

Crown the Villain

Volume I:
Haunting Scars

D. Sharon

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Map of Alataria



Author's Note

The character segments in this series don't necessarily happen in chronological order by their order of appearance. Some of them may happen at the same time as others, as well as before or after.

Also, the segments can also take place over a period of minutes, hours, days and even weeks, and the amount of time that goes by between each segment of a character can also be minutes, hours, days or weeks.

Prologue

Complete silence wrapped around the woman as she stood on the edge of the Maroon Bridge, looking down at Lake Wheel below. She thought of the popular nickname this lake has. The Wailing Lake. They named it so due to the many suicide attempts that had been made at this lake. People like to say that if you visit the lake at night and listen very closely, you can hear the wailing of all the dead who found their demise in these waters.

All was silent around her and yet she couldn't hear anything. No wailing of the dead. Only her own. Harsh winds blew at her as if some force was trying to push her and make her join the dead in the lake. And although she intended to do just that, she wanted a few more minutes in the blissful silence.

A minute later she could hear something. She looked at the road behind her and noticed a headlight coming her way. As the headlight came closer and closer, she could identify its engine sound. It was a motorcycle. She hoped he would just drive past her, not even caring if he notices her or not, as long as he moves on and leaves her alone. Her hope was unfulfilled, like every other one she had in her life before. The motorcycle came to a halt in the middle of the bridge, and the driver took his helmet off and left it on the handlebar. He looked to be about 30 years old. Not more than 35, she guessed. He had long black hair, reaching down almost to his shoulders, and he wore a black leather coat. At first, she feared it was a member

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of Harley Nation, the notorious biker gang, but a second later she realized it didn't matter. There was nothing he could do to harm her, as she was standing on the edge of her wishful death. The man approached the railing on the edge of the road and leaned his hands on it. His eyes had a dreary appearance. He took out a cigarette pack from his pocket and lit one with his lighter.

When he looked at her, he noticed how stricken with anxiety she appeared. He could see in her face that she was lost, as he knew that feeling all too well. "Don't worry, I won't try to stop you," he said, inhaling the smoke from his cigarette. "I was once in a similar spot, on a similar edge, ready to jump just like you," he blew the smoke away, into the thin night air.

"What stopped you?" she opened her mouth.

"Something... it doesn't really matter. If you had that something you'd be getting off that ledge too by now." He looked serious and ominous, almost as if he stopped only to watch the dreadful show of her taking the leap.

"I see... well, you're probably right, since I have nothing left in this world," she said.

"Which one did it? Lady Dread? Men of Midas?" he knew there was the death of a loved one involved.

"Ferals," she responded.

"Oh..." he knew that was probably the worst one of them.

"My husband and only boy." Tears started streaming down her face. *If it's Ferals that killed them, it must have been a very brutal kind of death.* The man thought to himself. "I'm very sorry," he said.

"Do you want to know how they died?" she asked.

"No," he answered decisively. "My nights are already packed with nightmares. I think I'll pass on the chance to have some more." A few moments of silence passed as he finished his cigarette. "Well, it's getting late. I better be off now." He got on his bike and took one last look at the poor woman. She gazed at the starry sky, taking one last glance at the mesmerizing view. *The only beautiful thing left in this place is the night sky,* he said to himself. As he began driving away, just as

he started accelerating, he managed to catch in the corner of his eye the horrible picture of the woman casting herself into the darkness below.

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Edward

Commotion and rumble dominated inside the courthouse at Morth City, as the man charged with first-degree murder entered the halls dressed in an orange uniform and handcuffs. It was Charles Blackburn, the ringleader of Code Sanguinary, also known as the Deserter General. Blackburn had white hair covering his head, and a thick white beard upon his old, wrinkly face. His dark blue eyes looked tired and restless as he was dragged to the table beside his attorney. Officer Edward Elwin, who was sitting among the crowd, was overjoyed to see the wretched criminal come to justice.

It was all thanks to Roycen McAllister, who served as an inside informant in Code Sanguinary, and supplied the incriminating footage of Blackburn beating and eventually killing a man with his bare hands. The victim was Serik Sanders, a member of the Justicars that was caught by Blackburn's men. Blackburn gave him the personal treatment in an attempt to squeeze out any information he may have had regarding the Justicars' headquarters location, a detail that is currently hidden from all the mob gangs in Alataria, and even the police force. Upon realizing the man was of no value to him, Blackburn put a bullet through Serik's forehead.

Since the trial was held behind closed doors, its contents forbidden to be documented by the media, a mass of reporters and journalists waited eagerly outside the room's large wooden

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doors for a statement about the verdict on the case. Edward could hear the flock through the doors, talking amongst themselves, probably placing bets on what Blackburn's sentence would be.

After a call for order and a few formal introductions that fired off the trial, Judge Hicken addressed Blackburn. "You are charged with the first-degree murder of Serik Sanders. How do you plea?"

"Not guilty." Blackburn didn't show any sign of hesitation as he declared his innocence. His voice was rough and old. A few whispers were heard among the crowd inside the room as a result.

The first person to testify was Vernes Price, the officer who led the case against Blackburn. Vernes was about 40 years old. *A grumpy old asshole with a receding hairline*, Edward summarized the man in his head. As Vernes took the stand and spoke about how his informant had worn a hidden camera and managed to take footage of the heinous crime, Edward noticed Blackburn's eyes squinting with anger. *I hope you rot in prison*, he thought. *People like Blackburn belong behind bars*. He hoped that others like Reus Mallistrom and Sunyula Trife would follow Blackburn to the courthouse, but he feared that it was too much of a demand. The difference between Blackburn and those two was that they were smart enough to buy every important figure in the police force in bribes while Blackburn was unwilling to do such a thing on a base of principals. Blackburn was a respected general of the Alatarian army once, but after the events of the Tearful Rebellion, he resented the government so much that he became a deserter, and formed Code Sanguinary with fellow deserter soldiers who agreed with his cause. That was why he was named the Deserter General.

In a country like Alataria, it's often hard to get criminals locked up. Not only do a lot of them manage to keep themselves under the police's radar by slipping the right amount of cash into the right pockets, but inventions like the Elastics, a set of gloves, shoes, and mask that had recently become popular as a means of leaving no trace of DNA at

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crime scenes, had made it very difficult to get incriminating evidence. Blackburn, however, loyal to his values, also made a target out of himself when he refused to play the game of bribes. That's why it was necessary to bring him down using an inside informant, who could supply evidence by video. Rumors had it that the order to bring an informant into Code Sanguinary and bring Blackburn to trial came down from the President of Alataria himself. The informant, Roycen McAllister, was hoping to catch one of the organization's gun trades as well, but he was considered too much of a tenderfoot to be present at those trades, and with the Chief of Police breathing down his neck, they had to settle for a murder charge. *Blackburn deserves to be prosecuted for so much more, but then again I guess when it comes to justice in Alataria, you have to take what you can.*

While Vernes mumbled on and on, another officer walked through the entrance doors and made his way in a hurry to the prosecutor's table. The officer looked very nervous. Edward wondered what caused it. With Vernes's rambling in the background, the nervous officer whispered something into the state attorney's ear, which made the attorney's eyes widen in shock. "Your honor, I have to ask for a private audience in your office right now." The attorney rose to his feet and made his request. Judge Hicken looked at him with a narrow eye. "Sit down, we're in the middle of a witness statement," he scolded him.

"Your honor, I have to insist," the attorney said. Judge Hicken made a long, grumpy sigh. "This better be good. The trial will resume in 5 minutes." Hicken banged his gavel and got up from his high chair. He walked through his office door which stood right beside his high station, with the two lawyers from each side of the trial following at his tail.

What's going on? What could the officer possibly tell the state attorney that would cause him to make such a fuss? The tumult was dominating the room once more, as the crowd around Edward was wondering the same question that he was. Edward saw the nervous officer whispering in Vernes's ear, as Vernes mingled

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within the sitting crowd. He noticed Vernes's eyes widening the same way the state attorney's had. He wouldn't let his curiosity settle. He had to find out what was going on. "Vernes!" Edward called as he got up from his seat and made his way to the grumpy old cop. "What's going on?" he asked once he reached him.

Vernes looked grumpier than ever, letting off a tired sigh before opening his mouth. "The key evidence that we were supposed to show now... it's missing. Someone replaced the flash drive that had the original footage file on it with a different one in the evidence room at the station."

"What?!" Edward was shocked. "How could this happen?" Code Sanguinary don't work with cops out of principal, everybody knows that. They couldn't have a bought off the cop taking care of this, so... who did this?

"I don't know." Vernes sounded defeated. Edward knew what his tone meant. It meant the one thing Edward feared. And then Vernes confirmed his suspicions. "This trial is lost. Blackburn gets to go free." *No... this can't be happening... we finally have a high ranked criminal before a judge and now he gets to walk out of it?*

"Does Dillard know about this?" Edward asked.

"Probably."

The judge returned from his private session with the lawyers, and as soon as everyone in the room returned to their proper seats, he read his announcement with the strike of his gavel. "Due to... unforeseen difficulties, this courthouse will resume Mr. Blackburn's trial on this day, next week, at 12 PM." The commotion returned at full upon hearing his decision, and Judge Hicken had to knock his gavel multiple times to restore order. *He's giving the police a week to find the missing evidence. If no one finds it during this time... Blackburn walks free.* Edward looked at Blackburn, who sat beside his attorney at the defense table, trying to spot any sign of gloating on the ringleader's part. Blackburn's face was devoid of any emotion. You couldn't tell if he was happy or sad about everything that had just occurred. *Did he plan this? Did he see this coming?* The questions burned in

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his mind.

Once everyone dispersed out of the hall, the reporters who were nested outside charged at the attorneys of both sides with microphones and cameras. Questions regarding the trial's outcome were soon all that Edward could hear, and so he sought to get away from the crowd. As he glanced back, he noticed the shocked expressions on their faces, as one of the attorneys announced that the trial has been pushed back by a week, with no verdict delivered. When he was asked why that was, he simply thanked the reports and stormed away, leaving them in a cloud of bafflement. *They were told not to let the media know about the missing evidence... this must be Dillard, our dear Chief of Police, trying to prevent APD from looking like a bunch of morons.*

Edward caught up with Vernes as he saw him pacing away in haste. "Vernes." He grabbed his arm. "Please tell me you're going to do something about this. I mean, this is your case, you ran it—"

"Look, kid, I don't know what to tell you. If the evidence is gone, then it's gone. Besides, I didn't even want the damn case. It was fucking Dillard who dropped this on me."

"Are you kidding me? It's bad enough we only charged him with a fucking murder when we KNOW this guy is responsible for so much more, now you want—"

"Look, if you care about this so much, why don't you just take the fucking case?" Vernes stormed off, refusing to continue the conversation.

This can't be happening. Code Sanguinary is an anti-government organization. They've been attacking politicians and government officials for years now, not to mention that they're supplying other gangs with weapons to sustain themselves. Blackburn must be brought down. He must pay for his crimes. Vernes, you fucking coward. If you think I'm just going to sit quietly then you're wrong, you grumpy old fuck. I'm going to get that evidence. Whatever it takes.



Edrimer

The day felt slow and boring. Edrimer Frye was sitting at the clerk desk in the convenience store. It wasn't the most fulfilling job in the world, but it was peaceful and quiet. And that's all Edrimer wanted. Peace and quiet. Upon his right arm, there was a tattoo he had gotten years ago of a symbol originally known as Seditone. It was shaped as spiraling thick lines, twisting and curling all over his arm, reaching from his shoulder almost to his palm. Seditone originally symbolized growth, strength, and peace, but during the Tearful Rebellion of 2031, the rebels adopted the spiraling shape as their symbol of a peaceful, quiet life, meaning it represented the very thing the Alatarian citizens wished to achieve during that uprising. That is why Edrimer wore that symbol with pride, for that was all he ever wanted in this world. However, there was another reason why he had the tattoo. His parents, who fought in the Tearful Rebellion as rebels and died, wore the Seditone with pride on their clothes. Edrimer wore it on his skin, as a tribute and a show of respect for their sacrifice.

The foul smell of cigarette smoke soon filled his nostrils and ruined his state of tranquility. His eyebrow twitched in frustration as he turned to the old man at his side. "You really have to stop smoking that shit, old man," he said to Zachary, the shop owner and his boss.

"Why don't you mind your own fucking business and start

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cleaning this place?" old Zachary retaliated with utmost spike. Edrimer smiled and got to his feet. *I love that old man*, he thought. Even though the two hadn't always seen things eye to eye, Edrimer had a great appreciation for his employer. He paid well and was never too demanding of Edrimer. But more than that, the thing Edrimer appreciated most about the old man was that unlike many other OldGens, this one was not actually as grumpy, annoying or lecturing as most of them usually tended to be. *Such an idiotic term that we've invented... OldGens and NewGens...* Edrimer felt his teeth grinding as he contemplated the obnoxious way people differentiated those who were born before the 2000s and those who were born after. On top of being moronic, he felt like this issue also had a sad part to it. Usually, OldGens, who should be over 50 years old, bear names of the old generations, and since they were born at a time when crime and corruption weren't plaguing Alataria as much as they do now, they like to reflect on those days. *Sure, a time when groups like the Justicars weren't even necessary, and names like Sunyula Trije and Jegaar Hill didn't make kids and adults tremble alike might have been great, but I'm fed up with the stories.* NewGens, who were born after the 2000s, were introduced into the poor state of the country from the start. As the years passed and poverty and unemployment grew, so did the percentage of children born of rape and accidental pregnancies. Soon enough, the population saw a significant increase in the number of children who were either abandoned by their parents for lack of financial ability to support them or simply lost them to the ever-growing criminal organizations. *No wonder studies show that the overall desire for raising a family in this country is dwindling further and further.*

"Well? Are you going to just sit there all day like that, or are you going to get off your lazy ass and clean this joint up?" Zachary scolded his employee. With a long sigh, Edrimer grabbed a broom that was leaning on the wall nearby and started sweeping lumps of dust from the floor. The store was quiet as a graveyard. Not a single customer was there. Only Edrimer and old Zachary.

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After a few minutes of sweeping, Edrimer noticed two men approaching the store entrance from afar. *Well, at least these customers can provide me with an excuse to stop cleaning this place.* Edrimer couldn't really make out the appearances of the two figures through the glass door from such a distance. He could only spot the black color of their clothes. A strange feeling suddenly overcame him. He wasn't sure where it came from, or what it meant, but his gut was undoubtedly trying to tell him something.

He looked at old Zachary, who was still sitting in the corner of the store, smoking what could possibly be his tenth cigarette today. When he shifted his gaze back to the two men, they were almost at the door. At such a distance he could make out a lot more of their appearance, and once he gave it effort, he finally realized what his subconscious had spotted a minute earlier. Now he could see it. The golden gloves, shoes, and mask. By the time Edrimer opened his mouth to warn old Zachary, he was too late.

The two Elastics-wearing members of Men of Midas walked in with guns drawn and pointed at Edrimer and Zachary. "Hands up!" one of them yelled. Edrimer raised his hands and, under the instruction of the other member, placed himself beside his boss. *Goddammit, I really wasn't planning on getting robbed today.* The light barely reflected off the rubber-leather hybrid material their Elastics were made of. *Men of Midas... greedy little bastards run by Reus fucking Mallistrom. All they care about is money.* Their famous dictum came to his head. *A golden key can open any door.* Most people in Alataria were familiar with that phrase, and its meaning was very clear. *Money can get you anything and anywhere.*

"Empty the register! Now!" the thug commanded.

"Alright, alright, calm down," said Edrimer. "There's a safe in the back room with plenty of money, alright? Just please don't hurt us." Edrimer hoped he was looking sincere when he begged for his and Zachary's life.

"Well, go on." The thug hurried him to the back room. Edrimer pulled a key out of his pocket and went ahead to open

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the back room door, which was at the other end of the store. He entered the room with the two robbers following him.

The room was dark and barely visible, with a layer of dust covering its floor. *Maybe I should have cleaned up THIS place instead.* He located the light switch and turned it on, revealing that the room was nothing more than 100 square feet.

A few metal shelves with cleaning supplies stood against the right wall while the left one had a large, five-foot-tall steel safe standing against it. A security camera was watching the three overhead, and while the two criminals noticed that, they didn't care about it. *Another benefit of Elastics: keeping you safe from security footage.*

After being pushed to get the matter over with one more time, Edrimer stood in front of the safe and started rotating its dial in the correct combination. *God, this better fucking work. I hope I'm not sweating or anything.* He finally opened the safe door, but as soon as the hinges' shriek was heard, old Zachary appeared at the door, pointing a shotgun at the two thugs. The muggers immediately raised their guns at the old man. "Put the gun down!" they yelled at him, but old Zachary was reluctant. *Great job, old man. Keep their eyes on you.*

There was a reason why Edrimer and Zachary were acting like that so far. In a place like Alataria, anticipating any kind of attack by a criminal organization was a common way of thinking. The Alatarian law predicted that in a case where one makes a potential attempt on someone's life, the right to self-defense can legally protect that someone for any lethal action he makes against the perpetrator. And acts like aiming a gun at someone is considered such a potential attempt, therefore legalizing anything that Edrimer or Zachary may do to the thugs at that point.

"I said drop the motherfucking gun!" the thug reiterated with his gruff voice.

The only thing that separated Zachary's blood thirst and his trigger-happy finger was the fact that even with Zachary armed, it was still a case of two against one, and both him and Edrimer knew that. For that reason, they led them to the back

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room, for the vault contained their winning card. *They're both looking at Zachary. Excellent. Time to bend the law in our favor.* Edrimer quickly pulled out the electric shocker from inside the safe and stuck it to the arm of the thug that stood closer to him, sending waves of electricity through his body. The Man of Midas twitched and palpitated, losing control of his body and letting off a shot without even intending. As soon as the shot was heard, the other thug turned his head to look at his associate for half a second. But half a second was all that Zachary needed, and he fired his mighty shotgun at him before he even had a chance to shift his gaze back. The bullets hit him all over the torso area, sending spatters of blood all over Zachary, and the man himself to the ground.

Without wasting any time, he loaded the next shell into his weapon and quickly aimed at the other guy, who by now had regained control over his body. Once he saw his friend's body lying on the ground, the golden thug tried raising his gun at the old killer, but before he could even bring his weapon high enough he was put to death the same way his friend had been, painting the walls red.

Edrimer stood there beside the open safe with a fast beating heart and a body covered with various red dots of blood. He looked at Zachary without saying a word. He felt grateful that this plan had actually worked. *When the cops get here they're going to ask for the security footage, and as soon they see how they pulled on us, they'll know it was self-defense. The law sees that as an attempt on our lives.* Edrimer's heart was still racing, but before he had enough time to tone down his heartbeat, the two heard someone walking into the store. *Talk about timing.*

Edrimer volunteered to take care of whatever customer it was that had just entered while Zachary watched over the back room. Once he returned to the store and looked at the so-called customer, his heart dropped. It was another man, wearing golden gloves, shoes, and mask. Another member of Men of Midas. A third robber.

As soon as the two saw each other, the thug drew his pistol and pointed it at Edrimer. *I can't tell if I should laugh at this bitter*

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joke or cry over my bitter fate. Time stood still for a second for Edrimer. Everything was so quiet and he felt such a strong sense of melancholy in the air that he almost thought that this was the world's cruel way of giving him the peace and quiet he wanted. Perhaps more than ever, Edrimer hated Alataria for all its flaws, at that single, everlasting moment, where he stood at the mercy of a hollow barrel, just seconds away from ending everything he knew. He wanted to close his eyes so he wouldn't have to see it coming, and merely one second after he did so, he heard the gun shot.

At first, Edrimer thought he was having a delayed reaction to the shot, but once he opened his eyes and saw the thug lying on the floor in a pool of blood that was gathering around his head, he realized his misconception. He saw the trail of smoke coming from the gun of one of the two men who stood at the store's entrance. They wore white Elastics and were staring right at Edrimer. *The Justicars...*

"Are the other ones dead?" the gun-wielding Justicar asked.

"Y-Yeah," Edrimer responded. He was barely able to gather his thoughts. *How did they know to be here at this exact time? How did they even know that there were more robbers than this one?* His questions remained unanswered, as the two men left the store before he could even ask them, leaving him standing alone in front of a corpse, just like the ones in the room behind him. All he wanted was peace and quiet, but there could be none of that in Alataria.

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Edward

Random objects and cars flew by Edward as he was speeding down the highway all the way from Morth City on his way to a local convenience store in Ussermis, Axfield, after picking up a call from dispatch about an attempted robbery made by members of Men of Midas. Apparently, the attempt ended up with 3 dead bodies, all of which were the robbers. Even though his day hadn't started very well, with Blackburn now possibly getting the charges dropped, he wasn't going to take comfort in the sight of three dead gangsters. *Alataria needs justice, not blood.*

Only the occasional traffic jam or red headlight would ruin Edward's attempt to avoid thinking about the trial. *Damn Vernes... he's not going to lift a finger... he's just going to let this case die*, he thought in those moments. *And Dillard... even though he's the one who started this case, under the orders of President Conrad, I still fear to learn how he's going to react.*

Once he arrived at the convenience store, he saw the paramedics stuffing the bodies of the robbers into black plastic bags and placing them in the ambulance. He noticed his good friend, Derlick Sims, questioning an old man. Once Derlick noticed Edward, he parted with the old guy and walked towards him. Derlick was perhaps Edward's only friend on the force, with everyone else being condescending pricks, in his opinion, who make fun of Edward's devotion to the force's

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cause. Only Derlick understood Edward. As the two met, Derlick swept back his slick red hair and let off a long sigh.

"Hey, man. Didn't know you picked up this call," he said to Edward. "I mean, I knew you were in Morth City at Blackburn's trial."

"Yeah, I... had to get away, so I decided to come here and... distract myself."

"I get it. The guys at the station told me what happened in the court."

"So, anyway... what happened here?"

"Well, apparently two members of Men of Midas tried robbing and killing the shop owner and his employee, but the old man shot them both with a shotgun, and then, when a third guy showed up, two Justicars appeared and killed that one."

"The Justicars?" It seemed odd to Edward.

"It's not that weird. The Justicars have been tackling Men of Midas a lot recently. They have a suspicious habit of showing up almost every time those fuckers are up to something," said Derlick. "I already heard everything from the old man, but I haven't had a chance to get to his worker there." He pointed at the young man who stood beside the old man. He looked to be about in his twenties, with short blonde hair and a trimmed beard. "You can have him if you want."

"Sure," said Edward and started walking towards the young man. *Anything that might take my mind off the horrible morning I just had.*

By the time Edward reached the man, the ambulance had finished loading the bodies onto it and drove away. While most people would celebrate the death of any members of Alataria's notorious mob gangs, Edward was no such a man. He would prefer to see them rot behind bars, instead of in the ground.

"Sir, my name is Officer Edward Elwin," he presented his badge to the young man. "I'd like to ask you a few questions if you don't mind."

"Sure," the man replied with a light, almost carefree tone.

"What's your name?"

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"Edrimer Frye."

"Can you tell me what happened, Mr. Frye?"

"Sure," he sighed and recapped the story Edward had just heard in detail, with every part of it matching the old man's tale.

"I'm going to have to ask that you hand over any camera footage you have of the incident."

"Sure thing, officer."

Edward scanned Edrimer with his eyes. He didn't look suspicious, then again, perhaps it was his easy-going attitude that managed to hide it. Edward noticed a long, almost artistic tattoo all over Edrimer's right hand.

"Is that the Seditone?" Edward asked. He recognized the shape of the swirly lines.

"It is." Edrimer stood proudly.

Every now and again, Edward would see graffiti paintings of that symbol in the districts around Fallhalt. During the days of the Tearful Rebellion, it was a symbol of hope and inspiration, but in the years after it, that symbol had become more of a monument of a long lost hope that is now buried in the past along with countless of brave people who stood up and rebelled against President Alford.

"Well, you best be careful when you walk around with that tattoo. I mean, I guess there's no harm in it here, in the Axfield district, but where I live, in Morth City, that might be dangerous."

"Oh, don't worry, officer. Morth City isn't on my next vacation plan. Neither is the entire Fallhalt district," Edrimer joked. *The government sees the Seditone as a symbol of treason and defiance and has therefore ordered every cop and law official in the Fallhalt district to see that any kind of display of it would be punished for.*

"So, anyway..." Edward sought to move away from the subject. "You said the Justicars just showed up out of nowhere?"

"Yeah."

"Did any of them say something?"

"Well, one of them asked about the other two robbers. I

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don't know how he even knew about them." *Perhaps they just spotted them going into the store.*

"And they didn't say anything else?"

"No."

"Did you notice anything about their appearances, perhaps? Could you spot their eye color through the Elastic mask?"

"No," he said. "Why do I get the feeling you're more worried about the Justicars, rather than Mallistrom's men who attacked me?"

"Well, that's actually not really me asking, that's Jonah Dillard asking," said Edward in a display of honesty.

"APD's Chief of Police has a special interest in the Justicars?"

"Oh, Dillard hates the Justicars more than anything. Every now and again, he likes to remind us how important it is that we gather every piece of information on them that we can get whenever it's possible, and how we should keep a sharp eye on their activities."

"He actually considers them a greater threat than the other crime syndicates? Why?"

"Groups like Men of Midas or Code Sanguinary have been around for more than a century. The Justicars have only been around for... 5 years or so."

"And he thinks that makes them easier to dispose of? That's ridiculous!"

"It's not just that. The Justicars basically do what APD should be doing, but they're also breaking the law with their lethal methods, so as far as making a joke out of the police, the Justicars gets first place."

"You forgot to mention that people like Dillard have their pockets full of money from people like Mallistrom," Edrimer rudely pointed out with a smirk. Edward remained silent to that comment. APD sure had a disgraceful reputation of having half of the force, if not more, paid off by ringleaders, with Reus Mallistrom being the first name to come to mind whenever mentioning that reputation. Not to mention that APD didn't have much to show as far as arrests and trials go,

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thanks to the ever-growing use of Elastics, which diminished the chances of finding DNA residue that might tie the criminals to their own crimes.

"Oh, I'm sorry, officer. Was that out of place?" Edrimer addressed him with a sarcastic tone.

"Actually, no," Edward fought back with utmost sincerity. "You're actually right. APD is corrupted, like many other things in this country. You're right about Dillard, and as much as I hate to admit it, without the Justicars' help, you might have been dead now." Edward spoke his heart out without hesitating. It felt good for once to talk freely about the force and its downsides, even if to a complete stranger.

"I like you, Officer Elwin," Edrimer presented his hand, and Edward shook it. *Still... if it wasn't for things like Elastics, we might have been doing better,* he couldn't help but think. Many believe that Elastics are one of the worst things that ever spawned out of the technological advancements of the 21st century. The fabric which Elastics are made of is some sort of a rubber-leather hybrid, which actually works as a breathing fabric, so its users won't suffocate or sweat themselves to death while also guaranteeing that no DNA residue like hair or fingerprints will be left while using them. Although no one is sure who was the one who took the unique fabric and turned it into the gloves, shoes and mask set that is known as Elastics, their use has been growing ever since they first appeared on the streets.

"So I'm guessing you're going to keep working here?" said Edward. "Unless you intend to join the White Knights of Alataria, now that you've seen them in action."

"I don't know. For now, all I want is my peace and quiet." *Don't we all?*

"Good luck finding that," Edward laughed. "Have a good day, Mr. Frye," he bid the young man farewell and rejoined Derlick.

The 32-year-old cop was drinking a cup of coffee that was given to him as a courtesy by the old shop owner. A lit cigarette stood between his fingers. "You know, my father used

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to tell me that cities like this one, Ussermis, were quiet places with little crime before the Men of Midas came in," said Derlick.

"Yeah, my father told me the same thing. Now Ussermis is no stranger to violence, especially since those fuckers have an outpost in this very district, in Ravenwey Burrows."

"Yeah, we've all heard about the abandoned metal factory they're using."

"Then why aren't we doing anything? Why aren't we shutting them down?"

"You know why." Derlick sounded indifferent as he inhaled the smoke from his cigarette and blew it away.

"Money. Of course." Edward made a face full of contempt. "They say the Mallistroms have their hand in everything. Every kind of business you can think of."

"Money makes the world spin, Edward. We both know that."

"Money makes the world rot. We both know that, too."

"You know how much I'd love to see Mallistrom or Trife or Hill walk down that courtroom."

"Yeah... that's a lovely dream. Sometimes I wish I could walk up to the Heart and punch our President Conrad in the face." Edward said. Everyone knew the capital city of Alataria by its name, Hartleigh, but almost everyone called it by its popular nickname, the Heart.

"The Heart..." Derlick said. "I find it very ironic that we call that city the Heart, whereas the most heartless bastards in the country live there." He chuckled.

"I'd call it sad, not ironic."

"Oh, come on, Edward, lighten up," he bumped Edward with his shoulder.

"Right, sorry," Edward tried to appear cheerful, yet his acting wasn't the best. "Let's just head back to the station," he said for lack of any desire to continue the conversation.

The police station in Morth City was one of the larger ones in Alataria and was the very one in which sat the Chief of Police, Jonah Dillard.

"I curse every time I have to drive to that goddamn station," Edward admitted during the trip. "I hate that place. I hate those dirty pricks we have to work with."

"Well, you know I hate them too, Edward, but you have to admit you're quite the odd man out."

"Why? Because I won't take money to look the other way?"

"No," Derlick chuckled. "Because you're so obsessed with your idea of justice that you refuse to accept any other form of it. I mean, I wouldn't mind that much if Blackburn was killed instead of jailed."

"Blackburn deserves to suffer for his crimes, just like any other ringleader in this country."

Derlick sighed. "Your father dug his principles deep into that skull of yours, didn't he?" *He did*, Edward admitted it in his head. *But in the end, he died alone because of it. His ideas made sure no one would ever come to visit him during his last days of illness. No one but me. And now... I wonder if I would one day meet the same fate. It's a good thing I have Derlick. In a country that only knows corruption and greediness, he is the only one who's willing to understand me and be a friend. I will always appreciate him for that.*

"Anyway, forget about the Deserter General," Derlick said. "Even if he walks free, there are bigger fish to catch in Alataria. Sunyula Trife and Reus Mallistrom are several times larger than his little band of rogue soldiers."

"Trife and Mallistrom will never end up in a courthouse and you know that, Derlick," Edward sounded anguished. "They're paying off Dillard, as well as every officer on the top brass. They're untouchable." Derlick didn't dare to say a word back. *He knows I'm right. He's not going to disprove me.* "And don't underestimate Code Sanguinary. What they lack in number, they make up in skill. Let me remind you that a few weeks ago they managed to infiltrate a press conference and assassinated the Minister of Finance with only a handful of men."

"Of course, I remember. That's what got that entire case against Blackburn in motion. I don't know what the General was thinking, to be honest. Did he really expect he'd be able to kill a minister without getting any kind of retaliation from

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President Conrad? I tell you, he's gotten reckless."

"Blackburn isn't reckless, trust me." Edward seemed confident. "I saw him at the trial this morning. He hadn't lost it. He still has that fire in his eyes, as he always did. Blackburn is smart. Everyone who has read anything about his military career would know that. He knew Conrad would retaliate. He's simply not afraid of him. The entire purpose of Code Sanguinary is to defy the President and take down his government."

"Yeah, but the number of soldiers he has these days in nothing compared to what he used to have. Shouldn't he be afraid of... extinction?"

"Derlick, you forget that this is Alataria," Edward looked at him. "People of his kind aren't the ones who should be afraid of extinction. We are the ones who should."



The sounds of passing cars and footsteps of people walking by were the first things the young girl heard as she opened her eyes. The first thing she saw was a figure crouching above her. Her vision was still too blurry to make out any details about the person, and her mind felt so fuzzy that she wasn't sure if she was dreaming or not. *Where am I? What's going on? Who... am I?* She tried digging deep into her memory but she couldn't find anything there. The person who was standing above her noticed that she had opened her eyes and tried speaking to her, but her mind was still too distraught to understand the words. She tried looking around and saw that she was lying in what could only be described as some sort of an alley. A dark, abandoned one, lit only by the stars that shone in the black night sky. *Where am I? What's going on? Who am I?* The questions burned again in her head, only, this time, panic and anxiety started taking over. She tried focusing on the person above her. It took her a few more seconds to realize that the figure was a girl, and it took her several more to understand her question.

"Are you okay?" the girl who stood above her asked. As she lay there on the cold floor, the girl with no memory started making out facial details of the one in front of her. She had long brown hair with bangs covering her forehead, deep brown eyes, thin lips and a small pug nose. She looked somewhere

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between 16 and 18 years old. "Are you okay?" she asked again.

"Y-Yes," the girl on the ground finally answered her, with a faint, hesitant voice.

"Oh, good, so you can talk," the girl with the pug nose said. "What happened? What's your name?"

"I... I don't remember." She got to her feet, rubbing her head as if that could trigger some of her memory back into action.

"What do you mean, you don't remember?"

"I... don't remember who I am or how I got here."

"Alright, relax. My name is Kelia. You're in St. Cyprian, Brontspil." The girl looked at Kelia with blank eyes, not sure what to say. "I guess you also don't remember where you live, right?" the girl shook her head. "Okay, how about I take you to my home, and we can call the police or something?" The girl nodded.

She looked at herself, noticing she was wearing a white shirt and blue jeans, with black sneakers. Despite some dirt that had rubbed onto her shirt from the alley's dirty floor, her clothes and shoes looked clean, perhaps even new.

"Wow, those shoes..." said Kelia. "I can tell they are of high quality. Those jeans too. They look really expensive. You don't get to see a lot of that quality in Brontspil." The girl remained speechless, not sure how to respond. "Well, I guess there's no point in asking where you got them, right?" Kelia asked. "If you don't even know your name, I doubt you'll know that."

She looked at Kelia's clothes and saw that the jeans she wore were tattered in place, with small hole and rips appearing all over them. It was apparent that they've been in use for a long time. Kelia's shoes looked old and worn as well. They had stains of mud on them, and one of her soles seemed to be torn. *Her clothes... no wonder she admires mine. Is she not able to afford ones that are more decent?*

The girl with no name looked once again at her own clothes, and noticed how lavish they looked in comparison. Seeing the pockets in her jeans, she went through them, hoping

to find something that might help her remember who she was, but the only thing she found was a folded piece of paper in her right pocket. She opened the folded page and saw a long list. The list was presented in two columns, with the left one having names written in it, and the right one having some sort of emotional effects written there.

#1: *Theylon Summers – Shivering, tears, having trouble falling asleep.*

#2: *Jelion Rake – Tears, less shivering then previous, refusing to react to anything or anyone, trouble falling asleep.*

#3: *Lunarey Sykes – Vomiting, loss of appetite, nightmares*

"What is that?" Kelia asked when she glimpsed at the list.

"I don't know."

"Did you make that list?"

"I don't know. I don't remember."

"Alright, since you don't know anything about yourself, or even your name, how about we give you a temporary one until you start regaining your memory?"

"W-What name?"

"I don't know. Umm... how about this one, right here, number 3?" she pointed at the third name in the list, Lunarey Sykes.

"Lunarey Sykes?"

"Well, I don't think we should take that last name as well. Lunarey should be enough."

"O-Okay."

"Everything's going to be okay, Lunarey. Let's go." She presented her a hand to hold, and the girl, now known as Lunarey, took it and walked with her.

Something caught Lunarey's attention once she saw Kelia's hand presented to her. It was a black bracelet that Kelia wore on her arm. It was made of some hard material and had a matte texture. It looked about half an inch thick and was almost as wide as a fist, wrapping neatly around her arm. *What is that? Some kind of a fashion accessory?* She wondered, but she dared not ask.

"How old are you?" Kelia asked. Lunarey remained silent,

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stooping her head in embarrassment. "Right, you don't remember," Kelia answered for her. "Well, I'd say you look 17 years old, but maybe I'm wrong."

"H-How old are you?" Lunarey asked.

"I'm 18. I'm a senior student at a local high school not far from here."

As the two walked down the streets of what she only knew as St. Cyprian, Lunarey found herself appalled by the gloomy sight of her surroundings. All kinds of litter and trash filled the streets, the buildings looked old and dilapidated, with either missing tiles or just a plain dirty appearance, and they were all colored either gray or brown.

Several people passed by them, and they look gave off a disturbing feeling. Some of them, Lunarey thought, were looking at the young girls with lustful eyes. *What is this place?* she wondered. She fastened herself to Kelia's arm and held it like a shield. Kelia looked at her and showed a reassuring smile on her face. "Don't worry. Nothing's going to happen, and if something does, I have a can of pepper spray in my pocket." She pulled a black sprayer from the pocket of her jacket. "I know that people around here may look intimidating. Actually, I think that's not really exclusive to the Brontspil district, but to every district in Alataria."

"Alataria?" Lunarey wondered.

"Man, you really don't remember anything, do you?" Kelia let out a sigh. "Alataria is the name of the country we're in. It's got 11 districts and you in one of the southern ones, Brontspil."

"Oh..." Lunarey said sheepishly. She rubbed her right hand, feeling awkward for not even knowing the name of the country they were in when suddenly a sharp pain came from where she was rubbing, right behind her right elbow. She pulled up her sleeve and revealed a tiny, pointy bump behind her elbow joint, right where a large vein was popping out. "What's that?" Kelia asked her. "Did you inject something into yourself?"

"I don't know." So many questions ran through Lunarey's

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mind, and no one could give her any answers. It angered her, yet she kept her cool and didn't show it.

"Alright, look, this is starting to get very weird. I mean, that list, this injection mark..." said Kelia. "I'm starting to think calling the police might get you in prison or something. I mean, what the fuck did you even do before you lost your memory?" Obviously she wasn't expecting an answer to that question.

"So... what do you want to do?" asked Lunarey, almost afraid to hear her answer.

"Well, if you ARE a criminal or something, the wise thing would be to tell you to fuck off, but... my good nature prevents me from sending you off in your current state, so how about we don't call the police in the meantime, until you regain some of your memory?" Lunarey's eyes lit up. "I know what it's like to live in this god-forsaken country, and I don't blame anyone who has to turn to crime to make a living. It's just the way things work now, so—" Lunarey cut her words off with a sudden, almost instinctive hug. She squeezed hard around her new-found friend and whispered in her ear, "Thank you, Kelia." *I'm so glad that of all people, she was the one who found me. Others who might have suspected me to be a criminal might have cast me away on these streets.* After letting go of her, Lunarey smiled and continued the walk to Kelia's house.

After 10 minutes of walking, the two reached an old apartment building, which was about 5 floors high. Once they entered it, they climbed a stench-filled stairwell up to the 2nd floor and made it to a wooden door that had a sign on it that said: "Hopewell."

"I'm going to have to tell my mom some story about you, so I need you to back me up on everything I tell her, understood?" asked Kelia.

"U-Understood," Lunarey replied.

Kelia knocked on the wooden door three times, and a few seconds later the door was opened by a woman with short brown hair and large almond-colored eyes. She wore an apron over a white shirt and blue pants. The woman invited the two

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inside with a cheerful smile and a begging question. "And who's this new friend of yours, Kelia?"

