

# Crown the Villain

Volume II:

Bullet and Blade

D. Sharon

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# Table of Contents

[Map of Alataria](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Demilan I](#)

[Edward I](#)

[Arkaneh I](#)

[Lunarey I](#)

[Demilan II](#)

[Edrimer I](#)

[Arkaneh II](#)

[Maileena I](#)

[Edward II](#)

[Edrimer II](#)

[Lunarey II](#)

[Arkaneh III](#)

[Maileena II](#)

[Edward III](#)

[Lunarey III](#)

[Arkaneh IV](#)

[Maileena III](#)

[Edrimer III](#)

[Edward IV](#)

[Lunarey IV](#)

[Arkaneh V](#)

[Maileena IV](#)

[Demilan III](#)

[Maileena V](#)

[Edrimer IV](#)

[Edward V](#)

[Lunarey V](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Appendix](#)

# 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

After about an hour of waiting, the sedative finally started to wear off, as the woman finally opened her eyes from her long sleep. A man was standing on top of her, looking with lustful eyes, a broad grin smeared over his face and lips anointed with his own saliva. "Finally," he whispered to himself. His hand twitched with excitement.

The woman was naked, lying on the cold, hard floor, with her hands spread across, like a crucified figure. He had to make sure her clothes won't get in the way, and that she was placed in a position most comfortable for him to work with. She looked in horror at the man. Her eyes were filled with fright, her pupils trembled, yet she couldn't say a word, as she was still under the effect of the paralyzing medication he gave her. She couldn't speak. She couldn't move. She could only watch as he hindered closer with a scalpel, looking mad and bloodthirsty.

"I-I-I've been waiting for you to w-w-wake up," He said with his slightly high-pitched voice. "I-I-I've been patient. I-I-I've been watching you for an hour. I h-h-held myself from d-d-doing anything to you." His stuttering was not a result of a talking defect, but rather an effect of his excitement and rejoices. "I-I-I know what to do. S-S-Stop telling me what to do." He seemed to be talking to another person. The woman moved her eyes around, but saw that no one else was there. He was talking to thin air. "S-S-Stop pressuring me," he kept saying to the invisible person. "Y-Y-You're always p-p-

## Bullet and Blade

pressuring me." His rambles only made her fear grow.

The woman lay still on the floor, yet he could notice the growing fear in her eyes. He had no mercy for her. He felt no sort of sympathy or hesitation for what he was about to do to her. All he felt was an eager burst to do the horrible things that he had already done to many more of his victims.

He sent down the scalpel into her eyeball, at first slowly, and then faster, until the thin razor was halfway through in her skull. A splash of blood gushed at the man's face. She didn't make a sound. She only lay there, doomed to feel the excruciating pain without having the privilege of screaming. And she wanted to scream so badly. Her mind was begging to let the world know of her pain, as boiling waves of pain and burn sliced through her. He continued to poke the scalpel around until the eyeball looked damaged enough to him. At that point, he pushed his fingers into her eye socket and furiously pulled the mangled eyeball. The waves of pain intensified. She no longer wanted to scream. She wanted to die.

That night was the longest, most painful one the woman has ever suffered in her entire life. Even all the cuts and bruises she ever received in her lifetime combined weren't a match for the kind that she felt at those moments. The man continued his grizzly act as he went on to pull her other eyeball in the same manner, and then using a saw, he cut off her arms from her torso. Lastly, he dug into her chest using the scalpel and took out her heart.

His eyes shone as he looked at the final outcome. Once, he was an honest, hard-working man with a family, but now his life was filled with nothing but madness and blood.

The Grimm Brothers story told about three surgeons, who each lost a body part. Eyes, arms, and heart. For that reason, the people of Alataria named him the Tri-Surgeon.



## Demilan

Ashcote's central bus station was heavily crowded and boisterous. People were running around constantly as if they were waves coming and going, ever keeping the ocean that was the bus station rumbling. Stores and stands, mainly of food, scattered around, looking to bring in whatever coin would come in their way in those desperate days of poverty.

Demilan saw the place from a positive point of view, preferring to appreciate the cleanliness and lack of any graffiti of mob gang dictums. It felt like a nice change compared to everything he had seen so far in that city. Having spent most of his life in Exumber, he started missing his old hometown, as by now he had grown weary of Ashcote and its overbearing presence of Men of Midas members. Surely, the golden thugs were present in Exumber as well, but everyone knew that Code Sanguinary were the ruling force in that city.

He sat on a bench next to Maileena, reading the country's leading newspaper, *The Heart of the Country*, with the side-purpose of hiding his and Maileena's face behind it. His eyes were red with fatigue and his body was still weak from the rehabilitation process. His fingers slightly trembled as he held the paper. The black duffel bag rested on the bench right beside him, with all of his weapons hidden in it, including his black knife. Maileena had a small bag next to her as well,



## Bullet and Blade

packed with some food and water. She insisted on keeping her revolver hidden in the back of her pants, concealed under her black jacket, instead of being put away in the bag.

Maileena looked nervous. She was constantly biting her lower lip and clenching and flexing her hands.

"Relax," Demilan said to her.

"Don't tell me to relax. We're very wanted people by now, Demilan. We shouldn't be in such a crowded place." She was incensed. "What are we even doing here?"

"Let me show you." Demilan rifled through the newspaper, flipping through various articles. One article was about the possible candidate to go against Gerald Conrad for the next presidential elections, Roger Strickland, an up and coming political figure who's long been rumored to be seeking the throne of the Segregated Quarter. Another article was about a famous pop singer's upcoming album, soon to be released by Golden Key Records, owned by Reus Mallistrom. Demilan's eyes narrowed as he read the name. *And the evils prosper...* he thought.

After going through those pages, he finally found the article he was looking for. "That's why we're here." He showed Maileena the paper. The headline was written in big, bold letters: "The Deserter General Goes Free," accompanied by a picture of Charles Blackburn below it. Dressed in orange uniform and handcuffed, the old ringleader had a surly expression. The article went on to describe how the trial, which took place behind closed doors, ended with Blackburn's exoneration over a technicality. It didn't specify which technicality it was, adding that the police refused to give away any information about it to the press. The next day, the bodies of 3 people were thrown at APD's station doors in Morth City, Fallhalt. The ones of the judge, state attorney and lead investigator of the case. *Code Sanguinary may have died down over these past few years, but Blackburn's still got it.*

"What is this? Why are you showing me this article?" Maileena asked.

"Blackburn is free, so now we're going to get to Exumber,

## D. Sharon

where his outpost is, and ask for some help."

"Are you insane? Did you forget that Blackburn kicked you out of Code Sanguinary for taking Vex? Why would he help you?"

"I wouldn't go through all this trouble and risk if I wasn't sure of this plan. Trust me, the Code Sanguinary outpost is where we need to go now."

Maileena looked hesitant. She was still a bit shaken by the recent attempt on her life by a member of Men of Midas and Demilan knew how crazy going to Blackburn sounded like, but he felt confident about that plan. "Blackburn won't hurt me. He wouldn't kill an ex-soldier of his. Trust me, I know him."

"Alright," Maileena surrendered. "I just wish we had your motorcycle so we could get there quickly and safely." With Demilan's current shape, he wasn't fit to drive the motorcycle. Thus, the two were forced to leave it by the apartment building when they left it in a hurry.

"Don't worry. We'll be alright." His voice sounded calm. "Anyway, the bus to Exumber will be here soon."

Maileena looked away in silence. She was clearly disturbed by something. Her eyes said it like an open book. "You're worried about Vera, aren't you?" Demilan knew her well enough by now to guess it.

"Do you...?" she held back the question at first, but then she went ahead with it, her voice dipped in fear. "Do you think they're still alive, Vera and Telia?"

A wave of uncertainty washed over Demilan. *What do I say? I'm not sure myself, but... I don't want her to worry... I also don't want to lie to her...* "Fuck, what am I saying?" she said, saving him from the question. "They have to be alive," She said, full of confidence.

"Of course," Demilan agreed with her, despite being more hopeful than sure of the matter. He held his dream catcher necklace in his hand. As he clutched it, he imagined that he was clutching Telia's hand and a sense of sorrow came over him. *Wait for me, Telia. Please... just be okay. I'll be with you again shortly.*

## Bullet and Blade

"How's your sleep?" Maileena asked him.

"My sleep?"

"Yeah, you know... the nightmares." She looked down at the necklace.

"Oh... it's... it's not good. I still have them." They were just as worse as they were before he ever met Telia. Each night brought a new slew of horrors to hunt Demilan in the realm of dreams. Most of the times, the nightmares repeated themselves, yet on other occasions, they were something he had never experienced before. Those were the ones who dreaded him the most.

"You've been talking a lot in your sleep lately. I've heard you say all kinds of things. Especially..." something stopped her from going on.

"What? Say it."

"Well... I heard you say things like: 'they're on fire! Someone, help them!' and stuff about breaking your orders." Demilan bowed down his head. The necklace dropped from his hand and returned to dangle from his neck. He looked as if he was reliving a traumatic event at that moment. "Are you... having nightmares about the Tearful Rebellion?"

"It's nothing new," He said. "They almost always revolve around it."

"You never actually told me what happened back then. What you saw and did."

"It's not really a pleasant topic." He only ever talked about those things with Telia.

"I know. It's okay if you don't want to talk about it. It was rude of me to—"

"No, it's fine." He looked at her. "Do you really want to know?"

"Yes."

Demilan made a long sigh. He was always ashamed of this weakness of his, being an experienced warrior, with skills and proficiency that defined him as a deadly killer. The memories of that single event haunted him for so long that he almost forgot what he was like before it all happened. Before the

## D. Sharon

people of the country rebelled against President Christopher Alford and demanded a better tomorrow in a land that had long been forgotten in the yesterday and had never given a damn about today.

"It was two weeks after the Rebellion started. The Heart was packed with angry mobs and armed soldiers. All the streets and roads were closed off. The Segregated Quarter was surrounded by military special forces that were protecting it, and the rebels were constantly trying to break through to get to the president and his men. They were mad. Some of them had signs calling for Alford's resignation... and some had weapons. The government had zero tolerance for armed rebels. They considered them just as much as a threat as Carl Gardner was when he tried to assassinate President Dwight Hamilton 2 years earlier. The Segregated Quarter was built to prevent such things from ever happening again... and now they felt like their lives were in danger." Demilan clenched his hand and ground his teeth. His forehead shrunk and wrinkled as his eyes narrowed. "We all knew they weren't in any real danger. They just panicked. No one anticipated the magnitude of those uprisings. I mean, there were thousands of people out there on the streets. And that's when Alford decided to send in a special military unit to take care of the armed rebels. I was part of that unit. We were sent to Harlington Square, where the rebels put up a decent fight. Today, that square is rebuilt. It looks as if nothing ever happened there, but back then it was... such a wreck. We lost some good men back there. The rebels placed shooters on high vantage points. They had the tactical advantage on us. That's when we were ordered to start using our grenade launchers. I was appalled. I thought our purpose was to make them surrender at minimal cost, but... it all quickly became so much bloodier than I ever thought it would." He closed his eyes as if he saw the pictures in his mind again. His lips trembled. He could envision it all too well. Even the sounds rang in his ear as if it was taking place right then and there. He remembered hearing the shriek of bullets as they flew inches next to him. He remembered dragging one of his

## Bullet and Blade

fellow wounded soldiers to a safe place, under a rain of fire and blood. He remembered all the carnage and death that happened by the end of that battle. "The explosions from the grenades... it was horrible. Body parts were flying all over... people were bleeding on the ground, begging for mercy... and in the end, what few that remained of that force of rebels got themselves cornered behind a truck. 'We surrender!' they called at us. 'Please, stop shooting! We give up!' I heard them. We all heard them. And when the order came to disregard their pleas and kill them anyway I refused to do it." He still remembered the cold, heartless tone in which his commander gave the order. "I called at my fellow squad mates to let them drop their weapons and surrender, but... they said we had our orders. 'Fuck those orders!' I remember saying. But they didn't listen to me. They fired another grenade at them. They didn't even care. I felt as if I was a madman, as I was the only one who didn't see them as worthless meat. Everyone else just... blindly obeyed. Those few rebels didn't die like the rest that did before. The explosion wasn't close enough to kill them, but it was just close enough to catch them on fire. They screamed and ran like maniacs as they were burned alive. My squad just stood and watched. And so did I. I wished I could save them, but I couldn't." He could hear their screams in his head again. It felt so vivid that he almost called out for someone to save them. He remembered their flesh blackening and filling up with blisters. When they finally stopped screaming the silence that followed was revealed to be just as scarring and frightening. "There were so many things that I saw back then. They never let go of me. When Blackburn announced that he was resigning as a military General and called for others to do the same, I followed him without a second thought."

"Fuck..." Maileena summarized her reaction. Her mouth remained open for a minute later before she could digest all the grisly details. "My grandma always told me that I was lucky to be young enough to never have known about what happened during those riots, and I've heard stories, but..."

"I try to avoid looking back at it. Those weeks were the

longest ones in my life."

"No one should go through what you did." She touched his shoulder, looking deep into his eyes with every inch of empathy in her body.

"I can say the same thing about you," he said.

"I didn't go through war."

"But you did go through hell." Their eyes met, and hers glittered. While Demilan could only guess what it was like to work at the Godly Succubi, he was perhaps the only person who could get close enough to understanding what it was to bear scars like hers.

"Yeah, I guess you're right," she nodded her head. "And I was one of the few who were dumb enough to step into that hell willingly."

"You had good intentions."

"For people like Kleon Hanford, it doesn't matter if you have good intentions or bad ones. We all went through the same shit. Most of the girls in the Godly Succubi, underage or not, came from foreign countries through Herkin Port. Many of them were kidnapped and were forcibly brought there. Others were just homeless or poor." While the words seemed to be coming out of her mouth easily, Demilan knew that it was not the case. "Kleon had living quarters in the VIP section. Bunk beds in small rooms, mostly roach-infested and rarely ever cleaned. Most of the girls in the club stayed in those living rooms, having nowhere else to go. Only a handful few were local and had a home, and I happened to be one of those few. Kleon allowed the few of us to let them go home at the end of the day as if we had finished out shift at their decent, honest job, but he let us know that if we'd try to run away from him, he would hunt them down, so barely no one ever tried... but I tried..." Demilan remembered how he found her in that warehouse, getting raped and beaten by several of Kleon's men. "If you hadn't showed up in that warehouse... I don't know where I would've been."

"Do you regret ever going to that place?"

"Well, now that they've taken Vera, yeah, of course, but..."

## Bullet and Blade

at the time when I first started there, I don't think I was that much filled with regret. The money Kleon paid for each of his girls was more than any job I had before, and I was able to finally provide for Vera. He used to promise the girls who were homeless and had to live in his club that once they would reach a certain amount of earnings he'll let them buy their own freedom. I'm not sure that he was sincere. I don't think I ever saw any of the girls do that."

"No one should need to buy their own freedom." the notion made him sick and angry. "No one should have to go through what you did."

"Yeah, well, that what people like us are for. To right the wrongs." She looked up at him.

Demilan chuckled. "Right."

"We are not a rotten apple. We are a good apple on a bad tree."

"We are a good apple on a bad tree," he repeated her words with a hint of a smile on his face.



## Edward

Edward shivered as he sat at his desk at the station and held today's issue of *The Heart of the Country*. "The Deserter General Goes Free," the title said, in letters so big and provocative that he almost felt as if they were mocking him. *They claim he was released on a technicality... not only did Dillard orchestrate this entire case, but he also had the nerve to not give the people of this country the reason why their only hope of justice was just taken away from them.* Edward felt furious, and yet the thought that he couldn't do anything about it infuriated him further. His situation was so dire and hopeless that it felt like it would be appropriate to simply take life as a ridiculous joke from now on.

He went on to read the article in full, summarizing its highlights in his head. *"Blackburn was charged with the murder of Serik Sanders, a member of the Justicars... the Chief of Police, Jonah Dillard, had expressed his sincere regrets that the sentence turned out the way it did. However, he refused to give away any information about what actually happened to result in the exoneration, as well as make any further comments on the case..."* the page crumpled under Edward's tight grip. *"...However, Blackburn did not waste any time making his own kind of comment on the case. The day after the exoneration, the bodies of Nigel Hicken, Tom Broker and Vernes Price, the judge, state attorney and lead investigator, respectively, who worked on the case, were thrown on*



## Bullet and Blade

*the curve, right outside the APD station in Morth City, Fallhalt..."* Edward has yet recovered from the sight. He didn't even like Vernes, and he didn't know the other two, but their fate was truly undeserved. None of them even chose to take part in this case. They were all assigned to it without even asking. Dillard gave Vernes this case against his will, and the judge and state attorney were appointed by the state. *Charles Blackburn truly is a merciless bastard.*

Just when he thought he was done being shocked and horrified, when he thought that it was finally his time to catch a break from all the endless chaos that he knew in Morth City, he read the next segment of the article and learned that he was wrong, for there could be none of that in Alataria.

*"...with the death of Officer Vernes Price, who led the investigation case of the serial killer known as the Tri-Surgeon up until his death, Officer Edward Elwin, who was also appointed to the case, was forced to lead it in his stead..."* Edward received the notice that he was assigned as the lead investigator in the Tri-Surgeon case shortly after Vernes's death. As far as Edward understood, Dillard was the one who gave that order. At first, Edward was slightly baffled as to why that was mentioned in an article about Blackburn, but only when he read further did he realize that the purpose was to introduce Edward into the article. *"...Officer Elwin also led great efforts in the Blackburn case, as he took over for Officer Price as the lead investigator during the trial period. APD thanked Officer Elwin for his commitment on the case and has acknowledged his hard work to try to put Blackburn behind bars."*

Edward continued to stare at the words for a while longer, trying to wrap his mind around the meaning behind them. Confusion and a sense of surrealism took over him. All surrounding noise was dimmed, and only the sound of his thoughts was clear. *This... this is all a lie. No one ever thanked or acknowledged me. Why would they write this? Who told them to write this?* Edward read the words again and again. *The way it's written... "His commitment on the case... his hard work to try to put Blackburn behind bars." It's almost as if someone wanted to turn me into a hero... at that point, he figured it out. Or a target.* His heart

## D. Sharon

dropped. *This is Dillard's doing. He has power over the press. He must have made sure they'd write this. He's... trying to turn Blackburn against me. He's attempting to make him aware of me so that he'll kill me. Dillard must not be willing to risk himself in case Derlick told me the truth about Blackburn's case.* His heart raced as cold sweat began building in his forehead. The newspaper fell on his desk as he stared into a void. *Blackburn's going to go after me now. I'm as good as dead.* He remembered his last encounter with the soldiers of Code Sanguinary, at Roycen's house in Maecor, Rockbury. Blackburn's men were trained killers. They were all ex-military soldiers, and they all possessed weapons and skills that Edward was no match for.

At that moment, it seemed like there was no one more hopeless and lonely than Edward Elwin in all of Alataria. A part of him thought that he might as well accept his impending doom, and take it as one final strike that life has thrown at him. For a minute, after thinking about the way he lost his best friend and the most important case he has yet to work on, Edward felt almost ready to give up. He felt like that so much that he wanted to simply go out on the streets and hope that Blackburn's men will find and kill him just so he can get it over with. *The Tri-Surgeon case...* he realized something as that notion crossed his mind. *When Vernes led the case, he had an entire team working on the case with him, but when I got the same position, all of a sudden, all members of that team got reassigned to various different cases. I was only left with a single partner. This also had to be Dillard's doing. There would be no reason for Dillard to take away my entire team and make me lead investigator if he wants me dead... unless it serves that purpose. By having me lead the case with only one person beside me, he basically made sure that every time a body would be found, or some kind of evidence will be discovered on a crime scene related to the case, I'll have to be there. He wants me to be out in the open as much as possible to make me an even easier target for Code Sanguinary. Dammit... that cunning fucker...*

Edward couldn't come up with any way out of the situation. His mind went into a spiral of despair and stress. There was no one he could turn to. Nothing that could help

## Bullet and Blade

him. All he had was the voice of his father in his head, telling him not to give up. His father always believed in fighting on against all odds. He was a seeker of justice too, perhaps a lonely one in his wishes, just like Edward, and he was the sole source of inspiration and pride that Edward always had. His father was the very reason why he became a cop, the very reason why he refused to go with the current of corruption and greed. After giving it some thought for several minutes, his father also became the very reason why he decided to fight no matter what happens, no matter who chases him, whether it's Blackburn or Dillard. *If I die, then I'll die, but I'll be damned if I don't put up a decent fight at the very least.* He threw the newspaper in the trash, feeling determined as ever.

He walked away from his desk, leaving his thoughts on the matter behind, and headed towards the desk of Officer Trisslin Long. Trisslin was Edward's new partner in the Tri-Surgeon case. She was also his only teammate in the pursuit. He found her sitting at her desk, facing her computer screen.

Trisslin had long, black hair and a slim body figure. Her skin was in the shade of caramel and her wide, lush lips were painted with crimson-shaded lipstick.

"Hi," he greeted her. Their eyes met. "I'm Edward Elwin, your new partner." He smiled, politely.

Trisslin seemed neither surprised nor impressed. The two only knew each other by face and name, as they never had to work together, yet he was sure she knew who he was. Edward had recently become the talk of the station due to the recent events he was involved in.

"I'm Trisslin," she finally broke a smile, even though it seemed like a forced one. He had seen such a fake smile before. Whenever others at the station had to be partnered with Edward, he would be faced with such fakeness. No one wanted to be forced to work with a man who was considered to be the black sheep of the station. Still, Edward didn't care about being labeled as such. His values, which differed him from the rest of the officers, made him feel unique and worthy of his badge. "I've heard some things about you," she said.

D. Sharon

"Well, some were not, but... I've also heard about how you got up to Dillard's office and took Blackburn's case upon yourself. That takes some balls."

"It takes a will to see bastards like him behind bars."

Edward had actually read about Trisslin before meeting her, wanting to know who he will be dealing with. Trisslin was 30 years old, only a year younger than Edward. She began working in APD only two years ago, but she was already carrying an extensive record. She took part in many successful cases, though she never led one herself.

"Anyway, did you get a chance to take a look at what we have so far on this case?"

"Yeah, I did. 7 victims spread over the districts of Canstow, Basilham, and Exumber."

"Right. All of those victims had their eyes, heart, and arms removed by the killer. The evidence suggests that the killer did these mutilations before killing them. I wonder how many of those poor fellows had to live through such a horrible ritual."

"You mean, the blood loss didn't kill them?"

"Not always. I'm guessing most of them didn't have the luxury of dying before he finished his twisted methods. The killer uses a homebrewed drug that paralyzes his victims, leaving them conscious but unable to move or talk. It's a mixture of Sorelium along with several medications."

Edward rarely ever had to deal with Sorelium in his years as an officer. The nerve-enhancing drug was one of the more expensive drugs out there, and not many people used it. Many were scared of using it, knowing that overdriving the human nervous system could be very dangerous. Its primary usage was usually for sex, making that act several times more intense and exciting, a fact which made sure that its users would get addicted to it.

"Is there any connection between the victims?" Edward asked.

"Not that we know of."

"And the crime scenes?"

"Also have no seeming connection."

## Bullet and Blade

"I see. Get me the files on all the victims and the locations where their bodies were found. Sent them all to me. I'll review them later." Trisslin started chuckling, covering her mouth in embarrassment. "What's so funny?" Edward seemed agitated by her reaction.

"Oh, nothing, it's just... your seriousness... it's funny." She kept giggling as if Edward was there to entertain her. He became even more agitated.

"What's wrong with being serious?" his forehead shrunk with anger.

"It's just that... Vernes went over those files so many times, and he never got anywhere with it. We've asked everyone who knew the victims, and tried going through every crime scene as thoroughly as possible in the search for evidence."

"So, you're saying you don't think this case is going to get resolved?"

"Look, Vernes had an entire team behind him. You only got me as a single partner, so excuse me if I'm doubtful." She chuckled once again.

As if a spotlight was suddenly lit above Trisslin's head, Edward felt that he was starting to see her true character. "You're an officer, dammit!" he slammed his hand on her desk, making her startle and jump. Her expression suddenly turned serious. "You're supposed to hunt down monsters like this one with every breath you've got, not dismiss them!"

"There it is," a hint of contempt was in her voice. Through his eyes, a dark aura started enveloping her figure. "There's the righteous justice seeker everyone in the station is talking about. I've heard a lot about your ideals and visions. Face it, Officer Elwin, you're not about to change anything around here." At that moment, Edward realized who his partner was. She was no different than any other cop he ever met. Even Derlick seemed friendly and easygoing at first, but in the end, he showed his true colors, the ones that have given up on any hope for change.

"Just... send me... those files." Every word was uttered

## D. Sharon

from his mouth with every inch of hate he had in him. He walked away from Trisslin, his back facing her the same way he faced his back on any other cop who thought the same as she did.

Later that day, a ceremony was held in honor of Officer Vernes Price. It took place in the conference hall of the station. Edward was present there, as well as most of the station's manpower. A few dozen cops crowded in the relatively small room, staring at a small stage, where 5 people stood: Vernes's wife and her two children, a boy and a girl, each no older than 12, the Vice Chief of Police, Archell Sherwood and the Chief of Police, Jonah Dillard. The latter stood beside Vernes's wife and kids, in the right corner of the stage, standing tall and proud, while Sherwood was standing in the center of the stage, in front of the podium.

Archell Sherwood was 45 years old. He had short brown hair, bright eyes, and a very menacing appearance. His wrinkly face, snub nose, and constant frown gave him an aggressive look. Everyone in the force knew Sherwood. Many said that his achievements in the force combined with his sharp mind helped him pave his way to the position of Vice Chief. Others said that it was his natural ways of manipulations and a great understanding of politics and law-bending that allowed him to get to such a high rank in such a relatively young age while officers who were older and more experienced were left behind in his trail. Edward didn't care much for rumors, and in his heart, he could already guess which of the two was more correct. *Anyone who gets so close to Dillard must be a lot like him.*

Sherwood read a speech about how valuable Vernes was to the force. He mentioned several cases that Vernes led in the past, most of which Edward wasn't even aware of. On and on the Vice Chief bragged and pictured Vernes as the role model for every APD officer. All the while, Edward was rolling his eyes, remembering how much of an old slacker Vernes really was. Some officers in the crowd were whispering how much bullshit Sherwood's words were while others looked at the poor lady on the stage and felt sorry for her. With every

## Bullet and Blade

mention of Vernes's name, with every sentence that appeared touching and humble, Vernes's wife wept. Dillard stood next to her, his face as cold as ice and his eyes looking straight forward. *What is it, Dillard? Can't you even look at the poor woman? Have you suddenly grown a conscience? You ARE responsible for the death of her husband, vicariously, after all...*

At that moment, when every hateful bone in Edward's body lit up, Dillard shifted his gaze, and as if he could hear Edward's thoughts, he found him in the crowd. Dillard's gaze hung on Edward like a tiger eyeing a gazelle. Edward could have sworn that he noticed Dillard's lips curve as if he was holding himself from smiling. The Chief of Police was taunting Edward with his eyes alone, mocking and ridiculing him without even having to do anything. Edward looked back with a spiteful expression on his face. He found no reason why he should hide his hatred for the man. The look exchange was charged with animosity, as both men knew that each of them wanted the other one dead.

The ceremony went on for another 20 minutes. At some point, Sherwood moved on from talking about Vernes to talking about Blackburn and Code Sanguinary. "These kinds of organizations are killing our country. They plant fear in the hearts of citizens and bring misery on poor, helpless souls." He turned to look at Vernes's family upon saying that. *A spark to light the fire of revenge among the officers, mixed with a touch of sympathy.* Edward was not impressed by the sentimentality. *They go against those criminals in words only.* Edward had learned by now not to trust promises of hope and justice, especially from such high-ranked people.

Once the ceremony was over, the crowd scattered, and Edward left the station to go home. Under a shroud of darkness, he walked towards his car in the station's parking lot. He felt uncomfortable, as the nightly atmosphere reminded him of the night that he had to shoot his best friend. It was as if that feeling of betrayal, that shock and refusal to accept reality that he felt that night kept haunting his mind every time he found himself walking around in the streets of Morth City

at night. That night truly left a mark on him, one that wouldn't go away easily.

Everything was quiet all around him. Nothing but the sound of crickets and his footsteps. He could see his car, only a few feet away from him, when he heard a noise from behind him. He turned around within an instant, with his hand already holding his gun. Panic ran through his body as much as blood did. He looked around, trying to examine his surroundings. His heart raced so hard that he could almost hear it beating, as everything around was still completely quiet. Just when he was about to turn back to his car, he saw a shadowed figure running away in the corner of his eye. He couldn't see where it came from or where it went, but he was sure that he saw it. His hand remained tight around his gun while he stepped slowly to his car, keeping his eyes peeled in all directions.

*If Blackburn wants me, he can come and try,* he thought. Once he reached his car, Edward let go of his gun and left it in its chest holster. He walked to his car and drove home that night, knowing that he had eyes watching him, waiting for him to let his guard down.





## Arkaneh

The offices of Golden Key Records were based in Basilham, Rockbury. The rocky mountain that the district was famously known for stood on the horizon, across from the road Arkaneh and Griffiths were driving on. Rockbury was also known for having a lot of well-developed industrial areas on one hand, but also several empty, undeveloped areas. Those vacant lands would be every contractor's dream, yet Reus had most of them in his possession. A few of those lands that he owned turned into industrial areas and malls, but most of them remained vacant as they always were. Rumors said that Reus simply didn't want to invest money in those lands and preferred to simply keep them for a few more years, at which point he would be able to sell them at a much higher price.

The desert views on one side and heavily polluting industrial areas on the other didn't fare well with Arkaneh. Such views weren't kind on his eyes. *Elina always said she hated the Rockbury district. She always wanted to go see the green planes of the Northstock district, but I never managed to get her to see them.* He quickly tried shaking his thoughts of Elina, preferring to keep himself focused.

"Doesn't Reus's record label have another set of offices in Nexlin, Waterchester?" Arkaneh asked Griffiths. "Why didn't he call to meet us there instead?"

## D. Sharon

"I guess it's because he's currently working with some pop singer on a new album. I heard that singer lives in Rockbury, so they're recording the album there." Griffiths replied. "Why? Would you rather see the glossy ocean in Nexlin instead of this fucking desert?" he mocked Arkaneh with his tone.

Arkaneh remained quiet. He was actually glad that he didn't have to find himself in Nexlin, where the infamous Herkin Port was. People loved to glorify the city of Nexlin, always mentioning the sound of seagulls and the miraculous view of the ocean that were not spared from the city, but still, Arkaneh knew about the true dark nature that hid behind those blue waves and favorable views. He knew that Herkin Port, the heart and soul of Nexlin, served both Men of Midas and Lady Dread.

Alataria's main port was a great source of both commerce and crime. Many of the drugs that were smuggled into Alataria were brought in with ships that docked at Herkin Port, under the guise of importing one merchandise or another. Those drugs would then make their way to the Men of Midas Oakneil outpost in Waterchester and from there they would spread into the streets of every city from Waterchester to Axfield, mostly through deals made in the Nucleus. But even worse than that, were the illegal smuggles that were brought for Lady Dread. It was no secret that every mob gang had their own primary source of income. Code Sanguinary had their gun trading business, Men of Midas had their drug trafficking, and Lady Dread had their human trafficking. Girls of all ages, both underage and older, were smuggled into the country to later serve as either prostitutes or just slaves for different deviants to have their way with, like the Ferals. Arkaneh didn't know much about the specifics of Sunyula Trife's human trafficking mechanism. He only knew that it didn't involve the Nucleus, unlike her loan-sharking business and that most of those girls usually ended up in the Godly Succubi, where they would dance and sleep with whoever would be flashing the money.

He tried his best not to think about it too much and focus on his forthcoming meeting with Reus Mallistrom. *This is what I*

## Bullet and Blade

*was aiming for. Getting to Reus Mallistrom. This is a further step in my plans.*

Arkaneh and Griffiths entered a marvelous glass skyscraper. It was so high that there seemed to be no way of seeing where it ended, its top floor shrouded in a mist of clouds. Arkaneh saw it as poetic, as the very man they were about to meet was very much like that, a man shrouded in a mist. A so-called businessman who deals in various illegal enterprises in the dark, and runs a criminal organization from behind his curtain. Yet the mist, in that case, was clear enough to see through. Almost everyone in Alataria knew Reus Mallistrom and the kind of person he was. *There's a common saying referring to Reus and his father: the Mallistroms have their hand in everything.*

Entering the skyscraper, they were greeted by a spacious lobby with a very high ceiling, decorated with shiny, cream-colored tiles on both the walls and the floor under their feet. A golden chandelier hung above their head, its crystal parts ever so sparkling. The entire hall oozed with a sense of luxury and high class.

They made themselves aware of the secretary who sat behind a long counter, dressed in a short skirt and a blouse that allowed for a wide and quite revealing cleavage. Arkaneh wondered if it was Reus that was making her dress like that for his own pleasure, to have something to feast his eyes upon on each of his visits to the lobby.

The secretary confirmed their appointment at the current hour with 'Mr. Mallistrom', as she called him and guided them to the elevator, where they would need to send themselves up to the 44<sup>th</sup> Floor.

As the two made their way, Arkaneh noticed the stressful appearance on Griffiths's face.

"Don't be nervous, Griffiths," Arkaneh said.

"Shut the fuck up. You don't know how Reus gets when he's pissed, and boy, am I betting that this would piss him off."

"Even if he gets pissed, it's not either of us' faults. Just calm down."

"Reus is a very powerful man—"

D. Sharon

"Do you really think I've lived 24 years of my life in this country without ever hearing about the powerful, mighty Reus Mallistrom?"

"Then you should prepare yourself for a shit storm."

*Reus Mallistrom is a man to be frightened from, no doubt about it, but it was his father, Joseph, that truly paved his family's rise to power. Joseph Mallistrom cleverly took advantage of the poor economic state of the country to manipulate people into working for him. Rumors say that he even took part in the brutal, inhumane acts against the rebels of the Tearful Rebellion, knowing that one of their protests was against his constant spread of corruption and crime, which was bad for his business. The truth is, without Joseph, there's no guarantee that Reus would be where he is, or even close to that.*

The elevator music was cheerful and relaxing, yet Griffiths was sweating endlessly. Looking at the frightened old man, Arkaneh wondered how he ever got to be a lieutenant for Reus.

The elevator doors opened on the 44<sup>th</sup> Floor, and the two walked out into a waiting room, where yet another secretary sat behind a counter, dressed just as lavishly as the previous one in tight pants and a buttoned shirt that had one or two buttons missing, as far as Arkaneh thought.

"Hi, we're here for our appointment with Mr. Mallistrom," Arkaneh said to her, going ahead before Griffiths would uncontrollably stutter instead.

"Yes, Mr. Frye and Mr. Griffiths. I was informed of your arrival," She said with a cheerful smile, one that appeared much too fake to Arkaneh. "If you'll just wait here for a moment, I'll inform Mr. Mallistrom." She rose from her chair and tapped on her high heels towards the office door behind her.

*Mr. Mallistrom... Mr. Frye... Mr. Griffiths... we're all criminals here, yet we're acting as if this is a formal business meeting about our legitimate affairs. How foolish. Reus may have his own, more legitimate enterprises that he deals with, but there's no need for all of this formality. Even this secretary must know who we are.*

"Mr. Mallistrom will be ready to see you in a few minutes." She came out of the office. "Meanwhile, you can wait for him

## Bullet and Blade

for in his office."

"Fine." Arkaneh sounded agitated.

They walked through the office door into a large room, where two wide sofas awaited them, a glass table stood in between them and a dresser with various kinds of alcoholic beverages and glasses next to it. They sat on one of the sofas and patiently waited. Arkaneh could notice the high-quality leather that the sofa was made of. He looked around and found himself impressed with the level of luxury that the office presented. Every piece of furniture was made of the highest materials and radiated with royalty. *And they say you can only find luxury in the mansions in Fraenon Hill.* Wooden bookshelves adorned the walls around, filled with books of various lengths and topics. Arkaneh knew better than to think that Reus is a great, sophisticated reader. *This is all just a show. Perhaps he manages to fool some people into thinking he's a great scholar, but a busy man like Reus couldn't possibly have enough time to read much.* Another door stood before the two, a white one, with a golden-plated handle. Reus must have been behind it.

Arkaneh's heartbeat was slightly accelerated. Meeting Reus was something he looked for and aimed at since joining Men of Midas. *Even though I never could have guessed there would be a snitch in Men of Midas, it worked wonderfully in my favor, giving me a way to draw the lieutenant's attention to me and getting me to a personal meeting with Reus himself.*

Finally, after a few minutes of waiting, Reus finally walked out of the white door with the golden handle. The ringleader was dressed in a tailored gray suit with an open-collared white shirt beneath it, a gray, color-matching pair of pants and black leather shoes. He had black hair, slicked back with a greasy appearance, with white streaks on the sides, and a trimmed black beard on his face.

"Sorry to keep you two waiting," he said, sounding indifferent as if he didn't really care about them. Just before the door behind him closed, Arkaneh managed to see the naked woman behind it as she was putting on a pair of pink panties, standing beside a large bed. *Now I know what kept him waiting.*

## D. Sharon

"I guess you're Arkaneh Frye," said Reus as he sat down on the sofa across from Arkaneh and Griffiths.

"That's right," Said Arkaneh. He could smell Reus's perfume from where he sat. It was a sweet scent, mixed with an acute exotic flavor.

"Well, Arkaneh, Griffiths told me over the phone that you need to inform me of something of grave importance." There was a sense of authority in Reus's voice.

"Yes. I—"

The bedroom door opened behind them, interrupting Arkaneh's words. Out of the door came the woman which Arkaneh caught a glimpse of getting dressed. She wore a blue shirt with an open collar with a matching skirt that went down all the way to her knees and had high heels with a slightly darker shade of the same color. She had big, green eyes that hid behind a pair of glasses with a black frame and were decorated with a smoky make-up effect. Her long chestnut-colored hair was neatly tied up in a bun and her thin lips were painted with an intense shade of red, almost blood-like.

Reus looked at her as she stood by him. "I apologize, gentlemen, for the interruption. Allow me to introduce Corellia, my personal assistant." Reus looked at her with a greedy smile and an admiring expression on his face.

There was no need to introduce Corellia. Griffiths knew her very well, and Arkaneh had already heard several things about her so far. She was Joseph Mallistrom's assistant during his last couple of years as ringleader of Men of Midas, and then moved on to be Reus's right hand once he rose to power. She escorts Reus almost wherever he goes and some rumors say that she might be more than just an assistant for him. *I guess some rumors hold some truth.*

"Corellia, you already know Mr. Griffiths, and this is his..." he had trouble finding a suitable word, "associate, Mr. Frye" He finally said.

"Nice to meet you." She made a vague, curvy smile. "Reus, I have to go. Remember you have another appointment in an hour." She whispered in his ear.

## Bullet and Blade

"Sure, sure," he replied.

She bid the men farewell and then left the room, her high heels tapping all the way out.

Arkaneh pondered himself for a minute. *Reus Mallistrom... a man who dresses in a tailored suit, all perfumed and groomed, sits in a luxurious office and sets appointments with you like a serious businessman... and yet when you look away he makes his employees dress like sluts and even sleeps with them in the room right next to the one where he meets his fellow gangsters under the guise of a business meeting. Oh, this is just too disgusting.*

"So, let's hear it." Reus turned back to Arkaneh, getting back to the subject.

"Men of Midas have had a lot of run-ins with the Justicars lately," Arkaneh said. "I knew that can't just be a coincidence, so I've concluded—"

"That we have a snitch in our ranks." Reus finished his word.

"You... already know?" Arkaneh remained cool, despite the surprise.

"Yes. I may be a very busy man, Mr. Frye, but I still pay much attention to our little organization. Talimay and I discussed the very possible existence of a snitch in Men of Midas just recently, shortly before her brother was killed."

"I see. So... what's your take on the idea?"

"Well, I only thought of it as a mere possibility at first, but the more I see the Justicars interfere with our actions, and now that I see that I'm not the only one who came to this conclusion, I believe you're right. We have a traitor."

"Wait a minute," Griffiths entered the conversation. "Why the fuck wasn't I aware of this? Why didn't you tell me, Reus?"

"I didn't see any reason to involve you in something that was still being considered as a wild theory," Reus said.

"But still, you could have—"

"Are you questioning my judgment, Connor?" Reus's voice rose. He looked at Griffiths, towering above him, casting a broad and dark shadow over the old lieutenant. *The mighty Reus Mallistrom...* Arkaneh thought.

## D. Sharon

"N-No..." Griffiths bowed down his head. "Anyway, this tenderfoot here says that he has a plan to flush him out." Griffiths made sure to emphasize the word 'tenderfoot' as he pointed at Arkaneh.

"Do I sense contempt in your voice, Connor?" Reus looked slightly agitated. "Does the fact that he's a tenderfoot bother you?"

"N-No, Reus, it's just—"

"A smart man knows to pay attention to others' wisdom and intellect, not their seniority." Arkaneh found himself impressed by Reus's wise advice. *Perhaps there IS a smart businessman behind that sexual appetite and mask of legitimacy.*

"Right, I know that." Griffiths seemed nervous.

"Connor..." Reus got up from his seat and turned around, heading for his dresser, where his beverages were. "Leave us alone, please."

Griffiths hesitated for a moment, most likely wondering why Reus would ever want to talk privately with a tenderfoot. Eventually, he took his leave, biting his lips. Reus grabbed one of the bottles on his dresser and poured a honey-colored liquid into a glass. He then turned around and offered the drink to Arkaneh. At first, Arkaneh wanted to refuse the drink, as he didn't like alcohol, and rarely ever drank it in his life, yet he feared of insulting Reus by refusing it, and so he took the glass.

"Please, excuse my lieutenant," Reus said as he poured himself a glass as well. "He can be a little... old-school sometimes." He sat back in his seat, taking a sip from his drink.

"It's alright. He cares a lot about his men, so I guess he makes up for it." Arkaneh took a sip as well. The drink had a very acute flavor to it, much to his dislike. The liquid burned through his throat, hot and spicy.

"Yes, he does. That's one of the reasons why I made him lieutenants in the first place. You see, most members see this involvement with our organization as nothing more than an occupation, a very dangerous, yet rewarding occupation. Connor sees it as more than that. He views Men of Midas as a brotherhood, a family. He never had any wife or kids, so I



## Bullet and Blade

guess that this is how he makes up for it. It may sound odd to promote a man based on such attributes, but in an organization like ours, it's actually imperative. Our organization is known to be one of the most profitable ones for its members, so most of our members turn out to be greedy. The consequence is that every once in a while when we hit a dry spell, we experience a defection of many members to other organizations, as they see their earnings plummet. Believe me, we've seen it happen."

"So you need men like Connor Griffiths, men who won't leave, even in tough times."

"Exactly." *He's far from being his father, and he doesn't have an infamous story like the Night of Obliteration to make people be afraid of him, but Reus Mallstrom shouldn't be underestimated so easily.* "You know, the reason you interest me is because, from what I've heard from Connor about you, you seem to remind me of my lieutenants in their younger years. The thing is... I wonder, Mr. Frye, are you one of those men who won't leave us? Are you someone I can call... trustworthy?"

"I—"

"Don't answer that. It's pointless. This question will only be answered as time will pass." Deep down, Arkaneh was glad he never had the chance to answer his question, as he would have had to do his best to lie to his face and say 'yes.' "Now, let's get back to the primary subject." Reus continued. "You said you had a plan to flush out our rat. Let's hear it, Mr. Frye."



## Lunarey

The dirty light bulb that lit the upstairs room in the Hairy Knuckle was starting to blink now. It has been on for many hours, and its wear was beginning to show. Lunarey was bound to the chair by her arms and legs ever since she was led there by Triggen, several hours ago. Her head was bowed down at the floor, and her hands and legs were feeling numb. She hoped that her face could be numb as well, as Triggen made sure to give her a hard slap every now and then. He claimed that it was to keep her focused while wearing a nasty grin on his face. Lunarey felt weak and tired, having not eaten or drank anything since she got there. Triggen promised her that he would give her something to eat, as he needed her alive, but so far he has yet to keep up on his word. Lunarey guessed he was just trying to enjoy pushing her limits.

*He needs me alive only so I could be used as a bargaining card against Sunyula Trife... that name wreaked havoc in her mind every time she thought of it. My mother... Lady Dread... how could this be? How could this psychotic sadist gangster be my mother? She hoped she could think of any way to disprove that fact, but somewhere in her heart she knew that there was no disproving the truth. The AL brand shoes... it makes sense now why I have such expensive shoes... Henrick Trife used to live in a magnificent mansion in the luxurious district, Fraenon Hill. Sunyula inherited that mansion, so*

## Bullet and Blade

*she keeps herself close to her outpost in Framstead, Northstock.*

"What are you trying to do here, Triggen?" Lunarey asked him in a tired, heavily breathing voice.

The brute with the beanie hat let off a smirk. "What do you mean, Princess Trife?" that nickname hurt more than any slap he gave her so far.

"What do you want to bargain me with Lady Dread for? A truce?"

"Well, that's up for our Red Rider to decide."

"Fane Hallstead, your ringleader? Is he coming here?"

"He is. He was held up with some business in Hawksen, but I got a call from him saying he was on his way a while ago. He's bringing his lieutenants with him and a few more men for backup." Lunarey sighed in despair. "That's right, Princess Trife, you're a hot catch. You're attracting the best of Harley Nation down here."

"Stop calling me that."

"Calling you what?" the grin once again appeared on his face, showing his grubby, dirty teeth. Lunarey gave up on keeping up with his game of taunting. She was too tired and beaten to try to reason such a thing out of the savage brute.

"Can I just please have something to eat?" her stomach growled.

"Alright, alright, I'll get you something." Triggen surrendered, after putting it off every single time she asked so far. He got up and went downstairs, leaving his ever-annoying presence in the room by having his foul stench still linger in the room after his departure.

*I just want to go home, Lunarey thought. Actually... I don't know if there's even a home for me anymore. There's a good chance that Kelia lied to me, that she knew who I am and she kept it from me, making sure I wouldn't find out. If that's true... I don't think I'll be going back there.*

By now Lunarey had lost all hope. She felt alone and afraid. Her heart screamed for mercy, for any kind of relief from the horrible reality that was thrown on her. That morning she was still a clueless girl who was living with her only and best friend, and now she was tied to a chair in a filthy pub, as the daughter

of Lady Dread. *Rosabell...* she remembered her. *Is this the kind of feeling that you had? Is this the level of despair and depression you've reached in your last days? Is this how alone you felt?* A tear threatened to form in her eye, but she stopped herself. She didn't want Triggen to see her crying, as he would likely make fun of her, and she was sick of seeing his lousy grin.

Triggen appeared back in the room, holding a plate with some potatoes and rice. He walked up to Lunarey and laid the tray on her knees. "There you go, Princess," he said. He held up a fork and jammed it into one of the potatoes. It looked raw and stale, probably laid on the back of some shelf for a while now. Lunarey swallowed some spit and opened her mouth. The potato had a foul taste. It was hard to chew and its peel seemed to have some dirt on it. "Do you like it?" Triggen smiled at her. Lunarey held herself from spitting what he considered being food right at this face.

Triggen then took a handful of rice on the fork and started delivering it into Lunarey's mouth. As he fed her, his eyes caught a glimpse of her arm, specifically on the injection mark on them. "I see you like having fun with needles," he said, chuckling. "Where did that come from? Vex?"

"I... I don't remember," she said. "I have no memory of that injection mark. I don't know who did it or what was injected into me."

