

## 1. Phantom: Longing

Being a superhero was awesome, but it came with a lot of bullshit.

Isaac Riel was perched on the concrete railing of a parking garage near the center of Vivimor, the dusty grey clouds roiling above him. Below, a wedge of black-armored Muertos faced off against a much smaller pack of grey-coated Hearts. There were gleaming scopes in windows and rooftops on all sides — Hearts' snipers ready to tear the Muertos to shreds and jumpstart a war.

It was one of the more trying days Isaac had had over the past two years, true, but that was only a question of degree. The substance of it was the same.

It had started last night with four men who'd recently joined the Izquierda branch of Los Corazones del Infierno. The Izquierda branch of the Hearts was made up mostly of East Vivimor natives, all of whom tended to be a little more affluent (and lot whiter) than their counterparts living in the West. They were usually hired because they were subtle and precise, true believers in the cause who could be counted on for discretion. But truth was, Hearts weren't so discriminating these days; partly because they couldn't afford to be, and partly because they could afford *not* to be.

So: four upper-class Easties who suddenly thought of themselves as righteous revolutionaries, turned loose with very little training on an unsuspecting city. It started with a sexual assault at a bar and ended six hours later with an officer of the District Police admitted to the Intensive Care Unit at the Geneton Institute, beaten into a coma. One of the Hearts was dead, and the other three under arrest.

This alone would have given Umbrella more than a couple headaches over the next few days, but by morning the outraged soldiers of the District Police (organized by one Major Davis with the silent consent of certain key members of the DP high command) were sweeping through East Vivimor, beating down the doors of every known Izquierda member and any suspects they had. When they didn't find the suspects, they interrogated their families — children of ten and mothers of fifty alike.

Most of the Muertos were disciplined enough to not hurt anybody. Most of them.

Izquierda soldiers were smart enough to keep their identities close to their chest even with the Hearts' ascendant, and most were seething at the reminder of the Muerto abuse that had first driven them into the ranks of the Hearts. Neither Joseph Sanchez nor his subcommander Andrew Zhao would have okayed any retaliatory action, but that didn't stop many of the newer Hearts from taking to the streets of their own accord, visiting the interrogated families one by one, driving the Muertos back in a show of force until they rallied together into one cohesive unit, either unaware of or indifferent to the Hearts' snipers surrounding them.

You'd *think* that having a prophet in Umbrella's corner would keep the shit from hitting the fan, but

tensions being what were, it was pretty easy to screw yourself. Case-in-point; some psycho dad was going to take an apartment building hostage the previous night, which Raynor had prevented by whisking the man away to a psychiatric ward. As a result, none of the cops who would have been called to the scene ever left their beats...which, it seemed, included the unfortunate soul who the new Hearts had beaten when he'd tried to stop them.

So. Do one good deed and get rewarded with a potential war. Just a lot of bullshit on all sides.

Isaac sighed and scratched at his sandy hair, cropped close to his head in military style. His chest was broad and his shoulders strong, and his bright blue eyes had a certain calculating intensity to them as they darted between the Hearts and the Muertos facing off in the streets. His thin blade of a nose was balanced perfectly between high cheekbones.

How to proceed? Truth was, Isaac just wanted to cut *loose*. This was a bigger crowd than he usually tackled, but he could do it. If he hit the snipers first, he could probably stop anyone from getting killed. His knuckles itched and his cheeks ached and a laughing face with coal-black eyes flashed through his mind and he remembered a better fight than this, a fight against an earnest open enemy who'd treated him with respect.

His memories were interrupted by movement far down the street. He hunched over and narrowed his eyes so he could better see the solitary, grey-coated shape striding towards the crowd below. He couldn't quite make out her features, but he knew who it was. No one else he knew moved with such angry certainty.

He hesitated, then stepped off the railing, mentally reaching for the sun that seemed to burn just behind his solar plexus. Fingers of fire spread along his limbs and lifted him up as though a strong wind had caught him from below. He drifted downwards like a leaf, grinning all the while. He glanced as he always did at his right hand, its flesh replaced by luminescent starlight.

He alighted on a rooftop closer to the action and bent low like a gargoyle (idly imagining a pair of leathery wings sprouting from his back). He was closer to the action now — he could make out the details of Kate Hammond's hawkish face, the broad forehead crinkled by her perpetual scowl, dirty blonde hair pulled back in a curt ponytail. She wore an emblem of a hand on her left sleeve, palm forward and all fingers straight up as though commanding you to stop. On her right sleeve, she wore a black band.

She stalked past the Muertos (who turned to follow her with pointed guns but did not move or speak) and came to a stop just in front of the Hearts. Her green eyes glared into the face of the young black man who stood at their head, with the emblem of a sinister grinning mouth on his right sleeve.

“What the hell do you think you're doing, Desmond?” she spat.

“Back the fuck off,” growled Desmond.

Kate grabbed him by the scruff of his shirt and pulled him forwards. There was a ripple among the Hearts: weapons jerked up but didn't quite train on her.

“I don't see any captains, Desmond,” she said, almost calmly. “No one authorized to speak for the Hearts. So I'm gonna need an answer; what the hell are you doing?”

“Look at'em!” called a brutish voice. An imposing figure in a mirror-plated helmet and gleaming black body armor stepped out from the block of Muertos. “Fuckers can't even keep their own house in order.”

Kate released Desmond and whirled to glare at the man. The ranks of the Hearts lifted their weapons and trained them on the Muertos; the Muertos raised their own weapons in turn.

As much as Isaac wanted to fight — as much as he wanted to put an end to this bullshit and thrash his way through like a proper god damn superhero — there were too many variables in play, with two angry armies and snipers above. He launched himself off the roof, imagining the kind of storms he'd seen in movies, far away from the unchanging dryness of Vivimor. Bright light flashed out from his body, and a titanic shout thundered at its heels. Shouts of alarm rang out from the men and women below him.

Isaac grinned and descended into their midst with slow, intentional gravitas, riding the coattails of his thunder. He landed easily on the ground, just a little ways from Kate.

“Hey, guys,” he said. “What's up?”

The man at the head of the Muertos turned his mirrored faceplate to glare at Isaac. His rifle remained pointed at the Hearts. “These criminals are in violation of the treaty,” he said. “They have come in support of rapists and murderers. We are well within our rights to-”

“To what?” Isaac asked. “To start killing a bunch of people when they get mad at you for beating women and children?”

“Umbrella has no authority here!” shouted the man, turning the barrel of his rifle so it was trained on Isaac. Isaac rolled his eyes and lifted his transparent hand, pointing his finger like a gun. A flash of light, a searing smack of burning metal and ozone, and the barrel of the gun fell to the ground, smoking still. The Major was left clutching a useless stock.

Credit to the Major, he dropped his broken rifle at once, and his hand snapped down to his sidearm. Isaac took a single step, drawing fire out from the sun at his heart, and in that one step cleared the dozens of feet separating them so that he was just in front of the man with the mirrored faceplate, his fingertip grazing the hard plastic of his chestplate.

“You traitor,” hissed the Major.

“Major Davis,” Isaac said conversationally, and the man tensed. “You have gathered an armed force of soldiers for the purpose of visiting reprisals upon the innocent.” He raised his voice a little, for the benefit of the Hearts behind him. “If there are any traitors here, they're standing right behind you. Following you, in fact.” Isaac cocked his head nonchalantly. “So what would that make you?”

Major Davis' hand was still on his sidearm. “I'm doing what needs to be done,” he said.

“You're risking the lives of everyone in this city and betraying everything you're supposed to serve,” Isaac said, still calm, still casual. “So here's how this is going to play out. You're going to walk away, right now, and you're gonna take your men with you.”

“And if I don't?” growled Major Davis.

Isaac gently prodded the soldier's chest.

There was a moment's tense silence. Then Major Davis took one step backwards and turned sharply on his heel. To their credit, the men of the District Police wheeled about in perfect formation, tight ranks marching effortlessly back to the nearest base. The thin line of Hearts behind them scattered out of the way.

A few scattered whoops sounded from the Hearts, but these died as soon as Kate roared, “And what the hell do you think you were doing?”

“We showed them!” Desmond shouted. “We-”

He broke off in a choked gasp. Isaac turned to find that Kate already had her hands around his collar again. “You showed them?” she said. “You showed them what, Desmond?”

Desmond glared into her face. “We protect our own.”

“Protect who?” Kate asked. “Rapists and bullies?”

“That's what *he* called us,” Desmond said.

“That's what they *were*,” Kate said.

“So we should have let them roll over us, huh?” Desmond demanded.

“We?” Kate repeated incredulously. “*We* did nothing, Desmond. *You* and a bunch of your friends got together and decided you had the right to speak for the Hearts.” She slapped her right arm—the one that bore a black band around its bicep. “No Captains,” she said. “No one trusted to speak for the Hearts. You aren't an army. You're a lynch mob.”

Desmond spat to one side. “You think they trust you?” he asked. “You're with *them*.” He jerked his head towards Isaac.

An ugly murmur rippled among the Hearts. Isaac almost stepped forward and took Kate's side, but he hesitated. He didn't feel right interfering with this. And he was still very conscious of the snipers in the buildings around them.

Kate took her hands off Desmond's shirt. Desmond took a step back from her.

Isaac almost didn't see her move; she blurred, and Desmond hit the ground, gasping and clutching at his stomach. Gasps rang out from among the Hearts, but suddenly Kate was glowing with blue static. "If I ever hear *any* of you are doing something like this again!" she roared, sweeping her eyes back and forth across the browbeaten Hearts. "I'll make you pay for it personally. We protect Vivimor. We do it with order, discipline, and discretion. We do not strut. We are not proud. Go. Home."

Another tense silence. The Hearts hesitated, but didn't move.

"You really should listen to her," Isaac called, and amplified his voice so the words could be heard for several blocks.

The disordered lines of the Hearts sheepishly began to scatter in different directions.

"Y-you bitch," spat Desmond.

"As for you," she said calmly, grabbing him by the collar of his shirt and hauling him into the air. "I don't think someone like you should get a second chance."

He gave her a brash grin. "T-think you get to decide that, bitch?"

Kate grabbed the gun at his side, drew it, and pointed it at his head. His eyes went wide.

"Yes," she said. "I do."

Then she slid his gun into her waistband and dropped him to the ground. "Give me your coat," she said. "And go home. If someone stupider than me thinks you could actually be worth something to us, you'll get it back."

Desmond slipped it off without another word of protest, throwing it at her feet. He walked just a little too quickly back down the street, not looking at the other Hearts.

"Good job," Isaac said.

She turned her head and gave him a withering look over her shoulder. "What the hell was that?" she asked.

"What?" Isaac asked, grinning.

"You know what."

Isaac shrugged. "Didn't look like I was gonna get to fight anyone, so I thought I'd have a little fun."

"You're not *supposed* to have fun."

"It's hard not to when you're me."

She put a hand to her head and sighed. Her shield dissipated. "Your power is such bullshit."

"I know, right?" Isaac stretched his arms, then cracked his fingers and started walking west.

"Thanks for dealing with the Hearts. Heard Umbrella's on thin ice over there."

"You heard right," Kate said, falling into step beside him (though she stopped to grab Desmond's

coat and wedge it into a ball beneath her arm). “A lot of people weren't fans of Olivia *before* she started interfering with us.”

“Yourself included.”

“Yeah,” Kate admitted, laughing a little. “That changed, though.”

“You okay?”

Kate's brief smile was gone as swiftly as it had come. “What do you think?”

“Haven't seen much of you.”

“I've been busy. So have you. And sometimes with the same troubles.”

Isaac shrugged. “That's what Umbrella does.”

Kate sighed and looked up at the grey sky. “I don't know, Isaac. It's...it's getting harder to trust the Hearts.”

No denying that. Since the Hearts had received official recognition as a governing body in Vivimor, their membership had expanded — they were now some ten thousand strong. And as their numbers had swelled, so, too, had their crimes. Some were just like the men now in Muerto custody, heady with power and eager to abuse it. Some wanted only to see the DPs pay for their crimes, and did not mind how much of the city they burned to see their vengeance done.