"Oh, Mom, this is Lunarey. She's a friend of mine."

"Nice to meet you, Lunarey. What a lovely name you have. I'm Cynthia." She presented a hand.

"N-Nice to meet you, too. Y-You have a lovely name, too," said Lunarey as she shook her hand.

"Well, it's an OldGen name, but still..." the woman chuckled. *OldGen? What's that? Never mind, asking wouldn't be wise.* "Oh, you... don't have a SmartWrist?" Cynthia asked as she looked at Lunarey's hand. *A SmartWrist?* Lunarey looked down and noticed the same matte black bracelet that Kelia had wrapped around Cynthia's wrist. Is that what she's talking about?

"H-Her SmartWrist's in repair. It broke down," Kelia hurried to answer for Lunarey.

"Exactly," Lunarey confirmed it.

Entering the apartment, Lunarey immediately noticed how small and dense it was. She started wondering if Kelia had any brothers or sisters, as she couldn't see how any more than two people could live in such a small apartment. She also noticed how dimly lit it was. Only one light bulb hanged from the ceiling, barely giving enough light to the living room.

"Hey, Lunarey, want to see my room?" Kelia asked.

"Uh, yeah, sure." She followed Kelia into her room through another wooden door. Kelia's room was just as small as Lunarey had expected by now. A single bed stood against the wall and a table and a small closet stood next to it.

"Well, unfortunately, I don't have a spare bed to give you, so you might have to sleep on a mattress on the floor," Kelia said. Lunarey didn't mind. She was happy enough to have a roof over her head.

"Do you think your mom will allow me to stay here for a while? W-What if she doesn't really that idea?" Lunarey sounded worried.

"Let me deal with her. I'll take care of it." Kelia sighed.

"Thank you, Kelia, really," Lunarey felt as if she owed Kelia

a debt she could never repay.

"It's okay," Kelia said. "I don't think I could ever leave a person to the vicious streets of the Brontspil district."

"This place... it frightens me," Lunarey confessed. "The people who passed by us on our way here..."

"Yeah, I know, everyone gets that feeling." Kelia didn't seem to be bothered by it. *She must be used to it by now.* "In Alataria, where you live can change every aspect of your life, for better or worse, but THIS district is probably one of those that have nothing to offer for the better. Brontspil and Flintwood, Alataria's two southern-most districts, suffer from the largest rates of unemployment, poverty and homelessness. It's very hard to live here."

"I-Is it like this everywhere?"

"Well, Alataria's general economic state is... horrible. Some districts fare better than others and make living in them a bit easier, but almost all of them are affected by our government's poor care of finances." *Perhaps I'm not as lucky as I thought...*

"I see." Lunarey said. "Alataria... Brontspil... Flintwood... these names mean nothing to me. I don't remember any of them. I don't know anything, Kelia. I mean, I don't recognize half of the words you say," she looked frustrated. "I don't even know what that SmartWrist thing is." She pointed at the Kelia's bracelet.

"Alright, relax, you'll get the hang of it, don't worry," She calmed her down. "A SmartWrist is like a phone, only much more capable."

"W-What do you mean, more capable?"

Kelia pressed her finger against her SmartWrist bracelet. The matte surface suddenly lit up, showing the time, date and Kelia Hopewell's full name in a digital display.

"Wow," Lunarey looked amazed.

"I can talk with everyone I want with this thing, take pictures, play games..." she stopped herself upon noticing Lunarey's awe-filled face. "Oh, sweet Luni, you still have a lot to learn about the world."



Demilan

Under the dark starry night sky, Demilan McCloud drove his motorcycle through the roads of Ashcote, a relatively small city in the Westden Fells district of Alataria. It was an old motorcycle, but it did the job. He wasn't really a bike enthusiast anyway. A black duffel bag was strapped to his back. He had been driving for almost an hour now and seemed to have finally arrived at his destination. It was an old warehouse.

He parked his motorcycle on the sidewalk and took off his helmet, storing it in the compartment under the seat. He scattered his long black hair and dropped his duffel bag on the floor. He opened the zipper on the bag and took out his assault rifle. It was a Skyla-30, a modern assault rifle that was mostly seen in the army. It fired 7.62 caliber rounds, held 40 rounds in a magazine, and had almost the firepower and accuracy of a sniper rifle, despite having a rapid fire rate. Demilan took two more magazines out of the duffel bag and placed them under his belt. He then strapped the duffel bag on his back once more and with his assault rifle at hand, moved towards the warehouse entrance.

He placed himself in front of the steel door and took a deep breath. He looked down and saw his necklace. It was a dream catcher that was hanging on his chest from a thin silver string, made of two circular shapes with several feathers adorning it, with various beads and thin strings braided in. As

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he looked at it, he found himself invigorated with fury and determination. *Always remember your goal, Demilan. That's what keeps the nightmares away.*

He quietly opened the door, closing it behind him, and slowly paced forward. At first, he was greeted by a couple of small rooms, with only a few tables and chairs filling them. Everything looked dark, and Demilan wasn't sure if he had gotten the right place. All he could hear, other than his soft footsteps, was a dripping sound from a nearby drain. His hand remained tightly wrapped around his rifle's handle nonetheless. Eventually, after quietly making his way through the shadows for a few minutes, he could hear voices coming from further inside the warehouse.

Once he made it to the large, open interior of the warehouse, the voices were audible enough, and among them, he suddenly recognized a female one. Unlike the other voices, the female one wasn't talking, but rather making sounds of ache and discomfort. Demilan hid behind a few crates and leaned over to watch the men inside. The ceiling stood high above their heads, and every sound they made echoed between it and the walls surrounding them. A foul stench of sweat and blood filled the place.

There were 3 men there, all with golden masks hanging at their belts and wearing golden gloves and shoes. *Men of Midas. That means I'm in the right place after all. I guess I remembered well.* Two of them stood in the middle of the hall, next to a few wooden crates. One of them had a shaved head and face, and the other one had short black hair and a nasty scar on the left side of his face.

Those two were having their way with a young girl who was bent against a crate, with her back facing them. The shaved man was going in and out of her while the scarred one stood near and watched. Both of them were gloating and grinning as the rape took place while the girl was making noises of pain, writhing and grunting occasionally. She wasn't crying, but she wasn't happy either. She was in pain and suffering. She was completely naked, her clothes tossed aside in a pile. Her hands

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were clenched into fists on top of the crate, and she was heavily biting on her lip with anger. *She looks so young. Can't be older than 16 or 17.*

The third guy had short brown hair and was standing far from the other two, smoking a cigarette while he watched the other two's deed. Even though he wasn't as cheerful as them, he didn't look shocked or appalled, but rather cool, as if nothing was out of the ordinary. *Sick bastards.*

With a teeth grind, Demilan silently watched for a minute as the shaved man penetrated the poor girl, again and again, giggling and smiling throughout the act.

He tried to figure out which one of the three was the one he needed. He examined the three faces. *The one with the scarred face.* He realized after digging through his memory. *He was definitely in Odis's crew. I remember that scar. Can't forget a scar like that. He'll know where Odis is. The other two are useless to me. That means I need to dispose of them.*

Demilan decided to start with the smoking guy first since he was secluded from the others and could be discreetly dealt with without triggering an all-out firefight.

He started softly pacing towards the man, using the crates as cover. The moans of pain that came from the raped girl followed him with every step until he was a foot away from the guy, placing himself right behind him. The smoking man looked as if he had no cares in the world. *Using the Skyla rifle is off the table with this one.*

Demilan waited to catch the guy in between inhaling and exhaling the cigarette smoke. Once the time was right, he quickly grabbed the man from behind, one hand twisting his right arm behind his back, and the other one covering his mouth and nose, blocking any exit of that smoke from those lungs, suffocating the guy. He quickly dragged him behind the crates. The smoking man tried resisting and fighting, but any wriggle he made only hurt him more, as his twisted arm was twisted further. He tried making noises, but he couldn't make anything beyond muffled murmurs. Demilan looked at the man's face with cold, harsh eyes, and watched as oxygen was

denied of him and his face slowly lost expression.

Eventually the smoking man closed his eyes and became still. To make sure the guy wouldn't suddenly come back a minute later and cause trouble, Demilan quickly snapped his neck, letting out a small crackling sound. Luckily for him, the other men didn't hear that.

The horrible smell of sweat and blood was still in the air. Demilan leaned over the crates and watched the other two members of Men of Midas.

From where Demilan was standing now, he could get a better look at the naked girl. He could now see the stream of blood dripping down on the other side of her face from her forehead. *They were beating her, on top of it all.*

"Come on, man, will you finish already? I want to go next," said the scarred man.

"Relax, Maythem, I'm almost about to finish," the shaved man said with a grin.

Quick and easy. Just need to isolate the guy with the scar. He was not about to wait for the man with the shaved head to finish his act. With a quick movement of his feet, he took himself away from the crates and went in towards the two men, his assault rifle held up and aimed at them.

At first, he lined his aim with the scarred man. *Must neutralize that guy, Maythem, first so he won't make any trouble while I take care of the other one.* He pulled the trigger and sent a deadly bullet through the scarred man's left leg, bringing him down and immediately drawing all attention to him. The loud gunshot echoed infinitely inside the warehouse.

The shaved man quickly turned around, about to draw his pistol at Demilan, only to find himself a few seconds too late. Before he could even draw his weapon, Demilan had already shifted his aim in a swift move to point directly at his right kneecap. *Can't risk the bullet going through him and hitting the girl.* The thought crossed his mind during the split second. He fired a round and blew off the man's kneecap, bringing him down on all fours with a mighty scream of pain. That scream lasted only a second, as now that Demilan could shoot him without

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risk hitting the girl behind him, he made another swift shift of his aim to the rapist's head and pulled the trigger once more. Spatters of blood and brain poured all over the floor, some of it hitting the girl.

As the blood pool around the shaved man gathered and grew, Demilan made his way to Maythem, the wounded scarred man, who was still agonizing over his hurt leg.

"Oh, fuck!" he screamed. "You motherfucker!" he cursed his shooter. "Who the FUCK are you?!"

Demilan crouched by the man and asked him in a heavy voice, "I want to know where I can find Odis Maben."

Maythem responded with a chunk of spit thrown at Demilan's face. *This fucker...*

Demilan placed his thumb over Maythem's bullet wound and squeezed hard, sending horrible waves of pain through him. He screamed again, louder than ever. "Where is Odis Maben?" Demilan asked again.

"I don't know, man, please," Maythem turned soggy. "I don't know who that is, man."

"Now, I know that's a lie. I remember you as part of his crew, Maythem."

"I don't know where he is!" Maythem cried. *You just called yourself as a liar, Maythem, and he who lies once will lie again. You DO know where Odis is.*

He pointed his Skyla rifle at his other leg. "I either get an answer or the joy of putting another bullet in you. Either way, I win," he said. Maythem simply looked at him with a frightened face. "Have it your way." Demilan was just about to pull the trigger when Maythem stopped him. "WAIT!" he screamed. "16 Pine Street. That's where he lives. Please, don't shoot." *That's a good boy, Maythem.*

A sudden rattle from behind caught Demilan's attention. He looked around and noticed someone was missing. *Where's that girl? Her clothes are gone... did she run away? How did I not notice that?*

"Little girl!" Demilan tried calling to her, even though he couldn't really tell if she was still in the warehouse. "If you're

still here, first let me say I'm not going to hurt you." No sound was heard. *One last trick. She wasn't crying or screaming. She just looked resentful. She's the type that would love for some payback.* "If you come out now, I'll let you beat the shit out of dear Maythem!" he called out, his voice echoing between the walls.

"Wait! What are you doing?! Stop! Don't do this! PLEASE!" Maythem cried, only to be ignored by the rugged gunman. After a few seconds where all that was heard was Maythem's sobbing, Demilan decided to give up on the matter. At that moment, he heard that rattle again. He saw her coming out from behind the crates, this time fully dressed in her long tight jeans, black shirt, and jeans-colored jacket. Her long brown hair went down all the way to her chest, and her big blue eyes sparked fiery like wildfire.

"A deal is a deal," she said in a stern voice as she paced her way to him.

"A deal is a deal," Demilan replied. He now noticed the wrench that was in her hand. *Must have found it somewhere in here. Very well. I'm not going to stop her.*

"No! Please, stop!" Maythem yelled once he saw the wrench coming his way. Demilan preferred not to watch. *I'd rather save myself the violence this time. I've had enough for now, I believe.*

He only heard the bashing noise that the metal wrench made as it walloped Maythem. *Sounds like she hit his head. This girl sure is merciless.* He heard another bashing noise. Then another. Maythem was no longer crying. He was no longer making any sound. Only the harsh hitting of the girl's wrench made noises now. After a few more hits, he heard the metal clang that suggested she'd dropped it on the floor. He turned around and saw the bloody pulp that was once Maythem's face. Spatters of blood covered her clothes and face. She was breathing heavily, yet looked somewhat satisfied.

"Thank you," she said to him.

"You're welcome." He started walking away when she stopped him. "Wait!" He halted. "Why did you do this? I mean, I know you didn't do this just to save me, I heard you asking him about Odis Maben."

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"Yeah, I just wanted to know where he was."

"Why? I know who Odis Maben is. He's a drug dealer in Men of Midas, what could you possibly want with him? Drugs?"

"No. He took someone away from me."

"I see. Well, Reus Mallistrom's men also took someone away from me. My little sister, Vera."

"I'm sensing a point coming." He could already tell.

"There's a good chance that both of the people we're looking for are at the same place. I suggest that we join forces."

"You'll just get yourself killed, little girl."

"Don't call me that, and don't you worry about me. I'll be doing this either way. With or without you." *Going alone against Reus Mallistrom will surely get her killed. Going along with me gives her a chance to make it out alive from the situation. God, what am I thinking? Taking a little girl with me on this mission?*

"How old are you?" he asked her.

"15," she said. Demilan buried his face in his hands, letting off a long sigh. *Goddammit... she's only 15 years old, and I just saw he beat a man to death with a wrench. What am I supposed to do now?*

"Please. I'm asking you because you seem to handle yourself pretty well. I want to save my sister." Suddenly, when her sister came into the conversation, she looked less intimidating and more helpless.

Why am I even considering this? I usually don't pay attention to such minor things. I have a mission. I can't just bring her along. But... what if I leave her alone? What if she goes out there against these guys alone and ends up dead? Can I live with that? I already have so many sins on my record, so many things that I wish I could take back, so much wrong to make right... maybe this can be me starting to repent...

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Maileena. Maileena Banister."

"For the record, I can't have your death over my head if something happens to us. Your life is your responsibility. I am not your godfather or your fucking mentor. This is only two people working together towards a common goal out of shared interests."

"Done."

"Alright, let's go. I have a place not far from here, you can take a shower there if you want." He started walking away when he noticed her crouching next to Maythem. She took a revolver that was hiding in the back of his pants. It had a long barrel, and it shone brightly. She placed the revolver in the back of her pants and tailed behind Demilan as the two made their way outside.

"Thank you, mister..."

"It's Demilan. Demilan McCloud."



Lunarey

The light of the early sun made its way through the cracks between the shutters of the window in Kelia's room. Sleeping on a mattress on the floor wasn't the most comfortable setup to have, yet Lunarey made do and kept any complaints to herself.

She rubbed the dust off her eyes and got up on her feet. Kelia was getting ready for school, packing her backpack with several hefty books. She was dressed in her school uniform, which consisted of a dark blue sweater, buttoned at the center and showing off her school's symbol on its left upper side, a white plain shirt below it, and a long blue, checkered skirt that went all the way to her knees.

Lunarey noticed Cynthia giving Lunarey a plastic bag with a single slice of bread and an apple. *Is this all the food she is able to spare for her daughter? It really is hard to live here.*

Lunarey hated seeing Kelia go off to school, as she wasn't keen on being left alone with Cynthia, yet she knew there was no other choice. She offered her help to Cynthia with any chores she might have had. Cynthia was a bit reluctant at first, but eventually she let her help. The two of them started washing the floor together. Lunarey was more than glad to give a hand. It was her way of giving back for letting her stay under their roof.

Once she was done helping around the house, Lunarey

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quietly sat on Kelia's bed, alone with her thoughts and wonderings. She looked at the ominous list of names, trying to figure out their meaning. *How am I related to these people? And what do these reactions written next to each name mean?* She wanted the answers so badly that her head started to slightly ache. *What do I know about myself? These shoes that I wear... these clothes... Kelia mentioned that they're of high quality, and must have been expensive. Is it possible that I come from a wealthy family? And what about that injection mark? Could it have something to do with my memory loss?*

Her train of thought was cut off abruptly when Kelia walked into the room, having just got back from school. She dropped her backpack on the floor, looking exhausted from her long day. Kelia looked at Lunarey and noticed the gloomy expression on her face. "Is everything okay, Luni? You look... down," she asked her.

"Yeah, I'm just... I keep wondering about my past. About who I am."

"Don't get yourself too worked up about it. It'll come back to you, I'm sure."

"I... can't seem to be as optimistic as you, Kelia. Maybe we can use your SmartWrist to find something that can help us?"

"Sorry, Luni, but my SmartWrist can't really do much beyond making calls. These things usually have online access, by my mom says we can't afford to pay every month to have that, so there's nothing there that can help us."

Lunarey's face reverted back to its fallen state.

"Come here." Kelia approached her and gave her a warm, loving hug. "Everything's going to be alright, Luni. I promise you."

There was something in Kelia's words that managed to calm Lunarey down, yet she still felt like nothing would stop her burning desire to know more about herself.

"Hey, I brought you something," said Kelia. "I took a couple of books from the school library. Thought you might use them to learn more about where you are, at the very least." She pulled two thick books from her backpack. One had a

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green cover, with the title "Tales and Histories of Alataria", and the other one had a purple cover, with the title "Crown the Villain: A Brief History of Alataria's Crime Lords."

"Thanks, Kelia. I appreciate it." *Knowing a thing or two about this place would be great.*

The books looked a bit dusty, yet they both seem to have been published recently. The pages had a slightly yellow shade to them, and their edges were occasionally worn and crumpled, but she didn't mind.

Later that day, Lunarey sat alone on Kelia's bed and opened the first book, the one with the green cover that held information about important events in the country's history. She tried concentrating on the words, but the noise that came from the living room wouldn't allow her. After several minutes, she finally gave up. She put the book aside and moved to peek through the door.

Through the narrow crack, she could see Kelia and her mother sitting on the worn out couch in the living room. They were watching a man with a slick haircut saying some things on a device that she had only recently learned was called television.

"In other news, a local convenience store in Ussermis, Axfield, was attacked by 3 people associated with Men of Midas. The three men were gunned down by 2 other men associated with the Justicars..." the man in the television said. "Also, 3 other members of Men of Midas were found dead in a warehouse in Ashcote, Westden Fells. The police have yet to comment on any suspects or leads in the investigation." *Men of Midas... what is that?* "Charles Blackburn was scheduled to be tried today for the murder of Serik Sanders, yet Judge Hicken decided to postpone the trial by one week. No official comment was given by him as to the reason for the postponement."

"I hope they put that bastard away for life," Cynthia commented on the report. "Maybe we'll finally see one of those damn ringleaders get what he deserves."

Sick of watching from a distance like a spy, Lunarey opened

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the door and entered the living room. "H-Hey, w-what are you watching?" she asked sheepishly.

Kelia turned to her with dread all over her face. "U-Uh, mom, I'm off to my room," she quickly told Cynthia, while getting up from the couch and dragging Lunarey with her into her room. Kelia closed the door behind her and let out a long sigh. "Luni, can I ask you something?"

"W-What?"

"Never watch that show."

"W-Why? What is it, anyway?"

"It's the news. It's where they report about the things that happened today in our country."

"Then why—?"

"Because..." Kelia stooped her head. "I don't want you to hear about what savageries happen around here. You won't like it, trust me."

"But YOU watch that show."

"Yeah, but I don't have the innocence and the privilege of not knowing what goes on in Alataria like you do. I wish I had that. That's one thing I envy in you."

"But—"

"Please, listen to what I'm saying. Do you trust me, Luni?"

"I..." Lunarey hesitated. "Yeah, I trust you," she finally gave in. "But I still want to know some things about what that man on the news just said."

"Like what?"

"Well... what's Men of Midas?" she asked Kelia.

"It's a group of gangsters who like to rob stores and businesses, along with selling drugs all over the country," Kelia explained. "Their ringleader is called Reus Mallistrom. That name ring any bells?"

"No." Lunarey felt embarrassed.

"Well, almost everyone in this country has heard of the Mallistroms. They're a very wealthy and well-based family involved in many industries in this country. Reus's father, Joseph Mallistrom, used to rule over Men of Midas, but after hitting 50 or so he decided to retire and leave the family

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business to his son, Reus."

"What kind of business do they do exactly?"

"Well, they have a very well-known record label called Golden Key Records, but other than that... I don't really recall right now. But people always say the Mallistroms have their hands in all kinds of industries. I'm pretty sure you'll find plenty of information about them in those books I gave you today."

"Oh... And what about those Justicars?"

"Oh, they're just a bunch of vigilantes who fight other crime groups. They like to paint themselves as the White Knights of Alataria, the saviors of our society from all the crime and corruption, but their influence wasn't that great since they showed up, so no one takes them too seriously. They always liked to say they would rid the country of groups like Men of Midas, Lady Dread, the Ferals and all those others."

"Wait... W-What's Lady Dread and the Ferals?"

Kelia sighed in response. "Just read the books, Luni. Everything is in there."

Over the next few days, Lunarey did just that. Following Kelia's advice, she used every spare time she had alone to read the thick books, enriching her knowledge about Alataria and the people in it.

She occasionally felt embarrassed, needing to learn things that should be pretty basic knowledge for every citizen in Alataria, like knowing that the president is called Gerald Conrad, or about the massive uprising that happened 14 years earlier, in 2031, dubbed by the people as the Tearful Rebellion. Lunarey was quite shocked to learn of the events that happened in that uprising.

In 2029, 2 years before the Tearful Rebellion happened, there was an assassination attempt on then-president Dwight Hamilton. While Hamilton was giving a speech at a local university, a 40-year-old man named Carl Gardner managed to force his way onto the stage, and then drew a gun and tried to fire at the president. Hamilton's bodyguards managed to seize

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the man before he even pulled the trigger, and he was given a sentence of 20 years in prison on the charge of first-degree attempted murder of a public official.

A year later, President Christopher Alford was elected, after running a most promising campaign which filled many citizens with hopes for a more stable economy, and a better future for themselves. Instead, Alford immediately started passing bills that further favored the rich over the poor, increased the gas and food prices, and didn't seem to have any effect on the losing war on crime. Further on, with the memory of President Hamilton's assassination attempt still not forgotten, Alford decided to minimize public officials' exposure to the people, considering the ever-growing criticism against them at the time. Under his order, the government constructed a special quarter in the Alataria's capital city, Hartleigh, also known by the people as the Heart. That quarter was sealed off in all directions, where alongside governmental buildings, they built mansions and villas, where the leadership's men would live. That way, the president and his men would always be protected from the public, working and living in a sealed off part of the city where no citizen could put them in danger. Therefore, they called it the Segregated Quarter.

Most people saw it in a different manner. They saw it as the president avoiding having to look at his people's grim state and ever-growing poverty while he sipped champagne in his large house. *Wouldn't surprise me to know that this was another factor that would later trigger the Rebellion.*

Ever since then, matters like press conferences and public announcements exclusively took place in the Segregated Quarter, minimizing any risks of harm coming to any of the politicians there. When the politicians had to leave the Quarter for campaign rallies or suchlike things, they were accompanied by a hefty security detail looking out for them.

During his first year in term, Alford quickly became known as one of the most hated presidents the country had ever seen. Under his leadership, Alataria saw its darkest days yet; financially, educationally and even diplomatically. When Alford

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was forced to cease all commerce activities with China, it brought forth uproar from the eastern country. Rumors say that a war was only prevented through backchannel talks.

Soon enough, the people decided that they had had enough. With the government ignoring their pleas and secluding themselves in the Segregated Quarter, an uprising soon started. At first, they were small protests in various districts, but as the media caught the attention of that, the flame of rebellion was kindled within many citizens, and before long the streets were packed with roaming, angry, violent rebels.

The government used almost any means it had to suppress the rebellion, using the military and the police forces to either arrest rebels or simply have them beaten. This course of action worked only partially, because while it did put many rebels out of commission, it enraged many others, and sparked them to join the fight. The streets of the Heart were swarmed with angry mobs, holding protest signs and yelling their frustrations out in front of the courtyards of the Segregated Quarter. Everything she read about what happened back there made Lunarey so furious. *How could the government ignore its people like that? How come things had to come to such a state?*

Most presidents didn't get too much love. Every new one that got elected brought new hopes with him for a better Alataria, but by the time they were halfway through their tenure, they showed that they were pretty much as worthless as their predecessors had been.

The Segregated Quarter was another thing that upset her. *They fear their people, and yet they barely make this place a better one to live in. Unemployment rates rise each year, crime rates aren't showing any improvement either, poverty plagues the country and meanwhile, those fuckers rest their legs on their high hills at the capital.*

The disastrous failure of the Tearful Rebellion had grievous consequences. It further established the domination of crime organizations like Joseph Mallistrom's Men of Midas and Henrick Trife's mob gang, as more and more people resorted to crime to survive. On top of that, the aftermath of the uprising was the desertion of General Charles Blackburn, along

with a few of his soldiers, and the founding of Code Sanguinary, a paramilitary group of ex-military soldiers who participate in anti-government activities. Blackburn and his followers refused to obey some of the orders that were given to them that meant harming innocent civilians simply to induce fear in them. *That's the guy that had his trial delayed by a week. I saw it on the news. But... from what I read here... he doesn't sound like such a bad guy.*

All that information simply made Lunarey feel worse. A part of her preferred not to know of these horrors. To this day, 14 years later, the impacts of the Tearful Rebellion are felt. Although Henrick Trife passed away and Joseph Mallistrom decided to quit his reign over his organization, the crowns were simply inherited by their children. Sunyula Trife, who renamed her organization Lady Dread, and Reus Mallistrom, who replaced his father as the man with everyone in his pocket, not to mention other groups who are now also in play, like the Ferals and Harley Nation.

Among all that depressing knowledge, Lunarey managed to find a glimpse of optimism, a thing which even surprised her. *Perhaps forgetting my past is for the best. Chances are there might be things there that I should be glad to forget.*

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Edward

Strong scents of cigarette smoke and cheap cologne attacked Edward as soon as he entered the police station. It was the day after Blackburn's trial and the robbery attempt by Men of Midas in Ussermis. As he made his way through the cubicle offices of his department, he noticed every set of eyes that lingered a second too long on him. He occasionally caught a muffled laugh or whisper. *They all like to laugh at me. Make a fool out of me simply for refusing to be as lazy or bought off as they are. I don't mind. Let them laugh. I couldn't give a shit.*

Once he finally sat down in his cubicle, he hoped to have 5 straight minutes of silence for himself. He closed his eyes and tried emptying his mind. *That kid at the convenience store yesterday... he said that all he wanted was peace and quiet... I guess that makes two of us. I don't want to think about Blackburn, Mallistrom or anyone like them for that matter. Just for 5 minutes. Just for 5 fucking minutes.*

However, not even two minutes had passed before Derlick appeared at his cubicle. "Trying to get some shuteye?" he asked Edward.

"Trying would be a good description."

"Well, anyway—"

"Let me rephrase that: go away!" he attempted to shoo away his friend.

"Oh, don't be an idiot. With your luck, Dillard would pass

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by right now, see you like that, and fire your damn ass." *Well... I guess he has a point. Luck has never been on my side.*

"Fine, what is it?"

"I looked at the security camera footage from the store attack. Looks like the robbers pulled their guns on that old man and his worker before those two shot them."

"Plausible cause for self-defense. They're off the hook. Anything on those 2 Justicars?"

"Elastics. Can't make out anything about them, other than one's voice."

"Does it help us?"

"Not really."

"Well, I guess this case is closed then."

"Dillard won't like this. I mean, he doesn't like getting nothing on the Justicars in cases where they show up."

"Jonah Dillard gets a hard-on from dead Justicars and money in his pocket. He got enough satisfaction from making the media pin all 3 deaths on them."

"Well, for him there's no such thing as too much bad publicity for the White Knights of Alataria."

The two decided to get some coffee from the coffee machine, if not to shake off some of the morning fatigue, then, at least, to get away from the annoying faces of everyone around them.

"Have you heard about those bodies they found?" asked Derlick.

"No. What bodies?"

"They found two bodies in Canstow yesterday. Both of them had their arms and eyes cut off and their hearts cut out."

"Wow. Sounds grizzly," said Edward as he sipped his coffee.

"Yeah, and two days earlier they found two other bodies like that in Basilham."

"So the guy travels fast. Those cities aren't that close."

"They're already naming him the Tri-Surgeon, after some old fairy tale or something."

"The Three Army Surgeons, by the Grimm brothers."

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Edward knew the tale, and could see the connection. Three army surgeons perform surgery on themselves, trying to impress an innkeeper. One cuts off his own arm, the second one cuts out his own eyes, and the third one cuts out his own heart. All three of them are supposed to restore their old organs back into place the next day, but after a cat sneaks in and steals their organs, they are forced to implant themselves with a pig's heart, a cat's eyes and a dead thief's hand.

"Word has it that Dillard wants to put Vernes on the case."

"Vernes? But he's still assigned to the Blackburn case."

"Not for long. With that key evidence gone, there's nothing really left to hope for. Dillard will just replace Vernes with some random guy until the case is closed next week so he can get a move on with this Tri-Surgeon thing."

"Goddammit! He's not even trying to save that case! Blackburn's going to walk free!" Edward snapped.

"Yeah, I know. I actually asked Vernes about this yesterday and he fucking shrugged, man."

Edward let off a long sigh. Although he was disappointed hearing that, he knew Vernes wasn't much of a justice seeker. Vernes didn't really want the case, but Dillard had forced him to take it. Dillard had only one reason to go head on with Code Sanguinary, and that reason was simply that he had no reason not to. Since Blackburn founded Code Sanguinary shortly after the Tearful Rebellion on the principle of rebelling against the government, the OldGen General never had any intentions of filling the police's pockets, as opposed to people like Reus Mallistrom and Sunyula Trife, who did. It's was Dillard's way of showing Blackburn what happens when you don't play his game.

Edward was enraged upon hearing that Dillard was just going to give up on putting Blackburn away. Blackburn was a long time wanted criminal, and those types are very hard to take down, especially when you have cops who seem to have trouble deciding which side of the law they're on. One of the factors that triggered the Tearful Rebellion was the worse-than-ever economic state Alataria found itself in. The

government issued a series of budget cuts, accompanied with tax raises, which infuriated the people who could barely make a living as it is. One of the budgets that was cut was the one that basically funded the police force, and one of the effects of that cut was a major decrease in the lower ranks' salaries. While some chose to quit the force and find another way to make a living, others found a way to restore some of that money they lost and even more by basically going corrupt, choosing to go against the principles of their own jobs in order to make ends meet. Although Edward knew of this, his feeling of repulsion overcame his sense of sympathy. He put down his cup of coffee and stormed away.

"Where are you going?" Derlick called after him.

"To talk some sense into the Chief of Police," Edward strode away into the long halls that led to Jonah Dillard's office. *I've had enough of his bullshit. Jonah Dillard... if it were up to me I would fire his ass. The guy has no care for law enforcement. He's willing to cut the Deserter General loose just like that. No way won't I have a say in this matter.*

Once Edward reached the luxury offices of the high faculty of the APD, he noticed a change in the atmosphere, as opposed to his own department. The musky smell of cigarettes and cheap cologne was gone, and the dusty, large open space was replaced with glamorous wooden walls and private offices, and the cheap furniture was replaced with ones of quality material. It felt as if he had somehow teleported himself to a whole different place. *I guess when most of the money flows to the high chairs...*

A large, wooden reception desk stood in the middle of the room. A blonde secretary sat there, wearing red-framed glasses, a tight suit, and a short skirt. *Some eye candy for all these old, greedy bastards to look at every time they leave or come to their office.* "Hi, I need to see Jonah Dillard," he said as he approached the secretary.

"Oh, well, luckily for you, he's in his office and he has some spare time," she said. "Let me just check with him." She tapped on her SmartWrist, activating its digital display, and dialed a

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number. She took it from her wrist and snapped it straight, placing it next to her ear. "Mr. Dillard, there's an officer here to see you."

"Edward Elwin." He made sure she passed on the name.

"His name is Edward Elwin." *This won't work, he doesn't know me, there's no way he'll waste his time with someone he doesn't even know.*

"Tell him I can solve him both problems of Blackburn and the Tri-Surgeon cases."

"H-He says he can... solve both problems of Blackburn and the Tri-Surgeon cases," she hesitated to repeat his words. The next few seconds were filled with nods and agreements on the secretary's part. "Very well," she said at the end of the conversation, hanging up the call and snapping her SmartWrist back around her wrist. "You can go in, Officer Elwin."

"Thank you," he said and made his way to the Chief of Police's office door.

Dillard's office was large and very inviting. Three black couches stood at one end of it while a large wooden desk and a high, black leather chair stood at the other end. *This is where he must sit and laugh with his friends in high places while they drink expensive wine,* Edward thought as he passed by the couches. He shifted his sight to Dillard's desk. *And once Dillard's done with that, he takes them here and seals whatever deal he wants from them.* Behind the tall leather chair, a wall of glass stood proud, showing the cityscape of Morth City behind it. A few medals of decoration and honorary diplomas hung on the walls around, some credited to Dillard when he was only a Vice Chief of Police. *He doesn't deserve any of them,* Edward could spit on them. *How does a man so wretched and corrupted gets so much applause? If it weren't for Dillard, many ringleaders would be sitting in jail right now, and who knows how many lives would have been saved.*

"Officer Elwin," Dillard said, sitting on his tall chair. Jonah Dillard's appearance fit with his OldGen name. His short white hair and the wrinkles on his face suggested that he was nearing 60 in age. "I hear that you wanted to discuss with me about—"

"Charles Blackburn must not walk free," Edward dared to interrupt his superior in command. Dillard's bright green eyes

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sparkled as he narrowed his sight at the rude officer in front of him.

"I agree, but—"

"Then why are you—?"

"I warn you," Dillard slammed his hand on his desk. "If you interrupt me one more time..." Dillard slowly calmed himself. *Goddammit, Edward, calm yourself. If you keep going like this, you're going to find yourself with no job.*

"Right. Sorry, sir."

Dillard sat back in his chair and crossed his arms. "Edward... that's a name you don't see much of anymore at your age. Did your father name you after himself?"

"As did his own father."

"Really? An OldGen name passed for three generations... Interesting."

"Our careers were also passed down."

"You mean both your father and grandfather were officers?"

"That's right. I followed in my old man's footsteps."

"I guess he's retired."

"He's dead," Edward declared in a cold, dead tone.

"I see... I'm sorry to hear that. Did he die on the job?"

"No. In his own bed at age 68. Terminal cancer." *And he cursed this country and its people every single day during his illness, until the day he died. I had to hear it again and again. 'Rotten,' he would tell me. 'Rotten to the ground. Every single one of them.'* Edward reminisced about those days in his mind. *I never really bothered to ask him who he was referring to exactly. In the end, it didn't really matter. I learned that it applies to everyone. Criminals and law enforcers alike. He wanted to see justice done, but he never got that, and when he died I took his wish and embraced it as my own.*

"And tell me, Edward, how long have you been in APD?"

"Two years, sir."

"That's what I thought." Dillard cleared his throat. "You see, my father was a fisherman," he said. "He used to catch his fish at Oakneil and sell them to fish traders at Herkin Port." Edward tried to understand where he was going with the origin

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story, but he couldn't figure it out. "He was a poor, old man who never got to achieve much in his life."

"S-Sir, I don't—"

"Surely you can understand the struggles someone from a poor family has to go through to pay for his own tuition and make his way to get to where I am now?" Only now was Edward starting to see the point in Dillard's words. "I've been fighting and working hard on the force for almost 40 years, so I'm anxious to know what an officer of only two years can teach me that I don't know, about two of my most high-profile cases." A hint of fury was apparent in Dillard's voice. His hands were spread out on the wooden table, and his eyes were fixated on Edward, piercing him with their intense gaze.

"S-Sir, I meant no offense."

"And yet here you are, claiming to be able to 'solve my problem,' as you put it. So..." Dillard inched closer from the other side of the table. "What solution have you brought me?" Edward sensed contempt in his voice.

"Sir, Vernes isn't going to bother looking for that missing footage. That means Blackburn walks free."

Dillard rose from his seat. Suddenly Edward noticed how tall he was. He turned around to face the view of the city, through the glass wall. "Why are you so eager to get Blackburn in prison, if I may ask?" Dillard asked him. "You do know that the Deserter General would simply be replaced by one of his four lieutenants, right?"

"I do. But he still deserves punishment."

"Punishment, eh? And what about his men? Don't they deserve to be punished too?"

"Sir, with all due respect, if it were up to me, I would launch an offensive against Code Sanguinary. You know damn well they're not the same as they were 10 years ago. Code Sanguinary has much fewer men nowadays, and they've drastically decreased their activities. They're at the weakest they've ever been."

"And yet even at their weakest, they are still surprisingly strong. Let me remind you, Officer Elwin, that strength isn't

always measured in numbers. Blackburn's soldiers have gone through tougher training than the military itself. They're deadly and accurate, and they have military-grade weapons. Launching an attack against them would end up with a lot of casualties." *As right as he may be, something about his voice tells me that he doesn't even want Code Sanguinary to be gone.* "Either way, if you think imprisoning Blackburn would make any difference, you're greatly mistaken. These days, cutting the snake's head isn't enough. It simply grows another." Dillard took a long sigh. He appeared weary all of a sudden as if his age was finally starting to show. "I still remember the day Henrick Trife passed away. A heart attack. It was so sudden. No one saw it coming. I remember the overall sense of joy that was in the air. It was silly, really. Henrick Trife was hardly the only ringleader in Alataria at the time, and his passing wasn't going to abolish all crime in this country, yet everyone seemed so... hopeful. They honestly expected change to come." Dillard looked away from the city. His eyes now lingered on the floor. "It was only a short while before Sunyula took over his organization, and then all the smile and laughs were gone. Everyone learned a hard lesson back then. In this country, taking down a fiend only brings forth a bigger one."

Edward remained silent for a few moments. It was hard to find the right words, as he knew Dillard wasn't lying. "This... I can't say that this isn't true. But I will take this risk. I will bring THIS fiend down. Give me the Blackburn case. I'll search for that missing evidence while you give Vernes the Tri-Surgeon. You have nothing to lose."

"Are you sure you want this? You do realize that if Blackburn or his men learn of your attempts to take him down, you might make a target out of yourself."

"I won't be intimidated by some rogue soldiers."

"I see. So... where is all this willingness coming from? Did you lose someone at their hands or something?"

"No, sir. I'm just... like my father." *I'd rather see justice done than see some bills in my hand.* He wanted to say that so badly, yet he held back.



