



PHIL TUCKER

DAWN  
OF THE  
VOID

BOOK TWO

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# Dawn of the Void

Book 2

By

Phil Tucker

## **Dawn of the Void**

### **Book 2**

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# Chapter 1:

## Upgrades

The next few hours were a blur. Transportation was arranged to get back to the Marriott, bodies were bagged, and equipment salvaged. People hydrated, ate Manna bread, and there was constant chopper traffic overhead and trucks rumbling around. Once it was determined that the Fourth Wave had truly ended, the mood lightened, and people congratulated each other.

Bulldozers came up the streets to clear them of demon corpses which were stacked so high that if they'd not started decomposing immediately would have made the avenues impassable. They were shoved to the sides, the mounds reaching the third-story windows in some places and turning the streets into hellscapes of ichor and chitin.

James made a point of just being visible, talking to folks, and listening to them. He congratulated those who had done a good job, asked what ranks they'd reached, and just gave them his time.

And slowly it got easier. Not that hearing about deaths or seeing bodies ever became easy, but after his talk with Serenity it stopped being about *him*. He showed up for his people, and with that outlook he realized he could take it. He could hug people who broke down, smile when others made dark jokes, or simply give commands, deciding who'd ship out first in the transport trucks when they rolled up.

Someone pressed a bottle of water into his hand, and he only realized then that he was parched; he drained it, then ate another Manna bread.

Only later did he gather Crimson Hydra. They were the last Blue Light team on site. Most of them had camped out in their intersection, waiting as the hours rolled by, and only when he returned did they rise to their feet.

Olaf gave James a grave nod. “You are very inspiring, James. You have good presence. I am honored to stand with you.”

“Yeah,” said Denzel. “Kudos all round, you guys. Hell of a show.”

“Thanks,” said James. “Though I want to find Yadriel before I feel ready to leave. How’s everyone doing?”

“Good,” said Joanna. She’d salvaged a large pair of aviators that fit her face well. “All things considered. I picked my Benediction, by the way. Soul Bastion. It allows me to protect us all while we sleep. Apparently, it turns out that the demons have the ability to corrupt us while we dream.”

“Delightful,” said Becca. “It just keeps getting better.”

“What about you, Becca?” James studied the woman. “You pick something?”

Becca was rebraiding her black hair, her fingers dexterous, her brow furrowed. “I did. Dark Vision seems to have opened shadow powers. I had a choice between Shadow Step, Black Apotheosis, and Living Darkness. Went with Black Apotheosis. I don’t know, it just called to me.”

“What does that do?” asked Denzel.

Becca paused her braiding, licked her lower lip, and then shook out her shoulders and stepped back. “I have a feeling this might be... kind of alarming.” Her grin was all anticipation, though. “So don’t shit your pants.”

She inhaled deeply, her chest rising, and with a flick her eyes turned jet black, sclera, irises, and all.

James was about to comment, but she wasn’t done.

Shadows streamed toward her, flowing from under the tank, from the cracks between the sandbags, from all around. They hid her figure, making her larger. She swelled in height, growing to some nine, ten feet, and became...

“Oh shit,” said Denzel, stepping back. “You’re a fucking shadow demon.”



“It feels good,” said Becca, her voice distorted, made menacing and hollow. It looked as if she were wreathed in living black flames that endlessly coursed about her. Her arms had elongated, her hands grown, and each finger was now tipped with a six-inch curved blade of pure night. Her face was almost completely hidden, but it looked vaguely like a bull’s skull if one had been dipped in oil, with backswept horns.

Rangers and other support personnel cried out in alarm. James turned, extended his arms, saw dozens of men hurriedly grabbing their M4s.

“Hey! Calm down! It’s OK.” It sounded really weird to be saying that. “It’s just a new power! New Benediction. Lower your weapons!”

The Rangers hesitated, but finally did so, their eyes wide as they stared at the creature of living night that loomed up behind James.

“My stats receive a +15 blessing in this form,” Becca said, her voice throaty with satisfaction. “And that only gets better the darker it gets.”

James didn’t know what to say. Could hardly credit what he was looking at. The fact that Becca was... this thing... that she could just... morph up into a... it didn’t feel *real*. Possible. His mind buckled as it tried to encompass her new power.

“Shit, girl,” said Serenity. “That’s not half-bad.”

Becca chuckled and hunched her shoulders, shadowed muscles of black flame rippling across her demonic figure. “Enjoy your bullets, Serenity. I’m going to be getting up close and personal from now on.”

“That’s...” began James.

“Fucking amazing,” said Bjørn, his tone rich with wonder. “You look fantastic, Becca.”

“Glad you like it,” she said wryly, but James could tell she was pleased. A moment later, the shadows diminished, and she sank back down to the street, her human form revealed in its core. She was covered in sweat, her chest rising and falling

as if she'd just run a race, but her grin was genuine and her eyes shone. "Damn that felt good."

"Wild," said Denzel, rubbing the back of his head. "But I guess if James can call down lightning, why the fuck not?"

James looked over to where Jason stood, the young army man at ease, his expression quietly satisfied. "What you got for us?"

"Couple of options. I'm not sure which to go for. The first's called Nova. I'm guessing it'll cause my Aura to go off like a tactical nuke. Which sounds great, but then we all saw what you can do with your lightning bolts. So maybe it's redundant?"

"If killing more demons ever becomes redundant," said Serenity.

"Then I got a power called Righteous Obelisk, and the third is Seraphic Web. Not 100% sure what those do. None of them are particularly calling me just yet." He paused and considered. "Maybe Web. I don't know. Given what we just went through here, it could have been useful."

"Those all sound good," said James. "And if you don't have a strong feeling yet, then just hang in there. Denzel, why don't you share with the group what you picked."

Denzel did so, his tone almost shy, but when he saw everybody's approval he perked up. "I'm hoping y'all don't make me use it too often. If you wouldn't mind."

Joanna threw her arm around his shoulders and gave him a squeeze. "We'll see what we can do."

"Now we just need to find Yadriel," said James. "But overall, this was a major power-up, everyone." He looked each person in the eyes and smiled. "With Olaf's Circle of Protection and Denzel's Martyr's Cry, we're now double insulated from harm, while Joanna's Soul Bastion sounds like something we're gonna need real bad when the time comes. We've got some serious options between Bjørn and Jason's new Benedictions, and Yadriel and Becca look like they'll be able to deliver the hurt up close and personal. Finally, Serenity

and I got the ranged attacks, and her unlimited ammo is probably gonna be a game changer once we eventually start running out of actual ammo. Like Hackworth would say: outstanding.”

“I’m keeping this Ma Deuce,” said Serenity. “It doesn’t heat up when I use my Eternal Fire on it. With a little more Strength I’ll be able to swing it around like nobody’s business.”

Olaf chuckled. “I would like to see the man who would take it from you.”

“Let’s do a circuit of the blocks around this position,” said James. “I want to try and find Yadriel before we head out. Maybe he’ll sense our ka-tet bond and show up.”

“Fucking Dark Energy Siphon,” said Becca. “That Benediction’s just a huge liability. You should drop a video warning the world about it.”

“Should have already done so, actually,” said Bjørn calmly. “A bit late, now.”

“Yeah, well, it’s too late to close the barn doors now.” James let their words roll off his shoulders. “Grab your shit. I’ll let the captain here know we’re doing a loop, and then we’ll catch a ride back to the Marriott.”

“Or,” said Bjørn, “we could visit my apartment. It’s only a dozen blocks from here. It might prove a nice change of pace for us all.”

James glanced around. Clearly everyone was up for visiting a millionaire’s pad over a return to the Marriott.

“Sure,” said James. “Mighty kind of you to host us.”

Bjørn’s smile was predatory. “Oh, it’s my pleasure. No need to thank me at all.”

## Chapter 2:

### Is a Knife Evil?

They made their way through the valley of dead demons.

It was unnerving and strange to walk through so many corpses. James had waived the offer of a Bradley, and there were too many in his ka-tet for them to take Zeroes. So they walked. Picked a torturous trail between the piles of decomposing demons, stepping on chitinous limbs that ashed before their advance and ground soaked in ichor.

Everybody was wary. Though there was no doubting the demons were dead, it was all too easy to imagine the walls of talons and abdomens and shattered masks suddenly lurching to life, for a single Nem2 to burst out of the depths of its slain comrades and attack them, hissing and screeching.

But none did.

This lasted for three long blocks. At the worst point they were forced to push through a great dune of bodies, their Auras ashing the corpses, which caused those piled above to collapse down upon them and ash as well, everyone at once furious and revolted.

“I’m going to wring his scrawny neck,” cursed Becca as she once again spilled over and had to catch herself with an outstretched arm.

But finally they left the grisly cordon behind, and at random James chose to take a left on 30th. Scaffolding encased the lower two stories of the building on the left, while a huge cube of glass had been glommed onto the corner of its opposite, with the building’s address decaled in huge letters across its face: *27 5TH Ave.*

James considered the construction and was struck by how anachronistic it seemed. Already it felt like an artifact from another age, a time when people had time and the desire to sit in air-conditioned offices and plan how to spend a few

million dollars on a fancy project like this that did - what? Announce to the world that this building was right where it was?

Shaking his head, he led the way, fire-axe over his shoulder, down the single, narrow lane. Manhattan was weird like that. One second you could be walking down an avenue that felt as wide as a football field, the next you could be sliding along a canyon of a street, construction on both sides, a bike lane somehow squeezed in along one shoulder, century old buildings looming high above you on both sides.

“Eurgh,” said Denzel, who’d gone around an abandoned cab to gain the narrow sidewalk. “Dead person.”

They paused, arrested by old instincts, and James followed after. A young man, face down in the gutter beside the cab’s wheels, several bullet holes between his shoulder blades.

“You think we should call someone?” asked Olaf.

“Who?” asked Bjørn. “The police? Is the NYPD even around any longer?”

“They have to be,” said Serenity. “Those bastards are like roaches. They’d be the last thing to die in this city.”

Bjørn smirked. “Somebody clearly had a productive relationship with our boys in blue. I never asked, Serenity. What exactly did you do for a living before the apocalypse?”

Serenity smiled sweetly at him. “I ran a donut shop in Flatbush. The Dolce Hole. The Gothamist gave us rave reviews.”

Bjørn frowned at her, suddenly uncertain.

“Let’s keep moving,” said James. “Last I checked 911 wasn’t taking calls.”

They proceeded down the street as if through a war zone, everyone scanning the buildings, moving cautiously, peering around cars, turning on occasion to check behind them. It reminded James of Mancini and his squad, and he wondered where they were and how they were doing.

It was another of those huge blocks between avenues, but eventually they emerged onto Madison and 30th.

Olaf frowned. “Why is everything under construction?”

Three of the four corners had scaffolding and raised roofing over the pavement, with shop names stenciled over the broad edges.

“NYC man,” said Denzel, punching one fist into the other palm. “City that never sleeps and all that shit. If you ain’t growing, you’re dying.”

“Interesting,” said Olaf.

There were people here. The sight of them shocked James, as if they’d been exploring the surface of the moon and run into pedestrians. They were wary, most carried an improvised weapon of some kind, and they moved with a haunted expression, glancing about as they hustled along the sidewalks. New Yorkers of every kind, wearing sharp clothing, phones in hand, carrying groceries, moving in packs, living their own desperate lives while the city collapsed around them.

“Weird,” said Jason. “I don’t know why, but I thought everyone was... gone. Left the city or something.”

“For where?” Joanna’s tone was bleak. “Everyone’s facing the same crisis. There’s no safe family to escape to.”

“Smaller towns don’t have demon symbols,” said Jason. “I’d have gone upstate to my granddad’s farm.”

“Hey.” Serenity drew up short. “You think all those Nem2s are leaving the podunk towns for the closest symbols? Like, migrating toward them?”

Nobody spoke. There might be eight million people in NYC, but there had to be easily twice that number in all of the state. Add in Jersey, Connecticut...

Bjørn smoothed down his rough, jaw-length beard. “Well, I think it’s safe to say Yadriel’s not been through here. There’s a decided lack of screaming.”

“True. Let’s cut back north.” James led the way up Madison. A moment later, they reached 31st Street. They

peered west toward 5th Ave, and in the far distance could see the piles of demon dead.

Without conferring, James led them one more block north. The block featured a series of upscale furniture stores, the kind where a single piece cost more than James's EMT salary would have made in a decade. The lights were still on inside, and each shopfront window looked like it fronted a museum.

They took a left on 32nd, cutting back to 5th Ave, and James was starting to feel like they were on a fool's errand when they heard the metal of a fire escape creak as someone moved upon it.

Their reaction was immediate; Serenity raised her Ma Deuce, Olaf summoned his Circle of Protection, and Becca aimed her Bushmaster.

But it was Yadriel, face pale under his hoody, three flights up, shoulders hunched, looking wretched. "Yo, don't shoot. I ain't gonna hurt you."

"Fuck," said Becca, lowering her gun. "Where'd you get off on surprising us like that?"

"Yadriel? Come on down." James tried to sound calm, but his heart was racing. "You're safe now."

Yadriel chuckled. "Oh, I know that. Question is, are you?"

Becca grinned. "Let's find out."

Yadriel hesitated, torn, and James reached a decision. "You lot go on ahead. Yadriel and I will catch up with you at the fortification."

Serenity hesitated then gave a grudging nod. "You got it, hon. Let's go."

The crew was clearly torn, but Serenity's decisiveness caused them all to follow after. James watched them head down 32nd, and when they were a decent distance away, looked back up. "You want to come down, or for me to come to you?"

Yadriel frowned, then sighed dramatically. “You’re not gonna leave till we talk, are you? Fine. I’ll come down.”

And he placed one hand on the railing and vaulted over, dropping thirty feet to land in a superhero pose, one hand on the asphalt, body sinking into a deep crouch.

“Damn,” said James. “You should be careful. Your knees are gonna kill you when you reach forty.”

“Heh.” Yadriel rose to his feet. “Guess there are some perks to going dark side.”

“That what you’ve done? Gone dark side?”

Yadriel pushed his hoody back and roughly ran his fingers through his frizzy hair. He didn’t answer immediately, but instead just held James’s gaze. His own heavy-lidded stare inscrutable.

“What do you think?” he asked at last.

“I don’t think so for a second.”

“Oh yeah?” Yadriel took a step closer. “How come you’re so sure?”

“Because we’re talking. And I don’t see it. I see a conflicted kid whose been dealt a rough hand, but not a demon.”

“You didn’t see what I turned into.”

“True. But you turned back.”

Yadriel scowled. “You don’t know me.”

“Not the details, no. But actions speak louder than words. And for all you keep telling me you’re a killer and a bad person, I’ve seen you fight alongside us, do what’s needed, help out with Bless and stand by our side. Which makes you a good person in my books.”

“Yeah? Maybe I did that ‘cause I didn’t have a choice.”

“And now you do?”

Yadriel nodded slowly, his smile almost a sneer. “Now I got a choice.”



“And what you choosing between?”

“Between being my own... my own self. Or just following you everywhere.”

“Sure.” James nodded as if giving weight to Yadriel’s argument. “Your own person. To do what? Be like Batman? Fighting the demons all by yourself? Hunting the streets at night like one of them?”

Yadriel raised his chin. “Maybe.”

James began to walk slowly toward him. “Where you gonna sleep? Whose gonna watch your back?”

“Don’t need anyone to watch my back. Not anymore.”

“That so. You got family, Yadriel.”

“Leave my family out of it.”

James stopped. “You know we’re meant to work together. The synergy bonus only works if we stand as one.”

“Fuck the synergy bonus. I’ll kill so many demons I’ll outpace the rest of you.”

James sighed. Yadriel looked so young. So hurt. So angry. “We need you, buddy. We can’t do this without you.”

“Bullshit. You need me just for my synergy bonus. That’s all you care about.”

“Not true, though that’s important.” James allowed his voice to sound exactly as he felt. Saddened, weary, and old. “I think there’s a rationale to the way this is all set up. The groups of nine composed of each Benediction variety. The waves of Nemeses. If the powers orchestrating this shit wanted to just kill us, they could have dumped Nemesis 3 on us on day one, or fuck, Nemesis 10. It’d have been a mass slaughter. I don’t think they want to just kill us. They’re grooming us. Preparing us for these Pits. Why? I’ve no fucking clue. Maybe it’s a game to them, and they want to give us a fighting chance. But what I do know is that if we’re smart we’ll use the tools they give us, because if not? We’re all going to die. Maybe not you. Maybe you’ll be the last man standing. But what use is

that? You want to grow old in a world where everyone else has died? Turn thirty, forty, sixty years old by yourself?”

Yadriel glowered at him.

“We need you. You’re part of our team. I don’t know who or what you were before, and frankly, I don’t care. I was homeless, but worse, I was actively trying to be a nobody. Now?” James smiled. “Now I’m a captain and in charge of this madness. How crazy is that? If a deadbeat like me can make a change, become part of something bigger, then buddy, the sky’s the limit for you. Don’t ditch us. Stick around. We need you.”

Yadriel’s face flushed and emotions wrestled across his visage. “You don’t know nothing about me.”

“True.”

“You don’t know what I done.”

James nodded.

“And these powers I got now, man, they’re like, they fuck me up, make me feel like...” Yadriel trailed off, his expression turning raw, his eyes tearing up. “You think you know me?” His voice rose to a shout and he took three quick steps forward. “Huh? You think you know me?”

James didn’t move, didn’t look away.

“You don’t fucking know me! You don’t even know what you’re asking for! Here, you wanna see?”

And Yadriel changed.

His limbs elongated, his clothing melted into his body, which turned black as a river of oil, his legs recurving the wrong way, his torso narrowing and producing armor, his forearms growing blades, his face turning porcelain white, horrific, like a hideous mockery of a Nem2s. He loomed over James, an insectile amalgam of an impossibly tall man and a demon, his whole body vibrating with lethal power and pent-up fury.

James crossed his arms and looked up into Yadriel’s face. Only his dark eyes had remained the same.

“I see you,” said James, fighting to keep his voice steady. “And nothing’s changed.”

Yadriel screamed, lurched aside, and brought both bladed arms down upon the roof of an old sedan. The car crumpled, windows blasting out. Again Yadriel lashed at it, raking his arms along the doors, producing a hideous screeching sound of tortured metal, then wheeled and loomed over James again, his face roiled by emotion.

James held his ground.

Looked up into Yadriel’s tortured eyes, and slowly shook his head.

“You don’t scare me,” he said softly. “Why don’t you come down out of there so we can talk?”

Yadriel rose to his full height, nearly twelve feet in all, arms splayed wide so that they nearly touched either side of the street, and screamed down at James, the sound so thick and rich with pain and horror that James felt his soul be battered by it.

But he refused to look away.

Remained utterly still, arms crossed.

For a long, aching moment, Yadriel remained thus, poised over James, and then he fell back, shrank down into his human form, clothing appearing once more, to cover his face and collapse against the ruined sedan, his body convulsed by terrible sobs.

James watched the kid cry, then slowly, carefully, made his way over to him, turned, and sat down against the sedan’s front tire, arms draped over his knees.

For a while, they remained like that, Yadriel crying into the crook of his elbow, James gazing at a closed nail salon behind a steel roll-down shutter until, finally, Yadriel wiped at this face.

“Why’d I get his power?” he asked, voice thick and raw with emotion.

“You chose it.”

“Yeah, but why’d I choose it? Doesn’t that say something about me? What I am?”

James sighed. “Is a knife evil?”

Yadriel just stared at him.

“Of course it’s not. It’s how you use it. A knife can chop the ingredients for a family dinner or be stabbed into some poor idiot’s back while he’s walking home from work. The knife’s not evil, it’s how you use it that counts. Same with your powers. You’ve been handed a huge fucking knife. Now, how you gonna use it?”

Yadriel’s expression turned pensive, and he turned to sit against the sedan, arms looping over his knees.

“Does your power change how you feel?” asked James. “Make you want to do stuff you normally wouldn’t?”

Yadriel went to answer right away, then checked himself. Frowned. “Once, maybe, I’d ‘a said yeah. But now... all this fucking Arete. I guess not. I heard once, how, like, money and power just make you more of what you already were. Let you be your true self. It feels like this power, becoming a... a demon, it lets me...”

James waited.

“I gotta lot of rage, man.” Yadriel stared at his fingers fixedly. “I gotta lot rage and... yeah. My life, it’s been... and this shape, this power, it’s like a way to finally...”

“I hear you.” James kept on staring right ahead. “It’s gotta be real tempting.”

“Like a motherfucker. There are some punks from my old neighborhood I wouldn’t mind finding. But...”

“Yeah. So you’re saying those instincts don’t come from the power, but from you.”

“I told you. I’m not a good person.”

“I don’t know. You haven’t headed off to your old neighborhood yet.”

Yadriel looked at him sidelong. “Maybe I still will.”

“Maybe. But in the meantime, what do you say to hanging out with us for a bit longer? Just while you figure it out?”

Yadriel scowled, looked back at where he was tearing at his thumb’s cuticle and frowned. “Well... all right. Just for a while longer. While I decide what I really want.”

“Good.” James stood. “Glad to hear it. I’ll keep this conversation between us. You up for heading back?”

“I don’t want to talk about this to no one else.”

“You don’t have to. I think they’ll understand you want to keep this quiet. I’ll tell them we figured shit out, and that we’re good. They’ll listen to me.”

“All right.” Yadriel’s hands went still, then he gave one curt nod and climbed up to his feet. “Fine. Lead on, Grandpa.”

James snorted. “Kids.”

But Yadriel followed him back out onto 5th Ave, and that was all that mattered.

## Chapter 3:

### Wealth and Power

James and Yadriel returned to the fortified intersection to find that the army presence had been drawn down. A second tank had shown up to tow the Abrams away, though it lacked a tank gun, and was in the process of being hitched up. Crews were overseeing the process, while the remaining Rangers were piling into Hummers.

The Ranger captain came up to say goodbye. He was in his late twenties, his blue eyes piercing, faint golden stubble along his jaw and upper lip.

*Why do all these soldiers look like kids?* James couldn't help but wonder.

But Captain Rawlings had a deep solidity to him, a calm presence that belied his relative youth, and his salute was crisp.

"Captain, we're pulling back to Fort Huntington. Does your squad need a ride out?"

"No, we're going to stay in the area for a bit. Thanks for the..." James trailed off, trying to think of the right word. "The good work. Appreciate it."

"Of course, Captain."

"Oh. One thing. Think I could keep one of those Zeroes? Might come in useful."

Captain Rawlings glanced over to where the three bikes stood together. "Honestly, sir? You can have the lot of them. After what I saw you and your squad do today, I think you guys would put them to good use. I'll square away the paperwork."

"Thank you, Captain."

Rawlings gave a curt nod, glanced over the rest of Crimson Hydra, then strode over to one of the last idling Hummers.

“Everybody else has headed back to the Marriott,” said Jason. “I’ve also told Star Boy about our plans to hang out here for a bit. Get some R&R.”

“How far is it to your digs, Bjørn?” asked Denzel, hands thrust deep in his letterman jacket pockets.

“Not far. Though to be honest, I rarely walked around. Let’s see. This way.” Bjørn set off, clearly enthused. Becca moved up to walk alongside him, and the others dropped into a column, with Yadriel and Denzel bringing up the rear and engaging in a low conversation. The rest of them listened as Olaf told an improbable tale of how a Ren Fair battle chess game had gotten out of hand when a group of neo-Nazis had tried to swarm the board, and how he’d had to intervene despite being dressed as a lion and wielding only a boffing sword.

The blocks passed quickly, and here and there James still saw signs of life persisting; a cafe filled with people using the Wi-Fi, strangers crammed around tables. People emerging from subway stops. A homeless lady pushing a shopping cart filled with Manna bread.

They reached Bjørn’s block, and everybody paused to crane their necks back and gape up at his tower. It rose like a blue steel spear into the heavens and looked to be hundreds of stories tall. Slender, improbable, and perfectly reflective, it appeared to be a building right out of a science fiction movie.

“You live in there?” asked Yadriel, tone awed.

“Only this past year,” said Bjørn modestly. “Had a bumper profit in ‘21, and thought: why not spoil myself a little?”

The ground floor was surrounded by the ubiquitous scaffolding, but once they navigated this, they reached revolving glass doors set impressively in a two-story facade of

steel, more glass, and bronze. The whole front looked like a medieval geometrist's fever dream.

Incredibly, two men stood guard at the door, both dressed in an old-school burgundy doorman's uniform, but each with a machine-gun hanging from a strap over their shoulders. They inclined their heads politely to Bjørn as he stepped up, but he ignored them and strode briskly into the lobby beyond.

Bemused, James followed, and entered a soaring space that could probably have accommodated a normal house. Uncomfortable-looking, gray leather couches were set around over ugly carpets that looked like badly polished cement. The walls were of hammered bronze. Everything looked expensive.

Bjørn led them to a bank of elevators, called one, and then stepped inside and drew a security card from his wallet which he inserted into a slot beneath the floor numbers and pressed "PH" at the top.

They all crowded in, and it became readily apparent that they were all in need of a good wash. Within moments, the elevator filled with the acrid stink of demon blood and sweat.

The ride up was disconcertingly smooth. James didn't feel any acceleration at all. But a moment later, the doors parted and Bjørn strode out into a private lobby. Everything was of pale marble, and great Chinese vases held intricately whorled branches that looked to have been laminated in precious metals.

The front door opened before Bjørn reached it, revealing a broad-shouldered man in an elegant suit of slate blue, his head shaved, his manner at once capable and deferential.

"Mr. Larsen," said the man, stepping aside.

"We've guests, Peter." Bjørn moved past him and into the penthouse. "How much of the staff remains?"

Peter held the door open for them all, nodding politely to each of them as they entered. The ka-tet came to a stop as they drifted into the entrance and gaped.

James had known apartments like this had to exist. That millionaires and billionaires had to live somewhere, but still.



The sight was... breathtaking.

The penthouse was two stories tall and the outer wall was all glass, with a slender column defining the corner. All of Manhattan lay spread out below them, the tips of the other skyscrapers, and a great green expanse dotted with buildings, lakes, and small woods that had to be Central Park.

The place was huge. You could have played volleyball in there. The large living room was spare, minimalist in decor, with tasteful couches arranged around a low coffee table. The floor was some kind of designer concrete, and everything felt airy and light, as if they floated above the city.

“Whoa,” said Denzel. “This place is crazy.”

“Not bad,” said Becca, turning to follow the staircase in the corner as it rose to the second floor, a landing revealing a half-dozen doors.

Bjørn was conferring with Peter in the kitchen, off to the left and with a glass wall of its own, an island of pale birchwood the size of a car surrounded by a half-dozen stools. He nodded to whatever Peter was telling him, then cut him off with a raised palm and turned to the crew.

“I’ve matters to attend to. Even with the apocalypse going on, a few calls must be made. Peter will see to it that you’re taken care of, and I’ll rejoin you for dinner. If you’ll excuse me.”

And he drew out his phone and strode out through a door.

Two women in slate blue matching outfits that matched Peter’s own appeared on the second-floor landing. James did a double take. Both were gorgeous, poised, and looked like they belonged aboard the deck of a yacht rather than on anybody’s wait staff.

Peter smiled and stepped forward. “I am sure you could all use hot showers and fresh clothing. We have four guest bedrooms upstairs, each with their own bathroom. May I suggest you pair off and take advantage of them? Bhavani and Fiadh will see to it that you have everything you need.”

Both women subtly became more alert, as if an invisible spotlight had been shone on them.

“I could get used to this,” said Serenity.

They filed up the staircase, and James was aware of everything he touched. He felt like he was leaving grime wherever he went.

The crew was clearly awed by their environs; people spoke quietly if at all, and when they reached the landing they came to a stop, nonplussed by the... maids?

“What are you both still doing here?” asked Serenity, her curiosity avid. “There’s a literal apocalypse going on. Don’t you want to get home to your families or whatever?”

Bhavani was a slight, slender woman, her features doll-like in their perfection, her black hair parted down the center and hidden under a head wrap. Her uniform was tailored to reveal her shoulders, but she wore a slate blue sari-like sash down over one shoulder, so that she looked at once elegant, professional, and beautiful.

“This is our home,” she said with a surprised, easy smile. “Fiadh and I both reside on the premises.” Her accent was slightly British. “My family is in London. It would be hard to reach them right now.”

“Mine’s in Dublin,” said Fiadh, her manner equally at ease and warm. Her hair smoldered, a remarkable red infused with bronze, with small blue flowers cunningly inserted into the updo that complemented her eyes and uniform. A smattering of freckles lay across the bridge of her nose, and James couldn’t help but wonder if the genial amusement in her eyes was genuine or feigned. Or if there was even a way to tell with people who worked for men like Bjørn.

“But come.” Fiadh stepped to one side and gestured to the doors. “Enough about us. Let’s get you settled.”

They were shown to their rooms. Bjørn had to own the entire top of the building. Each boasted the same reserved, severe elegance, the emphasis on lack of clutter or

ornamentation, surfaces bare, the windows all floor to ceiling, the lighting subtle and warm.

James ended up in a room with Yadriel, who clucked his tongue and made a beeline for the bathroom, only to stop in the doorway.

“Whoa. Yo, James, come check this out.”

James looked over his shoulder. The bathroom was as big as the bedroom, with a huge sunken tub facing the ubiquitous windows. The backwall was mirrored, the floor consisted of white marble, and a huge shower box with no partitions dominated the other side, a large chrome disc hanging over the subtly sloped marble floor.

“Hey, we supposed to shower naked in front of these windows?” Yadriel exclaimed.

Fiadh entered the bedroom, eyebrows raised, and then smiled. “Oh, don’t worry, sir. The windows are treated so that you can’t be seen through them. Can I fetch either of you some refreshments?”

“Sure, sure,” said Yadriel nervously. “I’ll take, uh, a Coke.”

“Water for me,” said James. “Thank you.”

Fiadh bowed her head and left.

“Yo, man, this out of control. Bjørn just like, lives here all the time?”

“The man’s a millionaire,” said James. “Guess he does.”

An hour later, they all gathered below in the living room. Everyone was showered, clean, and either wearing luxurious terry cloth, white bathrobes or dressed in expensive casual clothing that one of the staff had purchased somehow from the shops below while they were showering.

James sat on the edge of one of the couches and tried not to be intimidated or overly impressed. This was just a fancy apartment. The staff was scarily efficient because they were probably paid in the six figures to do things exactly like estimate clothing size and anticipate every need.

Still. James couldn't even see the streets from here. Just the tops of high-rises, skyscrapers, an endless spread of geometric shapes, with a handful of demon symbols hanging in the distance.

He stared at them. They were what really mattered. Not this fanciness.

Bjørn appeared at last, showered and in a sleek, black suit. Everyone fell silent as he descended to join them and watched as he moved to stand before the windows and gaze out over the city.

"It's fascinating to see what parts of the world insists on functioning, and how." He turned to them all, accepted a glass from Bhavani without glancing at her, and considered the crew. "What holds on to the old ways, what falls apart in the face of the new. I was just on the phone with a congressman and then the governor. I can almost see it, the old systems collapsing upon themselves under the weight of their inability to adapt."

Jason's eyebrows shot up. "You were on the phone with a congressman?"

"Congressman Collins, yes. He's holed up in the Hampshires." Bjørn frowned. "I won't be taking his calls anymore."

"Dude," said Denzel, his tone awed. "How rich are you?"

Bjørn's smile was dark. "A week ago I would have told you: not enough. But now? Much of this has become immaterial."

"Not enough?" Yadriel leaned forward. "You're like Tony fucking Stark up in here. You got congressmen calling you. You're a millionaire, right? How is this not enough?"

Bjørn's smile grew pained. "Yadriel. There are degrees of wealth, even at the very top. Where I'm at, with a liquid net worth of \$76 million, I am - or was - doing all right. I was just starting to play with the real wolves. I could fly private by chartering a jet, stay in any 5-star hotel I desired around the

world, and vacation whenever and wherever I liked. This past spring I rented a villa in Cannes during Film Festival - and the cost of \$17k per night didn't faze me. I socialized with congressmen, senators, and was a minor figure of some note in the New York social scene. I can buy any car I desire, have a full-time staff, and live, as you can see, in some style."

He gestured around the penthouse with his drink.

Yadriel's mouth had slipped open.

"But," said Bjørn. "I was at the golf club three weeks ago with some friends. I let slip that I'd had dinner with Senator Reubens, and my buddy, who really is one of the big boys, laughed and said he'd just had dinner with the president. He owns his own jet, has multiple residences like this one, and each with its own staff. His ability to buy things was an art unto itself. Once you get above a certain level, you don't own a villa on an exotic island, you own the island itself. They don't own Ferraris and McLarens, they own one of ten models ever made of that kind of luxury car." Bjørn shrugged. "So yes, I was doing all right. But I'd only begun my climb and had gotten nowhere close to where I wanted to be when this shitstorm blew up."

Serenity sat back, her drink raised to her lips. "It's people like you who fucking ruined the world, honey. People like you who are bottomless pits, where no amount of money is ever enough." She shook her head. "\$76 million? You couldn't spend that much in one lifetime if you tried."

"Oh, Serenity." Bjørn's smile was pitying. "You're looking at this from the outside in. Of course you don't understand. Do you think me a fool, some Scrooge McDuck who simply wishes gold for its own reason?"

"Gold's good," said Denzel.

"Then why the need for more money?" challenged Serenity. "How do you justify it?"

"Because money buys intangibles of real worth. I'm not talking cars or villas. Mere *things*. I'm talking access, influence, experiences, and time. I have one life. I wish to

make the most of it that I can. With money comes access to the world's elite, people of power. The truly wealthy can shape public policy, influence politicians, sway votes, and champion their causes. I'm a fan of the Rolling Stones. Last year I paid their fee to come perform at my thirty-seventh birthday party. I've played tennis with Roger Federer, had private tours of most of the world's most prestigious museums, had dinner with Nobel Prize winners, and seen this world's most beautiful, wonderful locations. I've given millions to local causes, changing countless lives with but a signature. But most importantly, money buys me time." Bjørn moved forward to stand before the coffee table, his eyes all but glowing. "I hate waiting. And with money, I never had to. Travel was immediate. I lived in a world where everyone set their clocks by my schedule, and every minute of my life was spent exactly as I wished it."

Serenity had drawn back into the couch.

Bjørn's smile was that of a wolf. "Money is a means, and the truly wealthy live in worlds of their own creation. That is what I wanted, right up till this apocalypse took place. And now that's all gone." He frowned and looked away. "What does power mean in this world, now? The currency will probably collapse soon. Congressmen and senators are growing ever more irrelevant. The military is ascendant, but more importantly, so is Blue Light. And I must admit, I invited you all here for a reason."

Bjørn moved back to the windows and gazed out over the city. "I'm afraid none of you grasped exactly who I was. The kind of man I used to be. I thought it educational to bring you here and give you a glimpse. And that is why I'd like to be more pro-active with the assistance I can give our group. James, you've done an incredible job thus far, but we're a team, are we not? There's no need for you to shoulder all these burdens by yourself. Let me help."

"Help how?" asked Serenity, tone overtly skeptical.

Bjørn's smile was almost kind. "Let me handle matters outside Blue Light. James has the common touch, and it makes sense that he should keep running things within the org. But

politicians, generals, the media - don't you think it would make more sense to let me help there, and to best navigate us through the pitfalls that we've barely avoided thus far?"

Bjørn spread his hands, his smile wolfish. "Guys. I just want to help."

## Chapter 4:

### Lies

James extended an arm over the sofa's back and said nothing. Absorbed Bjørn's words as the others blew up all around them.

"Are you kidding me?" asked Serenity. "You saying you could have done any of this better than James? It's because of him that we're even in this room, that there even *is* a Blue Light -"

Becca leaned forward. "You notice how many people we lost when we were forced to become Blue Light? Where's Sarah?"

"Yo, Sarah made her own call," said Denzel.

"Which was to ditch our ka-tet once it became obvious we were being played by the military," said Becca. "Sure we got something out of the deal, but we lost - what - almost a fifth of our people?"

Serenity stood. "The mayor killed his sorry ass, and we lost all protection. What was James supposed to do? Tell the CIA and US Army to go fuck themselves? You weren't there. You have no idea what our options were."

"What I would have suggested," said Bjørn smoothly, "would have been to call their bluff. We have, through James, the ability to reach literally millions of concerned citizens. If we had crafted a video and released it on TikTok explaining what was happening to us, and how we were absolutely sure the military would boost and not seek to control us, that would have created sufficient pressure to force them to leave us alone."

Joanna looked from one person to the next. "What's to have stopped them from simply arresting all of us?"



Bjørn's smile turned pitying. "The military has no ability to arrest American citizens. Even the CIA has no law enforcement function. Now, if the FBI had gotten involved, we'd be talking, but we've not crossed state lines nor committed federal crimes. Which means it would have fallen to state jurisdiction, the NYPD or the New York State Police. But with the mayor out of the picture, that would have fallen on Governor Bell. Whom, as it turns out, I'm friends with."

Serenity glared at Bjørn, momentarily speechless, then rallied. "Jessica told us they were talking about calling us an illegal militia. That would have made it easy for the FBI to get on our asses."

"Actually, that would probably have fallen to the Department of Homeland Security. But that's why we would get the public behind us, Serenity." Bjørn's voice was warm, practically honeyed. "James is a celebrity for a reason: he's brought hope to the masses, shown how we can fight these demons. How do you think the country would have responded if they locked him up for killing demons?"

Becca nodded. "If they detained us, they'd have been forced to let us go once they realized the country was rising up against them. Leaving us in a position of real power. We'd have flexed and shown we can't be fucked with. But instead, James buckled, and not only did we lose people, but now we have to do what the military says."

"The military's been pretty sharp about this," said Jason quietly. "There's no better entity out there for mobilizing armed force and logistics. As far as I can tell, Colonel Hackworth is delivering on his promises. How would we have defended the demon symbols without the guns and armor?"

Bjørn raised both hands. "Look, this isn't meant to be a public trial. All I'm saying is that I know how these systems work. I could call the governor -"

"Then why haven't you?" demanded Serenity.

"Yeah," said Yadriel, bobbing his head and sitting forward. "Why ain't you been pulling those strings already?"

“Because I didn’t want to step on James’s shoes, and every time I found out what was going on, it was already too late.” Bjørn shrugged. “What would a call to the governor do once James had already agreed to Blue Light? That’s precisely why I should be involved. I can make the calls as needed, not play catch-up every time James returns to the Marriott.”

James kept quiet, continued to listen.

“So, what you saying, man?” Denzel shifted on the couch. “You going to be the one who talks to Hackworth and shit? You’re not the captain. He wouldn’t talk to you.”

“I’m sure I could be promoted.” Bjørn didn’t seem concerned. “But yes. I would interface with the military leadership, local, state, and federal governance. I would shepherd Blue Light - which it seems we’re stuck with for now - through the halls of power and prevent our being ambushed again as soon as some other petty power broker gets upset at how we’re upending the old order. James would be inward facing and would continue his admirable job in leading the actual members of our organization. It would be a partnership. Truly.”

“I don’t believe you,” said Serenity, tone flat. “You once had all this power, and now that the world’s changed, you just want it back again. You’d muscle James out and, within a few weeks, be in complete control. This partnership ploy is bullshit.”

“Serenity,” said Bjørn, “your skepticism wounds me. I may have been the Bear of Wall Street, but I’m well aware of how deficient I am when it comes to James’s outreach potential and connection with the members of Blue Light.” He grinned. “I’m barely likeable, whereas everyone seems to adore him. How could I ever compete with that?”

Olaf had been listening with a deep frown, his mane of blonde hair hanging about his broad shoulders, and now he gave a curt shake of his head. “I do not like it. I drove all the way across the country because of James and his example. He gives hope.”

“Yeah,” said Yadriel. “I hear what you’re putting down, Bjørn, and I’ve got mad respect for what you accomplished here and all, but I’m gonna keep my faith in James.”

“Don’t think I need to announce my vote,” said Serenity with false sweetness.

Joanna rubbed her arm. “Does it have to be one or the other? Surely we can use Bjørn’s connections and keep James in charge?”

“That an option?” asked Denzel, tone alert. “Bjørn? Is this an all or nothing deal?”

“Of course not.” Bjørn sipped from his drink. “But my efficacy will be greatly lessened if I’m not at the negotiation table. And there’s one other facet to my argument that I believe is being overlooked.”

“And what’s that?” asked Serenity. “How big your wallet is?”

“No,” said Bjørn coldly. “I’ll demonstrate. **Serenity, please sit down.**”

His words sounded no different, didn’t rise in volume, nor even grew in intensity. But to James it suddenly felt as if nails had been drawn down a chalkboard or a huge wave had crashed upon a storm-wracked coastline. A sense of power washed over them all, and Serenity immediately sat, her eyes going wide.

“Now, I’ve refrained from using this power for obvious reasons, but it is *quite* powerful. I’ve yet to test its full extent, as we’ve been focused on shooting demons, but I think it could give us a massive edge against Fabricators, and possibly even our own kind. For example.” Bjørn’s eyes glittered. “**Serenity, vote in favor of my argument.**”

Serenity’s face went pale, her hands curled into fists, and she started to shiver. Her jaw worked, her eyes bulged, and a low moan sounded from the depths of her throat.

James stood up.

Bjørn glanced at him, read his expression, and waved his hand. “Enough. Forget my last request.”

Serenity fell back with a gasp, beads of sweat prickling her brow.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” cried Olaf, moving protectively before Serenity.

“Yo, man, that was *fucked* up,” spat Yadriel.

Even Becca looked taken aback.

“Serenity?” James kept his voice level. “You all right?”

She wiped her sleeve across her brow then glared at Bjørn. “Sure. I forgot my Ma Deuce, though. Let me go grab it.”

“Bjørn,” said James. “With me.” And he walked past the man to a set of sliding doors, which he pulled open so that he could step out onto a broad balcony.

It was more of a small garden, complete with manicured bushes, potted plants, and what looked like real grass growing between the elegant flagstones. A low table was set before patio furniture, and the railing was made of pure glass.

Bjørn emerged, glowering, brows lowered. “You don’t get to command me like that.”

James turned and placed his hands on his hips. Stared at the other man, and Bjørn locked gazes with him and stared right back.

The other man’s eyes were dark, his gaze fierce, intense, proud, dominating, predatory. It was like engaging in a stare down with a wolf. The kind of animal that would lunge at your throat before it admitted weakness and looked away.

James’s heart was pounding, great, heavy beats like a man nailing rail ties to the tracks. The sight of Serenity struggling like that had sent a bolt of jagged horror, fury, and disgust through him.

Once, he might have simply moved in and clocked Bjørn across the jaw.

But he was older, wiser, made bitter and knowing by hard living. Punching Bjørn would only have ended their katet there and then.

And maybe it had to end. But he'd not do so with a brawl in the man's million-dollar apartment.

"You owe Serenity an apology."

Bjørn grimaced and stepped past James to place his hands on the railing and look out over the city. "Let's dispense with pretenses for but a moment, shall we?"

James half-turned to face Bjørn's profile.

"We are both survivors, you and I," continued Bjørn. "We lived in different jungles, but I think there's more in common between the streets and the boardrooms than people give credit. Both are peopled by predators, and if you're going to survive, much less thrive in either, you need to be sharp. You need to know when to fade away into the background, and when to emerge for the kill."

James crossed his arms.

"This is a war. Over a billion people have already died." Now Bjørn did look at him. "More will die, and soon. How many will we lose before we stop pretending the world is as it was? Will it take another billion? Four? At what point will humanity admit that the old, civilized, *nice* ways of doing things are holding us back? That if we are to survive these Pits we will need to up our game and be as ruthless as our foes?"

Still James said nothing.

Bjørn waited, eyebrows raised, then grimaced. "I don't enjoy this. But I *will* do whatever's necessary to survive. If that means using this power I chose to increase our chances of success, then so be it. Fuck free will. And fuck respecting an idiot's right to make his own decisions if they imperil our chances of surviving. This power, Inspire, can be used to open doors for us, James. I can get the generals to do what we ask. The CIA, the FBI, Homeland Security - they will no longer be a problem. Because what I don't think anybody has understood yet, but which has been clear to me from day 1 is

that these powers, these abilities we've been given, they've fundamentally changed the playing field. Those of us who can call down lightning or command minds should be in charge. Those who make Manna bread and - what - walls? They need to do what they're told. They're no longer our equals. Literally. Their survival depends on *us*. And if they don't see it, we will force them to see it."

Bjørn stepped closer, his voice feverish. "We are the new aristocracy of this world. The rightful leaders. We shall protect them, defend them, but in exchange they must obey what we demand and allow us to do our jobs to the best of our abilities. You see this, don't you? There is no point in pretending things haven't changed, and those who accept it first shall inherit the earth." Bjørn grinned and spread his arms wide. "We shall rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the helpless people that move along the ground."

"Hmmpf," grunted James.

Bjørn dropped his arms to his sides. "Tell me you see this, James. You're just like me. A leader of men. A survivor. Tell me you understand."

"You lied."

"I what?"

"You said you didn't enjoy this. But I saw your eyes while you watched Serenity struggle. You enjoyed the shit out of that."

Bjørn's frown was one of genuine confusion. "What? I'll apologize to her. That's not a problem. And sure, it was gratifying to finally stop her from insulting me, but it won't happen again."

"I'm not so sure." James studied Bjørn. Really looked at him. "You're a dangerous man, Bjørn. Use your power on me."

Again Bjørn looked baffled. "What? Why?"

"Humor me. Tell me to slap myself."

The pause drew out, and then Bjørn shrugged. “Very well. **Slap yourself, James.**”

A wild compulsion swept over him. His thoughts narrowed until only Bjørn’s words echoed within his mind, filling him with a fierce, overwhelming desire to obey. Nothing would be better than to slap the shit out of himself, to do as he was told.

To obey.

James inhaled deeply, lowered his chin, and mastered himself. It felt like drawing back from the edge of a building, resisting the siren call to throw himself into oblivion.

When he exhaled, the compulsion lessened, became negligible. “There. Now we know. Your power doesn’t work on me, Bjørn. Is that clear?”

Bjørn’s eyes narrowed.

“You won’t use it on a member of this crew again. You won’t use it on any member of Blue Light, nor anybody else without good reason. Because no. I don’t agree. We’re no new aristocracy. We’re just some people who got lucky and will do our best to help the others.”

James took a step forward so that he was face-to-face with the other man. The air between them crackled with tension. “For a moment back there, you’d convinced me. I was going to agree to your suggestion. But then you went and pulled this shit, and my confidence in you vanished. So, yes, I’ll welcome your help with these matters going forward. But no. You’re not making captain, and you’re not handling shit without me. We clear?”

Bjørn’s jaw clenched and his nostrils flared. James got ready for the punch. He’d take it. The man probably hit hard, but James was sure he’d been hit harder.

Finally, after an aching ten or so seconds, Bjørn smiled. “Of course, James. This is your show. I was just trying to help.”

“Good.” James relaxed a fraction. “And I want your help. Your powers can make a huge difference when used

right. Stick around. We'll figure this out.”

“Sure,” said Bjørn. “Glad we got to chat. It’s always valuable to course correct. I can see I was way off base.”

“Good man,” said James, and patted him on the shoulder as he stepped by him. “Get ready. We’re heading to the Marriott. This has been nice, but it’s time to get back to work.”



## Chapter 5:

### Captain

James radioed for a ride and they descended to the streets in tense silence. Bjørn's staff bid them goodbye, surprised at the speed of their departure, and nobody spoke on the way down. Only when they emerged onto the sidewalk did James turn to the crew, the fresh air and vividness of the street providing the kind of energy that he needed for what he was to say.

"I've turned down Bjørn's offer."

Everybody watched him gravely, including Bjørn, whose expression was inscrutable.

"We've got a lot of weapons in our arsenal, and his power is one of them. But for now, we're going to stay the course, and I'll let him know when it's appropriate to use his abilities. He's agreed to not use his power on any of us without our express permission first. Right, Bjørn?"

Bjørn's expression became professional, brisk, agreeable. "That's right. And apologies, Serenity. My demonstration upstairs was truly out of line. I know you're pissed at me, and rightly so. I'll find a way to make things right."

Serenity just stared at him.

"That's a line in the sand that he will not cross again. No exceptions. For now," continued James, "let's get our head back in the game. If anybody has any concerns, they're to bring it directly to me. Yeah?"

Nobody answered, but several members nodded.

Their transport arrived a few moments later, part of the resupply convoy that was bringing gear to Brooklyn from some location upstate. They hopped into the back, settled in amongst crates, and rode south through Manhattan, over the

Manhattan Bridge, and were dropped off at the Marriott before the truck continued its passage to Fort Hamilton.

Serenity occasionally stared at James, her glare accusing, demanding, unsatisfied, but he just raised a palm, the gesture indicating: *wait*.

The Marriott was busier than ever. Victorious teams had returned from across the city, but the mood wasn't as festive as the day before. Everyone was aware of their losses. James led Crimson Hydra through the lobby, greeting those he knew, waving back to others who called out to him, congratulating team leaders and seeking to project an air of calm and confidence.

"James." Jessica emerged from the crowd with her tablet in hand, hair done up in a twist, looking harried and professional as always. It felt like old times. "Where have you been? Colonel Hackworth is here and waiting for you."

"Hackworth is here?" James frowned. He wanted to tell Jessica what had happened, but her expression was intense. "Everything all right?"

"It's complicated. Yes. We won a resounding victory today, but he's got plans he wants to discuss. Now."

"I told Star Boy we were taking a detour through Bjørn's pad."

"All well and good, but Hackworth's out of patience and we need to get with him. Ready?"

"Sure," said James. "Though we need to talk right after." He looked to Serenity. "Coming?"

"You betcha."

"The rest of you settle in. I'll be back when I can."

Jessica led them down a hallway and into a conference room. A dozen men and women in fatigues sat around the table or on chairs set along the backwall, most with laptops open before them. Hackworth was at the head of the table leaning over a large map of the city, discussing particulars with those clustered around him.

Cindy and Star Boy were already there, both working on their laptops, and when James entered they looked up and Star Boy grinned.

“Kelly,” said Hackworth, straightening. “There you are. Congratulations on your success today.”

“Thank you, sir,” said James, trying not to feel wary. “We did our best.”

“Given what you were up against, I’m pleased with what you all accomplished. Take a seat. We’ve a lot to get through in very little time.”

James sat down, Jessica and Serenity pulling out chairs beside him. The other men and women settled in, with most of them studying James with avid curiosity.

“Let’s get this started. I’ve been giving careful thought to how best to handle Blue Light, and how to integrate our civilian members into a traditional military structure. We’ve survived the Nemesis 2 Fourth Wave, which gives us almost two weeks to get up to speed and prepare for the Nemesis 3. At first I thought it best to be hands off, to allow you and the former DRC to do your thing, but after analyzing your command structure and how you executed the missions these past two days, I believe some changes are in order.”

Hackworth’s expression was sober, and he watched James carefully as he spoke.

“In short, we are to remain a special operations force whose primary organizing principle will be to maximize the synergistic benefits of working in groups of nine. That being said, there is a profoundly important reason that military units are organized as they are, and that is to maximize our ability to execute our missions as quickly and efficiently as possible.”

Hackworth paused, as if giving James room to protest, but then proceeded.

“Now, there is no disputing that you are the heart of Blue Light. But having observed your leadership style, it’s obvious that once battle begins you operate with an extremely flat hierarchy and limit yourself to acting as a squad leader. The

limits to your ability to command and control distant platoons are profound, and leadership is actually displaced to Richard Stokes, who serves as a communications and intelligence officer without formal authority to give tactical commands.”

James frowned.

“So we’re going to remedy this situation. I will be assuming direct command of this group, and with the help of my headquarters and headquarters company, I will ensure that we identify our Mission Essential Task List as well as establishing our Area of Operation, individual Areas of Responsibility, and overall Area of Interest.”

Serenity raised her hand. “I’ve no idea what any of that meant, sir.”

Hackworth smiled. “You’ll learn. Now, we need to develop this infrastructure and our overall mission with an eye on both our timeline and the realities of working with new recruits. As such, we’ll keep things as simple as possible. First I’ll explain Blue Light’s new command structure and introduce key personnel. I am the commanding officer, and everything that takes place within Blue Light is my responsibility. Normally, I would take time to sit with every officer, but we don’t have that time, so I’ll endeavor to do so as we go. What’s important is that I want you all to know that my door is always open to those with questions or feedback, and that I value officers who show both loyalty and initiative.”

Nods all round.

“My objective for Blue Light is to create a rapid response special operations force that can bring the new powers humanity is manifesting to bear upon our foes, while also seeking to expand our model across the country and grow our organization as effectively as possible to increase the number of soldiers we can field in future operations. It is not enough to clear Brooklyn, or even all of the New York metropolitan area of our foes. We must think on a national scale, and I believe that what we are creating here will be critical to our nation’s long-term survival.”

More nods. Even James found himself agreeing.

“Now, our headquarters unit will be composed of a number of critical officers. My Executive Officer, or XO, is Major Baker. He assists me in executing my vision for the special forces group and he’ll be intimately aware of our force’s state of combat readiness. He will assume command if for any reason I am removed. And he oversees our group’s administrative and support staff.”

The XO nodded around the table. He was a dour man, his black hair so thick and silky it had the sheen of seal fur, and his cheeks were badly pocked so that they looked like the surface of the moon.

My S1, or principal staff officer, is Captain O’Brien.”

A man in his late twenties inclined his head. He had a doughy complexion, as if he’d never seen the sun, but his gaze was sharp and focused.

“Captain O’Brien will coordinate all aspects of personnel services, finance services, and command information services. He will be assisted by Lt. Cindy Robinson, who will help run the Personnel Administration Center, and ensure that we are recruiting and retaining as many new operatives as we can manage.”

Cindy smiled nervously at everyone and almost raised her hand to give a little wave.

“Our S2, or intelligence officer, will be Captain Stokes. His implementation of the ASOCC, remote surveillance via drones, and familiarity with the psychology of the enemy, insofar as his gaming background can be credited, has been of obvious utility and benefit to the group already. He will be assisted by more traditional staff, which will bring him up to speed on how to prepare reports, interface with other units, and coordinate with federal intelligence agencies.”

Star Boy’s grin was unabashed.

“Our S3, or operations officer, is Major Duffy. She is in charge of operations planning and is expected to anticipate situations that may arise during combat and to prepare SOPs to handle these conflicts.”

Major Duffy looked around the table, expression neutral, as if looking for signs of dissent or complaint. She looked to be just a little younger than James was, a handsome woman with all softness flensed from her being. Her red hair was bound back in a severe bun, and her green eyes were as hard and pitiless as those of a raptor.

“Finally we have our S4, or logistics officer, Captain O’Shea, who is our lifeline to the military machine that is the US Army and responsible for ensuring we have all the supplies and operational support we need as we undergo our duties.”

Captain O’Shea was a large man, his face craggy, his hair thinning, and he smiled warmly around the table, then winked and gave a nod, as if saying, *count on me, folks, I’ll find you a bottle of whiskey on the sly*. James took an immediate liking to the man.

“Captain O’Shea will be assisted by Warrant Officer Miles, who will continue her sterling work ensuring this force has everything it needs to operate at peak efficiency.”

Jessica’s smile was pained.

Hackworth gave everyone a moment, allowing folks to take each other in, then looked to James.

“Now, you must be asking yourself where you fit into this command structure. I’ve been considering your talents and role carefully and have decided that you can continue to do what you do best as a captain. But in all respects, you’ll be functioning as a command sergeant major as well. You’ll assist me in all matters pertaining to the enlisted ranks. You will assist me in extending my command influence, assess morale of the force, and be essential during critical events. You will have freedom of movement across the formation and will create dialog with subordinate command teams, as well as evaluating their effectiveness and needs.

“Now, obviously you’re no regular officer. During operations, you will lead your Hydra platoon and report directly to me. We will take the esteem with which the group holds you into account when making our plans, as well as no

doubt placing you at the tip of the spear. But as a captain, you will be able to speak directly with me, liaison with the ranks, and then go into battle and do what you do best.”

Everyone turned to stare at him, and James realized that on some level Hackworth needed his permission. If he stood and flipped the table, Blue Light would implode.

But he realized that what he felt most strongly was relief. He saw Esme’s corpse once more. Thought of teams Manticore, Yeti, and Wraith, and how they’d been overrun without his knowing. Could he have done things differently? Probably not. But having Hackworth here with his team running things while they fought in the field meant that, next time, it might go down differently.

“Yes, sir,” said James softly, and thought he heard several people exhale in relief.

“Outstanding. Serenity, you will assist James as his XO. Again, unorthodox, but it just makes sense. We’re going to form five battalions out of our existing force, each led by a lieutenant colonel, and each composed of three companies led by captains. Each company will consist of three platoons, and each platoon will be led by a lieutenant and first sergeant, and consist of your crimson, ivory, and ebon squads. Thus each battalion will be around 250 operators strong, plus support staff, and First Group, as our forces here in NYC will be called, shall consist of around 1,250 operators all told.”

Nods all round.

“Our Area of Operation will cover the entirety of the five boroughs, as well as much of the New Jersey coast along the Hudson. Each battalion will be assigned a borough as their Area of Responsibility, with each lieutenant colonel acting as that sector’s commander. The battalion responsible for Staten Island will also oversee the Jersey coastline, but once we recruit and train enough new members to form a sixth battalion, Jersey will become its AR.

“It’s come to light that a large number of our operators have developed new powers, and that some of these are game changers. Captain Stokes will work with Major Duffy to

optimize our battalion composition so as to take full advantage of these new powers. With three companies per battalion, it would be best if two were saber, and the third support.”

Hackworth frowned down at the map before him. “But as I said at the beginning of this meeting, it’s not enough to hone our existing operators into peak lethality. Stokes, how many Nem2s does it take for Supplicant 9 to reach Novitiate 1?”

Star Boy sat forward abruptly and tapped on his laptop. “Ah, it was... about 2,441, sir.”

“And to progress to Novitiate 2?”

“That would be just over 6,000.”

“Whereas 6,000 Nem2s is enough to bring 100 or so Mendicant 5s up to Supplicant 5. That is why I’m formalizing a Second Group with a parallel structure composed of our military men and women who wish to benefit from what we’ve learned here and close the gap as quickly as possible. This Second Group will also be 1,250 strong and will be integrated into First Group’s operations so as to benefit from their strength and expertise. My XO and Captain O’Brien, my S1, will work on organizing Third Group, and will open it to applications from other service members. My goal is to eventually have four groups operational in the city, and to have this be the model that can be duplicated across the nation.

“Toward that end, we will use the remaining Nem2s from the first waves at the live hives as training and leveling for Group 2, and once every hive is cleared, will focus our second week before the arrival of Nem3 on getting other Blue Light forces up and running across the country. That will mean a tour of nascent forces on the part of our leadership here, with a focus on Kelly’s outsized impact on morale and recruitment.”

The nods now were more hesitant.

James raised his hand. “Sir, is that wise? Pulling me off the streets? I’m only Novitiate Level 1. We don’t know if that’ll be enough for Nem3.”



“It’s as I said, Kelly.” Hackworth’s expression turned grim. “It’s mission failure to protect New York if the rest of the nation burns. We must establish as many other Blue Light groups as possible if we’re to stop this tide. We’ve seen some good initiative taking hold in Chicago, Portland, and Houston, and Atlanta, but that’s not enough. New York has taken the lead in terms of organization, ranking, and military recognition. Now it’s incumbent upon us to export this model to help as many others as possible to duplicate our successes.”

James nodded reluctantly. “Yes, sir.”

“Good. Each of you has a lot on their plate. Captain Stokes, I want you to review the intel you’ve received from our new Novitiates on their powers, and to prepare a group presentation for this evening. We cannot plan if we do not know what we’re capable of. I want as thorough an overview as you can give.”

“Yes, sir,” said Star Boy smartly. “I’m great at presentations. Really good. Plus, I’ve already been compiling data. There’s a lot to cover, but it’s all good stuff.”

“Excellent,” said Hackworth, then gave them all a charming, crooked smile. “We have to accomplish in days what takes most battalions a year. We must forge a fighting force out of a group of heroic individuals, graft military hierarchy and order onto what has thus far been a successful militia and do so in a manner that calls to our better selves and allows Blue Light to shine forth as a beacon of hope across the country. God knows it needs one. I want to speak with each of you individually before Stokes’s presentation, and for you to use the next few hours to get to know each other and prepare for what’s to come. Clear? Then dismissed.”

## Chapter 6:

### Shield of Faith

“All right, listen up you *monkeys*.” Star Boy leaned forward dramatically, eyebrows raised, and waited as if daring the Blue Light crowd to react. When nobody responded he resumed slowly pacing back and forth on the stage. “As Colonel Hackworth just finished saying, we won a big victory out there today. Fourth Wave-level crazy. We’re talking millions of the bastards, shut down, denied, kicked out of town.”

James looked over to where Hackworth stood with Jessica and the rest of his staff. The colonel’s expression was blank. Was he regretting asking Star Boy to give this talk? Maybe, maybe not. Probably just resigning himself to working with what he had.

Star Boy paused, considering. “A big win, except for the few symbols where we didn’t come out on top. But those losses are why I’m up here dispensing wisdom right now. Just because we had some big wins doesn’t mean we can relax. Hold up on that *Doña Juanita*, yeah? We need to evolve if we’re to be ready for Nemesis 3. Which, according to our synchronized swatches, are coming in twelve days. Sure, sounds like a vacation, but you’d be dead ass wrong.”

He paused again, raised his eyebrows as if daring someone to contradict him.

“Now, being ready for Nemesis 3 is far more complicated than what we had to do for Nem2. For one, we’ve a host of new abilities to incorporate into our battle plans, second, we’ve a limited number of XP left in the hives to distribute optimally across our troops, and third, we’ve got a national movement to develop. It ain’t gonna help *nobody* if New York survives the next round and we lose Philly, Miami, Detroit, LA, Chicago, Houston, and, uh, New Orleans. Which means we need to start thinking big. We need to take the Blue

Light ball and run with it. We need to go from tactics to strategy, yeah?”

James shifted in his seat. Crimson Hydra was seated about him, with Bjørn one seat behind. The CFO had been affable, relaxed, had apologized elegantly and even made some jokes at his own expense. But James wasn't fooled and was aware of the man like a constant ping on a radar.

“So, let's start off with our new abilities. Apologies to our non-Christians in the crowd we're going to keep things simple by using the terms appearing to the greatest number in the crowd. We're at twenty-seven Benedictions now, folks, and that's a lot to keep track of.” Star Boy turned and clicked a little controller in his hand. A projector clicked on, revealing a simple PowerPoint slide with three words written across the center:

### **Shield of Faith | Smite | Bless**

“Fucking classic.” Star Boy turned back to the large crowd. “You gotta imagine the powers-that-be running this shit are classic MMORPG players. We got our tanks, our DPS, and our buffers. Classic fucking split. Right here we run into problems. When you were dealing with the Nem1s - remember those good old days? - almost half of you went Smite at Level 5. I mean, why the fuck not, right? Hulk smash is instinctual. To be precise, 45.12% of you went Smite. 30.39% went Bless, leaving only 24.49% to go Shield of Faith. Now, I could talk your ear off about the psychology behind this, but the immediate problem lies in the unequal distribution of Benedictions, and how they've bottlenecked our ability to create synergizing groups.

“Now, since the Google Form went live, courtesy of the inestimable Warrant Officer Miles, we've received 13,233 viable applications, which means only 3,241 Shield of Faith'ers. Which wouldn't be so bad, but as you know, less than half are locals, and of those locals, only one third have actually shown up, giving us a pool of 540 Shield of Faith

candidates, of which just over 342 are currently in operating teams. That's right, we have 198 Shield of Faith candidates waiting to get in on the action, and Cindy's been processing them while you righteous bad asses have been out there kicking butt. Great news? Maybe. Remember the bottleneck. That's enough Shielders for 66 new teams. But we also have 653 Smitters ready to go, enough for 217 teams, which means a whole bunch of them can't get in on the action in an optimal way."

Star Boy paused and studied the crowd. "You guys with me so far?"

Serenity raised her hand. "You're saying we ain't got enough Shield of Faithers."

Star Boy snapped his fingers and pointed at her. "That's right! A+ to the lovely lady. Folks, and by folks I guess I mean James, we need to start actively recruiting more Shield of Faith and Bless people so we can round out our teams. Which ties into the third step, which we'll get to, *but*, for now, let's keep digging into our new powers."

He clicked his button.

Under each main Benediction appeared three more:

**Shield of Faith: Circle of Protection | Healing Grace |  
Remove Fear**

**Smite: Dark Vision | Sacred Strike | Deadeye**

**Bless: Dark Energy Siphon | Aura Mastery |  
Inspiration**

"Already we see specialization. Shield of Faith can lead to a defensive area, healing, or removing hexes. Smitters can specialize in melee, ranged, or what seemed at first rather oddly the ability to see in the dark." Richard shrugged. "Was

confusing at the time, but now we know. Finally, Bless led to becoming a Sith Lord - sorry, Dark Energy types - Aura Mastery, which combines aspects of Circle of Protection and Sacred Strike, or Inspiration, which I like to call the Alexander the Great/Hitler power.”

Richard turned back to the crowd. “Nine specializations, and each required to form a squad. For those of you who never caught on, that’s a term I’m borrowing from Stephen King’s *The Gunslinger*. Great series, check it out, I think it’s on Kindle Unlimited on Amazon, so no excuses. But you need each one of those to get that experience sharing synergy that has allowed so many of you to rank up so quickly.

“Beyond that, we’ve seen that groups who include all nine sub-specializations also function better as a team. All those powers mix-and-match beautifully, allowing each squad to excel. Now, there’s an argument to be made that you could cherry pick specializations for any given mission, ditching, say, the Remove Fear, Dark Vision, or Inspiration members for more firepower, but that’s because we don’t know what’s coming with Nem3 and beyond. The existence of these specializations tells us we should be expecting more darkness and terror, and soon.”

Richard paused; lips quirked into an apologetic grimace. “It’s gonna get dark and scary out there, is what I’m saying. But now we know more.”

Again he clicked, and more information came up.

“First let’s look at the Shield of Faith options.”

**Shield of Faith: Circle of Protection: Angel’s Armor |  
Aureate Buckler | Communal Benediction**

**Shield of Faith: Healing Grace: Mass Solace |  
Martyr’s Cry | Indomitable Resilience**

## **Shield of Faith: Remove Fear: Remove Curse | Dispel Illusion | Soul Bastion**

Richard studied the projection, then turned a knowing glance to the crowd. “Sick. We’ve been testing these all afternoon and have some pretty exciting results. Quick review. Somebody hit me with Angel’s Armor.”

Immediately the air about Richard’s body began to glimmer as motes of gold light coalesced about him. They swirled and, in an instant, had formed into a slightly translucent set of full plate that encased him from head to foot. The armor was beautiful, ethereal, and looked to be made of glowing golden light, ivory, and steel.

Richard raised an arm and considered the armor. “Weightless, unable to stop mundane attacks, but we’re guessing this is some Grade-A defense against demons. Duration and durability seemed dependent on Arete levels, though spending a point of Aeviternum seems to max out those properties. Very sweet. You can remove it now, benevolent stranger.”

The suit glimmered and fell apart, disappearing a second later. “Then we have Aureate Buckler. Someone want to hook me up?”

A gold disc appeared a few feet to James’s side. It was a foot wide, composed of concentric circles of platinum and gold, and hovered easily in the air.

“Now this one is interesting.” Richard considered the Aureate Buckler. “It moves with me, and also moves to intercept attacks. Cindy?”

Cindy stepped up onto the stage, clearly expecting this summons, and threw a stone at Richard. Hard.

The Aureate Buckler swung around smoothly and intercepted the projectile, which clanged off its gleaming face.

“Couple of things we’ve noticed. One, the Aureate Buckler intercepts all attacks that come within a certain distance of me, about three feet, even if its trajectory would

mean it would miss. Second, as you noticed, it blocks mundane attacks. Pretty sweet. We're guessing it's also great against demons, but probably not as good as the Angel's Armor, which provides 360 protection. The Aureate Buckler can only be in one place at a time. Useful against shitty humans, though. Thanks, Cindy. And we can drop the Aureate Buckler now."

The gleaming disc faded from view. "As before, the Aureate Buckler's strength and duration seem keyed to Arete, and maxed out by Aeviternum. We think both the Angel's Armor and Aureate Buckler are also boosted by Stamina, but we've not been able to verify yet. Finally, we have Communal Benediction, and this one is great. From what we can tell, this allows the caster of Circle of Protection to pick one second-tier Benediction currently being used within the Circle of Protection and bestow it on everyone else that's also in the circle."

A buzz of interest went up at that.

"That's right folks, for only \$9.99 you, too, can be the proud owner of Deadeye, or Aura Mastery, or Dark Vision or what-have-you. Leaving the circle ends your use of the shared Benediction, and again, duration seems keyed to Arete and Stamina. But that's a huge game-changer right there."

"I will take that one," whispered Olaf. "Though the Angel's Armor was great. And the Aureate Buckler."

"This final Benediction means that a squad moving within a Circle of Protection can all enjoy the benefits of Smite-enhanced firepower," continued Richard. "It means everyone can use Dark Vision to prevent darkness-based powers from nullifying us moving forward, or the same for fear spells. Everyone can gain access to healing, or even Sacred Strike. What does this mean in turn?"

Richard pauses as if awaiting an answer. Some hand went up cautiously, but he just plunged on and answered the question himself. "That's right. That means Circle of Protection folks just got handed the team tactics hat. They're going to need to know when to switch Benedictions, how to

call out the plays, and to ensure everybody's aware of what's coming down the pike. The only Benediction they *can't* bestow is Circle of Protection; a pity. I got real excited there when that one occurred to me."

Murmurs as the nearly thousand-strong crowd broke into quiet conversation. James glanced over to the military folks by the ASOCC: they also seemed to be taking notes.

"Buckle up, buckeroos, because that's just one of the nine new power-sets. Angel's Armor, Aureate Bucklers, and Communal Benediction. On the face of it, everyone should just get Benediction Share, and I may even advise that one, but consider this: none of our powers currently defend against normal people or even thrown rocks. An Aureate Buckler could make a big difference when shit gets really Mad Max out there. And the Angel's Armor allows for protection independent of the Circle; it'd be a trap to become too dependent on it, as it would mean the squad is always clustered together. Food for thought."

James nodded slowly.

"Then how do I make my pick?" demanded Olaf.

"The next set are much more straight forward," said Richard, cutting back in over the conversations. "Check it out."

### **Shield of Faith: Healing Grace: Mass Solace | Martyr's Cry | Indomitable Resilience**

"In short, we have a mass healing spell that's about 50% as potent as a straight-up Healing Grace but can target the whole squad and maybe even more folks, the ability - apparently - to prevent someone from taking a mortal wound and taking half the damage yourself - can I say ouch? And this one's pretty great, the ability to turn everyone in your group into a low-level Wolverine. That's right. Indomitable Resilience seems to bestow an enhanced healing factor which lasts a very long time. We've some folks who are still enjoying



the benefit several hours later, though again, I'm sure there are correlations between Arete and that Benediction.

“Which should you pick? No strong guidance here. Indomitable Resilience sounds cool, but it's not strong enough to get you on your feet right away. In the heat of battle, a Mass Solace would allow a number of hurt people to get back up and keep fighting. But Mass Solace uses much more power and taps out after a couple of uses. Indomitable Resilience is like the Energizer Bunny. It just keeps on giving and would allow folks to stay in the field much, much longer. As for Martyr's Cry, we all know how you only get to use your Aeviternum to heal from a mortal wound if you've got the seconds of time to spend it. A head shot? That's when it would make the difference. They're all good, they'd all make a huge difference in different circumstances, but we're currently still too generalized to make those calls. Pick what appeals to you, and we'll match you down the line to the missions that would benefit most from your selections, yeah?”

Nods all round.

“Finally, the Remove Fear power set.”

### **Shield of Faith: Remove Fear: Remove Curse | Dispel Illusion | Soul Bastion**

“Not gonna lie to you, these are the least sexy Benedictions out of all twenty-seven thus far. I've heard a bunch of you grumbling about feeling useless in battle up to this point, but let me emphasize, that's up to this point. All of these would be absolutely crucial against the attacks they're designed to negate. What do they imply? That future foes are gonna hit us with fear attacks, curses, illusions, and nighttime corruption. That's all some heinous shit, folks, and I personally hate that we can't take all of these defenses. Right now your Remove Fear team members may have taken a back seat to everyone else, but I promise you this: the day will come when they make the difference between us surviving this apocalypse or succumbing to it. So yeah, let's give our brave

Remove Fear folks a round of applause. C'mon. Let's show them some love and appreciation.”

And Richard clapped, nodding to the audience, which slowly at first and then ever louder started to applaud as well, till some folks started whistling and hooting and the applause became thunderous.

Joanna grinned, raked her short blonde hair back, and shoulder bumped Olaf who'd whispered something to her.

“Well, all right, go team Blue Light. Now. I want to move on to my personal favorite group of Benedictions. The Smite crew.”

## Chapter 7:

### Smite

“Now we’re talking,” said Serenity.

“Now, the Smite crew are the ones who lay down the pain. Something your humble Star Boy can only do with his sense of humor.” Star Boy paused. “See what I did there?” He pointed at himself. “Self-aware.”

“Richard,” said Jessica from the side of the stage, her tone flat.

“Right, right. So! Smite. Let’s take a look.” He clicked his clicker.

**Smite: Dark Vision: Shadow Step | Black Apotheosis |  
Living Darkness**

**Smite: Sacred Strike: Heavenly Assault |  
Empowering Light | Fortuna Aeviternum**

**Smite: Deadeye: Eternal Fire | Eye of the Needle |  
Lord’s Ruin**

“Quite a spread.” Richard tapped his chin. “All of it bad ass. Let’s run through this quick. First, the mysterious Dark Vision. When this first popped up, I was like, *what?* How does it fit in with the *theme*, ladies and gentlemen? Smite is an attack, DPS Benediction, with Sacred Strike and Deadeye covering ranged and melee. But Dark Vision? Did someone mess up? There a mid-level demon bureaucrat somewhere right now getting shanked for goofing on the power spread? I mean, don’t get me wrong, it was *useful*, especially with the

magical hive darkness protecting the Black Gems, but not really on par with Sacred Strike or in theme. In short: weird.”

Richard turned back to the crowd. “But now all is revealed. It’s a precursor, almost a litmus test for those who’d be psychologically predisposed to the tier-three powers. Now, I’m not saying those folks are fucked up. Mark my words. Not saying that. But I am saying that Dark Vision had a unique allure to a certain kind of person who’d choose it over straight DPS. The ability to see in the dark indicates a desire to - what - be in the dark? To penetrate secrets? We could armchair psychoanalyze this all day. But these tier 3 powers. Hoo-boy.

“First we got Shadow Step. I mean, this is just sweet. We’ve four people who chose it already and have demonstrated their ability to use shadows as motherfucking portals. It’s literally what’s on the can. If the shadow is dark and large enough, they can step through and emerge from a different spot within line of sight. Line of sight is key. I can’t wait to run some experiments at night, but for now, this is some sweet-ass mobility. Incredible.

“Then we have the big daddy, Black Apotheosis, and really, this is the showstopper, just like Communal Benediction. Show of hands who’s seen this one in action already.”

Maybe a third of the crowd raised their hands.

“Well, let’s get that cleared up. Nothing I can say is equal to the real thing. Any volunteers willing to come on stage and scare the pants off the rest of Blue Light?”

Becca immediately stood, and Richard pointed at her. “Ms. Locklear, come on down!”

She worked her way down the row, then strode confidently up to the stage and climbed the steps. Stood with her hands on her hips, chin raised, her thick black braid hanging down over one shoulder.

“All right,” said Richard. “Let ‘er rip.”

The ballroom went absolutely silent. It was as if everybody was holding their breath. Becca lowered her chin,

inhaled deeply, and shadows began to stream toward her, sliding up from under the stage, the folds of the backdrop curtain behind the projection screen, flowing and wrapping around her form.

It was so fucking weird. James sat forward again. Even as he watched it take place he felt a sense of bizarre disbelief. Like watching movie special effects in the flesh. Part of his mind just couldn't credit it, despite everything he'd seen this past week.

The shadows burned and roiled around Becca, lifting her off the ground, swelling her frame to its nine- or ten-foot height. Her waist looked almost unnaturally thin compared to her broad shoulders, her arms simian in length, her head encased in living shadow with back-swept horns.

James heard people actually gasp, felt the shock scald the air. Perhaps the eeriest part was how Becca's shadow form had no visible eyes. He'd almost have been comforted by burning green orbs or something. Instead, her face, her head, was one uniform axe-head of a wedge, no mouth, no features at all.

"Well, there it is," breathed Richard into the mike. "Black Apotheosis. Apparently the form gives its user a general +15 across the board on all stats, which can also be boosted by Bless. The claws are wicked and earlier tore through a fire-door in one of the stairwells. Add in Dark Vision, and we have ourselves a Grade A melee combatant and straight up assassin. You wouldn't see this thing coming up on you at night, would you?"

Becca turned her axe-blade head to stare at Richard, who paled. "Except you, Becca. You're the best."

For a moment, Becca just stood there, wreathed in black flame, and then she released the form and dropped lightly to the stage. She winked at Richard, hopped down off the front of the stage, and made her way back to her chair.

"Woo! Intense. So, that's Black Apotheosis. We're going to keep researching the form. I got lots of questions: does cutting through the shadow parts hurt Becca in the center? How much does the stat boost increase at night? Does the form

afford any mental or spiritual protection? Lots to learn. But our last is Living Darkness, and this one's just as freaky. No need to demonstrate, but in short, its user gains actual control over darkness. Anybody here play Vampire the Masquerade? Show of hands? We got any Lasombra fans? Clan Lasombra? No?"

Richard's smile wilted as he gazed out over the still audience.

"Fucking nerds," he muttered. "Anyways, this benediction allows the user to control the darkness, though it seems pretty crude right now. Extrude tentacles, cause the darkness to grow firm and grasp people, that kind of stuff. It's a power that requires plenty of concentration and imagination, and I imagine what people can do with it will only grow as they get more experienced, but folks, it's versatile. I was playing this one game of Vampire where the DM had these guys escaping in a minivan, right? And I used Arms of Darkness - that's a similar power from the game - to animate the shadows in the footrest, grab the steering wheel and yank it to the side. The minivan left the road and hit a telephone pole. Bam. So much for their getaway." Richard paused, scratched at his throat, then forced a smile. "Anyways. That's the Dark Vision power set. Shadow hopping, living shadow, and turning into an actual shadow demon, with all of them empowered by basic Smite and the ability to see in the dark. Freaky cool."

James glanced at Becca. She was staring straight ahead with the slightest smirk on her lips.

"Moving on." Richard clicked his clicker, and the next power set was highlighted.

**Smite: Sacred Strike: Heavenly Assault |  
Empowering Light | Fortuna Aeviternum**

"Here we have our bread and butter, the Benedictions chosen by none other than our Captain Boss, James Kelly. So Sacred Strike is a limited area of effect strike, some four or

five yards deep by two wide, give or take. That opens up these other attacking Benedictions. Everybody already heard about how James cleared up the Fourth Wave with Heavenly Assault?”

Now it was James’s turn to stare straight ahead as people gazed at him.

“That’s right, James called down some sweet-ass lighting to clear the block. Other folks reported less powerful versions, so we’ll need to look into that, but in short, it’s like calling in a divine EMP which only knocks out demons. No damage to normal stuff or people, which is *nice*. Means we can clear out messy combat situations without worrying about collateral damage.

“Now Empowering Light is kind of like a mix between an anti-Black Apotheosis and Indomitable Resilience. The user lights up like a bonfire, gains the same +15 to every stat bonus, and causes low-grade regeneration to everyone within their radius, which seems to be about four yards right now. I’m going to want to quantify how strong this regen is compared to actual Indomitable, but I’m guessing its weaker for being an ancillary benefit. Given how demons are going to be using magical darkness, this ability to light up battlefields, amp up your stats and regenerate your allies is pretty sick.”

Richard pressed the mic to his lips and stared at the crowd from under lowered brows. “Sick,” he repeated, his voice growing loud and reverberant over the speakers.

“Richard,” said Jessica again, tone more impatient.

“What? It is.” Richard shrugged innocently. “Last Bennie. Fortuna Aeviternum. I just love it when shit get Latin. So old-school cool. Anyway, we’ve not had a chance to use this one yet, but what the people who chose it report is that you develop the chance to regain any spent Aeviternum immediately after spending it. Like some kind of heavenly lottery. We don’t know what the chances of getting your points back are yet, but given how important Aeviternum is, this one’s huge.”

“Damn,” said Denzel from the seat behind James’s. “I could use that.”

“Finally, Deadeye.”

### **Smite: Deadeye: Eternal Fire | Eye of the Needle | Lord’s Ruin**

“Can I just say, these are my favorite names? So very cool.”

“There was just one choice,” said Serenity confidently. “Soon as the ammo runs out, everyone who didn’t take Eternal Fire will be screwed.”

“Kicking off with Eternal Fire, talk about awesome. Unlimited ammo? No need to reload? I mean, this is like, the ultimate fantasy for something like 13% of the adult US population and the entire armed forces. Seriously, Jessica and I have been in high level discussions about resources, the need for establishing ammo stockpiles in strategic locations, how to coordinate Fabricators on making ammo, and at what point we’ll need to start rationing, but this? This changes the whole equation.” Richard paused. “For a very small subset of us. But still, fantastic.”

“That’s right,” whispered Serenity, slouching down in her seat with a satisfied smile.

“But it’s not the only Bennie on the list. Eye of the Needle is trippy. This is a sniper shot power which goes beyond anything even the best players of Sniper Elite 5 could dream of, because - as far as we understand it right now - it lets the user see through walls. Let that sink in for a second.”

Richard raised both eyebrows and waited.

“What?” said Serenity, sitting back up.

“That’s right, I said see through walls, mother bitches. To a degree. It’s not like generalized X-ray vision. But if there’s a legit target on the other end, the user can get a sense of them through walls, other barriers, and then shoot their fucking shot



*through* those walls, too. But yeah, there has to be a legit target on the other end. We only know this much because Ms. Castillo from Crimson Yeti discovered this ability while clearing out the last of her Fourth Wave incursion. She was panning around with Deadeye and looking for a Nem2 that had gotten away from her, and saw it moving through a building, having gone in through a window to get around her and reach the symbol. Bang! She took the shot, killed it. Didn't leave a hole in the wall either."

Richard nodded as he scanned the crowd. "Right, yeah? Fuck physics as we understand it. Now, some downsides: this sniper shot takes time to reload. You can't paint and spray - or is it spray and paint? - like you can with Eternal Fire. But this could be an excellent way to target big bads like the hive queens." He kissed his fingertips. "Beaucoup sexy."

"Hmm." Serenity glanced at James. "Not bad, I guess."

"Finally, Lord's Ruin. What a name! Another ranged shot attack, which make sense, and is akin to a holy hand grenade. Slow delivery, but results in a blast radius of some ten yards up to a distance of some hundred yards. Think about that, folks: ten-yard radius. That's a showstopper right there."

Serenity raised her hand. "Do Eye of the Needle and Lord's Ruin have unlimited ammo as well?"

"Affirmative," said Richard. "They self-generate just like Eternal Fire, but again, have slower loading times. We're gonna work on quantifying those delays asap."

"Hmmpf," said Serenity, slouching down again.

"Don't worry," said James, leaning in. "Eternal Fire is definitely more your style."

"Yeah," said Serenity, then she brightened. "Plus I get to carry around a Ma Deuce."

"Right?" James grinned. "Pretty bad-ass."

"So in summary, Deadeye leads to a variety of useful powers, just like the others. Spray and play - wait. Whatever. Spray and pray, holy hand grenade, and spooky action at a distance sniping. Love it. Now, I know what you're thinking:

how are we supposed to decide which to take? Well, folks, when it comes to equally attractive options where each power has definite benefits in different situations, you gotta go with what feels right to you. In some situations, clearing huge chunks of zerg rushes with a holy hand grenade will be optimal. In others, sniping a big boss will be sweet. You Eternal Fire folks can just go to town in almost any situation. So when every choice is appealing, there's no wrong choice. Just pick what suits your style, and then we'll match your squad to the right situation as they come up. Yeah?"

General nods throughout the crowd.

"Now, bear with me, we're almost done. The last power set, the weird, the freaky, the hot mess that is Bless. These buffers are kind of a grab bag of different Benedictions, so let's dive right in and see what the fuck our demon overlords were thinking."

## Chapter 8:

### Bless

“I still got your attention?” Star Boy looked out over the audience. “Good. Because this last segment is a bit of a puzzler. Let’s take a look.” He clicked his clicker.

**Bless: Dark Energy Siphon: Demonic Form |  
Infernum Reaper | Void Break**

**Bless: Aura Mastery: Nova | Righteous Obelisk |  
Seraphic Web**

**Bless: Inspiration: Terrify | Arete Font | Holy Zeal**

Star Boy rubbed his chin and considered the projection. “We don’t know much about the Dark Energy stuff yet. Not had a lot of volunteers. What we do know is this: Dark Energy Siphon both quiets your Aura and boosts your stats the more dark energy you pull from the demons. No known cap as of yet, though Reggie - where’s Reggie - reported getting to +13 on all stats earlier today. So, comparable with Black Apotheosis and Empowering Light, and maybe stronger given enough time. However, there does seem to be a... how to put it, slight destabilizing effect on the user. Like a rush that goes to their head. We put out warnings once this became obvious, but what can you do? Dark energy is intoxicating. I mean, that’s why people go over to the dark side, right?”

Nobody laughed.

“Right, right,” said Star Boy, rubbing the back of his head. “So, first up, we have Demonic Form. Everybody who’s reported back on using it said they took on a form similar to the Nem2s, which leads me to think it may be a bit of a copycat talent? We’ll find out when the Nem3s show up. Unlike Black Apotheosis, it doesn’t grant an immediate stat boost, so Demonic Formers will need to work that Dark Energy Siphon, but it *does* seem to grant similar powers to the

Nem2s, mainly the ability to jump like a cat on a hot tin roof. We'll see if Nem3 powers come with it, too, when the time comes."

James glanced over at Yadriel. The kid sat with his arms tightly crossed, his chin lowered, his lips pursed.

James didn't blame him.

"Then we've got the Infernum Reaper. I like this one. Major revelation here folks: turns out demons have their own version of Aeviternum. Now, nobody's gotten to use it yet, but what the folks who chose it understand is that all demons have some amount of Infernum, even if Nem1s and Nem2s don't have enough to qualify for a full point. This power piggybacks off Dark Energy Siphon, in that it activates the ability to harvest demonic Infernum, which should theoretically add up to a full point and then become available as extra Aeviternum. We think. Nobody's used an Infernum point yet, so who the fuck knows? We'll find out, I guess, and I'm also gonna postulate that the more powerful the demon, the more Infernum it'll have, till some have full points, or multiple, giving them Aeviternum abilities, like being able to empower their attacks and insta-heal. Nasty. So Infernum Reaper both bolsters our own Aeviternum amount while depriving the enemy of that resource. Super tasty."

Murmurs ran through the crowd. James shifted where he sat, considering. Fortuna Aeviternum and Infernum Reaper both spoke to the importance of Aeviternum in the big scheme of things. He needed to talk to Star Boy and double down on the imperative that folks buy at least two if not three Aeviternum points before reaching Supplicant.

"Finally, we've got Void Break. Again, nobody's used this yet, but the understanding is that it's a huge discharge of all your built-up Dark Energy, resulting in a brief moment of Bruce Lee-level bad-ass. Folks who chose it report understanding that they momentarily develop regeneration, stat boosts, and something called Void Armor, but that after the break the user is left weak and spent. So: risky? Risky. But also potentially a fight winner if used right, and its duration. You guessed it: more experimentation needed."

Star Boy paused to snag a bottle of water from the stage floor, gulped, then set it back. “OK, to recap: Dark Energy Siphon is bad-ass and scary. We got the ability to theoretically boost stats to infinity given enough demons, along with assuming a copycat demonic form, stealing Aeviternum, and going ninja-fucking-insane for a brief spell. Verdict? Sweet. Sick and sweet. Like a weird version of sweet and sour.”

Star Boy paused, considering, then shook his head. “Anyways. Keep an eye on your Dark Energy Siphon folks. This power is ‘intoxicating’ and can lead to their acting reckless. No signs of it corrupting folks yet, but hey, the day is young, yeah?”

Jessica’s eyebrow rose. “*Richard*. Last warning.”

“Cool, cool, I’ll keep it chill. Now, Aura Mastery.”

Click.

### **Bless: Aura Mastery: Nova | Righteous Obelisk | Seraphic Web**

Jason leaned forward, rubbing his hands together and looking expectant.

“First off, show of hands from your Aura Masters: who’s used their power to make an Aura light saber already?”

Nobody raised their hands.

“Nobody? C’mon, people, you’re killing me. At least think about it next time? Anyways, Aura Mastery is awesome. The ability to shape, direct, and weaponize your Aura equal to only your Arete and Aura level. You’ve seen folks go nuts with this already, right? Extending Aura spears, making Aura weapons of all kinds? Very cool. Now, Nova causes your Aura to flare and blast out. Early experimentation seems to correlate the area covered to Arete, with each point translating to about a foot. Yeah, wicked. Downside? Long cooldown time, about two seconds per point. So yeah, do the math: if you’re rocking Arete 50, you can blast a 50-foot radius, but then need to wait

1:40 till you can use the power again. And during that time? No Aura at all. So, risky, especially during wave scenarios.”

Lou raised her hand. “So, Nova is the same as Heavenly Assault, basically?”

“No, you’re absolutely wrong.” Richard stared at her deadpan and then grinned. “Just kidding, great question. But yeah, you’re wrong. Heavenly Assault can be dropped within a few blocks’ radius, while Nova detonates with the user at ground zero. Also, Heavenly Assault can be used over and over again while Nova has a cooldown. Heavenly Assault eats up divine energy like a motherfucker, while Nova is much lighter in expenditure, leading the user to be able to use it many, many more times. So. Yeah. Pretty different.”

Lou scowled but nodded.

