” “Oh,” Mathias said, keeping his voice gentle even as his grip tightened around her hand. “I thought perhaps we could go on a little trip. You would like that, wouldn’t you? Just you and me.” “A trip?” Her voice was smaller now, less excited. “But what about school?” “We will figure that out.” He moved faster. The small spaceport at the edge of Carnival Continent glowed ahead, its terminals open for visitors leaving before the landmass drifted away from Porta Nexus. If he moved now, maybe he could still protect her. Maybe he could take her somewhere Viktor did not know.

Maybe he could stop betraying the Port before there was nothing left of the man Brutus had believed in. Maybe no one else had to end up like Elaina, bleeding in the dark because Mathias had

been too afraid to choose differently. He reached the ticket terminal and lifted his hand toward the screen. Then he saw the receptionist. The man behind the counter wore a black jacket. On the breast was a small skull patch. Mathias froze. The receptionist smiled brightly. Too brightly. “Captain Mathias! Did you enjoy your time?” Priscilla bounced on her toes, unaware of the way her father’s body had gone rigid. “Yes! It was so much fun!” The man leaned down toward her with a warm smile. “That’s wonderful.” Mathias’s voice came out low. “What are you doing here?” “Oh, nothing unpleasant.” The receptionist straightened, still smiling. “Mister Scathe simply wanted to remind you of your commitments. You did not forget, did you?”

Mathias could not move. For a moment, every feeling inside him collided at once. Rage, sharp enough that he wanted to reach across the counter and crush the man’s throat. Terror, cold enough to lock his claws in place. Confusion, because Viktor’s reach had followed him even here, onto a drifting carnival landmass above Porta Nexus, into the one place Priscilla had been allowed to smile. Then he looked down at his daughter. Priscilla grinned up at him. “Silly Daddy. So forgetful.” Mathias lowered one hand onto the counter, then the other, leaning forward as if the weight of his own body had finally become too much to hold. “Please,” he said. The receptionist’s smile did not change. “I gave him everything he wanted,” Mathias whispered. “The documents. The recruits. The Military database.” The words tasted like ash, each one another piece of his division laid bare. “I gave him all of it. Just let us go.” The man paused, pretending to consider it.

Then he shook his head. “You should set a good example for your daughter, Captain. Don’t leave your work half finished.” He slid something across the counter. A photograph. Mathias looked down. Elaina was in the picture, pale and broken, being loaded into an ambulance by AID-E units while Cassian stood nearby with horror on his face. For one terrible second, Mathias could not understand what he was seeing. Then he did. She had lived. Relief struck him first, so sudden and sharp it nearly brought him to his knees. Then horror followed close behind. Viktor knew. Viktor had people watching

the hospital, the boundary, the consequences of everything Mathias had done.

Mathias crumpled the photograph in his fist. The receptionist only smiled. Mathias turned away from the counter and lowered himself in front of Priscilla. Somehow, he managed a laugh. “Silly me,” he said. “I forgot I have something important to do for work.” Priscilla blinked. “Right now?” “I am afraid so.” His smile trembled despite every effort to hold it still. “I may be gone for a while, so I need you to stay with the Stonehides. You like Uncle Brutus, don’t you?” She hugged her plush dragon to her chest and nodded enthusiastically, unaware of the danger, unaware of the ruin opening beneath his feet. “He tells funny stories.” “That’s wonderful.” Mathias pulled her into his arms. He held her tightly.

Too tightly. Priscilla squirmed a little, then went still when she felt him shaking. “Daddy?” Mathias buried his face against her shoulder, trying and failing to stop the tears. “Daddy, are you crying?”

He did not answer. He could not. Because he knew, with a certainty more terrible than any threat Viktor could have spoken aloud, that this might be the last time he ever held his daughter.

Chapter 36: I Wanted to Believe

Mathias walked down the dark streets alone. His breathing was heavier than it had ever been. Not from exhaustion. Not from fear. Something deeper had settled into his chest, pressing against his ribs with every step. He knew this was the end. Still, he kept walking. Toward the hospital. The streets around him were quieter than they should have been. No vendors closing stalls. No late-shift workers cutting across blocks. No curious civilians whispering at the sight of a Military captain moving through the dark. The road ahead had been cleared so completely that even the silence felt organized. Mathias understood before he reached the doors. They were waiting.

He stopped at the edge of the hospital approach. The building rose ahead, bright and clean against the night, every window a reminder of what waited inside. Elaina. Alive. Breathing. A witness. A woman he had broken and left in the dark because he had been too cowardly to choose anything else.

He took one step forward. Darla stepped out through the hospital entrance before he could take another.

“That is far enough,” she said. Her voice was steady, but her eyes were cold in a way that felt wrong on her. Not hatred, exactly. Something worse. Disappointment buried under duty. A hopelessness that

made Mathias look away before he could stop himself.

"You connected the dots already." He said quietly, "Afraid so," Cassian answered. Mathias turned his head slightly. Cassian stood in the street to his left, capelet shifting in the night air, his face carved into something controlled and merciless. Behind Mathias, Fiora and Bram moved into position, blocking the route back. A second later, Alister dropped lightly beside Darla from a nearby ledge, battered, bandaged, and standing as if pain were merely an inconvenience he refused to acknowledge.

Mathias looked around at them all and let out a tired sigh. "You had Peacekeeping clear the civilians."

Alister's eyes narrowed. "Naturally." Cassian stepped forward. "What I do not understand yet is why." His voice was quiet, but anger trembled beneath every word. "Why would a man like you do this?"

Mathias looked down. For a moment, no answer came.

Darla's hand tightened near her sword. "Captain Mathias," she said, each word heavy with effort, "you are under arrest for treason and conspiracy against the Port, attempted murder of Captain Elaina Kestral, obstruction of Internal Investigations, unlawful disclosure of classified information, and whatever else Cassian finds once he finishes tearing your life apart." Cassian's smile was faint and humorless. Mathias did not respond. Slowly, he took a deep breath and closed his eyes. When he raised his head again, the exhaustion had not vanished, but something inside it had hardened. "It must be done," he said. Darla's ears lowered. "Do not." Before anyone could say more, Mathias moved.

He shot forward like a cannon fired at close range, crossing the distance to Darla in a blur. Darla barely had time to draw her blade before his sword came down. Steel met steel with a scream that rang through the empty street, the force of the blow driving cracks through the stone beneath her boots.

Cassian jumped aside, fury flashing across his face. "Level Four authorization!" The words cut through the street. For half a heartbeat, everyone paused. This was not a threat level. This was Cassian granting field authority before the fight could become something worse. Darla nodded once. Her blade

answered.

The weapon shifted in her grip, inner locks snapping open as pressure built along the spine. Steam blasted from vents near the guard, and the sudden propulsion hurled Darla out from under Mathias's strength. She moved with the force instead of against it, letting the blade guide her around him in a sharp arc. She landed behind him and cut cleanly across his side. The strike bit deep. Not deep enough. Mathias turned and swatted her away with his free arm. The blow hit like a battering ram, sending Darla through the nearest wall in a burst of plaster and broken brick. "Darla!" Fiora shouted.

Alister was already moving. He slipped in low, blade flashing, forcing Mathias to turn before he could follow Darla into the rubble. For a few seconds, Mathias could barely parry the strikes. Alister fought like a man who knew he had no strength to waste, each movement precise, irritating, and aimed at openings Mathias did not want him to find. Then Fiora joined him. She came in fast, knife in one hand, Sword in the other, her usual chaos sharpened into something focused by fear. Together, she and Alister forced Mathias back step by step. Bram moved behind him. The man caught Mathias in an arm lock, wrapping both massive arms around him and planting his feet hard against the street. Mathias struggled, muscles straining, claws scraping against Bram's sleeves as the bear held firm.

"Captain," Bram said, voice low and urgent. "As a former member of the Military Division, I ask you to accept my plea. Stand down." For one second, Mathias went still. Then his eyes hardened. "No." He drove his head backward into Bram's face, twisted against the hold, and broke free with raw strength. Bram stumbled, and Mathias kicked him away hard enough to send him skidding across the street. Mathias raised his sword again. Darla climbed out of the broken wall behind him, dust falling from her shoulders, blood at the corner of her mouth, eyes fixed on him. Her grip tightened around her blade. Steam hissed along the weapon's spine as it shifted, ready to throw her forward again. Then she moved.

She returned his earlier strike with one of her own, flashing in as quickly as the blade would

allow. Steel rang against steel. “I wanted to believe in you!” she shouted. Mathias blocked, but the force of her charge drove him back a step. “I wanted to believe I was wrong.” Her voice cracked, and that seemed to anger her more than the wound in her side. She struck again, harder. “That not all lizards were like the one who...” “You were wrong!” Mathias roared. The words hit harder than his blade. Darla staggered back half a step, not because she believed him, but because for one awful moment, it sounded like he did. Like every cruel thing she had ever feared had found a voice in the man who had once saved her life.

Then her eyes sharpened. “Then why did you save me?” she demanded. Mathias froze. Darla drove forward again, forcing him to raise his sword. “Why bother? Why put yourself between me and death if this is what you believed?” He had no answer. His blade lifted. Whether to strike or defend, even he did not seem to know anymore. A booming voice split the street before either of them could move. “That is enough.” Mathias stopped instantly. He knew that voice. Everyone did. Brutus Stonehide walked into the cleared street, and the anger on his face was so wrong, so unnatural, that even the night seemed to quiet around him. Brutus was a man built for warmth, laughter, and impossible faith. Seeing fury in him felt like watching a hearth catch fire and burn the house down.

“I thought you were acting strange,” Brutus said. His voice was low, but it carried across the street all the same. “Now I know why.” Mathias did not turn around at first. His sword remained raised, but the strength had gone out of it. The tip wavered. Brutus stopped several paces away. “I have been told enough. Not all, I suspect. Not nearly all. But enough.” His jaw tightened beneath his fur. “I trusted you.” Mathias’s eyes closed. “I broke bread with you, I put my faith in you. I gave you a place beside me when half this city would not even look you in the eye.” He kept going. The sword lowered by an inch. Brutus’s voice hardened. “And you did this.” The blade slipped from Mathias’s hand. It struck the stone with a sound that seemed far too small for everything it meant.

Mathias fell to his knees. The fight went out of him all at once, leaving only the shape of a man

who had been holding himself upright long after he had already broken. “You’re right,” Mathias said. His voice was hollow. “I betrayed you.” No one moved. “I betrayed all of you.” He bowed his head lower. “You never should have believed in me.” The others recovered slowly, closing in with their weapons still ready. No one trusted the surrender yet. Not fully. Not after what he had already done.

Alister stood with one hand pressed against his wounded side, breathing hard but watching Mathias carefully. “So you yield?”

Mathias did not answer at first. He only knelt there before the dropped sword, staring down at his own hands. Then he spoke so softly that Darla almost missed it. “Am I the monolith of my people?”

Darla’s grip tightened around her blade. For one terrible moment, she wanted to say yes. Everything in her that had been shaped by old wounds, old stories, and the memory of her father’s death reached for the answer. Yes. This was what she had feared. This was what she had always suspected waited beneath the scales. Betrayal. Violence. Blood. Then she remembered Mathias moving without hesitation.

Remembered him putting himself between her and a bullet. Not as a performance. Not as a trick. Not because anyone was watching. He had simply moved because someone had needed saving, and in that moment, he had not cared what she was to him.

The thought died in her throat. Darla lowered her blade by an inch. “I don’t know what to think anymore,” she admitted. Mathias went still. Then, slowly, he raised his head. Tears streaked down his scaled face, catching faintly in the hospital lights. “I give up,” he said. No one moved too quickly. No one trusted surrender from a man who had just tried to cut his way into a hospital. But Mathias did not reach for his sword. He did not tense to run. He only looked up at Darla with the expression of a man who had finally run out of lies to stand behind. “But please,” he said. “My little Priscilla. She has done nothing.” Darla’s ears lowered. “Hate me,” Mathias continued, voice breaking. “Hate me with every fiber of your being if you must. I have earned it. But leave her out of this. Please.”

Darla softened despite herself, not with forgiveness, but with confusion. The plea did not fit the shape of the monster part of her had wanted him to be. “Is that why you did all this?” she asked. Mathias closed his eyes. Then he nodded. “I will tell you everything,” he said. “Everything I know. Everything I have done.” His voice became smaller. “So long as you keep her safe. Away from his hands.” Bram stepped forward carefully and restrained him. Mathias did not resist. He only bowed his head as the cuffs locked around his wrists.

Brutus watched in silence. For a moment, the old bear looked like he might say nothing at all. Then he spoke, his voice calm, but wounded in a way anger could not hide. “Little Cilla is with my wife, there is no better place for her now.” Brutus said. Mathias’s shoulders shook once. Brutus looked down at him, and the disappointment in his eyes was almost worse than rage. “I only wish you had placed the same faith in me that I placed in you.” Mathias could not answer. Brutus turned and walked away without another word. He was still angry. Everyone could see that. The anger sat heavily in every step, in the set of his shoulders, in the way he did not look back. But with that single promise, he had understood enough. Whatever Mathias had done, whatever punishment waited for him, Brutus would not fail the child. He would keep Priscilla safe. Even now.

Peacekeeping arrived shortly after. They moved quickly and quietly, restraining Mathias further while making sure no prying eyes had gathered near the cleared street. There would be no public spectacle. Not yet. No crowd, no shouted charges, no chance for rumor to become the first official record. His crimes were clear enough to act on, but too dangerous to announce carelessly. Mathias did not resist as they secured him. He did not raise his head when they led him away. A transport descended from above, its lights cutting through the dark, and within moments he was flown directly toward the Island.

Fiora watched him go with horror in her eyes. She did not see an evil man. That would have been easier. She saw a desperate one. A man who had tried to protect everything he cared about and had

somehow become the thing threatening it. A man who had told himself one more compromise would be the last, one more favor would keep someone safe, one more betrayal could be endured if it bought time. She saw herself. “I…” Fiora’s voice caught. “How could…” The words died in her throat.

She looked toward the others. Darla stood rigid, her sword lowered but not yet sheathed. Bram’s face had gone heavy with sorrow. Alister watched the departing transport with a tired, unreadable expression. Cassian was silent, his anger folded tightly behind his eyes. No one was happy. No one looked victorious.

Fiora took one step forward. For one terrifying second, the truth rose inside her. Scratch. The documents. The favors. The way she had let him stay in her room because she was too afraid to force the matter into the light. The words nearly came out. Then she stopped. Not now. Maybe that was cowardice. Maybe it was common sense. She could not tell anymore. But even if this was not the moment to confess, one thing had become painfully clear. If Scratch was still in her room, then it was time for him to go. Fiora turned and ran before anyone noticed. The others were too distracted by the transport, by Mathias, by the weight of what had just happened. None of them called after her.

A few days passed. Mathias was not given a proper cell. Not yet. He was held in a secure room on the Island, somewhere between an interrogation chamber and a temporary cage, watched closely enough that even breathing felt accounted for. The Port had not announced the arrest publicly. They could not. Not until they understood how far the damage reached. When Cassian entered, he looked almost like himself again. Almost. The clean posture had returned. The careful expression. The smugness was absent, but the shape of the administrator had rebuilt itself over the brother who had wept in the hospital. He sat across from Mathias with calm precision, placing a thin folder on the table between them.

“I have come to speak with you,” Cassian said. Mathias did not answer. He only looked at him.

The question was obvious enough that Cassian did not pretend to miss it. “Priscilla is safe,” he said.

Mathias's shoulders loosened by a fraction. "For now, she remains with the Stonehides. However, I have considered several options. Keeping her in Porta Nexus may be dangerous. If Viktor Scathe's reach is as long as you believe, then proximity is a liability." Cassian folded his hands on the table. "It may be better to relocate her somewhere farther away. A Union world, perhaps. Or a Coalition one."

Mathias looked up sharply. Cassian did not soften the next part. "That would mean you would not be able to see her." "I don't care," Mathias said at once. The speed of the answer seemed to satisfy Cassian more than any plea could have.

"Do it," Mathias said, quieter now. "Take her anywhere he cannot reach." "Very well." Cassian opened the folder, though his eyes remained on Mathias. "Now enlighten me." Mathias said nothing.

"Your daughter is blameless, So I will not use her as a shield. She will be protected whether you cooperate or not." Cassian continued. Something in Mathias's face cracked slightly at that. Cassian's voice cooled. "But someone did use her. Someone placed her between you and every oath you ever swore." Mathias closed his eyes. "Was it Viktor Scathe?" Cassian asked. "The true perpetrator, so to speak?" For a long moment, Mathias only breathed. Then he opened his eyes again. "Yes," he said.

Cassian's expression did not change, but the room seemed to sharpen around the word. Mathias lowered his head, and then, at last, he began to tell him everything.

Jax sat beside Elaina's hospital bed, holding her hand while she slept. It was strange, being on this side of the room. Not long ago, she had been the one watching over him, sitting beside his bed with that serious expression of hers, pretending her concern was merely professional. Now she lay pale against the pillows, bandaged, bruised, and breathing steadily only because Lucy and the AID-E units had reached her in time. Jax kept his fingers wrapped around hers as if letting go might make the whole thing less certain. Elaina stirred. At first, it was only a faint shift of her hand. Then her eyelids fluttered, and her eyes opened weakly. For a moment, she stared at the ceiling without understanding where she was. Then her gaze drifted toward him.

“Callum…” she whispered. Jax went still. Her brow furrowed faintly. “You… why are you…” He gripped her hand a little tighter. “You are a stubborn idiot,” he said, voice low and serious. “You should not have gone in alone.” Elaina blinked at him. She looked too weak to argue properly, which may have been the only reason she did not immediately try. “Why are you here, then?” she asked. Jax sighed. “Because I am a stubborn fool too.” A faint shadow of recognition crossed her face. Her eyes searched his, unfocused but not empty. “Did I say something? When I was…” she asked. “It does not matter.” “So I did.” She said. Jax looked away. Elaina would have smiled if she had the strength. Instead, she only let out a tired breath. “Coward.” “Yes,” he said quietly. “At least today.” That made her look at him again.

He cleared his throat before the silence could become too honest. “The doctor says you can leave in a few weeks if you pace yourself. Though I may arrange a little payback and make them keep you longer.” “You would abuse medical authority against me?” “I would abuse several kinds of authority against you.” Her eyes narrowed weakly. “I need to…” “You need to rest,” Jax cut in. “So rest. Like you forced me to.” Elaina’s hand shifted slightly under his. “You are a stupid bastard, you know that?” “I do.” He stood, but did not let go immediately. For a moment, he looked like he wanted to say something else. Something older than the hospital room. Something neither of them had touched properly in years. Instead, he leaned down and placed a kiss against her forehead. Elaina closed her eyes. Then he left before either of them could make the wound any deeper.

The Military Division moved before dawn. A small team was assembled under quiet orders, too few to draw attention and too heavily armed to be mistaken for routine patrol. They flew low over the forgotten edges of the crime sector, engines muffled, lights dimmed, keeping above the broken streets and out of the territories where the gangs still watched for anything that looked like a raid. No one wanted another fight tonight. Not unless they found the one they had come for.

Mathias’s information led them into the Forgotten Depths. Following the map he had provided,

they descended toward the underground warehouse where Viktor had been keeping his people. They found the door. They did not knock. The Military team breached it in one clean motion, weapons raised, bodies moving with practiced discipline. For half a second, every soldier expected gunfire, blades, shouting, something. Nothing came. The warehouse was empty. Not abandoned for long. That was the worst part. The place still carried the warmth of recent use.

Food had been left scattered across tables. Cups sat half-full. Papers were strewn across the floor, some torn, some burned at the edges, some abandoned in the middle of being packed away. Broken components lay beside stripped machines, as if someone had ripped out whatever mattered and left the rest behind. One of the soldiers lowered his weapon just slightly. “Damn it,” he muttered. “Where have they gone?” The lieutenant in command, a brown bear with a heavy coat and a heavier stare, did not answer immediately. His eyes moved across the room, taking in every overturned chair and missing crate. “Recently,” he said at last. “They left recently.”

From the entrance behind them, Kloe stepped inside with several cats at her back. The Military soldiers glanced over, tense by instinct, but the lieutenant only gave her a short nod. Whatever arrangement had brought them here, neither side looked fully pleased by it. Kloe ignored the looks and scanned the warehouse. “Even if they fled, they may have left a trail.” The bear lieutenant turned toward her. “Then find it.” Kloe’s tail flicked once, but she did not argue. “Gladly.”

Chapter 37: One Small Favor

A few weeks passed with nothing of note happening, but the mood inside Special Operations Headquarters never really lifted. If anything, the quiet made it worse. Fiora felt it every time she walked through the halls, in the way voices dropped sooner than they used to, in the way everyone kept working without the old chaotic spark that had made the place feel alive when the division first formed. They had been winning, technically. They had saved Elaina. Saved Bram's Family. They had arrested Mathias. They had found Viktor’s warehouse. They had protected Priscilla. They kept succeeding, one impossible problem after another, and somehow every victory only peeled back another layer of something awful underneath. Nothing felt solved. Nothing felt lighter. It was like the whole building had learned how bad the city really was and could not forget it.

Fiora missed the way things used to feel. She missed the noise, the stupid arguments, the feeling that Special Operations was a messy accident that might somehow become something great if everyone kept tripping forward together. Now it felt suffocating, like the walls were full of secrets and everyone was waiting for the next disaster to announce itself.

She had searched for Scratch after Mathias's arrest, but her room had been empty. No rat under the desk, no smug little grin on her bed, no irritating voice calling her Fera like they were friends. He must have left while she was out. That should have made her feel better. It did not. Eventually, Fiora could not stand it anymore. She left headquarters without a word, telling herself that a quick bite to eat might calm her down, or at least give her something else to think about. She had barely made it down the street before a familiar voice called from an alley, casual and irritating in a way that made her stomach twist. "Hey, Fera."

Fiora turned, and the moment she saw Scratch standing there half in shadow, grinning like nothing had changed, rage took over. She ran at him without hesitation, knife already in her hand. Scratch's grin vanished as he stumbled backward and raised both hands, finally seeming to understand that she was not playing along this time. "Whoa, whoa, What's the big deal, friend?" he said. "No!" Fiora screamed. Scratch blinked. "No what?" "No more!" She yelled. "Oh, come on, Fera," he said, trying to soften his voice into the old familiar shape. "Just one more..." He said. "No more favors!" The words tore out of her so loudly that Scratch flinched. For the first time, the friendly mask slipped completely. His eyes narrowed, and the grin became something thin and ugly. "You think you can just walk away?" he asked, voice dropping. "We had a deal. I haven't said nothing. I kept quiet. You helped me in harmless ways. Little things. Things nobody even noticed."

Fiora's grip shook around the knife, but all she could see was Mathias on his knees, broken under the weight of everything he had told himself he had to do. One more compromise. One more betrayal. One more terrible thing that would somehow keep someone safe until there was nothing left but the damage. "I'm done," Fiora said. Scratch stared at her for a moment, then smiled again because he had found the bruise and knew exactly how to press it. "Then I'll tell your little friends." The threat hit where he meant it to. Fiora's expression twitched, fear flashing across her face before she could hide it. Scratch noticed and relaxed, confidence creeping back into him.

“There it is,” he said softly. “You don’t mean that. You’ve just got cold feet.” He stepped back, still watching her. “I’ll let you think about it. Meet me at the docks. Two-thirty in the morning. Help me with this, and I swear, you really won’t see me again.” He turned and walked away before she could find the courage to chase him. The moment he disappeared, Fiora’s legs gave out. She sank to the ground in the alley, knife still clenched in one hand, breath coming too fast. She could not keep doing this. She would not cave to him again. She knew that now. But knowing it did not make the next part any easier, because if she did not help him, then she had to tell someone, and every possible face that came to mind made the fear worse.

Darla would hate her. Fiora could already hear the voice her mind invented, cold and disappointed. You’re just like that evil lizard man. I can’t believe I ever thought you were cool. Alister would see through every excuse before she even finished making it. Jax would call her an idiot, and he would be right. Bram was worse. Bram would not even need to yell. He would just look hurt, and that thought nearly made her curl in on herself.

For several minutes, Fiora sat there and thought harder than she had ever thought about anything in her life. Not in the usual wandering way, not jumping from one bright stupid idea to another, but really thinking, forcing herself to follow the fear all the way to the end. If she told Darla, Darla might hate her. If she told Alister, he might never trust her again. If she told Bram, she might not be able to stand what his face did afterward. But there was one person who would not waste time being hurt first. One person who knew how to take something ugly.

A few hours later, Fiora arrived at Internal Investigations. She walked through the halls with a terrified kind of purpose, ignoring every suspicious look thrown her way. By the time she reached Cassian’s office, she did not knock. She opened the door and stepped inside. Cassian sat behind his desk, looking up with interest, almost as if he had been waiting for something strange to happen and was pleased that the day had finally delivered. “I admit, Fenleigh,” he said, folding his hands together,

“I never expected you to seek me out, let alone so formally.” Fiora sat down across from him, pale and serious in a way that made the amusement fade from his face by a fraction. “We need to talk,” she said.

“Then do so.” He said. Fiora opened her mouth, and everything came out wrong. “This stupid rat guy is… and I’m an evil traitor, and I did things, but not big things. I mean, maybe big things. I don’t know. I’m a bad guy, and I think I’m going to jail, and I probably deserve it, and...” “Fenleigh.” Cassian’s voice cut through the panic cleanly. Fiora stopped, gripping the arms of the chair as if the room might start spinning without her permission. His expression had changed. The amusement was gone now, replaced by something sharper and far more careful. “I want you to take a deep breath,” he said. “Then explain slowly. Can you do that?” Fiora nodded. She breathed in, then out, then tried again.

This time, she told him everything. She told him about Scratch, about the favors, about the documents, about the pressure, about how he always said this would be the last one and somehow never meant it. She told him she had let him into her room and hidden him there, that Darla had knocked and she had lied, that she had been too afraid to say anything because every time she thought about confessing, Scratch’s threat felt louder than her own conscience. And once the first truth broke loose, the rest followed after it. She told him who she really was.

Cassian did not interrupt. That was almost worse. He simply listened, eyes widening little by little, not with panic, but with the rare look of a man watching a puzzle rearrange itself into a shape he had not expected. He took in every word, every mistake, every omission she admitted before he could ask. By the time she finished, Fiora felt hollow, like she had poured out everything keeping her upright and had nothing left inside to replace it. Cassian leaned back slowly and rubbed both hands over his face. “Well, I have to hand it to you.” he said at last. Fiora winced. “I always suspected something was off with you,” he continued, lowering his hands and looking at her with reluctant, almost offended admiration. “But this? You had even me fooled.” Fiora swallowed. “Yes. So…” She stood shakily, held both arms out in front of her, and pressed her wrists together. Then she squeezed her eyes shut and

waited for the cuffs.

Cassian said nothing. The silence stretched long enough that Fiora opened one eye. He was not reaching for restraints. He was staring past her, mind visibly moving behind his eyes, pieces sliding into place one after another. A minute passed. Then another. Finally, Cassian sat forward. “Well done, Operative Fenleigh,” he said smoothly. “It appears the mission I assigned you was well placed.” Fiora’s other eye opened. She tilted her head. “What?” Cassian’s smile returned, small and dangerous. “You heard me.” “I really don’t think I did.” She said. “That is unfortunate, because I was being quite clear.” He reached for a blank form from one of his desk drawers and set it in front of him. “From this moment forward, you are a cooperating operative working under Internal Investigations authority in an ongoing effort to apprehend a wanted criminal known as Scratch.”

Fiora stared at him. “From this moment forward?” “Yes. Do try to keep up.” “But before this moment I was…” She argued. “Compromised,” Cassian said. Fiora flinched. He did not soften it, but he did not twist the knife either. “Coerced, frightened, foolish, and in violation of enough regulations to make my afternoon genuinely inconvenient. But you came to me voluntarily before carrying out his next demand, and that gives me something to work with.” Fiora lowered her hands slowly. “So I’m not going to jail?” She asked. “I did not say that.” He said. “I said I have something to work with.” Cassian picked up a pen and began writing. “Your prior misconduct will be documented. Carefully. Quietly. In a way that does not allow every ambitious idiot in this building to turn you into a political bonfire before we extract value from the situation.” He explained. “That sounds bad.” She said. “It is bad.” He said. “Oh...”

Cassian looked up from the form. “But it is not irreparable. Not yet.” His eyes sharpened. “Scratch believes you are still afraid of him?” Fiora nodded. “And he gave you a location and time?” “The docks, Two-thirty.” She said. Cassian did not answer right away. His gaze drifted back toward the form, but Fiora could tell he was no longer really reading it. He was somewhere else now, turning her

confession into angles, routes, risks, and paperwork she could not begin to understand. Finally, he set the pen down. “Comply.” He said. Fiora blinked. “What?” “Do as he asked.” He ordered. “What? Why would I...” “Do not question it,” Cassian said, standing. “Just do it. We will make use of your blunders.” “That is not an explanation.” She said. “No,” he said, already moving toward the door. “It is an instruction.” Before Fiora could gather enough panic to argue properly, she found herself ushered out of the office and back into the hall. The door closed behind her with a soft, final click.

For a while, she just stood there. Then she sat on the nearest bench outside Internal Investigations, staring at nothing while officers passed her by with suspicious glances. Cassian was a schemer. Everyone knew that. If anyone could turn this into a trap, it was him. That was why she had come to him. At least, she thought it was. Now she was not so sure. Going back to base did not feel right. She could not walk through Special Operations Headquarters and pretend nothing had changed, not with Scratch’s meeting waiting for her in the dark and Cassian’s plan hidden somewhere behind that smug little door. So she drifted through the city instead, eventually ending up on a park bench as the world moved around her. People talked. Streetlights came on. Vendors closed up. Children were called home. Life kept going as if she had not just confessed to being a traitor and been told to commit one more betrayal on purpose.

By the time night fell, Fiora felt like she had been waiting for days. She made her way toward the docks with every step heavier than the last. The air near the water was cold and damp, carrying the smell of fuel, old rope, fish, and metal. Dock lights reflected in long, broken lines across the dark surface. Fiora reached the place Scratch had named and stood there alone, arms wrapped around herself, trying not to look as frightened as she felt. Ten minutes passed. Then twenty. Then thirty. No Scratch. For one awful moment, she wondered if he had caught on. Maybe he had seen her go to Internal Investigations. Maybe he had already run. Maybe Cassian had told her to comply because he expected Scratch to vanish and now she had ruined everything without even getting a chance to fix it.

Then a shape stumbled out from between two storage buildings. Scratch. He was carrying too many bags, more than he could handle comfortably. They hung from his shoulders and arms, heavy enough to drag his posture crooked, jingling with the unmistakable sound of clanking metal. His usual grin was gone. His eyes darted from roofline to dockside to the water and back again, like he expected the shadows to grow hands. “Good,” he said, breathless. “I was afraid they might have noticed. Come on, Fera, help me.” He shoved one of the bags into her hands before she could answer and started toward the dock.

Fiora nearly dropped it. “Is this… credits?” “Yeah,” Scratch said, not looking back. “You can have some if you move faster.” The bag was full of coins. Not a few. Not enough for a meal or some quick bribe. Enough that Fiora suddenly understood why he looked so panicked. “You’re running.”

“I was wrong,” Scratch muttered. “Pissed off too many people. Got too greedy. Got too visible. Whatever you want to call it, I gotta go.” He said. “Go where?” He stopped so abruptly that she nearly walked into him. For a moment, he did not turn around. When he finally did, something strange passed over his face. Not regret exactly. Not honesty either. More like exhaustion pretending it had become truth.

“I was born in the gutter, you know,” he said. “Didn’t have some old family name, didn’t have a division, didn’t have anyone holding my hand and telling me I could be better. I had mud, rats, knives, and people stepping over me like I was already dead.” He adjusted the bags on his shoulder, the coins clinking together. “I was saving. Scraping. Doing what I had to do. And now I’m out.” He explained. Fiora stared at him. “You’ll never hear from me again, Fera,” Scratch said. “I mean it this time.” He started walking again toward a small boat already waiting at the end of the dock. “But you’re staying on-world?” Fiora asked, confused. “Until all this nonsense calms down. Can’t even go near a spaceport without getting flagged.” He gave a strained laugh. “But when I can, I’m gone for good. New name. New world. Maybe a nice coat. I’ll finally be someone.”

Fiora looked down at the bag in her hands, then back at him. “How many people did you step on to get there?” Scratch’s expression tightened, then he forced a smile. “Aw, come on. Don’t be like that.” He laughed. “How many?” She pressed. “I know I made you do a lot,” he said, lowering his voice into something coaxing. “But think about all the things I did for you too. I kept quiet. I protected your secret. I gave you time.” He stepped onto the dock and waved her closer. “It all worked out, didn’t it?” Fiora placed one of the bags onto the boat. Her fingers lingered on the rough canvas for a second. “And what do you want from me?” She asked. “Protection,” Scratch said quickly. “Not far. Just to the other side of the water. Once I’m there, you’re done. I swear it.” She looked at him for a long moment.

Then Scratch stepped onto the boat. Figures appeared around them.

Kloe dropped from above first, landing between Scratch and the dock exit with her blade still sheathed but ready. More cats emerged from the shadows along the warehouses, roofs, and mooring posts, half the Intelligence Division closing in without a sound. NoxLux walked out from the opposite side, their covered eyes turned toward Scratch with identical calm. Scratch froze. “What?” He lunged for the boat’s motor, yanking at it in a frantic attempt to start the engine. Before it could catch, a horn sounded across the water. Scratch looked up. Larger boats glided out of the darkness, cutting across the dock lanes and blocking every route away from shore. Their lights flared on one after another, turning the water around him silver and white. “No,” Scratch whispered.

Kloe stepped closer. “Step off the boat.” Scratch turned to Fiora, wild-eyed now. “Well, don’t just stand there. Protect me!” For the first time all night, Fiora understood what Cassian had meant.

Not because he had explained it. Not because he had been kind enough to warn her. Because the trap had closed, and Scratch was doing exactly what Cassian must have known he would do. He was demanding one more favor. Fiora stepped back from the boat and walked to the others. “No,” she said.

Scratch stared at her. “I will not do anything else for you,” Fiora said. Her voice shook, but it did not break. “You’re going to jail.” His face twisted. “You little...” “Even if I’m joining you right after.”

The cats moved before Scratch could run. He tried anyway, scrambling toward the edge of the boat with a bag still caught around one shoulder, but there was nowhere left to go. Kloe struck first, knocking his arm aside. Two more cats caught him low. Nox intercepted his attempt to slip between them, while Lux somehow appeared exactly where his next dodge should have carried him. Within seconds, Scratch hit the dock face-first. He cursed. He twisted. He tried to flatten himself, tried to kick, tried to wriggle free with the practiced desperation of someone who had escaped cuffs before. This time, they were ready. Cuffs locked around his wrists. Then around his ankles. Then another chain bound those restraints together, leaving him furious, folded, and very much trapped.

"You won't be slipping out of these," Cynthia said. Fiora looked over in surprise. Cynthia stood nearby in full Intelligence uniform, her posture straighter than Fiora had ever seen it, her expression professional in a way that made her almost unrecognizable from the woman Fiora had met in the dirt. For a second, Fiora could only stare. The disguise had been so complete that seeing the real officer beneath it felt almost unfair. Scratch lifted his head just enough to glare at her. "You think this makes you clean?" he spat. "You think they're going to forgive you because you handed them me?" Fiora's throat tightened. For a moment, she could not answer. Then she looked at the cuffs, the bags of credits, the cats, the blocked water, and finally Scratch's furious face. "No, I don't." She said quietly.

Scratch's expression twisted. "Curse you, Fera. I'll get you for this. I'll tell everyone. I'll make your life a living hell." He thrashed against the restraints as the cats hauled him up, every movement violent and useless. "You'll pay for crossing me!" Fiora did not move as he was dragged away. His voice kept echoing across the docks, growing smaller but not softer, until the cats pulled him out of sight. Most of Intelligence left with him. Only Cynthia lingered, watching Fiora with a look she could not quite read. "I had no clue Cassian had you working this deep undercover," Cynthia said at last. Then she smiled, a little sheepishly. "I misjudged you. I thought you were just a silly idiot." Fiora froze. The praise landed worse than an insult would have.

“Well, I…” She looked down, then back up, not sure what lie she was supposed to tell or what truth she was allowed to keep. “Sure.” Cynthia accepted that with a nod, apparently hearing confidence where Fiora had only managed confusion. “Good work, Fenleigh.” Then she turned and followed the others. Fiora stood alone for only a moment before NoxLux approached from the edge of the dock. Nox’s covered eyes tilted toward her. “Mr. Sterros would like a word now that the mission is over.” Lux smiled. “Great job!” Fiora took a slow breath and followed them. Internal Investigations felt different late at night. Quieter. Colder. The usual movement of operatives had thinned to a few shadows behind glass doors and the distant scrape of paperwork being filed by people who probably never slept.

NoxLux led her back to Cassian’s office and left her there without another word. Cassian stood by the window with his back to her, looking down at the city below. He did not turn around right away. The silence stretched long enough to make Fiora’s stomach twist. She shifted on her feet, waiting for the trick, the punishment, the part where he said the word “operative” had only been a temporary convenience and now the cuffs were waiting after all. “I think,” Cassian said at last, still facing the window, “I would like some insight.” Fiora blinked. “Insight?” “What is the Port to someone like you?” She looked down.

For once, she did not answer quickly. The question felt too big to catch with the first stupid thought that jumped into her head. So she took her time and tried to tell the truth. “When I first got here, I thought it was a cesspool.” she said, Cassian’s shoulders moved slightly. Maybe amusement. Maybe not. “But then I saw more,” Fiora continued. “I saw people who cared. People who didn’t. Good people. Bad people. People trying really hard and people making everything worse because it was easier.” Her voice softened. “I saw Special Operations.” Cassian finally turned slightly, though not fully. “And what do you think now? Would you still like to leave? Join another, more idealistic nation? Pretend this place is not worth the trouble?” he asked.

Fiora sighed. “I love the Port,” she said. The words surprised her a little, even though she meant

them. “I love Special Operations. I love the people who do everything they can to make this world better, even when it keeps getting worse.” She looked up at him. “Even you, in your creepy way.” Cassian turned at last. “Creepy?” he asked, one brow raised. “I prefer tactful.” “You would.” She said. He laughed softly, and for the first time that night, some of the tension loosened from the room.

“I believe that is the answer I was hoping to hear from you, Fenleigh.” He walked back to his desk and rested one hand on the folder there. “You may go home now. I will handle the rest.” Fiora’s eyes widened. “What? Just like that?”

“No.” Her ears sank. “I said you may go home,” Cassian replied. “I did not say the issue was solved.” “But what about…” She looked toward her own wrists, then toward the door. “What I did?” Cassian studied her for a moment. “I will not punish you for your crimes,” he said. Fiora stared at him. “Not because they do not matter,” he continued. “They do. Not because you were clever. You were not, and certainly not because this has become convenient for me, though I admit that helped.” His expression sharpened, but his voice remained calm. “I will not punish you because you stopped before you became like the captain. You came forward before the final favor. You chose this city before fear finished making your decisions for you.” Fiora’s vision blurred.

Cassian’s gaze softened by the smallest amount. “You care about the Port. More importantly, you care about the people living in it. I will always be on the side of those who do.” “I don’t understand,” Fiora said, her voice small. Cassian sighed, but there was a smile beneath it. Cassian’s expression settled again, more serious now. “Go home, Fenleigh. I will do everything I can to fix this.” Fiora backed toward the door slowly, as if moving too quickly might break whatever impossible thing had just happened. Her heart fluttered with disbelief, relief, and a fear that had not fully learned how to leave yet. Was it really over? She stopped with one hand near the door.

Cassian watched her carefully. “Will you be telling the others?” The question was softer than

she expected. Not an order. Not even pressure. More like he needed to know how to frame the story around the choice she was already making. Fiora looked down. “Yes,” she said after a moment. “But not yet. I don’t have the words. Reasonable.” Cassian nodded, She looked back at him, eyes wet now. “Thank you, Cassian.” The words were quiet, but she meant them completely. “You are very welcome,”

Chapter 38: Vote for Morvin

The election was nearing its end. The debates still happened, technically, but most of the candidates had abandoned the idea of changing anyone's mind in public. The real campaigning had moved into private speeches, closed meetings, neighborhood appearances, and carefully worded final pleas aimed at the groups still undecided enough to matter. Garrick and Morvin remained neck and neck. No one could say with confidence which way the city would lean once the polls officially opened in a few weeks. The final vote would decide the future of Porta Nexus, or at least decide which person would be blamed for it.

Nothing had been said publicly about Mathias's arrest. Nothing had been said about Elaina Kestral's hospitalization either. To the city, the election just continued. Fiora skipped down the street toward Special Operations Headquarters with something clutched carefully in both hands. She had bought it from a stall on the way back, and the more she looked at it, the more certain she became that it was exactly what the headquarters needed. She hurried into the mess hall and set it on one of the counters with great ceremony, then began nudging it slightly left, then slightly right, as if calibrating a delicate radio. Bram turned from the stove mid-stir. Today's meal was Risottish, thick and fragrant

enough to fill the room with a warmth the building badly needed.

"What have you got there, Fenleigh?" he asked. Fiora stepped back proudly so he could see it properly. It looked almost like a dreamcatcher, though not quite. Instead of feathers and beads, it had small rings made of old portal wire, bits of colored glass, and tiny suspended prisms that caught the light whenever the air moved. At the center was a thin spiral of coppery metal wrapped around something that might have been crystal, or might have been polished junk someone had convincingly lied about. Bram's expression softened with recognition. "Whoa. I have not seen one of those in years. Where did you get a reality catcher?"

"The lady at the stall sold it to me, She said all my dreams would come true." Fiora said confidently. Jax, who had been passing through the hall with a box of tools, stopped just long enough to scoff. He set the box down with a dull clank. "You got scammed. Those do not do a damned thing." Fiora puffed up immediately. "You don't know that." "I know several things. That is among them." Bram gave the device another fond look. "That is not what Nexians of the past believed. People used to hang them near windows or over doorways. They believed that if you focused on the future you wanted and believed hard enough, the catcher could snare the reality where that future came true." Fiora's eyes brightened. "See?"

"Oh, please," Jax said. "The future does not come to you on hopes and dreams. You build it." Bram stirred the Risottish again, unbothered. "That is one way of looking at it." "It is the correct way of looking at it. Besides, even if that ever had any basis in reality, it would not anymore." Fiora frowned. "Why not?" "Because of that damned Emperor." Bram looked over, confused. "The Multiversal Empire one?" "Who else do people mean when they say that damned Emperor?" Jax asked. "There are several candidates," Alister said, walking in and lowering himself into a chair with the careful posture of someone still pretending his injuries were less annoying than they were. "Some of

them would be quite offended to be left out."

Jax ignored him. "Whatever he did during Project Deforestation fundamentally changed the multiverse. It does not behave the way it used to. Probability, outcomes, branching paths, all of it was altered. So even if something like that once worked, it would not work now." Fiora stared at the reality catcher, then back at him. "So you're saying Natasha didn't save the multiverse good enough?" She said. Alister sighed. "Oh, so you know that name, but no one else's." "She's famous." "Commander Cyrus is famous. The Coalition would tell you he and the Heart were the decisive factor, and that Natasha's role was largely Union propaganda. I was there in the room for Aion's interview myself."

Bram cleared his throat gently. "I think this world's politics are complicated enough for me already." "A wise instinct," Alister said. "Cherish it." Fiora grabbed the reality catcher protectively before Jax could insult it again. "Well, I still like it." "How much did you pay for it?" Alister asked.

Fiora stood straighter. "Five hundred credits." Every eye in the room turned toward her. Even Bram stopped stirring. "Fenleigh," he began carefully. "You got scammed," Jax said again, with the calm certainty of a man announcing the weather. "I did not get scammed!" Fiora snapped, cheeks puffing out. "You'll see. I'm going to put all my power into it, and then Garrick will win, and we'll all get promotions, and Bram will propose to me..." She said the last part under her breath. Bram blinked.

Fiora froze. The room went very quiet. She cleared her throat loudly and raised both hands toward the reality catcher as if nothing had happened. "Anyway."

Alister leaned back in his chair, deeply pleased. "No, no. Continue." "I'm focusing!" Fiora said, closing her eyes and thrusting her hands dramatically toward the device. "Do not interrupt the sacred Nexian ritual." Jax lifted his box of tools. "The sacred Nexian ritual of losing five hundred credits."

Fiora strained harder, arms trembling as if invisible power were pouring out of her and into the little rings of portal wire. "Reality! Hear me! Bring us the good outcome!" She demanded. Bram returned to

stirring with a faint smile. “Well, I suppose it cannot hurt.”

In the square of Founders Ward, a stage had been set up beneath rows of banners and flickering campaign lights. The ward had seen better days, though someone had clearly tried to make it presentable for the cameras. Fresh cloth covered old damage. Bright signs hung over cracked stone, urging citizens to vote, to believe, to rebuild. Above it all, Morvin looked down from his airship with open disgust. “Do I truly have to speak here?” he asked. One of his aides stood beside him with a tablet clutched tightly in both hands, already braced for the question. “Data suggests this is a base you cannot afford to lose, sir. Not after the deportations.” Morvin sighed as if the voters themselves had personally inconvenienced him. “Yes, yes. Tragedy, outreach, healing. I know the words.” The aide wisely said nothing.

Below, the crowd had already begun to form near the stage. Some came because they supported him. Some came because they hated him and wanted him to hear it. Most came because this was the final stretch of the election, and every speech now felt like it might decide the city’s future. Through that crowd walked Viktor. He was alone and dressed nothing like himself. No sharp intimidation. No theatrical edge. He wore a button-up shirt, modest glasses, and his hair had been arranged in a softer, messier way that made him look more nervous academic than criminal broker. Even his posture had changed. He moved with a slight uncertainty, shoulders drawn in just enough to seem harmless. A man in the crowd noticed him almost immediately. “Who are you voting for?” the man asked.

It sounded less like conversation and more like an opening challenge. His tone carried the energy of someone ready to explain, in great detail, why any answer but his own was proof of civic failure. Viktor turned toward him with a fake nervous smile. “Who, me? Why, Morvin, of course.”

The man studied him for half a second, then nodded in approval and turned back toward the stage.

Viktor’s smile lingered a moment longer than it should have. This speech may have been aimed at Founders Ward, but everyone would be watching. Spec Ops from headquarters, half-listening over

meals and paperwork. Aviation from their stations above, as they had during the debates. Reporters, division heads, campaign staff, undecided voters, and everyone who still wanted to believe the election could fix what the city had become.

Morvin descended not long after. His airship lowered with polished elegance, casting a shadow over the square as the crowd reacted in pieces. Some cheered. Others booed, especially those who remembered the Siege correctly and had not forgiven him for the failures wrapped around it. Morvin took both reactions with practiced ease, waving as if applause and hatred were simply different dialects of attention. He stepped onto the stage, crossed to the podium, and adjusted the microphone with the impatience of a man eager to finish so he could leave. “People of Founders Ward,” Morvin began, his voice carrying across the square. “What happened here was devastating.” The words were correct.

That was the problem.

They sounded hollow, like he had memorized the shape of grief without ever learning its weight. He spoke of restoration, of dignity, of returning peace to the city. He mentioned the pain of displacement and the need for order, but only in the broadest strokes, as if the deportations were an unfortunate weather event rather than a policy people in the crowd still remembered in their bones.

Viktor watched from below, hands folded politely in front of him. Morvin continued, warming into familiar territory. Garrick was reckless. Garrick represented uncertainty. Garrick had allowed dangerous forces to rise while hiding behind noble words and unfinished promises. Porta Nexus did not need experiments, Morvin insisted. It needed stability. It needed experience. It needed someone who had already guided the city through danger before.

A few people cheered. A few shouted back. Morvin lifted one hand, not to calm them, but to rise above them. Viktor’s eyes moved across the crowd instead of the stage. He watched which lines landed. Which ones angered. Which ones stirred the people who wanted to be reassured more than they wanted to be told the truth. Then Morvin leaned closer to the microphone. “And to those who say this city has

forgotten you," he said, voice swelling with sudden performance, "I say this: under my administration, no ward, no citizen, and no family will be abandoned to chaos." For a moment, the square held its breath.

Viktor smiled. Morvin was starting to trail off now, drifting deeper into the same familiar promises wrapped in longer, more flowery language. Restoration. Stability. Responsibility. The words moved through the square like expensive curtains hiding a rotten wall. Viktor lifted one hand to his ear comm. "How are we looking?" "The Military did not modify their patterns," a voice answered. "At least not enough to matter. The rooftops are secure." The speaker stood over the body of a Military Division guard, one boot planted beside the fallen man's weapon. The Hooded Major himself. Weakness had crept into the Port in more ways than one. "Perfect," Viktor said. He slipped away from the crowd and into a narrow alley between two old buildings. For a moment, he was only another nervous voter disappearing from the press of bodies. Then light flashed within the alley, sharp and unnatural.

When he emerged from the other side, he was the Reaper once more. The mask. The black. The terrible shape of a story the city already knew how to fear. "Showtime." He climbed to the rooftop with practiced ease. One of the defeated guards lay near the edge, still breathing but unconscious. Viktor nudged him with his boot, then kicked him over. The body struck the street below with a heavy crack that cut through the edges of Morvin's speech. People screamed. Morvin stopped talking. For one beautiful second, every eye in the square looked the wrong way. Viktor crouched at the roof's edge and drew his multi-tool. It shifted in his hands, metal folding and extending until it became a long sniper rifle. He lowered himself into position, pressed the stock against his shoulder, and looked through the sight.

Morvin's face filled the lens. Small. Pompous. Frightened now, though he was trying not to show it. Viktor's smile widened beneath the mask. "Calva, dear," he said softly. "Are you in position?"

“Sure am,” Calva answered, delighted. “Start the operation.” The city shook. Not from one explosion. From many. Smoke billowed up from different corners of Porta Nexus at once, dark columns rising between towers and wards like the city itself had started bleeding. Sirens began to wail. The crowd in Founders Ward shifted from confusion to panic as every comm, screen, and emergency relay tried to understand which disaster mattered first.

Across the city, near the nearly completed New Civics building, Calva peeked around a corner. Cleatus stood in front of the structure like he had not moved a single inch since planting his feet there. Stubborn. Immovable. Ridiculous, in a way she almost respected. Almost. Calva slowly pulled up a hood, then lifted a mask over her face. The mask of Anarchy Man. She could not help laughing. “Let’s go, boys!” Men in black jackets rushed out behind her, spreading into the street with weapons drawn. They struck the masked Civics troops without warning, crashing into the guards before the formation could settle. The Civics soldiers recovered quickly, raising rifles, drawing swords, and snapping into defensive lines around the building. Calva skipped backward through the first volley like this was all part of a game.

Then she pulled out a rocket launcher. “Ha!” she shouted, bracing it on her shoulder. “Anarchy!” She fired straight at the New Civics building. Cleatus sharpened at once. His whole body seemed to wake from stone. One moment he was standing there, silent and unbothered. The next, his weapon was in his hand, flashing upward as he moved. He cut the missile before it could land. The explosion burst above the street instead, raining fire and smoke across the pavement. Calva leaned back, laughing through the mask. Cleatus turned toward her. He knew the real threat when he saw it. Then he charged.

Viktor adjusted his sights. For a moment, the crosshairs settled on Morvin’s head. The former Chancellor stood frozen behind the podium, eyes wide, mouth half-open around whatever useless words had died there. The crowd below him had started to unravel, people ducking, screaming, shoving

against one another as smoke rose across the city and sirens wailed from too many directions at once.

Viktor could have ended him. One shot. One clean hole through the skull. One more corpse for the election to choke on. Instead, he shifted the barrel. “Not today,” he murmured. He fired. The laser cut through the air in a bright, vicious line. Morvin had no time to react. The shot grazed the side of his face, close enough to burn a line across his cheek and send him collapsing to his knees behind the podium. The crowd dropped with him, panic rippling outward as people threw themselves low to avoid the unseen sniper.

Morvin clutched his face, gasping. Blood ran between his fingers. For one naked second, there was no speech, no posture, no old dignity. Only fear. Morvin’s eyes darted toward his airship, already calculating the shortest path back to safety. He was ready to run. Ready to leave the crowd behind. Ready to abandon Founders Ward the way he had abandoned it before, because beneath every speech about order and sacrifice, Morvin cared more about his own life than anyone else’s. An aide rushed toward him, crouching low as if to usher him away. “Sir, this way,” the aide said.

Morvin grabbed at the man’s sleeve. “Get me to the ship.” The aide leaned close. Then his voice changed. “Not if you want to win.” Morvin froze. He looked at the aide properly for the first time and realized, too late, that this was not one of his people. The clothes were right. The badge was right. The face was forgettable enough to pass. But the eyes were wrong. “What?” Morvin whispered. “Who are...” The false aide smiled politely and leaned closer, speaking directly into his ear. Morvin’s eyes widened. “No,” he breathed. “No, you would not.” The aide whispered again. Whatever he said drained the argument from Morvin’s face. Fear remained, but it changed shape. Not courage. Never courage. Something more useful. Obedience.

The aide pressed a pistol into his hand. “Stand,” he said. Morvin’s fingers closed around the weapon. For a heartbeat, he remained on his knees, blood trailing down his cheek, the crowd screaming around him, every instinct begging him to crawl back to the airship and flee. Then he rose. Slowly.

Painfully. The crowd saw him. The cameras saw him. Morvin lifted the pistol with shaking hands and fired toward the rooftop. He missed. Of course he missed. The shot went wide enough that it was almost embarrassing, but Viktor stood anyway. The Reaper rose from the rooftop like a nightmare deciding it had been seen, cloak snapping in the wind. Then he turned and ran. To the crowd, it looked like retreat.

Morvin stared after him, stunned by the effect. Then he understood enough to use it. “You thought you could silence me!” he shouted, his voice cracking at first before strengthening. “No! No longer!” The square quieted by inches. Morvin raised the pistol higher, blood still streaking one side of his face. “I am not afraid of you, Reaper!” For half a second, no one reacted. Then the crowd roared. It began in scattered pockets, cheers breaking through panic, then spreading until the whole square seemed to catch fire with it. People who had been crawling away moments earlier stood and shouted. Morvin looked out at them, genuinely surprised by the sound. Then, as he always did, he accepted credit for something he had not truly done. He raised both arms. “I will fight for you, Porta Nexus!” he declared. “No more Reapers!” The cheering grew louder. On the rooftop, already slipping out of sight, Viktor smiled beneath the mask.

Half the city saw it happen. The shot. Morvin falling. The Reaper on the rooftop. Morvin rising again with blood on his face and a pistol in his hand. The crowd roaring as if they had just witnessed courage instead of a performance arranged around fear. Inside Special Operations Headquarters, everyone had gone still. The reality catcher swayed gently above the counter, catching little fragments of light while Morvin raised his arms on the broadcast. Darla stood first. “We need to do something.” Before anyone could answer, the broadcast cut away. The image of Morvin vanished, replaced by Aion at the ANN desk. His usual polished confidence was still there, but it had tightened around the edges. Someone off-screen must have been feeding him information too quickly for comfort, because his eyes flicked once toward the side before returning to the camera.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, everyone,” Aion said, voice steady despite the urgency beneath it, “but we have an important announcement. Reports are coming in from across Porta Nexus. The Marrow Collective has launched coordinated raids on multiple Peacekeeping precincts throughout the city, as well as the nearly completed New Civics building.” The room changed at once. Darla’s ears lowered. Bram set his spoon down. Jax, who had only been half-watching from the hall, stepped back into the room. Aion continued. “There are also reports that a small-time vigilante has joined forces with them and is spreading havoc near the New Civics site.” The screen shifted to shaky field footage.

Smoke filled the street outside New Civics. Masked Civics troops formed defensive lines while black-jacketed attackers pressed in from several angles. In the center of the chaos, Cleatus clashed with a figure in a hood and mask, their weapons striking hard enough to throw sparks through the smoke. The mask was unmistakable. Anarchy Man. Alister stood so abruptly his chair scraped against the floor. “What?” On the broadcast, the masked figure swung wildly, laughing as Cleatus drove them back from the building. More footage cut in: black jackets storming a Peacekeeping precinct, another street filling with smoke, a Civics checkpoint burning while people watched from windows, uncertain whether to cheer or hide.

Aion’s voice returned over the images. “We urge everyone to stay inside and avoid your local precincts until further notice. Do not approach active conflict zones. I am confident the Port Authority will keep us safe.” For the first time, that confidence sounded like something he had chosen to say rather than something he fully believed. “Aion out.” The broadcast cut back to Founders Ward. Morvin was still on the stage, still standing, still bleeding, and somehow more confident than he had looked before the shot. The crowd below him chanted his name now, the fear of the attack already twisting into something useful. Darla stared at the screen. Jax cursed under his breath. Fiora looked between Morvin, the footage of New Civics, and Alister, whose face had gone dangerously still.“They’re using your mask,” Bram said quietly. Alister did not look away from the screen. “Yes.”

Chapter 39: Shattered

All of Special Operations stared at the screen in stunned silence. “We need to do something,” Darla said, but when she looked around, Alister was already gone. He was out the door before anyone could call after him, running with everything his body still had toward New City Hall. He would not let someone use his half-baked disguise like this. He had worn that ridiculous mask as a distraction, as an insult, as a stupid little trick to make criminals look the wrong way. He never could have imagined it going this far. How could anyone have? He vaulted onto a rooftop and kept moving, leaping from one building to the next as smoke rose from Peacekeeping precincts across the city. At first, the sight looked terrifying. Pillars of black smoke. Sirens. Shouting in the distance. The kind of chaos that made the whole city feel like it was coming apart.

Then Alister looked closer. One precinct had a broken front door, a single black-jacketed attacker already face-down in the street while Peacekeeping operatives restrained him. Another had smoke pouring from a window, but no real fire. A third had a crowd gathered nearby, frightened but unharmed, watching operatives handle what looked more like a staged disturbance than an assault.

It was too small. That was what bothered him. The attacks were real, but only barely. Real enough to be filmed. Real enough to be reported. Real enough to make people think the Marrow Collective was everywhere at once. But not real enough to matter on their own.

The fires were theater. The war was fake. Which meant the real performance had to be somewhere else. Alister pushed himself harder, teeth gritting as New City Hall came into view through the smoke. The nearly completed building loomed ahead, colder and sharper than the old Civics hall had ever been. In front of it, Cleatus stood locked in battle with the figure wearing Alister's stolen mask. Calva. Most of the black-jacketed men who had come with her were already down, scattered across the street in broken heaps. The remaining few were barely standing. Cleatus had not moved from his post for days, maybe weeks, but the moment the building had been threatened, he had become something else entirely. His mechanical limbs drove him forward with brutal precision, each strike forcing Calva farther from New Civics.

She was laughing. Alister landed hard on the street, sword already drawn. "Take that mask off," he snarled. Calva glanced back at him and brightened beneath the hood. "Ope. Time to go." The remaining attackers stumbled toward her at once. She grabbed the nearest one by the arm, then another, forcing them into a tight cluster as Alister charged. Cleatus moved at the same time, silent and relentless, his blade raised to cut off their escape. For one second, Alister thought they had her. Then Calva pulled a device from inside her coat. It was small, ugly, and wrong-looking, more like something torn from a machine than built for a person. Without hesitation, she slammed it against the back of her own head. A needle-like connector snapped into place at the base of her skull. Alister's eyes widened. He lunged. Cleatus struck. The light took them first.

Calva, the remaining attackers, and the device vanished in a violent flash, leaving only smoke, scorched pavement, and the echo of her laughter behind. Alister slid to a stop where she had been standing, sword still raised. For a moment, he could only stare at the empty space in front of him.

“Impossible,” he breathed. Before he could dwell on it, the city flickered. Holographic screens flashed to life all across the street. Not the normal public displays. Not emergency infrastructure. These were smaller, hidden projectors, mounted in alleys, tucked beneath signs, planted along rooftops and street corners where no one had noticed them until the exact second they became impossible to ignore.

One by one, they lit up across Porta Nexus. The image glitched into focus. The Reaper appeared on every screen. The camera caught him from the side at first. He looked down, one hand rubbing thoughtfully along the chin of his mask, as if framing himself in deep contemplation. It was too staged to be natural. Too careful to be accidental. “I targeted Morvin because I saw him as a coward,” the Reaper said. “A man who would let this city burn so long as he could hide beneath it. A man who would wear leadership like a robe and discard it the moment it became heavy.” He paused. “But perhaps I was wrong.” Across the city, people froze exactly as they had before. In streets. In shops. In transit stations. In homes. Every face turned toward the nearest screen, caught between fear and the terrible need to hear what came next.

“Perhaps the former Chancellor has reflected,” the Reaper continued. “Perhaps, when forced to stand in the open, he found something inside himself after all. Maybe he truly is what this city needs.” He turned slowly toward the camera. “So I will leave him to you.” Then he pointed directly into the lens, as if assigning the city a sacred duty. His other hand curled into a fist, held close to his chest in theatrical conviction. “My attention now turns to my true target. The ones behind everything. The ones whose hands move quietly beneath every disaster, every policy, every little compromise that turns suffering into profit.”

“His true target?” Alister muttered, still staring at the screen. His mind raced through possibilities faster than he could sort them. Garrick. Heskal. New Civics. The Guild. Legislation. No, not obvious enough. Not theatrical enough. The Reaper tilted his head. “They were always on the list,” he said. “But rot must be revealed layer by layer. You begin with the obvious infection. Then you cut

deeper.” The image glitched. For half a second, the mask split into static, then reformed. “The individuals tainting every decision, every division, every move this city makes… that is where the rot has spread from. Mostly.” A small laugh slipped into his voice. “There are others, of course. And they will be next.”

The screens cut out all at once. Just like that, the Reaper was gone. For a moment, the street remained frozen in the aftermath of his voice. Then sound returned in pieces. Distant sirens. Shouts. The groan of damaged metal near New Civics. The uneasy shifting of officers who did not know whether they had just won, lost, or been used. Cleatus had already returned to the front of the building. He planted his feet in the same place as before, staring ahead as if nothing had happened. As if missiles, impostors, riots, and impossible escapes were only weather passing around the post he had chosen to become.

Alister lowered his sword slowly, still looking at the empty patch of street where Calva had vanished. “How was she able to…” His voice trailed off. His eyes narrowed. “That should be impossible.” Cleatus said nothing. Alister turned toward the nearest inactive projector, then back toward the scorch mark on the pavement. His thoughts snapped into place one after another. “Perhaps,” he said quietly, “a check of the rogue portal dampener is in order.”

It did not take long for Aion to answer. Every screen across the city shifted again, this time to the familiar desk of the Anderson News Network. Aion sat upright, composed and ready, though anyone who knew him well enough would have noticed the tension at the corners of his smile. “Good evening, Multiverse,” he began. “I won’t mince words today. The recent attacks have already been dealt with, and their scope appears to be smaller than initially feared.” Behind him, footage rolled across the display. Peacekeeping operatives restraining black-jacketed attackers. Smoke rising from precinct doors. Civics soldiers securing the New Civics perimeter.

“It seems the assaults on the precincts were largely distractions,” Aion continued, “while the

true targets were the New Civics building and the attempted assassination of Former Chancellor Morvin." The footage shifted again. Morvin on the stage. Blood on his face. Pistol raised in trembling hands. The Reaper fleeing across the rooftop. Aion's expression tightened by a fraction. "Just as expected, the Port Authority kept us safe. At this time, there are no reported casualties." He paused, letting the next part settle before he said it. "And, to everyone's surprise, Former Chancellor Morvin fired back." The screen lingered on Morvin standing before the crowd, wounded but upright.

"Now, I am sure most of you know my opinions on the man," Aion said. "Especially after the Siege." His voice did not waver, but the words carried weight. "However, I have to hand it to him. It really does appear that he defiantly stood his ground against his would-be assassin." Another pause. "Maybe he truly has reflected on his actions." He leaned back slightly, returning to something closer to his usual broadcast posture. "That is all for right now. Stay safe, everyone. Aion Anderson, signing out." The cameras died. The moment they did, Aion slumped back in his chair and dragged a hand down his face. Something about the whole thing felt wrong.

He turned toward the monitor and rewound the footage, stopping it at the moment Morvin's aide crouched beside him. The man leaned in close. Too close. Morvin's expression shifted after that. Not from fear to courage. Not exactly. From fear to obedience. Aion replayed it again. Then again. "If only Mia could read his lips," he muttered. The thought made his expression soften with regret almost immediately. Mia had been frighteningly good at that once. Better than anyone he knew. Now she could not see the footage at all. He exhaled and turned toward Crow, who sat off to the side writing an article with quiet focus.

"Hey, kid," Aion said, lowering his voice. "I hate to twist your arm like this, but…" Crow looked up. Aion glanced back at the frozen image of the aide whispering into Morvin's ear. "Something doesn't seem right about this," he said. "Think you could look into it a little more?" Crow gave a small nod and stood without hesitation. Aion lifted one finger quickly. "And don't tell Mia." Crow nodded

again, then phased through the wall without a word. Aion watched them disappear and let out a long, tired sigh. He rubbed his temples, already regretting several decisions at once. The door opened behind him. Mia stepped into the room, her expression calm in the deeply dangerous way that meant she had heard just enough to be suspicious. “Don’t tell Mia what?” Aion shot upright so fast his chair nearly tipped over. “Nothing!”