But there were others, too. The members of Izquierda who'd started a black market, selling medical goods to the needy people of West Vivimor at exorbitant prices. The members of Boca who'd been running a “protection service” for vulnerable women, and spiriting them away after they'd paid. The members of Derecho who'd gone to people in favor of peace, beating them and their families, destroying their homes.

That wasn't even the most galling fact about the bullshit they were wading through lately. There were always assholes, and a few men like Davis or Desmond didn't necessarily serve as condemnation of the whole force. But Alex and Raynor had confirmed some of the Hearts' commanders knew what was going on. The Hearts were becoming more interested in preserving the integrity of their organization than in protecting West Vivimor.

“Yeah,” Isaac said. “I know.”

“I know you know,” Kate said. “You're the one who keeps dealing with them.” She flashed him an amused glance. “Got a little violent with those Derecho boys, didn't you?”

“They wanted to fight,” Isaac said. “I was happy to oblige.”

“Always are. You've been kind of twitchy lately.”

“What, you've been around to see?”

He regretted the words as soon as he'd spoken — Kate looked angry, apologetic, and wistful, all at

once. "I've been busy, okay?" she said.

"Okay." He lifted his hands in a gesture of peace. "Sorry."

"It's fine."

Their road took them meandering into the far, far west side of Vivimor, right up against the gargantuan Wall that surrounded the city. Almost no one lived here, if they could help it — these were the oldest buildings, the one thrown up in a panic or battered and abandoned when the small town had swelled into a impromptu refugee camp as the Wastes had rolled over California, sinking it into grey death.

They came to a stop only a few blocks from the wide space that separated these buildings from the Wall proper — the watch zone, as his father called it — next to an alley littered with rotting trash and broken pieces of metal. There had once been bodies here, too, but those were long since gone. Only the faded bloodstains remained, on the ground and the walls.

And as he always did, Isaac remembered. That man-shaped monster like a whirlwind, tearing bodies to pieces with bare hands.

"You still come here, huh?" Kate said, peering down. "Doesn't creep you out?"

"Don't you still train in the old Cormorant base?" Isaac asked, folding his arms.

She shrugged. "Yeah, but I'm made of stronger stuff than you."

"Well, *obviously*. Want to come up with me?"

Kate grimaced. "Absolutely not."

"Aw, why?"

"I didn't like it with the fire escape. The only way up there now is for you to carry me."

"Yeah, so?"

"So it's demeaning."

"Is not!"

"Is so."

"Okay, maybe a little. But there's a door!" He nodded at the rusted side door so grimy it almost blended into the building.

Kate arched her eyebrows. "You ever been in there?"

"You kidding? This building is creepy as shit."

"Says the superman," Kate said, laughing. "But yeah. I'm not going in there if I don't have to."

Isaac frowned at her. "You've got a shield that makes you invincible *and* you train at the site of a mass murder. You can handle creepy."

Kate sighed and shook her head. "I'm going to go train in my own creepy place," she said. "You

still itchin' for a fight?"

Isaac grinned. "Think you can take me? I thought I was overpowered?"

"You are, but you need the handicap to keep up with me."

Isaac laughed. "Maybe afterwards, okay?"

"Okay. Don't keep me waiting too long."

She set off back the way they'd come. Isaac watched her go and almost ran after her. He'd come up here enough, after all. Didn't want to keep a friend waiting.

But then, he wanted to be up there. Wanted to get a sense of things again.

He looked up, touched on the fire inside his mind, and released it in a wave around his body. The air all about him shimmered, then caught him with countless invisible fingers and began to pull him aloft. Another flare and he sped up, the wind rushing by him. He took a single glance down when he was about six stories up, and relished the giddy sense of vertigo in his stomach, making him feel light and precarious and powerful all at once.

He alighted on the rooftop of his lookout. For an instant, he thought he really saw Mort there — that powerful back through the white undershirt, the Emperor of Monsters overlooking his dominion. But the ghost of his memory faded fast; he was alone.

That kingdom of monsters — the long, pallid expanse of shifting grey ash that lurked outside Vivimor — dominated the horizon, just visible over the shimmering neon tide of the Kopelsburg Defensive Field, flowing from one tall silver pylon to the next for hundreds of miles in either direction, humanity's only defense against the ashen Wastes.

A kingdom inhabited by wretched monsters, twisted husks that had once been men and dogs and a hundred other benign things. Several of them had been let loose in the confines of the city two years ago. Under the direction of their Emperor.

Mort. A monster thousands of years old, who drank the very life from people's bodies. A monster that had slaughtered and raged and warred and killed his father's friends and nearly killed Isaac half a dozen times. A monster who had been frank and honest and who had laughed together with Isaac as they clashed like titans through the streets. A monster a hundred times better than the pathetic men and women trying to exploit each other day in and day out all over this city.

One day, Isaac would fight that monster again. And one day — perhaps today — Isaac would fight Hearts or Muertos or any of the petty tyrants taking advantage of people weaker than they were. He might fly back to Umbrella, or head towards Kate. There were a thousand things that he, and he alone, could do.

Being a superhero might come with a lot of bullshit, but that didn't mean Isaac didn't love every



minute of it.

Isaac sauntered over to the edge of the roof and sat down with his legs dangling in open space, thinking of everything he might still do, even if he had to wade through bullshit to get there. And thinking of the terrible monster before whom there would be no bullshit. Just a contest, more pure and joyous than anything Isaac had ever felt.

## 2. Aegis: Offer

She whirled and struck at the ghosts in her head, and concrete cracked and broke wherever her shielded fists fell.

Blue light filled with static white bursts clung close to her skin and to her clothes, and even to the flaring tails of her Hearts coat. According to Isaac's mom, this had to do with the way her shield manifested itself — within nanoseconds it formed a bubble around her, which then collapsed and clung to her, only a few microns from her body. They still didn't know how she formed it.

Then again, Kate didn't much care what they knew or didn't know. As long as her power worked. As long as she could call upon her armor and stride into battle again. Just as she'd done two years ago.

She came to a panting halt in the midst of smashed rubble, her body aching with echoes of this session and so many others like it, her one consistent routine in the midst of all the chaos and bullshit of the last few months. Slabs of concrete lay broken all around her, stretching far off into the shadows of this empty parking garage. Most were not from this session, however — this parking garage had seen her practice many times over the last two years.

And had seen horrors beyond counting, down on this level and up above.

The shredded bodies Mort had left here as a warning were long gone, but the air still felt heavy with their ghosts. It wasn't really so long ago that she'd heard the screaming of his victims from up above. In the dark recesses of this battered place was a hidden door, with a ladder leading down into the dark as well as up towards the floors above.

A gang of tech thieves called the Cormorants had once worked out of the upper levels, stealing hardware and selling it at half-price to the needy of Vivimor. Mort had obliterated all but one of them, smeared their flesh and blood across their headquarters, and then informed the Muertos that the Hearts were responsible. That massacre had thrown the city into chaos and nearly lured the Hearts and the Muertos into open war.

But Kate's memories of that day were more personal. In the aftermath of that first slaughter, Kate and her men had been caught in a raid by the Muertos, and nearly tossed into prison. That was her first encounter with Mort — the aftermath of his casual bloodbath.

“That was impressive.”

Kate whirled, her shield snapping back into being as she lifted her fists. When she saw the speaker, she dismissed her shield, but did not lower her guard.

Brigadier General Dmitri Valisgrad was a colossus of a man. He stood easily a foot taller than her, with a chubby face dominated by a silver-streaked black beard and small eyes which looked even

smaller in comparison to his tremendous eyebrows and bulbous nose. His short hair was concealed by the brimmed black cap he wore. His broad chest stretched the material of his black and grey dress uniform so tight it looked as though it was about to burst. Silver stars glinted on his shoulders.

“You're not supposed to be here, Brigadier.” Kate said.

Valisgrad cocked his head. “What if I am here as a simple citizen?” he asked. “To enjoy the many attractions of West Vivimor?”

“Is that why you're here?”

He jerked his head back the way he'd come. “Would I have taken the old tunnel if I was?”

She knew that tunnel — the ladder that led up to the hidden Cormorant base also led down to an unfinished subway tunnel running between East and West Vivimor. She knew it because she'd had to take it to escape Valisgrad's troops two years ago, when Mort had led them blundering into his trap.

“And by the way,” Valisgrad added, tapping his shoulders. “Brigadier has become somewhat inaccurate.”

Kate narrowed her eyes. In the dim light, she could just make out the five stars gleaming on each shoulder. More than he'd had the last time she'd seen him.

“You were promoted?” she said, allowing her disbelief to creep into her voice.

“Given the changing political situation, my experience and personal connections were deemed essential to the future of our city.”

“Deemed by who?” she asked. “The US?”

He smiled a little. “Their input was taken into consideration.”

Kate frowned. There had never been a general in the ranks of the District Police before. Their highest rank was Brigadier, and that signified command authority second only to that of the District Governor. “What does being a General mean?”

“It means that I have effectively replaced the District Governor.”

Shit. Valisgrad in charge? He'd been a moderating influence in the first few months after Mort's attack, but he'd never trusted the Hearts and he remained a vocal opponent of their rise to power.

“How democratic,” she said.

He cocked his head. “And the Hearts are elected, are they?”

“We had to find a way to stop people like you.”

“Even if what you say is true, the Hearts have *become* people like me.”

That stung, and not just because of the showdown in the streets earlier today. She retorted, without thinking, “I'm surprised the US still trusts you.”

He shrugged. “Why wouldn't they? Because my daughter works so hard to keep the peace?”

“Well, that,” Kate agreed. “And she was sleeping with Sanchez.”

The General's eyes flared, and he took a single step forward. In that moment Kate felt a keen sense of...not fear, exactly, but something like dread, something like shock. There was so much power and fury in that single step that she felt it almost as a blow. She forgot about her shield. She forgot how strong she'd become. For a moment, she felt as weak as she had when the man had pulled her into that alley and pressed that gun against her head.

But then Valisgrad took a deep breath and the moment passed. “There are certain topics,” the General began. “That we should refrain from discussing, I think.”

Kate nodded slowly. “That includes shots at the Hearts.”

“*Cheap* shots,” the General said. “It is not insulting to state that your Hearts are stampeding out of control.”

The initial agreement in Kate's chest stirred a deluge of shame in her, and she swallowed. “How dare-”

“Don't deny it, Captain Hammond. How do you expect your people to survive when Andrew Zhao openly fights Joseph Sanchez?”

How could he possibly know that? There had been a handful of people in the room when Joe and Andrew had started screaming at each other.

Her shock was showing on her face, and she tried too late to cover it — the sly smile on the General's face revealed he'd already seen.

“How?” she demanded, and let the implications of the question thunder through the air.

The General shrugged. “Your Hearts are not as united as you think,” he said. “So many people afraid of what their rule would bring. Afraid of what happens when you give criminals and bullies the reins of power. War is coming, Captain Hammond, and I do not intend to let the Hearts win.”

“You don't believe in your daughter anymore?” she asked.

The General laughed, though there was something brittle in the sound. “My daughter has done spectacular work,” he said. “After the fear and relief of Mort's attack died down, the District Police and the Hearts should have been forced into conflict. War should have broken out six months after Mort's attack.” He shrugged. “Olive has managed to forestall this fight for two years. But she cannot prevent it.”

Kate managed to smile. “I think you underestimate your daughter, General. She's pretty damn stubborn.”

Valisgrad's eyes flashed. “And I think you underestimate the danger of our situation, Captain Hammond,” he retorted. “I seem to recall an argument at my dinner table two years ago, hours before

you used my daughter to break into a District Police facility.”

“Hours before your daughter *convinced* me to to break in,” Kate countered. “Which was kind of my point.”