Triggen kept on feeding her when suddenly he halted. His eyes traveled further down from her arm to her pocket. "What's that?" he asked. She looked down and saw the folded piece of paper that was peeking out of her pocket. *Oh, no...* she immediately thought. "Don't touch that," she told him, but to no avail. Triggen's dirty fingernails were already clutching at the paper. *I didn't want him to see the list...*

Triggen unfolded the paper and his eyes started rifling through it. *That list... those people... at first, I wanted to ask him about it, hoping that he would shed some light on it, but once he told me that I was Sumyula's daughter, I knew that would be a mistake. Whoever killed those people is most likely to be affiliated with Lady Dread, and, in that case, there's a good chance one of those victims used to be a member of*

## Bullet and Blade

*Harley Nation.* At first, Triggen seemed natural, but at some point his eyes narrowed and his nostrils widened. He looked up at Lunarey, his face appearing wrathful. "What the fuck is this shit?" he asked her. His hand twitched, ready to strike at her in the case of a wrong answer.

"I'm not sure myself," Lunarey told the truth and prepared herself for another strike at his hand. "When I woke up with no memory this list was in my pocket. I swear. I'm not sure what it is."

"Do you know who these people are?" Triggen bit his lips in anger.

"Not really. I read online that they're dead."

"Do you recognize these names?" he held the list up in front of her with his finger pointing at numbers 8 and 9 on it. Garnell Sears and Jetter McKinley were their names.

"No," Lunarey said. "But I can already guess that they were members of Harley Nation." She knew her fear was right.

"Oh, they were... but more important than that, they were my brother and best friend." A great weight was suddenly dropped on Lunarey's heart. Her fear and anxiety multiplied within a second, as Triggen rose to his feet, his eyes red with the flames of fury and revenge. He was no longer grinning. His face was dead serious, and his hand still twitched in eagerness.

"T-Triggen, I-I had nothing to do with their deaths." She started stuttering. "Please, y-you have to believe me, I—"

"SHUT UP!" he sent a mighty punch at her face, making her lose her balance just as before and fall along with the chair onto the floor. A never-ending sense of burn and pain washed over Lunarey's throbbing face. She couldn't help but stop the tears. Triggen didn't help her back up this time. He left her weeping on the floor, standing above her like a giant overshadowing a small, helpless ant. "You can say whatever you want. Even if it wasn't you, it was your fucking mother that ordered their deaths. And you know DAMN WELL that no one dies quickly when it comes to Lady fucking Dread!" he sent a powerful kick at Lunarey's stomach. Suddenly, the intense pain in her face lost volume compared to her

temporary inability to breath and the overwhelming soreness that ruled her lower body. She was too weak and in pain to do anything, even to try to talk some sense into Triggen. "I'm going to make sure to give you every ounce of pain I can without killing you before Fane gets here," He said.

"P-Please..." Lunarey mustered up her strength to weakly blurt out her plea, but Triggen didn't seem to care for it. Just as he was ready to send another kick at her way, gunshots were suddenly heard from downstairs. Triggen turned around and drew his gun. As more shots were heard, he slowly paced towards the stairs with his gun aimed forward. *Gunshots? What's going on? Who's shooting?* Lunarey wandered as the waves of pain still ensued. Triggen looked focused. His hand was steady and ready to pull the trigger. Once he placed himself right in front of the stairs that led down, he stood still before walking down, trying to see if he could see who was shooting from where he stood. Several seconds passed until finally the shootings stopped. Triggen remained at the top of the stairs, his hand still holding his gun firmly. Lunarey looked at him when suddenly she noticed him flinch as if he saw someone downstairs. She saw his finger starting to pull the trigger, only one second too late, as Triggen was shot in the chest just before he could kill whoever the shooter was. Triggen fell back and his finger went on to pull the trigger, only that the bullet was fired at the ceiling now.

An eerie silence fell on the Hairy Knuckle. Lunarey now noticed that she couldn't hear any of the people downstairs. She heard footsteps coming up the creaking stairs. The steps were slow and careful. Lunarey wasn't sure if she should have been glad that Triggen was gone or terrified by whoever the killer was. The entire place was silent as a tomb. Nothing made a sound, except for the slow, creaking footsteps of the shooter, as he made his way upstairs.

Finally, the man appeared at the door. Wearing purple Elastics, the man was tall and fit, looking to be in his 30's. He wore a long trench coat and held a silver pistol. He took off his mask and revealed himself. His hair was black and wavy, his

## Bullet and Blade

eyes were bright green and his face was adorned by a light beard. At first, his eyes lingered on Lunarey, making her fear that he was about to shoot her as well, but then he quickly ran to her side and helped her up. "Vaikillia!" he called. "Thank God, you're alright." He untied her hands and legs. A sudden rush of blood reanimated Lunarey's limbs. "Oh, god, what did they do to you?" he touched her face and a small ounce of pain triggered.

"Ouch!" she cried.

"Oh, sorry," He apologized.

"I-I don't—"

"I was worried sick about you." His face betrayed that he was genuine in his words. "When you ran away, I..." he held back. "Never mind. Anyway, your mother is going to be so happy when we go back to—"

"Wait." Lunarey stepped back, away from the man. The mention of her mother startled her. "Who the hell are you?" she asked him.

"V-Vaikillia... what do you mean—?"

"Answer the question!" Lunarey's voice rose.

"I-It's me, Samuel."

"Samuel..." she repeated the name. *Samuel... that name rings a bell...*

"Vaikillia, what's going on?"

"Don't call me that. That's not my name."

"W-What?" he seemed perplexed.

"I don't know who you are. I lost my memory. I woke up in an alley with no recollection of who I am or how I got there."

"Please... tell me you're joking."

"I'm not. I've only learned who my mother is, and I can tell you I'm not going anywhere near that woman."

"You don't have to worry about her, she loves you. And I'm always here to protect you."

"Then where were you when I woke up alone in an alley in this god-forsaken city?"

"I..." he choked on his words. "Look, you're not going to have to be with her for a long time. We had plans, the two of

us. We were going to get rid of Sunyula."

"G-Get rid of Sunyula...?"

"That's right. You would take control of the organization and make me ringleader with that authority so you can live a happy, peaceful life away from all this."

"Why should I believe you?"

Samuel made a long sigh. His face appeared genuine, yet Lunarey refused to take the risk. "You... you really don't remember anything?" he asked. "You don't remember anything about us as well?"

"W-What do you mean?"

"Never mind..." he looked away. "In any case, Lady Sunyula is already informed of your location, and she'll be coming here anyway to look for you, so you don't really have a choice."

Lunarey closed her eyes in defeat. *Sunyula Trife... they say there's no escaping her. She's the kind that gets what she wants.* "How did you even find me?" she asked.

"I got a call from someone who claimed to have followed you and that man to this place."

"Who?"

"Kelia Hopewell," he said. Every syllable of that name hurt like a sting. Lunarey's heart sunk. "She's actually outside."

"Then let's go thank her." Lunarey looked determined. *Kelia... the best friend I've had... and the best liar I've seen.* She thought as she left the room with Samuel.

Once she crossed the doorway out of the filthy room she was held in, she glanced at Triggen, who was lying on the floor with a bullet wound in his chest. He was still breathing and his eyes were still open. As she looked at him, with no hint of mercy in her heart, she noticed his gaze turning to her. His face remained the same and he was too weak to say anything, but Lunarey knew. Deep down she knew that he wanted to let her see that slimy grin of his one more time, or perhaps call her Princess Trife one last time before he took his last breath. She turned towards the stairs and climbed down, forgetting about the wounded brute as soon as she did.



## Bullet and Blade

Downstairs, the pub looked like a bloodbath. Blood stains and corpses decorated the Hairy Knuckle. Two bodies rested against the wall inside a sitting booth, riddled with bullet holes, with weapons still clutched in their hands. The old bartender lay on the floor behind his counter. He had no weapon in his hand, and yet he was shot multiple times just like the other ones. Broken bottles of booze and shattered glasses were abundant on the floor and bar counter. Two men stood at the entrance, wearing purple Elastics and holding submachine guns. Lunarey flinched as she noticed them. Even through their masks, she could sense a drive for killing coming from them. They looked so calm and relaxed, as they stood between a horrifying image of massacre and brutality, just the kind that defined Lady Dread.

As Samuel and Lunarey left the pub, the two men accompanied them. That was when Lunarey finally noticed Kelia, who stood outside, still wearing her school uniform. "Luni!" she called and ran towards her. "I'm so glad you're okay. I was so—"

"Stop it," Lunarey interrupted her, coldly. "You lied to me." Kelia's cheerful expression vanished. "You knew who I was and you kept it away from me. You kept me from watching the news or going online so I won't accidentally bump into one of the many 'Missing' posters of mine."

"I-I..."

"Stop lying. Stop trying to think of excuses. I'm sick of it. Just tell me why you did this."

Kelia's face fell. "I knew who you were," She confessed. "I recognized you as soon as I saw you in that alley. And I also knew who Sunyula Trife was. And... I also knew my mom and I were starving."

Lunarey struggled to wrap her head around her words. "You... wanted me around so you can get money from Sunyula in return for me?"

"You have no idea what it's like to live here. Please, you have to understand—"

"Then why did you let me live with you in the first place?"

"I didn't know anyone from Lady Dread, so I had to keep you around until I could reach out to them. And it just so happens that I finally got my hands on a member's phone number. I-I followed you and that man after that speech you gave at my school so I knew where you were."

"Did your mother know as well? Was Cynthia also a part of this?" Kelia merely bowed her head in shame. Lunarey knew that it meant that she did. "You were my best friend." Lunarey found that moment more painful than Triggen's hits. "I trusted you, and you were just using me." Suddenly she remembered Rosabell again. *Rosabell mentioned that she had friends in the past and that they turned on her... and since then she lost all hope in people.*

"Luni..."

"Don't call me that." Lunarey looked away. She couldn't even look at the person who now taught her how cruel and heartless people can be. She looked at Samuel. *There's no escaping Sunyula Trife*, she thought. "Let's go, Samuel. Mother's waiting."



## Demilan

Exumber didn't bring much of a scenery change, but something in the air surely felt different, as tall, crowded buildings and narrow streets were a common thing it had with Ashcote, as well as the lack of greenery and roads full of cracks and bumps. However, it was much quieter than Ashcote, although that quietness came bearing a harrowing vibe with it. It was as if the shadow of Code Sanguinary enveloped the city with its presence, as if Charles Blackburn himself, the Deserter General, was watching everything and everyone in that city. Everyone in Exumber knew that it was home to Code Sanguinary's one and only outpost, and every person in the city feared their men. Demilan knew that they would be right to fear them.

As he walked with Maileena through its streets, memories came flushing at him. Exumber was his hometown. It was where he gained everything that he had that was worth something, and it was where he lost all of that.

Still recovering from his Vex relapse, Demilan struggled to walk, and he had to use Maileena's aid to get by. *My body became so dependent on Vex so quickly... no wonder they say Vex is the most addictive, most dangerous drug ever invented. I hate being so weak. But I have to carry on... for Telia.*

The two reached a large structure, locked away behind a

steel gate and an armed guard. 'Cowden Meats' read the big sign on the structure.

"This is it," said Demilan.

"Cowden Meats?" Maileena looked perplexed. "Code Sanguinary's outpost is in a meat factory?"

"Yeah. They operate from the basement floor of this place. The factory manager here, Iren Eustis, allows Blackburn to do this for... well, quite a decent rent."

"Isn't Cowden Meats in bed with Mallistrom?"

"Yeah. I also heard that their CEO has business with Reus, and Iren is no exception. Shortly after Reus replaced his old father, Joseph, he wanted to make sure his father's friends would become his own friends, and Blackburn had good relations with Joseph. Back then, Blackburn was struggling to find a location to use as an outpost, and he and his men moved around a lot from one deserted place to another. Reus used his connections at Cowden Meats to arrange it so that Blackburn would be able to use the basement floor of this factory, so long as he pays its manager, Iren, every month."

"So I guess Iren is well connected to Reus." Maileena figured.

"Oh, absolutely. Iren became very close to Reus ever since then, and Blackburn had shown his gratitude by selling Reus guns whenever he needed. Either way, Iren doesn't give a shit about whatever is going on in that basement. All he cares about is money. Trust me, I know him."

"So, anyway... how do we do this? How do we go in there?"

"There's no 'we' here. You have to stay outside. They'll never let you anywhere near that basement. I'm the only one who can go there. They know me."

"If they know you, then they must also know that you're no longer a member."

"I happen to have a friend that'll let me in." a wry smile appeared on his face.

Looking upset, as she never liked being left out, Maileena stayed behind as Demilan marched on towards the guard at the

## Bullet and Blade

gate. It's been a year since Demilan had been kicked out of Code Sanguinary, and yet the short walk brought him back to the days when he walked it on an almost daily basis, with green-grey camouflaged Elastics and his trusted Skyla-30 rifle, as a proud soldier of the Deserter General. He recognized the guard as the same one that has always been there, even back in the old times. *Some things don't change.*

"Hey there," He greeted the guard. The man looked at Demilan with a peculiar look, as if he was trying to recognize the familiar figure. "You don't remember me?" Demilan asked.

"I do." The guard said. "It's just that I haven't seen you in a long time."

"Yeah, I know." Demilan bowed his head. "I was in a hospital for a year." He partially lied.

"Seriously? What happened?"

"Coma. I got beat up by some Ferals." The lie became more intricate.

"Damn savages." The guard looked repulsed. *It's a good thing he can't know what's going on inside the organization, being only a gate guard, so he can't disprove me.*

"Anyway, can you let me in? The guys are expecting me."

"Sure thing." The guard clicked a button in his booth and the metal gate buzzed open, its metal hinges creaking with every inch of its movement.

Demilan walked in with his head high. The meat factory was home to him for many years, yet now he was walking towards it like a stranger in someone else's home. He felt like an outcast, like a trespasser on holy grounds. The grounds of Charles Blackburn.

Sounds of clashing metal and turning cogwheels greeted him as he entered the factory. Among the heavy machinery and abundant chunks of meat that were traveling around on the running tracks, there were plentiful of workers, all wearing blue uniforms, hairnets, and yellow rubber gloves. Demilan passed his gaze around the workers and noticed that he could still recognize some of them from back then. *Everyone in this factory must know what's going on in the basement. They've seen the green-grey*

*Elastics walking around and disappearing into the basement floor. And yet they don't feel intimidated. They know who Blackburn is. He doesn't target innocent civilians like other ringleaders. He only targets government officials and Justicars. He shouldn't even be compared to that sadistic bitch, Trife, or that greedy bastard, Mallistrom.*

He started making his way towards the basement floor. When he reached the stairs that led below, he felt a slight tremble in his hand. He struggled to figure out if it was due to the Vex detox still affecting him or simply because he felt anxious.

Just as he was about to step forward, he heard a familiar voice behind him. "Where do you think you're going?" the voice said. Demilan turned around and saw Iren Eustis, dressed in a gray suit with his hands crossed and a frown on his face. Iren's facial appearance changed as soon as he saw Demilan's face and recognized him. "You... I remember you."

"It's good to see you too, Iren," Demilan said with a hesitant smile.

"What are you doing here?"

"W-What do you mean? I'm about to head down to—"

"Don't bullshit me. You may think that everything that goes down there never reaches this floor, but I'm the exception. I know you got kicked out, plus, I don't see you wearing any Elastics, so why don't you tell me why you're really here." *Dammit. I should have known. I guess Blackburn pays Iren with information, on top of money.* "Well?" Iren urged him. Demilan remained speechless. In any other case, he might have been able to think of something on the spot to get himself out of the situation, but his mind was still slightly scrambled from the detox, and so he had trouble doing so. "Alright, I'm going to make it easy for you," Iren said. He reached for his suit and drew a gun from a shoulder holster. Demilan looked around. None of the workers were looking at them, even though at least one of them must have noticed what was happening by now. He wondered if they were so indifferent because they were scared or because they just didn't care.

Demilan tried to find words, only to blurt an awkward

## Bullet and Blade

stutter. "I-I—"

"It's okay, Iren, he's with me." Demilan heard yet another familiar voice, only, this time, it was a much more welcomed one. Winselt Langton climbed up the stairs from the basement floor with a calm smile on his face. Rough stubble adorned his face, along with a long, gruesome scar going from his forehead, through his right eyebrow, to his right cheek. He had Elastics on his legs while the gloves and mask hung on his belt, and silver double-barreled pistols rested in their chest holsters, under each of his armpits.

"Winselt!" Demilan shook his old friend's hand and gave him a warm hug.

"It's good to see you again, Demilan," Winselt said with a cheerful smile. "Anyway, like I said," he turned to Iren. "He's coming with me." Iren snorted and turned away. As soon as he left, Winselt's face embraced a concerned expression. "What are you doing here? What were you thinking coming here? You know we have cameras watching everyone who enters this facility. As soon as they saw your face, they alerted Blackburn immediately. They sent me here to take you to him."

"It's okay, Winselt. Take me to him."

"Did you... come here to see Blackburn?"

"Not exactly. I'll explain things after I finish talking to him. Right now, I'm sure he's waiting for me, so we shouldn't waste time."

Winselt's face remained looking concerned. "Alright. Let's go." He said.

The two walked down the stairs. Demilan took each step slowly and carefully, while hanging on to the wall rail, as he had trouble keeping his balance on such steep stairs. Winselt noticed Demilan's painfully slow pace, yet he didn't dare to ask about it. *Two years ago I was walking down these stairs as a proud soldier... now I'm walking down them as a hunted outcast, barely able to keep his balance together.*

The hallways of the basement floor were as narrow and ghastly as he remembered them. Grey walls lit by white fluorescent lights sent off a sense of seriousness and coldness,

just like the soldiers of Code Sanguinary. Demilan held off any memories of those hallways from rising with all his efforts, in an attempt to stay focused and keep his mind collected.

He looked at Winselt, focusing on the silver pistols on his chest. "I see you still carry those old pistols, eh?"

Winselt chuckled. "Oh, yeah. Umbra and Lux never left my side." He drew them and landed a soft kiss on each of the double-barreled pistols. Demilan always considered an assault rifle to be much more effective in battle than those pistols, yet Winselt always liked those guns, and never liked using any others.

"I can't believe you've been using them all this time. I'm surprised you're not dead yet."

"These bad boys never let me down. They're the reason I'm still breathing." Winselt grinned.

Finally, Winselt stopped in front a white door at the end of the hallway. Demilan recognized it as the door leading to Blackburn's office. He was never allowed to enter that room. Only Blackburn's lieutenants were. As he walked through the door, leaving Winselt behind, an amusing thought came up to him. *Who would have thought that the day I would get to enter Blackburn's office would be in such circumstances?*

The door closed behind Demilan with a loud shut. A long, rectangular black table stood in the middle of the room. The spiraling lines of the Seditone were carved into the middle of it. *Blackburn always bore that symbol with pride.* Five characters sat around the table. On the right side of the table sat Jonathan Conley and Bradley Hodge. On the left side sat Keith Gaines and Peter Hoover. Those were Blackburn's four lieutenants. They were all in their 50s, gray and white hair being their common feature of appearance. They all had an impressive military experience and had proven themselves time and again on the battlefield. *I wouldn't expect Blackburn to choose any lesser men to stand at his side.* At the top of the table, sitting right in front of Demilan, was Charles Blackburn, staring at very soldier he kicked out a year ago.

*The five shot-callers of Code Sanguinary,* Demilan thought.



## Bullet and Blade

"Sir, I—" Demilan started saying.

"Don't," Blackburn interrupted him with a wave of his hand. He went on to stare at Demilan for a moment longer with his dark blue eyes. His facial expression was dead and cold as a corpse. All eyes were fixated on Demilan, as he stood there like a criminal waiting for his sentence. He tried reading into Blackburn's face to see if he could guess his thoughts as the General stared at him in silence, yet the Deserter General was unreadable. The eerie quietude lasted a few moments longer, making Demilan more and more nervous. Blackburn's stare gave off an ominous, baleful feeling, one that no other man could possibly give off.

"It seems that lately people have been underestimating me," Blackburn finally broke the silence. "I only just got exonerated from murder charges. It was a desperate attempt by Jonah Dillard to make me another player in his game of bribes. He thought I could be played like a puppet, to be intimidated by such a corrupted scum like him. I gave him a very clear answer, in the form of three dead bodies. Jonah Dillard thought I could be manipulated. He thought he could twist my arm. And now here YOU are, back again where you were told to never step foot again. It seems that everyone has forgotten who I was... who I am."

"I know." Demilan bowed his head down in shame. "I know I'm not supposed to be here."

"And yet you are. Have you too forgotten who I am?"

"No, sir. I never did. I served you for many years and I've always admired your leadership—"

"Save the ass-kissing." Blackburn frowned. "I'm glad you still remember." He got up from his seat. The four lieutenants did the same. Before Demilan had a chance to figure out what was about to happen, the two lieutenants who were the closest to him, Jonathan Conley and Keith Gaines, brought him down to his knees with a kick. It wasn't hard to knock Demilan out of balance in his current state. Once he raised his head, he saw the barrel of a gun being pointed at his face, held by Blackburn himself. "That means I don't have to explain your

punishment," He said in a cold manner.

*This wasn't part of what I planned. I know Blackburn. He would never harm his own soldiers. But... his eyes... his face... he looks eager to pull the trigger. Was I wrong? Did he change? Or is it that he no longer considers me a soldier?* "I only came here to ask for help!" Demilan cried.

"Help?" Blackburn wondered. "Why would I help you?"

"I don't know. It was a last resort. I hoped maybe you could let bygones be bygones. I did serve you for a long time." Blackburn remained silent. His hand remained firm around the gun handle. His dark blue eyes remained dead and fixed. "Please... it's my wife, Telia... she's been kidnapped by Men of Midas. She's held at the Godly Succubi. I have to get her back." Blackburn's eyes narrowed. "I know I was kicked out. I know I'm not welcomed here but goddammit I still served you loyally!" Demilan begged. "She's innocent. She's helpless. There's no telling what they're doing to her."

Blackburn lowered his gun, his face still looking blank. "As much as I'm sorry for your wife, I'm running an organization here, and I must put its sake above all else. My relations with Reus Mallistrom are good at the moment. We sell them guns and their money helps to keep us going, so I have no interest in doing anything that might harm his club, and let alone I have no interest in helping a junky like you." He didn't even look sorry or sympathetic. *Blackburn truly is a cold and calculated person. No matter how much I beg or how dire my situation will ever be, he will never help me.* "You mentioned your long service in my ranks. Consider that the only reason you're being spared." Demilan was raised back on his feet. "However, the next time I see your face around here, I won't even give you the chance of crying to me."

The door behind Demilan was opened by one of the lieutenants. "You are no longer a soldier. You're just a walking sin." Upon those hurtful words uttered, Demilan left the room, looking shameful and disappointed. He glanced behind one last time, seeing Blackburn's dead stare as the door closed.

Winselt waited for him on outside the room. Once he saw

## Bullet and Blade

Demilan walk out of it, he looked quite relieved, probably since he was still alive. "I'm going to have to walk you out," Winselt said.

"I know." Demilan walked with him, as the two made their way outside.

"How did it go? He didn't kill you so I guess it wasn't that bad."

"Oh, I may be alive, but that doesn't mean it wasn't bad. I didn't expect to be ambushed by his lieutenants as well."

"Don't flatter yourself. You happened to catch them in the middle of a meeting. You're not that important to Blackburn."

"I see."

"Was it worth it? Was it worth risking your life and coming here?"

"I don't know yet. That's up to you." Demilan's eyes turned to Winselt.

"W-What do you mean?"

"I didn't really come here to see Blackburn. I knew that I would be forced to see him as soon as I step foot in this place, but I was actually coming here to see you."

"Me?"

"Yeah. I need your help."

"Well, you could have called, you know."

"Actually, I couldn't. I lost my SmartWrist about six months ago, along with your phone number." He held his hand high and showed him his bare wrist.

"Couldn't you just track my number somehow?"

"Winselt, I'm on the run, in case you haven't noticed. It's not like I have a phone book or online access at my disposal."

"I see. So what do you need from me?"

"Up until yesterday I was living in an apartment in Ashcote owned by a friend of Telia who generously allowed me to use it while he was out of town, but I can't stay there anymore and I have nowhere else to stay."

Winselt gazed at Demilan, looking sorry for his former comrade. Everything in Demilan was saddening. The trouble he had to keep his balance, the need to risk his life only to beg

for his old friend for a place to stay, but on top of all that, his eyes were the most saddening. He had the eyes of someone who had lost all that is dear to him. The eyes of a soul so lonely and desperate that a thousand cries of sorrow wouldn't match its own.

"Alright, I can help you," Winselt said. "There's a motel not far from here. The owner owes me a few favors. I'll give you the address and call him up front. Go there and introduce yourself. I'll make sure he'll give you a room to stay."

"Winselt... thank you." Demilan was humbled.

"God knows I own you more than this little favor. I'll drop by to visit you there at some point, and when I do, I'm going to want to hear your story. I need to know what's going on."

"You will, Winselt. I promise."



## Edrimer

Edrimer stood on the pavement near the apartment building he lived in. A lit cigarette poked out of his mouth, hanging between his lips. *Zachary hated my smoking habits. God, I miss that old man. He probably never would've imagined I would ever be a member of the Justicars. To be honest... me neither.*

As he saw the gray car coming from afar, he looked at his SmartWrist to check the time. It was 8 AM sharp. *Just as Serian said. The Justicars sure are punctual as fuck,* he thought to himself. The car pulled over right in front of him. The driver's window rolled down and revealed a man with short dark hair and a clean, shaven face. "Get in," he said, without as much as greeting Edrimer.

"Good morning to you as well," Edrimer said, sarcastically. He put out his cigarette on the ground and got in the back seat of the car. Three people were sitting in the car other than Edrimer. The driver who ordered him to get in looked stiff and unpleasant. *Let's hope he's not part of the team. Otherwise, we're going to have a problem.* Another man sat in the passenger seat. A young-looking man with long, curly brown hair that was swept back and looking slightly greasy. He looked just as unpleasant as the driver, in Edrimer's eyes. The third person in the car was a woman who sat in the back seat, next to Edrimer. She had long, blonde hair that was curled up in a bun at the crown of

her head. She had light makeup on and wore a tight shirt and a skirt that highlighted her lean body.

"Hi," Edrimer greeted her, hoping that he wouldn't be greeted back with the same cold, stiff attitude as the driver.

"Hi," she said back. "I'm Elahysis Wilder." She presented her hand. *Thank god, a seemingly-normal Justicar.*

"Edrimer Frye." He shook her hand.

"So I guess you're the new tenderfoot they told us about."

"Yeah, I... suppose I am." He seemed embarrassed.

"It's okay," she giggled. "I'm a tenderfoot of a sort as well. I've only been a member for a month or so now."

"Oh, great," He sighed in relief. "And here I was thinking I'm going to be the constant joke of the team."

"Well, you can be calm. I think most of the team is going to be comprised of tenderfoots."

"Right, because this case is pretty much the only kind you can give to tenderfoots."

Elahysis smiled and nodded in agreement. "You know, you look familiar. Have I seen you somewhere?"

"Well, if you're from around here, perhaps you've seen me at the local convenience store not far from here."

"Maybe... I might have been there once or twice. But... isn't that the place that recently got..." she stopped when she saw Edrimer's facial expression changing for the worse. "I see." She had now likely realized the reason why he ever became a member. "So, where are we even headed?" she hurried to change the subject.

"I don't know," he said. Edrimer looked outside the car window. "I think we're headed south." He recognized the streets that they were passing by. "Maybe we're going to the Westden Fells district."

"Maybe," she sighed. "Goddammit, why the fuck did Serian pick me for this job? I'm more of a fighter than a detective." She grunted.

"Perhaps he sees something in you that you don't."

"I doubt it."

"Well, anyway, I'm sure you'll get to have your action."

## Bullet and Blade

Serian said that Lady Dread will also be coming after the Tri-Surgeon."

"Right," she said. "God, it seems like those purple fuckers have been around forever."

"Yeah. I think it's been 7 years since her father died and she took over." *I remember the day Henrick Trife's death was announced. A sudden rush of hope instantly filled everyone's hearts at first, but as soon as it was reported that Sunyula took over his operations, it quickly faded away. His death was so sudden and unexpected. A heart attack at the age of 47.*

"A friend of mine who lives in the Brontspil district told me that pictures of her missing daughter were all over the newspapers lately."

"Well, whoever her daughter is, I hope she's not fucked up like her mother."

After a while, the signs that the car passed through betrayed where they were heading. *Morth City*, Edrimer read the road sign. Edrimer had never been to the Fallhalt district before, even though he always wanted to visit the Heart. Eventually, upon entering the city, the car stopped near an old apartment building.

Edrimer looked at Elahysis as the two stepped out of the car. The street around them looked pretty empty, with barely no traffic. As soon as the car door closed behind them, the driver rolled down his window. "Go up to the second floor, the third apartment," he said. Wasting not a second more, he drove away, heading for the horizon, leaving the two behind at the entrance of the building. Edrimer looked at the apartment building in dismay. He never expected the Justicars to be working from such a lousy place.

"Let's go," he said to Elahysis, climbing up the small staircase that led to the entrance door. The two climbed up to the second floor and reached apartment 3. Edrimer knocked on the door a few times. He heard a figure approaching the door. The figure stopped in front of the door and peeked through its peephole. It took the figure a few seconds before the door was finally unlocked and opened. Serian greeted the

two on the doorstep with his usual frown and dead expression. "Get in," he said, bluntly. *I guess all Justicars have bad manners.*

Once Edrimer entered the apartment, he saw several figures standing next to a few desks with computers on them and a large whiteboard with newspaper pieces stuck to it.

Serian sent an ominous, harsh look at Edrimer. *The last time we spoke, I was trying to convince him to let me take part in that attack on Brine Street, Edrimer reminded himself. He doesn't know I actually went there, and I'm not going to tell him. Serian seems to me like most OldGens. Grumpy and bitter with a touch of stubbornness, so there's no way telling him would benefit me in any way.*

"Serian, I justed wanted to—" Edrimer started saying, but before he could finish his sentence, Serian grabbed him by the arm.

"I understand you're willing to help," Serian said, slowly, his words uttered with utmost understandability. "But I can't have you arguing with me like that. If I tell you to stand down... then stand down." His eyes pierced through Edrimer's, making him feel as if they were penetrating his soul.

"I understand," Edrimer said, reluctantly, even though he didn't entirely mean it, having natural rebellious tendencies.

Three people stood next to Serian. Two men and a woman. The first man was tall and fit. He wore a tight black shirt which highlighted his muscles. The second man was much shorter and wore thick glasses. The woman had short brown hair that was cut at her neck and large green eyes. *So these are my teammates,* Edrimer guessed. Serian wasted no time and hurried to speak.

"Good, now that everyone's here you can start working," Serian said. "First, let me introduce everyone." He turned to the muscular man. "This is Apex Frampton. He's a former sniper of the Alatarian army. He was discharged a few months ago. Quiet as he may sometimes be, he's very sharp and keen." *A former soldier? How did he end up with the Justicars?* Apex was a colossal man. He could possibly take on several men at once. His nose was wide and a bit crooked, most likely due to an injury he suffered as a soldier.



## Bullet and Blade

Serian turned to the short man with the glasses. "This is Johnaren Lawther. While he may be young, only 20 years old, he's shown a surprising level of intellect and cleverness, making him a great asset." *20 years old... that IS young. Then again, I've heard of much younger people who join these kinds of organizations.* Johnaren seemed like the opposite of Apex, physically. He seemed barely able to fight with his bare hands. Edrimer highly doubted he had any experience or knowledge in that field. However, he also knew that intelligence is just as important as strength, and could sometimes be even more valuable.

Serian turned to the woman with the short hair. "This is Samari Sables. Her parents immigrated here from the Middle East years ago. What she lacks in combat experience she more than compensates in world knowledge." *The Middle East truly has been a war-ridden place over the last decade. No wonder people would rather live here than over there.* Samari also seemed young, though probably less than Johnaren.

"This is Edrimer Frye," Serian then introduced Edrimer. "He recently lost his workplace and his boss in an attack made by members of Men of Midas. Don't let his sarcastic attitude and humoristic notes fool you, this is a very smart man with very large ambitions." *He knows me so well I want to cry.* "And finally, we have Elahysis Wilder. She's a former lawyer who's already well trained with guns and hand to hand combat." *A former lawyer? What brought her here? And how is she so experienced? This woman just turned 10 times more interesting.*

"Now that everybody knows each other, I expect you to start working on this case," Serian faced Edrimer and Elahysis. "Apex, Johnaren, and Samari had already begun working on this case by the time you joined us, so catch up. Our goal, let I remind you, is to find and kill the man known as the Tri-Surgeon. Frankly, I don't care how you do it. Just get results. Remember, we fight for the sake of Alataria's citizens. Let us show them that we are their White Knights in the darkest nights." Upon that said, Serian left the apartment.

"So," Edrimer said as he walked up to the whiteboard. "Tell us, my dear teammates, what have you got so far?" the

whiteboard was filled with scribbles and article pieces. *'Two bodies found in Canstow, Silvercoast,'* said one article. *'The Tri-Surgeon strikes again! Another body was found in Basilham using the same killing methods,'* said another. Horrifying pictures of the mutilated victims of the killer were spread across the board. A small map of Alataria stood at the corner of the whiteboard, with Canstow, Basilham, and Exumber being circled with a red marker. *Those are all the cities where they found victims of him.*

"To be honest, we haven't made much progress so far," said Apex, his voice sounded deep and heavy. "We tried making any kind of sense of all the killings he's made so far, but we don't really see the connection."

"That's right," Samari joined into the conversation. "The Tri-Surgeon is responsible for 7 killings so far. All the victims were found in the same situation, with their eyes, hearts and arms cut off, but there seems to be no connection between the victims."

"So they're all just random picks?" Edrimer asked.

"Either that or we're missing the connection," Samari replied.

"The murder locations also appear random," Johnaren said, adjusting his glasses.

"Well, I'm not sure about that. They're all in proximity to each other, so it could be that he just went from one city to another," Edrimer said.

"Actually, there's a problem with that logic." Johnaren got up from his seat and went beside the map on the board. "You see, according to the newspapers, the autopsies showed that the victims found in Canstow were killed first," he pointed at the circled city of Canstow on the map. Exumber stood between it and Basilham. "The victims in Basilham were the next ones who got killed and then the ones in Exumber. That means—"

"That the killer had to skip Exumber when he made the trip from Canstow to Basilham and then went back to Exumber." Edrimer had already figured it out. "So in other words, he didn't just pick random cities and moved from one to the

## Bullet and Blade

closest one near it. He chose those cities in particular."

"Which makes us think that his victims are also not random," Samari said.

"Alright, so what do we know about the victims?" Edrimer asked.

"Not much. They're all in their 20's or 30's, and they all have seemingly random jobs. One of them is a firefighter, another one is just a secretary."

"One of them is also unemployed," Johnaren intervened.

"So that rules out their occupations as the connection between them," Samari said.

"What about the Nucleus? Is there anything there that we could use?" Edrimer asked.

"The only things concerning the Tri-Surgeon on the Nucleus are posts of desperate people begging for the Surgeon to target other people that they hate. There's no useful information anywhere there." *God, the Nucleus sure is a gathering place for the worst people ever.*

Edrimer looked back at Elahysis. She stood quiet and hadn't said a word yet. Her eyes focused on the board as if she was trying to piece the puzzle together in her mind. "Elahysis," Edrimer woke her up from her deep state of concentration. "What do you think?" he was interested in the former lawyer's opinion.

"Everything you've gathered so far..." she said. "Is it all from newspapers and articles?"

"Of course," Apex said. "Why?"

"Because that won't get us anywhere. APD still has the advantage on us in means of resources."

Edrimer gave it a thought. "She's right," He proclaimed. "We need a better source of intelligence."

"This is all we've got," Johnaren sounded vanquished.

*This won't work... we need to get an advantage. Otherwise, APD would wound up catching the guy themselves.* His mind raced. *We're missing some dots here, I'm sure. My gut is never wrong, just like it wasn't during Serian's audition in that warehouse. But how do we acquire an intelligence source that beats the police's one?* He looked around at his

team. He saw the determination and wisdom in all of them, but with that considered, he also saw their lack of ability to get the case anywhere. At that moment, like a fearsome thunder in a storm, an idea struck his mind.

"Who's running the case against the Tri-Surgeon at APD?" he asked. Without saying a word, Samari grabbed one of the newspapers on the table and shuffled through it. "I know I've seen it somewhere in here..." she mumbled to herself in quiet. "There it is," she said upon hitting a certain page. She handed the paper to Edrimer and the answer to his question greeted him in black characters over the white-grey paper page.

*"...with the death of Officer Vernes Price, who led the investigation case of the serial killer known as the Tri-Surgeon up until his death, Officer Edward Elvin, who was also appointed to the case, was forced to lead it in his stead...."*

The name rang a bell in Edrimer's mind. *Officer Edward Elvin... I remember that name... he was the one who took my statement after the first attack at Zachary's store. I actually liked him.* A smile flitted over his lips. "I have a plan."



## Arkaneh

News of Talimay Singh's return echoed all the way from Waterchester to Axfield. Everyone was already aware of the warm welcome back she received in the outpost she led in Oakneil, Waterchester. After being away for a while to mourn her deceased brother, Heycliff, Men of Midas' first and only female lieutenant was back in the ranks.

Back when Arkaneh sat to meet Reus for the first time in his office, Reus already prepared him for her return, and so he offered that she would take part in Arkaneh's plan to catch the traitor. Therefore, by the time she made her first visit to the Ravenwey Burrows outpost after her anticipated return, she was already well aware of the current situation, and the proposed plan.

Welcoming handclaps and loud cheers were abundant as soon and she stepped into the abandoned factory. Arkaneh watched from above, through the glass in Griffiths's office, as the interior hall was packed with over two dozen members of the outpost that were calling and shouting Talimay's name, chanting it like a prayer, as if their messiah had just entered their holy ground. *Talimay has had some impressive achievements during her time as a lieutenant. Some say she holds the highest count of Justicar kills, as well as being behind some of the most profitable robberies and heists. No wonder she's so well-liked among the brothers.* The red-

headed lieutenant waved at the cheering members with a half-gleeful smile, one that suggested she wasn't still completely over her brother's death.

"She's getting quite a welcome," Arkaneh said to Griffiths, who sat in his chair behind Arkaneh.

"Yeah..." Griffiths's voice sounded grim. "She was always the most adored one. The legendary Talimay Singh," his face looked sour. Arkaneh could already tell what was hiding behind that frown and cold tone. *He's jealous of her. He wishes he could be as well-liked as she is. I can probably guess what he must feel like, being the lieutenant who cares first and most about his own brothers before anything else, sitting in his chair as he hears how everybody cheers and howls that name of his counterpart.*

"I heard some call her the Golden Marauder," Arkaneh added salt to Griffiths's wounds. The old man sat in silence against that, only making a grunting sound.

Talimay was accompanied by 4 members of her own outpost as bodyguards, as well as a young girl. The girl had black dreads tied to her head on the left side, and long, silky hair on her right side, short enough to only reach her chin. Black tattoos riddled her arms, and her bottom lip was adorned with a silver ring on its left side. A black laptop was clutched in her hands. The young girl remained shy against the racket that took place around her. Arkaneh noticed some members whispering among themselves as their eyes lingered on her, probably wondering who that girl was, but he already knew the answer to that question. *Fenia Merritt. According to Reus, she's a brilliant girl who serves the organization on all matters technical. Her involvement in jobs usually consists hacking into keypads and security systems. She refuses to go into the field herself, choosing to aid through her computer from behind the curtain instead. Reus asked Talimay to bring her along as part of the plan.*

Talimay and her entourage paved their way through the members to the rusty stairs that led up to Griffiths's office. Before climbing them, Talimay ordered her 4 bodyguards to remain downstairs, making her way up with Fenia alone. The cheers finally died down as she walked up, eventually fading

## Bullet and Blade

away altogether.

Arkaneh's plan was simple, yet effective. At the current situation, he had 6 suspects, out of which one had to be bugged. Arkaneh realized that the only place to plant a bugging device on a person without him noticing was most likely in his SmartWrist. Therefore, the plan was to have Talimay come to the outpost under the guise of delivering words of encouragement and raising morale against the recent attacks made by the Justicars while Fenia would analyze the SmartWrist of the 6 suspects to find out the bugged one. Since Arkaneh's recent ploy with the warehouses raised many question marks among the members and had everyone begging Griffiths to answer for the 7 men who died in the result. Talimay would also have to tell everyone about the existence of a rat and explain the plan that stood behind that night. That would also serve as an explanation to why they would take away everyone's SmartWrist before her speech.

Originally, the plan was supposed to have Griffiths deliver the speech, but once Reus heard about it during their latest meeting, he suggested that they use Talimay's upcoming return instead and have her do it. Obviously, Griffiths didn't look quite satisfied with that change in plan, and Arkaneh could definitely notice that.

"Good to see you, Griffiths," Talimay acknowledged her partner as she stepped into his office.

Griffiths removed his frown and got on his feet. He walked up to her and shook her hand. "Talimay, how are you?" he asked her.

"I'm... okay." She hesitated. The pinch of grief that still lingered in her was visible through her sad green eyes. "And you must be Arkaneh Frye," she approached Arkaneh.

"I am." He shook her hand.

"This is Fenia, you must have heard of her by now," she presented the young girl to her side.

"Hi," Fenia said in a shy manner.

"I've sent my men to gather everyone in the nearby room, as well as gathering all their SmartWrist before I go there

## D. Sharon

myself to give my speech," Talimay said.

"Good," Arkaneh said. "I understand that Reus filled you in on everything we have so far."

"Yes," she replied. "That trick with the warehouses and the groups was a clever one. Now we have to find our leak source within that group of 6 people."

"Did he also inform you of their identities, as I gave him?"

"He did, and the 4 men I brought with me from Oakneil know them as well. They've been instructed to place the SmartWrists of those 6 individuals in a different box, apart from everyone else's."

"Great. Since we're bound to the length of your speech, we're only going to have just enough time to check out those 6 SmartWrists."

"Very well. I'll try to keep them busy for as long as possible. I'm going to head down and bring those SmartWrists. We'll talk later." Talimay left the office and climbed down the stairs. Her presence seemed to be lingering a minute longer after her departure, as Griffiths's silent teeth grind was still noticeable.

"You look nervous, Griffiths," Arkaneh pointed out to him.

"Shut up, tenderfoot," He rudely replied. The OldGen took out a bottle of scotch from his desk drawer and took a sip from it. His eyes rolled back afterward as if the booze tastes like heaven. Arkaneh simply looked at him in disgust.

Fenia hurried to sit down at Griffiths's table and placed her laptop in front of her. As her fingers swiftly tapped the keyboard with utmost grace and agility, her eyes lit up and the hint of a smile curved on her lips. *Clearly, this is what she's meant to do. I can see why she'd never go out there with her comrades and stick to her computer, and I can see why Talimay and Reus permit her to do so.*

"Alright, I think I'm all set," Fenia said minutes later.

"Very well," Arkaneh said. "Remember, I'm going to need you to work on those SmartWrists as fast as you can. Once Talimay announces that we have a rat among us, we're going to want to act as quickly as possible and know who our leak source is, in case we want to question him immediately. We don't know how the rat will react, so we can't take any



## Bullet and Blade

chances."

"Are we even sure it's such a good idea to tell them about the rat?" Griffiths barged into the conversation, taking another small sip right afterward.

"We've talked about this, Griffiths," Arkaneh said. "The people here are agitated after our latest scheme. No lie can cover up so many question marks, and if anyone disappears or runs away, we'll have a prime suspect for our rat. This is our only choice. Besides, it'll shift the anger over the 7 men we lost to the Justicars, which is what you need right now, instead of it being directed at you."

Griffiths grunted in silence in the face of Arkaneh's claim.

"Arkaneh's right." Fenia agreed. "If your people are thirsty for answers, and the truth is the only one that works, then that's your play. You don't have any alternative."

*She seems like such a clever girl... how did she ever end up in this organization?* "Fenia," Arkaneh approached her. "Forgive me for asking, but, how old are you?"

"25," She replied.

"Reus told me that you've been a member for 3 years now."

"If you're going to ask me about why I joined or anything like that, spare me the question. I'm not going to answer that." *She saw where I was going with this way ahead... as I thought, this one is very clever.*

Talimay returned to the office a moment later, carrying two plastic boxes, stacked on top of each other. "The top one has the 6 SmartWrists of our suspects," She said upon leaving them on the floor."

"Great, I'll start working on them." Fenia jumped out of her seat and opened the top box, pulling the first SmartWrist out of it.

"I'm going to go ahead and speak to the people downstairs. Arkaneh, I suggest you join as well, so no one will question where you were."

"Right," he said.

The two climbed down and made their way into the next room, where the two dozen men have been waiting eagerly to

hear the words of the great Golden Marauder.

"Reus mentioned that you already spoke with him about the possibility of having a rat among us," Arkaneh said as they walked.

"Yes. He was the one who brought up the notion, but we never actually gave any effort into that wild theory. I think deep inside, we both hoped that we would end up being wrong." Her voice turned stern. "When I find out who that traitor is, I'm going to rip his guts out, and I'm going to hang him for all to see. I'll make sure everyone knows who he was and what his punishment was."

"There's no such thing as bad publicity, eh?"

"Bad publicity?" she chuckled. "Everything is a matter of perspective. To the average citizen, every headline revolving us is bad publicity, but to us... every other organization that sees us hail fire and stand firm, every ringleader who may think twice before going against us, every potential tenderfoot who's bickering over which organization he should join... in the end, it's only more profiting. A golden key can open any door, right?"

"Right," Arkaneh felt sick agreeing with the term. *More profiting... Men of Midas truly are a bunch of greedy bastards.*

Talimay's eyes scouted Arkaneh, taking a long look, almost as if she could see into his soul. "You seem different from the others," She said. "Tell me, why did you join us? You don't seem as money-hungry as most members."

"Don't be a fool. What kind of person wouldn't be money-hungry in this god-forsaken country?"

"The kind of person that seeks something that money can't buy." Upon uttering those cryptic words, Talimay entered the spacious room, in which the members of the Ravenwey Burrows outposts were waiting. *Talimay Singh... you too are not the same as most members. You're far more intelligent and far keener. You may just prove to be the only person in this organization worthy of my attention.*

Another hail of cheering began as soon as she was noticed in the room, much like the one she received upon entering the

## Bullet and Blade

outpost.

The room was lit by two large lamps, pointed at the direction of a small stand, on which Talimay took position. The 4 men she brought with her were mingled among the crowd.

As the cheering died once more, Talimay looked at the crowd with a menacing expression and spoke with a high, confident voice that echoed between the walls like a mighty roar. "My fellow brothers, today I bow my head, in honor of my fallen sibling, Heycliff. He was a great man and a valuable asset to our organization. He did not deserve the death he received." Her voice was determined and strong, yet mixed with a hint of sorrow. "He taught me many things, but most important, he taught me how to fight back against those who hurt us. So, my brothers, as we all bow our heads to commemorate him, I ask that we immediately raise them back and look ahead. Not at our future, for we can't see it or know what it is. Not at our past, for we can't allow ourselves to be lost in it and hang on it forever. We look at our present, and in the current present, we have to fight against our enemies!" shouts of agreement and roars of vengeance started to overtake the crowd. Fists were raised in the air by some. "We must show everyone that we are a force to be reckoned!" More fists were raised. "Show them that we have hearts of fire and hands of blood!" as the roars conquered the room and men were seen thumping their chests with pride like Vikings, Talimay's eyes shifted to Arkaneh. He could see the desire for vengeance in them, but as he did, he noticed her expression changing from an invigorated, fervent one to another, much more serious. "We will strike at those who try to hurt us. And we will strike twice fold at those who do it by ratting on us." A sudden shift in the crowd's enthusiasm took place. Whispers of wonder were heard among the people. "That's right," she said. "We have a rat in our ranks." Voices rose in the crowd, some begging to know who it was, others claiming that it can't be. "We don't know who it is yet, but know that we are working on it. We were trying to figure it out when we sent you to

those warehouses, and it's also the reason why we took your SmartWrists earlier." A sudden silence had fallen on the crowd. "Whoever you are," her eyes scanned through every single person in the room. "When I find you... you better run fast." Talimay got off the stand and made her way through the baffled men out of the room. Arkaneh hurried to follow her, glancing back at the outpost members quickly before leaving. Just before losing eye contact, he could see the perplexed appearances on several men, as well as rage on others.