“Then we got Righteous Obelisk. Now this one is *weird*. And awesome. Anybody care to drop one on stage?”

Five motes of light appeared around the stage, pushing away from each other until they were equidistant, and then expanded to form obelisks of heavenly white light which coalesced into ivory and gold, with a swirling white fire at the peak like the opposite of Sauron’s Eye from the *Lord of the Rings* movies. Each was slightly different from the other, but clearly meant for the same purpose, and James immediately felt the blessing wash out over the crowd, magnified in some way for each Aura overlapping, the effect euphoric, dizzying, overwhelming. Energy flooded his being, his muscles felt jacked and heavy, his reserves endless, his might unstoppable.

Marveling, he checked his stats:

**Strength: 15 (Obelisk+15: 30)**

**Stamina: 10 (Obelisk+15: 25)**

**Speed: 8 (Obelisk+15: 23)**

**Agility: 5 (Obelisk+15: 20)**

**Power: 10(12) (Obelisk+15: 27)**

“Holy shit, five of them?” Star Boy stared about himself in wonder. “Oh, fuck that feels good. Can I do a backflip? I think I can do a backflip.”

He bit his lower lip, suddenly looked really nervous, then leaped and backflipped in the air, landing neatly and then raising the mic immediately to his lips. “Woo! Hell yeah!”

People were laughing in the audience, some standing, others grooving as if to some unheard music. It was as if the whole crowd had just taken a hit. James understood. The sheer joy from feeling this healthy, this strong, this *good*, was exhilarating.

“Now hold on, hold on, we’re doing a presentation here, not having a party.” Star Boy mock-glared at the audience. “But, yes, each obelisk drops an area of effect +3 Bless that stacks with other blessings. While these babies are up, however, the Blesser can’t use the ability on anyone else until they cancel the obelisk. OK, don’t hate me, but take these things down. You guys aren’t listening.”

The obelisks faded away, one by one, leaving behind faint misty outlines that lingered until only the white fire remained, and then those snuffed out, too.

The crowd booed Star Boy, who raised his arms and nodded.

“Yes, yes, worship me as is right. I drink your hate. Give me more.”

The crowd laughed, settled back down, and Star Boy grinned. “OK, so, preliminary analysis: bad ass. Especially when squads are together. You can’t stack normal Bless this way, so if three Obelisks are dropped on a holding point, you’d get +9. That’s huge. Cons: the obelisks can’t move, and once dismissed have a punishingly long cooldown. So no, you can’t go leapfrogging from obelisk to obelisk. They have to be used strategically. Also, an Obelisk by itself has a radius of some ten feet. Which is good, but limited, yeah? The more Obelisks are dropped together, the more those radiuses stack, which is

why even you fuckers fifty feet away from me were feeling the goods. Something to keep in mind, and which points out that this is primarily a defensive power.”

Star Boy waited for this to sink in, then nodded. “Finally, we have Seraphic Web. Kind of like the D&D ‘web’ spell. No, I’m not going to ask who here has played, as I don’t want to have my heart completely broken.”

Serenity leaned over. “I used to play.”

Yadriel leaned in, eyes going wide. “For real? DM or player.”

“Player, obviously. Didn’t have the patience to run shit.”

Jason gave an up nod. “We used to play all the time back on base. We should get a game going.”

“Deal, yo,” said Yadriel. “I was running this bad-ass Dark Souls-styled game, it was fucking sweet -”

“Can we listen to Star Boy?” asked James.

Everybody sat back but exchanged meaningful glances.

“- in that these filaments are still Aura, which means any demon that runs into them will get toasted. Perfect for crowd control. What we need to establish is for how long the web lasts, and if they can remain independent of the user leaving the area. Imagine dealing with the Nem2 waves if we could just plug streets with Iron Aura webs? Bad ass. So, more to learn, and again, great utility and defensive power.”

Star Boy took another sip of his water. “All right, almost there. Last batch, and these are the hardest to wrap my mind around.”

Click.

**Bless: Inspiration: Terrify | Arete Font | Holy Zeal**

“Here we go. The Inspiration Benediction tree. On some level, I think these powers are scarier even than the Dark



Energy Siphon and Dark Vision trees. No offense, kiddos. Some of you have heard me calling them the Alexander/Hitler skill set, and I think that's pretty clever, though nobody else has picked up on that. In short, Inspiration is like..."

Star Boy trailed off, trying to find the right term. "Mind fucking? Mind control? It can be used for good or ill, and that's why it's so dangerous. All these other powers we've discussed are exclusively for fighting demons. Heavenly Assault and Eternal Fire won't hurt a human. Only Black Apotheosis and Demonic Form allow you to hurt another person. Everything else? Meant for one thing, and that's fighting the bad guys. But Inspiration? This one seems to only work on people.

"Now, there are some great examples of it proving clutch in a fight. Baker with Crimson Wraith kept his team from breaking and running when shit got real bad. It's literally the stuff of generals, yeah? Or Bards, if you're into gaming. Raise morale, keep others from running or doing something stupid. Given that Remove Fear is a thing, we can only imagine that some demons will have compulsion powers. Which means Inspiration will be a crucial counter."

Star Boy paused. "But there's a reason the military and federal government is worried about this one. It's really effective on folks with less Arete than the user, which means all the Fabricators and probably a decent amount of regular rankers. There's room for abuse, is all I'm saying."

James pointedly didn't look at Bjørn, but he could sense the tension rise amongst their team.

"Anyways, the first power is Terrify. This seems to effectively be a debuff. This one does work on demons, and while we've not yet had many examples on the field, it's a classic form of crowd control. Probably scales with your Arete, and is contested by the enemy's power, but yeah, interesting. Then we have Arete Font, and this *is* sexy. Effectively applies your Bless ability to Arete, allowing you to boost the whole team by +5, or one individual by +10. Sweet, am I right? That could effectively give everyone in your team

a +1 Aura level boost, or one person a +2, as well as empowering all their own Benedictions. Pretty cool.

“Finally we have Holy Zeal. This one’s a bit... scary? It seems to be a mix of Bless with Void Break and Inspiration. Everybody gets a +10 to their stats, very low-level Indomitable Resilience, and a single-minded focus on accomplishing a goal at any cost. And, uh, that really does seem to be at any cost. It coulda shoulda been named Kamikaze Run. Lots more to learn with this one. Does the squad have to be open to it? Is there a cooldown? Upon accomplishing your goal, does everyone suffer a drop in stats? I don’t know, but it’s both a Hail Mary and kind of terrifying at once.”

James stroked his beard and now he did glance at Bjørn. The other man was staring straight ahead, lips pursed, brow furrowed.

Which would he choose? What would his choice say about him?

“All right, that’s the last of them,” said Star Boy. “Phew. There’re twenty-seven different powers available to us all, but still only nine members per group. That means we’re going to start seeing a lot of individuality moving forward. A group that can drop Benediction Share, share out Lord’s Ruin, and place a Righteous Obelisk is going to be very different from one that bestows Angel’s Armor, amps up on Indomitable Resilience, and races forward with Eternal Fire, Demonic Form, and Black Apotheosis.

“The fact of the matter is most of you already made your choices on the battlefield. That’s fine. We need to know what you picked, and I’ll study the variations and come up with some Venn diagrams about who is gonna be best at what. So please: find some of Cindy’s tablets and update your profiles. I can’t help you if you don’t help me. Clear?”

There was a murmur of acknowledgement.

“Cool. Thanks for listening. You’re beautiful, I love you, New York!”

Star Boy blew a kiss, walked backward, then turned and handed the mic to Colonel Hackworth, who watched him leave the stage with a wry expression.

“Let’s give Captain Stokes a hand for that presentation,” he said, and then brought the mic close to his lips so that his voice grew ominous and loud, “because he will never be heard from again.”

Star Boy paused in the act of returning to stage, eyes widening in alarm, and the crowd ate it up.

“All right everyone, that was a lot to digest, but you’re in the army now. There’s no end to the information we’re going to be slinging at you.” Hackworth’s tone grew subtly more professional. “With the Fourth Wave defeated we’re going to take tonight and tomorrow to get everybody squared and aware of their place in Blue Light. I’m going to be meeting with captains and lieutenants, and all of you will become familiar with your commanding officers and their sergeants. No, we’re not going to start PT and holding roll call, but you *will* learn your unit’s area of responsibility, begin to do joint exercises with Group 2, and assist in the eradication of the remaining hives.”

Hackworth paused and stared out over the sea of faces. “This is it right here, soldiers. You are humanity’s best hope. Amongst your number are some of our greatest warriors. If we can marry your lethality with the military’s mastery of organization and logistics, I do believe we’ll be ready for Nemesis 3 when they show their ugly faces. All I need from you is your enthusiasm, your loyalty to our nation, your obedience to your commanding officers, and your faith in each other.

“The US Army motto is: This We’ll Defend. It speaks to the heart of what we do. The Army Special Forces’ motto is: To Liberate the Oppressed. But I believe Blue Light needs its own guiding principle. We’ve seen dark days, but there are darker yet to come, and over the next weeks, months, and maybe even years, the people of our nation and the world will turn to us for hope, for guidance, and for delivery. For them we shall hold back the forces of evil, for them we shall be that

beacon of hope. Hence Blue Light's motto: The Light in the Dark."

Hackworth let his voice ring out over the audience, who stared at him with fixed attention.

James felt his chest swell, and before he knew it, he'd risen to his feet. Serenity looked up at him, eyes wide, then also stood.

Which prompted Yadriel, Joanna, Denzel, and the rest of Crimson Hydra to rise. Ebon and Ivory Hydra then rose, and with the scraping of chairs and the rustling of clothing all thousand or so members of Blue Light rose to their feet and faced Hackworth on stage.

Hackworth raised his hand in a sharp salute to his new special operations force, who, as one, raised their hands to their brows in return.

For a moment, they stood thus, and then Hackworth lowered his arm with crisp speed, and gave them a dangerous smile. "Dismissed."

## Chapter 9:

### The Leader of the Free World

The day and evening had proven hectic, and it was only as dusk fell that James managed to find time alone with Serenity. She'd gone up to an abandoned Cuban restaurant on the 17th floor with views of Brooklyn's downtown core. The restaurant was gloomy with the growing darkness, the colors bleached out, the no doubt vibrant murals depicting life in Havana grown faded and gray.

"There you are," said James, crossing the small waiting area, passing the hostess stand, and navigating the tables to where Serenity sat at the gorgeous bar. No doubt it had been she that had turned on the bottle backlights, so that everything glittered and shone.

Serenity sat with a glass of some mellow-colored liquor before her, fingers slowly tracing the circumference. She'd texted him her location, told him to come talk.

He'd not asked any questions.

Grabbing a stool, James took the bottle of whiskey, leaned over to grab a glass from behind the bar, and poured himself a finger. "How you holding up?"

"What are we going to do about Bjørn?"

James took a sip and pursed his lips as he worked the whiskey around his mouth. It was still weird to be drinking such good stuff consistently.

Serenity turned to glare at him. "The man's a psychopath. I mean, we already knew that, but now there's no denying it. You need to tell Hackworth. You need to get rid of him."

"All right." He set the glass down and hunched over it. "Say I do. Bjørn gets kicked out of Blue Light. What happens next?"

“What the fuck does it matter?”

“Becca follows him.”

“So let her go, too. We can replace them with new recruits.”

“Sure. But where do they go? What do they do?”

Serenity frowned. “They go to fuck-town and get fucked. Who cares?”

James didn’t answer at first. He tilted his glass from side to side, watching the liquor slide about within.

“Fine,” said Serenity, sitting back. “Tell me where they go, oh wise master.”

“I couldn’t keep Sarah. I saw it in her eyes. This hoorah environment wasn’t for her. Or a good number of the old DRC. How many people did we lose, agreeing to Hackworth’s plan?”

“I don’t know. A hundred? A hundred and fifty?”

“Cindy told me a hundred and thirty-six. Where do you think they’re doing right now? You think Sarah’s hiding under a bridge? They fought together, they connected with folks like themselves.”

“So you’re saying they stayed in touch? Like as if the DRC were prison, and now they’re out and working together?”

“Something like that. Say it’s an informal network. We showed them the benefit of working together. Why would they go back to being solo? I’d wager they’ve formed teams of their own, are working out of sight to keep leveling, keep killing demons. Maybe they got out of town. Maybe they drifted to Long Island, or into Jersey, or hell, I don’t know. But what do you think Bjørn’s first move will be once he and Becca are kicked out of Blue Light?”

“To go find those people?”

“Sure. The man is defined by his sense of superiority. He can’t feel superior if he ain’t lording it over someone. I wager he’d go find the folks that left the DRC and stoke up their

anger, their resentment. Twist what happened here so he looks like a noble victim and set himself up as their leader. He said some scary shit to me out on that porch, Serenity.” James looked at her sidelong. “New aristocracy, how Fabricators need to fall in line and shut the fuck up and do what they’re told. I think Bjørn’s really excited by these developments. I think he sees a chance for him to become an old-school king, ruling through Inspiration and whatever Benediction he ends up choosing.”

“So...?”

“So.” James frowned. “There are no good options. Sure, the easiest option would be to cut him loose. Kick him out, headache gone, and we focus on our work. But I’ve a feeling that would come back to bite us in the ass in a big way down the line.”

“So keep him close?”

“Where we can keep an eye on him. His power doesn’t work on me. I think my Arete’s too high. If I can placate him, give him enough authority that he thinks he’s getting something, then we can keep him from going completely rogue and becoming a real monster down the line. I’ll make him the platoon sergeant. That might be enough to take his edge off for now.”

“I don’t know.” Serenity raised her glass, lowered it. “I don’t know if I can keep myself from breaking his jaw. Or maybe we should just shoot him in the back of the head. Problem solved.”

James sipped his whiskey, watched her.

“The way he looked at me while I was fighting his command.” She flushed and looked down. “Not the first time a guy’s looked at me that way. The first time...”

James grimaced. Let the silence drag out, then gave a curt nod. “I hear you. I’m sorry. You want him gone, you give me the word.”

“Just like that?”

“Of course,” said James. “Bonnie and Clyde, remember?” His grin was rueful. “There’s no way I’m going to ignore what you want in this.”

Serenity licked her lower lip, raised her glass, lowered it again.

They sat in silence, considering.

James looked past Serenity, past the empty tables, and out the tall windows at the city. Lights were coming on, but the streets seemed quiet.

“So no to just killing him?” Serenity raised an eyebrow. “Slippery slope and all that?”

“Yeah, I’m not about to start executing people I disagree with,” said James wryly.

“Fine. Then... I don’t know, I’ll think about it.” Serenity’s voice was quiet. “But thanks. For listening. For letting me have the choice.”

“Of course.” He took another sip. “Don’t tell anyone, but I think all this Blue Light business isn’t going to last. Society, civilization, it’s all going to change. Bjørn might be right on that account. But when everything is lying in ruins around us, you and me will still be standing. Together. I don’t mean to ever lose sight of that fact.”

Serenity studied his face, as if seeking a hint of deception, and then smiled tentatively and raised her glass. “Bonnie and Clyde.”

“Amen,” said James, and finished his drink.

\* \* \*

The next two weeks were the busiest of James’s life.

It felt as if six or seven things were constantly happening at the same time, as if the very world around him were evolving at a faster pace than he could keep track of, and no



matter how diligently he worked or sought to stay abreast he never felt caught up.

Group Blue Light, an idea, a rough coalition of disparate individuals, came into reality. Through the careful insertion of experienced lieutenant colonels and captains recruited from other special forces or handpicked by Hackworth, their own triads morphed into cohesive units. Three triads formed a platoon under a captain, and James found the Hydras matched with Medusa and Dragon in Alpha Company and led by Captain Torres, an unflappable and resolute Texan who, while only being Supplicant 2, earned his authority through sheer resolve and overwhelming physical gifts.

Platoons would head out on patrol frequently with matching platoons from Second Group, doing large laps of their Area of Operation, moving slowly down avenues so that their presence could be felt by the locals, looking for errant Nem1s to snipe, and getting used to how best to move through an urban environment. Group Two's know-how rubbed off on their own folk, and soon it became second nature to have someone always watching their six.

The hives were terminated in a series of overwhelming operations that focused on leveling as many of Second Group's units as possible. First Group would escort these green companies in, watching carefully for signs that they were about to be overwhelmed, and intervening only as necessary.

Given that the men and women of Second Group were recruited from the army's finest, they needed very, very little hand holding, and soon were almost uniformly in the high Supplicant ranks.

When James wasn't on patrol with his platoon or doing marrying up drills with Second Group's forces, he was moving amongst the battalions, visiting a different one each day, shuttling to and fro on his Zero.

Those were some of his favorite moments, spearing down near empty avenues on the electric bike, fire-axe strapped to its side, standard issue pistol on his hip, weaving

between abandoned cars and exploring the city as it evolved and adapted.

For slowly, people began to emerge from their apartments, and James started to see the best of humanity on display. Neighborhoods came together to repair damage, to open streets, to bury their dead. Windows were either replaced or boarded up, Manna bread was freely distributed, and sometimes James even saw kids playing on the sidewalks again.

The sight filled him with a terrible hope and crushing sense of pessimism.

None of this could last.

The demon symbols in the sky had proven resistant to even Smite-enhanced attacks, and the military had chosen to ignore them even as scientists and analysts sought to understand their nature.

With eleven days left till Nem3, a research group out in Stanford finally cracked the code behind the black gems, and found that by casting Healing Grace on them while within the aegis of a Circle of Protection they could be opened and the energy within their cores released to flow back into the comatose victims who'd been lain low ever since they fell to the Nem2s.

News spread across the world and, for a glorious afternoon, images and videos were shared of the near-dead awakening, rising bleary eyed and stiff from their week-long slumber to universal celebration.

Being the CSM meant that he was both a member of the rank and file yet also not; it took some time for the regular Blue Light folk to overcome their suspicion and stop thinking of him as a mole for Hackworth. It didn't last long, but for a few days James would arrive at battalion Forward Operating Bases and be greeted with hesitancy and reserve.

But it never lasted. His manner overcame suspicion, and when it became clear he was willing to go to bat for regular operators, he started to be welcomed again.

When he wasn't on the road visiting the FOBs or out patrolling with his platoon, he was with Hackworth at the Headquarters and Headquarters Company, sitting in on discussions of morale, planned training sessions, updates from across the country, or simply providing Hackworth with room to vent his frustrations.

Hackworth's XO, Major Baker, was as dour and negative as he was brilliant and resourceful, which made him at once invaluable in managing all the varied aspects of running the force as he was a drag on morale and cohesion.

"Just get rid of him," said James one evening in the near empty conference room. Hackworth stood before a huge touchscreen, slowly moving around a map of NYC and examining their deployments.

"Were this a regular situation, and we had a year to get combat ready before returning on tour, I might. But we have seven days till Nemesis 3, and I can't afford the disruption." Hackworth turned to stare at him. "I also can't afford to send you to Washington, but we've no choice in the matter."

"Washington?" asked James.

"The White House, to be precise. The president's asked for a high-level meeting with key people to review our preparation for 3-Day, as it's being called, and specifically mentioned your name."

James's eyes widened in shock. "What?"

"Tomorrow. We're to be in the situation room at 10 a.m. We're flying in late tonight and will review my presentation on the plane. Don't worry, I'll handle the conversation. If the president asks you anything, you answer questions simply and directly."

James pulled out a chair and sat.

Hackworth's smile was sympathetic. "You didn't expect to be summoned by the President of the United States this week?"

"Or any week." James rubbed the back of his neck. "He knows my background?"

“I’m sure the CIA has presented him with a file. Now, whether he’s read it or not, I can’t say.”

“But...”

“Why does he want to see you?” Hackworth sighed. “Look. Think of it this way. What is the president?”

“The leader of the free world?”

“Well, that, but more than that. He’s a symbol. People ascribe far more power to presidents than they actually have. They’re blamed or credited with economic rises and falls beyond any one person’s comprehension. But a president is expected to represent the best of us, to speak for all of us, to give us a sense of shared purpose and identity. I know that’s rarely the case, but if any one man in this country appreciates the value of a symbol like you, it’s the president. Your influence on recent events has been huge. It’s entirely possible there would be no Blue Light if it weren’t for you.”

“That was mostly Jessica’s doing.”

“Perhaps. She’s a formidable woman. But she couldn’t have done anything without you to work with.”

James frowned but said nothing.

“Blue Light groups are being formed in every major city across the country. Our setup here is being used as the template, and nobody who signs up to serve is unaware of who you are and what you’ve done. Whether it’s earned or not, you’ve become a symbol, James. The self-made man who rose from tragedy to lead a militia against the demons, whose example inspired thousands to flock to NYC, and whose leadership led to the defeat of the Fourth Wave. Not every city has done as well as we have, and some have fared far worse: look at what happened in Newport, for example.”

James considered the colonel’s words but remained still.

“It will be a brief meeting.” Hackworth’s tone had become final. “The president wants to hear directly from us, and we’ll simply tell him everything we’ve been doing and our plans for 3-Day. I’ll field any questions he might have, and then we’ll be shown the door. Do you own a suit?”

“A suit?” James blinked. “That a rhetorical question? Sir?”

Hackworth snorted. “Not a problem. We’ll get you a dress uniform. You’ll look sharp. Our flight leaves Kennedy Airport at 21:00. We’ll leave here at 19:00, so let your company know you’ll be gone. I’ve already notified the officers.”

“Yes, sir,” said James, rising to his feet. “I’ll be ready.”

“I know you will.” Hackworth turned back to the touchscreen map. “I’ll see you soon.”

# Chapter 10:

## Situation Room

A black sedan picked them up outside their DC hotel the next morning and drove them to the White House. James wore a dress uniform that Jessica had ensured fit him perfectly, and he felt stiff and uncomfortable and utterly unworthy of the navy-colored suit. The black tie felt like it was choking him, the white button-down shirt was starched to hell, and he had a conspicuous lack of decorations on his chest but for the bare essentials.

Still, he had captain chevrons on the upper arms of both sleeves, and Hackworth told him that was all that mattered.

A Secret Service officer waved them through the White House gate after inspecting their identification and looking out the window, James still couldn't believe he was there. Fighting demons was more likely than his being driven up to the most famous building in the world while wearing an army dress uniform.

They got out into the chill air and were led through a side door and along corridors and up and down staircases that led to the Situation Room. James tried not to gape. Even now, he half-expected the ubiquitous guards to yell at him and draw their guns.

The Situation Room was surprisingly small and windowless. Comfortable office chairs were arranged around an oval table, while more chairs were lined before the paneled wood walls. A number of people were already present. While they milled around, Hackworth was introduced to a variety of them, from the president's press secretary to the Chief of Staff. The Deputy Secretary of State pumped Hackworth's hand as he squeezed his shoulder, and the Secretary of State himself was talking to a general in the corner. The Secretary of Defense arrived with his deputy, followed moments later by a

man Hackworth whispered was the president's National Security Advisor.

Almost everyone ignored James; his uniform indicated a right to be there in some capacity, but he was clearly a nobody, relatively speaking, so they gathered in groups, some talking garrulously, others quietly, until Vice President Cox entered, looking harried and with bloodshot eyes; he smiled his famous smile, grabbed a chair right away, and sank into it as if he planned to never stand up again.

People took this as their cue to sit, and James found himself pulling out a chair between the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense, cut off from Hackworth and suddenly feeling as if he'd strayed into no-man's land.

Then the president walked in, and everyone leaped to their feet and chorused, "Good morning Mr. President."

President Murphy had grown famous for his ability to campaign non-stop for four years during the entirety of the last election cycle, holding revivalist religious gatherings while reaching out to appeal to the center with his nuanced platform of choice of a surprisingly progressive VP. His prodigious stamina was obviously serving him in good stead. He was a handsome man, a Southern Baptist pastor, his presidency incredibly controversial for breaking down the walls between church and state, and well into his 70s and up until his presidency famous for looking fifty-five. The first two years of his presidency had aged him a decade, and the last two weeks had slammed him the rest of the way home, so that his hair was now pure white, and his face lined and carved by deep emotion.

But he smiled affably and waved everybody down, sat at the head of the table and after some introductory remarks - none of which James could remember later over his own internal monologue of *oh shit, that's the president, oh shit* - bid the presentation to begin.

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff began, and after a quick round of introductions stated that they were going explain the nature of Blue Light, the necessity for its being

institutionalized across the country, and why it now represented our nation's best hope of marshaling the new powers being made available to mankind for the greater good.

A second general took over, whom the chairman had introduced as the commander of the United States Army Special Operations Command. The commander outlined the need for a new special force modeled on the lines of the Green Berets who could harness the new and impossible powers being made available to half the world's population, and how the army was uniquely positioned to recruit and administer this group across the nation. He reviewed in quick order the seven operations launched by regular military forces such as Operation Urban Angel that had met with moderate if costly success, then outlined two enhanced operations, one of them being James's own assault on the first hive in NYC, and how the demons had succumbed to the Auras and Smite-enhanced powers.

Everyone listened intently, and President Murphy in particular showed sharp focus, his hands clasped before his mouth, his eyes narrowed as he followed the arguments.

Finally the USASOC general introduced Hackworth, briefly outlined his career and experience leading a battalion in Afghanistan, and how he'd recognized the opportunity presented by the DRC in New York and pushed hard to have to assimilated into the Special Operations Command as its own entity.

Everybody turned to Hackworth, who looked damned impeccable in his dress uniform and flawless Errol Flynn good looks. The colonel rose to his feet, and in calm, precise language walked the room through the origins of the DRC, its successes, James's own initiative in spreading critical information, and how they'd agreed to work together for the good of the nation. He outlined the organization's hierarchy, mission, and gave a brief overview of its powers.

President Murphy leaned forward, his interest avid. "Now, I give my blessings that I was not called to fight one of these Nemeses myself, for I am now an old man of seventy-two years and dare say I'd scuff my boots if I had to stomp



one into the ground. But I'm mighty fascinated with these magical powers. Is this the gentleman in question, Captain Kelly?"

James knew Hackworth had been about to pivot and describe how the Blue Light model could easily be turned into a template, a process which was already underway, but he paused and smiled. "Yes, Mr. President. This is the miraculous captain himself."

Heart pounding, James rose to his feet, went to salute, and remembered just in time that there was no saluting indoors.

"Well, I never." Murphy smiled widely at him, and James felt the man's charisma wash over him like the rising sun. "Captain, it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I have myself seen one of your TikTok videos, and though it pains me that we rely on a Chinese platform to spread such vital information, I cannot sufficiently express my admiration for what you have achieved. Tell me, Son, is it true that you wield these miraculous powers?"

"Yes, sir," said James, voice stiff, wondering: *surely somebody's demonstrated Benedictions to the president by this point?*

"Well, I must confess that I'd like to see something." Murphy sat back. "What rank did you say you were?"

James opened his mouth to say *Captain* but caught himself just in time. "Novitiate 1, Mr. President."

"Novitiate 1. Will you look at that." Murphy beamed around the room as if drawing everyone else into his admiration. "Now, what can you do with that?"

"Sir, my Benedictions are Smite, Sacred Strike, and Heavenly Assault."

"Heavenly Assault. Sounds like something our Space Force should be working on. Is it safe for you to give us a demonstration?"

James's pulse was pounding in his ears. If he called a Heavenly Assault in here, nobody would be hurt, but it would

freak the shit out of everyone. One of the Secret Service guards would no doubt shoot him.

So instead he took up a pen that lay on a blank pad before him and activated Smite. Silvery fire ran up the length of the pen, immolating it, and burning thinly in the harsh overhead lighting.

Everybody leaned forward to study it.

“Now what is that?” asked Murphy, though from the gleam in the president’s eye, James was sure he knew.

“This is the Benediction Smite, Mr. President. It’s fueled by my Arete and Power stat, and with it, I can, ah, put demons down.”

“Mr. President,” said Hackworth smoothly, “Nemesis 2s have proven to be resistant to all but our most powerful guns. That pen, however, could be stabbed through their armor. Though, admittedly, it would take a lot of stabbing till one noticed.”

There were chuckles all round, and James realized: damn, Hackworth’s good at this.

“And do you wield a pen when you go into battle, Son?”

“No, Mr. President. I wield a fire-axe. My second-in-command wields a Ma Deuce, and shoots Smite-enhanced fifty caliber bullets from the hip.”

“Now we’re talking,” said the vice president with a grin.

“And do you believe in your heart, Captain Kelly, that your organization holds the keys to our salvation?”

James held the president’s gaze as a feeling of calm certainty swept through him. “I do, sir. There is much I don’t know. Who is orchestrating this Armageddon. Why the demons are appearing now. But there is a logic to the System at play. We are being... honed, sir, by each successive wave. Taught by the powers and their synergies how to best fight together. I’m confident that the Nemesis 3 will be our toughest enemy yet, and probably beyond the ability of regular folks to harm. If we don’t level up as many soldiers and citizens as we

can before the enemy arrives, we will be vastly unprepared for the slaughter to come.”

People around the table frowned, clearly disliking his choice of word. Perhaps they liked to keep shit upbeat in here. But Murphy leaned back and tapped his lips. For all his good ol’ boy language, there was a cold and fierce intelligence to his gaze.

“I like you, Son, you’re a straight shooter. I appreciate that in a man. As I said before, you have my thanks for all you’ve done. A mighty fine job, mighty fine. Colonel Hackworth, my apologies, I went and interrupted you.”

“Not at all, Mr. President,” said the colonel. “As I was saying, the group structure that we’ve implemented is roughly modeled on that of the Green Berets, and thus sufficiently familiar that it will require little modification for our units to adopt wholesale. However, the fact is that those who have taken the greatest advantage of these synergies are civilians; they represent the most advanced block of high-ranking fighters available to us, and thus must be recruited, armed, and indoctrinated as quickly as possible if we are to succeed. The army has begun this process, and we’ve seen some good successes on a variety of fronts, but there remains a suspicion and resistance on the part of the public to sign up for the military. That is why, if you choose to personally endorse Special Operations Force Blue Light, I believe we’ll see a large increase in sign-ups and a dramatic growth in our operational strength across the country.”

President Murphy nodded, and James took the opportunity to slowly sit down. Several of the men around the table studied him, and one gave him an approving nod: the National Security Advisor? James couldn’t keep them straight anymore.

“Now, I’ve been told that the System presented to each man and woman reflects their personal faith, but I know in my heart of hearts that it is the Lord Himself who is vouchsafing us these powers so that we may combat Satan’s legions.” President Murphy smiled around the Situation Room. “As such, those who wield the lord’s powers are His angels, and I

am fully prepared to endorse the creation of as many Blue Light forces as we can muster before 3-Day. I did not ask to serve during the end times, but it is said in the Book of Revelations that the kings shall gather to conduct war in the name of God Almighty, and if I may play any part in mustering those kings and helping the Lord pour His just and holy wrath upon these devils through these, His anointed, then I shall do just that.”

Everyone nodded gravely, including Hackworth, who’d only managed to give half his presentation.

“Thus I say unto thee,” continued the president, looking directly at his press secretary, “gather the press, for I shall speak to our people, and I shall quote Ezekiel 25:17, for we are all truly our brother’s keepers and the finder of lost children. And Blue Light shall strike down upon these devils with great vengeance and furious anger for their attempts to poison and destroy our brothers!”

“Amen,” said the vice president dryly, and most of the room went ahead and crossed themselves.

President Murphy grinned wolfishly at Colonel Hackworth. “Well done, sir. I look forward to seeing what your people can accomplish. You have my administration’s full support. And you, Captain Kelly. You, I shall say my prayers for, because the Lord always sends us men suitable for the occasion, and you have the makings of a hero, if not a saint.”

James didn’t know what to say. How to respond. Dumbfounded, he simply inclined his head.

President Murphy slapped the table, grinned, and a wolfish, predatory gleam entered his porcelain blue eyes. “Now get out there, Son, and show those spawns of Satan the true meaning of hell!”

# Chapter 11:

## Angel Wing

“It’s not much to look at, yet, but I’m close to attempting the final assembly,” said Jessica, tucking a strand of blonde hair behind one ear.

James had met her in the parking garage beneath the Marriott where a large space had been cordoned off for Fabricator usage. The air smelled of old exhaust, and the lighting was garish and bright. They were only a floor down, the ramp to the street just visible in the distance, but the area had been marked off by yellow tape and cones to keep any errant vehicles from driving into the construction zone.

At least, that’s what it looked like to James. While he’d been busy visiting the different battalions around the city, patrolling with his own crew and gallivanting off to DC, Jessica had been maintaining her impressive rate of work. Looking around, James saw piles of neatly organized steel pipes of varying diameter stacked to one side, next to huge bundles of iron rebar and large plastic bins marked with biohazard warning symbols.

But what drew his eye were the bins filled with glowing materials he’d never seen before, stuff that clearly had to be the mysterious components Jessica had identified as necessary for her construction of an Angel Wing.

“Yes, you haven’t seen this yet. Here, it’s not dangerous.” She reached into one bin and pulled out a ragged chunk of black and crimson crystal. It had the textured, crumbly look of a geode, the color gradations rich and varied, with the crimson parts glowing subtly within her palm.

“Sanguis petra, or blood rock. This forms wherever demons have spilled enough blood after about a day. We’ve been excavating it by the ton around a number of fallen hives. It’s being studied, but nothing conclusive has been determined

yet. Even its basic elemental composition defies understanding at this point.”

James took the rock. Despite its crumbly appearance it was remarkably heavy and hard, the thousands of faceted edges sharp, and felt subtly *wrong* to his senses in a way he couldn't pinpoint.

“And here we have Adamantino Divinum, or holy diamond.” Jessica stepped over to the next bin. This was filled with chunks of diamond that glowed from within with a golden radiance. Most of the chunks were the size of his fist, but here and there he saw some as large as his head.

“These grow spontaneously in a variety of locations. We've discovered it growing in pre-schools, homes, churches... the one common characteristic is that all these places are highly regarded as spiritual or centers of human... positivity?” Jessica frowned, clearly displeased by her own vagueness. “If it grows in a home, it's usually a place where several generations of healthy, successful individuals have thrived. Pre-schools or daycare centers are high end and with excellent ratings. Not all churches manifest the divine diamond, but those that do are well regarded as centers of their communities.”

“No shit,” said James, reaching down to pick up a chunk. It was faintly warm to the touch, and light, like coral. “So this... what? Absorbs good vibes?”

“No idea. And I'm not going to waste time speculating. It's a critical component for my crafting, however, so I've requisitioned enough for my needs. That's all I currently care to know.”

“Sure.” James set the beautiful, ethereal golden diamond back down.

“There are several other exotic components, but fortunately they are needed in far less quantity as they are harder to find.” Jessica led James over to a series of smaller bins on a pop-up table. “Hearts of Ivory, Golden Dawn, and so forth. These are the real bottleneck, as we've yet to figure out why they manifest where they do.”

“But you’ve got enough?”

“Yep.” Jessica gave him a nervous, bright smile. “It’s been hard juggling my new responsibilities to Blue Light with my desire to develop my Battle Engineer class. But fortunately, there are literally millions seeking to do the same across the world, and people have been sharing their findings via a number of different media. Saves me from having to experiment.”

James looked around the job site. “So what comes next?”

Jessica pulled a black plastic case over, the kind you might carry a flute around in, and popped it open. Lying on the black velvet was a wondrous, bizarre-looking object. It was about a foot long and composed of a variety of metals, all of them interwoven around small gears and lenses, its sides inlaid with ivory and gold and tipped with a thick, gleaming lens of perfectly clear glass.

“My mechanicus.” She drew it forth and turned it about in her hands. “I manifested it a few days back. Mostly made of Aeviternum, it’s the means by which I’ve channeled Aeviternum into the ingredients so as to make the composite elements for the Angel Wing.”

James leaned down to study it. “You just... manifested it?”

“Essentially. It’s keyed to me. Another Battle Engineer couldn’t use it.” She turned it about, considering it. “It’s... very strange. I’m aware of it as an extension of my own being. My sense of self encompasses its length. Very... very weird. But there you have it. With it, I’ve created these.”

“Damn,” said James, following her to another table. “You *have* been busy.”

Her expression turned wry. “Am I ever otherwise? Now these... these are very... different.”

She reached down into a reinforced storage bin and started drawing out large, bulky objects that were apparently quite light.

The first was a head-sized chunk of complex machinery composed mostly of steel and gold filaments around which the diamond seems to have coalesced. Jessica set it down carefully, and James studied it with avid curiosity.

“The Proprioception Helm. The best way I can describe it is as a sensor array for the Angel Wing. It allows the Wing to have a sense of itself, and its place in the world. Apologies, I barely know what that means myself. This is the Virtuous Heart.”

She placed a second object on the table. It was an amalgam of blood stone and divine diamond, a complex interlacing of both elements the size of two fists placed together.

“This holds the bulk of the Aeviternum that will power the vehicle, and the duality apparently is necessary for both its ability to store power and then distribute it via the Adiaphoron Network. When fully charged, it will probably be painful to look at. Here is the Throne of Reason.”

The third object was a large, golden soccer ball inlaid with ivory filagree, easily the most beautiful artifact of them all. Nodes of divine diamond were placed here and there.

“This is the means by which the rider controls the Wing. Not sure how it works yet either. And then we have this, the Adiaphoron Network.” This last was a series of thick, interwoven cables, looking to be composed of flexible blood rock and other materials. “It forms a literal net, and I think dictates the form of the Wing, as well as acting as the conduit for the power.”

“You made all of these?”

“I did. Over the past few nights.” Jessica placed her hands on her hips and frowned. “Nobody has yet managed to create a final Angel Wing, as any mistake in the crafting of these key components dooms the endeavor, and it’s hard to get 20 Aeviternum to pour into an attempt. But we’re ready now. All I need is to lay everything out, gather a company so they can supply the power, and, well...”



“Make your first Angel Wing.”

“Supposedly.” Jessica rubbed her hands briskly on her hips. “Do you think your Alpha Company would be up for helping out?”

“I’ll check in with Captain Torres. Don’t see why not. What time?”

“I’ll start laying everything out now. Perhaps you all could come down here in a couple of hours?” She checked her watch. “Say eight on the dot?”

“Eight it is.” James looked over the alien yet beautiful objects on the table once more. “This is outstanding work, Jessica. You’ve outdone yourself. I think. I’ve got no idea how hard this was to do.”

“It took a lot of focus.” She studied her components critically. “But I think we’re in good shape. Teams in Taiwan have come the closest to crafting a functioning Angel Wing, and I’ve followed their advice where it made sense. Though I’ve made a couple of changes of my own. Things that just didn’t make sense to me. I don’t know. It’s not a science. More like... cooking, I suppose.”

“You cook?”

“I most certainly do not. But I imagine I could if I had to.”

James grinned. “I bet you’d become a top chef in a week if you set your mind to it.”

Jessica laughed. “Perhaps. Let me know what Torres says?”

“Will do. We’ll bring Alpha Company down here at eight. See you then?”

“Yes.” She took up her mechanicus and tapped it on her palm, already distracted by her thoughts. “See you then.”

\* \* \*

Captain Torres was amenable; that, and his relationship with James was a weird one. While technically in charge of Alpha Company, there was no denying that James was the heart of Blue Light, and thus worth deferring to. So the captain, a massive, high-energy ball of determination and fierce focus, listened to James's request, and immediately agreed.

It helped that their company had no patrol duty till the next morning, when they were due to do a circuit with Second Group's Bravo Company from their third battalion.

The members of Hydra, Dragon, and Medusa all gathered together, over eighty individuals of varying ranking strength, and together they descended to the parking garage with Captain Torres leading the way.

Carvajal, Crimson Dragon's charismatic leader, moved up alongside James. "So you really got to meet the president? Is he as crazy as he looks?"

James grinned. "You know we can't slag the president, amigo. He's the army's big boss."

Carvajal laughed. "You kidding me? He's the crazy guy who said he could bring the economy back with prayer. I may be a poor boy from Asturias, but even I know the economy doesn't work that way."

James chuckled. "Well, the demons saved him from having to manifest that particular miracle."

Lindsey edged in behind them. He was a massively corpulent guy in every way, easily six foot four and over three hundred pounds. He had a penchant for wearing jean overalls, dirty long-sleeved shirts, and little else, even in this weather, and insisted on carrying a chainsaw with him wherever he went. James had heard folks call him Leatherface behind his back, and done his best to stamp out that habit, but even he had to admit Lindsey wasn't doing himself any favors by dressing that way with the mug he was born with.

"I can't believe you got to meet him," Lindsey said in his high-pitched voice. "That's so cool, James. So cool. Did you

get to hang out?”

“No, he did not get to hang out,” said Carvajal in disgust as they all filed into a concrete stairwell. “What are you smoking, Lindsey?”

“What?” Lindsey sounded baffled. “Why wouldn’t the president want to hang out with James?”

“I only saw him in the Situation Room,” said James. “Just for the briefing.”

“Listen to this guy,” said Serenity from behind them all. “Just a quick briefing in the Situation Room.”

“So cool,” sighed Lindsey again. “Wish you’d taken some selfies with him. I’d love to see those.”

“Can you quit kissing James’s ass for one second, Lindsey?” Carvajal shoved open the fire door and waited for Captain Torres to lead them out to the parking garage. “Is that humanly possible?”

“But I’m not kissing his ass.” Lindsey’s voice got higher. “James is a good guy. What’s wrong in saying that? If he hadn’t done what he’d done, I’d still be in Maine -”

“Defending your grandma’s place, yeah, we know,” said Carvajal.

“Let’s focus,” said James, clapping Lindsey on his massively broad shoulder and stepping past him to join Torres as they approached Jessica’s work area. She’d laid everything out on the floor, with each of the alien components set down amidst rods of rebar and steel piping. A dozen other Fabricators were assisting her, but they all stepped back as the soldiers approached.

“Captain Torres,” said Jessica, straightening from where she was positioning some final items. “Thank you for your time and letting me use your company.”

“Yes, ma’am. How do you want ‘em?”

Everybody was crowding in behind James and Torres, peering down at the components that glittered under the fluorescent lights.

“Perhaps we could have Alpha stand here on the right, Bravo there on the left, and Charlie at the end there?”

“Very well,” said the captain, and everybody moved carefully about, till each company was stationed about the workspace as directed, clustered into tight groups of just under thirty and craning to get a view.

Jessica moved to her table, took up her mechanicus, frowned one last time at the pipes and golden spheres and the rest of the components and then gave a curt nod. “Thank you everyone for coming. We’re going to be attempting to create an Angel Wing here today. As you probably know, we’ve been busy collecting all the necessary components, and I think we’re finally ready to try and create one. The last missing component is raw Aeviternum; my understanding is that we need at least twenty for a functioning Angel Wing, but the more the better. The most anybody has managed to harness was a team in Taiwan who collected thirty points; I’d like to see what we can accomplish with eighty-one.”

Captain Torres raised his chin. “Why eighty-one, Chief?”

“This whole System seems to enjoy the rule of three as a basis for everything.” Jessica shrugged. “Nine for a squad, twenty-seven for a platoon, and so forth. Eight-one is nine times nine; that seems a fortuitous number.”

“Very well.” Torres frowned down at the gleaming pipes and components. “What do you need from us?”

“I’ll begin the creation process. It’s deceptively simple. On my mark, everyone’s to spend an Aeviternum. Try to focus on my mechanicus here. I’ll use it to channel everyone’s points into the creation.” Jessica’s smile was self-deprecating. “If it sounds vague, blame the System. We’ll figure this out as we go.”

“Very well.” Torres looked around the three companies, then nodded back to Jessica. “Ready when you are.”

Jessica took a deep breath and glanced at James. Only then did he realize how nervous she was. He gave her an

encouraging smile, and she flashed one back before turning to the components.

“Here we go,” she whispered, and pointed her mechanicus at the ground.

It immediately began to glow with a soft, golden radius, which poured from its tip to envelope the artifacts. In moments, everything was consumed by the light, lost within its aureate glow. Jessica’s hair stirred as if before an invisible breeze. She lowered her chin, narrowed her eyes, and then raised her hand. “Now.”

James summoned a point of Aeviternum, but rather than expend it on himself or pour it into an attack, he simply... offered it up to Jessica. It was a bizarre sensation, yet there was a clear opening for it; the Aeviternum didn’t dissipate into the air, but immediately pulled forth as if being set upon a steep slide and sucked down into the mechanicus, which radiated a powerful gravitational pull.

The mechanicus immediately grew painfully bright; the parking garage was filled with its blinding radiance, and James had to squint or be blinded. Jessica was barely visible, lost within that glorious cloud of gold, and he heard her cry out with effort.

Was she in danger? Was it too much power? James raised his hand, tried to make out what was happening - and then the golden glow dimmed and just as quickly disappeared.

Jessica staggered back, gasping, wisps of smoke rising from her mechanicus, her eyes wide, her face pale.

But her gaze was fixed on the long, sleek, elegant vehicle that now lay before them all.

The Angel Wing.

## Chapter 12:

### The Secrets We Carry

The machine was beautiful. Easily a dozen feet long, it was slender and delicate, fashioned from sinews and plates of steel and gold, and veined with divine diamond that gave off a pulsing glow. A large depression near the front could serve as seating, and James realized the whole of it was like a kind of motorbike without wheels, elongated and with ivory wings emblazed along the side; the wings weren't functional, he saw, but more a stylistic effect, a symbolic decoration.

Everybody pressed in close, admiring. There were handlebars near the front, but no instrument panel, no obvious mode of ignition, nothing that compared to a machine. How did it turn on?

Jessica stepped in close and touched one of the handlebars, her expression one of naked awe.

“Well done, Chief,” said Captain Torres, his grin nearly splitting his face. “Looks like we scored another first.”

“Damn,” said Denzel, head bobbing from one side to the other as he examined it from all angles. “How's it work?”

“I'm not sure,” said Jessica, her tone distant. “It's... not intelligent, nor aware, even, but...”

James crouched beside it and realized the Angel Wing was hovering a couple of inches off the ground. Taken aback, he raised his gaze back and forth, but no, there was nothing holding it up.

“It's flying,” said one of the operators from Crimson Dragon. “It's actually flying.”

“Let's give the chief some room,” barked Captain Torres. “ platoons, step back.”

People reluctantly did so.

“Jessica?” James looked to her. “Thoughts? It come out right?”

“I think so.” She trailed her fingertips over one of the stylized ivory wings set down the length of the craft. “It feels... *right*.”

“You know how to fly it?”

“Hmm?” She looked up at James and blinked. “Me? Oh. No. I mean, I think I do, but it responds to Arete. It has its own internal power source; literally anybody could fly it, but that would drain the Aeviternum. It’s better if the rider fuels it with their Arete.”

“What happens if it runs out?” asked James. “Would it fall apart?”

“No, but it would become unresponsive. I’d need to awaken it again with a new ritual. Minor in comparison, but inconvenient. So.” She looked up briskly and smiled. “Want to take it for a spin?”

“Me?” James’s eyes widened. “You made it.”

“But my Arete is pitiful compared to yours. That, and it feels right for you to take it out for the first time.”

“Maybe, but this is your creation. You definitely get first dibs.”

“Oh, enough already,” interjected Serenity. “Why don’t you both take it out?”

James eyed the seat. There was definitely room for two. He glanced up to Jessica, who adjusted her glasses. “I suppose we could,” she said.

James went to protest again, but saw Serenity roll her eyes and smiled sheepishly. “All right. I guess that’s a decent compromise.”

Carefully, hesitantly, he moved up alongside the Angel Wing and swung a leg over the seat. Settled, felt the craft dip an inch under him, then rise back up as if it were floating on the air.

Jessica moved up behind him, swung her leg over as well, and sat. “I think you have to connect with it. Grasp the handles.”

James hadn't felt this nervous since that first time, a lifetime ago, when he'd first taken a motorbike out onto the I95. He wiped his palms on his pants then leaned forward to grip the handlebars.

They were of textured gold, and the moment his fingers closed around them a new sense of the Angel Wing blossomed in his mind: he felt it as much the same way Jessica had described her bond to her mechanicus, an extension of himself. He felt its beating heart, powered by an incredibly dense nucleus of Aeviternum. Its Throne of Reason was embedded within the Wing's body just beneath the handlebars, and felt... not alive, but... vital, quickened, responsive, ready. It reached out to him, powered by its Helm of whatever, and James felt a spiritual click as he synchronized with the Wing.

Which immediately lifted another foot into the air, causing Jessica to cry out and clutch at him in shock.

“There we go,” he said, and just like that he knew how to fly it. Control was intuitive, and he felt his divine power begin to whisper into the heart, activating the entirety of the Wing through its Adiaphoron Network.

He turned the handles and the Wing slowly pitched around to the right, causing the platoons to yell out in good humor and fall back.

“You all right back there?” he asked.

“Fine. No safety belts. Just realized.”

“Well, hold on. Here we go.” He looked over to Torres. “Be right back, Captain.”

Torres laughed, his eyes shining. “Enjoy the ride, Captain.”

James willed the Wing to nose forward, and they glided over the pile of steel pipes, smooth as silk, their feet bumping against the topmost and then they slid through the parking



level like a surfboard pushed across the surface of a still swimming pool.

“Go faster!” yelled Serenity.

James chuckled and willed the Wing to move a little quicker; they eased around a huge cement column, glided down the lane, and then nosed into the exit ramp. The Wing’s nose yawed up, but James felt a strange pull keeping him tight on the seat; it wasn’t quite the same feeling he’d experienced while riding the Killer Egg’s outside platform, but the effect was similar.

A security bar crossed the top of the ramp beside the security booth, and James pushed the Wing a little faster as they slid up the ramp, cleared the bar, and emerged into the dusk.

Sparse traffic was going up and down the avenue, most of it still focused on the Emergency Management building up the street. One of the cars slammed on its horn and then abruptly stopped, the man within staring at them with bulging eyes as James turned the Wing up the avenue and pushed it even faster.

Jessica was gripping his arms tightly, but now slid her arms around his stomach as they flew six feet above the street, sliding up the avenue effortlessly.

“This as high as it goes?” she called.

James grinned. “Hold on.”

And he willed the Wing to rise, its nose climbing, and just like that they flew higher, first one story, then two, then three.

Jessica let out a second cry of panic. Treetops rushed by on both sides, large windows looking into apartments, offices, and then they cleared the rooftops on the left and James leaned in that direction, the Wing swinging out wide beneath the evening sky.

The wind was sharp but James didn’t feel the cold. He leaned forward and opened up the Aeviternum throttle, or whatever the equivalent was.

The Wing responded eagerly, and like a hurled spear, it burst forward. They had to be going fifty, sixty miles an hour, and still James felt the Wing capable of more. They sped past buildings beneath them, the Brooklyn skyscrapers to their left, Queens off to their two o'clock, and behind it all Manhattan, a glittering jungle of towers that were now coming to life, lights flickering on up and down their lengths.

“There,” said James, and focused on Midtown.

“Where we going?” shouted Jessica as they picked up even more speed.

“Hold on!”

He pushed the Wing as fast as it could go. Brooklyn unrolled beneath them as they gained more altitude, faster and faster, his beard plastering to his chin and chest, hair streaming back, but some property of the Wing protected his eyes so that he didn't need to squint.

They had to be cruising at a hundred miles per hour now, maybe more, and suddenly they burst out over the East River, flying alongside traffic crossing the Manhattan Bridge, and still the Wing had more to give. James felt the Virtuous Heart coruscating like a furnace, his Arete fueling its might.

Faster, faster, and then they shot over the shoreline, FDR Drive whipping by, passing over expensive waterfront condos. James pulled the Wing to the left, curling along the shoreline, and headed right toward the Financial District on the southern tip of the island.

Faster, faster, they had to be going a hundred and fifty now, entire blocks speeding by below them, the towers approaching at alarming speed, and at the last moment, James yanked the Wing to the side so that they skidded sideways through the air. James allowed the traction to slide and then willed it to catch when they were pointed right at one of the canyons between the skyscrapers, and they exploded forward.

Jessica screamed as they punched between the buildings, some fifteen stories up, short blocks flashing by below, lines of parked cars, people hurrying about unaware of them.

James let out a whoop, his every sense on alert, his whole body alive with power and profoundly connected to the Wing. He slalomed from side to side, getting a feel for the protective buffer zone that encased them, a pod of armored air that prevented him from getting too close to the buildings - though he sensed he could drop that defense if he wanted to.

They sliced into the heart of the Financial District, zipping by windows, ledges, skyscrapers from different decades, centuries even blurring by. At random, he picked a turn, and the Wing nearly flipped onto its side as he made the curve, sliding again until he willed the traction to catch, and they shot forth like a stone from a sling.

Jessica was hugging him tightly, but as they blew north, he felt her pull away slightly and look down on either side, and then she let out a whoop of her own. Trees, squares, parking lots, huge bulky AC units on rooftops, water towers, all of it rushed beneath in a stream of blurred electric light and dappled darkness, till they burst out over a park with grand, governmental buildings arranged below, dingy White House knockoffs that James realized were the City Hall and Courthouse buildings.

He swayed the Wing out to the left, left the ornamental park behind, flew a couple of blocks more and realized the skyscrapers were dwindling away. They flew out over built-up blocks, great square buildings that only rose some six or seven stories high.

Lower Manhattan.

Far ahead he could see another great bank of buildings, Midtown, and burning above one of the tallest buildings, the demon symbol.

James's wild exhilaration died in his chest.

For a moment they just coasted, the Wing losing speed, and then he turned it around and headed south once more.

There was no symbol above the Financial District despite the density of high-rises. Probably because few people actually lived there. Mostly commercial. Which suited James fine.

They cruised forward, and then he saw a massive glass skyscraper off to the left, right on the shore of the Hudson. He swung the Wing out wide, and they flew toward it, only for him to appreciate truly how massive it was as they drew closer.

The Wing climbed, nose rising, rising, and in a moment they were speeding up the glass side of the building, totally vertical yet gripped by the Wing's power, leaving Manhattan far below, even the other skyscrapers dropping away, until at last they shot over the top. James immediately eased off, and the Wing encircled a great four-hundred-foot-tall radio spire emerging from the center of a three-story tall ring of iron set flush atop the building's flat rooftop.

James slowed the Wing, drifted closer, and brought it over the building's retaining wall, but the rooftop was two stories below it, so he kept the Wing hovering just inside the lip.

"Hot damn," he whispered, looking out over Manhattan. Everything appeared tiny from this far up, a complex tapestry of blocks carved by slender streets and avenues, the Hudson and East River easily visible on both sides of the island, Queens and Brooklyn stretching away toward the horizon, none of it looking real.

But everywhere he looked hung demonic symbols. Dozens of them.

"Wow," whispered Jessica. "This is the One World Trade Center. I was just up here - well, a floor below in the Observation Deck - a couple of months ago."

"Yeah? Must feel like a lifetime ago."

"It does." Jessica absent-mindedly smoothed back her hair. They sat in silence, just drinking in the view. It was sobering, stunning, and put the scale of their endeavors into perspective.

James summoned the countdown:

**5 days till Nemesis 3 released**

## 75 days till Pits open

They were supposed to defend all of this?

“How does it feel?” asked Jessica. “To fly the Angel Wing?”

“Amazing.” He studied the vehicle between his thighs. “It’s less like riding a motorbike and more like... surfing. Which I never did too much of, but I had a summer in LA after college. That sense of leaning into things, the board being a part of you.”

She punched his shoulder. “And thanks for terrifying me. What part of an easy outing did you not understand?”

James laughed. “I couldn’t help it! When you fly this thing, you’ll understand. It’s...” He trailed off and stared back out over the city. “It’s like nothing I’ve ever experienced.”

“Well.” She sniffed. “You’re forgiven. This time.”

Again they fell into silence, and James became aware of her warmth against his back. Her arms weren’t around him, but she was leaning against him.

He cleared his throat. “Do, ah, you want to be getting back?”

“Hmm? Only if you need to. This view.” He felt more than saw her shake her head. “It’s good to change one’s perspective once in a while.”

“Yeah.” Why couldn’t he think of something to say? With Serenity, everyone else, he had no problem talking. But just sitting here with Jessica made him feel awkward. Would she think he’d brought her up here for a reason? No. Idiot. She wasn’t thinking along those lines at all.

“I’d ask how you’re holding up,” he said, “but you always duck the question.”

“Me, duck the question?”

“See?” He chuckled. “Classic.”

“I’m fine.” It felt more like an assertion than anything else. “Obviously there’s a lot of pressure. But I’m working well with O’Shea. He’s not quite as focused as I think necessary, but he knows how the army works, and that’s enough.”

“Is anybody focused enough for you?”

She snorted. “Star Boy can achieve brief bursts of impressive productivity if he’s sufficiently caffeinated and isolated.”

“Fair.” He stared out at the city but didn’t see it. Thought of what Star Boy had told him of Jessica’s past. “But you’re taking care of yourself? This is a marathon, not a sprint. You keep burning the candle at both ends you’ll burn out altogether.”

“I know.” She sighed, and he felt surprised; he’d genuinely expected her to deflect him again. “But there’s too much to be done, and I’ve always been terrible at delegating. I’m fine, James. I promise.”

Did he believe her? He knew she wanted him to, but...

“That,” she continued, “and we’d not be sitting here now if I took things easy. Now that we’ve got proof of concept, I’m going to refine my process and see if we can’t get a production assembly line going. We’ve millions of Fabricators in the city. If we can organize them, create - I don’t know - an engineer corpse like the army’s, a parallel to Blue Light - what?”

James grinned out into the darkness. “Nothing.”

There was a moment of baffled silence. “No, it’s not nothing.” She punched him lightly again. “What did I say that was so funny?”

“It’s not ‘corpse’. It’s ‘corps’, like an apple core.”

“No it isn’t.”

“Yes, actually. It is.”

Another pause. “Oh. *Oh*. That’s why Serenity loves it so much. Why didn’t she tell me?”

“Because...” he trailed off. “Because you’re almost overwhelmingly competent? I think she appreciates you having some hint of not being infallible.”

“She thinks I’m infallible?”

“I think we all do at this point.”

Another silence, and James had to resist the urge to turn around and glance at her.

“Well, I’m not.” Jessica suddenly sounded subdued. “Believe me, James, I am far, far from being overwhelmingly anything.”

Now he did turn. She was frowning out over the city, lips pursed, glasses catching the myriad reflections. “What is it?”

“Hmm?” She blinked at him. “Nothing. Just - feel free to tell Serenity not to be so impressed. None of us really know each other, do we?” Her gaze was direct, her expression raw, open. “The secrets we carry. The sides to us nobody else sees.”

“True.” He remained twisted around. “Anything you want to share?”

“Me?” She laughed. “Oh no. Not at all. Forget I said anything. What was I saying? A Battle Engineer Corps.” This time, she said it right, without even an ironic emphasis. “If we could mass produce Angel Wings it would be of huge benefit. What if Nem3 can fly?”

“True.” James turned back to the city with a pang of frustration. For a moment there, she seemed ready to lower her guard.

Then he scowled. What was he angling for? She was over ten years younger than him. And clearly not even aware of how idiotic his thoughts were. Which they were. Given that there was nothing going on here.

“So. This has clearly been a successful run. Now to refine the process, share the data, and mass produce. One day, who knows? We could be fielding entire platoons on Angel Wings. That, and these are the very lowest ranked models.”

James’s interest perked. “Oh yeah?”

“Indeed. I leveled, incidentally, upon creating the Wing before. Fabricator 3, which has opened up a new series of items I can create, one of which is the Archangel Wing.”

“No shit? What’s that like?”

“If this is a, I don’t know, scout ship, then I get the impression an Archangel is more of an armored presidential sedan.”

“Hard to make?”

He heard more than saw her smile. “Oh, yes. I’m going to have to study these new plans for a while. New components, the works. But for now, we can get to work on making more Wings.”

“Yeah, for sure.” James rubbed his thumb across his other palm. “Ready to head back down?”

“Yes.” She sounded so decisive, clear, focused. “We’ve got a lot of work to do.”

“Right, yeah.” He willed the Wing to rise.

“And James?”

He paused, didn’t look back. “Yeah?”

She pressed her palm against his back. “Thank you. For everything. I don’t know if I’ve ever told you how much of a difference you’ve made. Though obviously you know, what I mean is, clearly...” She trailed off. “Clearly you’re an incredible asset to our team, and I’m... honored... to be working with you. I’ve worked with my fair share of terrible bosses, but you’re easily head and shoulders above them all.”

James smiled tiredly. “Mighty nice of you to say. But like some wise lady once said, I am far, far from being overwhelmingly anything.”

She snorted. “Ha ha.”

“Ha ha, indeed. Hold on.”

And before she could reply, he urged the Wing over the building’s rating wall and pointed the nose straight down.



Jessica's scream trailed them all the way down, her arms clamped around his waist like iron bands. They leveled out at the last moment to speed down the avenue, and her screams turned to outraged laughter.

She kept holding him, though, and he grinned all the way back to the Marriott.

## Chapter 13:

### As Close to Family as I've Got

After what felt like an idyllic week of preparations, it suddenly felt as 3-Day was upon them. With only four days remaining, every moment felt precious. Jessica set to work marshaling military staff and volunteer civilians to create her envisioned assembly lines. Cindy and Captain O'Shea, the S1, worked on coordinating the different platoons and companies depending on their Benediction strengths, while Duffy, Hackworth, and his XO, Major Baker, spent countless hours trying to determine the optimal way to prepare for Nem3.

To James's consternation, President Murphy called him out by name in his televised address a day after their visit to DC, and James found his position as the face of Blue Light cemented into public opinion.

Which meant travel. Once Olaf reached Novitiate 1 and selected Communal Benediction, James had no more excuses to avoid the duty, and Major Baker presented him with a three-day dash across the country with six stops in hot spots in dire need of his presence.

"What the fuck am I supposed to do in Jacksonville?" asked James, leafing through his itinerary. "Or San Antonio?"

Major Baker's smile was utterly humorless. "What you did here in New York, Kelly. Get up in front of people and make them believe in Blue Light."

James's scowl didn't abate. "I'm only coming back the night before 3-Day? How the fuck am I supposed to prepare?"

"Language, Captain," snapped Baker. "You're owed no explanation. This is your duty, and if you have any issues with executing it, I advise you take it to Colonel Hackworth, and explain precisely why you're too busy to oversee the implementation of the national plan you personally asked the President to sponsor."

James sighed and dropped the paperwork on the table. “Fine. Who’s going with me.”

Baker raised an eyebrow. “You need a babysitter?”

“Major, I was homeless three weeks ago. You want me to show up to all of these flights on time and look semi-respectable while doing so? You’d better believe I could use some help keeping things straight.”

Baker narrowed his eyes. “I don’t appreciate your tone.”

“Sorry, Major. How would you like me to phrase it?”

“You serve as the commanding officer of Hydra Platoon, do you not? Your first sergeant should be your right-hand man. Why not ask him to travel with you?”

James thought of Bjørn. Considered. “Actually, sure. Good idea. Thanks, Major.”

Baker frowned again. “You leave in two hours. I suggest you get ready. Dismissed, Captain.”

James gave the man a two-finger salute which, obviously, was unnecessary indoors, but he just liked to see Baker splutter. He left the conference room, made his way to the lobby, and there called Bjørn. The man was up in his room relaxing, but he agreed to descend and, a few minutes later, emerged from the elevator banks, dressed in army fatigues and looking somehow predatory and rumpled at the same time.

“Sarge, take a seat.” James gestured to one of the ornamental armchairs set around a lobby coffee table.

Bjørn arched an eyebrow and did so.

“Orders from the colonel. I’m to do a six-city tour over the next three days to inspire morale and help get Blue Light forces shipshape. I want you to come with me and help out.”

Bjørn narrowed his eyes. “Me.”

“You’re my first sergeant. Baker pointed out that it’s customary for lieutenants to rely on their sergeants for support in all things. Seeing as I don’t have an XO, it makes sense.”

“I see.” Bjørn sat back and crossed one leg over the other. “And this has nothing to do with your being hesitant about leaving me behind unsupervised.”

James smiled politely. “Why would I be worried about that?”

Bjørn smiled back. “I’ve no idea. A hunch.”

“Foolish of you. Of everyone I know, you’ve got the most experience navigating airports and have probably been to all the cities we’re visiting. That and your Benedictions will prove useful if we run into any particularly thorny problems. You’re my second-in-command, Bjørn. It makes sense that you accompany me.”

Bjørn considered James. “You have a copy of our itinerary?”

James handed him the paperwork, then watched as Bjørn flipped through it.

“Why these six cities?”

“They’re B-tier in terms of preparation,” said James. “According to Hackworth, they’ve made sufficient progress to warrant assistance. A visit can help be the push they need to be ready for 3-Day. C-tier are just too disorganized to warrant our attention, while A-tier don’t need it.”

“Makes sense.” Bjørn set the papers on the coffee tables. “We have the data on the local authorities? Rankers? Their state of progress.”

“Star Boy’s going to send us a file on each city,” said James. “Their COs have been notified that we’re coming, and’ll probably roll out the red carpet for us.”

“And we’re to do what, exactly?”

James shrugged. “Improvise, most likely. Give a speech, meet with the officers, maybe mingle with the enlisted. Help review their plans, raise morale. I don’t know.”

“All right. I’ll come. It’ll be interesting to see how the rest of the country’s doing. When do we leave?”

James checked his new watch. “Car picks us up in an hour forty-five.”

Bjørn stood up. “Well, if you’ll excuse me. Becca’s waiting for my return upstairs, and suddenly I need to make it count.”

James grimaced politely. “Don’t be late.”

“I’ll try, Kelly. But her appetite? Fucking voracious.” Bjørn grinned darkly and strode away.

James watched him go, then sighed. Maybe they were breaking some military rule by shagging every chance they got, but James couldn’t be bothered to find out. He dug out his phone and texted Serenity: *lobby?*

She replied with an eggplant, which he wasn’t sure how to take, then a Ferris wheel emoji, then a wolf head.

*Sorry, he wrote back. I’m not fifteen. Don’t understand.*

*Old man,* she wrote back, but five minutes later she stepped out through the same elevator Bjørn had used, hair freshly washed, her Adidas tracksuit looking the worse for wear but better, in her opinion, than military fatigues.

“Hey, Boss,” she said as she dropped into the armchair beside him. “What’s up?”

“I’m starting to understand why the army doesn’t use hotels for barracks,” said James. “Calling everyone down from their rooms is a pain.”

“Boo hoo.” Serenity gazed past him at a group of operators who entered through the glass doors, then back to him. “This a work call or pleasure?”

“Work, unfortunately.” James pinched the bridge of his nose and told her his orders. “So I’m going to need you to run things while we’re gone. Keep folks moving, keep them busy. The more they sit around, the more nervous they’ll get.”

“Sure.” Serenity frowned at him. “You sure Bjørn won’t shank you while you’re flying over Idaho?”

“Be pretty suspicious if he did.”

“So you’re not sure.”

“I’m pretty sure he won’t.”

“Great. You know he’s still a megalomaniac and a complete psychopath?”

“Yeah.”

“And you want to spend three straight days with him?”

“Did I say that? No. But I also don’t want him here unsupervised, just like he guessed. The man’s got a way with people. He’s appeals to their worst instincts. I don’t want him whispering in Yadriel and Denzel’s ears.”

“Last time I say it: you should lock him up or something. This is literally like keeping a supervillain at arm’s length. He’s gonna wait for a moment of weakness and then he’ll kill you.”

“Yeah, maybe.” James sighed. “But I’m old fashioned, Serenity, for better or worse. He fucked up once. I believe in second chances. Shit, didn’t you and I get them? But I’ll tell you this, he crosses the line again, I won’t hesitate.”

“If you’re still alive to not hesitate.”

“If I am, sure. I know he sees me as weak for not getting rid of him. He’d have probably killed me, if our roles were reversed. But I don’t think putting faith and trust in other people is weak.” He frowned. “I think it gives people a chance to rise to the occasion.”

“Unless you’re a psychopath.”

“Unless you’re a psychopath, true.”

Serenity threw up her hands. “There’s no getting through to you.”

“Old dog, new tricks.”

“You’re not even speaking in full sentences anymore.”

“Old man, tired.”

“Old man, my ass.” Serenity looked away, but James saw the subtle tension sweep through her.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“C’mon, Bonnie. What’s up?”

She turned abruptly to fix him with her stare. “You got the hots for Jessica?”

James felt his eyes widen and the blood drain from his face. “What?”

Outrage, or excitement, or incredulity, or all of the above flooded Serenity’s face and she leaned in. “You do!”

“I do not!” He made a face. “Jesus Christ, she’s like, twenty-one.”

“Twenty-eight.”

“How do you know that?”

“She and Star Boy were in the same class in college.”

“Yeah, he told me.”

“And he got drunk one night and made a pass at me. I asked him if his mother knew he was still out, and he told me he was a grown-ass man, twenty-eight years old.”

“So?” James felt flustered so he just glowered at her. “Twenty-one, twenty-eight, doesn’t matter. She’s just a kid. No.”

“She’s not just a kid.” Serenity sat back now, her gaze turning speculative. “She’s closing in on thirty, and she’s a real looker. If you’re into that buttoned-up, straight-edge, sorority girl, sweet-ass perfect type.”

James snorted. “Something tells me she wasn’t in a sorority.”

Serenity shrugged one shoulder. “So you are.”

James just glared at her.

“Don’t get mad.” Her smile turned complex. “Given what you’ve been through, it’s... good... to feel something like that. Right?”

“I don’t know what I’m feeling. But I do know it ain’t going anywhere.”

“I didn’t say it had to. Just... that I’m happy for you. That you’re feeling something. That’s progress, right?”

“I don’t know.” James hunched forward and rubbed his eyes. “If feeling like a damned fool is progress, sure. That and I’m completely confident that she sees me like an uncle. Which she should. Fucking hell, why are we even talking about this?”

“Because,” said Serenity, leaning forward as well so that their heads were only inches apart. “For a while there, I thought you and I might become a thing. Remember? Back at my place? I thought it was the natural evolution of what we had going. Bonnie and Clyde on the streets, sexylumberhobo-action in the sheets.”

“You didn’t just say that out loud.”

“But...” She trailed off, shrugged, juttied her chin forward. “I don’t think that’s in the cards for us. The idea of doing you with a strap-on now just feels... weird.”

James let out a bark of laughter. “That’s how you roll?”

Her grin was wicked. “That’s my buy-in. You should see my raise.”

“Maybe not.” They smiled at each other, and James realized he was feeling something akin to relief. “But thanks for telling me. I think... yeah. I was wondering the same thing. But it never felt in the cards.”

“We’re just killing this poker metaphor.” Her expression turned sad for a moment. “I kind of wanted it. Kind of still do. But this fucking Arete is like a Maglite. I can see now that I just want to keep you in my life, would use that as a way to tie you to me. So... maybe we can skip the latex gimp-suits and just agree to be friends.”

“Friends,” said James. “Yeah. More than that.” His throat grew tight. “You’re as close to family as I’ve got, Woman.”



“Aw.” She tried to tease him, but he saw the pain and raw vulnerability in her eyes. “I’ve always wanted a better, a new grandpa.”

“Grandpa my ass,” he said, giving her a playful push.

“No, we’d do different things back there.” She sat back with a laugh. “But if that kind of roleplaying is your thing, I’m game.”

“Damn, Woman. You’re light years more advanced than I am. I still think kissing after dinner is exciting.”

Her smile turned fond. “Yeah, it can be.”

For a moment, they just sat there, then she dug out her phone. “Hold up. Let me text Jessica.”

His heart lurched in his chest. “What?”

“Honesty is the best policy,” she said, then dropped her phone. “God, I’m kidding! You should see your face.”

He dragged his fingers down his cheeks. “I should never have told you.”

“You didn’t, I fucking deduced it.”

“For real, Serenity.” He fixed her with his stare. “There’s nothing there but a stupid... I don’t know, thought. That I’m working on crushing. I’m not going to say or do anything. It’s ridiculous and inappropriate.”

“Hey, chill out. I get it. You’ve been a bitter, single, broken man for almost a decade, then along comes 55 points of Arete and a brilliant, beautiful, young, single woman. Doesn’t take a genius to figure out what would happen.” Her smile was warm. “I’m just teasing you. And will continue to. But I get it.”

“OK, good.” He sat back. “Why do I feel exhausted?”

“Because somebody didn’t raise their Stamina enough? I don’t know, wild guess.”

They sat in silence again, and then he smiled. “You’ll keep an eye on things while I’m gone?”

“Yeah.” She smirked. “I guess I can do that.”

“OK. I get back the night before 3-Day.”

“If Bjørn doesn’t shank you.”

“If I don’t get shanked.”

“Work on that. I’d be pissed if we had this heart-to-heart only for you to get your dumb ass killed.”

“Got it.” He groaned and stood. “Speaking of. I should probably pack. Got myself a national tour in an hour.”

Serenity rose lithely to her feet. “Send me a postcard from each city?”

“Sure.”

They stared at each other for another moment, and then Serenity stepped in and wrapped her arms around him. He hugged her back, and when she pulled away her eyes glistened with tears.

“For real. I’ve never had such ridiculously healthy conversations and breakthroughs with anybody else. You’d best get your ass back.”

He winked at her. “Scout’s honor.”

“Good.” She stepped back, sniffed, grinned. “I’ll work on Jessica while you’re gone.”

James lunged for her, but she danced aside, laughing, and skipped back to the elevators. “Safe travels! Don’t worry, I’m on the case!”

James watched her go, unable to maintain his scowl, and once the elevator doors closed, sighed and shook his head ruefully. He stared at nothing for a moment, considering, then smiled.

Everything might be about to end in four days, but this was probably the best he’d felt since Laney and the girls had died.

What a world.

# Chapter 14:

## 3-Day

The next three days were a blur.

Airports were terminally weird experiences, and Bjørn alternated between being a charming and withdrawn travel companion. It was all suitcases and stale snacks, empty gates and harried skeleton staffs who volunteered heroically to keep the lights on. Hotel rooms and minifridges, rental cars lifted from abandoned lots, keys snagged from under the counters, convention centers and new skylines.

The cell networks were still up, so James would call each new contact upon arriving and head on over. Shake hands, try to remember names, fail. Military men, officers, enlisted. Ranking civilians, tales of horror, of survival, of improbable victories. Speeches from stages, speeches from the top of staircases, mingling sessions, reviews.

Meetings. Men and women laying out their problems, hoping for solutions, for miracles.

James mostly listened. When he had something good to say, he said it. When he didn't, he tried to offer constructive criticism. When the situation was hopeless, like in Jacksonville, he just grimaced and powered through.

Bjørn was great. His commentary was sharp, his analysis instant, his ability to dominate a room with key points exemplary. He respected James's leadership, though, and mostly just worked the wings.

Hotel rooms at night. Strange views of unknown city downtown cores. Each city with its own climate, its own vibe, its own atmosphere.

It was a whirlwind tour. They spent more time waiting and flying than talking to people. But at the end of each visit, folks would pump his hand and tell him how grateful they were that he'd come out to help.

And the look in their eyes made him uncomfortable. They didn't see him, James Kelly. They saw the man the president had described, the enigmatic figure that had emerged on TikTok, the sexylumberhobojack of apparent legend.

At first, James tried to puncture that impression, to show them he was just the same as them, no better. But after Cleveland, Bjørn took him aside and put him straight.

“Look,” he said. “They need you to be more. This isn't even about you. This is about what they can take from the fantasy of you. The strength and hope they get from thinking that you're more, that you're on their side, that if they work hard enough, get lucky enough, they can follow in your steps. So cut out this humble self-deprecating shit. Be dignified, sure, but if they want to think you're Superman, let them. Because they need Superman right now, not James Kelly the random guy off the street.”

He was exhausted by the time they returned to JFK. The glare of fluorescent lights, the echoing terminals, the moving walkways, the black car waiting to pick them up, all of it blurred with the other instances from the past few days.

But as they drove east through Brooklyn, it all started to feel real again. Familiar sights. Familiar buildings. The demon symbols hovering over the hated hive locations.

They pulled up outside the Marriott, and James climbed out, his clothing rumpled, his mouth tasting stale, his eyes dry. Grabbed his suitcase and looked up the height of the tower.

When had this place started feeling like home?

Bjørn yawned, grabbed his own carry-on, and together they entered the lobby.

At first, nobody noticed, but then people did, familiar faces, triad members, and smiles lit up their faces, their expressions glad, *relieved*.

James was back.

Serenity and a handful of the other Crimson Hydra folks had claimed a knot of armchairs off to one side, and they leaped to their feet and rushed over. Serenity all but tackled

James, causing him to stagger back, even as Becca wrapped her arms around Bjørn's neck and kissed the shit out of him.

Olaf let out a booming laugh, and Denzel clapped him on the shoulder. Yadriel hung back, but a fierce relief was on his dour face as well.

“Guys, I was gone three days.” James set down his case. “You’re acting like it’s been months.”

“Sure felt that way,” said Serenity. “I’ve had to sit in on the meetings you missed. Kill me now.”

“A lot has happened,” said Joanna. “Jessica is a madwoman. You have to see what’s going on in the basement.”

“Angel Wings?”

“A fleet of them,” grinned Joanna. “They’re amazing. We’ve all been out on one. It’s...” She shook her head with helpless wonder.

“We’ve been drilling plenty,” said Denzel. “Working on integrating our new powers. Now that Olaf’s got Communal Benediction, it’s sick what we can do. Working on new commands so that we can switch from Deadeye to whatever on a moment’s notice.”

“Hasn’t been the same without you, though,” said Serenity, hip checking him. “We’ve done our best. Everybody has. All sorts of training’s been going on. Learning how to use the radios, what commands mean what. The works.”

“How was the tour?” asked Jason, arms crossed over his broad chest. “Worth the time?”

James glanced at Bjørn, shrugged. “Yeah, I think so. We raised folks’ spirits, I guess. Gave some input. I’ve got a lot to process.”

“Hackworth’s vision is becoming a reality,” said Bjørn. “The question is if it will manifest in time. A lot of the places we visited were halfway there. New York is easily miles ahead of the rest.”

“Well, that makes sense.” Serenity breathed on her nails and buffed them on her shirt. “Seeing as who’s operating here. Speaking of which, we’ve got a plan for the First Wave tomorrow.”

“Hackworth settle on one at last?”

“Star Boy convinced him. But c’mon, let’s get your shit dropped off. Hackworth wants you to debrief him on everything, and then we need to get ready for tomorrow.” Serenity picked up his suitcase for him and kissed him on the cheek. “Welcome home, Boss.”

\* \* \*

### **45 minutes till Nemesis 3 released**

James dismissed the message and eased the Angel Wing forward. Serenity sat with her back to him, her Ma Deuce covering their six by resting on a jerry-rigged pivot that Jessica had helped mount with steel and her mechanicus.

They were a good two stories above the main avenue along which an endless line of school buses was parked, a thin crowd running alongside them, military folks directing them where to go, the sunlight barely warming the late afternoon.

The rest of Crimson Hydra were following behind on their own Angel Wings, two mounted on each but for Jason who was flying solo. Carvajal’s Crimson Dragon was flying point up ahead, while Lindsey’s Crimson Medusa was bringing up the rear of the caravan. Their Ebon and Ivory squads were distributed throughout the actual buses which were loaded with over ten thousand First Wave folks.

The convoy would be escorted both ahead and behind by Bradleys loaded up with extra troops, and four Black Hawks would monitor from the skies.

The operation had been enormously complex but efficiently handled; people had been gathering since before

dawn, filtering in from all over the borough to board the buses and wait. Water had been brought in from warehouses, MREs distributed to each person, and, slowly, every bus had been loaded.

The plan was simple: without knowing what Nemesis 3 would look like, there was no way to adequately prepare for it. So instead, they'd take to the interstate and drive up the 87, barreling along at 60 mph and hoping that the demons would materialize outside each bus along the highway's shoulder.

Outside of the city proper, though it would probably suck for the suburbs.

The front of the convoy started. Over a hundred and fifty buses had been gathered here over the past 36 hours, all driven by army specialists, each with at least half a First Group Blue Light squad on board. The other buses in the other boroughs were staffed by Second Group squads or the highest-ranking regular military forces available. It wasn't perfect, but it was the best they could do.

Getting the whole convoy moving took time, and the NYPD had been called in to make sure there were no obstacles or incoming traffic to block them, such that they drove north to merge onto the Brooklyn Queens Expressway, and powered ever further north, leaving Queens to cross over Randall's Island and then onto the 87.

James flew overhead, the Wing responsive to his every thought, summoning the Nemesis 3 countdown every few minutes.

They weren't making good time.

The plan had been to have the convoy at least past Yonkers by the time the Nem3s appeared, but they were still barreling through the Bronx as the minutes ticked down.

His radio crackled. He had access to several different bands, from the aircrew monitoring the situation from the skies on great satellite planes to the convoy leaders to Hackworth and his Command Center back at the Marriott.

The order was given for the buses to hit the gas and time the Nem3 arrival as they drove through the vast Van Cortlandt Park, a huge stretch of forest and green north of the Bronx.

“Gonna be close,” said Serenity, her voice carrying easily despite the speed they were flying at.

### **5 minutes till Nemesis 3 released**

James was aware of his heart pounding, pounding as the moment drew nigh. Another bus convoy was visible from their vantage point, a long group just visible up the 87.

One of the Black Hawks scudded by overhead, the huge guns pointed nonchalantly down by sunglasses-wearing bad-asses.

The buses were flying, powering along at almost a hundred miles an hour, all hundred and fifty of them, an impossible sight, tops gleaming in the cold sun, roaring past each onramp where cop cars were parked, lights flashing, men in uniform watching.

### **4 minutes till Nemesis 3 released**

James tuned out the chatter over the radio and lowered the Angel, flying just above the buses, slicing through the air at easily some hundred and twenty miles an hour. An overpass marked the boundary to the park, and beyond it rose the brown, sere trees, their branches clutching nakedly at the winter sky, an endless expanse devoid of homes and victims.

No plan was perfect. The Nem3s would have to go somewhere. But better a diffused attack north of the city than tens of thousands slaughtered in large groups or across town.

Or so James hoped.

The first of the buses slid under the overpass, Carvajal’s squad flying low to do the same, keeping pace easily with the



lead.

### **3 minutes till Nemesis 3 released**

James sensed Serenity working the Ma Deuce back and forth, testing the range of motion for the hundredth time. With Eternal Fire the barrel wouldn't overheat and be slagged; she'd be able to unload Smite-enhanced .50 Cals on whatever appeared forever.

James hoped it would be enough.

One by one, the buses drove under the bridge, and he pulled up, gaining altitude to check on the front. The lead bus was now entering the park proper. A golf course lay on the right of the highway, with a huge field beyond that. Another highway curled in from the right to pass under the 87, and when the lead bus made it over that overpass James's own midway mark drove under the bridge.

They were going to make the park.

### **2 minutes till Nemesis 3 released**

James fought to keep his breath steady. They'd done all they could to prepare for this moment. Two weeks of organizing, training, and planning. Over five thousand ranking soldiers and Blue Lighters were working together to mitigate the disaster that was about to unfold. Everyone in Crimson Hydra was at least Novitiate 1. They had the best Benedictions of anyone in the country. The victims below were on the move, blasting along at over eighty miles an hour now, the buses sufficiently narrow that if the Nem2 arrival distance remained a constant, the enemy should appear fifteen yards away.

If they appeared in front of the bus, they'd get run over. Behind? The same. The shoulders? They'd be left behind in seconds, and as Star Boy had speculated, perhaps they'd

appear while going at the same speed as the buses and hit the ground at almost a hundred or so miles an hour.

That'd leave a mark.

The mid-point entered Cortlandt. Up ahead, the lead was spearing through the densest part of the woods. Carvajal had his own Deadeye with a Ma Deuce mounted on the rear, as did Lindsey behind, but there wasn't much they could realistically do against 10,000 Nem3s. The hope was that they'd be able to intervene and keep the convoy moving. To ensure everybody got away.

Everybody knew the worst that could happen would be for a bus to flip, to crash, to block the highway and stall the rest of the convoy.

For everyone to be forced to a standstill, surrounded by Nem3s.

### **1 minute till Nemesis 3 released**

"C'mon, c'mon," muttered James, his pulse racing, his chest tight. Would they fly? Be a swarm? Would they cast fear effects, would they be insectile?

Worse, would they be intelligent? Would they know how to fight together? The Nem2 arm-blades could cut into tank armor. Would these be able to plow right through a bus?

James felt as if bowling ball were dropped into his gut, his whole body was crawling with pinpricks, and his gaze continuously strafed the wooded shoulders.

"Here we go," shouted Serenity. "You ready, hon?"

"Ready," he growled back. "Crimson Hydra, Bless Green."

Power washed over him as the blessings stacked.

"We're at ten seconds," came Star Boy's voice over the radio. "Counting down. Nine. Eight. Seven. Six."

James raised the Angel Wing to a height of some twenty yards. Trees rushed by beneath them. The buses picked up speed.

“Five. Four. Three.”

James took a deep breath.

This was it.

Finally

At long fucking last.

“Two.”

James leaned forward, scanned the forest.

“One. Time’s up. Good luck, everyone.”

# Chapter 15:

## Nemesis 3

A new message appeared of its own accord in James's vision:

**You have 1 hour to gather  
with 100 other First Wave summoners**

Serenity must have seen it, too, for James felt her stiffen against his back. But there was no time for further reaction, for a second message appeared:

**Gathering accomplished  
Nemesis 3 has released**

Time seemed to slow.

An ebon demon appeared directly beneath them atop one of the buses.

It was massive, hairless, and obscenely muscled.

Easily three times the height of a man, it stood hunched over on two dog-like legs, a tail flaring out behind it with a spearhead tip, its torso bent nearly parallel to the bus, shoulders, chest, and back so hugely strong that it had more in common with a prized bull than anything else.

Each arm terminated in a yard-long machete of black bone, its tip hooked, and long enough that the Nem3 rested their edges atop the bus.

Its head. Jesus Christ. No eyes, just a fanged maw that split its skull in two, the upper half of its face nothing more

than bulging bone, a triceratops-like fan of horn and bone sweeping up to a huge spike of bone that emerged from the peak of its swollen back like the head of a harpoon.

The roof of the bus buckled under its weight.

The radio was going wild.

More Nem3s were appearing, most of them along the side of the roads, a few atop buses, each massive, as tall as the buses, hideous, instantly alert, tails lashing, muscles tensing.

The Nem3 on the bus roof just below them looked up, sensing them somehow without eyes, screeched, and the bone harpoon embedded in the great mound of muscle between its shoulder blades erupted forth and flew at them.

James yelled and yanked the Wing aside. It flew into a barrel roll and dropped, the bone harpoon spearing past and nearly taking them out, and then even as he righted the craft he saw the Nem3 bunch its legs and leap at them.

Its departure crumpled more of the bus's roof, caused the huge vehicle to swerve, its backend fishtailing.

But James dipped the Wing down right to the road, skimming just inches above it, and raised his hand to unleash a Sacred Strike as the Nem3 flew over him.

White fire gouted forth, a huge curtain of glory through which the Nem3 flew, its black skin blistering and burning away.

James looked back to keep track of it as it landed, staring over his shoulder as the demon hit the highway's shoulder, bounded forward, then collapsed to one knee.

Serenity opened fire with the Ma Deuce, it's every shot reverberating through the wing, a powerful *DONDONDON* that James felt more in his chest than heard.

He tore his eyes from the Nem3, looked ahead, and screamed.

One was galloping right at them, using its bladed forearms as front legs, its mouth wrenched open. It leaped, he

yanked on the Wing, and tore off and up to the left as the demon flew past them, its left blade reaching, missing them by inches.

“Fuck!” he shouted and gained altitude. The buses were barreling along, chaos erupting up and down the line. Black Hawks were swooping down and laying waste with their armament. Carvajal was working to clear the Nem3s atop the buses on his end. Six buses ahead a Nem3 was tearing the roof off its bus, working its huge blades into the metal and wrenching the metal aside even as it sank into the crumpling mass beneath him.

Serenity worked her Ma Deuce from side to side. She needed him to hold steady, but a Nem3 came galloping out of the shoulder and hurled itself into one of the buses.

The vehicle was going a hundred mile an hour.

The Nem3s hit it like an elephant, smashing in through the windows and immediately tearing down the length of the bus as it blew past him, glass exploding everywhere, its taloned arms slashing through metal as it sought to hold on.

“Serenity!” yelled James and banked to the right so the bus would come into her field of vision.

The Nem3 embedded itself into the very rear of the bus. Gunfire erupted from within, but it reached down with one arm and hacked off the rear right wheel.

The bus’s back corner dropped to the highway, unleashing a storm of sparks. Serenity opened fire, Smite-enhanced .50 Cals blowing into the Nem3, but the bus fishtailed, metal screeched, and then a second Nem3 hit it and the whole thing flipped.

Even as the bus began to roll, James realized the whole operation had gone FUBAR.

The next bus slammed on its brakes, tires squealing, and slid sideways along the highway behind the first bus which was powering along on its side. The second flipped, crashed down, and then the third slammed into it nose first.

“Fuck!” shouted James, bringing the Wing around. Another fifty buses were slamming on the brakes, desperately driving out to the sides, some hitting the cement medians, others sawing to the hard right onto an emergency lane.

There had to be some fifty Nem3s along its line.

The demons raised their heads as one and flung themselves into the slaughter.

“Crimson Hydra!” James shouted into this radio. “With me!”

The other Wings had been spread out behind him, but as he brought his craft down in for a landing, they descended in turn, settling light as feathers upon the gray asphalt beside the three-bus pile-up.

Olaf leaped off his craft and immediately a Circle of Protection rose into existence, five yards in radius and burning with a bright, pure light.

Everyone rushed to stand within its perimeter, M4s raised, and immediately their guns blazed with Communal Smite.

James grabbed his fire-axe and moved inside the perimeter as well. The squads in the three buses were fighting back, machine-gun fire bursting out the windows, but the Nem3s didn't seem fussed. Another bounded into view, landed atop the first capsized bus, stared at them, and fired a bone harpoon their way.

“Incoming!” shouted Denzel, and three shields materialized before the harpoon, which slammed home and bounced off. The harpoon was at least two yards long, as thick as James's arm, and tipped with a wicked point. It'd go clear through a man.