“Regardless,” Valisgrad said, waving one hand dismissively. “You wondered how much liberty one really had to pay for security. It was an interesting question, but it no longer represents the state of affairs in Vivimor. Perhaps there was once some truth to the notion that the Hearts offered an alternative to a...” He trailed off, searching the air. “To a...problematic government.”

“You mean a group of oppressive assholes who didn't want anyone talking back to them?” Kate growled.

The General shrugged. “Perhaps,” he said. “But the Hearts are no longer rebels. They are an organization of weight, recognized, sanctified, and supported by the UN. And they are riven by infighting brought about not by idealistic differences but by questions of power and control.”

Kate wanted to argue, to speak back, to lash out with words that would reduce his accusations to dust. But there was too much truth here, too many memories of Hearts abusing the people of West Vivimor, turning on each other, protecting each other from any retribution or justice. Just like today.

And presiding over all her doubts was the memory of a furious Andrew screaming at Joe about how he had compromised everything, thinking with his dick rather than his head.

“When the next war comes, Captain Hammond,” Valisgrad continued into the silence. “It will not be a contest to decide whether liberty or security wins the day. It will be a battle to determine which group holds the reins of power in this city. And I believe you would be better served by fighting on my side.”

Kate felt her jaw drop a little. “You're *recruiting* me?” she said.

“You are smart, sharp, and swift,” the General said. “You would be an asset to any army you joined, even without your power. With you on the side of the District Police-”

Kate threw herself forward. Credit where credit was due, the General didn't flinch, even when Kate slid to a stop mere inches in front of him. “I am a captain of Los Corazones del Infierno,” Kate said, letting all her frustration and doubt and anger give her voice a cutting edge. “I joined because the people you command abused their power and harmed the weak. Why would I ever join you?”

The General lowered his small eyes. There was an unbearable softness to his gaze that left Kate feeling slimy and weak. She wanted to attack him, just so he wouldn't look at her with such understanding.

“Captain Hammond,” he began. “When was the last time the Hearts dispatched you on official duty?”

The question hurt far worse than it had any right to, but at least Kate was ready for it; she kept her face neutral, masking the throbbing lance of doubt and confusion buried in her side. “That’s Hearts’ business,” she said. “Not yours.”

Valisgrad sighed. “Captain Hammond, let us not play games here. You are being kept out of the loop because no one is sure where your loyalties lie. Do they lie with Joseph Sanchez, clinging to peace whatever the cost? With Andrew Zhao, desperate to make the Hearts the new power in Vivimor, whatever he must sacrifice? With my daughter?” He smiled a little. “But the truth, Captain Hammond, is that your loyalties lie with none of these. Your loyalties lie with whoever gives you the resources you need to protect this city. Your loyalty lies with Vivimor.”

And that was true, wasn’t it? Hadn’t she only joined the Hearts to protect the people of West Vivimor from the depredations of the worst elements of the city? Of people like the man in the alley, grabbing her and fumbling for her pants as he threatened her?

“That is the same reason members of the District Police plot against me, Captain Hammond,” Valisgrad continued. “I serve the District Police, but only insofar as they serve Vivimor. As long as Umbrella protected Vivimor better than my men, I lent them my support. But war is inevitable now, and whatever else you may say about the District Police, we have always kept the peace in Vivimor.”

“And you think that’s enough to make me join you?” Kate demanded, a little relieved to let her outrage fly into the face of her battering doubts.

“I think that you are an ally of my daughter and a protector of the people of Vivimor,” he said. “I think that with your help we can put a swift end to this war and establish order and peace.”

“An iron fist around the throat of Vivimor,” Kate growled.

Valisgrad shook his head. “This isn’t about power, Captain Hammond,” he said. “This is about facts. The Entity you call Mort is still out there. It will try to destroy us again. This is no longer about who should control Vivimor. It is about putting ourselves in the best position to survive.”

“And you think the Muertos can do that?” she demanded.

“I think that the District Police have a clear chain of command,” he said. “Discipline. Authority. The weight of tradition. I think the Hearts are a new power — headstrong and divided. Even if they can defeat the District Police, they will tear themselves apart. We offer the best chance for the survival of Vivimor.”

Kate straightened up a little, and took a sidling step back from Valisgrad. “I’ll be reporting this to my superiors, General.”

“I’m sure that will only increase their trust in you.” Anger flared, magma flowing through her veins, and she lifted her fists again. Valisgrad lifted his own hands defensively. “A poor jab, I’m sorry. You are

free to report me, Captain Hammond. But please. Keep my offer in mind.”

She snorted to mask her doubts. “As if.”

“You are not stupid, Captain Hammond,” he said. “You know as well as I that the Hearts' interests are no longer the same as Vivimor's. Say what you will about the District Police, but our goal has always been the preservation of this city. Can you trust the Hearts to save us? And if you can't, can you do it all by yourself?”

Kate said nothing. Truth was, she didn't know.

“With you on our side, Captain Hammond,” he said. “We can survive. We can win.” He tipped his cap. “Please. Consider my offer.”

He turned into the dark and vanished in a few quick steps. Kate stared after him, doubt and shame pummeling her ribs and making her feel weak. The Heart — her Hearts — were not what they'd once been. Too many bullies, and too many good men too afraid of punishing the bad apples in case it weakened the Hearts as a whole. That was not the group she'd joined.

But could she join with Valisgrad? With the man who'd tortured one of her soldiers, and hunted her friends through the streets like criminals?

She swallowed, trying to suppress her endless doubts, and lifted a hand to her ear. “Call Tom,” she said aloud. Her implant chirped in her head once, twice, and then he answered.

“Kate?” Tom said, level voice a little cautious and a little tired. “I hear you broke up an ambush on the Muertos.”

“Oh, yeah,” Kate said. “Desmond and some of the others were-”

“Zhao's furious. Says you were protecting the Muertos. Letting them roll right over us.”

And that hurt, worse than almost everything Valisgrad had said, because it was a reminder of days spent like this, training for fights she wasn't allowed to be a part of, wasn't trusted with, and through it all that nagging sense that she *shouldn't* be trusted with it, because she didn't want to be a part of the organization Andrew Zhao wanted to build and she didn't want to let people like Desmond destroy the Hearts and Vivimor with it.

Olivia wouldn't have taken this. Olivia would have gone straight to the source of the problem.

“I see,” she said, and disconnected from Tom. “Call Andrew Zhao,” she ordered her implant.

The implant chirped twice in her before he answered. “Captain Hammond,” Andrew Zhao said, voice cool and words clipped. “What-”

“Go fuck yourself, Zhao,” she said, and before he had time to say anything pressed, “I stopped a bunch of stupid people from starting a stupid fight that would've ended in a pointless war. You got a problem with that, tell me, and then I'll kick your ass and take your place. Let Joe know General

Valisgrad just tried to recruit me.”

“How dare-” Andrew started, and then she ended the call.

*Well*, Kate thought, stretching her aching limbs. *That'll keep them on their toes.*

And then off again into a whirlwind of smashing blows, shattered slabs of concrete as she ignored the chirping of the implant in her ear, the smooth feminine voice letting her know that Joe and Andrew and Tom and even Jack were all trying to reach her. Maybe she was being crazy, but being crazy wasn't always a bad thing. Olivia Valisgrad had shown her that, time and time again.

“Getting slow!” Isaac called. She turned to find her old friend standing in a hole in the wall, dark outline glowing with grey sunlight.

“We're all slow compared to you,” she retorted. “Except for Raynor.”

“Yeah, fuck that guy,” he agreed cheerfully, sauntering towards her. “I could do with a bit of a distraction. Still up for a sparring match?”

Kate grinned. “Sounds perfect. Let's hold back a little, yeah? Don't want to knock this whole place down.”

“Good point,” Isaac said. “Besides, you look tired. Wouldn't want to embarrass you too-”

He yelped and flickered away from her as she slammed a blue-shielded fist into the ground where he'd been. Fast, so fast, but she'd faced Mort in a place like this, struggling desperately against him even without her shield. She could beat Isaac. She could beat Andrew. She could beat anyone who threatened her city.



### 3. Leviathan: Broker

Funding Umbrella had been complicated from the outset. The only money she could really trust was what Geneton provided: the rest had to be investigated, as she made sure that neither the US or the UN were trying to give themselves undue influence. Most of what money she received went to the upkeep of their various operations — keeping Raynor's computer running, funding doctors and social groups that helped care for the poor and unfortunate of Vivimor, supporting any organization interested in keeping the peace. A fraction of it went to small salaries for each of the key employees.

But Olivia hadn't felt too guilty on using the money for one particular luxury. An enormous, perfect bed. A mattress so soft that she felt at ease lying on it even without pillows, that almost seemed to swallow her whole and hold her in a delicate embrace. Silken sheets as gentle and intoxicating as a lover's caresses against her bare skin. And feather-stuffed pillows, specially imported, that seemed to stroke her head like a mother's hand soothing away a fever.

So, she squirmed a little in her comfortable bed, drifting in a dozy, dreamy space devoid of reality's dreadful depredations.

Then there was a knock at her door.

“Miss Valisgrad!” Henry called.

Olivia, still half-asleep, groaned, “What?”

“Alex says we're expecting company. We've also had messages from both the US and UN embassies.”

“Of course we do.” She groaned again and ran a hand through dark black hair, a little greasier than she liked it — she hadn't showered in a day or two. “Alright, I'll be right down.”

She rolled out of her bed and reluctantly grabbed at some clothes — loose comfortable jeans slung over her desk, a bra half-hanging off a small black console, and a t-shirt that was a little too small for her. She sighed, removed it, and grabbed a slightly looser blouse that didn't cling so closely to her tits or gut. As she did, she ran a hand over her stomach, frowning. Too much pudge, but then, she didn't have time to work out, or to wander through the city as she once had.

Ugh, whatever. She had bigger concerns than being a little squishy.

She pushed open her door, turned big brown eyes narrowed in annoyance at Henry, then strode past him, beckoning for him to follow. Henry was wiry and energetic, always twitching a little, his eyes flickering this way and that behind his wire-rim glasses. In spite of his youth, his pallid red hair seemed to be balding. He wore a shoe exclusively on his right foot — his left was an advanced Geneton prosthetic of shining white plastic that extended from his knee.

“Any word from Isaac?” she asked.

“No,” Henry said. “But we have reports that he and Captain Hammond disarmed the situation together.”

She stopped and glanced back at him, her heart twisting a little. “Him and Katie?”

“Yes.”

“Nice of her,” she said, perhaps a little more bitterly than she intended.

“She did soften the Hearts' side of things,” Henry said, with a worried glance at her.

Olivia said nothing as she seethed inside. After all the help Olivia had given Katie two years ago, why couldn't she just swallow her pride and join Umbrella? It had to be clear they were better than the Hearts right now, and every scrap of info she got her hands on indicated that a lot of Hearts would follow her if Katie would just...

Well, whatever. There was work to be done. No time to worry about why Katie was being stupid.

She descended the stairs and stepped out onto carpeted floors of the operations room. There were only two exits set in the cream-colored walls — one thick metal door leading outside, and one pair of beautiful mahogany doors leading to their ornate conference room. The rest of the green-carpeted main office was occupied by the desks and equipment of her two main employees.

Alejandro Sangre sat at one of these desks. He was an emaciated Hispanic man with luminous dark eyes set deep in his severe face, dark hair trim and neat, a faint wispy beard on his face. He was sorting through holographic screens of various places (jungles, cities, oceans, and grassy plains, from her quick glance), clicking his tongue. His dress shirt and khakis billowed off his skeletal body like robes.

A blurred shape sat at the other desk, flickering too quickly to be followed, surrounded in a sea of ever-shifting lights and colors. Olivia cleared her throat and began walking towards this other desk, and all at once it came to a halt. A short but stocky man stood in the midst of a field of holograms of varying size, shape, and color. Long strands of greasy brown hair fell over his face, and he stretched and yawned, showing off muscular arms. He looked lean, predatory, and a little older than his twenty years should have allowed. He also stank to high heaven.

“Take a shower,” she said.

“Waste of time,” Raynor Laroque said.