Arkaneh

Arkaneh Frye sat against the wall in the spacious interior hall at the abandoned factory that was used as an outpost for Men of Midas. Connor Griffiths, one of Reus Mallistrom's two lieutenants, sat in the corner of the room with his escort girl. All she wore were her pink lace panties, her face powdered with heavy make-up. She sat on the OldGen lieutenant's lap, grinding against his groin and licking her lush, red lips. While Griffiths was smiling a lascivious, teeth baring smile, Arkaneh simply sighed to himself and looked away. Such trivial things didn't appeal to him.

On the other side of the room sat 3 other members of the organization, or as the lieutenants liked to refer to them, brothers. *None of them are brothers of mine.* Arkaneh despised the idea. The three were drinking beer and laughing out loud as they listened to stories which Arkaneh could only describe to himself as idiotic and childish.

He tried taking his mind away from the frustrating things around him, but every thought that crossed his mind was soon interrupted by the men's boisterous laughter. *Such short minded buffoons. If I were Reus, I would be ashamed of my own men.*

Everything was upsetting Arkaneh at that moment. From the lowlifes around him to the hideous excuse for an outpost that he was sitting in. The walls around Arkaneh were peeling and almost out of color. Trash like empty beer cans and

cigarette butts were found everywhere around, and the loud traffic from the nearby road denied him any silence.

"This is what happens when you send morons like Seramoy and Heycliff to these things! They couldn't even rob a fucking convenience store!" said Ferro, the first of the three men who sat at the table, a large guy with a long Mohawk haircut and a rough voice. *Muscles for brains*, Arkaneh thought as he looked at the man.

"Would you keep it down, goddammit? Griffiths is right there! If he hears you trashing Heycliff like that..." Graysen warned him.

"He's right," said Tylene, the third man of the bunch. "Talimay may not be here right now, but if it gets back to her that you're trashing her dead brother, she'll fucking throw you in the Wailing Lake."

"Yeah, yeah, I get it..." the large man sighed. *They're right, you damn fool. Talimay can be a dangerous individual.*

Talimay Singh was Reus's second lieutenant. Even though Arkaneh considered her to be the sanest person in the organization, he didn't find himself affected by her absence. Talimay's brother, Heycliff, was one of the three guys who had died trying to rob a convenience store in Ussermis recently. She's been absent in mourning for a few days now.

"We looked like fucking amateurs on the goddamn news," Arkaneh overheard Ferro going on. "We should retaliate. Let the news have another story, this time showing that we're not the clumsy fucks they made us look like!" *Such vulgarity... such ignorance...*

"Yeah, Ferro's right," said Graysen. "I say we burn down that store where our brothers died." The three started yelling in excitement, hitting their fists at the table, all in agreement with the idea. *A mixture of cheering, laughing and rabble, all flavored with such moronic enthusiasm. I can't take this anymore*, Arkaneh thought.

"Don't be stupid," said Arkaneh. The rabble quieted down as Ferro turned around. Arkaneh's eyes were facing away, refusing to gaze at the mighty brute as he approached him with heavy steps.

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"Did you say something, little guy?"

"I said, 'Don't be stupid.'" His eyes finally turned to stare right at the grunt, full of confidence, lacking any sign of fear or fright that any other man might have shown in his place. "If you want retaliation, you should take it to the Justicars. They're the ones who killed those brothers. Burning down the shop would only matter to the shop owner, who didn't do anything, which you'd know if you'd listened to that news report."

Ferro let out a burst of laughter. Arkaneh remained the same, holding a serious expression on his face, and sending dead, cold eyes right at the laughing brute.

"You're a funny man. What's your name, funny man?"

"Arkaneh Frye. And if I made you laugh I apologize, that was not my intention. I actually simply wanted to show you how dumb you are." Ferro's face turned red within half a second.

"You fucking piece of—"

"I wouldn't recommend doing so much as touching me. You know Griffiths isn't very intolerant with brothers fighting among themselves, and he's right there." Arkaneh pointed at Griffiths, as the old lieutenant moved his hand softly over his prostitute's body.

Ferro made a grunting sound while Arkaneh kept provoking him with his fearless appearance. Eventually, Ferro went back to his table without saying a word, resuming his conversation with his brothers instead.

Arkaneh looked around the great hall. Rusty machinery and walls covered with stains and dirt surrounded him. *Rust and filth are all I see here*, he thought. About a dozen people were in the outpost, and none of them were doing something Arkaneh wouldn't consider disgraceful. It was either drinking beer and talking non-stop about idiotic topics with a lack of any intellect in the conversation, like Ferro, Graysen, and Tylene, or people being pleased by the warm touch and comforting care of prostitutes. *Those girls... the way they dance and parade around these wretched animals... it's almost as if they enjoy it. No... they're not enjoying any of it, they're just trying to please the lieutenant. Griffiths must*

have 'borrowed' them from Kleon Hanford, the guy who's running the Godly Succubi strip club in Ashcote.

Thinking about places like the Godly Succubi made Arkaneh feel sick. The thought of a strip club where women are forced to undress and pleasure men for a living... not to mention the rumors about a private VIP section in the club, limited only to powerful and influential men, where they could get the same service from underage girls. Kleon Hanford, the club's manager, was notoriously known as a womanizer and a sex addict. He was also a member of Men of Midas, and so his club was giving the organization a percentage of its revenues.

Drifting away from such revolting thoughts, Arkaneh returned to focus on the three men, noticing their enthusiasm about the idea of attacking the convenience store in Ussemmis. *They're still talking about that?* By now, Arkaneh had had enough of it and decided to do something about it. He got to his feet and started walking toward Griffiths.

As he approached, he saw the escort girl sending Griffiths a naughty smile while curving her body, like a wave in a wild ocean. Her hand moved over his chest, slowly and gently. *Lieutenants are known for being spoiled by their ringleader, and Reus Mallistrom's lieutenants are no exception.*

"Can we talk for a second?"

"And who the fuck are you?" said Griffiths without even giving Arkaneh the courtesy of looking away from his girl.

"My name is Arkaneh Frye," Arkaneh maintained his composure, even though he was infuriated inside.

Griffiths now realized he was not going to enjoy his lap dance with Arkaneh looming over his shoulder. He shooed the girl away and finally took a long, hard look at Arkaneh as if he was trying to figure out just who was the man in front of him.

"You're a tenderfoot, aren't you? I remember your face."

Tenderfoot... what an awful word to brand new recruits with. "Yeah," he reluctantly agreed to be called something so demeaning in his eyes.

"How long have you been in Men of Midas?"

"About a month or so."

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"I see." Griffiths didn't seem impressed. Arkaneh already knew some things about Griffiths from what he had heard from others. Connor Griffiths was a man who deeply believe in values of loyalty and family. Men of Midas was considered in his eyes a brotherhood, and he cared much for his men, yet he was also known as a man with some distaste for tenderfoots. "So what is it that you want, Arkaneh Frye?" Griffiths asked.

"Those men over there," Arkaneh shamelessly pointed his finger at the 3 brutes sneering at the table amongst themselves. "They want to have a rampage at that convenience store from the news."

"Yeah, I could hear them all the way from here, so what?"

"You're a lieutenant. That attack, like all actions of the organization, is going to have to be sanctioned by you. You have to deny it."

"And why would I do that?"

"Because that won't make any sense—"

"Why the fuck not?" Griffiths raised his voice. "Let me ask you something, tenderfoot, do you think the people of Lady Dread, Code Sanguinary, fuck, even the fucking Ferals don't ever watch any news? When they see these kinds of things, it makes us look weak, which is something we can't have them thinking. Otherwise, they might try to take advantage of that. As long as it makes the news broadcast something that might mend that reputation we got from those 3 idiots, it's fine with me."

Arkaneh could see the point behind Griffiths' words. *Our image has great importance in this line of work. They say up until 10 years ago or so, the state of Georgia in the US had a few biker gangs running in it. Many of them were too scattered and weak as far as manpower went, and once the larger group, Harley Nation, started a territory war with them, it ended up with some bloodshed and a merge of all remaining members of the weaker gangs into Harley Nation.*

Still, Arkaneh couldn't ignore the ever-bothering thought that that plan was a pure waste of time and effort, on top of being a risk for his so-called 'brothers', as they could end up just like the 3 who had gone there before them and got

themselves killed. "The Justicars should be our real target," Arkaneh said.

"Don't think for a second that I've forgotten about the fucking Justicars. They've been a massive pain in our fucking ass recently. Seems like everywhere we go now they're just happy to be there and ruin all the fun." Arkaneh was already aware of the Justicars' recent interference with their activities. *I wonder...* thoughts started running through his mind.

"How long have they appeared like that?" Arkaneh asked.

"A few months now, I guess." Griffiths shrugged.

"I see," he stroked his chin. "And I'm guessing you're not only talking about robbery attempts like the recent one."

"No. Drug buys, gun trades with Code Sanguinary, heck, we even had a run-in with them when we were buying some new girls from Lady Dread at Herkin Port a while back." Arkaneh pondered to himself. "Why? What's on your mind?" Griffiths wondered.

"Nothing," he reassured Griffiths. "Regarding attacking that convenience store, I guess you're right. Maybe this course of action would be wiser. I'd like to be a part of it if you don't mind." Griffiths shrugged and quickly called his seductive mistress back.

Arkaneh started walking away. He couldn't help but let the sparks in his mind bounce between the walls of his head. He had thought of a great idea, one that not only tested a theory of his but also might make that attack more profitable for everyone, especially himself. His face was cold, yet his eyes burned.

They see me only as a simple tenderfoot. They think I'm just another member who's going to make some quick cash and get shot at some point. But they don't know me. They don't know my intentions. And by the time they will... they will all know my name.

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Maileena

The hot waters hit Maileena's bare body and washed away the sweat and blood that covered her. Like many other showers she had had before, she felt as if she was washing away more than just the physical filth. After what happened in the warehouse, she felt so violated that the first thing she did upon entering Demilan's apartment was asking where the shower was. She didn't mind if she came off as a bit rude. After all, she'd just met the guy. Then again, she constantly reminded herself how badly she needed his help. *He's very good at killing. He might be my only chance of getting Vera back.*

After stepping out of the shower, she stood in front of the mirror and looked at herself while her slender body was dripping all over the floor. She noticed that her cheek was slightly swollen. She also spotted a few bruises on her body in different locations and in varying severities. Some were on her legs or chest, some were barely visible and some were dark and apparent. She refrained from trying to sort which ones were courtesy of her latest abusers from the warehouse and which ones came before them.

She walked into the living room wrapped in a white towel, seeing Demilan sitting on the couch. His long, black wavy hair reached his shoulders, looking moist with sweat. Black stubble adorned his face and a harsh expression defined it. He wore a black leather jacket and dirty blue jeans. His duffel bag rested

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on the floor beside his feet while his assault rifle sat on his lap. Maileena admired the killing machine's beauty, painted with a green-grey camouflage.

The apartment Demilan took them to was well-furnished, but it was also dusty and looked as if on one has been to it in a long time. Still, Demilan had the key to it, so she just assumed he didn't clean it in a while.

"How do you feel?" he asked her.

"Still like shit, but... better, I guess," she replied. An awkward silence followed as Demilan tried his best not to look at her damp body, covered only by a rather thin piece of fabric. *It feels weird... for once that a man would actually look away from the figure of my body, rather than stripping me with his eyes while drooling all over the floor with lecherous thoughts rushing through his mind. It feels out of place... I guess I'm used to that kind of obnoxious behavior.*

In an effort to avoid memories that might make her feel bad about herself, Maileena turned to raise another question that had popped into her mind earlier.

"Tell me, why didn't you use any Elastics back there? I mean, you might have left behind all kinds of evidence like spit, hair, fingerprints. You can get really fucked if the cops find anything like that there."

"I don't care. Besides, I don't have any Elastics."

"Than... why the fuck would you mess with Men of Midas? Don't you know how dangerous Reus Mallistrom can be?"

"Don't you take me for a child, little girl. I knew Reus Mallistrom long before you did, and I'm not scared of him."

"And what about the cops?"

"Even if the police finds out I'm the one who killed those men, you can bet either Mallistrom or one of his lieutenants will put a few bucks in the right hand to make sure they back off to let them have their revenge, so the cops aren't much to worry about."

"Well, either way, they can still track down where you live and come here."

"Only that this isn't my apartment. This is... my father's."

"Your father? And why wouldn't they search for you here?"

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"I doubt they'll try. He's in a nursing home, so they'll have little reason to think I'm here."

Maileena felt a bit struck by Demilan's astounding confidence and knowledge of how everything worked with regards to crime organizations. It didn't take too long for her to do the math.

"Who are you?" she asked him, sounding as if she had just met the man. Demilan looked down at the ground before staring straight into Maileena's eyes with a cold, harsh look. He knew she wasn't expecting to hear his name or anything similar. She wanted to know who he was regarding affiliations.

"Do the math yourself," he answered as if he was too ashamed to say it himself.

"Well, I can rule out Men of Midas. And if you were a Feral you'd have raped or tortured me long ago. You came here on a motorcycle, but I don't see Harley Nation's traditional sleeveless shirts. Other than that you could be Lady Dread, Code Sanguinary or even a Justicar for all I can tell." A slight curve formed on Demilan's lips. He raised his assault rifle and held it above his head with one hand.

"This should narrow your list down."

Maileena immediately knew what he meant. Demilan's assault rifle was military grade, the kind you only see in one particular group in Alataria. A group that is known for their ties with the military, and for their unique perk of having high-grade weapons. Code Sanguinary. "I see," she said. "So this is Blackburn's doing." Demilan shook his head.

"It's not. I'm a former soldier of Blackburn. I've been out of Code Sanguinary for about a year now."

"How come?"

"It's... a long story." His eyes slid back to stare at the floor.

Out of respect for the ex-soldier, Maileena backed off the subject and dug no further. Instead, she asked him to look away as she was getting dressed. Without hesitation, Demilan did as asked, and wouldn't move his head by an inch until she gave him the okay to do so. Upon his turning back, she couldn't hold herself back from chuckling.

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"What is it?" he asked.

"Nothing, it's just... I'm not used to men like you. Men who aren't disrespectful or, at least, drooling at the thought of me getting naked."

"Don't exaggerate. There are worse places in this country as far as population goes. This isn't the Brontspil or Flintwood districts."

"No, but this is Ashcote, where you have strip clubs like the Godly Succubi."

"And what would you know about the Godly Succubi?"

"More than I wish I did."

"What do you...? Wait, don't tell me..." he choked on his words. Maileena remained quiet in turn, yet her eyes reflected that this was true, that she truly had the misfortune of working at the god-forsaken club. "You said you were 15," he said.

"And I didn't lie." A moment later it hit him. He looked at her with a shocked expression on his face, and wide open eyes. "The VIP services," he said in a weak voice, almost whispering. Maileena, in turn, gave him a sharp, cold look, confirming that horrible detail about her life with her eyes alone. "I heard about it only as rumors back when I was still in Code Sanguinary."

"Well, the rumors were true. It's real."

"But... why? Why would you work there?" he asked, looking almost afraid to hear the answer.

"When I was 5 years old, my parents were killed by a bunch of Ferals, leaving me and my sister, Vera, to live with our grandmother. But after she died last year, Vera and I were left with no other relatives to take care of us, which left us in the hands of Social Services. They placed us in the custody of a drunken asshole. He was very abusive, so I took Vera and we both ran away. He didn't report it for some reason, I guess he preferred not having to feed or take care of us while he was still cashing in on whatever allowance he was getting from Social Services. My grandmother's apartment remained vacant so we stayed there. We tried to survive on our own. I was trying to bring in some money by taking 2 jobs, but it wasn't

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enough. I knew Mallistrom's Men of Midas was a great source of cash, so I went to the Godly Succubi and asked for a job."

Demilan looked appalled. He ran his hand back and forth through his long hair. His eyes were fixed on the girl as she told him the harrowing story. "I can already tell how that worked out," he said.

"They slapped me and told me to get lost." Her eyes now slid to the floor, too embarrassed to look at him. "There was this guy... Kleon Hanford... he was in charge of the girls there... I had to convince him to hire me."

"Oh, god, please spare me," he raised his hand. "I don't want to hear it."

"I never slept with him," she reassured him. "I just... showed him what I had to offer." Demilan looked disgusted. "Anyway, he hired me eventually."

"I can't believe they're actually running those services... calling it VIP as if it was some fucking luxury." He remained calm, yet the rage inside him was clear to see.

"Well, those who came to use us wouldn't refuse to call it that."

"Goddammit," he found the bitter truth hard to swallow. "What kind of sick freaks use little girls for their pleasure?"

"The powerful ones. Politicians, high-ranking businessmen, or basically any good friend of Reus Mallistrom." There was evident confidence in her voice. Maileena had spent enough time in the VIP section to know very well what she was talking about. She knew every inch and every face in the Godly Succubi.

"Fuck," he buried his face in his hands.

"Do you still work there?"

"No. A couple of days ago one of the men that I was to serve was being violent. Too violent." She still remembered the pain he inflicted on her. It was horrible, and it seemed to never end. *That grin he had on his face. He didn't care if I was hurting, he only cared about fulfilling his twisted fetish.* The memory pained her almost as much as his hits did. *If you ever want to find the filthiest, most sadistic and heartless men in Alataria, the Godly Succubi is where*

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you'll find them. "I couldn't take it anymore so I tried to leave." She continued her story. "He fought me back and I ended up punching him in the face to escape. Obviously, Mallistrom's men didn't appreciate that, but before I could do anything, they broke into my house and kidnapped Vera and me. They gave me to those men you saw in that warehouse. They'd been having their way with me until you showed up."

"Do you know where your sister is?"

"No. That's why I need your help. I have to find her."

"How old is she?"

"12."

"Oh, fuck," he ran his hand through his stubble. "Don't worry, we'll get her."

"Thank you, Demilan." He lay back without talking further. She decided to give him a few seconds to wrap his mind around all that he had just heard. She saw the revolver lying on the table, the same one she took from the one named Maythem. She took it in her hand and rubbed her finger against the slick steel of the long barrel. She wrapped her right hand around the handle and wheeled its barrel with her left. It felt slightly heavy, yet she could picture herself getting used to its weight.

"That's a hell of a weapon. Do you know how to use it?" Demilan asked her.

"Everything can be learned," she pointed the gun at the wall, squeezing her eye at the sights as if there was an actual target standing right in front of her. She then lowered the gun, staring at the mechanical marvel instead. *Such a beautiful tool of death.* She loved the way it looked.

"You like it, don't you?" Demilan noticed the slight curve of her mouth.

"I do, very much."

"Maybe you should name it."

"It's not a pet."

"Many people name their guns. I've known some guys at Code Sanguinary who did. Sunyula Trife named her double-blade sword Scarlet Thorn."

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"I see... Well, I don't have a name for it."

"You'll get one, eventually." He got up from the couch, grabbing his assault rifle with him. "I need to go. I have to find Odis. Stay here, Maileena. I'll be back in about—"

"Fuck, no. I'm going with you."

Demilan sighed and grabbed her shoulder. "I don't need to tell you that this isn't a game. You saw me killing those people in that warehouse."

"And you saw me beat the shit out of one of them. I'm not innocent, trust me. I may look young, but I've seen and done more than anyone should at my age." Maileena's eyes were burning with determination.

Demilan reluctantly agreed. He was clearly not happy with his decision, yet he went with it anyway. He strapped his duffel bag on his back and left the apartment along with Maileena.

This isn't about repaying Demilan for saving me. This isn't about trying to help him or something. This is about seeing these things to make myself have a better understanding of them. This might make me stronger. I need to be stronger to save Vera.



Edrimer

The smell of Edrimer's homemade chicken soup spread all over the small kitchen in his uncle's apartment. His old uncle, Jeremy Frye, sat at the small rectangular table, waiting for his dinner. Edrimer never really liked eating chicken soup, yet he knew that his uncle did, so he made the gesture of making it for him.

"At least, you're safe and sound," said Jeremy in regards to the robbery at Edrimer's workplace.

"I'm telling you, Uncle Jeremy, these fucking gangs have been a plague in Alataria over the last decade," Edrimer grunted as he placed two bowls of the soup on the table, one for each of them.

"You think gangs didn't exist back when I was young? We had all sorts of them roaming the streets, and the police weren't that much more effective than they are now. The only difference is that back then a life of crime wasn't very rewarding or even worth the risk. Today, with our shitty economy, being a gang member can fix you up far better than having a regular job, and the risks are not that great with all those dirty cops," said the 68-year-old as he took a sip out of his spoon.

Edrimer sighed while sipping some soup as well. "The more years pass, the more everything seems fucking grim," said Edrimer.

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"Be grateful that you never had to participate in things like the Tearful Rebellion. I did, and I wish I didn't have to remember any of it." *Oh, boy, I really better start watching my words. I might trigger one of his 'good old days' stories. I love Uncle Jeremy, but his stories are the very reason I tend to dislike OldGens.*

"I was 8 when the Tearful Rebellion happened," Edrimer said. "I barely remember anything from the time it happened. Basically, everything I know about it is from the pictures and videos on the internet."

"Your brother, Arkaneh, was 10 back then and he remembered things too well for his own good."

Arkaneh... Every time Edrimer's brother came up he would sadden a bit, reminiscing about the last time he saw his older brother. It was one of the few things that could snap Edrimer out of his sarcastic attitude. Edrimer pushed the bowl of soup away. He'd lost all appetite. He got up from his seat and instead moved to the kitchen window, looking out at the cloudy horizon. *It was 3 years ago... no, 2 years. Yes, it was 2 years ago when Arkaneh decided to leave us and move away, right after his girlfriend, Elina, died.*

"I'm sure Arkaneh is fine, Edrimer." *He says the same thing every time. He always notices my reaction to any mention of Arkaneh.* "You two have always been smart enough to take care of yourselves." Edrimer sounded a long sigh as he kept on focusing on the view. The night sky was dark, shrouding the buildings and streets with an eerie atmosphere.

"We barely heard from him, Uncle."

Jeremy let his spoon drown in his soup. It seemed that he'd also lost his appetite. "Your brother wasn't the same after what happened to Elina, but I'm sure he still cares for you." *Does he?* Edrimer wondered if there was any truth to that.

For almost as long as Edrimer could remember himself, he only had two family members, and they were Jeremy and Arkaneh. His parents were part of the rebels during the Tearful Rebellion, and they were killed during its events. To that day, Edrimer didn't actually know the circumstances of his parents' death, nor did he wish to know. He never asked Jeremy about

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it, and he didn't see the point in knowing. *All I know is that they died bravely, on a fiery battlefield in the Heart, amidst ruin and chaos, under a veil of cries for help. They were heroes... and yet those in power in the Heart would label them as traitors and terrorists.* Edrimer didn't remember all that much of them, yet in his heart, he still missed them, just as he missed Arkaneh.

All of a sudden, his train of thought was cut abrupt, as his SmartWrist lit up and vibrated, signaling an incoming call. Zachary's name was displayed on the bracelet.

"What's up, boss?" Edrimer picked up the call.

"Edrimer, get to the store quickly! I can see them coming, please—!" Zachary sounded panicked and anxious.

"Hold on, hold on. Who's coming? What are you talking about?"

"The men with the golden masks." The words echoed in Edrimer's mind. *Men of Midas.*

"I'm on my way. Hold tight." He hung up the call, grabbed his long, gray coat and rushed to leave the apartment, promising his uncle that he would be back shortly as he shut the door behind him.

I can't believe they're doing this again, he thought to himself, as he raced down the road in his old car. *Is this retaliation for those three guys they lost? But why would they attack the store? The Justicars got the blame for all three deaths on the news, so... what's going on?*

Edrimer felt the sweat building up on his face, his mind constantly imagining the worst and best scenarios that might be expecting him. All he hoped was that old Zachary was alright. *Zachary is a lone wolf. His wife passed away and his son hasn't spoken to him in years. I'm the only one he trusts and knows well. I was the only one he could call.* He pushed the gas pedal further.

How am I supposed to fight them back this time? I don't even have a gun. Should I call the police? Are the Justicars going to miraculously appear again? He felt as if every single possible concern had risen up in his head during the 10-minute drive to the store.

As he was about to make the turn to the store, he could already hear a series of loud noises that could only be interpreted as gunshots. *If they laid a finger on that old bastard...*

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Once he finally made the turn, he felt as if his heart had dropped to the floor. His eyes refused to accept what they saw. Out of all the scenarios he'd pictured by the time he got there, this might have been one of the worst ones.

The store was a wreck. All windows were shattered and broken. The few pieces of glass that remained standing were riddled with bullet holes.

2 men were crouching behind a red car in front of the store, both of them wearing gold Elastics. They were carrying pistols in their hands.

On the opposite of them were 2 other men who wore the white Elastics of the Justicars. The Justicars were carrying sub-machine guns and were putting heavy fire on the red car, hoping that one of their bullets would find its way to the golden thugs.

Between them was Zachary, sitting against the store's entrance doors. His hand was placed on his belly, red with blood from the bullet wound he has taken there. *No...*

Edrimer wanted to rush to Zachary's side, but he knew that walking into the firefight would only get him killed. He watched as the Justicars sprayed the red car with bullets, reloaded their magazines, and then repeated the process.

Eventually, they held their fire for a few seconds, which made the golden thugs come out of their hiding spots to try to take a shot at the White Knights of Alataria. The two Men of Midas poked their head out and fired a few rounds at the Justicars. In return, the Justicars fired back.

One of the Men of Midas was shot in the head, spraying a new shade of red all over the red car, while the other one suffered a shot to his right arm. The wounded man returned to hide behind the car while his comrade fell to the floor beside him. Somewhere in his heart, Edrimer wished that he could be the one to put those bullets in them.

He heard Zachary coughing, the redness from his belly now almost reaching his legs. *I have to get to him. The Men of Midas are done. The wounded guy isn't going to be doing much anymore, and even if he does try to make one last attempt at those Justicars, they can surely*

take him down with no problem. I have to take this chance. He got out of his car and ran towards the store. He ran behind the two Justicars to avoid getting himself between the two fronts of the battle. Edrimer finally made it to Zachary, crouching by the OldGen, and taking his hand. "I'm here, Zachary, I'm here." He caught his breath while speaking. Once he noticed that the hand that covered the bullet wound was still as a rock, he realized he was too late. He looked at Zachary's face and saw his lifeless eyes, staring at the horizon.

The next few seconds felt eternal to Edrimer, and during them, he felt a crushing wave of sadness and grief which, by the time those seconds passed, turned into an erupting blaze of rage and fury.

He wanted them dead. All of them. Every single one of them. *Zachary didn't deserve this!* He kept thinking. The idea to take one of the Justicars' sub-machine guns and finish off the wounded shooter crossed his mind, but before he could put any further thought into it, the situation changed.

He didn't even see the black van coming. By the time he noticed it, there was no stopping it from hitting the two Justicars at full throttle. The few shots that the White Knights managed to take at the van before getting run over didn't seem to do much, as three Elastics-wearing members of Men of Midas jumped out of it unharmed.

Two of the three went to care for their wounded brother while the other one slowly made his way to Edrimer, a pistol gripped in his hand.

I can't believe this. Just a minute ago I thought I was going to get out of this alive. I must have the shittiest luck ever. There was no point in trying to think his way out of the situation. Even if he could manage to take out the guy in front of him, the other two would simply make sure to kill him. The situation seemed lost.

Edrimer stooped his head as his executioner stood before him. He refused to look at him. "Just get this over with, you motherfucker." He welcomed death.

"Hey, man, are you going to kill that guy or what?" one of the two other guys yelled at the third one as they carried the

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wounded man and the dead one into the van.

"Leave him," said the third man. "Enough blood has been shed here."

Before Edrimer could even be shocked by the fact that his life had just been spared, something else shocked him. *That voice... it can't be...* The man crouched down in front of Edrimer and said, "If you say anything to the cops about those two brothers of ours who got shot, we will hunt you and your loved ones down. When the cops get here, you tell them that none of us got hit."

Edrimer could see the man's eyes through the holes in his golden mask. *Blue eyes... not just any blue eyes... I recognize them... their shape, their hue... and that voice...* "Arkaneh!" he called. The man who he thought to be his long-absent brother stood still and narrowed his sight. "It's you, isn't it?" Edrimer asked him. *It has to be him. I'm not wrong. That voice. Those eyes. That's my brother, alright.* The man stood still, not saying a word. "I know it's you, Arkaneh!"

The man who he sought to be Arkaneh Frye simply turned around and walked away towards the black van. "Arkaneh!" Edrimer called out to him as his figure slowly created a distance between the two. Once the man reached the van, he took the driver's seat and drove away with his comrades, leaving Edrimer alone next to the bodies of Zachary and the two Justicars.

Arkaneh... you've got to be kidding me. How the fuck did he end up in Men of Midas? Why would he ever join them?

Edrimer felt distraught. All kinds of emotions ran through him. He sat next to Zachary's still body for a few minutes before he heard a voice nearby. "Grenn!" the voice called. Edrimer got up and inched towards where the voice was coming from, leading him to the bodies of the two Justicars. "Grenn, come in!" the voice called again. It was coming from a radio communication device on one of the dead Justicars. He grabbed it and took a closer look at it. A black radio transmitter, around half the size of his palm. "Grenn, what's going on over there, goddammit?!" the voice came from the

device. Edrimer couldn't trouble himself to think much in his current state. He pressed the button on the side of the device and brought his mouth closer to it.

"Hello?" he said. No voice answered on the other side. "Hello?" Edrimer repeated.

"Who is this?" the male voice finally came from the other end of the line. Edrimer looked around him. All he saw was blood and bullet holes everywhere. He was sick of it. He now realized that his wish to have a peaceful life would never come true on its own. He had to make it come true by taking action. By putting the men who deny it of him to their just end.

"My name is Edrimer Frye, and I would like to join the Justicars."



Arkaneh

"Step on it!" Ferro urged Arkaneh. "Tylen is losing blood!" he referred to the wounded man in the van.

"Don't worry, Tylen, we're going to get you fixed," said Graysen, the fourth man inside the van. "No, we're not," Arkaneh stated in a cold, decisive tone.

"What did you say?" Graysen asked, irritated.

"Look how much blood he's lost. By the time I get anywhere, he'll be dead. There's no saving him," Arkaneh condemned Tylen with his words.

"If you drive faster, I'll prove you wrong!" Ferro growled at Arkaneh. *No, you won't.* Arkaneh decided to keep that reply in his mind alone. *No point in further arguing with these idiots.*

He recalled the unexpected appearance of his brother back at the store. *What was he doing there? That wasn't part of my plan. If these guys had heard him calling my name, they'd have taken him out for sure.* The fact that Edrimer managed to recognize Arkaneh through the mask tremendously surprised him. *If it were any other man there in my place, holding that gun in front of him, Edrimer would probably be lying dead there along with those Justicars and that old man right now, yet I spared him. Threatening him and his loved ones, which can basically only be Uncle Jeremy, ensured that he won't talk about those we lost in the fight. Even if he suspects that it was me, he won't risk getting Jeremy killed.*

A couple of police cars passed by the van, driving in the

opposite direction towards the convenience store, their sirens making a vivid display of blue and red colors and an ear-deafening noise. *Edrimer must have called them after we left. Doesn't matter much to us. The only things the cops will get out of that crime scene are the identities of two dead Justicars.*

Ferro and Graysen kept urging Arkaneh to drive faster and reassuring Tylen that everything would be alright. *The Justicars... They showed up again. This proves my theory. It's not a coincidence that lately they always happen to know where and when to be. Someone in Men of Midas is tipping them off. After their appearance at the robbery attempt I started suspecting that it might be the case, but being a new recruit I had to put that theory to the test. That's the only reason I went along with this stupid plan to attack that store again. I had to see if the Justicars would know to show up when we strike. And they did. Now that I'm aware that there's a rat somewhere around, I have to flush him out and dispose of him. He is a threat to my plans.*

"Oh, fuck, he's getting pale, man!" Graysen panicked.

"Stay with us, Tylen!" Ferro said.

"I'm giving him no more than 10 minutes," Arkaneh coldly announced.

"Just shut up and drive!" Ferro yelled.

But am I sure it's a rat? Could it be that one of the rooms is bugged instead? No, impossible. Griffiths and Talimay make regular sweeps throughout the outposts for such cases. It has to be a rat.

From behind, Arkaneh kept hearing Tylen's heavy breathing and squeals of pain, along with Ferro's coarse voice reassuring him.

How is the rat even feeding the Justicars with information? Is he leaking it to them directly or is he wired in some way and is doing it without even knowing? Well, I can safely rule out everyone in the van. If any of them was snitching to the Justicars, whether directly or indirectly, then the Justicars wouldn't have shown up and attacked us. They knew that we would have our Elastics on, so they could potentially kill their own rat without knowing. No... it can't be any of the people in this van.

As much as Arkaneh wanted to, concentrating on the matter wasn't easy, with the two grunts constantly throwing empty promises at the dying man, always throwing him off his

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train of thought. The one thing that consoled him was that it was keeping them from seeing where they were heading. It had been a few minutes now since Arkaneh had passed by the turn to Ravenwey Burrows, where their outpost was, in the abandoned factory. Instead, he was heading towards Servein.

The immediate suspects are the two lieutenants since they're the ones who get involved in all the organization's actions. But it can't be Talimay Singh. Her brother, Heycliff, was recently killed by the Justicars in that robbery attempt. If she were the rat, she wouldn't have leaked about that attack and jeopardized her brother, and if she were bugged, the Justicars would know that if they killed her brother their rat would stop functioning as she would be mourning him. Besides, with her gone at the moment, she wouldn't have known about this attack. No... she's not the rat... which leaves Connor Griffiths as my prime suspect.

A sharp right turn onto a dirt road grabbed Ferro's attention. "What the... Where the fuck are we?!"

"Servein," Arkaneh answered.

"What the fuck are we doing in Servein?!"

"You'll see in a minute."

The dirt road led to a large forest; one with gray trees which barely presented any foliage. The ground had a brown shade to it, with twigs and sprigs everywhere. The trees stood almost naked, rising to a height of 30 feet, blowing in the harsh wind.

Somewhere in the middle of the road, with a few more miles still ahead to go on it, Arkaneh stopped the van and turned off the engine.

He turned around and watched as Graysen closed Tylen's eyes with a sad expression on his face. "He's gone," he declared. Arkaneh didn't appear even slightly sad. His face remained as serious and devoid of any emotion as always.

"Let's go," Arkaneh ordered the two without even giving them any more than 5 seconds to mourn their brother.

"Go where? What are we doing here?" asked Ferro.

Arkaneh grabbed a black bag from the left rear corner of the back of the van and pulled four shovels out of it. "Well, I guess we'll only be using three." He threw the spare shovel back into the van. He looked into Ferro's fiery eyes and knew

he was bound to hand out some explanations. "Griffiths's orders," Arkaneh said. "Before we went out, he told me that if anyone should die on this attack, they must be buried here, where no one will ever find their body."

"W-Why?"

"Because if the news reports that another one of us got killed in a fight against the Justicars, our image will be damaged again. We can't have anyone knowing that we lost two brothers." He hated using that last word. Ferro exchanged glances with Graysen as if the two were deciding telepathically whether or not to trust him. Eventually, after a few seconds, they each grabbed a shovel.

The three crawled out of the van, with Graysen carrying Tylen's body on his back, and Ferro carrying Tylen's dead partner. Following Arkaneh's lead, the three walked into the forest for a few minutes until hitting a 100 square foot clearing. "Here." Arkaneh shoved his shovel into the ground, marking the place to bury the bodies.

The three started digging vigorously. As a pile of dirt stacked on one side of the clearing, a hole was created on the other. For a bit more than 10 minutes they thrust their shovels into the ground again and again, until the grave was complete.

"That's enough," Arkaneh ended the tiring digging process with the wipe of his sweat. The other two dropped their shovels to the ground and placed the two bodies in the hole. The grave was wide enough to take the two without needing to stack one body on top of the other.

"Great job, guys," Arkaneh acknowledged their hard work.

"So, what now?" asked Ferro. A slight curve appeared on Arkaneh's mouth. He looked at the two with his cold, dead eyes, giving them a chance to realize the answer for themselves a second before he drew his gun. They had no time to react. No time to do anything against it. Their fate was sealed as soon as they got into that van with the ominous blonde-haired tenderfoot known as Arkaneh Frye. He pulled the trigger, shooting Ferro in the head, and then quickly shooting again at Graysen's head. It happened so fast that none of them could

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even show any hint of a facial reaction. Arkaneh found himself slightly disappointed at that. He wished to catch a look at their expressions upon the face of death.

Once he threw their bodies on top of the other two in the grave, he started shoveling dirt back in. Once the bodies were almost completely covered, he took one last glimpse at Ferro's dead expression. Arkaneh felt nothing. Not even a shred of sympathy or guilt. His face remained the same, cold as the winter's night. Upon finishing, he went back into the van and drove away, this time heading for the abandoned factory in Ravenwey Burrows.

With the van now empty, Arkaneh relished the silence he had from all the nonsense every one of those 'brothers' around him kept blurting. Ever since joining their ranks, his dislike for people had only grown.

I can't know for sure if Griffiths is the rat, but I have to cover that possibility. An idea was already forming in his mind to tackle the situation.

Once he finally arrived at the abandoned factory, he entered the old building and climbed up the deteriorating stairs to the main hall. While some of the machinery was pushed aside against the wall to make room, some of it could not be moved. The resulting outcome was a large, spacious room with several large machines standing in seemingly random spots. Some of the men were sitting and talking while a few others were maintaining their guns.

In the right corner of the hall stood a room, at the top of a staircase just as shaky as the previous one, which Griffiths claimed as his office. Arkaneh could see the OldGen's cigarette smoke trail through the clear windows in that room. He climbed the stairs and entered the lieutenant's office, catching Griffiths just as he was snorting a short line of Vex.

"I just got tipped off about what happened there," said Griffiths as he rubbed his nose. A few grains of the addictive, high-inducing purple powder still lingered below his nostrils. "Two dead Justicars, none on our side. Great work. Where are the rest?" he took an inhale at his cigarette.

"They're all dead." Arkaneh blatantly announced. "The Justicars killed them all. Only I made it out."

"Oh... I see." His expression turned grim. "Did you bury them, then?"

"Just as you ordered. Deep in the forests of Servein." Arkaneh sat down in front of his desk. Griffiths's SmartWrist rested on the table in its straight form, next to an empty bottle of scotch stood and an ashtray filled with cigarette butts, its latest one still emitting a faint smoke trail.

"Fuck, how many did we lose? 3?"

"4." *That old junkie can't even hold count of his men.*

"Goddammit." He put out the cigarette. "Shit around here comes in piles."

"What do you mean?"

Griffiths slid his SmartWrist across the table to Arkaneh in utmost contempt and indifference. The pictures of two people presented on the digital display. The first was a male with long black hair, big dark eyes, and rough stubble across his face. The second one was a young female, hardly older than 16, with long, silky brown hair, turquoise-colored eyes, a small nose and slightly puffy cheeks.

"Three of our brothers were killed in a warehouse in Ashcote. These are the two fuckers whose DNA was left on the scene. He's an ex-soldier of Blackburn's and she works at the Godly Succubi." The names 'Demilan McCloud' and 'Maileena Banister' were written at the bottom of the portraits.