Serenity hefted her Ma Deuce and fired from the hip, reaching out and touching the Nem3 where it stood with hundreds of burning .50 Cals in seconds. The bullets caused fist-sized holes to erupt across its chest, knocked chunks of bone off its skull-plating, then split its head wide open so that it collapsed backward off the bus.

James felt the blood drain from his face. It'd taken at least twenty shots from a Ma Deuce to drop. What did that mean for everyone else?

“Behind!” screamed Jason, and James wrenched around to see a fourth Nem3 come dropping out of the sky to fall upon their circle. One shield got up in time, but it crashed right through it, hit Olaf's Circle, and caused the hemisphere to flare into visibility, bright white radiance barely visible in the daylight.

Jason extended his hand and a spear of Iron Aura burst forward to punch into the Nem3's chest. It slammed clear through the Nem3's body, emerging out its back, but the demon just screamed and brought both blades crashing down upon the hemisphere.

Which shattered.

The Nem3 fell upon them, only to be met halfway by Becca's Black Apotheosis. She flew up to tackle it around the waist, her black flaming head splitting open to reveal a maw of her own which she clamped around the Nem3's throat.

The impact was tremendous, and James thought he heard bones crunch as the pair fell to the ground, locked in their embrace, the Nem3 shrieking as it sought to tear Becca's shadowy form apart with its bladed arms.

But Jason was there and dropped a dozen Iron Aura spears through its head, killing it.

James turned back to the buses, saw one of the two remaining Nem3s slam its bladed arm through a ruined window to where a man was firing Smite-enhanced bullets, and finally snapped his mind into the situation.

He extended his hand and called down a Heavenly Assault empowered with Gloria.

From the skies fell a tree-trunk thick bolt of lightning, hammering the Nem3 where it stood, encasing it in burning silver and gold. It unleashed a shockwave of raw divine power that blasted out in a block radius, washing over the three buses



and the beginning of a fourth behind them, filling the air with sweet, devouring might.

The blinding light suffused the world, then disappeared.

The Nem3 James had targeted was a burned-out husk, still erect on its rear legs for a moment before it collapsed like a scaffolding made of charcoal. The second which had been digging its way into one of the buses also lay dead, reduced to cinders, and another Nem3 that had been charging them collapsed onto the road from its leap and exploded into black chunks of coal.

James breathed heavily, arm extended.

**Your rank is now Novitiate 2**

**You have 5 unspent points**

Everybody stared at him, wide-eyed, but there wasn't time for words. The whole line of buses was engulfed in madness.

“Come on!” he shouted and moved back to the Wings. “We fly tight, cluster-formation. Straight strafe down the line. Form up!”

They'd practiced this all but twice, and it took careful positioning up front to get right. But everybody leaped onto their Wings, each of which hovered a few inches off the ground while waiting for them. James gave Serenity a moment to lock her Ma Deuce back into place, then willed his Wing to rise.

Olaf's Circle of Protection burned around them, encompassing the five Wings, two on either side of his own.

As one, they rose like a platform, and then together they took off down the line.

A Nem3 came galloping toward them, only to fall apart into huge, bloody chunks as a Black Hawk roared by, its Smite-enhanced miniguns blazing and tearing up the road.

“Fuck yeah!” said Jason, raising his fist.

Each bus was being assaulted by one or two Nem3s. They were tearing into the vehicles as if they were made of cardboard, reeling back as the squads within hit them with Smite or a Black Apotheosis form emerged to tackle them, but mostly it was a slaughter. All the demons had to do was reach inside with a limb and wave it around to mostly puree the fuck out of everyone within.

Olaf shared Smite again across the group, and everyone raised their guns. They flew at around thirty miles per hour, cruising down the shoulder and rising to some twenty yards in height.

The first Nem3 reared back to screech at them in defiance, opening its bladed arms wide, and everybody pegged it with Smite, M4s chattering as they poured white fire down into its torso.

The Nem3 staggered back, dropped to one knee, then launched a bone harpoon before collapsing.

Three shields appeared before the assault, but a second harpoon came at them from a Nem3 a bus down, flying with horrific speed and accuracy.

“Watch out!” shouted Olaf, but only one shield got over just in time - whomever wielded it angled its surface so that the harpoon hit just right to deflect instead of completely block, sending the harpoon flying a few yards wide.

More Nem3s were taking notice of their approach. Three of them were gathered atop one of the buses and, as one, they hunched, bringing their bone harpoons to bear.

“Shields!” shouted Olaf, changing their Communal Benediction, but James reached out and dropped a Heavenly Assault upon the trio.

Again the divine lightning boomed down, wreathed with Gloria, and when the painfully bright light washed away, the three gigantic demons were reduced to ash.

“Fuck yeah!” shouted Yadriel.

Olaf's Circle flared bright white. James hadn't even seen the attack coming, looked around wildly, saw a Nem3 off in the shoulder of the road, a new bone harpoon already pushing its way out of the bloody hole in the muscled mound atop its shoulders.

Fuck. They regenerated those *fast*.

"Smite!" shouted Olaf, and everybody opened up again. Serenity, here Ma Deuce pointing backward, cleaned up as they went.

But shit was happening fast. The Nem3s could *move*. Squads were spilling out of the buses, M4s lighting up, Circles of Protections dropping, but it was hard work: James saw a Nem3 charge right into one, swatting aside a shield and slamming into the hemisphere, the force of its attack sending cracks through the hemisphere.

Lindsey's Medusa was approaching on foot at the far end, guns chattering, his chainsaw roaring. But without Heavenly Assault, they were hard pressed to make progress.

"Left flank!" shouted Jason, and then a Nem3 fell upon them, somehow leaping the twenty yards to hit their side, slamming into the circle only to fall away as they opened fire on it, tracking it down, and then they were past and Serenity finished it off.

James fought to not try and look everywhere at once. A bone spear hit their Circle without warning, fracturing it, and then another Nem3 bounded toward them, loosing a harpoon before leaping right after.

"Shields!" shouted Olaf, and everybody manifested one in the Nem's path, blocking it entirely so that it fell to the ground, cratering the asphalt beneath its paws.

"James, let me at 'em!" shouted Yadriel. "Let me shift!"

"No," he called back. "Not yet. We need to keep mobile."

He could sense Yadriel's frustration, but too bad.

A screen of six Nem3s were closing on Medusa, drawn from the last few buses and composed of those who'd fallen behind during the initial summons. Lindsey's Circle was up, but harpoons were coming at them from every side such that their shields couldn't keep pace.

"With me!" shouted James and urged his Wing to close swiftly. They accelerated smoothly and rose up before dipping back down, Olaf shifting to Smite again, six guns roaring. Four of the Nem3s turned, flinched before the bullets, ducked their heads, then pounded toward them, arm-blades gouging deep cuts into the road. As one, they prepared to leap, crouching low for just a second, but then James reached deep, drew on his Aeviternum, and empowered a Heavenly Assault.

Aeviternum flooded the blast. The bolt that fell from the gray skies was as thick as an ancient oak tree, Gloria intertwined with its fury, and the blast hit right behind the four Nems.

The shockwave was tremendous, blasting out in every direction, washing over Lindsey's crew, past them, and over the rear Nem3s.

James gasped, the blast faded away, and they flew over ashes, every Nem3 blasted apart and utterly destroyed.

**Your rank is now Novitiate 3**

**You have 5 unspent points**

"Hell yeah, James!" cried Lindsey from below, his voice pitched high with fear and relief. "Hell yeah!"

"Fucking A, man!" Jason grinned at James, his eyes alive with admiration. "Gotta love dropping nukes!"

James surveyed the back of the convoy. His assault had wiped out the remaining Nem3s, but sporadic fighting was still taking place up the line.

"Let's turn this around and mop up," he said. "We ain't done yet."

“Whatever you say, boss man,” said Denzel. “Let’s go mop up.”

Their fleet of Wings cut a tight turn, and they started heading back up the line.

But the sight of the stopped and savaged buses filled James’s heart with despair. If this was just the First Wave, how the fuck were they going to handle the Fourth?

## Chapter 16:

### Get There Fast

It took ten more minutes of bloody work but they cleared the last of the Nem3s. Having four Black Hawks in the sky helped like crazy, though they almost lost one when a Nem3 wheeled and loosed a harpoon straight up at its undercarriage. The bird wheeled away at the last second, the harpoon missing by a yard.

When finally the last Nem3 collapsed to their massed gunfire, James set the Wing down and staggered off it. Took a moment to take stock, looking up and down the line of buses.

Perhaps a quarter of them were wrecked. Gouged open, caved in, tires torn off, roofs ripped up. But casualties were, at least at first glance, light. Aeviternum no doubt, but also plain good tactics. Synergies showing their worth. Shields and Circles of Protection, Smite-enhanced M4s and the fact that their tactic of riding buses had forced the Nem3s to the outside, needing to cut their way in even as Blue Team triads and Black Hawks cut them down.

“Command, this is Kelly. Brooklyn convoy is cleared.”

Hackworth responded. “Copy, Kelly. The Queens convoy is still engaged. Can you catch up with them on the Wings?”

“Yeah, we can do that.” James looked at this crew. “Mount up. We’ve more work to do.”

“Command, heading up the 87 now, over.”

They got back on the angelic crafts and rose smoothly to a height of some ten yards. His divine power pool was dangerously low; having blasted out two Heavenly Assaults was a wicked drain, but he still had enough to urge the Wing to glide forward with ever faster speed.

No need for words. No time for a god damn speech.

Just time enough to hurry and help out as best they could.

Some of the teams along the Brooklyn convoy let out ragged cheers as they flew by, but the sound only infuriated James. Didn't they see? Didn't they understand? This was nothing. This was a fucking appetizer to the main course that was coming. They'd put a stop to about a hundred Nem3's without taking too many losses, but it had been a hard fight, and they'd been forced to burn a lot of resources.

How the fuck were they supposed to handle the hundreds of thousands coming with the Fourth Wave?

"Command, please relay a message to Miles." The bubble of calm around the Wing made it easy to speak even as they went ever faster. "We need to increase our Fabricator output. Not just Wings. We need everything. We need it yesterday. Over."

"Copy, Kelly," said Star Boy, voice sober.

James grimaced and leaned over the handlebars. Urged the Wing faster. They blew past Carvajal's team that was mounting up, no doubt having received the same message. The Black Hawks had streamed ahead, moving shockingly fast for such massive vehicles.

"Kelly, situation with Queens convoy is bad," said Star Boy. "They dropped their Nem3s north of Yonkers, and two-thirds of the buses got away. Last third was trapped by a crash, they've circled wagons, but are facing almost a hundred Nem3s. Get there fast."

*Get there fast.*

What would happen if he dumped a point of Aeviternum into the Wing's tank? He had three points left. That was three Heavenly Assaults, but what use would those be if he arrived five minutes too late?

He checked his sheet, a quick summons that brought the numbers before him. 15 unspent points, 10 just gained, 5 from his last level that he'd never spent. Checked Aeviternum costs. 15 a point now.

Damn.

Boost Arete? Buy another Aeviternum? What was the right call?

He needed that Aura. With what was coming, another Heavenly Assault wouldn't make a difference.

Better Iron Aura would.

He dumped the 15 points into his Arete. It rose to 70. His divine power pool swelled, his Iron Aura rose to 4, and with savage determination he summoned his second Aeviternum and poured it into the Wing.

“What the fuck?” shouted Serenity as the hoverbike began to glow gold.

“Hold on,” growled James, and the Wing *flew*.

They left the pack behind, skimming forward ever faster, the trees blurring around them, the empty blacktop speeding by. Faster and faster, and then the Black Hawks were growing larger, crawling back toward them through the sky. James kept his gaze locked on the road up ahead. Willed the Queens convoy to swell into view.

They sped under the Black Hawks.

“This is Super Six Three, what is that passing us below?”

“Super Six Three, this is Alpha Five One, that's an Angel Wing, over.”

“An Angel Wing?” The Black Hawk's pilot's calm, almost bored tone came close to cracking. “It's going almost three hundred miles an hour.”

James left the Black Hawks behind. Hunched over the vibrating, burning Wing, he willed it to go faster, felt its components rattling, starting to come apart beneath him. Willed it to hold together, to give him just a little more juice, to just get there...

They blasted over a subtle rise in the highway, crested, and there was the convoy just ahead, Cortlandt Park long



gone, a large grassy bank rising on their right to warehouses, more bare trees on the left.

The buses had formed a crude triangle, many of them overlapping, and atop their roofs stood Blue Light teams, guns blazing, Circles of Protection flaring into view again and again.

Thirty or forty Nem3s were massed around them, hunching over to launch harpoons, leaping and being rebuffed by shields, though there, on the left corner, three had gained a bus roof.

James came tearing down upon them at full speed, but even so he wasn't in time. He could only watch as the Nem3s tore through the team, ripping bodies which healed with Aeviternum and then were torn again, swiping heads off, bulling their way deeper into the defenses.

One of the Queens convoy Black Hawks came roaring past, unleashing hell, but the Nem3s leaped aside, mercurially quick, having figured out how the choppers worked.

"Hold on," shouted James. Two Aeviternum points, just enough divine power for another Heavenly Assault.

"Slow down!" Serenity screamed back.

No time to slow down. They came bleedingly fast down the interstate, silent but for a deep thrumming in the wind, and at the last second, James yanked the Wing to one side, letting traction slip so that they slid broadside into the mass of Nem3s.

At the same time, he burned an Aeviternum, fueling a Heavenly Assault. It dropped from the skies like a blast from fucking Thor, slamming like a redwood made of living silver and gold right into the densest part of the Nem3s, obliterating them with Gloria.

But the demons possessed crazy reflexes. They reacted instantly as the Wing slid amongst them, turning, snarling, preparing to leap.

James dropped a second Heavenly Assault on the other side of the bus-triangle, shattering the world again with livid

light.

The first flared away, revealing a dozen dead Nem3s, each little more than standing columns of ash.

Three Nems launched themselves at James, and he shunted the Wing forward, jerking ahead four or five yards, turned it hard to the right, skidded a yard, leaped forward again.

Nems landed around them.

Serenity opened up with her Ma Deuce.

*DONDONDONDONDONDONDONDON -*

This time her .50 Cals punched clear through the demons, not killing the ones behind, but far more effective than moments ago.

Text was flickering into view:

**Your rank is now Novitiate 4**

**You have 5 unspent points**

James stopped the Wing short, reached for his remaining divine pool and summoned a final Heavenly Assault. This one he dropped on the very far side of the triangle, close enough to the buses so that its energy would wash over them, clearing the Nem3s who'd breached.

Again the world flared white and gold. Again an intoxicating wave of power washed over them, and another block's worth of Nem3s were immolated.

**Your rank is now Novitiate 5**

**You have 5 unspent points**

10 more points. James slid them into Arete, bringing his total to 80, his Iron Aura to 6.

No more Aeviternum. Not enough Arete even with the new boost for another Heavenly Assault.

James looked around the interstate. Piles of ash were blowing away in the wind just about everywhere. The men and women atop the buses were gaping at him.

But that wasn't a complete end to the Nem3s. A handful had stood just outside the blast radiuses of his Heavenly Assaults, and now these oriented on them, hissing and drawing close, moving slowly as if taught caution by his power.

Serenity had paused for a moment as well, half-turned to stare at him, but then she caught herself and swiveled the huge gun about and unleashed hell once more.

This signaled the Nem3s to attack. They exploded forward, bounding on all fours, a couple of them hunching to loose harpoons.

James leaped off the Wing, snatching up his axe as he went, and swung a Sacred Strike into the face of a Nem3 falling upon him, the sheet of flame enveloping the demon as James hurled himself clumsily aside.

*Fuck.* They'd left the Bless crew behind. He'd grown used to working with heightened Agility and Power, and now he was down to his basic stats.

He felt old and creaky, but fury bore him on.

The Nem3 crashed down where he'd been, its front charred and cracked. James lurched toward it, axe swinging, Smite enhanced, and brought its blade *thokking* down on the side of its head.

The skull shattered; the huge demon went down.

But there were more.

A bone harpoon came flashing toward him. His Iron Aura flared, extending a good three yards out now in all directions, but the harpoon was pure bone and didn't give a damn about his Aura.

James froze, would have taken the attack square to the face if Serenity hadn't tackled him, knocking them both aside

as the bone spear flew by.

“Up!” she shouted, releasing him and rolling to her feet with enviable skill.

Cursing his Agility 5, James climbed clumsily to his feet and then let out a cry of alarm as a Nem3 appeared before him, huge, a clawed fist the size of a tire scything down to take off his head.

His Iron Aura had subsided, but he felt it within him, dour and ponderous, lethal and waiting. Pure reflex made him reach for it again, and his panic caused him to flare it out, push it forth like an outflung arm.

Iron Aura blazed out and hit the Nem3 like a wall. Knocked its clawed fist aside and hit the towering monstrosity in the chest like a Mack Truck.

James felt the impact, the bone-rattling force of it. The Aura slammed into the Nem3, lifted it off its clawed feet, and hurled it back, its entire front charred, muscle cracked and blackened.

It crashed to the ground a handful of yards away and lay there mewling.

“Fuck me,” muttered James, then raised his axe, caused Smite to flow down its length, and looked up to see a Nem3 falling upon them, its leap taking it insanely high.

Only for a Black Hawk to train its miniguns on it and tear it apart midair.

Two Nem3s remained. Fearless, they bounded forward, but slammed into Shields. Teams had dropped down from the buses and were approaching. Smiters unleashed M4s on it, Serenity trained her Ma Deuce, and the last of the Nem3s were torn apart.

James reeled back, sucking in huge chestfuls of air. Looked around. No more left. Just piled of ash, blackened bone, torn chunks of demon.

“You good?” he asked Serenity, who’d put up her gun.

“Yeah, I think so,” she said, then propped the barrel against her shoulder. “You did all this?”

James took an extra deep breath, held it, then released. “Most, yeah.”

“Fucking hell,” said Serenity. “I’m Level 6. That happened fast.”

“More to come.” James activated his radio. “Command, this is Kelly. Queens convoy secured.”

“Uh...” Hackworth sounded speechless. “We, ah, saw, Kelly. That was... I mean, good work.”

The other Wings were speeding into view now, the rest of Crimson Hydra and with Medusa and Dragon coming up behind. They all slowed, eyes going wide.

Teams came up from the buses. James recognized most of them. Ebon Ogre, Ivory Naga, Ivory Pegasus, Crimson Yeti, Ebon Centaur. A bunch of others, all of them rushing up and then coming to a stop, expressions awed.

Young, the tall, bony leader of Crimson Yeti, stepped forward. Her blonde-white hair was intricately braided into a crown. She visibly swallowed and gave a sharp shake of her head. “Jesus Christ, James. How did you do that?”

“Novitiate 5.” James didn’t want their admiration, to waste time hanging around. He thumbed his radio again. “Command, this is Kelly. Status on the other convoys?”

“Kelly, this is Command.” That was the S3, Major Duffy. “Manhattan convoy is clear, minimum damage, heading north on the 95. Bronx convoy is bogged down ten miles north of your position. Staten Island and Jersey convoys are clear, heading south on 95.”

“You going to do more?” asked Young, disbelieving.

“If I don’t, who will?” James clapped Serenity on the shoulder. “Come on, Eternal Fire. We ain’t finished yet.”

“James!” shouted Olaf as they mounted their Wing. “Don’t leave us behind like that!”

“Then keep up,” growled James. “No time for dawdling. We’ve got ten miles to cover. Let’s get going.”

“Whatever you say, Jefe,” said Yadriel with a dark grin.

“God damn.” Joanna removed her aviators to examine the battle scene. “You did all this yourself?”

“What am I, chopped liver?” asked Serenity, climbing back on the Wing.

The Black Hawks, eight of them now, were scudding north at full speed. James sat on the Wing, willed it to rise. No Aeviternum left, just a quarter of his divine power left in the tank. No more shock and awe, not today at least.

“Tend to the wounded,” he said loudly so that everyone in the crowd could hear. “See what buses you can salvage. Get to work. Tomorrow we’re facing the Second Wave.”

Expressions hardened, people nodded, turned away, began to return to the buses.

James hunched over the handles and willed the Wing on.

# Chapter 17:

## Elmsford

It took five minutes to cover the ten miles north. It was a beautiful drive. The suburbs north of the city were swank. It's where the rich folks who got tired of living in Manhattan but couldn't quit the day jobs on Wall Street went to live. Treelined highway most of the way, with the occasional golf course vista opening up to one side or the other.

James flew in silence, ignoring the chatter on the radio, and Serenity knew to leave him alone. His team followed hard on their heels. They swooped down the length of the highway, the Black Hawks pulling ahead, and finally reached the town of Elmsford where the debacle had taken place.

The Black Hawks were circling overhead when they arrived, but no shots were being fired.

That told James all he needed to know.

They were too late.

The convoy - or the tail end of it had left the 87 just before it turned west to plow direct north into the heart of sleepy Elmsford. No telling why. They'd almost made it into the town center before a pile-up had ended their drive. Two lanes a side, bare trees everywhere, a huge condo building about four city blocks-worth long looking out over a strip of parking at the ruined buses.

There were six of them. A fragment of the original convoy, about six hundred folks, including six teams of Second Group Blue Light operators.

All dead.

James slowed the Wing to a crawl, rose up some thirty yards, and simply drifted over the carnage. The sight was familiar. Wrecked buses. Shattered glass. Dark puddles of

blood. Mutilated bodies. Here and there the remains of a Nem3.

The rest of Crimson Hydra floated just behind in a “V” formation. They cruised over the site. James turned at the last and came to a stop, just floating, staring out over the carnage.

Some six hundred dead.

Bodies inside the buses. Bodies across the highway. Severed legs. Decapitated heads. Entrails pulled out like hanks of gleaming snakes. Blood.

Blood everywhere.

His stomach cramped with disgust, with horror, but it was as if his mind had no connection to the rest of him.

James felt nothing but icy cold resolve.

“They’re out here,” he called to the others. “The Nem3s.”

“Then let’s find them,” Becca called back.

“Sounds like a plan.” He thumbed his radio. “Command, this is Kelly. We’re going to search Elmsford for Nem3s, out.”

“Kelly, this is Command.” Star Boy. “Good hunting.”

“C’mon,” he called, and eased the Wing up and over, sliding through the air and gaining more altitude. “Let’s get a bird’s eye on this.”

They rose, crossed over the condo plex, saw a couple of residential streets behind, gray rooftops, townhouses pressed together, lots of trees, parked cars.

“There,” said Serenity, who’d been Deadeyeing through her gun.

James saw it. A Nem3 loping down the street.

They were so damned big. Thirteen feet? Something like that. Those weird dog-like legs looking almost skinny holding up the massively muscled upper torsos, its arms ape-like and reaching to the road, each terminating in a machete from hell.

Hairless, black, horrific.



“On it,” said James, and they flew in its direction. It didn’t hear them coming, what with the Wings being utterly silent, and they cruised right over it so that Serenity could open fire.

*DONDONDONDONDON.*

Even though it was Smite bullets she was firing, the gun still reverberated and shook the Wing.

“Got it,” Serenity hissed.

Screams sounded, thin and distant, and they accelerated in that direction. A Day’s Inn, cars parked before the single-story rooms, long expanse of roofs in a giant horseshoe. A couple of cars had been flipped, and as they slid out over the parking lot James saw a Nem3 burrowing its way into the front of a unit, shouldering its way through the imploding doorframe.

It looked like a hairless bulldog trying to get into a snack box.

*DONDONDONDONDONDON.*

It arched its back as huge chunks of its body were blown apart, tore free, turned to aim its harpoon at them, then collapsed onto its back.

“Another one bites the dust,” Denzel called from his Wing. “Want us to split up, Boss, cover more ground?”

“We ain’t helping much just following you around.”

“Kelly, this is Carvajal.” His radio came to life. “Want to quarter this town?”

“Sure,” he replied. “You take the north. Lindsey, you with us?”

“Here, James.” The large man’s voice was tinny. “Want us to take the east?”

“Sure. Kelly out.” He looked to the others. “Pair off. Olaf, Joanna, Denzel, Yadriel, you head that way. Jason, Bjørn, Becca, head south. Serenity and I will cover the center.”

The Wings peeled away. The Black Hawks were patrolling from up on high, and occasionally came thundering down to open fire. And so it went for the next half-hour. A bug hunt, an extermination. With Serenity's Eternal Fire and their vantage from up on high, there was little the Nem3s could do. Their harpoons had shocking reach; occasionally James was forced to veer aside so as to not be impaled, but for the most part, the Wing's silent approach allowed them to get the drop on the demons.

Finally, a good ten minutes passed with nobody reporting a sighting. James went higher, giving Serenity's Deadeye more altitude, but she wasn't able to raise another target.

"Command, this is Kelly." He took one last look below. It was possible they'd find more if they opened the radius of their search, but over half the land outside the town was skeletal woodland. "I think we're done here."

"Roger," said Major Duffy. "Go ahead and come on back."

"Sounds good," said James, though the notion of leaving the streets galled him. "Heading back."

"We done here?" asked Serenity.

"For now." He went to Hydra's radio band. "Everyone, we're heading home. Hunt's over. You all got enough juice to make it?"

Bjørn was the first to reply. "Yes, but going to have to tap some of the Wing's own power source to make it."

"Same," said Olaf. "I pushed hard to try and keep up with you back there, James."

"Might be able to make it," said Jason. "Been bumping Arete."

Denzel pitched in. "Anybody get new powers?"

"We'll talk when we're home." James didn't want to hear any chatter. "Let's go."

The Black Hawks radioed their own command and peeled away. Local police had rolled in along with fire trucks

and an ambulance.

Looked like Elmsford had kept their shit together. Or perhaps wealthy little towns like this hadn't burned out their departments as much.

For a moment, James considered gliding down to help out, pull bodies from buses, help unite limbs to torsos, but the thought repulsed him.

Not that he'd not seen shit like that before.

Well, nothing like that slaughter.

But he'd reached his own fair share of bad car accidents in the day.

No, it was that he didn't want to face their failure to protect their own.

Maybe that meant he *should* go face it. But his core rose up, rebelling. So he urged the Wing to a cruising height of some fifty yards, oriented on the distant, tiny towers of Manhattan, and cut home as the crow flew, leaving the highway and passing over buildings, streets, schools, playing fields, industrial sites, all the signs of a now past and orderly way of life.

He didn't push the Wings. Kept them going at what felt like a steady 50 mph. Their life force was potent, powered as they were by 81 Aeviternum each, but he didn't want to touch those reserves. Who knew what the future would bring? Best to drain their own divine power and keep 'em pristine and ready for go-time tomorrow, or the day after that, or fuck. For the Fourth Wave.

Because that was going to be a murderous shit-show.

They cruised across the northern tip of the Bronx, slid down over the East River, and finally cut over the northern coastline of Brooklyn to slip into the downtown core. His radio chattered, but it was just folks coordinating, different lieutenant colonels reporting in on their convoys, buses turning around and heading home.

James felt numb. They brought their Wings down to street level, cruised around the Marriott and together slid down into the parking garage.

Jessica had turned the entire first floor into her workshop. Cars had been towed away, opening up more space, and now everywhere Fabricators were at work, unloading new supplies, arranging components, calling out orders, directing folks, raising their mechanicus and activating them so that a heavenly glow would bathe chunks of blood stone, heavenly diamond, and more.

James had found this entire operation wondrous up until an hour ago. Now it all looked so terribly insufficient. There were - what - a hundred or so folks at work here?

That wasn't going to cut it.

Space had been carved out for the forty or so Wings Jessica had overseen the construction of. Half of them were back, Crimson Fenrir and Crimson Grendel standing in a mixed crowd, discussing in hushed tones amongst themselves the nightmare they had no doubt seen.

James set his Wing down in an open spot, sat up, sighed, stretched.

Fenrir and the others went silent, looked their way.

Serenity patted her Ma Deuce, swung a leg over, stood.

“Hey, Kelly.” It was Ramirez, a tough guy who's short, tousled dark hair was bleached honey-colored at the tips from a life spent doing landscaping. “I heard you did some crazy shit out there.”

James stood, turned to face the crowd. Including Crimson Hydra, some forty Blue Lighters were watching him, expressions reserved, each trying to mask their shock, their uncertainty.

He wanted nothing more than to snarl at Ramirez, to brush past him, to head on up to confront Hackworth. Instead, he took a steadying breath and gave a sober nod. “Sure. I did a little something. How did you guys fare?”

Nervous smiles flickered across faces here and there.

“Not too hot,” said Ramirez. “Shit, these Nem3s can take a punch. We lost a Wing to a bone harpoon. Manny here’d have died without Martyr’s Cry.”

“I saw a Black Hawk go down,” said a guy from the Crimson Grendel crew. “Harpoon took out its back rotor. It was just spinning around like crazy, went down behind this office building.”

“We got our work cut out for us.” James moved forward slowly, allowing people to shuffle out of his way. “But we’re here, aren’t we? Where those Nem3s at?”

“Dead,” grinned a skinny kid with an 80s high top fade.

“That’s right. I’m going to head upstairs now to plan out our tactics for tomorrow. Because those bastards are gonna suffer the same fate. If you’ll excuse me?”

“Yeah, of course,” said a woman, stepping aside hurriedly.

“They won’t know what hit ‘em,” said another guy.

“Glad you’re with us, Kelly.” James didn’t even see who said that, didn’t bother looking. He led his crew through the crowd toward the elevators. Saw Jessica off to one side, talking earnestly with a handful of Fabricators. She was watching him out of the corner of her eye and broke off her conversation when he abruptly changed direction and strode toward her.

“How did the Wings perform?” she asked, stepping away from the other Fabricators.

Again, James had to master his fury. *This isn’t her fault.* “They did great. Made all the difference.”

She frowned, studied him. “But?”

James glanced back at the other Crimson Hydra’s who’d followed Bjørn and Serenity’s lead and held back. Touched Jessica’s elbow and led her farther aside. “We’re fucked.”

“We’re what?” She mastered her shock with impressive speed. “I’ve heard preliminary reports but couldn’t tell what was rumors.”

“It’s worse than whatever you heard.” James forced himself to remain calm. “They’re fast, smart, hard to put down, and they’ve got ranged attacks. Jessica, they were opening buses like sardine cans. Our only saving grace is that one appears for every hundred humans, otherwise we’d be dead.”

Jessica crossed her arms tightly. “Smite-enhanced weaponry was ineffective?”

“Serenity was hitting them with a score of .50 Cals before they’d drop. Later, after we leveled, she must have done something - raised Power, maybe, for more Smite damage - and did better.”

“Damn.”

“Yeah. Look. Something’s become clear as day, and I feel like an idiot. All my focus has been on Blue Light. Guns, ammo, squads, training. But that’s only half the equation. The Wings were key to today’s success, but they’re not enough, not forty like we’ve got.”

“We’re working on making more.”

“That’s not it.” James caught himself, lowered his voice. “Another forty won’t make a difference. We need thousands. More, we need to start reinforcing our bases with Fabricator walls, we need Fabricator weapons, we need enhanced armor, we need *everything*. And we need it yesterday.”

Jessica’s face paled. “I understand.”

“I don’t think you do. We have how many Fabricators in the city?”

“Around three million.”

“And how many are working here?”

“We don’t have enough components for a million people to work on.”

“Then fucking *get them*.” James lowered his head, pinched the bridge of his nose, grimaced. “Look. I’m sorry. But I don’t think anybody understands what’s going to happen over the next couple of days. The Nem3s are going to fucking slaughter us, Jessica. The Fourth Wave will be - what, a hundred thousand Nem3s? We took care of several hundred today, but it took *work*. We can’t handle a hundred thousand. We’re gonna be slaughtered.”

Emotions flickered across Jessica’s face like shadows over water. She blinked, pursed her lips, then gave a slow nod. “I understand, James.” She frowned and looked away, deep in thought. “We need to exponentially scale up our production. We have two days to do so, and to also set-up distribution so that these new products are disseminated throughout our forces.”

James nodded, feeling bleak.

“OK. OK.” She nodded again, more confidently this time. “I’ll think about it. Give me an hour or two, then I’ll rope you back in and tell you how we’re going to tackle it.”

James wanted to laugh. A hundred thousand Nem3s. There was no tackling that. But he couldn’t give in to despair. “All right. Thank you.”

Jessica reached out and took his arm. “James. We’re just getting started. We’ve time enough to turn this around. Do you trust me?”

The answer came easily, smoothly, immediately. “Yes. Of course.”

“Then trust me. I’ll find a way.” Her gaze bored into his own. “I will find a way.”

They stood thus for a moment, and to his surprise, James felt a burden shift from his shoulders. If anybody could, it was Jessica Miles.

He gave a shaky laugh. “All right. I trust you. Yes. Come find me when you’re ready. I’ll be waiting.”

# Chapter 18:

## New Haven

The Command Center was tense, filled with admin making calls, connecting different units, coordinating forces, overseeing their two Groups and working on bringing them home.

James crossed the ballroom to where the ASOCC was located. It had been mightily augmented these past few weeks. Monitors on walls, triple the workstations, all manner of new gear. Over thirty-five people were at work, and Hackworth stood in the center of it all, hands on hips, frowning at what he saw.

James scanned the walls. Drones provided aerial coverage of multiple locations. A bus convoy driving smoothly along a highway. The multiple pileups along the 87. One particularly large screen showed all of NYC covered in moving icons, with each hive demon symbol picked out on malevolent crimson.

“Colonel.”

Hackworth looked over. “Kelly. Good. We need to do an after-action review. Duffy -”

“Colonel, can you step aside for a moment?”

Hackworth paused, considered Kelly, then nodded. “Sure thing.”

They stepped out through a side door. James cast his eyes around, led the colonel down the hall and into a small business room, a number of public terminals available to hotel guests. He waited for Hackworth to enter and closed the door.

“Good work out there,” said Hackworth, tone neutral.

“You know we’re fucked.”

“What I know is that we’ve got our work cut out for us.”



“Tomorrow we’re facing thousands of Nem3s. We can’t put that many people on buses.”

“We knew we’d have to adjust after learning what we’re up against -”

“What we’re up against, Colonel, is...” James sought the right word. “We’re fucked.”

“That’s not a constructive assessment, Captain.” Hackworth’s tone grew terse. “We need to make the most of the next twenty-four hours -”

“For crying out loud, Hackworth!” James had to resist the urge to hurl a computer monitor aside. “Talk to me straight here. Just admit it. Between you and me. Nobody else listening in. Just quit the pep talking and constructive thinking for a second and look me in the eyes.” James felt helpless before his own horror. “We’re fucked.”

Hackworth sighed and rubbed at one eye. “I can’t do what you’re asking for, James. I’m career military. I’ll never admit defeat.”

James felt the strength go out of him and sat heavily in one of the chairs. “I don’t see how we make this one right. Despite everything we’ve done. We didn’t do enough. If we gather everyone for the Second Wave into one place, we’ll be facing thousands of them all at once. They’ve got range on those harpoons, and it takes multiple hits from M20s to drop them. But say we do. Say we deal with the Second Wave. Even the Third. How are we going to deal with a hundred thousand of them come the Fourth Wave?”

Hackworth’s expression softened. “You’ve been working under a fallacy, James. We can’t.”

James looked up.

“We couldn’t have saved everyone if the Nem2s had been interested in fighting. Our one hope was that the Nem3s would be the same, interested only in getting to the hives, but that was always a long shot.”

“So you figured this out ahead of time?”

“I hoped for the best-case scenario but prepared myself for the worst. What’s the worst? Humanity taking a hit. Millions more dead. We can’t devise the perfect answer for every wave. We can only do our human best. And that’s what I aim to do now.”

James grimaced and rubbed at his temples.

“I understand where you’re coming from, James. It’s something I realized only a week ago myself. This System we’re working with, it seems designed to ramp us up as long as we play ball. But the pitfall is to think that if we play ball we can stay ahead of the game. We can nullify whatever the System throws at us. But that’s not true. Even with Angel Wings and Fabricators and Blue Light and national organization, it’s nowhere written it will be enough. Nem3 is the truth of that.”

James felt his anger beating within him like an old hammer pounding a sheet of iron. “I just want to find out who or what is behind all this and tear its throat out.”

“We all do. But seeing as that’s beyond us right now, we can do the next best thing, and that’s deal with these new waves. Now. Are you ready to think things through? We don’t have time to waste.”

“Yeah,” sighed James. He stood up. “I’m ready.”

\* \* \*

New facts came to light quickly as the command group gathered for the review.

“Hold up,” said Star Boy, scanning his tablet. “You guys see what’s happening in New Haven?”

All conversation stopped. Star Boy flicked his screen onto the conference room wall monitor, and immediately a shakily held hand recording on an Instagram video reel appeared. High in the air hung a demonic symbol, wreathed as always in purple flame, and reaching up to it from the heart of

the city was a column of black fire, easily some five or six yards tall, looking slender at this distance, a reverse waterfall of flame.

Star Boy was searching and pulled up another video. “This one’s Plano, Texas.”

Again another demonic symbol appeared, the sound of a woman sobbing in the background as she held her phone up, a column of black flame spearing up into it.

The XO, Baker, was shaking his head. “We’re not seeing that here in New York. Are we?”

“No. Unless it started now,” said James.

Star Boy flicked through a bunch of live drone feeds that were patrolling the city. They showed the demon symbols, burning yes, but not being fed black flames.

“Were the hives in Plano and New Haven cleared?” asked Duffy.

“No,” said Star Boy, turning to his laptop. “There were two hundred and seventeen symbols registered across the country. Just over half of them were cleared. Plano and New Haven weren’t.”

Serenity shook her head. “This is happening to the other hundred or so?”

“Let’s see. Faster to check social media then wait for official reports.” Star Boy did a series of quick searches. Two in Tulsa. One in Pittsburgh. One in Lincoln. Four in Columbus. Three in Nashville. One in Buffalo.

Everybody watched in stunned silence as Star Boy kept pulling up new feeds, new recordings.

Each and every one showed the same: a river of black fire flowing up into the symbol.

“The black gems,” said James. “They weren’t cleared. They must be doing this.”

“So, what are we looking at?” asked Hackworth. “Is that human soul energy flowing into the symbols?”

Nobody answered till Star Boy sat back. “Look, this is just guesswork, but clearly the Nem2s were building toward something, right? We’re looking at it. They collected thousands of people, stole their energy, turned their bodies into goo. Why? What are these symbols for? Well, we know we’re counting down toward these Pits being opened. So maybe what we’re looking at is the process of creating Pits. Maybe each symbol marks the possible location of where one will be created.”

“Shit,” said Baker.

James leaned forward. “What’s happening on the blocks themselves?”

Star Boy frowned. “Not finding any recordings of that yet. Apparently, nobody’s volunteering to get in close enough.”

“We’ll get that intel soon enough,” said Hackworth, his tone projecting confidence. “What we need to work on are our plans for tomorrow. We’ve got everyone in the Second Wave on standby waiting for instructions. We need to figure out what we’re going to tell them. Thoughts?”

James stood up. “We can’t decide anything without knowing what the enemy’s up to. It’s less than a hundred miles to New Haven. I’ll take a Wing and be there in less than an hour.”

Major Duffy frowned at him. “In that hours’ time, we’ll have reports flooding in from every agency out there. No sense in your going yourself.”

“Plus you’re low on just about everything, hon,” said Serenity. “Aeviternum, divine power. What are we going to do if we run into trouble?”

“The Wing can handle it, and I won’t engage. If I stay high enough no Nem3 can bother me.”

“You’re needed here,” said Duffy flatly, her gaze hard. “We can send any operator out to take a look.”

“No,” said James, not giving a damn if he was breaking military convention by gainsaying a major. “I want to see it

with my own eyes. I want to understand what's going on. I've got the highest Arete out there. There's a chance I'll see and understand things others will miss."

The XO scowled. "Captain, you are way out of line -"

James cut him off. "Not talking to you, Baker."

The XO's face darkened. "Captain -"

"Fine." Hackworth's voice cut across the conversation. "If you feel like you need to see it for yourself, I'll allow it." He held James's gaze. "But I want you back within two hours. Take no risks. Eyeball it and return. Am I clear?"

"Yes, Colonel."

Serenity stood up. "Guess we're heading out now?"

"No," said James. "I need to do this one alone."

Confusion flickered across her face, then anger. "What the fuck, James?"

"Can't explain it. I'll be back soon." And he strode out, moving with purpose, ignoring Serenity's outraged glare.

He descended into the parking garage, ignored queries from other operators, avoided looking in Jessica's direction, and marched over to the Angel Wings. More had returned, and he picked one at random, moving with mechanical efficiency. Sat, connected with the Helm, and then willed the craft to rise, turn, and smoothly glide over the cement floor and up the ramp.

He burst out into the street and quickly strained for altitude. The Wing couldn't simply climb in a vertical column, but needed to move forward as it did so, so that he flew forward and up, ever up, till he rose above the rooftops, higher and higher, fifty, sixty yards above the streets below, and then shot north across Brooklyn.

James didn't think as he flew. His mind was blank, like a white board wiped clean. All he felt was a deep and personal sense of outrage. It felt good to be moving, to be acting. The very thought of sitting through another meeting made him want to scream. He was aware on some distant level that he

was being bloody-minded, that he could have taken all of Crimson Hydra, could have tried to explain himself better.

His Arete was too damned high for him to pretend otherwise.

But this felt *right*.

The arrival of the Nem3s had started something else, something huge, and he needed to know what. He needed to see it directly. Hearing it from a report, even a video recording, wasn't enough.

Queens rolled by beneath him. All he had to do was follow the coastline and he'd hit New Haven. He crossed over Williamsburg with its reputation for funky hipsters and alternate lifestyles. Long Island City with its warehouses and brand-new condo towers that rivalled Manhattan for height. Over Astoria, and then finally hit the East River, broad and swollen this far north. Flew over Riker's Island, then curved right to follow the coast, kept going till the huge Long Island Sound stretched out before him, glittering in the afternoon sunlight.

The Wing flew smoothly, elegantly, defying the wind, carrying him at an even fifty-yard elevation. The beauty and wonder of flight didn't touch him. His gaze was on the horizon, the point along the coast where New Haven would appear. Towns scrolled by to his left. He didn't know their names, didn't care.

Beaches, gulfs, river mouths, parks, condos, harbors, shipyards.

On and on he flew, until at last the urban buildup on his left thickened. Urban sprawl meant it was impossible to tell where one city ended and the other began, but he didn't have to worry.

Because there, inland a ways, was the demonic symbol, flying high in the air, burning and brilliant even in the sunshine. James cut over the coast, saw a bay form just up ahead, the reason no doubt for New Haven's being there. He flew over suburbs, parks, avenues, commercial areas, a river.

A huge rail station appeared below along the coastline, massive warehouses with flat rooftops, an IKEA.

He slowed as he drew closer. The symbol hung right over the center of the town, perhaps a quarter of a mile inland from the bay and its wharves.

And there it was: the river of black fire flowing up to pour into the symbol's base.

James drifted closer. He was perhaps a couple of hundred yards away. The fire splashed against the iron underside of the symbol but was soaked right in. Nothing dissipated into the air around it.

Directly below was a dome of shadows. It encompassed the hive area, three blocks or so a side, the peak of the dome some forty or so yards tall. But not made of the black flame that speared up into the symbol; this was more of the magical darkness that had blocked the entrance to the flesh fortress, a swirling, oily mass that was utterly opaque. The black fire column burst free from the apex of the dome, causing the shadows there to swirl and ripple but not allowing him to peer inside.

James willed the Wing higher. He flew in a slow curve, gaining altitude, till at last he was level with the symbol itself, some hundred and fifty yards high. He studied New Haven below him. From this height it seemed almost normal. But plumes of smoke rose from different parts of the town, and a building on a university campus in the northern half of the city was on fire.

Why hadn't they cleared their symbol? Had they lacked the organization? Had there just been enough ranking citizens to handle the Nem2s? Not enough of a military presence to outfit them with powerful enough guns?

No matter. It was too late now.

Scanning below he saw a Nem3 loping along an avenue, hunched over and huge, its machete-bladed arms swinging from side to side as it went.

Hatred twisted James's gut, and he considered divebombing it.

But no. He forced himself to hold back, and a moment later saw it burst into a sprint, leap, and plunge into the black dome.

Scanning now, James saw more of the Nem3s. They were coming from all directions and converging on the hive, unconcerned, unmolested. Now that he was looking for them, he couldn't miss their huge forms barreling up avenues and leaping along, swarming in like the Nem2s had before them.

James thumbed his radio, then released it. He was way out of range.

So he just sat there, feeling the last of his divine power pool running out, knowing he'd have to tap the Wing's Aeviternum reservoir to get home. But he couldn't leave just yet.

He had to take this in.

Was Star Boy right? Was this a precursor to a Pit forming?

James summoned the countdown:

### **70 days till Pits open**

The sheer amount of time still to go weighed on him like a lead jacket.

"Fuck you," he hissed, then stared over at the demonic symbol. "Fuck you and your bullshit System and your countdowns and leading us by the nose. I don't know how, but I'm going to figure out a way to destroy you. All of you. You made the wrong fucking move coming here."

For a second, nothing happened, and then a figure emerged from the side of the symbol and began to fly smoothly toward him.



# Chapter 19:

## Temptation

James brought the Wing around to face the approaching Monitor, because what else could it be? He was out of Aeviternum, perilously low on divine power, alone and a hundred and fifty yards up in the sky.

Maybe he should have bolted.

But he knew that was never in the cards.

The Monitor emerged from the demonic symbol in a cloud of roiling darkness that quickly bled away to reveal Jessica Miles once more, her blonde hair streaming about her face, her office-wear mutated and lengthened so that it had become layered robes of white and stark gray, as if an extravagant designer had taken Jessica's sober choice of outfit and run wild.

James dry swallowed and raised his chin. The Monitor drew closer, in no rush, and her expression was utterly unlike Jessica's own. A dangerous light gleamed in her eyes, and her smile was wicked, knowing, cruelly amused.

*"Good afternoon, James."*

James stared at where Jessica had come to a stop before him, hovering with ease, her robe and hair shifting as if she stood in a column of silent wind.

"Are you the same Monitor I spoke with last time?"

*"Meladrix? In some ways yes, in others... no. We are Monitors. I can manifest Meladrix... there."* Jessica closed her eyes, then smiled and opened them once more. *"Hello, James. My, but you have grown. I sense the acrid stench of Gloria upon you. Well done."*

"Don't patronize me," he snapped. "If I had the Aeviternum now I'd hit you with that Gloria and fry your eyes out."

*“Charming. Your Gloria would tickle, nothing more. Had you truly focused on leveling, perhaps you might challenge me now, but I see you have not. So much wasted time. What a pity.”*

James clenched his fists. “There’s time enough yet.”

*“Is there?”* Jessica canted her head to one side. *“For you, perhaps. For the billion or more that shall die over the next few days? Time has run out.”*

James felt impotence wash through him. He wanted nothing more than to wipe that smile off Jessica’s lips. “That is not my fault. You and your kind are the one’s responsible for this apocalypse.”

*“Are you so sure?”* Jessica seemed to consider. *“Interesting. Regardless. The odds of your species surviving grow ever more improbable. What would you be willing to do to improve your chances?”*

In a flash, he recalled the Monitor’s offer last time: how it would answer his every question if he but slept with its Jessica form.

*“Are you so sure this is but a ‘form’ that I am taking?”* Jessica’s smile grew knowing. *“Why have we taken it again? You know a little of Jessica’s background. But not nearly enough. How did the death of her boyfriend cause her to become this miraculously efficient force? What happened to her during that weekend after his death? Were we perhaps laying the groundwork for this apocalypse even then? Is she superhumanly effective because, on some level, she is superhuman?”*

“You’re not going to poison me against her,” growled James.

A look of amused innocence crossed Jessica’s face. *“You can’t answer my questions, can you? Think: if Jessica Miles was so very, very clever and talented and effective, why was she only an assistant to a deputy commissioner when you first met her? Should she not have risen to a position of power already?”*

James glared at the Monitor, at Jessica's own beautiful features.

*"No answers. It is odd, is it not? How you can't say with complete certainty that you know her? What drives her? Her secrets? What was it she said?"* Her intonation changed, became a perfect copy of Jessica's voice from that moment atop the One World Tower: "Just - feel free to tell Serenity not to be so impressed. None of us really know each other, do we? The secrets we carry. The sides to us nobody else sees."

"Fuck you," he rasped. "This won't work."

*"Oh, but it already has."*

James's thoughts were scrambled, furious, uncertain. With ruthless determination he reined them in. "Enjoy your games. The day will come when I close my hand about your neck and burn your head off with sacred fire."

*"Mmm, I can hardly wait."* Jessica ran her hand up her body suggestively and caressed her neck. *"The touch of a violent man. How ironic. How fitting. But you didn't answer me before. What would you be willing to do to improve your species' chances?"*

"Why should I believe you'd help me?"

*"Can you afford to pass up this opportunity?"*

Which was the heart of it. He was all too painfully aware of the tragedies to come. How unprepared they were. Could he pass up an opportunity for aid? Information?

*"Or power,"* whispered Jessica. *"Surely you could use more?"*

"At what price?"

Jessica smiled. "Is your kind not already paying enough?"

"You didn't answer my question."

*"Oh, James. You poor, broken man. You are trying so hard."* A note of surprising compassion infused her voice. *"Despite knowing you aren't qualified. A fraud. A failure. If*

*you couldn't protect your wife and daughters, what makes you think you can protect anyone else? You know you'll only fail. Yet here you are, ridiculous and red in the face, barking and making demands of me, negotiating as your world burns. And what's even more surprising, more delicious, is that you know all this. What a foolish figure you cut. And yet still you persist. I don't know whether to admire or pity you."*

Her words hit him harder than he wanted to admit. "Like you said, I know this. And you still haven't answered my question."

*"The price? It depends on what you desire. I could double your Arete, right here, right now, if you agreed to change your Aeviternum to Infernum points."*

James let out a bark of laughter. "Fuck off."

Jessica smiled, clearly not having expected him to go for it. *"I will declare all of Brooklyn off limits to the remaining Nemesis 3 waves if you sacrifice the other members of Crimson Hydra to me."*

James's gut clenched. "Never."

*"Eight lives are worth more than the millions that shall die?"*

"I can't trust you to keep your word."

*"But if you could." Jessica floated closer. "If you could trust me. Would that be a fair trade? Serenity, Bjørn, Becca, Denzel, Olaf, Joanna, Yadriel, and Jason? Could you sacrifice them to me in order to safeguard the 2,132,782 humans that are currently within the boundaries of the borough known as Brooklyn?"*

James felt his throat cramp shut.

*"What if I promised to close the symbols that float over Brooklyn?" Jessica drifted even closer. "You have no idea what a boon that would be to you over the long run. And think: would they not willingly lay down their lives in combat to protect those millions? Is this not but another means for them to do so?"*

“I can’t,” he croaked. “I can’t trust you.”

*“But say we found a means for you to do so.” Her voice grew soft. “Could you lay Serenity down upon mine altar, and press a blade to her throat, parting her flesh and opening her arteries so that others might live? Millions of others? Could you gaze deep into her eyes as she died, trusting you, loving you, knowing that her death was the noblest, the greatest death possible?”*

James stared in horrified fascination at Jessica as she drew alongside the Wing.

*“Or is it that you fear what you would become if you could kill those dear to you? A monster in your own right? Oh yes, such an act would kill you, as well. But are you worth more than those millions, James? Have you grown so proud of your little accomplishments, has your self-worth grown so inflated?”*

“I don’t trust you.”

*“That protest grows old.” Jessica reached out and placed her palm upon his chest, her gaze never wavering from his own. “What if we raised the ante, and I promised to close all thirty-four symbols in the area? To declare New York City off-limits to all demons until the Pits opened? Could you sacrifice all of Blue Light to me to achieve that goal? All thousand members of the First Group? Could you kill them yourself, knowing you gave over eight million innocent men, women, and children the chance to live, to prepare, to fend for themselves? Picture it, James: all thousand men and women of Blue Light, lined up before you, stepping forth one by one to lie upon my altar so that you could slit their throats, your arms red to the elbows, your face spattered with warm, rich, delicious blood -”*

James smacked her hand away and willed the Wing to retreat. “You’re sick. I’d never do that.”

Her smile grew knowing. *“You would. I see it within you. That’s why you’re so upset. You don’t like to realize the truth.”*

“No. You’re fucking with me. This is all just a game to you.”

*“I swear this to you, James Kelly: if ever you approach one of our seeds - what you call a demonic symbol - and agree to my offer, then I shall make it so, and provide you with the evidence you need to believe I shall hold up my end of the bargain. This offer shall stand till the Pits themselves open.”*

James stared at Jessica’s face in horror.

*“Do you wish to strike me, James?”* Jessica’s face turned innocent once more, eyes wide, expression contrite. *“Do you wish to make me cry out in pain and remorse? To apologize, and weep? We can go somewhere private, somewhere nobody would ever learn of what you did to me -”*

“You really are the fucking devil,” whispered James. “Everything you say. Everything you offer. It’s just meant to break me down.”

*“Hmm.”* Jessica dropped the innocent look. *“Perhaps. But that’s happening well enough on its own. You are changed from when last we spoke. More proud, more entitled, angrier, bitter. Need I do much more when you are already well on your way to breaking?”*

“I’ll never break.” He said it with hollow certainty. “I’ll fight till my last breath.”

*“Oh, that you will. But what makes you ‘you’ will surely die. The force, the presence that drew others into your orbit, which made you such a positive influence. That is ending. You will become a machine of destruction, solitary and furious, waging your wrath upon endless legions of demons as you lose your connection to all that led you to fight in the first place. One day, you shall awaken from your murderous stupor and realize that all is gone but vengeance, and that, in truth, nothing separates you from the demons after all, that you, like them, delight in slaughter, and with your world reduced to ashes, you might as well join them -”*

James let out a cry of rage and hurled a Sacred Strike at Jessica, digging deep from the last of his reserves. White fire

exploded forth to wash over the Monitor, who never flinched nor raised an arm to defend herself.

The white flames dissipated, and Jessica remained as before, untouched, unburned, her smile slight, pleased.

*“Yes. That’s it, James. Hurt me. Or, at the very least, do your paltry best to do so.”*

James sat there, heaving for breath, bewildered, horrified, impotent, unsure of himself. He wanted to flee but couldn’t tear himself away.

Jessica drifted closer again. *“This meeting draws to an end. By our calculations, 93% of your city’s population will be dead by the Dawn of the Void. You have not yet seen calamity, nor drunk deep of despair, no matter what you may think. What lies in store for you and yours would break you here and now if you could but encompass it. Death, James. Death on a scale you cannot imagine. Pain. Heartbreak. Bitterness. The end times.”*

She paused before him, and he felt - sensed - that which was the Monitor loom large within Jessica’s skin.

*“But you, only you, can avert that. Come back to me when you are ready, when you are willing to make the necessary sacrifices, and we shall stay our hand. New York could be a bastion of hope and prosperity for all the world to see. You can save it, James. You alone. If you are willing to pay the price.”*

And then Jessica was gone, vanished as if she’d never been there, and James blinked, startled, and gazed about himself.

He was alone.

Alone with her poisonous words, her threats of horror and promises of hope.

Shaken to his core, his whole-body trembling, he willed the Wing to turn around. Gazed at the river of black fire pouring up into the symbol one last time, then willed the Wing to take him home.





## Chapter 20:

### Harsh Lessons

James flew out over the ocean, his speed slow, his thoughts in turmoil. She was fucking with him. This was a test, a trap. There was no way she'd come through with any promise. But then again, she'd sworn to give him proof he'd find convincing. He'd no idea what that could be, but say she came through, convinced him.

Would it be the right move? To sacrifice Crimson Hydra for the eight or so million she'd predicted would die?

James scowled. Why was he believing anything she said? She was the enemy. She was only here to bring death and ruin to them all.

But then again, the demons, the System, it could have wiped them off the face of the earth on Day 1. All they'd have had to have done was drop the Fourth Wave of Nem3s instead of the First Wave of Nem1s, and everything would have collapsed in fire and ruin.

So there was an ulterior purpose here. He'd discussed it before: a sense that the System was preparing them, educating them, helping humanity get ready for the real war that was to come. And if that was the case, maybe the Monitor wasn't just trying to screw with him. Or not just screw with him but offer benefits.

Then why not ask that he also kill himself? Offer Brooklyn in exchange for his suicide, or something like that?

But fuck it, the details didn't matter. What it all came down to was whether he should play ball. Because yes, obviously, the lives of nine people weren't more important than those of eight million. She'd been right: everyone on Crimson Hydra was willing to risk their lives over and over again to save thousands.

James cruised slowly, gazing out over the Atlantic, not seeing the endless waves, the distant horizon turning dark as evening fell.

It was morally repugnant, the thought of killing everyone in Group 1 to save the city. But was it the right thing to do?

James blew out his cheeks. No.

The answer was stark and clear and certain.

No, it was not the right thing to do.

But he couldn't explain why, not even to himself.

He thought of Bjørn, hirsute and suave, elegant and forceful. Bjørn would take the deal without hesitation. As long as Bjørn himself didn't have to die.

There was a clue in there as to why it was the wrong choice. It wasn't that the lives of Crimson Hydra or Blue Light were inherently worth more than the millions of Fabricators - though perhaps an argument could be made that saving NYC in the short term would doom it if they lost all their fighters in the long term - but rather that... the principle of the thing was wrong.

James allowed the Angel Wing to slow to a stop. He looked down and ran his thumb over the ivory and gold of the craft. Felt its smooth, untarnished surface. So pure, so radiant, so... glorious.

He felt old and worn sitting on its glory.

If he were to start making such deals with the demons, would he be worthy of sitting on such a craft?

Or, more accurately, would their species? Should they entrust all leadership to the likes of Bjørn, for whom the ends always justified the means, no matter what?

Or would they lose something precious, irreplaceable in doing so?

Was that what the Monitor was after? Why she was willing to make this deal? To corrupt humanity, to get its most

advanced fighters to break, morally, and lose something they could never get back?

A new thought occurred to him: what if later powers on their character sheets could only be earned by the righteous? These three miracles they'd never heard mention of?

By why him? Why make him this offer? Simply because he was the most advanced in the region? Were similar offers being made to men and women in Shanghai, Mumbai, London?

James inhaled raggedly.

The Monitor was not his ally, not even covertly. Whatever it offered him, it was to his ultimate disadvantage. There were thorns hidden in the depths of this bargain that he couldn't yet anticipate.

And moreover, what would happen to the eight million folks who were spared when the Pits opened? With no demons attacking them, they'd be deprived of the chance to level. With Blue Light gone -

And, oh shit. What effect would that have on the nation? Forget the 8 million in New York. What would people in Miami, Houston, Chicago, and LA think if they watched James slaughter a thousand operators to safeguard his city? The Blue Light movement would collapse. National morale would shatter. The army would have to go it alone, and he'd go from being some twisted symbol of hope to a hated symbol of greed and horror.

Almost, he could hear Jessica laughing at him from the depths of the distant symbol.

He spat over the side of the Angel Wing and aimed it toward home, picking up some speed but not enough to tax its reserves.

Fuck the Monitor. And screw his own short-sightedness. It had taken him this long to figure out what a terrible deal that was.

No.

Better for humanity to undergo this trial by fire and emerge stronger and more resilient, even if it meant millions dying.

Because millions were nothing compared to the whole species going extinct.

James shuddered. The math was horrific, the acceptance on his part bordering on sociopathic, but he couldn't deny the truth of it. Better that most of humanity died so that the species could ultimately win through than to safeguard the bulk of it and have everyone die altogether.

Question was: should he share the offer with Hackworth and the others? James tried to imagine the chaos this would plunge Blue Light into. Of course there'd be universal rejection over their being sacrificed, but what if word got out to the people in the city? Might they not turn against Blue Light in turn? Demand their sacrifice?

Fuck, but that would be a nasty turn. The city baying for their deaths?

No. He'd tell Hackworth and nobody else. Hackworth, he could trust to keep this close.

Because James had seen how people could get when they were desperate. Time and time again on the streets he'd seen cold and fear and addiction turn good people into creatures of instinct. People were like onions. Layers of good and culture placed over deeper cores of need for survival. Sure, during times of disaster, the best usually came out in people, but that was for brief, heroic spells. Week in, week out, if left alone, or fending for their kids, people were capable of surprising themselves with just what they were willing to do to be safe.

Not good surprises, either.

The Long Island coastline appeared on the far side of the sound. Of course, he'd not been out over the Atlantic. Just forgotten for a moment how huge the sound was.

Musing, concerned, introspective, James flew the Wing in what he thought was the right direction, angling toward the right so as to cross Long Island and slice into Queens, and

eventually came in low over a jutting corner of land that gave way to a small bay, an outflung island, and then a small bay choked with anchored white boats. Marinas bristled at the edge of a small town, and he flew in over a park, a soccer field, crossed railroad tracks, then over the small commercial core of the picturesque town.

He gazed down with mixed feelings. This was just the kind of upscale little community he'd never have bothered visiting a few weeks ago. The kind of place where he'd have been noted by the local cops and firmly guided out to the city limits. It was early evening now. There were few signs of the apocalypse here. Everything was quiet. Somehow it seemed like the smaller communities managed to keep services functioning longer than the big cities, for he didn't see much by way of mountains of trash or abandoned cars.

He flew over a rooftop bar, Bob Marley music rising up to greet him as a dozen regulars nursed drinks and failed to spot him cruising silently overhead. Passed over a parking lot beyond, enclosed on three sides by the backs of commercial buildings, cars orderly, the place dimly lit, three people struggling in the corner, their movements jerky -

James brought the Wing curving tightly around.

One was a woman, the other two men.

Nobody else was in sight. The men had pulled the woman in behind the dumpsters and one of them was trying to pin her arms behind her back while the second fought to kick her legs out from under her.

Dull, ponderous anger filled James and he brought the Wing down to the asphalt.

“Hey,” he called out, voice soft with menace. “The fuck you guys doing?”

The men startled. They were young, good-looking, well dressed. The woman was the same age, her caramel hair in disarray, her expression somewhere between furious, terrified, and suddenly hopeful.

The men were checked by the sight of the Wing. The one who'd been trying to kick out the lady's legs turned to glare at him, slowly recovering his arrogant anger. "We're just friends. Just getting along. No problem here."

"The fuck we're getting along, Graham." The woman tried to shake herself free. "Let me go."

"You heard her." James moved forward, slowly opening and closing his hands. "Let her go."

"Fuck off," said Graham, his tone growing haughty, seething. "Get on your fancy toy and get the fuck out of here."

"Don't think that's going to happen," said James quietly.

The woman tried to break free again, and the second man shoved her, hard, so that she fell to the ground. He moved up beside Graham and pulled a small, pretty gun.

James slowed. This second guy was trouble. There was a feverish gleam in his eyes and he was smiling all crazy. "You threatening us, pal? We've a right to defend ourselves if so."

The woman had frozen, her eyes wide and locked on the gun.

James kept moving forward but raised his hand placatingly. "I'm James Kelly with the Blue Light force out of Brooklyn. There's an apocalypse going on, gents. We should be focusing on the demons, not fighting each other."

"Jesus man," said Graham, licking his lips and moving away. "What are you doing?"

"Self-defense," said the second guy. "We're being threatened. You guys got Stand Your Ground in New York?"

"Graham, tell him to stop," said the woman.

James thought he heard the Monitor's laughter again. His anger was thick and ugly, like dirty stormwater surging through the sewers. The kid with the gun was practically laughing, so hopped up on adrenaline and power and whatever else he'd taken.

“Put the gun down,” James said. The kid wouldn’t shoot. He was out of divine power, couldn’t even throw a Sacred Strike at the kid to blind him. But just a little closer -

BLAM.

It felt like being punched in the thigh. Dull impact, his leg jerking back. The girl screamed, scrambled to her feet and ran off down the narrow alley toward the front street.

James looked down. The kid had shot him square in the thigh. A small hole was already turning crimson, and suddenly he could feel his pulse throbbing in the wound, pain blossoming.

“What the hell?!” Graham took off after the girl.

The second guy’s grin had grown wider. “Now apologize, old man, for threatening me. Or the next bullet will be between the legs.”

James’s leg was going weak, his vision narrowing, the pain growing like a fist of fire in his leg. The kid had missed a major vein, which was a blessing. The bullet had punched through muscle, nothing more, but he needed to apply pressure to the wound, cinch a belt tight across his upper thigh -

“Fuck you,” said James.

The kid raised the gun and aimed it right at James’s face. “Fuck me?”

James hobbled forward, hands still raised, his fury turning ugly. Moved right up to the gun and leaned into it so that the barrel pressed against his brow. “Fuck you.”

The kid wavered, then laughed, the sound high-pitched, and stepped back. “Oh man, you’re a hoot. You’re crazy, Grandpa. Get the fuck out of here.” And he lunged forward and slammed the pistol butt into James’s brow.

James tried to block, but he was too slow. Agility fucking 5. The gun cracked against his brow and he went down.

He lay there for a second, blinking away the dizziness, and heard the kid walking away, laughing.

After a moment, he sat up, undid his belt, and looped it around his leg. The kid was gone. A couple walked toward their car, paused at the sight of him, then hurried into their Mercedes, locked the doors, and drove away.

James cinched the belt tight, but there was no hole for the buckle tongue. He was out of Aeviternum, so no healing.

Frustration suffused him. What an idiot. What had he been thinking?

Hissing against the pain, he slowly rose to his feet and hopped over to the Wing. Sat gingerly on it, lifted his leg over, and willed it to rise.

It did so.

His best bet was to just fly back to the Marriott. He'd be there in twenty or so minutes.

The Wing gained altitude, cleared the rooftops, then soared southwest.

The beautiful little town rolled by below, gave way to thick woodland pocked with open pockets in which ridiculously huge mansions sat, complete with guest houses and swimming pools. Those eventually gave way to a golf course, then endless suburbs, large homes in old neighborhoods. He flew over a highway, and the buildings below became more middle-class. His thoughts were in a fog, and he'd almost reached the far coastline of Long Island before realizing he had to turn.

He found a highway and followed it west. His pant leg was red and soaking now, the tourniquet not doing shit. The pain was intense, but he could handle pain.

What he was having trouble with was humanity's fucking stupidity. Its sordid pettiness. How even now people were willing to act like animals.

And him? An idiot. Walking up on a guy with a gun. He'd never have done that before. Too much time spent ashing demons had given him a sense of invulnerability.

What had his Iron Aura done for him?



Nothing.

His Sacred Strike would have healed the guy.

His Heavenly Assault would have maybe surprised the man, little more.

Speed 8 and Agility 5 meant he was still slow as fuck compared to a trigger finger. If he'd managed to throw a punch, his Power 12 and Strength 15 would have decked the guy, but who was he kidding?

He wasn't decking anyone with Agility 5.

Idiot.

Star Boy's praise for the Aureate Buckler came to mind: Useful against shitty humans.

Manhattan's towers came into view, and he curved toward the south, cutting through Queens and into Brooklyn.

He felt tired, worn out. A lot of that was blood loss, but the wound wasn't too bad. Small caliber. Neat little hole. More the shock of it. The rage. The sense of frustration and futility.

James felt like a fool. One second he'd been debating the fate of millions, thinking himself this ultimate arbiter, the next he was nearly killed by a rich dipshit with a crackerjack gun plated all in chrome.

Still. There was no way he was going to fly past and not try and help.

Hopefully, that woman would steer clear of those two moving forward. He doubted she'd report them to the cops.

Downtown Brooklyn hove into view. He arrowed in on the Marriott, descended past rooftop level, and eased around the back of the hotel to descend into the parking lot.

Only to slow at the sight that greeted him.

Hundreds, no, maybe even a thousand people were slowly making their way down the ramp, most on their phones, moving with wary patience and determination.

A voice echoed from deep within through a megaphone:  
“Keep moving, please! Battle Engineers on the left!  
Structuralists and Domestics one more floor down! War  
Smiths on the right!”

Jessica’s voice.

And James hated how the sound of it made him tense up  
with suspicion and anger.

## Chapter 21:

### Old Crow, Yukon

Instinct caused people to look up as he descended upon the crowd, and a ripple effect took place, upturned faces spreading as more noticed and looked up in turn. The crowd parted before him, allowing him to dip down enough to pass into the garage without having to skim beneath the top of the entrance.

“Hey, it’s James Kelly!”

“James! Right on!”

“Yo, he’s hurt!”

James left the clamor behind and floated up and close to the huge cement rafters that girded the ceiling. The first parking level was crammed with people slowly sorting themselves into groups, half the mass continuing to the next level down, the rest splitting to the right and left. Cones with yellow tape demarcated gathering areas, and the air was already growing warm and stuffy from the nearly thousand people slowly forming into groups.

Jessica stood atop a chair at the base of the ramp, megaphone in one hand, glowing baton in the other. She acted as breakwater, causing the turgid crowd to split about her, assistants with more glowing batons urging people to move quickly and not dawdle.

“James!” she waved at him, her smile harried. “There you are. I couldn’t raise you on the radio.”

He eased the Wing up beside her. “I headed to New Haven. Went to check out the hive there.”

She glanced at his wounded leg, then back at his expression, then turned. “Lauren, take over here. I’ll be right back.”

And without asking, she scrambled up onto the Wing, which dipped slightly under her weight. “Head over to my office over there.”

James had to restrain the urge to smile. Her directness always amused him. He urged the Wing over the curious crowd, passed over waist-high cement barriers that had been hauled into place to cordon off her personal workshop, and finally alighted beside her desk.

Jessica raised her radio. “Command, this is Miles. Please send a Healing Grace operator down to my office, over.”

“Copy Miles. Sending someone now, out.”

Jessica slid off the Wing, took her mechanicus from where it was holstered at her hip, and waved it over the Wing. “Hmm.”

“Yeah, had to push it there for a bit.”

James studied Jessica. How different she was from the Monitor’s version. The real Jessica lacked the Monitor’s sultry knowingness, that casual wickedness, the impossible arrogance and alien intelligence.

Instead, she was focused, alert, fully present and with a clarity to her being that hinted at her formidable intellect.

“How long did you work for the deputy commissioner?” he asked.

Jessica frowned. “Excuse me?”

James waited.

“A year and a half.”

“You weren’t promoted?”

“I was. I began as a front desk secretary. That lasted four months before I was made junior assistant to the Assistant Commissioner for Logistics. I was promoted again, made senior assistant, then again to senior assistant for the deputy commissioner.”

James nodded. “Why’d you start as front desk secretary? You got a good degree, right?”

Jessica stilled. “Where’s this coming from, James?”

“I spoke with the Monitor again. It took your appearance and tried to tempt me with all kinds of fucked up offers. But it also tried to turn me against you.”

“I see. By saying what?”

“Asking questions. How much I actually knew you. How someone so effective and smart has remained an assistant all this time. She asked what happened to you the weekend after your boyfriend died.”

Jessica’s face paled and her expression hardened. “I see. So now you suspect me of - what?”

With the echoes of hundreds of voices bouncing off the cement ceiling, the shuffle of feet, the blare of instructions over megaphones, the controlled activity all around them, James realized what he’d known all along.

“Nothing.” He sighed. “I know you have your secrets. The Monitor wants to tear us apart. Turn us against each other. But like I said before, I trust you. So you keep them. I’m sorry. I didn’t handle this well.”

Jessica’s shoulders relaxed a fraction. “You sure you want to leave it there?”

“Yeah.” He rubbed the base of his palm into his eye. “I’m sure. We’re never going to survive if we don’t have faith in each other, right?” He dropped his hand into his lap. “And I have faith in you, Jessica. Doesn’t matter what you’re hiding. The Monitor can go fuck itself.”

Jessica took deep breath. “Thank you. And - I’m willing to tell you. About my... well. The other side of my life. Later, perhaps.”

“Only if you want.” He looked around the parking lot again. “You’ve got a lot on your plate here.”

“Yes.” She rubbed her hands briskly down her hips. “I put out a summons. Cindy’s running a staging post down the street registering volunteers, with duplicates being put in place in the other boroughs. Star Boy’s created a simple registration

form online for those willing to harvest components, and we're identifying drop-off and processing points to bring them to our factories. We're going to need you to put a video out soon asking for more volunteers for a variety of posts. Nothing gets people moving like your videos."

"Sure," said James. "How are you doing this so fast? This shit always takes weeks."

"That's the benefit of having authority and good people ready to do what's needed. Star Boy can put together basic landing pages and processing forms in moments. Cindy can organize these processes efficiently, and with the S1's staff helping her, requisition whatever she needs to make it happen. I put out the original summons on your TikTok channel, and the response was immediate. There are a lot of people who want to help but don't know what to do. They're just waiting for directions."

James looked out over the slowly shuffling crowd again. "And all these people? They're going to do what?"

"Start Fabricating. I gave talking points to group directors who will orient groups of 25 and then send them down to deeper parking lot levels to get started. Battle Engineers will work on Angel Wings, War Smiths will mass produce enhancement runes -"

"What are those?"

Jessica blew a lock of gold hair out of her face. "Talismans that imbue the wearer with a permanent stat bonus. It's the simplest thing they can make and requires the least resources. Structuralists will move in teams, creating enhanced walls to protect key locations like our Forward Operating Bases. Domestics are going to start churning out food reserves and uniforms."

James nodded, absorbing all this. "OK, that sounds good. We have a sense of a production timeline?"

"Not yet. It all sounds good on paper, but I want to see how it comes together in practice. There are several possible bottlenecks that could stall progress, and we'll only know

what needs improving when things break down.” Jessica frowned and looked toward the crowd. “But we’ve got a lot of goodwill and highly motivated volunteers. I’m emphasizing the need for leadership and taking the initiative. With a little luck, we’ll identify good people to put in charge of teams, and soon have groups of nine operating like Blue Light.”

“Hey, James?” It was Denzel and Jason. They slowed at the sight of his leg, then without a word Denzel extended his hand. Gold light washed over James’s body, and the throbbing pain eased away along with the vague, wooly-headed feeling that came from exhaustion and blood loss.

“Ah.” He straightened. “Thanks, Denzel. That’s the stuff.”

“What happened, sir?” asked Jason. “The enemy using small arms now?”

“No.” James snorted at the idea of Nem3 using that little chrome pistol. “Just people being idiots. I was flying back home and saw two guys trying to rape a woman. I intervened and got shot for my troubles.”

“The woman?” asked Denzel.

“She got away. So there’s that, at any rate.”

“You could have died,” said Jessica.

“True. It was a good reality check. One I’ll take to heart.”

“To avoid tackling dudes with guns?” asked Denzel.

“No, to boost my stats so I can take ‘em out no problem. Anyways, enough of that. I’ve got to see Hackworth.”

“He’s up at the HQ.” Denzel pointed upstairs. “Still doing that after action review thing.”

“Fair. Jessica, you need anything?”

“For you to record that video. I’ll page you when it’s time. Also, I have a surprise for you, but it’s not ready. Should be done by some point tonight.”

“Sounds good. Let me park this thing and then we can head up.”

\* \* \*

James pulled Hackworth aside. Something in his expression stilled the protests from the XO and other Crimson team leaders.

When they closed the door and were alone in another small meeting room, James laid it out for the colonel. He recounted the exchange with the Monitor as best he could recall and left nothing out.

“Well,” said Hackworth when James finished. “Isn’t that something.”

“We should not accept,” said James firmly. “First - well. I’m not murdering anybody. Second, we can’t trust them. Third, any offer has to be to our ultimate detriment. Fourth, we might save people in the short term, but the city would be undefended when the Pits open up. No demons means no leveling, and with everyone dead - well. Fifth, this would crush morale across the country and cause the collapse of Blue Light as an institution.”

“Yes.” Hackworth stroked his jaw. A fine stubble had grown along its length, somehow making his Errol Flynn looks all the more rakish. “I agree. That, and our nation has a long-standing policy of not negotiating with terrorists. Which, I think we can agree, these invaders qualify as.”

James snorted. “Amongst other things.”

“What I find interesting is their continued interest in you, James, as well as their willingness to make offers. It’s a fascinating counterpoint to the relative mindlessness of the Nemeses we’ve faced thus far, and a hint of what’s to come.”

“The Nemesis 3s are smarter than the 2s. I saw them learn how to avoid Black Hawk fire, and they’re capable of



operating as a group. Not much smarter, but definitely more capable.”

“Sure. A gradual increase in intelligence seems to be the trend. But to my first point: in your original report on your first meeting with the Monitor, you relayed how it called you a Nexus, ‘in whom fortune and resolve are wed to optimal circumstances.’”

“Good memory.”

Hackworth smiled wryly. “One might argue this is mildly important and worth remembering. Further, you said there were seven hundred and forty-eight other Nexii in the city. Individuals whom fortune and resolve were at their peak. Yet only you have drawn the attention of the Monitors in New York City.”

“That we know of.”

“That we know of. There have been reports of other individuals across the country having similar conversations, and the NSA has put together a file documenting all the interactions and building a profile on what these Monitors are interested in and offer. It is, as you can imagine, highly classified, and ordinarily would never be shared with a captain like yourself, but - well.” Hackworth grinned. “My penchant for taking the initiative rears its head once more. Here.”

He drew out a manilla folder from his briefcase and set it on the table.

James drew it over and opened it. The first page stated the document’s classification level and warned the rest of the world not to read it. James flipped to the next page. A summary some three paragraphs long, followed by bullet points listing the countries and individuals who had documented encounters with Monitors:

- United States of America
  - James Kelly, 2/22/22, Queens, NY
  - Nora Waters, 2/22/22, Indianapolis, IN
  - Victoria Marshall, 2/22/22, Los Angeles, CA

- China

- Xin Liu, 2/22/22, Shanghai
- Beverly Zhu, 2/22/22, Beijing
- Shen Song, 2/22/22, Wuhan, Hubei
- Xiang Feng, 2/22/22, Weifang, Shandong

- India

- Hina Mammen, 2/22/22, Mumbai, Maharashtra
- Anshu Singh, 2/22/22, Indore, Madhya Pradesh
- Mukul Rajagopal, 2/22/22, Jalgaon, Maharashtra

- Russia

- Rodion Komarov, 2/21/22, Moscow

- Turkey

- Hasan Güneş, 2/22/22, Istanbul

- Afghanistan

- Qari Haideri, 2/22/22, Kabul

- Argentina

- Santino Ortiz, 2/22/22 Rosario, Santa Fe

- Iran

- Mostafa Rezaei-Nejad, 2/22/22, Yazd, Yazd

- Canada

- Patrick Belanger, 2/19/22, Old Crow, Yukon

- Nigeria

- Titilaya Hanifat, 2/22/22, Lagos

- Democratic Republic of the Congo

- Rasheedah Muinat, 2/22/22, Kinshasha

“What’s up with this Patrick Belanger?” asked James. “He spoke with a Monitor three days before anyone else?”

“Excepting Komarov in Moscow, yes. His profile is in the folder. The Canadian government shared that intel with us, supplementing what the CIA could uncover. Belanger is a seventy-eight-year-old relic who lives in the very north of the territory of Yukon. Old Crow is the only community that can’t be reached by motor vehicle, requiring folks to fly into the airport there. Interesting place. It’s the northernmost non-Inuit community and has a total population of 221.”

James frowned. “221?”

“Interesting, isn’t it? Everyone else has been located in a major metropolis.”

James turned the pages, skipping past other profiles till he came to the page on Belanger. There was a copy of his driver’s license, along with a list of his biometrics and pages of what looked like hospital data on him.

The face was that of a striking old man. His face was deeply carved with lines, his brows lowered as he glared at the camera, and there was something cruel and dauntless about his stare. A proud man, looking to be all sinew and bone.

James scanned the rest of the data. Born in 1944 in Halifax, Nova Scotia, he worked for two decades at different jobs in the port, ranging from cleaning the tankers to different positions on the oil refinery, to a better paying job handling bulk gypsum at a specialized cargo handling pier.

In the 70s he left Halifax with his wife, Jane Belanger, and traveled north over the course of the decade, till he fetched up in Happy Valley-Goose Bay in 1978 where his wife died in a car accident.

He was in and out of state mental health hospitals through the 80s, with several of the reports printed and included in the file. Paranoid delusions, schizophrenia, and persistent hallucinations that his wife was haunting him and making him horrific offers he dared not accept.

James paused on this last. “Says here he was warning folks about Armageddon.”

“Mmhmm.”

“And that he claimed to carry the ‘Light Eternal’, a responsibility he despised?”

“Ravings of a madman, so they said.”

Belanger escaped from The Waterford Hospital for Mental and Nervous Diseases in 1992, and disappeared from all records till 2013, when he turned up in Destruction Bay nearly dead from exposure and a broken leg. After being treated, he stayed in the town and got a job at the timber mill, till he left a year later. He disappeared again until 2019, when he was listed as a suspect in the deaths of three trappers in the Kendall Island Sanctuary. He was never located, however, only to resurface in Old Crow a few weeks back on the 19th claiming that ‘a symbol of Satan had appeared in the sky above the forest where he lived, and a demon in the form of his deceased wife had descended unto him, offering him all manner of gifts and pleasures if he surrendered the Light Eternal, which he refused.’

“He was arrested for disorderly conduct and assault upon not being taken seriously, which is how this entered the System and was picked up days later by intelligence agencies looking for anything to explain what was going on,” said Hackworth. “A helicopter spotted a demonic symbol hovering over the woods north of Old Crow, right enough, but there was no sign of Belanger in his cabin.”

“He’d have heard a helicopter coming a mile away,” said James, turning back to the driver’s license photograph. He studied Belanger’s defiant stare. “What the hell. His wife coming back to him sounds just like the Monitors.”

“Right. The Canadian government said they’d look into the matter, but they’ve yet to turn anything up.”

James closed the file. “This needs looking into.”

“Agreed. Problem is, everyone’s too busy just trying to stay alive.”

“Second Wave tomorrow.” James tapped the manila folder. “But someone needs to find Belanger. We need to learn more about what happened to him.”

## Chapter 22:

### Sola Anima

“There’s only one thing we need to determine, and determine tonight,” said Major Duffy. “How are we handling the Second Wave?”

Everybody was gathered in what had come to be called the war chamber, the conference room just large enough for twenty. Hackworth and his Command, along with Star Boy, James, and Serenity. The four lieutenant colonels in charge of each Battalion were on wall-mounted monitors, while Lt. Colonel Bell, who commanded 1st Battalion, sat down the table, his face pulled into a sharp expression of focus.

James leaned forward. “The Second Wave will be divided by 100, which means we’re still dealing with thousands of Nem3s across all five boroughs. If we gather everyone together, that’ll be too many for us to handle.”

Star Boy leaned back in his chair. “Look, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but I think we have to accept that this one’s going to hurt. Say we gathered folks in groups of one hundred a block or so apart. Assign a squad to each group and kill the Nem3 when it appears. We’ve got 135 squads in First Group, another 135 in Second Group. That’s 270 groups of hundred, so 27,000 Second Wavers we can cover. But the number is five times that. That’d mean each squad facing five Nem3s. James? How’d that work out?”

“Rough.” James grimaced. “Some squads could tackle it no problem, but we’d take serious losses from our weaker groups.”

Captain O’Brien, the S1, shook his head. “That’s assuming we can assign groups of 500 neatly to each intersection. We’d not only need to assign the 200 intersections, but then get folks to move to the right location.”

“Tricky,” said Star Boy.

Major Duffy frowned around the table. “Anybody have a better alternative?”

“We can’t bus a hundred thousand people,” said Star Boy.

“Then let’s see what we can do,” said Hackworth. “Use the Emergency Management database of Second Wavers to get word out. Stokes, you know whom to contact at Notify NYC?”

“Sure. If they’re still at their post.”

“Break it down by borough, then provide each battalion with the list of intersections. Each lieutenant colonel will distribute their squads as they deem fit. Fort Hamilton’s reported the arrival of eight Apache gunships to go with the sixteen Black Hawks, and three A-10s.”

Major Duffy’s face lit up for the first time since James had met her. “We’re getting Warthogs?”

“Three of them.” Hackworth’s smile was grim.

“Sorry,” said Serenity, not sounding sorry. “What’s a Warthog?”

The XO’s grin was predatory. “The Air Force’s flying tank. Designed to tear through Soviet tanks during the Cold War. They have a seven-barrel, hydraulic-driven gatling gun that fires incendiary rounds with a depleted uranium armor-piercing core, each longer than eleven inches.”

Duffy’s eyes gleamed. “The gun’s so heavy the plane needs to be counterbalanced if its ever removed so they don’t tip over. It’ll tear through the Nem3s like our Ma Deuce’s did the Nem2s.”

“Sounds good to me,” said James.

“Stokes, let’s coordinate the intersections along main avenues,” said Hackworth. “I want our air support to be able to run straight lines over the enemy.”

“Got it,” said Star Boy. “That’s twenty-seven helicopters and airplanes, plus the Killer Eggs. Say an even 30 units of air support. That means each can cover seven intersections. I’ll arrange the intersections in a loop so that everyone can just fly

a circuit over all of them, meaning new air support should hit each intersection every few seconds.”

“Get on it,” said Hackworth.

“Colonel,” said O’Brien. “I’m concerned about our operators. They’ve seen a lot of heavy action already without the benefit of military conditioning. I’d like to coordinate with Kelly to begin an outreach counseling program to help operators process trauma and loss. If we don’t catch this now, we’re going to start losing people to trauma.”

“Reach out to Fort Hamilton,” said Hackworth. “See what clinical psychologists they have on staff. We don’t have time to begin any counseling tonight, but let’s have some people on site tomorrow to begin helping folks after the Second Wave.”

“Yes, sir.”

A knock sounded on the door, which opened to admit Jessica, a tablet in hand, a smear of oil on one cheek, locks of golden hair framing her face where they’d escaped her ponytail.

“Apologies for being late.” She raised the folder. “Got updates.” She then stepped aside so three others could follow her in carrying blanket-wrapped bundles. “And prototypes to share.”

“Ooh,” said Serenity, rubbing her hands. “I love me some prototypes. Do these go brr?”

Jessica gave a pained smile and waited as her assistants placed the bundles on the table. “We’ve now got over six hundred Fabricators working below in teams of nine, with another two thousand across the city hunting for esoteric resources. We’re starting factories in the other boroughs as we locate suitable premises. Though honestly, parking structures are proving ideal. We’ve people opening processing stations outside them and are in the process of creating infrastructure that will help us coordinate mass production.”

“Impressive,” said Hackworth.



“Thank James. He’s the one who awoke me to the need to go beyond experimenting and right into factory line production. Now, we’re limited by resources and Fabricator levels, so I’ve ordered folks to focus on what can be quickly produced and which might make a difference in tomorrow’s fight. First, rune amulets.”

She took up a fist-sized bundle and unwrapped it, revealing an intricate web of ivory and gold the size of a medallion. In its center glowed a symbol that was as entrancing as the demonic ones were discordant.

“War Smiths can create an amulet for each attribute, with a minor rune bestowing a +3 to the attribute in question, while a major rune, created with the imbuing of an Aeviternum, bestowing a +6. This is a major rune of Agility.”

“Can I?” asked Serenity, reaching forth.

Jessica handed it over, and Serenity studied it before looking back up. “No chain? How do I wear it?”

“It sticks wherever you place it.”

“Huh.” Serenity pressed the rune to the inside of her left forearm. It let out a brief glow and melded its back into her skin.

“Oh,” said Serenity in throaty appreciation. “Now that’s good.”

“Can it be removed?” asked Duffy.

“Yes. It can also stack with Bless. The total number of Aeviternum an operator possesses limits how many runes they can carry, however.”

“Shit,” said Serenity with a scowl. “I only have two.”

“Whereas James has four,” said Jessica with a smile. “Lucky James. These runes require divine diamond as their primary component, which is proving to be our bottleneck, but we’ve already created eighty-five of them, and will continue working through the night. It’s my hope to provide every operator in First and Second Group with an amulet of their choice by tomorrow’s wave.”

“Outstanding,” said Hackworth.

“Angel Wing manufacturing is slower but proceeding apace. Experimentation has revealed that we can create a Wing with only nine Aeviternum, allowing for quicker production, but at the cost of a weaker Virtuous Heart. That means a far shorter range if the rider runs out of their own divine power pool. Still, it’s allowing us to make nine minor Wings instead of one major one, which seems a good deal for tomorrow’s fight.”

“How many do we have?” asked Duffy.

“Forty-five. I’m hoping to have a hundred by midday tomorrow, but that will depend on everything proceeding as planned.”

“A hundred?” Star Boy tapped his chin. “That’s... we could pull a top squad or two from each borough, give it Wings, place it in center space so it could act as a roving stopgap. Shore up areas that are collapsing.”

“Factor that in,” said Hackworth. “We saw how Crimson Hydra was able to bolster three situations today alone. Be smart to have them on standby. Continue, Miles.”

“We’ve got Structuralists creating enhanced walls. These can either be freestanding or layered over existing walls to bolster those. Thus far, we’re reinforcing our FOBs and have folks reinforcing the Marriott as well as heading toward the other boroughs. We’ve no sense yet of Nem3s coming to attack us, but if it does happen, we’ll be ready.”

Hackworth nodded. “Good thinking. We may in turn use that ability to create more formidable outposts with which to withstand future waves. That’s a tactic for tomorrow, however.”

“Our War Smiths have also tried their hands at creating the base level armor and weapons that their Apprentice 2 rank allows. The schema are simple and crude, but I see the results more as a promise of what’s to come.”

At her nod, the assistants unwrapped two of the remaining three bundles. One revealed a chest plate of dull

bronze with fragments of divine diamond flecking its face like chips of glowing mica, and the other was a spear, six feet long and whose head was of similar bronze, the blade leaf-shaped and wickedly sharp.

“These are their very first creations, and I think promise much more exciting items to come. We were unable to locate any reputable sources of medieval weapons and armor, but now we don’t need to. Initial testing reveals that the armor is designed to defend against demonic attacks; it can’t stop a normal bullet, but we think it will prove very effective against claws and bone harpoons. They also provide a +2 to Stamina.”

Major Baker, the XO, took the breastplate from Jessica and inspected it. “One size fits all?”

“They change shape to match their user. And come with a backplate that joins seamlessly with the front when touched together.”

“Excellent news,” said O’Shea, the logistics and supplies officer. His smile radiated excitement. “I was having trouble locating enough armor-plated vests, but with these we won’t need them.”

