

The Division of Security Operations had borne witness to numerous calamities. Each disaster was no better than the last, the amount of blood spilled in every mission from its founding day in 2011 to this moment, if collected in a single place, would probably be enough to fill an entire lake, creating an actual "Red Sea" of its own. The sophisticated technology installed all over its headquarters and equipped on its members were simply tools of mass killings. Sometimes, one couldn't help but wonder if one of these days, the organization would bear witness to the apocalypse itself.

That said, when it was not in the middle of fighting a bioterrorist threat for once, the organization's headquarters actually looked relatively peaceful from the outside. If not for the iconic blue emblem adorned with a golden lion atop the star-spangled banner, ordinary people might not even see the difference between the DSO and other big companies out there, ones that conducted ordinary businesses that weren't related to some deadly viruses and an army of living corpses of various sizes and shapes.

Christopher Redfield passed through the security check at the entrance and took a step onto the DSO headquarters' brightly lit lobby. He was a big man, both in appearance and presence; when he was passing by, it was hard for others not to take notice of him. Perhaps it was merely a physical thing, perhaps it was due to the fact that he was among the rare few that had witnessed those numerous calamities and survived to tell the tale. His battle-hardened body and soul really did set him apart from ordinary people who likely hadn't seen more blood in their life than a cut on a finger, much less an entire town's worth of badly maimed zombies dripping blood and rotting flesh wherever they walked. Though nobody actually went out of their way to approach him, most people he passed by would throw at least a glance in his direction before resuming whatever they were doing at the moment.

But another reason why nobody wanted to approach him was perhaps because he had company by his side, one whose presence was no less attention-drawing than him.

"It's been a while since we last came here," Jill Valentine commented as she cast a look around, "I see they've renovated the old lobby and mezzanine floor. Do you think you still remember your way around, Chris?"

"We aren't here to have a tour. Why do I have to worry about forgetting my way around?" the man replied. Though his words were crude, it was clear to see that there were no hostilities shared between them, like a simple banter shared between two people who had known each other for a long time. "Besides, what's the use of the receptionist and security guards if they can't show a guest where they want to go?"

"You have a point. But it's quite rare for us to visit the DSO when there isn't an emergency mission going on. I'd say we take a little walk around after we finished what we came here to do. Who knows? Perhaps we'll come across some old friends, as well."

Jill's long hair from the past had been cut short; it was now hanging just a little above her neck. Still, it didn't reduce the image of a "strong beauty" as she was always known. In fact, this style only emphasized that image even further. She looked younger than her actual age; her figure was great, her physical aptitude was impeccable, and her instincts were sharp after being tempered in a "harsh

environment” for so many years. Though a lot of people might be deterred by her status and background, a beauty was still a beauty nonetheless.

The two of them walking side by side like this across a busy lobby was a pleasant sight to the eyes. Other men might envy him for having such a gorgeous companion by his side, but unfortunately, Captain Chris Redfield was probably blind to the charm of the opposite sex in general. Otherwise, among all the known beauties who had once fought by his side, surely there would’ve been at least one or two that he’d wanted to pursue?

On this topic, some of his gossiping colleagues had joked that their captain might have seen far too many grotesque creatures in his line of work that he’d forgotten the charms of his fellow human beings. Little did they know that this long-lasting impression of theirs toward one Chris Redfield was about to be broken today.

With or without a crisis to be handled, the DSO headquarters were always as busy as a bee colony. Upon reaching the receptionist, the pair of seasoned combatants discovered that there was quite a queue of visitors today, lining in front of the reception table like customers at grocery stores during weekend sales as the young reception staffs were going back and forth between registering everyone’s identities and giving them directions.

Thinking that it would look unbecoming of her big comrade to stand in line, looking completely out of place, Jill offered to be the one to register their arrival. Chris was thus shooed away to wait in a nearby lounge.

There was a vending machine not far from the benches. Out of the goodwill in his heart, Chris thought he should repay the favor by buying his partner a drink, so he went over to said vending machine instead of finding an empty seat.

Nevertheless, his steps were halted halfway through when someone else reached the machine before he did. It wasn’t because he thought that this person was cutting the line. It was simply because upon laying his eyes on that person’s back figure, he became unable to look away again.

This person was a brown-haired man wearing a black vest over his regular shirt. He was rather tall, only a little bit shorter than Chris himself. From the look of his build and posture, he must be someone who had been tempered by both rigorous physical training and field experiences alike. Nevertheless, it didn’t make him develop a burly figure. In fact, the proportion of his shoulders, waist, and hips would be just perfect in anyone’s eyes. Especially with that fitting black vest that overlined his fine figure to a T, if he hadn’t seen this person in the headquarters of an anti-bioterrorism organization, Chris would’ve thought he’d just seen a handsome model normally spotted on fashion ads and billboards.

There was no hidden intention in his heart at all, but now that this person had entered his line of sight, he felt like his eyes were definitely feasting on this splendid view that appeared in front of him out of nowhere.

*“What an impressive form,”* unconsciously, he thought to himself.