Unlike the previous attacks, there was a strange sense of calm this time. Most of the citizens’ panic had been quelled by the Port’s quick response and Morvin’s supposed bravery. For once, it looked as though Porta Nexus had handled everything exactly as it should. The elite, however, were in a frenzy. They panicked in ways ordinary citizens rarely had the luxury to, rattled by a single line from the Reaper. The man Darla had met in the Porcelli casino months ago was among them, frantically stuffing clothes, credits, and anything else he thought might matter into an open suitcase. One of the women he had hired to keep him company sat nearby in a chair, watching him with growing confusion.

“I don’t understand. What’s got you so worried?” He stopped immediately and turned toward her, his voice already quivering. “Are you serious? He’s targeting us now. The Remnant didn’t do that. No one messes with us.” He looked back toward the suitcase, hands trembling as he forced more money inside. “The masses are supposed to fight each other.” The woman’s expression darkened, though she quickly hid it. She was still very much trying to mooch off him, after all. “That’s horrible,” she said, laying the sympathy on thick. “A powerful man like you… at least they know who really runs things.” There was just enough mockery beneath the words to amuse her. He may have been rich, but he was nowhere near the top of that hierarchy. She could say with complete certainty that the Reaper had no idea who this man was. He was forgettable in a way she preferred.

Alister had already started walking back toward headquarters, but his mind was racing. The portal dampener was the obvious first lead. “That might pose a problem,” he muttered, rubbing his chin as he approached the door. “It is more heavily guarded than almost anything in the Port, but there must

be a mole. We can simply borrow Internal Investigations' authority again and investigate." The door opened before he could reach for it. Darla stood on the other side, having clearly heard enough to know she disapproved. "You're back. And… what exactly are you going on about?" Alister sighed. "Gather everyone. I'll lay out what I found." Everyone was still in the mess hall, so it did not take long. Alister went over what he had seen on the way to New City Hall, how small the precinct attacks had actually been, Calva's impossible escape, and the Reaper's message afterward. By the time he finished, Darla's expression had only grown more serious. "I understand what you're saying now," she said. "But even so, if we intend to investigate the portal dampener, we should get permission from Cassian. It falls under Internal Investigations, and something this sensitive is a major undertaking."

"Fine, whatever. But if he refuses…" He started. "Why would he refuse?" Darla barked. "If we have a legitimate lead, I see no reason he would stop us." Alister glanced aside. "You remember what happened with Heskal." Bram frowned. "I hate to admit it, but looking back… what could we have done? Cassian is the reason no one has been deported yet." "This is different," Alister insisted. "If we get pushed aside now, I consider that confirmation." "Confirmation of what?" Darla asked. Alister ignored her and turned toward Jax. "You would be able to tell if the dampener had been tampered with, wouldn't you?" Jax let out a tired sigh. "The portal dampener is an enigma. It was created by a Visionary nearly a century ago." Fiora tilted her head. "What's a Visionary?"

"It is a position awarded to people of exceptional genius," Alister explained. "Someone whose ideas fundamentally change the world. Visionary Draycott, for example. He built the shields." Jax gave a quiet snicker, mild irritation flashing across his face before he cut back in. "My point is that the dampener was designed to prevent exactly this sort of thing. Random people warping into the city without warning. Imagine an entire army appearing beneath our noses from seemingly nowhere." He looked toward Alister. "So before I tell you whether I can find tampering, I need to know something much more basic." The room went quiet. "What was the nature of the power?" Jax asked. "How

exactly did they vanish?"

"Well, it seemed as though she was engulfed in light, and then she was simply gone," Alister explained, still not seeing the significance. Jax took a moment to think. "The Empire's method of multiversal traversal is based on a similar principle. I will not pretend to know the details. It was a closely guarded secret, and they shared nothing outside their own forces. But from what little is known, it is closer to teleportation than conventional portal travel." He gestured vaguely with one hand. "The Union, and most of our own systems, open the door first. You pass through it. The Empire simply flashes from one place to another."

Alister raised an eyebrow. "If their method functions on the same principle," Jax continued, "have you considered that there may be nothing wrong with the dampener at all?" "What else could it be?" Alister asked, irritation creeping into his voice. Jax took a slow breath. "The reports from the Siege claimed the air-control system failed because the central station governing the shields was destroyed through a flaw in the design." He paused, already seeing Fiora about to ask a question. "And before you interrupt, Fenleigh, no. That explanation is utter bollocks." Alister's expression sharpened. "Why are you so certain? Intelligence attempted to investigate the cause at the time, but it was deemed an internal matter."

"That part does not matter," Jax said. "My point is that even when a system functions flawlessly, there are powers capable of working around it." The room seemed to grow colder.

Even Fiora understood this time. Her expression changed as if the idea had touched something she had experienced herself. Darla spoke first. "You mean that power," she said quietly. "The one the other Reaper used." No one answered immediately. "He made Union ships fall from the sky," Darla continued. "No one could get near him." Her ears lowered. "Only Orion Vesper could."

Bram spoke up before the argument could settle too deeply. "Maybe we should be focusing on the target instead. Who is 'really in charge' of Porta Nexus?" Darla's ears shifted as she considered it.

“Good point. That is a lot more vague than Aion Anderson.” Alister still looked annoyed that they had moved away from the dampener, but he followed the thought anyway. “Perhaps Garrick. He did just try with Morvin. Or perhaps he truly is looking into things and intends to go after Heskal next.” His mouth tightened. “Might as well drop it if that is the case.” The words came out too easily, almost as if some part of him did not mind the idea of Heskal dying.

Darla glared at him. “That would not be justice.” Then her expression sharpened. “And what about your own family? What about the Court?” Alister frowned, ready to argue the Heskal point until the rest of her words caught up with him. His eyes shifted. For all his instincts, for all his experience reading the shape of power in Porta Nexus, he had not even considered them. Not consciously. But the more he thought about it, the more plausible it became. Before he could say anything, Fiora blurted out, “I think the hackers who hack reality, the ones everyone says disappeared fifty years ago, did not actually go anywhere. They are hiding in the shadows, secretly controlling everything as we speak. They just want us to think they are gone so they can keep controlling us and being evil.” She said it with complete seriousness, staring down at the floor as if the truth itself had opened beneath her feet.

Everyone looked at her. Jax broke first. “What? No, Fenleigh. That is the dumbest thing I have ever heard. We are discussing real possibilities, not conspiracies.” Fiora slowly lifted her head, eyes full of dread. “You are going to be in for a rude awakening one of these days.” Alister ignored her with effort. “He could also mean New Civics,” he said. “Pick up where he left off.” “Hey!” Fiora snapped. “Listen to me!” The argument circled through a few other possibilities, but it was beginning to devolve. Before long, it had become the expected bickering between the two former captains, with Darla insisting they needed procedure and Alister insisting procedure was exactly how people like Viktor stayed ahead of them. The others gradually drifted to the side, watching with varying degrees of exhaustion while Bram returned to preparing dinner.

They had directions now. Maybe too many. The portal dampener, the old Reaper’s power, New

Civics, Heskal, the Court, maybe even the old hidden powers Fiora seemed determined to drag into the conversation whether anyone wanted her to or not. Perhaps what they needed was time to think. Time to let the pieces settle into something they could actually follow. But the Marrow Collective could attack again at any moment. Would they be ready when it did?

Before anyone could answer that, an unfamiliar sound rang through the headquarters. The doorbell. Everyone stopped. It was not often that anyone actually used it. Most visitors knocked, barged in, shouted from outside, or were Cassian, which meant the door existed mostly as a suggestion. The polite little chime caught all of them off guard. “Is someone here?” Fiora asked. No one answered at first. Then came the sound of movement in the hallway. Darla’s hand went to her weapon. Alister’s ears angled toward the sound. Jax muttered something under his breath and reached for the nearest tool heavy enough to hurt someone. Together, they moved cautiously toward the noise.

At the end of the hall stood Leonidas, looking entirely too pleased with himself as he glanced down the opposite corridor. Several Intelligence cats had already spread out through the headquarters with quiet, professional efficiency. Kloe stood beside him, but she would not meet Alister’s eyes. Her gaze stayed fixed on the floor, guilt written plainly across her face in a way she clearly hated and could do nothing to hide. “Ah,” Leonidas said brightly, finally turning toward them. “There you are.” His attention landed on Alister with a cheerfulness that made the whole thing worse. They had barely interacted for most of their lives, but neither of them needed much history to dislike the other. Alister’s eyes narrowed. “Why are you here?” Leonidas kept walking. He did not answer. He did not even slow. Two Intelligence operatives moved ahead of him, passing Alister and Darla before either could fully react. Fiora blinked as they came straight toward her. Then both cats seized her. “Hey, what...”

They twisted her arms behind her back and snapped restraints around her wrists before the thought of resisting had fully reached her body. The room went cold at once. Leonidas stopped in front of her, smiling like he had been waiting all day for this exact line. “Operative One Fiora Fenleigh,” he

said. “By order of the Port Authority, I hereby place you under arrest.” Fiora stared at him. For a moment, she could not understand the words. She had come forward. She had told Cassian everything. The worst part was supposed to be behind her. Cassian was on her side. He had said he would handle it.

All she could manage was a small, broken sound. “What?”

Chapter 40: Undone

Alister, Bram, and Darla stood in disbelief as Intelligence began to take Fiora away. Even Jax looked terrified for her. Darla recovered first. She stepped between Fiora and the Intelligence operatives, fury sharpening her voice into the kind of authority only she could command. “Wait just a moment. What are the charges?” Leonidas stepped forward lazily, completely unbothered by the question. “Extortion. Terrorism. Treason.” His eyes shifted toward Fiora. “And, most importantly, foreign espionage.” Silence swallowed the room. Leonidas tilted his head slightly. “Should I go on? I have more.” Fiora’s head lowered with every word. Darla faltered, remembering the things Fiora had said before. The Council. Natasha. Little fragments that had sounded strange at the time, easy to dismiss because they had come from Fiora. Now they felt different.

Darla looked at her. For once, all the goofiness was gone from Fiora’s face. “I…” Fiora’s voice cracked. “I’m not a spy. But… I’m sorry. I was still trying to figure out how to tell you all who I really am.” She meant it. That almost made it worse. “Show us the warrant,” Bram said. He sounded more desperate than angry. Leonidas flashed the document in front of him, looking away as though he was savoring every second. Bram took it carefully and read every word. It was not the first warrant he had

ever seen. He knew what to look for. There was no doubt. It was real. Fiora looked down, shame settling over her heavier than the restraints around her wrists. “I’m sorry, Bram,” she whispered. “I… I really am. I deserve this.” The operatives started to pull her away.

Leonidas laughed. “Ha. So much for this division. Just you wait. By the end of the week, you’ll all be finished.” He turned to leave. For a moment, none of them moved. None of them knew what to do. Then Alister stepped forward, eyes fixed on Kloe. “Kloe,” he said. “How could you? How can this be something you are part of? This has to be a fabrication.” Kloe did not look at him. “I’m not proud of this,” she said quietly. “But despite my pleas, he would not relent. At least with me here, the process will be done correctly.” Then she turned away and followed the others. The hallway felt too still after that. No one knew what to say. Bram’s breathing hitched. He still did not know what Fiora had done. He did not know how much of this was true, or what he was supposed to believe, but his anger began to rise anyway.

It felt far too familiar. “You think we are just going to give up?” he shouted. The Intelligence operatives stopped, but none of them turned around. Bram’s hands curled into fists. “You think we are going to lay down and take this?” Fiora glanced back at him, eyes wide with confusion, as if she could not understand why he was still on her side. “We will get you back, Fiora,” Bram said. “I swear.” His voice was hoarse, filled with more uncertainty than he wanted anyone to hear. Leonidas finally glanced back, smiling over his shoulder. “We will see if you still believe that soon enough.” Then he walked on, taking Fiora with him until they disappeared from the hallway.

Whatever grand plans they had been forming to stop the Reaper vanished from their minds. Now all they could think about was Fiora. The way she had acted. The things she had said. The little pieces that had never quite fit. “I guess it shouldn’t be a surprise that the whole amnesia thing was bullshit,” Alister said. No one answered. “We don’t know enough,” Bram said after another long silence. “We should get with Cassian. He’ll…” “To hell with Cassian,” Jax snapped. “Look where we

are. Even with all his meddling, they still took her. What can he do now, even if he wants to help?" He returned to his workstation before anyone could respond. A second later, a violent crash rang out as one of his tools hit the floor. He might have been trying to hide it, but he was angry too.

"I'll go to the Isle," Darla said. "She'll need support, even if there is little we can do." She left without another word. None of them stopped her. They did not have the energy. Alister stared after her, jaw tight. "What good will that do?" Then he exhaled sharply. "I hate it, but you're right. Let's go see him." He and Bram ran to Internal Investigations headquarters, but the place was strangely empty. The only ones there were NoxLux. "Ah," Nox said. "So you have come. Cassian expected as much. I'm afraid he is not here." "He rushed to the prison as soon as he heard," Lux added. Alister hissed under his breath. "I am so far past tired of this million-plan nonsense." "It is more complicated this time," Nox said. "She confessed to him." Bram went still.

Lux continued more gently, "She told him everything." "He was already running interference for her," Nox said. "But he could not act quickly enough." "What…" Bram's voice came out smaller than it should have. "She told him, but not us?" Lux stepped closer and tried to place a hand on his shoulder, but he was too tall, so she settled for his arm instead. "She wanted to tell you herself," Lux said with a soft smile. "She cares for all of you." "It sure doesn't feel like it," Alister muttered. "I can't believe I let that little…" He stopped himself, throwing up his hands. "Ugh, never mind. Forget it. Forget everything." He turned to leave.

"Wait," Bram said. "Where are you going?" Alister did not answer. He walked out without him. Bram frowned after him. "It's happening again," he said quietly. Both NoxLux tilted their heads. "What can we do?" Bram asked. Nox folded his arms. "There is nothing you can do. Cassian will handle it the best he can." Lux looked toward him and shook her head. "You don't really think that." Nox said nothing. Lux turned back to Bram. "What you can do for Miss Fenleigh is believe in her." Nox crossed his arms tighter, as if she had exposed him. Bram left soon after, not really knowing what else could be

gained from the conversation.

Darla rushed down the street. She was not going to stop until she reached the Isle. She did not know how true it was, but she had once been told that things in the prison were not exactly separate. There were segregated wings and special cells, sure, but most prisoners, from common thieves to murderers, were thrown into one massive block. If they found out Fiora was Port Authority, she could be in serious danger. Darla would not let that happen. She would get there first. Then they would find a real way to get Fiora out, but before she could reach the harbor, she locked eyes with Rufus rushing in the opposite direction, straight toward Special Operations. He stopped in his tracks. So did she.

"Sister! It's..." he started. "I'm sorry, Rufus. I don't have time to talk." "You don't understand. It's Grandfather." His voice tightened. Darla's confusion stopped her completely. "What about him?"

"I was on my way to get you. Well…" Rufus looked down. "He has summoned you back to the estate. You can't refuse." Her face darkened instantly. When she spoke again, her voice was quieter than normal. "Grandfather wants to talk to me?" She swallowed. "Last time I spoke to him, he said he never wanted to again." Rufus hesitated. "I remember." His eyes lowered. "He gave me a similar conversation." Darla's expression softened. "I'm sorry." She pulled him into a hug, brief but firm. Then she started to pull away. "But I can't go. I have to..." "He said if you don't go home right now, you're no longer a Dogenridge." Rufus interrupted, fear slipping through despite his effort to hide it, Darla's eyes widened.

Bram walked down the street, feeling more lost with every step. He did not know whether he should follow after the others, go to the Isle, wait at headquarters, or trust Cassian to handle what none of them understood yet. His thoughts pulled in too many directions at once, and before he realized where he was going, his legs had carried him home. What he saw there stopped him cold. His entire family was outside, gathered around a medium-sized ship as they slowly loaded it with bags, crates, furniture, and anything else they could carry. Bram's grandmother stood nearby overseeing everything,

her back turned to him.

"Grandma?" Bram asked, fear already creeping into his voice. "What is this?" She turned, surprised to see him. "Oh, Brammy. We…" Her face softened with sorrow. "We're packing everything up. I was going to tell you before we left, but you've been so busy." "Go where?" Bram asked. "On vacation?" He said it almost like he wanted her to agree. Like if he gave her an easy answer, she might take it. She shook her head. "Afraid not, dear." His heart shattered. "No!" The word came out too loud, almost a scream. "Why would you? We solved this. And even if we didn't, the papers will go through. They have to." It was the last blow he needed. The last kick that sent everything inside him spiraling completely out of place.

His grandmother stepped closer and placed her hand over his with a soft, sad smile. "Our time is almost up," she said. "And things don't look like they're going to change. It is better to move on our terms than be forced out." "This is our home," Bram insisted. "We have always lived here." "That we have." Her voice trembled slightly. "None of us want to leave. But pretty soon, we'll all be deported anyway. Porta Nexus just…" She looked back at the ship. "It isn't for us anymore." "That's not true!" He insisted. She sighed, the way she did when she wished the world were kinder than it was. "Bram, come with us," she said. "We will find somewhere new. And if not…" Her smile returned, faint and aching. "Well, you're free to have the house for yourself. Maybe you can start a new family here one day." She said. Bram barely heard that part.

"Where will you go? This place will always be ours." He asked. She did not answer right away. "Everyone in the neighborhood has different ideas of what would be best," she said at last. "Some speak of the Union. Some of the Commander's Coalition. But the Ashgarn family…" She looked up at him. "We have heard talk of a new Frontier. The heroes who saved us from the Siege created it. Not for everyone, perhaps, but for anyone willing to try." Bram's eye widened. "That is where we will go," she said.

“But that’s on the far reaches of the multiverse,” Bram said, fear overtaking him. “No one even knows for sure how to reach it yet.” He knew how dangerous a journey like that could be. They might not even make it. His grandmother’s expression hardened in the familiar way it always did when the choice had already been made. “Then we will find a way.” Bram lowered his head. “We leave in a few days,” she said. “I’ll make sure someone sends for you, if you decide to join us.” Then she turned and walked away, leaving him alone with the ship, the house, and the choice he had not been ready to make.

Viktor walked onto the upper level of the Porcelli casino. The Don was there, as always, playing cards. This time Portly sat across from him, though neither man looked especially focused on the game. The Don kept tapping his foot beneath the table, sweat gathering along his brow. Viktor sat down calmly. “What’s eating at you, Don?” “Porcelli business,” Portly said coldly. “Butt out, Scathe.”

“Now, is that any way to treat your good friend?” Viktor asked with a smile. “Maybe I can help.” Portly grumbled. The more he saw of Viktor, the less he liked him. The Don tugged at his collar like he was trying to let the stress escape. “It’s nothing. The boys upstairs are just panicking, is all. They think that maniac is going to attack them.”

Viktor raised an eyebrow in fake surprise. “Really? I would have thought the Court had the best defenses money could buy.” “True enough,” the Don said. “But they don’t get called out often. They don’t like attention. Not like this, anyway.” He tapped his cards against the table. “They are pressuring me to do something about it.” “Don,” Portly warned, clearly insisting he had already said too much.

Viktor gave a soft snort of laughter. “So they think that man was talking about them?” “Who else?” the Don said, as if the answer were obvious. Viktor leaned back.

“Do you know anything about this Reaper character? And that Anarchy Man? I can’t believe those two joined hands.” The Don said.“The Court wouldn’t be happy with you discussing this,” Portly pressed. The Don shot to his feet in anger. “I don’t want to hear anything from you about this. You

failed to capture him." Portly sighed and finally shut his mouth. "Can't say I know much about the Reaper," Viktor said with a shrug. "Ruthless, from the sound of it. No offense, but I did try to do business with him. Didn't get a single bite." "I wouldn't expect a broker to turn down business," the Don said, calming slightly. "But it's good you didn't. We would have problems." "I may not be able to find him," Viktor said, "but maybe it's about time you formally introduced me to the Court. I have an idea or two for stopping that guy."

Portly laughed. "That's rich. Not even I get to have chats with them." But the Don did not laugh. He rubbed his beard, seriously considering it. Portly stared at him. "You're not… Don, they would never accept that." "They might if I'm vouching for him," the Don said. He looked back at Viktor. "A man like you might be just what we need to counter him." Viktor leaned forward, smiling. "Well then," he said, "deal me in. I'm game."

Jax had gone back to work on the van, but the frustration had not left him. It sat in his shoulders, in the sharpness of every movement, in the way each tool seemed one bad thought away from being thrown across the garage. Someone knocked at the door. He ignored it. Not long after, three men entered anyway. Their uniforms were not Port Authority. They were blue with white trim. Coalition. Jax glanced at them from the corner of his eye without turning around. "Why is the Coalition in my garage?" "Apologies," the man in front said. "We rang the buzzer, but no one answered."

"Do you also break into someone's house when they don't answer?" Jax asked coldly. "Maybe they don't want to be bothered." "Well, normally we wouldn't, but after hearing about the attitude of Callum Draycott from others, we thought this might be an exception. The man smiled. Jax turned toward them immediately. "Who are you, and how do you know that name?" "We have our ways," the man said. "We heard what this world did to you. It is a shame, really. Everyone outside the Port knows what actually happened to the shields, yet they fabricate some nonsense and leave you buried under it."

"I've heard enough, Leave." Jax said, pointing toward the door. "Wait. Forgive me, but at least

hear our pitch. Your benefactor sent us." Jax frowned. "Cassian?" "No. Though he did try to stop us, at least until he heard what we wanted from you." The man explained. "Then who?" He asked "Supreme Administrator Heskal." He answered. Jax stared at him. The man continued. "He spoke highly of you. Told us of your achievements, and how the system threw you away anyway." He said. Jax looked away, completely thrown. Heskal, of all people, had pushed for this? And Cassian had backed down once he heard what it was? None of that made sense. He said nothing, so the man kept talking. "The Coalition is growing every day. We have powerful warriors, lawmen, laborers, and everything else needed to run a nation. But we still lack brilliant minds. The Commander himself sent me to recruit you."

Jax crossed his arms. "You want me to betray the Port and come work for you?" "I would not think of it as betrayal at all. More like a second chance." The man looked around the garage, not with disgust, exactly, but with the quiet pity of someone who thought he was seeing wasted potential. "The Port foolishly pushed you into becoming this. With us, you could become who you truly are. Your budget would be virtually limitless. The only restrictions would be the ones that cross moral lines." He seemed proud to offer it. Worse, he seemed to truly believe it.

"I saw the interview between Aion and your Commander," Jax said. "I know he claimed as much." He did not bother hiding his lack of trust. Former Empire soldiers making speeches about moral lines did not exactly inspire confidence. The man only laughed softly. "We are still proving to the Multiverse who we are. I understand not everyone will believe us right away, but we have reclaimed ourselves." He held out a contact card. "Maybe you can as well." Jax did not take it at first. The man placed it on the nearest workbench instead, then turned and left without another word. The two Coalition officers followed him out, leaving the garage quiet again. Jax stared down at the card. For once, he had no idea what to do.

Chapter 41: Bram

Bram returned to headquarters and stopped in the lobby, his head falling into his hand as the weight of everything finally settled over him. He did not know what to do. Everyone was gone except Jax, and almost as if the thought had summoned him, the engineer stepped out of the garage and headed for the door with the card still in his hand, seemingly driven by something Bram could not see. “Where are you going?” Bram asked. “To see Elaina,” Jax said without stopping. “I’ll be back… at least for now.” Bram stood immediately. “Wait. You can’t go. Not like this. We have to be ready for...” “Look around you, Ashgarn,” Jax said, his voice sharp but tired beneath it. “The people who wanted us gone got what they wanted.” Then he left before Bram could say anything else. Bram slowly sat back down. He did not know Darla had been pulled away. He did not know about Jax’s offer. He did not know where Alister had gone. But a part of him believed Jax anyway, even without knowing all the details. In the end, it had not taken much to fracture them.

Alister returned half an hour later. Bram had not moved, and the moment he saw him, his face lit with shaky hope. “You’re back!” “I forgot something,” Alister said, pausing as he studied him. “You’re looking glummer than normal. Did she really mean that much to you?” His voice carried the

same conflicted edge it had since Fiora was taken. Bram did not know how to answer. “You don’t have to act this way, you know. We all know you care.” Alister laughed, but there was nothing light in it. “And what good is that? They are all gone.” He moved toward the door, but Bram stepped in front of him. “Don’t you see what they are doing? This has happened before. They are doing it again. Are you going to let them win?” Alister stopped, confusion cutting through his frustration. “Doing what?” “Tearing us apart,” Bram said, his voice strained under the weight of it. “We need to do something. Anything.” Alister pulled his arm free. “Do what? There is nothing we can do. They took her. It is for the courts to decide now.” He said it like he hated every word. “You’re a Purrmont,” Bram pressed. “You have power.” Alister’s expression darkened. “I have nothing.” He started toward the door again.

Bram did not speak at first. Then, just before Alister could leave, he asked, “Do you know why they call me Warden Killer?” Alister stopped once more. “Naturally, when I heard the name, I looked into it,” he said, eyes narrowing slightly. “Sounded all too familiar.” Bram understood what he meant. A public disgrace. A ruined career. A story that followed him no matter where he went. “But what does that have to do with anything?” Alister asked. Bram’s hands curled slowly at his sides. “Will you listen to my story? It is not something I share lightly, but… I don’t know what else to do.” Alister said nothing. Bram looked at him, desperate now in a way he could not hide. “The way I see it, Al… you’re our only hope.” Alister stared at him for a moment longer, then sighed. “All right.”

Bram led Alister to the mess hall, though before he began, he asked if he could finish cooking the half-prepared food first. Alister sighed, slightly surprised, but accepted it. Of course he did. This was who Bram was. Even now, with everything falling apart around them, he could not leave food half-made. Once it was finished, Bram sat across from him and placed a plate in front of Alister, though he did not take one for himself. For a while, he only stared at the table, searching for the right place to begin. “Where do I even begin?” It was clear to Alister that Bram was not about to spill his past simply for the sake of it. There was a point he was trying to reach. Some reason he thought this story mattered

now. “The Umbral Guard,” Bram said at last. The name seemed to stir something old in him.

Five years ago, though it felt like a lifetime, Bram entered the Military Division’s base wearing far more armor than he did now. The emblems of the Military Division marked him clearly, but there was another symbol beside them. The sigil of the Umbral Guard. Another man in the same uniform hurried up to him, already nervous. “Bram, what are you doing? The Warden is going to kill us if you’re late again.” “Sorry,” Bram said with a smile. “I had to help my sister with something.” “Whatever. Come on.” The man broke into a full sprint. Bram followed at a more relaxed pace. He still had time, or at least he thought he did. He climbed the stairs all the way to the top of the base, entering a section separated from the rest of Military headquarters. Inside was a small briefing room with five men already seated.

“Ashgarn. You are five minutes late.” The man who spoke stood beside a display of the mission. He looked terrifying. Very tall, his face covered by a mask that barely contained the suggestion of something monstrous beneath it. He had four arms, maybe more, though it was hard to tell under the cloak. The men of Bram’s unit sat rigidly, all of them nervous in the way people became when they were afraid to upset someone. “Sorry, Severin,” Bram said as he took his seat with the others. “That is Warden Voss to you,” the man replied, then turned back to the display without wasting another second.

“For those of you who have not heard yet, the Multiversal Empire nearly succeeded in using a planet bomb created by their head scientist to destroy the entire world. If not for a handful of adventurers from the Guild, and strangely enough the celebrity Loki Thundermane, we would all be dead. As you can imagine, the Empire is no longer welcome in the Port. Captain Mathias has largely removed their presence himself.” “Then what is the mission, sir?” Bram asked. The rest of the men visibly shuddered, silently begging him to stop talking with their eyes. Warden Voss looked at him for a moment, then pointed to the display. The image shifted to a shipyard the Empire had once been allowed to use within the city. “There are still holdouts,” Voss said. “A few stubborn remnants refusing to leave.

We are targeting the most persistent one."

The men murmured among themselves for a moment. "The Empire is powerful," one of them said. Voss turned his head just enough to look at him. "So are you. The Umbral Guard exists for threats like this. You were deemed good enough to join. Show them why." Then he left without another word, and the operation began almost immediately after.

They hit the ground running, dropping from a jump ship straight into the shipyard. The first impact scattered the Empire grunts before they even understood what was happening. For a few seconds, the soldiers seemed too stunned to respond, as if they had expected negotiation, warning, or the slow pressure of a normal Port Authority raid. Instead, the Umbral Guard landed in the middle of them and began tearing through their formation. Once the Empire recovered, they came at the unit with everything they had, far more force than such a small group should have been able to handle.
Then Warden Voss crashed down among them.

He held a sword in two hands and a machine gun in the other two, firing while he advanced with almost impossible calm. For something so monstrous, there was nothing wild about him. He remained upright, controlled, almost refined, as if the chaos around him was beneath his notice. The sight alone broke some of the grunts before his weapons reached them. A few started to run in terror, while others growled in frustration and tried to hold the line. "Cowards!" one shouted. "The Empire doesn't run." Bram punched him in the face and knocked him out cold.

Not long after that, it was over. The surviving Empire holdouts were rounded up, restrained, and prepared for deportation. One of the men let out a long breath and lowered his weapon. "That wasn't so bad." "Acceptable work, everyone, No notes." Voss said as he walked past them. Then he continued on without waiting for a response. The rest of the unit seemed more relieved that he was leaving than they had been after beating the Empire soldiers. "You too, sir!" Bram called after him with a chuckle. Voss did not answer. He just kept walking. One of the men stared at Bram like he had lost his mind. "You're

crazy for talking to him like that."

"Nah, it's all right. Our leader deserves praise too, doesn't he?" Bram said. "Sure," another muttered, "but if you say the wrong thing…" Bram only smiled. "I know he looks scary, but deep down he's a big softy." The others sighed like they had all decided, at once, that Bram Ashgarn was going to get himself killed someday.

It took them weeks to clear out all the scattered holdouts. Most of the raids blurred together after a while. Another hidden storehouse. Another half-abandoned dock. Another group of Empire loyalists convinced that if they held on long enough, the Emperor would reward their faith. During one raid, a grunt broke from the line and stumbled backward in a panic. "You're supposed to negotiate with us..." he said. For the first time Bram had seen, Warden Voss looked genuinely angered by a line. "If you are witnessing us, you already rejected negotiation," he said. "Genocide is unacceptable. The Umbral Guard does not negotiate." Then he cut the man down without hesitation.

Even Bram felt himself tense at that.

The raid ended all the same. The surviving holdouts were restrained and dragged away, though one of them still found the pride to shout as he was taken. "You'll regret this. The Emperor will show you all. He will rule the whole Multiverse one day!" Bram said nothing, but that never happened. The Empire fell. How it happened was never entirely clear, at least not to Bram. Some said General Natasha Starcrafter of the Union stopped them. Some said Commander Cyrus forsook the Empire and put the Emperor down himself. Others claimed the truth was stranger than both stories combined. Bram did not know what to believe. All he knew was that the threat was gone, fragmented at most. The Empire became something people spoke of like a disaster that had already passed. Dangerous, yes, but finished.

A problem of the past. Then the Siege happened. The Crossbone Remnant, the faction abandoned by the Emperor, attacked Porta Nexus. Bram watched in horror as the air-control system fell from the sky and the shield vanished with it. Ships crashed down through the open sky. Men in skull-

themed masks flooded into the city, attacking without order, mercy, or discrimination. The past had not stayed buried at all. It had only been waiting for the Port to look away.

“We have to get down there and help,” Bram said. Warden Voss appeared beside him already prepared for deployment. “No. Leave that to Peacekeeping and the rest of Military. We have a mission of our own.” He walked toward their transport with the others. Bram looked back at the burning city one more time, then forced himself to follow. Their mission was simple: protect an important man. Bram had never heard of him, and his position seemed unclear, but his bunker was lavish, filled with expensive things and guarded by what was basically a private army. The Umbral Guard felt wasted on him. The man himself sat half-dressed in the middle of it all, overweight, barely groomed, snacking on caviar like potato chips while he yawned in annoyance, as if the people being slaughtered outside were nothing more than an inconvenience.

The longer Bram waited, the more restless he became. He paced around the room, trying to keep his mind off the screams and fire above them. Then he passed the security room and saw the feeds from outside. The chaos had only gotten worse. Porta Nexus looked like hell, but it was a hell very far away from this bunker. Bram had had enough. He balled his fist and walked straight up to Voss, who stood near the rich man, alert and ready to strike at the first sign of danger. “I can’t do this anymore, sir. People are dying out there. I can’t just stand here and wait. This man is well protected.” He said it almost like he was asking permission.

Voss peered down at him. “This man is our mission. The Umbral Guard does not fail.” “And what about them?” Bram pointed toward the monitors. “The Port is our duty too. Are you really okay just standing here?” Voss did not answer. For a moment, Bram thought he saw agreement in him, something trapped behind the mask and the orders, but if it was there, Voss would not voice it. “Operative Ashgarn,” Voss said carefully, “if you abandon your post, I will have to arrest you.” “You can arrest me after this.” Bram ran before anyone could stop him. The rich man shot upright in sudden

fear. “What? You can’t leave! Get back here and protect me, you maggot!” He tried to stand, tripped over trash he had carelessly thrown onto the floor, and hit his head hard enough to bruise. Bram did not stop. He kept moving.

Outside was chaos. Crossbone grunts were around every corner, attacking with reckless abandon, like they had nothing left to live for and were only looking for a place to die with impact. Bram struggled to push through them. They were just like the grunts he had fought before, but now they had nothing to lose, and that made them stronger. Even so, he kept moving forward, taking them down in waves, saving every civilian he could reach. Then he saw Portly and his men. They were completely surrounded, already down and moments away from being slaughtered. For a moment, Bram hesitated. He could tell by their clothes and by the company they kept what world they belonged to. He considered moving on. He almost did. Then he stopped himself.

Bram jumped into the middle of the fight and knocked one of the grunts back just before the sword came down on the pig. Portly stared at him in shock. “Why would you...?” Bram did not answer. He only planted himself between them and the Crossbones, fending off the next wave as the pigs recovered. Portly blinked, then seemed to come back to himself. “Well, don’t just stand there. Help him out!” The others found their nerve again, and together they joined the fight. With Bram holding the center and the Porcelli men striking from the sides, they managed to beat the remaining grunts down. For a brief moment, there was calm, though the city still burned all around them. The rest of the gang turned to leave, but Portly stopped and looked back at Bram. “Why did you help us?”

“Because this is your city too,” Bram said bluntly. Portly stared at him for a moment, then smiled and reached out his hand. “I’ll never forget this, you hear?” Bram took it, and they shook once before Portly vanished with the rest of his men. No matter how many grunts Bram knocked down, more appeared, one after another, like they were crawling out of the ground itself. He did his best to fight, to save, to protect, but he had been at it for hours, and exhaustion was starting to catch up with

him. He took down one more, then another, but every attack came slower than the last. His punches weakened. His breathing grew heavier. Eventually, he found himself surrounded with no one in sight who could help him. He kept fighting anyway.

He shot, punched, and kicked them back, but there were too many. The Crossbones closed in from every side, weapons raised, ready to strike before he could react. It looked as though this might be the end. Bram smiled. If this was how it had to end, then he had no regrets. He closed his eyes, ready to accept the impact. It never came. Instead, he heard a heavy thud, followed by the screams of countless men. When Bram opened his eyes, Warden Voss stood over the bodies of the dead soldiers. “Sir?” Bram asked, half relieved and half afraid he had come to stop him. Voss looked down at him. “You were right, Ashgarn. This is what is right. This is what the Umbral Guard was meant for.” He reached out a hand. “Let us fight.”

Bram gladly took it. Voss pulled him to his feet, and not long after, the rest of the unit gathered around them. More of the relentless bones began to emerge through the smoke, rushing toward them with the same empty fury as before. Together, the Umbral Guard charged into battle. This time, they pushed the Crossbone back. For the first time since the siege began, it felt like they were actually making ground. They fell back with a cluster of civilians to a bombed-out department store that had somehow survived the blast, then formed a defensive line around it, protecting the hundreds of frightened innocents huddled inside. Bram thought, just for a moment, that maybe they could hold.

Then he saw her. A woman stood on a nearby rooftop, looking down at them with a sadistic smile. Her eyes glowed red. Long fangs caught the firelight as she stared directly at the Warden, slowly licking her lips. Before anyone could react, the world seemed to go silent. Then came the sound of flesh tearing. She was suddenly behind Voss, so fast Bram had not even seen her move. A massive chunk had been ripped from the Warden’s neck before he could even register the attack. Voss dropped to one knee, his body wavering as blood poured down his armor. “What… are you…” he said weakly.

She gave no answer. “Kill,” was all she said. Then she vanished just as quickly as she had appeared, leaving behind nothing but the echo of her laughter.

Voss collapsed to the ground, struggling to rise. “Severin!” Bram shouted, reaching for him. “Ashgarn… Bram…” Voss rasped. His voice was already changing, tightening with panic and strain. “I can feel it. I can’t fight it. Soon… my body will not be my own.” He forced himself to look up at Bram. “You must end me before I slaughter the civilians.” He begged. “Sir, what are you saying?” Voss suddenly lurched upright. “Hurry!” Two of his arms lashed out at once, swords whipping toward Bram with terrifying speed. Bram barely managed to dodge in time, stumbling back as the rest of the unit froze in shock. “Umbral Guard!” Voss roared, his voice breaking under the strain. “This is my last order! You must… kill me!” Then he drove one of his blades straight into a nearby operative, cutting them down before anyone could react.

The unit stared in shock. They had always been terrified of Voss, but this was different. Before, even at his worst, there had been control beneath the fear. Discipline. Restraint. Compared to what stood in front of them now, the Warden they had known had been gentle. None of them knew what to do. Voss did not give them time to decide. He struck them down one by one, moving with brutal, unnatural speed. He no longer spoke. He screeched like the monster everyone had always assumed he was. “Damn it,” Bram growled. He unloaded his entire arsenal into Voss while the Warden tore through the others. Bullets shredded through armor and flesh. His mask cracked, then broke away completely, revealing the alien face he had always kept hidden from them. But even exposed, even torn open, Voss did not fall.

The two remaining operatives rushed him together, grabbing his arms and forcing them back. “Maybe we can reverse this,” one of them shouted. “If we can restrain whatever she did...” Then it happened. Two more arms burst from beneath Voss’s cloak and drove straight into them both. The operatives looked down in disbelief, blood spilling from their mouths as the hidden limbs pinned them

in place. One of them, with the last of his strength, raised his blade and sliced through the two arms had been using to hold him. The severed limbs hit the ground. Voss did not even flinch.

Bram stared in horror as the Warden kept walking forward. He had lost two arms, but four others remained. He screamed in rage and charged, driving a fist into Bram hard enough to send him crashing back. Bram hit the ground, rolled, and forced himself up before Voss could reach the civilians. He attacked again, tears blurring his vision. Strike after strike landed, but none of it stopped him. Bram grabbed the sword of one of his fallen comrades and drove it deep into Voss's body. The monster wrapped a hand around the blade and snapped it while it was still buried inside him. Still, Bram pushed forward. He stabbed, punched, and slashed at the remaining arms, forcing Voss back inch by inch. "Voss is not this slow!" he shouted, the words coming out like an insult aimed at whatever thing had replaced him.

At last, the creature collapsed, but even then, it kept twitching. Bram stood over him, breathing hard, trembling, crying, and knowing there was no other choice. He struck again. Then again. Then again. He had to make sure it did not get back up. He had to make sure the civilians lived. He had to make sure the last order Voss had ever given was obeyed. Only when the body finally stopped moving did Bram lower his weapon. Then he looked up and screamed into the burning sky.

The story returned to the present. Alister had eaten everything on the plate in front of him, though Bram was not sure he had even noticed. He had listened intently to every word. Some of it he already knew. He had been fighting in the Siege himself. But some of it was new, and those parts left him quieter than before. "After that, you know the rest," Bram said. "The Union and the Coalition came to aid us. So did that man. Orion Vesper, and the orange-haired woman. I found out later what exactly happened. The woman who attacked us… her name was Crepuscule. A vampire."

"Yes," Alister said. "I was the one who made that report. Commander Cyrus defeated her and turned the living ones back." He regretted the last part almost as soon as he said it, considering how

Bram's story had ended. Bram seemed to notice, but he did not seem angry. "That day, I had to kill a great man," Bram said. "I cannot say I regret my actions. I only wish he had made it out. If I didn't do what I did so many others would have died." He looked down at his hands. "But at the end of the day, that was not even really why I was arrested." Alister's expression shifted with surprise. "Then what was? I cannot say I understand what you are getting at."

"Remember the rich man?" Bram asked. "For the life of me, I cannot remember his name. But he filed a complaint. Said I attacked him. Said he was gravely wounded because I abandoned him." Bram's face tightened. "He was fine. The only injury he had was the one he gave himself, but he was important enough for them to care. Next thing I knew, they twisted the story even though they knew the facts. People were calling me the bastard who killed his own Warden." Alister said nothing. "Brutus and others knew the truth," Bram continued. "But that did not matter. They wanted me in a cell, so I was in a cell. And for a long time, I thought I deserved it." His voice lowered. "A part of me still does. But then Cassian pulled me out and showed me a new path." He finally looked back at Alister. "We do not know everything that happened with Fiora," Bram said. "But it has to be the same. Maybe not exactly. Maybe she did lie. Maybe she did things she should not have done, but I want to believe in her. Even if she was not fully truthful."

Alister looked down, really thinking it over. At last, he understood what Bram had been trying to say. He could not fault Bram for what he had done. Not really. Maybe the official story had been neat, useful, easy to repeat, but the truth was anything but simple. "Even so," Alister said, "I do not have the power you think I do. I am a disgrace now. A stain on the family name. I doubt they will even let me inside the tower." "Maybe you're right," Bram said. "But what is the harm in trying, at least? I'll go with you. Please, Alister. We have to save Fiora before they bury her." Alister looked down again. He truly did not know what else to do. "You're right. If there is any sort of connection still there, I would be a fool not to utilize it. And if there is not…" A faint, bitter laugh slipped out of him.

“Infiltrating it and confronting my bastard of a half-brother might be worth it in itself.” He said. “Great,” Bram said, standing at once. “I’ll go with you. We can go right now.” Alister shook his head. “If I do this, it is not something I can do with you. I have to do it alone.” Bram’s fist tightened, his anger slowly surfacing. “You expect me to just stand here and do nothing?” “Of course not.” Alister’s expression softened, just a little. “I expect you to do what you always do, Bram. Bring us together.”

Bram paused. “Wait here, and be confident I will return.” Alister said. Bram looked down, conflicted. Then, slowly, he nodded. “All right. If you’ll do this for me, I’ll do this for you.” He lifted his head, forcing confidence back into his voice. “But I won’t wait too long, you hear?” “I would be disappointed if you did.” Alister smiled.

Chapter 42: True Duty

Darla stood just outside the ornate gates of her family's estate as they slowly opened. She walked inside, taking in the view. It had been years. She had thought of returning to this place many times, but each time she had hesitated. Rufus had not followed her for similar reasons. The building stood as grand as ever. You could hardly tell it had burned to the ground years ago. It looked just as she remembered from childhood. Walks with her father. Sparring sessions with her mother. For a second, she almost saw her mother there, standing in the doorway and motioning for her to come closer, but when her eyes adjusted, she saw the truth.

A dog man approached with a smile on his face, maids following a respectful distance behind him. He had brown hair like Darla's and the same golden eyes, but unlike her and Rufus, he was covered in fur. "It's been too long, Darla. I've missed you. You've been well, yes?" he asked, pulling her into a hug before she could answer. "Caspian, is this..." she started. "Let your older brother embrace you for a while," Caspian said softly. "Aside from the lack of fur, you resemble Mother more every day." There was nostalgia in his voice, but Darla did not know how to feel about it. Was that the only reason he wanted to hold her? Because she looked like someone they had lost? Even still, she did

not resist. After a while, Caspian finally let go.

"Come. Let's go meet with him," he said calmly, walking into the estate as if there were nothing urgent waiting for them. They walked together through the halls. Caspian seemed content simply to be beside her again, while Darla felt awkward in a way she hated. "How are the others?" she asked at last. Then, more carefully, "How is… Elowen?" "Gareth is busy, as always," Caspian said. "He doubled the guard. He is afraid that man's threat may turn toward us, though I think he is wrong. The Dogenridges are not hated, outside of the cats." He said it as if he truly believed it.

"As for Elowen…" Caspian paused, and for the first time his calm expression faltered. "She has gotten much better. I have been able to convince her to leave her room and walk with me in the garden from time to time. But I'm afraid…" He looked ahead, voice tightening. "She is still very much traumatized. I do not think she will ever truly recover. I curse that dragon every day for…" He stopped himself. "No. I do not wish to dredge up that baggage during our reunion." Then he kept walking. Darla reluctantly followed.

They kept walking down the long hallway, passing shelves and alcoves decorated with fine trinkets. Unlike the gaudy excess of the Legislation office, these pieces all felt impossibly old. Every blade, medal, vase, and cracked ceremonial plate seemed to carry some piece of Dogenridge history. Nothing was there simply because it was expensive. It was there because someone in the family had once carried it, won it, broken it, or died protecting it. Then they reached the portraits. A long line of paintings stretched down the hall, each one depicting a Dogenridge head from the earliest days of their arrival in Porta Nexus. Twelve hundred and fifty years of history stared down at her from gilded frames. Darla had never liked walking this hall. For two reasons. The first was the weight of it. She had pride in her family, of course she did, but seeing every Dogenridge who came before her always made that pride feel heavier than she could carry. She could not help wondering whether she had let them down. Whether she had ever truly lived up to the name. The second reason waited at the room at end of

the hallway.

Near the end, one portrait caught her eye, and she stopped. Something about it was different from the others. The woman in the painting was dressed far more simply, almost plainly compared to the grand uniforms and ceremonial clothes surrounding her. She looked less like a noble posing for history and more like someone who had only agreed to sit still because someone else insisted the moment mattered. The nameplate beneath it read: **Lady Maerwyn Dogenridge The Unbowed Hound Liberator of the Hidden Kennels.** Darla smiled despite herself. “Ah, yes,” Caspian said, stopping beside her. “Your favorite, right? I do believe you used to gush about her.”

“How could I not?” Darla asked, a rare, measured excitement slipping into her voice. “She had no glory. No grand resources like we do. And yet she drove back the Gaslight Ascendancy with nothing but her will and her duty to the Port.” “A remarkable Dogenridge indeed,” Caspian said. “Some say the Port would not exist as it does today if not for her and her allies.” Darla’s smile faded. That word hit differently now. Her head lowered slowly, and her tail went still. “Caspian,” she said quietly. “Why am I here? Grandfather never wants to see me. And you are being so nice.” Caspian did not answer right away. “I don’t know,” he admitted at last. “But you are right to worry. I could tell by his tone that this will not be a pleasant reunion.” His expression tightened. “Listen, Darla. Do not think I hate you. It is just…”

“You have a duty to be the next head of this family,” Darla said. Caspian sighed, hesitating as if he wished she had not understood so easily. “I believe you have a place in this family. Just…” His voice softened. “Keep your head down. Hear his lecture. Let him say what he needs to say.” Darla did not answer. She only turned from Maerwyn’s portrait and kept walking until they reached the end of the hall, where massive ornate doors waited before them. Caspian stopped there. “You will have to walk the rest alone,” he said. “He ordered that no one else interrupt.” Darla nodded once, then pushed the doors open and stepped inside.

Inside was a massive room, the section of the house that belonged to the current head of the family. An older dog man stood in the foyer, leaning on his cane as he stared up at a painting. His body shook as if it were barely holding him upright, and his white fur had faded with age, but there was nothing weak in the way he occupied the room. Darla recognized the painting well. She remembered posing for it. Her and all her siblings, still young, gathered together in what should have been a happier time. Her younger self stood beside Rufus near the edge. Half the people in the portrait were gone now. In the center stood her human father and her mother, though her father's head had been ripped from the painting, torn away in what must have been a fit of rage. The old man still did not look at her. He only scoffed as he stared up at his late daughter. "The runt returns."

He slowly struggled to turn around. His eyes were filled with scorn. Darla did not answer. She only lowered her head respectfully and waited for him to explain why she had been summoned. He walked closer, though every movement seemed labored. "You think I am a fool? Do you think I am too old to see what you are doing?" His voice sharpened. "For a while, you almost had me believing you were worth something. But no. You are just as useless as that evil man who stole my daughter away from me." Darla's shoulders tightened. "Your father," he barked, "is a stain on our legacy." Her head shot up. "I don't care who you are. You will not talk about my father like that."

He grabbed her by the cheeks roughly, forcing her to face him. "Mind your tongue, runt. A Dogenridge knows better than to talk back to the family head." Then he let go, breaking into a choking fit as his body betrayed the authority his voice still tried to command. "If she had not fallen for him the bloodline would have remained pure. She would still be alive." He said to himself walking away to fumble with something in the cabinet he slowly fumbled for some sort of medicine. Despite his tongue lashing Darla attempted to help him seeing him struggling. "I don't need the help from the likes of you." He said pushing her away and he finally managed to open the bottom and take the pills.

"It is true my eyes and ears are not as sharp as they once were," Godfrey said, wiping his mouth

after the coughing fit passed. “But I have other ways of knowing. The Supreme Administrator told me about you dragging our name through the mud. Gallivanting with a cat, with no regard for your duty or your station. The other runt was my last choice for Captain, but the purebloods were too important to lose. Not now.” He started to ramble, and Darla let him for a moment, hoping he would get to the point before she said something she regretted. Then the title finally registered. “The Supreme Administrator?” she asked, her voice low. “Heskal? Heskal is behind this?” She almost laughed, but there was no humor in it. “You’re joking.”

Godfrey’s eyes sharpened. “We have known each other for years. He is a good friend to the Dogenridge family. He knows us.” His lip curled. “He knows you are a disgrace to the family name.” Darla said nothing. “No more,” he continued. “You will quit this Special Operations Division. It is a mockery. I will allow you to return home, but you will not taint the others.” He said it like the matter had already been settled. “You wish to confine me,” Darla said slowly, looking down again. “What did he tell you?” “He told me everything. Get out of my sight. The room has already been prepared for you.” Godfrey slammed his cane against the floor, as if setting the motion into stone. “You have done irreparable damage to our name.”

Darla froze, staring at him. Then her hands slowly tightened. “Do you even know what the Special Operations Division has done?” Godfrey did not turn to face her. He did not seem to know. Worse, he did not seem to care. All that mattered to him was that she had been demoted, that she worked beside a Purrmont, and that someone important had told him her existence had become inconvenient. “The Special Operations Division is a team that can do anything,” Darla said, her voice unsteady at first. “From small odd jobs to saving the Port from world-ending threats.” She was quoting Aion’s article as best she could remember it. The words had embarrassed her once. Now they felt like something she needed to hold onto.

“We have done that,” she said. “We are doing that. And we will keep doing that.” Godfrey

sharply glanced back at her. “Are you trying to defy my word?” His voice was colder than she had ever heard it. For a moment, Darla faltered. She thought of everything Special Operations had done. At first, she had hated it. The building, the demotion, the absurd missions, Alister, the constant chaos. But somewhere along the way, she had seen what it really was. A division for the cracks. A place for the problems no one else knew how to hold. A team that kept showing up, no matter how strange, ugly, or inconvenient the work became.

Then she thought of duty. Her family. Her name. Dogenridge was not just something written on a coin or carved above a gate. It was part of her. It was her father’s smile, her mother’s stance, Rufus’s voice, the portraits in the hall, the weight she had spent her whole life trying to carry. Defying Godfrey here meant abandoning that. Or maybe being abandoned by it. Her mind returned to the portrait in the hallway. Maerwyn Dogenridge. Darla did not know exactly what her favorite ancestor would do, not truly. The family had turned her into a legend, and legends were often cleaner than people. But then she thought of Fiora. Not the charges. Not the warrant. Fiora herself, confused and ashamed as Intelligence dragged her away, unable to understand why anyone would still be on her side.

Darla took a long, painful breath. “A true Dogenridge,” she said, forcing out every word, “knows that true duty belongs to the people we swore to protect.” Godfrey’s eyes narrowed. “My officer needs me right now,” Darla continued. “And I will not abandon her to sit in a room for the rest of my life.” Her voice shook, but she did not lower her head. “Even if that means I am no longer one of you.” With that, she turned and walked toward the door, a single tear slipping down her face. The old dog froze in disbelief, as if he could not comprehend the sheer gall of her defiance. He only returned to himself when she had nearly reached the door. “Come back here this instant!” he shouted. “You do not get to defy me!”

Darla kept walking. “I had better never hear you call yourself a Dogenridge again, runt! You are a disgrace!” His voice followed her all the way to the door, growing harsher and thinner until it broke

into another choking fit. Caspian was waiting just outside, terror plain on his face as he looked from Darla to the sound of Godfrey coughing behind her. “What did you...” he started. Darla gave him a faint smile, though the tears were still falling. “You should help him. It is the duty of the next head to support the current one.” “But Darla...” He started again. “We are nothing now,” she said softly. “I don’t belong here anymore.” Then she walked past him with sad eyes. Caspian looked after her, then back toward Godfrey, who was still choking from his own overexertion. For a moment, he stood between them. Then he sighed, lowered his head, and chose his grandfather, a quiet shame weighing down every step as he went inside.

Chapter 43: True Power

Alister approached Purrmont Tower, a high-rise so impossibly tall it was likely the tallest building in the Port besides the Roost. Even from the street, the structure was intimidating. Each floor looked like a world unto itself, stacked above the city in polished glass, old stone, and wealth that had learned how to look modern without ever becoming new. The moment he entered the lobby, he knew something was different from how he remembered it. It was strangely empty. Before, the place had always been full of people trying to get close to his family, and sometimes the Purrmonts had even obliged them. Aion Anderson and Helix Corporation might not exist as they did now if a Purrmont had not invested early. Of course, it had never truly been about believing in them, or about planning the future of the multiverse. It had been about the money they thought they could get back from it.
But now there was nothing. No petitioners. No clients. No ambitious little men waiting for one conversation that could change their lives. Just silence, polished floors, and two pigs standing by the door.

Alister could tell by the way they moved that they were Porcelli, though they were dressed

differently now, as if they wished to at least superficially claim otherwise. One of them crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow before looking to the other. “Hey, he’s one of those people on the list, right?” The second pig pulled out a comm and flipped through it until he landed on a picture of Alister. “Sure is.” He looked up with a grin. “Get lost, pal. We ain’t letting ya in.” Alister scoffed. “Excuse me. Last time I checked, this tower did not have the Porcelli name on it. It has my name on it.” His eyes narrowed. “Now stand aside. I need to speak with my father.”

The two of them looked at each other, then back at him. “Oh, I’m looking forward to this,” one said as the other cracked his knuckles. The punch came immediately. Alister could have dodged it. His body even started to move on instinct, but he stopped himself and took the hit instead. Picking a fight before he had even made it inside would have been a terrible plan, and unfortunately he was still just rational enough to know that. The Porcelli guards dragged him back outside and threw him onto the street, laughing as they returned to their post. Alister slowly pushed himself up and dusted off his coat. “Well,” he sighed, looking back up at the tower. “That’s a bust.”

His eyes traced the building, searching for another way in. “I wonder…” He looked down at his grapple gun. Before he could seriously consider it, a bird swooped toward the tower and tried to perch against the outer ledge. It was atomized on the spot. Alister’s eyes widened. “They did not used to have that,” he muttered, suddenly aware that the bird had just saved his life. He sighed. “I really did not want to do this, but…” He slowly pulled out his comm and started texting someone. Then he waited. After a while, someone stepped out onto a balcony on one of the middle floors, disabled something beside the door, and slipped back inside. Alister smiled faintly. “Ha. Take that.”

Then he thought about it for more than two seconds. If he mistimed the jump, he would still be fried before he reached the opening. He looked around at the surrounding buildings, but they were too far away. Of course they were. The Purrmonts had made sure of that. Nothing was meant to draw attention away from the tower, and nothing was meant to breach its perimeter. Then he saw the crane.

It stood beside an unfinished building nearby. Not close enough on its own, but if he angled it properly, it just might work. He grappled to the top, carefully checking to make sure no one was watching. As far as he could tell, the street below was clear. He dropped into the operator's seat and began moving the crane slowly, inching it closer to the tower without making the motion too loud or obvious. The last thing he needed was some guard looking up at the wrong moment.

When the arm was finally close enough, Alister climbed back up onto it and looked toward the balcony. "All right," he muttered. "Now for the hardest part." He calculated the jump in his head, then recalculated it, then decided thinking about it any longer would only make him less likely to do it. Once he was properly steeled, he leapt off the side in the opposite direction, fired the grapple, and let the swing carry him back toward the tower. At the peak of the arc, he released. For one glorious second, the plan worked. Then he realized he was slightly too low. He hurtled toward the balcony beneath the one he wanted, powerless to correct his path as the invisible defensive field waited for him like a very expensive execution device. "I don't want to die by bug zapper," he said, panic breaking through his dignity. Just before he hit the field, a hand shot down from the balcony above, grabbed him by the wrist, and yanked him up.

Alister started to hyperventilate, still recovering from the very real possibility that he had almost been vaporized by his own terrible plan. The figure who had pulled him up only started to laugh. "You're crazier than I remember," she said, deeply amused. "Thank you for your mockery, Cecily," Alister grumbled, finally looking up at her. A black cat stood above him in nothing but a tank top and shorts, her hair messy, her tired eyes dull with the profound boredom of someone who had not willingly left her room in months. She looked him over, then slowly turned her head toward the door. "What's that?" she called, with no urgency whatsoever. "Hey, guards. Intruder."

"All right, I get it." Alister pushed himself upright and performed a fake bow. "Thank you, great Celi, for allowing me entry." She shrugged and walked back inside, immediately returning to her desk,

where some sort of game was running on her computer. “Still a recluse,” Alister said, stepping in after her. “I am surprised they let you freeload like this, considering the treatment they give me.” “I do enough to keep them off my back,” Cecily said calmly, eyes fixed on the screen. “I’m a software developer now.” She said. “Of course you are.” He laughed. “But what does it matter?” she asked. “You got in. Now what? What are you even planning to say to Dad? It’s not like he gives a shit.”

“That is…” Alister paused. “Well, I am still workshopping that.” She did not look up from her game, but she could not help laughing. “Are you joking? You went through all this trouble, and you don’t even have a plan? You’re so dead.” Alister frowned. “You may be right, but someone I am responsible for is in trouble. If Father is responsible, or if he can do anything about it, then I have to try.” “Seriously? That’s all? What a waste.” Cecily asked, dismissive. Alister sighed. “I do not expect you to understand. How could you?” There was mild irritation in his voice, but Cecily did not seem to care. “Whatever. A former captain like you probably won’t have much trouble sneaking through the floors. The problem is Mirabell.”

Alister paused. “Mirabell? Last time I heard anything about Mirabell, she was seven and had just won that beauty pageant.” “Well, now she is head of security.” Cecily clicked something on her keyboard. “Watch out.” Alister laughed. “I doubt little Mirabell would do anything untoward to me.” He left the room, then quickly popped his head back in. “Thanks, Celi. I owe you for this.” She immediately threw an empty cup at him. “Fuck off,” she hissed. “You’ll get me in trouble for letting you in.” “Right.” Alister left without another word.

Cecily was right. Alister did not have much trouble sneaking past most of the patrols. They were lighter than he expected, scattered through the lower levels in a way that suggested the tower wanted to look guarded more than it wanted to actually catch anyone. The cameras were unavoidable, unfortunately, but either no one was watching them closely, or no one who saw him realized he was a threat. He made it to the elevator and stepped inside, only to find exactly what he had expected. The

upper floors required a key. “Stairs it is,” he sighed. The climb was not dangerous, but it was exhausting. Flight after flight stretched above him until his legs burned and his lungs started to hate him personally. It took nearly an hour to reach the top. By the time he arrived, he had to stop just before the door and catch his breath, one hand braced against the wall as he peered through the small window to see what waited outside.

A man stood on the terrace in full black tactical gear. Another bird flew by, this time landing on the roof without being harmed. For one brief moment, Alister thought that meant the defense field was down here. Then the man noticed the bird, lifted his weapon, and unloaded his ammunition into the poor thing. Alister stared in shock and horror. “The Court does not like birds, it seems,” he muttered, swallowing hard. Once the guard moved away, Alister slipped through the door and ducked behind a bush. The light assaulted his eyes immediately. Everything seemed brighter up here. He had made it to the top floor, where an immaculate garden stretched across the rooftop, maintained with the dedication only an obscene level of wealth could provide. He had never seen it himself. Barely anyone was allowed up here. This was where the Court made its most important decisions. The space was huge and almost maze-like, with tables arranged throughout in perfect symmetry. It should have felt idyllic. Serene, even. It might have, if not for all the armed men crawling through it and shooting at anything that moved.

The wind brushed a nearby bush a little too harshly. One of the guards immediately unloaded into it. Alister held his breath, suddenly aware of how close he had come to dying for the second time that day. A woman just out of sight huffed in irritation. “How many times have I told you? I said we are on red alert, not destroy-my-father’s-garden mode.” Alister let out the faintest laugh despite himself.

The talking stopped. He froze. Slowly, nervously, he peeked out from behind the bush, afraid they had heard him. He saw nothing. Relief washed over him, and he sank back down, letting out a quiet breath.

Then he realized someone was crouching directly behind him. The woman stared straight into his eyes

the moment he noticed her.

“Ah!” Alister fumbled for his sword. She wore a beautiful dress, one hand holding a parasol to shade herself from the sun. Her other hand held a knife only inches from his throat. Then her eyes widened with sudden delight. “Wait. Alister? Is that you?” Alister stared at her. “Mirabell?” “Mhm. That’s me.” She smiled brightly. Somehow, that made her more terrifying. “I missed you. I always liked you.” “You seem…” Alister glanced at the knife, then back at her face. “Different from the little girl I remember.” “Aw, don’t say that.” Mirabell pouted. “I am still the jewel of this family. No, the whole Port. Daddy says so. You used to say so too.” “I did?” Alister mumbled. “You did,” she said with absolute confidence. One of the guards raised his weapon, ready to fire.

Mirabell’s head snapped toward him. “No. Stop it, you moron. We are not killing my favorite half-brother.” The guard lowered his rifle slightly. Mirabell smiled again, sweet as poison. “Yet.” The man lowered the rifle the rest of the way and walked off. Alister stared at her. “Yet?” “Sorry,” Mirabell said, still smiling. “It is my job. I worked hard to get it. So if you want me to let you go, or whatever it is you came here to do, make it good.” She tilted her head. “Otherwise, I will get that man to come back and shoot you.”

Alister now understood the warning. Adult Mirabell was terrifying. “Um… well…” He gave her the least convincing smile of his life. “Because you love me?” “Like a bear I had skinned and mounted on my wall,” she said cheerfully. “You mean a bear, and not like a bear-man, right?” Alister stared at her smile for half a second too long. “Right. Forget I asked.” He was honestly afraid to know the answer. “Tick tock,” Mirabell said. “All right, fine.” Alister exhaled, dropping the act because he had nothing better left. “I don’t know what else to say. I’m desperate, all right? Desperate to do something that matters. If I talk to Father, maybe I can...” Mirabell yawned. Alister pushed through it. “Don’t you feel the same way? You want to do something that matters too, don’t you?” His voice dropped into a mutter. “And stick it to Leonidas.”

Mirabell perked up at once, hearing the name regardless. “Leonidas?” Alister blinked. “Yes?” Her face went cold. “I hate Leonidas. He ruined my favorite dress.” Alister stared at her, then decided not to question how that ranked in her moral universe. “If it pisses him off, I’ll let you go anywhere you want,” Mirabell said. “Really?” Alister straightened. “Well then. That is the reason I’m here. Partly, anyway.” Mirabell turned and started walking away, already bored with the conversation. “I’ll tell the guards not to bother you. Just walk right up to him. Even so, I can only let you stay for so long, so be quick.” She shooed him away with one hand, as if granting illegal access to the seat of the Mercantile Court was a minor household chore.

He walked down the main path now. No one stopped him, just as Mirabell had said. At the center of the roof sat a finely made table with three empty chairs arranged around it. Farther ahead, looking out over the city, stood a lone figure. As Alister approached, the figure became clear. Leopold Purrmont, head of the family, stood there sipping wine in the middle of the day without a single care in the world. Alister could not help but feel like the scene was familiar. Then it struck him, and for a moment he was somewhere else entirely.

He was a child again, rushing into his father’s study while the man stood at the window with a glass of wine in his hand, indifferent to everything behind him. “Father! Father, it’s me!” Alister said, excitement spilling out of him before he could contain it. “They said I could see you! It’s me, Alister!” He had never met him before, not properly, but he had been waiting for that moment for a long time.

Leopold did not even turn around. “Oh? Hm…” He tilted his head slightly. “Which one were you again?” The question was not cruel. That almost made it worse. He truly did not know, and barely cared enough to ask. He had many children. “Oh, um…” Alister faltered, suddenly unsure what he was supposed to say. “My mom. Her name was Irene. You know her, right?”