“Again, I hope to ramp up production as we go. I’ve three dedicated squads producing armor and weapons, with the rest focused on rune amulets. By tomorrow, I hope to have that number doubled, then doubled again.”

“The spear?” asked James, recalling his attempts at using rebar.

Jessica took up the weapon. “It’s light, durable, and again, specialized against demons. We believe it can also act as a conduit for Benedictions, and they provide a +2 to Power, which again stacks with runes and Bless.”

“So a major rune and spear could add a +8 to Power?” Star Boy’s eyes lit up. “Which in turn would augment Smite, whose potency is linked to Power and Strength. Love it.”

“This will be a game changer in the long run,” said Duffy, accepting the breastplate from Baker. “Especially as the gear becomes more potent. Defense and offense, mobility, and

the ability to harden our bases and create pop-up defenses. Excellent.”

“Though it’ll make tracking everyone’s stats a pain,” said Star Boy. “Runes, armor bonuses, everything else... gonna make our databases impossible to maintain.”

“Poor Star Boy,” said Serenity.

“I’ve one final creation to share.” Jessica took up the last bundle. “You may recall my mentioning it before alongside the Angel Wing.”

She unwrapped the blanket to reveal a tear-shaped ivory pendant a foot long. Its tapering end came to a sharp point, and a sphere of black glass was embedded in its head. It looked composite in nature, with hairline gaps running in elegant lines down its length, as if a solid blow could cause it to fall apart into a dozen pieces.

Everybody leaned forward to examine it.

“What... is it?” asked the XO at last.

“The Sola Anima,” said Jessica. “The Solitary Soul.”

“Is it a weapon?” asked Duffy.

“I don’t think so. It’s meant to be bonded to someone with Aeviternum, upon which it will activate. From the basic understanding I intuited, it’s an assistant of sorts, a companion, a...” Jessica trailed off. “A seed.”

The Monitor’s usage of the same word came back to James, and he fought the urge to shudder. “So are you going to bond with it?”

“No,” said Jessica. “I thought it fitting if you did.”

To James’s surprise everybody nodded thoughtfully.

“Me? I’m the highest ranked. It should go to someone who can use the help. A Crimson team leader who’s having trouble catching up.”

“I would disagree,” said Jessica. “Remember how you’re a symbol for all of Blue Light and beyond? It would be

excellent marketing if you made the Fabricator video I requested with a Sola Anima by your side.”

“Yes,” said Serenity. “One hundred percent. You need to continue rocking the bad-ass vibe. It’s part of your mystique.”

“Colonel?”

Hackworth nodded. “Agreed. We’re going to need you to pull double if not triple duty tomorrow. Any advantage you can get is to our benefit.”

“And it feels *right*, doesn’t it?” Star Boy looked around the table. “Bad-ass James Kelly getting the first Sola Anima? Unless you guys think I should get it. Show of hands?”

Even Duffy snorted in amusement, and Star Boy pretended to look hurt as he lowered his arm.

“Well, all right.” James reached out and picked up the ivory pendant. It was lighter than he’d expected, but solidly built. Nothing rattled or shook within it. The surface was smooth and glossy like an Apple product, the black hemisphere that emerged from the thickest part at the top barely opaque, so that he could almost peer into its depths. “What do I do?”

“Just invest it with a point of Aeviternum.”

“I’ll have to wait till dawn, then. And that’s a point I can barely afford to spend. You sure it’ll be worth more than a Heavenly Assault?”

“I’m not,” said Jessica quietly. “But it’s ranked higher than an Angel Wing in terms of value and costs an astonishing amount of divine diamond to build. It’s your choice, but I think it’s worth the expense.”

“All right.” James reluctantly set it down. “Thank you.”

“Excellent work, Miles.” Hackworth’s tone was sharp and efficient once more. “We all have a lot to do to prepare for tomorrow’s wave. Major Duffy, coordinate with Hamilton so that we can marry up our operations with their forces. Stokes, the sooner we have our intersections selected and can coordinate with the Emergency Management folks the better.

Miles, loop Captain O'Shea into your production schedule so that we can best distribute your creations tomorrow morning. O'Brien, I want you to consolidate our platoons and companies so that we're operating at strength tomorrow despite today's losses. Kelly, check in with the operators. The sight of you will bolster their resolve. Baker, you and I will review the plan from the bottom up and ensure we haven't overlooked anything. Clear?"

"Yes, sir," they chorused.

"Then let's get to work."

Everybody rose. James smiled gratefully to Jessica as she turned to leave, then considered the ivory teardrop on the table before him. What the hell was it? What would it do? How would it help them tomorrow?

In the end, despite the cost, he knew there was no way he'd not activate it. His curiosity was just too strong.

So, rising to his feet, he reached out, took up the Sola Anima, and tucked it under his arm.

## Chapter 23:

### Imbuing

James awoke at the crack of dawn, his alarm beeping mildly by the side of the hotel bed. It felt weird to wake up; he'd grown used to burning Aeviternum over the past couple of weeks to keep going at all hours.

A luxury they could no longer afford.

For a moment, he just lay there, arm resting over his brow, not looking at the empty half of the bed. His thoughts then strayed to Esme. Where was her body? Where were all the bodies going, for that matter? Were morgues still a thing? No, probably mass graves at this point. Barges laden with the dead. Potter's field. Big trenches, hundreds of corpses toppled in. Were they even wrapping them in shrouds?

Probably not.

James felt his gut twist at the thought of Esme and Luca rolling stiffly amongst a hundred other dead into the dark, to be buried as corpses, their faces pressed into the dirt forevermore.

With a grunt, he sat up, rubbed at his face, stood, and entered the bathroom. He took a scalding hot shower, mostly to wash away the dark emotions, and then stood for a while, brow against the tiles, staring straight down as twin drops of water fell off his out of focus nose to merge into one just before hitting the ground.

He toweled off and got dressed. It was just past six a.m. The Sola Anima lay on the desk by the large windows. It gleamed softly like a pearl espied through several feet of water. James checked his sheet. Aeviternum should be replenishing any minute now.

So he sat and stared at the construct. Allowed his thoughts to wander. The Monitor in Jessica's form, then

Jessica herself and the offer to reveal her secrets. Belanger, Old Crow. The rune amulets. The Second Wave hitting today.

Every few moments, he checked his sheet, and when the numbers finally reset he sat forward. Hesitated, hand over the Anima, then placed his palm on the hemisphere of black glass and willed an Aeviternum into the construct.

He felt a rushing roar as great power flooded through him, the might of the Aeviternum like channeling a flash flood through a slot canyon. Words appeared in his vision:

## **Imbuing Sola Anima**

### **Gloria detected**

#### **Sola Anima imbued at Gloria Immanence 1**

James drew back his hand. A speck of crimson light had appeared in the center of the black hemisphere, and this grew rapidly into a small sun, a bright, searing yellow surrounded by a corona of crimson.

But more, each hairline seam that ran down the length of the Anima became edged in gold, a gold that James intuited corresponded to his own Gloria, and then the seams split, the ivory hull becoming white enameled plate armor over black interior mechanisms.

The Anima floated into the air. James sat back. The portion above the black hemisphere parted, and a white head emerged from within it, gold filagree spiraling elegantly across its miniature yet handsome visage, black vertebrae holding it firmly in place. It was a mannequin of sorts, or a small... robotic being. Its legs were long, slender, its four arms tapering down its length in the form of wickedly sharp black blades.

A foot-high flying robot, elegant, delicate in appearance, with a burning sun for a heart within its chest sphere and a blank, stylized mask that looked vaguely masculine in appearance.



The Anima rotated to face him, and then the mask's eyelids flicked up to reveal twin burning sparks of gold.

James felt the Anima regard him, imprint upon him, connect in some fundamental way to his very being.

*Hello*, said the Anima, its voice cultured, refined, its tone somewhere between bemused and mildly surprised. *I am pleased to make your acquaintance, James Kelly.*

“Ah...” managed James. The Anima hovered with perfect poise above the table, and James was uncomfortably aware of the four foot-long blade-arms that were draped down its length.

*I am your Sola Anima and see that I have been imbued with Gloria. Most excellent. That will allow me to operate at maximum potential.*

“Hi,” croaked James, then tried to get his shit together. “What... what are you, exactly?”

*I am your Sola Anima.* It paused, and its ivory face quirked to one side in a manner much like a bird's. *I sense your confusion. You seek to understand my quiddity and function. My purpose is to safeguard you from harm and increase your chances of survival for as long as possible.*

“You're speaking in my head.”

*Correct.*

“Can you speak out loud?”

Its small mouth moved. “I can.”

“OK. And, ah, what can you do? That'll help me, ah, survive?”

*I have a number of distinct capabilities. For one, I can act as a remote viewing focus for you. Simply cast your mind into me, and you should be able to see what I see.*

James licked his lower lip. “All right. How do I do that?”

*I don't know. You just do.*

So James did. He envisioned seeing through the Anima's eyes, being inside it, and suddenly he was. He gazed upon himself, seated in the armchair, just as if he were gazing into a mirror. He was gazing out of the Anima's black hemisphere, he realized, not its eyes.

James blinked and snapped back into himself. "Holy shit."

*A curious expression.*

"What else can you do?"

*I need never sleep, so I will act as an ever-alert guardian. I am capable of attacking with my blades, like so.*

Without warning the Anima's arms burst into motion, spinning so rapidly that they blurred, turning the construct into a hovering blender whose body shimmered within the rotating blade-arms that moved around it faster than James could track, each blade limned with the gray fire of Smite.

He jerked back in the chair, and the Anima ceased to spin its arms, reverting with unnerving speed to its hovering stillness.

*I can also release a beam of concentrated Aeviternum as a last resort, though that will result in my being depowered.*

"But I can charge you back up with another Aeviternum?"

*Assuredly. I am capable of holding more than one point, though I consume a point for every week I am active.*

"So I could load you up with unused Aeviternum each night, which you could use as a weapon?"

*That is correct.*

James shifted in his chair. "All right, that's pretty great."

*You can also communicate with me via your thoughts.*

James paused. *Hello?*

*Hello, James.*

*OK, wow. This feels...strange. But... sure. There a range on which we can communicate?*

*I expect we shall soon find out.*

*So I can see through you, you'll guard over me, you can attack with your sword arms and unleash Aeviternum blasts which I can stock up inside of you. That's... that's great.*

*I can also hold your essence. In fact, that appears to be my primary function.*

*Hold my essence?*

*Indeed. A more advanced form of allowing you to gaze through my eye. Your essence would vacate your body completely and reside within me.*

*And... why would I do that?*

*I'm not sure. Maybe to avoid permanent death? Though I cannot reconstruct your body.*

*James made a face. Can you put me back in my body if it's not harmed?*

*I'm also not sure. Probably? We could find out.*

*That's OK. No rush on that front. What does imbuing you with Gloria do?*

*It enhances my Aeviternum blast, making it more potent, and increases my intelligence and sense of humor.*

*James paused. Your sense of humor?*

*See?*

*Oh. Sure. Ha-ha. Great. A funny... Anima. James studied the little construct. Do you know where you come from? Where were you before you appeared here in my room?*

*I've no memories of a prior existence, though I feel... I feel as if I have existed before this. My memories and identity begin now, however, with your imbuing.*

*So you don't know why the demons have shown up now to kill us humans?*

*I can hazard some humorous guesses.*

*That's fine. James tapped his chin. But you know about Aeviternum, Gloria, those things.*

*Correct.*

*Just not how you know it.*

*Correct.*

*But you feel like you existed before. And your memories were wiped. Which means something did the wiping.*

*Correct. I sense a bit of speculation there.*

*How much, ah, initiative can you take? Say I get hit on the head and fall over. What would you do?*

*Heal you with Aeviternum. Which, alas, would depower me.*

*Oh shit, you can do Healing Grace?*

*Correct.*

*Do you have any other powers you haven't told me about?*

*One more, courtesy of Gloria. It completes our bond. I must insert my primary sword-arm into your left eye so as to channel a one-time Blessing, raising all your stats permanently by +10.*

James froze. "You have to do what now?"

The Anima's little porcelain mouth curved into a grin. *I jest! There is no need to blind you in one eye for the Blessing to take place!* It spun in a complete circle, blade arms opening out wide as it ended in a bow. *Humor!*

"Ha," croaked James. "That's, ah, really funny."

The Anima straightened. *I know.*

"But you can raise my stats?"

*Thanks to Gloria, I can raise them by +10. Common Sola Anima's can only do so by +2. But we are not common, are we, James?*

"Guess not." He shifted his armchair. "So..."

*The Blessing? You need simply state that you take me on as your guardian and agree to supply me with at least a point of Aeviternum each week so that I may remain functional. That will officiate our partnership, and I will bestow the Blessing to seal the compact.*

*Sure. Yeah. I agree to that.*

The golden edging along the pearlescent armor plates shimmered, and the Anima inclined its head. *As before, so shall it be again. I shall aid you to the very best of my capability, and endeavor to help you survive the dawning of the Void.*

James felt a shiver run through him, followed immediately by a surge in his vitality, his strength, his everything. Filled with wonder, he opened his statistics.

**Name: James Kelly**

**Class: None**

**Rank: Novitiate 5**

**Title: Vanguard**

**Virtues: None**

**Benedictions: Smite, Sacred Strike, Heavenly Assault**

**First Miracle: None**

**Second Miracle: None**

**Third Miracle: None**

**Aura: Iron Aura**

**Strength: 8**

**Aeviternum Points: 4**

**Strength: 15 (25)**

**Stamina: 10 (20)**

**Speed: 8 (18)**

**Agility: 5 (15)**

**Power: 10 (22)**

**Arete: 90**

**Unspent Points: 0**

James stared at the numbers. He'd gained sixty points across all his stats, with a consequent jump of Aura Strength rising from 6 to 8. That was the equivalent of 12 levels' worth of points.

"Holy shit," he croaked.

*Another reference to this dubious substance.*

*My Iron Aura's gone up to 8.*

*Indeed. Very nice.*

*And...* James rose to his feet, moving slowly as if he feared he'd break something by accident. His whole body felt turgid with newfound power. Strength 25. He reached down, seized the desk over which the Anima floated, and raised it smoothly.

Not that it was a hugely heavy desk, but before he'd have had to watch his back, get his legs involved, grunt a bunch as he raised it unsteadily.

Now? It just floated right up.

The Anima floated aside. *Does that desk offend?*

*No. I just like randomly lifting things sometimes.*

Stamina of 20. He could swing his fire-axe now all day long. Agility 15. Nothing compared to Serenity's, but...

He stepped over to an ornamental bowl of fake fruit on the sideboard and plucked three wooden apples from the pile. Frowned, hesitated, then tossed one, then the other, then the third into the air, his hands moving with silky confidence as he wove a juggling pattern with the fruits.

Something he'd never have been able to do before. Now his hands moved of their own accord, as if he'd practiced this

his whole life.

*Very impressive, said the Anima dubiously.*

And Power 22? What would that do to the strength of his Smite and Sacred Strike? James realized he was grinning. He snatched the fruit out of the air, set them back in the bowl, and turned to the Anima. “My friend, you’re the best thing that’s happened to me yet. Fantastic.”

*I am a considerable blessing, agreed the Anima. And I am glad you appreciate me. I shall be sure to remind you of this sentiment often.*

“Do so.” James clenched his hand into a fist. His sense of wellbeing filled him, made him want to dance, to just hit the gym and lift really heavy pieces of metal. “But we’ve got to give you a name. I can’t just call you Sola Anima all the time.”

*Hmm, true. A name. I like James Kelly.*

*Sorry, bud, that one’s already taken.*

*You are the only James Kelly in existence?*

*Well, no, but it’d be confusing if we both had the same name.*

*You would forget and think yourself me?*

*No. James took a breath. Say someone called out James. How would we know who they were talking to?*

*They would be talking to you. Why would they talk to me?*

*Just... let’s come up with another name for you.*

*Hmm, irrational. But very well. Kames Jelly?*

*No.*

*Then... I shall think on it.*

James snorted. “Fine. Let me know when you find one you like.”

*Very well. Do you have any other questions for me?*

*If you don't remember anything about yourself, this System, the demons, the Pits, or where you come from, then no. Unless you forgot to tell me about anything else you can do?*

*Negative.*

*Then I think we should start the day. We've a Second Wave of Nemesis 3s to handle, and it's not going to be easy.*

*Easier, however, now that we have each other.*

*That's right, bud. James smiled at the floating construct. Things just got a lot better. It's good to have you aboard.*

*Good to be here. The Anima clicked its sword-arms together. Shall we get to work?*

*Let's do it.*



# Chapter 24:

## Countdown

James descended to the Marriott lobby, his Anima hovering just above and behind his left shoulder. When the elevator doors opened, he emerged, already painfully aware of how unusual a figure he now cut.

The lobby was full of people. Staff, assistants, operators, military folks from Hamilton, all getting ready for the day's activities.

Those closest glanced at James, saw the Anima, and just... stopped. Their eyes widened, their expressions turned to confusion, wonder, and surprise.

James kept on walking, his expression just shy of a perpetual grimace.

Awareness spread like a pebble dropped in a pond. More and more folks turned to gape.

*Do you receive this reaction often?*

*No. They're staring at you.*

*I know. The Anima sounded almost smug. I was being obtuse.*

James cut down the hallway, leaving a resurgence of conversation in his wake. He made his way into the ballroom, and again his arrival caused even more people to turn and stare.

“Oh, for Christ's sake,” he said as everybody stopped what they were doing. He strode toward the ASOCC, waving people and questions away, found Star Boy and demanded the mic.

The speakers came on, and he stepped up on stage. “Morning, everyone. Yes, that's a floating robot you're seeing right here. Jessica Miles made it last night. It's called a Sola

Anima, and it's going to be working with me from now on. I imagine, in time, most of you will get one, but no, you're not hallucinating."

The crowd stared back at him, wide-eyed. James sighed. "Just... yeah. Once we get through today's fighting, I'll, ah, put up a video or something introducing it to you all. Sound good? Good."

And he switched off the mic.

*That went well, said the Anima. I thought that went well. Friendly, clear, not at all defensive.*

"Dude," said Star Boy, taking the mic. "You got yourself a mini-droid?"

"Sola Anima," said the Anima. "Not a droid."

"Oh man, it even sounds cool. Like Alfred."

"Who's Alfred?" asked James.

"You know, like Alfred Pennyworth? Never mind. Listen, I'd love to gab, but I'm neck-deep in shit. People aren't doing what we're telling them to. It's like herding perverted sheep. And the Air Force folks are giving us grief about the Warthogs. So if you'll excuse me?"

"Sure thing," said James.

"Oh shit!" Serenity emerged from the crowd, two cups of coffee in hand. "That's the Animal Solar?"

"Sola Anima," said the Anima primly.

"It's so cute! And it talks! Is it smart? Where's it from?"

"It is very, very intelligent," said the Anima gravely.

"But it doesn't remember anything from before it came to me." James took the cup of black coffee gratefully. "Still, you gotta get yourself one. The benefits."

"That good, hey?"

"Better."

"The best," said the Anima.

“I like its style. And those cutty-arms. But we don’t have time to chat. Duffy’s on a rampage. Everything that sounded so simple last night is blowing up in our faces this morning. C’mon. We gotta help out.”

\* \* \*

Indeed, what had sounded simple and clear-cut on paper was proving to be a logistical nightmare. Star Boy had chosen to use the traditional New York City marathon route as the basis for selecting key intersections, and expanded it so that instead of ending in Manhattan’s Midtown it crossed over to the Jersey shore and dropped all the way south back to Staten Island. A huge loop with plenty of room for everybody to gather without bunching up on each other.

But the hundred thousand or so key people weren’t getting there in time. NYCEM had pushed out alerts, Star Boy had placed the itinerary on every website and social media platform, and announcements were made on the radio and TV stations, but only a quarter of the required Second Wavers were on the move.

James recorded a TikTok video urging folks to get out and hustle to their closest intersection as indicated on the maps online, but though the video got millions of views within minutes, most of those were no doubt from outside the city.

Star Boy was beside himself. “How is this so complicated? Don’t they *want* protection? Why do they think staying home will do them better than gathering with actual soldiers?”

“People aren’t rational,” said Serenity, arms crossed as she watched Star Boy’s monitor over his shoulder. “Fear and the false illusion of safety at home, you know?”

Around 09:00, gear was passed around. Every team leader descended to the parking lot to receive rune amulets, and James returned with three major ones. The Agility went to Serenity, Power went to Becca, and Stamina went to Olaf.

Armor and spears went to the weaker teams, and everybody was given a couple of Manna loaves in case the operation proved a protracted one.

Crimson Hydra marveled over the Anima, but there simply wasn't time to chat. They descended to the parking lot to mount up on Angel Wings, along with nine other Crimson teams who'd congregated to gather their own. Each borough would have two free-roaming elite teams on Wings ready to respond to an emergency. With shouts of encouragement to ride behind James, Serenity mounter her Ma Deuce on its pivot.

The Sola Anima floated around the Wing, examining it with avid interest.

*Fascinating. I feel a kinship for this construct, crude as it is.*

*Crude? They fly like a dream.*

*You only say that because you don't know better. Here. I shall engage.*

And the Anima floated down and closed into its tear-shaped form. This slid point first into the Wing's helm, socketing itself so that its black eye with its glowing sun was facing outward.

*There. Now I shall optimize with Gloria.*

A shiver ran through the Wing, and golden edging unfurled down its length.

"Whoa," said Serenity, turning about in place to study what was happening to the Wing. "James? You getting fancy?"

"I think the Anima is." James closed his hands about the Wing's handlebars. "It's, ah, melded with the Wing. I think it's amplified it with Gloria."

"How come you get Gloria and nobody else?"

"Guess you gotta be a global first."

"So hard to believe. How'd you even pull it off?"

“Good looks, is my guess. C’mon, we better get into place.”

The weather wasn’t doing them any favors. The sky was lurid with low-hanging storm clouds, and the air was damp and cold. A month earlier and it would have snowed, but now the day threatened rain, and everything was dank and dark for it.

James led his team out of the parking garage, raising a hand in salute to Jessica as they flew out, and together they rose into the morning air. The dark street gleamed damply, the traffic lights reflecting in smeared trails, steam rising from manholes and traffic lights.

They’d been assigned the triangular intersection where 4th Ave met Atlantic Avenue, the subway entrance to the large station prominent and central beneath them. The Barclay Center was a huge, grass-topped oval to one side, as improbably green a structure as any, while department stores walled off the other sides of the intersection.

Traffic was light, barely existent.

This formed the northern point of the 4th Ave corridor that ran all the way up from the southern tip of Brooklyn in Bay Ridge through Sunset Park and upscale Park Slope. Groups were meant to be congregating every third block, with one supposedly meeting right below them at the subway station.

“Looking like a small crowd,” called Denzel, easing his Wing a little closer. “What you think, two hundred?”

“Maybe three,” said Joanna, tone hopeful.

“But not five hundred, that’s for sure.” Yadriel glowered down at the small crowd. “People are idiots. They really think they’ll be safer at home? Didn’t they learn nothing from the first two waves?”

“People are scared,” said Bjørn calmly. “I saw this behavior countless times during economic downturns. We all like to think we’re rational, intelligent beings, but in truth, we’re liable to make decisions based on fear and misguided

hope. I don't know how many investors ruined their portfolios by panicking and selling at precisely the wrong moment during a crash. Didn't matter what we told them, they'd pull the plug and ruin themselves."

A Hummer drove through the intersection, mounted speakers playing a canned recording: "...to check online at any New York City government website for detailed instructions as to where to go for maximum safety. Remember: you cannot be protected if you do not report to your closest intersection. There you will find US military personnel ready and willing to..."

"Not good," said Denzel softly. "James, what happens if only like, half the people show up?"

"Well, for one thing, it'll be easier to clean out the intersections." James tapped the Wing's handlebars. "But second, that'll mean Nem3s distributed throughout the city. When I was up by New Haven, I saw one enter the hive there, but with all thirty-four of the hives here cleansed, I don't know if they'll bother gathering under the symbols. If they don't, well."

"They might just rampage till we put 'em down," said Yadriel.

"Or head out of town to the closest viable hive," said Bjørn.

"We just don't know." James frowned. "But one thing's clear. In an hour, some ten thousand Nem3s will appear, and it'll be our job to exterminate them."

"Shit," said Denzel. "What happens if folks don't gather in groups of one hundred?"

Olaf adjusted the large axe across his back. He looked like an ancient warrior come down from Valhalla on the ivory, gold, and steel Wing. "Not good. Remember how the government told us not to accept the Nem1 confirmation? My good friend Jonas did that. Waited it out. I find him in his bathroom, torn apart." Olaf shook his head. "I will never forget."

“Yeah, I think you’ve got the right of it,” said James. “If people don’t gather, they’ll be in big trouble. This System doesn’t like not being obeyed.”

“Star Boy telling them that?” asked Becca.

“He sure is. They’re just not listening.”

Their team subsided into silence. James’s radio came to life as different folks communicated through the various bands. Occasionally, James made out a drone cruising overhead, its metallic body gleaming with lenses and sensors.

Regular army forces rolled into position. Squads from the National Guard. Bradleys and Abrams, Hummers with mounted M20s and squads of regular infantry.

It was hard not to be impressed. All across the city, the different military forces were in position. Marines, Army infantry, special forces, you name it. Everybody concentrating their Area of Interest on the route chosen by Star Boy, the two hundred or so intersections where Nem3s were slated to appear.

James gazed out over Brooklyn. Flatbush Avenue extended southeast from their intersection, all the way down to distant Grand Army Plaza and the sprawling Prospect Park beyond.

Had it been just less than a month since they’d gathered there to deal with the Nem1s First Wave? He hadn’t seen a Nem1 in weeks.

So much had happened.

“Time?” asked Serenity.

Joanna and Yadriel were both Second Wavers.

“Thirty-five minutes,” Joanna responded.

Time ceased to have meaning. With three hundred or so folks below, that meant a force of three Nem3s. The folks who hadn’t gathered would try to do so frantically over the following hour, resulting in Nem3 appearances every now and again just about everywhere.

James felt a wave of hopelessness wash over him as he gazed out over Brooklyn. How the hell were they supposed to hunt them all down in such a huge city?

“Whatcha thinking, Boss?” asked Serenity softly.

“Just that I never appreciated how convenient it was for the Nem2s to gather in one place for us.”

“Heh. Yeah.” She bumped back against him. “Don’t worry. The Nem3s ain’t subtle. Plus, Star Boy said that almost every inch of the city’s gonna be watched by surveillance drones. Watch us spend the next twenty-four hours playing whack-a-mole.”

“Whack-a-Nem3. I can live with that.”

“Long as we don’t run out of resources. So tell me what your Anima thingy can do.”

James told her, tone quiet, but the others brought their Wings in close and listened, wide-eyed.

“No way,” said Denzel. “You got a permanent +10 stat bonus?”

“That is so good!” Olaf beamed. “All hail Gloria!”

“It’s better than that,” said Jason. “Think: he’s got a permanent Healing Grace just waiting for him.”

“Or a get-out-of-jail-free card in the form of an Aeviternum bomb,” said Becca. “God damn it, how’d I fall behind?”

“You’ll all get one soon enough,” said James.

“Sure.” Becca’s scowl didn’t fade. “Just without Gloria. What’d he say our stat bonus would be?”

“+2,” said James.

“Bah.” Becca eased her Wing away to do a slow loop over the large intersection.

*Do you think I should go explain to her why you deserve me more?*

*Nah, I think she’s good. Thanks.*



“Heads up, everyone,” said Joanna. “We’re at the five-minute mark.”

“OK, thanks, Joanna.” James was grateful for the interruption. “So listen up, everyone. We’re in this for the long haul today. Don’t blow all your resources right out of the gate.”

“All right, Mr. Four Heavenly Assaults dude,” said Serenity.

“Yeah, I’m talking to myself, too. We play this smart, we stay together, and we have to be ready to move on a moment’s notice. Keep an eye out for those harpoons. Olaf, ready with that Circle of Protection?”

“Is more Sphere of Protection, yes?” Olaf grinned, then closed his eyes, extended one hand, and exhaled. A moment later, the air in a large sphere around them shimmered with white fire, fey and wildly beautiful, before fading from view.

“Going to give everyone Deadeye,” the Viking announced. “Done.”

Everyone pulled their M4s from where they’d been strapped to the Wings’ sides.

“Keep it calm, keep it cool,” said James softly. “Becca, time to get back in close. We’re going to go through this like clockwork. You all know the Serenity prayer?”

“Yes,” said Serenity. “O God and Heavenly Father, grant to us the serenity of mind to accept that which cannot be changed; courage to change that which can be changed, and wisdom to know the one from the other, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.”

Serenity’s words, uncharacteristically sober, hung in the air for a moment. Joanna, Denzel, and Jason all crossed themselves, and James felt a shiver.

“We can kill the Nem3s we see. We can’t do much about the rest till Star Boy points us their way. Let’s keep our heads in the game and just do what we do best: kill demons.”

“Clear eyes, full heart, can’t lose,” said Denzel.

“Shit, man, hell yeah,” said Jason, leaning over to give the other a high five.

“Here we go,” called Joanna, voice tense. “Counting down from one minute.”

James took one last look over the city.

Everything seemed so calm.

So peaceful.

*I can feel energies coalescing,* said the Anima.

*Energies?*

*Yes. Undesired random disturbance in space and time. Growing turmoil. It's escalating rapidly.*

*Can you sense what's causing it?*

*Not the agent, no. But there is a growing attenuation in all four dimensions. A weakening. A growing perforation.*

“All right, it's showtime,” said Joanna. “Ten seconds.”

James inhaled deeply and stared at the crowd below. They were pressing against each other, their silence total but for the sound of someone sobbing.

Any moment now.

“Good luck,” whispered Serenity.

“You, too.”

“Time,” said Joanna.

## Chapter 25:

### Red Line

“Bless Green,” James said as he eased the Wing around. The blessings boosted his stats even as he scanned the intersection. The triangular median. The subway station building.

The crowd shifted, uneasy, like deer that have caught the scent of wolf.

A Nem3 appeared inside a sandwich shop. Its hulking thirteen-foot-tall frame was hunched, the glass distorting its bulk.

The first screams sounded. The crowd surged away from the sandwich shop. People tripped and were stepped on.

“Hello,” said Serenity, brought her Ma Deuce down and around and opened fire.

*DONDONDONDONDON.*

The sandwich shop’s window exploded as the .50 Cals made of pure Smite punched through even as the Nem3 leaped forth. Momentum carried it outside even as fist-sized holes cavitated through its body.

The crowd screamed. It lost cohesion, broke apart, and people began streaming in every direction away from the collapsing Nem3.

Jason leaned over the side of his Wing, M4 raised, butt against his shoulder, and opened fire.

A second Nem3 had appeared behind the subway station’s building. It was crouched low, blank, bulging bone visage raised to their squad. The muscled hump rippled and its harpoon exploded forth.

“Shields!” shouted Denzel, manifesting his own at 45-degree angle. The harpoon hit the shimmering wall of force

and bounced away.

Becca and Joanna joined Jason in shooting the second Nem3, their Deadeye Benediction allowing them to place their shots in its head, neck, and shoulders.

The Nem3 roared, mouth opening horrifically wide, and leaped behind the subway entrance.

“Motherfucker,” cursed Jason, and his Wing eased out wide, Becca and Joanna following after.

*James, there's a third demon atop the building behind that roof entrance.*

James scanned the shops that lined 4<sup>th</sup> Ave. The buildings were joined together, their rooftops forming a continuous plane that jerked up and down depending on how many stories each unit boasted.

There.

“Serenity, Nem3, there.” He pointed, turned the Wing, and she brought her Ma Deuce around.

*DONDONDONDONDON.*

The Nem3 burst into a run as soon as it realized it had been spotted. Its legs were gangly but long. It crossed the rooftop with stunning speed. Serenity's shot tracked it neatly, blowing chunks out of its torso and thighs, but it reached the edge of the roof and leaped at them.

There was no way it could reach. A futile gesture. But James approved when a Shield manifested before it, stopping it cold, causing the huge brute to bounce off and crash to the street three stories below.

Serenity rose slightly on her seat, aimed the Ma Deuce almost straight down.

*DON.*

A single bullet of burning gray fire punched through the Nem3's brow. It jerked and lay still.

Jason and the others were firing on the remaining Nem3. It was in bad shape. M4s didn't pack a tenth of the punch of a

Ma Deuce, but the combined firepower and Smite tore the demon apart as it sought to flee.

James thumbed on his radio. "Command, this is Kelly. Our intersection's been cleared."

"Roger, Kelly." Duffy on the line. "Hang tight."

A helicopter flew overhead, its nose tipped down, rotors blurring. Not a Black Hawk. Tan and segmented, huge guns, narrow windows. An Apache. It scudded overhead and banked to the right, following the trail of intersections down Lafayette Ave.

Gunfire was echoing across the city.

Screams.

The crowd below had dispersed.

A single man was picking himself up from the pavement. Old, white-haired, his jacket tan and muddied by slushy footprints.

"Boss, should I heal him?" asked Denzel.

"No," said James.

The old guy rose to his feet, swayed, got his bearings, limped away.

All kinds of gunfire was breaking out. James urged his Wing to rise. Cleared the rooftops, got a view of the skies.

Helicopters were following the route, occasionally diving down out of view to strafe the streets. And there.

A Warthog.

It was coming their way, silver and low, looking almost like something from another era. No sleek wings, no fancy jetfighter.

It gleamed sullenly in the overcast light. Then it angled down and a distant, almost electronic sound reached them:

*BRRRRRRRR*

Smoke engulfed the nose of the plane for a moment, and then it was past.

“Hot damn,” breathed Jason, rejoining their group. “Fucking uranium depleted rounds. Some Nem3 just got ashed.”

The Warthog flew overhead, banking to follow Lafayette.

“Kelly, this is Command. Head to intersection 71 where Lafayette meets Bedford. The intersection’s overrun. Air support can’t get clean shots.”

“Roger.” He looked to the others. “Let’s move.”

The Wing slid forward with ever increasing speed, the acceleration silky, slicing east over Lafayette. Ahead, he watched the Warthog bank north, passing over the intersection without going brr.

Overrun.

James looked at the map taped between the Wing’s handlebars. Intersection 71 punched the deepest into Brooklyn, a right angle that made it the closest point for most of the borough to reach.

If folks hadn’t followed their instructions, if they’d just traveled to the closest spot, that’s where they’d go.

Shit.

The Wings just kept on accelerating, speeding over other intersections. Some were nearly empty, while others were choked with folks and Blue Light operators battling handfuls of Nem3s.

Looked like almost nobody had followed the instructions at all.

Seven huge brick high-rises rose on the left side of Lafayette. Housing projects, maybe. Each arrayed askew, close to each other over two blocks, trees thick around their bases. Just a couple of narrow blocks before intersection 71.

James saw what had happened. That whole group of Second Wavers had just descended to the street and marched to the same spot.

The intersection in question up ahead was strangely empty. Of course. People had fled. He saw them sprinting away, hundreds if not thousands of people racing back down Lafayette, pouring around parked cars, charging north up the first side street, getting away.

Ebon Griffin had been given this intersection. It should have been a Crimson team. James had seconds to assess as they dove down.

Big intersection. Two main avenues. Each corner was a three- or four-story building, turning the ground into an arena. A dozen Nem3s at a glance. Ebon Griffin was retreating north up Bedford. Corpses lay strewn everywhere, torn in half, gutted, tossed aside.

The urge to just drop a Heavenly Assault was strong. Just clear the intersection in one fell swoop.

But not today.

The Wings were utterly silent, which is why they got the drop on most of the Nems. A couple saw them coming, or sensed, or however the fuck they perceived the word.

Croaked out warnings.

“Hold on,” said James. He did the equivalent of yanking up the parking brake so that the Wing swung around as it slid to a stop. Serenity let out a little whoop of surprise, then found herself facing the entire intersection from five stories up.

The others stopped on either side and, as one, they raised their guns.

If James released the handlebars the Wing would start to drift down. *Hey, Anima, can you keep the Wing in place?*

*Affirmative, James.*

Sweet.

James grabbed his M4, turned around, rose to his knees, and picked his target.

Everybody unleashed Smite-enhanced hell.

The Nem3s reacted with obscene speed. Even as bullets started hitting their flanks and broad backs, they wheeled, dropped into crouches, and loosed their harpoons.

A dozen of the bone spears flew toward them.

“Shields!” cried Olaf. Deadeye ceased to bless the guns, and instead, everyone manifested a Shield.

But too many harpoons were coming at them from almost 180 degrees. There was no coordinating where the Shields manifested. Several appeared dead center before them, a few off to the sides. James realized too late how haphazard their defense was and placed his shield in the center of the biggest gap.

It wasn't good enough.

Most of the bone spears slammed off the rippling walls of force. Serenity shot one out of the sky.

But four got through. They hit Olaf's Circle of Protection. The sphere flared white all around them.

“Get those shields in place!” shouted Denzel. “Cover the gaps!”

Huge cracks like lightning bolts had appeared over the sphere's surface before it had faded from view.

The ten remaining Nem3s already had new bone harpoons punching their way out of their humps.

“Drop a Heavenly Assault!” shouted Bjørn.

Yadriel extended his hand and black smoke began to rise from the demons below toward his palm.

Serenity trained her Ma Deuce on a Nem3 and tore it apart.

Becca had her Bushmaster up and was drilling a second one.

But everyone else was stuck on shield duty. The eight Nem3s hunched and loosed a second salvo.



Without a means to coordinate, the Shields swung back and forth almost at random.

Five harpoons were blocked. Another three got through and hit the protective sphere. It shattered, a wash of released power flooding over them.

Olaf shouted out in pain.

New bone harpoons were already emerging from the hollow humps, their tips glistening and sharp.

“Time to drop and engage,” James called. “Down!”

And he twisted, fell back in the saddle, and carved down through the air, a nearly vertical drop, down to the asphalt. “Serenity, stay on turret!”

*Anima, hold the Wing right here!*

He didn't hear the response, but reached down, grabbed his fire-axe, and leaped the remaining ten feet to the street.

“**Drop a Heavenly Assault!**” roared Bjørn in fury.

James felt his body go stiff as the command suffused him.

He landed awkwardly despite his boosted stats. He crashed to one knee, resisting the command, fighting off the wild urge.

A bone harpoon flew at him. He heard Serenity scream, managed to get up his arm, and then the harpoon hit him square in the face.

For a moment, everything went dark, quiet, and then a rushing filled his ears and the world came roaring back.

James was lying down, a bloody harpoon by his side. He touched his face. Completely unhurt. He glanced up: Denzel lay slumped over his handlebars, blood pouring from the corner of his mouth even as white light enveloped him.

No time. No time to even glare at Bjørn. James hopped to his feet, completely healed and refreshed, and snatched up his axe.

The Nem3s oriented on him. Serenity was raining hellfire down upon them, so they broke apart, darting to one side and the other, but closing.

A towering figure of burning flame dropped beside him, face wreathed in night, talons a foot long. Becca in Black Apotheosis.

Another monster dropped to this left. This one was even bigger than Becca. Easily twice James's height, it was corded in muscle, deep chested, each blade arms as massive and wicked as the Reaper's own scythe. But its face wasn't mere bulbous bone, but rather a grinning death skull, maw huge like Venom's, its eyes sunken deep in ridged-lined cracks.

Yadriel in Demonic Form.

James raised his fire-axe, willed Smite to enshroud its length, and ran forward.

The next few moments were overwhelming in their chaos. It was the closest to a medieval battle James had ever come. It took place on multiple planes. Throughout, Serenity was dropping huge bullets in a never-ending stream, and when she realized she could fire straight through her allies without harming them, she went wild.

Nem3s leaped so as to fall upon them. Jason flew in low, leaning out to one side with a ten-foot blade of Aura extended in both directions so that he threshed their ranks. Denzel, Joanna, Bjørn, and Olaf remained with Serenity so that they could all benefit from Deadeye.

But the real fight happened at ground level.

Yadriel let out a roar that was part euphoric scream and hurled himself straight up to crash into a descending Nem3 even as Becca bounded forward, fleet and fast, to entangle herself with a second demon, flickering around it, slashing it apart, lithe and ripple-quick.

A bone harpoon nearly took James in the face, but his heightened Agility allowed him to sway aside at the last second. He staggered, stutter-stepped, then hurled his fire-axe

with both arms from behind his back, overhead, and straight at the Nem3.

The axe blurred in a circle and sank deep into the demon's chest. James was there a second later. Speed 18 made him faster than Usain Bolt, and Power 22 allowed him to leap explosively. He crashed into the demon feet first, seized the axe by the haft, then pulsed his Iron Aura like a Mack Truck.

The demon was blasted away, the axe tearing free. Where before James would have crashed to the ground, he now contorted, landed neatly on the balls of his feet, then ducked under a claw swipe and slammed the axe clear through the Nem3's knee.

He sheared the leg right off. The Nem3 roared, collapsed, reared up, and then its head shattered as Serenity poured living Smite into its skull.

Jason swooped by again, his Aura passing through Becca harmlessly but dissecting her foe.

James glanced around, saw Ebon Griffin standing at the northern part of the intersection, just gaping.

Emotion arose within James's chest, but there wasn't time to celebrate. Yadriel let loose a second roar, seized the Nem3 he was grappling and his whole form suddenly flared with bright power.

Aeviternum.

Yadriel sank both claws deep into the demon's shoulders and wrenched it around, hurled it with Hulk-like strength.

The demon became airborne. It flew across the intersection, clawing at the air, and hit a cement ledge between the second and third stories of a building.

Hit hard enough to crater the wall, bounce off and hit the ground with a crunch.

Serenity finished it off.

A final Nem3 charged out of a side street. It tried to get the drop on Jason, but he twisted about, extended a hand, and a

log of Aura six feet thick pulsed into the Nem's head, ashing the bone and decapitating it.

The Nem hit the ground. Momentum caused it to slide right under Jason's Wing, which he raised a couple of feet so as to remain clear.

The guns fell silent.

Everyone looked around, evaluating, scanning rooftops.

Silence but for the rattle and brr off distant guns.

"Holy shit," said one of the Ebon Griffins.

*A strange fascination. Why such reverence?*

James released his Smite and dropped the axe down upon his shoulder. Becca turned about, claws flexing, seeking new prey, and then released her shadow form, sinking down to her normal figure.

Yadriel took five long steps and hammered his fist into the roof of a Hyundai. The cab collapsed, and then Yadriel kicked in the door, tore it free with a great squealing of tortured metal, and hurled it like a discus clear over the far building.

"Fuck yeah!" he shouted as he shrank back to his human form. He looked miniscule in comparison.

"Dude," said Jason. "That door coulda hit somebody."

Yadriel scowled. "If it did, I'll write an apology."

Only then did James turn to glare up at where Bjørn sat astride his Wing.

Bjørn met his gaze with burning defiance.

"Kelly, this is Command." Duffy.

"Command, this is Kelly, one moment."

"You fucking asshole!" screamed Serenity, rounding on Bjørn. "You nearly got him killed."

"He nearly got us *all* killed." Bjørn raised his chin. "One Heavenly Assault and this would have been over in an instant. Instead we were all forced to risk our lives."

“Everybody in close,” said James, and the tone of his voice ended the argument.

Bjørn hesitated. James could almost read his mind. Now was his chance to take off, if he were going to. But if he did, James would surely follow, James had more Aeviternum, could go faster on the Wing –

Bjørn lowered down and parked beside everyone else.

They gathered in a hesitant knot. Yadriel’s grin had disappeared. Becca was frowning, clearly worried.

“Denzel?” asked James, not taking his gaze off Bjørn. “You OK?”

“Yeah, man.” Denzel rubbed blood off his chin. “Hurt like a fucker for a second, but then Healing Grace took care of it.”

“You could have ended this immediately.” Bjørn’s voice was cold. “This was all unnecessary theater.”

“I said we needed to conserve resources.” James moved to stand beside Serenity.

“We also need to get through the damned day.”

“Fuck, what happened?” asked Jason.

“Dickhead here used Inspire to try and force James to use Heavenly Assault,” said Serenity. “Made James take a harpoon to the face which transferred to Denzel.”

“Oh shit,” said Jason softly.

Bjørn lifted his chin.

James studied the man. Looked deep into his eyes. He saw pride there, endless depths of pride, along with outrage. Resentment. Fury. A hint of uncertainty in how he glanced flickerflash at the others to gauge their expressions.

“I told you to never use your power on one of us.”

“I wouldn’t have had to if you’d done this right.”

“You’re not the leader.”

“Maybe I should be.”

“Hell naw,” said Yadriel.

“Over my dead body,” said Serenity.

“James is our leader,” agreed Olaf.

Jason, Joanna, and Denzel all nodded.

Bjørn licked his lower lip, calculating. “Then we must agree to disagree.”

For a long, aching moment, nobody spoke.

With Bless Green and his Anima, James’s Agility was 16.

In one smooth movement, he drew Serenity’s Sig from its holster, thumbed the safety off, and shot Bjørn between the eyes.

The *crack* echoed in the silent intersection. Becca screamed. Bjørn’s head snapped back and he collapsed bonelessly to the ground.

James thumbed the safety back and returned the Sig back to Serenity’s holster.

Not feeling anything, James turned on his radio. “Kelly here. Intersection 71 is cleared.”

“Fuck yeah,” he heard Star Boy yell in the background.

“Kelly, we need you back at Intersection 51. 4th Ave and Prospect Highway in South Slope. Ivory Medusa isn’t reporting back.”

“Roger, Command. Heading over there now. Out.”

A Killer Egg buzzed overhead, spec ops guys watching from behind their aviators.

Becca had fallen down beside Bjørn’s body, her eyes wide, mouth working silently.

Everybody else was staring at him.

“Mount up, folks.” James strode over to where his Anima was lowering the Wing. “Day’s just getting started.”



## Chapter 26:

### Ethics. Or a Crude Attempt at ‘Em

Becca tore her gaze from Bjørn to glare at James with such horror and shock and outrage that her voice shook from the intensity of her emotions. “You *murdered* him.”

James swung his leg over the Wing’s saddle and sat. “I did.”

The rest of the crew was staring at him in similar shock. All of them but Serenity. She spat on the floor and walked over to James. “He had it coming.”

“I gave Bjørn one chance.” James pitched his voice to carry. His heart was pounding, pounding, like a crazed man trying to knock down a door. “Back at his place. He told me he wanted to start a new order. A new aristocracy. To use his power to control everyone and tell them what to do.”

James gazed around the group. Denzel, Yadriel, Joanna, Jason - they were all frozen in horror. Olaf was frowning, his brow beetling down over his blue eyes, but of the group, the most self-possessed.

“I told him, out on the balcony, that he was never - ever - to use his power on us. I drew a line. He crossed it here and nearly got one of us killed.”

“You *murdered* him,” Becca said again, her hands curling into claws. “You think that makes you any better?”

“I don’t know.” James let the question hang in his mind, then dismissed it. “But I gave Bjørn a chance. I made the stakes clear.”

“You coulda cut him loose, man,” said Denzel, his voice tortured.

“And what would he have done? Gone home to hide in his apartment with his tail between his legs?” James raised his brow. “No. He’d have made his own Blue Light. Ruled over it



like some crazy medieval king. I saw it in his eyes. No regret but his failure to take control of us. This was going to happen, sooner or later.” James tried to meet everyone’s eyes again. “I gave him a chance.”

Serenity crossed her arms. “None of you felt his power like I did. Saw how much he enjoyed controlling me. The man was a monster. He had it coming.”

Jason was slowly shaking his head. “We don’t do this in the army. We court martial folks, we give them a military trial. We don’t execute them in the field.”

“This isn’t the US military,” said James softly. “And with his powers, he was a threat to us all.”

Olaf inhaled deeply, then gave a curt nod. “Ja. Is hard but is right. Bjørn spoke to me a few times. Complained about James, about how we do things. I told him no. But I could see him testing.”

“Same here,” said Denzel, tone still dazed. “One time, he suggested things could be different. I just stared at him till he walked on.”

Becca rose slowly to her feet. “Bjørn never killed anyone in cold blood.”

“Not yet,” said Serenity. “And look, I know this is tough. But you saw what happened to Denzel. You know that wasn’t right.”

“You *murdered* him!” screamed Becca, her whole body curving with the strength of her emotion. Her cry echoed off the walls. “You’re worse, a thousand times worse!”

James met her stare. “I’m sorry. I gave him a chance. I told him not to fuck with any of us. We couldn’t cut him loose. We couldn’t put him jail. I couldn’t trust him again. There was no other way.”

Becca turned to the others. “You’re OK with this? You’re fine with James killing people who disagree with him!?”

Olaf crossed his arm. “More than disagreement. Bjørn mind control.”

“I’m so sorry, Becca,” said Joanna. “I’m so sorry.”

Becca’s eyes filmed over with tears. She straightened, looked around the group again, then ran the back of her wrist over her eyes. “Fuck you all. If you think this is OK, fuck you. I’m out. No way in *hell* am I going to follow this monster.”

James sat quietly.

“You know in your heart what he was,” said Serenity. “What he wanted.”

Becca grabbed her Bushmaster and strode to one of the Wings.

“Where you going?” asked Denzel.

“To Nem3s.” She swung her leg over the Wing. “On my own.”

“Should we stop her?” asked Serenity. James shook his head. Becca rose into the air, aimed her Wing north along Bedford, and sped away.

“Fuck,” said Denzel, rubbing the back of his head. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

“I’m sorry.” James looked around the group. “I didn’t see another way.”

“Don’t apologize.” Serenity got on the back of the Wing. “We all heard him mind-fuck you mid-battle. You took a harpoon to the face because of him.”

“Yeah,” said Yadriel. “Fuck that guy. Thinking he was all better than us ‘cause he stole tons of money. He weren’t no team player.”

“I don’t know,” said Jason. “This just doesn’t feel right.”

“No,” agreed James. “It doesn’t. And we’ll talk about it again tonight. But for now, we need to help the others. Let’s go.”

He willed his Wing to rise up into the air. The others strode to their own, mounted up, and followed after him.

*Are you all right?*

*Yeah, I think so. James pondered the question as they started to speed southeast. I know it was the right move. I just don't know how to explain it right. What I saw in Bjørn.*

*Your group is broken.*

*Yeah. I broke it. But on some level, we were never really a group with Bjørn in it. We were just an accident waiting to happen.*

\* \* \*

They fought long into the evening. The day was a series of pitched, intense battles that were resolved quickly. Their team, even bereft of Becca and Bjørn, was more than capable of defeating small groups of Nem3s.

The Warthogs, Apache and Black Hawk choppers flew overhead constantly, while drones were used to track Nem3s and help teams run them down.

But James felt numb throughout. He executed his foes without emotion or urgency, wielding Smite and Sacred Strike as needed, and twice burning Aeviternum to heal wounds from unseen harpoons or scuffles with Nem3s that went wrong.

There was little conversation amongst their group. Most of the talk was coordinating tactics, pointing out enemies, or congratulating each other for clean kills.

The other teams were uniformly glad to see them. Often overwhelmed or struggling to hold back the Nems, they would let out hoarse cheers as Crimson Hydra descended from the sky to blast the demons apart.

But James never wanted to hang around after and receive congratulations. He'd radio in, acquire a new target, and then fly away with a grim wave.

Nem3s were appearing across the city now. Only half the Second Wavers had made it to any kind of intersection, and a mad scramble had taken place thereafter as folks tried to get into groups of 100 all over town. Anxious throngs rushed

through the streets, calling out, merging like beads of water into ever larger groups until a Nem3 manifested and then they'd scatter, screaming.

Soon, James was flying all over Brooklyn and Queens, hunting down targets tailed by drones. It was a small blessing that the Nem3s were often too large to go inside; they'd take to the rooftops and bound along, leaping high over streets to land on distant roofs, Crimson Hydra in pursuit.

The hours blended into each other. They ate Manna bread, and around late afternoon James ordered everyone to burn an Aeviternum to freshen up. Without their synchrony they leveled up exceedingly slowly and piece meal; by the time dusk fell they'd all advanced but a single level, except for the Shield folks who didn't advance at all.

James felt Bjørn and Becca's absence like a missing tooth, a gap he couldn't stop tonguing no matter how he willed himself to stop. Bjørn's presence had been a smoldering one, judgmental and strong, and had balanced James out, made him feel as if there were another pole to their group which kept them all balanced, kept James thinking his decisions through and making sure he was confident of his choices.

With Bjørn gone, their team felt strangely light, insubstantial. Serenity tried to make up for it with her ribald chatter, but her words failed to rouse the others. Yadriel was clearly the least affected. After his initial moment of shock, he cast off any regret or loyalty to Bjørn and declared the world better without him. Olaf also seemed to process the death better than the others, and though his aspect remained grim, the few times he met James's eye he gave him a firm nod.

Joanna was obviously still shocked, and both Denzel and Jason were far quieter than they otherwise would have been. James could tell Jason's shock was institutional on some level.

But there was nothing to be done about it now.

Yet any time James wasn't directly engaged in something, he saw Bjørn's face again, saturnine and powerful, his eyes dark and daring, his whole manner exuding arrogant self-confidence. He thought of their three days traveling across

the country together, how James had thought they'd reached... something akin to equilibrium. Mutual respect.

He'd been a fool.

Should he have simply tossed Bjørn over the balcony the moment the man had revealed his megalomaniacal sociopathy? No. That still felt wrong. It was important that James had given him a chance. Even if, in his heart, he'd known Bjørn would fail the test and fall to temptation again.

It was late when Command finally called them back in. Everybody in the Second Wave had either summoned a Nem3 or died when they'd failed to gather in a group of one hundred. They'd flown over several such tragic groups where they'd fallen in the streets, torn apart by Nem3s who'd appeared, one for each summoner, slaughtered them, then disappeared immediately once more.

James wanted to keep hunting, but his divine power pool was low, most of the crew was out of Aeviternum, and the drones were simply not picking up any more Nem3s.

The Sola Anima had remained mostly quiet. James got the sense it was processing everything it had seen that day, from the battles to Bjørn's execution. He asked it at one point if it could sense Nem3s, lead them to where they were hiding, and it had answered in the negative, other than being able to fly forth and hunt alone.

They returned to the Marriott.

James led his crew back to the Wing stables, the area cordoned off for parking, and set the seven machines down. They were the last team to return. Fabricators were busy transporting new resources down onto the level and working in shifts crafting more gear. There was no sight of Jessica, so James dismounted from the Wing and rubbed at his face.

The Anima unsocketed itself from the front, split open into its humanoid form, and hovered just above and behind his shoulder.

"Guys." James waited for the crew to turn toward him. "With me."

He led them to the elevators, up to the ground floor, through the bustle of returned groups to a side room. Everyone entered, the atmosphere tense, and James closed the door to face them.

“What happened today was fucked. I own that. But I killed Bjørn to protect Blue Light, to protect our integrity, and our ability to defend the rest of humanity as equals, not as superiors. My own standing and humanity may take a hit for it, but I’d rather be the one who is hurt than to watch Bjørn use his power for evil.”

The crew exchanged wary glances.

“I don’t use that word lightly. I fully own that I’ve made mistakes. I should have told everyone what he said that day on the balcony. I should have warned Hackworth, Jessica, everyone. But no. I wanted to give Bjørn a genuine second chance. For him to see he could step back from the ledge and fundamentally change his mind. I didn’t think he would. Serenity and I talked about it after. But it was important to give him the chance.”

Jason hesitated, then at James’s nod spoke up. “I hear what you’re saying, sir. And I know this isn’t the army. And that Bjørn could have done a lot of damage with his power. Maybe it’s because I didn’t see him mind control you in the fight. But...” He shook his head. “I’m still having trouble with your just shooting him like that. What it means that you thought you had to.”

“It was practical,” said Yadriel. “Bjørn wasn’t on our side. He was and only ever would be on his own side. It’s a pity Becca didn’t see that none, but hell, he was just using her, too.”

“We fight demons from hell,” said Olaf softly. “There is no room for demons in human form. It is wrong to control others.”

Joanna crossed and uncrossed her arms. “It’s... I think I’m shocked... horrified, even, by the fact that it happened at all. I was starting to think of us as... I don’t know, a family. Dysfunctional, maybe, but together. Against the bad guys.

Now everything feels weird, like the ground's still moving under my feet."

"I had two equally important goals," said James, trying to put his emotions into words even as he spoke. "And those were to defeat the demons and maintain our humanity while doing so."

"No longer?" asked Serenity.

"Just a little change." James smiled brokenly. "I'm still shooting to defeat the demons. But now I realize I'm willing to take a hit when it comes to humanity if it means safeguarding the rest of you from that kind of evil."

"That's not fair," said Joanna immediately. "You're not a martyr. We're all in this together."

"Maybe. But could you have stopped Bjørn in that moment?"

Joanna hesitated.

"The easiest thing would have been to let him go. But I know - in the depths of my soul, in the marrow of my fucking bones, that he'd become a far greater problem in the long run. That was it. My one chance to safeguard us all against his corruption. I took it. I'll pay the price."

"What price?" asked Serenity.

"I'm going to tell Hackworth what happened."

"Don't," said Jason immediately. "The military's clear on that being a major crime. There's no excuse for killing your own soldiers in the field."

"I don't need excuses." James drew himself up. "If I'm to lead Blue Light, if I'm to lead you all, then I need to play this straight. I'm not going to cover up what happened or ask you all to lie. I'm going to tell Hackworth what happened and why I did what I did. And then I'll pay the devil his due if that's what's called for."

"Bullshit," said Serenity. "Bjørn was right about one thing: the world's changed. You don't need to -"

“Serenity.” James smiled sadly. “We need to be accountable to each other. That’s the main difference between the world Bjørn wanted and the one I want to save.”

Serenity opened her mouth to protest, then fell silent.

James looked around the group. Everyone was weary, scared, confused. But already the mood had shifted slightly.

He could tell why.

His willingness to confess to Hackworth had lifted a weight from their shoulders.

“You’re good people. I’m proud to be working with you. I hope you never feel differently about me.”

And before they could answer, James opened the door and stepped back outside. He strode swiftly down the broad hallway, the Anima floating along behind.

*This is all very confusing, said the Anima. I thought we’d simply be killing demons.*

*I aim to make that my focus, said James. But right now, I got some house cleaning to do.*

*Most interesting. Ethics.*

*Or a crude attempt at ‘em.*

James entered the large ballroom and strode over to where Hackworth was conferring with Duffy, both of them staring at a screen covered in moving blips.

“Sir?” James paused till Hackworth looked up. “I need to talk to you.”



## Chapter 27:

### Someday. Not Today.

“You did *what?*”

James stood straight in the small conference room. His heart was pounding, and in his mind he saw Bjørn widen his eyes just as James aimed the gun at his face.

Recounting what had happened felt like letting off a depth charge deep within his soul.

“I killed Bjørn.” And as clinically as he could, he began recounting what had transpired at Bjørn’s apartment.

“No, I know all that,” said Hackworth, cutting him off. “Jessica told me the details after it happened. But god damn, James. You’d better explain yourself fast.”

“Yes, sir.” James stared over Hackworth’s shoulder. “Mid-battle, Bjørn tried to use his Inspire ability to force me to drop a Heavenly Assault. I locked up, resisting it, and took a harpoon to the face. I’d have died without Denzel’s Martyr’s Cry. As is, Denzel was forced to burn his Aeviternum to survive, and I was taken out of the fight and laid out for I don’t know how long with Nem3s around.”

“Damn. Then?”

“I confronted Bjørn after the fight. He was unrepentant. And I saw...” James tried to find the right words. “I realized that he fully expected me to back down. That he saw my giving him that second chance as weakness. That at worst, he’d be kicked out of the squad, maybe Blue Light, and that he was fine with that.”

“Court martial and dishonorable discharge.”

“But, sir.” James again tried to put the emotion into words. “Bjørn had no regard for anybody other than himself. Which would be fine if he didn’t have Inspire and Terrify. I knew in my bones what he would do next. Set himself up as

the leader of a dark mirror to Blue Light and create a medieval society in opposition to us.”

“So you executed him?”

“So I executed him, yes, sir.” James continued staring ahead. “I know that doesn’t give me any moral high ground, but with what’s coming, we can’t afford a man like Bjørn working against us. Creating an alternative to the way we’re doing things. Enlisting folks who believe might makes right and drawing them out of our ranks. The only way we’re going to survive what’s coming is if we work together. Bjørn would have burned our chances.”

“Damn, James.” Hackworth rubbed at his jaw and turned away. “This is... by all rights, I should have you arrested and tried before a military tribunal for murder.”

“I understand.”

“But tomorrow we’ve got the Third Wave. Then the Fourth.”

James said nothing.

“And do you know what it would do to Blue Light, to morale, if I had you arrested? If it got out you murdered one of your own squad?”

“Not good, sir.”

“No! Not good!” Hackworth let out a despairing laugh. “Who knows about this?”

“My squad. Becca quit and left us after it happened, don’t know who she’s told. Maybe Ebon Griffin, if they were still hanging around. Anyone watching through a window.”

“Damn it.” Hackworth rubbed at his eyes. “You couldn’t have just knocked him out? Tied him up and left him somewhere for collection?”

“Didn’t occur to me, sir. He revealed himself as a... an existential threat. To what we’re doing. Trying to do. I saw it. It was either take him out, or risk everything he could do to us down the line.”

“You realize that a unique understanding of a man’s potential future threat is absolutely no basis for murder? That the US military does not condone executions in the field under any circumstances?”

“Yes, sir.” James finally met Hackworth’s eyes. “I’m sorry. I know this fucks shit up. But much as I hate it, I believe it was the right play. Our future’s better with Bjørn removed from play.”

Hackworth held his gaze for a long while, then sighed and fell into a chair. Covered his eyes for a moment, then grimaced. “Well, even though this is the apocalypse, the US military cannot condone murder. If - when - word gets out as to what you’ve done, all of Blue Light will be torched if we’re seen permitting this crime.”

James stiffened. “I understand.”

“So I’m going to refer this case to the Criminal Investigation Division and recommend a special court martial.”

James felt the blood drain out of him.

“That being said, it may take time for the referral to take place. I am a busy man and am well known for being negligent when it comes to filing paperwork. Until the CID investigates your crime and turns over its official findings to the appropriate command and legal authority for disposition and adjudication, I expect you to continue fulfilling your duties both as the captain and leader of Crimson Hydra. After all, you are innocent until proven guilty.”

James’s eyes widened and he stared at Hackworth.

“But mark my words, James.” Hackworth stood and moved right before him, and now his anger did blaze forth, tightly controlled as it was. “Under my command, there will be no more summary executions. Our present circumstances are extraordinary, and your utility to our nation outweighs the need for immediate justice. But I will not delay judgment on this murder forever, nor will I tolerate any - and I mean *any* - such crimes in the future.”

James met Hackworth's steely, furious glare.

"Do not make the mistake of thinking your importance to Blue Light negates your need to follow the law enshrined in our nation's constitution or that you can violate our military's proud code of ethics with impunity. I thought you were far, far better than this, Captain. I am beyond disappointed, and only hope that time and your continued service to our nation will convince me that I'm making the right decision here today."

"Yes, sir," whispered James.

For a moment longer, Hackworth glared at him, then finally he stepped back. "Do not speak of this matter outside your squad, command them to remain equally silent, and refer any queries to me. Now, get back to work. We've an order of magnitude more Nem3s to kill tomorrow."

"Yes, sir." James hesitated. Tried to think of an apology that was worth a damn, but everything sounded weak. So he simply inclined his head, moved to the door, then paused. "Sir. I'm going to have to tell Jessica."

Hackworth clenched his jaw, considered, then nodded curtly. "I understand. No one else."

"No one else." James opened the door, stepped outside, closed it behind him.

The hallway was alive with people moving hurriedly to and fro, with the chatter of voices, radios, and echoing laughter coming from the distant lobby. It all felt surreal. James leaned one shoulder against the wall. Saw again Bjørn's mocking dark eyes. Saw Esme's lifeless face.

Had he done the right thing?

His Sola Anima came floated toward him, its miniature ivory mask a picture of concern.

*I feel out of my depth with these matters. Shall we instead go kill demons?*

*That'd be good. But that won't fix this problem.*

*Can you state it for me? Perhaps your framing of the issue will help me understand.*

*I killed Bjørn for the threat he'd pose us in the future. But in our society, folks aren't supposed to take justice into their own hands.*

*Your society. You refer to your world as it was before the invasion?*

*Yeah.*

*That world is transforming into something new. Do its laws apply to the world in which you live today?*

*I want them to. They were good laws.*

*Were they framed with these circumstances in mind?*

*Literally? No. But they were written after a war. The Founders knew about the dangers of battle.*

*But not a global war for your species' survival.*

*No, I guess not that.*

*This is a time of flux. The old is giving way to the new. There are no guarantees that the new will persist for long. You acted to increase the chances of this new world's survival.*

*Yeah.*

*Do you think everyone should act as you did when faced with a threat such as Bjørn?*

*James hesitated. Pondered. Yeah.*

*And that by doing so the world and its people would be improved?*

*Yeah, I guess so. Fundamentally. Folks like Bjørn shouldn't be allowed to use supernatural powers to control others against their will.*

*And the nature of Inspire makes it difficult to detain them indefinitely?*

*I'd say so.*

*Thus it seems to me, ignorant as I am, that you acted for the greater good during a time of legal uncertainty so as to increase the chances of humanity's survival. Your peers may*

*not accept it as such, but morally speaking it would seem you acted correctly.*

James had been staring at the carpet, but at this he looked up and scrutinized the Anima. *You think so?*

It spun its four sword-arms once about its body, a gesture strangely reminiscent of a shrug. *I am without fear of death, the consequent need to reproduce, and all the contingent instincts that are derived from those imperatives, so my opinion is idiosyncratic. But yes. That is my evaluation of this deed. You acted correctly, James, as far as you are capable of discerning. You may yet be legally culpable, but morally you are in the clear.*

James laughed darkly. “Well, that about clears it up then. No need to think about it further.”

*Agreed. I am glad to have been of assistance. What shall we do now? Go kill demons?*

“We’ll have plenty to kill tomorrow. Right now, I need to go tell Jessica what happened, get replacements for my squad, then circle back and make sure everybody’s still on the same page.”

*Alas. Killing demons gives me such sweet, sweet satisfaction.*

“You and me both, bud.”

James found Serenity waiting for him at the end of the hallway. She’d been chewing her thumbnail, and at the sight of him her eyes lit up and she hurried over. “And?”

“Court martialed.”

“You what?” Her face immediately flushed. “I’ll -”

“Someday. Not today.” James took her elbow and guided her back into the lobby. “He’s pissed as a cat in a barrel of beer, but he’s not going to do anything about it now.”

“Of course he’s not. What choice does he have? The whole organization would fall apart if he touched you.” She turned him around. “You know this is *your* group, right? If

Hackworth moves against you, two-thirds of Blue Light would look to you for orders.”

“Maybe. But that’s not the point. I want people working together, Serenity. Not drawing lines in the sand. But whatever, I’m off the hook for now. Do me a favor?”

“Go kick Bjørn’s corpse?”

“No. Find the others, tell them to not talk about this. Anyone asks about Bjørn and Becca, we’re to refer them to Hackworth.”

Serenity nodded reluctantly. “Fine. Where you going?”

“To tell Jessica. Please find the others before they start talking.”

“I think they’re all up in Olaf’s room. #3445. I’ll go talk to them now.”

“Thanks.”

He descended to the parking lot, emerged onto the first level, and found the place even more changed than before. New walls of beguiling metallic green were up, partitioning the area into large zones, with signs clearly pointing out where Battle Engineers and War Smiths were supposed to go, along with others with arrows pointing toward stairwells and elevators guiding Domestics and Structuralists below.

A large placard was set up beside the elevator banks, with a list of names set alongside different bands of color. Looking down, James saw the same-colored stripes painted along the floor, branching into different directions as they reached intersections.

“Smart,” he muttered. Jessica had her own color band: bright yellow. He set off after it, passed through two intersections, then reached the same large corner she’d occupied before, but now afforded privacy by the new walls and with huge shelving units along the sides.

“James.” Jessica was waving her mechanicus over a container of heavenly diamond. “One second.”

James crossed his arms and stepped to the side of the doorway to watch. Jessica focused intently on the diamond, and the glow from her mechanicus washed over the pile. When it finally dimmed, she straightened and frowned down at the gleaming rubble. “I’m trying to improve the purification process so that denser diamond remains after I phase out the impurities. Getting there, but...”

“What’s the benefit of density?”

She slid her mechanicus into her belt and turned to him. “The denser the diamond, the more we can force into a transformation, resulting in more powerful - what’s wrong?”

James guessed his face wasn’t as impassive as he’d hoped. “I shot Bjørn.”

Jessica froze, eyes widening, and then she moved past him to close the door. “He’s dead?”

“Yeah. He used his power on me during a fight. Nearly got me and Denzel killed. After, I confronted him. He wouldn’t back down. I saw the way things were going, so I shot him.” It was easier to say *shot* than *killed* or *executed*. “So I killed him.”

Jessica stared at him for a moment, taking this in. “Becca?”

“Gone.”

“Hackworth?”

“Threatened me with a court martial one day, but not today.”

“The rest of the team?”

“Upset. Mostly with me. But we’re down two and they’re raw about it. Don’t blame them.”

Jessica licked her lower lip then bit it. He watched her expression avidly, searching for clues, hints as to how she felt.

Finally she sighed, walked back to her huge desk, and sat on its edge. “All right. We’d better get you those new recruits.



Cindy can help you out there. She's back from setting up Fabricator recruitment stations in the Bronx."

"That's it? All right?"

"Yes." Jessica's tone was precise. "Remember how you said you trusted me? I trust you. From everything I've seen of you, James, from day one, you've proven yourself to be a good man. If you felt it necessary to kill Bjørn after giving him that first chance, then I trust you did so for a good reason. That's enough for me."

Relief flooded him more powerfully than he'd expected. He'd wanted Hackworth to understand but *needed* Jessica to. Somehow, he just couldn't imagine continuing this fight without her.

"Good," he rasped. "Glad to hear it."

She studied him. "You need to find a way to process this. You can't let it eat you up inside."

The Sola Anima bobbed. "We can kill demons together. Reach equanimity through violence."

Jessica laughed. "OK, so I made a murderbot. Great."

"Demon-murderbot," said the Anima. "That could be my name?"

"No," said James.

The Anima dipped in disappointment.

"Seriously. You need to take care of yourself."

"I know." James pushed off the wall. "I'll look into that. One day."

She frowned and shook her head. "There's nothing more tiresome than the tough guy routine."

"Then I'll look into it after the Fourth Wave. Right now, I've got to find Cindy and get those new recruits. Where she at?"

"I'll page her." Jessica paused. "James. I really am on your side. You don't need to doubt me."

For a moment, they stood thus, holding each other's gaze, and then James inclined his head. "Thanks."

"Let me page Cindy. She's around here somewhere."

James watched Jessica as she grabbed her radio from her desk and raised it to her lips. Her acceptance of what had happened allowed him to square away Bjørn's death. He inhaled, straightened his shoulders, and gave himself a nod.

Time to put Bjørn behind him.

There were other things to focus on now.

## Chapter 28:

### Interviews

“I’ve really fallen down the rabbit hole here,” said Cindy, smiling up at James from where she sat at her computer. “But in many ways this is still simpler than running fantasy conventions. No prima donna Hollywood guests, no switching schedules, and dealing with a few thousand people instead of a hundred. Still.” She typed into the command window and brought up the search function. “Despite all the moving pieces, Star Boy’s created this lovely database that does most the work. What are we looking for?”

“Replacements for Inspire and Dark Vision.”

“Those were Bjørn and Becca, weren’t they?” She suddenly looked stricken. “They fall in battle?”

“Something like that.”

Cindy studied him for a moment then decided not to pursue it. “All right let’s see. Smite is the biggest overall category, but only a quarter of Smiters went Dark Vision. That leaves us with seventy-five candidates, as we’ve had some luck recently forming new squads.” Cindy hesitated. “As well as needing to patch holes. What sort of person are we looking for? Male, female, age, etc.?”

“We can drill down that much?”

“To a degree.”

James thought of Becca. Acerbic, confident, brash. How she’d always felt outside the team, to a degree, and latched on to Bjørn so quickly. “Team player. Someone who’s going to work with us, lift us up, be a good influence.”

“Hmm.” Cindy tapped her lip. “Good influence. Let’s see.” She scrolled through the names, then stopped. “Oh! Kerim might be perfect for you. Let’s see... here he is. Kerim Alakuşoğlu. Forty-two, visiting professor at Columbia

University, Novitiate 2, went Smite, Dark Vision, Shadow Step.”

“Shadow Step?” James considered. “Good mobility. What brings him to mind?”

“He’s very striking, for one thing.” Cindy sat back and sighed. “Very handsome man, very dignified. But a profoundly good man, you know? Which is a weird thing to say about a person, especially as I don’t know him, but you get the impression right off. Very educated, very thoughtful, but he has this... I don’t know. Not reserve, but this old-school dignity. You should just meet him.”

“OK, sure. What about Inspire?”

Cindy tapped on the keyboard a few times. “What are we looking for?”

“Same again.” Bjørn’s saturnine features appeared in his mind’s eye, his powerful, dour personality, his sociopathic tendencies, his arrogance and scorn. “Someone nice.”

“Someone nice. Someone nice.” Cindy searched through the database, frowning. “Oh, Kimmie’s an Inspire. Where is she? Here. Kimmie Baum. Twenty-three, was a yoga instructor, worked at a rock climbing gym, went Bless, Inspire, Holy Zeal. She’s like a ray of sunshine.”

“Ray of sunshine sounds good.”

“I think you’ll be really happy with them both. Kerim and Kimmie are real steals. They’re on the premises right now. Let me call them down.”

“Sure. How about you ask them to meet me in... I don’t know. Conference room #3? The small one past the business center? Let’s do them one at a time. Kerim first?”

“Sounds good. I’ll let you know when he’s on his way.”

“Thanks, Cindy.” James smiled at her. “You’re the best.”

“The best?” asked the Anima, who’d been hovering silently behind James’s shoulder the whole time. “That is incredibly impressive.”

James chuckled. “That she is. Let’s go, partner.”

He grabbed a cup of coffee en route, and then entered the little conference room, grabbed a chair, and slumped back. Sipped till Cindy paged him that Kerim was inbound, and a few moments later there was a polite but firm knock on the door.

“Come in.”

Kerim was as elegant and dignified as Cindy had said. Tall, poised, with a coffee-colored wrap around his shoulders and a pair of slender spectacles balanced on his nose, he had the air of a medieval scholar, a man who’d traveled the world describing all the far-fetched wonders he’d discovered. Lean, with a mass of chocolatey-black curls about his head and a trimmed beard, he closed the door and entered. “Mr. Kelly? Ms. Robinson said you wished to speak with me.”

“Take a seat,” said James, gesturing to a chair across the table. “Crimson Hydra lost a few folks today, and we’re looking to get replacements as soon as possible. Cindy spoke highly of you.”

“Ms. Robinson is too kind.” Kerim sat, smoothed down his shirt, and studied James in turn, his gaze lively, curious. “So this is an interview?”

“Of sorts. No need for a resume.” James sat up, prompted to better posture by Kerim’s own alert poise. “Just seeing if we’ll get along. Tell me about yourself.”

“Very well. My name is Kerim Alakuşoğlu, and I am - or was - the Robert Yik-Fong Tam Professor in Humanities at Columbia University, where I taught comparative literature and poetry.”

His accent was curious, refined, polished, but subtly inflected in a way that made him sound foreign.

“Visiting from where?”

“Most recently out of Frankfurt, Germany, where I’d been living this past decade. I was born and raised in Istanbul but found the political climate growing too repressive to remain.” He frowned gently. “Certain religious

fundamentalists took objection with one of my poetry collections. I wrote openly about the Armenian genocide, and a criminal case was opened against me. Ultimately, I was forced to pay a fine for having insulted the honor of various gentlemen, and that was sufficient for me. I left for Germany and have only returned home a handful of times.”

James tried to make sense of this. It felt as if he stood at the brink of a gulf whose depths he couldn't understand. He hadn't even known there'd been an Armenian genocide. “You wrote those poems knowing you'd get in trouble?”

Kerim's smile grew pained. “I wrote them hoping I wouldn't. Trusting that the liberal foundation of our republic would prove strong enough to resist the temptation, but alas.”

“And how'd you come to be Novitiate 2? I'd have thought a professor would have just hidden in his office and waited this all out.”

“Some, perhaps. But I have spent my life writing about virtue and its crucibles. It did not seem to me, when this apocalypse began, that I could hide while others fought and not consider myself a hypocrite. So I ventured forth and was fortunate to join with a group of students who had seen one of your earlier videos. We all placed our points in Fanaa, and more by good fortune than anything else were able to advance quickly.”

“Fanaa?”

“I am a cultural Muslim, if not a practicing one, but that was sufficient, apparently, for my sheet to appear differently from that of Christians. Fanaa is the rough equivalent of your 'arete'. It is a term from Sufism which means the annihilation of self before Allah, whereby the self becomes the instrument of Allah's plan in the world.”

“Fascinating,” said James. “Do you have Aeviternum?”

Kerim smiled at James's enthusiasm. “I have Haal points. Haal is another Sufi term for a temporary state of enlightenment and transcendence, a gift from Allah over which man has no control. Even nonbelievers are said to be

capable of experiencing haal, as it is a gift that stems from Allah's overabundance of divine grace."

"That's awesome." James hesitated and then waved his hand. "I mean no disrespect, obviously."

"None taken. I am not a mystic and find these terms fascinating and strange as well."

"Benedictions?"

"Karama."

"But you have an Aura?"

"We call it Naf."

"That's... wow." James sat back. "What kind of intelligence is controlling all this? To know enough about... what did you call it? Sufism? And whom to apply it to?"

Kerim spread his hands. "That is a question being debated around the world. The simplest answer might be correct: Allah."

"But..." James frowned. "Why would Allah do this to us?"

"A question that echoes throughout our holy texts. There is a prophet in the Quran known as Job who is tested yet remains steadfast in his faith. He does not understand why he is being made to suffer, but his form of grace lies in not seeking to understand. He remains steadfast in his faith, perseveres, and is rewarded."

"So you're saying we shouldn't ask questions?"

Kerim shrugged. "It is human nature to ask, and I am not a secular poet, not a pious man. But when all we are faced with is mystery, I think you must either choose faith or embrace ignorance. Speculation is fruitless."

"Yeah, I can see that." James mulled this over. "All right, yeah. So, Shadow Step. Why didn't you go with Black Apotheosis?"

"To be honest? The idea frightened me. Already I feel myself greatly removed from the man I was but a month or

two ago. If I were to take on a demonic form of shadow and fire? I, Kerim Alakuşoğlu, would cease to exist.”

“But Shadow Step works for you?”

“It does indeed.” Again Kerim smiled his quiet smile. “It has offered me great versatility in the field, as I believe the military call it, and at night I am impossible to pin down.”

“Great.” James realized he’d already made his decision. “You want in with Crimson Hydra?”

Kerim laughed huskily. “Is that a rhetorical question? It would be an honor.”

James extended his hand. “Then welcome aboard.”

Kerim shook his hand, grip firm, his palm smooth. “Thank you.”

“I’ll introduce you to the others soon, and after we have a day working together, well, I’ve something big to tell you. If you’re fine with that, you’ll be a full member. In the meantime, I’ve got one more spot to fill.”

Kerim stood. “I’ll await your call in my room, then. Good evening, Mr. Kelly, and thank you again.”

James sat back, bemused, as the poet left the conference room. Cindy had been right. The man possessed a rare dignity and poise that made James feel educated and smart just for being around him. James grinned. The man would be a good influence, there was no doubt of that.

He called Cindy, who paged Kimmie, and a minute later there was another knock on the door, a friendly rat-a-tat-tat, and the door cracked open immediately so that Kimmie could peer inside, her smile tentative but warm. “Mr. Kelly?”

“Kimmie, hey, come on in and take a seat.”

She did so, slipping in sideways through the cracked door and closing it behind her. She was short, lively, her energy fresh and her hazel eyes gleaming with good humor. She wore a green military cap atop her bouncy head of pale blonde curls, and a pair of blue jean overalls over a long-sleeved white shirt. Snub nosed, freckled, with striking dark



eyebrows that contrasted sharply with her nearly white hair, she smiled at him, bobbed her head and slipped smoothly into Kerim's chair.

“Can I just say before we get started that it's really, really great to actually get to meet you?” She beamed. “I'm going to gush a little bit, but seriously, what you've done here is *amazing*. Blue Light, setting everything up, the patrols, the way we've already cleared out all the symbols in New York while so many other places are struggling? Super impressive. And your TikTok video about Aura was like, a literal godsend. I'd no idea what I was doing, other than I had to do *something*, and then you appeared in that *amazing* outfit and just told me what to do.” She shook her head in wonder. “And so I just got out there and did it. So. Thank you.”

James didn't know whether to laugh or blush. “It's nothing. Glad the video helped.”

“What happened to that fur coat though? You looked so good in it. Like... I don't know, an avenging angel sent from the heart of Burning Man.”

“Burning Man?”

“You never went? I only got out there once, but it was so mind blowing. Just... well. Guess it won't be happening for a while yet.”

“What won't?”

“Burning Man. This festival that was held every year out in the desert in Nevada.”

“No, I'm thinking it'll be a while till it does, if ever.”

“If ever?” Kimmie sat back. “Are you kidding me? People are going to be celebrating like crazy when we win this thing. It'll be Burning Man nonstop.”

“You think we're going to win?”

She raised both dark brows. “Do I think we're going to win? Of course we're going to win.”

James smiled. “I like your confidence.”

“You don’t?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Well, take it from me. Humanity’s got this one in the bag. I’m not saying it won’t be hard, that billions won’t die, but... yeah. I just know we’re going to win. In the end. Nothing can stop us.”

For a moment, they just sat thus, Kimmie beaming at James, until he chuckled and shook his head. “All right, I like your version better. Tell me about yourself.”

“Oh man. Where to begin? The short version. I’m from North Carolina, grew up in the Blue Ridge Mountains on a horse farm. Perfect childhood, my moms allowed me to pretty much run wild. But I broke their hearts when I told them I wanted to go to college in New York. So I came here, enrolled in the New School, and started teaching yoga at the studio on Broadway and 43<sup>rd</sup>. Also got a job at Climb Extreme gym, where I completely fell in love with rock climbing. Before this went down, you could find me there almost every evening. Such a cool crew. I guess I was growing tired of yoga. Been doing it since I was six. Which I love, and I honor the practice, but rock climbing is so *fun*.”

“Never done it,” said James.

“Anyway, then the apocalypse happened, and I took Bless - maybe because of my yoga background, actually, you know, Namaste y’all. And Inspiration seemed like the perfect fit, as I’ve always felt called to inspire others, or help them find their path, either on the mat, up a wall, or just in life. And then Holy Zeal just felt right. I don’t know why. Terrify was out, obviously, and Arete Font just felt too passive. So. Here I am.”

James shook his head in amazement. “You’re nothing like the last Inspire teammate we had.”

Complex emotions flickered through Kimmie’s hazel eyes. “I’m sorry. Were you guys close?”

“No, not really. My comparison was a good thing. How do you use Inspiration? What role do you see yourself playing

in a team, in this new world of ours?”

“I mean, the name’s right there on the can, right? Inspiration? My job is to get people to do their best, to feel their strongest, to give folks hope.”

“Yeah? How do you do that?”

“Can I use my power on you for a moment?”

James hesitated, seeing Bjørn’s dark gaze in his mind’s eye for a second, then nodded reluctantly. “Sure.”

“OK.” Kimmie inhaled deeply then smiled. “**Despite everything, you’re doing your best and it’s fantastic.**”

Her power washed over him. But where Bjørn’s had been a leaden hand reaching into his mind to wrest control, from Kimmie he felt a golden surge of wellbeing and an elevating sense of confidence. It felt like that moment when you step out of a cold stairwell into the sunlight and raise your face to the warmth. Weight James hadn’t even realized he’d been carrying seemed to lighten, and tension left his shoulders.

“See?” Kimmie’s smile was infectious. “Inspire. It’s like we’re all in a yoga class. I’ve found that the more Hallmark I get, the better. It’s super cheesy, but it works. Things are so dark, so intense right now. A little boost of goodness can make a world of difference.”

“Yeah, I can see that.” The warmth was still there, but James could tell now how it would slowly subside. He gave a surprised laugh. “That felt really good.”

Kimmie shrugged both shoulders high about her ears and grinned. “Even though I know we’re going to win, I also know it’s going to be really hard. I’m an optimist, but that doesn’t mean I’m hopelessly naive. So, yeah. Inspire can really help a team stay focused, stay positive, and believe in themselves and humanity.”

“You’re hired,” grinned James. He hadn’t realized just how much harder Bjørn had been making things till this moment. Instead of being a net positive, he’d been a threat, a drain on James’s resources and the team’s overall vibe. “If you want it.”

“Yes!” Kimmie leaped to her feet with a little fist pump. “That’s fantastic! Thank you! Wow!”

James laughed. “C’mon. We’ll let Cindy know, then I’ll introduce you to the others. We need to get ready. Tomorrow’s the Third Wave. I’ll have something big to tell you when the day’s over, and if you’re OK with it, you’ll be a full member.”

“Mysterious,” said Kimmie, then beamed. “But I’m sure we’ll be ready for tomorrow. I guarantee it.”

## Chapter 29:

**#dontlookdontdie**

**69 days till Pits open**

James dismissed the countdown as the elevator doors opened on the Marriott's Presidential Suite. Emerging into the entrance hall, the Anima hovering just behind his shoulder and Kimmie and Kerim in tow, James realized that the whole top floor of the Marriott was this suite, a gorgeous series of rooms with honey-red hardwood flooring, cream walls with accents, and fancy looking furniture.

The sound of a TV being played from the large room beyond was all he could hear. A news report.

"Hey, everyone," he called, leading the way into the living room. "What's...?"

Crimson Hydra was seated on a massive L-shaped couch, everyone staring fixedly at the TV where a CNN reporter was standing outside a hospital. The crew's faces registered different degrees of shock.

"The president's dead," said Serenity, tearing her eyes away from the screen.

"He's what?" James drifted up behind the couch. On the screen the reporter was talking earnestly into his mic, but the anchor cut in with an apologetic smile.

"Apologies, but we've received word that President Cox has entered the press room in the White House. We're going there now."

The screen changed to a different camera, one of no doubt dozens trained on a lectern set before a blue wall on which the White House was displayed in the center of a sober oval, the whole of it flanked by American flags and white pillars.

“Holy shit,” said James as President Cox emerged amidst much flash photography to stand behind the lectern.

*Divine excrement is your favorite thing. I love this world. So weird.*

“My fellow Americans. All I have I would have given gladly to not be standing here today. A great man, a great leader, and a great friend has been struck down by the nefarious and demonic forces that assail our nation even as I speak. John Murphy will live on forever in the words, deeds, and accomplishments that made him such a beloved figure in our nation, and he leaves behind in the minds and memories of mankind a single indomitable message that I will do my utmost to uphold: we shall not surrender, we shall not bend knee, we shall fight from shore to shore, from home to heartland, and cleanse our nation of these foul demonic beings.”

Serenity raised the remote and turned the TV off.

“How did they get to the president?” asked Jason, rubbing his hand over his buzzcut. “He should have been the most secure person in the world.”

“They got to him,” said Serenity, tone sober, cold.

Yadriel clucked his tongue. “Yo, man, he should have gone down into that missile silo place, Conrad.”

“NORAD,” said Jason reflexively. “But demons must be appearing down there, too.”

“I just spoke to him,” said James, trying to wrap his mind around the death. “A few days ago. Hackworth and I.”

Denzel wrapped an arm around the back of the couch to turn and stare up at them. “Who’d you bring?”

James wrested his mind away from the death. “Yeah, sorry. Everyone, this is Kerim, our new Dark Vision, and this is Kimmie, our new Inspire.”

“Hi, everyone,” said Kimmie with a little wave. “Talk about the worst time in the world to be introduced to y’all.”

Olaf rose to his prodigious height and forced a smile. “Welcome to Crimson Hydra! I will fetch drinks.”

“Smart man,” said Serenity, still looking a little dazed.

“A pleasure to meet you all,” said Kerim, bowing his head.

Everybody introduced themselves. Olaf returned with an open bottle of wine and a handful of glasses. “All I could find.”

Joanna went to fetch more glasses. Olaf poured a finger in each, and everybody took up a glass.

“Sorry, I’m still thrown by the news.” James rubbed the base of his palm into his eye. “This is a weird war we’re in. One moment we’re drinking wine in the Presidential Suite, the next we’re on the streets killing demons. If I stop and think about the sheer scale of the misery out there, it’s too much. It’s all too much. The only thing that makes it remotely doable is standing with good people. Knowing that good people depend on you and being able to depend on them in turn.”

Nods all around.

“We’ve been through hard times, all of us. As individuals and as a group. We’re figuring out how to be a team. How to work together. And I’m glad to say that with Kerim and Kimmie we’re one step closer to making that happen.” James turned to consider them. “They’re good people. I think they’re gonna make a huge impact on our crew. Welcome, both of you. Welcome to Crimson Hydra.”

“Welcome,” everyone chorused. They clinked glasses and drank.

“Thanks,” said Kimmie. “Can I ask something? Of all of you? I’ve got this Benediction, Inspire, which allows me to influence emotions, feelings, even encourage people to do stuff.”

Expressions around the group darkened.

“And I like to use it to boost folks up, to make the mood better. But not without y’all giving me your permission first.

So.” She smiled tentatively. “Can I try to help us out here a little bit?”

“Sure,” said James decisively.

Serenity raised an eyebrow at him. “Well, if James says so... sure. This time.”

Slowly everybody agreed, many of them glancing at James, but finally the agreement was total.

“Great. So.” Kimmie took a deep breath. “I used to close my yoga sessions with something like this, but I’ll adapt it a bit. The light inside me sees and recognizes the light inside you. **May you be happy. May you be well. May you be safe. May you be at peace and at ease.**”

Kimmie’s words rolled over them like a beachcomber made of soft glowing golden warmth. Before its gentle power James felt his doubts and stress ease, his concern, his guilt, his fears melt away. They didn’t disappear, but rather became less pressing, loosened their grip on his mind. A sensation of wellbeing filled him, of being in the right place and doing the right thing.