Just then, said “splendid view” bent down to pick up a can of coffee that had rolled out of the vending machine, making Chris nearly jolt from where he stood. The man straightened his body then, while opening the coffee can, he turned around to leave.

A pair of familiar blue eyes, framed by brown fringes on both sides, immediately met Chris’.

“Chris?”

The voice and face were not immediately registered in Captain Redfield’s mind — which had barely returned after wandering to god knows where. He stared for a good few seconds, forcing his short-circuited brain to restart as quickly as possible and deliver the person’s name to his numb tongue.

“...Leon?” he said after a long time.

Agent Leon Scott Kennedy lifted his light-colored eyebrow slightly, looking mildly surprised.

“What’s a BSAA member doing here at our DSO headquarters?” he asked, seemingly unaware of how Chris had been gawking at his figure just a little while ago, “You’re switching jobs? It can’t be that there’s another virus outbreak somewhere that requires the DSO and BSAA to work together again, right? Can’t really catch a break, can we?”

“...No. No, it’s neither,” amidst his internal struggle, Chris’ intellect gradually returned to him, “Just regular business. We’re meeting with some of your higher-ups later to discuss a few reports on our past cooperation. It’s nothing serious.”

“‘We?’ So you don’t come here alone?”

“Jill’s with me,” Chris pointed his thumb at the queue line in front of the receptionist, briefly looking back, “She’s in the middle of registering our identities.”

“I see. You should’ve said you were coming. Could’ve helped you guys gotten past those formalities.”

Agent Kennedy meant well yet unbeknownst to him, his expression of goodwill went into one ear and out the other.

On the outside, there did not seem to be anything different from Chris. He stood ramrod straight, a pose that had been imprinted on his muscle memory from the day he was still part of the Air Force. It made him look especially tall and robust, an honorable, seasoned fighter through and through. No one would expect that the inside of his head at the moment was no different from a blob of mush, as if someone had poured too much water onto a bowl of flour that instead of making a proper dough, it turned into an unknown paste with no apparent use.

And the one to blame for this...was none other than the good-willed but ignorant Agent Kennedy himself.

The two of them had gone a long way. Though they were part of different organizations, they ultimately shared the same goal. They had experienced an equal amount of crisis and terror. They had seen all forms of death with their own eyes — of strangers, and of their own friends. Looking back on the times when they were working together, they didn’t always see eye to eye. They had

exchanged not only heated arguments but also punches and kicks. They had even pointed the muzzle of their guns at each other.

Chris' memories of Leon could not all be considered entirely pleasant, but he still considered this person a comrade deserving of respect. Now, this sentiment of his was in the middle of growing into something else, like a flattened balloon suddenly being filled with air.

In the past, whenever the two of them met, more of than not, it was always in the middle of a calamity. They each had their own missions, had people they needed to protect, and villains they needed to pursue. Naturally, just like him, Leon was always well-equipped. He had his jacket on, under which he hid various armaments and communication devices to get him through the crisis. The circumstances of their past meetings were always dire. Frankly speaking, they rarely ever had the chance to relax and engage in ordinary conversations like ordinary people did.

Which was why seeing him today, in an elite professional environment, felt like a bucket of cold water being doused onto Chris' head, washing his impression on Leon anew.

Today's Leon S. Kennedy wasn't drenched in sweat and blood. He was clean and shaven; his expression was relaxed, he wasn't frowning and spending all of his brain cells focusing on an emergency mission. The shirt he was wearing was a good match with the color of his hair and complexion, complemented by the black cotton pants that outlined his long legs. But above all, Chris could not take his eyes off the fitting vest he was wearing over his shirt. He had thought that this man's figure looked great from the back. He never expected that he would look even better from the front where he could see the other's face and those fine lines of his neck diving into the unbuttoned collar of his shirt. From there, his gaze followed the natural course of Leon's body from top to bottom. His shoulders were wide, but not as wide as Chris'. The middle part of his body shrank into a fine, slim waist — Chris could only wonder how it felt if he could wrap an arm around it. And then there were his hips, flawlessly shaped by all the physical training he'd gone through for years.

Had he ever met another person like this? Throughout the course of his life-threatening career, Captain Redfield had always been surrounded by well-built men and beautiful women, but none of them ever tugged at his attention — and his heartstrings, unfortunately so — like Agent Kennedy did today.

He felt like he was about to become stupid by the sheer astonishment this coincidental meeting had brought him.

"Uhh, Chris?"

The crisp snap of Leon's fingers in front of his eyes snapped Chris' wandering imagination back, as well. He was distraught for a moment, then his eyes regained their focus to look straight at the handsome agent standing before him again.

"What's wrong with you today? It looks like your soul isn't here," Leon frowned slightly.

"No, it's nothing," the person whose soul had just recently returned replied immediately. Thinking that leaving it at that would kill the conversation, he hurriedly added another sentence. "You look good today."

He very much wanted to shoot himself as soon as the words left his mouth.