"The Godly Succubi? You mean in the VIP section?" Griffiths refused to answer that question directly, but his reluctance was more than enough for Arkaneh to know that the answer to that was 'Yes.' *I've heard plenty of rumors about the hidden VIP section of the Godly Succubi. Most of the girls, if not all of them, are bought from Lady Dread, whose human trafficking business is one of her primary sources of income.*

"APD are backing off to let us have them, so the word's out that—" he stopped and sighed. "Oh, fuck it, why am I even telling this to a fucking tenderfoot?" He grabbed the SmartWrist from Arkaneh's hand in frustration and placed it

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inside a drawer in his desk. "God, I wish Talimay was here to take some of this shit off my back, but she's still in mourning for her brother..." he mumbled to himself.

"Forget about this now, there's something you should know, Griffiths," said Arkaneh, drawing Griffiths's eyes to him. "I tortured one of those Justicars to give up some information. Obviously, he had nothing on their HQ's location, but he did tell me about a gun trade taking place today."

"A gun trade? With who?"

"I don't know. He said they never tell them who the supplier is, just like they don't tell them about the HQ location."

"Well, that's a shame. Knowing who supplies weapons for the Justicars would have helped a great deal."

"Then we have a chance to find that out while also doing considerable damage to them. He gave me an exact time and place."

"You're shitting me." He drew closer to the blonde tenderfoot. *This is exactly why I killed those two halfwits, Ferro and Graysen, so no one could reveal my lie about this gun trade, and so that I would get his exclusive attention.*

"It's happening in Swillstorm. We have a few hours. I say we gather a team and sabotage that trade. Not only will we get to kill some of them, but we'll also finally learn who's arming them. Once we know that, we might even be able to sever that trade connection."

"This might just cripple those fuckers."

"Exactly. Give me a list of your best men, and I'll drive them myself to the meeting point."

"Y-You? I don't know... I mean, you're just a—"

"Tenderfoot? I think I've just proven myself against the Justicars."

"Yeah, but—"

"Think about it. If Reus learns that we caught the Justicars' gun supplier... heck, we might even be able to turn him to our side, making him OUR supplier. Reus would be showering you

with everything you could ever ask for."

Griffiths stroke his goatee, pondering Arkaneh's wise words. *That's it. Take the bait. If there's anything that appeals to scum like you, it's greed.* "Alright, fine." *Jackpot.*

"Let me worry about filling the guys in, you just make me that list of men and send me on my way." *This would make sure that the trap would be set solely for Griffiths since I won't be telling them where we're going or why. If any of them know that, then I won't be able to rule Griffiths as innocent or guilty no matter the outcome. Only Griffiths must know. If he is the rat, and the Justicars show up there, it will prove that he's the leak, whether it's him doing it directly or using a wire device unbeknownst to him.*

"Alright. I'll make you that list."

As Arkaneh sat there for the next few minutes, letting Griffiths know about the place and time of the supposed trade, each time he looked at the old lieutenant, he couldn't help but see him as a little child who has just fallen into his trap. Arkaneh never tortured anyone. There was no gun trade. There was only a rat that had to be flushed out.

Haunting Scars



Edward

Edward always thought himself to be the sort of man who pursues his goals with utmost ambition and passion, yet as he scrolled through the log file which documented every entry that was made into the evidence room, he realized that fatigue and bitterness were the only kind of feelings that were driving him.

Someone walked into that evidence room and replaced the flash drive that contained the incriminating video against Blackburn with an empty one. Whoever that guy was, his name has to appear somewhere on here. The only problem is... I don't know when the switch took place. As far as I'm aware, it could have happened a month ago, and each day holds dozens of names in its columns.

The many voices of the officers working in his department made it hard to concentrate, and the intense scent of cigarettes that shrouded every corner of the place made him sick on top of it all.

The big topic on everyone's lips was clearly the serial killer dubbed the Tri-Surgeon. From what Edward could hear all around him, a few more bodies had been found, once again with their eyes, arms and hearts cut out. The investigation on the matter was moving slowly, with no big leads or suspects thus far. Even though the case managed to intrigue Edward, being a focused man, he made all thoughts of the heinous murderer subside in favor of his current case.

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Rows upon rows of names appeared in front of Edward's eyes on the computer screen. Some of them he recognized while others meant nothing to him. Deep down inside him, Edward started to wonder if he made the right decision by insistently taking Blackburn's case.

"Well, this looks... boring," Derlick came out of nowhere behind Edward.

"You have no fucking idea," said Edward in reply. "These are the log entries of everyone who has entered the evidence room lately."

"And one of them has to be the one who switched the flash drive."

"Right. Except that... I don't know who to look for or even when to look," Edward sighed.

"Dude, this is a needle in a fucking haystack. Let it go. You'll never get anything like that."

"No. I took it upon myself to put Blackburn behind bars, and this is the only way to do it."

"Don't you have any other leads to work on?"

"Well, I thought I might pay Roycen McAllister a visit. See if he might have something that could help me."

"Wow, you're really hanging on long shots with this case."

"At least I'm doing something." Edward said in an angry tone. "If I can do something to save this trial, then I'll do it. I can't let Blackburn get away with it." Derlick ran his hand through his slicked back red hair, looking defeated.

"Alright, I'll tell you what. Go drive up to Roycen, I'll work on these log entries, see if I can find something useful."

"R-Really? Don't you have other work to do?"

"Don't worry, I'll still manage to get everything done." Edward looked at him, overwhelmed. "Go on. Before I change my mind," Derlick rushed him.

"I own you one." Edward got up from his seat, grabbed his coat and rushed to leave the station.

"Just buy me a beer," Derlick called at him from afar.

Thank god I have Derlick. Without him, I'd be truly alone in that place.

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The drive to Roycen McAllister's safe house took about an hour. Being part of the witness protection program, Roycen, along with his wife and two children were moved to a small private house, just on the outskirts of Maecor, Rockbury.

Derlick is right. I'm hanging onto threads here. Roycen may have been the one who took the video of Blackburn killing that Justicar, Serik Sanders, but I don't know if he'll be able to give me anything helpful. The long drive woke all kinds of thoughts in his mind. Most of them had to do with people like Blackburn or Dillard, which he most despised, but at some point, those thoughts shifted to revolve around his father. *Dad always pursued justice. He would have gone through with this case the same way. He would have tried his best, even when chances of success would look slim. He gave me his name and ideals. I can't quit now. I can't let him down.*

Once he finally reached Roycen's safe house, he parked his police car in front of it and made his way to knock on the door. 36-year-old Roycen McAllister opened the door. He had short, wavy brown hair, bright green eyes, and a flat nose. His skin was slightly wrinkly and appeared a bit pale. *Clearly his time as an undercover soldier of Code Sanguinary and now a man with a new identity in a whole new place hasn't been sitting well with him.* The stress and anxiety were apparent on Roycen's face.

"Mr. McAllister, I'm Officer Edward Elwin, I—"

"Are you a fucking idiot? Don't call me by that name. I have a new name," Roycen looked around in paranoia.

"R-Right, sorry. Umm... As I said, I need to talk to you about the Blackburn case."

"Show me a badge," He demanded. *I've heard enough about just how dangerous and deadly Code Sanguinary can be, but I guess seeing it with your own eyes brings a whole new level of dread to it.* He showed the panicked man his badge. "Get in," Roycen rushed him inside.

A blonde woman, looking to be about the same age as Roycen, appeared at the end of the corridor that stood in front of Edward as he walked into the house. "Roycen? Who's—"

"It's alright, he's a cop," He reassured her. *I guess the sense of terror didn't skip his wife.*

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"Oh," She calmed down. "W-Well, would you like some tea, or... something to eat?" she seemed hesitant to offer hospitality to a guest as if the matter had become foreign to her.

"No, I'm fine, thank you," said Edward.

"Let's talk in the living room." Roycen guided him to a small living room where two white couches stood next to each other, a low glass table in between them, with an unlit fireplace across from them. Roycen sat on one of the couches while Edward sat on the other.

"Roycen, are... are you alright?" Edward expressed his concern at the pale man.

"I-I'm fine," Roycen replied, looking frantic. *The presence of a cop must stress him.*

"How are you adjusting to the witness protection program?"

"It's... okay, I guess. I lost all my friends and... my kids are pretty confused. They're currently at their new school. They don't know what to think, but..." he paused and looked away from Edward. "We're okay," he finished.

"Look, I get that it might be hard—"

"What do you want?" Roycen wasted no time. Edward respected that and dwelled no further on the matter.

"You probably already know what caused the postponement of Blackburn's trial," said Edward.

"I don't, actually."

Edward seemed perplexed. *I figured he would've asked one of the cops he knew by now. this is, after all, the case that brought him to where he is now.* "Well, that video you took of Blackburn killing Serik Sanders... someone took it. The flash drive that had it is gone. I'm trying to save this case while I still have time before it resumes. I need to know if there's any way we can recover that video you took."

"I-That video was on the flash drive. The flash drive is gone. There's nothing I can help with anymore."

"Think, Roycen. Everything you've done here is going to waste."

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"Look, my life isn't going to change back to what they were anymore, so forgive me if I don't give a shit. I don't care about this case anymore. Truth be told, I don't want to hear about it. I'm sorry, officer, but I can't help you." He stood up from the couch. "If this is why you came here, I'm going to have to ask you to leave now." Edward noticed the frightened expression on his face. His hand was slightly shaking, and he was clearly in a rush to get him to leave. *Something's not right. Could he be hiding something?*

"Roycen... why did you go along with the undercover task?"

"W-What?"

"You heard me. Why did you agree to go undercover as a soldier for Code Sanguinary?"

"I-I wanted to."

"No, you didn't. Look at you. You're scared to shit. You're fucking shivering."

"I'm going to ask you to leave, officer." He dropped his gaze to the floor, unable to look at Edward's face as he was politely shooing him.

"Roycen, look at me," Edward commanded, but with no success.

"Please, leave," Roycen's voice now sounded more resilient, and yet also mixed with further anxiety.

"Look at me!" Edward said out loud, this time succeeding in getting him to finally look at him. He could see it now. The fear in his eyes. The terror in his heart. *He didn't want this. He didn't want any of this.* "Who put you up to it? Who made you take that job?"

"I-I can't—" Edward shoved him back into his seat, interrupting his mumbles.

"Tell me!" he ordered. Roycen squirmed in his seat, and Edward could already read the answer in his eyes. "Was it Dillard?" he asked him. Roycen became silent, drifting his eyes away, confirming Edward's fear. *Why am I not surprised?* "What did he offer you? Money?"

"Y-Yeah." The words nearly choked behind Roycen's now-

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weak voice. "You have to understand, I had huge debts, and he offered to help me clear them."

"Goddammit..." Edward murmured to himself in frustration. "Fucking Dillard..." he kept on. Roycen looked almost traumatized, sitting on his couch, still trembling and breathing heavily. "Alright, look, I know you don't want to live in this fear. That's why I need you to help me. If we take down Blackburn, we can take Code Sanguinary down for good, too. You won't have to—" the doorbell interrupted Edward's words.

Roycen looked frantic once more. "Are you expecting anyone?" asked Edward.

"N-No," he replied.

Roycen's wife approached the door at first, but before she reached it, Roycen stopped her and signaled her to back away. He went to the door himself, asking, "Who is it?" while peeking through the door's peephole. No answer came from behind the door. Roycen backed away, turned to Edward and nodded his head, making it clear that he wasn't familiar with the figure at his doorstep. Edward's hand reached for his gun, yet he didn't dare to draw it yet. Roycen's wife stood behind him, as the two made a few more steps away from the door.

Utter silence filled the house. Edward slowly started to inch towards Roycen, but no sooner than 3 seconds later, 2 gunshots pierced the door, hitting Roycen in the abdomen. His wife screamed in horror, as Edward crouched down and pulled his gun from its holster. "Get down!" he ordered her. She didn't hear him underneath her ear-piercing screams. "Get the fuck down!" he yelled at her again, but to no avail. A few more gunshots came through the door and hit her, the same as they had her husband.

Once she fell down to the floor, shattered glass fell on Edward, as bullets turned to hit the window close to him. As much as he wanted to get up and return fire, the constant stream of fire wouldn't let him. Bullet holes riddled the walls, as well as the furniture, including the same couch that Edward had been sitting on a moment earlier. By that point, shattered

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pieces of glass were scattered everywhere around the floor and the McAllisters' blood has gathered in a wide pool in front of the door. *It has to be more than one shooter*, he concluded. *There's no way all this fire is coming from one magazine.*

Eventually, a sudden silence fell on the house. *Are they gone?* Edward wondered. He crawled to the nearby window and peeked through, seeing the two men who were running away from the house. The green-grey camouflage-colored Elastics that they wore confirmed what Edward was already thinking. *Code Sanguinary. Came here to get some payback on their snitch. Goddamn fuckers.*

He aimed his gun at them. He fired off one shot but missed. The second shot also missed, yet the third one managed to take down one of the two killers. He tried to fire another round at the second soldier, but by the time he aimed his sights at him, he was already too far away.

Edward quickly rushed to Roycen's aid. The poor man lay on the floor with his belly engulfed with redness. Blood was spewing out of his mouth and covering most of his chin. He made a few grunts of pain, trying to utter final words. Edward inched closer to the dying man. "There's a copy... bedroom... first drawer... Left side..." he had to pause between every few words.

"Hang in there, I'm going to call for help," Edward tried to reassure him, yet by the time he finished that sentence, he could already see that the man in his arms now as still as a statue. He went to check on his wife, yet no life was in her either.

Edward felt helpless. He felt a tremendous sense of grief mixed with great fury. *Dillard... Blackburn... Code Sanguinary... I'll take them all down myself if I have to.*

Once he called for backup, he made his way upstairs, to the bedroom. Inside the drawer where Roycen had directed him, he found another flash drive. A copy of the incriminating video, just like Roycen said. *I'll take them all down*, he reiterated the sentence in his mind like a war song, his eyes burned with rage.



Lunarey

The days under Kelia's rooftop passed slowly. Each morning, Kelia would leave for school, and Lunarey would have to find all sorts of occupations to get through the day. Lunarey hadn't left the apartment since she got there, as Kelia warned her that if she really was a criminal, she might be wanted by the police, so she'd be better off not going out. As far as Cynthia knew, Lunarey dropped out of school. Therefore, she never had anywhere to go to. Occasionally she would help Cynthia cook or clean the apartment, repaying her for her generous hospitality. Cynthia worked the evening shifts a lot, so she would usually disappear once the afternoon hit. When Kelia would come home after school, she and Lunarey would talk endlessly, mostly about things from Kelia's life, like her latest crush at school, or what her friend recently gossiped to her about. Most of the time, Lunarey didn't find any interest in those things, yet she acted intrigued every time to avoid offending Kelia. When Kelia was around, Lunarey felt like the hours would rush by as if they were minutes. She found a true friend and a source of strength in Kelia, and yet the questions and unknowns about her identity and past never ceased to haunt her. At some point, whenever she would find herself doing nothing, she would obsessively look for something to do, just so she wouldn't have to deal with her thoughts about those things.

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Kelia kept bringing her books from her school library, and Lunarey would devour them with utmost passion and desire. Her thirst for knowledge was never quenched. Not until she would learn about the things that she really wanted to know about. Who she was, and how she ever came to that alley with no memory.

One day, while Kelia did her homework, Lunarey was looking at that list of names once more, reading the words over and over again as if it could help reveal the truth behind them.

#7: *Silus Jackson – Nightmares, occasional shivering.*

#8: *Julianer Sanford – lack of appetite, periodically waking up at night, sleep deprivation.*

There seemed to be no clear pattern to the human reactions described in the list. Some of them came and went while others were constant or appeared only once.

"I wish I could know more about this list," she said to Kelia, catching her attention.

"I do too, but I already told you, Luni, we can't afford internet access," Kelia said. "It's a shame, really. We could've searched for information about these names. I bet the Nucleus would have some information that could help us."

"The Nucleus? What's that?"

"Well, it's basically a vast net of websites that can only be approached using special methods that not anyone is aware of. There's a lot of illegal things you can do there, like order drugs or even weapons, I heard."

"It sounds... scary."

"It is, but that doesn't stop a lot of people from using it."

"And you think there might be information about the people on this list over there?"

"Maybe. The Nucleus also has a lot of news articles that either got censored by powerful people, or simply things that are posted in secret to avoid trouble. You see, ever since the days of the Tearful Rebellion, government appointed people have to review each newspaper before it gets published, and they remove whatever parts they think may put the government in a bad light. It's all to make sure people won't be

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incited to start another rebellion." *They're so scared of another rebellion... yet they still won't do the things that would actually improve people's lives around here. It's like they enjoy the current state of things.*

"You know what, I'll try to ask some friends of mine if they have internet access and can help us with it."

"Thanks, Kelia," the hint of a smile curved up on Lunarey's lips.

The next day, while Kelia was at school, Lunarey found herself lying on Kelia's bed, staring at the ceiling. She had already cleaned every room in the apartment, and even washed the dishes. Suddenly, a strange noise that came from outside caught Lunarey's attention. She got up from the bed and looked through the window shutters. At first, she didn't notice anything, but once she heard those noises again, she tracked them down to an alley below.

The alley was narrow and filthy, with graffiti covering its walls and litter all around it. She saw 4 figures in that alley, all of them were girls who looked to be about the same age as her and Kelia, wearing school uniforms. One of the girls was black-haired and overweight. Lunarey couldn't make out any further details about her appearance from where she was other than recognizing her school uniform. It was the same one that Kelia had. The other girls, who were dressed in the same outfit, were apparently picking on her, calling her 'fat' and 'ugly'. Lunarey watched as they pushed her around and laughed at her.

The overweight girl was crying and begging for them to let her go, but the three bullies just ignored her pleas.

This is horrible. Why are they doing this? What could this innocent girl have done to them to deserve such treatment? Lunarey's hand clenched around the shutter.

On and on the three girls laughed and cursed the poor girl. "You fat piece of shit," she heard them say. "Goddamn bitch." They kept going. Lunarey felt confused and enraged. She wanted to know why this was happening, but also wanted to make those girls pay for their behavior.

Eventually, the abused girl managed to run through a gap

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between two of the girls, crying profusely as she was escaping. They let her run away and dispersed a minute later.

Lunarey left the room, hoping to clear her head of what she just witnessed. Cynthia greeted her with a concerned look. "Something wrong, Lunarey?" she asked, noticing the appalled expression on Lunarey's face.

"Y-Yeah, it's just..." she found it hard to express with words, and yet she somehow managed to describe to Cynthia what just happened in that alley, right outside their building.

"I see," Cynthia sounded a bit too calm for Lunarey's taste. "It's a common thing, actually. A lot of times you get to hear about these kinds of events happening in the area."

"Then why aren't the schools doing something about it?"

"They've tried many times but... they're simply incapable of dealing with this issue."

"Can't they punish those bullies or something?"

"They can, but that won't solve the problem. In fact, it sometimes makes things worse." A frown appeared on Lunarey's face. "You mean to tell me you've never seen this kind of thing before when you were at school?"

"I-I did, but..." she tried covering herself. "It's just not fair."

"Fair? Honey, I'm working my ass off 6 days a week to bring food to my table, while some people kill or rob others and get paid twice, maybe three times as me. How's THAT fair?"

"I-I'm sorry, Mrs. Hopewell, I didn't mean—"

"It's alright, calm down," Cynthia sat down, burying her face in her hands. "I'm just... tired, I guess." Her voice was full of defeat and frustration. "Alataria isn't a great place to live in, especially when it comes to Brontspil. I swear this district is probably the most awful place in the world."

"T-Then... why did you ever choose to live here?"

"I didn't... my late husband did... Kelia's father." Her eyes drifted away as if she couldn't look at Lunarey and mention him at the same time. "He used to run with Harley Nation, those damn bikers. It was back when they had a strong

presence in Brontspil." *Harley Nation... I remember reading about them. They're a well-known criminal biker organization in many countries in the United States and Europe, but Alataria only became aware of their power 4 years ago, when they opened their first outpost here.*

"He was the one who made us live here, and when he died in that gunfight ... he left me pregnant and alone."

"So why don't you just move away?"

"I can't afford it."

"I-I see. I'm sorry, Mrs. Hopewell, I-I didn't know that."

Cynthia didn't reply. She got up from her seat and went to the kitchen instead, occupying herself with housework. The gloomy expression on her face remained.

Upon nightfall, Lunarey stared at the ceiling again, just as she had that morning, only, this time, it was on the mattress on Kelia's room floor, and with Kelia lying beside her on her bed. The more she learned and heard about Alataria, the more she felt scared. Between the criminal gangs, the bullies, and the plaguing poverty around, she didn't feel safe at all.

"Did you have any luck with your friends today? Were you able to search for information about my list?"

"No, Luni, I'm sorry. None of my friends have internet access. It's just too expensive for people in a place like Brontspil."

Lunarey seemed disappointed, but she preferred not to dawdle on that subject any further for now. Instead, she told Kelia about the overweight girl who was picked on today, hoping to receive better input on the matter than what she had received from Cynthia. "I think I know that girl you're talking about. If it's the one I'm thinking about, then that kind of bullying happens quite a lot at my school," said Kelia.

"Why isn't someone defending her?"

"Well... let me put it this way, and I'm simply laying out the truth for you: school populations often resemble somewhat of a hunter-hunted situation. There are the hunters, and there are the hunted, and if you're not in one group, then you're in the other. Once someone tries to defend her, he'll immediately put himself in the hunted group, along with her, and nobody wants

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that."

"But... why? Why is this happening in the first place? Why should anyone be hunting anyone?"

"I don't know, I guess that it's human nature to try to harm one another, to feel superior to others."

"You think so?"

"Yeah. I mean, I know it sounds awful, but... given a situation where you have the upper hand on someone, where he's helpless and you can do whatever you want with him... few people can resist to taking advantage of that."

"You're right. It does sound awful."

Kelia sighed. "Let it go. You're only reacting this way because you're seeing this for the first time. Everyone else sees this all the time and just learns to shrug it off. It's not like there's anything to do about it, so... why do you make a fuss?"

"They called her 'fat' and 'ugly.' That girl was hurt."

"That girl was weak," she crudely declared. "Weak people always get haunted by their own flaws. Their own identity is the one that makes their life so difficult. It's nothing new, and it's not going to change." Kelia's words flung endlessly through Lunarey's thoughts. *Such a horrible thing... to be haunted by your own self... to have it be the thing that terrorizes you most... how do you make it okay? How do you overcome this?* She urged herself to ask Kelia that question, but she could tell by her roommate's irritated tone that she does not enjoy this topic, so in an effort to remain on her roof-providing friend's good side, she decided to bid her good night and leave her thoughts for another day.

Though Kelia's snoring was quick to be heard, Lunarey's sleep wasn't so hastened to come, as thoughts of that poor girl refused to leave her mind.



Demilan

Under the cover of the dark night skies and the silence ruling the streets, Demilan and Maileena looked at the tall apartment building on 16 Pine Street, where Odis Maben was claimed to be, as they approached it on his motorcycle. A quick look at the mail slots at the building's entrance revealed that Odis lived in apartment 6, on the third floor.

While Demilan had his usual black duffel bag strapped on his back, Maileena had her revolver stuffed in the back of her pants, fully loaded. Demilan decided not to bring the Skyla assault rifle with him this time, seeing no reason to waste his bullets and simply use his trusty knife and strong hands.

He slicked back his damp wavy hair and looked at the dream catcher necklace that hung around his neck, once more driving himself with motivation. *Remember who you're doing this for, Demilan.*

"You ready?" he asked her. Though Maileena seemed a bit hesitant, she nodded her head. Demilan was a bit concerned about taking Maileena with him. He didn't know her too well, and having her with him could complicate the situation. He tried talking Maileena out of tagging along with him one more time while they were on their way here, but her stubbornness made him realize that she was one of those types with a will of iron that no amount of convincing will probably affect.

As the two got off the motorcycle and entered the

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apartment building, a foul stench of muck filled their nostrils. The walls were littered with stains and drawings, certain parts of them peeling. With faces full of disgust they covered their mouths and noses while calling the elevator. Once the two were inside, Demilan pressed the 3rd-floor button and Maileena quickly drew her revolver from the back of her pants, ready to take down whoever might be waiting on the other side of the elevator doors.

“Listen, I want you to keep it cool, alright? Stay behind me, keep me covered and let me take care of everything.” Demilan hoped Maileena wouldn’t think that he was underrating her, though the truth was he wasn’t going to depend on any skills on her part. Once the elevator door opened the two quickly strafed towards the door on the left, which belonged to Apartment 6. Demilan knocked three times on the door, though no answer came. After about a minute of waiting he knocked again, harder and louder. Suddenly he could hear footsteps inside the apartment. The foul odor still dominated his sense of smell, but he tried his best to endure it and not let it overwhelm him. Once the footsteps reached the door, a rough voice spoke through it. “Who is it?” the voice sounded full of contempt.

“I’m here to see Odis,” Demilan answered. The door slightly opened, as much as the chain lock allowed it to, and a face popped through it, peeking out to see who dared to ask for Odis. The man had dark skin, with long, brown dreads on his head, a grizzly-looking scar on his left cheek and two silver ring earrings in each ear. “Who the fuck are you?” he asked, sending bits of spit at Demilan’s face. As soon as Demilan looked up and saw the person’s face through the slight opening, he recognized Odis’s long brown dreads immediately, and although he noticed Odis’s widening eyes, hinting that he also recognized Demilan, Odis wasn’t quick enough to react.

With a sudden burst of rage, Demilan forced the door open with the ram of his shoulder while letting out a scream of wrath, sending Odis down to the floor. Demilan quickly made his way to Odis, his eyes so red with anger that his mind wasn’t

sharp and clear enough to notice the other guy that was sitting on the couch in front of him and was already reaching for his gun.

"Don't fucking move!" yelled Maileena as she aimed her revolver at the guy on the couch. The guy froze in place and raised his hands. Seeing that the situation was under control, Demilan picked up Odis by his shirt and sent a frightening punch at his face. A bleeding gash appeared on Odis's face when he got back up.

Demilan punched him one more time in the stomach before hurling him next to his friend on the couch. Odis moaned in pain while the blood ran down his face. "McCloud, you motherfucker," he said in between cries of pain. "Is this how you repay me after I fixed you up so many times?" he laughed while holding his aching stomach.

Demilan started walking towards him, ready and eager to send a few more punches at his smug face before Maileena's voice stopped him. "Demilan!" she called. "We need him, remember? Don't be an idiot."

Maileena's words managed to calm some sense into Demilan's enraged conscious. "Right," he said. *Calm down, Demilan*, he said to himself. Demilan grabbed the gun that Odis's friend had in the back of his pants and threw it aside. He searched Odis for any guns or knives and found nothing. When he backed away to stand near Maileena, he noticed various drugs on the table in front of him. A few grams of heroin in the form of a powder, wrapped in little plastic bags, several pills of ecstasy and an ashtray filled with a couple of burned out cigarette butts. But among those things, one caught his eye the most. A syringe that lay there, with a purple liquid swimming in its cylinder. He knew what it was as soon as his eyes fell on it. *Vexillum. That damn drug haunts me everywhere...* he thought. *Looks like they were ready for a fix right when we arrived.*

"I see you got yourself a little soldier girl now with you, McCloud," said Odis with a big smile smeared upon his face.

"Shut up." Maileena turned her aim to him.

"Tell me, girl, what is he paying you with? Because I know

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that fucker doesn't have any money on him, do you, McCloud?" he turned to Demilan. "Otherwise, you wouldn't have gathered that much debt with us in the first place."

"Shut the fuck up, Odis!" Demilan snapped at him.

"You used to be such a good client of mine, McCloud. It's a shame how things turned out. I heard my boys did quite a number on you." Odis's crude words ended with a mighty punch to his face, gratitude of Demilan. The smiling drug dealer writhed in pain and spat in Demilan's direction.

Maileena turned to look at Demilan, her eyes basically asking the burning questions she had for him. *She wants to know what he's talking about. Goddammit, I was hoping we wouldn't have to bring that up, but... I don't think she's going to let this slide. If there's anything I DO know about her, it's that she's stubborn, and she's going to want to know who she's banging with, and I can understand that.*

With her revolver still aimed at Odis, Maileena placed herself in front of Demilan, her eyes looking straight at his. "Demilan, don't take this the wrong way, but I need to know what's he talking ab—" her words were cut short, thanks to Odis's friend, who used the short window of time, when Maileena turned her back on him, and lunged at her from the couch, attempting to grab her revolver. It happened so fast that Maileena didn't even have the instinct to react, yet Demilan did. With a split second reaction, he pushed Maileena aside and grabbed the assailant once he was close enough, throwing him to the floor on his back. Demilan drew his knife from its leather holster. The knife was military-grade, just like his rifle, so I punctured through the man's flesh with ease. It had a black blade with a matte texture that was now painted in red. He stabbed the man three times in the chest, making sure he wouldn't be making any further attempts at him or at Maileena. Spatters of blood covered Demilan face, and as he rose from his latest kill, he saw Maileena lying on the floor, and Odis still sitting on the couch, choosing to be a good boy, and not trying to piss off the ex-soldier.

"Are you alright?" Demilan asked Maileena as he helped her up.

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"Yeah, thanks."

"You shouldn't have turned your back on him like that."

"Y-Yeah, you're right. I-I'm sorry." She looked ashamed. Demilan ran his hand over his face, wiping the fresh blood from it. "Stay here and keep an eye on him," he ordered her. "If he moves, shoot his leg or hand." He went to the kitchen and brought a wooden chair to the living room. He opened his duffel bag and took a rope out of it. "Sit," he snarled at Odis. The man with the long dreads did as he was told, and once Demilan made sure he was tied and secured to the chair, he took Maileena aside.

"So from what I've gathered so far, you're a drug addict, and this guy was your dealer," she said to him.

"I USED to be an addict." He made it as clear as possible. "Back when I was still in Code Sanguinary, my wife, Telia, and I were having trouble having kids and... it took a toll on our relationship, so... I tried some Vex to take the edge off. Odis used to be my supplier. Thing is... you don't just try Vex. You get addicted to it before you even realize it." Reminiscing about his days of addiction wasn't easy for him. His face had a dark, depressed appearance. "With Code Sanguinary not bringing in enough money, I gathered quite a debt to Odis. Even with the money I made with Code Sanguinary, I was having a hard time paying it off, but once Blackburn found out about my Vex addiction... he kicked me out." It was a known fact that Charles Blackburn ran a tight ship with his soldiers. Drug use was strictly prohibited in his organization, and those who were caught doing it were banned from Code Sanguinary. "At that point, there was no chance of wiping my debt, and when the time came..." he turned to look at Odis, his face now turned red and his teeth ground together. "That motherfucker sent his men to beat me up and kidnap Telia. I was in a coma for 6 months. As soon as I woke up I started looking for her. The first place I went to was the warehouse where I found you. I remembered from my days at Code Sanguinary that that warehouse was owned by Men of Midas, so someone there would know to point me to Odis." His head now turned to the

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floor, looking ashamed and in pain. "And that's my story. Now you know."

"Demilan, I-I'm so sorry, I didn't know—"

"It's okay," he reassured her. "Now you know. I made a mistake... and it cost me everything I had. But I want to make it right. I NEED to make it right. The same way you do." He turned to look at Odis once more. He remembered the many trades he had with him. Every one of them was a mistake leading him on a path of self-destruction. *They say most people who try to quit Vex fail and the few who succeed only manage to do it by the time that they've lost everything around them.* "Let's get this over with." Demilan started pacing toward the tied man who had stolen his wife. "Things are about to get ugly."

Demilan looked straight into Odis's eyes. The redness surrounding the apple of the drug dealer's eye suggested that he had taken some kind of drug shortly before their arrival. His teeth presented shades of green and gray, and his breath reeked. His friend's body was lying beside the couch, creating a blood pool all over the floor around him.

"Where is my wife, Odis?" asked Demilan.

"Fuck you, McCloud!" Odis gave him a snarling smile in return. Demilan gave him a frightening stare before turning to Maileena. "Get me something to cover his mouth with," he told her. "I don't want him screaming. There are other people in this building, and we can't have them calling the police before we're done here."

Although looking a bit reluctant at first, Maileena did as commanded and brought a dirty white rag from the kitchen.

Demilan could spot the fear in Odis's eyes as Demilan drove the rag into his mouth. *He knows that I'm an ex-soldier. He knows that I used to work for Blackburn. He SHOULD be afraid.*

"Maileena," he turned to her once more. "Go through my duffel bag. Get the syringe with the green liquid. It should be there." Odis's eyes opened wide as he figured what Demilan was planning for him. He started screaming and wiggling in his chair as panic overtook him, but all Demilan could hear was the muffled cry of a person who had long deserved it in his

mind.

A few minutes later, Maileena presented him with the syringe. A green liquid was swimming inside the cylinder, and a plastic cover was guarding the needle. As Odis stared at the green substance, his pupils widened and his muffled screams increased in volume.

"Is that what I think it is?" asked Maileena.

"Sorelium," Demilan answered her question. "A very dangerous drug that makes the nervous system go into overdrive, intensifying every feeling and sensation, primarily used as a sex enhancer." *A leftover from my days of addiction. One that I would gladly put to use on this occasion.*

"W-Wait, isn't Sorelium deadly?" Maileena asked.

"Not when you take it in small doses," Demilan replied.

Before thinking too much, he removed the plastic cover from the needle and stuck it in Odis's arm. He made another muffled cry as the green Sorelium was driven into his veins. Demilan pulled the syringe and returned it to Maileena, who placed the plastic cover back on and put it back in his duffel bag.

"Maileena, I'm going to have to ask you one last thing," she looked at him. "Leave us." Suddenly, she looked enraged.

"Fuck, no."

"This is not something you're going to—"

"I've told you once before, I am NOT a little girl. I'm staying right here. I can handle it." At this point, Demilan was unsure whether it was true courage or plain stubbornness.

"Fine," he surrendered. He turned to Odis. "Now, you and I are going to play a little game," he said to his gagged prisoner. "The Army taught me many things; many techniques and methods to make enemies talk, but only people like Blackburn taught me what I'm about to show you." Odis stared at Demilan in horror, his pupils dilated with fear. "He liked to call this 'Looking Back.' You see, in life, every person makes mistakes, and until he does the right thing to correct those mistakes, his past will keep haunting him. Now, mistakes tend to pile up, so the longer it takes for him to do the right thing,

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the more mistakes he has to atone for. This is going to work just like that. The longer you keep refusing to answer my questions, the more your pain is going to pile up. Here, let me show you.” He sent a fierce punch to Odis’s stomach. Considering the nerve-intensifying Sorelium in effect, Demilan could only imagine the agonizing pain which Odis must have been feeling at that moment. His muffled screams made quite a noise even despite the rag in his mouth.

“Where is my wife?” asked Demilan, only to be greeted back with a muffled, “Fuck you.”

Good. I was hoping he wouldn't make it too easy. More fun for me. Demilan sent another punch to his stomach, this time, followed by a swift, frightening punch to his face. “See what I did there? Every time you avoid giving me an answer you can expect every hit you’ve received before, and every time we’re going to add a new one. And every new hit is going to get worse and worse.” Demilan almost sounded like a frantic sadist.

“Where is my wife?” he asked once more, and again was greeted with muffled curse words. He straightened his back and took a good look at the beaten man. He drew his knife from its chest holster. Its dark blade shone brightly as the sun beams coming through the window shutters hit it. Demilan’s grip on the handle tightened and he threw a look over to Maileena, checking her reaction to the situation. Although she stood firm and wasn’t looking away, her eyes slightly trembled, as she was unfamiliar to this type of scenario. *She may have some balls, but she's still a long way from where she'd like to think she's at.*

Without giving too much further thought about it, Demilan focused back on Odis, who had tears streaming down his face at this point. *You won't get any mercy from me, Odis. I sure as hell didn't get any from you when you decided to take away the love of my life and put me in a fucking coma for 6 months. Feel my pain, Odis. Feel my pain.* He punched his stomach once more, followed by another punch to his face, and then slashed his right upper arm with his knife, just below the shoulder. Odis shrieked in pain behind the rag. His nose was running and the tears kept flooding his

face. "Where is my wife?" Demilan asked the burning question that had haunted him ever since he woke up in that hospital. This time, there was no cursing. Odis simply bowed his head down, refusing to let any words out.

Once more Demilan delivered a series of excruciating blows to the man. A punch to the stomach, a punch to the face, another cut, this time below the previous one, followed by another slashing of the knife on his left thigh. Odis once again writhed in agony, but this time, Demilan noticed that he was trying to say something other his usual cursing.

"Are you going to talk?" he asked. Odis nodded. "If you scream, I'm going to have to make this twice as bad, do you hear me?" Odis nodded again. Demilan pulled the rag from his mouth and heard the man's irritating voice. "I gave her away to someone."

"Who?!"

"Oh, fuck, what was his name? Fuck. Fuck," he struggled to remember. "K... Kl— Kleon! Kleon Hanford! That's your guy!"

"Kleon Hanford?" Maileena asked, looking horrified.

"You know him?" Demilan turned to her.

"He's the guy that runs the Godly Succubi," Maileena replied. "He's always there. That's where you'll surely find him." Demilan noticed Maileena suddenly looked very upset. Her eyes refused to meet his, and she was giving a distant feeling for some reason. Demilan took her aside to the kitchen, leaving the bruised and bleeding drug dealer in the living room.

"Look, I get it, you ran away from that place, so I'm not going to make you go there with me."

"I have to go. My sister could be there as well."

"Then I'll search for her as well and bring her back with me."

"Demilan, please—"

"Look, I want you to picture something. Remember what happened in that warehouse where I found you with those guys? There's a good chance the same thing might happen in that club. Those people will never let her go." He grasped her

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revolver-wielding hand. "Do you even know how to shoot with this thing? Like, actual shooting. I'm talking about more than pulling the trigger. Aiming. Hitting people. You have to understand that—" He was interrupted by Maileena's sudden shriek and the feeling of someone lunging at him from behind. Demilan lost his feet and fell to all fours. Before he had a chance to react he felt the needle driven into his arm. Suddenly he felt a strange, yet familiar feeling. One that filled him with rapture and dread at the same time. *I know this feeling. I've been addicted to it for so long, I get tremors just from feeling it again. The syringe that was on the table... the purple liquid... Vex.* The drug that was his undoing 6 months ago was back in his veins, thanks to Odis. As much as Demilan tried to ignore the feeling of ecstasy, it left him too unfocused and powerless to throw Odis off of him.

"I'm going to kill you, McCloud!" Odis roared like a beast. *Dammit, I can't do much... that motherfucker... the Vex...* suddenly a loud noise deafened his ears. It was a gun shot. He looked up and saw the smoke trail emitting from Maileena's revolver barrel. "Fuck!" he heard Odis scream as he felt his weight lifted from him. Demilan turned and saw Odis holding his left ear with his hand, with blood oozing through his fingers. *She missed him. She only hit his ear.* "You fucking bitch!" Odis yelled.