“Trust me, it's not.”

Raynor waved a hand dismissively. “I need a faster computer.”

“Half our budget goes to your damn computers,” she scoffed. “I'm not wasting more money.”

“It's not a waste,” Raynor said. “You need me collating everything.”

“What do I need you for?” she asked. “Alex can let me know long before anything happens.”

"I am very useful," Alex agreed, flicking another holograph out of the way. "Speaking of which, there's about to be a stabbing on 65<sup>th</sup> Street."

"On it," Raynor said. He disappeared, then reappeared five seconds later, sporting a faded bruise on his cheek. "Done," he said. "Dropped him off at the DPHQ." He grinned. "Still think you don't need me?"

Olivia rolled her eyes. "Oh, of course I need you," she said. "Without you, Umbrella would fall apart." A strange look crossed Raynor's face, and Olivia narrowed her eyes into a glare. "Not this again," she growled. "It's been two years. Get over it."

"It's just..." Raynor began. "Look, Umbrella's a bad name. Makes everyone worried you're going to kill them all in a zombie attack."

"No one knows what you're talking about," Olivia said.

"I do," Alex said, lifting a hand.

"Shut up, Alex!" she barked.

"All I'm saying," Raynor pressed. "Is that we can go with a better reference. Why not Shield? Shield's a great reference. I could wear an eyepatch."

"Absolutely not!" Olivia said. "We're Umbrella. We shelter the people from the storm."

"Umbrellas really aren't much use in storms," Alex mused.

"It's a metaphor, Alex," she said, rolling her eyes.

"Didn't you get C's in English?"

"Yeah, so?"

"Miss Valisgrad?" Henry said.

"What!" she yelled, whirling on him.

"It's just...the General and Joseph Sanchez are already here."

Her eyes flickered to the door to the conference room. "Good," she said. "Let's keep'em waiting. Someone needs to deflate their egos. Alex, we got any other problems?"

"Nothing in the next 24 hours that I can see," Alex said.

"So we done here?" Raynor said. "I've gotta do our treaty thing with Isaac's mom in..." He checked the clock on one of his screens. "Five minutes."

"Plenty of time for you," Olivia said.

"Yeah, but I wanted to check some stuff with Alex."

"Mort stuff?" she said, glancing between them.

"As always," Alex said.

"Shoot the report to Henry when you're done," she said.

“Yeah, yeah...” Raynor disappeared, and soon both he and Alex were twitching figures amidst a constant cascade of transparent light.

“Call Isaac,” she subvocalized. He answered on the second ring.

“Hold on, hold on, I've got a call!” he shouted, amidst a cacophony of smashing sounds dimly echoing in the background. When these came to a stop, he said, “What's up, Liv?”

“We're closing up,” she told him. “Nothing big happening for awhile. Alex'll let you know if we need you. Have fun.”

“Will do!” Isaac said, and ended the call.

“What did the US want?” she asked Henry, ignoring the wooden doors.

“Ah...” Henry tapped the side of his glasses, and a stream of holos raced across his lenses.

“Ambassador Edwards apologizes for the tensions of the past few months and hopes that the promotion of your father to the rank of general promotes a new level of cooperation between-

“Tell them I'm happy they're interested in cooperating with us and we're still not gonna support the District Police,” she said. “We're peacekeepers. We're not playing favorites. The UN?”

“Ambassador Liu congratulates you on your peacekeeping efforts-”

“God, I hate it when they kiss ass.”

“-and would like to suggest that the Vivimor you are trying to create is at odds with the current leadership of the Hearts. They think that your support could convince Joe to step down, and he could be replaced with a candidate who-”

“Tell them Andrew Zhao is an officious little bastard who shouldn't be in charge until he gets over himself and I won't support any measure that hurts Joseph Sanchez,” she snapped.

Henry hesitated for a moment, then said, “They'll say it again, Miss Valisgrad.”

“What, that my feelings for Joe are clouding my eyes to the truth?” She said this last in a mockingly sophisticated tone, as though she were running political commentary on the news.

“Well, yes.”

“Feh, I wish,” Olivia said. “At least if they were I'd be getting laid.” She stretched her arms a little, trying not to think of her year-long dry spell. No time for anything fun anymore. Not with Joe being such a stubborn prick.

Her eyes flickered to the door again. “Guess I should actually meet with them, huh?”

“That seems appropriate, Miss Valisgrad.”

“Kay. Keep things running while I'm in there.”

She pushed open the wooden doors. The room within was paneled in matching dark wood and occupied by a long oval table, the seats of which were equipped with a sophisticated holographic

projection system. Her father sat on one side, sporting new stars on his shoulders. His dress uniform was dustier than she would have expected. Joseph Sanchez lounged across the table from him, his grey coat just touching the floor. His eyes were heavily accented by dark circles, and his powerful body seemed somehow diminished, like the broken wreck of a ship crashed upon the shore. His light brown hair was kept in a military cut close to the top of his head, and his rudder of a nose cleaved his face in two. He wore a black band on his left sleeve; the right bore an emblem of a flaming human heart.

“So,” she said. “What the hell are you people doing?”

Joe rolled his eyes. Her father cleared his throat. “Olive-” he began.

“Shut up,” she said. “Those men were on-duty when they started beating the families of Hearts for no other reason than they were pissed. Either you didn't know or you didn't care. Which is it?”

Her father looked at her through narrowed eyes, so she ignored him and turned her gaze to Joe. “Four of your guys raped a woman and put a guy in a coma,” she said. “And then an entire army turned up to defend them. Is that what the Hearts do now, Joe?”

Joe shifted, lifting dark-rimmed eyes to stare at her. There was a mournful tiredness in those eyes that made Olivia ache a little, but she refused to relent and kept her glare fixed on him.

“The Muertos shouldn't have gone after their families,” Joe grunted.

“So you were gonna kill'em all?” she demanded.

“I can't tell my men not to defend themselves.

She slammed her fist into the table. “Don't. Lie. To me.” She jabbed a finger (aching from hitting the table) at Joe. “Do you know how many of your people Isaac's had to bust? Your people are abusing their power, Joe, and I won't stand for it. Get them in line or I'll do it myself.”

From the corner of her eye she saw a smug expression cross her father's face. She whirled on him. “And you!” she shouted, her anger boiling in her stomach so coils of steam seemed to fill her from head to toe. “You keep arresting people on trumped-up charges! And it's weird that everyone who seems to get busted has spoken out either for the Hearts or against the Muertos. Guess that's just a coincidence, right?”

“Olive...” her father said warningly.

“Control your people,” she growled.

“These miscreants committed crimes within the territory of the District Police,” her father retorted. “Was I supposed to ignore it?”

“It's not your territory!” Olivia shouted. “It's one city!”

“It's divided on paper,” her father said calmly. “By treaty. My men oversee the East, and his rebels-”

“Hard to be rebels when we're officially recognized,” Joe drawled. “Doesn't that just make us-”

“OVERSEE!” she roared, so they both jumped in their chairs. “You're supposed to *oversee* Vivimor. It's not your territory. You don't rule it. You're protecting it. That's a trust. And if you guys keep abusing that trust, I'm going to take it away from you.”

Joe shrugged. “I'd worry more about him,” he said, nodding at her father. “He just tried to recruit Kate Hammond. Said he wanted her on his side when war finally breaks.”

A cold hand grabbed her heart and squeezed. She turned her eyes towards her father. “Is that true?” she asked.

Her father shrugged in turn. “I merely noted that Captain Hammond had not been used by the Hearts in any capacity for some time,” he said. “And offered her an alternative.”

Olivia's mouth twisted a little, and her eyes flickered to Joe. “You're not using Katie?” she asked.

Joe shifted uncomfortably. “There's been some doubt whether Captain Hammond-”

“You mean the girl who fought Mort, rescued Matt, and saved the city,” she said. “There's been doubt about her, huh?”

Joe's eyes fell to the table, and he said nothing. Her scalding anger melded with her icy disappointment until her rancor was as heavy and oppressive as a stormy sky.

“You're preparing for a war that doesn't need to happen,” she said. “You're forgetting what you owe to yourselves, your soldiers, and the people of Vivimor.” She sat down at the table, her fingers drumming a beat out on its surface. “So let's talk,” she said.

“And what gives you that right to give us orders?” her father asked.

“The fact that I'm the one who can,” she said. *Would you help me?* she asked without speaking.

Both men closed their eyes and shuddered. They jointly refused her connection, but she managed to rattle them. She couldn't help but be a little pleased with herself.

“Do not do that,” her father growled, his fingers tight on the edge of the table.

Olivia sighed and leaned forwards, resting her head atop her steepled fingers. Two years ago, both her father and Joe had given so much of themselves to her that they had been knocked unconscious. Those days were long since past; now her power seemed useless, especially in light of what her friends could do. But if she could not use her connections one way, she'd use them another. She'd force her way to peace, just as she had two years ago. She'd make them see beyond their petty, idiotic concerns.

“I'll do whatever it takes to make you listen,” she said. “Now. Let's figure this out.”

#### 4. Prophet: Doubt

When Alex fell asleep at night, the darkness behind his eyelids wore the faces of dead. Thousands of faces, male, female, old, young, all wide-eyed and terrified as Mort's hands fell upon them, ripping them to pieces before he drained the very life from their bodies, ghastly fuel for his ghastly eternity.

And now there were more. 67 South American mercenaries in some godforsaken jungle, fighting each other for the sake of some drug lord or some warlord or some government. There were no shortage of conflicts these days — dozens of proxy wars were being fought by governments all over the globe, as the US clung to the tattered shreds of the authority it had lost when California turned to Waste and new powers stepped forward to try and fill the void.

There were two distinct units, hunting each other through the thick jungle. The first few disappearances were easy to rationalize; men abducted by their enemy. It only intensified their wariness and their wrath. The fight became personal.

They never saw him coming.

He hunted naked these days, his skin mottled like a chameleon so that it blended with his surroundings. Stragglers and sentries had their throats crushed before they could sound an alarm, and then a grinning mouth wrapped itself around their wounds and drank the shimmering life right out of their bodies.

Several men tried to call for help, only to find that their phones, their implants, and their radios didn't work. Mort still carried a shroud with him, just as he had when he'd attacked Vivimor. It made it all the more difficult to hunt him; even when Alex could locate him, it was often too late to get word through.

When the full horror of their situation became apparent, one group of twelve soldiers got smart and formed a circle to make sure they couldn't be ambushed. They heard rustling in the thick green canopy above and opened fire. A bullet-ridden Mort tumbled from the dark and crashed to the ground. There was a palpable moment of relief amongst them. They lowered their guns.

And then suddenly Mort was on his feet, wounds closing in a mirage shimmer like heat on concrete, and he fell upon the mercenaries like a whirlwind, breaking bones and guns and anything that fell to hand. Within fifteen seconds, they were all splayed on the ground, screaming, moaning, and sobbing. But every one of the twelve was alive, until Mort came to them, grinning as he drank the rippling life from their wounds one by one.

Within 45 minutes of his first kill, Mort had broken and fed on all 67 of them.

“And do we know where they are?” Raynor demanded. They were hanging suspended in Raynor's

slowtime, flickering in and out whenever Raynor had to look up some new piece of information or Alex had to extend his gaze into the future. Alex had his hand on Raynor's shoulder: without physical contact, Raynor could not bring anyone into slowtime.

Raynor was at present investigating jungle conflicts in South America, but Alex didn't have much hope of them stopping Mort's attack. The places Mort chose to kill tended to be so torn apart by war that it was impossible to get a solid message through, and still more impossible to convince a skeptical warlord that a well-meaning seer thousands of miles away had called to give him some help.

"That is not how I see, Raynor," Alex hissed through gritted teeth. There was a deep ache behind his eyes — already today he'd managed to foresee two stabbings, one strangling, one kidnapping attempt, and a war. It had taken an hour to unravel the fact that this war — which would have destroyed the Muerto HQ, the Umbrella building, and most of central Vivimor — would be started by the rash actions of Major Tyler Davis, an egotistical tyrant working for the District Police, who would shoot and kill Desmond Smith, a twitchy xenophobe rising through the ranks of the Hearts, and then be butchered in turn by angry Hearts' snipers. And that was *after* he'd unraveled the nascent hostage crisis the previous night. The same crisis that would have kept the Muerto from the path of those four Hearts and...