Leopold did not answer at first. For one terrible second, Alister realized he might not remember

her at all. Then his father finally glanced back at him, only briefly. “A calico… hm.” He studied Alister’s face as if searching an old ledger. “She was wearing that sapphire dress, yes? She looked ravishing that night.” A faint smile crossed his face, mild and distant. “I liked her. Tell me, boy, whatever happened to her?” Alister’s excitement withered. “You don’t know?” he asked, voice falling. “She died. She got sick.” “Ah. Well…” Leopold turned back toward the window. “What a shame.” That was all.

“Very good,” he continued. “Do your best for the Purrmont name. That is all. Off with you.” He dismissed him completely, as though the child had been a minor interruption in an otherwise pleasant afternoon. Alister left with his head lowered. His mother had always told him his father was an amazing man. That he loved her. That somewhere high above the city, there was a great man who would surely be proud of him someday. But Leopold had not even remembered her name. The image shattered almost immediately. Then, standing just outside the study, something clicked in the young boy’s mind. He looked back at the door with sudden determination. “Oh,” Alister said to himself. “I know. He is just trying to motivate me.” His face lit with new excitement. “I’ll be the best Purrmont ever. Then he’ll be proud!” and with that, he ran off.

He was pushed back into the present, staring at the same view of his father’s back that he had seen all those years ago. Only this time, Leopold turned. At first it was only a glance, but then his face lit with recognition, followed almost immediately by scorn. “Who let you in here?” he asked, his voice a low growl. Alister took a deep breath. “I have come to speak with you.” “Do you know how much trouble you have caused me, boy?” Leopold asked, calm anger settling over every word. “Now I have to have Leonidas waste his talents cleaning up the mess you caused.” Alister felt something strange twist in his chest. His father was finally acknowledging him. He knew who he was now. He remembered him. And there was nothing there but contempt.

“Is that why you had him go after Fiora Fenleigh?” Alister asked. Leopold’s gaze shifted. It was

the same look of distant indifference Alister remembered from childhood, the kind that told him his father had no idea who that was and did not care enough to ask. “I do not bother asking about every detail,” Leopold said with a frown, sipping his wine once more. “It does not matter, so long as it is done.” “If you think he has been doing a good job, then you haven’t been paying attention,” Alister shot back. “Oh, really?” Leopold raised an eyebrow, almost as if he were giving Alister a chance in some strange way. A chance to plead. A chance to throw his brother under the carriage and maybe crawl back into favor. “Why do you say that? Do you know something I do not?”

Alister did not hesitate. “He has torn Intelligence in half. It is practically a civil war between him and Lucian, and anyone can see that. He openly flashes his ties to you in front of common gangsters. He has no care for his position. If anything, he seems to be actively sabotaging it. Attacking my subordinates without cause just to get at me.” His eyes narrowed. “Is that truly cleaning house, as you say?” He asked. Leopold considered this for a moment, then lightly chuckled. “Oh, Lucien. Such a fool.” He turned back toward the view. “You still do not understand, boy. The Port is meaningless to me. It does not matter. They play power games, but in the end, money is power, and we have all the money.” He said. Alister stared at him.

“I will admit,” Leopold continued, “flaunting our name so boldly before common criminals is a problem. But you appear to have come here for no good reason. So unless you have something else to say…” He was already dismissing him. “The Port is nothing?” Alister asked, anger breaking through despite his effort to stay controlled. “How can you say that? Countless Purrmonts have served the Port.” “You sound like Lucien,” Leopold said. “He said much the same to me once.” His voice hardened again. “Get out of my sight. I have nothing more to say to you. Leonidas will lift the Purrmonts higher.” He did not even look back. “You have done nothing but drag us down into the dirt.”

Alister looked down, searching for something else to say, some last angle that might make this trip worth more than humiliation. He had barely solved anything by coming here, but he had learned

enough. His father was not involved, at least not directly. He was not ordering every ugly move Leonidas made. He simply did not care enough to stop him. That might have been worse. Leonidas could be doing this for petty reasons, or someone else could be guiding him from a distance Alister still could not see. Two guards walked up to him as he stepped away. One of them gave a stiff nod. “Lady Mirabell said that if you come with us, we will take you down. We will not attack.” “How thoughtful,” Alister muttered.

He followed reluctantly as they led him back toward the elevator. Before they reached it, a group approached from the opposite direction. Porcelli men, moving with sudden importance. The Don led the pack, though Portly was nowhere to be seen. Not far behind him walked Viktor. Alister stopped. Viktor passed with a knowing smirk, and the sight froze Alister in place. “You…” he blurted out. “What are you doing here?”

Chapter 44: True Disruption

Viktor looked at Alister with a smug grin, but the expression disappeared almost immediately, replaced by polite confusion. “I’m sorry. Have we met before?” “What do you mean, have we...” Alister stopped. As infuriating as it was, Viktor was right. They knew of one another. Alister had followed his trail, investigated his dealings, and seen the destruction left behind by the Marrow Collective, but the two of them had never actually stood face-to-face before now. His eyes narrowed. “How could they possibly allow someone like you in here?”

“I was invited,” Viktor replied, closing his eyes with effortless confidence. “There is apparently a problem that requires my expertise. I admit, though, I find your hostility rather confusing, stranger.” He said. “The better question is what you are doing here,” the Don said. His earlier surprise hardened into suspicion as he looked Alister over. “I know you’re on the family’s ban list.” “He was just leaving,” one of the guards said, nudging Alister forward. Alister tore his arm free. “Are all of you idiots?” The garden fell silent. “This man is the Reaper, you have invited your own executioner into the heart of the Court.” Alister said, pointing directly at Viktor.

For the first time, the smug certainty around the table wavered. The Don's eyes widened, and several guards shifted toward their weapons. Viktor, however, did not move. He merely stared at Alister with the patient concern one might reserve for a stranger shouting nonsense in the street. Then the Don's expression hardened. "What absurdity. Remove him." The guards seized Alister by both arms and began dragging him away. He struggled just enough to slow them, but his mind was already racing ahead. He had no proof they would accept. No authority they respected. Even his own name had become a reason to disregard him. His luck had run out.

Still, he could not allow Viktor to enter this meeting without someone knowing what was said. As the guards pulled him down the garden path, Alister glanced through the contents of his bag. The multi-tool. His comm. A small recorder. Not much, but perhaps enough. He studied the garden again, counting guards, distances, blind spots, and the angle of the nearest decorative planter. Mirabell stood near the hedges, smiling pleasantly and waving goodbye as though he were leaving an afternoon party rather than being forcibly expelled. Alister sighed. There was only one option left, and it was a terrible one.

He suddenly twisted free, drove a heel into the first guard's stomach, and caught the second across the jaw with a sharp roundhouse kick. Both men collapsed before the others understood what had happened. "What are you waiting for?" the Don shouted, rising from his seat. "High alert! Shoot the rogue Purrmont on sight!" Alister sprinted back toward the center of the garden. Guards poured onto the path behind him, weapons rising. He crashed shoulder-first into an ornamental planter, knocking it sideways and spilling soil and flowers across the stone. Every eye followed the noise. That was all he needed. With his other hand, Alister tossed the recorder into the dense leaves of a nearby plant. It vanished beneath the greenery without so much as a glint. "What is the meaning of this?" the Don demanded. Viktor remained beside him, calm and completely unthreatened.

Mirabell appeared in Alister's path so quickly that he nearly ran into her. She still wore the same

bright smile, though the knife in her hand suggested the reunion had reached its natural conclusion.

“Sorry, big brother, I’m going to have to kill you now.” she said cheerfully. “As if!” Alister said changed direction and rushed toward the edge of the tower. Gunfire tore through the garden behind him, shredding leaves and sending fragments of polished stone into the air. Mirabell followed, moving far faster than her dress and parasol should have allowed. The edge approached. Alister did not slow down. He leapt from the tower without hesitation.

Mirabell and the guards rushed to the ledge and stared down. There was no neighboring structure close enough for him to reach and nowhere obvious for a grapple to catch. Far below, the streets looked like narrow lines carved between buildings, but there was no body. “Did he die?” one of the guards asked. Mirabell searched the tower’s exterior, her smile gradually disappearing. “No,” she said, irritation replacing her delight. “I don’t think he did.” Leopold approached from behind them, his expression colder than before. Mirabell immediately straightened and bowed her head. “My apologies, Father. He escaped.” “Enough, We have already wasted too much time on that fool. There are genuine threats to consider. Return to your positions before the others arrive.” Leopold said.

The guards bowed and dispersed. Mirabell followed, casting one last irritated glance over the edge before returning to her post. Within moments, the garden looked almost untouched. Servants hurried in to repair the fallen planter, replacing the spilled soil, setting the flowers upright, and wiping every trace of disorder from the stone until the rooftop once again looked as though perfection had never been interrupted. Viktor could not help but laugh. “Well,” he said, settling back into his seat, “that was certainly interesting.”

The Don frowned, clearly unsure how much of what had just happened he should acknowledge. For a while, he said nothing. Then he adjusted his coat and forced himself back into something resembling composure. “It was handled, The others will be arriving soon enough. I do not expect this to be a problem for you, but remember that these are powerful people. One of them is my direct

benefactor.” he said. “Relax, Don.” Viktor waved one hand dismissively. “I know when to speak and when to keep my mouth shut.” The Don gave him a long, uncertain look, then sighed and allowed the matter to drop. “It should not be much longer.” They moved to a smaller table off to the side and sat down. A servant arrived almost immediately, setting tea before them with silent precision before retreating. The garden returned to its carefully manufactured calm, though Viktor quickly grew restless within it. He tapped one foot against the stone, glancing toward the elevator every few seconds.

At last, the doors opened. A man in a black suit stepped out onto the rooftop. His appearance was immaculate in the way only an expensive corporate uniform could be, every line tailored, every detail polished, every expression measured before it reached his face. He noticed the three empty chairs at the center of the garden and brushed his fingertips across the back of one almost longingly before looking around to see who had already arrived. Leopold remained near the far edge of the rooftop, staring out over the city with no apparent interest in greeting him. The newcomer noticed the Don and Viktor instead and made his way toward them. He looked prepared to offer the usual polite introduction expected in high-level business circles, but Viktor spoke before he could.

“Silas Marquette, Executive face of Marquette Holdings. Your reputation precedes you.” he said warmly. Silas stopped, genuinely surprised. Some of the stiffness immediately left his posture. “You know who I am?” “Of course I do.” Viktor rose and offered his hand. “You should always know your clients before trying to sell them something.” He smirked. Silas gave a quiet laugh. “The man is not part of the Triad,” the Don said, correcting Viktor with faint irritation. “Not yet,” Viktor replied. He looked back toward Silas with an approving smile. “But he is a dreamer. I respect that. I am sure the two of us could find plenty of ways to support one another.” Silas’s mouth curled into a pleased smirk as he accepted the handshake. “I like you already. Viktor Scathe, yes? The Don’s proposed answer to the Reaper problem?”

“You have done your research as well.” Viktor’s grip tightened briefly before he released him.

“Exactly what I would expect from a hedge-fund manager.” He complimented. Silas seemed pleased by the recognition, though the Don looked less impressed by how quickly the two men had taken to one another. Before the conversation could continue, the deep hum of an approaching aircraft rolled across the rooftop. All three men looked toward the private landing platform as a sleek craft descended from above, its engines stirring the hedges and sending ripples across the surface of the tea. Silas glanced toward the center table.

“It appears the real meeting is about to begin.” Silas straightened his cuffs and stepped away. “We will speak again.” “I look forward to it,” Viktor said. Silas returned toward the three central seats, taking his place just beyond the table with the posture of a man who already imagined one of them belonged to him. Leopold finally set his glass aside and approached as well, standing behind the chair to the left. Mirabell remained farther back, but her attention had shifted entirely toward the center.

The two figures from the aircraft arrived moments later. The first was a pig woman dressed in an immaculate formal gown, every detail chosen with restrained elegance rather than ostentation. The Don rose immediately, then lowered himself to one knee with his head bowed. “Matriarch Agatha Porvaine has arrived,” a servant announced. Agatha acknowledged the room with a small, graceful nod before taking her place behind the chair on the right. She did not look toward the Don. She did not need to. His posture alone made the relationship clear. A large elephant man entered after her, dressed in ceremonial robes and carrying a golden staff that looked impossibly old, as though it had belonged to the Court long before anyone present had been born.

“Overseer Gajendra Ivorymantle has made his presence known,” the servant declared. Even Viktor was not entirely certain why the wording differed, only that it clearly mattered. Perhaps it was tradition. Perhaps it was rank. Perhaps wealthy people simply enjoyed inventing new ways to announce that they had entered a room. Gajendra moved behind the central chair. Then, without signal or ceremony, all three members of the Triad sat at once. The meeting began. At first, Viktor could hardly

believe how ordinary it sounded. They spoke calmly while servants poured tea and arranged small trays of food around them. Money moved between accounts. Funding was reduced from one organization and redirected toward another. Potential assets were discussed in the same tone someone might use to consider new furniture. Entire institutions seemed to rise or fall between sips.

No one acknowledged Viktor. Silas occasionally inserted a comment, careful not to overstep. Most of the time, however, he remained silent, hovering near the table like a man waiting for an empty seat to invite him closer. “I should warn you, they may not address you for some time.” the Don murmured, leaning toward Viktor, “A display of dominance?” Viktor asked, entirely unbothered. “Well… yes.” The Don glanced nervously toward the Triad. “But I would not phrase it that way while standing this close to them.” An hour passed. The Triad continued speaking among themselves as though Viktor did not exist. He rested one hand beneath his chin, tapping a finger against the side of his maskless face while his patience gradually ran out. “All right,” he murmured. “I think that is long enough.”

He pressed a button hidden inside his jacket pocket. Nothing happened immediately. The Triad continued its discussion. Agatha sampled another pastry. Leopold examined a document handed to him by a servant. Gajendra spoke at length about reallocating protection funds from one district to another.

Then a violent flash split the sky. Everyone looked up. Skull-shaped fireworks erupted above Purrmont Tower, blazing white and red against the daylight. At their center, a figure appeared high above the rooftop. The Reaper. He was falling directly toward them. Leopold surged to his feet. “Impossible.”

Silas stared upward, one hand moving thoughtfully to his chin. “Did he jump from a sky portal? No. The planetary shields should have prevented any external entry.” “It does not matter,” Gajendra said, still seated. His voice carried the weight of someone accustomed to being correct. “The tower’s defensive field will destroy him before he reaches us.” “What a foolish man,” Agatha said with a dismissive snort, lifting her teacup again. The guards were less relaxed. Weapons rose across the

garden. Mirabell moved immediately, parasol lowering as her knife appeared in her hand. The Don reached for his comm, panic already overtaking whatever dignity he had maintained.

“What is happening downstairs? Report.” he demanded. Only silence answered him. Viktor rose. The multi-cube in his hand unfolded into a long rifle as he stepped toward the central table. The Don stared at him. “What are you doing? You are not even permitted to carry a weapon on this floor.” Viktor looked back with a faint smirk. “Actions speak louder than any sales pitch.” Then he continued forward, utterly unafraid, while the Reaper dropped toward the heart of the Court.

Just before the Reaper struck the defensive field, his body vanished. Only for an instant. A heartbeat later, he reappeared beneath the barrier, still falling, and crashed directly onto the center of the Triad’s table. Porcelain shattered beneath his boots. Tea, documents, and silver trays scattered across the garden as the three rulers recoiled in disbelief. There was no time to understand how he had done it. The Reaper drew a multi-tool from beneath his cloak. Metal unfolded with a violent mechanical whine, lengthening and locking into the shape of a chainsaw. “How dare you breach this sanctum!” Gajendra thundered, rising with his golden staff in hand.

Leopold immediately stepped back, already searching for the nearest escape. Agatha remained frozen for one fatal second, her expression caught between outrage and the realization that something she had believed impossible had just happened in front of her. The Reaper moved before any of them could properly react. In moments, he had all three of them within reach, one sweep of the chainsaw away from ending the Triad entirely. A rifle cracked. The shot struck the Reaper in the side and hurled him from the table. He crashed onto the stone several feet away, the chainsaw scraping sparks across the floor. The Triad seized the opening and retreated behind the guards, dignity abandoned in favor of survival.

“So we finally meet, Reaper!” Viktor called, projecting his voice across the garden. He could not keep the laughter from it. He had been waiting for this performance for far too long. The Reaper

slowly rose. For several seconds, he said nothing. He merely stared at Viktor while the skull mask flickered from one distorted expression to another. Then one hand lifted to the side of the helmet and pressed something near the temple. “Yes,” the Reaper said at last. “I have heard much about you, Viktor Scathe.” The voice sounded wrong. Too measured. Too perfectly timed. Almost like a recording triggered by the press of a button. The guards began ushering the Triad toward the elevator, forming a protective wall around them as they retreated. Before they could reach it, the doors slid open.

A crowd of Anarchy Men poured out. They wore different versions of the same crude mask and black costume, each one laughing, shouting, and moving with the exaggerated madness of people performing insanity for an audience. The first guards barely had time to raise their weapons before the attackers crashed into them. The Don completely lost what remained of his composure. One of the masked men charged him, swinging wildly. The Don knocked the weapon from his hand, seized it before it struck the floor, and drove the blade back into him with a furious shout.

The remaining security force split almost immediately. Half turned toward the army flooding from the elevator. The others kept their weapons trained on the Reaper and Viktor’s confrontation near the shattered table. “How could this happen?” Leopold asked, his voice quiet with rage. “Inside my building.” Another attacker rushed toward him. Mirabell stepped between them and buried her knife in the man before he could close the distance. Blood splattered across her white fur and the front of her dress. She looked down at the stain with mild irritation, then glanced back toward Leopold. “Where is Leonidas?” Leopold demanded. Mirabell pulled the knife free with a satisfied smile. “He said he was making sure some nobody stayed in jail or something.” Leopold's eye narrowed but he didn't say anything.

Viktor opened fire first, unloading round after round into the Reaper. They moved with unnatural ease, slipping between the shots as though they already knew where each one would land. In seconds, they had closed the distance. Viktor managed to strike them once across the side of the head,

but the blow barely slowed them. The chainsaw screamed upward, cutting through his rifle and tearing a shallow line across his chest. Viktor staggered back, one hand pressing against the wound. The Reaper hesitated for the briefest moment, retreating farther than the injury should have required, almost as if they believed they had cut deeper than intended. “Cutting it close there,” Viktor muttered through the pain. Then he drove his boot into the Reaper’s chest and sent them skidding across the shattered remains of the table.

The Anarchy Men continued pouring through the garden. Purrmont security was better trained, but there were too many attackers coming from too many directions. One guard fell, then another. Their formation collapsed beneath the relentless pressure until nearly everyone had been overwhelmed. Before long, only Viktor, the Don, and Mirabell remained between the invaders and the Triad.

Viktor rolled one shoulder and stepped forward again. “Time for the counterattack.” He struck the Reaper across the mask just as another aircraft descended over the rooftop. Its engines tore through the carefully maintained garden, flattening hedges and sending broken porcelain skittering across the stone. The side doors opened before the craft had fully landed. Soldiers in black tactical armor poured out.

For a moment, the designs looked unmistakably familiar. Multiversal Empire plating. Crossbone Remnant equipment. The same hard shapes and military construction, but every skull had been stripped away or painted over until only featureless black remained.

The soldiers moved with brutal coordination. They tore through the Anarchy Men almost before anyone could understand what was happening. The attackers nearest the aircraft were cut down immediately. Those farther back broke formation and tried to flee, their theatrical laughter turning into genuine panic. It made no difference. Within moments, the garden was quiet again. The black-armored soldiers formed a defensive perimeter around the Triad, weapons raised and bodies positioned with military precision. Every barrel turned toward the Reaper, waiting for the slightest movement. The Reaper remained still.

Then they raised one hand dramatically. “Curses,” they declared. “You have bested me this day, but I will return.” Their body moved strangely with the words, each gesture arriving a fraction too late, as though they were acting out lines being fed to them rather than speaking naturally. Without another word, the Reaper turned and leapt from the rooftop. Viktor did not pursue. He merely watched them disappear over the edge, then turned back toward the Court with a calm smile. He opened his arms, presenting the soldiers, the defeated attackers, and the ruined garden as though unveiling a finished product. “Well, There is my answer. What do you think?” he said. No one replied.

The members of the Triad looked between one another, each waiting for someone else to speak first. The Don slowly lowered the weapon he had taken and moved closer to them, uncertain whether Viktor’s demonstration had impressed them or offended them beyond repair. Silas was the first to break the silence. “How did you get past the tower’s defenses?” “Oh, that.” Viktor glanced toward the aircraft. “I have a man who is rather talented with technology. I would have preferred not to interfere with your security systems, but the Reaper left me very little choice.” Another uneasy silence followed.

They all looked toward one another again, weighing the violation against the result. Viktor had breached one of the most secure buildings in Porta Nexus, brought armed soldiers onto the Court’s private floor, and staged a response before any of them had time to react. Yet he had also saved their lives.

At last, Leopold spoke. “How much money do you need?” It was not negotiation. It was a blank check. Viktor smiled. Twenty floors below, Alister hung from the end of his grapple line, one hand barely maintaining its grip. The hook had caught around a metal pole he had hidden earlier inside an unused apartment, the only preparation that had kept his leap from becoming suicide. His arm trembled violently. He had heard everything. He had been powerless to intervene, but the recorder had captured the meeting. The arrival. The attack. Viktor’s soldiers. The offer. It should have been enough to confirm what Alister already knew. Instead, it left him more confused than before.

How could Viktor be the Reaper if the two of them had just fought in front of the entire Court? Something about the performance felt wrong. The delayed voice. The unnatural movements. The way the Reaper had recoiled after cutting Viktor more deeply than expected. Every detail pressed against Alister's instincts, insisting that what he had witnessed was not what it appeared to be. His fingers began to slip. Whatever the answer was, he would have to find it somewhere safer. Alister tightened his failing grip and began lowering himself toward the darkened apartment before anyone thought to look down.

The garden was already being repaired. Servants moved quickly through the wreckage, replacing shattered porcelain, gathering spent ammunition, resetting overturned furniture, and restoring damaged sections of the lawn as though the violence had been nothing more than an embarrassing interruption. Before long, the rooftop would look perfect again. That was what the Court wanted. Perfection without evidence of what it cost to maintain. Each member of the Triad accepted an escort from Viktor's soldiers, at least until they reached the security of their own estates. None of them admitted they were frightened, but they did not refuse the protection either.

Viktor walked away from Purrmont Tower with an almost unimaginable amount of money, resources, and authority placed at his disposal. The Court was terrified in a way it likely had not been for centuries, and Viktor had positioned himself as the only man capable of stopping the assassin hunting them. Later that night, Viktor and the Don returned to the crime sector. They were about to part ways when the Don stopped and looked back. "I was right to place my trust in you, Viktor." He said. Viktor gave him an easy smile. "Don't mention it. We are all benefiting from this arrangement." He laughed softly and disappeared into the shadows.

Viktor eventually reached his hideout, concealed somewhere deep within an unknown corner of Porta Nexus. The Reaper was already waiting for him. They no longer carried themselves with the towering confidence they had displayed before the Court. Their shoulders were drawn inward, and their

hands shifted nervously at their sides. When they spoke, a softer, distinctly feminine voice came from beneath the mask. “I’m sorry. I…” The Reaper hesitated. “Are you all right? Are you angry with me?”

Viktor frowned and rubbed the fresh wound across his chest, looking down at the blood staining his torn shirt. “It hurt like a bitch,” he admitted. Then his smirk slowly returned. “But perhaps that is what sold it.”

He gestured impatiently toward the helmet. “Take that mask off already.” The Reaper reached up and removed it. As the helmet came free, the disguise surrounding their body flickered and dissolved, revealing Calva beneath it. She looked worried, her eyes fixed on Viktor’s wound. He approached her and gently lifted her chin. “You did well, Calva,” he said. “Very well.” Her expression softened, though the concern did not entirely leave her face. “Soon, the final stage will be ready.” Viktor’s smile widened. “And then we will put on a show these people will never forget.” Calva opened her mouth to answer, but Viktor leaned forward and kissed her first. For a moment, she remained completely still. Then she closed her eyes and kissed him back.

Chapter 45: True Resolve

Jax entered the hospital with an AID-E guiding him toward Elaina's room without asking unnecessary questions. The machine seemed to understand him well enough to know he had little patience for formality. He slowed just before the doorway, hesitating more than he normally would, then knocked lightly against the open frame before stepping inside. Elaina was awake and looking much better than she had before, though her injuries were still obvious, and the restless way she shifted beneath the blankets made it clear she was already tired of being confined to the bed. The heart monitor beside her fluctuated slightly when she saw him. "You came back," she said. "I did." Jax pulled a chair closer and sat beside her.

For a while, neither of them spoke, and Elaina did not seem to mind. Something about his presence calmed her, and for a brief moment the silence felt almost like it had before everything between them had fallen apart. Eventually, Jax looked toward her and asked, "How are you feeling?" Elaina did not answer. Instead, she studied his face, then noticed the card held loosely in his hand. Jax was stubborn. Once he had decided on something, uncertainty rarely showed on his face, and she knew that better than almost anyone. Yet now he looked conflicted enough that even he could not completely

conceal it.

“You want to ask me something,” she said, cutting through the pretense. His eye widened ever so slightly before he looked down and nodded, almost appearing guilty for once. “Do you remember what you said when we first found you?” He asked. Elaina tilted her head. “No. Did I say something stupid, or...” She trailed off, unable to imagine what she might have said. The first thing she remembered after the attack was waking in the hospital. Jax hesitated as though he had nearly decided not to tell her. “You asked me why I stopped.”

Elaina looked away, finally understanding what had brought him there. “Even half-dead, I was still thinking about you. I hate you.” She mumbled. “You should,” Jax replied bluntly. Another uncomfortable silence settled between them before Elaina finally spoke again. “I understand what happened to you. I understand that you should never have been blamed for all of it, but you already know I couldn’t accept Jax. You know why I left.” Jax did not answer for a long time. His fingers tightened around the card before he finally asked, “What if I became Callum again?” Elaina turned toward him in shock. “What?”

“Let me finish.” He stared at the floor rather than at her. “I received an offer. One far away from here. Let’s not pretend I can become the person you wanted me to be while I’m still in this city. At least not here. But perhaps somewhere else...” He paused again, struggling to force out the rest before finally looking at her. “Would that be enough for you? Maybe you could even come with me.” He asked. Elaina lowered her gaze, taking in everything he had said. “All I ever wanted was for you to show everyone who you really are, the way you used to.” She reached toward the card, and Jax handed it over without resistance. Elaina read it carefully before murmuring, “The Coalition. Maybe this is right.”

Jax waited, but her expression fell before she continued. “I can’t leave the Port. Not now. My brother needs me. But if you accepted this, I would be proud of you. You might change the entire

multiverse, not only Porta Nexus. I'm sure Cassian would be proud too." She paused, gripping the card more tightly. "And I suppose I would miss you." It was not the answer either of them wanted, and they both knew it. Another silence followed before Jax finally stood from the chair. "I see." "Wait." Elaina looked up at him. "What are you going to do?" Jax stopped at the doorway but did not turn around. "I don't know yet." Then he left before she could say anything else.

Cassian stepped off the transport and onto the landing ramp beside a woman dressed in green armor. Her hair was white and her eyes were a vivid green. She looked young at first glance, but there was a weariness behind her expression that suggested she had already seen far too much, no matter how long she had actually lived. Several soldiers wearing armor similar to hers followed close behind, along with a small group of Port Authority personnel. "They'll have to remain out here, I'm afraid," Cassian said with a sigh.

The woman glanced back at her escort, then gave a simple nod. "That won't be a problem. Just take me to her." Cassian nodded, and the two of them continued up the long staircase leading into the impossibly large prison looming over the island. Blackstone Isle had never been designed to appear welcoming. Even from the outside, the dark walls seemed built to swallow anyone unfortunate enough to pass through them. They were surrounded by guards in gray uniforms the moment they entered. Cassian and the woman spread their arms without complaint, allowing themselves to be searched.

"Armor is not permitted beyond this point," one of the guards said. "Can you make an exception?" Cassian asked. "You do know who this is, correct?" The guard hesitated, his eyes moving toward the woman's armor. Before he could answer, a voice came through his earpiece. He listened for a moment, then stepped aside. "The Warden has cleared it." They continued without further delay.

"I would have been fine removing it," the woman said as they entered the next corridor. Cassian did not answer. Leonidas was waiting just inside, wearing the self-satisfied expression of someone who believed he had anticipated their every move.

“Ha. I knew you would come. I won’t...” Cassian raised one finger and held it inches from Leonidas’s mouth, stopping him before he could finish. “Try not to start a war with a foreign power, Purrmont.” He kept walking without waiting for a response. The armored woman followed beside him, leaving Leonidas standing in the corridor with a deepening frown. After a moment, he apparently decided that following them would only make the humiliation worse.

A guard escorted them deeper into the prison. As they walked, the woman studied the scale of the place with open curiosity, her eyes tracking the endless tiers of cells and the distant movement of prisoners and guards. “This prison is impressive,” she said. “Its size puts some of our largest facilities to shame, but keeping criminals of every classification in one place must be a security nightmare.” To their right stretched a general population block so vast that its far end was difficult to make out, a dense city of steel walkways, reinforced doors, and watch stations contained beneath one roof.

“I would say so,” Cassian replied calmly, “but it was not my decision, and you did not hear that from me. State secrets and all.” He did not sound particularly concerned about the information leaving the prison. She was already inside Blackstone Isle. Whatever flaws existed in its design would reveal themselves to her eventually. They finally reached the deeper levels, where the open noise of general population faded into an oppressive quiet. This was segregation, the section reserved for the most dangerous prisoners in Porta Nexus. The cells were wider apart, the doors thicker, and every corridor was broken by additional checkpoints.

As they passed one of the cells, the woman slowed. A man sat inside behind the reinforced glass, half of his body covered in severe burns. She recognized him immediately. “I do not like the implication that she needed to be placed beside a man like him.” The prisoner lifted his head at once, as though he had heard her clearly despite the glass separating them. Cassian glanced toward the cell, then continued walking. “I suspect that was a personal decision made by someone who wanted to send a message. Still, it may have been preferable to the alternative. Leaving her to fend for herself in general

population would hardly have been ideal." He stopped at the neighboring cell.

Fiora lay restrained to the bed inside. A guard stationed beside the door opened it as soon as he saw Cassian approaching. Cassian stared past him at the restraints, his expression immediately hardening. "Do you truly believe she deserves this? That she is dangerous enough to require this level of confinement? Not even the Crossbone Reaper is restrained to a bed." he asked. The guard gave an indifferent shrug. "Those were our orders. We were told she was a risk, so we followed protocol." "And I am correcting those orders. Release her from the bed immediately. There is much we need to discuss."

The woman watched him closely. Beneath the anger, she could see something more personal in the way he looked at Fiora.

"Should I take her to an interrogation room?" the guard asked. "The cell will be sufficient," Cassian interrupted. The guard entered with them and began removing the restraints. Fiora stirred at the sound of the door and looked toward the figures entering the room. At first, all she seemed to notice was Cassian. "You came to…" Then she saw the woman standing beside him. Fiora froze. Her eyes widened with a mixture of recognition and immediate fear. "G-General Starcrafter?" Natasha smiled softly. "Hello, Fera Fenleigh." Cassian glanced between them. "You only changed your first name?" he muttered. "You came here yourself?" Fiora asked, her panic quickly overtaking the shock. "Does that mean I'm in serious trouble? Am I getting the firing squad?" She sprang upright on the bed before the guard had even finished releasing her.

"Fenleigh!" Cassian and Natasha spoke at the same time. Fiora immediately straightened and sat back down, hands folded in her lap. "No," Natasha said, her tone returning to something calmer. "I am here to take you home. You served under my command, which makes you my responsibility."

"But I heard you were the big boss of the Union now." Fiora looked between her and Cassian. "Can you really just take me? Won't the Port be angry?" "That is not quite how it works," Natasha said with a sigh. "There is military jurisdiction, extradition authority, martial oversight…" She stopped when

Fiora's expression began to glaze over. "Never mind. I know you will not understand."

"I'm sorry, Fiora," Cassian said. "I told you I would fight for you, but they acted before I had the opportunity. You may still have a case, but I'm afraid remaining here will most likely end with a severe sentence. This is my Hail Mary." He looked away for a moment, clearly unhappy with the admission. "If you are extradited into my custody, then we decide what happens to you rather than the Port," Natasha added. Fiora studied her carefully. "And what did you decide?" Natasha paused before answering. "If the Administrator had not already explained, I will be honest with you. Under different circumstances, I might have punished you for desertion. Now that I understand the full situation, I see no reason to do so." Her expression softened slightly. "You would return to the fold with your former rank restored. We were never particularly close, but I remember your ability. You would be valuable to our..." "I won't go!" Fiora's declaration echoed through the cell. Cassian and Natasha both stared at her. "What? Why? This may be your only chance, Fiora." Cassian asked.

Darla reached the prison later than she had intended, though her grandfather had left her little choice. Leonidas was still standing near the entrance, less confident than before, but the moment he noticed her, he straightened as though he had been waiting for another confrontation. "So the Dogenridge has come as well," he said, pointing toward her. Darla's expression fell. "No," she said quietly. "I'm just Darla." Leonidas tilted his head, clearly not understanding what she meant. "What? Even so, I won't allow you to..." His comm suddenly began sounding off over and over. He answered with immediate irritation. "What is it now?" Someone on the other end was shouting loudly enough that Darla could hear the distorted voice without understanding the words. The longer Leonidas listened, the more his expression deteriorated. His confidence vanished first, then the color seemed to leave his face entirely. By the time the call ended, dread had taken its place.

"Looks like you get to proceed after all," he said, trying and failing to sound unaffected. "You don't even have authority here," Darla said, watching him carefully. "Oh, but you're wrong. I've come

to an agreement with…" Leonidas stopped himself and grimaced. "No. I'll get chewed out again if I say too much." He started walking away, but after only a few steps he paused and glanced back at her.

"But can you really do it?" he asked with a laugh. "Do what?" She asked confused. "Segregation Block 10-B." Darla's eyes widened immediately. "What? Why would they put her there? Of all the places they could have chosen…" The fear came over her before she could suppress it. Her heart began to race, each breath becoming shorter than the last as the walls around her seemed to close in. Leonidas only laughed and continued down the corridor, satisfied that he had finally found something capable of hurting her.

Darla leaned against the wall and pressed one hand against her chest, trying to force herself to breathe normally. "It's all right," she whispered. "He doesn't… He doesn't…" She could not finish the sentence. After one final, unsteady breath, she pushed herself away from the wall and followed the waiting guard deeper into the prison. Every step felt heavier than the one before it. Her body seemed to be begging her to turn around, and the only thing keeping her moving was the sense of duty that had carried her through nearly everything else. She knew what was waiting for her. By the time they reached the segregation block, Darla had slowed so much that the guard finally stopped and looked back. "Ms. Darla, are you..."

"I'm fine," she said quickly. She forced herself forward. Fiora's cell was near the end of the corridor, just before the Crossbone Reaper's. Darla kept her eyes fixed ahead and told herself not to look into the other cells. Then she looked anyway. There he was. A red dragon sat chained against the wall, not even granted a bed. His back rested against the cold stone while his head remained lowered in silent meditation. The restraints around his limbs were heavy enough to hold something far larger than an ordinary prisoner. He heard her approaching. Slowly, the dragon opened his eyes.

The dragon recognized her immediately. "You," he said, lifting his head. "The little pup. You have grown, and yet you still shake in my presence. How disappointing." Darla's steps faltered, but she

forced herself to keep moving without looking at him. The guard escorting her finally seemed to understand, and his expression softened with sympathy, though he knew better than to interfere. “You will never become what you need to be if you cannot even bring yourself to look at me,” the dragon called after her. Darla made it as far as the next cell before her legs gave out. She caught herself against the wall and sank toward the floor, struggling to pull air into her lungs.

A laugh came from behind the neighboring glass. “Well, well. We are seeing quite a collection of familiar faces today.” The Crossbone Reaper watched her with open amusement. Strangely, the sound of his voice helped. Darla’s breathing steadied, and something inside her hardened. “I’m offended,” he continued. “No fear for me? I devastated this city far more thoroughly than that lizard ever did.” Darla pushed herself back to her feet and looked directly at him. “You know nothing. You are nothing. You stole a name that never belonged to you, and now you’re here because I put you here myself.” The Reaper only laughed harder. “And now someone else has taken the name again, exactly as I said they would. I’ve heard all about it.” Darla turned away and resumed walking. She had nothing else to say to him. “Your days are numbered,” he called as she disappeared beyond the cell.

She reached Fiora’s cell and was surprised to find the door already open. Cassian and Natasha stood inside with her. Darla paused outside and drew one last deep breath, quietly thanking the Reaper despite herself. He was a horrible man, but anger had returned her to her senses. She arrived just as the conversation reached its end. “After everything that happened, I understand why you’re offering,” Fiora said. “I understand the Union might accept me back, but I won’t go. I’m sorry. The Port is my home now, even if staying means I’m locked away forever.” The room fell silent, and Darla remained near the entrance listening. “I see,” Natasha said after a moment. “Very well. I will respect your decision.” She turned toward Cassian. “When will the trial be?” His expression tightened. “I still believe you are making a mistake, Fiora, but if there is going to be a trial, it will be soon.”

“Soon?” Darla asked, drawing everyone’s attention toward her. Fiora’s eyes lit up when she saw

her, but the relief quickly gave way to shame, and she looked down. Cassian acknowledged Darla with a slight nod. “The process would normally take much longer, but someone wants to turn this into a public spectacle. They are pushing it forward.” “Heskal?” Darla asked, already certain of the answer. “That is not something we should discuss in front of the general,” Cassian replied, which was confirmation enough. Natasha gave him a respectful nod, then looked toward Darla. “Captain...” She paused. “My apologies. Lieutenant Dogenridge.” Darla did not correct her this time.

“I will try to remain in the Port long enough to testify,” Natasha continued, “but I cannot promise how long that will be. Things are becoming increasingly unstable at home. Civil war may be imminent.” Fiora looked up in surprise. “But you fixed everything, didn’t you?” “It is never that simple,” Natasha said. “I wish it were.” She turned fully toward Fiora. “Listen, Fera…” Natasha stopped herself. “No. Fiora, I suppose.” Fiora waited quietly. “I protect my own. That is why I came here. You deserved that much, and I understand now why you lost faith in the Union. But if you choose to remain here, I will not allow you to return later simply because the situation becomes convenient. If we survive what is coming, you will not benefit from the sacrifices made by those who stayed. Do you understand?” Fiora nodded. “Yes, General.” Natasha held her gaze for another moment, then turned and left without another word.

Once she was gone, the attention in the room shifted toward Darla. Darla looked at Fiora and thought back over every strange comment she had dismissed, every contradiction she had ignored, and every moment when Fiora had seemed to know far more than she should have. “All those little things you said, the things that didn’t make sense at the time, the things I dismissed as nonsense… I think I understand them better now.” She stepped farther into the cell. “I’m going to fight for you too, but I need you to tell me everything.” Fiora nodded, a single tear forming in the corner of her eye. “Thank you,” she whispered. “And I’m sorry I wasn’t honest from the beginning.” Cassian smiled faintly, then stepped out of the cell and closed the door behind him, leaving the two of them alone to talk.

Alister returned to the base later that night looking completely exhausted. Every muscle in his body ached, and one arm hung uselessly at his side as he forced the door open. “Maybe hanging from a pole for hours wasn’t the best plan,” he muttered. Bram was waiting in the lobby and stood the moment he saw him. “You’re back. Did you figure it out? Did you...” He stopped himself, though the worry in his voice remained obvious. “Yes and no. Well… it’s complicated.” Alister groaned as he dragged himself farther inside. “Relax. You sound like someone’s grandmother.”

Bram nodded and fell silent, though he continued watching him carefully. Alister lowered his bag onto the nearest table. “I don’t know if any of this will help Fiora, but let me explain.” Before he could begin, the door opened again and Jax stepped inside. “You’re back too,” Bram said. “How was Elaina?” “Fine, but...” He started. “You should come with us,” Alister interrupted. “I could use your technical knowledge.” Jax stopped and crossed his arms. “Excuse me?” Alister sighed. “Look, I don’t have the energy to argue with you, Mr. Grouch. I just put myself through hell to get this. The least you can do is hear me out.” Jax stared at him for a moment before reluctantly nodding. “All right.”

The three of them gathered around the table while Alister explained everything that had happened inside Purrmont Tower, excluding the embarrassing parts from finding Viktor in the garden to planting the recorder and throwing himself over the edge. When he finished, he removed the recording drive from his bag and inserted it into the terminal. He was about to skip ahead to the Reaper attack when a familiar voice caught his attention. Leopold was discussing the movement of funds between organizations, speaking as casually as though he were rearranging furniture. Alister stopped the recording and leaned closer.

“At the time, I was barely listening to this part,” he admitted. “I was more concerned with figuring out what Viktor was doing, but hearing it again…” His ears lowered slightly as the implications settled in. “This is pretty incriminating. I’m going to have to go through the entire meeting later.” He said. “Get on with it,” Jax said impatiently. “What does any of this have to do with Fiora?”

“Unfortunately, not much. Leonidas seems to be doing this for petty reasons, mostly to hurt me, but he has a partner. Someone helped him push everything through. I just don’t know who yet.”

“Darla called,” Bram said. “She said they’ve done everything they can for now.” The way he said it sounded almost like permission to continue. Alister nodded and resumed the recording. They listened as the skull-shaped fireworks appeared, followed by the Reaper’s descent onto the tower. The recording captured the shouting, the destruction of the table, the invasion by the Anarchy Men, and Viktor’s sudden rescue force. By the time it ended, even Jax understood what Alister had been trying to show them. “You’re questioning how they entered the tower,” Jax said. “Viktor’s forces bypassed the defenses, but so did the Reaper. Both breaches happened almost immediately after one another.” He leaned toward the terminal, replaying part of the audio. “Could it be connected to whoever designed that drive?”

“Something about the entire thing feels wrong,” Bram said. “We can only hear what happened, but the Reaper’s voice sounds different. More mechanical. Like they weren’t really speaking.” He frowned. “If even someone like me noticed it, then it must have been obvious in person.” “Don’t call yourself a dummy,” Alister said absently, still studying the waveform. “But yes. Something was off. I know Viktor is behind this. I just can’t prove how.” He removed the device from the terminal and closed his hand around it. “Either way, we need to protect this. Even if it doesn’t clear Fiora directly, it gives us leverage. We could use it as blackmail, or better yet, as evidence to bury the Court once and for all.” “Then give it to Cassian,” Jax said. Alister looked at him with immediate irritation. “Would you stop making sense for five minutes?” “I’m serious.” He pressed.

“So am I. I’ll give it to him eventually, but not yet. This is our trump card.” Alister’s smirk returned despite his exhaustion. “If everything else fails, this might be what saves Fiora, even if using it is a little underhanded.” Bram shifted uncomfortably. “You’re planning to play dirty.” Alister looked down at the drive in his hand. “So are they.”

Chapter 46: The Trial

“A tribunal,” Heskal said with quiet authority, seated across from Cassian as the two administrators glared at one another. “A trial by jury,” Cassian insisted. At the end of the table, an elderly owl man released a weary sigh. Heskal barely acknowledged him before continuing. “A jury has no place in a case such as this. Not with charges of foreign espionage, terrorism, and the theft of restricted government material.” “I’m afraid he is correct,” the owl said. “Given the present charges, a tribunal is the proper venue.” “This is not a matter of oversight or political preference,” Heskal added, leaning back in his chair with the confidence of someone who knew Cassian had little leverage. “It is simply the correct procedure.”

“The charges are complete nonsense,” Cassian said. His composure had begun to crack, frustration sharpening every word. “There is no proof that Fenleigh colluded with a foreign power. General Starcrafter has already submitted her statement confirming that Fiora was neither acting under Union orders nor reporting information back to them. Without that allegation, there is no reason ordinary citizens should be excluded from judging the case.” “The word of a brute from another nation proves very little,” Heskal replied. “Do you honestly believe a foreign military leader would openly

admit that one of her operatives had infiltrated Porta Nexus?"

Cassian's eyes narrowed. He leaned closer across the table, studying Heskal with more open suspicion than before. "Why do you care so much about this trial?" Heskal did not answer immediately. His mask gave nothing away, but the pause itself felt deliberate. "Why do you?" he asked at last. "The answer should already be clear to you." "Administrator Cassian," the owl interrupted before the argument could escalate further, "I must deny your request for a jury." Cassian scoffed, but the owl continued before he could object. "Do not mistake that ruling for a predetermined verdict. I will preside over the tribunal and remain impartial, as I always have." "Of course," Cassian muttered. "For this proceeding, I will also permit each of you to select one additional member of the tribunal. Neither selection may have a direct personal connection to the accused, and both must possess standing within the Port Authority."

Heskal inclined his head. "Thank you, Administrator. Or do you prefer Judge while presiding?" The owl's expression remained flat. "Administrator Strix will suffice." Cassian barely heard the exchange. He was still watching Heskal. It was rare to see the Legislation Administrator anywhere outside the controlled security of his own offices. Heskal usually exerted influence from a distance, allowing orders, policies, and carefully chosen intermediaries to do the damage for him. Yet he had come personally for this hearing. He had interfered with nearly every member of Special Operations from behind a desk, but for Fiora's case he was willing to sit across from Cassian and ensure the structure of the trial himself. This was not about Fiora. She was only the match. Cassian did not yet know what Heskal intended to ignite, but refusing the tribunal would not stop it. At least this arrangement gave him one vote inside the room. "Very well," Cassian said reluctantly. "I accept."

Bram stood outside his family's home with a heavy frown as the last of their belongings were loaded into the spacecraft. Every member of the Ashgarn family had gathered near the ramp, ready to leave Porta Nexus behind, though none of them looked particularly happy about it. One by one, they

approached Bram with sad smiles. “Do you really have to go?” he asked. “I’m afraid so, Brammy,” his grandmother said. She studied his expression for a moment, then softened. “You’ve decided to stay, haven’t you?” Bram nodded. “I could never leave the Port, and even if I could, I have to stay and support my teammate.” His grandmother smiled knowingly. “Then I expect at least two grandchildren.” Bram tilted his head in complete confusion. She only laughed before her expression turned serious again. “There is one more thing. I could not, for the life of me, find out where your brother ran off to. We all looked, but we cannot wait any longer. If you see him, take care of each other. All right?”

“Well, you know how he is. He disappeared for three months that one time,” Bram said with a faint laugh, trying to ease her worry. “But yes. I will.” His family gathered around him for one final group hug. Bram held them close, doing his best not to think about how strange the house would feel without them. Before long, they boarded the ship, the ramp closed, and the engines came to life. Bram remained where he was as the craft lifted into the air and disappeared into the distance, leaving him alone for the first time in his life.

The day of the trial arrived soon afterward. The members of Special Operations had each faced their own ordeal and, for the most part, survived it. Jax was still wrestling with the Coalition’s offer. Fiora remained in very real danger. Darla had lost the support of her family, and Alister now carried evidence capable of provoking some of the most powerful people in Porta Nexus. Despite everything, they were together again. There was little they could do from the gallery, but at the very least, Fiora would know they had come.

They entered the enormous courthouse side by side. The Justice Division. The building contained an excessive number of courtrooms in nearly every shape and size, each designed for a different kind of hearing, dispute, or criminal proceeding. Fiora’s tribunal was being held in one of the smaller, more private chambers. It was not technically closed to the public or the press, but recording of any kind had been strictly forbidden.

Tristan stood outside the door, reaching hopelessly upward as he tried to reclaim his camera from a towering creature dressed in judicial robes. The clothing suggested he was some kind of court official, though his massive frame and twisting features made him look more like an eldritch monster dragged out of the deepest reaches of the multiverse. “Come on, give it back,” Tristan pleaded. “I already said I won’t film.” “I will place it at the front desk,” the creature replied in a low, measured voice. “You may retrieve it when you leave.” “Aion must have sent him to report on the trial,” Darla said as they approached.

“Speaking of that,” Alister said, lowering his voice, “Fiora already told you everything, didn’t she?” Darla sighed. “More or less. I think I understand why she made the choices she did.” She paused, searching for the right words. “She really is... No I won't say yet, at least. I’m sure she will explain it to everyone soon enough.” She entered the courtroom without saying anything more. “She had better, I have work to do. ”Jax muttered. The fact that he had come at all said more than the complaint. They were surprised by the shape of the courtroom once they stepped inside. The room itself was not especially wide, but the ceiling rose impossibly high above them. Three prominent balconies overlooked the chamber, each reserved for a member of the tribunal. Behind those balconies were additional rows of elevated seating for officials, dignitaries, and other important observers.

Heskal was already seated in the upper gallery, directly above his captain. He paid little attention to anyone below. Leonidas sat several seats away, wearing the expression of someone who believed his mere presence was significant. “Well, that is practically confirmation on its own,” Alister muttered as the group found seats near the front. Tristan entered shortly afterward and sat behind them, still grumbling about his confiscated camera. More familiar faces gradually filtered into the chamber. Captain Lacy arrived first, followed by NoxLux. Cynthia appeared as well, though she wore neither a disguise nor a Port Authority uniform. In casual clothes, styled like some trendy young woman out for the afternoon, she looked almost like an entirely different person.

A man wearing an apron labeled **Andre's Taco Stand** took a seat nearby, looking as though he had come directly from work. "Fiora has a lot of strange sympathizers," Alister said, faintly amused.

The last to arrive were Kloe and Lucien. Kloe stopped the moment she saw Alister. For a second, she looked as though she wanted to approach him, but guilt crossed her face before she could move. Instead, she lowered her gaze and followed Lucien toward a different row. Alister noticed. He said nothing.

Just outside the courtroom, Fiora stood with the restraints finally removed while Cassian remained close behind her. "Remember, Fiora, listen to your lawyer. He understands the law far better than you do. Do exactly as he says. Understood?" he said sternly. "Well, I… all right," Fiora said, though her uncertainty remained obvious. She glanced farther down the hallway toward the man approaching them. His suit was covered in bright stars, and he wore matching star-shaped sunglasses that made him look more like a stage performer than an attorney. "But are you sure this guy is… good?"

Cassian followed her gaze and sighed. "I'll admit he is somewhat eccentric, but he is also my personal lawyer. He does excellent work." The man finally reached them and immediately struck a dramatic pose. "That's right. I'm Avery Bright. Fiora Fera Fenleigh." He paused, considering the name. "All right, I'm calling you FFF. Just listen to me, and we'll get through this thing A-OK." He removed his sunglasses with a flourish. Fiora stared at him for a moment. "Right," she said sheepishly.

The doors opened as they entered the courtroom, and the entire room went silent. Everyone watched as Fiora took her place at the defense desk while Cassian moved to join the rest of Special Operations. "Do you think she'll be alright?" Bram asked nervously. "That remains to be seen," Cassian replied with a sigh. Not long after, another figure entered the courtroom. A kangaroo man hopped forward and took his place beside Fiora. The moment she saw him, her expression changed. "Oh no," she said quietly. Avery looked over at her. "What?" "I've heard about these." Fiora suddenly

looked terrified. “It’s a kangaroo court!” The man stared at her with an expression that suggested he had heard that exact joke far too many times before.

“No, FFF,” Avery explained. “That’s just the prosecutor. Good guy, but ruthless.” Fiora sighed in relief. “Oh. Okay.” Not long after, a voice echoed throughout the courtroom. “All rise for the honorable judges.” The voice seemed to come from nowhere as all three judges stepped forward onto their balconies. The owl man in the center moved first. “Administrator Orson Strix.” He took his seat.

The woman on the left stepped forward next. She appeared younger than the others, with blue swirling hair and a calm expression. “Captain Juro Harrow.” She smiled politely before taking her seat. “A captain and a judge,” Alister muttered from the gallery. “Interesting. Seems like most captains are purely defenders.”

He had seen her during meetings before, but never actually spoken with her. Finally, the last figure stepped onto the right balcony. A massive crystal golem stood overlooking the courtroom, his body shining like carved glass. “Magistrate Axiom Shard.” The golem took his seat, and the room fell silent. The trial was ready to begin.

They went over some boring opening statements that felt far too ceremonial and drawn out. Fiora barely understood any of it. The endless explanations, formal wording, and legal terminology all blended together until she felt like her brain was beginning to melt just from sitting there. Thankfully, Avery handled most of it. He spoke on her behalf, guided her through when she needed to respond, and quietly explained what was happening whenever she looked completely lost. Then the charges were finally read. “Operative One Fiora Fenleigh,” the voice from above announced. “You have been charged with extortion, terrorism, treason, and foreign espionage on behalf of the Union. How do you plead?”

Avery leaned closer to her. “Now listen carefully, FFF,” he whispered. “The plea is not about whether you regret what happened. The plea is about what the court can legally prove.” He adjusted his

glasses. “I’ve reviewed what evidence they have. We need to be careful with the extortion charge. That rat who accused you could be trouble, but his word is against Cassian’s. Terrorism? Treason? There is nothing there. The big one is espionage.” He looked at her seriously. “We both know you weren’t a spy. So we plead not guilty. Understand?” Fiora stood slowly, taking a deep breath. She looked around the courtroom. At Heskal above them. At the tribunal. At Special Operations watching from behind her. At all the people who had come despite everything. For a moment, she truly thought about it. Then she spoke.

“I plead not guilty to all charges...” Her voice weakened slightly. “Except extortion.”

The courtroom immediately erupted into whispers and conversation. Avery slowly lowered his head and sighed, pushing his glasses back up. “Alright,” he muttered. “If that’s how we’re playing it.”

From the gallery, Cassian covered his face with one hand. “Why am I even fighting for this stupid girl?” he muttered in frustration. The prosecutor, however, seemed pleased. The kangaroo man leaned forward slightly with a confident smile. “Your Honors, this clearly demonstrates an attempt to manipulate the court. She is trying to distract from the larger crimes she committed by admitting guilt only to a lesser charge.”

Avery stood immediately. “Objection!” The declaration echoed through the courtroom.

The three judges remained silent for a moment. Then Orson Strix leaned forward slightly from the center balcony. “Before we go any further,” he said calmly, “I believe we need to establish something first.” The owl’s gaze settled on Fiora. “Fiora Fenleigh. Who are you?” The question caught her completely off guard. She opened her mouth, but no answer came. She had spent so long preparing herself to explain what she had done, what she had hidden, and what she had been accused of. She had not expected someone to ask something so simple. “I...”

The courtroom remained silent. “Take the stand and begin your testimony,” the disembodied voice announced. Fiora hesitated before slowly making her way forward. From the witness stand, the

tribunal looked even more intimidating. The balconies seemed impossibly high above her, the three judges looking down from above like literal judgment itself. Every mistake, every lie, every secret felt heavier under their gaze. “Well, I...” Fiora looked down at her hands. “Where should I even begin?” “You do not need to tell us your entire life story,” Juro said calmly. She offered Fiora a small, reassuring smile. “Simply explain how we arrived here.” Fiora looked up at her, then nodded slowly. “Right...” She took a breath. “I guess it all started during the Aspect War.”

Years earlier, Fera stared up at a recruitment poster on a distant world. It was simple. **Join the Union.** A hand pointed confidently forward, promising purpose and belonging. Many people walked past without a second glance. They had families. Responsibilities. Lives they could not simply abandon, but Fera? Fera had nothing. No family waiting for her the only thing they had left her was the name. No home to return to. Not even proper clothing. No place where she felt like she belonged. Others saw the poster for what it was: recruitment propaganda during a desperate war effort. The Empire had fallen, and Natasha’s Union was expanding rapidly, searching for anyone willing to help eliminate the remaining threats.

Fera saw something else. An opportunity. Without hesitation, she walked toward the recruitment office. The man behind the counter looked her over immediately. His eyes moved from her thin frame to her uncertain expression. “Hey kid,” he said. “How old are you exactly?” “Oh, um...” Fera hesitated. “Sixteen.” The man immediately smiled. “Perfect!” Before Fera could fully process what was happening, a rifle had been placed into her hands. A set of secondhand armor was strapped onto her body, and within moments she was being pushed toward a transport headed for the battlefield. She had gone looking for a purpose. Instead, she found a war.

She ran forward with the others, completely terrified, as an army of black and red armored soldiers charged toward them from the opposite direction. She had not even received proper training. Her hands shook as she tried to fire her weapon, but nothing happened. She did not understand why. No

one had bothered to explain the safety mechanism, or even the basics of how to use the rifle they had given her. The enemy was getting closer. Too close. Panic took over. Without thinking, Fiora turned and began running back toward their own lines, breaking formation. A few others followed her, abandoning their position as the gap widened. “What the hell are you doing?” one of the nearby soldiers shouted. They closed the distance before they could fully retreat. Fera stumbled and fell as two enemy soldiers surrounded her.

The two veterans looked down at her with amusement rather than anger. “They’re sending babies to war now?” one of them laughed. “The Empire may be gone, but the Multiverse is still terrified of us.” He raised his weapon. Fera froze. She had no idea what to do. Her hands desperately fumbled with the rifle until, finally, she found the safety. The weapon fired. The shot struck the soldier directly in the head. The other man’s expression changed immediately. The mocking smile disappeared. There was no longer any amusement in his eyes. Fera tried to raise the rifle again, but he knocked it aside before she could fire. He charged. She barely managed to move out of the way, falling hard onto the ground. Her hands scrambled for the weapon again, but this time she abandoned the idea of firing.

Instead, she grabbed the rifle and drove the bayonet forward. She missed where she had intended to strike, but it was enough. The blade pierced his neck. The soldier collapsed, shock still frozen across his face as Fera stumbled backward. Blood covered her. She stared down at the two men lying in front of her. Only now did the reality of what had happened truly reach her. “I’m... I’m sorry...” she whispered. That was the moment she understood what she had signed up for, and it was only the beginning. The battles continued. Despite her pleas, despite asking for even the most basic training, they kept sending her back out. She did not want to kill. She did not want to become a soldier. But if she was going to survive, she needed something. Anything. A lesson. A drill.

Someone to tell her what she was doing. Instead, she was given the same answer every time. “You signed up for this. Earn your paycheck.” So the battlefield became her teacher. Every battle

taught her something. Every mistake nearly killed her. Every close call forced her to improve.

The people she had enlisted alongside disappeared one by one. The faces she had seen when she first arrived slowly vanished until, a year later, she was the only one left. By then, she was no longer the terrified girl who could barely hold a rifle. She was still afraid, but she knew how to fight. She was sent to another battlefield to reinforce a struggling unit, but the deployment had been rushed. Before she knew it, she was surrounded.

An average soldier was no longer a threat. She moved through them with instinct. A stab. A shot. A kick that sent one soldier crashing into another two. She had become exactly what the Union had thrown her into the war to become, but there was always another soldier. Another wave. Another enemy. The Empire Remnants never seemed to run out. Fera looked around as the soldiers continued closing in from every direction. “So this is how I die...” she whispered. Tears filled her eyes as she prepared herself for the end. “Never give up!” The voice cut through the battlefield. A group of Union soldiers rushed forward, tearing through the surrounding enemies with a confidence Fera had never seen before. They moved together, covering one another, fighting like they actually believed they were protecting something.

At the center of them was a man who looked completely out of place. He was smiling. On a battlefield. Fera could not understand it. She saw no reason anyone should be smiling here. He turned toward her. “You all right, rookie?” Fiora could only nod. “Great.” He smiled wider. “Name’s Traceson. Glad to meet you.” He extended his hand. After a moment, she took it. “Fera. Fera Fenleigh.”

“Where’s the rest of your team?” Traceson asked. “We came to rescue them.” Fera blinked. “Rescue?”

She looked around. “They sent me to do that.” Traceson stared at her. “By yourself?” She did not answer. She did not need to. His expression shifted from confusion to concern. One of the soldiers behind him glanced at the others.

“She must be from one of those units.” Traceson understood immediately. “Alright. Follow us, Ms. Fenleigh.” Fera looked at him in confusion. “What? I can’t just leave. I have to report back.” Traceson looked at her seriously. “Let me ask you something.” He gestured toward her armor and rifle. “Have you received a single day of training?” Fera said nothing. Her expression answered for her. Traceson sighed. “Thought so.” He looked back toward his squad. “Screw that. You’ve seen the wrong side of the Union.” He motioned for her to follow. “Let me show you the right one. Natasha fights for what we actually believe in.” For the first time in a long time, Fera hesitated for a different reason. Not because she was afraid. Because someone was finally offering her a choice.

Through Traceson, Fera was able to transfer without much trouble. She noticed the difference almost immediately. They trained together, ate together, and treated one another like people rather than replaceable bodies. They showed her how to hold her weapon properly, how to move with a unit, and how to rely on the soldiers beside her. They joked that she was still green, which only confused her. “What do you mean? We’re all green,” she said, looking around at their uniforms. None of them explained. They only laughed.

They still went out on missions, but these were nothing like the battles Fera had known before. The General often led the charge herself. They did not simply hunt down enemies and move on. They rescued civilians, defended their allies the way soldiers always should have, and made certain no one was left behind if they could help it. Every member of the unit watched the others’ backs, and for the first time Fera began to understand what an army was supposed to be.

One day, Fera walked through the ship alone. The others had been strangely quiet all morning, and some of them seemed to be avoiding her. She did not like the feeling, but she had little time to dwell on it before she stepped into the darkened bunk room. The lights flashed on all at once, revealing her entire unit waiting inside. “Surprise!” Small confetti cones popped into the air around her. Fera

jumped, staring at them in alarm and confusion. “What is this? What is this about?” Traceson stepped forward with a can of beer in one hand. “Well, you said you didn’t know when you were born, right? But you should be about eighteen now, so happy birthday!” He held the can out to her.

Fera accepted it with both hands, still not understanding what she was supposed to feel. No one had ever celebrated her before. No one had ever cared enough to choose a day and declare that it belonged to her. The emotions came all at once, overwhelming her before she could stop them. She began to cry, though the tears were quickly joined by a smile. “Thank you,” she said, looking around at all of them. “Thank you, everyone.” She meant it more than she knew how to express. They soon discovered that getting Fera drunk had been a terrible idea. Before the night was over, half the unit was chasing her through the ship, desperately trying to stop her from touching anything capable of exploding.

There were quieter moments as well. Sometimes she would sit beside Traceson near one of the observation windows, watching the vortex outside the ship twist and swirl as they traveled between worlds. “Hey,” she asked one day, “do you really believe all of it? The Union stuff?” Traceson nodded without hesitation. “Of course. Every group has bad eggs, but that doesn’t mean we stop fighting for what is right. We keep fighting in spite of them.” He paused, then smiled faintly. “Or at least, I think that’s what the General would say.” Fera smiled. She liked that answer. “I’ll fight hard too.”

For six months, she made happy memories with them. It did not last much longer. The Aspect War was beginning to escalate. People called it that now, though in truth it had barely earned the name until nearly two years into the conflict. The Aspects were things of unimaginable power, each one bonding to its user through a different part of the body. The General possessed one herself, and it made her skin nearly impossible to damage. Fera sometimes wondered whether anything in the multiverse could pierce it.

She had once watched from the sidelines as Natasha faced an entire army alone. They fired at

her, struck her, and threw everything they had in her direction. Her armor was left battered and ruined, but when the smoke cleared, there was not a single mark on her skin. The power alone would have been enough to make nations kill for the Aspects, but that was not even their greatest appeal. If someone gathered all twelve, they could open an ancient door said to grant any wish without restriction. Naturally, everyone in the multiverse wanted them. Then Aion reported that every Aspect had already chosen a holder. The war intensified almost immediately. More factions entered the conflict, each hoping to claim the wish for themselves. Remnants of the Empire, once thought destroyed, returned stronger than before. Cyrus and his Coalition entered the race, carrying an Aspect of their own. Marcus and the Chimera Legion did the same. The Crossbone Reaper and his Middle Finger.

The Union's ruling council wanted the wish just as desperately as anyone else, and they were not willing to let it slip through their fingers because of Natasha's restraint. They disliked her methods, even though those methods worked. It did not matter that she had already helped save the multiverse once. To them, she was standing between the Union and limitless power. So they sent him. Their overseer. After that, everything began to change for the worse.

"Ms. Fenleigh." The Magistrate's voice interrupted her memory, pulling Fiora back into the courtroom. "Relevance," Axiom Shard said calmly. Fiora blinked, suddenly aware of where she was again. "Well, I..." She looked uncertain, struggling to explain why any of this mattered. Before she could continue, Avery stood. "I believe this is important for the tribunal to understand." The three judges exchanged quiet whispers among themselves. The prosecutor leaned forward. "Objection. This is irrelevant to the charges. This is purely an attempt to gain sympathy from the tribunal." The members of Special Operations looked between one another in surprise. Even Cassian seemed caught off guard.

"She didn't go into this much detail when she..." he started, before stopping himself. He already knew the answer. Fiora had been carrying all of this alone. "All of that..." Bram muttered quietly,

thinking back to the things she had said to him. The conversations she had avoided. The moments on Aion's tower where she had almost opened up, then pulled away. "She was carrying all of that... and she isn't even done." The judges finished their discussion. "Ms. Fenleigh," Orson said, looking down at her. "You may continue. However, I would ask that you move forward slightly. We understand now how you became a soldier. What we do not yet understand is how you came to Porta Nexus." Fiora nodded slowly. "Alright." She took a breath. "Here goes."