“Wow,” said Denzel. “Bjørn was holding this out on us all this time?”

Olaf grinned. “Now that is what I call Inspiring!”

“Thank you,” said Joanna, moving forward to give Kimmie a light hug. “That was so needed.”

“Aww,” said Kimmie, hugging Joanna back and then beaming at everyone. “I’m glad that helped a little.”

“Shit, I ain’t felt this fucking cheerful in weeks,” groused Yadriel.

Kimmie frowned at him, confused, but then laughed when Yadriel proved unable to resist a crooked grin.

With the tension broken, everybody sat on the huge couch once more, Kimmie choosing to sit cross-legged on the floor while James claimed an armchair. For a while they simply spoke about normal things: who they’d been before, what they’d done and why. Kerim proved to be an excellent



listener; he gave whomever was talking his undivided attention, nodding and asking great questions that caused folks to open up more about themselves.

Serenity rustled up another bottle of wine, and the atmosphere had relaxed even more when James's phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Star Boy here. We've got a problem."

James sat forward. "What's up?"

"Go on TikTok and search for #dontlookdontdie."

"Just tell me what that means."

The rest of the conversation had stopped. Everybody was listening in.

"It's a new movement. Started up this afternoon and it's exploded in popularity. A bunch of videos were shared of folks going to the security intersections and dying. This guy spliced a quick cut of them all, then ended his video with his own account. He hid in his closet and the Nem3 ignored him and left. Now he's saying that everyone's best bet is to do the same, that if you don't look at the demon it'll leave you alone."

"Fuck," said James. "And people believe this?"

"It lines up with Nem2 behavior," said Star Boy. "But yeah. A ton of people are posting anecdotal evidence about it working, and everyone who's saying it doesn't are being blasted."

"What's going on?" asked Serenity.

James lowered the phone momentarily. "Misinformation campaign. Some idiot is saying the Nem3s can't hurt you if you don't look at them."

"We need you to put out a video asap," said Star Boy. "Can you come on down?"

"Sure, be right there." He hung up and stood. "Excuse me. Gotta go put out a video."

“Why would someone put out such a video?” asked Joanna.

“I don’t think it’s malicious,” said James. “Sounds like someone got lucky and is trying to help. But now it’s gone viral and everyone’s saying the best thing to do is stay home and not look at it.”

“That’s not good,” said Denzel.

“Yo, it’s like survival of the fittest.” Yadriel leaned back. “Idiots who believe that kind of shit will be removed from the gene pool, am I right?”

“No, Yadriel,” said Serenity coldly. “You’re not right.”

“Excuse me,” said James. He descended to the lobby and made his way through the crowd into the grand ballroom. Most of the soldiers were discussing the president’s death, Cox’s viability as a commander in chief, but Star Boy was laser focused on the TikTok issue.

“Look here,” he said as James walked up. “See the trend lines? This shit’s getting picked up everywhere. It’s even been cross posted onto Instagram and Twitter.”

James leaned down to watch as Star Boy clicked through a series of posts. One showed a girl demonstrating how to step into a closet, close the door, crouch and cover your head. #dontlookdontdie. Another was a guy packing his suitcase, faux-cheerful, holding a map of his designated intersection, only to have his roommate show up dressed as an angel and point him toward the closet. #dontlookdontdie. A third was a guy ranting as he strode around what looked like Boston, pointing out a slaughter in one cross-street and calling out the government and Blue Light for being murderous idiots.

“Jesus,” said James.

“It gets worse. There’s a sub-conspiracy popping up now called The Culling which posits that the Illuminati or whomever is doing this to kill the last good and independent minded people. You want to really blow your brains out, search for #CullingTruth on any platform. It’s getting wild out there.”

James rubbed at his beard. “You think they’ll listen to me?”

Star Boy sat back with a sigh. “Maybe? I don’t know. Blue Light’s gone institutional, so we’ve lost that rogue element trust we had before. But it’s worth a shot.”

“Fuck me.” James sighed. “Sure. But what am I going to say?”

“Dude, far be it from me to tell you. Just go with what feels right, you know? Give ‘em that honest straight talk.”

“Fine. Let’s find a quiet corner.”

Five minutes later it was done. James called out the conspiracies, explained how Nem3s were just as likely to kill you as not, and how they were different from Nem2s that had just wanted to get to the hives.

Star Boy uploaded it, and then the hate started rolling in.

“Whoa,” said Star Boy, watching the comment thread on Instagram explode.

“OK, OK, emojis, some positive comments, now, whoops, someone telling you to fuck off, here’s some thumbs up emojis, someone asking for you to put on a fur coat, OK, this guy’s calling you a government stooge, another guy...”

“What?”

“OK, not nice, saying you’ve got the blood of millions on your hands due to your lies. And... sell out, liar, that you’re responsible for... genocide? OK, hold up.” Star Boy clicked around, checked different accounts. “Looks like somebody had bots ready for your next post which triggered a bunch of influential attacks. Uh... why?”

“Great.” James felt a sinking sensation in his gut. “So that didn’t work out.”

“Not as planned, no.” Star Boy tapped his fingers on the table. “Well, shit.”

“I thought you were a gamer,” said James. “How do you handle something like this?”

“Normally? Either you don’t feed the trolls, or you try to out-troll them. None of which would work in our position.”

The Anima, which had been watching all this silently, floated forward. “Don’t despair. Come tomorrow, the Third Wave will prove conclusively that you were right!”

“So cool,” said Star Boy, admiring the Anima. “But a little morbid. What’s your name?”

“People call me Kames Jelly.”

“They don’t fucking call you Kames Jelly,” said James. “And if these people hide in their damned closets, they won’t be able to get together in groups of one hundred in time.” James felt a mounting fury in his chest. “Don’t they remember what happened in the Nem1 Second Wave?”

Star Boy sat back, looking nonplussed.

“How big is the Third Wave?” asked James.

“We don’t have an exact number.” Star Boy’s voice had grown quiet. “But it’s in the low millions in NYC alone.”

“Fuck,” whispered James. “Fuck. Time for a second video.”

“I wouldn’t advise it.”

“Better it not work than not try.” James raised his phone. “Listen up, I don’t care what you believe or don’t believe. I’m still the same guy who got this all started way back when, and I’m telling you straight, you need to get with a hundred other people when your time comes or you *will* die. Remember the Nem1 Second Wave, people. If you insist on hiding in a fucking closet then find a huge closet a hundred people can hide in. But if you’re smart, get to an intersection, and Blue Light will blow the Nem3s to kingdom come the second they show up. It’s your life, but don’t be a dumb ass.”

“I liked it,” said the Anima. “Emotional. Sincere. Forthright.”

“It was something,” said Star Boy. “But what the hell, worth a shot.”

James set the video to upload. “There. Did my best. Now the cards fall where they may.”

## **Chapter 30:**

### **Gearing Up**

#### **68 days till Pits open**

Might as well have been a lifetime. James dismissed the countdown as the elevator doors opened and he led Crimson Hydra out into the parking lot. Jessica had worked through the night to set up a new system, and each squad was to pass through in order to gather equipment before heading out to their intersections.

The parking lot was barely recognizable at this point. Foot traffic was intense, and overhead speakers announced messages and requests like at an airport.

“Shipment of divine diamond has arrived at Loading Bay 3.”

“Team Blue Hydra has completed quota for their night shift. Congrats team, be sure to mark your points on the board before clocking out.”

“3<sup>rd</sup> level Apprentice War Smith requested in Floor 3, Zone 2.”

The original cement walls were no longer visible; Structuralist walls compartmentalized everything, their surfaces glowing metallic green like the iridescent backs of a beetles.

A familiar face was waiting by the elevator, tablet in hand. “Mr. Kelly!”

“Mark, was it?”

“Yes, sir.” The young man had been a DRC assistant, or something. Was part of the first wave of government employees that Jessica had swiped. He was obviously pleased

to have been remembered. “We’re ready for you, if you’ll step this way?”

Mark led them out of the immediate lobby-like area, down a hallway with colored strips running along the floor, and into a large space with a table along each opposite wall. James’s eyes widened at the sight of what lay on the tables: gear.

On one side lay swords, axes, spears, maces, all kinds of weapons. Chest plate armor, helmets, the parts for your arms and legs. At the very end of the lengthy table were a half dozen Sola Animas in their dormant form, and then on the wall hung what looked like hundreds of rune amulets. The other table was covered in military gear, ranging from crates of ammo and magazines to guns, rifles, military vests, and helmets.

He’d hoped Jessica would be present, but instead Mark handed them off to another lady who summoned their squad’s profile on her tablet and beamed at them.

“Welcome, Crimson Hydra, and it’s an honor to meet you, sir.”

It took James a moment to realize she was addressing him. “Oh, yeah. Uh - thanks.”

Her smile widened as if he’d just said the most perfect thing. “You’ve got a rare code gold, which means your team is free to pick whatever you think appropriate for your upcoming mission. Just check out with me before leaving.”

“Wait, anything?” asked Serenity.

“Well, yes, but we ask that you be mindful of the other teams that have yet to pass through. Please take only what you think you’ll need.”

“Oh, goody,” said Serenity. “Christmas has come early!”

“My friends, if I may?” Olaf stepped toward the medieval weapons. “I have some experience with this. HEMA has taught me a little, though nobody can say they know how real the way we fight today is to the way it used to be.”

Everybody clustered around him, eyeing the weapons.

“Most first students at HEMA want the exciting weapons, the sexy weapons,” said Olaf, his expression turning severe. “To this I say: no! It takes much training to learn to use a sword. That is why I recommend the spear.” He took one up, gripped it in both hands and studied its construction. Sighted down its length to check out how straight it was, then ran a thumb over the leaf-shaped blade.

“Very good. Has some flexibility.” He shook it again, and the body flexed. “But light, strong, sharp. With a spear you keep your enemy far from you. Nem3s have big sword arms, so possible they cut through spear, but better than they cutting through you, yah?” He beamed, delighted, and Kimmie was the only one who smiled back, though it clearly took effort.

“Now see here.” He touched the crossbar two feet below the spearhead. “This is good. This common in boar-hunting spear. Can anybody tell me why?”

James recalled his experiment with rebar all too well. “Keeps the demon from sliding up the spear to get at you.”

“Yes! Very good, Mr. Kelly. Gold star. But see how they set the bar two feet down? A lot of room for demon to get steel deep in belly. Quick lesson. Hold spear like this. Legs comfortable, hip width apart. Don’t throw your spear. You will lose it and don’t know how to throw straight. Instead, poke! Poke poke poke. Back away. More pokey-poke. If Nem3 coming at you fast, and you must use spear, stick the butt in the ground, yes? In hole, against crack, something, then hold. Setting for charge. Nem3 will impale itself on spear. Then you run away.”

Olaf beamed at them.

“Yo man, I kind of want this guy,” said Yadriel, moving to where a truly medieval weapon lay. It was a metal sphere the size of a grapefruit with spikes emerging from all over its head. A thick chain ran to a metal bar the length of James’s forearm, with a textured grip running down its length.



“No.” Olaf made a peremptory gesture with his hand. “Bad idea. You more likely hit your head than demon. Very hard to use. No.”

“Yeah, but.” Yadriel picked up the morning star. “It’s got my name all over it.”

“I’ll take a spear,” said Kimmie with an apologetic smile, and took one up. “Pokey-poke.”

Everyone else picked a spear except for Serenity.

“So, excuse me?” The lady waved her hand. “Once you claim your weapon, it should appear on your statistics sheet. That’ll show it’s officially been registered.”

James pulled up his sheet. A new field had appeared at the bottom:

### **Equipment: Dawn Spear, Level 1**

“Why’s it called a Dawn Spear?” asked Joanna.

“The ‘dawn’ classification is one of the first type of weapons a War Smith can make,” said the lady. “Its strength varies throughout the day. It offers a +2 to Power from 6 a.m. to 9, then +1 for the rest of the day, and loses all bonuses while remaining a well-built spear during the night.”

“Huh,” said James, looking his spear up and down. “This’ll give my Smite a boost, then.”

“Oh, Mr. Kelly? Ms. Miles asked me to make sure you got this.” The assistant pulled a blanket-wrapped bundle out from behind her lectern. “She apologizes that she can’t give it to you herself, but she’s dealing with logistics up in Queens. This was made by Samantha Haight, our highest ranked War Smith. Jessica put in the request personally.

“Very exciting,” said Olaf, rubbing his hands. “Open it up.”

James took the bundle. It was oddly shaped, a weapon, obviously. Peeling back the blanket, he uncovered a large axe,

the blade made of pure divine diamond, the haft of ivory and gold.

“Ooh,” said Kimmie. “So pretty.”

The axe was two feet long, and the lower part of the blade extended down to create a greater cutting edge.

“Ah,” said Olaf, taking the axe from James. “A skeggox. Beautiful, beautiful. This style is called ‘bearded’. See here, the lower part of the blade? This is the beard. Allows axe to remain light by not putting a lot of metal - or diamond - here on the face of the blade.” Olaf frowned at James. “This is a serious weapon. You must be careful.”

“Motherfuckin’ demons better be careful,” said Yadriel, covering his mouth as he stepped back and hunched over. “James gonna be like chippity chop there go your legs, bitches.”

James grinned and took the axe back. Opened his statistics sheet.

**Equipment: Dawn Spear, Level 1**

**Sun Skeggox, Level 2**

“Sun Skeggox,” said the assistant, divining his question before he spoke it. “You can put a little divine power into it to get it to glow, or a lot to make it really bright. Also adds a +5 to your Power.”

“How come James gets all the good stuff?” asked Serenity.

Jason laughed. “Ma’am, you have an M20. I don’t think you should complain.”

James scanned up his sheet:

**Power: 10 (27)**

The urge to give the Sun Skeggox an experimental swing was overwhelming, but he restrained himself; it'd be poor form to cut someone's arm off before the fight even started. Even so, he eased a trickle of divine power into the axe and was rewarded by the diamond blade turning a dull bronze which began to glow with a faint orange light.

"Very impressive," asserted Kerim with a brisk nod. "It is just like being in a game of Dungeons and Dragons, is it not?"

"That's it?" Serenity frowned. "Dull-ass orange?"

"Miracles are wasted on this lady," laughed Denzel.

James eased a little more divine power into the blade, and the glow lightened to a purer candle white. It still paled in luminosity compared to the overhead fluorescent lights, however.

Kerim pushed his spectacles up the bridge of his nose. "I would wager it is effective against demonic darkness." He glanced around. "Don't you think?"

"Yeah," said James. "I'm guessing it is. Someone remind me to get this Ms. Haight a thank you card."

"Dude, it's the apocalypse," said Yadriel. "Let's bust open an ATM and send her a gift basket of like, a million dollars."

"Where would she spend it?" asked Denzel.

"She wouldn't, yo. It's a joke."

"A gift would be nice," said Kimmie. "I'll keep an eye out for something nice."

"Anyways," groused Serenity. "You all got your caveman weapons? Time for rune amulets."

"Second, armor," said Olaf firmly.

"And you and Olaf already have a major amulet each," said James. "Let's not get greedy."

"I'll take some armor," said Jason, glancing at the flak jackets on the other table before reaching for a medieval

breastplate. “One size fits all?”

“They adapt to your frame,” said the assistant with a smile.

Soon they were all attaching backplates and chest plates. They indeed molded smoothly to their bodies, forming smooth shells with a ridge running vertically down the center.

“Very good,” said Olaf. “This deflect attack. If I stab like so, see how tip of my spear slide off to the side?”

“And +2 to Stamina,” said Joanna. “Perfect. I’ve been neglecting that stat.”

“The cuirass is classic,” said Olaf. “That is the name of back and front together. Comes from French, *cuirace*, means ‘leather’.”

“Get your cuirass outta here,” said Yadriel.

“No, not queer ass, *cuirass*,” said Olaf in exasperation.

“Queer nothing,” said Yadriel.

“What’s wrong with being queer?” asked Denzel, his tone tight.

“Nothing, if that’s your thing,” said Yadriel. “Just keep that queer ass shit offa me.”

Denzel glared at Yadriel then visibly let it go.

“Yadriel.” James’s low tone caught the youth’s attention. “No more jokes like that.”

“What?” Yadriel seemed genuinely confused. “I’m not the one calling it a queer ass.”

James held his gaze.

“Oh, so it’s like that? We can’t even make jokes when they’re that easy?” Yadriel held up his hands in mock surrender. “Shit, that’s cool. Crimson Hydra’s woke as hell. I got it.”

James met Serenity’s gaze, and they both glanced at Denzel who’d turned his back on Yadriel to examine a dagger.

“Thanks,” said James, ending that line of conversation.

Soon, everybody was suited up in cuirasses but given how few greaves and vambraces - Olaf knew the names for all the weird armor parts - there were, James suggested they leave the pieces to those who'd benefit from them more.

"This appeals to my soul," said Kerim, stepping up to the wall of rune amulets. "It reminds me of the evil eye talismans that are sold in the markets all over Istanbul. That and a thousand others, each of ever more dubious efficacy."

"These work," said Serenity, pulling hers out to examine it. "Trust me."

"Oh, I do. It just reminded me of home." Kerim ran his fingertips over them, murmuring as he read the labels. "I'll take a greater rune of Speed."

"Stamina for me," said Denzel. "Gotta keep going when you guys start dropping."

"Agility," said Jason. "Helps with controlling my Aura."

"Power, 'course," said Yadriel.

"Hmm." Kimmie tapped her lips. "I suppose Agility. I don't like being hit."

"Power," said James, taking his up. It was the size of his palm and felt solid in his hand. A complex pattern of interweaving lines was painted gold against a black, glossy background. "What's this design? Celtic?"

"Nobody's been able to place it," said the assistant.

"It has some resemblance to Islamic calligraphy," said Kerim, turning his over. "But only slightly. Even the most stylized examples are still legible. This is not."

"If it works, it works," said Serenity from the gun table. "No complaining."

"Not complaining," said Kerim softly, pressing his to his chest. "Just musing."

James pressed his rune to his left shoulder and felt a wave of power wash over him as it melded with his body, sinking through his clothing to momentarily burn his flesh.

“Ow!” said Yadriel, smacking at the inside of his forearm. “Mine’s - oh. Never mind.”

The pain disappeared as quickly as it came. James rubbed the rune. Its ridges were tangible through his jacket.

“How’d it go through clothing like that?” asked Denzel. “That’s some straight-up magic.”

“Not a lot of logic to most of this,” said James, pulling up his stats. “But as Serenity said.”

**Strength: 15 (25)**

**Stamina: 10 (22)**

**Speed: 8 (18)**

**Agility: 5 (15)**

**Power: 10 (33)**

**Arete: 90**

He’d come a long way since this had begun. Arete 90 meant he could get out some six Sacred Strikes or three Heavenly Assaults without needing to resort to Aeviternum. Power 33? That was 2 from the synergy bonus with Strength, 10 from his Anima, 6 from the rune, and 5 from the Sun Skeggox. Madness.

He felt normal, just standing there, but there was a sense of potential, of explosive energy just waiting to be tapped. Add in the Strength 25 and Stamina 22, and he felt like he could fight all day long.

“Shit’s getting real,” said Jason quietly, staring into the air as well. “I’m not saying I’m confident, but I’m not not saying I’m confident, either.”

Serenity sighed and put down an M4. “I got nothing but boring chest armor out of this. We ready to go?”

“I think we are,” said James. “Time to mount up. Kerim, Kimmie, you guys ridden on Angel Wings before?”

“Ooh!” Kimmie clapped her hands excitedly. “No! But I’ve been dying to. They look so amazing. I’m going to get one of my own?”

James couldn’t help but grin even as Serenity rolled her eyes. “Yeah. It’s a loaner.”

“I haven’t,” said Kerim. “But I, too, have hoped to have the opportunity.”

“Well, the opportunity’s arrived.” James smiled gratefully at the assistant as he led the team out. “Let’s go test these new toys of ours.”

# Chapter 31:

## Third Wave

They cruised out to their intersection, the same one as the day before. Kimmie kept looping around on her Wing then apologizing, while Kerim had a stunned smile that just wouldn't go away.

Funny. James was already taking the Wings for granted. Amazing how quickly a body could grow used to something.

The crowd below was large. Easily three times the size of yesterday's, people on their phones, people talking in earnest groups, but when they caught sight of the eight Wings flying into view they let out a ragged cheer.

"They love us!" called Kimmie.

"Well, maybe kinda," replied Serenity. "They appreciate our guns, at any rate."

James did a rough headcount. Some six hundred people, maybe. His heart sank. Six Nem3s, an easy fight, but that meant several thousand people had opted to stay home.

Damn that viral message.

"How long we got?" he called to Yadriel.

"Thirty minutes."

"Maybe more people will show," said Serenity quietly.

"Maybe."

They landed the Wings atop one of the buildings and then set to waiting. Regular National Guard were stationed below, mostly as a show of force and for crowd control if people got restive, but their orders were to clear out five minutes before the Nems showed up.

James's radio chattered. Air support was on once more, and every few minutes some manner of aircraft flew past,



following the circuit. Drones were black specks in the sky, observing everything, and slowly more people filtered in.

But not nearly enough.

Time crawled by.

“We’ve got a long day ahead of us,” he said, capturing everyone’s attention on the rooftop. “Like before, let’s be cagey with our resources. Don’t spend Aeviternum unless you’ve got no choice. Play it smart, stay close, work together.”

Olaf nodded his approval. “And remember Shield codes, yah? Shield Gold? Full semicircle with the 12 o’clock on my spear point. Remember your o’clock. Shield Black? Full circle, each of you taking your o’clock.”

“We’ve got this, team!” Kimmie sounded painfully young, her tension riding close to the surface. “And remember: **we can handle this. We just have to stay calm and positive.**”

James felt the tension ease, felt his hopes rise. He knew it was Kimmie’s Benediction, but it felt so good, so easy to just relax a fraction and ground himself.

Denzel blew out his cheeks and rubbed his hands together.

Joanna stretched and then grinned. “You’re the best, Kimmie.”

“Aw, thank you!”

“Let’s climb,” said James. “Make sure we’re low enough that Yadriel and Kerim get counted for their hundred.”

Their Wings lifted off and they drifted out into the sky. The National Guard was hustling away. The crowd was growing restive, but the sight of Crimson Hydra moving into position seemed to calm them down.

The minutes crawled by, Yadriel counting them off.

“We have Communal Deadeye,” called Olaf.

“Bless Green,” said James, and a moment later his stats all bumped up by +3, bringing his Power to 36.

“Here we go, yo,” Yadriel called at last. “Ten seconds.”

The crowd stirred, throbbed, people pushing against each other, some giving cries of panic. Several at the edges broke and ran.

“Five,” called Yadriel. “Batter up!”

**“We got this,”** called Kimmie. **“We’re strong and we can do this!”**

Again the tension diffused, and James felt a wave of confidence wash over him. The crowd abruptly stilled; the screens must have appeared before their eyes.

James hefted his M4 just as the first Nem3 manifested right on the side of the intersection. The crowd screamed even as Serenity opened fire.

The Ma-Deuce unloaded the .50 Cals, but other Nem3s were appearing left and right. Seven in all. One moment the street was just a large crowd of half-terrified people, the next the demons loomed massive, each thirteen or so feet tall, blind, bony faces turning from side to side to orient themselves as the crowd broke apart in a mad rush.

Crimson Hydra opened fire. Thousands of rounds of Smite-enhanced bullets rained down upon the demons who reacted with wicked speed. They scampered away, blade-arms cracking into the ground as they galloped on all fours, while several hunched over to loose bone harpoons.

Shields manifested, deflecting the attacks, and the one that got through bounced off Olaf’s Circle. James tracked one of the Nem3s as it sprinted across the street, his bullets churning its flesh.

More harpoons came flying at them; again the Shielders let off their firing to block the attacks, again one got through and hit the Circle which flared bright white.

Three Nems were down. One was plowing through the crowd, just swinging its arms like a scythe, and with a curse James dove down, leaving the Circle and plunging behind the Nem to come at it just above the crowd. It sensed them coming, turned, and James hit it with a Sacred Strike.

The attack roared forth like a white plume from a heavenly flamethrower. It engulfed the Nem3, washing harmlessly over everyone else, and consumed it, burning it down to the bones.

*Exemplary!* His Anima was embedded again in the Wing, but its voice was as distinct as ever. *Now we know what Power 36 does to Sacred Strike.*

James angled the Wing toward the next Nem which had just loosed a harpoon at the clustered fighters above. He spun the M4 around by the strap so that it hung behind him, reached for the skeggox, tore it free from the Velcro and engulfed it with Smite.

A second later, he swung, leaning out as he tilted the Wing, the burning bearded blade cleaving through the demon's spine smoothly.

The Nem3 collapsed even as James flew past.

All the while, Serenity kept firing her huge gun, the massive recoil causing the Wing to shiver. She never lost her bead, however, even as he swooped and flew; she kept pounding the Nem3s as they went, her accuracy and Agility through the roof.

James climbed for altitude and realized it was over. "Hot damn," he said, scanning the area below. "Anima, you sense any of them hiding?"

*I don't,* said the Anima. *Though I am not infallible; I can sense them coming through far better than I can their presence. Take my word with a grain of pepper.*

"Well, all right!" shouted Jason, standing up on his Wing as if it were a jet ski. "We're getting good at this!"

Nobody was injured. Kimmie let out a little whoop, Olaf was beaming, and Denzel exchanged a fist-bump with Kerim.

"Command, this is Kelly. Intersection cleared."

"What, already?" Star Boy sounded taken aback. "Shit, I mean - ah, roger, Kelly, how many civvies showed up?"

“Just over seven hundred. How are the other spots looking?”

Duffy got on the line. “Kelly, this is Command, hang tight. We’ll have new coordinates for you to hit soon, over.”

“Guess they don’t want us chatting on the line,” said Serenity.

A Black Hawk flew overhead, the gunners watching, and one of them gave James a thumbs up as they flew by.

The minutes dragged on. Gunfire sounded from the intersections up and down the avenues.

“Kelly, this is Command.” Duffy again. “Make your way down to Intersection 21. Ivory Centaur needs help.”

“Command, this is Kelly. On it, out.”

The next hour felt like playing whack-a-mole. There were never more than four or five Nem3s in any one location, and Crimson Hydra now had enough firepower to crush the Nems quickly upon arrival. But enough of the low-level teams had problems with that many demons that Hydra was kept busy sweeping up and down the line, a task which eventually gave way to chasing Nem3s into the city.

But it wasn’t nearly as bad as it should have been.

James’s frustration only mounted as they continued to wipe out small knots of the enemy. They should have been fighting ten, fifteen of them at a time, not groups of seven or eight.

Which meant hundreds of thousands of people had chosen to stay home.

“This is going really well,” Kimmie called out after their sixth extermination. “I think I’m getting the hang of it!”

“Good job,” James called, and he almost shared his frustration. But the team was riding high on a series of victories, and they needed that boost after what had happened yesterday with Bjørn and Becca. No. Best to keep them focused on what was right before them and not worry about the bigger picture.

The streets started to fill with panicked people. They ran or drove or cycled about, shouting out to each other, asking if they were Third Wavers. Some came to the designated intersections, gathered in numbers till a Nem3 manifested, then ran away screaming. Time and time again, Hydra was forced to double back to new manifestations in spaces they had just cleared.

But the numbers taking to the street kept growing.

Tens of thousands streamed along the sidewalks, yelling for each other, trying to group up.

But Brooklyn was big. Even a hundred and fifty thousand people had time gathering over such a massive space. Star Boy had told him the night before that the borough was almost seventy square miles.

Way too massive an area for easy congregation.

“Time’s running out,” said Jason, who’d started a countdown on his bulky rubber watch. “Five minutes.”

The panic below became feverish. People began to scream, to clutch at each other.

“Split up,” James called. “Fly over them, lead them to intersections!”

A desperate plan. It worked a little; people reached for their Wing, cried out for help. James’s shouts were drowned out, but people followed as he flew by ten feet above the ground, gesturing for them to come on.

A surge built up behind him, growing from tens to dozens to scores of people. More came running in from side streets, and then there were a hundred of them, for they stopped moving and, as one, read their screens.

James immediately rose high into the air. A Nem3 appeared on the rooftop, hunched and massive. Without hesitation, it loosed a harpoon at them, and James threw the Wing to one side, turning as he went so as to bring Serenity to bear.

She opened fire, the huge gun pounding at the demon and tailing it as it raced over the rooftop toward them.

“It’s gonna jump!” screamed Serenity, and James ducked the Wing down, turning as they fell, bringing himself to the front as the Nem3 fell upon them, sword-arms slashing at the air.

Sacred Fire flooded over its form, and the demon died as it fell, cracking and falling apart before the sheer intensity of his blast.

The crowd cheered but James didn’t have time for their gratitude. He immediately pulled up high again, rising, rising, until the blocks lay spread out below him. People were shouting, pleading, many of them having fallen to their knees to pray.

“Jesus Christ,” said Serenity.

A Warthog scudded by, heavy and grim and utterly unable to stop what was about to happen.

Without Jason at hand there was no way to know the exact countdown, but there was no mistaking it when the hour ran out.

Beside every panicked person a shape flickered, ghostly and only human-sized. Each was translucent in the way Predator in the movie was when its cloaking shield was up, but the second they appeared they attacked.

The people had no chance.

As far as James could hear, screams rose to a fever pitch and then, as one, were snuffed out.

Bodies collapsed, eviscerated, hacked apart. Blood fountained where each person had stood, knelt, ran. Screams erupted from countless apartments, some cutting short, others continuing as horrified family members shrieked out their terror.

The sound was horrific, rising up over the city like a miasma, a crescendo of loss and pain and tragedy as something close to a million people were slaughtered as one.

James felt his gorge rise, felt bile scald the back of his throat, then jerked over to one side, convinced he was going to puke.

Nothing came out, just bitter spit.

Straightening, he forced himself to gaze down on the city. The survivors moving to those who'd died, unsure, tentative, not knowing what to do.

Because there was nothing to do.

Untold hundreds of thousands had refused to listen to the System's requirements and died for their rebellion.

Everywhere James looked, from out over Queens to the towers of Manhattan behind him to all of Brooklyn spread out below, he thought he could see the horror. The dead where they had fallen in mind-numbing numbers.

A seventh or sixth of the entire city.

Dead.

Gone.

And now the clock was ticking down to the Fourth Wave.

## Chapter 32:

### Arete 100

How do you process that much carnage? How do you understand, in your bones, that millions have died? To wrap your mind around that number. To visualize it.

Ten dead, sure. A hundred dead, yeah, you can picture an intersection full of bodies. A thousand? That's an entire subway train. A hundred thousand? That's the Rose Bowl stadium, and already a sea of humanity, no faces, no individuals, just a smear of flesh tones.

A million?

Two million?

James just sat there, staring glassily out at nothing. Someone was calling him. His radio was buzzing. Screams were rising from the city all around him, screams of horror, of anguish, of panic.

He blinked.

He had to get his shit together. There were still demons to kill.

“James!” Serenity elbowed him in the side. “C’mon! We gotta do something!”

*Do what?* That guy who'd come up with the #dontlookdontdie hashtag was now the greatest murderer in the history of their species. And shit, that wasn't just New York. How many people had signed up for his movement? Chicago, Dallas, Mexico City, Buenos Aires, Lagos, Montreal, Milan, Kiev, Moscow, Hong Kong, Beijing, Tokyo, Sydney, Mumbai, New Delhi, Cairo, Beirut, Jerusalem, Tehran, Khartoum, Nairobi, Cape Town -

“James!” The panic in Serenity's voice woke him. He blinked again, turned, focused on her face. The blood had



drained right out of it, and there was a feverish gleam in her eyes that told him she was barely keeping it together.

All of his emotions flattened, his pain, his panic, his horror faded away. He inhaled deeply, looked past her at the others, their expressions of despair, and came back into himself.

“All right,” he said, voice without a tremor. “What’s done is done. We’ll pick up the pieces. There are still demons to kill.”

He thumbed on his radio. “Command, this is Kelly. We’re going to begin sweeping for Nem3s, over.”

“Kelly, this... this is Command.” Star Boy sounded almost twelve years old. “Copy. Over.”

James pulled his Wing around so that he was facing the others. They oriented on him. Even Kerim and Kimmie, who’d just met him. They looked to him, and he saw their need.

“No words. What happened? No words. But the only thing we can do, the best thing we can do, is get to killing. Every Nem3 we put down is a new chalk mark on our side of the board. May not feel like much, but in reality, it’s everything. So if you’re up for it, let’s get to killing.”

Expressions hardened and, as one, Crimson Hydra nodded.

James inhaled again. “Sola Anima.”

*Yes, James.*

*I want you to help us hunt Nem3s.*

*I can’t sense them with any acuity beyond the visual.*

*You can fly fast and tell me what you see. Go scout.*

*Yes, James.*

The Anima withdrew from the Wing and rose up, opening to its humanoid form. For a moment, it simply stared at James, then it dipped, flew out wide, looped back, then zipped away, over the rooftops, arcing out wide as it went.

“Follow me.” James led them after the Anima. It flew surprisingly fast; James was content to just tool along behind it, giving it room to scout without trying to match its every turn.

*Here.*

“Found one. Let’s move.” James willed the Wing to leap forth and led their flying V across three blocks to an inner courtyard, a great hollow surrounded by high brick walls.

There, amidst the wreckage of a community garden and a shattered little greenhouse, was a Nem3. Massive, arm-bladed, it raised its blind face to the sky as they appeared overhead.

Bodies of old people were strewn about it in the dirt.

James’s dull focus went red.

He grabbed his skeggox, swung his leg over the Wing, and simply dropped over the side to plummet four stories down onto the demon.

The Nem3 sensed his approach, screeched its defiance, and leaped up to meet him.

People screamed his name.

James waited till the last moment, then pushed forth his Iron Aura, coated his skeggox with Smite, and swung with all his strength at the Nemesis.

They met ten feet up. James screamed with pure rage as his axe cleaved through both bone blades and buried itself in the huge demon’s head.

Its bony visage shattered, but its mass and momentum were such that James felt like he’d hit the ground as his boots planted on the demon’s chest and his descent was violently arrested. He sank into a crouch as the demon lifted him back up into the air, its screams burbling wetly as it died, and then he pushed off it just as it reached its apex.

His skeggox tore free. He surged off the demon, which fell away, and landed a good ten yards from it, both hitting the ground at the same time.

The demon flopped, writhed, and went still.

James had fallen into a deep crouch, but either his rage or high stats made it so that he didn't feel the impact.

For a second, all was still.

His Wing descended, Serenity at the front, her eyes wide.

James grabbed a handlebar and swung himself onto the saddle as she moved back.

“Another,” he commanded the Anima which hovered high overhead.

It zipped away.

He urged the Wing to rise, and when he'd cleared the four stories, he sensed the others watching him.

“Hell yeah,” said Yadriel.

“Next one's mine,” said Jason.

The screams and cries were a background tapestry, coming from open windows everywhere, from street corners and playgrounds. James inhaled deeply, turned this Wing around, and urged it to follow the Anima.

*Here.*

“Let's go.”

\* \* \*

They hunted through the afternoon. Through the evening. Through the night. The streetlights flickered on, revealing scenes of horror in their arc sodium illumination. The moon rose, half-filled, shedding silvery light wherever the orange glow failed to reach.

Nobody asked to stop.

On and on they hunted, ranging over Brooklyn, sweeping over its neighborhoods, occasionally rushing to provide back-

up to other teams who'd call for help when they ran into larger concentrations.

They all leveled. James dumped his points into Arete, bringing it to 95.

They fought on, buildings blurring, fights merging into each other, hunting and killing, hunting and killing.

It was almost two in the morning when James leveled again.

**Your rank is now Novitiate 7**

**You have 5 unspent points**

James paused. Summoned his sheet and studied the numbers. He'd no doubt as to what he was going to do. More Aeviternum would be nice, more Power, but whatever.

He wanted Arete 100.

He allocated the points.

**Aura: Bronze**

**Aura Strength: 1**

**Your Arete has reached 100**

**You may select a new Benediction:**

**Shield of Faith | Bless**

**Dark Vision | Deadeye**

**Empowering Light | Fortuna Aeviternum**

**Your new choice of Benediction will not affect your class**

“Hold up,” he called out. The others were picking over the battlefield, the inside of a Macy's, the fluorescent lighting flickering, the clothing racks knocked all over the place by their fight with three Nemeses. “Got an update for you all.”

Crimson Hydra picked its way over. When they'd gathered, he dismissed the notification. "I just hit Arete 100. It's allowing me to pick a new Benediction."

Jason gave him an up-nod. "Tier four?"

"No. Shield of Faith and Bless are options. As are Dark Vision and Deadeye. Along with the other two powers I didn't pick when I chose Heavenly Assault."

Eyes widened.

"You can select different branches?" asked Kerim. "But not the sub-tiers for each?"

"Right. Looks like I can start fresh from the top or work my way off different branches from Benedictions I've already chosen."

"Oh man, that's wicked," said Yadriel. "Whatcha gonna pick?"

For a moment, he felt a heady rush. Every Benediction was now open to him, in time. The sheer variety of options was overwhelming. From transforming himself into a creature of living night to summoning Angel's Armor, anything and everything was on the table.

But there was really only one choice.

"Bless."

"Bless?" Serenity sounded surprised. "Huh. I'd have thought you'd want more firepower, more Aeviternum, maybe."

"Nah, James is right," said Jason. "What'd Arete 100 do to your Aura?"

"Gone Bronze. Level 1."

"Bronze?" Kimmie clapped her hands, regaining for the first time that night some of her natural joy. "That should be enough to toast the Nem3s, right?"

"One way to find out. But yeah, Jason's got it. Arete 100, Bronze Aura. I want Aura Mastery." James felt savage

satisfaction in those words. “Then once that’s mine, I’m going to go Seraphic Web.”

“Oh man!” Yadriel pressed his hand to his brow. “Imagine that shit! Bronze spirit web all over the damned place!”

Olaf grinned. “You will not need us if you keep going so fast, James.”

“I’ll always need you guys.” James said those words with fierce intensity. “Don’t ever think that.”

Olaf’s teasing grin slipped from his face, and he nodded soberly.

“How are the rest of you doing?” James asked.

They sounded off. Serenity, Denzel, Jason, Yadriel, and Joanna were Novitiate 6. Olaf was Novitiate 5. Kerim and Kimmie had made the most progress and were both Novitiate 5.

James nodded, taking it all in. A shower of sparks fell from the ceiling over the Tommy Bahama clothing section, and they all spun, raising weapons and summoning powers. False alarm. They relaxed.

“Command, this is Kelly. Just hit Arete 100. Aura has gone Bronze 1 and I’ve been given my choice of a new Benediction. Not Tier 4, but rather any of my previous choices, ranging from Shield and Bless on down. Over.”

“What?” The radio gave loose a shower of fuzzy loud sounds as Star Boy seemed to knock over a bunch of stuff. “You motherfuckin’ what!?”

In the background, Duffy said something censoring.

“Court martial me,” Star Boy said, then his voice returned loud and focused. “James, you what? Bronze Aura? Any old Benediction choice?”

“Yeah. I’m going to go Bless, work my way to Aura Mastery.”

“Oh shit.” A pause. James could practically see Star Boy’s eyes going wide as he thought it through. “Oh shit, that’s so good! I’m gonna pull up everyone with high Arete, cross-index that with their power sets, see what’s optimal, no way am I going to let folks make this choice without guidance. You tested that Bronze against a demon yet?”

“Not yet. But going to now. I’ll report back when I do.”

And then, out of the blue, James felt a weird surge of emotion, sudden and almost violent, Star Boy’s enthusiasm and - innocence? Getting past James’s walls, making him painfully glad to have Richard in his life, to have that kernel of normalcy, of - of -

He grimaced, released the radio, and palmed the tears from his eyes.

“You OK, Boss?” asked Serenity.

“Yeah.” James laughed. “Getting emotional over Star Boy. I’m finally going mad.”

“It’s normal,” said Jason. “Don’t sweat it. Emotions go haywire after combat and losing folks. I remember this guy came back from a brutal patrol, back in Afghanistan. Tough as nails. Fell apart when he walked past the rec room and heard *The Simpsons* playing on the TV.”

“Yeah, man,” said Yadriel. “*The Simpsons* was always hella heavy.”

“No, asshole,” said Jason. “It reminded him of something. He never explained what, nobody asked, but you can only bottle shit up for so long. It’ll come out somewhere.”

“Why you bottling shit?” Yadriel kept his tone innocent. “Things were that rough in Afghanistan?”

Jason fake lunged at Yadriel, who jerked back, tripped on a fallen rack of dresses, and crashed onto his ass.

“Jesus,” said Joanna. “You guys keep this up, I might actually smile tonight.”

“Enough horsing around,” said James, wiping away the last of the tears. “We’ve a long night ahead of us. I want to see

what this Bronze Aura can do.”

“You picked Bless yet?” asked Serenity.

“Doing it now.”

James pulled up the menu, focused on the new Benediction, and selected it.

His character sheet changed and, like that, Bless was added right after Smite. Looked like there was a pecking order.

“Let’s try Bless Green,” he said.

Immediately his stats jumped by the standard +3. James frowned, focused on Bless, and willed it to activate, pouring divine power into it as he did.

A new sense manifested around him. A diffused sense of awareness, like a cloud that he could concentrate on as he chose. The members of Crimson Hydra were prominent in its midst, and he realized he could pull this cloud, this divine Aura, into any combination of them. Himself alone or everyone present.

He willed the divine Aura to flow into his team, and felt the power flow into all of them, draining out of the air until it was all concentrated within their figures. Immediately, he felt a maintenance cost begin to take a subtle toll on his divine power pool. It was subtle, but every moment he kept Bless active would cost him.

His own stats rose by another +1.

“Nice,” said Denzel, bouncing on the balls of his feet. “I could get used to this.”

“See?” Kimmie smiled around at them all. “Even when things get dark, we find reason to celebrate. **We’re growing stronger and better. We can make a difference in this war, and we will.**”

Her words washed over them all, and James found his chest unhitching as he drew in a deep breath. He hadn’t realized how shallow his breathing had become. It wasn’t optimism that filled him, but rather a renewed sense of resilient determination.



“Oh man, why didn’t Bjørn do this shit?” asked Yadriel.

“That’s because he was an asshole who didn’t know how to give,” said Serenity. “Only take. And he thought the power was Dominate, not Inspire.”

“Bjørn?” asked Kimmie. “The member I replaced?”

“Yes.” James stepped forward and put a hand on her shoulder. “When we’re done here tonight, I’m going to talk to you and Kerim about him. Then, if you can square what happened with him with your desire to join our team, you’ll be a full member.”

“Oh.” Kimmie frowned. “All right. I forgot you still wanted to talk about something.”

“I have already made up my mind,” said Kerim softly. “But I will listen before committing.”

Serenity squatted, hefted her M2, then rose smoothly and propped it over her shoulder. “First we have to finish cleaning this city.”

“Agreed. Anima?”

The gold and ivory homunculus flitted into view. “Kames Jelly reporting for duty.”

Kimmie giggled.

James sighed. “We’re heading out. Find us another demon?”

“Yes, sir.” It flew off toward the torn off double doors that led out to the street.

“You all ready?” James took up his skeggox from where he’d placed it on a counter. “Time to go see what Bronze Aura can do.”

## Chapter 33:

### Bronze

The Anima found them a trio of Nem3s stalking down the center of an avenue as if they owned it, dragging their sword-arms behind them and tearing up the asphalt.

James observed them from sixty yards up, the others arranged just behind him. “I think I’ll take these solo.”

“We’ll be on overwatch,” said Serenity. “Everybody with Deadeye and ready to rain down death if they prove too much.”

“Something tells me that won’t be the case,” said Jason wryly. “Not with Mr. Bronze Aura here able to drop a Heavenly Assault in an emergency.”

“Even so,” said Serenity. “Be careful.”

“You know it.” James lowered the Wing till they were fifteen feet above the avenue and then leaped. He landed lightly, skeggox in hand, a good block down from the suddenly alert Nem3s.

Serenity lifted away and then it was just him against the three hulking shapes. It hit James again just how massive they were. His whole body was about the size of one arm. Their hugely muscled chests and backs were as big as a bull’s body, and their tail whipped from side to side with eager cracks, easily ten feet long.

The three demons reached an unspoken agreement; they hunched over as one and fired their bone harpoons.

James didn’t flinch as he strode forward. He knew his team had his back. A second later, glimmering shields appeared before him, materializing in a wedge so that the spears bounced off and slammed into the buildings on either side of James.

“C’mere, you fuckers,” he whispered, rippling his fingers along the Sun Skeggox’s handle. He felt within him the power of Aeviternum, the ability to drop Gloria-enhanced Heavenly Assaults. But he restrained his might and instead simply approached, waiting, daring the demons to leap upon him.

It didn’t take long. They crouched and sprang with all the awful agility of the Nem1 gremlins, leaping high into the air, sword-arms opened wide, maws gaping, tongue lashing as they fell upon him.

James’s gut clenched, his grip on his axe tightened till his knuckles popped, but he willed himself to remain still.

To just stare up as death fell upon him.

The point demon slashed both sword-arms in a widening “X” at the last second, a blow that would have - should have - cut him in half.

But when the black bone blades hit, James felt a great outrush of power from his divine pool. One second he stood as himself, alone, another bronze encased him like a second skin.

The blades didn’t even ash where they touched him. They simply ceased to be. The two huge tips of each sword flew out across the street, disconnected, to clatter on the pavement, and the Nem3 fell upon James a moment later.

Only to then fall apart into two halves, a James-sized hole appearing down its center.

The other demons rushed him, shrieking and swinging their blades, only to fall apart as well as the Bronze Aura caused whatever part of them touched him to simply cease to exist.

In seconds, the street was silent.

James lifted his hand. The bronze looked painted over his skin, not a uniform color but with whorls of what might have been copper throughout, whorls that slowly moved like clouds of smoke across the air of a room.

It was beautiful.

Looking down, James saw that his clothing had been shredded by the Nem3 attacks; the Aura was literally skintight, and he could see his bronze chest through the gaping holes.

The other Wings landed in a circle around him. The members of Crimson Hydra gaped as he lowered his arms.

“You look amazing,” said Serenity. “Did that... hurt?”

“No.” The Aura was fading from view. A few seconds later, it was gone. “Not at all.”

Nobody seemed to know what to say.

James thumbed on his radio. “Command, this is Kelly. I’ve tested the Bronze Aura. It makes me immune to Nem3s. Whatever part of them touches me disappears.”

“Kelly, this is Hackworth.” The colonel’s voice was tight with control. “Please confirm what you just said.”

“The Bronze Aura makes me immune to Nem3s. I just killed three of them by standing still and letting them fall on me.”

A long, aching pause sounded through the radio. “Copy, Kelly.” Hackworth’s voice fairly trembled with excitement. “We’re going to need to send you to a number of hotspots far outside our Area of Operations. Please return to base asap.”

“Copy, Command. Out.”

“What does that mean?” asked Serenity. “Hotspots?”

Kerim pushed his spectacles up his nose. “I would imagine the colonel is referring to cities who do not benefit from Blue Light’s presence.”

“But we’ve got the Fourth Wave hitting tomorrow,” protested Joanna. “We need James here.”

Kerim shrugged. “Not, perhaps, as much as other cities do.”

“One way to find out,” said James. “I’m going to head back to the Marriott. You guys want to stay out here and hunt Nems?”

“No sense in breaking up the synergy,” said Denzel.  
“Right? We might as well tag along. Not that you’re going to need us.”

“Maybe.” James frowned. “But the folks here fighting the demons would still appreciate it.”

As if in response, a Killer Egg flew by a block or two over, spotlight burning the night as they searched the street.

“Nah,” said Serenity. “We’ll stick together.”

“We all agreed?” James looked around. “Then let’s head back.”

Twenty minutes later, James and his crew ascended to the Marriott’s control center inside the ballroom. The place was alive with voices and communications, Hackworth standing in the center monitoring the screens and reports while people at workstations monitored maps and reports that James couldn’t begin to figure out.

“James.” Hackworth swung around as if he could sense their approach. His face was haunted, new lines of concern carved into his handsome features, but his eyes burned with energy. “We’re getting reports from around the country that shit’s going south. It’s easier to list where things are going right than wrong. Right now, we need to get you to Philly. There’s a hive that has activated its black fire column there, and it’s sucking up Nem3s as we speak. I want you to shut it down.”

“Local forces overwhelmed?”

“Yes. It takes time to build a culture, and without a presence like yours to steady them, those branches have had difficulty maintaining coherency in battle. Your showing up will not only alleviate the pressure they’re feeling but will give them a second wind for what’s coming tomorrow. How much Aeviternum do you have?”

“Haven’t spent one yet. Four.”

“Excellent. We’re going to fly you to Philly immediately in a Chinook. Your team will go with you to benefit from your leveling.”

“Leaving now?”

“Leaving now,” agreed Hackworth. “We’ve got twelve hours till the Fourth Wave hits. We’re going to make the most of them.”

“And the rest of NYC?”

Hackworth hesitated. “Not good. Obviously. But we’ve got thousands of trained operators working on it. These other cities don’t.”

James nodded slowly, absorbing this. “Well, all right. Ready when you are.”

“Then let’s get you to Philadelphia.”

In the end, it was fastest for them to simply fly their Wings directly south to Fort Hamilton where the Chinook was waiting for them. James was tempted to make the whole trip on their Wings, but it was over a 500-mile round trip journey.

Twenty minutes after talking to Hackworth, their Wings flew over the Fort Hamilton boundaries. The fort itself was more like a massive sprawling campus right on the southern shore of Brooklyn, surrounded by a chain link fence and with a huge park on its left flank. Parking lots were full of civilian cars and Hummers, and they slid over a football field, nondescript warehouse-looking buildings, and finally alighted on a central field where the Chinook itself was waiting.

The helicopter was massive, with a rotor at each end atop a turret and a fat, ungainly body painted a dull green. Military folks waved them down with glow sticks, and James and his team were swarmed and processed the moment they alighted, though nobody was able to restrain the awe they felt at the sight of the otherworldly Wings.

Nobody wasted any time. James and his crew were shepherded to the rear of the Chinook where they ascended a ramp into the helicopter proper. James was surprised to see that the chopper was hollow, just a metal throat with red pull-down seating along each side and a couple of porthole windows along each wall. The walls and ceiling were metallic

and covered in a diamond pattern, and everything looked functional and sturdy as hell.

Aides got them seated, strapped them in, and then before James knew it the rear ramp was rising, closing, and the whole chopper came to life as the twin rotors began to thrum overhead. Kerim was seated across from James, the rest of their crew filling less than half the hold, and after a couple of minutes, the Chinook suddenly lifted up, the floor feeling as if it had started to slip from side to side, and then they were up and roaring into the sky.

Nobody bothered shouting over the noise. They instead simply stared at each other, not bothering to try and look out of the windows, and in about twenty minutes' time, they started to descend again. Down they went, and then the Chinook landed with surprising ease, touching down on some runway. The back ramp lowered and an army man strode in.

“Captain?”

James rose and collected his skeggox which he'd wrapped in a towel and thrust into a duffel bag. “Yes?”

“Lieutenant Bixby. If you and your squad will follow me?”

They descended the ramp onto what turned out to be a football field, and then crossed the green to waiting Hummers. Bixby turned out to be a tight-ass who clearly resented the whole situation, but he'd been given a job and performed it. As they drove through the streets of Philadelphia he gave James a bare bones rundown of the situation.

“We've six symbols over the city. We managed to clear all six of them out, but two of them re-activated last week as Nemesis2s infiltrated the area and began to capture locals. Our Blue Light force is small. Some local politics got in the way of its expansion, something I believe the higher-ups now deeply regret. Regardless, the arrival of the Nem3s prevented us from clearing out the remaining symbols, and now - well. We've got thousands of them marching into the hives and disappearing inside.”

“Understood.” To be honest, James didn’t really care about the details. “We heading to a hive now?”

“Yes. It’s located in the dead center of South Philly. Very densely populated area. It’s not over any particular landmark, just where South Broadway intersects Passyunk. We’ll reach it in five minutes.”

“Got it.” James stared ahead. He could feel Bixby’s gaze. “Yes?”

Bixby flushed. “You’re just going to... walk in there?”

“Yeah.” He knew the man wanted him to elaborate, but he just couldn’t be bothered.

Bixby licked his lips. “And the Nemeses won’t... they can’t... ?”

“No,” said James. “They can’t.”

Bixby nodded, pretending he understood, though it was clear he didn’t.

The Hummers stopped. Everyone climbed out. They could have been in Brooklyn. A broad avenue, four lanes wide, ran forever in both directions, with three-story buildings on either side. Stoops and trees growing out of the sidewalk plots, rowhouses and ground floor shops.

But two long blocks ahead - south, James figured - rose the dome of black fire that marked the edge of the hive. Looking up, James saw the column of flame rising to the demonic symbol which hovered five hundred feet up.

“Shit,” said Yadriel softly, getting out of the second Hummer. “We going in there?”

“I am,” said James.

“We all are,” said Serenity.

Several Hummers were already there, blocking off the road, with a platoon in place with machine guns and M4s trained on the hive. They watched Crimson Hydra with something akin to skepticism married with hopeful wonder.



James took his skeggox out of the duffel bag and propped it over his shoulder. "Might as well get started."

Serenity was unstrapping her M2 from where it had been bound across the Hummer's roof. "Give me a second, will ya?"

Everyone else limbered up, but there was no hiding the team's nervousness.

**"We've got this,"** said Kimmie confidently. **"With James leading the way, we'll be absolutely fine."**

The tension bled out of the team. James chuckled under his breath, almost made a wry comment, then decided that wouldn't be good for morale.

"There," said Serenity, heaving the M2 up as if it were a regular rifle and leaping down to prop it over her shoulder. "Ready."

"You, ah, I mean, are you going to need back-up?" asked Bixby.

"We'll be fine." James turned to face the hive. "Back in a few."

He knew he was making an impression on the local platoon, but that was his intention. "Bless Green and forward march. Let me take point."

The four Blesses hit them all, raising every stat by +4, and Crimson Hydra followed James between the parked Hummers and out into the open. James could feel the weight of the soldiers' regard as he strode forward, but he didn't look back. Made no sign that he was feeling his stomach knotting up.

Because it was one thing to kill a few Nem3s on the street.

Another altogether to march into a burning hive. As far as he knew, nobody had ever entered one and returned.

But there was always a first time.

Shoulders squared, breath steady, he led his friends down the avenue. The dull, distant roar from the hive sounded like that of a waterfall. There was no heat, but the closer they got, the more oppressive the air became, as if an unseen murk were lowering over them all.

“**Nice and steady,**” said Kimmie, again lifting their spirits.

James led the way. Step by step, till the dome of black fire rose up before them, flames sheeting ever upwards to curve out of sight.

What he wouldn't have done for his Angel Wing.

*I'm not sure this is a good idea,* said his Anima, hovering just behind his shoulder. *But it is exciting. If we all die, it was fun while it lasted.*

*We're not going to die,* said James, Kimmie's inspiration adding certainty to his words.

“Circle is up,” said Olaf as the white burning perimeter appeared around them. “Communal Dark Vision.”

And suddenly, the wall of darkness became translucent; a rushing gray film remained in place, but within, James saw hundreds of Nem3s milling about, a thick crowd that clogged the avenue that led up to the flesh fortress directly under the symbol.

“Once we're in, everyone focus on Shields,” said James. “Play it defensive while I do what needs doing. Clear?”

“Clear,” everybody intoned.

“Then let's do this.”

And James stepped through the translucent wall of ebon flame.

## Chapter 34:

### Inside

James stepped inside the veil of fire. He moved slowly, warily, watching the horde of Nem3s before him.

They'd been milling about, turning their heads blindly from side to side as if questing for an elusive scent, and with James's arrival, they finally found it.

And so, a hundred or so Nem3s turned as one to orient on him.

The rest of Crimson Hydra emerged behind him. Olaf's circle of white fire burned brightly around them all, mystical patterns filtering through the dark air.

"Oh shit," said Denzel quietly. "This is gonna hurt."

Serenity hefted her M2. "Let's party."

And she started firing, leaning back, the M2 extending over a yard before her, unleashing a stream of white bullets that never ended, never overheated the barrel, and which strafed across the Nem3 crowd.

*DONDDONDDONDDONDDON -*

Shit got hairy, fast.

These Nem3s sported Auras of their own, black flames licking over their skin, and they exploded into action, all hundred of them immediately shrieking and rushing forward, leaping, surging, blade-arms cleaving through the air.

"Fuck fuck fuck!" shouted Jason and thrust his palms forward. Tentacles of Iron Aura burst forward like the tentacles of a kraken, undulating at a length of some ten yards, whipping up and around and forming a blender of sanctified destruction.

"Deadeye!" shouted Olaf, and Joanna, Denzel, and Kimmie opened fire beside Serenity, pouring Smite-enhanced

lead into the tidal wave coming their way.

“Fuck this,” barked Yadriel, and his whole form bulged, jerked, and then erupted upward, his clothing tearing, his arms forming into huge blades, his face turning into a bony carapace, his muscles swelling monstrously as he assumed his demonic form. With an inhuman shriek, he charged forth between Jason’s swirling Aura arms, black energy flowing toward him from all the demons.

But it was like spitting into a hurricane. James knew this was different. The Nem3s were taking far less damage from the Smite-bullets, their burning Auras shielding them somehow.

So he raised his Sun Skeggox, activated its illuminating power, and dropped a Heavenly Assault on the avenue before them.

The air above the burning dome brightened but the bolt didn’t fall as it always had in the past. What pierced the black fire was skinnier, less forceful, with the veins of Gloria highlighted for the rest of the white fire being so pale. The lightning bolt hit the avenue some twenty yards ahead of them, thick as a sapling, and a concussive wave of white fire blasted outward, washing over the Nem3s.

Who staggered, some falling to their knees, their hides immediately scorching and cracking, but none of them ashed.

“Shit,” hissed James.

Bone spears flew at them, dozens at a time. Shields flitted from side to side, but Olaf’s circle immediately flared white as too many attacks got through. A second later, it cracked, collapsed, and a spear slammed into Serenity’s chest, knocking her off her feet and pushing her back.

Denzel cried out in pain. James saw the spear extrude itself as her wound healed, and then there wasn’t time for anything but war.

James ran forward, skeggox blazing with sunlight and bronze Smite. The closest Nem3s were vastly slowed down by the wounds dealt by his Heavenly Assault and Jason’s Aura

arms were carving deep gauges in their sides. Yadriel bellowed as he leaped into a mass of them, arms swinging, and James hurled a Sacred Strike after, both healing him and causing his foes to burn.

With a grunt, James dropped another Heavenly Assault. Again, the strike was greatly weakened by the burning dome; were it not for the Gloria, he didn't know if the assault would have done half as much damage. He ducked under a sword swing, tore his burning axe through a Nem's thigh, spun and hurled a Sacred Strike up at two demons who were plunging down at him then threw himself into a roll.

Machine gun fire mixed with demon roars. Serenity's Ma Deuce was thundering again, tearing huge holes in the demons, but more were coming.

James came up on one knee and dropped a third Heavenly Assault. This one caused a good thirty of the Nems who'd been hit by the first two Heavenly Assaults to ash; they simply fell apart, opening a wide area before him.

But there were plenty more to take their place.

James rose and was then knocked right off his feet to come crashing down on his side. A bone harpoon had slammed right through his back. He couldn't think, couldn't breathe, all was agony, but with effort, he burned his first Aeviternum and healed.

The pain vanished. The bone harpoon slid right out. James gasped, looked up, and saw a Nem3 about to swing its blade-arm down and decapitate him.

"Kames Jellyyyyyy!" screamed the Anima as it flew straight into the demon, sword-arms spinning and wreathed in Smite. It punched a bowling ball-sized hole right through the demon's chest and vanished, continuing to slam at high speed through more demons as it went.

James grunted, rose, hurled a Sacred Strike to the right, the left, then realized he wasn't using his greatest weapon: his fucking Bronze Aura.

**“Courage! Fight! We can do this!”** Kimmie’s cry filled his chest with fervent bravery, and he roared and simply ran forward, axe-swinging.

Nem3s came at him. Some fell away, undone by .50 Cal Eternal Fire, others reeled back as Yadriel fell upon them from the sky, but a good dozen roared right back at him and came charging.

James swung his axe, turned his shoulder, and powered right into the first one. His blow severed its arm, gave him an opening, and then his shoulder punched into the demon’s thigh. His Bronze Aura flared to life, but instead of consuming the demon whole it merely burned the shit out of its leg, warming and cindering the muscle and bone.

The hive’s black fire was dampening his power.

A blade slammed into his back, the edge ashing and crumbling as it hit, but the force still sent him stumbling forward.

A second Nem slammed its sword-arm against his head. It was like being clocked with a piece of crumbling wood. The arm broke apart, but there was enough force to the blow that James rose up to his feet, staggered back, then almost fell.

“Fuck this,” he growled, and dropped his fourth and last Heavenly Assault. Smite, Bless, and his Sacred Strikes had used up the remainder of his divine pool.

The lightning bolt crashed down, thinned out as before, and lines of Gloria writhed over the Nem3s who shrieked and fell back, their bodies carved and ashed.

Denzel cried out in agony again.

Yadriel reeled back, his huge form lacerated with wounds, but it wasn’t him that had taken the mortal blow. Even as James glanced at him, he saw Yadriel drinking deep of ever more black mist that flowed to him from the demons and caused him to grow even larger.

“Jelly!” shouted the Anima as it zipped past again, shearing limbs and causing heads to burst apart as its blender-blades tore through everything in its path.

James gasped, raised his axe, and lumbered forward again. They'd killed - what - fifty Nems? More? But it looked like an endless crowd of demons were pressing forward to take their place.

James reeled back, hurled a Sacred Strike at the closest demons, saw again how this blazing white fire was reduced to a dirty gray wash that burned but didn't kill the Nems.

"Fall back," he gasped. "Fall back!"

He looked at his crew. They'd followed him a good block into the hive. Olaf was bleeding, a scalp wound sheeting his face in crimson, his whole body straining as he sought to raise his circle. Jason had gone into full defense, encircling them all with his arms of Aura, but he couldn't duplicate the protective sphere and bone harpoons kept punching through his defenses.

Joanna was reloading her M4 when the bone spear hit her right in the side of the head. Her skull burst into an explosion of blood, bone, and brains, her whole body rocking to the left, suddenly limp, to collapse to the ground and lie still.

Denzel was down, blood running from his nostrils and the corners of his eyes. He didn't cry out.

Joanna didn't get up.

"Out!" James tried to roar over the clamor. "Get out!"

Kimmie raised her gun, eyes wide, and when she spoke her words boomed over the battlefield, not loud but penetrating, spearing straight into James's core: "**Retreat! As a team, retreat!**"

This was no Inspiration. James felt his being flood with renewed power and energy. His thoughts narrowed to her command which lay in perfect accord with his own desires, and all that mattered was getting himself and his crew *out*.

He could sense more than tell that his stats had all massively increased. Strength, Speed, Agility, Stamina - all of them had received a massive influx. Weariness fell away. His

very wounds began to heal up, the numerous scrapes and cuts and gashes.

James ducked a swipe, slammed his axe through a knee, then raced back to his people. Yadriel was falling back, too.

A Nem3 moved to interpose itself, and James *leaped*. His Power and Speed combined to give him wings and being close to 50, he soared. Up he flew, his bound momentarily breaking the laws of gravity, up over the slashing arms, right over the Nem3 which looked up as he flew past and slammed his axe into its face, shattering the bone carapace and sending black blood and fire flying.

He landed neatly. Scooped up Joanna's body, then used an Aeviternum to drop another Heavenly Assault right atop their group.

Gloria flooded over them. Nem3s fell back in dismay and pain. Jason used his Aura to slash at the Nems between them and the hive's perimeter, and James unleashed one of his last Sacred Strikes over his crew, bathing them in healing fire.

"Shields!" shouted Olaf as his circle came back up, the ambient Gloria seeming to give it power. James manifested his shield right behind them and ran, leading the way, Joanna over one shoulder, horrific hot wetness running down his back. As a team, they pounded up the avenue, the single-minded goal of getting the fuck out all consuming.

A couple of Nem3s landed before them, turned, hissed, and Yadriel bowled into them, huge and massively swollen, knocking them aside just as the rest of them sprinted past and burst out the wall of up-flowing fire.

It was like stepping out of the world's dankest, mustiest room into clear, fresh air. James heaved a deep breath, his stats dropping as the Holy Zeal eased off, and together they turned, back pedaling, watching the dome of black fire as they retreated.

Nothing emerged to follow them.

Gunfire erupted from the soldiers at the Hummers, and James realized they were shooting Yadriel.



“Stop!” He turned, waved his arms. “Cease fire!”

Yadriel crouched, snarling, blade-arms crossed before his visage, dozens of Smite-enhanced bullets slamming into his demonic form. But he flashed white, burning Aeviternum, and then sank down to his human form, unharmed.

“Fuck you, assholes!” he screamed at the gaping soldiers. “You fucking idiots!”

James dropped to his knees and lowered Joanna’s body to the road.

“No,” whispered Olaf, falling to his knees beside them. “No no no.”

Her head was utterly ruined. The skull shattered within the sack of skin and hair. James’s gorge rose.

“Oh fuck,” whispered Serenity, hand over her mouth.

“I’m so sorry.” Denzel was shaking his head, looking like he was going to burst into tears. “I ran out of Aeviternum. I’m so sorry.”

His Anima settled down on the road beside the corpse, its every surface covered in black ichor. It scrutinized the corpse then shook its head, answering James’s question before he could even ask.

“Fuck,” whispered James. “Fuck.”

# Chapter 35:

## Crisis

They loaded Joanna's body onto the Chinook and flew back to Fort Hamilton. People were giving commands, there was plenty of activity, but James felt like the hollow center of the storm, the quiet eye of the hurricane that spun up around them as they were returned back to New York.

An overwhelming urge to grab a bottle of whiskey and drain it dry had him by the throat. To just stop thinking, planning, and being responsible for people and cities and this whole fucking apocalypse. To check out for a day, for a week, forever.

To be done with it.

But he couldn't.

Too much damned Arete.

Even as he sat in the Chinook, strapped in and staring blankly down at his hands, his thoughts slowly pulled together from the chaos. It was natural to feel guilt, to feel self-destructive, to want to put down his burdens. He was only human. He'd made mistakes. Big mistakes.

He studied his palms in the harsh lighting of the overhead red bulb within its wire cage. He'd led his crew into the hive without much thought. Had been consumed by grief and horror over the millions that had just died, had been buoyed up by his Bronze Aura and lulled into a sense of fatalistic complacency by his nihilistic despair.

He'd been a shit leader. He'd simply walked into that deathtrap without thinking things through, with no plan, with nothing but an overwhelming desire to bring death to the demons and a false sense of invulnerability.

Now Joanna lay cooling in the black body bag at the end of the chopper.

It took more willpower than he thought himself capable of mustering. It felt like pulling himself out of sucking mud to just raise his head, the weight incredible, the guilt punishing.

But he had to do it.

Slowly, with enormous effort, he raised his head and looked about the crew.

Everyone was shell shocked. Serenity was watching him, displacing her own pain through concern for him. Olaf was raw with grief, his eyes glassy, his face openly showing his loss. Denzel, Yadriel, and Jason were all trying to bottle up their anger and pain, while Kimmie looked helpless, unsure of herself, tormented by indecision. Kerim was the most poised of them all, his features composed, his brow furrowed, his arms crossed.

“I’m sorry.” The words were lost in the background noise of the rotors, so he tried again. Louder. “I’m sorry.”

People looked his way. They frowned, some went to protest, but he carried on.

“Joanna’s death is on me. You followed me into that hellhole, and I didn’t think things through. Then when things went to shit, it took me too long to order the retreat.” He spoke loudly, evenly, with great deliberation. “I was overconfident and... I don’t know. Overwhelmed by what had happened with the Third Wave. The sheer scale of the deaths. I think on some level I was trying to kill myself, maybe, or punish myself by entering the most dangerous place I could find. I let you all down, and I’ll never be able to apologize to Joanna for it.”

Kerim straightened. “You must temper your words with the fact that your Bronze Aura seemed the perfect weapon. We all made the same assumption that you were invulnerable, including Joanna. We had hours in which to question your plan leading up to the attack, and none of us did. This is not completely your burden to shoulder.”

“But I’m the leader of this crew.” James held Kerim’s dark gaze. “So it is my responsibility. I let my Gloria and Anima and Heavenly Assaults and Bronze Aura get to my

head. I thought we could march in there and just lay waste to those demons. I should have gone in first by myself. I should have called for the retreat far sooner.”

Jason rubbed his jaw. “Hindsight is 20/20, sir. Don’t be too harsh on yourself. Kerim’s right. We went in as a team. None of us here are children. We were just doing our best.”

“I appreciate your words.” James considered them, the comfort they offered, then set them aside. “But they don’t change the facts. If we’re going to survive this - all of this, with whatever’s coming - we have to do better. *I* have to do better.”

“You’re just a man,” said Serenity, almost too quietly to be heard. “You’re not a machine, James. You’re doing your best.”

“My best needs to be better.” It was not bravado, nor was it self-recrimination. It was a simple fact. “The country looks to New York, and New York looks to Blue Light. Blue Light looks to Crimson Hydra, and you all look to me. I lost the right to fuck up like a regular jackhole when I chose to help run this show. So again, I hear what you’re saying, and I thank you for it, but I’m simply going to need to do better or we’re not going to survive what’s coming.”

The Crimson Hydra crew exchanged glances.

Kimmie hesitated then leaned forward. “I think it’s fair to say we all admire you, James, and none of us envies what you’ve got to handle. We... I mean, Joanna’s death...” She trailed off, tried again. “This is a war. We all know what we’re risking out here. I don’t think... I hope none of you think me presumptuous, but I don’t think Joanna would regret her actions if she were still here.”

“No,” said Olaf, voice raw. “She was brave. Strong. Quiet. A beautiful soul. She knew what we did was dangerous. She would do it again.”

“Right?” Kimmie looked around the group. “You all agree with me?”

Nods, some more hesitant than others, but everybody agreed.

“Then...” She took a deep breath. **“Know that we don’t blame you, James. We’ve all gotta do better, and we will.”**

Her words hit him like a fist to the chest. His throat closed up and his eyes watered. He saw in his mind’s eye Joanna’s ruined head, so ghastly, so... unreal... and felt bands of iron tighten around his chest.

“Thank you,” he whispered, and though he knew the words were lost in the muted roar, he also knew the others had felt his gratitude. He wanted to push this aside, to move on, but Kimmie’s power, her Inspired words, hit him hard and deep and he realized he’d been in the process of building a wall around himself, cutting himself off from the others. Isolating himself as their leader and taking on all the responsibility for what was to come.

He gasped, a broken laugh. Even now, with his attempts to come clean, he’d been subtly tricking himself, his guilt trying to find a new way to punish himself.

But Arete 100 and Kimmie’s words stopped him from doing so.

Some of the tension left his shoulders.

“I don’t know what it’s like in a regular war,” he said to Jason, “but I’m guessing one of the hardest parts is not having time to process shit, to grieve. The Fourth Wave is coming tomorrow, and we need to be ready. Much as my soul cries out to give Joanna a proper burial, we just don’t have the time. So when we return to Brooklyn, we’re going to report what we learned to Hackworth and Star Boy, then we’re going to get ready for what’s to come. Because one thing’s become clear. We need to stop as many Nem3s from entering the black fire hives as we can.”

Again, nods all round.

“So.” He inhaled deeply. “Enough of my jabbering at you. Thanks for staying with me. When we get back, you can all rest up. I’ll handle the after-action report with Command.”

More nods.

“We’re with you, James,” said Denzel. “No doubt.”

“Yeah,” said Yadriel. “And hell, we done learned a lot about what’s going on in those hives, right? That’s valuable intel.”

“For sure,” agreed Denzel. “Now we know we need to nuke those fuckers from orbit.”

Jason laughed quietly, shaking his head.

**“Hang in there,”** Kimmie said. **“It’s always darkest before the dawn.”**

And as cheesy as the expression was, the power behind her Benediction gave James comfort. More of the guilt and horror left him. He met Serenity’s gaze. In her eyes, he saw compassion, concern, and unflinching support. He drew strength from her unwavering friendship and settled back to wait out the rest of the ride.

\* \* \*

“We’ve got a problem,” said Star Boy as James strode through the ballroom to the ASOCC corner. “A real big one.”

James frowned. “You’re referring to what happened to us in Philly?”

“No man, but you got my condolences, for real.” Star Boy checked himself. “Seriously. That sounded bad, and I want to hear all about it, but - look, just come check this out.”

James put aside his irritation over Star Boy’s casually dismissing Joanna’s death, his team’s pain, all of it, and followed Star Boy to one of the computer terminals.

“What am I looking at?”

“It’s been building all evening. There’s been a huge backlash to yesterday’s #dontlook hashtag. Social media’s... I

mean, it's a burning wasteland of horror and people screaming at each other, but there's one thing they're all agreeing on."

He opened a video feed from what looked to be a helicopter. It showed an aerial view of a highway that was backed up, bumper to bumper, on one side. The other was empty.

"That's the 95 south heading to the Lincoln Tunnel."

Another video feed, this one from a stationary traffic cam. "Here's the approach to the Holland Tunnel. Just as backed up."

Another camera. "The Goethals Bridge into Staten Island." Another. "The George Washington Bridge." Another. "Mario Cuomo Bridge, way up north. And the highways coming south through the Bronx. They're all packed."

James ran his hand over his head. "What are you saying? Everyone's coming to New York?"

"From Hartford, from New Haven, from Trenton, Philly, Scranton, fuckin' Albany." Star Boy looked up at him, face pale, freckles stark against his skin. "They're all coming here, man. They all want Blue Light protection."

James grabbed a chair and fell into it. "How many people we talking?"

"I mean, I don't know. The highways are all jammed up, Manhattan is a fucking gridlock nightmare. We got folks flooding into Staten Island, we got millions leaving Long Island trying to get into Queens and Brooklyn. We had, what, four or five million left in the city proper after all the deaths? We'll easily double that the way things are going. Maybe more, man. I mean, fuck, the NYC metropolitan area has almost eighteen million people in it. After what happened today with the massacre, everybody wants in here, they want protection, and New York's one of the few places that looks like it's got its shit together."

"Fuck," said James. "Can we... I don't know, close the bridges?"

“Do we even want to?” Star Boy slowly shook his head, changing from one video feed to another. “Jersey’s a warzone right now, people fighting to get through. We’re talking millions in the street, man. It looks like one huge fucking concert all the way from Bayonne to Fort Lee. If we don’t let them in, the Fourth Wave’ll happen right there and there’ll be nobody to help ‘em.”

“We can’t... I mean, Blue Light can’t fight off... what’s the estimate for Nem3s?”

Star Boy shook his head, overwhelmed, then opened the calculator program. “Fuck, say, I don’t know, ten million people coming. Say half of them are Fourth Wave. Five million. Divide that by a 100, as nobody’s going to have any trouble finding each other. That’s 50,000 Nem3s tomorrow.”

They both sat in silence.

“And don’t get me wrong. There’s like 7 million people in Long Island alone. It could be double that. 100,000 Nem3s. I mean, who fucking knows.”

“What do we do?” asked James, eyes wide as he watched people shoving and struggling with the National Guard trying to bring order to a crazed intersection. “I can walk through ‘em all with Bronze Aura, but... the number dead...”

Star Boy dropped his hands into his lap. “I don’t know. I just don’t know.”



# Chapter 36:

## The System

What followed was a bunch of meetings. Hackworth and his Command folks, meetings where other generals were pulled in, folks from the NSA, the local leadership, Emergency Management.

James sat through them all, steeped in thought.

Barely heard what was said. Answered monosyllabically when addressed. Ignored the angry stares, the expectation that he pull an answer for this crisis out of his Blue Light hat.

But something was stirring within him. A realization. It came in flashes. The Monitor floating down to address him. The System messages that appeared each time he leveled, the Benediction synergies. The staggered waves of demons. The symbols.

“James?” Hackworth was addressing him. “James!”

James looked up. Everyone was staring at him. James didn’t know who half of them were. Didn’t care, not anymore. “Colonel, we need to talk.”

Hackworth blinked, taken aback. “We are talking. All of us. Except you. You’re a thousand miles away.”

“No, I mean you, Star Boy, Jessica, me. We need to talk.” James stood up, ignoring the dark looks, the spluttered indignation from important-looking people on the screens. “Now.”

And he strode out the room.

His Anima floated alongside him. *What’s going on?*

*Go ask Jessica to join us, will you?*

His Anima snapped out an imitation of a sharp salute with one of his sword-arms and flitted away.

Voices were raised angrily in the conference room behind him, but James strode toward the ballroom and made a beeline for Star Boy. “Richard. We gotta talk.”

Star Boy was sitting back, arms crossed, shaking his head slowly as he scrolled through different video feeds. “Hmm? I mean, what?”

“Up. Follow.” James turned as Hackworth came storming into the ballroom, expression livid.

“Acting like that -”

“Enough, Hackworth.” Something in James’s tone, his weary certainty, his detached calm, caused the other man to grow quiet. “We’re past pretending all this matters.” James waved at the ASOCC, the buzzing activity. “I’ve a decision to make, and I want you in the room when I make it. You coming?”

Hackworth inhaled deeply, visibly calming himself, then lifted his chin. “What’s going on?”

“Come find out.” James strode past him. Led Star Boy and Hackworth into the Marriott lobby just as the elevator doors opened to reveal Jessica. She looked exhausted, eyes ringed with shadows, hair mussed, clothing ruffled, but eyed James with the same piercing curiosity. “James?”

“We’re going up. Need to find Serenity.”

They rose to the penthouse and James led them into the large living room. A handful of Crimson Hydra were watching the TV, but Serenity was in the kitchen making herself a cocktail.

Everybody oriented on them as James entered the room. “Serenity? We’re having a talk.”

“No shit.” She poured a pale green liquid out of the shaker into a martini glass. “Ready.”

The penthouse suite had a small business room. James waited for everyone to file in, then closed the door.

Nobody spoke. They were all alert, watching him, aware that the ball was in his court.

“We’ve been doing this all wrong,” said James, moving to stand behind his chair. “All of it. From the beginning we’ve been following the System’s cues. Reacting and being led. Rewarded with levels and powers for behaving as it wanted. Forming teams, killing demons as they showed up, forming larger groups, organizing.”

“Right,” said Star Boy slowly. “For a reason.”

“Sure. Synergy. The need to save folks. We’re not idiots. Doing what this System wants makes sense. Fabricators, Blue Light, all of us working as hard as we can to save humanity.”

Tentative nods all round.

“You say this like it’s a bad thing,” said Jessica.

“Look at what’s happening out there right now.” James pointed at the window. “We’ve some ten million people trying to get into the city. The Fourth Wave tomorrow will be a massacre of biblical proportions. We’re talking a hundred thousand Nemesis 3s.”

Nobody had a response.

“And today, millions died in our city alone. Across the country? The world? Who fucking knows? We’re doing everything this System asks of us, and it’s never been enough. We might have held the line here in New York for a week or two, but the Nem3s are putting the lie to any sense of confidence we had. Worse, we got a glimpse of how bad things are going to get while we were in Philly. Hives covered in black fire where our powers are weakened. Even my Gloria-infused Heavenly Assaults weren’t killing the Nems.”

“I don’t understand,” said Hackworth, tone curt. “What are you saying?”

“That our fundamental mistake has been to trust in the benevolence of this System. To think that if we do what it wants, how it wants, if we team up in groups of nine, if we train, if we fight, we’ll win through. But it’s horse shit. Even doing everything right people are dying by the millions, and we’re still two months out from the Pits opening.”

James looked at each of them. “If we don’t change this up, we’re going to lose this thing. Following what the System wants will just get us extinct.”

Serenity drained her martini in one long slurp then set the glass down with a distinct *click*. “Great pep talk, Boss. So, ah, what’s the solution?”

“We have to look outside the System. Stop thinking we can use it to our advantage. Sure, we can keep leveling, gaining new powers, but that’ll never be enough. I saw that today in Philly. Crimson Hydra is as tough a team as I know of, and we got our asses kicked. So we have to find a new approach.” James straightened. “It’s why I want to go to Old Crow.”

Star Boy blinked. “Old Crow. Ah... ?”

“Patrick Belanger,” said Hackworth. “You want to find him.”

“Who the fuck is Patrick Belanger?” asked Serenity.

It was Jessica who answered. “The first person to report being contacted by a Monitor.” She smiled apologetically to Hackworth. “I took a look at the files. He reported speaking with one three days before anyone else.”

“Belanger has been off the grid since,” said Hackworth. “The Canadians haven’t found him. That, and he has a history of mental disorders. He spent most of the 80s in a mental hospital, claiming that Armageddon was coming.”

“Smart dude,” said Serenity. “Looks like he was right all along.”

“I want to find him,” said James. “He claimed to carry something called the Light Eternal, and Old Crow is the only place I’ve heard of where a demon symbol appeared without there being a ton of people. If anybody knows what’s going on, it’s Belanger.”

“That’s a hell of a long shot,” said Hackworth.

“Better than just doing what the demons want,” said James. “They went after him. Maybe have been contacting

him for decades. Look, I know it's a long shot. But we're going to lose this if we keep just taking to the streets and trying to kill demons. The rest of Blue Light can do what they can. But I need to find Belanger and find out what he knows."

"And tomorrow?" asked Hackworth. "The Fourth Wave?"

James sighed and sat down. "Yeah. I don't see any good outcome. I could stay and help, but when we're talking a hundred thousand Nem3s distributed across the city, would I make much of a difference?"

Jessica raised an eyebrow. "How do you think Blue Light would take it if you disappeared on the eve of our greatest battle yet?"

"Precisely," said Hackworth. "It's not a question of your killing a hundred or two hundred demons, it's your being able to inspire Blue Light to kill thousands, maybe tens of thousands."

"Like that'll make a difference," said Serenity, sitting back.

"It will." Hackworth nodded decisively. "Every demon we kill is one that doesn't get into a hive. Every demon we kill is another 100 people who are spared being massacred. I've no illusions about our ability to defend everyone tomorrow. But that doesn't mean we concede the fight. We'll muster everything we have and fight as long and as hard as we have to. And your presence in that fight *will* make a difference, James."

James frowned, tapped his fingers on the tabletop, then nodded. "Fine. Yes. I'll fight. But as soon as possible, I want a flight to the Yukon."

"And you'll have it," said Hackworth. "But first, we have to deal with the Fourth Wave."

"We're at almost three hundred Angel Wings," said Jessica. "That should help. And all the work I've been doing has leveled me to Battle Engineer 5. Which... I've not had enough time to fully explore, especially as higher-level

creations require exponentially more components, and nothing seems as initially beneficial as Wings, but...”

“But?” prompted Serenity.

“But I’ve put together a prototype that should be ready for the Fourth Wave tomorrow. It’s called a *Canis Bello* in my menu system.”

“One prototype?” Serenity raised an eyebrow. “That’s darling, but -”

“But we need all the help we can get,” said James.

“Beautiful dog?” asked Star Boy. “That’s weird.”

“Not ‘beautiful’,” said Jessica. “Bello in Latin means ‘war’. A War Dog. War Hound, maybe. Like I said, it required a *lot* of resources, and there are components to it that I don’t yet fully understand. I’m going to try and get it operational for tomorrow, though.”

“Outstanding,” said Hackworth. “I like the sound of this.”

James had to fight the urge to reiterate his previous point. To state how anything that was in line with the System’s guidance was suspect. But Jessica looked so worn out that he didn’t have the heart. “Make sure you take care of yourself.”

She checked her phone. “We’re only nine hours from dawn. I’ll be fine as soon as I can spend an Aeviternum.”

“Hey, Jessica, when’s the last time you slept?” asked Star Boy.

“Slept?” Jessica frowned at him. “I mean, I think...”

“You don’t know?” Star Boy let out a low whistle. “That’s kinda intense.”

Jessica stood. “We do have a war going on. I’m going to get back to work. But for what it’s worth, James, I agree with your point. Once the Fourth Wave is over, we need to run down Belanger and discover what he knows.”

“Agreed,” said Hackworth. “Your point is well made, if hard to swallow. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have several

bruised egos I need to placate. This may be a new world we're operating in, but there are some serious holdovers that can make or break our operations here."

"Thanks, Colonel," said James. "Appreciate it."

Jessica, Hackworth, and Star Boy all left together.

Serenity held James's gaze from across the table. "We need to replace Joanna."

"Cindy's supposed to radio me when she's available."

"We need to get Crimson Hydra's head back in the game."

James grunted.

"I need seven or eight shots of tequila."

"Wouldn't hurt."

She sighed and leaned forward. "How are we getting through tomorrow?"

"I don't know." He didn't even want to think about it. "One step at a time."

Serenity sighed. "So you think this is all just one big murderous set-up? To give us false hope that we can handle what's coming? Why not just kill us outright?"

"I don't know," said James again.

"Fucking demons. We don't even know what's happening in the center of those burning hives."

"Nope."

"They could be making some ultra-queens."

"They could."

Serenity scowled at him. "It's really great talking to you."

"Yeah." James sighed. "I know."

"OK, you know what? Screw the tequila. I know what we both need. Come on."

James frowned, stood, then followed her out of the conference room, across the hall, and into a bedroom.

Serenity closed the door. “On the bed.”

“Ah, Serenity...”

“I’m not aiming to fuck you. Shoes off, on the bed.”

James sat, undid his laces, pulled off his boots, and then lay back, watching her closely. She did the same, then lay down beside him. Reached over, turned off the lamp, and then scooted in till she lay next to him and placed her head on his shoulder.

For a moment, they just lay thus in silence, and by slow degrees, James relaxed. How long had it been since he’d just laid down next to a woman? He couldn’t even remember.

It felt... nice.

Slowly, carefully, he pulled his arm around and draped it over her shoulder. Serenity wiggled a bit, getting more comfortable, then sighed. “This is what I needed. Just for a little bit.”

James stared up into the darkness. Serenity was warm against his side, the weight of her head in the hollow of his shoulder comforting. After a while, her breathing deepened and slowed, and he realized she’d fallen asleep.

Nothing new occurred to him. No new strategies, no epiphanies, no assuaging of guilt or healing of the horrors.

But just lying there, two people together in the dark, did something to his spirit, his soul, that no words of Kimmie’s could have duplicated.

A deep, terrible knot of tension slowly untied itself in his chest, and a sense of troubled peace descended upon him.

A few moments later, despite everything that was to come, everything that had happened, and everything on his mind, James closed his eyes, and slept.



## Chapter 37:

### Canis

James awoke to the sound of his phone buzzing. Serenity was gone. He rolled over, grimaced, then sat up. Cindy.

“Hello?”

“Good morning!” She sounded insanely chipper. “It’s your 5 a.m. rise and shine call. Are you ready for the apocalypse?”

“Cindy?”

“Sorry, sorry, too much caffeine, too much death, too much despair. I think I’m starting to become bipolar. Can that happen? Or is it a brain chemistry thing independent of what happens in your life? Doesn’t matter! Come on down. Lots to do.”

“Thanks,” he said and hung up. For a moment, he just stared out into the pre-dawn gloom. He could feel it, waiting just beyond the curtains in the wings of his mind: so much he could think about, so much heavy shit.

“Nope,” he said, and just chose to not let those monsters step into the light. Instead he rose, showered, dressed, and emerged into the penthouse suite’s main living area.

Denzel and Kerim were eating breakfast together at the counter. Denzel was laughing quietly at something while Kerim shook his head, a despairing smile on his lips.

James slowed, paused. Something - oh.

“Good morning,” he said, grabbing a Manna bread from the basket as he walked by. “You guys have a good night?”

Kerim froze and he glanced at Denzel, who sat up straight, eyes widening in alarm.

“Relax,” said James, clapping Denzel on the shoulder as he walked by. “I’m happy for you guys. Anything that adds to

the net joy in this world is a good thing. I'm heading down to the ballroom. Where's everybody?"

"Everyone's sleeping except for Serenity, who went downstairs," said Denzel.

Kimmie emerged from the hallway, a towel around her neck, her pale blonde hair mussed. "Hey, guys. Morning."

"You know what?" James considered. "Kimmie? Kerim? A moment?"

They followed him to the TV area where they sat.

"We never had that talk." James leaned forward. "And there'll never be a good time for it."

"I'm in," said Kimmie. "You don't need to tell me anything."

"Let him talk," said Kerim. "Go ahead, James."

"You replaced two people. Bjørn and Becca." God, that felt like a lifetime ago. "Bjørn used his Inspire to try and control people. He wanted to form a new society, one where operators like you and me ruled over the Fabricators. Medieval shit. I told him no, and to never use his powers on us again. Then, a month or so later, he tried to force me to use a Heavenly Assault in battle. Froze me up as I fought him off. I ended up taking a hit to the face that Denzel had to take with Martyr's Cry."

"Oh shit," said Kimmie, lifting her hand to her mouth.

"I confronted him after the fight and saw that he was completely unrepentant. Saw that he still had that view of wanting to control others, of being in charge. I realized then that I could never trust him, couldn't jail him, and that if I cut him loose, he'd gather folks around him and cause no end of trouble."

"So you killed him," said Kerim softly.

"So I killed him," James repeated. "Which is why we need to have this talk. I understand if you don't want in, given what I did. Don't answer now. Think about it. Talk with Denzel, who was there, and saw what happened."

Kimmie lowered her hand. “But that’s not how Inspire is supposed to work. It’s meant to be a force for good.”

“It’s why he wasn’t as effective as he hoped. He once tried to get Serenity to act against her nature, and she just locked up. Same happened with me, maybe because we both had high Arete. He thought it was mind control, a means to dominate us into doing what he wanted.”

Kimmie looked outraged. “That’s awful. It’s... that’s awful.”

Kerim’s expression was more inscrutable. “You reported this to Hackworth?”