Futility at home and futility abroad. Alex's soul ached just as much as his head.

"If you could give us a little more info..." Raynor coaxed.

"I can see events, Raynor!" Alex snapped. "I can see danger in the city and see who Mort is killing, but not where, or how, or why. I am not omniscient. I cannot see into the past. And I cannot use my power constantly."

"No, but you have time to use it for your investments, don't you?"

Shame, guilt, and doubt all rolled together and made Alex feel heavy and leaden inside. He closed his eyes and massaged the bridge of his nose. Greed, that's what it was, and he'd never thought to succumb to it but did he have a choice?

"Sorry," Raynor said, after a moment. Alex opened his eyes and studied Raynor, who had a hand to his own forehead. "That was bitchy. Christ, I'm tired."

"Lord's name," Alex said automatically, giving Raynor a concerned once-over.

"When was the last time you even went to church?" Raynor asked

The question triggered another wave of guilt. He'd been avoiding Father Rodriguez for well over a year now. He somehow knew the priest would see right through him. "Too long," Alex admitted. "I...I also feel tired. These visions take their toll."

Raynor's eyes narrowed. "You're not in danger of going blank, are you?"



Alex shook his head. “No,” he said. “At least, I do not think so.” Back when they'd first started working for Umbrella, Alex had used his visions constantly, working around the clock. Within two days, however, the pain in his skull nearly blinded him with each use, and he could get only a glimpse of the future before his aching brain would have to relent, without ever having gotten the information he needed. It hadn't happened since, but he was always conscious of the danger. Without his visions, there was no hope for Umbrella to keep ahead of two armies yowling for each others' blood. No hope of stopping Mort.

Of course, without Raynor, they'd have little way of effectively acting on Alex's visions.

“Are *you* feeling alright?” Alex asked.

“I guess,” Raynor muttered. “If I could get some rest...”

“Have you been sleeping?” Alex inquired.

Raynor rolled his eyes. “Duh-doy.”

Suspicion ghosted up from Alex's chest. “Have you trying to sleep in slowtime?”

Guilt spasmed across Raynor's face. “Maybe.”

“Raynor...” Alex started. Raynor *could* sleep in slowtime, but it tended to take a pretty heavy toll on him, restoring his mind while making his power still more painful to use. Of course, outside of this practical consideration, it also made him rather difficult to be around.

“I know,” Raynor said, rubbing his temples. “I know. But I don't have enough time, otherwise.”

“It seems as though we never do,” Alex mused.

“Yeah.” Raynor grimaced. “I bounced the numbers over to Geneton. With the 67 he's going to kill, that makes for 51,462 people killed since he attacked the city.”

“God save us,” Alex murmured, crossing himself.

“Yeah,” Raynor said. “Geneton's calculations say that at least 30,000 of those probably went to his...life...storage...thing. I'm going with well of death.”

“That is an awful name,” Alex said absently, but his mind was on what Raynor had just told him. How much power did that give Mort? How much compared to the strength with which he'd defeated them all and nearly destroyed their city? How much havoc could that demon wreak?

They were both silent for a long while. Remembering their fight in the smoking crater on the side of the Wall, as Mort ripped like living lightning through their ranks. Raynor's slowtime hadn't saved him then, and neither had Alex's foresight. Even after they'd come this far, what if they were still so outmatched? What if nothing had changed? What would happen if Mort came again and they were just as powerless as they had been two years ago? Could even Isaac save them?

“Sure we can't get through to them?” Raynor asked.

“Would it help if we could?” Alex asked.

Raynor snorted. “It's not like he'd know we called.”

“Maybe,” Alex said. The scope of his powers had improved dramatically since they'd first developed during that desperate battle against Mort in Father Rodriguez' church, but that only made him aware of just how fragile and useless his foresight truly was. More than once, his investments had changed the markets so he took in more or less than his visions had shown him. At other times, he'd taken measures to prevent crimes, only to worsen the crime when the criminals in question reacted more violently than he'd anticipated, turning simple robberies into murders. Mere hours ago, his foresight had nearly damned the city to a conflagration of war when that Muerto had not been called to the hostage crisis, and so had run afoul of the new Hearts.

The mistake that haunted Alex most, however, was the time Umbrella had tried to catch Mort in Russia, six hours before he was going to slaughter a remote Siberian village of some 674 people. In the end, Mort had fed on over a thousand, including the special forces dispatched by Russia and the UN to stop him.

Yet another flaw in his visions, yet another hole for harm to crawl through and destroy all their careful plans. Yet another reason he so desperately needed Raynor to rest, because only he could act with such speed and precision that Alex did not fear to change the future.

“Do get some real sleep, Raynor,” Alex instructed. “You cannot continue like this.”

“Oh, worry about yourself,” grumbled Raynor, but he gave Alex a weak smile. “I'm good, Alex. I'll rest up later.”

Alex nodded and released his grip on Raynor's shoulder. He headed towards the metal door and tapped his implant; the door swung smoothly open, and Alex stepped outside.

Olivia had established her headquarters in a plain and serviceable two-story brown building just inside East Vivimor. It fit in neatly with the other administrative offices and functional shops located nearby. Only the word “UMBRELLA” printed on all sides in large white letters marked it as a place of any importance. A few blocks west, the colossal overpass that marked the boundary between East and West Vivimor loomed like a monolithic icon of some bygone age.

Alex headed east down Main Street, passing into East Vivimor's prestigious heart — its most important offices and its most expensive shops. Alex didn't pay much attention to the people or buildings; his eyes were fixed on some distant point, and his mouth curved into a skull-cracking grimace.

Raynor's accusations clung to him like leaden weights. Could Alex do more? Alex wasn't omniscient. The scope of his powers was really very selective, tracing people and events but unraveling

their origins only with great difficulty. Tracing the chain of events that would have destroyed half of Vivimor back to Davis and Desmond had taken so long on its own, and then there were the other tragedies to stop...

Perhaps if he could rest in slowtime for awhile, but for whatever reason his visions only worked in realtime. And how to sleep there, even if he wanted to? Have Raynor keep a foot on him the whole time? The thought almost made him smile, before his headache made him wince.

Such grand powers, that countered the plans of governments and armies. So useless when it counted.

No, no time to wallow in self-pity and doubt. There was too much to do, and his visions made him all-too-aware of how closely they skirted disaster at every turn. Two years ago Mort had had to trick the two armies into open conflict, and compounded those mounting tensions by smuggling Ghosts into the city. This new fight would need no such prompting, and both armies had been strengthened by international support. The first war would have been bloody: the second might well reduce Vivimor to a smoking ruin.

He left the business district of Vivimor, and trudged his way through one of its farthest suburbs — so far east that it almost brushed against the east section of the Wall that encircled the city. These escaperhoods were spat on by those who lived deeper inside Vivimor — the safe havens of the cowardly rich. Hard to blame them, when most of these little communities paid a fee so that off-duty DPs would patrol the streets, and were contractually obligated to ensure that the people in these neighborhoods were evacuated first.

But the people who lived here were safe. Wasn't that worth something? Wasn't that worth everything?

He came to the end of one secluded cul-de-sac only a few blocks from the main exit to the city and stopped in front of his house — a humble one-story affair with a brick facade, a sloping roof, and beautiful windows. But he froze in midstep and swallowed against the sudden dryness in his throat when he saw the other man standing by his door.

Ryan Caloin's awkward adolescence was long behind him now. His nice suit hugged the contours of his tall body, making him look faintly dangerous. His once-long brown hair had been trimmed to a precise, serious cut that framed a round face. He no longer wore glasses, and his skin was free of acne, though it still bore a few pockmarks. He was leaning against the wall of the house, and lifted his calm, collected gaze to examine Alex.

"You could not simply call me?" Alex asked, suppressing the faint discomfort he felt whenever he saw Ryan lately.

“Lotta people messing with the networks,” Ryan said. “Besides, I prefer face-to-face. Been too long since we saw each other.”

There had been a time when Ryan's words had seemed thick and slow, like he had to force them out of his throat. When you asked Ryan a question, he really seemed to ponder it. Now, however, he spoke quickly and casually, answering before it seemed he'd had time to think. Some of this change had already been happening two years ago, but most of it had come only after he'd started working for Geneton.

“Then talk,” Alex said, folding his arms.

Ryan rolled his eyes. “No need to be a dick, Alex. We're friends.”

“Are we?” Alex asked. “When was the last time any of us saw you?”

Ryan rolled his eyes again. “We're all busy as fuck, Alex.”

“You know what I meant,” Alex said. Back when Umbrella had first started operating with a significant grant from the Geneton Corporation, Ryan had been at Umbrella headquarters daily, coordinating their efforts with Geneton's. But though Umbrella and the Geneton Corporation still worked together constantly, Ryan had stopped showing up. It had been eight months since he'd stopped by Umbrella's base, six since Alex had seen him at all.

“I'm working as hard as you are, Alex,” Ryan said. “Trying to stop him. You're the one giving us our info. He's traveled thousands of miles and killed thousands of people. He's going to come back.”

“And we will stop him,” Alex said, forcing a confidence he didn't feel into his voice.

“Will we?” Ryan asked. “Two years ago he had to force a confrontation between the DPs and the Hearts. Now they're ready to do it on their own. And there doesn't look like there's a limit to how much energy he can stow away. Our research indicates he may have killed more in the past two years than he did in the preceding two centuries. And you saw what he could do with what he had.”

“I remember, Ryan,” Alex said softly. How could he do otherwise? That towering figure in the dark of Father Rodriguez' church? He'd only had to face him because Ryan had called him for help, and Alex had only fought him because he'd been hunting Ryan through the city.

And perhaps Ryan remembered, too, for that cool face shifted a little. “Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, I know.” They were silent for a moment, then Ryan cleared his throat, “Look, I just want to remind you of the stakes.”

“Umbrella is keenly aware of the stakes, Ryan.”

“Are you?” Ryan demanded. “You've been withholding information. Don't deny it.”

And how could he? Olivia might trust Geneton, but Ryan and Alex did not, and since they handled most of the research for Umbrella it fell to them to make a lot of decisions — who received what, and

how much they were allowed to know. Of late, they'd been keeping the advanced knowledge they had of Vivimor's internal politics to themselves. The Geneton Corporation might be a decent corporation, but it was still a corporation, and Alex didn't think they could be trusted to put the good of Vivimor over their own interests.

"Umbrella is an independent entity," Alex said stiffly. "You do not control our actions."

Ryan rolled his eyes again. "Alex, the situation's bad. We should be working together to stop it."

"We spoke of this once before, Ryan," Alex replied. "I am very grateful for all Geneton has done, for me and for us. But I am not sure we can trust him."

*Or you,* Alex added to himself.

Ryan sighed. "Alex, he really admires you guys. He thinks you're the best thing to happen to Vivimor in a long time. Hell, he's already working behind the scenes to help you out."

"Is he?" Alex inquired. "Is that between sponsoring the tests on us?"

"That's just politics," Ryan said. "And who else would you want to test us?"

"I'd rather not be tested at all," Alex countered.

"You can trust Geneton, Alex," Ryan said. "Hell, just yesterday he staved off an IRS investigation into Umbrella."

Alex opened his mouth to speak, then broke off, frowning. "What do you mean?" he asked, speaking a little too quickly

"Oh, the IRS was tracking some weird investments," Ryan said, his eyes a little too easy, his smile a little too gracious. "See, these accounts kept making investments just in time to catch moderate stock market windfalls. IRS did some backtracking and found that a lot of these are fake accounts registered through two or three layers of false servers and security. They think whoever's doing this is in Vivimor. Question is, why would you hide your stock investments if you aren't guilty of insider trading?"