Chapter 47: Fiora Fenleigh

Overseer Medan was a prudish man. He was no warrior, only a suit sent to keep Natasha from straying from the Union's mission. As soon as he arrived, he began making changes. Their meals were replaced with rations while he ate prime steak. Their methods grew dirtier, and every mission became less about protecting anyone and more about obtaining the Aspects at any cost. The General pushed back against nearly every decision, but the truth was that Medan possessed the higher authority. No matter how fiercely Natasha argued, he eventually got what he wanted. Morale plummeted until there was almost nothing left.

Technically, their Aspect hunts were still successful. The Union had obtained two of them, but Medan continued pressuring the soldiers to push harder. Even after one of the Aspect holders was murdered and the power vanished before anyone could claim it, he treated the loss as a failure on their part rather than the death of a person.

Fera first encountered the Chimera Legion during one of those battles. They were incredibly powerful monsters, unlike anything she had fought before. In some respects, they reminded her of the

people of Porta Nexus now, a collection of strange beings who should not have fit together but somehow did. The Legion, however, was far more ruthless. Their leader, Marcus, seemed to be descending into madness. She watched as he ordered two of their damaged ships abandoned and sent crashing into the Union forces below, showing no concern that his own soldiers might be caught in the destruction.

Even so, the Union won the day and forced the Chimera Legion to retreat. They had barely begun tending to their wounded when the Coalition arrived. Everyone immediately readied their weapons, believing Cyrus had simply waited for both sides to exhaust themselves before striking. Instead, his forces descended onto the battlefield and began administering first aid. Natasha did not stop them. Fera had heard the same stories as everyone else. Cyrus was only pretending to reform. He was playing the part of some true hero, desperate to make the multiverse forget everything he had done. Yet there he was, ordering his people to heal wounded enemies when he could have left them to die. Her opinion of the Coalition shifted that day.

Then the call finally came. Porta Nexus was burning. Its shields were down, and the city had issued a distress signal to anyone who might answer. Natasha answered immediately, despite Medan doing everything within his authority to stop her. The Crossbone Remnant had accomplished the impossible. They had breached the city, and Natasha refused to stand aside while the Crossbone Reaper did as he pleased.

By the time they arrived, Porta Nexus was engulfed in flames. Union forces deployed throughout the city to support the defenders, and the Coalition appeared soon afterward to do the same. For once, the two factions stood together against something they both considered worse than the other: fanatical, skull-covered soldiers who had long since lost any real reason to fight and now only wanted the multiverse to hear them. Fera remained aboard the ship with Traceson. Someone had to protect the Overseer. In the end, it did not matter. The Crossbone Reaper walked through the battlefield without

the slightest concern for anyone attempting to stop him. He looked toward the Union ship and casually raised a single finger. Every system aboard the vessel failed at once.

The ship fell from the sky. Fera felt the floor disappear beneath her as alarms screamed throughout the vessel. That power was terrifying. It was unlike anything she had ever witnessed, making every other Aspect she had encountered seem insignificant by comparison. Most people probably would have considered it a joke because of the body part through which it manifested, but there was nothing amusing about watching an entire warship die at the movement of one finger. The burning city rushed toward them. Then everything went black.

When Fera came to, the world was smoke, fire, and ringing metal. For a moment, she couldn't even tell which way was up. Then a hand grabbed her arm and hauled her forward. "Are you all right?" Traceson asked. She could only nod. The ship was ruined. Whatever had once made it a safe place was gone, reduced to broken metal and open flame. The survivors regrouped quickly, instinct taking over where thought failed. Crossbone soldiers were already closing in around the crash site. In the middle of the wreckage they found Overseer Medan, somehow still alive. Half his face had been burned away, and the panic in his remaining eye was worse than the injury itself.

The soldiers formed a loose line around him anyway. Even now, they protected him. Medan grabbed Traceson by the collar with trembling hands. "Get me out of here!" he demanded. "Sir, we're surrounded. Get behind us and..." "I don't care!" Medan snapped. "Do whatever it takes to get me out of here, even if it means sacrificing yourself!" The effort of shouting clearly hurt him. His body was barely holding together, but still he barked orders like his life was worth more than anyone else's. The soldiers looked at him with open disdain. Whatever respect they might once have had for the man had long since rotted away. But before anyone could answer, the Remnant forces pushed closer. The line tightened. The noise became chaos.

Then Medan moved. He shoved Traceson forward and ran the other way. Time seemed to slow.

Fera reached out instinctively as her mentor stumbled into the swarm of Crossbone soldiers. She was too far away. Too slow. The moment he fell into them, they tore him apart. Blood splashed across her face as she froze where she stood, her hand still stretched uselessly toward him. The line broke. The Crossbone soldiers surged after Medan and quickly finished him off as well before anyone could stop them. It hardly mattered now. Not long after, Natasha's right hand came crashing into the area with reinforcements, securing the crash site by force. Natasha herself arrived soon after. By then, the threat was over. Fera barely noticed.

She walked forward in a daze toward what remained of Traceson's body. It was mangled beyond recognition, ripped apart so badly that only the shape of where he had fallen told her it was him at all. She dropped to her knees in front of him. Her whole body shook. She looked around at the others, at the soldiers who had survived, at the city still burning around them, and all she could think was that she had been saved again. Saved, while the people who mattered were gone. Her comrades were gone. The man who had pulled her out of hell, who had shown her what the Union was supposed to be, was gone, and the Overseer... if he had just listened to Traceson, if he had just stood behind the line like he was told, then maybe they both would have lived.

Fera rose to her feet looking like she wanted to scream. Instead, she ran. She ran without direction, without purpose, without even knowing where her legs were taking her. She just kept running, through smoke and ruined streets and the wreckage of the Siege. Eventually the fighting stopped. The city quieted by degrees. The Siege ended. By then she was sitting alone in an alley somewhere, long after the danger had passed. Only then did she fully understand the mistake she had made. She had run, but more than that, she felt hollow. Hollow and angry. Angry at Medan. Angry at the war. Angry at herself for ever believing in the Union so completely. She sat there frozen, mourning the friends who had meant everything to her. The people who had taken in a nobody and made her feel like she belonged. The people who had died while she was still alive.

Then she remembered something she had heard once from another soldier. Some Union soldiers had defected to the Coalition. They said the Coalition accepted anyone willing to fight for what was right. For the first time, Fera understood why. The Coalition was here now. In Porta Nexus. This might be her only chance. So she made up her mind. She would join them, but when she finally found where the Coalition forces had gathered, she could not bring herself to approach. They were holding a funeral for their dead. The moment felt too sacred, too heavy, and she stood there at a distance unable to move. By the time she found the courage, it was too late. The Union left. The Coalition left.

Everyone was already moving on to the final battle of the war elsewhere. The shield over Porta Nexus was restored, and just like that she was back where she had started. Different world. Same situation. She had no one. Only this time she was still wearing Union armor, and now that the immediate threat had passed, people were no longer willing to ignore it. A Peacekeeping officer spotted her, blew his whistle, and ordered her to come with him. She ran. She dropped her weapon first. Then she stripped away the armor piece by piece, and after that, she disappeared into the cracks of Porta Nexus with no idea what she was supposed to do next.

Weeks passed. Porta Nexus rebuilt around her as though the Siege had never happened. Streets reopened, damaged buildings were repaired, and people returned to their lives while Fera slipped back into the only routine she had known before the Union. She dug through dumpsters for food, slept wherever she could avoid being noticed, and tried not to think too far ahead. “Hey, that dumpster is mine. You can’t...” The voice came from the far end of the alley, but it stopped the moment its owner saw her face. A rat man stood there dressed in rags not much better than hers. He studied her closely, eyes narrowing with immediate interest. “Haven’t seen you around before,” he said.

“So?” Fera shrugged and continued digging through the trash, searching for anything that might still be edible. “I’ve seen everybody, So who are you?” he replied.“Fera Fenleigh. Why do you care? I’m no one important.” “I make it a point to know things. Information is power.” He smiled, flashing

several gold teeth. “Whatever.” She turned away from him. He continued watching her. “You’re that Union soldier, aren’t you?” Fera snapped to attention, her entire body tensing. “How do you... I mean...” She clenched her fists, ready to fight if she needed to. “All right, yes. Now shut up.” “Relax, Fera. I’m not a bad guy. I just put two and two together.” He leaned casually against the alley wall. “They were looking for you for a while, but they stopped. Guess you weren’t that important after all.” He laughed. Fera glared at him, but he only smiled wider.

“Maybe we can help each other.” She looked him up and down. The rat wore torn clothing and looked as hungry as she was. Nothing about him suggested he could help anyone. “What can you do?” she asked skeptically. “Oh, lots of things. Just name it.” He was lying through his teeth, but Fera was desperate enough to listen. “Can you get me off-world?” she asked. “To a Coalition world?” “Well, of course I can.” He answered too quickly, then paused as though considering the details. “But that might take some time. Border Patrol isn’t going to let you pass looking like that. We’d need to forge an identification or two.”

“You can do that?” Her suspicion softened almost immediately. “Thank you. I’m sorry. I thought you were a bad guy.” For the first time, she gave him her full attention. “Now hold on, Fera. That isn’t how we do things.” His voice remained calm and friendly. “I can help you, sure, but first you have to do something for me. Nothing big. Just one little favor.” “Fine. What is it?” Before she fully understood what she had agreed to, he had found her a change of clothes resembling a Port Academy recruit’s uniform and pushed her toward one of the academy entrances. “Your name is Fiora Weller now. Got it?” he whispered. “Steal some documents for me there form in the main room. Don’t get caught. They’ll execute you.” “Wait, what am I even supposed to...” He shoved her closer to the gate and disappeared back into the alley before she could finish.

“Hey, new recruit!” someone called from inside. “Why are you just standing there? Come in already.” Fera froze. Then, terrified that hesitation alone might expose her, she rushed through the

entrance. She was led straight toward registration with several other recruits, still having no idea what she was doing or why Scratch had sent her here. One after another, the man behind the desk asked each person for their information, wrote something down, and waved them onward. “Civics-issued identification,” he said when her turn came, holding out his hand. “Uh...” Fera looked down at herself as though the document might somehow appear. The man finally looked up. “You don’t have an ID?” She said nothing.

He sighed. “Burned in the Siege, huh? Don’t worry. You’re not the only one. Just tell me your name.” “Fiora,” she answered quickly. “Fiora...” Her mind went blank. She had already forgotten the second half of the name Scratch had given her. “You don’t remember your last name?” the man asked. “Or do you not have one? Wouldn’t be the first time I’ve dealt with that.” “No, I have one. It’s Fenleigh.” The moment the word left her mouth, she realized what she had done. Her eyes widened, and her heart began pounding. She had used her real name. She was going to be caught before she even made it through the front desk. “I, um...” She desperately searched for anything that might save her. “I forgot everything. My whole life.” Even as she said it, she knew it was the stupidest excuse she could possibly have chosen.

The man stared at her. “Ms. Fenleigh, are you telling me you have amnesia?” He clearly did not believe her, but it was too late to take it back. “Yeah,” she said, doubling down. “One of those Bone guys hit me really hard in the head. I don’t remember anything.” She looked at him pleadingly, hoping desperation might somehow make the lie convincing. The man sighed again and wrote something beside her name. “We’ll work something out. You may proceed.” Fera stared at him in surprise. That had worked. She quickly moved on before he could reconsider.

She still had only the vaguest idea of what she was supposed to do. Scratch had mentioned a document, so she looked around for anything that appeared important enough to steal. Who would even care if a single piece of paper disappeared? Before she could properly search the room, someone called

out from down the hall. “Hey, Cadet! This way.” Fera panicked and followed immediately, afraid that refusing would make them suspicious. Every time she managed to slip away, someone else found her and directed her somewhere new. First she was pulled into a class, then shown to a room, then the mess hall, then another class. Before long, she had become so preoccupied with avoiding detection that she nearly forgot why she had entered the Academy in the first place.

Scratch waited outside for hours. She never came back. He returned the next day and waited again, but there was still no sign of her. Eventually, he shrugged. “Well, damn. Guess she got caught.” Then he left, already putting the entire thing out of his mind. Weeks became months, and before Fera fully realized what had happened, she was sitting in a classroom panicking about midterms. “Wait...” she blurted out in front of everyone. “Why am I doing this? How did I even get here?” One of the other cadets leaned toward the person beside them. “Her amnesia is really that bad?” He asked. “Poor girl.”

Eventually, the final examinations arrived. Administrators and captains from several divisions had come to observe. Most cadets would be assigned wherever the Port Authority needed them. They could request a preferred division, but there was no guarantee they would receive it. Administrators and captains, however, were permitted to bypass that process and personally scout cadets who appeared especially promising.

This year, Administrator Cassian Sterros, Administrator Brutus Stonehide, and Administrator Bernard Kesler were among those attending. Brutus and Bernard had come specifically to evaluate potential recruits. Cassian had another reason. He wanted to inspect how the Academy was being run, even if everyone would undoubtedly be on their best behavior while he was watching. The three administrators sat together, taking notes while the cadets demonstrated their abilities. The first examination involved target shooting. Several recruits managed to land a few respectable shots, though nothing particularly impressive. That seemed to be expected from cadets with limited experience.

Then it was Fiora’s turn. Until now, she had deliberately tried to remain unnoticed, never hitting

more than a few targets during practice. With everyone watching, however, the pressure overwhelmed her. Instinct took over. She raised the weapon and emptied the entire magazine into the target. The instructor walked forward to inspect it. “Did she hit the bullseye once and miss every other shot?” Cassian asked. The instructor leaned closer, then stared in disbelief. “No,” he said. “Every bullet went through the same hole.” He turned back toward Fiora in awe. “That may be an Academy record. Excellent work, Fenleigh. You’ve improved tremendously.”

The room erupted into applause. Every eye turned toward her. “Oh no...” Fiora whispered. Cassian had certainly noticed. Terrified that she had drawn too much attention, she decided she needed to correct the mistake during the next test. It was a sword-sparring match. Fiora stood completely still as the other cadet approached and allowed herself to be struck. She collapsed dramatically, clutching the spot as though the blow had caused unbearable pain. The instructor stared at her. “That may be an Academy low.” He sighed. “Let’s call that a mistake. Get up and try again.”

“Nope,” Fiora said immediately. “I can’t do any better. I’m horrible with swords.” The three administrators exchanged confused looks. Some of their interest had already begun to fade. The rest of the examinations continued in much the same way. Fiora completed the obstacle course in record time, then performed terribly on the written examination. She had intended to fail it, but in truth, she barely understood most of the questions anyway. Whenever panic caused her instincts to take over, she achieved impossibly high scores. Whenever she remembered she was supposed to remain unnoticed, she produced results so disastrous they seemed almost deliberate. By the end of the day, no one knew quite what to make of Fiora Fenleigh.

Cassian kept a sharp eye on her after that. The inconsistency seemed too deliberate to ignore. Once the examinations ended, he pulled the headmaster aside for a private meeting. “You’re telling me she performed mostly average throughout the term, with only sporadic spikes of exceptional ability, and she claims to have amnesia?” Cassian asked, clearly unconvinced. “Yes. That is what she told us,”

the headmaster replied. “She is not exactly the brightest student either. Her written scores are below average, though still passing.” He studied Cassian curiously. “Why the interest? You do not normally attend these examinations anymore.” “Well, I suppose there were those twins...” the man began.

Cassian did not answer. He had not come to the Academy to scout Fiora, but now he could not shake the feeling that something about her was wrong. “With those scores, does she even pass?” he asked. The headmaster looked through the results. “Well... once we account for the extreme highs and lows, her final examination score comes to exactly fifty. Averaged with the rest of her work...” He paused, checking the numbers again. “She just barely passes.” Cassian considered that for a moment. “I am putting together something new,” he said at last. “An experimental unit. I think perhaps she would work well there. I would like to take her under my wing.” In truth, he simply wanted a reliable way to keep an eye on her. That was how Fiora joined Special Operations alongside the others.

Fiora’s story finally returned to the present. She stood quietly at the witness stand, looking down at her hands. “After that, I joined the team,” she said. “I found a new family. We did a lot together. We saved the Chancellor’s daughter. I got promoted. We saved Aion. We did plenty of other things too.” Her voice weakened. “But then Scratch found out I was still in the Port. He saw an opportunity and started blackmailing me into doing what he wanted. I was afraid that if I refused, he would tell everyone who I was and take everything away from me.” She looked back toward the members of Special Operations. “I never meant to join the Port Authority,” she admitted. A soft smile crossed her face. “But now I’m here.”

The reaction throughout the courtroom was mixed. Cassian and Darla had already heard most of the story, but even they seemed shaken by the details Fiora had left out before. Neither of them had any doubts remaining. Fiora had made a mistake in the most Fiora way imaginable, stumbling into a life she had never intended to build and then nearly destroying it because she was too afraid to trust anyone with the truth. Even so, she was still one of them.

Bram appeared the most conflicted. There was something in her story he understood in a way the others could not. He looked down with sorrow, uncertain what to feel. Fiora had lost one family, found another, and then lived every day terrified that it might disappear. Bram had just watched his own family leave the Port while choosing to remain behind. The circumstances were different, but the loneliness beneath them felt painfully familiar.

Jax's expression remained as frozen as ever, yet something behind it had shifted. Her story had reached him too, even if he would never admit it openly. Alister, meanwhile, was no longer thinking about whether what Fiora had done was right or wrong. He was already searching for a way to get her out of this. A trace of irritation crossed his face, directed mostly at himself. The fact that he had never uncovered any of this felt like an insult to his honor as a former Intelligence captain. Cassian looked up toward the tribunal with growing uncertainty. The judges were speaking quietly among themselves again, their expressions difficult to read from below. "This is why I wanted a jury," he admitted under his breath.

Chapter 48: The Verdict

The trial continued as the tribunal questioned Fiora more closely about what she had done and what Scratch had forced her to do. None of it was especially severe in the grand scheme of things. The information had been valuable to Scratch, but mostly minor to everyone else. The prosecutor pressed each point anyway, attempting to establish a pattern of deliberate misconduct. The most serious incident was probably the drive Fiora had planted on Aion. Jax looked particularly taken aback by that revelation. “The one time I praised her,” he grumbled. Even so, the incident had ultimately led them to the Marrow drive. Behind them, Tristan suddenly rose from his seat and hurried out of the courtroom looking pale, most likely to warn Aion about what had happened. No one tried to stop him.

“A lie about one’s past does not, by itself, make that person an agent of the past,” Orson began. Juno raised one hand, signaling for him to stop. Orson seemed to understand and allowed her to speak instead. “I believe we have heard enough,” she said. “We know what happened, and we know who you claim to be. Before this tribunal reaches its verdict, I would like to hear how you are perceived by those who have known and served beside you.” She looked out over the courtroom. “We will now permit

anyone who wishes to speak on Fiora Fenleigh's behalf to take the stand." Before anyone in the gallery could move, Axiom interrupted. "The General has already submitted her statement," he said, "but there is one additional witness this tribunal must hear before testimony is opened to the public."

Confusion briefly crossed Juno's face, but she accepted the request. The doors at the rear of the courtroom opened, and two prison guards entered with Scratch between them. The rat was wrapped in chains from neck to ankle, suggesting the guards knew better than to allow him even the smallest opportunity to escape. He was a slippery creature. Scratch smirked at Fiora as he passed her and was led toward the witness stand, looking far too pleased with himself for someone arriving in restraints.

Scratch began with a pity party, immediately trying to paint himself as the victim. "That woman claims to be a saint, but she is the true monster here. I didn't force her to do anything. In fact, she forced me to..." he started to say. Avery was on his feet before he could finish. "Objection! It has already been entered into evidence that you accepted a plea bargain. You told Intelligence everything about my client in exchange for a lighter sentence. I have read the reports. They were only able to charge her at all because of your testimony." "Sustained," all three judges said together. Scratch frowned. "Damn it. I'm not used to my own words getting..." "You are attempting to lie to this court in order to slander Ms. Fenleigh," Avery interrupted again. Even the kangaroo prosecutor seemed to know Avery was right and made no attempt to argue.

"Mr. Scratch," Orson said, sounding more openly irritated than before, "if you intend to blatantly lie when we already have a sworn statement from you saying the opposite, this tribunal will have no choice but to hold you in contempt." Scratch swallowed hard. "I, um... I think I'm done here. Nothing else to say." The two guards immediately grabbed him and began carrying him away without another word. As he passed Fiora, Scratch leaned slightly toward her and muttered under his breath. "I'll find a way to get back at you for this."

After that, the testimonies truly began. One after another, the people Fiora had affected came

forward to say what she meant to them. Tristan was first. He looked uncomfortable standing before the tribunal, but he cleared his throat and began anyway. “I told Mr. Aion about what happened, and he said that if there are any charges connected to him, he would like them dropped. Ms. Fenleigh saved his life, and he is grateful. A little disappointed, but grateful.” Tristan hesitated before continuing. “He also said that Fiora... is a rising star who will shine across all of Porta Nexus.” He shifted awkwardly under everyone’s attention. “As for what I think... I, um... she’s cool, I guess.”

Darla took the stand next. “Fiora is a strong soldier who has always done her best for the Port. I have no doubt about that. I would stake my...” She stopped herself. The words had nearly come out naturally, but then she remembered what her grandfather had said and what he had taken from her. Darla straightened slightly. “I would stake my life on it, and whatever remains of my reputation.” Alister followed. He stood before the tribunal with his usual confidence, though his voice softened by the end. “Fenleigh is an absolute idiot. I believe that has now been thoroughly established.” A few people in the gallery tried not to laugh. “But she is our idiot, and...” He glanced toward Fiora. “The Port needs more people like her.”

Bram was next, quieter than all of them. He looked toward Fiora rather than the judges as he spoke. “She made a mistake. She was scared. We all get like that sometimes.” A gentle smile crossed his face. “But I have faith in her.” Fiora smiled back at him from the defense table. Jax was more direct. “She is a pain in the neck, but I’m invested now. Where is all that work supposed to go if she leaves?” He then began listing every weapon, device, and half-formed invention Fiora had bothered him about designing. “Most of them are still in the prototype phase, but if she isn’t here, no one else is reckless enough to test them properly.” He continued well beyond the point where anyone understood what he was talking about, descending into technical jargon about power distribution, unstable transformation systems, and impact resistance. Eventually, someone had to guide him away from the stand because he showed no sign of stopping on his own.

Then the rest of the people in attendance began to speak. The man from Andre's Taco Stand seemed especially eager, practically rushing to the stand when his turn came. "You don't understand. She buys my tacos, man. I love that girl. I probably wouldn't even be in business anymore if she got locked up." He pointed toward Fiora with complete sincerity. "And it isn't just that. She chases off anyone who bothers me. I used to get robbed all the time." Fiora and the others stared at him in surprise. She had only been hungry. She liked his tacos, so she kept going back. She had never realized that her presence meant anything to him beyond the money she spent there.

Cynthia spoke next. "Undercover investigations become messy. This case was no different. We would not have caught our target without Fiora's assistance." Her statement was brief and professional, but the support behind it was clear. Then Leonidas descended from the upper gallery as though he were gracing the entire court with his presence. He took the stand with an air of complete certainty. "She is a useless nobody and a danger to the Port. We lose nothing by cutting her loose and risk everything by retaining her." His words drew uneasy murmurs from the gallery, though Leonidas seemed almost pleased by the reaction.

Morvin's daughter entered shortly afterward under escort. She looked directly at Fiora before addressing the tribunal. "She saved my life. I would not be alive without her." Her expression hardened. "She did more for me than my father ever has." The resentment in her voice was impossible to miss. Several others followed, though most of their stories were smaller. One person complained about a window Fiora had broken during a pursuit. Another remembered her helping them cross a crowded street. Someone else described her stopping to carry something heavy without being asked. Fiora barely remembered any of it. To her, those moments had not been heroic or important. They were simply things she had seen that needed doing.

Cassian ultimately chose not to testify. He felt he had already said too much and shown too clearly how deeply he cared about the outcome. Anything further might be dismissed as favoritism and

do more harm than good. Eventually, the testimonies came to an end. Silence settled across the courtroom. Orson rose from his seat. “The tribunal will now retire for deliberation.” The three judges disappeared from their balconies, leaving everyone behind to wait. The silence became suffocating. Even after everything that had been said, no one could confidently predict the result.

Half an hour later, the tribunal returned. “We have reached a decision,” Orson announced. The room immediately went still. Every eye returned to the judges. “Fiora Fenleigh did not enter Porta Nexus intending to serve it. That much is clear. What is equally clear is that intention is not the only measure of a life. She remained. She served. She protected this city and its people repeatedly, even while fear led her to conceal the truth.” Fiora lowered her gaze. Shame and dread twisted together inside her until she looked as though she wanted to disappear entirely. “This tribunal will not pretend that her service erases her crimes,” Orson continued. “Neither will it pretend that her crimes erase her service.” He paused.

“On the charges of terrorism, treason, and foreign espionage, this tribunal finds Fiora Fenleigh not guilty by majority decision. Magistrate Shard has requested that his dissenting vote be entered into the official record.” Juno said. Leonidas shot to his feet with an angry hiss and stormed out of the courtroom. Heskal remained seated, though a faint frown crossed the portion of his face still visible behind the mask. Juno continued the ruling. “On the charge of extortion, the tribunal finds the accused guilty.” Fiora’s eyes widened. Her body began to shake. She heard only that single word. Guilty. In her mind, that meant she had lost.

“The accused will receive credit for time already served and will be returned to Special Operations under supervised probation, pending a future review of her rank and standing. She will also be required to complete additional training regarding proper Port Authority conduct, along with a period of community service to be determined at a later date.” Axiom said. Fiora lowered her head, believing it was over. Above them, Heskal’s faint smile returned. Avery placed a firm hand on her

shoulder. “No, FFF. Don’t misunderstand.” She looked toward him uncertainly. “Look up. Yes, you have a few things to deal with, but you aren’t being sent away. You aren’t being extradited.” He smiled. “You won.” For several seconds, Fiora simply stared at him. Then applause began somewhere in the gallery. Others quickly joined in until the entire room seemed to erupt around her.

Everyone slowly made their way toward the defense table, all of them smiling, relieved that everything had finally worked out even if Fiora still had a few things to do before the matter was truly behind her. Avery struck one last dramatic pose, then hurried out of the room as though he understood that the moment no longer belonged to him. Fiora looked from one teammate to the next, still struggling to believe they were all there. “You... you’re not mad?” “Of course not, idiot,” Alister said before anyone else could answer. “Now let’s get out of here. It’s time to celebrate. Cassian is buying.” Cassian frowned. “I have been paying for this entire case. It was expensive.”

He looked around at all of them, maintaining the expression for only a moment before a small smile returned. “But very well.” Special Operations left the courthouse together, with several people from the gallery following them to a higher-end restaurant Cassian seemed to favor. They ordered food and drinks, settling around the table and talking much as they always had. For all the secrets that had been exposed, Fiora was surprised by how little had truly changed. “So you know some kind of crazy Union kung fu?” Bram asked. “That’s why you’re such a good fighter, right?” “Uh... yes?” Fiora answered, unsure whether that was technically correct.

“It explains some of the designs you submitted,” Jax added. “They are different enough from standard Union equipment, but similar enough that using them would feel natural to you.” He went on. Alister groaned and leaned back in his seat. “I still cannot believe I missed all of this. Now that I know what I’m looking at, the signs were painfully obvious.” He groaned. Cassian gave a slow nod. Somehow, Fiora Fenleigh had managed to fool both a former Intelligence captain and the Administrator of Internal Investigations without ever being particularly good at lying. Darla simply smiled and took

another sip of her drink. She had become more accustomed to alcohol since the last time they had all gone out together and, though she would not admit it too enthusiastically, she no longer hated it.

Later that night, even Elaina made an appearance, though she was still bandaged and walking on crutches. She settled between Cassian and jax. She spoke with everyone as calmly as though nothing terrible had happened. The night went on. They laughed together, drank too much, and gradually slipped back into the familiar rhythm they had before everything went wrong. When the emotion of it all became too much, Fiora quietly stepped outside for a moment. She looked up at the sky, at the portals swirling above Porta Nexus, the shield barely visible as it blocked unauthorized entry, and the ships moving through the city's airspace like clockwork.

After a while, Bram joined her. He looked worried, though his voice was as gentle as ever. "Hey, Fenleigh..." He paused. "Sorry. Fiora. How are you holding up?" She did not answer. "After hearing all of that..." Bram continued. "It was a lot." He hesitated before looking toward her. "You don't really have a home outside of the team, do you? Well, if something ever happens to the base again, like last time, or you just want a change... let's just say I have an empty house waiting for you. Whenever you need it." Fiora stared at him, not seeming to understand what he meant. "Is this really okay?" she asked quietly. "All of you..."

"Of course it is," Bram said with a smile. "I don't deserve it." He did not answer immediately. Instead, he placed an arm around her shoulder. "You don't get to decide that, Fiora." The words sounded almost out of character coming from him, harsher than anything Bram would normally say. Yet they were exactly what she needed to hear. Fiora smiled, though she still said nothing. "I understand better now," he continued. "Everything you were afraid of. I've lost a lot of people in my life too." He looked out across the city with her. "So I'll promise again... I'll live for you."

Chapter 49: The Gears that spin and no one sees

Jax led the others through the industrial district, where the streets were quieter and far less crowded than the rest of Porta Nexus, though the constant clanking of machinery echoed from every direction. The trial was behind them now, and Special Operations was finally ready to return its attention to the more immediate threat: inspecting the Porta Dampener. For once, Jax walked at the front of the group, guiding them with an obvious familiarity he did not seem particularly eager to explain.

“I understand that you came from this division,” Alister said, glancing around at the factories surrounding them, “but is this really the only way?” Even he knew surprisingly little about Science and Engineering. To him, the division had always existed quietly in the background. If something broke, someone filled out the appropriate paperwork, and eventually a team of engineers appeared to repair it, usually much later than anyone wanted. Alister had rarely found a reason to deal with them directly.

Jax stopped and looked back at him with a tired sigh. “I’ve already explained this. The Portal Dampener is one of the most heavily guarded facilities in the Port. Very few people have the authority

to grant access, and I doubt the Supreme Administrator will approve it just because we ask politely."

Darla immediately understood what that meant. "Then who else has the authority?" "Who else?" Jax turned and continued walking. "The people responsible for maintaining it." They approached an enormous factory complex that seemed to spread outward in every direction, its walls disappearing behind towers, pipes, and adjoining workshops. Several engineers stood near the entrance. Their uniforms were noticeably different from the standard Port Authority designs: white jumpsuits covered in more pockets than any one person could reasonably need, each one filled with tools, instruments, and small mechanical components.

The engineers recognized Jax almost immediately. "Holy crap, it's Ca..." Jax raised a hand directly in front of the man's face. "Stop. I'm Jax. You have me confused with someone else." The two engineers tilted their heads, clearly failing to understand what he was trying to communicate. "I guess he looks a little different," one of them said. "But he's still just as grumpy. Are you sure you're not..." He started. "That doesn't matter," Jax interrupted. "Go inside and tell everyone that Jax is here, and that whoever you think I am is not. I merely happen to resemble him." The engineers exchanged a glance. "All right, Jax," the man said slowly. "If you say so. I'm not sure what you're trying to pull, though." They disappeared into the factory.

Alister turned toward him almost immediately. "What exactly are you trying to pull, Callum?" He did not know much about the name beyond the fact that Cassian and Elaina had both used it several times. Alister had attempted to investigate it before, but every search had led nowhere. "What are you hiding?" Darla asked more sternly. "Why does it matter?" Jax replied, effectively admitting there was something to hide. "We just went through an entire thing," Fiora said at last. "Yeah," Bram agreed. "A whole thing." Fiora leaned closer to him and lowered her voice. "You don't think he's secretly a spy too, do you?"

"I hope not," Bram whispered back. "The trial was a huge ordeal for all of us." "I'm not a

criminal," Jax hissed. "Well..." He looked between them, visibly irritated. "Whatever happened has already been handled by Cassian, not unlike what he did for you, Bram and Fiora." Both of them straightened immediately at that. Darla released another sigh. "No one expects you to tell us everything. Everyone has a secret or two, but perhaps it's time you placed a little more faith in us, the way we have placed our faith in you." "Why do you think I brought you here?" Jax asked. Before they could interrogate him any further, he pushed open the factory doors and stepped inside.

They stepped into the enormous lobby. A front desk sat near the entrance, though no one was currently manning it. Engineers moved in and out of distant rooms, disappearing through doors and across elevated walkways as machinery clanked somewhere deeper within the building. Jax continued toward the far end of the hall without hesitation. "Don't get in the way of their work," he warned as they approached another set of doors. The others nodded. None of them had any intention of interfering.

Jax slowly pushed the door open, and the sound began leaking through before they could see what was inside. Loud music poured into the hallway, catching all of them off guard. Beyond the doorway, a robotic woman made almost entirely of polished brass stood on a raised platform at the center of the workshop, singing as lights moved around her. "Sunrise hits the sink in gold. Gauge on the boiler, reading old. Steam is hissing, gears engage. Keys on the hook, turning a new page." The members of Special Operations looked around in confusion. Alister raised an eyebrow. "Is this why it takes them so long to fix anything?" he muttered.

At first, it truly did look as though the Engineering Division had stopped working to hold some random concert in the middle of the day. The music continued as workers moved between massive machines, cranes, welding stations, and half-finished devices. "Light it up, let the day come in. Open the valves, let the work begin. No grand design, no perfect plan. Just a fresh first cog and a steady hand." Then they looked closer. The engineers had never stopped working. Every movement matched

the rhythm. Tools struck metal on the beat. Mechanical arms shifted during pauses in the melody. Components were passed from one worker to the next with movements that looked almost choreographed. There was a subtle dance to everything they did, but none of it slowed them down.

Jax's eye lit up. "They finished her," he said, his voice carrying something close to wonder. "Airship hums at the docking mast. Pex still fixing that chronoclast. Kits in uniforms, goggles low. Clockwork whirring, telling them go." The longer they watched, the more impressive it became. What had first looked like slacking was actually a system. The entire workshop moved together, each engineer falling into place without needing to shout over the noise or stop to coordinate. "They're in perfect sync," Darla said, unable to hide her surprise. They were not merely fast. They were precise.

"Light it up, let the day come in. Open the valves, let the work begin. No grand design, no perfect plan. Just a fresh first cog and a steady hand!" The robot danced across the platform as she sang, pointing from one section of the workshop to another as though every movement was directing the engineers without the need for further explanation. The song gradually reached its end, and for one brief moment the entire room stopped. The workers applauded, some cheering from their stations, before softer music began playing and everyone returned to work.

Jax remained completely captivated. "Magnificent," he whispered. Fiora noticed immediately. "Jax, are you... crying?" "What? Of course not." He quickly wiped the tears from his face. "I wouldn't expect a dolt like you to understand the art of being an idol." He hissed. "Man, I never would've pegged you for a fan of that sort of thing," Bram said with a chuckle. "It was a good show, though." Before they could say anything else, the robot addressed the workshop again. "Great job, everyone! We're right on schedule, even accounting for the lack of manpower. Keep it up, and don't let the world get you down!" The engineers cheered in response. She then jumped down from the platform and sat on a nearby crate while a small alien man approached. He took the cable extending from behind her and plugged it into a machine, watching the information scroll across its display.

“That was even better than last time,” he said. “Looks like the data we added really helped. But that movement during line twenty-three... was that improvised?” He asked. She laughed. “I thought I would try inventing something of my own instead of copying other idols.” She tapped lightly against her metal frame. “It worked,” he said, sounding impressed. “We’re already doing that with the lyrics. Maybe we should consider creating more original material for the...” He stopped when he noticed Jax from the corner of his eye. His expression hardened immediately. “Why are you here, Usurper?”

The robot tilted her head and scanned Jax’s face. “Oh, Callum...” “That is not my name,” Jax interrupted. Her head tilted even farther. “It isn’t? Perhaps my sensors need to be recalibrated.” “Your sensors are fine. Flawless, even, Don’t let him convince you otherwise. He’s simply ashamed of his own reputation.” the alien said. Jax ignored the accusation and gestured toward him. “This is Lieutenant Pex Lumen. And the robot is...” Before he could finish, she leapt onto the top of the crate and struck a dramatic pose. “I’m Captain Project Idol Number Nine!” Alister stared at her. “A robot captain? That’s absurd. I could perhaps accept a lieutenant, but...” “She passed the test,” Pex snapped, clearly offended. “We all worked very hard to make certain she was perfect.”

“She wasn’t even fully manufactured when I left, Excellent work, Pex. I know everyone here worked hard to complete her.” Jax said. “Hmph. I don’t need praise from you.” Pex turned his nose up.

“Jax barely praises anyone,” Fiora mumbled. Darla looked between Pex and Nine. “Did the Engineering Division make its passion project a captain simply to justify continuing work on her?”

“She passed the captain examination, So there must be more to her than that.” Bram pointed out.

“We need to speak with the chief,” Jax explained. “Then go talk to him. You know his routine. I’m busy,” Pex groaned. “This is why everyone says Engineering is lazy,” Alister mumbled. Pex immediately turned back toward him, clearly tired of that particular complaint. “And yet they always leave out the obvious part. Do you have any idea how underfunded and understaffed we are?” “It’s okay. I’ll show them the way,” Nine offered with a smile. “Please do,” Pex said before walking away.

“Sorry about him. Anyway, it’s nice to meet you, um... Vis...” She trailed off, uncertain what to call Jax. “Jax. Just Jax,” he interrupted with an exasperated sigh. “For the Caretaker’s sake, you almost blew everything.”

Nine tilted her head. “But why hide it? Everyone here has told me all about you.” Jax’s expression hardened slightly. “People look at you differently once they attach certain labels to you.” Nine raised a finger to her lips and thought about that. “I suppose more people started speaking to me formally after I became a captain.” “Whatever. Let’s get moving,” Jax said, and Nine cheerfully skipped off in the opposite direction as the others followed.

She led them into a quieter section of the facility, where a tall man stood with his back turned, overseeing several operatives gathered around a machine. “We’ve taken it apart five times already, and we still can’t figure out why it won’t turn on. Everything should be working,” one of them explained. “Did you try replacing the power converter?” the man asked. “Damage can be difficult to detect on this model. Steam systems do not always interact well with carbon-based components.” The operative removed the converter and replaced it with another one sitting nearby. Just as the man had predicted, the machine powered on with a low mechanical hum. “Man, I feel stupid now. I never would’ve thought to check that,” the operative admitted. “It’s fine,” the man replied with a quiet laugh. “That comes with experience. You’ll get there.” The operatives thanked him and carried the repaired machine away while his back was still turned. “Administrator!” Nine called brightly. “You have visitors!”

The man finally turned around to face them. He stood taller than the others, though his frame was lankier than they might have expected, with a single large eye set in the center of his face. Fiora pointed before anyone could stop her. “Ah, Cyclops!” “Fiora, don’t be rude,” Darla barked. Alister looked at her in disbelief. “You saw the robot, and this is what surprises you?” The man only laughed, seemingly amused rather than offended. “It’s quite all right. I heard this Jax character was walking around.” He was clearly willing to play along. “Why are you here, Mr. Jax? It has been far too long.”

Jax's expression softened slightly. "It has, Magnus. It's good to see you." He said with a smile. Magnus gestured toward the nearby workstation. "Sit. We can discuss whatever it is you need." He lowered himself onto the edge of the table rather than taking a formal seat, seeming undeniably more down-to-earth than most of the other Administrators they had met.

After they explained the situation, Magnus scratched his chin and considered it carefully. "After everything that happened with the Air Con System, I would hate to see history repeat itself. Still, I inspected the Dampener only last week, and nothing appeared to be out of the ordinary." Fiora tilted her head. "What happened with the air conditioner?" Magnus laughed again. "Not quite. The Air Control System. It generates the shields surrounding the planet." "Magnus," Jax said, the warning in his voice sounding almost like a plea for him not to continue. Magnus glanced toward him with a faint smirk. "I don't see any problem with telling them. You are Jax, after all. I don't remember anyone by that name being involved." Jax frowned and retreated toward the corner, already realizing he had lost control of the conversation.

"You see, Visionary Draycott built the system," Magnus continued. "A marvel of technology, truly. It was not something that simply failed." He explained. Alister narrowed his eyes. "But that is what the official reports say. Draycott failed to maintain it, and the entire structure fell from the sky at the worst possible moment." "Yes, I know what the reports claim, but that is not what happened. It was the Crossbone Reaper. He used that power of his and brought the system down himself. Poor Mr. Draycott was blamed for it. We all vouched for him, but even after they forced him to repair the damage, they arrested him anyway." Magnus replied. His expression grew more serious as he looked between them. "If something similar happened to the Dampener, who knows who they would throw under the bus? Its creator died hundreds of years ago."

Fiora's expression darkened first. She had seen that power for herself and knew exactly what it could do. Alister noticed the change in her face, then remembered Bram's own history and how easily

he too had been blamed when the truth was more complicated. “I suppose that isn’t so difficult to believe anymore,” he admitted. Darla turned back toward Magnus. “Is anyone permitted to accompany you during an inspection?” she asked. “No. I handle it personally with a small group of vetted engineers, and no one below the rank of Warden is allowed inside,” Magnus explained.

“Draycott used to perform the inspections himself. He understood the system better than any of us.” Alister glanced toward Jax before continuing. “What rank is Visionary, exactly? It doesn’t seem to fit as neatly as the others.” Magnus scratched his chin. “I suppose you could say it falls just below Administrator and Captain, but in practice, when someone is declared a Visionary, we follow their lead. We would be fools to restrain a mind like that with rank alone. Look at what he accomplished for this city. The only thing that ever truly held him back was funding, but I’ll spare you that particular speech.”

“That was the point I was trying to make,” Jax said, finally stepping back into the conversation. “We need to consider other possibilities. Something like the power the Reaper used.” He added. Alister looked toward him. “Such as?” “Oh, oh! You mean like one of those orange women,” Fiora blurted out. Everyone stared at her. “Orange women?” they asked almost together. “Yeah! One of them worked with us during the war. At least, she did until they betrayed her and...” Fiora paused, pressing a hand against her forehead. “Never mind. That part makes my head hurt, but she had a power like that. She could zip and zap all across the multiverse. I remember one trip that normally took months, and she shortened it to about five minutes.”

Alister’s eye widened slightly in recognition. “Ah, I believe I understand who you mean. Captain Raleigh, the S-rank mercenary, unless I’m mistaken. I’m not certain that is precisely how her power functions, but if it is, then you may have a point.” He paused, then looked at Fiora with genuine surprise. “Oh gods. Fiora said something intelligent.” He said. “I’m smart... sometimes,” Fiora muttered, puffing out her cheeks. Bram gently patted her head, which seemed to improve her mood

immediately. “So what do we do?” Darla asked. “If we aren’t allowed to inspect it ourselves?” “Jax could,” Magnus replied, a faint smirk returning to his face. “He was once a senior engineer here. I believe I could persuade Legislation to permit him access, at least.” “You really think they would...” Jax began, already sounding ready to object. “That sounds like a wonderful idea!” Nine declared. “I’ll contact Legislation immediately!” Before anyone could stop her, her eyes lit up and she began placing the call through her internal systems.

After a moment, Nine started moving again. “All done. They said we could.” She announced it with the same casual excitement as someone who had just asked permission to go on a school trip and immediately been told yes. Darla stared at her. “Already? Who did you ask?” “Supreme Administrator Heskal!” Nine replied brightly. Alister looked at her in disbelief. “He answered that quickly? And he agreed?” “Did he even know who I am?” Jax asked. Nine’s smile faltered slightly as she thought about it. “Well, yes. I haven’t been functioning for very long, and I don’t usually have a reason to contact him, but he has always been very responsive whenever I do. He once said he would replace the entire Port with robots like me if he could.” She smiled again, though for some reason the statement made the room feel far less comfortable.

“Oh, one more thing. He left a message for Jax.” Nine’s body suddenly stiffened as she attempted to imitate Heskal’s posture and voice as closely as possible. “State security matters more than any personal grudge. You are the individual best suited for this task, so I will permit it. However, this is a one-time arrangement.” She relaxed again the instant the message ended, returning to her usual cheerful expression. “Well, that certainly sounds like him,” Bram said awkwardly. Magnus pushed himself away from the workstation. “Well then, shall we go? There are other matters I need to attend to later, so I would rather inspect it immediately.”

“Right... I suppose we’ll just wait for you back at the base,” Alister muttered. Jax did not answer. He left with Magnus and Nine, while the rest of Special Operations returned home as planned.

Bram naturally began preparing dinner, while Alister sat at the table beside Darla and searched through his communicator for any information he might have overlooked. “Callum, Callum... Who are you, Callum?” he muttered. “You don’t think that explanation Magnus gave us...” Darla looked over at him.

“I think Jax will tell us when he is ready,” she said, shutting the investigation down before it could begin. She paused, then added more quietly, “But yes. Magnus made it rather obvious.” “Made what obvious?” Fiora asked as she sat down nearby. “Oh, we were simply speculating about what happened to Mr. Draycott. Perhaps he is still in prison.” Alister replied. Fiora immediately stared dreamily into the distance. “I bet he’s super handsome. I wonder if he has a girlfriend. Do you think I have a chance?” she asked, beginning to drool slightly.

Darla and Alister exchanged looks of disgust. “Somehow, I don’t think either of you would want that,” Alister said. Darla leaned slightly closer. “Aren’t you and Bram...” she began gently. “Are we what?” Fiora asked, genuinely confused. Then realization struck, and her face reddened. “Oh, that. Yeah, I’m already on step forty-five of my master plan. Pretty soon he’ll be wrapped around my finger, and then we’ll have fifteen children.” She threw her head back with an evil laugh. “You are saying that while discussing your chances with another man,” Alister muttered. Bram continued cooking in the corner, completely unaware of the conversation.

Jax finally returned some time later. “So, how did it go?” Darla asked. Jax released a tired sigh. “Unfortunately, none of us found anything unusual beyond the system’s age. It has been operating continuously for centuries, but functionally it appears exactly as it always has. We even tested several portal guns against it. Not one of them worked.” No one seemed pleased by the answer. Alister set down his communicator. “We still have other leads, and the denial itself tells us something. I’ll report what we know to the other divisions and have them watch for anything similar. Intelligence may already have something useful. I simply need to find a way to involve them without letting my idiotic half-brother interfere.”

“Why not just tell your girlfriend?” Fiora asked. “My girlfriend?” Alister shot upright, suddenly flustered. “Yeah, Kloe. I saw the way you looked at each other, and before they threw me in prison, she was always saying ‘Captain this’ and ‘Captain that.’” Fiora smiled knowingly. “I’m not even a captain anymore. How would you know she was talking about me?” Alister demanded. “Because when I asked if she meant your brother, she got really upset,” Fiora replied with a smug grin. “Shut up, idiot. You don’t know anything about love. You thought Jax and Cassian were sleeping together!” Alister fired back. Jax’s glare immediately sharpened. “I told you never to mention that again.”

Chapter 50: The Final Mandate

Crow shifted through the shadows of the Morvin estate. It was dark and nearly empty, with only a handful of aides and Morvin himself remaining inside. He still lived in luxury, but he did so alone. Crow had been lurking there for some time, yet had found nothing useful. The only thing they had learned was that Morvin was nervous. They found him pacing back and forth through his study as though terrified of something, but that alone was not enough. Then, something changed. Crow glanced outside and saw an aircraft land on the estate grounds. Those inside disembarked in a hurry and entered the house, heading directly for Morvin's study. Even then, he seemed too distracted to notice them. His daughter stood silently, waiting for him to acknowledge her while he continued pacing. From the darkness, Crow began to record.

One of the men with her cleared his throat. "Mr. Morvin." "What?" Morvin snapped, finally looking up. "Can't you see I'm... Oh. Selene. Everything going well with your studies? You'll have to run for Chancellor someday yourself. I'd keep running forever if I could." He laughed. There was a hint of care in his voice, but it was obvious that the future he imagined for her had little to do with what she actually wanted. He looked past her as though she were already nothing more than an extension of

his legacy.

“I’ve decided, Father. I’m leaving,” she said coldly. “What? You can’t leave. Who will...” He started. “I’m going to study abroad. I don’t know what I’ll do after that, but it certainly won’t involve you. Even so, I thought you should know before I went.” There was no affection in her voice. Crow stopped recording. This was not what they had come for. “You dare? You can’t just...” Morvin rubbed his face in frustration. “Ugh, I don’t have time for this. I have election problems to deal with. We’ll talk about it later.”

Selene shook her head. “No. I’m going to Multiverse High whether you approve or not. Goodbye, Father. Have a nice life.” She turned and left with the two men before Morvin could respond.

“Ungrateful brat,” he muttered once she was gone. “I don’t need an heir. After this term, I’ll run four more times. She’ll see.” Morvin continued pacing. Crow was nearly ready to give up, but roughly an hour later, Viktor walked into the study as though he owned the estate, with Calva at his side. Crow immediately began recording again. “Ah, Chancellor. Sorry for the wait. I was held up.” Viktor sat in one of the chairs, and Calva settled into his lap, clinging to him.

Morvin trembled as he moved closer. “You... You’re behind all of this? No. You’re just some blond loser. You don’t look like anyone important. I’ve never even heard of you.” His words were dismissive, but the fear in his voice betrayed him. Calva did not seem to appreciate the insult. “Can I kill him?” “No. At least not yet. We still need him.” He answers. She sighed. “What if he only lost a finger or two?” “What? Are you mad?” Morvin protested. “A little,” Viktor replied with a laugh. “What exactly are you complaining about? I handed you the election on a silver platter. Follow my lead, and everything will be just dandy. I won’t ask for much. No one will even notice.” His smile widened. “Unless you overstep. Then, well... perhaps the Reaper’s aim will improve.”

“You’re working with the Reaper?” Morvin asked, confused. “I would have won without his involvement.” Viktor frowned, visibly disappointed by the man’s ignorance, but he did not correct him.

“I think you’ve asked enough questions already. Sit down. We have business to discuss.” He glanced toward the shadows. “But first, Calva, if you would... remove the bird.” Crow froze. They were not sure what he meant. It was rare for anyone to notice them while they were concealed. Before they could react, Calva sprang from Viktor’s lap and tore Crow out of the shadows by the neck. “Aion’s reporter...” Morvin whispered as fear slowly overtook him. He stared at the camera in Crow’s hand. He had walked past that exact spot repeatedly throughout the night without noticing them. Crow had blended in completely.

“They captured everything,” Morvin said, panic surging through his voice. Just before Calva could rip the camera away, Crow shifted back into shadow, phasing through her grip and freeing themselves. They shot through the wall and fled before anyone could stop them. “Damn it...” Morvin staggered backward. “I’m finished.” “Maybe,” Viktor said with a shrug. “What do you mean, maybe? Shouldn’t you care more? You can’t get any favors out of me if I’m in prison.” Morvin pleaded. “True enough, but they didn’t hear anything important to me. The rest is your problem.” Viktor leaned back comfortably as Calva returned to his lap. “Although I have become rather cozy with the cats recently. I’ll have them do something. Now, let’s discuss the real business.” He laughed.

It was time for another Port Authority meeting. Garrick and all of the captains and Administrators had gathered once more. Normally, they held at least two such meetings each year, one roughly three months in and another shortly before the year ended. There were occasionally exceptions, but despite all the chaos, this year had followed the usual schedule. Garrick was far more vocal this time, speaking on several matters and even offering suggestions of his own. It puzzled some of those present, considering how badly the election seemed to be going for him.

Cassian, meanwhile, was strangely quiet. He had dominated the first meeting, but perhaps the change was due to the wounds he was still recovering from, or the far more literal ones Elaina still carried. She had come despite her injuries. A chair had been set out for her, but she stubbornly chose to

stand with the other captains on her crutches, a decision that visibly irritated her brother. After several smaller matters had been addressed, Cleatus of all people spoke up. New Civics still had no Administrator of its own, with Heskal continuing to oversee the division, so Cleatus stood beside an empty chair. “I want to address security. It has come to light that our enemy may possess methods of bypassing the Portal Dampener.”

“Preposterous. Such a thing isn’t possible,” Leonidas immediately pushed back. “My lieutenant attempted to hide that report from me, but I saw it regardless. Engineering is merely trying to disguise its failures behind nonsense.” This time, Lucien did not interrupt. He genuinely did not know enough to challenge him. Then the strange thing happened. Heskal spoke. “There is nothing wrong with the Dampener. The finest engineer in the Port has examined it. The possibility must be considered.”

Leonidas looked across the room in confusion, his eyes silently asking what Heskal was doing. Heskal merely stared back, offering no explanation, but Leonidas backed down anyway.

“It should be obvious to everyone here that the Port requires stricter regulations,” Heskal continued. “A Union soldier was allowed to enter the city unnoticed...” “That case has already been dismissed,” Cassian interrupted. Orson looked ready to support him, but Heskal continued before he could. “Indeed. That matter has been settled. The underlying failure has not. Such a breach should never have been possible in the first place.” He said. Leonidas smirked, believing he finally understood where Heskal was going. “So what are you suggesting?” Garrick asked. Heskal’s attention shifted toward him. “You have already lost the election. That should be clear to anyone. Do not obstruct what must come next. Permit Helix Systems to be implemented throughout Civics, and grant its personnel broader authority to act against emerging threats.”

The words were framed as a request, but his tone made it sound far closer to an ultimatum.

Garrick hesitated. “I’ve said this before, but systems like those would not necessarily assist with stricter regulations.” “Yes. That will be considered,” Heskal replied, dismissing the objection almost as soon as

it was made. Cassian's eyes narrowed. Heskal had to understand the problem, yet he continued pushing for the system regardless. It almost seemed as though he expected, or wanted it to fail. Garrick said nothing at first. He thought about the polls. Winning now appeared almost impossible. Even so, after fully committing himself to the election, something had changed in him. Before, he had always kept one foot outside the government. Now he felt compelled to remain involved for as long as he could, even if he eventually had to be dragged out through the door.

"The people need a solution, even if it isn't mine," Garrick finally said. "All right. I will not oppose the implementation. However, I still recommend that a more robust system eventually replace it." "Of course," Heskal replied with a nod. "But while we are on the subject, there is something I would like to propose as well." Garrick said. No one spoke. The room waited with quiet curiosity. "Now that I understand the Port more clearly, I would like to address the threat-level system. At present, only the Chancellor may authorize Level Five, the highest state of emergency, which unlocks the full authority of every division. Even Level Four may only be authorized by an Administrator, and then only under specific circumstances."

Brutus answered from his place at the table, with no captain seated beside him. "Correct. A captain may authorize Level Two or Three. Level One is standard operation." "Right," Garrick said. "Then I propose this, and I do not suggest it lightly. These have been chaotic times. If I am to leave even one lasting mark upon this Port, I believe we must create a more dynamic authorization system. Captains and Administrators should be permitted to declare any threat level, including Level Five. As with Level Four, it should never be their first response, only an option available when circumstances demand it. If the decision is later judged unjustifiable, a higher authority may review and discipline them after the fact." He looked around the room before continuing. "I believe that could prevent another disaster like what happened at City Hall."

Another silence followed, but strangely, after everything that had happened recently, no one

seemed opposed. “Even without words, the sentiment appears unanimous. A formal vote is unnecessary,” Heskal said, seemingly pleased by the proposal despite not having conceived it himself. “However, since we are discussing chaotic times, I have a proposal of my own.” Heskal rose from his seat, his captain standing behind him. Murmurs spread throughout the room. Heskal did not normally ask for permission. He simply acted, which made the formality of this announcement feel far more dramatic than usual.

“At our previous meeting, Special Operations was officially recognized as a division. I questioned whether it was truly legitimate or merely Administrator Sterros’s collection of useful irregulars. Since then, they have answered that question. However, no division can be considered fully established without both a Captain and an Administrator.” Cassian leaned forward, unable to understand Heskal’s sudden investment. “Are you, of all people, proposing their promotion?” He did not like it, but if this served his own goals, he would not fight Heskal merely for the sake of fighting him. There would be little point.

“Indeed,” Heskal answered. “However, they will not be permitted to take the conventional examinations.” An uproar immediately swept through the room as captains and Administrators began arguing among themselves. Heskal made no effort to silence them. He simply waited until the noise gradually died down. “Then what would you have them do?” Cassian asked. “Special Operations claims jurisdiction over matters ranging from minor irregularities to threats capable of ending worlds. A conventional Captain’s examination would therefore prove very little.” A faint grin crossed Heskal’s face, so slight that most in the room would not have noticed it.

“But that is the standard...” Brutus began. “There is nothing standard about terrorism,” Heskal cut in immediately. “If they intend to answer such threats, then they must rise to the challenge.” “So how would this differ from the normal promotion examination?” Garrick asked, not entirely familiar with how the process usually worked. “Every captain in the Port, with only a few exceptions, will

participate.” The resulting uproar was unlike anything the chamber had heard before. “Are you joking?” Cassian demanded over the shouting. “You expect them to face every captain in the Port at once?”

Dalmore spoke first. “Fires don’t wait for examinations to finish,” he barked. “Yes. Fire and Rescue will be considered an exception,” Heskal answered. “What about your own captain?” Cassian pressed. “Facing her alone would be suicide.” The Legislation captain merely smirked. “She will also be exempt for that reason,” Heskal said, as though he were being perfectly reasonable despite the examination still sounding impossible. He then turned toward Lucy. “I would also like to request your participation, as the civilian.” Lucy looked around nervously as every eye in the chamber turned toward her. “Wha... me? Because I can heal everyone after they go all out?” She asked. Heskal nodded.

“Well, sure, I can do that, but what about my division? I don’t have any captains, and I would hope you wouldn’t force a still-recovering captain to participate.” Lucy hoped the objection might convince him to lessen the number of opponents. Instead, Heskal answered as though he had already prepared for the question. “Any division without a captain capable of participating will provide a lieutenant in their place.” The room continued to murmur. “You expect one person to survive an assault from nearly every captain in the Port while protecting a civilian?” Cassian asked, unable to believe the sheer gall of the proposal. “If they cannot, then your division was never what it claimed to be and should not exist,” Heskal replied.

“Come on, Heskal. Even I have to admit this is excessive,” Leonidas said, clearly enjoying the situation far too much. “Why not give them a handicap?” “Very well. Both Darla and Alister Purrmont may participate. That is the only concession I will make.” He said. The room fell silent again. Cassian looked around the chamber, fully aware of how unfair the examination remained. Garrick considered speaking up. Several others did as well, but then they remembered what Heskal had said. If Special Operations truly claimed to confront anything from minor disturbances to world-ending threats, this

was the standard he intended to hold them to. No one said another word. “The examination will commence at the end of the week,” Heskal announced. With that, the meeting came to an end.

Chapter 51: The Final Trial before the real one.

“We are doing what?” Alister exclaimed, shooting up from his chair. Cassian had called both of them into his office early that morning. At first, they had been excited when he said they would be discussing their promotions, but once they heard the details, they were both left stunned. They had taken promotion examinations before. This was something completely different, something that sounded outright impossible. “There is no way he intends for us to succeed,” Darla said, looking down. “You’re most likely right,” Cassian admitted. “You can still refuse, but I cannot say what that would mean for Special Operations.”

“That man really has lit a fire beneath us,” Alister said more quietly. “I’m afraid so. I was wrong to mock him. He is formidable.” Cassian’s usual smugness seemed to have vanished entirely. “So will it work like the normal examination, only instead of three captains... it will be all of them?” Darla asked. “More or less. However, both of you will be participating together.” Cassian paused. “I also need to decide which of you will become Administrator. That position has an examination of its own to worry about.” “I think Alister is better suited for that role, I could never see myself as an

Administrator.” Darla said.

“I concur,” Cassian replied. “Prepare yourselves, then. This will not be easy in the slightest.”

They left it at that. They could have continued talking for hours, but nothing they said would change the inevitability of what was coming. The end of the week arrived faster than any of them would have liked. Neither Darla nor Alister felt ready, but how could anyone truly prepare for something like this? The examination grounds were far from the city, situated in the undeveloped wilderness on the opposite side of the planet. A large forested zone had been enclosed by barriers to prevent the participants from leaving the designated perimeter. Within it stood the ruins of an ancient village that had been abandoned for eons.

An aircraft waited near one corner of the area, with a banner stretched before it bearing a single word: **GOAL**. A small observation building had been erected off to the side for those watching the examination. The grounds were far too vast to observe directly, so drones had been positioned throughout the area. Inside the building, holographic displays would automatically focus on the most important and dynamic moments of the trial. Fiora and the others sat together inside, fully aware of what was at stake. If Darla and Alister failed, it could mean the end of Special Operations. They might be reassigned, stripped of authority, or perhaps face something even worse. “Can they really do this?” Fiora asked.

“This is complete bollocks. Their chances are abysmal,” Jax replied. “We still have to cheer them on,” Bram insisted. They sat beside Kloe, who watched the monitors intently. Gobriella was there as well, busily taking notes. “If he survives this, there will be no doubt that he is the perfect mate,” she mumbled. “What?” Kloe asked. “Alister. I wish to mate with him,” Gobriella said calmly. “That’s absurd. You shouldn’t speak like that. It isn’t a funny joke.” Kloe’s face began to redden. “You want him too?” Gobriella asked. “I don’t mind. I only want a few.” “That is even worse! How completely unladylike!” Kloe exclaimed.

The captains took their positions across the field, spread miles apart from one another. None of them moved yet. They simply waited for the signal. Darla and Alister had been dropped into a random section of the map, somewhere none of the captains had been told about. Lucy was nowhere in sight. “Hmm. If I remember correctly, we need to find her and escort her safely to the goal,” Alister murmured. “Yes, but things are a little different with both of us participating. How would you like to handle this?” Darla asked. She knew this was the last place they could afford to argue as they normally did. Alister crossed his arms and thought it over. “I think we should remain together for now, at least until we locate Administrator Lucy.”

“I agree... but only until we find her?” Darla asked. “Think about it. The objective is twofold: survive and get her safely to the aircraft. One of us could escort her while the other creates a diversion.” He explained. “All right, but we aren’t allowed communications during the test. How are we supposed to know if you run into more than you can handle, or if I do?” She asked. “That is a good point. We would fail anyway if one of us ‘died,’” Alister said, making quotation marks with his fingers. “Still, considering everyone we’re facing, it may be a risk we have to take. We communicate whenever possible, while the one creating the diversion draws as many captains toward them as they can.”

Darla sighed. “All right, but who does what?” She asked again. “Well, I certainly don’t want to be the punching bag again.” Alister paused. “I mean, the diversion.”

She frowned at him. “Of course you don’t.” “Rock, paper, scissors?” He asked. Time was short, so they reluctantly left the decision to chance. Alister won. “Ha! Looks like it’s going to be you,” he gloated. Before Darla could argue, the thunderous crack of a gunshot rang through the air. “Looks like we’re starting. Move.” Darla took off without waiting for him to agree. Lacy was the first captain to act. She launched herself into the sky and began scanning the forest below, searching every clearing and break in the canopy for any sign of them. Most of the other captains remained where they had been stationed, waiting for Darla and Alister to come within reach.

The only other one to move immediately was Logistics Captain Mira Halloway. The rabbit woman tore across the field in a rapid zigzag, moving with astonishing speed as she searched the terrain. She left no trail, ruin, or overturned stone unchecked. Despite how heavily the examination had been stacked against Darla and Alister, none of the captains appeared willing to take it lightly. Darla and Alister kept close to the borders of the map. The last time they had taken the examination, the civilian had been located somewhere near the edge. The placement was always random, but they would usually be positioned on the opposite side from the aircraft serving as the goal. In the farthest corner, they finally found Lucy inside one of the ruins, tied against a stone pillar.

"You found me, my heroes!" she exclaimed, eagerly playing into the role. Darla immediately began untying her. Of course, the captains were familiar with the examination as well, and Lacy spotted them almost as soon as they approached the ruins. "They found the civilian. Far eastern corner," she reported from above. Mira was not far behind. She instantly changed direction and sprinted toward their location. Most of the captains still held their positions, but several began rushing toward the eastern side of the field. Mira arrived first, stopping before them and pointing her staff in their direction. "What exactly are you planning to do with that?" Alister asked, confused as he stepped between her and Darla, who hurried to loosen the remaining rope.

"This!" Nature itself seemed to answer her. Thick vines erupted from the ground and whipped toward them, attempting to bind their limbs. "Magic? What a pain." Alister fired his grappling line toward a distant tree behind Mira and used it to propel himself forward. He drove his sword into her guard, the strike pushed further by a burst of steam from the weapon. Mira was knocked backward immediately, but recovered before he could follow up. She began circling him at incredible speed, launching ice projectiles from every direction. They were easy enough to dodge. Alister had already guessed that she was probably one of the weaker captains in direct combat, but her speed made her difficult to pin down.

Darla finished freeing Lucy and quickly helped her away from the fight. Alister noticed immediately and moved to take her place, keeping Mira's attention fixed on him. "So that's the plan?" Mira asked. Then she suddenly bolted away. Darla had not exactly been given much choice, but she looked back at Alister and nodded for him to go before running in the opposite direction. Alister guided Lucy into the trees and told her to keep low as they slowly moved forward. They knew Lacy was still watching from above, so they advanced carefully from one tree to the next, using the thick canopy for cover. "Found you!" Nine sang. Alister frowned. He had been careful, yet this robot, not even a year old, had still managed to locate them.