“I’ve got an investigation and possible court martial pending. Yeah. But not today, not this week.” James rubbed his hands on his pants. “I felt it was necessary. Obviously. But I know how it makes me look. So judge for yourselves. Talk to the others, and then let me know, but try to do it soon. If you’re out, we’ll need to find someone else for the Fourth Wave.”

James stood, and the other two rose as well.

“I don’t need to talk to the others,” said Kimmie. “I’m in. I know you’re a good man. This Bjørn sounds terrible. If you did it, I trust that you had no other good choice.”

“Nothing’s that simple in this world,” said James sadly. “But thank you, Kimmie.”

Kerim looked back at Denzel. “I’ll think this over. I’m inclined to agree with Kimmie, but... I will let you know.”

“Good enough. Thanks for listening.” James gave them both a grimace of a smile, stepped around them and strode to the front door. “I’ll be downstairs.”

Kames Jelly rose from where it’d been standing immobile on a side table and floated over to where James stood. “I can sense something very exciting downstairs.”

James paused. “Very exciting?”

“Which means we should go down and not stand here talking about it.”

“All right, all right.” James summoned the elevator, but before he could press the lobby button, Jelly tapped the first parking level one.

*Trust me.*

*Fine.*

The elevator doors opened to reveal the Fabricator floor as before. The same colored lines led away to different areas, and even at this hour the place was alive with industry, the clink and clang of metal being struck by hammers, a variety of different and exotic smells mixing with the old stink of gas and rubber, the lights bright, announcements coming over the intercom system.

Jelly flew straight ahead and James had to break into a run in order to keep up. The Anima knew where to go: it zipped around corners, flew over startled Fabricators, and out into a new central area whose floor had been removed, making their level a second-floor balcony that wrapped around a sunken chamber.

The space was huge and with no sign of the concrete that had been neatly excised to give access to the floor below.

James’s gaze was immediately drawn to the massive machine dominating the space.

“Holy shit.”

*Your favorite.*

A bipedal robot rose some fifteen feet in height, a mess of support cables lashing it in place. It looked like a sleek, ambulatory tank. Or a gorgeous 1950s Rolls Royce atop a swivel mount pelvis with heavily armored recurved legs beneath it. Everything was gold and burgundy armor plating, gleaming as if lacquered, with rivet bolts along the edges and glossy stainless steel beneath in the form of its skeleton. Pistons, pipes, and a car grill along the front in the shape of a snarling mouth.

Actually.

James blinked and saw it. The front of the upper body was shaped like a wolf's head, the grill its mouth, twin ruby headlamps its eyes, the rest of the tank its massively hunched shoulders and back. Arms extended out on each side like sidecars on a motorbike, of limited mobility but each sported what was clearly a massive weapon of some kind, a pair of huge cannons whose bores were wide enough for James to stick his arm inside. Their barrels were ribbed, their bases complex engines whose purpose escaped him altogether.

Jessica was below, tablet in hand, conferring with a dozen other Fabricators, but some instinct caused her to turn and gaze right up at him.

“What the fuck is that?” James called down with a helpless smile, a laugh of disbelief bubbling up in his chest.

“*Canis Bello*,” she called back. “Our first War Hound.”

James stepped forward and dropped twelve feet to the floor below, landing easily and gazing up now at the Hound. It towered over him, massive, its burgundy and gold plating easily several inches thick and curved around its shins, its thighs, its hull and arms. It was massive, felt huge, heavy, ponderous.

Terrifying.

Jessica approached. “I’ve been pushing my people hard. It costs as much as twenty Wings to make, but given what we’re facing today, it felt right.”

“It’s ready?”

“We just need the Aeviternum. And no, I’m not going to ask operators to spend theirs on it before the fight. We’ve unlocked the ability to create Aeviternum batteries. Each can bank up to a hundred points. I’ve got nine of them fully charged, and we’ll be infusing the Hound with 729 points shortly.”

“729?”

“Nine cubed.”

“That’s a metric fuck-ton of Aeviternum.” James let out a low whistle and studied the Hound. “What’ll it be able to do?”

“Kill demons, mostly,” said Jessica, looking up as well. “As always, the schematics come with precious little details, but it should give the Nem3s a hell of a headache.”

“Damn, Jessica.” He grinned at her. “This is amazing.”

“It’s not active yet. There are some final details we’ll only be able to explore once it’s activated. For example, the central body has a cavity that’s Anima shaped. We don’t know what that’s about yet, but my guess is that’s a means to recharge it once it starts to run low on Aeviternum. We’ll find out soon.”

“When are you going to activate it?”

“In an hour. We’re running final diagnostics. Which, given the mystical nature of this construction, means using our mechanics’ to ensure the correct density of the component pieces and that everything’s hooked up right. These things make Wings look simple.”

“Amazing. Can you call me before you wake it up?”

“Of course.” Jessica smiled tiredly. “We’ve also got more equipment to distribute. We’ve got over ten thousand Fabricators working around the clock now. Every day, Cindy’s organizing and implementing new workshops across the city, as well as growing our oversight and Command Center to orchestrate production. We have over six hundred Wings across the city now. People are unlocking new schematics and items they can produce daily.”

James nodded and studied the War Hound’s visage. The snarling maw, the deeply inset ruby eyes, the molded crimson and gold head. He couldn’t wait to see it activate.

“You’re the best,” he said.

“Serenity told me about what happened. She was here earlier, checking in.” Jessica’s expression turned to one of concern. “Are you doing OK?”

She clearly knew it was an impossible question, but he appreciated her asking it regardless. “Yeah,” he said. “I’m fine. I’ll be back in an hour.”

And with that, he leaped, grabbed the edge of the first floor, hauled himself up, and made his way back to the elevators.

*That Canis Bello was amazing, said Jelly. I want to be one when I grow up.*

*You’re going to grow?*

There was a long pause.

*I guess not. But still, I feel a very strong desire to be one.*

*Me, too, bud. Me, too.*

James made his way to the ballroom. The hotel was alive with activity, and almost everyone recognized him as he went. James nodded to those who called out greetings, gave stiff waves to those who saluted him, and did his level best to get to the ASOCC.

Cindy was using a standing desk, headphones on, grooving as she scrolled through a database. A dozen crushed cans of Red Bull lay around her extra-wide monitor. James tapped her on the shoulder and she whipped around, eyes gleaming, deep lines of exhaustion carved into her face, her hair greasy and pulled back into a small ponytail.

“James! Serenity was just here. She told me about Joanna. I’m so sorry, but that’s war, right? We’re not supposed to feel sad for more than, what, ten minutes? Haha, kidding, this is all such a train wreck, but what can you do? I’ve already found some replacements for you, but you know what? That’s a tough one to fill. You want Deadeye, I got you, but Remove Fear? Nobody picks that. Not sexy? I don’t know. So, slim pickings, but we all need that synergy bonus, right? Right?”

“Whoa, Cindy.” James raised both palms. “Take a breath.”

“Right, yes.” She closed her eyes, inhaled deeply, then slowly exhaled for a four count. Then her eyes snapped open and she beamed. “There! So much calmer. So, here are the candidates, man, I can’t get over how morbid this all is. Why don’t you take a look and let me know who you want me to call?”

James stepped past her to look at the screen. For a moment, he couldn’t read the names. He saw instead Joanna, her honest, open expression, how she’d never ceased to be horrified, never become jaded, how despite her strong physique she’d been perhaps the most emotionally vulnerable of them all. The bond she’d formed with Olaf, the quiet support she’d given the whole team.

Gone.

Sarah, Bjørn, Becca, and now Joanna. They’d lost almost half of the original Crimson Hydra team. Was he sentencing whomever he picked to a 50% chance of death?

The responsibility was crushing.

“Fuck,” he whispered, and forced himself to focus on the names. Twenty-seven candidates. Arbitrarily, he decided he wanted someone in their 30s, young enough to be spry, old enough to have some life wisdom. Female, to keep the team balanced. That left three candidates.

“You know anything about these three?”

Cindy peered at the names. “Nope.”

“I don’t have time to interview them all. They all here?”

Cindy scrolled right along the columns. “Nope. Sarah Brown’s based in the Bronx’s recruiting center, Jennifer William’s in Manhattan. Only Miriam Larson’s here in Brooklyn.”

“That makes it simple. Page her for me?”

“You’ll be in the same conference room as last time?”

Suddenly, the thought of interviewing another person, sizing them up, asking questions, deciding if they’d join his team and probably die was just too much for him. Maybe it



was weakness on his part, maybe it was trauma, maybe he was just too god damned tired, but he realized he couldn't do it.

"I'm going to ask Serenity to do it. I've got to check in with Hackworth."

"Sure thing, Boss," said Cindy chirpily. "I'll get right on it."

James stepped away and called Serenity.

She answered a few moments later. "Morning, sunshine."

"Hey. Do me a favor?"

"What's up?"

"I don't have it in me to interview Joanna's replacement. You think you can check her out while I talk to Hackworth?"

"Sure." There was a pause. "You doing OK?"

James laughed. "We all need to come up with a better way of asking that. Because no. But also yes. Yeah, I'm fine. Just managing my reserves."

"Good to hear. I'll be right down."

James hung up. James Jelly was hovering beside him. "What?"

*You look like you're running low on Aeviternum.*

*I've got all four points.*

*Not what I mean.*

*I know. I'm fine. This shit takes a toll.*

*You should try becoming a machine. Makes everything much easier.*

*Thanks. I'll look into that.*

James found Hackworth, but the colonel was too busy working with his Command team to do more than greet him. James watched, nonplussed, as Hackworth coordinated with other branches of the military and prepared the whole war machine for the day's activities.

James backed away and left him to it. Thank God he wasn't responsible for all that.

Instead, he made his way back down to the parking lot and returned to the double-high construction zone where the War Hound stood.

Fabricators were wheeling in the Aeviternum batteries. They looked like waist-high heat pumps that glowed with a soft golden hue. Even from the floor above, their spiritual weight was immense; James could feel on some weird level how they distorted the very fabric of the world, as if each generated its own gravitational pull.

Jessica ran the operation with clear, precise commands. James didn't draw attention to himself, but instead watched as she oversaw the batteries being hooked up to the War Hound, received confirmations from the other War Engineers that the Hound was ready, and then did something with her own mechanicus that looked important. Everyone watched as she held it before the Hound's gleaming red and gold chest, and then she backed away and nodded.

"We're ready. Someone please page James Kelly."

"No need." He pushed off the column and stepped into view above them all. "I'm here."

Jessica flashed him a smile. It was only then that he saw how incredibly nervous she was. "Great. Then we're ready. Let's power it up and see what it can do."

## Chapter 38:

### Apparatus Bellicus Prime

James stepped back as the War Engineers got to work. This involved moving into a circle around the War Hound and raising their mechanicus tools, each of which was distinct yet formed in the shape of a complex metallic wand. Eight Engineers got into position, and then Jessica completed the circle and raised her own.

Almost, James expected her to begin an incantation, for a wind to pick up and blow her hair, but instead, her mechanicus began to glow with a fierce, blinding light. The silence ached until the batteries began to thrum, a deep, powerful sound accompanied by steady flickering as they responded to Jessica's will.

The sheer amount of power being channeled here was stunning. One Aeviternum could blast a city block with holy power. Jessica was conducting almost eight hundred points into her construct, and the effort showed.

She leaned forward, jaw clenched, arm shaking as she held her tool aloft, and then her eyes began to glow. Soon, they blazed like her mechanicus, resplendent with a rich golden fire, and then everything reached a threshold and the light in the batteries surged up the power cables into the Hound.

The war machine came to life. It didn't move, but suddenly it felt vital and began to give off heat. The air trembled with divine power, and James felt it in his heart, his lungs, as if a deep, inaudible bass beat were now playing.

The Hound's ruby eyes kindled to life, a mesmerizing liquid crimson glow, and the perforated exhaust pipes that rose from its rear - its shoulders - began to vent expended divine power into the air in the form of a ghostly blue glow.

James waited. Everyone waited.

But the Hound didn't move.

Jessica's eyes had reverted to normal, her mechanicus lost its glow. She lowered her arms, stepped back, blinked. "It's done."

"That's..." James couldn't find the words. "That's incredible. How do we control it?"

"I don't know," said Jessica. "I'd hoped it would come to life like an Anima. War Hound?"

No response. The huge machine remained still.

"Canis Bello?" Still it didn't respond. Jessica frowned, raised her mechanicus and focused. A moment later, she lowered it. "Everything is as it should be."

"Huh." James scratched his beard. "Maybe it needs to detect a demon to activate?"

"That would be less than ideal," said Jessica. "We're not about to invite Nem3s in here."

James looked back. "Any thoughts, Jelly?"

Jessica looked back at them. "Jelly?"

"Don't ask."

Jelly flew forward to flit around the War Hound, hovering here, hovering there, examining the massive machine.

*It's ready.*

*For what?*

*For animation. Alone, it is but a vessel. It needs a pilot.*

*A pilot? How so?*

In response, Jelly pulsed brightly, and for the first time, the War Hound responded. It shivered and James heard the sound of mechanical parts deep within it sliding and engaging.

"What happened?" asked Jessica, alarmed.

"Hold on." James turned, took three steps, then leaped to grab the edge of the upper floor. He hauled himself up and then turned to look.

The top of the War Hound had split open revealing its mechanical interior and a golden cradle the size of a magnum bottle of champagne. This cradle had lifted up and split open.

“That’s Anima shaped,” said James quietly.

*Correct. The War Hound requires an invested Anima to operate.*

James shivered with excitement. “What are you saying, Jelly? Someone needs to die and pour their soul into their Anima?”

*No, said Jelly. Though that is optimum and results in the greatest bond. Anyone can transfer their soul into the Anima temporarily. That Anima then inserts itself into the Canis Bello which allows the soul to control it as the pilot.*

“James?” Jessica was staring up at him. “Update?”

“The, ah, War Hound requires a pilot. Jelly’s telling me that anyone can drive it if they put their soul in their Anima and then insert it into the Hound.”

Silence. The crowd of some thirty Fabricators went completely silent. The War Hound continued to rumble like a parked muscle car.

“You can do this?”

“Jelly?”

*Yes, James. We can do this. In a sense, this is one of my secondary functions. I see that now. Not my primary, but key to my overall utility.*

*What’s your primary function?*

*I don’t know that yet.*

James let out a shaky breath. “Yeah. Jelly says we can do that.”

“What happens to you if the War Hound’s destroyed while you’re piloting?”

*If I am destroyed while invested, your soul will return to your body. The strength of your Arete will determine how long*

*it will take you to awaken from the resultant coma.*

*How long could that last?*

*I don't know.*

James relayed that information.

Jessica frowned at him. "And Jelly says this is how this is supposed to work?"

"Yes." James turned his gaze to the massive war machine. Fifteen feet tall, ponderous and huge, it looked amazing, indestructible. The desire to control it was sudden and unstoppable. James couldn't imagine what it would be like to enter battle inside something like that, but he couldn't wait to find out.

"I'm going in," he called out. *Jelly, let's do this.*

*Holy shit!* said Jelly.

*What's wrong?*

*Nothing. That is now my favored joyful exclamation. Place your body somewhere comfortable, James. When you invest your soul in me, you will lose control of it.*

*Can I return to it at will?*

*Tricky. Distance plays a factor. Leaving me when you are too far away will result in a temporary coma as you return to yourself.*

*Huh.* James pondered this, then pushed the danger away.

"James, wait." Jessica glanced to one side. "I'm coming up. We need to discuss this. Don't do anything without me."

"There's nothing to discuss," said James. "With Gloria and the highest Arete, it makes sense that I take the first stab at this. You said everything was as it should be. Jelly said the same. The Fourth Wave is going to hit in a few hours. I'll meet it from inside the Hound."

Jessica hesitated. "What about your team?"

"They can support me from Wings." James gave a firm nod. "I'm going in." He turned, moved to a cement column,

and sat against it. *Let's go, Jelly.*

*Close your eyes. Focus on my energy. Push yourself toward me. I will do the rest.*

James did as he was bid. In the warm, velvety darkness behind his eyelids, he sensed Jelly hovering before him, a glowing star of gold and silver. He reached for it, yearned for that light, which blazed and grew massive like a sun going nova.

### **Investing James Kelly in Sola Anima Investiture complete**

The sensation was simple, easy, and James felt his sense of self slip forward, unmoored from his body and flying up into the light. A moment later, he was hovering within a realm of golden clouds, warm and secure and utterly without body.

*We are now invested,* said Jelly, its voice coming from all around. *If you wish, you can choose to view the world through my central eye.*

James didn't know how to do that but formed the desire and it became so. Half of the golden clouds disappeared to become a fish-eye lens view of the world, the edges distorted, the central area sharply focused. James sensed the ability to take control of Jelly, much as a hand within a glove can choose to form into a fist at a moment's notice, but the view was changing already.

Jelly flew down to the War Hound and closed into his teardrop shape, then slotted itself neatly into the golden cradle, which retracted as it closed around them, locking them in place.

They slid into the center of the Hound's corpus and James sensed more than saw the hull close overhead. The loss of light didn't impact Jelly's view, which became a night-vision blue of the complex iron plates and golden circuitry all around them.

*Here we go, said Jelly. Have fun, James.*

His vision blanked out. Everything turned white, the golden clouds, the fish-eye lens. James felt a great rushing roar as a vibration through the essence of his being, felt as if he were falling into an endless hole, and then his world expanded violently and everything was changed.

**Imbuing Canis Bello**  
**Gloria detected**  
**Canis Bello imbued at Gloria Immanence 1**

James blinked. He was staring straight ahead now, his field of vision encompassing a 180-degree arc. He was high up, head level with the first floor, and his vision was subtly different; surfaces swam subtly as if energy rippled beneath the skin of the world. Colors were oversaturated, and dark corners and shadows gradated to the same blue night-vision he'd experienced with Jelly.

Words scrolled to one side of his sight:

**Canis Bello (Glorium)**

**Apparatus Bellicus Prime**

**Dimensions: (LxBxH) 12 x 12 x 16 feet**

**Tonnage: 9 tons**

**Speed Class: 2 cruise / 5 hard-burn**

**Aeviternum pool: 728/729**

**Pilot and Passenger Capacity: 1/1**

**Armaments: Empyrean Gun, double-barreled Vault Cannon**

**Armor: Shaped *Adamantino Divinum* plates encased in Angelus Steel**

**Aura: Bronze**

**Aura Strength: 1**

**Traits: Vanguard, Intimidating, Gloria Enhancement, Fuel Efficient**



**Strength: 155**

**Stamina: 170**

**Speed: 40**

**Agility: 25**

**Power: 90**

“Holy shit,” said James, and his voice echoed throughout the parking structure, filtered through the Hound’s grill, sounding distinctly like himself but with reverb and a deep rumble like summer lightning to underscore his words.

The Fabricators flinched and several jerked back in alarm.

“James?” Jessica moved to stand before him. “You in there?”

James could feel the entirety of the Hound. He *was* the Hound. Its body was his body. His legs, his arms, his bulky mass. A sensation of terrible might filled him, a grave and ponderous strength that nothing could stop. He raised and lowered his arms experimentally; they had limited range of movement, swiveling his weapons about so that they could target anything in the 180-degree arc before him. To track something as it moved behind him, he’d have to swivel on his hips.

He did so, and the upper chassis rotated smoothly, his legs remaining still, his upper half turning to face directly behind him. Realization hit James: he could simply spin and move in the opposite direction without having to turn his legs around. This enhancement to the Hound’s mobility was huge.

“James?”

“One second,” he said, his voice booming again throughout the enclosed space, mechanical and echoing.

*Jelly, you there?*

*I’m here, James. Apologies. I’ve been screaming silently with joy since we merged with the Hound.*

*How do I figure out what these different things on the Hound's sheet do?*

*Focus on them. I'll provide an explanation.*

James scanned the sheet. Empyreal Gun?

*The Empyreal Gun unleashes a stream of superheated Aeviternum in a twenty-yard plume, making it effective against swarms and massed enemies. The intensity of this blast is of sufficient strength to be useful against elite demons up to C-grade, overwhelming Infernum Auras and compromising armor. The plume's range can be adjusted so that it can be unleashed in a short, melee-range, or up to its full extent of twenty yards.*

*Hold up. C-grade demons?*

*That's what I'm understanding. It seems Nemesis is a category, not a grade. Hmm. Yes. Nemesis demons are those released before the opening of the Pits, and range from F to D. Nemesis 1 and 2 are considered F grade, while Nemesis 3 is E.*

James let that sink in. Nem3s were only E-grade? What the fuck would an A-grade demon look like?

Then he thought of the Monitors. There was no comparing them to a Nem3, and from his conversations with Meladrix, he had been given the impression that there were far stronger entities at play.

*So it goes from F to A?*

*No, James. There are A-grade demons, but I'm getting the impression that there are higher ranks than even that.*

*Well, shit.* James frowned, mind spinning, then forced himself to focus. *So the gun runs on Aeviternum. How quickly will I blow through my reserves if I use it?*

*It depends on the intensity of your attack. Full range will consume Aeviternum at four times the speed of melee-range. You will have to calibrate usage as you go.*

*Fine. And the double-barreled Vault Cannon?*

*The double-barreled Vault Cannon is a formidable weapon that fires Gloria-enhanced Smite 30 mm caliber rounds at 4,000 rounds per minute when in maximum mode, and 1,000 rounds per minute when in limited mode. Maximum mode is effective against demons up to E-grade and can be sustained for thirty seconds before needing a thirty second cooldown, while limited mode doubles the armor-piercing power of the round making it effective against demons up to C-grade and requires no cooldown. The Vault Cannon is fueled by the Hound's ambient divine power pool, which when depleted taps an Aeviternum to be replenished. Essentially, this weapon benefits from the Eternal Fire Benediction.*

*Fuckin' A. So the gun is a high-intensity flamethrower that can hurt even C-grade demons, while the cannon can fire forever in limited mode or for a minute in max?*

*That's right, James. Fuckin' A.*

*All right, all right. Let's see. Hard burn?*

*You can tap an Aeviternum to quadruple movement speed and double jumping range for twenty seconds.*

*And I do that how?*

*You merely need to think it, and I will make it so. I am your interface with the Hound and will implement your desires as you think them.*

*Sweet. What about these Traits? Vanguard?*

*That's a carry-over from your own title and means that your War Hound gains a 20% damage bonus whenever you are on the forefront of the line of battle.*

*I don't plan on hiding in the back. Great. Intimidating?*

*F-grade demons will flee your War Hound automatically, while E-grade demons will break and run if they suffer too many losses. "Too many" is contingent upon a host of numerical and environmental factors. D-grade demons will not break but will either avoid you if their number lies below a certain threshold or swarm you if not. C-grade demons and up are unaffected.*

*Gotcha. Gloria Enhancement?*

*That's a general upgrade, much like I received upon being Imbued. It raises your stats and makes your Vault Cannon far more lethal than regular Smite bullets. It also gives you Fuel Efficient, which means the Aeviternum in the Hound's reserve pool will be twice as efficient as other Hound's fuel.*

*Fuck yeah. And can I still drop Heavenly Assaults?*

*Yes, James. Those can be fueled by either your own reserves or drawn from the War Hound's pool.*

*James froze. I've got access to over 700 Aeviternum?*

*Yes, James. Fuckin' A holy shit you do.*

“James?” Jessica’s concern was growing. “Please talk to me.”

“Jessica?” James swiveled back around, the garage rotating smoothly by, and then lowered the huge Hound’s head to stare right at her. He felt lightheaded, euphoric, almost giddy. “You might want to sit down. This thing’s gonna turn the tide of battle.”

# Chapter 39:

## Inspiration

Everybody was crowded around. Crimson Hydra. Star Boy, Hackworth, officers, operators, Fabricators.

Gawping. Gaping. Unable to process what had just happened.

James understood where they were coming from, but impatience was building up within him.

It was time to roll out.

“Colonel Hackworth. How does this change Crimson Hydra’s deployment?” His voice boomed out through the parking garage, reverbed and thunderous.

Hackworth blinked. “Your team is no longer on overwatch. I’m going to place you in the thick of it. We’ll have you cross the Manhattan Bridge, cross through Manhattan, and make your way through the Hudson Tunnel into Jersey to clean out the demons there.”

“Understood.” James swiveled toward the massively reinforced ramp that led up to the first floor and the garage exit. “I’m going to get started. I want to be in position when the Fourth Wave hits.”

“Good.” Hackworth looked around at the crowd. “Everyone else, back to your posts. Move, people! We’ve two hours till the Fourth Wave hits. Show’s over!”

“Man,” said Star Boy as James took his first step, his four-toed foot causing the ground to shudder. “Fuckin’ titan online. Now I can die a happy man.”

“James.” Serenity moved alongside him. “What the fuck, man?”

“Grab your Wing. Double up with Olaf. I’m going to be making my way to the Manhattan Bridge. Find me en route.”

Despite the Hound's massive tonnage and size, it moved surprisingly smoothly; each step carried it three or four yards, progress slow and steady. But James wanted to see how fast it could go. What it could do.

He had to get outside.

"You heard the man - the war machine," barked Serenity to the rest of the crew. "Let's get on our Wings. Move!"

It felt surreal. There was no James inside the Hound, nobody inside the machine. He *was* the machine. He kept thinking he should be in there, seated, strapped in, holding joysticks, perhaps, feeling the shake of the Hound in his body, moving from side to side.

But no.

There was a purity to the experience. A singular identification with the mass and bulk of the Hound. He was fifteen feet tall now, weighed 9 tons. And he was starting to feel it.

He marched up the ramp, causing the Fabricator-created sheets of green steel to vibrate, then crossed the first floor to the main car ramp up to the street. Despite Hackworth's commands, people still just stood there, watching, eyes wide.

The ramp cleared before him, and too eager to just walk, James moved into a jog. He powered up the incline, his huge limbs pounding into the cement, his ascent smooth, and emerged a moment later into the avenue.

There he slowed, stopped, and looked around. Swiveled his chassis 360-degrees, growing accustomed to his field of vision, his area of focus. Not bad. How fast could he turn? He swiveled again, as quickly as he could, and the world spun. He stopped, spun some more, stopped again facing his original forward direction.

All right. Time to try running.

He began at a march, each footstep crunching the asphalt, then quickly moved into the same jog with which he'd tackled the ramp. The jog was ungainly; he rocked from side to side as he went, but this disappeared when he moved into a

run. At that higher speed, his upper body remained poised between the two pumping legs, shifting minutely from side to side as he went.

Speed-wise, he had to be going some twenty miles an hour. He felt ponderous, massive, unstoppable. Strength 155. He could run right through buildings.

Time to try the hard-burn. He tapped a point of Aeviternum and felt his engine thrum to life. If before it had thrummed silently, now it roared; he felt burned Aeviternum vent out the back and suddenly he was *moving*. It felt as if a huge hand had descended to push his back, urging him forward, faster and faster.

The War Hound powered down the avenue, doubling in speed, perhaps more. Forty miles an hour? Fifty?

Time to test that Power 90. With a flex of his will, he urged the Hound - himself - to leap. Without breaking stride, he crouched and surged upwards.

The War Hound burst into the air as if catapulted. His huge mass flew at least as high as the third-story windows, and when he came down, he caused craters to form under each massive foot.

*Damn!* James let out a whoop. *How far 'd I fly?*

*I'd estimate twenty yards, James. A very nice jump.*

*Twenty yards. Awesome. All right. Now to find a ruined building.*

*A ruined building?*

*I'm not done testing.*

James resumed jogging north toward the bridge. Pedestrians fell back with cries and shouts, only to step forward once more and marvel. He was clearly no demon. They didn't know what the fuck he was, but on some level he guessed they intuited he was on their side.

“Gonna kick some demon ass,” he boomed, his voice echoing off the building walls, and the sparse crowd let out a cheer.

There. A burned-out hulk of a building. The facade was crumpled in as if a garbage truck had rammed it, glass glinting across the sidewalk. James paused at a distance of some fifteen yards away, considering.

*James?*

*Let's see what the Vault Cannon can do.*

His left arm rose, and while he didn't see a targeting display appear, he could sense, could *feel* what it was aimed at. He panned the gun over the facade, testing how minutely he could aim it, then took a spiritual deep breath.

*Here we go. Let's start with limited.*

His double-barreled Vault Cannon came to life. Divine power flowed into the weapon, waterfaling into its heart as the barrels came to life, unleashing a staccato roar as each barrel alternated firing in such quick succession it was nearly indistinguishable.

1,000 30 mm caliber bullets a minute. Almost 17 shots a second. The Gloria-enhanced Smite bullets flooded forth and splashed against the ruined building, doing no damage.

*What? Oh. Shit. Right.*

*Your ammunition only does damage to demons, James. You can't damage structures nor humans with these weapons.*

*Why didn't you tell me?*

*I thought you needed to see it to really internalize the lesson.*

James wanted to grouse, but Jelly was probably right. Seeing the barrage of bullets splash harmlessly against the bricks slammed the lesson home.

There was no such thing as friendly fire. Given the crowds they'd be working with, that was a huge blessing.

*Then let's get to the bridge.*

James marched north. Brooklyn's downtown skyscrapers towered about them, paltry compared to Manhattan, huge compared to most other cities. He made his way down the



center of the avenues, and oncoming traffic stopped, the drivers' eyes widening in panic. They quickly reversed or pulled out to the sides, opening a way for James to keep moving north.

He experimented with the Hound as he went. Stopped and tried for a vertical leap. Tried moving and aiming both arms at once – tricky, but doable. Tried walking and swiveling his chassis as he kept something targeted. Lowered himself into a crouch - no walking forward when down like that. Tried hopping to the side. Doable, but awkward. The Hound wasn't built for sidestepping.

The crowds rapidly thickened. Soon, the street was flooded, people with backpacks, with suitcases, parents holding their children, people looking panicked, scared, unsure.

James was forced to slow down, but the sheer massiveness of his bulk caused people to press back and open a way for him.

“Don't be afraid,” he boomed out. “I am a War Hound, created by the Blue Light Fabricators and I'm here to destroy the demons. Welcome to New York. Please remain calm and step aside. Don't be afraid.”

He repeated a variation of this message every minute or so, his hugely thunderous voice rolling over the crowd and bringing them some measure of comfort.

Still, the situation was a clusterfuck. Thousands were gathered before him, and this was just a block or two. Star Boy had floated plans early on which involved sequestering Fourth Wave people in staggered groups of 100, allowing the Wings to complete the required hundred on a set schedule, triggering demon summonings and allowing the Nem3s to be systematically dispatched.

But such fine-tuned plans were completely implausible. The panic, the press, the sheer number of people made it unfeasible to attempt such careful crowd control. Folks barely had the presence of mind to step aside for a War Hound, much

less gather in orderly groups of 100 at distinct distances from each other.

The Wings flew in at last from behind, coming into view and matching his speed, arrayed like a halo about him.

“How’s it going in there, sir?” Jason called.

“Doing fine, Jason. This machine is a beast. I wish we had a hundred of them.”

“It’s not fair,” said Serenity. “I’m the gunbunny. How did you end up with those huge cannons?”

“You can take it out for a spin as soon as you get an Anima,” chuckled James. “You’ll have fun with them. The Empyreal Gun shoots something like Aeviternum plasma, while the Vault Cannon fires 30 mm Smite bullets. I’m going to put a real dent in our enemies.”

“Dude,” called Denzel. “You think you can take one of those black fire hives in that thing?”

James considered. “You know, I think I can. Let’s get through today and see how things stand. But yeah. I think we’ll be revisiting Philly after this.”

“By the way,” called Serenity. “James, meet Miriam Lawson.”

It was weird, being able to focus on the new team member without having to turn the Hound’s head. As long as she was within the 180-degree visual frame, he could simply focus on her and keep walking.

“Hi, ah, James,” said Miriam, waving a hand. She sat on the back of Kimmie’s Wing. Dark-haired with a large winesplash of a birthmark around her left eye and temple, she looked at once freaked out and determined not to show it.

“Thank you for this opportunity,” she called out to him.

“Really. I’m going to do my best to help.”

“She’s so earnest,” laughed Serenity. “It’s adorable.”

Miriam stared wide-eyed at Serenity. “I’m - it’s just that

—”

“See?” Serenity pivoted around. “Honey, relax. Say a swear word or something. For real. Go ahead, break the ice.”

“Hi, Miriam,” rumbled James. “Good to meet you. Feel free to ignore Serenity.”

“I mean, do you even know any cuss words?” asked Serenity. “Other than ‘poopy’?”

Miriam scowled at Serenity. “Of course, I know swear words.”

“Say one.”

“I, uh...” Miriam glanced nervously around at everyone else.

Kerim flew his Wing down between the pair of them. “There is no need to swear, Miriam. Profanity is a weak mind attempting to express itself forcefully.”

“Hey, fuck you, Kerim!” laughed Serenity.

James was forced to move even slower. Cars blocked the street now, the crowd flooding around them, most of the vehicles abandoned.

“Should have stuck with the Wings,” said Serenity. “Now whatcha gonna do, mech-boy?”

“This,” said James. The last of the crowd parted to show him a BMW sedan. It had been abandoned and was the first of what looked like an endless row of vehicles filling all five lanes that led to the bridge. James raised his foot and placed it on the BMW’s trunk. Eased his weight onto it and the trunk crumpled. The front of the car reared up at a 45-degree angle.

James paused then retracted his foot. Considered. He could shove his way along the pavement, but that was absolutely packed with people and he’d still have to shove cars aside.

Instead, he crouched and leaped.

He soared up and landed on the BMW’s hood. The engine block crunched beneath his huge weight, the car bucking up behind him, but without waiting, James leaped

again. There was no sense of effort to it. He simply jumped forward, pistons and magic doing the work, to land on the hood of the next car, a station wagon.

“Fuck,” said Serenity. “That thing can get air.”

“Out of the cars,” boomed James. “If you’re in a vehicle, get out. War Hound coming through.”

Denzel lowered his Wing so that he was flying just above the crowd and skimmed ahead, peering into each vehicle as he went. James leaped and leaped again. It was disorienting; he intuited that this kind of activity should make him out of breath. He felt the amount of mass being hurled into the air each time, and instinctively expected some kind of resultant exhaustion.

But there was none.

On and on he leaped, booming his warning until Flatbush Ave reached a huge intersection. Eight lanes crossed another eight with a large green park taking up the northwest corner. The result was a huge open space, abandoned cars surrounded by an ocean of humanity, with thousands crammed into the park alone.

James paused, parked atop a black sedan, slowly swiveling from one side to the other. There had to be at least twenty thousand people crammed in here, the crowd filling every avenue, covering the sidewalks, some people having even climbed up the traffic lights, with groups sitting atop the abandoned vans and trucks.

“This is a good place to start,” said James. “Crowd this big, we’ll get a couple of hundred Nem3s”

“What a clusterfuck,” said Jason. “How do you want us to deploy?”

“Stay tight and inside Olaf’s circle,” said James. “Everyone gets Deadeye. Yadriel, don’t leave formation unless I give the word. Jason, help Olaf maintain his circle by clearing away demons that get too close. Everyone else just lay down fire until we start drawing fire. Olaf, soon as too many harpoons are coming our way, distribute Shields.”

“Yes,” said Olaf. “Very good.”

Serenity had mounted her M2 between her handlebars on a swivel. She twisted around to look at the others. “We’ve a long day ahead of us, yeah? So pick your shots. You lot need to make your ammo last.”

Every Wing had saddlebags, James saw, large black duffel bags on each side that bulged with rectangular objects. Magazines.

Even so, Serenity was right. Given the numbers they’d be facing, even that much ammo would go fast.

Word had spread across the crowd and everyone, even those at the farthest reaches of the avenues, were craning their necks to look his way.

“Listen up, everyone.” James could pitch his voice even louder. His words crashed across the intersections like a tsunami, causing the closest to flinch and cover their ears. “We are Crimson Hydra from Blue Light. We’re here to protect you. When the Nem3s appear, the best you can do is crouch down and stay low. There’s no room to run and there’s nowhere to go. Do not panic. Do not try to escape. This is it. This is where we stand and fight. We will protect you. We will kill the demons. Just crouch, cover your heads, and let us do what we do best.”

The crowd wavered. He saw people glance at each other, their nerves still on edge.

Kimmie pulled out a megaphone. “Hello, everyone! I’m Kimmie. I just want to say a couple of things real quick. You guys inspire me. You came out to stand together when you could have tried to hide alone. **You’re here because you’re brave. Because you are willing to work together. You care about your neighbors, and that’s awesome. If we work together, we’ll get through this. So stay calm, keep it together, and we’ll make it through. Yeah?**”

People stood taller. Shoulders squared. James saw countless people inhale deeply, and a good number let out ragged yells.

Kimmmie raised the megaphone again. “I can’t hear you! **We’re the best of humanity, we’re braver than we knew, we’re going to face the devil and kick his ass. We can do this. We can do this together. Yeah?**”

This time, the cheer was more of a roar. Some people pumped their fists.

Kimmmie stood up on her Wing. “**You guys can do this! You’re unstoppable! Nothing can defeat humanity! We’re going to stand up to these demons and send them back to hell. You are brave, you’re beautiful, you’re fearless! Together, we’ll end this apocalypse and heal the planet!**”

This time, the roar came from twenty thousand throats. Everybody had stood up, from the folks atop the vans to those crammed into the park. People screamed their agreement, and it sounded like nothing so much as a battle cry.

“Hell yeah!” Kimmmie grinned. “**That’s the spirit! When the fight starts, stay cool, stay calm, pop a squat and let us waste ‘em. Got it?**”

Again the cheer came, solid and determined. Kimmmie waved, lowered her megaphone and sat back down. “There.” She exhaled sharply and grinned at her companions. “I think they’re ready.”

“Holy shit, Girl,” said Denzel. “What the hell was that? Your yoga classes must have been off the hook.”

“Look at them, yo,” said Yadriel. “They’re like high-fiving and shit. You’d think they were gonna do the fighting.”

“Damn, Kimmmie.” Serenity gave a begrudging nod. “I’m really starting to appreciate what you can do.”

Kimmmie shrugged happily. “Just trying to help, you know?”

“Outstanding,” said James, thinking of Hackworth. “Let’s hit them with that one more time before the Nems appear.”

“Yes, sir,” said Kimmmie.

“All right.” James adjusted his footing on the crumpled sedan. It gave him an excellent vantage point over the intersection. The Manhattan Bridge was less than a mile away.

There was no need to breathe, but James wanted to blow out his cheeks, settle his shoulders. Instead, he amped up the Empyrean Gun, filling its heart chamber with Aeviternum so that its barrel glowed golden. The Hound’s Aeviternum pool was at 721/729. Just barely tapped.

The Wings arrayed themselves in the optimal position. Olaf and Miriam just above and behind James, the others facing outward, M4s on their laps.

The crowd began to chant *We Will Rock You*.

Time was ticking down.

Time for the Fourth Wave.

## Chapter 40:

**BRRRRRR**

“Here we go,” called Serenity. “Got the official countdown. One minute.”

The crowd was eating out of Kimmie’s palm. She kept hitting them with Inspire every fifteen or so minutes, boosting them up, reinforcing their will, getting them focused and ready for war. Now with the moment at hand, the atmosphere was electric. Thousands were ready, roaring their eagerness for what was to come.

It was almost frightening.

“Thirty seconds,” yelled Serenity.

“Circle is up,” called Olaf. “Deadeye is shared. Strike like Thor!”

“Yo, you believe in Thor, dude?” asked Yadriel.

“I wish I did.” Olaf’s face was grim. “His blessing in battle would be righteous.”

“Fifteen seconds.”

“Good luck, everyone!” said Kimmie. “**Stay focused, stay calm. Fight with everything you’ve got. We’re going to win this.**”

Another wave of positive emotion washed over James. But it did nothing to blunt his excitement. He shrugged his armaments, both arms rising slightly, Vaulted Cannon and Empyrean Gun ready and infused with power.

*I’m very excited, said Jelly. There is so much this Canis can do. I am learning more about its interface even as I speak.*

*Test drive, growled James. Time for a spin.*

“Five seconds!”



“Rock and roll,” said Jason, great ethereal arms of pure Aura emerging from his chest like kraken arms. They began to swirl slowly around Olaf’s circle, glowing bright gray like buffed iron.

“This is for Joanna,” said Olaf and raised his M4.

“Two. One. Show time!” Serenity grasped her Ma Deuce by both handles and panned it over the huge intersection.

The roar cut off, people everywhere reading their alerts in consternation. They were seeing the requirement to gather in groups of a hundred and then immediately satisfying that demand.

James wanted to inhale. Wanted to roll his shoulders, limber up.

But he was a machine now. *An Apparatus Bellicus Prime*. All he could do was kill.

Shouts and screams burst forth as the Nem3s began to appear. Not one at a time, not in groups of five or ten, but hundreds.

In a moment, there they were. Towering, vicious, gleaming obsidian skin. Their faces little more than bulging bone carapaces, their maws opening in exultation at the sight of so many mortals gathered so tightly about them. Hunched over, massive, their arms terminating in those scythe-like blades, they shrieked in ecstasy and surged forward, intent on slaughter.

James opened fire.

He poured divine power into his double-barreled Vault Gun. The weapon grew potent, heavy, dire with heavenly might, and with a cacophonous roar, unleashed a stream of Gloria-enhanced Smite bullets across the intersection. Each bullet was eight inches or more, gleamed bright bronze, and flew with such speed and volume that it looked as if he were unleashing streams of burning copper lasers across the crowd.

The bullets passed through street signs, through people, splashed against the side of cars and vans.



The sedan crumpled beneath him, bounced as he left it, and then he was up, soaring through the air, the spears flashing beneath him. The very precision of the demon's aim undid their attack; they flew past him, slamming into Olaf's circle and shattering it immediately, overwhelming the Shields, but clattering and bouncing off the ruined sedan on which James had stood but a moment before.

"Out of the way!" roared James, his voice echoing, god-like. He'd aimed for the clearest spot he could see, and it cleared as the people there yelled and shoved away.

James landed. A handful of Nem3s were only a dozen yards away, a 90-degree arc.

Time for the Emyreal Gun.

The weapon fired up, blazed with golden fury, and then James unleashed a plume of raw, super-heated Aeviternum plasma. It billowed out with a shuddering roar, glory incarnate, washing over people and Nem3s alike.

The people were unaffected; if anything, they laughed, shocked, suddenly euphoric.

The Nem3s melted like sticks of butter thrown in a furnace.

Their flesh ran, their bones cracked, their limbs dropped out of their sockets. It took but one pass and all six Nems were reduced to hellish slag.

*Cool down over, James.*

*Time to party.*

He opened up with the Vault Cannon at the limited rate of fire and began to pound forward, allowing his Gloria-enhanced bullets to speed out over the crowd.

"Yadriel," he boomed. "You're up."

"Hell yeah!"

DONDONDONDONDONDON went Serenity's big gun.

The Nems were focused on James, however. They weren't concentrating any fire on his crew, so when Jason flew

past, heading out wide and trawling a net of pure Aura beneath him, James felt nothing more than blunt satisfaction.

He lumbered forward, people clearing a path as he went, but now the Nems were tracking him. Bone spears flew at him, began to hit. His Aura did nothing to stop them, so they cracked home, failed to dig into his huge armor plating, and simply bounced off.

James felt each blow like a punch, but they did nothing more than cause the Hound to shiver. He rotated his upper chassis as he went, spraying rounds indiscriminately through the audience.

**Your rank is now Novitiate 8**

**You have 5 unspent points**

James dropped a Heavenly Assault in the park. His line of sight was obscured by foliage and trucks, but the lightning bolt dropped down like a live wire of divine justice wreathed in Gloria's golden light. It slammed home, blasting out a shockwave of power.

Nem3s came bounding toward him, dozens at a time, closing to try and hack with their limbs.

Still firing with one arm, James unleashed his Empyrean Gun.

Aeviternum plasma blasted forth, and the Nems died.

**Your rank is now Novitiate 9**

**You have 10 unspent points**

His huge field of vision alerted him to the trouble up Flatbush toward the bridge. Nems were massacring people, wading through the crowd like assholes at the beach kicking over sandcastles. James dropped a Heavenly Assault on them, then a second, then a third.

Three bolts of living lightning slammed down in quick succession, triangulated to overlap yet still cover as much area,

and the white fire charred and then shattered the Nems choking the avenue.

**Your rank is now Acolyte 1**

**Your Class is Eradicating Crusader**

**You may select your First Virtue:**

**Fortitude | Justice | Prudence | Temperance**

**+10 to all physical stats +15 to Arete**

**Aura Strength: 4**

**You have 15 unspent points**

James didn't have time to read the details. He felt a sharp surge of elation, checked the Hound's stats, and saw that his own increase didn't affect the Hound's base stats. He'd dive into it all after the fight, and so dismissed the text and turned just in time to see a Nem3 come hurtling into him from the side.

His Bronze Aura activated. The Nem3 ashed as it hit the Aura, so that instead of being rocked to the side by the tackle, he was instead simply blasted by a spray of black smoke.

His Vault Cannon hadn't ceased firing. He raised it now to rake the rooftops and resumed striding toward the park.

Hydra was as busy as he was. Jason swooped back and forth over the crowd, dodging and swinging out wide around bone harpoons, lashing out at demons with his Aura. Yadriel was a fiend, leaping and tearing at all that he could find. Kimmie's voice echoed in the background as she worked crowd control, while everyone else continued to open fire with their Smite-enhanced guns.

**Your rank is now Acolyte 2**

## **You have 20 unspent points**

The crowd parted before James, folks screaming his name, cheering him on, and he dropped a couple of Heavenly Assaults down Tillary Street alongside the park which ran the whole length of the block. Then he raked the park proper with his Vault Cannon.

Nem3s were fleeing the intersection, swiping at people as they left, bounding like fleas as they jumped onto rooftops or away down the avenues.

2,000 or more demons had appeared, and over half had been killed already while the rest ran for their lives.

James dropped Heavenly Assaults at the farthest reaches of his ability, four or five blocks away. Turned, dropped more up Flatbush, turned another couple down Tillary to the west.

Nem3s collapsed, ashing as they fell.

“Crimson Hydra,” he boomed. “Hunt and destroy. I’m going to make my way across the Manhattan Bridge.”

“Copy,” Serenity shouted. Her Wing rose up, the others forming ranks with her, and together they swept out in a great curve, seeking more Nems to kill.

James caught a glimpse of Yadriel in his huge Nem3 form leaping up onto the facade of a building, digging into the brickwork, then leaping up to reach the roof and disappear from view.

Around James lay the dead and the dying. Despite the speed with which Crimson Hydra had put down the demons, their arrival alone had killed masses, the great sweeps of their bladed arms cutting people in two.

James lumbered north, and every few steps he unleashed a Sacred Strike over those lying close by. The white fire washed over them and their wounds were healed. People sat up, their cries of pain cutting off mid-scream, limbs re-attached, gut wounds sealing over, gouges and slashes and mortal blows healing in seconds.

*You can't heal everyone, said Jelly.*

*Not everyone. But some.*

James marched on. In moments, he was forced to leap from car to car once more, crunching down on each vehicle which buckled and folded beneath his weight.

It was five more blocks till he reached the bridge. People had fled the avenue, streaming away, and the demons had mostly raced after them. A few Nem3s still lurked ahead, but James dropped them with his Vault Cannon, tapping the limited rate to pump a score of burning bullets into each.

*Jelly, keep us moving north. I'm going to review what I've unlocked.*

*Yes, James.*

He pulled up his sheet and studied the numbers.

**Name: James Kelly**

**Class: Eradicating Crusader**

**Rank: Acolyte 2**

**Title: Vanguard**

**Virtues: None**

**Benedictions: Smite, Sacred Strike, Heavenly Assault, Bless**

**First Miracle: None**

**Second Miracle: None**

**Third Miracle: None**

**Aura: Bronze**

**Aura Strength: 4**

**Aeviternum Points: 4**

**Strength: 15 (Bless +5: 40)**

**Stamina: 10 (Bless +5: 37)**

**Speed: 8 (Bless +5: 33)**

**Agility: 5 (Bless +5: 30)**

**Power: 10 (Bless +5: 48)**

**Arete: 115**

**Unspent Points: 20**

His Bless Benediction had automatically reverted to a full +5 to himself once the rest of his crew had left range.

But still.

James could only stare. Power 48? Even his lowest stat was now 33. The huge bonuses from Jelly and finally achieving his Class had made all the difference. What would Serenity's Agility look like once she achieved the same?

Dismissing the obscene numbers, James focused on the Eradicating Crusader Class. As ever, there was no description. But James could intuit the meaning. Smite, Sacred Strike, and especially Heavenly Assault were all about destroying large numbers of demons. Eradicating them. Crusader? Wasn't that someone who quested forth in hopes of achieving a holy goal? If saving humanity could be considered a crusade, then maybe he was one.

James considered the Class a moment longer. It felt right, he decided. And opened up the four Virtues. Were those particular to his class? Didn't seem like it. They were too universal to be so perfectly tailored. Maybe all Acolytes gained access to the same four.

The Virtues.

**Fortitude | Justice | Prudence | Temperance**

Now what the fuck did they do? Empower him in some way? They had to be filtered through his Christian world view.



Fortitude and Justice leaped out at him, while Prudence and Temperance had no appeal.

Fortitude. The ability to persist, to carry on in the face of obstacles and exhaustion. That sounded like a fantastic virtue in the face of what was to come. But then Justice sounded great as well. Would that make him some kind of judge and executioner?

James felt frustrated. He wished he had a face with which to scowl. Why the fuck didn't these things come with an instruction manual? The System wanted them to choose, wanted humans to figure out synergies, but why didn't it make doing so easier?

Perhaps it was just a question of intuitively picking what felt right. Just as he'd gone for Smite, in this case he'd go for... Justice.

Because that's what he wanted. To bring justice to their situation. To punish the demons for their horrific transgressions and alleviate the woes of his fellow humans.

Justice.

James mulled over the decision a moment longer, and then willed it to be his selection.

### **Virtues: Justice**

And with that selection, awareness blossomed within him as to the meaning of the Virtue, and the incredible powers it granted him.

# Chapter 41:

## Dikastís

### Virtue: Justice

Understanding flooded into James and his mind blanked before the enormity of what was revealed. The four virtues were conduits, means to connect with beings that were exemplars of each concept.

A way to summon an avatar of Justice and embody it.

James felt vertigo as he attempted to trace the channel that linked him to that being, *Dikastís*. His mind couldn't wrap itself around the sensation. Not just distance, nothing as simplistic as *Dikastís* hovering above the clouds, but rather a distinct realm altogether. As if the conduit punched through time and space into a different realm altogether, a place outside of reality. It was as if a wormhole had opened between him and *Dikastís*, connecting him to this being, this embodiment, this exemplar of the Virtue.

And James realized he could summon it. Invoke *Dikastís* and bring its power down upon himself. Doing so would bring it to Earth, would cause it to manifest its glory upon him, but only in situations where great injustice was being done. Invoking the avatar frivolously would not only result in its not appearing, but in earning its displeasure. James didn't know what that meant, exactly, but he recoiled at the very idea.

Nor was the general apocalypse sufficient cause; he had to be faced with a particularly unique example of injustice to warrant invoking *Dikastís*. As to what would happen when the avatar manifested? James couldn't quite tell. He felt the equivalent of a choir singing, saw vision of golden light pouring down in radiant shafts.

It would be a true blessing.

*Fuck me, he whispered. Jelly, you ever hear of a Dikastís?*

*Yes! The Anima's shout was exultant! The name, I know it, knew it the moment you spoke it, though the second before it was lost to me. Dikastís, the avatar of Justice, one of the Quartet Virtues, as morose as he is grim, feared for his scythe and implacable will. Ah! And Jelly let loose a trill of sheer joy. It is as if doors have been flung open in the depths of my mind and understanding and consequent comfort come flooding in! You chose Dikastís? A bold choice, and I cannot say I am surprised. Be wary, James. Summon Dikastís only in times of true need. Of the four Virtues, he is the least tolerant of gratuitous summonings. But when he comes...*

*Wait. What is Dikastís? A Virtue? I feel him, just... there, on the edge of my mind. Like I could reach out and touch him, but... at the same time, so far away. Farther than... fuck, I don't know, the moon, or the center of our galaxy.*

*Dikastís resides within your heart, is everywhere and nowhere, omnipresent and yet wholly absent. Think of two sheets of paper.*

*Uh, all right.*

*Set them both upon a table, separate but close. Now draw a dot on each. You cannot connect the dots by drawing a line between them. Your pencil scratches a bold line to the side of your sheet and there must stop. The second dot is unreachable in such manner.*

*You're saying Dikastís resides in a different... dimension?*

*Not even as you understand it. But in truth the two sheets of paper don't lie apart on a desk, they are stacked together. At any time, you can reach Dikastís not by traveling across your own sheet, but by punching through your sheet into his. Wherever you go, there Dikastís is, waiting, resplendent, terrifying, holding the universe to account and prepared to lay down judgment.*

James tried to process this. The War Hound was still making rapid progress by leaping from car to car, Jelly maneuvering the great machine adroitly, allowing James to ponder.

*I still don't get it. Dikastís is, what? The philosophical embodiment of Justice? An angel? A... person on a different plane?*

*Yes.*

*Jelly.*

*You aren't yet capable of understanding, James. Your Aeviternum is a mere 4 points.*

*So if I raise my Aeviternum, I'll understand.*

*Yes, I believe so. The threshold is 10. That is a ways away for you.*

*Well, fine. Whatever. OK, so, I can now summon the avatar of Justice. Do you know what that does?*

*It allows you to lay down judgment upon thine enemies, James.*

*Well, all righty. Guess I'll find out soon enough.*

James considered the last element of his sheet. 20 unspent points. He could easily dump them into Arete, raising his Aura a staggering 4 levels, but...

Aeviternum now cost 20 points.

Damn, it was getting expensive.

With the War Hound, he had access to plenty of juice. Sure, he was coasting on the accumulated power of hundreds of Blue Light operators, but for now he could drop Heavenly Assaults at will, could lay waste to the Nem3s. But long term?

He needed to understand such things as Dikastís. He needed to understand what was going on if he was to figure out a way to win.

It was painful, but he pushed the 20 points into Aeviternum, and watched his amount tick up to 5.

Flatbush Ave changed. Large cement berms rose up to channel traffic onto the bridge, and the avenue rose up to become an overpass. James continued to crunch his way forward, occasionally demolishing a Nem3 with his Vault Cannon.

The concentration of demons diminished as he reached the bridge proper. Cars had been abandoned along its length, blocking it completely, and people had fled the vehicles to leave the lanes empty. The suspenders rose dizzyingly to the main cables which arced up to the towers. The bridge was so massive that James's 9 tons didn't so much as cause it to shiver as he pounded along, the towers of the Financial District rising to the left, massive brick residential high-rises on the right facing the East River gleaming below.

Serenity slid into view, flying just overhead, followed moments later by the rest of the crew. "James! You're out of the loop! We need to figure out a way to hook that thing to a radio!"

"True," rumbled James, his War Hound voice making her own shout a whisper. "What's happened?"

Denzel moved alongside his other flank, careful not to get in the way of his jumps. "Fucking disaster, man. Jersey's a warzone. Manhattan's got more Nem3s than a dead dog's got fleas. Everywhere you look, the fuckers are rampaging. The death toll..."

James felt his wonder and musings sluice away as the reality of what was happening hit home again. "The other teams?"

"Everyone's doing their best," called Serenity. "But we're taking big losses. There are just too many. It's the bone spears. They overwhelm circles too easily."

James processed this, had nothing to add.

"Also," added Denzel, "we can't find Yadriel. The idiot's gone missing. We searched but decided to stick with you."

"He'll follow," said James with certainty.

Jason swooped a little lower. “What’s it like being in there? Dude, you fucking wasted those demons. That machine gun of yours is insane.”

*Dude.* James felt like grinning. At last Jason was moving past calling him “sir”. “I won’t lie. It feels good to hit ‘em with both barrels. Gave me a taste of what it’s gotta be like to be Serenity.”

“Ha.” Serenity stuck her tongue out at him. “That’s sweet, but I don’t believe you for a second. I leveled up twice just because of your kills. You were dropping those blasts like a sick dog dropping deuces.”

“Oh, c’mon,” protested Denzel. “Really?”

James rumbled his amusement, the sound rough, mechanical, and reverberating. “I’ve got access to the Hound’s Aeviternum pool. 692 points left.”

“No fair!” shouted Serenity. “What? I want one!”

“Just wait,” said James. “You’ll get one soon enough.”

“Let’s go scout,” called Kerim. “We’ll wait for you at the bridge’s base.”

“Good idea,” said Serenity. “Hurry the fuck up, yeah, James?”

And the seven Wings flew forward, following the length of the bridge.

James pounded on, crushing cars, the War Hound tireless, till at last the double lanes dipped down to the streets of Manhattan. Part of him expected to see plumes of smoke in the air, for buildings to be on fire or falling over, but from the vantage of the bridge, everything seemed disconcertingly normal; the demonic war took its toll on humanity, not the buildings and infrastructure.

The streets, however, were awash with panicking people. Millions had crowded in over the past twenty-four hours, and now had nowhere to go. As such, they thronged and pushed at each other, wrestled in large crowds to find safety and escape.

But there was none.

The result was bedlam. People hammered at doors, climbed walls to smash in windows, climbed light posts and onto the tops of trucks and buses. The sound of wailing and screaming filled the air, combined with sirens and the roars of demons.

Madness.

Choppers scudded overhead, but the sheer press of humanity made it reckless to just open fire on the enemy; still the Apaches and Black Hawks dove down to unleash streams of blistering attacks on opportune targets.

Military forces were also in evidence, but they were grounded, tanks and Hummers and Bradleys trapped in traffic and swamped by the crowds, people trying to clamber onto them in the terrified hopes of finding safety. Most of the soldiers had abandoned their vehicles to proceed in squads and platoons, opening fire with Smite-enhanced bullets or working with greater cohesion where possible.

James slowed. There'd be no leaping or charging through these rivers of people. Instead, he powered forward slowly, booming his warning through the War Hound's grill: "Please get back. Move aside. Coming through. Please move back!"

The intersection with Canal Street was a mess, bodies strewn and splattered across the street, people screaming and shoving at each other as four or five Nem3s wreaked havoc. Serenity and the others flew overhead, having already killed six or so Nems, and now training their attacks on the remaining demons.

James paused as the intersection came into view, still standing on the last span of the bridge, and opened fire with his Vault Cannon.

Unlike everyone but Serenity, he could fire into the crowd with impunity. His barrage of Gloria-enhanced bullets scythed through the demons, tearing them apart, and he raised his gun to track the last one as it sought to leap away, catching it mid-flight and shattering its body, shooting off its left arm and cutting it into bloody chunks as it fell.

The crowd fell silent, shocked, and, as one, turned to stare at him.

James put up the Vault Cannon. “Help is here. Stay calm. Blue Light’s gonna take care of the demons.”

Kimmmie raised her megaphone. **“You’re safe now. Please stay calm and help each other and make way for James to come through.”**

A ragged cheer rose from hundreds of throats, and several people began to sob in relief, falling to their knees as they did so. James made his way forward, navigating between the cars and toward his crew. The crowd cheered him on, reaching for him, but moved out of his way as he proceeded.

“Let’s follow Canal Street to the Holland Tunnel,” James boomed to the others. “Jersey sounds the worst off.”

“Agreed,” said Serenity, lowering her Wing alongside him. “I just made Acolyte 1. Chose Fortitude. You must have hit it, too.”

“Acolyte 2. I chose Justice. Haven’t tried it out yet. Jelly told me not to fuck around with that power.”

“I got the same impression.”

The others clustered their Wings in close.

“I chose Prudence,” said Olaf. “With my Circle, my power, it felt right.”

“Justice as well,” called Jason, raising a fist.

“Temperance,” said Kerim. “I cannot believe how fast I am leveling with you all. It’s given me access to Mass Solace and Martyr’s Cry.

“Prudence,” said Kimmmie.

“Fortitude,” said Denzel. “I feel like I’m gonna need it.”

Miriam raked her black hair back, her eyes wide. “I’m, uh, still just a Novitiate. Level 8, though.”

She looked mildly shell-shocked.



“Good stuff,” said James. “We’re just getting started though. I’ve a feeling we’ll blow through Acolyte before the day’s done. Ready to head up Canal? The real fight’s waiting for us on the other shore.”

“The real fight is in the burning hive,” said Olaf. “Joanna demands vengeance.”

“Justice,” said James. “And don’t worry. I aim to bring it. But let’s get there first.” He lowered the Vault Cannon and began striding forward. “Let’s get to slaughtering.”

# Chapter 42:

## Hive

Crimson Hydra's battle up Canal Street was brutal.

For all that James was an unstoppable force within the Hound, he was but one speck of resistance in a sea of slaughter. People thronged, pushed, screamed, and were killed. Nem3s were everywhere. Leaping off buildings, charging into where the crowds were thickest, flipping cars, shrieking their delight.

James worked his way up the broad street steadily, his Vault Cannon on limited fire, spilling endless rounds across the blocks. Gloria-enhanced Smite bullets almost a foot long made short work of whatever they hit, but there were always more demons, always more death.

Overhead, Olaf maintained his Circle of Protection, the others forming a mobile death-dealing platform. Shields floated about them, parrying harpoons, and Serenity had put on some headphones so that she could rock out to music as she poured her Eternal Fire upon the demons, a cigarette clenched between her jaws. Jason made occasional forays out over the crowd, lashing the demons with his Aura, but the danger was too high; harpoons targeted him the moment he made himself a target.

Kimmie's voice was growing hoarse from exhorting the public to work together, to flee or crouch, or when things got really bad, just trying to bring a little light into people's last moments of terror.

Through it all strode James. Inexorable, implacable, focused only on destruction. Nem3s charged at him and fried upon his Aura. They hurled bone harpoons which bounced off the War Hound's armor. They screeched their hatred and died.

**Your rank is now Acolyte 3**  
**You have 5 unspent points**

Despite the rate of killing, the levels were coming much slower now. Perhaps Nem3s were meant for Novitiate leveling, and now that he was Acolyte, he'd need Nem4s to maintain the same pace. James dropped the five points into Arete.

No matter. In the War Hound, he could fight all day long.

James tracked a Nem3 as it leaped through the air, blasting it apart even as it reached the apex of its jump, and then felt it. An explosive boom of dark energy, as if a bomb had gone off to the south. Nothing changed around them, even the leaves on the sidewalk trees stayed still, but James felt a flare of alarm and momentarily staggered as he lost his poise.

“What was that?” Denzel yelled. “What the fuck was that?”

“Getting altitude,” shouted Serenity, and her Wing immediately began to climb. The Nem3s a block ahead were shrieking their delight and, as one, began to stream south, ignoring the cowering people and the battle coming their way.

*Jelly? What just happened?*

*I've not felt that before, James. But if pressed, I'd hazard that it was something bad. Hmm. Real bad.*

One of the drawbacks of being in the Hound was not having access to a radio. Unable to call in, he focused on Serenity as she climbed above the five-story buildings around them.

“Fuck!” she shouted. “We've got a live symbol down on the southeastern edge of Manhattan!”

“Live symbol?” James's voice boomed off the walls. “What do you mean?”

She dropped perilously quick, pulling up from her dive at the last second. “Black fire hive. They've brought one of the dead symbols back to life.”

The other Wings clustered in close.

“They can do that?” asked Jason. “God damn it. Should we head that way?”

“Yo, Star Boy,” said Serenity, thumbing on her radio. “We got eyeballs on the southern Manhattan symbol. It just lit up like a black-fire piñata. You want we should go take care of it?”

“Copy, Serenity. Yeah, get the fuck over there, pronto. I’m seeing tons of Nem3s heading that way. You know how they’ll power up. Problem is, I’m seeing other groups of Nem3s escorting Nem2s into the city. It’s creepy as fuck. Like the Nem2s were just waiting for this to happen.”

“Escorting?” Serenity frowned. “That’s some high-level shit. Can you get other teams on them?”

“Trying. You don’t know how bad the situation’s gotten. We’ve lost a third of our entire force already. Just... just too much going on. I’ll see what I can do.”

“Copy, Crimson Hydro out.” Serenity released her radio. “Fucking hell.”

“Let’s clear that symbol,” said James. “Last thing we want is all these Nems to get buffed.”

Kimmie scanned the area. “What about Yadriel?”

“He’s gonna have to catch up. We don’t have time to wait for him. Let’s hurry.” James turned south and left Canal Street. He knew exactly where the symbol in question was. Just south of the One World Observatory where he and Jessica had chilled a lifetime ago. That meant a straight shot down Broadway, six or seven blocks, then four of those mega-blocks west, then three or more south on West Street. Ten, fifteen minutes at most.

They powered their way south. The very air felt different, charged and dangerous. The Nem3s were all fleeing ahead of them, making their way toward the symbol as quickly as they could. Fuck. The hive was like a drain, sucking in every demon in the area. Which would give the local teams a respite but result in massively boosted Nems.

How many? How long did it take for the hive to buff them?

James pushed himself harder, leaping two, three cars at a time, occasionally taking to the broad sidewalks to race south, slamming signposts, newsstands, and even small kiosks aside as he charged.

Even as he made his way, he kept his Vault Cannon firing. Its range was staggering; if he could see a demon, he could shoot it, even several blocks ahead. Problem was that the farther the demon was, the more he had to guess which way it was going to go to lead it with his shots. No matter: infinite ammo and no damage to anything else meant he just blazed away as he went.

The Wings kept pace, limited by his speed. James's frustration was tempered by his awareness of how deadly their last attempt to hit a hive had been without a Hound. What was the point in getting there fast if they'd get their asses handed to them?

*James, just a warning: our Aeviternum pool is at 578/729. If the Nemeses are attempting to activate multiple hives, it's possible we'll need to quench several over the course of the day. So we can have fun, but we can't go buck wild.*

*Buck wild?*

*I learned that from Serenity. She's really interesting! She was telling me that before this invasion started, she used to put on this latex outfit with strategic holes cut out and go to these -*

*You know what? That's OK. No need to explain.*

They reached the turn. The closer they got to the hive, the more James could sense it, like a dark center of gravity that both oppressed and drew him in.

Damn it. The Nem3s were escorting Nem2s in? Was that their idea, or were both groups guided by some higher intelligence? The Monitors? No, they'd remained outside of this all until now. So...

An idea came to him.

Shit.

What had appeared in the center of the burning hives? The Nem2s had forged into a queen. Had the Nem3s merged into something greater as well? Something capable of orchestrating something like this?

All the more reason to nuke the hives. Too bad every single one was located in the center of the most populous parts of every city.

So thinking, James turned on West Street. One World Observatory towered above him, a finger pointed right at the heavens, and along the right side of the street rose older, grander buildings from a previous era. The avenue was massive, easily four lanes per side, and glittering towers rose here and there, fabulous and improbable, abandoned, no doubt, once all industry and work had collapsed.

But James focused on the demonic symbol up ahead. It rose high in the air and beneath it burned a new hive, a dome of living flame set in the midst of old residential high-rises, their hundreds of windows glittering as they reflected the flames.

Nem3s were pouring into the hive in startling numbers. Hundreds were entering every minute.

“All right,” boomed James. “This time, it’s going to be different. Stay on your Wings and guard the perimeter. I’m going in alone.” Serenity immediately went to argue but James cut her off. “No discussion. I’m the only one equipped to deal with what’s going on in there. If I need to retreat, I’ll do so, but until I see what’s going on, we can’t risk another Philadelphia. Clear?”

“Yes, sir,” said Jason.

“You give the orders,” agreed Olaf stoutly.

“Fine.” Serenity scowled. “We’ll keep new arrivals from reinforcing the ones inside.”

“Then let’s go.”

James led the way, loping forward, closing on the hive. He trained his Vault Cannon on the Nem3s leaping and scrambling across the street, blasting them apart as he closed, but his attention was focused on the huge dome.

Could the War Hound stand up to the enhanced demons within?

One way to find out.

“Here we go,” he boomed as he drew close and broke into a run. The Hound pounded the pavement, cratering it with each step. James primed his Empyrean Gun, took a deep, spiritual breath, and then leaped to cover the last dozen yards.

The wall of black fire flew at him, endlessly rushing upwards, and then he hit it and was through.

James entered the hive with his Vault Cannon blazing on both barrels even as he dropped his first Heavenly Assault.

The lightning bolt was weakened as before, forcing it way through the burning canopy overhead, but still it slammed down into the street and sent a shockwave of gold and silver flooding over the Nem3s.

Who turned as one, their bodies aflame, licked by ebon power, and roared at him.

James slammed down onto the ground, asphalt crunching beneath him, and broke forward, Cannon entering maximum fire. 4,000 rounds/minute, Gloria-enhanced, Smite-enabled, sheer wicked heavenly fury. The bullets raked across the assembled ranks and shattered bodies, blew off limbs, pulverized skulls.

But as before, what was effective on the outside was more limited here. Each demon could take more punishment. It didn't matter, however; the rounds came so fast and furious that they were still torn apart.

The demons closed in, hundreds on each side and James roared his defiance, unleashing his Empyrean Gun on his left flank as he dropped another Heavenly Assault on his right. And a second, and a third.

The superheated Aeviternum plasma flooded over the demons, immolating scores of them, quenching their black flames and ruining them where they stood even as the triple Heavenly Assaults wrecked the ones on James's other flanks. His Vault Cannon hit the end of its thirty seconds and entered cooldown, so James blasted Sacred Smites ahead of him as he charged on, one flash of righteous silver-white after another.

Harpoons slammed into him from all sides, buffeting him, challenging his balance. These burned black and did damage; he felt several embed their wicked heads into his Angelus Steel plating.

But he powered on. Again, his Empyrean Gun roared and Nem3s danced, incandesced, melting and shrieking, but the harpoons kept slamming into him and he staggered, nearly toppled over.

*Fuck this*, James thought, and brought a dozen Heavenly Assaults down all at once.

The roar of their impacts was thunderous and the shadowed world turned bright white, the golden overtones underscored by blue shadows. Nem3s were torched all around him, several hundred dying all at once.

**Your rank is now Acolyte 4**  
**You have 5 unspent points**

**Your rank is now Acolyte 5**  
**You have 10 unspent points**

James dropped the ten points into his Arete, bringing it to 130 and his Bronze Aura up to 7.

*Aeviternum pool at 542/729.*

*Just getting started here.*

The dozen blasts had cleared the block. James pounded forward, seeking the heart of the hive. There, a side street sat between the brick residential towers. The remnants of the flesh-walls the previous Nem2s had built for their hives.



Nem3s were pouring toward him, emerging from the ruined fortress building, their skin aflame, their harpoons flying immediately.

The cooldown on the Vault Cannon ended and he returned fire. Harpoons thudded into him, dozens upon dozens landing direct hits. Half of them bounced right off, the rest sank home, piercing the Angelus Steel.

*How we looking, Jelly? Damage update?*

*Armor is at 78% integrity, James. Once we drop below 50%, the Hound's internals will begin to take damage. Below 25%, we'll take quadruple damage.*

*Then we need to finish this fast.*

James reached for the heavens and summoned another six Heavenly Assaults. The lightning strikes fell in an arc before him, their blast radiuses overlapping, and another hundred or so Nem3s ashed.

James ran on, reached the shattered flesh walls and leaped over their broken ramparts. He landed within the great circle that enclosed the burning stream of black flames that raced upward.

There was no spire like he'd seen in the Nem2 hives he'd cleared. Instead, he saw a large stump of glistening raw meat some three yards tall. Thirty or so Nem2s were clustered around its base, rapidly extruding more human paste, a handful of them clinging to the stump as they accepted the new material and layered it on.

Atop the stump hovered a small black egg. Its facets gleamed with unholy light.

Bingo.

The Nem2s turned to regard him, their ivory masks still set in their horrifically disdainful smirks.

James reached for another six Heavenly Assaults. The sky lightened, but the Heavenly Assaults slid around the outside of the fortress as if a smaller, impenetrable dome encased the actual heart of the hive.

For a moment, the sky burned brilliant white as James stood within a bowl of living silver flame, but then it flickered out and was replaced by the black.

*James, to our left.*

James tore his attention with great reluctance from the spire to where a large shape had detached itself from the shadows wreathing the flesh-walls.

*Fuck, James whispered. The Nem3 queen.*

# Chapter 43:

## The Virtue of Justice

The Nem3 queen was huge. It must have been lying down when James arrived, because now it reared to its true height, towering over James in monstrous fashion. Easily over twenty feet tall, it was a mass of rippling muscle under taut skin; it was so ripped that it looked like a xenomorph anatomy lesson, every vein and even the muscle striations painfully visible.

Its bone-face was massive, still bulbous and blank, but now a great unicorn horn spiraled forth from its brow, easily two yards in length and ending in a wickedly sharp point. Six huge bone harpoons emerged from holes across its bulging back, and these looked to be four yards long each. Plates of black bone armor covered its back and the upper parts of its arms and legs, and a tail as long as it was tall whipped around behind it, terminating in a spiked club the size of a basketball.

And James couldn't bring down any Heavenly Assaults.

"Hello, motherfucker," James boomed through the Hound's grill. He raised both arms and unleashed the Vault Cannon and Empyrean Gun at the same time.

The Nem3 queen shrieked, the sound reverberating and causing the flesh walls to shake, and hurled itself to the side, sidestepping the majority of James's attacks. James pivoted, trying to keep the queen in view, strafing both weapons after it, but the queen was as fast as she was huge. Blurring with speed, she loosed all six harpoons even as she went wide.

James cursed and leaped, but his reactions were a hair too slow. Three of the harpoons slammed into the Hound's abdomen and legs, punching right through the Angelus Steel and divine diamond.

*James, armor integrity down to 57%,* cried Jelly in alarm.

James's leap carried him five yards to the left, but the damage to his knee caused the Hound to land awkwardly. He took a staggering step as the wounded leg gave way. For a moment, the world lurched, then the Hound dropped to one knee, roughly propped up at an angle.

James rotated, half-turning to stare up at the sky, and aimed his Empyrean Gun at the queen as she came blasting toward him. The superheated Aeviternum washed over the Nem3, and for a second, James thought he'd aced it, but then black flames roared over the queen's body, nullifying most of the damage.

*Motherfucker*, James hissed as the Nem3 barreled in, its armor plating sizzling and bubbling from the burns, its undefended undersides scorched and seared. He loosed a Sacred Strike but its tail came whipping around from out of nowhere. The huge club cracked the Hound across the head, and the whole machine spun and crashed down onto its back.

*41% integrity!*

The knowledge as to how the Hound could rise came to James intuitively. He flexed its legs and arms, arching its back and then inverting the posture violently, and hurled himself back up - only to be slammed into by the queen as it hit him from the side with the power of a collapsing high-rise.

James was knocked sideways and carried across the sanctum by the charging behemoth. He didn't slide off, realized too late that the horn had punched clear through his chassis, and from this position couldn't bring his gun to bear. His Bronze Aura flared, began to scorch and sear the demon, but the creature's black fire Aura was so intense it mitigated the damage. Furious, panicked, James raised his Vault Cannon and fired it at maximal speed, unloading hundreds of rounds in seconds into the queen's chest.

The queen slammed on the brakes and shook its head violently, causing James to fly off the horn and tumble through the air before crashing down heavily on the far side of the sanctum. Cursing, James levered himself back up, Jelly yelling at him about the damage.

James thrust himself back up, landed on his good leg and felt gyros compensate for the precarious balance. He raised both arms and deliberated.

The Nem3 queen had taken a beating as well: its chest was a mass of holes that wept black blood, and its carapace and flesh were badly burned. But from the way it was moving, it was still very much in the game. It prowled to one side, hunched over, and James realized in a second why it was waiting: six more harpoons were emerging from its shoulder mounts.

*Fuck this*, whispered James. *Dikastís, I summon you!*

A sense of immense distance suffused James, of connecting to a vast and ineffable entity whose interest in him was passing.

But that slight interest was enough.

Through that channel, that wormhole to whatever dimension the Virtue of Justice resided in, came a flood of glorious might. It felt like an archangel descending upon him, investing him with its power.

The Nem3 queen shrieked and loosed all six harpoons.

The harpoons burst forth, slowed, stopped.

The flames rushing up the inside of the dome also ceased to flow. The Nem2s turned into statues.

It was as if time itself had come to a stop.

A being appeared before him, as tall as the Nem3 queen yet ethereal where the demon was massive. It was an abstraction of a humanoid figure, gaunt and sketched out in glowing silver and white, crowned with a circle of gold and with a face that James's mind couldn't comprehend no matter how much he stared. As if Dikastís's visage were a divine beauty, stark and severe, beyond his ability to grasp. It caused James's mind to ache the longer he tried to capture that unworldly beauty, so it was with reluctance that he lowered his gaze to the being's chest.

**You are the first to summon me to this conflict,** Dikastís said, and his words were composed of a myriad of sounds: surf crashing upon the beach, immense crowds roaring in approval, the singing of wind chimes, the howl of wind plunging through canyons. **I mark you with my favor, James Kelly, and invest you with my exactitude. You shall be my avatar for the duration of this battle, and I shall mark a tenth of your Arete as belonging to me. Know that when I have claimed the entirety of your power, you shall lose yourself to transcendental glory and be mine forever, folding your essence into my greater self. At that moment, you will leave this plane of existence and cease to exist as you understand yourself.**

The being stared into the very depths of his soul. **Such a fate shall become more attractive to you the more you become me. But now, battle in my name.**

Dikastís shone brilliantly, so brightly that James had to close his eyes, and when he opened them again, a new status window hung in the place of the Virtue:

**You have summoned Dikastís, the Virtue of Justice  
13 of your Arete have been claimed in his name**

**You have received the Mark of Justice:  
+10 to all personal stats  
+1 Aeviternum**

**You are invested with the avatar of Dikastís:  
+60 to all stats (includes Holy Zeal bonus)  
Benedictions activated:  
Holy Zeal | Dispel Illusion | Remove Fear**

The +60 to all stats layered atop the Hound's own specs. James felt the war machine thrum with divine energy, and Jelly pulled up its numbers even as his own updates disappeared.

**Strength: 225**

**Stamina: 107**

**Speed: 110**

**Agility: 95**

**Power: 160**

Not only that, but James immediately felt Holy Zeal's low-level Indomitable Resilience begin to work on healing the Hound's many wounds; Angelus Steel and divine diamond plating began to reforge itself into pristine armor.

Time began to speed up, and as James rested weight upon his recovering leg, he saw a ghostly golden outline take shape around him, as if the ghost of Dikastís had manifested over the Hound, and felt Holy Zeal's obsessive fervor take hold as well: he would kill this Nemesis 3 queen or die trying.

There was absolutely no middle ground.

With a roar, he leaped aside, the Hound's reactions now so fine-tuned that he was able to avoid the bone harpoons with ease, and then with his 110 Speed, he charged across the sanctum, his Power of 160 launching him forward with each step.

Now it was he who had the upper hand, and the Nem3 queen sought to evade him in vain. James raced around and behind the demon as it recoiled, sought to spin to face him, and all the while he opened up with both weapons, pouring Aeviternum plasma and maximum-rate Gloria-enhanced bullets into its head.

The Nem3 shrieked in fury as it whipped its tail around, but James tracked the attack and concentrated his Vault Cannon on the tail even as he continued to pour the Empyrean Gun's blast on the demon's head. The huge bullets were perfectly aimed and severed the tail, so that six yards' worth flew wide, the great club bouncing off the wall.

The Nem3 shrieked again, the sound liquid now and full of pain and terror. James felt nothing more than savage hate arise within him. He wanted to kill it. To tear it apart. To bring justice to this place of sin, to erase the world of this monstrosity.

The queen sought to retreat, then surged back to attack James, then threw itself aside, but James danced with it, too fast by far and too agile by half to be knocked away or evaded. The Aeviternum plasma continued to pour over the demon's head, which finally cracked and erupted, Infernum and ichor gouting forth, and the Nem3 collapsed to the ground.

James pivoted and poured Aeviternum over the Nem2s, who'd continued their obsessive work on the column. They immediately charred, all thirty turning to husks, and then the column itself cracked and broke and the black egg toppled to the floor.

The column of black flame guttered and died. Fire ceased to flow up to the demon symbol, and a moment later, the entire dome tapered off and disappeared into a hundred tongues of black energy that dissipated in the wind.

James came to a standstill. He felt as if he should be heaving for breath, but there was no exhaustion, nothing. The War Hound was as ready as ever for battle.

*Holy shit, said Jelly. Holy shit.*

James felt the Holy Zeal leave him, followed a moment later by the avatar of Dikastís. The golden glow faded away, and the Hound's stats dropped precipitously back to their normal levels. Bizarre, how what had once felt god-like now felt barely adequate.

**Your rank is now Acolyte 6  
You have 5 unspent points**

**Your rank is now Acolyte 7  
You have 10 unspent points**

**Your rank is now Acolyte 8  
You have 15 unspent points.**



*Holy shit, whispered James. Uh, Jelly, how's our armor?*

*We regenerated a good amount, faster even than the regular Indomitable Resilience would have allowed. I guess that was due to the avatar. Regardless, armor is back up to 74% and all internal damage has been healed.*

*Wow, OK. James tried to process everything that had taken place. Needing something to contextualize it all with, he summoned his statistics.*

**Name: James Kelly**

**Class: Eradicating Crusader**

**Rank: Acolyte 8**

**Title: Vanguard, Bearer of the Mark of Justice**

**Virtues: Justice**

**Benedictions: Smite, Sacred Strike, Heavenly Assault, Bless**

**First Miracle: None**

**Second Miracle: None**

**Third Miracle: None**

**Aura: Bronze**

**Aura Strength: 7**

**Aeviternum Points: 6 (1 Justice)**

**Strength: 15 (Bless +5: 50)**

**Stamina: 10 (Bless +5: 47)**

**Speed: 8 (Bless +5: 43)**

**Agility: 5 (Bless +5: 40)**

**Power: 10 (Bless +5: 58)**

**Arete: 130 (13 claimed by Justice)**

**Unspent Points: 15**

Aura Strength 7.

He had 15 points to spend.

James poured the points into Arete and watched his total jump to 145.

His Aura Strength flickered up rapidly: 8, 9, then 1.

His Aura changed from Bronze to Silver.

James turned his attention to the Hound's chassis and arms. Unlike Bronze, a permanent silver glow now emanated an inch above his surface, faintly translucent and bewitching.

*Wow*, said James, and took a few steps forward.

*Wow is right. Uh. Try walking backward for me.*

*Walking...? All right.* Nonplussed, James took a few steps back, and if he'd had eyes, they'd have widened. He left a trail of Silver Aura behind him, as if the Aura lagged a yard and then slowly caught up. But the glow itself never left his Hound frame.

*What the hell?*

*What the divine realm of goodness, I think you mean. It appears that Silver Aura leaves a trail behind you as you move. I would imagine that the more powerful your Aura, the longer the trail. Effectively, in time, you might leave a wall of Aura behind you in battle.*

*That's... awesome.*

*Personally, I thought that merited a "Holy shit".*

*Heck yeah. Holy shit, indeed.*

James stood still, mind spinning. Silver Aura. The Mark of Justice, which had permanently buffed his stats and given him an Aeviternum boost worth 20. The Dikastís avatar. Which had "claimed" 13 of his Arete?

The being's word returned to him and he shuddered.

*Uh, Jelly, what did Dikastís mean when he said I'd be folded into him once he claimed all my Arete?*

*Yeah, about that. Not good, from a temporal mortal creature's point of view. Though pretty amazing if you're into becoming one with a divine being. You'll leave Earth and become like a drop of water in the ocean that is the Virtue. That which is "James Kelly" will be lost, essentially, as you are overwhelmed by the power of Justice.*

*Yeah, not good. Is there any way to undo this process?*

*Not have done it?*

*Great, thanks. And he said this fate would become more attractive the closer it became..?*

*Yes. The more divine you become, the more you will wish to become divine. A slippery slope, if you will, as your reluctance to merge with Dikastis disappears.*

*Great. James wished he had fingers to tap. Just great. Still. He pondered. Without the avatar, he'd be dead now. So, yeah. I'll just have to use it carefully.*

*Or use it judiciously. Jelly paused, expectant.*

*I'm not going to reward that.*

*Oh, come on! It was so good! I'll tell Serenity later. She'll appreciate it.*

*Bet she won't. Anyway. James looked around. This hive is cleansed, yeah?*

*Other than the hundreds of demons currently attacking Crimson Hydra who were pulled here before it collapsed, absolutely.*

*Shit!* James considered the black egg, but with no way to collect it, he had no choice but to turn and begin racing toward the others. The sound of gunfire and demons screaming came to him faintly in the distance.

But even as he ran, James felt a solid sense of satisfaction fill him. He thought of the Nem3 queen collapsing and dying, and though it did nothing to correct the loss, he hoped that Joanna, wherever she was, knew of what had happened.

It was a small thing, and endlessly insufficient, but James dedicated the kill to her memory, and hoped it brought her peace.

## Chapter 44:

### Old Friends

James pounded out of the hive and back out onto West Street. The siren call of the demon symbol had fallen silent. But before James had destroyed the Nem3 queen and brought the black egg low, it had called out to thousands of Nems, and they had answered.

Now, even with the hive extinguished, the area was flooded with demons. But the situation, it turned out, was under control.

James slowed, stopped.

And watched as Crimson Hydra went to town.

Above them all floated Olaf with his Circle of Protection, but now it was enhanced, the sphere's surface burning white in an inverse simulacra of the hive as countless harpoons slammed against it to no effect. White mystic symbols appeared fleetingly across its curvature, and in the center, Olaf stood upon his Wing, a great glowing armature of burning spiritual energy upon him, making him appear less a Viking and more Thor himself.

Olaf had summoned a Virtue, though it wasn't Justice.

With a cry, Olaf raised his axe and Seraphic Web burst into existence, strands of Bronze Aura flooding the area in a thousand cross-cutting strands, affixing to building facades, cars, bus stops, kiosks, traffic lights.

Nem3s screeched and howled in agony and died by the scores.

Meanwhile, Denzel, Miriam, and Kimmie clustered close beside Olaf. Each was invested by another Virtue, even Miriam. Whatever was happening below was taking its toll above; Denzel and Kimmie both were continuously wracked

by mortal wounds which they healed, flickerflash, their expressions ones of sublime transfiguration.

Down below, Yadriel was holding court. Massive in his Nem3 form, he was invested in a Virtue's blazing light, but more, wore ornate golden Angel's Armor over his demonic body. His movements were too fast for the demons to track, and his blows shattered limbs, burst heads. Wounds healed almost as rapidly as they were dealt, and over the cacophony of battle, James could hear the kid roaring with laughter.

Jason swooped over the battlefield, and the young soldier's Virtue was clearly Justice; James recognized the markings. His Aura Mastery lashed at the battlefield over and over again, slicing Nem3s apart, his aerial movements adroit and graceful, avoiding most of the harpoons flying his way. Those that hit but briefly inconvenienced him, but Martyr's Cry from Kimmie and Denzel kept him flying.

And Serenity?

Highest of them all, she gazed down upon the battle from seven stories up, her M2 trained on the tides of demons below, her gun blazing without surcease, her frame wrapped in the same Angel's Armor as Yadriel.

And Kerim? James searched and saw the scholar step into view behind an apartment's open window. He leaned out, opened fire, and when a handful of harpoons blasted his way, stepped back, only to reappear on a rooftop across the street.

Sniping quicker than the enemy could react.

*Let's lend a hand*, said James, and opened up with his double-barreled Vault Cannon. The huge bullets scythed down the enemy, and for a minute, it was nothing but unstoppable slaughter.

The demons ran at them, hurled their harpoons, raged, and died.

Finally the last wave eased.

**Your rank is now Acolyte 9**

**You have 5 unspent points**

“Fuck yeah!” shouted Serenity, putting up her Ma Deuce and allowing her Wing to lower. “You did it! You fucking did it, James!”

The others drew close, Yadriel padding over in his demonic form, Kerim stepping out of the shadows of a large kiosk.

“We’ve a black egg in there that needs collecting,” boomed James through the War Hound’s grill. “But yeah. I did it. There was a Nem3 queen. Pretty vicious.” He paused, wished he could grin. “But she’s dead now.”

“Fucking-A,” said Jason with a grin, reaching up to wipe demon ichor off his face. Like the others, the Virtue’s powers were fading away, taking with them the Angel’s Armor and other temporary gifts. “That’s gotta be a first.”

“Doesn’t matter. I see you all leveled up.”

Yadriel shrank down from his Nem3 form into his own slender shape. “Man, it was like crazy. Every few seconds a new level. Never seen nothing like it.”

“Though we need to figure these Virtues out,” said Serenity soberly. “I didn’t understand what mine meant when it said it’d claim ten percent of my Arete, but I didn’t like it.”

“Useful though,” grunted Olaf.

“Let’s hold off on summoning them again unless our lives depend on it,” said James. “I got the same message, and I can tell you that I ain’t ready to go become some abstraction of Justice. Which of the four did you all pick?”

“Justice, too,” said Jason.

“Fortitude,” said Serenity.

“Same,” said Yadriel, bumping knuckles with her. “Angel’s Armor, that Wolverine regen, and Remove Curse.”

“Prudence,” sighed Olaf. “Big surprise for me. I thought coming to New York that I would be at the front of battle, but

no. I am a mother hen, but that is good. I like my friends staying alive.”

“Prudence,” said Miriam shyly. “Seraphic Web, Aeviternum Chance, and Aureate Buckler.”

Kimmie grinned. “Guess which that leaves the rest of us?”

“Kerim,” said James. “You didn’t invoke yours. Why not?”

Kerim removed his spectacles and frowned. “I am a secular man, yes, but I have tremendous respect for matters spiritual and divine. Having my essence, my sense of self changed by Arete has been... disturbing but hard to reject. Having that same essence claimed by a being that claims to be a Virtue? I’m not ready to accept such terms.”

“Fair,” said James. “Someone radio in to Command. Let’s give them an update. Yadril, Jason, Kerim, head into the hive and retrieve the egg.”

“Yes, sir,” said Jason, raising his Wing to fly just above the other two as they jogged into the ruins.

“Yo, Command, this is Serenity. What’s up? We shut down the West Street hive, collecting the black egg now. Where you want us?”

“Serenity?” It was Star Boy. “I... I, uh...”

“Star Boy?” Serenity frowned. “What’s going on?”