Alex felt icy dread steal its way up into his throat.

"Geneton talked'em down, though," Ryan continued. "I mean, he's one of the signatories to the treaty, y'know? The one that said you guys won't use your powers for personal gain. He assured them that the members of Umbrella would never do anything like that, and that such allegations might force Geneton to reconsider some of his contracts with the US government."

Alex struggled to keep his face neutral. "That was...kind of him."

"Nah, not really," Ryan said. "He knows Umbrella's the best chance this city has, and he's not having you guys attacked by the US government. He wants you to succeed, and he wants to do anything he can to help. Just keep us in the loop, yeah?"

Alex hesitated, but the cold dread in his throat was stronger now, so strong he felt as though he

were choking. He nodded slowly. “We-” he started, and broke off, hating himself for these words. “We could probably...benefit from the help.”

“So could we,” Ryan said. He tapped his knuckles against the wall of Alex's house and smiled at Alex. “It's a nice place. Hope your mom's happy here.”

He stood up and walked away, not sparing a second glance at Alex. Alex stared after him, taking a few brief, aching glimpses into the future. Nothing. No change, save for Geneton's hand placed gently around his throat.

He swallowed, trying to dispel some of his anxiety, and opened the door to his house.

His mother was hunched over a desk, graying dark hair something of a mess, lined face creased in concentration. “Hola, hijo,” she murmured, lifting her eyes briefly before returning her gaze to the papers. “Not enough money to keep funding the scholarship.”

Alex swallowed again, and forced a smile onto his face. “It should be fine,” Alex said. “We just got another donation.”

## 5. Mayfly: Ache

“Look, Mrs. Riel,” Raynor began, his temples pounding so hard that his slowtime world felt dark around the edges.

“What is it this time?” she demanded, running one hand through her grey-streaked dirty-blond hair. They were in her office, a humble place consisting of a desk, three chairs, and innumerable holos hovering through every inch of available air. She was staring at one in particular, which contained only a large clock ticking down by the nanosecond. Isaac's mother was a serious woman who always seemed a little frantic, a thin nose slicing its way down her face and thin lips perpetually folded into a distracted frown. Her other hand was on Raynor's shoulder, and Raynor was struggling against the piercing ache in his temples to keep them both in slowtime as he watched the milliseconds crawl by.

“I don't mind spending time alone with you,” Raynor started. “I've talked a lot about you touching me over the years-”

Her fingers on his shoulder dug deep, and Raynor winced. “Oh yeah?” she said

“I mean, all very respectful.”

“Uh-huh.”

Raynor sighed. “Look, we've done this...how many times now? And we never get anywhere!”

“Getting somewhere,” she said. “Can measure the shift in your abilities. Your passage through time varies erratically based on your movements and what you include in your field. If you stand perfectly still, so does the world, but the more you interact with it the more quickly things seem to move. Every time you interact with a person you experience time at 1:1, like the rest of us.

“Oh good,” Raynor grumbled. “Cause I want people to know my weaknesses.”

Mrs. Riel sighed. “You know what these experiments are about, Raynor,” she said. “That was the agreement. You guys got your freedom, you got to run Umbrella, and in return you get tested. Take us out?”

“So that they can fight us,” Raynor said, rolling his eyes and relaxing the muscle in his mind, so that time began to speed by normally once more. He hid the relief he felt as the pain in his head lessened dramatically.

“If they have to,” she said. “You're dangerous, Raynor. You have thousands of times more...”

She trailed off. Raynor grinned at her. “Time?” he asked. “Were you going to say time?”

“Not an English major,” she grumbled, taking her hand off his shoulder. “But yes. More time than anyone in the world. Hell, you could kill an army all by yourself. By the time they knew they were under attack, it'd be too late to stop you. So they want every scrap of information they can get.”

“I mean I get that!” Raynor said, rolling his eyes. “But Geneton's got his stupid bugs on my computers! Doesn't that give him enough info?”

“They're not exactly bugs,” Mrs. Riel replied. “They just monitor the way you use your computer in slowtime. Give him a sense of your capabilities. He doesn't know what you look at or what's on your computer.”

“So he says!” Raynor said. “Supervillainous bastard could be hiding anything.”

“You've looked at them, haven't you?” Mrs. Riel asked. “See anything weird?”

“Well, no,” Raynor admitted. “But that doesn't mean-”

“Raynor, you're pretty damn good with computers,” she said. “And you can slow time. It would take a unit a dozen hackers working full-time to even make a dent in your security, and they might still lose.”

“Well, yeah,” Raynor said breezily, grinning. “But to be fair, that was true *before* I got superpowers.”

“Good lord,” she said. “I should stop letting Isaac hang out with you. That arrogance might be infectious.”

“You know I'm winning you over with my charm and good looks,” Raynor said, winking.

Mrs. Riel pursed her lips. “Well,” she admitted. “I do want your body.”

“I-” Raynor stopped as his stomach tried to flop free of his torso. “Huh?”

She latched a hand around his wrist, pulled his arm up, and started swabbing at it with a piece of damp cotton. Butterflies began to beat against his stomach. “Oh no,” he said weakly.

“Still afraid of needles?” she asked, grabbing a syringe. “You'd think after all this time...”

“Yeah, well,” Raynor muttered. “Doctors like you...” He looked up so he didn't have to see the needle take that sickening slide into his arm, wincing at the pain. A few moments later, and she pronounced, “Done.”

“Oh thank-” Raynor trailed off in a yelp as she expertly tweezed a hair off his arm, sticking it into a little glass slide.

“Now we're done,” she said, smiling.

“Can't believe Isaac isn't more psychologically damaged,” Raynor grumbled.

“I erased all the worst memories,” Mrs. Riel said.

“You are scarier than the Ghosts.”

Her smile widened. “You're done, asshole. Get out of here.”

“Yes ma'am!” Raynor said, forcing a cheer he didn't feel into his voice, and went striding out of her office. The door led out into a white hall with rooms on all sides — offices for the other doctors, as



well as rooms for the patients suffering from Premature Potentiality Syndrome. Raynor stopped in at one of them, a small room containing a stunning beauty lying on her back in a hospital bed. Her immaculate dark skin was covered by a cotton hospital gown. Glossy black hair framed a heart-shaped face and clay-brown eyes currently obscured by a rapid flurry of holos. Raynor gave her a once-over and smirked.

“My eyes are up here,” Jane grunted, tapping the side of her head to dispel the holograms and propping herself up on her elbows.

“And your ass is down there,” Raynor said.

“Gonna hit you.”

“What, you think you can take me?” Raynor said.

“Shouldn't need to do much to kick your ass,” Jane grunted. “More tests?”

Raynor rolled his eyes. “Ugh, yeah.”

“Needles?”

Raynor touched the place where the syringe had slipped in. “Yeah,” he said.

“You're such a god damn baby,” Jane sighed.

“Not all of us get to lay around playing videogames, Jane.”

Jane lifted her eyes to the ceiling. “Wouldn't if I didn't have to.”

A stab of guilt found its way to Raynor's heart. “Yeah,” he managed. “Yeah, I know.” He tapped his implant, summoning his own holograms over his eyes, and hastily subvocalized a series of commands. “Check your implant.”

Jane's eyes narrowed in suspicion. “Why?”

“Just got you that game you won't stop talking about.”

Jane's eyebrows quirked up. “*FFXXII*?” she asked. “That's not supposed to drop for another month.”

“There are advantages to being me.”

Jane grinned at him and lay back on her bed. “Talk to me again in 120 hours,” she said. “I've got a world to save.”

Raynor laughed and went off down the hall. But five steps in his face had resettled into a pained grimace, and he lifted a hand to nurse his aching head. Christ, but he hurt. He'd spent about 120 hours in slowtime over the past few days, with perhaps 12 of those spent sleeping. And Alex was right, sleeping in slowtime hurt like a bitch. You woke up even more keenly aware of the pain than you were before you slept.

Stupid. He needed to rest. But there was always something important he needed to do, and he never

had enough time...

Well, today he'd rest a little. Go home. Get some real sleep. Wasn't anything important he needed to do.

But on leaving the clinic, he found Kierra waiting for him, and his heart ached.

Kierra looked worse than he'd ever seen her. Her dark eyes were hollow with exhaustion, and her dark skin seemed tight in some places and loose in others. Her reddish-brown hair was thick with grease, like she hadn't showered in days. Her threadbare clothes wisped around like bits of fog around a body as thin and brittle as deadwood.

"You look like shit," he said, before he had time to think.

"And you still want to take me home and crawl into bed with me," she said.

"It's no fun talking to a god damn telepath," he grunted, his tired brain running through his old ideas of how to block her from reading his mind.

"It's a little fun," she said. "You never give up on trying to beat me."

"Yeah," Raynor said. He sidled a little closer to her. "You okay?"

She laughed. "No."

"Sorry."

"Not your fault." She stretched a little, then slipped her hands into her pockets. "I'm doing another search."

A wave of clammy fear pulsed out of his heart and chilled his veins. "Don't!" he said.

"I'm the only one who can."

"That's not a reason to--"

She sighed and shrugged her shoulders. "Better than being here," she said, and there was a pain in her voice that made him ache a little more.

"Is it that bad?" he asked.

"Worse than ever," she said. "I need some space. Plus, this way I can lend a hand. Keep an eye out for any Ghasts or...whatever."

She looked so beaten, so tired. He hated to see her this way.

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah, okay." He hesitated, then added, "Look, Kierra...you know if you ever need anything, I--"

She laughed, stepped closer, and kissed him on the forehead. Without thinking, he wrapped his arms around her and pressed his head against her chest. She rested her chin on top of his head. "No shit," she said. "You've got a martyr complex."

"Look who's talking!"

“Please,” she said, rolling her eyes. “I’m a survivor. You’re all just means to an end.”

He grinned up at her. “Baby, if you want to use me...”

She pushed him away. “When I get back.”

“Alright.” Raynor rubbed at his eyes. “I think I’m gonna get some sleep.”

“You need it,” she said. “Take care of yourself while I’m gone, alright?”

“You take care of yourself out there!” he retorted.

“Will do.”

She set off down street. But she didn’t bounce like she once had, and she looked a little slumped. Raynor watched her until she was out of sight. He touched his chest just above his heart, half expecting it to twinge as though it were bruised. His eyes were burning.

No, he wouldn’t go home to sleep. There were a hundred crimes he alone could stop, a hundred wrongs he alone could right. Who had time to rest, when people like Kierra persevered even through the pain?

He nodded and turned the opposite direction, heading for Umbrella.

## 6. Visitor: Depart

Vivimor had never been quiet for Kierra. Noise, noise, noise, as far back as she could remember. All this pain and fear and rage and jealousy, love and doubt and regret, a noxious cocktail that had terrified her as a child and then, once she'd gotten old enough to understand it, ground against her like people on a crowded bus, perverse and persistent.

But lately it was worse. Lately she could hear more, feel more. Like the whole city was standing next to her, screaming in her ear.

Was it any wonder she was always so desperate to get out into the Wastes? Get out into the numb and the quiet?

Kierra wasn't like the others. Her power hadn't awakened in her confrontation with Mort. She'd been living with it for much longer. And with every passing year, her sense of the world got stronger, and the countless screaming minds tore into her a little more.

She wound her way deeper into West Vivimor, struggling against the anger, fear, anxiety, and suspicion. So many people all over the city were convinced that Muertos or Hearts represented the key to a brighter future, and that their enemies had to be destroyed. And so many more were just struggling desperately to survive, clinging to the shadows and hoping they could weather the coming storm.

The helpless of Vivimor needed her. But it was so hard to help these days.

A familiar line of thought trailed its way out to her, like a tentative flute amidst the clamor of a brass band. She turned her head over her shoulder to see Ryan Caloin, in a well-tailored grey suit with his white dress shirt untucked and his red tie loosened, hurrying towards her. He had a bag over one shoulder.

"Sorry for the delay," he called. "Had to grab your supplies."