With his hand still grabbing his bleeding ear, Odis moved towards Maileena. Demilan was still on all fours. *I have to do something. I have to find my strength.* With great effort, Demilan grabbed Odis's leg and pulled it towards him before the wounded drug dealer could be in arm's reach of Maileena. Demilan did his best to keep himself focused, as the Vex's effect weighed on his mind. He drew his knife from its chest holster, just as he had before, and plunged the dark blade into Odis's neck. As he pulled it out, a spray of blood gushed out with it. With his eyes fixed on Demilan, Odis choked on his own blood. Maileena stood by in horror. Even though her face didn't show any sign of fear, her hands were trembling. Demilan, on the other hand, was cold as ice. He remained composed and silent as the man slowly died before him. Odis's

death wasn't quick. It took him several seconds of choking before he finally became still.

After that, Demilan strapped his duffel bag on his back once more and left the apartment along with Maileena. As much as he hoped his sins could die along with Odis, there could be none of that in Alataria. Instead, his sins returned to haunt him, as the euphoric sensation of Vex running through his veins slowly took over him, clouding his mind and sending him back into a dark place that he was too familiar with.



Edrimer

After attending Zachary's funeral and paying his respects, Edrimer drove home with a heavy heart. Since the gruesome attack at Zachary's store happened, Edrimer was constantly plagued by a mixture of burning resentment towards Men of Midas, hopeless depression for losing Zachary and an unnerving wonder regarding his brother's presence at the scene, with a golden mask upon his head.

Why was Arkaneb there? Since when is he working for Reus Mallstrom? Those questions wouldn't cease to echo in his mind. As he drove home, he couldn't help but feel like he was in a spiral of despair. His face was devoid of any emotion and his eyes hollower than the barrel of a gun.

Once he finally reached his home and parked his car, he noticed an eerie silence surrounding him. It was the kind of silence that he would usually relish during long days, but this time, it let all those wretched thoughts run wild again in his head. All he wanted was a rest.

He started walking towards the building entrance when suddenly he heard a rattle behind him. As he looked around, he noticed there wasn't a single soul in the area. He focused his eyes but couldn't spot anything. Then he heard another noise, this time coming from a different direction. The harrowing hush around him sent a chill down his spine. He decided to not let his curiosity get the best of him and proceeded to walk

towards the entrance door, but before he could take more than 3 steps, he could hear the rapid footsteps of someone leaping at him from behind.

Edrimer's instincts allowed him to turn around, but all he could see was a hooded figure that he couldn't possibly recognize before feeling the sting of a syringe in his neck. Edrimer pulled the syringe from his neck, but it was too late. Looking at the cylinder, he could tell that its contents were already running through his veins. As Edrimer stood before the mysterious figure, starting to lose his balance and his sense of vision, he tried using his last moments of consciousness to identify the person, only to lose to the tranquilizer a few seconds later.

The first thing Edrimer could hear when he finally woke up was the running engine of a car. His eyes were blindfolded, and his hands were tied with a zip tie.

As he recovered his senses, his panic started rising as well. It didn't take Edrimer long to conclude that he was sitting in the back part of a vehicle, a van of some sort. "Oh, now what?" he asked, his tone filled with his never-dying sarcasm. "Where the fuck am I?! What's going on?!"

"Calm the fuck down, boy," said an unfamiliar voice near him. "You're the one who asked for this," the voice said.

"What? What are you talking about?"

"You did ask to join us, didn't you?" *The Justicars... I see now.*

It was common knowledge that no one really knew where the Justicars operated from. No one really knew who their leader was nor where their headquarters were. If anyone knew the location of the Justicars' headquarters, the mob gangs would have rained fire on it long ago. The same went for their entire recruiting process. While there was more than enough information about the various crime organizations in Alataria, the same couldn't be said about the Justicars.

Edrimer kept wondering if he was doing the right thing by joining their ranks. He had no idea where he was. For some reason, his gut told him he wasn't in his hometown, Ussermis, anymore. *Fuck that. I bet we're not even in the Axfield district*

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anymore.

He knew asking where they were heading would be futile. His efforts on focusing on any sounds from outside of the vehicle didn't get him anywhere. The loud engine noise muffled almost everything else.

Edrimer started wondering how many people exactly were in the back compartment that he was in. He stretched his legs a bit, only to find them pressed against another set of feet across from him, as well another one beside him. *Including the man to my right, that means there are 4 people in total including me. I wonder if the other two are also new recruits...*

After what Edrimer counted as almost an hour of driving, the vehicle stopped and everyone in the back compartment was pulled out and led away on foot. Edrimer felt the tight grip of a man upon his arm as he was leading him. His legs barely kept up with the man's ridiculous pace. Eventually, Edrimer heard him opening a door and leading him through it.

As soon as Edrimer entered through the door he noticed his footsteps echoing. *We must be in some sort a large warehouse or something.* He couldn't hear any other voices in whatever hall he was in. *Is there nobody else here? Where were the other two taken? Fuck... looks like I'm getting the personal treatment.*

The man forced Edrimer to sit in a chair with his zip-tied hands resting on his knees. "Don't move," said the man in a heavy, gnarled voice, emphasizing every word to make the command unmistakable.

A few seconds later, Edrimer could hear someone's footsteps approaching, every step he took echoing between the walls of whatever large room they were in. "Hello, Edrimer," said the approaching man with a calm, almost reassuring voice. "You must have a few questions, but I'm afraid you won't be asking anyone anything right now. In fact, I'm the one who's going to ask YOU a few questions. Is that understood?"

"Yes," said Edrimer, with a voice full of determination.

"For the record," said the man with the calm voice. "State your full name and address."

"Edrimer Frye. Living in 22 Goodwin Street in Ussermis,

Axfield.”

“Good. What do you do for a living?”

“I... used to work in a convenience store, but... it recently got wrecked by members of Men of Midas.” He felt a pinch in his heart as he had to recreate the picture in his mind.

“I see.” The calm man’s voice refused to let go of its sense of tranquility. “And what if I were to place those men who burned down your shop right here, in front of you? What would you do?” *Well, fuck me. I'm getting a job interview.*

“I’d kill them,” Edrimer responded almost instantly. Even though he didn't truly know if that was the truth, having never been placed in such a situation, Edrimer knew that that's what the man would want to hear.

“Have you ever killed someone before?”

“No.”

“Then I’d say you sound pretty determined and decisive about doing such a thing.”

“Well, you guys do it all the time, so I don’t think—” A fast, jaw breaking slap interrupted Edrimer’s words. It was the other man in the room, the one with the tight grip and the gnarly voice. Waves of pain washed over Edrimer’s throbbing cheek, as he felt it burning with soreness. “What the fuck?!” Edrimer burst out.

“Oh, I’m sorry, that might happen whenever you choose to make comments that my friend here doesn’t approve,” said the calm man. “I suggest you just stick to answering the questions in a direct manner, without making any side notes.”

“Fine,” Edrimer grunted. *I guess I should ease up with my natural tendency for humor and spite.*

“Now, let’s say that right now there are two members of Men of Midas, or any other criminal organization for that matter, and they have your uncle, Jeremy Frye, at gun point.” Edrimer was startled at first upon hearing his uncle’s name, but the feeling quickly subsided, as he had a feeling that those guys would inquire about their recruits before even approaching them. *It would be stupid if they hadn't.* “Now, let’s say that you have a gun in your hand, and they’re right here, a few feet away

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from you with your uncle at their mercy. What do you do?"

Edrimer pondered before answering too quickly. Within the next few seconds, his mind went into overdrive, calculating exactly what the catch here was, and what the calm man would want to hear. *The Justicars may be all about getting rid of the criminal organizations by any means necessary, but I remember their initial claims being more about protecting the citizens of Alataria, rather than being an anti-mob vigilante group. If I tell them I'd shoot the gangsters and potentially lose my uncle, it would be the wrong answer.*

"I'd do whatever I can to save my uncle, even if it involves letting them get away," said Edrimer with confidence.

"Really? That's interesting. Why is that?"

"The Justicars are about more than simply killing criminals who corrupt our society, they're the White Knights of Alataria. They're the ones the citizens pin their hopes on. If I'm all about the killing, then I'm no better than them." The calm man held his response for a few seconds.

"And do you believe we deserve to be titled the White Knights of Alataria?"

"Well, people often use that title to mock you, but—"

"You little—" Edrimer could hear the gnarly man's footsteps nearing him.

"Stop!" the calm man brought the gnarly one to a halt before he could harm Edrimer. "Leave the room," he ordered him. The violent brute sounded a growl-resembling sigh. Edrimer could hear his footsteps getting weaker and weaker as he left the room, closing the door behind him.

"Your parents died when you were young, didn't they?" the calm man asked.

"That's right."

"And you've been living with your uncle ever since."

"Correct."

"Along with your brother, Arkaneh." Edrimer feared that the conversation would eventually turn to be about his brother.

"Right."

"Where is Arkaneh now, Edrimer?" The dreaded question finally arrived. *If they know that Arkaneh works for Men of Midas,*

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then there's no way they're going to recruit me. They won't take that chance. They'll fear I might be trying to sneak in undercover.

"You mean to tell me that you did all this homework about me and you couldn't find anything about my brother?" Edrimer tried buying time to think of a good answer.

"Don't dodge the question," the calm man said. *If he already knows the answer, then there's no telling what I'm in for. After all, no one knows anything about the Justicars' recruiting process. Either way, there's only way I can answer this question.*

"I don't know. Neither my uncle nor I have had much contact with him during the last two years since he moved out of our home."

"I see..." his voice sounded slower than usual. *Oh, shit. I don't like his tone.* "That's interesting because... we couldn't find anything on him." *Oh, fuck, thank god.* "Since there are no records of him leaving the country, there's a good chance that he's dead." *Or that he's just so fucking smart that he was able to cover all his tracks.*

"Oh..." he tried to sound as sad as he could. "I-I guess I've always considered that as an option."

"Final question, Edrimer. Why do you want to join the Justicars?"

"I want... to bring some peace and quiet to Alataria." He felt most sincere with that answer.

"Really? Is that all there is to it?" the calm man sounded skeptical. "Are you going to pretend it has nothing to do with the attack on your workplace and the death of your former boss, Zachary?"

"No, I'm not," Edrimer answered. "Two Justicars saved my life recently. Men of Midas tried to rob the store, and those Justicars killed one of them just before he could shoot me. I want to be able to save people like that too. Maybe that way, I can prevent more useless deaths, like Zachary's."

The calm man remained silent for a while as if he was pondering on Edrimer's answer. "Alright. Sounds fair enough," he said eventually.

"So... does that mean I passed all your questions? Are we

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done?"

"We're done with the questions, but... there's one last thing left before you pass." Edrimer heard the calm man approaching him. He was lifted to his feet from the chair. Following that, he felt the blindfold being removed from his head and after his eyes had adjusted, he could see the large warehouse that he was in. Other than a few large wooden crates that were scattered in a seemingly random way, the place was empty. Small glass windows all across the walls brought sunlight inside. The interior hall itself was quite spacious, possibly it had been some manufacturing facility in the past. In front of him, he could now see the man that he had been talking to. The calm man had short gray hair, blue eyes, light stubble on his face and thin lips, looking to be about 45 years old. "Here." The man placed a black pistol in Edrimer's bound hands and moved behind him.

"What's going on? Why are you giving me this?" Edrimer asked.

"For the first question I asked you, you said that if you saw a member of any mob gang in front of you, you'd shoot him," the man said in his ear from behind him. *Oh, no...* Edrimer could see where this was going. He looked straight ahead, where the calm man had been standing before and saw an unconscious man bound to a chair, wearing purple shoes, gloves, and mask. *You can't be serious...* "This man belongs to Lady Dread," the man said as he paced away from Edrimer, putting a fair distance between them. "I want you to prove that you're honest about what you say and shoot him." *Is this a trick? Does he actually expect me to do it?* Edrimer's mind raced. "And don't even dare so much as turn in my direction with that gun." Edrimer heard the man cocking his own gun behind him. "I can assure you, I'll put a bullet in you before you even see me." *The gun he gave me is real. I can tell by its weight that it's loaded.*

"Do you really want me to shoot him?" Edrimer asked. *Something's not right. I can feel it.* Edrimer looked around him. His gut feeling told him that he was missing something.

"Yes, Edrimer, I really want you to shoot him. Now, do it!"

the calm man urged him. *Look, Edrimer, look! Your subconscious noticed something, your gut feeling can't be wrong.* Edrimer scanned the empty hall but found nothing around him except the man in purple sitting in front of him. "Come on, Edrimer. I haven't got all day." It was only then when Edrimer finally noticed what he was looking for. On the wall to his right, a few feet above the ground, a lone camera stood, facing right at Edrimer. Edrimer noticed the blinking red light on it and recognized it immediately. *Zachary had the same camera at the store. That red light means it's currently taping.* He now understood what was going on. *How clever... the Justicars really are no fools.*

Edrimer started pacing toward the bound man in purple, and dragged him, along with his chair, towards the opposite wall, far away from the camera's view. "What are you doing?" the calm man asked him under the loud, echoing noise of the chair being pulled against the floor.

"That is one neat trick you guys are pulling on your recruits."

"What are you talking—?"

"You make them kill a gang member to show that they're willing to do what it takes, that they can be an actual asset to the Justicars, but... it's not just that, is it?" The man stood silent. "I know a running camera when I see one." A big smile appeared on Edrimer's face. "You catch them executing a helpless man on video and get yourself leverage over them. I guess this is a safety measure, isn't it? In case they're spying for someone, you can always pull that card on them and make sure they don't jeopardize the organization."

The man took a moment before responding. "Congratulations. You caught me. But if you're not a spy then you won't have to be afraid of that."

"I'm not, but I don't like to be played like a fool, and I also don't like people having leverage on me."

"This doesn't change the fact that this test still needs to prove that you're willing—" Edrimer's gunfire stopped him midsentence. The black pistol he had been given was emitting a smoke trail, and the man of Lady Dread now had a bullet

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hole in his head, and a river of blood pouring from it all over his body.

"There," Edrimer said. "Does this mean I passed?"

The man approached Edrimer, slowly and with his own gun still drawn. He looked at the body critically and then turned to look at Edrimer. "You did, but before I do anything, I'm going to make something very clear to you. Do you know what the mob gangs call their fresh recruits?"

"Tenderfoots."

"Right. Consider yourself a tenderfoot until you've proved yourself. That means that we'll be keeping a close eye on you until then. Do you understand?"

"I do."

"In that case... my name is Serian Conway, and welcome to the Justicars."



Arkaneh

The easy breeze caressed Arkaneh's long, blonde hair through the open car window as he sat in the driver's seat of the van with which he had just driven along with about a dozen brothers to a construction site in the rural scenery of Swillstorm, Northstock. "Where are we going?" the men asked Arkaneh throughout the whole ride there. "What's our job here?" they begged to know, and yet Arkaneh spoke nothing to them, leaving them in the dark up until the moment of their arrival at the site. The men stood at the site, dressed in Elastics, waiting for the White Knights to show up.

Meanwhile, Arkaneh enjoyed the clean air and silence of the rural scenery for a change. He felt as if every room and space inside the factory outpost in Ravenwey Burrows was filled with racket and fights over dumb things, accompanied by the awful smell of booze and cigarettes. *Barbarians. All of them. No matter where you go, or who you're affiliated with, whether if you're a member of Men of Midas or a biker of Harley Nation, they're all fools. Lowlife scum who consider shooting a man down and stealing his money their greatest achievement in life.*

Escort girls from the Godly Succubi roamed the halls of the factory, pleasing and teasing whatever man they came across. *You can thank good old Griffiths for that pleasure. That man sure loves his women. He's the one who brought those girls into the outpost, buying the loyalty of his men with cheap, easy filth.*

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Men like Griffiths repulsed Arkaneh. It seemed that every time he looked at the lieutenant, he would find his face either buried in a line of Vex or between a girl's breasts. One of the reasons he found himself so disgusted by the degrading acts of the escort girls was because it would remind him of his ex-girlfriend, Elina. Whenever he saw one of those brutes running his hand all over an escort girl's body, he would be reminded of how the men who took them on that fateful night touched her. Whenever he would see one of them forcing a girl to do something against her will, he would be reminded of how Elina had begged those men to stop.

Arkaneh looked at the cloudy afternoon sky, wondering if she was up there, watching him. He wondered if she would understand the reasons behind his actions, the reason why he joined Men of Midas and what he was planning to do. His face showed no emotion, for he wouldn't allow himself to show weakness, even though he was all alone in that van.

Elina used to love the green sights and broad fields around here. Shortly before she died, she begged me to take her for a trip in the Northstock district. She wanted to breathe the fresh, cold air of the north and run through the grassy hills of Swillstorm. He could see those hills now from afar. They had a vibrant hue of green to them and were big enough to be seen from miles away. It was no wonder that Northstock was considered one of the most beautiful districts in Alataria when it came to vistas. *I was going to fulfill her wish and take her here, but... I never got to do it.*

Arkaneh never forgot the night she died, nor would he ever. It was a scar forever engraved in his memory, forever tormenting him with the picture of losing the love of his life. It had been two years since it happened, during which the pain hadn't subsided much. During those past two years, Arkaneh made sure that the people who did it were punished, and he did that with utmost brutality. Yet, he never regretted what he did to them, as gruesome as it was. They deserved it, in his mind. *Anyone who stands in the way of my plans would meet the same kind of cruelty. I have no sympathy to spare for anyone. I lost that kind of emotion on the night Elina died.*

Once more, Arkaneh looked up at the sky. He closed his eyes and pictured her face among the clouds. *If you truly are out there, my dear Elina, I hope you're not disgusted by what I am today. I know that you would never picture me as a criminal and a killer, but know that there is a great purpose behind all of this, and when the time comes, I hope you can see that and forgive me for these sins.*

He relished the cold breeze a minute longer before coming to a decision. *It's been almost an hour now. The Justicars aren't coming. That can only mean one thing... Griffiths is not the rat.*

Arkaneh called the men back to the van. They seemed restless and agitated, having been forced to wait for no one for so long. Once they were all back in the vehicle, Arkaneh drove back to Ravenwey Burrows.

If Griffiths isn't the rat, and Talimay can't be as well, then it has to be one of the organization's members. This complicates things. Finding this rat just turned much more difficult. Unless... an idea started to take form in his mind.

On his way back to the abandoned factory, Arkaneh wondered if Reus or his lieutenants had suspected that they had a traitor in the organization, given how many tackles they've had with the Justicars. *A traitor in Men of Midas... I've heard what happened once when a traitor was discovered in this organization.* It was a story well known among people in Alataria. Usually, conversations about Joseph Mallstrom would at some point bring up the infamous story. Most people know that story as the Night of Obliteration.

Back then, the mob gang known as Rage Legion was starting to become a real threat in Alataria. They established two outposts, one in Framstead in the north and another in Sanriel, in the Westden Fells district. Their numbers were rising, and their ringleader became very ambitious. Too ambitious, some would say. He wanted to take over the drug trade, and to do that, he needed to get rid of Joseph. Men of Midas was still recovering from its latest war with the Ferals, so he assumed the timing was perfect. Thus, he took one of his tenderfoots and made him join Men of Midas as a spy. He wanted him to gather as much information as he could so that

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Rage Legion could strike at Joseph most effectively.

However, Joseph was a smart man. Brilliant, many would claim. It didn't take him long before he realized that his latest recruit was a spy for Rage Legion. He had suspected for a while that Rage Legion and its ringleader were trying to take him and his organization out, so he made sure to eliminate the threat entirely. Instead of killing the traitor in his ranks, he told him in confidence that he heard more than enough rumors about Rage Legion wanting to take over the drug trade, and since he was too weak from his latest war to fight them, he was going to give them a part of it and ensure peace. He sent him to Rage Legion's ringleader to set up a meeting so that they could divide territories and agree on terms. Joseph was scheduled to meet with Rage Legion's ringleader and his lieutenants in their Framstead outpost. On that night, Reus sent the spy once more, this time to Rage Legion's Sanriel outpost, with a bag containing several packs of Vexillum. He told them to give it to the members in the Sanriel outpost as a gesture of good faith, and made it clear to him once again that it was all being done to ensure peace. When Reus finally got to Framstead for his scheduled meeting, he waited outside their outpost with his men, while one of them pumped gas-form Sorelium into outpost's air ventilation.

Gas-form Sorelium... they say Sorelium isn't fatal in small enough doses, but any more than that would kill any person within seconds. Choking your enemy with gas-form Sorelium is a sure way to kill him.

While Rage Legion's ringleader and his lieutenants were choked to death inside, Joseph and his men waited outside and shot the few sole survivors who managed to run away from the gas. At the same time, the spy arrived at the Sanriel outpost with the bag of Vex he was given from Reus. However, the Vex in the bag was fake. It was baking powder with purple food coloring. Among the packs, several explosive charges were hidden. Reus places several of his men outside the Sanriel outpost, and once they saw the bag entering the outpost, they triggered the explosives and set the outpost ablaze.

Later that night, Reus ordered his men to search

everywhere in Framstead and Sanriel for whatever last members of Rage Legion remaining and wipe them out. By the next morning, Rage Legion no longer existed. In a single night, Joseph managed to obliterate an entire mob gang.

To that day, the only memory remaining of Rage Legion is their old outpost in Framstead, which was taken over by Lady Dread shortly after their demise.

It's a nice story, but I doubt history will repeat itself. Reus isn't Joseph. What he lacks in cleverness compared to his father he makes up with paranoia.

Once he made it back to the factory, he walked in along with the other men. Through the clear windows, Arkaneh could see Griffiths sitting in his office at the top of the staircase. He climbed the squeaky, rusty stairs and entered the lieutenant's office.

Griffiths was just opening his half-empty bottle of scotch. He noticed Arkaneh just as he took a sip of it straight from the bottle. Griffiths looked at the tenderfoot long and hard, burning him with his gaze. Arkaneh already knew why he seemed angry.

"I didn't get any reports about a shootout in Swillstorm," he told Arkaneh. "Do NOT tell that you were gone for this long, only to—"

"There was never any gun trade," Arkaneh interrupted him, unable to listen to any more of his ongoing ramblings. Griffiths's eyes widened.

"W-What do you mean—?"

"There was never any gun trade," he said it once again. "I made the whole thing up." Within three seconds, Griffiths put down his bottle of booze and paced toward Arkaneh, grabbing his shirt and slamming him against the wall.

"Are you fucking retarded?! Does this look like a joke to you?!"

"I was trying to—"

"I don't want to hear a fucking word out of you!"

Arkaneh maintained his composure, despite a strong desire to punch the OldGen. "Listen to me—"

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"If you think I'm going to let a fucking TENDERFOOT make a fool out of me—!"

"You're not listening—"

"I'm going to make you suffer like—" Arkaneh twisted Griffiths's hand and shoved him away, making the old man shriek in pain and placed far from him, as he wanted.

"I had to do it," Arkaneh explained himself. "We have a rat in our troops."

"What?" Griffiths shrunk his eyes, looking doubtful. "What are you talking about?"

"Every time we took some kind of action recently, the Justicars were there. They KNEW where and when we would be every time! The only explanation for that is that there's someone in Men of Midas leaking information to them."

"What does this have to do with the fake gun trade?"

"Whoever the rat is, he knows about our actions almost every time, but not ALL of our people know about our activities every single time... unless they're a lieutenant," Griffiths's eyes turned red once more. "In which case, they would know of every action since they need to sanction it."

"So you think either me or Talimay are helping the Justicars?" his face looked repulsed with the notion.

"Talimay's brother, Heycliff, died during that store robbery where the Justicars showed up. If it had been Talimay leaking information directly, she wouldn't have risked her brother's life and rat out about it. And if it had been indirectly, the Justicars wouldn't risk killing him and sending their own rat into a mourning period where she's useless to them, so she can't be it."

"Which leaves me."

"Which leaves you. I had to check that possibility. That's why I told only you about a fake stakeout for that gun trade. If you'd been the leak, no matter how, the Justicars would know about it and we would have been attacked by them." Griffiths's eyes narrowed. "Of course, there's also the possibility that one of the other men here is the rat, but there was a higher chance that it would have been you, so I checked you out first. I made

sure not to tell any of the men that I took with me where we were heading. That way, whether or not an ambush would take place, it would've determined your innocence or lack of."

"I don't believe this..." Griffiths mumbled to himself.

"Think about it. In case one of THEM was the rat, then even if an ambush would've taken place, it wouldn't tell me who the rat is. But since nothing happened that means you're not the rat." Once more Arkaneh found himself slammed against the wall within seconds.

"So you risked the lives of your brothers just to check a possibility?!" Griffiths grunted in Arkaneh's ear. His breath was hot and heavy, and had the acute aroma of scotch.

"The rat is responsible for the deaths of many of our brothers, and he can potentially cause a lot more!"

"Who the fuck do you think you are?! You're just a tenderfoot!"

"Does it really matter what I am? You have a very dangerous man in your ranks. As a lieutenant, you have to do something about it."

"Who's to say we really DO have a rat?"

"How else do you explain the Justicars showing up every time we do something?"

Griffiths ground his teeth and clenched his lips. His eyes still burned red, and his grip was still tight on Arkaneh's shirt. Griffiths stared straight into his eyes, eventually calming down, realizing the reality that Arkaneh spoke of.

"A rat in our ranks. A traitor," Griffiths said in disbelief. He raised his bottle and swirled the beverage in it, looking mesmerized. "Reus would go crazy if he heard about this," said Griffiths as he let go of Arkaneh's shirt, burying his face in his hands.

"Reus doesn't have to know about this yet. Let's try to focus on flushing our guy out before running off to tell Reus."

"Do you have any idea how we can do that?"

"I do, actually, and I'm going to need your help with it."



Lunarey

The more time passed, the more Lunarey learned about the world around her and the more she became indifferent to the many question marks that floated around her head.

After hearing about the Nucleus from Kelia, Lunarey dug through her books in search of information about it. She eventually managed to stumble upon several pages on the subject. It was said there that the Nucleus has been in existence for decades, but it wasn't always put to use for criminal purposes. At first, it was constructed for military use, with its main purpose being to transmit classified information without it reaching a third party. Also, several governments used it to communicate with their spies and undercover agents in foreign countries. However, over the years, most governments had moved on to much more sophisticated ways to do those things, while the Nucleus continued to exist. Eventually, people found out about it and used it for their own needs.

In a few short years, the Nucleus had become a place well known for its nefarious uses, mainly for having sites which allowed anyone to order illegal things like drugs and weapons.

In Alataria, several ringleaders had put the Nucleus to use. Men of Midas sell their drugs mostly through multiple sites that they own. Lady Dread runs her loan-sharking business using a site that offers loans to business owners. Harley Nation

owns a site used for illegal gambling.

APD took down many sites of that sort over the years, but it seemed that every time a site was taken down, two more rose in its stead. Eventually, they've minimized their efforts on that front, seeing no point in it.

The police seem to be helpless against the mob gangs. It's no wonder that this country is so infested with crime. But it's not right. I see how Kelia and her mother live in poverty. Every day, Cynthia sends Kelia to school with a ridiculous amount of food, not to mention that the meals they eat at home are also small and rationed. Recently, Lunarey had gone to bed hungry, yet she didn't cry or complain about it. It's not fair. Kelia took me in and helped me. Why does a person like her have to suffer while those ringleaders get to have such lavish lives? Why is no one fighting for justice?

It was then when she remembered the Justicars, another group she had recently become aware of. *Kelia called them the White Knights of Alataria.* Hoping to learn that they might be the answer to the justice she wished for, Lunarey ran through the pages until she found one that revolved around them. However, she was disappointed to learn of how little there was written about them.

In the book, it was said that no official information exists about the organization in almost every aspect, including its leadership, member count, headquarters location and recruitment process. They first appeared 5 years ago, in the year 2040. At first, they started spreading the word about themselves through posts on various propaganda sites on the internet, mostly ones that were on the Nucleus, before finally breaking into the mainstream media by hacking into the news channel's broadcast signal and airing a viral message to the people of Alataria. The viral message showed a man wearing white Elastics, speaking words of promise for a better future for the Alatarian citizens in a distorted voice. He promised that they would clear the streets of crime and restore to Alataria its sense of safety. *Kelia told me that those promises were worthless. She said that during the 5 years that they have been active, crime hasn't really decreased in Alataria and that many people don't take them too seriously.*

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The one detail that most charmed Lunarey was a quote from a short poem that the Justicars used to attach to their posts on the Nucleus before they aired their video on national television.

*Here everyone steals
And nothing is given
Here we scar the righteous
And crown the villain
Here we eat ashes
And see water in tears
Here we stand firm
And hope to rid us of these fears*

Something about that poem charmed her. She liked the grand, profound meaning that stood behind the short lines and few words. She wished that the poem was depicting an exaggeration of Alataria's true current state, yet from everything she had learned so far, she tended to believe that the poem pictured the actual, grim reality of the country. Its last two lines were a cry for change. A call for a stand against everything wrong in the country. A hope to rid people of their fears.

Though many consider the Justicars a criminal organization just as much as other ones for their use of lethal force in the name of justice, others simply see them as vigilantes who are using the only way left to deal with the ever-rising crime rates.

One day, after finding herself reading her books for a little over an hour, a noise caught her attention. She could already recognize the voices coming from below. It wasn't the first time she'd heard them. She rushed to the window and witnessed what she feared. The same 4 girls were picking on the overweight girl again.

They were pushing her and throwing curse words at her, most of them having to do with her physical appearance. Lunarey felt her blood boiling all over again, but then she remembered what Kelia had said before. *"Everyone else sees this all the time and just learns to shrug it off. It's not like there's anything to do about it..."* Those were her words. Lunarey recited them in

her mind, trying to calm herself, yet they only infuriated her further.

The abused girl's cries reached all the way to her window. "Stop it!" she cried. "Please..." she begged and begged, but the other girls were made of stone in Lunarey's mind. They enjoyed it so much. They laughed and laughed, and with each laugh that she heard, Lunarey clenched her hands further and further into angry fists.

Why does she have to suffer like this? What wrong did she possibly do? The questions burned in her mind. Cynthia... Kelia... they ignore such things... they look the other way like many others do. I won't be like them. I REFUSE to be like them.

As she walked out through the door of Kelia's room, she was already starting to regret her decision, and once she walked out of the apartment her regret only grew, but she was still set on her course of action. She dashed down the stairwell and through the building entrance, showing up right in front of the girls.

Her hands clenched into fists again as soon as she spotted them. "Hey!" she yelled at them as she paced in their direction. By the time their 4 faces all turned to Lunarey, the closest one of them had already suffered a devastating punch to her face by Lunarey's hand. As the girl fell to the ground, she held her face in agony and whimpered. Lunarey didn't waste further time on that girl and instead approached the one beside her, who wore a pink shirt and had a red backpack on. "Who the fuck are you?!" she asked in fear, only to be met with an answer in the form of a knee driving into her stomach. She folded and dropped on all fours. Lunarey felt good about herself. She knew these girls had it coming, but her sense of satisfaction was abruptly cut short when she felt a mighty punch hitting her face. She lost her balance and fell on her butt. Before she could regain her sense and strike back, the same one of the two remaining girls sent a fierce kick at her jaw. Lunarey felt the taste of blood taking over her mouth while dizziness and disorientation affected her. She expected to be hit again, but that hit never came. She looked and noticed

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that the two girls that were left standing were picking up the two that fell and were leaving the scene.

She looked at the obese girl that they had been abusing. She stood with her back against the brick wall, her eyes wide open with shock and disbelief. "A-Are you okay?" she asked Lunarey. The girl rushed to her aid and helped her get up.

Lunarey still felt a bit dizzy. "Yeah, I'm alright," Lunarey said as she wiped some blood off her lip. *That last girl sure knew how to punch and kick.*

"I-Thanks for doing that, but... who are you? Why did you do this?" the girl asked.

Lunarey pointed her finger upwards at her bedroom window. "I've seen this happen before from my window, and I couldn't let this go on." Lunarey noticed the glossiness in the girl's eyes. She was tearing up.

"My name's Rosabell," she presented a hand.

"Lunarey." The two shook hands.

"You look familiar. Is it possible that I've seen you somewhere before? Do you go to our school or something?" Rosabell asked.

"No. I don't go to school."

"How come?"

"I-It's a long story," she dodged the question. "Say... why do these girls always do this? How long has this been going on for?"

"There's no particular reason. They just enjoy it. They always make fun of me, tease me, call me 'fat' and whatnot."

"Can't you do something? Tell someone?"

"I tried telling some teachers a while back, but... it backfired on me. The teachers simply scolded them, and those bitches retaliated at me in return."

"Well, what about your parents?"

"They don't really like paying attention to me, so..."

"I-I'm sorry to hear that. So... you're saying that there's nothing you can do?"

"It's nice of you to worry about me like that. I've got to say, I'm... pretty shocked that you actually care. Usually... no one

really cares about me." Rosabell's words saddened Lunarey. *This girl... she looks so lonely.*

"Well, I care about you," she reassured her.

"You don't even know me," Rosabell shrugged.

"Yeah, but—" Lunarey stopped talking when something caught her attention. In the right corner of her eye, she spotted something. When she turned right, she saw a shadowed figure standing half a mile away from her. She could only see the outline of the figure from where she stood, yet she could have sworn at that moment that whoever that person was, he was staring straight at her. The figure stood there, refusing to move an inch or stop gazing at Lunarey. *Who the hell is that? Why is he staring at me like that? Does he know me?*

"Is everything alright?" Rosabell cut into her train of thought.

"W-What?" Lunarey turned back to Rosabell. "Oh, yeah, everything's alright," she said. When she turned her head right again, the shadowed figure was gone, as if it had vaporized into thin air. *Where did he go?* She begged to know.

"Anyway, I've got to get home," said Rosabell, strafing away while speaking. "Thanks again for your help, Lunarey," she waved goodbye at her. "Hope I get to see you again—"

"Wait!" Lunarey stopped her. She looked at Rosabell's waving hand and saw the SmartWrist on it. "Can I ask you for a small favor?"

"Yeah, sure. What is it?"

"Does your SmartWrist have internet access by any chance?"

"Uh, yeah, it does. Why?"

"Can I... look for something with it for a second?"

"Yeah, no problem." Rosabell snapped the thin bracelet from her wrist into its straight shape and handed it over to Lunarey.

The digital display on the SmartWrist greeted Lunarey with a show of the current time and date. She noticed a search bar at the top of the screen and tapped her finger on it. She reached into her pocket and took out the folded list of names

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that never left her since she had woken up in that alley. She opened the list and typed the first few names into the search bar. Theylon Summers, Jelion Rake and Lunarey Sykes.

Once the search results appeared, Lunarey's eyes darkened. All the results showed headlines of news reports and articles that pointed to the same conclusion. They all reported the names that Lunarey entered as people whose bodies were found in horrible states. According to the articles, Theylon Summers was a 30-year-old lawyer from Nexlin, Waterchester. Jelion Rake was a 28-year-old salesman from Oakleron, Flintwood, who got married only a few months before his body was discovered. His article was even accompanied by a picture of him, smiling and happy with his spouse. Lunarey Sykes was a 32-year-old bank clerk from Lyncastle, Brontspil, who was a single mother of a 3-year-old boy, who is now an orphan. It was too much for Lunarey. It was too overwhelming for her. She felt as if she was about to crack. She didn't know what to make of it. *This list... this damn list... what does it mean?! Why do I have it on me?!*

She pressed on to enter the rest of the names on her list, only to come to up with the same result and a horrible conclusion. All of the people on her list were brutally murdered by an unknown person. All of them were in their 20s or 30s, and all came from the surrounding districts of Waterchester, Brontspil and Flintwood. The police never found their killers, claiming that most likely the use of Elastics was involved.

All this time I've been carrying a list of dead people. She struggled to keep herself from falling to her knees. Who am I? Do I even want to know?



Edward

Never before had a beer been such a necessity for Edward as it was when he returned to Morth City. He left Roycen's house as soon as forensics showed up, leaving behind a show of blood and corruption, one that he wished to run away from.

He sipped from his long, tall glass as he sat at a local bar, where he had stopped to ponder before returning to the station with his case-winning, newly acquired evidence. He wanted to drown himself in the abyss that was the bottom of a booze bottle. Surrounding him was the racket of drunk, sleazy men and young, hormonal girls. Edward looked at them, seeing girls in short jeans and revealing shirts, talking to men who were old enough to be their fathers, flirting with them, playing with their hair and standing in poses that would make any man's head spin. He wondered which ones were prostitutes, in dire need of money for another line of that purple Vex, and which ones were simply home-wrecked girls, in dire need of love and warmth.

That made Edward reminisce about his mother. She left him and his father when he was only 10 years old, running away with another man. Edward's father always claimed that he wasn't surprised by that outcome, yet it didn't stop him from spiraling into a deep depression phase that never seemed to truly end, even on his death bed. Growing up, Edward came to realize that his father might have been the person to know best

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what injustice feels like. The departure of Edward's mother was only the start for his father, as along his lengthy career as a police officer, he witnessed and suffered acts of injustice that slowly seeped into the cracks in his mind, expanding and deepening them. He always fought and sued for justice, by as the years went by, he slowly stopped doing that and eventually he lost all hope for his country.

By his final days, Edward's father seemed like a shell of a man, a living corpse forced to walk in a world it didn't wish to be in any longer. Deep inside, Edward found solace in his father's passing, knowing that his old man might have finally found the peace he never got to have in his life.

Edward took another sip from drink and, in his mind, raised a toast to his late father.

His phone rang in his pocket. It was Derlick. He fought with the idea of ignoring up the call. He wasn't in the mood to talk to anyone, even if it was his best friend, yet eventually, he answered the call, unsure what led him to the decision.

"Hey, man, I just heard what happened at Roycen's place. Are you okay?" Derlick said.

"Yeah, I'm all right."

"Well, where are you?"

"I'm at that bar on Jenkin Avenue."

"Oh. Well, did you get anything useful from Roycen at least?"

Edward took the little flash drive from his pocket and took a long stare at it. "I got exactly what I needed. A copy of the missing evidence."

"Holy shit, are you kidding me? That's awesome! This is going to take Blackburn down for good!"

"Yeah..." Edward sounded defeated. He couldn't help but think about how that little thing got Roycen and his wife killed. *He was so scared... If it wasn't for fucking Dillard...*

"You okay there, Edward?"

"What? Oh, y-yeah—"

"You know what, how about you wait there and I come down to share a beer with you?"

D. Sharon

"Oh," Derlick's offer took him by surprise at first. "Yeah, sure, I guess. I'll be here." *A beer with a friend might be the best thing for me right now.*

He hung up the call and went back to staring at the foamy top of his chestnut colored drink.

So who's to blame for this mess? He started thinking. If it weren't for Dillard, Roycen might have never gone undercover, and yet it was Blackburn's soldiers who gunned down Roycen and his wife. As far as I'm concerned, they're both despicable and deserve to be punished. But for now, I can only deal with Blackburn. I couldn't touch Dillard if I wanted to. God, I don't even wish to think about what will happen to Roycen's two kids now. He sunk his lips in his beverage. He hoped to rid himself of further depressing thoughts about that matter, yet he was in no condition to embrace denial. *So much death and corruption... I can see why my father never liked his job on the force, yet he was the most motivated one there about fighting such things.*

During the next 20 minutes, Edward learned that escaping his thoughts was impossible and that only the alcohol was there to comfort him. Once he saw Derlick entering the bar, his hope for a better state of mind was renewed.