“It’s... a lot’s going on. We’re losing people. A lot of people. It’s hard to, ah, process. But... maybe you could work your way up to the Holland Tunnel and cross over to Jersey? It’s, ah... the situation there is...”

“Fuck, dude, get it together.” Serenity glared at her radio. “We’ll get there pronto. Where’s Hackworth?”

“He’s talking to some bigwigs. I think... some generals?”

“Fine. We’re moving out, over.”



“Good luck. Just... kill them all, yeah?” James had never heard Star Boy so shook up. “Kill all them fuckers.”

“Damn,” said Denzel. “That sounds...” He trailed off, unable to find the right word.

Jason and the others returned a moment later, Kerim zipping up a backpack and slinging it over his shoulder as he ran. Without a word, James began loping north, the War Hound crunching and smashing a path toward the Holland Tunnel.

The occasional pack of Nem3s came into view and he mowed them down. But clearly, the immediate area had been drained of demons due to the hive’s gravitational pull; it took their getting up by Tribeca and moving inland so as to be able to enter the tunnel to start seeing fresh action.

And the dead.

Never had James seen so many dead.

People lay everywhere. Sidewalks. Churned up inside cars where Nem3s had reached in with blade-arms. Face down in the street, sitting against the walls, piled up where they’d fallen and died.

Nem3s hunted amongst the ruins, prowling and seeking fresh prey, only to sense Crimson Hydra’s approach, turn with an eager howl, then die.

James didn’t allow himself to slow, to even consider stopping to examine the devastation. Everybody had gone to ground in this area, with many front doors standing open, too small for the Nems but obviously allowing people to get off the streets.

Thousands dead wherever James looked.

It was a small comfort that he didn’t have a stomach or gag reflex, but on some level, that denied him the comfort of an instinctive reaction. Instead, he forced his mind to become steely and smooth, not taking in the horror that lay all around him and, instead, focus on killing and moving.

Several Blue Light teams were fighting in the hugely open area where multiple streets swept through two small parks into the Holland Tunnel entrance. Those desperate enough to brave the tunnel on foot to cross over from Jersey had spilled out into the open here, and the demons that had been summoned beneath the river emerged here as well.

James put on speed as he heard the sound of gunfire and the desperate shouts and demonic screams, and pounded up Hudson Street to break out into the open and see the firefight. The two teams had backed into a tiny triangle of cement and torn up dirt between the lanes that converged on the tunnel, and were standing back-to-back, firing desperately at the demons.

Of which, there were only some thirty. But without Wings, the teams were trapped, immobile, and on the verge of being wiped out.

James strode forward, the ground shaking beneath the War Hound, and summoned four Heavenly Assaults.

Even as the blasts of divine lightning dropped concurrently from the sky to hammer the demons from all sides with shockwaves of irresistible power, James opened up with both the Empyrean Gun and Vault Cannon, massacring the demons before they had a chance to react.

The world went nova with bright, searing white light, the blast of the Heavenly Assaults shattered the demons, and when the glow faded, the enemy was all dead.

“Fuck me,” whispered one of the operators as James made his way across the lanes, his huge mechanical feet crushing Nem3 corpses.

James didn't recognize either team. They were regular soldiers, recruited into Hackworth's second Group.

One of the men stepped forward to greet him. Tall, lean, with wrap-around sunglasses above a hawk-nose, helmet jammed on tight, he looked familiar but James only placed him once he addressed the War Hound hesitantly.

“Hi, there. Thank you for the assist -”

“Mancini?” James’s booming voice echoed off the buildings and caused the remains of both squads to jump. “Holy shit, it’s you.”

Mancini froze. “James Kelly? You watching this?”

James laughed. “I *am* this. I’m piloting the War Hound from the inside. I *am* the War Hound right now, for all intents and purposes. I didn’t know you’d joined Blue Light.”

“Hell yeah,” said Delvecchio. The lanky gunner emerged from the crowd with his huge gun propped easily over one shoulder as if it weighed less than a broom. “Aw, man, tell me how I can get me one of those, James. There a form I gotta sign?”

Mancini grinned. “You kidding me, Kelly? We’ve been keeping track of you ever since we split up. When the offer was made for volunteers to join Blue Light’s Second Group, we were first in line.”

Singh was sitting to one side, his left side drenched in blood, left arm little more than a bloody sleeve, but one of the other operators dropped a Healing Grace on him and his arm reformed. With a grunt, he stood and moved to stand beside Delvecchio, where he snapped off a smart salute. “Captain.”

“Oh shit!” Serenity came gliding up on her Wing. “Will you look at these sorry assholes? Blue Light’s letting just about anybody into the outfit these days.” But her tone was so clearly joyous that the three men could only grin. “Where’s that sorry bitch Huffman?”

“Ah,” said Mancini, his grin disappearing as quickly as it came. “She fell during the Nem2 Fourth Wave. She made a noble sacrifice.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” said James. “She was good people.”

“Shit, I feel like an asshole again,” said Serenity. “I’m sorry, Mancini.”

“Don’t be.” He straightened. “Regardless, thank you for the assist. Anything we can do in return?”

“We’re headed to Jersey,” said James. “Situation over there’s fucked. You guys want to help?”

“Sounds good. But you won’t be able to take the Holland in that war machine. The tunnel’s packed with abandoned vehicles. You might be able to make your way over the cars, but the trucks will stop you cold.”

“Well, shit.” James considered. *Thoughts, Jelly?*

*We could go the direct route.*

*The direct route? The tunnel is the direct route.*

*No, James. Jelly sounded impossibly patient. The direct route. Through the river.*

*The Hound can swim?!*

*Of course not. But it can walk. We’ll sink, cross the river over its bed, and emerge on the other side. Jelly paused, then added helpfully, you don’t need to breathe anymore.*

*Ok. Ok, good. Let’s do that.*

“You all will take the tunnel,” James commanded, trying to sound more certain than he felt. “Clear it of Nems as you go, then wait for me where it opens up in Jersey.”

“What about you, boss man?” asked Jason. “You going to jump across?”

“Something like that.” James caused the Hound to twist its chassis from side to side briskly like a man limbering up. “Jelly tells me I don’t need to breathe anymore, so...”

“You’re going to *walk*?” Serenity stared at him. “Do you know how nasty the Hudson is? What kind of shit is in that mud? Urgh.”

“He’s a robot, yo,” said Yadriel in annoyance. “I don’t think he’s giving many royal fucks about it.”

“*Urgh*,” said Serenity for emphasis.

“Move fast, stick together,” said James. “I’ll see you there. Good luck.”

And with that, he began to lope west, toward the waterfront. It felt weird, almost wrong to leave this crew behind, but he had to work with the Hound's limitations.

Two blocks later, he left the last of Manhattan's buildings behind as he burst out onto West Street once more. He pounded across the divided lanes, leaping over abandoned cars, then hit the Hudson River Greenway at a run.

The Hudson glimmered through the trees and low bushes, flat and turgid, a dark and uninspiring grayish-green.

James tapped hard-burn. The War Hound exploded into a sprint. He crossed the thin belt of greenery in seconds, hit the great concrete walkway that marked the very edge of the island, and with a roar that echoed out over the river, he leaped, surging up over the fencing to fly out over the waters, his shadow trailing after him.

He hit the water a dozen yards out and sank with a great splash, down into the murk. There was no sense of wetness, of temperature. Down he went, and suddenly the water was lit up with a brilliant glow that originated from him.

*Lights, said Jelly helpfully. The Hound's eyes can light up something fierce with a little divine power.*

*Thanks.*

They hit the mud, which rose up in great plumes around them. The water was full of particulate matter, making visibility a limited thing indeed, and the surface was only some twenty feet above them, though the ground fell away steeply into a frankly terrifying blackness below.

*Shall we?* asked Jelly.

*Let's. What's the worst that can be hiding down there during a demon apocalypse?*

*Hahaha, said Jelly, utterly without humor. I sincerely wish you hadn't said that, James.*

With nothing for it, James began to stride forward and, step by step, the Hound rapidly descended into the abyss.

# Chapter 45:

## Jersey

Step by step. Ever deeper. The murk swirling, the pressure of the river above pressing down, unfelt but clearly imagined. The stark burn of his eye lights did little more than illuminate a great haze. The push of the current was strong, inexorable, and James course corrected by angling obliquely upriver in the hopes of remaining steady.

No monsters. No krakens. No fish, even. The ground was sandy pillows from which ropes of seaweed and bunches of mussels grew.

James felt as if his breath should be echoing within the Hound, felt as if he should have been sweating, cooped up as if in a tiny sub, but he was bodiless, without need for oxygen. So instead, he simply studied what lay before him, trudging forward along the riverbed.

*Movement up ahead, said Jelly abruptly. Let's slow it down, James.*

*Movement? He peered at the veils of silt and darkness just outside the blazing nimbus of his light. You gotta give me more than that, Jelly. We talking a fish? A sea dragon?*

*A sea dragon, James?*

*Don't fuckin' judge me. What did you see?*

*I think it was demons. Remember, our armaments work underwater. Don't hesitate to fire if needed.*

*Check.*

The Hound slowed but continued to move forward. It wasn't as if they could creep up on shit with their Klieg lights blazing, but still, James felt as if he were creeping up on the edge of a ravine. You didn't want too much momentum.

Then he saw it.

Movement, indeed.

Not just movement, but *traffic*.

Just beyond the radius of his perception, shapes were swimming by. Some massive, clearly Nem3s, others in a flurry of limbs, smaller and more complex.

Nem2s.

They ignored the War Hound, intent on their progress, a column of demons sliding into view, mostly Nem2s it turned out, with a Nem3 for ever ten or so smaller demons.

*What the fuck? Jelly, what are they doing?*

*I hesitate to speak with any certainty, but I would hazard that they're swimming, James.*

*When did you die and become a smart ass?*

*I'm getting quite good, aren't I? But seriously, James, it looks like they're using the river to move unobserved.*

*Must be how they got the West Street hive up and running. Fuck. They're smarter than they look.*

*Or directed by smarter beings. Either way, I think you're right. They're using the rivers to approach the hives unobserved before making a dash to revive them.*

*But the black eggs - they need people for them, right? To steal their spirits?*

*Which means they come bearing eggs, James.*

*Is there a way to detect the eggs?*

*Not that I know of.*

*Well, there's one way to handle this shit. It's old-school, but it works for me.*

James let rip with the Empyrean Gun. Super-heated Aeviternum plasma spilled forth in a great refulgent wave, washing over the demons before him and causing them to contort and spasm.

At the same time, he opened up with the Vault Cannon, firing upstream at where the demons were coming from, the

huge rounds burning bright as they sped away into the darkness, flurries of rounds punching through the water as if it were air and disappearing into the distance to become fleeting constellations.

Those that didn't tear apart demons, that was.

The enemy's shock was brief in duration, and then they reacted with fury. Demons began to boil out of the darkness, swimming toward the War Hound in great sinuous movements, the Nem2s looking like huge shrimp, the Nem3s like orcas.

James pivoted, cutting them down with his Vault Cannon, but soon the water was thick with demons seeking to tear him apart. Demons and their ichor; their black blood blocked his illumination completely, and soon great curtains of gore hung in the water, washing by with the current, along with chunks of demon bodies and corpses.

The War Hound rocked as the Nems began to buffet it, but his Silver Aura blazed forth and ashed the assailants. It was the force of the water itself, James realized, that was rocking him, along with the silty, unsteady footing.

*Time to keep moving. Though I'm tempted to just work my way upriver to find where these fuckers are coming from.*

*We have to keep the others appraised.*

*Right.*

It was nightmarish. Demons swimming out of the gloom and veils of silt. Were it not for the fact that he was wrapped in tons of blessed steel and enveloped in a divine Aura that protected him even better, James would have been scared of out his wits.

But he resumed his forward march, turning around so that he was able to fire behind him, and soon he left the maelstrom behind. The demons were more intent on their original mission than pursuing him, so in a matter of minutes, James found himself once more in the silent mausoleum that was the bottom of the river.



He passed a sunken wreck of a ship, half-lost in the silt. Strode over slick rocks, and finally began to climb, higher and higher, till at last the surface glimmered into view above. James powered up the last of the bank and finally reached a cement wall.

The water was still some ten feet above his head. *Where the steps at?*

*I doubt we'll find any.*

*Then let's try another way.*

James tried jumping, but all he accomplished was rising to the surface before sinking back down.

*Hard-burn?*

*Hard-burn*, agreed Jelly.

James willed the Aeviternum into his engine, squatted, then exploded upward. He burst out of the river with a roar, surging up onto gray bricks with a tidal wave of white water and silt. Water sluiced down his vision, but he immediately apprehended the hell into which he'd burst.

He'd leaped onto the edge of a huge park. A football field of grass stretched before him, a forest of poplars on the right, an archaic building with a gothic facade and a clock tower to his left, the towers of Jersey City rising beyond.

But the scene before him could have been right out of Dante's Inferno. The park was thronged with panicked people. Tens of thousands pushed and shoved at each other, sought to escape first one way and then the other from the Nem3s that rose up in their midst. Thousands were bunched up along the water's edge, and James's arrival shocked them so that they recoiled, screamed, and a good number fell into the water.

Smoke hung thick in the air. The chatter of gunfire and the raw screams of people dying or lying wounded mixed with the shrieks of the demons who were clearly playing with their prey, loping amongst them but taking their time, swinging their sword-arms slowly to slash and decapitate people every once in a while.

Blood. Viscera. Panic. The demonic glee.

James felt hatred curdle his soul.

“LISTEN UP, MOTHERFUCKERS,” he boomed through the War Hound. “PLAY TIME IS OVER. TIME TO DIE.”

Such was the volume of his roar that even the demons ceased their cavorting. The screams froze, the tableaux went still, and thousands upon thousands turned to stare in wonder as James raised his Empyrean Gun and Vault Cannon.

The Nem3s hunched their shoulders, recognizing a threat, but before they could react, James got to work.

He dropped Heavenly Assaults strategically as he marched forward and opened fire. Every dozen paces, he loosed a Sacred Strike over the wounded, healing them where they lay. His massive ammo fled over the field, passing clear through the crowds to hammer home into the demons.

The crowd began to cheer.

Ragged at first but with growing fervor.

“WRONG PLANET, ASSHOLES,” James boomed, raising his Vault Cannon to tear apart a Nem3 midair as it fell upon him.

The cheers rose, driven by fear, desperation, and wild hope.

On James strode, the demons coming out of the trees to the right, loping into view from around the buildings, streaming onto the field from the far end where it abutted with the city proper. Only to die, again and again, as James tore them apart.

He was halfway down the field when the last of the demons collapsed. For a moment, he simply scanned back and forth, looking for more targets, but saw only wonder-struck faces.

“Where is the entrance to Holland?” he boomed, tried to lower his voice.

A score of people pointed eagerly past the gothic building. South then. He'd compensated too aggressively for the current.

"What are you?" asked a young man, pushing back his hoody and lowering his shotgun.

"James Kelly," he boomed. "Look after each other. I've got to go."

The cheering started as he marched south, but rather than bask in it, he simply accelerated into a loping jog. He rounded a fountain at the park's end, made his way through a parking lot, killing a couple of Nem3s as he went, then had to navigate a train yard. Leaped the containing wall onto a highway, and there slowed to massacre more demons before working further south. He espied a Wing flit into view before descending behind the Port Authority building which stood in the middle of another huge parking lot, the asphalt crimson and gleaming with a recent massacre, demon corpses lying torn asunder here and there, with Crimson Hydra and the Group 2 soldiers gathering up.

"There he is," called Serenity, skimming over to him on her Wing. "Any trouble?"

"The demons are using the river as a hidden highway," said James. "I think it's how they're getting the Nem2s to the hives. Or as close as they can. You?"

"I'm just glad the emergency lights were on in the tunnel. That was...." Serenity shook herself. "Just be glad you didn't have to see that. Word's in from Hackworth. We're to work our way to a newly active hive just north of Hoboken."

"A second one?"

"A second one." She hesitated, gazed across the city. It sounded like a war zone. Choppers were crisscrossing the skies and, though out of sight, a Warthog's mechanized *BRRRRRRRRRR* echoed loudly.

"What is it?"

Serenity shook her head again. "Just... Star Boy says we've lost over eighteen teams already. Another thirty or so

are at half-strength or less. Blue Light's overwhelmed. Fuck. How could we not be? And the number of victims..."

"Stay focused." James forced his voice to stay calm. "You ever hit an AA meeting?"

"Ha, yeah." She snorted. "Used to go to them to meet guys to date."

"That's fucked up. But remember the Serenity Prayer, yeah?"

"Good in theory. But yeah." She shivered and sat up straight. "To the hive?"

"To the hive." James turned and marched over to the others. "We ready for this?"

"Ready, sir," said Jason.

Several of the others looked less than sure.

"Look, it's simple," said James. "We can either get back to work - or not. We can do our small part, or let the people we've saved suffer. Don't worry about how it compares to the big picture. Don't worry about what we can't control. What we can do is just keep on keepin' on. So let's do what we can. Nothing more, nothing less."

Nods all round.

"Then let's get going."

James led the group north. They tromped onto Main Street and followed it back north, over the railroad tracks once more into Hoboken proper. The Wings spotted the burning symbol in the distance, and James cleared the way, his Vault Cannon spewing constant fire.

But he was more temperate with his power now. His pool was 461/729. It still felt like a lot, but their day was just getting started.

They fought their way north, through countless blocks of residential zones, and everywhere they saw the refugees who had fled their homes in the hopes of finding succor. It was

easily over an hour since the Fourth Wave had hit, and the help that James and his crew could bring was late.

Far too late.

He got used to seeing the dead. Blind to the bodies. He focused on movement instead, and channeled his hatred into each shot, taking visceral satisfaction in tearing the enemy apart. Block by block, they worked their way north, eradicating demons as they went, till at last they reached the base of the new hive.

“We’re going in with you this time,” Serenity called from above. “With our Marks and stat boosts, we’re not as we were before.”

James wished he had a head to nod, but instead simply called out, “Very well. Form up. Crimson Hydra only. Mancini, you guys can’t handle the buffed Nems inside, so just form a perimeter out here and keep reinforcements out as best you can.”

“Yes, sir,” said Mancini, a hint of relief in his voice.

It took them seventeen minutes to clear out the hive. James led the crew in slowly, cautiously, and ensured that he was the target of the burning Nem3s as much as possible. The density of demons present was equal to Philly, but with the War Hound and Silver Aura the odds were completely different.

Slowly and methodically, they fought their way inside, and finally took on the Nem3 queen. James was ready to summon the avatar of Justice, but the concentrated firepower and abilities of his whole squad gave them enough of an edge that it never got that far. James closed with the queen, absorbed the punishment she meted out as the others riddled her with attacks, and with Yadriel’s help, he kept her pinned until the combined firepower took its toll and he was able to blast off her head.

Again, he toppled the spire and, again, Kerim collected the black egg as the dome of black fire collapsed.

“Man,” gasped Jason, sitting back on his Wing. “That was intense. Wing’s almost out of juice, though. We’ll need to swap them out if we’re to keep going.”

“Call in to Star Boy,” said James, reviewing the damage to his hull. “Maybe we can stop by the Blue Light FOB in Jersey for new Wings.”

“Doubt it,” said Serenity, frowning at her huge gun. It had taken a tail swipe and now the barrel was kinked. “You think they left a squad’s worth of Wings in reserve on today of all days?”

“Good point. Call in, regardless.”

“Star Boy, this is Serenity. Hive cleared. Can you check -”

“Serenity?” Star Boy’s gasp was raw, panicked. “Fuck, Marriott’s under attack. Can’t talk. We’re heading down to the parking lot now. Fuck!” There was the sound of a crash and then a scream. “Fuck! Cindy, no, get the fuck away from that!”

The radio went dead.

“Star Boy?” Serenity hit the button again. “Star Boy!”

No response.

Everybody stared at each other, wide-eyed.

James had no heart, no physical means to feel panic, but he turned to stare east toward the hidden Brooklyn. If he ran all out in hard-burn, it’d still have taken him almost an hour to get back to the Marriott.

Way too late.

The Wings? Ten minutes, if they could get there at all.

*Jelly, my body’s still back at the Marriott. If you eject me from the Hound, is there a way for me to just wake up?*

*I - yes. But it’s disorienting. And I will still be here, in Jersey. I advise you to let me carry your spirit back, I can reach your body in ten, fifteen minutes -*

*No time. Eject and send me back.*

“I’m returning to my body,” he boomed to the others.  
“The Hound will power down. Follow on your Wings.  
Mancini, protect the Hound till we get back if you can. Clear?”

“Got it,” said Serenity, turning her Wing around. “You’d better be safe, Kelly! Don’t you fuck around till we get there!”

“I’ll see what I can do.” James settled the Hound into a balanced pose. “Good luck, everyone.”

*All right, Jelly. Send me home.*

## Chapter 46:

### Star Boy

Star Boy nearly tripped as he scrambled out of the elevator, pushing everyone ahead of him. “Go, go!”

He knew everybody in the gaggle of personnel before him, comm officers and assistants mostly, their terror rank, their breaths coming in panicked gasps. The brilliant lighting of the parking garage was a balm, meant they were safe, and Fabricators were on hand to pull folks away from the elevator, clearing the doors.

“Richard!” Cindy shoved her way back to him. “What are you doing? You’re not going back up there?!”

“I have to, Cindy.” He drew himself up and gazed off over her shoulder, trying to look noble. “There are people still trapped up there. You know how it is. They need a hero.”

“Shut the fuck up. You can’t go back up there, you can barely make Manna bread -”

Star Boy’s heart was pounding, and it felt like liquid terror was coursing through his veins, but he knew what he had to do. “Cindy, I won’t flinch from my duty.”

“Duty my ass. We need you coordinating -”

He swept forward, wrapped an arm around her waist, and dipped her down to kiss her passionately. She froze, and when he drew back, her eyes were wide, shocked.

“We’ll always have Paris,” he whispered, then straightened and stepped back into the elevator to hit the lobby button.

“You don’t even have a gun!” she wailed.

He raised his hand and finger-gun shot her in the heart. The doors closed. All bravado fell away. “Fuck fuck fuck,” he whispered, running his hands over his balding head. “OK, Star



Boy, this is just like in Jurassic Park, kids are in the kitchen, just a don't draw attention, velociraptors don't eat what they don't see..."

The elevator doors dinged and opened to reveal the ruined lobby. The far doors were shattered, having burst inward with the first furious Nem3 assault. Couches were knocked over, glass glittered like handfuls of diamonds, and streaks of blood were vivid against the floor where people had died and been tossed around.

Bodies. A dozen at a glance, mostly the military guys who'd tried to put up a stand during those first few seconds.

No Nem3s.

"Fuck," whispered Star Boy, rubbing his palms on his hips. He'd not bothered with a gun. Without Smite they were useless anyways, and he couldn't shoot a door from a distance of a dozen yards. No, better to stay frosty, to stay sharp. This was a witty man's game, and he was the wittiest.

"OK, where the fuck did you guys go?" he whispered, peering out of the elevators. Gunfire echoed from one of the ballrooms, along with the ecstatic shrieking of a demon, and Star Boy's entire being broke out in goosebumps. Why hadn't he grabbed some amulets? A breastplate? An axe?

Because none of it would have helped against an actual demon.

"Softly, softly, catchee monkey," he whispered and eased out of the elevator. It was really kind of amazing, how badly his body didn't want to do what it was told. It reminded him of the fifteen minutes it had taken him that one time to leap off a boulder into a frozen lake. It was like his instincts were ten steps ahead of his mind, and knew he was better served just staying still.

But fuck that noise, he was the Star Boy.

OK, first he'd check the hotel offices. They'd placed their spillover personnel back there. Wincing with each noise he made, Star Boy ghosted across the lobby, trying to avoid

stepping on broken glass or smears of blood. More roaring came from upstairs. Had a Nem3 gotten up to the rooms?

No matter.

Star Boy rounded the huge front desk and dropped down. Why the fuck was he panting? He wiped sweat from his brow. Ridiculous. He crawled to the office door, pushed it open.

“Don’t shoot! It’s just your friendly neighborhood Star Boy!”

He raised his head. The small, open plan office was in disarray, with three military guys aiming rifles at him while a dozen office workers crowded in behind. “Hey, hi there. Somebody order pastrami?”

“Jesus Christ, Star Boy,” said one of the soldiers, a lanky dude called Orville. “What the fuck you doing in here?”

“Coast’s clear. Time to get below. C’mon.” Star Boy gave them all his best shit-eating grin. “I’m here now. Nothing to be worried about.”

“Nah,” said another soldier, his name tag reading Lee. “We should hang tight, stay quiet. We’re safe here.”

“Hate to break it to you, *dawg*,” said Star Boy, “but nowhere’s safe if you don’t have several feet of concrete between you and them. They’re forcing their way into different parts of the hotel as we chitchat. So c’mon. It’s a straight run to the elevators and safety.”

“All right.” Orville put up his gun. “Nems are out of sight?”

“How’d you think I got here? Hell yeah, they are.” Star Boy cracked open the office door and peered out over the front desk at the huge lobby. “C’mon, the night time is the right time.”

Everybody moved up, Lee complaining the whole while. And then on the count of three, Star Boy opened the door and stepped aside so everybody could race toward the elevators.

Which was of course when a Nem3 emerged from the far hallway that led down past the conference rooms.

The demon was huge. Star Boy had seen hundreds if not thousands of them over digital media, but that had done nothing to prepare him for their sheer bulk, their vicious horror, their monstrous strength. The creature looked like a juicer's wet dream, all bulging muscles and earthworm-sized veins under its black skin, its body as big as a tank, its tail whipping behind it, its blank skull-face orienting on the column of people as they raced to the elevators.

"Shit!" Star Boy looked around desperately, saw a handgun on the desk along with three clips. "Shit shit shit!"

The Nem3 rumbled and stepped out into the lobby as people screamed. Orville was hammering at the elevator button.

"Don't shoot!" screamed Star Boy, snatching up the handgun. "Let me distract it!"

He raised the gun and squeezed the trigger. Nothing. Was it broken? He tried again, nothing. Safety! Where was the safety, this little thing? He thumbed it down, aimed, fired, and the gun bucked in his hand as a bullet bounced off the Nem3's head.

"Ha! You feel that? You feel that, motherfucker? That's Star Boy, that's Star Boy power, coming right at you, you - you -"

He opened fire again, a wild spray as the gun kicked, bullets bouncing off the demon and doing absolutely no damage to it.

But he got the thing's attention.

The Nem3 turned slowly as if curious to fix him with its sightless visage. Its tail whip cracked.

"Oh fuck," gurgled Star Boy as he fought the urge to piss himself. "Oh... uh..." He raised the gun, lowered it, raised it once more, then dropped as the Nem3 spun and lashed at the desk with its tail.

The desk's surface erupted in a mass of papers, shattered monitors, and huge flakes of wood. Star Boy screamed and

resisted the urge to go fetal. Somewhere, he heard the elevator ding. There was a box down here. Military green. Could it be?

“Please please please,” he whispered, fumbling at the catches. They were unlocked. He flipped the lid open as huge footsteps came his way. Inside was black foam with a half-dozen grenades embedded inside it.

Tears came to Star Boy’s eyes. “Thank you. Universal Source, God, Buddha, whomever. Thank you. I don’t deserve this.”

He grabbed a grenade. It fit snugly in the palm of his hand. There was a simple ring affixed to the top. Star Boy yanked it off and leaped to his feet.

The Nem3 was right there, looming over him like an ebon wave about to crest and crash.

“For the Alamo!” Star Boy screamed and hurled the grenade right at its face. He dove aside the moment he released it. He caught a flash of the Nem lunging forward to snap at the grenade, twisting its head aside as it did so, then Star Boy hit the ground and shattered glass and the grenade detonated.

*WHOOMF.*

Star Boy immediately scrambled to his feet and turned, not daring to hope - but the Nem3 was still standing. Its skull was shattered, with black ichor running from the fissures, and smoke rose from the great gaps in its maw, but it was still standing.

“Fuck,” croaked Star Boy. The other grenades were at the Nem’s feet. Star Boy backed away as the demon shook its head, huge dollops of ichor flying, and oriented on him.

But looking past the demon, he saw that everybody else was gone. They’d escaped.

“A hero,” whispered Star Boy. “Me. A genuine hero. The best of the best. A martyr. I always knew I’d sacrifice it all. The nobility of my soul. Solid silver. Solid Snake. Me and Goku. Oh shit.”

The Nem3 reached down, clutched the front desk and hurled it aside. The huge piece of furniture tore free of its constraints and shattered into massive chunks.

Star Boy flinched and pressed back against the wall. He raised the handgun and clicked the trigger a few times before throwing it at the demon. It didn't even notice, but leaned down low, preparing to lunge forward, clearly enjoying the moment.

“Aye, fight and you may die,” whispered Star Boy, pushing off the wall. “Run and you'll live. At least a while.” The Nem3 paused, momentarily confused as Star Boy's voice gained strength. “And dying in your beds many years from now, would you be willing to trade all the days from this day to that for one chance? Just one chance to come back here and tell our enemies that they may take our lives...”

The elevator dinged again. The Nem3 canted its head to one side. Star Boy was hyperventilating, and with a cry, he screamed the last words, “But they'll never take our freedom!”

And he hurled himself forward, right fist drawn back to punch the shit out of the Nem3.

A bolt of white lightning burst down from the ceiling, immolating the demon where it stood, reducing it to shadows and blue overtones. A shockwave burst out, passing right through Star Boy, who closed with the demon and swung wildly, missed, overbalanced, and crashed to the floor.

The shocking light faded. Star Boy pushed himself upright and saw the Nem3 reduced to desiccated coal and ash. The huge monster collapsed upon itself, falling apart in great chunks.

“What...?” He looked past the demon to the elevators where a large, powerful man had emerged. His beard was thick and shot through with seams of gray, and his face was weathered by countless years exposed to the elements. On his brow sat a dauntless courage, while in his eyes dwelled a deep melancholy and resolve that spoke to a strength far outside anything Star Boy would ever know. His hand was outstretched, having just unleashed his Heavenly Assault, and

his craggy brows were lowered in focus and confusion over what he'd just witnessed.

“Star Boy,” rasped James Kelly. “Did you try to punch that demon?”

“Well, yeah.” Star Boy climbed to his feet, heart racing, mind spinning. “I challenged it to a Mike Tyson knock-out kind of thing. You know.”

“Well, Holy shit.” James’s voice was soft. “That’s gotta be the craziest shit I’ve ever seen. You OK?”

Star Boy rubbed chunks of glass out of his palms. “A little scratched up. War wounds, you know how it is. Jesus Christ, James, it’s good to see you.”

James cocked his head at the sound of another roar coming from deeper in the hotel. “Looks like we’re not done here.”

“They came in the front, six of them,” said Star Boy. “Overwhelmed our defenses. It was a madhouse.”

“Then let’s go.” James broke into a run, cutting across the lobby. Star Boy went to follow, but James had already disappeared down the hallway before he was halfway there. Star Boy ran faster, wanting to laugh, to sing, and caught sight of James entering the huge ballroom. He ran down the carpeted hallway, but the action was already over by the time he reached the doors.

The ballroom was a mess. A handful of operators had been on hand to defend the heart of Blue Light, but their resistance had been brief.

The number of dead was ghastly.

James had dispatched the three Nems almost instantaneously, and now was hitting the wounded with Sacred Strikes, healing them completely. “Star Boy. We need to get word out that the situation here is under control. Our teams in the field need guidance.”

“Guidance, under control, got it.” Star Boy bobbed his head and ran over to his station. His headphones, everything

was just as he'd left it ten minutes ago. His gaze landed on Bruno's face, his buddy that had been helping him code in new upgrades, and he flinched and looked away.

"I'm going to clear out the rest of the building," James called out, silencing the babble of conversation. "You're all safe now. If you can, support our people. The fight out there's ugly and still ongoing."

"Yes, sir," said one guy, then another, and soon everyone was streaming back to their stations.

"I'm going to find Hackworth and the rest of Command," said James. "Star Boy, you got this?"

Star Boy met James's eyes. How the man had changed. Good god, it was like trying to hold the gaze of a primal, ancient warrior, a being more legend than reality. A dark Aura of power hung about the man, and he seemed more than merely human.

He actually seemed up to the task at hand.

To fighting this god damned apocalypse.

"Yes, James," said Star Boy, straightening and feeling a rush of pride over being singled out. "I got this."

"Good. Hang in there, everybody."

And with that, James stepped back out into the hallway and was gone.

"Hot damn," whispered Star Boy, sliding into his seat. "Hot fucking damn."

## Chapter 47:

### My Kind of Terrible

James cleansed the remaining areas of the Marriott by the time the rest of Crimson Hydra arrived. The damage done to Blue Light was substantial; from a purely operational point of view, the loss of a score of key personnel and the psychological damage done was enormous, but James couldn't help but feel relieved that everyone he knew and cared for had survived.

Hackworth and the rest of his Command had been ensconced in a conference room as they conferred with the NSA and other military brass, and their sole attempt at killing the Nem3s had convinced them that any fighting was suicidal. James found them barricaded in one of the rooms, with only Major Duffy having died during the attack.

The Nems had been trying to find a way down to the parking level; their assault through the front, however, had delayed them, with a few trying to force their way down stairwells to no avail. It had been only a matter of time till they'd worked their way around the building to descend the parking ramps.

"Fucking hell," said Hackworth tiredly as he walked out with James to the ballroom. Then, entering his public persona, he stood up taller and set to asserting control over the situation, his voice loud and confident, his manner brash and unbeatable.

James helped establish a security cordon around the hotel with the rest of his squad; errant Nem3s kept drawing close like sharks scenting blood in the water, and it wasn't till Ivory Medusa showed up to relieve them of their guard duty twenty minutes later that James entered the hotel once more with Serenity for updates.



With Jelly floating over one shoulder, he found Hackworth calling in for reinforcements and slowly asserting control over the Area of Interest once more, coordinating attacks, re-establishing communications with battalions, and ensuring the fight against the Fourth Wave continued.

“Kelly.” Hackworth stepped away from the ASOCC to clap him on the shoulder. For a moment, the commander had no words, and James saw how deeply entrenched the lines of exhaustion and concern had grown in his previously handsome face. Before they could speak, the lights flickered overhead and then went out.

“Fucking hell,” said Star Boy, standing before his still operating station. “Someone check the breakers?”

The ballroom was a massive, dark space without illumination, with only the red EXIT signs offering a baleful glow over each door.

James exchanged a look with Serenity, and she hustled out of the ballroom. Soldiers brought in large free-standing lamps and plugged them into security strips that snaked off to large boxes that had started to hum against the back wall.

Bemused, James watched as technical folks did technical things, and a moment later, Star Boy approached Hackworth. “Looks like the grid’s down, sir. I just spoke to operators in Albany at the Nysio. They’re trying to get the power back up, but their whole operation is fucked. They’ve got cascading problems compounded by overloaded transmission wires.”

“How long till they get the power back up?”

“They’re not sure. They’re hoping - once the Fourth Wave dies down - to be able to work on the problem and get a forty-eight hour turnaround. They’re understaffed, even with army engineers helping.”

“Great.” Hackworth pinched the bridge of his nose. “And the blackout area?”

“It’s pretty bad. Most of the state’s coastline.”

“Shit.” Hackworth checked his watch. “It’ll be getting dark in four hours. That means we’ll be dealing with a

hundred thousand Nems in pitch black.”

“How can I help?” asked James quietly.

Hackworth glanced at James, dismissed Star Boy, then took him aside. “We’re reaching a place beyond institutional control. I was getting an update about our different Blue Light groups across the country. One third of them failed outright when the Fourth Wave started. Another third is just trying to hold certain areas and giving up the rest of their cities for lost, with the final group - most of which you visited, by the way - doing better and maintaining patrols and a visible presence. But it’s...”

“Fucked.”

“Fucked. I’ve been trying to think what we could have done differently. Mobilized our forces more effectively, deployed greater ordinance in urban areas, casualties be damned. But nothing comes to mind. Maybe if we’d accelerated the Fabricator program from earlier on, we’d have more of these War Hounds...”

“You know, I don’t think it would have made a difference. Even if we’d had a dozen War Hounds in the city at the start of the day.” James raised a hand to forestall Hackworth’s interjection. “I mean, yes, we could have killed an order of magnitude more demons today, but would it have really changed the outcome? The massacre, the millions dead, the chaos? No. This is going exactly as it should, as it was planned.”

“By the Monitors.”

“By whatever’s running this show. I’m about to level out of Acolyte. My Aura’s Silver, I can now summon avatars of Justice, spent the day walking the city in a War Hound, and really? It didn’t make a difference. Not big picture. These demons have an end game for us, and we’re just following their plan. When the Pits open, we’ll be a handful of elite fighters with a small group of Fabricators backing us up. Billions of us will be dead. Just as they expected.”

“So Old Crow.”

James smiled. “You know it. Nothing drives me crazier than busting my ass for nothing. I know we can make a difference out there, but it’s a very small one. The first time I spoke with the Monitor, she said I was one of seven hundred or so Nexuses in the city. I’m willing to bet that a Nexus is someone with the potential and luck to become a leader in this apocalypse. Someone who can rise up and level hard and get the rest of humanity pulling together. Which means even my successes are accounted for, predicted, expected.”

Hackworth rubbed his jaw. “When do you want to go?”

“I want to talk to my team and to Jessica. If we’re heading after Belanger, then the odds are good the demons won’t want us to make contact. Either he’s dead and gone or protected. We’ll need to be all on board and ready to fight above our pay grade. But when? Tonight.”

“Tonight?” Hackworth was genuinely taken aback. “It’ll be a real blow, losing you with so many Nem3s still out there.”

“Get someone else to ride the War Hound. Anyone with an Anima can do it. But I genuinely think I can do more good in Canada than I can down here. My killing another thousand demons or wiping out another hive won’t really move the needle.”

“The president’s given the green light for plan Hand Drop.” Hackworth’s tone turned subdued.

“What’s that?”

“Even subdued and cleansed hives are popping back up. The Air Force is going to have key personnel push bombs out of planes by hand, lighting them up with Smite just before they do.”

James let out a low whistle. “Even though they’re in the biggest city centers?”

“The areas are to be evacuated and the bombs are being calibrated so that they only destroy the area covered by the hives. Smite will make them effective, and that way the experience will still go to the nine-man groups aboard the planes.”

James nodded slowly. "I can see the appeal. When's that starting?"

"Tomorrow. Everything's being set in place tonight. My concern..." Hackworth trailed off. "My concern is that if, as you've said, the demons are aware of our next steps and planning for them, how will they react to such strikes?"

"I'm sure they'll be effective," said James soberly. "The hives will be wiped out. Until the next set of demons move in and set up shop again."

"Right. It's an arms race, isn't it? The best that the US military can throw at these fuckers till they become too strong for our munitions." Hackworth pinched the bridge of his nose again and sighed. "I know it's necessary, but it still feels like we're losing. At what point will we be convinced to drop dirty bombs, or be forced to evacuate entire cities so as to bring enough explosive power to bear? It's why I'm signing off on Old Crow. If there's a way to surprise these bastards, to get the jump on them, we need to take it. I'll commission travel and get clearance from the Canadian government. Soon as I've got everything lined up, I'll let you know."

"Sounds good. I'll talk to my people and keep patrolling till then."

"Very good." Hackworth clapped James on the shoulder. "Thank you for the save, there. It's surprisingly easy to discount how dangerous these demons are given how easy you make it look."

James grimaced and gave a sharp nod. "My pleasure, sir. I'll go talk to Crimson Hydra, grab a new Wing, and then patrol till you're ready for us."

James strode out of the dark ballroom and into the equally gloomy hallway. The crimson emergency lights cast an eerie glow over everything, and made the bloody smears on the floor and walls glisten.

Emerging into the lobby, James saw teams of people entering with efficient energy, reinforcements already arrived to help with the initial attack, soldiers and other military

personnel. James didn't pay them much mind, but instead saw Serenity making her way back into the lobby. They saw each other at the same time, and she cut through the crowd to reach him.

"Looks like the whole city's dead," she said. "Manhattan, Brooklyn, what I could see of Queens by taking the Wing way up."

"Yeah, Star Boy says it's a big problem from Albany. Overload of the grid or something. I'm surprised it lasted this long, but they say they can fix it."

Serenity looked around the dark lobby, the marble floor reflecting the light that streamed in from the ruined entrance and the tall windows. "Believe it when I see it."

"Hackworth's given us permission to go to Canada. We're probably leaving tonight."

"Tonight?" Serenity's shock was obvious. "Jesus fuck, Kelly, the place is still lousy with demons."

"And will remain so. We could spend the next week hunting them down and wiping out hives without winning this war. No. We have to blindside them. Stop doing the expected. Whatever happened with this Belanger guy, we need to move on it. If it's not already too late."

"I don't know, I don't know." She rubbed her jaw. "Just feels wrong, pulling out with so much work to be done, so many people counting on us."

"I hear you." James sighed. "But the best we can do is quit being predictable. All around the world, folks are fighting as the System wants. Leveling up, picking Benedictions, Virtues, whatever. Just like rats being fed sugar in a science experiment. But if you step back and look at our scorecard, how's our species really doing?"

"Not so hot."

"Not so hot. How many billions have died already? I mean, are we even able to count the number of dead at this point? And there are still under two months to go till the Pits

open. The way things are going, this'll be over before we even get there."

"Fine. Canada. You going to post a message or something to let everyone know?"

James frowned. "I don't think so. Maybe Jessica can post an update on the War Hound. That's some good news. But I want to keep this mission under wraps. I'm not sure how closely the Monitors are actually listening in, but if there's a chance at surprising them, we need to take it."

"Gotcha."

"So let's go find our team. I want everybody on board, and I know Miriam just signed up. How's she doing?"

"Miriam's good people. Stronger than she looks. She's in way over her head, but she's not tapping out. She might need some convincing to go to Canada, though. She's got a big family here in the city that she's fighting to make sure stays safe."

"Then this is the best way she can do that. I'll talk to her. Then I'll need a new Wing. Don't have time to get back to the War Hound today."

"Sounds like a plan." Serenity let out a low, shaky breath and closed her eyes.

"You hanging in there?" he asked, putting a hand on her shoulder.

"Saw some heinous shit in the Holland," she muttered. "Demons got in there with the people. They died ugly. Was... it's been a day."

"It's been a day," he agreed, and pressed his brow against her own.

For a moment, they just stood thus, an island of calm surrounded by the bustle of new arrivals, and then she chuckled. "How did a couple of fuck-ups like us get to be so important to humanity?"

"Beats me." He smiled and pulled back. "Maybe we were always worth more than people thought."

Serenity pretended to consider. “Nah. I was always a pretty terrible human being.”

“My kind of terrible,” he said, slinging an arm around her shoulders and leading her outside. “Now, let’s go convince the rest we’re worth following into the Arctic Circle.”

## Chapter 48:

### Bouncy Castle from Hell

They walked and talked. Or, more accurately, flew and shot at demons and talked. With their eight Wings forming a flotilla, they floated over Brooklyn, allowing Jelly to guide them to obvious locations where they could wipe out Nem3s while James reviewed the situation.

“If I understand what you’re saying,” said Kerim, putting up his M4, “this Belanger started making claims of an impending apocalypse back in the 1980s?”

“No saying he wasn’t just plain crazy back then,” said Serenity, letting her M2 droop so she could cup her hands and light a cigarette. She inhaled, narrowed her eyes, blew out smoke. “It’s possible the Monitors chose him because they knew he’d not be believed.”

“Yeah, maybe,” said James. “But his file mentioned his wife coming back from the dead to make him offers, even back then.”

“Sounds crazy,” said Serenity.

“Sure, but the Monitors have appeared to me in Jessica’s form twice now. It sounds like something they’d do.”

“Yo, James.” Yadiel reached out to snag Serenity’s cigarettes. “Listen, like this is a tough question to ask, but like, why didn’t the Monitors appear to you in your wife’s shape? Why Jessica both times?”

“I think...” James stared out over the brownstones. “I think they knew I wouldn’t listen if they showed up looking like Laney. I’d just start blasting. But Jessica was different. Someone I’d actually talk with.”

“Helps that she’s hella cute,” said Serenity, cigarette popping up as she grinned. “Evil dominatrix Monitor version of Jessica must be something.”



Jason's eyes widened. "She was wearing dominatrix gear?"

"She was not wearing dominatrix gear," said James firmly. "But she was trying to tempt me. Last time with some heinous shit. Which, bringing it back to Belanger, sounds like what he was dealing with."

"It's very interesting." Kerim tapped his fingers atop his Wing. "When the Nemesis 1 appeared, we all received a clear warning that 60,000 years were up. Yet if they appeared forty years ago to Belanger, that would have made it 59,960 years. Doesn't quite have the same ring."

"If Belanger actually saw Monitors back then," said Serenity. "Remember, they could have appeared to him just a few days before James, picking him because he wasn't a credible witness."

"Maybe." James scratched at his beard. "But it's mighty coincidental. Either way, there's something about Belanger that drew their attention several days early. That and this Light Eternal. Either that's a product of his delusions, or there's something there."

"Something like what?" asked Kimmie. "What are you hoping for, James, best-case scenario?"

James frowned. "I don't know, exactly. But say there really was something special about Belanger. Say this Light Eternal was a real thing. Then maybe they needed to defeat him, or kill him, or convince him of something to kick off the whole show."

"Like *Highlander*," said Jason. "Kind of. As in, maybe Belanger was charged with protecting this Light Eternal, and as long as he did so, the demons couldn't invade?"

"Yo, how the fuck's that like *Highlander*?" asked Yadriel.

"OK, not so much like *Highlander*."

"It's been a couple of months," said Denzel quietly. "What are the odds he's just sitting around in Old Crow with this Light Eternal on his lap, waiting for us to show up?"

“When you put it that way?” James grinned. “Slim. Look, I want to be real upfront about this: it’s a long shot. I could be reading into all of this way too much. But it’s the only angle I figure that gets us outside the plan the System has for us. The only way to zig when it keeps wanting us to zag. Even developing War Hounds won’t change things enough. We keep winning our little battles and losing the war. This is our best bet to try and flip the chessboard.”

“That how you win chess games?” asked Kerim with a wry smile. “By flipping the board?”

James grinned back. “It is when we can’t see how many pieces the enemy has, and they keep bringing endless waves of pawns and knights to the game with more to come.”

“Fair enough. Very well.” Kerim inhaled sharply and looked at Denzel. “I’ve never been drawn to the Yukon, but there’s always a first time.”

“How are we getting there?” asked Kimmie. “The Wings would never reach.”

“Hackworth is chartering us a flight of some kind. Old Crow has its own airfield. We’ll fly direct and have our ride wait there till it’s time to return home.”

“Why can’t Belanger have been in the Caribbean?” asked Serenity. “Or Bali? Why’s it got to be north of the Arctic Circle?”

“That is how you know we face true evil,” said Olaf. “But it is not so cold. We get you a parka, good gloves, bottle of whiskey. You will be fine.”

“Hmmp,” said Serenity.

“Miriam?” James looked to the dark-haired new member. “You’ve been mighty quiet. Any thoughts?”

“I...” Miriam curled a long, black strand out of her face. “I don’t feel like I have much to say or add. I feel incredibly out of my depth. I knew...” She glanced around nervously. “I knew that by going Remove Fear and Dispell Illusion I’d be making myself useful to the teams - Cindy and Star Boy made that clear - but I didn’t realize it would get me this far. So... if

you all think we need to go to Old Crow to find this Belanger, then... sure. Let's go."

James held her gaze. "You have a voice in this group. I may be the leader, but I want everyone to feel heard. You sure you're good to go?"

Miriam sat up a little straighter. "Yeah. You said this might be our best chance to changing the nature of this whole apocalypse. If I can help do that, I will."

"Good." James gazed out over the dark city. Dusk was falling but the street lights were dark, cars didn't move in the roads, and windows were illuminated here and there by either emergency lanterns or candles. Beyond it all, the towers of downtown and Manhattan arose like gravestones, dark and still.

"Whole city feels dead," said Yadriel in a whisper. "Like we done gone lost already."

"Yeah," said Jason. "What are they going to do about the bodies, James? There's hundreds of thousands of corpses in the street. They can't just let them rot, right?"

Olaf sat up. "We are lucky it is still cold. Come spring, the bodies will begin to rot. The city will be unlivable."

"Great. Thanks, Olaf," said Serenity.

"I don't know," said James quietly. "Perhaps the Fabricators can come up with something. They'll need to clear the streets before they can get the bodies out. I'm guessing... mass burials. Given the number of dead, maybe they'd load up the barges and drop the bodies offshore."

"If that's even a priority," said Serenity softly. "If there's anybody even kicking at that point."

They sat on their Wings, gazing out over the still city.

"The fabric of society is breaking down," said Kerim quietly. "The social contract. I've not heard from the mayor or local government in days. Were it not for Blue Light and the military, the city would be operating as an anarchic state. Manna bread has kept the worst from taking place, but with

the loss of power and the prevalence of Nem3s, I don't think anybody can predict how society will metastasize and change."

"Like *Mad Max*," said Yadriel. "That what you're saying?"

"I don't know." Kerim pursed his lips. "Groups organize to provide what's scarce. Right now, that's security, which only the military and Blue Light have been able to effectively provide. As long as the water keeps running and people can produce bread, they'll remain quiet. But if the water cuts out, we'll see true civil unrest."

"Unrest?" Jason sneered. "Who will they protest against?"

"Less whom will they protest against, and more which leaders will arise within their ranks to offer answers." Kerim raised a hand. "Not that there are answers, but people will follow those who pretend just as well as those who can provide actual solutions. Warring tribes. People hoarding weapons, fighting to hold on to the most defensible locations."

"Hoarding Fabricators," said Miriam darkly. "That's where the real wealth lies. In folks like Jessica Miles. Whomever can create the most has the most power."

They all sank into pensive silence.

"Not while we're around," said James at last. "We're not about to sink into *Mad Max* just yet."

"Brooklyn might not," said Kerim. "But will you police every borough? Jersey? New Haven? Philadelphia? Will you fly out to Buffalo, Chicago, Detroit, Minneapolis?"

James frowned.

"Because that's the kicker." Kerim shifted his weight. "You did an exceptional job of trying to get other Blue Light groups up and running, but in the end, we're dealing with an entire nation of terrified, grieving people. From Miami to Houston, from Los Angeles to Atlanta, from Kansas City to Missoula, people are facing the same terror and uncertainty."

“Which is why we need to get to Old Crow,” said James with renewed certainty. “We can’t make a big enough difference before the Pits open. But if we can change the fundamentals of the game...”

Everyone nodded.

“Sounds like a plan,” said Serenity. “Shall we kill some more Nem3s before we go?”

“Yeah,” said Jason. “Now that I can always get behind.”

“Speaking of which, there comes Jelly,” said James. “Let’s see what it’s found for us.”

Kames Jelly came zipping in, its blade-arms whirling. “Hello! I’ve found a group Nemesis 3s escorting a dozen Nemesis 2s in the direction of the north Brooklyn hive. Shall we?”

“Let’s,” said James, bringing his Wing around. “That sounds just great.”

\* \* \*

Hackworth chartered a Gulfstream jet to fly them out of LaGuardia.

“A Gulfstream? Isn’t that like a millionaire plane?” Denzel looked to the others as they carried their bags through the lobby.

“It’s just over three thousand miles to Old Crow,” said Star Boy brightly, walking alongside. “Too far for choppers. And while the Air Force has bombers and shit that can make that flight, it’s just easier to commandeer a fancy jet. Like when they sent James and, ah, Bjørn on that little circuit before.”

“Works for me,” said Yadriel. “I was born to travel in style.”

“Get the fuck outta here,” said Jelly. “Did I say that right? Get the fuck outta here?”

“You said that right,” said Serenity. “Too bad I can’t high-five you.”

Jelly raised a sword-arm and made it blur as it whipped it around, blender-style. “We could try.”

“Jessica said she was going to see you all off,” said Star Boy as they reached the wrecked entrance. “Want me to page her?”

“We can wait a second,” said James. “Not like the jet’s leaving without us.”

“Man, feels good to be so important,” said Star Boy. “So listen, we’re going to maintain communication with these satellite phones.” He handed Jason a black ribbed briefcase. “I don’t think you’ll be getting good WiFi out there, so hit me up if you need anything.”

“Great.” James reached and squeezed Star Boy’s shoulder. “You doing OK?”

“Me?” Richard pretended to look around in surprise. “Oh, I’m great! Ever since I proved myself a genuine hero, I’ve got the Fabricator chicks just all up in my grill.”

“Dude,” deadpanned Yadriel. “That don’t mean what you think it means.”

“Get the fuck outta here!” chimed in Jelly cheerfully.

“All right, who taught Jelly that?” demanded Serenity.

“Seriously.” James gave Star Boy a little shake. “You cool?”

“Yeah, man, I’m cool. I’m frosty. Turns out I was born for this shit. Apocalypting and all that.” Star Boy grinned. “No, for real, it’s almost weird how cool I am. I’m not saying this is fun, but if you ignore the millions dying every day, the demons, the end of the world, and my favorite *WoW* server crashing, this is pretty fun.”

“You’re fucked in the head, Star Boy,” said Serenity.

“Right?” He grinned. “It’s the only explanation. But I think I already was fucked in the head, but it’s only now that

the world welcomes my personal eccentricities, which means this is the best possible world for my personal brand of fucked up-edness -”

James held up his palms, cutting Star Boy off. “Good to hear.”

The sound of high heels clicking rapidly caused them all to turn to where Jessica was approaching, looking effortlessly beautiful and casual as always, the sleeves of her beige jacket rolled up to her elbows, her hair pulled back in a French twist, her mechanicus hanging from her belt.

“Sorry I kept you waiting.” She smiled at them all. “Things are heating up below. We’ve reached a critical mass of development and all sorts of synergies and discoveries are happening. It’s an exciting time, albeit a frustrating one. If we could ramp up production to take advantage of what we’re unlocking, it would fundamentally change the nature of this fight.”

“Oh?” James smiled. “Anything good?”

“I’d say.” She smiled back. “You know the Righteous Obelisk power? We’ve discovered a way to embed them in towers that causes their blessings to flow like electricity. In effect, it might be possible to create circuits that direct Obelisk blessings along pre-arranged routes, allowing us to - well. You can imagine. That and a new synthesis between Engineers and Structuralists that result in self-directed gun turrets. Think low-grade Sola Anima’s operating Smite-enhanced machine-gun emplacements with no cap yet on how big we can make the guns.”

“You had my curiosity,” said Star Boy. “Now you have my attention.”

“That all sounds great,” said James. “But like you said, it’s all about production speed.”

“Yes. Which is what I’ve been focusing on, the creation of infrastructure that will allow us to ramp up production at an exponential speed at the cost of up-front production. We’ve a large online presence now presenting our findings and best

practices to people all over the world, and are collaborating with international groups on how best to refine resources, farm them, all kinds of stuff.” She blew a lock of blonde hair out of her face. “But anyways. A lot is going on. Sometimes it feels like I’ve become this crazed inventor locked away in my basement. Hard to keep track of how things are going up here in the real world. How was the Hound?”

“Pretty fucking fantastic,” said James. “Though I had to leave it in Jersey in order to get back here in time.”

“I want one,” said Serenity, leaning in. “But can mine be hot pink with black accents?”

“I’ll see what I can do,” said Jessica seriously. “We’ve got six more in various states of production. They’re very resource intensive, but Star Boy’s analysis of its battlefield impact makes it clear they’re worth developing.”

“What comes after War Hounds?” asked Yadriel. “War Rhinos?”

Jessica laughed. “I’m unlocking that schema now. There are all manner of avenues of exploration. One area involves developing autonomous Anima that can run the War Hound 24/7, another involves recharging stations that would plug into the Obelisk network. A third looks to be a newer, bigger, badder model. It’s listed as an Ira Munitionis, or Rage Castle. We’re going to need to institute better resource gathering before we can bring one of those online.”

Star Boy let out a low whistle. “A Rage Castle? That like a bouncy castle from hell?”

“Yes,” said Jessica, looking at him over her spectacles. “That’s exactly what it’s like.”

“Get the fuck outta here!” said Jelly happily.

“Well, good luck with all that,” said James. “I look forward to hearing what you’ve gotten done when we get back.”

“Here,” said Jessica, pulling out a briefcase. “Major amulets for every stat for everyone. Also nine Aeviternum battery packs. I’ve had each charged with five points. You can



draw on them as needed and refill them a couple of times before they lose the ability to hold a charge.”

“Battery packs?” Serenity raised both eyebrows. “That’s a thing now?”

“As of last night,” said Jessica with a wry grin. “We got some talented people down in Staten. And - well. Good luck.” She leaned in suddenly and gave James a hug.

“I get a hug?” asked Serenity.

“Sure.” Jessica grinned and hugged her in turn, then shoved Star Boy when he opened his arms and stepped forward. “Good luck, everyone.”

“Thanks, Jessica.” James tucked her case under his arm. “With a little luck, we’ll be back in a couple of days with some good news.”

“I know you will.” She stepped back and crossed her arms, Star Boy turning to stand beside her as they watched Crimson Hydra leave. “Go kick their asses.”

James gave them both a two-fingered salute and stepped out into the night after his crew.

## Chapter 49:

### Old Crow

It was a four-hour flight to Old Crow. The Gulfstream was svelte and elegant and cut through the air with silent efficacy, cruising just shy of the speed of sound and with enough gas to make the return flight without needing to refuel.

Yadriel was like a kid at Christmas. He let out a cry of sheer amazement as he entered the plane and then stopped, taking in the huge leather seats, the teak dining tables between groups of four, the geometric patterns on the rich gray carpet, the huge porthole windows.

“Man, I made it!” He tossed his duffel bag into the arms of the steward and leaped into the closest seat, stretching out with a pointed sigh of contentment as he interlaced his fingers behind his head and kicked out his legs. “Yo, you guys got any champagne up in here?”

“We do, sir,” said the steward with obvious good training. “Would Moët & Chandon suffice?”

“Moët & Chandon? You ain’t got Cristal?”

Serenity smacked Yadriel upside the head as she passed him, the others filing in behind. People dropped into the seats, almost everyone still beholden to the luxuries of the old world that they couldn’t help but gaze around themselves with some small measure of wonder and appreciation.

The main cabin had seating for ten, the plane being divided into two areas, and James sat in the back with Kerim, Serenity, and Olaf. After a brief wait, the jet pulled out onto the airstrip. A single figure was directing them with a glowstick, and James looked past the man at the dark bulk of JFK Airport. The terminals were dark, the machines and cars and luggage trucks sitting silent. Was there a skeleton crew keeping things moving? Or had military folks come out here just to get them off the ground?

They took off smoothly and, a moment later, the steward came down the length of the plane with a silver tray of chocolate-dipped strawberries in one hand, another bearing flutes of champagne.

“Thanks, hon,” said Serenity, flashing the man a smile. “You’re the best.”

“Enjoy,” said the dude. “Something tells me these may be the last chocolate strawberries in the world.”

James turned his over in his fingers and then took a bite. “Damned good.”

Olaf leaned forward, his champagne flute dwarfed by his massive fingers. “One thing I have been wanting to know: do you think there is chance we go back to normal after this is over?”

James exchanged a glance with Serenity. “Normal?”

“Yah. Chocolate-covered strawberries. Good TV shows. People happy and living good lives again.”

James sat back. “That’s a hell of a question.”

“We’ve already lost, what, almost half our species?” asked Serenity.

“About that, yes,” said Kerim. “Though the ability to detail losses has degraded as we’ve lost more people. Given everything I’ve seen, however, I don’t think it would be untoward to guess three or four billion dead, especially in light of this Fourth Wave.”

Olaf frowned. “But we can win?”

“What does winning mean?” asked James softly.

“Defeat the Nemeses. Clean the Pits. Win.”

“Not the way things are going,” replied James. “I don’t think so. There’s an intelligence behind what’s going on, but I don’t get the sense it wants to leave us new and improved after the dust’s settled.”

Olaf drained his flute in one pull and set the glass on the glossy table before him. “Then what do you think it wants?”

“That’s the million-dollar question.” James looked at Kerim. “Professor?”

“Nobody knows, obviously. But it’s clear we’re rewarded for certain behaviors. We level as a result of using our powers to kill demons, and level faster for working in teams. The challenges that are thrown our way are always surmountable after terrible losses. It’s clear this System wants us to reach the Pits, to evolve and grow. It would have been simple to deprive us of Manna bread and cause mass starvation. But they didn’t. Our Fabricators can construct everything from shirts to War Hounds.”

“So the System is like parents?” asked Olaf dubiously. “Stick and apple?”

“Yes,” said Kerim after a moment’s hesitation. “But we still don’t know to what end. Are we a source of amusement? Do the demonic leaders watch us to see how long we will last, and place bets? Or is this meant to be a form of spiritual purification, so that the worthy - as determined by demonic morality - are rewarded if they survive long enough? Do the odds only grow forever until all are slain, or is there a hidden end point beyond which every survivor inherits the Earth? We don’t know.”

“They’re bastards,” said Serenity, tapping the base of her flute against her knee. “We know that much. They pretend to help us, but it’s as James said. We’re meant to suffer and grow weaker with every wave. As a species. Whoever’s in charge is a fuckin’ sadist.”

James nodded. “Yeah. That’s the feeling I get. The Benedictions, the Virtues, all of it. They’re tools, but insufficient. We’re being bled out as a species. The question is for how long we’ll remain distracted by our new shinies while the rest of us die.”

Olaf’s frown deepened. “So you do not think we can win?”

“Not if we play according to their rules. Hence this trip.” James saw the pain in Olaf’s eyes. “I’m sorry, big guy. I don’t think there’s any going back to the way things were. But if we

fight smart instead of just hard, maybe we can create our own future, not just the one the demons want.”

Olaf sat back, crossed his arms, and stared out the window. Up front, laughter broke out; someone had made a musical selection, and some bounce music had come up, the beat infectious, the bass deep. Kimmie jumped up and began to dance with surprising fluidity, prompting Yadriel to leap up and move behind her to start hip thrusting. She laughed, turned, and shoved him in the chest so that he fell back into his chair.

“I’m in love, yo!” Yadriel grinned up to Kimmie. “I didn’t know you could move like that, Girl! Let’s make babies.”

Serenity snorted. “Guess some things never change.”

“Thank God,” said James, feeling as old as he was amused, and clinked his flute with hers before taking another sip.

\* \* \*

They descended into Old Crow in the middle of the night. There was nothing to see outside the window but endless darkness. It felt like descending into the depths of a maritime trench. Down they flew, the pilot’s voice muffled from the cockpit as he made the occasional statement over the radio, and the whole plane grew silent as everybody crowded around the windows.

Nothing.

No moon, no illumination.

The steward bade them all buckle up, and half an hour later, they landed, the runway gravelly, the pilot skilled so that there was barely a bump.

“Welcome to Old Crow, Yukon Territory,” said the pilot over the comms. “The local time is 11:31 p.m., and the temperature is -32 degrees Fahrenheit. The airport here is

pretty bare bones, but I believe there are a couple of people on hand to help with your bags and get you oriented. Give us a moment and we'll have you figured out.”

“Negative 32?” mouthed Serenity.

The seatbelt light switched off, and everybody began pulling out parkas and winter gear from their backpacks. James did the same, and for the next five minutes, the cabin was full of the sounds of synthetic fabrics rubbing on each other, muffled laughter, and people getting ready for the brutal cold.

Rupert, the steward, pushed out the doorway and helped direct a push-staircase up to the side of the plane. He helped affix the railing, then descended into the blistering cold, the others crowding after him.

James paused at the top of the metal staircase. There wasn't much to take in. A small building with sloping roofs stood close by, lit up by exterior lamps and with its windows blazing yellow. The airport terminal. The cold was wicked, and he hunched his shoulders as he descended to the runway, which was packed dirt.

Two men were helping Rupert unload their baggage, but one straightened and pointed a heavily gloved hand toward the building. “Wait inside the terminal,” he said, voice gruff. “Sarah is waiting for you inside. Warmer.”

Nobody needed further prompting. Hefting their bags, everybody hurried across the snow to the terminal.

*I'm going to take a quick look around, said Jelly. Be right with you.*

They pushed their way into the large, empty-feeling building. It was new construction, the polished cement floor covered in huge black rugs, one side dominated by Air North kiosks, classic airport seating for a dozen people filling up the rest of the space.

The place was empty but for a woman in a fur-fringed parka, who smiled widely as they all entered the warm light. “Hello! Welcome to Old Crow, the northernmost non-Inuit

community in North America, and the only one located north of the Arctic Circle.”

“Sarah?” asked James, moving forward.

“Yes, Sarah Josie. I own the Porcupine Bed and Breakfast. We don’t have enough space to accommodate you all comfortably, but your point of contact, a, ah, Star Boy?”

“Yeah,” sighed James. “Star Boy.”

“Yes, he has already settled your accounts for the next week and asked that I help get you situated. You are military like the others?”

“The others?” asked Serenity.

Sarah’s eyes widened slightly. “The other teams? You are the third group to arrive this week. The larger Ch’oo Deenjik Accommodations are taken by them?”

“No, ma’am,” said James. “We’re not with anybody else. You catch who they were?”

“Yes, sir, the first group arrived three days ago. Canadian military, they helped us with the Nemesis 3s. The second group arrived this afternoon by helicopter from White Horse. I think they’re also American.”

“American military?” Jason’s head reared back. “Here?”

“Yes, sir,” said Sarah nodding firmly. “They were asking about Patrick Belanger.”

James felt everything grow still. “You know Belanger?”

Sarah made a face. “Old Crow is a very small community, sir. Everybody here knows everyone else.”

“Is he here? In town?”

“No, sir. Patrick never came into town much, and not since his arrest a few months back.” Sarah narrowed her eyes. “Why is everybody so interested in him? What has he done?”

“That’s what we’re here to find out,” said James heavily. “You know where he lives?”

“He claimed the old Billington homestead when he moved into the area a couple of years back. That’s a good fifteen miles north, accessible by snowmobile. Was he telling the truth? About the apocalypse?”

“There’s a chance he was,” said James. Sarah’s wariness was growing rapidly, her suspicion and alarm. “We don’t want to get him in any trouble. We just want to talk to him, see what he knows. It’s why we’ve flown up here from New York. Just to talk and see if what he knows could help.”

“I see. Well, you can speak to Robbie tomorrow about snowmobiles if you want to get out there. If they haven’t all been rented already.”

“Great,” said Yadriel. “We shoulda brought the Wings.”

“Yeah, should have just stashed them in the overhead compartments,” said Denzel.

“Maybe we can get situated at your B&B,” said James. “Talk a little more there?”

“Sure. It’s not far, but you won’t want to walk in this cold. I can fit three of you in my truck at a time. I can take you there in groups.”

“Sounds great, thank you.”

“Thank you,” said Kimmie with a broad smile. “We appreciate everything you’re doing.”

For a moment, James expected to feel Kimmie’s power, for her to start working on Sarah’s reluctance with Inspire, but when it didn’t come, he felt a sense of relief.

The two guys brought in the last of their suitcases, and it turned out Rupert and the pilot, Captain Jeramy, were going to be staying close by at one of their homes until needed for the return flight.

Everybody said their thank yous and goodnights, and then Sarah took James, Olaf, and Kimmie out to her truck.

The cold was wicked, and James hunched over the backseat as Sarah turned on her truck and put the heater to



blasting. It didn't do anything, and the layers of arctic gear felt useless as he hugged himself and stared out the window.

Old Crow was a tiny community set alongside a broad river, the roads broad like avenues, the buildings dwarfed by the immensity of the starlit skies and looking to be mostly log cabins or other single-story buildings. The truck drove slowly through the snow, and four minutes later, pulled up outside Sarah's home.

It was a large wooden building with a peaked roof and nothing to indicate it was a B&B. A solitary pine tree grew at an angle as if it had been hit by a car, and the motion sensor light lit up the white snow that blanketed everything.

Sarah led them inside with forced cheer. The interior was warm and homey, with patterned blankets thrown over couches or hanging like tapestries from the wooden walls. There were three small rooms in the back, each large enough for two, and Sarah had clearly prepared for them by turning the living room into a campsite that could accommodate another three.

"Coffee's there, tea, you can raid the fridge, make yourselves at home." Sarah smiled and returned to the front door. "I'll be right back with the next lot."

Half an hour later, they were all present, and the building felt packed, voices interlacing, people stomping around, the fireplace roaring. Kimmie helped Sarah make hot chocolates for everybody, and folks paired off while Yadriel, Jason, and Kimmie claimed the couch and sleeping bags laid out in the living room.

James waited for the right moment, and when Sarah was left alone in the kitchen, he stepped inside with a handful of dirty mugs and moved to the sink.

"Oh, you're fine, I'll clean those in the morning."

"Happy to help," he murmured. There was no dishwasher. He took up a sponge and small bottle of dish liquid. "You been in Old Crow long?"

“My whole life,” she said, turning to regard him. “Feels like it, anyways. I moved here in ‘93 to marry Pete. He passed five years ago, and now I think I’m here for good, though I’ve a sister who keeps telling me to move to Dawson City.” She considered him. “But you just want to know about Belanger.”

“Guilty as charged.” He set a dripping mug aside. “You remember anything about his arrest?”

“At least you’re straight forward about it. Yes, was a big to-do. He’d only come into town a dozen times, less and less as time went by. Word was he’d claimed the homestead, though I don’t know how, that old place was half-collapsed. But he bought some tools and an old snowmobile. Not sure where he got the money from. Kevin said his notes were all crumpled and old like he’d been sitting on them for several decades. He’d come in for supplies, but nobody really liked him. Too...” Sarah paused, looking for the right word. “Wild? Like he was more wolf than man. But he was tough. Like old roots. You’d have to be, to live out there by yourself.”

“Mmmhmm,” said James, setting another mug aside.

“Anyways, he kept to himself and we were glad to leave him alone. But then on the 19<sup>th</sup>, he showed up yelling about the apocalypse. He tore across town, trying to find someone to listen to him. Some of the boys confronted him, told him to simmer down, and he started throwing punches. That got him arrested, but he broke free somehow and got back out onto his snowmobile. Left town. Chief Anderson filed his report, and then everything went to hell.”

Sarah sighed and stared out at nothing. “Guess Belanger had been right. Anyways, some military types came out to investigate Anderson’s report, flew out to homestead in a chopper. There was no sign of Belanger, but there was a demon symbol thing floating above his house. It’s still there, last we heard.”

“Huh.” James turned and crossed his arms. “Nobody’s seen Belanger since?”

“No. And if he don’t want to be found, nobody will, either. It’s a big country out there. Belanger’s comfortable with

the wilderness. If he's gone to ground, nobody will find him." Sarah's gaze turned hard. "Not you, not the other soldiers, not anybody."

*James, there are two men watching your building from across the road. They're using military gear I don't recognize. Want me to buzz them?*

*No, hold on. I'll be with you in a sec.*

"I see. Well. Thanks for the information, Sarah. It's much appreciated."

"It's been a month since Patrick disappeared. Whatever you're looking for, Mr. Kelly, I can tell you one thing: it's long gone."

James pushed off the counter. "We'll just have to see about that. Goodnight, Ms. Sarah." And he stepped past her to rejoin his crew.

## Chapter 50:

### Jaywick

“How’d that go?” asked Serenity, looking up from a 1970s magazine she’d fished out of a basket.

“Jelly says we’ve got people watching us right now,” said James, restraining the instinct to move to a window and peer outside. “I think we should go say hello.”

Yadriel sat up. “We’re being watched? Oh shit, it’s on!”

“It’s not on,” said Serenity. “At least, not yet. The other Americans?”

“That’s my guess. Jelly said they have military gear, which sounds like our guys.” James frowned. “I figured we’d deal with them tomorrow, but we might as well handle the situation now.”

Kerim sat forward. “Let’s be clear about goals. If they’re being covert, they’re clearly curious about us as well. Should we simply invite them inside for a conversation?”

“If they were the friendly types, wouldn’t they have come and knocked?” asked Kimmie. “This watching us from the bushes is... I don’t know, it doesn’t make me want to invite them inside.”

“We can assume they’re here for the same reasons,” said James. “Belanger. So either we can work together, or they’re going to insist on competing. It’ll be good to know either way. Serenity, Kimmie, you’re both with me. Let’s go talk to them.”

“Me?” asked Kimmie in surprise.

“Yeah. You can help set the tone with your power,” said James. “Take the edge off, help us talk first, shoot later. But if it comes to shooting...”

Serenity’s grin was pure predator. “Then I’ll have that well covered.”

“Good. I’ll orient with Jelly and we can step outside.”

*They’re down by the river, James. There’s a ridge that rises from the beach, and they’re crouched behind that looking at your building.*

“I don’t get it,” said Olaf. “What could they want to learn by watching in the night? They know we are here. What more can they see?”

“Some dudes are weird, yo,” said Yadriel sagely. “They lurk around outside windows hoping to catch folks undressing. It’s a crazy world out there.”

Olaf stared at Yadriel. “You think these military guys want to catch me undressing?”

“Naw, man. Maybe Kimmie, maybe Serenity, you know? Or shit, you, too, who knows?”

“Thanks for that insight into human nature,” said Serenity dryly. She was by the front door and checking each of her Sigs. “You’re growing by leaps and bounds, Yadriel.”

“I’m just a man of the world, you know?” Yadriel shrugged like it wasn’t any big thing. “You grow up fast on the streets.”

“No kidding. Ready, James?”

James zipped up his parka and slung his skeggox over his shoulder. “Bless Green, folks. Let’s go say hello.”

*Jelly, keep an eye on them, we’re coming out.*

James cracked open the front door and slipped out. The odds were low that the strangers would just open fire, but you never knew. He felt tense, light on his toes, ready for anything. They’d distributed the major runes on the plane, with the result that everybody now had a +6 to each base stat. Add in the +3 from Bless Green, and he was sitting at Agility 44 and Speed 47. He was faster and more agile than the War Hound, and with his Power of 56 and Strength of 54, he felt explosive and inhumanly powerful.

If it came to a fight, he didn’t think the strangers stood much of a chance.

The cold was bitter and immediately caused the skin on his face to tighten, his eyes to sting. Stamina 51 allowed him to shrug it off, however, and he strode along the side of the house toward the back which faced the river.

Motion sensors went off, flooding the area with bright white light.

*They've ducked down out of sight, said Jelly. And have rather unwisely drawn handguns.*

“Evening,” called James with false cheer. “It’s pretty cold out. You two want to come in for a hot chocolate and a chat?”

For a moment, the darkness sucked in his words. He could hear the soft whispering hiss of the large river sliding by but couldn’t make it out. Then he heard a chuckle, raspy and genuinely amused, and two figures stood up, visible from the shoulders up.

“Good evening,” called one of the men, his accent distinctly English. “I have to admit old habits got the better of me. Probably should have just come up and knocked.”

Kimmmie cleared her throat. “**We’re here with the best of intentions,**” she called out, voice laced with power. “**We can all get along and work things out for the best.**”

“That so?” The same man was doing all the talking. His eyes were hidden behind ski goggles, a fur-rimmed hood pulled over his head, a ski mask hiding the rest of his face. “Well, that’s very kind of you. We’ll come up onto your property if you don’t mind.”

“Come on up,” said James.

*Oh, oh! There’s another Sola Anima here! It’s been keeping a high altitude. Maybe we can hug!*

The two men vaulted up lightly onto the higher ground and rose to brush snow off their gear. They were both of medium height and slender build, both wearing matching white arctic gear with grayish-blue camo markings that looked new and eminently suited to the environment, and both had their faces covered.

“I’m Captain Richard Jaywick with the SAS. I must admit we’re a little far from home.” The man’s voice was a rich baritone, friendly and slightly self-mocking. “We saw you all arrive in that private jet. Are you Yanks?”

“We’re Yanks,” said James. “James Kelly, Captain, Blue Light group operating out of New York, US military special forces.” Had he even said that right? Fuck it. “SAS? You’re the UK special forces, right?”

“That’s right.” Jaywick was almost too affable for someone who’d been watching them in the middle of the night. “And you wouldn’t be *the* James Kelly? The man who started Blue Light and put out those videos?”

“Sexy Lumber Hobo Jack,” said Serenity with obvious delight. “The myth, the legend.”

“Well, I’ll be damned.” Jaywick’s expression was hidden, but he sounded mildly incredulous. “What brings you all the way to Old Crow, Captain?”

“Same as you, I’m sure.” James still felt on edge. “Patrick Belanger.”

“Ah, yes.” No surprise there. “Quite the character, isn’t he? Important people back home want us to have a word with him. Same as the Canadian boys that are also in town. It’s getting quite busy around these parts.”

“You want to share notes?”

“Sure. How about over breakfast? We’d planned to head out before dawn for his cabin, but we can delay an hour to make sure we’re all on the same page.”

“Sounds good. What time does the sun come up?”

“Now?” Again with the amusement. “Past ten in the morning. Let’s meet for coffee at the Moose Head at eight. We can have ourselves a chat and then still have ample time to hit the trail. Sound all right with you, Kelly?”

“Sounds good to me, Jaywick.”

“Excellent. Then, if you’ll excuse us?” Jaywick led his companion up the shoulder of the property, past Sarah’s truck,

and disappeared onto the main road.

*The Sola Anima is still overhead,* said Jelly.

“That went well,” said Kimmie hesitantly. “Didn’t it?”

“I don’t know,” said James. “Can’t say I trust him.”

“Same. If he was really interested in exchanging info, he’d have done so right now,” said Serenity. “Instead, he clearly wants more of his men with him. And for us to show up at a set time and place.”

Kimmie stared at Serenity. “You think he’s setting up an ambush?”

“Don’t know, hon. But he was too friendly for my tastes.”

“Too friendly? You wanted him to be angry or something?”

“Would have felt more genuine. We caught him with his pants around his ankles and he laughed it off like we were third graders playing hide and seek. What do you think, James? This meeting worth going to?”

James frowned off into the darkness. “I don’t think they’ll ambush us there. If they really want to get rid of us, they’ll hit us here while we’re asleep. Open fire on the side of the house with everything they’ve got. Bullets would tear through those logs like nothing. I think Jaywick actually wants to see if he can learn anything from us. But beyond that? Yeah. I don’t trust him either.”

“We could work together on this,” Kimmie insisted. “It doesn’t need to be antagonistic.”

“You’re right there,” said Serenity, throwing an arm around Kimmie’s shoulders. “It doesn’t need to be. But one thing you’ll learn about boys with guns, hon, is that they like to find excuses to use them.”

James followed them to the front door where he paused.  
*That Anima still on us?*

*Yes.*



*Can you be sure it belongs to the two guys who were here?*

*No. It could belong to someone else, I suppose. Want me to engage it in conversation?*

*Has it detected you?*

*I don't think so. I'm special. Sneaky. Gloria-enhancement makes me amazing in so many ways. This poor guy is just doing its best.*

*Then let's keep your presence hidden. Stay out here tonight, Jelly, and watch for trouble.*

*Affirmative, James.*

James slipped inside and closed the door. Serenity was debriefing the others, and Sarah was listening from the kitchen. She'd said the second group was American. An innocent mistake? Or had Jaywick lied to the locals?

The crew discussed the exchange, but seeing as it was already almost four or five in the morning for them, and they'd spent the whole day dealing with the Fourth Wave, it didn't take long for people to crash. James and Serenity retreated to one of the rooms. There, Serenity pulled her bedding to the floor.

"What?" she asked. "If they open fire on us, this way I'll be safe."

"We got Jelly on patrol."

"Our scout's name is Jelly. I'll take my chances."

James snorted and sat in his bunk. He pulled out his satellite phone, fiddled with it for a minute, then called Star Boy.

"James! How is Canada?"

"It's cold. Listen, I need you to check on something for me. A Captain Richard Jaywick with the SAS has flown into town today. He was watching our building till Jelly flushed him out. Can you check in with Hackworth and see what he thinks?"

“Will do. Call me when you wake up.”

James turned off the phone, slid it beneath his pillow, and knocked out the moment he lay down.

\* \* \*

It was still dark when they arose. The acrid smell of freshly brewed coffee filled the house, and James rose, rubbed his eyes, and checked his watch.

Ten before eight.

“All right, everyone,” he called. “We’re out the door in five.”

He drew out the phone and dialed Star Boy. “Any news?”

“Yeah, been waiting for you to call. Get this: there’s no Captain Richard Jaywick with the SAS. Now, special forces are secretive by nature, and we’re trying to get confirmation from the UK that they know they’ve got people in Canada, but currently we’re just getting denials.”

“No shit.” James leaned forward, elbows on knees. “How does Hackworth want me to handle this?”

“Cautiously. Jaywick could still be for real, just deeply embedded. But figure out what you can and call back in. If possible, don’t let him get to Belanger before you do.”

“All right. Could get ugly.”

“You’re James fucking Kelly,” said Star Boy. “You got this.”

“Ha. Thanks. I’ll check back in soon.”

People piled into the living room, grabbing snow gloves, parkas, scarves, heavy snowsuits, all kinds of gear that had been packed into their cases. Sarah handed out mugs, told them which way to go, and then they emerged into the darkness.

*The Sola Anima watched us all night, said Jelly. But nobody else came close.*

*Noted.*

Olaf and Jason headed out with Sarah to see about renting privately owned snowmobiles, while the rest of them headed to the Moose Head just down the street, packs slung over their shoulders; the town being so small made it easy to find. They crunched down the salted and gravel main road, past buildings set back from the road, each isolated from the next, most with lights on already and smoke rising from their steel chimneys. Dogs barked at them from kennels, and the occasional vehicle rolled down the street, tires crunching, faces curious as the drivers stared at them.

“Can you imagine living here?” asked Kimmie, hugging herself. “Dark till ten? No way. I need the sun.”

“You’d get all you need in the summer,” laughed Kerim. “When the sun doesn’t set at all.”

The Moose Head was doing lively business. Probably far more than it ever did, as a large crowd was gathered outside in two rough groups. The cafe was well lit, its yellow light splashing out onto the snow-covered yard before it, and it was there that the military folks stood, most holding coffees and watching each other till James and Crimson Hydra marched up.

“Right on time,” said Jaywick, moving up to meet James, a couple of other guys flanking him. “A proper military man.”

The leader of the other group also approached, and soon they formed a triangle. Everybody seemed to be of roughly the same build and medium height. Maybe special forces washed out the small and overly tall guys.

“Good morning. Captain Marceau with the Canadian special forces. Captain Kelly? We were told you’d be arriving last night. Welcome to Canada.”

“Thanks, Captain.” Was that a pointed line, about how they’d been expected? Had Jaywick not been? “I assume you and yours are here for Belanger?”

“That is so. We arrived earlier this week, but stayed to help the people here with the Nemesis 3s. Now that that’s taken care of, we plan to find Belanger. But Captain Jaywick’s arrival here - and yours - means we should clarify how we’re to go about that.”

“My commanding officer told me to work with local law enforcement,” said James. “He didn’t mention that the SAS was going to be in town.”

“We just popped in, last-minute like,” grinned Jaywick. He pulled down his mask to sip his coffee, revealing a bristly orange mustache and lean, carved cheeks. “But we’re all friends here, aren’t we? Yanks, Canucks, and Brits? We should work together. Share intel, do the right thing for mankind.”

“Yes,” said Marceau uncertainly.

“Or not,” said Jaywick with a shrug. “We’ve rented six snowmobiles and intend to leave for the homestead within the hour. We can travel separately if you all prefer.”

“Given that we don’t know what’s ahead,” said James, “it’d make sense to move together. Captain Marceau, you have transportation?”

“We do. You’ll have to scrounge around town for more snowmobiles, however. The locals keep a few on hands for folks who come in to ski, but not enough for you all.”

“We’ll see what we can do. So. What do you all know about Belanger?”

Marceau and Jaywick exchanged measuring glances, and then Jaywick shrugged. “Enough to make it worth our while to fly out here. The boys in intelligence flagged the report where Patrick reported speaking with a Monitor days before everyone else, including you, Kelly. His medical records are fascinating and given that nothing else was suggesting itself worth investigating, we thought we’d come have a chat.”

“That so.” James studied Jaywick. The man sipped his coffee, expression innocent, eyebrows raised. “Well, that’s what we know as well.”

“Nothing else?” Jaywick looked mildly surprised. “I’d have thought you’d have more info. What with your chatting with Monitors in your spare time. No idea as to what their interest in him might have been?”

Did he know about the Light Eternal? James held his gaze for a beat, then shook his head. “We’re grasping at straws here. But what else are drowning men going to do?”

“That’s about the right of it,” said Marceau unhappily. “The presence of the demon symbol has us curious, though our first investigation a month ago turned up nothing.”

“Well. My boys are going to head out, then.” Jaywick took a last sip of his coffee and dashed the rest out upon the snow. “See you there, lads.”

“Give us a moment,” said James. “There’s safety in numbers. We’ll head up together.”

“That’s sweet of you, Kelly, but I think we’ll get started now.” Jaywick raised his mask over his face. “Early bird catches the word and all.”

Marceau frowned. “We can spare you two of our snowmobiles, Kelly. Enough for four of your people. But we’ll be leaving now, too.”

“Mighty kind of you.” James watched Jaywick walk over to his men who immediately started gathering up and moving to where a half-dozen snowmobiles were parked and loaded with gear and guns. “Watch out for Jaywick. My CO says they can’t get confirmation that he’s real SAS.”

“Oui, we’re having trouble identifying his unit as well. But he speaks well and knows enough about the SAS to answer our questions correctly. We’re going ahead to keep an eye on him. Hurry and catch up when you can.”

James clapped Marceau on the shoulder. “Will do. Be safe.”

“Yourselves as well, Blue Light. Or the *Sacre Bleus*, as we call you up here.” Marceau smiled. “Follow our tracks. And hurry.”

James watched as Marceau gathered his squad - also nine strong - and strode off down the street toward an empty lot where more snowmobiles were parked, a couple of guys tightening straps and packs.

“Shit,” said Yadriel. “This don’t feel right. How late we gonna be to this party?”

James frowned as the first of Jaywick’s men gunned their rides to life. “Late. Let’s hope Marceau keeps shit under control.”

The first of the snowmobiles drove out onto the road and began to make its way toward the end of town.

Jaywick gave a cheerful wave as he rode away, and James had to resist the urge to give him the finger.

“All right, standing around here won’t help us any. Let’s help Olaf and Jason get the remaining snowmobiles. Every minute we lose is one we give Jaywick with Belanger.”

“Let’s break up, groups of two,” said Serenity. “Just bang on doors and ask to rent whatever they’ve got. When you get hold of one, radio in to Kelly with your sat phone.”

Everybody nodded and split off, leaving James to go into the Moose Head proper to speak with the manager about renting something. But he walked slowly, watching as Jaywick’s column of snowmobiles dwindled into the distance.

*Shit*, he thought. Should he have forced Jaywick to wait? Held him at gunpoint? Asked Kimmie to delay them?

Too late now.

All he could do was hurry and pray they weren’t too late.

# Chapter 51:

## Defiance

It took only twenty minutes of hustling around town to round up three more snowmobiles and then they were off, mounted and with their gear stowed, helmets strapped on and tearing out of Old Crow in the pre-dawn gloom.

The tracks were easy to follow. Something like a dozen snowmobiles had left town, churning up the snow along the road's shoulder and quickly quitting the rough gravel lane for the undulating mounds that rolled between the trees.

James was cautious at first, but soon found that his ridiculous Agility gave him ample reflexes with which to navigate the woods even as he kept putting on speed. The limiting factor proved to be the medium itself; snowmobiles could accelerate quickly but slid into turns, necessitating a more careful weaving pattern as they raced between the trunks.

Headlights strafed the narrow trees. The tracks were deep and threaded ever forward. The snowmobile engines sounded like cheap motorbikes, but there was no gainsaying the traction they found even when they left the tracks for the powdery mounds that rose and fell like ocean swells.

On they raced, Jelly flitting ahead, a loose collective that fought to catch up with every second, every moment.

But twenty minutes was an impossible lead to close. So instead, James sent Jelly a mile ahead to make sure nobody had laid any traps or was waiting in ambush, and just did his best.

The sky was lightening when the pop-pop-pop of gunfire came thinly from the distance. James slowed, held up a fist, and everybody else came to a stop. They cut the engines.

*Brrrrr.*

*Pop pop pop.*

“What are they shooting at?” asked Serenity. They were too far away to hear any shouts. Just the thin, anemic echo of gunfire carrying a mile or two through the silent, brittle air.

*Jelly?*

*Flying ahead to see what's up.*

“Let's keep on. Slow and steady till Jelly reports in.”

Ten or so minutes later, Jelly spoke up once more. *Both groups reached the homestead. Their snowmobiles are parked outside. It looks like one group killed the other. There are bodies in the snow.*

*Did you see the second group?*

*No sign of them. Nor the second Anima.*

“Well, shit.” James stopped again, swiveled around to address the others. “Jelly says one of the groups just killed the other. I'm guessing Jaywick got the drop on Marceau. There's no sign of them now, though, which means they could be waiting to ambush us. We'll proceed slowly and have Jelly search again when we're closer.”

Denzel spit pointedly into the snow.

They proceeded. Despite the danger, James fell into something akin to a trance, beguiled by the endless weaving between trees that was only broken by the occasional need to navigate a ridge or the two miles they followed an old logging road before once again diving into the woods.

The eastern horizon was just starting to lighten, the sky gray, beams of faint sunlight causing the icicles that hung from branches and the haze of snow that billowed up behind each snowmobile to glitter.

*Going ahead to check for an ambush, said Jelly. We're only a mile away.*

James slowed again, tooling along after the tracks. Jelly reported back five minutes later.



*Very strange. There's no sign of anybody there. I searched the forest and undergrowth thoroughly, and even looked inside the farmstead. The second group disappeared.*

*The demon symbol?*

*It's there, five hundred feet up. I don't see any sign of demon activity, though.*

“No sign of the second group,” James called out to the others as they stopped around him. “Neither in the woods nor the cabin. We’ll proceed slowly and expect the worst. Jelly will be on site waiting for us. If anything rears its head, Jelly will let us know.”

Nobody looked pleased.