Talimay and Arkaneh made their way up the stairs to Griffiths's office once more, hoping that by now Fenia had finished analyzing the SmartWrists of the 6 suspects.

"Must have been a great speech," Griffiths said upon their entry. "We could hear the cheers all the way from up here." There was clear sarcasm in his voice. Talimay didn't seem to appreciate it much and chose to ignore him.

"What do we have, Fenia? Are you done?" she asked her.

"Yeah," Fenia replied. The box of SmartWrists laid on the floor right next to her. "Arkaneh was right. One of the SmartWrists was bugged." She held up a tiny chip, almost as small as a fingernail. *A bugging device... so this is how they could get information on us.* "This little chip is a listening device. It's basically the equivalent of wearing a wire, only hidden inside the SmartWrist. The Justicars can constantly hear everything around whoever has it in his SmartWrist, even if the SmartWrist itself is turned off."

"So if they're talking about some job or trade they're about to do, the Justicars will know about it upfront and know to be there," Arkaneh said.

"Right," Fenia said. "Even when they leave their SmartWrists here or at home before going out on such missions, the Justicars already know where and when to be."

"That's quite clever," Talimay said. "They know that lieutenants must sanction missions before they can be executed, so talking about the details of the missions is almost bound to happen."

"Alright," Griffiths intervened. "Now that we know how

they're bugging us, who's SmartWrist had the chip in it?"

"His name is Orrlian Fens," Fenia said.

"Good work, Fenia," Talimay looked down through the glass window at the scattered men that started filling the interior hall. "Bring that guy in. we need to ask him some questions."



## Maileena

Brown-colored walls and a stench of mold and dust greeted Maileena as she walked into the motel with Demilan. A grumpy-looking OldGen sat behind a counter, with a boxset of keychains standing behind him. *I guess that would be the manager*, she assumed. The motel was located in a rather secluded section of Exumber, as far as possible from residential neighborhoods without leaving the city's territory. *Thank god this place is so secluded. That gives us the least chance of running into anyone.* The only things around were a local bar and a pawn shop.

Demilan was having trouble walking, occasionally losing his balance. Therefore, he was leaning on Maileena to avoid falling on all four. The weight of the ex-addict was just slightly too much to bear for Maileena, yet she carried him without saying a word. By now, she couldn't be even slightly mad at him any longer. She knew that he was doing all he can, and so she decided to help him in every way she could.

"Hey there, what can I do you for?" the motel manager greeted them upon entry.

"We're friends of Winselt Langton," said Maileena. "He told us to come here—"

"Yeah, yeah," the manager interrupted her. "He already called me earlier. A limping man with long black hair and a

## Bullet and Blade

teenage girl with brown hair and brown eyes. He told me all about you two." He went for a drawer and pulled out a set of rusty-looking keys. "Up the stairs, second door on your right."

"Thank you." She took the keys and went upstairs with Demilan.

"Hey, don't think you can make a living here! You better be out of here within the week!" the manager shouted at the two as they climbed the stairs. Maileena chose to ignore him and kept on climbing instead, every step feeling like a challenge with Demilan's weight on her shoulders.

"I hate being such a weight on you," Demilan said.

"It's alright," Maileena smiled. "Just make sure to lose a few pounds when we're done with all this."

Demilan laughed in response. "Sure thing."

The room was small and just as horrid as the reception. The walls had stains on seemingly random spots and the only window had a heavy dust trail all over its frame. There were two single beds in the room and both of them weren't very comfortable, as Maileena noticed when she helped Demilan lie on one of them. Demilan groaned as he finally allowed his feet to rest.

"How are you feeling?" she asked him with a worried face.

"Well, I'm not a hundred percent yet, but... I'm getting there," he replied. *I guess that's true. A few days ago he could barely stand on his two feet. I suppose he's making progress.* She thought for a moment about what other Vex addicts must go through. She remembered once, back when she was still in school, how she was lectured during class about drug use and how wrong it is. The school brought an expert on the subject to instill fear in the students in the hope that it will drive them away from the horrors of Vexillum, Sorelium, Heroin and all others like them. While she remembered how the lecture itself didn't affect her much, some of the facts that the expert pointed out were forever engraved in her mind, one of them regarding Vex. *Vex is the most addictive drug in the world as of today. A single use is enough to make the human body go through long and horrible side effects if another dose is not taken quickly enough. It gives an ecstatic sensation of*

*euphoria and bliss, one that most addicts described as 'pure nirvana.'* Other addicts say they wouldn't go as far as to describe the feeling like that, which led many to believe that some versions of Vex running in the streets have a hint of Sorelium mixed in them to intensify the feeling of high. As she sat there, looking at Demilan and running those facts through her head, she couldn't help herself but feel sorry for him. But as she did, she also bounced the thought of the way she heard addicts describe the feeling Vex gives. *Pure nirvana. How I wish I could feel anything that could be described like that.* And so, for a moment, as weird as it felt, Maileena felt jealous of those who got a taste of the purple drug.

"Demilan," she turned to him. "When you... were using that drug..." she almost hesitated, yet her curiosity eventually got the better of her. "What did it feel like? How would you describe it?"

"W-Why do you ask?"

"I just... want to know."

Demilan's eyes drifted away for a moment. He seemed to be lost in memories, ones that he probably didn't enjoy reminiscing. "It felt... awful." Maileena felt taken aback by his answer.

"Awful? I-I don't—"

"When I first did it, I knew that I was doing something wrong, I knew that I was basically not just hurting myself, but I was hurting Telia as well. And that... that feeling it gives you... that high... even when I tried to enjoy it, it only made me feel worse about myself. And by the time I wished I could stop doing it... I couldn't." his eyes continued to drift away, refusing to so much as look at Maileena as he confessed his regrets.

"I see," she said. "It's just that I usually hear that it's—"

"Don't believe what others may tell you. I promise you that every Vex user has never really enjoyed it. Everyone knows what that drug does to you, to your loved ones. It's just another method of self-destruction we've invented for ourselves."

"Well... I guess we really have gotten better at self-



## Bullet and Blade

destruction over the past decade." She said with a heavy heart.

Soon enough, night fell. Demilan fell asleep very quickly, being constantly tired as he was. Maileena, on the other hand, was still having a hard time giving her eyes some rest. She stared at the ceiling for what felt like hours, hoping that soon the tiredness would take over her, yet her body was too restless. She couldn't stop battling thoughts of Vera. She wished she could hug her dear sister again. She wished she could put a bullet in Kleon Hanford's head, along with all his scum men who treated her like dirt in the Godly Succubi. Her patience was running low. She almost had to fight the idea of attacking the strip club on her own and leave Demilan behind before common reason showed her how foolish that would be.

Suddenly, she heard murmurs beside her. She turned to look at Demilan and tried paying closer attention to the noise he was making in his sleep. "Telia..." she heard him murmur. "Telia..." he called her name again. By the time she finally fell asleep, she could have sworn she had heard him saying that name in his sleep countless times.

The next day, Maileena woke up to the sounds of knockings at the door. Demilan was still heavily asleep. *Who could it possibly be?* Her heart started to race. She grabbed her revolver and raised it at the door. Slowly, she paced towards it, yelling, "Who is it?"

"It's Winselt," The voice said from behind the door. *Winselt?* She thought. *But how can I be sure it's really him?* She inched at the door. Standing on her tiptoes, she saw the man through the peephole. She only looked for one key feature on his face, and as soon as she saw it, she knew that it was truly him. *He has that long scar going from his forehead, through his right eyebrow, to his right cheek, just like Demilan said he has.*

She opened the door and let him inside. "Hey," he said. He was carrying two plastic bags in his hands. "You must be Maileena Banister."

"I am."

"The motel manager told me he gave you this room." He looked over at Demilan, who was surprisingly still under.

"Look at him, sleeping like a baby." He chuckled. "Anyway, I brought you guys some food." He laid the plastic bags on the floor. "There's some bottled water, bread, cream cheese, and some other stuff in there."

"Thank you." Maileena suddenly became aware of how famished she was. As she went through the groceries in the bags, she suddenly noticed the green-grey mask shoved in his back pocket. The reminder that she was standing in front of a member of Code Sanguinary troubled her. *As much as I don't like it, Demilan said that Winselt can be trusted and that he'd always been a good, loyal friend to him.* Nevertheless, she made sure her revolver remained tucked in the back of her pants.

"How is he doing?" he looked at Demilan.

"He's alright. Just a little weak."

"I'm guessing he's not going to wake up over the next few minutes."

"I don't think so. Besides, he needs every rest he can get right now."

"I see. It's just that I was hoping he could catch me up on everything that's been going on. I mean, he comes back to our outpost out of the blue after being gone for a year and asks me for a place to stay... I know something's up."

*He hasn't seen Demilan in a year. He doesn't even know what happened to Telia, or about the coma Demilan was in.* "I can fill you in," she said.

"Great. Do you mind if we do it over a cigarette outside?"

"I do, actually," she stood against it. *I can't risk anyone seeing me outside and recognizing me.* "You can smoke here if you want."

Winselt took a long, hard look at Maileena. It seemed that her stubbornness took him by surprise. "Alright," he said. The scarred man approached the dusty windows and opened its glass door to let any smoke out. The scarred soldier then pulled a cigarette box from his pocket and placed one between his lips. He extended his hand to Maileena to offer her one. Her initial instinct told her to refuse the offer, but a part of her overcame that thought. With all the stress and anxiety plaguing Maileena recently, between constantly worrying about her sister

## Bullet and Blade

and being persecuted by the police and the golden thugs, she pulled a cigarette out of the box, and generously thanked him. He lit both cigarettes and took a long, deep inhale. Maileena greeted whatever smoke she was bringing into her lungs, embracing it, for it gave her the closest thing to the relief she had experienced recently. It reminded her of simpler times, back when she worked at the Godly Succubi, and her sister was safe and sound. Though she was never a chain smoker, from time to time, she borrowed a cigarette from one of the employees at the club, if only to take her mind off from thinking about the next client she'll be serving today. They were never happy times, surely, but without having to chase, kill, or run away from anyone, they were simpler by no doubt, in her mind.

"Six months ago, Demilan's wife, Telia, was kidnapped by Odis Maben, a drug dealer associated with Men of Midas," she began telling the sad story of Demilan McCloud, the man who lost his soldier friends and the love of his life for a purple illusion of happiness. By the end of the story, Winselt looked at Demilan and made a long sigh. "Demilan, you fucking idiot," he said.

"He's a fucking idiot, sure, but he's trying to make it right. He's taking responsibility for his actions." She defended him.

A disappointed look remained on Winselt's face. "So, how did you get involved in all of this?"

"My sister, Vera, was kidnapped just like Telia after I ran away from the Godly Succubi. Demilan is kind enough to be trying to help me find her while we're attempting to find his wife as well."

"Always a savior," Winselt said. "Back when we fought in the Tearful Rebellion, before names like the Deserter General and Code Sanguinary meant anything to anyone, we went through things that I wouldn't wish my worst enemies will. The day we were sent to Harlington Square was the day that truly broke Demilan McCloud." *Harlington Square... that's the place Demilan told me about at the bus station, where they massacred the rebels, where Demilan screamed and begged to defy those orders.*

"Demilan was always an excellent fighter. He's a great marksman and he has sharp instincts, but more than that, he's always looking for someone to save." Winselt's touched his own face. "I got this scar not long after that day at Harlington Square. One of the rebels managed to get the better of me. The look in his eyes... he was insane. He wasn't like the rest of them. I always guessed that he must have lost someone he loved to our forces and became deranged. He brought me to my knees, tied my hands behind my back and pulled out his knife. To this day, I have trouble describing the pain I felt as he carved into my face, slowly and agonizingly. Demilan was the one who broke in and shot the rebel. He carried me all the way back to the unit and called for a medic. If it weren't for him, that rebel would've probably killed me eventually." Winselt's finished his cigarette and threw the bud outside the window. "On the day that Charles Blackburn announced that he was deserting the army and forming Code Sanguinary, we didn't even think twice before joining him."

*So that's why he's helping Demilan.* Every time that Maileena heard stories of the Tearful Rebellion, she felt grateful that she never had to be there during it.

"You guys are going to attack the Godly Succubi once he's better, right?" Winselt asked.

"Right."

"Let me know when that happens. I want to be a part of it."

"Are you sure? Do you realize what you're getting into?"

"I do. I'll just keep any Elastics at home before I go in there. Wouldn't want to cause any rifts between Code and Midas."

"Thank you, Winselt."

"This is me returning Demilan the favor," he looked at Demilan. "As soon as he's up and ready, we'll go there and kill them all."



## Edward

Low winter sun sent waves of warmth upon Edward as he made his way to the station. As with every other day, all faces that he met on his way to his desk lingered on him a second longer than he wished that they had. By now, Edward was the talk of the station. The honest, unbiased cop who was sole in his so-called surreal sense of justice, the same one who made headlines as the person who tried to take Blackburn down all by himself, and was now the lead investigator in the Tri-Surgeon case. There was plenty to talk about Edward around the offices of APD's station in Morth City. Never before had Edward wished to be anonymous as he had at those past days.

Lately, the Vice Chief of Police, Archell Sherwood, has been making a lot of appearances in the media. He's been interviewed both on television and radio and had quite some mentions in the newspapers. Most of the times he talked about the heinous Tri-Surgeon and the valiant officers who are working restlessly to capture him. When asked about Blackburn's failed case he usually dodged the questions with a playful smile and innocent eyes. *Another Dillard in the making*, Edward summed up the man in his mind.

Leading the Tri-Surgeon case proved to be a blessed distraction and worthy goal. More than anything at that

moment, Edward wanted to catch the serial killer and bring him to trial. A part of him knew that it wasn't just the officer of justice in him that wanted it, but also the man who wanted to stop being the disgrace of the force and talk of the day.

"Tough morning?" Officer Trisslin Long met him as he made his way towards his office.

"Just like any other," He replied with a sigh.

"Have you made any progress using the files I've sent you?" she asked. Edward knew that she was doubtful.

"Well, I haven't figured out if there was anything the victims had in common, but I DID find something else."

"Really?" she seemed surprised. "Tell me about it."

"Well," she started saying. "Like I said, I went through the case files and I'm still not sure what the link between the victims is. The two in Basilham were the wife and daughter of the mayor of Basilham, the two in Canstow were a porn actress and the brother of a major contractor and the three in Exumber are the son of a retired politician and two members of Lady Dread. Age doesn't seem to be a factor for the killer since our youngest victim is 18 years old and our oldest is 40."

"Yeah, yeah, I already know all that. Tell me something new," Trisslin rudely interrupted him.

"I'm getting there," Edward fought her back, looking agitated. "The locations of the bodies seemed random at first as well. We had an old warehouse, a distillery, and even a metal factory. But now I've found out that there is something that connects these locations. All of the owners of those lands used loan-sharking money to build those building and facilities in the first place, and there's only one group of people who deals with this kind of loan-sharking."

"Lady Dread," Trisslin said. It was a well-known fact that other than human trafficking, Lady Dread also dealt in loan-sharking. Many times, when business owners or such seek money for their business development or structure build, they would turn to Lady Dread for a loan. Usually, they would do it when the banks would refuse to give them any loans, and they would be left with no other choice. Lady Dread would lend

## Bullet and Blade

them the money they need, and they would have to return it with interest later. The interest rate would usually differ, depending on the loan's size and nature of the business, but would always be outrageously high. The deals were often made through the Nucleus, but the money would always get delivered in person, to avoid anonymity. This was necessary because those who failed to return their debt had to pay the price in blood, and not always just their blood, but their loved ones' too.

Closing his eyes in frustration, Edward carried on. "That's right, Lady Dread. The only reason I'm able to know this is because all of those land owners were horribly murdered after failing to return their debt to Lady Dread and the police investigations discovered that they used the Nucleus to make those loan deals. To be more specific, we're talking about loans deals that were made through the four crown jewels of Lady Dread. Samuel Butler, Richard Lane, Jeffery Carter, and Sunyula Trife. The ringleader and her three lieutenants."

"You're kidding me." Trisslin couldn't believe it. *The three lieutenants... better known as Samuel of the Shatter, Richard of the Dementia and Jeffery of the Ravage. Since Lady Dread's organization is known for using brutal violence against their enemies and debt-owners, each of their title describes their methods of torture. Physical torture, psychological torture and sexual abuse. Their involvement in the case means that the killer's actions don't have something to do with Sunyula alone, but with her entire organization.*

"Clearly, whoever the Tri-Surgeon is, he has some kind of connection to Lady Dread," Edward said. "The thing is, this isn't about making them lose money. Some of those loans were made years ago and are no longer relevant."

"Which means he's just trying to send them a message," Trisslin concluded.

"Right," he agreed. "He's trying to get their attention, I guess."

"Well, what—?" Trisslin's words were cut as the door was suddenly opened, and an officer stood at its front. He was breathing slightly heavily, suggesting that he at least paced fast

## D. Sharon

to the room to deliver his message. Edward could already tell what made him rush to the investigation room, and as soon as the officer spoke the news, he saw that he was right.

"Another body was found," The officer said. "It's the Tri-Surgeon. Eyes, heart, and arms. Same method."

"Where?"

"Right here, in Morth City. 22<sup>nd</sup> Mayflower Street."

"Let's go," He walked out of the room, along with his partner. "Trisslin, you're coming with me. Get a team of forensics to arrive at the site." He turned to the heavily-breathing officer, "I need you to get on press duty. Take any calls from reports or journalists and calm them down. I'm sure it won't be long before someone here tips them off for some cash. Make sure they understand that we won't be releasing any information until we're ready." The officer nodded with a blank face.

Edward and Trisslin made their way to the parking lot and got into the police car. "Another day, another body," She whispered to herself as she sat in the passenger's seat.

As he drove towards the murder scene, Edward found himself slightly paranoid, as he checked his rearview mirror several times during the trip. Knowing that Code Sanguinary's soldiers are after him, Edward had become more careful than usual. *This situation... this must be exactly what Dillard wants, he thought to himself. By making me lead investigator, he made sure that there was no way I would be able to stay in the station forever. A body was bound to be discovered, and even if not, a press conference is very likely to happen, and I'm going to have to be the one to speak in it. Dillard made me a target for Blackburn, and he's basically forcing me to be outside, where I'm exposed and vulnerable. I wouldn't wish anyone to be on Dillard's bad side.*

Two officers who kept watch on the site so far awaited Edward and Trisslin as they arrived at the scene. The murder site was at an abandoned building that was scheduled for demolition. Deserted and lifeless the building stood, surrounded by officers of APD, as Edward and Trisslin made their way inside.



## Bullet and Blade

The walls looked dried and an intense humidity was in the air once the two were inside. It wasn't long before they met another officer in the building, standing over a body that was covered with a white sheet. Edward already knew what to expect, and yet once he lifted the sheet and revealed the corpse, he recoiled upon seeing the staggering image. The body's skin appeared gray and a severe, ghastly stench was reeking out of it. It had gaping holes where the eye sockets were, as well as in the chest, where the heart should have been, and wide, rough wounds where the arms were cut off. All of those wounds had an almost brown shade to them and looked horribly rotten. With the smell and picture too much for Edward, he dropped the white sheet back on the body and stepped back.

"Who is it?" Edward asked the officer.

"We're not sure yet. We're waiting for the forensics to tell us," The officer replied. *This is definitely the Tri-Surgeon's work. Such brutality. Such mercilessness.*

At the corner of his eye, Edward noticed that Trisslin was looking at her SmartWrist. A worried expression appeared on her face.

"This is weird," Trisslin said.

"What is it?" Edward asked.

"This building... 22<sup>nd</sup> Mayflower Street... I've been looking it up and... neither Trife nor her lieutenants have any ties to this place, not now or in the past. The land owner of this place is still alive, and there's no record of him ever getting caught making a loan deal through the Nucleus."

"What?" Edward looked perplexed. "That... doesn't make any sense. Every place the Tri-Surgeon murdered in so far had this kind of connection to Lady Dread. How—?" a sudden noise from outside interrupted him. Edward could hear that it was a shout, yet he couldn't make any sense of it.

"Did you hear that?" Trisslin asked Edward.

"Yeah," He said. "What the hell's going on outside?"

Edward started pacing towards the exit door, with Trisslin and the other officer on his tail. A bad feeling already hovered

over him like a dark cloud, yet by the time he let any thought of it come through his mind, he was already opening the door, and the gun was already pointed at his face.

Four Justicars stood outside, wearing full sets of Elastics, with their faces hidden under the white masks. Two of them were pointing a gun at the two officers that were waiting outside. The two officers stood on their knees with their hands behind their backs. The other two were aiming directly at Edward, Trisslin, and the third officer.

"Glad you could join your friends, Officer Elwin." One of the Justicars said.



## Edrimer

"I don't know, Edrimer..." Johnaren expressed his fear. "Are you sure this is going to work?"

"Relax," Edrimer reassured him. "This is going to work. It has to."

"Has to? T-That doesn't sound very promising. "W-What if we die?"

Edrimer turned to Johnaren with a surprised look on his face. "You mean to tell me you joined the Justicars without the will to die?" he ridiculed him.

"W-Well, I-I just—"

"He's right, Edrimer. This plan is risky." Samari said. "I actually can't believe Serian gave it a green light."

"Everyone, just calm down," Elahysis broke her silence as well. "I actually think this could turn out to be a great idea. I'm with Edrimer on this." *Well, as long as I've got even one person on my side, I know I'm not totally crazy.*

The four hid in an alley near 22<sup>nd</sup> Mayflower Street, waiting for the police to send the Tri-Surgeon investigation team to the murder scene. They all wore white Elastics and carried pistols. Two officers were already waiting outside, and a third one was seen heading into the building earlier, yet Edrimer waited for the lead investigator of the case to show up.

After long minutes of waiting, a car finally pulled over near

the crime scene and two officers came out of it. The first one was a slender woman with black hair and the other one was Officer Edward Elwin. Edrimer recognized him immediately, as he still remembered his face from the time he met him after the robbery attempt at Zachary's shop.

"It's him," Edrimer said. "Let's wait a bit. I need him and that woman to get inside. It'll be much easier if we take over those two other officers alone first and then deal with the rest." Elahysis and Samari nodded in agreement. Johnaren, on the other hand, seemed to be mumbling something. As Edward inched closer to him, he recognized the old words of the Justicars being whispered from Johnaren's mouth, almost as if they were heresy that he didn't want anyone else to hear.

"Here everyone steals and nothing is given. Here we scar the righteous and crown the villain." He heard him mumble. "Here we eat ashes and see water in tears. Here we stand firm and hope to rid us of these fears" *I remember these words... five years ago, just before the Justicars made their debut in this country, anonymous users posted them all over forums and social networks, both on the Nucleus and outside of it. I remember wondering what they meant. They sounded so... inspiring. So hopeful. So invigorating and motivating. Soon after that, the Justicars hacked into a major television channel and played a video where a masked man announced the world of the rise of the Justicars and the end of the tyranny and mayhem of all the criminal organizations. Over the years, people realized that those words were just nonsensical bullshit. And now here I am, dressed as one of them. Life always has to be full of funny outcomes.*

"Here everyone steals and nothing is given..." on and on Johnaren kept chanting those words of hope and promise like a prayer, and Edrimer felt as if he was the only one who knew that no one would answer it.

"They went inside," Elahysis said.

"Alright, let's go," Edrimer commanded.

The four stepped out of the alley with their weapons aimed forward towards the two officers. Once the officers spotted them, their initial response was one of panic, but soon enough they reached for their guns.

## Bullet and Blade

"Drop the guns!" Elahysis yelled. Edrimer was surprised to hear such a mighty shout coming from what he considered an average-sized woman. "Drop them, I said!" she yelled again a second later. Seeing that it was a situation of two against four, the officers did as commanded and dropped their guns on the floor. Johnaren and Samari quickly kicked the guns aside and brought the officers to their knees, handcuffing their hands behind their back with the officers' own handcuffs. "Goddamn Justicars..." one of the officers said to himself while he was cuffed.

While Johnaren and Samari kept watch over the two officers with their guns aimed at them, Edrimer and Elahysis approached the entrance door to the building. They heard a faint voice from inside, followed by sounds of approaching footsteps. "Someone's coming," Edrimer said. "Get ready."

A few seconds later the door opened and Edward Elwin stepped outside, along with his female companion and the third officer who waited for them inside, only to be greeted by a hollow barrel.

"Glad you could join your friends, Officer Elwin," Edrimer said. Edward made a long sigh as he raised his hands in the air. "The guns. Drop them." Edward and his two companions did as they were told. Elahysis kicked the guns away and ordered the woman and the other officer to go down on their knees next to the other two.

While Elahysis cuffed them just like the other officers, Edward remained alone at the mercy of Edrimer's gun. "Why do you guys always have to butt in where you shouldn't?" Edward said in an anguished voice. "This is a murder scene that has nothing to do with you or any of the other gangs."

"This murder scene actually has everything to do with us," Edrimer said.

"What do you mean?" Edward seemed baffled.

"Let's talk inside. Alone." Edrimer guided him inside. Once they closed the door behind them, Edrimer lowered his gun. "I wanted for us to talk. I'm lowering my gun to ease up the conversation, but try anything funny and I'll raise it back up

before you know it."

"Fine. What do you want to talk about, Justicar?"

"The Tri-Surgeon."

"What do you guys have to do with him? He's not affiliated with anyone."

"He's a killer. He deserves our justice just like anyone affiliated."

"I see. So you're trying to kill him."

"We're trying to find him."

"You're trying to KILL him," Edward repeated the sentence with a high voice. "That's what you do. You use lethal force to impose your so-called justice. Don't try to hide it." *It'll be hard to negotiate with a man with so much hatred for our methods.*

"Look, we can help each other. We both want this killer to answer for his crimes."

"Hold on... are you suggesting what I think you're suggesting?"

"I want us to work together. You and I. with your resources and our ability to use methods you're not allowed to, we can catch him."

"Are you out of your goddamn mind?!" Edward snapped. "You expect me to work with the Justicars?!"

"I expect you to do whatever it takes to catch the man who's responsible for 7 killings so far, not to mention horrible mutilations that further hurts the victims' family." *Appealing to his softer side might calm him down a bit.*

"You can make that 8." Edward pointed at the body a few feet from where they stood."

"Actually... this isn't the Tri-Surgeon's doing. This is OUR doing."

"W-What?"

"We planted this body to get you here so we could talk."

"S-So you cut off his arms, eyes and heart to make it look like...?"

"Yeah. Don't worry, he was just a gang member." *One which I personally put a bullet in during my audition. The member of Lady Dread I had to kill to prove my tenacity... thank god Serian let us use*

## Bullet and Blade

*his body to do this.*

"So that's why this location didn't fit..." Edward whispered to himself. *Did he just say the location didn't fit? Does that mean the murder sites have some kind of meaning that they found out? If he knows more than I do, he won't need my help. I need to make myself seem useful.*

"Look, I've read the papers. You're a walking target and I'm sure you know it. I'm surprised Blackburn hasn't taken you out yet like he did that judge, attorney, and officer, who tried to put him behind bars."

"I know I'm a dead man walking. You don't have to remind me."

"I want to offer you protection. A Justicar who'll keep an eye on you and protect you from anyone who might make an attempt on your life."

"Thank you, but... no. I'm not going to have a Justicar keep tabs on me. I don't like being watched and I don't need any help. I can handle it by myself."

"Then what can I offer you for your cooperation?"

"Nothing. You can piss off." Edward started pacing away, angrily.

"Edward, you need this win." Edward stopped in place. His eyes stooped at the floor. At that moment, Edrimer knew that he was on to something. Officer Edward Elwin was apparently a man who's been on the losing side too much recently and needed to be on the winning side for a change. "I've been reading up on you. I can only guess how devastated you must have felt after the way Blackburn's case turned out. Now he roams free while you're being hunted like a deer. This could be your compensation. You lost Blackburn, but you can still make it right by winning the Tri-Surgeon."

"You... you sure are stubborn as fuck." Edward turned back to Edrimer.

"Only when I'm trying to catch serial killers," Edrimer joked. "Look, I've dug up a bit about this case. The officer who lead it before you had an entire team working on it and he got nowhere. You only have a single partner in this case right now. You can't do this without us."

D. Sharon

"Alright. I tell you what, I'll work with you... but I have one condition. You let APD ARREST this killer. You don't kill him and you don't take away our credit in his capture."

"Done."

Edward sighed. "Well, I guess we have a deal, Mr.... umm... what should I call you?"

"Oh, umm... you can call me... Forseti."

"Alright, Forseti." The two shook hands. Under the white mask, Edrimer was smiling, while Edward didn't let his smile be anything more than a slight curve on his lips. "So how are we going to get out of this... hostage situation you guys pulled here?"

Edrimer drew his gun and handed it to Edward. "We're going to pretend you turned the tables and overtook me."

"Really? And you trust me not to fire a bullet in your brains?"

"I do. Just tell my friends to put down their weapons and run away."

"I guess they're instructed to do just that."

"That's right."

"Okay then, let's do this." Edward took the gun from Edrimer and wrapped his left arm around him while his right one aimed the gun at his head. "By the way," he said just before opening the door. "Your voice sounds familiar. Have we met?"

Edrimer laughed. "I'll let you beat your head around this one."

As soon as the two went outside, the expression upon the faces of the four officers who were cuffed and on their knees almost immediately changed to a half-surprised, half-relieved one, as they saw their colleague holding the criminal Justicar at gunpoint. *Oh, how I bet he's itching to pull that trigger.* "Drop your weapons on the floor and leave," Edward commanded the three Justicars. At first, they seemed hesitant, and wouldn't lower their weapons, but another command from Edward's mouth made them succumb to his will. "Drop the fucking weapons!" upon shouting those words, the three Justicars did



## Bullet and Blade

as told. With their guns on the ground, they slowly started to back away until eventually they started running away until there was no sight of them. *Just like we trained.* At this point, Edrimer expected Edward to let him go as well, yet the righteous officer seemed to be delaying on that part. *Come on, let me go. What are you waiting for?* At that moment, Edrimer feared that his plan might backfire after all, that Edward would take advantage of the situation after all and go against him, but either way, he was clever enough to prepare for such an outcome. Up above, on a nearby building, his backup was keeping a close eye on the whole situation with his sniper rifle. It was the former sniper of the Alatarian army, Apex. *What a great way to put his skills to use.* But even with Apex's backup, Edward could still shoot Edrimer before his sniper would be able to do anything about it, which is why Edrimer made sure his gun would be empty.

Even with all his precautions, in the end, Edrimer wanted Edward's cooperation, which is why he felt concerned as he remained at his mercy for a lot longer than he wished to be.

Finally, he heard Edward whisper into his ear, "Hit me." once again, Edrimer smiled under the white mask. As he felt Edward's grip slightly loosening, he shoved his elbow into his abdomen. Edward grabbed his stomach, coughing in pain while Edrimer took the chance and ran away from the scene.

In his mind, Edrimer knew that Edward was fighting an inner urge to take him out. *He had to choose between doing what he sees as justice and what he knows is right. By letting me go and working with me, he knows that he can save more people from the Tri-Surgeon.*

Even though the situation worked out in Edrimer's favor, he knew that Edward's inner conflict might pose a difficulty and that their cooperation might eventually prove troublesome.



## Lunarey

The long road from St. Cyprian to Sunyula's mansion in Trainmor, Fraenon Hill was not only tiresome for Lunarey but also nerve-racking. As she sat in the back seat of Samuel's car, accompanied by his two trusty, blood-thirsty associates, she couldn't help but ponder what vicious fate might await her upon reuniting with her dear mother.

Sunyula Trife was known as many things, but lovable or maternal were never one of them. She was almost as powerful as the very men who sat in high chairs in the Segregated Quarter at the Heart, as wealthy as a company's CEO and as vicious as any Feral would allow himself to be. Many say that Lady Dread's organization isn't that different from the Ferals, other than the fact that the Ferals don't have any business standing behind them, and every victim of theirs seems to be chosen at random.

Samuel Butler had the appearance of a good-willed man, one that was a far cry from the stories and tales that painted Lady Dread with a crimson color of blood and a frightening tendency for torturing.

*Of all the people in the world, I got to turn out as Vaikillia Trife. I now envy the innocence and ignorance I was blessed with as a girl with no memory.*

After leaving St. Cyprian, Samuel drove all the way through

## Bullet and Blade

the Heart to Morth City, and from there he drove to Basilham. By the time he reached that city, it was nightfall, and the stars bid them to call it for a night. They stopped at a local hotel, one that was only a few miles from the Maroon Bridge that connected Basilham to Loncliffe Abbey.

When Samuel was booking the rooms at the reception, he didn't even bother to ask about the price of the rooms. He simply took out a bundle of bills from his pocket and handed them over to the clerk. Money was clearly no issue for the lieutenant.

Getting two separate rooms, Samuel's goons went off to stay at the other one, while he and Lunarey stayed at the first one. As awkward as it felt to her, Lunarey maintained a composed appearance and didn't allow it to affect her much.

That night, she went to the balcony and while leaning on the railing, looked up at the starry skies. Dozens of shining dots painted the skies with a pleasant picture. Over at the horizon, she could see the stony mountains, the same ones that the district of Rockbury was known for, and to the north she could spot the Maroon Bridge, hovering over the Wailing Lake. The moon's light shone beautifully over the waters of the lake. The mesmerizing picture seemed to be the only thing at the moment that could calm her down and ease up her anxiety. *I used to see these skies through Kelia's window all the time.* She amused herself with such tender thoughts. The night was as silent as a graveyard, with only the light breezes of winds and occasional cricket sounds to flow through Lunarey's ears. *This place, Basilham... it looks so different from St. Cyprian. I didn't see any graffiti or trash in the streets like I saw in that wretched old city,* she thought to herself. *Perhaps Brontspil truly is the cesspool of Alataria.*

Eventually, she heard footsteps coming from behind her. Before she could turn around, the man was already leaning on the railing right next to her, with a cigarette lit in his mouth.

"You know, it's funny," Samuel said. "Even before, you used to love watching the night sky like this." His voice was calm and gentle. His black, wavy hair blew softly in the light wind.

D. Sharon

"I guess some things aren't so easily lost," she said. Samuel smiled.

"How's your face?" he asked her. Lunarey's face was still swollen and purple from Trigger's hits. Every facial expression she made triggered small spikes of pain. Her legs also suffered from minor bruises, mostly from being tied so tightly for so long.

"It... still hurts," she said.

"I'll have someone look at it tomorrow after we'll reach Sunyula's mansion in Trainmor," he said.

That didn't make Lunarey feel any better. "My mother... Sunyula Trife..." even though the words came out of her own mouth, she still couldn't believe them. "I've heard so many things about her."

"And I'm sure none of them were good."

"No, they weren't. Tales of horror and unimagined brutality. The way she loans people money and then torture them when they can't repay it. The way she sells young girls as sex slaves." Samuel didn't comment on her accusations. He merely sighed, giving away, in a sense, that it was all true. "I heard that she has a sword with two blades instead of one that she always carries with her."

"Yeah, that's true. She calls it Scarlet Thorn. She even keeps it by her bed. I don't think I ever saw her going outside without it." Samuel inhaled his cigarette. The night was so silent that she could clearly hear the sound of crisp burning coming from it. After blowing the smoke away, he handed the cigarette to Lunarey as an offer.

"Here," he said.

"Did I use to smoke?" she wondered.

"On rare occasions. Your mother never knew. We always kept it from her." The thought of keeping something away from Sunyula invoked Lunarey's memory about a particular thing.

"You said... you would get rid of Sunyula."

"We were both going to do that."

"Why? Why would you want to kill her? And why would I

## Bullet and Blade

ever go along with it?"

Samuel stooped his head. His eyes seemed filled with sadness and agony. He must have felt helpless watching her with no memory of whatever he or she went through in the past. "You're scared of her, aren't you?" he said. "You don't want to get to Trainmor and live in her mansion. Isn't that right?"

"It is."

"Then your gut might still remember Vaikillia Trife. You were never a happy child under your mother's care. Sure, she provided you with everything a kid could ever want, but... as soon as Sunyula rose to power after her father died, she became aware that she needed a successor, just like Henrick did."

"And that's me." It was a clear guess. *The princess to Lady Dread's mighty empire of human trafficking and abusive violence.*

"She started having you present during some of our... procedurals."

"She rose to power seven years ago... I must have been so young."

"11 years old, as a matter of fact." It had only now occurred to her that she never really was sure of her real age. *That means I'm 18 years old. Funny how only now I realize that.* "At first, it seemed to be working. You understood what was going on and you appeared to be accepting it, but... not everyone can take this kind of world and embrace it as their own," he blew another puff of smoke into the chill air. "Once you grew up you and Sunyula started to have your... differences. When she feared you wouldn't prove to be the daughter she wished you to be, she started forcing our way of life on you. She made you watch again and again as we did what we did, and... eventually, she forced you to take part in it."

"You mean... I... tortured people?" she feared the answer.

"To some degree, yes." A nauseating feeling tore Lunarey's stomach. She felt as if she wanted to vile up whatever rotten, repulsing part of her that actually did it, even if she did it against her own will. Her hands quivered and her mind became

fuzzy. *What kind of animal am I? What kind of monster am I?* "Oh, my god..." she whimpered. Little drops of sorrow dripped from her eyes at the railing as she pictured the poor victims who suffered at her hand, and poor Vaikillia, who was forced to become the very thing she hated most. She felt as if no one in the world could truly understand her pain, her self-loathing, her wish to wipe her memory clean all over again. The girl who woke up clueless in that alley seemed like the luckiest girl in the world at that moment.

That was when she suddenly felt a warming embrace, as Samuel's wide arms wrapped around her, securing her in his hug. His arms felt like the wings of a guardian angel that had come to rid her of her pain. His hand slowly caressed her hair, stroking it gently. His mouth uttered no words, and there was no need to. She felt more comforted in his arms than she ever did. And deep in her heart, she knew that this was no hug from a stranger. She knew that these arms knew her body before, that such an embrace wasn't the first one to ever happen between them.

She backed away from him in a flinch, wiping her tears and regaining her senses. "Now do you understand why we have to get rid of her?" he asked her with a lovely smile on his face.

"I... I don't know..." she said. *How can I kill Sunyula when I can't even imagine myself doing it to all those poor victims? And how can he smile like that when he's talking about killing his own ringleader? I can't allow myself to be fooled by his kindness. This is a man who murders for a living.*

"I know you're afraid, but you shouldn't," he said, his elegance seemingly ever-lasting. "I'm not going to leave you, Vaikillia."

"Well, forgive me, if I don't see any comfort in that since I don't really know you," she inched away from him. His eyes stooped once again. He was hurt with every time she mentioned not remembering him. "Tell me," her eyes had now dried up and took the form of fire running wild. "What do they call you?"

"W-What?" he seemed baffled.

## Bullet and Blade

"What do they call you?" she reiterated ever so slowly.

He looked defeated upon saying his title, yet a hint of pride was clearly evident. "Samuel of the Shatter."

"And why do they call you that?"

"You know damn why." His face became irritable. He was right. Lunarey did know. She read all about the three lieutenants of Sunyula Trife, about all the horrors and crimes they stand behind. Samuel Butler was the younger one of the three, being the only one in his near-30s while the other two in their 40s. He was also the only one who wasn't a remnant that was passed on to Sunyula back from the reign of Henrick Trife. Samuel was recruited shortly after Sunyula rose to power, and was named lieutenant three years ago.

"You specialize in physical pain. Bone shattering, skull crushing, limb-dismembering—"

"Stop!" he said in a quick, yet loud voice. "Why are you doing this? Why are you saying those things, Vaikillia?"

"I am NOT Vaikillia!" she declared, her heart pumping up with fire and pride. "My name is Lunarey and the reason I'm saying these things is because I had a best friend named Kelia Hopewell, who stabbed me in the back. So you tell me, Samuel of the Shatter, why should I trust YOU?" her words flung at him like knives sharp enough to cut through metal. Her eyes penetrated his like long swords stabbing at his heart.

Samuel stood before her, his cigarette had long been but a burned out stick in his hand. His pupils trembled in his eyes. Yet, after everything said, his voice sounded as calm and gentle as it was at the beginning of their conversation. "You're right," he said. "You shouldn't trust me. But it's okay. I know the old Vaikillia did, and I know I can regain your trust. And until then, I'll do everything in my power to rid you of Lady Sunyula and make you free just like you wish."

Words choked at Lunarey's throat. For a moment, she almost felt bad for being so mean to such a kind man, yet she didn't let herself feel that way. As sweet and gentle as he was, Lunarey never forgot that she was dealing with a professional torturer. Deep in her heart, riding herself of Sunyula seemed

like a wake up from the nightmare, yet her ability to trust others had diminished significantly lately. In the end, Lunarey really did want to trust him, and she felt torn for not being able to do so. "I know I may be a fiend or a monster or whatever you'd like to call me, but... I don't want you to think that of all people. This world is beautiful, Vaikillia." Samuel said in a soft voice, as his eyes surveyed the view around them. "There's gold to be found under every piece of dirt and a smile to be raised under every sob. Never forget that." *I can trust him on that saying. I like that way of thinking. I have to. The world is beautiful. Whatever you may turn out to be, Samuel of the Shatter, even if I don't trust you fully yet, I trust that you're right on that part.*

With a delightful smile on her face, she bid him good night and went back into the room.

The next day started early, when the sun was still fresh in the sky. As soon as they all checked out of the hotel, Samuel, along with Lunarey and his two bodyguards, drove away from the city of Basilham. Riding through the Maroon Bridge, they made their way to Loncliffe Abbey and from there they entered the luxurious district of Fraenon Hill, as they entered the city of Trainmor.

The sudden change of scenery was evident. The sandy landscape and dusty air were replaced by lush greenery and fancy-looking houses on tidy boulevards. Lunarey saw it as the complete opposite of St. Cyprian. High-end cars parked in the driveways on every corner, children were seen happily playing at parks and playgrounds and even the random people that walked down the streets gave the impression of higher class. *This is Fraenon Hill, the pinnacle of Alataria, the fanciest, most expensive and prestige district in the country. Only the richest and most powerful people get to live here.* It almost seemed unfair in her eyes. To have people living in such a classy lifestyle while others in districts like Brontspil are plagued with poverty, sickness and gang violence. *They say Fraenon Hill is the only district with no gang presence at all. It's as if all ringleaders somehow agreed not to poke their noses where the lions of this country sleep.*

Surely, it was a lovely sight, one that reinvigorated



## Bullet and Blade

Lunarey's mood and made her forget for a second where she was heading. Seeing happy people like that, cheerful and full of energy, instead of the gloomy and violent ones she saw in St. Cyprian made her feel like perhaps Samuel's words were true, and that the world was actually beautiful. But there could be none of that in Alataria.

As soon as the car parked in front of Sunyula's mansion she already noticed the notorious ringleader at its front, a wry smile on her face. "Welcome back, Vaikillia," Samuel said before letting her out of the car. "You're home now."



## Arkaneh

Orrlian Fens, the member who's SmartWrist was discovered to be bugged with a listening device, sat alone in a little room, under a lone fluorescent light, with a terrified expression on his face.

Arkaneh and Fenia were looking at him through a glass window that separated them. They were waiting outside that room for Talimay to show up and make the interrogation. Fenia seemed carefree, yet Arkaneh noticed that she was piously staring at the supposed victim of the rat's schemes.

"What is it, Fenia?" Arkaneh asked her, his voice so indifferent that it was as if he didn't really care for her answer.

"Oh, nothing. I just feel somewhat sorry for this guy. I mean, we're interrogating him like some enemy captive. He's a member of this organization and supposedly, he's done nothing wrong."

"Then nothing bad will happen to him," he tried reassuring her.

Fenia guffawed. "Can you honestly promise that?" she asked him.

"No," he bluntly told her the truth. Her expression suddenly didn't change. She seemed almost as indifferent as Arkaneh. "Be careful saying things like that. Someone might mistake you for someone with a sense of mercy and empathy,

## Bullet and Blade

and those kinds of people have no business with a criminal organization."

"Don't get me wrong. I wish that rat a horrible death, but you can't ignore the fact that Orrlian is probably just a victim here and doesn't deserve this."

"Doesn't deserve..." he reiterated her words, which seemed foolish in his mind. "Be careful when you say such things. Once you start considering who deserves what, you'll have entire populations worth of people burning in flames." *I used to think like that. During all those days I spent in the hospital after that fateful night, I used to ask myself 'why did I deserve this?' But nowadays I know how ignorant of a question that is. The world never once asked that of itself about anyone. Mercy... I don't think I've felt anything like that in the past two years.*

Talimay entered the room at long last. Her red hair was wrapped behind in a ponytail and a gun was tugged in a leather holster at her waist. Her slender body swayed aside with each step that she took.

"He's ready for you," Fenia said to her. The red-haired lieutenant seemed to be boiling with rage from the mere sight of Orrlian. Her eyes scrunched as she stared at him. Unlike Fenia, Talimay's way of thinking turned her into the opposite of compassionate. It was these kinds of things that made her character much more intriguing for Arkaneh's. "You should leave this room, Fenia," she said in a firm tone, her eyes piercing through her like a sharp blade. Fenia seemed pale all of a sudden. She was no match for Talimay's daunting attitude. *A woman of ice and blood*, Arkaneh nicknamed her in his mind. Fenia showed no resistance, nor any kind of response. She simply bowed her head and left the room in haste.

Once she was left alone with Arkaneh, Talimay inched closer to the glass window. "Fenia reminds me of Griffiths," said Arkaneh. "She said he was just a victim."

"Yes, I know what you mean," said Talimay "I can see where they're coming from, but both of them need to learn how to look at the bigger picture. That rat is the cause of much more pain and suffering than I can ever inflict on this poor

## D. Sharon

guy." She made a long sigh, rubbing the nape of her neck thoroughly. "Then again, she's a good girl. She's been a big help to us at the Oakneil outpost."

"I know. I've heard all about it. I guess you just can't expect someone who takes no part in our fighting to always understand the need for violence."

She turned to him and looked at him with the same piercing gaze she gave Fenia before. "Don't get me wrong. No one should understand the need for violence. That's what brought us here in the first place. All of us." Her face looked stern. *She's actually aware of how horrible the things they do in this line of work are. This is the first time I've encountered such acknowledgment. It seems like everyone else in this organization sees this as a way of life, taking pride in it and showing no signs of shame or regret, but this woman... she's much smarter than them... she knows how to tell right from wrong, she knows that there's no pride in this... and yet she does it anyway. You truly are a fascinating person, Talimay Singh.*

"We should get this over with," said Arkaneh.

"Right," she nodded.

The two entered the next room, where Orrlian sat, and stood before him, towering above him like hawks hovering over prey. By now, he had sat there for more than an hour, while Talimay and Griffiths went to report to Reus all about the listening device they found. Sitting like that, alone and scared, for so long, with no clue of how he ever got there... even Arkaneh knew that Orrlian's mind couldn't have been in its best shape. Orrlian's face was drenched in fear and confusion while Talimay's showed only a sense of viciousness.

"Do you know why you're here?" she asked him.

"N-No..." he whispered under his breath.

"You're here because we found a bugging device in your SmartWrist. Care to explain it?"

"W-What?" Orrlian's eyes widened and his lips shivered. His gaze kept swiveling sideways back and forth. "That can't be."