“Oh, thanks,” luckily for Chris, the subject of his observation was completely oblivious to the chaotic thoughts running rampant in his mind, “I have no other choice. Gotta look the part today, otherwise, Hunnigan will scold me.”

“Hunnigan? Agent Ingrid Hunnigan? Why would she scold you?”

“I’m here for a meeting today, just like you,” Leon said casually, taking a sip of his canned coffee, “I don’t think it’s anything urgent either. But some important people are apparently going to be there, so she specifically told me to dress well for the occasion.”

“I see...”

He wasn’t sure if this get-up Leon was donning was suitable for the occasion or not, but this man really did “dress well.” Very well, in fact.

Just then, Leon’s phone rang.

“...Looks like the meeting preparation’s about to start. I gotta go,” he said, briefly looking at the phone screen before returning his attention to Chris, “Are you going to hang around here once you’re done with your... Well, report discussions?”

“I guess... Yeah. Yeah, we’re going to stay for a bit.”

“Great. I’m going on ahead. Tell Jill I said ‘hi,’” the two corners of Leon’s lips curled up slightly into a smile, “See you guys later.”

He lifted his canned coffee as if about to make an invisible toast to Chris, turned on his heels, and walked away.

In the meantime, the one left behind remained standing at the same spot, nailed to the floor like an oversized statue blocking everyone’s way. Only his eyes seemed to be alive — and they were following the back of that leaving figure intently, as though wanting to burn that impressive view into his memory.

He didn’t even hear a set of light footsteps approaching him from behind.

“I’ve completed the registration,” being none the wiser of the tumultuous emotions her partner had just gone through, Jill walked over casually while putting back their identification documents into a small bag she was carrying, “They said we just need to— Hey, Chris, what’s wrong?”

Only now did Chris react to her arrival. He stared dumbly at her.

“Huh?”

“Don’t ‘huh’ me. What’s the matter with you? Why are you standing in the middle of the lounge?”

She frowned and shifted her line of sight in the direction that Chris had been staring, just in time to catch a familiar person walking away — already too far for her to call over yet still close enough that she could see his figure in its entirety.

"Is that Leon?" she leaned forward, "Have the two of you been talking just now?"

"Yeah," Chris continued to look ahead, not sparing her a glance at all, "Yeah, we've been talking."

Call it a woman's intuition; even though her experiences could be considered far tougher and more unusual than the rest of the world's female population, it didn't take long for Jill to notice something bizarre about her partner. She looked at him, then at the departing Leon, then back at Chris again. Suddenly, Agent Valentine seemed to have reached enlightenment.

"Oh..." she nodded, folding her arms, "I see what's going on now."

Chris wasn't paying attention to her in the slightest bit. Once Leon's figure completely disappeared in the corner, he finally remembered that someone else was standing beside him.

"Sorry, what were you saying just now?" he asked.

"Never mind," replied Jill, curbing a smile that was about to bloom on her face, "Leon seems to be doing well, does he? He looks good."

"Yeah..." once again, Captain Redfield mumbled the same answer, "Yeah, he... He's fine..."

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The elevator's door opened with a *swish*, following a distinct *ding* signaling that the metal box had arrived at its destination. Leon stepped out along with the other passengers, soon finding himself on the second floor of the DSO headquarters. A part of the floor was surrounded by glass fences; this balcony was directly overlooking the lobby on the ground floor below. When the crowd walking in front of him dispersed, he saw a familiar lady in a regular black-and-white office attire waiting for him by the glass fence.

"You're here," Ingrid Hunnigan nodded at him, "Let's go to the meeting room before the higher-ups arrived."

"Yes, yes. I get it," Leon replied nonchalantly, "Do I really have to attend this meeting though? It really doesn't suit me at all. It's more for someone prim and proper like you."

Ingrid only sighed and shook her head, refusing to entertain his rambles.

"I saw you talking to someone in the lobby just now," she changed the topic, "He looks familiar. Was it Captain Redfield from the BSAA? Were you two friends?"

"Yeah. He said he had things to do here today. Jill Valentine is with him, too," Leon finished the rest of his coffee and tossed the empty can into a nearby trash bin, "Why do you ask?"

"I see," Ingrid said as they walked side by side, "I just thought it's strange that he kept staring at you for quite some time after you left. What were you two talking about?"

"Chris was staring at me? For what?" the one being questioned returned the question to his peer, "We weren't talking about anything important at all. But he did seem a bit off when we met a while ago."

"A bit off? How?"

"Don't know. Feels like he's out of it for some reason. He keeps staring at my face," having said this, Leon suddenly covered his mouth and tried to wipe something off, "Don't tell me I've been having some coffee mark on my face all this time and he'd been trying not to laugh at me?"

He was genuinely asking, but he was met with a pitying gaze from behind Ingrid's glasses instead.

For the second time today, Agent Hunnigan could only sigh and shook her head.

Somewhere in the DSO headquarters' lobby, another woman was also doing the same thing she did; her heart full of amusement and sympathy. Though they weren't aware of each other's presence, the word that left their lips at this moment was one and the same.

"Boys..."