They drove the last mile. The homestead was a large, rustic log cabin. Once it might have been grand, something an entire family or several generations had worked on, but it was clear Belanger hadn't put much effort or had enough time to fix it up. Some sections were discolored, the new timber standing out against the old, and half the clearing before the building was turned into a work area, complete with sawhorses, piles of lumber and trash.

The snowmobiles were parked in two groups. The distinction was nominal; there wasn't enough space for both groups to have really parked apart from each other. Bags and rucksacks were still strapped to the machines.

James and the others came to a stop behind both groups. Sitting up, James removed his helmet and saw the bodies. A quick count revealed eleven corpses. Most had collapsed in a tight group before the front door, but four or five had tried to make a break for it.

James got off the snowmobile and drew his skeggox. The axe glittered in the fresh dawn light. Senses peeled, he moved forward cautiously, listening intently, seeking any sign of movement.

Nothing stirred. The dense fir trees around the cabin were laden with snow. None looked disturbed, no branches

were suddenly bare for having people shove past them and dislodge their cargo.

They all stopped behind the other snowmobiles and studied the clearing.

“Footprints are all over the place,” said Serenity, a Sig in each fist. “Looks like everyone marched up to the house there before the fight broke out.”

“Jelly, anything?”

“No, James.” The Anima buzzed into view and hovered before them. “Very strange. No footprints leading away from the house, nothing.”

James frowned at the symbol. It hung high in the air and burned dawn gold, having caught the rising sun’s rays before anything else. It spun slowly, malevolent, its iron curves and rusted edges defying comprehension.

“Maybe that thing sucked them up,” said Denzel. “Or a Monitor came down and ate them.”

“Maybe,” allowed James. “Let’s keep looking. Nobody’s to go off by themselves. Minimum groups of three. You see something, you shout.”

People nodded uncertainly, clearly unnerved.

**“We got this,”** said Kimmie. **“Whatever happened here won’t happen to us.”**

Confidence flowed into James and some of the tension sluiced away. Miriam let out an obvious sigh of relief as her shoulders lowered an inch.

James led the way. He tried to read what had happened from the snow, the shell casings, where people had been shot. It was beyond him, however. The snow was churned up, blood was sprayed everywhere, and the bodies told no tales.

It was Marceau’s group that had been dropped. As dangerous and wary as they’d been in their own right, Jaywick’s force had ambushed them neatly. Most of the shots were in their backs. They’d probably stopped before the cabin and hailed Belanger when Jaywick had opened fire.

Several of Marceau's men, however, had tried to make a break for it. Two lay behind a woodpile, both having been shot in the head. A third with gunshots in his back had crawled a dozen yards toward the snowmobiles before being shot in the back of the head twice.

"They got two of Jaywick's men," said Serenity, crouching beside the corpses.

"That means there are seven of them out there somewhere." James scanned the clearing. His heart was pounding but he felt calm. "Let's look inside."

Everybody raised their M4s. Serenity ghosted up beside the front door. The wooden planks had been torn up by stray shots. Only the sound of their terse breathing filled the arctic air.

There was no movement from within. James pushed the front door open with his skeggox and when nothing happened, he crouched and peered inside.

The cabin was dark and musty and cold. No sign of recent habitation. It was furnished with old, bulky furniture, the kind of stuff a skilled carpenter might have made on site. Light filtered in dimly through the dirty windows. A huge stone fireplace was dark and ashen.

No bodies.

"Going in," he called, and pushed the front door all the way open before moving inside and stepping aside so that the wall was to his back. Serenity entered a second later, both Sigs raised, and quickly covered the corners.

The doorway darkened.

A Nem3 lowered its head and stepped inside. "Shit, man," it rumbled. "This place is dank as hell."

James bit back a curse. Yadriel in his demon form. "I nearly cut your head off, you idiot."

"Nearly tried, you mean." Yadriel padded forward, his tail lashing. "This place is empty."

James rose and looped around the room, listening intently.

Nothing.

He and Serenity poked their heads in each of the rooms. Silence and dust. Half the place was clearly disused, some rooms having been abandoned, while a smaller part had been lived in by Belanger. Unopened cans of beans and vegetables sat in a warped pantry, while in a small room with a cement drain embedded in the floor hung a flayed and gutted deer. The place was so cold there were no flies.

“Fuck,” said Serenity, putting up her guns and moving to the front door. “Nothing in here. You guys find anything?”

“No,” said Olaf from outside. “Footprints circle the house but don’t come back around. They disappear behind the house.”

“Let’s take a look,” said James. They all left the house and followed Olaf, who pointed out the prints.

“They move as a group. Here they stop, form a tight group. One man walk over to here by himself, then he return. Group keeps going, around the back, here.”

There was an old oil tank freestanding against the back wall. More trash, a shed whose open door revealed a work bench and abandoned tools.

“See here?” Olaf pointed at the prints. “They stop here. Poof. Gone. No more.”

James frowned at the snow. The prints, maybe a half-dozen people, clustered together beside the oil tank, and then just stopped.

“Could they have climbed onto the oil tank and then up onto the house?” asked Kimmie uncertainly.

“I’ll take a look.” Yadriel crouched and leaped, landing easily on the thick sloping logs that crunched beneath his weight. Lithe and fast, he scaled to the peak, looked around the roof, then back down at them, his face horrific where it

was implanted in the middle of the Nem3s skull visage.  
“Nothing.”

“Well, shit.” James propped his skeggox on his shoulder.  
“So they both rolled up. Jaywick got the drop on Marceau,  
walked to the back of the house, then disappeared.”

Kerim scratched at this chin as he stared straight up. “It  
had to involve the demons. The Monitors.”

“You’re probably right. Doesn’t help us any, though.”  
James frowned as he studied the symbol as well. “They don’t  
seem interested in us.”

“Actually...” Miriam dry swallowed and pulled her ski  
mask down under her chin. “Actually, I feel something. Never  
felt anything like this before.”

“Shut up, Yadriel,” said Serenity.

“What?” He pretended wounded innocence. “I didn’t  
even say nothing!”

“What are you feeling?” asked James quietly.

“Here, before us.” She gestured vaguely at the snowy  
area beside the shed. “There’s something...” She narrowed her  
eyes and raised both hands.

“*James.*”

The voice slid into his body like a shiv. James stiffened,  
turned, and there, standing on the edge of the cabin’s roof was  
Jessica. Her expression was grave and the dawn sunlight  
gleamed on her glasses.

Everybody startled. Yadriel hissed and raised his huge  
claws while Serenity drew a bead with both guns, her  
expression turning colder than the ice around them.

“Meladrix.” He raised his chin. “I was wondering when  
you’d crawl out of your hole.”

*“I have limited patience today. I will give you the same  
warning that I gave Richard Jaywick. Walk away and live.  
Persist in this inquiry and I shall personally ensure your  
immediate destruction.”*

The Monitor stared down at him with malevolent intensity. Gone was the banter, the humor, the teasing.

“You killed Jaywick?”

*“I erased him and his men from existence. Get on your snowmobiles, return to Old Crow, and fly back to New York. Do so and you will live to fight another day. Disobey me, and I shall snuff your lives out as easily as a child snuffs a candle.”*

Crimson Hydra shifted around him, uneasy.

Nobody spoke.

James studied the Monitor. She wore the same business casual outfit as always, clutched a tablet to her chest, wore Jessica’s blonde hair up in the same careless French twist that only made her look all the more elegant.

But her eyes.

They blazed with murderous intent.

Could they take her? She’d claimed once to be as far above the Nemesis 1s as man was to cockroaches, if not more. But now? If he dropped Gloria-infused Heavenly Assaults while everybody else used their powers? If they all invoked their Virtues?

James rippled his fingers over the haft of the skeggox. “You’re meant to observe, not intervene.”

*“Where is it written, James? You know nothing about the rules that govern my kind. But if you break those rules, do not doubt that we shall erase you.”*

“Huh.” James considered. “Miriam, what were you about to do?”

“I, ah...” Her voice was little more than a croak. “I was going to use my Benediction, Dispel Illusion.”

“Your lawfully given Benediction?”

“I... yes?”

“Then go right ahead. And if the Monitor tries to stop you, we’ll all summon our Virtues and go to town on her sorry

ass.”

Jessica hissed. *“You think your weak invocation of Dikastís scares me?”*

“Do it, Miriam.”

The tension in the air was exquisite.

Miriam coughed, raised both hands, and closed her eyes.

Jessica’s face screwed up into an expression of utter fury.

James exhaled slowly, rose to the balls of his feet, and reached out for Dikastís, searching for the avatar of Justice in its alternate dimension. Ready to summon it the second Jessica made a move.

The air beside the shed began to shimmer.

Jessica suddenly laughed, all tension fleeing her body. *“There is more than one way to skin a cat. Reap what you have sewn, James.”*

She disappeared. One moment she stood upon the edge of the rooftop, the second she was just gone.

“Oh shit,” whispered Serenity.

James turned. The snowy ground behind the house had disappeared. In its place yawned a pit some ten yards in diameter, its edges rough and wounded. Trickle of red liquid welled out of the earth and ran between the shattered cracks into the darkness from which rose plumes of steam and a terrible stench of sulfur and heated metal.

“What the fuck?” whispered Jason, drawing back from the edge.

James stared, wide-eyed, into the dark depths.

Some fifteen or so yards below, he saw the bottom. It was a large room, hewn from the living rock, the steam emerging from the cracks that rivened its floor and revealed seams of glowing orange in their depths.

A single archway stood to one side, edged in huge stones, a metal portcullis closing it completely.

“Well I’ll be god damned,” said James. “Good work, Miriam. Looks like we know where Belanger went.”

“And Jaywick,” said Serenity.

“And where we’re going,” said Yadriel. “Right, Boss?”

“Right.” James gripped his axe. “Here we go.”

And he jumped in.



## Chapter 52:

### Belanger

James fell the fifteen yards and landed solidly on the rock floor below. Before, a jump like that would have fractured both his legs, shattering his bones and driving the shards into his pelvic cradle.

Now, he just sank into a crouch, skeggox propped over one shoulder and slowly rose to standing. Jelly floated down as the others leaped down after him, landing in an arc around him. Yadriel carried Miriam, whose stats weren't yet up to snuff, but otherwise they fell silently and oriented on the huge portcullis.

"What are we dealing with here?" asked Denzel softly. "The Pits?"

"Nah," said James. "This is something unique to Belanger. I'm sure of it. The real Pits will be a sight bigger, I'm sure."

The darkness beyond the bars shifted and smoldered. It was clearly magical, the kind that wreathed the hives. Kerim pushed his spectacles up his nose and stepped forward. "The tunnel continues for a short way beyond the bars then curves out of sight to the right."

"Gotcha," said James, moving up to the bars. "Let me know if something appears." He grabbed the rough iron in both hands, crouched, then locked his arms and started to rise. Strength 54 was prodigious. On many levels, James didn't yet fully understand what he was capable of, but now he saw the direct results.

The huge portcullis rose with him. James felt the muscles writhe along his arms, felt his hamstrings snarl, felt his quads strain with effort. Up he lifted the huge barrier, pushing it back into the slot carved into the ceiling.

"Serenity," he grunted. "Skeggox."

She grabbed his axe, placed it upright beneath the bars, and James relaxed. The portcullis caught against the axe and remained a yard above the ground.

Everybody hurried under. James went last, passing through the shimmering darkness. The tunnel beyond was just a Kerim had described it, rough-hewn and with flickering illumination coming from beyond the curve. For a moment, James considered grabbing his skeggox, but then decided the ability to make a quick exit was more important.

Together they walked forward, listening intently. Jelly flitted ahead, disappearing around the curve.

*Large room beyond. Two corpses. Jaywick's men. Looks like they shot each other. Another pit in the center of the room. Goes down aways.*

James rounded the curve and saw what Jelly had described. Burning torches were set in metal scones affixed to the stone walls. The effect was positively medieval. The two men lay where they'd fallen, bullpup machine guns loosely cradled, their fronts torn up by gunfire.

"What the hell?" asked Jason as he moved forward warily. "They just have a falling out?"

"No telling," said Kerim. "We had best be careful. We have no ability to protect against possession or curses."

"That's no comfort," said Denzel.

James approached the pit. Great runes were carved around its perimeter. As he drew closer they began to burn a filthy green, and a wave of slushy frozen horror flowed into him. It was a primal sensation. His pace slowed and then he stopped altogether.

There was no obvious threat, but he was paralyzed with fear. His chest began to heave, his throat to close, his thoughts to whirl. Flickering images of a nauseating tenor rushed through his mind, nothing substantive but enough to turn his stomach.

The others also slowed, one by one, as they entered the runes' radius of effect.

“Fuck,” grunted Yadriel. “Why am I suddenly feeling like a little bitch?”

“**We are brave,**” said Kimmie, her voice shaking. “**Nothing can stop us.**”

Her power washed over James, nullifying some of the abject terror, and he managed another couple of steps before slowing again.

Miriam finally spoke up. “We... we have nothing to fear here. We... we can press on.”

She didn’t sound like she believed it, but her Benediction blazed forth, warming James in a more profound manner than Kimmie’s Inspiration. The terror withdrew, his chest unlocked, and he sucked in a deep gulp of breath as the green runes faded and went dark.

“God damn,” hissed Serenity. “I’ve not felt that way since grade school.”

James met Miriam’s gaze and nodded his approval. She looked guilty for having taken so long, but James waited till she returned his nod and stepped to the pit’s edge.

“Whatever’s down there, they really don’t want us getting to it,” said Denzel. “Fuck. Another jump?”

More unnatural darkness. Kerim peered down. “The fall’s not bad. Just ten yards. But there are a number of spikes. You land wrong, you’ll get impaled.”

“Great,” said Jason. “Can you do anything to get rid of the darkness?”

“No. But I can tell you where to jump. Here. If you take a small step forward and just drop, you’ll land in a clear space. One at a time.”

“All right.” James stepped up beside Kerim. “Right here?”

Kerim took him by the shoulders and moved him a little to the left. “There. Just a small step. Fall with your back almost touching the side of the pit. It’s just ten yards.”

James nodded, inhaled deeply, and stepped forward. He fell, punched through the layer of unnatural darkness, and then was through. He landed hard, falling into a crouch, and froze.

A dozen wickedly barbed spikes rose up all around him, each two yards in height. Landing on one would either result in complete impalement or being torn to shreds on the barbs.

“I’m fine,” he called, rising and slipping forward between the spikes. “Next.”

Another tunnel led out of the spike pit. Laughter and voices came from around the next curve, and in the shadows James saw movement.

One of Jaywick’s men, left on guard. The man was pushing off the wall with his shoulder, raising his gun, eyes wide in alarm, mouth opening to holler.

Power 56 allowed him to explode forward faster than any sprinter. Speed 47 allowed him to cross the pit as quickly as a bullet. Agility 44 allowed him to weave between the spikes as if they were yards apart instead of mere feet.

James closed one hand about the guard’s throat and closed the other around the gun, keeping the muzzle pointed down. He cracked the man’s head against the wall, hard, and the guard’s eyes rolled up before he even managed to croak.

James lowered him quickly, only to belatedly realize there was no reason to be gentle; a thick splotch of blood and hair remained on the ragged wall. Frowning, James tilted the man’s head forward. The back of his skull was pulped.

Strength 54.

Serenity dropped into the pit, hissed as she nearly slashed herself open, then called out the all clear and approached.

“What happened?” she asked, staring at the dead man.

“Me, I guess. He was left on watch.”

“Slick moves, Rick.” She looked past him. “Jaywick’s cautious. Two dead top side, two more in the pit room, now

this guy. He's down to three more. We outnumber him two-to-one."

"One of them had a Sola Anima. If it's Jaywick, he's no push-over."

The rest of the crew dropped down. Kerim's guidance was such that nobody had any accidents. Once they were all gathered, James led the way along the tunnel and out into a massive cavern.

The place was huge. Big enough to fit half a football field and composed of multiple different plateaus at varied heights. Stalactites and stalagmites rose to meet everywhere, turning the place into a forest of glimmering stone towers, and the air was musty and damp.

But James's gaze was pulled to the far side of the cavern where a huge throne rose from a high ledge, resplendent and demonic. It was a riot of bones and rusted steel, large enough for a Nem3 but occupied by an old man who watched Jaywick and several others slowly approaching, his chin on one fist, his expression bored, sullen, annoyed.

James extended his arm, stopping the others from moving any further. Jaywick was having trouble. It was simple enough to navigate the floor, to go around the stalagmites and leap from ledge to ledge, but already two of his men were dead, torn apart by invisible attacks that left their bodies shredded in pools of gleaming blood.

Jaywick crouched thirty yards before Belanger, heaving for breath, one arm stretched forth as if to forestall another attack. His remaining soldier stood a few yards behind him.

"You don't need to carry the weight any longer," Jaywick called to Belanger. "I understand that I'm not welcome here, but my arrival could be an end to your pain."

"But I'm not in pain," said Belanger dully.

"This is not living." Jaywick gestured around the cavern. "She's not really your wife."

"You think I don't know that?"

Jaywick hesitated. “Then why do you spend your time with her?”

“You don’t get to ask questions.”

“Whoa, wait-wait-wait. I’m sorry. You’re right.” Jaywick had positively flinched. “No need to call her. I, ah, am just here to help. To help you.”

Belanger frowned. “Is that so?”

“I’ll take on the weight, the burden. I’ll ease your load. Just give it to me and this can all end for you. Don’t you want peace?”

“Peace.” Belanger tasted the word. “It’s too late for that.” And he made a gesture.

The remaining SAS soldier wheeled around as a woman appeared by his side. She was naked, her body glistening with blood. Her lank blonde hair hung down past her shoulders, and her expression was alive with amusement and delight. She reached out and took hold of the soldier as he opened fire point blank into her gut, his gun burning bright with the silvery light of *Smite*. For a second, he just poured endless rounds into her gut, and then she tore him apart.

One hand holding his left shoulder, the fingers of her right digging into his abdomen to clutch at the rim of his pelvis, she simply ripped him in half. His scream cut off abruptly as gore fountained everywhere, bathing the woman anew. She released both halves and they fell with wet thumps to the ground.

“Fuck!” Jaywick reeled back and in doing so caught sight of James and his crew. “Kelly! Get her, get her while she’s visible -”

But then she wasn’t. Quick as a blink, she was gone.

“Get her?” asked Belanger, voice pricked with pique. “Get her? You would harm my wife?”

“No, of course not, mate, I merely meant -”

The woman appeared behind Jaywick. There was nothing demonic about her, nothing overtly terrifying, but that

in and of itself made her ghastlier. She reached forth just as an Anima came buzzing down from the darkness that cloaked the cavern roof. Its bladed arms blurred as it slammed into her back, only to bounce off, blades bent. Jaywick screamed and silver lightning blasted down from the roof to strike the woman, immolate them both.

But to no avail. She wrapped one arm around his chest, a hand around his chin, and tore his head clean off.

Blood geysered up as she released the body. The flare of Heavenly Assault died away. Her body was unmarked by the attack. For a second, she considered the head in her hands. Jaywick's lips moved for a second, and then she tossed the head away and looked over her shoulder at James.

For a second, their eyes met. Her face ran with blood, her hair hung heavy and lank with it, but still she smiled, a wicked, enticing smile, as if she were spying him from across the room at a party and deciding in that moment to have her way with him.

Then she was gone.

Belanger sighed and shifted on his throne. "You lot. You want the Light Eternal. You want to convince me to give it to you."

"That's right," James called back.

"It's right here," said Belanger, and he placed a burning sapphire gem the size of his fist upon the throne's arm. It was enmeshed in golden wires and looked just like a heavenly treasure. "Reach my throne and I'll give it to you."

James looked at the scattered corpses that littered the cavern floor. "That easy."

For the first time, Belanger smiled. The expression was haunted. "That easy."

"We could go as a team," said Serenity. "Circle of Protection, Shields up, Martyr's Cry to keep us going."

"Don't bother trying to kill her," Belanger called out. "Jane's more powerful than a Monitor now. Your best bet is to

just get the fuck out of here. But if you insist?" He patted the gem. "Start walking."

James licked his lips, considered, then squared his shoulders. "You lot wait for me here."

"What the fuck?" hissed Serenity. "Wait for you here?"

"There's only one way across," said James. "It's not a physical ordeal. This is a psychological labyrinth. I'll try the odds alone."

Olaf put a hand on James's shoulder. "If you insist. But we will be ready. If this Jane appears, we will act."

"Fine." James held Serenity's gaze till she looked away with a scowl, then turned to face the cavern. Fifty yards separated him from Belanger. A few precipitous drops, a few sharp climbs. He could run the distance in seconds, but for sure that would trigger Jane. He didn't know why, but he believed Belanger when he said she was more powerful than a Monitor.

Whatever they'd done to placate him, to get him to sit on that throne, it had to have been worth damning the whole species. The demons wouldn't have expended a lowly Nem on the deal.

James hopped off their ledge, fell a couple of yards onto a smooth expanse of rock, and began to walk forward slowly. "Patrick Belanger?"

The old man studied James, eyes narrowing at the casual tone. "The same."

"My name's James Kelly. Mind if we chat as I cross?"

"I expected nothing less. You need to convince me to keep Jane at bay. Move too fast and I'll release her. Annoy me, insult me, bore me, and I'll do the same." The old man paused and then an unhinged smile crossed his face. "I hope for your sake you're more interesting than those last fools."

"One way to find out," said James, and stuck his hands in his parka pockets. "Slow walk work for you?"



The old man nodded, again narrowing his eyes at James's chill tone.

“Cool.” James began to advance cautiously. “So tell me. Why'd you decide to sacrifice all of humanity for this shitty existence in a hole?”

## Chapter 53:

### Demon Promises are Shit

Belanger narrowed his eyes. Even from this distance James could tell he was a striking man; his face was dramatic, with deeply carved cheeks and a hawk-like nose, his eyes gleaming from under bristling brows, his skin heavily wrinkled like a paper bag that had been crumpled then smoothed over his skull. Yet for all that, he burned with a youthful vitality, and his presence was searing.

“Sacrifice all of humanity?” Belanger’s words were a sneer. “You think me far more important than I am.”

“You don’t hold the Light Eternal right there?”

Belanger considered the gem. “Why, so I do.”

“Then surely you had some role in what’s happened.”

“That I have. But a middling role, unimportant, everything considered. I suppose you’re just as ignorant as the last lot.”

Scorn slid into Belanger’s voice, and James could feel the man distancing himself, growing aloof, reaching for superiority.

He had to keep him on his heels.

“Yeah, I’m pretty ignorant. Won’t deny it. I was homeless till this all kicked off. Could probably have used some help, but there wasn’t any at hand. Not for the likes of me. Still, even at my worst, when I was lost in the bottom of a bottle and with no hope for a better tomorrow, I doubt I’d have agreed to have my dead wife back as a demon.”

“Your wife is dead?”

“Wife and both girls. They were killed in our family home while I was at work. Nearly broke me when I found out. I guess it did. But still.” James stopped walking, placed his

hands on his hips and stared across at Belanger. “Still, I’d never have accepted a fake version back.”

Belanger’s upper lip lifted from his yellowed teeth. “That’s because you’ve yet to learn the fine art of acceptance, Kelly. You’re young. You think you had it rough? You don’t know what you’re talking about. This thing here?” He patted the gem. “It’s a curse. It turns you into Job out of the Old Testament. Everything you touch turns to ash. Everyone you love dies. Every attempt at self-improvement becomes a mockery. And why? Because it’s one big fucking test. To see if you can resist long enough to hand it on. But fuck that. I finally understood after running from the truth my whole life.”

“Understood what, Belanger?”

“That we’re all alone in this world.” The old man leaned forward, eyes blazing. “That you’re born alone and you’ll die alone, that nobody can change, that nobody cares about anything more than themselves, that it’s a crapsack world full of idiots and fools, and the greatest fools are those who think otherwise. And you know why they think that way? Because they *need* to. They need the world to be better so they can get up in the morning, so they can brush their teeth and look themselves in the mirror. Without that faith, they’d curl up and die.”

Belanger sat back. “Not me. I’m done lying. I accept that I’m weak. That I’m old. That soon I’ll die alone. I’ve no illusions as to Jane being more than a manipulative succubus who’s manipulating me, making me dance to her strings. But while I live, I might as well get to finally enjoy the best life has to offer. You wouldn’t understand. You’ve no idea what the demons can do to us, to our brains, our minds, the worlds they can create, the sheer fucking pleasure they can drown us in. And why shouldn’t I? My whole life’s been shit. Why shouldn’t I get to enjoy my last final years before it all goes literally to hell?”

It sounded like a rhetorical question, but Belanger watched James with avid interest, as if defying him to contradict his words.

“Well.” James rubbed his beard. “That’s a hell of a life philosophy. Hard to argue with you when you admit you’re a selfish piece of shit who’d rather get your rocks off with some demon magic than save the billions of men, women, and children out there who never did anything to you.”

Belanger went to sneer but James spoke over him.

“Thing is, while you’re sitting here on this throne of yours getting demon head, I’ve been fighting on the streets of New York. I’ve seen countless good people lay down their lives to help each other out. I’ve seen my share of idiocy and greed, too. Now I know I’m far from perfect, so I don’t want to be a hypocrite and preach perfection here, but I do know the demons are worth fighting. And you know why?”

“No,” said Belanger, staring down his nose at Kelly. “Why?”

“Because fuck these guys.” James grinned and resumed walking. “Fuck these guys if they think they can come into our house and kick over shit. If they think they can make us jump through hoops like circus dogs while laughing at us. Fuck them for thinking we’re not worth taking seriously.”

“But we’re not,” smiled Belanger. “We’re little more than monkeys with the capacity to think for a few minutes before going back to planning how, where and what to fuck.”

“Nah, we’re more than that. They wouldn’t have given us that Light Eternal if we were just glorified chimps, would they?”

Belanger frowned down at the gem.

“What is that thing, anyways?” James tried to keep his tone careless. “Since we’re just chatting here. You said it gets passed on?”

“And on and on.” Belanger’s voice grew quiet, almost inaudible. “Ostensibly. Once we developed the capacity to destroy ourselves utterly, the demons finally took notice and gave this gem to our species. As long as its bearer could resist their offers, humanity was safe.” The old man looked up and

his smile was terrible. “But they knew we wouldn’t last long. And they were right.”

“The capacity to destroy ourselves? You mean atomic bombs?”

“Precisely. It’s the milestone they watch for, the natural culmination of our species’ evolution.”

James frowned. “But the messages said 60,000 years.”

Belanger waved a hand. “Who’s keeping track? Roughly 60,000, yes, since we were gifted with the ability to tell stories. But is it exactly so? Who knows? Who cares?”

“Wait, what? Stories?”

“Stories, yes, mass delusion that entire tribes of Homo sapiens could buy into. Unlike Neanderthals or Homo erectus, we developed the ability to believe in intangibles, in spirits, religion, in identities that transcended what we could touch and kill. And those stories allowed us to organize and work together. Before that gift, Homo sapiens were just another band of monkeys trying to survive. After? We tore across the world so fast that nothing was able to resist us. We wiped out all competition, and like viruses, thrived everywhere from the Arctic to the Sahara.” Belanger smiled. “Our capacity for destruction was engendered by the gift for story, with the atomic bomb being the endpoint in that evolution. And once we mastered the atom? Why, that’s when the demons knew it was time to come pay us a visit.”

James didn’t understand half of what Belanger said, but the old man’s certainty was sobering. “How do you know all this?”

“It was told to me by the previous bearer of the gem. Just as it was told to him by the original bearer. Three iterations are all we lasted. Pathetic, is it not?”

“Then...” James tried to make sense of this, to grasp something he could work with. “Then the demons set us up to fail?”

“It didn’t take much effort. We are so uniquely suited to self-destruction.”

“But they didn’t just launch the Nemesis 1 when we discovered the bomb.” James fumbled for a line of attack. “They gave us the Light Eternal. There had to be a reason for that.”

“It’s symbolic.” Belanger waved his hand. “They need permission from a human who fully understands the consequences of his betrayal to begin the apocalypse. I resisted for decades, but then...” His hand sank back down onto the gem. “Then I grew tired.”

“But you could have passed on the gem?”

Belanger’s eyes narrowed. “And make someone else live through hell? I was determined to hold onto it right till the bitter end. But I didn’t realize how weak I was getting. When my will broke, it broke all at once, and then I knew I’d failed the test without finding my replacement. Which meant I was damned for my weakness, so why shouldn’t I enjoy myself before an eternity in hell?”

James opened and closed his hands. He was a third of the way across the cavern. There’d been no sign of Jane yet. “You know, there’s a way to make this right.”

Belanger’s skepticism was searing. “Oh really?”

“Yeah. You man up and give me the gem. And in death, find redemption for what you’ve done.”

“There’s no redeeming my betrayal.”

“That’s absolutely true if you stick to this course. But what if there’s a chance at salvation if you do the right thing at the last? When you’re dealing with eternity in hell, isn’t even a chance better than none?”

Belanger opened his mouth to protest but made no sound.

James resumed walking, hand extended. “I get where you’re at. I was down in that hole myself for years. Pain. Guilt. Self-loathing. Hatred. Fury. Turning it in equal measures upon myself and then the world. If somebody had extended a hand, I’d have bitten it. But I know that was cowardice, just like you said. In the end, it takes saying *enough*. Knowing that

there's no greater depth to fall to, and deciding, exhausted and burned out as you are, that it's time to just stand up, dust yourself off, and do the right thing."

Belanger's brows beetled over his burning eyes. "Pretty words."

James pretended to consider. "They're not bad. Doesn't mean they're not true. Fuck it, Patrick. You've made a colossal mistake. No way around it. But there's still a chance to do better. All it takes is your deciding not to play ball anymore with the demons. Give me the gem, shuffle off this mortal coil, and see if that's good enough to reunite you with the real Jane. Because if she's up there right now, watching, listening, you know what she hopes you'll do."

Patrick licked his lips, considering.

Jane appeared by James's side, her lithe, gore-smeared body pressed against his side, her arm wrapped around his neck, talons pressed lightly against his throat.

James froze.

"Give me the word, darling," she said, staring at Patrick. "And I'll silence this self-righteous prick forever."

Patrick hesitated. Began to shift from side to side, uncertain.

"Here," said James, ignoring the pressure from the talons that split his skin. "New idea. Don't give me the gem. Give it to one of my friends back there. I'll sacrifice myself on purpose, right here, right now, to prove that my money's where my mouth is. Tell this demon to kill me. I won't fight. I'll die gladly if I know that you'll take my death as proof that I'm not fucking around and give the gem to one of the others."

"James!" screamed Serenity. "No!"

"It's all right!" James raised one hand to forestall one of his friends doing something stupid. "Patrick's tired of fancy words, aren't you, Patrick? You just want this all to stop. So. Let's go. I'll die for what I believe in. You get to pull the trigger, Patrick. Kill me. Prove to yourself that I'm not full of shit, then give the gem to the others. What do you say?"

Patrick stared at him, eyes glazed. “You don’t mean that.”

“Sure I do.” James frowned at the bloody woman next to him. “Tell this demon to kill me already. I’ve never been much of a fanatic, but if it means giving our species a fighting chance, I’ll die for the cause. Go on, Patrick. Tell her.”

“You’re bluffing,” said Patrick. “Or you’re mad.”

“You know I’m not crazy.” James smiled tiredly. “You’ve seen crazy. I’m just tired and old. C’mon. Let’s do this. You’ve wanted to shut me up since I started making you uncomfortable. I’ll happily die if it means you realize there’s still some genuine people out there, and if that realization shocks you out of your doom spiral. Kill me and give my friends the gem. Everybody wins.”

“Shut up,” hissed Jane, closing her fingers around James’s neck and nearly crushing his throat.

The sound of a scuffle broke out behind them. It sounded like several people struggling.

Patrick leaned forward, eyes bulging. “Fuck you.”

“Sure,” hissed James. “Didn’t come here. To be friends. Quit being an asshole. Kill. Me.”

Patrick rubbed his face then lurched to his feet. He gripped the Light Eternal in his fist and stared at it. “I made a deal with them! I swore!”

“Don’t mean. Nothing.” Jane was almost crushing his throat, and though he felt her desire to do so, she held back, waiting for Patrick’s order. “Demon promises. Are. Shit.”

Patrick was coming apart at the seams. His whole body was shuddering, arms trembling, his face having gone pale. “Hurt him!”

Jane laughed huskily, placed her bare foot against James’s knee, and jerked her foot down.

James’s knee snapped and bent the wrong way.



The pain was tremendous, overwhelming, but his impossible Stamina made it feel more like a lightning strike on the far side of a mountain than an immediate blow. James gasped, staggered, then placed a hand on Jane's slick shoulder as she released his neck.

"Mind if I borrow your shoulder?" he smiled. "Thanks, hon."

"Now? Now do you change your mind?" shouted Patrick.

"Oh, come on," said James. "Of course not."

Patrick dug his nails into his face and scratched down his cheeks, leaving crimson trails in his own flesh. "You're not real! You're not real!"

"Fuck," sighed James. His whole leg felt like it was bathed in magma, his knee joint as big as a house and all pure agony. "It's not fair expecting me to reason with him if he's crazy," he said to Jane.

Who glared at him, hatred in her brown eyes.

"I never wanted this," shouted Patrick, glaring at the gem. "I never wanted any of this! This world, this fucking world!"

"Then give it to me!" James shouted back, losing his patience. "End this shit! Just give it up and see if you get into heaven already. Anything's gotta be better than this!"

"Better than this," said Belanger quietly. "Yes. You're right. This... this is worse than anything else. Knowing I could end it and never doing so. That's the real torture. Just... end it."

"My love," called Jane. "We're not done with our games. Our fun. There is so much still to teach you. Tell me to finish this man and we can resume our pleasure."

"End it!" shouted James. "Now!"

Patrick stared at the gem in his hand. It trembled so that the gem bounced in his palm, and with terrible effort, he tilted

his palm, slowly, awkwardly, so that the burning blue gem trembled and slid and then fell free to the floor.

“There,” said Belanger. “It is done.”

“Oh, fuck,” said Jane in annoyance. “Enough of these games.” She grabbed James by the throat and lifted him off the ground. “You can’t collect the Light Eternal if you’re dead, can you?”

James grasped at her wrist as her talons sank into his flesh.

“Wait!” croaked Belanger as he sagged against his throne. “I’ve passed on the gem. Stop!”

“Shut the fuck up, Patrick,” snapped Jane. “And focus on dying. I, on the other hand, am going to do what I do best.” She grinned up at James, revealing a row of fangs in her mouth that would have done a white shark proud. “And murder everyone else.”

## Chapter 54:

### Kumite

Several things happened at once.

More, even, than James could keep track of.

Somebody started yelling.

He summoned Dikastís. The avatar of Justice came pouring through space and time to flood James with its power.

**You have summoned Dikastís, the Virtue of Justice**

**15 of your Arete have been claimed in his name**

**You are invested with the avatar of Dikastís:**

**+60 to all stats (includes Holy Zeal bonus)**

**Benedictions activated:**

**Holy Zeal | Dispel Illusion | Remove Fear**

Even as the power of the Virtue thundered into him, Jane crushed his throat, snapped his neck, pulping the muscles and bones between her talons, and tossed him aside.

But James had already summoned his first Heavenly Assault. White lightning blasted down, shot through with Gloria, to consume Jane utterly within its riotous center.

Serenity opened fire with her Sigs, both guns blamming out a blur of Smite-enhanced rounds into the heart of the lightning strike.

James hit the ground, consciousness fading, blood bursting out of his ruined neck, but before Denzel could intervene with Martyr's Cry, James burned an Aeviternum and healed up completely.

All in a couple of seconds.

Lying on his side, James stared at where Jane had stood. The lightning disappeared as quickly as it had come, taking Jane with it.

Was she dead?

No. She'd transported herself to his crew.

Yadriel loomed massive in his demonic form as Jane appeared before him, blood-slicked and lithe, her hair hanging in crimson ropes. He howled and dove down at her. James dropped another Heavenly Assault, burning off a chunk of his divine pool. Jason flared his Nova. His Aura blasted out, Bronze and bright, exploding out in every direction, expanding in a glorious sphere. Serenity swiveled and kept firing.

Jane laughed.

She leaped up and punched through Yadriel. Dove through his chest as if he were made of nothing more substantial than cardboard. Left a hole two feet wide behind as she flew upward, the blood burning off her body, leaving her pale and faintly charred from the attacks, to turn and hover overhead.

Kimmie pointed her hand at the demon. **“All right, everyone. Let's kill this bitch.”**

Holy Zeal crashed into James like a cresting tsunami. His stats all jumped another +10 and his focus narrowed so that nothing was as important as slaughtering the demon.

Yadriel had dropped to his knees, but the white flare of Aeviternum swept over him as he healed himself.

Olaf raised their Circle of Protection, the sphere manifesting as it pushed Jane back, but she laughed and struck the glowing surface, shattering it and driving Olaf to his knees as blood burst out of his nostrils.

James rose to his feet. He was shaking. Too much power. Dikastís rode him, imbued him with might. The Virtue of Justice's Holy Zeal was doubled by Kimmie's, with both of their Indomitable Resilience Benedictions layering over each other.

James felt feverish. Like he was hopped up on cocaine, possessing far too much energy within his skin. He felt like he was going to burst.

“Kerim!” he shouted. “Get my skeggox!”

The professor Shadow Stepped away.

James sprinted toward his friends. It had taken him minutes to cross to the halfway mark of the cavern. He ran back in seconds, leaped, soared into the air as if shot by a cannon right at Jane.

Who opened her arms as if to embrace him, then disappeared.

“No, you don’t,” shouted Miriam, and her Benediction flooded forth, dispelling the illusion.

James twisted midair to hit a stalactite with his ass and the soles of his feet. Gravity seemed to have lessened. He hit the ribbed, damp stone and saw Jane flitting around, her invisibility dispelled.

“Get the fuck outta here!” yelled Jelly, flying into her from behind in a whirl of blades. Where the first Anima had busted up its sword-arms, Jelly managed to cut into the demon, its Gloria-infusion making it far more powerful.

Jane hissed and sped through the air toward Miriam.

James dropped a third Heavenly Assault on her, bringing his divine pool down to half. Serenity was hitting Jane with every bullet, turning in place like a gun turret. Miriam screamed as Jane flashed past her, claws tearing through her throat.

Just like that, Miriam’s head sailed free in a gout of blood.

Denzel screamed in pain and her head flew back, re-attached, leaving her hale and whole.

Olaf busted out the Circle once more and raised his M4. Miriam did the same, as did Kimmie.

All of this happened in the blink of an eye. James saw the direction Jane was flying, and even as he began to fall, he shoved off the stalactite and flew to intercept.

The huge rock pillar cracked behind him from the power of his shove. He flew through the air and hit her in a Sacred Strike infused tackle, his Silver Aura flaring and searing her skin, the world crackling white as he wrapped his arms around her waist and knocked her out of her trajectory.

She screamed, more in fury than pain, and punched her fist through his spine and out of his stomach.

James's whole body went rigid. She grabbed hold of him by the shoulder and, from within, spun, hurling him away.

James windmilled through the air, Silver Aura trailing a foot behind him, blood and viscera unspooling, but burned a fourth Aeviternum even as his vision darkened. His spine healed, his stomach sealed, his strength flooded back into him, and he hit the ground a dozen yards away in a crouch, sliding back till he came to a stop.

Jason flared his Aura in Nova just as Jane went to strike Olaf's Circle; several Shields appeared at the same time and, this time, the demon bounced off, unable to shatter their defenses. Yadriel howled and hurled himself at her, massive in comparison to her slight frame. He raked her twice with his sword-arms, failing to break her skin but knocking her back with the sheer strength of his blows.

Jane hissed, caught herself midair, then burst forward to punch her fist straight through Yadriel's face. She embedded her hand inside his head, slammed it down his throat, and grabbed him where his collarbones met. With a shriek, she flung him down. His huge Nem3 body bounced off the rock, flared white with Aeviternum as Denzel screamed again. Yadriel healed instantly, bounded to his feet, leaped at Jane, but she swerved to avoid him.

Kerim appeared beside James, skeggox in hand. "Here, James."

James closed his fist around the golden axe. It felt good. It felt right.

“All right, bitch,” James rasped. “Let’s try this again.”

With Miriam up and inside the Circle, Jane couldn’t disappear. Everyone but Yadriel and Kerim were inside the protective hemisphere. Jane paused, considered, then the whole cavern went dark.

James didn’t know how he could tell, but he sensed Infernum gathering within her, faster than he could track.

“Watch out!” he yelled as he sprinted forward.

Jane extended both hands and crimson lightning burst from her fingertips. A dozen bolts as thick as her wrist hit the Circle.

It burst.

The lightning bolts slammed into those within. Serenity, Olaf, Miriam, Denzel, Kimmie, and Jason were lifted off the ground and hurled back, their clothing bursting into flames, their eyes bursting out of their heads, their skin splitting, their bodies charring.

James faltered.

The six bodies hit the ground.

All six flared white with Aeviternum, and all six picked themselves back up.

Jane hissed in displeasure. “You’ll not be able to heal forever!”

She was ten yards ahead of him, up in the air.

“Bless James!” he roared. His own Bless raised his stats by +5. Yadriel, Jason, and Kimmie hit them with their own, raising him another +15.

Dikastís had raised all his stats by +60. Kimmie’s Holy Zeal had raised all his stats by +10. Jelly had raised his Power by +10. The skeggox gifted him another +5. +6 from the major rune, and +10 from his Eradicating Crusader Class. The Mark

of Justice raised him another +10, and the combined Blessings and synergy bonus raised him another +22.

James grabbed the skeggox with both fists, drew it back behind his head, then jackknifed with all his strength and hurled it at her.

Power 143, Strength 141. Agility 131.

The skeggox flew from his hands like a gift from the gods. It blazed with the power of the sun, a burning brand, and hewed into Jane's back, its bearded blade sinking deep between her shoulder blades, cleaving deep.

The demon shrieked in shock and pain and scrabbled with both hands at her back, trying to reach the axe.

James leaped.

Summoned a Heavenly Assault just as he hit her with Sacred Strike, his knees crashing into her back on either side of the axe.

His Silver Aura flared and her skin began to char.

Serenity opened fire. Jason unleashed a third Nova.

Jane screamed as James rode her to the ground, grasping her by the nape of the neck, and when they hit the rock, he slammed his chest into the back of the axe, driving it deeper.

The demon no longer looked like Jane. The damage was adding up. Her skin was seared black and crimson, her hair had lengthened into crimson snakes, and her musculature had grown even as she'd become leaner. Her fingers were elongated and tipped with four inch talons which dug grooves into the raw rock.

The Heavenly Assault faded. James tore the skeggox free, raised it on high to cleave in the back of her skull, his Aura raging all the while.

One second, Jane was lying face down beneath his knees. The next, she was face up, her mouth split wide into a horrific grin, her eyes twin burning orbs of red. James screamed, tried to bring the skeggox down, but she vomited a geyser of blood up at him.



Not blood.

Lava.

It lifted him off her, propelled him up into the air, his whole front melting, his face ruined, eyes blinded, his scream buried by the burning liquid rock which flooded into his mouth.

James crashed to the ground. The pain was such he couldn't even think, couldn't reach for Aeviternum.

*I got you, James! Jelly power!* An Aeviternum rushed into him from the Sola Anima, and the pain disappeared, the front half of his skull regrew, the lava chunks that had embedded and seared themselves to his body fell away, and James hopped back up into a crouch.

Jane had risen into the air once more. "Tenacious bastards. Time to end this."

"Everybody, hit her with everything you got!"

The whole crew had summoned their own Virtues by this point. Kerim, Kimmie, and Denzel burned with Empowering Light, each blazing like the skeggox with pure white sunlight. Serenity and Yadriel were encased in Angel's Armor, while Olaf and Miriam had Gold Bucklers floating before them. Both raised their fists, and the cavern filled with Seraphic Web, the Bronze threads ranging in thickness from spider silk to as massive as James's thigh.

Jane hissed as she dodged and wove between the huge strands. She raised both hands to unleash more lightning but Kerim appeared behind her, having Shadow Stepped into the gloom at her back. He locked an arm around her throat and a second over her eyes, his Bronze Aura wrapping over her. Jane yowled in fury and clawed at his arms. Her talons cut his flesh and bone as if they were butter, but his Mass Solace and Martyr's Cry caused the wounds to heal back just as quickly.

Jason raised both palms and unleashed his Aura Mastery, pouring a beam of Bronze as broad as a car straight up and through the demon - then kept it there, burning her in place.

Yadriel bounded up and clamped his jaws on her left thigh and set to carving her chest and stomach with his sword arms.

Serenity cursed as she kept firing, her Smite-enhanced bullets punching into Jane over and over and over.

James ran forward even as Jane erupted in a crimson Nova of her own. Infernum-tinted power seared those around her, charred away their flesh, revealing bone, but Kimmie and Denzel's avatar-bestowed Mass Martyr's Cry caused them to heal back up, and their Mass Solace did the rest.

Again, Jane screamed and flared her crimson Nova. This time, Yadriel fell away to crash to the ground, insensate. Kerim's arms burned away completely, leaving stumps that emerged from the shoulder, and with a cry, he fell to the ground.

Jane swooped out of Jason's beam of Bronze. She was wrecked, her body charred and broken, but her hate yet burned bright in her eyes.

She turned, catching sight of James at the last moment.

Aflood with power and impossible might, he leaped. Faster than an arrow, he hit her, slammed into her chest, and placed a palm against her brow as he called down another Heavenly Assault.

He unleashed the Sacred Strike point blank, right into her skull, his Silver Aura washing over her at the same time.

She screamed, writhed, and everything around them went electric white as the Gloria-infused bolt hit them both.

Jane lost the power of flight and they hit the ground. James's insane Agility allowed him to remain atop her, palm still pressed against her brow.

Without hesitation, he used his last Aeviternum to call another Heavenly Assault and loosed another Sacred Strike right into her brow.

*Draw on me for power!* Called Jelly. James had stored four Aeviternum in the Anima the night before, and now he

reached for that divine power.

Jane screamed.

James called down a Heavenly Assault, flooded her mind with a third Sacred Strike.

She bucked, went Nova and hit him with Infernum Lightning at the same time.

The strength of her attack killed James instantly.

But he blinked right back to life as both Kimmie and Kerim screamed and took the blow.

Another Heavenly Assault. A third. Another Sacred Strike right into her brow.

Jane bucked her hips, tore James's shoulders and arms and chest open, but his doubled Indomitable Resilience healed the wounds right back.

A fourth Heavenly Assault. James lost track of the number of Sacred Strikes. He just kept flaring them right into her face along with the constant burn of his Aura. He sank his fingers into her eye sockets, gripped her by the front of her skull, and started slamming her head into the rock, pounding her down as he unleashed each Sacred Strike.

Jane's screeches rose in pitch. Jason loomed over them both, gasping, and went Nova one last time. Serenity stepped up and fired both Sigs at Jane's head at point blank range.

One last Heavenly Assault. James reached deep, took the last of Jelly's power, and with a roar, he raised Jane's head and slammed it down into the cratered rock with all of his Strength.

The rocky floor shattered as Jane's head burst.

With a cry, James reeled back, rising to his knees as he stared in manic horror at the demon between his legs.

Serenity kept firing, pouring Smite into the demon's ruined skull.

Olaf stepped up, the golden skeggox in hand. And with a roar, he brought it up and around and then straight through the

demon's neck with impeccable skill.

The demon's head was too embedded in the rock to roll free, but the neck separated and James felt the last of its essence flee its body.

Jason ceased his Nova, the burning Bronze fading away, and Olaf staggered back, his mustache and beard crimson with his own blood, leaving the skeggox buried in the stone.

Serenity fired another score of bullets into the ruined head that was pasted into the rock and finally put up her guns.

Everybody stood around breathing harshly, gasping, and only then did Kimmie's Holy Zeal fade, allowing some form of clarity and lateral thinking to return to James.

"Holy shit," gasped Kimmie. "We did it."

James rose shakily to his feet. He looked around at his friends. They stood in torn and ruined clothing, wild-eyed, their bodies sooty and blood-smearing, their chests heaving, but alive.

Alive.

He grinned, unable to restrain himself, and then let out a primal roar of conquest. Olaf joined him immediately, hunching his shoulders as he thrust his fists together, and then Yadriel howled, Serenity let loose a primitive scream of victory, and then they were all bellowing and roaring their defiance down at the dead demon, the being who'd held Belanger hostage, a creature they should never have been able to kill but whom they'd slaughtered as one.

Text appeared in James's vision:

**Your rank is now Disciple 1**  
**As the global first to reach this rank,**  
**your new Benediction will be empowered with**  
**Gloria:**  
**Shield of Faith**

**Dark Vision | Deadeye | Dark Energy Siphon | Aura  
Mastery | Inspiration**

**Empowering Light | Fortuna Aeviternum**

**You have 5 unspent points**

## Chapter 55:

### Light Eternal

“Oh man,” breathed Jason. “Disciple 1! And I get to pick a brand-new Benediction.”

The others murmured their agreement, but James dismissed the message from his vision and turned to the far throne.

Belanger had slumped down to the ground and lay still.

“Be right back,” said James and he took off at a run. He crossed the cavern quickly and leaped up to land lightly beside the throne.

Belanger was dead.

James crouched and pressed his fingers to the man’s neck.

No pulse.

“Hope you found some peace,” muttered James, then turned his attention to the blue gem.

The Light Eternal.

A test humanity was meant to fail. Would just touching it behold James to its power?

One way to find out.

James picked up the Light Eternal and studied it.

It was a raw hunk of sapphire, multifaceted and bound in golden wires, some of the gem’s faces cloudy, others polished to a clear gloss. Looking inside was like peering into a telescope aimed at the heart of the galaxy. James got a vertiginous sense of depth and immense space, saw thousands of sparkling motes like endless star fields.

**You have acquired the Light Eternal  
Do you wish to become its Guardian?**

James snorted. As always, the System provided the barest amount of possible information. He looked over his shoulder to where the rest of Crimson Hydra were talking amongst themselves. “Hey, everyone.” They looked his way. “I’m going to accept the position of Guardian for the Light Eternal, all right? Might make me responsible for humanity and the apocalypse though.”

“Go for it!” said Olaf, giving James two thumbs up.

“My man,” grinned Yadriel.

“All yours, hon,” agreed Serenity.

The others nodded, so James turned his attention to the message before his eyes and willed his acceptance.

**You are now the Guardian of the Light Eternal**

**You have gained the ability to use the Light Eternal**

**You have gained your First Miracle: Resurrect (1/day)**

**You are now immune to curses, fear, possession, and  
illusions**

**No locks, doors, or portals can bar your way**

**The Light Eternal has already been betrayed, all  
further powers are lost**

“Huh,” said James, trying to process the text. “You seeing this, Jelly?”

*Yes. First Miracle. Holy shit.*

*Resurrect. That mean what I think it means?*

*Bringing back the dead. Yes. You could probably start your own religion now. Had the apocalypse not already begun.*

*Ha, yeah. A little late. Shit. You think I can bring back anybody?*

*Try it.*

James felt his blood turn to ice. His chest locked up and he couldn't breathe. The enormity of the power hit him like a bullet train. Resurrection. Napoleon, Jesus Christ, Elvis, he could bring back anybody.

But his mind turned to one person and one person first: Laney.

Clutching the Light Eternal, James clenched his jaw and willed his dead wife return to life.

**The Guardian of the Light Eternal may only  
resurrect someone who died  
within the last 24 hours**

James gasped, overbalanced, and sat. His heart was pounding, his whole body felt raw and wounded, his mind spun.

Denied.

James hung his head and focused on not screaming. To have that hope dangled before him and then snatched away.

But, of course. Otherwise Belanger would have brought the real Jane back. James had been an idiot to think otherwise.

“You all right, hon?” Serenity leaped up beside him and put a hand on his shoulder.

“Yeah. Just freaked myself out. The gem gives me the ability to bring someone back from the dead. I thought... for a second...”

“Your wife?”

“Yeah.” James exhaled. “Fuck. But it only works on folks who died within the last twenty-four hours.”

“No shit.” She stared at the gem. “Honest to goodness resurrection?”



“Seems like it. Plus, I’m not immune to all mental effects, and apparently locks and doors can no longer bar my way.”

“What about the whole apocalypse thing?”

“Looks like we’re too late for that part. It said the Light Eternal was already betrayed and has lost all other powers.”

“Fucking Belanger.” Serenity glared at the corpse. “So now what?”

“I don’t know.” James felt hollowed out, exhausted. “Guess we were too late. Still.”

“Damn it.” Serenity shook her head. “It can’t just be this. Don’t get me wrong, resurrection is balls to the walls amazing, but one person a day?”

“Yeah.” James slowly stood. Considered the gem, then lowered it to his side. “Maybe something more will happen when I level. I don’t know.”

“The demons wouldn’t have tried so hard to stop us if it didn’t do more, right?” Serenity searched his face. “Even the Monitor showed up.”

“Wish I had answers for you. But I got none.”

Serenity sighed. “Well, it was worth a shot. Now this way you can bring me back if I ever drink too much.”

“Ha, right.” James leaped down to the cavern floor, and together they crossed back to the others.

“So what did we get, Boss?” asked Jason. “We control the apocalypse now?”

James told them what he’d been gifted with, but that the majority of the Light’s powers were lost to them.

“You’re shitting me, yo,” said Yadriel. “All this for some cheap-ass Jesus powers?”

“Cheap-ass Jesus powers?” repeated Kimmie in bemused disbelief. “Did you really just say that?”

“Naw, man, that ain’t right,” insisted Yadriel. “That’s not how this shit works. We should have gained, I don’t know, like a demon bomb, or... fuck, something huge.”

Kerim sighed. “Once opened, the ills of the world cannot be returned to Pandora’s box. Unfortunately, this feels all too correct.”

“Damn,” said Olaf. “Then why this big fight? Demons don’t want James to have that miracle?”

“Guess not,” said James. “But you know what? We can go back outside and ask her. See what happens when we emerge with this gem.”

Denzel grimaced and placed the base of his palm to his temple. “Not that I don’t want to, but that last fight took it out of me. I got no Aeviternum left.”

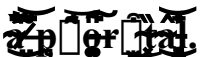


“Same,” said Kimmie.

“I hear you,” said James. “But we gotta leave this place regardless.” He took one last look around the cavern. “So let’s go.”

They climbed out. Took it slow. Eventually, they reached the base of the original pit in Belanger’s backyard. Yadriel shifted into his Nem3 form and leaped right out of the hole, then turned and dropped a coil of rope that they’d salvaged from one of Jaywick’s men’s packs.

Up they scrambled, and then they were out. Dawn had broken. It felt as if they’d been underground for days, but probably less than an hour had passed.

James stared up at the demonic symbol. It spun five hundred feet up, malefic and of wrought iron, wreathed in purple flames and as enigmatic and hateful as ever.

The Light Eternal has sensed   
  


“What the fuck?” whispered James as his vision filled with corrupted text. He blinked, swiped the text away, and then saw Jessica seated on the edge of the homestead, her legs crossed at the knee and hanging down over the edge of the eaves. One of her high heels swung from her toes. She canted her head to one side, curled her blonde hair behind one ear, and smiled.

*“Hello, James. Ready to talk?”*

“Time for a sales pitch?”

The others had drawn back, nervous, watchful, ready.

*“Precisely. But let’s speak seriously this time. I’ll dispense with the insulting offers and teasing. You possess the Light Eternal. It’s expended and near useless, but still an item of power that my kind doesn’t want carried in confident hands such as yours. So. What is it you wish in exchange for it?”*

“Nope.” James tightened his grip on the gem. “You’re not getting out of this that easy. You want the gem? You make me an offer.”

The Monitor narrowed her eyes. *“Very well. But I can tell your group has utterly expended itself. Factor your weakness into this negotiation.”*

“I don’t think so. If you could take the gem by force, you’d already have done so. So make your offer already.”

*“You know, I feel some measure of pride. How far you’ve come since our first meeting. I knew you were a Nexus, but I had no idea you were so uniquely talented and fortunate. Well done, James. You’ve excelled beyond all measure. But you don’t care for my praise, do you? Then let us deal. If you relinquish the Light Eternal to me, I will safeguard New York City and render its inhabitants exempt from all trials and tribulations. I will remove all the demonic symbols, as you think of them, and make it so that no demon will ever set foot within its boroughs.”*

James hesitated. “No. What use is saving New York if the rest of the world burns?”

*“Then I will expend much personal capital to bring back your dead wife and twin daughters. I will make it so they don’t remember being murdered, and restore your family home so that you may first visit them there without their being unduly alarmed. Further, I will restore you to how old you were when they died, and provide you and yours with every luxury, comfort and necessity to ensure you live long and fulfilling lives.”*

“How can we do that during the apocalypse?” spat James.

*“Illusions. But illusions so perfect that your wife and children will never know the difference. You, of course, will know, but your living a lie will be mitigated by your family’s happiness. Think on it, James: you will see your daughters graduate from college, watch them get their first jobs, get married, have children. All will be a lie but for their happiness. You will age and live a long, healthy life, enjoying every minute that this cruel world deprived you of.”*

“While everyone else suffers and dies.”

“Yes,” smiled Jessica. *“But your wife and children will thrive. Not illusions of them. Really them.”*

“James,” whispered Serenity, horrified.

He felt frozen. Paralyzed. It wasn’t even a question of whether he trusted the Monitor or not. It was that his most fervent wish from all his long years on the streets was being offered to him. The chance to bring Laney and the girls back. To see them again. To hold them, hold them tight, to feel his heart burst at knowing they were alive, *alive* god damn it, and able to enjoy all that the murderers had deprived them of...

“No,” he croaked. He felt dazed, ruined, drained. “No. I don’t want that.”

*“But you do.”* Jessica seemed truly puzzled. *“I can sense it.”*

“I...” Tears welled in James’s eyes. “They’re dead. They died. I want all that for them. I always will. Their lives. But what you’re offering... it’s...”

He covered his face with both hands. Words failed him. He felt dizzy. Someone put their hand on his shoulder. Then someone else, then a third.

With all the strength that he could summon, James sucked in a deep breath and raised his face to Jessica. “No. Screw you. No.”

“*Hmm.*” Jessica frowned. “*Very well. A five-year reprieve. Across the world. All demonic activity will end. All hives will close. All symbols will disappear. Five years will be added to the countdown for the opening of the Pits.*”

“Oh shit,” Yadriel hissed. “James!”

“Five years?” James stared at the demon, still numb from the gauntlet he had just survived.

“*Five years. After which, we will resume where we left off. In an hour, it will have been twenty-four hours since the Fourth Wave was released. Upon the passing of that mark, a universal countdown to Nemesis 4 is slated to begin. You may buy your planet and everyone on it five years to prepare.*”

James passed his hand over his brow. He felt tremulous and weak like an autumn leaf.

“Shit,” said Serenity. “That’s a lot of time. We could get Blue Light ready.”

Kerim stepped up beside James. “My friend. It is tempting, yes, but ask yourself: why do they offer so much? What do they fear that we’re relinquishing to them?”

“*We have all of eternity to enjoy your torment,*” said Jessica. “*Five years is nothing to us, though we understand it means much to you. Thus it is a small gift in exchange for the Light Eternal.*”

James felt an irrational desire to call the real Jessica, to consult with Star Boy, with Hackworth. How could he be entrusted with this decision alone?

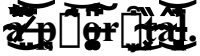

The responsibility was breathtaking, overwhelming, terrible.

The gem allowed him to resurrect the dead. One person every twenty-four hours. Was that ability so powerful that the demons would stop the entire apocalypse? It didn't feel right. The gem also made him immune to illusions, fear, curses, and possession. Again, powerful, but he was just one man. Even if he reached the heights of power, that alone wasn't worth what the Monitor was offering.

And the final ability? To open all locks and portals?

*"No more thought," snapped Jessica. "Decide, James Kelly. Save your people, give me that trifle -"*

James looked past her and up at the demonic symbol.

The Light Eternal has sensed   


Again the text grew corrupted to illegibility, but James could sense a question there. Sense that this was not how the Light Eternal was meant to be used, but that his monstrous Arete rating was allowing it to perceive something, detect a possibility that should have been beyond its power.

Jessica appeared directly before James, her eyes burning bright, her blonde hair flowing about her face as if she were underwater. *"Cease! Take one step farther and I shall -"*

James couldn't understand the question posed by the gem, not exactly, but he knew it needed but his permission to act.

*Why do they offer so much? What do they fear that we're relinquishing to them?*

James accepted the Light Eternal's offer.

The Monitor shrieked with such hatred and fear that reality itself seemed to break. The gem lit up like a sun so that blue light streamed forth from between James's fingers, rays of such brilliance that they didn't illuminate so much as sear

the rest of the world into darkness. New words appeared in James's vision, but words so utterly corrupted and glitchy that he couldn't make any sense of them. The text scrolled by, vanished, smeared back into existence, and then the Light Eternal blazed with heat, searing James's hand to the bone.

James screamed and dropped the gem. It shattered as it fell into a thousand glittering fragments.

The Monitor's screams cut off as she disappeared.

All grew still, but the world was irrevocably changed.

The sky was broken. As if the air had been a pane of ice upon which a heel had come down with brutal force. Great shards were splintered and distorted. Larger shards grew more concentrated and smaller the closer they got to the symbol, twisting and gyring in upon themselves like spiral staircases made of nothing.

James couldn't understand what he was seeing, but he ceased trying to process it and stared at the demonic symbol itself. The iron symbol had burst open, revealing a pulsing golden and crimson interior, the iron sides curling out like great ragged petals. Purple fire still burned from the broken shell, but it was clear that its interior was accessible now.

"What...?" Kimmie stepped forward, hesitant, then reached out and touched one of the air shards. Her fingers pressed against a tangible surface.

James blinked, came back to himself, and saw that the spiral of broken facets spiraled in on the opened symbol.

The Light Eternal lay shattered at his feet, its blue light gone. Just a mass of broken fragments.

**You have lost the Light Eternal  
You are no longer its Guardian  
You have lost your First Miracle and all associated  
Benedictions**

Guided by instinct, James placed a hand on a shard before him. It felt cool and smooth like plate glass, stronger than anything he could imagine yet broken by what he'd done. With a grunt, he heaved himself up and stood upon the shard.

At a forty-five-degree angle to the ground. Disoriented, he shook his head, fixed his gaze on the symbol, and began to climb toward it. From shard to fragment he went, some as easy to access as steps, others requiring him to leap or haul himself up.

Higher and higher he climbed. His stomach twisted and grew sour with acid, but he kept going. A hundred feet up, the world swaying this way and that as gravity pulled him toward the shards. Higher and higher, the pieces growing smaller and smaller till at last it felt like climbing a mad staircase.

The forest stretched toward distant mountains. Below, the clearing and its homestead was small, childlike.

James inhaled deeply. The symbol lay right before him, massive and bewildering. The staircase of translucent shards led right into its burning heart. He couldn't see what lay within.

But with a final breath, he placed his boot upon the symbol's lip and stepped inside.



## Chapter 56:

### Reservoir Cube

Heart in his throat, breathless, James stepped into the demon symbol. Light swirled before his eyes, fractals that dizzied him, and he reached out, shuffling his feet, unsteady.

Then he found solid footing beneath his feet and the refracted brightness steadied and became clear.

It took him a moment to process what he was seeing. He stood within the heart of a giant flower, its petals made of glowing gold energy shot through with tongues of silver, rising up around him like great, languorous spear tips. Beyond them, a cosmos of light and energy coiled, like some Van Gogh painting, a *Starry Night* of rich, saturated color.

The base of the flower was a hard floor of glowing white quartz. It was a small space, perhaps large enough for six or seven people to stand in, with no visible exits or furnishing.

Instead, his gaze was drawn to one particularly broad petal of gold whose face featured a handful of shelves, their surface twisted and barely functional, as if Salvador Dali had been commissioned to create a simulation of shelves, and not taken the assignment seriously.

Golden cubes were piled on the shelving. They were uniform in size, an inch on each side, and looked like nothing so much as condensed sunlight, their edges rounded, more real than any of the visual excesses that surrounded him.

Was this where Monitors resided? This was as far from a demonic hellhole as he could have imagined. What did they do here? Where had the way out gone?

Hesitant, James reached out, fumbled at the air from which he'd come, and found the outline of an archway. It was invisible from within the symbol but there.

That was good. It meant he could get the fuck out of here if he had to.

James licked his lips and approached the shelving. There were perhaps a dozen small cubes upon the warped surfaces. Just approaching them made his mouth dry out, his throat clench, and a vise tighten around his chest.

What were they? Why did he feel like he was putting his hand inside a rabid hound's mouth by reaching out to one.

His whole body shuddered as he picked up a cube. It was weightless yet solid. His guts trembled, his whole body felt flushed with acid. Unable to breathe, James raised the small golden cube to study it.

### **You have acquired a Reservoir Cube Absorb?**

What the fuck? James felt nauseous. His gorge was rising and suddenly his mouth felt flooded with sour spit. His stomach twisted into a greasy knot and the cube shivered in his trembling fingers.

A Reservoir Cube?

But what the fuck, it wasn't like he was going to say no.

Kames Jelly flew into the space with him in its humanoid form, its alabaster and silver face expressing amazement. "Holy shit."

James clenched his fist about the cube, relieved that he could put off the decision for a second. "This place make any sense to you?"

*This is... familiar. I remember it, somehow. A Node. It's connected. There are... resonances. I sense...* Jelly flew slowly about the small space, peering at the petals. *A web. This place is connected to the other demon symbols, somehow. One can travel between them... but knowing how to open a portal, where to go... it is too complex for me.*

*And this Reservoir Cube?*

Jelly floated down to stare at the shelving. *What is Holy shit multiplied by infinity?*

*Infinite Holy shit?*

*Infinite Holy shit is right, James. This... I can't even...*  
Jelly extended a single blade arm and touched its tip to the cube.

Golden worms of electricity flickered over its frame and it dropped to the ground, inert.

“Jelly?” James crouched beside the Anima. “Jelly!”

No response. The Anima lay still as if it were dead.

“Fuck, fuck fuck fuck,” said James, reaching down to touch the construct, then drew back his hand. Jelly was wickedly hot.

That’s when James saw his palm. The hand that had held the Light Eternal. The skin was scarred over Freddy Kreuger-style, his entire palm covered in rippled, twisted scar tissue that alternated pink, purple, and red. There was no pain, no sensation at all. It was as if all the nerve endings had been seared away.

James grimaced and stared at the cube.

This was it. This was what the Monitor had wanted to keep him away from. The passageways to the other demon symbols were useful, sure, but this - this was something else.

James tried to steady his breathing. He failed. He inhaled deeply, held his breath, but that made him feel like he was going to puke. The world was swimming around him. He felt vertigo, as if he stood on the edge of a skyscraper with the wind tearing around him.

“OK,” he gasped. “I accept. I want to absorb the cube.”

The cube flared so brightly that it blinded James. For a moment, the world was pure golden light, and then James’s vision went dark. His body cramped even as he felt himself fall over and begin convulsively vomiting. He couldn’t

breathe, couldn't do more than flail around as if suffering an epileptic fit.

The cube flowed into him.

And with it, entire galaxies opened in his mind. The demon symbol, the flower and the cosmos beyond it disappeared, and James found himself sinking into an interior place, a mental construct fashioned by the cube.

Somewhere, distantly, he was aware that he was still flailing, drumming his heels on the quartz floor, his back arched to its extreme, his whole being in torment.

But down here, he felt calm, removed, and filled with wonder.

The Reservoir Cube hung in the darkness of his mind's eye, but now it was a mile on each side. Countless straight lines fractured it, turning it into a composite of thousands of smaller cubes, and even so, each minor cube was awesome in its power.

Understanding hit James like a truck. This was where their power came from. Every person who leveled up. Who raised their stats. Who gained Aeviternum, who learned to wield Benedictions. Their power, their Auras, their divine pools, it was all sourced here, from these Reservoir Cubes.

The demon symbols were the vantage points from which the Monitors watched the world, Nodes in a greater web whose meaning defied his understanding, *and* the dispensers of power. Every time James had leveled, a Reservoir Cube had bestowed upon him a fraction of its power.

A thousandth, a millionth.

And James had just absorbed an entire cube unto himself alone.

*Oh fuck*, he croaked.

Power began to flood into him. Notifications flickered across his vision, each message supplanting the last. Disciple 2, Disciple 3, then faster and faster. 6, 8, 9, then he hit Seeker.

## **Your rank is now Seeker 1**

Seeker 1, Seeker 4, Seeker 6, Seeker 9, and he hit Robe Bearer.

## **Your rank is now Robe Bearer 1**

Again, he blurred through the ranks, hitting 9 in a matter of moments, and still the power continued to flood into him.

## **Your rank is now Cross Bearer 1**

Cross Bearer 1. Cross Bearer 3, 6, 8, 9.

Boom. He crushed through the ranks and leveled again.

## **Your rank is now Adept 1**

Adept 1, 3, 4, 8, 9.

More power.

More.

James was screaming now. He felt as if he'd been dipped in boiling mercury, his mind blasted by the experience points pouring into him.

## **Your rank is now Initiate 1**

Initiate. The levels blurred, burned through him, and he hit the tenth level.

Progressed.

**Your rank is now Progressor 1**  
**Your rank is now Journeyman 1**  
**Your rank is now Ascender 1**  
**Your rank is now Capacitor 1**  
**Your rank is now Deacon 1**  
**Your rank is now Priest of the Faith 1**  
**Your rank is now Priest of the People 1**  
**Your rank is now Priest of the Spirit 1**  
**Your rank is now Bishop Minor 1**  
**Your rank is now Bishop Ascender 1**  
**Your rank is now Bishop Capacitor 1**

James felt himself bite off his tongue, felt blood burst into his mouth but his tongue healed right back. His organs ruptured, healed. Blood streamed from his eyes, his nostrils, his ears. He felt his brain spasm and turn into slurry only to heal back, liquify again, heal. The messages kept piling up. Benefits, unspent experience points, new powers, new Miracles.

He wanted it to end. Was screaming and roaring at the top of his lungs, and still the Reservoir Cube poured its power into him. Each new rank required ever more experience to reach, and as he climbed the higher ranks, the growth was exponential. It would have taken millions, billions of Nem3s to cross these levels, and then no amount of Nem3s would have sufficed, and still the Reservoir Cube filled him with its might.

James's mental manifestation lost all control as he sank to a deeper, third level. In one plane of existence, his physical body was rupturing and bursting again and again only to heal instantaneously. On a second, his mental self-image was shrieking in panicked horror.

But on this third, deepest level, James's essence floated at a remove from it all. He didn't think, didn't feel. Beyond thought, he simply floated, an amorphous ball of light that grew ever brighter as the Cube fed him power.

It felt like floating a dozen yards beneath the surface of a storm-wracked ocean surface. Looking up, he could see the turmoil, the hurricane-force winds thrashing the waves, but down here in the dark, all was still.

James turned away from his body, his mind, and focused on his truest self.

So much power was flooding into his being that even as his spirit grew brighter it ceased to be *James*.

He was becoming raw power. His sense of self was sublimating into the Reservoir Cube. If he didn't take control, he would cease to exist as he knew himself and become a new reservoir in human form, inert, brain dead, spiritually devoid of all identity.

Such was the force of what was happening to him that it took James an eon to decide he didn't want that to happen. For his ego to assert itself and realize that he wanted to persist.

He didn't want to disappear into pure glory.

He wanted to remain himself.

James Kelly.

But what did that mean? On some level, he could sense the notification messages still flickering before his eyes. Archbishop of Rose. Dominion of One. Lord of Laughter. Essence of Might. Titles that meant nothing to him, but which spoke to heights of power that no human could have reached without drinking directly from the font meant to empower millions.

Who was James Kelly with such power available to him? If a person was an identity stretched across a continuum of time, defined by formative experiences and desires, by inherited personality and inherent limitations, then what did it do to that identity to break so many barriers and rise to high above oneself?

James floated in the void. A million miles away, his body exploded, splattering the interior of the demon flower chamber with blood, bone meal, organs rendered particulate - only for it all to retract as if the explosion were reversed, his body reforming into perfection.

His mind broke, his thoughts shattered, but deep down, his essence remained cool, puzzled, reflective.

James Kelly.

Did he wish to remain as such?

To be human?

More power. Ever more, flooding into him.

Certain truths became evident. Base virtues that had nothing to do with Dikastís and his Justice.

Love. Forgiveness. Joy. Wonder.

Where before James had felt the danger of falling into pure power, of becoming a new form for the Reservoir Cube, now he sensed a second peril: of losing his identity to the base miracle of simply being alive.

To become like a tree, basking in sunlight, glorying in nothing so much as the improbability of being aware.

With great regret, James pulled back from that temptation.

Instead, he regarded the man he had been. Weary and wry, broken and self-effacing. Strength born of trauma, weakness born from need. He saw himself in all his facets and realized that he had a decision to make.

If he wished to remain James Kelly, then he had to embrace those faults and hang-ups, unnecessary as they were. His insecurities and blind spots. His principles and strengths. To erase them, to become more, was to lose himself.

To remain James Kelly, he had to accept who James Kelly had been, and contour his power to that identity.

It felt like choosing to shoehorn a star into an old boot, but the value of the boot lay in its unique identity, how its



form gave the power of the star purpose, a vector, a cause.

Without James Kelly's weaknesses and strengths, he would exist somewhere on the spectrum between the wonder of a tree and the formless might of a star going nova.

*Then so be it. I shall remain myself, and lose this clarity.*

For a brief eternity, he hung back and gloried in creation. Opened himself to the wonder of existence, bathed in sunfire and dark matter, and then, without regret, he turned and compacted himself into his own being.

James concentrated his essence until it fit once more within his mold, and became himself anew.

Passion and pain, uncertainty and doubt, love and resolve, grim ambition and dauntless courage. His strengths and weaknesses.

A mortal man, fallible and focused.

James blinked.

He lay upon the floor of the demon flower, the white quartz smooth beneath his body. The great petals stretched up around him, but now he understood what he was looking at.

Awareness was his.

Between each petal lay a twisted worm hole that was squeezed shut. There were thousands of them, overlaid yet distinct, each leading to another Node. A network cast over the planet, a means to travel instantaneously to Moscow or Buenos Aires.

But beneath him, beneath the quartz floor, lay a far greater passage.

James sat up and studied the glowing quartz. If the Monitors wished it, they could cause the quartz in every Node to vanish and thus trigger the opening of the Pits.

There was no way to sabotage this mechanism. In fact, once he left this Node, he would not be able to force his way back in. That ability had been the provenance of the Light Eternal, which was shattered now and gone.

James frowned, pensive, and blinked, summoning the System messages so that they floated before his eyes again. He dismissed hundreds of them, so that he saw only the last iteration, the summation of all that had come before.

**Your rank is now Lord of the Increate 1**

**Titles Earned: Master of Mysteries, Overlord, Keeper of Humanity, Divine Bulwark, Prime Servant, Light Against the Dark**

**As the global first to reach this rank, all Benedictions are now empowered with Gloria**

**You now possess the following Finite Summons:**

**10x Angelic Host**

**5x Archangel**

**3x Dominion**

**1x Throne**

**You now possess the following Benedictions:**

**Shield of Faith**

**Magic Circle | Angel's Armor | Aureate Buckler |  
Benediction Share**

**Healing Grace | Mass Solace | Martyr's Cry | Indomitable  
Resilience**

**Remove Fear | Remove Curse | Dispel Illusion | Soul  
Bastion**

**Dark Vision | Shadow Step | Black Apotheosis | Living  
Darkness**

**Empowering Light | Fortuna Aeviternum**

**Deadeye | Eternal Fire | Eye of the Needle | Lord's Ruin  
Dark Energy Siphon | Demonic Form | Infernum Reaper |  
Void Break**

**Aura Mastery | Nova | Righteous Obelisk | Seraphic Web  
Inspiration | Terrify | Increase Arete | Holy Zeal**

**You may choose your First, Second, and Third Miracle:**

**Flight | Resurrection | Dimensional Anchor | Word of  
Slaughter | Banishment | Divine Bastion | Aeviternum**

**Hurricane | Refill the Cup | Infernum Crush | Forced  
Humility | Create Demiplane | Teleportation Circle |  
Invisibility | Freedom**

**Your physical form has been purified in the Divine  
Flame:**

**Corporal Perfection Rank 125**

**You have gained Mental Dominion:  
Mental Dominion Rank 100**

**You have manifested Spiritual Exaltation:  
Spiritual Exaltation Rank 75**

**Your Mark of Justice has been upgraded to:  
Equity**

**Your Mark of Justice has been upgraded to:  
Impartiality**

**Your Mark of Justice has been upgraded to:  
Judge**

**Summoning the avatar of Dikastís causes:**

**+200 to all stats**

**Judgment of Siglio Power**

**Judgment of Angelus Power**

**Judgment of Sanctity Power**

**You have 2,315 unspent points**

James blinked, overwhelmed, and then a thought occurred to him.

Slowly, hesitantly, he turned and stared at the shelving.

Where another nine Reservoir Cubes sat glowing softly.

## Chapter 57:

### 2,315 Unspent Points

The thought of absorbing another Reservoir Cube evoked within James a complete sense of negation. He'd barely been able to retain his sense of self with one Cube; a second would double his power at the expense of his soul.

No. That way lay annihilation.

Then?

James sat up. Ten Cubes. He knew a few good people who could make the most of them.

But first, he had to square away his own growth. James closed his eyes, rested his hands on his knees, and pondered himself.

That illimitable sense of grandeur and power was already fading. The unbridled wonder at being one with the cosmos. It felt like a dream, a brief glimpse of infinity that had been vouchsafed him and then stolen away.

James exhaled slowly and opened his eyes. He'd chosen to be himself, James Kelly, and now he was. He studied his callused palms. Himself in every dimension. Bounded and ruled by his thoughts, emotions, memories, and desires.

How had he thought of his being? An old boot?

James smiled wryly. How appropriate.

But he was an old boot with some momentous choices to make.

Again, James closed his eyes and, this time, he summoned his statistics.

**Name: James Kelly****Class: Eradicating Crusader**  
**Rank: Lord of the Increate 1**

**Title: Vanguard, Master of Mysteries, Overlord, Keeper of Humanity, Divine Bulwark, Prime Servant, Light Against the Dark**

**Virtue: Justice**

**Benedictions: All**

**First Miracle: Unchosen**

**Second Miracle: Unchosen**

**Third Miracle: Unchosen**

**Corporal Perfection: 125**

**Mental Dominion: 100**

**Spiritual Exaltation: 75**

**Summons:**

**Angelic Host x10**

**Archangel x5**

**Dominion x3**

**Throne x1**

**Aura: Silver**

**Aura Strength: 1**

**Aeviternum Points: 6**

**Strength: 15 (51)**

**Stamina: 10 (48)**

**Speed: 8 (44)**

**Agility: 5 (41)**

**Power: 10 (53)**

**Arete: 145/28**

**Unspent Points 2,315**

*Benedictions: All*, read James, and snorted in amusement. He could barely wrap his mind around that. In battle now he could summon the Aureate Buckler and Angel's Armor, drop a Righteous Obelisk overhead as he Blessed himself, see through magical darkness and Shadow Step, turning into living shadow, a demon, or Becca's shadow demonic form, fire Smite-enhanced bullets eternally or drop Smite grenades, drain demons of their power, and control his Aura in every way, inspire and terrify in equal measure, and

temporarily increase his Arete even as he had the chance to keep any Aeviternum he spent.

His mind fairly spun with the implications.

He'd become a one-man army.

And that was the least of it.

What did his new Summons ability imply, exactly? That he could now evoke angelic allies in battle? Basic logic implied that a Throne was the most powerful ally he could bring into play, but the "finite" nature of the summons insinuated it was a one-time deal.

Still. Summoning angels to battle.

James didn't even know how to process that new power.

And his Miracles. He could pick three. James read through the descriptions, but again, as always, there was no clear sense of what each did. Some were obvious, such as Flight, Invisibility, or Teleportation Circle. Others he could only guess at, such as Refill the Cup, Forced Humility, or Infernum Crush.

How was he supposed to choose three? Each option was incredibly powerful and unique.

Overwhelmed, James put those decisions aside and focused on his unspent points. 2,315. What would happen if he placed all of that in Arete?

But no. He'd seen how important physical stats were in battle. His Silver Aura had burned Jane, but if he'd not had his physical stats buffed to ridiculous heights, he'd never have been able to bring her down.

That and he couldn't place all his eggs in one basket. Whatever came next, he was going to be playing in the big leagues. For all he knew, there were demons who could negate his Aura. Then what? No, intuition had guided him this far. He'd not make an extreme choice like that.

How much was Aeviternum costing him now? James focused on his sheet and hissed. 50 points for a single dose.

That was harsh. Fortuna Aeviternum would help with that, along with Infernum Reaper, but still.

James focused on his breathing, regained his calm, and considered. There was no need to unilaterally spend all his points at once. He could drip feed them into his stats and see what happened.

With great deliberation, he spent 10 points on Arete.

His Aura Strength rose to 3.

Another 10 points, bringing it to 165.

Aura Strength rose to 5.

Ten more points. His Aura bumped up two more ranks. Ten more. Aura rose to 9.

Arete 185, Silver Aura 9.

Five more Arete, and his Aura flipped to Gold 1.

There were no demons nearby to trigger his Aura, so he couldn't see how it functioned, but it made sense to drop a final 10 points into Arete and bring it to 200.

**Your Arete has reached 200**

**You have gained the divine pool Regeneration Ability**

**Your divine pool will now regenerate at Lead Rank**

“Well, all right,” whispered James. He couldn't guess how quickly that might be, but seeing as his divine pool powered most of his Benedictions, that was a huge plus.

So far he'd spent 55 points on Arete.

2,260 to go.

On impulse he dropped another 100.

**Your Arete has reached 300**

**Your divine pool will now regenerate at Iron Rank**

His Aura jumped from Gold to Platinum and then straight to Ruby 1.

Again James raised his palm. There was no sign of the Aura, but he could sense it, a faint coiling disturbance in the air just above his skin. Like swirls seen in near frozen vodka.

2,160 to go.

James inhaled sharply, and spent 47 points on Power, raising the total stat to 100. The synergy bonus that hit every 10 points above 5 gave him +10 to Strength, raising that to 15 (61).

Nothing happened when his augmented Power hit 100, however. Perhaps there was an effect when the base stat did so. James dropped another 43 into Power, raising Strength by another +8.

**Your Power has reached 100**  
**You have gained the Power Stat Limit Break Ability**

Understanding dawned in James. Limit Break was a version of the Benediction Void Break. Once a day, for just a few moments, he could double his Power's base stat. With it being 100 (143), that meant he could briefly raise it to 243. That was almost three times the Power rating of the War Hound.

James let out a low whistle.

2,070 points left to go.

In quick succession he raised each physical stat to base 100.

**Strength: 100 (169)**  
**Stamina: 100 (138)**  
**Speed: 100 (154)**  
**Agility: 100 (154)**



**Power: 100 (159)**

**Arete: 300/28**

In quick success, he earned a Limit Break for each stat.

1708 points to go.

James felt a wave of giddiness wash over him. Other than his Stamina, he was now more physically powerful than the War Hound.

He blew out his cheeks and rubbed his face.

Time for more Arete.

Another 100 points.

**Your Arete has reached 400**

**Your divine pool will now regenerate at Bronze Rank**

His Aura growth slowed. No longer did it bump up a rank every 5 points, but now only every 10. As such, he rose from Ruby Aura 1 to Emerald 1.

James focused on his divine pool. It felt as vast as the ocean, making what he felt he'd been working with before feel like a puddle.

Time for some Aeviternum. At 50 points each they were expensive, but they were what fueled his greatest powers and allowed him to regenerate completely.

500 points bought him 10.

Another 500 points raised each base stat to 200, adding a host of new synergy bonuses and making his new totals staggering:

**Strength: 200 (289)**

**Stamina: 200 (238)**

**Speed: 200 (274)**

**Agility: 200 (274)**

**Power: 200 (279)**

**Arete: 400/28**

608 points left.

James's mouth was dry. It was frightening on some level to spend points so quickly, yet also exhilarating. What next? Another 100 in Arete.

**Your Arete has reached 500**

**Your divine pool will now regenerate at Silver Rank**

And another 100.

**Your Arete has reached 600**

**Your divine pool will now regenerate at Gold Rank**

His Aura jumped twice, from Emerald to Sapphire, from Sapphire to Diamond.

408 points left.

James licked his lower lip. More Aeviternum? He was at 16. He could bring it up to 20 and then dump the rest in Arete.

200 more points raised his Aeviternum to 20, and he put the remaining 208 points in Arete.

**Your Arete has reached 808**

**Your divine pool will now regenerate at Ruby Rank**

His Aura rose from Diamond to Diamond Sublime, then to Diamond Materia. He'd no idea what those distinctions meant, but they had to be good.

With a gasp James sat back.

All his physical stats were in the 200s now. His Arete was an astonishing 808, his Aura was Diamond Materia, and his divine pool now regenerated at Ruby Rank.

“Holy shit,” he whispered, dazed. “That’s... I don’t even know.”

“Get the fuck outta here,” said Jelly, slowly rising from the floor to hover before James. “Ow. That hurt. I’m... whoa.”

Jelly had changed.

That one touch of the Reservoir Cube had caused his Gloria-edging of gold to wash over him completely, so that he now appeared to be completely made of that luxurious metal.

James smiled. “Looking good, Jelly.”

“Feeling good, Kelly.” The Anima spun in a slow circle, sword-arms rising, and then stopped and focused on James. *Wait a second. Why does it suddenly feel like I’m sitting next to the sun?*

“You just noticed how bright I am?”

“Power has done nothing for your humor.”

James chuckled. “I’m, ah, Lord of the Increate level 1 now.” And in quick order, he shared the rest of his new abilities.

“Get the fuck outta here!” exclaimed Jelly in amazement and spun so rapidly it blurred. “You what? You can summon angels? Your Strength and Power are almost 300? Infinite Holy shit!”

“Infinite Holy shit is right.” James let out a deep breath. “I still need to pick out some Miracles. You got any insight on what they do?”

“Hit me. Tell me what they’re called.”

James repeated the list, and to his immense relief, Jelly recalled what each one did as James spoke its name.

Flight was simple, and allowed James to fly with control and speed determined by his Arete. Resurrection was the same once per past twenty-four hour limitation as the Light Eternal.

Dimensional Anchor locked down a location whose radius was again determined by James's Arete and prevented demons from gating in or out. Word of Slaughter was brutal: it allowed James to speak a word of heavenly power that would ring out and slay every demon that heard it beneath a certain power level, again determined by his Arete. The more powerful the demons, the more of his divine pool he spent. Banishment allowed him to send demons back to their layer in the Pit, while Divine Bastion was a super-augmented Circle of Protection that would provide James and whomever was with him reprieve, healing, and complete immunity to all attacks for a set amount of time. Aeviternum Hurricane allowed him to spend as much of his Aeviternum as he desired to summon cutting winds and endless Gloria-infused Heavenly Assaults that would last for a long duration while Refill the Cup allowed him to regain all his divine pool and Aeviternum once per day. Infernum Crush caused paralyzing pain in even demons of greater strength than himself, while Forced Humility caused anyone - demon or human - who opposed him and whose strength was below a certain threshold to repent and join his cause. Create Demiplane allowed him to create a small pocket realm into which he and eight other individuals could escape for up to twenty-four hours, disappearing completely from the world and becoming undetectable, while Teleportation Circle allowed him to instantly transport up to nine total individuals to any place he had previously visited. Invisibility was self-explanatory, with its strength determined by his Arete, while Freedom allowed him to break all bonds, mental, emotional, spiritual, or physical that constrained him and his allies in a given area.

James frowned. "I want all of them."

*It seems you can choose three.*

James rubbed his brow. "Flight has immediate appeal. Resurrection would have allowed me to bring Joanna back, and save my friends in the future. I mean, I can make a case for all of them."

*Then think on it. You don't need to decide right away.*

*Right.*

James stood and moved to the Reservoir Cubes. There were nine remaining on the warped shelves. Hesitantly, with great caution, he picked them up.

**You have acquired nine Reservoir Cubes.  
Absorb them all?**

James shuddered. The instinct to say yes was terribly strong for a fraction of a second. What would such monumental power do to him? Make him a god?

But no.

He knew what it would do.

Turn him into the equivalent of a sun, endless power and no identity.

One cube had nearly erased his very being.

Even a second would probably destroy him.

Ten?

He'd go supernova and never even realize it.

*No*, he thought, and the message disappeared.

Cradling the cubes, he turned to Jelly. *Ready to head outside?*

*Once we leave this Node, we will not be able to return.*

*I know.* James looked around at the wondrous petals and shifting sky. *But my friends are out there. And I've got presents for them.*

Jelly spun in a circle once more, gleaming gold. *Then let's go.*

James took one last look around the Node. So much had happened here in such a short time. The entire course of the apocalypse had changed. As a Lord of the Increate, he would change the tide of the war, could now summon down the heavenly hosts, wield miracles, and become a force that even the Monitors could no longer reckon with.

“You know, the Monitor once told me that even if I reached level 500 I’d only buy our species another month.”

Jelly turned to him. “What level are you?”

“500, I believe. But here’s the thing.” James looked down at the Reservoir Cubes. “I don’t think she once in a million years calculated what ten of us could do if we reached that power level. I don’t think she ever thought this was possible. That she even dreamed that humanity could muster this kind of power. But you know what?”

“What?”

James’s expression turned grim, his whole being filling with fell intent. “They’re about to find out.” And with that, he squared his shoulders, stepped into the invisible archway, and emerged back into the world.

THE END

## Book 3!

I'm happy to say that this entire trilogy is finished and will be released in its entirety in 2023. You can grab a pre-order of Book 3 [here](#).

**Also, please consider rating and reviewing [Dawn of the Void #2](#) on Amazon.**

It's no exaggeration to say that millions of books are published every year. I've little hope of getting *Dawn of the Void* in front of readers without your help, so if you have a moment, I'd truly appreciate your writing a review or leaving a rating.

Regardless, I hope you enjoyed the heck out of this story and are excited for the sequel. Thanks again for giving *Dawn of the Void* a chance.

Cheers,

Phil Tucker

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