"I'll have what he's having," Derlick said to the bartender while pointing at Edward and sitting next to him. "Man, you look like shit," Derlick greeted him with utmost sincerity.

"He didn't want to do it, Derlick," said Edward as he stared at what little there was left of his drink.

"Who? What are you talking about?"

"Roycen. Dillard knew he has heavily in debt so he seduced him with a lot of money to go undercover."

"Holy shit. Did Roycen tell you that?"

"Yeah, minutes before he was shot to death, along with his poor wife."

"I can't believe it..." Derlick received his drink and hurried to take a big gulp out of it. "Well, what are you going to do now? I mean, now that you know that, are you going to tell Dillard—?"

"I'm not going to tell him shit. That won't get me anywhere."

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"Except for unemployment," Derlick smirked.

"This isn't funny, Derlick!" Edward snapped. "Two good people died today, and for what? For this!" He placed the flash drive on the table.

"Alright, alright. I'm sorry, you're right."

"I'm sick of this place. No one ever gets what they deserve around here. Good people die or live poorly while fucking crime lords feast at their expense. It's wrong!"

"Look, I know that things look a bit grim in this country, but that doesn't mean you have to give up—"

"Give up? Who's giving up? My father never gave up in all his years in service, why would I give up? I'm going to crush all of them. Blackburn. Mallistrom. Trife," he muttered their names with every hateful bone in his body, "Dillard..." The last one was the most hated.

"Really? You're going to take them all down by yourself?" Derlick smirked again. Edward chose to finish his drink instead of replying. "Alright, I think it's time we head back to the station."

"Yeah, alright," Edward reluctantly agreed. Derlick finished the remainder of his beer in one gulp and the two left the bar, leaving some cash on the counter.

They started heading on foot to their cars. The cold air and dark skies accompanied the two on their walk. No soul was on the streets other than them. Edward found the cold weather to be fitting for some reason.

"Hey, can I see that flash drive?" Derlick asked. Edward handed him the valuable evidence without saying a word. "Man... so much blood and devastation for such a small thing."

"Yeah," Edward refused to add anything further to his reply.

The two were just passing by a dark alley when Derlick stopped, and Edward with him. "Edward, how long have we been friends?"

"A year or so, I think. Why?"

"Oh, man..." Derlick made a long sigh, his face facing the

floor.

"What is it?" Edward asked.

"I just want you to know... this is going to hurt me more than it'll hurt you," Derlick said and delivered a fast, yet powerful punch to Edward, sending him into the dark alley with a cry of pain.

Edward's head spun as he tried to gather his senses together. He lay on his back in that alley, staring at the man he had called a friend only a minute ago. "What the fuck?" Edward asked while writhing in pain.

"I'm sorry, Edward," Derlick said, drawing his pistol and aiming it at Edward. "But I never thought Roycen would actually have something like this in his possession."

"You... You're helping Blackburn? Why?!" Edward's voice rose. Derlick remained silent, uncomfortable with the question, instead looking at the flash drive in his left hand, while still pointing the gun with his right. "Tell me!" Edward urged him. "Why the fuck are you working with Blackburn?"

"I'm not. I'm working with Dillard."

"Dillard? What—?"

"When Charles Blackburn deserted from the military and formed Code Sanguinary 14 years ago, he had enough power and motivation to actually pose a great threat to the government, but we all know that over the years their number of his men dwindled, and their rebellious activities became so few that you barely hear about them anymore. However, one thing Blackburn always had enough of is money. His gun trading business was a sure income that kept his organization alive all these years. That's why when President Conrad gave the order to take Blackburn down, Dillard had other plans. Charles Blackburn has refused to play the same game the rest of the mob gangs have been playing for years. His soldiers have been killed and prosecuted many times, and yet he refused to buy protection from Dillard time and again."

"Oh, God..." Edward had already figured out the rest.

"This whole case was a farce. Blackburn was never supposed to go to jail."

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"The charges... The trial... Everything was just a threat. A show of power. A message to Blackburn."

"Play the game and fill my pockets or get fucked."

"B-But the president—"

"Knows that we had the misfortune of losing our key evidence, and will later hear from Dillard how much money and time were spent on this case, which will convince him to let the matter go instead of spending that same amount again."

"Then Roycen..."

"Was, unfortunately, a pawn in Dillard's little plot."

"You motherfucker!" Edward tried to get up, hoping to storm the wretched person he once called his best friend, but Derlick made sure to keep him at bay. "Don't you fucking move, Edward." He inched closer with his gun.

Edward felt defeated. After everything he just went through, getting shot by his treacherous friend seemed like the cherry on the top of a bleak reality. "Why, Derlick?" he wanted to know.

"Money makes the world spin, Edward," he said the same words he did at the convenience store in Ussermis.

"Money makes the world rot." Edward uttered back the same reply he had back then as well.

"Look, the only reason Dillard allowed you to go on this witch hunt against Blackburn was because he was certain you wouldn't find anything. No one planned on killing you."

"Well, I guess it's just my shitty luck, then."

"You're a good cop, Edward, the only one there is. I'll give you that."

"And you're a backstabbing fuck. You've been dealing with Dillard behind my back all this time. I guess you're also the one who took the evidence in the first place. That's why you volunteered to search through the entry logs of the evidence room. You didn't want me to see your name there."

"A smart cop, too."

"Too smart for my own good, eh?" Derlick remained silent on that question.

He dropped the flash drive on the ground and smashed it

with his leg, destroying the only thing that could have indicted Charles Blackburn. At that moment, Edward decided to take his chances and drew his gun from its holster, in the hope that Derlick's momentary focus on the flash drive would give him the opportunity to turn the table. Derlick noticed Edward's attempt, but a second too late. The gun had already fired, its loud blast echoing through the streets. It was a straight shot to the head. Derlick's now-lifeless body fell on its back, with the gun still clutched in his hand.

Edward got up and looked at the dead traitor before him, broken pieces of the crucial flash drive at his feet. All he wanted was to enforce the law and bring punishment to those who deserved it, and as a result, he had lost his best and only friend and was denied of any justice, for there could be none of that in Alataria.



Edrimer

Edrimer leaned against the window in the living room of his home, watching the gray car that had been parked across from his building for the past few hours. He could spot two figures sitting in the front seats, yet the darkness that engulfed them denied him from seeing their faces. Still, he knew who they were at the basic level. Justicars. *They're keeping a close eye on their tenderfoots. These guys are very careful. No wonder no one has been able to expose much information about them so far.* As much as Edrimer found himself somewhat impressed, he also felt as if a noose was tightening around his neck. *They can stalk me all day for all I care. The only thing that can truly worry me is them finding out about Arkaneb's affiliation with Reus Mallistrom, but I'm guessing he's not going to stop by for a surprise visit, so everything should be alright.*

"What are you looking at, Edrimer?" Jeremy asked as he noticed his nephew's obsessive staring out the window.

"Oh, nothing, Uncle Jeremy." He stepped away from the window, trying to appear as if everything was normal.

"Are you sure? I like to think I know you quite well and I'm sensing—"

"I'm fine, Uncle."

"It's just that... you know what today is." *That's right. I almost forgot. Today is the date when mom and dad died.*

"I remember," Edrimer said.

"I already visited their graves today. You should do the

same."

"I will. I promise."

Jeremy turned to walk away, when he stopped, unable to hold his words in. "You know, you can talk to me if something's up."

"For fuck's sake, I already told you I'm fine."

Jeremy chuckled. "You're just like your father."

"Stop fucking saying that. You keep repeating that every goddamn year."

"Because it's true, and you keep reminding me of that every time. Your father also never liked sharing his troubles with others. He kept showing off that sarcastic, carefree attitude, looking as if nothing bothered him, when deep inside he had all kinds of thoughts and worries." Edrimer feared that at some point his uncle, who knew him so well, would figure that something was troubling him, yet he didn't expect it to happen so soon. "I know how devastated you were after what happened to Zachary, and I also know that there isn't a single day that goes by where you don't think about Arkaneh and where he is." *Oh, Uncle, if only you knew about Arkaneh...* "I get it if you don't want to talk about it. But know this: your father suffered dearly from this kind of behavior." The old man said nothing further and chose to leave the living room instead.

For a few more minutes Edrimer sat there, beside the window, looking at the gray car with the two men, and pondering his wise uncle's words. The past week had been a very eventful one for Edrimer, between the robbery attempt, Zachary's death, Arkaneh's resurgence and him joining the Justicars. Suddenly he realized that he had barely had any time recently to just sit in quiet and think about all of that. The mess of feelings and thoughts in his head had reached a point where he couldn't focus on a single thing at any time. He decided to go somewhere where he could express himself without having anyone truly know about his struggles. He grabbed his jacket and left the apartment.

The drive only took about 15 minutes. As soon as he reached the place and parked his car, he noticed the eerie

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silence that ruled there. Grey clouds and heavy wind greeted him as he walked through the cemetery, passing by different graves of different people. Edrimer never liked visiting this place. He always felt that the atmosphere would consume his soul somehow. As a man who pursued happiness through a peaceful life, the death that surrounded him felt like a complete contrast to that.

Even though he hadn't seen if the Justicars that were keeping an eye on him had followed him to the cemetery, Edrimer knew that they were there and that right now, someone was watching him, yet he didn't care at all.

When he finally reached his parents' grave, he felt a pinch in his heart as he saw the two names engraved on the marble tombstone.

Lisa Frye

10.11.1995-08.07.2031

Jason Frye

05.06.1995-08.07.2031

"Hey," he spoke to their graves as if they could hear him. "I... I don't know why I'm even doing this." He made a false smile. "I guess I'm just in a really shitty place right now. I think I've come to terms with the notion that I'll probably never get to live life the way I wanted. Fuck, if I could live life the way I wanted, then Zachary would still be alive, telling me to stop slacking on the job and clean the place or something, and I'd have Arkaneh by my side again, like back then... and you guys might have still been here... but I don't have any of them in my life anymore. Zachary, Arkaneh... you two..." he stopped himself from crying. He had never cried before, and he wasn't going to start now. "It's not like I feel alone or anything... at least not in particular... it's just... I'm sick of losing. And now I've joined the Justicars, and I'm not sure if that was an impulse decision that I'm going to regret or..." he buried his face in his hands for a moment. "There was a time when we all knew where we stood and where our actions were going to take us, but that's just not the case anymore. Everything is so random and chaotic now. I mean, last week I was still dusting that old

convenience store, and now..." the cold wind wrapped around Edrimer, along with the harrowing silence that lingered. "Goddammit, I'm acting like a fucking baby... but you know what? Before I came here, I had doubts. I didn't know whether or not the choices I made recently were the right ones, but now... now I see everything more clearly. I know why my life is like this. It's all because of those fucking mob gangs. They killed Zachary, they made Arkaneh drift away, and they killed you guys. But I'll be damned if I'm going to let those motherfuckers rest easy. If I'm not going to live a peaceful life, I'm going to make sure they don't either. I'm going to hunt down every single one of them and destroy them." He now felt determined more than ever. "Just wait and see. I'm going to avenge you and everyone else like you."

The wind seemed to blow harder in Edrimer's face now. A part of him liked to think that it was his parents' spirits trying to encourage him and show support, yet he couldn't fool himself into believing that truly.

He heard footsteps approaching behind him. Serian Conway as he appeared behind Edrimer, dressed in a long black duster. Edrimer looked at him, half shocked by his presence. Even though he knew he was being watched, he didn't anticipate Serian's appearance. "Relax," Serian said. "I didn't hear anything that you just said if that's what worries you." Edrimer returned to look at the two graves. "July of 2031," Serian read the date of their death. "They died during the Tearful Rebellion."

"They died fighting for this country's future," Edrimer hurried to make it clear.

"I see." Serian bowed his head, as if he was showing respect to the two who fell in battle. "Everyone in the Heart would say they were rebels. Treasonous terrorists who sought to bring our country to ruin. But people like us know what they truly were." Edrimer was caught by surprise by Serian's show of honor. "Is that why you have a tattoo of the Seditone?"

"Among other reasons," Edrimer replied.

"Back then the Seditone appeared everywhere in the Heart.

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It was painted on every wall of every building, on every sign that was held. In those days, the visions that you could see in the Heart were death, flames and the Seditone."

"You fought during the Rebellion?" Edrimer asked.

"I did," Serian answered. "And I'm lucky to still be alive to talk about it. I've lost friends and family during those horrible days."

"People always tell me how fortunate I am for not having to take any part in the Rebellion. I was only a child back then."

"I agree with those people. No one should go through the horrors that happened there." Serian took out a cigarette and lit it in his mouth. "Do you have any idea who killed you parents?"

"I only know that they were some guys that worked for Henrick Trife back when he was still alive and a crime lord."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I don't remember when exactly was it, but on the day that the mob gangs decided to help President Alford against the rebels, true hell was brought to the Heart. They wanted to keep things the way they are, or they would lose all their power. Joseph Mallistrom and Henrick Trife, along with several other ringleaders brought dozens of their men and slaughtered rebels left and right."

"I've heard all about that." Edrimer heard stories about how Henrick Trife tortured many of the rebels he captured before killing them. Edrimer never wanted to know if his parents suffered such a fate, so he never asked, yet in his heart, he always wondered if it were true, trembling by the very thought.

"If Henrick Trife is responsible for you parents' death, does that mean you have some vendetta you wish to execute against his daughter, Lady Dread?"

"No. The people who did this are probably dead by now. Lady Dread had nothing to do with the death of my parents. It'd be stupid for me to hold them accountable and try to avenge their deaths by going after Sunyula Trife."

"It's good to know you have a sensible mind. It's a rare trait these days," Serian put his hand on Edrimer's shoulder.

D. Sharon

"Serian..." Edrimer turned to him. "There were two other guys in that van with me on the day I joined. What happened to them?"

"One of them joined us too. The other one didn't."

"Why not?"

"He just wasn't... qualified enough."

"Does that mean...?"

"He's not dead if that's where you're going with this."

"Well, then I guess you didn't just let the poor guy go home just like that, did you? I mean, what's to keep him from telling everyone about the Justicars' secret recruitment process?"

"We have our ways of making sure guys like him don't start talking."

"I get it, you guys are careful as fuck. Speaking of which, I feel bad for your guys, having to wait in that car for hours. Must be boring."

"They can handle it. I hope you're not offended or something. You have to understand—"

"You don't have to explain anything to me. I get why you're doing this. You're being careful. Though I must say, I didn't expect a personal visit from you."

"I actually came here to let you know that you're needed." Serian reached into his long duster and pulled out a small brown folder from it, handing it to Edrimer. Inside the folder, Edrimer saw several pictures of bodies, all of which showed their eyes missing. Further images also showed that the bodies were also missing their arms and a large, deep gaping hole in their chest hinted that their hearts had also been cut out.

"What is this?" Edrimer asked.

"APD named him the Tri-Surgeon. This guy has already killed 7 people using the same method of cutting out their eyes, arms, and hearts."

"So where do I come in the picture?"

"I like to think that I can spot a smart person when I see one. And you're smart alright. The way you answered my questions during your interview, the way you figured out about the camera, the way you noticed the tail on you. You're sharp."

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No doubt about it. I want you to help us come up with a way of taking this bastard down."

"I see. Well, have you guys got any leads yet that I can follow? Do the victims have anything in common?"

"Not that we know of. Their locations were also scattered. Three of the bodies were found in Exumber, two in Canstow and another two in Basilham."

"Sounds like the guy's on a killing spree."

"He is."

"Why aren't you letting APD handle this case?"

"We don't trust the cops to be able to capture this guy, and even if they do... we have a trust issue when it comes to the justice system."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah. In case you didn't hear, Charles Blackburn was scheduled to be prosecuted a few days ago, but a reliable source told us that the key evidence against him disappeared, which means he'll probably walk free. We like to deal justice the only way we know how."

"You mean with violence."

"If you have a problem—"

"I don't. It just sickens me that things around here have gotten so bad that this is now the only way that works. Anyway, I'll take this case, Serian."

"Good. A car will pick you up tomorrow at your home at 8 AM. It will take you to our current temporary base of operation. A team we've gathered to work on this case will already be waiting for you when you arrive." *A temporary base of operations... makes sense. The Justicars move around, never staying put for too long.* "There's one more thing you need to know. The two bodies that were found in Exumber... they were Lady Dread's people, so they might be out for payback as well. Take note that you might be running into them during this hunt."

"Great. I love a good challenge mixed with some action."



Maileena

Demilan and Maileena returned to the apartment. Throughout the entire walk from Odis's place, Maileena noticed Demilan's random mumbles and lack of concentration. His pupils were widened and his mind seemed to be somewhere else. After 6 months of not using Vex, his body was having a somewhat strange reaction to the purple drug's return.

Demilan dropped his black duffel bag on the floor as soon as the two walked through the door into the apartment and lay on the couch. "Oh, man," the ex-soldier was euphoric.

"Are you alright? How are you feeling?"

"How am I feeling?" he laughed. "Have you ever tried Vex before?"

"No," she sounded slightly agitated.

"Well, it's..." he stopped himself.

"Great? Awesome? Amazing?"

"It's the feeling that made me lose everything," he said in a blank tone. "It's neither of those things."

"Oh... I see."

"That motherfucker... fucking Odis!" a sudden rage overtook him. "That prick knew what he was doing when he stabbed me with that syringe. He knew what the addiction did to me." He buried his face in his hands.

"You should rest."

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"Rest? What are you talking about? We have to go after Kleon in the Godly Succubi!" He tried to get up from the couch, yet Maileena held him back, pushing him back down. "You're in no shape to fight anyone right now. Rest. We'll figure out what to do later."

"I need to find Telia."

"And I need to find Vera!" she snapped at him. "But we'll both get killed if we get reckless!" Demilan saw her expression, burning with anger and frustration, and remained on the couch. "I'm going to make us some coffee." She disappeared into the kitchen.

Night fell quickly that day, and soon enough the effect of the Vex wore off of Demilan's face. A part of Maileena was angry at him for making them delay their search for Vera. *If it wasn't for his fucking Vex addiction...* Yet a part of her also knew that it wasn't really his fault. *He couldn't see Odis coming at him with that syringe, and the bottom line was that he was a victim of the drug.*

The two sat in the living room with the sounds of crickets echoing from outside and the occasional sound of a car passing by. Other than those, it was silent. Too silent for Maileena. She never liked the silence. She held her revolver in hand, spinning its wheel again and again, while Demilan sat next to her, counting what remaining bullets he had to use with his Skyla rifle. There was eeriness in the air around them, and Maileena didn't favor it much. Ever since her sister was kidnapped by men from the Godly Succubi, she was constantly going through something, never leaving herself alone to her thoughts, never giving herself a chance to think about what recently happened in her life. From being raped and abused by Kleon's sleazy men, to being rescued by a rough soldier looking for his wife, to extracting information from a drug dealer. She knew that keeping herself out of some occupation would make the notion of her sister in the hands of those wretched men appear in her mind. And she was right.

"Do you ever... think about what led you here?" she broke the silence that wrapped around the two of them.

Demilan seemed taken aback by the question. At first he

seemed hesitant to answer. "I wish I could NOT think about it," he said eventually. "Without Telia... I feel broken. Incomplete. It's a constant reminder of what led me here."

"You couldn't have known that your addiction would get her kidnapped."

"It doesn't matter. The reality is that without it, she'd still be here. I don't even know what she has gone through during these past 6 months." Suddenly the notion of what Vera might have gone through ever since she was taken occurred to Maileena. *Did they rape her? Did they hit her?* Those questions made her furious. *If they've laid a finger on her, I'll kill them. I'll chop their fucking heads off.* "Do YOU see yourself accountable for what happened to your sister?" he asked her.

"I..." she thought about it for a second. "I do," she confessed. "It's like you said. The reality is that if I hadn't gotten mixed up with those people, Vera would still be here."

"But your case is different. You were trying to help the two of you make a living. You were trying to make money to feed yourselves. I was just a junkie."

"Either way, we can spin this around in any direction we want. We can blame ourselves or we can blame no one and say that we couldn't have known that this would happen. I think that whatever we choose, we should also blame the people who did this to us."

"Seems like everyone in this country is... rotten."

"Does that mean we're rotten, too?"

"I know I am."

"Demilan..." she turned to him, her eyes glistening in the moonlight coming through the window. "I've had the pleasure of dealing with the lowest sorts of people. I've seen rotten. I've seen more of it than I would rather. You're not rotten. The lengths you'd go to save your wife, the way nothing stops you, even if it seems you've lost everything. You're a good man, Demilan McCloud."

"I appreciate it, Maileena, but... I'm really not. You're forgetting that I used to be a soldier in the Alatarian army and in Code Sanguinary. That means I've killed people. Hell, I've

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even tortured some."

"So what? As long as those people deserved it, it doesn't matter."

"Is that what you think?"

"Yeah. Look, there's no right and wrong anymore, no heroes and villains, at least not in the way we used to define them in stories and fairy tales. Everyone has bad deeds on their record. It's how we live with ourselves that differentiates us from one another. People like us... people who are in pain and agony over the things they've done... we don't get to fall in line with those other scumbags who go to sleep with a smirk on their faces after raping or killing someone. A good apple on a bad tree isn't necessarily rotten. It's just an apple with shitty luck."

Demilan chuckled in response. "A good apple on a bad tree... my wife used to tell me similar things. Ever since I saw those horrible things in the Tearful Rebellion, I've had those awful nightmares. Every single night. They refused to let me go. People getting bludgeoned to death. Women and children trying to escape the wrath of President Alford, to no avail." He held up his necklace, the one with the dream catcher as its pendant. "Telia gave me this necklace, saying it would make the nightmares go away." He let go of the necklace. "Want to know a funny thing? It worked. The nightmares stopped. For a long time I felt relieved, but now... now they're back. Without Telia..."

"We'll find her, Demilan."

"I remember standing on the rooftop of that hospital after waking up from the coma. The first thought that ran through my mind was that Telia must be dead by now." Maileena's eyes focused heavily on Demilan. She saw the sadness in his eyes now. His voice became heavy and slow. "I was ready to jump. I didn't want to live like that. I mean, what's the point of trying to live on when I know that I've already lost everything I had?"

"But you didn't do it."

"No... I didn't. A part of me started to realize that Telia might not be dead after all. That's when I decided to find her

and make amends for my mistakes. I don't care if I die doing it, as long as I save her. Most people would have jumped. I even saw one do it a while ago."

"You did?"

"Yeah, when I made my way from the hospital to that warehouse in Ashcote, where I found you. This poor woman was standing on the Maroon Bridge, you know, the one that crosses over the Wailing Lake."

"The one that's known for all the people who jumped to their deaths in it."

"Right. She started telling me about how her husband and child were murdered by the Ferals, but I didn't care enough to listen. I was too focused on getting to Ashcote and finding Telia that... I was just so careless about her. I just wanted to stop to light up a cigarette, and she... she threw herself," Demilan looked as if he was struggling to say the words. "I just drove away." Maileena gazed down at her revolver, her mouth slightly open. "Do I seem a bit more rotten to you now?" he asked.

"No. It was her choice. That had nothing to do with you."

"Then why do I sense disappointment in your voice?"

Maileena simply spun the wheel of her revolver, remaining silent, not because she didn't want to answer his question, but because she didn't know how. She held the gun up, making the metallic barrel shine against the moonlight. It didn't feel as heavy as it was when she first picked it up. "You know, I still haven't picked a name for this gun." she said, changing the subject.

"Take your time" he allowed her to avoid the question.

Despite the circumstances of the conversation, Maileena quite enjoyed it. It'd been a long time since she had an honest, mature conversation with someone. Ever since she dropped out of school and lost touch with all of her friends, she had only found herself in the company of thugs and criminals who know nothing about having a mature dialogue with a person, and she could never talk with her young sister about such matters. *In shitty times like these, I better cherish every nice, lovely*

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moment I can get.

When the dark, moonlit skies changed to bright ones, lit by the warm sun, Maileena opened her eyes, awakening from her sleep. She didn't even remember falling asleep, yet she woke up on Demilan's couch. She rubbed her sleepy eyes and tried to adjust her eyesight to the brightly lit apartment scenery. Her revolver lay on the floor, apparently having dropped from her hand when she fell asleep. She looked around, searching for Demilan, yet she couldn't spot him, until she heard his voice coming from the bedroom, grunting and sighing heavily.

Curious about why he would make such noises, she opened the door to his bedroom, slowly and quietly, making the door squeak loudly as she entered the room. "Demilan?" she called out to him. The former drug addict sat beside his bed, his eyes red and his mouth open, grinning. His hands rested on the floor, and his eyes were staring at the wall, looking as if it was the most interesting thing in the world. "Demilan, are you okay?" she inched closer to him, eventually crouching by the man to take a closer look at him. That was when she saw it, laying on the floor, right next to him. It was a small wooden box, containing about 4 purple pills, an emptied syringe with droplets of purple fluid still in its cylinder, and a small bottle, containing the same purple fluid in it, to refill the syringe's cylinder. *Vex in all its forms. Pills and liquids.* "Demilan, what did you do?" she asked him, getting no response in return. Demilan was too high on the drug, wasting away in a mental state that probably brought him as much joy and pleasure as it was destroying his body and brain. *He must have had it here in the apartment all this time... a leftover from his days of addiction.* "Demilan, talk to me!" she urged him to answer her, yet the man still stared at the wall with a silly grin on his face.

At that moment, Maileena knew that she was facing a much bigger problem than she initially thought. Without Demilan, there was no way she could save Vera from the Godly Succubi, and right now Demilan was gone. There was only the shadow of the former soldier, drifting in the purple haze that was once his undoing.



Lunarey

Much to her surprise, Lunarey actually managed to raise even more question marks for herself, now that she knew that the people on her list were murder victims whose cases were yet unsolved. There was also the thought of the strange man who stared at her from afar that worried her. *Who was he? Is it possible that he recognized me from somewhere? That he might know me from who I was before I lost my memory?*

It was unbearable for her. The hardest part was keeping it all to herself. She couldn't bring herself to tell Kelia about her latest discovery. *If she learns that the list of people that I've been carrying around is actually a list of murder victims, she might take me for the killer, and probably kick me out, or worse, call the police.* She wasn't able to hide her worried expressions all the time, but whenever Kelia would ask her if something was wrong she would avoid the question or just make something up as an excuse.

From what she read on Rosabell's SmartWrist, the police couldn't find anyone with a motive to kill those people, nor did they have any evidence to link anyone to the murders, which probably suggested the use of Elastics. *Did I murder these people? Did I mutilate them so badly?* She felt disgusted whenever she was reminded of the brutal descriptions in those news articles. Eyes poked out, limb dismemberment, high degree burns. The list went on and on, making Lunarey feel sick.

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Ever since Lunarey defended Rosabell from those bullies, she kept thinking about her, wondering how she was. She hadn't seen anyone picking on her from her window in the days that followed, making Lunarey hopeful that she might have ended Rosabell's long cycle of abuse. She constantly glanced through her window, hoping to see that lonely girl once more, if only to have a pleasant conversation with her, perhaps making her feel a bit less lonely.

"Hey, Kelia," Lunarey turned to her roommate one day. "Do you remember that girl that was always getting picked on? The one I told you about that I saw from my window the other day?"

"Yeah. What about her?"

"Do you happen to know if she's still getting picked on?"

"Well, I actually saw her get beaten by some girls a few days ago. Aside from that, I don't think she even came to school since then."

"Beaten? Are you sure?" Lunarey dreaded the confirmation.

"Saw it with my own eyes." *Those girls... it must be same ones. I'm sure of it. They must have retaliated against poor Rosabell for what I did.* "Why? What's wrong?" Kelia wondered. "Why are you so fascinated with that girl? I already told you, this kind of thing happens all the—"

"Because I helped her."

"Y-You what?" Kelia had trouble believing what she had heard.

"The other day... I-I helped her. I fought off those girls..."

"What? Why didn't you tell me about this?" Kelia raged.

"I'm sorry, Kelia, I just—"

"You know how dangerous that is! If someone would have recognized you, they could have called the cops on you!"

"If you could just see what those girls do to her—"

"I DO see it! Almost every day at school!"

"Then... why don't you do something about it? Why does nobody want to help her?"

Kelia sighed in defeat. "You already know the answer. Because that won't change anything. That girl is who she is,

and who she is, is the reason she gets picked on. You can't change that. You saw it yourself. You fought those girls off, but they came back the next day."

"But it's not her fault! She did nothing wrong!"

"Sometimes it doesn't take that you do something wrong for something wrong to happen to you."

"It's not fair!" Lunarey burst. Her eyes glistened as they became teary. Kelia approached her and gave her a long hug. "I know, Luni... I know."

Long moments of silence went by as the two were wrapped in each other's arms. Lunarey felt helpless. It was as if she was crushed under the weight of all the ugliness she had witnessed so far. "How do you do it, Kelia?" she turned to her only friend in the world. "How do you live every day here knowing what you know?" she broke down.

"I..." Kelia seemed speechless. "I just don't think about it. It's as simple as that. This reality... this awful situation... everything from mob gangs who are ruining this country to simple school girls who abuse others... I was born into it. It's a constant part of my life. Fuck that, it's a constant part of ALL of our lives."

"No..." Lunarey's voice was decisive, full of rage. "It's not part of mine. I was born anew. I lost the person I was before and started all over again as Lunarey."

"That's not going to help you." That sentence hit Lunarey as if it was a weapon fired at her. "You just have to accept things as they are."

"I won't do that!" Lunarey declared. "I don't know who I was before, but I know who I am now. Whatever I might have done or seen... it's all in the forgotten past now, and it can't haunt me. These ideas of supremacy, survival of the fittest, ignoring the weak and poor, these are the kind of values that have brought us all here. They're the kind of values that made you grow up without a father, in a shitty district that you can't afford to leave. So I refuse to be as neglectful as everyone else. I'm going to use the chance I was given to be a better person." Once again, Lunarey managed to leave Kelia speechless. She

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spoke with such charisma and determination that it could be easily forgotten that only a while ago had she woken up with no recollection of the world around her. "That girl... she looked so lonely," Lunarey's tone lowered as she mentioned her. "Kelia, can I call her?"

"W-What?" Kelia finally opened her mouth.

"I want to talk to Rosabell, see how she's doing. Please, Kelia. Please, let me use your SmartWrist to speak to her."

"I don't know if that's a good idea, Luni."

"What harm could come from it? Please, Kelia... I need this."

Kelia sighed, long and hard. "Fine. I'll block my number so she won't know where the call is made from." She snapped her SmartWrist into its flat shape and started tapping on it a few times. Once she tracked Rosabell's number, she handed Lunarey the device, ready to make the call.

Lunarey felt so anxious when she heard the dial tone change into Rosabell's voice. "Hello?" she answered the call.

"Rosabell? It's me, Lunarey!"

"Lunarey? Hey... umm, how did you get my number?"

"I-I tracked it. I'm sorry, I just wanted to see how you were doing."

"Really? Well... I'm alright, I guess."

"I mean, those girls... the ones who picked on you—"

"Are still at it."

"B-But—"

"But you thought they were done for good when you beat them up?"

"I... I don't know... I-I can beat them up again!"

"That won't help. You know that."

"Oh..."

"Lunarey... why do you care so much about me? I mean, I like it, but... I guess I'm just not used to it."

"I just... do. Is it wrong?"

"Of course not. I'm just a bit taken back by the whole thing."

"I've been thinking about you ever since we met."

"Really? That's odd to hear."

"I was just worried about you."

"You really are something, Lunarey... umm, what's your last name, by the way?" Lunarey felt her heart drop. *What can I say? I don't have a last name, as far as I know. What should I tell her?*

"I-It's Gardner." She remembered the name from the books she read. Carl Gardner, the man who tried to assassinate President Hamilton, back in 2029.

"Lunarey Gardner... you're like my guardian angel, aren't you?"

"I-I guess."

"Unfortunately, my dear angel, you've arrived too late." Lunarey noticed a sudden shift in Rosabell's voice. "At this point, nothing's going to restore my hope for the world. Everyone's a fucking scumbag. And I hope that even though you appear to be naïve and innocent, you realize that too."

"That's not true. I—"

"I've had friends like you before... good friends who used to protect me like you did... until they turned on me."

"I'm not like that!" Lunarey pleaded.

"That's what I thought about them too, at the time. I'm sorry, Lunarey, but I don't believe in anyone anymore. I appreciate what you did for me, but I just can't risk another backstab."

"Wait! Just listen—!"

"I WILL tell you this, though: the way you stood up against those girls... you've got a lot of courage. And now you've given me some. And I'm going to use that courage for my own good now."

"What are you—?"

"Goodbye, Lunarey." She hung up the call. Lunarey put down the SmartWrist, her eyes wide open with shock regarding what she just heard. *Why was she talking like that? Why did she think I would backstab her? What did she mean by using her courage for her own good?* As always, questions haunted Lunarey.

That night, she had trouble finding sleep. Her mind kept racing with thoughts about Rosabell. She kept wondering how

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the conversation took such a dark turn all of a sudden. "I guess a scarred person is a scarred person. Nothing wipes away a scar," said Kelia when Lunarey asked for her input. That sentence flowed through her mind continually.

The next day, Lunarey tried to focus on other matters. She was sick of haunting thoughts and never-ending question marks. Instead, she turned to her books, enriching her knowledge of the world around her further and further.

With her mind settled on different matters, ones that shouldn't frustrate or worry her, Lunarey felt much more relaxed. Eventually, she completely forgot about Rosabell and the list of victims. For once she felt tranquility, as she cleared her mind of all that was bothering her, yet there could be none of that in Alataria.

A couple of days later, Kelia returned from school with a grim expression on her face. She entered her room and immediately addressed Lunarey, who was reading one of her books.

"L-Luni... we need to talk."

"What is it?" she closed the book.

"It's about Rosabell..." Kelia's bleak eyes had already foreshadowed the worst. Lunarey knew the news even before they left Kelia's lips. "She's dead. She killed herself." The book dropped from Lunarey's hands.



Arkaneh

Griffiths's breath reeked heavily of liquor as he stood next to Arkaneh. The two looked at a map of the nearby districts, which included Axfield, Fraenon Hill, Rockbury and Westden Fells. Men of Midas had two main outposts from which they spread their presence. The one in the abandoned factory in Ravenwey Burrows, Axfield, was responsible for every crime that involved a golden mask in those districts. The other outpost was located in an old building in Oakneil, Waterchester, not far from the offices of Reus's record label, Golden Key Records, in Basilham, Rockbury. From that outpost, their reach spread to Waterchester, Fallhalt, and Silvercoast.

In total, the organization's manpower reached about 7 dozen in number, but only less than 30 of the men worked from the Ravenwey Burrows outpost, while the rest were run from the Oakneil one. Both lieutenants, Connor Griffiths and Talimay Singh, who was still absent in grieving over her lost brother, were in charge of the Ravenwey Burrows outpost and the Oakneil one respectively. With Talimay currently away, Griffiths was in charge of Oakneil as well. The lieutenants were responsible for making sure the men were kept in line and either approving or disapproving every activity that came up on the board, occasionally with the advice of the other lieutenant. Reus's father, Joseph Mallistrom, was the one who

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first gave his lieutenants sanction rights over every illegal action that the organization was thinking to take. That method, which had been preserved to that day, made sure no one in Men of Midas would go on to do something foolish that might jeopardize the organization and its ringleader.

Reus never goes anywhere near the outposts, leaving their operations in the hands of his lieutenants, while getting constant updates to keep himself informed of the organization's every aspect. He refuses to associate himself with Men of Midas in the public eye, instead using his time to tend to his more legitimate businesses.

"So why are we so sure that this rat belongs to this outpost and not the other one in Oakneil?" Griffiths asked Arkaneh, stroking his white goatee. "I mean, we've had Justicars attacks on almost every district we're in."

"I've been doing some research," Arkaneh replied. "According to the papers and online news media, Men of Midas have had 14 run-ins with the Justicars over the last couple of months alone." He took a few red-colored pins in his hand and placed them on the map accordingly. "3 in Axfield, 4 in Rockbury, 2 in Fallhalt and 5 in Waterchester." The red pins stood boldly in their rightful districts. "The more interesting thing about this is the timing of these encounters. You see, the ones in Fallhalt and Waterchester happened one after the other, and the ones in Axfield and Rockbury all happened after them."

"Well, what does that mean to us?"

"Fallhalt and Waterchester fall under the jurisdiction of the Oakneil outpost while the other ones fall under that of the Ravenwey Burrows outpost. That means our rat used to be in the Oakneil outpost and later moved into the other one. The same thing happened a few months before that as well. We've had a total of 8 consecutive encounters in the jurisdiction of the Ravenwey outpost and 9 consecutive ones in the jurisdiction of the Oakneil outpost, which means our rat moved again between the outposts."

"But... how can that be?"

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"You tell me. Lieutenants are in charge of any transfers. Have we had anyone transferring between the outposts?"

"Transfers happen very rarely. Last time we had one was almost 2 years ago."

"Then the case isn't that our leaker simply switched outposts. That can mean only one thing: we have more than one rat and they're bugged somehow, most likely without them even knowing. Someone in Men of Midas is bugging our guys. He bugged someone in Oakneil, and now turned to bug someone else here."

"Why would he do it like that?"

"Why not? It allows him to leak information for the Justicars without jeopardizing himself much, and it continually throws us off. With the bug constantly switching between the outposts it'd be hard to guess that we have a leak, and more likely that we'd end up thinking that it's simply random and coincidental."

"So... how do we act?"

"First, we need to find our current leak. He denies us from doing anything without running into the Justicars. Hopefully, once we track him down, we can find some clues to the identity of our real rat." Arkaneh ran his hand through his long hair as he thought the plan out in his mind, making sure it was the right one to go with. *If I choose to stick to what I know to go after the previous men who were bugged in the hope of finding any clues about our rat, it would most likely end up being a waste of time and resources. Not to mention that I'm not sure that there's even a way to track them down now. Yes... finding the current leak is the right course of action. It'll be much easier and more likely to help us.* "I have a plan," Arkaneh announced. "But I'm going to need your help."

"I'm listening."

"How many guys do we have at this outpost, as of now, not including us both?"

"24 after our latest casualties."

"Alright, here's how it's going to work," Arkaneh took 4 blue pins in his hand and placed them on the map, all in various streets in the city of Ussermis, Axfield. "These 4

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locations represent 4 warehouses that are currently unoccupied and are up for rent. As you can see, there's one on Grove Street, one on Brine Street, one on Park Street and one on Dakin Street, so none of them is far from another. We take our 24 men and split them into 4 groups of 6. Each group would break into a different warehouse and wait there."

"Wait there for what? What are we going to tell them?"

"Well, how long has it been since our last gun trade with Code Sanguinary?"

"Over a month or so."

"Then I guess we can just tell them that they're there to receive guns that we already paid for from Blackburn's men."