"I say we skip the part where you're confused and dumbfounded and get to the part where you start to remember

## Bullet and Blade

who could have done it. Did you give your SmartWrist to someone at some point?" the Golden Marauder had little patience. Her stance was solid and stable. Her legs didn't move an inch. She stood there like a military general, with a straight back and a formidable voice.

"I-I don't think—" with a quick lash, she struck his face with the back of her hand. While he writhed in pain, she showed no hint of pain on her arm.

"Don't think. Know. Who did you give your SmartWrist to?" she readied her arm for another strike, looking almost as if she was itching for it.

"P-Please..." he turned to look at Arkaneh, who stood by so far. "You have to believe me, I don't remember. Please, make her understand—" Arkaneh clutched Orrlian's jaw with his hand, denying him the ability to speak.

"Don't beg to me like I'm on your side." Arkaneh's voice was low and heavy, one that must have instilled fear in Orrlian just as much as Talimay did. "There's no bad cop and good cop here. There's only you and us." his clutch tightened around his jaw. "So you better start thinking before you'll be asking yourself who are you more afraid of out of the two of us." His hand let go as he stepped back.

"I..." Orrlian had trouble to find words. Tears were starting to form in his eyes. "I may have given it to several people in the organization to take a look on some occasions."

"Who?" Arkaneh's voice was as heavy as a boulder.

"I need a minute to remember."

"You have less." Once again, Talimay's impatience revealed itself.

For a few moments, the utter silence was all that was in the room. The stench of sweat that came from Orrlian suddenly became evident to Arkaneh, as he was sweating profusely by now. *If Fenia was left to watch this, I don't know how she would have reacted... a part of me wishes that I could see it.*

"Your minute has passed," Talimay pointed out.

"I think... I think I remember giving to Genford, Jim, and Tyrell."

## D. Sharon

"Anyone else?" Arkaneh asked.

"No... W-Wait! I also gave it to Braden. I-I think that's all of them."

Without so much as saying another word, Talimay simply left the room, with Arkaneh on her tail, leaving Orrlian alone in the room once again. As she closed the door behind her, she began thinking to herself, stroking her chin and staring away. "We're going to have to check those four guys," she said.

"Right." Arkaneh agreed. "This is good. We're almost there, Talimay."

"Yeah..." her face remained distant. "I'm going to inform Reus." She hurried to leave the room. Arkaneh knew that something was going through her mind. Talimay looked far too troubled for someone who was so close to revealing the rat she so sought to catch. He left the room after her and saw her talking over her SmartWrist a few feet away from him. The troubled expression still hadn't left her face. Arkaneh left her alone for several minutes, hoping that by the time she's done talking to Reus, she'll be calm enough to talk to him.

Fenia joined him a moment later. "Well, what did you get out of him?" she asked.

"Four members had access to his SmartWrist at some point. We'll have to check all of them. One of them is probably going to be our rat."

"I see."

"Fenia," Arkaneh said. "you're in charge of our Nucleus sites, right?"

"Right."

"I was wondering... how is Men of Midas doing?"

Fenia chuckled. "What peeked your fucking interest?" she sent a teasing stare his way. "Well, since you're so fucking curious, we're actually not doing that well, to be honest. Drug deals in the Rockbury and Fallhalt districts have gone down in numbers. The rest of the districts keep a relatively regular amount of income."

*It's absurd to think that an organization run by a man as wealthy as Mallstrom can fall into such a tough situation. Drug trafficking in this*

## Bullet and Blade

*organization's primary source of income. Reus never wanted to spread any further in his illegal business. I'd guess that that probably has something to do with his infamous tendency to paranoia.* "Thank you, Fenia," he said. He then started walking towards Talimay, who by now had finished her phone call.

"You look troubled," he said to her.

Talimay remained silent for a few more moments, keeping her thoughts to herself, making Arkaneh wonder what could be running inside her mind. "Those men he mentioned..." she finally opened up. "They've been in this organization almost as long as I am. I can't believe one of them could betray us like that."

"Don't be naïve, Talimay." Arkaneh shrugged. "Loyalty is just another part of business nowadays. It's all about who's offering you the most. Whoever did it, If the Justicars offered him a lot of money, it only makes sense that he would do it."

"There was a time when loyalty couldn't be bought, wasn't there?" she asked the question as if she was hoping for an answer that would fill her with a glimmer of hope, but Arkaneh knew that the truth wasn't such an answer. Therefore, he remained evasive.

"I wouldn't know," he said. "By the time I grew up in this country it seemed like if such a time ever existed, it may have been long before any of us was made."

"And what about you, Arkaneh Frye?" she turned to him, her eyes suddenly appearing devious. "Would you betray us if someone would've offered you more money?" *She cornered me. I keep forgetting that she's smart. But why would she ask me that? Does she not trust me? Does she suspect me? I may have to keep my eye on her even more now.*

"In my case, my sense of loyalty is equal to my sense of greed, so I think I would've killed whoever would've tried to bribe me and take the money anyway. This is Men of Midas after all, isn't it?" a wry smile appeared on his face. "A golden key can open any door."

Talimay smiled back. "You're a smart man, Arkaneh," she said. "This organization needs people like you now more than

ever."

"Now more than ever?" he wondered what she meant.

"Yes. These are dire times. Our Vex suppliers over at Cuba ran into some trouble, so we didn't get any supply shipment over at Herkin Port for two weeks now, which is making us lose money." *Everyone in Alataria knows and fears Men of Midas for their ever-growing strength and wealth. No one ever dares to think that they might be in a financial crisis.* "Plus, we just lost one of our biggest drug dealers in the organization, Odis Maben."

"What do you mean, lost?"

"He was murdered by that ex-soldier and that teenage whore." The mention of them lit up Arkaneh's memory. *I remember those two. Griffiths once showed me their pictures, saying that everyone in the organization is well aware of them and is looking for them.* "I don't know what their deal is, but they've already killed three other members, and I'm just dying to get my hands on them."

"So, what are we doing in the meanwhile?"

"Well, to make up for our losses on the drug front, we've sold a decent amount of the guns we bought from Code Sanguinary to mob gangs abroad, as well as a small quantity to Harley Nation stateside."

"Are you sure that's such a good idea? They're at war with Lady Dread, and we have some business with Sunyula Trife. She sells us the girls that make places like the Godly Succubi profitable."

"True, without her human supply the Godly Succubi wouldn't have anything to offer our clients, but like I said, these are dire times. Their war is precisely why Harley Nation is looking into buying firepower, and they make for a nice buyer. Reus has already given us the okay to go about this way. If Sunyula ever finds out about this, we'll just have to make her understand. This isn't about picking sides. This is about plain survival."

An odd observation came to Arkaneh "I'm surprised you're willing to share this information with a tenderfoot."

Talimay made a long sigh. Her eyes drifted away as if she entered memory lane and her mind was far away now. She



## Bullet and Blade

took a quiet, slow step aside. All of a sudden, the rough Golden Marauder seemed much more fragile and much more human. "I joined Men of Midas 5 years ago when I was 18 years old. I had just finished high school and had no idea where I was heading. My boyfriend at the time was already a member, and before I knew it, I was too. I adored him. I believed his way was the only right one. Shortly after, the Justicars made their debut in Alataria by having multiple attacks on all mob gangs. Code Sanguinary, Lady Dread, the Ferals... everyone suffered at least one or two attacks by them. It felt so... arrogant of them, to make enemies on so many fronts as if they thought they could take on every single mob gang in the country by themselves." She remained silent a moment before her next sentence. Her eyes now seemed to be further away. "My boyfriend died in those first attacks, and I was left alone in a world of violence and mayhem that I entered without giving it too much thought. My first instinct was to quit, but... as time went by I began to accept that strange world. I became a natural part of it, and it became a natural part of me. By the time Reus noticed my efforts, I was still considered a tenderfoot, but he looked at me and told me that he knew I was trustworthy. That he knew I could bring something good to the organization. He said the same thing about you. He doesn't care if you're a tenderfoot or not. He can see the potential in people beyond that. So I'm not just sharing this information with a tenderfoot, but with a trustworthy one."

*Trustworthy...* the word flung around his head like a ball, bouncing off all the walls. The man who shot two other members, Ferro and Graysen, just to gain the lieutenant's attention. The man who pulled off a dangerous plan to gain a small list of suspects for being the rat, without any care for who or how many might die in the process. That was the man that she called 'trustworthy.' *Such irony... such ignorance...*

"In any case," she continued. "This rat is now within grasp reach." She couldn't help but let her lips quiver as she said that. Arkaneh knew how badly Talimay wanted to get her hands on

the traitor, and as much as he would've loved to be rid of him as well, he knew that she was burning with it far more. Her brother, Heycliff, died during a store robbery that was intercepted by the Justicars, meaning that the rat could also be responsible for her brother's death. But as much as Talimay wished to exact her revenge and perhaps even get some peace of mind on that end, there could be none of that in Alataria.

"I think we should—" a sudden blast was heard coming from the interior hall of the factory. A set of shouts and yells followed it. Arkaneh and Talimay looked at each other and guessed what it could have been. An attack.

The two rushed out of the room and made their way to the interior hall in a flight. Talimay drew her gun from its holster by the time they reached the hall, and Arkaneh drew his own. Entering with their weapons aimed, the two were shocked to see the large gaping hole where the metal entrance doors to the factory used to be. Scorched pieces of metal were riddled everywhere, and what remained of the doors were so bent out of shape that they couldn't resemble their previous form anymore. A wave of white-wearing Justicars poured through the blasted entrance, armed with submachine guns. *The Justicars? What is the meaning of such an attack?* Without thinking much, Arkaneh rushed to cover himself behind a thick pillar, reaching only a second before a hail of bullets rained through the hall. Almost a dozen other members were in the hall, ready to fight back. A few were brave enough to try to return fire during the Justicars' suppressing fire while the rest stayed behind cover. Arkaneh peeked behind the pillar, only to watch two of those brave ones get shot several times and fall down, lifeless. *How foolish it was for them to try to return fire under such a heavy attack. They should've waited like the rest for a pause.*

Arkaneh looked aside and saw Talimay hiding behind one of the heavy machinery that was all around the factory. Her face was red with fury and her hand was steady and blood-thirsty.

Once the Justicars' fire came to a significant drop in firepower, she came out of her cover and fired as many shots

## Bullet and Blade

as her pistol allowed her before returning to reload behind the machinery. Arkaneh watched as three Justicars went down under her fire. *I guess the stories of the Golden Marauder are true. Her aim is just as sharp as her mind.*

As much as Arkaneh wished that he could be excluded from the battle, he knew that he had to take part in it if he wanted to stay alive at the end of it, and so he fired as well a few rounds. He did his best to aim at the platoon of white soldiers but didn't see any of them go down before he returned to hide behind the pillar.

Another hail of bullets suddenly came, as some of the Justicars have finished reloading their guns. *Why would they attack us like this all of a sudden? This can't be a coincidence. This has to be about the rat. Talimay openly spoke about him during her speech, so it's possible that the rat had already informed them that we know about him. But still... I didn't expect such an extreme reaction.*

Once the hail faded down again, Arkaneh used the opportunity to fire a few more rounds. This time, he saw one of the Justicars get hit by his bullets and fall to the ground. A wry smile was suddenly appearing on Arkaneh's face as if he took joy in his kill. A second before returning to cover, Arkaneh looked around the hall and noticed several bodies of the gold-wearing members lying around, riddled with bullet holes and engulfed with a crimson color. After returning to cover, Arkaneh reloaded his pistol. He had only one more magazine left. Therefore, he hoped that the fight would end soon. Otherwise, he would be helpless and defenseless.

Talimay seemed to be firing endless rounds on her part. Her hand always remained steady and firm. She showed no hints of fear or stress. She showed no willingness to retreat or surrender. She showed only courage and a desperate desire to kill.

Before the next bullet storm could rain upon them, Arkaneh hoped to fire back one more time. As he emptied his entire magazine on the White Knights of Alataria, he saw another one go down at his hand. An even bigger smile now appeared on his face. Just then, he noticed a couple of soldier

exiting the factory through the same blasted hole they came through. *Are they retreating? Why? They outnumber us, and they seem to have no reason to retreat so far. What's going on?*

Before long, half of the white soldiers were fleeing outside. "Don't let them run!" Talimay roared like a wild beast with all her strength. "Kill them!" she yelled. A series of roaring cheers followed it and before Arkaneh noticed it, the golden thugs were coming out their covers and charging what Justicars remained in the hall. *They're charging them like blind animals... such is the influence of a lieutenant.*

The Justicars tried to escape in the face of the oncoming wave of retaliation. Most of them actually managed to flee, sprinting towards the exit, but a couple of them got hit and fell. The retaliators tried firing away at the running Justicars outside, but eventually they stopped.

As the dust fell upon the interior hall, an eerie silence accompanied it, as some people held their lost brothers in their arms. Arkaneh saw how hard Talimay was trying to hide her sad expression, as she looked at the dead bodies around her. Men of Midas may have given her skin as tough as stone, but her tender heart remained the same beneath it.

"Start taking care of all the injured we have. Make a body count of those who died, while you're at it," Talimay ordered one of the members. "Find Griffiths and see if he's okay," she ordered another one.

Arkaneh sat down and tried to recollect his thoughts. *This doesn't make any sense. Why would they attack us like this and then just retreat? What was their purpose? Did we miss something?* Before he could dwell on the question long, an answer in the form of a running member appeared in the hall. The man rushed to Talimay with a concerned look on his face.

"Talimay, thank god you're alright," the man said. "We have a problem."

"What is it?" she asked.

"While the Justicars attacked you guys here, a few more of us were attack by another group of Justicars on the other side of the factory.

"Goddammit," she ground her teeth.

"That's not all," he said. "They've taken one of our people."

"Taken? You mean as in kidnapped?" at that point Arkaneh had already figured out what had happened, what the attack was meant to serve. The wave that attacked the interior hall was supposed to be a distraction to scatter Men of Midas' forces, so it would be easier for them to kidnap a member on the other side of the outpost.

"Yes," the man said. "They've taken Braden." Once the name was uttered, Talimay looked at Arkaneh. She knew what that meant, just as he did. Braden was one of the four members that were mentioned by Orrlian to have burrowed his SmartWrist. His kidnap could only mean one thing. The Justicars had just extracted their rat, and that rat was Braden.



## Maileena

Over the next couple of days, Winselt kept stopping by the motel, dropping off some groceries and checking up on Demilan. Maileena noticed an improvement in Demilan's state. He was breathing much better and had more strength to walk. He still had his moments of weakness that required a short rest, but she knew that it would not be long before he would finally end his rehabilitation process.

One afternoon, while Winselt was not there, she sat on the bed alone and watched the recent news on the television. The news anchor spoke of a recent rise of a violent cult known as the Serath in Mexico and several states in the United States. Its followers, who are called Serathons, believe that the true world order should be much more archaic, which categorized them as anarchists. They claim that the current world leaders got their powerful position by either inheriting it or scheming and backstabbing their way to it, and most if not all of them abuse their power and care very little about their people. The Serathons like to mention the leaders of the countries of the Middle East as examples of this claim, as wars and death currently occupy that region of the world. They wish to bring the world to shambles and ruins, to create a perfect picture of chaos and anarchy wherever they are, for only then can the true leaders among the remaining people rise to power by

## Bullet and Blade

proving themselves worthy in such a devastated world.

Later, as the anchor turned to local news, he mentioned a Justicars attack on one of Men of Midas' outposts, in Ravenwey Burrows. He then turned to talk about a serial killer called the Tri-Surgeon. Maileena, who had never before heard of him, wondered where such a name came from. The anchor said APD had announced that the killer's latest discovered victim turned out not to have been killed by the Tri-Surgeon, but rather by someone else. The victim was apparently a member of Lady Dread and was discovered at a demolition site in Morth City, Fallhalt.

Even though there was no mention of the soldier and teenager who were still on the run after murdering several people, she knew that no one in Men of Midas was going to forget about them anytime soon. *At worst case for them, if they won't catch us for a long time, they'll simply hand over the chase back to APD.* Even with so much risk involved, Maileena never regretted her actions. It was all worth it if it meant saving Vera.

Vera was very young, only 12 years old, so she never knew everything that was going on in the world. Stories like the ones Maileena just heard on the news usually never reached her sister. Maileena tried her best to keep her from harm's way and make sure that she doesn't find out too much about the ugliness around, but at some point it was inevitable. Even though they never spoke about it much, Vera knew that Maileena was working in that sleazy club, but they never got into detail about what she did there. Deep inside, Maileena always felt like Vera knew a lot more than she seemed to, and a part of her always felt like even though she never quite told Vera about the things she had to do and endure in the Godly Succubi, her little sister already knew about them.

At times, Maileena wondered if there was ever any point in trying to protect Vera from the world. *Sooner or later, everyone gets a taste of the bitter flavor of this country.*

Maileena grabbed her revolver and looked at it, admirably. The metal barrel shone brightly as the sun rays hit it through the gaps in the closed window. By now, its weight felt much

lighter, and the handle seemed much more comfortable in her mind. She had grown used to her tool of death. She remembered her latest use of it, against the member of Men of Midas who tried to kill her under the order of his lieutenant, Connor Griffiths. When she stood there, aiming her gun at him with a shivering hand and a racing heart, she felt fear. It was not fear for her life, but for her sister. With Maileena dead, there would be no one to save Vera, and she would be condemned to a life of misery and sadness under the iron fist of men like Kleon Hanford, who runs the Godly Succubi.

Maileena always hated Kleon. She thought of him as a wretch who deserves a slow, painful death, one that must make him feel the never-ending torment and suffering of the girls in the VIP section of his club. He used to get drunk many times at the club, and when he did, he would occasionally pick one of the girls in the club and take her to his office, where he would have sex with her and then throw her out of the door. Most of the times, he would pick one of the regular, older girls in the club, but on some occasions, he would feel in the mood for one of the little girls in his VIP section. Maileena could never forget the fright in her heart every time he did. She feared he would pick her every time, but fortunately for her, he never did. *When I had to shoot that man who tried to kill me recently, I only hit him in the shoulder. When I'll be aiming my gun at Kleon, I'll put a bullet through his goddamn head.*

She rose from the bed with the revolver in hand and aimed at the window. She imagined that everyone who had ever hurt her before stood there, whether if it were the members of Men of Midas who raped her when Demilan found her, the various filthy, lecherous men who had their way with her at the Godly Succubi, or Kleon Hanford himself. With no bullets loaded in the gun, she pulled the trigger. A small metallic click sound came from the weapon. She did it repeatedly, imagining it was a different person standing in front of her each time.

"You're not holding it right," Demilan woke from his bed at some point. His hair looked greasy and damp, as he had not taken a shower since the day before, and his stubble had grown



## Bullet and Blade

much thicker by now. "I've told you before I'm going to have to teach you how to properly hold that gun." Making a small sound of ache, he came to his feet and stood behind Maileena. As she raised the gun forward, his hands wrapped around hers, stabilizing them and correctly positioning them, as only a trained soldier like him would know. His grip felt firm, despite the fact that he was not at his best. Demilan positioned Maileena's right-hand fingers much tighter around the handle and placed her left hand slightly lower for her to have a more stable hold and accurate aim.

"Try it like this," he said. Once she pulled the trigger again, Maileena felt much sharper. Her hands were much steadier and holding the gun felt easier. "Remember to take a deep breath before letting off a shot. Concentrate and block out everything that's not your target." She did exactly as he said. She took a deep breath before pulling the trigger again. "Good," he said. "Have you thought of a name for the gun yet?" he asked her.

"No. I tried, but... I couldn't come up with a name that would fit it." she then remembered how Demilan once mentioned Sunyula Trife's named weapon. A double-bladed sword she named Scarlet Thorn. Stories about her sword said that even though she was highly trained with it, Sunyula would rarely use it. *They say she saves it for special victims. One of the known occasions where she used it was when she executed the three lieutenants of Harley Nation some time ago. She stabbed them with it multiple times before cutting their heads off and leaving their bodies at Harley Nation's outpost in Hawksen, Brontspil.*

"Think of something that defines you. That might help." Demilan suggested. "And in any case, you should keep practicing."

"I will," she promised him. She knew she had to, to become stronger, and that was all she ever wanted, to be strong enough to protect her loved ones. She could never save her parents. She could never protect them, but she was willing to practice for years if she had to, in order to be able to protect Vera.

Every day since then, every couple of hours, Maileena would stand in the middle of the motel room and aim her

empty revolver at the window. Every time, Demilan would note her about whatever she was doing wrong, whether if she forgot to take a breath before firing, or even wrongly positioning her feet on the ground. She took every piece of advice he gave her and embroidered it in her mind. With each pull of the trigger, Maileena felt her blood rushing. She took the shot again and again, feeling like the hammer of justice each time, as she pictured a different person getting the shot every single time. *They never gave a fuck about me as they raped or beat me. I will act the same as they'll stand on the opposing side of this barrel.*

One day, while Demilan rested on his bed, awake, and Maileena watched the view outside through the gaps in the window shutters, Winselt came knocking on the door. Maileena ran to the door, as always with her gun drawn. After peeking through the peephole and recognizing the scarred soldier, she let him in. To her surprise, Winselt did not actually have any groceries with him this time. "I'm afraid I've brought slightly too much this time," he explained himself. "I could barely carry them all the way here. I left the bags downstairs at the reception desk. I'm going to need someone to help me carry them up here."

"I'll go." Demilan volunteered.

"Stay in that bed," Maileena frowned at him. "Rest as much as you can. I'll go." Winselt chuckled at the face of the young girl's prowess.

Together, they went downstairs. "How is he?" Winselt asked her.

"He's getting much better. It won't be long before he's fully recovered." She replied. *Demilan... recovered... will he ever be truly recovered? A man so mentally and physically scarred... will saving Telia truly be his redemption? Will it put an end to his sorrow and pain?* The questions begged answers in her mind, but she couldn't give them any.

As they reached the reception desk, she saw four plastic bags resting on the floor near the desk. She hurried to pick two of them up but as she was about to lift them off the floor, she

## Bullet and Blade

raised her head and stopped. A man stood at the reception desk, talking to the motel manager, ordering a room to stay in. As she recognized his face, she felt a staggering pinch at her heart, and as he looked at hers, he recognized her as well. Suddenly her blood boiled and her memory sprang into action. She remembered him all too well. She remembered his round glasses, his snarky smile and most of all, the hits his rough hands inflicted on her at the Godly Succubi. She never knew his name, but she knew that he has been to the VIP section more than once, and each time he picked her, his favorite toy, to have his way with. His eyes met hers. There was no doubt that the two knew each other, but Maileena quickly turned back to cut off the eye contact as fast as possible.

Her first instinct told her to draw her revolver, load a bullet and shoot it through his skull, but a split-second later, it made room for logic. *I can't just attack him like this. It would be stupid and would force us to leave this motel. I have to remain calm.*

Maileena hastened up the stairs back to the room, still holding the two bags in hand. "See which room that man at the desk goes to," she whispered to Winselt as she passed by him. The man with the long scar did not respond. He remained calm instead, understanding that he was dealing with a delicate situation. She expected nothing less from such an experienced soldier.

Once she was back in the room, she dropped the bags on the floor and turned to Demilan. "We have a problem," she said to him. "I'm pretty sure someone just recognized me downstairs."

"What? Who?" Demilan rose to his feet with an appalled expression.

"There was this guy at the reception desk... he... he used to be a regular at the Godly Succubi." A sense of shame overcame her. "He liked to be violent with me... when he wasn't sleeping with me." Demilan's hands clutched into fists. Maileena wondered if he was agitated because of his concern for her or because of the danger that the two of them were in now.

Winselt walked into the room with the other two bags in hand. "He went into the room at the end of the corridor," he said as he rested the bags on the floor.

"What do we do?" Maileena asked. "We can't just leave him alone. He knows me. He might report my location to Kleon."

"She's right," Winselt agreed. "If he just recognized her, it puts you in a dangerous spot."

Demilan covered his face with his hands as he thought to himself. He walked around the room for several seconds before speaking his mind. "We can't kill him," he said, decisively. Maileena felt crushed, as she hoped that it would be the only possible solution.

"Why not?" she begged. "We can't risk him—"

"We can't kill him." Demilan's voice rose at her. "If his body is found, APD will be crawling all over this motel, which is the last thing we need."

"He's right. You can't kill him," Winselt said. "At least not here."

"So... what do you suggest?" she asked.

Demilan turned to Maileena. He gave her a piercing gaze and laid his hand on one of her shoulders. "I know what you want," he said, looking sincere. "You want to hurt him as he hurt you." Deep down, Maileena knew that he truly did know what she felt. Perhaps he was the only one around her who could. Only a man like Demilan, who had the same desire as her to have his payback at the people who hurt him in the past, could understand her at that moment.

"Please..." her eyes almost teared up as she begged him. "Please let me do it. Let me kill him." She couldn't remember the last time she had to beg for something like that. She felt a hint of shame at that moment, yet she pushed that feeling back. She didn't care about it as long as she could get what she wanted.

"You can't kill him..." Demilan said, apologetically. "But you can do something else." A flicker of a smile wove into his lips.

The three discussed what they would do, and a few minutes

## Bullet and Blade

later, they all walked out of the room and headed for the violent pervert's one. Demilan knocked on the door several times. He looked ready, though still slightly frail from weakness. Winselt stood fiercely. Looking stern and fearless, he stretched his hands. Maileena's body shook, her hand itching for the revolver in the back of her pants. She looked around to see if no one was looking. The hallway was vagrant as a deserted home and silent as a graveyard.

They could hear footsteps nearing to the door, slow and steady. *Is he paranoid? Is he frightened to reach the door? He never seemed that way whenever he would hit me, perhaps he saw Winselt and it's him that he's scared of.*

As the door creaked open just a bit, Winselt and Maileena both stepped aside to get out of sight, just as they discussed they would. Demilan, who was the only one that the violent pervert had not seen so far, appeared before him through the small gap. "Who are you?" the pervert asked in a low voice, hinted with dread.

"Hi, I checked out of this room a few hours ago and I think I may have left some things of mine in there," Demilan said to the man. "Would you mind if I come in just to take a quick look?" the man hesitated, it was clear. He looked around, yet he could not see anyone besides Demilan, who merely presented a charming smile and an innocent appearance. "It'll only take a few minutes, I promise," Demilan said.

With a long sigh, the man surrendered. "Alright, make it quick." He opened the door wide, only to learn a second later just how big of a mistake he had made. Maileena and Winselt charged into the room along with Demilan, who closed the door behind him. Winselt struck the man with a fast, yet hefty punch, sending the man to the floor with a shocked look on his face. Maileena felt as if someone had just strummed a string of joy in her heart.

Before long, the pervert man found himself shirtless, gagged with a pillowcase and tied to a chair using power cables taken from the television in the room. It was just like how Odis ended up, only, this time, Maileena would lead the

torture.

"I'm going to show you something I've learned just recently. They call it Looking Back. The way it works is you either answer my questions or make it much worse for yourself." She held Demilan's knife in front of the man, stroking his face with the black, cold blade. As the sharp knife grazed against the man's bristles, his pupils dilated with terror. Wherever he showed panic and misery, Maileena only found joy and satisfaction. Winselt and Demilan stood behind her, not even daring to intervene. They knew this moment belonged to her and her alone.

"Do you remember me?" she leaned in front of him. The man looked frightened to the core, as hot sweat covered his face. He tried mumbling something through the rag, but it was too inaudible. In response, she slashed his upper left arm, seeing every spill of blood that came of it as the nectar of justice. The man screamed and cried beyond the muffling rag. "I asked you a question. Do you remember me?" this time the man nodded instead of trying to speak. Tears still ran down his face. "Do you remember what you used to do to me?" her voice rose and her eyes burned. Her free hand clutched around one of his. The man once again tried mumbling something but was met instead with another cut from the dark blade on his upper left arm, followed by another one to his right one. He writhed through the rag, his feet stomping at the ground like a wild animal. "See what I did there? Every time you fail to give me an answer, you get the same pain you got before, only more of it." Small drops of blood painted red lines down his arms. "Now, do you remember what you used to do to me?" the man nodded as before. *Of course you remember, you sick fuck. I'll never forget that joyous face you had whenever you had your way with me. You were in such euphoria that I doubt you'll ever forget our moments together.* "Are you going to tell anyone that you saw me here?" she asked. The man shook his head aside. "No one at all?" he shook it again. "Not anyone in Men of Midas?" he kept shaking his head. "Not Kleon Hanford?" this time the man tried speaking again through the rag, which both displeased

## Bullet and Blade

and pleased Maileena at the same time. She gave him another set of slashes, another one at his upper left arm, another one at his upper right arm and one on his chest. "Are you going to tell Kleon Hanford?!" she asked again. The man went back to shaking his head, in between weeping and agonizing in immense pain. "Now listen to me," she grabbed his jaw, forcing him to look deep into her vicious eyes. "You're going to check out of this motel. Make up an excuse for the manager at the reception desk for all I care. Get the fuck out of here and remember what you just said. If I have to learn you said anything about me, my two friends behind me will track you down and kill you." His head shook in her hand. "Do you understand?" the man quietly wept. Maileena refused to take it for an answer and raised the knife once more, but this time a voice from behind stopped her.

"Maileena," Demilan interrupted her. "I think that's enough. We cannot have him go outside bleeding all over the place. Besides, he's going to lose too much blood at this rate." Maileena turned back to Demilan. As he saw her eyes, he was taken back a bit. The fire in them, her astounding thirst for blood and her sense of rapture at every spill of blood he gave. They all showed on her face, and while he seemed hesitant at first, he stood his ground. "Give me the knife." He extended his hand. Every inch of Maileena's body told her to refuse him and keep cutting the pervert man. *It's justice. He deserves it. He needs to suffer like I did.* A voice in her mind told her. She wanted to ignore Demilan and keep on torturing the pervert. She wanted to inflict as much pain on him as possible. She saw nothing wrong in her actions, and still a part of her knew that Demilan was right. In the end, her common sense beat her primal instincts, as she handed the knife over to Demilan. He looked relieved as she did.

Winselt and Demilan bandaged the man's wounds and cut him loose. A few minutes later, they saw him checking out of the motel downstairs. Once he left the motel, Demilan looked at Winselt and nodded at him. Without speaking a word, Winselt went downstairs and left the motel as well.

The next day, Winselt came to the motel at noon. When Maileena greeted him, he gave her a photo while a hint of a smile appeared on his face. When Maileena looked at the photo, she felt once more as if someone had strummed the strings of joy in her heart. Demilan was right, they couldn't kill the man, at least not right there and then. That was why they had to force him out of the motel. Once he left and was far enough, it was much safer to kill him without making the police come to the motel.

As Maileena looked at the photo of the violent pervert's bloody corpse, she humbly thanked Winselt and embraced the photo into her chest. For the first time ever, she felt that justice had been done in Alataria.





## Edward

The long days at the station made Edward weary. Every day reporters would harass him, begging to know more about the Tri-Surgeon case and its progress. Edward refused to face them, sending Trisslin in his stead each time to either give them an evasive answer or simply shoo them away. The paranoia that plagued him recently didn't help either. Insomniac nights became a routine, as he developed a habit of looking over his shoulder to spot any soldiers of Code Sanguinary, as well as losing sleep over thinking about it.

Ever since he met the Justicar known as Forseti, he's been wondering if he had made the right decision. *Above all right now, I want to catch the Tri-Surgeon and amend my tarnished reputation, but... is it worth cooperating with Justicars? They're my enemy. They're killers and criminals disguised as vigilantes. Besides, if word about this gets out to Dillard, he'll put the bullet in me himself. He hates the Justicars more than anything, everybody knows that. He believes their façade and portrayal make them appear as a better solution to Alataria's crime situation than APD. Goddammit, I must be out of my mind.*

Forseti called Edward two days earlier, asking Edward to him all the files APD had on the killer's victims. Beyond that, Edward and Forseti hadn't had any other interaction so far. Obviously reluctant at first, Edward tried talking Forseti into forsaking his request, but the sarcastic Justicar insisted that it

was necessary if they were to find the link that binds the victims. Given an encrypted website on the Nucleus to upload the files to, Edward did what he perceived as unthinkable and sent the victims' record files to Forseti via the website. *This is for the case*, he said to himself as he did it, trying to justify it against his own gut feelings. *This will help us capture the Tri-Surgeon.*

Sitting at his desk, Edward's black SmartWrist's display lit up and rang. The number that was calling him was blocked. He snapped the SmartWrist straight and picked up the call, already knowing who it was. "How's my favorite police officer?" Edward could recognize Forseti's voice. He carefully looked around him before speaking back to make sure no one was watching or listening to him.

"Well, if someone could just shoot all those journalists and reporters who keep showing up at my office door, I would have been a lot better," Edward said with a sigh.

"Last time I checked, you had a gun yourself. I'm sure you'll be much happier doing it yourself." As much as Edward found Forseti amusing, he couldn't afford to waste time on jokes.

"Did you make any progress with the files I sent you?" he asked.

"I did," Forseti replied. "I want to show you what we've found. Can you come over at around 6 PM? The address is 2<sup>nd</sup> Goodman Street."

"Here? In Morth City?"

"Yeah."

"Sure, I'll come."

"Good. When you get there, go up to the second floor. Apartment 3."

"Alright, I'll be there." He hung up the call, wrapping his SmartWrist back around his wrist.

Later that day, as he made his way out of the station, he started hearing a loud commotion taking place outside once he neared the exit doors. A few officers stood in the station's entrance hall, staring out through the glass doors at the large crowd outside. Edward recognized Trisslin among the staring

## Bullet and Blade

officers.

Looking outside the glass door as well, he saw a mass of journalists, holding microphones and recorders at hand, all pointed at the man who's been stealing the spotlight everywhere on the media recently, Archell Sherwood. The Vice Chief of Police looked elegantly calm and confident against the waves the urging questions and unending inquiry that the sea of reporters flung at him.

"What's going on?" Edward asked Trisslin as he inched closer to her. "Did he call for another press conference?"

The dark-headed officer responded with a hinted laugh. "Yeah. It's basically the same as every other interview and conference he attended before. Making vague promises and updating the media on the progress of certain cases." *Sherwood had made so many appearances on the media lately. Another press conference like this one seems so needless and pointless. Could it be that he's doing it on purpose? But why? Sherwood is still Dillard's subordinate. He wouldn't do this without his permission.* At that moment, a terrifying thought came to Edward, like an arrow shot in his chest. *What if Dillard is making him do this? What if Dillard is grooming him to be his successor and he's already making sure everyone in Alataria knows who he is, especially ringleaders? Back at Derlick's funeral, he said that he was 'old and weary' and he mentioned that he had spent 40 years on the force. Could he be retiring? And if he does, is it a good thing or a bad thing? Sure, Dillard is a prick that APD would be better off without, but Sherwood isn't exactly a role model as well. There are plenty of rumors of his conniving nature and corrupt tendencies as it is. As far as I know, he's just another Dillard in a different name.*

"What do you make of him?" he asked her.

"Sherwood? I don't see too many good qualities in him if I have to be honest. He's too cocky and confident in front of the media. He makes it look like everything's perfect in this country, even though we all know it's not. At least when Dillard used to appear in the media, he kept his cool and didn't sprinkle words of reassurance."

"I see. Do you think he's worse than Dillard?"

## D. Sharon

"I don't know. Don't get me wrong, I'm not a fan of Dillard, but some rumors are going around about Sherwood. Some say he's a Vex addict in secret, which is very worrying, but the one rumor that frightens people in APD more is the one that says he's against Dillard's tendencies of taking bribes from powerful men and ringleaders. Apparently, Sherwood is almost obsessed with leaving his mark on this country, and he thinks that bringing down the criminal organizations is the way to do it. If Sherwood ever rises to take Dillard's seat, there's a chance he'll declare war on all the mob gangs."

"And why is that a bad thing?"

Trisslin looked at Edward and giggled. "Your constant seek for peace and justice... don't you ever get tired of it?" she turned her gaze back outside. "Don't you see how many cops will lose their lives in such a war? Alataria will turn into a battlefield. Every district will be engulfed in bullets and bodies."

"They're already like that."

"No, they're not. Trust me. I'm talking about the way it was eleven years ago, in 2034.

"You mean during Operation Cleanser?"

"That's right. Operation Cleanser was a bloodbath and you know it. Bodies were piling up on the streets back then, and there was no positive outcome whatsoever in the end."

Edward wasn't a cop eleven years ago, but he knew very well all about Operation Cleanser and the bloody gang war that precluded it.

In 2034, a large feud between the Ferals and several other gangs, Men of Midas and Code Sanguinary among them, escalated into war. They called in the Clash of Rampage, and it was considered to be one of the bloodiest gang wars Alataria had ever known. Shortly after the Clash of Rampage ended, APD tried launching a nation-wide operation to arrest or kill all members of the Ferals. It was retaliation for the gang war that left so much wreckage in the districts it took place in. Since the gangs on the other side of that war were all bribing APD's highest ranking officials, and the public demanded

## Bullet and Blade

retribution for the mayhem and chaos the Clash of Rampage caused, APD was left with only the Ferals as a target. *I remember that time. I was much younger, but I still remember the gunfights and chaos that ensued in almost every district in Alataria back then. Operation Cleanser was eventually considered a failure. Many lives were lost, and the Ferals miraculously survived through it.* "The Ferals' ringleader, Jegaar Hill the Wendigo, must still be boasting about how they survived it that to this day," Trisslin said, her lips twitching in anger. "That's why Sherwood rising to leadership might not be the best thing. We could be facing another Operation Cleanser."

*Another Operation Cleanser... I can't think of anything worse than another stain on APD's reputation alongside dozens of lost lives. But... then again...* "isn't that what we need?" he finished his thought out loud. "I mean, going all out against the mob gangs—"

"Let me stop you right there," Trisslin interrupted him. "I get where you're going with this, but you need to wake up from that stupid dream of yours, where Alataria could be a peace-ruling country, with no crime and violence. That will never happen, and if you naïve enough to think that it can, then I'm not going to be able to convince you otherwise." By now, Edward had grown sick of Trisslin's attitude and ideals. The more he had to spend time with his partner, the more he found his ideals clashing with hers.

"People like you are the very reason why we need another Operation Cleanser in the first place," he sneered at her. Trisslin didn't respond, most likely knowing that there was no point in escalating the conversation further. Neither of them was going to understand the other.

On that note, Edward bid Trisslin goodbye and left the station, with the tumultuous noise of the press accompanying him all the way to his car. He drove all the way to the address Forseti gave him. The address led him to an old apartment building, decorated with dirty white tiles and rust-shaded windows. He entered a barely-lit stairwell and climbed to the second floor. He knocked on the door to apartment 3. Several seconds later, a white-masked figure opened the door.

## D. Sharon

"Welcome to my humble establishment," Forseti's voice came through the mask.

"You mean, this is where you live?" Edward asked as he stepped inside.

"No," Forseti admitted. "But this is a place of operations for us, among other things." Edward noticed two other people in the apartment's living room, both also wearing white masks. Edward could distinguish that one of them was a male and the other a female. All of a sudden, Edward noticed how uncomfortable he felt being alone in a room with three Justicars. If their desire were to take him out, they would be able to do so without even making too much of an effort.

"So... I guess this is your investigation team?" Edward said in an awkward voice.

"You can call them that, though this isn't the entire team," Forseti said. "Oh, where are my manners? Edward, these are... well, let's call them Mars and Themis." he pointed at the male and female Justicars, respectively. Mars was a hefty, muscular man while Themis had a slender body figure and an average height.

Edward looked around the apartment. It was nicely furnished and, at first sight, seemed to be in good condition, but after taking a deeper, longer look at his surroundings, he noticed several things. The apartment was littered with specks of dust, which suggested no one had cleaned it in a long time, and in the kitchen laid a bowl of fruits, all of which looked pretty old and even slightly rotten. Also, there was no indication of anyone living in the apartment anywhere around it. No pictures of anyone, no shoes or clothes laying anywhere and not even a phone to call from. All indications led Edward to believe that the apartment wasn't occupied by anyone, and as Forseti said, it was used as a place of operations for the Justicars. *If I had to guess, I'd say that trying to locate the person who owns this apartment would somehow lead me to a dead end. At best, I'd get a name that would turn out to be an alias. The Justicars really are good at being secretive, I'll give them that.*

"So, let me show you what we've found," Forseti led

## Bullet and Blade

Edward to a whiteboard that stood in the middle of the living room. The whiteboard was packed almost entirely full with photos of the victims and seemingly random scribbles near them. Edward recognized the photos from the files he sent to Forseti.

"I see my files have been of some use," Edward said.

"Are you kidding me? They're the only reason we know why these victims were chosen."

"You mean... you know what links the victims?"

"I do." Edward found it hard to believe. Vernes's entire team of investigators couldn't figure that crucial piece of information and yet Forseti and his team did. *Could it be that I've underestimated them?*

The female Justicar known as Themis rose to her feet. "Thanks to the files you've sent us, we learned that the killer's crime scenes were all connected to Lady Dread," she said. "You guys cleverly figured out that all of the crime scenes were located in structures or places of business that Lady Dread helped build up using their money loaning business. Knowing that, we've started looking for ways to connect the victims themselves to Lady Dread."

"Which didn't get us anywhere," Forseti said. "There's no record of Sunyula or any of her three lieutenants having any connection to them, except two victims, who were actually members of her gang. Basically, it got us nowhere. That's when we decided to look at this from another angle."

"Instead of looking into who Sunyula was connected to, we started using the files you sent us to look into who the victims were connected to," Themis said. "That was when we found out that the connection the victims had to Lady Dread was most of the times vicarious."

"Starting with the two victims in Basilham," Forseti said, pointing at those victims' pictures on the whiteboard. "Two females, the wife and daughter of the Mayor of Basilham. This one was relatively easy to figure out. It's well known that Sunyula has deep ties to influential men and politicians, so it wasn't hard to find articles and evidence that the two met

## D. Sharon

several times in the past, and that there are even suspicions she helped him win the mayoral elections." *He's right. I remember reading about that. At first, there were serious allegations thrown around, but quickly enough they died down.*

"The next ones are the two in Canstow," Forseti continued. "The first one was a porn actress. She was a much harder link to find, but after much search, we uncovered she was a part of a scandal that came to light a few weeks ago. She was the mistress of one of President Conrad's chief advisors, who was also close to Sunyula."

"How come I've never heard of that scandal?" Edward wondered.

"Well, it was buried pretty quickly, and never got much exposure. I guess that's what happens when you've got the President backing you. Rumors on the internet say that their affair is still ongoing, which makes sense if the killer was trying to hurt that chief advisor. Anyway, the second victim in Canstow was the brother of a major contractor. That contractor was—"

"Close to Sunyula, right, I can already guess."

"Correct," Forseti said in a cheerful manner. "Finally, we have the victim in Exumber. The son of a retired politician. That said politician also shared favors with Sunyula."

"What about the last two victims, who were members of Lady Dread?"

"Well, their connection to her is obvious, isn't it?"

"Stop joking around," Edward seemed agitated. "Don't they stand out among the victims?"

"They do. Their connection isn't vicarious but direct. If I had to guess, I'd say the killer's trying to hurt Sunyula where she would most likely feel it. Everyone we've just mentioned, all of Sunyula's friends in power, are probably aware that the Tri-Surgeon is targeting Sunyula's influential friends. He's trying to end their so-called friendship that way. I'll go on a limb here and say that the two members he killed were used to draw Sunyula's attention to his killings, to make sure she saw through his actions."



## Bullet and Blade

"This..." Edward said. "This is extraordinary."

"You can thank Forseti in particular," Themis said. "He was the one who thought to search this angle."

"But... how does this information help us now? We know what links the victims, but how can we use that to catch the Surgeon?"

"Easily. We use bait. We know the killer targets people related to powerful men who are in bed with Sunyula, so we make him aware of someone like that and we lay a trap."

"Are you out of your mind?!" Edward snapped. "You're going to use an innocent person and risk his life?"

"Nothing will happen to the bait, we'll make sure of that." Forseti was quick to respond. "I'll never hurt an innocent person." Edward found it difficult to believe the Justicar. "Edward, unlike what you and most people think, the Justicars are nothing like other mob gangs. We aim to protect citizens, not harm them."

"With all due respect, Justicar, don't distance yourself that much from other gangs," Edward said, contempt oozing out of his tongue. "You are not justice. You are just death masquerading as justice." Upon hearing this, Mars, the large, muscular Justicar came forth with a heavy stomp, infuriated. Forseti was quick enough to bring him to a halt with the wave of his hand.

"You can't possibly think that APD is any better to this country," Forseti said, sounding calm despite the insult. "Jonah Dillard actually encourages acts of bribery and looking the other way."

"I'm not about to defend Jonah Dillard, but—"

"Then who ARE you going to defend?" Forseti's voice rose in a second, like thunder in a heavy storm. "Because every other cop on the force has his pocket filled with dirty money, and I don't remember the last time APD had any major arrests or trials unless you consider that shameful attempt you recently made with Sanguinary's ringleader!" Edward tried talking back, but couldn't find the right words. Deep inside, he knew that Forseti was right, and his speechlessness was evidence of that.

"Now, we don't claim to be doing the right thing," Forseti continued. "But I WILL claim that we're doing the only thing we can. Until APD shows us that they can be trusted to deal with scums like Jegaar Hill, or Fane Hallstead, or Sunyula Trife, or Reus fucking Mallistrom, we will always be around." Edward clutched his hands. He hated being wrong, but he knew that it's been a long time since he heard such truthful words. The last time he did, they were coming from Derlick, his late friend.

"I..." Edward stammered. *'Rotten,' dad used to say. 'Rotten to the ground. Every single one of them.' Is this truly the only possible way? Is this what we've been reduced to?* Somewhere in his mind, the answers to his questions already laid. Edward was just too afraid to reach out and see them for himself. Going by APD's rules was hopeless. He knew that. On every turn, someone would try to sabotage Edward's plans, the same way it happened when he was attempting to save Blackburn's case. Either it will be Dillard himself or some other cop on a payroll. Someone will always be in the way. "Forseti," he finally said, his eyes cowering away, ashamed to look at him. "You promised me that once we capture the Tri-Surgeon, you will hand him over to APD, alive."

"I did."

"Well, now I want you to make me another promise. Promise me that nothing will happen to the bait. Promise me that you will get that person out alive and well."

"I promise."

"Alright, then," Edward took a deep breath. "Who will you use as bait?"

"Actually, we're not sure. We hoped that you could be of some assistance on that matter."

It didn't take long for Edward to think of someone. If it was an influential friend of Sunyula they were looking for, Edward just so happened to be the enemy of one. "Soleina Dillard, the wife of APD's Chief of Police, Jonah Dillard, a very powerful and wealthy man on Lady Dread's payroll," Edward said. The Justicars in the room remained silent for

## Bullet and Blade

several seconds before any of them spoke. They exchanged glances and nodded their heads.

"I think that will be a great bait," Themis said.

"I think so too," Forseti agreed.

"Very well," Edward said. "Soleina Dillard will be appearing in a television interview on Channel 2 in two days, along with Archell Sherwood."

"The Vice Chief of Police? Fascinating." Forseti stroke his chin through the white mask. "Alright, what we'll do is this: during the next two days until the interview we'll be posting as much as we can on several websites and forums that Jonah Dillard's wife will be interviewed at Channel 2's studio. We'll make sure to post it both outside and inside the Nucleus, just in case."

"I believe that studio is in Morth City," Themis mentioned.

"Hopefully, our killer will notice this and find a way to kidnap her before or after that interview. Now, before any of that happens, we'll need you, Edward, to track down any structures where Lady Dread or her lieutenants had invested in. Our killer will take our bait there, so if and when he kidnaps Mrs. Dillard, we'll be waiting for him at each of those locations."

"Sounds like a good plan, but... what if it fails?" Edward asked.

"Then we'll find another plan." Forseti chuckled.