She didn't answer, not until he offered her his hand. The moment she took it, her body buzzed as though static were running over her skin, and the world got a little quieter. It didn't numb her senses, but instead acted as earplugs for her aching mind, blocking out the worst of the noise. "It's fine," she whispered. "Thank you."

"No trouble at all," he said, pulling the bag off his shoulders.

"Pills?" she said, taking the bag from him.

"Hydration capsules and nutrient bars," he answered. "Latest safe ones we could get you. One of the bars should keep you fed for the day. Each capsule contains the equivalent of about two drinks of water. We've got 120 capsules, 30 bars."

"Want me out there that long?" she asked, and resumed walking with her hand still in Ryan's. Ryan

followed without complaint.

“As long as possible,” Ryan said, shrugging. “We need information, and you need a break. Where are you living these days?”

Didn't want to answer that. In the dark, in the shadows. Wherever she didn't have to deal with people. Even the people she'd once found comfortable to be around were too loud now. Even Raynor.

When she didn't answer, Ryan frowned at her. His concern, curiosity, and frustration clattered against her like pebbles on a window. “You should be taking better care of yourself.”

She shook her head. “My powers do that for me.”

“They keep you alive,” Ryan said. “That's not the same.”

“You're getting all touchy-feely now?” she demanded. “Christ, you and Raynor are acting weird.” In spite of the blanket muffling her senses, she felt a wave of indecisive trepidation come rolling off Ryan. Fortunately, it was subdued enough to feel interesting, rather than painful. “What's wrong?”

“Haven't talked to him in awhile,” Ryan said stiffly.

“Well, you should,” she said.

“I'll keep that in mind.”

Kierra shrugged and looked up at the Wall, rising slowly in the distance, and guided them through an alley behind one of the crumbling buildings of the Wall District. “Get anything off what I brought you last time?” she asked.

“Ghasts are acting like Ghasts,” Ryan said. “That's hardly news.”

“And that signal?” she asked.

*That* was what woke her up at night in a cold sweat. Two years ago, Mort had smuggled hibernating Ghasts into the city, and they had awakened to rampage and murder all they could find. But those Ghasts had been awakened by *something* — something every citizen of Vivimor had felt. Ryan and the others had described it as a moment of self-loathing and revulsion. But Kierra's mind had been partially within one of the Ghasts, and she had felt it as a nothingness so total and complete that it had cut into her, its indelible imprint left behind upon her psyche. Silence given substance and will, and as the noise grew with every passing day she longed to find the source,

“We know it happened,” Ryan said. “But we can find no sign of it. Only the totality of the event indicates it was real.”

Kierra nodded, frowning into the distance. They entered a crumbling building and Kierra put her hand to the ground, let her mind and senses drift into the cold concrete. But even as she entered dumb, deaf, and blind stone the world was at her borders, clawing at the walls around her mind. Even the ground couldn't protect her anymore.

With a thought, she made the concrete facade crumble away, revealing a sloping tunnel. When she hopped down, Ryan followed, still clutching at her hand and keeping the worst of the pain at bay. "I can go from here," she said.

"No need for you to hurt anymore than you have to," Ryan said. The sincerity in his voice and in his mind caught her off-guard, and she turned back to face him in the dark of the tunnel.

"You really mean that," she said.

"Well, yes--"

"No," she said. "You mean that about all of them. You want to keep them alive, too."

Ryan shifted. "Well, yeah. Why wouldn't I?"

Kierra waited, as Ryan's thoughts mulled and muttered. "Besides," he continued, hesitant. "I...owe them all, don't I? Raynor. Alex." He looked sheepishly off to one side. "You."

She remembered. A terrified boy pinned to the ground, as Mort laughed above him. Heavy with terror, like a deer in the headlights, and then...

"I don't want to die," she repeated. His words, his plea, so earnest that it had reverberated across his mind and through every fiber of his being.

On the surface, he seemed to have come along way. But in the back of his mind, there were those lingering scents of fear and doubt.

"So why are you feeling so guilty?" she asked.

"I..." he started, then trailed off as they advanced through the tunnel. "Doing what is necessary can be...hard."

"Don't let it be," Kierra said.

"It's that easy, is it?"

"Yep," Kierra said. She stopped as she heard the faint traces of wind, and turned back to him. "We should stop here. Don't want you getting fucked up by the Wastes."

"I appreciate that." He hadn't quite let go of her hand.

"Do what you have to, Ryan," she said. "Don't let anyone tell you different. Don't try to be something you're not. It's a good way to get yourself killed." She squeezed his hand. "Stay alive. Keep going. You could always do that, even back then."

He winced. She felt it through his hand. "That seems like an insult."

"You can take it anyway you want." She released his hand and headed down the tunnel, wincing herself at the mounting pain of the voices behind her and above her, leaving her aching with claustrophobic mental noise. The bag jounced against her threadbare clothes as she walked faster and faster until the tunnel began to brighten, climbed over broken concrete and stone and out onto the grey

expanse of the Wastes. With a thought, she changed the air around her, rendering the poisonous powers of the Wastes harmless, then took a deep breath of dead air. She glanced down to the tunnel entrance at her feet, then back to the beautiful aurora shades of the Kopelsburg Defensive Field, twisting and throbbing in tidal pulses between the pylons. She could barely see the tallest towers of Vivimor above that neon shield.

The city of noisome pain was behind her. The silent Wastes ahead. Kierra felt at peace again.

## 7. Visionary: Assist

The day's work was nearly done. Alex had been warned about the investigation and made to realize how precarious his position was without Geneton's protection. Kierra had been sent out on a new expedition, to gather what information they could about the Wastes. Now there remained only his training, and then he could finally get some rest.

Dusk was gathering over the city, painting the grey shroud which perpetually hung over Vivimor with soft glows of pink, purple, and gold. Ryan paid little attention to the people rushing home to beat the curfew, enforced by Hearts and Muertos alike. His hands were folded behind his back, and his posture was ramrod straight. But he couldn't help the faint smile that always crept onto his face when he rounded a corner and got a chance to take in the Institute in all its splendor.

The Geneton Institute was Vivimor's most impressive building — a low white structure equal parts harsh angles and gentle curves, with a huge cylindrical tower bursting out of its center and rising high up into the air, nearly scraping the grey smog. As the day began to turn to night, floodlights were flickering on one by one, to illuminate the tower and the complex so that the building seemed to take on a lunar glow.

Ryan stepped through the office entrance, giving a curt nod to the security guard on duty and a faint smile to the last of the people who worked on the upper level, handling the bureaucracy and day-to-day affairs that came with running a corporation. They waved at him in turn, gathering their things — Geneton employees generally had curfew exemptions, but with both armies so twitchy it was probably best not to take any chances.

The base of the Institute's central tower had numerous elevators spaced along its perimeter, each with a small black sensor that registered employees and their clearance levels and okayed them for their various requests. But Ryan's attention was on the ceiling of the tower, which was to Ryan's mind one of the grandest sights in the city and, for that matter, the world.

It was a Sistine Chapel to intellectual achievement, designed by Geneton himself. At the very center of the mural, the apex of the tower, was a grand sun, golden and radiant. Scattered around it, all reaching for it, were various figures from history — a caveman holding a torch, a Chinese sailor aboard a long ship, Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, Feynman, Tesla, Da Vinci, Oppenheimer, Godel, Einstein, Darwin, and countless others, all with hungry eyes trained on that sun, reaching for it so that they formed a makeshift corona of grasping human brilliance.

Ryan stared at the mural until his elevator arrived, then stepped inside. As soon as the doors closed, he loosened his tie still further (damn things always made him feel like he was choking) and leaned



back onto the wall, shutting his eyes for a brief, grateful rest. Then the elevator slid to a halt, and the doors (and Ryan's eyes) opened onto the dim interior of a cozy apartment illuminated solely by floating holograms.

“No lights again, sir?” he called.

“Lights are a distraction!” answered Guy Geneton.

Ryan sighed and strolled past the desk just in front of the elevator and into their comfortable living room with its battered green armchairs and sunken maroon couch. Geneton was in one of the armchairs wearing only his red-and-brown plaid boxers, long skinny arms flinging holos this way and that as he sifted through maps, images, and data. His light brown hair was a wild mane atop his pale head, and his huge green eyes were filled with a frantic energy that never quite faded.

“Put on some clothes,” grumbled Ryan, stumbling towards their bedroom

“In my own apartment?” Geneton asked.

Ryan sighed and flung open the door to their room—the twin beds and their closets set in the walls opposite from each other. He flung his suit jacket onto his bed, hastily whipping off his tie and pulling off his dress shirt.

“Kierra's away!” Ryan called. “And Alex should be more cooperative.”

“Excellent,” Geneton replied. “We need to know where Mort is just as soon as they do.”

Too true, Ryan mused, shuddering a little as he remembered the Hunter's powerful hands on his back, teeth biting into his leg. He rubbed at the long-healed wound as he asked, “How's work on the *Daedalus*?”

“Our design is functional thus far,” Geneton said. “Construction is going a little slow, but we shouldn't need it anytime soon even in the worst-case scenario.”

Well, true, but the *Daedalus* was by far the coolest project they were working on, and Ryan would love to get some field tests going. That way he could help Kierra with her scouting work.

Thoughts of Kierra led him back to their conversation, though. To thoughts of Alex, Raynor, and doing what was right.

“Are you sure you don't want me to talk to Raynor?” Ryan asked.

“Raynor will give us all the data he needs to track Mort,” Geneton asked. “Which is the same data we need.”

“You don't want to check his searches?” Ryan asked, grabbing at a Geneton Corp t-shirt.

“What's the point?” Geneton asked. “We know all we need to. Besides, it would take far too much money to try to keep up with him. Especially given what we're spending on the lower levels.”

Ryan pursed his lips and thought about the room they were building far below. Two years ago they

had almost caught *Mortis Ambulare*, the Entity that called itself Mort, in a prototype portable KDF. Since then, they had launched a major construction project to install similar generators in the lowest levels of the Institute, with the goal of making an effective prison for the monster. He would return, that much was clear. When he did, they would be ready — to catch him, contain him, and study him. But...

“It still seems risky,” Ryan said, slipping sweatpants on and striding back into the living room.

“We've talked about this,” Geneton grunted. “The risk in capturing Mort is far outweighed by the potential gains. Honestly, Ryan, you have to learn to-”

Ryan grimaced. “I was talking about not recruiting Raynor,” he lied. He had no desire to revisit that well-worn topic of conversation.

“”Oh,” Geneton said, blinking. “Well, don't be. Raynor will always cooperate with us where Mort is concerned. His goals are the same as ours, minus a few flaws and foibles. Alex, by contrast, is a man of principles. He is a much less predictable quantity.”

True enough. Alex had always been difficult to understand. Throughout their time at the Institute, he'd always scolded Ryan for his inattention, but at the same time, he'd almost always relented and allowed Ryan to crib from his notes. When Mort had come hunting Ryan in the darkness, Alex had stood to face him while Ryan ran.

And now Ryan was blackmailing him. He closed his eyes and swallowed against the guilty lump in his throat.

“Oh, don't go feeling guilty,” Geneton grunted. “We have bigger things to worry about.”

And that was true, wasn't it? They were working for the survival of Vivimor and the betterment of the human race. But how many of his friends did he have to use to get there?

He heard Geneton's heavy sigh and opened his eyes. Geneton's green eyes were narrowed in his direction. “Ryan,” he said. “I need you focused.”

“I know.”

Geneton grabbed a slender black box and tossed it to Ryan. Ryan caught the warm plastic and closed his eyes again, allowing his mind to tumble in freefall through waves of information. Years and years ago, Ryan had managed to overcome his fear and confront the Hunter, and in so doing had gained the power to reshape with a touch — to heal injuries, thrust spikes out from the ground, reforge blunt metal into sharpened death. But these powers had limits — in particular, they were constrained by what he knew about the substances he was changing. So the moment he'd become Geneton's assistant, he'd started regular training, increasing his knowledge about the anatomic, molecular, chemical, and atomic structure of the world around him.