"Alright."

"Now here's the catch: one of those groups is going to have our current leaker in it, but if the Justicars hear through him about his group's location, they may not risk attacking them, for fear of losing their inside guy. Instead, each group is going to be told that it's a backup unit on standby while a different group will be carrying out the gun deal in another location nearby. That way, the Justicars will surely jump on the opportunity to take out that other group along with Blackburn's men."

"That's very clever." Griffiths seemed impressed.

"We'll tell the Grove Street group about the Brine Street group being the dealers, the Brine group will hear the same about the Park group and so on. Each group will only be aware of one other group, so when the Justicars attack one of the groups, we'll know that the group who knew about them has our rat."

"And what will we do once we know that? How will we know which one in that group of six is our guy?"

"We'll worry about that later."

"Well, it's a good plan you got there, but..." Griffiths inched closer to Arkaneh with a menacing look. "What about our brothers' safety, eh?"

"I already thought about that," Arkaneh reassured him, taking a step back. "With Talimay gone, you're running

Oakneil, right?"

"That's right," Griffiths sighed as if he hated to be reminded of that fact.

"Then I need you to take some men from their outpost, and place them somewhere in between the warehouses, so they'll be close reinforcements to whatever group will need them."

Griffiths seemed to be thinking for a moment. "I'll need a few hours to set that up."

"Very well. Once you do, I'll make sure to split our guys into groups and brief each one. I'll have to send each group right away so they don't end up spilling any information to another group, which will ruin the whole plan."

"Alright, I'll let you know when I'm ready."

Arkaneh stepped out from Griffiths's office and walked outside of the factory, in need of some fresh air. It was drizzling outside, yet Arkaneh didn't mind. He let the light rain wash over him as if it could wash away his sins and crimes. He looked at the cloudy sky and pictured Elina staring down at him. *Just a bit more. I'm not as far from my goals as I was before. I already got the lieutenant's attention, like I wanted. Hopefully, I'll reach my real target soon... Reus. Not long now. I'm sure I'll be meeting my great ringleader soon enough.* He took out a cigarette pack from his pocket and lit one in his mouth. Arkaneh rarely smoked. He considered the habit foul and awful, yet at rare times of need, when feeling stressed or upset, he'd light one to calm himself down, even though he knew in his mind that it was purely a psychological effect.

The skies were painted almost entirely gray, casting a dark, depressing aura over the city of Ravenwey Burrows. *Those skies... Arkaneh's memory quickly sprang into action. I remember... those nights after Elina died, when I lay in a hospital bed... Edrimer and Uncle Jeremy consistently tried to encourage me, raise my spirits, but... I was a lost cause. I don't blame them for not being able to help me. No one could help me at the time. The only one who could was dead. Every night I would crawl out of that pesky bed, dressed in a patient's gown and an IV plugged into my arm, and sit outside the*

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hospital, on a bench, under skies just like these. I remember thinking that the skies looked so sad. It was as if they were crying in my name. But now... now I just don't care... the skies can cry as much as they want. I'm sure as hell not the only one they should cry for.

He heard footsteps behind him. A young looking man appeared next to him, wearing a black t-shirt and torn jeans. He had short, brown hair that looked messy and frizzled. A golden mask and set of gloves hung on his belt while the golden shoes were already on his feet. Arkaneh didn't know him, nor did he felt that he wanted to.

"Got a smoke for me, man?" the young man asked.

"Sure," Arkaneh replied in a cold manner, handing him a cigarette and lighting it for him. His hopes that the man would leave upon getting his smoke vanished as he kept standing there next to him, blowing puffs of smoke into the air.

"You're one of the newer ones, aren't you?" the boy asked.

"Yeah," Arkaneh once again replied in a monotonic voice.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to call you a 'Tenderfoot' if that's what you're worried about."

He looks so young, Arkaneh thought. "How long have you been a member?" he asked him.

"About a year."

"How old are you?" Arkaneh seemed puzzled.

"17."

"So... you mean you joined Men of Midas when you were...?"

"16 or so, yeah." It only came as half a surprise to Arkaneh. As outrageous and shocking as it was to hear it, he knew that cases like this one, of people who turn to mob gangs at a very early age, weren't that rare in many parts of the country.

"What about your parents?"

"They left me when I was little. Grew up in an orphanage." *Another fact that should shock me, yet it doesn't. He's a NewGen, and like many other NewGens, he falls into that high percentage of children who've been abandoned by their parents for lack of financial ability to support them.* "I'm Raymond, by the way," he said.

"Arkaneh." The two shook hands. "Raymond? Isn't that an

OldGen name?"

"Yeah. My mother named me after her own father before she abandoned me."

"I see." *How ironic. A kid with an OldGen name, yet with all the features of a NewGen. No parents, no education probably, and turned to crime.* "I never liked the concept of giving children OldGen names," Arkaneh admitted. "I once read that people tend to do that as a way of trying to preserve the way things were back in their days. It's pathetic. The world is nowhere near the way it was 40 or 50 years ago. Naming kids with names from those times won't change the rest of the world. Those people are ignorant. They're too stupid and blind to see that nothing is ever going to be the same as before. It only gets worse. And we get worse with it."

"Yeah, well..." Raymond finished his cigarette quickly enough. "We all want to be stupid and blind sometimes. Don't you agree?" Arkaneh just stared back at him. "I mean, you're right, don't get me wrong, but... if all we ever know is despair and misery, then... what kind of life is that?"

For the first time in a long while, Arkaneh found himself amused. In a crowd of dimwits, Raymond seemed to be the first one in the outpost to show any sign of intelligence. "Perhaps you're right," said Arkaneh. "You seem smart enough. Why didn't you finish school?"

"I dropped out very early. Decided it wasn't going to help me much. Working for Mallstrom seemed much more profitable." *The same conclusion too many people reach to these days.*

"I wish I could argue with that notion, but... I guess this is a reasonable case these days."

"What about you? What brought you into here?"

Arkaneh looked up at the sky. He knew that the answer laid there. "Life brought me here," he summarized his case.

"It must have been a shitty life, then," said Raymond.

"Not always. For a time, it was the best life I could ask for."



Lunarey

The day after hearing the news of Rosabell's suicide, Lunarey barely managed to wake herself up. Sleep didn't come easy the night before. She kept wondering if she was to blame for what had happened. *She said I gave her courage... courage to take her own life.*

As the rays of the sun washed down the streets, Lunarey stared down at them from her window in Kelia's room, looking at that cursed alley where she first saw her. Everything was quiet. Cynthia was busy in the kitchen, and Kelia was still at school. She mentioned that today the school would have a special ceremony in honor of Rosabell. The thought of that ceremony disgusted her. *No one at that school was willing to help that poor girl, so why all of a sudden do they act like they cared about her?*

Lunarey's head, which was once filled with questions about her past, her identity, her injection mark, her expensive shoes and the ominous list of murder victims, was now only filled with thoughts about the girl who had killed herself. She wanted to rid herself of them. All she could hear in her head was her own voice, questioning again and again if it could have been prevented. She was filled with anger and confusion, and knowing that keeping it all inside would drive her mad, she decided to act on her impulse and make sure that at the very least, Rosabell would be honored the right way at that ceremony.

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She left the apartment, throwing a random excuse at Cynthia, and headed towards Kelia's school. Luckily for her, she knew exactly where it was thanks to Kelia's many detailed school stories. It was a 10-minute walk from Kelia's house, and with the streets empty of any soul, that walk was as silent as it could be.

Once more, Lunarey found herself walking through the unappealing streets of St. Cyprian. The litter that ravaged the pavements and poorly-conditioned buildings told a sad story of a place that has long been neglected by its people. She saw several homeless people lying on the curb during her walk, each one looking dirtier and more hopeless than the previous one. *Brontspil is one of the poorest districts in Alataria*, she reminded herself. Graffiti also seemed to be plentiful. On her way, Lunarey saw one that said: "Fear only two." She recognized that phrase. *Most criminal organizations like to have their own dictum, and this one is Lady Dread's. Fear only two. There are only two things you have to fear in this world: God and Lady Dread, or, at least, that's what their dictum says.* She recalled what she had read about that organization. *Lady Dread is a very frightful group of people. They say they torture their victims horribly and use grizzly techniques to make them suffer. Sunyula Trife, the ringleader of the organization, is said to be a very influential person. Rumors have it that politicians used to approach her during election times so she could turn the crowd's favor toward them. That was said to be achieved using brute force, ruining rivals' campaign tours and even threatening people into voting for whoever it was that was giving her the money.*

Once the walk was over, Lunarey finally found herself at the gates of Kelia's school. It seemed that she had arrived in time, as the crowd of students was just beginning to gather outside, in front of a large stage, on which stood a couple of microphone stands and a large picture of Rosabell, with flowers decorating its frame. She could hear a lot of noise coming from the crowd, but couldn't see Kelia anywhere among the mass of people. She decided to move closer, walking through the open gates, and eventually mingling with the crowd.

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Wearing a white shirt and blue short pants, along with her high-quality shoes, Lunarey stood out among the uniform-wearing students. Some of the people around her were looking at her suspiciously, trying to figure out just who she was, yet none dared to ask her. Some of them laughed among themselves as they gazed at her, whispering jokes and insults in each other's ears. Lunarey saw that as most inappropriate.

She looked up at the wide stage and saw an older woman stand up and approach the microphone, dressed in a black suit and skirt. She had a serious, almost menacing look on her face. *I guess she's the head principal*, she figured. The big picture of Rosabell stood in the far back corner of the stage. In the picture Rosabell wasn't smiling or even looking happy. She had a blank expression. She looked as miserable in the picture as she was in real life. Soon enough, silence had fallen on the crowd, and all eyes were set to the lady principal on stage.

"On this day," she started saying, "we honor the memory and life of Rosabell Finch, a girl who was taken from us too soon." *She acts as if she knew her*. "Rosabell was a kind, generous person. She was always smiling and willing to lend a helpful hand." *She couldn't possibly know that*. "She was a girl full of life and joy, one that we could only look up to." *She was miserable! For god's sake, she took her own life! How could you say she was full of life and joy?!* Lunarey made her way through the crowd, placing herself closer to the stage. "Let us all treasure her memory. Let us never forget her." *Lies! Everyone has already forgotten her! Look around! No one is even shedding a tear over her!*

Lunarey continued making her way through the people. She walked closer and closer towards the stage until eventually her hand was gripped. When she turned around to see who was holding onto her, her heart dropped. "Lunarey?!" Kelia looked astonished. "What the fuck are you doing here?!" Lunarey wriggled her arm away from Kelia's clutch, ignoring her words and burning questions, and instead continued to walk toward the stage, until eventually she reached it and climbed onto it.

Whispers and gasps were heard among the crowd as they saw Lunarey grab the microphone away from the head

principal and take the spotlight to herself. "I can see what you're doing here," Lunarey's voice echoed at the crowd. "You're all liars. You're all hypocrites. None of you truly knew Rosabell. None of you truly knew how miserable and lonely that poor girl was." Lunarey now turned to the head principal. Her face burned with fury. "Don't say kind words about her when you knew NOTHING about her!" her voice roared. "She took her own life because of all of you! The school wouldn't help her when she turned to someone for help!" she turned back to the crowd, now noticing the four girls who abused Rosabell, grouped together on the right side of the crowd. "And none of you was willing to be a friend to her when it was the only thing she was missing in her life. Instead, you picked on her! You made fun of her! You fucking beat her!" More gasps were heard at the sound of the curse word. The head principal tried to grab the microphone from Lunarey's hand, yet Lunarey shoved her aside and kept on unloading at the crowd. "She was an angel. And you all killed her vicariously." Suddenly, something caught Lunarey's attention. Beyond the crowd that stood before her, clutching his hands at the school gates, looking firmly straight at her, was the same shadowed figure that she had seen in the alley before. Once again, the distance between them denied her from truly seeing his face, yet she knew it was the same person. Just as before, he stood there and watched her, religiously. *It's him again... what is he doing here? Why is he following me around?* She refused to let it distract her. Instead of paying further attention to the man, she turned back to face the crowd and placed the microphone close to her mouth. "I don't know what makes us do these kinds of things. I don't know why some of us feel this need to tease and pick on other people. But if we don't change, Rosabell will not be the last person to end up like this." She felt the tears gathering in her eyes. "I know you probably don't even get what I'm saying. I know that the minute I get off this stage you'll just forget about everything I've said, so let me make my message a bit more clear and real. Look around you!" she ordered them. "Look at the disgusting place that you call

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St. Cyprian! Everyone here knows how filthy and disgusting the streets look. So today, when you all go home, I want you to look hard at those streets. I want you to see the peeling walls and the masses of trash all around and KNOW that unless you change your ways, you are as ugly as those streets! This place looks like this because of the indifference and selfishness of people, and that indifference and selfishness is precisely what's causing girls like Rosabell to take their own lives!" The tears now streamed down her face. "I hope I've made myself clear enough. If no one ever changes this... then I guess St. Cyprian is the most appropriate place for you to live." Lunarey placed the microphone back on its stand, wiped away her tears and removed herself from the stage.

All eyes were still set on her as she walked away through the school gates. *That was the only way I could truly honor Rosabell. I hope she finds some peace now.*

Lunarey noticed that the shadowed figure was gone, just like before. She hadn't even noticed him leaving. Once again he just disappeared as if he was never there. She started walking towards home, wondering how the students that had just heard her would react to her words. A part of her knew that it was the right thing to do, and yet a part of her also knew that by doing that she had angered Kelia and risked exposing herself.

Before she had too much time to think whether or not it was worth it, she felt a large, coarse hand cover her mouth, denying her from making a sound. The next thing she felt was the barrel of a gun pushed into her lower back. "Finally got you, you little bitch," a crass voice whispered behind her. "Start walking," the man said. His hand felt slimy and sweaty. His fingernails looked dirty and rough. Lunarey didn't dare to turn around and see the face of the man who held a gun to her back, yet she knew that it was the same shadowed figure who had watched her from afar twice now. She did as she was told as he led her, at the point of a gun, to a place she had never known before.



Edward

Grey clouds covered every piece of blue sky, it seemed. A cold wind blew hard on Edward's face as he stood at the cemetery, dressed in black, looking from afar at others dressed the same, for Derlick's funeral. Derlick's family was there. He recognized his parents and sister from the one time he happened to see them when he was visiting his dear friend. Some of his colleagues from the station came as well, though Edward wasn't sure why. *I never saw him talk to these guys before. Why are they here? Why are they pretending to give a fuck about his death?*

Edward stood almost half a mile away from the funeral, knowing that as the one who killed Derlick, he didn't have a rightful place there.

Derlick's mother read a long, endearing eulogy, telling how much of a good person he was, and how much she loved him and will miss him. By the end of that eulogy, she burst into a horrifying cry, eventually burying herself in the arms of her husband. She screamed and cried almost without end, drowning herself in a sea of her own tears. Others were crying as well. Edward looked at them and wished that he could cry like that as well for his friend, but he couldn't. Not with the thought that Derlick hadn't been much of a friend, let alone his sole partner to his values of justice. Not with the thought that Derlick tried to kill him in the end. Not with the thought that

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he was the one who had to pull the trigger on him eventually.

Edward's face was hollow, devoid of any emotion. Derlick's backstab was the last thing he needed after what happened at Roycen's place. On top of that, the only thing that could indict Blackburn was now gone. He felt like he didn't belong at the funeral, knowing that he was the one who killed him, yet a part of him knew that he had to pay his last respects to the man. Even after what he did, Derlick had still been one of Edward's main pillars of support over the past year.

A street camera happened to catch footage of everything that went down that night. The footage saw Derlick pointing his gun at Edward that night, and then Edward pulling his gun and shooting Derlick through the head in a split second. Luckily for Edward, the law protected him from any murder charges, as the right to self-defense in Alataria stated that as soon as Derlick pointed that gun at Edward, and essentially put his life in danger, Edward could kill him within the boundaries of the law. *Derlick probably knew that there might have been street cameras around. He must have counted on Dillard to back him up in any case, so he had nothing to fear.*

Edward heard a car pulling over behind him. He turned and saw Jonah Dillard stepping out of a black car, dressed appropriately for the occasion, his short white hair combed and slightly damp. Edward's facial expression immediately changed to a wrathful one. *How dare he?! He caused this entire mess to begin with! That bastard... how dare he come to Derlick's funeral?!*

"Edward," Dillard greeted Edward, presenting his hand. Edward wanted to lash out at the man, yet he knew that for the moment he had to keep his senses and remain calm. *If Dillard knows that I know about him, he'll have me dead before I know it.*

"Sir," Edward simply said.

"How are you?"

"I'm..." Edward hesitated to go on. "I'll be okay," he said though he wasn't quite sure of that himself.

"What a sad thing," he stood next to Edward, watching the funeral from a distance as well. "I heard you two were good friends."

"We were." *Though I wouldn't say that was the case at the very end.*

"Do you have any idea why he pulled that gun on you?"

"I... honestly don't know, sir." *He mustn't know what Derlick told me.*

"You mean, he just pulled on you without telling you why?"

"He..." Edward remembered Derlick's last words to him.

"He just said that it'll hurt him more than it'll hurt me."

"I see," Dillard stroked his clean-shaven face. "It's a fucked up world we live in."

"It sure is, sir," Edward's said in a spiteful tone while clutching his hand into a fist. "What did you tell his family?"

"We told them that he was attacked by some gangsters and that we're still looking into it. Telling them that Derlick was killed by a fellow cop would be too devastating for them." Dillard showed no inch of remorse or guilt as he blatantly told Edward about the lie that he was taking part in. "We'll probably just pick one of the mob gangs and blame them. It'll give them closure and put this thing behind everyone."

"Don't you find that unfair? I mean, if this was YOUR son, wouldn't you want to know who actually killed him?"

Dillard made a long sigh before replying. "Edward, when it comes to the truth, there are two kinds of people: those who hear it, and those who handle it. We're the ones who handle the truth. We can do whatever we want with it. We can bend and twist it as we see fit. I know that it sounds wrong, but when you get to sit where I sit, you tend to see just how destructive and damaging the truth can be. Sometimes a little change in the story is necessary to make everyone a bit happier. That sobbing mother over there belong to the kind that hears the truth. The same truth that we give her."

"It's wrong. People should get to hear the truth as it is, no matter how damaging it can be."

Dillard sighed. "I wouldn't expect you to understand, son." Edward felt infuriated upon being called 'son' by him. "Hopefully, one day you will, but until then, trust me when I tell you that people are often more hurt by truths than by lies."

Edward maintained his best not to jump at the Chief of

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Police and bash his head in. *You're a fucking scumbag, Dillard. Roycen and his wife, as well as Derlick... their blood is on YOUR hands.*

"Blackburn's trial is tomorrow," Dillard said.

"And he'll go free," Edward tried to find that glimpse of joy in Dillard's expression, yet the man didn't give it away. "Forgive me for saying, sir, but... you don't seem as devastated by that as I thought you would be."

"When you get as old and weary as I am, things don't get to you the way they once did." Dillard drew a cigarette and lit it in his mouth. "Retirement is only a few years away, and with almost 40 years on the force, I can tell you that nothing changes in this place. If anything, it only gets worse." He inhaled his cigarette and blew the smoke away. "When Henrick Trife died we thought we might have finally ridden ourselves of his mob organization. We never anticipated his daughter's rise to power. Now things are worse than ever. You've got the Ferals running around, raping and killing whoever they want, Harley Nation keeps on expanding after migrating from America and setting up an outpost in Flintwood. And now... Charles Blackburn will escape prison time for his sins."

"My father cursed this country on his death bed. He cursed everyone, both gangsters and officers."

"Your father sounds like someone I would have enjoyed having a conversation with." Although he still had about half of the cigarette left to smoke, Dillard dropped it on the ground and put it out by stepping on it. "I'm sorry for your loss, Edward." He turned back to his car.

"You're not going to stand there with the others?"

"I think I've paid enough respects." He got into the car. Edward watched as it drove away, grinding his teeth and clenching his fists. He stayed at the cemetery a while longer before leaving as well.

The next day had its own share of pain to deal with Edward. When he walked into the station, many eyes lingered on him. People whispered and stared at him shamelessly. *They all know what happened. They know I killed Derlick. As if my personal*

image around here wasn't bad enough...

But that wasn't the worst part of it. Blackburn's trial resumed that day after its postponement was decided by Judge Hicken. As expected, with no evidence to convict the Deserter General, Blackburn was exonerated of all charges and was let go. Code Sanguinary was whole with its ringleader once again. Every newspaper and television channel reported it, and with the public now aware that it all happened because the key evidence went missing, many felt enraged with APD. The country was going wild. It's been a long time since a criminal of such stature was up for justice, and now the citizens' hope was gone.

With Blackburn's case closed, Edward was notified that he was being reassigned to work with Vernes on the Tri-Surgeon case that was still ongoing. Edward accepted his new focus without even caring. Everything that had happened had made him realize how much his father was right about everything. *'Rotten,' he always said to me. 'Rotten to the ground.' You were right, Dad. You sure were right. The soldiers of Code Sanguinary would probably celebrate their great leader's return tonight, while I'll be drinking by myself, wondering how much of this is MY fault. Had I not gone to pursue a way to take Blackburn down, this might never have happened.*

On that day, Edward worked on whatever paperwork he received without giving off so much as a smile. The only thing that drove him to actually doing anything was the thought of a cold drink that waited for him at the end of the day.

Once the day was done, he took his things and left the station. When he walked through the exit doors, he felt relieved. He was glad that the day was over, and that he could finally drown his sorrows in the local bar, but before he could take more than a couple of steps away from the station he saw a black van driving by. The van stopped right in front of the station, and its passenger door slid open aside. He managed to recognize the camouflaged masks of Code Sanguinary inside as the men in the van threw 3 bodies out onto the road, right at the doorstep of APD's station. Edward reached for his gun, but the van drove away before he could do anything. People

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who walked by started screaming and panicking at the sight of the bodies and officers soon poured out of the station to deal with the situation.

Edward inched closer to take a look at the bodies. When he saw them, a sense of repulsion hit him. It was the bodies of Judge Hicken, the state attorney, and Vernes. The man who was supposed to judge Blackburn to a life in prison, the man who led the prosecution against him, and the man who led the investigation and supplied the incriminating evidence in the first place. All the men who almost brought Blackburn to his demise in prison now lay dead on the road, and the gruesome way they had been handled was the cherry on top. Hicken's hands were nailed to his eyes, the attorney's hands were nailed to his ears, and Vernes' hands were nailed to his mouth. This was Blackburn's way of saying: "This is what happens to those who decide to fuck with me. This is your justice. There is no justice."



Maileena

The weather outside of the apartment was cold and wet. Heavy rain and harsh winds hit the city of Ashcote. Maileena rubbed her hands together to keep herself warm. She wondered how Vera was doing at that very moment. She wondered if she was cold as well, if she was okay. Every day that passed by without her knowing what was going on with her sister drove her mad. *The Godly Succubi, that's where I might find her, but I can't just burst in there alone. I need Demilan with me, and that means he has to feel better first.*

Demilan was resting in his bedroom. After realizing that his Vex addiction was reignited, Maileena made sure to throw away all the drugs that Demilan had stashed in the wooden box he kept in the bedroom. She took care of him, knowing that the detox process is a long and hard one when it comes to Vex. It doesn't take too many uses of the drug to make the body almost completely dependent on it, making even the two single shots that Demilan received, one thanks to Odis and one thanks to Demilan himself, trigger a torturous rehabilitation process.

Curse that purple shit. Whoever first made it should burn in seven bells. No one ever knew who was responsible for coming up with Vexillum. The purple drug first appeared on the streets 11 years ago, merely 2 years after the people of Alataria rebelled, among other things, against the infestation of illegal drugs in

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the country and the police's poor efforts to fight it.

Maileena was never one to be tempted by the use of drugs, and seeing Demilan in his state made her all the more appalled by the notion. She spent her free time cleaning the apartment and making food for both of them, trying to pay Demilan back for all that he had done for her so far, but the food quickly began to run low, and eventually she knew that she had to buy some more.

We killed five Men of Midas in total so far, three in the warehouse, Odis, and his friend, and since we didn't use any Elastics, APD could target us as the perpetrators. Then again, Demilan said that Men of Midas like to pay the cops off to have the revenge for themselves, so I'm guessing the golden thugs are looking for us. Going out to buy food is going to be very dangerous.

After bickering with herself for a while, she reached the conclusion that the small amount of food remaining wasn't leaving her with many choices. She took what little money she had left in her pockets from her days as a pleasurer in the Godly Succubi and dressed in a black jacket, pulling its hood up in the hope of hiding her face, and hid her revolver in the back of her pants, covered under her jacket. She slowly opened the bedroom door, taking a last look at Demilan before leaving. He was fast asleep.

A part of her wanted to lash out at him for allowing himself to be tempted back into the warm embrace of Vex, yet she also knew that drug addictions can be too overpowering at times. Besides, as a 15-year-old girl who used to pleasure older men for a living, she knew she was in no position to judge others.

Maileena took Demilan's key and left the apartment, locking the door behind her. She walked out into the cold, soaking streets of Ashcote.

The walk to the nearest grocery store was relatively short, yet Maileena's anxiety made it feel eternal. Every face that passed by her made her heart jump.

With both APD and Men of Midas after her, she knew that she had to be careful.

The scenery was painted gray and blue with the heavy

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weather ruling around her. Ashcote wasn't the prettiest city in Alataria by far, but Maileena always believed it had a certain charm to it. She always dreamed of living somewhere in Fraenon Hill, the fanciest district in Alataria, reserved mostly for CEOs, celebrities and others of such financial stature, but with Ashcote being her only option, she grew to love its old houses and mold-infested buildings. But she knew that soon she might have to bid the city farewell. *When I get Vera, I'm going to get us both out of here, away from Men of Midas. We might go to Northstock. They say Men of Midas has zero presence there.*

She reached the grocery store, and a small weight was lifted off of her. She entered through the glass door, making sure her face was still hidden under the hood of her jacket. She walked through the aisles, grabbing all kinds of food products and placing them in a shopping cart. She took a box of cereal, bread, cheese, some milk and bottled water. *I can't take much more. I don't have a lot of money on me.*

As she scouted the shelves, looking for whatever she could take that would fit her budget, she noticed a man to her right. She could see him looking at her out of the corner of her eye. She hoped he would stop staring and walk away, yet after a minute of that not happening she began to worry. *Never mind. I'll just take what I already have in the cart. It's best I don't stay here much longer.*

Her rapid footsteps rattled in echo inside the store as she quickly pushed the cart towards the register. Another customer was already handling his purchases there. *Shit! Please, make it fast, I have to get the fuck out of here as soon as possible.*

Maileena looked around. She didn't see anyone behind her. The man who stared at her suspiciously was nowhere to be seen. The customer at the register was pulling out his wallet to pay for his stuff. Paranoia struck Maileena hard. *Come on, come on.* She wished she could just take her things and go.

Finally, the man finished his business at the register and the way cleared for Maileena. She placed the food products on the counter, putting them in plastic carrying bags. The woman at the register gave her a price, and Maileena quickly pulled out all

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the money she had in her pocket. She paid in haste, grabbed the bags and turned to leave. That was when she stopped in place, seeing the man who stared at her a minute ago. He stood in front of her, no mask or officer uniform on him, yet something about his piercing gaze stirred Maileena.

She headed for the exit doors when she heard the man say, "Hey, girl!"

Maileena didn't stop to see what he wanted. She just walked out and didn't look back.

The rain had stopped by then. Maileena paced quickly back to the apartment. A thick fog blocked her view, yet she still knew how to navigate in it. She looked back to see if anyone was behind her, only to find out that the fog denied her sight of anything.

She paced on and on, her plastic bags rattled as they hit against her legs.

"Hey, girl!" she heard the same voice from before behind her. She looked back and saw the man from the store now behind her. She didn't acknowledge his calling, instead pressing on down the street. *Who is he? What does he want from me? Does he know who I am?* Maileena's curiosity only panicked her further.

At last, she could see the apartment building that she so longed to get to. Without wasting any time, she ran inside the building. "Hey, stop!" She heard the man behind her as she started climbing the stairwell. A few seconds into her ascent to the apartment, she heard the tapping footsteps of the man climbing after her "Stop, I said!" he yelled.

Once she finally reached the apartment door, she started looking for the key in her pocket. *Come on, come on.* She found herself troubling getting it out with the ensuing sense of stress and panic.

"Don't fucking move!" the man appeared at the head of the stairwell, only a few feet away from her. Finally, she pulled the key out and opened the door with it. She rushed inside, dropped the bags on the floor and pulled her revolver. She turned to aim it at the man, who now appeared on her doorstep.

"Hands up!" she ordered him. The man seemed hesitant. At first, it seemed like he was about to do as she said, but then he stormed into the apartment, trying to ram into Maileena.

Time slowed down for her as she aimed her best at the man approaching, her hand shaking in stress. He had almost reached her when she finally pulled the trigger, sounding off an ear-deafening blast that made her flinch and cower. When she returned to look at the man, she noticed that she had only hit him in the right shoulder. He held his wounded arm in pain with a frightening look upon his face as he stepped closer and closer to her. Maileena stood shocked by the man's persistent efforts to get to her. With her flimsy hand, she started raising her revolver again to aim at him. A smoke trail was coming out of the hollow barrel. Before she could pull the trigger once more, the man grabbed her gun-wielding hand by the wrist and yanked the revolver out of it with his other hand. Her weak grip couldn't stand in his way. She watched him throw away the gun and panicked as his blood-covered hand wrapped around her throat. She felt his clutch tightening and her ability to breathe slowly being stolen away from her. He looked completely mad as he choked her, with his eyes wide open and his lips twitching.

Just when Maileena almost gave up on any hopes of getting out of the situation alive, Demilan appeared and punched the man's face, sending him onto the floor in agony. Maileena coughed as she regained her breath.

Demilan walked slowly and tiredly towards the guy. *He's still weak from the rehab.* Demilan pulled out his knife and tried flipping the guy over on his back, but he was greeted instead with a mighty punch to his stomach that dropped him on all fours, writhing in pain. Maileena knew that the man would try to turn the tables now in his favor, so she quickly took Demilan's knife from his hand and placed herself on top of the wounded man. She placed the black-as-night blade right above the bullet wound on his shoulder and started poking it with it. The man screamed in pain and twitched incessantly.

"Who sent you?!" Maileena asked him. The man kept on

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screaming without giving an answer. Maileena pushed the blade further into the wound, making the pain much worse, and the screams, too. "Tell me and I'll stop!" Maileena yelled.

"Connor Griffiths!" the man cried. "Connor Griffiths ordered your deaths!"

"Thank you," Maileena said and plunged the knife into the man's chest with all her might, letting out a slight roar as she did. A surge of blood splattered as she drew the blade back. The man tried fighting back, but the stab drew all strength from him. His hands tried reaching Maileena, but he was too weak to do any harm to her. The best he could do was smear the blood on his hand all over her shirt. Maileena wished to end the man's suffering and sent the dark blade down at his chest again, this time in a different spot. The man gasped in pain but didn't show much of a further reaction. Maileena looked at his eyes with the same cold, brutal manner that Demilan did as he watched Odis slowly die. It was only then that the man finally became still.

A few moments of silence had passed before her reaction was heard. "Oh, my God," she said.

"Are you okay?" Demilan asked her as he struggled to get up.

"Y-Yeah, I'm fine." She looked away from the body and helped Demilan to his feet. "I can't believe it. He just started chasing me. I..."

"You did well, Maileena," he reassured her. "He would have killed both of us."

"Who the fuck was he? And who's Connor Griffiths?"

"Reus Mallstrom's lieutenant. It's no surprise that he wants us dead. This guy must be a member of Men of Midas. You just happened to catch him without his Elastics."

"I-I panicked. I couldn't aim my gun well and I—"

"I'm going to have to teach you how to properly hold a gun, but other than that... it looks like you made some progress by yourself."

"Yeah, I guess."

"Where the hell did you even go?"

"We were running low on food. I had to go buy some. Look, I'm sorry, I didn't—"

"It's alright, don't worry. Nevertheless, we're going to have to go now."

"Go? What do you mean?"

"The gunshot and the screams... there's no way our neighbors didn't hear that. It's only a matter of time before the police are called."

"Where would we go?"

"I don't know. We'll figure something out."

"You're not well enough to go anywhere."

"Don't worry about me, I'll be fine. Pack your things. We need to go now."



Arkaneh

Even before he executed his plan, Arkaneh knew he was going to hate having to make it happen in Ussermis, his hometown. At first, he tried looking for vacant warehouses in the other cities of the Axfield district and even some further away, but Ussermis came up as the only place where he could do it.

The reason why he hated it was that all of the warehouses he picked for his plan happened to be in proximity to his uncle's house, the one he had lived in most of the life since his parents died. As he sat next to Griffiths in the passenger's seat of a car, the familiar streets ahead of him evoked old memories, ones he didn't appreciate. *I left these streets a long time ago in the hope that I would never have to see them again... it feels as if nothing good ever happened to me here. Only loss and sorrow... these are the only things these streets ever gave me. They're the streets where Elina died. Curse this place.*

Three other cars parked at the end of the street, all within sight of each other. They were the backup unit that Griffiths had gathered from the Oakneil outpost. About a dozen men, all armed and waiting for a simple command to take action. All 4 groups were already in position, each in its own warehouse, thinking that they were backing up another group that was supposed to make a gun trade with Code Sanguinary. The only thing that had to happen now was for one of those groups to

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get attacked by the Justicars and alert Griffiths using the radio communication device.

SmartWrists weren't allowed to be taken into jobs in any mob gang in Alataria. Like wearing Elastics to avoid incrimination, the ban on having SmartWrists during illegal activities was also an unwritten rule that every criminal naturally followed to avoid leaving any incriminating information that might fall into the hands of the police, or even worse, the Justicars, in cases of death.

"Do you think it will work?" Griffiths asked.

"What makes you think it won't?" Arkaneh said.

"I don't know... I guess I'm just nervous. Sitting here like this drives me crazy."

"Trust me, I'm having a much worse time than you."

"I don't like putting our brothers in danger like this."

"There are 6 men in each group, plus our backup unit is more than enough. They'll be fine." Griffiths still seemed on edge, despite Arkaneh's words and relaxed manner.

The two were dressed in golden gloves and shoes, their masks of matching color rested on their knees. By now, Arkaneh had learned to hate that color. The color of money. The color of greed and corruption. The color of Reus Mallistrom. *Some gangs have their own dictums. Lady Dread has 'Fear only two', and Men of Midas has 'A golden key can open any door'. Money can open any door you want, take you to any place you want. Everyone has a price. That's what Reus believes in, but he's wrong. By the time my plans are over, I'll show him where someone can get without relying solely on money.*

"Alright, what is it with you?" Griffiths turned to Arkaneh. "You look... I don't know, upset or something." Arkaneh didn't even notice it himself. His grim facial expression was a result of the floating memories of his days in Ussetmis.

"Nothing," he replied coldly.

"Bullshit. I know that look. It's the one that says you're thinking of something you wish you hadn't."

Arkaneh breathed a long sigh. *He's right, I'll give him that.*

"Do you have any regrets, Griffiths?" Arkaneh asked him.

Haunting Scars

"Regrets? I don't know... why?"

"I look at these streets and all I feel is regret. You see, I grew up here. My uncle has an apartment a few blocks away, where I lived since I was a kid."

"Oh." Griffiths didn't seem that interested, yet Arkaneh carried on.

"My parents died as rebels in the Tearful Rebellion. I was young, but I still have a few memories of them, if mostly vague."

"I'm... I'm sorry about your—"

"I do remember, however, very vividly, how my girlfriend was raped and beaten to death a block away from here."

"Y-Your—?"

"Her name was Elina," he said and started telling Griffiths about the moment when that changed his life forever, for the worst.

It was a cold, rainy night when it happened. Arkaneh was walking Elina home after the two caught a late movie. The two were drenched from the heavy rain, walking through the streets of the city of Ussermis. Elina leaned her head on Arkaneh's shoulder, running her fingers through his soaked hair. She loved his hair. He had never changed his haircut since, for that reason.

Arkaneh was only 22 back then, yet he felt like he had everything he wanted at his side. Even after being with her for almost 3 years at the time, his heartbeat would always accelerate whenever he looked at her as if he would fall in love with her each time, all over again. All he wanted was the love and warmth she provided him, the sense of safety and joy, but there could be none of that in Alataria.

On that dreadful night, forever engraved in his memory, they came out of a dark alley. He could have sworn they weren't there a minute ago. It was as if they appeared out of thin air. There were 4 of them. Ferals. They grabbed the two before they could do anything about it. They beat Arkaneh until he was in no condition to fight or do anything to jeopardize them. His face was swollen, dark bruises decorating

it, and bloody gashes appeared everywhere. Then they started beating her as well, although going softer on her so that her face would still be pretty. He would never forget her screams. He always wished that he could, yet no part of those haunting scars of memory would ever fade from his mind.

She cried for mercy as one of them pulled down her pants and raped her, right in front of Arkaneh. Even after the beating he received, at that point, it didn't feel half as painful as watching the love of his life getting abused like that. He begged them to stop, promising to give them any amount of money they would ask for, but they simply laughed and kept on watching poor Elina as she suffered. In between begging for help and letting off screams of pain, she called Arkaneh's name. The way she said it, crying for her loved one to save her, shattered his soul. He was helpless, as much as he was willing to do everything to help her.

Once the deed was done, they beat the two once more, eventually leaving them to rot on the street, hoping that they would die of their wounds. However, only one of them would answer their wish, and it was Elina. The doctors said she was already dead when they were brought to the hospital.

"Fuck, man, I... I don't know what to say," Griffiths said in response to the story.

"During the time after that, I chased the guys who did this to me."

"And...?"

"One of them was already dead by the time I got to him. The other two... I killed them myself. I made sure they felt the pain they inflicted on me... twofold." Griffiths seemed half-shocked, even though he was no stranger to violence. "The last one fled the country. I never found him."

"I see. Well—" Chatter over the radio communication device disrupted the conversation. The voice came through scrambled and unclear. "Come again, I couldn't understand that," Griffiths said into the device.

"I said, we are under attack! The Justicars are here!" the voice yelled.

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It worked. The Justicars attacked one of the warehouses. "Which frequency is that? Which group is it?" Arkaneh urged him.

"It's the one on Brine Street," Griffiths wasted no time and readjusted the radio frequency to the backup unit's. "Get to Brine Street! The Justicars are making an attack on us!" Within a few seconds, all three cars at the end of the street drove away and disappeared.

"Brine Street..." Arkaneh thought for a second. "That means the Grove Street group has the rat in it." He looked at Griffiths, who seemed almost reluctant to accept the horrible truth, that a snitch really had infiltrated his ranks. Gunshots and unclear yells were heard over the radio.