"Alright," Edward shrugged. "Then I guess you've got everything figured out." He turned for the door. "We'll be in touch. I'll show myself out."

"Edward, wait," Forseti stopped him as he was reaching for the door handle. "Thank you," he said, sounding sincere. "I know that doing this might be a bit out of your character, but you're doing the right thing."

"No, I'm not," Edward said as he opened the door, his voice full of anguish. "I'm doing the only thing I can." He left the apartment.



## Lunarey

Sunyula Trife's mansion in Trainmor, Fraenon Hill stood tall and humongous like a titan overshadowing the people below it. It was four stories tall and was as wide as almost three average buildings. A lush front yard garden greeted her as she passed through the black metal entrance gates, along with Samuel and his two bodyguards. A circular water fountain stood in the middle of the garden, with a brick road surrounding it and leading towards the mansion's entrance, while trimmed bushes and grass as green as ripe apples decorated everything around it. It was scenery so vivid and stunning that Lunarey almost felt bad that so many others couldn't enjoy it and had to settle for the horrid views of places like St. Cyprian. Samuel and his men didn't even bother to appear as anything other than indifferent. Such luxury was no stranger to them.

As she looked up at the mansion, she saw an image she had feared ever since revealing her own identity. Above the marble steps to the mansion's large entrance doors, stood Lady Dread herself, Sunyula Trife. She was tall and slim, wearing a long, black dress that went all the way down to the floor beneath her while providing a deep neckline which ended somewhere in the middle of her chest area. Sunyula had long black hair with dark purple highlights, matching the color of her organization. She

## Bullet and Blade

had dark, sharp eyes, adorned with smoky-looking make-up and long, bold eyelashes. Her nose was long and pointy, and her lips thin and pale. Her fingernails were long and sharp, painted black. On her waist, Lunarey noticed the infamous double-bladed sword, Scarlet Thorn, resting in its black sheath. *They say she carries that sword anywhere she goes. Even when she sleeps, she keeps it close to her.*

"My child, Vaikillia!" Sunyula called, stepping down the marble steps. "Thank god you're alright!" with no warning, she embraced Lunarey with a warming hug, clutching her tightly.

"Yes, mother," the word felt foreign to Lunarey. "I'm back."

Sunyula grabbed Lunarey's chin with her hand and examined her face. Seeing her purple-shaded cheek, she frowned and her eyes narrowed. "Those savages... look what they did to you," she said.

"I'm all right," Lunarey said, indifferently.

Sunyula crouched down and leveled her face with Lunarey's. Her eyes seemed to have a sincere, honestly caring appearance, yet Lunarey knew what sort of sadism hid behind them. "Samuel told me all about your memory loss over the phone." She patted Lunarey's head. "Don't worry, everything will be alright. Come on, let's get inside." Sunyula rose back up and took her daughter's hand.

As the two walked up to the mansion's entrance doors, Samuel and the other two members tailing behind them, Lunarey's heart raced. The only thing she could find solace in was the fact that Sunyula might just be the only person who could clear the fog about how she ended up in that alley with no recollection of herself. Unfortunately, recent events had taught Lunarey that perhaps unveiling missing pieces from her past might only make her feel worse about herself.

Upon entering the mansion, a large hall greeted Lunarey. Two curved stairwells on each side of the hall led to an upper floor, while the hall itself shone with pearl-white tiles, as shiny and glossy as water. Further ahead, she could see red couches with wooden framing and a color-matching red carpet

underneath them. Two men stood in the hall, waiting for them to enter, both looking old, yet not enough to be considered OldGens.

"Vaikillia," one of them spoke. "How good it is to see you again." He smiled.

"Vaikillia, these are Richard Lane and Jeffery Carter, my lieutenants," Sunyula introduced them. While the names were familiar to Lunarey, their nicknames were much better known to her. *Richard of the Dementia, a man in his 40s who likes to use psychological drugs and methods on his victims, and Jeffery of the Ravage, a man also around the same age who prefers to abuse his victims sexually in various ways. The books said he is known to have many perversions and is rumored to have sexual tendencies for both men and women.*

Richard was tall and had short gray hair. His green eyes squinted as he smiled at Lunarey. Jeffery looked only slightly younger, with fewer wrinkles and no gray hairs. Instead, he had long, black receding hair, slicked back. He was much shorter than Richard and had a hunched back. His nose was wide and flat and his lips kept protruding in his mouth. Something about his facial expression seemed eerie and peculiar to Lunarey, and she found herself more intimidated by the pervert than the psychological torturer.

"F-Forgive me," Lunarey stuttered. "But I have no recollection of—"

"We already know," Richard calmed her.

Looking over at Jeffery, Lunarey noticed that he was examining her head to foot, his gaze running up and down more than once. "You seem... thinner." Jeffery said with a voice as eerie and creepy as his appearance.

"I-I—"

"You'll have time to catch up later," Sunyula saved Lunarey from her own muttering. "Right now, I'd like to know exactly what happened to my daughter, and I'm sure she has many questions herself."

The two men nodded and stepped aside. Sunyula escorted Lunarey ahead towards the red couches. As she looked back, she noticed that Samuel and the two members stayed behind

## Bullet and Blade

with Richard and Jeffery, knowing that they are to leave Sunyula alone with her daughter. Seeing her so-called protector left behind made Lunarey even more nervous and afraid.

The two sat on one of the red couches. Sunyula ran her hand through Lunarey's hair, caressing her like a loving mother. "Now, tell me, Vaikillia," Sunyula said. "What happened to you?"

"W-Well..." Lunarey said. "I'm not sure how I got there in the first place, but... I woke up in an alley in St. Cyprian with no memory of who I was. This girl, Kelia Hopewell found me and took me into her house. She let me stay there for quite some time."

"I can't believe you found an honest, decent person in a repulsive place such as St. Cyprian."

"Yeah, well... she didn't turn out to be an angel." Lunarey became aggravated, while also sad. "She gave me a roof and shared her food with me. She was a real friend to me... or so I thought. It turned out she knew who I was. She saw the newspapers and knew there would be a reward waiting for those who return me to you. She was the one who called Samuel."

"Oh, my sweet, poor child. You must have felt so lost." Sunyula's voice sounded sincere, yet her face remained emotionless and void as if she wasn't even trying to look compassionate.

"Do you... know how I ended up there? What happened?" the question had burned in her head for seemingly forever.

Sunyula looked down with a sigh. "It was those fuckers... those fucking bikers..." rage filled her up, as her black-painted fingernails scratched into the couch's fabric. "This war of ours with Harley Nation had made our lives much harder, and I always feared you would end up getting mixed in it. I tried my best to protect you," she caressed Lunarey's cheek.

"What exactly happened?"

"I wasn't there. Samuel was. He said you had come to visit him in Garnicel, Brontspil, when some of the bikers attacked. They caught the two of you alone, with no backup from the

outpost. You tried to run away from them and ended up separating. Samuel said he tried to go back and find you, but you were nowhere to be found. He didn't even get to see if any of the bikers had followed you, which made us all worry." Sunyula seethed. "When he told me what happened, I swore I would cut open Fane Hallstead's neck myself with Scarlet Thorn." *Fane Hallstead... the Red Rider, the ringleader of Harley Nation... he's behind my memory loss?* "I started pulling every string I had and made sure every newspaper and news broadcast would show your picture."

"But... I woke up alone. How does this make any sense?"

"I don't know, Vaikillia. Samuel was just as surprised."

"So... you don't know how I came to that alley, alone with amnesia?"

"I'm afraid not. You must have been so scared, so lost."

"I was," Lunarey bowed her head. "I was lost since I woke up in that alley. I didn't know anything about myself. All I had were some clues, like this injection mark," she raised her arm and showed her the mark. By now, it had almost faded completely away. "I had these shoes, which were supposed to be of an expensive brand, and..." she paused for a moment.

"And what?"

"And... this list." She took the piece of paper out of her pocket, which by now was crumbled. She showed it to Sunyula and noticed how her expression was changing rapidly to a drearier one. "You know these names, don't you?" Lunarey asked her. Sunyula's mouth opened slightly, but no words came out. Lunarey could already see the truth in her eyes. "These people were murdered, mutilated in horrible fashions. They were victims of your organization, weren't they?" once again Sunyula chose silence. She looked up at Lunarey with that dreary expression, her eyes seeming cold as ice. All of a sudden, a sense of fear had fallen upon Lunarey. "I need to know, mother," she said despite the growing horror in her. "I need to know why this list was with me."

Sunyula lingered her silence a moment longer before speaking. "It's true," she said. "I've never hidden anything from



## Bullet and Blade

you and I'm not about to do so now. These people loaned money from us and failed to pay us back."

"I see..." Lunarey refused to look at her mother. "So... these reactions listed here... these behavioral effects... what are they supposed to mean?"

"They... belonged to the victims. The one who... did the things he did to them wrote down their reactions."

"Why?"

"I'm not sure."

"So... who did it? Who tortured those people? Who killed them?"

Something in Sunyula's face suddenly changed. The black-purple haired ringleader remained as cold as stone, yet her eyes narrowed as if she was trying to read her daughter's mind. "You really don't remember anything, do you?" At that point, Lunarey had figured that once again she was about to face an ugly truth, one which she will forever wish to forget, yet before she could ask her to let her go on living in ignorance, Sunyula's words came shooting at her like a fast bullet. "You did it, Vaikillia. You tortured all of them. You killed all of them."

Lunarey's heart plummeted. Her ability to focus was gone. Everything turned black around her. *Why?* She thought to herself. *Why?* The question flung around her mind endlessly, hurting with each time. *Why?* She begged to know. *Why would I do that? What kind of person am I? Why did I ever deserve to have such a horrible fate? Oh, what a lovely blessing I received when I lost my memory... now that blessing is gone. Ignorance truly is bliss.*

"Vaikillia?" Sunyula's voice echoed in through the fuzziness in her mind. "Vaikillia?" Lunarey finally turned to her mother.

"My name is not Vaikillia," she said. "It's Lunarey."

"What are you talking about?" Sunyula seemed baffled.

"I said..." Lunarey rose up to her feet, staring down at her mother, the infamous Lady Dread, with the utmost contempt. "My fucking name is Lunarey!"

Sunyula reached out to grab Lunarey's hand "Why are you—?"

"Don't touch me!" Lunarey flinched.

Sunyula's expression turned dark. She wasn't used to being yelled at, and clearly she didn't appreciate it at all. Still, Lunarey didn't fear her mother. As dangerous and deadly as Lady Dread might have been, Lunarey knew that her mother would never harm her. She could see it in her. She could feel it.

"Samuel!" Sunyula called for her lieutenant. Within a few seconds, he was in the room. "Take Vaikillia to her room. She's tired and needs some rest." Sunyula seethed.

Samuel grabbed Lunarey's hand and escorted her out of the room. "My name is not Vaikillia," Lunarey whispered under her breath one more time as she walked away with Samuel.

The two climbed up the curved stairwell and entered a long hall, decorated with a purple rug that covered the whole of it. Entering the first room on its right, Lunarey found herself in a large room with a wide bed, a wooden closet, and a glass window. The bed's sheets were in the organization's traditional purple colors and the window had drapes matching it as well. It seemed to her that wherever she would go around the large mansion, she would constantly be reminded that vicious criminals were living there, with the haunting purple colors always chasing her.

"What happened?" Samuel asked her, resting his hands on her shoulders. "I can tell when Sunyula's upset. What happened in that conversation?" Lunarey looked away. She couldn't even bare to look at him. "Vaikillia, talk to me."

"Did I really kill all those people?" she finally said. Her words choked in her throat. Tears came running down her face. Her eyes remained hidden from his, looking away instead. "What kind of a fucking monster am I?" she buried her face in her hands, falling on her knees. Her soul screamed in agony through her ever-running tears. Suddenly, she felt Samuel's warm embrace, just like at the hotel.

"Calm down," he said in a soothing tone. "You're no monster, I guarantee you."

"Then why did I do it?" her voice cracked through her weeping.

"Because you were ordered to, by your mother." Lunarey

finally turned to look at Samuel. Her eyes were bloodshot and swollen and her cheeks stained with streams of her tears. "She'd been grooming you. Sunyula's not like Reus Mallistrom, who keeps himself behind the curtains while his lieutenants run his organization. She likes to take part in our actions, so she knows that one day she might... die. And if and when she does, she'd like you to replace her, just as she replaced her late father, Henrick."

Lunarey's eyes froze. *She... she made me do it...* "I hate her," she whispered. "I hate her," she repeated. "I want her to die, Samuel." Her teeth ground with rage.

"She will," he promised her. "Soon."

"When?" she begged to know.

"I don't know. Soon." It was good enough for Lunarey. She couldn't stand another minute under her mother's roof. She wanted her gone. She wanted to be free and live her life away from all the violence and death that chased Lady Dread's organization. Yet she didn't push him further for an answer. She settled for what little he gave her. She never forgot that he was a killer. She never forgot that she couldn't trust him entirely, but at her current situation, she allowed herself to find comfort in his words. *'Soon.' I'll hold you to that, Samuel of the Shatter.*



## Arkaneh

Once again, Arkaneh found himself in Basilham, Rockbury, in the marvelous glass skyscraper where Reus's personal office was. This time, Arkaneh was accompanied by both Griffiths and Talimay, as they were all scheduled to meet Reus after the latest attack made by the Justicars. The meeting was meant to bring Reus up to speed on the casualties and damages, as well as on the recent developments regarding the rat.

Griffiths was holding the car wheel with firm, yet wounded hands. Cuts and bruises were scattered randomly across his hands, arms and face. A rather long, diagonal cut on his forehead looked deep and was sure to leave a scar. During the attack, Griffiths was fighting the Justicars on the other side of the factory, out of sight from Talimay and Arkaneh. Several men died by his side on that front, and it clearly affected Griffiths. Arkaneh had known by now how much the Vex-addicted lieutenant cared about his men. The old man seemed almost heartbroken, remaining silent and grumbling most of the time. Talimay and Arkaneh also suffered some wounds, but not nearly as much as Griffiths.

Upon passing the secretary in the lobby they ran into Corellia, Reus's assistant, who had just stepped out of the elevator. "Corellia, how are you?" Talimay greeted her.

Corellia smiled sheepishly and said, "I'm alright, Miss Singh.

## Bullet and Blade

It's good to see you, Mr. Griffiths. And you too, Mr. Frye." *Once more with the formalities. It makes me sick.* Corellia seemed to be in a hurry. "I'm sorry, but I can't talk. I have to take my kid to the doctor. He's had the flu for a week now. Reus is waiting for you upstairs," she rushed to leave the building.

Griffiths snorted. "That was rude," he said.

"She needs to take care of her sick son." Talimay defended her. "You've never had any kids, Griffiths. You wouldn't understand."

The three got into the elevator and headed to the 44<sup>th</sup> floor. "Corellia... she'd been by Reus's side for a long time now, hadn't she?" Arkaneh asked.

"Most definitely," Talimay said. "She served Joseph as well. I think they're still in good contact. During her time with Joseph, she married some guy and had a baby boy with him. But that husband of hers grew violent and started drinking and beating her. For months, she suffered quietly, hoping that she wouldn't have to tear her family apart by leaving him. She knew that every family in Alataria has more chance of breaking up than staying whole, and she was desperate to beat those odds. She wanted her son to grow up with both a mother and a father." Talimay sighed for moment. "One night, that bastard drank more than usual and started beating the kid. He hit his head several times and eventually he had to be rushed to the hospital. The poor boy suffered brain damage, and to this day, he had never recovered, nor will he ever. Shortly afterwards, her husband was brutally stabbed countless times in their home." *It doesn't take a genius to figure that only Corellia could commit that murder. Every other person would settle for a couple of stabs, but if he was stabbed so many times, the killer must have had a personal score with him. Joseph surely helped Corellia by covering up her murder using his connections with APD.*

"Poor woman," Arkaneh said. *Yet in a way, she had it coming. Being so obsessed with the idea that she could hold her dysfunctional family together was the cause of it all. She must blame herself every day. Each day, she looks at her son and sees the result of her own foolish ambitions. I'd pity her, but I no longer recognize such kinds of emotions. I can't.*

Finally, the elevator reached its destination and the three headed to Reus's office. Upon entry, Reus was already seated, waiting for them, yet he wasn't alone in the room. On the couch next to him sat Charles Blackburn, ringleader of Code Sanguinary, dressed in a formal suit, with a glass of scotch in his hand and a lit cigarette between his fingers. Reus matched Charles with the same glass and lit cigarette in hand.

"Mr. Blackburn," Talimay said. "I didn't know you'd be here." She shook the General's hand. Griffiths and Arkaneh followed suit and then sat together on the broad sofa across from Blackburn.

"Charles and I just finished talking business," Reus said. "Charles, you know my lieutenants, Talimay Singh, and Connor Griffiths."

"Of course." Blackburn took a sip out of his glass.

"And this is Arkaneh Frye, one of our latest additions to Men of Midas."

"Nice to meet you," Blackburn raised his glass towards Arkaneh, in recognition of him.

"I was glad to hear that you were exonerated," Talimay said. Arkaneh could smell the hypocrisy in her words. *She doesn't really care about Blackburn. He could have rotted in jail for all she cared. Oh, how many lies and pretends must be blurted out in such meetings.*

"Yeah, well, it shouldn't have surprised you," Blackburn inhaled his cigarette and blew the smoke away. "The case was a farce, it was obvious."

"What are you talking about?"

"I could see it from a mile away. Jonah Dillard never liked the fact that I refused to play his game of bribes, and I personally never liked corrupt men like him." *Yet you're sitting with a ringleader who DOES play that game with Dillard. More hypocrisy.*

"I see," she said. "So I guess you were never worried."

"Worried? I wouldn't have worried either way. If Dillard would've gone ahead with my trial and put me behind bars, I'd accept my fate."

Talimay looked peculiar "You don't mind being locked

## Bullet and Blade

up?"

Blackburn inhaled his cigarette once more, deeply and in length. He seemed calm and at ease. "When I formed my organization during the Tearful Rebellion, I knew how it might end for me. I accepted it. I saw that outcome as very likely to happen at some point. If I'm going to end up in jail one day, so be it. My men would continue my legacy and fight our poor excuse of a government."

"Speaking of your men, they hadn't shown much activity recently." Talimay pointed out. "Sometimes we tend to forget that Code Sanguinary still exists."

"Let me remind you, Miss Singh, that unlike your organization, ours is targeted at particular people, mainly those who keep themselves shelled in the Segregated Quarter. Our actions are much more complicated and calculated than store robberies and drug trades." Blackburn's sneered. "If it were up to me, the Heart would've burned in flames and the Seditone would've been painted on every wall, but I do not have the manpower or the resources."

"Burn in flames? Do you want another Tearful Rebellion?" Arkaneh asked

"I'd like to bring the men I most despise to a fate most deserving." His fingers clawed deep into his couch's armrest. *Finally, something I can agree on with the Deserter General.* For Arkaneh, it truly was fascinating to watch the dynamic chemistry between Reus and Blackburn. Business partners dressing as friends. In their hearts, none of them cared for the other and in their heads, each thought to be superior to the other.

"Charles," Reus interrupted. "Let us change the subject to a... lighter one." He tried putting out the fire in Blackburn's eyes. "I heard you recently had quite a lot of fresh tenderfoots joining your ranks."

"Yes, President Conrad sent a squad of about a dozen soldiers to the Middle East to aid our allies there." *A gesture of good will made to maintain good relations with our middle-eastern friends in their times of war.* "They were ordered to burn down an entire

village. Innocent people died. Men, woman and children. Most of them had nothing to do with the war." Blackburn put out his cigarette in the ashtray on the table. "By the time they were shipped back home, the guilt and scars pushed them to unanimously decide to desert the army and join Code Sanguinary."

"How horrible," Arkaneh said, though looking cold and uncompassionate.

"It is awful," Reus agreed. "At least you have more people for your cause." *Blackburn still doesn't have nearly as many people as he had years ago, and he sure doesn't have enough to burn down the Segregated Quarter, or even reach inside it.*

"Meanwhile, I hear you're actually losing people," Blackburn said.

"Yes, we've suffered several blows," Reus defended. "But, we'll recover, like always."

"It seems that the Justicars had been raining fire on your organization lately, and the casualties keep rising."

"They've suffered just as many because of us," Talimay hurried to defend the honor of Men of Midas. *No, they haven't. Not yet, at least.*

"Speaking of which, you might want to be careful," Blackburn drank the last of his scotch. "Another kind of danger is heading your way. One which I'm sure you're aware of."

"Let me guess. Your former soldier and that teen whore." Talimay said with a teeth grind.

"Call them what you want, but don't underestimate that soldier. I don't know anything about that girl he's with, but Demilan McCloud is a fierce and deadly man. A ruthless sharpshooter and a dangerous threat in close quarters combat. He is a true master of bullet and blade. He was an excellent soldier in my ranks."

"Then why did you kick him out?" Reus wondered.

"A drug habit," Blackburn said with a grudge. *So it's true that Blackburn has zero tolerance for drug habits among his men.* "That fool was sniffing Vex like it was sugar. Such a shame... he was a



## Bullet and Blade

fine man... and now his wife is held by your men."

Talimay looked at Reus, thinking. "Odis..." she whispered under her breath. "He used to love doing those kinds of things to those in debt to him... now I see why that fucker killed him."

"So that's why he's been killing our people?" Reus asked. "He's looking for his wife?"

"Yes," Blackburn replied. "That imbecile recently had the balls and the stupidity to reach out to me for help. I turned him down, of course, even though he begged to me. He said that his wife is being held at the Godly Succubi. He'll be hitting that place soon. I thought you'd appreciate a heads up."

"We do," Reus seemed grateful. He turned over to look at Talimay. "Contact Kleon. Make sure to increase security at the Godly Succubi." Talimay nodded in response. "And what about this girl? What's her motive?"

"Maileena Banister," Talimay said. "I've already asked Kleon about her. He said she used to work at the Godly Succubi until she ran away. Kleon and his men went after her and ended up taking her little sister."

"I see." Reus stroked his black, trimmed beard. "In any case, don't underestimate either of them. I trust my friend, Charles, when he says that this person, McCloud, is dangerous."

"Mr. Blackburn," Arkaneh leaned forward. "You mentioned that McCloud came to see you. Why didn't you kill him? I mean, I've heard that once you banish one of your men, they're told to never return again. Wasn't what he did an act of disrespect?" Arkaneh didn't actually care about it. His question only meant to test Blackburn's response. While he had any chance to learn what kind of man Charles Blackburn is, he would use it as much as possible.

"Like I said, he was a good man and an even better soldier. Yes, what he did WAS disrespectful, but killing a man like him in such a state would be even more disrespectful." *I see... so while he's a man of honor of strictness, he also had a more reasonable side to him when it comes to his men.* "Would YOU have killed him?"

Blackburn threw the question back at Arkaneh.

"Perhaps. Respect doesn't get people very far these days. You of all people must know that best. Your archenemies who sit at the Segregated Quarter in the Heart have never shown any."

Blackburn showed the hint of a smile. "You're not wrong, I'll give you that. But maybe one day, when you'll be in a place of power such as mine, and you'll be leading groups of men into battles, you'd understand that it's not that simple. It's not just black and white, and it's not just shades of gray either. It's a whole spectrum of colors." Blackburn said. "Heavy is the head that wears the crown, Arkaneh Frye."

"Heavier is the hand that holds the gun," Arkaneh said back.

Blackburn seemed entertained. "You know, I once had a soldier just like you in my ranks. He fought beside me for many years."

"What happened to him?"

"He died in battle at some point... but he took the most fuckers with him than any other soldier of mine to this day." A grin appeared on the General's face. "It was nice knowing you, Mr. Frye."

"Same here, Mr. Blackburn."

"Reus, I'll be leaving now." Blackburn rose from his seat, ready to leave. "Don't worry, I'm sure you'll overcome any of your hardships. Your father, Joseph, always did." The two shook hands. "We'll be in touch, Reus," Blackburn said.

"Of course," Reus said. Blackburn made his way outside and closed the door behind him. *Charles Blackburn truly is an interesting character. A war veteran. A man who stands for his principles against the whole world. A man who isn't afraid to get his hands dirty. A man who places his men above all else. On all those aspects, he differs from Reus. Yet, his organization had seen better days. Similarly to the Justicars, the more years passed, the more people had lost hope in his cause.*

"Connor," Reus turned to his lieutenant. "You've been awfully quiet so far. Is there something wrong?"

"He's just a little shaken up from the recent attack,"

## Bullet and Blade

Talimay explained.

"Right..." Reus seemed indifferent to the brutal, deadly event that recently happened. *Reus cares very little about his men. Members come and members go... that's how he thinks.* "How many did we lose?"

"Ten dead. Four are wounded." Griffiths hurried to answer the question. He blurted it out so quickly, as if he was memorizing the numbers in his head ever since it happened, torturing and tormenting himself with them.

Reus got up from his seat, adjusting his suit as he did. He walked up to Griffiths and grabbed his jaw in his hand, forcing him to face him. "Get your fucking grips together!" Reus berated him. Griffiths appeared unprepared for such a reaction from Reus, as he sat there, dumbfounded, his lips twitching with no ability to speak words. "We're in a clusterfuck of trouble, and I need my lieutenants sharp and focused!"

"I-I'm—"

"Don't fucking answer me!" Reus raised his voice. The slick-haired ringleader seemed more intimidating than ever. "I have the Justicars killing my men, I have a rat in my ranks and there're a fucking drug addict and a teenage bitch who are butchering our guys by the numbers! So you better give me something a lot better than a sob and a frown!"

"Reus, calm down," Talimay said. "Griffiths will recover by the time we'll leave this office. In the meantime, I'm sure you'd like to get caught up on the rat issue."

Reus let go of Griffiths's jaw and seated himself again. "Right, let's hear it."

"Well, Arkaneh figured that the rat must be bugging different members every once in a while to throw us off. He thought that the bugging device would probably be in their SmartWrists and he was right. We let Fenia go through the SmartWrists of the 6 suspects we had and we actually found a listening device in the form of a chip hidden inside one of them."

Reus buried his face in his hands. "I was the one who first brought up the theory that we might have a traitor among us,

but I always hoped I would be wrong. Arkaneh..." he lifted his face. "Well done. Truly well done."

"Thank you, Reus," Arkaneh said.

"What else?" Reus asked.

"We interrogated the bugged man and came to know that several men had the opportunity to plant the bug in his SmartWrist," Arkaneh continued the story. "That was when the Justicars attacked. Later, we learned that the actual purpose of their attack was to kidnap Braden, who just happened to be one of the men that were listed as the potential bug planters. So we've concluded that Braden must have been their rat, and the attack was meant to extract him."

"I see," Reus said. "So we're at a dead end, I guess."

"Not exactly," Arkaneh said. "Braden was kidnapped along with his SmartWrist. Fenia is working on tracking its signal down, or at least the last location where it had a signal. We might be able to use that to locate him and the Justicars."

"Alright, keep me posted on that. Now, how are we doing on the drugs front?"

Griffiths seemed troubled before going into that subject. Clearly, it was one that pestered both the lieutenants and Reus. Most of Men of Midas' income came from drug trades, and Odis Maben was one of their best dealers. "Losing Odis landed us a harsh blow," Griffiths said. "I've managed to find him a replacement. Hopefully, we'll be able to recover all of his past clients and get back to our feet."

"That won't be enough," Reus said, decisively. "We need to push our drug trades further. In which districts are we currently selling?"

"Axfield, Rockbury, Westden Fells, Fallhalt and Waterchester."

"I want us to be selling in Silvercoast as well."

"Silvercoast?" Griffiths seemed appalled. "I don't know, Reus, that's the Ferals' territory. They might prove to be troublesome." Griffiths warned him.

"I'll speak to Jegaar Hill myself, we'll work it out." Reus seemed confident.

## Bullet and Blade

"Reus, Griffiths may be right," Talimay took his side. "Jegaar the Wendigo is not the most reasonable person, and you know that the Ferals are a very different kind of gang. They don't have any rules. They don't have lieutenants or outposts. They only have a ringleader who barely does anything to be called as such."

*She's right. Jegaar Hill is said to be demented and ruthless. The Ferals don't take part in organized crime like other mob gangs. Instead, they just fulfill their dirtiest, sickest, most twisted desires on helpless victims. Their dictum is 'So be it.' If you wish to rape, butcher or torture someone just because you feel like it, so be it. If you want to steal something or kidnap someone, so be it. You can do whatever you wish in this world. Over the years, the Ferals have gotten into many wars with various mob gangs, including Men of Midas, and no ringleader genuinely likes having anything to do with them. The only reason they're still around is because they have a vast number of members. It's not that surprising, considering the fact that Jegaar Hill is basically subsidizing serial killers and rapists.*

"Reus," Griffiths joined in. "Let me remind you that your father warred with the Wendigo in the past. He's not a man you want to make deals with."

Arkaneh knew all about the war Griffiths was referring to. That war was known as the Clash of Rampage. His uncle, Jeremy, once told him that story of that war. It was a war that precluded Operation Cleanser and the Night of Obliteration, and it set up the stage for both of those events. Up until 2035, Servein served as Alataria's main port city, as Herkin Port was yet to be built, but in that year that changed. It was a tricky time. Vex was on the streets for only two years at that time, at its customer base was gaining attraction. The Ferals were running extremely rampant during those times, going on sprees of killings that didn't seem to end, and Jegaar Hill the Wendigo wasn't putting much of a short leash on his men. Many thought that it was the new drug, Vex, which made them so. After a few incidents where some Ferals killed clients of Joseph Mallistrom, Henrick Trife and several other small gangs who no longer existed, an alliance was formed against the

Wendigo. At first, they tried demanding compensation from Jegaar, but he refused to give any, claiming that he takes no responsibility for his men's actions. *Like many say, Jegaar Hill may be titled ringleader of the Ferals, but he's far from being such. That title mainly derives from him supposedly being the founder and first member of the gang, but nothing more than that. He lets his men do whatever they wish and never cares for the repercussions.* After that, Joseph, Henrick and the rest of the small gangs warred with the Ferals for several months. During a titanic showdown that took place in the dockyards of Servein, the port was completely destroyed. Herkin Port, which was already under construction, eventually became the main port of Alataria, as funding for reconstruction never came from the government treasury. After that showdown, a truce was finally called between the warring sides, and Jegaar actually agreed to pay some compensation to the allied gangs. The small gangs, however, were almost entirely wiped out by the time that happened, and they naturally dissolved into nothingness. The surviving remnants of those gangs joined the other existing ones. To this day, the ruins of the old dockyards stand there, wrecked and useless, as a monument to themselves. Later that year, as a result of the Clash of Rampage, APD tried wiping off the Ferals with Operation Cleanser, but the Ferals surprisingly managed to survive throughout it all. *Jegaar isn't considered clever or smart by anyone, but he IS dangerous to some degree, having more manpower than any other mob gang in the country.* In addition, with Joseph weak after the war, another mob gang called Rage Legion tried to finish him off and take over his business, but ended up being wiped out in the Night of Obliteration.

"I know who Jegaar Hill is," Reus explained. "I've talked to him before. Behind all his lunacy and burning love for anarchy hides a man I can reason with. Start gathering some dealers that we can send to Silvercoast. I'll give you the go-ahead once I've talked with the Wendigo."

Talimay seemed anxious. No one in the room other than Reus liked the idea. "Very well," Griffiths said after a long sigh, looking defeated. *Reus is taking quite a risk. If this somehow escalates*

*into another war with the Ferals, I'm not sure Men of Midas will be able to recover very easily from the losses. He's obviously desperate. He's a mighty lion that's been cornered by the zookeepers, roaring and clawing at everything around him blindly... which is exactly where I want him. With so many distractions and struggles, I'll be able to prove him of my worthiness. Once the dust settles, Reus will see me as someone that he'll want to keep at his side. You've called me trustworthy, Reus, but you don't know me at all. On one does. Not anymore.*



## Maileena

The sun was setting over on the horizon with a strong red aura as dusk fell. The streets of Exumber were fairly quiet, with only a handful of individuals walking outside. Maileena looked at them from above through the shutters of the window in the motel room. Seeing them walking so casually and carefree made her envious of their freedom and lack of need to look over their shoulder. *To be free and safe... that's all I wish for Vera and me.*

She looked over at Demilan, who was sitting on his bed, holding his Skyla rifle. He aimed it around the room, squinting his eyes through its scope as if he was target practicing. She could notice that he had returned to himself by now. His motor skills seemed to have been fully restored, and his instincts, while a bit rusty, were still mostly intact. "How are you feeling?" she asked him.

"Much better," he said. "I think I'll need only one more day to get my reflexes together. I believe tomorrow we'll be able to hit the Godly Succubi." A pinch of fear filled her heart. As determined and eager as she was to get her revenge on Kleon Hanford and saving her sister, she feared of what would await her there. The Godly Succubi always had at least four armed men patrolling around the club at any time, and with the recent events, she worried that they might face a greater number of



## Bullet and Blade

men.

An hour later, Winselt appeared in the room with his regular bundle of plastic bags at hand. Looking over at Demilan, he seemed pleased. "You look better," the scarred soldier said to his comrade.

"I am," Demilan said, rising from his bed to greet his old friend.

"Does that mean we're ready to do this?" a hint of eagerness appeared on Winselt's face. Demilan had told Maileena about how comfortable Winselt had always felt on the battlefield, despite what he's been through during the Tearful Rebellion.

"I think we are," Demilan replied. "Besides, I believe we've let this hang for too long already."

"Don't be an idiot," Maileena couldn't help but say. "If we were to attack them any earlier we would've died for sure. At least now we stand a chance."

"The girl's right, Demilan," Winselt said, tapping on his friend's shoulder. "Anyway, that's good, because I just so happened to have brought us something." He dropped his bags on the floor and burrowed his hand into one of them. He took out three earpieces. "We can use these to communicate during the hit." He handed one to each. Maileena held hers in her hand and examined it. It was small, shaped almost exactly like the inside of one's ear and had a skin-like color.

"I thought mob gangs were always using radio communication devices, not earpieces."

"First of all, Code Sanguinary is NOT a mob gang," Winselt seemed offended. For a second, Maileena had forgotten how much Blackburn and his men tried to distance themselves from the likes of other criminal organizations. "Secondly, they do use radio devices, but Code Sanguinary doesn't."

"Since Blackburn has ties to gun manufacturers, he gets military-grade equipment, and he's the only one that does," Demilan explained. "That's why he's the only one in the gun trading business. These earpieces are just another one of the perks you get when you work for him."

## D. Sharon

"Other organizations can't afford to have them, as these things are usually expensive, so they prefer to spend their money on weapons only and settle for those lousy radio devices," Winselt said.

"I see," Maileena said, humbly. "So, does that mean you took it from Blackburn?"

"Relax, they're not going to notice that these are gone." Winselt seemed casual and carefree. *Winselt is risking a lot to help us, including his life and his place in Code Sanguinary. I doubt Blackburn and his stern attitude would let this slide if he were to know.*

"Are you out of your mind?" Demilan berated him. "Take those back before he finds out! You've already done more than you should've." He threw the earpiece back to Winselt.

"Calm the fuck down," Winselt remained cool, as he tossed the earpiece back at Demilan. "You need all the help you can get if you want to save Telia."

Demilan looked down at the floor and sighed. "Thank you," He whispered hoarsely. Maileena knew that Demilan wasn't used to this kind of help. As a person who has continually known suffer and pain during his recent years, she knew that he was eternally grateful that he had Winselt at his side at such an hour of need.

"Maileena," Winselt turned to her. "Did you construct any kind of plan for the attack yet? After all, you're the only one of us who actually knows how that place looks and built."

"I actually have an idea," she said. The thought of a plan had lingered in her mind for the past few days, and after much concentrating, she thought of something. As the three gathered around, she shared her thoughts with them. "There's a room in the back part of the club, where they keep all the underage girls of the VIP section. It's located in a corridor that's entirely hidden from the public eye, on the upper floor of the club." As she spoke of that room, she remembered the times she was kept in it, along with about a dozen other girls, half of which were only slightly older than her, while the other half much younger. "Kleon himself usually likes to escort the VIP clients to the secret corridor. He takes them to that room, which he

## Bullet and Blade

likes to call the 'Showcase Room', and then the client picks a girl of his liking." She felt sick remembering that. Every time a client would show up there, every girl wished and hoped her dearest that he wouldn't pick her, chanting and whispering to themselves prayers or pleads to God. Maileena was never one to pray or plead to anyone and simply kept her wishes to herself, knowing that it wouldn't make a difference either way. "That room has a ventilation shaft leading to it. One time, one of the girls felt that she had enough and tried escaping through that shaft. It led her outside, but... she was eventually caught and received one hell of a beating before finding herself back in the Showcase Room." Maileena paused for a moment, almost as if she was taking a moment of silence for that poor girl. "We can reach that shaft using the emergency staircase behind the club and access the Showcase Room. There's even a chance we might find Vera there."

"And what happens after we get into that room?" Demilan asked.

"Actually, that shaft is pretty narrow, and only I would fit in there so I would be the only one going into that room," She said. A worrisome appearance took form on Demilan's face. "Once I'm in that room, I can try to ask the girls there where Vera and Telia are. With any luck, we might be able to pull this off without raising any alarms, as long as we stay in that hidden corridor and be sneaky."

Demilan started shaking his head. "That won't work," he said. "It'd be dumb of us to think we can actually do this hit stealthily." Maileena knew it was more than just that. She could tell that even though he refrained from saying it, Demilan didn't like the idea of sending Maileena alone at first.

"That's right," Winselt agreed with him. "I wouldn't count on stealth either. It's going to be nothing but a good old-fashioned gunfight." He pulled out one of his double-barreled pistols and aimed it at the wall, jokingly. "However... I think Maileena can take care of herself in there, Demilan, and her plan actually goes well with an idea I had in mind." He holstered his pistol back. "I want us to use Iren Eustis."

"Iren Eustis? The guy who runs the meat factory where the Code Sanguinary outpost is?" Maileena wondered.

"Yes," Winselt said. "Iren is a friend of Code Sanguinary and a frequent client of the Godly Succubi. While he'd never been a fan of the VIP section, he can get me in there with a single phone call to Kleon Hanford."

"You want to go into the VIP section as a client?" Maileena seemed shocked.

"Hear me out. If we all go in through the main door at once, we might make killing us a lot easier for them. Think about it, if all their guns are aimed at our direction, that'll be some heavy fire raining down on us. But, if we let Maileena take a bag of guns with her into the shaft and I'll get myself into the VIP section, I'll be able to get to the Showcase Room, where Maileena and my guns will be waiting for me. The two of us might be able to take out a few people before shit will hit the fan. By the time it goes loud, a few guys will already be dealt with and Demilan will enter through the main door. With Maileena and I on one side and Demilan on the other, we'll be able to divert their fire and split it. It'll be much easier to handle them that way."

Demilan and Maileena paused to think about Winselt's plan. Maileena bickered with herself about whether or not Winselt would actually be able to get himself into the VIP section. As she looked at Demilan, she knew that he was bickering with himself about the part where she would go in alone at first. Her eyes met his, and in a moment of telepathy, she tried channeling her burning desire to burn and destroy that club to the ground using sheer gaze. She didn't know if he truly realized how strong her longing for retaliation was, but before long, Demilan broke the silence. "Alright," he said, to Maileena's consternation. "I guess it IS better than simply busting down the front doors together." He turned over to look at Maileena. He looked as if he wanted to say something, yet he refrained from saying it.

"Good," Winselt said. "Maileena, what can you tell us about the firepower we can expect?"

## Bullet and Blade

"Well, I can't know for sure," she explained. "I mean, Demilan and I had caused quite some trouble for Men of Midas. I wouldn't rule out the possibility of them placing some extra men there until we're dealt with." Winselt nodded in agreement. "Anyway, when I was there, there were usually four security guards in the club, all, of course, were members of the organization. Usually, Kleon would have two men patrol the area near the bar and tables, where most of the clients would be. Another one would be in the area of the private rooms and the last one would be in the VIP section."

"What about Kleon? Where would we find him?"

"Well, he has an office in the back section of the club, but he also loves to hang around the bar."

Winselt and Demilan looked at each other. "We're going to need some ammunition," Demilan said.

With a thrilling grin, Winselt reached for another one of his plastic bags. "Already took care of that," he said. He took out of the bag several loaded magazines for Demilan's Skyla rifle, as well as ones for his double-barreled pistols and a box of bullets to be hand-loaded into Maileena's revolver. After that, he reached into the bag again and took out a fist-sized round device and a small rod with a clickable button on top of it. His grin grew larger as he held the disc-shaped device.

"You brought a Dynadisc? Is that really necessary?" Demilan asked.

Maileena had never seen a Dynadisc before, yet she knew what it was. Dynadiscs were invented many years ago by the Alatarian military. They were explosive charges that were shaped like discs, with only half-a-inch in thickness. Their surface was sticky and could be attached to walls and doors. The rods were small and had a silver shade, with a small, black, clickable button at their top. They were used as a remote detonator.

"You never know when you're going to need a Dynadisc," Winselt said. "Be careful when you use that. It carries quite a punch." Another grin appeared on his face. *Clearly, someone is eager to use this little toy.*

"God, I sure hope you were careful when you took this from Blackburn's armory," Demilan said.

"Stop worrying," he said. "Anyway, I'm going to leave this stuff here. So... are we ready to do this?" he asked. Demilan nodded and so did Maileena. "Great," Winselt turned for the door. "If it's settled, I think I'll hit the nearest bar. I saw one not far from here. I'll see you tomorrow for the showdown." He left the room.

Maileena returned to look through the window shutters at the people walking below, and as the feeling of envy returned to overcome her, she felt Demilan's hand resting on her head, caressing her hair. "You're strong. You're fierce." He said. "If you think you can handle this, then I trust you. I won't hold you back anymore." His words meant a lot to her. So far, Demilan always had his moments of doubt when it came to Maileena's abilities, but at that moment, she felt like his equal, instead of just a stubborn girl who followed his around. "I'm still not entirely comfortable with the idea of you going into the Showcase Room alone, but... I know how scarred you are... and I know how scarred I am. We both want our loved ones back, and we both want revenge on those who hurt us, so I'm not going to stop you from doing what you feel is right." His words were as tender and warm as a father's hug to his daughter. "Just... be careful."

"I will," she said. "Thank you." She placed her hand over his, gently.

"Whatever happens, we'll know we're doing the right thing."

"We are. Because we're a good apple on a bad tree."

Demilan chuckled. "That's right, We're a good apple on a bad tree." Maileena smiled. She had long forgotten what it was like to have someone in your life guarding and protecting you. Her parents died when she was too young to remember them, and with Demilan in her life, for a time, she didn't feel the need for a loving family beside her. It was as if some void in her was filled, one that even Vera could never fill. *We are not rotten. We are a good apple on a bad tree.* She kept telling herself.



## Lunarey

Sunyula's mansion was vast and complex in its structure. It had two floors above the ground floor and two more beneath it, and each one spread across what seemed to be like miles. Lunarey had trouble finding her way around so she asked Samuel to escort her whenever she wanted to walk around the mansion. However, there was another reason why she wanted him around her, one that she kept to herself. Sunyula's men were scattered all around the mansion, and each one seemed more frightening to her than the previous one. With Samuel at her side, she felt safer. He was the closest thing to a friend that she had at the moment and he was kind to her. So kind, in fact, that many times she had to remind herself that he was known as Samuel of the Shatter.

One day, Samuel and Lunarey walked through Sunyula's marvelous front garden. The green grass and light breeze gave Lunarey a sense of ease, one that the filthy, degraded streets of St. Cyprian never did. The Fraenon Hill district was such a far cry from the Brontspil district that it almost seemed like she had left Alataria and entered another country.

"Everything looks so nice around here," Lunarey commented. "Even the people who I see walk outside these metal gates seem... happy."

"I know," Samuel said. "Whenever I make the trip from our

## D. Sharon

outpost in Brontspil to here I get astounded by that as well. Fraenon Hill has always been the pearl of Alataria, the one place that isn't tainted by any sort of crime or filth."

"How is that? Why is this district so innocent of any criminal activities?"

"Well, several ringleaders live in this district, not to mention many powerful men like public officials and CEOs of various companies. The ringleaders know that if they start to wreak havoc in this district, eventually, a person of influence might suffer for that, and that would be bad for business. No one wants to be on those peoples' bad side, especially Reus Mallistrom, who has business with a lot of them. You know what they say; the Mallistroms have their hand in everything. That, of course, refers to both Reus and Joseph."

"I read that there used to be another Mallistrom," Lunarey remembered a mention of that appearing in the books she read.

"That will be Nestelia Mallistrom, Reus's younger sister. During Joseph's reign over Men of Midas, Nestelia served as his lieutenant, and she was a damn good one. Back then, Jonah Dillard was only Vice Chief of Police, and the Chief was a man who wasn't nearly as dirty as Dillard. Eventually, Joseph and the Chief of Police developed a rivalry, and in order to hurt Joseph the most, that Chief gathered evidence against Nestelia and started a case against her. Nestelia ended up going on trial and receiving life in prison for her various crimes. Joseph later killed the Chief of Police in retaliation, but Nestelia's sentence was already delivered by then, and there was no saving her. Jonah Dillard then became the Chief of Police and quickly established good relations with Joseph. To this day, Nestelia rots in prison. I think that this is one of the bigger reasons why Reus had turned so paranoid as soon as he replaced his father. I think he's afraid of ending up like his sister one day, so he makes sure to distance himself from his identity and ringleader as much as possible."

"I see," Lunarey said. "Sunyula seems like the opposite of him. I heard that she's not afraid to take part in her



organization's actions."

"That's true. Sunyula was never shy of doing any of the dirty work herself. Even the outposts are facilities registered under her name, unlike Reus's outposts."

*I will never wish to be anything like Sunyula, but I have to admit, there is one quality in her that makes me envy her. She's fearless. Nothing seems to affect her. I wish I could be like that. Samuel must be fearless as well. He's not shy of violence too, but... he doesn't give me the impression of a person who's supposed to stand behind so many acts of torture as they say. It's almost as if he acts differently around me. He seems to be protective of me. He's willing to kill Sunyula for me.*

Lunarey then pondered on Joseph and Nestelia. She realized how horrible Joseph must have felt ever since his daughter went to prison because of him. *It must be the most terrible thing any father can go through,* she thought to herself. This made her think about her own father. "My father..." she said, "do you know who he is?"

"I'm afraid not," Samuel answered, to her disappointment. "Nobody does. Perhaps only Sunyula, but I doubt any of us will get an answer from her. Over the years, many have asked her, and she never gave anyone an answer. Some think she doesn't know who your father is, and she's simply ashamed to admit so."

"I see," Lunarey said. "I was about to ask her about that other day when we had a talk, but... then things heated up between us and I never the chance..." Lunarey bowed her head, seeming disappointed. "This reminds me, I asked her about what happened to me. About how I ended up where I did. She told me how Harley Nation chased the two of us."

"That's..." he seemed hesitant. "That's true. They caught us both unguarded. We both ran, but... one moment you were right beside to me and the next you were... gone. I didn't know what had happened to you. I barely escaped with my own life, so I was even more afraid for yours." His eyes met hers. "I'm so sorry I couldn't save you. I... I should have—"

"It's alright." She calmed him down. "Besides, it doesn't matter anymore. I'm here now. I only wish I could know what

happened after we were separated. The next thing that happened was that I woke up alone in Brontspil. There are still so many questions left unanswered."

"You'll find the answers, I'm sure of it," he said. *I hope so, but... are those answers something that I'm going to regret ever knowing?* "This war with Fane... it's been a heavy burden on us for a long time now. Once Sunyula will be out of the picture, it'll be easier to end it for good. Fane is eager for that as well. He's been trying to end it several times over the past year."

"Even though Sunyula killed all of his former lieutenants, he still wants peace?"