"How?" he asked. "My eyes possess infrared sensors, thermal imaging, and my ears are extremely sensitive..." She went on. "All right, enough," Alister interrupted. "What are you going to do now, sing at us?" "No!" Nine replied happily. She extended both arms toward them. The metal folded apart, revealing weapon barrels before she unleashed a rapid stream of gunfire. Alister had only a moment to grab Lucy and yank her behind a nearby rock as the bullets tore through the trees around them.

Darla sprinted after Mira, but she could not keep pace. The rabbit was far faster. NoxLux and Juno were already waiting ahead. Darla almost failed to recognize Juno outside the tribunal, now dressed in a brown capelet with her sword already drawn. "We've caught on to your plan," Nox said. "You're screwed," Lux added. "Sorry, Ms. Darla, We won't be holding back." Juno said. She struck first. Darla raised her sword and parried, but NoxLux attacked together immediately afterward, forcing her to twist aside with barely enough time to avoid them. Mira circled the fight just as she had with Alister, launching shards of ice while vines curled up from the ground beneath Darla's feet. Darla carefully shifted away from them, then turned her attention to NoxLux.

"You are formidable," she said, driving her sword forward with enough force to knock both of them onto the ground. "But you are no Captain." Before either could recover, Darla swept the edge of

her blade through the air around their necks. “You’re both dead.” Nox and Lux looked at one another, then accepted the ruling. Juno lunged while Darla was still distracted, forcing her into another hurried parry. NoxLux frowned, disappointed that they had been the first to fall, but Lux still called out cheerfully as they left the field. “Good luck, Darla!”

Alister was carrying Lucy now as Nine chased them across an open field, firing missiles in their direction. “How in the hell did they fit so much firepower into that tiny body?” he hissed, panting as another explosion tore through the ground behind them. “No wonder she passed her examination.” “Administrator, do something!” he blurted without thinking. “Do you want to fail the test?” Lucy asked. Alister sighed and placed her behind the remains of an old stone wall. “No, but somehow I think this is going to infuriate Jax.” He spun around before Nine could react and cut one of her arms clean off. She stared down at it in surprise. “Oh. That’s not good.” She spoke as though it were a minor inconvenience.

“Please don’t make me damage you any further,” Alister pleaded. “You must be incredibly expensive.” “No can do. I have a duty as Captain.” Nine winked and opened fire with her remaining arm. Alister ducked beneath the burst, rushed forward, and tackled her to the ground. He drove his sword into the earth beside her head. “Well, it looks like you killed me too,” she said with a smile. “Damn it,” Alister muttered as he pulled the blade free. “That drew far too much attention. They have to know what we’re doing now.”

Juno fell to one knee. Mira fled as soon as she saw that the fight had been decided. “Very good. You have bested me, but your trial will only grow more difficult from here. Best of luck.” Juno admitted. With that, she collapsed unconscious. “You’re probably right,” Darla admitted. Most of the remaining captains were likely far stronger. She ran forward into a clearing and spotted Lacy circling overhead while Cleatus and Rufus rushed in the opposite direction, most likely toward Alister. She could not allow that.

Darla charged after them and attempted to strike Cleatus from behind, but he caught the blade in one hand and pulled. She released it immediately. Letting him drag her around would be a far greater mistake, even if it meant surrendering her weapon. Rufus turned to face her. “Sorry, Sister, but I can’t go easy on you.” “I would be disappointed if you did,” Darla replied, preparing herself even without her sword. Cleatus attacked first. Darla barely managed to evade the swing, and Rufus following immediately afterward made it even harder to recover. Every strike carried terrifying force. She was constantly only inches away from failing the examination. Lacy noticed from above that the others were no longer moving toward the objective. They had become fully engaged with Darla.

“I’m sorry, Darla,” she murmured. She aimed her rifle with her feet and fired. The shot struck Darla cleanly in the stomach, forcing her to swallow a howl of pain. Darla was losing. There was no way she could defeat all three of them alone. She glanced around and spotted her sword lying just out of reach. Dodging another shot from Lacy, she rushed for it, reclaimed the weapon, and immediately changed strategies. She began retreating as Lacy continued firing. She did not know whether the others would follow. If Darla fell, they would lose the examination, but if the captains reached Lucy, they would lose just as surely. Since Lucy was forbidden from fighting back, pursuing Alister might seem like the easier path.

Elsewhere, Alister continued running through the ruins of the village with Lucy close behind. Leonidas stood waiting for him in the center. “At last, we can fight face-to...” Alister ran straight past him. Leonidas stared after him. “Wait. Where are you going?” “Are you stupid?” Alister shouted without slowing down. “I would love to kick your ass, but not if it means I lose!” Leonidas hissed. “Get back here, you bastard!” He gave chase, but Alister refused to take the bait. As he reached the far edge of the village, however, he was forced to stop. A massive chasm split the earth directly ahead of them. He barely caught himself before running over the edge. Alister gulped as he looked down into the seemingly endless drop. “Not a problem. We can just...” “Get stabbed in the back!” Leonidas lunged

behind him. Alister twisted aside at the last possible second, narrowly avoiding the blade.

“You know what? You are the superior Purrmont after all. I think I’ll surrender,” Alister said. Leonidas stopped mid-attack, confused. Lucy looked at Alister with the same expression, but before either of them could question him, he suddenly fell backward over the edge with her. “What are you...” Leonidas shouted, rushing forward to stop them, but it was already too late. Lucy screamed in confusion, briefly convinced that Alister had just volunteered them both for suicide. Then his grappling line fired across the chasm and caught a tree growing near the opposite edge, barely within reach. The line snapped taut, leaving them swinging over the drop. Lucy clung tightly to him and took a deep breath. “I forgot you had that for a second,” she admitted.

Leonidas looked just as shocked. Then realization struck him. “Wait. I have one too.” He pulled out his own grappling device jumping and attempted to fire it, but unfortunately, it seemed he had never actually practiced using it. The hook missed completely, and he immediately began falling toward the bottom of the chasm. “Oh. Um... should we...” Alister started. Leonidas panicked and made another desperate attempt. The hook struck the canyon wall just before he would have gone splat, but it failed to hold properly. He slammed face-first into the ground at the bottom of the chasm instead. He was alive, but thoroughly humiliated. Alister pulled himself and Lucy up onto the opposite side. Both of them were still catching their breath when a voice thundered from above. “Don’t celebrate just yet!”

Brutus crashed down from the sky, shaking the ground so violently that Alister and Lucy nearly stumbled backward into the chasm again. “B-Brutus?” Alister stammered, staring at him in terror. “You’re not a lieutenant.” “Yeah, I thought it might be better this way, easier on you guys.” Brutus said with a laugh. “I was a captain back in the day, you know. I’m a little rusty, though. I don’t see combat like I used to.” He slammed one fist into his palm. “We are going to die.” Alister said.

Darla ran, and the others followed. The bullet wound made it difficult for her to widen the gap, while Lacy continued firing from above. Darla stumbled and fell, rolling aside on instinct. It was the

right choice. Cleatus and Rufus both drove their weapons into the ground where she had been only a moment earlier. “It’s a good thing we’re allowed to use Level Five,” she grunted. Her sword began to glow, the blade becoming impossibly hot. From the ground, she swung at Cleatus’s legs and managed to slice one of them clean off, though he moved the other just quickly enough to save it. Darla tried to rise, but another shot from Lacy nearly struck her. She had no choice but to remain down.

Things were looking bad. Even the small victories she managed did little to change the overwhelming advantage against her. “This is so one-sided it isn’t even funny,” Rufus said with a frown. He knew Darla was stronger than him, but she was fighting all three of them at once. Cleatus, meanwhile, seemed to have little trouble balancing on one leg. If these three had been selected for an ordinary examination, the test would have already felt nearly impossible.

Brutus struck the ground as Alister moved aside. His attacks were slower than those of the other captains, but Alister’s eyes widened as the earth shook and split apart beneath the blow. “Well, damn,” Brutus said, sounding just as surprised. “You aren’t rusty at all, you oversized oaf. Some handicap,” Alister hissed as he ran for his life. “I honestly thought I was,” Brutus admitted. “Well, I suppose it doesn’t matter now.” He dropped onto all fours and charged after them. The change made him terrifyingly fast. Alister had no chance to dodge. He could only throw Lucy out of the way before the bear’s jaws clamped around his lower body.

Alister screamed as Brutus lifted him into the air and slammed him back into the ground with enough force to nearly leave his body embedded in it. He groaned weakly, barely able to move. For a moment, he genuinely believed he might die there. Even if he had survived the attack, there was no chance he could endure another one like it. Brutus stared down at him, suddenly worried. “Oh. Did I go a little too hard?”

Both of them lay on the ground, far apart but trapped in the same situation. Neither had much fight left. The people watching from the sidelines stared at the screens with bated breath. Darla and

Alister had done well, but in the end, it looked as though none of it would matter. Cassian bit his lip in frustration. Fiora and Bram shouted at the displays as though the two of them could somehow hear through the screens. “Come on! Get up! Get up!” Jax rubbed his temples. In the room beside them, Heskal watched without expression. He did not look satisfied or disappointed. He simply studied the screen, waiting to see what happened next, while his captain only half watched from beside him.

Alister could feel his body giving up. His vision began to fade as unconsciousness pulled at him. His ears rang, and blood dripped down the side of his face. Then, through the haze, he saw something in the distance. The aircraft. The goal. From her own position, Darla saw it too. At the same moment, both of them forced themselves back to their feet, drawing on whatever strength they had left. Cleatus, Rufus, and Lacy had not expected Darla to rise again. She broke into a run. Ahead, she could see Alister moving with Lucy while Brutus barreled after them. They were almost there. Only moments from the goal.

Darla and Alister came together again. Time seemed to slow as they turned away from the aircraft and focused on holding the others back while Lucy climbed aboard. They were on the home stretch. They might actually win. Then Mira came rushing in from nowhere, sprinting directly toward Lucy. “Did you forget about me?” she shouted, irritation crossing her face. She did not want them to lose, but she could not simply let them pass. She leapt into the air and raised her staff, preparing to strike Lucy before she could board. Darla moved at the last possible moment, throwing herself between them and taking the full force of the blow. She crashed to the ground.

Lucy jumped inside the aircraft as the doors sealed behind her and the engines powered up. Darla remained on the ground, completely spent. Alister stood beside her, ready to defend her body from Mira, Cleatus, Rufus, Lacy, and Brutus with whatever strength he had left. The aircraft lifted into the air and began to fly away. A buzzer sounded across the examination grounds. Alister collapsed the moment he heard it, finally allowing unconsciousness to take him. The captains stopped immediately,

looking at one another in confusion. “Does that mean they won, or...?” Lacy asked as she descended from the sky. “They rescued the target and reached the goal,” Cleatus said, equally uncertain. “But they both fell.” “Unfortunately,” Brutus said with concern, “the only person who can decide that is Heskal.”

Heskal shut the door to the room behind him without explaining anything. Lucy returned immediately with a group of AID-Es and began treating the injured. Alister was given first priority. Crucible, meanwhile, practically forced his way over to Cleatus, using the opportunity to inspect the cybernetic replacements he had been given. Cleatus did not stop him. “You should have waited for me to install these,” Crucible scolded as he examined the damage. “They were not properly connected to your bone structure, and it may already be too late to correct that completely. Tissue has grown over parts of the limbs as well. That could lead to infection.” Even while lecturing him, Crucible began fitting him with a replacement leg. “I did what I had to do,” Cleatus answered bluntly.

Once everyone had been stabilized and no one remained in immediate danger, they gathered outside the room Heskal had entered. Darla and Alister were still receiving treatment, but Heskal had yet to emerge. An hour passed. “What is he doing in there?” Fiora groaned. “Reviewing the footage?” Bram suggested. “Being a pain,” Jax said. “Building enough suspense to give someone a heart attack,” Cassian muttered. Another hour passed before Heskal finally stepped out. Everyone crowded around him so quickly that he appeared visibly uncomfortable. He rarely left his office and normally delegated matters like this to someone else. Now, every person present silently waited for his decision.

“Where are Darla and Purrmont?” he asked. “Right here,” Alister answered. He entered the room, still clearly in pain and only barely able to remain on his feet. Darla followed not far behind.

They half expected Heskal to explain some technicality that had caused them to fail. Perhaps Darla collapsing before the buzzer had invalidated the result, or Alister had failed to reach the aircraft himself. Instead, Heskal spoke plainly. “The civilian was recovered. The civilian reached the designated extraction point. The candidates remained active until the objective was secured. The

examination was completed successfully." Everyone's eyes widened.

A few looked ready to question the details he had not mentioned, but none dared. It was as though asking might cause him to reconsider. Heskal seemed to understand their hesitation. "Ms. Darla placed herself between the civilian and a fatal strike. Mr. Purrmont remained standing to defend them both until extraction. I see no failure." The room erupted into cheers. "They did it! They did it!" Fiora shouted as Bram gave her a double high five. The entire team, with the exception of Jax, rushed forward and wrapped Darla and Alister in a group hug. "Not so tight, Brutus nearly broke me in half." Alister winced. "Sorry about that," Brutus said apologetically. "The ceremony will take place tomorrow," Heskal announced. "Ensure that all of you attend." He turned to leave, no emotion visible on his face as his captain followed close behind.

"Why is this man suddenly pretending he hasn't spent the past several months trying to get rid of us?" Jax asked Cassian with a frown, loudly enough for Heskal to hear. Heskal did not turn around, but he stopped. "Do not misunderstand me. I still disapprove of your division. However, you have overcome every challenge placed before you, including this one. I no longer possess the right to stand in your way." He paused. "At least for now." Then he left without another word.

The following day, the Port was abuzz. A new Captain and Administrator were being promoted on the same day, and no one could deny Special Operations any longer. Heskal had backed off, at least for now. Leonidas in particular seemed displeased by that, but even he attended, sulking near the back. Every Administrator, every Captain, and anyone else able to take time away from their duties had come. The ceremony was far grander than Fiora and Bram's promotions had been. Aion stood in one corner with Tristan and Mia, recording the entire event. "I knew they'd make it back up there," he said proudly.

Darla and Alister walked through the halls of the central office with barely contained excitement. Somehow, they had passed, though both of them could still feel every wound from the

examination. “We did it, Dog!” Alister exclaimed with a laugh. “That we did.” Darla hesitated. “I’m sorry. I nearly cost us everything near the end.” Alister looked ready to pile on with another insult, but stopped himself. “No, I think that might have been me. You do realize they made me take the Administrator examination immediately afterward, right? It was harder than I expected. There were far too many trick questions.” He laughed. Darla smiled, her tail wagging behind her as they reached the doors to the ceremony hall. Rufus stood on one side, while Kloe and Lucien waited on the other. “Dad and Mom would be proud of you for becoming Captain,” Rufus said. He paused, then reluctantly added, “Again.”

“Yes. We are all proud of both of you,” Lucien said. “The only disappointment is that neither of you will be returning to your former divisions.” Darla and Alister both looked down. They had nearly forgotten that returning to Peacekeeping and Intelligence had once been their goal. “Perhaps one day,” Darla said with a smile. “But for now, our place is with Special Operations.” Rufus and Lucien exchanged a glance, then nodded. Together, they opened the doors and welcomed them inside.

Every officer in the room stood at attention as Darla and Alister walked toward the podium. Heskal remained nearby, though far enough away to make it clear that this moment did not belong to him. Cassian stood at the center with a proud smile. “You have done well. You exceeded every expectation placed upon you, and now I formally hand this division over to you.” He said proudly. “Finally, an end to your meddling,” Alister joked. “Oh, there will still be plenty of that,” Cassian replied. “But yes. My hands are officially off.” He raised his voice so everyone in the room could hear. “Please present your coin pieces to me.”

Darla and Alister each handed him their coins. “Darla Dogenridge. Alister Purrmont. Nearly a year ago, you placed your Captain’s coins on my desk and were demoted. The circumstances behind that event may not yet be fully resolved, but through your hard work and determination, you have proven to everyone here why that decision was a mistake.” Cassian began with Darla’s coin. He

carefully removed its separate pieces, taking away the stars and replacing them with a single solid section made specifically for a Captain.

"A Captain guards the Port with her sword. The coin has become whole once more. Congratulations, Captain Darla Dogenridge." He handed the completed coin back to her. Darla accepted it happily, holding it tightly in her hand. Cassian then turned to Alister's coin and repeated the process, replacing its former pieces with a different solid section designed only for an Administrator. "An Administrator guards the Port with his mind. The coin has become whole once more, though in a new form. Congratulations, Administrator Alister Purrmont." He returned the coin to him. The room erupted into applause.

It was now official in every possible sense. Darla and Alister turned to face the crowd, politely waving and bowing their heads before slowly beginning their walk back toward the doors. The applause continued the entire way. "You know," Fiora whispered to Bram, "it almost feels like they just got married." Bram laughed. "I suppose, in a way, they did." "I encourage you to say that to their faces," Jax added, already knowing it would end badly for both of them. Even so, it was a happy occasion. As Cassian had implied, Founders Day was just around the corner.

Chapter 52: One rotation around the sun

Founders Day had finally arrived. It seemed less eventful than it had the year before. People were still celebrating, but there was less of a need for it now. The holiday had once been a way of proving that the city had moved on from the Siege, but now the Siege was far behind them. It had not been forgotten exactly, but it no longer occupied everyone's thoughts. Fewer people needed to convince themselves that life had returned to normal. Special Operations had no grand plans for the occasion. They had already seen more than enough excitement over the past several months and desperately needed a break, so for once, they were simply settling into a new normal.

Alister sighed in frustration as he looked through another stack of documents. Darla was in the adjoining room, though the desks had been shifted around since their promotions. His had been placed in the center while hers sat off to the side. "What is it now?" she asked. "The budget. Was it always this low?" Alister hissed. "How did Cassian manage this? Legislation is giving us almost nothing. This will barely cover supplies." Darla considered that for a moment. "Maybe Heskal is still pushing back against us, just in smaller ways." "Perhaps. Who knew there would be this much extra paperwork, though? I thought it was annoying before." He looked toward her with a sigh. "Want to trade?"

She crossed her arms. “That’s rich coming from the person trying to order me around like you’re suddenly the boss of me.” She said. “I am!” he yelled. “You know that isn’t how this works. Administrators and Captains are equals who serve different roles.” She pushed back. “Maybe officially, but we both know better,” he dismissed. Darla stood and moved closer, her face nearing his with every word. “Oh, really? Go ahead, then. Try ordering me around and see where that gets you.”

Fiora and Bram peeked through the doorway. “Arguing already. The honeymoon phase is over,” Fiora whispered. “I thought they would last at least a few weeks,” Bram admitted. Darla and Alister both noticed them and started toward the door. “Crap, they’re coming. Run!” Fiora shouted before racing down the stairs. Bram did not move immediately, but as soon as the office door began to open, he took off after her. Darla and Alister watched them flee and sighed. “What exactly do they think we are?” Alister groaned.

Jax was walking through the hallway just as Fiora came charging down the stairs. She ran directly into him. “Fenleigh, watch where you’re going,” he growled. “S-sorry,” she said. “Whatever. I was actually looking for you.” He said. Fiora tilted her head. “You were?” “I finished it.” Her eyes lit up immediately. “Really?” “Yes. Come on.” He motioned for her to follow just as Bram caught up. “You too, Ashgarn. I made something for you as well.” Jax led them into the training hall, where a weapon rested on a table. It was a gunblade, just as Fiora had wanted. She stared at it in amazement. “I reviewed the design after gaining a better understanding of the weapon you’re most accustomed to using,” Jax explained. “It isn’t exactly the same, so there may be a learning curve.” Fiora picked it up immediately and gave it a few experimental swings. “The reach is shorter than the bayonet on a Union rifle, but it’s lighter,” she observed, moving it around more.

“See the trigger near the top? Pull it.” Fiora did as instructed, and the blade extended slightly. “I’m hoping you’ll be able to retract and extend it whenever necessary,” Jax continued. “But that isn’t all. I also implemented the Port’s security levels into it. Go ahead and try Level Two.” Fiora hesitated.

“Wait, won’t we get in trouble if it hasn’t been authorized? I didn’t think we could activate one without permission.” “I haven’t installed that particular restriction yet,” Jax admitted. “No one needs to know. Turn the dial on the handle.” Fiora adjusted it, and electricity began sparking around the blade. She then pulled the trigger, sending a burst of electrical energy into the wall and leaving a dark mark behind. “You idiot! I didn’t tell you to fire the damn thing. They’re going to hear that,” Jax grumbled.

“Well, anyway, it has access to the full range, all the way up to Level Five. Do not use it in actual combat without authorization. I’ll install the restriction later.” Fiora stared at the weapon, barely able to contain herself. “Wow, Jax. I love it.” Before he could react, she wrapped her arms around him. Jax immediately tried to push her away, but eventually relented and allowed the hug despite his obvious embarrassment. “As for you,” he said, turning toward Bram. Bram looked around but saw no weapon prepared for him. Jax pushed Fiora away and pointed toward a pair of gloves resting on the table. “I noticed that although you carry a rifle, you usually default to your fists. I would like to add more later, but for now, all I could fit into them was a taser.”

Bram slipped the gloves on and activated the mechanism. Electricity crackled across them in a way similar to Fiora’s new gunblade. “Well, gee, Jax. I don’t know what to say. I didn’t even ask for anything, but these are great.” “I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear any of that,” Darla said from behind them, her voice stern enough to make all three freeze. “And you are going to make installing those restrictions your first priority.” Jax straightened immediately. “Yes, ma’am.”

Aion reviewed the footage Crow had taken while they stood behind him. “This is exactly what I was worried about, kid. Good work. You all right, though? They didn’t hurt you?” he asked. “Nothing lasting,” Crow replied. “Good. With this, we can...” Before he could finish, Crow abruptly shut off the monitor and removed the drive. Without explaining anything, they ran off with it. “What the...” Aion muttered in confusion, but a moment later Leonidas entered with several members of the Purrmont family. Kloe was noticeably absent. They immediately began searching the room without asking

permission. “Hello, Mr. Anderson,” Leonidas said calmly.

“What are you doing? You can’t just barge in here. You need a warrant. What are you even looking for?” Aion demanded. “I am not here as a member of the Port Authority today. I am here on behalf of my father, though that may change depending on your statement,” Leonidas explained as he glanced out the window. “That is not how any of this works. How did you even become a Captain?” Aion muttered. Leonidas ignored him. “A friend of ours, well, not my friend,” he added with slight resentment, “informed us that you obtained information illegally. Information that would defame a candidate we would very much prefer to win.”

Aion frowned. “That’s what this is about? Why do you care who wins the election? The Purrmonts already run half the city from behind the scenes.” He shrugged and gestured around the room. “Look all you want. I don’t have anything like that here.” “True enough, but a useful idiot is much easier to work around,” Leonidas said. “You do remember how you got your start in this city, don’t you?”

“Of course I do. Purrmont investment, but that doesn’t mean you own me. I’ve repaid that investment tenfold and become my own man,” Aion pushed back. “Oh, really? That may have been true when you still possessed that power, but what are you now?” Leonidas asked, his tone growing more heated. “You no longer have it. You’re merely a nuisance who tells lies.” Aion did not answer immediately. “Are you threatening me?” he finally asked. “Of course not. I’m only asking you to remember who made you, even if you have managed to slip your leash. Drop the Morvin story. Let the election proceed without involving yourself any further.” Leonidas turned toward the door. “It would be a shame if something happened to the Multiverse’s favorite weather lady.” He left without another word.

Cleatus stood once more before City Hall, his feet planted in the same place as always. The ground beneath him had slowly begun to sink, the shape of his stance pressed into the stone from how

long and how often he remained there. His wife approached him quietly, wrapping her arms around him and kissing the front of his mask despite receiving no response. “You’ve been eating, right? I brought you some more food.” She placed a small box into his hands, and he accepted it without a word. Then she began talking as though nothing terrible had ever happened between them. She told him about her day, brought up memories from the past, and reminded him that he needed to take better care of himself. Cleatus said nothing.

Just as she had promised, she had been coming almost every day. Cleatus had hoped that ignoring her would eventually make her stop, but it never did. After nearly an hour, she glanced toward the clock tower. “Oh, it looks like I have to get going. I love you, Cleatus. You’d better eat that,” she said, pointing once more toward the food in his hands before walking away. As soon as she disappeared from sight, one of the masked men approached him. “Should I put it with the rest, sir?” He hesitated. “Forgive me, but why not simply eat it if you’re going to have us wash the dishes afterward?” “I can’t anymore,” Cleatus answered without moving. “I don’t have a stomach.” “Oh.” The man looked down. “I’ll wash it for you. Sorry I asked.” “Just make sure someone eats it and that the container is returned to her.”

Cassian leaned back in his office chair, slowly sipping a glass of wine. For the first time in a long while, he looked genuinely relaxed. Elaina entered without crutches, finally able to walk on her own again, though much of her face remained bandaged and one eye was still covered. She stopped when she saw him. “What are you doing?” “It’s a holiday, and for once, there is nothing on my plate. I’m relaxing,” Cassian answered, already slightly buzzed. “Then why aren’t you at home?” She asked. His expression immediately soured. “Because experience has taught me that ‘nothing on my plate’ can change very quickly.” Elaina sat down beside him. “Fine, then. I’m not busy at the moment. I’ll join you.” She said it as though she did not want to admit that she had chosen to stay.

“Good. You bury yourself in work far too often.” He said. “Look who’s talking.” She glanced

toward him. “Do you think they’ll be all right?” “They’ll be fine,” Cassian replied with a laugh. “Then why do you keep looking at your communicator?” She asked. “Shut up.” Elaina smiled faintly before her voice softened. “What about Callum? Do you think he’ll accept the position?” She asked. “He is a stubborn man,” Cassian said. “Then again, all three of us are. I can never predict what that man will choose, but whatever he does, he will do it well. Whether he does it as Callum or as Jax.” He said. “Right. Jax isn’t anyone special,” she muttered. “Not yet, perhaps,” Cassian said, looking out through the window.

Viktor sat with Calva, seemingly alone, speaking to her about something far more intimate than usual. “So that’s why...” he finished. For once, there was no smile on his face. Calva listened closely, more thoughtful than he had ever seen her. “No wonder you want to do all this,” she said softly. “But... I like Jace. It’s a nice name.” His expression shifted between sadness and something closer to genuine happiness, as though being accepted had caught him off guard. “You wouldn’t if you saw him. Vincent shined so much brighter beside him.” He looked away. “Whatever. Enough of the sappy shit.”

“So, are we ready then? For the endgame, as you called it?” Calva asked. Viktor’s smile returned. “Not yet. We’ve still got one more big thing to pull off before that. But yeah, after that, all the dominoes fall. Hope you’re ready. It’s going to be wild.” He laughed, and Calva smiled with him, but her expression slowly changed. She frowned and looked away. “What if we... forgot all of this?” she asked. “What if we went somewhere else?” Viktor pushed her back slightly and looked directly into her eyes. “And did what? Become normal? I don’t want to be normal.” “No, I... we don’t have to be normal,” she pressed. “But maybe we don’t have to do this either. We could survive. It doesn’t have to be dull.” Viktor turned away from her. “You’re giving up on your revenge,” he muttered. Calva’s face immediately filled with fear. “No. I’m sorry. Forget I mentioned it. I was just... thinking about the future.” He turned back and pulled her close again. “We will have one,” he said. “One that no one will ever forget.”

Chapter 53: One More Distraction

A few weeks later, New City Hall opened to the public. The Helix machines had been installed with no modifications. They were simply set up, connected, and turned on. People eager to get their lives back on track flocked toward the building almost immediately. Cleatus stood at the doors as he always did, motionless as citizens passed inside. The masked figures stationed near him now held their guns openly, which made some people hesitate before entering. Still, hesitation only lasted so long. The deportation grace period was over, and even those not directly affected had problems of their own. Their insurance was inactive. They could not prove they owned their homes. Their old records had been lost, damaged, or tangled in bureaucracy. The Helix system claimed it could solve those problems quickly.

In many cases, it did. A person walked to the console. The system scanned their face, asked a few questions, and waited while the user entered their answers. The machine processed the information almost instantly. If the application was rejected, it printed a paper explaining the steps required to qualify. If accepted, it printed a new identification card or whatever other document the person needed on the spot. It was almost too smooth. To most of the people watching, it only made Morvin look more

right. That changed around midday. The screens glitched. Sparks danced across the consoles inside New City Hall before the same distortion spread to the larger displays outside. A moment later, the Reaper appeared on every screen with a tired sigh.

Several civilians fled immediately. Others froze in place, too afraid to move. Cleatus turned toward the nearest screen, glaring through his mask. He listened, but his body had already shifted, prepared for an attack. “Here we are again,” the Reaper said. “I won’t waste time today with a long spiel. At least not for Civics. You all know why I tore it down. Must I do so again?” The image flickered. His skull mask tilted slightly. “This is the best they could come up with. I’m sure some of you might be fooled into thinking this is better, but I’ll explain why it isn’t.” A document appeared beside him on the screen. “Tabatha Torren,” he read. “A centaur. Interesting. She lives on 21st Street, apartment 2A. She applied for health insurance and was denied because her credit was too low.”

A ripple of discomfort moved through the crowd. The Reaper continued. “She has a mother, a father, and two sisters. Need I go on?” He let the question hang there. “I have it all now. Everything entered into the system. Every answer. Every document. Every little fact they asked for, and it wasn’t even hard.” Cleatus’s hands tightened at his sides. “I won’t share the rest, of course. Tabatha was simply the unfortunate example.” The Reaper leaned closer to the screen. “This system could never fix the problem. So we tear it down, and if they rebuild it, we do so again.” His voice sharpened. “Prepare yourselves, City Hall. Prepare yourselves, New Civics.” Then Viktor laughed. “But not just them. This day is just getting started.”

A woman near one of the screens gasped. “I... I know her,” she said, turning to the person beside her in disbelief. “She was bragging about how easy it was just this morning.” Most of the crowd had already scattered in panic. Those who remained began backing away as the distortion around the building grew worse. Then the Anarchy Men appeared again. They emerged seemingly from nowhere and from every direction. Some poured out of alleys. Others appeared from the crowd. A few even

came from inside New City Hall itself. “That power again,” Cleatus muttered. He stabbed one of the attackers inside the building without hesitation. A second strike came from deeper within the hall.

Cleatus barely blocked it with his arm as the impact pushed him back several steps. Gram stood before him. He wore clothing similar to the other Anarchy Men, but unlike them, he made no attempt to hide his face. A few others stood with him, their expressions twisted by anger rather than theatrical madness. “You think you can just pretend nothing happened?” Gram growled. “Pretend like you didn’t try to throw away your oldest people?” Cleatus did not answer right away. “No,” he said at last. “Now stop obstructing the future.” Gram’s face twisted with rage. “The future?” he snapped. “What a load of shit.”

Outside, Peacekeeping had already arrived to reinforce the building, led by Rufus and Kira. Special Operations was not far behind, with the exception of Jax. Since nothing had been planned for them that day, it had not taken long for the team to prepare and join the fight. “Again with this,” Alister hissed, cutting into one of the attackers with his sword. “Even he has to know this is getting old.” His irritation only deepened when he saw the masks. They were still wearing crude versions of his former disguise, and every one of them made his eye twitch. Darla fought more carefully, using her fists instead of her sword. “Something is different about this group,” she said. “They aren’t like the others. I think we should show restraint.”

“Got it, boss!” Fiora shouted. She jumped into the air and drove her boot into one of the attackers, sending him crashing backward into an entire group. “Fiora...” Bram said hesitantly as several men toppled over. “I don’t know if that really counts as showing restraint.” He punched the nearest attacker with his new taser gloves. Electricity snapped across the man’s body, dropping him quickly without causing much visible injury. The attack felt half-hearted, just like some of the others they had fought before. Alister noticed it quickly, even though his anger at the stolen masks still clouded his judgment. The Anarchy Men were not spreading chaos evenly. They pressed toward New

Civics almost exclusively, ignoring easier targets even when Peacekeeping or Special Operations stood closer.

Darla and the others moved closer to the entrance, placing themselves between the attackers and the civilians who had not managed to escape in time. Yet even then, many of the Anarchy Men showed little interest in the civilians. Their attention remained fixed on the masked New Civics operatives. “You took my family away!” one of the attackers screamed. He tackled one of the masked operatives to the ground before the man could react and wrapped both hands around his throat. “Your family was a danger to the city,” the operative choked out. “You joining them is... proof of that.” “Shut up!” the attacker shouted, punching him again and again. “Shut up!”

Darla reached them and pulled the attacker away before he could kill the man. He twisted in her grip, eyes wild with grief and hatred. “How can you help them?” he demanded. “You really are a traitor to the Port’s true ideals.” The words struck harder than Darla expected. Her grip tightened, but she did not answer. Before the moment could stretch any further, the doors to New City Hall slid open. Gram came flying out, barely recovering in time to land on his feet. Cleatus stood in the entrance behind him, labored breaths rattling through his mask. The others who had followed Gram inside lay scattered at his feet. “This building will not be touched,” Cleatus said. “You will stop, or you will die.”

“Gram?” Bram said, his voice breaking with shock. He had been close enough to see his brother clearly now. Gram recognized the voice right away. His teeth clicked together, and he turned to face Bram without saying a word. “I’ve been looking for you for months,” Bram said. “The whole family has.” “And they still left,” Gram shouted. “This is my path now!” A silence fell over the battlefield. For one brief moment, everyone stopped fighting. Then a loud boom shook the sky. Every head turned toward the sound. Far in the distance, smoke curled from the Air Control System. Airships rushed toward it, followed by flying members of Aviation. The structure was not falling, but it had clearly been damaged. Maybe it was still being attacked.

Another boom followed. This time, a huge pillar of smoke rose from the direction of the Port Authority home office. “That’s the signal,” Gram said. The Anarchy Men immediately stopped attacking and began to retreat. Whatever power had brought them there was no longer available to them. They scattered on foot through the streets as Peacekeeping gave chase. A few stayed behind. Not to win. Not to escape. Only to fight. They made one last stand even though it meant nothing. They were angry, and by then anger seemed to be all they had left. They were put down quickly. “Wait! Come back here!” Bram shouted, chasing after his brother. Fiora followed right behind him.

Darla and Alister exchanged conflicted looks, but neither of them stopped them. Alister was already on his comm, checking the division network. It was smaller than before, but it was reforming. “What’s the damage?” Darla asked. “Aviation has lost control. An unknown force has taken the station, but they haven’t turned off the shield.” Alister’s eye narrowed as more reports came in. “The home office is being attacked by... the Crossbone Remnant? It must be the remnant of the remnants at this point.”

“The home office is well fortified,” Darla said. “I doubt they’ll need help, but the Air Control System... if that goes down...” She hesitated. “What if we face another Siege?” The words felt dangerous, as though saying them aloud might drag the possibility into existence. “That’s not all,” Alister said, his voice dropping. “What is it?” Darla asked. “Blackstone Isle is under attack. It’s a massacre. They’re requesting aid.” He stared at the reports in disbelief. “More Crossbone. Led by a hooded man and... the Reaper.” Darla went still. “You don’t think...” She stopped herself. “Why would they go there? It can’t be for recruitment.” “Maybe the new Reaper is trying to free the old one,” Alister said. “Why would he want that?” Darla asked. “They don’t share the same rhetoric. Crossbone wanted to destroy everything. This new one talks about revolution.”

“We don’t have time to understand the motive,” Darla said sharply. “We have to decide what to do and where to go. That is what being on our own means.” She barked. Alister sighed. “You’re right.”

For a moment, he said nothing. Picking the wrong target could create a disaster they would not be able to undo. “The home office can protect itself,” he said at last. “The prison seems to be in dire need, and even if those prisoners don’t join the Collective, virtually every criminal on the planet is in danger of escaping. At the same time, if the shield goes down, we could be facing an opportunistic foreign nation we are not prepared for.” He looked toward her. “How do you feel about a split?”

“Between the two of us?” Darla asked. “Naturally. I’ll go to the prison.” “No,” Darla interrupted. “I put the Reaper in prison. It is my duty to keep him there.” Alister studied her for only a second before nodding. “What about him... can you face him...” He said. She faultered for a moment but nodded. “Fine. You take Bram and Fiora. Jax and I will...” Before he could finish, a van sped through the street and screeched to a stop dangerously close to them. “What are you two blathering about?” Jax snapped from the driver’s seat. “We need to move.” Alister stared at the vehicle in disbelief. “You got this dinosaur to run?”

“Yes,” Jax said. “Enough about that. Get in.” “We still need a vehicle that can actually fly if we’re going to reach the Air Control System,” Alister said as he climbed inside. “Let me worry about that.” Jax said. “It will be just us two, Jax,” Alister said. He glanced back toward Darla and gave her a nod. She returned it. Then he closed the door. “Are you mad?” Jax demanded. “Just you and me?” “Yep,” Alister said with a tired sigh. “It’s how it has to be.” Jax cursed under his breath and drove off.

Darla watched the van disappear before getting on her comm. “Bram,” she said. “Did you catch him?” He did not answer right away. “No,” Bram said at last. “He slipped away.” Darla lowered her gaze. “I’m sorry. I failed him. I failed all of them.” Her voice shook slightly, and the worst part was that she believed it. “No,” Bram said. “My brother made his own choice.” He took a breath. “What’s the situation?” “City Hall is secured, but other locations are under attack. The prison needs reinforcements.” “Roger. We’ll head back to you now.” The call ended. As soon as it did, Bram’s whole body seemed to sink. Fiora stood near him, uncertain what to do. She hovered awkwardly, wanting to

help but not knowing how.

Bram noticed and forced a small smile. “It’s nothing,” he said. “I just needed a minute.” It was clearly not nothing. Seeing Gram with the Anarchy Men had shaken him badly. “Can I...” Fiora frowned, struggling through the words. “I don’t know what to do. Please tell me. You don’t deserve this.” That brought a real smile back to his face. “You’re already doing it,” Bram said. “Come on, Fiora. Let’s get going.” He started walking. Somewhere along the way, they began holding hands.

Heskal watched from above as Crossbone soldiers attempted to breach the front gate. Valeria stood beside him, waiting for his command. “Go show these fools their folly,” he ordered. “But...” she started. Heskal simply glanced back at her. That was enough. Her hesitation disappeared, replaced by a grin that slowly spread across her face. Without another word, she rushed away, eager to prove herself.

Heskal returned his attention to the battlefield below, expecting to see the inevitable failure of the attack. Then something changed. He raised an eyebrow. The gate was untouched. The Crossbone soldiers had not breached it. Yet somehow, they were already inside.

The alarms echoed throughout the prison as guards struggled to contain them. The attackers pushed deeper into the building, forcing their way through the corridors despite never having passed the front entrance. Heskal frowned. Unusual. However, he did not seem particularly concerned. They would not get much farther. “Hey...” The voice came from the corner of the room. Heskal turned immediately. Not out of fear. Confusion. Someone had entered his office. Someone had bypassed his security., and somehow, he had not noticed. “Are you the Supreme Administrator guy?” Calva stood there casually, waving at him with a smirk. “He certainly looks self-important enough to call himself that,” she said with a laugh.

Heskal’s eye narrowed as he studied her. “Are you the anomaly responsible for this?”

He looked her over carefully. “A G Unit. The information I have on your kind indicates that you should

not possess abilities such as these. Not since your progenitor.” Calva’s expression changed immediately. The amusement disappeared. “I’m not just... one of them.” Her voice became colder.

“I’m Calva.” She paused. “He named me. He showed me what I could really do.” For the first time, Heskal seemed genuinely interested. “Perhaps...” he said quietly, looking toward her. “Even I underestimated this.” A brief silence followed. “Viktor.” Calva’s grin returned, but this time there was no playfulness behind it. She was done talking. Light erupted around her as she rushed forward. Heskal moved at the same moment, the room disappearing in a flash as the two collided.

Chapter 54: The Air Control System

Jax drove down the road like a maniac, narrowly avoiding civilians and obstacles left behind by the chaos. Alister gripped onto the seat for dear life, his claws digging into the material as the van swerved through the streets. “Would you calm down...” he said. Jax didn't answer. “Look... Callum... I know it's your baby, but...” Alister started, only for Jax to slam on the brakes. The sudden stop threw him forward as Jax turned and stared directly into his eyes with a glare. “You're going to pretend to know how I feel now?” Jax asked. He did not deny the name. He did not deny what Alister was implying either. “Well...” Alister sighed. “In part. I know how to read between the lines.”

“Do you now...” Jax said, his voice quiet but sharp. “Jax...” Alister questioned. For a moment, neither of them moved. Then Jax took a deep breath before slamming his foot back onto the accelerator. The van shot forward once more, speeding through the city as dangerously as before. “Then we have an understanding,” Jax said. After a moment, he muttered under his breath, “How many times do I have to keep fixing the same mistake?” Alister took a deep breath, unsure what he could even say to that. “At least you're determined,” he muttered.

Jax didn't respond. He kept driving as Alister slowly calmed down, eventually reaching the outskirts of the city. Ahead of them was a familiar bridge. The same one that had burned down during last year's Founders Day. It still looked untouched, abandoned after the damage it had suffered. Jax kept driving straight toward it. Alister noticed the sign as they passed saying bridge out. “Um... Jax...” Alister said carefully. “Not to insult your intelligence, but you do know how to read, right?” He asked. Jax didn't answer. “Jax...” Still nothing. “Are you trying to kill us both?” Alister asked, panic beginning to set in again. The van accelerated.

Alister reached forward, preparing to stop him, but it was already too late. They drove straight off the edge of the broken bridge, falling into open air. For a brief moment, Alister was certain they were about to die. Then Jax reached to the side and pulled a hidden lever. The van immediately shifted. Panels unfolded, metal parts rotated, and the entire vehicle transformed with loud mechanical hisses and grinding gears. The engine changed as the vehicle began to lift itself back into the air, becoming a rough but functional aircraft. Alister stared in disbelief as they flew above the gap. “A flight mode...” he said, finally taking a breath. “I thought you said it didn't have one.” “It didn't,” Jax answered. Alister looked at him.

“I installed it,” he answered. “You installed it?” Alister asked. Jax adjusted the controls as the aircraft shook violently. “Didn't have time for a precise one though. Needs a runway.” The aircraft tilted dangerously. “So hold on.” The cat took a deep breath, finally calming down. It wasn't the smoothest ride in the world, and the vehicle still shook constantly, but at least they weren't flying through the city like they were trying to kill themselves anymore. “I'll have to notify Aviation. They might shoot us out of the sky if they don't recognize us,” Alister said, already pulling out his communicator to send the message.

They flew closer without obstruction. It wasn't often that anyone was allowed this close to the Air Control System, but this was a crisis. Even Alister, who had seen it hanging in the sky countless

times, had never gotten a proper look at it from this distance. It was a massive, clinical-looking sky station, barely still within the atmosphere. The first layer of the shield emitted from the bottom of the structure, protecting the planet below. The second, higher layer extended just above the station, designed to prevent anyone outside from simply firing directly onto it. Near the middle of the station was a massive opening where the damage had been done. Smoke had cleared, and the shield still held, but the attack was obvious.

Airships swarmed around it alongside people wearing jetpacks and creatures capable of flying on their own, but none of them were able to get close. A1R flew alongside them as they approached.

“Why isn't anyone going inside?” Alister asked, rolling down the window. “Just watch,” the robot answered. A small team attempted to approach the station. The moment they got close, the defenses activated. Weapons hidden across the structure opened fire, forcing the group to retreat before they were overwhelmed. “They took control of the inside already,” Jax muttered. “How could that be?”

Alister studied the station carefully. “Can you draw its fire away while we attempt to infiltrate?” “Roger,” A1R responded before flying away. The Wardens joined him. Gobriella laughed maniacally from a clunky-looking aircraft as she joined the formation. An angel woman and a falcon girl flew behind the robot in a V formation. The moment the station's cannons turned toward them, the group scattered in different directions, forcing the defenses to divide their attention. Lacy landed on top of the van as they continued forward. “I'm coming with,” she declared. “Are you sure?” Alister asked. “Of course,” she replied simply.

Jax moved the controls, pulling levers and shifting panels as the van began moving faster. Much faster. The engines roared as the vehicle accelerated like a rocket. “Get ready. I won't be able to stop it at this speed.” “Wait, what?” Lacy and Alister both shouted. The van shot forward and flew directly into the opening. The van crashed through several layers of outter walls. Lacy barley had time to move away. Alister and Jax were breafly knocked out. The cat groaned recovering leaving the van right away

and trying not to throw up. “What were you thinking are you... insane.” He asked. Jax was looking at the damage of the van smiling. “Good she held knew she was tuff” He said proudly. “Are you even listening.” Alister asked.

Lacy had landed face first a little ways away. Alister moved over to help her up as they looked around at their surroundings. No one was there. Only the low hum of the machines filled the area.

“There isn't much of a presence here,” Alister said, realizing that was almost more unsettling. “You're right. We have two Wardens stationed here, and countless operatives. Where did they go?” she asked. Jax looked around with a frown. “They must have hacked into the autonomous systems,” he explained.

Lacy just blinked. “I didn't even know they had those.” The fact that she didn't know was almost more frightening. “I think your Administrator chose to keep them as a failsafe rather than a full measure. Probably for the best, but... it hardly matters at the moment,” Jax explained.

Lacy tilted her head. “You sure know a lot about them...” “We don't have time for this. We need to find the Wardens and take back control of the system,” Alister interrupted. He pressed his back against the wall, looking down the dark corridor ahead. There was no one there. “This level has a console. Not the main one, but if we're lucky, we can access it and at least turn the defenses off,” Jax explained. The others nodded as he began leading the way. Lacy seemed to understand that he was some sort of expert, shifting above them to keep watch while Alister stayed beside him. But that was the strange part. The hallway was dark, yet there was no one there. They continued walking without a single person trying to stop them.

It didn't take long for them to reach the console. A nearly hidden panel in the wall revealed it, and Jax immediately got to work trying to regain control. “Blast... I should've known,” Jax muttered.

“What is it?” Alister asked. “My permissions have been revoked,” he sighed. “By the Port or...” Alister pressed. “It doesn't matter,” Jax interrupted. “Can you regain them?” He asked. “This terminal was

designed to override the main one if something happened to it, but without permissions, it's a glorified wall light," he groaned in frustration, continuing to type. "So we need to go higher? No one with access is available," Alister said. "That's right..." Jax replied as he continued working. "Then what are we waiting for?" Lacy asked. "I was able to at least get access to the cameras," Jax admitted. "But didn't you just..." Lacy asked. "A low-level hack. Even a child could do it," he cut her off. "I thought better of myself." He sounded almost disappointed that he had to break into his own system, and that he was able to.

He scrolled through the different levels of the system, scanning through the various feeds. "My word... Aviation didn't go anywhere," Jax said, almost intrigued. "What... what do you mean? Where are my people?" Lacy asked, pushing closer with her wings to get a better look. The camera feed showed an operative sitting inside one of the turret rooms, away from the controls. The weapon continued firing outside, but the person inside looked like they had already given up trying to escape. The room beside it showed the same thing. "So they didn't go anywhere..." Alister said slowly. "They just... they're trapped." He stared at the screen, unable to believe it. "But I was never able to test that," Jax muttered. "The files were never even implemented. Unless..." He trailed off.

Fifteen years ago. Callum Draycott stood on a production line. The work was dull. The pay was insulting, but it was the job he had. He watched as each component moved down the belt, stopping it occasionally whenever something looked wrong. He glanced over at the machine to his right, the one responsible for assembling everything together. He could tell with every press that something was becoming looser. The movements were slightly off. The sound was wrong. Callum sighed before pressing the emergency shutdown button. Everything came to a sudden stop.

The silence immediately drew attention. The loud clanging of metal and machinery being replaced by nothing was impossible to ignore. A man high above stepped out of his office and looked down at the halted production line. "What do you think you're doing?" the man asked.

Callum pointed toward the machine. “I've already reported this, but... it's clearly getting worse. If we don't fix it, the whole factory could...” “This again?” The man interrupted him, already sounding annoyed. “We have deadlines to fulfill. Quotas to meet. We don't have time to worry about your hunches.” He frowned. “You're not an expert. Get back to work.” With that, he turned and stormed back into his office. Callum watched him leave and let out a sigh. “A blind dolphin could see the issue,” he muttered. Reluctantly, he restarted the production line. The machines began moving again.

A few hours later, a bolt came loose, flying into the wall and nearly hitting him. Then the entire machine began to rumble before starting to fall apart. “Everyone... run!” he shouted. He led the others away as the machine collapsed, taking parts of the roof and the wall down with it. Just as he was about to rush out of the room, part of the machinery shifted toward the exit. Before he knew what happened, he was thrown clear. He woke up several days later in a hospital, confused and disoriented. This was before the Health Division had been founded, so a simple nurse was the one checking his vitals.

“Oh, Mr. Draycott. You're finally awake,” she said cheerfully. “Get me out of here. I don't have the money to pay for...” he started. “Oh, don't worry. Your medical bill has already been taken care of,” she explained. Callum raised an eyebrow. “By who?” “A man from the Port Authority. He said he would take responsibility,” she answered. “The Port Authority? But K Company isn't...” he questioned. “Are you feeling all right, Mr. Draycott?” the nurse asked, immediately becoming more focused on his condition now that the financial issue had been settled.

“The Port Authority doesn't own K Company. It is a private company, but it does have dealings with the Port,” a voice said from the doorway. “And when a factory literally falls apart at the seams, people tend to notice.” Cassian walked inside and took a seat beside the bed. “Hello, Mr. Draycott. I'm Lieutenant Sterros. Internal Investigations. I've been assigned to this case.” Callum crossed his arms. “What does that have to do with me? I need to get back to work.” “I'm afraid that won't be possible,” Cassian replied. “K Company has been dissolved... or rather, it most likely will be within the coming

days.” He opened his notes. “As for why I wanted to speak with you... everyone I interviewed said the same thing. Callum Draycott knew. Callum Draycott tried to stop it.” Callum raised an eyebrow in surprise.

“So they were paying attention after all,” Callum said with a sigh. “Yes. I'm no expert, but the problems were obvious. A loose bolt. A press machine that hadn't been serviced in a decade. A compressor that never got a proper break.” He continued listing the problems before finally stopping himself. “You said Internal Investigations...” Callum said, looking confused. “This seems... external.” To him, the most involvement the Port Authority had ever had with K Company was purchasing some of their products.

“Private companies like K Company still fall under our jurisdiction. This hospital is much the same. I'll admit, though, it is a gray area. Sometimes we have to fight with Intelligence over jurisdiction in situations like this,” Cassian admitted. “Should you really be telling me that?” Callum asked, looking uncomfortable. Cassian only smirked. “Perhaps not, but I want answers. Will you share them?” he asked, leaning forward. “You really expect me to betray my employer like that?” Callum asked. He paused for a moment. “I suppose we're both out of a job now, though.” “The only thing I expect is for you to do what’s right,” Cassian replied. “For your coworkers, of course.” He smiled slightly.

Callum frowned. Something about Cassian's attitude felt scummy. He didn't trust him completely. “Alright,” he said with a sigh. “I'll tell you everything you need to know.” Cassian wrote down everything. From irrelevant maintenance issues to overly complicated technical explanations that probably went far beyond what he needed. “You sure know a lot about machinery for someone who claims not to be an expert,” Cassian said with a laugh. “I just pay attention,” Callum replied.

A few days later, just as Cassian predicted, K Company was dissolved.Callum was out of a job. He stood outside the destroyed building with a sigh, unsure what he was supposed to do next. He had barely been managing to pay rent before this. For now, he would just go home, or at least, that was the

plan. He had barely gotten far before someone called out to him. “There you are. I've been looking for you,” Cassian said, pointing toward him. Callum frowned. “Isn't our business concluded?” he asked, assuming he was about to be questioned further. “Not quite,” Cassian replied. He pulled out a piece of paper. “What is this?” Callum asked, reading over the document.

“We couldn't find your mailing address, so I decided to deliver it myself,” Cassian explained. “An offer from the Port. Everyone from your team was given the same opportunity. The ones who deserved it, anyway.” Callum looked down at the paper, then back at Cassian. “I didn't think it was that simple,” he admitted. “It isn't,” Cassian said. “I may not be at the top, but I still have strings I can pull. This is simply one of them, Mr. Draycott.” He smiled. “I know talent when I see it. So take it. We can rise together.” With that, Cassian patted him on the shoulder before walking away.

Chapter 55: Callum Draycott

Magnus walked onto the main factory floor. Everyone seemed to be gathered around a large machine while someone fumbled with the controls inside. He looked almost amused. “Taking another crack at the Atlas Reactor? It hasn’t functioned in a century,” he laughed. He was moments away from telling them all to get back to work when the machine suddenly powered on. The engineers erupted into cheers. Magnus climbed the catwalk immediately, shocked. He needed to know who had been responsible.

Inside, Callum and Pex were hunched over the controls, smiling at one another as they exchanged a fist bump. “Nice one, rookie, but don’t think this means I’m giving up my position as Lieutenant,” the alien said with a smirk. “You could be a Captain if you wanted,” Callum pointed out. “What, are you crazy? That test is insane. I’m not strong enough. Besides, the Idol Project will produce our next Captain,” Pex declared. Callum did not look convinced. “You really love idols, don’t you? I’d never even heard of them before I came here. I don’t see the appeal.” Pex shook his head. “That’s what they all say. Just wait until one of them takes hold of your heart. One day, we will create an idol that truly shines.”

Before he could continue, Magnus reached them. “Ah, it’s you. Callum, was it? How did you possibly manage this? Do you actually understand how the system functions?” he asked. “Well... not completely, but with Pex’s help, we were able to figure it out. It’s a backup battery for the Portal Dampener, right?” Callum replied. Magnus laughed. “Yes. Not even I could get it working again. I wasn’t entirely sure about all of you when you were recommended. Don’t misunderstand me, we can always use the help, but there is a process to bringing in new people. There is a learning curve, and not everyone makes it through.” He let out a breath, then smiled. “What I mean to say is this: Operative Draycott, I think you will do very well here. I’m glad to have you with us.”

Not long after, Callum was called away to Internal Investigations headquarters. Something about the whole thing felt off. They had requested him personally to come collect their weapons for maintenance and repair. When he arrived, Lieutenant Sterros was waiting for him. “Ah, it’s you! How long has it been? I trust Engineering is going well?” he asked. Callum raised an eyebrow. “You’re a slimy one, aren’t you? Got some ulterior motive?” he asked with a smirk. Cassian laughed. “Whatever do you mean? I simply wanted the best man for the job. I’m not much of a fighter, but we have a few here. They need their weapons kept in tip-top shape,” he said with a nod.

“Right,” Callum mumbled as he looked over the swords and rifles carefully arranged inside a container. He slowly counted them. “The report said ten. I count nine...” “Ah, yes. Well, you see, one of my Wardens is a stubborn woman. She simply...” Cassian started. “What was that?” Elaina asked as she appeared behind him, glaring daggers into the back of his head. Cassian immediately fell silent. Callum’s expression softened as he studied her, though his attention quickly drifted toward the sword hanging at her hip. She crossed her arms, clearly unimpressed, as he moved closer. Then he heard it: a faint hiss that would have been impossible to notice if he had not been listening for it. He knelt down without thinking, causing her to take a step back.

“What are you doing?” she asked, a blush creeping across her face. “Your sword. I think the

combustion device has a crack," he said, trying to get a better look. "I already told Cassian I'm not turning it in. I have work to do, a case to solve, and I need my sword to..." She started. "If it isn't repaired, it could explode. Maybe even while you're on a mission, Ms..." Callum insisted. "It won't be a problem. I know my weapon better than some engineer. I'm far too busy for this," she said as she drew the sword, its scabbard still on. "See? Look, it's..." The moment she swung it, the weapon exploded in her hands. Callum tackled her before she could be caught in the blast. He looked down into her eyes as she blinked up at him in stunned silence.

"Are you alright?" he asked. Her face turned even redder, which was impressive considering her own skin was already pink. "Yes, I... ugh, get off me. You were right, alright?" she said, pouting. The serious woman persona had vanished, replaced by an embarrassed mess. Callum did as she asked, followed by a long silence. Then both he and Cassian started laughing. "It's not funny!" she yelled, jumping to her feet in embarrassment. "Whatever. Just fix it. I have things to do." She ran out of the room before they could embarrass her any further.

Things started to become more routine. He worked with the others in the shop, went out on calls to fix whatever had broken, and collected and maintained weapons from every division except those that already had an in-house craftsman. He fixed Station 14's interlock. Then he fixed it again... and again... before finally dismantling the entire door and replacing it. Somehow, it still refused to open properly. He screamed in frustration just as Cassian happened to be walking by. "Wow, look at you. You've really risen in the world. I've heard about your recent exploits. A Warden already... and yet defeated by a door," he said with a laugh.

Callum frowned in embarrassment. "Yeah, well... I'll fix it eventually. Every stubborn tool mends if you give it enough care. More importantly, why the hell are you in the sky? Are you stalking me or something?" "Of course not. My work takes me all over the Port. It's a simple coincidence that we're both here at the same time, but I can't do anything if I can't even get inside the station," Cassian

replied, continuing to mock him playfully. Callum sighed and returned to the door, hoping it would finally open this time. “Hey... Sterros,” he said as he worked, his voice softer than before. “Why the interest?” He asked.

“Interest? In what? Oh, you mean in you. You’re quite amusing, you see,” Cassian replied with a chuckle. “And the real reason?” Callum pressed, seeming to see through him better than most. Cassian went quiet for a moment. “It’s simple, really. There’s no grand plan. I just saw a man being underutilized. I love this world, but it certainly knows how to fail its best people. Not that you needed me. I’m sure you would’ve found your way here eventually.” He smiled. “Soon enough, we’ll both be big shots.” Callum smiled just as the door finally opened.

Something else had unfortunately become routine too. He was working on a pipe on the roof of a building when sirens began to blare. He quickly slid down to the streets below as raiders descended from the sky. Everyone around him ducked for cover as they attempted to loot whatever they could. Thankfully, the Military Division and Peacekeeping were quick to respond. No one was hurt, but much of his work had been undone, some of it made far worse than before. He clicked his tongue in irritation. The other Operative working with him only sighed. “Well, I suppose that’s the price of living here,” he said with a laugh. “What if it didn’t have to be...” Callum muttered.

The days blurred together, and his work remained mostly the same, with a few changes. Cassian kept finding reasons to meddle with him. Callum suspected part of it was simply for his own amusement. On the other hand, he began meeting with Elaina more regularly. At first, it was because she once again stubbornly insisted that only he was allowed to maintain her weapons. She wasn’t about to let anyone else see her persona crack. But as the weeks turned into months, they only grew closer. Soon, the excuse was not even mentioned. They were simply dating, holding hands in private and going out together whenever they could. The only strange part was Elaina’s insistence that they hide it from Cassian.

They met at a pancake shop. Elaina had already ordered and was trying very hard not to drool over the abomination sitting in front of her. It was covered in every kind of sprinkle imaginable and packed with blueberries. “Sorry I’m late. Got held up,” Callum said as he sat down, placing a bag beside him. The bag tipped over, sending several papers spilling across the floor. “Oh, damn it,” he muttered, quickly moving to gather them. Elaina glanced down, barely paying attention at first. They were schematics, the kind of thing she had seen him carry before. She would not have questioned them, but one caught her eye. It did not have any of the patents or symbols she normally saw on his work. “What’s that?” she asked. “Oh, um... it’s nothing. Just a fever dream I drew up in my free time.”

“A fever dream?” she asked, pulling it away before he could protest. “Stop, you’ll get syrup on it,” he said, more timidly than usual. She studied it closely. Most of the technical details went over her head, but anyone could understand what it was supposed to be: a massive machine capable of generating a shield around the entire planet. “Could you really make something like this?” she asked in wonder as syrup dripped down her chin. “I... I’m not sure. It was just a stupid idea I had. Who knows if it would even work? Using a single device like that poses the biggest challenge,” he started to explain, quickly falling into increasingly technical detail. She never really understood what he was talking about when he got like this, but she never stopped him. She simply watched with a smile, looking into his eyes as he spoke.

“But it’ll probably remain just an idea. I could never get something like this approved. Why would they believe me anyway?” he asked with a sigh. Elaina frowned. “You know I hate this self-hating crap, Callum,” she said, taking his hands. “You’re amazing. Maybe you’re right, but you said everyone on your team respects you. The Administrator acknowledged you himself. What’s the harm in at least submitting it? You’re so smart... why not use that?” “She’s right, you know. You certainly have my support,” Cassian said, suddenly leaning in to study the schematics more closely. “B-Cassian? What are you doing here?” Elaina asked, quickly sliding away from Callum, flustered.

“What do you mean? One of my subordinates was missing, so I came looking for you.” He raised an eyebrow. “Are you... on a date?” “What? No, of course not. I’m...” She glanced around desperately. “Oh, look, I have to go.” She ran out almost immediately. Cassian sat down with a sigh, looking over the blueprints more thoroughly. “She’s right, you know. There’s no harm in trying. I think a man like you can overcome a few simple hurdles,” he said softly before standing again. “But more importantly...” He gripped Callum’s shoulder tightly. “Draycott... are you fucking my sister?” he asked, his eyes suggesting that the wrong answer might get him killed. “Your what?” Callum asked in complete shock.

A few days later, he presented it to Magnus: a small model and proof of concept. Magnus looked impressed as he scratched his chin. “Wow... I mean it, Callum. I think you have something here. Something only a Visionary would think of,” he said. “A Visionary? I’m not on that level,” Callum pushed back. “You meet all the requirements. You’re a natural-born genius. You understand things even I have trouble wrapping my head around. You’re thinking about the future, and you have a model proving you can get there. If those aren’t the marks of a Visionary, I don’t know what is,” Magnus said with a laugh. “But I... aren’t there...” Callum hesitated.

“You mean requirements for officially receiving the title? Sure. I can’t decide that alone, and only a Visionary could properly advocate for a project like this. That, or the Chancellor.” He sighed. “Well, it looks like I arrived just in time, then,” Cassian said from the doorway. “Lieutenant Sterros? No, you were recently promoted to Administrator, weren’t you? What brings you here?” Magnus asked in confusion. Before Cassian could answer, Morvin walked through the door, flanked by two Wardens from Legislation. “Ha! A shield around the entire planet. That’s a brilliant idea. Thank you for bringing this to my attention, Mr. Sterros. They were right to promote you,” he said with a laugh.

“So, can you really do it, Mr... eh, whatever your name is. That doesn’t matter. My approval rating is at an all-time low after that lizard thing. At this rate, I’ll lose the next election. This will fix

everything. How much will it cost?" he asked excitedly. Callum blinked, caught off guard by suddenly being surrounded by so many powerful people. "Well, I'm not certain. I've never been very good at estimating the cost of projects, but... perhaps one hundred billion credits," he said nervously.

Morvin's expression fell immediately. "Yeah, no. That isn't happening. You can do it for less, right?" he asked, his voice suddenly colder, as though the wrong answer would end the conversation entirely. "Well... perhaps we could if we streamlined it, but it would need more funding eventually, once the project proves itself," Callum explained. "That's what I like to hear. Yeah, whatever. Maybe we'll do more later," Morvin said with another laugh, dismissing his concerns. "I approve it. Start immediately, before you cost me the election. Who knows? Maybe this will make you a Visionary like everyone says. I'm sure that'll make me look even better." With that, he left without another word. Callum didn't know much about Morvin but something about him rubbed him the wrong way, but he couldn't complain now that he had his approval.

Through the span of six months, his life became completely dedicated to the project. He was given resources he had never dreamed of, outside assistance, and other members of Engineering willing to follow his lead. A few, like Pex, started calling him "Usurper." It was mostly in jest, but Callum could tell there was some resentment behind it. In their minds, he had simply leapfrogged past them. Even so, they all worked hard. This was going to be Engineering's crowning achievement of the modern age. "After this, no one will complain about Engineering not doing its job," one of the men said as he tightened a bolt.

Then the day finally arrived. It had been difficult, and there had been countless trials, but the project was complete. The structure stood on the ground, half locked beneath it, and yet it still towered over the small stage built at its base. People gathered excitedly as Morvin stepped up to the podium. "Yes, everyone, the day has come, just as promised. No longer will you have to fear constant raids from opportunists. Our skies will be protected, and never again will anyone breach our great Port," he

declared with a smile as the crowd cheered. “Now, without further ado, allow me to present the mind behind this achievement. The man I personally discovered and selected for the project,” Morvin lied.

Cassian watched from the side, leaning against a wall with a sigh. “Talk about editorializing history,” he muttered.

“The man who has earned the rank of Visionary. Visionary Draycott, please come to the stage!” Morvin announced. No one came. Morvin stood there in silence, his smile slowly fading. Eventually, one of his aides approached and whispered into his ear. “It seems Mr. Draycott is already hard at work on another project and couldn’t make it,” Morvin said, clearly annoyed before quickly adjusting. “Just as I told him to be. Well, no matter. Let us raise this marvel into the sky.” He said. A younger Alister watched the stage from somewhere in the crowd, frowning. “Aw. I wanted to meet him.”

Farther away, Callum sat beside Elaina. “You were right. This is a much better view,” he said. “Are you sure you don’t want to be there?” she asked. “I don’t need recognition from anyone...” He looked toward her with a smile. “Well, there is one person.” They held hands as the enormous station began lifting into the sky. Everyone watched in wonder as it ascended. Callum’s grip tightened, as though some part of him feared it would suddenly explode in the air, but it did not. It continued rising, and once it was high enough, the system flickered to life.