"Raymond!" Griffiths called through the radio. "Raymond, answer me! What's the situation?" *Raymond? That's that kid who talked to me before, the one who got his name from his father... I didn't know he was leading the group on Brine Street.*

Between heavy gunshot fire and static noises, no word was understood on the other end. "Goddammit, I can't understand one fucking word he's saying!" Griffiths snapped. "We've already lost so many brothers recently... we can't lose any more... I can't lose any more." At that moment, Arkaneh noticed something that surprised him. Behind the lack of leadership skills and the drug and alcohol addiction, Griffiths truly cared for his so-called brothers. *I guess every thorn has its rose.*

"...killing..." only one word sounded clear among the rough chatter.

"Say that again," Griffiths said.

"They're killing us!" It now sounded clearer.

"Has the backup unit arrived yet?" Griffiths asked. "How many are dead so far?" There was clear dread in his voice, as he didn't really want to know the answer to that question. To his fortune, he received more unclear chatter of gunfire and yelling as a response. "Say again, I didn't hear that!" he still received no clear answer. "Oh, fuck it!" he started the car.

"What are you doing?" Arkaneh asked.

"I'm going over there to help them!" *This was NOT part of*

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my plan. This is far too dangerous. I refuse to risk my life for the likes of members of this wretched organization! This fool is going to get me killed!

"There are only two of us, we won't make any difference!" Arkaneh cried.

"Well, you're not the lieutenant here, are you?!" Griffiths yelled and started driving towards the warehouse on Brine Street. "Fuck, it's like you don't even give a shit about our guys!"

"It's not that—"

"Then draw your gun and get ready to fight." A sharp turn made by Griffiths took Arkaneh by surprise. *He drives like a maniac.* Arkaneh's pistol rested in his hand, ready to be fired. The thought of shooting Griffiths at that moment passed through his mind, yet it quickly faded in the light of common sense. *There's no telling how many Justicars are there. There could be twice our number. We're not even sure if the backup group even got there when they talked to us on the radio.*

"What about the other groups, Griffiths? We should call them as well to have more men backing us."

"Yeah, do it." Arkaneh grabbed the radio and, on behalf of his lieutenant, started ordering the other 3 groups to get to the warehouse on Brine Street. *The other groups are not close enough to Brine Street to make it on time. By the time they get there the fight may be over. Still, it can't hurt trying, and there's no point in letting them stay there anymore now.*

All of a sudden, Arkaneh could hear the faint sound of gunshots from afar. The warehouse on Brine Street was nearby now. A few minutes of driving later, Griffiths pulled the car over and the two got out of it with guns drawn. The backup unit's cars were parked right outside the warehouse, next to the car that belonged to the Brine Street group. *So the backup unit is here...*

Loud gunshots and screams came from within its thick concrete walls. Arkaneh looked around and saw a few people looking outside their windows, wondering and worrying about the origins of those noises. *APD will be here soon too. We don't have much time.*

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"Arkaneh," Griffiths said. "Since we don't know what's going on in there exactly, and where everyone is, I'll come in from the front and you go in from the back. That way, one of us may put some fire on them from behind and help the rest of our brothers." Arkaneh reluctantly agreed. "Don't forget your mask," Griffiths said as he placed his golden mask over his face. "And don't you fucking die on me."

The two split up, with Griffiths coming through the steel front door, and Arkaneh going around the structure towards its back exit.

Arkaneh held his handgun tightly, keeping his eyes and ears open for any enemy that might come up on him. He hadn't prepared for this, yet now that he was in the situation, he tried to be at his best in it. He had no fighting experience, and although he knew quite a lot about strategy and tactics, his skills as a soldier were almost non-existent. *Damn Griffiths... that moron is going to get me killed. Ever since I started executing my plans, from the moment I joined the attack on that convenience store, I've made sure to put myself at a minimum to no risk. I made sure to get to that store as a backup squad, in hopes that by the time I got there that battle would be over. When I took a dozen men to Swillstorm to see if the Justicars would show up, I made sure to stay in the van in case they did and I had to make a quick escape. And now... now I'm marching straight towards a death field.*

Finally, once he made it to the back door, he could hear more gunshots from inside, along with a few unclear yells. With his weapon aimed, he approached the door slowly. He reached for the mask that hung on his belt, but before he could put it on, he could feel the barrel of a gun pointed at his head from behind. It was then when he heard a familiar voice saying, "Hello, brother."



Edrimer

Chaos and mayhem seemed to be ensuing in Ussermis, as Edrimer listened closely to the gunshots from the window of his room in his uncle's apartment. *What the fuck is going on? Who's doing this? Dread? Midas? Sanguinary? Could it be the Justicars that are fighting someone over there? Fuck me... this city will never know rest at this rate.*

"Edrimer?" his uncle, Jeremy, appeared in the room.

"Do you hear that, Uncle?"

"I do. The whole neighborhood must be hearing it."

"If the people of this city ever complain about the lack of any action..." a wry smile appeared on Edrimer's face.

"I doubt that will ever happen," Jeremy chuckled. *It's sad as much as it is funny... bullets are flying only a few blocks away and we're just laughing at the situation, shrugging it off as if it was the most casual thing in the world. Fuck... what have we come to?*

Edrimer ran his hands through his short, blonde hair, looking disappointed. He looked down at his arm, seeing his Seditone tattoo. Spirals and thick curly lines of black ink blended neatly into themselves all along his arm. *This symbol stood as a sigil of hope and strength during the Tearful Rebellion, yet here we are, 14 years later, still bearing gunshots from our windows. Nothing has changed. If anything, it's gotten worse.*

"Do you think there's any point in fighting back, Uncle? Do you think people can actually change this kind of shit?"

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"I think you can be a sheep all your life if that's what you want, and hope for a better future, but a wolf says 'fuck it' and shapes his own future." *That old man... he's my favorite OldGen.*

"What happens if we lose? I mean, in the Tearful Rebellion—"

"The Tearful Rebellion shouldn't be an example of failure. Sure, we didn't get what we wanted in the end, but it's more important to remember it for the bravery and prowess of those who stood and fought, those who went out and risked their lives for a better today and an even better tomorrow. A wolf may die fighting for his future, but at least he won't have to live through a grim one." *He's right.*

"Uncle, would you mind letting me make a call?"

"Sure." Jeremy closed the door behind him, leaving Edrimer alone in his room.

As soon as he heard his uncle walking away from the door, he opened one of the drawers in his closet. In it were several things that he had received from Serian on the day that he was recruited: a set of white Elastics, a pistol, two loaded magazines, and a spare SmartWrist. It was a cheap model, made of low-quality materials, that was to be used only to contact Serian. It already had Serian's number saved in it. Edrimer took the SmartWrist and called Serian. A few dial tones later, his voice was heard on the other end.

"Hello?"

"Serian, it's Edrimer."

"What is it?" Serian didn't sound pleased to be disturbed.

"Are you aware of what's going down in Ussermis?"

"I am."

"Then I guess we're part of that gunfight."

"Yes."

"Who are we fighting?"

"What do you care? You're not part of this particular fight."

"I'm a Justicar, aren't I?"

"You're also a tenderfoot. We don't like to trust tenderfoots with every piece of information."

"Look, I get it, you guys are careful, your survival depends

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on secrecy and you're worried tenderfoots could be spies for the mob gangs or something, but you tasked me with helping you bring down the Tri-Surgeon, so—"

"The Tri-Surgeon is an independent serial killer, who's not affiliated with any of the mob gangs." *Oh, now I see. That way, even if I'm a spy, there won't be anyone who I can leak any information on the case to.*

"And here I thought you liked me, Serian."

"Well, don't cry over it. You're not the only one."

"Look, this gunfight... it's just near my home. I can get there and help. I want to prove—"

"You're not supposed to—"

"But I can—"

"I don't want you there!" Serian berated him. "Look, I'm tired of this conversation. Tomorrow a car will pick you up and take you to our temporary base of operations as we scheduled. Stay put until then." He hung up. *Man, what a cranky old fellow.*

Edrimer lingered a while longer, feasting his ears on the ongoing gunshots taking place just a few blocks away. *They don't trust me, and I can understand that. This kind of approach might just be the very thing that has preserved the Justicars for 5 years. Then again, there's no telling how much time and effort I'll have to put in before I can make any fucking difference around here. Fuck it. I have to show them that I can help. I have to show them that I am a true motherfucking White Knight.*

Edrimer grabbed the Elastics and held them in his hands. The unique rubber-leather fabric was white as snow. Its bright shade almost gleamed under the dark night sky. He took the pistol with him and left his room. On his way out, he grabbed his coat, hiding the pistol under it. His mind was made up and his face looked more determined than ever.

"Where are you going, Edrimer?" his uncle asked him.

"To do something good, I guess," Edrimer threw at him upon leaving.

The warehouse was a short walk away from Jeremy's apartment. As he drew closer and closer to the source of

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shooting, he came to realize that it was coming from an old warehouse on Brine Street. Once he could see it, he hid behind a wall of a nearby building, hoping not to be seen, as he wore the white Elastics. With his face covered, and his hands and feet protected from any leaving of evidence, he drew his pistol and walked out from behind the wall. *Coming from the front might be too risky. I should go through the back door,* he thought as he paced towards the warehouse. His heart was beating fast. *I have to do this. I have to take action in order to shape my future.*

As he walked past the front door, going around the structure to reach the back door, he saw a figure from afar, just as it was crossing the corner to the back part of the structure. Even though he didn't have more than two seconds to see him, he clearly saw the long, blonde hair that the man had, along with the golden gloves and shoes that he wore.

Is... Is that...? The golden Elastics... the hair... he paced much faster now. He hoped that he was wrong, but also hoped that he was right. If this was truly his brother, he might finally get some long-awaited answers.

He crossed the corner and saw the man standing in front of the back door. Now he could confirm his identity. Edrimer paced quietly toward him from behind, with his gun aimed. When he finally came close enough to let his gun touch his head, he uttered words that he had longed to say.

"Hello, brother." Arkaneh raised his hands in the air, with a pistol held in his right hand. "Drop the gun," Edrimer commanded him. Arkaneh wasted no breath so far in talking to his brother, and simply did as he was told. Edrimer kicked the gun far from the two. "Turn around." Once again, Arkaneh did as he was told, and both of the brothers seemed to be in awe as they looked each other in the eye. Edrimer was stunned to finally see his brother's face after 2 years, and Arkaneh was shocked to see the white mask that stared back at him.

"So... you're a Justicar now," Arkaneh said in his routine cold, monotonic voice.

"It's a funny story." Edrimer removed the mask from his face so that maybe his brother would find it easier to talk to his

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sibling, rather than a Justicar.

"I'm sure it is."

"Where the fuck were you, Arkaneh? You disappeared for 2 fucking years and you never even reached out to us!"

"Don't take it personally. I was busy." Arkaneh didn't even seem bothered.

"You fucking piece of shit. How the fuck did you even end up with Reus Mallistrom?"

"It's a long story."

"Look... I know how broken you were after Elina, but this isn't what she would have wanted."

"And how would you know that? This was my choice, Edrimer, you don't get a say in it."

"You're still my brother, for fuck's sake!"

"Maybe in the past... right now we're enemies. White and gold. So tell me... are you going to shoot me, or do you just enjoy pointing that gun at me?" *We're enemies... that's right... I'm supposed to kill him, but... I don't think I can do it... I mean, this is Arkaneh... this is my brother, who I grew up with...* "Well, Edrimer?"

An eerie silence passed while Edrimer stood there with a sturdy hand and a cluttered mind. He fought with the idea of executing his long lost brother, yet at the same time, he knew that letting him go would be wrong. "Just tell me... how could you do this? How could you not care about Uncle Jeremy and me like that?" Edrimer asked.

"When I left I didn't care about anyone, including myself. It wasn't out of selfishness... it was purely out of tiredness."

"Elina... what happened to her was... so horrible..."

"I'm going to make it right. Now put the gun down, please."

Slowly, Edrimer started lowering his weapon. "Make it right? What do mean—?" before he could finish his question, Arkaneh used Edrimer's momentary inattention to grab the gun from his hand and kick him down to the ground.

Arkaneh pointed the gun at his brother, standing over him. "I have to admit, I knew you wouldn't be able to shoot me, but

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for a second there you almost made me question my own judgment," Arkaneh said with a crooked smile, his cold voice now matched his nature. *I can't believe it... Arkaneh... what have you become?*

"You goddamn motherfucker," Edrimer cursed him.

"Such foul language is for lesser people, Edrimer, you should know that."

"So what now? Are you going to shoot me? Your own brother?"

"Don't try sentimentality with me. It won't get you anywhere," Arkaneh snarled. "But I'll tell you what." He lowered the gun and ejected the magazine, throwing it away. He then drew back the barrel of the gun, extracting the loaded bullet, and threw the gun in the other direction. *What is he doing?* "I want to offer you a deal. You probably know how much trouble the Justicars can be, and we happen to be in a time where we could really use an inside man in there."

"You want me to be your inside man?"

"I'll make sure you'll be rewarded in time, of course. I won't put you in any danger, and you'll be able to provide for Uncle Jeremy that way."

"Why the fuck would I help Men of Midas? Why the fuck would I help YOU?"

"Grow up, Edrimer. The Justicars haven't changed anything in 5 years. What makes you think you're going to be the one to get that poor excuse for an organization to bring any real justice to Alataria? At least if you help me, I can make sure it will be worth your while. I know you and Uncle Jeremy need the money."

"I don't fucking believe this. I don't know what happened to you over this last 2 years, but you are far from being the man I knew. I will NEVER help Men of Midas! You fuckers killed Zachary, that helpless old man who ran the store I worked in! He had nothing to do with the guys who tried to rob us and you killed him! Besides, have you forgotten that these kinds of criminals were the ones who killed Elina?"

Arkaneh remained silent for a while before responding, as if

he had let the anger that sprouted from Edrimer's reply to dissipate from the air. "You disappoint me, Edrimer," he finally said. "Perhaps it was a mistake to throw away that gun. Nevertheless, you alone stand as no threat to me, so I have no reason to dispose of you."

"Arkaneh!" a voice from inside the warehouse was heard. "Where the fuck are you? The battle is over! We won!" Edrimer didn't recognize the voice, yet it sounded grumpy and gnarly.

"That's Connor Griffiths," Arkaneh said. "Your friends in there are all dead. You should go before they come out here and find you." He turned around, ready to open the back door. "Oh, and Edrimer," he stopped to say. "The next time we meet, I won't be so merciful. I've spared you twice so far. Once as a brother, and once as a Justicar. That's all the generosity you're going to get from me." Upon saying those words, Arkaneh entered the warehouse.

Edrimer lingered a while longer, laying there on the floor, still trying to wrap his mind around the man who had once been his brother. Among the chaos and turmoil that ensued in his mind, the biggest question of all stood: was Arkaneh really willing to kill him?



Arkaneh

Arkaneh entered the warehouse with his golden mask in his hand. Wreckage and ruin were all he could see between its walls. Bodies wearing white Elastics littered the floor around the back door he just walked through. The walls were riddled with bullet holes and blood spatters. Bullets casings and empty magazines laid everywhere and the smell of gunpowder was still noticeable in the air.

At that moment, walking among a sea of bodies in a field of death, Arkaneh remembered the Night of Obliteration. He wondered if this was how Rage Legion's outpost looked like after Joseph Mallistrom filled it with Sorelium gas.

Some voices came from further inside. As Arkaneh paced towards them, gazing at the death around him as he went, he found Griffiths along with 11 more of his men. The men all looked tired and stricken while Griffiths looked upset. *11 men left... that means that out of 6 men from the warehouse group and the dozen more from the backup unit, we lost 7 men.* Arkaneh now noticed the bodies scattered around his fellow living brothers. Casualties on their side. It was an awful sight, and Arkaneh acknowledged it in his mind, yet his appearance remained composed and cold. He didn't seem shocked or repulsed by the image before him.

Once Griffiths noticed Arkaneh, he left his men and went to the far corner of the warehouse, where the other men

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wouldn't be able to hear or see him. Arkaneh knew that he wanted to express his opinion on the plan without having anyone knowing about the rat, so he naturally followed him.

He approached Griffiths, trying to look as humble and respectful as he could. "I'm sorry that it turned out this way," Arkaneh said. "But we accepted this risk when—"

"7 men dead," Griffiths snapped. "DEAD!" The old lieutenant looked enraged as much as he was in grief.

"And what about the men who were killed by the Justicars so far? They're dead too and it's because of your rat!" Arkaneh snapped back. "We had to do this."

"Yeah, about that 'we' part. Where the fuck were you? I didn't see you during the fight."

"I was attacked myself by a Justicar before I entered through the back."

"Is that so?" Griffiths looked doubtful.

"Yeah. I managed to fight him off. He ran away." Griffiths breathed heavily as he took a second to process Arkaneh's story. Eventually, he simply moved past it, not paying it much thought.

"Well, what the hell do we tell the rest of our brothers now?" Griffiths asked. "I mean, it's only a matter of time now before they talk among themselves and figure out that we were up to something. How are we going to explain that? We can't tell them about the rat, how's that going to look?"

"No... that's exactly what we have to do." Griffiths looked perplexed. "Look, everyone's going to know now that there were 4 different groups, even though they all thought there were only two. We'll also have to explain the presence of our backup unit of a dozen men. Plus, like you said, there's also the fact that all groups will claim that Blackburn's men never showed up. No lie can cover up so much."

"If we tell them, it'll reach other gangs. We'll look weak, not to mention we'll be letting our rat know that we know about him."

"Let him know. If anyone tries to run or hide, we'll know it's him, and then it's just a matter of hunting him down."

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Regarding the other gangs... once we deal with our rat, we won't look weak at all."

"Fuck!" Griffiths appeared mad again. "I can't just spread this on my own authority. This is too big."

"Then it's time to tell Reus." *Finally.*

"Shit, I guess it is. I don't even want to imagine his reaction."

"We were going to tell him at some point either way."

"Alright, but you're coming with me to see him."

"See him?"

"Yeah, Reus never talks about these things over the phone. Even with all his influence and power, he refuses to be careless enough to let anyone have the chance to get incriminating evidence on him, so we're going to have to meet him face to face. And don't flatter yourself. The only reason you're coming along is so I'll have the guy to blame for this mess next to me. I don't want this shit to fall on my back."

"Fair enough."

"I'll keep the rest of the guys in the dark until Reus gives the order to spring out the truth."

"Then it's best to get on it fast. You won't be able to hold everyone on edge for long. They're going to want to know why they just lost 7 brothers."

"Yeah... I know."

Griffiths walked away, joining his men at the front exit. As Arkaneh walked with them, he looked over the bodies wearing gold. Some were stacked on others, some still had their eyes open, and some had taken bullets to their heads while others to their chests and probably went through a much slower death. Deep within, Arkaneh knew that he was the one responsible for their deaths, yet he didn't feel much sorrow or regret. *These people... these brothers of mine... none of them had a bright future ahead of them. They pollute this country with crime and misery. Why should I feel sorry for them? Why should I shed a tear over their deaths or even act like I care?*

He was just about to look away and let the image wash away from his memory when he noticed a certain body that he

recognized. The body was buried under another one, but the boy's face was still intact and recognizable. It was the young man with the OldGen name, the one who borrowed a cigarette from Arkaneh in the rain just a short while ago. *Raymond...* he remembered his name. *He was so young, only 17 years old, so he told me.*

"Poor kid," said Griffiths as he noticed Arkaneh lingering over Raymond's body.

"Did you know him?"

"Raymond? Yeah, of course. He was a good kid."

"Such a shame."

"Yeah. It is," Griffiths's voice had a certain sadness to it, and even though Arkaneh tried to make his voice sound the same, deep within he felt the exact opposite as Griffiths.

I don't feel sorry for Raymond. He chose to be a criminal. It was his choice that got him killed. He may have been young, or a 'good kid' as Griffiths put it, but I won't feel sorry for him. For what it's worth, Raymond, know that your death wasn't in vain. My plans just crossed another step, as I'm finally going to meet Reus Mallistrom.



Lunarey

Lunarey sat on a chair with her hands tied behind her back and her feet tied to the legs of the chair. She was in the middle of a room on the upper floor of an old-looking pub called the Hairy Knuckle. It was about 15 minutes of walking away from Kelia's school. 15 minutes where Lunarey felt the barrel of a gun pressed against her back as she walked wherever the gun holder pointed her. 15 minutes where panic washed over her body. 15 minutes where she regretted ever leaving Kelia's room.

From the outside, the pub looked as sleazy and old as it was on the inside. An old, rusty sign that read 'The Hairy Knuckle' stood proudly above the worn, wooden door, which was riddled with scratch marks and dents. A couple of men were talking amongst themselves outside the pub. They acknowledged the mysterious man with a head nod as he walked inside with Lunarey. She noticed how those men's gaze lingered on her, as they bit their lips in passion, probably fantasizing about getting her into their bed and having their way with her.

An old bartender and a few rough-looking men were the only ones downstairs when they entered the pub. The men inside noticed the gun that was being held against Lunarey's back, yet they didn't seem alarmed or bothered. "What you got there, buddy?" the old bartender asked the mysterious man.

"I'll come down to explain in a minute," he said back. After he had led Lunarey to a room upstairs, he tied her to that chair and went down to explain the situation to them, all without saying as much as a word to her.

The room she was in served as a storage room for the owner of the pub. Plastic shelves stood against the wall, packed with cardboard boxes, most of them labeled with alcoholic beverage brands and a couple branded as cleaning supplies.

Lunarey was terrified. She didn't know what that man was about to do to her. After learning so much about the atrocities that happen in Alataria and in Brontspil in particular, she feared what was to come. She feared that he might have been a member of Lady Dread, the mob gang who's known for their brutal acts of torture and mutilation, or one of the Ferals, who fulfill their horrifying desires on their victims, whether if they're sexual or sadistic. Not being able to get a clear view of the man so far, she couldn't tell anything about him, and she hadn't seen any Elastics on him or on any of the other men in the pub. *Kelia was right. I shouldn't have gone outside the way I did. She warned me. She told me to stay indoors and I didn't listen. I'm so stupid. I just acted on impulse without thinking too much and now... now it might be too late.*

She heard a creaking sound coming from the open door in front of her, suggesting that someone was coming up the stairs. Lunarey's heartbeat went faster with each creak that she heard. A shadow appeared on the wall outside the door. Sweat started gathering on her face. The man then appeared at the door, the one who had forced her there. She could now see him clearly. His long hair flowed down from the black beanie hat all the way to his elbows. His thick black beard covered his face, and his big brown eyes stared at Lunarey, making her feel as if she was a lamb and he was a wolf, preying on his target. The bearded man was very wide and muscular. He wore torn-up blue jeans and a black sleeveless shirt with a wide collar, showing a small fuzz of his bushy chest hair. *A sleeveless shirt... Harley Nation's members wear only sleeveless shirt. It's like a dressing code for them. So he's a member of Harley Nation.*

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"I hope you're comfy," said the man in his husky voice. He approached her with heavy footsteps. Lunarey stared back at him, speechless from fright. "I know you can talk, little princess, I heard you give that heart-warming speech back there at that school." Lunarey remained silent. The man drew closer and closer to her until eventually their faces were a few inches apart. "What's wrong? Did the cat swallow your fucking tongue?" he gave her powerful slap with the back of his hand, sending both her and the chair to the floor. Lunarey writhed in pain, holding back tears. The man sighed and pulled her and the chair back up. "You better start sounding some words. Otherwise, I'm going to lose my patience again," he warned her.

"W-Who are you?" Lunarey stuttered.

"Name's Trigen. I already know yours so you can skip that part."

"Y-You know my name? Y-You mean you know who I was?"

"Who you WERE? What the hell are you talking about?"

"P-Please, tell me who I am!" Another slap with the back of his hand hit Lunarey's face, this time, she managed to keep her balance on the chair and not tumble to the floor.

"Do I look like someone you're going to want to fuck with?" he said. "Stop being funny and—"

"I lost my memory," she said in a weak voice.

"Come again?" he raised one eyebrow. "Say that again."

"I lost my goddamn memory." A hint of agitation showed through in Lunarey's voice. Trigen started chuckling. He turned and walked around the room until his chuckle turned into a burst of laughter. He laughed on and on as if he had just heard the funniest joke in the world. His continuous display of merriment reminded Lunarey of the four girls who had laughed as much at Rosabell when they picked on her. Once he stopped laughing, he looked back at Lunarey and saw the dead-serious expression upon her face. "Oh, my God, you've got to be shitting me," he said. "You're lying. It can't be—"

"I'm telling you the truth. I woke up in some alley with no

D. Sharon

recollection of who I am and how I got there, so please tell me—"

"You mean to tell me you haven't watched any news or read any papers lately?"

"What? No, I... I didn't."

"Fuck, I don't believe this! Your name and picture were practically everywhere in Brontspil! Everyone knows who you are!"

"W-What do you mean? Why am I—?"

"Hold on." He hastened back down the stairs. *What is he talking about? Why am I all over the news and papers in Brontspil? Does... does that mean Kelia also knows who I am? Did she lie to me? She told me not to watch the news... she told me not to go outside...*

Triggen returned to the room holding a folded newspaper in his hand. A frightening grin appeared on his face through his thick, dirty-looking beard. He looked at Lunarey and held the newspaper right in front of her. Now unfolded, the newspaper showed her picture on the front page, large enough to cover more than half of the page, while Triggen's hand purposely covered any text below it, denying her from seeing whatever was written about her, including her real name, which she guessed should have also been there.

So it's true. Lunarey was horrified.

"I'll tell you what," said Triggen. "You seem like a smart girl, so I'm actually going to guide you to the answers you seek."

"A-Alright..." she hesitated, unsure what he meant.

"Who do you think I work with?"

"Y-You mean in terms of a mob gang?"

"We don't like to call it that."

"Well, if I had to guess, I'd say Harley Nation."

Triggen reached into a drawer in the nearby wooden cabinet and lifted up a gray mask from it. *Grey Elastics... so I was right. He IS a member of Harley Nation's.* "Bingo!" he then declared. "Good girl," he giggled to himself. The rough-looking man ran his eyes over her tied body for a moment. His eyes seemed to be filled with harrowing lust. She feared what

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he might do to her. "Anyway..." he regained his focus eventually. "What do you know about Harley Nation?"

"I know that you're a biker gang. I know that you opened an outpost in Hawksen, Flintwood, about 4 years ago, after expanding from the United States, where you have a lot of outposts. I also know that your main source of income is organizing illegal gambling matches."

"Very good. How many outposts do we have?"

"I-I'm not sure. I only read about the one here."

"And one it is. Go on. What else do you know?"

"I..." she tried jogging her memory. "I know that your ringleader is Fane Hallstead. He's also known as the Red Rider because they say there are almost 30 murders believed to have been committed by him, and he was never charged to this day."

"Yeah, we can all thank Jonah Dillard and our great buddies at APD for that," he said. "So you know that I'm from Harley Nation. Still can't connect the dots?"

"D-Does that mean I'm part of Harley Nation or something?"

"Ha! Fuck no!" he burst into another spate of laughter. Lunarey waited in silence until he calmed down again, feeling angrier and more agitated than ever.

"Just fucking tell me already!" she snapped at him.

"Shut up!" he yelled, stomping his way towards her, making Lunarey shiver in her seat. "The next time you raise your voice at me, I'll hit you so hard you'll be spewing your organs on the floor!"

"Fine, alright."

"So... what do you know about the relationship Harley Nation has with other organizations?"

"I don't know, there wasn't much about it in my books. I read that the police suspects that they buy guns from Code Sanguinary like every other gang, but... I don't know much else."

"Well, we also like to pay occasional visits to the Godly Succubi in Ashcote when we're in the area, so you can say we

also contribute to Men of Midas in a way," he chuckled. Lunarey simply stared at him with animosity. "Anyway, the gambling business only provided for us for a while, and eventually its ability to sustain us... died out. So about a year ago we decided to expand into other ventures. You see, our Harley buddies back in the US gave us the idea to work together with one of their outposts in Georgia on smuggling immigrants from the US to Alataria. Apparently, it was a market with high demand that no one offered here, so there was a lot of money to be made. Our plans for expansion didn't bother people like Reus Mallistrom or Charles Blackburn since Brontspil wasn't their territory. Hell, even Jegaar Hill didn't seem to give a shit. But Lady Dread did. They saw this as a threat to their sex trafficking business and responded... quite rudely. Fane and Sunyula tried negotiating, but the bitch wouldn't compromise or back down on anything, and soon enough it escalated. She tortured and killed all 3 of our lieutenants at the time, and left their mangled bodies at our outpost in Hawkсен." *Sunyula Trife... I've read more than enough about her cruelty and tendency for sadism.* "This beef hasn't been resolved for a year now." *But why would he talk about the war between their gangs? What's the point behind it?*

"It's been a long, bloody war. We've lost a lot of our members, as well as killed many of theirs. After a year of fighting, Fane is tired, and so are we. Sunyula was never known for being a reasonable woman. Once you get under her skin, she's not going to let go. All our attempts to make peace with her failed miserably. Frankly, I don't know how that bitch has managed to keep her organization together for 7 years now." Triggen looked upset. His mouth curved and his nostrils widened. "I've lost so many friends..." He ran his hand through his hair. After a moment of collecting himself, he turned to look at Lunarey again. "So... do you have any guesses about what's going on?" *Harley Nation hates Lady Dread, so... if I'm all over the newspapers... and I'm of some value to Harley Nation...*

"Well?" he asked her.

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"I..." the answer hanged in her throat. *No... if it's what I think... no, it can't be...*

"You just figured it out, haven't you?" he grinned. "I can see it on your face." He looked happier than ever.

"Please, tell me I'm not—"

"Oh, but you are!" he flashed the newspaper in her face, now with his hand not covering the title beneath the picture she could read her full name.

MISSING: Vaikillia Trife

"No..." she muttered. My name is... Vaikillia Trife...

"You're Sunyula Trife's little daughter." Her eyes darkened.

"No..." she kept on muttering to herself. Her heart was beating fast. She refused to believe it. *Lady Dread... that sadistic psycho... she's my mother?* "No, no, no," she repeated.

"Oh, yes," Triggen said to her. "And when I'm done with you, your fucking mommy will be collecting you in pieces!"

Epilogue

Jonah Dillard stood before the glass wall in his office. A lovely, dark view of Morth City stood before him, barely lit up by neon signs and a few sole apartments where sleep had yet to fall on. He considered that view as a constant feature of such late night meetings, but by now he had grown used to it and even fond of it. A dark city with only a few lights brightening it.

The door creaked behind him as the journalist entered the room. "You're late," Dillard said coldly, his eyes still on the horizon.

"Yeah, well, YOU try to find a cab at this hour," the journalist grunted.

"You know why these kinds of things only happen in these hours. I prefer as few people as possible see you here."

"Yeah, I know. So... what do you need this time?"

"I guess you've heard that Blackburn was exonerated this morning."

"Of course."

"And I also guess you're going to print a story about it in tomorrow's newspapers."

"Yeah. Why?"

"I need you to edit in an extra small detail to that story."

"Which detail?"

"Well, you're obviously going to mention Blackburn's

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retaliation murders, right?"

"You mean the judge, the attorney and the officer who led the case? Of course we're going to mention it."

"Then make sure you also mention Officer Edward Elwin's admirable efforts to save the case when the key evidence disappeared."

"Edward Elwin? Alright, I can do that. Anything else?"

"No. That will be all."

"That's it? You called me up to urgently meet you here at such an hour only so you can make sure this guy gets mentioned in tomorrow's newspapers?"

It was very important for Dillard. He couldn't know what Derlick might have told Edward before he was shot. If Edward knew about Dillard's involvement in Blackburn's case sabotage, then he was posing a major threat to him. He had to go.

"Is there a problem?" Dillard asked.

"No. Of course not. I'll make sure his name appears in that story tomorrow."

"Good." The journalist left the office. Dillard stood for a few more minutes, looking at the same view as he had before. Even though he liked Edward and his high motivation to do his job, Dillard simply couldn't afford to keep him alive. He knew that when Blackburn sees Edward mentioned in the papers and realizes that he had a part in the attempt to take him down just like the other three who were so brutally murdered, the Deserter General will be going after him, saving Dillard a great amount of work and headache.

The dark view never lit up any further. In fact, a few lights had flickered off during Dillard's conversation with the journalist, making the city look even darker than before.

Appendix

Men of Midas

A Golden Key Can Open Any Door

A crime organization that exists for over a decade. Its members occasionally pull off robberies at small stores and businesses. Most of their income comes from drug trafficking. Even though they sell all kinds of drugs, from marijuana to heroin, due to the astounding popularity of Vexillum in recent years, they have been selling that drug mostly. Their drugs are imported from their associates in Cuba by shipments that come in through Herkin Port. The organization was first founded by Joseph Mallistrom, a former businessman who is considered by many to be brilliant, yet ruthless. They say Joseph had been making deals in every corner of Alataria, and to this day, not many people know all of his ventures in the business world. At age 50 Joseph decided to quit as the ringleader of the syndicate and let his son, Reus, take over instead.

Outposts:

- Ravenwey Burrows, Axfield, an abandoned factory.
- Oakneil, Waterchester, a two-story house, owned by Talimay's parents.

Ringleader:

- Reus Mallistrom, a man just as ruthless as his father, though not necessarily as smart. Unlike his father, Reus refuses to involve himself with Men of Midas too much. He prefers to stay behind the curtains from the safety of his office, even though he receives protection from Alataria's Police Department by bribing its highest ranking officers, and mainly its Chief of Police, Jonah Dillard. Some say he's simply paranoid, afraid that one day his protection from the police might end for some reason, so he prefers not to have any evidence linking him to the organization.

Lieutenants:

- Connor Griffiths, a man in his 50's, who has demonstrated his loyalty to Men of Midas time and again. He is known among other things for his great caring for his men, which he insists on calling 'Brothers.' He sees Men of Midas as a brotherhood and a family, more than anything. Griffiths has a hard addiction to Vexillum and alcohol. He runs the Ravenwey Burrows outpost.
- Talimay Singh, also known as the Golden Marauder. She runs the Oakneil outpost.

Lady Dread

Fear Only Two

A syndicate almost as old as Men of Midas. It is feared throughout Alataria for their cruel torture methods and their mercilessness. They deal in loan-sharking, mostly to new businesses trying to get up on their feet, and whenever a client can't return his debt, he gets to learn his lesson painfully, either by the members of the syndicate, or worse, by its lieutenants. Other than that, Lady Dread deals in human trafficking, specifically in young woman and even underage girls. They smuggle them through Herkin Port and then sell them to various clients, most notoriously to the Godly Succubi as prostitutes. It was first founded by Henrick Trife, a man who many claim to have brought the violence and viciousness of the crime life in Alataria to a whole new level. After his sudden passing from a heart attack at age 47, his daughter, Sunyula, took over the organization.

Outposts:

- Framstead, Northstock, a facility owned by Sunyula.
- Garnicel, Brontspil, a facility owned by Sunyula.

Ringleader:

- Sunyula Trife, also known as Lady Dread, a woman most feared in Alataria. She never hinders from violence or torture, and on some occasions, even encourages it. Most people know her as ruthless and merciless, much more than her father.

Code Sanguinary

A group of rogue soldiers of the Alatarian army that deserted based on their beliefs that the Alatarian government cares little to none when it comes to the well-being of their citizens. Refusing to serve such a government, the former soldiers in Code Sanguinary wish to bring the government down and put an end to their tyrannical, life-threatening rule over the citizens of the country. The group was formed by Charles Blackburn following the atrocities he had been forced to do during the Tearful Rebellion. Over the past decade of its existence, the group had seen its numbers dwindling and their anti-governmental actions growing fewer.

Outposts:

- Exumber, Westden Fells, in the basement of a Cowden Meats factory.

Ringleader:

- Charles Blackburn, also known as the Deserter General. During the Tearful Rebellion, Blackburn served the Alatarian army, but after having to execute several orders that forced him to mass murder dozens of rebels, he decided that the government and high-ranking officials of the army don't care about the atrocities they are committing. He announced his desertion from the army and rallied everyone who stood by his opinions to join him, eventually forming Code Sanguinary. Blackburn is a patient, honorable man, one who values his ideals and his troops above all while still remaining hard and demanding when needed.

Harley nation

A gang of bikers who first came to Alataria in 2041. Their origins trace back to the United States, specifically to the state of Florida, where they were first founded in 2025 by a man named Gantel Riggs. Harley Nation grew widely over the years. 10 years ago, their outpost in the state of Georgia in the United States gained them much power and dominance and made them a force to be reckoned. 6 years after that, they branched out into Alataria, across the sea, starting an outpost in Hawksen, Brontspil.

Outposts:

- Hawksen, Brontspil, a clubhouse.

Ringleader:

- Fane Hallstead, also known as the Red Rider. A man who's sole ambition is to see his gang grow and expand. He's wise enough to know that the war with Lady Dread is not something he can afford, which is why he sought to make peace with them, but he's also vengeful enough to strike back at them upon seeing his attempts fail.

Ferals

So Be It

The Ferals formed together many years ago, no one is sure exactly how many. Their orange Elastics first appeared two decades ago, but most people believe they have existed longer than that, simply being without a proper name for their band. They boast a large number of members, somewhere over 300 according to some people, all scattered around most districts of Alataria. They differ much from other mob gangs by not having any set outposts, no lieutenants and no kind of illegal business they practice in. What little income they make to sustain the group comes from money that was taken from their victims. Their group is comprised almost exclusively of mentally unstable rapists, arsonists, murderers and others of that like. Usually, they kidnap random, innocent civilians only so they could fulfill their deep, disgusting wishes and desires using them, which makes them perhaps the cruelest, most frightening mob gang in Alataria.

Ringleader:

- Jegaar Hill, also known as the Wendigo. He claims to be the first member of the group. While he is considered the ringleader of the group, he never actually takes any of the responsibilities a ringleader should take. He does not care about his men's actions or their repercussions. Many would describe him as a lunatic and a demented, unreasonable man.

Justicars

Like Code Sanguinary, the Justicars are a group of people who banded together to fight those they consider wretched. For that reason, they are sometimes known as the White Knights of Alataria. In an effort to distance themselves from crime syndicates, they refuse to adopt a dictum. Formed 5 years ago, they have sworn to fight the crime syndicates Alataria is plagued with, restoring the country's citizens their sense of safety and confidence. No one seems to know who the group's ringleader is or where is their headquarters or outpost. In addition, their count in numbers can only be guessed and information about their recruitment methods is mostly vague or guessed. Their identities remain secret at all times in order to keep the group safe from the syndicates' wrath.

Alataria Police

Department

Protect and Serve

Given the rising criminal organizations and the deterioration of Alataria's financial state, the officers who once swore to protect the citizens of the country from the corrupt, greedy criminals that roam it, had become such themselves. Many say it is actually harder to find a decent, honest cop rather than a dirty one. The corruption doesn't stop at the top of the chain. Even the current Chief of Police, Jonah Dillard, receives regular bribes from ringleaders in favor of looking the other way when it comes to investigating crimes they stand behind. However, not all ringleaders have Dillard and his high ranking officials on their payroll, mainly the Ferals, Code Sanguinary and the Justicars.

Over the years, APD's influence of the country's crime rates has been noticeably poor, with many people losing faith in them, and despite the many attempts of Jonah Dillard to justify APD's title as protectors of the citizens, none has made any significant change so far.