"It's not that he wants peace. He simply wants to preserve his organization. Fane's sole desire is to see Harley Nation grow and expand in Alataria. You see, Fane was chosen to lead Harley Nation in this country by the organization's ringleaders in the US when they first decided to expand into Alataria. I think Fane simply wants to prove to them that he was the right choice. However, his ambition might just be the most dangerous thing about him. I've heard rumors that he would do basically anything to make his outpost grow, so I don't know how trustworthy he really is."

*Fane Hallstead... they call him the Red Rider because of all the murders he has gotten away with. He's an awful person, from what I've heard, yet he and I have something in common. We both want to rid ourselves of Lady Dread.*

Suddenly, Lunarey's attention was shifted to the metal entrance gates. Jeffery of the Ravage and an entourage of his men entered the property. The hunched back old man's walking pace was slow and cumbersome. His dark-grey receding hair was swept back and his beady eyes were almost hidden behind his thick eyebrows. Once he caught sight of Lunarey and Samuel, his lips protruded and he drew closer to them, leaving his men to enter the mansion without him.

"Vaikillia, how good to see you again," Jeffery said in his creepy voice. "I've been hoping we could catch up."

"O-Okay," Lunarey said, frightened by the man. *I've heard many things about Jeffery Carter and none of them were good. He's a*

## Bullet and Blade

*deviant that I would advise anyone to stay away from.*

"Samuel, do you mind?" Jeffery tried to shoo him away politely. Samuel seemed hesitant to leave Lunarey alone with the old lieutenant, yet eventually he sighed and left the two alone, catching one last glance of them just before getting out of their sight.

"Oh, my, I feel like I haven't seen you in forever," Jeffery said. "Your skin looks pale and you seemed to have lost some weight during your stay in St. Cyprian. Did those people even feed you?"

"They did... what little they had." Lunarey said.

"You know, when I heard you were gone, I was really worried. I even counseled Lady Sunyula that she should call a temporary truce with the Red Rider until you are found, but... well, you know your mother." *To my misfortune.* "I've heard that you lost your memory. That's such a shame. I hope you'll regain it eventually. You and I have shared some... experiences that I wouldn't want you to forget."

"W-What does that mean?" Lunarey asked, fearing the worst.

"Oh, it's not how it sounds like. We didn't..." he stopped himself for a moment. "What I meant to say was that before you disappeared, Lady Sunyula used to take you to our outposts and watch all of her lieutenants in... action." His creepy voice gave Lunarey an eerie feeling. Jeffery's tongue kept sliding in and out of his mouth, salivating over his thin lips. He almost seemed like a dog carefully keeping watch over his snack. "It was all part of your initiation. She wanted you to watch our methods so some of it may rub off on you, so that perhaps, you would grow your own style, like each one of us has."

"You mean... she made me watch as you tortured people?"

"I hate using that word... torture." He shivered as if the word actually sent a chill down his spine. "These people deserve what they get. They broke the rules and they must be... punished." Once more, his tongue slid through his lips between every other sentence. "Without rules there would be

no obedience, and with no obedience, everyone would become... problematic. I hate it when people become problematic. You of all people know that best. You watched me as I was in my most intimate moments, and you dared not look away. Those people may have not known it at those moments, but their punishment made sure they would never break the rules again. I was setting them straight. And I have a very low percentage of... returning customers." He let off a blood-curdling giggle. *He's insane... he actually believes there's nothing wrong with what he does. He rapes people. He abuses them sexually however he sees fit. And I... I had to watch him to that. Oh, God... those are memories I am more than glad to lose forever.* "Richard and Samuel also said you never looked away as they used their own methods. You never dared to do anything that might've upset your mother. You've always been... obedient, Vaikillia."

"Well, I'm not the same person anymore," she said with confidence. "And my name is not Vaikillia anymore. It's Lunarey."

"Yes, I've heard you've been going around by that name now. I really don't see the point, Vaikillia." He looked straight into her eyes. "You are who you are, and that is who you'll always be." At that moment, his words floated the memory of Kelia's words regarding Rosabell in her head. *Kelia said that Rosabell's identity was the very thing that made her life so difficult, and that it wasn't going to change. Could they be right? Am I really doomed to live the same miserable life that Vaikillia Trife had?* "Anyway, there's a serial killer on the loose right now and we're hoping to catch him soon. And when we do, you can bet I'll be the one to set him straight. I hope you can join me when that happens. Your mother would be very pleased." With that said, Jeffery turned around and headed into the mansion.

*That man... that pervert... he's demented. I don't know why Vaikillia suffered through what she did, but something tells me that every second that she spent watching Sunyula's lieutenants' tortures felt eternal. I doubt she wanted to see it and I bet she hated Sunyula for forcing her that way. I won't act the same. I won't do it. Once Sunyula is dead, I'll make sure Richard and Jeffery would pay as well for their crimes.*



## Edrimer

Finding out which businesses in Morth City came to be using Lady Dread's loans wasn't a hard task. A quick search through the Nucleus yielded two results in the form of newspaper articles that told about two men who were murdered after failing to return their debts. The first one was an entrepreneur who used his loan to turn a large warehouse he owned into a storage facility. The other one was a man who wished to open his own bakery, but died before ever getting the chance to open it. APD found records of the deals they made with Lady Dread's men on their computers, following their murders.

Edrimer sat in the passenger's seat of the car while Elahysis sat behind the wheel. The two were wearing their white Elastics. The car was standing still, hidden in a small alley in one of the streets of Morth City, ready to head straight for the storage facility, given the word. It would have to be one of the two locations where the Tri-Surgeon might go to, after taking Soleina. Apex and Johnaren waited nearby as well, ready to charge for the now-abandoned bakery once the order came.

Initially, Apex suggested that they would wait at the locations themselves, but Edrimer was quick to decide that that would be too risky for them. If anyone were to spot them, it would endanger the entire mission. Therefore, he called that

they would wait nearby, hidden, and wait for Samari to alert them as soon as the Tri-Surgeon would make his move.

Samari kept watch over Channel 2's studio, where Soleina and Sherwood's interview was to take place. Shortly earlier, she said that she spotted Soleina's vehicle entering Channel 2's studio, as well as Sherwood's. Now all they had to do was to wait for the interview to be over and for Soleina to head back. Hopefully, the killer would show himself at some point in an attempt to kidnap Soleina.

Edrimer summarized the day up to that point in his head. He had spoken to Serian over the phone that morning about their plan to capture the Tri-Surgeon. Serian wasn't entirely confident of that plan, yet he wished him good luck with it and mentioned that he was keeping a close eye on Edrimer and his team's efforts. His voice remained monotonic and heavy during the entire conversation, which made Edrimer question just how seriously was Serian taking him and his team. When Edrimer tried asking Serian about the recent Justicars attack on Men of Midas' outpost in Ravenwey Burrows, he was met with the refusal to answer that he was expecting. Serian said that he wasn't going to share any information regarding that attack with a tenderfoot and that he should just focus on the Tri-Surgeon. Shortly after that, the conversation ended. *That grumpy old fuck isn't going to answer anything I ask him until I prove myself.*

As he tried going through the rest of the morning without looking too nervous, his uncle, Jeremy, could see through his pretense. When he asked him what was wrong, Edrimer dodged the question and hurried to leave the apartment as soon as he could. *There's no way around it. Uncle Jeremy always knows when I'm going through something. It was the same way with Arkaneh back then as well. He simply knows us too well.*

After taking his Elastics and his gun, Edrimer left the apartment and started setting things in motion. He contacted the rest of his team, as well as Edward, to let them know that the plan is about to be set in motion. By the time he had reached the warehouse, everyone was in position. Since SmartWrists couldn't be used as means of communications,

## Bullet and Blade

Edrimer had given Edward a radio device the day before, as well as ones for his teammates.

"That cop, Edward," Elahysis said. "Do you trust him?"

Edrimer put on a smile and chuckled. "Not really, but... he's all we got. He wants to catch this killer just as badly as we do and he's probably one of only a few cops on APD that isn't dirty. It's a shame that he hates the Justicars."

"I don't know... I have a hard time trusting him. I know what kinds of scum APD has to offer. I had to defend many dirty cops in court during my days as a lawyer."

"Really? You were that kind of a lawyer?"

"It's not as if I liked it. It was my job. I have a daughter to feed, you know."

"Actually, I didn't know." He seemed surprised. *Elahysis is around my age. That means she must have given birth at a very young age.*

"She's 3 years old. I gave birth to her when I was 19 years old."

"Well, where's her father?"

"Gone. He left shortly before she was born, so he never met her. We never planned on getting pregnant, and as soon as he had some time to think about it, he realized we wouldn't be able to afford to raise her, so... he split." *Just like so many parents nowadays.*

"I'm... sorry to hear that."

"It's fine. It was a long time ago. Anyway, I refused to give up on my baby. My mom is helping me raise her."

"Well, if you ever need any help—"

"Oh, please," she put on a sour face. "I don't need your help, or anyone else's for that matter. I've seen what people are capable of. After that jerk had left me I graduated from law school and became a lawyer, and that was when I discovered how many of his kind were out there. All those dirty cops I had to defend... all those murderers I had to claim as innocent..." *She'd lost all trust in people. I can't blame her if I'm honest.* "That's why I left my job and joined the Justicars. I'm done defending those people."

"I see. You know, my brother left my uncle and me just like

that jerk of yours did. He just... gave up on everything. He didn't even say anything to us. He just packed his things one day and said goodbye."

"Why did he leave?"

"He and his girlfriend were attacked by some gangsters. She didn't make it. In a way, he didn't make it either. Arkaneh changed from that day on. I couldn't recognize my brother anymore every time I looked at his face. He was... gone."

"Do you know where he is now?"

"I..." he thought about it for a second. *I wish I didn't.* "I don't," he finally chose to say. "And I don't know if I even want to. Whoever he is now... I don't know if I wish to know that person."

"It sounds like you guys were close."

"We were. My uncle rarely mentions him now, because he knows that makes me sad, but I know Arkaneh is on his mind all the time. Arkaneh and I lost our parents when we were young, so growing up, we only had each other. My uncle raised us for most of our lives."

"Edrimer," she looked at him. "People come and people go. There are no constants in life. None at all."

"Well, that's a sad thought," Edrimer chuckled, despite knowing that there was truth to that.

Silence lingered in the car for a few minutes, during which Edrimer wondered if he would ever run into Arkaneh again. The following thought that occurred to him was whether or not he even wished for that to happen. *That night... he aimed a gun at me and threatened to kill me the next time he would see me. Something in his eyes was different. Something in his expression was unfamiliar. He was never this cold and vicious. What happened to you, Arkaneh?*

"Forseti!" Edward's voice came through the radio device, making Edrimer jump. "Forseti, come in!"

"I'm here," Edrimer said.

"Soleina Dillard was just kidnapped!" Edward said. At first, Edrimer thought he had heard wrong. He looked over at Elahysis, who seemed just as confused as he was.



## Bullet and Blade

"Say again."

"I said Soleina Dillard was just fucking kidnapped! I was just informed that she's missing. The fucking Tri-Surgeon took her right under our noses!" *That can't be. Samari is watching over that studio. She saw Soleina go in, but she's yet to come out.* "That fucker disguised himself as an employee of Channel 2!" Edward continued. "He ran off with her without anyone noticing a while ago!"

Edrimer never anticipated this. He thought the killer would make his move only after Soleina would leave the set. Knowing that he wasn't going to have much time, he quickly sprang into action. "Apex, Johnaren, get ready. There's a good chance that the killer is going to head to either our location or yours, so get moving," Edrimer said into the radio device.

"Copy that. We're heading there now." Apex said.

Elahysis stepped further on the gas pedal, making the car howl as the engine burned hot inside. She drove faster and faster, never letting her eyes off the road.

"Edward," Edrimer said. "Let us know as soon as you hear anything."

"I swear to God, Forseti, if anything happens to her..." Edward sounded furious. *Great, this is the last thing we needed.*

Edrimer and Elahysis soared to the warehouse. Signs and scenery were barely comprehensible as they flew by them. Edrimer pulled his gun out and checked his magazine. The bullets shined in it, ready for a kill. He loaded it back and readied himself, as he finally saw the warehouse in the distance. *Nothing like a speed rush and a dead serial killer to make my day.*

As soon as they pulled the car over, Edrimer lowered the volume on his radio device to a minimal level to maintain a stealthy position. As they inched closer to the warehouse, they noticed a lone black car parked outside. The car had no license plates and looked rather old, with dents and scratches all over. *No license plates... he's already here.* As the two crept inside in silence, Edrimer felt his anxiety building up. *I just hope he didn't hurt her yet.* Elahysis seemed nervous as well. As strong of a woman as she appeared to be, even she couldn't handle her

fear from such a brutal murderer.

As soon as entered the warehouse, they heard a rattle. Looking around, the two didn't spot anything around them. It was only another minute later when another rattle was heard and Edrimer realized where it came from. It was coming from a closed room on the other side of the hall. Edrimer pointed at that room to let Elahysis know. She nodded and drew her weapon. "Edward," Edrimer whispered into the radio device. "The killer is at our location."

"Copy that," Edward responded. The two immediately paced towards the room. As Edrimer drew closer and closer to the room, he could hear mumbles coming from behind its door. "T-T-There we go," the voice said. "D-D-Don't worry. I-I-It won't hurt for long." Edrimer and Elahysis placed themselves on each side of the room's door, with guns ready. With an approving nod from Edrimer, Elahysis opened the door and aimed her weapon. Edrimer tailed after her but quickly stopped in place at the sight of the grizzly image before him. Soleina Dillard lay on the floor, still and unresponsive, her arms stretched like a cross figure while a man was crouching above her. The man had black Elastics, which seemed odd to Edrimer, as he knew no gang associated with such a color. Elahysis went ahead without saying anything, and before Edrimer could stop her, she stood right behind the man and let the barrel of her gun kiss his head.

"Get up," she ordered him.

"W-W-Who are you?" the man asked. *That stutter... it doesn't sound like the usual kind of stutter.* "Y-Y-You're not supposed to be h-h-here." *It's almost as if... it's not a speech defect, but rather a result of overexcitement.*

"I said get up!" she yelled. The man did as he was told and turned around to face her. That was when Edrimer saw the frightening red skull that was painted on his mask. The bizarre image took Elahysis by surprise as well, as she seemed speechless and shocked at first.

"J-J-Justicars? W-W-What the hell are YOU d-d-doing here?" the killer asked. Edrimer looked down at Soleina's body.

## Bullet and Blade

He looked away almost immediately once he noticed what had been done to her. The Tri-Surgeon always cut off his victims' eyes, arms, and heart, and it seemed that he had only begun his traditional methods with Soleina. Her black flowing hair was now painted crimson red, as two bloody, gaping holes stood where her eye sockets were. It looked as if he struggled to pull her eyes out, mangling her eye sockets in the result. *Oh, my God... we're too late... how could we let this happen?*

"Take off your fucking mask!" Elahysis ordered him.

"Y-Y-You are disrupting F-F-Father Blood's orders. He won't be p-p-leased. H-H-He will punish you," the man said. *Father Blood? What is he talking about?*

"Do it!" Elahysis raised her voice to new levels. The killer finally unmasked himself, revealing a horridly-looking face. The killer had a very pale skin, almost like the one of a cadaver and big black rings were painted around his dark eyes. His appearance was intentional, as clearly this was the work of make-up, yet something else seemed off about his face. His eyes seemed wide open and his teeth were visibly grinding as if he was excited. Whoever that man was, Edrimer could already tell that he was insane to some level.

"S-S-Stop talking!" the killer suddenly said and looked to his right, as if someone was standing there. "This is all y-y-your fault! I shouldn't have listened to y-y-you!" Edrimer looked at him, baffled. *Who the fuck is he talking to?* "You're always getting me in trouble. You're always getting me in trouble." The killer grabbed his head and shook it tirelessly. "I hate you!" he yelled. Edrimer looked at Elahysis and noticed that she seemed just as perplexed as he was.

Suddenly, a weak gasp emerged from Soleina. Edrimer looked down at her and noticed that she was still alive. Unfortunately for him, Elahysis looked down at her as well, which gave the killer the opportunity he was waiting for. Before she could notice what was happening, the killer pushed Elahysis's weapon away from him and rammed his head into hers. She dropped her gun and fell on the floor in agony, and by the time Edrimer realized what was happening, the killer

was already pushing Edrimer back, making him fall as well.

Edrimer quickly got up to his feet and ran after the man. He ran as fast as he could, yet he still had some trouble catching up to him. He tried firing twice at the killer but missed him. Only when the killer met with the exit door of the warehouse, could Edrimer finally catch him. The killer swiftly reached for Edrimer's gun and knocked it out of his hand. Edrimer grabbed the killer by the shoulders and threw him onto the floor in response. Then, he quickly positioned himself on top of him and started punching his face. He hit the man only three times before he was punched by him as well and lost his balance. The killer kicked Edrimer in the stomach and then kicked him once more in the knee, making Edrimer fall on all fours. Before the killer could kick Edrimer once more, Edrimer rolled aside the got back up on his feet. Staring right at the killer's pale face, Edrimer saw nothing but a lunatic in front of him. "From ash and fire the strong will rise." The man said in a weak voice as if he wanted only himself to hear it. "From ash and fire the strong will rise," he muttered it again. *What is he on about? What the hell is wrong with this guy?* Before he could say anything else, Edrimer charged at him, tackling him into the wall. The man cried in pain, but then quickly punched Edrimer in the face. As he tried overcoming the dizziness and regaining his balance, Edrimer noticed the pale man's twitchiness. His fingers jerked and quivered and his lips kept curving randomly. None of the two seemed to be willing to give up. Blood ran from the killer's nose, dripping down on the floor. He was panting and clearly in pain. Edrimer's face was swollen and bruised, and his stomach was still hurting from the kick he received. And still, none of the two would give up. In a hope to end the fight, Edrimer tried ramming his elbow into the man's chest, but the killer hastily dodged the blow and landed his own on Edrimer, knocking him out.

By the time Edrimer woke up to Elahysis's voice, it was already too late. The killer had escaped, and the two of them had to do the same. "The cops are already on their way here, Edrimer," she told him. "Edward told them that an

## Bullet and Blade

anonymous tip called and said that he saw the killer get here. They're going to be here at any moment. Come on, let's go."

While helping him up, Elahysis told Edrimer that she had contacted Edward and informed him of Soleina's state. Edrimer feared to know what his response was, so he didn't ask. *I promised him... his heart felt as heavy as a boulder. I promised him...*

The two ran together far away from the warehouse. Edrimer was limping due to his injuries, so Elahysis had to help him walk. As they ran, they contacted Samari, Apex, and Johnaren and told them to go back and leave their position. As they drew near to their car, two men appeared before them. Edrimer hadn't noticed them coming. They wore purple Elastics and had submachine guns strapped to their backs. *Lady Dread's men... they've come for the Tri-Surgeon. But... how did they know he was here? That can only mean...*

The two men reached for their weapons, but Elahysis was quicker than them. She pulled her pistol and fired one round at each person. One of them required another round for a sure kill. Edrimer was too weak to even have the instinct to pull his own weapon. *Thank God for Elahysis's quick reflexes.* "Let's go," she wasted no time and carried Edrimer to the car. She got into the driver's seat and drove off the scene in haste.

Edrimer's white Elastics had been tamed with his own blood. He felt like almost every part of his body was hurting and every movement that he was making only amplified the pain.

"I can't believe it," Elahysis said as she was catching her breath. "I can't believe that fucker ran away. How the fuck are we going to get him now?"

"Much more easily," Edrimer smiled. "We now know who he is exactly."

"No, we don't. We saw his face, but we still don't know his identity."

"Yeah, we do." Edrimer seemed cheerful. "Contact Edward. Let him know that in that warehouse he's going to find drops of blood on the floor near the exit door of that

warehouse. That blood dripped from the Tri-Surgeon's nose. He can run his DNA and find out who our guy is." While he rested on the passenger's seat, wounded and beaten up, Edrimer ran the pictures of the killer in his mind. He had never met such an odd and peculiar character before. The image of the red skull on a haunting black mask, the sight of Soleina Dillard's mangled eye holes and the horrid appearance of the killer's pale skin and thick, black painted rings around his eyes. All those pictures burned into Edrimer's memory. He knew that he wouldn't forget them easily, nor did he truly want to, as they only motivated him further to catch the Tri-Surgeon.



## Edward

Edward ran up the stairs to the apartment where he last met Forseti. Upon reaching its door, he started banging heavily and rapidly on it. A voice from within called for him to stop, yet Edward didn't cease until the door was finally opened. The white-masked Forseti stood on the doorstep, and before he could even speak a single syllable, Edward charged at him, shoving him until Forseti lost his balance and fell on his back.

"You promised nothing would happen to her!" Edward screamed at him, wrapping his hands around his neck. "You said I could trust you!" he kept going. Forseti tried to speak, yet his words choked at his throat. He was only able to make inaudible mumbles. Edward's grip tightened, yet at that moment a mighty force pushed him away from Forseti, sending him into the nearby wall.

As Edward rubbed his beaten head, he looked and recognized the large, muscular masked Justicar he knew only as Mars. He saw the one he knew as Themis standing next to him. Mars, the great brute, helped Forseti up to his feet and closed the apartment door. "Forseti, you motherfucker," Edward got up to his feet as well. "You promised... you promised—"

"I know!" Forseti yelled. "You think I planned for this to happen?!" he sounded upset. "This was never part of my plan.

I wasn't lying when I said that I would never harm an innocent citizen."

"How did this happen?"

"No one anticipated that fucker would kidnap Soleina at the set. By the time we got there, it was already too late."

"Oh, my god," Edward buried his face in his hands. "That poor woman..." Edward sat down on the living room sofa. "Jonah Dillard lost his mind as soon as he heard. He called for every available cop to go searching for her. I wasn't there, but I've heard that he lost it when he saw what happened to his wife."

"Edward, I'm... I'm sorry. I take the blame on this." *No... it's wrong for me to blame him. I can see Forseti has good intentions, even if he IS a Justicar. He's right, no one expected for the killer to disguise himself as a Channel 2 employee. And still... this turnout is so horrible.*

"It doesn't matter who's to blame," Edward said. "What matters is that we need to catch that son of a bitch right fucking now."

"Did you sample the blood drops from the warehouse?"

"We did. It was lucky you made him take off his mask. Otherwise, the Elastics' material would soak up his blood."

"And? Did you get anything out of it?"

"We did. His name is Caedes Rendell. He was a doctor who used to own a private clinic. To start his business, he loaned money from Lady Dread. Eventually, he failed to afford to pay them back, so they kidnapped his wife and son. Both of them were never found and are presumed to be dead."

"Oh, God..." Themis seemed sick. "So that's why he's targeting Lady Dread."

"Yeah, I guess so," Edward said. "Anyway, Caedes went off the grid after their kidnapping. There were no official records of him since then."

"He's trying to hurt Lady Dread's friends in high places by killing their loved ones to get back at her for killing his own loved ones," Forseti said.

"Seems like it. Jonah Dillard had put out an arrest warrant for Caedes and placed every cop on the hunt for him. We're



## Bullet and Blade

keeping his identity secret from the media for now."

Forseti sat down next to Edward, sighing. "We're dealing with a dangerous individual. He's smart, but he's also demented."

"Demented?" Edward asked.

"Oh, you should've seen him." Forseti carried on describing the Tri-Surgeon, mentioning the weird makeup he had on and his frequent twitchiness. "He also said some very strange things. At some point he was speaking to person in his head, yelling at him and acting as if there was actually someone else in the room." Edward seemed just as perplexed as Edrimer was when it happened. "He mentioned a 'Father Blood,' saying that he gave him orders and that we were disrupting them."

"Father Blood?" Edward paused to think. "Do you think someone is bidding him to do all these killings?"

"I don't know," Forseti shrugged. "He also mumbled an odd sentence. From ash and fire the strong will rise."

While Edward didn't recognize the sentence, Mars turned to look at Forseti once he heard it. "I know that saying," he said. "It's a saying that the Serath often use. It's almost like their dictum."

"The Serath?" Edward wondered. "You mean those weird anarchists who are causing mayhem across Europe and the United States?"

"Yeah. They believe the current world leaders and governments are too corrupt and uncaring to be ruling. They seek to spread anarchy in countries in hopes to take down their government and let the people who prove themselves most fitting among the chaos to rule instead."

"That sounds... farfetched." Edward was doubtful.

"Think what you want, they've proven to be a genuine threat after succeeding once in the Middle East. One of the reasons why the Middle East is so war-infested right now is because last year the number of Serathons in one of the countries there became staggering, and with so many followers they were able to start riots that brought that entire country down to ruins. The old leader was executed and instead they

appointed one they deemed to have proven himself worthy to rule during the riots."

"Fuck..." Edward seemed shocked. He had heard of the Serath before but simply wasn't very keen on everything that was currently going on in the Middle East. *Fanatics who believe that anarchy is the solution to our corrupt leaders... god, if they've reached Alataria, I fear of what might await us.* "So what does this mean? Are we dealing with a Serathon? I didn't even know they've reached Alataria," Edward asked.

"I don't know if they did, but it sounds like Caedes is a Serathon," Mars said.

"Well, Serathon or not, he's not any of your concern anymore," Edward said. "Thanks to your help, we now know who our killer is and we have the means to track him down. I think our ways separate here."

"No, they don't," Forseti declared, decisively. "You still need us if you want Caedes in custody," Edward looked perplexed. He crossed his arms, ready to listen. "Themis and I were met with two men of Lady Dread when we were getting out of that warehouse. They were coming for Caedes. They knew he was in that warehouse."

Edward's face turned upset. "You mean—"

"Someone in APD tipped Lady Dread off."

Edward looked away, ashamed. "Fuck..." he whispered to himself. "So even if we manage to locate Caedes, Lady Dread will probably be waiting right around the corner."

"And if Lady Dread arrives at Caedes's location, statistically speaking, there's a good chance that whichever cops will be there won't care about giving him away to them, so long as the money flows in their direction. We might be the only ones able to fend off Lady Dread and bring Caedes to proper justice in court."

"Fantastic," Edward said with a grunt. "Fine, but either way, it's only a matter of time now," Edward said. "Almost every cop in Alataria is currently looking for Caedes Rendell. He's going to get caught sooner or later."

"Right. Well, let me know when that happens."

## Bullet and Blade

"Sure," Edward said with a smirk, leaving soon afterward.

Edward drove back home, his mind riddled with anxious thoughts. Would capturing the Tri-Surgeon really be worth what had happened to Dillard's wife? Ever since he received the case, he told himself that he was willing to do whatever it took to protect the citizens of this country from the foul killer, yet never on the expense of an innocent person. A part of his subconscious kept showing him a mental picture of almost every other cop on the force, effectively telling him that he was no better, if not worse than them. Seeing that picture in his head made Edward feel sick to the stomach, just from the notion that he was as rotten and dirty as them. Just as they blindly go against the values of justice they swore to protect for their own desires, Edward felt the same about himself. He wanted to catch this killer at all costs, and in so he agreed to put an innocent civilian in danger, which stood against everything that he believed in.

As he opened the door to his apartment, barely able to think straight with all the thoughts that had run through his head by the time he got there, he hung his coat and dropped his keys on the kitchen counter.

An eerie, lonely silence wrapped the apartment. All the lights were off, yet Edward chose not to turn any of them on. For a moment, he preferred the darkness. As he sat down in his living room, Edward actually relished on the small pieces of silence that drained his mind empty, in an effort to calm down. He wished the blackness around him could somehow rid him of all his troubles, that it could save him from his own frustration, that he could find peace and quiet in it, a place of solace and comfort. It was a nice thought to have, but there could be none of that in Alataria.

As Edward looked around his living room, he noticed that several things lay on the floor. As he drew closer, he saw the television's remote control and his morning newspaper resting on the floor. As he dug around his memory, he suddenly realized that he remembered them being on the living room table when he left for work that morning.

Before the paranoia and troubling thoughts could plague him again, it was already too late, as he felt a mighty hit in the back of his head. Falling to the floor, beside the living room table, Edwards head spun and rang. His vision became blurry and strength was suddenly a hard thing to gather. With every effort he could make, he turned around on his back and faced his assailant.

There he stood, right above Edward. His sight was still too fuzzy to make out any details, but he could still spot the camouflage-colored Elastics the man wore. Code sanguinary had finally come to have their vengeance. As Edward started to crawl back, away from the soldier, his vision sharpened, and he was able to notice the pistol in the man's right hand. A silencer was attached to the barrel. The intruder raised his gun at Edward, without a shred of hesitation appearing on him. *An assassination in my own apartment? Is this how I'm going to die?* He thought. *Curse Charles Blackburn. Curse Code Sanguinary. Curse Jonah Dillard. What would Derlick say right now if he were here?* The thought of his departed friend made a spark of defiance light in his heart. *He would say 'screw Code Sanguinary!' He would say I should get up and fight! Blackburn may kill me in the end, but before that happens, I'm going to make sure I don't go out like a coward!*

With flames of prowess burning in his heart, Edward rushed at the assassin and tackled him before he could even pull the trigger on him. The assassin fell on his back but quickly tried pointing his gun at Edward. Before he could shoot, Edward grabbed the man's hands and tussled to shift his aim away. The two men struggled each other, as each one tried getting the gun to point at the other. Edward ground his teeth as he put all his strength together, but soon he realized that the trained soldier was much more capable than him, as the gun slowly turned back to aim at Edward. Knowing that, Edward sent his knee to ram into the soldier's groin, making him shriek with pain and lose grip on his gun. Edward took hold of the weapon, but the assassin recovered much faster than he anticipated, and without seeing it coming, Edward felt a strong kick pushing him away into the living room table and making

## Bullet and Blade

the gun fly from his hand a foot away. *He's much more dangerous than he seems. It's like he's able to numb the pain almost instantaneously so he's never at a disadvantage.* The masked soldier crawled for his gun, but Edward quickly grabbed his leg and pulled him away from it. Edward sent a fast punch to the man's face, yet again he quickly recovered and responded by two punches of his own. Grabbing his throbbing face, Edward rose to his feet and grabbed a vase from the cupboard nearby. He raised it high and then smashed it on the assassin's head, shattering it into pieces all around him. This time, the assassin seemed to take much longer to recover, yet Edward refused to even give him the opportunity to do that. *Curse Charles Blackburn. Curse Code Sanguinary. Curse Jonah Dillard.* He mumbled in his mind over and over as he walked to grab the electric iron from his ironing board. As soon as he turned around to head back to the soldier, he felt a fierce punch in his stomach and fell to his knees, dropping the iron on the floor beside him. Another swift blow came rushing to his face and made him fall on his back. The man crouched above Edward and started strangling him. Edward tried fighting back, yet he was powerless against the soldier's sturdy grip. *Curse Charles Blackburn. Curse Code Sanguinary. Curse Jonah Dillard.* He looked aside and spotted the iron almost within a hand's reach from him. He reached out but could barely make it to the iron. An odd fuzziness started shrouding his mind, as oxygen was slowly being denied of him. He made another reach for the iron, yet again he could make it. *Is this how I'm going to die?* An image of his father came to his mind. *Dad... you were right... everything you said was right...* He made one more reach for the iron. *This country is rotten, and there is no justice wherever you turn...* his fingers scratched the steel body of the iron. *But where you failed...* finally, he managed to grab it. *I intend to succeed.* Edward rammed the iron into the assassin's head, knocking him unconscious.

Edward gathered his breath and got back up on his feet. He went for the gun and grabbed it, pointing it at the unconscious soldier. *Should I kill him? Should I have him arrested? If I kill him, it will send a very clear message to Blackburn, but it wouldn't be justice if he*

*wouldn't be arrested.* Before he could figure out the answer, he heard a muffled voice coming from the assassin. At first, he thought it came from the man himself, yet he then realized that it was coming from a radio communications device that was tucked in his pocket. He picked it up and listened closer to the voice.

"Kyler? Kyler, is it done?" the voice said. "Kyler, respond!" Edward recognized the voice clearly. The last time he heard it was in a courthouse, claiming that he was not guilty. It was the man that was feared by many, but not by Edward. The Deserter General, Charles Blackburn.

"It's good to hear from you, Blackburn," Edward spoke into the radio device. "I'm glad we finally have the chance to talk."

Blackburn paused for a moment before talking back. "Is my soldier dead?" he asked, eventually.

"Not yet. I have a gun pointed at him, but whether he dies or not, that depends on you."

"And why is that?"

"Because I want us to strike a deal." Edward sounded confident.

"A deal?"

"Yes. You see, we have a common enemy, and I for one don't plan on taking out your soldiers for the rest of my life."

"You're talking about Jonah Dillard, aren't you?" Blackburn sneered. "You want to go against your Chief of Police?"

"It may come as a surprise to you, but I have as much hatred for Dillard as you do. I never even really understood why you never went against him. You took out the judge, attorney and lead investigator that tried to take you down, and you even tried to do the same to me, but I never saw you attempting to kill Dillard."

Blackburn paused again before responding. "What do you think would happen if I kill Dillard?" he asked. "I could do it if I'd wanted to, but that will most likely cause an outrage all over the news and media. Killing a judge or a lawyer or a simple cop wouldn't have the same effect, not when you're talking about

## Bullet and Blade

the Chief of Police, a person so powerful that he takes most of his orders from the President of Alataria. Code Sanguinary has no protection coming from APD as it is, and as soon as I kill Dillard, his successor would simply take his seat and deal with the outrage of his murder by going full scale against my organization. Now, I'll be the first to admit that Code Sanguinary had seen better days, so the last thing we need is a massive force of APD cops attacking us." *What he says makes sense. I guess he might be just as wise and clever as people say he is.* "So if that deal of yours has anything to do with killing Jonah Dillard, I'm going to have to decline it."

"Alright then, let me offer you a different kind of deal. I'll give you something you want more than my dead body, and in return, you lay off of me."

"And what about my soldier, Kyler?"

"I'll carry his unconscious body to the end of my block, where your men can pick him up from. But I'll be keeping his gun, of course."

"Fine. Let's hear your offer."

"I will give you the location of an apartment that's being used by several Justicars." *Blackburn hates the Justicars. The very reason why he was ever trialed was for executing a Justicar after trying to extract information out of him.* "I'll let you know when they'll be in it so you can send you men to wipe them out. You may also use whatever information you may find in that apartment regarding the Justicars."

Blackburn only thought about it for a few seconds. "Very well, I'll give you a number where you can reach one of my men to let us know," he finally said. "We have a deal."



## Lunarey

Upon nightfall, Lunarey crawled under the purple blanket in her large, soft bed. Every time she tried falling asleep and perhaps find comfort in a lovely dream, thoughts of her torturing and killing the people on her list came haunting her mind. In the pictures that she saw in her dreams, blood reigned supreme as the dominant element, covering the walls, the victims and even Lunarey herself. She kept picturing Sunyula behind her, telling her to hurt them further and further, not even looking shocked or appalled by the violence, but rather pleased. A helpless victim rested on his knees before her, wounded and bruised beyond any measure. Lunarey hit him again and again, even though she didn't want to. The victim didn't cry or beg or screamed but merely stayed still while he bled further. His skin was nothing more than a shell of blood. His face was empty. He showed no signs of suffering, but Lunarey knew that he was. She wanted to stop so badly, yet every time she heard Sunyula's snaky voice telling her to go on, she did her bidding. Eventually, come morning, she opened her eyes and escaped those images, yet her feeling hadn't improved much, as she was reminded of where she was.

She rose from her bed and approached her closet to get dressed. The closet was filled with top-quality clothes of the most expensive and luxurious brands. She recognized the AL



## Bullet and Blade

brand among them, the same brand her expensive shoes had. She immediately ruled out everything purple. *I'll be damned before I'll wear the color of this awful organization.* Finally, she picked out a short black shirt and long jeans and went downstairs.

She was greeted by Samuel downstairs, who smiled upon seeing her. "Good morning," he said. "How did you sleep?"

"Fine," she lied to avoid talking about it.

"Lady Sunyula and Richard are waiting for us in the dining room for breakfast." He took her hand and escorted her.

The dining room was long and tall. A fireplace burned in the back part of it while a long table stood at its center. A white tablecloth adorned the entirety of its length while silver candlesticks were spread along its middle part. Only Sunyula and Richard of the Dementia sat at the table. Sunyula sat at the front of the table and Richard sat next to her. She wore a tight gray shirt with a short black jacket on top of it, dark-gray skinny jeans and black high heels. Scarlet Thorn rested in its sheath around her waist as always.

"Vaikillia," she said. "How nice of you to join us. Come, sit." Lunarey sat next to Sunyula, and Samuel sat next to her. Lunarey found herself in awe of the wide selection of food that faced her. Omelets, pancakes, French toast, fried bacon strips, bagels and a variety of fruit salads lay on the table. Reluctantly, she ate a bit of every dish, feeling bad as she did, knowing how other people are doing in the country regarding food. *Kelia and her mother were scraping for food while Sunyula feasts on a daily basis.*

"Vaikillia," Sunyula turned to her daughter. "We're going to make a visit to our outpost in Framstead, Northstock."

"W-Why?" Lunarey asked.

"Oh, it's a regular thing we do. I like to check up on my outposts. Don't worry. I'm sure you'll love the northern scenery." Lunarey could think of many things she would rather do than to travel several hours to the Northstock district with Sunyula. "Samuel and Richard would accompany us, of course." She found some comfort knowing that Samuel will be at her side.

"Lady Sunyula," Richard spoke for the first time. "There are

some matters I hoped to bring to your attention."

"Oh? What matters?" Sunyula asked as she bit into her omelet. Richard hesitated to respond, gazing at Lunarey instead, looking uncomfortable. "It's alright," Sunyula reassured him. "You know I never hide anything from Vaikillia. You can speak about these things in her presence."

Richard cleared his throat. "Well, I've recently learned that Harley Nation had kicked their immigrants smuggling business into high gear. They've already smuggled several dozens of people from the US to Alataria."

"Fane seems to be relentless," Samuel said.

"Well, you can hardly blame him," Sunyula said. "Harley Nation are having severe problems, both in finance and manpower."

"I've heard about that too," Richard said as he dug his fork into his bacon strips. "From what I understood, they've been hiring hitmen and other paid assassins to make up for their shortage of men."

"How pathetic," Sunyula hissed. "Fane Hallstead simply refuses to let his poor little outpost die. I guess he'd already reached out to the Harley outposts abroad for assistance though I doubt he'll get any from them." Lunarey remembered what Trigen had said to her about the war that Harley Nation had been having with Lady Dread for a year now, and how costly it had been for both sides. *Fane tried desperately to end this war by bringing Sunyula to the table, but so far failed miserably. By now dozens must have died due to Sunyula's relentless behavior.*

"Mother," Lunarey turned to her. The word still felt foreign to her. "Why don't you broker a peace treaty with them?"

"A peace treaty?" Sunyula suddenly seemed filled with contempt. "I will not have peace with those fucking bikers. They've tried to put my business in Herkin Port in danger, and by now they've caused far too many casualties. There will be no peace, only annihilation." She seemed determined. Fire burned in her eyes and her grip on her fork and knife tightened as rage filled her up. "Don't forget that they're the ones who tried to kill you and ended up making you lose your memory."

## Bullet and Blade

Lunarey had yet to reveal the full truth behind that part. *Even if Harley Nation tried to kill me, there's still a piece of this puzzle missing. I still don't know why I lost my memory, or how I ever came to find myself in Brontspil.* "I will not let this matter go quietly." Sunyula turned to Richard. "When we'll reach the Framstead outpost, be ready to brief your men about an upcoming attack on Harley Nation."

"Very well, Lady Sunyula." Richard bowed his head. *More violence... more death... why does everything always have to come to this?* "I also wanted to update you on the Tri-Surgeon matter," he continued. *The Tri-Surgeon? Who's that? And why is he named like that?* "Yesterday, our informant in APD alerted us that the Tri-Surgeon managed to kidnap Soleina Dillard and took her to a storage warehouse in Morth City."

"Soleina Dillard? As in the wife of Jonah Dillard?" Sunyula didn't seem shocked or appalled but merely amused.

"Yes. I tried sending two of my guys over there to dispose of him, but they were gunned down by someone. APD got to that warehouse shortly afterward, but the killer had escaped by then. Now, I don't know how, but they managed to find blood samples of the killer in that warehouse."

"And?" Sunyula sipped from her cup.

"They know that it's Caedes Rendell."

"I see." She remained indifferent. "Well, we've already figured that it was him from the way he'd been killing all of his victims. Chopping off their arms, eyes, and heart..." she turned to look at Samuel. "The same way his wife and son were dealt with, weren't they, Samuel?"

Samuel almost choked on his food. He coughed and drank some of his coffee to ease his throat. "R-Right, Sunyula," he said.

"Oh, sometimes I imagine what his reaction must have been like when he saw their chopped-off body parts that we sent him. I bet his heart sank." She giggled, a twisted smile appearing on her face. Richard reacted similarly while Samuel simply made an awkward smile. Lunarey didn't understand much from the conversation, but she did make out one detail.

*The way she looked at Samuel when she mentioned the brutality that was done to that man's wife and son... is Samuel responsible for that?*

"Well, I guess that now that Dillard's wife has been brought into this, there's not much chance that we'll be able to avenge the two members that bastard killed. Dillard's going to want him all to himself." Samuel said as he took a bite of his toast.

"I'd rather let him have that fucker if it meant keeping Dillard as an ally. Because of Caedes, many of my allies refuse to work with me. Some even won't return my calls. They've figured that Caedes has been targeting them because of their relations with me, even though I kept saying it was preposterous."

"W-What did that man do, Mother?" Lunarey asked her. "What could he possibly do to deserve this?"

Sunyula stared at Lunarey for a moment before answering. "It doesn't matter anymore, my sweet. Finish your breakfast, we're leaving for Framstead soon." She turned to focus back on her plate, moving quickly away from the subject.

Once breakfast was done, Sunyula went upstairs to gather some of her things, while Richard went ahead to ready the escorting men. Samuel and Lunarey remained alone in the mansion's lobby.

"Samuel," Lunarey said to him. "Did..." she almost feared the question. "Did you really do that to that man's wife and son? Did you really—?"

"No." he hurried to make it clear. "I didn't. But you can't tell Sunyula." A worried expression was on his face. He looked around to make sure no one was there to hear him. "I couldn't do it. I let one of my men do it instead."

"Why? Why couldn't you?"

"They..." he stopped and stooped his gaze. His body was slightly shaking, and he kept his eyes clear from meeting Lunarey's. "The way they begged... the way they screamed." He closed his eyes and appeared as if he was reliving it in his mind. "I can't do it to innocent people. It's not fair. It's not right. Caedes was the one who should've paid the price, not his family." He shifted his gaze further away from Lunarey's.

## Bullet and Blade

"Back when Henrick was in charge, these kinds of things never happened. Henrick was ruthless and cruel much like Sunyula, but he was always fair. He never did the things we do to innocent people, only to those who were directly at fault. It was one of the only things that separated us from savages like the Ferals. Jegaar Hill and his men don't give a shit about who you are. They will rape, torture, dismember, burn and kill you regardless of how innocent or guilty you are. Sunyula could never make that distinction. That is one of the reasons I want her gone."

Lunarey didn't know what to make of it. On one hand, she was glad he didn't actually go through with Sunyula's order himself, but on the other she realized that he was still not shy of any sort of violence. "Why do you do it, Samuel?" she asked him, simply. More than anything, she begged to know that.

Samuel let the hint of a smile sneak onto his face. "You never asked me that question before, not even as Vaikillia," he said. "I guess back then you could've answered it for yourself." He sighed, lengthily. "The truth is all around you. By now, you've seen how violent, cruel and barbaric the world can be. You've witnessed the things people are willing to do to others. If I weren't like this, I simply wouldn't be here. The same goes for you, Lunarey." *He called me Lunarey... it's the first time he hadn't called me Vaikillia...* "Sooner or later, you're going to realize that you can't live and walk among people without stepping on some toes and pushing some people out of your way. It's a hard, nasty truth, but I think that it's one that Vaikillia understood very well." Something about his words rang right to Lunarey. *What he's saying... I hate the idea of the meaning of it, but... I can't say that he's wrong. The bullying Rosabell suffered which led to her suicide... Kelia's betrayal... that nasty grin on Trigger's face as he bit me over and over... I HAVE seen what people are willing to do to others. But if Vaikillia knew all that... what does that mean about the kind of person she was?*

Sunyula appeared above them, climbing down the spiraled staircase. Scarlet Thorn waddled from side to side as she took each step. "Come on, let's go," she said. Lunarey noticed that

she was carrying a black bag. It was no purse, and it definitely held some weight, as the arm that held it slightly leaned downwards. Samuel hurried to lift the weight off of her, as he took the bag himself. Samuel and Lunarey followed her outside, where Richard was waiting behind the wheel of a silver car. An escort car stood by next to it, with four men in it, armed with submachine guns and dressed with purple Elastics.

"What's in the bag?" Lunarey whispered to Samuel.

"Elastics and guns. Sunyula hates wearing those things, so we keep them in that bag. We'll put them on only if we have to."

Sunyula sat in the passenger's seat while Samuel and Lunarey sat in the back. The two cars drove through the metal gates and headed towards Framstead, Northstock. *They say that while Fraenon Hill is the most luxurious district in Alataria, Northstock is the one with the most beautiful views and scenery. They say the greenery is endless there, with vast fields and lush grass wherever you go.*

Minutes into the drive, Lunarey felt the effects of the insomnia she'd been having, as tiredness overcame her. She leaned her head against the glass window and fell asleep. *I hope that when I wake up I'll at least get to see those gorgeous Northstock views,* she thought to herself mere moments before entering the realm of dreams.

In her dream, she found herself in an empty void. She was standing on an invisible ground, with nothing but blackness all around her. The black void seemed infinite. She called to see if there was anyone there, but no response came. She tried turning her head around several times, but no one was there but her. She called out if there was anyone around once more, but this time, she heard a distant voice. "I'm here," the voice said. Lunarey turned around and saw a vague shadow of a person materializing into a mirror image of her.

"Are you me?" Lunarey asked the mirrored clone.

"Yes and no," it said. Lunarey felt confused at first, but quickly realized what it meant.

"You are Vaikillia," Lunarey said. The clone simply smiled and did not say anything. "Please, tell me," Lunarey begged.

## Bullet and Blade

"Tell me what happened. What happened when I ran away from Harley Nation? Why did I lose my memory? How did I end up in Brontspil? What was that injection mark on my arm? How did that list come into my possession?" the clone once again smiled without answering. "Tell me!" Lunarey raised her voice. "Tell me!" yet the clone remained silent. "Tell me!" Lunarey shook her by the shoulders. "Tell me!" she shook her harder. "Tell me!"

Suddenly, blood spurted out of Vaikillia's mouth. Lunarey looked down and saw her hands red with blood. Her right one held a knife and it was stuck on the clone's chest. "No..." Lunarey backed away. "I didn't do this..." she looked at her bloody hands, as Vaikillia fell to her knees, blood dripping down from her chin down to her neck and chest. "I didn't—"

Her sleep was interrupted as loud noises woke her. At first, she thought it was nothing and tried falling asleep again, but when she heard them again, she recognized them as gunshots. Soon enough, she also heard shouting from within the car. Looking around her, she saw Samuel going through the black bag and taking out two assault rifles, handing one of them to Sunyula and keeping the other one for himself. *What's going on?* Lunarey wondered. She looked out of the window and saw two men riding motorcycles to the right of their car. Her heart plummeted when she noticed the gray color of their Elastics. Harley Nation had come to lay their wrath upon Lady Dread. She never expected them to go after Sunyula during the drive.