The upper layer activated first, followed by the lower one. For a moment, the shield completely blocked out the sky, but it slowly faded until it was almost invisible. The crowd erupted into cheers as fireworks exploded overhead. “You’re an incredible man, Callum Draycott,” Elaina said. She hesitated only briefly before speaking more boldly. “I... I love you.” She kissed him. He was caught off guard by the suddenness of it, but quickly accepted. Porta Nexus would never be breached again.

A year passed, and the shield held. Some attempted to invade anyway, but none of them made it past the first layer. Porta Nexus felt safer than it had in a very long time. People stopped holding their

breath. The Military had always been great at protecting them, but now the whole issue seemed like a distant memory. Many said the shield won Morvin the election. Before, most people had been indifferent to him, and that was almost worse than being hated.

Callum came to him a few months later with excitement, ready to present the next phase. Morvin seemed willing to indulge him as he spoke, but the longer it went on, the clearer it became that he was not paying attention. He even yawned. “Mr. Draycott, I think I’ve heard enough,” he said. Callum stopped in confusion. “What do you mean?” Morvin waved a hand dismissively. “This whole second phase you’ve been babbling on about... it’s not happening. Do you know how much money we spent on this? Impressive, sure, but it works. There’s no need to go any further.”

Callum’s eyes narrowed. “Sir, with all due respect, the fact that I was able to get it working is a miracle. One device creating a shield around the entire planet isn’t enough. If it fails, we’re in danger again. That’s why I’m suggesting we build smaller devices that can link to the station, along with a second control system on the other side of...” he started, almost as though he believed Morvin simply did not understand. “No. We’re not doing that. It works. You performed the miracle, and you’ll keep it working, right? We don’t have two Portal Dampeners. Why would we need two of these?” Morvin said. “I indulged you because of what you’ve done for my career, but I think we’re done here. No more proposals. Go do whatever it is you engineers do. Go on. Shoo.” Callum clenched his fists, but he did as he was told.

As the years passed, Callum grew more and more jaded. He never stopped submitting requests, but every one of them was rejected. Morvin no longer cared. Only he and a handful of others could approve the funding. Callum technically had the authority to begin the work himself now, but not the money, or resources. He found himself returning to the Air Control System regularly. It was an incredible machine, but it never stopped running. He had to devote himself to repairing problems no one else understood. He spent more and more time there. Cassian and Elaina’s bonds with Callum had

grown strong by then, but not even they knew what to do about it. One morning, Elaina stopped him. “Callum, please. You’re running yourself into the ground. If you don’t take some time, you’ll...” she pleaded.

“I can’t stop. Every second I’m not working on it is another second it could fail,” he said, pulling away and leaving. He began coming back down less and less until, eventually, he stopped completely. The Port remained safe for years on his back, but then the Crossbone Reaper appeared. Morvin was warned. Morvin dismissed it, comfortable and complacent now that he was halfway through his fourth term. The Reaper and his forces entered almost too easily. From the streets below, he raised his middle finger toward the system as it began to glow. Callum was working outside when he saw a flash from below. Then the systems began failing one after another. More problems appeared before he could fix the ones already in front of him. Others joined him, trying desperately to help, but it didn’t matter. The shield failed, and the Air Control System fell from the sky. The Siege had begun. The Crossbone Remnant devastated the city.

Callum woke after it was over, the station lying destroyed on the ground. He was weak, but somehow mostly unscathed. Elaina was there. “Callum, I... I was so worried,” she said. Only then did he realize his head was resting in her lap. “I’m sorry. I...” he started. “Visionary Draycott,” Morvin called out. “No. You will be stripped of that title. You have a great deal to answer for. You failed to do your job and allowed the shield to collapse when the city needed it most. I can’t believe I ever believed in you.” Somehow, Morvin appeared untouched by the devastation around him as several of his personal guards moved to restrain Callum.

“What, are you stupid? It was that Middle Finger power. Did you see it when he fought Orion? You abandoned the port during all of this... how dare you!” Elaina argued. “Orion...” Callum questioned, but the longer he thought about it, the more he began to understand what was happening. “Morvin, you bastard. You’re saving your own skin,” he said weakly. “Don’t try to blame me for your

negligence.” Morvin said. “Take me away if you want, but let me repair the shield first,” Callum pleaded. “There will be plenty of time for that under their supervision,” Morvin admitted.

“No, stop it. This isn’t right. How can you just let them throw you under the bus like this?” Elaina shouted. “Because my name isn’t important. The system is,” he said weakly. “No. You’re wrong,” she said. He did not answer. He simply allowed them to take him away. “I hate you, Callum Draycott,” Elaina said, tears in her eyes. He spent the next week working tirelessly to repair it. It took an enormous effort from everyone in Engineering. They knew what had really happened, but none of them said it aloud. They showed their support through their actions. As soon as the station was back in the sky, Callum was thrown into a cell to rot.

Months passed. He felt numb. He had nothing to do but think about everything that had happened, and the more he thought about it, the angrier he became. Then, one day, Cassian appeared. “Hey. It took some time, but I was finally able to come see you, old friend,” Cassian said, softer than usual. Callum did not answer. “I found a way to get you out of here. It isn’t perfect, but...” “No,” Callum replied. Cassian stopped in confusion. “What do you mean, no?” “I’m not leaving this cell.” Callum said. Cassian clicked his tongue in irritation. “This isn’t the time to be stubborn. I swear, you two are...” “I’m not going anywhere,” Callum insisted.

Cassian paused. “Listen, I understand that what happened to you wasn’t right, but...” Callum suddenly rose to his feet and slammed his hands against the glass. “You made me think I could be something. You took me off that production line. You believed in me, and you were wrong. Look where I am now,” he said angrily. Cassian did not answer. “You’re right...” Callum slowly turned away, leaning against the glass as he lowered himself back to the floor. Cassian remained standing on the other side. Callum sat in silence, waiting for him to leave. “I still believe in you, Callum. Why won’t you let me help you? Don’t you want to see Elaina again? Don’t you want to make everyone in Engineering proud?” Cassian asked.

Callum did not answer. Cassian seemed more upset by that than anything else. “Ugh, whatever. If I can’t appeal to your emotions, I’ll use my talents,” he muttered. “I’m putting something together, and I’m afraid it’s incredibly broken. It needs fixing. Someone like you is the only person who can do it. The Callum I know would never leave a broken machine lying there. He would speak out. He would fix it. So, how about it?” He asked. Callum did not answer. A long silence passed between them. “I don’t know what sick game you’re playing this time, Sterros, but I suppose I could at least look it over,” he said softly.

“Wonderful, I...” Cassian started. “But Callum is dead. Understand?” “What do you mean?” he asked. “Callum was a failure. He deserves to die as one. I’ll be someone new. No one special. Just... Jax,” he said stubbornly. Cassian frowned. “You’re going to break her heart saying things like that... but alright. I’ll respect it.” He walked away without another word. “Jax... Jax... Callum!” Alister snapped, pulling him back into the present. “Are you alright? Come on, we need to move.” He said. “Right. Sorry. I just...” Jax looked back toward the console. “Let’s make things different this time.”

He began moving through the camera feeds again, trying to determine what they were up against. There were no guards or attackers anywhere to be seen. Who had broken in? The feed from the main control room was inactive. Jax sighed. “We don’t have a choice. We need to reach the main control room,” he explained. “Alright, then lead the way, Mr. Jax,” Lacy said confidently. “Right...”

Chapter 56: Reclaimed

Jax led the others up the spiral ramp winding through the center of the station. Even now, they had encountered no resistance. No guards. No attackers. Nothing but the distant hum of machinery and the muffled thunder of Air Control's defenses firing outside. "How did they break in without anyone seeing them?" Lacy asked. She knew the station well enough to realize they had already searched most of its accessible levels. "That's the frightening part," Alister muttered. "All that remains is the main control room," Jax said, sounding just as puzzled. The way he said it almost suggested he expected every missing operative and attacker to be waiting there together. They reached the top of the ramp and stopped before a set of massive industrial doors. The metal slabs stretched nearly to the ceiling, sealed tightly enough that not even light escaped through the center.

"They never keep these closed," Lacy said. "People are constantly moving in and out of the control room." Jax was already kneeling beside the entrance. He tore open a maintenance panel and began working through the tangled wiring inside. Alister and Lacy moved to opposite sides of the doorway, readying themselves for whatever waited beyond it. The doors slowly groaned apart. Jax stopped them once the opening was barely wide enough for someone to slip through. He had done it

intentionally. If an army waited on the other side, the narrow gap would prevent them from rushing through all at once.

He crouched and peered inside. No army waited for them. There was only a single figure standing over the central console. “Why can’t I get in?” the figure whined, striking the controls in frustration. The voice was high and almost childlike. Jax glanced back at the others before slipping through the opening. Alister followed to the right while Lacy took to the air above them. Once they moved closer, it became obvious that the figure was not alive at all. It was a robot, slightly shorter than Jax and built with exaggerated armor plating that made it resemble something from an old children’s program rather than a practical machine.

Its head turned slightly. “Is someone there?” it asked. Then it laughed. “No way. Those idiots are still trapped in their own rooms.” Jax studied it carefully. Something about the design felt painfully familiar. The bright crest across its helmet. The oversized shoulders. The circular emblem set into its chest. Even the slightly theatrical way it moved suggested that someone was controlling it remotely rather than relying on an ordinary artificial intelligence. Then he remembered. Jax slowly stood. “Super Mega Mecha Man DX-12,” he said. The robot spun toward him immediately. “What are you, wait.” Its voice rose with sudden excitement. “You know who this is?”

Jax took a step closer. “Of course I do. It was my favorite show when I was a child. Aside from the reduced scale, you replicated the design almost perfectly.” He went on. While the robot’s attention remained fixed on him, Alister began inching toward the console behind it. “Well, duh,” the robot said proudly. “I’m a genius. Copying such an iconic character was easy.” “You sound rather young,” Jax observed. “That program aired a long time ago. I’m surprised anyone your age still knows it.” “Please. It’s a timeless classic, old man.” The robot placed its hands on its hips. “I wish more people appreciated it.” “Old man?” Jax muttered. “I’m not that old.”

He glanced toward the observation windows. Outside, Aviation continued drawing the station’s

fire. Turrets tracked A1R and the others as they scattered through the sky, explosions flashing against the shields. “Were you responsible for all of this?” Jax asked. His voice was gentler than usual, almost disarmingly so. The robot laughed. “You bet I was. It was ridiculously easy.” It leaned back against the console with theatrical confidence. “That Draycott guy was a joke. I don’t know how you got in here, but it must be because his system sucks.” He mocked. Alister’s eyes shifted toward Jax. For a moment, Jax said nothing. Then the robot abruptly turned. “Wait a second. I know what you’re trying to do.”

It spotted Alister reaching toward the controls and swung one heavy metal arm at him. Alister barely twisted away in time, the fist slamming into the console beside him hard enough to dent the casing. “Why did you do this, you little brat?” Alister hissed as he drew his sword. The robot raised its arms defensively. “Because I wanted to see if I could!” it snapped. Then its posture faltered slightly. “Well... I guess now that I think about it, that stupid bastard was the one who kept egging me on.” He muttered. Jax’s expression hardened. “The Reaper?”

“Yeah... sure, whatever you want to call him,” the robot replied. “Just don’t think he controls me, all right?” It raised one arm and fired a rocket directly at Jax. He threw himself aside, but the projectile struck one of the nearby server racks, tearing through the casing and sending sparks across the control room as the entire station shuddered around them. “Are you insane?” Jax snapped. “Every machine in this room is integral to keeping the system functioning.” “Why should I care?” the robot asked, shifting its arm as another rocket locked into place. Jax gritted his teeth. “When we entered, you were complaining that you couldn’t access the larger system. You wanted to prove you could take control of it. You would be disappointed in yourself if you resorted to destroying it instead.”

The robot stopped. Its arm remained raised, but the weapon did not fire. “What do you know, old man?” it growled, frustration creeping into its voice. “I’ll blow this whole place out of the sky if I want to. I don’t care what they told me.” Before it could fire again, Lacy swooped down from above. Her talons closed around its shoulders, and she carried it several feet through the air before slamming it

into the wall. Alister rushed forward immediately and pinned the machine's arms against its body before it could recover. "Is he piloting it from inside?" Alister asked, glancing over the machine's compact frame. "No. Far too small." "Why would I come in person, you dumb feline?" the robot muttered.

Jax had already moved to the central console. His hands raced across the controls as he attempted to disable the station's defenses, but every command was rejected. He tried another route, only for the system to force him back to the main screen. "You used the files that I..." Jax stopped himself. "The files Draycott left behind. You pieced them together and used them to do all of this." He stared at the shifting lines of code. "They were incomplete. Untested. They were meant to stop infiltrators." "Ha! Of course I used them," the robot said proudly. "They were mostly finished already. It didn't take much work once my friends helped me. They're inside the system fighting you right now." Then it suddenly went quiet. "Wait a second. How do you know all of that?" it asked. "You didn't have enough time to figure it out. No way. That guy is dead or something."

"An artificial-intelligence-powered virus?" Jax muttered, ignoring it. "No... not exactly." He continued searching through the permissions, but every attempt ended the same way. Something inside the system detected his interference and forced him back to the main interface before he could gain any meaningful control. "Ha! Wouldn't you like to know?" the robot mocked. "Not that it matters. There's no way you're him." "I'll admit it," Jax said. "Your software skills are impressive. Where you also the one you made the marrow drive?" The robot straightened slightly despite Alister still restraining it. "But I may not be able to salvage the system in its current state. A full factory reset appears to be in order."

"A factory reset?" The robot laughed. "Hell yeah. Go ahead and try. No one can get my buddy out once he's inside. The system won't let you reset it anyway. Even if you managed to start, it would take weeks, and he'd fight you every time you tried to access anything." Jax finally stepped away from

the console. “You would be right under ordinary circumstances,” he admitted. “And even if we did reset it, Air Control would fall from the sky before the process finished.” He explained. Alister looked toward him sharply. “But it seems you underestimated Draycott.” Jax crossed the room toward an empty section of wall. “As if I did,” the robot scoffed. “Of course I made the Marrow Drive. No one can crack it. Where are you going?” Jax stopped before the bare wall and pressed his palm against it. A concealed panel shifted inward, revealing a narrow hand-sized recess. “A bypass?” Alister asked.

Jax slid his hand into the opening and found a hidden knob within. He pushed it inward, twisted it clockwise, then back in the opposite direction through a precise sequence only he seemed to know. “You may have me beaten when it comes to software,” Jax said, “but when it comes to hardware, I’m still king.” He pulled the mechanism outward, and the entire station shook. A crazed smile spread across his face, concerning everyone in the room. “Wait,” Alister said. “You aren’t seriously considering...” “Factory reset,” Jax replied. “Sometimes the simplest solution to a technical problem is the correct one.” He reached deeper into the opening and pressed his finger against something hidden inside.

Everyone outside looked around in shock and fear, followed by immediate relief when the shield began emitting from the station once more. The turrets had stopped firing, and the people trapped inside were finally free. Doors throughout Air Control were forced open the moment the reset completed, releasing Aviation personnel from the rooms that had become their prisons. “What? There’s no way... You...” the robot stammered in disbelief. “Draycott planned for this,” Jax said with a satisfied smile. “This isn’t over,” the robot growled. It tore itself free from Alister’s grip, though part of its body fell apart in the process. Despite its intimidating appearance, the machine did not seem particularly durable. Alister and Lacy immediately moved to restrain it again. “Don’t destroy it,” Jax warned. “We may be able to learn something from him, even if he isn’t physically here.”

The robot released a furious growl. “You think I’d allow that? I’m the smart one! I hack

systems. I'm better than all of you, and I'll get you for this! You hear me?" It pointed directly at Jax as its body began to glow. Jax's eyes widened. "Move!" All three of them threw themselves away as the robot self-destructed, scattering pieces of metal across the control room. After the smoke cleared, they slowly rose and looked around. "Does that mean... we won?" Lacy asked. "Perhaps the battle, but not the war," Alister muttered. Jax was already studying what remained of the machine. "That child was responsible for all of it. The recent City Hall breach, the takeover of Air Control, the Marrow Drive, the Reaper broadcasts, and most likely the attack on Purrmont Tower as well." He immediately began launching into a technical explanation, but Alister interrupted him. "Impossible. One snot-nosed brat couldn't possibly have..." He stopped, thinking back over everything that had happened. His expression slowly changed. "Well, damn. Now that I think about it, perhaps we should be worried."

Far away, in a dark room illuminated only by the glow of several monitors, a boy ripped a virtual-reality headset from his face and screamed in frustration before throwing it against the wall. "Nobody is smarter than me," he snarled, scratching furiously at his head. "I'll beat that guy." He turned back toward the monitors. Most of them displayed games running simultaneously, though several others showed streams of code, stolen records, and feeds from locations throughout Porta Nexus. A knock came from the door. "Hey, kid," a woman called from the other side. "Did you complete the mission yet?" "Why are you bothering me, you dumb bitch?" he shouted. "I told him no one bothers me, or I'm not helping anymore." He glared toward the door, then reluctantly added, "Of course I did. What Viktor wanted, anyway." There was a brief pause. "Good," the woman replied before walking away, leaving him alone with the screens.

Chapter 57: Prison break

Viktor breathed in the air as he held onto the railing of a gunship speeding through the sky, a pleased smirk spreading across his face. Farther inside the craft, the hooded Major stood surrounded by Crossbone Remnants armed and ready for war. “This is it, boys. We’re finally getting our great leader back,” Viktor said with a laugh. None of them answered. These appeared to be the Major’s personal men, and they were far more distrustful of Viktor than the others. “And you will simply stand aside once we reach that point?” the Major asked. “Of course I will,” Viktor replied, still laughing. Once again, no one answered him. The gunship began to ascend as several others appeared around them, approaching Blackstone Isle from every direction.

“Why not use the girl instead?” the Major asked. “We’ve got this. She’s doing something more important,” Viktor explained. “A prison like this is a cakewalk compared to what she has to do.” “Yet you assigned her very little protection compared to this assault,” the Major pressed. “She doesn’t need it,” Viktor muttered. He looked out toward the approaching prison and raised his voice. “Everyone get ready. It’s time to begin.” The moment he gave the order, the surrounding gunships accelerated and

crashed directly into the prison's outer walls. The guards had no time to prepare. Those who survived the impacts poured from the wreckage and attacked with reckless aggression.

Viktor's gunship was the only one that did not crash. It descended safely, dropped Viktor, the Major, and their men near the main entrance, then immediately lifted away. Viktor cracked his knuckles. "All right. Let's get to work." The front doors exploded inward, and Viktor walked calmly through the smoke with the Major beside him. Their men rushed ahead, killing anyone who crossed their path without mercy, but the guards quickly recovered and responded with equal force. A wolf man leapt from an upper platform and cut through an entire battalion of Remnants before they could react.

"They are well trained," the Major observed. "At this rate, our numbers should be roughly even." "Then let's change that," Viktor replied. He quickly slipped around a corner where no one could see him and placed the Reaper mask over his face. The false uniform formed around his body, hiding him beneath the familiar digital shape. He then stepped into the center of the mile-long general-population yard and looked out across the countless cell blocks surrounding it.

"Criminals," the Reaper called, his voice carrying throughout the prison. "I have not come here to kill you. I have come to arm you. Many of you were wrongfully imprisoned for crimes you did not commit, and so I offer you a second chance. I am not asking you to fight for me. No, that would be presumptuous. I simply ask that you make your exit violently." At the same time, the hooded Major reached the tower controlling the cells and unlocked them all. Doors began sliding open throughout the yard. The restraining collars around the prisoners' necks disengaged and fell to the ground, while other restraints were removed by Remnant soldiers who had already located the keys. Slowly, the prisoners stepped from their cells. Confusion gave way to excitement, anger, and panic as the general population erupted into an uproar. Some returned to their cells, convinced that joining the chaos would only make their sentences worse. Others rushed immediately toward the exits. The rest gathered into violent groups and began forcing their way deeper into the prison.

“Fucking finally,” one prisoner shouted as the mob overwhelmed a checkpoint the guards had hastily established. Viktor laughed and slipped out of sight. He removed the mask, and the Reaper disguise dissolved around him as the hooded Major rejoined him. “I would rather use this fodder as shields than sacrifice our own men,” the Major said. He still seemed uncomfortable with Viktor’s method, but he could at least appreciate its practical value. Viktor stared at him for a moment, not immediately understanding what he meant. Then realization crossed his face. “Right. Our men are far more valuable than a few losers,” he said with a laugh. “Do you know the layout of this prison?” the Major asked. “Of course,” Viktor replied. His amusement faded slightly as he looked toward the deeper sections of Blackstone. “The problem is that Seg is at the very bottom, behind the strongest defenses in the entire facility. Even for us, breaking through will not be easy.”

Darla, Fiora, and Bram had reached the bridge, miles-long stretch leading directly toward Blackstone Isle. The route was nearly abandoned, with most of Peacekeeping already gathered at the far end, prepared to confront the chaos spilling out of the prison. Escapees came in droves, pouring across the bridge in a desperate bid for freedom and willing to obtain it through the most violent means possible. “Level Three force has been authorized, but do not use it unless absolutely necessary!” Kira Coldren barked to her officers as they charged forward to meet them. Darla immediately moved to join the fight, but Kira intercepted the nearest prisoner with a powerful kick that sent them tumbling away from her. “No. You have to stop the people who started this,” Kira said. “Are you sure?” Darla asked. The husky merely nodded before turning back toward the advancing crowd. Darla glanced toward her two subordinates. “Steel yourselves,” she said. Fiora and Bram nodded with equal determination, and all three rushed past the battle toward the prison.

By the time they reached Blackstone itself, the assault had already left devastation throughout the entrance. There were no immediate signs of life, only destruction. The bodies of guards, prisoners, and Crossbone Remnants lay among the wreckage while small fires quietly burned through the ruined

halls. “This is awful,” Bram said, his voice low as he stared at the carnage around them. Darla raised her communicator and attempted to reach anyone still inside. “This is Captain Darla. Can anyone read me?” There was no response. She repeated the call several times as they continued deeper into the prison, but only static answered her. After several minutes, a strained voice finally broke through. “This is the Overseer. I’ll make this short. We’ve been completely overrun. Half of the guards and Wardens are dead. I’ve ordered those remaining to fortify the guard barracks and administrative offices where possible. Anyone who cannot reach them has been instructed to lock down their post and defend it as long as they can.”

Darla frowned as she listened. “Then is attempting to contain the escaping prisoners already out of the question?” she asked, more to herself than anyone else. “We’ll come to your location and...” “No!” the Overseer interrupted. “We’re secure for now. They cannot break into this section. The prisoners appear to be the only ones interested in trying, and they don’t have the equipment to succeed. I’m more concerned about the Remnant. They are moving toward Segregation, and they seem to have the means to breach it.” The Overseer paused, struggling to maintain their composure. “Every major criminal in Porta Nexus is held down there. Mass murderers. Architects of genocide. People responsible for the destruction of entire worlds. I’m sure you understand that even one of them escaping could be devastating. We will hold our position. Please, stop the Remnant.”

Darla hesitated, torn between securing the surviving officers and pursuing the attackers deeper into the prison, but another voice suddenly joined the channel. “Don’t worry, Captain Darla. This is Captain Harrow. I’m almost at the prison. As Captain of Justice, their safety falls under my responsibility,” Juno said. Darla released a quiet breath. “Very well.” With no further debate, she broke into a run toward the lower levels. Bram and Fiora followed close behind.

Viktor continued deeper into the prison, moving beyond the medium-security levels and releasing every prisoner he passed. Unlike those in general population, however, most of them did not

immediately attempt to flee. Some remained inside their cells, watching him with suspicion, while others stepped into the corridors and simply waited, as though trying to understand whether this was truly freedom or merely another trap.

Their hesitation seemed to puzzle Viktor, but not enough for him to care. Farther below, the Remnants had already breached Segregation. Prisoners were pouring from the reinforced corridors, including a familiar rat who hurried past with the others. Viktor did not acknowledge him. He barely acknowledged any of them, despite the fact that these were among the most dangerous people ever imprisoned in Porta Nexus. He continued straight toward his objective without slowing. Beside him, the hooded Major raised a hand to his communicator. “How many men do we have left?” he asked. “Fewer than one hundred,” someone answered through the static. “The remaining guards are hiding like cowards.” The Major released a heavy sigh but kept moving.

Viktor stopped just short of their destination, turning instead toward the neighboring cell. The Major looked at him with confusion but did not interfere. Even the Remnants moving through the corridor had made no attempt to release the prisoner held there. Behind layers of reinforced glass and restraints sat the Dragon himself. Massive chains bound his arms, legs, wings, and torso, yet even seated and restrained, he looked capable of tearing the entire cell apart. “Well, well,” Viktor said as he approached. “You certainly look as fearsome as I was told. All chained up, and you still look like you could end me without trying.” The Dragon offered no response. Viktor removed a key card from a dead guard and opened the cell. Even while sitting, the Dragon was nearly eye level with him. Viktor stepped inside and met his gaze with practiced confidence. “Your people have been oppressed ever since that little stunt you pulled,” he said. “I helped them. Gave them a second beginning. So, what do you think? Would you like to join the Marrow Collective?”

Only then did the Dragon truly look at him. “The man beside you often raves about such things, you are both weaklings.” he said, his voice low and heavy. “Do you believe me a fool?” “I don’t,”

Viktor replied. “But our goals are aligned, aren’t they? There’s no reason we couldn’t...” “Our goals will never be aligned!” the Dragon roared. One of the chains snapped beneath the sudden force of his movement, and his hand closed around the air inches from Viktor’s head, nearly crushing it between his fingers. For the first time, genuine fear crossed Viktor’s face. “All right. All right,” he said quickly, raising both hands. “I knew it was a long shot.” He took a cautious step backward.

“New plan. I release you, and you do whatever it is you intend to do. Sow some chaos, destroy a few things, and then we go our separate ways.” The Major placed a hand near the hilt of his sword, ready to draw it if the Dragon moved again. The Dragon slowly sat back and considered the offer. “Very well,” he finally said. “But do not mistake this for a debt. The path before me will remain clear, and you will never interfere with my future.” It was not a request. Viktor frowned but moved to release the remaining restraints anyway.

The moment the final chain fell away, the Dragon stood. He drove through the reinforced glass as though it were made of paper and launched himself into the corridor. The lights shattered as he passed beneath them, and within moments he had torn through the prison’s upper structure and disappeared into the sky. Viktor watched him go, visibly shaken despite his attempt to hide it. “Damn,” he admitted. “He was terrifying.” “A formidable foe, certainly,” the Major replied before turning toward the cell beside it.

Their true target was already waiting for them. The Crossbone Reaper stood behind the glass with an eager smile, as though he had known this moment would come. “So, the day has finally arrived,” he said. The Major immediately dropped to one knee as Viktor opened the cell. “Yes, sir. We have come for you.” The Crossbone Reaper stepped out with a smirk, but the moment his eyes settled on Viktor, one brow rose. He studied him more carefully than the others had, noticing something beneath the disguise and performance that most people had missed. “And you,” he said. “You’re the one who has been playing Reaper?”

“Was playing Reaper,” Viktor corrected, lowering his head in an imitation of respect. “Now that you have returned, you can reclaim your position as our rightful leader.” The Crossbone Reaper did not appear convinced. He continued staring at Viktor for several long seconds, as though already searching for the lie hidden beneath the offer. Then he walked past him without another word, allowing Viktor and the Major to follow.

Darla and the others reached the middle-security levels, fighting their way through groups of Remnants as they went. They arrived just in time to save a guard from being killed, forcing the attackers back before forming around him defensively. “What’s the situation?” Darla asked. The guard looked around in disbelief, still struggling to process what had happened. “It’s... it’s too late. They freed them all.” Darla glanced toward one of the nearby cells and noticed that the inmate inside had not moved. “Then why are some of them staying?” she asked.

“Because we aren’t stupid enough to run,” the prisoner answered from behind the open door. “Even if we somehow escaped the island, we’d only be caught again, and our sentences would get worse.” Before they could dwell on it, more inmates began pouring from the direction of Segregation. Unlike those in the lower levels, these prisoners rushed forward without hesitation. “They have longer sentences,” Bram speculated. “Some of them probably know they’re never getting out.”

“Hey, Fera.” Someone said. Fiora turned immediately toward the voice, rage flashing across her face as Scratch emerged from the corner. “Just wanted to let you know I’m out now,” he said with a laugh. “And I’ll be coming for you. Just you wait.” He turned and ran before she could answer. Fiora started after him, but Darla caught her arm. “I’m sorry, Fiora,” she said firmly. “He isn’t important right now.” Fiora frowned, her entire body tense with the urge to pursue him, but she did not disobey. More prisoners continued rushing through the corridor around them, and then the entire building began to shake.

A deafening roar tore through the prison as the Dragon smashed through the walls. Darla froze

completely. The flames already burning around the ruined corridor seemed to intensify as the sight of him stripped away everything she had become. In an instant, the strong Captain standing before Bram and Fiora was gone, replaced by the frightened little girl who had once watched him destroy her family. The Dragon noticed her immediately. “So,” he said, stepping through the wreckage. “You have come as well.” Bram and Fiora were terrified, but the fear on Darla’s face frightened them more. Neither of them had ever seen her look like that. They did not know everything that had happened between her and the Dragon, but they knew enough to move in front of her without hesitation.

“This is the Port’s answer to its problems?” the Dragon asked as he walked closer. “You are nothing.” He swept one hand through the air. Bram and Fiora raised their weapons and tried to block the strike, but the force behind it hurled both of them backward. Seeing her team thrown aside snapped Darla out of the memory. She remembered where she was, what she had come here to do, and who she had chosen to become. She activated Level Five immediately, surprising even the Dragon as she lunged forward and slashed across his chest. The wound was shallow, barely cutting through his scales, but he looked down at it with genuine surprise. Then, strangely, something resembling pride appeared in his expression. “Very good, little pup,” he said. “Perhaps you may still prove yourself strong.”

Viktor, the Crossbone Reaper, and the hooded Major emerged into the corridor behind him. Viktor glanced toward the confrontation with a smirk but continued walking, unwilling to delay their escape. Darla gritted her teeth. Even after forcing herself to move, her knees were still shaking. She did not know whether defeating the Dragon was possible, only that she had to stand between him and everyone else. The Dragon leaned backward and drew in a long breath. Smoke curled from between his teeth. Darla knew enough about him to understand what was coming and threw herself aside just before he released a torrent of fire. The blast melted through the corridor walls, incinerating the prisoners who had remained inside their cells and tearing through the outer wall of the prison until the open sky became visible beyond it.

“You still have a long way to go, little pup.” He drove his foot into Darla and sent her crashing into the wall. She struggled to remain conscious, knowing she had to stop them, knowing Viktor and the others were escaping while she lay there, but her body refused to respond. Her vision blurred as the Dragon turned away from her. Rather than leaving through the opening he had created, he lifted his head and sniffed the air, searching for something deeper inside the prison.

He followed the scent into a separate section filled entirely with lizard people. They had remained inside their cells even after the restraints were removed, but the moment they saw him, they began rushing into the corridor. “My lord!” one of them cried as they lowered themselves before him. Others quickly followed. “Go,” the Dragon commanded. “We shall begin again.” The lizards nodded eagerly and hurried toward the opening he had created, disappearing into the outside world.

The Dragon continued toward the rear of the section, where Mathias sat alone with his head lowered. He did not move or acknowledge the Dragon’s arrival. “These walls have ears,” the Dragon said. “I have heard much about you.” Mathias remained silent. “You endured. You possess strength, but you allowed others to decide how that strength would be used.” Only then did Mathias raise his head. “I have nothing to say to the monster who selfishly ruined the lives of every lizard who came after him,” he replied. “You acted without thought, and everyone else paid the price. I will never become you.” The Dragon appeared amused. “But you already have.” He said. Mathias’s expression hardened.

“I have heard what you did,” the Dragon continued. “Not what you did for that weakling who controlled you. I speak of the Siege. When everyone else hesitated, you made the choice none of them were willing to make. You protected the Port. You did what was necessary to keep it strong.” He went on. Mathias looked up at him in confusion. “How could you possibly know about that?” he asked. “I... that was different. It had to be done.” He insisted. “Yes,” the Dragon replied. “And that is why we are the same. Now come.”

Mathias stared at him, shaken and uncertain. He knew the Dragon was a monster. He knew what

he had done and how many lives had been destroyed because of him. Yet his words stirred something Mathias had tried not to examine. Had the Dragon justified his own atrocities with the same certainty Mathias had felt during the Siege? Had he also believed that brutality became necessary when strength and survival were at stake? Mathias did not know. He looked toward the Dragon with open conflict in his eyes, but after a long hesitation, he rose from his cell and followed him.

Chapter 58: Reaper Reborn

“Darla. Darla...” Fiora shouted as she shook the unconscious woman. Bram knelt beside them, both of them having awakened moments earlier with far less damage than Darla had suffered. Slowly, Darla opened her eyes. “The Dragon... did he...” she asked weakly. Bram lowered his head. “I’m afraid so. But if we hurry, we may still be able to stop the Reaper.” Those words were enough. Darla forced herself upright and immediately broke into a run toward the entrance. Bram and Fiora followed close behind, knowing they had little time left.

Viktor, the Crossbone Reaper, and the hooded Major were nearing the exit. “It is a shame we must make you walk through the very building that imprisoned you for so long, my lord,” the Major said with reverence. The Reaper merely laughed. “The prison was designed to make it difficult for aircraft to land within its walls. It hardly matters now.” “Before we reach the end, there is something I must return to you.” The Major removed the unusual sword from his hip and presented it with both hands. The Reaper looked down at the weapon and rubbed his chin. “Ah. So you were the one looking after it. Do you know its history?” he asked calmly. “I know it was created for the Reaper himself,” the

Major replied. “Yes, but not for me,” the Crossbone Reaper admitted. “I merely took it to strengthen my claim. I suspect it never truly suited the real Reaper.” The Major seemed uncertain how to answer and continued holding the weapon out to him. “Keep it,” the Reaper said as he walked past. “It may prove more useful in your hands.” “Thank you, my lord. As you wish.” The Major returned the sword to his side. “Our ride is waiting outside. Hurry up,” Viktor said, appearing entirely uninterested in the exchange.

“You’ll go no farther!” Darla barked as she caught up with them. The delay had bought her just enough time. The Major turned to meet her, positioning himself between Darla and the others while continuing to retreat toward the entrance with them. “Make sure we escape, Major,” Viktor ordered. “I will not leave you alone with our lord,” the Major replied defiantly. “It is quite all right,” the Crossbone Reaper assured him. “Only you can stop someone as powerful as her.” Darla stopped for a moment. After what had happened with the Dragon, she certainly did not feel powerful. She tried to move past the Major, but he had already drawn the sword. The weapon seemed to scream in pain as it left its sheath. Every attempt to pass him was met with another strike, and each blow appeared stronger than the last. “Fiora! Bram!” Darla shouted. “Roger!” they answered together before rushing past the duel and continuing after Viktor and the Reaper.

“Why do you still fight?” Darla asked as she clashed with the Major again. He gave no answer. “Your nation was destroyed. Your army was decimated.” She struck repeatedly, but he parried every attack. The longer the sword remained drawn, the more it seemed to change. Its shape twisted with each movement, growing more aggressive as dark material slowly began attaching itself to the Major’s hand. “Because I have honor,” he finally said, “and I have duty.” His words make her faulter. He brought the weapon down with tremendous force, sending Darla skidding backward across the floor.

“To whom?” Darla demanded. “Viktor?” “No.” He rushed forward and struck again. Darla blocked, but a visible crack spread across her sword.

“Then what?” she asked. “What do you fight for when you have already lost everything?” The Major stopped. For the first time, he appeared to be considering the answer himself. “We fight for the ideal we lost,” he said at last. “Not the Crossbones. The true Empire. The end of probability through might and honor.” “And yet you follow those two,” Darla replied. The hooded Major lowered his gaze. “The Empire was built upon the backs of men like them. Our great Emperor...” His grip tightened around the sword. “They do not compare to him. But I possess nothing of that caliber. And so, I obey.” He charged forward once more, making it clear to both of them that the conversation was over.

Fiora and Bram rushed outside, but by the time they reached the landing area, the gunship was already lifting into the air. Viktor stood near the open doors and waved down at them playfully. “See you next time,” he called before the doors slid shut and the craft accelerated away from Blackstone. Bram frantically searched the wreckage for anything they could use and spotted a mostly undamaged gunship of the same type lying nearby. He ran to the cockpit and found the pilots dead inside. “I know they were your enemies during the war, but...” He carefully moved one of the bodies away from the controls. “Do you think you can fly this?” he asked respectfully. Fiora climbed into the pilot’s seat and stared uncertainly at the unfamiliar controls. “I can try.” After several moments of fumbling with the systems, she managed to lift the damaged ship from the ground. It did not rise smoothly by any definition, swaying violently from side to side as she fought to keep it under control, but it was airborne and moving after Viktor.

Inside the escaping gunship, Viktor and the Crossbone Reaper sat across from one another, each wearing a faint smirk. “Good. The difficult part is over,” Viktor said. “Now we can get you back to the base and...” “Who are you, really?” the Reaper interrupted. Viktor frowned in confusion. “What do you mean? You want my rank and unit?” He straightened slightly. “First Lieutenant, Twenty-Third...” “Oh, my.” The Reaper leaned back, looking almost disappointed. “Was this level of theater truly enough to fool everyone? I cannot say I’m impressed. Though, after hearing about the current state of things,

perhaps they did notice. Perhaps they merely chose to participate in the delusion." He laughed quietly to himself. Viktor's practiced expression vanished. "What are you talking about?" "You are no soldier," the Reaper said confidently. "No warrior. The way you carry yourself is wrong. Every movement is a performance. You may have witnessed battle. You may even have fought in one or two. But you were never an Imperial soldier."

For the first time, Viktor had nothing to say. It felt as though the Reaper were stripping him apart piece by piece, exposing the emptiness beneath every posture and rehearsed line. After several uncomfortable seconds, Viktor opened his mouth to reclaim control of the conversation, but the Reaper spoke first. "So why do this? Why expend so much effort to free a man who has already made his mark? A dead man, for all practical purposes. It certainly cannot help you control my Remnants. Two Reapers would only divide them." he asked. A faint smile slowly returned to Viktor's face. The Reaper noticed it immediately. "Ah," he said as he rose from his seat and began pacing through the compartment. "So that is it. This was never about rescuing me."

"It's more than that," Viktor replied. "More theater. More narrative." The Reaper laughed softly. "But why should I allow you to destroy a scene I spent so long creating? I was never the original Reaper either. In that respect, perhaps we are alike. The difference is that I accomplished everything I set out to do. I will not be forgotten. The Empire will not be forgotten, even if you continue parading around inside its corpse." He stopped and looked directly at Viktor. "Can you say the same?" "Because you don't have a..." Viktor began, but the Reaper suddenly produced a pistol from beneath his coat and aimed it directly at him. Viktor's eyes widened. It was his own gun. He had never even noticed the one armed man taking it. "A choice?" the Reaper asked, pressing the barrel against Viktor's temple. "Then tell me. What exactly do you intend to do? How much further do you plan to bastardize my men?"

Viktor slowly began to explain. He told him what the prison break was truly meant to accomplish, what had already been set in motion, and what role the Reaper was intended to play in the

final act. The more he revealed, the more amused the Reaper became. At last, he lowered the weapon and stepped away. A laugh escaped him, then another, until he was laughing uncontrollably. “Very well, Viktor Scathe,” he said between breaths. “I’ll give you exactly what you want.” Still laughing, he raised the pistol to his own head and pulled the trigger. Viktor’s eyes widened in disbelief as the Reaper’s body collapsed to the floor.

“Trying to go out on your own terms?” he muttered. “Whatever. It doesn’t matter.” He kicked the body aside before sitting back down, but the silence that followed seemed to bother him more than he wanted to admit. A moment later, Calva flashed into the gunship. She looked toward him, immediately noticing that he seemed more solemn than usual. “What’s wrong?” she asked. “Nothing,” Viktor replied, clicking his tongue. Despite the dismissal, it was obvious that something had gotten under his skin. “Did you complete your mission?” He asked. “Mhm.” Calva gave a gentle nod. “What about Nix?” he asked. “You already know how that went, don’t you?” she replied. Her eyes drifted toward the Reaper’s body before returning to Viktor. “Do you want to talk about it?” “No. I just got humbled a few too many times today,” he muttered. “Viktor isn’t supposed to be humbled.” Then his smile returned, forced at first before settling back into something familiar. “But it doesn’t matter. With Mr. Fancy Pants, we can move on to the endgame. Come on.” He reached out his hand. Calva nodded, took it, and the two of them disappeared.

The gunship began losing altitude moments later and crashed into the water just as Fiora finally caught up. It remained afloat for the moment, though it was already beginning to sink. “What do we do?” she asked sheepishly. “Land beside it and prepare to fight,” Bram replied, already standing near the door. Their damaged gunship sputtered violently as Fiora brought it down as close as she could manage. Bram readied himself to face Viktor the moment the hatch opened, but when he forced it aside, all he found was the Crossbone Reaper’s body lying alone inside. Fiora stepped up behind him, and the two stared at the corpse in confusion. “Should we... take the body?” Bram asked.

Back inside Blackstone, Darla had finally defeated the hooded Major. Half of his body had been consumed by the sword's power, the strange energy having spread from the weapon across his arm and torso. Darla could barely remain standing herself. The Major dropped to one knee, then slowly fell onto his back. "Thank you, Darla Dogenridge," he said. She frowned down at him. "Thank me? Why would you thank me?" "You have given me a place to die," he answered. "You were strong. You bested me. A true soldier of the Multiversal Empire asks for nothing more." The glow in his visible eye faded, and his body went still. Darla remained there for several moments, disturbed by the exchange. He had seemed so loyal, yet so deeply lost. He possessed a sense of duty much like her own, but the thing he had truly fought for had died long ago, replaced by something worse wearing its remains.

"A tragedy has befallen us," Viktor announced from a raised platform, surrounded by what remained of the Crossbone Remnants. "During the rescue attempt, our great leader was slain... by Special Operations." The crowd erupted immediately, anger spreading through them in waves. Some shouted Darla's name, while others raised their weapons and demanded blood. Viktor allowed the outrage to build before lifting one hand. "But this is not over. He may be gone, but we remain. We will fight until our final breath!" He raised his arm in salute, and the Remnants copied him without hesitation. "We will avenge him!" they shouted together, their voices echoing throughout the chamber.

At a later gathering, Viktor approached the Anarchy Men and Gram with a much more relaxed demeanor, leaning against a nearby table as though they were discussing something trivial. "I know some of you were reluctant to join because of the whole Crossbone thing," he said. "And honestly, I gave it some thought. You were right. He was a horrible man. He did a lot of terrible things to this city." His smile widened. "So I killed him myself. Now I'm the only Reaper who matters, and together we're going to stomp all over what remains of his legacy." Gram smirked, clearly appreciating that version of events. Calva stood nearby and appeared equally pleased, while the others exchanged approving looks.

When Viktor addressed the lizards, however, he presented an entirely different story. His

expression became solemn as he stood before them. “When I entered the prison, I found poor Mathias. I tried to save him, but...” He lowered his head as though the memory pained him. “The Dragon, the same monster who ruined all of your lives, somehow broke free. He murdered Mathias right in front of me.” The lizards listened in tense silence. “Mathias did everything Porta Nexus ever asked of him, and when they were finished using him, they threw him away. They locked him in a cell beside a man they saw as no different.” Viktor slowly looked across the gathered crowd. “Do not let them get away with it.” They said little in response, but he could see the anger growing in their faces. Every word had found exactly where it needed to land. Viktor might be stealing an image from a dead man who stole that image from another dead man. But in his eye's he was the only one worth considering now.

Chapter 59: Did we win?

The prison had been retaken, and reconstruction efforts were already underway. Health personnel rushed through the ruins, tending to the injured guards and Wardens while Peacekeeping and Military forces moved in long after the worst of the fighting had ended. The attack was over, but as Darla stood among the rubble, it did not feel like a victory. Fiora and Bram returned carrying the Crossbone Reaper's body, both of them looking equally confused about what it meant. Had they succeeded in their mission, or had they failed? Darla could not bring herself to believe they had won.

They had protected lives, and the Reaper was dead, which was no great loss to the multiverse, but too many dangerous people had escaped. The entire disaster had also exposed something that should have been obvious long ago: placing nearly every major criminal in Porta Nexus inside one centralized prison had been a terrible idea. Fiora and Bram eventually separated to help support the others, leaving Darla alone among the wreckage.

Juno approached her, covered in blood and barely holding herself together. Half of the Justice Division had been wiped out, and Darla could see the weight of that loss written across the Captain's

face. She did not know whether she should say anything. “We may not have accomplished everything we needed to, but you saved some of my people today,” Juno said. Her body began to shake as she spoke, though she fought to keep her voice steady. “Sorry. I’m a Captain, but I’m far more accustomed to the judicial side of my duties than... this.” “But you protected the others, right?” Darla asked, partly out of concern and partly in an attempt to reassure her. “Indeed, thank you.” Juno replied. She turned and walked deeper into the prison without another word.

Darla’s communicator began to ring. Alister’s name appeared across the screen, and she answered immediately. “How’s it going, dog? We secured Air Control,” he said. Darla did not respond. She had no idea how to answer. “That bad?” Alister asked. Darla took a slow breath and carefully explained what had happened. When she finished, there was a brief silence on the other end. “Darla, I...” Alister’s voice softened. “You did everything you could.” The sincerity surprised her. It was not something he often offered so openly, especially to her. Still, she remained silent. “Are you worried about the Dragon?” he asked, just as gently. “Of course I am,” she admitted. “We’re already dealing with all of this.” “He was defeated once. We can defeat him again,” Alister assured her. “I’m coming to help. Jax is staying behind. He says he has to run maintenance or diagnostics or... something. I stopped listening when he became technical.”

“It’s already over,” Darla said quietly. “And now I don’t even know whether I’m fighting for the right thing.” Her thoughts returned to the hooded Major and his final words. Alister was silent for a moment before answering. “Darla, I know you never told me yourself, but I learned what happened with your family. I also know what you had to do to save Fiora.” His voice became firmer. “For you, that must have been harder than almost anything. But you still chose to save her. If that isn’t proof that you’re on the right path, then I don’t know what is.” Darla’s expression slowly lifted. “You’re a dumb dog,” he continued, “but you’re a true Dogenridge. Never change.”

She looked genuinely surprised by his words. Her tail gave a small wag before she could stop it,

and she opened her mouth to respond. Before she could say anything, Alister abruptly turned away from the communicator. “What? Impossible. What do you mean they got inside?” he demanded, apparently speaking to someone nearby. Darla’s expression hardened immediately. “What’s happening?” she asked. Alister did not answer at first. He seemed to be listening as someone hurriedly explained the situation to him. “You’re not going to believe this,” he finally said. “The Home Office. Just as I suspected, the attack itself wasn’t particularly successful, but...” He paused. “Heskal is missing. A small group of soldiers somehow breached the building. According to the witnesses, they simply appeared inside.” “What?” Darla asked, unable to believe him.

Heskal slowly regained consciousness, unable to see anything through the bag covering his head. Without warning, Calva ripped it away and laughed. “Wakey, wakey!” she said brightly. Viktor sat across from him with his hands folded, a smug smile resting on his face. The room was dark, its edges difficult to make out beyond the weak light hanging over the table. Heskal narrowed his eyes but said nothing. “The strong, silent type, huh?” Viktor asked. “Is that why nobody pays attention to you? The man behind the curtain.” He leaned back in his chair and placed his shoes on the table. Heskal remained silent. “Well, you’re no fun,” Viktor muttered. “Don’t you know a narrative requires dialogue? How are you supposed to be a compelling villain if you refuse to say anything?” Heskal still gave him nothing. “Fine. Whatever. You want to know what I want, right?”

Viktor straightened and began explaining everything. Heskal listened without interruption, but once Viktor finished, his expression shifted into something bordering on amusement. “And you believe that even if I did this, the Port would recognize it?” Heskal finally asked. “Have you ever heard the phrase ‘under duress’?” “Of course I have, but I already went through the trouble of filing everything,” Viktor replied. “We may as well see what happens, right?” He slid a document across the table. Heskal studied it carefully, reading through every line before looking up again. “How absurd. It may be properly formatted, but it would never withstand legal scrutiny.” “Well, Mr. Heskal...” Viktor paused.

“Or do you prefer something else? Why do you only have one name? It seems strange for someone of your rank. Nobody ever questions it either.”

Heskal smiled faintly. “They are not meant to.” The answer only seemed to confuse Viktor further. “Well, it doesn’t matter. Put simply, you sign the document, or Calva here violently tears you apart with her bare hands.” Calva looked mildly confused by the threat, but after blinking a few times, she stepped behind Heskal and placed her arms around his shoulders. Heskal did not react. “You don’t think she can do it?” Viktor asked with a smirk. “I am certain she can,” Heskal answered coldly. “Then why are you still refusing? Do you not want to live?” Viktor asked, genuinely unable to understand him. Heskal looked down at the document again. “I can simply forge your signature afterward, you know. It is not particularly difficult to obtain.” Viktor said.

Heskal considered the paper more carefully, as though weighing something Viktor could not see. “This pertains to the Crime Sector?” he asked. “Yep. That’s right,” Viktor confirmed. “Very well. I will sign.” He picked up the pen and did so without further resistance. Viktor watched closely, clearly pleased with himself as Heskal pushed the document back across the table. “But I assume you have no intention of releasing me afterward,” Heskal said. Viktor laughed as he took the paper. “Come on. You’re supposed to be smart. We’ll talk about that once they write it into law.” He stood and headed toward the door, Calva following beside him. The two disappeared into the darkness beyond it, leaving Heskal alone at the table. The moment the door closed, Heskal smiled.

Viktor looked around the room, taking in the strange underground hideout one last time. There were no visible exits leading outside and no obvious path by which anyone could have reached it through normal means. “Man, I’m going to miss this place, but all good things come to an end. We’ll grab the kid and head out,” he said as he crossed the room and stopped before a closed door. “Hey, Nix. You up?” he asked, knocking against it. There was no answer at first. “What do you want?” a voice finally called from the other side. “You said you wouldn’t bother me.”

“We’re leaving this place behind soon, kid. I guess you can stay if you want, but don’t expect the regular pizza runs like before. You’ll have to come with us.” Viktor explained. “What? Ugh, that’s so annoying. Do I have to?” Nix groaned. “He just told you!” Calva snapped, already moving toward the door as though she were prepared to tear it from its hinges. “I swear I’m going to whoop his ass if he doesn’t start showing you more respect.” She said. Viktor did not seem bothered by the insult. “Where are you going?” Nix asked from inside. “We’re going legitimate,” Viktor explained. “New swanky castle. Everyone will be able to see us.” “What a pain... but as long as I still get my pizza and you leave me alone...” Nix paused. “No, fuck that. I don’t want to leave.” “Well, fine, then. But I warned you,” Viktor said with a shrug as he began to turn away.

There was no response for several seconds, but then the door finally opened. A boy no older than fourteen stood on the other side wearing an oversized hood. Deep bags hung beneath his eyes, and his pale skin made it obvious that he barely ever went outside. He narrowed his eyes at Viktor. “Is that guy going to be there?” he asked. “The one pretending not to be Draycott?” Viktor blinked, delighted by the sudden interest. “Of course. He’s a main character.” His smile widened. “Well, damn. He really got to you, didn’t he?” “Shut up,” Nix muttered. After a moment of visible reluctance, he stepped out of the room. “Fine, I’ll come. But you’d better not bother me again until mission time.”

Calva warped them away, then separated from the others and appeared alone inside Marcell’s office. He sat behind the desk looking deeply conflicted, unsure what he was supposed to do. With Heskal missing, Marcell was technically the highest-ranking officer remaining in Legislation besides the Captain, but she had seemingly vanished the moment Heskal did. There was no chance she had been captured. It felt less like she had been taken and more like she had simply stopped existing, though Marcell assumed she had gone somewhere—anywhere—in search of him. Either way, he had been left in charge of a division he had never expected to command during a crisis he barely understood.

“Hey!” Calva barked, demanding his attention. Marcell jumped from his chair in alarm. “You get this rattled...” She paused, lifting one finger to her mouth as she tried to remember the word Viktor had used. “No, he called it something else...” “Ra... ratified?” Marcell asked sheepishly. “Oh, yeah. That. Do that,” she said cheerfully. “What? That isn’t how this works, and the Supreme Administrator...” he began, staring at her in confusion. “Your boss already signed it. Now do it, or you’ll never see him again,” Calva explained before vanishing as suddenly as she had appeared. Marcell remained frozen for several seconds, then slowly approached the document she had left behind. He picked it up and read through it, his confusion giving way to disbelief. “What... There’s no way...” he muttered with a deep frown.

Later that night, Portly entered the casino and immediately sensed that something was wrong. The floor was empty. There were no Porcelli men watching the entrances, no players crowding the tables, and no dealers waiting behind them. Everyone was simply gone, as though someone had ordered the entire building cleared before his arrival. The silence unsettled him. The Don had sent him away only to summon him back without explanation, yet even as Portly climbed the stairs, he encountered no one. He continued through the private halls and into the rear section of the casino, heading toward the Don’s office. “Don?” he called, but no answer came. At last, he reached the office and pushed open the door. The room was lavishly decorated but rarely used, since the Don preferred conducting business on the casino floor where everyone could see him. Portly stepped toward the desk. Its tall chair was turned away from the entrance. “Boss... you called?” The chair spun around immediately, revealing Viktor sitting there instead. “Hey, Porky,” he said with a smile.

Portly stepped back. “This is an overstep even for you, pal. You really think the Don will...” He stopped when Viktor casually motioned toward the adjoining room. “Oh, I don’t think he’ll mind,” Viktor said. “Or think much of anything, for that matter.” Portly looked through the open doorway leading into the Don’s private bedroom and saw him lying on the floor in a pool of his own blood. His

face went pale with disbelief. “No... Did you...” His shock rapidly hardened into outrage. “Not even you would... The Don...” Portly struggled to find the words. He had disagreed with the man plenty of times and warned him about dangers he had always dismissed, but in the end, Portly had remained loyal. “I told him he was wrong about you, but he trusted you.”

“And he paid the price for it,” Viktor replied. “The Don was a stupid man who couldn’t recognize the obvious predator standing right in front of him. But you, Portly...” Viktor rose from the chair and walked around the desk. “You were the only one who saw me coming.” “So you killed him?” Portly asked. “Sure did. He outlived his usefulness.” Viktor placed a hand on Portly’s shoulder, but Portly immediately shoved it away. “I don’t need people like him anymore. I need people like you.”

“Why would I ever work with you after this?” Portly demanded. “Because he was holding you back.” Viktor spread his arms as though presenting Portly with a gift. “Congratulations. You’re the head of the Porcelli family now. That’s what you wanted, right? Well, now you have it. You’re welcome.”

Portly tightened his fists. Every part of him wanted to lash out, but he knew better than to attack Viktor without understanding the situation. “You expect me to simply roll over?” “No. I fully expect your ambition,” Viktor answered. “But things are about to change around here, and if you and the Porcelli family don’t fall in line...” He shrugged. “Well, I have other options. Still, I’ve always been partial to Team Porky, so how about it? Good? Good.” Viktor walked out without waiting for an answer, behaving as though the matter had already been settled. Portly remained alone in the office, standing between the dead Don and the chair Viktor had just vacated, caught between too many emotions to count.

Chapter 60: All but Marrow

About twenty years ago, a small boy ran through the streets clutching a bag of bread against his chest while a group of men chased after him. He was painfully thin, dressed in little more than torn rags, and looked as though he had not eaten properly in weeks. His legs finally gave out beneath him, and he tripped, falling hard onto the pavement directly in front of a man wearing a black leather jacket lined with blue trim. The stranger had long, wild black hair and a pair of dark glasses he never seemed to remove. He turned immediately, looking down at the child with visible annoyance. “What’s a dumb brat doing here?” he asked. Then he studied him more closely, noticing the bread in his arms before glancing toward the men rushing after him.

A smirk slowly spread across his face. “You stole all that from those punks, huh?” He did not wait for an answer. Instead, he stepped over the boy, cracked his knuckles, rolled his neck, and proceeded to beat the hell out of every one of his pursuers. Some turned and ran the moment they saw what was happening, while the others tried to fight and quickly discovered they were no match for him. Once the last of them had been thrown aside, the man dusted off his jacket and turned back toward the

child.

He squatted in front of him and studied him more carefully before reaching into the bag, taking one of the loaves, and eating it directly in front of him. “You like the rest of us?” he asked. The boy said nothing. “You know. No parents. No home. No nothing?” The child still did not answer, though when the man took another loaf and pushed it toward him, he began eating so quickly that it became obvious he was even hungrier than he looked. “Thought as much,” the stranger said. He leaned back slightly and gestured toward the group standing behind him, a collection of violent-looking thugs dressed in bright, mismatched clothing. A pile of Yakuza at their feet. “Tell you what, kid. Why don’t you roll with us?” His smirk widened. “We’ll wreck this place and make everyone regret ever looking down on us.”

The child looked past him toward the waiting gang before finally speaking. “Who are you?” “Who, me?” The man placed one hand against his chest. “I’m Vincent Cross, and those are my Vultures.” He reached out his hand. “Come with us. You’ll never have to crawl around begging people for scraps again.” The boy stared at the offered hand, uncertain, while Vincent continued to smile down at him. “What’s your name, kid?” After a long hesitation, the boy reached forward and took it.

He joined them, and they took him in as though he had always belonged there. The Vultures were rough, violent, and far from civilized, but they were powerful, and in their own way they were fighting a war they had not started. They were ordinary people who had grown tired of the Port, the gangs, and the world that had abandoned them. Every one of them had watched the Sector collapse after one of its major gangs vanished overnight. No one knew exactly what had happened, but the disappearance left behind a power vacuum that dragged the Porcelli family and the Kinryū-kai into open conflict over the abandoned territory. The gangs had never been this brazen before. Violence had always existed, but it had been hidden behind closed doors, quiet threats, and bodies that disappeared before anyone asked questions. Now entire city blocks were being destroyed just so one side could kill

members of the other.

The Kinryū-kai claimed they fought for honor and order. The Porcelli family made no such pretenses. They wanted control of the sector, and they were willing to tear it apart to claim it. Vincent Cross had grown sick of both of them. So he started punching back, and years later, he still had not stopped. The Port Authority barely attempted to intervene. Instead, it sealed off the Crime Sector and abandoned everyone inside, treating the violence as though it could be contained simply by building walls around it. Perhaps the Mercantile Court secretly aided the Porcelli family. Perhaps someone else was manipulating the conflict from behind the scenes. Whatever the truth, no help was coming, and the fighting only became more destructive.

The Vultures disrupted everything. They attacked Porcelli operations, interfered with Kinryū-kai movements, and tore apart anyone who tried to claim the streets belonged to them. The boy watched in amazement from a nearby rooftop as Vincent dismantled an entire squad of pig enforcers with seemingly little effort. “Go, Vincent!” he shouted, leaning dangerously close to the edge. “Get ’em, boss!” a very young Mohawk yelled beside him. “Vincent!” a woman shouted from the distance. A red blur tore through the air. Vincent smirked and turned to face her just as they both drove their fists into each other’s faces. “Akane!” he shouted with excitement. The two boys watched in amazement as the force of the collision shook the rooftop beneath them. “We should probably go,” Mohawk said. “You know how intense Red Hair and the boss can get once they’re worked up.” He immediately took off running, and the boy hurried after him as the ground rumbled violently behind them.

They passed two Nexian siblings hiding in an alley, cautiously peeking out at the destruction beyond it. “Damn this place. I have to find a way to get us out of here, Elaina,” the older boy said with concern. “To where?” she asked with a frown. “There is no way out. Where would we even go, Cassian?” He glanced toward the distant walls surrounding the sector, then smiled with far more confidence than someone dressed in rags had any right to possess. “We’ll join the Port.” Elaina stared

at him. “Why would we do that? Aren’t they the ones who...” “If we show them that we matter, they’ll change their tune,” Cassian interrupted. “Then we can make real changes. For all of us.” The ground rumbled again as another distant impact echoed through the streets. Cassian looked back toward the others sheltering farther inside the alley. “I’ll go alone. You stay with them and keep everyone safe, all right?” Before Elaina could object, he ran off.

Several hours later, Vincent and Akane’s duel had somehow transformed from the two of them destroying half the district while trying to kill each other into the pair lying together in the rubble, kissing. Mohawk and the boy stared at them in utter confusion. “Adults are weird,” Mohawk said. “Do you think girls do that to everyone?” the boy asked, suddenly worried. “I don’t want to become all lovey-dovey like that.” “Nah, Vincent’s just like that,” Mohawk assured him with a laugh. “Don’t worry. They both know they’re enemies, but that doesn’t mean they don’t respect each other. They’re legends.” He looked toward the ruined street where Vincent and Akane remained together. “Legends don’t die.”

The boy kept moving forward, growing older alongside the others until he was no longer simply watching from rooftops. He joined the fighting, struck back against the other gangs, and helped the Vultures take territory of their own, but over time his smile began to falter. He could feel the difference between himself and the others. Mohawk dominated every room he entered. He had presence, the kind that made people turn their heads and remember his name. He fought just as hard, sometimes harder, but most people barely noticed him at all. “Branick, get over here! Look at the loot!” Mohawk shouted excitedly after one of their raids. Branick hurried toward the spoils they had taken from the Porcelli, his eyes widening at the sight of actual gold bars stacked among the crates, but before he could get close, one of the older Vultures shoved him aside.

“Fuck off, brat. This is ours. Nobody even saw you doing anything,” the man grumbled. “Hey. Play nice,” Vincent called from the rooftop above, startling him. “What? But that’s our whole thing,”

the man argued. Vincent only shrugged. “Anyone can become something if they try hard enough.” He dismissed the matter as though it were obvious, but the words brought a smile back to Branick’s face.

The years continued to pass, and Branick tried everything he could think of to stand out. He made his clothes louder, fought more recklessly, and practiced the way Vincent spoke and carried himself, hoping that if he looked cool enough or hit hard enough, someone would finally remember him.

Yet everyone around him seemed to keep running ahead while he struggled to keep pace. Eventually, he stumbled so far behind that he lost sight of the others entirely. While searching for them, he heard voices coming from a nearby rooftop and stopped beneath it. “What have we actually done that means anything for this city?” Akane asked her sister, Mikako. Branick remained hidden below, listening carefully and afraid of what either woman might do if they caught him eavesdropping. “We aren’t special. We’re the same as everyone else in this district. We were just a little luckier,” Akane continued. “Think about all the people here who are still suffering. We claim to protect them, but do we really?” Mikako was quiet for a moment. “You sound like him,” was all she said.

The sisters left shortly afterward, and Branick dismissed the conversation as something he had not been meant to understand. A few hours later, however, he stood before a burning building while the two legends fought once again. Everyone could tell this time was different. The flames were too intense for anyone to enter, and the Fire Division refused to come while the gang war continued. When the blaze finally died, the ruins were almost unrecognizable. Among the charred debris, they found two sets of remains locked together, inseparable even in death. Mikako dropped to her knees as disbelief gave way to a raw, shaking cry. The sound tore through the smoke and silence, becoming a wound the city itself seemed to absorb.

Around her, Kinryū-kai and Vultures alike stood frozen, none of them able to accept that it was truly over. That night, legends died. Branick fell to his knees in disbelief, but Mohawk stared at the ruins with something closer to awe. “That was the coolest thing ever,” he said with a laugh. “Maybe

one day I'll get to die like that." Nearby, Mikako slammed her fist into the ground. "Akane... I'll change everything," she whispered through her tears. The war seemed to end almost out of respect for the two of them. The violence simply stopped. The Crime Sector was never truly reclaimed, but the walls surrounding it were eventually removed, and life returned to normal, or as close to normal as life could ever be there.

The district remained largely lawless, but no one spoke openly about what had been lost. Branick could feel it, though. The Vultures had died that night along with Vincent. Mohawk came closest to embodying what Vincent had been, but most of the others moved on. They grew comfortable, unwilling to shake the city the way they once had. Then, one day, Branick saw the same man who had shoved him away from the loot speaking privately with a Porcelli enforcer. "Come by around three," the man said with a smirk. "They won't suspect a thing." The pig laughed and handed him a bag of credits. "You're really selling out your own men for a few credits?" he asked. "Some of the Vultures have gotten too rowdy," the man replied with a shrug. "I'd rather get rid of them, but I can't exactly do it myself now that I'm the boss."

"What are you doing?" Branick shouted as he ran from his hiding place and pointed at him. The man turned, studying him with no recognition at all. "Who are you?" Branick stared at him in disbelief. "Do you really think Vincent would have accepted this?" The man's expression changed immediately. "You're one of us?" he asked. Then he laughed. "The boss is dead, kid. Move on." He glanced toward the Porcelli beside him and sighed. "Well, I suppose I have to kill you now that you've heard everything." The two men began laughing as they moved toward him, already certain that ending his life would be simple.