Two months ago, Geneton and Ryan had discovered that Ryan's power allowed him to sift through

the information in a textbook in mere hours, simply by placing his hand on the textbook and letting the same sense that let him manipulate matter go tumbling through the information therein. They currently trying to do the same with hard-drives measuring in terabytes. This allowed Ryan to absorb considerable amounts of information, but it came at a heavy cost.

He felt that cost almost at once. He'd already pushed himself hard today, and all at once the bottomless well of information he was diving through overwhelmed his senses, sundered his brain and sent spasms of fire radiating out through his temples. He came to with his face pressed into the carpet, his mind spinning. "S-shit," he mumbled, trying and failing to rise to his feet.

"Too much?" Geneton asked.

"Y-you c-c-could help me up."

"And what would you learn from that?"

"N-not to t-take...orders f-from you."

"Please. I have you whipped."

"Y-you don't have to f-f-phrase it that way." Ryan struggled to stand, but a fierce pang sank him back to his knees, muttering pained curses to himself. A moment later, he felt Geneton's hands in his armpits, hauling him to his feet.

"I need you to take care of yourself," Geneton instructed, settling him into the couch. "You are the key to solving the Wastes. To solving Mort. Without you, I become too weak to bear."

Ryan grinned up at him, though his head was spinning and there were two or three Genetons fading in and out of one another. "Is t-this where you p-p-propose?"

"In your dreams," Geneton said. "And stop stuttering."

"N-not exactly u-u-up t-to me."

"You have the power to reshape with a touch," Geneton said, voice calm but commanding. "Your excuses do not hold water. Focus."

So Ryan focused, his awareness slipping beneath his own skin to study the webwork of his veins and the working of his muscles. Geneton was wrong, in a way: Ryan's dive into the hard drive had exhausted something deep within him, something he could not quite evaluate, identify, or touch. There would be no fixing that. But whatever it was that let him manipulate and understand had released negative consequences all across his body — broken vessels in his nose, constriction of vessels in his head and in his brain, disruption of his inner ear. These things he could treat, and with a deft touch, treat without worsening his symptoms.

He swam back to consciousness with pounding pain still drumming in his temples, but Geneton was a little more solid now. "Done," Ryan said.

“Good man,” Geneton said, standing back up and turning to his holograms. “Don't waste your potential.”

“You are an impossible optimist,” grumbled Ryan, not quite daring to rise from the couch.

The elevator door *dinged* loudly. Both Ryan and Geneton glanced over as Ivan Kopelsburg strode out into the thicket of hovering holos. He had wild black hair and a scraggly beard, and his bulbous nose made the rest of his face appear someone small by comparison. Dark eyes narrowed at Geneton. “For the love of God,” he grumbled, words thickened by a faint Russian accent. “Put on some clothes.”

“This is *my* apartment!” Geneton retorted. “Portable generators all set up?”

“Over my objections,” Kopelsburg said.

“Still?” Geneton sighed, turning to face him. “Why?”

“You cannot possibly predict a creature such as Mortis,” Kopelsburg said. “Our best bet is to destroy him.”

“If he can be destroyed,” Geneton countered. “And what would be the point? What if we can use what he is to refine humanity?”

Again, that boundless optimism. That faith that the worst things in the world could be reshaped to mankind's benefit. But then, how could he be otherwise? His greatest achievement had come about as a result of manipulating cancer, using himself as the experimental test subject. From such madness he'd created Panacea — a healing agent without equal the world over.

“You cannot,” Kopelsburg groused. “And I did not choose to follow you so you could destroy us in suicidal ventures.”

“Your objection is noted,” Geneton said. “So long as the work is done.”

“Besides some last construction?” Kopelsburg said. “Yes. Your dungeon is ready.”

“Dungeon does have a nice ring to it,” Geneton admitted, shooting a sidelong glance at Ryan.

“If you say so, sir,” Ryan replied, rubbing his hand across his temples.

“Bah,” spat Geneton. “Neither of you is any fun.”

“Probably because we're actually concerned about the consequences of our actions,” Kopelsburg said, rolling his eyes.

“He has a point, sir,” Ryan said.

“Don't agree with him,” Geneton said. “It makes him feel important.”

“I *am* important,” Kopelsburg said.

“Indeed you are,” Geneton said. “Your ego needs no reinforcement.”

“*My* ego?” Kopelsburg repeated.

The tone of the argument filled Ryan with a sudden, intense nostalgia. He remembered those first

wild days just after they'd fought Mort, when Ryan, Alex, and Raynor had debated endlessly inside Umbrella's headquarters, seeking to build a new future. And for a fragile moment Ryan's chest ached with a longing more intense than any he'd ever felt — not for love or knowledge or power or money but simply for a time when things had been simpler and he'd had friends to call on who he could trust and who could trust him.

And now he blackmailed the friend who'd rushed into the dark two years ago to save him.

“Sir-” he started, sitting up a little as his doubts got the better of him, and at that moment his implant spoke up.

“Incoming call from Olivia Valisgrad,” Sean Connery informed him.

“Answer,” he said.

“Ryan,” Olivia said. “Need your guys help.”

Geneton lifted a hand to his ear and spoke himself. “We hear you, Olivia. What do you need?”

“New info from Alex. Mort's going to attack.”

All three men looked at each other. Ryan's heart stopped in his chest.

“How?” Geneton asked.

## 8. Prophet: Premonition

How comfortable was this hollow monument to his greed.

Alex sighed and leaned back onto his couch, staring up at his spackled ceiling. The house really was a little too fancy for his taste, a little too decadent. But these escaperhoods were for the rich, so there'd been nothing more humble he could buy.

So, here he sat. In a reminder of his avarice and his selfishness.

Oh, it was easy to argue otherwise. Easy to think of all the charities he'd supported, funding Father Rodriguez in community outreach throughout West Vivimor, funding additional scholarships for private schools and the Geneton Institute. But that offered him no comfort, because it was guilt that drove these actions, not piety or charity. He was using these charities to salve his conscience. The reason he was abusing his God-given foresight to anticipate the stock market was to buy this place. To guarantee his mother a way out. To inure them to the tides of politics, so that if the worst happened she would be able to leave.

No, it wasn't moral. But Alex wasn't sure there was a better choice.

"Will it be enough?" he called to his mother, to try and distract himself.

"I think so!" his mom called back.

Well. That was something.

He massaged his aching temples, struggling against his exhaustion. It wasn't wise to push his powers so much, but they still had no idea where Mort was going to kill those mercenaries. Worse, they had no idea what his larger plan was. There must be a method to his madness, as there had been two years ago. But what was it?

Two years ago, Mort had come alone, save for the Ghosts he'd snuck into their city. His ability to awaken those monsters was inherently horrifying, but at least Alex didn't have to be afraid of Ghosts this time — he would have seen someone smuggling them inside. If a Ghost attack came, it would have to make it through the Kopelsburg Defensive Field first.

So. Danger would be predictable, at least. How comforting.

But what if he missed it somehow? It was possible — if he tried to keep track of too many events happening in the near future, or acted prematurely so people had time to respond, altering the substance of his visions (as had happened in the wee hours of this morning), or pushed his sight too far so it started to go blank. He wasn't omniscient. He could not look back and see how something had come to be, only see its consequences in the future.

Tired. So tired. Too many quandaries, too many questions, too much ambiguity and too little

accomplished. He betrayed the tenets of his faith for security, he worked himself to the bone for people who rushed headlong into self-destruction time and time again, he compromised himself so he could be blackmailed by the man who had been his friend. None of the others understood. They couldn't see the catastrophes that nipped at their heels, waiting for the right combination of wrath and stupidity to bring Vivimor to ruin. They couldn't see the phantom disasters lurking behind every moment of every day.

And for that reason, he had to keep going. To keep his eyes on the future, so that the next tragedy might be averted. To keep quietly making his investments, so that if he failed his mother could escape.

At least, that was what he told himself. But what if all his efforts were just so that when the time came he could run away? Could compromise his beliefs still further, and abandon his cause?

He closed his eyes, fighting against this doubt as he let his mind go chasing after Mort, because thinking of the monster without was easier than thinking of the sins within.

The Trespasser was standing in the branches of a tall tree, itself at the crest of a sloping hill in the midst of a misty jungle. He held a crumpled sheaf of papers, slightly soiled with dirt and gore, which bore a complex sprawl of numbers and equations. It took Alex a moment to realize he recognized some of these equations, and another moment to remember how; an astrophysics course he'd taken at the Geneton Institute.

"I hope you're watching, Alejandro Sangre."

That voice, deep and resonant and powerful. Those coal-eyes, glowing with good cheer. Every thought was driven from Alex's head. Frost trickled through his veins.

"Oh, little prophet!" the Trespasser laughed. "Little martyr. Sacrificing everything for the sake of your city." The cheer in his eyes dimmed a little, and the grin flickered like a candle about to be extinguished. "I'll tell you again. Take your friends and run. Go as far as you can, and live as long as you are able. You can't win."

But then the grin returned, and joy exploded from those eyes. "But if you choose to fight?" he said. "If you choose to fight, then you will be vanguard to the greatest war mankind has ever known. This is my declaration of war, little prophet. Warn your friends."

And violet fire burned out from his skin, so he was shrouded in a nimbus of amethyst light.

They'd had time to analyze Mort over the last two years. The DNA samples taken from the blood and skin Mort had left behind in his attack on the city revealed nothing particularly impressive. Whatever quality it was that allowed him access to so many miraculous abilities, it was something that was intrinsic to the totality of his existence, not merely to his genes. Yet another way he was different from Alex and the others; all their powers were built into them at the genetic level, granted to them by bizarre genetic differences born in the shadow of the Wastes. Where had Mort gained his strength?

But now Mort was burning with that violet glow, surest sign of the vast power he had stolen from countless men and women over the centuries. Geneton's theory was that the light came from the process by which Mort manifested the energy he'd stolen — an process so intense that one of its byproducts was this violent, piercing light.

And then the amethyst light exploded outwards, a violet missile hurtling into the twilight sky.

Without thinking Alex followed it, raced along its trail. Its speed was dizzying, turning the ground beneath it to a blur as it arched higher and higher into the evening sky, which steadily blackened into night. With a jolt, Alex realized he had followed it out of the Earth's atmosphere. The comet hurtled outwards, past satellites and gleaming debris floating eerily in endless silence against a panoramic backdrop of stars. On the opposite side, clouds roiled on the surface of a vast expanse of blue, green, and grey. Earth. More perfect than Alex might have imagined.

But their little missile was still hurtling along, and just before impact, Alex saw its target.

Monteblanc was an ambitious monument to science. It was a satellite nearly a hundred meters long, loaded with some of the most sophisticated technological equipment of its day and locked into geosynchronous orbit with Vivimor far below. The blanket signal it broadcast over the city allowed for a degree of peerless intercommunication between inhabitants of the city and between the city and the outside world.

Ambitious as it was, Monteblanc was also cost-effective; the Wastes caused aberrations and abnormalities in all types of communication even along the barrier of the Kopelsburg Defensive Field. A satellite such as Monteblanc was the only way to effectively maintain order. Vivimor was a miraculous city, and Monteblanc was the reason for that miracle. Every inch of it was a technological marvel. Generators and antennae ran along its length, gleaming in the lunar corona reflected off the Earth's surface. Alex had never seen it before, but it was unmistakable.

And then the missile hit in an explosion of silent violet. Metal twisted, burned, melted, and tumbled out into the void.

Alex slammed back to Earth, his eyes wide, his head pounding. He started to sit up, then his head swam dizzily and he slumped back into the couch.

Monteblanc. Mort was going to destroy Monteblanc? And what would follow? What kind of chaos might befall Vivimor if that satellite went down? If communications, computers, and implants all stopped working? Alex couldn't know for sure — his foresight didn't extend that far — but he could guess.

“C-call Olivia,” Alex mumbled, and as his implant chirped he tried not to wonder how long he'd be able to make such calls.