Samuel put on the purple Elastics, and Sunyula did the same, blurting several curse words as she did. Lunarey looked around and saw three more of the harrowing gray masks riding behind their car. Lunarey's heart raced. *How many are there?*

The escort car was a few feet away from theirs. Lunarey could see the men in it crawling through the open windows and shooting at the gray riders. The riders fought back, firing their guns as well at the escort car. It wasn't long before the shots came raining down on Lunarey's car as well. Bullets pierced through the windows and doors, making Lunarey duck in fright. Glass shattered all over the car, as the bullets found

their way through the windows. Lunarey felt sharp waves of pain as pieces of glass flung at her, cutting her at the shoulder and arms.

Sunyula wasted no time. As soon as she put on the purple gloves and mask, she pulled herself through her shattered window and took aim at the two riders beside the car. "Samuel!" Sunyula called. "Take those three on our back!" her assault rifle roared a deafening sound as she fired it.

Samuel crawled out of his own window and shot several rounds at the riders behind them. Richard remained unarmed behind the wheel, trying to keep his focus on the road while constantly checking his mirrors to see what was happening. *Does Sunyula have enough men guarding her? What happens if we lose to them? What will they do to me?* She remembered Trigger's brutality towards her. He hit her as if she was a punching bag.

"Vaikillia!" Sunyula called out to her. "Grab a gun and help us!"

"No!" Lunarey yelled, keeping herself cowered in her seat.

"Do it!" Sunyula said. "Do it or we'll die!" *I can't do it! I just can't!* "Vaikillia, come on!" Sunyula urged her.

"No!" Lunarey cried. She looked aside and saw Samuel firing off at the assailants. He seemed fearless. Lunarey wanted to be just like him. She wanted to rid herself of her fears. She wanted to be fearless as well. *Samuel said I have to fight back... I can't live and walk among the people if I don't step on some toes...*

Relentlessly, Lunarey went through the black bag, eventually spotting a black pistol in it. With the song of flying bullets still playing overhead, she grabbed it and peeked her head through her window. Only one of the two riders was now riding to the side of the car, and only two were in the back. Trying to cower as much as she could, Lunarey held the gun with both hands and tried aiming at the single rider. Before she could take a shot at him, the biker raised his weapon and fired off several rounds at Lunarey's direction. She ducked again as the firepower rained all around her.

Suddenly, Richard made a loud cry of pain. His shoulder was bleeding from a bullet he had taken. The car started to



## Bullet and Blade

slow down while Richard cursed and shouted. Lunarey peeked her head again and aimed her gun. She tried firing three times at the single rider, but she couldn't hit him. Just before she could fire the fourth round at him, she saw his head splattering a spray of blood and his body falling off the motorcycle, scraping against the asphalt road. She looked at Sunyula and saw the smoke trail coming out of her assault rifle.

Behind the vehicle, only two riders were left now. Sunyula and Samuel went back into the car to reload their guns, but by the time they had finished doing that, Lunarey saw the escort car accelerating from behind, catching up to the two riders. Going at full speed, the escort car rammed into their motorcycles, making them lose their balance and fall off of them onto the road.

Quickly after that, the cars came to a full stop and everyone poured out of them. *What's going on? Why are we stopping?* Only two men went out of the escort car out of the four that were in it. The other two lay dead in their seats, their eyes still open. Lunarey got out of the car as well and saw the two members walking up to the two riders who fell. At first, the riders tried to put up a fight, but they were too weak and frail from the fall to do much. The members from the escort car grabbed the bikers and dragged them all the way to Sunyula, unmasking them and bringing them to their knees.

Lady Dread stood with her arms crossed. Samuel stood by her, his eyes fixed on the gray riders of Harley Nation. *They're not even talking. It's as if they already know what's supposed to happen now.* The riders looked up at Lady Dread with the utmost contempt. Sunyula herself, however, seemed utterly thrilled.

As Samuel took a step forward, something suddenly changed in his eyes. Lunarey couldn't quite point out what it was, but she knew that all of a sudden something sinister and malicious had entered Samuel. Cruel intentions were leaking through his facial expression, as he stepped towards the biker, his steps ever so heavy and slow. At that moment, Samuel Butler was no longer standing there and Samuel of the Shatter was there in his stead.

Without any warning, without showing even a shred of regret or hesitation, Samuel opened the trunk of the car and took a crowbar out of it. The steel weapon rang as he tapped it against his hand. He inched towards the first of the two bikers and looked straight into his eyes. The eyes of Samuel of the Shatter appeared cold and dead. They were the eyes of a murderer and a torturer, one who's been doing it for a long time, and had known the kind of pain he inflicted close and personal. With a nod to one of the two members, the first biker was raised to his feet. Samuel raised the crowbar high and landed it swiftly on the biker's leg, just below his knee. A horrid sound of shatter was heard, mixed with the biker's screams of pain. Lunarey covered her mouth in shock. Without waiting another second, he launched the crowbar again and again into the biker's leg, and after several devastating blows, he moved on to his other leg and did the same. In reality, it only lasted about a minute, but in Lunarey's mind, it was so horrendous and excruciating to watch that it seemed to go on forever. *Stop it!* She screamed in her mind, knowing that Sunyula wouldn't approve of her saying that out loud in such a crowd. *Stop it, Samuel! Don't do this!*

On and on the hits seemed to repeat themselves, until finally Samuel halted. The crowbar was now spotted red and slightly dented. He returned it to the car's trunk and backed away, wiping off sweat off of his forehead.

Lunarey's hand remained covering her mouth. She looked up at her mother and saw a most horrifying picture. Lady Dread was making a wry smile, one of pure delight. *She's... she's not shocked or disgusted... she's... she's taking pleasure in this...*

Breathing heavily through his teeth grind, the man who had lost both of his legs had now muffled almost all other sounds. He didn't want them to hear him suffer anymore. He didn't want them to hear him beg or scream. Harley Nation's members were always said to be of a different breed. A tough, persistent one that refused to give their enemies any kind of joy in their defeat. His legs were now so distorted and disfigured, with one having his foot twisted almost entirely all

## Bullet and Blade

the way around, and the other one having a broken bone showing up as a bump under his skin, sticking out just below his knee. Blood ran fast and plenty through the holes in his pants and gathered in a pool beneath him.

*This... this is so horrible...* Lunarey thought. *Samuel... how could you do this? Perhaps I was right not to put my complete faith in you. You are, after all, Samuel of the Shatter.* She tried catching eye contact with him, but he remained looking only at the bikers, as he stood near Sunyula. *He's not looking at me on purpose. He knows what I'm thinking of him right now. Samuel, you coward. You hate disappointing me, so you prefer not to see the look of shock on me.*

Sunyula's gaze turned to Lunarey. "Vaikillia," she said in her snaky voice. "You showed great valor by picking up that gun and putting up a fight. I think you deserve to choose these men's fate."

"W-What?" Lunarey panicked. "I-I don't want—"

"Don't disappoint me, Vaikillia," Sunyula said. "Do these men get to live... or die?" her eyes shone as she uttered that last word.

Lunarey looked at the two members of Harley Nation. The wounded one seemed disoriented and weak. The pain and blood loss was about to make him pass out at any moment. The other man simply looked horrified, although remaining silent. "Let them live," Lunarey finally said, decisively. "Send them back to the Red Rider as a message. Let him know what happens to those who go after us." In truth, Lunarey only wanted to avoid any more death and violence, but she knew what kind of argument would please Lady Dread.

Sunyula chuckled. "Very well, my sweet." Instantly, the gray riders were let go of, and the entire entourage went back into their vehicles. As they drove off, Lunarey couldn't help but wonder if this was how her future was going to look like from now on, under the care of Sunyula. As she looked to her side, at Samuel, she noticed that he was still refusing to look at her.



## Arkaneh

Ruin and wreckage ruled over the outpost in Ravenwey Burrows. Following the deadly Justicars attack, many were injured and were missing from the outpost while they were recovering from their wounds. Those who remained fit to serve were trying to do their best to bring the outpost back to a normal-looking state. Many of the walls were riddled with bullets holes and fractures. In addition, some of the old machinery caved down due to heavy damage and had to be removed.

As Arkaneh walked into the outpost, he noticed how vacant the place felt. What was once a place packed with armed members and Kleon Hanford's escort girls now only had about half as much members, while Kleon's girls remained at the Godly Succubi until he would consider the current situation safe enough for them to come back. Kleon lost two girls during the attack, which infuriated him, according to what Arkaneh overheard, therefore turning him very cautious before losing any more of his income source. Arkaneh actually preferred it that way. He never liked seeing those girls around, shaming themselves and giving pleasure to men who certainly didn't deserve it, in his opinion.

Griffiths had been helping in clearing the wreckage as well from time to time, but mostly he would sit in his office, at the

## Bullet and Blade

top of the staircase and bury his head in lines of Vex and a bottle of scotch. Some of the whispers that Arkaneh had caught claimed that his addictions had only worsened after losing so many of his men.

Making his way to one of the offices at the end of the abandoned factory, Arkaneh found Talimay and Fenia. Talimay was overlooking at Fenia, as the short-haired technology genius was typing away on her laptop. "You wanted to see me?" he asked Talimay.

"Yes," The red-headed lieutenant turned to him. "I wanted your opinion on something."

Arkaneh drew closer to the two and saw satellite images on Fenia's laptop of the old dockyards in Servein. "Ever since Braden was kidnapped, I've been trying to track down his SmartWrist," Fenia explained. "One of the members who fought beside him during the attack claimed that he saw Braden being taken while his SmartWrist was still on him. I considered it a long shot and didn't give much hope that it'll work but..."

"Braden's SmartWrist just turned on." Talimay finished her sentence.

"It was turned off until now, but less than an hour ago I managed to get a signal from it and I was able to track down its location."

"And that's where Braden is?" Arkaneh pointed at the satellite images. "At the old dockyards in Servein?"

"Apparently so," Fenia said.

"We're not sure what to make of it. It feels like—"

"Like a trap," Arkaneh could already tell. "You're right, it does. If I had to bet my money, I'd say it's a trap."

"So... what should we do about it?"

Arkaneh thought about it for a while. *The old dockyards... it's mainly a vast open space so I wouldn't consider it the best place for an ambush. There's little where they can hide. No... if I had to guess...* "Fenia, could you look up if there are any buildings near the dockyards?" he asked.

Fenia became highly concentrated as she typed away on her

laptop. A minute later she returned her answer. "There's only one in proximity. There are a few more others, but they're many miles away from—"

"Show me that one building." He cut her midsentence, rudely. A few clicks later he saw an image of a tall building displayed on the laptop. The building looked like an office building, an old one, yet at least 20 stories high. "How far is that building from Braden's location?" he asked.

"not much, about half a mile away."

Even though Arkaneh's face remained emotionless as always, his eyes clearly shone with the spark of an idea brewing inside his head. "Talimay," he turned to look at her. "Can you gather some of your men?"

"How many?" she asked.

"6."

"Yeah, I can manage that."

"Good, tell them to get to that building and wait at its entrance until they receive word from you."

"Wait... what are you planning?" Talimay hesitated.

"I'll tell you on the way. Come on, we need to go." Arkaneh went for the door.

"Go where?" Fenia asked.

"To the old dockyards in Servein," he replied. The two followed Arkaneh to Talimay's car outside. As they walked, Talimay had contacted her men using her SmartWrist and assembled her team, telling them to wait at the building near the dockyards. Fenia begged to know Arkaneh's plan again and again, looking nervous, until finally he laid it out to them in the car.

During the drive to Servein, Arkaneh tried remembering the last time he was in the old dockyards. He was about 16 when his uncle, Jeremy, took him and his brother, Edrimer, to a restaurant in Servein. On their way back, they passed through the old dockyards, and as they watched them religiously, asking their uncle why were there burned out storage facilities and smashed walls all over there, Jeremy told them the story of the Clash of Rampage. That was how Arkaneh first learned about

## Bullet and Blade

the bloody war that waged between Jegaar Hill the Wendigo, and several other mob gangs, including Code Sanguinary and Men of Midas, led by Josph Mallistrom at the time. To this day, the Clash of Rampage stands as a shameful, blood-soaked event in Alataria's crime history, and is even taught in several school during history classes, most likely as a deterrent that might hopefully stir young generations away from crime. *But stories and tales do not shape a man's future. In the end, the events of his life will put a man on a certain path, and no story, as awful as it may be, will have the power to change that path.*

The final battle to end the Clash of Rampage was the one that took place in the old dockyards of Servein. Countless men were killed on that day, on all sides, and by the time that fight was over, all that was left of the dockyards was nothing but an ashen wasteland of havoc and destruction. Some think that the government left the dockyards in that state ever since so they would serve as some sort of a monument or a reminder of the tragedy that happened there. Others claim that they did it purely because they never saw a reason to spend money rebuilding it, with Herkin Port now standing as their replacement.

They stopped the car not far from the dockyards. Arkaneh, Talimay, and Fenia hid behind a hill, where they could watch the dockyards from afar. The old port of Alataria looked the same as it did when Arkaneh was 16 years old. Smashed walls and burned out storage facilities were all you could see there. A bit further away, Arkaneh could spot blown-off containers, a kind of damage most likely caused by grenades. Dust and ash were abundant, as well as the ghostly memory of what was once an honorable place of commerce and prosperity. *Now our current main port is mainly known for bringing in illegal 'merchandise.'*

In the middle of the old port, right at the center of an open space between the storage facilities, the three saw Braden, on his knees, with his head staring at the floor and his hands tied behind his back. A wide stream of blood was raining down from his mouth, covering throughout his chin and going all the way down his neck. *They cut out his tongue, Arkaneh realized. But*

## D. Sharon

*why would they do that? I thought Braden was one of the Justicars.*

Fenia gasped as she saw what was done to Braden, yet Talimay reminded her that he was a rat and a traitor and that he deserved a lot more pain than just that.

Looking to the east, Arkaneh saw the tall office building Fenia showed him. Glass windows appeared on all its floors. Arkaneh went for the car and grabbed a pair of binoculars. Watching the building from much closer now, he scanned every floor carefully with his eyes. The building seemed to be completely empty, as each floor proved to look vacant until he reached the 17<sup>th</sup> floor, where he spotted a glitter. *There you are, just like I thought.* The three waited a few more minutes until they were notified that Talimay's men were positioned near the building's entrance. "Tell them to go all the way to the 17<sup>th</sup> floor and get ready for a fight," Arkaneh said to her. Talimay nodded and briefed her men just as he said through the radio device.

It was clear that turning on Braden's SmartWrist was all part of a trap laid by the Justicars, but as soon as Arkaneh noticed that Braden was in the middle of an open space, the idea of an ambush seemed much less likely. However, with the existence of a tall building only about half a mile away, a sniper could easily be placed there to take out whoever was going to come for Braden. The glitter that Arkaneh caught with his binoculars on the 17<sup>th</sup> floor was the kind that couldn't be mistaken. It was the kind that came from the reflection of a sniper rifle scope. So far, the Justicars were always one step ahead, but this time, Arkaneh aimed to change that.

Listening closely to their advancement, Arkaneh heard the gunfight that took place on the 17<sup>th</sup> floor. Arkaneh truly hoped that Talimay's men were outnumbering the Justicars. Otherwise, his plan might backfire. With the tension overcoming her, Talimay demanded to know what the situation up there was. "There are only 3 Justicars up here!" a man shouted through the radio device. "Look out, one of them has some sort of a trigger!" the man's shouted to his comrades over the radio. *A trigger?* Within that second, Arkaneh's



## Bullet and Blade

received an answer for his wondering, as a loud, devastating explosion suddenly occurred at the dockyards. The blazing flames were so overwhelmingly bright and high that Arkaneh had to cover his eyes for a moment before he could look at the damage. Talimay and Fenia were speechless, their eyes locked in horror. A great crater now lay where Braden once stood. *They strapped a bomb to him... were they hoping to blow some of us off in addition to taking us out by a sniper?*

"Oh, my God," Fenia uttered in silence, her jaw dropping to the ground. Shouting came from the radio device. "Drop the weapon!" they heard one of Talimay's men yell. "Get down!" they heard next. "Talimay," one of her men spoke to her over the radio. "We caught one of the Justicars up here with a sniper rifle. The other two are dead."

"Bring him here," Talimay said back, her face red with a desire for vengeance.

*Something here doesn't make sense, Arkaneh thought to himself. If Braden was working for the Justicars, why would they cut out his tongue and strap a bomb to him? He thought about it for a while before reaching a conclusion. I can only think of one explanation. Knowing that we know Braden's identity, the Justicars couldn't risk us tracking him and letting him lead us where they wouldn't want us to reach, so they decided to get rid of him. They took out his tongue so he wouldn't be able to warn anyone about the bomb that's tied to him.*

Soon enough, Talimay's team regrouped with them, handing over the prisoner Justicar. His white mask still covered his face. For a moment, Arkaneh pondered on what if it turned out to be Edrimer. The last time he saw him, he promised to treat him as an enemy the next time the two would meet. Talimay stripped him of his mask with a quick, sharp pull. The man looked to be in his 40's, with short gray hair and deep blue eyes. He had light stubble on his face and thin lips.

"Fenia," Talimay turned to her. "Take his picture and run it through your facial recognition software. I want to know who he is." Her lips twitched with fury as she fixed her gaze at the old Justicar. Fenia hurried to snap her SmartWrist straight, and with a tap on its display, she took his picture. "Load him on

the car. We're taking this fucker back to Ravenwey Burrows."

On their way back, Arkaneh shared his thoughts with Talimay. She sighed in relief upon hearing them. "So, I guess this puts an end to our rat, once and for all." Arkaneh hoped his dearest that that was true. Fenia was busy at the back seat with her laptop, trying to retrieve the Justicar's identity.

As they left the city of Servein, heading for Ravenwey Burrows, Arkaneh bid the old dockyards farewell. Once again, he was reminded of that day when he visited the city with his uncle and brother. It was a good day, as far as his memory told him. Back then, they were only teenagers, trying to find their place in the world, but earlier, just before the Justicar was unmasked, as Arkaneh stood before the mysterious figure, he couldn't help but wonder what would have happened if it was Edrimer behind that mask. One thing he knew for sure, however. Unlike back then, Arkaneh had now found his place in the world, and unfortunately for him, so did Edrimer.

"I got it!" Fenia announced with excitement, just before they reached the outpost. "Our mystery man is named Serian Conway. He's 46 years old and lives in Morth City."

"Well," Talimay clenched a fist. "I'm going to have some fun with Mr. Conway."



## Maileena

The moon shone brightly on the neon sign of the Godly Succubi. It had been a long time since Maileena saw the place, and a wave of chill crawled through her bones as she did. Lit with a fair blue color, the club's name appeared right above its doors, on the neon sign. Above the letters, the outline of a woman in a cowboy hat was seen, shining red. The woman was lying on top of the letters with one leg stretched upwards and her head bending backward. *I hate that demeaning sign. I hate that demeaning place. I hate those demeaning men*, Maileena bit her lips.

Demilan looked concerned, as he watched the club from afar near her. She knew what was bothering him. *The thought of Telia being held in such a place... it must wreck him.* Demilan's duffel bag lay open on the ground beneath him, packed with the ammunition Winselt so kindly provided them with. Winselt was eager to get into the club, but Demilan insisted on watching it for a few more minutes, just to see if something was going on in there. Over the 20 minutes that they had been watching the place, everything seemed quiet from outside. Only one or two men had gone into the club, from what Maileena had counted.

A lone bouncer stood at the club's entrance. A pistol was holstered on his waist. Other than him, the three had no way of knowing how many more were waiting inside, armed.

## D. Sharon

"Alright," Demilan finally said. "It's time." The words felt ever so warm in Maileena's ear.

"Finally!" Winselt called in excitement. Demilan took several magazines for his Skyla rifle and stashed them in his deep pockets. He loaded the final one in his rifle and checked his sights. Maileena hid her revolver in the back of her pants, making sure it was loaded first. She took two dozens of bullets fit for it and placed them in her pockets. The rest of the equipment, including Winselt's double-barreled pistols, Umbra and Lux, remained in the duffel bag, along with a few more extra magazines and the Dynadiscs Winselt supplied them with. All three placed the earpieces in their ears.

"You know the drill, Maileena," Demilan turned to her. "Take the duffel bag with you into the Showcase Room and wait for Winselt to find his way to you there. Once he's in, the two of you start raining fire on the club. I will then infiltrate the club from the main entrance and take out as many as I can while they're still focusing on you."

"Right," she strapped the duffel bag on her back.

Right before she left, she stood there, facing Demilan. She gave him a warm hug. *He trusts me.* It meant a lot to Maileena. She wasn't about to let him down. She wanted to show them what a good apple on a bad tree is capable of.

Maileena then went on her way, going around the club, making her way to the emergency staircase behind it. The bag felt heavy on her back and was constantly making sounds of metal clanging against each other, as it swayed from side to side. Climbing the staircase with such weight on her proved to be a challenge for the young 15 years old, but she made her way to the top of them, finding the grate that would lead her to the infamous room she once swore to herself she would never return to. She removed the grate using a screwdriver that was in the duffel bag. The airway shaft was small and narrow. Knowing that she wasn't going to be able to fit in there with the duffel bag on her back, she tied its strap to her leg in order to drag it behind her while in the shaft. "Demilan," she said to him through her earpiece. "I'm going into the ventilation shaft

## Bullet and Blade

now."

"Alright," he said. "Good luck."

As she made her way through the narrow shaft, she could hear voices coming from further within. She crawled through it slowly to remain quiet. The duffel bag was hard to drag, and with the heat that ruled inside the shaft, sweat quickly covered every inch of Maileena's body. Finally, she made it to the Showcase Room. Through the bars of the grate that separated her from the room, Maileena saw the young girls who sat on its floor, some were barefoot and many with dirty, ragged, unwashed clothes, waiting for a client to enter and pick one of them to do his bidding. The clients never cared how the girls were dressed. For them, once those tattered clothes were off, their naked bodies were all the same for all they cared. *On that fateful day, I swore to myself... I swore that I would never see that filthy room ever again...*

The walls of the room were gray and dirty. A filthy toilet stood in the corner of the room, urine and feces were all but abundant in it. Since the girls would spend hours in that room, they had to share a toilet, and most of the times, that toilet wasn't working well, filling the room with a horrid stench. Beyond the room's door, Maileena could hear the muffled sound of loud music coming from the club's main hall, the kind that always roamed there. A seemingly random mixture of electronic sounds, wrapped by a booming bass that was so loud that it made the walls of the room shiver.

Maileena recognized most of the girls in the room. Some of the faces appeared to be new. There had been girls of various ages in there, from 11-year-olds to 17-year-olds, though the majority of them clearly belonged to the lower half of that age range. No one smiled in that room. All faces were painted with a dreary and depressed appearance. *Kleon always told us to smile whenever a client would enter the room, but none of us could ever bring ourselves to do that.*

"Demilan," Maileena whispered ever so quietly into the earpiece. "I made it to the Showcase Room, send Winselt in."

"Copy that," Demilan said. "I'm moving in closer to the

club. Winselt, get in there. I'll be waiting for you to give me the green light to go in."

Using her screwdriver, Maileena removed the screws off the grate once again and entered the room. All the girls in the room instantly jumped and some even shrieked. Maileena hurried to quiet them down. "Relax, relax, it's me," she said to them.

"M-Maileena?" one of the girls said.

"What are you doing here?" another asked.

"I'm going to get you out, don't worry," Maileena looked around the faces, trying to find Vera's, but to no avail. "I'm also looking for my sister, Vera. She's 12 years old. Did you see her here?"

"I did," one said. A great sense of relief washed over Maileena. "But I don't know where she is now."

"What do you mean?"

"I just... don't know." The girl shrugged. *Is it possible she's with a client right now? Oh, god, please make it not true.*

"Hi," she heard Winselt through the earpiece. *He must be talking to the bartender.* "I'm looking for Kleon Hanford. I'm a friend of Iren Eustis, I'm sure Kleon is expecting me."

"Mr. Hanford is right there," she heard the bartender speak. "Let me see if he's available right now, wait here for a moment."

"I can't believe it," Winselt whispered into his earpiece. "That fucker, Kleon, is sitting there with two girls, one of each shoulder." Maileena recognized that image. Kleon loved feasting on his girls, usually in the back office. Though he generally preferred to have a taste of those who had a ripe body, on some occasions, he allowed himself to violate one of the girls from the VIP section. Fortunately for Maileena, she never got picked by him.

"Mr. Hanford will see you now," the bartender said to Winselt.

"Maileena," one of the girls said. She was one of the younger ones, about 12 years old, just like Vera. "You need to leave. If they find you here, they'll kill you."

## Bullet and Blade

"She's right," an older girl said. "Besides, who knows what they'll do to us for not warning them. You're putting us at risk." Soon enough arguments calling for Maileena to leave started to arise in the room in plenty. *I remember that fear of theirs. I also used to fear Kleon and his men just like that, but no longer. I'm not the same girl anymore. I'm stronger, and I will NOT let Kleon threaten me anymore. Even if I have to die, I will find Vera and kill every single person in this club.*

"Enough!" Maileena brought the commotion to a halt. She pulled out her revolver and stuck it close to her body. "If one more mouth of yours opens, I will put a bullet through it." the girls now seemed frightened, some even backed away against the wall. "Everything is going to be fine, so calm the fuck down."

"Oh, you must be Winselt Langton," Maileena's heart suddenly plummeted as she recognized Kleon's voice through the earpiece. "Iren told me you'd be coming."

"And here I am," Winselt said. "Did Iren tell you—?"

"About the kind of service you expect to get here?" Kleon said. "Yes, he did." *Good. Once Kleon lets Winselt into the VIP section, we'll be able to start this showdown.* "Well, before we go any further, I suggest we talk about the payment." *Oh, no. I forgot how greedy Kleon can get.*

"First I'd like to see the kind of... product you're offering. Then we can talk about money."

Kleon started to laugh. "Look, buddy, I don't know you, and I'm not about to show anything before I see any cash." *Fuck. I've heard of how paranoid Reus Mallstrom is, but I've never figured it would rub off on Kleon.*

"Mr. Hanford, with all due respect, you have no reason to worry about your payment. Iren vouched for me—"

"I don't give a fuck about Iren!" Kleon snapped. Maileena heard the tumble of Kleon's hand banging on the table.

"Fine," Winselt said. "I'll make sure he gets your message. I'll also make sure that he'll never set foot in your club again." She heard Winselt get up from his seat.

"Wait!" Kleon stopped him, chuckling right afterward. "I

apologize. Iren has been a loyal customer of ours for a long time now. Any friend of Iren's is a friend of mine. Please, let me show you what you desire." *Yes! In the end, that bastard is more greedy than paranoid, it appears. Thank god for that.* "Oh, hold on for a moment, Mr. Langton," Kleon said. Maileena could hear a weak, faint voice. *What's going on now? Is someone whispering something into Kleon's ear?*

"What is it?" Winselt asked.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Langton, but... something came up. Please, have a seat. I'll be right with you." *What does he mean? What happened?*

"Winselt," Maileena whispered into the earpiece. "What's going on over there?"

For a few seconds, she got no response from Winselt, until eventually she heard his voice, muttering words so weakly she could barely hear them. "Oh, shit," he said.





## Demilan

With a man holding him on each side and another one watching him from behind, Demilan was dragged through the main entrance of the Godly Succubi. He never saw the three armed men coming, and by the time he did, they were already pointing their guns at him. The one behind him held his Skyla rifle, as well as his knife. It happened very shortly after he drew closer to the club to ready himself for the infiltration. The first thing Demilan tried to do was to warn Maileena and Winselt via the earpiece, but the men managed to notice the small device in his ear and confiscated it.

As he entered, the loud electronic music greeted him, along with the purple-blue colors that dominated the hall he entered. A bar with a wide variety of bottles stood on the left side of the hall, manned by a single bartender. Several wide pillars stood around the club, tiled purple and going all the way up to the ceiling. There were two large stages, both with a pathway leading to a circular smaller stage that had a dancing pole on it. Several rectangular tables were scattered around, most were currently empty, but Demilan was being escorted to one that wasn't nearly as such. A man with spiky, bleached-blond hair sat there, with two ladies leaning on each of his shoulders while his arms wrapped around them. The girls were dressed in a minimal outfit, covering only their breasts and groin. Heavy

make-up adorned their faces. The man had a tribal tattoo above his right eye, and his short sleeves revealed he had long, variant tattoos on his arms as well. His left eyebrow and ears were pierced, and a sly smile appeared on his face. It didn't take Demilan more than a second to realize that the man he faced was Kleon Hanford. As he sat down in front of Kleon, he spotted Winselt sitting only a table away from Kleon's but chose to not have any eye contact with him in an effort to keep Winselt's cover intact for the time being.

"You've been one hell of a nuisance, my boy," Kleon said, confidently. *This is the man who offers young girls to his special clients without batting an eye,* Demilan reminded himself. *It pains me to think and Telia and Vera are in the custody of such a vile man.* "I'm sure Reus would highly appreciate me when I bring you to him."

"You goddamn motherfucker," Demilan spat. "Where is my wife?!"

"Yes, yes, we've all heard by now that you're looking for your precious wife and that bitch's little sister." Kleon shrugged.

"How... how do you know that?" Demilan was appalled.

Kleon giggled. "Your old boss cared to inform us." *Blackburn?* "It seems the General still resents your old drug habits." Kleon smiled, showing off crooked teeth. The music kept booming around Demilan, making him feel as if the floor beneath him was shaking. "He's the one who let us know you were going to come here. Thanks to him we were smart enough to place lookouts around the club. Otherwise, we wouldn't be able to capture you." *Damn you, Blackburn. Back there you spared my life. I thought it was your way of showing gratitude for my long service. Then again, Blackburn always preferred to look at the bigger picture, and with that logic in mind, he'd rather rat me out to further tighten his relations with Reus.* "Not only that," Kleon continued. "We also increased our security." As Demilan looked around him, he suddenly noticed how the club was getting filled with armed men. Three came from the hallway to the right, and two more appeared upstairs. As Demilan

## Bullet and Blade

scanned his surroundings, he realized that there were more than a dozen armed men in the club. Some had submachine guns while other carried assault rifles. Even the bartender pulled a shotgun from beneath his counter. Once again that sly smile reappeared on Kleon's face. *That motherfucker... we never expected this many guards. Blackburn fucked us.*

"Where... is... my... wife?" Demilan grunted through his grinding teeth. His hand clutched the table in anger. Not even all those men would stop him from saving Telia.

"You're not going to see your woman or that little girl anymore," Kleon said. "Speaking of little girls, where's that little bitch you're supposed to be roaming around with? I have a little score to settle with her."

"Where... is... my... wife?" Demilan breathed heavily. "I am not telling you shit until I know where my wife is."

Kleon let go of the two girls around him and leaned over the table. "You know, when I first laid my eyes on your little cunt, back when she was brought to me by Odis Maben, I felt blessed to have such a new product to offer. She had such a lovely face," Demilan's finger burrowed deeper into the table. "And such a lean, nice body." His other hand clenched into a fist. "Her hair felt so soft when I ran my fingers through it. Every strand felt like velvet." His blood boiled. "I thought to myself, such a woman should be worshiped." His heart rushed. "Instead, her fate was to marry a Vex junkie who abandoned her and allowed her to be taken away." The loud music kept booming around. "Oh, what a cruel, dark world we live in. If she'd been my wife, I'd treat her like a queen."

Demilan looked down at his necklace, the same dream catcher necklace that Telia once gave him to rid him of his nightmares. Yet ever since she's been gone, Demilan had felt that he was living in a nightmare, one that he couldn't wake up from until he got her back. He reached into his pocket and pulled something out of it.

"You're right, Kleon. It IS a cruel, dark world, but it's not like that because of people like me." Maileena had told him that he wasn't rotten, and so did Telia. Suddenly a thump was

heard underneath the table. "Your men should've searched me better than just take away my gun and knife. Now, there's a Dynadisc attached to our table, and if you're not going to answer my question, I'm going to blow us all up." Demilan landed his hand with a mighty pound on the table, revealing the rod he held in it, the one that could detonate the Dynadisc. Flames of fury raged in his eyes. He seemed more determined than ever. Kleon's smile evaporated and a frown replaced it. "Where is my wife?" Demilan asked once again. In the corner of his eye, he saw Winselt backing away, slowly.

"She's not here." Kleon finally answered. The two girls beside him rose from their seats and backed away, looking frightened.

"What do you mean?"

"After Blackburn warned us about you, Reus told me not only to increase security but to also take Telia McCloud and Vera Banister away from here."

Suddenly, Demilan's heart felt heavy. "Then where is she?"

"I'm not sure. He sent some of his men here to take them. He never told me where he was taking them."

"You're lying!" Demilan yelled. "Tell me where she is!"

"I don't know!" Kleon said. *He's not lying... I can tell... she's really not here. Oh, Telia... my sweet love... I've failed you once again.* Tears begged to roll out of his eyes, yet he stopped them.

Suddenly a loud gunshot was heard, and all faces turned to its direction. Demilan recognized the unique, mighty roar of a revolver as its firing. *Maileena!* He realized where it came from. In that split-second of inattention, Demilan jumped from his seat as far away from the table as he could, pushing the button on his rod just before hitting the hard ground, detonating the Dynadisc.

Shrouds of the table flew everywhere, several pieces even hit Demilan. A veil of smoke started to cover the club, and the men around started coughing as they tried to make sight of their surroundings. Demilan's ear buzzed from the explosion, and his head spun around, yet he forced himself to regain his balance while he still had any kind of advantage. Among the

## Bullet and Blade

very brief chaos, Demilan charged on his feet for the man that held his weapons, taking his Skyla rifle, his knife and his earpiece by force from the disoriented man's hands and stabbing his stomach with his dark blade. He then ran over to the bar, shooting one of the men in his way. Ready to aim at the bartender, he saw Winselt instead, hiding behind the counter, holding the same shotgun that Demilan saw in the bartender's hands when he walked into the club. Demilan hid behind one of the large pillars, knowing that they may provide decent cover.

By that time, the smoke screen had evaporated and all the armed men were ready to fight back. Demilan knew that they were far more than they ever anticipated, perhaps even far more than they would be able to handle, yet not even all those men would stop him from saving Telia.

Demilan peeked above his cover, only to be greeted by a hail of bullets. Some of the firepower flew above and near him while some of it was blocked by the thick pole. "Winselt," Demilan talked through his earpiece. "I need you to lay down some fire. There's too many of them right now."

"Roger that," Winselt said. Demilan looked over at the bar and saw Winselt's shotgun peeking above the counter. Glass bottles shattered all above Winselt and various kinds of alcohol spilled on him, soaking the scarred soldier. Taking use of Winselt's covering fire, Demilan leaned behind the pillar and took aim at his enemies. He counted eight of them. He aimed his assault rifle at two of the armed men. Being the sharpshooter that he was, both of the men went down, but as soon as they did, the firepower of the rest of them shifted towards Demilan again, forcing him to hide again. *Earlier, I saw more than eight men. Did the rest of them go for Maileena?*

"Maileena!" Demilan called. "Where are you? What's your situation?" he never knew why she fired her revolver. "Maileena!" he called again after getting no answer. The electronic music kept getting blasted off the speakers, but by now its tremendous volume drowned under the sea of bullets that flew around the club. "Maileena!" he called again. The

pillar crumbled beside him under the heavy rain of fire.

"Goddamn it!" Winselt cursed. "I need Umbra and Lux!" he popped from behind the counter and fired several rounds at the men. Demilan saw one of them go down. "Demilan, the bartender only held a few extra shells for this shotgun! I'm going to run out of bullets very soon!" the situation was far from what the three originally planned, yet not even all these men would stop Demilan from saving Telia.

"Maileena, answer me! Where the fuck are you?" Demilan called for her again. He tried firing a few more rounds, only to find his magazine empty quickly enough. He ejected the empty magazine and loaded a new one from his pockets. He noticed that he had only two more magazines left to load, and started to fear that without Maileena's duffel bag, Winselt and him would remain with no means to fight.

More bottles shattered over Winselt's head, as another hail of firepower came down on the bar. Seven men were left firing at them. Three of them were hiding behind a flipped-over table and the rest hid behind pillars like the one Demilan was behind. Peeking from his cover, Demilan couldn't see Kleon anywhere. The table that he sat on earlier was in pieces, blasted, yet Kleon was nowhere around it. *Did he survive the explosion?*

"Demilan!" Winselt called as he rose from his cover, only to be greeted with a wall of bullets racing towards him. He cowered instantly. "We can't keep going like this! We're pinned down over here!" Winselt said. *He's right. We need to do something.*

"Winselt, draw their fire. I'm going to go around them and flank them," Demilan said.

"Alright, go." Winselt rose again from behind the bar, letting off two shots. Demilan quickly sprung from his cover, crouching, and went around the group of armed men, flipping over the tables that cross by him to use as cover. Demilan hoped to go all the way around them so he could take them out from behind. He kept on making his way, flipping another table to hide behind. He barely made another step from that table when someone lunged at him from behind, making him

## Bullet and Blade

fall on all fours. Looking behind him, he saw a most hideous image. The man's face was bloody and mangled. The entire right side of his face looked like a mutilated mesh, with many cuts and exposed flesh. His right eye seemed pale and colorless, suggesting he had lost his ability to see with that eye. The hair on his head now had patches where it was scorched or even completely burnt off. Demilan also noticed little pieces of shrapnel stuck at various points on the man's face. The monster stared right at Demilan's eyes. It was only then when he realized that the man before him was Kleon.

Kleon punched Demilan's face, but his punch felt weak and frail. Demilan tried aiming his assault rifle at him, but Kleon stopped him with his hands, hanging on to the Skyla rifle, preventing it from being aimed at him. The flesh on his hands was just as burned and scarred as his face was. Yet despite his attempt, Kleon wasn't much in terms of strength, particularly in his current state, and Demilan quickly overcame him, ramming his weapon's barrel into his face, sending him down on his back. He then raised his gun and readied his trigger finger. *Maileena has every right to be the one to take his life. Killing him would be unfair of me.* As much as he wanted to make the bullet hit Kleon's head, he fired it instead at Kleon's leg, incapacitating him.

While Kleon moaned and shrieked, Demilan left him behind and made his way around the armed men. "Demilan, I'm out of bullets!" Winselt cried.

"Keep drawing their fire!" Demilan said. Creeping up behind two of the men who hid behind the pillars, Demilan fired two bullets into the first, hitting him in the chest, and then in the head. By the time the other one realized what was happening behind him and turned around, Demilan plunged his knife into his neck, making a spatter of blood leak out. An ooze of red ran down the black blade.

The rest of the men, who had now noticed that Demilan was at their flank, split their fire evenly between Winselt and Demilan. The bullets gnawed at the pillar Demilan now hid behind. *Maileena*, his thoughts returned to her. *Where are you?*



## Maileena

"Your men should've searched me better than just take away my gun and knife. Now, there's a Dynadisc attached to our table, and if you're not going to answer my question, I'm going to blow us all up." Maileena heard Demilan through the earpiece. She never noticed that he took one of the Dynadiscs with him. She was sure they were all in the duffel bag. "Where is my wife?" he asked Kleon.

"She's not here," Kleon answered. Maileena almost fell to her knees.

"What do you mean?"

"After Blackburn warned us about you, Reus told me not only to increase security but to also take Telia McCloud and Vera Banister away from here." She almost lost her grip on her revolver's handle. *No... this can't be... Vera...*

All of a sudden she heard a noise outside the Showcase Room. The girls inside backed away to the wall in fright, looking scared and paranoid. Some held others in their arms, giving them what little warmth they could provide. *Every day is this room was like this*, Maileena remembered as she looked at them. Fear and loneliness were the dark clouds that hovered above everyone in that room. To be terrified by the mere sound of footsteps nearing the door, Maileena wished no such fate to anyone. She was one of the very few who always



## Bullet and Blade

embraced what came her way in the Godly Succubi since she volunteered for that position just so she could get paid enough to feed both her and Vera.

The footsteps now drew closer to the door. Maileena held her revolver tightly, her first finger ever so ready on the trigger. In the background, she could still hear Demilan and Kleon talking to each other, but she was too focused on her incoming visitor to pay any attention to what they were saying.

She pegged herself against the wall in order to hide behind the door when it opens. The door opened and a man carrying an assault rifle appeared at the doorstep, his back facing Maileena. The man was bald and shaved, wearing a black plain shirt and jeans, like the rest of the club's employees. He looked at the frightened little girls in contempt, grinning a second later. *Men like him don't scare me anymore.* Just like Demilan taught her, she took a deep breath as she aimed her gun. *I will no longer be bound to crude, evil men.* She had already grown accustomed to its weight, so it felt light in her hand. *And I will kill them all to save Vera.* She pulled the trigger. The blast echoed between the walls of the room. The mighty bullet tore through his head into the wall, painting several of the girls in red. The girls screamed in horror, only for their screams to be drowned by the sound of a big explosion. *The Dynadisc!* Maileena realized.

Soon enough, gunshots filled the club. *Demilan and Winselt... I have to get the duffel bag to them.* She hurried for the bag, her revolver still clutched in hand. Carrying it on her back, she left the Showcase Room. Walking through the hallway of the VIP section, she passed by the bedrooms where the clients would take the girls to and fulfill their twisted fantasies. At the moment, they were all empty, but she knew times where they had all been occupied simultaneously.

The loud firefight happening downstairs along with the deafening music filled her ears, so when the three men appeared in front of her at the end of the hallway, she couldn't even hear their approaching footsteps. In a panic, she raised her revolver, but one of the men grabbed her hand and pulled it aside, landing a powerful slap to her face right afterward,

causing the earpiece to fly off from her ear. Maileena fell to the floor, the duffel bag dropping along with her. The same man then grabbed her by her hair, hard and mercilessly, "Hey, I recognize that girl!" he said. "She used to be one of the VIP section's sluts!" the other two laughed. The man then threw her like a puppet into one of the bedrooms, leaving her revolver and bag on the floor behind.

Maileena hit herself against the bed's frame, writhing in pain. She held onto the mattress to keep herself from falling on the floor. As she heard the three men walk into the room, memories of her pleasuring men in that very room, on that very bed, came rushing at her.

"Well, I had no idea we were dealing with a whore," the second man of the three said in contempt, sneering. "We usually don't tend to aim our weapons at whores!" he laughed. "We do other things to them, but no shooting, no sir!" he grabbed her waist with a tight grip. "Here, let me demonstrate you!" he started to pull down her pants and panties while forcing her to bend over the bed. Maileena closed her eyes. "I'll make sure to remind you that you're a whore, not a gunslinger," they all laughed. She heard him unbolting his pants, eventually letting them drop on the floor. "Say, whore, how do you like to get fucked?" he asked with a chilling grin.

The men's laughter reverberated infinitely in her mind. They were no different from any other men she knew in that bedroom. The last time she was bent over, submissive to the lecheries of such perverts, it was at that same warehouse where Demilan first found her. Back then, those men did whatever they wished to Maileena, grinning and smiling as they did, without a shred of caring or sympathy, and when Demilan broke her free from their tame she beat one of them to death with a wrench, feeling ever so joyful in doing that. *Men like them don't scare me anymore.* She said the same words as earlier to herself. *I will no longer be bound to crude, evil men, and I will kill them all to save Vera.* She looked at the floor behind her. The man's pants that lay on the ground still held the pistol he holstered there. *They see me as a little girl and fill themselves with over-confidence.*

## Bullet and Blade

*That will be their undoing.*

She shoved her elbow deep into the man's abdomen, causing him to gag and twitch. At that moment, she reached for his holstered pistol on the floor, took it and fired twice at him, once in the chest, and another in the head. The man's body fell on her, lifeless, and the two men aimed their guns at Maileena. The dead body above her, used as a human shield, suffered three shots from their weapons, saving her, and allowing her to land a bullet in each one's head.

Once the two fell on the ground, Maileena shoved the body above her aside. Her body was drenched in his blood, along with her clothes. She pulled up her pants and underwear and left the room.

After checking the hallway for more of Kleon's men, she grabbed her revolver and duffel bag and reinserted the earpiece back in her ear. She then headed to the end of the hallway. Just before walking through the door leading out of the VIP section, she looked back and saw the pool of blood that gathered from the three men outside the bedroom's door. This time, it felt much more than mere joyful. It felt just.

The main hall of the club was a wreck. Looking down from the balcony of the upper floor, she saw bodies littering the floor beneath her. Kleon's men who remained alive were firing in two directions. Some were shooting at Winselt, who hid behind the bar's counter, and others were shooting at Demilan, who hid behind a pillar on the opposite side. She couldn't spot Kleon anywhere, wondering if he had died in that explosion she heard.

"Demilan," she called him over the earpiece.

"Maileena!" she heard the excitement in his voice. "Where were you? We need that bag right now!"

"I'm sorry. I had to deal with some of Kleon's men up here."

"Maileena," Winselt said. "I'm out of weapons. I need Umbra and Lux!" Maileena went through the bag, taking out the double-barreled pistols. She threw them off the balcony to the bar, one of them hitting Winselt, and the other landing

next to him. "Finally!" he called. "Now, how about some ammunition?" she threw two magazines at him. "Thanks, kid," he said. Winselt waited a few moments for the firepower that headed his way to wind down, and then rose from his cover, wielding his beloved pistols. Two bullets came from each one at a time, tearing through two of the men who aimed at him. Maileena saw one of them get hit by two bullets in his throat, falling on the floor, choking on his own blood.

Demilan was under much heavier fire. The pillar he hid beneath looked bare bone, suffering enough damage to crumble down to almost half its size. Maileena wanted to throw some of the ammunition in Demilan's way but he was too far away for her to reach. "Demilan, how are you holding up?" she asked.

"Not very well," he said back. "I'm very low on bullets. I'm down to my last magazine and it's very hard to find opportunities to return fire from where I am."

Maileena dropped the bag on the balcony floor and aimed her revolver. She fired at the men who aimed at Demilan, providing what little assistance she could. Most of her shots missed, but one of them actually hit one of the men. Unfortunately for her, it also drew their attention to her, and before she knew it, the fire had turned to split from two ways to three ways. Maileena crouched, but the bullets whistled all around her, one even barely hitting her.

The exchange of gunshots went on and on, with bullets hitting seemingly every possible wall in the club, shattering every breakable thing around and destroying the club that so far had destroyed the lives of many poor girls. Now that he was reunited with his pistols, Winselt allowed himself to charge from the bar to a closer cover, behind a flipped table. He roared and yelled with sheer excitement every time he took a shot at his rivals while Demilan remained quiet and focused. After two more minutes, the gunfight started to slow down. When Maileena looked down, she saw that only three of the armed men downstairs remained.

Demilan took aim with his assault rifle and pulled the

## Bullet and Blade

trigger once, hitting the first one right between the eyes. "I'm out of bullets," he then declared. Maileena reloaded her revolver with six new rounds and took aim at the two men below. She shot four rounds, but only one of them hit the second man in the shoulder. He fell on one knee, at first, but then rose again and fired at Maileena. While taking cover, Maileena shot the remaining two rounds she had left blindly in hopes to deter the man. After that, she heard Winselt's mighty pistols rip through the man she wounded. With only one man left standing, Maileena felt rejoiced, knowing that the battle was sure to be won, but when she peeked from her cover, she saw that the last man managed to make his way to Winselt. He charged at the scarred soldier, disarming him from Umbra and Lux, and punching him relentlessly.

*Demilan is out of ammunition*, she remembered. She started to reload her revolver in haste, but the bullets fell from her hand due to her panic. Looking down, she saw that Winselt managed to punch the man back, and got back on his feet. He shoved the man away from him with a powerful kick to the groin. Seeing the man wriggle in pain at a safe distance from Winselt gave Maileena an idea. She went through the duffel bag and found the other Dynadisc it held. She threw it from the balcony, landing it right beside the last guard. "Winselt, take distance!" she yelled at him. Once he spotted the Dynadisc he ran as fast as he could away from him. That was when Maileena held the rod in her hand and pushed the button. Once more, a Dynadisc exploded in the Godly Succubi, only, this time, it ended the fight, rather than start it.