They beat him ruthlessly, seeming to enjoy every moment of it. He cried out in pain and tried to fight back, but every attempt only made them laugh harder. When it became clear he could not win, he dragged himself toward the edge of the alley, only for them to seize him by the legs and pull him back

for more. They relished every strike, continuing until he barely looked alive. Once they were satisfied, they carried him to the river and threw his limp body into the water without a second thought. He disappeared beneath the surface, and they forgot about him almost immediately. Yet somehow, he was still alive. Weak and broken, he drifted with the current, barely conscious as the city passed around him. “I’ll... show you,” he whispered through bloodied lips. “I’ll be someone... You’ll regret this...” Then his eyes closed, and he surrendered to the darkness.

In the present day, the leader of what remained of the Vultures sat alone inside his bunker, eating beans directly from a can. Years of fear had reduced him to a paranoid shell of the man he once pretended to be. He no longer trusted his own followers, especially after Mohawk’s influence over them had grown too strong to ignore. He still issued orders and collected his share of the spoils, but he never left the bunker. Retro music played quietly through an old speaker while he ate in silence, surrounded by the rubble of a movement that had died long ago. Then a loud metallic knock echoed through the bunker. He groaned, shoved the can aside, and stormed toward a nearby monitor to check the exterior camera feed. Mohawk stood outside, looking far more conflicted than usual. “What do you want?” the leader demanded. “The Broker wants to speak with you,” Mohawk answered, his voice carrying none of its usual energy. “The Broker? I’m not speaking to anyone,” the man replied defiantly. “I figured you’d say that,” Viktor said from behind him.

The man leapt from his chair and pressed himself against the wall like a terrified animal. Calva stood beside Viktor, both of them having appeared inside without warning. “How did you... How did you get in here?” he stammered. Viktor smirked and casually sat on the edge of the desk. “You really dragged the Vultures through the mud, you know. Vincent would be so disappointed.” The man stared at him in horror. “W-who are you?” he demanded. “Does the name Jace Branick ring a bell?” Viktor asked, already knowing the answer. Calva instinctively reached toward him, but stopped herself before making contact. The man’s expression remained blank. He had no idea who Viktor was talking about.

“How about the kid you left to die in the gutter after betraying your own family?” Viktor continued, his grin twisting into something crazed. “What are you talking about? I never...” The man’s face went pale. “No. Impossible. We beat that kid senseless. There’s no way he survived.” Viktor threw his arms into the air. “Surprise!” he exclaimed, delighted that the man finally understood. He savored the recognition spreading across his face. “What do you want?” the man asked, his voice barely holding together.

Viktor sighed and leaned forward. “I’ll be honest. The Vultures used to be cool, but look at you now. You’re still sitting in the same rubble you were born in. You did nothing with the path Vincent laid out for you. He became something, while you withered away and died long before your body stopped breathing.” His voice grew more intense with every word. The man remained silent, but a dark stain slowly spread across the front of his trousers. He had pissed himself in terror. Viktor’s expression brightened with delight. “So I built over you. I’m going to become something no one will ever forget, while you are going to die in this bunker alone and forgotten. Every Vulture still worth a damn will join me.” He stepped closer until his face was only inches from the man’s. The former leader dropped to his knees. “No, please. I’ll do anything. Don’t kill me. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” Viktor looked down at him with open contempt. “I thought this would be more dignified,” he said, sounding genuinely disappointed. Then he raised his gun. “We’re done here.” He shot him in the head without another word or any further ceremony.

Chapter 61: The State of Things

Marcell walked toward the platform nervously as a confused crowd gathered around it. Aion stood nearby, looking just as uncertain as everyone else. “I set up the conference like you asked. What is this about?” he questioned. Marcell hesitated. “I’m not sure I’m allowed to say. Just know this is going to be a real pickle,” he replied with a frown before pushing past him. He stepped up to the podium and looked as though he were struggling to force the words out while the crowd’s attention settled on him. “I’m sure all of you are wondering why we’re here,” he began slowly, reading from a prepared script. “After the recent attacks, it seems the Marrow Collective has become a very real problem.” He paused, allowing the crowd to react. “Why would he admit that?” Aion asked under his breath. “That changes today,” Marcell continued.

Special Operations returned to headquarters defeated. They had stopped the enemy, but not really, and now they desperately needed a chance to breathe, one they were not going to receive. The reception room door had been left open. Darla moved to close it without thinking, but what she saw inside stopped her cold. Viktor sat there calmly with Calva beside him. “Yo!” he said, raising one hand

in greeting. Darla drew her weapon immediately, ready to end him where he sat. “What are you doing, dog?” Alister questioned. The others did not understand at first, but they followed her inside, saw the problem, and drew their weapons as well. “Whoa, whoa, calm down. I didn’t come here to fight,” Viktor said, raising both hands.

Darla did not lower her sword. “Then why are you here?” Alister asked. “Call it a sales pitch,” Viktor replied with a laugh. The group slowly began to circle him. “Why would we ever listen to you after everything you’ve done?” Bram asked. “We don’t even know the half of it,” Jax added, making the others shudder because they knew he was right. “Yet you came here this brazenly. Aren’t you worried about being found out?” Alister asked. “The time for secrecy is over,” Viktor admitted calmly. “You’re planning something. All the more reason to stop you,” Darla said, preparing to strike. Viktor only laughed. “You know, when that newsman named you as my rivals, I wasn’t convinced. I’d still like to believe I’ve been one step ahead of you every time we’ve indirectly clashed, but I’ll admit it. Now that I’ve seen you together, I really do think there’s something to your little group.” His words surprised all of them.

“So I’m going to offer you something. Join us. Everyone needs heroes to look up to, and imagine what it would mean if you joined. The ultimate validation.” His smile widened. “You could finally solve some of those pesky problems that have been gnawing at you. The deportations,” he said, pointing toward Bram. “The false framing,” he continued, turning toward Fiora. “Being thrown under the bus.” He pointed at Jax. Then his attention shifted to Darla and Alister. “And the two important families who refuse to do what is right for the city because they care only about themselves, even when that means throwing away their own children.” Darla’s anger sharpened immediately. “What do you know about us?” Alister hissed. Viktor leaned back slightly. “More than you know about me.” He spread his arms. “So how about it? Become true heroes with me. Join the revolution, just like your ancestors once did against the Gaslight Ascendancy.”

“The Port is many things,” Darla said in a low growl, genuinely enraged by the comparison, “but slavers isn’t one of them.” “Maybe not yet.” Viktor paused, then waved the thought away. “Oh, hell, forget it. Negotiations have clearly broken down. Every hero needs compelling villains to make him interesting anyway. Who better than you five?” “You’re the hero in this story?” Fiora asked, finally growing frustrated enough to break through. “You’ve already killed countless people. Your own people too. Heroes don’t do that!”

“History is written by the victors. Who says they didn’t?” Viktor asked with a shrug. “I’m going for more of a morally gray storyline.” He glanced between them. “So it’s a no-go on the team-up. That’s fine, but you may grow to regret that choice.” Fiora, Alister, Bram, and Darla all moved to strike, finally done with his nonsense, but Calva simply wrapped herself around him and warped them away before any attack could land. Their weapons crashed into the chair instead, reducing the poor thing to splinters.

Marcell continued speaking. “The Marrow Collective has attacked us where it hurts, and now they have taken several of our officials hostage. They have made their message clear.” He swallowed hard, barely seeming to believe the words himself. “The Supreme Administrator has already signed the order into law. As of this moment, the Crime Sector will be reorganized into a recognized free state. Only once that recognition becomes official will the hostages be released and the Marrow attacks come to an end.” The crowd erupted. People shouted over one another, disbelief and panic spreading through the square. “What? There’s no way!” someone yelled.

Viktor stood atop the casino roof, taking in the sky as he waited for his plan to begin. The streets below were filled with his collection of contradictions. The Crossbone Remnants and other Imperial factions stood at rigid attention beside the Anarchy Men, who remained loose and relaxed while giving them suspicious looks. The lizards gathered on the opposite side, fewer in number but physically stronger than most of the others. The Vultures lingered apart from everyone else, refusing to

line up at all. Mohawk looked conflicted as he stared up at Viktor. “Are you really Jace?” he muttered to himself. Portly stood on the opposite side, similarly troubled, but remained silent for now as he led the Porcelli faction.

A man hurried onto the rooftop. Viktor turned toward him. “So, what did Masa say?” “He said you can rot in hell and that he will never join,” the man replied reluctantly. “A complication, but it doesn’t matter.” Viktor looked back over the gathering below. “He may simply be the first to fall.” He stepped toward the edge of the roof and spread his arms dramatically. “All right, everyone! Set it up. The Crime Sector will be remade into... Bone Town!”

The factions began spreading throughout the district, carrying equipment and materials with them. Walls slowly rose around the territory, each one painted with skulls, of course. The Kinryū-kai attacked anyone who came near their territory, but their smaller numbers made it easy for the larger coalition to drive them back. Before long, they were forced to retreat to their mansion while the walls closed around it and Marrow took control of everything else. Masa stood at one of the windows, staring out at what had become of the district. “How far this place has fallen,” he said solemnly. “What will we do, boss?” one of his men asked. “We fight,” Masa answered after a long silence. “That’s all we have left.”

Once the walls were complete, work began on the supposed castle. It was a crude structure built directly over everything else, just stable enough to remain standing and large enough for people far beyond the Crime Sector to see. Viktor stood before it with Calva, staring up at the jagged towers and skull-covered walls with genuine excitement. “This is it, Calva. We’ve done it.” He looked at her with a bright smile. “Isn’t it beautiful?” Calva smiled back, but there was sadness behind her eyes now. “Yeah,” she said softly, taking his hand. “We sure did.” Special Operations rushed outside as the walls rose. The Crime Sector had always bordered their small district, but now its presence was more obvious than ever. Darla stared at the new walls in disbelief. “How can this be legal? It can’t be.” “They may

not know for certain," Alister said, watching the construction continue. "Not with Heskal still missing."

Chapter 62: Street Justice

A week had passed. The walls stayed up, decorated with crude bones, with a castle high in the sky for all to see. The Port was frozen, unsure what to even do about it. It should have been obvious, but the legal document and supposed hostages had crippled their response. So nothing was done. That was until Bone Town's borders started to expand. Almost overnight, the blocks nearest the walls were pressured into joining by Remnants. They claimed it was better there. That it was freer, all while holding guns to people's heads. The walls spread farther and farther until it became impossible to ignore.

Bone Town might not be something the Port could reject outright, but they could at least stop the expansion. Garrick ordered the Military to remain along the borders, though even that decision was questioned by some. Reclamation Day was approaching, the day the Chancellor would be elected, and after the stunt with Morvin, it seemed doubtful Garrick still had much of a chance at all. Darla and Alister stood near one of the barricades, staring at the wall with matching frowns. "One document was enough to do all this..." Darla muttered. "How long is this farce going to last?"

Beside her, Alister rubbed his chin. “Even if every claim they’re making is true, the document can’t be legitimate. Bone Town cannot last...” He paused, his expression tightening. “The frightening part is that I don’t see how Viktor wouldn’t understand that.” A chill ran down Darla’s spine. “What could he possibly be planning? Even if that’s true, he’s out in the open now. All of his forces are. He gave up one of his biggest advantages.” She asked. “Unfortunately, for now, we’ll have to go along with it,” Alister said with a sigh. “And be ready when the time comes.”

Masa looked out the windows of the manor, surrounded on all sides by Remnants and a handful of Vultures. They seemed to have stopped the attack for the time being, but the fighting had made one thing clear: they had no intention of letting the Kinryū-kai live unless they joined them. Ryugi ran up behind him, struggling to catch his breath. Masa didn’t turn to face him. He simply kept staring out the window. “Boss... it’s not good. Big Sis and a lot of the other veterans are down. Maybe we should...” Ryugi started. “All of you should leave while you still have the chance,” Masa said with a sigh. Ryugi blinked. “Wha... but, Boss... we can call Mikako. Get their help...”

“Mikako knew the truth. The Kinryū-kai have no place here anymore.” Masa’s expression remained solemn. “You should all join her now. Leave a stubborn old man here to die.” “How would we even...” Ryugi questioned. “I’m not as strong as I once was, but I can clear a path for all of you,” Masa answered plainly. “What sort of nonsense is that, Boss?” one of the senior members said as he walked into the room with a frown. “You say you’re the stubborn one... did you forget why we stayed with you in the first place?” “You’re fools,” Masa muttered. “Yeah. Stubborn fools, just like you. We aren’t leaving you behind.” The man smirked. Masa finally smiled, though there was sadness in his eyes. “Then let us burn together,” he said. “Like Lady Akane.”

The streets of Bone Town were strange. In some ways, they looked much as they always had, only with more skulls. In others, they were far worse. Everyone who had lived in the Crime Sector before had made some kind of choice to call it home. Some had gone there to hide. Others simply had

nowhere better to go. The Port proper was only a few blocks away, and anyone could leave whenever they wanted, but now the walls were back. That choice was gone. Unwilling citizens had been swallowed up along with the newly claimed territory, not unlike the old crime war years ago. The gangs stayed mostly near the city center, while Remnant patrols guarded the borders and newly taken streets. Mixed in among them were a few men dressed in black that Portly hadn't recognized until now.

The pig stood just outside the casino. Viktor's castle had practically been built over it, blocking out most of the sunlight. In the small square nearby, the Anarchy Men had gotten to work constructing a platform. A real guillotine sat at its center while others set up cameras around it. "What is this nonsense?" Portly muttered. "I dunno. Kinda fun," Mohawk said, leaning against a wall as he watched them work. "Read a story or two about revolutions like this. Didn't really end well for anyone in the end. Even you gotta know that." Portly sighed. "Do I look like I read books?" Mohawk scoffed.

"You say all that, but you're still here. He murdered your boss and everything." Something about the way he said it felt different. Less like a joke. More like he was testing him. Mohawk's expression had hardened. He still looked like he was trying to decide something. Portly clenched his fist. "Yeah... that bastard did. I'd like to tell him exactly how I feel about that." "Then why don't you?" Mohawk asked. Portly's grip slowly loosened. "Ain't so simple..." "Ain't that the truth," Mohawk muttered. He took off his sunglasses and rubbed his eyes.

At Purrmont Tower, Leopold and the others had been confined to a single room. One of the men in black stood guard by the door. "What is the meaning of this?!" Leopold shouted. "Boss's orders," the man replied with a shrug. "Boss?" Leopold snapped. "I'm your boss. I employ you. I write your checks." He marched right up to the man, only to be struck hard enough to send him sprawling onto the floor. Leopold touched his face in stunned disbelief. Someone had actually dared to hit him. The man laughed. "That whole charade is over. You're hostages now." He leaned casually against the door. "And while Reaper said we could rough you up a little if we wanted, he was pretty clear you had to stay

breathing. Then again... there are three of you. Do we really need more than one?"

For the first time in a very long while, genuine terror crossed Leopold's face. "But I... I'll give you whatever you want. Just..." The soldier's expression changed immediately. The amusement vanished. He strode over and kicked Leopold hard before grabbing him by the head. "You think we give a damn about money?" he growled. "We have plenty of that now, even if we did." He tightened his grip. "So be a good little cat." The man walked off taking a position at the door again. "Viktor Scathe... You will pay for this... For making a fool of the Purrmonts." Leopold hissed.

Later that night, all across Porta Nexus, much like many times before, holographic displays began to light up with a simple message: PLEASE STAND BY, accompanied by the Reaper's face. Unlike some of the other times, people flocked toward the screens. Their fear had become fascination, everyone waiting with bated breath to see what new horror, or salvation, the Reaper would bring them next. Within Bone Town, the streets were filled with people, mostly Anarchy Men, though plenty of ordinary civilians swept up into the newly claimed territory had gathered as well. They shouted with excitement for whatever was about to happen, the bulk of them clustered around the execution platform.

Viktor, dressed as the Reaper, practically danced down the street as the crowd cheered, Calva not far behind. A Remnant soldier aggressively yanked Heskal forward. The man's once-fine robes were tattered and stained with mud, his hair disheveled and his face bruised. "Move along!" the soldier barked, violently shoving him forward. Strangely enough, Heskal barely reacted. He simply continued walking as though the entire ordeal were nothing more than a minor inconvenience. People began to boo and throw things at him. "Down with supremacy!" someone screamed. Even then, Heskal showed no reaction.

Outside Bone Town, the broadcast finally began. The cameras showed the execution platform just before Viktor and the others arrived, but before it could continue, the screens turned to static.

Power across Porta Nexus suddenly went out. “Huh. A power outage now, of all times?” one spectator muttered. “I wanted to see what...” He stopped mid-sentence, staring ahead in confusion as though he had forgotten what he was doing. Then he simply turned and walked away. So did everyone else. “Damn it,” a shopkeeper muttered as he headed back inside. “Engineering better fix this blackout. I don’t want all my product going bad.”

Viktor made it to the platform, standing proudly as Calva took her place beside him with far less enthusiasm. Heskal was shoved up the stairs behind them. Gram stood beside the guillotine, smirking as he watched him approach. “I look forward to wiping that indifferent look off your face,” he said with a laugh. Heskal gave him nothing. Gram’s smile faded. “Has it not sunk in yet? You’re going to die. You’re going to pay for all the suffering you’ve caused.” Still nothing. Gram clenched his fist, frustrated that he couldn’t get a reaction out of him, but before he could antagonize him further, Viktor stepped forward and raised his arms.

“People of Bone Town, welcome!” he called out. “Today, we are here to judge one man. A man who saw himself above us all. The man behind all your suffering. Yes, the Supreme Administrator himself!” The crowd erupted as Heskal was forcibly pushed forward. Viktor threw an arm around his shoulders and squeezed his cheeks as the cheering grew louder. “This man sat back and watched you suffer. He made things worse for all of you at the bottom while making the obscenely rich even richer. He made himself more powerful and looked at all of you like you were nothing.” The crowd broke into another uproar. Once they finally settled, Viktor released Heskal and spread his arms. “But I’m nothing if not a fair judge. Let’s allow the man to defend himself.” The crowd laughed.

“So, what do you have to say for yourself?” Viktor asked. “Now that we’ve dragged you down into the dirt with the rest of us?” Everyone turned their attention toward Heskal. He only sighed, stood up straight, and adjusted his tattered tie. Instead of addressing the crowd, he looked directly at Viktor. “I fail to see how murdering me in this farce of a trial will benefit you in any way.” Viktor recoiled with

exaggerated shock. “Oh? Is that your way of pleading for your life? Well, don’t stop now. Beg some more. Maybe we’ll have a change of heart.” He laughed, clearly relishing the humiliation. A forgotten nobody was standing over one of the most powerful men in the Port, playing with him like a toy.

Heskal sighed again and finally turned toward the crowd. “I regret none of my actions. I have nothing more to say. Get on with it.” The cheering broke apart into confused murmurs. Viktor groaned. “A killjoy to the end. Whatever. Let’s get this over with.” His enjoyment was already fading from Heskal’s refusal to give him anything. As Gram guided Heskal toward the guillotine, Calva reached out and grabbed Viktor’s arm. “Is this really... the right thing to do?” Viktor pulled his arm away. “Of course it is.”

Heskal’s head was forced beneath the blade and strapped into place. Even now, he did not react. Gram grimaced in anger. “Whatever. You’re done now...” he muttered. The crowd grew louder. “Justice for the Port!” someone shouted. They seemed almost relieved that someone was finally doing something after so long. The blade dropped and severed Heskal’s head cleanly, sending it into the basket below. The crowd went wild. “The tyrant is dead!” Viktor shouted. “And the Port will follow! We will take this city back for the people!” “Reaper! Reaper!” the crowd began to chant.

Already, people were starting to move away from the body like it was old news. A bandage over years of pain, giving them something immediate to celebrate without actually fixing any of it. Calva looked back at Heskal’s headless body, then at Viktor as he was already walking away to celebrate. After a moment, she followed him. A few of the Anarchy Men remained behind to clean up. Before long, the square was almost completely silent. “What do we do with the body?” one of them asked. “Who cares?” Gram muttered. “Throw it in a dumpster or something.” He sounded strangely unsatisfied. The man responsible for so much of his family’s suffering was dead, and yet somehow it had not felt the way he expected.

At Special Operations headquarters, Jax had rigged one of the displays to a battery, trying to get

it working while the others watched. Even like this, it showed nothing but static. “Was this a mistake?” Darla asked. “Some kind of test before the real thing?” “No...” Alister said, staring at the screen. “I can’t see him doing that. Something must have gone wrong.” Fiora suddenly rushed into the room. “I looked all over the city. Nothing’s on fire. Not even in Skull Town.” “Bone Town,” Alister corrected.

“Who cares what it’s called?” Darla sighed. Bram frowned. “I’ve got a bad feeling about this. Are you sure we can’t just... sneak in or something?” “I’ve considered it,” Alister admitted. “But I don’t think that’s a good idea right now. Reclamation Day is right around the corner.” Fiora blinked. “What is that? Everyone keeps saying it on the street.” “The day the Port broke free from its oppressors and became the world it is now,” Bram explained. “And the day a new Chancellor is inaugurated.”

Heskal’s body was thrown into a dumpster in a back alley and forgotten about. Once everyone had left the scene, a figure began to approach from the shadows.

They leaned down and picked up Heskal’s severed head. “Cipher 001 reporting. The Supreme Administrator has been killed,” they said into their comms. A short pause followed. “No one outside the Crime Sector witnessed it. I made sure of it.” Another pause. “No, I doubt that will be a problem. They’ll forget too.” The figure looked down at the head in their hand. “Am I free to proceed?” They waited for the response. “Very well.” Cipher 001 turned and walked away, carrying Heskal’s head with them before disappearing back into the shadows.

Chapter 63: Reclamation Day

The day had arrived. People from all across the city gathered just outside the steps of the Home Office, banners raised as celebrations filled the surrounding streets. While the Military remained focused on holding back Bone Town's expansion, most of the rest of the city had started to ignore the problem as though it weren't even happening. Even so, a few civilians wandered through the festivities visibly shaken. "Morvin will solve this. Just you wait," one man reassured a terrified woman. Special Operations had been assigned to guard the area alongside the few remaining available members of the Military, while Aviation watched the skies.

"I hate this... How much longer do we have to wait?" Darla growled. "Even if Morvin isn't any of our first choices, getting through the election might be what finally pushes things forward," Alister said with a sigh. "Garrick can't exactly start moving people into Bone Town the day before his term ends." Darla frowned. She knew he was right, but she didn't like it one bit. Bram and Fiora were patrolling the area across from them, while Jax monitored the systems for cyber threats, a very real possibility with Nix still out there.

Inside the Home Office, Aion stood beside Mia, gripping her hand tightly. Sweat had begun to form across his brow. Crow stood nearby, while Tristan seemed to be elsewhere. “What’s wrong, Aion? You’re shaking.” Even without her sight or hearing, Mia could read him like a book. She could still hear him, at least. “Oh, it’s nothing,” he said, though the conflict in his voice made the lie obvious. Mia frowned. “Aion... I... This isn’t like you. You weren’t even this nervous during the Aspect War.” “Right, well...” Aion looked away. “We all saw how that turned out.” “I know there’s the whole terrorist problem, but compared to that, this is just a little election. It’ll be alright.” Her expression softened. “Don’t hold back. Like always.”

Aion went quiet. She understood now that there was something he wasn’t telling her. “I don’t want to put you in danger again,” he finally admitted. “I mean, what was I thinking? What kind of man exposes someone they care about the way I did?” Mia felt around until she found his other hand, then brought both of his together in hers and lifted them gently. “Tell me what’s on your mind, Aion,” she pleaded. Before he could answer, Leonidas appeared. “Mr. Anderson! It’s almost time!” he called. “I trust you’re ready for your close-up?” Aion instinctively stepped between Leonidas and Mia. She looked confused, unable to see or hear the newcomer, only Aion’s increasingly nervous breaths.

“Yes, yes... I’m coming. Don’t worry.” “Good.” Leonidas narrowed his eyes. “And I hope you’ll be staying on script, yes?” Aion didn’t answer. He simply looked away. “All this Bone Town business isn’t shifting your allegiances, is it?” he muttered. Leonidas’s face shifted through several emotions at once. Anger was there, but beneath it was something closer to fear. “I will not be questioned. Remember our agreement.” He stormed off. Aion slumped slightly. “Aion... I don’t understand what’s happening,” Mia said, “but don’t worry about me. You are a News Men through and through, remember?” She smiled.

Aion smiled back, even though she couldn’t see it. “Right. I... what was I thinking?” Even then, he didn’t sound like he believed himself. Crow walked over and held out the drive. “I’ll protect her,” he

said simply. Aion stared at him for a moment before taking a breath. “Thank you, kid. Never thought I’d be relying on you this much for something like this.” “What will you do?” Crow asked. Aion looked toward the doors. “I don’t know yet.”

Leonidas had slipped into a corner where no one was around, communicator held close to his ear. “What do you want? I did everything you asked...” he said, unable to hide the nervousness in his voice. Viktor chuckled softly from the other end. “You sure did. Don’t worry, your pops is sitting nice and comfortable like always. Although he isn’t exactly happy about it.” There was a brief pause. “Got one last job for you. Do this, and we’re good.” Leonidas’s communicator pinged. He looked down as the information came through.

“Viktor Scathe... Are you loyal to anyone?” His expression tightened. “I thought you were supposed to be the Captain of Intelligence,” Viktor replied. “I’m sure your brother would’ve figured it out already. So what’ll it be?” Leonidas hissed at the comparison. “Can’t say I really care about hurting them, but...” He looked over the information again. “Why would you even...” Viktor said nothing.

Leonidas swallowed his frustration. “You’ll release Father and the others if I do this?” “After today, nothing else matters,” Viktor replied. Leonidas stared at the screen for a long moment. “Alright,” he sighed. “I’ll play your game.”

Outside, everyone had taken their positions. A large crowd watched from either side as the Captains of the Port lined the walkway, standing opposite one another in two parallel rows. Darla stood among them, but Leonidas, and Valeria were nowhere. Behind the platform, the Administrators took their places Marcell standing in for Heskal reluctantly, and Alister somehow ended up beside Cassian without meaning to. Lucien was absent as well. Alister had saw him earlier that day so it puzzled him he wasn't here. “Purrmont,” Cassian said politely. “Sterros,” Alister replied. Nothing but professionalism. After an awkward pause, Alister finally spoke. “So... what do you think might happen today? I’ve already got a pretty good...”

“Oh?” Cassian interrupted with a faint smile. “Admitting defeat, are we? I’d be happy to share notes... that is, if the great Alister Purrmont is willing to converse with me.” Alister clicked his tongue. “Whatever. I didn’t want to know that badly anyway.” He crossed his arms and looked away. Cassian continued regardless. “I’m sure you’ve already figured it out yourself. The Marrow Collective mostly operated from the shadows before. Effective. We couldn’t see them, so we couldn’t find them. But now...” “They’re out in the open,” Alister finished. “Right.” Cassian’s expression sharpened. “Which leads me to believe that what we think they want and what they actually want are two very different things.” “Or maybe it’s just Viktor who’s misaligned,” Alister added. Cassian raised an eyebrow. He looked like he had dismissed that possibility before, but now, hearing it said aloud, he seemed to reconsider it.

Music began to blare before they could continue. Garrick had taken his position beside the podium while Aion stood behind it. Morvin’s airship descended from the sky, even more decorated and gaudy than usual. He stepped out to thunderous cheers, waving to the crowd as though he had already reclaimed the city. Public opinion had shifted almost entirely in his favor. There were still a few die-hard Garrick supporters scattered among the crowd, but they were all but drowned out. Morvin reveled in the attention as he made his way down the long walkway. Port officers lined both sides and saluted as he passed. He marched like a man returning to claim property that had always belonged to him. When he reached the Captains, they reluctantly saluted as well. Most of them clearly did not like it, but the people had chosen.

The music stopped just as Morvin reached the podium. Garrick and Aion looked down at him. Morvin wore the same smug expression as always, fully convinced the day belonged to him.

Aion began the ceremonial speech, though his mind was somewhere else entirely. “On this day, two hundred and forty-seven years ago, the Port liberated itself from the Gaslight Ascendancy. It reclaimed itself after a long occupation. Once again, we reclaim ourselves by listening to the wishes of the people

and electing their chosen leader...” He continued, but the more he spoke, the worse the words tasted in his mouth.

Morvin simply nodded along as though every word had been written for him personally. This was his fourth time hearing some version of the speech, after all. Garrick slowly made his way down from the platform as Aion continued. He pulled out the insignia of the old king and looked down at it, feeling its weight in his hand one last time. When he reached Morvin, he held it out. “During the Siege, you gave this to me,” Garrick said. “The people have decided it belongs to you once again. I will not deny them.” His expression tightened. “You will do what is right for the Port this time, won’t you?”

Morvin laughed. “Don’t be stupid. It was never yours to keep. Just a small blemish on my otherwise perfect record.” He extended his hand impatiently. “Move aside. Let me reclaim what belongs to me.” Aion finished the next section of the speech and looked down at the podium. All that remained was the exchange, a few final words, and Morvin would officially be Chancellor again. His hands tightened around the podium. His heart pounded against his chest. He thought of Mia’s smile. His eyes darted across the gathered officials. Leonidas was nowhere to be seen. That surprised him at first, but then he looked closer. Intelligence was almost entirely absent. Was this a test?

“Mr. Anderson?” Morvin called up to him. “Are you still with us?” A few people in the crowd laughed. Aion blinked and forced himself back into the moment. “Right. I... I will now...” He stopped. “No...” he muttered. “This isn’t right.” Morvin’s expression hardened. “What isn’t right? Get on with it. The people have chosen.” “No,” Aion interrupted. “They don’t know.” The entire plaza fell silent. Morvin’s confidence cracked for the first time. “Know what?” he asked. “There’s nothing to know. Finish already.” Aion gripped the podium even tighter. This was his last chance to turn back. He took a deep breath. Then he made his choice. To be a newsman.

“My apologies, everyone. This may be a little late, but there is something I have to bring to light

before we continue." The crowd erupted. "Get on with it! We need a leader!" someone shouted. Marcell reluctantly stepped forward. With Heskal absent, he was effectively the highest-ranking Legislation official left to handle something like this. "Mr. Anderson, this is highly irregular. On what grounds would you..." "Morvin is working for the Reaper," Aion said. The crowd exploded again. Shock spread through the officials as well. Even Cassian and Alister looked caught off guard. "I didn't think even he would stoop that low," Cassian muttered.

"Liar!" someone shouted from the crowd. "Where's the proof?" another demanded. From their perspective, Aion had stopped the transfer of power at the last possible moment while the city was already desperate for someone to take control. Garrick looked up at him. "Do you have proof? And why wait until now?" "Because I was threatened," Aion admitted. "They told me they would hurt the people I love." His voice shook, but he kept going. "But I won't hesitate anymore. If you want proof, here it is." He gestured toward the large holographic display behind the podium. The recording began to play.

Morvin was clearly visible speaking with Viktor. Viktor himself was unfortunately out of frame, but Morvin's words alone were more than enough to implicate him. The color drained from Morvin's face as the empire he thought he had just reclaimed began collapsing around him. Garrick slowly lowered the king's insignia and put it away. His eyes narrowed. "How could you?" "This is clearly..." Morvin looked around desperately. "You all believe this nonsense?" The crowd had already turned. Some still shouted that it had to be a trick, but too much suddenly made sense. Even the supposedly botched assassination attempt. It had never been botched at all.

"Alright, that's enough of that," a voice suddenly echoed over the speakers. The Reaper appeared on the roof of the Home Office with Calva, Gram, Nix, and a handful of Remnants beside him. They had simply materialized there. The crowd froze, and every Port Authority officer immediately sprang to attention. "Yep, that's right," Viktor said, spreading his arms. "Morvin and I had

a little deal. But now? That doesn't matter. I thought we could reclaim this city more peacefully. Seems like that isn't an option anymore." He looked out over the crowd. "But let's not kid ourselves. At some point, words just aren't enough. I've shown you all that, haven't I?" His grin widened under his mask as it glitched. "So, like our ancestors before us, I will reclaim the Port." He raised an arm. "The revolution begins now."

The Remnant soldiers leapt from the roof and opened fire on the crowd. With so many Port officers already gathered for the ceremony, they were quickly intercepted before they could do much damage. Before anyone could respond to Viktor himself, Calva wrapped the others in her power and they vanished as suddenly as they had appeared. Then a deep rumbling rolled across the city. Everyone turned toward the distance. The walls of Bone Town began to fall. The endgame had begun.

Chapter 64: The Walls Come Down

More than half of the Military Division sat behind their barricades just outside Bone Town. Things had slowed, and while everyone looked uneasy, they were calm enough for the moment. That changed when the walls across from them began to shake. Without warning, they came down. From behind them, the Crossbone Remnant marched straight toward the Military. The officers immediately prepared for battle as the bone-covered soldiers advanced, looking eager for a fight. At the same time, Anarchy Men tore past them in vehicles or on foot. The Military was too busy engaging the Remnants to stop them.

The Porcelli and Vultures took a more discreet route out, using a tunnel that led into the main city. As if that were not enough, groups from nearly every faction began appearing all across Porta Nexus, seemingly placed there by Calva before anyone could react. They attacked anything and anyone in their path. The city began to burn. Civilians ran in terror. Systems all across Porta Nexus started behaving strangely, machines twitching and going haywire.

From the Home Office, half of the Port's leadership looked out over the chaos, unsure where to

begin. Cleatus had already returned to City Hall. “Get the civilians inside the Office!” Bernard ordered. Rufus and the other Peacekeeping officers immediately began directing people to safety. “I must join my men,” Brutus said before dropping to all fours and charging away. The city was already burning, though the attackers sent directly to the Home Office had been dealt with. Garrick stared out in horror. “Is he... really trying to recreate something as horrid as the Siege?” Naturally, people had begun surrounding both him and Morvin. “It’s... it’s all lies,” Morvin stammered. “Garrick must have done this. He wasn’t willing to...”

No one was buying it. This was a man who had already abandoned them once. The moment Morvin realized that, he turned and ran for his airship. Fiora moved to stop him, but Darla caught her. “He’ll get what’s coming to him,” Darla said. “The city is more important right now.” The remaining officers all looked toward Garrick. “I do not have the authority to...” he began, hesitating. “With all due respect,” Cassian cut in bluntly, “you never did. But the Port needs you now, just like it did two years ago.” Garrick went quiet for a moment. “Alright,” he finally said. “I’ll do what I must. It seems most of you already know what to do. I’ll step in only when necessary.”

The Captains still present nodded before splitting off in every direction, each heading toward wherever they would be most useful. Only Special Operations and Internal Investigations remained. Garrick stepped slightly away from the others and activated his communicator. “Caerith... I’d like to hire the Guild for a job.” He paused, listening. “Yes. As many as you can send.”

Cassian started to walk off with Elaina. “It’s as I feared. Get NoxLux. We’re going.” Elaina nodded. “Wait... where are you going?” Alister asked. “Internal Investigations business. We’re following a lead. You have better places to be,” Cassian replied, not bothering to explain further. Alister clicked his tongue as Cassian walked away. “There are countless places we could go right now... how are we supposed to choose?” He frowned, thinking. “Perhaps it would be better if Intelligence directed

us like I did during the...” He stopped. “Hold on a moment. Where are they...?” He looked around, increasingly confused. He hadn’t heard a single word from Intelligence, not even now, with the city descending into chaos. Alister pulled out his communicator and started going through the handful of Intelligence contacts he had managed to keep or regain after becoming Administrator.

Bram walked over to join them. “Where’s Jax?” Darla asked. “Apparently he ran off sometime before the walls came down,” Bram explained. “No one knew where he went. He just left instructions on what to watch for if someone tried to hack the systems.” “Where would he go at a time like this?” Darla asked. “It’s Jax, He probably saw some super-technical mumbo jumbo and ran off to stop it.” Fiora said. “You’re probably right,” Darla admitted. “He doesn’t move that fast for anything else.” Even so, she was growing more restless by the second, looking in every direction at all the fires they needed to put out.

“Kloe, you finally answered. What is going...” Alister started. “Captain... he... stabbed Lucien... we... help...” The call abruptly cut out. Alister froze. His expression shifted into something Darla almost never saw from him. Fear. She caught it immediately. “It seems we’re being pulled in every direction,” Darla said. “Do what you need to do. Take Fiora or Bram with you.” “No.” Alister shook his head. “I’m not sure what’s going on, but... I think this is something I have to deal with alone. The city will need all three of you.”

Darla hesitated, then held out her hand. “Very well. Be safe, Alister.” He took it and nodded. “You too. If this is as bad as it looks, Caretaker knows we’re going to need it.” Alister fired his grappling line toward a nearby rooftop and launched himself away. Darla watched him go for a moment before turning back to Bram and Fiora. “This time...” she said, more firmly now, “this won’t be like the prison.” Both of them nodded, reassuring her. Then the three of them rushed down the street toward the nearest disaster.

The city was being attacked from all sides. It wouldn’t be wrong to compare it to the Siege. The

biggest differences were the numbers and the people involved. The Crossbone Remnant still attacked with reckless abandon, almost suicidal in the way they threw themselves into battle, but there were far fewer of them than the millions that had come before. The Anarchy Men seemed to have little interest in attacking civilians, focusing almost exclusively on the Port Authority, though the rage behind every strike was unmistakable. The lizards were much the same. The gangs, surprisingly, seemed far more halfhearted in their attacks. They were participating, but there was restraint behind it. Portly stopped anyone who tried to go too far, almost as if he were protecting both sides from an unfortunate situation neither of them really wanted.

Peacekeeping took the brunt of the fighting. Of all the divisions in the Port, they likely made up the majority of its active forces. They needed the manpower to police an entire planet of people. The Military was still engaged along the former Bone Town border, while Aviation flew down to assist where they could. Unfortunately, most of them had to remain above the city. Lacy hated watching the chaos unfold beneath her. A1R flew beside her. “Why not go?” he asked. “Because it would only make things worse if the shield somehow went down during all of this,” Lacy said with a frown.

“Indeed. We will guard it. Go.” She looked at him uncertainly. “Airry? Are you sure?” “Yes. It’s what you had me built for,” he replied. Without another word, Lacy dove toward the city with a handful of the other Aviation officers, leaving A1R and the remaining forces to guard the skies. Fire, Health, and Engineering were already doing everything they could below, putting out fires, rushing civilians to safety, treating the wounded, and desperately keeping critical systems from failing under the destruction spreading around them.

Outside City Hall, Cleatus brought down another Anarchy Man as he approached. Efficient as always. Focused as always. Or at least, that was how it looked to everyone else. His attention kept drifting. Whenever there was a lull in the fighting, Cleatus would look east. His fist would tremble slightly before he forced his attention back to the enemies trying to reach the building. “Captain... why

do you keep looking away?" one of the masked Civics officers asked. "In all the time I've known you..." "His wife," another officer explained quietly. "She lives on Caldron Street, east of here. I've taken her dishes back to her for him." Cleatus said nothing. His grip only tightened around his sword.

Then he looked east again. The smoke was getting worse. The masked officers exchanged looks. "Sir... no one would fault you if..." "I must protect Civics," Cleatus interrupted. The man stopped, clearly unsure what to say. "Sir..." He looked back toward City Hall. "Right now, City Hall is just an empty building."

"They don't seem to agree," Cleatus replied, glancing at the defeated Anarchy Men scattered across the ground. "Listen. We are Civics. If those anarchist bastards want to take us on, we'll handle it." The officer pointed east. The smoke had grown thicker. "Go to her." Cleatus hesitated. His feet remained firmly planted where he stood. Then he looked toward the fire again. "I will return." He turned and dashed away.

Chapter 65: The Board

Darla led Bram and Fiora forward through the destruction, stopping where they could to assist Peacekeeping and cutting through squads from the opposing factions as they slowly made their way toward the largest fires in the distance. Dalmore and his men rushed past in flying fire trucks, spraying everything they could reach while a being made entirely of flame absorbed what the water couldn't touch. There were too many fires to linger, and they moved on almost immediately. Mira suddenly rushed in front of them, stopping short when she realized who she had found. "Special Operations!" she called, sounding almost relieved. "Intelligence has gone silent, so the rest of Logistics and I have been moving information while we deliver supplies."

"That's good. What do you know?" Darla asked. "It's probably not a surprise, but they're focusing on key points all over the city. Really pulling out all the stops. This isn't like before. They mean it this time," Mira said, still catching her breath. Darla listened carefully. "Okay, well, where's the Reaper?" Fiora asked, cracking her knuckles. "We'll just go beat him up ourselves." Almost the moment she said it, holographic displays appeared across the city. The Reaper stood in some kind of

room, addressing the Port. “The Port could never have stood for as long as it did. That’s why I’m stepping up...” Viktor began, slipping into another monologue. The broadcast continued, but after a while the words started to feel strangely repetitive.

Mira glanced toward one of the displays. “Not sure where he actually is. Those are all over the city now.” “Is there anything pressing? Somewhere they’re pushing harder than the others?” Bram asked. “A large force of the Anarchy Men seems to be heading straight for City Hall,” Mira explained.

Her communicator immediately started going off again. “I’ve got to get back to it. Good luck, Special Operations.” She took off at full speed. “We’ll help Cleatus,” Darla said, already moving. The closer they got to City Hall, the worse the chaos became. Fires burned across the streets, fighting broke out at nearly every intersection, and the noise seemed to come from every direction at once.

Then Calva suddenly appeared just out of reach, bringing another squad of fighters with her.

“Wha... it’s her!” Fiora shouted. Calva turned toward her with a smirk, though something behind her eyes looked almost sad. The men she had brought immediately charged at Special Operations while Calva prepared to disappear again. Before she could, Fiora lunged at her. Both of them vanished.

“FIORA!” Darla and Bram shouted at once. They had no time to dwell on it. The squad was already surrounding them. Calva hit the floor hard somewhere else, clutching her head. Fiora landed beside her. Calva rubbed her own head as her eyes glowed faintly.

“That hurt...” Calva groaned. “Unexpected people warping with me... ugh...” Fiora sprang to her feet and pointed triumphantly at her. “Ha! I knew it was you! I’m a super detective! Soon everyone will understand, and then we’ll uncover the hackers too!” Calva stared at her. Her expression said everything. “What are you talking about...?” “The... ugh, it doesn’t matter right now.” Fiora shook her head and drew her gunblade. “You’re one of those orange-haired girls, right? But, like... a bad-guy one. I’m gonna kick your ass!” Calva’s expression hardened. She pulled out her chainsaw and revved it.

“I’m not just some orange-haired girl,” she growled. “I’m Calva!” Fiora froze. “Oh. Um... I guess that was kinda rude.” She lowered her weapon slightly. “It’s just, you’re like them, and the other one was kind of a good guy, but...” Calva had already had enough. She swung the chainsaw. Fiora barely managed to bring her gunblade up in time to block it.

Back with Darla and Bram, they had already taken down the unit Calva left behind and continued toward Civics, but the path ahead was blocked. Gram stood in the middle of the street with two Anarchy Men beside him, waiting. They stopped immediately. “Knew you’d end up going this way,” Gram said, his tone dead serious. Bram’s fists tightened. “Graham... what the hell are you doing? How could you join them?” The words came out like he was barely holding back the venom behind them. Darla’s eyes narrowed. “You’re the only one of them who doesn’t wear a mask.” Gram glanced at her. “I have nothing to say to a literal dog like you.” “Answer the question,” Bram said, his anger rising.

“We’re going to destroy Civics, and I won’t let you get in the way,” Gram answered plainly. “You want to fight?” Bram slammed one fist into his palm. “Then I’ll knock some sense into you.” Gram turned and calmly started toward a nearby alley. “I’ll be the one convincing you.” Bram immediately moved to follow, but Darla caught his arm before he could get far. For a moment, she wanted to stop him completely. To tell him this was exactly the kind of thing that got people killed. But one look at his face told her this was something he had already decided he needed to face. “Bram...” she said, her grip loosening. “Promise you’ll come back to us.” His expression softened. He gave her a reassuring nod, then ran after his brother. As soon as they disappeared into the alley, Darla’s face hardened again. She turned toward the two Anarchy Men standing in her way. “Stand down,” she said. “I understand your pain. I don’t want to hurt people of the Port.” “You know nothing of pain,” one of them snapped before rushing her.

Portly and the Porcelli tore through another neighborhood, making a show of wrecking

buildings while still giving civilians enough time to flee. They damaged whatever they needed to make it look convincing, but they never turned their weapons on the people. Portly sighed, rubbed at his temple, and lit a cigar. In the distance, he could see Mohawk and the Vultures being much more violent. Mohawk was laughing as usual, but even Portly could tell something was off. It wasn't the same gleeful expression of someone enjoying the chaos. It looked more like he was trying to distract himself from something.

Portly and his men moved closer. Mohawk frowned when he noticed him. "What the hell do you want? You're in the way." "You enjoying yourself?" Portly asked, ignoring the hostility. "What kinda question is that? Of course I am." Mohawk grinned. Portly exhaled a cloud of smoke. "Now, I could be wrong, but I don't remember your face looking quite like that all the times we used to tussle."

"The fuck are you trying to say?" Mohawk climbed down from the rubble and got as close to Portly as he could, staring him down. Portly didn't answer. "You wanna go right now?" Mohawk snapped. "I don't care if we're on the same side now. I'll beat the shit out of you!" He jabbed a finger against Portly's chest.

Portly barely reacted. "I'm saying, what the hell are we doing? Think about it. We were told to cause destruction." "Yeah, that's the best part. Nobody's stopping us from..." Mohawk started. "And what happens to the places we already hit?" Portly interrupted. "We didn't leave anyone behind. Bone Town wasn't so different." He explained. Mohawk raised an eyebrow. "So what? He doesn't plan on running every district." "Or any district, for that matter." Portly gestured toward one of the holographic displays showing the Reaper's repeating broadcast. "Can't you see what's happening? This ain't built to last. It's all bluster."

Mohawk looked down for a moment, actually thinking about it. "That's how Vultures roll. That's how Vincent rolled. Jace knew that," he muttered. "That's not the Vulture I remember seeing growing up." Portly laughed. Mohawk went quiet. For once, he thought about something harder than

anyone around him was used to seeing. The other Vultures exchanged confused looks. Mohawk wasn't exactly known for being thoughtful. "You're right," he finally said. "This whole thing... it's one big dramatic show to him. He's gonna hang us all out to dry." He paused, then laughed under his breath. "Vincent wouldn't want this. He loved being alive. He'd want us to enjoy that shit, not die like a bunch of chumps."

Portly smirked. "Then let's forget this revolution nonsense and secure our own futures." He held out his hand. Mohawk looked at it for a moment, then took it. "I'm assuming you've got a plan?" "Of course I do," Portly said. "We're heading to Purrmont Tower." Mohawk's grin immediately returned. "Oh man, you're making my heart skip a beat. You hear that, guys?" The rest of the gangs seemed just as excited. Without another thought, the Porcellis and Vultures abandoned the battlefield and turned toward Purrmont Tower.

Chapter 66: Identity

Calva spun through the air, bringing her chainsaw down at Fiora with enough force that she barely managed to block it. The impact knocked her backward, almost sending her into a wall, but she recovered before losing her footing. Then she looked down and noticed a small scratch across the weapon. Her eyes widened. “I just got this thing... oh no. Jax is gonna be so mad. He’s gonna kill me.” “Well, you don’t have to worry about that,” Calva said, swinging again. “Because I’m going to kill you first!” Fiora dodged this time, seemingly more afraid of damaging the gunblade than getting hit herself.

“Oh! I know. We can use Level Five now, right?” She shifted something along the weapon. It hissed violently as the blade began glowing bright red. Calva’s confidence vanished. Fiora swung. Calva barely managed to dodge as the blade carved through the steel wall behind her like it was made of butter. Before she could recover, Fiora immediately pointed the weapon in the direction she had moved and opened fire. Most of the rounds failed to pierce Calva’s unnaturally tough skin. The last one was different. Charged by the blade, it punched straight through her gut. Calva stumbled backward, clutching the wound.

“Viktor was right...” she winced. “I really do want to beat your ass, but I don’t have time for you.” She started fiddling with the button attached to her hand. “You’re running?” Fiora asked. “And you’re too far away to stop me.” Calva smirked. Fiora was faster than she expected. Steam erupted from the gunblade, propelling Fiora forward as she lunged and grabbed onto Calva just before she activated the device. The world twisted. A second later, they appeared atop a tower deep in the economic heart of the Port. Calva immediately dropped to her knees, clutching her head. Her eyes began to glow as she struggled to stay lucid.

Fiora backed away slightly, then hesitantly reached out a hand. “Are you... okay?” Calva slapped it away and forced herself back to her feet. “It’s your fault I’m hurting in the first place! Taking extra people with me puts a lot more strain on me!” She swung at Fiora again. “Oh... sorry.” Fiora paused. “Wait, no, I’m not! You’re just gonna keep doing that teleport thing all over the city and making everything harder for everyone!” “Yeah? So what? Why do you care?” Calva’s chainsaw connected dead-on and sent Fiora crashing into the side of the neighboring building. Dust swallowed the area. For several seconds, there was no movement.

Calva let out a breath and reached for the button again. Then came a hiss. Fiora shot out of the rubble, bruised but very much alive. “Because Porta Nexus is my home!” She slashed across Calva’s chest before she could react. The Level Five blade left a significant gash, but even at that setting it still wasn’t enough to cut all the way through her. Ironically, the extreme heat cauterized the wound almost immediately. Calva already had one hand on the button. The world twisted again.

They appeared at Station 14. Several Aviation operatives turned in shock as the two women suddenly materialized in front of them. Calva grabbed her head again, the pain clearly worse this time, but she didn’t hesitate. She swung immediately and knocked Fiora off the side of the station before any of the operatives could react. Then Calva jumped after her. She came down with the chainsaw pointed straight at Fiora. Fiora caught it with the gunblade, but she had nowhere to brace herself. They were

both falling, Calva above her, forcing the weapon down harder and harder. Then the heated blade began melting through the chainsaw's teeth. Fiora kicked away and blasted steam from the weapon, forcing distance between them. She fired.

Calva dodged several shots, but not all of them. Rounds punched cleanly through both shoulders. Fiora had the advantage now. With the gunblade's steam propulsion, she could maneuver through the air far more easily than Calva expected. She surged forward and drove the blade toward Calva's chest. Calva twisted at the last second. The blade buried itself in her leg instead. Fiora roared and pulled the trigger. The weapon fired directly into her. Calva cried out in pain and warped them again, this time dropping them onto an empty battlefield. Fiora pulled the blade free and looked down at the girl beneath her. Calva was in even worse shape now, barely conscious as she struggled to stay awake at all.

"Maybe... that's enough?" Fiora asked. "Enough..." Calva muttered. "It'll never be enough. Viktor is going to keep going and going until..." She suddenly stopped herself. Fiora's eyes widened as something clicked into place. For a moment, she saw herself in the girl lying in front of her. "You... don't really want to be doing this, do you?" Calva's eyes widened too, but with fear rather than realization. "What...? No! Of course I do!"

She forced herself back onto her feet, even though the leg Fiora had nearly destroyed could barely support her. Every step looked painful, but she kept moving through sheer will alone, her expression becoming more desperate and crazed the longer she stood. "Is he... making you?" Fiora asked, slowly backing away. "Making me?" Calva repeated. "He's never made me do anything I didn't want to." She stopped in her tracks. Her head lowered, and the light in her eyes seemed to darken.

"He's the only one who saw me. The only one who was kind to me..." Her voice began to shake. "Why does no one understand? He gave me a name, gave me everything! Why would I betray that?!" Calva screamed and swung the broken chainsaw at Fiora. Fiora barely dodged. "Because what he's

doing is wrong!” “What they did to him was wrong!” Calva shouted back. She attacked with even more intensity than before. She was clearly running on fumes, but somehow that only made her more dangerous. Even with Level Five active, Fiora found herself struggling to match her speed as she was forced backward again and again.

“I get it!” Fiora shouted. She finally broke through Calva’s assault and knocked her backward. “The Port isn’t always a nice place! I know that better than anyone!” Fiora charged after her and swung just as hard. The gunblade slammed into what remained of Calva’s chainsaw, finally shattering it completely before continuing into her. But Fiora’s weapon had already taken a beating of its own, and the extreme heat running through it had made the metal increasingly vulnerable. Cracks began spreading across the blade. “But you had good times too, right?” Fiora asked. “Moments you spent with him. Moments you loved?”

Calva didn’t answer at first. She could barely move anymore. “I love him more than anything!” she finally screamed. Fiora stopped attacking. “Then... maybe we could...” “No!” Calva snapped. “This is what he wants... and you’ll never understand!” Fiora frowned. “That isn’t love, then.” Calva snarled. “What?!” “Love makes you stronger.” Calva charged one final time. Fiora did the same. She slammed the gunblade into Calva with everything she had. The already-cracked weapon shattered on impact, releasing a small explosion that threw both of them away from each other.

Fiora crashed hard onto the street and rolled several times before finally stopping. She coughed, slowly pushing herself back onto her feet. She was bruised, exhausted, and badly weakened, but she could still keep going. Calva looked far worse. She groaned against the wall she had been thrown into. Her leg was destroyed, her torso riddled with wounds, and blood mixed with exposed machinery across her battered body. Even then, she found enough strength to move one hand. Her finger pressed the button. Calva vanished. This time, Fiora was too slow to stop her.

Viktor paced across the command room of Marrow Castle as the roof shook above him. The

structure had never really been built with stability in mind, and every distant explosion seemed to remind him of that. “Where is Calva...?” he muttered, looking down at the Remnant forces still waiting to be warped into position. “There are too many forces still in the city.” He sighed and turned back toward the camera. He picked up the mask, ready to put it on and record another message while he waited. Then Calva warped in directly at his feet.

She collapsed onto the floor. For the first few seconds, Viktor didn’t even recognize her. Then he did. The mask slipped from his hand. He dropped to his knees beside her, his hands actually shaking as they moved toward her battered body. For once, there was no performance in his expression. No grin. No grand speech. Just something close to terror, his eyes looking almost like he was questioning everything at once. “Calva...” His voice came out quieter than usual. “What... happened to you?” “I’m... I’m sorry...” she whispered weakly. Viktor carefully lifted her from the floor and carried her over to a bed.

“Who was it?” he asked, calmer now, though his hands still weren’t steady. “Brutus? Maybe even one of the dogs?” “It... I...” Calva struggled to keep her eyes open. “Please... I can still...” She couldn’t finish. Her eyes closed. “I’m not mad, Calva,” Viktor said softly. “We got most of our guys out there. Rest, all right? The endgame’s almost here.” He hesitated. “What was that you said before... about leaving all this behind?” A faint smile appeared on Calva’s face, but she was already too weak to answer. She passed out. Viktor remained beside her for another moment.

“Rest...” he murmured. “I know you’re tough. By the time you wake up, I’ll need you again.” He stood and picked the mask back up. Before returning to the camera, he opened communications. “Everyone still in Bone Town, fan out. We lost the warping card... for now.” He cut the connection, turned back toward the camera, and raised the mask to his face. Then he went right back to monologuing.

Chapter 67: Ego Death

A year ago, Nix sat in an old-fashioned arcade tucked away in Porta Nexus. Places like this were getting rarer and rarer, and even as a kid he knew nothing beat the classics. He could spend all day there. School could shove it. He played everything from Drill Digger to Mr. Sack Man, but his favorite had always been Alley Attackers, an old fighting game he had practically memorized. He dropped into the seat beside the cabinet, but instead of inserting any money, he placed a small device against the coin slot and tricked the machine into thinking he had paid. He spent hours on that cabinet alone, running through match after match, until eventually even he started getting bored.

Then someone sat down at the cabinet on the opposite side. Nix glanced over but couldn't see who it was. A few coins clinked into the machine, and after a moment a challenge request appeared on his screen. He smirked. "Heh. You think you can beat me? Alright." He accepted immediately. The first stock was easy. Nix tore through the other player almost instantly. "Are you even trying?" he mocked. Then the second stock started. Something changed. The other player seemed to lock in all at once, suddenly using combos only serious players could consistently pull off. Nix's grin faded as he leaned

forward. By the time they reached the final stock, both of them were down to their last life, and Nix had no intention of losing.

The match became frantic. They traded blows almost perfectly, countering each other again and again, but something felt wrong. Nix frowned. The input lag seemed worse than usual. His opponent was just a little faster every time. His health kept dropping. “No. No way.” Nix groaned and shoved another device into the side of the cabinet, quickly hacking the game to give himself more health. It still wasn’t enough. His eyes widened as the other player launched his character into the air and chained together a ridiculous sequence of attacks. “A Super Mega Nut Buster Supreme Combo...?” Nix stared at the screen in disbelief. “But nobody can do that!” His character slammed into the ground. Defeat.

Nix shot out of the chair in a rage and immediately ran around to the other side of the cabinet to see who had beaten him. Viktor stood there with a smug grin. “Yo. Good game, kid. Really had me sweating near the end.” Nix stared at him. “You... how did you do that?” Viktor raised an eyebrow. “Oh? You wanna know? I could show you.” He leaned casually against the cabinet. Nix’s expression sharpened. “Although...” Viktor continued, “aren’t you getting a little bored playing games like this?” Nix frowned. “Oh. You’re one of those dumb adults who wants me to go back to school.” Viktor shrugged.

“Not quite. I was thinking we could make things a little more... interesting. Forget school.” Nix hesitated. “Like what?” Viktor pushed himself away from the cabinet and started walking. “Come with me and find out. I’ll even show you how to pull off the combo.” “Hey, wait!” Nix hurried after him without another thought. Behind them, inside the cabinet Nix had been playing on, half the wires hung loose where someone had cut them. Nix had been far too distracted to notice.

Back in the present, Jax drove his van down the road just as the larger attack began. Back at the

Home Office, he had received a simple message. Someone had broken through one of his firewalls, but instead of attacking anything, they had left only a single line behind. “I’ll be at the Central Relay Station. Come fight me.” Jax understood the meaning immediately. Most people probably wouldn’t have considered the Relay Station as important as Air Control or the Dampener, but that was a mistake. It was the source that linked Porta Nexus to the Multiverse’s internet and connected countless Port systems through it. If someone took control of the Relay Station, the damage could spread far beyond one building.

He arrived quickly. The structure itself was almost strangely modest. There was no grandeur to it, nothing that screamed how important it actually was. If anything, it looked like it had been intentionally designed to blend into the surrounding district. Only a handful of signal towers rising above the roof gave away its purpose. As Jax drove closer, several turrets suddenly rose from the ground. They opened fire. Bullets slammed into the van’s armored plating. The reinforcement held, but Jax immediately reversed once he understood the danger and pulled back outside their range. Once he was far enough away, he stepped out and studied the defenses. “Hmm...” he muttered, rubbing his chin.

“Callum!” Jax turned as a fox from Engineering came running toward him in a panic. “Link? What are you doing here? Aren’t you Operative One? They could use you out there.” Link shook his head. “I’m a Warden now. And this station is my domain. Something happened inside. I was forced out.” “I see. Are there still people inside?” Jax glanced toward the building again. “Most likely.”

Jax stared at the turrets for another moment. “That model... Torrent, right? Is it new? Looks different from the ones they used a few years ago.” Link blinked. “Yeah. They installed them last year, I think. Foreign company.”

“Ten-meter range?” Jax answered. “Yes, but how did you know?” Jax didn’t answer. He climbed back into the van and started driving forward again, keeping as close to the wall as possible. He moved slowly this time, rolling over poles, curbs, and even a fire hydrant as he positioned the

vehicle exactly where he wanted it. The moment he crossed into range, the turrets opened fire again. Rounds hammered against the van's armor. The plating held, but cracks quickly began spreading across the windshield. Just like Jax expected, the turret positioned on the opposite side began firing toward him as well. Straight through the turret beside it. The first turret was shredded almost immediately by friendly fire, leaving only one remaining. From inside the van, Jax pointed toward it and motioned for Link to move.

Link understood. While the surviving turret focused entirely on the van, Link slipped around behind it. The windshield cracked again. "Damn it," Jax muttered, ducking lower. "I knew I should've gone with a digital window." Link reached the turret and ripped out the cables feeding power and control into the weapon. It shut down instantly. Once everything went quiet, Jax finally stepped out of the van and stared at the damage. He sighed. "You still need work," he said, giving the side of the van an affectionate pat. Then he smiled faintly. "But you did well." Link stared at him. "What now?" "Stay here. Whatever's going on inside, I'll handle it." He said. "But it's my responsibility too!" Link protested. "At least let me send you the blueprints or something." Jax paused. "That would be helpful," he admitted.

They both went inside. Smaller turrets and drones met them almost immediately. Jax tossed a compact box onto the floor, and it unfolded with a mechanical snap, projecting a force field around both of them just as the first barrage hit. "Really...?" a voice came over the comms, clearly irritated. "That's not even a Port device." "It could be," Jax answered, watching the shield absorb the fire. "Everyone could use a shield or two." He paused. "It's you, isn't it?" "Yeah, it's me... Callum Draycott," the kid replied mockingly. "You're mistaken. My name is Jax." His voice stayed calm. "Regardless, I'm going to stop you now."

"Pfft, whatever. Come on already." "Too scared to face me yourself?" Jax jabbed. "What? No, of course not!" Nix snapped. "This is like... level one. You don't fight the boss until you beat the level,

idiot.” The turrets opened fire again just as the shield flickered and ran out of power. Jax and Link both ducked behind cover. Jax quickly pulled up the building layout Link had given him and pointed toward a narrow maintenance shaft running along the hallway. It looked barely large enough for the cleaning robots it had been designed for. “Can you get to that control panel through the crawlspace?” Link looked at the opening.

“I think I’m small enough to fit. But unless we reach the main control room, it’ll only shut down part of the system.” “That’s fine, Just be careful. There are bound to be surprises.”Jax whispered.

Link nodded. Jax reached into his coat and pulled out a small brass sphere. It unfolded in his hand, expanding into a rifle. Link stared. “Is that... a mult...” “Same principle. My design.” Jax raised the weapon and fired. The turrets went down almost immediately. Both of them rushed into the hallway and split off in opposite directions.

When Jax reached the next door, it refused to budge. The entire frame had gone into lockdown.

Nix’s voice came back over the comm. “Ha! You can’t even get past a dumb door. Loser.” Jax ignored him and ran his hands along the seams, feeling for something. Once he found what he was looking for, he wedged his fingers into the gap, ripped open a small section of the paneling, and pulled on something inside. The door immediately slid open. “What? How did you do that?” Nix asked. “This isn’t a bank vault,” Jax explained as he kept walking. “It’s designed to open during emergencies. Earthquakes. Fires. Things like that. Even if you tell the system to keep it locked.” He continued down the hallway without slowing.

Jax was met with more turrets almost immediately, but before they could fire, every one of them suddenly powered down. “Great going, Link,” Jax whispered. “Grrgh... you think that’s the only thing you have to worry about?” Nix’s voice snapped through the comms. A swarm of drones poured in from the next room. Jax’s eyes lit up with interest. “Oh... this will be a great test.” He pulled out a cylinder that expanded into a compact cannon. “Test? I’m the one testing you!” Nix shouted. Jax fired. A net

shot out of the cannon and spread across the swarm, catching nearly every drone at once. A small electrical pulse ran through it, and the machines immediately began twitching and malfunctioning before dropping out of the air.

Jax studied the result as he kept moving. “Hmm. Looks like the electricity is too powerful. It’s supposed to be a harmless way to stop crowds of people.” “Try your stupid net on these guys,” Nix said. The walls of the next walkway opened, revealing ten robots similar to the Super Mega Mecha Man units Nix had used before, along with another wave of drones. “Hmm. Right. Doubt that would be effective against a force this large.” Jax reached into his bag, pulled out an orb, and tossed it into the middle of them. It embedded itself into the floor and released a pulse similar to the net, but much stronger. Every robot shut down at once. They collapsed to the floor with a series of heavy thuds.

“The hell... an EMP?” Nix asked. “Precisely.” He explained. “That’s cheating... ugh...” Jax kept walking. “You know this building has gas too,” Nix said. Something shifted inside the ventilation system. Jax heard the hiss almost immediately and put on a mask. “Then you probably should’ve kept that to yourself,” he said. “Not that I didn’t already know.” “I hate you!” Nix screamed. Jax continued forward. It was more of the same after that. Every trap Nix activated, Jax seemed to have an answer for. Every clever little obstacle was met with some device, mechanical workaround, or simple piece of knowledge Nix hadn’t considered. Eventually, Jax reached the control room. Nix stood with his back to him, hood pulled up, gripping the console so tightly his knuckles had gone pale.

“I refuse to believe a washed-up loser like you can beat me...” he muttered. Then he turned. He looked furious, but beneath it there was something else, like he was struggling not to cry. Jax’s expression changed immediately. “Gods...” he said quietly. “I knew you were a child, but... you can’t be older than fourteen. Maybe even twelve. That bastard would make a...” His face hardened. “Thirteen and a half,” Nix corrected him. Because of course he did. Jax stared at him for a moment. “Do you even understand how much trouble you’ve caused people?”

“Of course I do!” Nix snapped. “But they don’t matter. I’m better than them. Smarter.” His expression turned smug again. “You were too, but Viktor said you let them use you like a chew toy. Like an idiot.” “Did he now...” Jax sighed. “Well, I suppose he’s right about one thing. I’m not exactly setting the best example for kids.” He paused. “But you’re young. You shouldn’t listen to people like him.” “Pfft. Are you gonna be like all the other dumb adults who told me to waste my life going to school?” Nix stuck out his tongue. “Dumb old fart.” “School is for forming habits, not learning.” Jax explained. Nix blinked.