Once the dust settled, all that remained in the club was the booming music. While Maileena made her way downstairs, Demilan had found his way to the club's control panel and turned off the music. Only a harrowing silence now filled their ears, one that could only exist should the club ever be ridden of the filthy-minded men who ran it. To Maileena, it felt peaceful. It felt liberating.

"Are you alright?" she asked Demilan when she met him downstairs. His nose was bleeding and his forehead looked

bruised and swollen.

"I'm all right," he said. Winselt joined the two, appearing drenched and reeking of alcohol. He suffered from several cuts on his face and hands. "I'm going to look for the security control room," Winselt said. "I need to make sure I delete whatever records the cameras in this place just took. I can't have APD on my tail and I sure as hell can't have Blackburn finding out I helped you." He split from the two.

Demilan walked several steps to a body that lay on the floor. Only when he picked the man up and carried him over to Maileena did she notice he was not a corpse, but a living person too wounded to make any significant movements. His face was disfigured, maimed by the Dynadisc's explosion, yet she could still recognize Kleon Hanford. To her, he was now as ugly outside as he was inside. His leg had a bullet wound in it. Deep inside, she knew that it was Demilan's doing. She knew that he kept him alive despite having the opportunity to kill him just so she can have him for herself. It warmed her heart.

Without saying any words, he simply handed his black knife over to her. She held it in her hand, feeling like it was exactly where it was supposed to be at that moment. She held the blade to Kleon's neck and looked deep into his eyes. He recognized her immediately. "If I could have stabbed you for each girl in this place whose life you've ruined, I would, but you'll die long before that," Maileena said in a cold tone. "Instead, I'll do it only once... for my sister." She stuck the blade into his neck. Kleon started gagging, his mouth held open. His entire body shivered and his eyes rolled upwards. She let him choke for several more seconds, allowing him to suffer as much as his body could let him before pulling out her revolver, loading a single bullet and firing it through his head.

As his body fell to the ground, she looked at her revolver, now stained with blood, and remembered what Demilan had said before regarding its name. *Think of something that defines you... that's what Demilan said to me.* "Sinful." The word dropped from her mouth without her noticing, as if her subconscious

## Bullet and Blade

was telling her something. "That is what defines me. That is this gun's new name. Sinful." She held it up with pride.

Winselt rejoined the two, claiming to have succeeded in deleting the camera records of the last hour.

"Demilan McCloud and Maileena Banister!" a loud male voice suddenly called. It broke the silence unexpectedly. Demilan looked everywhere around him to find the man who called for him, but to no avail. Maileena and Winselt seemed just as baffled as he was.

"Who is this?" Demilan called. His finger tightened on his rifles handle, ready to jump the trigger if needed.

"I want to make you an offer. A deal, you may call it. I wish to show myself, so I ask that you don't shoot me. I am unarmed." the voice said, echoing between the bloody, riddled walls of the club. Demilan had now located the voice to be originating from the front doors though no one was there. Whoever the man was, he was hiding behind those doors.

"What deal?" Demilan asked, concentrating on the door in an effort to catch a glimpse of the man.

"A deal to reunite you with Telia McCloud and Vera Banister." Demilan, Maileena, and Winselt immediately exchanged glances, filled with both doubt and thrill. Hesitant as he was, Demilan called for the man to show himself, promising that he won't harm him though his hand remained tightly clutched around the handle and trigger.

The man showed himself, standing at the very entrance to the club. Empty shells and blood spots lay littered under his feet. He seemed to be in his 20's, with long blonde hair waving all the way to his neck, a shaved face, and eyes as blue as the skies. His face seemed cold and blank, with no hints of emotion on it. He didn't wear any Elastics, yet he gave off an ominous feeling. "My name is Arkaneh Frye," the man said. "I am a member of Men of Midas." Within the second, all three raised their guns and aimed it at Arkaneh. "Please... lower your weapons," he remained calm despite the hollow barrels that faced him. "I know where Telia and Vera are, and I can help you get them. Like I said, I wish to make a deal." Maileena

couldn't tell if Arkaneh was lying or not. His face was too blank and empty to read into. It was as if the man was nothing but a shell, a shadow of a person. "I think you'll find my deal quite worth it as it requires very little of you. I just ask that you lower your guns."

"And why would you help us?" Demilan asked.

"Because I too have lost my loved one, and I know what it's like to be willing to go to every length in the world to get them back."

Maileena turned to look at Demilan as if she was asking for permission to do so. With an approving nod from Demilan, the three lowered their guns and heard the man's offer





## Edrimer

A few hours after Soleina Dillard's kidnapping, Serian called Edrimer and his teammates and asked to meet them in the apartment in Morth City. His tone suggested that the conversation they were going to have wouldn't be a pleasant one. *First, I get beaten up by the Tri-Surgeon, then I almost get choked to death by Edward, and now I have to be berated by Serian. When is it my turn to catch a break?*

Edrimer and Elahysis sat on the sofa in the apartment's living room, while Johnaren, Samari, and Apex were talking amongst themselves in the kitchen. Elahysis tended to Edrimer's wounds. During his struggle with the Tri-Surgeon, he suffered several bruises to his lower abdomen and chest. In addition, his face was swollen and he had a black eye. Elahysis rubbed a special ointment on Edrimer's bare chest to ease his pain.

"That's quite an impressive tattoo," Elahysis remarked as he noticed the swirly lines that curled all over Edrimer's arm. "The Seditone... it feels like I haven't seen this symbol in years. I used to see it everywhere."

"Well, you sure won't get to see it in the Fallhalt district," Edrimer said. "Law officials have zero tolerance for any kind of display of the Seditone."

The ointment helped to ease his pain, yet he still felt small

stings of soreness whenever he moved his body too much. "It takes balls to be in Morth City with such a tattoo," Elahysis said. "But why would you have such a tattoo?" she asked. "I mean, you must have been a child when the Tearful Rebellion happened."

"My parents fought and died in the Rebellion," he said in a weakened voice.

"Oh," Elahysis said. "I'm sorry to hear that. I lost my grandparents the same way. I hate the Rebellion. I hate President Alford. Countless lost lives are on his hands." She seemed agitated.

"I heard that ever since the Rebellion he never left the Segregated Quarter. He became so paranoid and fearful for his life that he made sure a house was specially built for him between the high walls of the Quarter," Edrimer said. "He's probably wasting his days living a life of luxury and comfort to this day, safe from the wrath of the people."

"That bastard," Elahysis spat.

A few minutes later, Serian barged into the apartment, hot and angry as a human flame. He didn't bother speaking to Apex, Johnaren or Samari, giving them only a sullen look. Instead, he headed directly for Edrimer and Elahysis, as he knew that they were the two who tackled the Tri-Surgeon. "How the fuck did this happen?!" he yelled.

"Serian—" Edrimer tried to speak.

"Don't answer to me!" Serian raged. "Because of you an innocent woman is now lying in the hospital! Do I need to remind you that we are supposed to PROTECT citizens?" he buried his face in his hands. "This is my fault as well. I shouldn't have given you a green light on this plan."

"Serian, we're so sorry about what happened, but we are very close to catching the Tri-Surgeon," Edrimer said. Within seconds, Serian drew so close to Edrimer's face that the young tenderfoot could feel the old man's breaths on his skin.

"Listen closely to me," Serian said in a deep voice. "The only reason you are all still Justicars is because I expressed to the ringleader how valuable you are. If I didn't see any

## Bullet and Blade

potential or intelligence in any of you, I wouldn't stop him from kicking you out in the worst way imaginable. This CANNOT happen again. I won't protect you a second time. Is that understood?"

"Yes," they all answered together.

"Good," Serian said. "Now, bring me up to speed." Edrimer started telling him all about the true identity of Caedes Rendell and the suspicions that the Serath might have reached Alataria. "Oh, God, not the Serath," Serian seemed highly concerned. "I won't lie to you. We always feared that one day those maniacs who reach our country. We've been keeping a close eye on them. They have several hard-to-find sites on the Nucleus where they spread their word and call for people to join their ranks, and we've been monitoring them. Recently, several posts about Alataria have showed up."

"So does that mean they really are heading here?" Apex asked.

"We can't tell for sure yet," Serian said. "So far, they've only showed some interest in this country, but we haven't seen any evidence of them coming here."

"Well, now you have one," Elahysis said.

"A madman muttering a famous Serath saying is hardly any evidence. However, I want you to question him about it, given the chance." He looked at Edrimer.

"I will." Edrimer said.

"Let us all hope the Serath aren't coming here, because if they are... we all have a reason to be afraid," Serian said. Shortly afterwards he left the apartment. The concerned appearance of his face lingered right until the moment he walked through the door.

During the next couple of days, the media had been frenzied about Caedes Rendell, the infamous Tri-Surgeon. Jonah Dillard had been evidently missing from the press, staying by his wife's bed at the hospital. Officially, he has made no comment on either Caedes or his wife's injuries. Vice Chief of Police, Archell Sherwood, however, has made a brief appearance in front of several reports, claiming that the

Alataria Police Department are putting every resource at their availability into finding Rendell.

Edrimer, Elahysis, Apex, Johnaren and Samari had been keeping a low profile in the meantime, waiting to hear news of the ongoing hunt. *I hate waiting*, Edrimer thought to himself as he sat in the living room of his uncle's apartment. *I'd actually rather listen to an OldGen's stories for two straight hours if it meant putting an end to all this waiting.*

His uncle, Jeremy, entered the living room, sat next to him and turned on the television. He tuned the broadcast to the news. Edrimer was never one to sit and listen to the news, yet he wasn't going to bicker with his uncle. The slick-haired anchorman started with the ongoing spread of the Serath, the menacing cult that had already caused much damage in the Middle East. News of their presence had now come from Romania, France, and several more states in the United States. There was no mention of Alataria during that story, yet Edrimer had a bad feeling about it. *The Serath are spreading quickly and dangerously, recruiting members in a daunting pace. The fact that Caedes might very well be a Serathon could suggest they had already started their descent upon this country.*

"What a bunch of lunatics," Jeremy spat.

"Lunatics or not, they've already shown the world what they're capable of," Edrimer said. "I mean, can you imagine what could happen if they gain a lot of followers in this country? These people are worshippers of chaos and anarchy. They might recreate the Tearful Rebellion."

Jeremy chuckled. He seemed amused by the idea. "That just might make President Conrad piss his pants. If there's something the people at the Segregated Quarter are afraid of, it's another Rebellion." Edrimer remembered Caedes's words. *From ash and fire the strong will rise.* A shiver passed through his spine just thinking about the Serath setting base in Alataria.

The anchorman then went on to talk about a shooting that took place just on a road southeast of the outskirts of Framstead, Northstock, between members of Harley Nation and members of Lady Dread. Several bodies were found laid

## Bullet and Blade

on the road. Finally, he mentioned that the police were still investigating the shooting. *Both Sunyula Trije and Fane Hallstead have Dillard and his high-ranking officials in their pocket, so I'm guessing that investigating isn't going to end with any significant discoveries.*

Suddenly, Edrimer's SmartWrist vibrated. It was Edward's number on the screen. Even before picking up the call, he knew what it meant. Caedes must have been tracked down, and it was now only a question of who gets to lay his hands on him. *I promised Edward that I would let him take Caedes into custody,* he remembered. Once he picked up the call, he learned that Caedes was spotted through a street camera entering a pub in the Heart, the capital city. Since Edward was the appointed lead investigator in the Tri-Surgeon case, he was the first and only one informed of that information as of that moment. Therefore, he was able to give Edrimer a head start to get to Caedes and wipe out whatever presence of Lady Dread that may be there before he sends officers to arrest Caedes. Edward sounded nervous on the phone. Clearly, he was planning on severing his ties with the Justicars by now, but his luck wouldn't allow it. Upon hanging up the call, Edrimer's heart weighed heavily. He now had to choose how he would act. He thought about it for a while, eventually contacting Elahysis, Apex, Johnaren and Samari and letting them know of the situation. They all agreed to meet at that pub in the Heart, armed and ready for battle. When he spoke to Elahysis, the two agreed that they should ask Serian for backup as they had no way of knowing how many men Lady Dread would send.

Edrimer left the apartment, taking his white Elastics and his gun, his head filled with every hope that this would go right. While driving to the Heart, he tried calling Serian, yet there was no answer. He tried calling a few more times but met with the same empty response. Eventually, his SmartWrist vibrated. At first, he thought it would be Serian, returning his calls, yet it was Elahysis calling. "Hey, have you been able to get ahold of Serian?" she asked him.

"No," he replied.

"That's weird. He's usually always available on his phone."

"Well, maybe he's just too busy daydreaming about Reus Mallstrom disbanding Men of Midas," he joked.

"That's not funny. And don't underestimate Serian," she sounded agitated. "He's a very smart man. He's probably one of the oldest members of the Justicars. You should look up to him."

"He's a grumpy OldGen, that's what he is," Edrimer sneered. His foot grew deeper into the gas pedal.

"Yeah, well, that he is," Elahysis agreed, chuckling. "But that doesn't dispute the fact that he's a wise man." Edrimer had long stopped caring when people call others wise. It didn't really impress Edrimer, as he knew that that wasn't the most important trait nowadays. *Zachary was a wise man, yet he found himself riddled with bullets outside his store, his heart pinched as he remembered the old man. Even wise people end up dying in the foulest of ways. I don't care who's wise anymore. I'll get my pearls of wisdom from scribbled writings on dirty bathroom stalls. They usually hold some wisdom.*

"We need that backup," Edrimer said. "What are we going to do?"

"I guess we should just hope that our luck would save us from Lady Dread." *Luck... that's another thing people lack a lot of, and even those who have it don't always get a happy ending. No... I won't count on luck, especially not mine.*

"I might have an idea," he said. "It's not the best, but it might just be the only one where we'll come out of this situation alive." He hanged up the call and dialed for another person, setting his idea into action.

When he finally got to the pub, he parked his car and hid in an alley nearby, where he could change into his white Elastics without anyone seeing him. Stepping out of the alley, he walked towards the pub. It was a small pub, only a few miles away from the high-walled Segregated Quarter. With his gun shoved in the back of his pants, Edrimer entered the place, dressed as a White Knight.

The pub was rather vacant, with only a handful of people sitting in it. A stench of booze and cigarettes was in the air.

## Bullet and Blade

The bartender, an old man with a long beard, was dragging a wet rag over the counter, looking indifferent and bored. Only one man out of the handful in the pub sat in front of the bar's counter, and Edrimer quickly recognized him. With his head stooped and his arms crossed, Caedes Rendell sat there, alone, as if he was waiting for someone to sit by him. Pulling his gun in the middle of the pub, Edrimer drew everyone's attention to him. Their eyes widened and their jaws dropped as they saw a Justicar all of a sudden standing there. One person even spilled his drink all over himself. "Everyone, get out!" Edrimer yelled, letting off a warning shot at the roof. Within seconds, everyone cleared out of the pub. Everyone except for Caedes, who remained just as he was before, not even flinching or showing any sign of acknowledgment of Edrimer.

Edrimer sat next to him, his gun still in hand, and saw the awkward expression Caedes had. It was as if the man was in a trance. His eyes were open, staring at the wooden counter, and his fingers twitched and twirled, just as they did when he saw him at the warehouse. The makeup on his face was smudged and faint, yet it still showed on his face. The white powder that made his skin appear as pale as a cadaver's was now smeared away at random spots. The thick black rings around Caedes's eyes turned grayish and thin black lines ran down from those rings to his cheeks, suggesting that he may have been crying.

"A Justicar? Again?" Caedes asked as his eyes shifted towards Edrimer. Red veins framed Caedes's eyes, and his pupils trembled in them, looking ever so frightening. "I was hoping someone else would come."

That was when Edrimer realized it. Caedes, once a brilliant doctor, a killer so clever and careful that he was able to pull off multiple murders without leaving a clue to his identity and managed to kidnap Soleina Dillard right under everyone's nose, wouldn't just walk into a pub, knowing he was a serial killer hunted by the police. He wanted to get caught. "Why did you want someone to come for you? Why would you want to get caught?" Edrimer asked him.

Caedes didn't even look at Edrimer. His eyes kept staring

down. "I see their blood in my dreams every night. Their screams... their agony..." he grabbed his head with his hands, looking helpless. "I was hoping it would stop as time went by, but it... doesn't. It never stops. I just want it to stop." *His stutter is gone. So I was right, it really was only a side-effect of excitement. I guess it only happened to him during one of his killings.* "Revenge..." he mumbled. "Revenge is something I could never fathom before. Why would one want to inflict more pain on another person and fill this world with more hatred? Why?" he looked at his hands. His lips shivered as if they were trying to form a smile but failed. "Only after I lost my family did I realize what it was all about." His creepy eyes shifted to Edrimer. A chill went through him. "Father Blood explained it very well when we met. He said the world was already filled with enough hatred to destroy it. In order to correct it, one simply needed to shift that hatred, to inflict that revenge onto those who ruin the world with their corruption and selfish desires."

"Father Blood... who is he?"

"He's a man much better than you and I. He's stronger. He's smarter. He's... better." *It sounds like Father Blood is simply a deranged person who was able to take advantage of Caedes's moment of grief and madness to twist him up and make him do his bidding.*

"What's his name?"

"Oh, I don't know. He never told it to me."

"Did he tell you which victims to kill?"

"Yes, but... he has nothing against Lady Dread. I was the one who wanted to hurt her. Father Blood simply helped me find the targets that would do the job. And the way I did it... the eyes, hands and heart... I only did it because of... that guy..."

"What guy?"

"He... he started appearing shortly after I met Father Blood," Caedes's eyes started to tear up. "I always thought he looked familiar, as if I knew him once in my life. Sometimes he took other forms, like a shapeshifter. Once he... he even made himself look like my wife," his hands quivered. *He's getting really upset just by talking about it.* "He promised that he would reunite



## Bullet and Blade

me with my family! He promised that I would see my wife and son once more! All I had to do... was to kill for him... just the way he wanted. Eyes, hands, and heart. He wouldn't have it any other way." *An imaginary person telling him to inflict such brutality. This explains why he was seemingly talking to someone who wasn't there when we found him next to Soleina Dillard.* "Father Blood never liked it. I think he found it quite gruesome, but he accepted it." The insanity kept on spewing through Caedes's voice. Edrimer felt sorry for the man even though he never forgot what a monster he was at the same time. *Losing his wife and son pushed Caedes over the edge, turning him from a successful family man into a horrid fiend that most people wouldn't even consider human.* "That person... the shapeshifter... he told me that with every person I was killing, I was not only making this world a better place, but I was also getting closer to reuniting with my family." *Which is why he felt excited every time he did.* Looking at Caedes, Edrimer noticed the sincerity on his face. He truly believed in what he was saying. At that point, Edrimer was no longer sure if this was all the outcome of Caedes's madness or the influence of Father Blood.

"Where can I find Father Blood?" Edrimer asked.

"Oh, he moves around. In fact, I believe he left Alataria shortly before my face started to appear on wanted posters."

"Is he a Serathon?"

"Caedes Rendell!" a voice suddenly shouted from outside. It was rough and demanding, like a debt collector who had come to get what was his. "You have ten seconds to come out here or else we'll open fire at this pub!" Edrimer knew that the voice couldn't belong to any of his teammates, nor would an APD officer say such things. Therefore, it could only mean that it was a member of Lady Dread. *These people have the worst timing.* Caedes looked careless, almost as if he didn't even hear the person outside, but when he got up from his seat and started pacing towards the pub's doors, Edrimer knew that Caedes was simply embracing his fate.

Knowing that Lady Dread's men would open fire on him as soon as they see his white Elastics, Edrimer rushed towards the

windows and peeked through them. There were three cars and eleven men dressed in purple Elastics outside and among them stood Jeffery of the Ravage, one of Sunyula Trife's lieutenants. Edrimer recognized his face from the newspapers and media. *Oh, I've heard about this fucked up freak. That weirdo will screw anything that moves and I'm betting he's hot for Caedes.* Lady Dread's men were all armed with heavy weaponry and looked eager for a fight. *There's no chance I'm walking out of this pub right now. These fellows will rip me to shreds.* Across from Lady Dread's men, Edrimer noticed a police car, with three officers standing by it, idly. *Just as I thought. You can't count on the police when you're facing those purple motherfuckers. I'm going to have to execute my idea. I'm sorry, Edward, you're not going to like it, but I've got no other choice.*

Caedes walked up to the door, ready to walk out. "Caedes, wait!" Edrimer stopped him. "Please, I need to know. Is Father Blood a Serathon? That sentence you said, it was a saying of the Serath." Caedes remained idle against the door. His head wouldn't even budge to look at Edrimer. "Caedes, answer me!"

The Tri-Surgeon looked hopeless. Edrimer knew that Caedes was simply ready to embrace his deadly fate, and he was about to do it with every inch of willingness in his body. There was no saving him at that point. He was already a dead man walking. His hand reached for the handle but a second before he turned it, his head rotated sideways to look at Edrimer. He now had the same demented expression on his face as he had in that warehouse. "A great fire is coming to consume this country, Justicar," he said. "And none of these gangs and organizations can stop it. Not even APD. It will be gory. And it will be gruesome. And it will be... just. Because from ash and fire the strong will rise." Upon finishing his cryptic prophecy, Caedes twisted the handle and walked outside. He didn't raise his hands, nor did he look nervous, but rather peaceful. Perhaps he thought that soon he would get to reunite with his family, in death. *A great fire... coming to consume this country...* the words lingered in Edrimer's mind.

Staying hidden in the pub, Edrimer took his radio device and called for Apex. "Do it now," he said to him.

## Bullet and Blade

Edrimer knew that with no backup coming from Serian, there would be no way that he and his teammates could stand against Lady Dread. He knew that they could very likely be outnumbered, at which he was right, and not to mention that he considered the fact that if a fight broke out, the officers of APD might prove to be another enemy to be dealt with. Fighting, therefore, was not an option. Yet Edrimer refused to let Lady Dread have their way with Caedes. Even if the Tri-Surgeon would meet death at their hands, Edrimer insisted on depriving them of that privilege. That was why he told Elahysis, Johnaren and Samari to stay put instead of coming to the pub. That was also why he told Apex to position himself at a lookout point and wait for his command. Only a second after Edrimer said the words, he heard the sniper gunshot outside. It was swift and sharp, yet it echoed heavily. He saw Caedes's body fall to the ground with a thump. The bullet hit him in the head. Edrimer expected nothing less from the veteran sniper.

Guns were immediately drawn and aimed in all directions, as everyone was trying to figure out where the gunshot came from, yet Edrimer knew that Apex was probably gone from whatever roof he was on a second after he pulled his trigger. He heard curse words spewing out of some of the purple-clothed thugs while the blood pool around Caedes's head grew larger and thicker. *I promised Edward I would bring Caedes into custody, but I had no choice. Either way, if you ask me, Caedes got a much more fitting end.*

He sneaked out of the pub through the back door. After watching the men in front of the pub for several minutes until they all cleared out, he made his way to his car and drove away. Picking up his SmartWrist, he called Edward and let him know what had happened. At first, Edward remained silent, barely saying anything, a response which most terrified Edrimer, but eventually he spoke. "I need you to meet me," Edward said. "The rest of your team too. Meet me in that apartment of yours in Morth City." Edrimer didn't know why Edward wanted to meet, yet he agreed nonetheless. He kept his gun close to him all the way there.



## Edward

News of the Tri-Surgeon's death didn't take time to reach Edward's ears. Many at the station felt rejoiced and thrilled that the vicious killer met his fate. Even though it had only been two hours since he died, Edward already heard whispers telling that Caedes tried to pull a gun at the officers who came to arrest him, which inevitably forced them to retaliate. However, Edward knew the truth, as Forseti already told him what actually happened. *Archbell Sherwood is probably already preparing his statement to the press*, Edward figured. He wondered how Dillard was feeling about Caedes's death. The old Chief of Police has been completely missing from the station ever since his wife was injured, spending all of his time with her instead.

When Edward learned from Forseti how the quarrel with Caedes finally ended, he knew there was only one loose tie left he had to wrap up. He made a deal with Charles Blackburn. A deal in which he promised to give up the Justicars' apartment and let him know as soon as Forseti and his team were in it. For that reason, he asked Forseti and his team to meet him in their apartment. *He promised*, Edward reminded himself. *He promised he would hand Caedes over to APD for a fair trial. He promised.*

Standing across from the apartment building in which Forseti's apartment was, Edward picked up his SmartWrist and

## Bullet and Blade

dialled the number Blackburn gave him when they made the deal. One of Blackburn's soldiers answered. Edward let him know that the apartment was ready to be attacked.

While he waited for Code Sanguinary to show up, he received a call. It was Trisslin. "Congratulations," she said once he picked up the call. He felt as if he deserved no such words. "I heard our killer is finally dead."

"Our killer should've been in prison," he said with a sigh.

"Yeah, well, at least the case is closed." *That's what they all think about. Just closing the case. She doesn't even care about how it turned out. To her... to all of them, a dead killer as the same as a locked up killer. They don't know what justice is. They only know the kind that runs red.*

"Right, I guess so," he didn't wish to open an argument with her, especially knowing that it would be pointless. "But I don't know if a guy as hated in the station as me is going to be getting such warm the rest of them."

"Yeah, I'm don't think so too," her honesty hit him hard and painfully.

"Trisslin," he hesitated for a moment before going on, yet eventually, he did. "Lady Dread's men were present when Caedes was found. They were trying to take him with them. That means that someone leaked his whereabouts to them."

"I see," her voice grew quieter.

"The thing is... I only told you about it at first. The rest learned about it only a while later, and when you consider the timing in which Lady Dread appeared there—"

"Edward," she interrupted him. "What do you want?"

The question bounced around his head. What did he want? It was a question not even he could answer. He wanted justice. He wanted the corruption to be gone. He wanted people like Trisslin to understand that Lady Dread were the enemy, not an ally. But there could be none of that in Alataria. By now, he had seen how his idea of justice was being crushed at every turn he made, and the more he pushed on, relentlessly, to fulfill his father's dream, the more he realized that perhaps his father was wrong all along. 'Rotten,' he used to call them. 'Rotten to

the ground.' *And you can't have true justice when those who are supposed to inflict it are rotten.* "If I ever catch you doing that again," he finally spoke. "If I ever catch you doing ANYTHING that helps the crime syndicates... I will fucking kill you," he hissed, sounded as decisive and fierce as if he was calling war on the entire police force.

"Edward—" he hung up before she could finish her response. The cold chill greeted him as the silence around enveloped him. He didn't regret doing that. For the first time in a long while, he went with his gut feeling, instead of swallowing his pride.

It wasn't much longer before the soldiers of Code Sanguinary showed up at the apartment building. A big van stopped at the side of the road, and 8 soldiers, all dressed with the green-grey camouflaged Elastics, poured out of it, armed with military-grade assault rifles and knives holstered at their waists. Edward stood by from afar, watching them, hidden from their sight. He noticed their stance and the way they gripped their weapons. They were trained soldiers, no doubt. Blackburn always held his men to the highest standards, arming them with the deadliest weapons available in the country and training them in ways that even the Alatarian Army never did. Yet even a trained soldier is no match for a bullet that's heading towards his back.

As the soldiers formed around the entrance to the apartment building, ready and eager to charge in, Forseti and his teammates opened fire at them from behind, getting cover in the building across the street. The soldiers never expected them so they couldn't hold much resistance against them. The Justicars wielded submachine-guns, as they usually do, with only one of them making the exception by using a sniper rifle. Edward figured that it was probably the same one who took Caedes down. The soldiers had no place to find cover behind, and most of them fell instantly while a few tried firing back. But without cover and outnumbered it didn't take long for them to get hit as well. In the end, it was over within a minute. The 8 bodies of the soldiers lay dead at the doorsteps of the

## Bullet and Blade

apartment building. Edward looked at them with a blank expression. *This is for Roycen and his wife.* Usually, he would prefer those soldiers to find themselves in prison, yet their lifeless bodies seemed to serve him as a good outcome nonetheless. His father might have never approved of it, yet Edward was a man of his own.

At the beginning, he wasn't sure if he should go forth with his deal with Blackburn and let him have Forseti and his team or go against him. Eventually, he made that decision naturally, as he started reminding himself of how Blackburn's men took down Roycen and his wife, not to mention that they sent an assassin to kill him in his own apartment. Edward refused to work with a man as vile as Blackburn, and despite knowing what grave consequences might await him, he knew that it was the right thing to do.

He heard the footsteps behind him. He turned and saw Forseti climbing down from his vantage point at one of the upper floors of the building. With his face masked, Edward could only guess what grin must be hiding beneath it.

"Did you suffer any casualties?" Edward asked.

"No, we're all fine," Forseti replied. "Look, Edward, I know that doing this must not have been easy after Caedes—"

"Shut up," Edward said, calmly. "That was the second time you broke your promise to me. You promised Soleina wouldn't get hurt and then you promised you would bring Caedes to custody."

"Edward, I—" Forseti stopped talking once the pistol was aimed at him. Edward's eyes were cold as he held it, fearless.

"The only reason I let you know of my deal with Blackburn instead of letting those soldiers rip you and your friends to shreds, is because I actually despise Code Sanguinary far more than I despise the Justicars. But now I see no reason why you shouldn't meet your well-deserving end."

"Edward, we had no choice. It was going to be a few of us against both Lady Dread and those officers you sent. We were severely outnumbered and outgunned. It was either that or Caedes would've fallen into Lady Dread's hands." Edward

didn't care for his words and claims. His gun remained aimed at Forseti. The cold breeze seemed appropriate. "Besides," Forseti said. "I wouldn't do this if I were you."

"And why is that?" Edward's voice was slow and piercing.

"Because I've taken some precautions. That apartment where we came up with the plan to catch the Tri-Surgeon, the one where you suggested we use Soleina Dillard..." Edward could already figure out where he was going with it even before he heard it. "We bugged that apartment with hidden cameras. We have footage of you not only working with Justicars but also setting up the very plan that sent Dillard to his current state of grief." Edward looked down at disbelief. "You know what's going to happen if you kill me, don't you? I wouldn't want to be you if that footage leaked out somewhere. I guess Dillard's rage wouldn't be your only problem if that happens."

Edward lowered his gun and holstered it back, knowing that the White Knight had outsmarted him. "You know what's funny?" he asked Forseti. "Those dead men over there," he pointed at the 8 corpses that lay across the street. "You see that as justice, don't you?"

"Yeah," Forseti said, without hesitation. "But I guess you don't."

"Actually..." Edward stared at the bodies. "I think I'm starting to get your point." He showed the hint of a smile. "We're done, Forseti, aren't we?" he asked him.

"Yeah, I think we're done." With that said, Edward buttoned up his jacket and walked away, leaving the Justicar behind.





## Lunarey

After Harley Nation's attack, Sunyula refused to head back to her mansion in Trainmor. To her, it would be like admitting defeat. With only two members left alive as bodyguards, she sent Richard, who was wounded, along with one of them back to Trainmor with the escort car, in order to make sure Richard would get proper treatment in time. Meanwhile, Sunyula, Samuel, Lunarey and the remaining bodyguard drove on to the Framstead outpost. Samuel took over the driver's wheel with joy. Deep down, Lunarey figured that he must have done that to avoid sitting next to her in the back seat, which only angered her further. The black bag remained at her feet in the car. The weapons that fired only minutes ago were stashed in it, still loaded. *At that moment, when I had to hold that gun and shoot... it felt as if I was truly a part of Lady Dread. It made me feel secure. It made me feel fearless, if only for a second... but it also made me sick.*

"Fane grew some balls," Sunyula muttered in spite. "Big balls." She bit her lips. "How dare he try to take me out? He needs to be put down. His whole outpost needs to be put down."

"Sunyula, we can't just rush an attack on them. Harley Nation may have grown few in numbers, but they've been compensating it by hiring professional killers."

"Then figure out a way to hit them hard." *Sunyula knows only*

*violence and bloodshed. Triggen said that Fane vigorously tried reasoning with her, but he never got anywhere with it. Was Henrick as ruthless and relentless as she was, or was he more reasonable on such occasions? I wonder...*

"I suggest we don't ready our men at Framstead for an attack just yet. Let's think about a more effective way to hurt them."

"Fine," she grunted, displeased.

"Perhaps we can recruit some allies to help us. Do you think Reus would help?" Samuel asked.

"Reus has his own issues to deal with. He's been suffering heavy losses recently. Apparently those fucking Justicars have been a pain in his ass lately."

"Well, what about Blackburn?"

"Blackburn merely sells us weapons. He's not going to involve himself in a war he has nothing to do with."

"What if we pay him for assistance? His soldiers could inflict substantial damage on those bikers."

"Code Sanguinary are no mercenaries for hire. Suggesting such a thing to him would not only insult him, but also infuriate him greatly. Trust me, Blackburn is a man of honor and principle, among other things." She sighed. "Besides, I'm not inclined to own anyone any favors. I like to deal with my problems myself, head on. We'll deal with Harley Nation ourselves."

"Very well." His hands tightened on the wheel.

Lunarey looked outside her window in despair. She found it hard to understand the world that the people of Lady Dread were living in. Its rules were vicious and harsh, making her feel almost as if she didn't belong in it. *Did Vaikillia fit in it better than me? Did she understand all this need for killing?* She looked down at her hands. They were bloody and hurting, a result of the glass that shattered from her window.

"Vaikillia," Sunyula turned her head to her. "Are you alright? You seem quiet."

"I'm... I'm all right," Lunarey said, weakly.

"I'm sorry you had to go through this. I promise you, I will

## Bullet and Blade

make them pay... for everything they made you go through."

She didn't want them to pay. She didn't want more people to die. In her mind, only one person deserved such a fate, and that was Sunyula. "Why didn't you hear Fane out when he tried to end this war by talking?" Lunarey said, bringing a deadly silence on the car.

"What?" Sunyula looked taken aback.

"Why do you relentlessly keep on going with this war, refusing any offer of peace?"

"Enough talk about peace!" Sunyula snapped. "Sooner or later you're going to have to realize that peace isn't always an answer."

"Harley Nation has outposts abroad as well. It's only a matter of time before one of them or more would reach out and help them, and if that happens—"

"Fane had been reaching out to them for quite a while now, and I haven't seen any waves of sleeveless bikers docking at Herkin Port."

"But—"

"I don't want to hear any more of this nonsense. We'll speak later once we're in Framstead."

The rest of the drive was quiet. Too quiet for Lunarey's taste. Soon the views around her changed to much greener ones, as vast fields of grass carried on the horizon, stretching longer than the eye could see. The city of Framstead was blessed with such views surrounding her, so much so that Lunarey felt sorry for the city itself, for it had to be stained with the presence of Lady Dread. The outpost was located in the middle of the city, in a private facility owned by Sunyula herself. Inside, men of purple were abounding, standing on every corner of the place. Lunarey was admired that so many people were willing to serve her mother, especially knowing that each of them was willing to exert extreme acts of violence in her name. It made her slightly sick as well.

As they entered, Sunyula's face turned from a frown to having a big, teeth-showing smile on it. Her anger was gone within a second. *I guess she can't afford to look upset right now.*

"Samuel," she heard Sunyula whisper to him. "I'm going to see if something was taken care of. I'll be back shortly."

"Alright," he said.

While Sunyula disappeared into another room, Lunarey drew closer to Samuel. Approaching him from behind, he didn't see her coming, and once their eyes met, she could sense the anxiety in him.

"Before you say anything," he was the first to speak. "I need you to understand something. This is how it works. This is how it always worked. You... I mean, Vaikillia knew that. She understood it. So don't look at me like you're disappointed in me or something."

She didn't know what to say. On one hand, Samuel was the closest thing Lunarey had to a friend and a protector, but on the other, his brutality made him indistinguishable from the other scums she considered Sunyula and her men to be.

"Look," he went on. "At some point, you're going to have to decide. Are you Lunarey or are you Vaikillia Trife?" her initial instinct told her to answer that she was Lunarey, but after giving it a thought for a moment, she realized that it wasn't such an easy question. Vaikillia accepted the violent world she was living in. The more Lunarey witnessed the events that occurred around her, the more she came to think that perhaps it wasn't even a matter of choice. Perhaps she had to accept it either way and the longer she refused to do that, the longer she would remain confused, distraught and miserable.

"Lunarey," he stared into her eyes, mesmerizingly. "What do you want, more than anything?"

The answer spewed out of her mouth out of instinct, as if she had prepared for that question ahead. "To be rid of all fears."

"Then embrace this life," he knelt on one knee before her. "Stop cowering and shying away from the things you see around you. Stop seeing us as the ones out of place and realize... that it's everyone else that's out of place. The world we live in... however bloody and horrid it may be... that is the

## Bullet and Blade

only true world." He put his hands on her shoulders. Their touch felt comforting, yet also familiar. It wasn't the first time she felt as if her subconscious was trying to tell her something.

"Vaikillia," she suddenly heard Sunyula behind her. "Come here, please. I want to show you something."

Samuel rose back to his feet and backed away, his eyes still glaring at her. Turning to Sunyula, she noticed a crooked smile on her face, one which she didn't like the sight of. Sunyula escorted her to the same room into which she disappeared moments ago. "I've been preparing something special for you. Something I thought you might like," Sunyula said.

The room they entered was dimly lit and had an overpowering foul stench that made Lunarey instantly cover her mouth and nose. The room was completely empty, with only doors on its walls. Most of the ceiling lights weren't working. Only one was lit continuously, and another one was flickering. It was as if no one cared to bother taking care of that room, or rather preferred it stayed that way. Sunyula walked through the room seemingly carefree. The stench didn't seem to bother her. She almost appeared as if she was in her natural place. Several sounds of moaning came from a few of the doors around her. Though she couldn't make out any words of those moans, she quickly realized that they were cries of pain and despair. Looking around, she noticed blood trails leading into some of the doors. It didn't take her long to figure out where she was. *Torture cells. This is where Lady Dread keeps their victims and torture them however they see fit. Most of the times, the people who end up here are the ones who loaned money from Lady Dread and failed to pay it back.* In her heart, she knew that whatever violence and bloodshed she witnessed so far couldn't possibly match the ones that took place here. *This is where blood is spilled ten times more. This is the embodiment of Lady Dread.*

"Mother," she said. "W-What are we doing here?"

"Well, I've noticed how distraught you've been ever since we reunited. And I know a lot of it has to do with your memory loss and the fact you need to reacquaint yourself with everyone and everything around you, but... I also know it has

something to do with the fact that you had a good friend who backstabbed you."

"Wait... are you talking about—?"

"I believe her name was Kelia Hopewell." A dark, sinister halo suddenly surrounded Sunyula in Lunarey's eyes. All of a sudden, her mother appeared before her like a dark harbinger. "I know what it's like to feel betrayed. I know what it's like to have someone you love and care about hurt you in a way you never imagined he would." The two reached a certain door. There were no moaning coming from inside, but Lunarey could hear someone's deep breaths inside. "Now, I also know how good it felt when I had my revenge on the person that hurt me like that, so I figured I would let you have it too." Sunyula opened the door. It creaked with each inch it opened. Lunarey's eyes opened wide with shock when she saw the girl who was once her friend sitting in the room.

Kelia's mouth was gagged shut with a piece of tape. Her arms and legs were bound with cable ties. Blood spatters covered her body and face. She had already taken a couple of beatings by now.

Kelia raised her head, slowly, fatigued. When her eyes met Lunarey's, she looked happy for a moment, only to look horrified once she spotted Sunyula beside her.

"Kelias..." Lunarey whispered under her breath. Within a moment, emotions of both rage and sympathy flushed her body.

"She betrayed you, Vaikillia," Sunyula said into her ear, like a serpent, her words ever so venomous. "She sold you away, pretending to be your friend, only to make a profit." Lunarey ground her teeth. "Now is your chance," the serpent went on, hissing in her ear. "You know what to do. The feel burns in your bones." For once, Sunyula spoke words that rang truth to Lunarey.

Taking a few steps towards Kelia, Lunarey clenched her hands into fists, her eyes burning red with fury. Kelia started screaming through the gagging tape, unable to make any words audible. Her spree of screaming was cut abrupt by a heavy

## Bullet and Blade

punch that landed on her face, gratitude of Lunarey. Lunarey's hand hurt from the punch, yet the feeling of satisfaction quickly made it subside. She went on to give Kelia another slap with the back of her hand. A bruise quickly appeared on Kelia's face, swollen and purple. "I thought you were my friend!" Lunarey screamed, tears running down her face. She landed another slap with the back of her hand. The bruise became more swollen and purple, taking on the shade of the same organization Lunarey loathed. "You were the only person I ever trusted! How could you do it to me?! How could you pretend the way you did, only to sell me off like that?!" she launched another punch at her. Kelia whimpered, her head stooped down.

"I trusted you!" she screamed, slapping Kelia again. "I loved you!" she slapped her once more. "But you lied to me!" at first it felt good, yet slowly it started to feel less and less so. "You didn't see me as a friend!" suddenly Samuel's words rang in her ear. "You only saw me as quick cash!" *The world we live in, however bloody and horrid it may be, that is the only true world. Those were his words.*

Lunarey looked down at her hands. She could no longer tell her own blood from Kelia's. She looked back at Sunyula and saw a large smile of pleasure smeared on her face. No doubt she looked like a proud mother, more than anything else. Lunarey stepped back, looking horrified. Her flames of rage had been extinguished, and only the ashes of regret remained.

*Oh, god, what am I doing?* She panicked. *This isn't me. This isn't the kind of person I am.* At that moment, she heard the ringing of metal in her ear. Looking beside her, she saw the two blades of Scarlet Thorn, finally out of its sheath, held in Sunyula's hand. The blades were bright and sharp, perfect in their form, with no dents or scratches. One could barely notice they were ever used. *Sunyula rarely uses her sword,* she reminded herself. "Do it," the serpent hissed once more. "Finish it."

Lunarey started to shiver as Sunyula placed the handle of the sword in Lunarey's hand. The leather straps that wrapped around the handle felt soft and comfortable, yet the weight of

two blades felt like a burden to Lunarey. She had to struggle to keep the sword raised.

Lunarey looked at Kelia. The girl who was once her friend was now covered in blood, beaten and tortured. She was barely conscious. Her eyes kept on flickering on and off. Her mouth was open, yet not even moans of pain were coming out of it now.

She knew that what she did was a step into the same world she had a hard time accepting, and the sword in her hand was another step, a bigger one. "No..." she said, weakly. "I can't..." tears gathered in her eyes. "I can't do it. I can't."

Sunyula grunted and then sighed. She took the sword away from Lunarey. "It's alright," Sunyula said, looking at ease. "You'll get there. After all, you're the daughter of the infamous Lady Dread and the granddaughter of Henrick Trife. Killing is in your nature. It's in your blood." Sunyula stepped towards Kelia. She didn't seem to have any trouble holding the heavy sword.

"W-What are you doing?" Lunarey asked, fearfully, through her tears.

"Let me show you how it's done," Sunyula said. She placed the blades near Kelia's throat.

"No—!" the blades slid through, tearing gashes at Kelia's throat. Blood instantly poured out of them like waterfalls. Kelia's eyes rolled back, as well as her head. Lunarey looked away, not able to see the gruesome image, yet the sounds of Kelia choking haunted her ears nonetheless.

During Kelia's final moments, Samuel's words echoed once more in Lunarey's head. *The world we live in, however bloody and horrid it may be, that is the only true world.*



## Epilogue

A man sat in a dark room, reading a newspaper. He had just read about the death of Caedes Rendell, or as the media in Alataria dubbed him, the Tri-Surgeon. He thought it to be such a hideous, derogatory nickname. He didn't weep when he learned of his death. In fact, he had been anticipating it ever since Caedes's identity was revealed and a national manhunt for him began. Yet still, he refused to let it go just like that. No one understood Caedes like he did. No one knew what pain Caedes went through like he did. Under his care, Caedes was reborn from the wreckage of grief and sorrow that drowned him. And Caedes never knew his name. He only knew him by the same title as everyone else. Father Blood.

The newspaper article said that Caedes tried to open fire at the police officer who came to arrest him, yet Father Blood knew that it couldn't have been true. He could see through the media's lies and heresy, getting upset by merely thinking about it. Near the end of the article, it was mentioned that praises of congratulatory rained down on the lead investigator of the case, Officer Edward Elwin. The name was etched into his mind. If anyone was responsible for what happened to Caedes, it had to be Officer Elwin.

He got up to his feet and headed outside, into a corridor, with the newspaper clutched tightly in his hand, as if his fingers were wrapped around the throat of a person that he was

choking. The floor he stepped on was dirty and grimy. The walls around him had holes and cracks in them and the parts that didn't were filled with graffiti. He went further down the corridor until he finally reached a room. A stench of blood, mixed with several other foul odors came out of it even before he opened the door.

Slowly, he entered. Inside, he saw the two girls. They were mutilating their latest victim, ripping apart his internal organs as if they were their toys to play with. The victim wasn't making a sound. He was dead long before Father Blood showed at their door, yet he was sure that he was screaming his hardest when he was still alive. The girls never knew what sympathy or mercy was. All they knew was how to have fun. And that was exactly what they were currently doing.

Bathing in the victim's blood, they laughed and giggled, covering themselves entirely, while sitting in a large pool of red.

"Kharisa, Akasia," he said to the girls, catching their attention. "Caedes is dead."

"Oh, no," Kharisa said.

"I liked Caedes. He was fun," Akasia said.

"He needs to be avenged," Father Blood said. "Alataria is a land where corruption and filth are everywhere, and it's about time they've learned of our wrath."

"What do you want us to do?" Kharisa asked, looking excited.

"Start with this man," he threw the newspaper on the floor in front of them. "Officer Edward Elwin. He was leading the case against Caedes."

"Oh, boy!" Akasia jumped with enthusiasm. "Can we kill him?"

"Not yet. First bring him to me."

"Wait... so does that mean—?"

"There's a gang called Harley Nation in Alataria that smuggles immigrants into the country. I'll use my contacts in Alataria to make sure there's room saved for us." The girls seemed thrilled. "Pack your things. We're going to Alataria."

# 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, a woman in her 20's. Talimay joined Men of Midas in the footsteps of her boyfriend, who later died at the hands of the Justicars. Talimay is harsh and fierce, and many describe her as being very driven and relentless. 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.

### **Lieutenants:**

- Richard Lane, also known as Richard of the Dementia. He used to serve Henrick and went on to serve Sunyula. His torture methods include the use of psychological drugs.
- Jeffery Carter, also known as Jeffery of the Ravage. He

used to serve Henrick and went on to serve Sunyula. He prefers to rape and sexually abuse his victims, without differentiating if they are young or old, or if they are male or female, which causes many to believe he is bisexual, even though he always refrained from confirming it.

- Samuel Butler, also known as Samuel of the Shatter. He is the only lieutenant who was promoted to his position by Sunyula and not Henrick. He is also the youngest of her lieutenants. His torture methods include physical pain, bone breaking, and limb-dismembering among other things.

## 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.

### **Lieutenants:**

- Jonathan Conley, a hardened soldier who fought in the Tearful Rebellion.



## Bullet and Blade

- Bradley Hodge, a soldier who have vast military experience and had the longest military career of all the current lieutenants.
- Keith Gaines, a former General, much like Blackburn, who joined Code Sanguinary two years after its formation.
- Peter Hoover, a man who proved his worth as a brilliant tactician and a smart leader. He was promoted to lieutenant after his predecessor died horribly at the hands of the Ferals in the Clash of Rampage.

## 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 whose 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.

### **Lieutenants:**

- Darylon Holms, also known as Death Incarnate. One of the most deadly members of Harley Nation in Alataria. He is also one of the first members of the gang in the country.
- Sokhol Goddard, Fane's cousin. Following the execution of Fane's three previous lieutenants by Lady Dread, Fane promoted Sokhol to Lieutenant.

## 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.