Jax continued. “Viktor told you smart people like us make the rules, and everyone else follows them?” “Exactly.” He laughed. “So you think your actions don’t have consequences.” Jax sounded different now. More restrained than usual, like he was consciously trying not to be too harsh. “What do your parents think about that?” Nix’s expression soured. “Mom and Dad abandoned me a long time ago. I don’t care what those shitheads think.” Jax paused. “Right. Sorry. Perhaps that was the wrong comparison.” Nix scratched his head, already looking bored again. “Enough talking. This is boring.” He stepped away from the console. “Let’s fight. I need to prove I’m better.” Drones began circling around him as one of his arms flashed to life, holographic displays forming around it. Jax didn’t move. “I’m not going to fight a child,” he said stubbornly.

Nix hated that. He thrust out his hand, and a massive laser erupted from the gauntlet around his arm. Jax barely had time to dodge before the blast tore through the doorway behind him and continued straight through several rooms beyond it. Jax stared at the destruction for a moment, sweating just a little. “A powerful pulse ray in such a small gauntlet. I’ll never deny you have talent, kid.” “Then stand still and die!” Nix shouted. He tried to fire it again. Nothing happened. Jax raised an eyebrow. “It’s a miracle it worked the first time.” Nix growled and directed the drones to swarm him instead. Jax stood his ground, not looking nearly as worried as Nix wanted him to.

“Oh, one more thing,” Jax said. “That Marrow Drive of yours. I’ll admit, it took a lot of doing,

but... I found my way in." A playful smirk crossed his face. The drones froze in midair. Then, one by one, they turned around and aimed themselves at Nix. "What?!" Nix stumbled backward. "But... there's no way you could figure out my entire system from that stupid drive!" "Well, you're not wrong there," Jax admitted. "But there's something you don't seem to understand. That's fine. You're young."

"Wha... what is it? Is it some kind of cheat code? I knew it!" Nix demanded. "No, no. Nothing like that." Jax started walking toward him. "Callum Draycott was smart. Even if I do say so myself. But he didn't build everything he built by himself. No one really does. Everyone contributes to something bigger. Even a washed-up mechanic like me." He stopped in front of Nix and rested a hand on his shoulder. Nix refused to look him in the eye. Behind them, another voice suddenly called out. "Alright! Got it! Everything should be reset!" Link had reached the main console while Nix was distracted and restored control of the station. Nix spun around. "What...? Ugh! You tricked me! That's not fair!"

Jax's expression shifted. "Life is not fair." Nix lowered his head. He clearly didn't want to accept it, but there wasn't much left to deny. He had lost.

"So what?" he muttered. "You're gonna arrest me now?" Jax sighed. "You need to understand that what you did was wrong. But..." He paused, struggling for the right words. "Listen, you're a smart kid. I don't know everything Viktor told you, but there are better ways to show people who you are than... this." He said. Nix looked up at him. "And what? Be a loser like you?" Jax laughed. "For a little while? Yeah, maybe." He smiled. "But one day, I think you could be better than old Callum Draycott ever was." Nix stared at him. Jax held out his hand. "So what do you say? Nix, was it?" Nix hesitated for a long moment before finally taking it. "Yeah... fine. I'll come with you." He immediately looked away. "But don't expect me to help stop Viktor." He scoffed. "That's fine." Jax smiled. "Let the adults handle it."

Chapter 68: Pride

Alister walked toward Intelligence Division Headquarters, a massive spire that pierced the skyline. It sat a little apart from most of the city and, much like City Hall, barely matched the steampunk architecture surrounding it. He hadn't been back there in a long time, not since his demotion. When he entered the lobby, he was met with nothing. Not a soul. That alone was strange enough, but when he glanced up at the security cameras, every one of them was powered down.

Something felt deeply wrong. Of course, the cryptic message from Kloe had already told him as much. He tried the elevator anyway, pressing the button several times. "I really don't feel like climbing a hundred floors. Come on." Nothing happened. Alister stared at it for another second before sighing and heading for the stairs. He didn't bother checking most of the lower floors. They were largely a buffer anyway. The real Intelligence work happened much higher up.

When he reached the first operational level, the silence threw him off immediately. This was the staging room, where operatives were dispatched throughout the Port. Normally there should have been cats working communications, agents moving in and out, reports being shouted across the room.

Instead, there wasn't even a whisper. Alister moved cautiously through the area, searching for any sign of life, and found his answer in the next room. Several Crossbone Remnants lay dead across the floor, dressed entirely in black like the ones who had occupied Purrmont Tower. A pair of Intelligence operatives had clearly managed to take them down, but the Remnants had taken the cats with them.

Alister froze. He recognized both faces. As Intelligence Captain, he had always made it a point of pride to remember the people serving beneath him. "Laura... Beethoven..." His expression tightened. "I'm sorry. I'll make sure your families are told. And that you're given a proper send-off." He gently pulled their bodies away from the wreckage, laid them beside one another, and covered them with a sheet. "I'll be back."

Alister continued upward. The next floor was more of the same. "Thaddeus too..." he muttered, staring down at an older cat slumped against the wall. "You didn't have many years left anyway, old man. Fine Warden." Then the air shifted behind him and a door creaked open. Alister spun instantly into a fighting stance, but relaxed the moment a half-dead cat stumbled through the doorway. "Dimitri!" He rushed forward and caught him before he could collapse, quickly studying his wounds and beginning to dress the worst of them. "What happened here?" Dimitri struggled to focus. "It... they came..." "Don't force it," Alister said. "I'll find out one way or another." Dimitri's breathing remained shallow. "Must... hurry..." "Indeed. You'll be fine now. Answer with your eyes. Are there many of them left?" Alister studied his weakening gaze carefully and got his answer. No. "Good. I'll handle it." He lowered Dimitri somewhere safe and continued upward again.

This floor was different. Alister could hear a struggle somewhere ahead, louder and far more intense than anything below. He cautiously peered around the corner and stopped in surprise. Crossbone Remnants were fighting alongside Purrmont family enforcers against the remaining Intelligence operatives. The cats were clearly more skilled, but badly outnumbered. Alister didn't hesitate. He launched himself into the fight. The operatives saw him and immediately recoiled, fear

flashing across their faces. For a split second, they seemed to think he had come to join the Purrmont men. Instead, Alister cut through their attackers before any of them could react. “Captain?” one of the operatives asked nervously. “Not anymore, remember?” Alister said. “But yes, I’ve come to aid you. Now, what’s with those faces?” The two operatives exchanged uncertain looks.

“I can answer that.” Alister turned. Kloe limped out from another room, looking terrible and barely able to remain standing. “Kloe.” He crossed the distance immediately and caught hold of her before she could fall. “Who did this to you?” She looked away, almost as if she couldn’t bring herself to admit it. “Our own Captain...” Alister’s expression changed. “My brother... but why? Even he would know how...” His eyes sharpened. “Is Lucien all right?” Kloe swallowed. “He is now, but... Leonidas was only a few inches away from actually killing him. He’s fighting for his life. High fever. He needs a doctor.” Alister’s grip tightened slightly. “The path below should be clear now. Can you make it down? How many men are left?” “I... don’t know. We took down a lot of them, but they caught us by surprise. We didn’t expect him to just attack Lucien like that.” Her legs started to give out beneath her, and Alister caught her again.

“Here.” He removed his communicator and placed it in her hand. “Take mine. Yours was destroyed, wasn’t it? That would explain the message cutting out.” “Yes, but..” “No buts. Let me handle this. It’s my responsibility in more ways than one.” Kloe stared at him. Even through her fur, her face seemed flushed red. Maybe she was blushing. Maybe it was only exhaustion. “Captain...” she said weakly. “You know what makes you different from the other Purrmonts, right...?” Alister looked almost nervous for the first time. “I’m not...” He hesitated. “Tell me sometime. Just make sure you make it out so you can.” A faint smile crossed her face. “Yes, sir.” Then she passed out in his arms.

The remaining operatives immediately looked toward him for direction. “Get everyone out that you can,” Alister ordered, and they nodded without hesitation. One of them moved to take Kloe from him. “Once they’re safe with Health, we’ll return.” They said. Alister shook his head. “No. The city is

in complete chaos right now. They need Intelligence operating more than they need you following me upstairs." The operative hesitated. "But, sir..." Alister carefully handed Kloe over and glanced toward the stairwell leading higher into the tower. Somewhere above them was Leonidas, Lucien nearly dead because of him, and whatever remained of the force that had taken over the building. His expression hardened. "I'll be fine on my own."

The next floor belonged to the Captain and Administrator, but as Alister stalked through it, he found very little besides a handful of guards. He dealt with them quickly. There wasn't much investigating left to do anyway. The signs of a struggle were everywhere. He knocked the sword from the last man's hand and slammed him against the wall, pressing his blade to the man's throat. "I don't feel like being nice today. Not after all this," Alister said, completely serious. "So you're going to tell me how many of you there are and what your objective is."

"I do not fear death," the man replied with a chuckle. "Oh, so you're one of those suicidal ones." Alister's grip tightened. "Didn't really know how to handle you all at first. But, well... we've learned since then." The man's smile faded slightly. "What you really should fear is living," Alister continued. "I've gotten pretty good at prolonging people's lives during torture." That finally got a reaction. The man looked genuinely afraid. "I... it doesn't matter. It's probably already finished." Alister's eyes narrowed. "Elaborate."

"The server room!" The man said. Alister's expression changed immediately as he understood. "You've earned your death." He stabbed the man without hesitation and kept moving. The server room was only one floor above. Alister rushed down the hallway, no longer wasting time on the few remaining guards. He moved across the catwalks toward the central node and finally saw him. Leonidas stood at the main console. Across the screen: **ERASURE: 20%** "Leonidas!" Alister shouted, breathing hard. Leonidas looked over his shoulder with a smirk. "So you've come... I knew you would. Now, we..." "How could you do this?" Alister cut him off. "I knew you weren't completely aligned

with the Port, but this? Your fellow cats too?"

Leonidas clicked his tongue. "Lower families. None of them live up to the Purrmont name. And with their server gone, two centuries of information goes with it. They'll practically be drooling babies. Useless to everyone." He laughed. Alister didn't. "You didn't answer my question. What does Viktor have on you?" Leonidas's expression twitched. He clearly didn't like that. "That fool has nothing to do with this. This is all me. I'm the one in control." His smile became strained. "And now, finally, we've reached this moment. We can face each other once and for all, and I can remove the family disgrace from the record along with Intelligence." The laugh that followed sounded almost desperate.

"Stop pretending you're the mastermind, You never were." Alister hissed. "Shut up." Leonidas's grip tightened around his sword. "Shut up... fight me, brother!" He drew the blade and attacked with almost no further warning. Alister parried. Their fighting styles were immediately familiar, clearly built from the same foundations, but Leonidas fought with far more aggression. His strikes were raw and forceful, constantly trying to overwhelm Alister, while Alister stayed restrained and reactive, waiting for openings rather than forcing them. Even so, Alister was struggling to keep his composure. "You leave too many openings." Leonidas swung wide. Alister took the opportunity and slashed across his chest.

Leonidas stumbled backward, staring at the wound in disbelief. "You dare..." His expression twisted. "Your mother was a lowborn cat, you know. You have no right to challenge me." Alister's face changed. "Oh, you want to make this about mothers?" His restraint finally cracked. "You really do want to die, don't you?" Alister took the bait and lunged. Leonidas caught the strike with his own blade, redirected it, and drove his sword into Alister's right shoulder.

Alister's vision started to blur as Leonidas pulled the blade free and laughed. He stumbled back, one hand clamping over the wound in his shoulder, then glanced toward the screen. ERASURE: 40% The longer this fight dragged on, the more crucial information would disappear with it. Alister forced

himself upright, breathing much harder now. His right arm was nearly useless, so he shifted his sword into his left hand. “Viktor’s security detail...” he said between breaths. “They turned on you. I get it now.” Leonidas’s expression changed. “What...? How could you possibly...” “I was Intelligence,” Alister cut in. “Far more than you’ll ever be, you fraud.” He laughed weakly.

Leonidas roared and attacked again. The fight resumed, but Alister was slower now. His movements had lost some of their sharpness, partly because of the injury and partly because he simply didn’t have the energy left. Even so, what remained was controlled. Every movement had purpose.

Leonidas jabbed forward. Alister shifted just enough to avoid the worst of it and drove his blade into Leonidas’s leg. Leonidas snarled and swung again. Alister caught the strike, redirected it down the length of his own blade, and sent the force right back toward him. For the first time, Leonidas was clearly on the back foot.

“Hey... bro... You know what I learned after all this demotion nonsense?” Alister said, barely managing to stay standing. “Like I care!” Leonidas charged again. Alister gave him a tired smile. “I’m not as clever as I thought.” Leonidas hesitated for only a fraction of a second. “And there are people around every corner who can humble me.” Alister moved. With what little strength he had left, he flashed past Leonidas and delivered one final strike. Leonidas froze. Then he collapsed to the floor. “No...” he muttered weakly. “Impossible... I... You’re nothing...”

Alister looked down at him, barely able to remain upright. “Well, nothing just beat your ass.” He gave a strained laugh. “What does that say about you?” He limped toward the console. ERASURE: 49% Alister slammed his hand against the controls and stopped the process. The number froze. Forty-nine percent. He stared at it for a moment, breathing heavily. Then his legs finally gave out. Alister collapsed beside the console.

Portly and Mohawk had made it to Purrmont Tower, and they hit it hard without warning. Thanks to the Porcelli family’s connections to the Court, they knew the back entrances and access

tunnels well enough to bypass most of the obvious defenses. Before long, the men guarding the tower were sprawled across the floor behind them as they forced their way into one of the secured rooms.

Ms. Porvaine was sitting inside, looking more bored than frightened. She stood with complete confidence the moment they entered. “You’re late. I expected you much earlier, Mr. Preasely,” she said calmly.

Portly raised an eyebrow. “You were expecting us, ma’am? Of course you were. Everyone knows you’re the real mind of the Court.” He bowed slightly. “Honestly, I’m more surprised you know my name, Ms. Porvaine.” Mohawk made no such effort, even after Portly gave him a sharp kick. “Indeed,” Porvaine replied. “Though I’ll admit I only took notice of you rather recently. The poor Don should have listened to you. Now, quickly. I trust you’ve freed the others?” Both men nodded. “Very good. Though I hope you didn’t make too much of a spectacle for Leopold. He deserves to be humiliated after this blunder.” She stepped past them as though the tower already belonged to her. “Both of you will be rewarded handsomely. Let us be off.” Mohawk watched her walk past with a look that made it obvious he didn’t appreciate being spoken to like hired help. Portly leaned toward him. “Hold your tongue. We’re gonna need her to work her magic unless you feel like going to jail with the rest of Marrow.” Mohawk sighed heavily. “Yeah, yeah.” Then he followed.

Chapter 69: Brothers

The city was still in shambles. Fighting had broken out across Porta Nexus, and at this point it was difficult for anyone to tell who was actually winning. Marrow itself had scattered across the city, dividing the Port's attention in countless directions at once. The Reaper still appeared across the holographic displays, ranting about revolution and the future of the Port, but something about this speech felt different. The others had carried more weight. This one sounded almost like he was filling time, waiting for some particular moment to arrive while making sure he could still claim he had been part of the battle without actually stepping onto the field himself.

Bram and Gram stood across from one another beneath one of those displays. Bram glanced up at Viktor's image for a moment before looking back at his brother. "You actually buy into this? He's just spouting gibberish." Gram looked up as well, his expression souring. "Yeah, he kinda is at this point... where the fuck is he?" he admitted. Then his eyes returned to Bram. "But it doesn't matter. Our grievance is real, even if he's fucking around." Bram's expression softened, more sad than angry. "What grievance, Gram? Our family left. You should've gone with them." "That is the grievance!"

Gram spat back. Bram barely reacted. “With who exactly? The Port? New Civics? Heskal? Did you forget who blew Civics up in the first place?” He paused, studying him. “Or maybe your issue is... with me?”

Gram’s fists tightened. “You don’t think I know all that? You’re damn right I have a problem with you. You defended them. You claimed you were helping. You promised, and they were still pushed out. Even if they did it willingly, I blame all of you. You all need to pay!” Bram stared at him for a moment. “And how exactly do we pay for our... crimes?” he asked solemnly. Gram looked down. For once, he didn’t seem to have an immediate answer now that someone was actually asking him to explain it. “Join us, Bram,” he finally said. “We’ll burn down Civics. Then the Home Office. Maybe Reaper is full of shit, but we can still make this Port worth a damn.” There was almost something pleading in his voice, even if it was clear he didn’t really expect Bram to say yes.

“And kill and maim countless people in the process,” Bram answered. “People just like our family. Would Grandma want that? Would our ancestors want that?” His voice stayed calm, but the anger underneath it was starting to show. “Our ancestors ruled this world,” Gram fired back. “Now we’re lucky if anyone even lets us be part of it.” Bram stared at him in disbelief. “How can you even believe that? Morvin was half Nexian. Cassian is an Administrator. They aren’t the only ones either. King Nexus wanted us to mix with everyone else. That’s why he opened the portals in the first place.”

“Morvin? That’s your fucking answer? One half-Nexian made Chancellor, so everything’s fine? I’m tired of this historical bullshit,” Gram snapped. “Who gives a damn about some king who died a thousand years ago? He was wrong.” He raised his fists and cracked his knuckles. “And I can see this whole talking thing was a long shot anyway.” Bram raised an eyebrow. “No offense, bro... but did you forget when we were kids? You didn’t beat me once in the ring.” He sighed. Gram punched him in the stomach with everything he had. Bram’s eyes widened as the blow knocked him completely off his feet and sent him crashing onto his back. “A lot can change in fifteen years,” Gram said with a smirk.

Bram slowly pushed himself upright, much more cautious now. “I guess I was wrong to underestimate you.” He settled into a stance, though there was no enthusiasm in it. “But that doesn’t change the fact that I don’t want to fight you.” Gram swung anyway. Bram brought his fists up almost instinctively, his body remembering something his mind hadn’t thought about in years. Their late father had put both of them into a boxing league when they were young, and the stance came back to him as naturally as breathing. “Gram, I...” he tried to say, only for another torrent of punches to cut him off. Bram kept his arms raised, protecting his face as blow after blow hammered against his guard.

“Listen to me!” Bram shouted, still refusing to hit back. Gram drove a fist into his stomach. Once, then twice, then again. Bram stumbled backward, breath catching in his throat. This was different. Gram wasn’t just angry anymore. He could actually hurt him. “I have nothing more to say to you!” Gram shouted. Bram lowered his guard slightly, finally taking him more seriously. Gram jabbed forward, but Bram slipped to the right and punched him across the face. The hit was restrained, but there was only so much Bram could hold back. Gram staggered, blood running from his lip. “You still hit like a truck,” Gram muttered with a smirk. “Yeah...” Bram’s expression hardened. “Well, I don’t want to have to run you over.”

Gram answered with another punch. “Stop looking down on me!” Bram recognized the motion immediately. It was Gram’s favorite punch when they were kids. He had thrown it the same way every single time, and Bram instinctively moved in the direction he always had. This time, Gram changed it. At the last second he shifted his weight, drove an uppercut into Bram’s jaw, then followed with a rapid barrage of punches before Bram could recover. Bram was completely thrown off. “You really thought I wouldn’t fix that habit?!” Gram shouted as he laid into him. His punches didn’t have Bram’s raw power, but they were faster, more aggressive, and relentless. By the time Bram managed to create distance, bruises were already spreading across his body. He dropped to one knee, groaning as he tried to catch his breath. “You’ve... gotten strong,” Bram admitted, and there was almost pride in his voice.

Gram didn’t care about the praise. He punched him again. Bram hadn’t expected it and fell backward hard, dazed on the ground for a moment before slowly forcing himself back up. Gram stood there breathing heavily, staring at him with an expression that looked more wounded than triumphant. “Why do you get to stay...?” he muttered. Bram froze. His expression softened. “Gram... is that what this is...” But Gram didn’t let him finish. A jab came first, followed immediately by a cross. Something in Bram finally snapped.

He slammed a fist into Gram, then another, then another. Gram raised his guard, but Bram tore through it with sheer strength. Every punch landed harder than several of Gram’s put together, and all the anger Bram had been trying to bury came rushing out at once. For a few seconds he stopped seeing his little brother in front of him. He only saw someone trying to hurt him. Bram raised his fist again, ready to bring it down. Then he stopped. His breathing was ragged, his hand trembling as he held it there. Slowly, he lowered it. He remembered his restraint.

Both of them stood again, barely recognizable beneath the bruises, breathing heavily as they stared each other down. “Are we done?!” Bram shouted. “NO!” Gram charged. The fight was slower now. Rawer. Neither of them had much strength left, and whatever technique they had started with was disappearing with it. They beat each other senseless while the city seemed to do the same around them. Every punch felt like it matched another explosion in the distance, another building breaking, another piece of Porta Nexus tearing itself apart. Gram landed one. Bram answered with another. At this point, they were barely even defending themselves, just standing there and taking turns hitting each other because neither of them knew how to stop. “Gram...” Bram said, tears gathering in his eyes as he threw another punch. “Bram!” Gram shouted back, answering with two of his own.

They were both swaying now. Either of them could have fallen at any moment. A few more punches would do it. Bram leaned forward and threw one last blow. His fist connected. Gram went limp. Bram caught him before he hit the ground and fell to his knees with him, cradling his brother in

his arms. Both of their faces were swollen and bruised almost beyond recognition. “We have to stop this...” Bram whispered, struggling to stay conscious. “This madness...” Then he collapsed beside him.

Chapter 70: A Dream, A Woman's Hope

The battle was reaching its peak. The Port was slowly beginning to regain ground, but from where Darla stood, she could see just how much of an uphill battle they still faced. She had nearly reached City Hall, cutting through everyone who stood in her path, but when she finally arrived, she was horrified by what she found. Bodies were scattered everywhere, belonging to every faction. Some weren't combatants at all. The Anarchy Men and the masked officers of New Civics were still locked in battle, each side fighting with such hatred that it was difficult to imagine either of them stopping. One grievance fed another, just like Gram had said.

Darla stopped. Her tail went still and her ears drooped lower. "Stop," she said, but no one heard her. A few Anarchy Men charged in her direction, and she did her best to put them down without seriously hurting them. "Stop," she said again, louder this time, but still no one listened. She grabbed at her head as she watched neighbors killing one another. Tears started forming in her eyes. This was too much. The entire city was suffering the same way, and standing there in the middle of it, she could almost feel all of that pain pressing down on her at once. Every poor soul who had died seemed to be

begging for someone to do something, anything, to avenge them. That anger only created more anger, more people demanding someone else pay. “Stop,” she said once more. Still nothing.

Darla finally exhaled, planted her feet, and barked as loudly as she possibly could. “STOP!” The word exploded outward like a wave of power, startling even her. For a moment, it almost felt as though the entire city had heard it and stopped just to find out where it came from. Everyone across the battlefield froze and turned toward her. Darla stood there stunned by the sudden silence, even though it was exactly what she had wanted. She could already feel the moment beginning to slip away. It wouldn’t last. She needed to say something before everyone remembered why they had been trying to kill each other.

She took a deep breath. “Don’t you see what’s happening?” Darla shouted. “You’re fighting each other. Killing each other. For what? Because someone convinced you it was necessary?” No one interrupted her. “Where are they now? Are they bleeding for you?” She pointed toward the hologram of the Reaper still droning on above them, but his words were completely drowned out by Darla’s voice. “Porta Nexus is supposed to be different. You’re supposed to be different. You’re neighbors. Citizens. You’re the people who... come together when we really need each other.” Her voice caught for a moment. “That’s what my father believed. That’s what he died for.” She stopped herself. This wasn’t about her. If she went too far down that path, she would lose what she was trying to say.

Darla cleared her throat and looked across both sides of the battlefield. “So please... I’m begging you. Stop fighting. Take off your masks. And I don’t just mean the Anarchy Men. Civics too. Look at the person you’re fighting and see that they’re part of this city too.” “You think we’re just going to let this go?” one of the Anarchy Men shouted. Darla thought about that for a moment. Asking them to simply forget everything that had happened would be too much, and maybe they had every right to refuse. Her expression hardened as she shifted into a confident fighting stance.

“If you have to fight, then fight the people who actually did this to you.” She looked across the

crowd. “And if you’re still not convinced... then I’ll fight every last one of you myself.” She meant it.

One of the Anarchy Men slowly stepped closer, his fist clenched, but there was no aggression left in the movement. He looked conflicted more than anything. “How am I supposed to let go of this pain?” he asked. “How can you expect me to?” Darla’s expression softened. She relaxed her stance and slowly reached out her hand. “I can’t promise this city will never fall. I can’t promise bad things won’t happen again.” Her eyes moved across the battlefield. “But I can promise that every time it does... we’ll help each other stand again.”

Silence settled over City Hall. No one resumed fighting. One of the Anarchy Men slowly reached up and removed his mask. Then another did the same. The New Civics officers seemed almost shocked that Darla’s words had worked at all. Most of them still looked uncertain, but eventually one of them reached for his own mask and pulled it away. An Anarchy Man stared at him. “Jeremy?” The Civics officer froze. “David...?” They stared at each other in complete disbelief. “We were about to kill each other,” Jeremy said quietly.

That was the real trigger. More masks began coming off on both sides. Faces emerged from beneath them, and just like Darla had said, they were people they knew. Neighbors. Old friends. People who had worked beside one another, eaten together, passed each other on the same streets, all swept into fighting by forces much larger than themselves. Some simply stared at each other in horror. A few began to cry. Others actually embraced. “I’m sorry, man,” one Civics operative whispered as he pulled an Anarchy Man into a hug.

A few of them still refused to accept it. It was only a handful, but they tried to resume the fight anyway, forcing the newly unmasked people around them to pull them back. Some even stepped between former enemies to restrain the ones who were still too angry to stop. One Civics officer and one Anarchy Man managed to break through entirely and rushed toward Darla, only to hesitate for the briefest moment when they realized they were charging her side by side. They looked at each other in

confusion, almost disturbed by their sudden unity. Darla didn't give either of them time to reconsider. She sheathed her blade, stepped forward, and knocked them both to the ground without killing them.

The others quickly moved in to restrain and tend to them. One of the Civics operatives looked around at everything that had happened and suddenly seemed to realize another problem. "Oh gods... what have we done?" He rubbed at his head. "I'm not saying this wasn't right, but... we're both screwed. Legally, I mean." Darla smiled, her tail finally beginning to wag again. "Then I'll fight for you too." One of the Anarchy Men looked toward her. "What are you going to do now?" "I'll keep moving. Go wherever the city needs me. The battle isn't over yet. Maybe I'll even find the Reaper himself." Then something occurred to her. "Where's Cleatus?" One of the Civics officers looked toward the east. "He finally made a choice."

Darla didn't completely understand what he meant, but something about the way he said it made her smile. She nodded in approval before looking back across both groups. "Can I trust all of you to stay safe when I leave?" There was still a hint of worry in her voice, but this time both sides nodded with real determination. Now that so many of them had seen friends, neighbors, and loved ones beneath the opposing masks, the fighting suddenly felt much harder to justify. Darla took one last look around before walking away proudly.

Elsewhere, Caldron Street was burning. Crossbone Remnants tore through the neighborhood, setting buildings ablaze as they dragged Eleanor from her home. "Heard a certain Captain had a wife around here," one of them laughed. "Can't wait to see the look on his face when he finds you mangled and broken just like him." Another tilted his head. "Does he even have a face anymore?" Before anyone could answer, they heard something approaching. A low, heavy thumping. Footsteps. They all turned toward the street, but the direction the sound came from was completely engulfed in flames. A shadow appeared inside the fire and kept walking. Cleatus stepped through the flames as though they weren't there. "You want to see my face?" he asked coldly. The Remnants immediately lost their nerve.

“Did he just...?” One of them pulled Eleanor closer and pressed a knife against her throat. “Don’t come any closer!” Cleatus didn’t even let him finish the threat. A grappling line fired from his mechanical arm, buried itself in the man, and violently yanked him away from Eleanor. She covered her eyes before Cleatus crushed the man’s skull between his hands, then dashed forward before the others could react, planting himself directly between them and his wife. The Level Five blade came out, and the remaining Remnants never stood a chance.

Cleatus cut them apart with brutal efficiency before carefully guiding Eleanor away from the immediate fighting. Then he looked down the street and saw more shapes approaching through the smoke. Hundreds more. “It’s not over yet,” he said. “I’m sorry.” Then he ran toward them. “They were right! He’s here! Get him!” It became obvious almost immediately that a huge portion of Marrow’s remaining forces had been sent specifically to isolate Cleatus and kill him. “How foolish.” He hit them like a force of nature. Blades swung. Guns fired. Cleatus blocked, parried, and cut through them one after another, but there were simply too many. Even someone like him couldn’t fight forever.

Eventually they began wearing him down. One strike took off an arm, and he kept fighting. A blade stabbed through his stomach, and he tore it away and continued forward with the weapon still buried inside him as though it meant nothing. Then, eventually, there was silence. Eleanor slowly looked over the ruined street, terrified of what she was going to find. Cleatus emerged from the smoke with weapons still embedded throughout his body, pulling them out one by one as he walked toward her, each step slower than the last. Then he dropped to his knees and fell face-first onto the pavement. But there was no one left behind him. The remnants of the Remnants had been almost completely wiped out by one man.

“I didn’t want you to see me like this,” Cleatus admitted weakly. Eleanor rushed over and turned him onto his back, terrified by the damage. “I’m not scared,” she said, her hands shaking as she looked over him. “You saved me. How could I be scared? We need to get you to Health and...” “I can’t

give you children anymore." She stopped. "What?" "I can't give you anything anymore," Cleatus continued. "I can't be who I was." "Cleatus... you think I would think less of you because..." She lightly punched him, careful not to actually hurt him. "You idiot. I did want all of that. I'm not going to lie to you. But I love you. Even if you can't give those things to me anymore. Don't ever think I wouldn't." Her voice began to shake. "Please... I've been waiting so long. Just come back to me. I don't care if you aren't the same anymore." Cleatus looked away. "Cleatus was lazy," he muttered. "He made dumb jokes." "And I loved that about him," Eleanor answered immediately. "But you know what else he was? Dedicated. Maybe he didn't always show it the best way, but I saw what he did for me. I see what he's still doing for me. And I still love him."

She slowly moved one hand toward his face and carefully removed his mask. The scars beneath it were severe. Half of his mouth was exposed in a way that made it obvious he couldn't safely leave the mask off for long. Respirators had been built directly into his face, and his eyes no longer had lids to close over them. Cleatus immediately looked away. "Look at me," Eleanor demanded. He obeyed. "When all of this is over, and you finally get some real, proper care, we're going to Eventide." Cleatus stared at her. "To retire?" he asked weakly. "No." She smiled through the tears. "Just a small vacation. Long enough to show you exactly how much I still love you." She leaned forward and kissed the place where his lips would have been. When she pulled away, Cleatus remained silent for a moment before finally answering, very quietly, "Very well."

Chapter 71: The Endgame

There was no doubt about it now. Special Operations had stopped several of the major attacks themselves while the rest of the Port fought back everywhere else. Marrow was losing ground, people, and supporters. Only scattered pockets of Remnants remained, along with a few Anarchy Men, the lizards, and a handful of unfortunate souls still trapped inside the Crime Sector.

Inside the Kinryū-kai manor, countless bodies littered the grounds. The forces surrounding the estate had finally been drawn away, leaving only Masa, Ryugi, and a handful of his top enforcers standing. Cynthia and Lester were there as well, both looking at each other with uncertainty. “Was it really okay that you helped us?” Cynthia asked. Masa glanced toward her. “You provided services to my men for years. It was the least I could do.” Cynthia frowned, still not entirely understanding. Her ears twitching. “But... you’ve seen our cat features now. You...” she started. Masa laughed. “Were spies? Yes. You may have fooled some of the gangs, but not the Kinryū-kai. Lady Mikako herself saw to your protection.”

“Cynthia...” Lester said, pressing against his wound. “He saved us. Don’t push it.” He

swallowed hard. “You know how close we came to actually being crucified. They already had the crosses made.” Cynthia’s face went pale as the memory caught up with her. “Right...” she muttered.

Masa looked out across the ruined courtyard, noticing the sudden absence of enemies beyond the walls. “Now is the best time. Leave before it’s too late.” Cynthia blinked. “Really? Just like that?” “Yes.” Masa glanced toward Ryugi. “I only ask that you take young Ryugi with you.”

“What? I’m not leaving, boss!” Ryugi snapped defiantly. A green-haired woman stepped out from the manor. Ryugi froze. “Big sis... you...” She punched him in the stomach before he could finish.

“You’re too young to be stubborn like these old bastards. Let’s go.” Ryugi folded over with a groan as she hoisted him over her shoulder and started walking away. “Good luck, Lady Sakura!” Masa called after her almost casually. Cynthia stared after them, completely thrown off by the entire exchange. “Wait, um... is this really okay?” “Just go,” Lester said, already following Sakura. Cynthia hesitated one last time before hurrying after them.

In another section of the city, the lizards had been almost completely singled out. Like the other factions, they had been sent off to cause destruction, but the way they had been positioned felt different, almost as though someone had deliberately pushed them into their own corner of the battle.

Before they could continue, something massive crashed down in front of them. The Dragon. He looked different now, dressed in finer clothing than before, but the sight of him alone was enough to make the lizards recoil in terror. “The... you...” one of them stammered. “Monster...”

“So you believe,” the Dragon replied calmly. “And I’ll admit there is truth in that. But I do not cause pain and death without reason.” “You... you killed Mathias!” another shouted. “How could we ever...” “Afraid that isn’t the case.” A hooded man stepped forward beside the Dragon. The lizards turned toward him as he slowly lowered his hood. Mathias. Every one of them froze. “But... Reaper said...” “That bastard tricked us all,” Mathias said, adjusting his monocle. “He didn’t even try to save

me.” The lizards stared between him and the Dragon in disbelief. “And you...” one of them said with disgust. “Even if that’s true... you’re with him?” Mathias hesitated. “I had the same reaction when I saw him.” He glanced toward the Dragon. “But then I heard him out. I’m not going to pretend he didn’t cause our kind suffering... but perhaps...” Mathias paused. “Perhaps he had a point.”

The lizards remained tense. “Won’t you at least hear it?” For a long moment, nobody moved. Then one of them lowered his weapon. “Fine. This battle is fruitless anyway.” He looked toward the others. “But we’re not just joining you.” The rest slowly nodded in agreement. The Dragon gave a small, approving nod. “I would expect nothing less.” Then he turned and began leading them away.

Darla walked toward the Crime Sector, still trying to process everything that had happened, when Jax’s van suddenly pulled up beside her. The window rolled down and Jax leaned toward her with a smirk. “Need a ride?” Darla returned the look. “Yes.” She climbed inside, only to stop when she noticed Nix sitting there. To her, he looked like some random child Jax had picked up off the street in the middle of a citywide battle. Nix immediately glared back at her. “What?” Darla stared at him for another second before looking at Jax. “Do I want to know?” “Probably better that you didn’t ask,” Jax admitted. “Well, now I need to know,” Alister said from further inside the van, still looking badly wounded. Darla glanced over at him. “Do we know where the others are?” she asked. “Yes. Fiora made contact. We’re heading for her now. Intelligence is back up and directing things too,” Alister said proudly.

They stopped near an alley a short time later and found Fiora struggling to carry Bram over her shoulder. She was much smaller than him, so the fact that she was managing it at all was something of a miracle. Alister blinked when he saw them. “You both look like death. Did you fight a paper shredder?” Fiora and Bram looked at him without much of a response before climbing into the van. “So where are we going now?” Fiora asked once they were moving again.

“Where else? To beat the shit out of Viktor.” Jax said. Bram glanced around the van. “Um... I’m

not saying I don't want to, but..." His eyes moved over the group. Half of them looked like they were barely holding themselves together. Alister was actively panicking as one of his wounds reopened and he struggled to patch it back up. Nix laughed from his seat. "Ha! You losers are gonna die." Everyone turned toward him at once. "Who is this kid?" "I said don't ask," Jax replied as he kept driving.

Viktor stared down at the battle map with growing anger. "No... no, we haven't reached the climax yet." Dots representing his forces were disappearing one after another while the Port's units began closing in around the Crime Sector. The entire board was collapsing much faster than he wanted. Behind him, Calva began to stir. She was still badly injured, but somehow not nearly as mangled as she had been when she first returned. "Viktor..." she said weakly. He turned toward her immediately, blinking in surprise. "You look... do you have some kind of healing factor?" "I don't know..." Calva admitted. "It still hurts, but..."

Viktor's expression softened. He started pacing around the room, clearly torn between what he was seeing on the map and the girl slowly recovering behind him. "The whole plan is going to shit too soon." Calva looked toward the display and saw what he meant. "It's... not too late to back out," she said nervously, knowing exactly what he had been preparing for. Viktor stopped. His fist clenched. For a moment, he actually seemed to consider it.

Then he turned toward her. "You know what? Sure. Fuck this. Let's get out of here." A smile spread across his face. "Not like we can do much with the scraps we've got left anyway. What did you have in mind?" Calva froze. "Oh... um..." She clearly hadn't expected him to actually agree. Then her eyes lit up as all the possibilities suddenly hit her at once. "I was reading about this place called Callosuma. They have gladiator battles every day, and they rent rooms to people who want to live there for, um..." She hesitated. "Well, I forgot how much, but we can afford it, right? We have plenty of money." "Alright, fine," Viktor said. "But are you healed enough to warp there?" Calva's eyes shifted uncertainly. "I... think I can manage at least one more." His smile changed, just slightly. "Well, come

on then. Let's go!" "Wait, right now?" Calva asked. "Don't you want to grab a few things first?"

"Nope. Now is fine. It's all useless junk at the end of the day." "Oh... okay." Calva reached out her hand. Viktor took it. Then, unexpectedly, he leaned forward and kissed her. Calva's face immediately flushed. She looked down with a soft smile. "Thank you..." she whispered. She pressed the button. "Goodbye, Calva." Her smile vanished. "Huh?" Viktor shoved her away. "Wait..." She reached for him in shock, but the warp had already taken hold. Calva disappeared. Viktor remained where he was, staring at the empty space for a moment. Then he looked down at the mask. "I can't let this go," he muttered. "Nothing else matters." His expression hardened again. "It's fine. I've caused enough chaos. I'll just rewrite the script a little." He picked up the mask and placed it over his face once more before approaching the camera.

"Hello, everyone." The broadcast spread across Porta Nexus. "Glad we all got to have a bit of fun playing revolution together, but it looks like our little game has finally come to an end." He laughed. People all across the city stopped what they were doing to watch. Something about this speech felt different. "What does he mean, playing?" one of the Anarchy Men asked. Viktor continued. "You know... you'd think it would've been harder. Convincing all of you to dance to the beat of my drum. But it really wasn't. Every single one of you was desperate for someone to see you. For someone to give a shit about your little problems that, frankly, nobody really cares about. All I had to do was tell you what you wanted to hear, and you clung to every word like it was some magic spell."

The fighting across the city slowed even further. "The hell is he talking about?" someone muttered. "You really thought I was loyal to some long-dead empire I was never even part of? That I gave a shit about the plight of some losers who lost their home?" Viktor laughed again. "Oh no, racism! I played all of you for fools, and you fell for it." His tone became colder. "No. In my eyes, everyone in this city is scum. Always has been. You can dress it up however you want, pretend this place is some beautiful symbol of unity, but underneath it all you're exactly what I always thought you were."

He paused, letting the silence build.

"But I'm not saying all this just to say it. I want you all to know who I really am. Not some other Reaper. Not some dead man's legacy. I used that bastard to get here. I used his name, his mask, his reputation, all of it. But in reality..." His hand slowly rose toward the mask. The digital outfit around him began to flicker away. He dragged the moment out as long as possible. This was it.

His moment. The one he had been building toward from the beginning. The moment where everyone would finally see the loser they forgot, the nobody they threw away, the man who had spent all this time making sure they would never be able to forget what he had done to them.

But that moment never came. NoxLux appeared out of nowhere and tackled Viktor before he could complete the reveal, both bodies slamming into him and dragging him away from the camera as Elaina rushed forward and shut the broadcast off. "What are you... no! That was the most crucial moment!" Viktor shouted desperately, struggling beneath them. "Oh, really?" Cassian said as he calmly dragged a chair into position and sat down. "Thought that might be the case... Jace Branick." Viktor froze. "How do you..." "Know you?" Cassian leaned back. "I won't lie, I don't. Even if we grew up in the same neighborhood. But everyone leaves a trail, you know. Even dead men."

"Then you know what it's like," Viktor said quickly, already trying to twist the conversation back toward himself. "How could you pick..." "No." Cassian cut him off immediately. "I'm not that foolish. I've seen your playbook." Elaina started searching the room for anything useful while NoxLux kept Viktor pinned to the floor. "It may be true that we started in the same place," Cassian continued, "but you and the Vultures ran around destroying your own neighborhood while claiming you were changing the world." Viktor glared at him. "And that makes you better? Vincent was a better man than any of you." Cassian sighed. "From everything I've seen, that's your problem. The Vultures protected some people. They gave children like you somewhere to go. But they were violent toward everyone else. Even at their noblest, they were still hurting people. And you're so desperate to recreate

something that happened two decades ago that you did all of this?"

Viktor laughed, though there was very little humor left in it. "You ruined it," he said, the anger in his voice suddenly quiet. Cassian stared at him. "So all the suffering doesn't matter, then? Because the big bad Viktor Scathe didn't get his dramatic reveal?" Viktor's expression tightened. "I don't remember you, Jace," Cassian continued, his voice softer now but no less firm. "But that isn't because you were nothing. It's because there were hundreds of us." Viktor stopped struggling for a moment. Cassian leaned forward slightly, studying him. "But you decided that meant causing more suffering. A child screaming into the void." His eyes briefly moved toward the empty space where Calva had vanished. "That woman seemed rather taken with you. You could've gone with her." He shook his head. "Talk about keeping the cycle going."

Cassian stood and leaned closer, looking Viktor directly in the eyes. Viktor glared back with more hatred than he had shown almost anyone, and for such a petty reason. Cassian had denied him the moment he had spent years imagining. Before either of them could continue, every screen in the command room suddenly flashed back to life. Cassian turned toward them in confusion while NoxLux kept Viktor pinned. Heskal appeared on the broadcast, standing behind a podium completely unharmed, as though nothing had ever happened to him. Marcell and Valeria stood beside him. Marcell, at least, looked considerably more nervous than Heskal did.

Viktor went completely still. "What...?" The anger drained from his face, replaced by confusion and then something closer to terror. "We... we killed him. How is he..." Cassian looked back at him, equally confused. "What are you talking about? He's been in his office this whole time." Viktor stared at him in disbelief. "No. You're wrong. Calva took him. We chopped his head clean off!" Elaina looked toward Cassian with the same bewildered expression. Neither of them had any idea what Viktor was talking about.

From the podium, Heskal began to speak. "The Crime Sector has existed within Porta Nexus for

far too long. It should never have been allowed to persist in the first place. After this brazen attack, we no longer have any justification to hold back. The Port does not accept documents signed under coercion, and it does not negotiate with terrorists." Marcell shifted uneasily beside him while Valeria remained at attention. Heskal raised one hand toward the city behind him. "By order of the Port, all forces are order to lay waste to the Crime Sector."

"What?" Cassian, Elaina, and Viktor said almost simultaneously. Cassian's confusion lasted only a second before his expression changed. "Run." NoxLux released Viktor immediately. Cassian and Elaina turned for the exit with both bodies following close behind, abandoning Viktor where he lay. Whatever questions they had about Heskal, whatever Viktor had been about to reveal, none of it mattered anymore. If that order was actually carried out, there would soon be nothing left of the Crime Sector at all.

Chapter 72: Erasure

Marcell blinked in disbelief as Heskal's broadcast ended. "Wait... what? You don't mean..." "Complete bombardment," Heskal elaborated. "Like there never was a Crime Sector." Marcell stared at him. "But sir... sure, a lot of people there aren't exactly upstanding, but civilians were..." "They joined a hostile state. Therefore, they are no longer part of Porta Nexus. That is, if any of them remain at all." Heskal reached toward a button sealed beneath a glass cover and pressed it without hesitation. Marcell's face went pale. "Sir... are you... that's genocide." Heskal barely reacted. "It's justice."

On the ground, Brutus stared at the order coming through his comms in shock. "They want us to do what? Their forces are already on the back foot. We can finish them easily. Let us handle this." "Follow your orders," the voice on the other end replied. Above the Crime Sector, the entirety of Aviation's fleet was already moving into position. Lacy flew up toward the command ship after noticing something was wrong. "What is happening?" Gobriella was already fighting with the steering controls, pulling against a wheel that refused to respond.

"The controls aren't responding. Someone took control remotely after A1R refused to follow the

order," she explained, motioning toward the powered-down lieutenant in the corner. Lacy stared at him. "No..." She already understood what was about to happen, and worse, that there was nothing she could do to stop it. Across Porta Nexus, every ship, every cannon, every weapon mounted on every station turned toward the Crime Sector. Then, in a single moment, an entire world's worth of artillery opened fire.

Cassian and the others barely made it past the barricade before the bombardment began. Even escaping the Crime Sector wasn't enough to make them safe, as chunks of debris and shattered structures were hurled into the surrounding districts by the force of the explosions. They ran for cover while, elsewhere, Jax slammed on the brakes and violently veered the van aside, almost driving straight into the chaos. Everyone piled out and stared in horror as the Port unloaded everything it had into what amounted to only a few districts. Back at the government complex, Marcell dropped to his knees. "How could you... do something so awful?" he asked, no longer able to hold his tongue. Heskal didn't answer. He simply watched, seemingly satisfied. Valeria appeared just as unmoved.

For what felt like hours, the people of Porta Nexus could do nothing but watch. There was no hiding it. Even from miles away, the destruction consumed the horizon as the Crime Sector was systematically reduced to rubble. Eventually, the guns finally fell silent. The ships stopped firing. A1R suddenly powered back on. "Airry!" Lacy cried, throwing her arms around him. Gabriella looked down at the controls as they came back online. "We have control again," she said in relief. On the ground, Brutus's communicator crackled. "Move in," Heskal ordered. Brutus stared across what remained. "There's nothing left..." Even as a hardened soldier who had seen more battles than most people could imagine, he looked genuinely shaken. "There could be stragglers," Heskal replied coldly. "Take care of them." Brutus tightened his paws. Everything about him said he didn't want to obey. "Yes... sir."

"Please, let us move in," Lucy urged over the comms. "No," Heskal replied. "Focus on Port Authority personnel. Any survivors inside the Crime Sector will be dealt with." Lucy slowly slid out of

her chair and onto her knees. “Why did I think... joining the Port would save lives?” she whispered to herself. “Maybe I should just... cut ties and stay on HOME.” A voice came through her comm. “There are still people out there who need saving, Administrator,” Crucible reminded her. Lucy stayed still for another moment before forcing herself back up. “Right. I’m coming.”

The Military moved into what remained of the Crime Sector, with Special Operations following behind them. There really weren’t many survivors. Those who had somehow lived through the bombardment were often missing limbs, burned beyond recognition, or too far gone to even speak. Some begged to be spared. Others could only lie among the ruins and wait. One Crossbone Remnant soldier stood almost untouched amid the devastation, backing away from the towering Honey Badger Warden approaching him. He might truly have been the last remaining soldier of an army that had once contained trillions. “Please,” he begged. “Let me go.” The Warden stared down at him coldly. “After all this... now you want mercy? Sorry, buddy.”

Somewhere deeper in the ruins, Viktor stumbled forward. One arm was gone. Half his face was burned beyond recognition. He could barely keep himself upright, and ironically, he looked more like the Crossbone Reaper now than he ever had while wearing the mask. “I’m not done...” he muttered. “I’ll start over. I’ll...” His vision went black, and he collapsed face-first into the rubble. After a moment, footsteps approached him. Calva had found her way back. She knelt beside him and gently lifted his head as he slowly regained consciousness. Tears were already building in her eyes. “Why... why would you lie to me?” she asked. Viktor struggled to breathe. “Don’t be stupid... You never meant anything to me. Just... a tool.” Calva frowned, then carefully pulled him up and carried him across her back. She was still injured herself, but compared to him, her wounds seemed almost insignificant.

“What are you... doing?” Viktor groaned. “I’m already dead... Calva.” “I know,” she said through tears. “Let me go... Get out of here.” “Shut up. I don’t want to hear any more of your lies.” Her voice was harsher now. Slowly, she carried him toward a wall that had somehow survived the

bombardment and gently lowered him beside it. Then she sat down on the side where he still had an arm, took his hand, and rested her head against his shoulder. Viktor stared at her weakly. “Why are you still here?” “Because I love you,” Calva answered bluntly. He gave a broken laugh. “I was manipulating you from the start too, you know.” She didn’t answer. She simply remained there with him in silence.

After a while, Viktor began to cry. Only a little at first. “All of this...” His voice cracked. “And they won’t remember me. None of them will.” Calva’s grip tightened around his hand. She was quiet for several seconds before answering. “I’ll remember you, Jace.” Viktor slowly turned toward her. “Even if everyone else forgets, I never will.” She said it like it was the simplest fact in the world. His expression softened. “I see...” His head sank against her, and then he was gone. All the pain and misery he had caused finally ended with his death. Calva stayed there for another moment before leaning over and kissing him softly on the cheek one last time. Then she vanished.

Not long afterward, Special Operations found the body. Jax made Nix remain in the van while the others approached. Cassian was already there, standing over what remained of Jace Branick. He looked more solemn than he had during their confrontation, and for a while he didn’t even acknowledge the others. He simply stared down at the broken body. “I understand that all of this started because of him,” Cassian finally said. “And I understand that some of you may still want to set the record straight. Tell everyone exactly who Viktor Scathe really was.” He paused. “But as an investigator... personally, I think some crimes are better left unsolved.” He turned and started walking past them. Alister frowned. “You expect us to turn a blind eye to everything he’s done?” Cassian stopped for only a moment. “Not at all. Only remember that what he really wanted was recognition.” He glanced back at Viktor’s body. “I’ll let you decide whether he deserves it.” Then Cassian walked away without another word. It was over.

Epilogue

"Good morning, Multiverse," Aion said, noticeably calmer than usual. "It's been a week since the Marrow Collective made their move on the Port, and we are all recovering well. Now that I have... most of the facts, I'm here to deliver them to you." He adjusted the papers in front of him as the rest of the crew watched from the sidelines. "This Reaper... let's call him the Marrow Reaper. He seems to have manipulated people all throughout the Port, along with several off-world groups, toward a goal I can't say I fully understand. What I can tell you is that the result was terrorism, a failed revolution, and a city left bleeding. Thankfully, the Port was quick to respond, and Special Operations themselves dismantled much of the Marrow leadership along with the Reaper himself."

Aion paused for a moment before continuing. "As for who this new Reaper actually was? No one really knows. But perhaps that's for the best. Too often, the people responsible for horrible acts live on in infamy while their victims, and the people who stopped them, are barely remembered at all. So instead, I'd like to take a moment to acknowledge everyone who stood against this plot, and the unfortunate souls who lost their lives because of it." As he spoke, the symbols of each Port Authority

division appeared across the screen, followed by the names of those who had died during the fighting. Aion remained silent for several seconds, allowing the memorial to speak for itself before continuing.

"As for the Chancellor..." He started to speak, only to stop and glance awkwardly toward the side. "Right. Sorry again, everyone, for the late announcement. There was a recount." His energy suddenly returned. "And thanks to the work he was already doing, along with his handling of this crisis, there really wasn't much doubt about where the votes were going. Garrick has won in a landslide victory!" Aion announced with considerably more excitement. "Oh, and don't worry. Morvin may be a political figure, but he's currently confined to house arrest, with a trial coming soon." A small smirk crossed his face. "Anyway, that's all I have time for today. Aion Anderson, signing out!"

Darla watched the screen with a frown. "Recovering well... he didn't even mention the Crime Sector." Something about that left a bad taste in her mouth. Across the room, Bram stood over the stove, quietly stirring a pot. "Well, if Ally was here, he'd probably have some explanation," he said. "The hackers..." Fiora started from where she sat on the counter, but Darla immediately shushed her. "Aion's not one to hold back. Maybe he's saving it for next time... or Heskal has delayed him somehow." There was a slight unease in her voice as she said it. Bram didn't answer right away. He simply poured bowls for each of them, his eyes more solemn than usual. "Well... what's done is done." Fiora looked down at her bowl. "I know they were mostly bad people, but..." "Right," Darla said, taking a seat with them. "All we can do now is work hard and make sure nothing like that ever happens again."

Before they could talk about it any further, a loud explosion from the hallway nearly made Fiora drop the bowl she had already started drooling over. All three of them turned toward the door as smoke slowly drifted past the frame. "No... are you stupid? Why would you think that went there?" Jax growled from somewhere outside. "Why do I have to do this? This is grunt work," Nix groaned in response. Darla, Bram, and Fiora all poked their heads into the hallway, still not entirely sure who

exactly the kid was or why Jax had apparently decided he lived here now. “Because it’s grunt work,” Jax replied, offering absolutely no further explanation. Nix stared down at the mess in front of him. “These pipes are from the Stone Age.” “That’s why we’re replacing them,” Jax said. “You know...” Fiora whispered, “I really didn’t think Jax would somehow adopt a child after all this.” Jax immediately shot them a glare. All three disappeared back into the mess hall without another word.

At Purrmont Tower, the Triad had come together again as though nothing had happened. “All things considered, most of our assets were hardly touched... mostly,” Gedendra said, side-eyeing Leopold as he calmly sipped his wine. Portly approached the group and gave a polite bow. “Seems you have a guest.” “Oh, perfect timing. Mr. Preasly, send them in,” Agatha said, clearly already expecting whoever was waiting outside. Silas smirked. Leopold raised an eyebrow. “I don’t remember seeing anything about that in the...” Before he could finish, Alister stepped into the garden with Kloe and Lucien behind him. “Leopold Purrmont, you are under arrest by order of the Port,” Alister said confidently. “Excuse me?” Leopold nearly spat out his wine. Two operatives immediately moved forward and restrained him while the rest of the Triad simply watched, looking far less surprised than he did.

“What is the meaning of this?” Leopold demanded as he was pulled from his chair. “What are the charges?” “Collusion, extortion, money laundering... the list goes on,” Alister said, closing his eyes with a knowing smile. “On what grounds?” Leopold snapped. “We certainly have plenty of those,” Lucien replied. “Recordings of your dealings, financial records, and eyewitness testimony from Ms. Porvaine and the others.” Leopold’s expression twisted the moment he looked at him. “Lucien.” The name came out with enough disdain to suggest there was plenty of history behind it. Leopold turned back toward the rest of the Triad, only to find Silas already settling comfortably into his seat, clearly delighted by the entire spectacle. “You backstabbing... you sold me out to save yourselves.”

“You’ve made far too many mistakes,” Gedendra replied. “This generation of Purrmonts has

done more harm to the Court than any other. So we ask that you step down. Perhaps the next generation will prove worthy yet." His eyes moved toward Alister as he slammed his cane against the floor, as though the strike itself made the decision final. "No hard feelings," Silas added with a smirk.

"Thank you all for your cooperation," Alister said, turning toward them with a wink, and a bow. "But I'd watching your backs too." Agatha simply laughed. "I look forward to it." Without another word, the operatives dragged Leopold toward the waiting prison transport. Mirabell stood nearby with her guards, cheerfully waving as he was brought past. "Bye-bye, Daddy! Have fun in prison!" Leopold immediately started thrashing against the operatives. "How dare you do this to your own father! I made you! I own you!" Alister didn't react. He simply followed them around to the back of the transport, where Leonidas was already sitting restrained inside. The operatives shoved Leopold in beside him. "Sorry, Father, but... I can't say I care about your opinion anymore," Alister said as the doors began to close.

"You bastard son of mine! You'll pay for this! You'll..." Leopold continued shouting, but as the doors slowly sealed shut, something in his expression shifted. The fury drained away, replaced by something almost impossible to read. He looked at Alister one last time through the narrowing gap. "You outplayed me..." A faint smile crossed his face. "I'm... proud of you, son." Then the doors closed. Alister blinked in surprise, clearly not expecting that to be the last thing Leopold said to him. Kloe smiled at him, and after a moment the three of them climbed into the front of the transport. The vehicle lifted away from Purrmont Tower as workers below were already removing the Purrmont name from the building and replacing it with Porvaine.

"Right, now that that's taken care of..." Portly said, stepping forward and dropping to one knee before the Court. Mohawk made his way beside him much more reluctantly. "I have a certain proposal for this Court, if I may." Agatha leaned back in her seat, looking immediately interested. "We're listening." Portly smiled. "Porcelli, the Vultures, and most of the other gangs are finished. But I've got

plenty of other business opportunities in mind." Mohawk glanced sideways at him, already looking like he regretted agreeing to any of this. Portly's grin only widened. The Court exchanged looks among themselves, and judging by their expressions, they seemed to like what they were hearing.

Heskal sat at his desk working through documents as he always did when the air in the room suddenly shifted. A man in a gray jacket appeared beside the door and locked it before Heskal could react. Then, just as quickly, another man appeared behind him dressed in a purple suit. Heskal froze the moment he realized who it was. "Your little stunt in the Crime Sector was an overstep," the man said as he slowly paced behind him. Heskal's expression hardened. "It was necessary to gain more control over this world." "No. There is no need for more control. That does not serve our goals. You already control this city adequately. Any further meddling risks exposing us." He said. Heskal glanced back toward him. "And your operation with Trojan? You consider that worth being exposed?" The man paused. "Oh, so you know about that." A faint smile crossed his face. "It is far more important than this, that's for certain. Soon the operation will be over anyway. Just remember, Heskal..." He leaned slightly closer. "Every machine can have its parts swapped out." Then both he and the gray-jacketed man disappeared as suddenly as they had arrived.

Heskal clicked his tongue, looking angrier than he ever allowed anyone else to see, but a knock at the door came almost immediately afterward. "Enter." By the time the door opened, his composure had already returned and he was back to working as though nothing had happened. Marcell stepped inside and glanced around the room. "Were you speaking with someone?" "Have you contacted Captain Cleatus?" Heskal asked, completely ignoring the question. "No, sir. It seems he has gone on holiday with his wife." Heskal groaned. "This is not a good time." He sighed, then took a slow breath. "I trust he filed all the paperwork?" "Yes, sir." Marcell said. "Good. Civics needs to be reworked. They seemed promising, but their insubordination will not be tolerated." The way he said it made it sound almost like he expected Marcell to carry out whatever punishment followed.

Marcell clenched his fist. “Sir...” He stepped closer. Heskal stopped writing, set down his pen, and looked directly at him. “What is it?” he asked. Marcell hesitated only briefly. “After everything you’ve done... legal or not... how can you say that? They carried out your orders.” “None of that matters if they fail at the most crucial moment,” Heskal replied coldly. “They will be given the same treatment as the terrorists who attacked City Hall.” Marcell stared at him. “Sir... I...” His fear was obvious now, but so was his anger. “You’re just abandoning them? I... I won’t let you!” The words left his mouth before he could stop himself.

Heskal studied him for several seconds with an unreadable expression. “You wish to take responsibility for Civics?” he asked. Marcell immediately started sweating. After everything he had seen over the last week, he was more terrified of Heskal than ever, and now he wasn’t even sure what he had just volunteered himself for. Still, he forced himself to answer. “Yes. I... don’t punish them. Let me take responsibility.” Heskal sighed and opened one of the drawers in his desk, pulling out a thick stack of documents. “Very well. Take the Administrator exam. I’m confident you will pass.” He placed the papers in front of Marcell. “Once you do, I will hand Civics over to you.” Marcell blinked. “Are you serious?” Heskal had already returned to his paperwork. “Completely.” Marcell straightened almost immediately. “Yes, sir! I won’t let you down!” He grabbed the documents and hurried out of the room to do exactly that.

Throughout the city, most of the damage had already been repaired. The Crime Sector was the exception. People tried not to look toward it, but it was impossible to ignore such a massive wound carved into the city, especially when no one had even attempted to build over it yet. Where the Kinryū-kai manor once stood, Masa slowly opened his eyes. Somehow, impossibly, he was still alive. A massive golden dragon statue had collapsed over him during the bombardment, shielding him from the worst of the attack. He was the only survivor left among those who had remained at the manor, saved almost literally by the image of his ancestor. A section of the city had been arrested Gram included,

Bram still visited him from prison though.

Elsewhere, Peacekeeping and the other divisions had already fallen back into something resembling their normal routines. There were empty desks and missing faces, but compared to the Siege, the losses were easier for most of them to absorb. Intelligence had not been so fortunate. Nearly half of its personnel were gone, and just under half of the information it had spent centuries gathering had been erased along with them. Lucien stood looking over what remained of the division with Kloe beside him. “It will be hard to come back from this,” he admitted quietly. Kloe glanced toward him. “What about you? You’re still hurt...” Lucien frowned and adjusted his monocle. “I’m just old. I might not have much time left.” His expression softened slightly. “It’s a shame Alister won’t be returning to us. But when the time comes, I’m sure I can count on you and the others.” Kloe looked at him for a moment before nodding in agreement.

Special Operations arrived at the Barracuda expecting, at most, another meeting. Instead, they stopped almost immediately when they saw the place covered in banners reading “GREAT JOB!” in lettering that looked just sincere enough to be mocking. “Surprise!” Cassian called out, standing near the counter with Elaina beside him. Most of Internal Investigations was already there, but Rufus, Brutus, and several others had apparently made their way over to celebrate as well. Alister stared around the restaurant, visibly twitching. “You rented out a fast food restaurant for a party...” “Seemed appropriate,” Cassian said with a laugh. Darla looked around, still confused. “And what are we celebrating exactly?” Cassian raised an eyebrow. “Why, your anniversary, of course.” Bram chuckled. “Has it really been a year?” Fiora immediately started counting on her fingers. “Wait, but... I thought Founder’s Day was...” Cassian facepalmed. “The division was formed a little after that, Fenleigh. Honestly, you were literally there. How do you not remember?”

“Anyway,” Cassian continued, waving toward the tables, “everyone brought something, so enjoy yourselves.” Elaina turned toward Jax. “Jax... maybe we could...” Before she could finish, Nix

suddenly appeared directly in front of her and stared up at her critically. “This is her?” He snorted. “Pfft. You really fucked this one up. She’s way too good for you.” Elaina blinked. “Who are...” “That will be enough of that,” Jax said with a tired sigh. He looked toward Elaina and held out his hand. “I’d love to... that is, if you’ll have me.” Elaina blushed slightly before taking it, and the two started walking away together. Nix followed immediately, much to her annoyance. “Who is this little brat?” she asked. Nix grinned. “I’ll tell you. Just ditch this washed-up old man and get with me.” Elaina stared at him in disgust. “What? You’re like twelve.” “Thirteen and a half, gods damn it!”

The night went on, and for once all of them had a little time to celebrate. Fiora spent most of it with Bram and Brutus. Darla found time to sit with Rufus. Jax and Elaina tried repeatedly to get a moment alone while Nix made that practically impossible. Cassian never really joined in with everyone else, though. He stood off to the side with NoxLux, watching the party with a quiet sense of satisfaction. “I think this was one of my better decisions,” he said proudly as he looked over the division he had created. After a while, he turned toward the exit. Nox glanced at him. “Where are you going?” Cassian smiled. “Unfortunately, I have work to do. Seems I’ve already stumbled into another conspiracy.” With that, he left the others to enjoy themselves.

As the night dragged on, the fact that the Barracuda was a fast food restaurant did absolutely nothing to stop everyone from getting drunk off their asses. Even Darla eventually gave in. Nix was the only one not allowed to drink, something he complained about constantly. After a while, Darla stepped outside to get some air and sat down on a park bench, staring up at the moon and the portals hanging in the sky above Porta Nexus. A lot had happened over the last year, and even half drunk she was still trying to process all of it. Eventually, Alister stepped outside and joined her. “What’s with the mopey act, dog?” Darla didn’t look at him immediately. “Did we make all the right choices?” she asked. “Not revealing the Reaper. Staying with Special Operations. Rejecting our families.” Alister frowned. He looked like he had been avoiding that exact question himself. “At first, I hated the whole thing,” he

admitted. “And you, of course.”

Darla looked toward him, clearly waiting for the rest. Alister shrugged. “What? I still hate the whole thing and you.” She glared at him. “Alright, alright.” He sighed. “Maybe you’re... not as bad as I thought.” Darla’s expression softened slightly. “Not officially solving the case that got us demoted in the first place still annoys me a little, but... I think I’ve accepted that.” He looked back toward the Barracuda. “Just look at everything we’ve done through Special Operations. Maybe not every choice we made was the right one, but...” He stopped himself for a second, clearly hating what he was about to admit. “Being here with the meathead, the dumbass, the tightwad... and you...” A smile finally broke through. “I don’t regret a thing.”

Darla smiled back. “You could at least call them by their names, you know.” “Right.” Alister turned toward her more seriously. “Darla Dogenridge.” She immediately opened her mouth to correct him, but he held up a hand before she could. “I don’t care what your crappy old grandpa said. I’m glad I met you... and the rest of our team.” He extended his hand toward her. “Let’s keep making this city better. Together.” Darla looked at his hand for a moment before taking it. “Together.” They stood and walked back toward the party side by side, the noise from inside growing louder as they approached.

Porta Nexus kept moving forward.